

# Hare Krishna

I noticed a lady. She was wrapped in so many bulbous crumples and twists of fiery-coloured fabric that it seemed as if what could be seen of her body was being held up by its overabundant density, that the almost equally creased protrusions of her hands, feet and face were where all the reds and browns and purples and golds folded into each other, to become a deep and warm shade which contained all of the rainbow surrounding it in dense creases; lines of skin that were more like billows of dyed fabric compressed together under some titanic force, and granted life and expression as if this were an oriental Golem, formed of the luxuriance of colour and pattern rather than the penury of the earth.

Looking back, I think I had seen her before -perhaps many times- but there had never been reason for her to be separated from the street, to be given a form and pulled out from the bas-relief which froze either side of that road into an unquestioning, unproblematic and mutely comforting doorstep to my Soho. I must have glanced at her for longer than is considered a glance, and a small wrinkled hand emerged from within, borne by a bright yellow variant of material, generally concealed perhaps in order to celebrate with its appearance any willed engagement with the world outside her folds.

There was a book in the hand, she might have been smiling, and as the hand rose it followed me, I think with her face as well, around their soft supporting pillar. I noticed that the book was one of those offered for free by the Hare Krishnas, of which she was one, outside of whose little muffled restaurant she stood, and I looked away from her, speeding up with agitation and feeling compromised; in the slight extension of a glance, in a handful of steps, an isthmus had momentarily risen above the waves of habit to connect me with a precious atom of strangeness, and even before I could savour it I was rudely robbed of its charm by a little book that brought both me and the lady offering it back to the banal and tense reality of the city's hassled and its hasslers.

She hadn't come up to me -like those violent teenagers decorated in symbols of incommensurably sincere charity- and shattered the penumbra around my privacy with the brutality of feigned conversation, in fact I don't believe she had even looked at me; but I felt that her poetry, her mystique had been nothing more than a silent version of such intrusive conversation, an entreaty in colour, that her verbose body of clothing was intended for passers-by as an orchid uses its luminous veins to call in insects.

I began relegating her to the category of urban nuisances, to the same universal space occupied by charity-touts, free-newspaper purveyors, proselytizers and survey-workers; and she would have disappeared into that general abstraction forever -along with the Krishnas- if she hadn't broken the silence, hadn't called gently out to someone who I had not been in a decade.

Ten years ago I had been atomized through the mechanisms of puberty, and whereas that which is supposed to comprise one's character -the set of notions and values that govern behaviour- was for me just a gas, exterior to my body and susceptible to any noxious breeze that came its way; my body however -although it had changed unalterably a few years before- was relatively stable, and became the image in the mirror to which I clung while my immaterial properties remained protean; which was why I was so deeply affected every time I was mistaken for a girl, which happened frequently. The validity of my reference was undermined: if people couldn't even manage to grasp to which fundamental human binary my body belonged, was it perhaps not less fixed than I had wanted it to be? Every time I was referred to as a girl, as madam, as "your daughter, sir", the effort required to reclaim my body, to convince myself of its solidity once again was minutely heroic.

I had forgotten that this used to happen, and as I was moving away from the lady and I heard her call "Madam", I was stopped by one of those shifts in perception which crack open the container in which we have sealed the impressions of a particular period in our past; the cacophonous rush drowned out the dominance of my present self, it filled me with the imprecise feelings of anger, confusion and freshness of an adolescent me, which

were less real emotions than treasured belongings to which feelings had been attached, and which I had lost and forgotten about.

I didn't immediately understand what had been given to me by the Hare Krishna, all these treasures had fallen on me from a great height, and I was immobilised under their weight; all I could do was to turn around and walk back to her, ask what she had said, be confirmed in what I had heard and stumble off. Across Oxford Street, step by step, the glittering gifts she had presented me with from within my own past began to reveal themselves, one by one; the deafening noise in turn softened, fell apart, and pulled itself back together again to gently sing some sort of internal lullaby. It had all been packed up and locked away for a reason, all these feelings had been difficult to manage when they were new; but feeling them in their remoteness I was glad they had been given back to me, glad to greet them again after time had turned them into relics to contemplate rather than obstacles to be overcome, handed over by a woman who had mistakenly found the one word which could penetrate through the clotted indifferences of my mind.

As I turned these objects over in the intuitive gaze of the daydream, I couldn't help but feel as if something childishly superstitious had come true, that the woman was some sort of witch, that she knew what would entail from her utterance and had purposely transformed me, that despite my copious, disorderly and impossible to miss smear of facial hair, she had projected the word regardless of my sex because her intention was to bring about the effect in which I am still revelling (and trying to put down on paper). It is just a fancy which I know to be beyond possibility, but despite its impossibility, the small section of street where the real and the fanciful momentarily merged has since stood out in abundant relief, has retained the colour of the incident, or rather the existing place and its colours have come alive with the shape of the incident.

I don't know what Hare Krishnas do, what they believe in or their history; what I do know is that their sad smiles, the pale pastels which make it look as if their walls, food, clothes and face-paint together constitute a unified figure, the tired struggle and the drained happiness of their chanting that emanates every day from a window somewhere above their restaurant,

and which occasionally expands and alters Oxford Street with its presence; all these things that I do now know, since I have started looking, since one of them called to me as if I were not a man; all these things have stained the pallid relief that had been Soho Street like paint stains a canvas, forever turning its bare surfaces, walls and glass from mere unobtrusive material into a transparent display of life.