

Silence

a very short story by
James Oswald

A chorus of hammers, coruscating sound echoing around the city. Dimly, like the threat of a thunderstorm far off, the noise of the city murmurs its traffic-choked litany. Occasional screeches remind me of simpler prehistoric times. Somewhere a radio plays to itself. Radio One FM, the station of the nation, brings you another 31 days in may. Images of godhood, time travel and predestination flirt with my subconscious. Why are these hammers being wielded. What foul purpose requires their constant raucous attention?

Somewhere in this city a pack of large happy Labradors are sitting on a wooden stage and watching a particularly amusing mime act. A team of Spanish dancers, caught in a time warp, dance the slow pirouette. Their castanets click with a monotonous regularity. An army of blind men, dogless, their only weapons white sticks, march to a haphazard tune. A freak effect of the weather amplifies their approach and suppresses their moans.

I am asleep, drifting through the unreal lands of my imagination. In my tent all is dry but overhead the oak of life drips its collected wisdom, splash, splash, bang, bang.

Silence returns to the city. Or is it its first visit? Creeping quiet shuffles up the street, enveloping people in its silken noiselessness. It approaches me, borne on a wave of sound. Cacophony breaks into the room, thrashing around like the proverbial storm in the teacup of my mind. Next doors television, far too loud to be watched from that room; learner motorcycles vying with each other down the high street. Roller skating in a buffalo herd (oh you can't). One million watts of music power. All the sound ever made trying desperately to be heard over the din.

Silence. A lack of noise that Terry Pratchett would probably describe as being the other side of sound. I can't even hear my heartbeat. Am I dead?

I shout myself hoarse. No sound. I feed it a pony nut but it just soothes itself away.

I can't be dead because I am still in the kitchen. The same noteboard, still wearing its winter coat, hangs on the wall alongside the Autocar and Motor calendar. Purloined beer-bottle labels curl and peel off a cupboard door. Another calendar, another car; the female noteboard, similarly confused about the weather and seasons, hangs barren. Parted from her love by the vast span of the kitchen table she dreams of children and post-it notes. Alan the black teddy bear, badged and Bottom scrawled across his middle dolefully surveys the scene. His bow tie has spots.

No eyes in the back of my head I cannot see the Scottish Farmer year planner. Hell would be poor punishment without it so I am sure it's still there.

If there had to be a theme for this place it would be bottles. Large wine bottles form up on the counter ready to do battle for their Generals the Demijohns. Small infantry beer bottles have had their morning wash and now laze about in the

sunshine, drying, resting and preparing for the inevitable fill of battle. Veterans of earlier campaigns proudly wear their metal caps and sport their medals, Old Nematode Ale, Ginger Beer, Boots Strong Ale and Wheat Beer the different battles now won. Down on the floor, confined to their winebox prison the conscientious objectors await inevitable doom at the hands of the bottle bank.

A quiet explosion. Far away, small but as distinct in the silence as a big bang in the void of nothing. The first small seed of chaos in a universe of perfect order and slowly, piece by piece, the sound returns.

First the heart, clumping its oversize wellingtons in the peatbog of my chest. Next breath, least of the five winds but most often invoked. The turn of a key in the lock, opening of a door. Footsteps across the hall herald the end of the enforced silence. The kitchen door swings open and with it the noise of the city returns. The radio squeals into life, cars roar their defiance to reason and the hammers return to torment me with their questions.

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