

**Photography tears the subject from itself**

**Robert Desjarlais**

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And if seeing was fire, I required the plenitude of fire, and if seeing would infect me with madness, I madly wanted that madness.

Maurice Blanchot

I cannot urge you too strongly to a meditation on optics.

Jacques Lacan

**July 8. Arles. I am looking at a photograph.**



I have been looking at it for days now. The photo keeps calling me to take another look, and another after that. The image has taken possession of me like a restless spirit from elsewhere seizing hold of an unknowing mortal. I find myself swooning into the image much as I have fallen into deep afternoon sleeps after arriving jet-lagged in Paris: when I wake hours later into a funk of grogginess, unsure where or who I am in the world or what hour or day it is, the sleep rears up and pulls me back down into the depth of dreams and murmured voices.

I took the photograph two years ago, while standing on the steps leading up to the Basilica of Sacré-Coeur in Paris, on the butte Montmartre, the highest point in the city. It's a simple story at first glance, once you know something of the parameters of the photograph's

production, in time and space. The man to the left had asked the man in the center if they could be photographed with each other. His friend, the man to the right, is taking the photograph. I photographed the three of them in the act of photographing, in a moment just before, while, or after the camera clicked an image.

The man between them had been standing about the steps for some time, for as long as I had been there that day, at least. He was asking for money in a quiet, understated way. He stood out amongst the others because of his appearance, because of his silent stillness. He had positioned himself by the steps, embraced by a dark winter coat, with his hand held out, softly, his hands held low, close to his waist, not assertive. He did not want to be there, his stance told me, but he was there, within the elements, to earn a keep for the day.

Police were roaming about in those midday hours, asking beggars and street sellers to move on. They did not ask him to leave, he was not drawing attention to himself. He did not thrust out an empty hand, beseeching tourists passing by, as other beggars had been doing, until the police swept them away. He stood quietly, hands close to his sides.

The man did not look like the alms-askers that wait outside the entrances to churches in France and elsewhere, *le priant*, the praying, who hope to receive charity from devout souls entering a church. He looked unsure of how to plead for money at this site of reverence and attraction.

I had come to Sacré-Coeur that day to revisit a place I had known years back. The cloying rush of tourists, hovering about the scrub of land like ants treading a sand hill, was displeasing to me. Yet the scene made for easy photographs. Just about everyone had a camera. Friends and families were clicking high and low, making pictures of the Basilica straight on. I simulated joining in on the visual frenzy in seeking to procure images of all that moved about. I was a wolf among sheep, plucking images from the flock. I took photographs of children spinning about the ponies fixed into a carousel at the edge of Montmartre, of the miniature, glow-in-the-

dark Eiffel Towers sold by men from Africa, of people relaxing in lunchtime sunlight, and of a woman seated by its entrance, asking for alms.

Camera in hand, I stepped inside the cool somber of the church, and returned to the sunlight near the steps. At some point I saw the man was standing next to another man, about to have a photograph taken. I must have acted quickly. It was easier that the man was not looking my way, occupied as he was with the methods of another camera. I raised the machine and clicked the button which triggered the shutter which sparked the twenty three million image sensors in the camera's cortex to ink their photographic work. I held onto the picture that now lies close to these words.

I now have this image with me, along with a few other photographs, as I travel about in France. The image keeps coming back to me. It lies below the surface of my retina when I sleep at night.

**July 10. I now have a decent read on the photograph, I believe, after considering it for hours, walking about this city of images.**



Four figures stand most apparent in the photograph, or five if one counts what appears to be a girl, on the periphery; her image is fragmental, supplemental, easily overlooked. The four figures form a quartet of bodies. The man, potentially blind. The man standing next to

him. The man taking the photograph. And the woman below those three, walking into the frame of my own secondary photograph. Whenever I look at the image I move from figure to figure apparent in the image, the two faces visible and the two persons near those visibilities. The perceptions are dispersed, thrown here and there. I keep coming back to the man in the middle of the image. The energy of the vision centers on that central figure, his face especially. There is a gravitational force to his dark sun presence. The photograph as a whole is a rustle, a disturbance. Some experts speak of photography as a medium of death. For me, this photograph comes from a tumult far before death, or in the ferment before a birth.



The man on the left is posing for the photograph. Apparently. In dim light I thought at first that this youngish man was holding another camera in his hands; the object now appears to be a pair of stylish, glare-resistant sunglasses. Presumably, their owner was wearing them earlier and he had taken them off. Better for the photograph to portray his eyes clearly, and his person more generally. Sunglasses can enhance vision, by diminishing hazy sunlight. They can also hide the eyes and obscure the soul that sees through the eyes.

Is this young man visiting Paris? He is probably not from France, or so I suspect. He hails from another land. He is traveling with his friend, the man taking his image. Or his friend lives in Paris and he is visiting him there. They are going about the town, seeing the sights,

riding the metro, snacking on crêpes smoldering with chocolate nutella. The image is rife with possibilities, you see, there are many lines of probability, suggested by the imagery involved. Of nothing can we be certain. We tell ourselves stories. It's a cold day in Paris.

My thoughts go to this young man, to his face and eyes and the branch of veins and knuckles in his hands. I try to imagine what his life is like, what brought him to Paris and to the Basilica that day. What was the day after that like for him? Will he send the image to a girlfriend or a sister back home? I am in that vague uncertain terrain that lies indefinitely in the interface between one person and another. We know so little about others. A flatness defines my comprehension of him. My perceptions hit a wall as dense as the dark, rain-resistant fabric of his coat.

