

Cole, T.

Selections

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BERLIN

The human being, born naked, is plunged into private darkness under a shroud. The fashion in Guantanamo has suited ISIS well for inspiration. The jumpsuit, oversized, is rolled up at the ankles. The hood, like an eyelid, draws attention not only to what is hidden, but to what would look right back at us if it could.



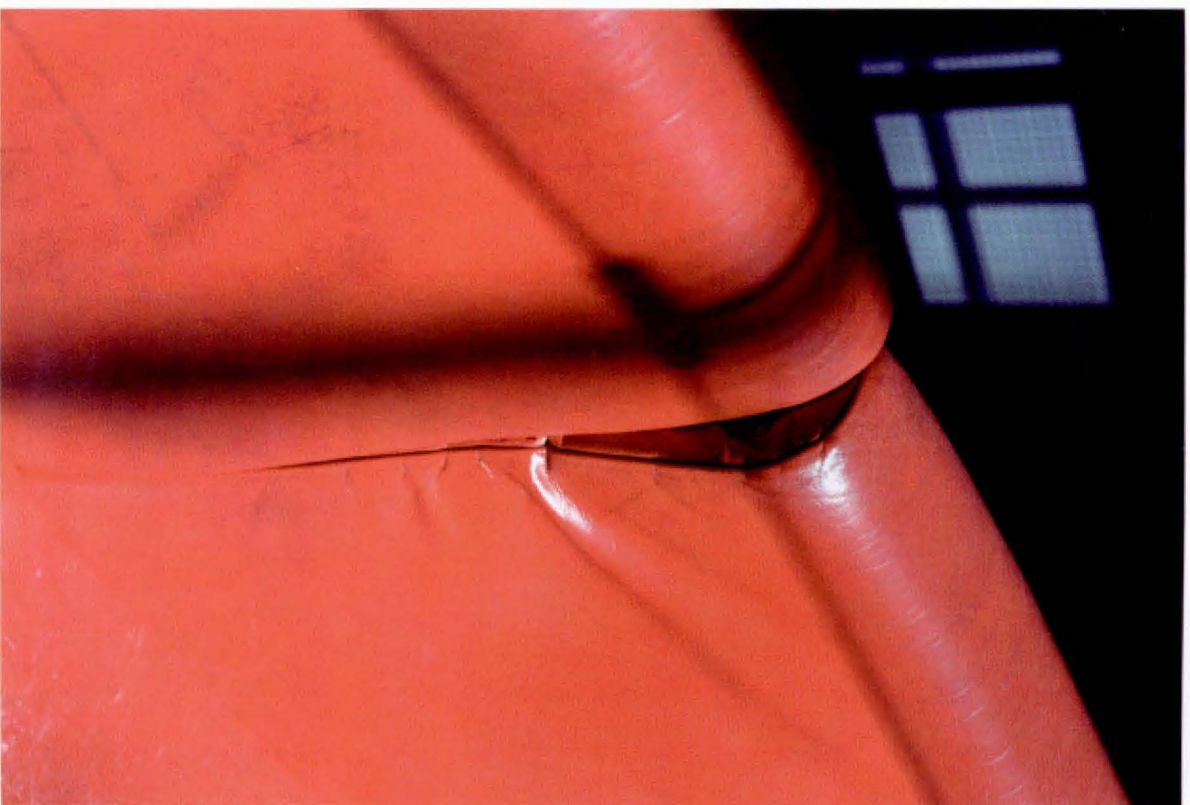
WANNSEE

There was a construction project for a few weeks outside my room.—“Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’—“Six miles from Wannsee is Sanssouci, in Potsdam. When I made this photograph in Wannsee, I did not know that Caravaggio’s *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* was in Sanssouci. Has there been a more intense or more erotic demonstration of the sense of touch than in Caravaggio’s painting? The split in Thomas’s shirt is the same size and shape as the wound in the side of Christ: both are eyes that short-circuit vision. Christ advises Thomas to surrender the sensual faculty in favor of the cognitive. But his hand, guiding Thomas’s hand, says something different. Caravaggio, as usual, goes to that dark core where action splits from intention. I was based in Wannsee for the summer, and spent some of my time going to distant places in search of paintings by Caravaggio: to Madrid, Venice, Basel. I missed the Caravaggio right next door.



