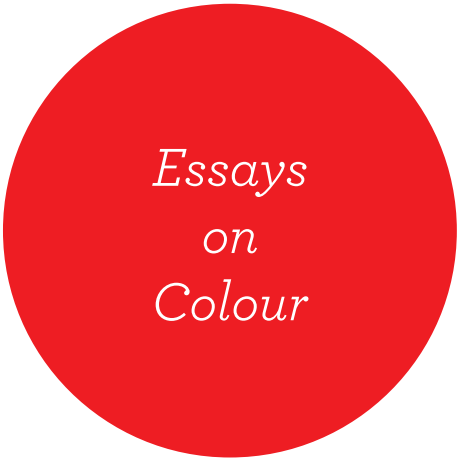

Essays
on
Colour

ESSAYS ON COLOUR

A collection of columns from Cabinet Magazine

Eleanor Maclure

Introduction

For every issue the editors of Cabinet Magazine, an American quarterly arts and culture journal, ask one of their regular contributors to write about a specific colour. The essays are printed as Cabinet's regular Colours Column. To date, forty-two different colours have been the subject of discussion, beginning with Bice in their first ever issue.

I first encountered Cabinet magazine when I stumbled upon Darren Wershler-Henry's piece about Ruby, on the internet. I have since been able to collect all of the published columns and they have provided a wealth of knowledge, information and invaluable research about colour and colour names.

Collectively, the writings represent a varied and engaging body of work, with approaches ranging from the highly factual to the deeply personal. From the birth of his niece in Matthew Klam's Purple, to a timeline of the history of Lapis Lazuli mining in Ultramarine by Matthew Buckingham, the essays have provided fascinating insights into a whole range of colours, from basic terms such as black and red, to the more obscure: porphyry and puce.

While some focus very much on the colour in question, others diverge into intricate tales of history, chemistry or geopolitics. There are personal anecdotes, legends and conspiracies, but more than that, the essays demonstrate the sheer diversity of ways we can talk about colour.

The essays gathered here have become far more than just the background reading they began as. The aim of this book is to bring together the works, as a unique representation of the different ways we relate to, experience and interpret colours.

Essays
on
Colour

"...all the elements of the world must be in me, in everyone— would mingle with the copper and make a union, a new thing, alchemically, chemically, pigmentally. And that thing was the color bice, a good color"

BICE

JONATHAN AMES

When I was a little boy, I liked to pick my nose. In fact, I've enjoyed picking my nose for most of my life. This is not something to be proud of, but telling you about my nosepicking brings me to the word bice. Perhaps it's not clear how this brings me to bice, but I will try to explain.

The good and clever editors at Cabinet asked me to write about a color. I said I would do this. I am a writer and writers usually say yes when editors offer them work. So the idea was that they would choose the color for me and I was to respond. But they didn't give me the color right away, they told me they would call me back in a few days. Fine, I said, and I looked forward to this. I saw it as a version of that classic word association game—the pschia-trist says to you, "Just tell me the first thing that comes to your mind after I give you a word." Then he says, for example, "Cereal" and you say, "Morning," and then he says, "Picnic," and you say, "Apples, no—copulation," and nobody figures anything out, but the game is fun to play. So I waited for my color, to which I was going to respond to with immediate first-thought, first-feeling sensitivity and clarity and enthusiasm. I did find myself, though, cheating and mentally preparing my essay in advance, hoping for blue, about which I could write about my grandfather's eyes, or red, the color of my hair, my son's hair, my great-aunt's hair, my grandmother's hair, numerous uncles' and cousins' hair, and I envisioned an essay with the winning title A Family of Red Heads, or just Red Heads.

Then the phone call came. The Cabinet editor said, "Your color is bice." I was silent, mildly ashamed at a deficient vocabulary, as well as a deficient knowledge of colors. Blue and red were striking me as quite pedestrian now. "Do you need to look it up?" asked the editor. "Don't worry if you do. I didn't know it either. It was my colleague's idea... Do you want something easier? Like yellow?"

I felt tempted to say yes. My eyes are often yellow because of a dysfunctional liver, and I immediately thought about how I could write about my liver and about the body's humors. But steeling myself, showing a flinty courage, I said, "No, bice is fine. I have a good dictionary. I'm on it. You can count on a thousand words on bice from me."

We rang off.

I opened my dictionary—it's an OED for the field, so to speak; it's about the size of the Bible, as opposed to the colossus numerous-volume regular OED. I found bice, though, out of curiosity, I checked my American Heritage Dictionary, and there was no bice. Good thing I have my Junior OED. What I encountered in the dictionary was this: "pigments made from blue, green, hydrocarbonate of copper; similar pigment made from smalt, etc.; dull shades of blue & green given by these."

Well, my immediate response to bice was straight out of the ethers of my long ago childhood; it was Proustian; it was tactile; it was visual; it was beautiful, sad, and lonely. It was better than blue or red or yellow. What I saw in my mind's eye, my soul's heart, was the standing, tube-like copper lamp, which used to be beside the couch in the living room of the house I grew up in. And every night, I would sit on this couch in the darkness, alongside this unlighted lamp, and I would watch television all by my very young (six, seven, eight; this went on for years), lonesome, yet happy self. I felt a solitary contentment in the darkness watching my programs before dinner, my mother cooking in the kitchen beside the living room, and all the while as I absorbed the stories from the TV and soaked up the radiation from that ancient, large contraption (TVs, like cars, were made uniformly big back then), I would pick and pick my nose and then wipe my small treasures in the tubing and grooves of that long lamp. And no one saw me doing this because I was in the darkness. And the effect of my salty mucous—like sea air on a statue—was that the copper lamp slowly, in streaky spots, turned greenish-blue. To everyone but me this was a mystery. "Why is this lamp eroding?" my father would sometimes ponder.

On occasion, showing largesse, I would put my snotty treasures on the underside of the wooden coffee table in front of the couch and our dog Toto, named by my older sister after Toto in the Wizard of Oz, would come and bend his red and brown Welsh Terrier neck and happily and aggressively lick up the snots. I can still see him in my mind, craning to get under the table. And my parents and relatives would notice this and everyone thought that he must like the taste of wood.

I was clandestine in my actions, but I didn't feel too much shame about any of this—nose picking was too much something I had to do. But as I got older, the lamp was looking more and more terrible, and there was talk of throwing it out. I secretly tried to clean it, but the blue-green streaks would not go away. But I didn't want this lamp to be forsaken by my family; things back then, objects, were nearly animate to me, dear even, and to lose a thing from the living room, my special room of TV and darkness, would be terrible. I wanted everything to stay the same forever; and, too, I felt horribly guilty that I was killing this lamp. So I pleaded with my parents on its behalf, told them I loved the lamp, and it wasn't thrown away. With this reprieve, I tried not to wipe my snots on it anymore, to only coat the bottom of the coffee table and feed my beautiful dog, but sometimes I would weaken, and I'd find a new unstreaked spot—I could feel them with my fingers—and so I'd make my mark, my hydrocarbonated snot—there must be hydrogen and carbon in my mucous, all the elements of the world must be in me, in everyone—would mingle with the copper and make a union, a new thing, alchemically, chemically, pigmentally. And that thing was the color bice, a good color, I think, because it has brought back to me that TV and darkened living room and childhood and lamp and coffee table and beloved dog—all things gone a long time ago. All things that didn't last forever.

"—Most people think if colors have attributes such as good or evil, that the color of evil is either the red of arterial blood gushing from a wound, or the deepest black of the darkest night sky. While these are certainly evil colors, they are not as evil as beige.... The most evil color has to appear benign."

BEIGE

ANDREA CODRINGTON

Beige is the color of evil, or at least that's what Aaron Priven thinks. Priven, the author of the Internet's only website dedicated to that most unassuming of hues, writes:

—Most people think if colors have attributes such as good or evil, that the color of evil is either the red of arterial blood gushing from a wound, or the deepest black of the darkest night sky. While these are certainly evil colors, they are not as evil as beige.... The most evil color has to appear benign.

Priven might just have a point.

At first blush, of course, the color beige might have all kinds of comforting associations—from oatmeal, that pabulum of wintertime childhoods, to a worn-to-softness pair of trousers. But beige is also the color of deceit and oppression. Khaki, after all, originated in mid-19th-century colonial India, where it took its name from the Urdu term for "dusty." It was in the altogether different—but no less exotic—locale of Transvaal that the British first realized that donning dun-colored uniforms while fighting the Boer locals would help them sneakily blend into their dried-out South African surroundings. Thereafter, khaki replaced regimental blues and reds and became a military staple the world over—as well as the building block of any hot-climate camouflage pattern.

One can easily find other examples of beige's pernicious ability to blend into the background at the political and socio- cultural level. Just consider the Hannah Arendt-John Mellencamp continuum.

What does a German-born left-leaning political critic hold in common with a hard-living Midwestern rock star? Arendt, whose 1963 book Eichmann in Jerusalem gives a first-hand account of the trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, was one of the first 20th-century thinkers to set forth the idea that evil was represented as much in this world by banality as by anything that could be called sinister. She based this observation on Eichmann's behavior during the trial, which was marked by total thoughtlessness: cliché speech patterns, a lack of critical ability, and unthinking obedience to authority. (As a Nazi, of course, Eichmann also tended to wear beige uniforms.)

Exactly 30 years later, John Mellencamp came out with a song that further implicated the relationship between banality, evil, and the color beige:

—It's just beige to beige
That's all it is these days,
Little windows for you to crawl through.
You just do what's expected of you.
It's just beige to beige to beige
These days.

Of course, Mellencamp's formula that routine ("beige") equals constraint equals evil is a rock-and-roll staple. It is also at the very core of the advertising techniques that drive contemporary consumerism, as Thomas Frank has pointed out in The Conquest of Cool. "Commercial fantasies of rebellion, liberation and outright 'revolution' against the stultifying demands of mass society," he writes, "are commonplace almost to the point of invisibility in advertising, movies and television programming."

In a cultural moment predicated on visual flamboyance, beige is indeed the enemy. It is a truism that when the economy is doing well, colors brighten (hence the Great Depression's nickname as the "Taupe Age"). According to the Color Marketing Group, the country's most influential color forecasting organization, colors like Mazenta ("A new twist on magenta that leaps from retro right into the future") and Fuschion ("An active, unisex pink that is both sporty and glamorous") will be dominant in 2001—which leaves beige beyond the pale.

Apple Computers, one of the most obvious progenitors of the consumption-as-rebellion method of advertising, is now in the position of distancing itself from decades of cranking out what tech aficionados disparagingly term "beige toasters." These days, Apple heralds each season with a splashy introduction of new colors for its lollipop-reminiscent iMac. An inter- view with iMac designer Jonathan Ive on Apple's website even bears a headline that reads "Sorry, no beige"—thus shifting blame from the company to the color. (Interestingly, when German designer Hartmut Esslinger first created the original Macintosh in 1984, the company lovingly referred to the beige box as "Snow White.")

Of course to every revolution there is a counter-revolution, and recent years have seen a return of low-key colors in fashion. But far from representing suburban normality or old-school comfort, high- style beige is all sharp tongue and urban angularity. "Beige

is like the martini of color," says New York-based club organizer Erich Conrad in a 1997 Esquire article called "Ecru Brut." "It's quiet but toxic."

There is certainly some evidence to the contrary. Those frenetic jitterbugging commercials for Gap Khakis seem to reposition beige as the methamphetamine of color. But whatever your poison, too much of either might land you in the infirmary. And according to Sir Elton John—who knows a thing or two about substance abuse and sartorial extravagance—beige is one color that should be kept in the clinic. At a VH-1 Fashion Awards show a few years ago, John spoke out against "boutiques looking like hospitals, selling a lot of beige suits."

Evil. Toxic. Hospital-like. Could these terms really apply to a hue that Webster's describes as "the color of undyed wool?" Could the wolf really be dressed in sheep's clothing? A quick numerological evaluation of color chip 468C in Pantone's ubiquitous matching system reveals an astounding answer. Adding the color's three numbers amounts to the number 18. And we all know that the number 18 results when you combine 6 + 6 + 6.

"The identity of ash as a color is questionable. Ash is not ashen—drained of color—but variously gray, whitish, black-like, flecked, dirty, streaked. It can be steely and cold, or the harsh, smoky yield of raging flames. Intangible, abstract, but also very much there, even if only in trace form, ash is an absolute result."

ASH

MEGHAN DAILEY

The identity of ash as a color is questionable. Ash is not ashen—drained of color—but variously gray, whitish, black-like, flecked, dirty, streaked. It can be steely and cold, or the harsh, smoky yield of raging flames. Intangible, abstract, but also very much there, even if only in trace form, ash is an absolute result. Elsewhere, ash is a mood. It speaks of melancholy, New England maybe—turning leaves on ash trees under overcast skies in damp autumn air, that sort of thing. Ed Ruscha's drawing *Ash* (1971), rendered in gunpowder and pastel, perfectly crystallizes its valences and free–floating (literally) signification. For Ruscha, words are ever the stuff of extended reflection, of puns and hidden meanings, presented as plain as day. I like to think that he must have enjoyed the particular convergence between word and medium (a combustible substance in its pre-asheous state).

One can experience ash by wearing it. The LL Bean catalog sells "Bean's Sloggs," an outdoor shoe available in color ash as well as color black, and also some men's casual trousers in ash—just one among many barely distinguishable neutrals the company offers: taupe, beige, moss, peat, stone, timber, fatigue. The clothing and colors signify the outdoors, and are situated and named as part of nature's continuum. But peat and stone are going to outlive the whims of consumer taste. Ash's relevance as something wearable is proven on Ash Wednesday when, out of humility and sacrifice, Catholics receive ashes on their foreheads as a sign of penitence. Before Mass, many blessings are bestowed upon the incinerated palm branches, then the priest smudges a little sign of the cross on your forehead and reminds you of your future state as dust. In early Christian times the faithful, in their hair shirts, would toil and seek penance and sacramental absolution for forty days. The contemporary equivalent? I contemplate wearing my ashes to an afternoon press preview at a New York museum. How long will I last before wiping them off? (Practically a sin.) St. Anthony's church on Houston and Sullivan has a Mass every half-hour. Stop by, repent, get your ashes.

In France, ash is a verb. To envision life there (I'm thinking of Paris, specifically) as one comprised of a remarkable number of hours spent smoking and sitting or waiting or reading, but always smoking, is to conjure more than mere cliché. They love their cigarettes. There's a tearoom in Paris, in the fifth arrondissement, in the Mosque de Paris. People arrive there early with nothing but a pack of Gauloises Blondes and a copy of that day's *Libération*. Some remain there for leisurely stretches of time—the kind of open and unencumbered time that most people only jealously dream of possessing. But regardless of the circumstances under which they are smoked, cigarettes are ubiquitous, and Parisian hands seem never to be without one. Consider the sheer amount of ash produced (once all the butts have been sifted away) by the act of smoking down and flicking (only occasionally, however, for maximum ash length) all of those ciggies. One imagines a gently shifting range of ash dunes, soft as talc, on the outskirts of Paris, in the *banlieue*, or out on the suburban banks of the Seine, temporarily eroded by rain, but built up again by the endless supply of carbon cargo brought in by the fleet of Renault dump trucks that offer round-the-clock transport of the residue of that toxic, intoxicating daily habit.

Such imagery is doubtless a product of this non-smoker's perverse fascination with a smoke-loving culture. It's bigger, though. For me, ash has become a metaphor for the Parisian emphasis on repose. It has been transformed into something I call ashitude. In France, simple inquiries such as "Did you receive my letter?", "Do you know when Mlle. Blanche will return?", "Is it possible to purchase this item?" and so on, seem so often to elicit a "non." Ashitude is a particular form of dismissal; don't look for sympathy, expect shrugs. Example: If you leave your Filofax on a payphone at Orly Airport, don't count on getting it back. Go ahead, call the *bureau des objets trouvés*, maybe they'll be open. Maybe they will answer the phone. If they do, inquire in faltering French whether anyone has found *un agenda* in the terminal. Silence. Then a casual yet considered response: "Un agenda… non, non…." The shame and disbelief that the contents of your life are now possibly amongst cheese rinds and Café Kimbo grounds (and, yes, cigarette butts) in a French landfill, and the utter disregard with which your plea is met, prompt the following scene to flash across your brain: The gentleman on the other end of the phone is sitting, smoking the most aggressive cigarette ever rolled, thumbing through

your Filofax and ashing on its pages. Non, non, non. Ash, ash, ash. You thank him anyway, wish him a very *bon jour*, and hang up, understanding that your concept of time has been refreshingly, maddeningly done away with. It is now as lost as the precious Filofax, which might as well be a pile of ash for how its log of days, activities, encounters, and numbers now exists only as a trace in your mind. This unknown French ash–man, having successfully killed time—just simply extinguished it like his last cigarette—has demonstrated something of how incidental language is. In the translation from one to the other, the particularities and references of your respective languages—more broadly, your sensibilities—were lost. Maybe a few cigarettes were not the only casualties of your exchange.

"According to the Optical Society of America, it is possible to identify somewhere between 7.5 and 10 million distinct colors. "Ruby" is presumably one of them, but how would we agree on which one it is?"

RUBY
(AND BEYOND)

DARREN WERSHLER-HENRY

The price of wisdom is beyond rubies. Job, 28:18

According to the Optical Society of America, it is possible to identify somewhere between 7.5 and 10 million distinct colors. "Ruby" is presumably one of them, but how would we agree on which one it is? In his essay "How Culture Conditions the Colours We See," Umberto Eco notes that the majority of attempts to discriminate between colors fail dramatically. In the Farnsworth-Munsell test, which involves categorizing 100 different hues, 68% of the test subjects (colorblind people excluded) make between 20 and 100 errors; only 16% of subjects make fewer than 16 errors.

Even if we could agree on a particular shade like "ruby" (a dubious proposition, evidently) odds are that we wouldn't be able to discuss it. After pointing out that the majority of the Farnsworth-Munsell test subjects lack the linguistic means to identify even the hundred colors in the test, Eco observes that the largest collection of color designations in English, A. Maerz and R. Paul's *A Dictionary of Color* (New York: Crowell, 1953), assigns names to only 3,000 hues, and that of these 3,000 names, only eight occur in common usage. In other words, "average chromatic competence is better represented by the seven colors of the rainbow."

"The names of colours," concludes Eco (from these and other scientific, linguistic, and philosophical observations), "taken in themselves, have no precise chromatic content: they must be viewed within the general context of many interacting semiotic systems." So any useful discussions involving the status of "ruby" must immediately move over (the pun is irresistible) the rainbow and into the realm of systems of cultural meaning and exchange.

Which brings us to the Ruby Slippers, the most immediately identifiable North American cultural icon associated with the color ruby since the making of the film *The Wizard of Oz* in 1939. But if we can bracket Judy Garland and camp, and the burning question of whether or not there were more than seven pairs of slippers made for the movie for just long enough to compare the film to the source text, L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, something much more interesting becomes apparent: the ruby slippers were originally silver.

This disjunction leads to an examination of the semiotic values of ruby, silver, and gold as signifiers of financial exchange, and how the reading of a key cultural text shifts dramatically because of the seemingly innocuous decision made by one Noel Langley, a screenwriter for MGM, to substitute one of these hues for another.

This isn't just quibbling over details; there's a serious argument to be made for reading Baum's *Oz* as a complex symbolic allegory describing William Jennings Bryan and the Free Silver Movement of the 1890s, and it all hinges on the fact that Dorothy's slippers are silver, not ruby.

William Jennings Bryan believed it was unnecessary for the government to maintain gold reserves equal in value to all the paper currency in circulation. During his presidential campaign, Bryan advocated the coinage of silver at a fixed ratio with gold (16 ounces of silver coin for every ounce of gold reserve), which he hoped would break the Eastern banks' monopoly on gold-based currency, and simultaneously inflate the meager prices that farmers received for their crops, easing their debt burden.

So then: Is reading *Oz* as a pro-Bryan allegory dabbling in economic conspiracy theory pseudo-criticism worthy of Ezra Pound? Let's weigh the evidence.

"Oz" is the abbreviation for "ounce," the official unit of measure for gold and silver. The road to the Emerald City, the seat of fiscal and political power, is made of, um, yellow bricks. You're beginning to get the idea.

The allegorical reading of Oz was first suggested by historian Henry M. Littlefield in his article "*The Wizard of Oz*: Parable on Populism." Littlefield argues that the characters also lend themselves to allegorical interpretation. Dorothy (everywoman from the Midwest) inadvertently slays the Wicked Witch of the East (the bankers), then heads down the golden road in her new silver shoes (means of circulation) to free the "little people."

Dorothy accomplishes her task with the help of the Scarecrow (an uneducated farmer), the Tin Woodman (an industrial worker and the epitome of alienated labor. The Woodman was originally a human being, but the Wicked Witch of the East cast a spell on him that caused him to chop off part of his body every time he swung his axe; his flesh was gradually entirely replaced by metal prosthetics that rusted and failed—

as did the factories themselves in the 1893 depression) and the Cowardly Lion (Bryan himself, a committed pacifist and anti-imperialist). The Wizard (President) turns out to be a carpet-bagging opportunist, carny, and master of illusions who is eventually debunked by the scarecrow, educated by his recent experiences. Dorothy drowns the Wicked Witch of the West (wiping out the drought) and the Wizard flies away in a balloon full of his own hot air, leaving the government of the land of Oz in the hands of the enlightened triumvirate of Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, and Lion.

As with all allegorical interpretations, it's difficult to know where to draw the line with Oz (as David Antin notes, "Allegory is a very corrupt figure, a figure notably incapable of supporting fact"). Over the years, scholars have suggested, with diminishing credibility, that the Flying Monkeys represent the First Nations ("'Once,' began the leader, 'we were a free people, living happily in the great forest, flying from tree to tree, eating nuts and fruit, and doing just as we pleased without calling anybody master.'"), Winkies represent the people of the Philippines (under US control after the Spanish-American War), and even that Toto represents the teetotaling Prohibitionists.

Tenuous associations aside, problems with reading *Oz* as a pro-Bryan allegory arise when scrutinizing Baum's actual politics. L. Frank Baum was not a particularly political animal, but was known to have marched in several torchlight parades promoting Bryan's presidential campaign.

The flip side of the coin, though, is detailed in David B. Parker's article "The Rise and Fall of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as a 'Parable on Populism.'" Parker provides two pieces of evidence that suggest that Baum was actually a Republican, not a Populist. The first is that in 1890, Baum bought a small newspaper, the *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer*. Parker remarks that "the *Pioneer* was obviously a Republican paper. During the municipal elections that spring, Baum editorialized in support of the Republican candidates; after they won, he wrote that 'Aberdeen has redeemed herself… [a]fter suffering for nearly a year from the incompetence of a democratic administration.'" Later that same year, Baum editorialized against the Independent movement that evolved into the Populists.

The second piece of evidence Parker provides is that on 12 July 1896, the year of the election that would mark what has been called "the Climax of Populism," Baum published the following anti-silverite poem in the *Chicago Times Herald*:

When McKinley gets the chair, boys,
There'll be a jollification
Throughout our happy nation
And contentment everywhere!
Great will be our satisfaction
When the "honest-money" faction
Seats McKinley in the chair!

No more the ample crops of grain
That in our granaries have lain
Will seek a purchaser in vain
Or be at mercy of the "bull" or "bear";
Our merchants won't be trembling
At the silverites' dissembling
When McKinley gets the chair!

When McKinley gets the chair, boys,
The magic word "protection"
Will banish all dejection
And free the workingman from every care;
We will gain the world's respect
When it knows our coin's "correct"
And McKinley's in the chair!

Prominent Baum scholar Michael Patrick Hearn quoted this poem in a 1991 letter to the *New York Times* (20 December 1991), arguing that there is "no evidence that Baum's story is in any way a Populist allegory" and that Littlefield's allegory "has no basis in fact." A month later, Littlefield himself recanted and agreed with Hearn, writing that "there is no basis in fact to consider Baum a supporter of turn-of-the-century Populist ideology." (*New York Times*, 7 February 1992).

The real irony, though, doesn't lie in Parker's partial deconstruction of Littlefield's allegory. It lies in the fact that rather than recontextualizing *Oz* as an ironic or parodic allegory, or pushing the whole argument into a kind of De Manian treatise on allegory and unknowability, Parker turns around and contends that Oz is, in actuality, a *Theosophist* allegory.

Don'cha love academics?

"...generally, indigo imbues things equal parts melancholia and serenity. What makes the color-as-idea so sensual is the Sturm und Drang of its lowering visual presence, encapsulated by the musical complexity of its name."

INDIGO

FRANCES RICHARD

I'm just a soul who's bluer than blue can be
When I get that mood indigo
Duke Ellington

The blues are a swath of the emotional/visible spectrum, and indigo weights its heavy end. Pure indigo is a darkness with hints of reddish purple, ashen black, burnt green; a saturated, inky, night-and-ocean tone. Its affective nature is not unchangeable: Indigo buntings are jaunty little birds, and Timex watches with Indiglo™ lighted faces glow a comfy, television blue. When extended with white, indigo's intensity softens like beloved worn-in jeans—Levi Strauss & Co. was an early bulk consumer of vegetable indigo, and contemporary denim is dyed with a synthetic version that is as "fugitive" or fade-prone as its natural counterpart. But generally, indigo imbues things equal parts melancholia and serenity. What makes the color-as-idea so sensual is the Sturm und Drang of its lowering visual presence, encapsulated by the musical complexity of its name. Ellington knew the elaborate play he'd get by rearticulating a funky, lovelorn blues with the sophisticated, liquid o's and i's and d's of "Mood Indigo,"—in which a lilting "moon" is imbricated as if behind blue-black clouds. Indigo stands for the dyer's hands indelibly stained to the elbow and the patch of sky adjacent to starlight; the indigenous hues of Japanese printed cottons, Indonesian batiks, mussel shells, and bruises are all in the word. Hence, in part, the appeal of the Indigo Girls, or Joni Mitchell's almost-redundantly titled album Turbulent Indigo. In this allusive flexibility, as well as in its aural cadence, indigo implies the psyche, subtly indicating "in," "I," "ego." In the midst of its clouds-and-water tonalities, it appeals to something interior, subconscious, and fundamentally earthy.

The history of indigo, in fact, intertwines with earth on a more than lyrical level, linked to the establishment of colonialism and the patterning of trade routes. The dye's subdued allure has been seducing beauty-seekers for millennia, and in exploring techniques by which to reliably create its particular dark blueness, industries were founded and international relations influenced. The story of indigo's cultivation, preparation, and distribution as a tangible commodity reads as a primer on the development of luxury-goods markets on a global scale. This history can be boiled down to two weedy-looking plants. Whenever a neutral substrate takes on the short-wavelength spectral reflectance peculiar to indigo, the active ingredient is a lustrous coppery-midnight powder known as indican [$C_{16}H_{10}N_2O_2$]. Indican must be extracted via a complicated fermentation, aeration, and precipitation process, and it can be derived from some thirty different kinds of vegetation. But the most important of these are Indigofera tinctoria, the common indigo—named for India, the species' original habitat—and Isatis tinctoria, also known as dyer's woad. Woad is basically indigo's poor relation, a European herb of the mustard family producing a similar tint, but offering roughly thirty times less indican per comparable mass of organic material. Both types, despite the involved processes of their facture, boast ancient pedigrees in literature. Mentions of woad occur in Sumerian cuneiform, ancient Egyptian papyrus, and Carolingian manuscripts; there is far-flung evidence for its use in classical and medieval times, from the Russian Caucasus to northern France; from Manchuria to western Africa. Vitruvius describes it in De Architectura and Chaucer in The Canterbury Tales, while in his treatise De Bello Gallico, Julius Caesar records that "All Britons paint themselves with woad, which grows wild and produces a blue dye. This gives them a terrifying appearance in battle." Pliny the Elder concurs: "There they have a plant…with which the women and daughters in Britain paint their bodies at certain festivities; they go naked and are similar to the Ethiopians in color." Ovid reported that early Teutonic tribes used woad to cover graying hair.

Indigo, meanwhile, circulated in the bazaars of ancient Egypt, Greece, Byzantium, and Rome; in China, Japan, pre-Colombian Central and South America; in Java, Ceylon, Persia, and of course, India—where Marco Polo observed production methods thought to have been practiced since 2000 B.C. After the 17th century, indigo was rarely used by artists, who found that Prussian blue, ultramarine, and azurite dispersed more easily in oil binders. But prior to that era, agents in the ports of Venice, Genoa, and Marseilles traded with Persian middlemen in Asia Minor and Hormuz, providing the pigment identified in blue passages from The Last Supper and Madonna and Child by Leonardo, in Rubens's Descent from the Cross and Vermeer's Christ in the House of Mary and Martha, as well as in other artworks of various periods from Turkey to Tibet.

The waning of indigo's use as a fine-art pigment coincided with an increase in its importance as a textile dye. In the early 18th century, European society was swept by a fad for Indian exotica (parallel to crazes for chinoiserie, or tulips), and in order to satisfy the accompanying lust for brilliant blue, French and English entrepreneurs founded hundreds of New World indigo plantations. Facilitated by the slave trade, dyeworks in the West Indies and the American Carolinas were manned by Africans from the regions of Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Cameroon, who were sometimes seized specifically for their native skills in growing and processing indigo. (Knowledge of rice cultivation was an African intellectual property similarly capitalized upon; for a time, indigo rivaled rice, sugar, and tobacco as the primary cash crop on colonial American and Caribbean plantations.) Interestingly, the growing of indigo—which, unlike rice, does not require standing water, and therefore does not breed mosquitoes—nearly eradicated both malaria and yellow fever, which were decimating colonists. When the "Indigo Craze" subsided in the 1790s, both diseases resurfaced in new and more virulent strains. For the next hundred years, indigo remained a staple commodity in the international textile trade—the interplay of chromatics and political economy achieving a kind of full circle when, having lost access to American sources after the Revolutionary War, England imposed a plantation system on indigo-producing villages in India. Finally, in 1897, the German firm Badische Anilin Soda Fabrik developed a synthetic substitute. Loosed from its physical roots in the dyer's fields and vats, indigo migrated toward the abstract as a title-writer's dream, a one-word poem.

You ain't been blue; no, no, no.
You ain't been blue,
Till you've had that mood indigo.
—Duke Ellington

"Look for the green in the brown, the shimmer—that's Hazel. I tried, I looked. I pretended to see it, gazing into my mother's eyes, yes, sure, it's there—Hazel. They looked brown to me."

HAZEL

JONATHAN LETHEM

Oh, Hazel, you're making me crazy and lazy and hazy! Hazel, I think I love you! Hazel, you were the beginning of sex to me, a boy's love for an adult woman's mystery. I'm a little drunk on you, when I dim the lights and let the memories flood in... Hazel, you are a gypsy dancer... but let me try to explain.

My eyes are blue. Blue-gray. My father, a Midwestern Quaker, has blue eyes. My Jewish mother had eyes that were something other. Brown, I would have said. My brother ended up with those eyes too. *Hazel*, my parents both explained. This was important. Look for the green in the brown, the shimmer—that's Hazel. I tried, I looked. I pretended to see it, gazing into my mother's eyes, yes, sure, it's there—Hazel. They looked brown to me.

I associated this with a game of my mother's, another trick of gaze: She'd put her nose to mine so that our faces were too near to see in focus and say, with bullying enthusiasm, "See the owl! Do you see the owl? It's an owl, do you see it?" I never could see the owl. A blur, a cyclops, maybe a moth, but never an owl. I didn't know how to look for the owl. But I didn't know how to refuse: "Yes, I see the owl!" It was the same with Hazel. I saw and I didn't see. I saw the idea: something green in the brown, a richness, something Jewish and enviable and special, not mere brown eyes. The notion of Hazel balanced, in our family, against the specialness of blue eyes, it stood for everything that wasn't obvious in the sum of advantages or virtues between two parents. Hazel was my mother's beatnik Jewish side, her soulfulness. I granted it—I was in love with it! So Hazel was my first imaginary color, before Infrared, before Ultraviolet, and more sticky and stirring than either of those: Hazel is to Ultraviolet as Marijuana is to Cocaine, as Patchouli is to Obsession. My mother wore patchouli—it smelled Hazel.

My next Hazel was when I was fourteen or fifteen. My father is a painter, and I was following in his footsteps. He had a drawing group, every Thursday night. I'd go and draw, sitting in the circle of artists, the one kid allowed. From the nude model. A mixed experience, a rich one. I was sneaking looks for hours at a time, in plain sight. This was the 70s. I demanded they treat me as an adult, and I was obliged. And there were two beautiful women, artists, who sat in the circle and drew from the model as well: Laurel and Hazel. Like the names of two rabbits. Laurel was blonde and Hazel dark, no kidding. I loved them both, mad crushes. Again, an intoxicating mix, the nude before me, Hazel and Laurel my peers in the circle. The model would finish with a pose and you'd go around, murmuring approval of one another's drawings, pointing out flourishes. Steamy, for a boy. Crushes on your parents' female friends, when you're a hippie child, mash mothery feeling with earthy first stirrings of lust—you're not afraid of women's bodies when you're a hippie child. That's got to be invented later, retroactively. I took showers outdoors with nudists, it was all good. Hazel was waiting for me, she was in store.

Then the Dylan song, of course, from "Planet Waves." *Hazel*. "Planet Waves" I'd put with "New Morning" and "Desire," the three records of Dylan's most saturated with hippie aesthetics, the sexy gypsy stuff, the handkerchief-on-the-head phase. "Hazel" is a ragged, tumbling song of lust, that Rick Danko organ sound: "You got something I want plenty of…" And from the same record, another lyric: "It was hotter than a crotch…" My mother loved Dylan, so it all folded together, the hot murk of Hazel, what I'd never seen but was ready to see, the green in the brown, Hazel, Dolores Haze-l, oh, I long for you still, you were the beaded, reeking initiation I never quite had, girls with potter's clay under their fingers, maybe, girls who when they danced spun in whirling skirts, and sex outdoors with bugs around and the sun in hazel eyes. And at night we'd see the owl, I was sure. Instead by the time I was ready it was an infrared or ultraviolet world, we danced with knock-kneed Elvis Costello jerks, sneering at Hazel, those grubby Deadhead girls in the next dorm, and made out with short-haired punks in cocaine fluorescent light. We reinvented body-fear, pale anemic anorexic sex-ambivalence. Hazel might be having all the fun, but she was shameful now, David Byrne had explained the problem perfectly. I pretended I'd never known her, and I hadn't—only trusted she'd be there, and detected the patchouli scent of her promise to me, the promise I failed to keep. Hazel, I never saw you.

"The blind aura of safety orange has entered everyday living space. One pure distillation appears in the logo for Home Depot, which posits one's most intimate sphere, the household, as a site that is under perpetual construction, re-organization, and improvement. The home becomes unnatural, industrial, singed with toxic energy."