This youngish man is holding the faint line of a clipped smile, just a thin line, no beaming for the folks back home. Self-conscious before the camera, he is holding himself still and stable for the picture. In this one instant he is there, standing on the steps of the Basilica, he is in Paris on this fine sunny cold day in October. There may have been other pictures taken of him before this moment, and others after that. They might have surfaced on Facebook, or Flickr, or Instagramme. You have to wonder about this, where the images get to, one way or another. Images travel, that's a principle; they disperse like pollen in an April breeze. When I consider their many possible destinations, time opens up before me, present, past, and future. I get lost within that swirl of time. I am taken outside of myself, once again. I am far from singular or finite. I try to come back to the present. It's not easy holding onto a single moment. Each moment skips off into other moments, like stones skimming along the surface of ocean waters.



The younger man is standing next to the blind man apparent. I was stunned when I saw that sudden pairing. He had asked the blind man to pose with him. How outrageous, I said to myself, to put the man on the spot in that way. The photographers wanted to have him become a freakish side show, to be a dramatic figure within a photo at a tourist attraction, a "selfie" with a twist: a man stands by the entrance to the basilica, a blind man by his side. Passion and suffering on the Mount. The blind man of Sacré-Coeur. We know of the photoerotic pleasure of coming close to the ground of suffering, of witnessing its presence, vicariously living the tale of it, but not too close. The two subjects of that brief instant are standing side by side a good foot apart from one another. There are no bodies leaning into one another, no arms embracing, no trace of a touch, no sensate contact. I see no shared looks, no real connection. They are others to each other, a "relation without relation."

The blind man appears to be looking down, away from the view of the camera, no smile or glint of joy on his face. He looks alone amongst others, head bowed.

Why did they think this would make for a decent photograph, a good memory to capture? We are left to wonder, as I was that day, if the two visitors had some particular notion in mind, unfamiliar to me, to the effect that it's an auspicious matter to be photographed while standing next to a blind man. Would the image serve as a lucky charm down the road? Or was there something in the culture of the two visitors that encouraged them to enact a record of standing alongside a figure of abjection? The interpretations run



rampant, you see, we can barely hold on. We are left to wonder. We are always left to wonder.

And yet the blind man went along with the arrangement. He agreed to be included within the frame, for a few centimes. Evidently. It's hard to make a living these days. I cannot recall observing the two men's request, their pitch to the blind man to be included in their photograph. What I do recall remembering, or imagine remembering, or remember imagining, is that once the photo was taken there was a release of the still pause, a dissipation of the tension of bodies held taught, their worlds ticked on, the young man retrieved a coin from his person and handed it to the blind man apparent. That older man held the coin in his hand, he looked down, checking its value. He looked up and nodded his head, signing off on the deal. The young man nodded in turn. Transaction completed, they parted ways. I cannot say that they looked each other in the eyes. I do not know about that. You see I cannot say if the blind man could see, or not.

There was a careless, casual meanness to their intent, I thought. I was no better, perhaps. No worse, perhaps. I was prepared to picture the man's unseeing presence in another form of visuality, when we were not standing face to face, no words involved.

**July 12. The photograph has been transporting me to an imaginary realm between the actual and the phantasmagoric.**



My eyes are drawn to the man in the center of the photograph, the blind or semi-blind man. He is looking down. His visage is one of humility, graveness, and, perhaps, shame; or so I read his downcast expression. I do not think he is simply performing that humility, making a show of his abjection, better to make a buck. He is not pleased about being photographed with his visual deformation on display, because of that deformity. He has gotten used to it, it comes with the territory. He is required to sell his deformity, display himself, convert poor vision into hard cash. He needs the looks of others while dismayed by those looks. This is how I imagine him without knowing him at all. Such is my sympathetic leaning toward him. I have only his appearance to go by, and what my imagination weaves out of the silk of those fine details. The man's face appears weathered, folds of surface skin moon-circled below his eyes. I have at times wondered if this man was Moroccan in origin, in proscribed or proclaimed identity, for in the photo he is wearing clothes that remind me of the *djellaba* ["je-lla-ba"] that Berber men wear. That perception sets off a sea of possibilities, histories of fantasy and simulation. That perception appears to be a mirage. The man's coat looks as though it could come from a bargain store in France. The thought occurs now that the man might have acquired that particular coat because it reminded him, subliminally, or overtly, of the clothing that he and other men wore back home, and he found comfort in that enveloping resemblance. Perhaps.

My fancy goes to this unknown man, if fancy is the right word for the imaginative enquiry I seem to be on. If the man is blind or semi-blind, how did he come to be this way? At what age

did he sense something was wrong in how he pieced together the world? Has he tried to have his vision repaired? Where does he bed down at night? Does he have a family, any children, sons or daughters who worry about his welfare? Would he be back at the Basilica the next day, and the day after that? Would I be able to find him there again, two years since? We tell ourselves stories. Voyeuristic we can be in imagining the features of another's life. He served in the military. He is transcendently spiritual, beyond the means of this current life. He lives with a roommate, a hobbled, unshaven man. He dreams on a mattress of cardboard. See how easily one's thoughts venture half-blindly into the province of his subjectivity, without stubbing a toe on anything concrete or certain. I cannot be sure of anything, nor can you, dear perceivers. A photograph can be at once crystal clear in its substance and terrifically uncertain in its implications. Photography is a tangled play of surface appearances and infinite, uncertain depths.

