

A Kiss

by Kaitlin Prest

The Heart, Radiotopia podcast network. 'A Kiss' (USA 2014) 7mins.

HearSay Festival winner 2014

AUDIO: <https://soundcloud.com/hearsayaudiofestival/kaitlin-prest-can-a-kiss>

<http://www.theheartradio.org/>

Reviewed by Miyuki Jokiranta

'The way she kisses it's like she's telling you something. She's listening to you too.'

Kaitlin Prest's *A Kiss* presents an intimate moment between former lovers, captured in an audio piece shaped like a palindrome. It begins and ends with the questions that hang over any relationship – are we aligned? Are we hearing each other? Are we heading in the same direction? *A Kiss* is a subtly woven tapestry of private thoughts and reflections amplified, that refuses to pigeonhole the protagonists' relationship and refuses to privilege the narrator's version of events.

'It's not like, 'He started out as this and then this thing happened and now he's this.' It's like, 'He may be this. Some things happened. He may be this. But he's probably both at the same time.' One of my favourite goals as a storyteller is to try to find ways to give a voice to those conflicting truths.' – Kaitlin Prest'

Kaitlin's work sits askew the current trend in US radio making; poignant stories drawn from personal insight, yes, but an unwavering handholding narrator, no.

An audio impression

I first came across Kaitlin's work when drawn to the provocatively titled *Audio Smut*; a Canadian radio program, which broke down stigmas around sex, telling sex positive stories openly and honestly; at times grungy, at times truly experimental. I kept returning to this candidly

confessional radio throughout *Audio Smut's* transformation into *The Heart*, Kaitlin's ongoing podcast for Radiotopia, an independent podcast network of noted audio storytellers, based in Boston, US. I heard a deft ear designing, tinkering with and creating entire worlds of sound.

Alongside her regular podcast, Kaitlin produces short-form creative audio, such as *A Kiss*, which carries the family DNA of *Audio Smut* - open, honest, sex-charged, a bit punk, unapologetic in its need to be liked, and certainly will not appeal to all. At its core are an attraction to and an ease with uncertainty, which permeate the entire work.

Her shorter works are no less compelling for their brevity. Podcasts slip the bonds of traditional broadcast formats, editorial guidelines, and their time constraints. A story takes as long or as short as it needs and a piece can reveal itself both within its content and also through the time it takes. This is the case with *A Kiss*, a quick seven-minute dip in the shared psyche of Kaitlin and her former lover, Kyle, who after three years of being separated, now find themselves in Kaitlin's bedroom on a sun-drenched afternoon, in the air a question - will they kiss?

(0.00) 'The sun was pouring into my bedroom. There's something about the afternoon that... turns me on. There's something about that lazy alertness, I just want to dive into my bed and, I don't know, make out.'- Kaitlin (transcript of *A Kiss*)

A Kiss concentrates on a fleeting moment that would be undermined if stretched to beyond the duration of the act itself. Notably the piece focuses on a kiss not the kiss, seemingly a passing fancy not something definitive. Kaitlin's work chooses microcosmic worlds to enlarge to a point where each thought, each intention, even each stage of an action is given the time to unfold, offering up intimate portraits of character. Paradoxically, greater insight comes from the momentary than something attempting to be more exhaustive. Such a brief account precludes detailed explanation but creates a closeness fed by imagination.

Radio and the interior

Although the story is set in Kaitlin's bedroom, throughout the entire piece there's no natural sound to locate us there, to ground us in the lovers' physical reality. Instead she employs audio's ability to create

liminal spaces where fantastic worlds unfurl. This is the theatre of *A Kiss*, in which the story's events are narrated by the interior voices of both Kaitlin and Kyle and buoyed by non-literal sound design. The effect is a kind of suspended consciousness, with a miasmatic ability to undermine certainty, for how can any two people experience the same truth?

A Kiss is heavily reliant on the natural intimacy established when listening to voice. However, this intimacy isn't communicated solely through words. From the proximity, even physicality, of how the voices are recorded, to the immersive and spatialised sound design, *A Kiss* attempts to convey the *feeling* of the moment.ⁱⁱ A feeling that is opaque but intense and momentary.

Voice as composition

Initially the dual narrators exist separately, offering a he-said she-said account of their previous romance, but as the piece progresses and the kiss approaches, the clarity of the relationship begins to cloud over, as does the distinction between the two voices and their intentions. Kaitlin and Kyle's voices interleave and a delicate dance of language takes place - a word said by one is picked up by the other and a sentence heading in one direction is set a new course. As Kaitlin decides to dive in and kiss Kyle, a second set of voices reflecting on that action emerge and Kaitlin and Kyle become both actors and observers of the kiss. The private and performed collapse, as thought turns to action.

