

No Words : An Audio Drama

Chris Gregory

(Sounds - Traffic – city soundscape)

Naomi : (Narrative). Rome wilts in late summer heat. The dusty pavements and market squares feel baked to the red clay surface of a tennis court. The open spaces of Villa Borghese are parched and arid at the end of a long, intense summer that shows little sign of mellowing.

Naomi : I have been here three days now. Robert has been shooting across the city for a new fashion house keen to promote its credentials by hiring one of the best up-and-coming photographers. They pay well and we are being kept in comfortable, if rather noisy, accommodation just off Via Del Corso. Even with the shutters closed and the ambient wash of the air con cranked to full, the sounds of Vespas flit like angry mosquitos through the room deep into the night.

After another fitful night we breakfast early. Rob wants to start the day's shoot before the most intense heat kicks in, give the models a few hours off and then start again in the last hours of afternoon sunlight.

Rob : ...to catch this reddish light of the low sun. It sort of makes the stone of the ancient buildings come to life with shadow and texture. It's amazing Nay... you should...

Naomi: (interrupts) ... I'm not coming to the shoot today. Going to check out some art..

Rob : (Not surprised or disappointed – tone doesn't change) Sure. It might be a bit boring anyway I think... Lots of standing around while us creatives contemplate our navels...

Naomi : (Inner monologue). He doesn't look up from his iPad, his voice is uninterested

Naomi: Gian Lorenzo Bernini....

Rob : umm... sorry what ?

Naomi : Bernini : sculptor. Did some of the marbles in Piazza Navona

Rob : Oh sure, yes. Where are you meeting him?

(Pause : Sounds : cutlery on plates, the low hum of conversation)

Naomi : You used to think I was beautiful.....

Rob : I'm sorry ? Used to?

Naomi. : You couldn't help but stare at me. I'd catch you stealing glances when you thought I wasn't looking. I could tell you were framing me with imaginary fingers, the way movie directors are supposed to...

Rob : (laughs). I was. I still do that - maybe you just don't notice.

Naomi. : Because you don't do it.... More interested in the iPad and... who's this ? Chloe Garner ?

Rob : Professional interest. I honestly think I did some of my best work ever with her yesterday. She has this amazing .. I dunno. I want to say poise but its not as formal as that.. A presence, a charisma. There's no word for what she has.... Look at this...

Naomi : (inner monologue) Chloe Garner on the Ponte Sant'Angelo - The castle keep in the background in reddish tones. Chloe's skin is almost glowing against the honey stone angels of the bridge...

Naomi. : She's amazing. Do you find her attractive?

Rob : She's only just turned 21. She's got the worldview of a sixth former. a spoilt kid who's just signed a contract for half a million over 2 years..... She can't hold a conversation about anything but herself for more than about 12 seconds...

Naomi : Yet the face of an angel and the poise of ... what did you say ?

Rob : I said there were no words for it...

Naomi : No words.....

Naomi: (Inner monologue). And the rest of the breakfast goes in silence.... As we rise to leave the table he says

Rob : Heard how the kids are doing ?

Naomi : (inner monologue). Ah yes, his children. He knew he'd forgotten something.....

Naomi : Fine. Running my parents ragged no doubt. Freya lost her first tooth...

Rob : ah, give her my love when you speak to them...

Naomi : Sure. Unless you want to ?

Naomi : (Inner monologue – tired). No. No, of course not...

Naomi : (Narrative). The Galleria Borghese is the latest building in Rome to take my breath away. I have become fascinated by the work of Bernini, a

baroque sculptor, as much a part of the soul of Rome as those Vespas and the centuries of history. I have come to see his "David" but in the gallery, there confronted by the art itself and not just guidebook reproductions, it is another work that catches my attention.... Apollo and Daphne.... I am fascinated: looking from all angles, marveling at the detail, the vision and the subject.....

It depicts the moment when Apollo catches up with the fleeing Daphne who, un-tempted by his increasingly unpleasant and forceful advances has attempted to outrun him. Praying for release from her pursuer, sufficiently desperate to accept any means of ridding herself of this relentless bastard, the statue depicts the very start of her transformation into a laurel tree..