SAFETY ORANGE

TIM GRIFFIN

These are the days of disappearing winters, and of anthrax spores whose origin remains unknown, or unrevealed. Concrete phenomena float on abstract winds, seeming like mere signatures of dynamics that supercede immediate perception. The world is a living place of literature, interstitial, eclipsing objects with the sensibility of information, and experience floating on the surface of lexicons. Everything is so characterless and abstract as the weather: Wars are engaged without front lines, and weapons operate according to postindustrial logic, intended to destabilize economies or render large areas uninhabitable by the detonation of homemade "dirty bombs" that annihilate culture but do little damage to hard, architectural space. Radical thought is also displaced, as the military, not the academy, offers the greatest collective of theorists today; all possibilities are considered by its think tanks, without skepticism or humanist pretensions, and all nations are potential targets. Ordinary health risks described in the popular press are totally relational, regularly enmeshing microwaves and genetic codes; the fate of ice caps belongs to carbon. Everything is a synthetic realism. Everything belongs to safety orange.

It is a gaseous color: fluid, invisible, capable of moving out of those legislated topographies that have been traditionally fenced off from nature to provide significant nuances for daily living. Perhaps it is a perfume: an optical Chanel No. 5 for the turn of the millennium, imbuing our bodies with its diffuse form. (Chanel was the first abstract perfume, as it was completely chemical and not based on any flower; appropriately, it arrived on the scene at roughly the same time as Cubism.) The blind aura of safety orange has entered everyday living space. One pure distillation appears in the logo for Home Depot, which posits one's most intimate sphere, the household, as a site that is under perpetual construction, re-organization, and improvement. The home becomes unnatural, industrial, singed with toxic energy. Microsoft also uses the color for its lettering, conjuring its associative power to suggest that a scientific future is always here around us, but may be fruitfully harnessed (Your home computer is a nuclear reactor).

Such associative leaps are not unique. In postindustrial capitalism, experience is often codified in color. During the economic surge of the past decade, corporations recognized and implemented on a grand scale what newspapers documented only after the onset of the recession: that colors function like drugs. Tunneled through the optic nerve, they generate specific biochemical reactions and so determine moods in psychotropic fashion; they create emotional experiences that lend themselves to projections upon the world, transforming the act of living into lifestyle. Something so intangible as emotion, in turn, assumes a kind of property value as it becomes intimately maneuvered by, and then associated with, products. (One business manual recently went so far as to suggest that "consumers are our products.")

The iMac, to take one artifact of the 1990s, was introduced to the general public in a blue that was more than blue: Bondi Blue, which obtained the emotional heat accorded to the aquatic tones of a cosmopolitan beach in Australia, for which the color is named. Similarly, the iMac's clear sheath is neither clear nor white—it is Ice. (Synesthesia reigns in capitalism; postindustrial exchange value depends on the creation of ephemeral worlds and auras within which to house products. And so, as colors perform psychotropic functions, total, if virtual, realities are located within single, monochromatic optical fields. Control of bodies, the original role designated for safety orange, is set aside for access to minds, which adopt the logic of addiction.) In fact, the 1990s boom might be usefully read through two specific television commercials that were geared to hues: It began with the iMac's introduction in blue, orange, green and gray models, in a spot that was accompanied by the Rolling Stones lyric "She comes in colors." Later, against the backdrop of 2001's dot-com wasteland, Target released an advertisement featuring shoppers moving through a hyper-saturated, blood-red, vacuum-sealed field of repeating corporate logos—colors and brands were by then entirely deterritorialized, lifted from objects and displaced onto architecture—to the sound of Devo's post-punk, tongue-in-cheek number "It's a Beautiful World."

Devo often wore jumpsuits of safety orange, which was, at the time, the color of nuclear power plants and biohazards—a color created to oppose nature, something never to be confused with it. It is the color of information, bureaucracy, and toxicity. Variations of

orange have often played this role. Ancient Chinese bookmakers, for example, printed the edges of paper with an orange mineral to save their books from silverfish.

Times change. In 1981, the Day-Glo connoisseur Peter Halley suggested that New Wave bands like Devo were "rejecting the cloddish substance of traditional humanistic values," comparing their work to that of the Minimalists. (All colors are minimal.) Yet the course of Devo has been the course of culture: the band's rejection of humanistic values has become more abstract and expansive, and enmeshed in cultural tissue. Their music moved away from the specialized artistic realm of electro-synth composers like Robert Fripp and Brian Eno (who produced the band's first music in a German studio at the behest of David Bowie) and into the world. First, it appeared for the mass audiences of the television show *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, for whom the band wrote music. More recently, its band members have written music to accompany Universal Studio's Jurassic Park ride and, most recently, Purina Cat Chow commercials. Their anti-humanism no longer approaches culture from any critical remove; there is no synthetic outside from which to unveil the bureaucratic, unnatural structures of a social façade that presents itself as entirely natural. We have entered an era of synthetic realism.

Devo is hardly alone in this kind of abstract migration. Vito Acconci has recounted a similar shift in his subjectivity, which may be traced in his shifting modes of production from poetry and sculpture to architecture and, finally, design—where his work is intended to disappear into the world. His changing taste in music is more to the point. He started in the 1960s by listening to the long, introspective passages of Van Morrison, then moved to the public speakers of punk in the 1970s. Today, he prefers Tricky, in whose music "it is impossible to tell where the human being ends and where the machine begins." Individuals, in other words, have given way to engineers. Music by a composer like Moby has no signature sound or style; art by a painter like Gerhard Richter similarly leaps from genre to genre. Subjectivity itself is encoded for Napster. And safety orange, the color of this synthetic reality, becomes culture's new heart of darkness.

"Rust is a darker variant of red, but it's also something you can sniff, swallow, or rub between your finger and thumb till the granules soften to a fine rouge-like powder. And then it's also a process—corrosion—in which new molecules form from old ones."

RUST

ALBERT MOBILIO

It's a different feeling. Depending. On the day. The person. The metal you've scraped it from. It can be rough. A gorge-deep rough, like a fistful of sandpaper working along the spine, working in quick, sharp strokes up toward the back of the neck. That's the way it is for me most of the time, like my vertebrae are being rubbed until my spine's as smooth as cable. But smoothness isn't what I end up feeling. Long after the first rush, there's an echo of rough singing somewhere inside some nerve. Other people say it starts out like needles—steel needles spiking out like sun rays inside your head. They talk about having to keep very still until one hits the ripe spot, low at the back of the skull. That one pulses through your body, down through your legs, until your feet cramp as the bright metal point pushes all the way through. Descriptions vary. Some folks go on about micro-chills or hyperawareness of their teeth. They rhapsodize about a motorized humming that sounds, when you listen closely, like voices on faraway phone lines. Others talk about their vision lost in the swirl of a drowned autumn. About the charcoal drip in their throats. When they talk this way, their mouths go a little slack and their eyes narrow and nearly flutter. They're remembering that feeling, the one you get from doing rust.

Hydrated ferric oxide. A textbook will tell you it's what happens when iron oxidizes after exposure to air and water, but that's what happens to iron, not to you. Not to you if you put a fingertip coated with its sandy granules to the back of your tongue or when you inhale a long, coppery ridge. The body craves air and water, yet those things—the stuff of life—are transformed in rust. They become grainy husks of themselves. Of skies and breezes, of rain and breath. In rust, this has all been burnt down to something lifeless. Something subterranean. The earth's blood baked to a crisp. A voice hung out to dry under a tireless sun. Rust is the taste of dirt. Of old soil and stone that's been freshly dug up and is suddenly aired out in your mouth, in your brain. It's the taste of a grave. It's the best high I've ever had.

They call us "red rims" because of the faint stains on our nostrils. They call us "rust-ups," or "shed heads," since we collect stuff—old nails, pipes, and buckets—from tool sheds. They aren't many of us, but there's probably more than I think. No one really knows since it's not something you need to buy (although you can: clued-in factory workers at steel mills and auto plants harvest it by the pound—good stuff off fresh, unpainted metal), and not something you want to do with anyone else. Rust hasn't spawned much of a culture—rust music, rust raves. Rust is something you do with the door shut and the lights low. When your eyes begin to coagulate with the color of a fresh scar, you don't want company. When your stomach sours and your tongue grows chewy and dry, you want quiet so you can register each increment of physical change. Red rims are loners, people in love with their own sadness. They are dolorous people who believe today had to smother yesterday to take its place. How word got around from people like us, no one can really say.

For myself, I remember hearing a health official on the radio recounting the comeback of old-style intoxicants like airplane glue and oven cleaner, and then adding something about "anecdotal reports of rust being inhaled by anorexic teenage girls in the Northwest." This stuck with me as one of those goofy, can-you-top-this tidbits that you bring up with friends. Maybe a year later, while cutting the grass, I found a pair of pliers that I had dropped while fixing the swing-set in the backyard. Having remained outside through the winter, they had acquired a thick, uniform coating of rust. The pliers looked slightly comical, like a child's fuzzy toy version of a tool, and even edible, as if they'd been dipped in a seasoning, paprika perhaps. The gritty stuff came off immediately in my hand. Blood-brown swaths on my palm: stigmata. A sunset smeared across my lifeline. The weirdly powerful impulse to bring that hand up to my face, underneath my nose, was no doubt akin to the feckless curiosity that compels children (and sometimes adults) to find out if the stove is hot by touching the burner. An hour later, I'd scraped the pliers clean so they were as silver as the day I bought them. That night it would take another hour to scrub the auburn smudges from my upper lip and nose.

I say it's the best high ever but I don't know what I mean by that. It's not even a high. It's a low, maybe as low as you can get and still climb back to the surface, to a world that isn't aging and dying around you. I don't know what it is. And I don't know why I crave it. Why any of us do. We talk—some of us have been

drawn together by rumor, chat rooms, or telltale signs like strips of neatly cut sheet metal browning on the back fence—about how it helps us accept our place in the mortal scheme of things, or how it's like sex, a little death. How it's therapeutic. But those are a drunkard's lies. Mostly we talk about the big special effect, what we call *sliding*—the hallucinatory state in which you sink so thoroughly out of that day's, that hour's, grasp that you experience, not dreamily but in a way that is eye-widening and precise, what seem to be actual sensations and objects from the past.

Sometimes it's just the day before, sometimes it's years, or decades. Sometimes it's your past, sometimes not. Maybe you feel your father's hand ringing your tiny wrist and smell the car exhaust at a busy intersection. Or maybe you can taste the dessert wine you drank last Sunday. You reach out for your stereo knob and find that you're turning the dial on an old Emerson radio cabinet. Imagine a camera left in a room with its shutter open for, say, a hundred years, then further imagine that everything that turned up in front of that lens over all that time is exposed on a single frame of film. If such a piece of film existed, rust would be the wedge permitting you to slide between superimposed images. It lets you roam around the picture. Adjust the knick-knacks, twist your finger in the hair of the woman who had to leave in haste two nights ago. Of course, there's no such magic film. But rust—when its iron shreds are clustering in your blood, filing away at your spine—makes you believe there is.

Rust is a darker variant of red, but it's also something you can sniff, swallow, or rub between your finger and thumb till the granules soften to a fine rouge-like powder. And then it's also a process—corrosion—in which new molecules form from old ones. Getting your head rusted is another kind of process, one that corrodes the present (as real as an iron ingot in your hand) with an omnivorous past (enveloping as a mist). You conjure remnants of small histories—the chafing embrace of your starched, parochial school collar, a kitchen clock with a plate for a face and a fork and spoon for hands. On rust, everything you see, everything you taste or touch, is washed in a vibratory russet hue. (It's the shed head's sepia.) And it all glows—especially your own skin—with the warmth of unseen chemical reactions. The air around you whistles slightly, creating the impression—but not the bodily sensation—of movement. It's as if you are falling while staying still, the world peeling off around you, the iron-brown earth parting to let you pass. You're heading toward the empty place that's always been ready to take you in. To make you at home. You are water and air turned to dust. You are red-eyed. You are gone to rust.

"There's a butterfly called the Orange Sulphur (Colias eurytheme). It's the color of a lemon drop. Another butterfly is called the Cloudless Sulphur (Phoebis sennae). It's the color of a creamsicle. These are lovely colors, light and tasty. But they're the bright side of sulphur."

SULPHUR

THOMAS BELLER

There's a butterfly called the Orange Sulphur (*Colias eurytheme*). It's the color of a lemon drop. Another butterfly is called the Cloudless Sulphur (*Phoebis sennae*). It's the color of a creamsicle. These are lovely colors, light and tasty. But they're the bright side of sulphur. They don't address the feeling of unease that comes over me at the thought of it, something menacing and hidden beneath the surface. Sulphur is a substance, a color, a flavor, and a smell. For me sulphur is a smell first, then a substance, finally a color. Perhaps it's a mood. What mood would be sulphuric? Pablo Neruda's poem, "Walking Around," as translated by W. S. Merwin, contains this stanza:

> *There are birds the color of sulphur, and horrible intestines*
> *hanging from the doors of the houses which I hate,*
> *there are forgotten sets of teeth in the coffee pot,*
> *there are mirrors*
> *which should have wept with shame and horror,*
> *there are umbrellas all over the place, and poisons,*
> *and navels.*

There *is* a bird that is, at least partially, the color of sulphur—the Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo. It has above-average talking ability, apparently, and at the top of its precocious head is a fringe the color of light mustard.

The Neruda poem brought me closer to the sulphur I was looking for, but it was his mood, not mine. What did I think about the color of sulphur? It escaped me. So I resorted to the tactic of the indecisive, the eager to please: I took a poll. Among friends after a meal I said, "Sulphur! What comes to mind?"

"Stink bombs!"

"Something harsh and dangerous."

"Smelly, but not toxic. Maybe even good for you."

"Something lunar, spacey, airborne."

"What's the color of sulphur?"

"Mustard."

"Sex and suffocation. You have sex and then there is the sad post-coital lighting of a match, which is a sulphur smell."

"Why suffocation?"

"Because a flame takes up oxygen."

"Why sad?"

"Because it's post-coital."

Moody sulphur. Sad sulphur. Asphyxiating toxic stink-bomb sulphur. Post-coital sulphur! Which was mine? Then it occurred to me that my first encounter with sulphur was happy. Almost ecstatic. It can be summed up in two words: Chemistry set. And within the chemistry set, test tubes. And within the test tubes, colored powders. The chemistry set was a gift from my father, who had come home from some far away place. Presents my father brought me were highly prized, even though the jigsaw puzzle he'd returned with from his last trip lay in a jumble on the floor, unsolved, untried. I never did the puzzle, but I loved getting the present, the exchange of kisses, the coldness on his coat, his sandpaper cheek against my smooth one when he lifted me off the ground.

The chemistry set felt more than just fun, though; it had the aura of progress and self-improvement. I was about eight years old. I imagined my room a laboratory filled with bubbling beakers, smoke rising in white puffs. My father was a doctor, and I knew this had some tangential relationship with chemistry. Both disciplines involved men in white smocks, experiments, charts. My father was a psychoanalyst. I sensed some abstract link between his profession and the chemistry set: the deeply embedded patterns, the interaction of potent substances, playing with fire in a controlled environment.

There is an abundance of sulphur in the earth's crust. It's especially abundant around volcanoes. Hot-springs smell of sulphur. Geysers. Sulphur forced to the surface. You could say sulphur is the fart of the earth. Perhaps sulphur is the unconscious of the earth. It lies unseen in the depths, but manifests itself in all sorts of day-to-day items.

I took out the test tubes. In each was a different chemical, a different color. Sulphur did not stand out at first. I was excited by the ambience of precision, but it was only an ambience. I had no discipline. I liked to throw things out of windows. I was a consumer of textures: the coarse, granulated texture of Nestlé chocolate milk mix, which I fed into my mouth in heaping portions on which I nearly choked. The melting, velvety texture of powdered sugar, which I fed into my mouth in heaping portions on which I nearly choked. The bland, super-fine powder of straight flour, which I fed into my mouth in heaping portions and nearly choked. I probably wasn't the

ideal kid for a chemistry set, not that I was going to eat it. But I was by then, also, a connoisseur of the dead silences of hallways and the little offices where schools keep the fixers and special helpers. Those were the days when I made the rounds of little offices at my school: the assistant principal, the school psychologist, the math tutor, the English tutor. I was given ink spots to stare at, blocks to play with. I was an expert at these interpretive games, but my handwriting was as legible as a Rorschach test. I needed a handwriting coach, and Mr. Murphy was that man.

They had let him hang around after retirement to work with some special cases. His eyes, on cold wintry days, watered like crazy. If it wasn't for his smile I would have thought Mr. Murphy was crying. We met in a slightly musty boardroom with couches along the walls and a long polished table in the center where the trustees occasionally met and where disciplinary committees were often held. In later years, when appearing before various tribunals in that room, I would think it was lucky that Mr. Murphy wasn't around to see me like this. The year after those quiet sessions, I was brought up on fireworks charges, a trace of sulphur popping into the narrative.

What do you do with a chemistry set? You sit there in your room, the box open, taking everything out gingerly. You have been instructed to follow the instructions. You make a brief attempt at the manual. But it isn't long before you get around to the smelling, the handling, the tapping of little bits from the test tube into your palm, or perhaps into another test tube, for some random mixing of components. You open the test tube called "Sulphur" and smell it. Almost all the other smells exist in the mouth, the back of the throat, or behind the eyes. But sulphur goes straight to the gut, like that magic trick with the handkerchief that is a deep lustrous purple with a little loop in one corner. From that loop you can pull through a bright pink handkerchief, the whole thing turning inside out as it emerges from your fist. In it goes as purple, out it comes as pink! The smell of sulphur goes all the way down to the bottom of you, then pulls you through your own ass and turns you inside out and oh my God! Put that cork back in the test tube! Then stare with horror and wonder that something could smell so bad.

In other words, once you start fixating on a color, you remember it everywhere. It becomes a Zelig of colors. Sicily was the world's provider of sulphur until the end of the nineteenth century, when a new method allowed for the mining of deposits in Louisiana and Texas. The most enduring image from a visit I made to Sicily a few years ago came late at the end of a day while driving along the southern coast, the sea to my left and open fields of cut hay to my right. Somewhere behind me was the island's volcano, Etna, which I had visited that morning. It was not yet dusk, and the late afternoon sun slanted sharply across a field of hay and made it look enchanted. It glowed as though lit from below. The yellow orange light was, looking back on it, the color of sulphur. And then there was that reddish brown earth that sat, a few years after the era of the chemistry set, in a lumpy pile next to my father's grave: Weren't there streaks of light brown, bordering on orange? Sulphur making a cameo.

"The relative infrequency of the color blue in Greco-Roman art and the imprecise terminology for blue in their languages will later lead some 19th-century art historians to theorize that the "ancients" were blind to the color blue."

ULTRAMARINE

MATTHEW BUCKINGHAM

6th Millennium B.C.E.
Mining of lapis lazuli, a dark blue gemstone, begins in the Kokcha Valley in the Badakshan region of what is now northeast Afghanistan. Initially lapis is traded to India and Egypt, then to Mesopotamia, Persia, Greece, and Rome. The gems are used in jewelry and sculpture. The Egyptians, who call it the "Sky Stone," consider lapis sacred and their imitation lapis is the first synthetic color known to be produced in the world. With the market value rising, security is increased at the mines, where miners are routinely chained to the walls of the mineshafts while they work.

6th Century B.C.E.
In Egypt, paint pigment is made from lapis gems by grinding them to a powder. The resulting paint is used to decorate tombs beginning in the Fourth Dynasty.

11th Century B.C.E.
Lapis is traded along the "Silk Road" and increasingly enters Europe through Venice. There the paint pigment derived from it is called "ultramarine," meaning from "over" or "beyond the sea." Throughout the rest of Europe, the color is often referred to as "Venetian Blue."

In Greco-Roman and Indo-European cultures, social codes and systems of representation have long been organized around the colors white, black, and red. The relative infrequency of the color blue in Greco-Roman art and the imprecise terminology for blue in their languages will later lead some 19th-century art historians to theorize that the "ancients" were blind to the color blue.

1150
Medieval artists begin using blue more symbolically and the tripartite color system is replaced by new combinations. In Christian Europe, the most significant change is the use of ultramarine blue to depict the robes of the Virgin Mary.

Late 12th Century
Many monarchs of Europe, wishing to associate themselves with the values and power of the church, adopt the deep-blue color of the Virgin's garments for their own robes. Only in Italy, particularly in Florence and Rome, where the royalty continue to wear red, is the turn to blue resisted.

Early 13th Century
Ultramarine, which contains more impurities than blue particles, is still the most difficult artist's pigment to grind by hand. Some improvements in its production make manufacturing more efficient—meaning more reliable supplies for artists who are using the color to portray queens, kings, and religious figures. But this also increases demand for lapis lazuli gems. As its price surpasses that of gold, ultramarine blue literally becomes the material wealth it had heretofore signified. Patrons commonly specify in writing the exact amount of ultramarine blue they will purchase for the artist to use in commissioned paintings.

1350
Following the plague years in Europe, sumptuary laws dictating how clothes are to be manufactured and worn are instituted in order to limit expenditure on dress, encourage modesty, and segregate society along lines of gender, class, and religion. These laws mark a shift to the widespread use of black in art and dress and a near banishment of color. Blue is exempted somewhat, retaining its earlier associations with the dignity of monarchs and the morality of the church.

1666
Isaac Newton experiments with prisms to separate white light into colored rays, quantifying and categorizing the spectrum of visible light. Many European monarchs and artists return to wearing and using color as some sumptuary laws are repealed. Soon the number of pages appearing in painter's manuals on the use of blue exceeds that of all other colors.

1774
The "cult of Werther" springs up in response to the publication of Goethe's first novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Influenced by the blue dress coat Werther is described wearing in the book, the cult declares blue to be the color of Romanticism and also adopts the wearing of blue coats.

1787
Goethe, while traveling in Italy, notices blue deposits on the walls of limekilns near Palermo and observes

that these glassy deposits are often substituted for lapis lazuli gems in decorative applications.

1806
A chemical analysis of lapis lazuli, made by Desormes and Clement, is published in France.

1814
M. Tessäert removes glassy deposits, similar to the ones Goethe described, from the glassworks at St. Gobain, France, and suggests to the Société d'Encouragement pour L'Industrie Nationale that it investigate a method for producing an artificial ultramarine blue. Upon examination, the glassy deposits from St. Gobain are found to have a chemical structure similar to lapis lazuli.

1824
The Société offers a prize of 6,000 francs for the manufacture of a synthetic ultramarine blue with a price of less than 300 francs per kilo.

February 1828
Even though Jean Baptiste Guimet's process for producing artificial ultramarine blue costs 400 francs per kilo, he is awarded the Société prize.

March 1828
Christian Gottlieb Gmelin, at the University of Tübingen, challenges Guimet's claim to the Société prize and rival factories in France and Germany begin producing, respectively, Guimet's and Gmelin's synthetic ultramarine formulas. By now, genuine ultramarine blue is fetching up to 4,000 francs per kilo. Despite Gmelin's German nationality, artificial ultramarine blue quickly becomes known as "French Blue" or "Permanent Blue" (even though it is less permanent than the original).

1841
Under the British puppet ruler Shah Shuja, Afghani lapis mining temporarily ceases in Badakshan. A year later, all British forces will be routed from Afghanistan and perish while retreating to India.

1938
William Butler Yeats publishes his poem "Lapis Lazuli," a meditation on impending war and death.

1946
With the aid of a microscope, art conservators from the Central Laboratories of the Belgian Museums discover tiny traces of cobalt blue mixed with ultramarine blue in a painting thought to be a Vermeer. The discovery indicates the painting is a forgery: cobalt blue, a 19th-century pigment, was developed in the attempt to produce a synthetic ultramarine blue.

Revenge was the forger's motive: Dutch artist Han van Meegeren reasoned that if the same critics who had snubbed his own work praised a "Vermeer" by his hand, he could reveal his deception and be redeemed as a great artist. But after discovering how lucrative the endeavor was, he kept silent and produced five more "Vermeers" and two "De Hooghs."

Van Meegeren's fifth "Vermeer" was sold to Hermann Göring. After the war, Van Meegeren was arrested and charged with "treasonable collaboration" for his part in the loss of a national treasure to the Nazis. After six months in jail he admitted that he had made the painting himself. Art critics and scholars flatly rejected his claim, arguing for the authenticity of the works. Under house arrest, Van Meegeren set about painting a new "Vermeer" to demonstrate his point. Ultimately he was convicted of fraud at a one-day trial and sentenced to a year in prison. He died of a heart attack before serving any time.

Ironically, his forged "Vermeers," which had seduced his harshest critics, were far closer in style and sensibility to his own paintings than to Vermeer's, which they barely resembled. In addition, the sale of the fake Vermeer to Göring was made only on the condition that 200 Dutch artworks stolen by the Nazis earlier in the war would be returned to Holland.

1947
The United States Air Force is separated from the Army, creating a new US military division. The new Air Force flag is ultramarine blue with the department's insignia at the center.

1960
Artist Yves Klein works with the pigment dealer, Edouard Adam, to patent International Klein Blue, which is made up of ultramarine blue suspended in synthetic resin. The colorless carrier dries to a matte

finish, creating the look of raw pigment and an illusion of depth on the painted surface.

1979–1989
The USSR moves troops into Afghanistan. Mujahideen leader Ahmed Shah Massoud maintains control of the lapis lazuli mines in Badakshan and uses revenues from his ten-percent "revolutionary tax" on gem sales to help fund the war against the Soviets.

1989
With the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, lapis mining booms—production increases by fifty percent. Massoud's forces earn an estimated five million dollars per year during this period.

1996
The Taliban seizes power in Afghanistan and the regular lapis trade routes are disrupted. Massoud, now working with the Northern Alliance, fights the Taliban, in part with funds that are again raised through lapis sales.

September 9, 2001
Ahmed Shah Massoud is killed by a camera-bomb discharged during an "interview" with assassins posing as TV journalists. In retrospect the elimination of Massoud, a potentially strong opponent of the Taliban, is widely interpreted as being part of Al-Qaeda's preparation for the airline hijackings two days later in the United States. Subsequently the US-lead war against the Taliban halts mining and sales of lapis lazuli. After 20 years of war and neglect, the mines, some of them thousands of years old, are reported to be in very dangerous states of disrepair. Reserves of the gemstone are stockpiled. Prices in the Peshwar market drop to all-time lows.

"It was noted that by merely staring at an 18 x 24 inch card printed with this color, especially after active and intentional exercise, there would result "a marked effect on lowering the heart rate, pulse and respiration as compared to other colors."

PINK

DAVID BYRNE

"I adore that pink! It's the navy blue of India," declared Diana Vreeland, former editor of *Vogue* and source of many aphorisms. By this she meant that, just as navy blue in our culture tends to signify conservative respectability, pink exemplifies tradition and balance in India. The existence of universal stylistic and psychological color reactions is therefore placed in doubt: what we would consider a wild, flamboyant, and feminine color is, in India—at least according to DV—considered refined and conventional.

I asked my daughter, who is thirteen and loves the color pink, why the attraction and what it's all about. She said it's a "nice color," it "looks good on me," and "guys can't wear pink—it makes them look stupid" (more on this later). "Pink and black look good on everybody—except redheads." When pressed, she suggested, "Maybe it's because of Barbie" (proof that kids are aware of the effects of marketing, branding, and advertising). "Maybe because I was given pink stuff as a baby—and maybe because it's pretty."

According to a Japanese color analysis website, "the color pink is very suitable for ladies. In this my research, I would like to say that they want to have dream, hope toward their future and to be tender in mind."

These expert sources were consulted because I originally thought, when asked to write about this color for *Cabinet*, that I would investigate the assumed female propensity for pink. I wondered, was there indeed such a link? And if so, why and how? In addition to consulting fashion mavens, online analysts, and teenagers, I planned to ask sociobiologists why this association, if it indeed existed, might be beneficial to the species.

As I soon found out, however, pink was actually considered a color best suited to boys until as late as the 1950s. Blue was the girlie color. Pink, inasmuch as it is a watered-down red—the fiercest of colors (does anyone doubt me here?)—was naturally associated with boys, with their instinctive attraction to fire trucks and sports cars. The *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1918 said, "The generally accepted rule is pink for the boy and blue for the girl. The reason is that pink, being a more decided and stronger color, is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is pertier [sic] for the girl."

So much for genetic, gender-based color predilections—or at least in the way we commonly think of them. My research would now take me in a new direction. Why did the gender/color switch take place? It's hard to say for sure, but one could make the case that as women asserted themselves in society in the late 1940s, as a response to the influx of men who were mostly traumatized and battered from World War II, more active roles in the world encouraged women to adopt an appropriately energizing color for themselves—that is, if one is to believe the *Ladies' Home Journal* color analysis. It could thus be argued that adopting pink was an early sign of the feminism due to flower in the 1960s, and that far from being a color imposed on women by marketing men, pink was actually a badge of self-determination and power. Alternatively, one might conjecture that the pink triangles used during the war by the Nazis to identify homosexuals gave the color a "queer" association, at least to North Americans, thus leading men to abandon it.

Some hard data on the "pink effect" is available. In the late sixties, Alexander Schauss, director of Life Sciences at the American Institute for Biosocial Research in Tacoma, did extensive studies on psychological and physiological responses to the color. Schauss had read the earlier studies of Swiss psychiatrist Max Luscher, who found that color preferences provide useful data about one's personality profile. He noticed that color preferences shifted according to psychological and physiological fluctuations in his patients. Color choice reflects emotional states, according to Luscher, and also reflects corresponding changes in the endocrine (hormonal) system.

Schauss then asked himself if the reverse might also be true. Could color cause emotional and hormonal changes? Could varying wavelengths of light, received by the eye, trigger profound and measurable responses in the endocrine system?

In early tests in 1978, Schauss observed that color, surprisingly, affected muscle strength, invigorating or enervating the subject, and it even influenced the cardiovascular system. Schauss began to experiment on himself, with the help of fellow researcher John Ott, and soon discovered that a particular shade of pink had a most profound effect. He labeled it P-618.

It was noted that by merely staring at an 18 x 24 inch card printed with this color, especially after active and intentional exercise, there would result "a marked effect on lowering the heart rate, pulse and respiration as compared to other colors."

In 1979, Schauss managed to convince the directors of a Naval correctional institute in Washington State to paint some prison confinement cells pink in order to determine the effects this might have on prisoners. Needless to say, suggesting that prison cells be painted pink was not an immediately popular idea—prison officials, like the rest of the culture, having rapidly absorbed the switch in pink's gender affiliation—so, to commemorate the bravery of the prison directors, Schauss named the color after the two men. Baker-Miller Pink is now the official name of the paint that can be mixed as follows: R:255, G:145, B: 175.

At the correctional facility, the rates of assault before and after pink exposure were carefully monitored. According to the Navy's report, "Since the initiation of this procedure on 1 March 1979, there have been *no* incidents of erratic or hostile behavior during the initial phase of confinement" (emphasis mine). Merely fifteen minutes of exposure was enough to ensure that the potential for violent or aggressive behavior had been reduced. That's not long. Pink is strong medicine! The confinement cells are pink to this day, and thus far, *no* hostile or violent behavior has occurred. In spite of such success, military use of Baker-Miller Pink has been limited, though its enervating effect on potential and real enemies has indeed been investigated. A number of tanks used in Desert Storm were pink, but attempts by antiwar activists to surreptitiously surround the Bush administration with P-618 have thus far been unsuccessful.

Subsequently, Baker-Miller Pink was studied by a team at Johns Hopkins University, where a peculiar tendency toward appetite suppression was observed. Researchers confirmed the now-familiar stress-reduction effects, but the corresponding appetite reduction was an unexpected side effect—fortuitous, as this team also happened to be searching for alternative means of weight loss.

The Santa Clara county jail soon got word of P-618, sometimes also called "Drunk-Tank Pink," and in late 1979, in a rush to achieve results, they may have overreacted. Officials painted a holding cell pink and immediately placed several inmates there for a few hours—this resulted in the prisoners scratching the paint off the walls with their fingernails. Subsequent procedures were limited to the recommended fifteen minutes. The color was also used at a California VA psychiatric hospital and a San Bernadino youth clinic. One implacable patient, whose behavior seemed to show no signs of improvement under normal conditions, was as a last resort placed in a pink seclusion room where "within six minutes he calmed, was heard crying, and was seen sitting in the middle of the room."

News of the color that saps your energy continued to spread rapidly. In the early 1980s, visiting-team football locker rooms at Iowa and Colorado State were painted pink until, in an effort to control this sneaky, unsolicited color therapy, a rule was passed by the Western Athletic Conference that both visiting and home teams' locker rooms had to be painted the same color. Color became a controlled substance. On the T.V. show *That's Incredible*! when contestants were asked to support weight on their outstretched arms, those exposed to pink cards were less able to do so. And the logo of Weight Watchers, though not officially Baker-Miller Pink, is pink nonetheless, as if the appetite-suppressant properties of pink could insinuate themselves just by looking at a product's packaging.

So, back to the beginning. Girls and Boys. Far from enhancing virility and voraciousness, pink leaches it away. Was pink then marketed, post-World War II, by men to women as a girlie color in a secret effort to restrict gains made by women in the workforce during the war? To turn the newly independent earners back into passive consumers? This was all decades before the Baker-Miller research, of course, but one might go so far as to assume that the "pink effect" was unconsciously or instinctively known (except by the writers of the *Ladies' Home Journal*). Diana Vreeland's awareness that pink's power is culturally determined in this light looks prescient, and my daughter may buy into pink, but clearly she knows that it is being sold to her. Instinct and intuition often predate proof.

"She drank some more, while he told her the color of Chartreuse looked sick, even feverish, but maybe the weird yellow and green high-voltage potion held an alluring illness, laced with the charge of deception."

CHARTREUSE

LYNNE TILLMAN

How abrupt she was. She'd handed him the glass of Chartreuse, and her wrist flicked upward. Her hand's rebelling, he thought. Then she flinched. But she caught herself, she hadn't told him what actually happened, and she hadn't lied. She'd left room in their conversation for ambiguity. So this was the conversation he was in, but what about the others he hadn't been asked to join. His life was cycling into territory where gaps counted more. Mind the gap, but his mind was wandering.

"In La Grande-Chartreuse," she said, also abruptly but with a laugh, as if to distract him, "the head and celebrated monastery of the Carthusians, near Grenoble, the monks brewed Chartreuse. It's a liqueur or aperitif—you can have it before or after—made from aromatic herbs and brandy. The recipe is an ancient secret."

She visited the monastery years ago, crossing the Channel as a teenager, and pronounced the word herb the English way, its "h" heavy and funny as the man's name.

"Pope Victor III, Bruno of Cologne, founded the order in 1086. Twenty years after the Norman invasion..."

He interrupted her then, he remembered he interrupted her, and she hated that.

"When the English language suffered a loss of prestige, but you still keep that hard 'h,' don't you?"

She drank some more, while he told her the color of Chartreuse looked sick, even feverish, but maybe the weird yellow and green high-voltage potion held an alluring illness, laced with the charge of deception. Her cheeks flared scarlet, the garish liqueur having its way with her. It burned his throat, too. But she kept her tongue, and her ruse, if it was one, wasn't even bruised. He wasn't going to force the issue, it would be like rape, and who wants truth or sex that way. He swallowed the yellow/green liqueur, distasteful and medicinal. Then he poured them both another Chartreuse.

