

COLOR THEORY

by Rachel Lin Weaver

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I. *Texas*

Cadmium Yellow

The house I lived in as a toddler in Del Rio had yellow walls, and was perched precariously about two miles from the Mexican Border, right alongside the Rio Grande and a stone's throw from Lake Amistad, in what my parents described as the armpit of the country. It was an understandable description because the neighborhood was so rough; our house got robbed four times in three months that year. But that's how it was with living off-base. If you were in the Air Force, you either stayed in their sterile concrete cage of security, or you lived in the real world, and my parents, being the intrepid characters they were, always chose the latter. True, they were dreamers, and like most dreamers they believed in experiencing everything you possibly could about a place; the good and the bad. Being the product of these dreamers inevitably meant that I was going to experience life in Del Rio alongside them, whether I wanted to or not. Our neighbor José, the large, angry man who lived next door to us and always stank of tequila, was wearing a stained yellow shirt the day he shot our dog and hung its dripping body on the chain link fence dividing our lawns.

Burnt Orange

Summer was bonfire time, time for prowling the desert at night. Dad and Jimmy and Robert would get home late from a gig, heads still buzzing from being on stage, salty

from frying under the lights, my father the drummer especially. He was skinny as a beanpole then, mom said. She and Claire would wander out from the kitchen with agave on ice for everyone except me, though I knew I would get a taste if I howled long enough. The stuff was acrid as gasoline and the flavor made my mouth water with nausea. I was always sent to bed after they had finished the second or third drink, but I knew the routine. The screen door would rock shut, squeak on its hinges. They would go out back past the old Joshua tree, stand around. They were always too far away for me to hear their conversations, but I could see their glowing cigarettes from my window. Maybe if I held my breath and listened carefully enough I could catch snippets of their laughter, or hear my father stacking deadwood in the old fire pit. Nights they didn't have music to play, the guys would come over early and everyone would show up to eat and get drunk. Around sunset, Dad and Jimmy would team up with our Mexican neighbors and together they would hoist a whole skinned goat, impaled from nose to tail, over the licking flames.

Alizarin Crimson

Prickly pear cactus fruit turn scarlet when ripest. They grow to be flushed, egg-shaped fingers along the uppermost crest of the tough green leaves. Wear gloves when examining them. Reach out and give them a little squeeze to check that they're soft enough before picking them, but do so with care or else you'll end up digging a broken cactus spine out of your thumb for an hour or two, gloves or otherwise. The flavor when best can be remarkably sweet; something of watermelon and banana and guava and pear. Everyone in the desert eats them, so if you don't, someone else will: the coyotes, the

Mexican bats, the honeybees, the birds, the fire ants, —they don't miss out on such fleeting delicacies. If you're lucky enough to find more than a few rotting fruit, rub them first in the sand to remove the poisonous hairs. Cut one into slices with a knife. Try it raw; let the fleshy pulp lay heavy on your tongue before you swallow. With the rest, make a sticky jam good for spreading on tortillas or cornbread, or for luring addicted children out of their beds and into the kitchen for midnight tablespoonful-at-a-time raids. For a brief time perhaps, until prickly pear season is over, everyone's favorite color will become red. "*La tuna!*" the Mexican children shout, smiling, "*la tuna!*" They crowd around your father and he pauses in the middle of the white caliche road.

II. *Alaska*

Titanium White

Summers, once a week we piled in the old white car and took the long curving arm down Seward Highway to hike on the Kenai Peninsula. I sat in the front seat of my mother's car then, nine, ten years old, window cranked all the way down. I was forever crippled by motion sickness, so despite the chill in the air, the window stayed put, even if it meant being pelted by sleet. Despite being next to the window, we would often have to stop in order for me to walk around "to get some air," as though I hadn't just been sitting in a virtual wind tunnel for the past twenty miles. Dad would always get out and smoke a cigarette while mom walked with me, stopping to hold my hair as needed. Seward Highway runs for quite a while along the coast, so maybe it would have happened inevitably. Mom spotted them first because she could hear them singing, the belugas in

the sheltered bay. There were maybe a hundred of them, clustered near the shore, sheltered beside large, quartzite-banded boulders that glistened nearly black in the seawater. We made our way down the hill to the beach precariously and the chirping and whistling grew louder. Dozens of small, perfect babies floated next to their mothers who watched us as we approached. Beluga whales are a deep gray when born, but they metamorphose, growing paler as they age. Eventually, their bodies are an astonishing white, and when they move far out at sea, it is easy to mistake them for the whitecaps of waves, or for bobbing shards of iceberg. They had come to the bay to give birth, and now they were singing, just like canaries, in white chorus that was as blinding as it was deafening. We stood and stared, and they stared back with dark, seeing eyes.

