

The Singing Statues

by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009

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Again last night, as the dusk air began to move across the desert from Lagoon West, I heard fragments of music coming in on the thermal rollers, remote and fleeting, echoes of the love-song of Lunora Goalen. Walking out over the copper sand to the reefs where the sonic sculptures grow, I wandered through the darkness among the metal gardens, searching for Lunora's voice. No one tends the sculptures now and most of them have gone to seed, but on an impulse I cut away a helix and carried it back to my villa, planting it in the quartz bed below the balcony. All night it sang to me, telling me of Lunora and the strange music she played to herself...

It must be just over three years ago that I first saw Lunora Goalen, in Georg Nevers's gallery on Beach Drive. Every summer at the height of the season at Vermilion Sands, Georg staged a special exhibition of sonic sculpture for the tourists. Shortly after we opened one morning I was sitting inside my large statue,

Zero Orbit, plugging in the stereo amplifiers, when Georg suddenly gasped into the skin mike and a boom like a thunderclap nearly deafened me.

Head ringing like a gong, I climbed out of the sculpture ready to crown Georg with a nearby maquette. Putting an elegant fingertip to his lips, he gave me that look which between artist and dealer signals one thing: Rich client.

The sculptures in the gallery entrance had begun to hum as someone came in, but the sunlight reflected off the bonnet of a white Rolls-Royce outside obscured the doorway.

Then I saw her, hovering over the stand of art journals, followed by her secretary, a tall purse-mouthed Frenchwoman almost as famous from the news magazines as her mistress.

Lunora Goalen, I thought, can all our dreams come true? She wore an ice-cool sliver of blue silk that shimmered as she moved towards the first statue, a toque hat of black violets and bulky dark glasses that hid her face and were a nightmare to cameramen. While she paused by the statue, one of Arch Penko's frenetic tangles that looked like a rimless bicycle wheel, listening to its arms vibrate and howl, Nevers and I involuntarily steadied ourselves against the wing-piece of my sculpture.

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In general it's probably true that the most maligned species on Earth is the wealthy patron of modern art. Laughed at by the public, exploited by dealers, even the artists regard them simply as meal tickets. Lunora Goalen's superb collection of sonic sculpture on the roof of her Venice palazzo, and the million dollars' worth of generous purchases spread around her apartments in Paris, London and New York, represented freedom and life to a score of sculptors, but few felt any gratitude towards Miss Goalen.

Nevers was hesitating, apparently suffering from a sudden intention tremor, so I nudged his elbow.

„Come on,“ I murmured. „This is the apocalypse. Let's go.“

Nevers turned on me icily, noticing, apparently for the first time, my rust-stained slacks and three-day stubble.

„Milton!“ he snapped. „For God's sake, vanish! Sneak out through the freight exit.“ He jerked his head at my sculpture. „And switch that insane thing off! How did I ever let it in here?“

Lunora's secretary, Mme Charcot, spotted us at the rear of the gallery. Georg shot out four inches of immaculate cuff and swayed forward, the smile on his face as wide as a bulldozer. I backed away behind my sculpture, with no intention of leaving and letting Nevers cut my price just for the cachet of making a sale to Lunora Goalen.

Georg was bowing all over the gallery, oblivious of Mme Charcot's contemptuous sneer. He led Lunora over to one of the exhibits and fumbled with the control panel, selecting the alto lift which would resonate most flatteringly with her own body tones. Unfortunately the statue was Sigismund Lubitsch's Big End, a squat bull-necked drum like an enormous toad that at its sweetest emitted a rasping grunt. An old-style railroad tycoon might have elicited a sympathetic chord from it, but its response to Lunora was like a bull's to a butterfly.

They moved on to another sculpture, and Mme Charcot gestured to the white-gloved chauffeur standing by the Rolls. He climbed in and moved the car down the street, taking with it the beach crowds beginning to gather outside the gallery. Able now to see Lunora clearly against the hard white walls, I stepped into Orbit and watched her closely through the helixes.

Of course I already knew everything about Lunora Goalen. A thousand magazine exposés had catalogued ad nauseam her strange flawed beauty, her fits of melancholy and compulsive roving around the world's capitals. Her brief career as a film actress had faltered at first, less as a consequence of her modest, though always interesting, talents than of her simple failure to register photogenically. By a macabre twist of fate, after a major car accident had severely injured her face she had become an extraordinary success. That strangely marred profile and nervous gaze had filled cinemas from Paris to Pernambuco. Unable to bear this tribute to her plastic surgeons, Lunora had abruptly abandoned her career and become a leading patron of the fine arts. Like Garbo in the '40s and '50s, she flitted elusively through the gossip columns and society pages in unending flight from herself.

