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TEJU COLE PAIRS TEXT AND IMAGE TO EXPLORE MYSTERIES OF THE ORDINARY

By Robert Pinsky, June 1, 2017



BLIND SPOT

By Teju Cole

Illustrated. 332 pp. Random House. \$40.

Teju Cole has composed a lyrical essay in photographs paired with texts, with each set identified by its locale, including — to name only a few — Auckland, Brooklyn, Brazzaville, Hadath El Jebbeh, Lagos, McMinnville, Paris, Queens, São Paulo, Selma, Vals, Ypsilanti, Zurich. Yet Cole's subject is not variety but what he calls "the continuity of places ... the singing line that connects them all." Unlike tourism, or tourism's uppercase guide, the Travel Pages, "Blind Spot" does not pursue the spectacular landscape or portrait that epitomizes a destination. Rarely do Cole's images of streets, doors, mirrors, murals, pavements, interior and exterior walls disclose their specific geographical setting. The terse captions do that. The point here is not the exotic but its opposite: mysteries of the ordinary, attained in patiently awaited, brief flashes. In other words, this is a book about human culture.

The photographic term "flashes" also applies to the method of Cole's 2012 novel, "Open City," which arranges its incidents somewhat obliquely, in an episodic rhythm based on psychological discovery rather than adventure or suspense: an introspective picaresque. The novel accumulates intensity by spurning trite expectations — about New York and about the Nigerian central character's life there as a medical student. Even when he is mugged or breaks up with his girlfriend, the surface of incident is less important than the underlying, ineffable undertones of destiny and character.

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Similarly, in “Blind Spot” passages often refer backward or forward to one another, but not with any obvious narrative or discursive rhythm. Often the text glosses the exact instant of the photograph, as when a chance wind lifts some netting for a moment, opening a landscape into human time: “They are with us now, have been all along, all our living and all our dead.” The images are populated with human life, but for the most part that life is implicit: with a notable, climactic exception, there are few faces.

These choices are deeply purposeful. The abstaining, in texts and photographs, is ardent. In São Paulo, the image shows a dizzy, dense geometry of many-colored city blocks of towers and windows. In the facing text, someone asks the author a question that he says resembled “the sudden realization that a mirrored wall has been double-sided all along.” That question, which Cole gives, characteristically, as “not her exact words,” concerns the unity of all his work around one, unstated problem. In Selma, about 100 pages later, the question recurs: the image shows a flat, barren geometry of a monochromatic street bifurcated by a vivid telephone pole. In the facing text, Cole writes of “a dream in which I am crossing the street and never reach the other side. ... I keep deferring my arrival at the destination. The destination is to arrive at this perpetual deferral, to never reach the destination.” Beyond the apparent contrast between density and blankness, São Paulo and Selma, a similarity: that “continuity of places.”

About his many pictures of signs, posters, commercial images, he writes that those subjects are “neither more nor less than the ‘real’ elements by which they were framed. ... Which world? See how? We who?” And the same, central passage declares that perception moves “on a case-by-case basis. The very contingency and brevity of vision become the long-sought miracle.”

This questioning, tentative habit of mind, with its allegiance to particulars, suspending judgment while hoping for the brief, limited miracle of insight, drives Cole’s enterprise. It is an “avenue of thought” for which he rejects “the dismissive term ‘self-referential.’ ” This inquiring, open attention is a form of what used to be called (before the word began to smell of departments and committees) “humanism.”

The title “Blind Spot” has many meanings. It refers to a serious medical condition that afflicted Cole, and to the partial, unforced nature of insight, in language as in images. In the book’s final image we do at last see a living human face: a boy in the Republic of Congo, holding onto an orange railing above water. In the book’s concluding passage: “He is looking out, looking outward, but here, poised at the edge of the crisis, he is also looking inward, looking in.” The boy’s extraordinary facial expression, Cole explains, was at first invisible, even his eyes were invisible — the viewer was blind to them — until patient work in the photographic processing, rescanning the negative, brought to light those eyes and their expressive, layered vision.