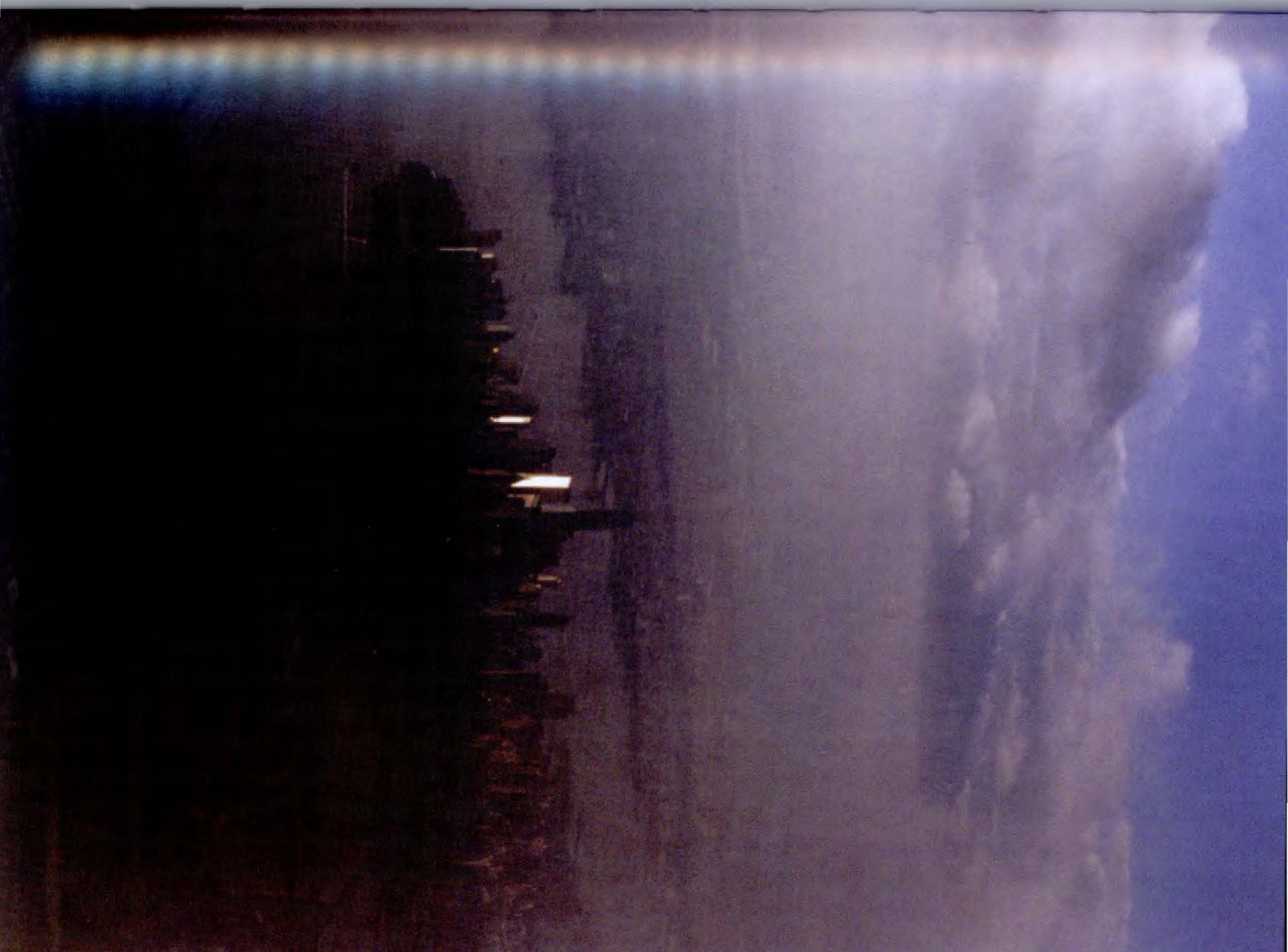
ZÜRICH

The vulnerability, in the sun's light, of an object. James of Milan (late thirteenth to early fourteenth century) expresses in his mystical devotional text *Stimulus Amoris* a desire to copulate with Christ "wound to wound." A century later, Julian of Norwich also recognizes the erotic charge of Christ's woundedness. The pun between "vulnus" (wound) and "vulva" accommodates these sexual readings.