A kind of golden amnesia stilled other monologues inside him. Her shirt, chartreuse for the occasion—their fifth anniversary—winked ambivalently. She liked designing their nights, he thought, color combinations were her thing. He wondered how he fit in sometimes. Yellow elided with the green, never landing on the integrity of one color, and, he reflected sullenly, her blouse managed to be a fabric of lies, too. The silk looked sinister, too shiny, and, under the light, his wife's facade iridesced. Glimmering vile and then beautiful. Inconstant chartreuse numbed his tongue and his eyes.

"This tastes disgusting," he said, finally. "I could get used to it." "Absinthe," she explained, or he remembered she did, "was called 'the green fairy,' because it made everyone crazy—everyone became addicted, and there was legislation against it, still is, like against heroin, because they thought it would destroy French civilization."

"Maybe it did."

"But now you can find it, if you want. At a party I went to, we all drank from the fairy cup."

She didn't find his eyes. Maybe it was then, he thought, that it happened.

"The Carthusians were expelled from France in 1903, and they went to Tarragona. Spain."

"Home of tarragon?"

"But they returned in 1941."

He remembered thinking about the Pope's treachery during the war.

Her blouse kept changing, now yellow, now green. It was kind of driving him crazy, but maybe it was the effect of Chartreuse. What she liked best about the Carthusian monks was their vow of absolute silence—it was the most rigorous order. Resolute religiosos, she joked, who, paradoxically, brewed a high-volume alcoholic drink. She figured they didn't indulge, because it might loosen their tongues.

"In 1960, there were only 537 Carthusians," she said.

"Your tongue isn't loose," he said.

"I'm thinking of going on a retreat—I want to be silent."

"Leave the conversation?" he asked.

"You're too ironic for words."

"You got me."

Just what he expected of her, to run; but what did he expect of her? He toasted her with the manichean aperitif or liqueur, whatever it was. Her reticence settled over him like a green or yellow cloud. With it, she left. She spent half a year away, in silence, or at least she didn't talk to him. He had to trust her, he supposed. She stayed with a very small order of Carthusian nuns, who didn't drink Chartreuse. He

condemned himself for not pursuing her there.

While she was away, he spoke of his perplexity to his therapist, who was not silent enough. Loyalty, betrayal, living with the lie, not escaping it, the way some fled from what was supposed to be true—he wrote notes to himself about honest disillusionment. To others, within this mostly quiet time, sometimes he was shameless and blatant. He once declared at a cocktail party, a fragile glass of Chartreuse—his drink now—in his hand, "Fidelity and infidelity, what's one without the other? You can't imagine a mountainless valley, can you?" With a secretholder's thrill at disclosure, he told his therapist: "I love her. I live inside an illusion. A shimmering criminal illusion."

On weekends, he hit stores and developed the habit of collecting shirts and jackets of chartreuse. The dubious shade represented his obsession with transparency and opacity. Now he thought it was one thing, and he could see right through it and her. Then it was another, and she was denser than a black hole. He wished he were the Hubble telescope.

Chartreuse was popular, the new grey, he liked to say, and his closet was full when she returned. Her need for silence—at least with him—hadn't completely abated. He never knew if it was because she had once deceived him or because she couldn't stop. Or because his once having thought she did horrified her, when she hadn't, and now she wanted to and couldn't.

He contented himself with the little things, his and her chartreuse towels, how they equitably divided chores— the pleasure of domesticity stayed novel for him—and her occasional marital passion. Like him, she fashioned herself daily, a devotee of Harold Rosenberg's "tradition of the new." So eventually they would turn old-fashioned. At least, they were together.

He would always associate the night it happened, when he thought it happened, with fateful chartreuse, whose eternal shiftiness he could spin tales about. Also, about the CIA, the monastery as the first factory, and the beauty of silence. It was really golden. He and his wife celebrated themselves and their differences on their anniversary. They loved and denied each other, simultaneously, and more and more laughed at themselves. There were things he'd never know. Still, nothing competed with their complicity, their chartreuse hours together.

"No other tint of clothing has so aggressively been used to link mundane office life, well-fed fraternity catatonia, or the Haldol atmosphere- of country clubs with robust wilderness trekking and free-spirit nomadism the kinds of behavior, in short, that are the least likely to occur."

KHAKI

BEN MARCUS

If any clothing color is meant to corroborate the spasms of a fantasy that we are not really living in cities or towns where all danger from animals has been removed; that instead some forested adventure awaits us for which we must be properly outfitted; that in fact we are secretly rugged safari people who at any moment will ditch our offices for an impromptu hunt of treacherous elephants, a jeep trip through uncharted veldt; then that color is khaki. No other tint of clothing has so aggressively been used to link mundane office life, well-fed fraternity catatonia, or the Haldol atmosphere- of country clubs with robust wilderness trekking and free-spirit nomadism the kinds of behavior, in short, that are the least likely to occur. Now a staple pants color of corporate casual Fridays, it is those Fridays that, rather than encouraging comfort, are meant to announce to our co-workers, as the dumb half of show-and-tell, who we really are, lest they miss it behind our suits and ties: When we wear khaki, we are potential Hemingway characters ready to take up arms against the wildlife, and then to repose over mojitos in cabanas. In truth, khaki is the ultimate wasteland camouflage, what will finally hide people when the last buildings have been demolished and we are reduced to wandering over the desert. The old camouflage of Rorschach greens, browns, and grays, was designed for a planet that still lived and breathed, where warfare might occur in a dripping, ozone-fresh greenhouse, when hiding meant taking cover under a tree. Since those sectors are now either demolished or ossified by longing tourists, and the new warfare is conducted in the sand and dust, with our fondness for green fading into nostalgia, khaki makes the most invisible outfit for the future, a covert skin for battling atop the dead, colorless planet.

Khaki is so entrenched as a textile concept that one can refer to pants as "khakis" and court no confusion. Are there any other garments so ubiquitous that we identify them by their colors? While blue jeans can faintly evoke the wild west, there is little wild west anymore to evoke the myth has been severally punctured though jeans still (the non-designer ones) bespeak yard labor and trade labor and other sorts of activities that make a person dirty. Their blueness is secondary to the actual texture of their material. Khakis, meanwhile, announce leisure and the aftermath of activity, the sense that something strenuous just happened but has now been cleaned up. Khakis signal repose after the hunt, a patrician costume of earned relaxation that acknowledges the environment of dust and sand but still appears wealthy and dressy It is no wonder, then, that khaki is the iconographic garment for the well-behaved, well-paid American "person," who defaults to that color choice because it is apparently the most comfortable; because it seems easy and simple, inoffensive while still slightly stylish, and imminently durable. But since when does color alone provide sufficient sensual comfort against the skin, particularly in the climate-controlled interiors we frequently navigate? And why does almost no one wear khakis that are not khaki-colored, even though marketers frequently pin their hopes on magenta and compost-colored pants cut just like their khaki counterparts? Witness the commercial arc of Banana Republic, at first a retail outlet for the "suburban safari" enthusiast, a ludicrously unsuggestive phrase (wouldn't wilding count as suburban safari?). Hats, whips, chaps, rucksacks, survival gear, hard-weather performance material, facial salves to toughen the cheeks against desert zephyrs: These were the ingredients of the early marketing efforts at Banana Republic, and this is the identity it still traffics in, even if those products are no longer on sale, even while Banana Republic has fully shifted its line from outdoor to indoor, desert to office, wilderness to city. What happened to the buckaroo mascot and the gutted jeep chassis that punctuated the shop floors? Entering now, one finds instead a rabidly generic set of corporate uniforms in no way linked to the khaki foundation, neat stacks of supposedly staple outfits for men and women that manage to be both extremely unimpressive and readily identifiable as BR wear. The lighting is cold and uniform, so unlike the brilliant sunsets of the savannah. One must push all the way to the back of the store to find its origins, tables heaped in khaki pants with names like Dawson and Emerson, insinuations of rugged individualism rather than what khaki really is: a team uniform for dead people, wishful wear for lifestyle-free people.

If we desire a clothing color for something that will never happen to us, it is only because nearly nothing physical happens to us of our own volition, and we must independently generate the suspicion that it

once has or that it will again. Clothing is the ultimate vehicle for this physical advertisement of self, a mating hypothetics we require of each other to share secrets and fantasies, to dramatize our disgusts with our real lives, to show off to others what we might do if we were really alive. Like weekend cyclists in the park who wear elaborate gear not connected to better cycling performance Lycra jerseys emblazoned with Italian advertisements, corporate logo colors disfiguring torsos, insignias of sponsorship covering every body part these accessorizing gestures are meant to announce one's dreamed inclusion in a theatrical sporting affair that others should admire, since these hobbyists have caught themselves admiring televised cyclists and wish to ape, if not the skill, then the costume of the professionals. These cyclists identify each other's seriousness of purpose by their gear, but their purpose is not necessarily to cycle. It is similar to fans who advertise the same companies as their sports heroes. The only difference is that the professional is getting paid for his endorsement. And if khaki is not a textual advertisement, it is a spiritual one, though one that has so collectively possessed the nation that it now appears like "basic" clothing, a staple, rugged wear for unexpected times even if it is decidedly unrugged, made of ever- cheapening cotton something that belongs in everyone's pants drawer. It is innocuous and innocent, free of overt subtext (in other words, it is a successful myth). In khaki clothing, we have managed to dramatize both our past and future, however fictitiously, while rendering a present that is bland and nearly invisible, translucent without being revealing, immensely fragile, however sturdy it appears. We will soon be bumping into people we did not know were there, and khaki will become another name we use for nothing.

"The many fluctuations in the precise tone of sepia sometimes represent aesthetic choices by the photographer or the printer, but more often have to do with a greater or lesser knowledge of chemistry on the part of these practitioners."

SEPIA

LUC SANTE

The word means "cuttlefish" in Greek. According to the *Britannica* (eleventh edition), "the ink-sac, immediately upon the capture of the animal, is extracted from the body and speedily dried to prevent putrefaction. The contents are subsequently powdered, dissolved in caustic alkali, and precipitated from the solution by neutralizing with acid." It is a rich tone on the border between red and brown, although its precise definition has blurred somewhat since the use of cuttlefish ink has languished, so that today it overlaps with such shades as burnt sienna and Venetian red. In photography, where it occurs naturally in one of two dispositions of gold salts in the toning bath—the other tending toward the cyan range—it was long favored because sepia toning converts the silver content to a sulphide, thereby increasing the life of the print. It was also preferred to stark black-and-white for its warmth and its greater illusion of lifelikeness in the decades before the widespread application of color photography.

Because of this it has become the color of nostalgia. When you visit Tombstone, Arizona, or Leadville, Colorado, you can dress in one of a variety of replica Old West outfits and have your portrait taken in a simulation of a frontier photo studio; the print will be finished in a particularly ruddy shade of sepia. This same shade was until fairly recently employed to reproduce 19th-century photographs in books issued by budget coffee-table publishers, such as Bonanza. A volume on the transcontinental railroad, say, or even a collection of pictures by Timothy O'Sullivan, if published in an inexpensive edition before 1990 or so, was sure to feature muddy plates that were presumably thought to gain in atmosphere what they lost in detail. Today you can convert your recent experiences into thrillingly distant memories by digitally turning color photographs a monochromatic sepia through the agency of Photoshop. For added poignancy you can even give a picture an oval mask and fade out the edges. The photos used in demonstrations of the technique always depict momentous occasions with a predetermined nostalgia factor—the arrival of the new baby—although not the ones associated with ends more than beginnings, such as the retirement party or the golden anniversary, for which sepia would introduce an unwelcome reminder of mortality.

Sepia photographs from the past—from the earliest calotypes by Fox Talbot, circa 1840, up to maybe the third decade of the 20th century—supply a range of emotional effects as broad as their range of variations on sepia. The many fluctuations in the precise tone of sepia sometimes represent aesthetic choices by the photographer or the printer, but more often have to do with a greater or lesser knowledge of chemistry on the part of these practitioners. The more reddish the tone—the greater its resemblance to contemporary mass-market ideas of the color—the more likely it is that it has resulted from deterioration of the print over time. Sepia in its original state can sometimes be misty, but it can also be steely. It can blur the edges of things in a way that mimics the selective softening of memories over a lifetime, but it can also register and enumerate details with fidelity and penetration, to a degree that beside it black- and-white can appear bloodlessly actuarial and polychrome looks gaudy. Sepia was fortuitously equipped to take on the sensuous and very nearly the tactile qualities of much of the matter represented in the photographs of its period: walnut furniture and flocked wallpaper and velvet draperies and brass fittings and bronze statuary—and bricks and stone, of course.

But maybe this was not simply fortuitous. Lewis Mumford entitled his survey of the arts in America between 1865 and 1895 *The Brown Decades* (1931), and in it he postulated that the period was one of protracted mourning: "The Civil War shook down the blossoms and blasted the promise of spring. The colours of American civilization abruptly changed. By the time the war was over, browns had spread everywhere: mediocre drabs, dingy chocolate browns, sooty browns that merged into black. Autumn had come." He finds brown in the houses and in the streets, and in painters: the solemn Thomas Eakins inspired by Rembrandt, the mad and indigent Albert Pinkham Ryder concocting pigments from unstable combinations of available substances, ensuring that his pictures would become ever more brown as time passed, not to mention so fragile that many can no longer be exhibited. The overwhelming environmental brown had psychological sources, of course, but it also derived from industrialization, specifically from the vastly increased ambient soot that covered American

cities. Brownstone, after all, was not only grand and dignified; it was convenient, since it required cleaning far less often than marble and did not turn black the way most other facades did in the smut-filled coal era. Brown is the color of dirt. It is what results from churning together the entire palette. It is an apt shade for a society that has gone from rustic improvisation to merchant-banker stolidity without an intervening succession of classical and romantic stages. Viewed in this light, sepia fulfills the dual purpose of evoking the flavor of its time and of leavening and retouching its less creditable aspects.

Sepia was thus predestined to be the color of nostalgia, well before the subjects of photographs printed in sepia had become objects of nostalgia. The photographs could evoke those subjects while literally or figuratively camouflaging their pollution, much the way the mind, in recalling a golden age—which is always one's own childhood, however it is dressed up or relabeled—glosses over difficulties and ambiguities and hardships. Sepia was of course employed in photography around the world, but it has a specific significance in the United States, a youngish country that has not yet lost its empire but is nevertheless as much in thrall to nostalgia as crumbling Russia or expropriated Portugal. Nostalgia in America arises from the continual displacement of its inhabitants, from the slapback effect of ruthlessly accelerated change, from the denial of historical memory and the consequent shallowness of affective ties. America is a moving car, its passengers strapped into their seats, impelled to look forward at distant beckoning lights that may be those of a radiant future but might only be emanating from a parking lot. The past is fog. The parts of it that lap close to living memory can be dismissed without examination as junkyards of defunct ideas and obsolete equipment. Farther back, all that can be distinguished in the haze are shadowy images, tinted by moral reproach.

Sepia colors a world that can be accepted as unfathomably different from our own. If black-and-white determines for us the tone of the 1930s or the 1950s, when options and fashions and outlooks were ostensibly as clear-cut as they were constricted, then sepia describes a time that is positively alien. Not only did they not have colors then, but they also had no extremes, no midnight or noon. It was perpetually twilight, or possibly late afternoon, and the sun burnished surfaces rather than lighting them up. Sensations were muted. Sounds were hushed. People moved and talked slowly and measuredly. It was an older time than ours, not only chronologically but also in the sense that it was keyed to the rhythms of old age. Our forefathers were already conscious of being our forefathers, even if in their stern, plain virtue they could have no idea of the multicolored, fully-wired chaos that was to succeed them a century or so later. We can only think back with wonder and puzzlement, imagining an unbridgeable chasm between the emotions and impulses and desires of that time and those of our own. When we gaze upon the sepia-toned *cartes de visite* of our ancestors, or of unnamed strangers that have washed up at flea markets, we are flushed with pious sentiments, perhaps, or perhaps feel a mild envy, or maybe without admitting it to ourselves we think we are looking at primitives, if not imbeciles.

When applied to the historical past, nostalgia is merely the obverse of a coin the reverse of which is contempt, since it embodies a refusal of sympathetic imagination. In this dereliction sepia, as a distancing mechanism, is unfortunately implicated. It is sepia's fate to be so intimately tied to the technology of the past that it has effectively become obsolete. But can this be said of a color? Other colors associated with bygone procedures—verdigris, carmine, indigo—have retained vigor while wearing their antique pedigree with a certain panache. Sepia is of course sufficiently broad in its range to find current employment under various aliases, but its name is shut out. It registers as a dead letter even when context might seem to preclude such a verdict (viz., its use as the title of a long-running African-American news magazine, a genteel analogue to *Ebony* and *Jet*; a title so genteel, in fact, that it now sounds embarrassingly apologetic). But then again, a corollary to ignorance of the past is the assumption that the judgment of our own time is final. Maybe sepia and what it implies are simply not old enough to be seen without arousing insecurity about our place in the queue everyone calls "progress." Maybe the carcass still stinks and the bones have not yet been bleached. But when the wave of digital innovation has crested and been replaced by something else, when the last generation to remember the advent of color in movies and snapshots and television has died out, when the dead weight of nostalgia adheres to the products and customs of our own time, sepia will be freed to look new again.

"...when they cut her open, she bled the sharpest, loudest purple he'd ever seen, something metallic, a color with inner flecks of glowing light, illuminating deeply oxygenated blood."

PURPLE

MATTHEW KLAM

My mother once referred to drunken people on blankets and lawn chairs at our local summer music festival as "commoners," though we are not, as a family, hung up on our possible connection to crowned heads. Still, when my sister got rushed to the hospital with dire complications in her pregnancy, on the very day when I—stuck in Provincetown, Massachusetts, teaching at a summer writers' thing—received this assignment to write about the color purple, I knew that she would live and that the baby would, too. As heir apparent, the product of one of the most important women on earth, this child had a lineage to extend, a great life to look forward to, not least of which would be to receive the little purple Barney slippers I'd bought already. There's a phrase from Roman times, "born to the purple" (because the cost of harvesting purple dye from Tyrian mollusks was so high), and I couldn't help but imagine this glorious unborn essence as something akin to royalty, an almost divine being who would one day live in opulence. The shell of *Haustellum brandaris*, a sea snail from which Royal or Tyrian Purple is produced. Dr. G. Thomas Watters at the Ohio State University informs us: "The snail's narcotizing saliva helps it overpower its prey, usually other shellfish. On exposure to air, the saliva turns purple and will stain just about anything. The Greeks, Romans, and Phoenicians cooked the snails and dyed fabric in the 'juice.' The dye was expensive to make and generally could only be afforded by the most wealthy and it eventually became the official color of the Roman aristocracy, particularly the Caesars. When Rome succumbed to barbarians, the color persisted with the rise of the Catholic Church under Constantine and eventually became its official color. The shell has nothing to do with the purple dye—it's all in the snail spit."

The semi-dangerous condition in the womb worsened. My sister, my brother-in-law Paul, and my mom went into battle mode—no tears, no rudeness, just warriors. The labor lasted 18 hours, and my mom, who's not a young soldier anymore, sat up all night in some waiting room, relaying updates from Paul via cell phone. "They put her on Pitocin" … "Pitocin not working" ... "Waiting for the doctors to signal the next move."

The next morning I tried to profess the joys of a finely tuned phrase, amid lovely ocean breezes, as if that mattered. After class there was still no word. The cell phone died. We waited as that second day passed, and finally they wheeled my sister into surgery. It was evening now, and I walked with a friend to the edge of town and out along the massive stone breakwater that crosses the bay to the lighthouse. Looking back toward the harbor half a mile away, we saw the town's outline cast in a gauzy plum haze, the faintest tinge of blue turning black, the vaguest edge of darkness visible in the last whisper of light. My friend said, "The air is purple." The falling sun did a cartoon rhapsodic routine, a perfectly engineered *Truman Show* of color. The sky, the surface of the bay, and the space between went crazy and everything changed. The western horizon flashed hues there aren't names for, spectrums of fuchsia and creamsicle orange, palest turn-of-the-century-pasteboard baby blue, a vision of light that predates war and Pilgrim landings and medical miracles.

At that moment Paul stood by at the proceedings in the Beth Israel operating room and noticed that the light over the table, that stamen of pure halogen jutting from its mirrored bowl, sent down an extraterrestrial beam onto the belly of my little sister, and when they made their incision, when they cut her open, she bled the sharpest, loudest purple he'd ever seen, something metallic, a color with inner flecks of glowing light, illuminating deeply oxygenated blood. The Cesarean section—named not for Julius Caesar but for a Roman law—did in fact connote the elevation of an unborn child to prominence (if not divinity), because the law charged the doctor to extract the baby regardless of the mother's condition. Not exactly a comforting thought. And then this girl, four pounds four ounces, our family's new nobility, this tiny New York Italian-Jewish-Swedish-Catholic princess that the doctor pulled from my sister appeared dead, with a long, pointy head and a pallor Paul described as New York Mets Blue.

"If it hadn't been my own kid," he said, "I would've run out of the operating room screaming."

But then the newborn started screaming, and soon after I got the news: The baby was okay! My sister was tired but okay! Everybody's okay! I felt so relieved, so happy, in love with someone I didn't know. Of course, my older brother has two little girls I love. I've played Magic Candy in their plastic playhouse until my clothes got muddy; they have a made-up name for me, Uncle Dindin, and I have names for them,

Sadie-pie, Lily-butt, and I would drown to hold them above water to save their lives, although they're a little stranger than I would've guessed my own brother's kids would be. They are their mother's daughters, they eat gummy worms for dinner, but I love them completely. My sister is the last of these few people whom I worship without conditions, and now she had just given me one more.

The gig in Provincetown lasted a few more days, and it was Carnival Week. I was looking for baby dresses on Commercial Street, dodging eight-foot-tall drag queens on rollerblades. Purple is the mascot color of the gay and lesbian movement, the number one choice after the rainbow flag, the default trim of P'town bed-and-breakfast Victorian mansions. There was celebratory purple everywhere. And then, two days later, when I got to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, my sister had made a spectacular recovery. The baby looked hale and pinkish, with red splotches, and my father, drunkenly overjoyed, passed on his highest praise. "She's got good culla." It's a term he uses not for the merely suntanned, but to compliment the glow of an exercised soul. My sister sat in bed in a robe I'd never seen before, bought by my mother for the occasion, pale lavender. The dye job on her hair looked fresh, her face appeared lit from within. Despite the major surgery, the day and a half of labor, the death-defying process she'd been through, she had good culla too.

This baby is the future, she's the family, she will take the throne.

We, like many third-generation American clans, have a fractured history. My family is Austrian, though the town could've been in the Ukraine, between Lemberg and Tarnapol, or Poland. Somewhere in the Hapsburg empire, Klams emerged. Other branches sprang from places I've got vague ideas about, Russian warm-water coastal hamlets abandoned in pogrom-inspired flight. The idea that we might come from other than shtetl stock is a long shot, but I'm willing to think that we were barons, we led villages for centuries, we were royalty, or knew royalty, or knew how to act when they came to town, how to converse, not eat with our hands, and we would've been royalty if we weren't a bunch of dirt-farming peasants.

She was born on August 28, 2003. Her name is Violet.

“My friends described the color as pistachio, but they were mistaken. These were art students and they should have known better. It wasn’t pistachio at all”

PISTACHIO

SPENCER FINCH

My friends described the color as pistachio, but they were mistaken. These were art students and they should have known better. It wasn't pistachio at all; in fact, you would need to mix a handful of pistachios in a blender with two scoops of vanilla ice cream and a tablespoon of lemon zest to even approach the color. It was my first car and, at least chromatically speaking, my best. Volvo produced this color for only two years, 1976 and 1977. If you know anything about Volvos of this era, you know about the engine, the famous B21R, which was introduced in 1975 and could propel a vehicle twice the size of mine straight up the side of a fjord. To this day I can recognize the sound of that engine from down the block, strong and smooth, low and rumbly. But the color you would probably remember, too. It was a great era for car paint: Volvo also produced a fruity orange and a robin's egg blue in the mid-1970s. Other European carmakers followed suit, a nod perhaps to a groovy 1970s Scandinavian sensibility, but the others did it with considerably less élan. Mercedes's version of light green, for example, could only be described as bilious.

I inherited the car in 1986 and my first task was to attack the rust problem, which was getting out of hand. Ten years later, the rust would metastasize to the brake system and nearly kill me and my two Swedish passengers. But, for the moment, it was a superficial problem that could be treated with sandpaper, fiberglass filler, rust-killer, and paint. I didn't know the first thing about painting a car, but I rented a compressor and spray gun, went to the local NAPA, and got paint mixed. The color, which had a number that I cannot remember, also had a name: Teton Green. This phrase is an etymological carnival unto itself, but really means nothing, and is in fact further from the truth than pistachio." I repainted the car in my parents' garage, and after that the left side (which I painted first) was matte and the right side (which I painted after I got the hang of spraying lacquer) was nice and glossy. The hood and the roof were left original and faded a bit, and became yellower over time. A few years later I smashed the front right fender into a hardware store sign and that was repaired and repainted professionally and was somewhat bluer than the rest of the vehicle. Plus, it had a dark green pinstripe, which contrasted badly with the pistachio (although this car never looked better than it did parked under a blue spruce tree.) So it was this mix of green shades and tones, some yellower, some bluer, in various stages of fading, that was labeled "pistachio" by people who were paying many thousands of dollars a year to learn the difference between yellow and blue.

The apparent indeterminacy of pistachio as a color concept resurfaced recently when I became interested in Vladimir Nabokov's theory of a colored alphabet. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov describes in amusing detail his "colored hearing." It is not synesthesia, per se, but something similar. The connection for Nabokov is between the sound of the letter and a color; thus, the system varies from language to language. The *a* in English is weathered wood, whereas the French *a* is polished ebony. Nabokov points out that the rainbow spectrum in his own private language would be written as *kzspygv*. He does this by replacing the standard violet/indigo/blue/green/yellow/orange/red with his own huckle- berry/thundercloud/azure and mother-of-pearl/unripe apple/bright-golden/rich rubber/rose quartz. He eventually took this theory to a crackpot extreme, arguing that his son's colored hearing represented a perfect synthesis of his own colored hearing and that of his wife, Véra. Dimitri apparently heard a lot of muddy brown.

Nabokov's descriptions at first seem remarkably precise: for example, *f* is the color of an alder leaf and *m* is a "fold in pink flannel." When I sat down to generate these colors with ink and watercolor, however, I discovered that they were frustratingly inexact; quite literary and quite unscientific, and not really informed by a painter's or colorist's vocabulary. What color, really, is a "limp noodle"? And no rainbow I have ever seen contains "rich rubber" which Nabokov himself places in the "brown group." Rose quartz (*v*) alone among the 26 colors is a verifiable pigment.

For Nabokov, the color pistachio is associated with the letter *t*. So, in the course of my research I looked at a lot of pistachio nuts, which I suspected might look different now than they did in 1966. The pistachios Nabokov ate were likely imported from the Middle East, because before 1976 the United States had virtually no domestic pistachio industry, and most nuts were imported from Iran, Iraq, and

Turkey. In retaliation for the OPEC oil embargo, the United States imposed a tariff on nuts and, as a result, domestic production of pistachios exploded, mostly in California. The imported nuts are basically the same as the domestic nuts, but there is a crucial chromatic difference. The imported nuts came in shells that had been dyed red, a practice that began in the 1930s. They were dyed, apparently, to cover up ugly blemishes caused during mechanized harvesting and processing. Eventually, many consumers assumed that this red was natural. After all, the red shells look no more artificial than the bright green nuts. California producers followed suit for a while, but when red dye was identified as a health hazard a number of years ago, the natural tan shell color was phased back in. Now the old-fashioned merry Christmas nuts are rarely seen, although I did spot them in a vending machine at a bus station in Saratoga this summer. The shell color matters, because the green nut indeed looks noticeably more intense when contrasted against a red shell, as Johannes Itten points out in plate 105 of the *Art of Color*.

So faced with the compounded uncertainty of shell color and Nabokov's loosey-goosey approach to color description, I sat down with a bag of pistachios to approach the color of *t*. There is no question in my mind that he would locate *t* between *p* and *y* in his rainbow, that is, between yellow and green. Pistachio nuts have an unnatural yellow acidic cast as well as a dark olive undertone, sometimes approaching, believe it or not, *chartreuse*. They are also more yellow at the center. (Darker green nuts, however, are supposedly higher quality.) So I knew I was somewhere between "unripe apple" and "bright golden," but beyond that, I was flying blind. Pistachio is really not close to any paint color that comes in a tube. You can start with Hooker's green or even viridian, but you have to take it a long way, tarting it up with something fresh like sap green and some yellow, like acrid bismuth yellow. Then to get the low notes, some olive green must be added. I finally used a mixture of five different pigments to match the nut color, but I am not the least bit confident that this is the same color Nabokov meant by *t*.

Despite the appealing ambiguity of this elusive color, there are limits. Yesterday, a Design Within Reach catalogue arrived in my mailbox, and as I hungrily paged through it, I came upon a sleek Italian chair called the Bellini Chair ("an instant classic!") that comes in three colors: charcoal, dove gray, and pistachio. This so-called pistachio color is further from the real nut than Teton Green ever was, and is what the J. Crew catalogue used to describe as "sea foam" or perhaps "light mint." In fact, this modern pistachio seems nothing less than an ice cream parlor error, with mint chocolate chip being scooped instead of pistachio. While it is true that the green of the pistachio nut and the green of a mint leaf are both produced by chlorophyll, they are located at very different points on the visual spectrum. With the Bellini chair we have now jumped about 75 nanometers down the wavelength chart towards blue. If we were to slide another 75 nanometers in this direction, "pistachio" would mean "huckle-berry." Seventy-five more and pistachio would be invisible.

And invisibility, I hope, is where it will end. Pistachio will be corrupted by willful indeterminacy until it is rendered meaningless as a color name and, with any luck, falls into disuse. Only then, when "pistachio" can be resurrected as pistachio and returned to its peculiar and indescribable yellow-green essence, will nuts like me be happy.

"Even the word "gray" can drain life from language. It is the unimaginative short-hand for the death of the imagination, the erosion of moral passion, the stealthy disappearance of individual character and enlivening surprise."

GRAY

GEOFFREY O'BRIEN

There are no gray popsicles or balloons or children's bath toys. America's favorite newspaper, *USA Today*—the one they slide under the door of the desert motel—is, according to its ads, "never gray." A reviewer of pop music says, "It's not in the American character to rest in that gray place." A bureaucrat asked about the broader consequences of a proposed policy change says, with muted contempt, "That's a gray area," as if pointing to a wide and useless undeveloped tract of land, overrun with weeds and discarded shopping bags. They despise gray, or fear its influence. It reminds them of dust, or worse. Gray functions like the weeds that creep out through cracks in the pavement. It is what finally takes over: aimlessly oppressive, fogged-out, lichened-over, drained of youthful coloration, devoid even of specifiable characteristics, at once unbeckoning and inescapable. It goes nowhere all over the place. Gray hair, gray skies, the "gray matter" of a brain spinning bodiless within its own circuitry: the flag of a country without sun or flesh or vegetation, the rubble-strewn wilderness that extends between the unattainable purities of black and white. A limbo whose denizens never quite graduate.

Even the *word* "gray" can drain life from language. It is the unimaginative short-hand for the death of the imagination, the erosion of moral passion, the stealthy disappearance of individual character and enlivening surprise. In an Arthur Miller play, a neurotic woman has a dream in which "everything is sort of gray," and it amounts to saying that her erotic life, her hope for any kind of fulfillment, is over. In a certain kind of Scandinavian detective novel, the whole field of vision is gray: the streetcars, the tollbooths, the harbor, the corrugated shed, pieced together from abandoned construction materials, where drug-addicted high school students are found murdered. The *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* of fifties mythology was supposed to be the man who buried every last trace of adventure, transgression, rebellion, to become a perfectly functioning cog in a social machine that was itself embodied in grayish variants of steel, asphalt, cement, the worn-out faces of coins, and the toxic effluvia of smokestacks.

Gray is the color to which the mind returns as to a prison, where gray uniforms move within a labyrinth of institutional walls of uniform gray. There is a memory loop of descending repeatedly into a basement where the janitor's buckets are stored, among pipes and canisters that are themselves painted over in thick swaths of gray. From here the subterranean corridors branch out through which we were led unwillingly—or walked even without being led because we could not imagine any other course of action—though they led inevitably to a room we did not want to enter: the room where we would be tested for infection or maladjustment, where we would be forced to remember sequences of numbers, or, worse, to sit and wait in silence, with nothing, not so much as a joke from a package of bubblegum at hand to distract. If acts have color, gray might be the color of passive waiting for an outcome anticipated without enthusiasm.

We wake years later to discover that among the rooms to which those corridors led is the one we ended up living in. We stare up through its airshaft to discern a patch of gray, or down to see the square of cracked paving condemned to stare blindly back. We had spent our days devising curtains and disguises, floral displays, trails of mascara, anything to avoid looking too long at the cement-and-metal framework of that housing project. It was immense enough to contain within itself railroad depots and airports so as to ensure the constant necessary flow of utensils and battery oil. Indeed it was immense enough to have its own sky.

No, we didn't live there, couldn't have: that imagined space must have come from somewhere else, some final Eastern European enclave of Stalinism, where thought police in gray uniforms ride gray cars with blacked-out windows past miles of state-sponsored apartment blocks built over demolished churches and concert halls. In that city it is always raining. Discontented people think about suicide but lack the energy for the decisive act. The mail is late or lost, the shop closed permanently for repairs. The families hoard cracked photographs of ancestors in bulging broken suitcases that hold all that is left of the place they came from. They speak to each other in hoarse whispers as if to convey that anything spoken is some form of unappreciated intrusion into that silently nurtured suffering—that poisonous mix of rancor and regret—that is their only solace. They have been there so long they love the place, down to the

last crumbling bit of soap and the sofa with the broken springs.

I saw them in a movie that was nothing but tones of gray arranged in blocks of shape: a constructivist paradise where people existed to supply an occasion for interesting angles or patterns, epic crane shots of crowds geometrically surging. The tanks rolling through the smashed wall provided an optical delight. The movie could have gone on forever, since patterns are continuously generated wherever human bodies move among structures of stone and metal and there is a camera to register their movements. Now the airplanes are coming, smoke rises from the residential neighborhoods, the crowds are forced toward the pit, the torture unit seals off the street, and it is all a "bracing" or "exhilarating"—or perhaps the appropriate and thus unspeakable word is "soothing"—set of variations of gray.

Does the prisoner come to love his prison? So much that he can scarcely distinguish between the geometric pleasures of the black-and-white war movies and the paler, airier swirls of an early thirties Paramount picture, where blonde tresses and semitransparent negligees, champagne bubbles and luminous dance halls, translate into slight but crucial variations of gray? The figures that move in that ether are more like life than life itself. They might well look pityingly down on a spectator who can only dream of such invulnerable buoyancy. Color photography would make them artificial. Any conceivable heaven would be gray.

