

LA FLORA

Silence

A letter to the listener

Before you begin — The meditations were written to be met without explanation. If you have not yet listened to the album, you may want to do that first. The letter will be here when you want to know more. But there is no wrong order — some find the meditations deeper once they trust where the album is taking them.

This album came from a book.

A thin one, published in 1896, by a Belgian writer most people no longer read. His name was Maurice Maeterlinck, and the book is called *The Treasure of the Humble — Le Trésor des Humbles* in his original French. Across ten essays, he made one argument: that the deepest dramas of a human life are not the parts anyone can point to. The events, the milestones, the visible turning points — these are not the substance of a life. The substance is everywhere else. In the hours of ordinary being. In the silences we move through and rarely remember. In the kindness that flows through us without leaving a trace. In the second life, quieter than the first, that has been running beneath the surface the whole time.

I came to Maeterlinck through his essay *The Intelligence of the Flowers*. It is a book about plants, but more accurately about how to attend to a form of intelligence that does not speak the way we speak. After reading it, I went looking for more of his work, and found *The Treasure of the Humble*.

When I read it, I understood that Maeterlinck had written it for me, and for anyone who had ever suspected that the loudest parts of being alive were not the deepest. That the days we cannot account for in any narra-

tive might be the days the soul was most fully at work. That silence is not what is left when nothing is happening, but what has been there all along, underneath the noise we make to keep from noticing it. This is the book the album came from. Each of the seven meditations sits inside one of Maeterlinck's essays.

A brief note for those arriving here without context: La Flora is a contemplative practice — a library of guided meditations, organized into albums, and a newsletter called Field Notes. Silence is the second album. The letter you are reading or listening to is its companion.

The album makes a single argument, returned to from seven angles: silence is not the absence of something. It is the presence of something older than speech.

This is Maeterlinck's claim. It is not a claim I made up. But it is a claim I have come to live inside, and the seven meditations are seven different ways of inhabiting it. They do not explain the claim. They do not defend it. They do not invite agreement. They invite the listener to feel it — to sit close enough to silence for long enough that the claim becomes, briefly, something experienced rather than something said.

The meditations were written this way on purpose. *La Flora's* posture, across all its work, is to refuse to explain. The plants explain themselves through their growing. The poets explain themselves through their lines. The meditations explain themselves only by being met. This letter is the one place where I do explain — where I name what the meditations were built from, and what they were built for. The meditations themselves stay quiet. They have to. They are the experience, and explaining would diminish them.

But the work behind them is real, and I would like you to know about it.

Track 1

Silence as a Companion is the opening meditation, and its work is to undo a single confusion. Most people, asked what silence is, would say it is the absence of sound, or the absence of speech, or the absence of company. The meditation begins by proposing something else: that silence is not an absence at all, but a presence that has been keeping company with the listener their whole life, and waiting, patiently, to be noticed. Maeterlinck's line — "*let us wait in silence; perhaps soon we will hear the murmur of the gods*" — sits at the meditation's foundation. The murmur is not somewhere else. It has been here.

The image at the meditation's center is silence as a presence that takes up no space and fills everything in the room. The closing line — "*you have not been alone*" — is the album's first quiet gift. The meditation does not announce itself as a setup for what follows, but it is one. Everything else builds on the listener's willingness to allow that silence is not empty.

Track 2

What the Soul Has Been Waiting For draws from Maeterlinck's essay *The Awakening of the Soul*, which is one of the most beautiful things he wrote and one of the most difficult to translate into a meditation. The temptation, with any essay about the awakening soul, is to make the awakening dramatic. To stage it. To use the language of arrival, illumination, revelation. Maeterlinck refused all of that, and so did this meditation. The awakening, here, is the recognition that a window has been in the wall the whole time and you are noticing it for the first time. The light has not changed. Only your stopping has changed.

The *Field Note* for this meditation pairs Maeterlinck with Mary Oliver's — "*attention is the beginning of devotion*". That is the meditation's whole instruction, if it can be said to have one. Not concentration. Not striving. Attention, soft enough to let what was already speaking be heard.

Track 3

The Life That Happens While Nothing Is Happening is the album's central and longest meditation. It draws from Maeterlinck's most quoted passage — the one about the old man sitting still in his armchair, who knows more, simply by remaining, than the conqueror who wins his battles. Maeterlinck's image is Victorian and male, but the argument is universal. A life is mostly what happens when nothing is happening. The ordinary hours are not the between. They are the life.

I anchored the *Field Note* for this one with Annie Dillard: "*how we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives*". Dillard's line is famous, but it is famous because it is true. We are taught to measure a life by its events. The births. The arrivals. The turning points. But most of a life is not a turning point. It is the hours nobody photographs. The thinking. The breathing. The waiting for water to boil. The meditation insists that these hours are not the waiting room. They are the room.

The seed phrase that opens and closes the meditation — *you are here. that is enough.* — is the line I return to the most.

Track 4

The Goodness That Does Not Know Itself is the album's loving-kindness meditation. Most loving-kindness practices ask the meditator to send good wishes outward — "*may you be safe, may you be happy, may you be free from suffering*". This meditation does none of that. It draws from Maeterlinck's essay *The Invisible Goodness*, in which he argues that the truest goodness is the kind that passes through a person without being noticed, even by the one offering it. A word softened before speaking it. A patience held when it would have been easier to turn away. A refusal to harden. These acts are the substance of goodness, and they do not require the doer's recognition to be real.

For the *Field Note*, I reached past Maeterlinck to George Eliot, who wrote at the close of *Middlemarch*: "*the growing good of the world is partly dependent on*

unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs. That is the meditation's argument, named by a different voice from a different century. Maeterlinck and Eliot were not in conversation, but they were in agreement.

