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BLUETS

1. Suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with a color. Suppose I were to speak this as though it were a confession; suppose I shredded my napkin as we spoke. *It began slowly. An appreciation, an affinity. Then, one day, it became more serious. Then* (looking into an empty teacup, its bottom stained with thin brown excrement coiled into the shape of a sea horse) *it became somehow* personal.

2. And so I fell in love with a color—in this case, the color blue—as if falling under a spell, a spell I fought to stay under and get out from under, in turns.

3. Well, and what of it? A voluntary delusion, you might say. That each blue object could be a kind of burning bush, a secret code meant for a single agent, an X on a map too diffuse ever to be unfolded in entirety but that contains the knowable universe. How could all the shreds of blue garbage bags stuck in brambles, or the bright blue tarps flapping over every shanty and fish stand in the world, be, in essence, the fingerprints of God? *I will try to explain this.*

4. I admit that I may have been lonely. I know that loneliness can produce bolts of hot pain, a pain which, if it stays hot enough for long enough, can begin to simulate, or to provoke—take your pick—an apprehension of the divine. (*This ought to arouse our suspicions.*)

5. But first, let us consider a sort of case in reverse. In 1867, after a long bout of solitude, the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé wrote to his friend Henri Cazalis: "These last months have been terrifying. My Thought has thought itself through and reached a Pure Idea. What the rest of me has suffered during that long agony, is in-

describable." Mallarmé described this agony as a battle that took place on God's "boney wing." "I struggled with that creature of ancient and evil plumage—God—whom I fortunately defeated and threw to earth," he told Cazalis with exhausted satisfaction. Eventually Mallarmé began replacing "le ciel" with "l'Azur" in his poems, in an effort to rinse references to the sky of religious connotations. "Fortunately," he wrote Cazalis, "I am quite dead now."

6. The half-circle of blinding turquoise ocean is this love's primal scene. That this blue exists makes my life a remarkable one, just to have seen it. To have seen such beautiful things. To find oneself placed in their midst. Choiceless. I returned there yesterday and stood again upon the mountain.

7. But what kind of love is it, really? Don't fool yourself and call it sublimity. Admit that you have stood in front of a little pile of powdered ultramarine pigment in a glass cup at a museum and felt a stinging desire. But to do what? Liberate it? Purchase it? Ingest it? There is so little blue food in nature—in fact blue in the wild tends to

> mark food to avoid (mold, poisonous berries)—that culinary advisers generally recommend against blue light, blue paint, and blue plates when and where serving food. But while the color may sap appetite in the most literal sense, it feeds it in others. You might want to reach out and disturb the pile of pigment, for example, first staining your fingers with it, then staining the world. You might want to dilute it and swim in it, you might want to rouge your nipples with it, you might want to paint a virgin's robe with it. But still you wouldn't be accessing the blue of it. Not exactly.

8. Do not, however, make the mistake of thinking that all desire is yearning. "We love to contemplate blue, not because it advances to us, but because it draws us after it," wrote Goethe, and perhaps he is right. But I am not interested in longing to live in a world in which I already live. I don't want to yearn for blue things, and God forbid for any "blueness." Above all, I want to stop missing you.

9. So please do not write to tell me about any more beautiful blue things. To be fair, this book will not tell you

about any, either. It will not say, *Isn't X beautiful?* Such demands are murderous to beauty.

10. The most I want to do is show you the end of my index finger. Its muteness.

11. That is to say: I don't care if it's colorless.

12. And please don't talk to me about "things as they are" being changed upon any "blue guitar." What can be changed upon a blue guitar is not of interest here.

13. At a job interview at a university, three men sitting across from me at a table. On my CV it says that I am currently working on a book about the color blue. I have been saying this for years without writing a word. It is, perhaps, my way of making my life feel "in progress" rather than a sleeve of ash falling off a lit cigarette. One of the men asks, *Why blue?* People ask me this question often. I never know how to respond. We don't get to choose what or whom we love, I want to say. We just don't get to choose.

52. Try, if you can, not to talk as if colors emanated from a single physical phenomenon. Keep in mind the effects of all the various surfaces, volumes, light-sources, films, expanses, degrees of solidity, solubility, temperature, elasticity, on color. Think of an object's capacity to emit, reflect, absorb, transmit, or scatter light; think of "the operation of light on a feather." Ask yourself, what is the color of a puddle? Is your blue sofa still blue when you stumble past it on your way to the kitchen for water in the middle of the night; is it still blue if you don't get up, and no one enters the room to see it? Fifteen days after we are born, we begin to discriminate between colors. For the rest of our lives, barring blunted or blinded sight, we find ourselves face-to-face with all these phenomena at once, and we call the whole shimmering mess "color." You might even say that it is the business of the eye to make colored forms out of what is essentially shimmering. This is how we "get around" in the world. Some might also call it the source of our suffering.

53. "We mainly suppose the experiential quality to be an intrinsic quality of the physical object"—this is the so-

called systematic illusion of color. Perhaps it is also that of love. But I am not willing to go there—not just yet. I believed in you.

54. Long before either wave or particle, some (Pythagoras, Euclid, Hipparchus) thought that our eyes emitted some kind of substance that illuminated, or "felt," what we saw. (Aristotle pointed out that this hypothesis runs into trouble at night, as objects become invisible despite the eyes' purported power.) Others, like Epicurus, proposed the inverse—that objects themselves project a kind of ray that reaches out toward the eye, as if they were looking at us (and surely some of them are). Plato split the difference, and postulated that a "visual fire" burns between our eyes and that which they behold. This still seems fair enough.

