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TOO MUCHNESS

A young man of fourteen sits in his older brother's room looking over a bookcase stocked with science fiction and *Hardy Boys* mysteries but also literary books: *The Great Gatsby*, *The Sound and the Fury*, D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. A voracious and precocious reader, the brother, who is seventeen, is not much for sports, nor are sports much for him. In fifth grade, his teacher once sent home a note alarmed that the brother read too much and wouldn't go out for recess. This embarrasses the younger brother who likes sports, reads only what he has to in school, and wants to be a businessman like his father.

But on this day, the younger brother begins to read a story in a magazine. These magazines, unlike the ones lying around the house, *Redbook*, *Life*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, have no photographs, with names that demand serious attention, *Partisan Review*, *Evergreen*, *New American Review*.

He opens up one of these journals and sees three prize-winning short stories. Given his main reading material for pleasure has been *Mad Magazine* and comic books, he reads the shortest of these contest winners. A story about a young girl who in the midst of a violent storm follows her father out to take care of the farm animals. She loses track of the father and panics. The story is only two pages long, but what strikes the young man—and he can't account for this—are the descriptions: the fierce pelting of the rain;

the leather bomber jacket the father wears; the smell of the mud when she trips; the deafness she experiences in the midst of the raging storm. He finds himself reading the words aloud, just to hear how they sound in his mouth.

Downstairs, his mother moves around the kitchen. Pots are being loudly put away. He can feel her stress from upstairs. At fourteen, he is an expert on reading her moods, especially the silent ones, whose frequencies he tunes into with the acuity of an alert animal. The phone rings. No doubt it's his father checking in from the furniture store he owns. Business is slow, very slow; 1967 has been a challenging year with its racial strife in Chester, Pennsylvania, the industrial town where his father's store has been for the past forty years. Though the young man doesn't know it at the time, the store, more like a family member than a business, will go bankrupt soon.

And here are some other things the young man doesn't know: that his unhappy mother will get worse over the years. That he will inherit her anxiety and that his generally sunny disposition will be subject to dark moods too. That his brother will not, as everyone expects, become the writer in the family because the process is agonizing for him. The young man does not know that role will be his, born of moments like these in his brother's room when the physicality of language overcomes him. He does not know that he will suffer in love or lose those most dear to him or be stuck with what a therapist he sees will call "life issues" but will come to mine these issues, a.k.a. obsessions, for the benefit of his writing. He does not know that he will be like every other writer in this way. He does not yet know that when Franz Kafka writes, "I have the true feeling of myself only when I am unbearably unhappy" that this condition is not to be feared because to be unbearably happy necessitates the transformation and release of such suffering into art.

He only knows one thing: that this small, prize-winning story in a journal whose name he will not remember is palpable to him. A word he doesn't know either. But that is what happens. He's tasted language. He could lick it off the page. It's chewable. He feels bathed in it.

Stanley Elkin, a writer of darkly prodigious works of satire (and who once said "More is more") and who may never have written a sentimental word in his life, was asked in an interview which writers he admired. He listed some of the giants: Henry James, Melville, Faulkner, George Eliot, and then Norman Corwin. Norman who, you ask? Yes, Norman Corwin, a radio writer from the forties, because when Stanley was fourteen years old, Mr. Corwin mentioned God as someone who "furred the fox against the time of winter." Elkin, who even as a child had no particular faith in God, did, however, have a profound awakening to the *spirit* of language. "I guess that was the first time I was conscious you could say things in certain ways," Elkin explained. "And boy my fourteen-year-old hackles rose up against the back of my neck. 'Furred the fox against the time of winter.' Not just God made all creatures big and little."

