

INTRODUCTION

First Things:  
Two Black and  
Blue Thoughts

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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.”<sup>1</sup>)

PERHAPS MY FIRST  
BLACK (AND BLUE) MEMORY  
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Hailing the womb, black can be archaic.<sup>2</sup>

I feel more or less certain that I remember being inside the body of my mother, inside this first home, a “dark continent” (Freud)<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup>

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.”<sup>5</sup>

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).<sup>6</sup>

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).<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup>

MY FIRST (CERTAIN)  
BLUE (AND BLACK) MEMORY

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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.”<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>) 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



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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.”<sup>11</sup> (Nabokov, author and lepidopterist, was an expert on a large group of butterflies known as Blues.<sup>12</sup>)

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,”<sup>13</sup> 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),<sup>14</sup> 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"

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Pecola wants nothing more than “Morning-glory-blue-eyes . . . Alice-and-Jerry-blue-storybook-eyes.”<sup>15</sup> Her vision is as skewed as Kiki Smith’s upside-down *Lilith* (1994) (Plate 2). With each page that I turn, Pecola (like Coca-Cola), who is too brown, too sweet for this world, pecks and pecks at my own brown eyes, as if I were one of Cinderella’s wicked stepsisters.

Unloved, emotionally malnourished: Pecola (like black coal) feeds her starving girlhood with milky whiteness, even consuming “three quarts of milk” in one sitting, just to take advantage of using the Shirley Temple cup that obsessed her.<sup>16</sup> The cup is clear blue, like a fantasy of the little starlet’s glass-blue eyes. Pecola similarly nurtures her wounded self with Mary Jane candies, sweets with the taste of molasses and peanut butter, not unlike a Peanut Butter Kiss or a Squirrel Nut Zipper or a Bit-O-Honey:

Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle dis-

array, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane.

Three pennies had brought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane.<sup>17</sup>

But these little girls with blue eyes wrapped in yellow paper did not heal Pecola.

It was by chance that I watched *A Patch of Blue* by myself while my mother did household things. As a little girl, I saw many afternoon movies on television starring my favorite movie stars: Shirley Temple and Sidney Poitier. My adult memory of my childhood viewing of *A Patch of Blue*, where Poitier feeds the viewer and the blind girl with seen and unseen blackness, is hued blue and taboo. The memory is still sorely felt: it is bruising, is black and blue.

This recollection of seeing *A Patch of Blue* is not horrifically bruising like my adolescent memories of seeing documentary footage of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or of discovering photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau. To quote Susan Sontag's recollections of seeing pictures of the concentration camps in 1945, when she was twelve years old: "When I looked at those photographs, something broke."<sup>18</sup> No, my *Patch of Blue* did not break me: my memory is much more neutral than that. But it is precisely this neutrality that will dirty this book black and blue. As Roland Barthes claims in *The Neutral (Le Neutre)*, a landmark series of lectures delivered at the Collège de France in 1978, twenty-three little chapters or dandelion seeds or twinklings, under the shadow of the recent death of his *maman*, "the Neutral is colorful (and it stains!)"<sup>19</sup>

Long ago, that little film starring a black man held by a patch of blue went inside me and made a home for itself. Like a marble from my childhood, it has always been there. Intermittently, I have held this black and blue cat's-eye again: looking through it, rolling it in my mouth. But it was not until recently that I realized how special this marble was. It was my first black and blue thought.

Like Pecola drinking whiteness in a Shirley Temple cup, I tasted Poitier's blackness in a wrapper of sweet blindness, like Selina herself.

