

# Seeing Red

(A dialogue with myself)

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“Artists can color the sky red because they know it’s blue. Those of us who aren’t artists must color things the way they really are or people might think we’re stupid.”

—Jules Feiffer



Me: Red is a trickster and should never be trusted.

Myself: Oh come on, red is just a color.

Me: Just a color? Just a color? Are you serious?

Myself: Yes, just a color-- the low energy edge of the visible spectrum. Wavelengths between 625 and 750 nm. There is nothing tricky or untrustworthy about that.

Me: (*interrupting*) All right Einstein, but if red is JUST a color, how do you explain the beauty of this sunrise?

Myself: Well, when the sun is low in the sky, at dawn or dusk, its light has to travel through a lot of the earth's atmosphere. The molecules in the air scatter the light that is blue or green more effectively than the oranges and reds, so the remaining light is red.

Me: I didn't ask why the sunrise is red, I asked why it is beautiful.

Myself: Look, I agree that the warm tones of sunrise and sunset are spectacular. But I really don't understand why you think red is "tricky" or "untrustworthy."

Me: So tell me why are kings' robes red? Power, right? I was always told to wear a red suit on days that I wanted to seem strong and powerful. Something like 80% of all national flags use red to symbolize strength. Mars, the red planet, was named after the Roman god of war. The Forbidden City, the seat of Chinese imperial power for over 500 years, was predominantly RED.

Myself: Whoah! Slow down. What is your point? Are you saying that power and strength should never be trusted?





Me: Well, that MAY be true, but that isn't my point. Red also symbolizes love. It is the color of Valentines, roses, hearts, passion. Robert Indiana chose RED for his iconic sculpture for a reason, you know.

Myself: Don't get me started. Valentines are just a Hallmark ploy to sell cards, flowers, and candy. Nothing to do with hearts and love.

Me: Yeah, yeah yeah. Real romantic, aren't you?

Myself: Hey now, be nice. I just don't think that red "heart-shaped" candy boxes are particularly heart-felt.

Me: But red IS the color of passion, desire, energy, cabernet, rubies, red wheelbarrows, strawberry fields...

Myself: Oh my God! STOP!

Me: Red is the color of life – deep red, blood-red – crimson blood that brings us into the world and nourishes our cells. Essential.

Myself: Right, but REALLY not so great if someone finds you laying in a pool of it...

Me: Exactly! Now you are catching on. Red is the chameleon of color - not one thing but many. Tricky. Contradictory. Necessary for life, but horrifying in death. *Not to be trusted.*



Myself: But red is a **color** – it can't be tricky and there is nothing intrinsically untrustworthy or treacherous about an undulating light wave. You are attributing discordant human interpretations and social conventions to an inanimate force with no agency.

Me: No! They're not just human interpretations or social conventions. Red is a signifier throughout nature. Some insects are colored red to indicate they could be poisonous and dissuade predators. The faces and um... privates... of Japanese snow monkeys turn bright red when they are ready and receptive to mating! Love in the wild kingdom! And the alpha male in a mandrill community has, among other enhanced attributes, a redder face.

Myself: Humans are the opposite- we blush red when we are embarrassed or humiliated, not when we're feeling frisky or dominant.

Me: No. Think about it. We also flush when we're romantically receptive. Women paint their faces to clearly convey that message. The cosmetics industry depends on it. And we **see** red and **turn** red when we are furious. Just like our primate cousins. Passion and fury.

