What is there to be said in silence? How do we live while muted, either in silence or vibrancy? How have we muted others or ourselves, intentionally or accidentally? In this issue of memoryhouse, our contributors explore the theme of mute and tackle these questions in a variety of creative nonfiction pieces. Whether it is the beautiful silence of a snowy afternoon or the painful feeling of not knowing what to say, muteness can affect us in many ways. We hope that you enjoy the pieces in this issue and that they leave you to ponder the significance of the unsaid.
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memoryhouse is a quarterly student-run publication that curates the personal narratives of the uchicago community and beyond through creative writing and visual art. our performance ensemble, memento, tells stories through spoken word poetry.

to learn about joining memoryhouse or submitting work, please visit chicagomemoryhouse.wordpress.com

founded 2012, alida miranda-wolff
cover photo: “memento diner, brownsville, PA” by pearse anderson
the day the earth stood still

ross thompson

When the blizzard quietly arrived, we were halfway through a double feature of *Creature From The Black Lagoon* and *Destination Moon*, unaware that the pathways outside The Mercury had vanished: the world marooned upon itself, muffled by blankets of black and white and put to sleep. Resigned to a silent city shuttered by water reshaped, we retreated back inside the foyer where there was soda on tap and buttered popcorn by the bucket. We bunkered down in reclining chairs, let film after film play back to back like hymnals, and dozed in the strobing illusory beam outshining our former lives while the world outside turned liminal.
i.
The movie theater is on fire but we aren't supposed to talk about it, woman aren't supposed to talk about it, allowed to hail fire in a theater, as if women opened/their mouths to conjure fire, but fact is/fact: the theater is on fire, on fire your hallowed walls, your predatory dark/cast into the light, your smoke tongues/click no more, your suits, worth more than our lives these days, are dust we dance the bones of this/place on fire, inside the belly of the beast until the ghost of your chains/are not heavy in the least.

ii.
& nobody, not a soul but a camera, would stop to watch over your body
& there was still a camera to catch your body mid break, in case it was beautiful
& every pair of eyes on the globe rolled in to lick at the screen
& I could not bring myself to watch the blow, where the volkswagen reveals itself a shriek, the shady palm an unforgiving spike.
& somebody was the car, the tree, the missing seat belt, the missing tape, somebody was the tortuous dirt road, somebody the dirt
& everybody, all of us, was the camera
iii.

“I’ve been waiting to feel less angry. And when I’m ready, I’ll say what I have to say.”
—Uma Thurman, via Access Hollywood

that spark-iron scream of metal
clenching metal, we recognize.

that exhaust, dead-heat steam whistling through
teeth, we recognize. and tectonic

pressure pulsing sinus too. yeah,
we see you, Uma—

our teeth, too, pressing down like
tunguska trees—we see you.

we, too, furnace fire. how tired
those lungs must be pulling in

and in the air, fuming with chernobyl coals.
abiding. and isn’t that ancestral

feminine? keeping kettles to boil, our drums
always feverish? only we isn’t firebrides

no more,
no we some deeper

and unsleeping combustion, and you
looking goddamn Vesuvius, Uma.

Somebody gonna ask about your fissures?
gonna tempt the stone

fury while your throat
fumes?

go ahead and let ’em. these temples
have ashed greater men.

we temples
of righteous red rock, approaching critical mass.
spot inspections

laurinda lind

When the gossips from across town stop in unannounced, we joy in our clutter, our nests of goods clumped like gold. We thrive on our secrets, our mazes that draw us to rites only we understand. Still we laugh nervously or take on the street look of the stricken who are so clean they clatter. If all else fails we hide under beds breathing slow, comforted below the belly of the ship that takes us from the tangled shore night after night, to a silent place where it all lets loose.
We’d lasted 15 minutes before the shushing got too loud
The coloring books were a masterstroke
They parried with whines of too few pencils to color them

I think their best movement was during the viola solo
They squirmed, having to pee and refusing to pee
Being whispered to at highest volume to the bathroom
— and giving perfect pitch to wails of ‘no no no’

The docents were the nicest grandmothers that ever gave
unfollowable advice
While I pulled her away from the rail she clung to
I had somehow turned, ‘please, my dear’ into 3 swear words
This monad
Is windowless.

Think of purity, Think again of
Think your hopes at reading texts as imagined Romance language.
Hermana de mi alma,
Nothing gets easier, redemption is the silent room, and
All of everything is one long throat song.

