

## Life After Color

by rachel landau

The funniest part of moving from New England to coastal California is the change in color. I can't—and wouldn't—argue that one is assuredly better than the other; in color terms, I am not sure any superiority can be claimed. The palettes are just so different.

Where I grew up, the fall foliage is unbelievable shades of orange and yellow; in winter, snow reflects light, and everything glows. Spring and summer rains evoke a green lushness, an impossible fertility on the ground which clashes with the silver-gray sky. Even in the perpetual rain, the evergreens provoke strong emotion with their visibility against any backdrop. And so New Englanders, as I have come to know them, take an astounding amount of pride especially in their fall colors, not that they have much control over them: from calendars to tourism opportunities, there is a market for the shades of decay most visible from the winding Vermont highways.

California is nothing like this. California is, at its core, shades of blue—the deep blue of the Pacific in some places, the gray-blue of the Pacific in others. It is shades of brown, like dirt and sand, and occasionally the bright yellow or orange of fresh citrus, the greens of lettuce heads growing across Monterey County, the pink of a rosebush on Stanford's campus. California is also the color of the sky when fires spread across the territory, threatening other colors violently in their path.

These are the colors of California as I have learned them. Yet I have learned them sparsely, between times when there was nothing to do but stay inside, waiting for the world to be more normal again. To be normal—which is to return to its usual colors, its brightness.

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Goethe, in his *Theory of Colors*, is greatly concerned with the question of 'normal' vision and the appearance of 'normal colors.' He describes how patients with typhoid see the boundaries of objects as colored when they are not; he notes how milky cataracts can cause patients to see red lights. He even questions whether patients with jaundice see the world through yellow humors.

These abnormalities are causes for concern to Goethe because they render his experiments less effective. When testing perception, we need some collective promise that these recorded observations can be standardized across a general population. Yet, as we learn from Goethe's stressed-out ramblings, there is no such possibility. Any number of irregularities, abnormalities, and exceptional circumstances of health can make it physiologically impossible for individuals to see color the way Goethe believes to be necessary.

In the centuries since Goethe's time of writing, the medical establishment has done extensive research to better understand the workings of the mysterious eye. From a case of simple nearsightedness to astigmatism to glaucoma, ophthalmology textbooks dive deep into the material and mechanical workings of that organ, making a visit to the eye doctor all the more pleasant. Some of the tools may seem almost medieval—that enormous apparatus for trying out different glasses prescriptions hardly looks like anything else in this century—but the impressiveness of medical research is undeniable.

One may state that, as a society, we have grown to understand the eye. However, that does not mean we have grown to understand seeing. Stuck in a cycle of dependence on language, descriptions of what it means to *see* cannot fulfill the poetic task of manifesting sight itself. I can only tell you, in so many words, what I see, and then perhaps you trust me.

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It was the day Matei found out his friend was dying, and Ukraine had been at war against Russia for nearly a week, and the first blossoms of spring were falling to the ground, tired of the wind. The start of March has always been like that for me—dreary, catastrophic. My roommate Shira and I were sitting in the backyard, doing our homework, surrounded by short ferns and the suspicious tint of a March sky, when the conversation turned to the question of color.

“Has it ever happened to you,” I asked, “that during a depressive episode, colors look different?”

“What?” she said, never having heard of the phenomenon.

“When I'm depressed, colors lose their saturation,” I explained. “My eyes no longer do the work of distinguishing between certain shades, so everything looks the same as everything else.”

I pointed out how the plants in the garden were all different shades of green, enhanced by shadows and flashes of sunlight from behind the roof; yet I only knew about that because I had seen it before and knew rationally that such shades existed. At a glance, in the midst of a depressive episode, all I saw was one shade of green, spread across a few stem-lines, darkened by shadows that seemed too frightening for reality.

“Fascinating,” Shira said. And we both turned back to our tasks, sipping on sodas.

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Because the retina is part of the central nervous system, it should come as no surprise that its function would be negatively impacted by Major Depressive Disorder. After all, many people seem to experience depression as a full-bodied illness, with symptoms ranging from changes in appetite to mood to ability to sleep. The retina, decidedly proximate to the brain structures which control so much of our lives, must not be forgotten from the list of what can be impacted by a depressive episode.

Despite the predicted correlation, past studies have been redacted due to too much trust placed in the patients' own descriptions. A recent article in *Biological Psychiatry*, titled "Seeing gray when feeling blue? Depression can be measured in the eye of the diseased," attempts to overcome the shortcomings of language through the use of pattern electroretinograms, which allow for a non-invasive, quantitative measurement of retinal function.

The researchers recorded electroretinograms in the eyes of forty patients with depression and forty without depression. They found that depressed patients, even when medicated, displayed a significantly lower retinal contrast gain. In other words, the researchers could tell the difference between a depressed person and a non-depressed person simply based on data showing how well their retinas were working. In this way, Goethe was right—that being ill makes it harder to see the way that others see.

But what are we do to with this information? Collective myth and fascination with correlations between creative genius and mental illness would have anyone believe that the greatest artists and writers of our time have experienced symptoms of psychological unwellness for the full length of their lives. I wonder if this knowledge that people with depression literally see the world *differently* must be a cause for us to reevaluate our readings of colors in certain paintings and prints.

For example, consider Van Gogh: his oft-romanticized struggles with his own mental health are as well known as the intense orange-yellow hue of his sunflowers. What kind of framework would we need to honor the possibility that, physiologically, the world indeed looked that way to him?

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It was the day Matei found out his friend was dying, and after finishing up my coursework for the afternoon, I went to San Jose to see him. I met him at his apartment, and then we drove to H Mart, mostly in silence.

