

HOW TO READ A POEM DURING A PANDEMIC | TJ BEITELMAN

Venture into the world, timidly, with provisions: water in a metal bottle decorated with cherry blossoms, some peanuts in a plastic jar, sunscreen (past the expiration date), a hat, a mask your wife knitted for you (the multicolored one), your music, two books, good shoes for all terrain. A lightweight backpack for holding it all in.

Drive to the state park, three-point-something miles from your back door, meander to the north trailhead parking lot, park.

Strap the pack on. Hit play. (“Life ain’t fair and the world is mean.” —S. Simpson)
Walk.

Take the easy trail for a while, the slow incline. Wide smooth path.

Passing people, people passing you, feels—you can’t help it—like dying a little bit. Hold your breath as long as you can. Even behind the mask. When you pass the cordial (unmasked) college kids and finally take in a breath, yes, that’s weed you smell. How much viral load in a contact high? Don’t answer. Don’t want to know.

Turn onto the White trail, not least to put distance between yourself and anybody else. It’s harder going, steeper, rockier, narrower in places. Soon you’re walking along the spine of the highest ridge in the park. By now you’re well into the second of the two records you downloaded. Silence around the corner.

When it comes, stop. Take off the headphones. Drink some water. Watch a hawk glide, a mile, two miles away.

Keep walking.

Find where the narrow path opens into a clearing interspersed with lean, spindly trees. If you were Annie Dillard you would know the names of the trees and later, when you’re back on the wide path that leads to the trailhead, you would know what kind of owl it is that stares down at you, wraith-like, from its plain-view perch in a tree three feet from the path. And you would write a timeless, classic, mystical essay about that bird, about this moment of uneasy communion between the two of you. Part nightmare, part numinous vision.

You’re not Annie Dillard.

Stay in the moment. Don’t fast forward. Don’t flash back.

In the clearing, stop, pull from your pack one of the books, the thinner one. The poems. Open it somewhere, anywhere, and read the poem there. Read it as if it is a personal prayer, a prophesy, for this very moment. The poem is about hammering nails into wood to build an improbable house along a ridge. (As it happens, it’s a house you’ve been to: you know the poet.) It’s a poem about feeling sound, how what is invisible can have a presence. Read the poems around it. How they speak to each other, and to this moment: Trees have names, names you can know, they are more than alive. A place is never just a place. It lives inside you, even if something vital in you never belonged there.

Close the book. Drink some water. Thread your arms through the pack’s straps and descend the ridge, in this rich silence, toward home.

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