

Black and Blue



The Bruising Passion

of *Camera Lucida*, *La Jetée*, *Sans soleil*,

and *Hiroshima mon amour*

CAROL MAVOR



Papaver orientale.



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For Manny Farber
and Patricia Patterson,
who first schooled me
in black and blue.

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Augie, Ambie, and Ollie, lustrous loves of my life.

My mother and father.

And for all time, Kevin Parker.

ABBREVIATIONS

Page references for the three texts cited most often in this book observe the following conventions:

1. Roland Barthes's *La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie*, translated as *Camera Lucida*, will be referred to as *La Chambre claire*. Parenthetical citations are to Richard Howard's English translation of the text, with an H, followed by the page number, and to the Seuil edition of the French text, with an S, followed by the page number. The full citations are as follows:

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Éditions de l'Etoile, Gallimard, le Seuil, 1980).

2. For the screenplay for *Hiroshima mon amour*, by Marguerite Duras, parenthetical citations are to Richard Seaver's translation of the text, with an S, followed by the page number, and to the Gallimard edition of the French text, with a G, followed by the page number. The full citations are as follows:

Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour; Text by Marguerite Duras, for the Film by Alain Resnais*, translated by Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1961).

Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour, scénario et dialogue* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1960).

3. Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, translated as *In Search of Lost Time*, will be referred to as the *Recherche*. Parenthetical citations are to C. K. Moncrieff's and Terence Kilmartin's translation of the *Recherche*, with a K, followed by volume and page numbers, and to the Pléiade edi-

tion of the French text, with a P, followed by volume and page numbers. The full citations are as follows:

Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, translated by C. K. Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised by D. J. Enright, 6 vols. (New York: Modern Library, 1992). Note: the pagination of the British edition is different from that of the American edition.

Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, edited by Jean-Yves Tadié, 4 vols. (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pleiade, 1987–89).

INTRODUCTION

First Things:

Two Black and

Blue Thoughts

This is the story of
a man marked by an
image from his
childhood.

*Ceci est l'histoire d'un
homme marqué par une
image d'enfance.*

— Chris Marker, *La Jetée*

I was once an infant, without speech, marked by (a black and blue) image from the womb. (*Infant*: “from the Latin *infans*; from *in* (not) and *fari* (to speak): the one who does not speak.”¹)

PERHAPS MY FIRST
BLACK (AND BLUE) MEMORY
.....

Hailing the womb, black can be archaic.²

I feel more or less certain that I remember being inside the body of my mother, inside this first home, a “dark continent” (Freud)³ in which no more could be seen than saturated blue-blacks, violet blue-blacks, and crimson blue-blacks, despite the fact that my not-yet born eyes were wide open. To be inside is to be blind. Likewise, my fetal ears heard the shallow breath of my mother. I heard the sound of her heartbeat: a crushing, cushioning thumping, not unlike the sonorous palpitation which pounds its way through the black underground cavern of *La Jetée*, Chris Marker’s film of 1962.

I remember the darkness, the amniotic semiotics of the velvetized, waterized sounds. I heard the gentle crackling of my mother’s bones. In the words of Jean-Luc Nancy: “it is always in the belly that we—man or woman—end up listening, or start listening. The ear opens onto the sonorous cave that we then become.”⁴

My mother and I, we were a couple tied by an umbilicus.

We were lovers.

I kicked my mother’s ribs.

My memory is bruising.

My memory is black (and blue).

Perhaps . . . I am still there, meditating in the uterus of my mother. Perhaps . . . I am an old child, waiting, resisting what Roland Barthes describes as the “Western frenzy to become adult quickly and for a long time.”⁵

Today, my mother remembers nothing, not even me, just like the mother plagued by Alzheimer’s in *Three Colors: Blue*, Krzysztof Kieślowski’s film of 1993. (The demented mother is played by Emmanuelle Riva, the gor-

geous actress who came to fame as the star of *Hiroshima mon amour*, Marguerite Duras's and Alain Resnais's film of 1959.)

My mother has lost herself. My mother has forgotten herself. My mother no longer fears forgetting. There is nothing to remember.

The casting of Riva as the mother in *Blue*, after her starring role as the very beautiful French actress in *Hiroshima mon amour*, is the kind of thing film connoisseurs can smile over. In *Hiroshima mon amour*, Riva is the unnamed young woman who has come to star in a film about peace. In Duras's script the woman is referred to as SHE (or ELLE in the French). ELLE is falling in love with a Japanese man. She fears that falling so deeply in love with a new man will cause her to forget her former German lover, with whom she illicitly fell in love during the German occupation of France. ELLE fears forgetting her German lover, now dead, more than she fears any other thing in her life. Her biggest fear is forgetting.

