

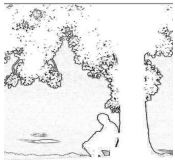
## Silence

I HAVE known the silence of the stars and of the sea,  
And the silence of the city when it pauses,  
And the silence of a man and a maid,  
And the silence for which music alone finds the word,  
And the silence of the woods before the winds of spring begin,     5  
And the silence of the sick  
When their eyes roam about the room.  
And I ask: For the depths  
Of what use is language?  
A beast of the field moans a few times     10  
When death takes its young.  
And we are voiceless in the presence of realities—  
We cannot speak.

A curious boy asks an old soldier  
Sitting in front of the grocery store,     15  
"How did you lose your leg?"  
And the old soldier is struck with silence,  
Or his mind flies away  
Because he cannot concentrate it on Gettysburg.  
It comes back jocosely     20  
And he says, "A bear bit it off."  
And the boy wonders, while the old soldier  
Dumbly, feebly lives over  
The flashes of guns, the thunder of cannon,  
The shrieks of the slain,     25  
And himself lying on the ground,  
And the hospital surgeons, the knives,  
And the long days in bed.  
But if he could describe it all  
He would be an artist.     30  
But if he were an artist there would he deeper wounds  
Which he could not describe.

There is the silence of a great hatred,  
And the silence of a great love,  
And the silence of a deep peace of mind,     35  
And the silence of an embittered friendship,





There is the silence of a spiritual crisis,  
Through which your soul, exquisitely tortured,  
Comes with visions not to be uttered  
Into a realm of higher life.      40

And the silence of the gods who understand each other without speech,  
There is the silence of defeat.  
There is the silence of those unjustly punished;  
And the silence of the dying whose hand  
Suddenly grips yours.      45  
There is the silence between father and son,  
When the father cannot explain his life,  
Even though he be misunderstood for it.

There is the silence that comes between husband and wife.  
There is the silence of those who have failed;      50  
And the vast silence that covers  
Broken nations and vanquished leaders.  
There is the silence of Lincoln,  
Thinking of the poverty of his youth.  
And the silence of Napoleon      55  
After Waterloo.  
And the silence of Jeanne d'Arc  
Saying amid the flames, "Blessed Jesus"—  
Revealing in two words all sorrow, all hope.  
And there is the silence of age,      60  
Too full of wisdom for the tongue to utter it  
In words intelligible to those who have not lived  
The great range of life.



And there is the silence of the dead.  
If we who are in life cannot speak      65  
Of profound experiences,  
Why do you marvel that the dead  
Do not tell you of death?  
Their silence shall be interpreted  
As we approach them.

Edgar Lee Masters. 1869–