

The Color

by John Olson

The artist glides through an art supply store looking for a color within. She can feel the color, but she can't name it. She can almost see it, but it's not that kind of color. It's not like, say, blue or red, a primary color that animates flags or exotic ceremonies. It's not green, definitely not green. Green is the color of nature, trees, shrubs, ferns, grass. This color is preternatural. It may not exist in nature at all. But it needs to. She needs to find this color and bring it into existence. Preferably in oil, though acrylic will do, perhaps even gouache. The clerk is a middle-aged man with a mustache and thick brown hair who may have once been a pilot for an airlines but must now clerk in an art supply store. She doesn't know why she thinks that about him but she does. Can I help you, he asks. No, but thank you, she says. Ok, he answers, just let me know if you have any questions. He leaves her to her silence interrogation. Her inner search. How many people at any given moment of the day that you see walking down the street or sitting in a car are experiencing their own private interrogation, their own private detective work, who am I, is there an end to the universe, what will happen to me when I die.

The color, she is sure, is a form of yearning. She can feel that. So it might be something purple. Or violet. Hyacinth or heliotrope. Mulberry or plum. But no. She doesn't feel a correspondence there. No true rapport, nothing that has that sound of soft summer rain late at night when the car doors have stopped slamming and voices are gone and there is nothing in the night but raccoons and wandering cats. That's the feeling but not the color. That comes close to the feeling. But it's not the whole feeling. It's only a part of the feeling. It may be there is no color for that feeling. It's not like the dots in the Sunday paper cartoons giving Dagwood and Blondie a life. That's partly what colors do, they animate things, people and seasons and birthdays and jokes. Clowns. Fruit. Embryos pulsing with life. Bluish tints of membrane veined with blood. She tries to imagine the color as a phantom, an ocean wave, the white robe of an

aikido instructor, a gardenia bobbing in a light breeze. None of it will do. It's simply not that kind of color. The kind of color that gives things an identity. And then she sees it, there on the bottom shelf. So obvious. How could she have missed it? She picks it up and brings it to the counter and the clerk comes to the register as she fishes out her wallet and credit card to pay for it. This astonishing color. This omelet of flame, this translation of pain, this perverse light shouted into cold oblivion.

