

## THE LONELY CITY

IMAGINE STANDING BY A WINDOW at night, on the sixth or seventeenth or forty-third floor of a building. The city reveals itself as a set of cells, a hundred thousand windows, some darkened and some flooded with green or white or golden light. Inside, strangers swim to and fro, attending to the business of their private hours. You can see them, but you can't reach them, and so this commonplace urban phenomenon, available in any city of the world on any night, conveys to even the most social a tremor of loneliness, its uneasy combination of separation and exposure.

You can be lonely anywhere, but there is a particular flavour to the loneliness that comes from living in a city, surrounded by millions of people. One might think this state was antithetical to urban living, to the massed presence of other human beings, and yet mere physical proximity is not enough to dispel a sense of internal isolation. It's possible – easy, even – to feel desolate and unfrequented in oneself while living cheek by jowl with others. Cities can be lonely places, and in admitting this we see that loneliness doesn't necessarily require physical solitude, but rather an absence or paucity

of connection, closeness, kinship: an inability, for one reason or another, to find as much intimacy as is desired. *Unhappy*, as the dictionary has it, *as a result of being without the companionship of others*. Hardly any wonder, then, that it can reach its apotheosis in a crowd.

Loneliness is difficult to confess; difficult too to categorise. Like depression, a state with which it often intersects, it can run deep in the fabric of a person, as much a part of one's being as laughing easily or having red hair. Then again, it can be transient, lapping in and out in reaction to external circumstance, like the loneliness that follows on the heels of a bereavement, break-up or change in social circles.

Like depression, like melancholy or restlessness, it is subject too to pathologisation, to being considered a disease. It has been said emphatically that loneliness serves no purpose, that it is, as Robert Weiss puts it in his seminal work on the subject, 'a chronic disease without redeeming features'. Statements like this have a more than casual link with the belief that our whole purpose is as coupled creatures, or that happiness can or should be a permanent possession. But not everyone shares that fate. Perhaps I'm wrong, but I don't think any experience so much a part of our common shared lives can be entirely devoid of meaning, without a richness and a value of some kind.

In her diary of 1929, Virginia Woolf described a sense of *inner loneliness* that she thought might be illuminating to analyse, adding: 'If I could catch the feeling, I would: the feeling of the singing of the real world, as one is driven by loneliness and silence from the habitable world.' Interesting, the idea that loneliness might be taking you towards an otherwise unreachable experience of reality.

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Not so long ago, I spent a period in New York City, that teeming island of gneiss and concrete and glass, inhabiting loneliness on a daily basis. Though it wasn't by any means a comfortable experience, I began to wonder if Woolf wasn't right, if there wasn't more to the experience than meets the eye – if, in fact, it didn't drive one to consider some of the larger questions of what it is to be alive.

There were things that burned away at me, not only as a private individual, but also as a citizen of our century, our pixelated age. What does it mean to be lonely? How do we live, if we're not intimately engaged with another human being? How do we connect with other people, particularly if we don't find speaking easy? Is sex a cure for loneliness, and if it is, what happens if our body or sexuality is considered deviant or damaged, if we are ill or unblessed with beauty? And is technology helping with these things? Does it draw us closer together, or trap us behind screens?

I was by no means the only person who'd puzzled over these questions. All kinds of writers, artists, filmmakers and songwriters have explored the subject of loneliness in one way or another, attempting to gain purchase on it, to tackle the issues that it provokes. But I was at the time beginning to fall in love with images, to find a solace in them that I didn't find elsewhere, and so I conducted the majority of my investigations within the realm of visual art. I was possessed with a desire to find correlates, physical evidence that other people had inhabited my state, and during my time in Manhattan I began to gather up works of art that seemed to articulate or be troubled by loneliness, particularly as it manifests in the modern city and even more particularly as it has manifested in the city of New York over the past seventy or so years.

Initially it was the images themselves that drew me, but as I burrowed in, I began to encounter the people behind them: people who had grappled in their lives as well as work with loneliness and its attendant issues. Of all the many documenters of the lonely city whose work educated or moved me, and who I consider in the pages ahead – among them Alfred Hitchcock, Valerie Solanas, Nan Goldin, Klaus Nomi, Peter Hujar, Billie Holiday, Zoe Leonard and Jean-Michel Basquiat – I became most closely interested in four artists: Edward Hopper, Andy Warhol, Henry Darger and David Wojnarowicz. Not all of them were permanent inhabitants of loneliness, by any means, suggesting instead a diversity of positions and angles of attack. All, however, were hyper-alert to the gulfs between people, to how it can feel to be islanded amid a crowd.

This seems particularly unlikely in the case of Andy Warhol, who was after all famous for his relentless sociability. He was almost never without a glittering entourage and yet his work is surprisingly eloquent on isolation and the problems of attachment, issues he struggled with lifelong. Warhol's art patrols the space between people, conducting a grand philosophical investigation into closeness and distance, intimacy and estrangement. Like many lonely people, he was an inveterate hoarder, making and surrounding himself with objects, barriers against the demands of human intimacy. Terrified of physical contact, he rarely left the house without an armoury of cameras and tape recorders, using them to broker and buffer interactions: behaviour that has light to shed on how we deploy technology in our own century of so-called connectivity.

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The janitor and outsider artist Henry Darger inhabited the opposite extreme. He lived alone in a boarding house in the city of Chicago, creating in a near-total void of companionship or audience a fictional universe populated by wonderful and frightening beings. When he gave up his room unwillingly at the age of eighty to die in a Catholic mission home, it was found to be stuffed with hundreds of exquisite and disturbing paintings, work he'd apparently never shown to another human being. Darger's life illuminates the social forces that drive isolation – and the way the imagination can work to resist it.

Just as these artists' lives varied in sociability, so their work handled or moved around the subject of loneliness in a multitude of ways, sometimes tackling it directly and sometimes dealing with subjects – sex, illness, abuse – that were themselves sources of stigma or isolation. Edward Hopper, that rangy, taciturn man, was occupied, though he sometimes denied it, with the expression of urban loneliness in visual terms, its translation into paint. Almost a century on, his images of solitary men and women glimpsed behind glass in deserted cafés, offices and hotel lobbies remain the signature images of isolation in the city.

You can show what loneliness looks like, and you can also take up arms against it, making things that serve explicitly as communication devices, resisting censorship and silence. This was the driving motivation of David Wojnarowicz, a still under-known American artist, photographer, writer and activist, whose courageous, extraordinary body of work did more than anything to release me from the burden of feeling that in my solitude I was shamefully alone.

