

Conversations with Women in Blue

(extract)

Beth Kephart

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 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.

— Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*

I hear them sometimes, when I am working. I stop to look at what they left behind. The lines, the weaves, the words, the silks, the romps, the grassy riverbanks, the stars. The dare of it all. The emboldened making. The hint, about or near them, of the color blue: Blue as flower petal, pigment, home, song, place. Blue as mood, as dusk, as bruise. Blue as a robin's egg. Blue as a glass apple. Blue as the mist shrouding a blue mountain.*

Cleopatra (Queen)—Flax

When the boat floats up the Nile and it is the season of blooms, I speak the color of blue.

Artemisia Gentileschi (Artist)—Lapis Lazuli

The facts are not what they seem. The violence cannot be accounted for—not in the novels they have scribbled of me, not in the films they've run through their machines, not in the preening language of the critics who assume that Judith, as assassin, is just another name for me, or that the Virgin Mary is a version of myself before these words occurred to me: Violated. Betrayed.

Imagine, instead, the lapis lazuli. Imagine the Sar-e-Sang mines, folded into that mountain stretch of Northern Afghanistan. Imagine Marco Polo himself walking among those hills, 400 miles northeast of Bamiyan. How the traders carried their haul down the Silk Road. How the clever chemists crushed the stone to extract the lazurite (using pitch, using turpentine, using linseed oil, wax, and heat). How, like bread dough in the hands of a baker, the warm paste, soaked in alkaline lye, was folded over and into itself until the blue arrived.

How much more than gold is blue. How much more true. On the tip of my brush. In the gleam of that eye. In that rolled-up sleeve of the assassin.

Anna Atkins (Cyanotyper)—*Cyanotype Blues*

You will slather the page with iron salts, slip it into a darkened cove. You will buy eucalyptus and thistle, clip ferns from the box on your sill, steal from your wildflower garden, and think of me, by the British shore, harvesting the *flowers of the sea*: *odenthalia dentata*, *halymenia*, *padina pavonica*.

I was concerned with the delicacies of blades, midribs, and holdfasts. Stripes. Air bladder floats. I wanted evidence of what would die, in the end, on its own. Each page its own page, a photogram. Each bundle of photograms sent by way of post to botanical friends who would later, according to my instructions, but always, it seems, imperfectly, bind their bundles into volumes 1, volumes 2, volumes 3.

A decade is what it took, so that I did not have time to sign the enterprise beyond my initials: A. A. *Anna Atkins*. Though later they would call me the Anonymous Amateur and give Sir John Herschel the acclaim of having published *The First Photographically Printed and Illustrated Book*, a long name for the simple feat of chasing ghosts. It would take more than one hundred years for someone to want to find me, to guess that I had lived, after all that I had pursued, that I had *made*—my ankles salted with seawater, my hands reaching for holdfasts.

White where the life was. Blue where it remains.

Mary Anning (Bone Hunter)—*Purple-Blue*

The memory I have is purple-blue. Being just one year old at the time, a swaddle of a child in the arms of the woman who was not my mother. We lived in a poor place by the rough sea, and a circus had come around, and even though a wild storm was clenching the skies above, the woman who was holding me rushed outside to see.

It was a circus, after all! Come to our beaten up and craggy town where strange creatures once dragged their long tails, their fins, their wings, and now more strangeness.

The sky strike killed her. Still more blue than purple in my mind's eye. And I guess you could say that I had to survive, having been named for a sister who had been killed by a fire, and how many sisters or brothers in a single family can die? Most of the ones in mine did. And then my father died. And sometimes the wet claw of the sea would take its swipe inside the home left to my mother, my brother, and me, and we had to sell what we could find, and this is why, this is how I survived.

Ammonites. Vertiberries. Ladies' fingers. Devil's toenails. The bones and husks of the shale and limestone of the Blue Lias in the Lyme Regis, in the southwest English County of Dorset that will become known as the Jurassic Coast after history finally agrees that my work here was my work. That I lived. That I found. That I learned. That I sketched. That I was the one who discovered.

Some names of some things, for the record: Plesiosaurus. Ichthyosaur. Pterosaur. Coprolite.