

MAGGIE NELSON

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.

14. I have enjoyed telling people that I am writing a book about blue without actually doing it. Mostly what happens in such cases is that people give you stories or leads or gifts, and then you can play with these things instead of with words. Over the past decade I have been given blue inks, paintings, postcards, dyes, bracelets, rocks, precious stones, watercolors, pigments, paperweights, goblets, and candies. I have been introduced to a man who had one of his front teeth replaced with lapis lazuli, solely because he loved the stone, and to another who worships blue so devoutly that he refuses to eat blue food and grows only blue and white flowers in his garden, which surrounds the blue ex-cathedral in which he lives. I have met a man who is the primary grower of organic indigo in the world, and another who sings Joni Mitchell's *Blue* in heartbreaking drag, and another with the face of a derelict whose eyes literally leaked blue, and I called this one the prince of blue, which was, in fact, his name.

15. I think of these people as my blue correspondents, whose job it is to send me blue reports from the field.

16. But you talk of all this jauntily, when really it is more like you have been mortally ill, and these correspondents send pieces of blue news as if last-ditch hopes for a cure.

17. But what goes on in you when you talk about color as if it were a cure, when you have not yet stated your disease.

18. A warm afternoon in early spring, New York City. We went to the Chelsea Hotel to fuck. Afterward, from the window of our room, I watched a blue tarp on a roof across the way flap in the wind. You slept, so it was my secret. It was a smear of the quotidian, a bright blue flake amidst all the dank providence. It was the only time I came. It was essentially our lives. It was shaking.

19. Months before this afternoon I had a dream, and in this dream an angel came and said: *You must spend more time thinking about the divine, and less time imagining unbuttoning the prince of blue's pants at the Chelsea Ho-*

*tel.* But what if the prince of blue's unbuttoned pants *are* the divine, I pleaded. *So be it*, she said, and left me to sob with my face against the blue slate floor.

20. *Fucking leaves everything as it is. Fucking may in no way interfere with the actual use of language. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is.*

21. Different dream, same period: Out at a house by the shore, a serious landscape. There was a dance underway, in a mahogany ballroom, where we were dancing the way people dance when they are telling each other how they want to make love. Afterward it was time for rough magic: to cast the spell I had to place each blue object (two marbles, a miniature feather, a shard of azure glass, a string of lapis) into my mouth, then hold them there while they discharged an unbearable milk. When I looked up you were escaping on a skiff, suddenly wanted. I spit out the objects in a snaky blue paste on my plate and offered to help the police boat look for you, but they said the currents were too unusual. So I stayed behind, and became

known as the lady who waits, the sad sack of town with hair that smells like an animal.

22. Some things do change, however. A membrane can simply rip off your life, like a skin of congealed paint torn off the top of a can. I remember that day very clearly: I had received a phone call. A friend had been in an accident. Perhaps she would not live. She had very little face, and her spine was broken in two places. She had not yet moved; the doctor described her as "a pebble in water." I walked around Brooklyn and noticed that the faded periwinkle of the abandoned Mobil gas station on the corner was suddenly blooming. In the baby-shit yellow showers at my gym, where snow sometimes fluttered in through the cracked gated windows, I noticed that the yellow paint was peeling in spots, and a decent, industrial blue was trying to creep in. At the bottom of the swimming pool, I watched the white winter light spangle the cloudy blue and I knew together they made God. When I walked into my friend's hospital room, her eyes were a piercing, pale blue and the only part of her body that could move. I was scared. So was she. The blue was beating.

23. Goethe wrote *Theory of Colours* in a period of his life described by one critic as “a long interval, marked by nothing of distinguished note.” Goethe himself describes the period as one in which “a quiet, collected state of mind was out of the question.” Goethe is not alone in turning to color at a particularly fraught moment. Think of filmmaker Derek Jarman, who wrote his book *Chroma* as he was going blind and dying of AIDS, a death he also forecast on film as disappearing into a “blue screen.” Or of Wittgenstein, who wrote his *Remarks on Colour* during the last eighteen months of his life, while dying of stomach cancer. He knew he was dying; he could have chosen to work on any philosophical problem under the sun. He chose to write about color. About color and pain. Much of this writing is urgent, opaque, and uncharacteristically boring. “That which I am writing about so tediously, may be obvious to someone whose mind is less decrepit,” he wrote.

