

kodachrome

for Raymond Geuss

Parsons Kansas, Rochester New York, Iqaluktuuttiaq Nunavut. The colours are so different. Ray was eloquent on the topic. Parsons is green, brown, and yellow, with an unusual red-tinged brown. Rochester has subtle pink clouds and slightly washed out blue skies. Iqaluktuuttiaq has brown, too, but the brown is a lot more grey, and there is more deep blue below the horizon than you appreciate until you look for it. That's in summer; in winter it is just black.

Ray said all this in the coffee shop of the airport, on his way to Iqaluktuuttiaq to service the domes that kept track of the whales. I always listened carefully when Ray talked about colours, for he was colour blind. Ray's colour-blindness was not the usual marginal kind, where you stumble on a few discriminations that are easy for most others, because you lack a few specialised cone cells in your retina. He just did not have cones; his retinas were crowded with rods, sensitive to tiny changes in illumination but quite indifferent to changes in colour. With all those rods he could see in what others took to be dark, and you might expect him to be dazzled in the bright colourful day. But he knew when the leaves were turning; he knew when the sunset was spectacular; he knew when your make-up didn't look right. He often helped me choose clothes, and it would be he who said that this particular purchase should be seen outside, in daylight. Just sometimes he would make an enormous mistake. He said that a cat was green, once, and when I said "Ray, cats are never green", I could see him absorbing it and storing the information for future use. It was important information for him because he loved cats. He cared for most animals, though he said he had reservations about colour-discriminating primates. Those colours take up a

lot of space in your brain, he would say, that could be better used just for seeing, or imagining what someone else sees. He would spend hours at the Vancouver aquarium staring through the porthole at the belugas. One in particular would stare back at him, and they would be eye to eye for ages, as if they shared a vast watery eye with the same shadows and highlights reflecting first in the retinas of the one and then those of the other.

That was the cheerful talkative colour-ascribing Ray of then. Nothing like the sad quiet unresponsive recent Ray. The Ray of darkness, I would say, but not to him. One evening he explained. The death of kodachrome was the death of colour in him. The birth of colour happened for him forty years ago, when he was about twenty and got a job in a developing lab. He maintained the machines, so he didn't develop film, at first. But he got to see lots of negatives, and one day he saw something that amazed him. It was the negative of a photo of a forest, a forest that would look to him like a sea of not so varied greys. But the negative was varied, variegated, with various varying varieties of voluptuous velevety colours. He remembered a word, *bunte*, in a German poem from school, that he had stored away as one of those things that were a clue to other people. Against the rules, he made a copy of the negative, and held it to the light whenever he had a chance. It made him feel like other people. He hadn't realized how much it mattered to him. He tried other negatives. Some of them worked. He bought a roll of kodachrome and a second camera so he could compare black and white prints to kodachrome negatives. After a lot of negotiation he got permission to develop films himself, in exchange for running the lab on holidays when no one else wanted to be there. At these times, all alone with the machines and the chemicals, he played with the process until the effect was at its greatest. The result was a series of negative-positive pairs, that he kept at home and studied. He tried other colour films, but nothing worked like kodachrome.

It's all there in the brain, he said. You just have to get to it. And these pictures did that for me. I could speak colours; I could describe things in ways that worked for people, sometimes even made them see things they hadn't. I had to keep practicing with the pictures, he said, it was something I had to keep grasping and holding to myself. That was alright, the practice was fun, though hard and tiring. Less good was the need to replace the photos. They faded in some subtle way, something about the actual negatives changing and something about needing to feed myself new pictures from time to time, or so he said.

The disaster began with digital cameras. People still used colour film at first, but fewer and fewer, and he had to search out places to buy it. The lab closed, and though at first there were others not far away he didn't work there and couldn't make prints to his own formula. Then those labs closed: kodachrome held out for longer than many, because the professionals used it, but more and more did not. The last lab to develop kodachrome film closed in December 2010, but long before that Ray had ceased to be able to spend half an hour every morning looking at the green of new leaves, the green of pine trees, and the stages of autumn maples from yellow-green to red. The colour bleached out of his life.

It was much more drab then than it had ever been before. Somewhere lurking in his brain were all these colours, and he supposed they flashed and vibrated for everyone else. But they wouldn't come out for him, as if he were exiled from a rich and fertile garden that others could enter freely. He avoided colour conversations, then conversations about scenes and clothes and faces, then conversations about anything. He spent more and more time by himself, sleeping late and not going onto the street until it was almost dark, and everyone he met was operating on rods just as he was. Even then, he preferred not to talk, in fact to have as little contact as possible with anyone who had been in the garden.

This was before Iqaluktuuttiaq. It is always cold in Iqaluktuuttiaq, and night half the year. And there are big eye-like domes that used to track planes but now track the whales and walruses patrolling the north-west passage. We need to know how many they are and where they go, perhaps because we care about them but more importantly because we have to show that we care about them, to proclaim how Canada looks after all that rock and dark water. They are full of equipment, much more sophisticated than the radar they once held, but still imaging machinery, turning the complex sound delays of echoes at twelve frequencies into patterns of colour on screens. It is surprisingly like the machines that develop colour film. Or like the machines that developed it when it still existed. Ray was perfect for work there. During the six months of darkness he would not be dismayed or confused but could get ahead with operating the equipment. And it would be good for those big wet mammals, that we know how many they are and where they're going. This appealed to Ray. But he wouldn't go, not even when the deputy minister's secretary's assistant phoned him personally. Too cold, too dark, too much of a decision. He just stayed at home and suffered.

Miserable months for Ray then, hiding in bed until the sun set, doing nothing, knowing Iqaluktuuttiaq was calling him, but not wanting to listen to it.

On December 30, 2011, the last Kodachrome lab in the world, in Parsons, developed its last roll. There were news stories about it, and after some uncertainty about that last roll there was a decision, some days later that the last 36 kodachrome prints and their negatives would be on permanent display at Kodak headquarters in Rochester New York. Of course he went. They were fresh kodachromes, and there was a variety of them, different settings of the camera directed at different kinds of scene. And the effect was immediate. After a couple of hours of staring at them the words came back to him. He could say which fruit were ripe, he could talk about paintings, he

could tell you why your ear-rings don't go with your dress. And he could tell where he should be.

There were only a few minutes till the plane left, for Churchill and then on to Iqaluktuuttiaq, so he explained quickly. From Rochester Ray had been to Parsons, to connect his retinas and his cortex to the original scenes. They almost arrested him, he was so happy. And the light was so bright. It shone right inside him and made him happy about the dark. There would be little more colour, but he had touched it now, and he could go. In an internet cafe in Parsons he bought his ticket for the cold and sombre north.