

بیاورد شمع و بیامد بباغ
برافروخت رخشنده شمع و چراغ

بدان سرو بن گفتم ای ماهروی
یکی داستان امشبم بازگوی

This is the story of *Bizhan and Manizheh*. Two mythic lovers from lands at war, as told in the *Shahnameh*, the book of Kings. It is also the story of a ring: given to promise relationality beyond the alienation of political othering; to promise the salve of an endless abandonment to love, to kinship.

The *Shahnameh* is the world's longest epic dating back to the early 10th century. The Persian poet Ferdowsi composed the poem over several decades from gathered fragments of Persian and Pahlavi mythic and historic sources, scattered through space and time.

It was then loved, celebrated, admired, and produced in beautifully illustrated Manuscripts, serving successive empires as the talismanic touchstone for their always fragile legitimacy. This lovers' tale opens with Ferdowsi, awoken by panic to a vast darkness.

*A night as black as coal bedaubed with pitch
A night of ebony, a night on which
Even the moon seemed fearful of the skies:
Her face was three-fourths dimmed, and all the night
Looked gray and dusty in her pallid light¹*

In a moment of foreshadowing, the poet asks his companion for light, and a story to dispel the darkness.

*I started up, bewildered, terrified;
My fear awoke [the one] at my side.
[Who] I called for to bring torches, light;
she fetched bright candles to dispel the night
And laid a little feast on which to dine,*

*But why do you need candles now? She said,
Has sleep refused to visit your soft bed?
Drink up your wine and-as you do so - I
Will tell a story from the days gone by:*

¹Ferdowsi, Abolqasem, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, Translated by Dick Davis, Penguin Classics, 2016

We then find Bizhan: a formidable Persian warrior, sent to ward off wild swine at the border where the rival lands of Iran and Turan meet. Intoxicated by his victory, Bizhan ventures north into Turan. And there, in an enchanted orchard, he meets Manizheh, the beautiful princess of Turan. Falling madly in love despite their political conditions, Manizheh smuggles Bizhan into her private quarters, where the young lovers spend their days and nights singing and dancing their desires.

Ferdowsi chronicles the willfulness in Bizhan and Manizheh's decision to love against all odds. It is a metaphysical decision – today, we might call it Levinasian – to preserve the irreducibility of the other against political or cultural schemas, and to affirm the endless, dialogical generativity of this unknowingness.

Indeed, the affair is intolerable to Manizheh's father, the Turanian king. Soon after finding him, the King has Bizhan imprisoned in a dark well.

After pacing the mouth of the well for many days and nights in grief, feeding Bizhan and keeping him company, Manizheh hears of a traveling caravan of Iranian merchants, and rushes to seek their aid.

Among the travelers is Rostam, Shanameh's most revered hero. Indeed, Rostam had arrived in Turan after hearing of Bizhan's fate, and resolved to disguise himself as a jewel merchant to rescue Bizhan.

Though suspicious of her intentions, Rostam hears Manizheh's pleas, but says nothing of his identity. Instead, he sends some food with Manizheh for Bizhan, inside of which he has hidden his own precious ring. Upon discovering Rostam's ring, Bizhan's joyous laughter fills the well, and he tells Manizheh to go back to Rostam and ask him about his horse, *Rakhsh*....

Manizheh hurries like the wind to deliver this message. Hearing it, Rostam is assured of her loyalty, knowing that Bizhan had entrusted her with their secret. And so he instructs her: "Spend the next day gathering firewood in the forest, and when night comes, light a magnificent bonfire."

That next night, Rostam set out toward the distant glow, where he finds the devoted Manizheh at Bizhan's well. Out of his captivity, Bizhan turns to Manizheh:

*And to you,
you, who've suffered long and patiently,
Who've given heart and soul and wealth for me,
Who thought that, undergone for me, distress
Was but another name for happiness,*

*Who cast aside your kin, your noble name
Your parents, crown and land, to share my shame.
I'll bow before you like a man whose days
Are passed before his god, in prayer and praise*

What is in a ring? Its ontology, its politics? I painted and repainted this symbol, wanting to retrieve some of its complexity against the consumerist visions of myth and fairytale that have ensnared it. As I painted one day, only half listening to news radio, I overheard some reporting about a “Jewelry law,” passed in 2016 to allow European border officials to confiscate valuables from refugees unable to finance their stay. I considered the idle piles of memories, promises, and bonds between lovers, friends, and kin, growing in boxes at guards’ desks. Like the Turanian king, these agents devoted themselves to protecting borders and producing political strangers. And I considered Rostam, who, in the paradigm of the *Shahnameh*, restores the wonder that the ring can represent, exceeding borders, allowing for the stranger to be cast in the light of ethical openness.

Like Manizeh at the mouth of the well, I painted and repainted the mouth of Rostam’s ring, in a meditative and repetitive practice that I might call, after Derrida, *elliptical*. At once the rhythm of a cipher that encircles our shared existence as lovers and kin, the *ellipse*, as in the shape of an orbit, is held open by the absence of being, and our endless search for it. And the *ellipsis*, as in the dot-dot-dot at the end of a list, signifies overflowing excess, as in the paratactical rhythm of an infinite series, as in the promise upon promise of rings piled at borders.

And so I painted, allowing for excess and absence to coincide at this wet surface that I had been working for months: With each elliptical stroke, the brush dragging into its orbit not only all kinds of barely visible debris – hair and dust and insects – but now also these thoughts, of crossings, of jewels and rings, of what you keep, or risk, or leave behind, of neighbors, of enemies. A *halo of affinities*², of helpers, of others... Chains of saviors, links and rings.

-Mel Mikhail

² Dabashi, Hamid. *The Shahnameh: The Persian Epic as World Literature*, Columbia University Press, 2019