

# SILENCE

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*"But human speech is not just a blowing of air. Speech has something of which it speaks, something it refers to."*

*Yes, but what it refers to is peculiarly unfixed.*

- Zhuangzi (tr. Ziporyn)



## PREFACE

*Silence* consists of fragments, shards of vessels that may once have held – what? They hold nothing now. All slips through their clutchless clutches. But I am getting ahead of myself –

In mid-October 2021, a dear friend of mine, call him A, made a strange request. I had known him a year: he moved here in mid-2020; somehow we found each other; we have been inseparable since. Until, that is, he decided the time had come to sever us: he was leaving (where to, he did not say).

Many of our conversations concerned poetry: he was my first and best reader during our time together. Still, I was surprised when he asked whether, after he left, I might edit his poems for publication. He had mentioned his writing before, though dismissively, but never shown it to me or (that he told me) anyone else. So he took his leave, and a month later a package arrived. In it was a three-ring binder containing handwritten copies of nearly 250 poems, composed (if the dates he provides are to be believed) between 2014 and 2021. The most recent was completed some four months before his departure; past that, it appears his Muse fell silent.

The binder also contained instructions “to my editor”. Cognizant that he had not yet matured as a poet, he insisted that I be severe in my selection, even to the point of printing only parts of poems, should only parts prove worthy. A discerning ask: only a handful of his poems are fit to publish as he left them, though many contain heightened moments.

*Silence* is my attempt to meet his request, a collection of 36 fragments that, to the best of my ability, authentically represent my friend’s work. The title is mine; I chose it because it is the target at which the best of his poetry aims, as if he hoped that with the right arrangement of words he might speak silence itself. He said as much to me, more than once, on our long walks through Seattle’s parks, in the all-too-brief year I had the honor of being his friend.

The order, too, is mine. I do not believe my wise friend cared much for

chronology. Had he arranged them himself, naturally I would have respected his decision, but he left no hint of intent along these lines. So I have, as best as I could, attempted to arrange them so as to speak more clearly, more silently. Should they fail to do so, should the structure gag them, the fault is mine alone.

As noted, I found only few of his poems to be worth publishing in full; these appear as he left them. The rest are fragments, selections only of those lines and half-lines I felt would honor his vision. Where I have made cuts, I have preserved the spacing on the page, rather than collapsing the poem to a block. My thought is: where his words do not reach silence, perhaps silence itself may do so.

Plainly, I have had a heavy hand in his work. This may be criticized – am I not mixing my own ideas and visions in with his? Can this result in anything other than dilution and diminution of his voice? A fair, even inescapable worry. I offer the only reply I can: every decision I have made, I have made with him in mind. I do not say that I have succeeded in producing a work he would recognize (I hope I have), but I do say that, of all the versions of this work I produced (many featuring far fewer of my own interventions), this is the one I believe he would prefer.

I have spoken enough, and must leave off. I have not given my friend's name; this is by request. He did not wish to be known by name; his identity, he often said, never really fit him. In our conversations about poetry, he scrupulously avoided learning about the authors we discussed; he did not care for such "trivia".

As the editor of another's work, it would be inappropriate for me to dedicate *Silence* to anyone. My editorial labors I dedicate to any they happen to benefit. A, my silent friend, I love you, I miss you.

Seattle

2022

[1]

Cease your singing, impudent lungs!

[2]

Then the scattered threnodists  
    wing their song away,  
and the sulking sky presumes to clear,  
  
and silence settles on the day

[3]

Muse who was not, who did not Hymn, Dance, Sing,  
Bloom, Glorify, Delight; Mouth who was poor  
of Voice, not Lovely, not of Heaven; Spring  
unreckoned of the nine, choked heretofore;  
Felicity, discharge!

Forgive

[4]

for chaos always  
scuppers intention:  
the unruly detail  
escapes, the voiceless  
bird sings, the dam bursts



[5]

The gorge waits in the rock,  
unsure for what it waits.

The rock is solid all through;  
the gorge barely knows itself.

Water begins to trickle  
through the cracks and crevices.

The gorge tenses, feeling each rain  
carve it closer to being.

[6]

the kind of warm spring day you cannot help  
but forget, even though it's mid-October  
and all the robins have been replaced by geese.  
you'll get to the bottom of this – if, that is,  
it bottoms out, though it may simply slide  
through your fingers, as such things are wont to do.  
notice, though, there's one thing missing – where is it?

[7]

No future is told here

no prayers forthcome

[8]

Rut it with furrowed words,  
Isomorphic, yet heightened words

[9]

If my voice be not ripped  
    mute from my throat,  
by the wind whipped, whirled, howled  
    down, if my voice  
be discernible

sand-diving

[10]

pale mosses digging  
into the windthrow

[11]

you've heard that Time proceeds in fits and starts  
too rapid for vision to disentangle. where  
you encountered such an outlandish hypothesis,  
even when it is you're having this thought,  
is untraceable, like a single caw from a tree  
brimming with crows, but don't, for that, stop thinking it.  
sometimes, it even gets all jumbled up

[12]

as if,  
now,  
the stubborn veil  
of the heaped years' dust  
becomes the *thing* itself,  
as if underneath the caked neglect  
the *singular* is featureless,  
immune to all discerning,

tracing messages  
in grime to thicken into memory



[13]

There, you see it, purling around a streetlight,  
swallowing the mercury-vapor glimmer,  
meager at its brightest, obscure, a pale ghost  
fending off darkness:

mist that, curling, gloomily grinning, makes a  
phantom of the phantom that you, despite all  
your encounters with evanescent things, had  
hoped you could count on.

