

# Segue

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online literary journal

## ELIZABETH BERNAYS



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# Poppies

One of my early memories is of red paper poppies being sold in the streets of Brisbane, Queensland on Armistice Day—November 11<sup>th</sup>. My father came home from work in gray three-piece suit and wide-brimmed felt hat, a poppy in his buttonhole, and as he came into the house and removed his hat, he laid the poppy down on the sideboard where it stayed for the next week. I had never seen those red corn poppies growing, but the two pieces of red construction paper, joined in the center by a black button bore no resemblance to the poppies I knew.

Other poppy memories from when I was small are the gardens full of Iceland poppies in the front yards of Queensland houses. Pinks and yellows and oranges, big cups of crinkly thin petals that let the sun through, long hairy waving stems, lots of yellow pollen. We didn't grow them in our garden, though my mother was a keen gardener and grew other plants in herbaceous borders; *poppies are too common* she said, meaning that they were beneath us. I never discovered why she thought that.

∴

In my house in the Arizona desert I have a small gouache picture by Charlotte Mensforth of real scarlet poppies, a sea of red blooms among olive trees in some Mediterranean country, bringing back memories of holidays in the Spanish countryside. My first sight of that brilliance was an unprecedented exultation of color as my husband, Reg, and I picnicked by the field. The singular experience was impressed into indelible memory with that clear blue sky, warm sun reflected on massed red flowers, patches of gray olive trees, a bottle of Rioja, a loaf of dry bread and a hunk of hard cheese—memories floating in my head, returning tears mixed with delight. It wasn't as if I hadn't seen the real red poppies before, I had several times seen them as red dots among the wheat fields of Salisbury Plain, and as strings of red in the vineyards of Provence, but never before had I seen a solid mass of them, a world of scarlet.

We had rented a car in Malaga and driven off westwards, soon leaving behind the last of urban life and entering the hills and villages of Andalusia. The sight of those poppies as we drove made us gasp, and we decided to stop among them and have an early lunch, drinking in the spectacle as we sipped wine, and we must have rested there for a couple of hours before continuing on our journey.

As Reg dozed I lay and dreamed of flowers and colors and how they had affected me as a small child. I remembered how, when I was seven, I had been allowed to cut flowers from our garden in Brisbane, and I was with Mama sorting through the lovely multicolored array at the kitchen table. The clarity of the scene after more than fifty years is testimony to the highlight that it was, an occasion on which all the colors and delicate shapes made me unusually dizzy with happiness. And even more so that I could touch and examine and organize and arrange, make

delicate mixtures of the pink phlox and blue forget-me-not, or bold arrangements of yellow pansies and orange wallflowers. Then, to make the morning perfect, Mama admired. Her soft green eyes looked and adored and her brilliant wide smile loved, and we both knew our closeness. Working together. Our shared love of flowers.

I picked up a little sprig of lobelia, that very intense saturated blue kind that makes everything else look a bit washed out. Something happened then that defies understanding, but it had happened before and still I am not too old; the color captivates, overwhelms and possesses all the senses, as if only color, *this* color, is the essence of being alive.

I said to Mama, “This color makes my brain go funny and shivery.”

She stopped and turned abruptly to me. I saw her eyes, hard now, and alarmed. Her mouth had become a thin line, twisted at one end. That’s what I remember most, that dreadful ugly frightening twist. She didn’t say anything though, and the moment passed, but the enchantment of doing flowers with Mama was never quite the same. Some things had to be kept secret, those strange feelings must not be told. I often went into the garden to look at flowers and repeat the thing, go through the feeling I had that morning and embrace the mystery, feel the wonder of color.

∴

Driving on a particularly steep hill after our Spanish lunch among the poppies, where sheep grazed at a ridiculous angle, I said, “Just look at that scene,” and Reg turned to see the hillside, and not noticing a rock in the road, ran the front axle into it causing it to bend enough to prevent further driving. We were crestfallen to be stranded so soon in our vacation, and remained silent as we walked the mile or so into the next village, which turned out to be Santa Maria del Rosario.

