

To Pledge Again: Notes On Silence and Responding

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Half a decade after my ex from college and I had broken up, in my mid-twenties, I messaged him to let him know he'd be in an essay of mine, to be published soon. He replied, the first time he'd responded to me in four years. I hadn't sent much in that time—texts that I was thinking of him, an inside joke or a dream he was in, the kind of message that *I* would've replied to but that also didn't make it clear the *feeling* behind my being in touch. The feeling was: I will perish of pain if you don't respond to this. His silence, or rather the imbalance of communication, made my skin burn all over my chest and the muscles behind my ears clench. This happened regardless of how innocuous what I'd sent him was. I'd read back over it again and again, trying to cool the shame of having contacted him at all.

In his reply to my message about the essay though, he was friendly, casual. He said he was excited to hear from me, that he'd been thinking of me. We should meet up the next time we were in the same city, he suggested.

We had only dated on and off for not-quite-two years in college, but it was the most significant romantic relationship I'd had at that time. When it ended, we'd told each other how much we loved each other and agreed that we both imagined being together again, for a significant part of our lives, when we were older and readier. This was the most we could manage to promise at the time. I believed we would eventually be life partners, perhaps married. Having written about him for years, I'm tired of describing him—his slight scoliosis, his goofy smile and sharp chin, his imperfect teeth and short brown hair and the way he briefly touched his face before doing something silly or mischievous.

A few months after his invitation, I visited Los Angeles, where he lived, from San Francisco, where I lived. I remember packing for that trip, how imbued with meaning the clothing I put in my suitcase felt, though I no longer remember the exact items I chose. He was newly single; I was definitely single. I wanted to be in another relationship, longed for and obsessed over it. I'd dated people for a few months at a time, but nothing

serious since we'd broken up.

We sat outside at a bar, our first time seeing each other in years. There were twinkle lights and a glass of wine each. Then we walked through Griffith Park to a hill with a view of the city. We ate greasy breakfast foods in a diner after midnight, talked in a car outside his apartment. Finally, we went inside, which I hadn't wanted to do but I really had to pee and it was after 2am. He was alive, a real person, and also he said he'd been thinking about me for the last four years, the way he'd promised he would when we broke up, but I had not believed him, although I'd been thinking of him too.

We looked about the same as when we'd dated, except I was probably fifteen pounds heavier; he worked out more and had a deeper crease between his eyebrows. He said he was still addicted to relationships. Maybe I was too. "You're like enlightened," he'd told me in the diner, under the fluorescent lights, and I was scared he didn't understand me anymore, because I was definitely not enlightened. Later, in the car, he took the statement back, and I was glad to be seen more clearly.

It was completely inevitable and also the most surprising day in half a decade, when I woke up in his bed the next morning. We kissed goodbye a few hours later near his car; he had to go to work. I wasn't wearing shoes. The concrete burned the soles of my feet. It felt like the start of something important. I didn't see him again for years.

re spondere. Originally Latin—again to pledge. The word's usage began a sharp up and to the right curve in the early sixties, like a start-up in hypergrowth, continuing through to the late eighties when I was born. It plateaued around the early 2000s, around the time I began, in middle school in the suburbs of Silicon Valley, being obsessed with my responses—in letters, IMs, emails, voicemails on my private landline and then cell phone.

I have believed I should always be capable of responding, of pledging again. Owed responses are stored in my body, in tightened shoulder muscles and the sides of my sore neck.

At one point, I thought this essay would cover the way different computers talk to one another through electric signals, as a metaphor. I asked for help understanding this process from a software engineer I'm close friends with, and perhaps it is relevant to mention that I have long been surrounded by software engineers, mostly but not only men, and those who work closely with them. People who want problems to be definable and solvable.

As I grappled with silence and responding, years passed: my late twenties. I got tired of being so constantly available for other people, and of sensing into an absence looking for some kind of love.

