



Known and Strange Things: Essays

By Teju Cole

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A blazingly intelligent first book of essays from the award-winning author of *Open City* and *Every Day Is for the Thief*

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Finalist for the PEN/Diamonstein-Spielvogel Award for the Art of the Essay and PEN/Jean Stein Book Award

With this collection of more than fifty pieces on politics, photography, travel, history, and literature, Teju Cole solidifies his place as one of today's most powerful and original voices. On page after page, deploying prose dense with beauty and ideas, he finds fresh and potent ways to interpret art, people, and historical moments, taking in subjects from Virginia Woolf, Shakespeare, and W. G. Sebald to Instagram, Barack Obama, and Boko Haram. Cole brings us new considerations of James Baldwin in the age of Black Lives Matter; the African American photographer Roy DeCarava, who, forced to shoot with film calibrated exclusively for white skin tones, found his way to a startling and true depiction of black subjects; and (in an essay that inspired both praise and pushback when it first appeared) the White Savior Industrial Complex, the system by which African nations are sentimentally aided by an America “developed on pillage.”

Persuasive and provocative, erudite yet accessible, *Known and Strange Things* is an opportunity to live within Teju Cole's wide-ranging enthusiasms, curiosities, and passions, and a chance to see the world in surprising and affecting new frames.

Praise for *Known and Strange Things*

“On every level of engagement and critique, *Known and Strange Things* is an essential and scintillating journey.”—**Claudia Rankine**, *The New York Times Book Review* (Editors' Choice)

“A heady mix of wit, nostalgia, pathos, and a genuine desire to untangle the world, or at the least, to bask in its unending riddles.”—*The Atlantic*

“Brilliant . . . [*Known and Strange Things*] reveals Cole’s extraordinary talent and his capacious mind.”—*Time*

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“[Cole is] one of the most vibrant voices in contemporary writing.”—*LA Times*

“Cole has fulfilled the dazzling promise of his novels *Every Day Is for the Thief* and *Open City*. He ranges over his interests with voracious keenness, laser-sharp prose, an open heart and a clear eye.”—*The Guardian*

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“[Cole] brings a subtle, layered perspective to all he encounters.”—*Vanity Fair*

“In page after page, Cole upholds the sterling virtue of good writing combined with emotional and intellectual engagement.”—*The New Statesman*

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Editorial Review

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“Erudite and wide-ranging . . . Mr. Cole proves himself a modern Renaissance man.”—*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

“Teju Cole proves the twenty-first-century essay is in fine fettle.”—*The New Statesman*

“[*Known and Strange Things* possesses] a passion for justice, a deep sympathy for the poor and the powerless around the world, and a fiery moral outrage.”—*Poets and Writers*

“Bold, thoughtful essays.”—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“We have in Cole . . . a continuation of [James] Baldwin’s legacy; he’s an observer and truth-seeker of the highest order.”—*The Seattle Times*

“Essays pulse with the possible; the best ones gesture at unexplored territories. But they feel most satisfying where the author has followed his ideas to places the reader hadn’t thought to visit. *Known and Strange Things* contains many essays that do this beautifully, combining the thoughtful pause with insistent questioning, tumbling over different terrains, picking up bits of them as they go, taking on the grain and texture of all the places they’ve been.”—*Financial Times*

“An immersive experience into a wide-ranging set of concerns, memorably conveyed onto the page.”—*Men’s Journal*

“[Cole] displays infectious inquisitiveness as an essayist.”—*O: The Oprah Magazine*

“[*Known and Strange Things*] showcases the magnificent breadth of subjects [Cole] is able to plumb with . . . passion and eloquence.”—*Harper’s Bazaar*

“Erudite, committed and finely observed.”—*The Age*

“[*Known and Strange Things* reveals] fascinating aspects of Cole’s searching and unusual mind . . . omnivorously exploring everything from Virginia Woolf to his now-famous essay on the White Savior Industrial Complex.”—*The Washington Post*