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Loneliness, I began to realise, was a populated place: a city in itself. And when one inhabits a city, even a city as rigorously and logically constructed as Manhattan, one starts by getting lost. Over time, you begin to develop a mental map, a collection of favoured destinations and preferred routes: a labyrinth no other person could ever precisely duplicate or reproduce. What I was building in those years, and what now follows, is a map of loneliness, built out of both need and interest, pieced together from my own experiences and those of others. I wanted to understand what it means to be lonely, and how it has functioned in people's lives, to attempt to chart the complex relationship between loneliness and art.

A long time back, I used to listen to a song by Dennis Wilson. It was from *Pacific Ocean Blue*, the album he made after The Beach Boys fell apart. There was a line in it I loved: *Loneliness is a very special place*. As a teenager, sitting on my bed on autumn evenings, I used to imagine that place as a city, perhaps at dusk, when everyone turns homeward and the neon flickers into life. I recognised myself even then as one of its citizens and I liked how Wilson claimed it; how he made it sound fertile as well as frightening.

*Loneliness is a very special place*. It isn't always easy to see the truth of Wilson's statement, but over the course of my travels I've come to believe that he was right, that loneliness is by no means a wholly worthless experience, but rather one that cuts right to the heart of what we value and what we need. Many marvellous things have emerged from the lonely city: things forged in loneliness, but also things that function to redeem it.

## WALLS OF GLASS

I NEVER WENT SWIMMING IN New York. I came and went, but never stuck a summer, and so all the outdoor pools I coveted remained empty, their water spirited away for the duration of the long off-season. Mostly, I stayed on the eastern edges of the island, downtown, taking cheap sublets in East Village tenements or in co-ops built for garment workers, where day and night you could hear the hum of traffic crossing the Williamsburg Bridge. Walking home from whatever temporary office I'd found that day, I'd sometimes take a detour by Hamilton Fish Park, where there was a library and a twelve-lane pool, painted a pale flaking blue. I was lonely at the time, lonely and adrift, and this spectral blue space, filling at its corners with blown brown leaves, never failed to tug my heart.

What does it feel like to be lonely? It feels like being hungry: like being hungry when everyone around you is readying for a feast. It feels shameful and alarming, and over time these feelings radiate outwards, making the lonely person increasingly isolated, increasingly estranged. It hurts, in the way that feelings do, and

it also has physical consequences that take place invisibly, inside the closed compartments of the body. It advances, is what I'm trying to say, cold as ice and clear as glass, enclosing and engulfing.

Most of the time, I sublet a friend's apartment on East 2nd Street, in a neighbourhood full of community gardens. It was an unreconstructed tenement, painted arsenic green, with a claw-footed bathtub in the kitchen, concealed behind a moulding curtain. The first night I arrived there, jet-lagged and bleary, I caught a smell of gas that grew increasingly pronounced as I lay unsleeping on the high platform bed. In the end I called 911 and a few minutes later three firemen trooped in, relit the pilot light and then hung about in their big boots, admiring the wooden floor. There was a framed poster above the oven from a 1980s Martha Clarke performance called *Miracolo d'Amore*. It showed two actors dressed in the white suits and pointed hats of the Commedia dell'Arte. One was moving towards a lit doorway, and the other had flung both hands up in a gesture of horrified alarm.

*Miracolo d'Amore*. I was in the city because I'd fallen in love, headlong and too precipitously, and had tumbled and found myself unexpectedly unhinged. During the false spring of desire, the man and I had cooked up a hare-brained plan in which I would leave England and join him permanently in New York. When he changed his mind, very suddenly, expressing increasingly grave reservations into a series of hotel phones, I found myself adrift, stunned by the swift arrival and even swifter departure of everything I thought I lacked.

In the absence of love, I found myself clinging hopelessly to the city itself: the repeating tapestry of psychics and bodegas, the



bump and grind of traffic, the live lobsters on the corner of Ninth Avenue, the steam drifting up from beneath the streets. I didn't want to lose the flat I'd rented in England for almost a decade, but I also had no ties, no work or family commitments to tether me in place. I found a lodger and scrimped the money for a plane ticket, not knowing then that I was entering a maze, a walled city within the island of Manhattan itself.

But already this isn't quite right. The first apartment I had wasn't on the island at all. It was in Brooklyn Heights, a few blocks away from where I would have been living in the alternate reality of accomplished love, the ghostly other life that haunted me for almost two full years. I arrived in September, and at immigration the guard said to me without a trace of friendliness *why are your hands shaking?* The Van Wyck Expressway was the same as ever, bleak, unpromising, and it took several attempts to open the big door with the keys my friend had FedExed me weeks back.

I'd only seen the apartment once before. It was a studio, with a kitchenette and an elegantly masculine bathroom tiled all in black. There was another ironic, unsettling poster on the wall, a vintage advert for some kind of bottled drink. A beaming woman, her lower half a glowing lemon, spritzing a tree hung liberally with fruit. It seemed to epitomise sunny abundance, but the light never really made it past the brownstones opposite, and it was clear that I was tucked up on the wrong side of the house. There was a laundry room downstairs, but I was too new to New York to know what a luxury that was, and went down unwillingly, scared the basement door would slam, trapping me in the dripping, Tide-smelling dark.

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Most days I did the same things. Go out for eggs and coffee, walk aimlessly through the exquisite cobbled streets or down to the promenade to gaze at the East River, pushing each day a little further until I reached the park at Dumbo, where on Sundays you'd see the Puerto Rican wedding couples come to have their photos taken, the girls in enormous sculptural lime-green and fuchsia dresses that made everything else look tired and staid. Manhattan across the water, the glittering towers. I was working, but I didn't have anything like enough to do, and the bad times came in the evenings, when I went back to my room, sat on the couch and watched the world outside me going on through glass, a light bulb at a time.

I wanted very much not to be where I was. In fact part of the trouble seemed to be that where I was wasn't anywhere at all. My life felt empty and unreal and I was embarrassed about its thinness, the way one might be embarrassed about wearing a stained or threadbare piece of clothing. I felt like I was in danger of vanishing, though at the same time the feelings I had were so raw and overwhelming that I often wished I could find a way of losing myself altogether, perhaps for a few months, until the intensity diminished. If I could have put what I was feeling into words, the words would have been an infant's wail: *I don't want to be alone. I want someone to want me. I'm lonely. I'm scared. I need to be loved, to be touched, to be held.* It was the sensation of need that frightened me the most, as if I'd lifted the lid on an unappeasable abyss. I stopped eating very much and my hair fell out and lay noticeably on the wooden floor, adding to my disquiet.

I'd been lonely before, but never like this. Loneliness had waxed in childhood, and waned in the more social years that followed. I'd lived by myself since my mid-twenties, often in relationships but sometimes not. Mostly I liked the solitude, or, when I didn't, felt fairly certain I'd sooner or later drift into another liaison, another love. The revelation of loneliness, the omnipresent, unanswerable feeling that I was in a state of lack, that I didn't have what people were supposed to, and that this was down to some grave and no doubt externally unmistakable failing in my person: all this had quickened lately, the unwelcome consequence of being so summarily dismissed. I don't suppose it was unrelated, either, to the fact that I was keeling towards the midpoint of my thirties, an age at which female aloneness is no longer socially sanctioned and carries with it a persistent whiff of strangeness, deviance and failure.