Or is this the final temptation, to harbor (in the face of every form of decay) the desire to write a poem consisting entirely of the word "gray," a word which in that context—a universe stripped bare of distinguishing characteristics—would mean city, cloud, veil, wall, cliff, ocean, silence, shadow? To plunge into blackness is to die. To plunge into gray? Perhaps merely to succumb to the lure of cloudiness, a morphine-induced dimness, the backdrop for a dreamlike play by some Belgian symbolist of the *fin de siècle*. Act One: A clearing by a lake. Clouds have gathered. Water and sky merge into a tremulous blur. The barrier of mist is no barrier at all. It denies edges altogether. It hangs in space like some impossibly huge canvas by Mark Tobey. A block of gray, simple and empty, with no trace of the jabbing insistence of sunlight. It lacks both splendors and miseries, lets you vanish into the act of looking at it, neither makes a demand nor gives an answer.

It is not human. Animal, perhaps: the hide of an elephant blocking everything else from view as it passes, or the skin of a gigantic prehistoric reptile filling a frame in a comic book as it emerges from between rock walls. The comic book was *Turok, Son of Stone*, a fifties adventure in which two American Indian hunters were trapped in a sealed-off canyon where they spent their time—years and years of it—doing battle with the dinosaurs who had survived there. In that world all was gray: either lifeless rock or devouring reptile. The humans darted among crevices and caverns, living to fight another day but never finding a way out. Their presumed despair was alleviated only by the bright flat blue of the Southwestern skies under which they struggled.

A gray rock streaked with ash-smears: toward some such natural altar you come in the end, even if not daring to pray for more than a change in the weather. That at least is in the realm of what can reasonably be expected. After the tedium of sunshine, there is almost a lust for the transformations that announce the approaching storm. In the theatrical space between black clouds and surging whitecaps, gray runs through all its changes. "The poetry of destructive energy": the phrase hangs in the air a moment before being swept away by the first blast.

The wintry air-mass pushes forward. The sky in that quarter resembles a solid wall of wet cement. The somber wet gray must be Eden, the color of what is not yet hardened, not yet built.

"I noticed when taking the recently-purchased cord out of its packaging that it was designated "ivory." It doesn't look ivory to me. I mean, I guess it's ivory the way so many neutral housewares are labeled "ivory," but it's not the ivory I have in mind."

IVORY

FRANCES STARK

There's an eight- or ten-foot telephone cord coming out of my laptop and curling into a heap on my beige melamine desktop; it has to travel an awkward distance in order to plug into the phone jack. I noticed when taking the recently-purchased cord out of its packaging that it was designated "ivory." It doesn't look ivory to me. I mean, I guess it's ivory the way so many neutral housewares are labeled "ivory," but it's not the ivory I have in mind. I want to make a monochrome painting here. I imagined my "Ivory" text as a cross between a do-it-yourself Robert Ryman painting (I hear kits are available in museum shops) and a Morandi composition of mostly off-white objects.

The cord is not plugged into the phone jack, but there are two things I previously culled from the Internet that I'd like to get out on the table now and be done with, because I want this to be a real monochrome and not some kind of calico juggling act of disparate references like I'm used to performing.

The first snippet isn't something I went fishing for. It just arrived by email in my virtual copy of the New York Times. It's an art review by Roberta Smith about an exhibition of ivory at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Living in California, I instantly felt that this was a big deal that I was missing out on, and how on earth could I address Ivory for a New York–based publication and ignore the fact that this exhibition was taking place? If only I could see it, it might make a significant difference, or even blow my mind, but let's not get carried away. This'll do:

The flowering of ivory carving in the monasteries of the Middle Ages, equaled only by manuscript illumination, did not coincide by chance with the Crusades. Meanwhile, the number of elephants required to keep nineteenth-century Europe outfitted in billiard balls and piano-keys alone would make even the most unrepentant carnivores among us weep.

I also underlined the phrase "pure, useless delight"—a direction I'd prefer to head in, but before that, the other Internet finding has to do with several half-assed websites attributing the origin of the phrase "ivory tower" to a passage in the Bible where Solomon says about his beloved, "Thy neck is as a tower of ivory." It strikes me as utterly lame. Go in search of the root of a culturally complex pejorative and you find some empty biblical cheese; only later did I dig deeper to find that the writer Sainte-Beuve may have plucked it from the Bible and coined the term to criticize aesthetes like Nerval and Baudelaire. It still doesn't explain why the tower is ivory. But here's another clipping for you:

In 1851, when Louis Napoleon—whom the bourgeoisie had managed to install as president—dissolved the Second Republic in a coup d'état and established the Second Empire in its place, Baudelaire's former companions in Bohemia soured on politics once and for all. Withdrawing into what Sainte-Beuve derided as the "ivory tower" of a life devoted solely to art, writers like Flaubert and Nerval declared war on bourgeois society; this was the beginning of what Lionel Trilling eventually described as the self-perpetuating "adversary culture." But Baudelaire, who no longer viewed the world as being divided between bourgeois and Bohemian, but between bourgeois and Bohemian on the one hand, and true philosopher-artists on the other, would have no part of it. Trapped, if you will, between the "abyss" of Gautier's aesthetic separatism and the inauthentic "solid ground" of bourgeois vulgarity and do-gooder mediocrity, Baudelaire was a man forever on the verge.

Oh, did I say I wanted to make a monochrome painting here? I'm starting to think it's totally impossible. I make actual paintings too, but nobody really considers me a painter. Right now I'm working on some paintings and it's in that painting part of the painting that I want to be, rather than here with this clatter of associations and references. I don't think it would be stretching it to say my paintings are ivory in color. The surface of these paintings has been the only clear idea in my head when it comes to pondering the color ivory. All the baggage of ivory the material is just more noise having to do with colonialism and all kinds of social problems and guilt that doesn't interest me. And the baggage of ivory the tower? More interesting, sure, but too much clutter overrides the color.

Nobody really considers me a painter. In fact, I just recently applied for a tenure-track teaching job that falls under the heading Painting, and when I mentioned that to one of my former teachers, who is a painter known for his writing more than his painting, he said, "You applied for the Painting position? That's a long shot." This was followed by a little evil laugh as he punctuated our conversation by walking away. I

may not be enjoying the view from the ivory tower any time soon.

The ivory-colored paintings I'm making have that hint of yellowish warmth that the phone cord does not, and a hint of surface malleability that the plastic of the cord does not. For reference, I uncovered an ivory-handled tool from the early twentieth century. It's not clear if it came from grandma's vanity or grandpa's workshed, but regardless, it's my only actual ivory referent in the house. The ivory part is well-handled on account of it being, well, a handle, and so it's well-worn and has some cracks that are quite dark with dirt, and some very yellowy grains. It's the porousness of the ivory that allows for the yellow, I think, or that's at least what happens when I'm painting. I apply the milk paint—casein—and then sand it, and in order to feel if it's smooth, I rub my hands across it and then the oil from my hands gets in there and it starts to get slightly buffed and ever so slightly yellowish here and there, and I'm sure you want to keep your finger-oils out of paintings, but I can't resist. Strictly speaking, ivory has been assigned to me—not something I can hide from you, or myself. But the thing is, I have an aesthetic weakness for ivory-colored things and somewhere along the line I suprised myself by wondering if it wasn't too close to my aesthetic to be written about responsibly, as if I'm not allowed to have a personal aesthetic. Now, I wonder where I ever picked up an idea like that? I don't like the way such a vague notion like writing responsibly can just pop up out of nowhere completely unwarrented and sully the mood with do-gooderisms and mediocrity. It's as irrelevant as Solomon's "thy neck is as a tower of ivory" is to the state of seclusion or separation from the ordinary world and the harsh realities of life.

I probably should retreat to the Ivory Tower, but I don't think the view is that great. Surely I'd have less time to lie around the house looking at and thinking about my stuff. This includes, of course, my ivory-colored things and the less yellowish and more simply off-whitish stuff too, like my paintings and the German porcelain and my collection of ivory-colored skirts that I never wear, or the broad, beautiful margins of Franny and Zooey, or all the bowls and candlestick-holders and my Commes des Garçons wallet and my chrysanthemum brooch made out of sharks' teeth. This rag-tag list is not exactly how I pictured my Ivory Morandi. I told myself early on it should be a perfect crowd of individual articulations; matching, of course, but not so closely matching as to appear to be wearing uniforms. I thought I was so clever; "not so closely matching as to appear to be wearing uniforms." Needless to say, I didn't get close to meticulously depicting a series of things, let alone their subtle variations. That's not easy to do in writing, on account of how easy it is to stray from the purely visual. I guess that's why I didn't actually pull together an arrangement of vases and fabrics, because the translation would be too grueling. I wish my computer screen was ivory-colored, instead of this blue-white. And while I'm off-centered, I might as well mention that I can't stand the smell of Ivory soap, and I don't know how they can get away with calling it "99% pure" when it has such a strong smell. But back to the paintings.

There were some problems with the casein surfaces my assistant was working on, and it wasn't her fault but mine. It turned out that they had to be totally redone, so I took the opportunity to paint them myself this time. I got to enter into that pure ivory space for a couple of days, and it was a relief in a sense, but not as perfect as I had imagined it. Trying to sand something to perfection and get that hint of yellow and a hint of gloss is a lot less entrancing than I remember it being. It's like a form of futile dermabrasion. As I sanded, I wondered if I would ever break down and resurface my face with dermabrasion. And then I wondered if the porousness and the small blemishes on my panels weren't in fact a feature that made the surface more beautiful. I know that sounds corny; it reminds me of my mother explaining why it's okay if my skin isn't like ivory. Look at the golden hills, she would say, see how they look like soft lion paws and you want to pet them, but you know full well that if you go up in those hills they are patchy and scratchy and not soft to the touch at all. Okay, now this is getting too yellow. Let it be known I don't have experience with monochroming. My ivory paintings are ivory now, but I plan to break their current mouth-watering silence with imagery. Peacocks.

"Silver was worn to good effect by the Tin Man, but on others, it can seem like second-string arrogance: I'm special, but not as special as gold over here. It's good for jets, streaks, and bullets—anything that zips through the air."

SILVER

PRISCILLA BECKER

Silver is the metallic version of my favorite color, gray. I don't like silver as much as I do gray for the same reasons I don't like loud people as much as quiet ones. Silver was worn to good effect by the Tin Man, but on others, it can seem like second-string arrogance: I'm special, but not as special as gold over here. It's good for jets, streaks, and bullets—anything that zips through the air.

Silver is also the color of my radiator, a beloved apparatus in my apartment. I love little more than to be awoken in the night by the sound of the heat spitting on. Its strange nocturnal respiration fills me with a deep sense of security.

My father always kept the heat low—fifty-eight degrees at night and sixty-two during the day. We weren't freezing, just uncomfortable—the favored condition of my family.

My father also likes music to be turned down low. The sensation of an orchestra needling in the distance is a source of irritation for me. I like music to be heard and heat to be felt. The *suggestion* of music or the *intimation* of heat makes me feel desperate, but they are just the conditions, I suppose, that make my father feel alive. In any case, these tendencies of my father's are good indications of his crepuscular existence.

The heat in my childhood home was noiseless, its emissions weak and regular, more a gesture towards comfort than comfort itself. The heat in my apartment announces itself, most noticeably in the middle of the night when it bumps up against the relative quiet.

This is the time when I get up to relieve my bladder. I stumble into the middle room where intricate criss-crossed shadows are sketched on my walls by the giant tree outside my windows. It is a beautiful and frightening scene. Often there is a moment when I am torn between continuing to the john and sitting among the shadows of my middle room. I have done both. The times I choose the shadows, my face falls into their line and acts out the play of darkness and light for a while.

It is then that the song of the silver radiators plays out. There are three—radiators, that is. I neglected to mention their number because I hate to play favorites—another familial carry-over—but it is my bedroom radiator of which I am most fond. I suspect, though, that their number goes a way toward explaining my new appreciation for this color. I have never before had more than one radiator, at least not more than one that I'd call my own.

To be fair, I don't know which radiator sounds the first note of the symphony, asleep as I am on its downbeat, but I suspect, because of its westernmost position in the apartment, that it is the one in the writing room. Because this is opposite to sense (for why would a song rise in the west?), I feel it is probably correct—just as when I think I should turn right, if I turn left instead, I am usually headed in the right direction.

I imagine the song begins in timid fashion, in the westernmost room, from the thinnest of the three radiators—just three humps wide—with a remote whistle, like a mosquito flying in from the coast. It hovers and worries for a few moments alerting the bedroom radiator to begin its ascent—a gathering-up, a dredging, silver wind shuttled through a tunnel. This is the sound that wakes me.

It is not unusual for sound to wake me—I have the shallow sleep of the congenitally guilty. In summer, while growing up, the sound of tension in the trees would wake me. It was a vibrant sound like high live wires, alert and crackling. A few years ago, I described this tension to a friend, who laughed and said it was locusts, which fly in swarms and nest in the tops of trees. Another friend claimed it was cicadas, and I think now, after listening to their downloaded mating calls, that this is probably what I heard.

Sometimes after awakening, I would get up to check that nothing had been moved in the house. On rare occasions I would encounter my father. The unexpected sight of him hunched over a bowl of cornflakes, his silent spoon unaided by artificial light, embarrassed me. That I had been discovered creeping pointlessly through the house embarrassed me too.

And now in my own apartment, awoken by the sounds of the heat, it is perhaps the sense of the actual that impresses me.

On nights that I succumb to the allures of the shadows, I proceed to the middle room and take to my rocking chair. Each backward motion chips white paint from the wall, revealing a green, like mold, beneath it. The shadows web across my face.

As though sensing my presence, the middle room radiator chimes in—like someone whistling between silver amalgam fillings. By this time, the bedroom is

gaining momentum: it delivers two sustained pitches, from different sections of its orchestra—a high note blown from the top as from a silver flute, and from the lower portion, more like a bassoon, a steady hiss. An internal rattling also pipes in—a machine sound.

The writing room begins its rhythm—an under-percussion—a gentle low thumping; its song gathers urgency. After all, it is a little further on in the theme. A staggered tune, a round, is by now in full bloom.

The middle room, not to be outdone, inserts its rhythmic pattern; it beats a higher, sweeter tone than the writing room, like someone tamping an embroidered plaque into the wall. Its tune becomes more insistent, and though I like to think of my bedroom radiator as the big guy, the string section for our purposes, in all honesty this prestige probably falls to the middle room—what with its central location, its position before the conductor (me).

This middle room is the carrier of the main theme—percolation. It is a murmuring, a conversation—among its own silvery disparate parts, and also among the voices from the other rooms.

And I haven't yet mentioned the kitchen and bathroom. The wind instruments come primarily from these rooms, where tall pipes finish in silver gauges—the source of their sound. These have far less range than the silver accordions, delivering only the mostly sustained but sometimes gusting high winds of the tropics.

The bedroom goes on; the writing room lags; the middle room is quiet, exhausted.

Then it all begins again, but in a fury, a confusion of tones. The writing room fights for precedence, and, once gained, holds its harmonies. A toilet is flushed in an abutting eastern apartment—a cascade of cymbals shimmering over the top of the sound.

From the bedroom, a high-pitched valvic squealing, like pulling up to a stop, applying the brakes. And with this denouement, my mood begins to sympathetically descend. A satisfied whisper releases from the center of the radiator and rides out on its own breath. Now a mid-range clinking, the sound of finger tambourines made of silver nickels, submerged and internal.

The writing room delivers its final kettle drum sound—like large drops of water dripping into a basin. And, in fact, I later discover, water *is* dripping, though not into a basin, but onto my hardwood floor.

As I reluctantly get up from my seat, I console myself with my fortune—a silver symphony of a half hour's duration, and with the knowledge that I have tickets in my bathrobe pocket for many future nights of song—at least for a few more weeks, when the heat is officially turned off.

"Usage generally suggests that the color is more a chemical or technical than an aesthetic (or experienced) blue—and literature, after all, derives from experience (whether real or entirely fantastic). Cyan, nonetheless, is the proper name of the color that a parrot might see over Tortola"

CYAN

LYN HEJINIAN

Cyan (pronounced SIGH-ann) is the color that emanates from a calm sea not far offshore on a clear day as the blue of the sky is reflected in salt water awash over yellow sand. You can see it for yourself in postcards mailed from coastal resorts or, if you are at a resort, from a vantage point somewhere above the beach—from a cliff, say, or lacking cliffs, from atop a palm tree. Various shades of cyan form the background to the ad for Swarovski (whatever that is) on page 13 of the April 2005 issue of *Gourmet* magazine. To create a highly saturated cyan on your own, you might pour 1/4 cup of Arm & Hammer's Powerfully Clean Naturally Fresh Clean Burst laundry detergent onto the whites in your next load of wash (presumably Arm & Hammer adds the pigment to its product in order to provoke association with what we imagine to be the pristine purity of tropical seas). Also, you might search for "cyan" at wikipedia.org, where a resplendent rectangle of the color is on display, along with a succinct definition: "Cyan is a pure spectral color, but the same hue can also be generated by mixing equal amounts of green and blue light. As such, cyan is the complement of red: cyan pigments absorb red light. Cyan is sometimes called blue-green or turquoise and often goes undistinguished from light blue."

You can trick your mind into seeing cyan where it *doesn't* exist by forcing your mind first to see everything as red. Hold a red filter (candy wrapper, red glass, etc.) to your eyes so that your entire field of vision (including peripheral vision) is colored for a minimum of one or two minutes—the longer the better. Then remove the filter and quickly look at a piece of white paper.

In addition to being the name of a color, cyan (from the Greek *kyanos*: dark blue, blue) can combine linguistically with other terms. According to *Webster's Dictionary* (online at bootlegbooks.com), in medical terminology, for example, we find "cyanopathy" ("disease in which the body is colored blue in its surface, arising usually from a malformation of the heart, which causes an imperfect arterialization of the blood; blue jaundice") as well as "cyanosis" ("a bluish or purplish discoloration [as of skin] due to deficient oxygenation of the blood; cyanotic"). Cyanosis can be figurative as well as literal; in *Margaret*, a mid-nineteenth century novel by the Reverend S. Judd (an American Romantic in the mode of James Fenimore Cooper), a character remarks, "His love for me produces a cyanosis."

Taking their name from cyan, the Cyanea form a genus of jellyfishes, the most famous of which is the *Cyanea capillata* or Lion's mane jellyfish, classed among the world's "dangerous animals" because of the painful (though rarely fatal and sometimes even "innocuous") stings it can inflict; specimens of *Cyanea capillata* as much as 8 feet wide and 1000 feet long are not uncommon along the coast of the North Sea, and are also frequently seen in the waters around North Sea oil rigs. Despite the cyanic prefix, *Cyanea capillata* is not blue but generally yellowish; in the same region, however, *Cyanea lamarckii* flourishes, a true blue jellyfish, also known as the Bluefire.

The first appearance of cyan as a combining form in English occurred around 1838, in T. Thomson's *Chemistry of Inorganic Bodies*, and it now functions in the names of various chemicals and chemical processes. Thus cyanin is the name of "the blue coloring matter of flowers; —called also anthokyan and anthocyanin"; cyanogen is "a colorless, inflammable, poisonous gas, C_2N_2, with a peach-blossom odor, so called from its tendency to form blue compounds, among them pigmented paints, inks, etc., labeled Prussian blue"; and cyanide is "the name of a poisonous compound whose ingestion can be fatal, since it inhibits tissue oxidation (causing cyanosis—which is to say, the victim turns blue)."

An Egyptian papyrus in the Louvre mentions the "penalty of the peach," an apparent reference to intentional (perhaps judicially mandated) cyanide poisoning, using oils pressed from bitter almonds. Almond-scented breath is a notable symptom of cyanide poisoning; however, approximately eighteen percent of men and five percent of women are unable to detect the smell. Cyanide is also present in cherry laurel leaves and in foodstuffs such as cabbage, spinach, cassava, and (as amygdalin) in apple pips, peach, plum, and cherry pits, and, of course, almond kernels. In the kernels themselves, amygdalin seems to be completely harmless as long as it is relatively dry. However, the seeds contain an enzyme that is capable of releasing cyanide when the seeds are crushed and moistened (as happens, of course, when they are chewed). Exactly this occurred with dreadful

results in mid-March of 2005, when children at an elementary school in the Philippines ate a snack of inadequately prepared cassava; twenty-seven died and a hundred others became severely ill.

Hydrogen cyanide is present in some insecticides and it is often used as a pesticide in the fumigation of ships, large buildings, houses, trains, and airplanes. Automobile pollution-control devices with malfunctioning catalytic converters generate cyanide, as does burning wool, silk, horse hair, and tobacco, as well as modern synthetic materials, such as polyurethane. Hydrogen cyanide gas is the gas of the gas chamber; Hitler used so much of it that the walls of his death-camp shower rooms were permanently stained blue.

Among the possible antidotes to cyanide poisoning is hydroxocobalamin, a reddish powder; this has at least been shown to be an effective antidote for experimental cyanide poisoning in mice, guinea pigs, baboons, and dogs. Treatment for severe cyanide poisoning has its own risks, however, among them methaemoglobinaemia (a condition in which the iron normally present in haemoglobin is oxidized, leaving enzymes in the blood incapable of utilizing it). As an antidote to this condition—as an antidote to the antidote, as it were—either one of two blue dyes, toluidine blue and methylene blue ("a dark green, almost odourless, crystalline powder with a bronze-like luster"), can be effective. In effect, then, a blue poison can be counteracted with a red compound which, however, can itself be a poison, which can then be counteracted with a blue compound.

Cyan is the first name of an *oyaji* character in the *Final Fantasy VI* video game. He is a 159-pound, 5-foot-10-inch tall, 50-year old samurai, who has survived the poisoning (by cyanide gas?) of the castle of Doma, though it kills his wife Elayne and son Owain; his fullname is Cyan Garamonde. Cyan's special ability is Sword Tech (*SwdTech*), in which, according to the game's manufacturer, Cyan Worlds, ("located on the outskirts of Spokane, Washington, a city of roughly half a million. It's less than a two hour drive to a dozen ski slopes and lake resorts; a 45-minute flight to Seattle; a day's drive to Yellowstone, Glacier, and Banff Springs National parks; a half a day flight to Hawaii; and a world away from the rat race"), we can identify eight specific techniques. These include: Dispatch ("A randomly targeted single-strike attack"); Retort ("No immediate effect, but if Cyan is hit before his next turn, he will counterattack for huge damage"); Slash ("Halves enemy and causes seizure status [like Poison but with no cure]"); Quadra Slam ("Four randomly-targeted attacks"); and Stunner ("A fullscreen attack").

Six cyan (though not Cyan's) samurai swords were on auction on eBay on 21 December 2004; bidding on each began at £29.99, and they were timed to be sold off every ten hours or so.

Because cyan is one of the three main pigments used in CMYK color reproduction (magenta and yellow being the other two, with black added in to sharpen contrasts and deepen shadow—black is responsible for the K in the CMYK, though why a K rather than a B is not clear), on any given date on eBay, an enormous number of cyan print-heads, toner cartridges, plates, inks, etc., are available. Among the other cyan commodities for sale on eBay on 25 November 2004 were: Rare Chinese Cyan Jade Culture Genitals ($5.99): a Three Dog Night Cyan LP ($19.47); a Three Dog Night Cyan CD ($1.49); a pair of red/cyan 3D viewing glasses ($11); a pair of brown/cyan ski goggles ($99); a number of medium-sized cyan Julius Peppers Carolina Panthers Reebok Jerseys ($39.99 each); and four 100% cashmere cyan pashminas ($8.99 each). More pashminas at the same price were available on 21 December 2004 and on Easter Sunday of 2005, along with a Cyan Glazed Dragon Handle *Ruyao* Pot (twelfth-century China) ($5.80); a Sexy and Stunning cyan lingerie set (AUS $19.99); a set of 350 loose cyan-blue Czechoslovakian seed beads ($2.49 for the lot); several more copies of Three Dog Night's 1974 *Cyan* LP, one of them signed by "Chuck Cory Danny" (who would be Cory Wells and Danny Hutton, who are still with the band, and Chuck Negron, who was apparently kicked out of it) ($19.99), and one not signed (99 cents). On Easter also, one could buy a Cyan Lycra Spandex Zentai Unitard Catsuit, available in four sizes: small ($20.50), medium ($12.50), large ($26), and extra-large ($57). One can't help but wonder what determined the price variations. The extra-large Cyan Catsuit cost more than twice what the large cost, suggesting that it must contain more than twice the amount of lycra spandex fabric (it must, in other words, be huge as well as blue) and/

or it must represent more than twice the amount of "time-congealed labor" (and have been exceedingly tedious to put together).

The whole world of color is a world of light—and of mind. Lighting designers play with both by adding and subtracting colors to and from each other so as to trick the mind into seeing what it should see. As Jan Kroeze of JKLD (jkld.com) describes it:

Because the relevant part of the brain, which for convenience's sake we call the eye, tries to see white light (an extremely relative term), it will add any missing colors to the least saturated surface. To wit: Most theatre and other lights are produced by heating a tungsten filament till it glows—this is true for most light bulbs (it will not be true in five years). The light generated by this method is almost entirely red, even though the eye sees it as yellow (let's not go there). Under normal circumstances the eye deals with this—a sheet of white paper will look white under tungsten light. However in theatre there is a tradition of using colored gels to provide mood, suggest location, etc., and there is a tendency to use a warm color, such as pink, on the actors to make them look prettier, more sympathetic, whatever. When that happens the red bias in the light is reinforced and the eye has to take charge. Striving to see white light, the eye adds the missing colors—in this case cyan—to the least saturated surface within the focal area. This is often the actor's skin which, as the ever more desperate lighting designer adds more and more pink light, turns ever blue/greener. To solve this problem, one simply aims a cyan-colored light somewhere close by on the set. The eye is then satisfied, colors are balanced, and the actor suddenly looks ten tears younger.

The word "cyan" appears nowhere in Shakespeare's works nor in the *Bible*; it doesn't appear in Emily Dickinson's poetry, nor in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Usage generally suggests that the color is more a chemical or technical than an aesthetic (or experienced) blue—and literature, after all, derives from experience (whether real or entirely fantastic). Cyan, nonetheless, is the proper name of the color that a parrot might see over Tortola, or a parasailor who will artfully discover (in the words of new.onepaper.com/virginvoices) "the exhilarating experience of floating in the air over the cyan sea." Alas, that cyan sea is heating up and, thanks to dirty rain and human run-off carrying substances like Arm & Hammer's Powerfully Clean Naturally Fresh Clean Burst laundry detergent, it has been a long time since the cyan of the sea has been pristine.

"The color of caution is the color of concern. It's a maternal sign in a world of commands. Yellow doesn't bark. It reminds. It doesn't demand. It encourages."

YELLOW

NATO THOMPSON

This is a cautionary tale. Continue reading if you like, but give way if pressed. Don't tense up. Relax. Stretch your fingers. Feel your breathing. Hold this magazine gently, letting your thumbs rest on the front of the pages while your remaining fingers press slightly on the back to produce a bending effect. The resulting pressure should produce an optimal surface for reading text. You can focus on this essay, but please, retain an awareness of your surroundings. Practice using your peripheral vision and make note of any incremental shifts or movements in your environment. You might want to read this in a wood chair, not so comfortable that you run the risk of falling asleep, but not so stiff that you might hurt your back or let an extremity fall asleep. Have snacks on hand, too, in order to avoid an unnecessary break. You might also want to relieve yourself before proceeding. And please, turn off your cell phone. Let's begin.

This essay is dedicated to the color yellow. The color of caution. The color that beyond all others looks out for you, the reader. The driver. The citizen. The vulnerable body. Yellow is bright because it doesn't let its guard down. And neither should you. It's a dangerous world out there and you can thank the color yellow for lending a hand in navigating this treacherous terrain.

The color of caution is the color of concern. It's a maternal sign in a world of commands. Yellow doesn't bark. It reminds. It doesn't demand. It encourages. It is the hand on the back of your tricycle, gently modulating your speed as you pedal down the sidewalk. It coddles you, advises you, nurtures you. It is a Zen sign in a world of fascists. You do not necessarily stop nor do you go, you proceed at a contingent speed based on the surrounding conditions. Like Tai Chi, you let the motion of the world move through you and use its inertia to catapult a foe. The yellow light at the intersection blinks a perfect rhythm. It pulses with the beating of your heart. It is letting you know that unlike the rest of the colors, yellow is there, lending a hand, doing the hard work, and tending to that eating, breathing, sleeping, and driving being that is you. This level of empathy is unheard of in all other street signs. It is the big maybe that resonates with the flexible state of mind that will get you through. When you proceed in a cautious manner, you are saying to the world, "No hurry here. Just getting the job done." That's an ethical yet strategic position.

A yellow curb does not say to you, "Do not park your car." Nor does it say, "Do park your car." The yellow curb asks you calmly to be aware of the codes and regulations that pertain to that site of vehicular standing. The yellow curb is not reprimanding you, but rather reminding you that geography is in cahoots with the disciplinary society. It's saying, "My child, do not be naïve. The world is full of surprises, most of which are tucked away in the penal code. Do not ignore them. Knowledge is a good defense. Beware!" Listen to the yellow curb. The curb is murmuring profundity.

Yet caution is contrary and its consolation often belies its cruelty. The caution sign itself bears out this formula, for the sign is a sign of a schizophrenic appetite. Not content to be merely the color of caution itself, the caution sign goes the extra distance by wearing the word "CAUTION" boldly on its visage. It is neither a double negative nor a double positive; it is a double conditional. The textual black caution demands caution while the color yellow caution gently reminds caution. These simultaneous paternal and maternal forms of danger avoidance find a conflict in their tone and the ultimate meaning of the caution sign itself escapes reason. You tense up at the bold demands of the text and then coo at the cajoling of the color. Caught in this vertiginous psychosexual trauma, you brace yourself for the intersection. This brazen act of double meaning may at times result in interpretive paralysis. While many on the road find the act of interpreting the double negative a nuisance, the double conditional is an outright safety hazard.

Caution is the way of the road and it is hard to imagine a cautionary world without the invaluable iconography of road signs, lights, crosswalks, and meridians that have catapulted yellow into humble pragmatic legend. Next time you drive, use the yellow signs. Not that they demand that of you. No, that is not yellow's way. But go ahead. Use them. For many of these signs are the sign of things to come. They are diamond-shaped potential futures placed at the corners of your eyes. As you hurtle yourself through space with pistons pounding at the miniscule ignition of gas and spark, the yellow sign warns, whispers, and waits. Children at play, blind children, deaf children,

children Xing, deer Xing, bear Xing, moose Xing, turkey Xing. Like a film preview, these iconographic potentialities produce a vision of a world that may arrive, a narrative that you are about to enter from stage left at a velocity far beyond the cast's capacity. Far be it for the child, turkey, or moose to prepare, for it is you, the potential future of disaster, that comes barreling down that snowy road. It is you, you as the future, of which the signs warn. They say to you, "What kind of future do you want to be?" The yellow signs have witnessed these potentialities played out time and time again. They do their best. They have seen a prancing deer launch out into the road, feet tucked, head high, eyes glowing in the glare of headlights as it is splayed across the hood of a Honda Civic with the agonized hands of Cynthia trembling at the wheel. Heart racing. Easy-listening blasting. Traces of deer hair enmeshed forever in the front left bumper. Yellow knows. Yellow nods.

Yellow understands gradient and contour. Yellow acknowledges driveways and low salt zones. It is yellow that tacitly accepts the geologic conditions that produce futures based on a society of velocity. It looks you in the eye and reminds you that the future of disaster in large part derives from the inability of you, the driver, to acknowledge the evershifting relationship between your tires and the skin of the earth. The yellow sign will not waste your time by letting you know about a straightaway, nor inconvenience you with a grade of zero. Nor does yellow stop you. Leave that for the garish vulgarity of red. Yellow warns. Yellow is the ghost of Christmas yet to come and, in that sense, yellow is the sign of the ultimate thing to come—death itself.

For yellow is foreboding. In every cautionary whisper, one hears the trembling laughter of the grave. In every yellow sign a new vision of your potential demise comes to light. A squiggly road sign emerges and you see yourself careening at 70 mph off into a tomb of birch and pine. Every bend is a new hackneyed memorial with dried flowers and a rickety cross. Every emerging intersection begs for a collision so brutalizing that the pavement cracks and the signs themselves are torn asunder. Fire hydrants explode, engine oil spews, and the smell of burnt rubber fills the nostrils of those paying tribute to speed, contour, and collision. And it is yellow, that horrifying color of smug self-satisfaction, that looks over the smoldering site of disaster that lies below its towering reprimand and says, "It is I, the sign of caution, that told you so. I am the one who warned. And it is I, in your last melancholy seconds with your eyes blinking at the descending gas gauge, ears aggravated by the seat belt warning, and your breath fading on the cracked windshield glass, it is I that looks over you. It is I that told you so."

"Is anyone tawny who you can have. You know what I mean. It seems a slightly disdained object of lust. Her tawny skin—face it, used that way it's a corrupt word. It isn't even on the speaker. It's on the spoken about. She or he is looking expensive and paid for."

TAWNY

EILEEN MYLES

I drove up to Santa Barbara this weekend with the question under my belt of whether CA is tawny or not. I thought this is something I can do while I'm driving. The driving is a new problem. I mean I love driving because it is the greatest opportunity to listen to music and music pretty much comes from young people with few exceptions so I'm sailing up the coast on someone's young vibes and a bright slap of marigold is zipping along the highway with me for a while but you know marigold is such a businesslike color. It's usually the one bright color an otherwise boring situation has to offer in the way of energy. It's like "bright." This is unrelated to tawny but I'm just letting you see how I open up the color. The biggest driving problem (and this has been true for a while, but before I lived in CA it was chiefly on book tours I had this problem) is that while aimlessly driving across America (my favorite thing in the world to be doing) I get stabbed by an idea—and maybe I have a big pad of paper next to me on the seat but usually I have some fucking receipt for gas (most likely) and a big thought comes—one like this:

When Moses hit the rock with a stick and water came he didn't think great now I can always do that.

Obviously I can't lose that thought nor the one about tawny so—do I write it down? I bought an iPod for this specific purpose—so I can connect an iTalk to it and then talk into it when I drive in my truck. But then it turns out you can't plug an iPod into my truck. I could if I had a cassette player but no, I have a CD player, which doesn't do the trick.

There's another radio way so I bought that product but San Diego has so many bandwidths all used up with you know wonderful conservative radio yapping. How much does Jesus love you. A big sign over the freeway says this. It's his back with his arms extended. He loves you this much. And the sun of course is pouring down his backside. Is Jesus tawny is a thought. Having failed utterly to record my thoughts by pressing a button while I drive I have instead devolved in another direction. I call myself. After Eileen delivers her cheery greeting I go: I drove up to Santa Barbara this weekend with the question under my belt of whether CA is tawny or not. Satisfied I hang up.

It's interesting: there's a wall along the freeway over there and there's green dabs of paint every so often on it and a sun pouncing down. It feels kind of warm so the color isn't right but there's a feel. I'm thinking tawny isn't a color. It's a feeling. Like butter, the air in Hawaii, a feeling of value. Is anyone tawny who you can have. You know what I mean. It seems a slightly disdained object of lust. Her tawny skin—face it, used that way it's a corrupt word. It isn't even on the speaker. It's on the spoken about. She or he is looking expensive and paid for. So I prefer to think about light. Open or closed. Closed is more literary light. Or light (there you go) of rooms you pass as you walk or drive by but most particularly I think as you ride by at night on a bike so you can smell the air out here and see the light in there, the light of a home you don't know and feel mildly excited about, the light you'll never know. Smokers with their backs to me standing in a sunset at the beach are closer to tawny than me.