24. “In view of the fact that Goethe’s explanation of color makes no physical sense at all,” one critic recently noted, “one might wonder why it is considered appropriate to

reissue this English translation.” Wittgenstein put it this way: “This much I understand: that a physical theory (such as Newton’s) cannot solve the problems that motivated Goethe, even if he himself didn’t solve them either.” So what were Goethe’s problems?

25. Goethe was interested in the case of “a lady, who, after a fall by which an eye was bruised, saw all objects, but especially white objects, glittering in colours, even to an intolerable degree.” This story is but one of many Goethe relates of people whose vision has been injured or altered and who seemingly never heal, even when the cause of the injury is psychological or emotional in nature. “This indicates extreme weakness of the organ, its inability to recover itself,” he observes.

26. After my friend’s accident, I began to think of this lady of the bruised eye and these glittering white objects with more frequency. Could such a phenomenon be happening to me, with blue, by proxy? I’ve heard that a diminishment of color vision often accompanies depression, though I do not have any idea how or why such a

thing is neurologically possible. So what would it be a symptom of, to start seeing colors—or, more oddly, just one color—more acutely? Mania? Monomania? Hypomania? Shock? Love? Grief?

27. But why bother with diagnoses at all, if a diagnosis is but *a restatement of the problem*?

28. It was around this time that I first had the thought: we fuck well because he is a passive top and I am an active bottom. I never said this out loud, but I thought it often. I had no idea how true it would prove, or how painful, outside of the fucking.

29. If a color cannot cure, can it at least incite hope? The blue collage you sent me so long ago from Africa, for example, made me hopeful. But not, to be honest, because of its blues.

30. If a color could deliver hope, does it follow that it could also bring despair? I can think of many occasions on which a blue has made me feel suddenly hopeful (turning one's car around a sharp curve on a precipice and

abruptly finding ocean; flipping on the light in a stranger's bathroom one presumed to be white but which was, in fact, robin-egg blue; coming across a collection of navy blue bottle tops pressed into cement on the Williamsburg Bridge, or a shining mountain of broken blue glass outside a glass factory in Mexico), but for the moment, I can't think of any times that blue has caused me to despair.

31. Consider the case of Mr. Sidney Bradford, however, whose corneal opacities were grafted away at the age of fifty-two. After his vision was restored, he became unexpectedly disconsolate. "He found the world drab, and was upset by flaking paint and other blemishes; he liked bright colours, but became depressed when they faded." Not long after he gained vision and saw the world in full color, he "died in unhappiness."

32. When I say "hope," I don't mean hope for anything in particular. I guess I just mean thinking that it's worth it to keep one's eyes open. "What are all those / fuzzy-looking things out there? / Trees? Well, I'm tired / of them": the last words of William Carlos Williams's English grandmother.



33. I must admit that not all blues thrill me. I am not overly interested in the matte stone of turquoise, for example, and a tepid, faded indigo usually leaves me cold. Sometimes I worry that if I am not moved by a blue thing, I may be completely despaired, or dead. At times I fake my enthusiasm. At others, I fear I am incapable of communicating the depth of it.

34. *Acyanoblepsia*: non-perception of blue. A tier of hell, to be sure—albeit one that could be potentially corrected by Viagra, one of whose side effects is to see the world tinged with blue. The expert on guppy menopause, whose office is across from mine at the Institute, tells me this. He says it has something to do with a protein in the penis that bears a similarity to a protein in the retina, but beyond that I cannot follow.

35. Does the world look bluer from blue eyes? Probably not, but I choose to think so (self-aggrandizement).

36. Goethe describes blue as a lively color, but one devoid of gladness. "It may be said to disturb rather than en-

liven." Is to be in love with blue, then, to be in love with a disturbance? Or is the love itself the disturbance? And what kind of madness is it anyway, to be in love with something constitutionally incapable of loving you back?

