J.D. Smith

Beginning with a Line from *The Bread Bible*

If working with a sticky dough alarms you,
First make yourself less prone to its effects.
Wash hands and forearms for some time, then dry
So thoroughly that no bits cling or slip.
These measures failing, or bypassing them,
Attempt to work with plastic gloves so that
Each finger's safe in its respective condom,
With all of the attendant loss and gain.
Regardless of the method you select,
Flour surfaces until an arid fog
Is stirred by your least move or slightest breath.
You may then ponder some alternatives:
Not having dough, or hands to knead it with—
Not to mention, as we often don't,
The distant if well-known enormities
That strike the Horn (and heart) of Africa
And everywhere it serves as metaphor,
Details of which can murder appetite.

To step away from melodrama, though,
What is the worst thing that could happen here?
A person learning baking from a book
Can well afford to lose a loaf or two

En route to golden-brown perfection.
The kitchen cleared, trash taken out, that loss
Will not be noted or remembered more
Than taking second in a spelling bee,
Failing a driving test the first time out,
Not getting into Harvard, or Yale Law.
Get over them, yourself, and if you must,
The Buddha in the road. Dough doesn’t care.
If such indifference is not to taste,
Still try to raise your threshold of alarm.
Take stock, a breath, a shot of something strong.

Remember the alternatives. Start in.

To His Skeleton

At length, sharp bone
Becomes well known
As mottled skin
Grows paper thin,
Firm flesh shrinks back
And joints go slack,
As aches diffuse
Their worsening news.

Why excavate
At this late date
What will return
To earth, or burn?
What truth discerned,
What lesson learned
Requires this taste
Of coming waste?

No answers come
From Nature, mum
And still, which bends
To its own ends.
But asking will
Demand its fill.
As bones emerge,
Fresh questions surge.
What's lost, at length,
Besides youth's strength?

Gone like sound knees,
Are memories
Of long disease,
Uncertain cure,
Thought turned from pure
At early age
To gnarls of rage
At schoolyard taunts,
The unmet wants
Of single years,
Hard by careers
At lowly tiers
Of grinding gears
Or tapping keys,
And by degrees
Attaining, lo,
A long plateau
From which some fall,
For whom that's all
Until flesh fails,
Bone slips its veils.
This brings us to
The present view
Of short days left
And time's sure theft—
If indiscreet,
Not incomplete.
What's taken, then,
Won't come again,
Which holds, in brief,
Along with grief,
No small relief.

At a Bistro

A speck adrift in red wine caught my eye
    And took shape as a minute fly,
    Both wings and all six legs aflail
    On alcohol and surface tension
    Before the facts of physics could prevail,
Barring a rarely-offered intervention.

I could have waited for another glass
    (The server, though, would seldom pass)
    Or drunk my order, fly and all,
    But squeamishness surpassed my thirst
    Up to a point: my stomach wall,
I hoped, would hold against stray microbes' worst.

Possessed by curiosity or sloth,
    And probably a bit of both,
    I dipped a spoon into my drink
    And, drawing up a sea-dark sip,
    Spilled out the excess on the zinc
And left the sodden insect on the tip.

The ruby droplet turned to air, the fly
    Held out its wings to further dry
    Until, it seemed, no worse for wear
    Nor swallowed in a drunken haze
    It lifted off into the air
To live out its remaining hours or days.
This flight called for another round.

No better reason could be found:
I'd saved a helpless life, although
In the face of minimal resistance.
Today I'd nothing else to show
For my bourgeois mock epic of existence.

What grace, in turn, might I hope to receive?
I paid the check and took my leave.

