

# No Sound

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Me gustas cuando callas porque estás como ausente,  
y me oyes desde lejos, y mi voz no te toca.

—Pablo Neruda

**A**s one who has dealt with chronic timidity all her life, I have often wrestled with the subject of silence. It's not a topic fit for conversation, so I usually confine my thoughts on silence to the inside of my head. When is it acceptable to be silent? I've come up with a short list of answers: while you sleep, or in the shower. Whilst chewing, say the masters of etiquette. During periods of intense concentration or anticipation. Meditation. And death.

As Samuel Beckett writes in his play *Endgame*, "What is there to keep me here?" His characters' answer: "The dialogue" (802).

In Beckett's postmodern mind, silence is nothingness. Silence is death. And the only thing that fends off silence is conversation. To be silent is to be alone, and to be alone is to straddle the thin line between life and death. Dialectic, the exchange of words or ideas, is connection. And connection is existence—or at least existence according to Beckett. The characters in *Endgame* speak about nothing, repeat themselves and acquiesce to the tedium of daily life. They are willing to engage in inane conversation, just so long as they continue to converse. They talk simply for the sake of obliterating silence.

Beckett's statement has me panicked. I'd rather save my words for something meaningful than waste them on hollow speech. Every word should be chosen carefully, every phrase deliberately constructed. Science tells me that silence is nothing more than an atmosphere with a sound level below twenty decibels, and biology says that I'm alive as long as my heart's beating. What does dialogue have to do with survival? I'm only moderately consoled by the fact that Beckett's bleak, absurdist idea is but a movement in drama—I could

just as easily ally myself with the Pinter school of the pregnant pause, which says that life, not death, lies in silence.

I remember finding life in a Pinteresque moment of silence between lovers in a photograph by JoAnn Verburg. Two men, Marvin and Maurice, lie on a sofa. The taller of the two is Marvin. He rests on his back, taking up the width of the couch. Maurice is lying in the fetal position behind him, resting his head on Marvin's arm and wrapping his bent legs around Marvin's knees. The two hold hands over Maurice's sternum, displacing *The New York Times* that lies across them. Maurice's eyes are closed, and in his free hand is a remote control, poised and pointed at a television outside the frame.

But the television isn't on—the only source of light in the photograph shines from an unseen lamp on a side table. The white light from the imagined source dissipates from right to left over the frame, silhouetting the sofa arm opposite Marvin's head. Marvin's large, weary eyes silently gaze at Maurice, who sleeps peacefully. The room is silent. There's not a sound in the frame—perhaps the hum of the air conditioner or the whirr of a fan, but nothing else. Not a word nor whisper is uttered. Marvin is lost in Maurice's repose, content to observe quietly his sleeping lover.

I remember one night, when I was the only one awake in the house. I ran my wrinkly hands over my soapy limbs, making sure that every last square centimeter of skin was properly cleansed. Shoulder blades, elbows, torso. I lathered and rinsed, silently reviewing the events of the day. I recalled conversations I'd had, imagining things I could have said to make myself seem wittier, and regretting things I'd said that had made me seem less so. I ran my fingers over my chest, and then I felt it—a nickel-sized pebble under the skin, or a marble, or a gumball. I moved under the steaming torrent and rubbed my eyes with the heels of my hands, my pulse rebounding between my eyelids and palms. I opened my eyes to the bleached white tiles, perfect squares caulked into the narrow walls.

I remember the night I went out to dinner to a hibachi restaurant with my family. I looked up from my plate for a moment, and I saw a woman across the room begin to shake. She convulsed, silently pulsed back and forth uncontrollably. Suddenly, she put her head down on her empty plate, and the young girl next to her put her chopsticks down to say, "Mom? Mom!"

With effort, I ripped my eyes from the woman who laid her head on a plate, shuddering up and down. I looked to my parents, who continued their conversation about their plans for the weekend. My sisters cleaned their

plates. The uniformed chefs kept chopping vegetables, lighting onion volcans and then stifling them with small plastic dolls that seemed to extinguish the flames with urine.