Her face was the clue. As she took off her sunglasses I could see the curious shadow that fell across it, numbing the smooth white skin. There was a dead glaze in her slate-blue eyes, an uneasy tension around the mouth. Altogether I had a vague impression of something unhealthy, of a Venus with a secret vice.

Nevers was switching on sculptures right and left like a lunatic magician, and the noise was a babel of competing sensocells, some of the statues responding to Lunora's enigmatic presence, others to Nevers and the secretary.

Lunora shook her head slowly, mouth hardening as the noise irritated her. „Yes, Mr Nevers,“ she said in her slightly husky voice, „it's all very clever, but a bit of a headache. I live with my sculpture, I want something intimate and personal.“

„Of course, Miss Goalen,“ Nevers agreed hurriedly, looking around desperately. As he knew only too well, sonic sculpture was now nearing the apogee of its abstract phase; twelve-tone blips and zooms were all that most statues emitted. No purely representational sound, responding to Lunora, for example, with a Mozart rondo or (better) a Webern quartet, had been built for ten years. I guessed that her early purchases were wearing out and that she was hunting the cheaper galleries in tourist haunts like Vermilion Sands in the hope of finding something designed for middle-brow consumption.

Lunora looked up pensively at Zero Orbit, towering at the rear of the gallery next to Nevers's desk, apparently unaware that I was hiding inside it. Suddenly realizing that the possibility of selling the statue had miraculously arisen, I crouched inside the trunk and started to breathe heavily, activating the sensor-circuits.

Immediately the statue came to life. About twelve feet high, it was shaped like an enormous metal totem topped by two heraldic wings. The microphones in the wing-tips were powerful enough to pick up respiratory noises at a distance of twenty feet. There were four people well within focus, and the statue began to emit a series of low rhythmic pulses.

Seeing the statue respond to her, Lunora came forwards with interest. Nevers backed away discreetly, taking Mme Charcot with him, leaving Lunora and I

together, separated by a thin metal skin and three feet of vibrating air. Fumbling for some way of widening the responses, I eased up the control slides that lifted the volume. Neurophonics has never been my strong suit—I regard myself, in an old-fashioned way, as a sculptor, not an electrician—and the statue was only equipped to play back a simple sequence of chord variations on the sonic profile in focus.

Knowing that Lunora would soon realize that the statue's repertory was too limited for her, I picked up the hand-mike used for testing the circuits and on the spur of the moment began to croon the refrain from *Creole Love Call*. Reinterpreted by the sonic cores, and then relayed through the loudspeakers, the lulling rise and fall was pleasantly soothing, the electronic overtones disguising my voice and amplifying the tremors of emotion as I screwed up my courage (the statue was priced at five thousand dollars—even subtracting Nevers's 90 per cent commission left me with enough for the bus fare home).

Stepping up to the statue, Lunora listened to it motionlessly, eyes wide with astonishment, apparently assuming that it was reflecting, like a mirror, its subjective impressions of herself. Rapidly running out of breath, my speeding pulse lifting the tempo, I repeated the refrain over and over again, varying the bass lift to simulate a climax.

Suddenly I saw Nevers's black patent shoes through the hatch. Pretending to slip his hand into the control panel, he rapped sharply on the statue. I switched off.

„Don't please!“ Lunora cried as the sounds fell away. She looked around uncertainly. Mme Charcot was stepping nearer with a curiously watchful expression.

Nevers hesitated. „Of course, Miss Goalen, it still requires tuning, you—“

„I'll take it,“ Lunora said. She pushed on her sunglasses, turned and hurried from the gallery, her face hidden.

Nevers watched her go. „What happened, for heaven's sake? Is Miss Goalen all right?“

Mme Charcot took a cheque-book out of her blue crocodile handbag. A sardonic smirk played over her lips, and through the helix I had a brief but penetrating glimpse into her relationship with Lunora Goalen. It was then, I think, that I realized Lunora might be something more than a bored dilettante.

Mme Charcot glanced at her watch, a gold pea strung on her scrawny wrist. „You will have it delivered today. By three o'clock sharp. Now, please, the price?“

Smoothly, Nevers said: „Ten thousand dollars.“

Choking, I pulled myself out of the statue, and spluttered helplessly at Nevers.

