



One Imperative
Solitude

My twin puts dead haworthia
stems in my palms and
tells me to eat them.
Eat them, and know that -
is life outside right now.
I crunch dead
chlorophyll between enamel
Teeth and bits of death trip
Over the metal on my tongue.
My twin laughs, and feeds me
Jasmine and lemon tea.
It does not soothe anything,
but it reminds me to breathe.
I stay awake to write
And when I crawl into bed my
Twin is already there ready
With dreams to share.
My twin cries where I don't, asks:
"Why would you do this to yourself?"
Insomnia releases me at 7
In the morning, and I rise from bed
alone at 1400 hours. My mother
says "you do not have a twin"
When I ask where everybody is.
I eat a late lunch alone and
Stir-fried vegetables *crunch*.
(Title: *Roots are showing*)

R, May 2020

Letter in a Lockdown

Joel Gn

Dear C,

It has been more than two months since we were shut in, and – if memory has not failed me – four since we last met. As always, you seemed reticent yet generous with your time back then. Given the lives we have, I would not be surprised if you deem my words a little juvenile, if not naïve. We did of course, talk of meeting again, but the world we knew has changed. When I texted to ask if things will ever be the ‘same’ again, you replied that you do not think so. It is not difficult to see why. When permitted, we step out alone with our faces partially covered, and are always at a distance from others. It hardly makes sense to speak or smile, much less reach out when the rudiments of human fraternity are ruled to be nothing but a kiss from Judas, an apparent betrayal of our physical integrity that is surrendered to an institution for extirpation.

Wearing a mask saves lives, these powers say, but they often forget that masks are also screens of representation, because one could draw, paint, sculpt, weave and even write on it. Every mask is a face worn for the world, and an

instrument by which we communicate with the other. One could argue this presentation is an act of artifice and deceit, but what, if I may ask, is more potent than this facing out and struggle with the truth of bare life? This struggle is hardly present in the masks we wear now. Instead, they have inevitably reduced us to the level of biology, that we may only see each other as identical organisms, susceptible to infection and death.

Call me old-fashioned, but are we also not sedentary bodies, with souls growing wearier within walls and screens? You are aware I would very much want to see you in person again, but the tools at our disposal have deferred such an encounter. For even if you appeared on a screen in real-time, it would be a pixelated trace, devoid of the presence I looked forward to every time we agreed to meet. These digital tools and structures imply so much alienation, it is no wonder they are now at the forefront of the current malaise. Screens can put our minds back to the grind, even as we confine our own bodies to spaces of our own device.

Perhaps (and I may yet still be writing in all too human terms), our current isolation from each other could be nature's attempt to contain us. You were, I remember, mindful of how human

actions could impact nature. I remain uncomfortable with the notion, for it seems more reasonable to think that we are, in spite of our noblest intentions, fundamentally at odds with nature. Enigmatic and unpredictable, nature was and still is something that we've taken, used, assumed and *pretended* to exist with.

Some thinkers have gone further to speculate that humanity was neither nature's master nor servant, but a parasite at her margins. If this is true, then we ought to concede that we are always alone in this world. Our forebears believed that being with nature was a mere sojourn, hence they conceived of rites and passages to another place. We are, for better or worse, less convinced of this, and so we say to our family, friends and most of all, lovers, 'it is us against the world'.

I hope there will come a time when I can say the same to you, not just for the sentiment of my own longing, but also for the precarity that we will continue to find ourselves in. Like those before us we were never exactly at home, but went ahead to build dwellings of solace from nature's intractability. Have we allowed ourselves to relish in these excesses? I look out of the window to find clearer skies, greener

pastures and the songs of more creatures at night. It seems we were ultimately nature's inscrutable virus, and I cannot help but wonder if the present pandemic was her version of a cytokine storm.

And so I return to the question of our survival – there is much to be anxious about during this time, yet only a handful are actually worth living for. Is staying alive one of these things? If you ask me, I would prefer we dance to the Bee Gees all night long before taking our final breath than be perpetually sustained by a respirator. Call me foolish, but there's no harm in dreaming, I suppose. After all, no one knows what will become of the world, the day you and I can meet again.

