

# Between Two Silences

## *voice in writing*

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Some time ago I was asked about the year my voice broke through. I am still not so sure about “the year” part because it seems to me that a Voice is always breaking through. But a voice does break through, and what it breaks through is the writer. In the process, the struggle defines both the Voice and the writer. In an interview in the *Paris Review*, the poet Anne Sexton said, “The poetry is often more advanced, in terms of my unconscious, than I am.” The same can be said of a Voice. I often feel my poems are larger than I am and the characters are more courageous. My work is dominated by tough, intelligent women who won’t take shit from anyone, much less a man. I am beginning to think that “finding your Voice” means getting used to being bossed around.

Looking at it another way, I think finding your Voice means choosing your angels. The word “angel” comes from the Greek *angelos*, or messenger. My own angels, Margaret, Annie, Mad Anne, and more recently street photographer Vivian Maier, arrive with messages from the self. They have a woman’s clear sense of men, and an ironic, critical “take” on the world. Being women, they get past the perceptions of men. But even when they are talking about themselves, they are indirectly talking about what the world of men is and is not, and therefore, about me.

I love these characters but eventually I began to write from a Voice closer to my own. It is hard sledding writing from the self when our society seems bent on writing off entire classes. Seniors are told they have used up their quota of services and should make way for the young whose lives are more valuable. Youth are told they can’t read, can’t write, and there are no jobs for them. In the vernacular of adults with day jobs, youth are no longer the hope of tomorrow but a problem to be solved. And because they have been reminded of their marginality so often, Youth, and many others believe it. They have been shut out of today and shut out of tomorrow.

John Ciardi said a poem is “a countermotion across a silence.” That is, of course, one level of silence. But there is another kind as well. Consider the hole in Mental Health, or the weight beneath the word, Reconciliation. On the list of such words, the marginalized Voice of the writer is a special case of the marginalization of all Voices. As a poet living in the world, I am caught between two silences, the intimate one Ciardi spoke of and that other one—the Big Silence. This is where I am positioned. It is where my Voice is now.

Where does the Voice come from? There is no simple answer. A writer has many Voices that break through at different times. Samuel Johnson said, “What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure.” The fact is no real writer writes without effort. Nevertheless,

work which comes quickly often stands up to work that has been slaved over, cussed at, and made to sleep downstairs with the dog. The Voice, it seems, is already there waiting for the writer to step into it.

I tend to write long poems. *Daniel*, my first collection, is composed entirely of characters speaking directly of their experience as they are living it. They invent their own vernacular to fit the moment. Their purpose is not poetry, their purpose is to speak. The poetry comes from the truth they have faced, or failed to face, and from the need to be heard.

Having the craft makes finding your Voice easier, but not easy. Craft is not Voice, and the problem remains of getting beneath the surface of things. What really counts is boldness. As Anne Sexton said, "Fuck structure and grab your characters by the time balls. Each of us sits in our time: we're born, live and die."

She is saying get into their lives, your life, and the poetry will be there.

Robert Bly said that rapid association or the "leaping" in poetry is itself content and has a meaning that goes beyond language. I think of Voice in this way. Voice *is* content: an impulse which exists even with the words stripped away.

An aspect of Voice I greatly admire in any kind of writing is the impression of an individual imagination moving the work along in an almost physical way: this and the sense the writer is discovering something that was not known until the moment it was written, a moment of revelation, or a flood of revelation. All this speaks not of technique, but of the deep learning which is necessary for good writing. By deep learning I mean those things which are deeply true, knowledge the writer has to earn.

In a scene many will know, Robert Currie, describes a visit with his father in his poem, "Evening at Extendicare." The local band begins to play the old time tunes that still have a resonance in such places. The women have already begun to dance together, then

...One wheelchair  
is rolled in before the band, turning slowly with the tune.  
My father's fingers drumming leather arms,  
he leans toward me. "We could do that," he says.

I stand, feel people watching me,  
feel a blush crawl above my collar, shrug,  
and wheel him forward, step awkwardly behind,  
and we enter the cluster of dancers,  
my cheeks flaming. "Ain't we got fun?"

Currie's unadorned poem takes its time in the most ordinary language. It is about fathers and their sons, conflicted intimacy, what each these men are here let go of, and its residue in the poet. The images are subdued. The momentum depends entirely on our belief in

the existential situation, the tone and the confidence of Currie's natural diction. In a poem that could easily lapse into sentimentality, we trust the Voice, the writer and what he has given us.

One can hardly talk about Voice without bringing up Tim Lilburn, his twelve books of poems and essays, his singular language and the vision it comes from. In *Names of God*, there is a poem, "The horses are Dying, Scotland 1920," where horses stand before the North Sea:

The visions sing: plunge in, plunge  
in, manes flying like spume.  
Plunge in you whom disease  
has driven to dream passionately  
of slaughter.

Tim is a vision-seeker, and this is how he seems to approach Voice, "...plunge in, plunge in." Like Jacob at the river, Lilburn has wrestled all night and want to know that angel's name. "Let me go, for day is breaking," says the angel in Genesis. "I will not let you go until you bless me," replies Jacob, *choosing* his angel.

What is a Voice? A Voice is someone speaking, but maybe not. It is all definition through evasion. It may not be possible to define for as Rilke said, "What is extraordinary and eternal does not want to be bent by us..."

Many are silenced these days by what is outside us and in us. The visionless future is everywhere. Our heritage of struggle has been trivialized and is always referred to as part of our nostalgic past. Look at the news: we are struggling now. We try to imagine a future but who is there to proclaim it: who we are, what we say is valuable, and the choices that go with it. This kind of writing is an act of resistance. The purpose of our Voice is to make us strong and to prepare us for our work, for as Antonio Machado wrote:

Mankind owns four things  
that are no good at sea.  
Anchor, rudder, oars,  
and the fear of going down.