

# Fragments of colors: an homage

**Marcella Beccaria**

Lived, imagined, or not seen, colors are created in our brain yet inhabit our world. And yet we perceive them, we experience them, they condition our choices and change our mood. Colors can bring us together, but we have also clashed, fought and killed for color. In literature, as in art, colors are skillfully balanced and pervade the writings of the most diverse authors, arousing powerful emotions in readers and creating new levels of knowledge. Passing through red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet, without forgetting black or white, the following fragments are a tribute to their authors. I quote them as it is my understanding that the many ways in which they will be interpreted can create a whole new world of light spectrums.

I am at present engaged in a very curious investigation. I discovered last summer with certainty that colors appear different to me to what they do to others. The flowers of the Cranesbills appear to me in the day almost exactly sky-blue, whilst others call them deep pink; but happening once to look at one in the night by candle-light I found it of a colour as different as possible from daylight; it seemed then very near yellow, but with a tincture of red; whilst nobody else said it differed from the daylight appearance, my brother excepted, who seems to see as I do.<sup>1</sup>

But I can't wait to get to the flowers. It was in fact the season when they made their appearance *en masse* overnight, the first flowers of the year, great big daisies of an almost grayish white, rightly devoid of all commercial value and devoid also of the poetic value that neglected, non-commercial things possess. And those yellow flowers of still less value, so little that no one knows their name even though they appear punctually every year, thick and healthy, to spread yellow over the Italian meadows, which are in turn an excessive, unsightly green on which the sun casts a pitiless light, blinding and unpoetic, where everything is illuminated in the same way. Add the almost purple lilac of certain fruit trees (almonds I think) arranged in rows in those vilely green fields with groups of other trees that are still bare and the pickets and fences bearing witness to work performed by now with no hope and only by the old.<sup>2</sup>



Nicola De Maria  
*Cinque o sei lance spezzate a favore del coraggio e della virtù* (Five or six lances broken on behalf of courage and virtue), 1982–85  
water-based colors and pastels on wall  
dimensions determined by the space  
Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Torino  
long term loan  
Collection of the artist  
Photo: Renato Ghiazza

<sup>1</sup> John Dalton, letter of February 1794 to Elihu Robinson, quoted in *John Dalton's Colour Vision Legacy*, ed. by C. Dickinson, I. Murray, and D. Carden (Manchester: Taylor and Francis Ltd., 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Petrolio* [1992] (Milan: Oscar Mondadori, 2010), p. 246.



Joseph Mallord William Turner  
*Lecture Diagram: Colour Circle No. 2*,  
c. 1824–28  
graphite and watercolor on paper  
55 x 75.8 cm  
© Tate, London 2015

So, in an area of Paris which was as unknown to me as the Amazon, I found myself engaging in strange practices under the watchful eye of Czech importers. Knowing nothing of their trade, I lacked the technical terms with which to specify my needs and could only apply native criteria. I set about choosing the smallest of the embroidery beads known in French as *rocaille*, which were piled up in the trays in heavy hanks. I tried to bite through them to test their toughness; I sucked them in order to make sure that they were made of tinted glass and that the colour would not run at the first contact with river water; I varied the amounts purchased in accordance with the basic Indian color scheme: first, black and white in equal quantities; next red; then a much smaller quantity of yellow; and, for form's sake, a few blue and green, which would no doubt be spurned.

The reasons for these preferences are easy to understand. Since they make their own beads by hand, the Indians look upon the smallest as having the greatest value, that is, as requiring more work and skill; their raw material is the black shell of palm nuts and the milky mother-of-pearl of river shells, and they seek to achieve effects by alternating the two colours. Like everybody else, they appreciate most what they know best, and so I was to have great success with the black and white beads. Yellow and red are often considered by them as belonging to a single linguistic category, because of the variations in shade of the urucu dye, which ranges between scarlet and a yellowy orange according to the quality and ripeness of the seeds; however, red remains the dominant color of the two, because of its intensity, with which the Bororo are familiar through certain seeds and feathers. As for blue and green, these are cold colors which, in the natural state, are chiefly represented in perishable plants: a twofold reason for the natives' indifference and the vagueness of their vocabulary relating to these hues: blue is assimilated to black in some languages and to green in others.<sup>3</sup>