Outside the window, people threw dinner parties. The man upstairs listened to jazz and show tunes at full blast, and filled the hallways with pot smoke, snaking fragrantly down the stairs. Sometimes I spoke to the waiter in my morning café, and once he gave me a poem, typed neatly on thick white paper. But mostly I didn't speak. Mostly I was walled up inside myself, and certainly a very long way from anyone else. I didn't cry often, but once I couldn't get the blinds closed and then I did. It seemed too awful, I suppose, the idea that anyone could peer over and get a glimpse of me, eating cereal standing up or combing over emails, my face illuminated by the laptop's glare.

I knew what I looked like. I looked like a woman in a Hopper painting. The girl in *Automat*, maybe, in a cloche hat

and green coat, gazing into a cup of coffee, the window behind her reflecting two rows of lights, swimming into blackness. Or the one in *Morning Sun*, who sits on her bed, hair twisted into a messy bun, gazing through her window at the city beyond. A pretty morning, light washing the walls, but nonetheless something desolate about her eyes and jaw, her slim wrists crossed over her legs. I often sat just like that, adrift in rumpled sheets, trying not to feel, trying simply to take consecutive breaths.

The one I found most disturbing was *Hotel Window*. Looking at it was like gazing into a fortune teller's mirror, through which you glimpse the future, its spoiled contours, its deficit of promise. This woman is older, tense and unapproachable, sitting on a navy couch in an empty drawing room or lobby. She's dressed to go out, in a smart ruby-coloured hat and cape, and is twisting to look down into the darkening street below, though there's nothing out there save a gleaming portico and the stubborn black window of the building opposite.

Asked about the origins of this painting, Hopper once said in his evasive way: 'It's nothing accurate at all, just an improvisation of things I've seen. It's no particular hotel lobby, but many times I've walked through the Thirties from Broadway to Fifth Avenue and there are a lot of cheesy hotels there. That probably suggested it. Lonely? Yes, I guess it's lonelier than I planned it really.'

What is it about Hopper? Every once in a while an artist comes along who articulates an experience, not necessarily consciously or willingly, but with such prescience and intensity that the association becomes indelible. He never much liked the

idea that his paintings could be pinned down, or that loneliness was his metier, his central theme. 'The loneliness thing is overdone,' he once told his friend Brian O'Doherty, in one of the very few long interviews to which he submitted. And again, in the documentary *Hopper's Silence*, when O'Doherty asks: 'Are your paintings reflective of the isolation of modern life?' A pause, then Hopper says tersely: 'It may be true. It may not be true.' Later, asked what draws him to the dark scenes he favours, he replies opaquely: 'I suppose it's just me.'

Why, then, do we persist in ascribing loneliness to his work? The obvious answer is that his paintings tend to be populated by people alone, or in uneasy, uncommunicative groupings of twos and threes, fastened into poses that seem indicative of distress. But there's something else too; something about the way he contrives his city streets. As the Whitney curator Carter Foster observes in *Hopper's Drawings*, Hopper routinely reproduces in his paintings 'certain kinds of spaces and spatial experiences common in New York that result from being physically close to others but separated from them by a variety of factors, including movement, structures, windows, walls and light or darkness'. This viewpoint is often described as voyeuristic, but what Hopper's urban scenes also replicate is one of the central experiences of being lonely: the way a feeling of separation, of being walled off or penned in, combines with a sense of near-unbearable exposure.

This tension is present in even the most benign of his New York paintings, the ones that testify to a more pleasurable, more equanimous kind of solitude. *Morning in a City*, say, in which a

naked woman stands at a window, holding just a towel, relaxed and at ease with herself, her body composed of lovely flecks of lavender and rose and pale green. The mood is peaceful, and yet the faintest tremor of unease is discernible at the far left of the painting, where the open casement gives way to the buildings beyond, lit by the flannel-pink of a morning sky. In the tenement opposite there are three more windows, their green blinds half-drawn, their interiors rough squares of total black. If windows are to be thought analogous to eyes, as both etymology, *wind-eye*, and function suggests, then there exists around this blockage, this plug of paint, an uncertainty about being seen – looked over, maybe; but maybe also overlooked, as in ignored, unseen, unregarded, undesired.

In the sinister *Night Windows*, these worries bloom into acute disquiet. The painting centres on the upper portion of a building, with three apertures, three slits, giving into a lighted chamber. At the first window a curtain billows outward, and in the second a woman in a pinkish slip bends over a green carpet, her haunches taut. In the third, a lamp is glowing through a layer of fabric, though what it actually looks like is a wall of flames.

There's something odd, too, about the vantage point. It's clearly from above – we see the floor, not the ceiling – but the windows are on at least the second storey, making it seem as if whoever's doing the looking is hanging suspended in the air. The more likely answer is that they're stealing a glimpse from the window of the 'El', the elevated train, which Hopper liked to ride at night, armed with his pads, his fabricated chalk, gazing avidly through the glass for instances of brightness,

moments that fix, unfinished, in the mind's eye. Either way, the viewer – me, I mean, or you – has been co-opted into an estranging act. Privacy has been breached, but it doesn't make the woman any less alone, exposed in her burning chamber.

This is the thing about cities, the way that even indoors you're always at the mercy of a stranger's gaze. Wherever I went – pacing back and forth between the bed and couch; roaming into the kitchen to regard the abandoned boxes of ice cream in the freezer – I could be seen by the people who lived in the Arlington, the vast Queen Anne co-op that dominated the view, its ten brick storeys lagged in scaffolding. At the same time, I could also play the watcher, *Rear Window*-style, peering in on dozens of people with whom I'd never exchange a word, all of them engrossed in the small intimacies of the day. Loading a dishwasher naked; tapping in on heels to cook the children's supper.

Under normal circumstances, I don't suppose any of this would have provoked more than idle curiosity, but that autumn wasn't normal. Almost as soon as I arrived, I was aware of a gathering anxiety around the question of visibility. I wanted to be seen, taken in and accepted, the way one is by a lover's approving gaze. At the same time I felt dangerously exposed, wary of judgement, particularly in situations where being alone felt awkward or wrong, where I was surrounded by couples or groups. While these feelings were undoubtedly heightened by the fact that I was living in New York for the first time – that city of glass, of roving eyes – they arose out of loneliness, which agitates always in two directions, towards intimacy and away from threat.