NEW YORK CITY

And in this case it was the real city that seemed to be matching, point for point, my memory of the model, which I had stared at for a long time from a ramp in the museum.



NUREMBERG

In March 1498, the Nuremberg goldsmith and printer Anton Koberger published Ludovicus of Prussia's *Trilogium anime*, for which Koberger's godson Albrecht Dürer provided an illustration. Ludovicus, in his discussion of fantasia, touches on the composite nature of the chimera, that creature of legend whose hind parts were a dragon, the middle parts a goat, and the fore parts a lion. The world of dreams, Avicenna suggests, comes to pass when the rational brain gains unhindered access to the imagination's storeroom of images. Dürer, considering the question of Beauty, wrote: "I often see great art and good things while asleep which do not occur to me awake. However, when I wake up the memory of them is lost." But from time to time, in certain heightened states in certain individuals, the boundary between the chimeras seen in dreams and the discrete forms of waking life begin to blur. In these sudden rifts in the natural order of time, prodigies of vision in the guise of hybrid forms can appear briefly, before the critical faculty intervenes and the world rights itself again. It was a hot day and I had been walking for a long time.



PALM BEACH

Aristotle says the soul never thinks without an image. Giordano Bruno, following, says to think is to speculate with images. A view turns out to be a view of a view, as though reality had been caught unawares, half-naked. "Speculate": for the first time I notice there's a mirror in the word.

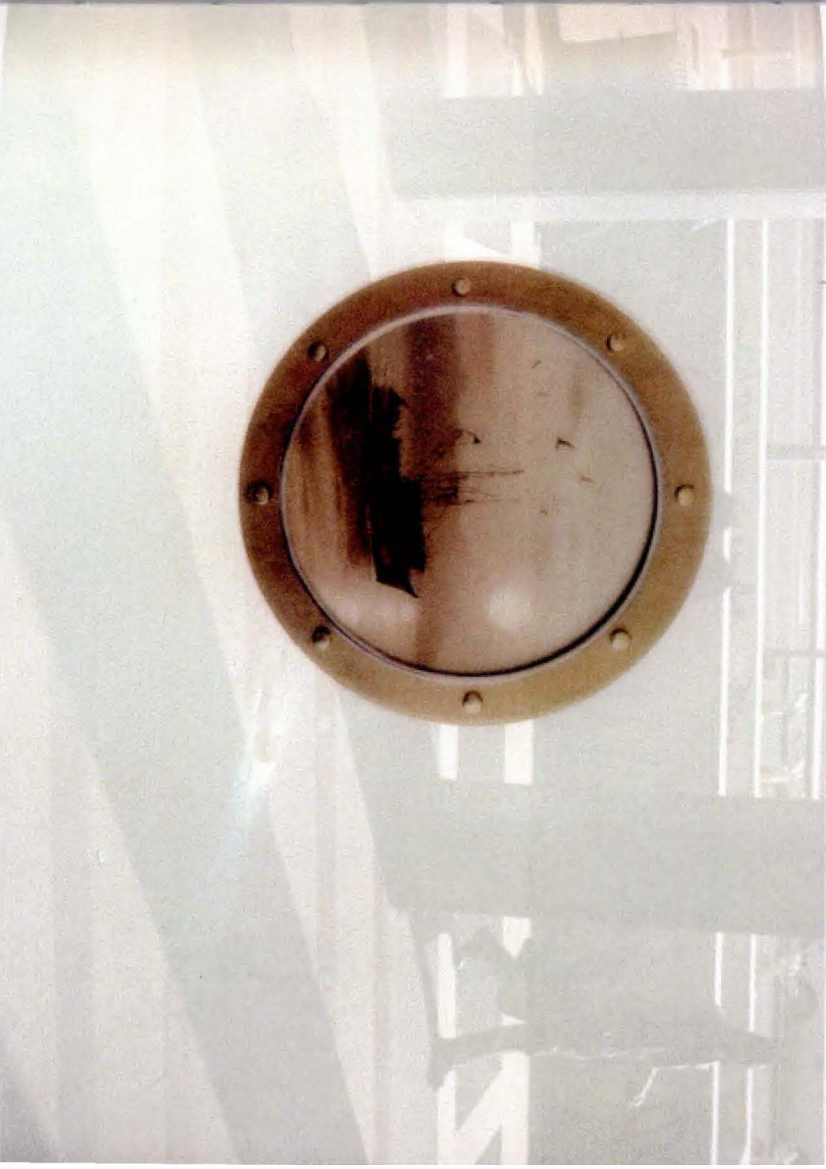


MILAN

There came as a suppliant to the god Asklepios a man who was so one-eyed that on the left he had only lids, there was nothing, just emptiness. People in the temple laughed at him for thinking he would see with an eye that was not there. But in a vision that appeared to him as he slept, the god seemed to boil some medicine and, drawing apart the lids, poured it in. When day came the man went out, seeing with both eyes.

