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BLACK PAPER

WRITING IN A
DARK TIME

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After Caravaggio

1

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, born in late 1571 in Milan, is the quintessential uncontrollable artist, the genius to whom normal rules do not apply. "Caravaggio," the name of the Northern Italian village from which his family came, reads like two words conjoined, *chiaroscuro* and *braggadocio*: harsh light mixed with deep dark on the one hand, unrestrained arrogance on the other. Raised in the city of Milan and the village of Caravaggio in a family that some say was on the cusp of minor nobility, Caravaggio was six when he lost both his father and his grandfather, on the same day, to the plague. He was apprenticed around age thirteen to Simone Peterzano, a painter in the region, from whom he must have learned the basics: preparing canvases, mixing paint, perspective, proportion. He apparently developed a facility for still-life painting, and it was probably while studying with Peterzano that he absorbed the pensive atmosphere of Leonardo da Vinci and great Northern Italian painters of the sixteenth century like Giorgione and Titian.

Caravaggio most likely first went to Rome in 1592. The reason

might have been his involvement in an incident in Milan in which a policeman was wounded (the details, as with so much else in his life, are foggy). It would be far from the last time he had to get out of town. In Rome, it did not take him long to gain both acclaim and notoriety, and by the mid-1590s his paintings had settled into the styles and subjects we often think of as Caravaggesque: lutenists, cardplayers, a panoply of brooding androgynous youths. Eminent collectors vied for his work, Cardinal Scipione Borghese and Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte among them. Success went to his head, or perhaps it activated something that had always been there. His language coarsened; his drinking worsened; he got into fights often and was arrested multiple times.

In 1604, Caravaggio was thirty-two. He already had behind him a string of indelible masterpieces, made for Roman patrons and churches: *The Supper at Emmaus*, *The Calling of Saint Matthew* in the Contarelli Chapel, *The Conversion of Saint Paul* in the Cerasi Chapel, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*. By that year he had also completed *The Entombment of Christ*, a work of profound grief and astonishing achievement, even by Caravaggio's already high standards. But in his personal conduct, he remained reckless. "Sometimes he looked for a chance to break his neck or jeopardize the life of another," writes Giovanni Baglione, a contemporary and one of his first biographers. Giovanni Pietro Bellori, a later seventeenth-century writer, tells us, "He used to go out on the town with his sword at his side, like a professional swordsman, seeming to do anything but paint." At lunch in a tavern one day, he ordered eight artichokes, and when they arrived, he asked which were cooked in butter and which in oil. The waiter suggested he smell them to figure out the answer himself. Caravaggio, always quick to suspect insult, sprang up and threw the

earthenware plate at the waiter's face. Then he grabbed a sword; the waiter fled.

As a boy in Lagos, I spent hours poring over his work in books. The effect his paintings have on me, the way they move me but also make me uneasy, cannot be due only to long familiarity. Other favorites from that time, like Jacques-Louis David, now seldom excite me, even as Caravaggio's mesmerizing power seems only to have increased. And it cannot only be because of his technical excellence. The paintings are often flawed, with problems of composition and foreshortening. My guess is that it has to do with how he put more of himself, more of his feelings, into paintings than anyone else had before him.

The themes in a Caravaggio painting might derive from the Bible or from myth, but it is impossible to forget even for a moment that this is a painting made by a particular person, a person with a specific set of emotions and sympathies. The maker is there in a Caravaggio painting. We sense him calling out to us. His contemporaries may have been interested in the biblical lesson of the doubting Thomas, but we are attracted to Thomas's uncertainty, which we read, in some way, as the painter's own.

But there's more than subjectivity in Caravaggio: There's also the way his particular brand of subjectivity tends to highlight the bitter and unpleasant aspects of life. His compact oeuvre is awash in threat, seduction, and ambiguity. Why did he paint so many martyrdoms and beheadings? Horror is a part of life we hope not to witness too often, but it exists, and we do have to see it sometimes. Like Sophocles or Samuel Beckett or Toni Morrison — and yet unlike them — Caravaggio is an artist who goes there with us, to the painful places of reality. And when we are there with him, we sense that he's no mere guide. We realize that he is in fact at home in that pain, that he lives there. There's the unease.

Late in May 1606, two years after the artichoke incident, Caravaggio lost a wager on a game of tennis against a man named Ranuccio Tomassoni. A fight ensued, in which several others participated. Caravaggio was injured in the head, but he ran his sword through Tomassoni, killing him. After two days of hiding in Rome, he escaped the city, first to the estates of the Colonna family outside Rome, and then, near the end of the year, to Naples. He had become a fugitive.

Caravaggio's mature career can be divided in two: the Roman period, and everything that came after his murder of Tomassoni. The miracle is that he accomplished so much in that second act, on the run. His work changed — the brushwork becoming looser, the subject matter more morbid — but he remained productive, and he remained valued by patrons. He worked in Naples, in Malta, in as many as three different cities in Sicily, and in Naples again before he set out for Rome in 1610, in the expectation of a papal pardon. He died on that return journey.

In the summer of 2016, I had plans to be in Rome and Milan for work. The US presidential campaign was proceeding with wall-to-wall coverage, and the body politic was having a collective nervous breakdown. The bizarre candidacy of Donald Trump had established him, against all odds, as a contender. Right-wing movements were gaining ground across the world. Fleeing war and economic distress, thousands of people were dying in the Mediterranean. The brutality of ISIS had made videos of beheadings part of the common visual culture. What I remember of that summer is the feeling that doom wasn't merely on its way; it had already arrived. (It had arrived, but then it evolved, and four years later, had become something else again.)

2

I knew I would revisit paintings by Caravaggio in Rome and Milan. At least he would tell me the truth about doom, and I would find in him the reprieve certain artists can offer us in dark times. And that was when an old and long-cherished idea came back to me: What if I traveled farther south, visiting each of the places Caravaggio had in his years of exile? Many of the works he made in those places remain, some *in situ*. Naples, Valletta, Syracuse, Messina, and possibly Palermo. The more I thought about the idea, the more I wanted to make it happen. I wasn't after a luxurious summer sojourn. The places of Caravaggio's exile had all become significant flash points in the immigration crisis, which was not entirely a coincidence: he'd gone to them because they were ports. A port is where a given territory is most amenable to arrival and to escape, where a stranger has a chance to feel less strange. I had two strong reasons for deciding to undertake the journey: First, I longed for the turmoil I knew I would feel in front of Caravaggio's paintings in the museums and churches where they were held. But second, I wanted to see something of what was happening at that moment outside, beyond the walls.

I arrived in Naples in late June, by train from Rome. It was my first time in the city, and the taxi driver, a middle-aged man, must have guessed as much. He explained that there was a fixed fare of twenty-five euros between the Napoli Centrale station and destinations in town. By the time the concierge at the hotel confirmed that the trip shouldn't have cost more than fifteen euros, the driver was gone. Later that evening, on Via Medina, half a block from my hotel, I passed by a woman sleeping on the ground. Most of her body was covered by a small blanket, but her feet stuck out, and I was reminded of the bare and dirty feet of the

Virgin Mary that had so offended the first critics of Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin*. The next day, the sleeping woman was gone, but I saw another woman seated near the same spot, yelling at passersby in garbled words that were probably incomprehensible even to speakers of Italian.

Naples bookended Caravaggio's years of exile. The first visit was late in 1606, the second in 1609, and he undertook important commissions on both visits. By October 1606, he was already being plied with offers and welcomed into the highest Neapolitan artistic circles. One of his first completed works in Naples was for the recently formed charitable society of the Pio Monte della Misericordia. The painting, for which he was paid without delay and which he was quick to deliver, was a large canvas titled *The Seven Acts of Mercy*. It can be seen to this day in the church for which it was commissioned in the center of the city, just off the narrow Via dei Tribunali. *The Seven Acts of Mercy* is a complex painting that tries to compile into a single vertical plane seven distinct vignettes, allegorical counterpoints to the seven deadly sins. In reproduction, the picture seems a congested mess. But in real life, at more than twelve feet high in a small octagonal building, it is uncannily absorbing.

The protagonists emerge from pools of darkness to play their respective roles, and they seem to drop back into that gloom when the viewer's eye moves on to other sections of the painting. On the right side of the painting is an allegory of charity from ancient Rome: the elderly Cimon breastfed in prison by his daughter. A body being carried out behind her (we see only the feet) represents the burial of the dead. In the foreground, a bare-torsoed beggar, sprawled at the feet of Saint Martin, represents the clothing of the naked. *The Seven Acts of Mercy*, with its stacked narra-

tion as well as its light effects, was to have a sensational influence on Neapolitan painting after Caravaggio. This was something of a pattern for him: in each city where he lived, he was like a lightning bolt, a startling but brief illumination in whose aftermath nothing was ever the same again. When I came out of the church into Via dei Tribunali, *The Seven Acts of Mercy*, with its surging movement and sharp divisions of light and dark, seemed to continue on the busy street.

On the day I arrived in Naples, I saw some young African men selling shirts and hats just outside Napoli Centrale. That afternoon, I went down from Castel Nuovo to Castel dell'Ovo, where boys dived from the causeway into the bay. Near the entrance of the castle, a man sat selling trinkets. He was Senegalese and sometimes worked as a translator of books. He was fluent in French, Italian, and English. His current project, he said, was about the African presence in Italy. I asked him where the Africans were in Naples, and he said perhaps I'd find some at Piazza Garibaldi. But, he added, that was not a neighborhood I'd want to be in after nightfall.

