

PART ONE

FEAR

BERKELEY

I WAS STAYING IN ONE of the largest student cooperatives in North America, as an exchange student, when I first discovered Oppen. It was a large wooden house in the Berkeley Hills, where the air smelt of eucalyptus and weed. Students performed the building maintenance, cooking and cleaning in exchange for subsidised rent – and unbeknown to me, it was famous across campus as a party house. They once held a rave where they gave out Ecstasy tablets from a biscuit tin at the door, and spent canisters of nitrous oxide, or laughing gas, routinely littered the basketball court. Students rose on Ritalin, to steady their minds for midterms, and then sank down with weed for the weekend. The house was renovated, and refocused around academic endeavour a few years after I left, after a student died of an overdose.

The fact the house was maintained by the residents meant it always felt dark – light bulbs weren't changed and the windows rarely cleaned. The walls were covered with murals: a cow's face eyed you in the main hall, and my room was adorned with a huge wave, the nauseous swell rising above my head.

I didn't feel at home in Berkeley. And yet I never said anything. I never tried to change accommodation, or tell anyone that things weren't right. The cooperative was arranged around a courtyard, peppered with broken bottles. After a party the residents would throw the empty bottles at the wall, and I would lie in bed, listening to the glass breaking on the basketball court below. This was the year that The Facebook arrived in Berkeley and I spent hours looking at the online profiles of students in neighbouring rooms. I was out of place: I didn't get high, and I mislabelled the universe, calling cilantro 'coriander', and Band-Aids 'plasters'.

It was a time when nothing worked. Language, in particular, was broken. I remember trying to explain the peculiarly British idea that you 'can't be bothered' to write an essay to my roommate, one evening.

'Do you mean you don't want to?' she said.

'No, I *want* to, I just can't be bothered,' I replied.

'So you *can't* do it?'

'No, it's not that I can't do it. I *can* do it, and I *want* to do it – I just can't be bothered.'

But my words didn't mean anything. In a world where your parents have been saving for college since before you were born, and where undergrad is just the first rung on a decade of Grad School, Law School, Med School, Any School to prepare you for the world – the idea of not being 'bothered' with work was anathema. Even the drug-taking often seemed to me to be pushed to the level of absurdity: there was no such thing as a quiet pint on a Tuesday. You were sleeping in the library during the week,

and then getting out of your mind at the weekend. I remember the first time I saw someone balling a sleeping bag into their rucksack in the stacks of the central library, I laughed. I couldn't imagine living at that level of intensity. And yet the covert sleeping bag somehow made sense of the speed, ketamine, cocaine. That was the pattern of life.

Into this came Oppen. I was lonely, and frustrated. Something about his brilliant, bright directness made sense to me. He was not trying to be clever – just saying things as they were. I was introduced to him as part of a course on Objectivist poetry. His philosophy was that poetry should always be 'sincere', and that the poem is a reflection that 'there is a moment, an actual time, when you believe something to be true'.¹ The word 'objectivist' refers to the fact that the poets saw the poem itself as an object, or artefact, which helped to explain and bear witness to real things in the world.² His work was taught alongside the abstruse and difficult poetry of Louis Zukofsky – and Oppen was a breath of fresh air. One of the first poems I read was about deer. It is called 'Psalm', and begins:

In the small beauty of the forest
The wild deer bedding down –
That they are there!³

As I read I could see the deer in the beech woods by the house I grew up in. The little muntjac who would dart out of sight, with a rustle of leaves, so that there was a sense of the miraculous, on the rare occasions that one stopped in your

path. I understood his reverence for the world. But more than that the poem seemed to speak of a respect for language too. In the final stanza Oppen turns from the deer to the words themselves; ‘The small nouns / Crying faith’.

In interviews and essays he would return to this poem, and explain that in this final verse he was simply saying that language mattered, because it referred to something real in the world. He was in awe not only of the deer, but of the words themselves, the ‘small nouns’ that pointed to the objects in the world and made them real: the ‘wild deer’ with their ‘alien small teeth’.⁴

In my homesick funk, I had almost lost sight of this reverence for both the world and words. I was falling out of sync with life around me – failing to make friends and building my days around late-night Skype calls back to the UK. And so I began to hold onto Oppen in this parallel universe where language didn’t work, and I couldn’t connect with people. I held onto his faith in humanity. His most famous poem is called ‘Of Being Numerous’. It was part of a collection that won the Pulitzer Prize in 1968. In it he seems to be trying to reconcile the paradox of being at once part of humanity and existentially alone:

Obsessed, bewildered

By the shipwreck

Of the singular

We have chosen the meaning

Of being numerous.⁵

The poem is full of images of the push and pull of isolation and community. It is packed with images of urban living, with people crushed cheek by jowl, 'Pressed, pressed on each other'. And yet, it also depicts a city of missed connections, of thresholds, doorways, 'a world of stoops', of walls and windows – the things that come between us. But the poet is not isolated, or cut off from other people by the city. Rather, he is bound by human connections that run to the bone – the ties you wish you could break, for he says:

I cannot even now
 Altogether disengage myself
 From those men⁶

The paradox of being both desperately alone in the middle of the city, and also unable to shake the voices of others, made sense to me. It resonated with those days of glancing at the still-new Facebook, and the loneliness of cooperative living – where memories of home were more real than my neighbours' faces. The only other place I have really experienced that kind of loneliness was during my first few years of boarding school. It was a place where you were always watched, but rarely seen. I remember waking up and locking eyes with another girl across the dormitory, and the strange sadness of entering each other's consciousness before we were quite awake.

*

Back in London, after choosing the wedding poem at my parents' house, I continue to read Oppen, carrying my book of poetry on the Tube in and out of work, the small lines juddering with the motion of the train. The early poems are prefaced by Ezra Pound, the father of Modernism. Oppen was, he said, a bright young thing, a 'serious craftsman', with a 'sensibility that has not been got out of any other man's books'.⁷ The first poems, gathered together in a collection called *Discrete Series*, are unmistakably of New York. Even underground in London I can feel myself there: the dark buildings that reach to the sky and the wind tunnel streets. And the wide ocean. Oppen had sailed into New York on a cat boat with his new wife Mary. I imagine him, dark and saturnine, observing the city in glances, first a 'Closed car – closed in glass – / At the curb, / Unapplied and empty'⁸ and then the city ladies, 'Your coats wrapped, / Your hips a possession'.⁹ He mocks the pointless spunk of capitalism, the 'prudery / of frigidaire, of / Soda-jerking –'.¹⁰ And he seems somehow invisible, detached from the city. He is able to assess, to judge – to take a lover and see only her component parts, 'your armpits causeways for water'.¹¹ There is something of the journalist in these early poems, a certain distance. A certain self-assurance.

And then it stops. There is a gap. I turn the pages back and forward to try and confirm it. The next poems in my collection are from 1962. There is nothing between 1934 and 1962. Not a word for this span of a life. He has vanished. I can't understand what happened. The pictures alongside the poems also jump from a young man looking out at the sea to a seemingly ageless,

wizened face, lost in the middle distance. Where has he gone? Why would he have stopped writing? I get off the Tube, flustered for a moment in the melee above ground. There must be a reasonable explanation – perhaps in his letters or personal papers there will be clues.

So I renew my membership of the British Library, and go in search of books I have not read for ten years. I wrote my university dissertation on George Oppen when I came back from America, and spent days scanning obscure journals in the silence of the Reading Rooms. But I had forgotten about this gap. It is strange that I would have forgotten that he stopped writing for almost thirty years – but then that's the thing about silence, it is at root, an absence and, in a sense, there is nothing to remember. The books are sent up from the subterranean stacks, and I open them eagerly, hoping for clues. But there is nothing. Less than nothing. It was not just his poetry that stopped. His selected letters start and then abruptly stop in the early 1930s, only to start again in 1958.¹² He kept a living correspondence throughout his life – writing several letters a day, which read like conversations. But not in those years. There is nothing. I check the archive records for the University of San Diego where Oppen's archive is stored. Alongside the letters are notes, jottings and daybooks, the notebooks in which he wrote his poetry. But again, there is nothing. The earliest letters and notes in the archive seem to date from 1957. I have hit a silence.

I feel cheated, angry almost. I want to understand why he stopped. I look around the library at the other people, heads

bowed in the glow of their desk lamps, set apart like an Edward Hopper painting. They don't care. My frustration deepens when I learn from the Preface to Oppen's selected letters that while his words may have stopped, his life continued apace. He went to war, fighting the advance of Hitler during the 1940s, and then returned, wounded, to America, only to fall under the suspicion of Joseph McCarthy. In the Cold War, Oppen and his young family were seen as being suspect because of their Communist Party membership in the 1930s. And so, I learn, he went to Mexico, and lived as an exile for almost a decade, with his wife and daughter, before returning to the States in 1958.¹³ But for all of this, there are no words. Just a thumbnail biographical sketch. Or at least, there are no words written at the time. It is only in the poetry and letters written in the later years of his life that Oppen begins to pick through everything that happened, sifting through and making sense of it all.