In Santa Barbara I hooked up with Bruce and Jill and before we parted we went to such a restaurant, awful by the sea. One of Jill's friends was in a wheelchair looking out at the sea and I just thought how rough for him to be in this place looking out and imagined the landscape of tawny being huge for him. Unbridled, the whole world. I don't think of disabled as being less but tawny is even more somebody else's if you never go to the beach alone anymore and there you are looking out. I don't smoke and so I think of Bruce as having more access to tawny than me standing there on the horizon having a smoke being nostalgic because there's little else to do when you're smoking pretending to feel. I miss it. I miss it exactly like that. The cigarette being a little rouged by light.

Jill and I talk quickly about pussy while Bruce is away. Getting any. You slept with Chris. Two hundred hours. That's all anyone got. That's amazing. Chris was this very cute butch who died of cancer a few years ago. My age. And I'm not stone like Chris but I'm a bit of a man, and yet before she died she wanted to give *me* a massage. And that was a feeling. Her kind dying hands rubbing all over my body. I gave myself up to whatever feeling she had, and it was in the late afternoon and the grass in her backyard was spectacularly green. The feeling was golden. Have I said it. Pretty much yes. It's a beautiful sadness.

Driving back down the coast the next afternoon (spent the night in LA) after deciding tawny was not what CA had it's more of an East Coast word I had it

all alone in the late afternoon driving. I want to return to Moses for a moment. He probably thought this will never happen again. He looked around. What can I possibly say.

"But what if we've got it backwards?
What if scarlet caused us to
become passionately fixated
on transcending ourselves, via
merging with others in the act of sex,
or by killing and being killed? What
if scarlet was a drug"

SCARLET

JOSHUA GLENN

When paranoid types encounter a word as enduring and pervasive as *scarlet* (OF, *escarlate*; It., *scarlatto*; ON, *skarlat*; mod. Gr. *skarlaton*; Serbian, *skrlet*; etc.), we sit up and take notice.

A signifier used nowadays to refer to a vivid red color inclining to orange or yellow, *scarlet* is believed to be an alteration of the Persian *saqalat* (*saqirlat*, in modern Arabic), meaning a high-quality cloth, usually dyed red. Not just any red, though! In non-industrial societies, flame-red scarlet symbolizes fertility and vitality. Color therapists consider scarlet a vasoconstrictor, arterial stimulant, and renal energizer: they employ it to raise blood pressure, stimulate erections, increase menstruation, and promote libido. And in our popular culture, it's associated with fallen women (*The Scarlet Letter*) and those women whom we'd like to see fall (Scarlett O'Hara, Scarlett Johansson, Miss Scarlet from the boardgame "Clue"). It is an intoxicating, maddening hue.

But if scarlet is reminiscent of sex, it's also reminiscent of death. Since the days of Genghis Khan, poets have marveled at how poppies as scarlet as blood tend to spring up in war-torn meadows; that's why veterans wear poppies on Memorial Day. And recent archaeological discoveries in the Middle East suggest that scarlet has symbolized death for nearly as long as humans have engaged in symbolic thinking: lumps of ocher found near the 90,000-year-old graves in the Qafzeh Cave in Israel, scholars have claimed, were carefully heated in hearths to yield a scarlet hue, then used in ritual activities related to burying the dead.

Thus in the history of symbolic thought, scarlet has meant both Eros and Thanatos, Sex and Death, the conflicting drives that—according to Freud—govern every aspect of human activity. But what if we've got it backwards? What if scarlet *caused* us to become passionately fixated on transcending ourselves, via merging with others in the act of sex, or by killing and being killed? What if scarlet was a drug—like rhoeadine, the sedative in scarlet poppies used by the god Morpheus, and the Wicked Witch of Oz—first distilled in the ancient Middle East? What if *saqalat* was not merely a luxury item but an intoxicant that once possessed entire peoples and changed the course of history?

At the risk of being flippant, one might go so far as to suggest that this crackpot theory makes sense of the Old Testament.

Let's face it: the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, authored by Moses himself, tells a far-out story. Skipping over Genesis, the prequel to the main narrative (it's *The Hobbit*, if you will, to Moses' *Lord of the Rings*), we read in Exodus that the author, an adopted Egyptian prince who came to sympathize with the multiracial community of slaves known as Hebrews, encountered an entity "in flames of fire from within a bush": If God has a color, that is, it's flame-red, or scarlet. This unnameable phenomenon (YHWH means "I am who I am") seems to possess and inflame Moses: when Moses comes down from Mount Sinai after spending 40 days with YHWH, "he was not aware that his face was radiant"(Ex 34:29), and forever after, one reads, he wears a veil when he's out in public (Ex 34:33–34). What does YHWH want? To shape the Hebrews into a nation unlike other nations, one with no king but YHWH; to reveal Its laws to the Hebrews; and, oddly enough, to instruct the Hebrews in exacting detail on how to erect a tabernacle where It will dwell.

Does this take-me-to-your-leader business put anyone in mind of JHVH-1 (JEHOVAH), the evil, godlike space creature dreamed up by the parodic Church of the SubGenius? No surprise there, because in several important respects YHWH does resemble an extraterrestrial. Like the radioactive alien in the movie *Repo Man*, YHWH can't be directly viewed by the Hebrews. It's kept under lock and key in a protective containment sphere of sorts: the tabernacle. Though the Hebrews have fled into the wilderness with only a few possessions, throughout Exodus YHWH demands from them rare and specific materials for his dwelling place. First and foremost, It orders them to bring offerings of "blue, purple, and scarlet" (Ex 25:4), meaning dyes derived (in the case of blue and purple) from shellfish that swarm in the waters of the northeast Mediterranean, and (in the case of scarlet) from *Dactylopius coccus*, the cochineal bug, as well as from the various caterpillars and larvae that feed on cochineals.

Now, the scarlet pigment harvested from cochineals and their predators is a compound called carminic acid, which—according to chemical

ecologists—functions as a protective substance. So when YHWH tells Moses that It wants Its tabernacle and Its door to be constructed of *saqalat*, and that furthermore It wants the ark in which It lives to be surrounded by more *saqalat* (Ex 26:1,36 and 27:16), It is obviously sterilizing Its environment. YHWH goes on to design the vestments of its priests, also of richly dyed cloth, and It forbids anyone "unclean" to enter the tabernacle: any priest who has become unclean through contact with other Hebrews, YHWH insists, must wash himself in scarlet. Leviticus, a book dedicated entirely to the special duties of YHWH's priests, seems to suggest that scarlet dye was also used by the priests to infect others with what we might call the YHWH virus. In Leviticus 14, for example, we read that YHWH instructed the Levites to use a length of scarlet-dyed cord to sprinkle liquids onto the open sores of any ailing Hebrews. As we shall see, the scarlet cord, which functioned something like a syringe, would become an important symbol for the Hebrews.

There is a great deal more of this kind of thing in Leviticus and also in Numbers, an account of the Hebrews' nomadic existence in the Middle East following their initial organization at Sinai. But in Numbers, YHWH finally reveals his plan to the Hebrews: they are to invade Canaan. Why? Because Canaan, later called Phoenicia, was a land where the dyeing industry was of central importance to the economy (both names in fact mean "land of purple"); and YHWH must have desired to corner the market. Having possessed the minds and bodies of the Hebrews via his priests' scarlet cords, YHWH organizes them into a military camp and they march from Sinai as Its conquering army. The only problem is that the Hebrews keep defying YHWH: after thirty-nine years, they still haven't invaded Canaan, and the old guard of tabernacle insiders is dying off. In Deuteronomy, the final book of the Pentateuch, Moses makes a last-ditch series of speeches urging the Hebrews to remain faithful to YHWH, and then dies himself.

This might have been the end of the history of YHWH on Earth, were it not for the efforts of Joshua, a Hebrew strongman who got his start standing guard outside the first, temporary tent that Moses set up for YHWH. Joshua leads the Hebrews across the Jordan into Canaan, occupies the kingdoms of Og and Sihon, and sends spies into the fortified kingdom of Jericho. At this transitional moment in the Book of Joshua (and the history of mankind), sex and death play a crucial role. Rahab, a prostitute, shelters Joshua's spies and delivers to them the intel that the Canaanites are terrified of the Hebrews and YHWH. The spies then inform Rahab that when the Hebrews take Jericho, she can spare the lives of her family by hanging something out of her window. Remember what it was? That's right: a scarlet cord.

Joshua and the Hebrews conquered Jericho and went on to seize control of all the hill country and the Negev, thus gaining control of the area's dye industries. The next three major books of the Hebrew Bible—Judges, Samuel, and Kings—record Israel's rise and fall. Judges portrays a kind of anarchist utopia unlike any other nation (i.e., an exploitative monarchy), because it could have only one king: YHWH. Early in Samuel, however, the Israelites bring YHWH's ark into battle against the Philistines, and it is captured. For twenty years, the ark remains outside its protective tabernacle, and diseases follow it everywhere (1 Sam 5:6). It seems correct to assume that YHWH, unprotected by *saqalat*, was destroyed at some point during this period. Perhaps this is what Philip K. Dick was getting at in *Our Friends from Frolix 8*, in which a character announces, "God is dead. They found his carcass in 2019. Floating out in space near Alpha."

The Hebrews, meanwhile, minds no longer clouded by whatever ego-obliterating substance they'd received via the priests' scarlet cords, ceased to obey YHWH's injunction that they should have no other king. Immediately after we learn of the ark's capture, we read that Samuel, the most distinguished of Israel's judges, was approached by a committee of Hebrews who demanded, "Now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have." Samuel anointed Saul, who proceeded to do what kings everywhere have always done: he built a standing army, invaded other countries, and exploited the populace. By the end of 1st and 2nd Kings, we cannot help but agree with the Hebrew prophets. Alas, Israel became a nation like all the other nations.

So what role does scarlet play in our lives today? We Americans have always enjoyed portraying ourselves as a new Israel, but these days it's only too apparent that we're the empire-building Israel about which Isaiah lamented. Not only that, we're a nation of sex and death addicts, ricocheting from one extreme to another—anorexia/obesity, Puritanism/pornography, sloth/war. Why? Call it an attempt to recapture the annihilating highs and lows experienced thousands of years ago by the Hebrews. Like them, we're only happy when we're drinking the scarlet Kool-Aid.

"I had just completed the thirteenth and final volume of "A Series Of Unfortunate Events," a sequence of novels chronicling the lives of three hapless orphans, one of whom is named Violet."

VIOLET

DANIEL HANDLER

Upon receiving this publication's instructions to write on the color violet, I had just completed the thirteenth and final volume of "A Series Of Unfortunate Events," a sequence of novels chronicling the lives of three hapless orphans, one of whom is named Violet. Accordingly, I decided to spend a bit of time with another young girl named Violet. This Violet is the daughter of prominent Kansas City booksellers. I've always liked her, but as with people I like who live in Kansas City, I never got to talk to her much. Via regular mail, I was able to ask her a great number of questions, selections from which are reprinted here.

Your name is a color. What's up with that?

NO one knows
and I dont Know
either.

Do you know a good joke? Please tell it.

I no one but I cant
Write it call me and
I can tell you

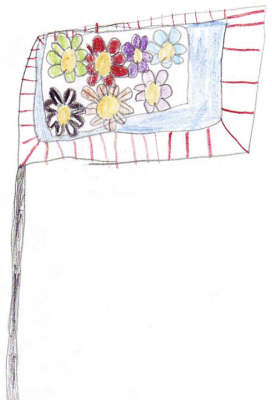
The writer F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "Everybody's youth is a dream, a form of chemical madness." What do you think of this?

Crazy how can our hole
life be a dream.

If you were given an award tomorrow, what would you say in your acceptance speech? (Don't forget to thank me.)

this award means a lot
to me. I dont Know how
to thank you eh hem. Its
a great honor to have it.
Clap Clap Clap Clap Clap.
Yes thank you thank you

If you had a flag, what would it look like?



Printed below are fragments of a poem by Sappho, who lived in Ancient Greece. Many of her poems are only in fragments – the rest of them are lost in history. Please finish the poem for us. (Some hints: the symbol] means that there were definitely words there, but there might be words elsewhere, too. Also, in case you don't know, the word "Muse" refers to a mythical woman who inspired artists.)

there] was
a] goat
that stole gold from a] goat
] for comrades
and] for the love
] of children
for poor] not rich
and] to
the] gods
the] nice gods
] to gods
that are] ugly
and that] are
With] Muse
for] animals

"In Western societies, white is rendered the invisible color, while brown is among the most visible; in turn, that which is made invisible is considered natural. That's how dominant ideologies work—by equating themselves with a state of nature and the nature of the state"

BROWN

ALAN GILBERT

The same week Cabinet asked me to write on the color brown, Time magazine announced "You" as 2006's "Person of the Year." Time's selection turned out to be mostly an excuse to celebrate the emergence of Web 2.0 and its "open source" technology of collective contribution, nonproprietary distribution, and seemingly indiscriminate mixing, which supposedly renders obsolete once and for all notions of high and low, authority and amateur, producer and consumer, artist and audience, etc. It's the potential realization of postmodernism's failed dream, despite lingering questions as to whether or not Web 2.0 will fundamentally change basic relationships of power.

I remember the last time there was such enthusiasm about—and gushing rhetoric around—the Internet as democratic tool for radical change. Back then, I read Mondo 2000 and Wired religiously, although I found the latter's anti-corporate corporate language alienating and opaque. If Web 1.0 meant that bodies would be freed of material burdens, such as other people and offices (Mondo 2000 positively drooled over the idea of solitary individuals having virtual reality sex, and Wired promised that one day soon everyone would be a telecommuter), then Web 2.0 signals the replacement of content with accumulating information, of aesthetics with mechanisms of transmission, and of the isolated subject with one in perpetually updated relation—just click REFRESH.

Among other things, this means that Web 2.0 is a partial deathblow to conventional aesthetics. This isn't so terrible, and was inevitable anyway, since aesthetics is a historical construction—a rapidly aging one at that. Francesco Bonami writes in a recent issue of *Artforum*: "If going to a museum is seen as a kind of airport-lounge experience, you have to accept that art can easily turn into 'stuff,' meaning that viewers will experience mostly accumulation rather than sublimation." This is happening on a much more pervasive and invasive scale outside of the museum space as Web 2.0 continuously and voraciously feeds on the compiling "stuff" of culture and information. In this sense, MySpace and YouTube are doing more to challenge traditional aesthetics than progressive artists, art institutions, and Hal Foster-edited anthologies on anti-aesthetics combined, just as gallery– and museum-going paradigms for appreciating (and critiquing) art are being confronted by Web 2.0's culture-as-file-and-information-sharing model.

In a catalogue essay on the work of Josephine Meckseper, John Kelsey describes how "all attention is swallowed in the communication of a message rather than in the intensity of an event." As Web 2.0 poster children, MySpace, YouTube, and Wikipedia prove, two-dimensional foraging is what's most important. Much of the appeal of YouTube and MySpace results from being able to say—i.e., tell somebody else, typically electronically (email a link)—that you've seen or heard something online. Moreover, nobody watches a YouTube video for its formal components. Color, sound, and resolution quality are secondary. Does all of this make a column focused on color a bit irrelevant?

On the contrary. As Josef Albers demonstrated in *Interaction of Color*, color, too, is profoundly relational. His chapter IV heading sketches one aspect of this: "A color has many faces—the relativity of color." Interestingly, the example he uses shows perceptual changes that occur to the exact same shade of brown depending on the colors surrounding it. Another example reveals how different browns can be made to look similar when surrounded by lighter or darker hues. Robert Ryman's obsessive monochromatic experiments with the color white point not to its purity or transcendental quality but to its relativity—material as well as cognitive.

Albers's and Ryman's experiments with color may be rigorously phenomenological, as opposed to political, but the experience of color in any meaningful sense never precedes psychology and culture. James Baldwin writes in *The Fire Next Time* that, "color is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality." Accounting for color always accompanies the act of perception, which at its most basic is a physical process involving light, wavelengths, retinas, and electrical and chemical processes in the brain. Brown throws this dynamic into striking relief.

Too much color has always confused categories. "As a non-spectral colour, brown has been especially resistant to theory," writes John Gage in *Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism*. But that's not for lack of trying. Not surprisingly, Wikipedia has

an entry for *brown* that combines description and supposition. Presenting a list of at times arbitrary associations with the word brown, it informs online "researchers": "Brown is also sometimes used to refer to brown people or darker skined [*sic*] Caucasoids of South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa" and, "Brown is the color of many soils, animals, tree barks, feces and many other things in nature." Whether as nature, excrement, or a racialized other, in European-American culture something in brown always remains unspoken, frequently lodged between the sublime and the abject.

In *Bright Earth: Art and the Invention of Color*, Philip Ball echoes Gage and points to—consciously or not— brown's many resonances (the "brown note" in music fabled to induce bowel movements is a different issue): "Brown is another difficult one. It sits on the border between a real color and an achromatic one—a 'dirty' color akin to gray." Despite co-authoring a sonnet with Paul Verlaine that affectionately describes an asshole (not an irritating person, but the orifice), Rimbaud abandoned brown to silence—as he later abandoned poetry—when he didn't assign it a corresponding vowel in his synaesthetic poem "Voyelles." I was once intellectually smitten with Georges Bataille's notion of "base materialism" (death, decay, and shit), and the scatological element in Paul McCarthy's performances reduces me to a giggling entrancement. And I know I'm not the only person who pauses in curious bemusement whenever I encounter UPS's advertising slogan, "What Can Brown Do For You?"

In a world where communication, information, and experience are being continuously extended, sped up, and flattened out, everything now seems to happen simultaneously. These new combinations of technology and commerce may have prompted Thomas Friedman to declare that "the world is flat," but the invisible hand of his—and Adam Smith's—"free" market is most assuredly white. Aesthetics, race, and nationhood—each are discourses traditionally fearful of brown's intermixing. In fact, the historical development of the concept of race runs loosely parallel to that of aesthetics, and like aesthetics (and nationalism), culminated in the nineteenth century's explosion of real and pseudo-science. (Not uncoincidentally, the nineteenth century is also when the first modern investigations into the psychology of color took place.)

In Western societies, white is rendered the invisible color, while brown is among the most visible; in turn, that which is made invisible is considered natural. That's how dominant ideologies work—by equating themselves with a state of nature and the nature of the state (which is one reason why conservatives are quick to label homosexuality an "unnatural" act, and helps explain the television show *Survivor* locating capitalist competition in a "natural" setting). Baldwin was right. Color is a political process. When blended, the commingling of black and white may make gray, but brown has a little bit of every color. Baldwin asked, "Isn't love more important than color?" I agree. As with "open source" social modes, love is a complex relational. And brown is its color.

"The photographs in "The Olive Standard" seize on this hard-to-produce olive fabric as a symbol of how much American savvy has done to help us infiltrate and assimilate colonial cultures. Olive is the color of the very Modern idea that there is complexity at the heart of simple things."

OLIVE

DZIGA LOVECHILD

Tim Davis is an artist for our times. By that I mean he is mediocre, smug, and overreaching. And as is the way of such things, Davis has been granted a boldface stage for his cellophane noodlings as the American representative at the otherwise unfailing Coxsackie Biennial. Davis began his career as a photographer, roaming the realm like a Merry Man, "adding meaning but not material" (in his words) to the world, acting out that bottomlessly poetical global system of visual accounting that entails *looking for* and then *looking at*. But in recent years, along with hordes of fellow professionally-trained artists with advanced degrees, Davis has joined another fraternal organization, the K of C, or "Kind of Conceptual," which is dedicated to insuring that collectors, critics, and curators understand what the artist intended to do as much as what he did.

"The Olive Standard" is a set of dysfunctional artworks enabled by a press release, an object known hereafter (and *ad infinitum*, pretty please) as the PR. Biennials are big and require art big enough to fill them. This one is in an enormous Quonset hut, which has served as a blimp hangar, a women's correctional facility, a pen for smuggled exotic pets, and a used clothing store, though Gehry & Assoc. have converted it into a giant jacket potato. Davis's largest piece confronts the attendee immediately. A series of green panels fills a rotunda. Sometimes I wish I could write one-line journalism (my proudest would be this obituary: "Al Held's broken loose!"), because "A series of green panels fills a rotunda" is all I really have to say about this piece. The panels are large, say three meters tall. They are in varying shades of olive. As you approach them, a concentration of woven detail instructs you they are photographs of fabric. The PR informs you they are photographs of army fatigues. I quote:

The idea that the color of a soldier's uniform might serve as a cloak of protection is strangely recent. British Redcoats wore that color because cochineal dyes (first brought from the New World by Cortés) were less expensive than the blue Oliver Cromwell ordered. The Russian army wore green in the eighteenth century, but just to distinguish it from Prussian blue, etc. Teddy Roosevelt ordered army uniforms changed to olive in 1902, in the midst of America's second period of imperial expansion into the olive green jungles of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and The Philippines. Camouflage patterns emerged in World War I, but in this century, olive has served as the symbol of American imperial might. The simple idea of blending into the jungle, though, caused complex practical problems.

A 5 September 1938 *Time* magazine article tells us:

Olive drab army material has long posed a procurement problem. Because OD must be woven from fibres of seven different colors, few mills are able to supply it and large batches often have to be rejected by inspectors as off-color.

The photographs in "The Olive Standard" seize on this hard-to-produce olive fabric as a symbol of how much American savvy has done to help us infiltrate and assimilate colonial cultures. Olive is the color of the very Modern idea that there is complexity at the heart of simple things. Picasso, after all, once said to Cocteau: "If they want to make an army invisible at a distance they have only to dress their men as harlequins."

Davis's photographs do show the true complexity of the rumoredly straightforward grid, courtesy of the predictably unpredictable photographic detail seen during close inspection. They vary in overall color, from snotty Picholine to ruddy Manzanilla, transcribing a week or so of On Kawara's green grounds. And they are somewhat impressive, as your mother's 1970 olive green bathroom makeover might impress a Lilliputian. In the end, these artworks don't know if they are objects of contemplation or thesis bullet points, and, being so unsure, perhaps they are neither.

Passing the "OD" photos, you are led into another room, this one containing a shimmering pool. The room is unlit except for frosted glass windows, which while blocking out Coxsackie's natural beauty (imagine a Frederic Church painting riddled with cement plants, convenience stores, and prisons), allow in its greasy range of daylight. The pool is filled with olive oil, which sits dark, inert, and extra-virgin during much of the day. Any uptick in solar activity de-virginizes the oil in the pool, lightening it from an opaque Minimalist slab to a giddy ecology of glowing bubbles. The sculpture, dependent on light and architecture to be articulate, is fragile and beautiful as it glows. It reminds us that olive is a color we know not from nature but from agriculture, and that, as recipes were the first writing,

farming was the first art. But the piece has none of the gravity of the great legacy of Minimalist-needling artworks it follows. Charlie Ray's *Ink Box*, for example, a black steel cube filled with printer's ink, gravely apes the seriousness of the artworks it is undermining. Davis's pool of oil is spectacular and enervating, but is neither humorous nor amorous enough to avoid feeling like it belongs in a World's Fair or a science museum.

The PR argues for greater significance. We learn from it that the pool is Olympic-sized, and that its surrounding tiles—a dusty set of Santa Fe aquas and beiges—are actually close-up photographs of swimming champion Michael Phelps taken by the artist with a telescopic lens during the XXVIII Olympiad in Athens. "The Olympics," writes Davis, "have gone off the olive standard. At the ancient games athletes competed, as individuals, for amphorae of olive oil. Now they represent nations in abstract glory, and the athletic *agon* is an embarrassing distraction from newer wars for oil."

Some day, the press releases of art exhibitions will be giggled over by stoned archaeology grad students as if they were myths about hippo-headed deities. The idea that Davis might connect this enormous crucifix-less *Piss Christ* with our various Gulf Wars is as outlandish as much of the Book of Mormon. I feel safe saying that referentiality is the new good. Part of our successful adaptation to the information overload we were once so worried about is the flattening out of the value of information. For artists, if it references something, from politics to popular culture (and ideally Art History), it has value.

Note, in this light, Davis's edition for sale in the gift shop. It is a silkscreen photograph of Arshile Gorky teaching camouflage painting. Gorky organized classes so artists could help out with civil defense after he was denied permission to work as a *camoufleur*. Davis's image of an artist who actually volunteered to help his country is printed on olive drab fabric, and costs $150.

Do sit through, if you will, Davis's video of an immigrant Turkish boy reading, in German, the passages in Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Color* that deal with olive. There is no more perfect work of contemporary art than Gary Hill's *Remarks on Color* (1994), in which Hill's young daughter reads the entire Wittgenstein text from beginning to end whether she understands it or not. It is elucidating and gorgeous, smart and vivid and real and touching. Davis's video is not an homage, not a criticism, not an appropriation, not an embarrassing Hollywood remake, not even a moustache on the *Mona Lisa*. It is a smear of contemporary politics on a work of art that approaches pure philosophy, like perfunctory small talk in an art house lobby after a Tarkovsky film. It is just something done to fill out a space in a Biennial. Tim Davis just flew in from the art world, and boy, are his references tired.

"The whites of their eyes, white lies, white trash, White Russians (the kind that supported the tsar, not the beverage), gentrification, eugenics, great white sharks, white-collar crime, white cheddar cheese whiz, white marmalade, non-dairy creamer, White Castle burgers"

WHITE

JOSEPH GRIGELY

Little Whites
Pearls, stoats, Ambien, Ativan, Oxycodone with the coating chipped off, snowflakes, coconut flakes, white blood cells, White Dome hydrangeas, Shasta daisies, Iceberg roses, wooly aphids

Moved & Moving Whites
Sheep, snow geese, unicorns if they're true to mythological form, lab rats, albino rhinos, the Abominable Snowman, glaciers, most crack rocks, some speed, swans, snowshoe rabbits, Toyotas when painted with Toyota 040 white, white flight, nurses, brides, maggots, the white of white anger, Moby Dick, the bottom of Niagara Falls

Whites To Watch Out For
The whites of their eyes, white lies, white trash, White Russians (the kind that supported the tsar, not the beverage), gentrification, eugenics, great white sharks, white-collar crime, white cheddar cheese whiz, white marmalade, non-dairy creamer, White Castle burgers

Whites With An X
Maalox, Xanax, Anthrax, borax, the spot where the buried treasure is

Whites, When The White Comes Mixed With Black
Zebras, Holsteins, killer whales, Brown v. Board of Education, piano keys, street signs in Buenos Aires, Oreos, tuxedos, *The New York Times*, the white sails of Theseus, Nuit Blanche, Minor White, Walter White, Barry White

Paperwhites
E. B. White, T. H. White, Edmund White, Patrick White, Margaret Bourke-White, the White Whale, the White Wizard, the White Knights, *White Noise*, *White Fang*, *Whitewalls*, *A Heart So White*, *A Man Called White*, *The Woman in White*, alabaster Desdemona from *Othello*, *The White Peacock*, *The White Album* (Didion)

The Whites In Your Ears
The White Album (The Beatles), The White Stripes, White Lion, White Tiger, White Zombie, *White Riot*, "white crunk," white noise, Average White Band, The Polyphonic Spree, the color of the cover of the soundtrack from *A Clockwork Orange*, the Good Humor Man

Color Chip Whites
Lambskin, seapearl, moonlight, white diamond, white ice, white heron, feather down, chantilly lace, meadow mist, white wisp, white blush, white opulence, whitewater bay, cream froth, Bavarian cream, calming cream, mannequin cream, icicle, sand dollar, cloud cover, cloud nine, minced onion, Swiss coffee, sugar cookie, opaline, albescent, niveous, French canvas, Spanish white, evening white, ballet white, timid white, alpine white, maritime white, Acadia white, intense white, palace white, simply white

Shiny Whites
Limoges & Sevres, Kohler & Toto, Bernini's *Apollo & Daphne*, Michelangelo's *Pieta*, Mont Blanc at sunrise, certain billiard balls, golf balls, lottery balls, the stoops of row houses in Baltimore, the word *Coca-Cola* on vending machines, cheese left wrapped in wax paper at room temperature, white knuckles, White Rain, capped teeth, patent leather shoes

Wet Whites
Milk, lebneh, Elmer's Glue, whipped cream, t-shirts in 1980s films targeting teenage boys, whitewater rivers & whitecaps on waves, snowballs, beluga whales, white beer, white shite, white lightning

Prepositional Whites
The inside of abalone, the bottomside of plaice, the underside of the tail of a whitetail deer, the whatever side of an igloo, the marbling of beef, the building across the street if it were to be cleaned, Malevich's white-on-white, white-on-red (color of blanket worn by horse in the #1 starting gate), black-on-white (color of blanket worn by horse in the #2 starting gate), the white wigs on barristers, the insides of Twinkies, the insides of cannoli, the insides of speech bubbles, heroin east of the Mississippi, the home team wears white

Whites With A Reputation
Eminem, platinum blondes, white Broncos, white vans

Imperfect whites
White-collar workers, the Chicago White Sox, Whitehall, the White Mountains (Arizona, not New Hampshire), "Hills Like White Elephants," cigarette smoke, elephant ivory, sulphur duns, grayling, the

White Cliffs of Dover, jaundiced eyes, vitiligo, Lapland, Belorussia, seagulls, jellyfish, skeletons, beige

Whites Not As White As Expected
Snow leopards, birch trees, off-white as in off-piste, pastis when mixed with water, lard, limestone, mashed potatoes, Queen Anne's lace, Robert Ryman, Agnes Martin, whitefish salad, ptarmigan, polar bears, clerical collars, white Zinfandel, the Isle of Wight

Whites Destined To Be Unwhite
Tampons, toilet paper, tighty whities, Q-tips, gym socks, freshly starched and ironed sheets, cricket clothing, shag rugs, fresh snow, white weddings, white gloves, white smoking jackets, White Sands National Monument, christening gowns & confirmation dresses, cotton puffs, silicone caulk

Effervescent & Intangible Whites
White matter, white clouds, whitemares, black-light white, the white of a California morning, the white of country music, the white light of infinity, the word of God in Renaissance paintings, candlelight white, Caspar the Friendly Ghost, Luke 9:23 to 9:29:

> *And he said to all, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.*
>
> *For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it.*
>
> *For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses himself?*
>
> *For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.*
>
> *But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God."*
>
> *Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.*
>
> *And as he was praying, the appearance of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became dazzling white.*

The white of a fog machine in a club

Squishable & Crumbable Whites
Marshmallows, Fluffernutters, cottage cheese, cotton candy, potato salad, polystyrene, plastic packing peanuts, Model Magic, a white Christmas

Cover-up Whites
Wite-Out, white shrouds, Whitewater, whitefuck, whitewash, the White House, White Sands Missile Range, Kilz

Useless Whites
White crayons

Profound Whites
Constable's clouds, crème Chantilly, a clean sink, the Taj Mahal, the white shirt in Goya's *Third of May*, a blank sheet of blank paper, a white flag in a war, the white guy with the white beard in *Lord of the Rings*, stars, Vichy pills, White Widow, the white you see when you exit a dark house into the sun

Plain Everyday Whites
White bread, white rice, white Nikes, white pines, white picket fences, SWF, white mustard, bleached flour, bleached sheets, Ivory soap, vanilla ice cream, vanilla icing, White Hen, White-Westinghouse, the White Pages, whitebobs, white bums

Miscellaneous Whites
Movie screens, white dreams, white asparagus, the blood of cockroaches, calcium carbonate, meringue, blancmange, panna cotta, Snow White, White Plains, "Oh my grey hairs!/ you are like plum-blossoms / white!" (W. C. Williams), the whiteness of thighs

His Own Kind Of White
Elvis

Whites That Have Nothing To Do With White
Bobwhite Quail, White Elephant Sale

Whites We Know More About In B lack
White magic, white lung disease, white holes

"Women and homosexuals wear the color, use the word. Code for gay until lavender took over, mauve is the gender expression shibboleth—the example most often given of things real men don't say."

MAUVE

SHELLEY JACKSON

Contusions and confusions. Half-mourning and melancholia. Twilight and adolescence, home decorators and homosexuals. Drag queen hair, cheap swag, braggadocio. Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley (that "monstrous orchid," said Wilde). Orchids, especially *Cattleya labiata*. All things orchidaceous, including the word "orchidaceous." Prose just shy of purple. According to Nabokov, time itself.

A young chemist tinkering with coal tar, hoping to find a way to synthesize quinine to treat the malaria felling British soldiers stationed in India, discovers, instead, a color. Mauve, the color of disappointment.

But, "strangely beautiful," thinks the chemist, and dips some silk in it, finds the color takes. He sends a sample to a Scottish dyer, who sees possibilities. The color lasts like no natural purple. And the ladies seem to like it.

Mauve, the color of opportunity.

It is 1856. Madame Bovary, who would have looked luscious in mauve, is about to poison herself in the pages of the *Revue de Paris*. A year later, Empress Eugénie will fall for the new hue—matches her eyes, she says. In 1858, Queen Victoria wears it to her daughter's wedding and gives it her royal imprimatur.

Cooked up in a laboratory by a scientist who thought, like that other earnest young scientist Dr. Frankenstein, that he was beating back death, mauve is the first artificial color. And like Frankenstein's creation, mauve is vital but unnatural, a little monstrous. Even pestilential: "The Mauve Measles," quipped *Punch*, are "spreading to so serious an extent that it is high time to consider by what means [they] may be checked." Everyone is wearing it. And since skirts are enormous, and worn with crinolines, not to mention the unmentionables, mauve unfolds by the yard (or the meter) out of dye-works across Europe. It is followed in quick succession by other synthetic colors, also derived from coal tar: aniline yellow, aldehyde green, *bleu de Paris*. An entire industry foams up out of furbelows, demonstrating the power of both science and the female consumer. As Simon Garfield points out in his book *Mauve* (to which this essay is heavily indebted), by launching industrial chemistry, mauve will change the fate, not just of fashion, but of science, medicine, art, and war. It will also make the chemist, William Perkin, a very rich man.

One does not necessarily think of a color as a commodity. Colors, the ancients reasoned, are qualities of objects, or our eyes' subjective response to those objects, not entities in themselves. They tinge and dapple and pass on. Nonetheless, some ancients paid high prices for one color: purple. So "Tyrian purple" is the name Perkin gives his new hue, referencing the dye eked out of the glandular secretions of tiny, spiny sea snails in ancient Tyre to color the imperial robes of Rome. But real Tyrian purple was the near-black of dried blood. What's more, Perkin's color is cheap, but that's mauve for you, the color of ostentation. The name doesn't take. Instead, mauve gets its name from a French flower, the one the English call mallow. (Though Nabokov, licking his lips, would liken the color to an orchid's instead: *Cattleya labiata*.)

