Flowers

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Nobody sees a flower, really, it is so small. We haven't time, and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time.

—Georgia O'Keeffe

blue, adj. Of a mixture: random with the clumps forbidden. Every item keeps its distance from its own kind; any handful contains what any other handful contains. The retina is blue. A forest planted blue looks like a forest. Of a flower: the rarest color a petal can make, so it never sits next to another of itself, so it always fits.

There is a stack of money on the table and it will not stay mixed. It is Thai money, which means the twenties are plastic and everything else is paper, and the plastic slides off the paper and finds the other plastic, so that however the stack is arranged in the morning, by afternoon the twenties have found each other and are lying together in a clump like something that happened without anyone's permission. Mixed in with the notes are lottery tickets, which are thinner than either, and which also clump, for their own reasons, and which are in the stack because they are what I give as tips. The intention is simple. When something has to be paid for, I take five things off the top without looking, and the five things should come to roughly the right amount and include one ticket. A thousand, a couple of hundreds, a twenty, a ticket. That is the whole specification, and the stack refuses it daily.

The first thing I tried was cutting it. Take a chunk off the top, put the rest on top of that, repeat. I did this a great many times, sitting at a table with a beer, with the seriousness of a man doing something, and the twenties stayed together, and it took me an embarrassingly long time to understand why, which is that cutting a stack does nothing. Number the notes and watch: cut it anywhere and the sequence is the same sequence started

from a different place. Four, five, six, one, two, three. Six, one, two, three, four, five. The stack is a ring. A cut moves the point where the ring is opened and changes nothing about who is next to whom, and a million cuts are one cut. The twenties were together before and they were together after, and all that had changed was which of them was on top, which was the only thing I had been looking at, which is why it had looked like progress.

What finally worked was crude. Find a clump. Take one thing out of it. Put it somewhere else, not next to its own kind. Do this until there are no clumps. It is slow, it is done with the fingers, and it is the only thing that did anything, and when I described it to someone later they gave it the right name at once: combing. You comb hair for the same reason. Not to sort it, not to randomize it, but to undo the clumping while leaving every strand more or less where it was. A comb is not an argument with the hair. It is a disagreement with the tangles only.

What I had wanted, I would have said, was for the stack to be random. It was not. A random stack has clumps in it. Shuffle a deck honestly and you will find three hearts in a row more often than feels right, and if you ask someone to lay cards out so that they look random they will space the hearts apart and produce an order that is too even to have come from chance, and

a card player can tell at a glance which deck was shuffled and which was arranged, because the arranged one has no clumps and the real one always does. Randomness has no manners. Each position is decided without consulting its neighbors, and so nothing prevents five tickets from arriving together, and now and then they do. The stack I wanted was one in which that never happened: random, but with the clumps forbidden; every note keeping its distance from its own kind; any five off the top containing what any other five contain. Not random, then. Something else, with a name I did not have.

The name is a color. Noise comes in colors because a noise is described by how its energy is divided between slow changes and fast ones, and the division can be written as a single exponent, so that the colors sit on a line. White noise is flat, every speed equally represented: the coin flip, the stack with no manners. Brown noise is the random walk, each item a small step from the last, nearly all drift and no surprise; a wallet sorted by denomination and then slightly disturbed is brown, and so is the sound of a waterfall and the price of anything. Pink sits between them, slow drift and quick jitter in balance; rain is pink, and so is most music if you measure how loud it is from minute to minute. Blue is the mirror

of pink: fast change dominant, drift suppressed, every item differing from its neighbors and the mix evening out over any stretch longer than a few. And violet is the mirror of brown, nearly all fast change, which in the limit is strict alternation: thousand, twenty, hundred, ticket, thousand, twenty, hundred, ticket. Violet is not a mix. It is a pattern, and a handful from it is identical to every other handful, which is a different thing from being the same.

Blue is the one I wanted, and it lives between white and violet. Push away from white by refusing clumps; stop short of violet by refusing to make a pattern. That is combing, described from the far side, and it explains why combing felt like neither shuffling nor sorting, because it is neither: it is the removal of one specific thing, adjacency to one's own kind, and nothing else. And the arithmetic of it is strange enough to be worth stating. The colors line up by exponent, and adding two noises adds their energy, so by addition you can slide along the line toward whichever noise is louder but you can never leave it. The comb leaves it. A comb is violet, teeth at a fixed spacing, held in the hand. Hair is brown, each strand following the one next to it. What comes out is blue, and blue is not the sum of violet and brown, which would be somewhere near white. The comb is

not added to the hair. It is run through it. The operation is division with the quotient thrown away: run the tangle through the grid, forget which tooth each strand was under, keep only where it sat between two teeth, and lay the teeth back down in order. The integer part is the grid's. The remainder is the tangle's. Their sum is a jittered lattice, which is how blue noise is made wherever anyone makes it on purpose, and the people who make it on purpose are printers, who scatter black dots to fake a gray and have known for a century that dots scattered at random clump into visible grain while dots scattered blue read as a smooth tone; and the people who build game engines, who plant forests, and have learned that a forest planted at random looks planted and a forest planted blue looks like a forest.

Mathematicians have a word for what the comb leaves behind, and it is a theorem rather than a color. A pattern of points is hyperuniform if, when you draw a window of any size around part of it and count what falls inside, the uncertainty in the count grows only with the edge of the window and not with its interior. For a random scatter the count wanders in proportion to the window's area: twice the window, twice the doubt about what it holds. For a hyperuniform scatter the doubt lives on the boundary. The inside of any window

is already known. That is the handful-of-five property stated as a limit: the only thing you do not know about five notes off the top is which two were cut in half by the cut, and everything between them is settled.

