

Singing in Summers of Distress

by Joseph Corrado

I awoke to Edward Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*—just as I had instructed my jiggy comm to always play for wake-up music on weekends. It made me feel like I was getting to the finish line with a smooth victory march. I sprang from my bed and paced with the music toward my wall comm, imagining that it would deliver a diploma that would qualify me for a jiggy getaway.

"Please open a north window," I said to my NexGen comm as I rubbed sleep from my eyes. The giant screen lit up and the digital shutters sprung open to reveal what looked like another cool summer dawn in Portland. In my usual morning stupor, I watched an OHSU tram gondola glide down from the hospital's hillside, swinging slowly as it passed over the I-5 freeway. Gray clouds covered the sky like a vast rumpled blanket.

"Allah be praised!" I said half aloud reverting to my childhood speech. It was a perfect day for a trip to the coast. I was imagining Pacific City for strolling on the beach, breathing ocean air, listening to the night waves rolling, and forgetting all the muck and ruck.

My window snapped to a cam feed with an eagle-eye view of the Willamette river by Tillicum Crossing. I stared at the languid river and became entranced by the soft grey ripples lapping the western bank—phalanxes of gray shadows advancing to the shore. I glimpsed the faces of grief in the recent vids of the horrific massacres in El Paso and Dayton only a few weekends ago. And I remembered Toni Morrison's recent passing and her insistence that words have power and that oppressive language is a form of violence.

The virtual ripples morphed into lines of marchers who would be converging this afternoon in Tom McCall Waterfront Park. Patriot Prayers and some Proud Boys would be strolling in the same park with Rose City Antifa and their coalition. Everyone was expecting vile, violent language amplified by mobile PA systems and boom boxes. There would be verbal duels, taunts, cruelty. Dangerous stuff might be thrown or sprayed. Maybe fighting.

I took a deep breath of relief that I would be far away from all this mess. I had a tinge of guilt about leaving Doc Vic and Molly to face the music on their own. But they had insisted that I take some well-deserved "down time." Besides, there was no room for me in the truck. I should go unwind somewhere.

So I told the comm to pop my Today4U panel and build an itinerary for a weekend trip to Pacific City—departing in about an hour.

"I suggest reserving a room at the UTurn Inn, Akbar. It is near Pacific City and at the edge of the beach."

"Show me," I said excitedly. A 360-degree peep frame opened to a small tidy motel at the edge of the sand and close enough to the shore to hear the waves calling. I tapped for a reservation at UTurn and headed for the shower.

Oye Como Va by Carlos Santana started to play as the shower turned to a cool light rain. I stood in the drizzle and floated off to the day when I first met Professor Vic Porquio, when I was still doing sketch gig projects and free-lance hacking for pop-up multi-level marketing fly-by-nights.

I flashed on him charging into the Philosophy class that foggy morning at Portland Community College. He paced furiously back and forth and then turned to us and almost shouted: "Where's Aristotle when you need him?" He looked stern and then he shouted the question again and made us squirm in the silence.

I saw the Courage teeter-totter he projected—a tippy balance between deficiency at one end, excess at the other. "Real courage," he boomed, "balances the beam. It does not tip to the extremes of cowardice or rashness." I thought he looked directly at me when he said it wasn't easy to do.

Doc Vic, as I came to call him, introduced me to Daniel Kahneman's ideas in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. I learned how slow thinking is more work for our brains; how it's always easier to glide along in fast mode—just taking everything at face value and going with the flow.

Then I flashed on that bright morning when Doc Vic had called me and a few other PCC students to his office, and showed us vids of his recent experiments with his EEMAD, which he decoded as an Eye-Ear-Mouth Autonomous Drone. It was a flying cam linked with a microphone linked with an acoustic generator and amplifier for his Directed And Modulated sounds. DAM tones he called them—sonic stimuli for prompting and reinforcing slow-mode focus in large crowds. Cutting-edge social tech.

He confided that he was starting a small consulting business, Centroid Logics, for developing his DAM technology. Would any of us be interested in joining his small enterprise? Science at the edge. Hard logic. Long hours. Basic living pay.