That evening I wandered instead through the Quartieri Spagnoli, the crowded "Spanish Quarter," where Caravaggio lived and where he found the combination of high culture and low life that so appealed to him. The streets of the quarter were narrow, the buildings tall; many walls were decorated with graffiti. It was easy to imagine it as a place where life had been boisterous and cheerful for a long time, a place of concealment and informality—just the thing for a man on the run. The Quartieri Spagnoli was crowded that night, full of residents, students, and tourists. My server at the pizzeria where I dined, a jovial young man, had a tattoo on his arm: *veni, vidi, vici*. It was an allusion to Julius Caesar, of

course, but it could also be, I later found out, an identifying mark among members of Italy's resurgent far-right movement, a sign of their nostalgia for Mussolini's fascism.

The next morning, I went up to the Museo di Capodimonte, located in the northern part of the city in a building that used to be the palace of the Bourbon rulers of Naples and Sicily. After a long, straight sequence of rooms, I arrived at Caravaggio's *The Flagellation of Christ* (figure 1). Christ stands at the column, life-size, and around him are three assailants, two of whom pull at him, the third of whom crouches, preparing a whip. As so often with Caravaggio, there is the story that is depicted, but beyond it, and often overwhelming it, is an intensification of mood accomplished through his use of unnatural shadow, simplified background, and a limited palette. It is an image of brutal injustice, an image that makes us ask why anyone should be tortured.

When I left the museum and walked down the Capodimonte hill, strolling through the busy city at evening, I was distressed. I imagined that I was being watched by people in the doorways and windows. I began to think about how Caravaggio, once he escaped into exile, could never take a good night's sleep for granted, but I was also thinking about all the people in the city at that very moment who were in one way or another precarious guests: the woman in the doorway at Via Medina, the man selling trinkets at Castel dell'Ovo, the many young Africans I saw at the train station.

Naples had given me two magnificent late paintings by Caravaggio, but my efforts to see a third had been thwarted. *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*, reputed to be his very last painting, was out on loan. I decided I would leave for Palermo the following day. I wasn't traveling in correct order: Caravaggio went from Naples to Malta, and only then to Sicily and eventually back to

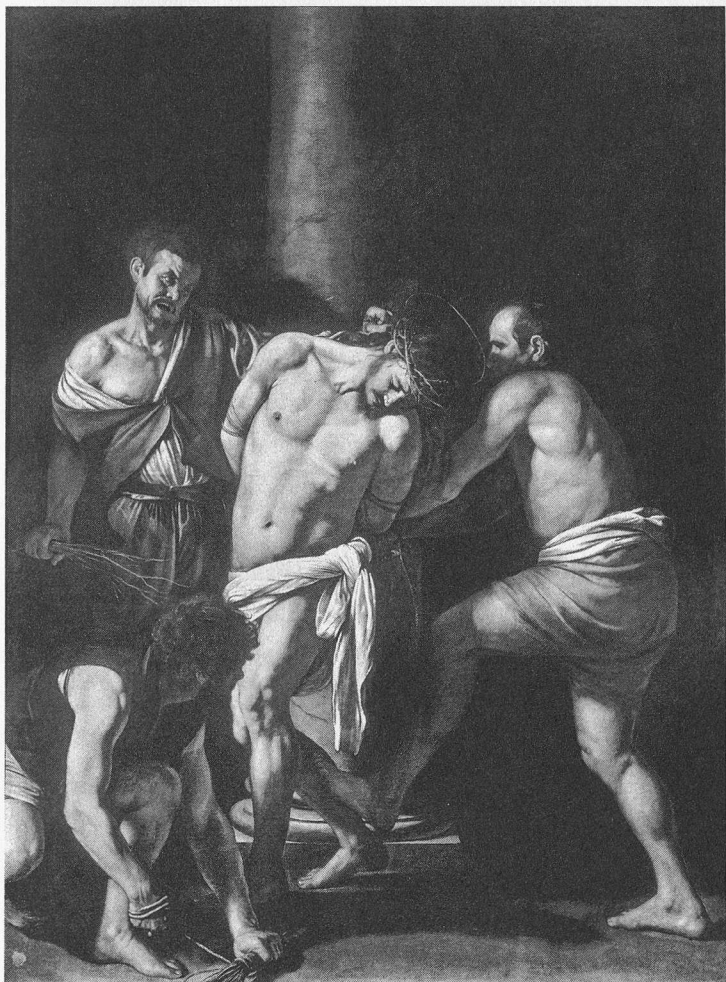


FIGURE 1. Caravaggio, *The Flagellation of Christ* (1607). Oil on canvas. Museo di Capodimonte, Naples. Photograph: Wikimedia.

Naples. But my intuition was to leave Malta almost for the end, a remote culmination to a dream journey.

Night had fallen by the time I got back to my hotel room. Below me lay the city, its houses packed close in the dusk, their lights glittering like a cloud of fireflies all the way to the edge of

the water with its ferries and cruise ships—beyond which lay, in almost total darkness now, the Bay of Naples, Mount Vesuvius, the Isle of Capri, and the Mediterranean Sea.

3

The Oratory of San Lorenzo on Via Immacolatella in Palermo is surrounded by a tangle of streets so narrow and twisty that I got quite close to the building without seeing it. I took two wrong turns before I finally found the entrance. On the high altar in the chapel of this oratory, Caravaggio's *Nativity with Saint Lawrence and Saint Francis* hung for centuries. Caravaggio is likely to have made the painting in 1609, though the somewhat conservative style (elements of the composition bring to mind his much earlier *Calling of Saint Matthew*), as well as the paucity of documents, put that date in doubt. What is certain is that the painting was made before 1610, and that it was one of the treasures of Palermo until the night of October 17, 1969, when it was hacked out of its frame by persons unknown, never to be seen since.

The consensus now is that the Mafia was most likely involved in the theft and almost certainly responsible for the final fate of the painting. What was that final fate? Stories have floated around. It was sold off; it was fed to pigs; it was burned in a fire. But nobody knows for sure. In its place now, on the high altar of the oratory, hangs a copy commissioned in 2009 and painted from photographs of the original, a plucky facsimile that looks nothing like an authentic Caravaggio. Perhaps this is why the printed tourist information asks visitors to cast their eyes elsewhere and enjoy "the beautiful marmoreal floor realized in 1716 by the artists of murble Francesco Camanlino and Alojsio Mira." But my pilgrimage was not to see a marble floor. Caravaggios are so few—around eighty are agreed upon by scholars—that the absences

feel like scars: those mentioned by seventeenth-century writers that haven't survived or been identified, the three that burned in Berlin in 1945, the one that haunts the oratory in Palermo.

The summer of my trip was a difficult time in Italy, but Sicily had its own special difficulties. I couldn't be sure, for instance, whether the many examples of graffiti I saw with the word "ultras" referred to soccer fanatics, right-wing political thugs, or some combination of the two. In the heat of the afternoon, I walked through the Ballarò market, its gaudy stalls offering produce and cheap goods. When I returned, the sun was going down, and the city had undergone a change. The market's stalls were shut, the streets almost silent. There had been stories about the conflicts some Nigerians in Palermo had had with the Mafia, their involvement in prostitution, the terrible acts of violence they both endured and perpetrated, the stabbings and slashings. None of that was visible during my stroll through the Ballarò market that evening, but the vibe was tense, and I knew that I didn't want to stick around.

4

Two things were clear to me by the time I took a train the following morning along the Sicilian coast from Palermo — via Cefalù, Capo d'Orlando, Gioiosa Marea, and Barcellona, a succession of unfamiliar towns — to Messina. The first was that I could no longer separate my exploration of Caravaggio's years in exile from what I was seeing around me in contemporary Italy: the sea was the same, the sense of endangerment rhymed. The second was that, after my stymied attempt to see *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula* in Naples and the predictable disappointment of seeing the replica *Nativity* in Palermo, I was more than ready to stand in front of a real and great Caravaggio painting again. I got into a taxi at the

station in Messina. The driver said, "So, you're a football player?" I laughed. Indeed, what else could a young African headed to a hotel be? "No, I'm here to look at paintings by Caravaggio." "Ah, Caravaggio," he said, unconvinced. "Caravaggio. Great."

In Messina I met up with Alessandra Coppola, a Neapolitan journalist who had agreed to be my guide in Sicily. After lunch, we walked around the city, which was unlike any I had seen in Italy: modest, modern, full of flat-roofed multistory buildings devoid of ornament. There was a good reason for this: an earthquake leveled Messina in December 1908, destroying 90 percent of its buildings and killing more than seventy thousand people in the surrounding area. The city that emerged in the aftermath was plainer and more rational than many other Italian cities its size. Many of the new buildings were designed to withstand future earthquakes.