Several Solitudes

In a culture run by and for extroverts, solitude stands little chance of receiving a proper assessment. Group activities seem to multiply into a minefield for the less gregarious, which poses a problem—for groups. At least one volume is dedicated to the difficulties that churches' congregational cultures pose to introverts and how congregations can attract and retain them, and presumably their donations. A sympathetic psychologist or management consultant might arrive at how many hours of an introvert's average workweek are devoted (i.e., "lost") to dodging or dreading birthday and other "parties" in windowless conference rooms and signing cards for them, or happy hours in similarly claustrophobic bars and restaurants with hard acoustics and loud ambient music. Time actually spent in these events, and in regretting them, represents a no doubt smaller number but one still too grim to contemplate, no matter how much alcohol is served. The prize for attempting to run the invitational gauntlet and emerge only minimally scathed earns one the distinction of being known as "antisocial," as if not attending an event threatened others' ability to do so. This stands in distinct contrast to the designation of persons with little or no libido as asexual rather than anti-sexual; they rarely interfere with others' fun.

Underlying the convivial norm is the assumption that solitude is inherently undesirable, and sometimes it can be. Working in small groups was crucial to the survival of our hunter-gatherer ancestors, and larger clusters have permitted—for good and ill—the specialization needed for sedentary agriculture and later industrial societies. At any stage of

civilization, there remain plenty of places where and times when one shouldn't walk alone.

In this context enforced solitude represents the sternest punishment. Execution can be over with quickly, but expulsion from the group and its resources means a living death, and in extreme climates quite possibly a slow and painful one. Anyone who enjoys air conditioning and running water can only imagine the desert psalmist's cry "I am cut off." It thus seems fair to wonder if the United States' refraining from exile as a sentence stems from the Eighth Amendment prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment. Tangent to exile is solitary confinement, which for even the most confirmed introverts represents too much of a good thing.

Solitude, moreover, is associated with "the solitary vice" targeted in anti-masturbation hysterias of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—as is someone alone had no other options until the next telephone call or knock at the door. Snickering aside, hotels' "Do Not Disturb" signs may well have benefited more lone travelers reading or napping than any number of trysting couples or individuals pleasuring themselves. With or without hairy palms and a sidewalk-sweeping cane, some simply need less contact than others with the world that is too much with them.

Once solitude is deemed suspect, those who seek it out are likely to be regarded in a far from positive light. What kind of person is not drawn to the safety and pleasures of the community: solidarity, fellow-feeling, *Gemütlichkeit*? In other words, what is wrong with him/her/them?

Labels are applied like diagnoses of illness, and statistical deviance is conflated with the moral variety. The prevailing gregarious norm goes unquestioned in the sense that perhaps takes too literally Alexander Pope's dictum "Whatever is, is right." Suffering from stunted growth and tuberculosis of the spine, he might have meant this in only a very general way.

To use an unfortunate verbifications of recent decades, the "othering" of the less sociable features prominently in popular culture. The serial killer or mass murderer is often described as a "quiet man" and possibly one "who kept to himself" or simply a "loner." Yet a horrifically expanding sample casts doubt on that association. Wayne Gacy, Ted Bundy and BTK Killer Dennis Rader were active and well-known in their communities, if not universally liked, and spree killer Richard Speck seemed to enjoy an alarmingly active social (and sexual) life in prison. The perception of the solitary as threat to society has nonetheless been perpetuated to the point of self-parody. In *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*, Paul Rubens' protagonist cautions love interest Dottie not to "get mixed up" with him because he is "a loner, a rebel," like any number of characters whose directors expected their actors to say as much while keeping a straight face.

As for heroes, the Lone Ranger in fact works with Tonto, and Batman with Robin. Superman acts alone in his superhero morph, but mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent interacts with a wide range of Gothamites, if far less than he would wish with Lois Lane.

If a penchant for solitude is conflated with vice or downright evil, conviviality is often seen as prima facie evidence of virtue. Pascal once noted that most of the world's problems stemmed from people's inability to sit alone quietly in a room, but he can be dismissed as a sickly nerd, and a religious fanatic to boot. At an outdoor meet-up of dog owners, a person too busy talking to notice that his dog has defecated may end up better regarded member than the more reticent person who steadfastly picks up after her companion animal. By these premises civic virtue in the absence of social intercourse does not exist—one apparently cannot contribute to the common weal or the polis without explicitly interacting with its members. If a tree falls in a forest, and so on, the implicit answer is NO.