Say *mauve*. It takes longer than most English words of its length. Long enough to lose heart part-way through. We're not quite sure how to pronounce its soft center: *aw* or *oh*. *Mauve* collapses in the mouth like a chocolate truffle. Like a truffle, it tastes expensive, decadent, imported. The word is to American English as the color is to American clothes. It enters one's vocabulary late if at all, an adult word, with a tinge of the boudoir, and so it signals sophistication and a possibly unhealthy attention to aesthetics. It's a little too knowing (shades of swimsuits to tempt Lolita: "Dream pink, frosted aqua, glans mauve"). It's a little too French. *Mauve* signifies over-refinement, the exhaustion of potency in the making of ever-finer discriminations; that's why "Code Mauve" is the stuff of stand-up. A prose writer knows she's getting fancy—purple—when she uses *mauve*, as she isn't, paradoxically, when using *purple*. Mauve prose: the phrase gets a wink, unlike the prosaic purple, though it's not always clear whether mauve avoids purple's excesses, or fails to rise to its imperial pomp. But either way, *mauve* is fey, rococo, mandarin (all decidedly purplish words). It comes across as calculated, even factitious. Decorative rather than forceful, it's a crepe veil or piece of jet pinned on a sentence, not its muscle. Women and homosexuals wear the color, use the word. Code for gay until lavender took over, *mauve* is *the* gender expression shibboleth—the example most often given of things real men don't say. (Given by, frequently,

men themselves, though that would seem to strain the tenet.) "Man rule: We have no idea what mauve is," woofs one blogger.

What *is* mauve? That pale violet that makes certain flowers seem to fluoresce at dusk, or the sullen, sullied rose of Victorian lampshades and mourning dresses? A cooler magenta, a gooier violet? Mauve, the color of ish, is defined most clearly by hedging negatives: not quite pink, not quite purple. It's less a hue in its own right than a diminution or intensification of some other hue; it has about it, simultaneously, an air of petulant retreat and overweening assertion. "Pink trying to be purple," sniffs Whistler. Or the visited link, its vitality depleted. Mauve is a "feminine" color, but not a yielding one. It is adult, imperious. But its strength is ambivalent. Though pugnacious, it is not candid. Like Victorian fashions, it stresses femininity while repressing the frankly female.

This ambivalence is characteristic. Mauve is the color of suspended choice and uncertain boundaries. One of the few colors permitted to women in half-mourning, the period of transition between black crêpe and the full spectrum, mauve signals the transition from despair to reconciliation. A transition that recapitulates the dye's own emergence from a beaker of black gunk. The association with death is not just metaphorical. Only a few years after Perkin's discovery, suspicions arose that mauve, and the other new dyes it led to, could raise real rashes, that the efflux of factories could poison villages. And Pynchon traces an arc in *Gravity's Rainbow* from mauve to the dye industry, from the dye industry to IG Farben, from IG Farben to Zyklon B.

"Consider coal and steel. There is a place where they meet," Pynchon writes: "the coal-tars. A thousand different molecules waited in the preterite dung. This is the sign of revealing. Of unfolding. This is one meaning of mauve, the first new color on Earth, leaping to Earth's light from its grave miles and aeons below." But was it a new color? Surely mauve, the hue, already existed in nature—in the orchid, the mallow, the *mauve*. The glans, even. Except that, as Oscar Wilde writes, it is not Nature but Art—in the persons of Monet and Pissarro—that creates the "white quivering sunlight that one sees now in France, with its strange blotches of mauve, and its restless violet shadows ... and, on the whole, Nature reproduces it quite admirably." Nature imitates art, and artists can't paint nature mauve without mauve paint. In 1856, the world changed color.

As colors go, that is a very recent birthdate, which makes mauve, precisely, dated. The color of *now* became the color of *then*. But mauve came back in the nineteen-eighties, and the eighties came back, are coming back, will come back any day now (time, like mauve, is an alloy, not an element). Mauve is the past; the future is mauve.

"I don't believe that opal is a color. Perhaps it can describe a complicated façade, but it does not maintain itself as a homogenous, autonomous, "seen-in-the-world" color. Opals are unreliable. They always look different and are, in fact, colorless."

OPAL

EMILY ROYSDON

I don't believe that opal is a color. Perhaps it can describe a complicated façade, but it does not maintain itself as a homogenous, autonomous, "seen-in-the-world" color. Opals are unreliable. They always look different and are, in fact, colorless. I am not making this up. When I followed through on my initial skepticism, I learned that opal is a colorless, liquefied, water-jelly mineral that slips through the cracks of stones. What we refer to as opal—the rainbow sheen and color potpourri—consists of impurities in the silica content. It has one quality that we can relate to the concept of color: the bent-ray/refracted light-ness of visibility. Other than that, I must insist that we acknowledge opal for what it is—a gem, an object.

To drive my point home, I testify that in order to see an opal with my own eyes I went to a jewelry re-sale shop on 14th Street. There I witnessed a woman selling her cache of jewels for cash. When she was offered $300, her head slumped and she was barely able to speak in her own defense. She needed more, and she wasn't going to get it. For a moment, we were together in a room full of excess; excess and exploitation. I to rebuke the opal, she to collect on her future.

I want to consider opal beyond the boundaries of its usual signifiers. Lose color, lose gem. What properties does it boast in and of itself? It's slippery and always looks different. It accumulates in the right conditions, and is valued for its purity… that's when I got it! Wealth. An opal is a conceptual, substitute icon of wealth. (Often milky white laced with rainbows! You see what I am saying.) Like a headlamp in a quarry, the analogy illuminates the face of the miner and the treasure.

Let's take the opal to task. But let's do so with the transparency of the silica of which we are speaking. What is at risk for each of us to reveal the material conditions of our existence? It is hard to be forthright about what exactly we have in the world, and about how much more we want. How can we transform the dominant vision of wealth and see how our position in the economy is obscured by the myths of class mobility, poverty as a moral failing, and scarcity? I should be speaking in I's. How I persist with a scarcity model even though I have never missed a meal in my whole life. Should I donate more money to organizations that work on behalf of shared politics? Is it enough to be balls-out honest about my financial status? (At this very moment $2,210.92 in my WaMu Free Checking account, no savings but some form of an inheritance sometime in the future. I own some art and a valuable necklace that was my grandmother's. No real estate, no investments.) What about the environment and how I take great pleasure in flying around the world to do stuff? Well, all this not-so-cathartic disclosure is my way of getting to a point of connection and explication with myself as an imperfect example. Like an opal, my impurities reveal me. The macro on my micro is that it is important that people have a clear understanding of their resources, and how their resources are connected to what other people do and don't have. The thrust is to re-imagine a sense of connection, rather than consumption based on isolation, independence, and scarcity models. I want to consider how good it would feel not to want so much all the time, to get rid of that neck cramp from always looking up the class pyramid.

Nary a stone would be cracked if not for the glimmer of impurity begging the hammer come down hard.

I have been thinking about opals and wealth a lot recently, and talking to a brilliant friend, Dean Spade, about the potential of direct conversations on wealth and redistribution. Conversations to examine complicity, responsibility, and ethical living in capitalism. Feminist consciousness-raising groups came to mind as an apt model. This process of building a shared analysis from the knowledge already within the room seemed particularly relevant to address the history of a constituency ripe for this kind of social experiment. Why does it get so uncomfortable when we try to talk about the politics of consumption and capital, real estate and inheritance? Why do we so quickly demur to apathy instead of challenging our habits, desires, and the depth of our needs? Why is shame shackled to both a trust fund and a working class past? What is at risk for us to acknowledge the material conditions of our lives?

My archive accumulates. My material memory. I's of responsibility. I on unemployment, me and my absent father's disability check. I am thirty. What is at risk for me? Where does my desire come from? What are the repercussions of my lifestyle—on myself, on my own

sense of justice, on my environment, on ours? What fear, what failure is attached to this reflection? What is enough?

What about opal? How does its ambiguous classification as a color, gem, and object of desire play out? How does the imperfect jelly harden into the myth of meritocracy and upward mobility? How does wealth become so precious and precarious, solidified as a rainbow-hued stone to collect and protect?

Let's transform the "conceptual, substitute icon of wealth" into a more intelligible equation. How can we understand SiO_2–nH_2O?

"I may as well get it over with and say that my first association with maroon is with an outfit I made for myself as a teenager. Maroon was my favorite color, even though I called it burgundy."

MAROON

MOYRA DAVEY

Marooned, I keep thinking, by a color: put ashore on the desolate coast of a blank page. But of course there's the flip side: opportunity in the prospect of a published page.

In a rueful commentary on the process of how many of his essays came into being (usually by invitation from a literary journal to "reflect on this or that"), Quebecois writer Yvon Rivard concludes: "If we associate thought with the essay, I have to acknowledge that I only think on demand." Likewise, I'm going to think because I've been asked to, and because there's something about this challenge that makes me say I won't be stumped, even if it is damned hard to know what to say about marooned, I mean maroon. The editors accused me (legitimately) of skirting the color in a previous draft of this essay, but this time I'm going to stay studiously on hue.

I may as well get it over with and say that my first association with maroon is with an outfit I made for myself as a teenager. Maroon was my favorite color, even though I called it burgundy. (FYI: I image-googled maroon and burgundy and switched back and forth between the two swatches: no significant difference. Likewise with Word's thesaurus). I thought the color beautiful and regal and couldn't understand why everybody didn't wear it. The outfit consisted of a corduroy wrap-around skirt, and a vest with a velour front, ribbon ties, and a pinstriped back, all in deep, rich maroon/burgundy. I loved this outfit, especially the vest, which I thought of as samurai-influenced with its little wing flaps contouring the armholes. And now, a long-extinct memory of a photograph of me standing by a canal in Ottawa wearing the outfit has just wafted into consciousness. My boyfriend took the photo and presented me with a Cibachrome print in characteristic bluish tones and with a glassy, unforgiving surface. To my shame, I'm pretty sure I defaced the print by applying India ink to the contours of my chubby waistline. Surely a copy exists somewhere, Cibas (metallic, indestructible) being the Daguerreotypes of their day.

I want to mention one more maroon garment that I sewed for myself: a reversible coat of maroon plush on one side and maroon moiré satin on the other, and snaps, since I've had a dread of buttons dating back to early childhood (hence the ribbon ties on the samurai vest).

Maroon is strongly associated with athletic and school uniforms. Though mine were never maroon, I had to submit to a total of five up through grade eight (navy blue, brown, brown, red, red). The first four had buttons that needed to be mitigated by:

1. Turning tunic belt inside out.
2. Wearing unauthorized tie over Brownie outfit.
3. Putting iconic "Flower Power" stickers on shoulder strap buttons.
4. Changing red plastic buttons on closure tabs to metal kind, a variety I can tolerate.

The fifth was a stretchy gym leotard that, thank God, had a zipper.

It's fascinating and even a bit scary how this assignment is provoking a Proustian flow of involuntary memory. About a month ago on Cape Cod, like a swirl of smoke from the genie bottle, I began to recollect: "Two more notebooks survived for a while, maroon-backed ledgers like the '57–'59 volume…." Out of nowhere I'd called up Ted Hughes's infamous mention of Sylvia Plath's last two diary books, one of which he destroyed. I thought he'd said "maroon," but doubted myself, wondering if they weren't in fact blue, like the cover of the *faux fin-de-siècle* engraved lavender-blue notebook I'd been carrying around since May. But I was right, and it still amazes me that you can google "maroon-backed ledgers" and in two clicks be reading excerpts from Hughes's introduction to the diaries.

Apropos of notebooks and diaries: I've been finding that the small ones I routinely carry around in my purse or knapsack hold out a kind of promise, and can bring immense comfort and pleasure, whereas the larger diary books I've kept on and off since the early '80s have come more and more to signal something ominous and soiled. The small notebooks are principally "idea notebooks" with stars to indicate something to come back to. The larger ones have a more ambiguous function: they contain starred ideas as well but also a fair amount of sludge. I've been trying to cut back on the sludge and have begun formatting entries as "bullets" and lists as a way of having the useful stuff be more visible. But the temptation to round up the events of the days dies hard.

The above-mentioned lavender-blue diary, even with its attractive cover, was beginning to feel particularly freighted. Here's an extract from one of its last pages that sums up fairly well both the good and bad aspects of diaries and notebooks:

> ⋆ *See small black notebooks: write about these friggin notebooks, love/hate relation. Compulsion to keep track of every damn thing. Fear of forgetting vs. how sick , how unhealthy, dirty, nauseating the whole project can begin to seem.*
> *notebook = rag write about this*
> *= a soiled handkerchief.*

I'd been wanting to shed the lavender-blue notebook, which luckily was nearing its end anyhow, and I considered, in honor of maroon, and thinking it might bring good luck, of finally activating an *actual hard-backed maroon spiral notebook* with blank, white pages and ribbon ties that had been given to me as a Christmas present by Mark D. several years ago and has been on the lower shelf of my bedside table ever since, awaiting the perfect task or moment to be called into service. But it's too beautiful an object for such an ambivalent purpose as mine, nor have I ever been able to sustain anything for very long on un-ruled paper.

Instead, and also thinking it might bring good luck (because of the Plath association), I bought what I think of as a classic ledger notebook: it's not maroon, but it has that outdated stationery store look that would have felt at home in the 1950s: stiff blue board covers, threaded binding, and the pages numbered from 001 to 120. It's also exactly the same style of book my beloved partner used for his philosophy notes as an undergraduate in the early 1980s (an un-ambivalent purpose in my estimation).

But I made a mistake. This brand new notebook makes me sick, too. Its pale, lime-green pages are too thin and transparent, too tightly ruled: I can't see clearly what's on the page because there's not enough contrast between the ink and the delicately tinted, see-through paper. Hence, it's too hard to separate out what's worth retaining from the sludge, even with stars. I need the pristine whiteness of *papier velouté* to offset the messiness excreted by my pen. The notebook also reminds me too much of the marble notebooks from the mid '80s. Plus, I just googled "ledger," and it turns out this book is not a ledger at all (though the association between accounting and note-keeping is not completely off the mark). I wasted $9.08, but worse than that, I'm in the awkward position of having begun a notebook that will have to be discontinued at page 009.

Another memory is signaling from the depths: a postcard in a plastic sleeve of Freud's couch sent to me by my childhood friend Alison S. (whom I met around the time of the maroon outfit). This postcard has been in storage and in three different apartments (in fact, at one point it was also in the diary box at my house in upstate New York that contains all my journals going back to the early '80s). I recall unpacking it several times over a series of moves and always thinking of it as a touchstone, something to come back to. It has that "talismanic" quality (Sontag), and though I've played lost-and-found with it a few times, I've always kept it in my peripheral vision. I fished it out of its current repository, the 1930s aqua metal dentist cabinet in the studio, and sure enough, Freud's room was packed with maroon, not just in the geometric shapes on the Persian rugs draped over couch and wall, but also in three large cushions that are as unambiguously maroon as the spines of many books on the shelves to the right.

To return to the printed page: I've always wanted to write one of those "Top Ten" lists. Were I to do it now, I'd place at the summit Catherine Lord's *tour de force* memoir *The Summer of Her Baldness*, devoured and cried over in the last few weeks while writing up these memories of my own. I love Lord's book, subtitled "A Cancer Improvisation," for many reasons, not the least of which is its diaristic, epistolary mode and her habit of drawing up lists, including one of a collection of hats and caps wherein the gift of a maroon fez is gratefully noted.

"One can imagine Dippel, the pale student of unhallowed arts, kneeling beside the thing he had put together, quite uncomprehending that this, rather than his alchemy, would be his greatest legacy. He named the newborn color Berlin Blue."

PRUSSIAN BLUE

GEORGE PENDLE

Will posterity remember us for our successes or our mistakes? Will our legacy be the result of a life's dedicated application, or a moment's half-forgotten accident? Years can be spent chasing chimeras without realizing that our claim to enduring fame was forged in the blink of an eye in the heat of pursuit. Such is the tale of Johann Konrad Dippel, whose ineradicable achievement—the creation of Prussian Blue—was of little interest to him when placed beside his grand magical dreams.

Dippel was born in Castle Frankenstein in 1673. It is not known whether lightning attended his birth, but certainly it would not have been an overly dramatic sign for a man who seemed determined to blaze his way into history. His father intended him to be a minister, but from an early age Dippel sought astonishment and argument rather than concord and conformity. He openly questioned the Catechism when he was nine years old, before spending his youth aggressively defending, then mercilessly attacking, orthodox Lutheranism. While attending theological college in Giessen he began to publish satirical religious tracts under the name Christianus Democritus. These were written with a vehemence that many found unseemly.

His religious contrariness brought him minor infamy. He was labeled "ein indifferentistischer Schwarmer" ("an indifferent fanatic"), and found himself persecuted by the clergy and threatened by the mob. Perhaps it was little surprise that within two years of moving to Strasbourg, where he had hoped to make his name in theological study, he had killed a man in a duel and fled back to Giessen.

This setback did not humble Dippel's vaulting ambition. His unorthodox interests had by now broadened to include palmistry and astrology, and after reading the writings of Ramon Llull, the medieval Spanish mystic, Dippel came to believe in his own ability to transmute lead into gold. He bought a small estate, on credit, where he might work in peace, but after eight months of continuous heating, his crucible cracked. Pressure from his creditors forced him to go into hiding.

Moving to Berlin, he created a palatial laboratory in which he sought to achieve that other alchemical dream: a universal remedy. Dippel believed that the secret to this lay in the oil created by the destructive distillation of animal parts. Leather, hoofs, and horns were boiled down into a malodorous treacle that became known as "Dippel's Oil" and which he claimed could cure fevers, colds, and epilepsy. Dippel's Oil gained a certain notoriety as a medicine—Diderot would later openly question its worth—but its success as a sheep dip and insecticide was unchallenged.

Soon the sheer pitch of his ambition attracted the attention of King Frederick I. The Prussian court was, at the time, besieged by alchemists who promised the possibility of limitless wealth in exchange for royal patronage. Dippel was asked to act as referee to their claims. A lesser man might have taken this post as a sinecure, but Dippel was no cynic. He did not seek wealth, only gold, and as such was a conscientious judge. He unmasked pretenders but also sought to learn the secrets of those he thought were genuine. In particular, he waxed rhapsodic about meeting the mysterious Lascaris, who was believed to have performed a double transmutation, changing mercury into gold and gold into silver.

It seems only fitting that a man who believed so utterly in the efficaciousness of alchemy should find the fulfillment of his genius as a direct, albeit unwarranted, result of his fevered alchemical research. In 1704, a dye-maker named Diesbach, who shared Dippel's laboratory, was in the midst of creating a batch of cochineal lake—a deep red—formulated by the boiling of insects and the addition of alum, green vitriol, and potash. Discovering that he had no potash to hand, he borrowed some from his colleague and added it to his heavily pestled insects. As he mixed and mingled he discovered, to his astonishment, that what he was creating was not a deep red, but instead a dark, ungodly blue.

Upon being informed of this uncalled-for transmutation, Dippel tried to piece together the reason for it. The potash Diesbach had used had previously been employed in the creation of Dippel's Oil. It was thus contaminated with animal blood. When mixed with the green vitriol (iron sulfate), this blood caused a reaction, and a blue that had never before been seen on Earth was brought into existence. One can imagine Dippel, the pale student of unhallowed arts, kneeling beside the thing he had put together, quite uncomprehending that this, rather than his

alchemy, would be his greatest legacy. He named the newborn color Berlin Blue.

At the time, blue was a particularly difficult color to create and work: azurite turned green when mixed with water; smalt and woad tended to fade; indigo was not colorfast; and ultramarine could only be made from the crushed lapis lazuli mined in the mountains of Badakhshan and cost more than gold. But Dippel's blue had a steadfastness, a vividness, and a simplicity of creation that surpassed them all. Unlike its creator, it was immediately welcomed by the world.

Fittingly for a mixture of blood and iron, one of its first uses was to dye the uniforms of the Prussian Army, from which it gained its more familiar name. As the army expanded under Frederick the Great, Prussian blue became a symbol of Teutonic aggression, although after that army's decisive intervention at the Battle of Waterloo calling someone "my Prussian blue" also became a term of endearment in England.

Meanwhile the color's complex molecular structure (which was not fully described until 1977) allowed it adapt to a number of quite different environments. Prussian blue became an indelible mainstay of Victorian innovation, providing the blue in blueprints and the tincture in the early photographs known as cyanotypes. Artists flocked to use it. Japanese printmakers dismissed their beloved indigo for it, while in France the Impressionists used it lavishly in their *plein air* compositions (only Renoir abstained, declaring he was "horrified" by the color). Soon Prussian Blue was working its way into every nook and cranny of society, becoming a pigment in printing inks, typewriter ribbons, and cosmetics.

Yet Prussian Blue's success was not confined to the visible, exterior world. It slowly began to move inside us, inveigling its way into our bodies and displaying far more efficaciousness than Dippel's Oil ever had. It became an antidote to heavy metal poisoning and remains the pathologist's leading tool in detecting lead poisoning. Encroaching onto the microscopic world, it revealed itself as a natural molecule-based magnet.

There was a solitary blip in its relentless evolution when, in 1958, Crayola renamed their "Prussian Blue" crayon "Midnight Blue," following schoolteachers' complaints that explaining the causes of the Thirty Years' War severely retarded their pupils' attempts to color-by-numbers. But otherwise the color's spread has been inexorable. It has even gained a role—as Dippel himself had—as an important arbiter of truth. Its appearance in paintings made before 1704 is one of the key ways to detect a forgery. Similarly, its absence from the gas chambers at Auschwitz has been used as a speculative crutch by Holocaust deniers who claim it should have appeared there as the byproduct of the interaction between cyanide, a substance found in both Zyklon-B and Prussian Blue, and the iron in the chambers' walls. A neo-fascist teen folk group recently named themselves after the color.

But while Prussian Blue has rampaged across time and space, its popularity assured by its constant revelation of new characteristics, Johann Konrad Dippel remained fatefully trapped within his own time and antagonistic personality. In 1707, after years of luckless alchemical experimentation, he left Berlin and became a student of medicine in Leyden. For reasons unknown, he was jailed for seven years on the Danish island of Bornholm, where he spent his incarceration convincing himself that ancient Egyptians had once inhabited the same land. European royalty's well-known weakness for alchemists saw him freed after seven years, and he became physician to the Swedish court in Stockholm, but once again his argumentative character brought this role to a premature end. His last years were spent as a guest at the Castle Wittgenstein where he engaged in further theological controversies and alchemical research. In 1733, he predicted that he would live until he was 135 years old. With characteristic exactitude, he was found dead in his bed the following spring.

Posterity has been no kinder to Dippel than the age in which he lived. Recent attempts to recognize the alchemist who was born in Castle Frankenstein, who worked with animal parts, and who attempted to defy the laws of nature, as the inspiration for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* have been deemed highly improbable by scholars. Yet one thing is immutable: Dippel's most successful creation—a blue deeper than any God had chosen to create for Himself—could not have come into being without his fiery, misguided, and ill-fated excesses.

"Even after some three hundred years, ask what color puce is and most people will immediately think of puke—a yucky green or even a slightly ratty brown. They have no idea of purple brown or brownish purple, and know nothing at all of fleas or flirting or bloody murder."

PUCE

BARRY SANDERS

Some French wag in the seventeenth century played a colossal joke on the world, creating a color that everyone has heard of but, over three hundred years later, very few can define. The color is puce. But that's not the joke. It's that puce turns out to be the most decidedly sexual and most violent color in the paint box. Puce is about plotting. Puce is about villainy. And it is not just about simple murder, but the emotionally charged and deranged murder usually associated with love—with jealous, overheated love. Think twice about using puce, or at least heed its creepy history.

The first but by no means strangest fact about puce is that it owes its existence to one of the tiniest animals in the kingdom, the flea—in Latin, *pulic* or *pulex*, or more descriptively, *pulex irritans*. In Old French, flea is *pulce*, which by the time of the Renaissance becomes *puce*. Which prompts the question: how did we get from the loathly flea to the lovely puce? The answer is a surprising one—especially in the usually predictable world of the color wheel.

Don't expect to find the answer in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for it offers only the following thoroughly confusing definition: "Of a flea-color; purple brown, or brownish purple." Does the OED deliberately deceive? Puce is not flea-color—that would render the color black. And black is far from either brown or purple. The supreme arbiter of the English language only perpetuates the mystery.

Even putting aside the differences of color, we have to ask: Why would anyone memorialize such a nasty, outrageously useless pest? Surely, there must be something other than perversity going on here. Camel brown and dove gray, colors that take their name from respectable animals, we can understand. But a flea seems out of the question. After all, fleas have been responsible over the centuries for millions of deaths. The flea is the plague; the flea is the Black Death. Moreover, everyone knows the flea's intimacy with that dreaded rodent, the rat—a relationship just too, too disgusting for most people.

And yet the flea has another side, this one outlandishly sexual. It's what appealed, I am certain, to our anonymous French wag. The flea took on its sexual identity from a string of suggestive cognates with *puce*, like *pucelle*, "maiden" (and in certain contexts, "slut"); *pucelage*, "maidenhead"; and *depuceler*, "to deflower." In addition, the French eroticize the flea in a phrase popular since the fourteenth century, "*avoir la puce à l'oreille*" ("to have a flea in one's ear"), meaning that one harbors a libidinous urge, "a sexual itch." Say the word *puce* today, and a Frenchman will either titter or offer a knowing wink.

As far back as antiquity, that little black speck starred in some of the most elaborate metaphors of love, beginning with a volume of poems entitled *Carmen de Pulice*, "Songs of the Flea," which some historians attribute to Catullus, and others to Ovid. But while the flea's sexual career blossomed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with a rash of erotic flea poetry, it really took hold in late sixteenth-century France after a celebrated court scandal. A flea, it seems, can fell a nation.

The events in question unfolded in the most innocent way. One particular evening in the summer of 1579, Monsieur Étienne Pasquier, a lawyer and distinguished man of letters, made a call on Madame Madeleine Des-Roches at Poitiers, and, to his surprise, noticed a flea on the bosom of her daughter, Mademoiselle Catherine. Pasquier, along with the other assembled gentlemen, showed special interest in the flea's audacity but delighted even more in the privileged spot the flea had chosen for itself. A great commotion ensued, the men huddling in the corner to plot a course of action: should one of them pluck the flea, so to speak, or should they ignore the tiny parasite altogether?

No, they decided, they could not completely sidestep the flea and the virgin. And so, as distinguished men of letters, they decided to commemorate the event by composing poems about the jet-black flea on Mademoiselle's snow-white bosom. With great fanfare, they published their cycle of some fifty poems, in 1582, giving it the very direct but nonetheless provocative title, *La Puce de Madame Des-Roches*. In an attempt to dazzle Mademoiselle Catherine with the far-fetched reaches of his poetic imagination, the rather portly Pasquier imagined himself as a flea—more accurately, perhaps, as a pest—so as to better play the lover: "If only God permitted me / I'd myself become a flea. / I'd take flight immediately / To the best spot on your neck, / or

else, in sweet larceny, / I would suck upon your breast, / or else, slowly, step by step, / I would still farther down, / and with a wanton muzzle / I'd commit flea idolatry, /nipping I will not say what, / which I love far more than myself."

Lacking in restraint (and good taste), Pasquier grew even more tedious as he brought his love to a climax of sorts, falling back on that overused French phrase: "Oh flea . . . / Thanks to you, Madame / Is aroused for me. / For me she is aroused / And has a flea in her ear." We have no record of Catherine's or her mother's reaction to Pasquier's rugged doggerel. Critics, too, chose not to comment.

Most of the assembled gentlemen wanted to kill the flea, but stopped themselves. Which takes us to the very dark heart of the joke. A flea's color does not change after it bites an animal or a person: the flea, both pre- and post-bite, retains its jet-black appearance. Some poets boasted that they could notice a change in the size of a flea after it had taken a bite, the image of an engorged flea designed to bolster the insect as sexual symbol. But to discover if a flea has blood inside it or not—in this case, Mademoiselle Catherine's elegant and refined blood—requires one thing only: a person must flatten it.

That's what the men at the Des-Roches court all knew: the temptation to kill the flea is always present, always a reality. Confronted with the flea, each one of us, even the most normal-seeming person, just cannot wait to get that irritating pest between our nails—especially after it has bitten an arm or leg—and slowly, deliberately squeeze until we hear that tell-tale pop. Call it what you want, but that death squeeze constitutes an act of revenge. And it's that trace left behind on your fingertips, the reddish stain, that our seventeenth-century French practical joker memorialized as "*la couleur puce*."

And thus the catch—the real joke. We can only enjoy the color puce, only experience it first hand, by killing. In order to spill our own artistic guts, we must first spill the flea's. And given its sexual connotations—recall *pucelage* and "maidenhead"—"popping the flea" reverberates with sexual innuendo, specifically with breaking the hymen. Puce is love's stain. Hence none of those respectable gentlemen around Catherine would dare "kill the flea," so to speak, at least not in public view.

Like vampires and vampire bats, the flea feeds on human blood, but in the sixteenth century it sucked with much more meaning. Aristotelian science, popular in the Renaissance, imagined coitus as the mingling of the man and woman's blood—just the perfect thing to fire the imagination of one of the period's most clever poets, John Donne. In the opening to his sonnet "The Flea" (1633), the speaker tries to persuade his mistress to go to bed with him, using a flea bite as his come-on for coupling: "Mark but this flea, and mark in this, / How little that which thou deniest me is; / It sucked me first, and now sucks thee, / And in this flea our two bloods mingled be."

The mistress remains silent throughout the poem. We never hear her speak. Clearly, however, she has been stewing. For, in the last stanza, she destroys the speaker's overblown argument by literally taking matters into her own hands. She kills the flea, which brazen act draws a shriek of protest from the speaker: "Cruel and sudden, hast thou since / Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?" In her mind, the need for revenge; on her fingers, the evidence of the abuse of puce.

Donne describes a woman who breaks convention to assert herself: I'll kill the flea myself, she seems to be saying, and remain whole and intact, to boot. Her undersized revolutionary act did not go unnoticed. Just a few years later, for example, the Renaissance French painter Georges de La Tour made that same bold statement the subject of his painting, *La Femme à la puce* (ca. 1640), sometimes translated as *The Flea-Catcher*. His famous *Femme* brings to a conclusion the history of puce.

A woman, draped loosely so as to reveal her breasts and a good deal of her mid-section, sits in front of a candle with a flea trapped between her thumbnails: we catch her in the act of killing. She makes visible the desire of the woman in Donne's poem, to put an end for all time to such demeaning, flea-sized sexual foppery. Indeed, one needs a magnifying glass to see the flea in La Tour's painting, and even then it is doubtful one could actually make out its tiny shape. The flea seems to have totally disappeared. We are aware of it solely in La Tour's title. Woman has triumphed, and that is in part why some art historians choose to identify La Tour's lady as Mary Magdalene—more upstart and aggressive than most women in the Bible, more so than her discreet sister, and more so, certainly, than that other Mary.

And thus all we can really see, and what has been left behind in the painting, is pure color. La Tour has bathed the entire canvas in a purple brown or brownish purple, depending on how the candle illuminates parts of the background. *The Flea-Catcher*, a radical painting in the history of art, takes on a bit of philosophical importance, as well. For La Tour destroys not just the animal, but also the sexual origins of that single, sneaky, most playful and dangerous color, already a part of the French palette by La Tour's time, *la couleur puce*. The flea is dead—"out of the picture." Only the pure color remains, cleverly present in the painting's title, this time in the second meaning of puce. And that's the color we use today—still elusive, still playful, but decidedly asexual.

Even after some three hundred years, ask what color puce is and most people will immediately think of puke—a yucky green or even a slightly ratty brown. They have no idea of purple brown or brownish purple, and know nothing at all of fleas or flirting or bloody murder.

"This was, however, a purple quite distinct from the royal blue of crushed hexaplex snails, or the violet purple of poison aconite ...or the lighter mauve of chaste-tree flowers, or, to be sure, from the scarlet produced by mashed planthoppers—the color of blood first shed."

PORPHYRY

CATHERINE HANSEN

An etymological descent into porphyry begins with no more than a casual wade. Barely ankle-deep, one already discovers its kinship with purple: Latin, like one of the gods of myth, made two amorous raids upon the Greek word *porphuro*, which then bore the lexical twins *porphyrites* and *purpura*. A few steps deeper in, and this original Greek word pulls up a netful of Tyrian murex shellfish which, slit along their feeble bellies, weep purple blood used to dye royal cloth for more than 3,600 years. This was, however, a purple quite distinct from the royal blue of crushed hexaplex snails, or the violet purple of poison aconite (first seeded by the spittle of Cerberus), or the lighter mauve of chaste-tree flowers, or, to be sure, from the scarlet produced by mashed planthoppers—the color of blood first shed. The color *porphuro*—what would later become known as the color of porphyry—was the darker, earthier red-purple of blood already clotted. We are now swimming in waters somewhat over our heads, but no deeper than the length of rope used to lower a bucket of murex bait, and still quite littoral.

Whenever it was that the Greeks first encountered that Phoenician shellfish (perhaps around the eighth or ninth century BC, when they adopted the Phoenician alphabet), they adapted an existing word—*porphuro*—to designate them and the color they produced. But what exactly was this word, deemed worthy of naming the new color? What did it designate before?

In the *Odyssey* a certain fixed expression appears several times, translated by Richmond Lattimore as "my heart was a storm in me as I went." Here, the storm translates a grammatical form of *porphuro*. In the *Iliad*, this porphyry is the color of death, particularly when it falls down over the eyes like a veil: *porphureos thanatos*. As for its precise shade, Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon* (7th edition) has nothing more definite than the color of the sea, "as when the great sea heaveth darkly with a soundless swell"—the dark, swollen gliscence of a wave that does not break. Cunliffe's *Homeric Lexicon*, upon encountering *porphyry*, yields the following near-poem:

> *of disturbed water, gleaming, glancing*
> *of the disturbed sea, to heave*
> *to the sinister gleam that plays on the mist of death*
> *to the lurid gleam of the rainbow set against a storm cloud*
> *to the warm hue of blood*
> *of the heart, to be troubled, moved, stirred*

We have now left the sunny waters where the murex live; the bottom now lies many fathoms below our feet, and a storm threatens.

In some places, one reads that the Romans were the first to quarry extensively from the mountain known as the Father of Smoke (Gebel Dokhan) in Egypt's eastern desert, which was and still is the only place in the world to find imperial porphyry. A Roman field geologist discovered the site in 18 AD, a decade before Rome's official transition from republic to empire. The rich and the regal alike were delighted to discover that this geologically unique rock resembled in color the murex blood used to dye their robes, and began to import it for use. Caligula, for one, could now be tickled by the sight of his image sculpted in purple blood. Convicts and Christians were sent to the desert to heave blocks of imperial porphyry over the sand, wasting their flesh to build purple sarcophagi for emperors, and dying so that Byzantine scions could be born in purple chambers. It wasn't until the fall of the Roman Empire that the porphyry quarry was abandoned, and soon afterward the road from the city of Qena to Gebel Dokhan was lost altogether.