Burnt Umber

Nicholas was my next-door neighbor and the closest thing to a best friend I had while in elementary school in Anchorage. From what I remember, there were two older sisters, maybe an older brother somewhere in his background as well, but they were nearly adults then and far too cool to spend any time with us. Besides that, Nick was the only one in the neighborhood willing to wade in the creek with me. The creek ran through a thicket of spruce and aspen. Sunlight, if it ever made it down to the tannin-stained water, only cut through in geometric fragments, so thick was the growth there. In July, salmon berries grew along the bank, as did chocolate lilies, forget-me-nots, and the occasional lupine. Like true explorers, Nick and I did our best to destroy the natural environment. We muddied the water, terrorized the fish, got mosquito bites, and once, as of one mind, decided to dam the creek to form a lake by piling birch limbs and fallen sticks, rocks,

pine needles, mud, and gravel in buckets from both of our driveways on top of one another. Our swamp lasted all of forty-five minutes, but in those forty-five minutes we felt the pride of civilization, of mastery over the land. Nature, for that brief instant, bent to our will, or so it seemed, while quietly plotting against us. We hurried to Nick's house for brownies, but by the time we had been hosed down, towel-dried, fed, and ushered back into the wilderness, our marvelous dam had collapsed, and what was there of structure instead was but a streak of muddy water in a self-cleaning brook, and a pile of water-heavy sticks, slowly bobbing away.

Sap Green

It came like a sickness, the warmth. It slipped in, grasped icicles and slid under snow banks, ate holes through the frozen crusts over rivers, cracked shocked stones, that sickness. It came every year like this on the back of the Chinook winds, an abrupt suffocation. The once-white world wasted, grew thinner and thinner until all that was left were the skeletal remains of nine months of winter; a patch of white still clinging to the shadows, an icicle under some protected eave. With its leaving, all truths were violently made known; a dead magpie like a black stain in the back yard, frozen to death maybe in December, a homeless man in downtown Anchorage, huddled beneath a forgotten park bench (early February perhaps?), a crumpled baby moose, eyes gone but fur intact—must've starved, must've been January during that brute cold snap. Mosquito larvae teemed in every inch of stagnant water, ravens and burying beetles gorged. And more than that, the inanimate world became suddenly resurrected, embryonic, each plant or suggestion of plant, almost white, curled tightly against the black ground. Maybe a day

from sprouting leaves, some drank in that excess of water, others drowned in it. All fed, all breathed.

III. *West Virginia*

Graphite Gray

February and November in West Virginia are the gray months, the transitional times where weather is finicky and can shift from one extreme to another in a heartbeat. We keep ourselves occupied by getting out of our houses and getting together; me, Lexi, Ian, and Joe. We are sixteen, and we are spookies: lots of black and gray clothing, lots of silver jewelry, sometimes eye makeup for all of us. We spend time at the fairgrounds in Fayetteville because there isn't a skatepark within forty miles, and nobody has a job so nobody can afford the gas money to go there anyway. At the fairgrounds though, there's a little pavement, a few picnic tables, a gas station and a coffee shop within a ten minute walk. We carry our skateboards through the grass and up the hill, walking side by side, hoping that people will notice how different we look. We listen to anxy white thirtysomething men sing the same song on album after album. I am treated like one of the guys and I feel at home in that role. I am the only one who has not lived their whole life in Fayette County. Together, we feel alienated from the rural communities, trapped by the smallness of them, suffocated by the tiny high school we attend with its backward attitudes about sex, about religion. We cannot yet vote, but we are political. We attend rallies, protests, refuse to say the pledge of allegiance. We start the first high school chapter of the ACLU in West Virginia history. We will burn ourselves out on

bureaucracy before we are ever capable of influencing it. Ian will fall in love with me and I will fall in love with Lexi. When Lexi and I begin dating, Ian will grow bitter and distant. Joe and Lexi and I grow closer. We are the unstoppable trio. We do everything together. We tell one another our deepest secrets. We tell one another lies.

Indian Red

In certain hollers, West Virginia dirt is thick and heavy. Opaque gold, white, or red, the fine silt merges together under June rainwater, turns slick and sticky beneath moldering leaves on the forest floor. White-tail deer moving down toward the river skid and stumble, leaving deep wells and furrows in their path. Geoff and I stumble across them in our own slippery descent. Geoff is a potter in his fifties, a mountain man worn down by mountain labor, his face the same dark tannin as the fallen oak leaves, the color of his ancestors. His black hair is long, tied back in a ponytail and streaked with gray. His beard is wiry and coarse as pig's hair, curly after years of tending wood kilns, singing eyebrows and arm hair in the radiating heat. "Look." He points to the bruised blue cohosh, the trampled sensitive ferns. "Four or five, and a fawn, too." He knows these things the way I know the poems of Yosa Buson, can read the forest as though its secrets the black ink of calligraphy on a blank page. His is poetry of the forest, the passage of time and life and death through these woods, and mine so much smaller. Bowed now, stooped over the deer sign, he reminds me of one haiku in particular: *The old man/ cutting barley—/ bent like a sickle*. We go to the river to harvest clay. We fill burlap bags with the mineral-stained mud, lug them back up the steep mountainside until our bones creak. "The red turns black in the kiln," he explains, "wash it some, but once you've

sifted it, you can paint with it.” He is a man of few words, and I an eighteen-year-old of even fewer. Later he will cut a paintbrush from red squirrel tail, mix the mud with oil, color of brick. He will cradle a leather-hard vase in his lap, still warm from sitting in the sun. Woods. Geese. Five deer. One fawn.