For now, I pray you and yours are keeping well, and that this note would, at the very least, be one of the pleasures that you can discover in these difficult times.

J.



Jeremy Fernando, *Girl, interrupted*, 2018

Waiting

I await you,
have always been awaiting you,
and will always be awaiting you:
It's what keeps me going.

Like Nick Cave awaiting the one he was waiting
for,
but without the heroin.

I try to keep busy:
work, vacuum, cook;
a thing to do to keep me from thinking of you:
stupid, mindless, drone tv, almost effective;
drink, bullshit, read:
failed attempts to keep you out of my head.

The life ebbs a little more,
sometimes a lot more,
everyday;
time is always running-out,
always has been,
but I have no other viable option:
for now, I can only wait.

So I live a half-life,
dreadfully threading through existence,
keeping the breath going,
waiting for you.

Michael Kearney
May 2020
Tokyo

Tan Jingliang, *Sweet Angel* 1-4









I dragged a rock into
the house, at the same time
my brother leaves to dig
a trench into the garden.
I cradled a piece of cold
heart in my palms and told it:
I shall find David in you.
Meanwhile, my brother shovels
black dirt to create life
out of all the dead apples buried.
My room is white-on-white of
dust. And David is warmed
by my chisel, kissed by metal.
The personhood my brother
Waters into the crops
Becomes dinner like if souls can be shared.
David stands in my room
Quiet and cold, and I think
I saw him move at night and bury himself.
(title: **When the dust settles**)

R, May 2020

Cherishing

My mind plods through the past,
and my soul begs it to slow down.
The past is probably gone, I know,
but I want to relive it as slowly as I wish I could
have lived it ...

Loud noises across a bar,
mindless, mortality ignoring.
Inane laughter shatters the illusion of the past I
was trying to seep into ...

I light a cigarette and mourn the past I did not
cherish enough.

Michael Kearney
May 2020
Tokyo



Sara Chong, *today is an egg*, 2020

Solitude Scam episode 1
Landline Ringers: No News Is Good News
Setsuko Adachi

When the house phone rang, it made her jump. It was such an unexpected sound. These days in her world, she rarely experiences ringing landlines; smartphones in the silent mode have taken over. Landlines are for the older generation. They *talk* on phones. They call each other to speak. They leave voice messages on answering machines. Their children's generation would much prefer to text.

She picks up the dusty receiver before it gets to the preset answering machine. It needs to ring quite a while to get to the answering machine. It was her way of avoiding people leaving messages, although she cannot remember when was the last time anybody left a message.

“Hello?”

“Your dad and I wired the money. I hope this settles all the problems that you got yourself into. We are worried abo...”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“What do you mean, ‘What are you talking about?’? You had us worried very much about your call yesterday. You said your company has found out that you have been embezzling ...”

“Mother! I did not make such a phone call.”

“Oh, my! It wasn’t you? It must have been from your sister then. You know, you two sound alike. Don’t tell her that I called you. She didn’t want anybody to know.”

“How much did you wire?”

“Five hundred thousand yen.”

“Will that money make her trouble go away?”

“That’s what she said. Her colleague, who is a good friend of hers, realized what she was doing, and told her if she fixes it, they won’t report it to the company.”

Her mother’s uneasiness can be detected in her tone. Her mother is feeling guilty. She has given away too much information.

“Sorry, I need to go. I need to call your sister. Don’t tell her I told you. You don’t know about any of this, okay?”

Click.

Her aged parents are a typical landline generation. Smartphones, for them, are

(smart)*phones*. They are for receiving and making calls. You *talk* to people.

However, for their children's generation, smartphones are no longer a phone, a talking device. They are *smart*(phones). They text. They do not talk on their phones. They rarely receive or make calls. They do not need phones, let alone landlines.