In the late afternoon, Alessandra and I went to the Museo Regionale di Messina, a simple building on a rise near the strait that separates Sicily from the mainland. There were trees and marble antiques scattered about its grounds. We were visiting on a Wednesday afternoon, and almost no one was there. We felt fortunate as we moved through the silent galleries. Stepping into a large gray room, without fanfare or warning I found myself standing before *The Raising of Lazarus* (plate 2). It hit me like a sudden gust of wind. I don't know if I cried out, but I know I began to shake. I approached it, making sense of it as I moved closer—a harshly lit, frightening picture, an entanglement of limbs, some as yet unresolved drama—and as I did so, I saw that there was a second painting in the room, also by Caravaggio: his *Adoration of the Shepherds*. This was a quieter work, but it was also large and had its own force field.

I sat on a bench in the middle of the room, the two paintings

set at a right angle to each other. I was awestruck, out of breath, caught between these two immensities. The very act of looking at an old painting can be so strange. It is an activity that is often bound up with class identity or social aspiration. It can sometimes feel like a diverting, or irritating, stroll among White people's ancestors. It can also often be wonderful, giving the viewer a chance to be blessed by a stranger's ingenuity or insight. But rarely, something even better happens: a painting made by someone in a distant country hundreds of years ago, an artist's careful attention and turbulent experience sedimented onto a stretched canvas, leaps out of the past to call you — to call *you* — to attention in the present, to drive you to confusion by drawing from you both a sense of alarm and a feeling of consolation, to bring you to an awareness of your own self in the act of experiencing something that is well beyond the grasp of language, something that you wouldn't wish to live without.

The Raising of Lazarus, painted around 1609, is dominated by the dark expanse in its upper register. Below, as though spotlighted, is the scene of resurrection. At the center, stretched out in a diagonal, taut between death and life, is the pallid, almost greenish body of Lazarus. A man supports him, and his sisters mourn on the right side of the painting. On the left is the figure of Christ, with his head backlit, stretching out his right arm to summon life back into the dead man. Golden light is flecked over hands and faces, arms and legs.

I've always been moved by the story of Lazarus as it is recounted in the Gospel of John. The basic shape of the narrative is recognizable and relatable: someone dies, and the heartbroken family pleads for their loss to be reversed. In the case of Lazarus, Christ is so moved by the family's grief that he interferes with the natural order of things and grants an exception like no other: he

brings the dead man back to life. This makes it an exemplar of a kind of cosmic partiality, what we would all hope for at our most wounded and vulnerable. Caravaggio pins the scene down to its material facts: the confused faces of the onlookers, the downcast faces of the sisters, the necrotic body of Lazarus, the supernatural authority of Christ.

The drama that unfolds in *The Adoration of the Shepherds* is, by comparison, much quieter. What can one do with the stable where the infant Christ was born? Many artists cannot rise above the story's fairy-tale baggage, but in Caravaggio's hands, the narrative is brought alive again. The key, as usual, is his trust in realism: show what things look like, and the feelings will come. The painting is a pool of burnt umber, swirling around the placental red of the robes worn by the Virgin and one of the shepherds. This is no sweet family scene, but rather a document of roughness and need. Why should a newborn and his mother be in such a dirty place, barely protected from the elements? What corner of a refugee camp is this? Why do these people not have a home?

Caravaggio left Naples in 1607 and ended up in Sicily in late 1608, taking commissions in Syracuse, Messina, and probably Palermo. But between his time in Naples and his arrival in Sicily, he spent more than a year farther south, in Malta. He had to leave Naples for reasons that are not clear. Then, Caravaggio being Caravaggio, he had to escape from Malta after committing a crime there. And when he left Sicily, it was inevitably in a hurry, this time because he feared for his life. He went from Sicily back to Naples, and then began to make his way toward Rome. He was productive in those convoluted final years and months, but he was also harried and homeless. It isn't hard to imagine that when he painted *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, he might have found

himself in deep sympathy with the Holy Family. They were, after all, confronted with one of the simplest and most complicated of all human needs: a safe and decent place to spend the night.

5

At the hotel in Messina, I read in that morning's *Corriere della Sera* about a boat that sank more than a year earlier with seven hundred people onboard. That boat had now been retrieved by the Italian coast guard. It had been raised and was being taken from the sea to the Sicilian port of Augusta. I decided I would go to Augusta and watch the berthing of the boat. We departed from Messina and drove down the coast, past Taormina and Catania, on a clear bright morning that had Mount Etna's smoky peak visible on our right for long spells. The town of Augusta, when we reached it, was bright and deserted. We had lunch at a cafe there but could not find any information about the retrieved boat. So we drove farther down, past Syracuse, all the way to the southern tip of the island, to the resort town of Pozzallo. There was heavy traffic as we made our way through the town. A hearse went by, tailed by a large crowd on foot.

At the beach in Pozzallo, we met up with some Italian and American friends and then drove into the port area, where ferries and container ships usually docked. The gates were open, but there was no one at the window and no one else on the grounds. Between the dock and the road, fenced in behind the port area, and sitting on the parking lot some fifty yards away from us, were eight large wooden boats. Painted blue, white, and red, they were crammed up close together, each tilted to one side, several leaning against one another. I left my companions behind and began to walk toward the boats. Orange life jackets covered the decks

and spilled out from them, and by the time I reached the boats, the strong smell they emanated had become a stench. The boats seemed to have been dragged in from the sea with no attempt made to clean them. They were festooned not only with huge quantities of dirty life jackets but also with plastic water bottles, shoes, shirts, and all the filth of many days of human habitation at close quarters.

There was no way of telling which, if any, of these boats had tipped its human cargo over into the Mediterranean, which had been intercepted by European authorities, or which had brought terrified travelers safe to shore. I had my notebook with me as I walked among them, and I made notes of what I was seeing. I observed the details, wondering how I might set it all down in writing. What happened next took me by surprise: I suddenly collapsed to my knees and began to sob. My chest pulsed, my tears flowed, and between those boats with their strong smell of human bodies, I buried my head in my hands, ambushed and astonished by grief.

When I regained my composure, I climbed into one of the boats, unbothered now by the stench, wanting only to be there, imagining the unseen and desperate crowd of seafarers. Then, after a while, I rejoined the group. We drove out of Pozzallo and returned to Augusta. It was a provincial port, full of cranes and ships and containers, much busier and much more extensive than Pozzallo's. There was a large fenced-in area set aside with tents for people who had been picked up within the last few days or weeks and who were awaiting processing and transfer to other sites. A large ship with many passengers was supposed to come in. We were now told it would not dock that night.

But a smaller group of migrants had arrived during the day, and

a police officer gave me permission to speak with two of them. I was led to a room with bright fluorescent lighting. The men were Bangladeshi, both young, probably in their twenties. They looked dazed. They'd been given clean clothes — a checked button-down shirt for one, an athletic T-shirt for the other — and on their feet they wore plastic Crocs. They presumably spoke Bangla. There was an interpreter, a Pakistani man who was fluent in Urdu. He could get the general idea of what the men were saying, I assumed, possibly because they also knew some Hindi, which overlaps appreciably with Urdu. But there was another problem: this interpreter spoke fluent Italian but only halting English. And so, there was work involved in getting him to understand my questions and further work involved in him getting the Bangladeshi men to understand his interpretation of my questions. When they finally understood something of his questions and responded, there were the same number of imperfect steps to get the answer back to me.

The men were both named Mohammed. One of them was bigger than the other. They had been rescued from a boat coming from Libya, where they had been living and working for more than a year. Why did they leave Bangladesh? To find work, they said. And how had Libya been? Big Mohammed shook his head. It was very bad, he said, they had to get out of there, the Libyans were cruel; but it cost a lot of money to gain passage on the boat. And how was the journey? Again, it was big Mohammed who answered: The traffickers had lied, he said. The passengers were told they would be in Italy in six hours. But they were out at sea for almost an entire day before they were picked up by the Italian ship.

I asked them what they hoped to do, and it was the smaller Mohammed who spoke up now. They wanted the freedom to

work in Europe, he said. His companion nodded in agreement. Their fatigue was apparent—the fatigue of having just that day survived an ordeal at sea. That’s what I kept thinking about: that they had lived but others had died. Why had things turned out that way? It was a matter of luck, and this seemed to contribute to their bemused air.

We were told of another boat that was to dock later that night, at a second and smaller port in the Augusta area, a few minutes’ drive away. The large ship we had expected, we were now told, had been prevented by the authorities from docking. But a handful of its passengers were to be brought ashore for emergency medical attention. And so we went to this other port, and after half an hour, a small covered boat did indeed come in. There were other members of the press present on the pier with us, and we were all allowed to witness the boat’s docking but not to get close to it or to take pictures. Police officers patrolled the area while six or so medical professionals, clad in white full-body protective gear and white face masks, boarded the boat. Soon, they lifted out a frail man and placed him onto a stretcher. He was wheeled over to the ambulance. One of the Italian journalists suggested he was Eritrean.

Not long afterward, the medical professionals in their white suits and masks led a Black couple, a man and a woman, out from the boat, and then a second couple. Both women were pregnant. Each of the four was helped off the boat and onto the pier and then led up the pier to the waiting ambulance. I went up to the ambulance. One of the men was seated near the door, and I asked him where they were from. “Nigeria,” he said. Feeling that I was somehow overstepping my professional bounds, but also imagining that perhaps these people would not hear many soft words in

the coming days, I said, "Welcome." Then I added, "God be with you." Before the man could respond, a police officer closed the ambulance door and waved me from the area.