The blind man felt someone take him by the arm. "Come with me," said the same voice. They helped him to sit on the seat by the driver and fastened his seatbelt. "I can't see, I can't see," he whimpered in tears. "Tell me where you live," said the other. Voracious faces eager for something new peered from the windows of the vehicle. The blind man rubbed his eyes with his hands. Nothing. "It's as though I were caught in the fog or fallen into a sea of milk." "But blindness isn't like that," said the other. "They say it's black." "Well for me it's all white."<sup>4</sup>

March 21. A sullen darkness now hovered above us—but from out the milky depths of the ocean a luminous glare arose, and stole up along the bulwarks of the boat. We were nearly overwhelmed by the white ashy shower which settled upon us and upon the canoe, but melted into the water as it fell. The summit of the cataract was utterly lost in the dimness and the distance. Yet we were evidently approaching it with a hideous velocity.

<sup>3</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* [1955], trans. J. and D. Weightman (London: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 323–24.

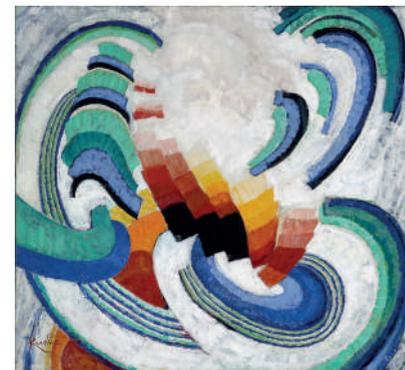
<sup>4</sup> José Saramago, *Blindness* [1995], transl. G. Pontiero (London: The Harvill Press, 1997).

At intervals there were visible in it wide, yawning, but momentary rents, and from out these rents, within which was a chaos of flitting and indistinct images, there came rushing and mighty, but soundless winds, tearing up the enkindled ocean in their course.<sup>5</sup>

The immense mountains and precipices that overhung me on every side—the sound of the river raging among the rocks, and the dashing of the waterfalls around, spoke of a power mighty as Omnipotence—and I ceased to fear, or to bend before any being less almighty than that which had created and ruled the elements, here displayed in their most terrific guise. Still, as I ascended higher, the valley assumed a more magnificent and astonishing character. Ruined castles hanging on the precipices of piny mountains; the impetuous Arve, and cottages every here and there peeping forth from among the trees, formed a scene of singular beauty. But it was augmented and rendered sublime by the mighty Alps, whose white and shining pyramids and domes towered above all, as belonging to another earth, the habitations of another race of beings.<sup>6</sup>

Charlotte rose. It aroused me; but I continued sitting, and held her hand. “Let us go,” she said: “it grows late.” She attempted to withdraw her hand: I held it still. “We shall see each other again,” I exclaimed: “we shall recognise each other under every possible change! I am going,” I continued, “going willingly; but, should I say forever, perhaps I may not keep my word. Adieu, Charlotte; adieu, Albert. We shall meet again.” “Yes: tomorrow, I think,” she answered with a smile. Tomorrow! how I felt the word! Ah! she little thought, when she drew her hand away from mine. They walked down the avenue. I stood gazing after them in the moonlight. I threw myself upon the ground, and wept: I then sprang up, and ran out upon the terrace, and saw, under the shade of the linden-trees, her white dress disappearing near the garden-gate. I stretched out my arms, and she vanished.<sup>7</sup>

By the will of our Father in heaven, the governor of the whole world, the red man of America has become small, and the white man great and renowned. When the ancestors of the people of these United States first came to the shores of America, they found the red man strong—though he was ignorant and savage, yet he received them kindly, and gave them dry land to rest their weary feet. They met in peace, and shook hands in token of friendship. Whatever the white man wanted and asked of the Indian, the latter willingly gave. At that time the Indian was the lord, and the white man the suppliant. But now the scene has changed. The strength of the red man has become weakness. As his neighbors increased in numbers, his power became less, and now, of the many and powerful tribes who once covered these United States, only a few are to be seen—a few whom a sweeping pestilence has left. The northern tribes, who were once so numerous and powerful, are now nearly extinct. Thus it has happened to the red man of America. Shall we, who are remnants, share the same fate?<sup>8</sup>