So that was the day Doc Vic hired me and Molly, the day we started working on the big Portland Police Bureau contract. The police had heard about our EEMADs and Doc had sold them on "a prototype acoustic device for security support." It was basically a truck-mounted platform for twenty of his DAM drones. They wanted to augment their current Long Range Acoustic Device, the LRAD 450XL, and link with their forensics truck with its cams and vid uplinks. But instead of the LRAD's ear-splitting sirens that make your fingers spasm, our sonic effectors used the Doc's DAM slow-mode-control tech.

Molly did mostly admin and logistics. I did a lot of the code hacks and hardware assembly. The work was hectic but I loitered outside the Doc's office one morning and overheard the speaker phone. Someone was saying "...independent observer thing....Directive

635.10...just sending twenty new feeds to the IC for situational awareness." Chief Outlaw said we were sitting on a powder keg, and the new EEMADs would be like having twenty extra MAVs deployed. The mayor said the DAM thing was our ace in the hole...high priority...must be ready for August 17, 2019. Today.

I jumped out of my shower daze and dressed quickly. I hauled my knapsack out and stuffed it hurriedly. There was barely room left for my laptop. Maybe I could leave it behind? But it had all my DIS project files and I imagined that hacking on the beach might actually be relaxing.

But didn't I want a getaway from the grind? I argued with myself and my mind drifted to thinking of the possibility of an audio duel between the PPB's LRAD system and the EEMAD's transducer array that also broadcasted in the 1 – 5 kHz range, where human hearing is most sensitive. Would their shrill and painful sounds neutralize our "chi tones"?

My comm beeped and Molly's worried face popped into a Zoom pane. "Hi Mol, what's up?" I asked as nonchalantly as I could. Then Doc Vic's pale, haggard face with an oxygen hose up his nose popped into another pane. "Wh...wh...what's wrong," I rasped.

The Doc said he had a bad case of food poisoning...no way he could be on the truck this afternoon. Would I please take his place? He knew that I knew all the controls and there were detailed procedures in his notebooks. He had complete confidence that I could step in. He apologized for the abrupt change of plans and promised a full-week getaway as soon as he was back in the saddle.

I couldn't say anything at first. Resentment and fear entered in fast mode. No well-deserved R&R. And I would have to be close to possible violence where my dark brown, Afro-Mexican skin might draw the hateful attention of some of the white supremacists or their cronies. The thought of being so close to their venom made me weak-kneed. But then I imagined how exciting it would be to sit up at the control console and witness our DAM things in action.

I tried to sound more confident than I felt. "For sure, Doc. No mess. I hope you are OK for sure. I know how everything sets up and runs. Mol and I can do it for sure. Get well soon."

Molly cleared her throat and said she could meet me at the office in an hour. She tried to joke that everything would be jiggy as long as I didn't show up wearing my red Muslim kufi cap. I laughed weakly and the Doc wheezed as the hospital cam feed trembled, making it look like he had suddenly gone into a seizure. He waved goodbye with a pained, pixilated smile. Molly waved goodbye with an unconvincing grin.

I reluctantly emptied my knapsack. The question of including my laptop was now resolved. There was plenty of room and I might need it...for something. And then I threw in my mobile charger, my water bottle, and four energy bars to call breakfast when I had a chance.

A couple of minutes later, I was on my bike for a twenty-minute ride to the office—maybe faster if the traffic along Macadam was light. The morning air was humid but still fresh and I pedaled steadily in a comfortable low gear.

My mind wandered to snatches of the Doc's DAM lectures: Directed And Modulated audio...like cooing and singing softly to restless babies...gentle nature sounds...soothing chimes... a neural gyroscope for emotional balance. I flashed on his jiggy PowerPoints for the research that proved that certain tonal patterns at certain frequencies helped about 80% of randomly selected adults to maintain slow-mode control.