6

Syracuse is built of a honey-colored stone, the same stone used for humble homes as well as for the cathedral dedicated to the city's patron saint, Saint Lucy. Her legend is typical of female Christian saints: a vow of chastity, consecration to God, defiance of the temporal authorities (in her case the governor of Syracuse), and subsequent gruesome execution. Versions of the legend say that Lucy's eyes were gouged out before she was executed. Saint Lucy is the patron saint of the blind, and in her statue atop the cathedral, she holds a dish in which she carries her eyes.

A contact in Syracuse had put me in touch with a young man from Gambia who came across by boat from Libya some eight months earlier. D. had registered as a minor—he admitted to me that he was no longer one, and I put his age at about twenty—and he had been placed in a group home with other minors. He had a dark and intelligent face and an easeful manner that reminded me of my younger cousins. He seemed glad to be speaking English to someone and was even happier when I told him I was Nigerian. "I love Nigerian music," he said. "It's all I listen to." I asked him why he migrated. His father had been a small-time politician, he said, and had fallen afoul of Gambia's then president, Yahya Jammeh. "My father was forced into exile in Dakar. Things were very difficult for my family. For my mother, for my sisters." But why didn't D. also move to Dakar? "I wasn't so close with my father." But then his father died, and the situation became even more desperate. He went to Libya, to find work there, and managed

to send small sums home. When he at last decided to pay money to human smugglers for a passage to Europe, he told no one back home.

"You weren't afraid of dying?"

"I was, a little," he said, "but Libya had become bad. I had to go."

It was the same story, in essence, as that of the Mohammeds. "And the journey, was it as bad as you feared?" "Worse," D. said. The smugglers had given a radio to one of the passengers, whom they arbitrarily appointed "captain." The instructions were that he try to contact one of the Italian ships after a certain period of time. After a few frantic hours, the stratagem worked, and the migrants were picked up and taken to Sicily. Only on arrival did D. let his family know he had even attempted the trip. He said the Italians had been kind to him. He was still living in the house for minors, where he had a certain amount of freedom. But he had very little money and no working papers. Months had passed, and he was now itching to leave Syracuse and go to a larger city.

Then he asked me why I was in Syracuse. I told him I was there to see a painting by Caravaggio. I pointed toward the Piazza Duomo and asked if he would like to accompany me. He said he didn't see why not. As we entered the church of Santa Lucia alla Badia together, he said, "You know, I come around here every day, around this piazza, and I've never been inside a church. Not this church, not any church. In my whole life, I mean. I've never seen the inside of a church." He was raised Muslim. He seemed amazed that he could just walk in, that no one questioned his presence or stopped him at the door. We went to stand in front of the altar-piece.

The Burial of Saint Lucy is enormous, at ten feet across and more than thirteen feet high. It is in poor condition now: the paint

surface is abraded, and large areas are damaged. But this does not weaken the effect of the painting. If anything, the material frailty of the image helps focus your attention on its funereal mood. Saint Lucy, dead, is stretched out on the ground, a cut visible in her neck, her eyes sealed shut. A crowd has gathered behind the body. In the foreground, two powerful-looking men dig into the ground, but this "ground," lost in a field of dark browns, makes it seem as though time itself were burying the picture. Darkness encroaches on the protagonists from all sides. As D. looked at the painting, I wanted to tell him about how Caravaggio, by this point in his travels, was quite paranoid and had taken to sleeping with his sword. But I didn't. We looked at the painting together for a while, and then we stepped out of the church. Outside, D.'s eyes seemed full of wonder, as much from Caravaggio, I supposed, as from me, this strange fellow West African who appeared out of nowhere, asking odd questions.

7

From the air, the first impression I had of the largest of the Maltese islands was of a large corkboard floating in the sea: a flat brown terrain set off from the water by vertiginous cliffs. On the drive in from the airport, the taxi driver offered, unprompted, "Malta is nice, but we cannot feed all these refugees. We are a small island. We are not a big country." Malta is distinguished by well-preserved homes and churches, the imposing fort of Castel Sant'Angelo, and the lasting and omnipresent influence of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta. It was the patronage of this militant Christian organization, also known as the Knights of Malta, that drew Caravaggio to Malta in July 1607.

Caravaggio lived in Malta for a little over a year and in that time

made a small number of paintings for the Knights, whose patron saint is Saint John the Baptist. His stiff, dutiful portrait of Alof de Wignacourt, the grand master of the order, hangs in the Louvre. Another portrait of Wignacourt is presumed lost. These paintings were probably made to curry a specific favor: to get him into the good graces of Wignacourt, so that Wignacourt would grant him a knighthood, to improve his chances of a papal pardon for his murder of Tomassoni. The island still has two major paintings from Caravaggio's time there. The first is *Saint Jerome Writing*. The second is the work that, more than anything else, took me to Malta: *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (plate 1), a painting I had known about since I was a boy, well before I had any idea of Malta as an actual place.

The most populated part of Malta is a dense agglomeration of towns near Valletta, the capital. I stayed in Sliema, one of those towns, dined by the waterside, walked in the quieter streets, wandered. It wasn't until the third day that I plucked up the courage to go to the Co-Cathedral of Saint John in Valletta. The co-cathedral (so called because the old Maltese capital, Mdina, in the interior of the island, already had a cathedral) is gilded and ornate and pulses with the murmur of visitors. But if you follow the signs, passing through a small door at the back, you enter a small, quiet, chapel-like room, the oratory. Straight ahead, but visible only after you come around a fixed partition, is *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*. The effect is of having walked in on something horrible, something you wish to unsee.

The seven people depicted in the painting feel like real people in a real space, dwarfed by the dark background. The lighting, the monumental scale (even larger than *The Burial of Saint Lucy*), the height at which the picture is hung, and the distribution of dark and light all add to the impression that what you are seeing is an

actual event: the two prisoners watching the execution; the servant girl with the gold plate; the old woman; the man directing the killing; the executioner reaching for the knife with which to finish the job; and Saint John himself, prostrate on the floor, his neck spurting blood. Caravaggio signs his name below, the only time we know him to have done so, with a red line drawn out of that blood.

All the malevolent force of the paintings by Caravaggio I had seen in the preceding two weeks — *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*, *David with the Head of Goliath*, *The Flagellation* — all that murderous power seemed now to have been distilled into a single nightmare image, a surveillance camera trained on an unfinished crime, a snuff film.

The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist was difficult to absorb into my understanding of whatever it was I thought painting was. More than a year would pass before I found a key that helped me process what I saw in Malta: two brief video clips from Libya made in 2017. The first, filmed by an unnamed source, shows men being sold at a slave market. The second was made by CNN journalists who went into the suburbs of Tripoli to confirm the story. The men being sold are migrants from Niger, a few of them standing at night against a bare wall, a desolate courtyard like that in Caravaggio's painting. The light is poor. It's hard to see. The business is brisk and rapid: prices are called out, unseen buyers bid, and it's over. In those clips, what I saw was life turned inside out, life turned into death, just as I had seen in Caravaggio's painting. Not simply what ought not to be, but what ought not to be seen.

The painting impressed Caravaggio's hosts. On July 14, 1608, not long after his completion of the painting, he was named a Knight of the Order of Saint John. Aloff de Wignacourt made the proclamation, comparing him to Apelles, the greatest painter

of ancient times. Caravaggio was awarded a gold chain and, according to Giovanni Bellori, Wignacourt "made him a gift of two slaves." Most of those enslaved in Malta were Muslim, at a time when the hatred between the Knights of Malta and the Ottoman Empire was at a mutually fanatical pitch (there were many enslaved Christians in the Ottoman lands). We don't know the identity of the two people handed over to Caravaggio, but many enslaved people who worked in a domestic context in Malta were from Bornu, which spanned parts of present-day Nigeria and Chad.

Caravaggio did not get to enjoy his cruel status for very long. By late August, he was involved in yet another violent fracas. Giovanni Rodomonte Roero, a high-ranking knight, was wounded one night in an assault, and Caravaggio and five other men were implicated. Caravaggio was held at Castel Sant'Angelo for weeks. But he somehow escaped from captivity, lowering himself from the fort with a rope. Finding a boatman, whom he may have bribed, he made straight for Sicily. Thus came Syracuse, Messina, Palermo, the great paintings he made in those months trailing him like so many bread crumbs; and then, feeling he was under mortal threat in Sicily, perhaps fearing the reach of the Knights of Malta, he returned to Naples, to another spell of productivity in a city he knew well. He thought he would be safe in Naples. He was mistaken. In October 1609, on his way out of a tavern, he was surrounded by a group of men. They beat him up and slashed his face. It has been suggested that he was partially crippled and partially blind after the attack. It took him a long time to convalesce. Between that assault and the end of his life, a nine-month period, he produced no more than a handful of paintings, the last two of which are believed to be *The Denial of Saint Peter* and *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*.