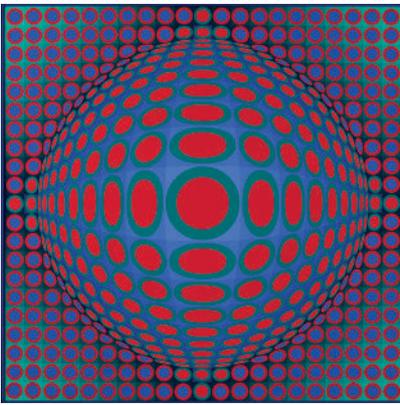
František Kupka  
*Tourbillon (Vortex)*, 1923–24  
 oil on canvas  
 72.3 x 78.8 cm  
 purchased in 1957  
 Centre Pompidou, Paris – Musée  
 national d'art moderne / Centre de  
 création industrielle  
 Deposited at Musée de Grenoble,  
 Grenoble  
 Photo © Musée de Grenoble

<sup>5</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1838).

<sup>6</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London: Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, & Jones, 1818), chapter 9.

<sup>7</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* [1774] (Mineola NY: Dover Publications, 2002), Book I.

<sup>8</sup> Memorial letter of the Cherokee Nation, written in December 1829 to the United States Congress, printed in January 1830 in the *Cherokee Phoenix* and reprinted in the March 13, 1830 issue of the *Niles Weekly Register*, Baltimore, Maryland.



Victor Vasarely  
*Vega 222*, 1969–70  
 acrylic on canvas  
 200 x 200 cm  
 Courtesy Erling Neby Collection,  
 deposited at Henie Onstad  
 Kunstsenter, Norway  
 Photo: Øystein Thorvaldsen

The Great Wall is one hour's drive north of Peking. At first, we pass through parts of the city. An ice-cold wind is blowing. Pedestrians and bicyclists lean forward, struggling with the gale. There are rivers of bicyclists everywhere. Each of these rivers halts when the lights turn red, as if a lock had suddenly been closed, and then resumes its flow until the next set of lights. Only the wind disrupts this monotonous, laborious rhythm. If it picks up too violently, the river begins to surge and billow, spinning some bicyclists around and forcing others to stop and dismount. Confusion and chaos erupt in the ranks. But as soon as the wind subsides, everything continues once again in its proper place and dutiful movement forward. The sidewalks in the center of the city are full of people and one frequently sees columns of schoolchildren clad in school uniform. They walk in pairs waving little red flags, and the one at the head of the procession carries either a red banner or a portrait of the Good Uncle—Chairman Mao. The children enthusiastically call, sing or cry out in unison. What are they saying? I ask Comrade Li. "They want to study the thoughts of Chairman Mao," he replies. The policemen, whom one sees on every corner, always give these processions the right-of-way. The city is all yellow and navy blue. The buildings fronting the streets are yellow and the clothes everyone wears are navy. "These uniforms are an achievement of the Revolution," explains Comrade Li. "Before, people had nothing to wear and died of cold."<sup>9</sup>

So the harlequin or rose period was a period of enormous production, the gaiety of France induced an unheard of fecundity [*sic*]. It is extraordinary the number and size of the canvases he painted during this short period, 1904–1906. Later, one day when Picasso and I were discussing the dates of his pictures and I was saying to him that all that could not have been painted during one year, Picasso answered, you forget we were young and we did a great deal in a year. Really it is difficult to believe that the harlequin period lasted from 1904 to 1906, but it is true, there is no denying it, his production upon his first definite contact with France was enormous. This was his rose period. The rose period ended with my portrait.<sup>10</sup>

It is hard to recount a particular moment of that day, when all the events followed one another so quickly. I can say that when we arrived at the ramp, the wind carried all the vapour of the fuel toward us on the steps. We were enveloped and our vision was intermittent. It was almost like a cold, surreal embrace on the part of planet Earth. Then there were various moments of departure, acceleration, detachment, entry into the first orbit, the first dawn and arrival on the ISS. The first time I saw the station I was about thirty meters away. The first image was the transition when the sun was about to disappear and the light was orange for a few seconds. Then I experienced a torrent of emotion with the entrance and the embrace of colleagues.<sup>11</sup>

Looking at the injured, I realized how seriously the town had been damaged. The fire was at its peak at around that time. It thundered 10 times between 10 and 11 o'clock. The

<sup>9</sup> Ryszard Kapuściński, *Travels with Herodotus* [2004] (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2009), pp. 59–60.

