The Book of Silence

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Extract

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Growing up in a Noisy World

It is early morning. It is a morning of extraordinary radiance – and unusually up here there is practically no wind. It is almost perfectly silent: some small birds are chirping occasionally and a little while ago a pair of crows flapped past making their raucous cough noises. It is the first day of October so the curlew and the oystercatchers have gone down to the seashore. In a little while one particular noise will happen – the two-carriage Glasgow-to-Stranraer train will bump by on the other side of the valley; and a second one may happen – Neil may rumble past on his quad bike after seeing to his sheep on the hill above the house; if he does he will wave and I will wave back. That is more or less it.

I am sitting on the front doorstep of my little house with a cup of coffee, looking down the valley at my extraordinary view of nothing. It is wonderful. Virginia Woolf famously taught us that every woman writer needs a room of her own. She didn't know the half of it, in my opinion. I need a moor of my own. Or, as an exasperated but obviously sensitive friend commented when she came to see my latest lunacy, 'Only you, Sara – twenty-mile views of absolutely nothing!'

It isn't 'nothing', actually – it is cloud formations, and the different ways reed, rough grass, heather and bracken move in the wind, and the changing colours, not just through the year but through the day as the sun and the clouds alternate and shift – but in another sense she is right, and it is the huge nothing that pulls me into itself. I look at it, and with fewer things to look at I see better. I listen to

nothing and its silent tunes and rhythms sound harmonic. The irregular line of the hill, with the telegraph and electricity poles striding over it, holds the silence as though in a bowl and below me I can see occasional, and apparently unrelated, strips of silver, which are in fact the small river meandering down the valley.

I am feeling a bit smug this morning because yesterday I got my completion certificate. When you build a new house you start out with planning permission and building warrant, and at the end of it all an inspector comes to see if you have done what you said you would do and check that your house is compliant with building regulations and standards. Mine is; it is finished, completed, certified. All done and dusted. Last night I paid off my builder, and we had a drink and ended a year-long relationship of bizarre intensity, both painful and delightful. Now I am sitting and regathering my silence, which is what I came here for in the first place.

Three minutes ago – it is pure gift, something you cannot ask for or anticipate – a hen harrier came hunting down the burn, not twenty metres from the door. Not many people have a hen harrier in the garden. Hen harriers are fairly rare in the UK, with slightly over a hundred breeding couples mostly in the Scottish Highlands. They are slightly smaller and much lighter than buzzards, and inhabit desolate terrain. Male hen harriers, seen from below, look like ghosts – pure white except for their grey heads but with very distinct black wing tips. They hunt low and glide with their wings held in a shallow V; powerful hunters, beautiful, free. I do not see them very often, but the first time I came to the ruined shepherd's house, which is now, today, my new home, there was a pair sitting on the drystone dyke. They speak to me of the great silence of the hills; they welcome me into that silence.

The silent bird goes off about his own silent business, just clearing the rise to the west and vanishing as suddenly as he came. Briefly I feel that he has come this morning to welcome me and I experience a moment of fierce joy, but it rumbles gently down into a more solid contentment. There are lots of things that I ought to be getting on with, but I light a cigarette and go on sitting on my doorstep. It

is surprisingly warm for October. We had the first frost last week, light-fingered on the car windscreen. I think about how beautiful it is, and how happy I am. Then I think how strange it is – how strange that I should be so happy sitting up here in the silent golden morning with nothing in my diary for the next fortnight, and no one coming and me going nowhere except perhaps into the hills or down the coast to walk, and to Mass on Sundays. I find myself trying to think through the story of how I come to be here and why I want to be here. And it *is* strange.

I have lived a very noisy life.