(1.54) 'We weren't in love anymore, but it was the afternoon and I was in a state. I was overcome by some afternoon urge to shake things up. As soon as I knew I wanted to kiss him, all these other questions came up. Why hadn't he tried to kiss me?'- Kaitlin

'I wasn't certain it was the right thing to do'- Kyle

'But I was certain in that moment that we could just kiss. It was the afternoon and we were comfortable with each other. Simple' – Kaitlin

'It's pretty rare for love to be simple'- Kyle

Kaitlin cites American radio artist Gregory Whitehead as an inspiration and mentor in her practiceⁱⁱⁱ, and his influence can be heard in her compositional use of language. This world of the bedroom is spoken into

existence, but the text concurrently functions as an element of sound design, as an instrumental line in the larger composition - imparting tone, colour, texture, and rhythm alongside meaning. During one listen, I actively disassociated word from meaning, and without much effort, heard *A Kiss* as a crunchy pop song, where snippets of language acted more like a melody than lyrics. Kaitlin has paid particular attention to the scripting and delivery of words, so that they function on a semantic and musical level, yet never feel too staged.

A Kiss benefits from a stereo listening. The narrators emerge from the middle of the stereo field, present and uncomplicated. As the emotional complexities of the afternoon unfold, the voices start to shift between left and right, between foreground and background. The narrators are subverted by the observers of the action and talk over not only each other, but also themselves. Kaitlin and Kyle momentarily come together, fuse and then just as quickly, fall out of step again. An act of transgression has occurred, former lovers have stepped over a line, or maybe stepped into a space that was and always will be grey.

At times the reliance on panning and spatialisation feels heavy-handed, but overall the mimicking of spoken sentiments with affective sound design serves to emphasise how our headspace echoes with the voices of others, which we cannot fully understand.

Vibrations and oscillations

Underpinning the voices are a modest three sound textures – a synth line that ebbs and flows, vibrates and oscillates according to the emotional pitch, what sounds like snatches of melancholy American singer-songwriter Elliot Smith, which mostly occur when the narrators reminisce about their past, and silence. Silence sits at the heart of the piece, the moment before the kiss and the moment directly after, when the implications of the kiss are unknown, highlighting through absence acute moments of uncertainty.

(3.37) 'I had been anticipating that kiss for...years. Since I left.' - Kyle

'And it was unremarkable.' - Kaitlin

'Uh... the kiss was beautiful' - Kyle

'It felt like we just were doing what we do- Kaitlin

'Emotional part of me didn't feel like I could give myself to the kiss.'- Kyle

'There was a part of me that was unnerved...' –Kaitlin

'The kiss, y'know, was wonderful/...by the fact that the kiss wasn't good'- Kyle/ Kaitlin

'And then....'- Kaitlin

The synth line emerges again as *A Kiss* draws to a close, the wavering heartbeat of a simple and beautiful act writ large through sound. In the final seconds as Kaitlin and Kyle wonder what the future holds, their voices emerging again from front and centre, we hear a few strummed guitar chords, folding the past onto the present and projecting into the future. A listener seeking resolution will not find it. What they will find is something much closer to reality, life as a palindrome formed from the colliding trajectories that are love, lust, attraction and nostalgia. What seems to be a simple story shaped around a kiss gently teases out the nebulous nature of truth.

ⁱ *The Timbre* [Interview with Kaitlin Prest](http://thetimbre.com/kaitlin-prest-the-art-of-podcasting-no-12/), April 10, 2015. URL: <http://thetimbre.com/kaitlin-prest-the-art-of-podcasting-no-12/>

ⁱⁱ Tape Radio - <http://taperadio.org/kaitlin-prest/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Gregory Whitehead's 'performance documentary' *On the Shore Dimly Seen* is reviewed elsewhere in [this issue](#) of RadioDoc Review. See <http://ro.uow.edu.au/rdr/vol2/iss2>

MIYUKI JOKIRANTA



Miyuki Jokiranta produces and presents [Soundproof](#), Radio National's playground for the sonically curious and within her own radio arts practice, she crafts a space between music and words. Before falling down the radio art rabbit hole, she produced for RN's Books and Arts, Poetica and Off Track, and while living and studying in the US for a range of National Public Radio programs, including Radiolab, Radio Rookies and Radio Diaries.