

BLIND SPOT BY TEJU COLE REVIEW- A WRITER'S PHOTOGRAPHS

By Ro Kwon, June 29, 2017



On encountering a collection of Teju Cole's photographs and writing, I began to wonder about the mind behind the camera, the eye giving such careful attention to, for instance, a pair of scissors; then a dirt hill; folding chairs; mesh; a siding; part of a brick wall; imitation Gucci bags; crushed plastic bottles ... With few exceptions, the photos here memorialise such items, ostensibly common things made radiant by the quality of Cole's looking. His images come titled with such place names as Zürich, Tripoli, Lagos, Seoul, Ypsilanti, Ubud, Brooklyn and São Paulo. No matter the locale, they all bring to mind the exhorting lines of Adam Zagajewski's "En Route": "Light on the walls of old houses, / June. / Passerby, open your eyes."

In truth, however, I was initially drawn to *Blind Spot* less for its 150-plus photos from dozens of countries than for its text, the short paragraph or two – at times, just a couple of sentences – accompanying each image. I've sought out Cole's writing since 2011, when I first read his novel *Open City*, which centres on a psychiatric resident who takes long walks around New York City while he looks, thinks, listens and occasionally speaks. Many of the photos in *Blind Spot* originate in Cole's previous books. In a postscript, he writes that, once he started publishing, he began to receive invitations to teach and to literary festivals. During his travels, he used his camera as an extension of his memory. "The images are a tourist's pictures," he says, but it wasn't until he "began to match words to these interconnected images" that this book came to life.

The words, though, aren't quite descriptions of the pictures; they're not straightforward commentaries. Instead, Cole's squib-sized texts are more like meditations, often lacking a direct relation to the photos. In the space between each image

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and its paired text, much is implied. A picture of Beirut apartment balconies appears alongside a discussion of Emily Dickinson's poetry; a shot of a telephone pole in Selma, Alabama, jostles with a dream of deferred arrival. Early in *Blind Spot*, Cole positions a photo of hotel curtains next to a moving consideration of Albrecht Dürer's drapery studies. "A folded drapery is cloth thinking about itself," Cole writes. "In the crumples, pleats, gathers, creases, falls, twists and billows of cloth is a regular irregularity that is like the surface of water, like channels of air, like God made visible. The human is the divine enfolded in skin."

So prompted, the reader of *Blind Spot* becomes more alert to drapery in subsequent shots. The tarps, cloths and sheets shine with analogical possibilities. As in a novel, Cole's images gradually form patterns, leitmotifs. "I am intrigued by the continuity of places, by the singing line that connects them all," he explains. He notes that the most intricate 16th-century studies are of angelic robes, then steps out of LaGuardia airport and sees, in a tarpaulin-covered edifice, "a white-robed flutter descend on the afternoon, 'with ah! bright wings'" (quoting Gerard Manley Hopkins). Purse-sellers in Venice gather up their counterfeit goods in white cloths and flee the carabinieri. They rush up a flight of stairs, "wings flashing in the setting sun".

Wings, angels, the divine: this is a God-shadowed book, and Cole writes memorably – and amusingly – about having been an evangelist. Once, in school, he tried to faith-heal a classmate: "This was at a time when God had been moving through me." He eventually lost his religion, and *Blind Spot* can be at its most powerful when it draws on the apostate's longing, with prose that pushes up against the visible, material world.

Consider a photo of another plastic sheet. This one was taken in Wannsee, Germany, and the sheet is translucent, water-mottled, with a slit in the material. The plastic covers a line of bricks. On the opposite page, Cole quotes the chapters in the Bible when the risen Christ tells the apostle Thomas, who doubts the resurrection, to put his hand in his Lord's side. Six miles from Wannsee, Cole says, one can visit Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, in which "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." Suddenly, one notices that the slit in the plastic is eye-shaped, too; the sheet could be the torn fabric of the real, barely hiding the absent divine. "Once absolute faith is no longer possible," he writes, "perception moves forward on a case by case basis. The very contingency and brevity of vision becomes the long-sought miracle."

Next to a photo shot in Tivoli, Cole recalls hearing that someone he knows is losing his vision. "I was stunned," he says. "Him of all people, so young, so good at seeing." In this new, luminous book, Cole shows himself to be really one of the best at seeing.