

Silence is Health

After the coup all conversations ran like bad cocktail parties, where you know only a few people and carry your conversations no deeper than the weather, or sport, or clothing, or food. You never know who is listening and even when you know, you don't know: for those you used to know, "before" may no longer be the same people "since." So you say next to nothing. It is not difficult. *El Silencio es Salud*: "Silence is Health."

The banners and posters began ostensibly as public service. The clogged streets were full of invective horn-honking and the cessation of such would give rise to better mental health for all of us. That was true. But original intent gave way soon enough. Indeed, the slogan became a new anthem for a new nation. Its snarling menace was very much in its simplicity and in the easy fallback of government officials plausibly bemused by any suggestion that the term referred to anything other than car horns, and how can one argue otherwise? Of course, when we should have been speaking, we said nothing. Besides, we would come to learn only later, from one who had miraculously survived, that the appearance of this same slogan was hung along the corridors leading to the torture chambers of our country's largest death camp.

Certainly you could talk about *La Roja*. The national *futbol* team, a thing we can all put our hearts into because we loved them before and we will love them after (if and when there is an after) when time is simply "now" and isn't cleaved in half. We still hearkened to the elevated finish in the World Cup when our country hosted. It is a national pastime to relive the glory; in a glorious past, there is no present, and the future still holds promise.

When *La Roja* came up, you smiled, exercising those muscles which lately had ceased to get work. You talked about when we bested Italy, striking twice in the second half in a game stopped four times for fights, when the police came onto the field to haul off offenders. You reveled in our boys having sent those smug oversexed Italians packing, a balm to national pride after an Italian journalist wrote that we were "proudly miserable and backwards" and that nothing functions properly here. (Though we do allow that his observation, that "taxis in the city center are as rare as faithful husbands," made many of us laugh).

So talk about *futbol* was safe. That was healthy. You did not talk about what the *Estadio Nacional* became after the coup. There are many things you ignored. In that way it all became normal. The military displays in the park—the children who come and touch and play and climb and the benevolent smiling officers patting their heads and placing the children's little hands on steering wheels. The television channels an endless stream of military glorification, so insistent that even those who agreed with the sentiment turned off their sets for the banality of it all, for the utter lack of imagination. The banning of all theoretical subjects in the high schools and universities, even modern math, leaving only eternal truths. So went the thinking. That was your instruction and you forgot that was not normal. You forgot the necessity of art and idea. You walked by the stacks of bodies outside the undertakers' doors and at first you shuddered, your physical body giving into its mechanical protest. But you carried on and you did not look back and when the next day you read in the newspaper that because of the massive influx of bodies the local undertakers' union had lobbied the government to reclassify their jobs as hazardous, such as those in chemical factories and mining, this made sense to you and the bodies are just bodies and what is really at issue here is one of simple fairness and why shouldn't these undertakers, taxed through systems they did not create, not also receive their reclassification? Why should they not receive their increased wages and vacation time? After all, what is fair is fair. This is how the mind works, and it's easy, really, when you allow it to be.

There was the case, two weeks into the coup, of the singing women. They sat in a circle, legs crossed, singing songs in front of the gates of Parliament—or what used to be Parliament. Now, a large iron lock and chain shutter the gates where the women sang.

Singing. No more human expression of joy apart from laughter. Even in the song of protest or spiritual or blues. These are, in some respects, the most joyful of expressions, these plaints. These require one to face the nadir head on, absorb it, process, accept and not reject it, and open one's mouth and sing and in so doing, defeat it, make it one's own.

And so these women sang.

But the quaver—that gave them away. That little tremor in their voices that betrayed their fears. And of course it did, for they knew what they were inviting. From nowhere the men appeared, like the slink and spread of shadows, seemingly able to emerge from concrete or cloud and materialize like the accumulation of vapor into form, as if they had always been among us and came from nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Now present and fully realized, they wielded their batons, snapping ferociously with quick whips and flicks of wrists, smashing into these women as they held one another.

Each smash the singing turned to yelp and cry and then resumed, as best as possible, song. But it was song that was no longer song—instead, some choked thing that hardly resembled human sound.

But they held on.

