

So Much Blue



a novel

"[Percival Everett has] one of the most eclectic and original bodies of work in American letters."

—*Harper's Magazine*

PERCIVAL EVERETT

BY THE AUTHOR OF ERASURE AND I AM NOT SIDNEY POITIER

So Much Blue



ALSO BY PERCIVAL EVERETT

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Walk Me to the Distance

Suder

The One That Got Away

re: (f) gesture

Abstraktion and Einfölung

Swimming Swimmers Swimming

Trout's Lie

So Much Blue

A NOVEL

Percival Everett

Graywolf Press

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For Melanie, who has made so much happen

A picture is a secret about a secret.

—Diane Arbus

So Much Blue

I WILL BEGIN WITH DIMENSIONS. As one should. I had a mathematician friend tell me once, perhaps twice, that dimension is concerned with the constituent structure of all space and its relation to time. I did not understand this statement and still I do not, in spite of its undeniable, obvious poetic charm. He also tried to tell me that the dimensions of an object are independent of the space in which that object is embedded. It's not clear to me that even he understood what he was saying, though he seemed quite taken with the idea. What I do understand is that my canvas is twelve feet high and twenty-one feet and three inches across. I cannot explain the three inches, but can say that they are crucial to the work. It is nailed to a wall that is twenty feet tall and thirty-five feet across. The opposite wall is the same and the adjacent walls are but fifteen feet wide. And so the square footage of the space is five hundred twenty-five. The volume of the building space is ten thousand five hundred cubic feet. I am six feet tall and weigh one hundred and ninety-two pounds. I cannot explain the two pounds. I prefer that numbers be written out as words.

I also favor referring to colors by name rather than by sample. I do not like charts depicting gradations of colors or hues. At the paint store or art shop there are thousands of such strips, just waiting to be thrown away. They tell me nothing. The examples, and they are never exemplars or nonpareils, are but mere approximations of what the paint will be on the pallet or on the canvas or the paper or the wood or my fingertips. Transparent yellow is not transparent on the *swatch*. What a word that is. Swatch. Indian yellow might as well be cadmium orange. Aureolin might as well be nickel titanate might as well be lemon yellow. Names, on the other hand, are precise, unambiguous; one might even say rigid, fixed, unalterable, certainly inelastic. That is not to say that words are not precise, but names in fact are. Even when they are wrong or offered in error. A name is never wide of the mark. I should point out that I view color names as proper names, in that they give us no information about the things named but identify those things specifically. Just as my name works for me,

my name being Kevin Pace. There are probably other Kevin Paces in the world, but our names are not the same. Perhaps our names have the same name, but the name of my name is not a proper name.

These are my paints, my colors. Powders mixed with linseed oil. This is my painting, colors on raw linen. I have used much phthalo blue, Prussian mixed with indigo. In the upper right hand corner is cerulean blending into cobalt, maybe bleeding into cobalt. The colors and their names are everywhere, on everything. The colors all mean something, though I cannot say what, would not say if I could. Their names are more descriptive than their presence, as their presence need not and does not *describe* anything. This is my painting. It lives in this structure that looks like a foaling barn; I suppose that it is. No one enters but me. Not my wife. Not my children. Not my best friend Richard.

There is another building in which I make other paintings. Everyone is welcome there. The paintings are available and uncovered and waiting to be considered, bought, and hung on living room walls or in bank lobbies. I like them well enough. Some are good. Some not so. It's really not up to me to judge and so I won't. They are all whores, these paintings. I acknowledge them, appreciate them as just that. It's not their fault and in fact I do not view that as a bad thing in and of itself. There really isn't much wrong with being a whore, if it is done well and without apology or qualification. Do they, these paintings that I seem to reference with some insouciance, though that is not my intention, have some leitmotif? Maybe. I don't know or care. I wonder if they share anything at all series to series, canvas to canvas. Experts some years down the pike will argue about my materials, about my technique, about my palette. I would love to think that there is some of me consistently present on each canvas, then I wonder why it matters, why, to mix metaphors, anyone needs to hear some haunting sequence of notes again and again.

I had a rather brief period of success some years ago. And so I have a bit of money, enough anyway for my family to live comfortably. I

send my kids off to private school, though I don't know why. The public school is no doubt better, but it's several miles farther away. The insinuation here is that I am lazy. True enough. Many of their schoolmates seem stupid to me, but perhaps they are merely spoiled. But they are just children. Maybe all children are stupid or maybe they are all geniuses and perhaps there is no difference between the two. Personally, I no longer care about genius. I might have gotten close to it once, but probably not. Who knows? Finally, more importantly, who cares?