I've long had friends like my ex, who understand silence. They've applied it liberally, disappearing from contact for days or weeks at a time. When I was

younger, I often called them selfish and infuriating. Mostly, I secretly wanted to become them. *Teach me your ways*, I wanted to tell them, when I wasn't pleading: *Just call me back when you get a chance, okay?*

When I was seventeen, someone I loved, also seventeen, jumped from a bridge and died. He didn't give me warning, but he hadn't responded to my last email, which I took as a missed sign once he was gone. I learned then what a true, forever silence was and lived in terror of them. I reread my last response to him on a loop, critiquing it, wondering where I'd gone wrong in letting him know he was loved.

When my college boyfriend and I first broke up, I replayed his imagined death constantly in my mind, for years, the same way I replayed an image of the real death of my friend, which I hadn't seen. If someone I cared about hadn't texted to say they'd arrived home safely, I couldn't sleep well through the night. For a decade, I fell asleep worrying about extreme disasters—the roof caving in, hearts stopping in the night, nuclear bombs. I woke up wondering who had died while I'd been sleeping.

It's true that every time, and this happened many times throughout our non-relationship, I *asked* my ex not to speak to me so I could get over him, and he took me seriously and complied, even when I broke my own rules and contacted him, which I almost always did. In this way his silence could be interpreted as a kind of practical love for me. He was honoring my past self's request. It wasn't unusual for me to feel confused about the distinction between cruelty or care. When I contacted my ex, I was convinced that I was being given clear signs to break the silence, through dreams or snippets of conversation I overheard. Sometimes, this was confirmed to be real; once, after not speaking in months I reached out to him the same day he was on his way to visit his very ill grandpa.

My excuse for breaking my rules: he was the first person to love me in that particular way that changes what love means from that point forward. To care to understand me, or try to at least. But I'm tired of assigning so much meaning to that relationship, which was in most ways unreal, untested—we never worked full-time jobs at the same time, never traveled for a week or two together, never spent even a month sharing the same room. Yet for years I couldn't stop writing, or thinking about him.

That night we first saw each other again, after we'd gone into the apartment so I could pee, but a few hours before we would sleep together, my ex lay on his couch and I sat next to him, and I laughed and laughed. "What?" he said.

I felt his heart beating under my flat hand, and it was like magic to me that he had stayed alive inside of all that silence we made. I said, "This is all just still here."

"I know," he said, his voice as reverent as my insides felt.

Of course, in asking my ex to stop speaking to me all those times, I've been recreating the silence, the wake of my friend's jump off the bridge. I've been the one sobbing, digging my fingers into my eye sockets, and I'm the one who asked for it. This is not unusual.

Maybe if I was a son and brother, white and Christian, instead of a Jewish daughter and only child, I would know how not to answer, and I would not be held responsible for answering, or for taking care of anyone. Maybe I would be lonely.

I do know sons who say they want to get better about keeping in touch, and daughters who say they are trying to call their parents less, only once a week instead of once a day, or once every two weeks instead of every Sunday. Daughters who say they need space.

Sometimes I can't tell if I'm no longer friends with men I thought were my friends, or if I've just stopped calling and texting them and this is what the friendship looks like when I do that. If, to them, we're still friends.

I have not confronted directly when there is too much silence. I have not wanted to seem, or be, so affected by other people. In my texts, I tried to appear chill. I've been trying to be a particular kind of woman—white, less Jewish, and Californian. Not to be out of control, the woman or girl who cares more than is appropriate to the situation. Who sends multiple texts in a row, some of them containing visible emotion, for instance anger.

I would still like to include a lot of science in this essay so that you know these ideas are substantiated; I would like to not seem crazy or irrational. That is why earlier I wrote "my late twenties" instead of "my Saturn return," so you will know I care about biological age and the Gregorian calendar.

I do not write about energy chords and the way I can feel people tugging on them when they're thinking of me or projecting onto me or wanting something from me or worrying about me or just having a hard time. I want to be taken seriously and of course there is the old fear: I do not want to be burned at the stake. So I cannot write this essay until I understand quantum physics well enough to use it to explain to you that energetic bonds are real and that I can influence the energy fields between me and another person, across hundreds or thousands of miles, across lifetimes because time is actually a construct, all folded onto itself, occurring simultaneously, which I will also explain to you using science, when I have finally learned enough and am ready to write this essay.