Even as the crack turned to splinter and shatter. Even as wrists and forearms jutted in queer angles. Even as cry and sob overtook and replaced song. Still, they held on. As if letting go of one another meant letting go of hope, of life. As if in hope that maybe someone was filming this and would broadcast it across the globe, as if the images of six singing women being battered by impassive men behind mirrored sunglasses would be the thing, finally, to bring help pouring in from all over the world. Because you can't believe it's happening. You, who watch, who are there to see it happening, you can't believe it. So you turn away. Because it is so close that you can touch it. But if you are somewhere else and you see it, you can register your outrage and demand change and intervention. But here, face to face, you see only the cold cell and the cattle prod. You have heard about the bodies, drugged and immobile, slipping from open doors and corkscrewing into the ocean, weighted with I-bars and cinched with straps, and falling, as if in a bad dream, into the foaming, thrashing maw of ocean waves. So after instinctively reaching out—this could be your mother, your sister, your aunt, your grandmother; if you are old enough: your daughter—you then retract and turn away. You ask yourself if the men have seen you make your move, have seen your face in this restricted space. You cannot tell because you can never see their eyes. You cannot peer into their souls and beg quietly, telepathically, commune over unseen waves, appeal to a shared humanity, a shared nationality. You turn away. And that is how it works. That is how it continues. The great Turning Away.

It is only your country. It is only your conscience. And that can always be wrestled with later. For now, the bones are not yours. They are not your mother's, or your sister's, or your aunt's, or your grandmother's, or your daughter's. You tell yourself that they never will be, and that they are silly, these women, to have even been here. Crazy to have believed that their actions would affect anything. Since when has song crashed the edifices of hate and stick and steel? People claim that it has. But, has it, really? Won out over bullet and baton?

You go back home. And you don't talk about it. When you close your eyes, you see it all again. But now it is a film, some thing you've seen at the cinema, a thing unreal: The bones are weak. They lay in pieces within the pillow of skin. The hair, surprisingly, is made of tougher

stuff. It doesn't tear from the scalp so easily. These women with their battered bones are dragged across the cobblestones by their hair and tossed into the back of unmarked vans with blacked out windows and they speed away to God-knows-where. One wishes for the hair to simply tear away and then, newly freed, the women can flee while the men behind their sunglasses stand dumbfounded by the clutch of wispy brown in their palms, and realizing what it is they realize also that they are too late. The women are gone, swallowed up by the masses. Easy enough to find, one supposes—look for the woman with the shattered arms and bald patch with its pink seeping flesh. But one has to wade through the hundreds, the thousands first, who form protective rings and scurry them off somewhere, to some lair of safety, some underground place.

This is not how it happened, of course. They did not escape. There were no protective rings, no shuffling off and shoving inside open doors to be plied with food and drink, to be soothed and comforted. No, people looked away instead. You did, too. But now, back home, in darkness, sleep a teasing narcotic that never seems to come like it used to, before, now you reconstruct. You tell yourself what you need to: these were silly women, thinking that their songs could win a war. How else to wake the next day when the sun announces itself and reminds you that this is no dream?

You know the truth, but you do not acknowledge it: They are behind closed doors, these women—as are you. But your closed doors contain the smudges of familiar fingerprints, an ink-stained blot near a telephone, a wayward swipe across a television screen. Not the streak of a death grip while you are being torn away from everything you know and love, not the blood-spattered splay across a wall that will need to be wiped clean and made invisible, not the crack and indent of scuffle and struggle.

In the houses of those who had disappeared, those who were ripped as if from the womb, the floors would tell the story through the black scuffs of the shoes they all wore, the standard issue military shoes, and these scuffs were stubborn, impervious to scrubbing. But after a while, those left behind, the families, the lovers—they began to leave the black marks alone. Of course there would be no forgetting, but they wanted reminders beyond those of the heart and head. They wanted to see it and touch it and press themselves against it; those scuff marks told them that their loved one, now disappeared, was here and had fought. And that counted for something. There is perverse comfort in that pain of remembering and seeing. For they knew the intent, knew why those men wore those shoes and ground them into the floor. They wanted to leave their reminders, but ones that could easily be explained away as simple domestic stains—funny how those who made the rules seemed, always, fearful of having to someday account for those same rules. And so whereas the victims left behind once threw themselves at those scuffs and tried to get them gone, they no longer bothered. Realizing the impossibility of it, they played the game, too, and kept those marks there as shrine. They were disappeared, these loved ones, so that the families would live an indefinite torture, their pain suspended for all time. But if they chose to leave the marks, they owned them, and maybe—just, maybe—stripped them of their ultimate power.