—*Inscriptiones Graecae*, IV 21121

At Asklepios's temple in Epidaurus, you sleep so that in dreams you may find a cure for your illness, so that you may "see with an eye that was not there." It is the sleeping that cures the illness. The inadvertence of the dream narrative that opens, like a door, what had been sealed shut—your happiness, your ability to walk, your darkened eye—and grants new admission to the world's marvels.



BROOKLYN

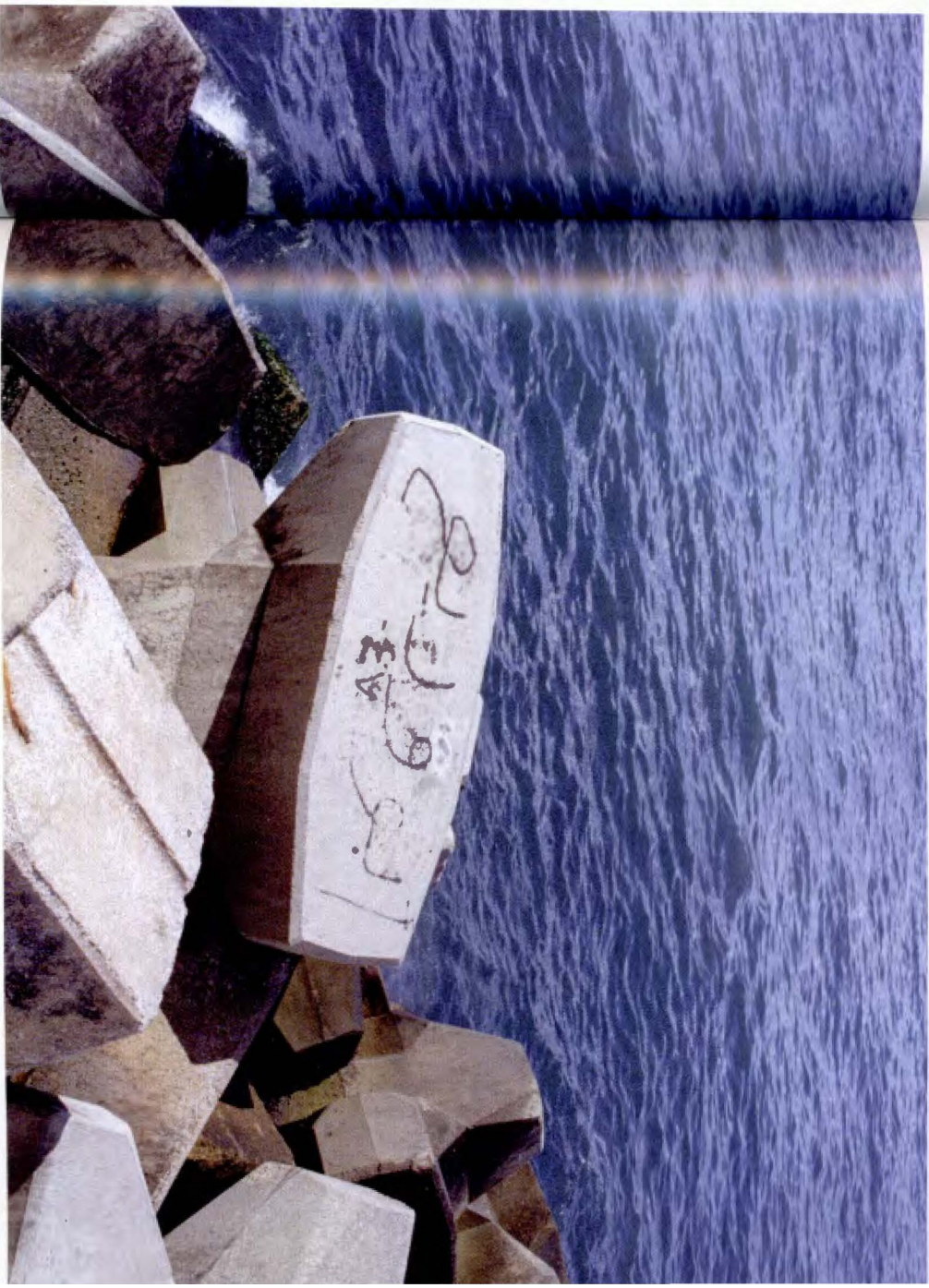
Losing myself in the city during those aimless walks, I encounter chimeras made of lexical fore parts and material hind parts. A sign saying "cars" bearing an image of a car above a car. Sometimes the indication is crossways: the vessel carrying the image of the ship is the image of the bus. There are signs that say nothing, that reveal, like the poker-faced skull under all our facial expressions, the bedrock truth of it all. But almost as interesting as these signs of nothing are those signs that announce only that they are signs, signs that live as an homage to sign as sign.

