

## THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE

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It is, of course, an irony to speak about silence. As soon as you start talking the peace is broken – the word silence is as problematic as the word “suddenly” – before you finish the word it no longer means what it says -- or “future” – the first syllable is in the past before you get to the end of the word.

Similarly the word “silence” spoken aloud, contradicts its meaning. It is only defined by loss, by its absence.

Yet speech, like music, requires silence to be comprehensible, whether it is the necessary hiatus that makes each word distinct, the pause at the end of a sentence, the break at the conclusion of a paragraph or the stillness at the closing of a speech.

We cannot understand the continuous - and we are biologically incapable of speaking without stopping for breath.

We cannot make sense without silence.

Silence encloses our lives – before our first cry as a child and after our last breath. It is the white space around a poem, the double bar line that borders a piece of music, the frame of a painting.

We need silence before music begins and after it has finished in order to take in what has happened – to understand it and to feel that the work is completed.

We only know a work has ended through the silence that concludes it.

We honour the dead with the silence of respect, commending the souls of those who have made “the ultimate sacrifice”.

Silence is our response to tragedy – but there are many other kinds of silence - not only respectful, meditative, prayerful or filled with memory - but attentive, thoughtful and subdued.

Silence can be pregnant, fearful, shocked and stunned - sullen, dogmatic and even aggressive . As a crime writer I am currently working on a story called “No Comment” in which a guilty man exercises his “right to silence”. My detective, Canon Sidney Chambers, a clergyman familiar with the meditative quietness of prayer, is brought in to encourage the man to speak – to break the criminal’s hostile silence.

So, silence can be uncomfortable, awkward and embarrassing – if I stopped now, for example, how long would it be before the pause became a silence that became so unsustainable that it had to be broken by the noise of apology, protest and departure?

Let me give you an example of one of the most famous moments of embarrassed public silence. On the evening of 29 August 1952 a crowd of avant-garde aficionados and local music enthusiasts filed into the Maverick Concert Hall near Woodstock, in America, to hear a piano recital by the young virtuoso David Tudor.

The penultimate piece on the programme was John Cage’s latest piece, *4’33”*. Tudor shut the piano and sat still. The wind rustled in the maples. Half a minute later he reopened the lid, then shut it. The summer rain could be heard falling on the Maverick’s wooden roof. Another couple of minutes – Tudor opened and shut the lid again – and muttering broke out in the hall. People began shuffling towards the exit. Four minutes and 33 seconds without a note



There you go. One friend, on hearing one of Cage's lectures walked out saying: "John, I dearly love you, but I cannot bear another minute."

T.S. Eliot said that humanity cannot bear very much reality – but the same is true of silence - We cannot necessarily stand it for very long time.

The longest that anyone has survived in the 'anechoic chamber' at Orfield Laboratories in South Minneapolis is just 45 minutes.

It's 99.99 per cent sound absorbent and holds the Guinness World Record for the world's quietest place, but stay there too long and you may start hallucinating.

When it's quiet, ears will adapt. The quieter the room, the more things people hear. They can hear their heart beating, their lungs, their stomach gurgling. 'n the anechoic chamber, they *become* the sound and people can't stand it.

This modern scientific experiment is bizarrely pre-figured in the Bible's last book – the Revelation of St. John – after the seventh seal is opened and before the last judgment there is a calm before the storm to take in the magnitude of what has happened – a prolonged and stunned silence: how long does this last?

"About half an hour" that is as much as humanity can stand.

*And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour.*

After this the trumpets sound and the silence is broken.

The message is that whether we are in earth or in heaven, we can't tolerate silence for long. It's too uncomfortable. We find we have to say something to break the silence – often with anything that comes to mind.

I remember someone coming up to me after my father's funeral and saying "Well, least he had a good day for it." It was true, it was a sunny day, but did that really compensate for a death? And did the well-meaning man's words help at all? Would the grief have been any different in the silence and the rain? I don't know. But the man made the effort to say something. It didn't really make any sense but I was grateful that he made the effort – that attention was paid – and attention is, in its own way, a kind of prayer.

Why am I telling you this? Because it is at the core of John Betjeman's heartbreaking poem "Devonshire Street" – which starts with the silence of shock - after a doctor has given a fatal diagnosis to a man in the presence of his wife. They leave the surgery and can think of nothing as powerful or as meaningful to say in response.