But I am bored by having to prove my thoughts using double-blind studies and the peer reviewed words of white men; I am bored by trying not to be that girl and so not understanding my own powers: sensitivity as a superpower rather than (only) a liability, an idea first given to me by one of those former software engineer friends, actually. Eventually, I thought, I would

transmute my frustration, anger, and despair in the face of all this silence—I would one day not mind as much, or stop being drawn to people who could be silent in this way, but it turned out: I just got bored. I am bored by pretending I don't have feelings, that I'm not affected when someone ignores me or communicates in the way of a seven-year-old or fourteen-year-old boy, although he is a grown man in his thirties.

Sometimes I've worried power is all I'm looking for in love relationships, or at least all I know how to look for. I cannot remember a time before I knew that silence could be wielded, and how sharp it could feel.

There is exquisite power in silence as punishment, and also when used as a shield against anger. Sometimes silence is the only good option. For instance, it is much harder to be berated if one temporarily doesn't exist.

Silence wielded means you have not been forgiven yet. And death is the ultimate silence.

A rule I've learned about not answering, from my ex, and others: don't make exceptions. If you are cutting someone out, cut them out completely.

Maybe I'm not writing about silence. Maybe I'm writing about fear.

Maybe I should write about the apology letter I found recently when packing up my room, a note written to a former friend. I'd stopped speaking to him after I'd come to consciousness to his hand inside me, when we were both drunk in college. Fresh from a blackout, I didn't know how I'd gotten into his bed. I said no until I found enough movement in my arms to push him off of me and into the wall. Then, mercifully, he stopped and went to sleep on the couch. We never talked about it. I felt guilty about not speaking to him for years. Holding the letter in my hands for one last time, I was so glad I never sent that note apologizing to him for the silence.

There's a friend I used to Skype in the mornings and evenings when we were running a feminist workshop together and depending on each other to get through our early twenties—each of us working at nonprofits, not sleeping enough, stressing about every little thing more than it probably deserved. At a certain point during or just after our codependent, completely intertwined friendship, she stopped responding to me. Not *only* me, I heard from mutual friends, but still, it stung. I wanted to be special, and of course I was worried she'd die inside the silence. So I was angry and sad and plenty of other feelings but also it was familiar: now she was just like my ex-boyfriends.

Finally, years later, we saw each other in the desert and she apologized. I

told her I accepted her apology and that I forgave her. Then a few days later I told her actually, though it was hard to admit, I was grateful for her example during that time, though it'd hurt, because I'd needed it. That her withdrawal was a model for me later on when I needed to withdraw and be quiet, and when I hurt people's feelings by withdrawing.

Finally, one day it wasn't a lie to say my ex's silence didn't fuck me up the way it used to. His silence didn't make me want to scratch my arms until they bled, rip up blank paper and stuff it into my mouth, just to have something to do.

Of course part of the story, and I don't like saying this part, is that hours after one of those times I asked him to stop speaking to me, I went on a first date, although we didn't call it that at the time, with someone else. So from an ecological perspective, my ex's silence was good, it allowed in that new relationship.

It took more than a decade since our breakup to write that I do not see us together in the future and to mean it, and give no exceptions to that. To not feel the urge to contact him. I have chewed too long on this silence thing; it tastes like gum that's lost its flavor and my jaw is tired.

I thought there were relational doors and you could open or close them, but it turns out there are ropes and you can keep them or cut them, or perhaps they are cut for you by beings invisible. Now, the rope between my ex and I is cut and so it doesn't matter what I say or don't say or what he says or doesn't say.

I used to wonder if I was unwell because I was thinking of him so often, but now, knowing more about how these things work, I wouldn't be surprised if nearly every time, he was thinking about me too, wanting, perhaps not consciously, to get my attention using only our energetic tether. How often I text a friend who says, "I've been thinking of you so soooo much the last few days!"

"I know," I say, and I am happy. "I got your braintext."

I know my words do not keep him, or anyone else, alive. My love does not keep him, or anyone else, alive.

I've been practicing, and I do know a little more about silence now, my silence often the product of grief and anger, but I am not an expert non-responder. I'm still learning; I feel guilty; I think about it too much; I am not chill. I keep practicing, trying to know when saying nothing is a better response. Maybe I'll never learn. Some days, I don't even want to.



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