“Cole’s essays are brilliantly written—sharp, intelligent—and yield a pleasurable sweetness. His prose, in its variations, is impeccably where he wants it to be. His erudition is put to work humbly. But in encountering these essays, perhaps the most important quality to grasp is Cole’s deep sense of the seriousness of life. . . . I am sentimental about Teju Cole and think of him as an emissary for our best selves. He is sampling himself for our benefit, hoping for enlightenment, and seeking to provide pleasure to us through his art. May his realm expand.”—**Norman Rush**, *The New York Review of Books*

“Cole combines the rigor of a critic with the curiosity of Everyman.”—*BookPage*

“A bold, honest, and controversially necessary read.”—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Cole is a literary performance artist, his words meticulously chosen and deployed with elegance and force. To read, see, and travel with him is to be changed by the questions that challenge him.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Cole’s insights cast fresh light on even the most quotidian of objects . . . [and his] collection performs an important service by elevating public discourse in an unsettled time.”—*Booklist* (starred review)

“A terrific collection of essays from one of our greatest public intellectuals.”—*Vox*

“Cole’s writing is masterful and lyrical and politically and socially engaged, and he is probably one of the most interesting African writers at work today.”—**Chris Abani**, author of *Graceland* and *The Face*

“The forms of resistance depend on the culture they resist, and in our era of generalizations and approximations and sloppiness, Teju Cole’s precise and vivid observation and description are an antidote and a joy. This is a book written with a scalpel, a microscope, and walking shoes, full of telling details and sometimes big surprises.”—**Rebecca Solnit**, author of *Men Explain Things to Me*

“Absolutely wonderful . . . Teju Cole is so erudite, so laser sharp, that his intelligence shimmers, but best of all, his personality shines through as being kind and generous. I found myself transported and moved deeply.”—**Petina Gappah**, author of *The Book of Memory*

About the Author

Teju Cole was born in the United States in 1975 and raised in Nigeria. He is the author of *Every Day Is for the Thief* and *Open City*, which won the PEN/Hemingway Award, the Internationaler Literaturpreis, the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the New York City Book Award, and was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award. His photography has been exhibited in India and the United States. He is Distinguished Writer in Residence at Bard College.

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Angels in Winter

?Dear Beth,

Our first sight of land came from Lazio's farms, a green different from American green, less neon-bright, more troubled with brown. Later, on the express train into town, the impression was strengthened by the scattering of pines, palms, and cypresses along the tracks. I became aware for the first time of how plant life is part of the story of being in a foreign place. As the eye adjusts to different buildings and different uses of technology, as the ear begins to find its way into the local dialect, the flora, too, present a challenge to the senses. Here, the biome projected a certain obstinacy: these plants had struggled against both human culture and hot weather for a long time.

It wasn't hot the day we arrived. It was cool, the fog interleaved with rain, spoiling visibility. A woman from Verona, her ticket on her lap, sat across from us. She wore a business suit and sunglasses, and had the slight impatience of early morning work--related travel. On the other side of the aisle was a middle-aged couple, the man in a blue tracksuit (which at the belly strained to contain him). Facing them, a sharply dressed young man in dark blue suit, powder--blue shirt, and skinny black tie spoke loudly into the telephone—"Pronto! Sì, sì. Sì, sì, sì! Andiamo, ciao, ciao!"—a clipped bare-bones negotiation. There was a performative busyness in his torrent of sì's; negotium, the negation of pleasure.

Italy is a Third World country. It has the ostentatious contrasts as well as the brittle pride. The greenery of Fiumicino quickly gave way to abandoned buildings with rusted roofs. We rumbled by a necropolis of wrecked cars in a wide yard, beyond which were muddy roads stretching back into the country and ceasing to be roads, become just muddy fields. On the culverts and walls, as those became more numerous, graffiti artists were indefatigable, covering every available surface. The tags were beautiful: they answered to the ancient ruins. The ruins themselves were as elaborate as stretches of aqueduct, or as simple as sections of broken wall. Their size as well as their integration into the landscape was the first real sign of the ubiquity of the past in Rome. In many places this past was elaborated and curated (as I would soon discover), but in others it was entirely untouched, the material relics simply remaining there, a testament to thousands of years of decay, an echo of the wealth and greatness of the people who lived here.