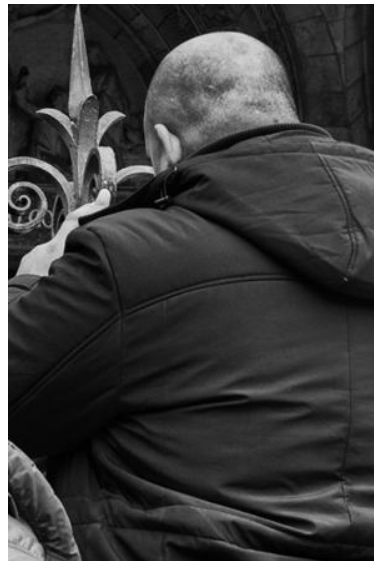
I believe the man was blind. Or, at the least, his vision was partially impaired, if not fully. It appeared as though a cataract, an opacity in the lens of the eye, seemingly pure white in its waxy substance, had come to cover over the pupil of one eye, the left eye at least, the one most visible in the image. With that unseeing left eye the occluding matter is *flowing down*, like the white foam of a waterfall, to use words that reach back to the etymology of the word for this optical disorder. Cataract, from the early 15th century, stems from the Latin *cataracta*, "waterfall," and from the Greek *katarhaktēs*, "waterfall, broken water; a kind of portcullis." The water is "swooping, down-rushing" (from *kata*, "down"). The second element of the word has been traced either to *arhattein*, "to strike hard," or to *rhattein*, "to dash, break." The hard white foam of a downrushing waterfall resembles the hard white stone clouding the lens.

He must be able to see a little, this apparent blind man, at least a little. Otherwise, he would not be able to get his bearings. He would not know if, when, or how he is being photographed. He needs to know where the camera lies, doesn't he? He needs to see when he is being seen. I would like to zoom in on the quadrant of his eye, with any photographs I have of him. I would like to focus in on the pixels that reflect a trace of his eye, disturbing as that action

sounds, and try to assess the damage, to unravel what kind of disease disturbance came to impale his eye. I would like to ask an ophthalmologist, a physician wearing white who specializes in eyes, to know for sure, pin the question down. I have looked at images of cataracts on-line, to see if there's a resemblance to the marred eye in the photograph. It's difficult to keep looking at those images of pained orbs of clouded yellow white looking back at me. I look away. I shut down the screen, a pair of eyes closing their lids. A diseased, unseeing eye is disturbingly other to what I take an eye to be.



The younger man is looking down as well. I can see that now, in the photograph, theirs or mine. His eyes are aligned with the sturdy midriff of his friend. Perhaps this too he finds appropriate, not to look directly at the camera, be it because of convention, deference, humility, or shyness. I would like to think his lowered eyes indicate he felt some discomfort, if only unconsciously, in having asked the blind man to pose with him within the frame of the photograph. I wonder if there was with him some sense of the morally fraught, double-edged fact of the arrangement. Of this interpretation I cannot be sure.



There's the bulky, partial presence of the man preparing the photograph. He might have his image taken, in turn. With the lunar globescape of his head tilted toward the viewfinder, it's clear he is concentrating within the long moment of focusing the lens. He is inching to press on the release trigger at just the right, well-formed instance. I say "he is concentrating" in the present tense, and I know you think within that timing too, even though that present moment is now two years past, and counting. Photography implies a grammar of multiple tenses, past, present, future. The photograph carries the trace of a once ago present. It's as though we're in that moment, too. We are in many moments at once, you see. It's difficult to hold onto just one.



It's conceivable that when the friend, pictured in the photograph, looked at the image later that night, or the next day, or a year or two after that, he was disappointed with his actions that day, for having asking the blind man to pose with him. Or a friend or a cousin asked him, *What the fuck?!* The young man felt a tinge of shame. He took down the photograph from Facebook. He tore up glossy prints. Perhaps. He tried to forget the moment. Perhaps. Nietzsche wrote of the arrival of what he called "philosophers of the dangerous Perhaps."

I have the photograph, still.



Just now I am carrying a copy of this image, and a few others, while I am traveling. The original digital files, the RAW color versions of all the photographs I took that day, are on the hard drive of my computer in my home in New York, 6000 kilometers away. I'll have to wait until I return there at the end of the month, to see where the greater story lies.

**July 13. Aix en Provence. I am now in Aix, staying for a few days with a friend and her husband on the outskirts of the city, close to the abandoned Bibemus quarries where Cezanne used to paint. My friend is also an anthropologist.**



This afternoon I told her about the photograph which has come to interest me. She looked closely at a copy of it. She told me that when she first saw the image, after I had sent a digital copy to her months before, she took the figure in the center to be an inanimate part of the statuary of the Basilica, like a stone figure from medieval times. "It was so immobile, so sculpted," she said. "Right there are the strong bones, and sculpted face, down to the pools of the eyes."

I can see now how the man's head could be perceived as one of those *grotesques*, those fantastic human and animal forms, which look down from the heights of stonework built into facades of many churches in Paris. "And sculptures like that do not have eyes," my friend

added. A medieval gargoyle, a blind man from Morocco. So many glances stir up images from the vast, unruly optical unconscious that lies within the sediment of our perceptual memories.





July 14. This afternoon, I read to my friend what I have written to date concerning my tentative understanding of the photograph.



We sat at a patio outside her home on a fine summer day and she listened to the lines of interpretation while looking at the image. Once I had finished, she introduced another sensible reading, counter to the one I had put together. "The three men in the photo are probably Maghreb," she said, "from either Morocco or Algeria." It's possible, she proposed, that they are from the same village or the same region, and they wanted a photograph to mark the occasion of meeting in this faraway town. Perhaps they recognized him from somewhere else. And even if they had no known connection with him, it must have been pretty interesting to encounter another Maghreb standing on the steps of the Basilica. The two men might have wanted a souvenir of that odd occurrence. It's also important for Muslims to do good works and to give alms to those in need, my friend explained. The two men might have combined a donation with the request of a photograph. The man standing between them might have also had that idea in mind when coming to the Basilica, but he was unsure how to go about asking for alms in a Christian setting, and so he stood uncertainly along the steps leading up to the church. This all could well be true. There's no way to know, for sure. We tell ourselves stories.

