

THE BLUE OF DISTANCE

By Rebecca Solnit, from *A Field Guide for Getting Lost*

The world is blue at its edges and in its depths. This blue is the light that got lost. Light at the blue end of the spectrum does not travel the whole distance from the sun to us. 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. This light that does not touch us, does not travel the whole distance, the light that gets lost, gives us the beauty of the world, so much of which is in the color blue.

For many years, I have been moved by the blue at the far edge of what can be seen, that color of horizons, of remote mountain ranges, of anything far away. The color of that 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. And the color of where you can never go. For the blue is not in the place those miles away at the horizon, but in the atmospheric distance between you and the mountains. “Longing,” says the poet Robert Hass, “because desire is full of endless distances.” Blue is the color of longing for the distances you never arrive in, for the blue world. One soft humid early spring morning driving a winding road across Mount Tamalpais, the 2,500-foot mountain just north of the Golden Gate Bridge, a bend reveals a sudden vision of San Francisco in shades of blue, a city in a dream, and I am filled with a tremendous yearning to live in that place of blue hills and blue buildings, though I do live there, I just left there after breakfast, and the brown coffee and yellow eggs and green traffic lights filled me with no such desire, and besides I was there already and was looking forward to going hiking on the mountain’s west slope.

We treat desire as a problem to be solved, address what desire is for and focus on that something and how to acquire it rather than on the nature and the sensation of desire, though often it is the distance between us and the object of desire that fills the space in between with the blue of longing. I wonder sometimes whether with a slight adjustment of perspective it could be cherished as a sensation on its own terms, since it is as inherent to the human condition as blue is to distance? If you can look across the distance without wanting to close it up, if you can own your longing in the same way that you own the beauty of that blue that can never be possessed? For something of this longing will, like the blue of distance, only be relocated, not assuaged, by acquisition and arrival, just as the mountains cease to be blue when you arrive among them and the blue instead tints the next beyond. Somewhere in this is the mystery of why tragedies are more beautiful than comedies and why we take a huge pleasure in the sadness of certain songs and stories. Something is always far away. The mystic Simone Weil wrote to a friend on another continent, “Let us love this distance, which is thoroughly woven with friendship, since those who do not love each other are not separated.” For Weil, love is the atmosphere that fills and colors the distance between herself and her friend. Even when that friend arrives on the doorstep, something remains impossibly remote: when you step forward to embrace them your arms are wrapped around mystery, around the unknowable, around that which cannot be possessed. The far seeps in even to the nearest. After all we hardly know our own depths.

In the fifteenth century, European painters began to paint the blue of distance. Earlier European artists had not been much concerned with the faraway in their art. Sometimes a solid wall of gold backed up the saints and patrons; sometimes the space curved around as though the earth were indeed a sphere but we were on its inside. Painters became more concerned with verisimilitude, with a rendition of the world as it appeared to the human eye, and in those days when the art of perspective was just arriving, they seized upon the blue of distance as another means of giving depth and dimension to their work. Often the band of blue toward the horizon seems exaggerated: it extends too far forward, it is too abrupt a change in color, it is too blue, as though they were exulting in the phenomenon by overdoing it. Below the sky, above the putative subject of the painting, in the spaces before the horizon, they would paint a small blue world — blue sheep, blue shepherd, blue houses, blue hills, blue road, and blue cart.

In his 1474 portrait of Ginevra de' Benci, Leonardo painted just a narrow band of blue trees and blue horizon at the back, behind the brownish trees that frame the pale stern woman whose bodice laces up with a lace the same blue, but he loved atmospheric effects. He wrote that when painting buildings, "to make one appear more distant than another, you should represent the air as rather dense. Therefore make the first building...of its own color; the next most distant make less outlined and more blue; that which you wish to show at yet another distance, make bluer yet again; and that which is five times more distant make five times more blue." The painters seemed to have become smitten with the blue of distance, and when you look at these paintings you can imagine a world where you could walk through an expanse of green grass, brown tree trunks, of whitewashed houses, and then at some point arrive in the blue country: grass, trees, houses become blue, and perhaps if you look down at yourself, you too would be blue as the Hindu god Krishna.