Every writer has had these moments. This, after all, is the basis for Tobias Wolff's celebrated story "Bullet in the Brain." Despite the threat of death, Anders, a literary critic, who finds himself in the midst of a bank robbery while in a teller's line, cannot suppress his distaste at the hackneyed speech of the robbers: "One of you tellers hits the alarm, you're all dead meat." "Oh, bravo," says Anders aloud. "*Dead meat.*" He's so helpless in the grip of his irate compulsion to speak up that even faced with his

own demise he remains a relentless critic of those who, in his view, debase language. Or to put it another way, Anders can't keep his mouth shut because he is constantly searching for proof of his own existence *through* language. If he shuts up, he stifles that existence. If he doesn't shut up, he risks the wrath of those, the bank robbers in this case, who live by clichés, with no awareness of their sins. Either way he's "dead meat," spiritually or physically.

Why do writers revere this brief story so much? Certainly for its ingenious technique. Where else can you find a sentence of whopping g-force such as: "After striking the cranium, the bullet was moving at 900 feet per second, a pathetically sluggish, glacial pace compared to the synaptic lightning that flashed round it."

But mostly the story strikes home because it defines the very struggle of a writer's life: the constant tension between exhausting language and renewing it, between being cynical about its promise versus believing in its revitalizing powers. Anders, the jaded critic, no longer able to experience the freshness of language while hypersensitive to its failings, rediscovers at the moment of his death the unadulterated delight of speech. He remembers as a young boy at a baseball field being struck by the sensorial impact of voice, his "furred-the-fox" moment. Here are the final two paragraphs of the story:

Then the last two boys arrive, Coyle and a cousin of his from Mississippi. Anders has never met Coyle's cousin before and will never see him again. He says hi with the rest but takes no further notice of him until they've chosen sides and someone asks the cousin what position he wants to play. "Shortstop," the boy says. "Short's the best position they is." Anders turns and looks at him. He wants to hear Coyle's cousin repeat what he's just said, but he knows better than to ask. The others will think he's being a jerk, ragging the kid for his grammar. But that isn't it, not at all - it's that Anders is strangely roused, elated, by those final two words, their pure unexpectedness and their music. He takes the field in a trance, repeating them to himself.

The bullet is already in the brain; it won't be outrun forever, or charmed to a halt. In the end it will do its work and leave the troubled skull behind, dragging its comet's tail of memory and hope and talent and love into the marble hall of commerce. That can't be helped. But for now Anders can still make time. Time for the shadows to lengthen on the grass, time for the tethered dog to bark at the flying ball, time for the boy in right field to smack his sweat-blackened mitt and softly chant, *They is, they is, they is*.

Words will kill Anders, but words are body and breath too. There comes that moment—and many such moments afterward—when what is heard or read produces a rapture in writers of such infectious strength and drive that it impels a quest to replicate that sound in one's own work. At first it's only mimetic, “furred the fox” or “They is, they is.” Until it sheds the initiating skin and becomes the writer's own original voice.

But I have to return to my younger self for a moment. My peripatetic life in my twenties leads me to the Multnomah County Library in Portland, Oregon. I have a recent bachelors degree in psychology. However, I've decided to forego graduate studies in the field, because I'm more drawn to character than case histories, to irreducible mysteries over diagnostic conclusions, and to a profession where being overly imaginative is beneficial not worrisome.

I've moved to Oregon with my girlfriend, Ann, and having earlier worked the requisite odd jobs of a writer—waiter, lumberyard watchman, tree planter, youth counselor, bubble-gum factory worker—I'm now collecting unemployment insurance. We have no TV, no phone, and so far no friends, which suits me just fine in my ambition to read and write constantly. Ann has found a job down the street in the administrative offices of Goodwill Industries, and my unemployment insurance covers the rent. Ann has encouraged me to write, even though it annoys her that I don't begin until eleven at night and don't stop until she's getting ready for work in the morning. But I crave the stillness

of the Portland evenings when the only stirrings are the mice running up and down the dumb waiter chute in our turn-of-the century house that we share with other tenants. And let's face it . . . it takes me until eleven pm before I stop procrastinating

Including visiting the Portland library, where wandering through the stacks, I come across a story collection by an author with my same last name. I slip the thin volume out and start to read the title story, "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities." A twenty-one-year-old man in a movie theater watches the courtship of his parents in 1909. Their engagement plays out on the screen: his father asking for his mother's hand; the first meeting of her family; a trip to the boardwalk where they have an argument about visiting a fortuneteller. But the narrator is alarmed by what he sees, not pleased at all. In fact, he's so upset that he stands up in the theater and shouts at the screen, "Don't do it! It's not too late to change your minds, both of you. Nothing good will come of it, only remorse, hatred, scandal, and two children whose characters are monstrous!"

