ELEANOR CLARK
(1913–1996)

In 1945, Eleanor Clark went to Italy on a creative writing grant. Living in a sixteenth-century fortress, her intentions to write fiction were diverted by Rome—its piazzas, fountains, statues, and people. She wrote her impressions in a series of sketches and essays that evolved into her book Rome and a Villa, which was published in 1952. In her review in The New York Times, Katharine Anne Porter wrote, “The whole book is a distillation of a deep personal experience; it is autobiographical in the truest sense.” Although Clark wrote other books and contributed articles to The New Republic and Partisan Review, she is best known for Rome and a Villa. Revised and reprinted in 1975, it was received as a minor classic. Anatole Broyard wrote of the new edition that it is “perhaps the finest book ever to be written about a city.”

Fountains

You walk close to your dreams. Sometimes it seems that these pulsing crowds, with their daily and yearly rhythms established so long ago none of it has to be decided any more, with their elbows and knees and souls and buttocks touching and rubbing and everybody most pleased and agreeable when it is like that, in a bus for instance, will in another minute all be naked, or will have fish tails or horses’ behinds like the characters of the fountains. For the Anglo-Saxon mind, ruled by conscience and the romantic, rigid in its privacies, everything here is shocking—an endless revelation and immersion; this is the vocabulary of our sleep; and the key image is always water.

That is the great assault of Rome, and it is total and terrible. It is really strange that foreigners of the polite centuries always used to wax so romantic about the fountains of Rome, and the music supposed to represent them was such as any young girl could listen to. The truth is, they are extremely indecent, in various ways. Their number is indecent, much as the lives of the Caesars were; common reason expires here; it is of their nature too to make those lives quite ordinary, nothing surprises you beside them. Their settings are apt to be extravagant; they can have sprung up anywhere, be tacked anywhere on the sides of buildings or are themselves a whole house wall; and their details have the candid, smiling sadism of dreams. But the worst is the life around them, and their part in it. They are not only memory, or the living singleness of time, though they are that too and the city would have fallen apart under the weight of its past a long time ago without them; this is easy to see; you notice at once when there is a drought and the fountains become quiet and stale, or empty, how old everything begins to look. But there is another unity or community within every single moment to which they are essential, and that is where the real outrage comes.

The romantic, the idealist, the tender-minded of any vein dies a thousand deaths in these fountains; their every dolphin is his nemesis.

The very genius spent on them makes them shocking. They are not objets d’art held off from life and treated with respect as they would be anywhere else; there is a closeness, an imminence of touch around them that nothing in our life has except dreams and sex, whence the awful burden on those. They are always being drunk from and splashed in and sat on, everybody dips into them as into his own private memory and quite often they have all kinds of rubbish in their lovely basins, because although the street cleaners of Rome are many and hard-working they cannot be everywhere at once.

The churches likewise; it is all physical and close; God is not
up in any Gothic shadows but to be touched and smelled and fondled, reached into up to the armpit. The Anglo-Saxon, hunting everywhere for French cathedrals, feels his mind threatened like a lump of sugar in a cup of tea.

The spaces are shocking. They are close, too, and give no warnings, so that suddenly the Pantheon or the huge volutes of Sant' Ignazio are crowding right over you; you are not allowed to stand off, it seems you are not allowed to admire at all; it is as though a giant mother were squashing you to her breast. Besides those freakish squares and the narrow streets around them, most vividly in the old quarters, Trastevere and all the part between the Corso and the Tiber, do not constitute an outside in our sense, but a great rich withinness, an interior, and running water is its open fire. Even a tourist can tell in a Roman street that he is in something and not outside of something as he would be in most cities. In Rome to go out is to go home.

