

# The light that gets lost

Last summer, driving through the unremitting sunshine of southern Spain, many of the roadside ads had nothing left to say that wasn't blue. Across billboards, hoardings, bus shelters, shop windows smudged with insects, smiles were fixed but fading, as happy people offered products in one colour only. There was a slightly sickly, turquoise tint to the blue which matched the glaucous hues of palm leaves on the traffic islands. On the most exposed sites, whose stock photo couples held uninterrupted views out to sea, even the blue had given up the ghost.

In modern industrial printing, blue seems to be the most resilient colour. Cyan, magenta, yellow and black: of the four coloured inks of offset lithography, it's the blue which goes the distance. And literally, too: distant views appear blue because only the shortest waves of light's spectrum manage to reach us.

Not being a natural scientist, for years I would have to Google to remember why the sky, sea, and distance appear blue, a question that seems so simple it might be asked by a five year-old. Then I read Rebecca Solnit's mercurial *Field Guide to Getting Lost*<sup>1</sup>, and it finally stuck: as light travels towards us, blue is the light that goes missing:

The world is blue at its edges and in its depths. This blue is the light that got lost [...] It disperses among the molecules of the air, it scatters in water. Water is colorless, shallow water appears to be the color of whatever lies underneath it, but deep water is full of this scattered light, the purer the water the deeper the blue ... The sky is blue for the same reason, but the blue at the horizon, the blue of land that seems to be dissolving into the sky, is a deeper, dreamier, melancholy blue, the blue at the farthest reaches of the places where you see for miles, the blue of distance.<sup>2</sup>

This distant blue isn't a colour you can paint with a single hue, however skillfully you mix the shade: it requires layers, translucency, building things up slowly. If you want to see an artist infatuated with this and its dream-like effect, look at Claude Lorrain, the 17<sup>th</sup> century French painter of mythical landscapes whose horizons are still shimmering three centuries later. The layered distancing involved in looking back three hundred years to a scene which itself refers back to the ancient world, and whose classically-draped figures gaze out over great distances, only makes Claude's blues recede further.

For Solnit, the color of distance is the color of an emotion, 'the color of solitude and of desire, the color of there seen from here, the color of where you are not'<sup>3</sup>. Blue is by definition something that's far away from you, something withheld or left behind. If you're singing *the blues*, it's the colour of longing or lament for something lost – a lover, a job, money, freedom; your youth, even. But this is a melancholy which draws you in, not a colour or music you want to pull away from.

There are blues which follow us through life, blue touchstones, many of them experiencing only the gentlest fading: blue eyes may grey or darken, but blue biro ink can be relied upon, as can classic

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<sup>1</sup> Solnit, Rebecca, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*; Canongate, Edinburgh 2006

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p.29

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

denim, the democratic blue of fashion<sup>4</sup>. Airmail letters, known affectionately as blueys, are sent to distant friends and military personnel with only slight shifts in the internationally recognized pastel shade, perhaps yellowing gently over decades if kept in a drawer. Nature's renewal of itself year on year ensures the same fragile, surprising turquoise of a broken blackbird egg will be found on pavements every Spring.

But many other blues are wavering, inconsistent. Sea and sky, our greatest expanses of blue, make a mockery of language – the idea of containing all their hues and tints in a single word. One of the tiniest blue wildflowers, *Myosotis sylvatica*, the common forget-me-not, appears in hues from pale powder blue to deep ultramarine, all of which get chalkier as the flowers fade.

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Another summer: I'm in the long corridor-like hall, on the first floor of Falkland Palace in Fife. My family have run ahead (I know, it's National Trust, they shouldn't be running) and as the shrill voices and rapid footfall recede, I'm alone with the tapestries. The entire wall facing the windows is hung with them: heavy wooded scenes of hunting, farming, rural pleasure and ease, all bordered by looming luxuriant foliage, which puts you, facing them, standing in deep shade. It feels cool, still and timeless. I read the label: *Verdure Tapestries, Flemish, 17<sup>th</sup> century*. But *verdure* means lush green – and there's no green in front of me. Those forests, fields and creeping foliage are thick and lush but they're woven in deep indigo, Prussian, teal, Egyptian- and grey-blue.