That autumn, I kept coming back to Hopper's images, drawn to them as if they were blueprints and I was a prisoner; as if they contained some vital clue about my state. Though I went with my eyes over dozens of rooms, I always returned to the same place: to the New York diner of *Nighthawks*, a painting that Joyce Carol Oates once described as 'our most poignant, ceaselessly replicated romantic image of American loneliness'.

I don't suppose there are many people in the western world who haven't peered into the cool green icebox of that painting, who haven't seen a grimy reproduction hanging in a doctor's waiting room or office hallway. It's been disseminated with such profligacy that it has long since acquired the patina that afflicts all too-familiar objects, like dirt over a lens, and yet it retains its eerie power, its potency.

I'd been looking at it on laptop screens for years before I finally saw it in person, at the Whitney one sweltering October afternoon. It was hanging at the very back of the gallery, hidden behind a shoal of people. *The colours are amazing*, a girl said, and then I was drawn to the front of the crowd. Up close, the painting rearranged itself, decomposing into snags and anomalies I'd never seen before. The bright triangle of the diner's ceiling was cracking. A long drip of yellow ran between the coffee urns. The paint was applied very thinly, not quite covering the linen ground, so that the surface was breached by a profusion of barely visible white pinpricks and tiny white threads.

I took a step back. Green shadows were falling in spikes and diamonds on the sidewalk. There is no colour in existence that so powerfully communicates urban alienation, the atomisation



of human beings inside the edifices they create, as this noxious pallid green, which only came into being with the advent of electricity, and which is inextricably associated with the nocturnal city, the city of glass towers, of empty illuminated offices and neon signs.

A tour guide came in then, her dark hair piled on her head, a group of visitors trailing in her wake. She pointed to the painting, saying *do you see, there isn't a door?* and they crowded round, making small noises of exclamation. She was right. The diner was a place of refuge, absolutely, but there was no visible entrance, no way to get in or out. There was a cartoonish, ochre-coloured door at the back of the painting, leading perhaps into a grimy kitchen. But from the street, the room was sealed: an urban aquarium, a glass cell.

Inside, in their livid yellow prison, were the four famous figures. A spivvy couple, a counter-boy in a white uniform, his blond hair raked into a cap, and a man sitting with his back to the window, the open crescent of his jacket pocket the darkest point on the canvas. No one was talking. No one was looking at anyone else. Was the diner a refuge for the isolated, a place of succour, or did it serve to illustrate the disconnection that proliferates in cities? The painting's brilliance derived from its instability, its refusal to commit.

Look, for instance, at the counter-boy, his face maybe affable, maybe cold. He stands at the centre of a series of triangles, presiding over the nocturnal sacrament of coffee. But isn't he also trapped? One of the vertices is cut off by the edge of the canvas, but surely it's narrowing too sharply, leaving no room for the

expected hatch or gangway. This is the kind of subtle geometric disturbance that Hopper was so skilled at, and which he used to kindle emotion in the viewer, to produce feelings of entrapment and wariness, of profound unease.

What else? I leant against the wall, sweaty in my sandals, itemising the diner's contents. Three white coffee cups, two empty glasses rimmed in blue, two napkin dispensers, three salt shakers, one pepper shaker, maybe sugar, maybe ketchup. Yellow light flaring on the ceiling. Livid green tiles (*brilliant streak of jade green*, Hopper's wife Jo had written in the notebook she used to log his paintings), triangular shadows dropping lightly everywhere, the colour of a dollar bill. A hoarding above the diner for Phillies American cigars, *Only 5cs*, illustrated with a crude brown doodle. A green till in the window of the store across the street, not that there was any stock on show. Green on green, glass on glass, a mood that expanded the longer I lingered, breeding disquiet.

The window was the weirdest thing: a bubble of glass that separated the diner from the street, curving sinuously back against itself. This window is unique in Hopper's work. Though he painted hundreds, maybe thousands, in his life, the rest are simply openings, apertures for the eye to gaze through. Some catch reflections, but this was the only time he ever painted glass itself, in all its ambiguous physicality. Simultaneously solid and transparent, material and ephemeral, it brings together what he elsewhere did in parts, fusing in one devastating symbol the twin mechanisms of confinement and exposure. It was impossible to gaze through into the diner's luminous interior without experiencing a swift

apprehension of loneliness, of how it might feel to be shut out, standing alone in the cooling air.

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The dictionary, that chilly arbiter, defines the word *lonely* as a negative feeling invoked by isolation, the emotional component being what differentiates it from *lone*, *alone* or *solo*. *Dejected because of want of company or society; sad at the thought that one is alone; having a feeling of solitariness*. But loneliness doesn't necessarily correlate with an external or objective lack of company; what psychologists term social isolation or social privation. By no means all people who live their lives in the absence of company are lonely, while it is possible to experience acute loneliness while in a relationship or among a group of friends. As Epictetus wrote almost two thousand years ago: 'For because a man is alone, he is not for that reason also solitary; just as though a man is among numbers, he is not therefore not solitary.'

The sensation arises because of a felt absence or insufficiency of closeness, and its feeling tone ranges from discomfort to chronic, unbearable pain. In 1953, the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Harry Stack Sullivan came up with what still stands as a working definition: 'the exceedingly unpleasant and driving experience connected with inadequate discharge of the need for human intimacy'.

Sullivan only approached loneliness in passing in his work, and as such the real pioneer of loneliness studies is the German psychiatrist Frieda Fromm-Reichmann. Fromm-Reichmann spent

most of her working life in America and is memorialised in popular culture as the therapist Dr Fried in Joanne Greenberg's semi-autobiographical novel about her teenage struggles with schizophrenia, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*. When she died in Maryland in 1957, she left on her desk an unfinished pile of notes, which was subsequently edited and published as 'On Loneliness'. This essay represents one of the first attempts by a psychiatrist or psychoanalyst to approach loneliness as an experience in its own right, distinct from and perhaps fundamentally more damaging than depression, anxiety or loss.

Fromm-Reichmann viewed loneliness as an essentially resistant subject, hard to describe, hard to pin down, hard even to broach as a topic, noting dryly:

The writer who wishes to elaborate on loneliness is faced with a serious terminological handicap: Loneliness seems to be such a painful, frightening experience that people do practically everything to avoid it. This avoidance seems to include a strange reluctance on the part of psychiatrists to seek scientific clarification on the subject.

She picks through what little material she can find, gathering up scraps from Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud and Rollo May. Many of these, she thinks, muddle together different types of loneliness, conflating that which is temporary or circumstantial – the loneliness of bereavement, say, or the loneliness that stems from insufficient tenderness in childhood – with the deeper and more intractable forms of emotional isolation.

Of these latter, desolating states, she comments: 'Loneliness, in its quintessential form, is of a nature that is incommunicable by the one who suffers it. Nor, unlike other non-communicable emotional experiences, can it be shared via empathy. It may well be that the second person's empathic abilities are obstructed by the anxiety-arousing quality of the mere emanations of the first person's loneliness.'