The story pierces my heart: this after all could be my own parents. I could just as easily be sitting in this theater shouting for *them* not to do it. Not to forfeit their dashed dreams. My father who always wanted to be a composer and went into the family business instead. My mother who always wanted a family but cannot be happy no matter how hard I try to please her as a good son. My brother who will not become a writer and from whom I will be estranged over the years, partly for that reason. None of this will ever be discussed. Silence will rule our house. And just as the narrator at the end of Delmore Schwartz's "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" is removed by an usher with the rebuke and warning "you will find out soon enough, everything you do matters too much," I understand that indeed everything *does* matter too much and that my only way to endure

this *too muchness* is by making even more of it. Making a big deal of what everyone tells you to either forget or get over, which could be the very definition of what writers do: provocateurs awaiting the right moment to emerge from their families or community and vivify “what matters too much” to keep silent.

I still well remember everything about reading “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities”: where I was standing; how the book felt in my hand; its gray cover; the intact binding that creaked open because no one had ever checked it out, which only made it more precious to me. Here were the facts, an unhappy marriage with bitterness. Here was the poignant gap between what might have happened and what did happen. All the pathos and sad beauty of life was in that gap and could only be shown by what was missed and the “too muchness” that followed. A too muchness that is neither a surfeit nor a burden but a largess of unplumbed riches of material waiting to be discovered within a writer and often forged out of the complications of silence.

I went back into the main reading room of the library with my stack of literary journals on the table and sat there and thought, *I have to do this, I have to do this*. I wasn't particularly gifted as a writer; no teacher had taken me aside and said, *Steve, you genius, you must give your life to art*. Indeed, Mr. Rosenberg in Freshman Composition at Miami University of Ohio had given me a C for the term. What made me think I *could* do this?

Tillie Olsen in her book *Silences*, published in 1978, explores the varieties of silences that befall writers, some of which are the result of political, cultural, religious or

social repression, as well as the premature silences when a writer's life is cut short by disability or death. Most writers I know, however (and none of them, by the way, is Joyce Carol Oates) struggle with silence imposed from the inside. As Olsen writes: "Kin to these years-long silences are the hidden silences; work aborted, deferred, denied."

In other words, self-censorship.

One of the main struggles of writing is to put aside any idea of everlasting validation. The process, like drinking, is stacked in favor of always needing more as your tolerance for success increases. If only I could finish a story; if only I could get it published; if only it were in the *New Yorker*; if only I won a prize; if only it was a national prize; if only I published a novel; if only it got reviewed in the *New York Times*; if only it was a front-page review. If only Michiko Kakutani in all her fearful symmetry loved my book—or maybe monetarily better, Oprah. The "if onlies" never die, because though they're the least important contributor to the whole endeavor, they're also the whiniest in their demand for escalating proof of legitimacy. They are, however, little help in the face of the blank page. A silence can burglar in and steal confidence at any stage. As one of my students put it, "I wish I could tell the difference between self doubt and just bad writing." Between those two possibilities, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot, falls the shadow.

Much of what has motivated my own writing has been the tension between speaking and silence, between the silence I grew up with in my own home and my subsequent need to expose what was underneath that silence. I've been intrigued over the years as to how writers deal with silence in their lives and also make use of it in their



work. It is no secret that writers aren't happy-go-lucky conformists devoted to preserving the status quo. They have a need to write because they often haven't had a voice—or not the subversive voice they wished to use, nor the support, time, or freedom to express it.