I find black and blue everywhere. It abstractly brushes and stains me in



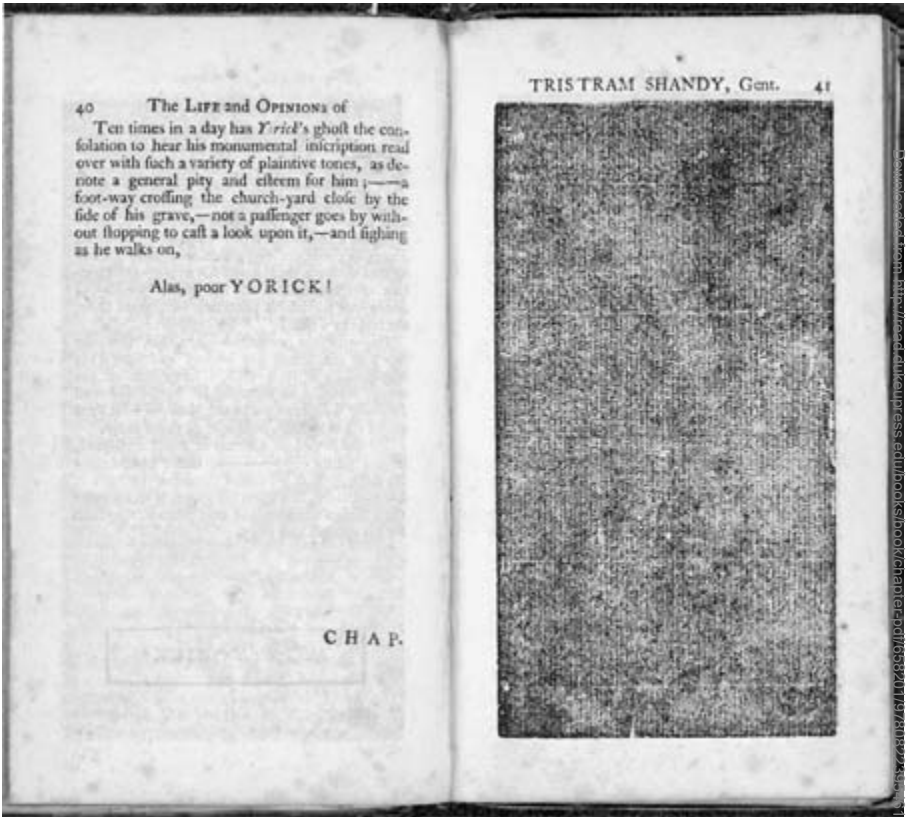
the black and blue paint of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko. It figures in Francis Bacon. It sings to me in the voice of Louis Armstrong in his recording, in 1929, of “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?”

Black is the color of the darkroom, of desire, “of the black milk of the nocturnal goat” (Rilke),<sup>20</sup> of cinema, of being underground, of a fall through the hole of the pupil of the eye, of a bomb shelter, of a cellar, of a pile of coal, of dirt, of sweet, thick, dark molasses, of bad-luck cats, of the velvet dress of John Singer Sergeant’s *Madame X*, of the mourning coat, lined in fur, with matching skull cap, worn by Hans Holbein’s *Christina of Denmark*, of Laurence Sterne’s famous all-black page in *Tristram Shandy*, of rare tulips, of the paintings of Ad Reinhardt, of night, of caves, of melancholia, of the black sun, of the sunless sky (after a volcanic eruption or after the dropping of a nuclear bomb) and of beauty.

Black is the color of cinema itself. As Barthes writes, the cocooning blackness of the movie theater is “the ‘color’ of a diffused eroticism . . . it is because I am enclosed that I work and glow with all my desire.”<sup>21</sup> When leaving the movie theater, Barthes mews, in a feline way, that “his body has become something soporific, soft, peaceful: limp as a sleeping cat.”<sup>22</sup> The nocturnal cat is the moviegoer of the animal kingdom; it is the totem animal of Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, and Agnes Varda.

Black is the womb-like bedroom where Proust wrote most of the *Recherche*, covering the windows to suppress all light, lining the walls with soundproofing cork, reversing his hours so as to turn day into night: in sum, living in a darkroom, developing his detailed pictures of life in blackness. Walled in, *uterinized*, Proust wrote not only the blue parts of the *Recherche* (more on azure words soon) but also the beautiful black bits, like “the story of the pearls”: Madame Verdurin’s once-white pearls that “had become black as the result of a fire,” which indeed made them that much more exquisite (K, VI, 35; P, IV, 293).

Blue is the color of the blues, “the ink that I use is the blue blood of the swan” (Cocteau),<sup>23</sup> of the sea, of the cyanotype, of memory, of the eyes of my youngest son, of the gray-blue of my mother’s eyes, of hope, of Yves Klein, of Thomas Gainsborough’s *Blue Boy*, of Giotto’s joy, of Derek Jarman’s blank film titled *Blue*, of Helmut Newton’s Polaroids, of “blue pencils, blue noses, blue movies, laws, blue legs and stockings . . . examination booklets



of Laurence Sterne's famous all-black page in Tristram Shandy, of rare tulips, of the paintings of Ad Reinhardt, of night, of caves, of melancholia, of the black sun, of the sunless sky (after a volcanic eruption or after the dropping of a nuclear bomb) and of beauty.

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... and cheese,”<sup>24</sup> of baby boys, stillborn babies, of glaciers, of cocktails, of Marina Warner’s *Indigo*, of desire, of distance, of longing “of the light that got lost,”<sup>25</sup> of not being warm, of beauty “of the aster or the iris or the air a fist has bruised.”<sup>26</sup> Thomas Becket (claims William Gass) “is a very blue man.”<sup>27</sup>

“The air a fist has bruised”: that’s a rustle, a murmur, a buzz, a humming.<sup>28</sup>

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While blueness (as in blue eyes) and blackness (as in dark skin) are unequivocally about race, the two colors flower into other ever-expanding tropes as they shade, highlight, tint, dye and bruise my book: *Black and Blue*. After all, blue is not only a color of whiteness, as in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, it is also the color of nostalgia.