When I read those lines, I remembered sitting, years back, outside a train station in the south of England, waiting for my father. It was a sunny day, and I had a book I was enjoying. After a while, an elderly man sat down next to me and tried repeatedly to strike up conversation. I didn't want to talk and after a brief exchange of pleasantries I began to respond more tersely until eventually, still smiling, he got up and wandered away. I've never stopped feeling ashamed about my unkindness, and nor have I ever forgotten how it felt to have the force field of his loneliness pressed up against me: an overwhelming, unmeetable need for attention and affection, to be heard and touched and seen.

If it's difficult to respond to people in this state, it is harder still to reach out from it. Loneliness feels like such a shameful experience, so counter to the lives we are supposed to lead, that it becomes increasingly inadmissible, a taboo state whose confession seems destined to cause others to turn and flee. In her essay, Fromm-Reichmann returns repeatedly to this issue of incommunicability, noting how reluctantly even the loneliest of patients approach the subject. One of her case studies concerns a schizophrenic woman who asked to see her psychiatrist specifically in order to discuss her experience of deep and hopeless loneliness.

After several futile attempts, she finally burst out: 'I don't know why people think of hell as a place where there is heat and where warm fires are burning. That is not hell. Hell is if you are frozen in isolation into a block of ice. That is where I have been.'

I first read this essay sitting on my bed, the blinds half-drawn. On my printout, I'd drawn a wavering Biro line under the words *a block of ice*. I was often feeling then like I was encased in ice, or walled up in glass, that I could see out all too clearly but lacked the ability to free myself or to make the kind of contact I desired. Show tunes from upstairs again, cruising Facebook, the white walls tight around me. Hardly any wonder I'd been so fixated on *Nighthawks*, that bubble of greenish glass, the colour of an iceberg.

After Fromm-Reichmann's death, other psychologists slowly began to turn their attention to the subject. In 1975, the social scientist Robert Weiss edited a seminal study, *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation*. He too opened by acknowledging the subject's neglect, noting wryly that loneliness is more often commented on by songwriters than social scientists. He felt that in addition to being unnerving in its own right – he writes of it as something that 'possessed' people, that is 'peculiarly insistent'; 'an almost eerie affliction of the spirits' – loneliness inhibits empathy because it induces in its wake a kind of self-protective amnesia, so that when a person is no longer lonely they struggle to remember what the condition is like.

If they had earlier been lonely, they now have no access to the self that experienced the loneliness; furthermore,

they very likely prefer that things remain that way. In consequence they are likely to respond to those who are currently lonely with absence of understanding and perhaps irritation.

Even psychiatrists and psychologists, Weiss thought, were not immune to this near-phobic dislike; they too were liable to be made uneasy 'by the loneliness that is potential in the everyday life of everyone'. As a result, a kind of victim blaming takes place: a tendency to see the rejection of lonely people as justified, or to assume they have brought the condition on themselves by being too timid or unattractive, too self-pitying or self-absorbed. 'Why can't the lonely change?' he imagines both professional and lay observers musing. 'They must find a perverse gratification in loneliness; perhaps loneliness, despite its pain, permits them to continue a self-protective isolation or provides them with an emotional handicap that forces handouts of pity from those with whom they interact.'

In fact, as Weiss goes on to show, loneliness is hallmarked by an intense desire to bring the experience to a close; something which cannot be achieved by sheer willpower or by simply getting out more, but only by developing intimate connections. This is far easier said than done, especially for people whose loneliness arises from a state of loss or exile or prejudice, who have reason to fear or mistrust as well as long for the society of others.

Weiss and Fromm-Reichmann knew that loneliness is painful and alienating, but what they didn't understand was how it generates its effects. Contemporary research has focused particularly on this area, and in attempting to understand what loneliness does

to the human body it has also succeeded in illuminating why it is so appallingly difficult to dislodge. According to work being carried out over the past decade by John Cacioppo and his team at the University of Chicago, loneliness profoundly affects an individual's ability to understand and interpret social interactions, initiating a devastating chain-reaction, the consequence of which is to further estrange them from their fellows.

When people enter into an experience of loneliness, they trigger what psychologists call hypervigilance for social threat, a phenomenon Weiss first postulated back in the 1970s. In this state, which is entered into unknowingly, the individual tends to experience the world in increasingly negative terms, and to both expect and remember instances of rudeness, rejection and abrasion, giving them greater weight and prominence than other, more benign or friendly interactions. This creates, of course, a vicious circle, in which the lonely person grows increasingly more isolated, suspicious and withdrawn. And because the hypervigilance hasn't been consciously perceived, it's by no means easy to recognise, let alone correct, the bias.

What this means is that the lonelier a person gets, the less adept they become at navigating social currents. Loneliness grows around them, like mould or fur, a prophylactic that inhibits contact, no matter how badly contact is desired. Loneliness is accretive, extending and perpetuating itself. Once it becomes impacted, it is by no means easy to dislodge. This is why I was suddenly so hyper-alert to criticism, and why I felt so perpetually exposed, hunching in on myself even as I walked anonymously through the streets, my flip-flops slapping on the ground.



At the same time, the body's state of red alert brings about a series of physiological changes, driven by gathering tides of adrenaline and cortisol. These are the fight or flight hormones, which act to help an organism respond to external stressors. But when the stress is chronic, not acute; when it persists for years and is caused by something that cannot be outrun, then these biochemical alterations wreak havoc on the body. Lonely people are restless sleepers, and experience a reduction in the restorative function of sleep. Loneliness drives up blood pressure, accelerates ageing, weakens the immune system and acts as a precursor to cognitive decline. According to a 2010 study, loneliness predicts increased morbidity and mortality, which is an elegant way of saying that loneliness can prove fatal.

At first it was thought that this increased morbidity occurred because of the practical consequences of being isolated: the lack of care, the potentially diminished ability to feed and nurture oneself. In fact, it seems almost certain now that it is the subjective experience of loneliness that produces the physical consequences, not the simple fact of being alone. It is the feeling itself that is stressful; the feeling that sets the whole grim cascade into motion.

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Hopper could not possibly have known about any of this, except of course from the inside out, and yet in painting after painting he shows not just what loneliness looks like but also how it feels, communicating with his blank walls and open windows a simu-

lacrum of its paranoid architecture, the way it functions to simultaneously entrap and expose.

It's naive to assume that an artist is personally acquainted with their subject matter, that they are not simply a witness to their age, to the prevailing moods and preoccupations of the times. All the same, the more I looked at *Nighthawks*, the more I wondered about Hopper himself, who had after all once said: 'The man's the work. Something doesn't come out of nothing.' The vantage point the painting makes you enter into is so particular, so estranging. Where did it come from? What was Hopper's own experience of cities, of intimacy, of longing? Was he lonely? Who do you have to be to see the world like that?

