Robinson, When I Was a Child

But I think it was in fact peculiarly Western to feel no tie of particularity to any single past or history, to experience that much underrated thing called deracination, the medi-tative, free appreciation of whatever comes under one's eye, without any need to make such tedious judgments as "mine" and
"not mine."

Idaho society at that time at least seemed to lack the sense of social class which elsewhere makes culture a system of signs and passwords, more or less entirely without meaning except as it identifies groups and subgroups. I think it is indifference to these codes among Westerners that makes Easterners think they are without culture.

As an aspect of my own intellectual life as a bookish child in the far West I was given odds and ends-Dido pining on her flaming couch, Lewis and Clark mapping the wilderness— without one being set apart from the other as especially likely to impress or satisfy anyone. We were simply given these things with the assurance that they were valuable and important in no specific way. I imagine a pearl diver finding a piece of statuary under the Mediterranean, a figure immune to the crush of depth though up to its waist in sand and blue with cold, in tatters of seaweed, its eyes blank with astonishment, its lips parted to make a sound in some lost dialect, its hand lifted to a city long since lost beyond indifference.
The diver might feel pity at finding so human a thing in so cold a place. It might be his privilege to react with a sharper recognition than anyone in the living world could do, though he had never heard the name of Phidias or Myron. The things we learned were in the same way, merely given for us to make what meaning we could have them.

The peculiarities of my early education are one way in which being from the West has set me apart. A man in Alabama asked me how I felt the West was different from the East and the South, and I replied that in the West "lonesome" is a word with strongly positive connotations. I must have phrased my answer better at the time, because both he and I were struck by the aptness of the remark, and people in Alabama are far too sensitive to language to be pleased with a phrase such as "strongly positive connotations." For the moment it will have to serve, however.

It must have been at evening that I heard the word "lonesome" spoken in tones that let me know the privilege attached to it, the kind of democratic privilege that comes with simple deserving. I think it is correct to regard the West as a moment in history much larger than its own. My grandparents and people like them had a picture in their houses of a stag on a cliff, admiring a radiant moon, or a maiden in classical draperies, on the same cliff, admiring the same moon. It was a specimen of decayed Victorianism. In that period mourning, melancholy, regret, and loneliness were high sentiments, as they were for the psalmist and for Sophocles, for the Anglo-Saxon poets and for Shakespeare.
In modern culture these are seen as pathologies—alienation and inauthenticity in Europe, maladjustment and depression in the United States. At present, they seem to flourish only in vernacular forms, country-and-western music being one of these. The moon has gone behind a cloud, and I'm so lonesome I could die.
It seems to me that, within limits the Victorians routinely transgressed, the exercise of finding the ingratiating qualities of grave or fearful experience is very wholesome and stabilizing. I am vehemently grateful that, by whatever means, I learned to assume that loneliness should be in part pleasure, sensitizing and clarifying, and that it is even a truer bond among people than any kind of proximity. It may be mere historical conditioning, but when I see a man or a woman alone, he or she looks mysterious to me, which is only to say that for a moment I see another human being clearly.