As a matter of fact we all live very noisy lives. 'Noise pollution' has settled down into the ecological agenda nearly as firmly as all the other forms of pollution that threaten our well-being and safety. But for everyone who complains about RAF low-flying training exercises, ceaseless background music in public places, intolerably loud neighbours and drunken brawling on the streets, there are hundreds who know they *need* a mobile phone, who choose to have incessant sound pumping into their environment, their homes and their ears, and who feel uncomfortable or scared when they have to confront real silence. 'Communication' (which always means talk) is the *sine qua non* of 'good relationships'. 'Alone' and 'lonely' have become almost synonymous; worse, perhaps, 'silent' and 'bored' seem to be moving closer together too. Children disappear behind a wall of noise, their own TVs and computers in their own rooms; smoking carriages on trains have morphed into 'quiet zones' but even the people sitting in them have music plugged directly into their ears.

We all imagine that we want peace and quiet, that we value privacy and that the solitary and silent person is somehow more 'authentic' than the same person in a social crowd, but we seldom seek opportunities to enjoy it. We romanticise silence on the one hand and on the other feel that it is terrifying, dangerous to our mental health, a threat to our liberties and something to be avoided at all costs.

My life has also been noisy in a more specific way.

Because of an odd conjunction of class, history and my parents' personal choices I had an unusually noisy childhood. I was born in 1950, the second child and oldest girl in a family of six; the first five of us were born within six and a half years of each other. If you asked my mother why she had so many children, she would say it was because she loved babies, but if you asked my father he would say something rather different: 'Two sets of tennis, two tables of bridge and a Scottish reel set in your own house.' We grew up in London, and in an enormous early-Victorian mansion house (my father's childhood home) in south-west Scotland. My parents adored each other. I think they adored us, though in a slightly collectivised way. They were deeply sociable and the house was constantly filled not just by all of us, but by their friends and our friends; my mother's father lived with us for a while; there was a nanny and later an au pair girl. What was perhaps unusual for the time was that they were very directly engaged as parents; there was none of that 'seen and not heard' nursery life for us. We were blatantly encouraged to be highly articulate, contentious, witty, and to hold all authority except theirs in a certain degree of contempt. I am appalled now when I think back to the degree of verbal teasing that was not just permitted but participated in: simple rudeness was not encouraged, but sophisticated verbal battering, reducing people to tears, slamming doors, screaming fights and boisterous, indeed rough, play was fine. (You don't grow out of these things – my son's partner has since told me her first encounter with us as a group was one of the most scary experiences of her life – she could not believe that people could talk so loudly, so argumentatively and so rudely without it coming to serious fisticuffs.) We were immensely active and corporate; introspection, solitude, silence, or any withdrawal from the herd was not allowed. Within the magical space they had created for us, however, we were given an enormous amount of physical freedom – to play, to roam, to have fights and adventures.

It worked best when we were all quite small. In 1968, when every newspaper in the country was bemoaning the outrageous behaviour of teenagers, my parents had five of them. I think retrospectively

that they lost their nerve a bit. I am not sure what they imagined would happen. If you encourage your children to hold authority lightly, eventually they will work out that you are 'authority' and hold you lightly too. They were better with smaller children – we had fairly traumatic and very noisy teens.

There were good moments. One thing that is hard to insert into this account is just how sophisticated and politically engaged my parents were. I remember the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, for example, with great vividness because one of my parents' closest friends was an admiral in the US navy. He was staying with us, we went on a lovely sunny day trip to Cambridge and as we walked along the Backs, a very young man from the US Embassy appeared. He had been searching for Uncle Harry personally; he had to fly home immediately to Defend His Country against Communism. The following year I knew about the Profumo affair too, though rather lopsidedly. It was the cause of a rare fight between my parents, who usually managed to maintain perfect solidarity against their children's activities. My father taught me a bitter little limerick about it, which he encouraged me to recite at a cocktail party of his Butlerite Conservative friends (several of them eminent) and which rather accurately reflected his own politics.

> There was a young girl called Christine
> Who shattered the Party machine.
> It isn't too rude
> To lie in the nude
> But to lie in the House is obscene.

