

As I say...

Maurice Scully, *Things That Happen*

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Maurice Scully's **Things that Happen**, incorporating 'Livelihood' published in 2004, is 603 pages long and covers work written between 1981 and 2006. It consists of 8 separate books though these were always intended as elements in a single, larger project. Inside the copy he sent me, Maurice has written echoing Klee, "taking thousands of lines for a walk." He might have said tens of thousands for the project is a mammoth undertaking. 25 years to write and prepare, it's taken another 15 to find a publisher who for good measure has simultaneously issued a critical survey of Scully's work, **A Line of Tiny Zeros in the Fabric**. Anyone wishing to know more of Scully's writing, particularly details of how a number of well-informed and diligent readers understand Scully's methods and concerns, should look there, where they will also find a devoted and as-complete-as-humanly-possible bibliography.

First things first, to avoid a possible misconception: **Things that Happen** is emphatically not, as might be anticipated of a poet approaching 70, a sort of Collected Poems. In fact it may be wrong to think that Scully writes poems at all though he certainly writes poetry, laying it on to pages that sometimes have titles though

these almost never suggest that the poetry occurs as poem-units. They may be bracketed (as if peripheral), recurrent (a great number of pages are headed 'Sonnet' though having no resemblance to anything formally sonnet-like: Responsibility, Steps, In the Music, Fire are all titles repeatedly applied to texts not always for immediately obvious reasons) or non-existent. And just as titles barely indicate a beginning, so 'coda' barely indicates an end. The book provides half a dozen codas to its component parts and ultimately even offers passages headed 'coda coda'. While these may function as additions to preceding passages that have reached a kind of conclusion, they could equally well be thought of as hinges to whatever comes next. Scully's project is implicitly unfinishing and unfinishable. The writing has cadences but not termini. Its matter is daily happenstance and constantly extends through quotation, misquotation, self-quotation, accident, interruption, overflow, over-hearing, echo, musical inklings, repetitions, hesitations and rearrangements, until it comes to form a labyrinth of numberless carefully constructed instances any one of which, nourished both by the pages that have preceded and by a meticulous attention to present detail, might seem cousin to another. What Scully himself says of Five Freedoms of Movement, the first component of **Things that Happen**, is true of the book's entirety: "Freedoms is constructed as an arrangement of checks and balances not discrete 'poems', a bit like a Calder mobile. The book is the poem."¹

Almost anyone who writes anything about Scully's work eventually comes up with a word like 'labyrinth' to describe it: web, lattice, threads, weave, mesh, constellation, net, complex tissue, mycelium, reticle, trellis... The further we advance into the book, the more each page comes to resemble a dot in a matrix that it's impossible to step back to view. We read from within the poetry's architecture. We can't know exactly where we are in it because the poetry's site is itself partially a terra incognita into which the poet himself is advancing. Or how else is such a passage as this to be read ?

To The

Ten thousand
intent at desk the

in stopped swirl
 the ten thousand
 things that convene
 shine escape
 intermittent material
 in a pipe that
 & that dying out. Half
 a walnut
 a shell.

Whereat the root
 music of the unpat
 threads means to/
 then but/

This is all that p.371 of **Things that Happen** offers: an apparently intermittent material that stops and starts and swirls, ending with four lines, three of which seem to be wilfully severed. The heading – can this be called a title ? – deliberately denies the reader an object. ‘Ten thousand’ might follow logically but then we’re given no noun; the promise of clarification is renewed by the fourth line but the only concrete detail we get is ‘a pipe’ (are we listening to air-locks in a heating system ?) and an inexplicable piece of nutshell (an object on the desk in line 2 ?). Then what on earth is ‘unpat’ (is it ‘unpatterned’ with two syllables lopped off ?); and what are we supposed to do with ‘then but’ ?

Strategies of interruption and incompleteness, denied fulfilment, diverted or dismantled grammar are sufficiently familiar that it’s hardly bewildering to find them in a poet of Scully’s generation. I think these are inappropriate terms however to describe his method here. He’s not offering a poetry of dislocations but rather the reverse-- *relocating* poetry on the site that is closest to hand, right here, right now. Indeed lines 5 and 6 tell us explicitly what the text is focussed on, ie. “things that convene/ shine escape”; all ten thousand or more of them, which he omits from the title so that one or two of their vast number can happen *within* the poem. A detail comes into focus, shines, escapes. The fragment of walnut shell occurs as a sort of

momentary evidence, mounted in the poem's music. If you were to read the last four lines as if built simply on strategies of disruption, you would have to overlook the tightness of the musical structure: 'unpat' occurs as one beat in the pulse that runs through 'whereat/root/unpat/but'. And you would also have to ignore that 'whereat', an unexpectedly formal word in context, suggests that something will happen next – that some new things may be about to convene – only to have the possibility escape in the uncertain shine of 'unpat'. So the poem is both noun and verb: it names and it enacts simultaneously. It corresponds to the intention Scully describes in an interview "not to write an autobiography, not to sketch a hero and edit amazing events, but to interact with the world... Not to meditate on the world, but to be *in* it."²