You are home, as are those you love. So you get on with the business of life. You make yourself breakfast. And you eat, swallow it down with mechanical efficiency. Somehow, you eat. It is not your business, those women. Yes, you saw it. You saw their broken limbs and bleeding heads, their being taken off to a place from which they will never return. But you are still at home and for now that is enough. For now, you count your blessings.

But it is there, always, waiting for you, waiting to drag you back to a world of troubled sleep and guilt and shame. It lurks.

It happens to me. Today, it happened to me, yet again, in real time.

I hear a name called. It isn't my name, so at first I don't turn around. But it is a nickname that my mates at school used to call me. It's been years since I've heard it and it no longer hits its mark: *Calaca*. "Skeleton." When I was a boy, it made sense. I used to be very thin. Even my relatives used it: "Come on, calaca, eat something!" But I am no longer thin, so it is strange to hear it thrown in my direction.

I don't turn. I keep up my pace. But it comes again: "*Calaca?*"

I know now that it is meant for me. My whole body tenses and I can feel my arms and shoulders squeeze inward as if to form a protective shield across my most vulnerable parts. A ripple of fear crawls up my spine and pushes, wave-like, through my scalp where a tingling accompanies a slight paralysis. It is difficult to turn my head. But I manage when the voice calls my old nickname yet again. This is the world now: a simple shout for you, something that could elicit excitement in past days, now brings fear. The very best thing in the world is to be left alone. *What could someone want with me?*

But something in the tone lacks authority. There is no demand in it, no order. It is, instead, almost a curiosity, as if, had it been visible in the air, it would possess question marks.

I turn and I see a uniformed soldier. Drab green. No medallions.

His is the uniform of a conscript, the lowest rung.

He moves toward me and I recognize something in his face. I've seen him before.

"*Calaca?*" he asks again.

I don't answer. How does he know me? And where do I know him from?

His lips move slightly upward. A smile is what most would call such a movement. But this is no smile. This looks instead as if he has suffered a facial injury or has some deformity, a muscular atrophy perhaps that arrests his lips when he tries to move them into a U. "Ah, *Calaca*. I thought that was you."

Still, I say nothing.

He takes off his cap. "Luis. Luis Sanibel."

Dios mío. Luis. I do know him. We had been schoolmates, years ago. But he looks like an old man now—hair gray, deep lines on his forehead, a nest of purple wrinkles under his eyes. I would never have recognized him, not in a thousand years.

One of the students in the class, when we were mates a decade ago, one day discovered a wasp nest in the crook of a window in our classroom. Not long after he spotted several wasps going in and out did one of our classmates get stung, a red-haired girl named Sanibel, who leapt out of her seat and, screaming, ran into the hall. Several of the braver boys, looking to impress—the girls, the teacher, each other, themselves—ran toward the nest, still in its initial stages but substantial nonetheless: grayish strips of paper with four or five wasps buzzing round. The boy who got there first carried a rolled up magazine and swatted two of the wasps out of the air, smashing at them over and over. One of the wasps he got without problem and it immediately flipped onto its back. But the other kept escaping the blows and was furious, filling the room with ominous buzzing. The girls ran to the far end of the room, as did our teacher, Señora Kaye, all the while admonishing the boys and yelling at someone to go get the custodian. But still this boy kept at it and eventually he did stun the other wasp with a good swat and pounded it over and over until it was in pieces: a couple of legs here, segments of wings there. In this way the two dying wasps petered out, their legs giving involuntarily twitches now and again, their antenna moving in slow circles, until they were both gone and, once the custodian did come and

was able to remove the nest—he simply opened the window, took the end of Senora Kaye’s ruler, and flipped the entire thing to the outside—things more or less got back to normal.