The fight between my parents was not, interestingly, about the content of these lines, but about my father encouraging me to 'show off'. A bit of me still wonders what on earth they thought would come of it, especially for their girls. You bring them up free and flamboyant, and are then totally surprised and even angry with them when they don't magically turn into 'ladies'. It was, for me at least, a strange mixture of upper-class convention and intellectual

aspiration. There was a good, and noisy, example of my father's confused vision a few years later. I was expelled, fairly forcibly, from the House of Commons in 1973 for disrupting a debate on the Equal Opportunities Act, then a Private Members' Bill. I was pregnant at the time. *The Times* (my parents' daily, obviously) made this a front-page item including my name. I was rather anxious about how my parents would react. My mother was appalled that I should do this *while I was pregnant*, but my father was entirely delighted. Not because he favoured such actions or had any particular enthusiasm for Equal Opportunities, but because the person responsible for 'Order in the House' was an old friend of his, whom nonetheless he found both prissy and pompous – he was much amused by the embarrassment that I would have caused this friend, having to deal with 'one of us', with someone he actually knew. He may also, of course, have admired my boldness, without admiring the way I had chosen to exercise it.

We were inevitably sent off to boarding schools, the boys disgracefully at seven or eight and my sisters and I a little later. I am just about prepared to acknowledge that there might conceivably be children whom public school, under the old boarding system, positively suits and that there are homes so dire that boarding is a relief or even a joy, but it remains for me one of the very few institutions that is bad for both the individuals it 'privileges' and our society as a whole. In this context, however, all I want to do is point out that the entire ethos depended on no one ever being allowed any silence or privacy except as a punishment; and where the constant din inevitably created by over two hundred young women was amplified by bare corridors and over-large rooms. I found it a damaging, brutal experience, made worse by the fact that in my parents' world not to enjoy your schooldays was proof that you were an inferior human being – you were supposed to be a 'good mixer', to 'take the rough with the smooth' and enjoy the team spirit. If you are feeling miserable and inferior the last thing you are going to do is *tell* parents who think that the way you feel is proof that you are miserable and inferior.

Perhaps the stakes were too high; perhaps they were too proud of us. At home we were supposed to get into Cambridge, *and* wear long white gloves, a tartan silk sash and our deceased grandmother's pearls, and dance at Highland Balls. I was expected to have my own political opinions, *and* have them turn out the same as my parents'. We were expected to be sociable, active and witty, *and* hard-working, industrious and calm. We were meant to be sociable and popular and bizarrely chaste. At school we were meant to be educated, independent, self-assured, *and* totally innocent. On Saturday mornings we all had to kneel down in the assembly hall so that the mistresses could walk along the rows and make sure everyone's skirt exactly touched the ground. I am still not sure what the terror of the miniskirt was about, really. It all got pretty intolerable and very noisy.

In 1968 I escaped. These were the days before the Gap Year was a well-organised middle-class rite of passage, but if you stayed on at school after A levels to do the then separate Oxbridge entrance exams, you finished school at Christmas and had an inevitable gap until the following October. My father filled this gap by packing us off to any foreign continent of our choice and leaving us to get on with it. It was probably the first time in my life that I had been on my own and responsible for myself; it should have been a time to break out. My skirts were spectacularly shorter than anyone in America had ever seen before – hippies and counterculture and the politics of protest and feminism itself may have been US imports, but the miniskirt was authentically British – and my class accent was less immediately identifiable, but I was not really up to it. It was six months of being the wrong person in the wrong place at the wrong moment, just. I left Washington the day before Martin Luther King was shot and arrived in Los Angeles a week after Bobby Kennedy's assassination. In San Francisco I did go to Haight Ashbury, but I went as a tourist. From that perspective it seemed sordid and scary, and I left at once.

I do remember, though, one bright hot dawn in the Arizona desert when I stared into my first huge nothing: it was the Grand

Canyon. It was red and gold and vast and silent. Perhaps I should have sat down on the rim and stayed for a while, but it was too soon. I gawped for a bit and walked down a little way, then I turned round, got back on the Greyhound bus and went on to somewhere else.