37. Are you sure—one would like to ask—that it cannot love you back?

38. For no one really knows what color is, where it is, even whether it is. (*Can it die? Does it have a heart?*) Think of a honeybee, for instance, flying into the folds of a poppy: it sees a gaping violet mouth, where we see an orange flower and assume that it's orange, that we're normal.

39. The Encyclopedia does not help. "If normally our perception of color involves 'false consciousness,' what is the right way to think of colors?" it asks. "In the case of color, unlike other cases," it concludes, "false consciousness should be a cause for celebration."

40. When I talk about color and hope, or color and despair, I am not talking about the red of a stoplight, a peri-

winkle line on the white felt oval of a pregnancy test, or a black sail strung from a ship's mast. I am trying to talk about what blue means, or what it means to me, apart from meaning.

41. On the eve of the millennium, driving through the Valley of the Moon. On the radio a DJ was going through the best albums of the century, and somewhere, I think around number thirty, was Joni Mitchell's *Blue*. The DJ played "River," and said that its greatness lies in the fact that no woman had ever said it so clearly and unapologetically before: *I'm so hard to handle, I'm selfish and I'm sad*. Progress! I thought. Then came the song's next line: *Now I've gone and lost the best baby that I ever had*.

42. Sitting in my office before teaching a class on prosody, trying not to think about you, about my having lost you. *But how can it be? How can it be? Was I too blue for you. Was I too blue*. I look down at my lecture notes: *Heart-break is a spondee*. Then I lay my head down on the desk and start to weep. — *Why doesn't this help?*

43. Before a faculty meeting, talking again with the expert on guppy menopause. *What do biologists make of the question, Does color exist?* I ask. Duh, he says. A male guppy looking for a mate doesn't worry about whether color exists, he says. A male guppy only cares about being orange, in order to attract one. *But can it really be said that the guppy cares about being orange?* I ask. No, he admits. The male guppy simply *is* orange. *Why orange?* I ask. He shrugs. In the face of some questions, he says, biologists can only vacate the field.

44. This particular conversation with the expert on guppy menopause takes place on a day when, later that afternoon, a therapist will say to me, *If he hadn't lied to you, he would have been a different person than he is*. She is trying to get me to see that although I thought I loved this man very completely for exactly who he was, I was in fact blind to the man he actually was, or is.

45. This pains me enormously. She presses me to say why; I can't answer. Instead I say something about how clinical

psychology forces everything we call love into the pathological or the delusional or the biologically explicable, that if what I was feeling wasn't love then I am forced to admit that I don't know what love is, or, more simply, that I loved a bad man. How all of these formulations drain the blue right out of love and leave an ugly, pigmentless fish flapping on a cutting board on a kitchen counter.

46. *Disavowal*, says the silence.

47. *Is there a good kind of hustler?* I wonder, as I steer my car through the forest of gargantuan billboards, ghostly palm trees, and light-flattened boulevards that have become my life.

48. Imagine, for example, someone who fucks like a whore. Someone who seems good at it, professional. Someone you can still see fucking you, in the mirror, always in the mirror, crazy fucking about three feet away, in an apartment lit by blue light, never lit by daylight, this person is always fucking you from behind in blue light and you both always seem good at it, dedicated and lost unto

it, as if there is no other activity on God's given earth your bodies know how to do except fuck and be fucked like this, in this dim blue light, in this mirror. What do you call someone who fucks this way?

49. There is a color inside of the fucking, but it is not blue.

50. The confusion about what color is, where it is, or whether it is persists despite thousands of years of prodding at the phenomenon. And literally prodding: in his zeal, in the "dark chamber" of his room at Trinity College, Newton at times took to sticking iron rods or sticks in his eyes to produce then analyze his perceptions of color. Children whose vision has been damaged have been known to smash their fingers into their eyes to recreate color sensations that have been lost to them. (*That's the spirit!*)

51. *You might as well act as if objects had the colors*, the Encyclopedia says. —Well, it is as you please. But what would it look like to act otherwise?

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