

WORDLESS

My sister stayed silent for several days in a row when we were young. She was twenty years old, a student of spirituality. I was thirteen, a student of surliness. She announced that she would be silent and then commenced to be so.

My parents were pretty graceful about it.

Seems like there's more room in the house now, said my dad.

We should celebrate this form of prayer, said my mom.

Cooooool, said my brothers. Is this permanent?

Eventually my sister spoke again- to yell at me, as I recall- but I never forgot those days. I was reminded of it recently when she emerged from long silence at the monastery where she now lives. Is it hard to be silent? I ask.

In the beginning, it is, she says. Then it becomes a prayer.

I contemplate snippets of silence in mine existence and find them few; but I find that this delights rather than dismays me, for most of my sea of sound are my children, who are small quicksilver russet testy touchy tempestuous mammals always underfoot in the understory, yowling and howling and weeping and chirping and teasing and shouting and moaning and laughing and singing and screaming and sneering and sassing and humming and snoring and wheezing and growling and muttering and mumbling and musing and so making magic music all the livelong day.

Which is pretty cool; though it will not be permanent.

But sometimes they are silent and I am a student of their silence; my teenage daughter absorbed in book or homework, curled in her chair like a cat in the thicket of her room; my sons asleep, their limbs flung to the four holy directions, their faces beatific, their bedclothes rippled hills and dells; or all three children dozing in the back seat of the car as we slide through the velvet night, their faces flashing cinematically in my mirror as streetlights snick by metronomically; or the way they sat together silently before the silent television one crystal morning, four years ago, and watched two flaming towers crumble down down unto unthinkable unimaginable ash and dust.

I contemplate other silences. The tense intense tender silences of my mysterious wife. The silence of chapels and churches and confessionals and glades and gorges, places that wait for words to be spoken in the holy caves of their ribs. The split second of silence before two people simultaneously burst into laughter. The pregnant pause. The hot silence of lovemaking. The stifling stifled brooding silence just before a thunderstorm unleashes itself wild on the world. The silence of space, the vast of vista. The crucial silences between notes, without which there could be no music; no yes without no.

I rise earlier and earlier in these years. I don't know why. Age, sadness, a willingness to epiphany. Something is opening in me, some new eye. I talk less and listen more. Stories wash over me all day like tides. I walk through the bright wet streets and every moment a story comes to me, people hold them out to me like sweet children, and I hold them squirming and holy in my arms, and they enter my heart for a while, and season and salt and sweeten that old engine, and teach me humility and mercy, the only lessons that matter, the language I most wish to learn; a tongue best spoken wordlessly with your hands clasped in prayer and your heart as naked as a baby.

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