Where do you start on the morality of this? Where does the justice lie in the fact that the girl who had done nothing wrong other than to catch the eye of a god has to pay this price to escape him ? And how, as told in numerous versions of the story, are we supposed to feel more sympathy for Apollo for losing that which he most desired when poor Daphne ends the story rooted to the spot, bound in bark and leaves ?

But as art, it is breathtaking. I half listen into a guided museum tour.

Tour leader : Bernini works with marble as though it is plasticine: malleable beneath his fingers. Able to be kneaded like freshly made dough and scooped and scraped in moments rather than over long, painstaking months of effort. Every detail of Daphne's young form is perfectly captured in the warm light of the Istrian marble. Her toes are turning into roots, stretching and digging themselves into the earth beneath her feet. Bark is clinging to her ankles and calves. You can almost sense the movement upwards as her legs turn to the trunk of a slender tree. Her fingers are sprouting leaf topped twigs. Her face seems confused and afraid, grateful to escape the clutches of Apollo but not expecting what has just started to happen to her...

Naomi: (Inner monologue) I am transfixed, mesmerized, lost for words....

Museum attendant : Don't worry. It is just a story... Are you ok Signorina?

Naomi : Oh , sorry. (nervous laughter) I was captivated.... How did you know I spoke English?

Museum attendant : English guidebook sticking out of your bag....

Naomi : ah, I see. It's beautiful isn't it ? Troubling but beautiful. I wish I got to look at this art every day. Do you ever get bored?

Museum attendant : Never. But it is not the art that intrigues me so much anymore. It is visitor's reaction to it. Their expressions : sometimes tears, sometimes amusement. That never gets boring. (Laughs). Your reaction was a little extreme though. I thought you had sprouted your own roots! That's why I asked if you were ok.

Naomi. : was I there that long ? (laugh). I was enthralled...

Museum Attendant : Almost an hour.....

Naomi : (to herself – inner monologue). Almost an hour. Christ, where did the time go ?

Sounds : traffic, city sounds.

Naomi : (Narrative, Inner monologue). After the cool of the gallery, the September heat is ferocious. Haze and dust seem to fill the parkland and as I walk through the busy streets, past Termini and its shabby market stalls, past the steps of Santa Maria Maggiore and the Foro Romano in a meandering route back to the hotel, I think about how the evening with Robert will pan out....

Sound : Mobile phone ring tone..

Naomi : At 7 my iPhone rings... It's Robert

Naomi : Hi !

Rob : (phone voice). Hey. Some of us are going for a few drinks in a bar in... erm Trastevere. Fancy joining us ?

Naomi : Do you really want me to ?

Rob : I wouldn't be calling if I didn't...

Naomi : Let me think about it. Start without me, I'll call you back...

Rob : sure - don't be long...

Naomi: Oh fine thank you - my day's been fine. Thanks for asking.

Rob : and mine too. Thanks for erm, asking.... Come over to Trastevere...!

Naomi. : (wistful) One of the things... one of the several things we have lost is the easy intimacy we used to share. The way in which he could make me feel totally at one with him, part of some in-joke that only we were privy to even when part of a large group. The way in which he would make me laugh just by the slightest arching of an eyebrow, the slightest change in intonation in a conversation with a stranger, the way he'd play with his food or dance in our quiet apartment when we opened the curtains to let the light of a full moon fill the room. The way he'd say my full name, middle names included to summon me to lunch.

Rob : (echoey... Imitating soft southern Irish accent) Naomi Louise Siobhan O'Donnell. Do you want some fecking pasta or not ?

Naomi : (Wistful again – softer, slightly longing.). The way he'd stand behind me in the darkening light of a late summer evening, his large hands cupping my breasts as he kissed my shoulders and neck, whispering the lines of some barely remembered song or poem in my eager ear.

Naomi : (to herself). Don't neglect me Robert - don't leave me to wilt and die in the heat like an un-watered flower...

He slips into the room at 11.30, a little drunk. Noisily trying to be quiet...

Naomi. : Rob, Christ, it's late.. I ...