When I rolled up to our office and garage on SE Water Avenue, Molly was loading EEMADs into the launch racks on the truck. I wanted to slow down and talk and eat a power bar but she said our time was tight and I should retrieve the control console and ops manuals in the Doc's office and then we had to boogy.

I stowed my bike and stashed the Doc's keys and the red 3-ring ops binder into my knapsack. Molly and I ramped the control console up onto the truck's flat bed and I clamped it down. Molly had already fitted the shells that protected the EEMADs on the racks. The result was something like a long carton cradling twenty, giant, multi-colored eggs.

Molly laughed her jiggy way and said her "checklist say all da checks be complete and we be ready to roll." She climbed up and slipped behind the wheel and the engine beeped on. We glided silently out of the garage into the cool gray morning. Distant sirens screamed somewhere across the river.

Soon, the steel grating of the Hawthorne Bridge rumbled under us. Many walkers and bikers along the bridge waved, and smiled, or made peace signs. I saw a couple of zany clowns, one with a sign that said "Joey is a Bozo," probably referring to Joey Gibson, the smirking leader of the Patriot Prayer squad. Or maybe it meant Joe Biggs in his "I'm Just Here for the Violence" tee shirt.

We passed a dancing unicorn and a bunch of people wearing white chef hats and carrying signs announcing "White Flour." A large marching band, Banana Bloc, was dressed in bright yellow tunics and peaked hats. Many young and old people, many singing and laughing. But despite all the local bonhomie, I felt weak and anxious and definitely out of my comfort zone.

I thought it would be good to distract myself so I blurted that I was excited to actually field test our DIS stuff and prove that it really works. Molly laughed. "Dis stuff? Dis stuff? You lips be too lazy to say dis DAM stuff?" I laughed nervously, realizing my Freudian slip. I stammered and confided that I called my side hack project "DIS," meaning Dysfunction Intervention with Song. "Dis be why you burn the lights all night?" Molly prodded with a chuckle and nudge to my ribs.

So I told her my DIS story that began that night when I'd been hacking some of the Doc's DAM code and imagined broadcasting something that would be better than the simple humming tones in the current EEMADs. I explained how I studied vids from Charlottesville and other protests and had noted how a single raised voice could often lead to its echo by the group.

The truck stopped abruptly, about midway over the Willamette. Ahead, the traffic was backed up from a police checkpoint at the end of the bridge. Molly made a big sigh and asked me to try to finish my DIS story before we got to the checkpoint. So I tried to

summarize that toxic verbal behaviors typically segued into pushing. The push becomes punch. Next come tangled sounds and struggling bodies and a blur of fleshy blobs and pointy things. And next I remembered the *bouba* and *kiki* experiment by Wolfgang Köhler.

Molly was listening carefully as the truck inched forward so I elaborated on how Köhler used two distinct shapes: a distorted, seven-point star, and a shape like an amoeba with seven soft-edged pseudopods. He asked people which shape is named *bouba* and which is *kiki*.

"*Bouba* be the amoeba," Molly interjected. "The spikey one be *kiki*."

"Right jiggy on," I replied. "Almost everyone, over 97%, even kids, even people who don't speak English; they all choose *kiki* for the angular shape and *bouba* for the rounded one."

"So what be dis fact good for?" Molly pressed.

I explained that Köhler's test proved there is a predictable linkage between human auditory and visual stimuli. Synesthesia is real. So that night it hit me to hack a mesh of neural nets to morph *kiki* protest words into *bouba* chants and marching tunes and dancing songs. Participation would produce more slow-mode control—even more than the Doc's DAM tones.

"My DIS prototype listens to the spikey tones and shrill sounds and hateful words and then the AI transforms them into *bouba* songs. People will become enthralled with their own powerful music. No violence. Just singing.

"Wooah der," Molly put a hand on my waving arm. "You be sayin' dis hack run over da Doc's DAM speakers?"

"For sure," I said excitedly. "Same hardware. Just new code hacks for the ears and mouths. I already ran a test last week at Providence Park—Timbers against the Vancouver Whitecaps. My system worked like jiggy. I synced the tempo to the Timber's capo's gestures and everyone started singing along with DIS." Molly raised an eyebrow and frowned and said my idea sounded a little fringe and maybe something the Doc might try for the EEMAD Mark II.