Our first task was to call the car rental agency. In the only tavern in the village we found a telephone and were promised help by nightfall, and with nothing else to do we wandered around the tiny, pretty place built on a hillside, with views to higher mountains. There were perhaps fifty houses and a central square, and on the hill above was a bullring, but we saw no sign of shops. Tired with walking and waiting, we sat silently on the roadside at the lower edge of the village in the afternoon sun, watching people pass by. I could sense Reg fretting about our dilemma, but for my part, it seemed at least worthwhile trying to enjoy the scene. Two men and a boy in tattered clothes walked in from the fields, followed by another man leading a sheep, I assumed for slaughter. A woman with a small girl walked by and the girl smiled shyly as they passed us. A skinny man on a donkey with a three-legged dog. A large woman with a basket of hay. A young couple with a baby. A thin man with a three-day beard.

The sun went down and there was no sign of help; we would have to find somewhere for the night. Returning to the bar we saw no indication of accommodation available there or elsewhere. Then, wandering into the square as dusk gave way to darkness we finally realized that there were shops here, but they were unmarked and inconspicuous. Looking down into a basement

area in front of a house on the square we saw piles of cigarette boxes, matches and soap through the windows and presently someone emerged with a basket and climbed the steps to the road.

“We must go in and ask about where to stay,” I said.

Reg was reluctant and it fell to me ask in broken Spanish for a *cama* for the night because of an accident in our car.

“Si,” the woman behind the counter said, looking us up and down unsmilingly, and some twenty minutes later she beckoned us to come with her as she went out, up the steps and down a side street. She took us into a small two-storey house with an attic to which she led us and we smiled our *gracias* as we asked *cuánto cuesta?* All of us knew that price was not the issue, and in fact we agreed to a high price more like the cost of a hotel room in Malaga. We walked back to the car to get what we needed for the night and as we returned to our attic the woman was sitting sewing with a young girl, both of them with rugs draped over their laps.

“Carne, carne,” the woman said insistently, and I thought that must mean meat and looked at Reg and said, “Maybe she is asking us to eat.”

“Si, si,” we replied in unison and made eating movements.

“Carne,” she repeated frowning, and made a square shape with her hands, and eventually we realized she was asking for our identity cards. We produced passports, but these were evidently novel and not satisfactory, and a difficult few minutes passed as we tried to think what to do next. It was Reg who had the idea of offering his business card, which fortunately served the purpose, and the woman retreated to her needlework; we were dismissed.

Reg and I looked at one another. We needed food, and went out again to search the village. We found no restaurants, so after beer and tapas at the bar we went early to bed for a cold night with too few blankets. Morning found us searching again for food. Rounding a corner by the square we smelled fresh bread, and soon after felt the heat of a wall and I pushed open an unmarked door into the warmth and delight of a bakery with fresh loaves of bread laid out on shelves. How that warm yeasty smell was better than it had ever been!

Back at the bar we called the car rental agent once more. Although there had been something interesting and enjoyable about learning a little of life in the small rural village, the novelty had palled, and Reg’s anxt was finally having an impact on me as well.

“You said you would come yesterday afternoon.”

Oh they were so sorry. Oh there had been a misunderstanding. Yes there were actually two places called Santa Maria del Rosario and they had been to the other one. So sorry. They would be with us as soon as possible—within three hours.

By midday we were being towed to Jerez. The rental staff there were kind.

“You hit a rocka, si, si, the weather bad eh?”

“Yes,” we lied.

“Si, si, si.”

And we had a new and better car for the remainder of our holiday, which meant a celebration that night in the top Michelin Guide restaurant in the town—wonderful food served in a building that had been a medieval monastery. Reg declared his strong-smelling pheasant to be the best ever, and I found my leg of lamb unsurpassed and surely from a herd feeding on the herb-covered Spanish pastures. The anxiety of the last thirty hours faded as we ate and drank and I look back on the time as an interesting adventure, though Reg never wanted to be reminded of it.