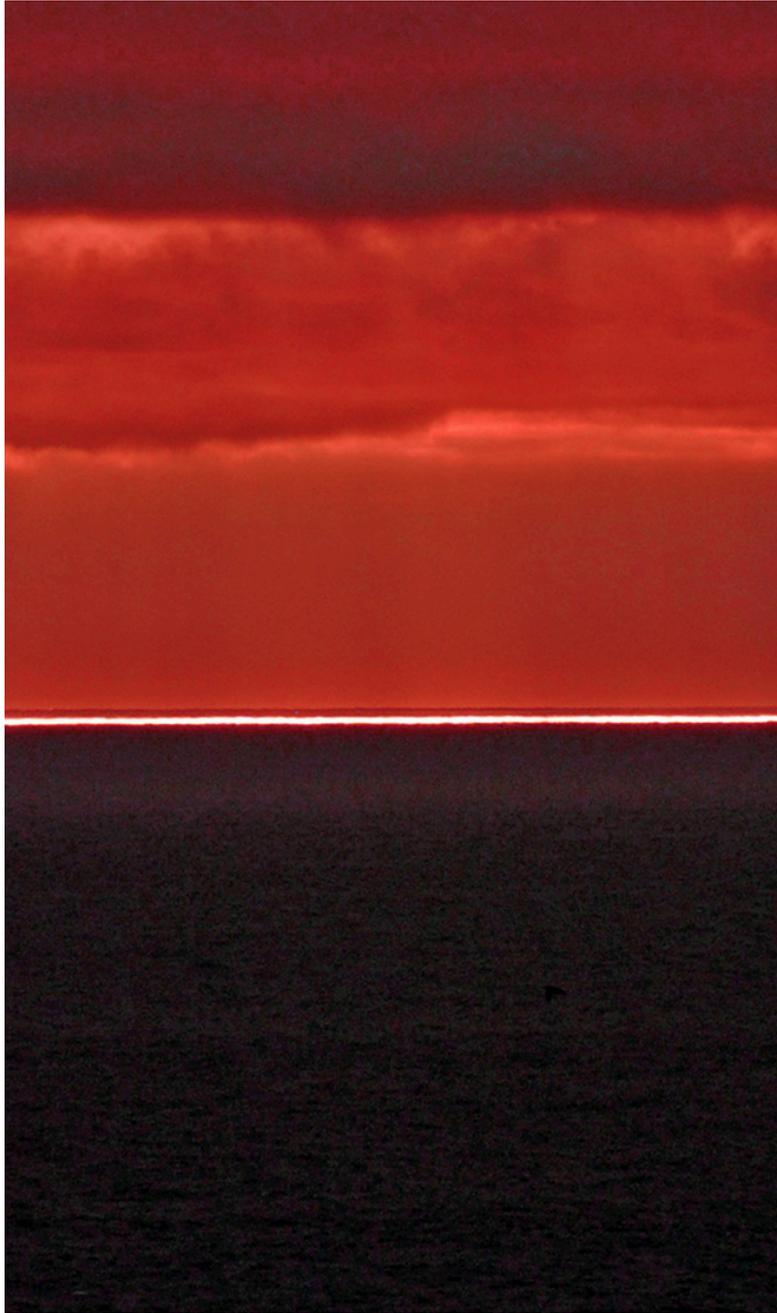




Myself: Point taken. But it is **not** intrinsic to the color red. If humans turned blue when they were angry and snow monkeys had green faces, nothing would change. This has nothing to do with the wavelengths of light we call red. Red. Is. Just. Red.

Me: Red may just be red, but it carries so much more. In Japan, the torii are painted red to symbolize the transition from the profane to the sacred. Red is the Janus of color, looking both ways, forward and back – a color of transition.

Myself: We finally agree! Red is indeed a color of transition; it occupies the far end of the visible spectrum and marks transition between the visible and invisible. Beyond red light is infrared radiation, imperceptible except as heat.



## **Beyond Red**

Red is at the edge of time  
the gentle edge of change.  
Beyond red are  
night and  
winter.

Red is at the edge of love  
the shy blush of nascent passion.  
Beyond red are  
joy and connection  
comfort and support.

Red is at the edge of danger  
the color of warning.  
Beyond red are  
oncoming traffic  
poisonous baneberries  
venomous snakes and  
toxic insects.

Red is at the edge of civilization,  
the knife edge of anger, hatred, blood, and violence.  
Beyond red are  
chaos and  
death.

Red is at the edge of light  
dividing all that is seen from the unseen.  
Beyond red lies the  
invisible  
the raw energy of the universe.