Less than a year after I went to Naples, the Metropolitan Museum received *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula* on loan. I was able to see it side by side with *The Denial of Saint Peter*, which is in the Met's collection. Because we know he died not long after, we cannot help reading these paintings through the lens of a late style, as works that convey both the tremendous skill of the artist and his sense of hurry. They are paintings of great economy and psychological depth. The fear in Saint Peter's eyes, the grief on Saint Ursula's face: was this the insight of a man who knew his life was almost over? It's tempting to think so. But Caravaggio expected to recover from his injuries of the previous year. He expected a pardon from the pope. Even with a substantial body of work behind him already, he was only thirty-eight. He must have thought he was just getting started. He wasn't moving from life into death, like John the Baptist. He was moving from death back into life, like Lazarus. So he thought; so he hoped.

In the summer of 1610 Caravaggio received word that a pardon was being arranged for him in Rome, with the involvement of his old patron Cardinal Scipione Borghese. He left Naples on a felucca, a sailing boat, in the middle of July, taking three paintings with him as presents for the cardinal. A week later, he was in Palo, a coastal fort town twenty miles west of Rome, from which he presumably planned to make his way to the city. But something went wrong in Palo. On disembarking, Caravaggio got into a scuffle with the officers of the fort and was arrested. The felucca set sail without him but with his paintings still on board. It headed north to the coast of Tuscany, to the small town of Porto Ercole. Possibly there was another passenger to drop off. When Caravaggio was released, days later, he hurried overland in the direction of Porto Ercole, a day's ride. Upon arrival, he collapsed in an exhausted heap. The felucca arrived around the same time.

It was a hot July day in 2016 when I headed to Porto Ercole. My train from Rome passed by Palo after about thirty minutes and arrived in Orbetello–Monte Argentario an hour and a half later. I imagined it could have been a fever-inducing journey in July 1610. I stayed in Orbetello and took a taxi from there the following morning, across a spit of land that ends in the promontory of Monte Argentario, on the southern side of which is Porto Ercole. I had breakfast at a cafe on the rocky beach. A quartet of visitors was seated near me, two of them, from their accents, American. One American was an older man. “Well maybe this guy will win the election, and he can put an end to all that,” he said. “Political correctness is just crazy. You’re not even allowed to compliment anyone anymore. They’ll cry sexual harassment.” He held forth with the attitude of one who wished to be overheard. He complained about his ex-wife. His three companions nodded sympathetically.

Caravaggio never painted the sea. I search his oeuvre in vain for a seascape; vistas of any kind are rare. We can address only what has survived of his work, and in what has survived, there are no swells, no waves, no oceanic calms, no shipwrecks or beaches, no sunsets over water. And yet his final years made a chart of the sea, and his ports of call were all literal ports, portals of hope, of which Porto Ercole was the final, unanticipated stop. He’s buried somewhere there, perhaps on the beach, perhaps in a local church. But his real body can be said to be elsewhere: the body, that is, of his painterly achievement, which has gone out to dozens of other places around the world, all the places where wall labels say, “d. 1610, Porto Ercole.”

He was a murderer, a slaveholder, a terror, and a pest. But I don’t go to Caravaggio to be reminded of how good people are, and certainly not because of how good *he* was. To the contrary:

I seek him out for a certain kind of otherwise unbearable knowledge. Here was an artist who depicted fruit in its ripeness and at the moment it had begun to rot, an artist who painted flesh at its most delicately seductive and its most grievously injured. When he showed suffering, he showed it so startlingly well because he was on both sides of it: he meted it out to others and received it in his own body. Caravaggio is long dead, as are his victims. What remains is the work, and I don't have to love him to know that I need to know what he knows, the knowledge that hums, centuries later, on the surface of his paintings, knowledge of all the pain, loneliness, beauty, fear, and awful vulnerability our bodies have in common.

I walked down to the harbor in Porto Ercole. Small boats in their neat dozens bobbed on the water, and I asked one of the waiting men to take me out. The air was clear, the water a deep blue with faint hints of purple. For the second time on my journey, I got into a boat. We zipped along, and when the boatman took his shirt off, I did the same. He seemed to be in his early fifties, and he said he had always lived in Porto Ercole. He spoke little English. When I told him I was from New York, he grinned and gave me a thumbs up. "Oh, New York!" he said. We were a couple of miles out. Did he know of Caravaggio? Of course he did. He pointed to the beach. "Caravaggio!" he said, still smiling.

I signaled to him to cut the engine. It sputtered to a stop, and the silence came rushing in, so that the only sound was that of the waves lapping at the hull as the boat rose and fell on the Mediterranean.



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BLACK PAPER

WRITING IN A
DARK TIME

TEJU COLE

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What Does It Mean to Look at This?

A photograph of a group of suffering people: we look at them, and from the sadness of their expressions and gestures, we know something awful has happened. But finding out exact details, through the photograph alone, is more difficult. Who these sufferers are, why they suffer, who or what caused the suffering, and what ought to be done about it — these are altogether more complex questions, questions hard to answer by only looking at the photograph.

The accounts journalists typically give of their motivations, particularly for photographing violence, aren't always convincing. Why go off to wars or conflict zones at great personal risk to take pictures of people whose lives are in terrifying states of disarray? The answer is often tautological: the images are physically dangerous and psychologically costly to make, and therefore they must be the right images. Susan Sontag, probably the most influential writer on the intersection of violence and photography, didn't buy this argument. With forensic prose, she cut through complacent apologies for war photography and set photojournalistic images of violence squarely in the context of viewers' voy-

eurism. This was the argument advanced in her 1977 essay collection, *On Photography*. Sontag believed that a certain passivity was inescapable in spectatorship, and that any image of violence would be tainted by this passive distance. "Through the camera people become customers or tourists of reality," she wrote. Looking at images of violence, she seemed to suggest, was both self-absorbed and self-absolving.

She revisited the subject near the end of her life, with more complexity. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), she still viewed photojournalists with skepticism (she dubbed them "star witnesses" and "specialized tourists"), and remained averse to the kind of prurient gaze that images of torment can foster. But she amended some of her earlier positions. She had previously argued that photographs, despite their capacity to generate sympathy, could quickly shrivel it through overexposure. She became less sure about that. She also queried the idea, implicit in her earlier arguments and explicit in the work of theorists like Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard, that the abundance and distribution of images made reality itself little more than a spectacle:

It suggests, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world. But it is absurd to identify the world with those zones in the well-off countries where people have the dubious privilege of being spectators, or of declining to be spectators, of other people's pain, just as it is absurd to generalize about the ability to respond to the sufferings of others on the basis of the mind-set of those consumers of news who know nothing at first hand about war and massive injustice and terror.

Sontag wondered, near the end of *Regarding the Pain of Others*, whether "one has no right to experience the suffering of others at

a distance, denuded of its raw power," and she came to the conclusion that sometimes a bit of distance can be good. "There's nothing wrong with standing back and thinking," she wrote. (Even more than the incisiveness of her judgments, Sontag's willingness to reconsider her previous views is what endears her to me.)

The challenges of viewership have only intensified in the twenty-first century. Images of violence have both proliferated and mutated, demanding new forms of image literacy. Some recent scholars of photography have argued with some of Sontag's assertions in *On Photography*. One of those scholars, Ariella Azoulay, has questioned the claim of voyeurism. Azoulay reads images of conflict or atrocity as constituting a more interwoven set of actors, displacing the question from one of voyeurism, or even of empathy, to one of participatory citizenship. We are all in this together, Azoulay seems to be saying (and I don't think the Sontag of *Regarding the Pain of Others* would disagree). In making such an argument, Azoulay attends to a different tradition of writing about photography, one connected to an assertion made in 1857 by Lady Elizabeth Eastlake in the *London Quarterly Review*: "For it is one of the pleasant characteristics of this pursuit that it unites men of the most diverse lives, habits and stations, so that whoever enters its ranks finds himself in a kind of republic, where it needs apparently but to be a photographer to be a brother."

But in Azoulay's view, it is not only being a photographer that grants a person admission to this imaginative republic. Being the subject of photos, no less than taking photos or looking at photos, is one of a set of mutually reinforcing activities in which the participants are interdependent and complicit. The meaning of any given image arises from these various roles as well as that of the camera itself. This is one of the points Azoulay makes at length in her lucid and indispensable 2008 study, *The Civil Contract of*

Photography. Her argument rests on the civic relations between people: "When and where the subject of the photograph is a person who has suffered some form of injury, a viewing of the photograph that reconstructs the photographic situation and allows a reading of the injury inflicted on others becomes a civic skill, not an exercise in aesthetic appreciation." Azoulay's project arose out of her own experiences as a Jewish Israeli citizen who, nevertheless, had to interpret the images she was seeing of Palestinian suffering. Are these people radically other, or are they somehow included in the general "we"?

. . .

Photographs of atrocity always confront us with questions of inequality. But these questions can no longer simply be reduced to "Why them and why not us?" If, as Azoulay argues, photography deterritorializes citizenship, then these images accuse, they interrogate, and they put us in the same boat with those we are looking at. "What have we done," they ask us, "to create the conditions in which others, our fellow citizens, undergo these unspeakable experiences?"