Why would a poet stop writing at the height of his career? He had been hailed as a new and distinctive voice by Ezra Pound, after all. Why would he stop taking notes, or writing letters – or at least make sure those words, if they existed, would never see the light of day? After Oppen started writing again, in the late 1950s, everything was saved – his archive contains shopping lists, fragments, endless letters, the poems carved out of the ephemera of life, as if making up for lost time. Or lost words.

Had he chosen his silence, or were there things in life he simply could not write about? Perhaps the experience of war,

hinted at in 'Of Being Numerous'? Or life as an exile? It feels urgent, important – I need to know. When I chose the Oppen poem to read at the wedding I had forgotten that his life was shaped around a silence. And now it seems too great a coincidence to ignore, as I explore the pauses in my own life.

I get up and walk out of the Reading Rooms, and through the café to the verandah, which looks out across the roar of the Euston Road. Around me everyone is eating lunch. Tables of academics and students are talking on their phones and chatting. Laughing and sharing sandwiches in the sun. Listening to the drift and swell of their conversation, it feels like being underwater. It makes sense that in shaking off my own silence I would turn again to Oppen: a poet with silence at the heart of his working life – but who has somehow always found the words I have wanted to say.

THE VOLVO

MY SILENCE BEGAN IN THE Volvo. It was my father's car, with a towel for the dog draped across the back seat and forgotten Yorkie wrappers in the footwell.

I couldn't tell you the day I stopped talking. But I can place it, point to it, feel my way into it almost. And for me it was the Volvo, driving through the half-light of winter mornings. The flash and flare of headlights, and the dead space of the commute.

I remember being told once that during the Iranian revolution cars became figured as a space beyond politics, somewhere no one could see what was happening – safe from the secret police, immune from surveillance, where you could kiss, or talk, without being heard. Somewhere anything could happen. The Volvo felt a bit like that.

To us as children it was a tank: indestructible. My father always joked that it was special because it would always come off better than the other guy in a crash, and as a child it would take all my weight to turn the handles that lowered the windows.

It was a space for play: for reverse seats in the ‘very back’ that faced the receding traffic; the smell of chlorine after Sunday afternoon swimming; and sugared fingertips from sticky buns.

But all that changed when I started secondary school. The day began with an hour’s commute, and the Volvo became functional: a taxi, where nothing is communicated but pleasantries.

When I started school, my father re-routed his life, and would drive an hour cross-country every morning so that he could drop me at the gates, before catching the 7.30 train into London.

We would eat breakfast together in the numb dark before dawn, and drive along the motorway listening to ‘Classic Gold’ on medium wave radio: ‘Nights in White Satin’ and ‘Unchained Melody’. We rarely spoke on the journey; each staring blankly into the middle distance, as he hummed tunes from before I was born. He smelt of aftershave, and kept an electric razor in the glove box.

Ten minutes before we arrived, our route took us down a slip road, which ran alongside the motorway. My father would invariably say it was a shortcut, but I’m not sure if it saved us any time. It was my favourite part of the journey. Mist rose above football fields, and the empty goalposts stood matchstick-precarious. For a minute it felt as though we could be going anywhere. And then the black and white chevrons of a sharp turn would flash past the window, and we were back on the motorway, and the headlights of traffic crawling towards the roundabout at the top of the hill.

I often think I could have said something to my father on

that slip road – in that moment when things could be different. But I never quite found the words.

When we arrived, he would shave as we waited in the car park – stretching his skin in the rearview mirror.

‘Have a good day,’ he would say with a smile. ‘Work hard and earn lots of money.’

In the evenings I collapsed wordlessly into the passenger seat; a strange mirror image of him, in my school shirt and tie.

‘How was work?’ I would ask.

‘Fine. School?’

‘Fine.’

‘That’s good.’

But things were far from good at school. I had always been popular at the village primary I had attended until I was ten years old – but in this prestigious all-girls boarding school I was lost; unmoored somehow, and set adrift. I was one of only three day-girls in a year of almost one hundred. From the start I felt like an outsider, and I had been warned not to talk about life at home.