Though he disliked interviews, and as such left only a minimal record of his life in words, Hopper was often photographed, and so it's possible to track him through the years, from gawky youth in a straw boater in the 1920s to great man of the arts in the 1950s. What comes across in these mostly black and white images is a quality of intense self-containment, of someone set deep inside himself, leery of contact, emphatically reserved. He stands or sits always a little awkwardly, slightly hunched, as tall men often are, his long limbs uncomfortably arranged, dressed in dark suits and ties or three-piece tweeds, his long face sometimes sullen, sometimes guarded and sometimes showing a small glint of amusement, the deprecating wit that came and went in disarming flashes. A private man, one might conclude, not on easy terms with the world.

All photographs are silent, but some are more silent than others, and these portraits attest to what was by all accounts

Hopper's most striking feature, his gigantic resistance to speech. It's a different thing from quietness, silence; more powerful, more aggressive. In his interviews, it functions as a barrier, preventing the interviewer from opening him up or putting words into his mouth. When he does speak, it's often simply to deflect the question. 'I don't remember,' he says frequently, or 'I don't know why I did that.' He regularly uses the word *unconscious*, as a way of evading or disclaiming whatever meaning the interviewer believes to be seeping from his pictures.

Just before his death in 1967, he gave an unusually long interview to the Brooklyn Museum. He was eighty-four at the time: the foremost realist painter at work in America. As always, his wife was present in the room. Jo was a consummate interrupter, filling in the spaces, jumping in all the gaps. The conversation (which was recorded and transcribed, though never published in full) is illuminating not only in terms of content, but also for what it reveals of the Hoppers' complex dynamic, their intimately adversarial marriage.

The interviewer asks Edward how he comes to choose his subjects. As usual, he seems to find the question painful. He says that the process is complicated, very difficult to explain, but that he has to be very much interested in his subject, and that as such he can only produce perhaps one or two paintings a year. At this, his wife interrupts. 'I'm being very biographic,' she says, 'but when he was twelve years old, he grew, he was six feet tall.' 'Not at twelve. Not at twelve,' Hopper says. 'But that's what your mother said. And you said. Now you're changing it. Oh, you contradict me . . . You know, you'd think we were bitter enemies.' The

interviewer makes some small sound of disavowal and Jo ploughs on, describing her husband as a schoolboy, slim as a blade of grass, no strength in him at all, not wanting to make trouble with the mean kids, the bullies.

But that made him rather, it would make one shy . . . he had to lead the line at school, you know, the tallest, and oh, he hated that, these bad boys in back of him, and they'd try to push him off in the wrong direction.

'Shy is hereditary,' Hopper says, and she replies: 'Well, I think it's circumstantial too, you know . . . He never has been much on the declaring himself – '. At that he interrupts, saying: 'I declare myself in my paintings.' And again, a little later: 'I don't think I ever tried to paint the American scene. I'm trying to *paint myself*.'

He'd always had a knack for drawing, right from his boyhood in Nyack, New York at the tail end of the nineteenth century, the only son of cultured and not particularly well-suited parents. A lovely naturalness of line, and at the same time a certain sourness that came out especially in the ugly caricatures he drew right through his life. In these often strikingly unpleasant drawings, which were never exhibited but which can be seen in Gail Levin's biography, Hopper presents himself as a skeletal figure, all long bones and a grimace, often under the thumb of women or hankering silently for something they refuse to supply.

At eighteen, he went to art school in New York, where he was taught by Robert Henri, one of the foremost proponents of the gritty urban realism known as the Ashcan School. Hopper

was an outstanding and much-praised student, and so understandably lingered at college for years, unwilling to cast himself fully into independent adulthood. In 1906 his parents financed a trip to Paris, where he shut himself away, not meeting any of the artists in the city at the time, a lack of interest in prevailing currents or fashions that he maintained lifelong. 'I'd heard of Gertrude Stein,' he remembered later, 'but I don't recall having heard of Picasso at all.' Instead, he spent his days wandering the streets, painting by the river or sketching prostitutes and passers-by, setting down a taxonomy of hairdos and women's legs and nifty feathered hats.

It was in Paris that he learned to open up his paintings, to let light in, following the example of the Impressionists, after the gloomy browns and blacks favoured in his New York training. Learned too to meddle with perspective, to make small impossibilities in his scenes: a bridge reaching where it couldn't, the sun falling from two directions at once. People stretched, buildings shrunk, infinitesimal disturbances in the fabric of reality. This is how you unsettle the viewer, by making a not-rightness, by rendering it in little jabs of white and grey and dirty yellow.

For a few years he went back and forth to Europe, but in 1910 he settled permanently in Manhattan. 'It seemed awfully crude and raw here when I got back,' he remembered decades later. 'It took me ten years to get over Europe.' He was jarred by New York, its frenetic pace, the relentless pursuit of the *long green*. In fact, money quickly became a major problem. For a long time, no one was interested in his paintings at all, and he scraped by as an illustrator, hating the clichéd commissions, the dismal neces-

sity of lugging a portfolio all over town, an unwilling salesman for work he didn't think at all worthwhile.

They weren't exactly rich in relationships either, those first American years. No girlfriend, though there might have been brief liaisons here and there. No intimate friendships, and only occasional contact with his family. Colleagues and acquaintances, yes, but a life notably short on love, though long on independence, long too on that discarded virtue, privacy.

This sense of separation, of being alone in a big city, soon began to surface in his art. By the early 1920s, he was making a name for himself as an authentically American artist, stubbornly sticking with realism despite the fashionable tide of abstraction filtering in from Europe. He was determined to articulate the day-to-day experience of inhabiting the modern, electric city of New York. Working first with etchings and then in paint, Hopper began to produce a distinctive body of images that captured the cramped, anxious, sometimes alluring experience of urban living.

His scenes – of women glimpsed through windows, of disordered bedrooms and tense interiors – were improvised from things he saw or half saw on long walks around Manhattan. 'They are not factual,' he said much later. 'Perhaps there were a very few of them that were. You can't go out and look up at an apartment and stand in the street and paint but many things have been suggested by the city.' And elsewhere: 'The interior itself was my main interest . . . simply a piece of New York, the city that interests me so much.'

None of these drawings show crowds, of course, though the crowd is surely the signature sight of the city. Instead they focus

on the experience of isolation: of people alone or in awkward, uncommunicative couples. It's the same limited and voyeuristic view that Alfred Hitchcock would later subject James Stewart to in the Hopperesque *Rear Window*, a film that is likewise about the dangerous visual intimacy of urban living, of being able to survey strangers inside what were once private chambers.

