

LOOK AT ME . . .
I HAVE NOTHING TO HIDE



I'm Fuckin lonely & INSECURE
I'm STUCK in this Hotel
I NEED A DRINK --
TO FORGET
TO MAKE ME FEEL SECURE
William H. 82

Jim Goldberg,
Untitled, 1983

Jim Goldberg had a deceptively simple idea: to make portraits of people in their bathrooms, bedrooms or front porches, then print them out in black and white with large borders, and give them back to their subjects to write down, with total honesty, how they feel about themselves. In one example, a mother and a young daughter are in a modest tidy kitchen. The caption reads: 'We look like ordinary people! We have a terrible life.' In another, a distinguished-seeming lady sits on the edge of a bed in a run-down motel: 'I will not allow this loneliness to destroy me, I STILL HAVE MY DREAMS ... Countess Vivianna de Blonville.' And then there is our man, trying to appease his self-hatred while losing his mind.

In the series, we sense the tragic irony of all the mistaken efforts we typically make to keep up appearances in the hope that this will make us acceptable and win others over. With no evil intent, but simply out of a hunger for love, we lie: we declare that we are fine, that things are on the up, that we're OK really, while inside, we long, we sob and we despair. We believe that we are doing others a favour, but we are only compounding the isolation that is killing us all. Our upbeat pronouncements serve to box everyone in; no one can find a way to commune around what are, in truth, universally distributed pains. Lies beget lies. The price of honesty becomes ever higher.

Goldberg's work tries to help us break the chain. Beneath the surface, we are all in various stages of agony, as the scrawls in the margins of his pictures attest. The visual evidence is usually slight, even nonexistent. 'He looked so happy,' they so often say of those who have recently jumped off bridges. We are ready for friendship and its consolations when we can trust that things are almost never OK for anyone.

We are lonely because we keep forgetting that while success impresses, awes and generates envy, it is only failure, vulnerability and the confession of madness and grief that draw sympathy and connect us to others. We should keep more of our desperation in view; we shouldn't just scrawl it on the edge of photos, we should intimate it to others when we next have them over for supper. Honesty about our pain is a gift, not a burden.



Alec Dawson,
Nobody Claps Any More, 2014

We'll never know exactly what it is that brought her to such despair, late at night, in the gloomy dark of the kitchen. But we can imagine the broad contours of her anguish because we know our own versions so intimately. She feels that no one can understand her, that her misery is shameful, that she is utterly alone and beyond sympathy.

What she can't see, perhaps, but that we might notice in the image, are the small intimations of tenderness: the moonlight lovingly silvers her arms and gently rounded stomach; her underwear is endearingly innocent and child-like; the softness of the tea towel behind her suggests the softness of the words we would, ideally, murmur. We don't see her, as she sees herself, as a worthless failure. We see her as one of us, as broken, frail, unhappy but deeply in need, and worthy of great compassion and kindness. If only we could, and if only we knew how, we'd want her to feel how much intimate goodwill we have for her; how her unknown pain moves us.

Our closeness to her in her distress is the great message of the work. At our own lowest ebb, we think no one could ever look at our shame-ridden selves and feel genuinely close to us and powerfully and generously moved. We can't imagine someone wanting to stand by us, put their arms around us and love us more, not less, because we are so deeply

unhappy. We think that our failings, errors, misfortunes and misery cast us out from the human community, which is interested only in our buoyant facade. We suppose that anyone who sees us now – even the people we're otherwise closest to – would disdain us as weak, incapable fools who deserve our troubles.

And yet, we ourselves have proved the reverse. Our brains may resist the conclusion intellectually, but we know it first hand, right here, in front of this piece of art: in most people, our distress doesn't provoke contempt, it opens their hearts and brings them, gently and quietly, to our sides.



Robert Adams,
*Longmont, Colorado from What We Bought:
 The New World, Scenes from the Denver
 Metropolitan Area, 1970–1974*

One of the reasons why we may suddenly break down without warning is that we have not been able to flex over the years. We have been too stoic, at great cost to ourselves. We have kept going. We have maintained our optimistic manner. We have driven for hours around the Denver metropolitan area to see our clients, stopping off for meals at unsociable times of the day and night in vast, brightly lit, air-conditioned supermarkets, where we have gone through company reports over a milkshake to the sound of price promotions and jingles.

