

THE HISTORY OF SILENCE, by Pedro Zarraluki

“We could write a book about silence,” I said.

Her mouth curved into a smile, which broadened as her thoughts began to race. Irene’s most dazzling smiles were the ones that came from deep inside. She remained motionless for a few more moments. Then she leapt to her feet and looked at me, brimming with enthusiasm.

“It will require an enormous amount of work,” she said, tainted perhaps by an understandably (in her case) encyclopedic attitude. “Why did cinemas hire piano players during the silent movie era? Is silence bearable? Is there such a thing as silence or is it just an accumulation of distant sounds? Which do we find more nerve-racking: noise or the absence of noise? On the other hand, haven’t we all at some point or another been forced to remain silent? Who did so out of self-interest, out of weakness or perversion? Who has saved and who condemned others by his or her silence? Can one spend a whole lifetime waiting for a question to be answered? Does absolute silence, the silence of God, really exist, or is it simply a metaphor for ignorance? Can silence be bottomless, as deep as a well? Can one feel comfortable inside a well? Why isn’t absolute silence described as something boundless, like the calm, empty spaces of the universe? Can silence be methodical without seeming artificial? Have you ever been to a wake? Isn’t it true that the only ones who behave naturally at a wake are the dear departed because they are so damned silent? On the other hand, is hearing nothing from a loved one for twenty years the most unbearable type of silence? Why do we wait patiently but not eternally for a simple word that would put an end to our pain? Why do we say that someone broke the silence instead of freeing the silence or calming it, which would be very poetic and would prevent that ringing in our ears we find so annoying? Why do we say someone is the silent type, as if they went through life on tiptoes, when in fact that person simply doesn’t talk much? Is talking the most deliberate way to break the silence? Why does silence seem awkward at dinner parties and not on mountaintops? What happens at those rare dinner parties that are held on a mountaintop? How can keeping silent be the noblest and the most despicable act when what is being kept is exactly the same thing? Why don’t you say something? You’re letting me do all the talking. Is silence a betrayal of evolution, perhaps, and thus a fleeting omen that everything comes to an end?”

When Irene finally stopped talking, her agitated words lingered in the still air. I contemplated the barren landscape, thinking how difficult it was going to be to give shape to all this. But my mind was teeming with ideas. Irene and I looked straight at each other, both of us immersed in thought, that rigorously silent, overwhelming activity. I had the strange impression that everything around us had come to a halt, like the ominous calm that precedes the deadliest storms.

ANTÓN MALLICK WANTS TO BE HAPPY, by Nicolás Casariego

Enough is enough. I don't want to be a pessimist, or a victim, any more. I reject the status of black hole. This notebook, which I address and dedicate to Vidor Mallick, inveterate gambler and amateur loan shark, is proof of my will to optimism, that is, my great desire to become a man with a sunny disposition, happy, *normal*, one of these guys who springs out of bed every morning and has answers for pretty much every single one of life's many questions. I believe it can be done: there are, they say, many such men sprinkled across this earth—the ones, yes, whom the pessimists (who probably are in the majority) describe as constituting hell itself. I will speak of happiness, or of the search for it, which is really the one thing that matters to us human beings, much as some try to busy themselves with learning, power, or even just with love, pretending they don't know how doubtful these are as ways of attaining it, or at least in the hope of giving the slip to sadness and the certainty of death. I will speak, finally, of my life and of this unattainable ideal, one we don't know how to define without reverting to such vague terminology as "satisfaction," "mood," "pleasure," or "contentment."

May it be so.

[...]

It's a starry night, dear Vidor (do you mind, oh happy ancestor, my addressing you thus?), very clear, the air so crisp it can only mean cold. I've just got home, I'm drunk and I smell of cheap perfume. I've smoked a cigarette out on the balcony, gazing up at the firmament, and I've been trying to imagine what your childhood in Hungary must have been like. You rarely spoke about it. Sheets of ice floating down the Danube, river waters frozen and in motion at the same time. My belief is that you avoided talking or writing about your childhood not, as everyone in the family claimed, because it was so horrible, but in fact because you had such a good time. It pained you to leave it behind. You never got over the happiness.