

Good Letters

Singing Silence in A Far Country Near

By Peggy Rosenthal



“Without the traffic, silence / itself would sound red birdsong...”

As I’m reading these lines in the poem “Seeing in Silence” in Murray Bodo’s latest volume, *A Far Country Near: Poems New and Selected*, I pause and ponder. How can silence “sound”? I could get literal and say that without traffic’s

noise we can hear the birds. But that doesn’t catch the paradox of birdsong as silence.

It’s a paradox that Bodo explores throughout this volume. Silence is a recurring theme. In fact, ten percent of these poems use the word. And it even titles three poems: the one above plus “Silence” and “Psalm of Silence.”

Bodo isn’t the first to explore the sound of silence. Simon and Garfunkel did it in their great 1964 song of that title. In the song, “the sound of silence” is sinister, “touched” by a flashing neon light that reveals ten thousand people not listening to each other but together bowing to “the neon god they made.”

For Bodo, on the other hand, silence’s sound is positive—in various ways. There is

that silence as birdsong, above and also in “Lake Music,” with:

*Quail-gray skies where water birds
rise and swim the chilling air...*

*Their music the silence of
what is heard in the seeing*

I pause with the puzzle of these last two lines. Now we have silence, hearing, and seeing all working together for a single effect. “Seeing” the birds’ flight is “heard” as the “silence” of their “music.” This synesthesia is hard to wrap my mind around. Then I realize that it’s not a mind-game. It’s an image: the birds have risen so high that we can’t literally hear them, but in the silence of seeing them we seem to hear their music.

Even richer and more mysterious is the synesthesia in Bodo’s poem “Silence”:

*Silence loud with divinity
No words, no thoughts, no images
Could silence be the God of prayer?*

*As when, silent, he wrote in sand
And she—smelling his feet—heard?*

First God as silence, paradoxically “loud” with divinity. Then the woman taken in adultery hearing Christ’s message by smelling his feet.

As I write this, I’m aware of the silence around me... and of its sounds. The fridge running. My own breathing. Is there ever a silence that doesn’t sound?

Bodo would, I think, say no. For even silent words sound. Take the poem “Justice,” which first pictures the loving touches that forgive someone who has offended, then concludes:

*there’s a chance we’ll become what
we trace—silent words singing*

Several other poems also play with the silence of words. “Psalm of Silence” offers praise to God, ending:

*Your Word gives words to these words
makes song of the silence you are*

There’s that song of silence again. But now we also have the irresistible play with the Word and words.

Bodo, a Franciscan priest, naturally has many poems on both St. Francis and St. Clare. “St. Clare in Contemplation” evokes again the mystery of God’s soundless Word. Her silent contemplation is:

*like the silence
of that voice on the cross
uncovering the soundless
Word of God*

Soundless words aren’t limited to God, as in the poem “Words”:

*Words take me...beyond the world of the world
I see and hear and touch—to

the world of dreams and silence
words themselves invisible*

Words here (in the world of dreams) are both silent and invisible. But how about, I wonder, the world of being awake? Words, for me, always sound: even when I read to myself—or write, as I’m now doing—I silently speak each word. And invisibility? Of course, written words are clearly visible.

But spoken words? Despite the synesthesia in “Lake Music,” of those “water birds” whose music is “the silence of / what is heard in the seeing,” I’d have to assent that our literal spoken words are not seen.

More than words and music are silent in *A Far Country Near*. In “Home Visit” one

MORE THAN WORDS AND MUSIC ARE SILENT IN *A FAR COUNTRY NEAR*. IN HOME VISIT, ONE of the many poems recalling his childhood or later visits with his parents, Bodo muses on walking with his mother after dinner, his father not along because he'd rather be fishing. In place of the father, Bodo and his mother do the casting:

*We cast words until we felt
a closeness silent as skin*

I love this last line's image, intensified by the alliteration of "l"s and "s"s. I can feel skin touching skin, truly a silent closeness. I also love the image of casting words. Do we throw words out on a line (the pun is inevitable), to see what we'll catch?

I know that I do. When writing, at least (not so much when speaking), I cast about for the right words—as I've been doing in writing this post. And hearing each word in my head as I write: this is a form of the sound of silence.

After pondering the poems of *A Far Country Near*, I'll never again hear silence as totally soundless.



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Peggy Rosenthal writes widely on poetry as a spiritual resource. Her books include *Praying through Poetry: Hope for Violent Times* (Franciscan Media), and *The Poets' Jesus* (Oxford). See [Amazon](#) for a full list. She also teaches an online course, "Poetry as a Spiritual Practice," through *Image's* [Glen Online program](#).