There are no sidewalks in these sections. The walls rise from the cobbles as from lagoons, only people are out all along them, under the laundry which is a drastic exposure in itself, more than for any Kinsey or Gallup, and unless they are playing football they are most often mending something. That is one of three occupations you see anywhere in Europe that are no longer known in America: people walk, they carry, and they mend. Not only women; men are mending too, in thousands of dark bicycle and mattress shops and tiny individual foundries opening on to the same streets, and which may be the family's windowless kitchen and bedroom as well. What makes these streets Roman, and not those of any old European city, is the demonic energy that goes into everything, and the divine disregard for any other form of life, especially in the football players; also an element of miracle in the way the motorcycles and other traffic get through, shooting straight from hell, without anyone's changing his expression or pace or direction at all. If a Roman does have to move an inch for your car he looks at you like an affronted emperor; but on the whole American cars are objects of as pure a passion as Romans are capable of. "Oh, what a fine machine!" a woman calls out. "When Baffoni comes that'll be for me!" Baffoni is Big Whiskers or Stalin—but it was only a gaiety this time, at the sight of a Buick in her living room.

The big spaces are distressing too. There is nothing French about them, none of that spacious public elegance of the Place de la Concorde or the views up past the Tuileries. Big Piazza del Popolo, where the great political mass meetings are held among trees and flowing streams and Egyptian tigers, was even designed by a Frenchman, but the Roman look soon grew over it, like the weeds and wild flowers in the crevices of its twin churches.

Piazza San Pietro, so splendidly reasonable as architecture, if you forget the Via della Conciliazione, is not a place for reasonable individuals to stroll with a happy sense of partaking in the achievement and somehow corresponding to it, as they would in such a square in Paris. It is a place for people to congregate in the terrific force of their gregariousness, their mass cravings, like cattle around a water-hole; and when it is empty, when there is no saint being made or other spectacle, it is lifeless: very admirable in its lines but cold, with a hollow look, like the scene of a dream in which after standing with a great crowd one has suddenly been left alone. But then as suddenly you find it filled another way; another sequence has begun. It is a sunny winter afternoon, and now even this enormous space has become a living room, or public nursery. The Dome, announcing itself for miles around as the center of the world, is actually presiding like a hen over thousands of babies and mothers and lovers and very ancient people strew all over the steps of Bernini's colonnade and the awesome area it encloses, not as if they owned it but really owning it. It is where they live. The fountains, those two high waving flags of world Catholicism, are as local as a barnyard pump. There is no distance; there is no awe of anything.

It is like a party all the time; nobody has to worry about giving one or being invited; it is going on every day in the street and you can go down or be part of it from your window; nobody eats alone in the cafeteria, reading a book. A sickbed is another public gathering; there is a ritual of moaning, question and response; everybody must crowd in.

Then there are the periodic Big Parties, a great deal older
than their present ostensible occasions, dogmas and the names of saints, so old that the tautness of life they cause seems of an order with the habits of bees and the motions of tides. Everybody knows what to do, none of it is to be decided any more, there is no question of having a good time or not; if that is what you are supposed to be having that day then you are having it. The strolling places are all big with motion; the main sounds are of laughter, easy as waterfalls, and motors, but the machines are not going out of the city unless to the beaches in summer; they are just expressing themselves. The little iron tables or big wooden ones with their scars and rubbings of so many other such days, or in some arbor restaurants the hideous cement ones like cut-rate tombstones, are each a domestic fragment of the one sprawling family affair—the material of the public table is of intimate importance in this form of life, more than a person's own last name; the children are in and out of everything, no distance there; other families, of four, five, six, rumble by packaged into one bulbous organism astride the family Vespa; and at the proper hour it is all one mass exodus, to bed.

The honored personage, in any gathering, is the pregnant woman. She is exhibited, she exhibits herself, everyone feels happier and more important if there is someone in that condition at the table; and nothing can be refused her. If you refuse a pregnant woman something she wants you will get a sty in your eye, and her frustrated wishes will appear as blemishes in the child.

It is a deluge. You are in life way over your head, there is no getting out of it, except in the beaux quartiers which are not beaux at all but only pretentious; taste never functioned here on anything between the hovel and the grand palazzo. There are distances there but they are the result of a failure, not a natural way of being. Those sections are always sad and on the big party days, about a dozen a year though some percolate into a season of two or three weeks, seem marked more than ever with the black sign of the sickness of the middle class. The health of the city is elsewhere, around the fountains, where the private soul is in ceaseless disintegration; nothing is held back; the only secrecy is of the city itself.