Among the many people Stewart's character L. B. Jeffries watches over from his Greenwich Village apartment are two female figures who might have walked straight out of a Hopper painting. Miss Torso is a sexy blonde, though her popularity is more superficial than it initially appears, while Miss Lonelyhearts is an unhappy, not quite attractive spinster, consistently displayed in situations that attest to her inability to find either companionship or contentment in solitude. She's seen preparing dinner for an imaginary lover, weeping and consoling herself with alcohol, picking up a stranger, then fighting him off when his advances go too far.

In one excruciating scene, Jeffries watches through a zoom lens as she makes herself up in a mirror, dressed in an emerald green suit, before putting on large black glasses to assess the effect. The act is intensely private, not intended for spectators. Instead of displaying the polished exterior she's so painstakingly produced, what she inadvertently reveals instead is her longing and vulnerability, her desire to be desirable, her fear that she's running short on what remains for women a chief currency of exchange. Hopper's paintings are full of women like her; women who appear to be in the grips of a loneliness that has to do with gender and unattainable standards of appearance, and that gets increasingly toxic and strangulating with age.

But if Jeffries is performing Hopper's characteristic gaze – cool, curious, detached – then Hitchcock is also at pains to show how voyeurism works to isolate the viewer as well as the viewed. In *Rear Window* voyeurism is explicitly presented as an escape from intimacy, a way of side-stepping real emotional demands. Jeffries prefers watching to participating; his obsessive scrutiny is a way of remaining emotionally aloof from both his girlfriend and the neighbours on whom he spies. It's only gradually that he is drawn into investment and commitment, becoming literally as well as figuratively engaged.

A rangy man who likes to spy on others, and who must learn to accommodate a flesh and blood woman in his life: *Rear Window* mimics or mirrors more than just the contents of Hopper's art. It also reflects the contours of his emotional life, the conflict between detachment and need that was lived out in actuality as well as expressed in coloured streaks of paint on canvas, in scenes repeated over many years.

In 1923, he re-encountered a woman with whom he'd studied at art school. Josephine Nivison, known as Jo, was tiny and tempestuous: a talkative, hot-tempered, sociable woman who'd been living alone in the West Village after the death of her parents, doggedly making her way as an artist, though she was crushingly short on funds. They bonded over a shared love of French culture and that summer began haltingly to date. The next year, they married. She was forty-one and still a virgin, and he was almost forty-two. Both must have considered the possibility that they would remain alone for good, having gone so far beyond the then conventional age for marriage.

The Hoppers were only parted when Edward died in the



spring of 1967. But though they were as a couple deeply enmeshed, their personalities, even their physical forms, were so diametrically opposed that they sometimes seemed like caricatures of the gulf between men and women. As soon as Jo gave up her studio and moved into Edward's marginally more salubrious room on Washington Square, her own career, previously much fought for, much defended, dwindled away to almost nothing: a few soft, impressionistic paintings here and there; an occasional group show.

In part this was because Jo poured her considerable energies into tending and nurturing her husband's work: dealing with his correspondence, handling loan requests and needling him into painting. At her insistence, she also posed for all the women in his canvases. From 1923 on, every office worker and city girl was modelled for by Jo, sometimes dressed up and sometimes stripped down, sometimes recognisable and sometimes entirely rebuilt. The tall blonde usherette in 1939's *New York Movie*, leaning pensively against a wall: that was based on her, as was the leggy red-haired burlesque dancer in 1941's *Girlie Show*, for which Jo modelled 'without a stitch on in front of the stove – nothing but high heels in a lottery dance pose'.

A model, yes; a rival, no. The other reason Jo's career foundered is that her husband was profoundly opposed to its existence. Edward didn't just fail to support Jo's painting, but rather worked actively to discourage it, mocking and denigrating the few things she did manage to produce, and acting with great creativity and malice to limit the conditions in which she might paint. One of the most shocking elements of Gail Levin's fascinating and enormously detailed *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography*, which draws closely on Jo's unpublished diaries, is the violence into which the

Hoppers' relationship often degenerated. They had frequent rows, particularly over his attitude to her painting and her desire to drive their car, both potent symbols of autonomy and power. Some of these fights were physical: cuffings, slappings and scratchings, undignified struggles on the bedroom floor that left bruises as well as wounded feelings.

As Levin observes, it is almost impossible to form a judgement of Jo Hopper's work, since so little of it has survived. Edward left everything to his wife, asking that she bequeath his art to the Whitney, the institution with which he'd had the closest ties. After his death, she donated both his and the majority of her own artistic estates to the museum, even though she'd felt from the moment of her marriage that she'd been the victim of a boycott by the curators there. Her disquiet was not unwarranted. After her death, the Whitney discarded all her paintings, perhaps because of their calibre and perhaps because of the systematic undervaluing of women's art against which she'd railed so bitterly in her own life.

The silence of Hopper's paintings becomes more toxic after the revelation of how violently he worked to suppress and check his wife. It isn't easy to square the revelation of pettiness and savagery with the image of the suited man in polished shoes, his stately reticence, his immense reserve. Perhaps his own silence was part of it, though: some inability to communicate in ordinary language, some deep resentment around intimacy and need. 'Any talk with me sends his eyes to the clock,' Jo wrote in her diary in 1946. 'It's like taking the attention of an expensive specialist' – behaviour that compounded her feeling of being 'a rather lonely creature', cut off and excluded from the artistic world.

Just before the Hoppers got together, a fellow artist jotted down a pen-portrait of Edward. He started with the visual elements: the prominent masticating muscles, the strong teeth and big, unsensuous mouth, before moving on to the cool static way he painted: blocking things out, retaining control. He noted Hopper's sincerity, his vast inhibitions and his wit, writing: 'Should be married. But can't imagine to what kind of a woman. The hunger of that man.' A few lines on he repeated the phrase: 'But the hunger of him, the hunger of him!'

Hunger is also what's communicated in Hopper's cartoons, in which he abases himself before his primly elevated wife, a starving man, crouching on the floor while she eats at the table or kneeling in pious self-abnegation at the foot of her bed. And it flickers on and off in his paintings too, in the vast space he makes between men and women who share the same small rooms. *Room in New York*, say, which ripples with unexpressed frustration, unmet desire, violent restraint. Perhaps this is why his images are so resistant to entry, and so radiant with feeling. If the statement *I declare myself in my paintings* is to be taken at face value, then what is being declared is barriers and boundaries, wanted things at a distance and unwanted things too close: an erotics of insufficient intimacy, which is of course a synonym for loneliness itself.

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For a long time, the paintings came steadily enough, but by the mid-1930s the periods between them had started to lengthen. Until

very late in life, Hopper always needed something real to spark his imagination, wandering the city until he saw a scene or space that gripped him, and then letting it settle in his memory; painting, or so he hoped, both the feeling and the thing, 'the most exact transcription possible of my most intimate impressions of nature'. Now he began to complain about a lack of subjects that excited him enough to bother beginning the labour, the tricky business of trying 'to force this unwilling medium of paint and canvas' into a record of emotion, a process he characterised in a famous essay titled 'Notes on Painting' as a struggle against inevitable decay.