A week later I walked in the area under the Prospect Expressway. The "sign here" sign was gone, replaced by an ordinary sign selling something.



BEIRUT

My darling. They said we wouldn't cross tonight. Now they say we must. My phone is dying. There is a pregnant woman here and she won't stop crying. I will send you a Facebook message tomorrow, inshallah.



LONDON

The body has to adjust to the environment, to the challenges in the environment. The body isn't wrong, isn't "disabled." The environment itself—gravity, air, solidity or the lack of it, et cetera—is what is somehow wrong: ill-matched to the body's abilities, inimical to its verticality, stability, or mobility.

She said her husband had said their infant daughter, whose mind is conventional but whose limbs struggle to accomplish their given tasks on earth, is, in this sense, like an astronaut: far away from home, coping.



TRIPOLI

In Tripoli, I thought of Homs, which is an hour's drive away, only an hour's drive, which Death now visits. But what can this proximity mean? There were soldiers in the middle of town in Tripoli, a tank. Blast walls painted with the Lebanese cedar. I asked my friends why, and they said they hadn't even noticed. A Syrian child grabbed my arm and wouldn't let go.

It takes courage to face the open sea. It is one thing to know in theory that a boat can float, and another to entrust your actual all to it for days. The Phoenicians who lived on this coast knew the sea, were synonymous with it. The piscine grace of their seafaring craft can still be seen, at modest scale, in their descendants' fishing boats.

They were fifty-three. Some undoubtedly more courageous than others, but each was more courageous than he or she would, in tranquility, have wished to be. This was October last year. You wouldn't have heard of it. Just another drop in the sea of stories.

The disaster is that which has already happened. The boat was built for fifteen and they were thirty-eight over the limit, Palestinians, Syrians, and Lebanese. The boat was built for fishing but now, in waters past fishermen's range, it had become a craft of crazy hope.

How does the story end? They didn't die. It hardly counts as news. The Navy stopped them a few miles out (their hearts breaking at a sty-mied flight, but for those whose courage had already failed the sea's interrogation, a relief too). They were towed to shore and charged with the crime of hope.

I am writing this on a flight back into New York City. The river's sil-vered tendrils around the fragile city. I dozed on the flight and dreamed of drowning. Forty-five minutes after my flight lands, a small plane crashes into the Hudson. It's a World War II-era plane, a P-47 Thunder-

bolt built between 1941 and 1945. Fear death by water. The pilot was fifty-six years old. In the taxi home, I write about the boat in Tripoli, a "craft of crazy hope." Had I looked up just then, would I have seen a small doomed plane arcing across the evening sky? Around 10:40 P.M., I am drifting off to sleep (am being lowered into sleep). At that very moment, the pilot's body is retrieved by divers.



LISBON

The apartment was nice but, now that they had two daughters, too small for the family. She was a nurse and he was a doctor, both in their thirties. They found a new place, a house in another neighborhood, and began to make arrangements for a move. Then he died.

Death moves like dominoes in the dark. One unseen thing falls after another. She couldn't move from the apartment, she could no longer afford to move. The only move she made was out of their bedroom into a smaller room in the apartment. Their bedroom she left unchanged. The years passed. The money never quite came together. The dream of a house faded. She raised her daughters, they grew up and left home. There was no question of remarrying.