Robert Adams' subject has been carefully placed in the middle of the photograph, at the very centre of our focal point, to underscore his significance, but he is also – purposefully – a tiny, hunched figure, a boy at a school desk, redolent of submission and impotent dutifulness. He is powerless in the face of the vast alienated supermarket and the cold, functional, commercialised modernity it represents. The picture is subtly eloquent about everything that shouldn't normally be felt in this sort of place: the extent of our pain and frustration, the scale of our longing for love and beauty, our sense of suffocation, our loneliness and exhaustion.

To stand up and to start to scream, perhaps to take off all our clothes and bang the table in rage, would only look like madness;

in fact, it might be the clearest sign yet of an ongoing capacity for health. We might inconvenience other shoppers; perhaps the police would have to be called; we might end up at home lying mute in bed for weeks. The family would panic but, amidst the chaos, there would be some kind of confused bid for well-being – a desire to renegotiate the terms of life, a wish to set things up for the future on a more authentic basis.

There are versions of normality that require us to lose our minds when we consider them properly. There is little in the photograph that could rightly be counted as sane; this is a portrait of a distinctively modern kind of hell that we would have every right to protest against via outbreaks of so-called folly. Under our aegis, the man should get up and shout, 'Enough!' Sometimes, the best thing we might do to ensure our sanity is to go mad for a while.



Edgar Degas,
Family Portrait, 1858-1869

The northern European mid-19th century in a luxurious bourgeois apartment; the high-water mark of not expressing feelings. It's a family portrait, traditionally the opportunity to show off our best, but Degas has done us a favour by painting that far more interesting (and common) of things: a dysfunctional family; in this case, his own. Laura, Degas' aunt, looks into the middle distance as if she were at a funeral; Baron Gennaro Bellelli, her husband, scowls with his back to us. The two children, decked out in their finest, strive to keep up appearances. A few weeks after the sitting, Laura wrote in despair to her nephew that her home was 'immensely disagreeable and dishonest ... Living with Gennaro, whose detestable nature you know ... will soon lead me to the grave.' We understand.

Little Giulia, with one leg tucked under, is still young enough to be playful. But the one who knows and really counts is the timid and thoughtful observer on the left, holding our gaze discreetly yet firmly; 10-year-old Giovanna, Degas' favourite cousin, whispering to us across time: *I don't know what to do. I love them, but it is awful here.*

We're usually encouraged to worry about naughty children, the ones who grow up delinquent, disobey their parents and graffiti the underpass. But we should worry as much, if not more, about overly good children, the ones

who seek to please everyone and who don't know how to complain or get angry; the ones whose parents, because of their depression or fury, give them no room to rebel. They are the ones who people-please, who always assume that they are in the wrong, who invariably put their needs below those of others and who are headed for illness. They might be us.

Giovanna touches us because she is so well behaved in an environment that doesn't merit her respect. She is too keen not to rock the boat. She knows exactly what her mother – with a supervising hand on her shoulder – wants of her and how many sad things she has on her mind. She's aware how easily her father can lose his temper; furniture is regularly smashed around here. There's not much room left for her to feel or say anything.

Giovanna grew up into a sick and unhappy adult. We ourselves may have been far too good for far too long; we may have tried too hard to please and accommodate ourselves to difficult and punitive people. It might be time for us to dare to get usefully awkward for a while.



Cy Twombly,
Untitled, 1954

It's a sign of enlightenment that such works can now be taken seriously and discussed with respect; that we have collectively allowed ourselves to become aware of some of what is going on inside a vigorous scribble and all it can represent.

