**Humanities Lab:** Sound and Well-Being  
**Term:** Spring 2020  
**Impact Project:** Deaf Republic Poems (creative interpretation in lieu of an essay)  
**Featuring:**

Brian Grant (graduate student in the School of Sustainability)
A Silent Dance Between Deaf Republic and COVID-19

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WST 598
03/22/20
Foreword:

What follows is not an essay because this form didn’t feel right to express what I am after. I did intend to address the prompt exploring silence as an act of resistance and compliance (and I am satisfied with this exploration), but more so I wanted to write with rather than write about Deaf Republic and create something that felt more personal and representative of where I am currently at. I naturally began writing in a similar style as Ilya Kaminsky – I’ve been trying to write more poetry lately so the only thing better than reading his book was trying my hand at writing in his style. Of course, I am not a poet.

I am, however, in the midst of this wild, beautiful, awful, anxiety-ridden, very peaceful, paradoxical moment in time defined by the global spread of COVID-19. I feel like I’m pretty good at being deaf to the media most of the time, but I am utterly inundated with this situation at present. It’s such a drastic change for probably every being on the planet! Transformation is inevitable – a potential to heal through trauma or a potential to harden through trauma. What will our path as a species be post COVID-19? I hope I’m alive to experience it and tell my perspective of the story.

Thus, when it came to creating with Deaf Republic I got the idea of “dancing” between my interpretations of Kaminsky’s poems and my perspective on the current pandemic. I tried to choreograph his words and my words together into a performance of being human during a crisis – be it wars or pandemics.

In addition to poems from the book, I also drew inspiration and quotes from his interview with The Guardian titled, “‘I will never hear my father’s voice’: Ilya Kaminsky on deafness and escaping the Soviet Union” by Claire Armitstead. I cited these in a very basic form via footnotes: DR = Deaf Republic and Interview = quotes from the Guardian interview. All of the quotes are either his poems from the book or his words about the book. Page numbers are included for the quotes from the book. I chose this unconventional method for aesthetics and because this is not a journal article.

I hope it speaks to you.
Act One – In The Midst Of Crisis, Transformation Begins

Marching to Extinction

It’s been some years
Since we had our last outbreak
And we knew from that what we’ve always known
Our cellular skin is not alone in isolation
We are part of this world - this Earth, this Body

We had no time to hear it though
A lesson in transformation or a foreshadowing of pandemic infection
Deaf to the voice of the Earth
We chose the ladder

The status quo
A march to extinction
“A finger flipped at the sky”¹

This is the Fight

When Petya was shot the townspeople became silent and lost their ears
And simultaneously
(Re)discovered their bodies
“See how deafness nails us into our bodies”²

His death a transformative act
The sound of the noise now ringing violently in their ears
From trauma comes resistance
The waves have been crashing, only now do they “lift the gulls off the water”³

Their wings flapping gracefully in silence
As their lips press together – resistance!

Tuning the enemy out to find strength within, this is the fight

¹ DR, p. 20
² p. 63
³ p. 11
(Re)discovering Bodies

So it was when Italy became ill
Infected white skin was the shot that shook us
The shot we heard
    That left our ears ringing

And we wage war
    But, unlike the war on terror
    The war on germs fights a deaf enemy
        Our words are useless
    We must fight in silence
        We must fight in our bodies

Suddenly, we have bodies
    Quarantined we are nailed to our bodies
Isolation creates space for awareness
    As deafness creates space for Being

The resistance here is an ontological transformation
    Slow down, cover your mouth, stay home
        Just be, this is the fight

Masked Transformation

Like the townspeople’s shift to gesture
    We also communicate without words
Masked mouths and gloved hands
    Bare shelves and dimmed lights

A hard rain falls
    Thunder growls amidst a cold wind

The networks announce:

    WE ARE INFECTED WITH A CONTAGIOUS VIRUS. FOR YOUR OWN PROTECTION
    WE ARE ON LOCK-DOWN. STAY IN YOUR HOMES. QUARANTINE YOUR BODIES.
What Happens to Language in a Time of Crisis

Not even a month ago our language center around political campaigns and celebrity lives and deaths. You know the usual stuff – us versus them, money, TV shows, and sports. This was language without the mask. With the mask on our language has become spread out and somber. There is more space between words. A reflection of the distance between bodies. Neighbors talking from their porches. Teachers and students miles apart in virtual classrooms. Religious leaders holding virtual sermons. The silent schools, churches, and shopping malls give a bold speech. Their locked doors, dark rooms, and empty parking lots display the words: fear, cancelled, quarantine, testing, hospital beds, vulnerability, and collapse. This is our language shaped by a pandemic. This is our world on mute.

Act Two – How Do We Live on Earth, Child?

The Taste of a Toxic World

Before the war we decided
It was time
Maybe it was the call of Spring
Or the fruits of couples counseling
It was time to conceive our second child

The silent warmth of our bodies together
Told me what she hadn’t yet said
Let’s pay attention to the moon
And howl together when it’s full

War changes everything
So we started to think again
“A child learns the world by putting it in her mouth”⁴
And this is becoming a toxic world

We Lived Happily in the Midst of the Pandemic

⁴ DR, p. 65
Told to keep our distance and isolate, but it’s too beautiful outside for that. It’s as if a force greater than the voice of a politician or a medical doctor or a celebrity is pulling us out and into the sunshine. While we are deaf to the voices of control and influence, we hear the birds sing a new song. Not new to them but new to our ears, which are typically muddled with the sounds of planes and cars, along with parties and sporting events and concerts. It’s as if we “simply told the world to shit its crazy music off for a while.”\(^5\) We’ve (re)discovered silence, the substrate from which all song springs, and we rejoice!

We lived happily in the midst of the pandemic.

Strangled by Beauty

This is an incredible performance
A dance “to remain human”\(^6\) during a pandemic
But every stage is swallowed by darkness in time

What about the possibility that this magnificent stage of spring wildflowers
Boasts the facade of Momma Galya’s theatre?
Aesthetic lure holding the promise of excitement and pleasure
Are you hiding something behind your curtain?
   A silent and subtle killer -
      A puppeteer and a puppet string?
      A breath and a virus?

Will our deafness leave us gasping for air?

Panic or Preservation?

Fear is what keeps us here (hearing)
“You are alive, I whisper to myself, therefore something in you listens”
The lines between panic and preservation blurred
“How do we live on earth, child?”\(^7\)

Silent lines wrap around the arms dealer
Just as silent witnesses “pocket their phones and go”

\(^5\) DR, p. 58
\(^6\) Interview
\(^7\) DR, p. 67
“Yet, I am. I exist.”

Act Three – The Space Between, The Space to Be

The Silence Between

The perpetual background of our story
“The soul’s noise”
Silence is always present (“the invention of the hearing”)

In a time of peace it may be compliant
A time of war resistant
But in the quiet between these two ways of being
Is the silence of Being
The soul’s voice

This is the silence between
War and peace
Sickness and health
Death and life
The silence between each word

Here the song of interconnection is sung
To hear it is to be deaf to it
Because it’s not a place to listen
It’s a the place to Be
Like a tree

Watching the story of Earth