July 15. We have yet to consider the fourth figure, the woman passing through the frame of the secondary photograph, perhaps because she seems incidental to the main action. Her presence in the image is apparently accidental.



The accidental characterizes so many photographs. The woman is stepping into the frame of that moment. She is climbing up the stairs, apparently, bee-lining it toward the interiors of the Basilica. The lofty ascent is fatiguing her, her feet are tired, the bag held by her right shoulder is growing heavy, and yet she is determined to witness the sacred beauty that lies just ahead. This is the line of need she is on, her immediate desire, alongside the trajectories of those around her. Would she remember that moment, at all, if asked about it again? That day at Sacré-Coeur. Her face is not visible in the photograph. There is no clear persona or identity apparent. Her grey winter coat is an agent of sorts. It obscures and enhances. The coat blocks any clear view. It continues a slashing line, right to left, which begins with the photographer's coat. The blind man's look seems to follow that down-sloping

line toward a lower ground, be it earth, rest, death, or damnation. And then the line veers upward, following the line of the young man's coat. The face of the man who appears to be blind is set within the virtual V which appears to a viewer's eye. This arrangement helps in my present viewing to make the hood about his head look like a dusky halo, profane and non-ecstatic. The arching crescent of that half halo is echoed by the wrinkled curve crowning the top of the woman's coat, which appears just below the incandescent glow of white in the space between. It's almost as if the silent, unspeaking affinity between those forms points to the ways in which there can be instances of likeness and connection among different forms of life. It's almost as if the straggly luminance in the between suggests the possibility of quiet beauty, transcendence even, within the knockabout arrangements of everyday life. Almost. There is no angelic transcendence here. It's just a Monday afternoon on the steps of Sacré-Coeur.



For some time I disliked the woman's incidental presence in the secondary photograph. Not that I had anything against her. I simply thought this blank dull whitewash of a figure obscured any clear perception of the relations between the three men half visible. In my waking dreams I have tried to reach the image with my hand and claw it away from the camera's line of sight, to see more openly what lies beyond.



I once showed the image to a friend of mine, a photographer. It's a shame, I said, that all that stuff is there, in the foreground, the grey white coat and the white hair. She said she liked this blotchy disturbance. It made the picture less clear, less ordinary. I trust her judgment. It strikes me now that the occlusion caused by the woman's presence fits well with what I have come to perceive within the elements of this picture. To photograph is to be partially blind. A photograph is hobbled perception. Like a cataract eye, the filmy substance lies obstructed, occluded. A photograph implies a hallucinatory phantasm of half-perceptions and partial, surface knowings. We see what is there, before us, at that moment, in that particular configuration of time and place, and the implications of this are what linger in time. We see so little, and we envision much more than that. A photograph stands as a combination of sure apparent surface and infinite uncertain depth.

Beyond the man taking the photograph, past the camera held in his hand, stands an upper part of the cast-iron gate. Our eyes can make out the graceful swirls of the solid metal apparent in the picture, while the tip of the lance, the punctum that could prick a heart, lies unseen and unapparent. The rest of the metal remains to be seen. We sense a substance there and its incomplete, uncertain continuation. Much the same could be said of any given photograph.

**July 16. The picture keeps looking back at me.**



It brushes against me like that man in the streets of Arles that other night. Four figures animate the photograph, five if you count the hint of the girl. Six, if you include the person who took the secondary image. Countless other figures lie beyond the scene of the photograph, all the potential viewers of it, all the eyes and imaginative sensoriums that might chance a look at it, the many possible viewings of it, theirs, yours, or mine. The moment and look of the image has the potential to expand infinitely into space. The photograph can be found on a website on the Internet. It has reached Seattle. It has rested on a kitchen table in Bucharest, and on an oak table in a restaurant in New York City. One place it probably has not appeared is in the home of the blind man or of the two men who photographed him.

July 17. I wrote that the blind man is looking down, toward the ground or toward the vague space the woman occupies.



Now that I have looked closely at the print, I'm not sure about this observation. I can see now that it's possible that the man is looking at me, at the remote figure behind the camera taking the secondary photograph. He might have noticed, in the act of being photographed, another camera pointed his way, and he glanced toward that second optical presence. I cannot be sure of this.

Looking close, I can see that the pupil in his left eye is completely covered over by a milky white cataract, the size of a small fingernail. There's no mercy in that. It's as if that cataract eye is looking at me, though I know that can't be the case. It would be crazy of me to really think that, wouldn't it? A blind eye cannot see. It's a lookless look. Still, that eye appears as if chastising me, scolding me for my photographic yearnings. Shame on me for wanting to take a picture of a blind man on the steps of Sacré-Coeur, and for free, no less. His right eye is seen unclearly. There is a dim dulled squint to that vision. Perhaps that eye, too, is affected by cataracts, not as much as the left. This makes me think that the man could see partially from that eye. His vision might have worsened by now. I feel for him, infinitely so.

He is looking at me, the man in the photograph, and he is not looking at me. I did not see that in the time of photographing. Now, I can piece together a timeline of events, tentative, relevant looks and motives included. He was on to me, I can see that now. He knew I wanted his image. Perhaps I had gathered that, if the two men could take his image, then another picture from me would not hurt matters more. I stayed close, waiting for a decisive moment. He must have seen me, if palely and obscurely. He was not sure, either, what he was seeing. His look toward me was an interrogative.