But soon enough several of the boys noticed Luis, whose chair was closest to the window and who stared at those wasps for the remainder of the time and, if we weren’t going crazy, was actually crying. Those wasps, the life leaking out of them, elicited grief in that poor, sensitive boy. I’ll confess it: I didn’t enjoy watching something die, either. But they were wasps. What good were they? At best, they would have ignored us and we would have ignored them. At worst—well, wasp stings are no fun and, in fact, Sanibel did not come back to class that day.

But to fail to hide such sorrow in the presence of young boys, boys who thrilled at the opportunity for sanctioned killing of anything smaller than they . . . poor Luis became an immediate target. That very day—or the next, I can’t quite remember—a dead bird was discovered on the stoop outside our school. That was all it took. One ringleader and several minions pretended to sob and wail when Luis came out and they pointed it out to him and asked if he was going to cry and run home to his mommy. This did not let up for a good week, until it became boring and all the laughter had been wrung out of it and then, ultimately, forgotten.

But this boy, the kind of boy who became sorrowful over a dying wasp and its last flickering moments, this boy is now a young man turned prematurely old, as if he has become his own father.

Luis moves closer to me, in such a way that it seems he’s forgotten that he’s carrying a rifle. Its lip points in the general direction of my feet as he approaches and he lets it bounce against his body, haphazardly, as if what he’s carrying is a *bota*, maybe, and not a lethal weapon. The rifle rests between us as Luis puts a hand on my shoulder and cocks his head slightly, in the manner of a curious dog.

“Oh, Calaca. I cannot tell you how good it is to see you.”

My nervousness does not dissipate. In fact, it grows. Here is a man I had never known all that well and whom I haven’t seen in some ten years. Why is he treating me as if we had once been the best of friends and have merely had some kind of easily repairable falling out?

“It’s good to see you, too, Luis,” I finally manage. “How are things with you?”

I point at his gun and his uniform, and he looks at both as if he only now realizes he possesses them.

“Well . . . I’m in the national army now, as you can see.”

I nod. “Is that going well?”

Luis abruptly sits on the curb, his legs stretching into the road. We remain this way—he sitting, me standing—until, feeling ridiculous, I sit down next to him.

He takes off his beret and heaves a monstrous sigh, the kind that my *abuela* used to favor, an exhalation as heavy and ponderous as if the weight of the entire universe and all its accumulated matter had pressed down upon her and squeezed out the last of her air. Luis is far too young for that—no matter how his looks have aged.

“You ask me how I am, Calaca. This is funny. I have seen things . . .”

“I understand, Luis.” But I don’t understand and I am not sure why I have said that. I do not know what else to say.

“There was a boy, you see,” Luis says, after a long pause. “Lived in San Marcos. Purported leftist. We went to his house. Six of us. Lieutenant. His second. Four of us conscripts.”

He isn’t speaking very softly. I look around, worried. Is this wise? For him to be telling stories such as this? For me to be sitting next to him, listening? But then again, those who do walk by see nothing other than a soldier and an acquaintance talking. What of it? So I stay where

I am. It feels rude to tell him I have to leave. Though I suspect I could. I suspect I can simply stand up and walk away and I'm not certain he will even notice until I am long gone. He does not look at me. He speaks mostly to the air, to his hands, to his boots, to the gravel in the street. His rifle lip rests on the ground. His legs splay in opposite directions as if made of jelly. Luis is a broken man; anyone can see that. So I stay, out of pity. I listen.

"We were searching for subversive material. Socialist manifestos, literature, pamphlets, maybe arms. You know."

I tell him that I do not. Can this be some kind of test?

"It can be anything, Calaca. Anything Lieutenant says it is. The Holy Bible can be proof of subversive activity if you open it and note the page which is marked. Not every page, you see, supports our righteous cause." Luis cracks a smile—or, at least, his best approximation of a smile. "My uncle was a priest. My father went to seminary. I know the bible," he tells me.

I nod.

"So we searched. That was our job, Calaca. The alleged was not home. But his mother was, as were four of his siblings. The youngest . . . the youngest, Calaca, the youngest was a baby. A wee little one. And then the next was three, perhaps four. And we were six in number, as I have told you. And we were scary, I am sure. Imagine that, Calaca. Imagine if you were a child and six soldiers came into your home. You would be scared, no doubt. Anyone would."