The scholar Susie Linfield critiques Sontag in different terms. In *The Cruel Radiance* (2010), Linfield defends what she sees as the noble ideals of documentary photography. She finds fault with a number of notable photography critics (Sontag, as well as Roland Barthes and John Berger, among others) for being distrustful of photography, for not loving it enough. Sontag is, to Linfield, a "brilliant skeptic," and Linfield finds this a much less attractive persona than the one of the "smitten lover," which is what she deems the film critic Pauline Kael. What photography can do especially well, in Linfield's view, is present the ways in which the ideals of human rights fall short. A photograph cannot

show human rights, but it can depict, with terrifying realism, what a starving person looks like, what a human body looks like after it has been shot. "Photographs show how easily we are reduced to the merely physical, which is to say how easily the body can be maimed, starved, splintered, beaten, burnt, torn and crushed."

This is sharply observed. But the devil is in the details, and the kind of details photographs are good at are visual and affective, different from the kind of details we might call "political," which have to do with laws, shades of linguistic meaning, and the distribution of power. For all her optimism about the efficacy of photography, Linfield admits that "we, the viewers, must look outside the frame to understand the complex realities out of which these photographs grew."

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag wrote, "The photographer's intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it." The truth of the statement is obvious in certain cases, such as that of the notorious photographs made in late 2003 by Private Charles Graner Jr. and others at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. In stripping prisoners naked, piling them up into a pyramid, or ordering them to masturbate, Private Graner and other American soldiers might have intended to use humiliation to "soften" their prisoners up for interrogation. But the images, once they were released into the world, had a much more shocking and enraging meaning.

Or consider the case of the Syrian photographer code-named Caesar. He was making photographs, with a team, as part of his military-police job. Disturbed at the increasing number of gruesome murders he had to photograph, he began to smuggle out large numbers of images — images of thousands of people starved, beaten, or tortured to death by the Syrian state — between the fall

of 2011 and the summer of 2013. Caesar himself eventually escaped Syria. His images, initially made for one purpose (as the regime's records of its enemies), came to take on a different significance (as evidence of astonishing crimes against humanity). The gap between the photographer's intention and the subsequent life of the image is usually not as significant as in these two cases. But there's always some kind of disjuncture, a disjuncture that arises from photography's tendency to show only so much but often to mean much more: a photograph's tendency, in other words, to connote more than it denotes. As Tina Campt has written, photographs don't speak, but they are not mute. They are quiet, and solicit a kind of listening.

• • •

A photograph of a group of suffering people: it registers at first as a familiar type of image, the expertly made photograph of an atrocity in a faraway country (plate 3). The photographer's expertise expresses itself through color and visual rhythm; despite the subject matter, it is a beautiful photograph. We see five people: four women and one man. They are surrounded by rubble. On a blue door or wall is graffiti. The man and three of the women have clapped their hands to their mouths and noses, or raised their hands to cover their faces, as though they are simultaneously grieving and protecting themselves from a stench. The fourth woman has averted her eyes. Something horrible is going on, something we can't see.

But what does the photograph, by itself, tell us about what that "something" is? Not much. Unless it is supported with extra-photographic evidence, it will be limited to platitudes about human brutality or the universality of grief, truths for which no

photographic argument is required. At the most basic level, that extra evidence begins with the caption: "Susan Meiselas. Neighbors watch as dead bodies are burned in the streets of Estelí, 1979." The caption gives us the photographer's name, establishes a place and time, and also gives us a plain description of an event. But if we stop there, we have only decorated the image with a bit of knowledge. Further investigation might reveal that Estelí is a city in northern Nicaragua, and that in early 1979, a popular struggle by the Sandinistas to unseat the dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle was gaining strength. We might discover that the dead bodies just out of sight in Meiselas's picture were of people killed by Somoza's National Guard. The people in the photograph were reacting, Meiselas said, to "the intensity of putrefied bodies that have been on the street for three to five days in the hot sun." Out there photographing, she could smell them. We almost can, too.

This single photograph could be supported by a shelf's worth of books: about the history of Nicaragua, about right-wing regimes, about Latin America in the late '70s, about leftist dreams of revolution, about American foreign policy, about the sense of smell, about the personal courage of a woman photographing in a war zone, about the political economy of Estelí, and so on. The photograph cannot do that all by itself, but it can occasion those investigations.

Recognizing the frustration of trying to make photographs speak to the incredible complexity of civil conflict, Meiselas has written, of her time in Nicaragua, "I had photographs, they have a revolution." In the course of 1978 and 1979, she made hundreds of photographs. She made many more in subsequent visits. What difference did those photographs make? Moreover, what could be more irritating, and even offensive, than to have someone

photographing you while you mourn the burning of a relative's body? Would you want a photographer there, clicking away, on the worst day of your life?

I return to Azoulay's idea that the photograph functions as a bond between the photographer and the photographed, that it's a kind of promise made by the first of these people to the second: *I will bear witness to this*. In their grief, in their shock, even in their irritation at the presence of a photographer, the hope for those who are photographed in the midst of their suffering is that what is happening to them will go out into the world, and possibly, by being seen, will help bring them relief.

Proof of this is elusive. We've all seen war photographs that are mere grist for the journalistic mill. Some photographers *are* addicted to war, and some viewers *are* voyeurs; and yet photography is not limited by these ways of seeing. Photography works and doesn't work, it is tolerable and intolerable, it confounds and often exceeds our expectations. "Conflict photography," in particular, arises out of a huge set of moving variables that in unpredictable, unreliable, but unignorable ways help make the demands of justice visible. Taking photographs is sometimes a terrible thing to do, but often, not taking the necessary photo, not bearing witness, or not being allowed to do so can be worse.

A Crime Scene at the Border

On Tuesday, June 25, 2019, Rosa Ramírez was filmed at home in San Martín, El Salvador. Ramírez stands by a doorway in a small interior. She is distraught, and her large brown eyes glisten in the glare of camera lights. “The last message he sent me was Saturday. He said, ‘Mama, I love you.’ He said, ‘Take care of yourselves because we are fine here.’”

Her face is puffy from weeping.

“When I read that message, I don’t know, it made me want to cry because I saw it as a sort of goodbye.”

. . .

The man lies face down in water, his black shirt more than half-way hiked up his back. A toddler, also face down, is tangled up in his shirt. They lie side by side, her arm draped across his neck. He wears black shorts. She wears red pants pulled up past the calves, tiny shoes, and we see the telltale bulge of a diaper. Blue beer cans bob in gray-green water around them. The rushes on the riverbank grow profusely. The photo shows Rosa Ramírez’s son, Óscar

Alberto Martínez Ramírez, and his daughter, Valeria, and it was taken by the Mexican photojournalist Julia Le Duc.

Oscar Martínez and Valeria had traveled from El Salvador and had been in Mexico a couple of months. Disheartened by a torturous asylum process, they tried to swim across the Rio Grande from Matamoros to Brownsville, Texas. That is where they both drowned. Martínez was twenty-five, Valeria nearly two. In the video made three days later, Rosa Ramírez speaks as one for whom all hope is gone. The previous Saturday, she was reading a message from her son. By Tuesday, with the cameramen recording, she had herself become news.

Martínez and Valeria are two of the hundreds of people who will die on the United States–Mexico border before the year 2019 is through. They are two of the thousands who have died in the past decade in awful circumstances. On the border, people have died alone or with others, in the desert or in water, of exhaustion or of thirst, or shot with bullets, their bodies left to the elements or wild animals.

• • •

When the Associated Press distributed Le Duc's photograph around the world, it did so within the conventions of news reporting: something happened somewhere, someone photographed it, the image was picked up by a news agency, and it went out to the international press. The photograph was published in the pages of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Guardian*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and countless others. In news reports and opinion columns, it was lauded as an act of witness, and the hope was widely expressed that it might activate the conscience of the American government and spur a change on the border.

Brutal images easily elicit sympathy. It is true that a very few

images of suffering have catalyzed changes in policy, but it is equally true that terrible images are published all the time, thousands of them each year, and the vast majority change policy not one iota. There have been truly astonishing, and truly sickening, photos from Gaza, Lampedusa, Yemen, Kashmir. But governments, in spite of an abundance of memorable photographs, regularly fail to honor the legitimate claims made before them by persons seeking safety and dignity.

Perhaps too much is made of individual photographs. What if we had, for each incident, not one photograph, but a hundred? What if we had photographs taken across the span of time showing not just what happened in Matamoros in June 2019 but what led to it? Would we be able to hold on to our innocence?

. . .

In the 1980s, Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush supported El Salvador's military-led government in a civil war against various leftist groups. The government's atrocities have been well documented, and tens of thousands of Salvadorans died. Hundreds of thousands more fled to the United States. In the mid-1990s, President Bill Clinton allowed the "temporary protected status" of Salvadoran refugees to expire after the end of the civil war there, and many of those who were forced to go back formed or joined the gangs at the core of the current violence in that country. In June 2014, President Barack Obama boasted that Border Patrol agents "already apprehend and deport hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants every year." In 2017, dozens of suspected gang members were illegally executed by United States-funded Salvadoran security forces.

In January 2018, the White House announced its intention to end temporary protected status for nearly two hundred thou-

sand people who had come to the United States from El Salvador after a series of devastating earthquakes there in 2001. The effect of this would be to cut off the ability of those people to support poor relatives back home, threatening further injury to an already wounded Salvadoran economy. In April of the same year, Border Patrol agents began implementing a “metering” policy that slowed the processing of asylum claims at the United States–Mexico border to a trickle, creating a huge backlog. In June 2019, the United States vowed to provide no further aid to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador until they reduced the migration of their nationals to the United States—a cruel and counterproductive measure.