Finally we passed through and drove past a line of concrete barriers and down to a staging area. I spotted the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Federal Protective Service, the Port of Portland, Gresham police, county sheriffs and state police. A burly cop stepped out from a trailer marked "Crowd Management Incident Commander (CMIC)." He checked our IDs and then a bike cop led us to a spot within view of the Battleship Oregon Memorial.

We parked on the Esplanade, not far from where I had stood that day in 2008 when 75,000 people listened to Barak Obama predict "Yes, we can." That vivid memory boosted my nerve and somewhat loosened the knot tightening in my stomach.

I climbed up to the control console and set the EEMADs ready for launch. The scissor lift raised the racks over my head while I turned on the surveil mapper, and the police cam feeds.

I watched a large group gather around the mast from the old U.S.S. Oregon. They started clapping and singing and dancing to a festive song that I didn't recognize. Further north, on

a cam feed from the Morrison Bridge, I watched clumps of outsiders in camo clothes and black shirts and pants and red MAGA caps. I glimpsed a bearded outsider jumping around in a "Training to Throw Communists Out of Helicopters" tee shirt. Something like sagging bagpipes were straining on a tinny boom box. A guy in suspenders attempted a few steps of a Scottish jig that elicited some weak whistles and hoots of approval. The loud, bag-pipey music droned on as they clumped into a marching formation.

The police had now closed Hawthorne Bridge, but my cam feeds still showed a crazy quilt of Antifa groups and supporters surging up from the south end of the park, many waving Iron Front flags and beating drums. My surveil mapper refreshed with ID flags the police were using: Malawi Mouse Boys, Canary Island Whistlers, Western States Center, Empathy Riot, Democratic Socialists of America, Pop Mob, Khmer Rouge Survivors, ART JAM, Portland Health Professionals for Justice, PDX Press, Outside Press, and a dozen more with only numeric IDs.

On both sides, many were wearing masks or bandanas or oversized, silvered aviator glasses under hoodies or construction hats or bike helmets. But the unconcealed white-supremacist faces seemed more menacing. They had a crude and self-righteous mien for teaching the locals a lesson. I felt an undertow of contempt for them and then was seized by a fear of losing control over my own fear of their irrationality.

So, I imagined myself to be an invisible jinn of my childhood. I flew through the air and snatched the face and head coverings off the Boys and their ilk. Then I was marching with the ART JAM group, my bike helmet strobing and a medical mask over my mouth and nose.

I returned from my reverie and watched the two large waves of protestors slowly converge. A woman in white, carrying a "White Supremacy Is Terrorism" sign, confronted a MAGA-hatted fast talker who kept ranting and pointing to the ground as if claiming Portland as his turf too.

I launched the EEMADs and started recording the converging struts and shouts. Then I started the DAM tones and watched as group movements slowed and became distracted by the powerful piezoelectric transducers focusing acoustic energy. The Doc's first chi tones sounded to me like Tubular Bells by Mike Oldfield.

Just as the Doc's research predicted, I watched our real-time AI learn which tones worked best for slowing and redirecting the protestors' movements. Everything was going jiggy. A great weight was lifting and I reached for another power bar. But as I slowly chewed the tough fiber, I watched in dismay as the protestors began to acclimate to the tones and regroup and form new shouting matches.

Soon, the air was thick again with horrible, hate-filled words—especially from the Proud outsiders. What would they do if they noticed my nice brown skin, or suspected my Mexican...or Sufi Muslim heritage? My hands began to tremble as I fumbled the DAM controls.

The shouting grew louder and the language more vile and our DAM tones were making no difference. I glimpsed a clutch of Proud Boys who were pointing and shouting at our truck; me sitting at the console. And I guess that's when I lost control and figured that there was nothing to lose if I plugged in my laptop and uploaded my DIS code to the console for a real

"road test." So my AI listened to all the cacophony and the drifting EEMADs became a chorus of DIS music.