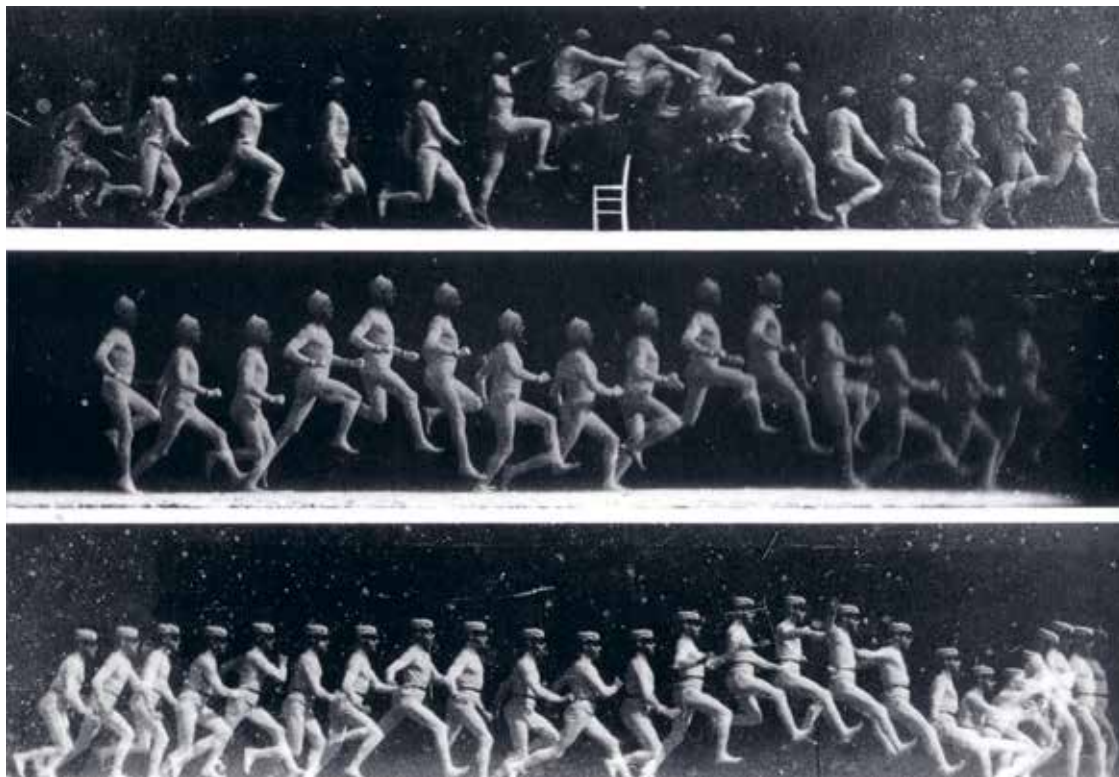
For most of our lives, we aren't allowed to show too much of our untrammelled selves in public. We have to speak in finished sentences and aspire to make sense. But there is so much more unfolding within. One of Twombly's goals was to give visual expression to consciousness; his subject was our inner mystery, entanglement, muted drama and lawlessness. He shows us what it is like to think and to feel a long time before we're able to produce anything as socialised as an idea or a sentence. He made maps of what goes on in the busy back room of the mind, which we rarely allow others into, let alone much acknowledge to ourselves.

The celebrated Irish novelist James Joyce had an analogous idea when he put a microphone inside his characters' heads in *Ulysses* and invited us to listen in: 'A quarter after what an unearthly hour I suppose they're just getting up in China now combing out their pigtails for the day well soon have the nuns ringing the angelus they've nobody coming in to spoil their sleep except an odd priest or two for his night office or the alarmclock next door

at cockshout clattering the brain out of itself let me see if I can doze off 1 2 3 4 5 what kind of flowers ...'

It's far from nonsense (and it takes genius to rescue it from inattention); it's a Twombly-like meditation on the mess that happens before we can make sense to other people, before we have combed our thoughts for the world.

We usually feel obliged to edit and simplify our thoughts remorselessly. Twombly is giving space to the original mystery, to show us what happens when we aren't trying to censor and adjust to the demands of someone else. There is so much more to us than we are encouraged to realise. We should follow Twombly into the depths and hold our nerve around the mesmerising disarray. We'll be a great deal more interesting, and eventually a lot calmer, the more of the inner tumult we can bear to look at and reflect on.



Étienne-Jules Marey,
The Running Jump, 1882

Étienne-Jules Marey was a 19th-century French pioneer of chronophotography: the art of splitting up complex movements into their parts and arranging them across a single image. After inventing a chronophotographic ‘gun camera’ that took twelve consecutive frames a second, Marey fixed a small piece of gold foil to a moth’s wings and recorded the particular figure-of-eight shape these make when beating in flight. Then Marey became interested in birds and photographed the landing of a heron, a duck, a pelican and a seagull, before shifting to observe the motion of sheep, donkeys, molluscs, dogs, reptiles and a jellyfish he found in the Bay of Naples.

Along the way, he was able to answer for the first time the mystery of whether a galloping horse ever has four hooves off the ground at the same time (it does) and how a falling cat manages to land on its feet (it uses the inertia of its own mass, proposed Marey, thereby ending a mid-Victorian vogue for throwing cats out of windows to learn more). Shortly before he died, Marey made a landmark study of fifty-eight kinds of smoke as they blew over a variety of differently sized objects.

Marey’s images of a jump remind us of our usual inability to notice more than a fraction of what is actually happening within our apparently simplest actions. Most of what we

do slips through our fingers. Our blindness applies as much to the psychological realm as it does to the physical one; however complicated walking or jumping might be, nothing compares with the number of nuanced steps involved in dynamics like ‘trying to get through to my child’, ‘breaking up with a lover’ or ‘searching for approval from a withholding parent’. Imagine if we were also able to break down such events into their parts.