How would such a relentless catalog of inhumane policy be photographed? Momentous political decisions, often made by men in suits in quiet, evenly lit rooms, do not tend to generate visual drama. The photographs might only show someone signing a document or someone in the middle of a speech. They might show a president, a member of Congress, a Border Patrol agent, a lobbyist, a judge, a citizen at a political rally or in a voting booth.

What if these photographs, in all their bureaucratic banality, were presented alongside the photograph of two drowned people? It would be a strange juxtaposition, a strangeness out of which some vital truth might be articulated. And what if the photograph with the dead bodies was omitted entirely and only the policies that led to the deaths were shown? Would we still be shocked and saddened? Or do we always need the spectacle of corpses to make the story real?

• • •

The media’s defense of the publication of Le Duc’s photograph was familiar: that it is the job of the press to disseminate the truth,

no matter how bitter, and that by showing the bitterest truth, some justice might be done. But a photograph of a dead child on the United States–Mexico border is not, by itself, the bitterest truth. A bitterer truth might be to convey that what we are looking at is a crime, not an accident. The bitterest truth might be to show that the crime was committed by the viewers of the photograph, that this is not news from some remote and unconnected reality but, rather, something you have done, not you personally but you as a member of the larger collective. It is *you* who have undermined their democracy, *you* who have devastated their economy, *you* who have denied their claim to asylum. These are not strangers requesting a favor. They are people you already know, confronting you with your misdeeds.

That is not how such images are typically presented or understood. So, what happens if evidence of your crimes is presented to you over and over again but you do not accept culpability? What happens is that your assessment of the evidence becomes ever more disingenuous. It's a pity, you say. It's unfortunate, outrageous, heartbreaking. You make these declarations, which are partly true but mostly false, and life goes on.

But what also happens is that the images enter an aesthetic realm, detached from the human pain from which they emerged. It is too easy to forget Rosa Ramírez standing in her home, mourning as any of us would, and it is too easy to remember the striking photo of her dead son and granddaughter. The publication of such images is often followed by speculation about which among them is likely to win prizes. The photographer of the spectacularly terrible image is immediately congratulated by his or her peers, for some glory is surely on its way: a Pulitzer Prize perhaps, or a World Press Photo award. And this slope slips down to that ever-louder demographic that exults in making America great again,

among whom the brutal images do more direct work. The images show foreigners getting what they deserve; far from being an indictment, they portray a natural order. "Reality is don't be illegal," as one commenter on the *Times* site put it. Another wrote, "The bad judgment of the father in attempting to swim a river with a toddler on his back is his responsibility."

The weak and the disesteemed should suffer, and indeed they suffer. They should die, and indeed they die. The world is what it is. Not only is it easy to bear other people's misfortune, but their very suffering confirms that they are undeserving of mercy.

. . .

Photographs of extreme suffering will continue to be published; few publications will pass up the opportunity to feature a memorable image. If the past is any guide, they will be published in a way that does not particularly challenge those who wield the power of life and death over others. The *New York Times*, for instance, describing its decision to publish Le Duc's photograph, said it was careful not to make a "political statement" or convey "a position on the issue of immigration." This carefulness, in the face of horrific policy, already takes a position.

Nor is it likely that the asymmetry between those whose pain is turned into news and those who "consume" the news can be corrected. There are powerful, almost incontrovertible, codes of decorum maintained by and for people who are thought of as White, or who have been invited to participate in Whiteness. The racial disparity in published photographs of traumatized bodies is by now a recurring, and almost tedious, question. Media organizations have standard (and often grouchy) ripostes to the question each time it arises, usually involving an appeal to news-

worthiness. And yet, newsworthiness rarely brings destroyed White bodies to the front page of the newspaper.

The questions we need to ask now are more urgent and more discomfiting. What sort of person needs to see such photographs in order to know what they should already know? Who are we if we need to look at ever more brutal images in order to feel something? What will be brutal enough?

These photographs, finally, are mirrors, not windows. We look into them, and what they reflect back to us is something monstrous and hard to reconcile with our notion of ourselves. We look, and look, and then—sated with looking, secure in our reactions, perennially missing the point—we put them away.



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BLACK PAPER

WRITING IN A
DARK TIME

TEJU COLE

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Ethics

When we speak of migration, it is easy to resort to watery language: we speak of a “flow” of refugees, an “influx,” a “wave,” a “flood.” These are not neutral terms: they make the condition of our fellow human beings a cause for alarm, not on their behalf, but on ours. But people are not water, they are not inanimate. When I watch the clips of slave-trading from Libya—the clips that so reminded me of Caravaggio’s terrifying late painting *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*—I am not watching a wave or a flood. I am watching people being sold. The numbers are called out, and I witness a human being un-humaned. Their abductors refer to them as “merchandise”; each is sold for the equivalent of a few hundred dollars. An obscenity that should not happen to anyone, an obscenity that should not be seen by anyone.

Humanity is on the move. As of 2019, there were some sixty-seven million people in one condition of migrancy or another. The numbers will only rise and will come to include some of us who don’t expect to be included. Part of what draws me to Caravaggio is his imagination for the unhoused, the unhomed. His sympathy for those marginal conditions was shaped by his own

experience. When I look at his tender, violent work, I see that experience transmuted into a work of witness. We tend to think of the news as a natural phenomenon, rather than one shaped by culture, privilege, and imperialism. With Caravaggio, I feel compelled to consider what it might mean to abandon the conventions of "raising awareness," of what it might mean to commit to the more dangerous work of bearing witness. The one who merely raises awareness can still pretend to neutrality, while the one who bears witness has already taken sides, has already committed to being unprofessional.

There is a difference between reading about something and hearing something, an irreducible difference between being told about something and seeing something. The difference is in our affective responses when the senses are triggered more directly. And our responsibility, painful as it might be, to seek out that directness as a form of ethical knowledge. I am reminded of a story Anne Carson tells in her remarkable book *NOX*, which is an elegy for her brother:

When my brother died his dog got angry, stayed angry, barking, growling, lashing, glaring, by day and night. He went to the door, he went to the window, he would not lie down. My brother's widow, it is said, took the dog to the church on the day of the funeral. Buster goes right up to the front of Sankt Johannes and raises himself on his paws on the edge of the coffin and as soon as he smells the fact, his anger stops.

When I went down to the US-Mexico border in 2011 to understand better what was happening there, I saw many things that altered my sense of my belonging in the United States; not only my sense of belonging, but also my sense of responsibility. I saw

people with swollen feet dropped back from a failed migration, cared for by volunteers in Mexico. In the United States, I saw border agents practicing their shooting at an open-air firing range. And I saw the border wall like a gash, like a wound, between the two. On a second visit to the border, I went to the county examiner's office in Tucson, and I was shown the bodies of the those who had died in the desert. Many would never be identified, their bodies too disfigured by wild birds, by wild dogs, by sun and wind and rain. That day, at the county examiner's office, I made a photograph of the unclaimed rows of the beloved dead. I remember that there was a faint smell of formaldehyde in the storage unit. But that was not the smell of death. I saw the fact, but I know I did not smell the fact. What would have happened had I smelled the fact?

More incisive (mysteriously so), more striking, more deeply into the fact, is something concerning the border that comes to me from a distance. I am thinking of something from late 2018, an event that stood as one in a string of those dispiriting moments that Adrienne Rich prophetically termed "our country moving closer to its own truth and dread." It was an audio recording surreptitiously made in a detention facility in Texas that June. In the recording we hear children between the ages of four and ten who are weeping, deeply distraught at having been separated from their parents. An agent, who can hear the raw pain of the kids, jokes, "We have an orchestra here." Seven minutes of very young children wailing and begging for their parents—*mami*, they cry out, *papa*—while all around them, the practical business of the border agents and consular officers continues. If one thinks, for a moment, of any child between the age of four and ten for whom one cares, the cruelty of the policy becomes unbearably apparent. The violence that subtends our societal arrangements can sud-

denly manifest through our hearing something, or seeing something, or perhaps most powerfully of all, smelling something.

This perhaps is the secret of someone like Caravaggio: that he can break through the surface of the canvas and evoke senses not normally connected to the art of painting. On the run for his life, he is as alive as he can bear to be, all across the spectrum of sense: sensate, sensitive, sensuous, sensual, sexual. Thinking about the bodies living and dead in Caravaggio sends me back to what Kristeva wrote: "Corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live." The smell of death, the smell of the fact, threatens one's identity. This is one of the key assertions in Kristeva's crucial essay *Powers of Horror*, from 1980, in which she lays out for us new thinking about the abject. "The corpse," she writes, "seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost abjection. It is death infecting life."

One account, probably apocryphal, says that Caravaggio had a recently buried corpse exhumed so he could use it as a model for his Lazarus. But in Caravaggio, the apocryphal and the real become very close. When we look at the rigor mortis of Lazarus, his greenish skin, we can almost smell the picture. Lazarus of Bethany, friend of Jesus, brother to Mary and Martha, is buried in a tomb sealed off with a stone. Jesus, seeing the distress of those who loved this man, is himself distressed; his power over life and death does not diminish his affective response. *Jesus wept*. The story is told in the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of John, and it is there that I find the detail that strikes me most powerfully: "Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 'Take away the stone,' he said. 'But, Lord,' said Martha, the sister of the dead man, 'by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.'"