Shouts of "go back home" fused into a thumping chant of "gum humm" that reminded me of a triumphal phrase at the end of Tchaikovsky's *Capriccio Italian*. Yells and taunts of "Nazi trash" morphed to "nash om ta" in a cadence that sounded like something from Blue Man Group's *PVC Pipes and Percussion*. Screams of "commie traitors" became "come for tra" in a hypnotic rhythm that pulsed like the powerful Mellotron the Moody Blues used for *Every Good Boy Deserves Favor*. Empathy Riot was singing like the "O Fortuna" sopranos in Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*.

The EEMADs became the song capos. The protest was transmuting into a clash of civil chanting—a musical contest—our songs are stronger than yours. Everyone would spend themselves in singing their hearts out. Here, certainly, was the ultimate in non-violent protest.

But my confidence quickly tipped to panic when the clutch of Proud Boys caught my eye again. A scrawny guy wearing a MAGA hat and holding a flag that warned "Don't tread on me" was giving me the finger. A couple of masked men in hob-nailed boots started to shout "get the commie drone nerd." They began strutting toward me, jabbing their flagpoles menacingly.

I looked around frantically. No police nearby. Then a band of black brothers and a big beefy white guy broke away from the main Antifa throng to follow the outsiders heading toward me.

The scrawny MAGA hat guy brandished a stiletto knife. Then one of the black brothers pulled a cap off his flag staff, revealing a spear head that glinted in the weak sun. I imagined the violence that might unfold right before me and felt suddenly weak and nauseated. My hands shook and my legs felt like stones.

That's when I thought I heard the Doc calling from a drone: "Where's Aristotle when you need him?" And in a flash, I knew that I was now the fulcrum for balancing something...something more than twiddling my control knobs.

The MAGA hat guy pushed through the chanting crowds and stomped toward me, rage on his face, his stiletto arm stretching for a thrust. The black brother jumped to my defense and swiped his staff at the MAGA hat who turned and taunted my bro to take one more step forward like a real man.

So I toned the strongest org word I knew, jumped off the edge of the truck, holding my laptop to my face for protection. My intense org call and my shoulder crashed into the brother's spear-staff that cracked in half as I rolled to the ground.

"Look out!" the local brother shouted, pointing to something behind me. I twisted and saw the MAGA outsider crouching toward me, weaving his stiletto, leering and snarling like a feral thing. I jumped to a defense stance and held my laptop in outstretched arms. It was not an ideal shield, but it worked well as a sounding board for my fierce org word. He was jolted by my roar. The stiletto hesitated and then swung up and jabbed. I pushed my laptop forward like a plow blade and the stiletto struck with a jolt.

The laptop discharged a loud bang and furious sparks with a noxious smoke. The MAGA hat fell backwards in alarm, tripping one of his accomplices. Then the police arrived and hauled away MAGA hat in cuffs.

The next I remember, Molly was putting an arm around my aching shoulder and saying that the protest was losing wind and the police were letting the wing-nuts cross the Hawthorne Bridge to leave town. We should call in the EEMADs; then she would drive me home for some rest for my bruised arm.

I watched my little song birds drift back to their nests. A clump of retreating outsiders was rasping something like Tchaikovsky's *Marche Slave*. Some of my home boys were heading downtown, but most were heading for the southeast across the Hawthorne and Burnside spans. "I'll always be around and around and around and around and around..."

and around and around and around..." Their hypnotic Nietzschean mantra slowly faded into the breeze and I flashed on that windy night when Doc Vic had confided, an edge of worry in his voice, that his initial numbers indicated that it might be possible for the DAM tones to induce temporal lensing at the quantum level.

Soon, Molly was walking me into my apartment. She put a cool compress on my scraped shoulder and tucked me into bed and told my comm to call her if I needed help.

Pomp and Circumstance woke me again. I shuffled stiffly to my comm, curious about how the media were digesting yesterday's events. Today4U popped headlines: "Strange Singing Calms Park...Protest Ends in Poetry...PDX in Tune with Times...A+ for Mayor's Protest Plan..."