One only needs to drift nostalgically *Toward the Blue Peninsula* with the shadow-box artist Joseph Cornell, whose favorite colors were blue and white.<sup>29</sup>

One only needs to sink into the wistful longings of Proust: unalloyed blues of the azure sky, beryl blues of the ocean, and melancholic dusky sapphires of the midnight hours.

In the *Recherche*, the Narrator’s obsessive desire for his love interests (first Gilberte and then Albertine) is propelled by a black and blue (indigo) liquidness. In his imagining of both Gilberte and Albertine, the colors black and blue contain molecules of Jewishness (in the period’s air of the Dreyfus affair). Most poignant, in this regard, is the Narrator’s confession of painting over Gilberte’s black “Jewish” eyes with an envisioned blue:<sup>30</sup>

Her black eyes gleamed, and since I did not at that time know, and indeed have never since learned, how to reduce a strong impression to its objective elements, since I had not, as they say, enough “power of observation” to isolate the notion of their colour, for a long time afterwards, whenever I thought of her, the memory of those bright eyes would at once present itself to me as a vivid azure, since her complexion was fair; so much so that, perhaps if her eyes had not been quite so black—which was what struck

one most forcibly on first seeing her – I should not have been, as I was so especially enamoured of their imagined blue. (K, I, 198; P, I, 139)

And, of course, Proust, whose mother was Jewish, had his own famous eyes that looked like “Japanese lacquer.”<sup>31</sup>

But Albertine has true blue eyes. She is an inversion of Gilberte. Likewise, she is an invert, a lesbian (in a book where the homosexual is likened to the Jew, by an author who was both). The blue eyes of this unknowable, close-minded, anti-Semitic Albertine are a surprise:<sup>32</sup> for her hair is nightly, like “black violets” (K, V, 14; P, III, 528). So, just as the black eyes of fair-skinned, red-haired Gilberte come as a shock, Albertine’s “blues” are unexpected and unnerving. Relentlessly associated with the ungraspable liquid of the sea, Albertine’s eyes are impossible to hold captive, are always already fugitive. Her eyes are the blue ocean: “So much so that when she shut them it was as though a pair of curtains had been drawn to shut out a view of the sea” (K, V, 14; P, III, 528).

Black and blue are racial markers.

Blue is longing.

Black is melancholia.

Black is the true color of Gilberte’s blue eyes.

### BLACK (AND BLUE) BEAUTY

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The beautiful person or thing incites in us the longing for truth.

– Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*

At the heart of *Black and Blue* are one book and three films: Roland Barthes’s *La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (1980); Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1962); Chris Marker’s *Sans soleil* (1982); and Alain Resnais’s and Marguerite Duras’s *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959). All four of these works are French and postwar. All four are guilty of beauty and can be read (as a result of their culpability) as unjust. *La Chambre claire* touches us with the crystalline language of “the delayed rays of a star” (H, 81; S, 126). *La Jetée* caresses us with the tranquil (if confident) narration of a father’s bedtime story, with images so still that

you believe you can enter them.<sup>33</sup> *Sans soleil* does business with lush voice-overs and unceasing rushes of exhilarating footage that pop into our eyes-as-mouths “to be eaten on the spot like fresh doughnuts.”<sup>34</sup> *Hiroshima mon amour* cashes in on a rhapsodic soundtrack and seamless cinematography.

Blue, black, and beauty are all colored duplicitously (from an acknowledged Anglo-American-European schematic vision). Blue is joy and sadness. Black is evil and sophistication, reverence and knowledge. Black is the color of the first engravings and type. Elaine Scarry emphasizes beauty’s deceit when she astutely claims: “Berated for its power, beauty is simultaneously belittled for its powerlessness.”<sup>35</sup>

Both blue and black are intensely connected to beauty. Given the punch of black and blue, it is no coincidence that Michel Pastoureau’s first books on color began with these entwined colors.<sup>36</sup> The punch, according to Pastoureau, is not just metaphorical, it is also historical: “For a long time, blue, an unobtrusive and unpopular color, remained a sort of ‘sub-black’ in the West or a black of a particular kind. Thus the histories of these two colors can hardly be separated.”<sup>37</sup>

By marrying beauty with the political, my subjects aggressively (if subtly) break the rules. They use beauty (through the colors black and blue, the touching of colored skin, the enchanting structure of the fairy tale, and the erotics of love) as a serious political tool for unveiling truths.

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In *La Chambre claire*, the reader confronts Barthes’s desire for the black body as nourishing and taboo. He gives us a story of race that causes us to shake our heads: up and down, side to side, yes and no. He is wrong. He is right. Barthes’s wrong-and-right moves are visible, forever in process, forever corrections marked black and blue (Plate 3), not unlike the appealing page of amended type that we discover in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*: “Corrections? More for the pleasure of studding the text.”<sup>38</sup> It is as if the text were a garment, and the corrections buttons, snaps, grommets, tucks, and pleats.