This is surely one reason for Scully's often stated dislike of simile. Implying that something is *like* something else distances it from the immediate world: rather than interact, it counteracts by apposing a parallel. At its most literal, 'things that happen', is a statement of fact. Reader, open this book and you can hope to find things happening – a Tinguely exhibiton in which the role of the clanking, clanging, ringing, singing complex of machinery is taken by words. Kit Fryatt has explained that 'things that happen' in fact "distantly alludes [to a speech in which] Celan spoke of the effects of the Holocaust upon language: 'It passed through and gave back no words for that which happened; yet it passed through all this happening.'"³ Celan's bleakly incontrovertible suggestion is that some events, however words may probe them, are beyond their scope: they can propose nothing meaningfully commensurate to what indubitably happens. Fryatt rightly remarks that "the imprecision of [Scully's] allusion is calculated to avoid appropriation of Celan's suffering and that of European Jews, while it quietly draws attention to everyday enormity". And, it might be added, it allows Scully's title to contrast with the phrase used by Celan in confronting a very different historical and cultural circumstance. In recent decades Scully has made his poetry in a reconstructed, unheated, sinking shed, a few paces from his house at the bottom of the garden, surrounded by papers and books, hearing birds and sometimes a dripping roof. The dimensions are utterly different. The rescaling of 'everday enormity' (an exact phrase) is a permission: in Scully's world, resonances from what happens

don't strike the walls of the sort of anechoic chamber that Celan had to listen to, and so are not necessarily stripped of the possibility of equivalent words.

But the reading of 'To The' above is misleadingly incomplete. Only in a limited sense is the detail of the walnut shell, for instance, 'momentary evidence'. Why, we could ask, this detail and not any of the other nine thousand nine hundred and ninety nine ? If it's an arbitrary choice, is that sufficient reason to include it ? If it's there to root the text in detail, wouldn't any detail do ? Scully however is way too careful to be arbitrary: if his work sounds informal it's never casual. Amongst the pages that precede 'To The' is this passage:

listeners there
are &
steady hey but

cohere? Go there
look: hanker after
people or a

god or a blinding
pattern
one of the

smallest birds in
the world its
nest the size

of half a
walnut shell
built to such

deft such delicate
these feathers
leaves even telltale

flower-petals moss
hair feet

bill spider-thread

weaving or the
bird's own saliva
together or both (364)

The 'half a walnut shell' in 'To The' migrated from these lovely flitting rhythms to be woven into the later page as a flower motif might in the border of a renaissance tapestry (the same motif in fact occurs a number of times in the book). It starts life as a measure for the size of a bird's nest, while in the later passage the nest has gone, leaving the shell an autonomous detail. If we hear the echo, 'To The' can be read as a structure whose thin and fragmentary fibres hold together according to the poet's skill as a music-weaver of in-gathered matter in the same way that the nest depends on the bird's skill as a sticker-together of feathers, flowers, moss etc.. The nutshell is neither an arbitrary detail nor a forced intruder but one of the many motivic spider-threads - the 'tiny multiple/ rivetings' (366) - that hold the book's web in place, one instance of an essential and recurrent technique. And if you look carefully you see the second appearance of the shell isn't actually one detail at all, but two: the text says 'a walnut/ a shell'. That added determiner creates a rhythm whose staccato cadence makes the 'dying out' in the text into a thing that can actually be heard happening-- an occurrence in a new context as much as a recurrence.

