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## Silent Quarantine

In silence, the world comes in close. Drops of rain sliding off the eaves seem to be inside the bedroom, on my pillow. The cat at my hip in a fluttering dream; her twitches against the quilt are nearer to me than my own heartbeat. In the middle of the night, the moon is in my hair, young and tender, keeping me awake.

What if I have the virus? Will I keep my promise and not go to the hospital, already so overcrowded a new intern has to take care of two critical cases in the ICU, without respirators?

I turn on the light and read a Chekhov short story, “The Darling,” translated by the great team, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. A darling story about a darling young woman who everyone thinks is darling, only she has no thoughts of her own and cannot be alone.

The silence can be lonely, leaving me orphaned in the sheer vastness of space. Silence is sometimes accompanied by the clicking of a chickadee at the bird feeder worrying a sunflower seed. Or the house groaning from winter’s inward thrust. Or two birch branches rubbing in 10 below temps. But when the phone rings, the windows rattle and so does my brain – an intruder into the expanding silence that has become my constant companion.

It’s been ten months now of my quarantine. I could go out if I wanted, get in the car and drive around. Get take-out from a restaurant, wander through a cemetery, call a friend, take a walk in town wearing a mask. Instead, I call no one. I wander the frozen dirt roads or hike into the forest where it is silent (not counting the rustle of chipmunk and squirrel, or the

woodpecker's ratchet against a rotting tree). I try to work on my book but there is no publisher waiting so I procrastinate, dallying about my small house, quickly running out of rooms.

My dreams are anything but silent, filled with teeming crowds, like a Bombay or Tokyo, and I'm frantic, looking for a place to wash my hands all the while thinking *don't these people know about social distancing? No one is wearing a mask!* I scramble for safety but there's nowhere to hide. When I wake, I know the virus will last a long time.

Dolphins in the Venice canals. Coyotes in downtown LA. Kashmir goats walking through a Welsh town. Stray cats overtaking the streets of Paris. Seven crows crowd my compost pile early in the morning, shattering the silence of the moon, cawing and cackling. Fox prints in the snow. A rafter of turkeys stalk my front yard. A doe and her fawn finish off my peony leaves.

Distractions. Relief. I try to stay inside the silence, the isolation, grateful for the opportunity to go deeper in, unravel new states of awareness. A lot of the time I grow impatient and have to do something. I cook and watch movies. Play chess online. Try to write, but grow weary with my stories.

With a friend who lives far away, we read Proust. 50 pages every week or two and then we talk on the phone. I'd never read Proust before, though I've started many times. Long meandering descriptions, the meditative examination of time and memory, few paragraph breaks, lengthy social conversations among the upper class – I never seemed to have the patience to delve in. Because of my friend, I persevere.

We eventually finish the first volume of Proust's "In Search of Lost Time." Reading him put me in a kind of trance that I found comforting. But I had to surrender to the length and breadth of his sentences, reading slowly and deliberately. If I wasn't fully conscious, sentences would go by and I'd not absorb them. But if I read slowly and paid attention, the riches

were many – his generous study of people, dealing with anything and everything, trivial or profound; his ability of immersion immersed me; the beauty of his descriptions were places I could live in, like a spell. “...even if we have the sensation of being surrounded by our own soul, it is not as though by a motionless prison: rather, we are in some sense borne along with it in a perpetual leap to go beyond it, to reach the outside, with a sort of discouragement as we hear around us always that same resonance, which is not an echo from outside but the resounding of an internal vibration.”

Proust helped me to slow down.

During the second month of the COVID-19 pandemic, I took up yoga again after many years of not practicing. It was excruciating. I often felt nauseous holding a pose. I figured it was because I was so out of shape, joints blocked with jammed-up energy. When released, I felt like passing out. After a few weeks I could feel my body opening, relishing the attention. That’s one of the perils of being a writer – being in the head and forgetting about the body.

After eight months of practicing, yoga has become a refuge, a place and time where I can sit inside myself and not be so much in the world. Writing can do that too but in order to find refuge in writing, I have to work through my resistance to get inside the imagination and let it rip. Yoga helps me to work through resistance until I gradually let go, deeper and deeper, sometimes reaching a point of stillness, nothingness, calm.

These are not calm days. The rage that rips through me is like the pain when I’m holding a pose and my back is screaming and my arms are shaking. I want to give up and lie down. I avoid listening or watching the news just like I avoid working on my book, or picking up Proust for another chapter, or subject myself to another round of sun salutes and planks. Writing is a

chore; yoga is a chore; Proust is a chore. And what is happening on the news is nearly unbearable.