The heavy mahogany door with its wrought-iron screen  
Shuts. And the sound is rich, sympathetic, discreet.  
The sun still shines on this eighteenth-century scene  
With Edwardian faience adornment -- Devonshire Street.

No hope. And the X-ray photographs under his arm  
Confirm the message. His wife stands timidly by.  
The opposite brick-built house looks lofty and calm  
Its chimneys steady against the mackerel sky.  
No hope. And the iron knob of this palisade  
So cold to the touch, is luckier now than he  
"Oh merciless, hurrying Londoners! Why was I made  
For the long and painful deathbed coming to me?"  
She puts her fingers in his, as, loving and silly

At long-past Kensington dances she used to do  
"It's cheaper to take the tube to Piccadilly  
And then we can catch a nineteen or twenty-two".

It is something to say. They probably don't need to save the money – but what else can the wife say? It is a way of disturbing the silence behind that “No hope” - the “no hope” that prefigures the final silence of death.

Banality, through its context, becomes poetry.

Poetry defines those moments when normal language, everyday utterance, is either inadequate or fails entirely.

Because there *are* frequently times when we *don't* know what to say or we *can't* find the right words - even if we know someone well or have the best intentions.

Here is Philip Larkin's poem - Talking in Bed

Talking in bed ought to be easiest,  
Lying together there goes back so far,  
An emblem of two people being honest.

Yet more and more time passes silently.  
Outside, the wind's incomplete unrest  
Builds and disperses clouds about the sky,

And dark towns heap up on the horizon.  
None of this cares for us. Nothing shows why  
At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find

Words at once true and kind,  
Or not untrue and not unkind.

Because words are so temperamental, breaking silence can be a risky endeavor – it can be easier, calmer, safer to remain silent rather than come out with the wrong thing. (It has taken me thirty years of marriage to learn this)

The words we do eventually use in difficult situations have to become as - *or more* - precious than the silence they break - in short, the words we use have to be worth saying.

Speech is both simple - it's easy to say any old thing - and complex - both reassuring and terrifying. The stakes, after all, can be so high. Khalil Gibran once depressingly pointed out "Between what is said and not meant, and what is meant and not said, most of love is lost".

I am not as pessimistic as that; but acknowledge the dangers of thoughtless speech and the comparative safety of silence.

( Although, of course, silence is not always safe – just as it is not always neutral - in the world of politics and protest, silence means consent – tacit acknowledgement is still acknowledgment)

Poetry is a form of combatting silence by interrupting it, defining it, and then saying something more - it's a means finding the right thing to say when we no longer know what words to use – and it's why we employ poetry at funerals to fill the void of inarticulate loss.

Outside poetry we don't always have the skill to define or refine ourselves - so often, in the prose of every day life we don't *know* what words to use, other than regular, comforting, banalities that skate the surface of the silence.

The pressure is always on us to say *something*. We live in an increasingly noisy world of self proclamation - of *me too me too me too* - that becomes so pervasive the theologian William Vanstone once compared it to being by an indoor swimming pool - all the noise comes from the shallow end.

So how should a poet behave? What should he or she say to be properly heard in the great battle between noise and silence?

The American writer Wendell Berry had some advice in his long poem *Given*.

It's called "How to be a Poet":

There are no unsacred places;  
there are only sacred places  
and desecrated places.

Accept what comes from silence.

Make the best you can of it.

Of the little words that come  
out of the silence, like prayers  
prayed back to the one who prays,  
make a poem that does not disturb  
the silence from which it came.

This is a different kind of silence; one that is found in contemplation and companionship. It is the quietness of acknowledgement, acceptance and an understanding of times when words, for just a few moments, are no longer necessary –it's this kind of silence that lies at the heart of Meg Bateman's poem "Happiness"

Often have I seen them come together,  
two old friends, two crofters,  
who after a brief murmured greeting  
will stand wordlessly together,  
side by side, not facing each other,



and look out on the land whose  
ways and memories unite them,

breathe in the air, and the scent of  
tobacco and damp and lamb scour,  
in the certain knowledge that talk  
would hamper that expansive communion,  
break in on their golden awareness  
of all there is between them.

This is what George Eliot called ***The Other Side of Silence***: a return, after the deafening experience of the noise of everyday life, to a form of contemplation that re-opens our ears to the natural world and a re-engagement with elemental truths- knowledge that is more vibrant than the honeyed vacuities and shouty superfluity of everyday life.

