

Hills the Color of Elytra.

by Conrad Vispo.

Below me as I write, a small brook, timid from the Autumn's dryness, wends its way through a little valley. Around it is a mix of stream-side grasses, shrubs, forest, and farm fields. My eye distinguishes these by texture and color: the grasses of tan excelsior; the shrubs, a darker, burgundy-tinged tangle; the forest, a collection of columns in varying shades of grey; the pasture, as smooth or rough as the back of a weathered hand, green still tussling with brown.

Our eyes parse the landscape, making patterns of color, tapestries from texture. But there are other colors and textures than those just mentioned. We could start with the palette of the plants. That lighter grass along the creek may be Rice Cut Grass; the darker, finer clump with the better hairdo, a sedge. What I had bundled up as brush is actually a botanical rainbow: rust-brown goldenrods tossing feathered seed heads the color of old pillowcases; that hint of red wine is the stalks of wild rose and dogwood; the bristly web of dark grey may be viburnum or perhaps Musclewood. And in the forest, those grey streaks are hardly nameless ranks. They are light-skinned Cottonwoods growing darker with age; the barkless trunks of dead Elms, bare and waxy smooth; the stout, old Sugar Maple reigning over its stretch of fence row, nearly black in the falling shadows. The pasture is, perhaps, the less varied of the lot, though it too, upon closer inspection, may display the persistent green pride of clover or brown wisps of a grass whose name I ought to remember.

As has been done with plants, so too could be done with beetles - the brick red and deep velvet blue Bombardiers beneath the creek rocks; the iridescent emerald green of *Chlaenius* and *Poecilius* a bit farther up the bank; the shiny, ebony of *Pterostichus* in the forest; the oily violet-black of *Carabus* in the shrubs; and the *Harpalus rufipes* in the field, a dark peach with a fine yellow fuzz. Any creature is a color.

In fact, one could leave out the common colors and say only that a hillside wears swathes of Chestnut Oak with ripples of birch tucked in its creases; or that the banks of the gravelly stream are of deep, smooth *Bembidion* (a tiny beetle). It would be fair to say this not because these taxonomies necessarily reflect visual colors or tactile textures, but because they *are* poet colors; that is, they *are* the stuff of patterns, of melodies. Understood, they can populate the mind's eye with canvases as full as any thick-oiled, window-lit Rembrandt. Full not only of the predictable, but also alive with the unexpected: sudden splashes of 'color' – a flock of orchids in an old meadow; a small, Arctic butterfly resting beside a swamp. These are the flourishes of nature that remind us of humility, of the fact that the patterns we start to build in our minds reflect our own logic, not wild nature's. Such are the hues of ecology, and, because of our power to transform them, we should know them better.

The relative uniformity of that pasture was no accident. Writing about 200 years ago, John Lorain, an astute observer, described the experiences of farmers plowing forest soils for the first time. The production of early fields, he explained, resorting to agronomic 'colors', was patchy. The pillow and cradle ground surface of mature forests, caused by uprooted trees and the resulting cavities in the ground, resulted in pockets of poor, mineral soils and 'pools' of organic matter. After initial ploughing, this patchwork persisted in the soil, causing first crops to be uneven in growth. With time, such variation is homogenized by the plough, spreading an average soil across the ground. Researchers have shown that even after forest returns, as it has to many former fields, uniformity can long remain, reducing variation in soil conditions, reducing those ecological colors of clear Leatherwood or light *Gastrellarius* (yet another beetle).

In our actions, we erase colors which we often do not even see. To paraphrase present-day lepidopterist Roger Dennis, the more we do to the land, the more we have the responsibility to know how the land is doing. There is a near-infinity of colors on this Earth, it is painted with the 'color' of nature's microbial flowering, with the twitching antennae of diverse ants, with the self-proclaiming calls of warblers or tree crickets, with the face-powder dust of mushroom spores. Find your medium for understanding, then colorize your canvas with the knowledge of your passion. Regard the resulting landscape, the reflection of your eye but largely the work of other hands; consider it well. Then share it heartily with anyone who will look. They will see great beauty and urgent importance.