Editors' Introduction

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...logical chains, 
confessional whispering,
the interval kept in reserve,
speech-rubble sound-scree.

Hoisted into the wind
your ear flutters,
hears itself flutter.

As I thread words they split, spoken off-target.
—Günter Grass

Don’t gobblefunk around with words.
—Roald Dahl

In “Your Ear”—from Günter Grass’s 1974 collection Liebe Geprüft (‘Love Tested’)—one partner eulogizes the fantasy of mutual understanding. Fired off into the air, phrases swirl among the updrafts for a moment, then fall to the ground like wreckage. Even strung onto the kitestring of the other partner’s ear, words “split” under the effort to communicate. Meanwhile “your ear flutters,” hearing nothing but “itself.”

Compare this kite-ear with the elephantine pinnae of Roald Dahl’s BFG (Big Friendly Giant): such ears are capable of detecting ant speech, a “heart beating across the road,” and the flight of a dream on the evening breeze, but they are powerless against the homophonic. Beings and beans, Wales and whales, Jersey and jerseys, even thin air and thick ear. Offended by the attempts of his pint-sized guest to correct his conflations, the BFG reproaches her “gobblefunking.” He can hear, you might say, everything but himself.

While we have called the theme of this fourth issue of Word Hoard “Word of Mouth,” Grass and Dahl prompt us to consider those parts of dialogue beyond speech: not merely speaking to but receiving from, not merely exchanging with others but corresponding with ourselves. We have called it “Word of Mouth,” granting significant privilege to that one organ. We should equally consider it to be “word of ear” and—as the contributors to this issue remind us—“word of hand,” “word of mind,” “words of mouths.”

This issue is another high water mark in Word Hoard’s aspirations toward generic
Alongside research from a half-dozen academic points of view, we offer reflective and creative works by an interviewer, a poet, a performance artist, and a visual artist.

Rather, two visual artists: reprising his role as cover illustrator, Hinson Calabrese summons at once the intimacy of a cinematic close-up and the architectural coolness of an establishing shot, confronting us with a mouth looming over an unpeopled street.

Discussing his cover with us, Calabrese stressed its allusion to the San Gennaro festival scene in The Godfather Part II: flying this toothy street banner over Little Italy, NYC, “a place entirely preoccupied by the illusion of tradition and ritual,” manifests the crucial relation between “word of mouth” and “folk history.” But the street’s vacancy proposes that, like “ritual and ceremony,” the spoken word is no longer attended: “word of mouth (and what it means) is a strangely persistent leftover from a world of communication that has moved on.”

Welcome, then, to the aftermath of the party. It’s just you and a mouth. Rather, a banner from which a mouth seems to emerge, which stretches not only over a street but across a shadowy skyline. This second perspective transmutes it into something like a surgical mask. The implication is deeply ironic, of course—a prophylactic meant to sequester the mouth, a mask, is also the condition of its uncanny spectacularity, a banner. But the implication is also horrifically kitschy—for if this is a surgical mask, it is of the novelty kind, a lurid zombie mouth screenprinted across it. The overwhelming question: What do we do, now, when we purport to turn our attentions on the mouth? Are we merely being disingenuous, or are we being necromantic?

Let’s back up. Extracted from the wholeness of a face, this mouth cannot be definitively assigned an expression. Perhaps its lips are unsealed, prepared for conversation. Perhaps it emerges—from some non-Euclidean space behind or beneath the paper-thin banner—with solicitude and vulnerability. But such emergence is a deft illusion, trompe l’oeil tantalizing us with a liveness forever just out of earshot. In this way, Calabrese’s illustration—much like a transcription of spoken words, much like the essays and creative pieces in this issue—asks you to listen with your eyes.

The writing in this issue of Word Hoard resonates with that of our first three issues. Like our first issue, “Community and Dissent,” these works stalk questions of isolation, dialogue, and community, of authority, resistance, and complicity. Our second theme, “The Unrecyclable,” resurfaces here in contemplations of authenticity, adaptation, and performance, of subjectivity, ego, and embodiment. And a few new kernels of “Pop/corn” explode as our writers stir problems of ethics, aesthetics, and economics, of parody, sincerity, and responsibility. “Word of Mouth” lies at the intersection of such matters, adding crucial interrogations of speech, text, and sign, of fail-
ure, error, and noise, and of the myriad ways in which chinwagging might make us more able or less willing to listen.

Miranda Niittynen starts us off, proposing an ethics of “feminist ethnography” in response to the mutual interference of those two uneasily yoked terms. While the former picks its way carefully among the rocks of appropriation, power relations, and subject formation, the latter trots after the carrot of the Other’s ‘authentic voice’—a notion shaped by the ubiquity of the voice recording technology designed to capture it. Niittynen finds a productive strategy for ethnographic collaboration through Judith Butler’s theorization of the self as unfixed, incohesive, and inarticulable and in her call to suspend the desire to comprehend the Other.