'Blue-disease' is a cruel term for it, since it's not blue's fault. I find the explanation in Jenny Dean's study of natural dyes, *Wild Colour*: it's not the blue, but the yellow that has failed:

On some old tapestries the grass often appears as blue as the sky because the yellow, which was used to create a green when overdyed with blue from indigo or woad, has disappeared entirely and only the blue remains.

[...] although green is the most common colour in the natural world, a true grass green is almost impossible to achieve from a single plant dye. This is why such greens were, and still are, made by overdyeing yellow with blue or blue with yellow.<sup>5</sup>

I love this thought – that the blue was there all along, hiding underneath, revealed by light. Blue is time passing. How many of the images we make will eventually fade to blue?

Memorable uses of blue in poetry, including A. E. Housman's 'blue remembered hills' often call upon its evocation of distance, that misty cerulean which in an already nostalgic context brings a wistful melancholy. But the vividness of a bright azure blue can be cruel, too. In Robert Lowell's 'Waking in the Blue'<sup>6</sup>, an autobiographical poem set in an asylum, blue's dazzling beauty is brutally indifferent to his suffering:

Azure Day  
Makes my agonized blue window bleaker.  
Crows maunder on the petrified freeway.

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<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Armani is often quoted as saying 'Jeans represent democracy in fashion'; cited by Kassia St Clair in *The Secret Lives of Colour*, John Murray, London 2016 (p.192)

<sup>5</sup> Dean, Jenny, *Wild Colour*, Hachette, London 1999 (p.16)

<sup>6</sup> Published in the collection *Life Studies*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York 1959

Here blue is conveying personal experience with radical honesty: published in 1959, Lowell's testimony of his own mental illness and hospitalization came at a time when such disclosure was deeply taboo. *Azure* and *agonized* are linked with the drama of that z; this isn't just feeling blue, it's a matter of trying to stay alive.

Maybe it's blue's connotation with transparency (water), as well as depth and distance (sky), which makes it the colour to bear such honesty. I don't know. But back in my studio, I've put translucent blues aside. I'm using gouache, a water-based medium that you turn to when you need opacity, and I'm seeking the dilution point where I get the movement I need but only just. I want that flatness of colour, too: a flatness which keeps you on the surface, and insists the painting is about the painting, it's not driving you to something else. The blues I'm mixing are midway blues, slightly dirty azures, not-quite brilliant hues that hover uncertainly between Egyptian and cerulean. I muddy the water deliberately; I want the complexity and impossibility of mixing the same blue twice. The chalkiness of gouache makes it especially elusive: lighter tones generally dry darker and darker tones tend to dry lighter, making it almost impossible to predict how the colour will settle. Since the paint dries quickly and I can't reproduce a blue I've mixed before, I'm forced to focus, to commit to making each painting in a single, intense session. A blue hour.

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I finish my account just as the light is dropping, shifting attention from the afternoon out there to evening in the room, the lamp on my desk reminding me of my familiar, helpful objects. Ochres are turning warmer, whites of eyes a paler sludgy grey. Holding it under the lamp now, but what side of blue is that? The lamplight playing tricks, or just low blood sugar? With the daylight gone, tilting the picture this way and that under the lamp isn't enough. I scan it in. The familiar shunting and a lag before it appears on screen: blue light bringing me back into the day.

A slippery blue, though the iron in it would suggest strength. A blue that's hard to remember, and impossible to capture. Perhaps that's the same thing? My phone thinks it should be brighter, and gives it the azure edges of a chlorinated pool, but there's a shiftiness to it too, a feeling of something that used to be otherwise - the faded cyan of those posters, left too long in the sun. Scanned in, it's much too dull, weighed down like the end of a sigh.

The blue has sunk into the crevices of my hands. Soaked into skin it assumes the same hue as veins - a muddy, dull turquoise with mauve hints about it. My fingers look much older, and clotted with blood.

I'm looking at the painting now on screen. The glass holds it taut, tilted for inspection. But that's not the blue. The paintings themselves I've pressed between the pages of a stack of books, my heaviest tomes that will receive a blue imprint. Only the weight of the stack is stopping me from retrieving them to hold against the screen, the falsified blue.

If I make a blue which can only be truly seen within the walls of my room, can it exist to the world outside? Or is it a blue that cannot be communicated?

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*This is an extract from a longer essay to be published at a later date; email [hello@annachapman.co.uk](mailto:hello@annachapman.co.uk) for more info.*