Mme Charcot regarded me with astonishment, frowning at my filthy togs. Nevers trod savagely on my foot. „Naturally, Mademoiselle, our prices are modest, but as you can see, M. Milton is an inexperienced artist.“

Mme Charcot nodded sagely. „This is the sculptor? I am relieved. For a moment I feared that he lived in it.“

When she had gone Nevers closed the gallery for the day. He took off his jacket and pulled a bottle of absinthe from the desk. Sitting back in his silk waistcoat, he trembled slightly with nervous exhaustion.

„Tell me, Milton, how can you ever be sufficiently grateful to me?“

I patted him on the back. „Georg, you were brilliant! She’s another Catherine the Great, you handled her like a diplomat. When you go to Paris you’ll be a great success. Ten thousand dollars!“ I did a quick jig around the statue. „That’s the sort of redistribution of wealth I like to see. How about an advance on my cut?“

Nevers examined me moodily. He was already in the Rue de Rivoli, over-bidding for Leonardos with a languid flicker of a pomaded eyebrow. He glanced at the statue and shuddered. „An extraordinary woman. Completely without taste. Which reminds me, I see you rescored the memory drum. The aria from Tosca cued in beautifully. I didn’t realize the statue contained that.“

„It doesn’t,“ I told him, sitting on the desk. „That was me. Not exactly Caruso, I admit, but then he wasn’t much of a sculptor.“

„What?“ Nevers leapt out of his chair. „Do you mean you were using the hand microphone? You fool!“

„What does it matter? She won’t know.“ Nevers was groaning against the wall, drumming his forehead on his fist. „Relax, you’ll hear nothing.“

Promptly at 9.01 the next morning the telephone rang.

As I drove the pick-up out to Lagoon West Nevers’s warnings rang in my ears— „...six international blacklists, sue me for misrepresentation...“

He apologized effusively to Mme Charcot, and assured her that the monotonous booming the statue emitted was most certainly not its natural response. Obviously a circuit had been damaged in transit, the sculptor himself was driving out to correct it.

Taking the beach road around the lagoon, I looked across at the Goalen mansion, an abstract summer palace that reminded me of a Frank Lloyd Wright design for an experimental department store. Terraces jutted out at all angles, and here and there were huge metal sculptures, Brancusi’s and Calder mobiles, revolving in the crisp desert light. Occasionally one of the sonic statues hooted mournfully like a distant hoodoo.

Mme Charcot collected me in the vestibule, led me up a sweeping glass stairway. The walls were heavy with Dali and Picasso, but my statue had been given the place of honour at the far end of the south terrace. The size of a tennis court, without rails (or safety net), this jutted out over the lagoon against the skyline of Vermilion Sands, low furniture grouped in a square at its centre.

Dropping the tool-bag, I made a pretence of dismantling the control panel, and played with the amplifier so that the statue let out a series of staccato blips. These put it into the same category as the rest of Lunora Goalen’s sculpture. A dozen pieces stood about on the terrace, most of them early period sonic dating back to the ‘70s, when sculptors produced an incredible sequence of grunting, clanking, barking and twanging statues, and galleries and public squares all over the world echoed night and day with minatory booms and thuds.

„Any luck?“

I turned to see Lunora Goalen. Unheard, she had crossed the terrace, now stood with hands on hips, watching me with interest. In her black slacks and shirt, blonde hair around her shoulders, she looked more relaxed, but sunglasses still masked her face.

„Just a loose valve. It won’t take me a couple of minutes.“ I gave her a reassuring smile and she stretched out on the chaise longue in front of the statue.

Lurking by the french windows at the far end of the terrace was Mme Charcot, eyeing us with a beady smirk. Irritated, I switched on the statue to full volume and coughed loudly into the handmike.

The sound boomed across the open terrace like an artillery blank. The old crone backed away quickly.

Lunora smiled as the echoes rolled over the desert, the statues on the lower terraces responding with muted pulses. „Years ago, when Father was away, I used to go on to the roof and shout at the top of my voice, set off the most wonderful echo trains. The whole place would boom for hours, drive the servants mad.“ She laughed pleasantly to herself at the recollection, as if it had been a long time ago.

„Try it now,“ I suggested. „Or is Mme Charcot mad already?“

Lunora put a green-tipped finger to her lips. „Carefully, you’ll get me into trouble. Anyway, Mme Charcot is not my servant.“

„No? What is she then, your jailer?“ We spoke mockingly, but I put a curve on the question; something about the Frenchwoman had made me suspect that she might have more than a small part in maintaining Lunora’s illusions about herself.

I waited for Lunora to reply, but she ignored me and stared out across the lagoon. Within a few seconds her personality had changed levels, once again she was the remote autocratic princess.

Unobserved, I slipped my hand into the tool-bag and drew out a tape spool. Clipping it into the player deck, I switched on the table. The statue vibrated slightly, and a low melodious chant murmured out into the still air.