If Niittynen hears mostly static in the voice recording, E Martin Nolan tunes his ear the music of “error.” From a reflection on the process of interviewing authors, Nolan turns to Anne Carson’s meditation on mistake, omission, fragmentation, and imperfection as individual notes comprising the chords of poetic meaning. Poetic liberty from any obligation to unmediated ‘authenticity,’ Nolan argues, allows artists like Janet Cardiff to grip, contort, and even compound the mediations of voice recording technology in their attempts to mimic the “real” fragmentation of the self.

Brendan C. Gillott sustains this inquiry into poetry, subject, and voice, reconsidering Charles Olson’s The Maximus Poems as a sort of performance script and demonstrating how its energetic, caustic “noise” eats away at the traditional poetic ego, as epitomized in Ezra Pound’s Cantos. Gillott proposes that Olson’s paratactic “mouthings” echo the parataxis of embodiment and suggest the possibility of an egoless poetic voice—a “poet-mouth.”

Christine Leclerc’s poem “Empty it out” responds to both Gillott and Olson by adopting its form from a poem central to Gillott’s essay, Olson’s “Golden Venetian Light […].” Breathing new life into the overdetermined image of the mouth, Leclerc not only resurrects it to sensuous, gustatory delight but also reanimates it to Frankensteini-an, monstrous isolation. Her “mouth within a mouth without a mouth” suspends between the differential senses of “a word” and the alienating sensations of body horror.

Lois Klassen similarly worries the delicate fabrics of communication and community in a transcription of her visual work We Spoke, itself a transcription of several “intimate exchanges” occurring over two weeks in April, 2011. Her concern with “dialogical aesthetics” and the fictionalizing effects of mediation return us to the creative potentialities of auto-ethnography implied by Nolan. But, harmonizing with Niittynen, Klassen reflects on a (not-quite monologic) performance piece by Casey Wei to find both discursive hegemony and subversive opportunity in the inter-textual and “inter-subjective location of dialogue.”

Casey Wei offers her own reflection on the same performance piece, Answers: A Monologue. Through the decontextualization and re-voicing of celebrity sound bites, Wei suggests, Answers draws attention to how mass culture produces and circulates spoken words as commodities. Regarding the
deliberate subversiveness of parody with skepticism, however, Wei (much like Janet Cardiff) values instead the “the snippets of ‘Realness’” one catches when listening for, and with, sincerity.

It is shouting distance from celebrity to Victoria Barnett-Woods’s analysis of “word of mouth’s” most common denotation—“gossip”—in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* and Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*. Through Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of “mimicry,” Barnett-Woods figures gossip as a dissident discursive mode which resists the linguistic and political hegemony of nationalist narratives. She further urges us to consider gossip and rumour within productive circuits of intra-, inter-, and extra-textual dialogue laid by the novel form.

Jason Sunder implies a troubled relation between the literary and the political, unpacking the complicated socio-historical contexts in which Forster and Sidhwa write in order to question Barnett-Woods’s conceptions of power and resistance. “[T]he infinitely complex formations in which class, caste, gender, and race … are intertwined in history,” Sunder argues, render gossip ambivalent and its concrete effects uncertain. Postulating “the circulation of gossip as a sort of trade in illicit speech,” Sunder scouts the challenges of a political economic theory of gossip.

With our issue drawing to a close, we move from *viva voce* (“living voice”) to, as Mary McLevey nimbly turns the phrase, “the theory of viva non-voce.” Jamie Rooney intercedes in the linguistic philosophy surrounding “homesign”—the gestures utilized by deaf children who have not acquired conventional signed languages—by challenging Endre Begby’s recent assertions about homesign’s “spontaneous” semantic content. Dramatizing the interlocutory challenges presented by this non-conventional and ostensibly “non-shared” language, Rooney emphasizes the dependence of successful dialogue on mutually, situationally established linguistic norms.

Mary McLevey concretizes this concern with interlocutors’ mutual responsibility by considering the architectural space required for, and the productive spatiality offered by, signed languages. Calling for “the renovation of [our theories of] language to include three-dimensional space,” McLevey highlights the social and political stakes of “audism” and “Deaf Gain” and champions the unique critical and pedagogical benefits of sign languages’ iconicity.

As our theme deals with the exchange and circulation of language—speech, text, and sign—it seems particularly appropriate that this issue of *Word Hoard* be the first in which we feature a book review. Finally, then, we are indebted to Julia Novak for offering her study *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance* as the subject of our inaugural review, authored by Andy Verboom. Acknowledging Novak’s study as an important intervention in literary critical methodology, Verboom challenges the study’s twinned fidelities—first, to the promise of the archival and, second, to the promise of critical objectivity—and asks, “Does live poetry require written criticism to flourish?”
Editors’ Introduction

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It’s time we editors quit our chin-wagging, ear fluttering, and gobblefunking. Swivel your ears with us and listen to what follows. Of course, these contributions aren’t the final words—and we’re glad that’s not how creation and criticism work. We look forward to revisiting many of these questions, contemplations, and problems in future issues of Word Hoard. After all—as T. S. Eliot writes in his final of The Four Quartets, “Little Gidding”—“last year’s words belong to last year’s language / And next year’s words await another voice.”

Andy Verboom
and Meghan O’Hara
with Emily Kring

Word of Mouth
Works Cited

