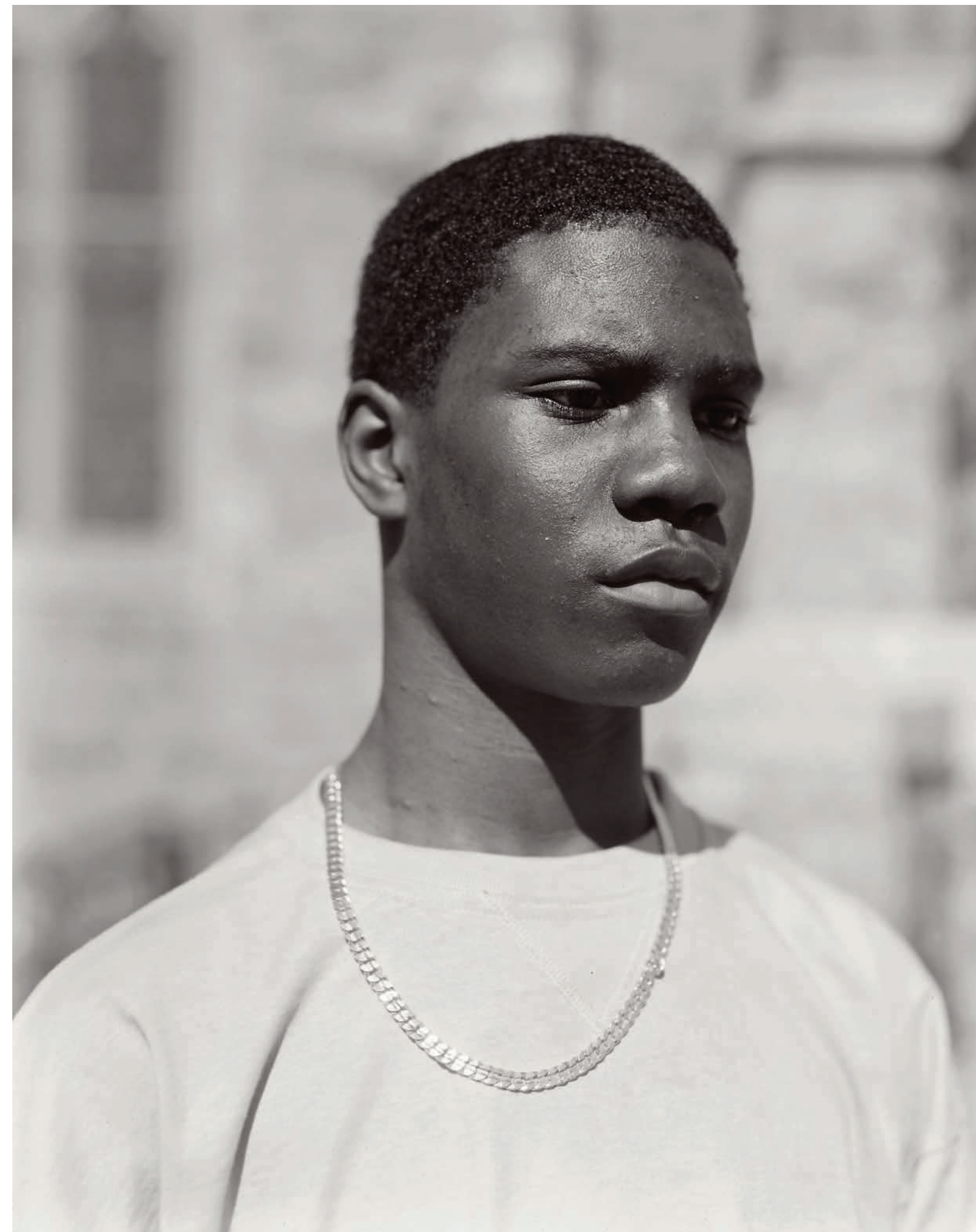
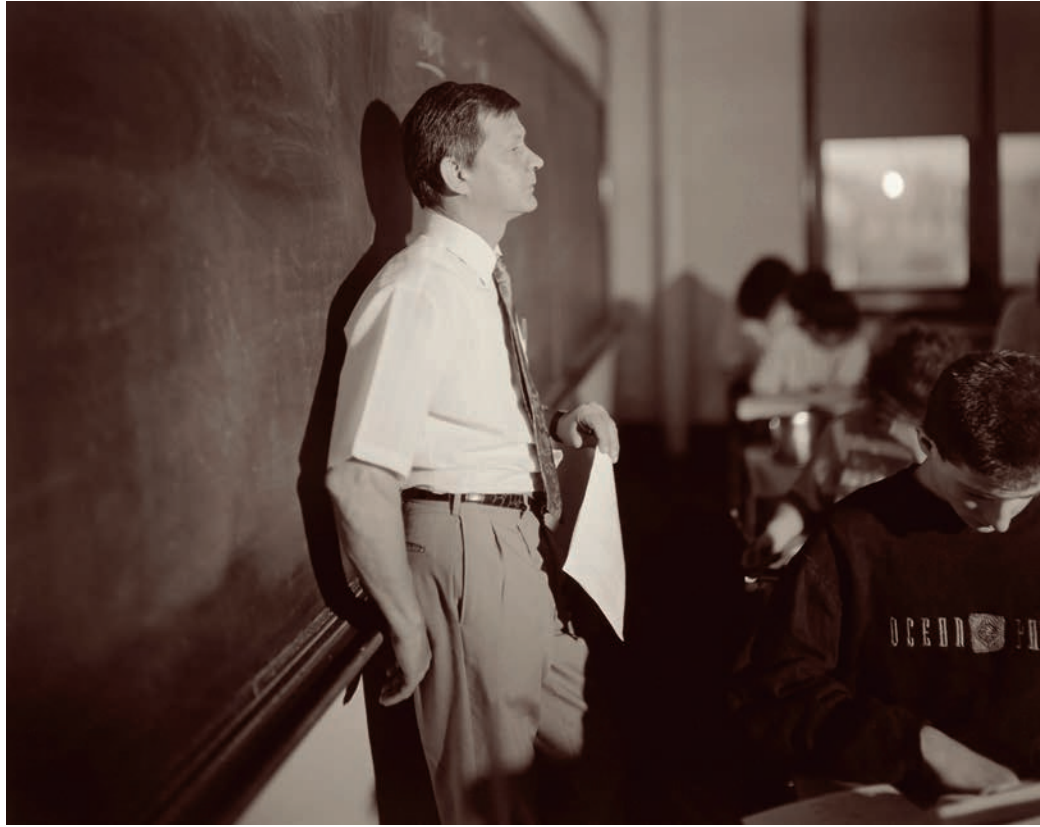