**July 17. Or, or, or, my head is getting filled with alternate possibilities, neural pathways are lighting up with the transmitters of plausible occurrence.**



What fecund epistemology, what abundant ways of knowing, would embrace a logic of assorted, possible alternatives? And what if many of those alternatives, if not all of them, are imagined, or the result of conjecture, a “casting together” of facts, impressions, and lines of interpretation, all of them spread out in dizzyingly multiple planes of time? Perhaps one that is truer to life, to what most people encounter in their everyday lives, than the finest, smartest lines of reasoning that learning can buy. So much in life, so many improbable conversations and

probable scenarios, are imagined, not concretely real, and an anthropology attuned to the imaginary - a fantastical anthropology, an anthropology of the phantastic – needs to account for the force and tenor of the imagined, the possible, the conjectured, the feared and dreamed of, spectres of memories and apparitions, within the filmic flow of thought and expression.

Or: alternatively, we could stick to an anthropology of the empirical, of the facts only, the data right before our eyes, earnest to a fault, and ignore all the imaginings swirling about any situation in life – though that would seem the true madness.

So much of scholarly writing these days is so *earnest*, zealously sincere, calculated, discourses comatose on arrival, the words “peer review” signing a death sentence to any creative singularities; everyone seems afraid of being criticized for not towing the line of political and moral propriety. So often there is a clarity of representation, where everything is explained and articulated, to the point of exhaustion. There is no play of life in any of it, except for the barren smiles of wry commentary. There is little imaginative fancy to most scholarly writing, nothing transgressive, no uncalculable desire or longing, nothing strange or unsettling within the reach of its energies. No pathos. No passion. No spiders crawling across the page. No fevered philosopher embracing a flogged horse in Turin.

And so I read novels and creative non-fiction, and watch films.



**July 18. The more I look at the photograph, the more I doubt what I know or could possibly know for sure.**



The "I" of myself and of others is undermined. There is a dissolution of a stable self. I am taken outside of myself, into a field of partial bodies and obscured consciousnesses. There are no bounded, neatly packaged forms of perception. There are no coherent selves to speak of. We are brought into a coarse, dense, intricate mosaic of sociality, composed of an infinite dynamic patchwork of precepts and sensations within the image. That uncertain, ever-changing mosaic is pointblank within everyday life as well, though we might not always see it that way. It's as if the photograph slows time to a charged pause, so slow, so gradual. A careful regard of its composition unravels elements that we often take for granted, like a sure sense of what is going on in this moment or that, or who we take ourselves to be, or how we regard others close to us. Once we have stepped into that space of perception, and adopted a certain optics of attentiveness, the world tends to emerge increasingly complicated; it becomes multiple, ambiguous, uncertain, and, at times, illuminated. The tangled interplay of otherness and sameness in everyday life becomes evident. Every detail matters, each wrinkle in time.

Looking at a photograph can offer a vexed phenomenology of perception. The closer we look, the more appearances grow strange, uncertain.

The photograph leaves me uncalmed, unsettled. It tears me from myself.



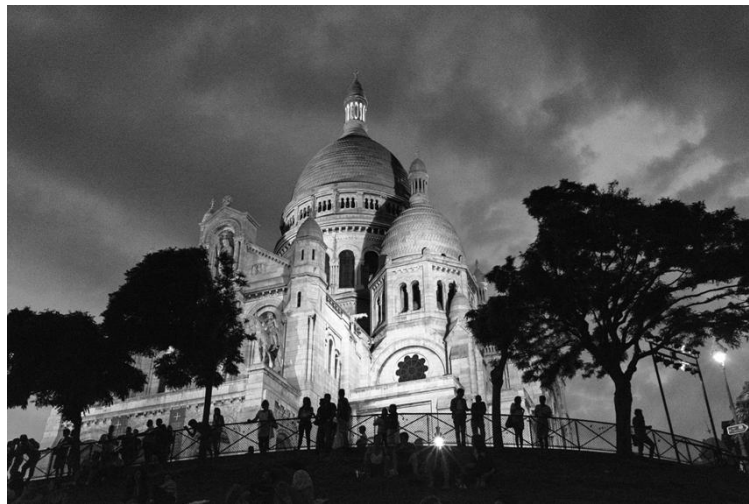
**July 19. I am now in Besançon, where I once lived.**



It's a disturbance, you see, to look into the eyes of a blind person. We often take the eyes of others to carry a glint of the soul revealed within. Plato, for one, insisted that it is not the eyes that see, but rather our soul that sees by means of the eyes. When the eyes are impaired, gone,

or blunted, something has been altered. We're left unsure where to look. We face a certain disconcerting optical resistance. We cannot look into the eyes, in the same way, and we do not know where to glimpse the soul in relation to our own. We cannot rely on the conventional, time-tested means of communing with the living self of the other. If we do not know if the other can see, or not see, or to what degree, we are thrown off further. Everything comes into doubt. This might help to explain the frequent use of shaded glasses over unseeing eyes, for those shiny obscurities can disguise erratic vision.

**July 19. I have decided to go to Sacré-Coeur next week, when I am in Paris again for a few days, before my flight home.**



I can revisit the place and try to piece together what occurred that October day. The rush of tourists will be tiresome, no doubt, shouts and antenna cravings on an anthill, but I need to be there and look about and learn if he is still there.