The suburban tenements soon appeared, festooned with washing, and increasingly small patches of open land on which flocks of tough-looking sheep grazed. By the time we arrived at Termini, the rain had begun again, this time heavily. We knew which bus we wanted, but there were no bus maps (everyone else seemed to know where to go). Finding the right embarkation point consisted of walking from one section of the parking lot to another, and we were drenched by the time we did find it. But time quickened, and we were soon inside Rome proper, in the Esquiline (one of the original seven hills), inside what felt like a gigantic Cinecittà set.

I was intoxicated by the visual impression of the place: the large well-laid-out squares, the dilapidated but elegant buildings, the Vespas, the mid--century modern feel of much of the signage, the ragged edges on everything (for some reason all this made me think of Julian Schnabel). It was alluring, even in winter, perhaps especially in winter, with the colors warm and bold (orange, red, and yellow), but somewhat desaturated. As we passed through Piazza Vittorio Emanuele, I noted the gargantuan scale of the built environment, and the profusion of ornament.

Both scale and ornament are related to history. "The classics" are not homogeneous. But what distinguishes Roman art from Greek art? I go with this impression: the Greeks were idealists, invested in the perfection of form, fixated on eternity. Isn't the way people die in the *Iliad*, sorrowfully but not without a certain dignity,

part of the attraction? I thought of your love for the Greeks, Beth, which is related to this dignity. The Romans, who later adopted their forms with a startling exactness—much of what we know of Greek art is from Roman copies—were more grounded: they got more complicatedly into the preexisting questions of political advantage, obsequy, national honor, and, of course, empire. Propaganda became more vivid than ever. And so, the buildings got larger and more ornate, lurid even, ostensibly to honor the gods or the predecessor rulers (many of whom were deified), but in reality as guarantees of personal glory. The Greeks loved philosophy for its own sake, more or less, but the Romans loved it for what it could be used for, namely political power. This at least was the way I understood it—you'll forgive a traveler's generalizations.

Roman propaganda, the manipulation of images for political ends, hadn't begun with Augustus, Julius Caesar's successor and the first of the emperors, but he'd certainly brought it to a keen level. He'd enlisted architects and sculptors for the project of transforming him from violent claimant to the leadership—a position for which he was neither more nor less qualified than his main rival, Mark Antony—to Pater Patriae. The message, which got through, was that he was not merely fatherly but also avuncular. He was powerful, well loved, generous, and his leadership was inevitable.

Augustus's successful marshaling of art to the shaping of his image was the template for just about every emperor who came afterward. The skill and subtlety of Roman art, from the first-century emperors to Constantine in the fourth, was for the most part dedicated to dynastic and propagandistic goals. Was there after all, I asked myself, so great a leap between imperial Rome and the buffoonery of Mussolini? The misuse of piety was no new thing.

And so, on that first day, heading out in the late afternoon to the Capitoline Hill—the ancient site of an important temple to Jupiter, now a set of museums around a Michelangelo-designed piazza—I was braced for a mental separation between art and its public functions. I came up Michelangelo's broad, ramped staircase, past the monumental sculptures of Castor and Pollux, into the glistening egg-shaped piazza. The rain had ceased. Not many people were around. I had my arsenal of doubts at the ready.

But I want to set parentheses around this essay, Beth. It's no good pretending that, in going to Rome in 2009, one has gone to some exotic corner of the earth. Rome was as central a center of the world as there has been in this world. And now that there are many centers, it remains one of the important ones. So, I want to acknowledge not only that millions of other visitors do what I just did—visit Rome as tourists or pilgrims—but that this has been going on for a great long while. Those visitors have included many of the world's best writers, and, in addition, many of the world's great writers have been themselves Romans. I am unlikely to write anything new or penetrating about Rome. In writing about Rome, I am writing about art and history and politics, and how those things relate particularly to me, a solitary observer with a necessarily narrow, a necessarily shallow, view of the place. Rome is simply the pretext, and the font of specifics, for the discontinuous thoughts of a first-time traveler.

