

DISPATCHES FROM AN/OTHER PLACE

As the pandemic has unfolded over the past several weeks, we have found ourselves in a peculiar moment of shared experience across the globe. Most of humanity has been ordered to stay indoors, enacting an extraordinary collective confinement unique in our history. For those of us who make up Wesleyan, we find ourselves in a disorienting moment--separated from friends and colleagues, displaced from our community, striving to find ways to continue meaningful work. These weekly newsletters are small dispatches from my corner of this new place we have found ourselves in, tidbits to help make meaning in times of turmoil.

Dispatch 1:

*"In perfect solitude,
there's fire"*



tisserandnola@gmail.com @m_tisserand · Mar 16
we are all edward hopper paintings now



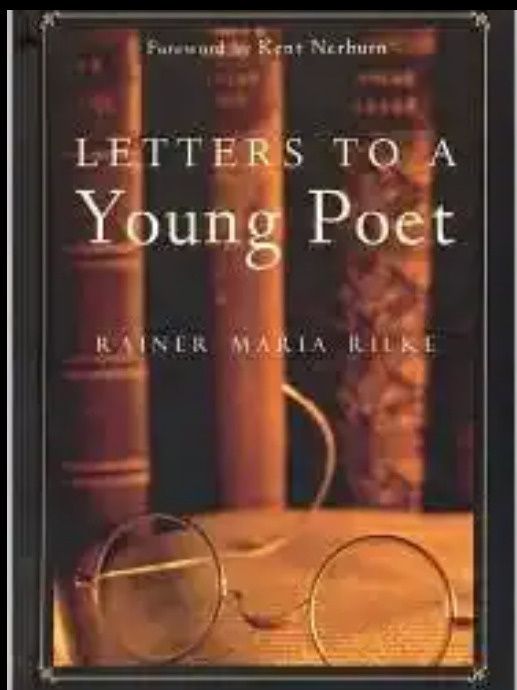
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Dear students,

The hallmark of this quarantine is solitude. As I've connected with many of you over video and phone over the past weeks, this is clearly the thing people are struggling with the most. Isolation is an unfamiliar state for most of us. Whether we are currently isolating with roommates, family members, or on our own, the very concept of "social distancing" is anathema to our nature as humans. We evolved to find safety and solace in keeping company, and enforced solitude can be a challenge.

And yet, as I settled into the idea, and then the fact, of quarantine, I found myself drawn to those poets and thinkers who have lauded the riches of solitude. Reframing quarantine as cultivated solitude has allowed me to draw comfort and even moments of joy out of this totally weird experience. So let me share some of the things I've turned to:

First and foremost, from the ultimate champion of solitude and its rewards, Rainer Maria Rilke, who published his iconic [Letters to a Young Poet](#) nearly a hundred years ago:



"And you should not let yourself be confused in your solitude by the fact that there is some thing in you that wants to move out of it. This very wish, if you use it calmly and prudently and like a tool, will help you spread out your solitude over a great distance. Most people have (with the help of conventions) turned their solutions toward what is easy and toward the easiest side of the easy, but it is clear that we must trust in what is difficult, everything alive trusts in it, everything, in Nature grows and defends itself any way it can and is spontaneously itself, tries to be itself at all costs and against all opposition. We know little, but that we must trust in what is difficult is a certainty that will never abandon us; it is good to be solitary; for solitude is difficult; that something is difficult must be one more reason for us to do it."

Amazing. I first read these letters nearly two decades ago and still turn to my dog-eared copy for guidance. If you haven't yet had the pleasure, the entire volume is available online at the link above. Treat yourself!

As I sat down to write this letter, this [missive from the Brainpickings archive](#) showed up in my inbox with timely words from Chilean poet Pablo Neruda's Nobel Prize acceptance speech:



There is no insurmountable solitude. All paths lead to the same goal: to convey to others what we are. And we must pass through solitude and difficulty, isolation and silence in order to reach forth to the enchanted place where we can dance our clumsy dance and sing our sorrowful song -- but in this dance or in this song there are fulfilled the most ancient rites of our conscience in the awareness of being human and of believing in a common destiny.



Finally, the [Poetry Foundation](#) has amassed a beautiful collection of poems celebrating solitude (there are some gorgeous ones in the "wallowing in loneliness" section too, but I'm here to guide you to the delightful parts of solitude!).

So to close out with a nod to the viral Hopper tweet at the top, here's an evocative poem by Grace Schulman, "[American Solitude](#)"

*"The cure for loneliness is solitude."
—Marianne Moore*

Hopper never painted this, but here
on a snaky path his vision lingers:

three white tombs, robots with glassed-in faces
and meters for eyes, grim mouths, flat noses,

lean forward on a platform, like strangers
with identical frowns scanning a blur,

far off, that might be their train.
Gas tanks broken for decades face Parson's

smithy, planked shut now. Both relics must stay.
The pumps have roots in gas pools, and the smithy

stores memories of hammers forging scythes
to cut spartina grass for dry salt hay.

The tanks have the remove of local clambers
who sink buckets and stand, never in pairs,

but one and one and one, blank-eyed, alone,
more serene than lonely. Today a woman

rakes in the shallows, then bends to receive
last rays in shimmering water, her long shadow

knifing the bay. She slides into her truck
to watch the sky flame over sand flats, a hawk's

wind arabesque, an island risen, brown
Atlantis, at low tide; she probes the shoreline

and beyond grassy dunes for where the land
might slope off into night. Hers is no common

emptiness, but a vaster silence filled
with terns' cries, an abundant solitude.

Nearby, the three dry gas pumps, worn
survivors of clam-digging generations,

are luminous, and have an exile's grandeur
that says: In perfect solitude, there's fire.

One day I approached the vessels
and wanted to drive on, the road ablaze

with dogwood in full bloom, but the contraptions
outdazzled the road's white, even outshone

a bleached shirt flapping alone
on a laundry line, arms pointed down.

High noon. Three urns, ironic in their outcast
dignity—as though, like some pine chests,

they might be prized in disuse—cast rays,
spun leaf—covered numbers, clanked, then wheezed

and stopped again. Shadows cut the road
before I drove off into the dark woods.

I'll leave you there: with Rilke in his conviction that we find intellectual depth and creative purpose in the rigors of solitude; with Neruda, ever the humanist, enlivened even in exile in his belief that passing through solitude and silence is the surest way to reach one another; and finally, with Schulman, mesmerized, by what she finds in solitude; abundance, grandeur, fire.

Be well,
Tamanna Rahman
your friendly neighborhood nurse practitioner



Tamanna Rahman is a psychiatric nurse practitioner who joined the CAPS team in January 2019. She completed her nurse practitioner training at Yale University and holds a BA from Williams College in American Studies, where she studied social movements and literature. Outside of work, she enjoys engaging in activism, gardening, cooking and baking, and hanging out with her Russian Blue cat and giant Newfoundland dog.