The meditation closes with the recognition: *you have been kinder than you know.*

Track 5

The Second Life Beneath the First is the album's philosophical hinge. It draws from Maeterlinck's essay *The Deeper Life*, in which he proposes that beneath the visible life — the life of events and decisions and surfaces — there is a quieter life that has been running the whole time. Not a hidden self. Not a truer self. Simply another layer, slower and older, that keeps continuing whether we are watching or not.

The image at the meditation's center is a river running underground beneath a walked path. You have been on the path for years. The river has been there the whole time. It does not require your knowing of it to continue flowing. But if you stop and put your ear to the ground, you can hear it.

The *Field Note* for this meditation pairs Clarice Lispector — “*estou atrás do que fica atrás do pensamento*”, “*I am after what is behind thought*” — with João Guimarães Rosa, whose story *The Third Bank of the River* gives us a father who has gone nowhere and has not come back. Both Brazilian writers, both attending to the same thing Maeterlinck named in French in 1896: that there is something running beneath what we appear to be doing, and it does not need our attention to be real.

This was the most challenging meditation to write. It asks the listener to descend further than the album has asked before, and to discover that the descent is not into something foreign. It is into something they have been carrying.

Track 6

The Silence Between Two Who Trust Each Other is the album's second silence meditation, and it answers the first. The first was about silence as companion — the presence already keeping you company before you arrived. This one is about silence as communion — the silence that happens between two beings who trust each other enough not to need speech. The listener is asked to remember such a silence, and to rest inside it again.

The *Field Note* brings in two kindred voices for this one: Rilke, who wrote that “*love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other*”, and Thomas Merton, who wrote that “*the deepest communications between two people take place in silence, not speech*”. Maeterlinck would have agreed with both. He wrote often of the silence that passes between people who do not need to translate themselves to each other, and he treated that silence as one of the great holdings a life can offer.

What this meditation honors is the silence shared between two people who have not needed each other to perform. The meditation treats that silence as one of the real possessions of a life — not sentimental, not nostalgic, a form of knowing that does not age. *The silence between you never leaves.*

Track 7

The Beauty That Does Not Announce Itself is the closing meditation, and it draws from Maeterlinck's essay *The Inner Beauty*. His argument, simply: the deepest beauty is not seen on the surface. It moves through a person from within. It does not announce itself. It is, in his view, what makes a life truly beautiful — not appearance, not accomplishment, but the quiet inner quality that a person carries through their days.

I closed the meditation, and the album, with Maeterlinck again — “*nothing in the whole world is so athirst for beauty as the soul, nor is there anything to which beauty clings so readily*” — and with Lispector, who wrote: “*o que estou te escre-*

vendo não é para se ler — é para se ser”, “*what I am writing to you is not to be read — it is to be*”. That is what I want the album to be. Not something to read, not even something to listen to. Something to be inside, briefly, until being inside it is no longer different from being inside yourself.

The image at the meditation’s center is light moving through a room at an hour when no one is in it. The light continues. It is not performing. It is fully itself, witnessed or not. The meditation closes by suggesting that the listener’s own inner beauty has been moving this way through their life — continuous, unwitnessed, fully itself. They have not had to see it for it to be real. Including from themselves.

That is the album.

I want to say something about what it refuses, because the refusals are as much a part of the work as the writing. The meditations do not give instructions for posture, breath, or attention technique. They do not name what the listener should feel. They do not promise transformation, healing, awakening, or any of the things meditation has been sold to deliver. They do not use the vocabulary of contemporary mindfulness culture — no “*letting go*”, no “*presence as practice*”, no “*noticing without judgment*”. Not because those phrases are wrong, but because they have been worn so smooth that they no longer touch anything. The meditations also do not explain themselves. The listener will not be told what each meditation is about, what Maeterlinck wrote, what tradition the work descends from, or what they should take away. This is the one place — here, in this letter — where the explanation happens. The meditations stay quiet. They have to.

What the meditations do, instead, is keep company with the listener. They sit beside, not in front. They trust that the listener is paying attention because they are there. They do not require belief, agreement, or even understanding. The book Maeterlinck wrote in 1896 is the same way. He never asked anyone to believe him. He asked the reader to wait in silence with him for a little while, and to see if anything could be heard. I have done my best to write the meditations the way he wrote the book.

Maeterlinck died in 1949. *The Treasure of the Humble* was written when he

was thirty-four years old, and it was his first major prose work. It became famous. It went into many languages. It was read by people who needed exactly that kind of writing in exactly that decade. And then, over time, it was put back on shelves and forgotten, the way most books are forgotten.

But the questions in the book did not go anywhere. They are the same questions we still carry, less articulately than he did. What is a life made of when nothing is happening. What is silence actually holding. What runs beneath us when we are not watching. What is the goodness we will never remember offering. What is the beauty we cannot see in ourselves.

He asked these questions in a particular voice, from a particular country, at the end of a particular century. I have tried, in the album, to ask them again — in a different voice, from a different country, at a different time, but with the same patience, and the same trust that something will be heard if we wait.

If the album has done its work, you will not need this letter to be moved by the meditations. You will already have been moved. The letter is for the part of you that wants to know where the meditations came from, and why. That part deserves an answer. This is the answer.

The murmur Maeterlinck was waiting for in 1896 is, I suspect, the same murmur the meditations are listening for now. It has not gone anywhere. It does not change, from year to year.

Only our noticing of it changes.

You may stay.

— Iara

[Listen]

— May the silence keep you company, as it has all along —