She texts her sister immediately. "Did you call Mom yesterday?" The message was marked read instantly on the screen, and her sister's reply, "no" appears. "Where are you?" "on the train, why?" "Mom is calling your house phone right now to let you know that they wired the money. They said you were caught embezzling the company's money, and you needed five hundred thousand yen to fix the situation." "huh? i did not call her yesterday."

The sisters thought of the same thing. The two texts appeared almost simultaneously.

it's me it's me scam

It's me, it's me scam.

The "it's me, it's me" scammers target the landline generation. They call house phones. The official report said that 96.9 percent of "it's

me, it's me scam" victims are older than 65 years old.^{1,2} "It's me, it's me scam" — as awkward as it may sound, English media reporting on this scam uses the term, too. It is the literal translation of the Japanese *ore-ore sagi*. The scammers, when the phone is picked up on the other end, begin to talk saying, "Hello, it's me, it's me," which is the practiced custom of how children in this region identify themselves to their parents on the phone. And as the numbers of scam rate indicate, saying "it's me, it's me" in a panicky tone to initiate the phone conversation is enough for parents to believe they are talking to their troubled child. Brilliant in a way, the scammers took advantage of the vocal disconnectedness in this age and time in Japan. Parents cannot tell their children's voices over the phone — She and her sister do not sound alike. The aged land

¹ This scam is modeled on a scam that has become a socially recognized problem in Japan known as "Ore ore (it's me, it's me) scam." The data is from Japanese

² "Damages from 'it's me' and other petty fraud scams in Japan down for fourth straight year," *The Japan Times*, February 21, 2019.

generations, they fall into the trap set by the scammers and make urgent money transfers to save their matured children.

what's the damage?

Five hundred

thousand yen.

That was the end of the sisters' text exchanges. Both sisters started working.

At the lunch break, after running an errand at the bank, she calls her parents'. The father answers, "Hello?" "Hello, it's me, it's me. Did you talk to sister?" "No, we could not get through to her. She must have gone to work. We left her a message on her answering machine." "Dad, she did not make the call. I texted her. You have been conned."

"What?"

"Yea. You've heard of 'it's me, it's me scam'? They got you." She continued, "Call the Police. Call the bank. See if you can get the money back and if they can catch the bad guys."

She has heard nothing from her sister nor her parents after that. *No news is good news*, as the

saying goes.³ They are considerate to her, her parents, and her sister. They do not want to bother her with phone calls: she is busy. Do not take up her time. The daughter works, and she has a husband and children to take care of. No call from them means they are fine. If and when they call, it is because there is a problem that got out of hand. Otherwise, they will see each other in the summer.

The family still adheres to the cultural tradition of meeting together once a year in mid-August for a week or so. Well, culturally speaking, it is twice a year: once in summer at *o-bon*⁴ time and once at the end of the year-new year. But the family is not big on getting together at the parents at the end of the year-new year. Their family's thing was in mid-August. Every year, they do not doubt that the family reunion at the parents will happen. Nobody needs to confirm anything. Everybody builds that into their schedule. It is an annual habitual occurrence.

³ 「無沙汰は無事の便り」「便りのないのは良い便り」

⁴ *O-bon* is a family reunion time in Japan. It originates from Japanese Buddhist custom to honor the spirits of one's ancestors.

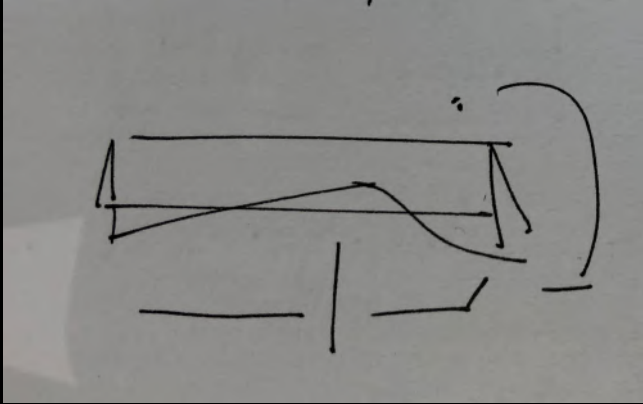
When they meet, they have a great time catching up with each other. Last year, they had a hearty laugh at an incident that had a teenager develop a mild landline phobia.