In *La Jetée*, Marker dreams the fairy tale and the political film as strange bedfellows. How might the structure of the fairy tale provide meaningful hope in the blackness of this imagined World War Three?

In *Sans soleil*, black is the color of transport, as Marker migrates from island to island, from place to place, from Guinea-Bissau to Japan to Iceland to Cape Verde, from the past to the future. Is it possible to speak of terror, of colonialism, of annihilation, of natural disaster, of bombs, of prejudice through this black mobility cut with the hope of blue?

In *Hiroshima mon amour*, the impossible representation of the dropping of the atomic bomb is understood through sacrilegious love. Can one understand impossible suffering and loss through the erotics of love?

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Proust, who was not sure if he was an *unaesthetic* philosopher or a full-on *aesthetic* novelist, is in the air of all four of my subjects. *Black and Blue's* three films and one book, it seems, took a few beauty lessons from Proust.

Barthes, who often references the *Recherche*, taught his last seminar on writing a novel, and he left fragments of his own Proustified novel behind.

In 1945, one of Alain Resnais's first professional assignments was as a cameraman and editor on a 16mm short film, directed by Jean Leduc, called *Le Sommeil d'Albertine* (or *Les Yeux d'Albertine*), which was based on an incident from the *Recherche*.

Chris Marker pays homage to Proust in *Immemory* (1998), an interactive CD-ROM that includes a photograph of a bakery that sells madeleine cakes (taken in Illiers-Combray, the town where the famous author spent his boyhood holidays<sup>39</sup>); a meditation on the Proustian significance of the character of Madeleine (as played by Kim Novak) in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*; and these words – "I want to claim for the image the humility and powers of a madeleine."<sup>40</sup>

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*Black and Blue* seeks to tell stories. Like a historical novel, its function is not to correct history, but rather to make history appear (Fredric Jameson).<sup>41</sup>

"Is History not simply that time when we were not born?" (H, 64; S, 100).

## SPARSER

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This black and blue book is sad and short. Sadness is new to me. But sadness is not the opposite of pleasure: it is its lining. My earlier books were a mix of things: the heft of nostalgia, the clouds of flight, girlish excess, boyish unstopability. They were more blue than black. My relatively happy books (medium sized and, even, quite fat) certainly have endpapers of sadness. But this book is sparser with its ingredients.

Barthes remarks that a text on pleasure cannot be anything but short: “(as we say: is that all? It’s a bit short); since pleasure can only be spoken through the indirection of a demand.”<sup>42</sup> I claim the same brevity for *la tristesse du texte*, the sadness of *Black and Blue*. Books on pleasure and books on sadness are always in danger of not getting the affect right and of self-indulgence. Better to keep it thin. (I fear this book is not thin enough.)

## LIKE A BRUISE

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Black is not the opposite of blue: it is its lining. Both are sad colors.

All four of my “tender buttons” (*La Chambre claire*, *La Jetée*, *Sans soleil*, and *Hiroshima mon amour*) feel the hurt of war, of love, of time like a bruise. (One meaning of *bleu* in French is bruise.) After watching *La Jetée*, *Sans soleil*, and *Hiroshima mon amour*, a tenderness remains, though we may have forgotten how the bruise got there. If our skin is black, the bruises may not show at all. Invisible pain is often the most impossible to reconcile.

The affect of these texts is akin to my memory of *A Patch of Blue*. The ridiculous, but moving, melodrama of my childhood, in the microcosm and macrocosm of time, is like one of Proust’s “exquisite small-scale contrivances”:<sup>43</sup> the tiny chance-taste of a madeleine, the tiny chance-sound of a spoon on a plate, the tiny chance-touch of a starched napkin, all minuscule things which loom with large significance. It is a wound from yesterday that is felt today. *La Chambre claire*, along with my three films (as fed by *A Patch of Blue*), ring time, just as a bruise circles and fills a bodily insult with its injurious colors. (But in this book there is little yellow: the color that appears when a bruise begins to heal.)

Sometimes, between the time of the pain and when the bruise presents itself, we forget the injury. I am trying to not forget. Bruises are the before-time wounds of always-falling childhood and the after-time of growing old. (It takes so little to bruise the elderly.)

A bruise is an injury that is “neither inside, nor outside.”<sup>44</sup>

I am sitting in the bathtub counting all the bruises on my legs: a child caught in the body of a woman.

In an echo of Marker’s *La Jetée*, “this is the story of a woman marked by an image from her childhood.”<sup>45</sup>

This is the story of a woman marked by a patch of blue.



A bruise is an injury that is “neither inside, nor outside.”

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