This world was realized in the cyanotypes, or blue photographs, of the nineteenth century — cyan means blue, though I always thought the term referred to the cyanide with which the prints were made. Cyanotypes were cheap and easy to make, and so some amateurs chose to work in cyanotype altogether, some professional photographers used the medium to make preliminary prints, treated so that they would fade and vanish in a few weeks' time: these vanishing prints were made as samples from which to order permanent images in other tones. In the cyanotypes you arrive in this world where darkness and light are blue and white, where bridges and people and apples are blue as lakes, as though everything were seen through the melancholy atmosphere that here is cyanide. The color persisted in postcards through the middle of the twentieth century: I own some of blue palaces and blue glaciers, blue monuments and blue train stations.

One year of drought the Great Salt Lake fell so low that much of what was ordinarily sea became land, and I went out walking on it toward Antelope Island, which floated above its reflection, a symmetrical solid object like a precious stone, floating in that blue. Miles and miles of what had not long ago been lake had become a puzzle-patchwork of shallow pools and damp and dry sand, shallow lagoons of clear water, long fingers of sand that stretched toward the island and its reflection in the deeper blue water beyond. Sometimes the sandbars ended in water and I had to find another way forward, but I could more or less walk directly toward the island for the miles and hours I was out. I walked across ground that was sometimes ribbed sand, sometimes smooth, that sometimes caved in underfoot, as though there were pockets of air underneath, that sometimes squelched so that my footprints were surrounded by paler sand where the water had been pressed away by my weight. With that long line of footprints unfurling behind me, I couldn't get literally lost but I lost track of time, becoming lost in that other way that isn't about dislocation but about the immersion where everything else falls away.

Sometimes there were small sprays of brown oak leaves on the ground, though there were no trees anywhere within sight and shore was far away. Sometimes sodden crumpled clots of feather and bone that had once been birds sat on the strand. How the leaves arrived, how the birds died, was unfathomable, that word meaning depths that cannot be plumbed. Behind

me etched high into the rocks and mountains beyond the Great Salt Lake was the waterline of Lake Bonneville, which had been so much bigger, so much deeper, long ago in a wetter era on earth, when redwoods grew in Arizona and Death Valley was likewise a lake. Ten thousand years or more have passed since that lake ceased to exist, but its ring all around the landscape insisted that where I walked was once deep underwater, just as the flotsam and soft sand reminded me that not so long ago I could have rowed or swum where I was walking. This was new land, temporary land, that would be drowned in winter, and years might pass before it would be walkable again, or centuries. Antelope Island, golden in the harsh light, would get larger and clearer as I walked but always remain ahead like a dream or a hope. The water that remained was pale blue and on that scorching October afternoon a pale sky met it far away, the distinction between water and air hard to make out. Lost in the walking that set me loose in the moorings of time, I thought of the talk I had given in Salt Lake City. To describe the the profundity of change we fail to register, I had told a story from another lake, from Lake Titicaca in Bolivia. When I was two, we lived in Lima, Peru, for a year, and all of us, mother, father, brothers, and I, went up into the Andes once, and then sailed across Lake Titicaca, from Peru to Bolivia. Lake Titicaca, one of those high-altitude lakes, Tahoe, Como, Constance, Atitlan, like blue eyes staring back at the blue sky.

One day a few years ago my mother took out of her cedar chest the turquoise blouse she bought for me on that trip to Bolivia, a miniature of the native women's outfits I wore on special occasions. When she unfolded the little garment and gave it to me, the living memory of wearing the garment collided shockingly with the fact that it was so tiny, with arms less than a foot long, with a tiny bodice for a small cricket cage of a ribcage that was no longer mine, and the shock was that my vivid memory included what it felt like to be inside that brocade shirt but not the fact that inside it I had been so diminutive, had been something utterly other than my adult self who remembered. The continuity of memory did not measure the abyss between a toddler's body and a woman's.

When I recovered the blouse, I lost the memory, for the two were irreconcilable. It vanished in an instant, and I saw it go. Sometimes you hear of murals and miraculously preserved bodies buried, sealed, protected from light for hundreds or thousands of years. Exposed to the fresh air and light for the first time, they begin to fade, crumble, disappear. Sometimes gaining and losing are more intimately related than we like to think. And some things cannot be moved or owned. Some light does not make it all the way through the atmosphere, but scatters.

