

Verdure

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Green 1

The shade of leaves on a birch tree in springtime: late enough spring that the thaw is long over and leaves have not just made an appearance but begun to crowd the air in earnest. They are still so new that it takes a moment to realize you have seen them; they are a little like ghosts, occupying a space you know to be empty until your knowledge catches up to your senses. This green is, surprisingly, a little bit brown, despite its sharp spanking newness—not brown like old leaves are, but dingy in the way of something that has just been born and hasn't been washed yet. It's not a beam of light straight from heaven, after all. It's the work of an organism that has been in the same place for years, endured the cyclical spinning of life on earth, and is up for another go-round because that is the only available means of life. At sunset the sky behind this shade of green looks a little green itself. This may be an optical illusion, but then, that is what the sky is made of.

Green 2

The green on the box holding a souvenir carried home from a far place. This was two shades of green to begin with: a plain background green, no more blue than it is yellow and no more yellow than it is blue; and a foreground green which is somewhat darker, so as to appear soft to the touch, outlining a pattern of vines in diamond shapes. Now, after a number of years sitting in the same place on a shelf, the box has faded unevenly and includes more greens than that. The side facing the books on the shelf is fresh, not exactly bright—it was not bright to begin with—but whole, maintaining its full complement of pigment. The top and the opposite side have, under the influence of sun, come to resemble outdated wallpaper in the back rooms of a dentist's office, the room where the dentist keeps reference books and the Victorian extractor someone found in an antique store and gave to the dentist as a gift, which would be alarming if displayed where the patients could see it.

Presumably the inside of the box is not green at all—it seems likely that it's plain brown or white cardboard—but opening the box would mean coming face-to-face with the souvenir inside, the block of ink waiting to be wetted and the brush to dip into it to write in a language you do not know. It is a writing tool brought back from the place where you were profoundly illiterate, and, as such, its purpose is hard to fathom.

Green 3

There are a lot of greens belonging to bamboo. The green when it emerges from the ground—as a shoot, not a sapling, betraying the botanical truth that it is more grass than tree—is pale and easily camouflaged. People who have been digging bamboo for a long time know how to distinguish these shoots from the other undergrowth, and can even tell which way the root runs, and which way you should dig to uproot the shoot and collect it for eating. They can try to show you the trick of it, but experience is the only way to learn.

While you follow instructions and dig with a tiny trowel, collecting shoots to be cooked up for lunch, the whole bamboo grove surrounds

you, tossing its branches and dappling the light. There's little undergrowth; bamboo stalks are connected by a shared root system, so they dominate the ground where they grow. To stand in the grove is to stand right in the middle of a living thing.

Then, the trunks or stalks of bamboo are a very slightly dusty green, and the leaves are a brilliant shock of green, a moving sea of green, trunks and branches and everything shifting, producing a steady murmur like the sea.

After weeks and months living far away from home in a concrete block of apartments, I find this bamboo grove something of a relief, but it isn't really familiar. It reminds you of new spring growth in America, but it is a different species entirely. The homelike quality of this place does not reside in the shape of the bamboo stalks or the sound they make when the wind takes them in its hands, but in the fact that, here as elsewhere, people cherish green where they find it, and that the green here has the unconscious will to continue growing, just as it does in your old favorite places. The grove is comforting by analogy: you don't know it well, but you know places like it. You know what it is to leave the city and soak yourself in green, even if you don't know which way you should be digging.

Green 4

The green of the family van. Not quite dark enough to be called forest green, although that's probably how it was advertised. If you look closely you can see that the paint has little sparkles in it; it glitters subtly like a beetle's shell. Smooth, except where you scraped it against the garage door when you were learning to drive—the paint was repaired there so that the scrape is almost indistinguishable, except for the bumps that remain.

When your dad moves on to a small SUV and your mother, free at last from ferrying young people around, buys a luxury sedan, the van passes for a short time to you. Not the deed because you're not sticking around, but you get the right to use it for a while. You drive it north for the summer to a town close to the Canadian border, where the green exterior blends with the pine

trees crowding in on the edges of the town, and where all 300 people have cars in the same color or in a corresponding shade of navy blue. The town is full of park rangers, outfitters, and naturalists. You are one of the naturalists, as anyone can tell by looking at you in your khakis and hiking shoes and the anorak you were issued at work.

Everyone around you is white; everyone is from a Christian background; you just have to assume not everyone is straight. There's a Jeep you see around town with a gun rack on the back and Confederate flag bumper stickers, and you'd like to tell the driver, "You're way too far north to be whistling Dixie," but you have no idea who he is. He could be any of the people you see at the grocery store or the coffee shop or the Fourth of July fireworks, such a small group that their faces are all vaguely familiar.

On some days you drive to the places where roads end, get out, and walk down the hiking trails. Your job is teaching you to see these woods: to tell the difference between a red and white pine, to spot a heap of gnawed pine cone bits that tell you a chipmunk was there, to identify scat left by a fox or rabbit or wolf or bear, to gather spruce buds and make them into tea. You walk until you find a good place to sit with a book, at the end of a rock overlooking a waterfall or next to a pond that used to be a pit mine. In this way, you can spend hours on a two- or three-mile walk.

It is evident that you're not the first person to bring a book or a pen to these woods. Someone at the bookstore decided to stock the Robert Pinsky collection you have in your hand. All the rangers and naturalists seem to have read Aldo Leopold's essay "Thinking Like a Mountain," his description of shooting a wolf and watching "a fierce green fire dying in her eyes." You could be one of the people who come here to find that green fire and stay here to tend it. You could blend right in.

Green 5

Olive green. Olives are disgusting. Despite the elegance of James Bond's martinis, despite the sun-soaked picturesqueness of olive trees, despite the

indispensability of olive oil, olives remain disgusting. Like pickles, they are something to be ferreted out of a meal if seen in time, swallowed hastily with a quick chaser of water if discovered too late. This is not the kind of distaste that comes with unfamiliarity, a recoil from the foreign. It's the kind that happens when you try something young, don't like it, and form a lasting impression based on that dislike, as strong as if you had burned your hand and learned to avoid the stove. An aversion that lasts even while you try, and happily take to, seaweed and sushi, whiskey and gin, haggis and pungent French cheese. It is possible to be adventurous, worldly even, while retaining within oneself the precise pickiness of a very small child. Olives remain forever sickly green, un-food-green, brown-green, the color of something not for you, the color of something you encounter in familiar places—those olives and mini pickles at Christmas, passed around in a little hobnail glass plate—but decline to partake in, drawing lines beyond which your family may not compel you to go. A bit of early and still-precious autonomy, built on disgust.

It seems easier to choose this way than to choose by liking. What don't you want? Olives. What do you want? Not the small town but the sturdiness of those all-wheel-drive forest-green cars; not the bamboo but the whippish green grace of the bamboo; not the mess of the brush and ink but enough learnedness to display them with the lid off their velvety green box; and as much as you can hold of the shocking pale green of spring, which every year eludes your grasp and goes.