In Middlemarch, she wrote

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.”

This is what John Cage was getting at. In 1928, as a geeky 16-year-old high-school pupil in Los Angeles, he won the Southern California Oratorical Contest with a speech on Pan-American relations entitled ‘Other People Think’.

It ran:

One of the greatest blessings that the United States could receive in the near future would be to have her industries halted, her business discontinued, her people speechless, a great pause in her world of affairs created, and finally to

have everything stopped that runs, until everyone should hear the last wheel go round and the last echo fade away ... then, in that moment of complete intermission, of undisturbed calm, would be the hour most conducive to the birth of a Pan-American Conscience.

In order to write and to read and to listen one has to return to silence and learn from it – to go to it's "other side", the side we find on leaving the relentless twenty-four hour noise of a neurotic, anxious, world - what the Norwegian writer Rolf Jacobsen calls "the silence afterwards" :

Try to be done now

with the provocations and sales statistics,

the Sunday breakfasts and incinerators,

the military parades, the architecture competitions

and the triple rows of traffic lights.

Get through it and be done

with the party preparations and marketing analyses

for it's too late,

it's far too late,

be done with it - and come home

to the silence afterwards

that meets you like a hot spurt of blood against your forehead

and like the thunder on the way

and the chimes of mighty bells

that make your eardrums quiver

for words are no more,

there are no more words,

from now on everything will speak

with the voices of stones and trees.

The silence that lives in the grass

on the underside of each blade

and in the blue intervals between the stones.

The silence  
that follows after the shots and the bird-song.

The silence  
that lays a blanket over the one who is dead  
and that waits on the stairs until everyone is gone.

The silence  
that nestles like a fledgling between your hands,  
your only friend.

The idea of silence being precious, vulnerable and yet as full of potential as a fledgling, pays tribute to a common theme in writing about silence and natural sound – it's a return to that pre-lapsarian state before human sin - the silence in a refashioned garden of Eden decorated with the fragile optimism of bird song.

Before his death in 1917, the Anglo-Welsh poet Edward Thomas, remembered England as an alternative garden of Eden before the sin and suffering of the first world war.

In his poem Adlestrop, birdsong becomes a poetic reminder of the beauty of George Eliot's other side of silence – a purer state of awareness, a heightened sense of reality removed from the busy futility of human action.

Yes. I remember Adlestrop—  
The name, because one afternoon  
Of heat the express-train drew up there  
Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.  
 No one left and no one came  
 On the bare platform. What I saw  
 Was Adlestrop  
 —only the name

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,  
 And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,  
 No whit less still and lonely fair  
 Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang  
 Close by, and round him, mistier,  
 Farther and farther, all the birds  
 Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

The poem ends in a held moment of ecstasy; modernity fades into the background. The steam train stops, hisses and is no longer heard. There's a cough; and then the shared acknowledgment of song – pure song, both close and far away, a united moment of nature – and the poem ends there, leaving that song for as long as you think necessary – it continues to fill the white space under the poem and the memory of reading. There it is, Edward Thomas is saying – birdsong. Listen. Take as long as you like. The words have stopped too – there is only this blank space. Fill it with bird song.

Such moments resist analysis. You just have to let them be. This is true, too, of Emily Dickinson's work, where birdsong also plays its part.

Split the Lark—and you'll find the Music—  
 Bulb after Bulb, in Silver rolled—  
 Scantilly dealt to the Summer Morning  
 Saved for your Ear when Lutes be old.

Loose the Flood—you shall find it patent—  
 Gush after Gush, reserved for you—  
 Scarlet Experiment! Sceptic Thomas!  
 Now, do you doubt that your Bird was true?

By "split the lark" Dickinson means just that - cut the lark open, and you will easily find the bits and pieces that make the music - these are bulbs rather than eggs – bulbs because they bring forth flowers but also perhaps because musical notes on a page are bulbous – the lark’s music has a ready supply of fecundity - but if you want to see how it all works, if you don’t believe in the power of music and poetry on its own, if you are a doubting Thomas and want to dissect the music and re-open the veins, then the blood will flow—“patent”, that is open and unobstructed - gush after gush - and the lark will die.

Sometimes, Dickinson is arguing, you have to let the poem exist for its own sake- you have to let the music sing.

And music has its own poetry to shimmer over the silence, one that can reach into the deeper spaces inside ourselves - what Rainer Maria Rilke called the “heart-space”. Here is his poem, *Music*.