My canvas, my private painting, has a title, a name. It has never been spoken aloud to anyone. I have said it only once, under my breath while I was alone in my studio. It is a bit like my email password except that it cannot be retrieved if I forget it. I have not written it down. One reason I will never let my children see the painting is that they might try to name it and so ruin it and everything. I will not let my wife see it because she will become jealous and that will ruin it and everything. I know that my family and friends, though they love me, I imagine, whatever that means, are somewhat eagerly anticipating my death or, just because I love the word, *quietus*. They all want to see the canvas. I wish I could see their faces if they do, but they will not. They all believe that I do not trust them. This is true enough. They are insulted by the many locks and by the sealed-up windows of the painting's house. I do not trust them as far as I can throw the lot of them collectively. Early on they would occasionally nose around my studio, trying to sneak peeks, even whiffs. Coyotes and raccoons around a tent. They have given up. For now. Is this my masterpiece? Perhaps. Probably not. I don't know what that word means. This notion of a masterpiece has something to do with eternity, forever, I am told. I will have no truck with such concepts, not out of philosophical principle, but as a matter of taste. It may well be that the eternity of a masterpiece allows it to exist out of time, but I am too dumb to understand this and not smart enough to refuse to understand it. My *masterpiece* is apparently of great concern to so many. It is not a good feeling to know that one is more interesting dead than alive, but neither is it a terribly bad feeling.

I am fifty-six years old. I saved that dimension for last for no

particular, significant, or interesting reason. I am not old by current standards. Sixty is the new forty. Seventy is the new fifty. Dead is the new eighty. That is to say that if I died today everyone would comment on my youth and yet if I broke my leg trying to leap the back fence everyone would call me an old fool. I cannot do many of the things I could once do, but then I don't want to do those things. I have little desire to sprint anywhere or to swim across a river or to dunk a basketball, not that I ever could. But I am in age limbo, too aged to be reckless, too young to be a curmudgeon and get away with it. Yet I am close enough to the other end, the far end of my time line, my expiry date, to generate interest in my work.

There is much talk or chatter, prattling, in the so-called art world (which is more doubtful, *art* or *world*?) about my secret painting, that painting, this painting. I have heard a rumor, canard, if you will allow that term, that some parties are already bidding on it. That tells me all I need to know about *some* parties, *those* people or perhaps about all people. The painting could be ugly. The work could be shoddily made. It could be insulting, shallow, morally repugnant, silly, or, worst of all, pedantic. From what I have heard, my family might be taken care of for a couple of generations after my death. There is really nothing comforting in this knowledge. None of it will happen anyway. My best friend, a retired Beowulf scholar named Richard, has promised me that he will burn the studio to the ground if I should die before him. I believe he will be faithful to this promise, but sadly I doubt that he will outlive me. And so I have a plan to booby-trap the place. But first I have to figure out how to do it without harming anyone, especially myself. It's not that I do not trust Richard, it's that I do not trust traffic. I do not trust the weather. I do not trust lines of communication, fiber optics and microwaves notwithstanding. Neither do I trust automobiles, especially those without carburetors. Richard might be on vacation or flirting with a woman he's met on the village square when I die of a sudden. Mobile reception might be lost because of a lightning strike to a tower. It could happen. I know that Richard will do his best and will get it done if he has the chance. I know he will do it because he is my friend.

I take friendship very seriously. If you are my friend and you need me then I will find you. I will be there even if it means bringing a bicycle chain to a fight in an alley at two in the morning. That may sound extreme, but this is how I am. Moreover, I attract friends who think like me. I'm not saying it's a good thing, but it is a thing. Richard will burn my studio to the ground because we are friends, not because of what happened thirty years ago.

This might seem like a likely or predictable segue for me to offer the story of what happened thirty years ago. I will tell you that, but not yet. First, I will tell you what happened ten years ago.

My wife and I were in Paris for a couple of weeks. It was supposed to be a romantic getaway, without the kids, a nice warm time to celebrate twenty years of perfectly fine, loving, safe marriage. And it was so a romantic time, however, alas, with someone else. In itself this is not a startling admission. Neither is it exceptional that my affair was with a twenty-two-year-old aspiring watercolorist. Surprising, but not exceptional. The only thing extraordinary is that I would admit to something so pathetically clichéd. It happened after my wife decided, and I encouraged her, innocently, to spend a couple of days in Bordeaux with her college roommate. That is the story I will tell you now. It is a story about being old and about being young.