Duccio's *The Raising of Lazarus* is part of the predella of his

monumental altarpiece, the *Maestà* (plate 7). In Duccio's rendering of the event, we are at the moment of miracle. Mary, in red, on her knees, pleads. Martha explains to Jesus that her brother has been dead too long. The crowd throngs. And he who was dead comes forth, wrapped like a mummy. In his eyes we see the confusion, and the softening of the confusion into something like life (painting is its own miracle in the way that it can toggle between two emotional states). And there's a further and unforgettable detail in Duccio's panel. A young man, near the entrance of the tomb, looks directly at Lazarus, but he has covered his nose and mouth. It is a holy moment, but a stench is a stench. This young man injects the scene with a sad and humane poignancy. In certain scenes of mourning, there are those who weep with abandon, sometimes throwing themselves at the body. Often, these are the most closely bereaved, who, in the loss, are at a loss of themselves. But there are frequently others, who are also grieving but perhaps with a bit more distance, a distance that allows them to take in more than the loss, to take in the smell as well and to therefore cover their noses. The figure overwhelmed by the stench of death. Where have I seen this figure before?

There she is in Koen Wessing's photograph from the Nicaraguan conflict, as published in Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. A dead child on the street covered in a sheet, a mother weeping in the foreground, another woman, some steps behind, covering her nose. And there they are in Susan Meiselas's photograph from the same conflict. They cover their noses, sometimes their faces, both in grief and in disgust. The bodies, of protesters against the regime, have begun to putrefy. Perhaps it's significant that these are *neighbors*, for you would not mind the smell—or there are things you would find more urgent than the smell—if it were your child. The gesture of covering one's nose or the moment of

being overwhelmed by the smell is a gesture that indicates a certain distance, and in this distance, as we note in the paintings of Lazarus by Duccio and Giotto, and in photographs of Nicaragua by Wessing and Meiselas, is a space for the spectator to enter. We cannot feel this particular mother's grief, this sister's loss, but we know what it means to be in community and at the same time be susceptible to olfactory stimuli. We can at least be neighbors.

People who are in a state of abjection are often the same people who are said to "threaten our security." And indeed, they do: they threaten our sense of ourself as secure, as non-abject. They show the loss of security that always threatens the human self. People we have made to suffer extremely are reminders of something of which we don't want to be reminded: that we can suffer extremely too. Our security is threatened not because there is something they will *do* to us, some kind of attack, but rather because of what we *are*: beings as vulnerable and insecure as they are. This is knowledge that must be suppressed at all costs, knowledge that is therefore met with disgust. The abject is disgusting because it comes from us, because it is our unstable selves externalized, the intimate fact we cannot bear to smell. This is what happened to me in Pozzallo, in Sicily, when I unexpectedly encountered a fenced-in parking lot on which migrant boats had been stored. I received and understood the sad reality of those boats with my intellect, but it was when I smelled them that I burst into tears.

The news asserts itself as a neutral report on the state of things, and elicits predictable responses. In fact, it is an elaborate enterprise driven by the predictability of the response. "A boat sank," a news report might say, "and 700 people died." The reader's response might be, "What a pity." "Thousands of people have died crossing the US-Mexico border." "So sad." What is inaudible in

all this, and in almost all news, is any sense that the events are not simply unfortunate, that they are folded in with our actions, with the actions of our government, and bear on our personal responsibilities to each other.

• • •

In the fall of 2013, I visited the Palazzo Pitti in Florence, where I saw, among other paintings there, Caravaggio's *Sleeping Cupid*, painted in Malta. Emerging from the museum, walking into the warren of streets in front of it, I suddenly fell into intense and bittersweet feelings that I somehow knew were connected to a memory of my childhood in Lagos. I began to remember certain afternoons in the 1980s when, coming back from school, which was at the University of Lagos campus in Akoka, and heading home, which was across town in the then-tranquil neighborhood of Ikeja, we would occasionally stop at a stationery store in Yaba, where my brother and I would spend our hard-earned pocket money on rare pencils, boxes of pastels, sable brushes, and heavy cream-colored artists' papers.

My brother and I were both crazy about drawing and painting, from when I was around seven and when he was five, onward into our teens. We still are. He's an artist, and I dabble. Back then we loved nothing more than to test our mother's patience by dawdling in the stationery store. She would be waiting in the car, eager to get back to Ikeja after what would have been a very long working day. But for my brother and I, the ritual of buying art materials was not to be rushed. We'd examine pencils in the hard H series (2H, 4H, 6H) and the soft B series (2B, 4B, 6B, and so on). Like all fanatics, we gloried in the specifics and went lovingly from aisle to aisle, consuming with our eyes and touching with our fingers the arrayed products, made by companies whose

names were mantras to us, two little boys on a school afternoon in Lagos, manufacturers like Staedtler, Winsor & Newton, Rotring, Stabilo, and Faber-Castell, names that held for us the holy hush of promise, of hours of pleasure to come when we set up our easels and sketchbooks at home and, like the rivals we were, drew and painted still-life arrangements. But in that shop in Yaba, the name of which is now sadly lost to me, we would eventually have to make a decision and settle on what to buy.

The reality was that we never had much money. We might be able to afford the sixteen-pastel set, but not the glorious one with sixty-four sticks. We might have enough money for the horsehair brush, but not the real sable brush, the one that, when wetted, took on the shape of a teardrop that terminated in a single point. So, on each visit, desire would meet limitations, and we would have to spend within our means. We took our time deciding. Afterward, we headed out to the car and our mother, whose patience had likely expired. Of course we knew that the happiness that would come from one new brush or a new set of pencils was more than worth our mother's temporary displeasure. Besides, she took a secret pride in our artistic abilities, since she had no such facility herself, and sometimes mused on the mystery of having children with inclinations so radically different from hers.

All of this came rushing back that afternoon in Florence. And it wasn't the memories themselves that suddenly overwhelmed me, it was the *feelings* associated with those memories, those intense and bittersweet feelings. I felt unaccountably young, happy, full of anticipation, overstimulated, competitive, creative, and vulnerable, and only after a few moments did the reason for those feelings reveal itself in the memory of visiting the stationery shop. Where had this torrent of feeling suddenly come from, almost thirty years later and thousands of miles away, in a for-

eign country? What could have triggered such powerful associations? I turned around in the small Florentine street, walked back a few steps, and found the answer: I had smelled the fragrance of freshly shaved pencils. Amazing, that in the cacophony of the street, I could be felled by something so faint and specific. I had walked by a shop selling art materials, and the smell coming from its open doors had served as a shuttle to my boyhood self. The sensation of smell had bypassed my conscious mind, gone deep to the root of my memory, and given me an experience stronger than that I'd got from the masterful paintings with which I had just spent the afternoon, the works of Giovanni Bellini, Raphael, Titian, Caravaggio.

Henry de Montherlant is credited with saying that "happiness writes in white ink on a white page," but I believe that happiness is no less complex an emotion than sorrow. The abject smell that broke my heart in Pozzallo, the painting of St John's beheading in Malta, the videos and voices from Libya, and the crying of bereft children on the recording from Texas: these are all news from the unhappy side of life. Each is powerful and unforgettable in its own way. But the sweet smell of shaved pencils on a Florentine street is as profound as any of them. Our senses are unendingly intricate and subtle. We can see, we can hear, we can touch and be touched, we can taste, we can smell. We know where the parts of our body are, we can feel hot and cold, we can feel pain, we can maintain our balance. We can experience moments of synesthesia, we can be astonished by the smell of jasmine, we can be moved by the sound of drums, we can feel the way architecture acts on the body. We can find, in book after book, in film after film, those moments of complexity and complication that shake us awake and bind us ever more closely to life, those embodied and neurological experiences that reassure us that we are not alone.

Moving through the world, finely tuned, encountering others who are also finely tuned, their bodies mingled with ours, their intricacy and subtlety: all of this bears on our ethical responsibility toward those others. It is as though we are all in the same boat and, in that same boat, we can smell each others' bodies. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag sounds a helpful note of caution: "Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated. People don't become inured to what they are shown—if that's the right way to describe what happens—because of the quantity of images dumped on them. It is passivity that dulls feeling." I'm interested in what Sontag terms "passivity" here. The quantity of images, she suggests, is not what is at issue. What is at issue is the way they are received. How can the recipient of this fact of the world be more active?

I often think that if sensitivity is a feature of my ethical equipment, then the same must be true for others. I don't mean that exquisite sensitivity is required in order to be morally alert. I mean that it can function as a reminder, as an intensifier, of what we have always owed each other. To paraphrase Édouard Glissant, when we regard each other, we should tremble. These are the reasons I travel, or read, or look at art: to find out, to feel, to tremble, to forestall any risk that the active fact might be rendered passive or useless. I open myself up to shake off "raising awareness" and take on "bearing witness," to go closer, to feel what I feel there (wherever "there" may be), to observe what I sense and transmute that into shared responsibility, into a knowledge that my body—our bodies—were made fit for it.