[14]

where, in the thicket, is the Fact? not here,  
bramble of forces unnaturally bent,  
ellipsis writhed around essential flux –

where, in the orbit, is the Fact? not here,  
body attracted by purport far-flung,  
elliptic wanderer through crooked void –

where, in the struggle, is the Fact? not here,  
record of valiant dead-end resolve,  
obituary of a relict self –

[15]

it's winter now: you watch your breath dissolve  
into the fog that's standing at attention,  
column after column on the ice.  
but why did I insert this here? having  
been made, I flee. as you follow, you feel  
yourself disintegrating, particle  
by particle. with you goes the cold

[16]

Who says "I"? A hundred or more impostors.

[17]

Long-silent oracle

hidden things

my callow thought

I ask

of you no credence in my folly. That

idle chatter

no utterance

but this

is a dead thing, thrown off in haste, a fragment  
of silence

[18]

If words prefer wide-open spaces, they  
are in the wrong place,

for which the old alliances, that know

“the pressure”

traverse

this wasteland wordless. — No, it’s

The oldest metaphors

[19]

No, not really: I do not think the tree stump  
is a metaphor (though its hollow center  
quarters lichens, fungi like ears – this void that's  
always eavesdropping –

[20]

the pond-water is turbid: it gives you back  
your scrunched-up face in blotchy sepia,  
disfigured by the breeze. below the image,  
all the dust this mirror has gathered has sunk  
and become mud in which a startled tadpole  
wriggles. there's something there, if only you  
could make it out. squint. but that's enough



[21]

Memory

Memory, for a moment,

No sound but the wind,  
training the grass to its shear.

[22]

temples to error are the trees  
glittering weight

the hush that is owed to guilt

the era of forgetting

[23]

Look there:

rotting wood uplifting to nothing, twisting  
trunk and branches in its elusive prayer.

*Let it unnerve you.*

[24]

*and then the lighting of the lamps*  
for the last time, before the circuitry  
corrodes and no materials remain  
to mend it. underneath, the rain

monotonously dances, free  
of form and free of gracefulness, and stamps  
the earth with empty symbols, empty tugs  
at heartstrings uselessly gone slack.

what tangled absence haunts  
us? what despair?  
something missing from the air.

the world is made of wants,  
and truth at last is lack:  
no bugs

[25]

it's beginning to get clamorous in here,  
more and more confused by the second. you  
were promised Time would be an arrow, but here  
it's piling up – must be an accident  
somewhere ahead, or possibly road work,  
and cars are starting to hightail it out of there.  
you can hear them turning above you, on the bridge

[26]

Resuscitator, cease!

[27]

pardon my  
gelid mouth,

[28]

fled the nausea  
of an enthusiasm  
squandered

a spark from nature's heraclitean fire  
drawn inward, carefully worked  
by silent bellows until  
it caught on a sliver of passing rubbish,  
flotsam of an earlier fibrillation

but to be a burning shard is perilous,  
afloat in a lake of faces



[29]

it's me again, this time come not to mock  
but to be of genuine help, if I can.  
at least, it sounds like me. it's difficult  
to be certain when all you've got to go on is  
the memory of how I sounded then.  
it's rather unreliable. possibly  
I'm just the wind, gamboling through cattails.

[30]

I sit, a tree with a bent trunk

*inside itself*

*the udumbara blooms*

*its furtive flower*

My ruminations strangle me

[31]

About this, let there be no obscurity.

All I am saying is,

[32]

In one word, *startling*.

[33]

then let us wait forever, if things are as you say.  
if, truly, perfection is unattainable, let us sit  
    in silence, not gibber and clack and strew  
    about us the scraps of our ill-formed thoughts.  
let us gather moss: stationary stones  
that never will come in contact, except as some outside force  
    ordains it – a fate unfelt, unknown.  
    let us grow fuzzy, let  
inchoacy be the only lushness we desire.  
and if, as friends, we find this difficult, then let  
    us treat these lumpy words as the slag  
    of a metal we've refined to nothing

[34]

so it seems that nothing binds this. you have ransacked,  
with commendable diligence, empty space.  
turn your attention, even for a moment:  
all this will vanish. overhead, the geese  
pivot, come splashing down into the pond.  
a few frames later, the day disperses, having  
been filed either away or to a point

[35]

Paused, on pause, the windmills – all three immobile.

Wind departed. Everything waiting, hanging.

Then – a shudder (maybe), a trick of vision.

Blink. The pale moon lingers as afterimage.

*(In the gaps I vanish. Disintegration.)*

Then the returning.

[36]

I call across the mute, unsullied Sheer