It's essential that I don't feel victimized by the pandemic. I check myself continually that I don't complain about the inconvenience, the loneliness, even the fear of getting sick. I refuse to see this as damaging to my way of life. I adjust. Surrender. Control my thoughts. Live inside silence. Silence throws me back inside myself. Helps me to remember I am not the center of the universe, no matter how I may strive to make it so. And, inside of me is a home, always present, if I would only calm down and surrender.

I've always admired the old Moroccans for accepting life as it comes. *Insha 'Allah*. All in good time. Or never. They have patience, not in a rush, live quietly. They don't worry about the future because they may die tomorrow so why fret? They're always ready to die just thankful that they're still breathing. Don Juan too, in Castaneda's book, *Journey to Ixtlan; The Lessons of Don Juan*, taught the importance of carrying death on his left shoulder as his most trusted advisor. "An immense amount of pettiness is dropped if your death makes a gesture to you... Your death will tell you that nothing really matters outside its touch."

Perhaps the fear of fear silence comes from being so closely associated with death. Everything stops. And we know nothing about it. Nothing. The cold steel hand of the unknown overtakes us and we're dead. Gone forever. A timeless nothingness, for us that are left anyway. Who knows for the dead?

So often silence is equated with loss – a loved one, a time in life when all was so much better. Bittersweet melancholy. Memories quivering in the folds of daily life. I lost my best friend. She vanished into thin air. I've not heard from her in years. Silence. Complete, heartbreaking silence.

Time is different in silence. Clocks tick, watches buzz, time clocks punch, the cuckoo chirps, the bell tolls. Time races towards death in slow motion, unless you are in an ICU with Covi-19 and the acceleration of time is pitch perfect; a coloratura's high F. But for us who are not yet sick or who may never be sick with the virus, time has shifted, and we're scrambling to make sense of our days; the hours, minutes, seconds passing into the next. So, like the old Moroccans, I want to drop into the silence and surrender. Why fight? I fight because silence is foreign to all I have ever worked for: friendships, marriage, children, degrees, money, success. Silence isn't in that equation. It is something alien, like this pandemic.

If I breathe *inside* the silence instead of into the divisions of a day – hours, nights, weeks – the day doesn't have to be measured, it can simply go by. No need to hurry. Plenty of time for everything. Bake cookies, make an accordion book, walk in circles, read Proust, "...he had acquired the habit of taking refuge in unimportant thoughts that allowed him to ignore the fundamental essence of things." Or read Simenon's detective stories, "He spent more than an hour studying the carpet with a magnifying glass and he collected about thirty barely visible threads...silk!"

Time is merely more or less...unless. Unless. There's a lot of unlessees.

The pandemic stretches out with no time for its end. We're not accustomed to not knowing the beginning and end of events. But then we never know, really. This time is beyond our control and that frightens the stuffing out of needing to be in control, so counter to human nature.

I've been thinking about Jack London and Chekhov, and listening to a lot of Beethoven. In 1913, Jack London was the best known and highest paid writer in the world. He made over a million dollars on fifty books and spent it all. He built himself a mansion, bought a ranch, sailed a yacht, and died a suicide because of debt, overwork, and liquor. Chekhov wrote over 500 stories and 14 critically acclaimed plays. At the age of 44, he died of tuberculosis in Germany, three years after marrying his great love, Olga Knipper, the leading lady in his plays at the Moscow Arts Theatre. His coffin was sent home to Russia on a green freight train, marked FOR OYSTERS. Beethoven did not name the "Moonlight Sonata." It was simply "Piano Sonata No. 14 in C Sharp Minor." The emotion of the piece came from Beethoven sitting at the bedside of a dear friend who had suffered an untimely death.

In the novel, "The Star Rover," Jack London writes about a convict confined to a prison cell. "In solitary one grows sick of oneself in his thoughts, and the only way to escape oneself is to sleep...I now cultivated sleep. I made a science of it. I became able to sleep ten hours, then twelve hours, and, at last, as high as fourteen and fifteen hours out of the twenty-four. But beyond that I could not go, and, perforce, was compelled to lie awake and think and think....And time was very heavy and very long. I played games with flies, with ordinary house-flies that oozed into solitary as did the dim gray light..."

