

# ON LONELY, LINESS

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Dear friends,

Thank you for engaging with ON LONELINESS, my holiday season audio special. I'm pleased to share with you here the poetry you heard in the recording, including some of my own.

I call my work "deliberately internal" and this is why. We all carry vast secret worlds inside us: my own secret world is a source of both isolation and strength. The connections between our internal selves form a network along which flows empathy: empathy is a force for good.

Wishing you the best,

Amy Wilson  
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## SPECIAL THANKS TO:

CHRISTOPHER ANKNEY

ANNA BELEW

EMILY CLADER

LOIS KANE

DANE LARSEN

JIM MANHEIM

BO REN

CAROLYN RACINE

HOLLY PAINTER





SECTION I:

EXPERIENCING  
LONELINESS

## LONG AFTERNOONS

(Adam Zagajewski, translated by Clare Cavanagh; 1998)

Those were the long afternoons when poetry left me.  
The river flowed patiently, nudging lazy boats to sea  
Long afternoons, the coast of ivory  
Shadows lounged in the streets, haughty manikins in shopfronts  
stared at me with bold and hostile eyes.

Professors left their school with vacant faces  
as if the Illiad had finally done them in.  
Evening papers brought disturbing news,  
but nothing happened, no one hurried.  
There was no one in the windows, you weren't there;  
even nuns seemed ashamed of their lives.

Those were the long afternoons when poetry vanished  
and I was left with the city's opaque demon,  
like a poor traveller stranded outside the Gare du Nord  
with his bulging suitcase wrapped in twine  
and September's black rain falling.

Oh, tell me how to cure myself of irony, the gaze  
that sees but doesn't penetrate; tell me how to cure myself  
of silence.

*From Mysticism for Beginners, published by Farrar Strauss & Giroux.*

## IMPERFECTIONS

(Amy Wilson; 2015)

But of course it is a pain beyond words to see my own self as others see me;  
I can't forgive my jawline, my thick waist, my fluttering voice and lisp,  
that my cheeks grow up over my eyes in photos. Of course it never occurs to me  
that my cheeks are just trying to protect my soul –

why wouldn't they be, when everything else about me is?

To be seen, let me just say it, is my biggest fear and greatest longing.  
Should I not just say it?

There is no watercolor painting, no street art, no ripped-open-animal-carcass, no stand of  
pine that will say this for me. "No one will ever love you for your honesty."

The hand of the world is too cruel and smart; that I am a true romantic is the curse with  
which I was born. All I want is everything, a love that waltzes.  
I'm only a reckless observer, discovering what I already knew:  
though the voice flutters and the jaw is weak, the heart does not speak but is not dumb.



SECTION II:

OBSERVING  
LONELINESS

## LOT'S WIFE

(Anna Akhmatova, translated by Meryl Natchez; 1924)

God's luminous messenger, larger than life,  
Led the one righteous man along the black mountain.  
But regret cried out to his wife:  
"It's not too late, you can still catch a glimpse

of Sodom, the red rooftops of home,  
The square where you sang, the yard where you spun,  
The tall house, its windows abandoned –  
The house where your daughters and sons were born."

She looked back – a sudden arc of pain  
Stripped her eyes of sight,  
Fused her feet to the ground –  
Her flesh became transparent salt.

Who will mourn this nameless woman?  
She seems the least of all we lack.  
Yet I, for one, can never forget  
How she gave her life for one look back.

*This translation appears in Poems from the Stray Dog Café, published by hit & run press.*

## AN ACCOUNT

(Amy Wilson; 2015)

The man on the subway wears earbuds and a do-rag and a sweatshirt with an anxious iguana on it, bright yellow. His companion reads Huey Newton and carries a pink plastic bag from Ricky's. Her curly hair, her perched pink knit beret, are perfect. Her warm plaid coat, her black lipstick. They were on the train when I got here. They are black.

His skateboard is hooked over the side railing of his seat. I hear the clicking sound and look up from my book, which is describing homesickness in delicate exquisite detail. It is *Brooklyn* by Colm Toibin. I am feeling sorry for myself. He is solving a Rubik's cube.

Swift and irregular clicking, well-practiced. I see him come close, one side all orange, and continue on. Can't leave that one side all orange I suppose. The expression on his face never changes. Only his hands show what must be a huge and restless intelligence. I think of an octopus and how it will starve itself to death. I think of an octopus and how it will predict the future. The clicking stops.

He holds the cube in his palms and they get off at 6th Avenue. "It's not that many stops between 14th and 59th," he says to her. I have one more stop to go, but the itching in my own heart feels slightly better now.





SECTION III:

UNDERSTANDING  
LONELINESS

## BETWEEN MOUNTAIN AND SEA

(Norman MacCraig; 1984)

Honey and salt – land smell and sea smell,  
As in the long ago, as in forever.

The days pick me up and carry me off,  
Half-child, half-prisoner,

On their journey that I'll share  
For a while.

They wound and they bless me  
With strange gifts:

The salt of absence,  
The honey of memory.

*Originally published in Voice-Over by Chatto & Windus;  
collected in The Many Days: Selected Poems of Norman MacCaig by Polygon.*

## THE WOMEN IN THE LAND'S END CATALOG

(Amy Wilson; 2015)

have long hair with wispy ends and deep green eyes that look straight into the camera.  
Slight lines around the mouth and eyes.  
Probably smell of cashmeran, that note in perfume that smells like off-white.

make me think, maybe I should buy a raspberry cotton chevron tunic,

maybe someday I'll have a swing in my backyard.

I want to look age as directly in the face as this woman looks at me from the pages of the Land's End Fall 2015 womenswear catalog.

I believe there will be stability there, a place to fold my treasured sweaters.

I know two straight lines can only ever meet once, so it's a good thing  
none of us are straight lines.