Again, I nod. Though he cannot see me in any case. Not with him looking anywhere but my face.

"So, this child she is crying. And she will not stop. Finally, Lieutenant orders the mother to shut up the crying child. She tries, of course, but nothing is working. 'If you do not stop that child from screaming, I will do it,' he tells her. How, Calaca, is that going to work? I ask you. Of course it does not. The child only screams louder. And now the other children are whimpering and the mother is, too, and all the while we continue our search and we are finding nothing and I am all this time just hoping we leave. Why would we stay? We did not find what we came for and things are escalating, Calaca. Why not just leave and it is all over? But I do as I am told and I continue to search through drawers that I have already searched and I peek again under beds where I have seen nothing apart from balls of dust and when I look up, I see Lieutenant walk over to the mother and he rips the crying child from her arms and he smashes the butt of his rifle into the child's head and now it is no longer crying. The blood is coming in spurts, you see, like a faucet pushing through its water after a long shutoff. Do you know what I mean by this? With the faucet?"

I nod, uncertainly.

"Only it is not a faucet. It is the head of a child and it is not water but blood and we cannot live without our blood, Calaca . . . Even a skeleton knows this," he laughs, a laugh that is not a laugh.

"The mother now is no longer there. I mean she is there, but she is not there, if you know what I am saying. Wherever she is she is drawing upon enormous wells of strength and she is punching and slapping and biting and kicking at Lieutenant and she is screaming 'Murderer!! Murderer!' and I cannot say why this is but Lieutenant does not shoot her but rather orders Jaime—he is a fellow conscript—he orders Jaime to shoot her. But Jaime will not. And now Lieutenant tells Jaime that either he shoots her or he, Lieutenant, will shoot Jaime. 'You kill her or I kill you' he says. But Jaime still will not. He actually handed his rifle to me. So Lieutenant pulls out his pistol and he shoots Jaime in the head and Jaime collapses."

Luis stops. For a very long time there is silence. Then, finally: “The rest, I cannot remember. We left. That I know, of course. But what else, I do not know. It was like I was floating, like whatever long string had kept me connected to this earth had been snapped. And I have been floating ever since.” Now finally Luis looks at me and the look in his eyes is one of a drowning man, a person not long for this life. “Can you see it, Calaca? Can you see the way I float? That I no longer walk? I am not of this world anymore.”

“I’m sorry, Luis. I am sorry.” I stand up, suddenly wanting to be very far from this ghost of a man. “I must go,” I tell him, and I start to move away. “I wish you—” But I don’t know what I wish him and I can say no more and so I just stand there, dumbly.

“It is good to talk, Calaca. I talk to them, at night, when they come see me. But they do not talk back. They only look. And so it is good to talk to you, Calaca. This has been good.”

I finally find the strength to move away.

“I am not a priest, Luis,” I say. “I cannot perform confession for you. Forgiveness is not mine to parcel out. I am sorry.”

He “smiles” again, waves me away. “That is okay, Calaca. I am beyond forgiveness.”

That is my permission to leave. As I round the corner, I pause and take one last look and there Luis remains, lonely and broken, sitting on the curb, no one stopping, no one smiling, a whirl of activity surrounding one motionless person, a person, I am certain, who will never be a whole person again.

Maybe I can help, after all; I consider it. But after a moment I turn away and choose not to try. It is easier this way. It is easier to be, perhaps, true to my real self. I have committed sins before. This is far from my first, and nowhere near the worst.

There was the year when my father was home from the mines at a time that coincided with his birthday. That had not happened previously, so my mother was determined to make it special, even as she knew that a fuss would embarrass him. She prepared a sumptuous feast: *arrollado huaso*, *cazuela nogada*, *chapalele*. The gift I planned to give him was a written history of the young man I had become. He had missed out on much of my growing up; the highlights of my maturation were told to him in snatches of letters and breathless accounts by my mother and, of course, she was privy only to those things I chose not to hide away. She had noted the milestones, yes, but the thousand tiny steps that made up each of those leaps: these were invisible to her, often by a literal distance if I was outside the house, but more in the inevitable way in which it is possible to see a child’s growth only in large gaps of time.

