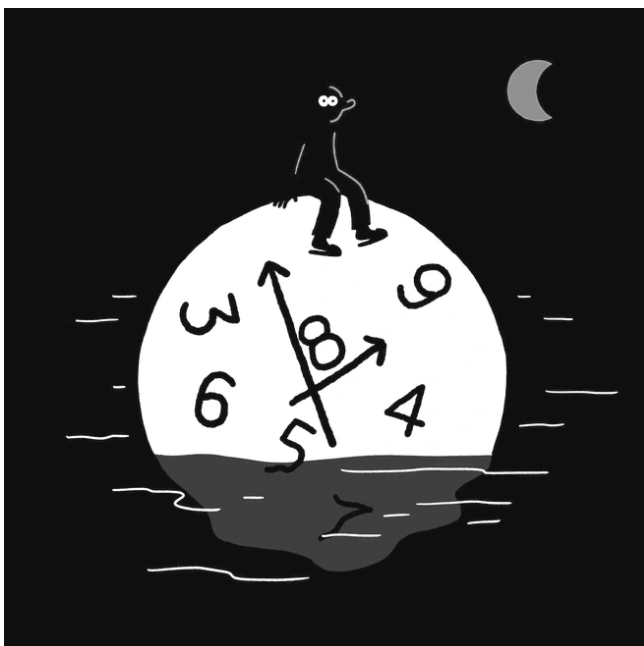


# An Ode to Insomnia

JAMES PARKER



- 1 You have to get up.  
That's the first thing. Don't just lie there and let it have its way with you. The sea of anxiety loves a horizontal human; it pours over your toes and surges you up like a tide. Is your partner lying next to you, dense with sleep, offensively unconscious? That's not helping either. So verticalize yourself. Leave the bed. Leave its maddening mammal warmth. Out you go, clammy-footed, into the midnight spaces. The couch. The kitchen.
- 2 So now you're up. You've reclaimed a little dignity, a little agency. You're shaken, though. You make yourself a piece of toast; it pops up like a gravestone. Insomnia is no joke. The thoughts it produces are entirely and droningly humorless. Failure, guilt, your money, your body. Someone else's body. On and on. And over there, look, the world: the whole flawed and shuddering and horribly lit life-and-deathscape, with all of us shambling around the circuit like broken beetles. At 2:41 a.m., everyone who's awake turns into Hieronymus Bosch.
- 3 And therein, my sleepless friend, lies the key: you're not alone. Even as you twist in these private coils, these very particular difficulties, you are joining a mystical fellowship of insomniacs. We are all out there, keeping an eye on things: a sodality, a siblinghood, an immense and floating guild of piercingly conscious minds. What might happen, if not for our vigilance? Into what idiocies of optimism and vainglory might humanity collapse? We're like the Night's Watch in *Game of Thrones*, except there are millions of us. Above the city rooftops it shimmers and flexes; it tingles over the leafy suburbs: the neural lattice of our wakefulness.

- 4 “God time” – that’s what my late friend, the writer Gavin Hills, used to call insomnia. Meaning, I think, a release from the individual and partial, a release into the eternal. The clock goes weird in the small hours. It speeds up and it slows down. It has moods. You yourself have moods. Now the Gothic backchat of insomnia fills your mind with terrible news, terrible apprehensions; now you feel at peace. Now panic seizes you: How will you function in the morning, on so little sleep? You’ll be grumpy, you’ll feel ill, your brain won’t work! All those things you have to do and say! And now you feel something else: a serene compassion for your social self, for the buttressed and bashed-together you, so brittle, trying so hard, that you present to the world. Maybe you think about the other bashed-together selves that you’ll encounter, in the grayness of the day, and you experience compassion for them too. This is quite precious.
  
- 5 It’s 4 a.m. You’ve experienced yourself, fully and purgatorially. You’ve preserved the balance of global sanity. You’ve had pity on your fellow man. You have sniffed timelessness. Your work is done, insomniac. Go back to bed.

*The Atlantic, 2020*