

Loneliness: Fourteen Variations

Barbara Hurd

1: Not Trying to Fix It

On a lonely afternoon, I miss my lover, my sister, my brother, my father, I miss the dog, the neighbors, a best friend on the other coast. I miss my husband, my wife, my children, my colleagues, the illusion of friendliness from the stranger who used to wave from his porch. I miss my cousins, my childhood; I miss the me I used to be. I get up in the morning and there's absence all around. The other towel in the bathroom stays clean and dryer-fluffed. In the kitchen sink, a single dirty fork. I'm always the one driving the car.

Sometimes it's a cool absence and I'm a cool lonely—bluesy with low notes. Sometimes it's a hot absence and I'm rash-covered and restless with a single drumstick and no drum in sight. Sometimes I've thought there's no end to all this and sometimes I've thought there's no need to fix it, that now and then I'll just say how I am and see how it feels. Lukewarm-lonely, beige with a side order of oatmeal. Burrito-lonely, folded into myself with a toothpick in my neck. Hailstorm-lonely, dented and pocked. I miss my teammates, my grandmother, the meow of a hungry cat. I'm cocoon-and-cloister-lonely, the rest of the world a-tango in the muffled beyond.

2: The Loneliness that Counts

The loneliness that counts carries its own clipboard and tracks how many didn't call, didn't wave on the street, didn't compliment your shoes today. There's the blues accountant to report to and the heart that needs to explain its

tendency to shrivel. Picture the claims adjuster circling the dented car or the official at a basketball game adding up the fouls. This loneliness has its uniform, its props and crucial tasks, without which it would likely disappear.

3: The Insufficient Wardrobe

When I'm trying to rename loneliness, I call it solitude and drape a velvet cloak around the absence pressing against me. Or I say it's isolation and wrap myself in something gauzy and white, sip wine from a glass with a bendable straw or dress like a hermit in long wool skirts, immersed in Thomas Merton.

What to call it, though, when I stand in the open door of the closet and find nothing that appeals? Nothing flirty or sober or exotic. Nothing that transforms me or confirms, comforts or disguises. The rejected possibilities pile up on the bed; I'm undressed without options, reminded once more that a mark of loneliness is that it has no idea what to wear.

4: Trying to Fix It at a Party

When I'm lonely at a party, too many of my greetings are obvious lassos, my sashays to the bar just another form of bait. I'm a cowboy in earrings, a century from the open range, or a high-heeled fisherman in the desert. I need to remember I don't want the ones who'd willingly be reeled in or roped, who'd want the me I'm really not.

5: The Loneliness of the Upside-Down Cake

The bud vase with its single lily, one candle, Joni or Aretha on the CD player, a meal I've fixed because I'm supposed to be cherishing this time alone. Chickpea salad and roasted peppers, a breast of chicken smothered in almonds. I'm so quietly pleased I want to tell someone else.

Mary, who understands such things, doesn't answer the phone. Maybe she's enjoying her own dinner-for-one and doesn't wish to be interrupted. I try Tim and then my sister. The phones ring and ring in empty houses. I imagine Tim's dogs raising their heads, Mary's cats alert on their haunches. My own old dog is snoring on the couch and the cat's in the basement, batting a mouse across the floor. What do they think about eating alone, their heads hung low

over bowls of Friskies or Purina? I consider, for a moment, waking the dog, bringing her dinner to the table, but she'd be more interested in my chicken than her chow and isn't that one of the pleasures of eating alone—nobody else eyeing your food? Maggie's not home either and when I give up and sit down again to the arugula salad I've ringed with oranges and pecans, it all looks pathetic, the culinary version of boosting self-esteem that finally boosts mine enough so I can admit that tonight I'd really like a dinner partner, especially one who covets my company, my conversation, at the very least the upside-down cake I've so carefully fixed for my dessert.

6: The Loneliness that Justifies

When I find myself lonely because I'm with someone who loves to be alone and who scarcely knows I'm here, I feel a childishness I want to yield to entirely. Forget self-amusement or scintillating starts to conversations, provocative dress or self-pitying sighs within earshot of the one who's filled up on solitude. I want to barge into his room and stomp my feet, stand with a pouty lip, hands on my hips, and insist he play with me, talk with me, at least dismiss me soundly enough to justify this infantile urge to smack him on the side of his head.

7: The Loneliness of Inattention

My inattention, I mean, when my interests have dulled, become halfhearted.

8: One Possible Respite

A mile back in a remote Appalachian cave, a waterfall's been plunging for thousands of years. Once, in my headlamp, I saw it spray silver. Overhead, the ice ages had advanced and retreated, cities risen and decayed, wars raged. Sometimes when I'm lonely, I close my eyes and imagine crawling back again through narrow clefts in ancient stone to the water's ceaseless sound, back to what can't, of course, know a thing about loneliness and a din so thunderous I can't even think about mine.

9: During Sex

One of the most common kinds. The two of you in bed, bodies going through their fleshy delights and he's thinking about that offside's scall in the second quarter and you're wondering why the dog's been limping and then here's his beloved face lowering toward yours and you can almost hear over the bed the collision of those private thought balloons cartoonists use in comic strips, which makes you laugh aloud, which pleases him and you know you should do better, at least try to be somewhere in the vicinity of this pleasure. When it's over and you each roll away murmuring, "That was great," you know the refuge of indefinite pronouns and not to ask which "that" each of you might mean: the sex, the private thoughts, the permission for private thoughts during sex, the possibility that even at its best sex is a detour around what both of you for a moment have forgotten can never quite disappear. And what about the dog? Maybe it's a thorn in her paw and he's got his hand on the remote control, thinking the third quarter's probably started and you're both grateful for each other's bodies, their generous play and happy willingness to act as if sex were a cure for the lonely.

10: The Body

Loneliness calculates the space between the edge of the body and everything outside, pays scrupulous attention to the distance, which it calls heartache or failure.

Solitude, however, pulls the tape inside, gauges interior gaps, which it has no interest in filling. Havens, it calls them, sanctuaries.

11: The Loneliness that Loves to be Bronzed

By the curb of a city street, a single shoe is lying on its side—black leather and a scuffed-up two-inch heel. I'm at the café window across the street with a cup of coffee and a fantasy that half the men who notice the ankle strap unfastened and bent backwards like a broken bone are making up a story, and that half the stories are about the urgency of passion, a few about a drunk, one about a woman who got hit by a car. I like imagining who has the best story and how lonely a man might have to be to make it all up. I order another cup and feel

how his loneliness might lessen mine, though there's the sight of his back as he walks on again, and the shoe still on its side in the streetlight.

12: Old Age

For a long time I thought my mother must know forty words for loneliness, she was so thoroughly acquainted. Or, after decades, do the distinctions dim? In the blurry end, little difference between losing your husband and your childhood pet, your future and your youth and, increasingly, most of the present too. She lives in a small room made smaller now by her helplessness to distinguish between large and little griefs, between absences she's created and deaths she's borne with dignity. And I, who want to matter more than the woman next door, dread the loneliness of the day she doesn't know the difference.

13: The Loneliness of Others' Assumptions

When people used to say, "How lucky you are to be a twin, you'll never feel lonely," they made me think the loneliness I often felt was something suspect and unsound, so I secreted it even further inside, which only made me lonelier than I'd been when I assumed loneliness was, for most of us, a rather normal state of affairs.

14: The Loneliness of the Unused Parts of Ourselves

The easiest to deny and to endure, and the one you're least likely to know might taint every relationship you have.