First cliché, I loved and love my wife, was not bored with her, was not unhappy with my life, with my children, or with my work. I was not looking for excitement or adventure or even sex, though all three have their appeal. It started in a silly way, like something out of junior high school, too tame to be a male fantasy, literally a brush of hands, a light rake of skin that persisted at first a beat too long and then was revisited. Like most things that come back to haunt you, it haunted me in the beginning. No ghost is born overnight.

I had never thought much one way or another about being a cliché. In my profession, as an artist, I might well have been just that. I was somewhat introverted, a little odd to many, a lot odd to some, moody, mildly sloppy in dress, absent minded. I possibly cut a handsome figure in my youth, as my mother might have said, but that never mattered to me, and it is more than possible that it was

not true at all. It turns out that one becomes a cliché from inattention. I was not observant, was not taking in my surrounds fully.

I wandered into a little lecture at the museum at the Jardin du Luxembourg. On the walls behind the clearly articulating do-cent dressed like a flight attendant were some thirty paintings by Eugène Boudin. They were all of cows, of course. I was impressed by this fact; so many cows. I was completely bored by the paintings, but excited to be able to follow the lecture in French.

I was sitting next to a young woman with perhaps the whitest skin I had ever seen. She was attractive, I suppose. I didn't think about this at the time. It had been many years since I had thought about whether someone was attractive or not. I considered that she might have been the only actual white person I had ever seen, a pedestrian thought, but honest enough. Yet she did not look like the porcelain doll one hears so much about. Was she zinc white? Titanium? I decided she was flake white, with all its lead danger. Her hair was light blond, but that hardly mattered. We were sitting on a backless bench. I gripped the seat on either side of me and leaned slightly forward. It turned out she was gripping the bench as well, her left hand next to my right. The backs of our hands grazed. I looked at her and said, "*Pardon,*" and moved my hand away an inch. Then, either by her conscious or unconscious movement, by my conscious or unconscious movement, by an anomaly of gravitational force, or by the vibrations of the building caused by a distant metro train, a bus, or a low-flying jet, or the folding of space, our hands touched again. Dimension. This time neither of us moved away. Perhaps we were both thinking, so what, our hands are touching, this won't kill me, it's just where our hands happen to be. But it felt good. At least to me, so I left it there. I peeked at her and guessed she was in her twenties and that's when I really felt like a cliché. I was a dirty old man. Worse, I was a dirty old artist man.

After the lecture everyone wandered about staring dumbly at all the portraits of cattle. I felt a bit of sadness thinking about the paintings that way, perhaps shame. They were rather nice pictures of cows, but I could not tell one from the next. Who could? I doubt a cow could. My boredom must have shown on my face because

the young woman with the hand stood next to me and said, “You don’t like them.”

I looked at her.

“It’s not that,” I said. “Not exactly anyway.”

She questioned me.

“Really, I get it that he inspired Monet and all that. I love the paint and painting. I do. It’s that, well, wouldn’t twelve have been enough?”

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“Wouldn’t twelve paintings of cows have been enough?” I felt silly repeating it. “Perhaps he didn’t want some cows to feel slighted.”

“I do not understand *slighted*,” she said.

I searched. “*Négligé?*”

She nodded. “*Vous êtes drôle.*”

“I try. I apologize for my French. *Je suis désolé.*”

“It is okay. I speak English. But I have an accent.”

“The accent is nice.”

“Americans always say that.”

“Do we?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m not very good at flirting with old men.”

She was lying. I felt like an old fool just talking to her, though I had no designs. I would have been less of a cliché if I had had some designs. I would sound like less of one now if I admitted to having had designs, but I was what I was. As much as it pained me to admit, in a moment of reducing myself to an artistic expression, I resigned myself to a kind of Greenbergian complaint about surrealism, my present cliché being just that, surrealistic, that the picture fails because of an appeal to the anecdotal. An equally painful admission was that I believed, as much as I did not want to, that the medium was everything. Canvas and paint, that’s all there was, all there is. The medium there, in that museum, of my cliché, was two bodies. And sad as it made me, and excited as well, I knew that the two bodies would find each other. It wasn’t male fantasy; I was never confident enough for that. It was artistic prescience, if that makes any sense. Even if it doesn’t, that’s what it was.

“Are you an artist?” she asked.

“I am. I’m a painter, an old-fashioned painter.” I said this even though I had no idea what I meant. I never offered my profession any amount of second-order thinking or consideration. I had one prolonged and pointedly tiring argument with some idiot from the Yale English department about whether painting was a language. Without asking what I know now to be the correct and reasonable response—which was “Huh?”—I instead said, “Why of course it is.” He said something about art not being able to write its own grammar, but rather betrays it in its invention. My response to this was cognac. And when I was good and drunk, I said, “A painting is not meant to signify, but to show.” When I saw him on his heels from my first salvo of nonsense I finished him off with “The semantic function of a painting is not a criterion of its aesthetic quality.” The hit was complete. Had I been a real mafioso I would have then slept with his wife.