Standing behind the statue, I watched Lunora respond to the music. The sounds mounted, steadily swelling as Lunora moved into the statue’s focus. Gradually its rhythms quickened, its mood urgent and plaintive, unmistakably a lover’s passion-song. A musicologist would have quickly identified the sounds as a transcription of the balcony duet from *Romeo and Juliet*, but to Lunora its only source was the statue. I had recorded the tape that morning, realizing it was the only method of saving the statue. Nevers’s confusion of *Tosca* and *Creole Love Call* reminded me that I had the whole of classical opera in reserve. For ten thousand dollars I would gladly call once a day and feed in every aria from Figaro to Moses and Aaron.

Abruptly, the music fell away. Lunora had backed out of the statue’s focus, and was standing twenty feet from me. Behind her, in the doorway, was Mme Charcot.

Lunora smiled briefly. „It seems to be in perfect order,“ she said. Without doubt she was gesturing me towards the door.

I hesitated, suddenly wondering whether to tell her the truth, my eyes searching her beautiful secret face. Then Mme Charcot came between us, smiling like a skull.

Did Lunora Goalen really believe that the sculpture was singing to her? For a fortnight, until the tape expired, it didn’t matter. By then Nevers would have cashed the cheque and he and I would be on our way to Paris.

Within two or three days, though, I realized that I wanted to see Lunora again. Rationalizing, I told myself that the statue needed to be checked, that Lunora might discover the fraud. Twice during the next week I drove out to the summer-house on the pretext of tuning the sculpture, but Mme Charcot held me off. Once I telephoned, but again she intercepted me. When I saw Lunora she was driving at

speed through Vermilion Sands in the Rolls-Royce, a dim glimmer of gold and jade in the back seat.

Finally I searched through my record albums, selected Toscanini conducting *Tristan and Isolde*, in the scene where Tristan mourns his parted lover, and carefully transcribed another tape.

That night I drove down to Lagoon West, parked my car by the beach on the south shore and walked out on to the surface of the lake. In the moonlight the summer-house half a mile away looked like an abstract movie set, a single light on the upper terrace illuminating the outlines of my statue. Stepping carefully across the fused silica, I made my way slowly towards it, fragments of the statue's song drifting by on the low breeze. Two hundred yards from the house I lay down on the warm sand, watching the lights of Vermilion Sands fade one by one like the melting jewels of a necklace.

Above, the statue sang into the blue night, its song never wavering. Lunora must have been sitting only a few feet above it, the music enveloping her like an overflowing fountain. Shortly after two o'clock it died down and I saw her at the rail, the white ermine wrap around her shoulders stirring in the wind as she stared at the brilliant moon.

Half an hour later I climbed the lake wall and walked along it to the spiral fire escape. The bougainvillea wreathed through the railings muffled the sounds of my feet on the metal steps. I reached the upper terrace unnoticed. Far below, in her quarters on the north side, Mme Charcot was asleep.

Swinging on to the terrace, I moved among the dark statues, drawing low murmurs from them as I passed.

I crouched inside Zero Orbit, unlocked the control panel and inserted the fresh tape, slightly raising the volume.

As I left I could see on to the west terrace twenty feet below, where Lunora lay asleep under the stars on an enormous velvet bed, like a lunar princess on a purple catafalque. Her face shone in the starlight, her loose hair veiling her naked breasts. Behind her a statue stood guard, intoning, softly to itself as it pulsed to the sounds of her breathing.

Three times I visited Lunora's house after midnight, taking with me another spool of tape, another love-song from my library. On the last visit I watched her sleeping until dawn rose across the desert. I fled down the stairway and across the sand, hiding among the cold pools of shadow whenever a car moved along the beach road.

All day I waited by the telephone in my villa, hoping she would call me. In the evening I walked out to the sand reefs, climbed one of the spires and watched Lunora on the terrace after dinner. She lay on a couch before the statue, and until long after midnight it played to her, endlessly singing. Its voice was now so strong that cars would slow down several hundred yards away, the drivers searching for the source of the melodies crossing the vivid evening air.

At last I recorded the final tape, for the first time in my own voice. Briefly I described the whole sequence of imposture, and quietly asked Lunora if she would sit for me and let me design a new sculpture to replace the fraud she had bought.

I clenched the tape tightly in my hand while I walked across the lake, looking up at the rectangular outline of the terrace.

As I reached the wall, a black-suited figure put his head over the ledge and looked down at me. It was Lunora's chauffeur.

