

# **Organizing a Waterfall: On Composing an Electroacoustic Environment for Three Poems from Alice Fulton's *Felt***

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## About Alice Fulton's work



- Born 1953 in Troy, New York; studied at Cornell University (MFA, 1983) with A.R. Ammons.
- Teaching positions at University of Michigan (1983-2001) and Cornell University (2001- ).
- Seven books of poetry and essays:
  - *Dance Script With Electric Ballerina* (1983)
  - *Palladium* (1986)
  - *Powers of Congress* (1990)
  - *Sensual Math* (1997)
  - *Feeling as a Foreign Language* [essays] (1999)
  - *Felt* (2001)
  - *Cascade Experiment* [anthology] (2004)
- “Postmodern Fractal Poetics”: characterized by a disruption of “poetry plane” through the use of sharp contrasts, irony, self-reflexivity, and juxtaposition of the esoteric with the banal.
- Common themes include feminism, Emily Dickinson, popular culture, chaos theory, fractal geometry, music, art.

## Background on the Work

- First encountered Fulton's poetry in 1997 ("Fractal Lanes").
- Fulton's poems inspired the titles of two previous works:
  - "the road in its unfoldings" (meta-passacaglia for wind symphony, 1996-97)
  - "crown knots & cascades" (movement VI of *Occam's Razor*, 1994-99)
- The present work was originally intended as a setting of Fulton's poem(s) for choir and stereo computer music; later determined that setting would be for poetry reading with 8-channel sonic "environment."
- Three poems selected from Fulton's most recent work, *Felt* (2001):
  - "Prequel"
  - "By Her Own Hand"
  - "Call the Mainland"
- Alice Fulton recorded poems in August 2004; work completed March 2005.
- First performance by Alice Fulton at the University of North Texas in April 2005.

## Pre-compositional Considerations

- Computer music: fixed medium chosen over interactive environment.
- Poetry reading: natural pacing of poems; precise alignment with fixed computer music is not critical.
- Sound source materials determined by the content of each poem; “text painting” used throughout.
- Structure and character of computer music determined by that of each poem:
  - “Prequel”—“stream-of-consciousness” text and poem layout suggests continuous flow of materials, wide variety of sound sources; turbulent wind sounds serve as a unifying element.
  - “By Her Own Hand”—poem about suicide suggested introspective, static, obsessive music; sound sources limited exclusively to guitar sounds and spoken poem fragments.
  - “Call the Mainland”—contemplation of nature; bird sounds used to delineate three-part structure suggested by poem.

## Selection of Sound Sources

Sound sources determined by specific words, phrases, or concepts in each poem; sounds are transformed and integrated according to the structure of the poem.

- Prequel:

- “sketch” – writing with pencil on paper 
- “stretch” – twisted balloon
- “egg” – cracked and scrambled 
- “chess” – wooden chess pieces on board
- “roar and waterfall”; “waves” – rushing water sounds
- “frost” – ice skate on ice 
- “tornado”; “twister” – turbulent wind sounds
- “cricket” 
- “dead-bolt” – door slamming
- “turbine” – machine sounds 

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### ▪ By Her Own Hand:

- “My last sound was like the small release / of frets and strings you sense / when a guitarists changes chords.”—this line is the impetus for the use of guitar sounds throughout the poem. 
- “Have you ever been embarrassed / by a **frugal kiss? It is embarrassing to live.**”—this text (in yellow) is used in the computer part (read by the poet).
- “The human yen for angels is depraved. / It decorates death with heaven, ...”—contrasting musical material presented here.
- “I do regret the writhing.”—guitar string scrapes evoke this imagery.

### ▪ Call the Mainland:

- “birds”—several sampled varieties used as a metaphor for nature.
- “the body speeds”; “heart, lungs, and gut”—heartbeats and breathing sounds are used.
- “the mind sparks”; “blood-brain barrier”—represented by processed sounds suggestive of electrical impulses.

## P R E Q U E L

Before the blank—full of fresh  
grain scent and flecked  
like oatmeal woven flat—  
canvas, before the blank canvas  
is stretched or strained  
tight as an egg, before then—  
sketch. It doesn't catch  
commencement: it won't hook  
the scene like a rug,  
or strategize too far ahead.  
It isn't chess. It doesn't expect  
the homestretch or the check.

Each line braves rejection  
of the every, edits restless  
all into a space that's still  
the space of least commitment, distilling  
latitudes in draft.