In other places, one reads that, well before the Roman excavation period, the Egyptians made extensive use of imperial porphyry. This contradiction becomes more interesting when one considers the huge lost labyrinth of Egypt, near the City of Crocodiles, said by some to be Daedalus's model and inspiration, and of which no archaeologist has yet discovered the unequivocal ruins. This labyrinth, which Madame Blavatsky reports to be about five million years old, was—any quibbles about dates notwithstanding—once visited by Pliny. Inside, in the dark, among statues of monstrous beings, he found columns made of imperial porphyry. Blavatsky mentions this fact in *The Secret Doctrine* but refuses to elaborate, saying that certain kinds of knowledge are only for the highest initiates. She adds that on Gebel Dokhan, there are also quarries of black

porphyry, of incalculable value and great hidden power compared even to the purple; in the eighth-century Fleury Gospels, images of the evangelists are framed by imperial porphyry columns, but the hand of God, representing his Word, emerges ablaze from a column of black porphyry.

We are no longer concerned with moving back shoreward toward the littoral; adrift, we are far from any of those facts to which a straight *expositio littoralis* might lead. In the third century, a certain disciple of Plotinus—nicknamed Porphyry in his youth for his Tyrian parentage—wrote a commentary on a passage in the *Odyssey* which concerns a cavern where naiads weave webs of purple on beams of stone. As Homer describes it, the cavern has a double entrance, one for the ascent of gods, another for the descent of men. Within the neo-Platonic allegory that Porphyry sets forth in this commentary, a careful reading uncovers many of the insights that would eventually lead this disciple-exegete to the peak of the Father of Smoke, with its black and its imperial quarries. Although it was clear to him that the ancient inventor of the double cavern did not know of the actual Egyptian site, the pilgrim reader sensed the poet of poets had seen a truth, and had cunningly woven it into a fiction.

It is, as Porphyry knew, through a process akin to wine-drunkenness that every ethereal soul finds the body to which it is destined. As it first falls within the gravitational field of matter, the soul loses control and begins to spiral in tightening circles, with all of the potential elements and particles of its body in a storm and tumult about it, and, becoming more and more drunk with matter, it begins to forget its previous luciform being, and the elements harden about it into fragments cemented together in the humus of earthly substance. Homer had chosen to symbolize the soul's acquisition of its vestment of matter by the weaving of purple garments on stone, just as flesh is woven over the bones and suffused with mortal blood.

Blood is what ties a soul to the earth, and it is also what produces and contains earthly memory. For this reason, at the end of that long drunkenness known as life, the matter that the soul acquired at the beginning, along with the blood that animated it, must be discarded. When it comes time for a soul to leave its body, the composite being passes through a set of gates and falls away into subterranean tunnels, the rocky walls of which rasp and scrape away any adhering particles of matter; but the blood, which has become nearly one in substance with the soul, remains. The soul must therefore undergo what is called diagenesis—a dissolution and recombination of its elements. This is accomplished when, at the end of its subterranean journey, the soul passes through a second set of gates, made of a stone that is said, in the sources that describe it, "to catch and contain the final rays of every setting sun"—which is to say, it catches and contains those last particles of blood and memory which the soul leaves behind as it is released into the panthalassa of the Milky Way.

Now, souls in this final, unencumbered state have no concern for earthly things, and are as dreams or shadows compared even to earthly dreams and shadows. But what Porphyry suspected, in fits and starts of insight, was this: just as these souls have left behind their memory along with the blood of their bodies, they can recover memory and return to earth if they can recover the blood, which is kept, frozen and archived forever, in the gates of stone.

Although the reasoning that led him finally to journey from Rome to Gebel Dokhan in the eastern desert would be difficult to reconstruct, it is clear enough that the problem that concerned this fastidious, erudite, and ambitious man was how to travel to the underworld, and then not to lose his terrene memory, but rather to recover it and return. As he stood by night at the entrance to the imperial quarry, all about him lay russet fragments of stone chipped from its walls, the scattered, addled memories of those thousands upon thousands who had failed to return, and did not care to. How to recover his blood, once it had been captured by the stones? Was it possible to carry it with him instead, and let it guide him home as a lodestone? And if not, how would he recognize his own, alloyed with the blood of all the others? One can only guess if he asked himself these particular questions. Neither can one do more than speculate as to whether, when he returned to his body, he returned with his own memory, or with the earthly memory of a Shasu nomad, or of a Kamboja of the Hindu Kush, or of one of the Carpians of the Carpathian mountains. We do know that, after he returned, he married and lived a quiet village life until his death.

Long after the road from Qena to Gebel Dokhan was lost, Napoleon went with his armies to hunt the purple quarry, but never tracked it down, and he had to be buried in red quartzite instead. When the mountain was discovered again later in the nineteenth century, the wife of an oil magnate secured a porphyry sarcophagus for her husband. It wasn't much longer still until the all-terrain traffic from the Red Sea resort at Hurghada, only a few kilometers away, brought adventurers who began the long process of picking the place clean.

"The Duke's innovation was to colour the handkerchief magenta, for lower-contrast, and therefore more covert, signalling, which necessitated that it be viewed upside down by bending down so far a to peer through the legs."

MAGENTA

SALLY O'REILLY

Magenta house in Whitechapel, London, is one of those late twentieth-century buildings that look like the back of a supermarket, even from the front. But behind this workaday façade, a small team of specialised thinkers called the Qualian Research Group is discreetly frothing with complex ideas on the very nature of reality.

The word *qualia* refers to a rather intangible philosophical concept, perhaps because it relates to the understanding of understanding itself. Philosophers George Graham and Terence Horgan describe qualia in typically elliptical terms: "For every conscious mental state, there is something it is like for the subject to be in that state or to undergo such an experience." More simply put, but no doubt lacking in some vital nuance, qualia are thought to occur within the human mind in correspondence to particular external phenomena. And yet they constitute more than sensory data, as they correspond to the internal experiences of sensations as well as their eternal causes. I will curtail my definition of qualia here, as such inquiry requires the spatchcocking of human consciousness, the turning inside-out of causality and epistemology, for which I have neither qualification nor constitution. What concerns us here, rather, is Magenta House itself: a name that, after a little digging, is found to have obscure but particular significance for the qualia debate.

While magenta is a primary process colour, it cannot be generated by a single wavelength of light, but it is a mixture of red and violet wavelengths. Importantly, red and violet are at opposite ends of the spectrum, so you could say that magenta forms the perceptual bridge of the visible spectrum, creating an illusion of continuity between two extremities. It is this communicative quality of magenta that has attracted the attention of qualiaphiles.

The name magenta was first used in relation to the colour shortly after the Battle of Magenta in 1859. Presiding over the French Army there, General Marie Edme Patrick Maurise MacMahon, a Frenchman of Irish decent, deployed the three somewhat –scattered divisions under his command in an attack on the town, marking out its clock, visible above the trees from each battalion's position, as a rallying point. The following day, in acknowledgement of his agile decision making and successful execution of strategy, MacMahon received a marshal's baton and the title of Duke of Magenta.

Following his celebrated use of the clock tower as a beacon, the Duke discovered a facility for devising irregular forms of communication, adding these to his list of achievements the commercial success of the compact waterbourne messenger wigeon, and the best-selling collation of facsimiles of long-distance love letters from the thirtieth-century BC entitled I Love A Man In Cuneiform. The apparatus that most vividly captured the public imagination, however, was the Homograph, a signalling device originally devised by Royal Navy lieutenant James Spratt in 1808, the year of MacMahon's birth. The Homograph, or human signal tower, is ingeniously simple and requires just a handkerchief and a codebook to operate:

This new, easy, and useful code of numeral signals, is to be performed with a white handkerchief, to be held in different positions with the body. …In working the Homograph, the body should be erect, the positions steady, the handkerchief to be held well in front of the arms, and parallel to the person to who you are to impart your intentions. The best place for shewing signals from a ship is in the chains, or on a lower deck port, as the white handkerchief exhibits a greater contrast with the black sides, an is of course better discerned; when made from the shore , on the side of a green hill, or in front of some thick foliage, or hedge, or dark wall. The positions which you intend [to] compose the number of your signal should be made in succession. … It is to be understood that the persons who use the Homograph signals are to have their conversation premeditated, and inserted in separate books, and the sentences to be numbered, [whereby] each, by reference to his book, may carry on the conversation at a distance of four miles by a common telescope.

The Duke's innovation was the colour the handkerchief magenta, for lower-contrast, and therefore more covert, signalling, which necessitated that it be viewed upside down by bending down so far a to peer through the legs. The intensifying effect of this position on vision is analysed by Marcel Minnaert:

There is an old prescription among painters for seeing more life and greater richness in the colours of a landscape, and that is to stand with your back to the landscape, your legs wide apart and bend forward so

far as to be able to see them. The intensified feeling for colour is supposed to be connected with the greater quantity of blood running to the head.

The Homograph in its new form played a pivotal role in innumerable victories, from military operations to matters of the heart. Prior to its wide usage, through, to ensure that the Homograph did not simply spawn a bewildering plethora of disjunctive idiolects, a series of codebooks was published to standardise and tailor the system to specific applications. Code number seventeen in the military Homographic codebook, for instance, is interpreted as, "The enemy are routed in their right, their centre is in great disorder," while in the fishwife's version it signifies, "There is a gentleman giving free moustache rides on Tuesday mornings in the next village."

Hanky waving and scarf signalling subsequently became a European obsession in the 1870s and, as its greatest upholder, the Duke was inaugurated President of France, whereupon he continued to develop his ambitious communications network. In 1874, he entered into discussions with the British government regarding proposals for a channel tunnel and railway, although this eventually faltered due to insularity and paranoia born of the Napoleonic Wars. He was credited with a number of other innovative ideas that were similarly too forward-thinking to be embraced: his handrails on wheels for mobile stability, for instance, were derided as tautological, while his proposal for broom-mounted candles for sweeping in the dark was condemned by trade unions as "really pushing it." It was noted by a number of spiritualists of the day that the Duke"s aura was, astonishingly, predominantly magenta, which is considered a sign of great inventiveness:

The key to understanding the Magenta Personality Spectrums colour is their unwillingness to conform to the expectations and norms set by society. These individuals seek to express their individuality by using, with creativity and flair, the belongings and raw materials at their disposal. … Reds want to subdue reality, and Oranges want to conquerer it; Magentas want to push physical reality to the leaky margins – that locale where fantasy and reality become a blur. Magentas consider life worth living only if they can listen to their own inner drummer. They live on the edge, creating a three-dimensional physical environment in their mind's eye that is very different from the one we experience in our day-to-day existence.

But despite the radical genius of MacMahon's democratically constituted communications network, the Homograph was eventually abandoned due to grave health and safety concerns: the oxidising agent required for the final stage of production of magenta dye was arsenic acid, and it was feared that an epidemic of airbourne poisoning would arise from increasing levels of usage.

After over a century of obscurity, though, the memory of the Homograph has finally been resurrected, albeit tangentially, in the naming of Magenta House. Qualiaphilic psychologists have evoked the Duke's low-contrast magenta Homograph in recent discussions of perception, suggesting that the intensification of the upside-down, though-the-legs viewing experience establishes as fact the variance of qualitative perception. Within the Qualian Research Group, then, the Homograph has assumed the status of a latter-day Vitruvian Man, embodying a glimpse a qualia communicating across the gap between perception and reality, and warding off solipsism with its consensus-forming code-book.

"Colloquially, it is the patina that convinces us of the age of bronze statues and copper roofs. In more technical usage, it refers to the blue-green, green-blue, and green copper salts of acetic acid (copper acetates). Either way, it is a peculiarly verdant rust: a sign of age, in the livery of spring."

VERDIGRIS

JEFF DOLVEN

The Baron Verdigris, despite his name, was black and white. This could hardly be helped in Aubrey Beardsley's pen-and-ink frontispiece to *Baron Verdigris: A Romance of the Reversed Direction*. But the Baron acquires little more color from the prose of Jocelyn Quilp, the possibly pseudonymous (and if not, now forgotten) author. His skin is pale; his moustache is of an "inky blackness." Beardsley omits to ink that signature feature, but its blackness greatly impresses the Lady Meningitis, the Baron's consort. She sings,

> *Verdigris, oh Verdigris!*
> *My love for thee will never cease.*
> *The night is dark that tempests lash*
> *But not as dark as thy moustache,*
> *My Verdigris!*

Nor is there much color elsewhere in the book, aside from the blood spilled by the Baron in his gentlemanly rampages. So his surname—which calls to mind a distinctive, half-organic, half-metallic green—is something of a puzzle.

It would be a mistake to credit *Baron Verdigris* with the deepest literary guile, but the book, published in 1894, is nothing if not clever, and there may be an answer to the puzzle in its subtitle, *A Romance of the Reversed Direction*. Quilp's conceit is that her hero, an eleventh-century aristocrat, has discovered the secret of time travel without getting very good at figuring out when he is. Having toured the *fin de siècle*, he knows his future as the past, and he is constantly toggling between the dialect of a Victorian toff and a Shakespearean king. It is this dislocation that shows his true color: for verdigris is imbued with temporal paradox. Colloquially, it is the patina that convinces us of the age of bronze statues and copper roofs. In more technical usage, it refers to the blue-green, green-blue, and green copper salts of acetic acid (copper acetates). Either way, it is a peculiarly verdant rust: a sign of age, in the livery of spring.

The name *verdigris* means the green of Greece, *viride graecum*, and by the time Pliny writes of it in his first-century *Naturalis Historia* its use as a pigment was apparently already well established. (As a remedy, too, for ailments ranging from watery eyes to leprosy.) How was it made? Pliny recommends "drilling holes in white copper and hanging it up in casks over strong vinegar"; you can then scrape the green film from the copper (it is mucilaginous in texture at this stage, hence the early anglicization *verdigrease*). By the time European painters began to use it as a pigment, many refinements had been introduced, and the vineyards of Montpellier gradually became the most important and productive sources for the stuff. The Montpellier method—as Jacques Montet described it for Diderot's *Encyclopédie*—was to layer copper strips with fermented grapes in earthenware jugs. Over three or four days, the acid in the grapes would form white crystals on the strips; the strips were then removed from the jugs and laid out on a rack, where they were periodically wet with wine until that valuable green film had formed. Given that the whole process was a kind of accelerated aging, wine would seem to be a fit collaborator. (Interestingly, the production of verdigris in Montpellier was a business largely controlled by women: in this sense, verdigris was ahead of its time.)

If the process was cumbersome, the results were unmatchably lush, a vibrant green that fertilized the painters' foliage and spotlit their drapery. The literature on pigments is filled with complaints about the tendency of verdigris to dull and blacken over time, completing its career as rust. But the process could be halted with varnishes, and in oil paint verdigris was much more stable; indeed, it positively ripened, with the bluish green of its first application becoming, over the first month or so, vivid and pure as a spring leaf. Well into the eighteenth century, its rivals—various mixes of yellows and blues, malachite, or green earth—paled by comparison. One can see it to good effect in the fabrics of Titian's *Vanity of the World* (ca. 1515) or the forests of Abraham Janssens van Nuyssen's *Diana with her Nymphs* (ca. 1610). And we are every day surrounded by its vernacular beauty, spreading over shining metals like lichen on a stone, or sober algae on a bright pool.

Despite his privileged relation, the Baron gives no sign of caring about all this art history, or beauty. He is only out to poison Lady Meningitis, if he can figure out how to do so without anachronism. The one unmistakable green in his romance is the cloth binding, which has held its color for over a century by virtue of the sort of coal-tar synthetic pigment that consigned verdigris to art history (along with its poisonous successor Scheele's Green, which, as

a pigment in wallpaper, laced the drawing rooms of nineteenth-century Europe with arsenic). It may be that the illustrator Beardsley had the Baron's greeny name on his mind in making that frontispiece. If the blacks are dark as the Baron's heart, the articulated plate of his armor looks a lot like the leaf-work in the four corners of his composition—a little allegory, if you're searching for one, of the paradoxes of verdigris, vegetable and metal, permanence and transience, chlorophyll and corruption. But for all that, there is a straighter path to the problem in a more familiar source, one with a nobler, if still equivocal, hero. In Book VI of the *Aeneid*, Virgil recounts with grim respect the strength of the ancient ferryman Charon, *deo viridisque senectus*: the old age of the gods is green. What is that green, but verdigris?

"When you think about it, it's surprising that we can see black at all: our eyes are engineered to receive light; in its absence, you'd think we simply wouldn't see, any more than we taste when our mouths are empty."

BLACK

PAUL LA FARGE

A little while back, when I was working on one of my many doomed projects, I went into a cave. Not just a little cave, either, but an enormous emptiness in the ground, the trace of a watercourse that gnawed its way across half the state of Kentucky a few thousand years ago. We—this was my friend Wayne and I—went a long way in, then we sat down and turned off our lights. The darkness was like nothing I'd ever seen. I couldn't see my hand in front of my face; after a while I could barely believe that my hand was there, in front of my face, waving.

That darkness is what I think about when I think of black. I was going to write, *the color black*, but as every child knows black isn't a color. Black is a lack, a void of light. When you think about it, it's surprising that we can see black at all: our eyes are engineered to receive light; in its absence, you'd think we simply wouldn't see, any more than we taste when our mouths are empty. Black velvet, charcoal black, Ad Reinhart's black paintings, black-clad Goth kids with black fingernails: how do we see them?

According to modern neurophysiology, the answer is that photoreceptors in our retinas respond to photons of light, and we see black in those areas of the retina where the photoreceptors are relatively inactive. But what happens when *no* photoreceptors are working—as happens in a cave? Here we turn to Aristotle, who notes that sight, unlike touch or taste, continues to operate in the absence of anything visible:

Even when we are not seeing, it is by sight that we discriminate darkness from light, though not in the same way as we distinguish one colour from another. Further, in a sense even that which sees is coloured; for in each case the sense-organ is capable of receiving the sensible object without its matter. That is why even when the sensible objects are gone the sensings and imaginings continue to exist in the sense-organs.

We "see" in total darkness because sight itself has a color, Aristotle suggests, and that color is black: the feedback hum that lets us know the machine is still on.

The contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben, following Aristotle, remarks that the fact that we see darkness means that our eyes have not only the potential to see, but also the potential *not* to see. (If we had only the potential to see, we would never have the experience of not-seeing.) This twofold potential, to do and not to do, is not only a feature of our sight, Agamben argues; it is the essence of our humanity: "The greatness—and also the abyss—of human potentiality is that it is first of all potential not to act, *potential for darkness*." Because we are capable of inaction, we know that we have the ability to act, and also the choice of whether to act or not. Black, the color of not seeing, not doing, is in that sense the color of freedom.

No wonder the cool kids wear black. (I wanted to be one of them, back when, but for reasons which remain obscure to me—they are hidden in memory's own darkness—I owned few black garments. My clothes were dark gray, dark blue, expressive of the wish to be free and the shades of inhibition that forever held me back.) Black is the color of refusal; it's the color of coming to a fork in the road, and not taking it. No wonder the Rolling Stones' "Paint It, Black" (the comma added by a confused record executive: did he construe *black* as a term in a series—"Paint It, Blue" coming up next—or as a derogatory vocative, a racist analogue to "Paint It, Sam"?) became an antiwar anthem.

The space of refusal is also the space of imagination. You can sit in the darkness for as long as you like, staring blindly at nothing, and see what you will. Maybe that's the reason why caves, which are the Fort Knox of blackness, were the first sacred places. In the total darkness of caves, human beings rubbed their eyes until they saw weird patterns in the dark: gods, they thought. (Some of these patterns, generated by feedback loops in the visual cortex, are rectilinear; David Lewis-Williams has suggested that we favor the straight line on the basis of these early, sacred visual experiences.) The cave where Wayne and I sat was formerly used by Native Americans to initiate their boys into manhood: from their point of view the cave was a liminal space, between two stages of life, the one dissolved in darkness and the other not yet known. Which was fitting, because we were first drawn to caves on account of an adolescent love of the role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons, which offered us the chance to become anything we wished, and to roam underground to our hearts' content. (Of course, those explorations were benighted: they amounted, like the cave's darkness, to nothing at all.)

What did we grow up to be: paladins, thieves? Alas, neither. Black is the color of what might have been, not of what is: it is the color of pleasures past. Regret is black, and so is its cousin melancholy, which Robert Burton describes as "cold and dry, thick, black and sour" (with the exception of *sour*, a good description of the atmosphere in many caves, among them the one where we sat). Melancholy is the humor that keeps the others—warm blood, angry choler—in check, the one that counsels against action. It prefers the potential to the actual. No wonder it has trouble getting out of bed.

Wayne and I turned on our lights after a few minutes, and found our way back into the green Kentucky autumn. Surely neither of us was sorry to be out of the cave: it was cold down there, and after a while the darkness that surrounded our headlamps' little beams became oppressive. We could hardly imagine how the serious cavers did it: John Wilcox and Pat Crowther and the rest of the people who found the tiny connecting passage that assembled two fairly large caves into the world's largest cave system; Bill Stone and his multi-day deep-caving expeditions; Michel Siffre who once spent 205 days in a Texas cave. A little blackout was enough for us, a few hours spent with the ghosts of projects which would never see the light of day.

"Only the most expensive and painstaking intaglio printing process will do for the black fronts and green backs in which we all trust."

GREEN

PAUL MALISZEWSKI

I received the counterfeit hundred-dollar bill at a bookstore of all places. It was February 2009, and I was giving a reading in Washington, DC. A former student of mine came up to me after the event to say hello. The student, whom I'll call Jeffrey, had two copies of Fakers, my then recently published book of essays. One copy was for him, he said. The other was a gift for his father. As I signed the books, Jeffrey mentioned that he had a good fake for me. I expressed some surprise, though I had heard this gambit a few times before and was, frankly, a bit weary.

Jeffrey was a bright enough student, not that it was hard to distinguish oneself in the introductory creative writing classes I taught at George Washington University, where the silent, sullen majority of my students paid more attention to premium denim and high-priced highlights than the literary style of whatever writer I assigned, hoping against all reason that the right book by the right author might cleave the ice of their frozen selves. In such company, Jeffrey did stand out. At least at the beginning of the semester, when he managed to turn in some good writing – honest expressive stuff.

About halfway through the course, however, Jeffrey stopped attending class. Every now and then, he sent me emails, always in the middle of the night and always apologising and alluding to vague personal problems. He promised to make up all missed work, but I didn't see him again until the last day of classes, when he showed up late with "The Big Game" his forty-seven-page masterpiece. "The Big Game" was a fictional account of a marathon poker night featuring a kid named The Kid and assorted old hands, all of whom were "rugged" or "grizzled" or "pockmarked" though otherwise interchangeable. The story proceeded card by interminable card, hand by plodding hand. The Kid's pile of money rose and fell. He was up $500, then he was down $700, then he was up again, and so forth. Five pages in, I guessed the Kid would, against all odds, prevail and also that this Kid was, without too much imaginative nipping and tucking, none other than my student. Owing to the lateness of the story, as well as its mind-numbing lack of all style, Jeffrey earned a C-minus for the assignment and a D for his final grade, a generous estimation, I thought, of what work he had completed. I handed the signed books back to Jeffrey and thanked him again for coming. He seemed about to go when he stopped and asked if I had ever done any looking into counterfeit money.

I hadn't. Mostly, I explained, I wrote about literary fakes: journalists who invented sources and concocted details and then claimed they were real, memoirists who fashioned more colourful lives, that sort of thing.

"Reason I ask, " Jeffrey said, "is I came across this the other week." He produced something from his pocket and carefully unfolded it, placing it on the table between us. It was a hundred-dollar bill.

I looked at it and then I looked at Jeffrey. "Okay," I said.

"It's fake," he said. He spoke as if he had just performed a magic trick.

"It looks real," I said, "not that I come across hundred-dollar bills every day." I leaned forward to inspect it, my hands folded in front of me.

"I won it playing poker, " he said.

"Sounds like you lost then."

Jeffrey smiled and allowed I was probably right.

"The thing of it is, " he said, "this is a supernote."

I shrugged my shoulders and looked, I imagine, confused.

Jeffrey filled me in on what he knew of supernotes – forged hundred-dollar bills so accomplished that even the experts were sometimes fooled. They had been around since the late 1980s, here and there. The Middle East, mostly. Russia. Even the best authenticating machines couldn't dependably tell a supernote from the real McCoy. Jeffrey was grinning as he spoke, a little giddy even. "Pick it up," he said.

With some reluctance, I did. "It definitely feels like money," I told him.

"I'm telling you, it's a great forgery," Jeffrey said.

"The people who made it should make actual money."

I put the bill down and pushed it back across the table towards my student.

"Take it," he said.

I told him I couldn't, I shouldn't.

"Take it for your research," he said. "For your files or something."

I picked the bill back up and turned it over, considering.

"I've got fifty-eight more at home," he said. "I'm not going to miss this one."

I did the math in my head. "Must have been a big night," I said.

"Actually," Jeffrey said, "an average night, I'm afraid." And with that, he told me he had to be going.

At home, I sandwiched Jeffrey's hundred between the pages of Hoaxes, a 1940 treatise by Curtis MacDougall, the battered and sentimental cornerstone of my books on fakery. For five months, I managed to forget about it.

Then, in early July, I heard from Cabinet about writing a Colors column for the magazine. I was assigned green. For a time I thought only of the colour itself, in the abstract, green for the sake of its greenness. Then, for another, shorter time, I thought of the colour in my life. I looked around for it. I noted every appearance. At some point, I thought of American money and, of course, I then recalled the counterfeit bill my student had given me.

I pinned two one-dollar notes to a bulletin board in my office so I could look at them, back an front. Besides the bills, I pinned the supernote. Periodically, I took them down and held them. I was trying to see a dollar anew, as if I had never encountered one before. Our money, I got to thinking, is anxious, stricken with unease. The real thing, actual money, seems perpetually fearful, not just of being faked but of being mistaken for something inauthentic. Every time engraved line, every whorl and curlicue, is there to make counterfeiting difficult. What's more, the curlicues just keep getting smaller, and more elaborate. The front of the larger bills – the recently redesigned five, ten, twenty, and fifty – now feature microprinting. On the new fifty-dollar bill, for instance, the words "The United States of America" appear on President Ulysses S. Grant's collar, tucked right under his beard. The tiny typeface here and elsewhere can hardly be seen without the aid of a magnifying glass, and it's virtually impossible to reproduce by cheaper more widely available means, such as digital scanners and colour printers. Only the most expensive and painstaking intaglio printing process will do for the black fronts and green backs in which we all trust.

But what of the supernote? How had those counterfeits been done so well? Information is scant and, however intriguing, full of wild speculation. Several sources believe supernotes are produced by currency printing facilities controlled by a foreign government. Some think Syria is responsible, or North Korea, but there has never been any firm proof. Intelligence agencies worldwide have no clue where such a facility is located. The United States government has been extremely reluctant to acknowledge the existence of the supernote for fear of undermining confidence in the dollar. In 2006, however, seventeen years after the first supernote was detected, the deputy assistant director of the United States Secret Service came before the Senate Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information and International Security and testified that the supernote, while "unlikely to adversely impact the US economy," could, because of its high quality, "have significant influence" when introduced "into a micro economy." Other sources speculate that the supernotes are in fact produced by the CIA and distributed surreptitiously to certain high-profile political actors the agency wants to track, studying the eddies and patterns their money makes as it enters the giant churning currents of all the globe's cash.

I sent an email to Jeffrey, telling him what I was working on and asking if he had received anymore of the funny money. A few minutes later, his response appeared in my inbox. "Hey professor," he wrote. "no more bad bills, at least none that I know of. Ha! I maybe be able to help you, though. Are you free anytime next week?"

We met at a restaurant near campus and after the waiter took our order, Jeffrey leaned in. "the first thing you need to know," he told me, "is that it's not a foreign operation. It's happening right here." He pointed at the table.

"In the District?" I asked. I mentioned reading somewhere about possible CIA involvement but thought the details sounded sketchy.

Jeffrey waved the notion away. "It's not the CIA," he said. "It's just convenient for a lot of people to play this like it has geopolitical implications."

The truth, it turned out, was both odder and, as is often the case, more banal. The counterfeiting operation, Jeffrey explained, was actually run by a small band of students at George Washington and nearby Georgetown University. A couple of students with access to the papermaking making studio at GW create a mixture of cotton and linen fibers using

nothing fancier than the school's thirty-year-old Hollander beater. They then pull sheets of the paper complete with the necessary watermarks, security devices, and those wiggly red and blue silk threads that seem caught in the surface. From there, the pages are shuttled to Georgetown, where the art department owns a seldom used intaglio press with a large print bed. The team there applies the green ink, allows the pages to cure for seventy-two hours, and then prints the black. Next, the pages come back to GW, where students in the art department complete the letterpress work, inserting the matching pair of serial numbers and the seal of the Department of the Treasury in green ink, then overprinting the Federal Reserve District seal and the denomination's value in black.

I asked Jeffrey what part he played in the whole operation.

"I just play poker," he said. "My job, if you can call it that, is to win real money off the other players, as much as I can. Then, sometime in the last few hands, I go all in, this time using the supernotes I brought. I go down in flames – or seem to anyway. It's like money laundering except way more entertaining."

I wasn't sure I followed the ins and outs of this laundering, but I told Jeffrey I'd like to see the printing operation for myself.

Jeffrey looked doubtful. "I'm not sure that's going to be possible," he said. "why not just take the tour?" he asked, referring to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. "We based everything we do off them."

Jeffrey then described how the money gets made at the bureau's facilities in DC and Fort Worth, Texas. They operate twenty-four hours a day, he said, Monday through Friday, with production sometimes carrying over to the weekends. In fiscal year 2009, the bureau printed about twenty-six million notes each day, a print run with a face value of approximately $907 million. The numbers, all the numbers, staggered. Much of this tornado of paper replaces existing money that has worn out: a dollar bill, for example, circulates for roughly twenty-one months before it needs replacing.

"The ink," Jeffrey said, "is something of a secret." The Bureau purchases all its inks from Sicpa Securink, a Swiss-based multinational with a branch in Springfield, Virginia. On average, the bureau goes through 9.7 tons of ink per day. What's more, Sicpa supplies the ink used in eighty percent of the world's currencies.

"What if I protected your identity?" I asked Jeffrey. "I could make it so there's nothing telltale in the writing."

No response.

"Come on," I said. I didn't lie to plead, but it was too rich a story not to at least try.

"I'll think about it," he said, finally. "Maybe I'll talk to people."

After lunch, we stood out on Pennsylvania Avenue, just chatting. Apropos of nothing, Jeffrey said he had been meaning to ask me about his story and his final grade.

I thought he was joking. "Your story was terrible," I said.

"So but what if I write you a better one?" he asked.

I sighed and looked down the street, watching cars pass. I didn't want to read another story. My god, the semester was long over. Still, my access to Jeffrey and, in turn, to the counterfeiters now hung in the balance.

"If you write a better story," I said, "I'll consider changing your grade."

Jeffrey thanked me.

"It has to be a much better story though," I said. "That last one hurt my eyes."

"Don't worry, professor," Jeffrey said. "I'll make this one good."

A few days later, Jeffrey emailed me his new work. Curious, I opened the document straight away and began to read. It was something of a now-familiar story, about a student and his professor and, yes, a rather byzantine counterfeiting ring. The character of the student was a voluble sort, eager to explain how he successfully ran what amounted to green-goods scam on his old professor. In the nineteenth century, as he told it, an enterprising con artist would offer to sell finely done counterfeits to some gullible mark. When the mark asked to see a sample of this great handiwork, the con artist just showed him a real bill. What the mark actually purchased in the end, of course, was perhaps a few genuine notes bundled up with cut newspaper or strips of dyed linen. The student had done no differently. In the story's denouement, the professor, noting his student's "incredible pluck and imagination," agreed at last to change his grade. It was, I thought, an optimistic tale. I told Jeffrey I'd think about it.

"We're talking about systemic excitement here: heart rate, brain waves, respiration. We're talking about a deeply mysterious physiological response, one that runs the gamut from arousal to alarm."

RED

MAGGIE NELSON

I want to talk about something pushed all the way in then pulled all the way out, something dipped. As Lily Mazzarella says in a poem titled (appropriately) "Anger":

Bleeding on wood seemed natural
I could dip fingers inside me and come out
With two red wands, true red.

The hands have become wands, alchemised by blood. They go in and come out, slick with evidence. Red is the evidence, the marker of what's inside. It's almost always a surprise, even when you expect it, even when it's what you're going for.

Blood is always red. I wasn't entirely sure of this until today, so prevalent is the legend that blood is blue in its way back to the heart aster having been depleted of its oxygen by organs hungry for it. Some say it's children that erroneously hold this belief, due to all those anatomy charts in grade school that represent oxygenated-blood as red and deoxygenated blood as blue. But by my count, just as many adults are under its sway. It is an alluring legend insofar as it asserts – not wrongly – that there are mysteries inside the body not available to our witness. It maintains that there is a "true" color of blood – blood in the wild – that any form of exposure (in this case, to oxygen, and human vision) would alter, or ruin. Like the giant squid (or at least the giant squid until 2004, when Japanese researchers finally managed to photograph an adult in its natural habitat), the legend of a wily, fugitive blue blood that transforms instantaneously upon being disturbed by outsiders is a happy superstition, the kind that can be inextricably hard to give up. No one has seen a lot of things upon which our existence depends.

Some people say our blood appears blue from the outside because our veins are blue, but our veins aren't really blue either. They only appear blue due to a combination of factors, which include the overlying skin's capacity to scatter and absorb different wavelengths of light, and dark red colour of blood running through them. So what color are veins really? Hard to say, as veins are vessels, whose form is generally determined by their content. A vein without blood is but a "hollow utensil"; think of the inert, gray tubing of a sausage.

Truth be told, there are no "true" colors – and perhaps that is the harder fact to swallow. As Wittgenstein advises, it is wrong to "just look at the colours in nature" in an attempt to understand them, for "looking does not teach anything about the concepts of colour" (*Remarks on Colour*, p72). Elsewhere, however, he cajoles quite differently: "Don't think, but look!" (*Philosophical Investigations*, p66). So what, or when, does looking teach us? What can we ask of things, except that they appear?

To the question, "How do I know that this colour is red?" Wittgenstein famously proposed the answer: "I have learnt English." True enough. And yet. This little koan does little to explain the visceral, effect, on the human organism, of apprehending redness. "Upon merely seeing the colour red, the metabolic rate of a human being supposedly increases by 13.4%," reports Alexander Theroux in *The Primary Colours*. We're talking about systemic excitement here: heart rate, brain waves, respiration. We're talking about a deeply mysterious physiological response, one that runs the gamut from arousal to alarm.

Consider for example, a recent sculpture made by artist Harry Dodge. It consists of a piece of wood, glistening with red paint, suspended horizontally by two wooden legs stuck into a cement base. One end of the wood is sharp – a stabbing end; the other is barnacled by indeterminate coagulation, remnants of pocked and granulated organs.

Now, I know this stabber is red because I have learnt English. But I also know it is red by the visceral chain of associations and reaction I have in beholding it – associations and reactions I would not have had it been dipped in purple, or green, or yellow. For this stabber has been somewhere. It has been dipped, and it has come forth changed, from wood scrap into wand, true red.