Then, that autumn, I went to Oxford. I became a student at exactly and precisely the right time – for then 'to be young was very heaven'. What more joyful and lucky thing could happen to a privileged public-school girl than to find herself a student at Oxford between 1968 and 1971? It is fashionable now to decry the astonishing, extraordinary period in the late sixties – to dismiss it, or to blame it. I refuse to go there. I am with Angela Carter:

> There is a tendency to underplay, even to devalue completely, the experience of the 1960s, especially for women, but towards the end of that decade there was a brief period of public philosophical awareness that occurs only very occasionally in human history; when, truly, it felt like Year One, when all that was holy was in the process of being profaned, and we were attempting to grapple with the real relations between human beings . . . At a very unpretentious level, we were truly asking ourselves questions about the nature of reality. Most of us may not have come up with very startling answers and some of us scared ourselves good and proper and retreated into cul-de-sacs of infantile mysticism . . . but even so I can date to that time and to that sense of heightened awareness of the society around me in the summer of 1968 my own questioning of the nature of my reality as a woman.[1]

Everything interesting and important that has happened to me since began in Oxford in the three years that I was an undergraduate. There I discovered the things that have shaped my life – the things that shape it still, however unexpectedly, as I sit on my doorstep and listen to the silence: socialism, feminism, friendship and Christianity; myself as writer, as mother and now as silence seeker.

It was not instant. I arrived in Oxford more virginal in more ways than now seems credible. I felt like a cultural tourist, unable to connect directly with the hippies, with their drugs, mysticism and music; or with the politicos and their Parisian excitements, though I went like a tourist to hear Tariq Ali speak at the Student Union; or with the 'sexual revolutionaries' who whizzed off glamorously to London and complained about the repressive college, which expected us to be in bed, alone, by 10.30. I had to cope with the realisation that I was not the cleverest person in the world – a mistaken belief that had sustained me for years. It was culture shock; I had a strange, nagging sense that I was where I wanted to be, but I wasn't quite getting it: an odd mixture of excitement and frustration. I wanted it. I wanted all of it. I did not know how to have it. My life could have gone horribly wrong at this point.

Then, just in time and gloriously lucky, I tumbled, by chance, by grace, in with a new group of people. They were a group of American students, most of them Rhodes Scholars and all of them active against the Vietnam War. They hung out in a shambolic house in north Oxford. I am not entirely sure why they took me under their collective wing, but they did and I was saved. What they gave me was a connection point between politics and personal lives, the abundant energy that comes from self-interested righteousness, a sense that there were causes and things that could be done about them, and large dollops of collective affection. This household has become famous for something other than their sweet kindness to me – because one of the people in it was Bill Clinton, who has always, as far as I am concerned, been a loyal friend and an enormous resource; but it was not just him: it was the whole group of them.

My world was transformed. The sky was bright with colour. I smoked my first joint, lost my virginity and went on my first political demonstration. I stopped attending lectures and my ears unblocked so I started to hear what was going on around me. I realised that a classical education, Whig history and compassionate liberalism were not the only values in the world. I was set suddenly

and gloriously free. I made other friends, did other things – and we talked and talked and talked.

A bit later this household gave me, rather unexpectedly, something every bit as important. One evening Bill asked me if I would go with him to hear Germaine Greer speak at Ruskin College, shortly before *The Female Eunuch* was published. He had heard she had terrific legs (she did) but very properly thought it was the sort of event that he wanted a woman to go with. Being Bill he quickly rounded up some more people and that night I met Mandy Merck and thus discovered the brand-new Women's Liberation Movement.