**July 21. When I bring a camera to my eyes I cannot see well through the lens.**



There are smudges on it. I can't clear them away. I can make out some figures, details in the image, some children on bicycles on the street below, while other figures are obscured. I can see, and I cannot see.

**July 22. My fear is of growing blind myself, of losing the trade of clear vision until I have to manage without, relying on sound and touch to make my way down trafficked streets or within the intimacy of a home.**



"One day you'll be blind like me," runs a line in Beckett's *Endgame*. "You'll be sitting here, a speck in the void, in the dark, forever, like me."

I worry that, in photographing the man's blindness so cheaply, and writing about him with sharp-edged words, I risk bringing a similar wound into the sockets of my own.



July 23. What is one to make of the fact that, soon after writing the above paragraph, my eyeglasses broke on me?



This happened last night, in the rented apartment where I am staying for the week. I began to clean the lens of my eyeglasses with a piece of smooth, clean cloth, as I had done countless, absentminded times before. This time, the force of the pressure from my thumbs against the lens caused the frames of the eyeglasses to snap into two pieces, midway along the fine metal bridge linking the two lens. Broken, *cassé*.

This morning I brought the broken eyeglasses to an optician's shop in town and asked if there was any way to repair them. A woman working there said that there was not, as the metal was "titanium," incapable of being glued back together. She was kind enough to try to mend the break by using tape and some glue to form a makeshift encasement holding the two stems together. For a few hours I walked around with the glasses held together that way. But the cast lost its grip on the right side and the two halves fell apart, slipped from my face, and fell to the ground.

**July 24. Last night I woke into the darkness of any early hour and sleepily became aware that my hand was touching the eyelid of my right eye.**

[                    ]

The sharp, jagged edge of a fingernail was digging into the epidermis. Perhaps in my dreams or in some unconscious state I was trying to clear out an irritating disturbance. This non-conscious action, undertaken while I was asleep, is alarming to me. I could have easily harmed that eye, or the other. I fear that worse can happen. I have asked my body not to do anymore damage while I was asleep. I nodded off with the prayer that I would awake unharmed and clear-sighted. Sleep should be a safe haven, a refuge from the brittle onslaughts of the day, though dangers clearly lie there. "We surrender to sleep," wrote Blanchot, "but in the way that the master entrusts himself to the slave who serves him." Strange to think that my body could have motives of its own, foreign to my conscious self, an alien body which could harm the organs on which this very self so tenderly relies.

Meanwhile, I have taken to wearing a pair of prescription sunglasses that I have with me. These lens work fine enough, though I'm worried that I appear a bit suspicious, "shady," *méchant*, when walking into cafes and restaurants with the dark shades on, or when I am wearing them in twilight hours, or at night, walking about with the camera in my hands.

**July 24. More curious still. I have just lost the sunglasses.**



I now have nothing with which to see the world clearly. This happened around nine tonight, in the dusky hour after the sun had set to the west of Besançon. I was standing along the side of the Pont Battant. I leaned over the railing there to take some photographs of a linked series of buildings along the side of the Doubs. When I went to look at this image on the LCD screen, I took off the sunglasses to see better, as I had done countless times before. I lost hold of the glasses. They fell down and away from me, with the force of an object jettisoned from the self. I heard the glasses hit sharply against the metal edge of the bridge, and then silence, only, after that. I looked down to see if I could spot them still on the bridge. They were nowhere to be seen. They must have fallen into the opaque swirling depths of the river.

My first thought after losing the sunglasses was that I was close to blind. I worried that I would face difficulties in finding my way back to the apartment, unlocking the door, climbing the darkly lit stairs, stepping into a strange place, finding my footing on the creaking wood floors of the living room and kitchen. I soon realized that I could still see much of the world, vaguely so. I could not make out the details of signs set along the roadways, and I could not pick up the telling features on the faces of those walking past me. I entered a market to pick up some food for that night and the next day, and found in walking about the store that I was as though half blind, half seeing - not far, perhaps, from how the apparent blind man perceived the



world. Once home, I returned to using the regular eyeglasses, severed into two. While moving about the place, I held the right side close to my eye, like a 19th century monocle, whenever I needed to view words or materials up close.



**July 25. Just now I am on the train to Paris, seated in a window seat in second class coach, looking out at the passing towns and farmlands.**

This morning I realized I have a pair of contact lens with me, lodged into a corner of my suitcase. I purchased a set of them back in March, before a trip to Morocco. I have seldom used them, as I found that they strained my eyes if I wore the lenses for any length of time. It took a while to fit the concave sides onto my cornea. My eyes are not used to such plastic intimacies; the cornea looked crystal pure, innocent of harm, before the contacts intervened. The lenses seem to be working well enough now. I will have to rely on them during my waking hours, and trust that they will stay in place during the trip to Paris, train and subway, while carrying a suitcase and heavy bag.

With the contact lenses on, my eyes cannot see well words or elements up close. And so I picked up a pair of inexpensive "reading glasses" at a pharmacy to read texts, write with the laptop, and regard photographs on the screen. I am using them now, as I write. My eyes are adjusting to these new prosthetics of vision, one glare-resistant lens layered atop another. Remarkable it is how many optical devices we rely on in this contemporary world. With each lens, my vision is at once enhanced and partial. I am always a little blind.

**July 26. Paris. A return is never a circling back to the same.**



I made my way to the Basilica last night and again this afternoon. The scene before the church had changed with the alternate season, and with the shifts in memory. The place was other to how I had remembered it. The area before the church now appeared smaller, more scrunched together. It took a while to regain a sense of proportion. Nothing is ever the same.