Egyptian Violet

Your little sister is ten and you seventeen. Today, for once, you will set aside your differences. Together you will leave the house and enter the field. You will both search and search until you find them. There! closed gentian, the fragile purpleblue flowers lingering even after the first frost, dotting the hillside of your neighbor’s cow pasture. It is cold and dusk and you both scramble up the hillside quickly, hoping Old Jerry will be too busy tending to evening farm duties to notice the theft. You pick handfuls of the flowers, the tough stems only relenting after a tug that makes your palms sting, but you keep gathering them until both you and the blonde girl stooped beside you can fit no more in your clenched fists. The hillside barren, fingers numb, you race back down the slope, carefully cross the frozen creek, climb over barbed wire, run back through the horse pasture and finally cut diagonally through your yard, past the sickly birch tree, past the tethered dog, past the beetle-eaten rose bushes. Mother is in the house, still bedridden. Together you tear through the looming silence of that room, cheeks red, hands still burning. Together you cry out against the injustice of it. Mommy, Mommy – we brought you flowers! We brought you flowers! Aren’t they beautiful, mommy?

IV. Kentucky

Ivory Black

At night, in the deep dark, I dream of things shuddering in the earth. On 64 two days ago, the strip mine that lurks in my mind, the barren land, a moonscape, a mountain dead for a harvest of the dead. I dream long, fitful dreams of it. Deep in the ground, a trillion bodies, a forest, a century, corpses pressed together over countless lifetimes, buried only to be exhumed, to be defaced, to be burned. Blackness, the color of soil, the color of night, the color of ink, the color of my lover's hair and eyes and skin, but this, a blackness deeper than all alive in the good dark; this, a choking smoke that lingers in the lungs forever, a sudden weight; eight men crushed beneath ten thousand pounds of coal. I wake. I wake and it is Friday and four seventeen in the morning in Louisville. I wake and I am still next to her. I wake and sit up straight in bed, covered in sweat, my heart hammering. Honey. Are you okay? Yes, I answer automatically, still catching my breath. Are you sure? I nod after a moment. I think so. Just another bad dream.

Cinnabar

At twenty, she heads toward the creek at six in the morning alone. She carries a small knapsack with a bottle of water, pocket knife, binoculars. She rarely asks anyone to come along—not because of the streak of shyness that has never quite left her, but because she can only feel truly centered alone. This is a troubling paradox for her; she recognizes the sacredness of life now, acknowledges how precious and spectacular the universe is, sees interconnectedness in so many things. And yet, a constant loneliness gnaws through her like an acid. She is lonely among family, often lonely among friends.

There are times when she can shed herself of this sense, but often only when alone, or when buried in some time-consuming project. She keeps herself far too busy because of this, but feels stifled by her overwhelming schedule. Early mornings are the only hours she has to herself. She makes the easy trek to the forest, watches the light coming slowly through the yellowing leaves. Already, she can feel the heat creeping over the horizon with the first streaks of dawn. A smooth roundness in her peripheral vision catches her off guard, and she stops. Three green pawpaws, perfect and covered in their transparent white film. She shakes the thin tree and they fall, bouncing. She cuts one in half easily with the pocket knife. The flesh is yellow, soft, and tastes of banana. For this moment, she is alive in herself.

King's Blue

His eyes are buckeyes, strange, inanimate, glossy brown. I only notice them as such when I am caught beneath him, pinned like a butterfly behind glass, mute. The night is mauve and he a hibernating bear. Eons pass. Out the window, no stars, but I watch Venus rise up above the city's radiation and disappear from sight. No moon. At first light, the kettle warming on the stove, the Hungarian tea, color of blood. I drink and the tartness curdles on my tongue. On NPR, Brahms again. By ten or eleven or twelve he will be awake. He does not work today. He will want to go to the coffee shop to play chess with his friends. In the shower, I scrub my body until my skin is afire.

I relocate to the living room and grab the novel I have been picking at. It is set in Japan fifty years ago. Somewhere in Tokyo, children right now are being tucked in to bed. I cannot read, nor can I breathe. I turn off the radio and throw open a window.

Outside, pigeons, traffic, wind in leaves eight stories below, a clear sky crosshatched by glittering contrails.

And suddenly a woman is sorting through her belongings. She will not venture into the man's room for fear of waking him. Her keys are on the table, her phone in the kitchen, her jacket hanging by the door. All else can stay for all she cares. Hours of jazz, a stack of books, her collected film noir, a set of cello strings, woodfired pottery, two orchids— let him keep them with the rest of his things. Not her. She slips out quietly, takes the elevator to the first floor, bursts out onto the gleaming sidewalk. There is a sweet, blue flower blossoming within her.