

A READING SEAT, PLACED TO MAKE the most of the light at a west-facing window. Outside, not too far away, some hazels and a bare wintry tangle of hawthorn and dog rose; inside, battered old sofas around a medicine-chest coffee table. I have waited impatiently for this opportunity... and now I am alone in the house. I want principally to find out what the house sounds like when it is utterly still. Would it, I wonder to myself, be possible to hear it breathe?

1. The dog rose is alive with robins, blue-tits and blackbirds. They are eerily silent.
2. It's a breezy day, supplemented intermittently with violent gusts, making trees in a nearby copse roar angrily but briefly – like the crashing of a single big wave, broken in an instant. And just outside, last summer's whippy new growth of coppiced hazel is like a stand of fishing rods, casting, casting, casting in the wind, sometimes creaking when they bend too far, sometimes clacking as they hit each other.
3. Anna, our cleaner, was in earlier. There's a faint smell of bleach coming from the far end of the house. There's a lingering hint of the scent she wears too.
4. At peak times in the schedule, a travel-trade murmur coalesces somewhere above this part of the world – stacking for Stansted. Now and then a distant engine moan comes out of the clouds, more breathy really than a moan, thinned, almost transparent, hoarse, throaty. A throttling back, a whine as the plane sheds height, then it's gone.

5. A hot metal radiator smell, tangy with rust. (One of the valves leaks tiny beads of reddish-brown water which thread their way down one of the radiator's white-painted pipes, evaporating before they reach the carpet.)
6. A clatter of the front door's letter flap, then the papery slap of something fat on the mat.
7. A magpie alights briefly on an extremity of the dog rose outside, muttering to itself – not the full-blown racket of its ratchety call, just an understated sandpaper rasp, a reminder that more could be said.
8. There's a towel on the radiator, presumably put there to dry, which indeed it has. It's now cooking gently while exhaling the scent, industrially floral, of fabric conditioner.
9. At Christmas, someone must have placed a bowl containing four clementines in the hearth... and it has been overlooked since. Noting that the peel of the fruit is now succumbing to furs of grey-green mould, I pick one up and sniff it. I get an unsettling blend of pine-fresh zestiness and the breadiness of yeast.
10. A far distant train horn, one long, plaintive note.
11. There's one corner of a magazine peeping out from under a sofa. I rescue it. It's the bumper festive edition of *Radio Times*. There's the faint vestige of a coffee mug ring on its cover.

12. The mantelpiece clock is battery-powered, so I think I imagined that its second hand would sweep the dial smoothly. It doesn't. It steps out the minutes second by second, like clocks since... well, since olden times. And if you put your ear to the cool glass face, you can hear a ticking too.

13. The collected works of Wallace Stevens lies open on the coffee table. Its pages are foxed, browned at the edges; and they smell parched yet sweetly over-ripe, a hint of figs perhaps, and redolent more of rice than paper. Someone has been reading, on pages 20 and 21, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*.