

A Chapter on Red

Jericho Parmis

*It is not the form that dictates the color,
but the color that brings out the form.*

—Hans Hofmann

First: a heart, or three, drawn and cut from construction paper. Nearly twice the size of my young girl's hand, so that when I held them, waiting for my mother, they balanced weightless on my palm. My mother knelt with a handful of pins pursed between her lips. One by one, she adhered the hearts in a row down the front of my dress: above the bottom hem, at my waistline, at the center of my chest. A tissue paper crown and glittery staff completed my coronation. Released into the hallowed night I yelled, "Off with their heads!" as I trailed the bright superhero cape of my older brother through the echoing hallways of our Bronx apartment building in search of trick or treat. How easy it seemed to craft something lovely from paper and scissors—and a heart, no less, so perfectly trimmed, at once sharp-edged and smooth in triptych against my white cotton gown.

*

Or perhaps, even before the hearts there was Matisse. I would sit before a small reproduction of Matisse's *The Red Studio* that hung in my parents' bedroom which, when the futon was tucked just so, was also the living room. For the longest time, I thought Matisse's studio must be a room in a dollhouse—somewhere the Queen herself might reside. Awash in Venetian red, the canvas depicts what the artist must have seen before him as he worked—a still life of propped paintings and sculptures. The artworks, rendered in detail and color, are indicated only by negative gaps in the red surface. Of his painting Matisse once remarked, "I find that all these things . . . only become what they are to me when I see them together with the color red." A grandfather clock stands in the center of the composition. Matisse eliminated its hands, as if, in the space of the artist's studio, time is suspended. As if all attention were given to the process of seeing a retrospective housed in a single color.

*

"It might help you better relax," my father told me as he tried to explain an exercise he learned in art school to focus the mind on a single color and every instance in which it occurs. "Try red," he said. And because often my father's ideas have a way of taking root in my mind as a steady preoccupation, I try his exercise. On my way to work I take inventory: traffic lights, stop signs, a fire engine. A tinsel holiday wreath tied and forgotten on a telephone pole. An array of lipsticks and nail polish, headscarves and jewels. The laces of a young boy's tennis shoes. The looped handle of a baby's rattle. And just when it seems the world is alive in red, the cat that sleeps on floor of the neighborhood bodega slinks lazily from around a corner with a fresh bead of blood on its whiskers, as if to remind us coffee-and-cigarette "regulars" that something is always dying.

It isn't long before my catalogue of red inhabits the mind—integrating and then segregating memory through a siphon of red. I see the construction paper hearts. I see the wheels of my roller skates, the bright handlebars of the new bicycle I first rode without training wheels along the Hudson, and the deep chrome of the vintage Schwinn I found at a thrift store in Colorado—and between those two bicycles alone, there are twenty some odd years to color in.

Can I tell a story in a single color? The painters did it: Rothko and Hofmann. Yves Klein, too (but he may better serve an essay on blue). Can we fulfill our memories in monochrome? Bathe words in color as Matisse dared bathe his canvas?

*

Before I saw, I tasted. When I was eight years old playing catch with my brother, I ran for the ball and within an instant lay flat on the ground with a mouthful of concrete. My two front teeth (the new adult teeth of which I was so proud) lay somewhere in the salty mess that unfolded in my mouth. The bitter taste, like a penny splintered and molten along my tongue, churned against

my raw gums. I hardly registered what happened—that I had tripped on the sidewalk’s uneven pavement. But I made the catch that day. I remember only because of how tightly I gripped the ball, refusing to let go. Even as my brother and the neighbors came running; even as my father took me inside, shielding my eyes of the bathroom mirror as he cleaned my wounds. My face and hands and knees throbbed for days. As I healed, my friends came to see the new front teeth my dentist fashioned from caps of enamel around the ruins of my incisors. My brother brought his friends by after school to show off, like a crime scene, the place where my face stained the sidewalk, which was little more than an inkblot, or splattering of paint. And yet, it recorded, like evidence, my first lesson in glory and pain, of how quickly we fall between the two, how humbled we become by our own missteps.

*

I was even younger, six or seven, when I learned of the birds. The hummingbirds were my favorite. The ruby-throated, in particular, the one variety most likely to stray east of the Mississippi, so I waited for them to visit New York. When I discovered they were attracted to red, I became consumed, concocting nectar from sugar water and food coloring. I filled feeders and mason jars and placed them on the windowsills and fire escape.

Most bird-pollinated flowers are red and rich in nectar. But is this simply because the honeybees can’t decipher them? How odd that the color red, which at the end of the spectrum carries the longest wave of light, is inconspicuous to the bees, and therefore left for the birds. Imagine a male cardinal—so effortlessly designed to attract—appearing to a yellow jacket as little more than a notion against the bare winter trees and snow.

This, my first lesson in matters of the birds and bees: that color holds the power to entice and allure. And since, I have seen it countless times in the plucked look the skin has when touched by frost or wind or sun, when flushed with sex or panic or desire. Like the scarf-flaunting matadors in Spain courting their bulls. Or the rose of the flamenco dancer, following the rhythmic clap and wail of her castanets. Like the polish I’m never bold enough to wear on my fingernails, the lipstick I’ve never cared for, the blush I find laughable, because my cheeks redden as they are, under even the slightest pretense.