“Pick up the phone,” somebody told the kid when the phone started ringing. Her parents only had that old black rotary dial phone, and that was their main means of communication with the outside world. The kid did. It was a total disaster. The kid simply did not have the experience of answering the phone and speaking to strangers. The kid was not trained to take messages or put the calls through to somebody else. It was not part of the kid’s upbringing. The kid only used smartphones to text friends, watch YouTube, and use various SNS.

It is unlikely that the teenager is going to overcome the phobia, she thinks. There simply is no opportunity for the kid to overcome the phobia. That one week at her parents’ is the only time they are likely to experience a landline that actually rings, and often. And really, it did not matter if the kid did not overcome the phobia. House phones have been silenced. The world has shifted to smartphone-internet communications.

When the time to part comes, they always talk about getting together more often. They all live in the same city, not far from each other. Yet the wish, so genuine on the spot, is a wish that nobody remembers for real. Once they step out of the parents' door, they all look forward to meeting again there next year. Until then, no news is good news.

Let me express my gratitude to Michael Kearney for his reading, editing, and commenting on this first episode, and the following episode: 'Solitude Scam Episode 2 Landline Ringers: Isolation'.



Jeremy Fernando, *a tent, a circle*, 2020

Solitude Scam Episode 2
Landline Ringers: Isolation
Setsuko Adachi

Yesterday, the Police officially declared their firm determination to eradicate the “it’s me, it’s me” scam:

We are aware that it is beginning to look like a futile cat-and-mouse chase to the public. However, with all the data we have accumulated over the years of Tom and Jerry-ing, we managed to develop multiple effective programs. Rest assured, we will get them. We now have the analytical skills to extract potential numbers that are used by criminals from landline activities. We know which landlines we should keep our eyes on.

We will hunt them down to every corner of the world. They shall pay for what they did. Let us know if you receive any suspicious calls. Record them and provide them to us. This data helps us isolate perpetrators.

We kindly ask for your cooperation. Thank you.

Today, she got a call from the Police on her house phone when she came home from work earlier than usual. National holidays were approaching, and everybody was leaving early. The young female officer said she is calling landline users whose police record shows their phones have been picked up before they got to the answering machine. In her pleasant youthful voice, the officer informed her, her phone is one of them, and that means she is highly susceptible to be victimized by the “it’s me, it’s me” scam. The officer, with professional kindness and efficiency, instructed her to let the phone ring until it switches to the answering machine. Let the caller speak to the answering machine first because 1) it records the voice of the caller. 2) She will know if it is a call she needs to pick up or not. The officer made it clear that she should not hesitate to report in with any calls she received that she felt suspicious. “We now keep a close watch on the activities of suspicious numbers. And your report can only help us to increase the accuracy of our observation. If you have any questions, if you need to report in, or if you want to know more about how to prevent yourself from being victimized, call this number.”

The piece of paper on which she jotted the number down is left by the phone. It was a toll-free number. The officer said it was available 24 hours, 365 days. They keep their watch.

She sinks weekly into the couch. The call from the Police has her shaken up. Did they know? She is terrified. She ended up conning her parents the other day. Their five hundred thousand yen sat in the bank account of her online shop, which stopped doing business a while ago. Sweat pours out on her forehead. Her fingertips are icy cold.

She was in that mood of hers that day that she would experience from time to time: Nobody cares about her. To get her out of that self-indulgent mode, she called her parents.

And it was her fun-loving spirit that thought of playing a prank. She knew them, they knew her. She did not doubt that her parents would be quick to realize that it was she — their daughter calling and playing a prank on them, and when they did, there would be a hearty roar of laughter that would uplift everybody's mood. On the contrary, things got serious way too quickly. She could not even bring herself to say, hey, I am just making fun of you... And they wired the money.

Well, her parents wanted to help her out, and they thought she was the kind of person that would embezzle money from her company—that hurt. And she lied to them that she never made that call.