<sup>10</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Picasso* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1938), p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> Samantha Cristoforetti: <http://aforisticamente.com/2016/06/22frasi-citazioni-e-aforismi-su-astro-nauta/>

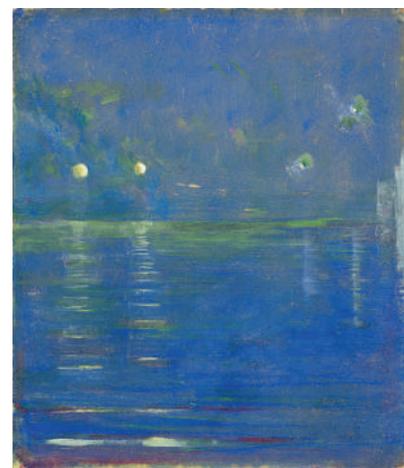
sound of thunder itself was not so great but still I could see the lightning over the fire. When I looked down on the town from the top of that hill, I could see that the city was completely lost. The city turned into a yellow sand. It turned yellow, the color of the yellow desert.<sup>12</sup>

The eye is evidently formed in accordance with the objects seen since childhood. The Venetian painter, for example, sees everything as more luminous and serene. We who live amid dust and mud on discolored earth that dulls all reflections and often spend our days in cramped rooms cannot develop this joyful gaze. Going through the lagoons in the bright sunshine and looking at the gondoliers in their multicolored clothes, poised lightly over the seats of the gondolas as they row, standing out against the luminous green surface in the blue air, I had the best and most vivid image of the Venetian school. The dazzling sunlight accentuated the local colors and the parts in shadow were comparatively so light-colored that they could have served as light in turn. The same goes for the green reflections on the bright green surface of the sea.<sup>13</sup>

Suddenly he remembered that Matisse had spoken of doing my portrait with green hair and he fell in with that suggestion. “Matisse isn't the only one who can paint you with green hair,” he said. From that point the hair developed into a leaf form, and once he had done that, the portrait resolved itself in a symbolic, floral fashion. He worked on the breasts with the same curving rhythm. The face had remained quite realistic during all these phases. It seemed out of character with the rest. He studied it for a moment. “I have to bring in the face on the basis of another idea,” he said, “not by continuing the lines of the forms that are already there and the space around them. Even though you have a fairly long oval face, what I need, in order to show its light and its expression, is to make it a wide oval. I'll compensate for the length by making it a cold color—blue. It will be like a little blue moon.”<sup>14</sup>

The most dramatic recollections I had were sights themselves. Of all the spectacular views we had, the most impressive to me was on the way to the Moon, when we flew through its shadow. We were still thousands of miles away, but close enough, so that the Moon almost filled our circular window. It was eclipsing the Sun, from our position, and the corona of the Sun was visible around the rim of the Moon as a gigantic lens-shaped or saucer-shaped light, stretching out to several lunar diameters. It was magnificent, but the Moon was even more so. We were in its shadow, so that there was no part of it illuminated by the Sun. It was illuminated only by earthshine. It made the Moon appear blue-gray, and the entire scene looked decidedly three-dimensional.<sup>15</sup>

Yes, because I use only pure colors. My blue is the blue that comes out of the tube. Anyone can copy my paintings. All you need to know is what blue it is: cobalt, ultramarine,



Mikalojus Konstantinas Ciurlionis  
*Pasaulio sutverimas (V)* (Creation  
of the world – V), 1905–6  
tempera on paper  
36.3 x 31.3 cm  
Estate of M. K. Ciurlionis National  
Museum of Art, Kaunas, Lithuania  
Photo: Arūnas Baltėnas

<sup>12</sup> Testimony of Isao Kita, in *Voice of Hibakusha*, eyewitness accounts of the bombing of Hiroshima from the programme “Hiroshima Witness” produced by the Hiroshima Peace Cultural Center and NHK, the public broadcasting company of Japan.

<sup>13</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Italian Journey* [1816] (London: Penguin Books, 1982).

<sup>14</sup> Malte Herwig, *The Woman Who Says No: Françoise Gilot on Her Life With and Without Picasso—Rebel, Muse, Artist* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2016), p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Neil Armstrong in Robin Hanbury-Tenison, *The Oxford Book of Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 559.