I blinked and tried to swallow. A woman was in cardiac arrest across the room, and I was stuck in my chair between the wall and thirty prattling people who were too determined to finish their dinners to notice.

I remember one still summer night, lying exhausted on a boy's couch. It had been a long and blissful evening, and by midnight, all we had the energy to do was spoon on the sofa, echoing the position of JoAnn Verburg's silent lovers. We lay beneath a blanket with the lights off. I could feel the manmade ridge that stretched from his sternum to his belly button (a souvenir from open heart surgery) against the curve of my spine. I felt a lazy finger brush against my hip and a heavy arm bear down on my ribs. I opened my eyes in the dark, wary of the silence. I expected some words of encouragement, an expression of appreciation, or even a whispered sweet nothing or two, but all I heard was the hum of the air conditioner or the whirr of a fan.

Me gustas cuando callas porque estás como ausente.  
Distante y dolorosa como si hubieras muerto.  
Una palabra entonces, una sonrisa bastan.  
Y estoy alegre, alegre de que no sea cierto. (17-20)

Tim O'Brien writes, "You're never more alive than when you're almost dead. You recognize what's valuable" (131). When looked at through a Beckettian lens (if "alive" is talking and "dead" is silent), O'Brien's words translate to something resembling "You're saying the most when you're silent." Silence filled with unspoken dialogue is conversation, too. A similar translation of O'Brien's words can be found in Pablo Neruda's poem, "Me gustas cuando callas." This poem has always intrigued me—I've always known it to be a love poem, although my Spanish classmates could never understand why. They were caught up in the chauvinistic appearance of the poem, in which a man tells his lover that he likes her best when she is not speaking. But I never found the poem to be anything less than reverent. Neruda finds beauty in silence. He feels closest to his beloved when she is still and quiet. Her very presence conjures so many feelings within him that speech would disrupt the purity of his love, the clarity of her beauty. But for Neruda, the beauty of silence also lies in the hope and anticipation that it will soon be broken.

That night, the anticipation overwhelmed me. I wasn't content to be still like Marvin; I had to break the silence. I spoke the boy's name—just one whispered syllable—and it shattered the celluloid moment. Over the ambient noise I heard his deepened breathing—he'd fallen asleep. I was the only one awake in the house.

And the next morning, I couldn't put into words what I'd discovered in the shower the night before. I knew I had to tell someone, to see a doctor, to confront a terrifying truth. But I couldn't say what I'd found aloud to myself, let alone to anyone else.

Eventually, though, the woman spoke. The paramedics came and they secured her on a stretcher. An EMT asked her questions to make sure her frontal lobe was still functioning. I heard her tell her daughter that everything would be alright. She could communicate, and so she was alive.

I think back to the divergent meanings of silence suggested by Beckett and Pinter, and it turns out that they're not so divergent after all. For ten performances in 2006, Harold Pinter appeared in *Krapp's Last Tape*, a one-act play written by his friend, the late Samuel Beckett. In the play, Krapp sits alone onstage listening to an old recording of himself, stopping the tape occasionally to wordlessly brood over or comment on the follies of his youth. In the end, however, Krapp bows to silence, letting the recording take over the last lines of the play:

*Krapp's lips move. No sound (28).*

The tape recorder speaks. "Past midnight. Never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhabited" (28).

There is Beckett's silence, filled with sound—Pinter's loaded pause made permanent. The review in *The New York Times* featured positive opinions from critics commenting on the profundity of the piece and "the coming together of the two masters of the speaking silence and the pregnant pause" (Cowell 2). Pinter filled Beckett's empty pauses with meaning, creating dialogue and life within them. On stage, silence is part suppression and part peace—entirely mixed with emptiness. There is beauty and terror in this paradox. Beauty and terror, silence and noise, all equally vital for survival.

But I also think back to Marvin and Maurice at home on their couch, their hearts beating in tandem beneath the Sunday *Times*. They are completely silent, but completely alive. Maybe Beckett and Pinter's theories are just theories. Because survival isn't just about existing, but about *living*—not just

conversation, but connection. And even in an environment with a sound level below twenty decibels, the snapping shut of valves can still be heard. Even in a soundproof room, the heart still beats.

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