A woman was seated close to the church, her hand held out toward the people passing by, her voice pleading for alms. Outside, men were selling water bottles. I heard them talking with each other in Hindi, and soon learned that they are from India. Other men were carrying boxes

of Heineken beers with them, selling the bottles one by one to thirsty tourists, while keeping an eye out for any police officers intent on fining or arresting them for selling wares without the appropriate permits.

There was no sign of the blind man.

**July 27. This morning I returned to the Basilica.**



Still no trace of the blind man. By the end of the day's excursions my eyes were sore and tired. I suffered an excess of keen vision, while the cornea must have been adjusting to receiving slightly less oxygen from outside air. I had to go back to the apartment and dig out the contact lens from the glaze of my eyes, thirteen hours after layering them onto those watery orbs. I stumbled my way about the apartment with the use of the broken eyeglasses. The frames kept collapsing into two parts, and so I resorted again to holding up one of the lenses close to my right eye. I peered through that glassy makeshift monocle while squinting the other eye shut. I went out to buy some groceries, carrying the single lens with me, held on its broken stick. Navigating poorly, I bumped into someone, a burly young man, our shoulders colliding near the yogurt section. I returned his angry bothered look.



July 28. This morning it took twenty minutes to place the contact lens properly over the watery curves of my corneas. I had to keep taking the instruments out, inserting them again, until they felt fine and clear over the surfaces without sharp irritation. My body is a reluctant cyborg.





I went to the Basilica twice today, this afternoon and again around nine at night. Within the field of intersecting sights and sounds close to the steps, busy with human interests, stood a man with a guitar, singing a bluesy version of the song, "I want to know, have you ever seen the rain?"



Still no trace of the blind man.



I've taken to sitting on the steps of the Basilica for an hour or two, while reading a novel, or sketching random notes. A few of the water merchants had become curious as to my reason for returning, day after day. I told them I was a photographer, writing about travels in France.

Tomorrow, I think I'll bring the photograph of the blind man with me, with the intent of asking one or two of the water-sellers if they recognize him at all. Perhaps they've seen him around.

**July 28. He was there today, the blind man. He stood by the steps to the Basilica, much as he did when I saw him before.**



This afternoon, on my last day in Paris, I approached the hilltop from the northwest. In my bag lay the black and white photograph. Upon arriving at the Basilica, I expected to encounter much the same scene as the past few days - the carnal pulsations of tourists, the dazzling mechanics of cameras, men selling their bottles of water. I turned toward the entrance and glanced at a woman seeking alms. That's when I saw him standing by the gate.

He was still there, reasonably well, still on his feet, at the clutch of it. He had assumed much the same pose as in the photographs. His hand was held out, gently. A light metal walking stick lay in the nape of his wrist. He was standing directly in the sun's heat. Sweating, he wiped his brow free of perspiration. He wore a heavy coat, light brown in color, with a large hood, possibly the same coat he had on when I had photographed him two years before. The lower parts of the coat appeared darker in color than those above, suggesting that the darkening resulted from an accumulation of sweat. I sat on the steps a few feet above and away from him, we felt the heat from the same sun. I could not fathom why he would be enveloped in such a thick and heavy coat on a summer day in July. Perhaps the expanses of its coating lent him a sense of protection, and kept part of him hidden from the stares and flesh of others. He had to expose himself each day, put himself by the gates and demonstrate his blindness. Did the coat serve as an eyelid, protective and soothing? Clouds passed above, bringing relief for a minute or

two, the searing heat returned. He shook his head at times, as if throwing off a fit of lightheadedness. He retrieved an inhaler from inside his coat and drew breaths from it. Coagulates of people passed. Very few of them gave him any money, one in fifty, at best – women, chiefly. Any coins received he measured and then deposited in his right coat pocket.

"Voleur!" I heard him say at one point. *Thief!*

His word caught my eye and I watched as he turned and looked toward the crowd of people below, as though sighting or sounding someone who had snatched a few coins from his hand - or to indicate to others the sensed direction to which the thief had taken flight. Perhaps he heard someone running off. Nothing came of his alert. No one responded, as far as I could tell, his words fell without consequence. He returned to his stance by the gate, hand held out.

He must have been terribly thirsty. I sat and watched, taking in the day's sensorials. I looked into my wallet and saw that I had three twenty Euro bills, nothing smaller than that. A twenty would be too much to give him, I reasoned - he might not discern the amount, or he could lose it later that day. Or someone would see me giving him the money, and rob him of it later on. I reached into my backpack, past the photograph, and felt for any change scattered about, ten or fifty centime pieces. I came up with a handful of coins. I walked down the steps and approached one of the men selling the water bottles.

"Ça va?"

"Ça va."

"C'est chaud aujourd'hui."

"Comment? Oui. C'est chaud."

The man had two bottles remaining in his bucket. I bought one of them and held it in my left hand. In my right hand was the grab of coins. I opened the bottle and took a sip of the cool water. I walked along the fence, toward the blind man, and stood close to him. He did not see me standing there.

"Monsieur," I said.



He looked blankly.

"It's for you, » I said in French. « It's a bit of money. »

He turned toward me and held out his hand. I placed the coins in the palm of his hand. My hand touched his.

"Merci," he said.

"Merci," I said.

Would you like some water?

"Some water ?"

"Yes. A bottle of water.

"Yes. Some water."

I doubt he could have known or recognized me from two years before. How could he be aware, at all, that I had been intensely concerned with his specular image, and the condition of his eyes? Or that I had been hoping to locate him again. He must have been oblivious to the black and white photograph which lay in the heated confines of my shoulder bag.