Of course the fountains are not all for every purpose and time of day; it depends on the space. Piazza del Popolo is a fascinating crossroads, a place to sit a while, but far too big and unprotective really to live in; the little square around the lovely Tortoise Fountain is more like a back stoop. For general all-day use, but especially at l'ora della passeggiata and in the evening, two of the best are beautiful Piazza Navona with its three fountains—"godless Navona" the angry reformers of the Middle Ages called it—and the cobbled square of Santa Maria in Trastevere, which is not much less beautiful although only one of its buildings is a true palazzo. But the others are massive and handsome, too, of a comfortable height, and have the weathered succo colors of embers, ochre to rose, darker under the ledges, that are the characteristic ones of the city and help to give the walls their mysterious organic relation to people, nothing one could think of clearing away in a hurry. The main beauty of the piazza, as of most of the others, is that in spite of its superb proportions it seems not to have been planned but to have come about as a widening in a cow path does, so that nobody has that unpleasant feeling of doing what is expected of him, though in fact they are doing in nearly every detail what has been done in the same place for a great many generations. The fountain here is large and central, as it needs to be. It is not a sculptured one but a high impersonal form, a real flowing goblet, chattery but serene, which both fosters and absolves all the immense amount of being, being then and there, not waiting, not conceiving or imagining, that goes on around it. All water has an aspect of holy water; you feel it most strongly in these unfigured basins, not shooting up great rousing banners of liquid light as at Saint Peter's but the stiller ones, especially where life is so thick around them. The main feeling around this one is of a perpetual wiping out of experience; continuity is all in the water.

The church is essential in the same way. It was the first one dedicated to Mary and has kept the modest, authentic dignity of
its great age beneath its tatters and strange accretions—or not so strange: there has been no serious change since the Twelfth Century square tower and mosaic across the façade. It gives the square its deep subtlety of color and line, and is part of its other spaciousness, too, along with the moving water, and as a view of the mountains would be.

The place itself is voyage; that is why there is no restlessness. Neither is there anything for the tender heart, neither pity nor self-pity; for the delicate sensibility it is all scandal and continual death.

The most startling people are the children; no other Italians have quite that look. These are the boys painted by Caravaggio, with all the tough seductive wisdom of the city, the toying challenge miles beyond any illusion, in their eyes; painted sometimes, in their careless open shirts, as child saints, when all their sublimity is of the rock bottom. They have been spared nothing, nobody ever changed the subject when they came into the room; by the age of seven it seems there is no human temptation or degradation they have not walked through the boiling center of, no vice they have not made up their own minds about, and they can have the manners of mule drivers or of cardinals as they happen to choose; only they cannot dissemble; they have the appalling candor all Rome, and when you see it in a child’s face you do not know if you are looking at fish or at angels. You see something else in their eyes; it is themselves as very old men, then their children and great-grandchildren standing before you at the age of seven and of seventy or a hundred, all with the same two huge eyeballs looking at you in what might be a smile.

The wonder, you might think, is that their fathers can be so childish. The rages of these men are marvelous. A Vespa brushes with a Filobus and immediately the two drivers are at each other as if there had been a feud between their families for years. “HOO! LA! HO!” “Ignotante!” “Fesso!” “Coglione!” They gesticulate, point to their steering wheels and fenders, bring the city to witness; the buses run from overhead wires so soon twenty are held up. The owner of the Vespa in his fury gets his front wheel stuck sideways and the motor going full speed makes the machine buck like a wild horse; so the bus moves on but he catches up with it a block later, plants himself square in front of it and begins shouting again. The scene is mandatory, if you were in the wrong it is even more necessary to make out that you were not; and inside the bus everyone is pleased, more than they were already at being transported like a shipment of eels; they would have been cheated if one of the drivers had not played his part. The most relaxed-looking people in Rome are the bus conductors, patrons all day of a kind of party that puts the public at its best and Wittiest, because the lack is not of sensibility, only of nerves. The Roman form of serenade is to race a motorcycle motor under the girl’s window, but mufflers are not common in any situation; the only things as dearly loved as a good noise are breakneck speed and eye-splitting lights, preferably neon—all expressions of well-being, like a huge belly laugh.

