

THE SILENCE HERE

By Dylan Brenneis - August, 2018

The silence here is filled with sound.

The river itself passes slowly, noiselessly, but the air above and all around it is rich with Nature's busyness.

Two bees dance in spirals through the air around me as they jockey for position, each chasing the other in turn. Their mutual buzz grows and shrinks, zips left and right and all around (pauses a moment while they plod along my paddle's edge), and whizzes about my feet before floating away on a zephyr.

The river is banked on one side by steep cliffs of sand and clay, varying between fifteen and twenty feet above the water. Tall blades of grass gather at the top of the precipice, spectators at the edge of my solitary parade. These are the leaves that Whitman loved, rustling to one another in the hushed tones of the breeze as they watch me float past. A sandpiper hops along beside the water, scratching and pecking at pebbles and sand.

The sky is a clear azure expanse, open and full of possibility. Trees and hills hem it in at the edges in a wide verdant belt, saving my fragile mortal mind from collapsing at the beauty of the whole.

I am completely taken in. My heart aches simultaneously with the blessing of being in this place, and the despair of the impermanence of my experience. My mind drifts to thoughts of entropy, contemplations of the death and chaos that is such an inescapable part of living and order. Everything tends to chaos. Buildings once firm crumble and fall; lives once full of love and meaning come to end; Nature herself is ever-changing and will, in the end, cease to exist as disorder envelops the world. But could beauty exist without this chaos?

When I fall in love with a painting, it is because I know my eyes cannot rest on it forever that it is able to change and affect me. I gaze on a stunning vista or a lovely face, and seek to change myself, to better myself to have more of this beauty in my life. Were it not for the knowledge of beauty's fragile nature, I would have no reason to change; no reason to feel touched.

Music's charm is in the height of impermanence; sound is but travelling waves of energy that by necessity of physics must exist only in one moment and not in the next. We can only enjoy music while it plays, and once it is over enjoy only its memory.

My boat bumps against the side of the cliff and drifts leisurely outward into the stronger current. Today, the river is my guide; its direction is both gentle and strong, and I am content to follow its journey. My paddle is dry in the sun. I have the power to choose my own course and direction—even oppose the flow of the water, and ordinarily I would. But today the river will choose for me, and I will do my best to learn from it.

Ahead, a clump of trees and brush stubbornly holds fast amid the powerful water, having fallen there victim of the river's fury as it swelled in the spring. The stream babbles and bubbles noisily as it flows over and under and around the logs and twigs, swirling in eddies and churning tempestuously. The river, like time (*tempus*, you say: the root of tempestuousness), refuses to stop or slow for any earthly obstacle. As I gradually float nearer, it seems I'm headed for the fray. I lower my hands to my paddle, but do not lift it. My boat circles slowly sideways, then backward as it turns in the eddies upstream of the brush.

I'm taken aback by the wonderful view I hadn't gazed on before: upstream, beyond the cliff face, the land rolls upward in gently sloping hills, clothed in trees and greenery. Mighty poplars stand firmly at the side of a low forest, acquiescing to be swayed only ever so slightly by the fresh westward wind. They solemnly guard the forest behind them from the wide expanse to the left: a brightly blooming field of lemony yellow canola which extends as far as I can see in the other direction before falling from view.

behind the jutting cliff edge. Beyond the forest lay a soft rolling meadow freckled with grazing Herefords as content to live in this place as I am to gaze upon it.

The logs and brush pass harmlessly by my side, the current of my guiding river having nudged me out of the reach of the tangled snarl.

I consider how often I've worried throughout the course of my life, anxiously trying to affect things beyond my control. Many nights I've been unable to sleep, my mind racing with one particular concern or another. How many beautiful things have I missed in all my furious paddling?

The sun blazes high overhead, and I can feel its rays bathing my skin in a soothing warmth. Upstream on the water a skiff of ripples dances ethereally, and my grass spectators on the cliff bend gracefully in a wave moving swiftly downstream toward me. All at once I am caught in a warm gust, the straw of my hat rustling and creaking as the brim catches the breeze. It dies down as suddenly as it had started, and the river continues to guide me along around the bend.

A while later I come across a small cove where the current slows and actually turns back on itself before joining again with the main river body. Most of the river rushes past, intent on continuing its circuitous eastward journey, but those parts near the side are content to take a short rest.

I myself have floated up alongside the cove, and my guide gently pushes me in. My boat lazily turns as I begin my slow upstream journey to the top of the bay. Eventually, I come to a dead stop. The water laps at the side of my kayak, patiently waiting for some small change in the current that might start me moving again. I wait patiently also.

In the middle of the river, where the current is the strongest, the remains of a once-proud tree protrudes from the water like a spear. It is bent low just above the water's surface, humbled by the river's endless might. The scars in the wood tell much about its former glory. It is wide at its base, and very long; this tree would have towered among many others. Knots along its length exist as remnants of many powerful branches which would have been clothed with innumerable leaves, rich and green each summer, and glorious in gold and yellow each autumn. Squirrels and birds would have enjoyed many generations in this tree; it would have been the pillar and foundation of their existence: immutable and everlasting.

Its bark and branches are now completely stripped, and its underside is worn completely smooth by the water's erosion. Its topside, by contrast, is jagged and rough; myriad splinters and shards of wood stab this way and that, evidence of having survived the forceful and dangerous ice floes of the spring thaw. This tree has been allowed to rest near its place of former glory only by virtue of its willingness to be humbled: to part with its leaves and branches and to bow along the water. It has accepted its inevitable aging and death with grace, and remains beautiful.

I turn my gaze back to my peaceful cove, and upward to the cliff face which here hangs out over the water. Roots and twigs dangle from the edge, thirstily reaching to the water below. The sun reflects off the water's surface onto this overhang, projecting fantastic dancing shapes of light onto the sandy clay.

A tiny bank swallow pokes its head out from a hole in the cliff, checking left, right, up and down before fluttering skyward with a frantic beating of its wings. *What a wonderful home you have here, little swallow*, I muse. *What a wonderful home I have here too.*

A small eddy bubbles up beside me from somewhere below, and I am shifted ever so slightly to the side. The current catches me again, and I am gone. I am somewhat reluctant to leave, yet grateful for the impermanence of my stay—that I was blessed to have left while everything was still beautiful.

A short while later I have reached the end of my journey, and I know I must return to the hustle and hurry of the city. Again I am reluctant to have to go; again I am grateful for the impermanence of my stay. It seems to me now that the inevitability of time's progression and the necessity for change are not so much at odds with beauty and happiness, but are perhaps their essence.

I thank the river for its guidance—both physical and otherwise, and begin the long journey back home.