Marey’s images bid us to try to slow down time so that we can grasp more about the often pained but elusive lives we lead. Fortunately, we do have equivalents to gun cameras in the psychological sphere. They are called diaries, discussions with friends who listen well, psychotherapy sessions and long baths, all of which help us to go carefully through our emotions and tease out what is happening to us beneath our anxiety or anger, desire or guilt. The movements of our hearts are no less complex than those of a heron’s wing and are as rewarding to isolate and study. Our perturbances will abate when fewer of our feelings have been left to flutter and run without exploration.



Gustave Caillebotte,
Rooftops in the Snow, 1878

When it was first exhibited, at the Fourth Impressionist Exhibition in Paris in April 1879, Caillebotte's wintry picture attracted little attention. He wasn't a famous artist and the scene was far removed from anything that, then as now, visitors would typically consider appealing: sunny vistas, bright flowers, intriguing social situations, yachts on the water.

Caillebotte had painted the picture a few months before, gazing down for long hours from a window of his top-floor apartment onto the snow-covered rooftops of the neighbouring houses after an unusually heavy fall. It's a muffled, muted scene. The leaden sky is pregnant, the air is still and cold, there are no children's cries or clatter of passing carriages. It may already be past ten but no one is heading out anywhere; the shutters in the mansard roof opposite – normally thrown open to freshen the rooms and signal the start of the day – remain asleep.

What attracted Caillebotte was the mood the view promoted. Winter is as necessary and as inevitable a part of the meteorological – and by extension psychological – cycle as other more favoured seasons. We may be more used to perceiving the value of spring, summer and autumn; these may be the staples of the artistic eye, but winter has as much to teach us. Caillebotte encourages us to make our peace with the retreat of heat and light,

with the requirement to turn inward for a time, with the shortened days and weeks when, across the Île-de-France, snow blankets our usual impetuosity and enterprise.

We need periods of hibernation, when we can sit out the storms and the sadness, confident of eventually, in good time, being able to emerge revived into a less hostile climate. Caillebotte's gaze impresses us with its steadfastness; there is no need for panic or despair. There is a noble acceptance of the darkness and the bitter gusts. Best to stay inside. The earth may be hard now, but deep within its frozen particles it is already anticipating the return of the first clement winds. We should not be afraid of our sterile winter days. We can greet them with benevolence and curiosity, as they too belong to the natural cycle. However unlikely it might seem, the crocuses will re-emerge, the daffodils will in time gladden and restore us.



Louise Bourgeois,
The Insomnia Drawings (detail), 1994–1995

All her life, the celebrated French-American artist Louise Bourgeois had trouble sleeping. She would usually wake up at around two in the morning and not be able to get back to sleep until five. She would be haunted by memories of her domineering father; she was terrified of failure and poverty; she worried about how much she still wished to do and how little she had achieved in her own stern eyes.

Then, in the 1990s, Bourgeois – then in her 80s – decided to turn her sleepless hours to use. While still lying in bed, she created a remarkable body of work designed to steady her mind, contain her most vicious thoughts and return her to serenity and self-acceptance. She was to call these her *Insomnia Drawings*, of which there were more than 200.

What may touch us is how apparently simple they are: there are repeated lines, loops, squares, cross-hatchings and dots; there are doodles and squiggles, ears and (apparent) small feet. In order to appease her relentless mind, this hugely sophisticated, vibrant artist needed something repetitive, precise and absorbing to cling to. As she traced her red pen slowly and with an almost child-like air of concentration along the paper, another side of consciousness could set to work digesting her experiences, rearranging her sense of perspective and rebutting her fears. *Insomnia* was her mind's revenge for all the thoughts she

had carefully omitted to have in daylight hours; now, at night, with her drawings as guard rails, she could return order to her emotions.

What Bourgeois needed in these moments of fear wasn't anything obviously sophisticated: she needed a simple way of stabilising a latent complexity that threatened to overwhelm her. When similarly vicious jumpy moods visit us, we might benefit from analogous disciplines: walking carefully around a tree, weeding a flower bed, re-arranging a cupboard or cleaning the inside of a cutlery drawer. We won't directly solve our problems, but we will still our terrors by giving our wiser, less alarmed selves a chance to return and take the reins. The apparently artless, but in truth deeply intelligent and strategic, containment of panic should be counted among the highest of our mental tasks.