There are several methods I have seen to air out the place:
1. They ripped the shortest hair from their head and tickled what they approximated was the belly. It took a dozen half hour sessions for three days before they realized that the room has no neurons and cannot respond to touch.
2. They therapied the room. They caressed its wallpaper (out of habit, knowing it did not feel) and tried to coax it from its silence. But the room has no mouth and cannot speak.
3. They bared their teeth like a primordial fear. Ha.
4. They tried to break the walls with their fists, their foreheads, the flat of their foot. They punched and headbutt and kicked until numb and broken. Never forget Newton's Third Law while in the room; never forget the room is an abyss.
5. They cried digging a shallow hole into themselves. It was not an at tempt at freedom but an emptying. It would make no difference, even if it were. Just as the hummingbird's wings are tied to their heartbeat, the room's silence is its existence.

Yet in a dream I have been told experience
Is what you attend to. A rose grows in concrete
As beautiful as concrete. Residue at Sarajevo.

Attend to the garden and your days like classes;
You cannot change the room's mind—
Make it the book of you like John Forbes Nash.

In truth, all this is inspired by a Greek chorus. We bundle and burn and
Let me tell a story, not the truth.
(The roses fade in Sarajevo)
After all this time I have forgotten what was lived.
I feel a dreadnought's shadow overhead.
I feel displacement pressing language into me,
Only to be rendered empty at the pressing back.

If only it were simple as a certain slant of light. I fear
The new age
Wastes its vision on a dimming slant of light.
The concrete must be uprooted.
Let us build a monument to concrete.
Let us recall the tones, one and all.

After all, I have forgotten after all.
But I see you grow confused,
_Hermana de mi Alma,_
As I, underneath the bow,
Bend string to measure out
This room.

Let me try again to be your one-man chorus:

To bind, the Leopard Slug must hang from a sturdy branch. In that moment it is not up or down. Liminal, standing in the doorframe of the room. From afar it could be an oblate cocoon between Alpha and Omega. And when it is all over there will always be an up or down to go, just so. Some stories are just so. Always the story begins with a room of one’s own and sometimes its walls must radiate with _Logos._

If I text a garden wall, will it be received?
Nothing is easier after, after all.
I wait for your screams,
your judgements,
and I feel it emerging upwards
from the depths of the sea,
but there is only the cold quiet noise around me.
Mother tells me how could you
how could you even think
that any man would show you
an obscene act when you are unsexy as hell.
But he did,
mama, and all the silences
of years at the backseat of the car could not deny
why I am beautiful as hell today.
It is so quiet in the parking garage the night my husband passed out. The overhead fluorescent lights paint pale yellow shadows over the rows of cars waiting, like sleeping dogs, for the jingle of keys announcing a driver's return. We walk up the incline of the ramp towards our car—there is a warning, yet we fail to interpret it as a warning. It is the moment before the moment.

"My legs have that heavy feeling. I need to rest a minute," my husband says.

It has happened before. Many times. The doctor ordered tests that revealed nothing. More tests are scheduled for a month later. "Rest and it will pass," was the standing medical advice. We step to the side of the ramp and rest a minute as incoming cars inch past us in search of a parking space.

Our car is parked facing the Eastern wall of the garage, adjacent to the ticket machine. There is a two-foot space between the row of stanchions, which indicate where the wheels of the car rest, and the wall.

Minutes later he stands in front of the blinking and grinding automated ticket machine while it takes its time to spit out the paid parking ticket. Perhaps it's a certain hesitancy as he puts the ticket in his pocket, an awkward step, or simply some intuition that prompts me to say, "Let me drive home."

"OK." He agrees and hands me the parking ticket without the requisite argument. That should have been my second warning. I place my purse in the back seat and open the drivers' door. The windshield frames his first few steps in front of the hood of the car on his journey to the passenger seat. I see him turn—toward the car—toward me—as though reaching for the chrome hood ornament—as though reaching for me—as though about to speak. No words come, only a massive bewilderment contorting his face, as arms flail forward towards the front of the car, while his body begins its long tipping backwards.

"Are you having a heart attack?" I scream. Do I expect an answer? I want him to tell me I'm overreacting. Who else had I asked all the years of marriage to soft peddle a problem, tell me not to worry, tell me everything was ok, tell me this too will pass? You with your corny jokes. Why had I refused to laugh at them? And talk of sports that cluttered the air with diversions I didn't care about, are already gone.

I wordlessly plead with him, with God, to alter this aberration of reality, like the time he willed his knees to bend and bend again, denying the pain in order to traipse with me through the ruins in Greece and all the times his positivity punched holes in a worry that threatened to overwhelm me.

