

Alone on the Borderline

Adolfo Aranjuez

It often starts with a pang of dread, then a frantic scan of the calendar, chat window, inbox. When was the last time you and a loved one spoke? You count the number of days since the last communiqué and check who initiated: an uncomfortable five, and you. You coax memories of your most recent time together, the chats so natural it seemed like lockdown never fractured interactions, and the food they'd sent you away with (which you quickly squirreled away as reminders to eat well and that you're cared for). Then you survey the exchanges before that – the length of them, the tone, the frequency, who spoke more, less, who ended it, how. Soon, you detect the sensation that typically displaces the dread: bittersweetness.

In that time, you could have dialled a number – one saved conveniently in your phone's 'Favourites' list, arranged hierarchically from most to least loved (or who most to least loves you; they're proportionate) – and been done with it. Except, for you, making something happen nullifies its positive impact, because affection should be expressed without prompting. Plus, you like it like this: being alone. A government-sanctioned lockdown is gold because it means you get the stability and bending-the-world-to-your-will that you've always craved. Sure, you have the occasional night of vice or those infrequent, therapist-decreed spontaneous activities, but your ideal baseline is same. Regularity means you can

temper the way that everything – the rest of the world, your relationships, your sense of self and self-worth – is always scarily in flux. Being alone means you don't have to answer to anyone, and that you don't have to expect an answer; each reach-out is an opening for vulnerability.

Then again, it's one thing to be *generally alone* and another entirely to be *specifically alone*. *Generally alone* encompasses survival mechanisms that compensate for isolation, and the swathes of solo apartment dwellers who derive pleasure from relative solitude. (Another thing altogether is the loneliness epidemic that's now a public health issue, but your concern is the state of alone, not the condition of loneliness). *Specifically alone* reminds you of your choices: that maybe you've pushed people away, if not explicitly, then by being overly fastidious about the 'right' way care should be shown. This has made it nigh-impossible for anyone to just 'be', or else taught them to stay at arm's length – which is, defensively, where you want them. Or maybe it's circumstantial, in the sense that the circumstances you do exert control over can no longer line up with the circumstances in others' lives. Or maybe it's just, as you've told yourself before, the way you're programmed – and, if people truly love you, they'll understand and act accordingly, right?

One other thing you can't pin down: time. It's always been vague and volatile, but,

Thermomixed into the 2020s cocktail alongside confinement, infection fear, overzealous libertarianism and long-drawn-out routine, it's gotten that much more elusive. You take to perusing Facebook's Memories pics to get a glimpse of where your loves had sprung from, and Instagram posts to see where those loves have led. You're dizzied by the realisation that so much has changed – hairstyles, humour, how often you hang out, your haunts – and that, despite the component parts no longer being the same material they were when the bonds first manifested, the bonds themselves are still there. You remember how social media was your playground, a place where you'd flaunted your enviable connections. It was a golden time: you were haloed with the warmth of your inner circle everywhere you went because you were together, and after that, the halo would stay because you'd have mementoes and messages with which to relive it. You were in-the-moment in a moment that would never really end.

But now? You'd egressed from online for your brain's sake, a neuronic short circuit causing you to fixate on likes and comments to the point of paralysis for hours. It was a healthy trade-off, you'd told yourself; saved from the allure of web-dispensed dopamine, you could focus instead on life outside the screen. The main perk of being alone is that socialising becomes an opt-in proposition – but in lockdown, with folks having substituted IRL with URL, you're marooned. You ponder the merits of making a glorious return, then find yourself dissuaded by the eons of internet history you'd have missed. Time, according to psychologist Ruth Ogden, distends and condenses to suit its container – a comfy apartment, a crowded street corner, an uncertain country, an unending app feed. And if your time away has taught you anything, it's that you don't really like it on there, anyway. The internet is a realm of pure thought, externalised as approximates of interaction. No-one really lols when they type 'lol' and you find this disingenuous.

Something you do like is being able to name things, and your therapist has gifted you that: *teleological mode of mentalisation* – the belief that observable action is necessary for validating the reality of psychosocial phenomena such as love. And another: object constancy – the aptitude for understanding that people and phenomena, once perceived, continue to exist even when absent from the purview of consciousness. Part of your problem has always been that you need assurances that someone in your life is actually *in* your life, so you hunt around for displays of affection. When most people aren't calling or making plans with one another, they're likely just tired or grumbling at bills or wishing the dishes washed themselves, trusting that relationships are as watertight as they were five days before. But you're not most people. You believe your ability to discern time gaps and tally interactions lets you Cassandra your way out of sinking ships before threats appear. The real danger, though, the teleological one, is to assume that everyone's feelings and actions are driven by consistent motives – which you somehow have preternatural access to. Worse is the assumption that, in prickly situations, people can only be one of two things: unaware of how their actions could hurt you (thus throwing into question how much they really know or care for you) or wilfully choosing to hurt you.

Humans are messy and changeable, including you, and this kills you, so you hold onto soothing but fallacious thinking. Interiority is your blessing and bane; instead of venturing out (to the real world or the simulated online one) to confront the unpredictable, you retreat into a carapace of self-devised interpersonal thought experiments. You rationalise this is okay because you're – as sociologist Corey Keyes has conveniently identified – *languishing* during this period of global uncertainty; not quite psychologically unwell, but not super great, either. Yes, despite the myriad metaphors to the contrary, love isn't a flame that can be

extinguished so readily. Yes, your fear of abandonment, which causes you to seek evidence of love and pre-emptively sideline or sever ‘risky’ relationships, needs to be kept in check. But there’s a crisis out there and there’s a crisis in here; with a personality disorder, you can at least say the problem is rooted in your cerebral apparatus. It’s like living and watching at the same time, someone or something else dictating how each scene progresses to the next.

And so you resign yourself to suspension. You scroll through a few more windows, line up hippocampus pictures with social media pictures, and will time to get a damn move on. Everything is probably fine, even if you can’t confirm it, and since you can’t make it so, you’ll just have to tell yourself it is.

Adolfo Aranjuez is an editor, writer, speaker and dancer. He is currently the Melbourne International Film Festival’s publications and content manager and Liminal’s publication editor; previously, he edited the magazines ‘Metro’ and ‘Archer’. His essays, criticism and poetry have been published widely, including in ‘Meanjin’, ‘Right Now’, ‘Screen Education’, ‘The Manila Review’ and ‘Cordite’.
adolfoaranjuez.com

Nitpicker

Your regular editing lesson, brought to you by Penny Johnson, Program Manager of Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT. Apply Australian style and formal grammar.

1. My neighbour Henry is a writer (and an/and) editor.
2. Henry is the one (that/ who) recommended I do the life writing course.
3. He’s lived all over the world: Hanoi, Vietnam; Rabat, Morocco (,/;) and Buenos Aires, Argentina.
4. His literary soirees are exquisite monthly affairs, for which he always (borrows/ lends) my chaise lounge.
5. In return I may mingle with his guests, (whoever/whomever) they may be that night.

Answers on page 21