Once I felt secure enough to cope, it transpired that actually one thing my childhood had provided me with were the skills of collectivity. Groups suited me; quick-fire combative talk was something I had practised around the dining-room table from my earliest years. With well-trained energy I engaged in the very noisy, highly verbal student political life of the time – the noisy articulacy of the socialist left and then the emerging verbal culture of early feminism. In an odd way it was like all the good things and none of the bad ones from my own childhood. To speak out, to tell aloud, to break the silence (and, to be honest, to shout down the opposition) was not only permissible – it was virtuous, if not compulsory.

In 1972 I had my first short stories published; I got married and I got pregnant. My husband was an American from upstate New York; he came to Oxford on a scholarship and stayed. By the time we got married he was a trainee Anglican vicar of the extreme Catholic persuasion – high church and high camp went together in those happier days. In the early seventies the best of the adherents of Anglo-Catholicism were all so funny, so witty and so quick, self-mocking, heavily ironic and we all loved talking. While he was training my husband invited a new friend to supper one night; the friend, nervous about dining with a heavily pregnant feminist intellectual, asked someone what we were like. 'Don't worry,' said this mutual friend, 'they all talk at the same time, very loudly; so you don't have to say anything if you don't want to.'

So then I was an Anglo-Catholic socialist feminist. Perhaps the only thing that holds these two together is that they are both very noisy things to be. I quickly extended the din range, though; I became a vicar's wife and a mother. A vicarage is the least quiet place imaginable – a house that is never your own and never empty or silent.

My daughter was born in 1973. Looking back now, I know that my first experiences of positive nourishing silence were her night feeds. My husband's great-grandfather was a carpenter – he had made furniture and when we got married my parents-in-law had sent from America the most exquisite New England four-poster bed made of bird's eye maple with golden candy-twist posts. In the soft darkness of the pre-dawn, propped up in this beautiful bed, with my beautiful daughter contentedly dozing, I encountered a new sort of joy. From where I am now this does not surprise me, because that relationship between mother and child is one of the oldest and most enduring images of silence in Western culture. In about 2000 BCE one of the psalmists wrote:

> I have set my soul in silence and in peace,
> As the weaned child on its mother's breast
> so even is my soul.[2]

Four thousand years later Donald Winnicott, the child psychoanalyst, wrote, in a totally different context, almost exactly the same thing: that the capacity to be alone, to enjoy solitude in adult life, originates with the child's *experience of being alone in the presence of the mother.* He postulates a state in which the child's immediate needs – for food, warmth, contact etc. – have been satisfied, so there is no need for the baby to be looking to the mother for anything nor any need for her to be concerned with providing anything; they are together, at peace, in silence. Both the ancient poet and the contemporary analyst focus on the child here – but as a mother I would say there is a full mutuality in the moment.

I remember it with an almost heartbreaking clarity. Some of it is

simply physical – a full and contented baby falling asleep at the empty and contented breast. But even so I now think that those sweet dawns, when it turned from dark to pale night, and we drifted back into our own separate selves without wrench or loss, were the starting point of my journey into silence. I am a bit curious that it is the night feed, rather than any of the other times the 'weaned child' lies in the mother's arms, with its wide eyes somehow joyously unfocused. There is something about the dark itself, and the quiet of the world, even in cities, at that strange time before the dawn, but also I suspect that physical tiredness enhances the sensation. More particularly, you are awake to experience it solely and only because you are experiencing it. If the feeding were not happening you would almost certainly be asleep, be absent from consciousness in a very real way. This is not true during daytime feeds, but here, in the fading night, there is nothing else to do save be present. The dark, the 'time out of time' and the quiet of *night* are fixed in my memory along with the density of that particular silent joy.

At the time I did not recognise it for what it was, but I now know that it was an encounter with positive silence, in an unexpected place. For the most part the experience of having small children is not silent.