Music: breathing of statues. Perhaps:  
 silence of paintings. You language where all language  
 ends. You time  
 standing vertically on the motion of mortal hearts.  
 Feelings for whom? O you the transformation  
 of feelings into what?: into audible landscape.  
 You stranger: music. You heart-space  
 grown out of us. The deepest space in us,

which, rising above us, forces its way out,--  
holy departure:

when the innermost point in us stands  
outside, as the most practiced distance, as the other  
side of the air:

pure,  
boundless,  
no longer habitable.

Music has a transcendent quality that takes us both inside and beyond ourselves. For a poet like Walter de la Mare it is capable both of enchantment and of extending our lives beyond the merely temporal.

When music sounds, gone is the earth I know,  
And all her lovely things even lovelier grow;  
Her flowers in vision flame, her forest trees  
Lift burdened branches, stilled with ecstasies.

When music sounds, out of the water rise  
Naiads whose beauty dims my waking eyes,  
Rapt in strange dreams burns each enchanted face,  
With solemn echoing stirs their dwelling-place.

When music sounds, all that I was I am  
Ere to this haunt of brooding dust I came;  
And from Time's woods break into distant song  
The swift-winged hours, as I hasten along.

Shelley wrote that "music, when soft voices die, vibrates in the memory"; it becomes a part of us just as it is part of the air, part of eternity, a touch, a

sense, a hint beyond mortality, a glimpse of what might be called the eternal verities.

One can get sentimental about this, but for a poet like Seamus Heaney, music and poetry could combine to create something that transcended even itself; it could go return to an eternal silence that still contains the music we have just heard and perhaps all the music that has ever been, both before and after time.

### **The Given Note**

On the most westerly Blasket  
In a dry-stone hut  
He got this air out of the night.

Strange noises were heard  
By others who followed, bits of a tune  
Coming in on loud weather

Though nothing like melody.  
He blamed their fingers and ear  
As unpractised, their fiddling easy

For he had gone alone into the island  
And brought back the whole thing.  
The house throbbed like his full violin.

So whether he calls it spirit music  
Or not, I don't care. He took it  
Out of wind off mid-Atlantic.

Still he maintains, from nowhere.  
It comes off the bow gravely,  
Rephrases itself into the air.

Recently there have been are brave musical experiments with “lost sounds”, attempts to recapture music that was heard in the air a long time ago. At the Royal College of Art, Jon Wozencroft has run a series of experiments at Stonehenge because he believes the giant “Preseli” bluestones there – brought two hundred miles from Pembrokeshire - were specifically chosen for their musical qualities – the stones were acoustically arranged and could be played like bells, gongs or tin drums when hit with small hammerstones – and that it might be possible to recreate or even release that early music.

What would it be like if we could listen once more to the first songs sung at Stonehenge? To think of the place as the first orchestra pit – with nature both its architecture and instrument?

While we remain confined to our mortality, unable quite to unlock the percussion of the past or the music of the spheres, poets and musicians tell us, even warn us, to appreciate and experience music when it comes to us – to kiss the joy as it flies- to use Blake’s ornithological metaphor - one must not miss these moments, as Thomas Hardy chastises in *The Self-Unseeing*:

Here is the ancient floor,  
Footworn and hollowed and thin,  
Here was the former door  
Where the dead feet walked in.

She sat here in her chair,  
Smiling into the fire;  
He who played stood there,  
Bowing it higher and higher.

Childlike, I danced in a dream;  
Blessings emblazoned that day;  
Everything glowed with a gleam;



Yet we were looking away!

Poetry has a natural tendency to lament; inspiration recollected in tranquility is assembled into poetic form after the moment has passed; the actual experience worthy of poetry has already been lost.

This regret is intensified when the poet is no longer remembering a piece of music or a moment of birdsong but the lives of the loved.

The mid-Western American poet Edgar Lee Masters is best remembered for his collection *Spoon River Anthology*, first published in 1915, a sequence of over two hundred free-verse epitaphs spoken from the cemetery of the town of Spoon River. This is his poem, Silence. I hope it speaks for itself.

I have known the silence of the stars and of the sea,  
And the silence of the city when it pauses,  
And the silence of a man and a maid,  
And the silence of the sick  
When their eyes roam about the room.  
And I ask: For the depths,  
Of what use is language?  
A beast of the field moans a few times  
When death takes its young.  
And we are voiceless in the presence of realities --  
We cannot speak.