Any technique of course can sometimes fail to function. If stuck when working on a text Scully has what he calls his 'Secret-Emergency-Procedure-In-A-Fix' method which consists of

recording the work, then listening to it, super-attentively, in the dark, as a critical, somewhat sympathetic, *impossibly* knowing stranger. This must be used very sparingly and with great concentration or it loses effect. Then revise and sculpt and work to keep the evanescent growing shape in your mind as you go. You don't quite know where you're going of course. To know that would be death to the vitality of the work.⁴

What I find fascinating here is how, to get out of a fix, Scully puts himself in the position of a reader – specifically a *listener* – in order to free himself to work on the text as the bird works on the growing shape of its nest. He attends to it in the way he might reasonably hope a well-disposed reader would coming to it for the first time. This bears directly on the ‘listeners there/ are’ passage, for in evoking the bird’s work Scully tells us something about how he hopes all the different strands of his poetry not only can be made to hold together, but can be recognised by the reader as they do so. He is in fact specifically responding here to Ezra Pound who in his later years came to feel that he had failed to find coherence in the Cantos – “I am not a demigod,/ I cannot make it cohere” – and consequently had made a ‘mess’ of his life’s work. Its threads wouldn’t come together in the radiance of the sort of blinding pattern he imagined Herakles envisioning - “SPLENDOUR, it all coheres” - as he approaches death. To which Scully seems to rejoin, *hang on EP, that’s way over the top, demi-gods? blinding patterns? what do you want those for when you’ve got listeners and the example of one of earth’s tiniest birds. Take a look: these are all the elements anyone needs for things to cohere if you’re super-attentive.* And to make sure we don’t miss the point, the passage ends

their eggs even
 their eggs themselves
 stuck down fast

against gales one
 flat yes precision

stuck down
 fast

This is example rather than metaphor: the method isn’t *like* the bird’s, it *is* the bird’s, adapted to purpose. A gramme or two of bird can secure its eggs in a filigree structure against the wild elements by making a precise coherence of its fibres and filaments: the poet applies the same method to make aligned words cohere. I’d love to add an etymology that derived *coherence* from *co-here*, “co” meaning to bring together (a cooperation - for example, between

reader and writer via a page) plus “here” meaning exactly what it says (here and now). Alas, it would be completely spurious though the word’s original meaning in Latin, ‘to stick together’, is close to what adhere now means. And Adherence is the title of the section of Livelihood where these passages first appeared. Would it be any more reasonable to propose that for all its apparently disrupted surface, ‘To The’ holds together because we - *if* we – can *adhere* to it and to the poet’s attention in ‘sticking it’ together... ?⁵

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It would be wrong to give the impression that the texture of ‘To The’ however is any more than one of many textures in the book. Whilst the writing may seek coherence in the weave of its threads, often these aren’t disruptive or fragmented at all. Scully is essentially a lyric poet of great and sometimes simple grace.

Dandelion & daisy begin.

Soon a sweetish whiff

of wallflower and walks

past the Ashtown Tin Box Factory

down to the pouring canal.

These words are the last in the book. There’s a subtle mastery of rhythm and sound here (compare the contrasting speeds of the last 2 lines), of alliteration (the ‘d’s of line 1, ‘s’s of line 2, ‘w’s of lines 2 & 3, ‘t’s of line 4 and more remotely the ‘p’s of lines 4 & 5) and detail (how the ‘Ashtown Tin Box Factory’ undoes what might be assimilated as pastoral; or how ‘Soon’ does the same by tying the lines to an implied moment not a general sentiment), that could only be managed by a poet long familiar with his craft. Indeed the way the five lines pivot around the deliberately placed repeated syllable ‘wall-/wal-’ brings to mind the way the syllable ‘-land’ structures the celebrated mediaeval lyric ‘I cham of Irlaunde/ Ant of the holy londe/ Of Irlaunde’, whilst the interlacing of vowels and consonants both

for contrast and echo seems as intricately worked as Bunting's 'a thrush in the syringa sings'⁶ Scully's first line actually has a first word that contains 4 varied vowel-sounds and three out of four words that repeat a vowel (-de, -sy, be-), an alliteration and an internal rhyme ('and'). Placed on the last page of the book with its image of the water-pouring canal, the text gives us a brief musical wonder that articulates onward flow as an image for writing that evolves from the fluidity of what daily happens. For the record we also have another of those 'multiple rivetings' on which the volume's coherence so much relies: 493 pages earlier – and as the texts are roughly chronological, perhaps two and a half decades earlier also – is a page that ends

a flower incongruous in concrete by a gate
 where dogs piss marking off a mate
 or a place where/ a wallflower
 & a sweetish whiff .(90)