“And what do you try to make when you paint?” the young woman asked me. She was not tilting her head in a certain way, but I noticed it.

“I’d be happy to make a cow,” I said.

She smiled, verged on a sound.

“I’ll tell you what I want to paint. I want to make a painting and have no idea what it is, but know that it’s a painting. Does that make sense to you?”

“Maybe if you said it in French.”

“I doubt that would help.”

“You’re noticing the way I walk,” she said.

I hadn’t, but I nodded anyway.

“It’s the walk I save for old men.”

“You practice it?” I asked.

“It comes naturally.”

“I believe you.”

“I too am a painter. I make watercolors.”

“I don’t have that kind of control. Too much thinking up front.”

Since she’d mentioned her walk I could not fail to pay attention to it. She bounced and wore her youth aggressively. She was beautiful. Her face didn’t matter. Her body didn’t matter. Anyone walking like that had to be beautiful. Every turn, every stop, every start was choreographed and yet completely free, improvised. She

was jazz and I could have hated her for it, but I did not.

“Voulez-vous vous joindre à moi pour le café?”

“Alors formelle,” she said.

“I’m sorry, my French isn’t good enough to give you *tu* easily.”

“Your French is cute.”

“I get a headache trying to speak French,” I told her. “Especially listening. I don’t hear the language well.”

“Pity,” she said.

The word *pity* had never meant so much and perhaps so little as it did from her lips at that moment. The word itself, the two sounds of it, more so than the meaning, were not locatable. The word was there all right, but there like an electron is there.

“Yes, I will take coffee with you,” she said. “I will practice my English. And you can practice whatever it is you are trying to speak.”

“My name is Kevin.”

She shook my hand. “Victoire.”

Against my better judgment, which is to say that I was exercising no judgment at all, she and I walked from the Jardin du Luxembourg north on rue Bonaparte. We said nothing until we reached the fountain at Saint-Sulpice.

“Are you studying art?” I asked.

“Yes, at the *École des Beaux-Arts*.”

“Impressive.”

“Yes, it is,” she said and leaned against the low wall of the fountain. It was midafternoon on a mild but windy December day. Mist from the fountain floated in the air. I looked at the statues of lions.

“Let’s have that coffee,” I said.

She nodded and we walked over to the *Café Mairie* and sat outside under a heat lamp where the waiter gave me a knowing look that was either approving or disapproving, I could not tell, but either was equally troubling.

“The waiter thinks you’re young enough to be my daughter,” I said.

“Then he thinks too much,” *Victoire* said.

“At any rate, it’s polite of you to sit and talk me.”

“And you said you didn’t know how to flirt.”

“I’m forty-six years old, married with two children, and happy with my life.”

“Yet here you are.”

“Yet here I am,” I repeated.

“I know your work,” she said. “I’ve seen some paintings in magazines. I liked them.”

“Photographs of paintings are deceptive. You might not like them in person.”

“Perhaps.”

Coffee went on as one might have expected. Victoire told me about her watercolors, gently stroked my ego by talking about my own work, did so with the perfect, perhaps French, amount of constraint and then we parted with an agreement to meet for lunch two days later. We managed to end before I stupidly complimented her appearance. It dawned on me, as I wandered north along the busy rue de Rennes on my way to my hotel, that I could have said something like “You’re quite lovely.” I was at once proud of myself for not thinking to make such a vacuous assertion and dismayed, perhaps embarrassed, that I considered it even after the fact.

That night my wife called from Bordeaux. Linda told me she was enjoying her friend, but not so much Bordeaux. I told her about my coffee with the twenty-two-year-old.

“That’s wonderful,” she said. “I’m glad you got out. It’s good to meet people.”

“We sat at the Café Mairie.”

“Was she beautiful?”

It pained me to have to consider what might be an appropriate response, so I did what I always did, out of a lack of imagination, lack of a gauge of political delicacy, lack of a decent memory, I told the truth. “Yes, she was.”

“That’s wonderful.”

I nodded, though on the phone.

“I’m having lunch with her on Friday.”

“Just so long as you’re not late meeting my train.”

“Montparnasse?”

“*Oui, quatre heures.*” And with that Linda had exhausted her French and ended our conversation. “Good night,” she said.

“Night.”