

# *The Syntax of Silence*

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in the Wiseman's house  
at the end of Main Street  
in York Harbour faraway  
on the edge of the Atlantic  
I am learning in slow ways  
how to live sabbatically,  
drawing silence like  
the sun calls the sea

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some days I talk too much  
like I often eat too much,  
fending off the terror of silence  
like car wrecks on a long lost lonely highway  
in a March snowstorm

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since I have no language

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for silence, how can I utter  
a poem about silence?

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why are some letters written  
but not pronounced: silent letters?  
is a silent letter a vestigial organ  
like an appendix or tonsils  
serving no purpose except  
to confound spellers,  
a disreputable cousin lurking  
in shadows, not invited  
to the party, an eccentric uncle  
nobody acknowledges, nobody  
can forget, known only in the writing,  
unknown in the speaking,  
seen and not heard  
a sonnet of silence?  
is a letter ever silent?

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because language begins  
in silence and ends in silence,  
there is no language without silence

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silence is a Gregorian chant,  
one more language  
I do not know  
like Latin or Sanskrit

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silence convenes the alphabet,

lexicon, syntax, speech, writing,  
and signification, to spell language

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silence designates spaces  
for dynamic meaning-making,  
revelation and concealment,  
disseminating significance

silence divides discourse,  
the seamless web of textuality,  
like a December blizzard blows  
boisterous waves into the harbour

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sometimes silence  
is born out of fear,  
submission, resignation,  
oppression, convention,  
avoidance, rejection,  
censorship, ignorance

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silence is the unarticulated,  
the unspoken, the unwritten  
that cannot be articulated,  
spoken, or written but

silence is not inarticulate

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silence tastes like Demerara molasses,  
Good Luck margarine, my mother's

homemade bread in long winter afternoons,  
the mouth full with soft sweet steam

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like an E-bay auction  
most talk is valuable since  
somebody somewhere wants it,  
but I cannot sell silence

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*silence* is both a verb and a noun,  
a subject and a predicate:  
silence silences

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silence is the breath of dark  
moist rum-soaked fruit cake,  
a poet's language  
I am trying always  
to hear, to learn:  
no light without shadows  
no shadows without light,  
always one

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silence of intimates, silence of mime, silence of private reading, silence of  
liturgical worship, silence in death, silence of the to-be-said, silence of  
God, silence of the unknown, silence of an unanswered letter, doorbell,  
telephone, silence of nothing-to-say, silence of nothing-I-want-to-say,  
silence of consent, silence of omission, silence of reservation, silence of  
good manners, silence of the mute, compelled silence, compelling  
silence, silence in sleep, silence of the absurd, silence of nothingness,  
silence on a crowded bus, silence of the deaf, silence of fear, silence of the

past, silence of indifference, silence of an unwritten text, silence of not-listening, silence of absent noise, silence of the abyss, silence of the universe, silence of autism, silence of a monk, silence of the abused, silence of memory, silence of imagination, silence of silence

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Job sat in the ashes  
scraping his leprous flesh,  
totally puzzled by God,  
and Job's friends,  
Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar,  
sat with him  
for seven days and seven nights  
in sympathetic silence,  
but eventually insisted  
on explaining Job's predicament:  
if only they'd remained silent

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still silent, silent in stillness  
silence suffices, sufficiency of silence  
satisfying silence, silent satisfaction  
silent suggestion, suggestive silence  
silent scene, seen silence  
silent stirring, stirring silence

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John Cage performed  
his composition 4'33"  
by walking on the stage  
and sitting at the piano  
in silence  
for four minutes  
and thirty-three seconds

many call it Cage's masterpiece

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as a student in elementary school  
I learned silence,  
learned to sit patiently,  
learned to pretend listening,  
learned to speak the sanctioned answers only,  
learned silence well,  
too well, a well of silence,  
almost drowned in the well

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have I ever known silence?

what do I hear even in this quiet room?

refrigerator, clock, furnace, laptop, water in pipes.

body gurgles, cracks, squishes.

the glossolalia of ghosts and spirits, conscience  
and memory, the unconscious and imagination.

is silence ever silent?

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are silence and utterance inextricably related,  
two manifestations of language, diastole and systole,  
like two pistons in an Acadia double-cylinder engine,  
pumping with the immutable rhythm:  
PUT put PUT put PUT put PUT put

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be silent.  
being silent.  
what is the difference?

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am I one of the silenced  
or one of the silencers?

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surgical silence:

1. mouth opened wide  
with a gag
2. tongue transfixed  
with stout silk
3. tongue pulled well  
out of the mouth
4. tongue at the base  
cut with short snips
5. tongue seized with Wells'  
forceps and removed

*(Gray's Anatomy)*

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a discourse  
sanctions some statements  
and

excludes some statements

and subsequently silences  
the sinuous and sensuous possibilities  
of shifting shapes in sentences

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silence falls like December snow,  
full of surprises seen finally in the window

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whole books  
have been written  
about silence.

why does silence  
generate so much  
noisy discussion?