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Over the years Maurice has frequently sent me work in typescript prior to publication. From time to time a package would arrive in the mails with a set of bound photocopies always in the same format, black plastic slide-binder, A4, often the same typewriter. A greeting, a short pithy message. Sometimes a tiny piece of information that illuminated a detail of the text.⁷ Always simple, always good-humoured. As a result most of the writing that went into *Livelihood*, and ultimately **Things that Happen**, arrived piecemeal and was read as if complete in itself. The emerging architecture of a larger structure, never entirely graspable in any case, more or less escaped me. Scully has a mesmerising capacity to choose ordinary words, to a large degree words that anyone could find themselves saying, and by cleaning off their edges and exactly composing their syllables, transform them from roadstone into fresh-washed pebbles. It was this brilliance extracted from the everyday that I enjoyed on the days when the typescripts turned up. To encounter Scully's words for the first time is to be handed "a way into [a] delicate fossil-music... that won't leave/ my daren't my ear alone" (347), that tiny hiccup of perception enacting the music's tenacity. Consider the marimbas here for instance: "A monkey's grassblade trickily siphoning

living nibblets/ from an anthill...” (that’s a real monkey in the real Matabeleland) (156). The voice speaks from *within* the world, immediate, uncontrived to the point that it can shift from something like child’s play to quick-witted self-irony and the gear-change is barely noticeable:

I thought I could
hear a leaf...

...land
on my page-

top here on my table-top
bid bead bed bod then/
then delete that oh

just another born-again
quietist waiting to
bite back (406)

Above all, reading the typescripts, the writing seemed audible. These were words that were being said, part of a conversation in which I could imagine even the page itself listening should anyone, or anything, choose to reply. The pages often do in fact transcribe Scully in a kind of conversation with himself, but in such a way that the reader is just as much the one spoken to. At times it’s quite explicit:

an
exciting science of slicing clutter from
your life can be... I call it *poetry*.
& you? well, let’s work together...

...Art, Wine, Committees &
Involuntary Spasms. let’s - I thought – surely
we can discuss this one. (143)

Even the way his lines sometimes compact or cut into one another, hesitate or advance by indirection, seem influenced by the rhythms and patterns of conversation. And Scully is clear about the use he

makes of talk

learning to follow
the way you hear the talk

you will learn to follow
the ways you see the talk
deployed (283)

As a teacher of English as a foreign language for many years, Scully has lived by listening to others learning to speak an unfamiliar language and he takes the habit with him when he goes down to the shed to write. He practices ‘an ache of disciplined listenings over long/ spaces, to make “a this” that is not for sale’ (329) and if we get the injunction “Listen to the sound of that” (362) there’s no knowing if he talks to himself or us. His emergency-procedure kit for revision involves *listening* with ‘great concentration’ to his own words as a stranger might, as an outsider entering a conversation. Many pages of **Things That Happen** are filled with the sounds that visit as Scully sits at his desk listening, preparing to write, so what the words subsequently register might be read as a reply to – or a conversation with – all that constitutes ambient noise.

Ambient noise... oh, something wrong there, for me... [I] t’s neither ambient nor noise, but the penetrating signature of... everywhere I’ve lived. All the many houses I’ve lived in, rooms I’ve worked in, they’ve all had their own highly distinctive song, sound. Composed certainly of quite mundane things [...] but in combination, extraordinarily distinctive. Not to privilege human language and stuff it with ego but listen, the poet a contributor not an imperious editor⁸

The pervasive sense of an imagination nurtured by listening and insistently close to the sounds of talk, has a lot to do with why reading **Things That Happen** seems so much like participating in an exchange. As much as the poet is seeking to articulate an interactive relation to the world – a sense “of the world impacting its *itself* on you” (302) – he’s also shaping his words as an exchange with the reader in a mirroring of that relation.

And then on one occasion I received a sequence (part of what was eventually published as Tig) that contained these lines:

I've had quite enough
Creativity

Free Expression, Genius & all that.
Quits.

Let's communicate. (562)

This struck me at the time as key, and remains so. The entire six hundred and three pages of **Things That Happen** could be read under its sign. For all the sometimes broken or compressed surfaces of Scully's work (and I've focused disproportionately on that here), he's a poet saying things that he wants to communicate through *speech*-- "...& all that" is spoken before it's written language. His work isn't bolstered by literary or political theory. It doesn't invite decoding. If it jump-cuts and fissures, that's the world in which "information magnif[ies] to a grainy blur" (329) impacting its multiplicitous "itself" on the words he's using. To misquote William Carlos Williams, Scully gives us 'no ideas but in things that happen,' at the speed they happen, although the essential misquote here is that Williams, as is usually overlooked, insisted on preceding his words with 'Say it' (sometimes with added exclamation mark). He "wanted to write a poem/ that you could understand. For what good is it to me/ if you can't understand it?" but the contract needed the reader's signature: "but you've got to try hard"⁹ No conversation ever goes far without alert listening. Creativity, Free Expression, Genius etc. are impertinent to what poetry communicates if it means that the "this" of it is somehow uniquely rooted in the poet. Talent at the point of sale. No, please, quits, let's talk it over rather than that. Communication isn't a one-way telling. It's a connection made over sought-for common ground.