But there are complications. First at the sharp end, the stabbing end, remains dry and is seemingly too small an area to provide a grip. How, then, did it dip? Its drippiness, its sheen, indicate that the motion in and out was swift; but that motion has been suspended – with some comedy – by two wooden legs stuck into a base now holding up this uncanny prize. In any case, whatever it is, wherever it has been, it arrives to us with much more than a smeary, diaphanous glaze, such as that left by blood on a

blade. It has come back with shine, heart affixed.

Heart-extraction, as we likely all know (who could forget, once one heard?), was the Aztecs' principal form of human sacrifice. It was a bloody business, performed with a sacrificial dagger and propelled by the belief that the living human heart held fragments of the sun – fragments that needed to be extracted and returned to the sun god, so that the sun would continue to orbit. After extracting the heart, the sacrificer would hold it, still beating, up to the sun, the bloodshed signifying the chain of the offering.

So, there is reason for alarm. There is reason to assume that anything that emerges with such red evidence may not have left its host intact.

This plunging and beholding sometimes indicates violence, but it need not always. It is true that intensity and violence can be difficult to disentangle. But it is also true that there is much to be gained from doing so. Red stands at the crossroads of this meditation.

Imagine, for example, a fist or cock striped with menstrual blood. Those who want to imagine this as a wounding do so at there own peril; those who bleed each month typically know better. That which is within often must come out, or simply does come out. Our surprise, when beholding a piece of toilet paper that suddenly comes up bright red, is related, I think, to our surprise that we exist, here, in these bodies, at all – bodies that operate at times in keeping with our will, and at others, with complete indifference to it.

Let us return, then, to Mazzarella's poem. Whence the red wands? Here is how the poem begins:

> *I bled through my violet housedress*
> *A vain spot real bloody in the wooden*
> *steps up to the house*
> *I've died and gone to Alder Street, I say*
> *and try*
> *to dance a little dance. I was sick*
> *and happy, just lost an amniotic sac.*
> *My hands trembled because I did not understand.*

Indeed, who can understand? What her body has just done, (spontaneously abort, presumably) is necessarily beyond her. It may help here to imagine magma, that messenger from below, and its almost psychotic blend of orange, yellow, black and red. Magma doesn't wait to be retrieved by a stick, ladle, or wand. It finds its own way out.

"What you hope is beneath your skin / is beneath your skin," Frank O'Hara once wrote. And, of course, what we fear is beneath our skin is there, too. Red confirms this – our – condition; no wonder it quickens. It stains the messenger, who has come to deliver the perpetually shocking news.

"the very categories with which this strange and versatile stone has been described remind us how difficult it is to pin down in the world of the senses. Ambrosial to the end, amber is a reminder that color can be so much more that what meets the eye."

AMBER

MARK BRADLEY

Amber is the stuff of antiquity. Like a prison of the past or a miniature museum, it captures, preserves, and exhibits a snapshot of history. It is colour, and yet much more than color: it is the object of touch, taste, and smell as much as it is the object of vision. Once sticky, now smooth and glossy to touch, a receptacle of static energy and a time capsule of resinous smell and tangy taste, amber is a treat for the synesthete.

Amber, then, is quintessentially *stuff*: amber perfumes, amber candles, amber lights, and amber honey are all reminiscent of the substance and its associations, rather than just what it happens to look like. Most colors start out anchored in specific objects or phenomena, and not just such familiar associative categories as ivory, peach, orange, lavender: in Greek and Latin, "white' and "black" were attached to light and darkness; "red" to blood; "green" to plants; "blue" to deep water; "yellow" to blond hair; and so on. Amber, though, is so much more. Many people today might think twice before classifying it straightforwardly as a color, not least because amber occurs in such a range of different hues: whites, greens, blues and blacks, as well as yellows and browns. And yet its use as an adjective is commonplace in our color repertoire: amber traffic lights, amber eyes, amber nectar, amber-hearted, and so on. The Romans were among the first to turn it into a color: Pliny the Elder tells us that the decadent emperor Nero used to describe his wife's hair as "amber-colored" (*sucini*) and so set a fad among high-society ladies for a new hair colour. Pliny, a natural historian and a Stoic philosopher, was deeply worried by the luxuries and immorality of his day, and by the effects the rich material culture of imperial Rome had on its inhabitants and their experience of the world. His patience with such exotic fancies as amber was short: some connoisseurs (he complained) think it is the color of the sun, of fire, of honey, or of wax because they imagine it is actually made of these things; others call it pee-coloured because they believe it was formed from crystallized lynx urine. Pliny's account of amber was a satire on the sensory bedlam at work in imperial Rome: all vices, he concluded, can be glamorized using fancy language and a warped imagination.

Not for nothing was amber such a talking point for Romans. An antiquity even in antiquity, amber derived from a faraway place as well as a faraway time: according to the Greek historian Herodotus, the one thing everybody knew about amber, apart from the fact that it had been around since time immemorial, was that it was from distant lands (mostly, in fact, from the Baltic, an ancient territory shrouded in mystery and intrigue). For Greeks and Romans, this precious fossilized resin, prized for its warm glow, transparency, and ability to refract light in weird and wonderful ways, was widely used for jewellery, amulets, even sculpture and architectural decoration. Little surprise that it became associated with the sun: the Greek called it *elektron,* a word associated with *elekter* ("the beaming sun"). Homer described the halls of Menelaus flashing and glowing with amber and other precious materials, imitating the gleam of the Olympian heavens. Mythical heroes such as Herakles were imagined adorned with glowing amber ("a marvel to behold"), and divine tears shed at the death of Phaethon, son of the Sun, were formed out of the precious stone. And there was a fine statue of the emperor Augustus at Delphi carved out of amber, pointing unequivocally to his heroic and divine status in the world.

For mortals, on the other hand, amber became a token of affluence, fertility, and protection: amber amulets were widely believed to aid women in childbirth and to protect newborn babies. It also developed an association with Dionysus, the god of wine, perhaps because it was reminiscent of certain wines in its appearance and fragrance. From Egypt to Greece and from the Italian peninsula to early Britain, amber was widely used in funerals as a decorative gift or burned as incense, its divine glow and ambrosial properties making it an ideal token for the transition from this world to the next. The ancients too were the first to observe that when rubbed with woollen cloth, amber was charged with static energy and attracted light objects such as feathers, paper, or grass – a sure sign, the argument inevitably went, of its magical properties. The early Greek philosopher Thales of Miletus even thought amber must have its own soul, so potent were the electrical energies contained within it. And some two thousand years later, perhaps under the influence of Francis Bacon who was *au fait* with the electrical properties of amber, Greek *elektron* lit up our earliest English dictionaries with *electricity*.

The intriguing, magical, and other-worldly properties of amber are, of course, not restricted to the myths, rituals, and accoutrements of classical antiquity. The Polish have a tradition that nuggets of amber are coughed up by the Baltic sea (as indeed they are) because of a mythical amber palace smashed into smithereens by the angry god of the sea; they used these nuggets as amulets to keep snakes, black magic, and the devil at bay. Rosaries of "Baltic gold" were sometimes used in Islamic prayer. And in ancient China amber was burned during religious festivals, releasing a fragrant oil that was used in the production of a precious substance called "artificial musk". There is some evidence that this penetrating scent was used across the ancient Mediterranean and medieval Europe as a highly prized perfume, and it continues to be used across the world (for better or worse) as a tincture and medicine in the treatment of such ailments as epilepsy, dementia, whooping cough, and a welter of ear, nose and throat problems. The healing properties of amber are up for debate, but it is thought to aid respiration and calm the mind, boosting the immune system and accelerating healing. Amber "teething necklaces" are widely available as a "natural" remedy for babies with teething pain – not to chew on, we are told, but to release electromagnetic energies and essential oils. In Turkish folklore, amber smoking mouthpieces make for safe sharing as they guard against infection, and amber has long been ground up in to alcoholic beverages to make them appear healthy: some types of the Scandinavian herbal liquor Akvavit ("Aqua Vitae," the water of life) are still distilled using amber, a core ingredient that is purported to secrete resin and pine oils into the spirit and give it "body." Though itself distinctly uncrystalline, amber is also a regular in crystal healing – believed to absorb negative energies and draw out disease, the oils it secretes are occasionally used in the practice of aromatherapy. Amber, then, epitomises essential colour, odour, and flavour all rolled into one compact ball of warm, glowing energy. Old magic.

Whole books have been written about amber, so complex and evocative are its multiple histories, properties and associations. From sunny Greek *elektron*, to resinous Latin *sucinum*, from Egyptian *sokal* to aromatic Arabic *anbar*, and from Finnish *merrikiwa* ("sea-stone") to German *Bernstein* ("burning stone"), the very categories with which this strange and versatile stone has been described remind us how difficult it is to pin down in the world of the senses. Ambrosial to the end, amber is a reminder that color can be so much more that what meets the eye.

"In terms of myth, Nudie Cohn's gold suit for Elvis can be seen as the beginning of a lineage – the creation of a mantle to pass down, and the inauguration of gold as an archetypal aspect of pop iconography."

GOLD

MICHAEL BRACEWELL

Elvis stands with his feet spaced widely apart, his shoulders dropped, his arms hanging loosely. There is good-humored self-consciousness in the young King's demeanor, but what renders him regal, by way of the most immediate signifier on offer, is his suit (and bow-tie) of pure shining gold. By common assent, Elvis's reign is undisputed, and the gold suit – it looks shiny as kitchen foil – is the garment that transforms him from commoner to monarch. The effect is more vaudevillian, almost clown-like, than rock-and-roll cool, but such is the iconic image on the front cover of Presley's *50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong*, released in 1959 – just three years after his breakthrough single "Heartbreak Hotel" dominated the charts on both sides of the Atlantic – and in doing so arguably marked the beginning of the pop age as we know it.

Elvis's gold suit, for all its swagger, somehow lacks sex appeal. Glancing quickly, you might think that the King was wearing a rather extravagant pair of pyjamas. It is a garment clearly descended from the ceremonial dinner suits worn by dance band musicians and theatrical entertainers – although Elvis's pride in being a "entertainer" would remain one of his most endearing qualities. (Later, when fat, imperial, and high on kung fu, Elvis would be asked at a press conference what he thought about US involvement in Vietnam. "Ah'm sorry suh," he mumbled back, "but ah'm jus' an entertainer.") Back in 1959, however, the totality of the suit's gold, its sheer slab-like shimmer – more TV game show than Versailles – asserted a pop Americana update of Shakespeare's oft-quoted comment on style and kingship: "My presence, lie a robe pontifical, ne'er seen but wonder'd at."

For *50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong*, Presley was suited in gold by the wonderfully named Nudie Cohn – whose own story, as the King's tailor, reads like a glamorously American reclamation of a European fairy tale. Nudie had arrived in New York in the 1940's and started a business making "undergarments for showgirls" – an occupation which one somehow imagines being Groucho Marx's dream job. "Nudies for the ladies" was a fair success, but it was only later, after a country singer called Tex Williams bought Nudie a sewing machine from the proceeds of an auctioned horse, that "Nudies Rodeo Tailors" was born in North Hollywood to provide rhinestones and fringes for the aristocracy of American music. (Some forty-five years after Cohn created Elvis's look for his 1959 album, Mark E. Smith – ever pop's republican – would be found on the cover of *50,000 Fall Fans Can't Be Wrong* with the kingly gold suit replaced by sweater and jeans.)

In terms of myth, Nudie Cohn's gold suit for Elvis can be seen as the beginning of a lineage – the creation of a mantle to pass down, and the inauguration of gold as an archetypal aspect of pop iconography. Fast-forward a year and cross the Atlantic to Liverpool, where Billy Fury – "The Elvis of Birkenhead" has just recorded his signature album, *The Sound of Fury*. Released in 1960 on the Decca label (they would turn down the Beatles) and destined (unfairly) to reach only number eighteen on the UK Top Twenty, *The Sound of Fury* remains distinguished as a great British Beat album mostly by way of its cover artwork. Now it's Fury wearing a (or "the") gold suit – this time with a black shirt – and somehow he looks cooler and sharper than the King himself. It is as though the gold suit has lost the stiffness of its newness, becoming worn-in and slick. It has also become strangely Anglicised – less brash and loud – even though the entire universe it celebrates is primarily black American.

Combine the stage name Billy Fury with the ceremonial pop mantle of the gold suit and you have a virtually pure pop statement – up there with Johnny's leather jacket in *The Wild Ones* or Johnny Ray's hearing aid or Lord Byron's club foot. Gold – oft reputed, like diamonds, to curse those who crave it – is both an alchemical substance (that which has been refined, leaving behind the dross) and capable of conducting a current, a useful capacity in a medium which , to quote Patti Smith, is the (un)natural consequence of "Art + Electricity." But might pop's gold suit be haunted – fable-like, bestowing fame, wealth, and glamour in exchange for long life, and even soul? (British artist Linder's recent performance work and film, *The Dark Town Cake Walk: Celebrated from the House of FAME* (2010), enacts this exchange, delivering on cue the archetype of the Star – clad in gold lamé – who is placed in sacrificial configuration with the archetype of the Witch; Linder's point being the relationship between glamour and magic.)

And so: Elvis died of heart failure by 1977; likewise, tragically, Billy Fury by 1983 – the year New Romanticism morphed into the soundtrack of Yuppie dreams of *la vie deluxe* by way of Spandau Ballet's UK number two hit, "Gold", with its exhortation to "always believe in your soul." (Meanwhile, if you go to Liverpool's great Anglican cathedral, pop fans, you'll discover in the choir there's a simple oak lectern with the name "BILLY FURY" inscribed in gold – a conflation of faiths that is hard to resist, remake, or remodel.) With his usual acuity, British style analyst Peter York would subsequently note the manner in which the trajectory of New Romanticism would keep in perfect step with the rise of Thatcherite ideology – "Gold," in all it's triumphalism, was the perfect song for the new generation of venture capitalists with smooth jaws, clean arteries, and fat pens.

But the gold suit – untamed – dances down the decades. In 1973, for example, we find the young Malcolm McDowell starring in *O Lucky Man!*, Lindsay Anderson's relentlessly cynical update of A Pilgrim's Progress. The suit is fitted for him by a fellow resident in a seedy hotel, who appears to be as much an agent of destiny or emissary of fate as the Hotel Manager as Benjamin Britten's operatic version of Death in Venice. McDowell wears the suit as though it were Arthurian armour – or as though it shared, with profound irony, a mid-Victorian, Anglo-Christian interpretation of Arthurian virtues. But still it cannot protect him. We see him plunging through Arcadian English countryside, soon to blunder into a horrific "research facility."

The magical aspect of glamour is unsurprisingly volatile, and pop's gold suit, even as it appears to empower and enshrine, also seems to bring with it the sin of hubris ("insolent pride towards gods,") that seldom goes unpunished by the vagaries of mortality. Marc Bolan, Malcolm McLaren, and Morrissey will all triumph on pop's stage in shining gold – yet each has (or had) more than a nodding acquaintance with the shadow. In this, we might look upon pop's golden raiment as articulating, with a precision that is almost too neat, the dynamics of classic myth: ambition, triumph, irony, and tragedy. So always believe in your soul.

"Alone among basic color terms in English, orange muddles the distinction between thinking and being—between that which can be conceived, and that which ostensibly is."

ORANGE

MICHAEL ROSSI

Orange is unsettling. An awkward hybrid of adjective and noun, the word upsets the quintessentially modern distinctions between objectivity and subjectivity, nature and culture, public and private. To name a color is to concretize a mental activity. There is no thing in the world called red, nor green, blue, yellow or any other spectral color. Alone among basic color terms, *orange* denotes both sensation and thing. And thus, alone among basic color terms in English, *orange* muddles the distinction between thinking and being—between that which can be *conceived*, and that which ostensibly *is*.

Such, anyway, was the opinion of Albert Munsell. By the time of his death in 1918, the American painter, art school professor, and color scientist had spent the better part of his life trying to devise a uniform and balanced scheme for the scientific classification and notation of color. Troubled by the apparent chaos and indefinitude of the English language's treatment of color names, it was Munsell's ambition to free the American people from the uncertainty of colloquial color language. Rather than having only a nebulous idea of what their fellow citizens meant when they used words like *red* or *blue*—let alone the ephemeral names of fashionable hues like *crushed strawberry* and *elephant's breath*—users of the Munsell system would be able to relate their inner most chromatic experiences with confidence and exactitude. Only *orange* stood in his way. "Orange is an interloper,' Munsell declared in 1906, "and destroys balance."

Munsell's specific complaints about *orange* were twofold. For one thing, as he explained to readers of his 1905 book, *A Color Notation*, the word *orange* was "indefinite, and refer[ed] to a variable product of the vegetable kingdom." That is, it was too closely tied to a set of objects—the citrus fruits for which it was named, which themselves fluctuated wildly in orangeness from specimen to specimen—to truly stand for an ideal sensation. The same was true, for that matter, of *indigo*, which, at least among semantically fastidious scientists, had fallen out of favour as a color term, as well as *violet*—which had morphed into *purple*, ditching its association with the freewheeling floral world to become a more stately, abstract color term. (In actuality *purple* retains much of its phonetic association with the regal garments called purpure from which it draws its sensual association. After purpure fell out of common use in the fifteenth century, the name remained as a descriptor for the color—a dissociation between object and adjective that did not occur with *orange*.)

For another thing, *orange* disrupted the rhythm of Munsell's system. Starting in 1879, Munsell began working with the notion of a three-dimensional color "sphere" or "globe" as a basis for his notational system. The system worked like this: at either pole of the globe sat black and white. Radiating out from the grey inner-most axis of the globe, one found ever brighter, more saturated colors. Around the equator of the globe, Munsell arranged his spectral colors. The simplified system resembled a beach ball, with bright colors on the outside that became more and more gray as they moved towards the "core" of the sphere, and lighter or darker as they moved towards either pole.

Through this convention, any point on or within the sphere could be noted by a set of coordinates. But it was important to Munsell that his coordinates be "balanced"—that is, each hue ought to reflect its chromatic opposite across the sphere. In order for this to occur, Munsell felt it necessary that the sphere be divided into ten chromatic regions, arranged in spectral order and denoted by letter. First, Munsell set out what he considered to be five fundamental colors: red (R), yellow (Y), green (G), blue (B), and purple (P). These sectors were in turn divided in half to provide secondary color markers (YR, GY, BG, PB, RP), for ten total orientation points. To notate hues between these orientation points, each of the ten sections were then divided into ten equal parts, as was the axis running from white to black, and the concentric circles radiating from the center to the edge of the sphere.

In this way, any color could be alphanumerically identified with great precision. No more need for indeterminate names like *crushed strawberry*. That particular pinkish hue might be called *5R 5/5*: a term signifying a color directly in the middle of the "red" part of the color globe (between 1R—a kind of purplish red—and 10R, a sort of yellowish red) that is at exactly between the most and least saturated of the 5R category of colors.

Conspicuously absent from Munsell's color nomenclature was *orange*—an elimination that Munsell justified by pointing to orange's sideline as

a citrus fruit, as well as the scientific convenience of dividing his color space into a decimal notation. In any case, Munsell hastened to point out that, he was not eliminating the *color* orange from his system—he was simply dropping the *word* from the list of basic spectral colors in the interest of scientific efficiency, and replacing it with the much more accurate numerical gradations of *YR*. Indeed—as Munsell did not point out, but surely would have, had he known—prior to the sixteenth century, speakers of Old and Middle English had gotten by perfectly well using *geoluhread*, or"yellow-red," to describe things that were neither the color of blood, nor of buttercups, but somewhere in between. Before making the jump from fruit to abstract sensation, *orange* had been a thirteenth-century borrow from the French *pume orenge*, by way of the Italian *arancio*, via the *nãranj* of Arab traders.

Munsell's genius, in essence, was to recommend a return to Anglo-Saxon basics, replacing *orange* with its *geoluhread* predecessor—a suggestion that met with a varied reception. Munsell's fondest hope was that his system would transcend use as a scientific or specialist nomenclature, to become the standard mode by which everyday Americans spoke about color—a wish that he pursued by peddling his system to school districts throughout the United States. While administrators and reform-minded art teachers were, by and large, receptive to the idea of teaching color to schoolchildren according to scientific standards, for many educators Munsell's particular standard was a bridge too far—not least because of its stance on *orange*. Munsell and his supporters struggled to convince teachers that his system did not eliminate the *color* orange—just the name. As Royal Farnum, an educational reformer and past student of Munsell's admonished an audience of art teachers in Baltimore in 1912, "I know how you are all feeling because I've heard some [of you] whispering together. What is it all about? Why does he leave out orange? You insist upon that, although he really doesn't leave it out." Indeed, with no apparent irony, Munsell dramatized the five-fold, *orange*-less divisions of his color system with the image of a segmented orange fruit, an analogy that, understandably, did little to placate his critics. With Munsell's death in 1918, his system slowly faded into obscurity in educational circles.

On the other hand, *orange* or no *orange*, Munsell's system found spectacular success as an industrial and regulatory standard. Munsell promoted his system tirelessly to government regulators and industrial manufacturers, who were receptive to the notion of a well-calibrated, systematically notated system for adjudicating and controlling the colors of everything from cars to product wrappers to fruit and vegetables. By the time of his death, Munsell's system was the touchstone for public and private regulation of industrial, pharmaceutical, and agricultural products. Thus it was possible to ask with a straight face, "what color is an orange?" and expect to get, in certain contexts, an answer with the imprimatur of scientific accuracy. Munsell's system of color was a useful tool when orange juice needed to match federal color standards, and growers stretched the limits of legality in the quest to make the zest of their produce appear to be zestier than that of their competitors.

In addition to industrial and government regulation, Munsell's system found favour among social scientists. Prominent among these were anthropologists and linguists, some of whom set out in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s to investigate the cultural and biological precepts of language formation among the different cultures of the world using standardized arrays of Munsell chips: grids of 160 colored squares depicting a wide chromatic spectrum in regularly spaced intervals. Among the most controversial of the studies to emerge from this line of research was Brent Berlin and Paul Kay's *Basic Color Terms*, a monograph that proposed that words for colors emerge in all human languages in a fixed order: first words for light and dark; then for red; then for yellow or green; and so forth until one reaches languages (typically spoken, perhaps unsurprisingly, by advanced technological civilizations, like those of Europeans and Americans) that had a full complement of eleven basic color terms, including *pink, purple, gray* and *orange*.

Critics objected to Berlin and Kay's conclusions on a number of grounds, not least their stringent standards for admitting color terms as "basic." For instance, Berlin and Kay insisted that, when in doubt, a basic color term should not refer to objects in the world. Thus a language that only had words for "light," "dark," and "the color of leaves" would not perturb

Berlin and Kay's scheme, since "the color of leaves" is not the same as *green*. In English, of course, *red* would be in, but *olive* would be out, as would *chestnut* and *turquoise*—for much the same reasons that concerned Munsell (and which Wittgenstein also pointed out in his musings on color, when he noted that "it is easy to see that not all color concepts are logically of the same order"—e.g. "color of gold" and "yellow" are fundamentally different ideas).

Which brings us back to *orange*. The word makes for an uncomfortable fit in Berlin and Kay's scheme. The point of isolating basic color terms is to chart the development of abstract units of cognition—to discern when and how language and cognition begin to make sense of the physical world. But *orange* is a conspicuously concrete term, historically and etymologically tied to its eponymous fruit. Berlin and Kay give orange a pass anyway, noting that one ought to invoke the no-reference-to-colored-objects clause only when attention to lexical status and psychological salience fail to clarify whether a term is basic or not. But this can only be taken as a somewhat obvious and awkward workaround—a reminder of the tenuous associations between words and things, rather than an explanation of their fortitude.

Today, beyond the misgivings of Munsell and his successors, orange retains an aura of the indistinct, the unwanted, even the unthinkable. Consider, for instance the Homeland Security Advisory System's penultimate warning of impending attack: orange alert. Situated between the dull throb of relatively mellow yellow and it's-curtains-for-us red, the orange of orange alert is at once a bureaucratic fantasy and a reminder of impending corporeal doom. It signifies nothing so much as nameless dread—called forth on a whim, but with the faint whiff of real physical harm. Or consider the orange-jumpsuited "detainees" of Camp X-Ray: individuals in the world and of the world, and yet our of sight and silenced—simultaneously subject and object, beyond the easy reach of language. Although their uniforms might best be colloquially described as *safety orange* or *blaze orange*, it would be more fitting to use formal Munsell terminology—*5YR 6/15*—as a suitably recondite color name to go with the imprisoned nonprisoners drifting in legal nonspace.

“Soames remembered the color as greyish-yellowish; I picture it as the olive green favored by the US military until they switched to camouflage.”

DRAB

AARON KUNIN

In 1997, everyone wore drab. Do you remember what we looked like? I don't. No one does. The only account of this fashion of the nineties comes to us secondhand, from an interview with a time traveler recorded a full century earlier:

"They all," he presently remembered, "looked very like one another."

My mind took a fearsome leap "All dressed in Jaeger?"

"Yes, I think so. Greyish-yellowish stuff."

"A sort of uniform?" He nodded. "With a number on it, perhaps?—a number on a large disc of metal sewn on to the left sleeve? DKF 78,910—that sort of thing?"

This scene greeted the eyes of Enoch Soames when he entered the reading room of the British Library on 3 June 1997. Soames, whose brief, undistinguished literary career attracted little notice among his contemporaries in the 1890s, gave the Devil his immortal soul in exchange for an afternoon in the library of the future researching his posthumous literary reputation. A poet convinced of his own genius, he did not reckon that the mediocrity of his output would fail to persuade future generations. So he was chagrined to learn that literary historians memorialized him not as a "thurd-rait poit" but also an "immajnari karrakter" invented by his acquaintance, the writer Max Beerbohm.

What else did he see in the reading room? Soames, a decadent aesthete who professed "Catholic diabolism," was further disappointed to find that after one hundred years the positivists and the utilitarians were, at least temporarily, the victors in the culture wars. While in power, they instituted a thorough reform of English spelling on a rational, phonetic basis; their cultural critics viewed literature and other arts "az a department of publik servis," and valued works only in terms of their usefulness to society.

And they—we—wore close-fitting, tightly constructed but porous wool garments made according to the process developed by Gustav Jaeger. Worn next to the skin, Jaeger's wool invigorated the body and did not let it suffocate in the unhygienic gas that it sometimes released. This cloth could take various dyes, but we only used one. Or maybe we used none at all, since one of the meanings of *drab* is the color of cloth, whatever material it may be, before it has been treated with any dye.

Soames remembered the color as greyish-yellowish; I picture it as the olive green favored by the US military until they switched to camouflage. The playful changes and reversals of the world of fashion, which used to come and go with the seasons, we reduced to one color, one shape, one texture. As de Tocqueville predicted, between the incompatible values of liberty and equality, we chose to pursue equality to a point where it degraded to conformity.

I have always liked the idea of wearing a uniform. The discipline of having a routine appeals to me, as well as the convenience of not having to decide what to wear. Most of all, I like to be imperceptible when I go out. Uniformity of dress can have the same magical effect as polite formulas in conversations: when they work they render my dealings with other people so smooth as to be beneath notice. You and I fade into the background. (In this sense, drab military uniforms may have the precise value as the camouflage with which they were replaced.) The trouble is that a uniform only has this effect when everyone wears it. If you have a personal uniform, and wear the same outfit every day, people start to notice: Have you been wearing the same shirt everyday? Or do you have a closet full of those shirts?

In Beerbohm's story, it's interesting that we , people of the future, having diminished out dress to a single color scheme, rationalized English spelling to appear the way it is pronounced, and reformed the makers of culture to serve society, still retain some vestige of the concept of fiction. According to the most advanced literary historian of the era, Soames is an "immajinri karrakter." Fiction could imply fantasy, but Soames is not at all exciting or desirable. He fades into the background. This concept of fiction designates a kind of existential poverty.

The inclusion of a fictional element may differentiate drab from the other color words that we use to mean colorlessness. Everything in the world has a color, but some colors don't seem to have a color. Most of these not-colors occur somewhere around the greyscale, and maybe drab does too, if you agree with Soames that it is grayish-yellowish. Although we distinguish many different colors on the surfaces of things, documentary realism

privileges only black and white. The rest of the colors are fantastic rather than realistic. A Hollywood soundstage, photographed in Technicolor, it becomes the Emerald City, an imaginary place.

The allegorical figure of Fame in Milton's *Samson Agonistes* has a pair of mouths and a pair of wings "one black, the other white," and by the double action of the mouths "with contrary blast proclaims most deeds." Fame indiscriminately gathers everything spoken and written in history and "proclaims" it. Fame does not care; Dalila, who speaks this passage, does. She predicts that the Philistines will worship her as a hero, while the Israelites will remember her faithlessness and enmity. She prefers the hero-worship, and is seemingly untroubled by the malediction. Although she lives in a world of conflicting opinions, she is confident in her power to determine the impression she will leave in it.

Soames also cares. To manage his fame, he made an extraordinary sacrifice to visit the British Library in my lifetime. But the same Fame who has so much to say, from the mouths on each side of his face, about Dalila, barely deigns to whisper the name of Soames and the titles of his slender volumes, except to diminish their reality. Soames's very physical presence is "dim," with a vague beard, soft hat, and raincoat that "strive earnestly to be distinctive" but do so "unsuccessfully." The painter William Rothenstein, who in Beerbohm's story undertakes to paint Soames portrait, claims that it is technically impossible: "How can one draw a man who doesn't exist?" The resulting pastel only fictionalizes Soames existence further in that "it 'existed' so much more than he; it was bound to." The poet's last recorded words are: "Try to make them know that I did exist!"

Black and white, the colors of writing, interact to proclaim the existence of their objects. They disappear to make other things appear. The disappearance of drab, the color of the background, is transitive: it makes its objects disappear. Soames, my angel of drabness, disappears both in visual art and in print, although the pastel portrait by Rothenstein and the written portrait by Beerbohm fail to ascertain his existence for opposite reasons. So fine an artist is Rothenstein that the work of his imagination exists "much more than" Soames, whereas Beerbohm is "so hopelessly not an artist," Soames tells him, "that, so far from being able to imagine a thing and make it seem true thing seem as if you'd made it up."

Soames dimness, which he desperately tries to overcome, might have afforded him some advantages. Maybe he was in the wrong line of work. If he could have asked Antonio Mendez for advice about careers, he might have learned that "if you're the person who stands in line at the market and the clerk keeps waiting on the person behind you, you know you're gonna be a good spy." In an interview with Errol Morris, Mendez, a retired CIA operative and expert in the use of disguise, reveals that "the really good spies don't need disguises. They're just uninteresting" to look at.

To be recognized and trumpeted by fame is what power usually means, but, making one's name effective in history entails making it vulnerable, giving other people a handle against you. Yet there is another kind of power in invisibility, as Mendez recalls: "Watching them swirl around you and you know they can't see you." How perception slides away is drab's allure.

References

This book would not have been possible without access to all of Cabinet magazine's back issues from their website: www.cabinetmagazine.org. References for all of the articles are listed below.

Bice by Jonathan Ames taken from Issue 1 Invented Languages (Winter 2000/01 pp.13-15)

Beige by Andrea Codrington taken from Issue 2 Mapping Conversations (Spring 2001 pp.11-13)

Ash by Meghan Dailey taken from Issue 3 Weather (Summer 2001 pp.12-13)

Ruby by Darren Wershler-Henry taken from Issue 4 Animals (Fall 2001 pp.12-14)

Indigo by Frances Richard taken from Issue 5 Evil (Winter 2001/02 pp.19-21)

Hazel by Jonathan Lethem taken from Issue 6 Horticulture (Spring 2002 pp.20-23)

Safety Orange by Tim Griffin taken from Issue 7 Failure (Summer 2002 pp.17-19)

Rust by Albert Mobilio taken from Issue 8 Pharmacopia (Fall 2002 pp.15-17)

Sulphur by Thomas Beller taken from Issue 9 Childhood (Winter 2002/03 pp.15-17)

Ultramarine by Matthew Buckingham taken from Issue 10 Property (Spring 2003 pp.7-9)

Pink by David Byrne taken from Issue 11 Flight (Summer 2003 pp.12-14)

Chartreuse by Lynne Tillman taken from Issue 12 The Enemy (Fall/Winter 2003 pp.15-17)

Khaki by Ben Marcus taken from Issue 13 Futures (Spring 2004 pp.7-9)

Sepia by Luc Sante taken from Issue 14 Doubles (Summer 2004 pp.7-10)

Purple by Matthew Klam taken from Issue 15 The Average (Fall 2004 pp.7-9)

Pistachio by Spencer Finch taken from Issue 16 The Sea (Winter 2004/05 pp.7-9)

Gray by Geoffrey O'Brien taken from Issue 17 Laughter (Spring 2005 pp.7-9)

Ivory by Frances Stark taken from Issue 18 Fictional States (Summer 2005 pp.12-14)

Silver by Priscilla Becker taken from Issue 19 Chance (Fall 2005 pp. unknown)

Cyan by Lyn Hejinian taken from Issue 20 Ruins (Winter 2005/06 pp.14-16)

Yellow by Nato Thompson taken from Issue 21 Electricity (Spring 2006 pp.10-12)

Tawny by Eileen Myles taken from Issue 22 Insecurity (Summer 2006 pp.12-13)

Scarlet by Joshua Glenn taken from Issue 23 Fruits (Fall 2006 pp.10-12)

Violet by Daniel Handler taken from Issue 24 Shadows (Winter 2006/07 pp.12-14)

Brown by Alan Gilbert taken from Issue 25 Insects (Spring 2007 pp.10-12)

Olive by Dziga Lovechild taken from Issue 26 Magic (Summer 2007 pp.16-18)

White by Joseph Grigely taken from Issue 27 Mountains (Fall 2007 pp.14-16)

Mauve by Shelley Jackson taken from Issue 28 Bones (Winter 2007/08 pp.7-9)

Opal by Emily Roysdon taken from Issue 29 Sloth (Spring 2008 pp.18-19)

Maroon by Moyra Davey taken from Issue 30 The Underground (Summer 2008 pp.17-19)

Prussian Blue by George Pendle taken from Issue 31 Shame (Fall 2008 pp.14-16)

Puce by Barry Sanders taken from Issue 32 Fire (Winter 2008/09 pp.16-18)

Porphyry by Catherine Hansen taken from Issue 33 Deception (Spring 2009 pp.13-15)

Magenta by Sally O'Reilly taken from Issue 34 Testing (Summer 2009 pp.17-19)

Verdigris by Jeff Dolven taken from Issue 35 Dust (Fall 2009 pp.16-17)

Black by Paul La Farge taken from Issue 36 Friendship (Winter 2009/10 pp.10-12)

Green by Paul Maliszewski taken from Issue 37 Bubbles (Spring 2010 pp.12-15)

Red by Maggie Nelson taken from Issue 38 Islands (Summer 2010 pp.7-9)

Amber by Mark Bradley taken from Issue 39 Learning (Fall 2010 pp.7-9)

Gold by Michael Bracewell taken from Issue 40 Hair (Winter 2010/11 pp.7-9)

Orange by Michael Rossi taken from Issue 41 Infrastructure (Spring 2011 pp.14-17)

Drab by Aaron Kunin taken from Issue 42 Forgetting (Summer 2011 pp.15-17)