

## In Response to “The Lethality of Loneliness”<sup>1</sup>

As if we needed science to confirm that loneliness ravages us.

As if we didn't know it is a disease of the heart,  
that in emptiness we fill ourselves with whatever is at hand  
and like hollow logs rot from the inside out, crumbling,  
that even our cells gather in quiet recesses  
to rebel against solitude in self-destructive protest.

That in being forgotten we forget ourselves  
and the slow decay of the mind is inseparable  
from intimacy withering like a gangrened limb.

To be alone is the binary state of infinite zero  
and our bodies labour to conform.

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<sup>1</sup> An article describing the myriad health problems that loneliness can cause, as established by psychobiologists.

The films and novels lied. Not life-changing;  
no electricity clung to skins when we touched,  
drunk, indiscriminate, goose bumps  
like seeds budding on our bodies.

Not magical. It didn't transform us,  
empower us with hope effortless as thought,  
or thoughts faithful as hope.

No music, twisting  
twined in pastel ribbons;  
You didn't swoon, though  
I wouldn't have minded.

Only your lips haunting mine, like a friendly apparition,  
a shadow cast by something more-  
my shirt stained with your warmth.

Only this, only belatedly;  
like a clumsy burglar,  
who in the process of breaking and entering,  
leaves little traces of her entry behind.

## On Moving On

The worst is over now; your name  
no longer carries that cruel salt sting  
of overdue longing. When I dream of you now  
it is faded like old cloth, indistinct.

The edges have gone.

I hide your things away, still  
unsure if I want to return them.

Now and then

I come across a note or an old photo,  
lingering like a chrysalis  
shed on the way to higher ground.

## Soundtracks

The choice moments in our lives should come with soundtracks  
so we can separate them from the chaff,  
so we know when something changes  
and this time you're being serious.

We should be followed by orchestras, each of us.  
So the strings will cue us in on how to feel  
and we can tell that this goodbye will be final,  
the shadow behind the stairs isn't friendly  
and the tears running down your cheek  
are happy not sad. Instead there is only  
the static of roadside cars, a dog barking  
in the distance, clothes flapping in the wind  
and the melody of silence that only knows one note  
and always sounds like missed chances and regret.

## On a poetry reading at a small cafe

For a long time I shivered from the aftershocks.  
Even now I think I am reeling, equilibrium awry,  
rocked by the weight words impose on meaning  
and the way a voice can press on the heart.

Long after breath died as echo and decomposed into silence  
something lingered; an errant ghost in my skull  
at once poignant, haunting, colliding into walls  
and searching for an exit. I felt like a pagan,  
undeserving, stealing glimpses  
of slivers of someone's soul, bared and poised, on the cusp  
of neither celebration nor mourning  
but maybe a little of both. If I'd known before,  
I relearned that night; that poetry illuminates  
silhouette wounds against backdrops of words,  
that in-between lines I am now forty-one  
and my best friend is in prison.

That the cadence of vulnerability transfixes us,  
leaves us flustered and prostrate,  
held hostage by third-party sincerity.

And more – that poetry makes me long to write,  
to wring the rinds of emotion and read the remains aloud  
to see if my words, too, could resonate,  
with quiet faith, like the whispers in that place.

We write the worlds we wish we could live in,  
every holiday a sparkling sea, every homecoming  
wreathed in the beauty of the prosaic. No-one stutters  
except for effect, the underdog wins at the end,  
everyone is witty unless they're dull to make a point.  
There the record skips from car chase to confession,  
montage to montage, and the minutiae is beautiful;  
the lung cancer is foreshadowed two chapters in  
by the cigarette in the ashtray  
and the audience always sees it coming.

I wish life could be like that;  
my formative years in the prologue  
and a thousand pages to explore the meaning of life  
in Parisian street-side cafes, deigning only to converse  
in high-brow meaningful-pause symbolism.  
I would be taut with purpose like a drawn bow,  
love lyrically, suffer only as a plot device.  
I would never get lost;  
Never take the wrong bus unless it took me  
To a lost love, a childhood friend, an old rival from school  
slipped out of my life but for that fortunate mistake.  
I would know when, if not how everything ends,  
eat only by candlelight,  
sleep only to have prophetic dreams.

## Goldfish

My father loved the goldfish, especially after the children left.  
They were bright, docile, at three dollars each dear enough to cherish.  
They would gather when his shadow fell on the pond  
though from gratitude or instinct he couldn't say;  
he thought they were lonely so he moved them to the bigger pool  
with the rest, the koi and the bottom feeders.  
He thought he was making things better.  
So when two vanished he blamed the cats  
that slipped sometimes into our house,  
lean and hungry, kept a watchful eye for their raids,  
loitered near the garden so he could hold nature at bay  
with a shout and a threatening clap. Then two more vanished  
and he knew it was the others who were preying on them,  
chasing them in shrinking circles till at last  
they succumbed. Divine intervention via fish net;  
he scooped the lone survivor out, tail fins mangled,  
put it in a bowl while he figured out what next.  
Two days later it died in the pond where it began,  
rising through the water. My father threw it out himself.  
He didn't buy any more; maybe he couldn't bear to.  
But maybe it gave him comfort that it floated to the top  
in the end. That for a while it lingered there,  
on the verge of two worlds,  
as if with just a little coaxing,  
it might break through the surface and ascend.

## On the Long Nights

These cigarettes are bad for me, I know, but I cannot help myself.

Not on the long nights I feel his absence more than His presence,  
when I cannot see the stars except to notice how large  
and lonely the spaces between.

The nights I am exquisitely aware we live as we dream,  
in distracted solitude, and my cup overflows  
with the emptiness of distance, disappointment like ash.

The nights my human condition yields only questions  
that yield only dial tone silence, over and over,  
and I pray it is the number that is wrong  
and not the line that is deserted.

Those are the nights I am most hungry,  
desperately try again and again,  
cry out futilely for a response that, after all,  
in time, will be self-evident.