

Color Me Orange
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1000 words

If I peered outside my window, I could look over to the fields: to flooded plots that sat slender stalks of rice, to the lentil crop crowned with flowers and to the tall stems of wheat and sugarcane, depending on what time of the year I looked.

If I gazed further, let my eyes wander beyond the lush lines of mango, pomegranate, papaya and tamarind trees, yearning for a reprieve from the hibiscus-red sun that rose in the sky impatiently, impetuously, my twelve-year-old eyes could see the edge of the forest.

To my child-eyes, this woodland was magical. One that hid untold stories, sparkling secrets, within its roots and branches, leaves and shoots, insects and animals, gods and spirits, light and darkness and sounds and silences. I knew this as I foraged this jungle daily for grass and food.

Otherwise, we of the tiny village of Jetpura, with two hundred families and a thousand people, lived modest, mud-homed lives, close to our sun-bleached fields, with no electricity or running water, toiling under a savage sun.

Situated in the Nazibabad district of Bijnor city in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, our village had a lot by way of dissatisfaction, as there were jobs only for a fourth of us, and little by way of gaiety, other than festivals and marriages. Unless, you counted one-armed Tungruz, a man with a peculiar name and playful ways, who if you met even once made you cherry. As he did me. And others.

The first time I saw Tungruz, he was hanging upside down from the branches of a gigantic banyan tree in the forest though he missed an arm. He smelt of saffron and cardamoms. As an awkward, timid child, his was an audacious act, one that threw away all rules and blurred the

line of what can and cannot be. What was more, he acted upon it without fear of chastisement and without seeming to know of his strength.

My skin felt different upon seeing him. There was a freeness inside of me, an opening up to many abilities. I was not frightened, instead, as bits of me melted, I was full of carefree energy and was changed to a frolicsome, joyous, energetic boy. Maybe he fulfilled my deepest yearnings. Who am I to say? The forest to me became all the more enchanting.

Villagers said Tungruz had long been in these jungles with wildings of all manner. They said he awakened to the first loud, grating calls of peacocks that came in the pitch black hours before dawn, when the solitary cheetah also hunts, and then caused disruptions through the day, intended or unintended they didn't know.

A tribal told me Tungruz could tell if elephants were excited, lost, playful or surprised just by hearing their distant trumpets and that he had seen him whooping with a host of monkeys, their gibbering akin to babies' cries.

Tungruz wore orange when he visited our village. The gaudy, wanton vibrancy of his cotton kurta and dhoti punctured our ordinary landscape like an orange fireball and its sweating heat suited Tungruz's hyperactive persona, his buzzing brain, its sensory overload, and his magma interiors.

In this avatar, we saw how Tungruz defied all laws of nature, how he became a bridge between the world of the spirits and the world of form and how he communed with shadows, possibly human or maybe subhuman, superhuman or even aliens who lived in realms beyond our knowing and disappeared into the universe's fabric after their dialogues.

We saw his intense physical sensations as he told people their futures and the region's future: droughts, starvation, floods, bountiful crops, happy marriages...all of which came true. To us, his mutterings were not scary and his prophecies, even if unfortunate, did not put us in

despair; instead, they set us off, warm and steady, on another path of exploration and learning.

Many village folk believed he was an arboreal creature. “He aligns with primates and throws up echoes of our ancient heritage,” they said. Others disagreed. “He is not a monkey groomed but a god in a tree. As he hears other gods, spirits, people and animals, we have made his banyan tree our temple.” One villager claimed he knew Tungruz’s real story. “He was a carpenter who damaged his hand. A faith healer cut off his right arm and threw him into the world without his craft and mind, forcing him into the forest.” All I knew was he was supreme fun.

Tungruz disappeared inexplicably when I turned eighteen. I lost something vital: my exuberant enjoyment of life. It went with him. I was at war with myself, I poisoned myself with uncertainty.

Where was he? What was his truth, I wondered.

I asked my village elder.

“Though people have voiced many versions of Tungruz and his disappearance, they are unimportant,” he said. “Having lived our lives with people of different faiths and beliefs and with djinns alongside, with whom we talk, argue and curse by turns, we accommodate all of Tungruz’s truths without separating them by strands or fretting about facts, certainties or reason for he made us happy.”

My father agreed. “Truth, my boy, is complicated, the actual is only actual in one place and at one time.”

What did I think of him? I was asked.

“He taught me that if one did not open one’s mind beyond borders, the doors to unseen realities, its wonders and truths, will remain closed,” I said.

As I spoke, I heard Tungruz’s cackling laughter but saw no one.

The chittering continued.

I knew then I had found him, in another form. We had no distance.

I knew it in my body, too, as vigor and happiness bubbled within, glowing orange.

I made my way to his banyan tree. Its swaying leaves and lullaby accents soothed my disappointments as if to say we grow best during interruptions.

I stored the tree’s saffron-cardamom scents, its woodsy fragrances, within my skin linings.