The week had been mostly colorless for me. Walking up and down the aisles in search of ingredients for dinner, Matei and I chatted sparsely about his plans for the next few

days—whether or not he would go to Santa Barbara to say goodbye to his friend was still up in the air. He was waiting to hear back in greater detail about her condition; he didn't yet know that she was in a state of total organ failure. Between comments, we would point out examples of stylish packaging, beautiful produce, and instant coffee products.

I used to make a special effort to go to the supermarket and the mall while sad, because sometimes the bright colors and fluorescent lights would shock my vision back into a state of greater acuity. This impulse, strange as it is, still remains. A twenty-year-old study from the *International Journal of Psychophysiology* suggested that melancholic patients have reduced sensitivity to light, so much so that the pupils of people with depression are less reactive to stimuli. Unaware of this scientific justification, I nonetheless gravitated towards places that were most likely to reverse this physiologic effect of my sadness.

And then I figured this out about myself: As my depressive episodes became easier to track and anticipate in accordance with changing seasons and different circumstances, I grew accustomed to the sensation of coming-and-going between mental states. I got to know myself as a regular person and then, entirely separately, as a depressed person. I relished the moments when I landed squarely between these states, anticipating a change in being, a transformation.

That was how I realized the extent of the change in color. After weeks of what felt noticeably dreary, I would notice a new color on something I had seen countless times before—it was usually a shade of green on a leaf, or an irregularity on the sidewalk's surface where some moss was growing, so quiet and so beautiful. When colors returned again and again, I had the realization that their return implied that they had at once been absent from my awareness. With time, I began to recognize that the change in saturation tracked precisely with the nature of my depressive episodes, as though for the exact period of my sorrow I felt the colorlessness of everything.

At H Mart that night, I was distressed when none of the fruits and vegetables were bright enough to shock me out of my sadness. I wanted so badly for the orange of the oranges to remind me of who I was, to return me to myself. For once, the trick didn't work.

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Every year, on my birthday, my mother tells me the same anecdote about color: that before I was born, her life was in black-and-white. Then, seeing me for the first time, she suddenly recognized color in the world around her.

I never knew what she meant until I started tracking the patterns of my own depressive episodes and noticed what helped me escape them. It was as though looking at things—the experience,

purely, of looking at something beautiful—had some fantastic and unspeakable impact. In this way, I came to love the act of seeing as a sort of saving; flower petals in springtime seemed to be as effective as Lexapro. I remember when I saw Matei for the first time and felt a color change in the environment around me, as though the boost in positive emotion from his presence had healed me instantly. If only the healing were permanent.

I bet the shift from black-and-white into color can be as easily explained by love as it can the psychophysiology of depression. The vivid colors of happiness are undeniably different from what we see in the depths of pain. I confess, once again, that Goethe really was onto something. No matter the source of the pain, there is a certain way it manages to change everything, even color.

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There's a Reddit post from a few years ago, in which u/Onywan asks depressed people what their favorite color is. The 75 comments in response are shockingly consistent. Shades of gray, purple, teal, and blue, as well as some references to black, are most common. Occasionally, reds, greens, and yellows are preferred, but the tendencies towards blue-related colors are overwhelmingly obvious.

I wonder if there is something specific about these colors that appeal to the eyes of those experiencing a depressive episode. All the more challenging is that these internet strangers are just that—strangers—who have self-identified on a forum and then used words for colors that may, in their minds, be unimaginably different in reality. The causes to negate the value of the data are multifold; likewise, the urges to make meaning from this minute corpus are many, as I can only hope that there is some significance to the pattern.

If there is a scientific explanation for the tendencies towards blue, I would guess it has something to do with the retina's preferential sensitivities to some colors over others. I find that shades of yellow, orange, and green are hard to look at during a depressive episode; perhaps that is because all three of those colors contain yellow at their base, whether pure or mixed with another primary tone. Blue, on the other hand, is clean and simple, and different intensities of it are hardly painful to the eye.

At the start of this essay, I described the color palettes of New England and California, the two places I have lived most consistently over the course of my life. Yet, there is also a third place—depression—with a color palette all its own. What is so striking about the Reddit post is that the colors on that palette are not unlike the one I would design for myself when trying to verbally describe what being depressed looks like.

If New Englanders take pride in the color of foliage and Californians claim the beauty of their orange wildflowers, then those living in a realm of depression necessarily find themselves at the other end of the color wheel, grasping onto blue.

So when I say that California has been blue for me, what I really mean is that I have been lonely here.

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After Rasa died, Matei drove back to the Bay Area from Santa Barbara. He had said goodbye to her on the last night of her life, when she was hardly recognizable from what cancer had done.

I waited for Matei first in the quiet of my Palo Alto apartment, and then during the long hours of my job at a nearby coffee shop. When I finished my shift, Matei picked me up from work, and we quickly drank iced tea and kombucha in the parking lot.

At my apartment, we sat at the table and chairs in the backyard, surrounded by plants that had looked flat and unmemorable days before. They were still grayish and difficult to see. Matei put two oranges on the table—oranges from Rasa's tree, which she had cultivated in the year before she died.

The tree was actually two branches spliced together, so different types of oranges grew from the same trunk. In silence, Matei and I peeled the oranges and split them in half, hoping we'd each try some of the two different varieties; one had a rough skin, and the other was smooth. It was the warmest day of spring so far, and the bright light from over the roof was almost blinding.

Looking up at the sky, I briefly experienced it—color—I briefly experienced it. I felt all of the colors come back to me for just a moment, and in my memory I can still see the blue sky, Matei's green eyes, and the rough orange peels in my hands. The sweet acid of citrus on my tongue; the best orange I have ever eaten—I remember it vividly—how we sat there in silence, tasting the last of a life's harvest, hurting.

And as though that moment had never happened, life quickly returned to its colorlessness, and I was left only with the memory.