



Loneliness and the Writer

Clare Fisher

WRITING AT THE START of 2021, the start of the third of who knows how many national lockdowns, loneliness is not so much the elephant in the room as the elephant that has become the room. I am inside it; you too; we all are. Did I say ‘room’? What I think I meant was ‘Zoom’.

Loneliness can take many forms; there is the loneliness of the single person who lives alone, who only sees others via Zoom, or for government-regulated two-metre-apart walks; who might, if they are lucky, be ‘bubbling’. There’s the loneliness of the person whose industry has been decimated by the pandemic; they must invent some sort of structure and purpose to their days. Then there is the loneliness of the parent who must work from home whilst home-schooling their kids, whilst cooking, cleaning and keeping everyone sane. Yet the leathery skin on which these more specific lonelinesses totter – the meta-loneliness, if you like – is perhaps the pain of being wrenched from whatever shape we’d expected, pre-pandemic, our lives to take.

What does this mean for the writer and for writing? I’m not sure. I’ve spoken to writers for whom the pandemic has been a welcome break from rushing around the external world; they’ve now been able to rediscover the creative selves that were previously hidden beneath that busy, busy surface, as well as to connect with wider creative communities online. Yet for others, the encroachment of work, childcare, and/or housework has chased that creative self completely off-grid.



I, personally, have veered from one extreme to the other; as a single, childless person, I've had the luxury of writing whenever I want, and there have been weeks and indeed months when I've wanted to write lots. I've lived according to my strange internal clock and when it is ticking very fast, I feel alone, but not lonely; not at all; the words are all I need, and more. There have, however, been many weeks and months when the clock just stops and the words won't work, not my own, not other people's. I log into one online platform after another. I remind my creative writing students to stay motivated and message each other or even go for walks. I go for walks; walk after walk. But something's missing, and I'm not sure what.

There's a line in Eley Williams' short story collection, *Attrib*: 'What is a sentence but time spent alone?' It stuck in my brain the way some sentences do. In one sense, all writing is a product of aloneness; of the writer's attempt to shape that aloneness into something different and new. There is, of course, the myth of the lonely writer, the hermit, the recluse; yet you must have something, some sort of world, to retreat *from*. Which is what makes writing in the midst of a global pandemic both easy and hard; to write is to push language to its limits by interrogating those limits; it is to come to some halting acceptance of uncertainty, of our inability to fully know and control: this is exactly the sort of thing for which writing ought to prepare us. Yet writing is not life and life is always two elephant-sized steps ahead, and no quantity of words will prepare me for it, not at all.