Startled, I moved away across the sand. In the moonlight the chauffeur's white face flickered bonily.

The next evening, as I knew it would, the telephone finally rang.

„Mr Milton, the statue has broken down again.“ Mme Charcot's voice sounded sharp and strained. „Miss Goalen is extremely upset. You must come and repair it. Immediately.“

I waited an hour before leaving, playing through the tape I had recorded the previous evening. This time I would be present when Lunora heard it.

Mme Charcot was standing by the glass doors. I parked in the court by the Rolls. As I walked over to her, I noticed how eerie the house sounded. All over it the statues were muttering to themselves, emitting snaps and clicks, like the disturbed occupants of a zoo settling down with difficulty after a storm. Even Mme Charcot looked worn and tense.

At the terrace she paused. „One moment, Mr Milton. I will see if Miss Goalen is ready to receive you.“ She walked quietly towards the chaise longue pulled against the statue at the end of the terrace. Lunora was stretched out awkwardly across it, her hair disarrayed. She sat up irritably as Mme Charcot approached.

„Is he here? Alice, whose car was that? Hasn't he come?“

„He is preparing his equipment,“ Mme Charcot told her soothingly. „Miss Lunora, let me dress your hair—“

„Alice, don't fuss! God, what's keeping him?“ She sprang up and paced over to the statue, glowering silently out of the darkness. While Mme Charcot walked away Lunora sank on her knees before the statue, pressed her right cheek to its cold surface.

Uncontrollably she began to sob, deep spasms shaking her shoulders.

„Wait, Mr Milton!“ Mme Charcot held tightly to my elbow. „She will not want to see you for a few minutes.“ She added: „You are a better sculptor than you think, Mr Milton. You have given that statue a remarkable voice. It tells her all she needs to know.“

I broke away and ran through the darkness.

„Lunora!“

She looked around, the hair over her face matted with tears. She leaned limply against the dark trunk of the statue. I knelt down and held her hands, trying to lift her to her feet.

She wrenched away from me. „Fix it! Hurry, what are you waiting for? Make the statue sing again!“

I was certain that she no longer recognized me. I stepped back, the spool of tape in my hand. „What's the matter with her?“ I whispered to Mme Charcot. „The sounds don't really come from the statue, surely she realizes that?“

Mme Charcot's head lifted. „What do you mean—not from the statue?“

I showed her the tape. „This isn't a true sonic sculpture. The music is played off these magnetic tapes.“

A chuckle rasped briefly from Mme Charcot's throat. „Well, put it in none the less, monsieur. She doesn't care where it comes from. She is interested in the statue, not you.“

I hesitated, watching Lunora, still hunched like a supplicant at the foot of the statue.

„You mean—?“ I started to say incredulously. „So you mean she’s in love with the statue?“

Mme Charcot’s eyes summed up all my naivety.

„Not with the statue,“ she said. „With herself.“

For a moment I stood there among the murmuring sculptures, dropped the spool on the floor and turned away.

They left Lagoon West the next day.

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For a week I remained at my villa, then drove along the beach road towards the summer-house one evening after Nevers told me that they had gone.

The house was closed, the statues standing motionless in the darkness. My footsteps echoed away among the balconies and terraces, and the house reared up into the sky like a tomb. All the sculptures had been switched off, and I realized how dead and monumental non-sonic sculpture must have seemed.

Zero Orbit had also gone. I assumed that Lunora had taken it with her, so immersed in her self-love that she preferred a clouded mirror which had once told her of her beauty to no mirror at all. As she sat on some penthouse veranda in Venice or Paris, with the great statue towering into the dark sky like an extinct symbol, she would hear again the lays it had sung.

Six months later Nevers commissioned another statue from me. I went out one dusk to the sand reefs where the sonic sculptures grow. As I approached, they were creaking in the wind whenever the thermal gradients cut through them. I walked up the long slopes, listening to them mewl and whine, searching for one that would serve as the sonic core for a new statue.

Somewhere ahead in the darkness, I heard a familiar phrase, a garbled fragment of a human voice. Startled, I ran on, feeling between the dark barbs and helixes.

Then, lying in a hollow below the ridge, I found the source. Half-buried under the sand like the skeleton of an extinct bird were twenty or thirty pieces of metal, the dismembered trunk and wings of my statue. Many of the pieces had taken root again and were emitting a thin haunted sound, disconnected fragments of the testament to Lunora Goalen I had dropped on her terrace.

As I walked down the slope, the white sand poured into my footprints like a succession of occluding hourglasses. The sounds of my voice whined faintly through the metal gardens like a forgotten lover whispering over a dead harp.