And while I'm at it, I also want to question the very possibility of writing anything about a people, in this particular case Romans. Is it possible, I wonder, to write a sentence that begins "Romans are??.??" and have such a sentence be interesting and truthful at the same time? We are properly skeptical of generalizations, after a lifetime of "blacks are??.??" "women are??.??" "Indians are??.??" "Pakistanis are??.??"

But an important part of the Roman enterprise, historically speaking, was the effort to characterize Rome and what it meant to be a Roman. This went beyond local pride, and also beyond imperial ambition. It was a certain relationship to fellow citizens and to the state, a relationship aided by war and by oratory. Principles were important, they were fought over if necessary, and any and all hypocrisies had to be practiced under the

aegis of the principles. The motto SPQR (Senatus Populusque Romanus: a reminder that a given enterprise or monument was there at the pleasure of the senate and people of Rome) simply manifested the principles at stake.

Rome followed the example of Athens in this (think of Pericles's funeral oration, which had more sly jingoism than an American campaign speech) and would herself later serve as exemplum for the American experiment. Before American exceptionalism, there was Roman exceptionalism, to a much more severe degree. Our Capitol is named for the Capitoline Hill. Close parentheses.

Thus primed with my skepticism, a skepticism compounded with an anticolonial instinct, I entered the museums on the Capitoline Hill. Well: so much for preparation. I was floored. My theories simply had no chance against what I experienced—the finest collection of classical statuary I had ever seen. The strength of the collection was not limited to the famous pieces—the *Capitoline Venus*, the *Dying Gaul*, the *Colossus of Constantine*—wonderful though they were. There were countless other sculptures, including several, such as a standing Hermes, that would have been the proud centerpieces of lesser collections. The patron of boundaries wore his winged hat and winged sandals, held a caduceus in his hand—what a wonder to meet Hermes where Hermes meant so much. But what struck me most was the rooms full of marble portrait busts.

Ancient Roman marble portraiture rose to a very high degree of competence. It was an art that had been less thoroughly pursued by the Greeks, invested as they were in ideal forms. The fascination of Roman portraiture for me was twofold. First, I was struck by how subject to fashions it was, how, within the space of thirty or forty years, there were perceptible shifts in the sculptural style. The pendulum swung between “veristic” and “idealizing” techniques. A female portrait from the second century c.e., for instance, is rather easy to identify: the sculptors depicted the corkscrew hairstyle of the time in careful detail, and made extensive use of the drill (to poke holes in the marble, and give the hair an illusion of depth). Drills were used, too, in portraits of men during this period: after Hadrian's decision to wear one, beards were all the rage, and they were sculpted in marble with drills. By the time of Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus (both bearded), portraiture had reached new levels of psychological acuity. To the realistic depiction of age and wrinkles, which was itself a conscious throwback to the portraiture of the Roman republic, there were now added indications of the subjects' frame of mind: melancholy, levity, exhaustion, fleeting states set in stone.

Among the many representations of the gods and emperors and senators were busts of ordinary citizens. What these portraits showed was that ordinary Romans participated intimately in this image economy. I was right to have been aware of the propagandistic aspect of image making, but not to the extent of forgetting how widespread and common images themselves were, and how generally sophisticated the ability to read them. One estimate puts the number of sculptures in Rome in the second century at 2 million. History tends to favor rulers and warriors, but the history that peered at me from the white marble faces on the Capitoline was closer to ground level: bakers, soldiers, courtesans, writers. It was a history of involvement and implication in the Roman project.

Whatever Rome was, or whatever it had been, it was so out of the enthusiasm of the people of Rome for Roman modes of being. The sculptures were one part of that. They were a way of expressing a desire to be honored and to be remembered. That the results were so visually arresting was no coincidence. The visual propaganda of the emperors would not have been so forceful had the populace not been already attuned to imagery.

So, “Romans are??.?” what? Romans are people who are part of Rome, and would rather be part of Rome. To be Roman was to participate in Rome. That was my inkling on the first day. But, of course, that inkling

was not to last the week without revision.