For more than thirty years she has lived in the apartment. Not for one night has she slept in what used to be their bedroom.



PIZ CORVATSCH

Persons unknown for reasons unknown placed a strip of black tape on the portrait of each black professor at Harvard Law School. The strip generally went from upper left to lower right, like a backslash, crossing out the right eye of each black professor, making of each a pirate or cyclops. We learn quite young the tricks of perspective: with a thumb you can make the moon disappear, with tarp you can blind a mountain, with a net capture a horn. But not really.



RIVAZ

If you walk along the northern lip of Lac Léman, between Montreux and Lausanne, you will see before you the lake's flat shine all across to Évian-les-Bains in France.

On steep slopes you wend your way past the wine-growing villages of Corseaux, Saint-Saphorin, Rivaz, and Chexbres, feeling in your legs the pleasure of a long walk along narrow old roads, some of which have new surfaces. We are a small group, we walk in solitude. There are people working in the vineyards. In one grove, a man harvests by hand, onerous-looking work. Farther along, in about half an hour, we will taste the white wines of Lavaux. Our mouths will be explored by the nectar of the landscape we have crossed. For now, below us are brown-roofed hamlets, and a pair of twin boys, around ten years old, come laughing up the road. "Do you live here?" "We have always lived here!" "Do you like it?" "We love it!" Their answers are in unison.

I rest at a concrete outcrop with a bunting of vintners' blue nets, a blue the same color as the lake. It is as though something long awaited has come to fruition. A gust of wind sweeps in from across the lake. The curtain shifts, and suddenly everything can be seen. The scales fall from our eyes. The landscape opens. No longer are we alone: they are with us now, have been all along, all our living and all our dead.



BRAZZAVILLE

Darkness is not empty. While preparing this book, I rescanned the negative of the boy by the Congo. "His eyes disappear," I had written. But all of a sudden, with slightly altered settings, I could now see his face, his eyes. Darkness is not empty. It is information at rest. Late in the nineteenth century, after hundreds of years of pressure by the European colonists, the villages in the interior, along the Congo River, began to succumb to the invaders. In response to this civilizational crisis, Mangaaka power figures were sculpted ever-larger, growing from their miniature sizes to the height of a man.

In each village, the Mangaaka was a sentry to ward off the oncoming collapse, "poised to spring into action," as scholars said, and "intensely reflective." The Mangaaka was full of potent medicine, with eyes of white metal enamel, irises of iron ore. This boy is double-visioned. He is looking out, looking outward, but here, poised at the edge of the crisis, he is also looking inward, looking in.



POSTSCRIPT: A MAP OF THE WORLD

ect came about when I began to match words to these interconnected images. The process, I found, was not so different from one of composing a novel: I made use of voices, repetitions (within the text, and from other things I have written), allusions, and quotations. This book stands on its own. But it can also be seen as the fourth in a quartet of books about the limits of vision.

To look is to see only a fraction of what one is looking at. Even in the most vigilant eye, there is a blind spot. What is missing?

Brooklyn

March 2017

In each place I have traveled, I have used my camera as an extension of my memory. The images are a tourist's pictures in this sense. But they also have an inquiring feeling to them and, in some cases, showed me more about the place than I might have seen otherwise.

I was born in the United States and moved back to Nigeria, my parents' country, as an infant. After finishing high school in Nigeria, I returned to the United States for university. With only a few exceptions—notably in the UK—this was the world I knew. In the last eighteen or so years, however, travel became a bigger part of my life. It began first with the journeys I undertook for my research as an art historian in training: to Germany, Austria, and Belgium. But later, after my books were published, I began to receive invitations to literary festivals and to teaching programs. If the place is interesting and I have the time, I go. I also traveled on vacation, or to see friends and family. Later still, I traveled on my own specifically to make photographs. Ten countries, twenty, thirty: the numbers mounted and "home" was now also in airport lounges and hotel rooms. Without my having intended it, the map of my movements was becoming a map of the world.

I am intrigued by the continuity of places, by the singing line that connects them all. This singing line I have responded to in this book in the form of a lyric essay that combines photography and text. Human experience varies greatly in its externals, but on the emotional and psychological level, we have a great deal of similarity with one another. Whether I was in the small town of Vals in Switzerland or in a high building overlooking the dwellings of millions of people in São Paulo, my constant thought has been the same: how to keep the line going. This proj-