She dozes off on the couch. She wakes up the next morning. Her body is heavy and exhausted. She knows it is caused by her mental state. She has neck aches and shoulder aches. Those are probably due to her falling asleep in an unnatural posture on the couch.

She looks at the calendar pinned over the house phone and thinks of her work responsibility. She would not be causing anybody trouble if she did not go in today. She just had no energy. Many will be gone from the office starting tomorrow anyways. It is Golden Week. If one takes tomorrow, Friday off, it is followed by five consecutive national and substituted national holidays. A lot of them have arranged to take next week's Thursday and Friday off, too, because that will make it even more golden — a ten-day consecutive break. She did not.

From her back pocket, she takes out her smartphone and emails that she is not well, and if it is okay, she wants to take a day off today. “No problem,” comes back the reply. “Feel better soon.”

Whew.

She has no idea what time it is, but the ringing house phone stabs her. Immediately, she is physically unwell. Tense and nauseous. Her organs are twisting within. They are storing heat and liquefying, and toxic and non-toxic gases are generating. If this continues, her simmering interior will burst. Is it the Police? The unknown landline ringer is pushing it. She vomits at the imagined sense of her body decomposing.

Finally, when the answering machine comes on, the ringer hangs up, leaving no message. No trace of who the person is. The imagined putrid odor fades. Is it a good sign or a bad sign? How close is she to being exposed?

She spent the whole day on the couch, immobilized in fear. She called in sick the next day, too, and again the reply was nice. “Hope you get better soon and enjoy your Golden Week! See you next Thursday!” The only time

she got off the couch was when Nature beckoned. Then, she would drag her body off the couch, stagger to the restroom. The dishes with unfinished food from Wednesday evening remained untouched.

The Golden Week started, and she did not leave the couch. She feels weak. She is scared. The home phone stopped ringing. She is wondering if the Police have taken her number off their list, or if it had to do something with it being the Golden Week, or if they are on their way to arrest her.

Days go by, nobody calls. She checks her smartphone. All she finds is a heap of junk mail. The fish is beginning to stink, and the rice is dried in the bowl.

She stays on the couch, dozing off, loses track of what day it is today. She is not even aware that her Golden Week is over. Yesterday was Thursday. Today is Friday.

In her fading mind, she is aware that this is the reality. —Nobody cares.

She waited in fear yet, hoping desperately for the landline to ring. Nothing. No Police call, no parents call. The psyche stalled and slumbered, entrusting her existence to the body. In the fetus position, she would open her eyes from time to time, but not for long; the body readily pulled her back into the slumber. She was quite content with the state, or so she felt until she heard herself groaning. The pain was expected. It was beginning in her left calf, the cramp, and the convulsion attacked.

Bearing the agony, waiting for the convulsion to subside, trying to gain control of, which only seems to make it worse, the desperately uncontrollable left calf muscles, — all these series of physical pain put an end to her stay-in slumbering. It also eluded the lonely death that might have been on its way.

When the worst was over, she found herself sitting on the couch, her hand massaging the calf. It was then when she noticed her eyes were teary. She quickly dismissed the tears. These tears had nothing emotionally attached to them. They were merely a physical reaction to pain. The after-cramp muscle sore called for a warm bath. She let the body soak in the warm water. After a while, she starts rubbing the filth off her

body crust. It is evident that tissue metabolism has been sound all this time.

Feeling warm, refreshed, and tired from taking a bath, she pours herself a glass of wine and throws the stinking fish away. She takes out the leftover pasta from the fridge, smells it. Her nose discerns it is edible today, not tomorrow. She microwaves and eats it. Then, she goes to bed. The fan in the bathroom, slowly but surely, ventilating the stale air.

She thought she must be glowing with light in the darkness. She could feel the life at her core was on fire when she woke up. She was refreshed and was full of enthusiasm. She carefully controlled and conducted the heat to the surface. And, a good solitary oscillation did it all. It adjusted and fixed the misaligned and distorted pieces of her crust, bringing back the much-needed integrity and flexibility against the rotten forces.