# A GLIMPSE

What novelist *Elizabeth Strout* sees in Judith Joy Ross's arresting portraits

# OF TRUTH





THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT:  
 'MR. ADAM RUTSKI, SPANISH  
 TEACHER, HAZLETON HIGH  
 SCHOOL', 1992; 'UNTITLED,  
 EURANA PARK, WEATHERLY,  
 PENNSYLVANIA', 1985

PREVIOUS PAGE:  
 'NORTHEAST PHILADELPHIA,  
 PENNSYLVANIA', 1999

**About the artist**

*For 40 years, Judith Joy Ross has captured scenes of everyday life on large-format cameras. Her subjects – often working-class people in northeastern Pennsylvania, where she is from and still lives – are children, teenagers, workers, anti-war protestors, members of Congress. Her work has been exhibited at museums including MoMA, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the National Gallery of Canada. In 2017, she was awarded the Lucie Award for Achievement in Portraiture.*



There is a thing I have always believed to be true about ordinary people: inside each one of us is an entire world, a universe of emotions and reactions and ambiguities and confusions. And yet there is something in this mess of stuff we have inside ourselves that is *honest*. But only a small part of that ever gets shown to the outer world. This inner world of our honest self, colliding constantly with

the outer world, is what interests me as a fiction writer, along with my deep and abiding desire to know what it feels like to be another person.