Chekhov is a master of fat, rounded silence in his prose. Silence hovers around his sentences, between people, in his ability to treat all creatures, human and in nature, with equanimity. "In Oreanda they sat on a bench not far from the church, looked down at the sea, and were silent. Yalta was barely visible through the morning mist, white clouds stood motionless on the mountaintops. The leaves did not stir, cicadas called, and the monotonous, dull noise of the sea, coming from below, spoke of the peace, the eternal sleep that awaits us...And in this

constancy, in this utter indifference to the life and death of each of us, there perhaps lies hidden the pledge of our eternal salvation, the unceasing movement of life on earth, of unceasing perfection.” A perfect definition of silence, and why it can be terrifying.

I listen to Beethoven’s 7<sup>th</sup> symphony over and over and over, sometimes six times in a row before I turn off the music and allow the silence once more. The 7<sup>th</sup> is so joyful; buoyant and life affirming. I imagine galloping at high speed along a beach, waves splintering underfoot. I lie on the couch and let the music absorb into my cells, imagining my mitochondria building muscle to fight the virus. I make soups and listen to the symphony. I play chess and listen. But I insist that my yoga be done in silence. Full stop.

Like London, I explore modes of consciousness. How I perceive, how I think – key to how beneficial silence, and this time, can be. Finding pleasure in exploring states of dislocation. Examining, deeply, what loneliness really feels like; in the head, the toes, the fingertips. How does my frustration play out? What is causing the anxiety? Is it because reality is disrupted and I’m unable to recapture the *comfort* of being in control? Is my fear coming from being too certain about my place in the world and not dubious enough about reality?

Silence comes in all forms. Silence in listening deeply. Silence in resentment. Silence in apathy. And then there’s the silence in communion with something greater – the natural world, the cosmos, God. The beyond.

I am finding that silence is a welcoming space and prohibits nothing. It is available any time, any place, in sickness and in health. But I must seek it out, knowing full well that silence is a formidable presence.

Silence is sweet and tender in the early, early morning. At night, silence cuts deep in a bed and alone. Silence envelopes everything, permeates the marrow of life. If allowed in, given room in my brain, it can be nourishment. If I let myself surrender, I can leave myself. Enter another world. No hurry. No complaints. In silence, I find I am filled with gratitude, and give in. Who knows what I'll become?

The Native American Indians knew how to be silent as they moved in the world. They walked silently in the woods by lifting their thighs, and placing one foot in front of the other, rolling the foot into place. In the forest they walked barefoot or in moccasins, feeling the earth through their feet. As they walked, they cast their gaze sideways, not straight ahead. Softened the eyes, and thereby taking in everything. This takes a lot of practice. I've tried. This way of walking demands slowing down. Breathing deep. Ready for anything. Learning to be silent.

And yet, in silence, worries and fears are often amplified. We are, by nature, chattering creatures, not practiced in listening. In the silence, I can truly hear if I choose. In here is a generous, open-armed space in which to deeply listen to myself. What voice do I choose? Chatter or silent, exhausting or restful?

In my time-obsessed thoughts, there is the need to control. Through the generous, soothing, all-inclusive silence, I can give up on time. There is no way of knowing how long this pandemic will last but with the help of the safe haven of silence, I find hope. Silence is a companion that will never desert me. An elixir in life. All I have to do is surrender and drop in. As deep as I dare.

The Italians, great lovers of food and wine, have coined the phrase *dolce far niente*. This means to work as little as possible; blissful laziness, carefree idleness, indulgent relaxation, the art of slow living. If we are being urged to take precautions and avoid crowds, to stay home in the worst-case scenario, then aren't we moving into slower times? Working from home in our pajamas, cutting back on work travel, vacations, eating in restaurants, going to parties, concerts, sports events – all the interactions we've taken for granted as our human right. It is a blessing that I can work from home. I have to remember this.

There just isn't any way except to get down, way down deep inside. Be silent and find some beauty in there. And then make some beauty. Draw. Read poetry. Plant a garden. Feed the poor. Work graciously. Live in the fecund imagination and live to create rather than living to survive. I can do that.

I remember at the start of my quarantine, a male hermit thrush arrived in my yard. He is a proud bird with a flicked red tail and a broad chest. Birds don't have larynx like humans but a syrinx that is no bigger than a raindrop. And yet this allows a thrush to produce two unrelated pitches simultaneously due to their two bronchial tubes. The haunting fluted song of the thrush is full throttle ahead, no holds barred, and gloriously beautiful. This memory returns to me in silence. Or when I'm sitting down to write. Or stretching into a shoulder stand. Or making dinner. Silence is a refuge, as wide open as the sky.