And yet the drive persists. To quote Kafka again:

If I have written something one evening, I am afire the next day in the office and can bring nothing to completion. Outwardly I fulfill my office duties satisfactorily, not my inner duties however, and every unfulfilled inner duty becomes a misfortune that never leaves. What strength will it necessarily drain me of.

Kafka suffered under his father's emotional tyranny. His authoritarian father demanded obedience to rules that he himself ignored and that instilled in the young Kafka a questionable sense of reality. In a letter to his father he wrote, "The impossibility of [us] getting on calmly together had one more result, actually a very natural one: *I lost the capacity to talk.*"

Kafka's stories and novels are filled with characters either unheard or misunderstood when they do speak. We hear not a word from the hunger artist in that eponymous story until the end. A has-been, his "art of fasting" forgotten, the hunger artist confesses he only wanted to be admired for his fasting. When he's told he was indeed admired, he protests that he shouldn't have been; it was only because he couldn't find the food he liked that he fasted. In my reading, he never receives the praise, attention—that unattainable for Kafka fatherly affection—to keep him and his art alive. Undiscovered for days, he's found withered away beneath straw in his cage, swallowed up in silence. He's replaced by a young panther with a ravenous appetite and with no need of applause in all his savage and self-satisfied hunger.

Nor can Gregor Samsa of "The Metamorphosis" convey his anguish to his family. And when he does speak, all are horrified. "With Gregor's very first words the chief clerk

had only backed away.” And later when Gregor cries out “Mother Mother,” his mother screams, flees, and falls into the arms of her husband. Granted, Gregor at this time is a large insect, but still . . . no matter how much a Kafka character tries to explain himself the results are the same: disconnection. Words themselves are unreliable and ineffective, their meanings so dislocated from intent that they become that specialized subset of silence: nonsense. Joseph K in *The Trial*, unable to make sense of his predicament, knows not why or with what offense he’s charged. All his queries and complaints fall into a silent void of bureaucratic hell. In Kafka’s alienated and irrational world, there is no respite from the ever-present threat of being misunderstood, unrecognized, falsely accused, abandoned, dismissed, ridiculed, or unknown. But the greatest degradation, as for many writers, is indifference: silence. It’s not overstating the case to say that most writers, if they hear no acknowledgment of their voices, if they cannot create sound and movement upon the cultural, social or historical fabric, feel the terrible pain of nonexistence.

Melville, after creating one of the most superabundant novels in history, a bountiful work of narrative exposition commencing with the ghostly declaration of survival, “Call me Ishmael,” not long afterward publishes “Bartleby the Scrivener.”

Bartleby is arguably the most mysteriously silent character in all of fiction: *I prefer not to proofread a document; I prefer not to go to the post office; I prefer not to tell you where I was born; I prefer not to quit these quarters.* And, finally, Bartleby prefers not to accept his employer’s desperate attempt to help by taking Bartleby home with him. No explanation is provided for Bartleby’s progressive withdrawal that

eventually results in imprisonment for vagrancy and death from starvation. Bartleby's muteness is so profound, so intractable that he is lost to all possibilities of being reached. Why does Bartleby behave this way? Among the theories—the story is a study of clinical depression or schizophrenia; of modern alienation; of the dehumanizing effects of capitalism—is the view that Bartleby reflects Melville's own despair in the face of the critical and financial failure of his work.

It's no surprise that Melville, given all his financial pressures and publication difficulties, would create a character who, like Kafka's characters, has little agency in the world. In a letter to Hawthorne, Melville wrote, "What I feel most moved to write, that is banned—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way, I cannot. So the product is a final hash." *Moby Dick* or *The Whale*, as it was originally titled, sold less than 2000 copies and received mixed reviews. Melville was writing into a silence so effacing that at his death one columnist suggested that anyone who could remember Melville thought he had died long ago. His last novel, *The Confidence Man*, had appeared three decades earlier.