Giovanni Anselmo  
*Senza titolo* (Untitled), 1990  
 Africa black granite sheet, canvas on loom and stainless steel cable noose with clamp  
 200 x 140 x 6.5 cm  
 acquired by Fondazione Guido ed Ettore De Fornaris from Alda Sassi, Turin, 1996  
 Fondazione Guido ed Ettore De Fornaris  
 GAM – Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin  
 Courtesy Fondazione Torino Musei  
 Photo: Studio Fotografico Gonella

Giovanni Anselmo  
*Senza titolo* (Untitled), 1990  
 Aosta green granite sheet, canvas on loom and stainless steel cable noose with clamp  
 200 x 140 x 6.5 cm  
 acquired by Fondazione Guido ed Ettore De Fornaris from Alda Sassi, Turin, 1996  
 Fondazione Guido ed Ettore De Fornaris  
 GAM – Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin  
 Courtesy Fondazione Torino Musei  
 Photo: Studio Fotografico Gonella

applied more or less thickly. It is the quantity and thickness that determine its quality. The proportion of colors comes into play in the case of a color reproduction. The material is non-existent. I worked for a long time telling myself that the material was of no importance whatsoever. It is the quantity of blue, green, and red that produces the expressive harmony of my painting. At the time everyone was trying to imitate fresco. The absorbent canvases they used were supposed to make an oil painting look like a fresco but the result, poor and wrinkled as it was, had nothing to do with the beauty and depth of fresco.<sup>16</sup>

I bought some lapis this evening, not because it was cheap or a good colour, but because it comes from the famous mines near Ishkashim in Badakshan, and is therefore the authentic stone from which the old painters ground their blue. The sale of it is a Government monopoly and the whole export of the mines goes to Berlin.<sup>17</sup>

All our Concord waters have two colors at least; one when viewed at a distance, and another, more proper, close at hand. The first depends more on the light, and follows the sky. In clear weather, in summer, they appear blue at a little distance, especially if agitated, and at a great distance all appear alike. In stormy weather they are sometimes of a dark slate-color. The sea, however, is said to be blue one day and green another without any perceptible change in the atmosphere. I have seen our river, when, the landscape being covered with snow, both water and ice were almost as green as grass. Some consider blue "to be the color of pure water, whether liquid or solid." But, looking directly down into our waters from a boat, they are seen to be of very different colors. Walden is blue at one time and green at another, even from the same point of view. Lying between the earth and the heavens, it partakes of the color of both. Viewed from a hilltop it reflects the color of the sky; but near at hand it is of a yellowish tint next the shore where you can see the sand, then a light green, which gradually deepens to a uniform dark green in the body of the pond. In some lights, viewed even from a hilltop, it is of a vivid green next the shore. Some have referred this to the reflection of the verdure; but it is equally green there against the railroad sandbank, and in the spring, before the leaves are expanded, and it may be simply the result of the prevailing blue mixed with the yellow of the sand. Such is the color of its iris.<sup>18</sup>

There is another kind of perspective which I call Aerial Perspective, because by the atmosphere we are able to distinguish the variations in distance of different buildings, which appear placed on a single line; as, for instance, when we see several buildings beyond a wall, all of which, as they appear above the top of the wall, look of the same size, while you wish to represent them in a picture as more remote one than another and to give the effect of a somewhat dense atmosphere. You know that in an atmosphere of equal density the remotest objects seen through it, as mountains, in consequence of the great quantity of

<sup>16</sup> Henri Matisse: *l'intervista perduta con Pierre Courthion* [1941] (Milan: Skira editore, 2015), p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Byron, *The Road to Oxiana* (London: MacMillan & Co, 1937), Part V, Kabul, 17 June.