Rob : You didn't call. People are thinking I'm making you up. Going back to an empty hotel room for a...

Naomi: ... Wank over a picture of picture of Chloe Garner ?

Rob. : Jesus Nay - give me a break. Remember we always said, work hard, play hard? Live life like it's your last day on earth.....

Naomi : Sure - I tell you what, I'll do the "work hard" bit shall I ?

Rob : Look, tomorrow night, I promise, we'll go to that restaurant we've been talking about near Republica..

Naomi : Sure. That would be nice...

Naomi. (to herself : Inner monologue). And it would... it really would...

I feel him slide into the bed beside me as I pretend to sleep. Soft fingers lift a curl of hair from my face. The gentlest of kisses on my cheek and then he rolls over. Within minutes the timbre of his breathing changes and I know he is asleep....

I fall asleep thinking of Daphne and her fingers sprouting green leaves, her toes turning to roots and her expression. Her expression

(sound – faint traffic noise, city sounds).

Naomi : (inner monologue). In the morning I wake up thinking of the kids. Of Freya's tooth and Coll's bear, left at a friend's house. I wonder how he managed to sleep without his beloved Bruno. I wonder how I managed to sleep....

I meet Robert at a table in the window of the hotel's breakfast room . Scooters and fiats race up the arrow straight canyon of Via Del Corso. Early tourists heading for the Spanish Steps and Trevi Fountain trudge past the window.

Sound : low conversation : cutlery sounds

Rob : Sleep ok ?

Naomi : Mmm, yeah, ok. You ?

Rob : Out like a light.... Exhausted

Naomi : Drank enough to knock you sideways...?

Rob : Three Peronis and a sambucca.... How was , what's his name ? Beronni ?

Naomi : Bernini

Rob : Ok - how was he ?

Naomi : Stunning - breathtaking. Overwhelming, actually. No words...

Rob : Listen, about tonight ...

Naomi : Shall I book ? The guidebook says booking is essential...

Rob : erm, I remembered that there's a bit of a do. Chloe and her people hosting. It's her last day on the shoot today. She heads back to London tomorrow. Listen Nay, it would be just lovely if you would join me. Please..... ?

Naomi : (disappointed)). ... I'll think about it. But we were going to..... Just you and me.....

Naomi : (inner monologue). And another meal passes in silence. The babble of conversation I cannot understand, the bustle of waiters, the mundane clink of cutlery on china... All the while I'm thinking of Bernini and Daphne. Marble and roots..... The way in which that which confines you can, in a way, set you free...

Rob : Got to rush. Piazza Navona at 7. I'll text you the name of the restaurant...

Naomi . : Sure

Naomi : (inner monologue) Sure, just leave me here with my thoughts and my irrational jealousies and my vague un-nameable feeling that something I treasured so much is dissolving in the palm of my hand....

Music : city sounds

Naomi: (inner monologue) I think about St Peter's but the vastness of the Basilica and square don't seem to match my mood. I know before I even make the decision that I will return to Borghese...

City sounds

Naomi : (Narrative) In the tiny street stalls outside Santa Maria Della Vittoria I buy a delicate peg doll from a gypsy lady. I'm not sure if it is for Freya or for me. She takes my hand, wanting to read my palm but I gently pull away fearful of what she might tell me. Today it seems better not to know about a future so hazy I can barely imagine it beyond the fingers of my outstretched hand ...

City sounds

Naomi : (Narrative) I cut through the tight streets of Ludovisi and enter Villa Borghese via the south gate. The heat of the day is building, traffic sound fades a little. I feel able to breathe a little away from its claustrophobic intensity.

Sounds : Voices : babble of conversation

Naomi : (narration : Inner monologue). I join a short queue for the gallery, counting the accents, feeling the building heat like a pressure headache on the back of my neck and shoulders...

Inside the cool of the gallery I see the attendant. His kindly smile and welcoming demeanour. I feel flattered that he recognises me.

Museum attendant : Signorina. You have come back for more time with the lady ?

Naomi : Daphne ? Yes – a few more minutes

Museum attendant : As long as you want. You seem to have, hmm – I don't know how to say this.. erm affinity ? You have affinity with her somehow ?