Katherine Anne Porter was no stranger to silence herself. Her reputation rests on just 28 short stories she wrote over her lifetime and one published novel, *Ship of Fools*, which took her 20 years to finish. She once famously said, "I think I've only spent about ten percent of my energies on writing. The other ninety percent went to keeping my head above water."

One can't but wonder at the influence of silence—and silent stretches—on Porter. Like Melville, Porter created one of the most memorable characters in fiction, who, akin

to Bartleby, is virtually mum. In “Noon Wine,” a stranger shows up seeking work on a farm. The farm’s lazy and stingy owner, Mr. Thompson, asks him, “How much you fixing to gouge outa me?”

“I’m good worker,” answers Mr. Helton. “I get dollar a day.” And that’s pretty much all we hear from the untalkative Swede. Initially, his silence frustrates the family members until they become used to his remoteness and stop trying to pry information out of him.

The entire story’s mystery, a riveting one, rests on Mr. Helton’s taciturnity, and on Porter staying out of his point of view. Mr. Helton, a sort of genie at making the dry scrubble land flourish, soon turns the farm into a cornucopia of abundant butter, cheese, eggs, milk and fat hogs, the likes of which the penurious Mr. Thompson has never been able to produce himself. Only at the end of the story do we learn of Mr. Helton’s background; considered an escaped lunatic, he’s wanted for the murder years earlier of his brother.

The withholding of information about Mr. Helton is not so much a plot contrivance as it is in keeping with the character of a tormented man who has tried to remove himself from the world and all its misunderstanding and seek sanctuary on a near-barren farm. What’s remarkable, as with Bartleby, while virtually saying nothing during the course of this fifty-page story, is how enlarged, vivid, and riveting Mr. Helton’s character becomes. Silence in this case, as with so many characters who speak little but have powerful presences, means anything other than invisibility and more than just passivity.

Chief Broom, the narrator of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, however, is a character who despite his stature—he's six foot seven—is overlooked to the point of being virtually invisible. Supposedly deaf and mute, he's mostly ignored by the patients and the staff of the mental hospital where he's a patient. But he hears and sees everything, and his silence is a self-imposed, protective one from the bullying, prejudice, and ridicule he has suffered throughout his life. It is only with the help of the provocateur and hero of the novel, Randall P. McMurphy, that Chief Broom eventually gets back his voice and true stature, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

This pairing of an extrovert and introvert in fiction, such as McMurphy and Chief Broom, is not unusual. Nick Carroway might be said to be the introverted side of Jay Gatsby. Lennie of George in *Of Mice and Men*. The outspoken Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park* of the novel's self-effacing heroine Fanny Price. Even Sancho Panza, no slouch himself at gab, takes a backseat to the irrepressible Don Quixote whose insistence on confrontation gets the both of them trounced in battles. And is it any wonder that the classic American novel *The Scarlet Letter* propels itself by Hester Prynne's secrecy as to who her adulterer has been? That being none other than the eloquent minister Arthur Dimmsdale—Hawthorne juxtaposing the public, sermonizing face of the community with that of the most banished and silent member. Again and again the pairing of the wordless with the spoken form a combustible mix that creates the tension of so many works. It would be fair to say that the force of a narrative often erupts from the tension of the silence underneath. Or as Adrienne Rich in an essay on Emily Dickinson put it: "It is always what is under pressure in us, especially under pressure of concealment—that explodes in poetry."

And could there ever be a more talkative story for its first three quarters and a more solemn one for its last fourth than Joyce's "The Dead"? We have no true notion of what this story is really about until the final scene between Gabriel and Gretta in their hotel room after the Christmas party when Gabriel learns of Gretta's first and perhaps truest love: a past suitor, Michael Furey. The years of silence in keeping this lover to herself come crashing into the present with a misery to the both of them, breaking down every assumption about their marriage. To learn that the person you most know is suddenly the most "other" to you is a heartbreaking blow. "He thought of how she who lay beside him had locked in her heart for so many years that image of her lover's eyes when he had told her that he did not wish to live. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love." The narrative is a masterful mix of the public and private, of bustle and quietude, of the spoken and withheld. The story ends in the deepest part of Gabriel's consciousness with one of the most famous and lyrically "silent" paragraphs in literature, the insular snow suppressing all external sound.