55. One image of the intellectual: a man who loses his eyesight not out of shame (Oedipus) but in order to think more clearly (Milton). I try to avoid generalities when it comes to the business of gender, but in all honesty I must admit that I simply cannot conceive of a version of female

112. At times I have heard it said that we don't dream in color. But surely this is a mistake. Not only can we dream in color, but more importantly: how could anyone else know if we do or do not? At times I have been tempted to think that we dream more colorfully now because of the cinema. (To know what dreams were like before the cinema!) But then I think of "The Dream of the Rood," one of the first documents in Old English, from around the eighth century, which flickers with color (and with pleasure, and with pain): "Behold I shall tell of a most marvelous dream . . . It seemed to me that I saw a tree, more wonderful than any other, spring high aloft, bathed in light, brightest of wood. All that beacon was covered in gold . . . Wonderful was the triumphant tree, and I stained with sin, wounded with wrongdoing . . . I was sadly troubled, afraid of that fair sight. I saw that beacon, changeable, alter in clothes and color: now it was wet with moisture, drenched with blood's flowing, now adorned with treasure." The question of whether gold counts as a color may here arise, but I am not equipped to tackle it. I will relay only this: "What is on the other side of gold is the

same as what is on this side" (John Berger); I'm tempted to think this disqualifies it. The red of the dreamer's wrongdoing, however, appears nonnegotiable.

113. In his unfinished novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen,* Novalis tells the story of a medieval troubadour who sees a little blue flower—perhaps a bluet—in a dream. Afterward he longs to see the blue flower in "real life." "I can't get rid of the idea," he says. "It haunts me." (Mallarmé, too: "*Je suis hanté.* L'Azur! l'Azur! l'Azur! l'Azur!") Heinrich knows his obsession is a little singular: "For who would be so concerned about a flower in this world? And I've never heard of anyone being in love with a flower." Nonetheless, he devotes his life to searching for it: thus begins the adventure, the high romance, the romance of seeking.

114. But now think of the Dutch expression: "*Dat zijn maar blauwe bloempjes*"—"Those are nothing but blue flowers." In which case "blue flowers" means a pack of bald-faced lies.

156. "Why is the sky blue?" —A fair enough question, and one I have learned the answer to several times. Yet every time I try to explain it to someone or remember it to myself, it eludes me. Now I like to remember the question alone, as it reminds me that my mind is essentially a sieve, that I am mortal.

157. The part I do remember: that the blue of the sky depends on the darkness of empty space behind it. As one optics journal puts it, "The color of any planetary atmosphere viewed against the black of space and illuminated by a sunlike star will also be blue." In which case blue is something of an ecstatic accident produced by void and fire.

158. God is truth; truth is light; God is light; etc.: the chain of syllogisms goes on and on. See John 1:5: "And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not." (As if darkness, too, had a mind.)

159. A good many have figured God as light, but a good many have also figured him as darkness. Dionysius the Areopagite, a Syrian monk whose work and identity are

themselves shrouded in obscurity, would seem to be one of the first serious Christian advocates of the idea of a "Divine Darkness." The idea is a complicated one, as the burden falls to us to differentiate this Divine Darkness from other kinds of darknesses—that of a "dark night of the soul," the darkness of sin, and so on. "We pray that we may come unto this Darkness which is beyond light, and, without seeing and without knowing, to see and to know that which is above vision and knowledge through the realization that by not-seeing and unknowing we attain to true vision and knowledge," Dionysius wrote, as if clarifying the matter.

160. Equally complicated: the idea of *agnosia,* or *unknowing,* which is what one ideally finds, or undergoes, or achieves, within this Divine Darkness. Again: this *agnosia* is not a form of ignorance, but rather a kind of *undoing.* (As if one knew once, then forgot? But what did one know?)

161. Philosopher Bertrand Russell was a fan of Wittgenstein's early work in logic, but he complained that the later Wittgenstein "seems to have grown tired of serious

the universe, the article says, is "pale turquoise." *Of course,* I think, looking out wistfully over the glittering Gulf. *I knew it all along. The heart of the world is blue.*

223. A few months later, back at home, I read somewhere else that this result was in error, due to a computer glitch. The *real* color of the universe, this new article says, is light beige.

224. Recently I found out that "les bluets" can translate as "cornflowers." You might think I would have known this all along, as I have been calling this book "Bluets" (mispronounced) for years. But somehow I had only ever heard, "a small blue flower with a yellow center that grows abundantly in the countryside of France." I thought I'd never seen it.

225. Shortly after finding out about the bluets, I have a dream in which I am sent an abundance of cornflowers. In this dream it is perfectly all right that that is their name. They do not need to be bluets any longer. They are American, they are shaggy, they are wild, they are strong. They

do not signify romance. They were sent by no one in celebration of nothing. I had known them all along.

226. As I collected blues for this project—in folders, in boxes, in notebooks, in memory—I imagined creating a blue tome, an encyclopedic compendium of blue observations, thoughts, and facts. But as I lay out my collection now, what strikes me most is its *anemia*—an anemia that seems to stand in direct proportion to my zeal. I thought I had collected enough blue to build a mountain, albeit one of detritus. But it seems to me now as if I have stumbled upon a pile of thin blue gels scattered on the stage long after the show has come and gone; the set, striked.

227. Perhaps this is as it should be. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*—the first and only book of philosophy he published in his lifetime—clocks in at sixty pages, and offers a grand total of seven propositions. "As to the shortness of the book I am *awfully sorry for it; but what can I do?*" he wrote to his translator. "If you were to squeeze me like a lemon you would get nothing more out of me."