It would domesticate the feral  
dusk and stockpile dawn.

It would be commensurate, but settles  
for less, settles  
prairies in its channels. Great plains  
roar and waterfall, yawn and frost  
between the lines.

From hunger, from blank  
and black, it models erotic

stopped tornadoes, the high relief  
of trees. In advance or retreat, in terraced  
dynamics—its bets are hedged—with no dead-  
bolt perspective. Its point of view? One  
with the twister in vista glide,  
and the cricket in the ditch,  
with riverrain and turbine's trace.  
Inside the flux of  
flesh and trunk and cloudy come,  
within the latent  
marrow of the egg, the amber  
traveling waves is where  
its vantage lies.  
Entering the tornado's core,  
entering the cricket waltzed by storm—  
to confiscate the shifting give  
and represent the with-  
out which.

- Stream-of-consciousness flow of text.
- Text layout reminiscent of a tornado.

## BY HER OWN HAND

If you believe you would have caressed every lash  
and freckle that I was  
but for decorum, I appreciate the thought.  
Have you ever been embarrassed  
by a frugal kiss? It is embarrassing to live.

My love for my husband was all balled up  
with mothering. I had compassion for any flesh  
trying that hard to be iron. Imagine  
living with his bluster and hiss  
for forty years. Have you ever been embarrassed  
by a frugal kiss? I died of it. Just say I sublimed.  
Snowflakes do this all the time. Say I was tired  
of eating beige, for heaven's sake. Of  
molestation imposed by my own body.  
Let's see. I wasn't stoical enough for me.

You might say I've eased into the trees  
and the autistic fields: eyes like forget-me-nots. "Desire." All that business you admire.  
The human yen for angels is depraved.  
It decorates death with heaven, longing  
for the note I never left.

My last sound was like the small release  
of strings and frets you sense

when a guitarist changes chords.

Enough to let you know the music's made by hand.

I am not without regrets,  
picayune as they may seem or plain  
grotesque. I do regret the writhing.  
I wanted to be self-reliant.  
I wanted to reach up and shut  
my own eyes just before I died.

- Poem about suicide presented from the perspective of the victim.
- Traditional layout of poem suggests straightforward and direct manner of the subject.

"transcendent" departure from more mundane observations

## CALL THE MAINLAND

Nature hates a choir. Have you noticed  
the lack of chorus in the country every dawn?  
The birds spent the night looking down on earth  
as that opaque, unstarred space.  
The vivacious soundscape they create at day  
must be their amazement  
that the planet's still in place.

No wait. Time out and whoa. There I go—  
coating the birds' tones with emotion,  
hearing them as my own. I know, I know.

Yet I can't say birds aren't feeling  
in their hollow bones some resonance of glad  
that night has passed.

I can't claim their hearts don't shake  
when the will to live another day  
in the cascade of all that is  
is strong. Emotion

makes its presence felt in flesh.  
Maybe you've noticed—the body speeds  
its reflexes and is moved. It moves. It makes

the heart, lungs, and gut  
remember their lives

DISRUPTION  
(transition)

A

B

like sleepers between bouts of sleep.  
While more serene delights  
are intellect selective, without cardiac effect:  
the mind sparks

at a Borges story or elegant proof in math,  
a bliss that doesn't shift  
across the blood-  
brain barrier. Such heady pleasures  
are never for the birds.

To be key  
rather than bit player, of independent means—  
to sound your own agenda in polyphonic overlay  
as day takes shape == as day takes shape

the birds begin their final take.  
They'll never know themselves as symbols  
of the sublime. Transcendent  
messy shrines, whose music won't stoop  
to unison or climax—  
tell them I said hi.

A

A: Romanticized fantasy about nature, birds  
B: More rational contemplation of the subject

## Conclusion: Some Reflections on the Work

- On the use of fixed medium vs. interactive environment:
  - Affect upon live performer(s): degree of control
  - Types of interactivity: *interactive* vs. *reactive* environments
  - Continuum of temporal intra-/inter-relationships
  - Solution: fluid relationship between performer and computer music
- On the use of “text painting” and musical representation:
  - Historical precedents
  - 19th century program music
  - 20th-century reactions
  - Acousmatic aesthetics
- On the relationship between text and music:
  - Music as primary vs. supportive role
  - Perception influenced by disembodied quality of electronic media
  - Expectations within traditional concert setting
  - Practical concerns for alternative venues