[Snow] was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.

*Dubliners*, the collection of stories that includes "The Dead," took Joyce 9 years to publish, in great part because the publisher worried about being sued for obscenity and the book's content judged "anti-Irish." The volume sold only 499 copies at first, one short of what was needed to collect royalties—a publishing contract that also stipulated Joyce

had to buy 120 copies for himself. Joyce's *Ulysses*, even more widely condemned for its blasphemy and obscenity, was banned in the United Kingdom until 1936. Throughout his self-imposed exile, tumultuous scrums with his wife, various money-making schemes, extended fights with his publishers and zealous obscenity charges, Joyce battled just to have a public voice. "The Dead," with its ruptured grief and vulnerability, represented a cry of pure and unassailable feeling against that silence.

For Edward St. Aubyn, a contemporary English novelist residing just across the Irish Sea from Joyce's homeland, the censorship to be overcome, however, was of the deepest internalized sort.

St. Aubyn at the age of five was brutally raped by his father. In the first book of Aubyn's *Patrick Melrose Novels*, through the point of view of the central character Patrick, we witness the unbearable act.

Then he was back down on the bed again feeling a kind of blankness and bearing the weight of not knowing what was happening. He could hear his father wheezing, and the bedhead bumping against the wall. From behind the curtains with the green birds, he saw a gecko emerge and cling motionlessly to the corner of the wall beside the open window. Patrick lanced himself towards it. Tightening his fists and concentrating until his concentration was like a telephone wire stretched between them, Patrick disappeared into the lizard's body.

The scene is one of the most accurate and painful descriptions of dissociation: the psychological term for the detachment from one's body during trauma. Patrick will become self-destructive over the course of the novels, a heroin addict filled with self-loathing and rage. Patrick does not admit to anyone what has happened to him—the abuse continues until he's eight. The abuse forms a kind of subterranean narrative throughout the novels, implied but not dwelled on. Two books later, in *Some Hope*, an adult now and eight years after his father's death, he tells his best friend, Johnny, a

psychologist, about it. “How do you mean ‘abused?’” Johnny asks. Patrick tries to answer. “‘It was . . .’ he sighed, concussed by memory.” And then the narration continues in Johnny’s point of view: “After having watched Patrick drawl his way fluently through every crises, Johnny was shocked at seeing him *unable to speak*.” (my italics)

Such a confession after years of vigilant suppression brings with it not immediate relief but silence within sound. In 1991, St. Aubyn finally told his mother about the abuse. His mother’s reaction, as he put it in a *New Yorker* interview, “wasn’t totally satisfactory”: “‘Me too,’ she said—meaning that his father had raped her as well. ‘She was very, very keen to jump the queue and say how awful it was for her.’”

With that kind of reaction, no one would have any trouble understanding why St. Aubyn or his novels’ alter ego, Patrick, would never have spoken of the abuse earlier. The inability to be heard and protected and to only fear making matters worse and more punishing would scare anyone into silence. Such silences are not temporary. They are not resolved. They have no expiration date. They are long, limitless silences, even when breached. The core of such silence is always a mix of fear, rage, and unwarranted guilt that strike a child with a voiceless paralysis no less crippling than a physical disease. The only recourse is exposure. The only relief, safety. The entire quintet of the Melrose series is written out of such a silence, contextualized within the shrewdest social commentary, wit, and psychological self-assessment. If you’re lucky enough to have the talent of St. Aubyn, it’s also the transformation of experience into art that releases you from the strangulating hold of silence. What St. Aubyn has managed in the Melrose novels is to make the brutality of his childhood the hidden subject of the books—the rape and abuse are hardly referred to—while never letting us forget for a moment that its legacy infuses



every sentence. It's the backest of backstories and therefore the one that needs to be approached most obliquely.