I turned back to where the man selling the water had been, but he had gone. I had been counting on that last, remaining water still being there. I looked toward the blind man, still by the gate. I gave thought to giving him the opened water bottle, from which I had already drunk. If I gave it to him, he would have no way of knowing that I had already taken a few sips. He would hold the bottle to his lips and drink the liquid and the fluids of our saliva would have interwoven in a brief fine stream of comingled time. There would be a consubstantiation of frail, separate bodies now together linked, unknown to him. It would not be right to give him a water I had already sipped from, without informing him of this; he could get sick, he would be consuming something tainted, unwanted, beyond himself. He should know about this.

I brushed past the gate, past his open hand, and located a man selling water by the concourse below the gate and stairs. I gave him a euro coin and brought the water to the gate.

"It's some water, Monsieur."

"Water ?"

"Yes. A bottle of water."

He reached for the bottle, sensed its shape, and took it in his hands.

"Merci."

"Merci."

He looked at me, and said, "Vous êtes gentil."

*You are kind.*

*I am not sure of that.*

He looked at me with a gesture of caring regard. He did not have to see me in order to show his regard of me. His voice was rich and grave and tender and sane - and, dare I say, wise and knowing, as if he had seen a lot. In those moments I saw not a blind beggar but a person standing before me, within a moment of mutual regard and respect. His damaged eyes were there, in the pools of his sockets, they did not matter much. His eyes were no longer monstrous. I could have stared at them, but there was more to his presence before me. We had spoken, face to face. He was greater than me. He was greater than my impression of him, vaster than the picture I had accrued. His presence before me, and the immediacy of the encounter – it happened so quickly – nearly overwhelmed me.

He took the water, and he turned, I suppose. I walked away, back up the steps. I realized I still had the cap to the bottle I had given him. I held the milky white plastic, nearly translucent in appearance, in my hand. I thought of returning and letting him know I had the cap, but this would have been too confusing an exchange to force upon him.



I watched as he took a few sips of the water. He drank much less than I thought he would - he looked so terribly thirsty, sweat saturated his coat. With care he placed the bottle on the ground, close to the metal bars of the fence, and he felt his way back to the entrance to the gate. The bottle laid there, on the hard ground, the lid crucially open, precarious. Anyone walking past could knock it over with a quick, unknowing swipe of a foot, and the water would spill to the ground.

I sat on the steps as he continued to ask for money. I took out my notebook and began to write out notes and observations. I wanted to remember as much as possible, the look of him, his gestures and movements, my thoughts, so much is lost after just a few minutes. He looked my way, toward me seated on the steps, watching him, writing down words in the space between us. I trusted he could not see me. There was an invisible relation between us. It was as if we were keeping each other company, biding time together, as friends might do. I took a few photographs. There were nine steps between him and me, and a small flat surface, this I counted. We sipped from the waters at the same time, tuned to the same rhythm of thirst.

He reached for the fence behind him and touched it with his hand. Sensing it still, he moved slowly along the fence, feeling for each metal bar, equidistant from its neighbors. When he came to a larger, more massive bar, the one bearing a protruding spike, he motioned his

body downward, toward the ground. He reached for the lidless bottle of water, touching it with his fingers, and grabbed hold without spilling its contents. He brought the bottle close to his mouth and took a few brief sips. He placed it back on the ground. I worried anew that the bottle would tip over, with so many walking past. I gave thought to walking down the steps and standing close to the water, to protect it from spillage, but thought that my body's presence along that pathway would cause further turmoil. The man relied on his hands to feel his way back along the fence, back to where he had been standing before, four posts and then the larger post. So this was his topography on the steps, his method of siting where he stood or wished to go. His hands and walking stick worked the fence as a prosthetics of sight, an extension of his unseeing eyes, reaching out, anticipating, always hesitant, never more than half certain. I worried how he would fare once apart from the count of steps and posts.

I wished to stay there, watching continuously. I had to leave the hilltop and walk down to where I was staying, to check in on a scheduled conversation by skype with a friend. That call never happened. Back at the apartment I located an assortment of change that I had accumulated during my recent travels in Europe, small units of Nordic gold or copper-covered steel held in a plastic zip-lock sandwich baggie. I put the bag in my knapsack, left the apartment, and climbed the steps to the Basilica. I wanted to give the man this collection of change and talk with him more -- though I wasn't sure how well I would be able to strike up a conversation with him, introduce myself, ask about his concerns, in French no less, and without him having the capacity to see me talking to him, my gestures, expressions, the light in my eyes.

I returned to the basilica, breathless from a quick jog up stone stairs. He was nowhere to be seen. Another man had taken his place by the gate. Perhaps the alms-seekers have arranged shifts, I thought, like buskers at a subway station. Or this subsequent, more able-bodied man had muscled the blind man off.

Could it be that someone, a friend or an aide, came and met him by the gate to the basilica, and helped him to climb down into the streets of Montmartre?

In one sense, I felt relief he was gone. If he happened to leave while I was there, I would have been tempted to trail a few steps behind his uncertain progress. I would learn how he managed his movements once away from the terrain of the church, where he went to, what he did next, where he lived. I would have photographed him as he crossed a busy avenue and tapped his way around a street corner.

I could have arranged to interview him, a digital recorder scooping up his words.

I could have drummed up a life history and conveyed his plea for life.

I would contribute to the annals of medical anthropology, and launch a new theory of suffering, for the betterment of humanity.

I would have finessed a phenomenology of blindness, while bringing attention to his plight and glory to my name.

**If I had the opportunity to talk with him again, I would ask for his name, only. And leave it at that.**