<sup>18</sup> *Walden: Life in the Woods* [1854], in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), vol. 2, pp. 195–96.

atmosphere between your eye and them—appear blue and almost of the same hue as the atmosphere itself when the sun is in the East.<sup>19</sup>

I wore a patch on the eye for much of the time, so that the normal image from my good, left eye would not have to compete with the distortions from the right eye. Abramson followed up my radiation treatment with some lasering, and a couple of weeks later, the edema finally started to subside. With this, the vision in my right eye started to stabilize, the distortions and light sensitivity gradually disappearing. Abnormalities in color perception, however, remained, although (unlike the distortions) these were not apparent if I used both eyes. If I closed my good eye, I suddenly found myself in a different chromatic world. A field of yellow dandelions would suddenly become a field of white dandelions, while darker flowers would turn black. A bright green fern, a selaginella, turned a deep indigo when I scrutinized it through a lens with my right eye.<sup>20</sup>

Tuesday, January 16, 1912. Camp 68. Height 9760. T.  $-23.5^{\circ}$ . The worst has happened, or nearly the worst. We marched well in the morning and covered 7 1/2 miles. Noon sight showed us in Lat.  $89^{\circ}42'S$ , and we started off in high spirits in the afternoon, feeling that tomorrow would see us at our destination. About the second hour of the march Bowers' sharp eyes detected what he thought was a cairn; he was uneasy about it, but argued that it must be a sastrugus. Half an hour later he detected a black speck ahead. Soon we knew that this could not be a natural snow feature. We marched on, found that it was a black flag tied to a sledge bearer; near by the remains of a camp; sledge tracks and ski tracks going and coming and the clear trace of dogs' paws—many dogs. This told us the whole story. The Norwegians have forestalled us and are first at the Pole. It is a terrible disappointment, and I am very sorry for my loyal companions. Many thoughts come and much discussion have we had. Tomorrow we must march on to the Pole and then hasten home with all the speed we can compass. All the day dreams must go; it will be a wearisome return.<sup>21</sup>

Night had fallen, but without his knowing whether it was only within him or in the room: to him everything now was night. And night was also in motion: darkness gave way to more darkness. But this darkness, different from what the eyes see, quivered with colors issuing, as it were, from the very absence of color: black turned to livid green, and then to pure white; that pure, pale white was transmuted into a red gold, although the original blackness remained, just as the fires of the stars and the northern lights pulsate in what is, notwithstanding, total night.<sup>22</sup>

The ascent of the privileged, not only in the Lager but in all human coexistence, is an anguishing but unailing phenomenon: only in utopias is it absent. [...] Let us confine ourselves to the Lager, which (even in its Soviet version) can be considered an excellent



Atsuko Tanaka  
*Peinture* (Painting), 1960  
oil and phosphorescent painting  
on canvas  
82 x 65.5 cm  
Celia and Anthony Denney Collection,  
deposited at Les Abattoirs, 1995  
© all rights reserved  
Photo: Auriol-Gineste

<sup>19</sup> Leonardo da Vinci, *Trattato della Pittura* [sixteenth century] (Rome: Stamperia De Romanis, 1817), p. 145.

<sup>20</sup> Oliver Sacks, *The Mind's Eye* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Robert F. Scott, *Captain Scott's Last Expedition* [1913], ed. by M. Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Marguerite Yourcenar, *The Abyss* [1968], transl. G. Frick (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976).

“laboratory”: the hybrid class of the prisoner–functionary [...] with ill-defined borders which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants constitutes its armature and at the same time its most disquieting feature. It is a gray zone, poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge. This gray zone possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge.<sup>23</sup>

The morning air, spilling over with radioactive notes, gray and sun-beclouding, belched about him, haunting his nose; he sniffed involuntarily the taint of death. Well, that was too strong a description for it, he decided as he made his way to the particular plot of sod which he owned along with the unduly large apartment below. The legacy of World War Terminus had diminished in potency; those who could not survive the dust had passed into oblivion years ago, and the dust, weaker now and confronting the strong survivors, only deranged minds and genetic properties.<sup>24</sup>

But something has happened to the perception of color in the eye. When I went for a stroll this morning, a bright green tennis ball lying in the gutter lost all its color when I looked at it with just my right eye. Similarly with a Granny Smith apple and a banana—both turned a horrid gray. Holding the apple at arm’s length, I find the central gray-out surrounded by a normal green, as if color vision is preserved around my fovea but not in it. Blues, greens, mauves, and yellows all seem to be attenuated or lost; bright reds and oranges are the least affected, so when I pick an orange from my fruit bowl to test myself with, its color looks almost normal.<sup>25</sup>

**23** Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* [1986], transl. R. Rosenthal (New York: Vintage International, 1989).

**24** Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), chapter 1.

**25** Oliver Sacks, *The Mind’s Eye* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).