‘Now then,’ the housemistress had said, at the beginning of term, ‘I think it’s best if you don’t mention your parents too much – and try not to make a fuss when you’re being picked up this evening.’

I nodded. She straightened her skirt to hide the pale hem of her petticoat.

‘This is the first time most of the boarders will have been away,’ she said, ‘and some might get a bit homesick-y. We want you to feel welcome, of course – but we haven’t had any day-girls

before.’ She paused. ‘So this will be a learning curve for all of us.’

For the first two weeks of term the boarders were not permitted to call home. Instead, they wrote letters to their parents in Chelsea, and arrived in chapel red-eyed every morning. After this hiatus, they were allowed ten minutes, each week, to use the public payphone in the corridor.

Going home became a guilty secret. I never announced when I was leaving, but slipped silently into the junior library to wait for my father to arrive. Sitting there alone I would listen to the sing-song of the other girls’ conversation, as they walked back to the boarding houses in the dark.

I struggled to fit in, and by the second year I knew something had to change. So I began to join the boarders in the dining room as they ate breakfast, in an effort to make friends. Buoyant with the morning’s letters, or tearful – linking arms in solidarity – they talked of the moments I had missed overnight. Initially I tried to take part, laughing at everyone else’s jokes and hovering beside fast-forming circles of friends – but without the shared reference points of dormitory life I couldn’t carve a way into the conversation, and soon I began avoiding the other girls altogether.

I began to hide in the boot room during breakfast. Rows of metal cages and heavy cloaks – used only once a year for the carol service – made it an easy place to disappear. Trunks and tuck boxes were stacked to the ceiling and the air smelt of sweat and linseed oil. No one was ever there for more than a few minutes – to collect a lacrosse stick or a textbook.

‘Oh, hi,’ they would say, ‘I didn’t see you there.’

‘Yeah, sorry, I was just leaving,’ I’d reply.

‘Cool.’

No one guessed I had been standing there for an hour, pretending to have just arrived. My days were bookended by awkward pauses in the boot room, and as time went on the silence began to swell, until I found I had nothing to say.

I never intended to stop talking – but soon keeping quiet became a habit. I felt the silence settling on me in the Volvo, as we drove down the hill towards the gates. It felt safer, easier somehow, to say the bare minimum. I would answer direct questions from teachers or other girls, but I lost the art of conversation. Looking back I find it hard to pinpoint exactly when my silence took hold in those first few years of secondary school, or to know how long it lasted. What is imprinted on my memory are individual moments. The unallocated pauses between classes, when the other girls would be saving seats, and drawing biro tattoos on the backs of their hands, as I looked on. I knew my behaviour was odd – and would try and will myself to speak – but I didn’t know how to break into their conversations. Weeks would pass when I said little more than, ‘Yeah. Cool. Thanks.’ I was never bullied – just ignored.

My parents didn’t realise what was happening. I didn’t know how to tell my father on the long drive home that I had barely said a word since we had parted that morning. And once I was back in the familiar surroundings of home, I found I could talk normally again. I was ashamed of my silence – and feared I must

have done something terribly wrong, if no one wanted to talk to me.

It is now more than two decades since I stopped talking at school – but silence has become a fault line running through my life – always splitting at the same points of weakness. I see my teenage self in the anxiety I still feel before parties, and the blank fear of being cornered with nothing to say. Or in memories of sitting in a university interview, as they waited for me to answer a question about the role of the gravediggers in *Hamlet*, and knowing no words would come out of my mouth. Looking back, I realise that even as a very young child I would retreat into silence when things went wrong. Even though I was popular in primary school, there were breaktimes I remember slowly walking around the edge of the netball court, treading the painted perimeter like a tightrope, when no one would play with me.

And as an adult, silence has served me well professionally. On the eve of my first filming trip to Afghanistan, for example, I was sent on a ‘hostile environment course’, to learn what to do if I were to be kidnapped. We were told the best way to survive was to become the metaphorical grey man in the room – the person no one would notice. Answer questions if they are asked, we were told, and try to blend in. Don’t make sudden movements. Never say more than you need to.

This survival strategy was reassuringly familiar, as I had spent my early adolescence as the ‘grey man’ – becoming ever more quiet, unobtrusive and almost invisible at school. For me, that was the purpose of not speaking – it was a way of staying safe.

UNSPEAKABLE

But now I realise that silence is unsustainable; it may keep the hostage alive for a few extra hours, but it is no way to build a life. Over time it has threatened everything I care about, and now I must find my way out of it.