“We are working hard. In fact we’re just hustling. It’s not easy at all,” Moses said. He’d made little room for small talk or pleasantries. A certain bitterness was evident in his voice. Moses was a friend of Paula’s, and she’d introduced him to me because he was a Nigerian, an Ibo. Before he came to the house, she’d told me that he was a building contractor. “He is in partnership with an Italian. You know why? If you have an employee, there are rules, you must pay a certain amount, of taxes, of benefits, a certain minimum salary. But if you are ‘partners,’ then there is no responsibility. And so this man cheats him by making him a partner; Italians cheat foreign employees this way. They painted this house, but I don’t know who pocketed the money.”

Moses’s sober mien and sharp comments confirmed this picture. “Our problem is that when we go home, when we are there for a few days, we spend one thousand euros. And everyone thinks that life must be luxurious for us overseas. They think we live in palaces here. It is not so, but they don’t know that. They get on the next flight and come. They meet a bad situation in Rome.” I asked him about the Nigerian community in Rome. “There are many of us,” he said, “not as many as Turin—you know, that’s where our women are, mostly, doing, you know—but our people are always how they are. You know our people. No Nigerian helps you unless you help them first, unless you pay them money. Nothing is free. There is no help. I’ve been in this country now nine years, and everything is still a struggle. Especially for those of us who don’t have much education.”

Moses spoke fluent Italian, and he wore a well-cut brown suit, a blush-colored tie, oxblood brogues. His mustache was meticulously trimmed to a slightly comical half-inch-thick strip on either side of his philtrum. There was no particular warmth in his interaction with me, confessional though it was. His presentation was smart, his manner courtly, a contractor dressed like a dandy; but the tone was all exhaustion. A miserable cry of exhaustion. “Our women” to describe the Nigerian prostitutes in Turin was, I thought, part of his resigned attitude. No activist he, just a brother trying to survive.

Paula was Italian, and separated from her husband. She ran the bed-and-breakfast with the help of a business partner. The husband, Carlo, helped when she needed it. We’d met him on the first day—an evasive, thin-faced man—and hadn’t seen him since. Their split was recent. Paula herself was warm, an “accidental Italian” as she saw it, much more interested in Latin America, in salsa and tango, and in learning English.

One evening, at the kitchen table of her beautiful home, she said, “Have you read Saviano? Everyone here read this book. It’s so sad, no? I feel such deep shame for my country.” Roberto Saviano’s exposé of the mafia, *Gomorrah*, had been a bestseller, and had been recently made into a film. But a number of threats on his life meant that he was now under round-the-clock police protection. It was a big story. For anyone who knew the ruthlessness and reach of the Naples organization known as the Camorra, the threats were credible, and chilling. Their tentacles reached into high levels of law enforcement and government. “I don’t care about Berlusconi. Everyone hates him,” Paula said, “but I care about the future of Italy. It means nothing to me, for myself, but I think always of my daughter. She is growing up here, she will maybe make her life here. We have a justice system so slow that it is like having no justice system. Mafia bosses are released on technicalities, but petty criminals get stiff sentences. Can you believe, in Naples, when the police comes to arrest a killer, the women get in the street and make a big scene, shouting, crying? The Camorra is like a cult; it controls them totally. I have such shame for this country. And our politicians, of course, they can do nothing. Berlusconi, he is the worst, just the worst. You say his name and people spit.”

Perry Anderson, in a recent essay in the *London Review of Books*, wrote about the “invertebrate left” in Italy. From the engaged and partially successful interventions of Antonio Gramsci and Rodolfo Morandi there had

now emerged??.?.??nothing. Italian politics was a mass of confusions, and within this confusion, rightist parties clung on to power.

Paula said, “We are excited for America. We love Obama. But we don’t believe we can change things here. It’s not possible, so we don’t try. It’s a great shame for us, though people don’t talk much about it.” Later, on television I watch Berlusconi speak rapidly and smugly, his hands gesturing at speed. The impunity that he and the Camorristi share is met with shrugs. He’s made of money; he can outbid anyone.