St. Aubyn in another interview was asked if he ever regretted admitting that the anguish felt by Patrick was his own. He answered:

The whole Melrose series is an attempt to tell the truth, and is based on the idea that there's some salutary or liberating power in telling the truth. So it would have been quite tiresome to lie about it after having done it. But I can still say what I think is true—that I have spent 22 years trying to transform painful lived experience into what I hope is pleasurable reading experience. The intention was to make a work of art rather than a confession.

Autobiographical writing of course always skirts the edge of confession, and yet masters of the form such as William Maxwell, a literary son of the Midwest, find the revelatory junction where imagination meets experience. I can hardly think of a writer whose work embodies the richness of silence more than Maxwell's. It's as if there are small air pockets between each sentence, if not each word. To hear a recording of Maxwell reading his work, the softly hoarse rhythm before the next syllable drops in, is to hold one's own breath in anticipation of the narrative events presented with the sharpness of a boning knife. Here's a paragraph from the opening pages of *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. A young boy has just found his father dead—murdered we learn—and rushes from the barn to tell the housekeeper:

Who believes children. Brushing him and his story aside she [the housekeeper] ran to the barn. Wilson was sitting on a milking stool in the middle stall, his body sunk over against the partition. She caught him by the hand and cried, "Lloyd, what on earth is the matter with you?"—thinking he had been stricken with heart failure or possibly apoplexy. As the child said, he was sitting there with his eyes open but he was dead.

The careful tempo and reserve of this passage, the initial distance of the ruminative prefatory first sentence, "Who believes children," notably without a question

mark, and then the precise capturing of Lloyd Wilson lifeless on his milking stool, presents more a silent tableau than a pulsating dramatic scene. You can hear the beats between the sentences, ending with the indisputable resolution, as though in a hushed courtroom, “As the child said, he was sitting there with his eyes open, but he was dead.”

So much of this short novel has to do with characters keeping their emotions to themselves until they can't anymore—lovers speak few words but with such restrained passion that their declarations bore deeper than any grander testaments. Isolated moments like torn pieces of a photograph can only hint at the whole: a dog barks into the empty night for its vanished owner. Memory is the vehicle for how the tragic events of the novel are delivered, and in memory there is always a tempered reflection, despite any vividness of recall. In an early passage, the narrator describes what happened after his mother's death:

My father was all but undone by my mother's death. In the evening after supper he walked the floor and I walked with him, with my arm around his waist. I was ten years old. He would walk from the living room into the front hall, then, turning, past the grandfather's clock and on into the library, and from the library into the living room. Or he would walk from the library into the dining room and then into the living room by another doorway, and back to the front hall. Because he didn't say anything, I didn't either. I only tried to sense, as he was about to turn, which room he was going to next so we wouldn't bump into each other. His eyes were focused on things not in those rooms, and his face was the color of ashes.

That wordless pacing and the arm around the father's waist convey the depth of their mutual grief. Shortly afterward the narrator speaks more directly about his own feelings toward his mother in a passage full of brokenhearted loss:

After I couldn't remember except in a general way what she looked like, I could still remember the sound of her voice, and I clung to that. I also clung to the idea that if things remained exactly the way they were, if we were careful not to take a step in any direction from the place where we were now, we would somehow get back to the way it was before she died.

In an interview, Maxwell said about his mother, who, as in the novel, died when he was ten, “Things happen that you don’t want to happen that you can’t bear to happen, and that you must somehow learn that there is no way to get around that fact. So I learned to live with the things that can’t be undone.”

Is there anything more *undone* for a child than losing a parent? That loss, that abandonment looms as one of the greatest silences of all. Time and again Maxwell wrote about or based a character on his mother, and always with the endurance of “learning to live with what can’t be undone.”