I put the blouse away in my own trunk and then took it out when I began to think of it again and found that my memory had turned it into something more familiar, into the velvet blouses Navajo women and girls wear. The Bolivian blouse was beaded, and it had a zigzag neckline of soft blue piping and two blue bows whose ribbons were pressed into flat creases long ago, but the fabric was a striped brocade. It was turquoise, the blue of swimming pools and of semiprecious stones, brighter than the sky. Bolivia, I said to a friend, who heard, Oblivion.

When I first began to write, I had been a child for most of my life, and my childhood memories were vivid and potent, the forces that shaped me. Most of them have grown fainter with time, and whenever I write one down, I give it away: it ceases to have the shadowy life of memory and becomes fixed in letters; it ceases to be mine; it loses that mobile unreliability of the live, just as the blouse ceased to be something I recalled being inside and became the garment worn by that unrecognizable toddler in the snapshot when it was handed to me. A person in her twenties has been a child for most of her life, but as time goes by that portion that is childhood becomes smaller and smaller, more and more distant, more and more faded, though they say at the end of life the beginning returns with renewed vividness, as though you had sailed all the way around the world and were going back into the darkness from which you came. For the elderly, often the nearby and recent become vague and only the faraway in time and space is vivid.

For children, it's the distance that holds little interest. Gary Paul Nabhan writes about taking his children to the Grand Canyon, where he realized "how much time adults spend scanning the landscape for picturesque panoramas and scenic overlooks. While the kids were on their hands and knees, engaged with what was immediately before them, we adults traveled by abstraction." He adds that whenever they approached a promontory, his son and daughter would "abruptly release their hands from mine, to scour the ground for bones, pine cones, sparkly sandstone, feathers, or wildflowers." There is no distance in childhood: for a baby, a mother in the other room is gone forever, for a child the time until a birthday is endless. Whatever is absent is impossible, irretrievable, unreachable. Their mental landscape is like that of medieval paintings: a foreground full of vivid things and then a wall. The blue of distance comes with time, with the discovery of melancholy, of loss, the texture of longing, of the complexity of the terrain we traverse, and with the years of travel. If sorrow and beauty are all tied up together, then perhaps maturity brings with it not what Nabhan calls abstraction, but an aesthetic sense that partially redeems the losses time brings and finds beauty in the faraway.

Antelope Island grew closer and closer, larger and clearer, but finally there was a point at which there was no going on. Or perhaps there was but it would have meant swimming in that sea that even in its usual state is far saltier than the ocean and in this drought must have been intensely concentrated. I can imagine another version of that journey in which I stripped and swam, burning my back and bobbing like a cork, to the island, but I do not know what I would have done upon arrival. And I'm not sure the island was meant to be arrived at, for up close its glowing gold would have dissolved into scrub and soil.

When I had gone as far as I could walk, I looked down and the scalloped edges of land and water lost scale and looked like the world seen from an airplane. Airplane flights are usually from city to city, but inbetween are the untrodden realms to which you can only give approximate labels— somewhere in Newfoundland, somewhere in Nebraska or the Dakotas. From miles up in the sky, the land looks like a map of itself, but without any of the points of reference that make maps make sense. The oxbows and mesas out the window are anonymous, unfathomable, a map without words. I've found out that the wish the plane would do an emergency landing in one of them is widespread among those who go from city to city on their work. These nameless places awaken a desire to be lost, to be far away, a desire for that melancholy wonder that is the blue of distance. And that day at the Great Salt Lake as I looked at my feet, even those feet seemed a great distance away, in this terrain without scale, in which the near and the far folded into each other, in which puddles were oceans and sand ridges mountain ranges.

I walked back, the island behind me and before me the ruinous Salt Palace where the truck awaited, back into the world of ordinary clutter. But near where I'd started there was one more surprise in that landscape: a series of shallow indentations where water had dried into salt crystals. One was a carpet of roses, one a heap of straws, one a field of snowflakes, all made of muddy salt, though when I tried to cut away a small cluster of the pale brown roses to take with me, they immediately became less beautiful. Some things we have only as long as they remain lost, some things are not lost only so long as they are distant.