The eye is built this way. The light-sensing cells in a retina are not on a grid, because a grid would alias, laying moiré over everything striped in the world, and they are not scattered at random, because random leaves bald patches and clumps and the world would arrive with holes in it. They are hyperuniform, each cell keeping its distance from the others, and in a chicken, which has five kinds of cone where we have three, every kind is hyperuniform on its own and all five are laid over each other, interleaved, so that no cell of any color is ever next to a cell of the same color, and the whole thing is a bouquet of five colors with the distances kept. Nobody arranged it. The cells push each other apart as they grow, and the pushing apart is the whole algorithm, the comb run by the hair itself.

So the stack was a small instance of a large thing, and the large thing is that the arrangements people call natural are not random. They are random with a distance kept. The clumps have been combed out and the texture has been left in, and the eye, which is made of the same arrangement, reads that as life, and reads the

grid as a machine and the scatter as an accident. There is one more thing the stack taught before the flowers took over, and it is about rarity. The notes that clump are the common ones: the twenties, because there are many of them and they are all plastic; the hundreds, because there are many of them and every price is made of them. The notes that never clump are the fifty and the five hundred, which I hoard because they are rare and which, being rare, never have another of their kind within reach. They cannot clump because there is never more than one. A rare enough item is blue noise by itself, with no comb required, and any handful that contains one is a handful you remember.

I make flower arrangements, which is a thing that happens in hotel rooms more than people suppose, since the room has a vase and the road has a stall, and I have learned the rules by getting them wrong, which is the only way the rules of a bouquet can be learned, because nobody writes them down and the florist will not tell you. A white flower always improves an arrangement. A pink one always does. Red is difficult: it argues with everything and wins, and then you have a bouquet about one red flower. Yellow is difficult in a different way; it makes the others look as if they have been photographed under a bad lamp. Brown flowers do

not exist, and the ones that come close are called dried. Green is not a color in a bouquet, it is the paper. And a blue flower, put into any bouquet whatever, always fits, and does something no other color does, which is to make the rest of the bouquet into a background. The other flowers were an arrangement before. With the blue one in it they are an arrangement you can see.

The reason is not taste, or not only. It is scarcity and chemistry and distance. Blue is the rarest color a plant can make. The pigments that do the work in a petal are red and purple by default, and to turn them blue the plant has to shift the acidity of its own cells or bind the pigment to a metal, aluminum usually, which is why a hydrangea is blue in one garden and pink in the next and the difference is the dirt. Fewer than one flower in ten has learned the trick, which is why the sky is full of blue and the stall is not, and why a blue flower at the stall costs what it costs. So a blue flower is the one kind that is never next to its own kind, because there is never more than one of it in the room. It is blue noise by prevalence, the five hundred of the stack: an item whose expected count in any handful is close to zero, which therefore cannot clump, which therefore spaces the arrangement around it by being the one thing in it that is maximally far from everything else. White and

pink always work because they are the stall's majority and the eye has stopped seeing them as colors; they are the hundreds, the paper, the thing a bouquet is made of. Red fails because it is loud and plentiful and clumps with itself the way the twenties did; two red flowers are a clump, and one red flower is a clump of one, which is worse. Blue is the ticket.

And blue is the color of distance. Painters have known this since they first tried to paint a hill behind a hill: the far one is bluer, because the air between you and it is blue, and the farther the hill the more air, and the more air the more blue, so that blue became the pigment of away, of the thing you are not standing next to. A blue flower in a vase is a far thing placed near. It brings the horizon into a hotel room. The other flowers are here, at arm's length, pink and white and the paper of the leaves, and the blue one is here too but it reads as there, and that is the trick the eye plays and the trick the arrangement needs, because an arrangement with no there in it is a bunch. The blue flower is the one that keeps the maximum distance from everything else while standing in the same water, and the distance is what makes the rest legible as near.

That is the second thing the vase taught that the stack had not. The blue flower makes the other flowers visible

as a set. A bouquet of white and pink and green is a pleasant thing you look through, the way you look through a window. Put the blue one in and you look at it, and then you look at the others in relation to it, and for the first time the bouquet is a composition rather than a bunch, because the eye now has a point from which the distances can be measured. Hyperuniformity is invisible until something in the pattern is rare enough to show you the spacing; a comb's work cannot be seen in the combed hair, only in the one strand that lies across it. The blue flower is the one whose rarity is a ruler.

A corpus is a bouquet, and a corpus is also a stack, and the rule for both is the same rule. Every text in it is a stem, and the one thing a new one owes the others is the bouquet's rule and the stack's rule and the retina's rule: do not sit next to your own kind. A new text that retells what an old one told is a clump; the twenties have found each other; the reader takes five off the top and gets three of the same. A new text that avoids this by being as different as possible from everything is red, loud and alone, a bouquet about one flower. The stem that belongs is the one that keeps its distance from its own kind and no more, so that any handful of five from the

shelf, taken without looking, contains one of each kind, and reads, and comes to roughly the right amount.

And in every bouquet there is one stem that is not about any of the others and is about the arrangement, the stem whose rarity makes the spacing visible, which is placed last and which, once placed, cannot be taken out without the bouquet becoming a bunch again. The Romantics knew this flower, and they knew it as a thing seen rather than held. In the novel Novalis died before finishing, a boy dreams of a blue flower and spends the rest of the book walking toward it, and the point of the flower, the thing that made it the emblem of a whole century's longing, is that it is never picked. It is seen from a distance that stays a distance. That is not a failure of the book, and it is not the book being unfinished. It is the only way a blue flower works. Pick it and it is a flower in your hand, one more, white and pink in a different color, a clump of one. Leave it where it is and the whole field arranges itself around the place where you are not.