∴

We were to pass many poppy fields during the vacation in Spain and later vacations there too, and the memories are forever mixed with scarlet poppies, masses of red among olives, patches of them in wheat fields, armies of them along roadsides. Each flower made more brilliant by the black center—a shiny spot of jet black at the base of each petal and the dense black stamens. A flower to remember. A flower for Armistice Day.

There is extensive writing about the use of the scarlet corn poppy as a symbol of remembrance, though stories of its origin vary. All agree, however, that a poem written by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae in 1918 was significant.<sup>1</sup>

The poem is said to have moved Moina Michael so much that she decided to wear a red poppy as a way of keeping faith, as McCrae urged in his poem. Michael worked for the American Young Men's Christian Association and at an international meeting of YMCA secretaries in November 1918, she discussed the poem and her poppies. Madame Guerin, the French secretary, also inspired, approached organizations in allied nations and persuaded them to sell poppies to raise money for widows, orphans and needy veterans. There were real poppies, silk poppies, and eventually, paper poppies—the sort my father wore on Armistice Day.

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A few years after a poppy-filled holiday in Spain, Reg and I saw Mensforth's painting at a small gallery in Bond Street, London. Because she lived for years in the south of France, I suspect the poppy field she painted is a French one, and there are also white and yellow flowers, and trees too bright to be olives. Beyond and to the left is a hill village, typical of southern France, and on the right in the distance are blue-tinted mountains. The light is bright and the feel is luminous and Mediterranean, the sky is pale in the manner of certain very hot summer days. Red is the brightest hue and the most opaque color in the picture. It revives memories of those Spanish vacations, decorated with corn poppies and the simple thrill of seeing so much bright color in one place. And the painting gives a feeling of summer and hot days, of how it really feels to want to lie among the poppies.

∴

It was after I immigrated to the United States that poppies took on a fresh meaning, to match a new world. Around Berkeley, California poppies grew here and there, and on the roads west of the Berkeley Hills one saw them on the roadside. Even more than corn poppies, these flowers are blindingly bright, and their orange color remains somehow in the back of one's eyes when eyelids close. Perhaps more than any other color experience, this one was most extravagant, and I am definitely not alone in my enjoyment. Even people with no interest in flowers, no knowledge of plants, know the California poppy, which is a native wild flower in many warm sunny environments of South and Western United States. It has, in recent years, become a nursery special, now even adapted for English gardens.

Living in Tucson, in the Sonoran desert, I see related poppies somewhere every spring, though it is only in the good years, when winter rain has been early, well spaced, and plentiful, that carpets of them may be seen in patches on the desert floor, though the colors seem less saturated in Arizona. And because rainfall is geographically so unpredictable, one must travel to see the best shows. I went one year some forty miles west to see the acres of orange, mixed with blue lupines and smaller numbers of other wildflowers. In some places the little plants come up in the fall and further rains fail, so that by springtime, miniature plants here and there have miniature flowers and many other plant species are totally absent. Even so, the tiny blossoms retain their orange (or sometimes yellow) brilliance.

Above all, poppy memories are about the spring of 1989. It was a rare year of great rain in the southwestern United States and the deserts were massed with color. We drove to Death Valley and saw the normally barren expanses covered in yellows and whites and blues and reds and a few orange poppies too. But it was when we drove on to Antelope Valley that we saw one of the sights of a lifetime. This wide flat valley of more than two thousand square miles in the Mojave Desert, northeast of Los Angeles, was completely orange with the flowers of California poppy. I was glad Reg was driving because my head reeled and my brain felt overloaded with the orange sensation. It was a cool windy day and the flowers were not fully out, but they were so dense that the orange was still almost solid as far as one could see, right up to the Tehachapi Mountains in the distance. Walking among them, one could see blue lupines and yellow daisies here and there, but the brilliance of the poppies turned them into insignificance.