I reach him while he is still falling but I can't stop gravity even as I try to grab his arm. His legs are skewing like a rag doll, his shoulders are propping themselves alongside the concrete wall of the parking garage. For one wild moment I believe he is sitting, that he has broken the fall. Oh joy! Then I hear it, the resounding sound of his skull smashing full force against the brick wall pitching him forward as gravity sends his face onto the concrete floor. I am on the floor with him, my face next to his ear, my hands caressing his shoulders and I am shouting, "I love you, I love you, I love you." I want him to hear me. I want "I love you," to be the last words he hears on this earth. I know they will make him happy. When did I say them last? It is all I can do for him. "I love you, I love you" I can think of nothing more important than knowing one is loved. God knows they are not words I have uttered in recent years with the same intensity as "You forgot to get gas in the car, again."

His eyes are open, a glazed stare. "Can you hear me?" A guttural noise emerges from his mouth, a noise I associate with a stroke. He is trying to reach me. He heard me. At least he heard me. I say it again, "I love you. I'm going to get help. You will be ok."

I don't want to take my hands off his shoulders, his back. We have never had "the talk." As though we are going to live forever. Do other have the talk? Why haven't we talked about death? An afterlife? I want to keep him alive by touching him, but I stand up. The garage is empty. We are alone. Where are the people who gather around an
accident, where are the people with cell phones? I run to retrieve my purse and my phone from the back seat of the car. I push the home button. Circles of numbers appear. I punch in 911. Again and again, I can't connect to an operator. 911 is the only number that exists and it is failing me. I push the home button again. Numbers flashes in front of me. I don't remember the code to unlock my phone; I don't remember if there is an emergency access button. I keep trying to punch in 911 and the numbers keep flashing, a lottery of numbers and I am caught in the loop going nowhere.

Later I will remember those precious seconds when I ran to retrieve my phone. The warm stream of pee trickling down the inside of my thighs, squeezing my legs together with the realization that I was wetting myself.

I scream, “Help me, help me, somebody help me, please somebody help me.” I stand up. Somehow I know I must stand to be seen even though I belong on the floor with him.

Someone is running down the stairs from the second floor of the parking deck. Later he will tell me his name is Adam. We both bend down over my husband. His eyes are closed now. I start all over, “I love you, I love you.” I cradle my husband’s head, placing my hand between his skull and the wall. There is blood. There is so much blood. Adam calls 911. He follows the operator’s instructions. Adam asks my husband’s name. “Bob, it’s Bob,” I answer. And Adam is shouting “Bob, Bob, come on, talk to us.” and I am screaming “Bob, Bob, open your eyes,” then I watch as Adam places his hand in front of my husband’s mouth and I hear him tell the operator, “Yes, I can feel breath,” and for that moment I know my husband is still alive.

In some alchemy of wonder, you open your eyes—gurr—gurr—an awful pitiful sound flooding me with gratitude. Oh, you are a bull, I think as I embrace his still wide shoulders.

A stubborn bull who always believed in a good ending, whether it was coating into a gas station just in time to avoid sputtering to a dead halt on the road or talking me through a night of high fevers when one of the children was sick. Now after all these years I am reveling in his stubbornness, his bull nature. He is not giving up. He is willing himself back. I’ve got to remember to tell you this.

I hear sirens approaching. Police, ambulance, medical people are permeating the air with a false calm. Someone says, “You have to leave him so we can work.” Then “Get the stretcher. Don’t move his neck.” But I have already moved his neck when I picked up his head. Did I break his neck? Four or five policemen and women surround me with their bodies. There are questions. I try to break away and return to him but they are herding me. I stand on my toes; shout over the shoulders of my shepherds, “I’m right here. Can you hear me? There is no response. I give someone a list of his medication and then someone says, “He could bleed out. We need to get him to a trauma center.”

Now after all these years I am reveling in his stubbornness, his bull nature.

I can hear someone asking questions. “What’s your name?” Did I hear you answer, or did I imagine it? “Where do you live? When is your birthday? What’s today’s date?” Are you kidding me, I have not passed out or smashed my head on a brick wall and I couldn’t tell you today’s date if I had a calendar in front of me. Amazed, I hear the medic say, “Good Bob, you’re right. It’s Wednesday September 28th. Let’s get him in the ambulance.”

Adam comes to me. His clear scrubbed face earnest. A soft brown leather bag is slung over his shoulder. The motor is purring as I climb in and buckle the seat belt. Within two minutes the driver gets a signal from the trauma center. They are ready for us. He turns on the siren and we are speeding in and out of traffic on our way to the hospital.

The back of the ambulance is bright, lit up like daylight. I can’t see my husband, only hear the EMT workers asking the same questions again and again. They are trying to keep him conscious while they address his condition. “What’s your name? Your address? Your date of birth?” I can hear muffled responses. But then an odd response. It doesn’t seem to connect to the question. “Are you going to send me a card?” It doesn’t make sense. My heart drops. The
medic's voice shows alarm.