Judgment of the less sociable, though, is not however, always based on moral criteria. Such judgment can instead involve a frank assessment of aptitudes, tinged with pity. Polite conversation often skirts evaluations of this sort, but *in vino veritas*.

In *cervisia* as well. To wit: in our twenties, a high school friend of mine joined me in visiting a third friend who was tending bar where my father had worked part-time some two decades before. All three of us present soon found ourselves in a cabbages-and-kings discussion with a barstool philosopher named Perry. He seemed not have been much older than us, but from his beer garden perch he had apparently seen a great deal. This allowed him to note that both of us on his side of the bar possessed a "high IQ." He went on to say that my friend was obviously more intelligent because he "talked more."

This came as news to both of us. My friend—now a commercial airline pilot and published author—was taller, better-looking, more athletic and far more charismatic, but my test scores, grades and other conventional measures of intelligence had always been greater. But in the eyes of Perry (IQ unknown), I wasn't merely a geek, but a second-rate one at that. A nerd manqué, I had aimed low and missed.

The epilogue to our cheap drafts with Perry suggests that he was far from alone in his thinking. The first time I told this story, I met with the response "Maybe you should talk more." It could happen, just as two-headed turtles have hatched and survived into adulthood. But this leaves unquestioned the fallacy, once exuberantly voiced by Sammy Hagar, that there is only one way to rock.

Jim Harrison has more reflectively questioned various subcultures' desire to impose a "monoethic"—only one way to exist and behave, or only one such way that is presumably normative and superior to all others. Unfortunately, monoethics abound. I once read of a hard-charging entrepreneur who not only did not attend a liberal arts college but also believed that liberal arts colleges should not exist. Less

numerous, and perhaps fortunately so, is the artist explicitly contemptuous of non-artists, or at least those who fail to appreciate his work. Others are the provincial Manhattanite, or the dour individual whose radio is set to the local NPR affiliate and who lives in her own private Vermont.

All of these monoethics, though, depend on a degree of specialization that can severely restrict contact with individuals much different than oneself and makes it easy to forget the extent to which we often depend on others precisely because they differ from ourselves in aptitude and inclination—including an inclination to spend little time with others. Even the simplest stages of social organization have included specialists, but the shaman would have known the village's leading hunter, and both would have known the potter. The warriors and sages of antiquity were likewise symbiotic, regularly exposed to if not necessarily appreciative of each other's different gifts. Some, like Sophocles, played both parts.

In these settings traits represent differences in proportions rather than complete otherness. Non-specialists are sometimes expected to partake of one another's traits, withdrawing as a rite of passage rather than a lifelong vocation. The Australian Aboriginal walkabout falls under this heading, as do the Native American vision quest and biblical times of fasting and prayer in the wilderness. Descent from none of these is readily apparent in the present-day corporate "retreat" of PowerPoint presentations in chilly conference rooms, interspersed with periods of enforced conviviality like those found in any other setting.

In a culture that gives rise to such events it is hardly surprising that solitude is disparaged and those who seek it out morally as well as statistically deviant. Largely unknown, solitude is seen as monolithic and its devotees all unpleasantly alike.

But what if solitude represents more than the preferred habitat of some subspecies of bloodless troglodytes?

And what if it is not so much an experiential widget as a container of multitudes? Solitudes have long been viewed as differing among themselves, each a mute testimony to the ineffability of experience. In this spirit Rilke famously described the two solitudes that stand together in romantic love. Other solitudes can fall together by chance or be yoked together by violence, if necessary. In this spirit Canadian novelist Hugh MacLennan took Rilke's words for both the epigraph and the title of his novel on the physical proximity of his country's Anglophone and Francophone communities, and the cultural gulf between them. Hundreds of such solitudes cover the world.

Individual solitude also takes many forms. The most obvious is physical separation, but this does little to convey differences in the interiority of experience, or how solitudes vary in quality.

Solitude's bad reputation may arise, in a corollary to Gresham's Law, from a lack of contact with the genuine article. Many are instead compelled to spend much of their waking hours in what could be called pseudosolitude, which combines the worst features of both physical isolation and social interaction. Pseudosolitude may not have originated with industrial or post-industrial life, but our era has perversely perfected it.