A curious boy asks an old soldier  
Sitting in front of the grocery store,  
"How did you lose your leg?"  
And the old soldier is struck with silence,  
Or his mind flies away

Because he cannot concentrate it on Gettysburg.  
It comes back jocosely  
And he says, "A bear bit it off."  
And the boy wonders, while the old soldier  
Dumbly, feebly lives over  
The flashes of guns, the thunder of cannon,  
The shrieks of the slain,  
And himself lying on the ground,  
And the hospital surgeons, the knives,  
And the long days in bed.  
But if he could describe it all  
He would be an artist.  
But if he were an artist there would be deeper wounds  
Which he could not describe.

There is the silence of a great hatred,  
And the silence of a great love,  
And the silence of an embittered friendship.  
There is the silence of a spiritual crisis,  
Through which your soul, exquisitely tortured,  
Comes with visions not to be uttered  
Into a realm of higher life.  
There is the silence of defeat.  
There is the silence of those unjustly punished;  
And the silence of the dying whose hand  
Suddenly grips yours.  
There is the silence between father and son,  
When the father cannot explain his life,  
Even though he be misunderstood for it.  
  
There is the silence that comes between husband and wife.  
There is the silence of those who have failed;

And the vast silence that covers  
Broken nations and vanquished leaders.  
There is the silence of Lincoln,  
Thinking of the poverty of his youth.  
And the silence of Napoleon  
After Waterloo.  
And the silence of Jeanne d'Arc  
Saying amid the flames, "Blessed Jesus" --  
Revealing in two words all sorrows, all hope.  
And there is the silence of age,  
Too full of wisdom for the tongue to utter it  
In words intelligible to those who have not lived  
The great range of life.

And there is the silence of the dead.  
If we who are in life cannot speak  
Of profound experiences,  
Why do you marvel that the dead  
Do not tell you of death?  
Their silence shall be interpreted  
As we approach them.

So now we have arrived, at the time for a brief discussion, in a church, about that final silence – death – for which Christians often prepare for in prayer and in preparatory silence.

The practise is as paradoxical as speaking about silence; we prepare for life after death by practicing death in life.

Silence lies at the heart of the Christian mystical tradition- the practice of silence is called hesychasm.

One of the purposes of religion is to redefine silence – to move it away from nothingness, an end, a void – and to give it meaning - by converting it into an eternity – taking away the full stop at the end of life and leaving instead an infinite space ahead of it....

Nikolai Madzirov's poem very short poem, Silence, argues that religious thinkers therefore transformed the way we think about silence. He writes:

There is no silence in the world.  
 Monks have created it  
 To hear the horses every day  
 And feathers falling from wings

Are these every day horses passing by, in the Yeatsian sense- Horseman pass by – and are these the feathers of birds? Or are those horses the four horsemen of the apocalypse, pre-figuring the end of the world and the feathers the feathers of angels?

They are probably both....the words we use can carry dual meanings, just as the experience of meditation, trance , poetry, sleep and dream make the borders between life and death permeable – just as there can be sound bleed into silence, and silence bleed into sound, so death bleeds into life and life bleeds into death –poets have often been interested in this half-way house - Keats referred to his frequent thought that he was already dead and that he was leading a posthumous existence- sleep and dream are necessary conditions for the romantic imagination which place the half-life of “ the swoon” at its centre

Here is a stanza from his Ode to a Nightingale, a poem recollected in tranquillity after a dream state that clouds both sleep and waking – and features, yet again, bird-song:

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time  
    I have been half in love with easeful Death,  
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,  
    To take into the air my quiet breath;  
    Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
    While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
    In such an ecstasy!

Keats died at 25, already familiar with the random reign of death. He accepted it, knew it was coming. He even practised it, like monks and those early adherents to Jeremy Taylor's great meditative text 'The Art of Dying Well.'

'In our modern age, many people are protected, by medicine, fortune, genetics and wealth from the familiarity of frequent death. This means that when it comes, it comes as a shock, rather than as something to be expected.

There is, perhaps, nothing more shocking than the death of a child, particularly after the joy of birth and arrival - it seems a pointless travesty to take away something so recently delivered and celebrated - but this unbearable return to silence has inspired some very great poetry- most recently perhaps, in the work of Robert Peake, a young Anglo-American poet whose second collection, *The Knowledge*, is published this month.