My “letter” to him covered twelve full pages in small script from my composition notebook. When I handed it to him on his birthday, first thing in the morning after I woke up, and explained what it was, he beamed at me and ran his calloused palm across my head. “Thank you,” he said.

My mother looked at me sidewise. She hardly spoke to me all day, even when serving me my lunch, sliding it under my face as I sat at the table, before walking out of the kitchen and not returning until I had finished and my plate, soiled from my simple meal, required cleaning. She understood, even suspected, my motives. My father was an intelligent man, able to coax food from the least promising soil, able to read the wind and clouds and navigate by stars, and patch anything that needed repair, and always doing so with whatever was at hand, a gift for ingenuity of which I’ve never seen an equal.

But he could barely read. And so he was gone to us for the whole day. He didn’t even eat his lunch, but rather sat in his room laboring over each page, each paragraph, each sentence, each letter, each mark of black ink on white paper, breaking down what must have felt like a tome into

more easily digestible parts. It is now, thinking about this, that I imagine him such as one who must walk a thousand miles to safety and who cannot contemplate the whole without succumbing to hopelessness. This is how he most likely felt when taking up those pages. How he tackled it as he did any massive undertaking, the understanding and resolve to take each individual step, one after the other, over and over, so that progress can be marked and despair can be held at bay.

But my mother suspected my cruelty even then, even while it perhaps began to nibble at the corners of my consciousness and seep into the deepest recesses before I swatted it away and told myself otherwise, that my gift was just a gift, and a thoughtful one, that those many hours I put in recounting the minutest details in the most ornate language possible to me, were measurements of my love for my father, that I would leave nothing out, that I would paint pictures as any ace portraitist so that he could be there with me, side by side, watching his son grow to be a man. Yes, that is what I told myself.

It was only later that I acknowledged to myself what my mother knew all along, that I was punishing him—for his absence, for his decency and simplicity, for his being a good man, for the many hours I wished him there and knew it would not be. So I employed every recursive instrument in my toolbox, wielding each word like a tiny knife, each intended to prick the skin and stab at the heart so that over the course of those twelve pages, the overall effect would be a massive sword descending from the heights, cleaving him in two.

I knew what struggle would ensue for him and I knew also that he would only assume the beneficence of my motives as I had presented them to him, smiling widely, the whole of my story held behind my back as I approached, and then thrusting my hands forward as if handing over sacred waters from the Fountain of Youth.

Even as his eyebrows crawled up his forehead and his eyes watered in joy, even as his lips upturned and the etches of his wrinkles shone prominently, even then I told myself that my motives were pure. Even after he went into his room at nine in the morning and did not emerge until after three in the afternoon, even then, after he wordlessly staggered to the kitchen and gulped down three glasses of water as if he had walked the distance home from the mines, hundreds of miles to the north, through the mountains, and had just arrived in our lintel—even then, I told myself I had done good.

“Thank you, son,” he said. “I will cherish this.”

I was not content with that. “What were your favorite parts?” I asked.

He paused, collected himself, looked to his toes, looked at my mother, now standing in the kitchen with us, her shoulders slumped, appearing older and more tired than I could ever recall seeing her previously.

“I liked all of it,” he said.

“But which parts?” I pressed.

That is when Mama entered, shooing me to the back of the apartment. “Wash up for dinner,” she said.

We ate not long after. In silence. I watched my father move the tines of his fork through his food, pushing *patatas* this way and that, occasionally taking a small bite, then leaving most of it before heading back to his room to smoke.

I got him his matches and he thanked me as he had thanked me that morning for my gift. He ran that palm over my head again. I burned at that touch, as I burn now. From shame, anger, incredulity at my own cruelty.

Our capacity for unkindness knows no bounds. Any student of humanity knows that. Every citizen of my fair country is living that.

But this cruelty is most egregious when cloaked in love and affection. And so I am hardly different from those who run my beloved country and who visit cruelty upon cruelty. We should never fool ourselves into thinking otherwise. I know that I can no longer.