Let us consider—because it has been thrust upon us—the office cubicle. Invented by Robert Propst and first sold by manufacturer Herman Miller as the Action Office II in 1967, the cubicle was originally designed to replace the open offices that have perversely come back in fashion. It has since ranked with the multi-modal shipping container as one of the most blandly powerful innovations of the last century. Propst's intentions notwithstanding, the contemporary cubicle farm places white-collar workers in a series of enclosures designed to minimize real estate costs by maximizing the number of work stations in a given area without redundant expenditures on acoustically meaningful walls or, in some settings, close proximity to windows and natural light.

The same approach arguably underlies concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), better known as factory farms. Whether this spatial arrangement contributes to workplace shootings represents an intriguing research question. Perhaps Temple Grandin, whose insights have improved slaughterhouse conditions, could offer similar advice for offices.

Penned in a small but hardly private place, like calves en route to veal, the typical office worker is out of visual contact with his colleagues, the better to focus on a monitor and perform certain narrowly defined clerical or symbolic analytical tasks. Though deprived of visual contact with others, the worker bee is nonetheless exposed to the sounds of telephone calls, music of not necessarily compatible tastes and the clicking of keyboards; knuckle-cracking and nail-clipping are optional. The cubicle wall's Maginot Line is no more resistant to odors. The worker's sense of vulnerability is reinforced by the typical placement of the work station's seat facing away from its entrance—a choice avoided by gangsters as well as higher animals. This arrangement calls for vigilance that readily edges over into hypervigilance, like a long-haul trucker strung out on caffeine and possibly other stimulants, but without a trucker's opportunity to exercise mastery of skills and autonomy in action.

The cubicle farmer is thus, to mix metaphors, perpetually dangled in the limbo of the firehouse—a condition of high responsibility and low control, but without the fireman's possibilities of life-affirming risk, clear-cut results or public appeal; a grocery bagger, postal clerk or similar assembly-line worker experiences similar frustrations. Yet no firehouse has been the birthplace of a great work of art, science or philosophy, nor has any mailroom. Charles Bukowski worked in a post office before he was able to write full time, but his writing served as a rebuttal to his day job rather than an affirmation of its possibilities. When drink, pari-mutuel betting and misguided sex all fail,

autonomous creation is the last arrow in the quiver of psychic defense.

Less literal cubicles abound. Rush-hour solo driving simply puts the cubicle in motion, while short commutes on public transportation pose similar issues. A functional person's city bus or subway consists largely of attempting not to encroach on others and avoiding others' encroachments, the latter easier said than done.

A more subtle version of pseudosolitude occurs in the de facto training cubicles college and university computer "labs." Given limits on hours of access and time of use, and no guarantee that others will follow posted instructions to avoid loud conversation and telephone calls, any work done is that of a proverbial long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Like the cubicle farmer, the computer lab rat often must leave his/her back exposed to a common area and must remain vigilant at some atavistic level. As Special Agent Dale Cooper noted in the first season of *Twin Peaks*, "once a traveler leaves his home he loses almost 100% of his ability to control his environment," and seeking some degree of equilibrium drains mental space and energy from deep concentration. Studying at Ottawa's Carleton University in the early 1990s, I suspected that the great thoughts of the late twentieth century were not arising from the Dunton Tower computer lab.

Where those great thoughts did occur may not yet be known, but, like the great thoughts of other centuries, they are likely to arisen from what could be called genuine solitude. Archimedes was presumably bathing alone with his thoughts when he arrived at water displacement as a means to measure the volume of irregularly shaped objects. If he weren't, he wouldn't have needed to go into the streets of Syracuse to shout *Eureka*! A recent poll similarly found that many writers get their best ideas in the shower.

Trees join tubs and showers as sponsors of solitude. Newton was presumably alone with a falling apple when he

discovered gravity. In a contemporary example, the poet Myra Sklarew once note to a writing class that, while the workshop had its uses, she preferred to think poetry as taking place under a tree somewhere.

