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Headphone Hypocrisy

Meredith Stephens

Walking along the esplanade, the throngs of passersby sport headphones or earbuds as they jog or walk their dog. Shouldn't they be in the moment, savoring the sea air or the sunset, rather than escaping to another world through their earphones? At least they could be talking to their dog as they jog. It seems a betrayal of the here-and-now to escape to another time and place in a locale which is already beautiful, and a defiance of mindfulness. Since I have been awakened to the power of using the five senses to appreciate the immediate environment I cannot shut off this awareness.

Then again, maybe I am longing for the days when strangers were more conscious of others sharing their space, and would acknowledge them with a comment about the weather in passing. Perhaps I am like the protagonist in the Japanese series *Totally Inappropriate*, who time travels from the Showa Era (1926 - 1989) to the present, and wonders why passersby are wearing “noodles” in their ears.

Meanwhile back at home I am burdened with the task of sorting through items from my parents' shed. There are books with decaying spines they had inherited from the 1800s, documents from a great-uncle who had no descendants, and paintings by a great-aunt. I divide the items into those to keep, donate and recycle. The recycle piles include electronic waste. I add some old cables and cords to the pile, and then spy an old set of headphones. The foam on the ear covers is faded, and I place them in the electronic waste pile. Then, on a whim, I plug them into my phone, turn on You-Tube music, and play some songs by James Taylor. Suddenly I am transported to another time and place. The headphones are so old that they do not sit neatly on my head, so I hold them in place.

“I found some old headphones!” I announce to Alex. “I am going to eat my words the next time I see someone sporting headphones on the beach.”

“They are old and grotty. You can do better!” replied Alex.

I am set in my ways, and remember the words of the previous generation who would use objects until they broke and then repair them, or repurpose them. I cling to my pair of tattered earphones and persist in using them whenever I need a lift in mood.

“I’m getting you some new headphones for your birthday,” insists Alex. “You won’t look back.”

“You know I’m a Luddite. I am quite happy with these,” I protest.

Days before my birthday Alex drives me to the electronics store in the mall. The assistant shows us headphones with wires. Using bluetooth would be too contemporary for me. Alex spies some pink headphones and he knows how often I wear pink.

“How about these?” he asks me.

“Lovely!”

Why are they more expensive than the black ones?” he asks the assistant.

The assistant picks up the box and replies, “You can have them for half price!”

The deal is done, and I now find myself with a pair of pink earphones which deliver good quality sound and stay positioned on my head. Now it is my turn to escape from my surroundings to another time and place. They do insulate me from the conversations of people around me, but they are not noise-canceling, so if someone is addressing me I can just push one side back to participate in the conversation.

“You could use them on the boat next time we sail to Kangaroo Island!” urges Alex.

We had a long sailing adventure in 2022 when the borders were open after the pandemic. We sailed from South Australia to the south of Tasmania, up the east coast to Southport, across the Coral Sea to the Loyalty Islands in New Caledonia, before returning home almost two years later. Now that

our boat is back in South Australia, we take every opportunity to sail to Kangaroo Island. There are few other vessels in the strait. Sometimes there are tankers, cruise ships or trawlers in the distance, and fishing vessels along the coast, but few pleasurecraft. The five-hour trip affords plenty of time to listen to music.

Alex checks the weather forecast and once he has confirmed that the winds are favorable, we decide to head to the island. We load our Border Collie, Haru, into the car and drive to the marina. On the dock, Haru trots happily ahead of us, anticipating the sailing. We strap her lifejacket on and she bounces up to sun herself on the side of the boat. Alex takes the helm, and we depart the marina into the strait, waving at fisherfolk in their vessels entering the marina. The boat starts rocking, and I summon Haru from the side of the boat and tether her to a ring at the bow.



The most exciting thing for me about sailing is being joined by dolphins. They usually join us when we have been sailing for a couple of hours and are at the mid-point in the strait. Several dolphins swim beside us and then head to the bow, swimming just in front of us. Then dolphins in the distance are attracted to the congregation of dolphins at the boat and head towards us. They dive and breach in front of us for up to an hour, before swimming away. If it is calm enough we sit on the bow and talk to them. The day of the winter solstice is not too cold, and once the dolphins make their appearance I untether Haru and head to the bow with her. This time I am about to do something which contradicts my principles. Instead of being present in the moment, savoring the

rocking motion of the boat, smelling the sea air, and enjoying the dolphins' antics, I am going to don my headphones. First, I listen to Japanese pop music, guiltily displacing myself in time and space. Japan is so far away and the music is from the nineties. Then I listen to Californian pop music from the seventies. I even listen to Bach cantatas recorded in the Netherlands. I feel that I have betrayed the present moment with my artificial escape to distant locales, but I can't help but have a heightened sense of enjoyment when I listen to the music. The sea air smells even better, the rocking motion feels more pleasant, and I still enjoy watching the dolphins. I can even sing to them now that I have musical accompaniment in my head. Haru doesn't mind, as I stroke her forehead in circles, that I am listening to music rather than fully devoting my attention to her.



When I return to the esplanade in Adelaide I resolve to no longer criticize those jogging or walking their dogs while wearing earphones. We must have music, and if technology has made it possible to avail ourselves of it anywhere and anytime, I will embrace it.

Bio:

Meredith Stephens is an applied linguist from South Australia. Her creative work has appeared in the *Blue Mountain Review*, *Agape Review*, *The Font - A Literary Journal for Language Teachers*, *Continue the Voice*, and *MockingOwl Roost* blog. In 2022, with Yudai Aoki, she received the Michelle Steele Best of JALT Award for Extensive Reading. In 2024 her stories were featured as the Editor's Choice for the June edition of *All Your Stories*.