She is even humming, *outside of society, that's where I want to be.*

Then, Sunday evening, she receives an email from her boss with an attachment.

How was your long vacation? It is not a big deal at the moment, but you haven't turned in the form about taking your days off. Make sure to submit it the first thing in the morning tomorrow.

She quickly filled out the attached form, signed it, and replied.

Thanks for looking after me, boss. I am attaching the form to this email. I backdated the submission date. See you tomorrow.

The boss instantly writes back to her.

No problem. See you tomorrow.

Her sudden laughter stirs the air. It warms the room atmosphere. "Ha-ha," she laughs at herself, "I am still a positive workforce worth checking on. I am still inside the system. They won't abandon me to rot just yet."

She stretches, and she can feel it deep in her bones that her parents are not going to call to check on her. If she dies, it will be an unattended lonely death, and Nature will take

care of the carcass. The corpse needs to be autopsied to determine the cause of death—starvation, most likely.

Her parents will hear from the Police. “Your daughter was discovered dead. It seems she died a while ago. The Medical Examiner’s Office will conduct an autopsy to determine the cause.” She knows her parents will be heartbroken when they hear of her unnatural death. They will be shocked that nobody was there to take care of her at the end of her life.

A few days later, at the lunch break, she rings the parents' home phone from her smartphone.

"Hello, it's me. Did you talk to sister?"

"You were right. We were conned."

"I am sorry to hear that. You wired out of love for us, I know. That sentiment is appreciated. Did you inform the bank? Call the Police?"

"No, we didn't. It is too embarrassing."

"Well, it is your money. If you are okay with that, it is not my place to say."

The End.

Pondering

I fled my house disheveled,
to anywhere ... be *there* ...
to escape its emptiness,
an emptiness that was infecting me.

I had to flee,
but not to commune,
not to interact,
but to find the comfort of the Already Dead:
The comfort the Already Dead find in being
surrounded by life,
of being enveloped by life while they are cold,
while they are still,
while they are observing,
wondering about life,
perplexed by its mechanisms,
yet no longer suffering its strife.

The Already Dead observe the Living as they
suffer life;
The Already Dead ponder.

Michael Kearney
May 2020
Tokyo

When Sammy Davis Cried

You had a dream, a dream eager
For pleasing prophets whose rigour
Plots for change marked mean, meek, meagre
But just enough to thrust bigger
Nights out of way with each jigger
Worn thin by the hours of snigger
Aimed at you. Your stoic still vigour
Stood tall apart, a calmed figure.

Lim Lee Ching
May-June 2020
Singapore

On living in the age of a pandemic

Jeremy Fernando

Giorgio Agamben tries to never let us forget that keeping alive is not quite the same as living. And whilst he was widely derided for equating the novel coronavirus to a common flu, his point that *there is a difference between living and merely staying alive* should not be cast aside. For, even as contagiousness of the coronavirus means that our lives have had to radically change in order to potentially survive, the fact that social distancing has become the order of the day and we have had to give up many of our social rituals suggests that — since our *habitus* is shaped by, formed out of, our habits — it might well be changing, re-shaping, what it means to be human.

In that sense, even as Slavoj Žižek seems to be critiquing Agamben — « not to shake hands and to go into isolation when needed IS today's form of solidarity » — it would be an error to read it as being an antonymous claim.

For, we should also bear in mind the beautiful reminder of Jean-Luc Nancy that *it is space that is first needed for touch*.

Not too far, but also not too close:
and where perhaps what is needed is for us to
create a *proper distance between ourselves*.

For, as the late, great, Anne Dufourmantelle
continues to teach us: « being completely alive is
a task, it's not at all a given thing. It's not just
about being present to the world, it's being
present to yourself, reaching an intensity that is
in itself a way of being reborn ».

And where, perhaps the very task at hand is to
discover how to *maintain the social — bring
forth the 'us' — whilst remaining physically
distant*.



Jeremy Fernando, *shadows approach, for fan ho*,
2018