The room of Pascal's thought, though, is available in all weathers. Virginia Woolf's corollary of the need for a "room of one's own" has become a cliché; it is at least more attainable than her much less cited co-requirement of five thousand pounds a year, a handsome sum at the time. The violation of such a sanctuary in the previous century entered legend as the visitor from Porlock who broke the inspiration and possible opiate spell in which Coleridge was composing "Kubla Khan." The ghost of this story informs the artist's colony rule against visiting a studio uninvited. More explicitly, Wordsworth sang the praises of solitude in a Romantics answer to the intrusions of the English Industrial Revolution.

At least one of its productions, though, has created a space for genuine solitude. Anthony Trollope wrote some of his novels while commuting by train to London and a high-ranking position in the Royal Postal Service. Extended train travel—say a half hour or more—offers a delineated period of unbounded solitude, not unlike the meditation alarm clocks, effectively spiritual egg timers, advertised in Buddhist magazines. A similar commute has until recently served Scott Turow between his home in the North Shore suburbs of Chicago and the downtown offices of the law firm of Sonnenschein, Nath and Rosenthal; in this mobile studio he wrote *Presumed Innocent* and subsequent novels.

Air travel can also, if less dependably, afford a space for solitude. Poet Robert Phillips notes that much of his writing is done on airports and in airplanes. And so has much of this essay. The "special security announcement" made every several minutes becomes the filtered babbling on an incoherent Leviathan, along with other forms of white noise. Perhaps not coincidentally, the security of airports can be compared to that of jails; the history of prison writing from Saint Paul to Malcolm X deserves its own library of studies, as does the parallel tradition of writing from insane asylums.

Such solitudes, though, are rarely available on the writer's terms.

For all their preindustrial pedigree, ships have a mixed record. If the prevailing account is correct, John Newton wrote "Amazing Grace" in the wake of an Atlantic storm that buffeted his slaving ship: emotion expressed in urgency rather than recollected in tranquility. That situation seems far less favorable to works of other than lyric mood or length. The less immediately eventful voyage of the *Beagle*, however, gave Charles Darwin the secular monk's cell of his cabin in which to compile and analyze the observations that became *The Origin of Species*.

Cafes and taverns provide a longer and possibly more prolific lineage. Thomas Paine is believed to have composed much of *The Rights of Man* at London's Olde Red Lion, and in the popular imagination French literature, give or take a Proust in a cork-lined office, is assumed to be written at a sidewalk café. The spread of café culture in North America follows the Parisian example. Many of the seats in both chain and independent coffeehouses are taken by lone individuals attending to books, papers and computers in the now-proverbial "third place" that is neither home nor standard place of employment. Eating and drinking is a secondary concern, if not a pretext. Like an hourglass or the water clocks of antiquity, the cup of coffee is the interval for which one rents office space.

All of these settings can provide the possibility if not the certainty of genuine solitude. Yet none of these settings is on its surface comparable to better-known redoubts of solitude such as the wilderness or a cabin on Walden Pond, marked by physical isolation.

Public venues clearly are not, even as they suffice for writing or any form of solitude for which writing serves as a proxy. Loneliness in a crowd, lamented to the point of cliché, is answered by an individual's stroll through a great city, attending to his thoughts more than his surroundings, in the spirit of Walter Benjamin's *flâneurie*, an experience that

points to the essence of genuine solitude. Others may be present—and not necessarily as the staff of a Sartrean Hell—and sensory stimulus may occur, but none of them require immediate attention on the part of the solitary person. Dishes may clatter, lighted signs blink, and horns honk, but one can leave their management to others while engaged in greater or lesser thought, or none. We might sit like Pascal, or wander like Wordsworth's cloud, but alone rather than lonely. We might hear the small still voice that addressed the prophets, or simply our blood coursing through our eardrums.

But watching and listening may lead to more listening and more watching. Those points in time could be drawn into untold constellations of thought. What Chesterton said of Christianity can also be said of genuine solitude: it has not been tried and found wanting, but found wanting and left untried. In those scarce times of genuine solitude, we can ask what might happen if we tried it more often and made it more available for others.

How many answers might others provide on their own?