Maxwell understood how silence could become conflated with guilt. How as a child, with a vulnerability for self-blame, you could wonder what *you* did that would result in the death of your mother from influenza and be punished by her irrevocable absence. And Maxwell, as any writer must do, addressed that silence by excavating the past rather than excising it. He discovered his imagination in the details of his Midwest upbringing, turning those memories into moving, understated studies of place and character. Interviewed at 86 years old, Maxwell said the past is no longer different from the present. “I live in the past as I live in the present.”

Is that so different for a writer of any age? Doesn’t the past speak out of the silence of being gone, and isn’t it a writer’s job to make the past heard again, to use all the power of reflection and “too muchness” to give it voice?

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I’ve been married thirty years, and yet I learned something about my wife only recently. One night, after dinner, she told me that when as a child her friends would talk about their mothers, she would sit silently and hope no one noticed. Her mother

committed suicide when she was seven. She had nothing to offer because all such conversations were in the present tense: *my mother wants me to cut my hair; my mother is taking me shopping today; my mother is bugging me about cleaning my room; oh, God, yes, my mother says same that thing all the time . . .* There may be no silence as profound as a suicide, both the act and the reaction to it. My wife, who is a writer, too, still writes out of this silence and the consequences of what followed in the wake of her mother's death. A writer can't ignore the silences in her life; I would argue that writers have to come to know the silences within themselves in order to make use of them in their work—know and study and welcome these silences like Trappists monks. I'd argue further that a writer's path is a continuous journey into and out of silence, as many times as it takes to prevail.

Years ago, I went through a particularly bad period with my writing. My second novel, unlike the first, sold poorly. My publisher didn't pick up the option for the third book and soon dropped me, as did my agent. I sank into a depression, unable to write anything, a self-conscious silence that Tillie Olsen in her book *Silences*, quoting the poet Louise Bogan, identifies as "the knife of the perfectionist attitude in art and life at my throat."

At some point, however, I began writing again: a story based on an anecdote a friend told me about a friend of his, a woman, who fell asleep in an airport while waiting for her plane to board. As she slept, her husband kissed her and took her wallet to buy some items at the airport concession.

Except the person wasn't her husband, but a stranger, a well-dressed thief in a dark suit and blue tie. The story that I based on the incident took me quite a while to get right and even longer to get published. But years later when the story was also anthologized, I was asked to write an accompanying essay about its conception. The true source of the story lay in deeper emotional territory than its seeding anecdote. It concerned how I became a stranger—the title of the story—to myself after my father died. I was subject to sudden outbursts of anger and to spontaneous tears at inappropriate moments. I also felt as if the entire world had become muted—or what I described to a therapist as the Great Void in which I could not make any sound. In the essay about the story, I wrote, “At the time I heard this story from my friend my mother had been dead for two years and my father would die shortly after I began trying to write it. I'd dealt with the loss of my mother by becoming all the more clutching of my father's existence. It was only after he died that I felt truly bereft, alone as I'd ever been before, robbed and empty.”

All of this was compounded by never really being able to talk to my father or maybe his never being able to listen, and the incontrovertible fact of that matter after his death. I had exchanged one kind of silence with him for another. But it was writing that story, the first that would become part of a collection I would publish years later, about a thief silently kissing a sleeping woman while he steals her wallet, that helped me find my voice again. Ten stories poured forth, a too muchness that surprised and humbled me in testament to the power of renewal.

Jean Rhys, the author of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a brief novel that took her years to write about a madwoman in the attic, a madwoman who is committed there by her

husband who is never named but is a thinly disguised portrait of Mr. Rochester of *Jane Eyre* notoriety, understood about the meaning of silence and the struggle for too muchness.

For a long period during her writing career, Rhys, suicidal, alcoholic, and lonely, went silent until she published *Wide Sargasso Sea*. I like to think of her during that time finding the courage to continue by what is my all time favorite quote about writing: “Listen to me.” Rhys wrote. “I want to tell you something very important. All of writing is a huge lake. There are great rivers that feed the lake, like Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. And there are trickles like Jean Rhys. All that matters is feeding the lake. I don’t matter. The lake matters.”