His first collection was written in the seven years following the death of his infant son - it's called "The Silence Teacher".

### **The Silence Teacher**

Seeing friends for the first time after his death  
tested the silence a room could hold. The rest  
was a kindness like holding our breath.

My wife's oldest friend offers her best  
brave smile, tells us about the first time  
her daughter, in new hearing aids, passed a nest.

Pitched as high as a tin wind chime,  
in a sphere beyond the rumble of speech  
she only knew "tweet" from what mother had mimed.  
But birds' hunger songs seemed as far from reach  
as the angels Blake saw perched in a tree,  
and sweeter than any science her mother could teach.

Her world was based partly on what she could see.  
The rest was a guess - the flailing of a street preacher  
seemed like the swats of a man attacked by bees.  
Quick lips make it easy to misread a speaker,  
and once at a party, based on what she had seen,  
the girl introduced her mother as a "silence teacher".

Grief's small hands cupped before me,  
reliving the news of our infant son's tests,  
his brain as quiet as her soundless sea,

and still as winter in a robin's nest,  
I did not say: I was the one who held him last  
until the ticking heart stopped in his chest

or what that silence taught, and how it pressed.

There are no real words to describe the poet's grief. Comfort comes from news of a girl who is deaf. The silence, like the silence I described at the beginning of this talk, is almost unbearable:

Seeing friends for the first time after his death  
tested the silence a room could hold.

How long can silence last?

There are, yet again, references to birds - learning the word "tweet", the dead son's brain "still as winter in a robin's nest" and then there is the idea that silence, the other side of silence, can perhaps retrieve absence, make it present once more. The poem opens out the boundaries of time to make them permeable, and sometimes, just sometimes, helps the loss.

Ghasan Zaqtan is perhaps the best living Palestinian poet at the moment, after the death of Mahmoud Darwish. His poems, unsurprisingly perhaps, deal not only with lost lives but lost identity – a lost nation forced into silence – that must be recovered, at least at first, by poetry and memory.

His poem "Wolves" from the collection "*Like a Straw Bird It Follows Me*" needs a little bit of setting up.

It begins with loss and departure - there is no hope, no birdsong -

The birds' departure from his heart  
leaves the plains white

The bird of happiness, the song in his heart has gone, the plains are a void of whiteness without any other colour. All is barren. Gone. But then Ghasan

Zaqtan enters what is, in effect a virtual Palestinian mausoleum; a door opens and the dead inside jump back to life

the voices

of those who left long ago will jump like grasshoppers  
when the door is opened.

They are so shocked by the poetic door opening and revealing their lives that they tell them to sit down and wait for a bit while they re-organise themselves,–

Wait, wait a moment

for us to dry a moment

They have to get dressed. The women put their necklaces back on – the poet has to mind his head – it's almost comic - they take their time about it because they have been waiting for years for this moment to come back to life, to be remembered – and they need to take time, take stock of what is, unfortunately only an interruption to the silence of loss – of death – only a temporary retrieval from absence while the poem lasts.

Here it is:

The birds' departure from his heart

leaves the plains white

where the story is white

and sleep is white

and silence is the caller's icon.

A laugh of sand will sprout when the door is opened

from fear's angle, a hymn

for the grand winter, and the voices

of those who left long ago will jump like grasshoppers

when the door is opened.



Wait, wait a moment  
for us to dry a moment  
there's in our trace  
a reckless lament  
and a ceramic bird ...  
and watch for the necklaces on the ceiling  
Why don't you turn the lights on  
or be happy with sitting  
and watch for the fruits on the ground

Your voice in my room exhausts the silence  
the silence of pots  
the silence of shelves  
the silence of writing  
the silence of lighting  
and the silence of survival  
which I have been gathering for years  
with the patience of one who's alone with the garden in summer  
or one who retrieves absence  
the absence  
that never stops.

In contrast to religion, which employs silence to wait patiently for a response, poetry and music challenge and even attack that silence – in many ways they offer a secular alternative to religion - fighting instead for the vitality of being alive, uttering defiance in the face of death, crying out for resurrection through memory.

They are protests against oblivion – shouts and songs that tell the silence we were once here and we will be remembered.

For the American poet Walt Whitman humanity was a mass choir consisting of individuals each giving voice to a series of 'varied carols' of everyday life.