"What terrifies us about death is not the loss of the future, but the loss of the past. Forgetting is a form of death ever present within life" (Milan Kundera).⁶

My mother, like Blue Riva, now rests in that place, far beyond the fear of forgetting.

My mother, like Blue Riva, is the symbol of love's forgetfulness. To quote the male lover, also unnamed, in *Hiroshima mon amour* (HE, or LUI in the French), "I'll remember you as the symbol of love's forgetfulness. I'll think of this adventure as the horror of oblivion" (S, 68; G, 105).

I seek Riva inside a film on forgetting and inside a film on memory, but I am not sure which is which. For, "memories come to us as something, well forgotten" (Tobias Hill).⁷ Similarly, Chris Marker claims in *Sans soleil*, his film of 1982, "I will have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining."⁸

MY FIRST (CERTAIN)
BLUE (AND BLACK) MEMORY
.....

It was quite by chance that I was sick at home one afternoon and found myself watching *A Patch of Blue* (1965). It was a long time ago. I was a little girl.

A Patch of Blue is a heart-wrenching, civil rights era melodrama starring Sidney Poitier, and directed by Guy Green. The character of Selina (played by Elizabeth Hartman) is helpless, white, blind, and adolescent, with a terrible mother who caused her blindness during a drunken scuffle. (The very awful mother is played by Shelley Winters.) The only color memory that Selina has from her world before blindness is a “patch of blue” (Plate 1). Blind Selina, with this bit of blue sky or blue ocean or blue cardigan or blue cup or blue nothing at all, falls in love with Gordon, Poitier’s character: a gorgeous “man of color.” Green could have made the film in color, but he was emphatic that it be in black and white.

This patch of blue produced a tiny, if violent, affect on me, what Walter Benjamin describes as “a little shock.”⁹ The affect of my patch of blue is not unlike the affect of Marcel Proust’s famed little patch of yellow wall (*petit pan de mur jaune*), only in reverse. My blue is nostalgic; Proust’s yellow is nostologic. (Nostology is a word for gerontology: it is from the Greek *nostos*, a return home, with reference to aging or a state of second childhood.¹⁰) In *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27), Bergotte, Marcel Proust’s famed character, who happens to be a writer, who shares much with the real author of the long novel, famously goes to see Jan Vermeer’s painting *The View of Delft* and gets all stirred up by a tiny patch of yellow. This happens on the last day of the old man’s life, at the end of his life, not at the start of his life.

At last he came to the Vermeer which he remembered as more striking, more different from anything else that he knew, but in which, thanks to the critic’s article, he remarked for the first time some small figures in blue, that the ground was pink, and finally the precious substance of the tiny patch of yellow wall. His giddiness increased; he fixed his eyes, like a child upon a yellow butterfly which it is trying to catch, upon the precious little patch of wall. “That is how I ought to have written,” he said. “My last books are too dry, I ought to have gone over them with several coats of



It was quite by chance that I was sick at home one afternoon
and found myself watching *A Patch of Blue* (1965).

.....

paint, made my language exquisite in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall.” (K, V, 244; P, III, 692)

In the case of this book, my eyes are fixed on a blue butterfly “upon the precious little patch of wall” that I am trying to catch. I have a case of “Nabokov’s Blues.”¹¹ (Nabokov, author and lepidopterist, was an expert on a large group of butterflies known as Blues.¹²)

When I first watched *A Patch of Blue* I was a nine-year-old white girl enjoying the freedom of being just a little sick, of missing school, of drinking ginger ale in the morning and sucking on red, triangular-shaped, deliciously artificially flavored cough drops.

My age was the same as Claudia’s, the little black narrator-girl in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison’s wounding novel (set in Ohio in the grim year of 1941, the beginning of the Second World War). Same age, but different colors, classes, geographies. Claudia hated all the white things I loved, including Shirley Temple and those big glassy blue-eyed, pink-skinned, yellow-haired dolls of my childhood. Claudia destroyed the latter with a “disinterested violence,”¹³ not unlike Shelley Winters’s own blinding of her child.

Claudia, wise and sympathetic (whose voice mimics those of adult black women spilling their souls, and those of family and friends on the porch or in the backyard),¹⁴ tells the story of another little black girl, who is her binarism: eleven-year-old Pecola, incredibly woundable Pecola.



butterfly "upon the precious little patch of wall"

.....