Meanwhile I was in the process of becoming a writer; more words, more word games. More noise. It is easy to think of writers as living silent lives, but on the whole we don't; when we are writing we usually work alone and usually with great concentration and intensity – but no one writes all the time. Perhaps as a relief from that intensity there is a tendency, at least among younger writers, to seek out people and activities. Anyway it was the seventies; feminist writers were engaged in demystifying our work, opening it up and talking about it. Everyone was in a Writers' Group. I was in a wonderful Writers' Group – with Michelene Wandor, Zoe Fairbairns, Valerie Miner and Michele Roberts. We wrote a collective book and we talked and talked and talked.

I liked my noisy life. All that talking. All my life I have talked and talked. I love talking. I used to say that if I were ever in *Who's Who*

I would put down deipnosophy as my hobby. Deipnosophy means the 'love of, or skill of, dinner-table conversation' (from the Greek *deipnos* – dinner). I have always loved this word and I loved the thing itself. I've been lucky enough to know some of the great deipnosophists of my times.

It is hard to think of a less silent life.

It was – and this is important to me – an extremely happy life. I achieved almost all the personal ambitions I started out with. I am a published writer of the sorts of books I want to write and believe in: I have written five novels, including *Daughter of Jerusalem*, which, with Michèle Robert's first novel, *Piece of the Night*, was credited with being the UK's first 'feminist novel' and which won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1979. I have also written a range of non-fiction books and, perhaps most important to me, I have produced a long steady line of short stories. I made a living doing freelance things I liked to do. I had two extraordinary and beautiful children with whom I get on very well. I felt respected and useful and satisfied. I do not regret any of it. This does matter. When things changed and I started not just to be more silent, but also to love silence and want to understand it and hunt it down, both in practice and in theory, I did not feel I was running away from anything. On the contrary, I wanted *more*. I had it all and it was not enough. Silence is additional to, not a rejection of, sociability and friends and periods of deep emotional and professional satisfaction. I have been lucky, or graced; in a deep sense, as I shall describe, I feel that silence sought me out rather than the other way round.

For nearly twenty years I had a marvellous life. Then, at the very end of the 1980s, for reasons I have not fully worked out yet, that well ran dry.

My marriage disintegrated.

Thatcherism was very ugly. It was not just the defeat of old hopes, but in the impoverished East End of London where my husband had his parish it was visibly creating fragmentation and misery. There was a real retreat from the edge, in personal relationships, in progressive movements of all kinds and in publishing.

Anglo-Catholicism ceased to be *fun*; and became instead increasingly bitter, misogynistic and right-wing; we stopped laughing, and a religion where you cannot laugh at yourself is a joyless, destructive thing.

As a writer I ran out of steam. I lost my simple conviction that *stories*, narrative itself, could provide a direct way forward in what felt like a cultural impasse.

I also went through a curious experience – a phase of extremely vivid and florid 'voice hearing', or auditory hallucinations. Although such experiences are commonly held to be symptoms of psychosis, and often form a central part of a diagnosis of so-called 'schizophrenia', this does not seem to me to describe the experience fully. I continued to carry on with my life. I found the content of these voices more absorbing and engaging than tormenting, and they certainly never urged hideous actions upon me. They were very distinct, however, and belonged to individuals, mainly drawn from fairy stories – a 'lost little girl', a dwarf, a sort of cat-monster. The most threatening were a sort of collective voice which I called the Godfathers and who seemed to represent a kind of internalised patriarchy, offering rewards for 'good' or punishments for 'bad' behaviour. I am still uncertain how much they were connected to the death of my real father in 1982, just a few months after my son was born and named after my father. When they were at their most garrulous there was a genuine conflict between my normal noisy lifestyle and listening to them and attempting to explore and understand what they were saying. There was an additional problem; inasmuch as they gave me any 'instructions' at all, these were about not telling anyone about them. This meant the rather novel experience of having something important going on in my life that I did not talk about.

The worst aspect of all this was the fear, indeed the terror, that I might be going mad. It was the normal cultural response to the voices that was the most disturbing aspect; otherwise and in retrospect they gave me a good deal of fictional material, some interesting things to think about and an awareness that there was something somewhat awry in my life.