The women are of the species. Foreign men who take up with them or try to are nearly dashed to pieces, which in these days is a common attraction. With their dumpy graceless bodies and an air of the Empire about their beautiful heads and shoulders, their faces not marred but somehow made more personal and approachable by the extraordinary frequency of wens on them, these Roman women move in the blazing noon of a terrible cold sensuality, that can kill because it is so truly gay. They are said to be the coldest women in Europe but they are probably also the most candid; they are no more nebulous than the sky above them, and seem incapable of the least affectation; and they lose not an atom of their tremendous inner conviction because their calculations have brought them to a prospect of doing the washing for the next fifty years under an image of the Madonna. Their power even takes on another depth of joyousness once that is settled. The drive of femininity, which is of the whole being and so just the opposite of nymphomania, never gives out; neither does the lung power; their voices carry like rockets across the square and in all the streets around, in a frenzy
body is a true Roman who has not been there, the song says, but that is only the beginning. One is about the fountain at Piazza Esedra where the bronze naked ladies are kicking up their heels while the man at the center wrestles with a dolphin: "Oh what is he doing with that big fish..." A Holy Year one may have come out of mothballs: "I sin all the year round, now I am making up my accounts for l'anno santo..." Santo goes into a dozen or fifteen syllables, a long spiraling, leering, eye-rolling cadenza as coarse as any of the items that follow; the violinist is not retiring at all now; his big comedian's face is crackling with obscene suggestion and the moaning of the strings has turned to a sly slithering and biting more skillfully dirty than any of the verses; and after this song the singer will have to get out his handkerchief though his forehead was dry enough after the sad ones, at which he seemed to be working so. But this is an act, too, and will not make you friends with them, though sporadically, depending on business and the sirocco, they may pretend so; friendship is an alien idea; sooner or later your feelings are going to get hurt, and then suddenly it appears that all this time you had not been where you thought at all, among the roots of your own memory, but in China. It is an oriental city.

The spaghetti and the beads hanging in the doors to keep the flies out, the guttural singing notes and sudden rests of Roman speech are Chinese; the reverence for parents, the bright-colored swarming streets, the easy talk of death; there is nothing here that you will ever understand.

of anger you would suppose but it may be only to ask the time and in a moment will be as loud with laughter. With their children it is a torrent treatment that may go on for thirty years, or never stop, of huggings and slappings and spoiling and tyrannical ordering about. The American, reflecting on his own childhood, feels exposed as to a break in Boulder Dam.

The guitar player at one of the two restaurants there on the square, in the aura of the venerable church, is something worse than shocking; it is because of the church, and the fountain, that he can be.

The restaurant has become rather fancy lately and the two musicians, who are the most talented of the kind in the city, size up their little audiences with a brutal shrewdness that could be mistaken for ridicule. Those knowledgeable children, after all, have not lost anything in growing up; these men know what they are doing, and for tourists they will play the worst of the Neapolitan repertoire as soulfully as anybody else. The guitar player, who sings, brings a look of longing into his big dark eyes, set in a leathery egg-shaped face, broadest at the bottom of the cheeks, which for those five minutes is all wistfully racked by the incapacity of any human art to express such beauty as the heart perceives; the beauty of the lady at the table is also too much; if he rested his eyes on hers for more than the duration of one yearning middle G he would have to stop singing entirely; when business is brisk he may have to be overcome by such sorrow twenty or thirty times in an evening, while the violinist, who is taller and wears glasses, keeps expressionless and a little in the rear, knowing that his face—this is his sorrow—is more suited to a comedian, and not wanting it to intrude on so touching a performance. The only thing is that their little routine bow at the end, acknowledgment of the guest's superior station and extreme kindness in listening to them, never gets quite finished; they had already moved on when they started it.

Their real songs, and any Roman's, are the long obscene stornelli, ballads with a Moorish twist and many verses rising in detail as they go on. One is about the prison of Regina Coeli—no-