

I appeared in Ghazni when Book of Kings poet Firdusi completed the final line of a quatrain with the most intricate of rhymes, besting the court poets of Shah Mahmud, who ridiculed him as being nothing but a peasant. I was there on the quiver of Book of Kings hero Rüstem when he traveled far and wide in pursuit of his missing steed; I became the blood that spewed forth when he cut the notorious ogre in half with his wondrous sword; and I was in the folds of the quilt upon which he made furious love with the beautiful daughter of the king who'd received him as a guest. Verily and truly, I've been everywhere and am everywhere. I emerged as Tur traitorously decapitated his brother Iraj; as legendary armies, spectacular as a dream, clashed on the steppes; and as Alexander's lifeblood shimmered brightly from his handsome nose after he suffered sunstroke. Yes, Shah Behram Gür spent every night of the week with a different beauty beneath domes of varying color from distant lands, listening to the story she recounted, and I was upon the outfit of the striking maiden he visited on a Tuesday, whose picture he'd fallen in love with, just as I appeared from the crown to the caftan of Hüsrev, who'd fallen in love with Shirin's picture. Verily, I was visible upon the military banners of armies besieging fortresses, upon the tablecloths covering tables set for feasts, upon the velvet caftans of ambassadors kissing the feet of sultans, and wherever the sword, whose legends children loved, was depicted. Yes, handsome almondeyed apprentices applied me with elegant brushes to thick paper from Hindustan and Bukhara; I embellished Ushak carpets, wall ornamentation, the combs of fighting cocks, pomegranates, the fruits of fabled lands, the mouth of Satan, the subtle accent lines within picture borders, the curled embroidery on tents, flowers barely visible to the naked eye made for the artist's own pleasure, blouses worn by stunning women with outstretched necks watching the street through open shutters, the sour-cherry eyes of bird statues made of sugar, the stockings of shepherds, the dawns described in legends and the corpses and wounds of thousands, nay, tens of thousands of lovers, warriors and shahs. I love engaging in scenes of war where blood blooms like poppies; appearing on the caftan of the most proficient of bards listening to music on a countryside outing as pretty boys and poets partake of wine; I love illuminating the wings of angels, the lips of maidens, the death wounds of corpses and severed heads bespeckled with blood. I hear the question upon your lips: What is it to be a color?

Color is the touch of the eye, music to the deaf, a word out of the darkness. Because I've listened to souls whispering—like the susurrus of the wind— from book to book and object to object for tens of thousands of years, allow me to say that my touch resembles the touch of angels. Part of me, the serious half, calls out to your vision while the mirthful half soars through the air with your glances. I'm so fortunate to be red! I'm fiery. I'm strong. I know men take notice of me and that I cannot be resisted. I do not conceal myself: For me, delicacy manifests itself neither in weakness nor in subtlety, but through determination and will. So, I draw attention to myself. I'm not afraid of other colors, shadows, crowds or even of loneliness. How wonderful it is to cover a surface that awaits me with my own victorious being! Wherever I'm spread, I see eyes shine, passions increase, eyebrows rise and heartbeats quicken. Behold how wonderful it is to live! Behold how wonderful to see. Behold: Living is seeing. I am everywhere. Life begins with and returns to me. Have faith in what I tell you. Hush and listen to how I developed such a magnificent red tone. A master miniaturist, an expert in paints, furiously pounded the best variety of dried red beetle from the hottest climes of Hindustan into a fine powder using his mortar and pestle. He prepared five drachmas of the red powder, one drachma of soapwort and a half drachma of lotor. He boiled the soapwort in a pot containing three okkas of water. Next, he mixed thoroughly the lotor into the water. He let it boil for as long as it took to drink an excellent cup of coffee. As he enjoyed his coffee, I grew as impatient as a child about to be born. The coffee had cleared the master's mind and given him the eyes of a jinn. He sprinkled the red powder into the kettle and carefully mixed the concoction with one of the thin, clean sticks reserved for this task. I was ready to become genuine red, but the issue of my consistency was of

utmost importance: The liquid shouldn't be permitted to just boil away. He drew the tip of his stirring stick across the nail of his thumb (any other finger was absolutely unacceptable). Oh, how exquisite it is to be red! I gracefully painted that thumbnail without running off the side in watery haste. In short, I was the right consistency, but I still contained sediment. He took the pot off the stove and strained me through a clean piece of cheesecloth, purifying me even further. Next, he heated me up again, bringing me to a frothy boil twice more. After adding a pinch of crushed alum, he left me to cool. A few days passed and I sat there quietly in the pan. In the anticipation of being applied to pages, of being spread everywhere and onto everything, sitting still like that broke my heart and spirit. It was during this period of silence that I meditated upon what it meant to be red. Once, in a Persian city, as I was being applied by the brush of an apprentice to the embroidery on the saddle cloth of a horse that a blind miniaturist had drawn by heart, I overheard two blind masters having an argument: "Because we've spent our entire lives ardently and faithfully working as painters, naturally, we, who have now gone blind, know red and remember what kind of color and what kind of feeling it is," said the one who'd made the horse drawing from memory. "But, what if we'd been born blind? How would we have been truly able to comprehend this red that our handsome apprentice is using?" "An excellent issue," the other said. "But do not forget that colors are not known, but felt." "My dear master, explain red to somebody who has never known red." "If we touched it with the tip of a finger, it would feel like something between iron and copper. If we took it into our palm, it would burn. If we tasted it, it would be full-bodied, like salted meat. If we took it between our lips, it would fill our mouths. If we smelled it, it'd have the scent of a horse. If it were a flower, it would smell like a daisy, not a red rose." One hundred and ten years ago Venetian artistry was not yet threat enough that our rulers would bother themselves about it, and the legendary masters believed in their own methods as fervently as they believed in Allah; therefore, they regarded the Venetian method of using a variety of red tones for every ordinary sword wound and even the most common sackcloth as a kind of disrespect and vulgarity hardly worth a chuckle. Only a weak and hesitant miniaturist would use a variety of red tones to depict the red of a caftan, they claimed—shadows were not an excuse. Besides, we believe in only one red. "What is the meaning of red?" the blind miniaturist who'd drawn the horse from memory asked again. "The meaning of color is that it is there before us and we see it," said the other. "Red cannot be explained to he who cannot see." "To deny God's existence, victims of Satan maintain that God is not visible to us," said the blind miniaturist who'd rendered the horse. "Yet, He appears to those who can see," said the other master. "It is for this reason that the Koran states that the blind and the seeing are not equal."