*

Summer afternoons, I got in the habit of eating pomegranates with the boy next door. He was the son of our Greek landlady, a woman who spat over my head and told me I was beautiful. Raised in a world of secular bohemia, I found unending curiosity in Greek orthodox traditions. We’d sit on the back porch, each with our orb, pulling at its tough rind, breaking into it as if a crystal ball that held secrets we wanted nothing more than to devour. We brushed the juice from our fingers onto our bare knees. The color took to our skin like watercolor. The jeweled kernels, ruby arils, burst in my mouth, their flavor like instinct, like the first boy I kissed. The first boy I swore to love, and failed to.

This was the same fruit the landlady had us smash against our doorstep on New Year’s morning, before the first stride across the threshold, a mark of fortune and safety. Like the red-dyed egg nestled in the bread we ate the night before.

Now, in the town where I live, the locals raise Chinese lanterns along Main Street to mark the New Year. But I’m still curious about pomegranates. I still raise one to my nose each year as I pass them in the grocery store. What children are sitting on back steps courting sweetness? How many stride over doorsteps where the same fruit juice has seeped into stone, dried, and grown sticky in the sun? The mark of another year, broken open, promising to be new.

*

A friend of mine, a florist in town, once gave me a lesson in roses. Deep reds signify burning passion, she told me, while lighter hues mean romance. Crimson is the color of sex (which, she takes time to explain, is different from romance) and not to be confused with burgundy, which connotes desire. The symbolism is accredited, she assures me. But I have my doubts. Didn’t the ancient Greeks believe roses came from the blood of Adonis and were as much symbolic of love and affinity, as of growth and decay? What about red chrysanthemums—one of the four Noble Gentlemen who mark the seasons in the east? Or the poppies that line the castles in Ireland for remembrance? I find more enchantment in lilacs and wildflowers. We don’t order bouquets for wit or humor. Not enough people send flowers for valor and distinction.

*

I wasn't surprised to learn that in 1911, the same year that Matisse's painting of his studio subsumed in a field of cadmium went on view at New York's Museum of Modern Art, Mark Rothko began exploring abstraction by painting soft-edged blocks in diaphanous colors. Of Matisse's canvas, Rothko said: "When you looked at that painting, you became that color, you became totally saturated with it." And this seems more or less to explain Rothko's own process for addressing his work, the way he seemed to will or breathe the paint onto his canvases in a slow spinning of reds and yellows, like gossamer, like screens. In a painting we expect such color to last, to be present, as long as we care to notice. But what, I want to say to Rothko as I try to saturate these pages—what happens when color fades?

*

For centuries, red was the treasure of the Incas and Aztecs, and then the wealth of red belonged to Spain. When it is fresh, the pigment, carmine, made from the blood of a cochineal beetle, is one of the purest dyes produced in the natural world. But it is also the most fleeting.

J.M.W. Turner painted with carmine even though he knew of its impermanence. And so his work, his bequest to the nation of England, was far more colorful than the signature grey stormscapes we see today. Imagine an artist trying to capture the moment of a setting sun unleashing a brilliant slash of light through the clouds. As he reached to dip his brush, how could he not choose the best pigment, the perfect red, even though he knew it wouldn't last? What if words became illegible after they were written? Wouldn't we write them all the same? Unconcerned with posterity, Turner cared little of a painting's longevity but of the very moment it was created. Red, vanishing and impermanent, was his immediate—near fugitive—desire.

*

When I was eighteen and moved west to Colorado, I thought I would forever mourn the deep red foliage of the East Coast. My mother sent care packages filled with origami cranes and folded stars, nestled in a bed of pressed maple leaves. "Pieces of home," she called them, as if titling a shadow box or still life. But "home" has always been a variable. And some years ago, when I

finally left Colorado and returned to the northeast, it was the red rock canyons I craved.

I prefer red in its organic incarnations—rust-red creek beds, sea oats and sumac leaves, the blooms of algae that color the Red Sea. But the human hand that paints in red or the manufactured, commissioned varieties of red satisfy my belief in the duality of things. We have co-opted the natural shades of fruits and flowers and assigned them to passion, seduction, and—be it forbidden or sanctioned—to love. Pigments and paints are poised to accentuate and allure. And yet we color stop signs and fire engines red. Emergency exits and security warnings all bear the color of fear and trepidation—of warning. Waves of taillights and sirens color tragic nights.

No wonder then that the reason stones appear red is the same reason our blood runs red: iron colors human and earthly temperament. Science teaches this. But what about the stories and myths we tell ourselves, the meaning we make, in order to endure? Native Americans believed that after the hunters killed the Great Bear, the animal's blood fell from the sky to color the leaves. And because I learned this in elementary school, in the portable planetarium our science teacher erected in the gymnasium, and because it still strikes me as hauntingly beautiful, it is the story I will tell my children if ever they are born: that death and demise can lead to beauty. Because what we hold most dear, what we claim to live for, is as much inherently necessary to life as it is dangerous and threatening to live. Red is the dying leaves just as dying stars exhibit a Mars-like tint before they go—evidence of their passing yet, just as much evidence of their life.

