

You turn on the radio and hear a child digging his father's grave.

"There is a boy and his father is dead. And no angels sang and no one was better because of it and all that is left is this kid and the shovel digging the grave and a fly buzzing in the air. If there is beauty, we must find it in what is really there: the boy, the shovel, the fly. If we look closely, despite the unbearable sadness, we will discover it."

This is composer Bob Ostertag's written description of his sound piece "Sooner or Later," recorded in El Salvador (New American Radio, September 8, 1994). The boy hiccups with tears as he digs, announcing his pain in Spanish, his admiration for his father and his intentions to avenge the murder. Ostertag's music slices the boy's speech as thin as garlic cut with a razor blade, then blows each instant up, into its own requiem. By examining each breath, each impact of shovel to ground under the audio microscope, he magnifies the pain so large as to engulf the listener with a wave of pure empathy while at the same time turning sniffles into rhythms, making it into art.

Still, listening to this seems like embracing someone who has no skin, as if the boy was a bare mass of nerves and guts and blood, which stain your own clothes when you touch him.