In the photographs of Judith Joy Ross, we are allowed a glimpse of truth into who the person is that she is photographing. And what a thing! To see with our own eyes into the honest self of another! These photographs are breathtaking and glorious in their ability to capture what would seem to be uncapturable. It must be Ross's sense of wonder that has made it possible for her to do this. Her apparently fathomless sense of wonder and curiosity of what – for a moment – it might feel like to be *that* person.

A man leans against a blackboard ("Mr. Adam Rutski, Spanish teacher, Hazleton High School").

He is holding a piece of paper in his hand, and to see him in this photograph is to all but know him. His haircut, the tip of his nose in its profile, his tie, his trousers – one can almost feel the fabric of these trousers – all this makes him feel to me to be profoundly familiar. His gaze, which is not at the camera, connotes a slight fatigue, a sense of chronic world-weariness, and yet an acceptance of that fate as well. I stare at him and believe that I know him. Not because he reminds me of anyone I know, but because he is *himself*.

In "Untitled", taken at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington DC in 1984, we see the face of a young boy/man on the cusp of understanding his position in the world, and Ross has captured something ineffable in the poignancy of this face. The face is honest, it is *his* face. I keep looking at that face and thinking: "Oh!" And what I mean by that is: So this is you, this is really, *really* you.

And how does Ross do this?

By caring deeply for her subject and somehow letting that person know she holds no judgment, is only there to experience them for a few moments, and so gains their trust in some essential way.

Three young girls in bathing suits stand eating ice cream bars ("Untitled, Eurana Park, ▶





'ORDINARY PEOPLE, PERHAPS, BUT THROUGH ROSS'S LENS WE CAN SEE THAT THEY ARE, IN FACT, EXTRAORDINARY, AS ALL PEOPLE ARE'  
ELIZABETH STROUT



FROM LEFT: 'UNTITLED, VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL, WASHINGTON, DC', 1984; 'FIFTH STREET, BETHLEHEM, PENNSYLVANIA', 1996; AND 'OFFICER JOAN FEKULA, BETHLEHEM, PENNSYLVANIA', 1990





'CYPRIEN KOUAKAM-DUBOIS, QUAI DE MONTEBELLO, PARIS', 2003

FACING PAGE: 'UNTITLED, EURANA PARK, WEATHERLY, PENNSYLVANIA', 1982

◀ Weatherly, Pennsylvania”). It is their expressions, innocently pleased, it seems, to be in the eye of a camera, although the youngest seems more interested in her ice cream than the camera. But here is what really slays me about this photo: their legs coming from their bathing suits. I stare and stare at these young girls and the bathing suits they wear. I can almost feel the way their suits cling to their small bodies. It reminds me of when I rode the subway in New York City and would watch some person across from me, and think to myself: OK, her jeans are tight stretching over her thigh, I know what that must feel like. Always I was trying, instinctively, to know what it felt like to be that person. And these three girls in their bathing suits bring back to me my own sense of acute curiosity.

Why is this important?

Because a *relationship* is taking place in front of our eyes. I no longer have to imagine what I see across from me, it has now been given to me. The relationship is between Ross and the people she photographs, and then her relationship with us, the viewers. She has said, “People became my subject – the lives of people! They were all strangers but now I could know them.”

And so we get to know them too. We can love them if we want to.

Again, quoting Ross, “Both of us together – we make the picture... We might actually be in love for a few seconds.” For me, it is this fleeting moment of love which is vital to her work.

Ordinary people, perhaps, but through her lens we can see that they are, in fact, extraordinary, as all people are. Which brings me back to the beginning of my comments. We are sealed within ourselves and the multitudinous unknown parts of ourselves. And yet – and yet! Ross allows us an inside peek into the honest part of someone else. That is all we can expect in this world, that moment. Maybe it is all we need. **FT**

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 “Judith Joy Ross - Photographs 1978-2015” is at Le Bal, Paris, from March 16 to September 18, with an accompanying book published in English by Aperture. Elizabeth Strout’s novels include “Olive Kitteridge” and “My Name is Lucy Barton”

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‘BOTH OF US TOGETHER – WE MAKE THE PICTURE... WE MIGHT ACTUALLY BE IN LOVE FOR A FEW SECONDS’

JUDITH JOY ROSS