Father Rafael said, “Italians are too interested in enjoying life to do anything about politics. Wine, fashion, that’s what they care about. So people like Berlusconi face no opposition.” Father Rafael was a Jesuit I had met through another priest in New York last summer. He now lived in Rome. He was easygoing, in his mid-forties, not at all ascetic. We’d first met over drinks and football matches. I was drawn to him then for his matter-of-fact style. “Most priests dislike this pope,” he’d said to me, “he’s old, his ideas are old. The sooner he dies off, the better. This is something we priests talk about openly. We loved John Paul, because he did a lot to move the church forward in the right ways. Now Benedict, among his other mistakes, has given a free pass to those who want to drop the vernacular and return to a Latin mass. What’s the point?” Like many priests of his generation, he’s not from Europe or America, not white. He’s from Angola, though for many years he worked in Burundi, and considers it his home now. We met in a trattoria not far from the Colosseum. I ordered the pizza with prosciutto and funghi; he ordered the same, but without the ham; it was Lent.

“You won’t have too much problem with racism here,” he said, “especially if you speak the language. Italians love that, when someone from outside masters their language.” He was doing advanced studies in biblical scholarship at the Society of Jesus. Italian, being only a half step away from Portuguese, had been easy for him to learn. “And you have to remember, there are racists everywhere.”

But, I wanted to know, wasn’t the situation of the Roma, the gypsies, especially bad? “That’s true,” he said, “people here have little patience with them. There is a belief that they are generally criminals and, well, they are. They raise their children up to be thieves.” I had raised an eyebrow, so he softened his stance. “Out of every two crimes reported in the newspaper, one is committed by Roma. Is that the reality? Who knows? But that is what is reported. So, Romans don’t view them as human beings, really. There is a big effort in the comune to push them out once and for all. There have been rapes and murders recently that they are blamed for. And that is why you haven’t seen many of them: they’re afraid! I think there’s a real possibility of Roma men being lynched in this city now. The feeling about them is that hostile.”

On the metro lines, there was a small set of videos that recycled endlessly on TV screens. One, a jaunty little cartoon, warned you against pickpockets. Another was a television blooper reel, most memorably featuring a fat man in a hurdle race who stumbled at every hurdle but kept going. And then there was the slickly produced spot that implored those who had been victims of racism to call the number provided. The “anti-razzismo” push was a serious public project. But privately? In many restaurants and museums, I was stared at, aggressively and repeatedly. In public interactions, I was treated either to the famous Mediterranean warmth (usually by the young) or to an almost shocking disdain. I had at least four incidents of speaking to people (in my few phrases of Italian) and being met with resolute silence, some transactions taking place entirely in that silence.

There were in any case many people of color in the city: Africans, Bangladeshis, Latin Americans. Around them was the inescapable air of being on the margins—the clergy seemed to be visitors, and the workers (newsagents, street florists, sellers of knockoff luxury goods) appeared to have scarcely more secure a hold. They were here only because Romans, for now, tolerated their presence. The comune was Roman, nativist.

Not black, not brown, not Albanian, and definitely not Roma.

After Berlusconi's frothing performance, the RAI picture cut to a newscast. The newscaster was a middle-aged African man, much darker than I am, distinguished-looking, graying at the temples. He delivered the day's headlines in rapid Italian, and in the cloying, ingratiating style common to newscasters everywhere.

I used to hate angels. But even to put it that way gives them too much credence. It would be more accurate to say I don't believe in angels but I dislike the idea of angels, finding them silly, seeing none of the beauty, grace, or comfort that people seem to project on them. When I was more active in church life, I found angels actively embarrassing, as though comic book or fantasy novel characters had somehow lodged themselves into the center of the world's most serious narrative. Fairy tales should have no role in theology.

No feature of angels annoyed me more than their wings: impractical, unlikely, entirely incredible from a biological point of view. I always reasoned that for a man to fly with wings on his back, he would need back muscles as enormous as a bison's. Angels, in most depictions through the ages, looked like men with white toy wings tacked on. They were an infantile fantasy, made to bear a spiritual burden that they were, to my eyes at least, remarkably ill suited for. Angels were just about as relevant to my life as the preprocessed sentiment of Hallmark cards or Top 40 love songs: in other words, irrelevant.