"Allah be praised!" I mumbled in my first language of wonder as I staggered back to my bed and climbed in.

Then *Pomp and Circumstance* woke me again. I felt weak and vaguely annoyed as I shuffled dimly to my comm. The Stack Overflow control was spinning crazy but I ignored it and told the north window to open. The shutters flung wide to a grey summer morning. The eagle-eye view of Tillicum Crossing over the Willamette seemed more like a photograph than a live cam feed.

In a semi-trance, I dazed at the river's lazy ripples and ignored the melting clock in the NexGen pane. I was still half-asleep, so I really can't say how long I stared at the replay of the river's endless waving, but I do remember that when I eventually popped my Today4U panel, a mother lode of stuff spun out, startling me like a blinding avalanche. The news feeds flowed in a dark grey blur.

"Akbar, I have archived your stack overflow and have selected only the latest Today4U feeds that you will probably find important or jiggy." the comm announced in a tired voice.

The clock, no longer melting, now clearly reported 08:43 | 06-06-2020 and then my mind sank into blackness. How could I be ten months past the last time I awoke? Could my clock be broken? Infected? Was this amnesia? Hallucination? Confused and incredulous,

I scanned the strange yet somehow familiar blips that scrolled up the panel:

6-4-2020

► **Portland Protests Against Police Killings Continues. Damian Lillard Joins March.**

Organized protesters against police brutality gathered on both sides of the Willamette River on Thursday—the eighth day of protests in the city following the police killing of **George Floyd** on May 25 in Minneapolis. **Damian Lillard** marched at the head of a large protest group. Loudspeakers were erected in Tom McCall Waterfront Park, and people danced and sang to **Kendrick Lamar's** "Alright." The very large crowd chanted "Nonviolent resistance!" as they left the park and night descended. MORE...

6-4-2020

► **Mayor Removes Portland Police From All Public Schools.** Portland Mayor **Ted Wheeler** is removing school resource officers from campuses. Portland Public Schools Superintendent **Guadalupe Guerrero** first announced the decision on Twitter MORE...

6-4-2020

► **Portland Police Chief: Focus Is on Arresting Criminals.** Portland Police Bureau Chief **Jami Resch** reported today that "Officers...will continue to facilitate free speech and assembly and focus efforts on arresting those who engage in criminal activity..." MORE...

6-5-2020

► **Portland Police Face Unrest Early Friday.** Another peaceful protest took place in Portland Thursday, but police said that after thousands of demonstrators dispersed for the night, a dozen committed crimes including dangerous street MORE...

6-5-2020

► **Portland Police Use LRAD Instead of Tear Gas for Crowd Control.** Portland Police Bureau Assistant Chief **Chris Davis** said sometime after 1:30 Friday morning, officers in the sound truck... came under attack. They deployed their "long range acoustic device," or LRAD, that reportedly emits "a tone that is very hard to be around." Chief Davis hinted that the LRAD might be considered as an alternative to CS tear gas for crowd control. MORE...

6-6-2020

► **Mayor Calls on Local Company to Upgrade the LRAD.** Mayor **Ted Wheeler** taps a local company, Centroid Logics, to convert LRAD units to emit new DAM tones as crowd-control option. The mayor explained that, instead of using the technology to produce extreme pain and hearing damage, the new Directed And Modulated (DAM) sounds would help channel negative mob energies into positive group behaviors. The mayor played a couple of acoustic samples and the press people present began to slowly sway in unison, chanting "The fourth and fifth estates are watching." MORE...

Where was I? When was I? A fast-mode angst clutched me. This was more than a wrinkle in time; more than a glitch in the matrix. I took a long, deep breath and re-centered. "Allah be praised!" I whispered in awe and submission to the fearsome mystery of the here and now.

Yet, it was probably outside of time that I began to glow with the graduate's pride and hope as I watched an OHSU tram gondola, again gliding down, swinging slowly.

###