Naomi : Perhaps I do

Naomi : (Inner monologue). I view from all angles, take pictures on my iphone. Tiny, beautiful details : her toes becoming roots, her fingers and their budding leaves. Her expression: awful and unfathomable.... (concerned, surprised- Naomi adopts the vulnerable frightened voice of a young girl... lost and surprised....) “Wh.. What’s happening to me ?”

Music : fades to sound of the hotel room – distant traffic a voice says “room service”.

Naomi : Later I dine alone : room service delivers me pizza and chianti – I throw open the shutters and take in the view across the pan tiled rooves to the dome of St Peter's, the tower of Sant'Angello. Watch the light fade and imagine all the parties and nights-out going on in the streets below. Rob's party : the gorgeous Chloe, ten years his junior.....

(sounds – city sounds, car horns, sirens....all through the previous section. – fades after Naomi finishes speaking.

Naomi : Sleep is fitful but when I dream.....

(sound effects – a forest – bird song, the wind through treetops)

Naomi : (a sense of wonder in her voice). I am in a forest glade...

I breathe the pine swept air and feel the sharpness of twigs and leaves beneath my feet. Birdsong is everywhere, cascading through the clearing , echoing amongst the trees.

A gentle voice that seems to come from everywhere.....

Museum attendant : Are you ready signorina ?

Naomi. : And I see him walking towards me, into the dappled sunlight of the glade. His face is calm and reassuring. I know I trust him. Know I'll be safe....

Naomi: Yes... quite ready

Museum attendant : then I wish you great happiness...

Naomi : And as he smiles and I try to step forward to hug him I feel my feet rooted to the forest floor, my toes stretching, burrowing into the soft damp earth, holding me fast to the spot. For a moment I panic but then I understand...

Naomi . (sense of wonder, realisation). It's a dream. All metaphor.... I'm Daphne – my own version of her..

Museum attendant : If you like we can call it metaphor - it's as real as you want it to be....

Naomi : (calm, slightly breathless wonderment). And I watch, fascinated as shades of green and brown start to appear on the skin of my feet then slowly, like a CGI movie effect that I can feel in my own body, bark seems to grow from the ground stretching and squeezing its way over my feet and working up, taking my ankles, pushing my legs together, encasing my calves and slowly my knees which seem to fuse into a single stem or trunk.... Fascinated, I lift my dress watching the gnarly dark bark replace the smooth, pale skin of my thighs, tiny shoots and branchlets sprouting and bursting leaves before my eyes.

Naomi : (surprised, in wonderment). and my fingers... oh!

(Inner monologue). Stretching, becoming slender twigs and budding at the tips before opening to leaves..

Museum attendant : and your hair signorina...

Naomi : Each strand of brown hair is thickening, turning green, leaves seeming to push their way upwards from my scalp...

Museum attendant :growing so tall ...

Naomi : (surprised wonderment – inner monologue). I am looking down at him from twice my normal height, my body stretching upwards , my arms reaching to the height of the tree canopy around me.... The light is brilliant up here and birdsong fills the air.....

(Music and effects sequence. – birdsong of every sort..... Rises to a crescendo and fades....)

(A single beat.... A door opening and the sound of stumbling steps as Rob enters the room.)

Naomi : I wake as he stumbles into the room, roll over to see his silhouette against the doorway light...

Rob : Hey, you missed another good one...

Naomi : (sleepily). hmmm, yeah ?

Naomi : (softly). And I feel him slip into bed beside me, his breath warm on the nape of my neck and gently whisper

Rob : Goodnight Nay.... I love you so much but you're drifting from me.....

Naomi : And I let myself think.....

Naomi. : (inner monologue - reflective – resigned, as though she's decided she need to make a change). Is it me or is it him ? are there compromises I should have accepted when I chose to bear his children? Was it too much to expect that I would find something for myself in some corner of his life?

The familiar change in his breathing tells me he has fallen asleep...

(Slowly, without emotion). When he wakes in the morning he will find me gone.....

(Music....station announcements, the sound of passengers at Stazione Temini...fades into Naomi's Theme.....")

End.