The mechanic, the carpenter, the mason, the boatman, the shoemaker, and the woodcutter all join in the chorus of the nation. The singing of the mother, the wife, and the girl at work expresses their joy and their feeling of fruition. These are highly individualistic men and women. Each person sings "what belongs to him or her and to none else":

I Hear America singing, the varied carols I hear;  
 Those of mechanics--each one singing his, as it should be, blithe and strong;  
 The carpenter singing his, as he measures his plank or beam,  
 The mason singing his, as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work;  
 The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat--the deckhand singing  
 on the steamboat deck;  
 The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench--the hatter singing as he  
 stands;  
 The wood-cutter's song--the ploughboy's, on his way in the morning, or at the  
 noon intermission, or at sundown;  
 The delicious singing of the mother--or of the young wife at work--or of the girl  
 sewing or washing - Each singing what belongs to her, and to none else;  
 The day what belongs to the day - At night, the party of young fellows, robust,  
 friendly,  
 Singing, with open mouths, their strong melodious songs.

Music is the celebratory response to death's lamentable silence.

Poet, performer, and jazz aficionado Quincy Troup, wrote of Duke Ellington's death not so much as a departure from life but an arrival in, and a gift to heaven – as if heaven's music had been incomplete without Ellington's great swing – the magical charm – or gri-gri – of his talent.

## **The Day Duke Raised: May 24th, 1974**

For Duke Ellington

that day began with a shower  
of darkness, calling lightning rains  
home to stone language  
of thunderclaps, shattering, the high  
blue, elegance, of space & time  
where a broken-down, riderless, horse  
with frayed wings  
rode a sheer bone, sunbeam  
road, down into the clouds

spoke wheels of lightning jagged  
around the hours, & spun high up  
above those clouds, duke wheeled  
his chariot of piano keys  
his spirit, now, levitated from flesh  
& hovering over the music of most high  
spoke to the silence  
of a griot-shaman-man  
who knew the wisdom of God

at high noon, the sun cracked  
through the darkness, like a rifle shot  
grew a beard of clouds on its livid, bald  
face, hung down, noon, sky high  
pivotal time of the flood-deep hours  
as duke was pivotal, being a five in the nine  
numbers of numerology  
as his music was one of the crossroads

a cosmic mirror of rhythmic gri-gri

so get on up & fly away duke, bebop  
 slant & fade on in, strut, dance swing, riff  
 & float & stroke those tickling, gri-gri keys  
 those satin ladies taking the A train up  
 to harlem, those gri-gri keys  
 of birmingham, breakdown  
 sophisticated ladies, mood indigo  
 get on up & strut across, gri-gri  
 raise on up, your band's waiting

thunderclapping music, somersaulting  
 clouds, racing across the deep, blue wisdom  
 of God, listen, it is time for your intro, duke  
 into that other place, where the all-time great  
 band is waiting for your intro, duke  
 it is time for the Sacred Concert, duke  
 it is time to make the music of God, duke  
 we are listening for your intro, duke  
 so let the sacred music, begin

Music and poetry offer the means of connecting to something more lasting than our own flickering humanity; they are the affirmation that we are alive, re-born even, after we have spent some time on the other side of silence.

I'd like to end, as seems proper at a music festival with a final poetic celebration of the power of music in response to the tragic, the fleeting and those doomed to death in war time; the hope amidst the horror of Siegfried Sassoon's great poem, written in April 1919, just after The Great War - and replete with yet more references to birdsong –

### **Everyone Sang**

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;  
 And I was filled with such delight  
 As prisoned birds must find in freedom,  
 Winging wildly across the white  
 Orchards and dark-green fields; on--on--and out of sight.

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;  
 And beauty came like the setting sun:  
 My heart was shaken with tears; and horror  
 Drifted away ... O, but Everyone  
 Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never  
 be done.

Here the exclamation of the psalms meets the natural state of birdsong - note that the singing is wordless - in reference to a freer, more innocent and timeless state of sinless paradise in the face of human cruelty and conflict

For this, like music, is how poetry works.

It is an intense, considered, distilled response to both the noise and din of aggressive humanity – to “the ignorant armies who clash by night” - and to the inevitable final silence that faces us all.

By writing or reading poetry, making music, or simply by speaking thoughtfully we are re-affirming the best of what it means to be human. Even in the face of war and unbearable suffering, when the worst cruelty, barbarity and senselessness lie before us, poetry arms us with a re-affirmation of the human instinct for survival, definition and meaning amidst the fluke and miracle of being alive.