“What? What was that Bob? What did you say?” I hear my husband repeat his offbeat answer. Suddenly, I get it. I know what’s going on. You can’t be married all these years and not know, “He’s making a joke,” I shout into the back of the ambulance, “He thinks he’s funny, he’s referring to the question about his date of birth. He wants to know if you are going to send him a card.”

“Wha? Oh, now I get it” one of the medics says, obviously relieved. We all chuckle in unison, even the driver. He’s trying to entertain them with a corny joke. That’s what he does, and it aggravates me no end, but not tonight. Keep it up. Tell all the jokes you want. I’m even laughing. Just stay alive, you bull, and I promise I will always laugh at your corny, ridiculous jokes.

Later that week, as I sit alongside him in the hospital room, he tells me he has one memory of the whole incident. He doesn’t remember passing out, or hitting his head, or trying to speak, or my screams for help, or Adam, or the police, or the bandage on his head, the IV line, the stretcher, the ambulance. The only thing he remembers is hearing me say, “I love you.”
I don’t actually remember
the last time
I saw Billy Stanfield
because I was very young
and have since lived and
made up entire histories,
but the time I like to think
was the last time
I saw him alive
was that time under the tree
at Central School,
his nearly white hair ablaze
with noon sun, surrounded
by little girls, not because he was
the cutest, the tallest or the fastest,
but because he was the nicest,
and that was the innocent time
before us girls began to ignore boys
who were nice.

He was wearing a new T-shirt
with a puffy pizza decal
and asking us to scratch
the circles and sniff.
I remember first the scent
of laundry and then the surprise
of pepperoni, and what it felt like
to have my little nose pressed
against his birdlike chest,
how I had maybe wanted to hug
or kiss him on the cheek.

Over the years I thought
about stealing away to the dim
microfiche room at the library,
to scroll through every local paper
from 1975 until I found the one
I imagined read:

two small children die in a house fire,

I know there was an attic
and, of course, matches.
Billy and his little sister,
not yet four, left alone
maybe 10 minutes,
maybe hours.
A funeral I hadn’t been allowed to attend.

We held our own at the edge
of the school’s woods,
six little girls gripping
pictures of Billy drawn
with crayons and big, red
pencils that were easier
for small hands to grip.
Billy with a lopsided head,
a giant grin, his pizza shirt,
surrounded by flowers and birds.

We buried them
in the ground the way
we’d heard they did
with real people,
held hands and promised
to love him forever.
We went home.
Dinners made,
dogs brought in,
teeth brushed,
prayers said before bed

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,
if I should die before I wake…
spilling paint

katarina boudreaux

It was a quarter for the carnival striped bag of fish chow, and you placed each coin in the slot like tokens of grief.

The water below us swirled in orange and saffron, and I pointed out a flash of white as I sprinkled food over the writhing masses in delight - but you threw your handful out all at once, ready to return to the comfort of conditioned air.

I don't remember the rest of the day, just your hand outstretched and empty, colors disappearing beneath us, the moment cut short and your lips too thin for the fullness of your face, my mouth wordless for once, the clean air crisp between us.
Eyeless statue, my blind muse stumbles to the bathroom at three in the morning to pretend to brush her teeth.

I follow her there, thinking of an absence of words. A few nights ago, she whispered a beautiful stanza in my ear. Just one.

It was gone by morning, erased with all memories of what it was like to fail yesterday, leaving just a faint burning sensation like some recollections do.

I wave my hand in her direction, but I’m starting to believe she may not even know I’m the room anymore.
Cameras panned across the clean city square. In his room, I curled beneath the folds of the blanket, reached for his hand, held it in my lap. The square lay vacant not merely of citizens; there was no litter, no filth, no vendors, no tourists. Sterile. Where were all the people who lived so tightly packed in such little land? He slipped his hand from mine, slipped it around my shoulder. As the documentary delved into North Korea’s controlled media, he pulled the blanket closer, discussed the power dictators had; what they could do beneath the facade of perfection, their idyllic portraits painted with the blood beneath their skin. His hand played across my collarbone; his eyes sparked curiosity. As quick as his brain could be, his hand was faster. Instinct suggested I discard the blanket, but something kept me chilled to the bone, and I never moved.

One day, when you’re older, you’ll realize it was you all along. One day you’ll realize you created all this drama.

