

A shower of nouns

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [November 25, 2015](#) issue



Mosaics in the apse of the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere in Rome. Photo by [Luca Volpi \(Goldmund100\)](#) via [Creative Commons license](#).

Virginia Woolf argued that life does not unfold like the neat plot of a novel. Instead, she said, life comes to us as “an incessant shower of innumerable atoms,” an endless series of impressions that are different for every person.

I think of Woolf’s shower of atoms on Sunday mornings in Rome, where my family is living this year. For me, newly arrived with my rusty Italian, going to church is like standing in a shower of nouns. The rest of the grammar flows past me so quickly that my ears and brain can’t keep up. But I catch many of the nouns: *pace, giustizia, misericordia. Syria. Burkina Faso. Libya. I bambini, i poveri, la creazione.*

My favorite church in Rome is Santa Maria in Trastevere, which faces onto a piazza where the life of the church and the life going on all around it are one life. Children and street performers, priests and congregants, tourists and beggars and pilgrims mingle. And through it all runs the music of the fountain: water over water over stone.

Santa Maria in Trastevere is famous for its 12th-century mosaics. On the facade of the church, Mary nurses her baby, surrounded by women. Inside the church, Mary’s

baby appears in glory, a handsome grown man with his arm around his mother, his long fingers draped over her shoulder. Mary gestures toward her son, and no wonder: she is so dazzling in her beauty that we need to be reminded to look at anything else. Mother, son, and the saints who flank them are larger than life, their eyes wide, their faces still and beautiful. They shine out of the golden half-dome in which they sit.

Beneath them the congregation assembles. Every morning and evening and five times on Sunday, worshipers gather, embrace in greeting, and sit together in the pews. When worship ends each evening, the Community of Sant'Egidio, a lay group dedicated to peacemaking and service to those in need, gathers for prayer beneath the grave and graceful figures in the dome. They return, as they put it, to the feet of Jesus after a day of service in the world. A basket near the front of the church overflows with prayers written on scraps of paper; a statue of St. Francis also attracts written prayers, and I add my own to the pile around his feet. Christians have been praying on this spot since the middle of the fourth century, and under the mosaics since the 12th. The place is saturated with prayers.

On Sunday mornings I sit halfway up the nave so that I can catch the nouns as they fall from the pulpit where the gospel is read, and so that I can see the face of the preacher. My sneakers and my stumbling attempts to keep up with the responses give me away. I am not a local, but I am greeted as if I am during the passing of the peace.

T. S. Eliot wrote that certain poems communicate even if you cannot understand the words. The fifth canto of Dante's *Inferno*, he promises, will speak to you in its original language, even if you do not know a word of Italian. Teresa of Ávila made a similar claim for the Song of Songs. Even when I hear it in Latin, she wrote in her commentary, it reaches me. And when someone translates it for me into my mother tongue, she insisted, I do not understand it any better.

Sitting in the shower of nouns that collect around and inside me as they fall, I am reminded of the power that words have to affect, disturb, and even change us, even when we don't know exactly what is being said. Woolf wrote that the impressions with which we are all bombarded in the course of a day—the "shower of atoms"—reach us sometimes as evanescent and at other times as "engraved with the sharpness of steel." *Peace, justice, mercy. Syria. Burkina Faso. Libya. The children, the poor, the creation.* Without modifiers and qualifiers, these words reach

me newly sharp, making a claim I can feel. They animate each other without verbs and phrases. They fashion their own sermon, one that implicates and calls me.

As with any sermon, however, it is not the words alone that speak. The sermon I hear is shaped by the listening congregation and its ministries and by the face of the priest who leans toward us as he speaks. It is shaped by the woman with outstretched hands sitting in the doorway, the children playing in the piazza, and the prayers piling up around the feet of St. Francis. And it is shaped by the figures of Mary and Christ in glory, sitting above us, gazing out with their wide-open eyes. Beneath them we look tiny, nearly lost against the brilliant mosaic. The shower of words and silence, music and gesture, and the color and light that fall from each small tile, combine to tell us something magnificent about being alive in this world. Beneath those towering figures, we also shine.