Toward the end of my week in Rome, standing in the long gallery of the Museo Pio--Clementino in the Vatican, I saw another fine statue of Hermes. Nearby were two herms. I did not look at the herms for long, but—as is fitting to their function—they flashed through me memorably. You know I have been thinking about porous boundaries, shadow regions, ambiguities, and, lately, about the idea of embodied intermediaries. This is why I have become more interested in how these intermediaries have been narrated: Hermes, Mercury, Esu, and, in the case of the Christian religions, angels. But no, to say “interested” is insufficient. Better to call it “invested”—an investment in what, it now occurs to me, I might call a parenthetical mode of life.

I visited Rome in the waning of winter. The senses implicated me. The senses were key: in addition to the classical statuary, my most intense artistic experiences of Rome were the troubled architect Borromini and the troubled painter Caravaggio. Both freed my senses, caught my heart off guard, blew it open. Borromini's buildings—the small church of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane in particular—seemed to be taking wing right before one's eyes. Caravaggio's paintings, meanwhile, were full of musicians, peasants, saints, and angels. His *St. John the Baptist* (at the Borghese Gallery), the young prophet with an inscrutable expression on his face, his body nestled next to a wild ram's, was a sensuous catalogue of subtle conflicts, as smoky and disturbing as anything by Leonardo da Vinci.

People, too, stood in as angels. Paula, the owner of the bed-and-breakfast, who declared that she did not believe in doing anything if she could not do it with amore, was one such. Another was Annie, a new friend, whose wisdom and intelligence steeped me in worlds entirely mine and entirely unknown to me. In stories of her friends and acquaintances, I caught glimpses of creativity and flexibility (hers, as well as theirs). Through her, I understood De Sica better, and Rossellini, and Visconti. I especially enjoyed her story about driving Fellini around—of his insatiable curiosity about everything around him. And through her, I met Judit, a Hungarian photographer, who, in the long low Roman light of a Sunday evening, showed me a quarter century of her work, pictures taken in Budapest and Rome. Our photographs—I shot a great deal in my brief time in the city—had uncanny areas of resonance. We were drawn to the same moments: reflections, ruins, motion, wings. I wondered if perhaps immigrants and visitors had certain insights into the heart of a place, insights denied the natives. My life and Judit's had been so different, she growing up in Communist Hungary, wrestling over a lifetime of creativity with the legacy of great Hungarian photographers—Kertész,

Munkácsi, Capa, Brassai—then moving to Italy, and raising a son in what still felt, to her, like a foreign country. I was grateful for the connection, of which Annie had been the intermediary. And for the connection with Annie, too, which had been brokered by her sister, Natalie. These avatars of Hermes who guided me from where I had been to where I was to be. And you also, Beth, through whom these words and images now enter the world in a new way.

At the Spanish Steps, where, even in winter, tourists swarm, there were lithe African men doing a brisk trade in Prada and Gucci bags. The men were young, personable as was required for sales, but at other moments full of melancholy. The bags were arranged on white cloths, not at all far from the luxury shops that sold the same goods for ten or twenty times more. It was late afternoon. Beautiful yellow light enfolded the city, and, from the top of the steps, the dome of St. Peter's was visible, as was the Janiculum Hill, on the other side of the Tiber. In that light, the city had an eternal aspect, an illumination seemed to come from the earth and glow up into the sky, not the other way around. Did I sense in myself, just then, a shift? A participation, however momentary, in what Rome was?

There was a sudden commotion: with a great whoosh the African brothers raced up the steps, their white cloths now caught at the corners and converted into bulging sacks on their backs. One after the other, then in pairs, they fled upward, fleet of foot, past where I stood. Tourists shrank out of their way. I spun around and pressed the shutter. Far below, cars carrying carabinieri, the military police, arrived, but by then (all this was the action of less than half a minute) the brothers had gone.

Later, I looked at the image on my camera: the last of the angels vanishing up the long flight of steps, *a hurry through which known and strange things pass*, their white wings flashing in the setting sun.

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