If we say his work, I think it's impossible to miss that Scully is an oral poet (the cd issued in 2000 on which he reads with Randolph Healey is called *Mouthpuller* for good reason). In this sense it's hard to understand why Scully isn't more widely known in his native country for Irish literature is full of writing propelled by an instinctive orality. Joyce and Beckett wrote pages of talk, Jack B Yeats wrote 'talking novels', Flann O'Brien also, under such a crowd of pseudonyms they could talk amongst themselves. Colm Toibin considers "the greatest novel in the Irish language" to be *Cré na Cille* by Mairtin O Cadhain, a work composed entirely of dialogue in a Connemara dialect. Wilde wrote plays, novels poems yet is known principally for things culled from his texts and appropriated to his voice as 'quotations'-- things *said*. And where orality matters it can only thrive if it meets a willingness to listen. Stories – or poetry – are a relation, both in the sense of 'a narrative' and 'a relationship'. They add up afresh with each retelling: they require the mouth and the ears to pull them into shape. They implicate an audience.

There's a story that tells how Joyce and Beckett once shared a taxi in Paris and having passed the journey in complete silence, parted company remarking that it had been good to talk. That may be an unconvincing witness to actual events but is clearly true as story. The proof would be in the telling, in what mouths and ears do with the evidence as it's passed on. **Things That Happen** is a testament to decades of patient work, a telling of poetry made from – *in* – circumstances as they pass through. Its musical fabric is traced by a voice that listens to a world in which the passage of what happens gives back words as quantum resonances. I don't think Scully is claiming that such words will always be heard, merely that consistent and dedicated attention may attune the ear to their availability. But only if both poet and reader know how to listen and hear what's said.

to recapture details

before yr decision

just as they were exactly so
is not possible

after yr decision

it was perhaps the best thing possible
in the circumstances.

that “now” can mean

nothing.

as I say... (59)

Endnotes

¹ A Line of Tony Zeros in the Fabric (ALZ), Shearsman, p.12.

² ALZ, p.69.

³ ALZ, p.68. I originally imagined that 'things that happen' might carry overtones from Auden's line in the elegy for Yeats, "poetry makes nothing happen, it survives' and that Scully's was partially a reflection on Auden's words: if poetry makes nothing happen it's because it is, of its nature, something that already happens. Which is nearly what Auden actually writes a few lines later 'it survives/ A way of happening, a mouth'. Without questioning Fryatt who is obviously right, I checked with Maurice whether Auden's was in any way relevant to his title. Answer: 'Auden it isn't'. Which is clear enough. I was reading into Scully's title an echo that got in by my error not his intent.

⁴ ALZ, p.17.

⁵ In a recent email, Maurice made some remarks about the structuring methods in these books that seem relevant here. The point being that while the reader is unlikely to notice, these devices are nonetheless fundamental to the form--the unseen bones to the body 's shape. "In *Cohering* (co-hear-ing) you'll find that the last word of pieces often rhyme with the first or the title of the next piece. The central piece (pp 366 - 369) rhymes with itself, beginning & ending with the same word ('good'), a bardic poetry convention. Also the whole section (pp 359 - 376) begins & ends with "Look". *Cohering* was written around the time of the birth of our twins: I thought of the 2 'o's' in 'Good' & 'Look' as representing their advent, their eggs ... that's the kind of daft nonsense I use to structure things. I don't expect *any* reader *ever* to pick up that. It's just a private structuring device. But the structure can be picked up subliminally. "

⁶ I have a note wondering whether, consciously or not, Scully's 'a breeze in the ivy clicks' (474) owes something to Bunting's line.

⁷ 'Arc,' for instance, the heading for a piece on p.453 that's partly a memorial to Scully's father, if read backwards gives the Gaelic word for 'sorrow'.

⁸ ALZ, p.82.

⁹ WCW, Paterson, 'The Delineaments of the Giants', I and 'January Morning' section XV.