I wanted to roll in the orange, to be a part of this extraordinary place, but of course did not. For hours though we feasted our eyes on orange and I can bring back the picture now in all its gaudy detail; the smooth clear color of each petal, the perfection of each flower, the waving mass of orange, the strange excitement in my head, wondering if there were enough insects to pollinate the millions upon millions of blooms, thinking of the massive seed banks in the ground that could wait and wait for such a year.

My painting is of red corn poppies (*Papaver rhoeas*) but it stands for bright color as well as for the corn poppies. And so it stands also for orange California poppies (*Eschscholzia californica*). The picture is on the wall in my dining room, opposite windows to the desert and Tucson Mountains. On hot dry summer days, when the desert is mostly brown and the only flowers in sight are the few remaining white blooms on the tops of giant saguaro cacti, I can look at a painting of a gentler place, where red color comes each summer and I can think of all those poppies—scarlet corn poppies in Europe, orange California poppies in the United States—and relive the ecstatic delight that was mine in Spain and California for those hours, days, weeks.

Oliver Sacks writes, in *The Island of the Color Blind*, “For us, color normals, the richness of the vegetation was at first just a confusion of greens, whereas to Knut [who had no ability to see color] it was a polyphony of brightnesses, tonalities, shapes and textures.” Elsewhere he explains that Knut doesn’t miss color, but has built up a world of beauty, color and meaning on the basis of what he has. With my emotional response to color *per se*, this is so hard to imagine.

I wonder if there are upper or lower limits to the ecstatic experiences we have from our senses and just as individuals lacking one sense have increased sensitivities in others, perhaps reduced possibility for emotional pleasure in the brain induced by one sense is made up for by increased emotional pleasure in other domains. And I wonder if individuals have proscribed levels of pleasure that are expressed or felt by whatever complement of senses they have, whatever sense may be absent from birth or lost during life. In any case, I feel lucky to have such joy of color vision. How rich my visual life has seemed, how many epiphanies brought on by delicacies, intensities, varieties of colors. My emotional, perhaps even spiritual, response to color may be replaced by something else if I lacked the cones on my retina that allow perception of it, but for now I am very conscious of the magical biology of my eyes and the optic lobes of my brain whenever I see blue sky and new green leaves, clouds painted by the last rays of the sun, the blue lobelias of my first home, sulfur butterflies, red poppies, orange poppies.

## Notes

### i In Flanders Fields

In Flanders field the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie  
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.

## Author Notes

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*Elizabeth Bernays grew up in Australia then, in England, after some time traveling, she worked for the British Government, working on agricultural pests in developing countries. In 1983 she immigrated to the United States as a professor of entomology at the University of California Berkeley. Later, she was appointed Regents' professor at the University of Arizona where she also obtained a Master of Fine Arts. She has published essays and poems in a variety of literary journals, and is the recipient of several literary awards including the 2007 X.J. Kennedy prize for nonfiction.*

### About the Work

The paintings in my house inspired me to write stories around them, and the collection of essays is called *The House of Pictures*. This one, about poppies, brought together many memories of poppies from childhood on, including nostalgic recollections of holidays, thoughts about war, lovers, and poppy-filled places. It also was inspired by my highly sensitive color vision, something that does vary among individuals. This fact is of great interest to me as a biologist, and I believe in influences how we enjoy art and the world about us.

This story flowed without interruption as I wrote, one memory or thought triggering another until I felt “poppied out.” The hard part was honing the finished product and in my view this is always the more difficult task. Resolving this meant real self-discipline to work and rework what I had written to make it say what I meant without clumsy construction or repetition.

The craft of non-fiction for me is the joy of expressing the thousands of inner thoughts and ideas that make up a head-full of memories and facts and emotions, which, when organized and articulated, make order in my life. It is, further, a way to communicate my thoughts and life to others, however few may read the work.

### Elizabeth Bernays on the Web

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