I find in working always the disturbing intrusion of elements not a part of my most interested vision, and the inevitable obliteration and replacement of this vision by the work itself as it proceeds. The struggle to prevent this decay is, I think, the common lot of all painters to whom the invention of arbitrary forms has lesser interest.

While this process meant painting could never be entirely pleasurable, the periods of blockage were far worse. Black moods, long disappointing walks, frequent trips to the cinema, a retreat into wordlessness, plunging downward into a shaft of silence, which led almost inevitably to fights with Jo, who needed to speak as badly as her husband required quiet.

All of these things were at work in the winter of 1941, the period from out of which *Nighthawks* emerged. Hopper had achieved considerable acclaim by then, including the rare honour of a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. Ever the New England

puritan, he hadn't let the increase in prestige go to his head. While he and Jo had moved from the cramped back studio at Washington Square to two rooms at the front, they still didn't have central heating or a private bathroom; still had to haul coal up seventy-four steps for the woodburner that kept the place from freezing.

On 7 November they returned from a summer in Truro, where they had recently built a beach house. A canvas was put on the easel, but for weeks it stayed untouched, a painful blankness in the small flat. Hopper went out on his usual outings, trolling for scenes. At last, something came into focus. He started making drawings in coffee shops and on street corners, sketching patrons that caught his eye. He drew a coffee pot and jotted colours next to it: *amber* and *dark brown*. On 7 December, either just before or just after this process started, Pearl Harbor was attacked. The next morning, America entered the Second World War.

In a letter Jo wrote to Edward's sister on 17 December, worries about bombing are interspersed with complaints about her husband, who is finally at work on a new painting. He's banned her from entering the studio, meaning she's effectively imprisoned in half their tiny domain. Hitler has said he intends to destroy New York. They live, she reminds Marion, right under glass skylights, a leaking roof. They don't have blackout shades. Ed, she writes crossly, can't be bothered. A few lines down: 'I haven't gone thru even for things I want in the kitchen.' She packs a knapsack with a chequebook, towels, soap, clothes and keys, 'in case we ran to race out doors in our nighties'. Her husband, she adds, jeers when he sees what she has done. There's nothing new about his slighting tone, nor her habit of passing it on.

In the studio next door, Edward gets a mirror and draws himself, slouching at the counter, establishing the pose for both his male customers. Over the next few weeks he furnishes the café with coffee pots and cherry countertops, the dim reflections in their shined and lacquered surfaces. The painting has started to quicken. He's busy with it, Jo tells Marion a month later, *interested all the time*. Eventually he allows her into the studio to pose. This time he elongates her, reddening her lips and hair. The light strikes her face, bowed to consider the object in her right hand. He finally finishes on 21 January 1942. Collaborating, as they often do, on titles, the Hoppers call it *Nighthawks*, after the beaked profile of the woman's saturnine companion.

There's so much going on in this story, so many potential readings, some personal and some far larger in scope and scale. The glass, the leaking light, look different after reading Jo's letter, her agitation over bombs and blackouts. You could read the painting now as a parable about American isolationism, finding in the diner's fragile refuge a submerged anxiety about the nation's abrupt lurch into conflict, the imperilling of a way of life.

Then there's a more intimate interpretation to be made, about the ongoing struggle with Jo, the need to keep her punishingly distant and then to bring her close, to change her face and body into the sexual, self-contained woman at the counter, lost in thought. Is this Hopper's way of silencing his wife, locking her into the speechless medium of paint, or is it an erotic act, a mode of fertile collaboration? The practice of using her as a model for so many different women invites such questioning, but to settle on a single answer is to miss the point of how emphatically Hopper resists

closure, creating with his ambiguous scenes a testament instead to human isolation, to the essential unknowability of others – something, one must remember, that he achieved in part by ruthlessly refusing his wife the right to her own acts of artistic expression.

In the late 1950s, the curator and art historian Katherine Kuh interviewed Hopper for a book called *The Artist's Voice*. In the course of their conversation, she asked him which of his paintings he liked the best. He named three, one of which was *Nighthawks*, which he said 'seems to be the way I think of a night street'. 'Lonely and empty?' she asks, and he replies: 'I didn't see it as particularly lonely. I simplified the scene a great deal and made the restaurant bigger. Unconsciously, probably, I was painting the loneliness of a large city.' The conversation meanders on to other things, but a few minutes later she returns to the subject, saying: 'Whenever one reads about your work, it is always said that loneliness and nostalgia are your themes.' 'If they are,' Hopper replies cautiously, 'it isn't at all conscious.' And then, reversing again: 'I probably am a lonely one.'

It's an unusual formulation, *a lonely one*; not at all the same thing as admitting one is lonely. Instead, it suggests with that *a*, that unassuming indefinite article, a fact that loneliness by its nature resists. Though it feels entirely isolating, a private burden no one else could possibly experience or share, it is in reality a communal state, inhabited by many people. In fact, current studies suggest that more than a quarter of American adults suffers from loneliness, independent of race, education and ethnicity, while 45 per cent of British adults report feeling lonely either often or sometimes. Marriage and high income serve as mild deterrents, but the

truth is that few of us are absolutely immune to feeling a greater longing for connection than we find ourselves able to satisfy. The lonely ones, a hundred million strong. Hardly any wonder Hopper's paintings remain so popular, and so endlessly reproduced.

Reading his halting confession, one begins to see why his work is not just compelling but also consoling, especially when viewed en masse. It's true that he painted, not once but many times, the loneliness of a large city, where the possibilities of connection are repeatedly defeated by the dehumanising apparatus of urban life. But didn't he also paint loneliness *as* a large city, revealing it as a shared, democratic place, inhabited, whether willingly or not, by many souls? What's more, the technical strategies he uses – the strange perspective, the sites of blockage and exposure – further combat the insularity of loneliness by forcing the viewer to enter imaginatively into an experience that is otherwise notable for its profound impenetrability, its multiple barriers, its walls like windows, its windows like walls.

How had Frieda Fromm-Reichmann put it? 'It may well be that the second person's empathic abilities are obstructed by the anxiety-arousing quality of the mere emanations of the first person's loneliness.' This is what's so terrifying about being lonely: the instinctive sense that it is literally repulsive, inhibiting contact at just the moment contact is most required. And yet what Hopper captures is beautiful as well as frightening. They aren't sentimental, his pictures, but there is an extraordinary attentiveness to them. As if what he saw was as interesting as he kept insisting he needed it to be: worth the labour, the miserable effort of setting it down. As if loneliness was something worth looking at. More than that, as if looking itself was an antidote, a way to defeat loneliness's strange, estranging spell.