



The Pursuit of (un)Happiness and Other Sad Stories

by Victoria Cooper

I thought about it when I crossed the road
When I turned off the lights
Or slammed the front door behind me

I felt it when I put my book down
Made a cup of tea for one
Or walked into a crowded room

I saw it at dinner table place settings
Ladies hiding behind large glossy magazines
Men with pints and crosswords and sleeping dogs

I read it in newspaper articles:
“I am 15 and I feel like dying because nobody cares about me”
“I feel alone. What should I do?”
“I have a job I enjoy; however, I have no friends.”

I could taste it with every bite of my meal for one
Each single serving of cottage pie
And each small tin of baked beans opened

I heard it when I listened to radio dramas
In the staff room over consoling conversations
But mostly in the deafening late night silences

I knew it was a national crisis for Japan
Hikikomori, a word invented for techno hermits
I knew it was a virus that increased my mortality by 26%

I knew I reeked of it; the bad smell following me
The stench of it repelling others, never drawing them near
My fingers smelled of it when I combed my daughter's hair
And I could not wash it off

My friend, enemy and lover.
My one sure thing in an uncertain world
It lay down with me each night, spooning my hollow back,
Sleeping soundly between husband and wife

I spoke it fluently each morning while I burnt the toast
And each time I used a machine to pay for petrol
I heard my footsteps on the footpath
And was reassured by their echo

I knew the secret that scares us all
The canker sore that grows if left untended
Consumes you within and then without; to die alone

Loneliness is the unnamed disease
That lies cold-hearted and stiff against my heart
Each beat tries to kill me and yet it is the ache that keeps me alive.