We walked along the dirty streets, avoided the gaze of the strangers who smoked joints on their lawns. My arms were crossed, his constantly moving. Stories and songs spilled out of his mouth; my ears drowned in the onslaught of words. I can’t honestly say I stopped listening, but four blocks ago there was some semblance of ‘us’ and now ‘he’ was all there was, and that’s when his words stopped actually saying things. Perhaps we’d just walked into the bad side of town, perhaps I was more scared than I’d thought, but, then again, my picture was his screen saver as if that somehow labeled me as his. He walked a little in front of me, but he kept losing his bearings, and his stories trailed off when he found another to start on. Maybe he’d say we just window-shopped, watched the sunset, exchanged gifts as a farewell… anything to rewrite the worst first date of my life.

You want me to talk? You want my words? I watched you move to the beat… Eye contact with you was like water in California, something I would have paid exuberantly to get just a taste of. If I could have stood close enough, you’d be on me, hip to hip. How can I ever forget that?

Oh, is that all he’s done? Thank god; I thought he’d actually hurt you.

I woke up disillusioned. Can’t say how it happened, just woke up, and knew. I woke up a lot of times that day; each time I just pulled myself further beneath the duvet, hiding behind a suffocating facade of sickness and trying to find clear air to breathe. I’d been fine the day before; they all wondered where I could have caught this sickness. They brought me things to drink and asked why I never got out of bed. “Here, he’s downstairs, you can just lie down there and watch movies till you feel better.” What had changed? I didn’t know. I only knew that if I saw him, I wouldn’t be able to breathe. Even now, I could feel his hands beneath the blanket, and chills shook my skin. So I lay beneath the confines of a comforter, and feverishly slept the fear away.

I don’t really have anything to say… I just wait till you’re done talking so I can kiss you. It echoed in my mind for hours afterward… the last thing he said before he got his way. Maybe it was a reasonable exchange; I got to talk, he got to touch. It felt more like a war, though. My mind countered his hands, going everywhere. I talked more and more, and he touched more. Nothing was wrong, so no one knew, but my skin was a battlefield, and the front inched ahead every chance it could.

You might be struggling with
something from long before him. I hope you seriously consider seeking out help before you end up hurting yourself even more next time.

I lay in his arms, the neglected fire dying at our feet. We looked at everything but each other. He told me it wasn't like he'd expected. My skin felt cold. I wasn't like him, he said; I was 'rough' and I'd 'done this before.' After a pause, his hands slipped back into my hair. He said I could teach him, that he liked the roughness more than the gentleness. I was just thankful the fire died so that he couldn't see my face. How could I know his I love you was nothing more than a test run? I knew better than to believe him, but I did because I wanted to. Teach me, he whispered, but all I wanted was to forget.

Were you ever this close to the others? Did any of them make you feel like this?
How could you expect me to know if you never told me anything was wrong?
Tell someone next time before you end up hurting yourself even more next time.

Next time.

I needed to stop, to think. Was it all my fault, after all? Because I didn't admit anything was wrong? Everyone knew us and what we did, and they thought it was fine. Why wasn't it fine with me? I could have stopped this before it got here, but I didn't. Constantly reliving tainted memories, accusations and defenses echoing through my mind, I realized there was only one thing worse than having to start all over again;

"How is this relationship my choice if it makes me lose my voice?"
The obscenities of my life stick
in my throat like glue, choking
me blind. I have lost my ability to hear
the sound of my own sanity. I have become
a cacophony of regret, bottled up
inside a soundproof booth. I am a 33 being
played at the speed of a 45, out of sync.
I cannot find my groove, only the drag
of that damned needle that has taken my voice,
turned it into something less than background
noise.
I try to reach you by calling you “honey” because I feel responsible for your decay. We are a select club of two planning the end of the world in steps like jigsaw pieces crawling toward a perfectly evil tableau montage picture at the end.

I put your soft flesh in my mouth, coax you to rapture make you a sandwich. Legs, fingers break off who to fuck, who to eat. Cattle walk down the hall oblivious to this religious movement we’ve started in secret, you tell me you feel the weight of Armageddon in the grooves in the floor, and every time the record needle skips.

Pieces of God keep getting stuck in my hair I keep trying to reach you through the grooves in the floor wear a short skirt at lunch. There are too many mental checklists to make, too many things to remember—angels snap outside the window bay like chained dogs time is running out.
I know I am the center of a dying planet.
You left the island on my lower back
deserted.
Today my own
carnivore flagpole
eats at me from the inside.
The carousel begins.
It spins around
red orbits on fire.
I know I am the center of a dying planet.
My headband kisses the ground,
while I imagine my scrotum exploding.
The walls of my body wrapped with small jelly beans,
our misfortune rejoicing.
They urge me to this pressing urgency.
Convulsed,
out of ordinary words.