*

Before death, there will forever be the injuries of love. The first: my father, who against a table broke the bones in his hand as my parents negotiated their divorce. The second: my first love, who caught a ricocheting shard from the glass he threw against the wall on the eve of our inevitable split. His ring finger, nearly severed, glistened scarlet to the bone. And though *he* was the patient in the hospital emergency room, my whole body ached as if over and over I had fallen, pieces of me lost upon impact, calcified, dislodged. I would ache this way for years after, recoil at the thought of the raw vacancy, the bare tissue. And again, the markings, this time left

shamefully on the carpet and on the pillowcase I used to wrap his hand. The color dried and deepened to rustic burgundy—wasn't that my florist's term for desire?—or was it the earthy red of Van Gogh's severed despair after Gauguin threatened to leave him? Far from the fleeting flush of a lover's heaving chest, when we cut our bonds such injuries stain. Red is the color of love and lunacy, of infatuation and its failure, of how slowly, tolerantly—as if in a pact of silence—we drift between the two.

*

When I look up the word *red*, I find its origin in the Indo-European *ruedh*, and later the Greek *erythros*. In Sanskrit, *rakta* is the word used for *red* and for *blood*. In Comanche, the word *ekapi* is used for *red* and *color* and *circle*, too, which suggests something fundamental, something all-encompassing. Red is the color of beauty in Russia, of luck and good fortune in China. It is the color of Greek tragedies, epic battles of glory and salvation. Ancient Romans painted their gladiators and heroes in red; they washed the statues of gods and emperors with the same ruddy pigments that can be found in the murals of Pompeii. Here, we might gossip over red-carpet celebrities in the same breath we recall catching a red-handed thief. We might anticipate the pomp and circumstance of a red-letter day in as much as we curse the red herring of deceit. We hang flags of patriotism and revolution, landmark districts of prostitution and lust.

*

We say, *red-eye* and we mean flying overnight. But it is also what I call crying until morning. The kind of weeping—silent, full—that might be reserved for blue, except that it hoods our lids and circles the underside of the eye in red. This, the kind of weeping I learned from my mother, the kind you wake to the next morning and nurse like jetlag, like a hangover, face puffed, swollen, a little older around the eyes. The red of rage and grief and euphoric sadness; the red-eye of weightlessness, of rebirth.

*

If I were to return to—if I were to safeguard or time capsule—one image of red, it would be the paper hearts, royal insignia of my girlhood make believe, of the simplicity of young desire. As my brother and I, parading as our heroes: Superman, Wonder Woman, Captain America—that patriotic threesome, that fantastical

ménage à trois—three hearts to save the world. One Queen to issue the brutal destiny of beheaded hope. And if paper hearts seem too naïve, perhaps instead, a package of red doilies I bought in college at a thrift shop—the same shop with the stunning vintage Schwinn—that I strung into lacey curtains, still believing in paper-made pleasures. And they lasted, too, nearly as long as that first bout of love, before the wind took them. I think sometimes of their fate, wonder what bird may have swooped up their shreds to insulate its nest, what child discovered them littering the sidewalk during a game of catch, how the paper crimped and fell to the ground like fresh autumn leaves.

*

The next time I visit my father, I tell him I no longer see things the same. And to some extent, that's true. Color seems more evident now, more laden with testimony, with consequence. "Try red," my father had said. So simple. And now, I notice it everywhere: in the cranberries and rhubarb stalks at the farmer's market, the cider apples and bell peppers, and yes, the pomegranates, too. In the book-bindings that wall the library, the neon sign kept open at the diner, or the historic brick buildings that accentuate downtown.

Of course the painters knew how color is not only revealed in form, but how form—a synthesis of light and reflection—is just as much revealed in color. In the city, sirens sound through the streets delivering pain and sadness as cargo because a nineteen-year-old took one in the gut on Heath Avenue after holding the door for some thug's sister, and the red pool that must have swelled beneath him—the stain of chivalry's passing. But what if the sirens signify a heart being rushed for transplant, or an expectant mother about to birth her only child? The fire engines rush too, and a family may have lost their house, but what if a child is rescued from a fearful height or a battered home? Stalled traffic lights on Broadway mean frustrated commuters, waiting. But they also mean more time to breathe—stillness in a frenzied city.

*

"Color has taken possession of me," Paul Klee once said of his work. His canvases, like quilted patterns, reveal color and shapes—stick figures and fish, houses and hearts—in a childlike, sophisticated meditation.

Here we begin and end again with the heart, because what greater possession exists? Adhering and tearing, pinned and stripped bare. On the chest, on the sleeve, broken and repaired. It may be an impossible idea, to tell the story of a color, but perhaps we might glimpse a chapter that contains the story of a single human experience, a retrospective of memory, the folded edges of paper and pleasure and pain, which exist in the heart's chamber, like a studio, like a cabinet of curiosity. The heart contains us. When oxygenated, when exposed, it pulses in crimson and scarlet, carmine, red—at once the longest wavelength of visible light, and the first color we lose sight of at twilight.