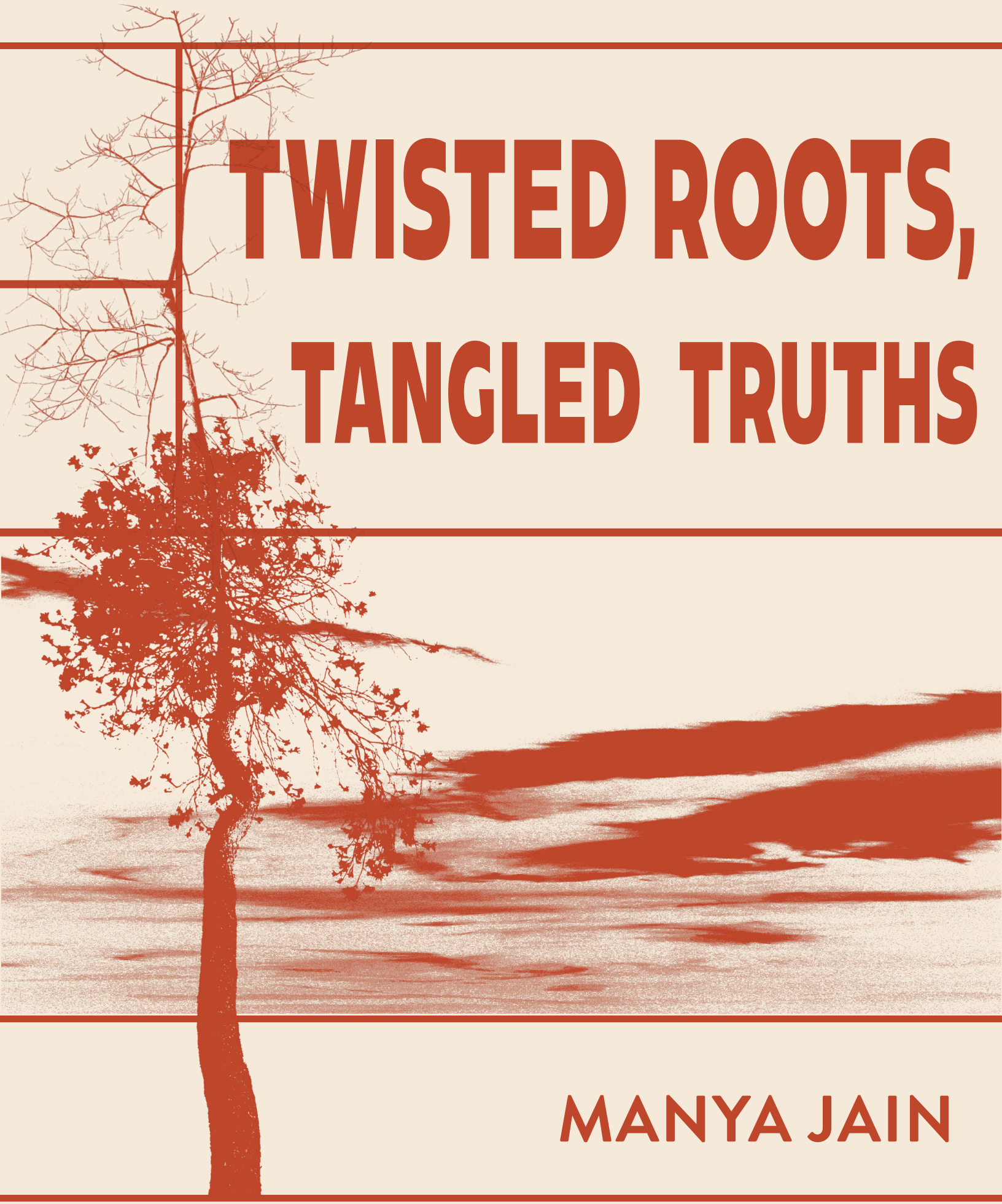
2024

Tangled roots, twisted truths



TWISTED ROOTS, TANGLED TRUTHS

MANYA JAIN

There once was an ancient and vast forest. Trees stood tall like sentinels, with their roots deeply tangled in the earth's memory. Much like the hippocampus, it stored every tale whispered by the wind. The air hummed with the quiet rustling of leaves and birds. A harmony of knowledge passed from season to season. But this peaceful expanse was interrupted by a single seed of information that drifted down from the sky. Small and unnoticed, it nestled into the soil. The warmth from the sun and the breath of the wind made this little seed grow.

At first, the wildflower was just another one among many, with bright and inviting petals. Creatures of the forest, drawn by its allure, stopped to admire it. With every glance and every lingering moment, the flower spread. This was the dopamine system at work, rewarding attention and reinforcing behavior. The more the creatures noticed the flower, the more they returned. However, blind to their knowledge, they were carrying its seeds in their fur and feathers. With each step, with each flutter, the idea flourished.

But not all things bloom in life.

Amidst the undergrowth, a shadow moved between the trees. The amygdala remained ever watchful. It didn't need to chase its prey, fear was all that was required. The first time the wind whispered of the new flower, the amygdala lifted its head. The second time, its ears twitched. The third time, it leaped. Panic rippled through the bushes. Fear, like a swift current, surged through the small creatures, etching itself into their minds more quickly and lasting longer than any calm moment. The threat was not real, but their fear was.

The old trees, the hippocampus of the forest, recorded what they heard. With each moment and every repeated story, their rings were etched. However, the hippocampus does not question what it absorbs. Be it truth or falsity, what is written remains.

Up high on the tallest pine, sat the wise Owl of the prefrontal cortex. It watched patiently, as the storms and seasons came and went. It knew the language of the wind and the stories carried in the currents. But as the days passed, the stories began to repeat. The illusory truth effect took hold. Familiarity bred certainty, even without proof.

Initially, the Owl resisted, attempting to recall what was real. But when a tale is told a few too many times, it settles into the mind just like fog settles over the hills. Soon enough, the Owl too was unsure of that which had been and that which had only been said.

The forest had come alive with sound. The birds on the branches sang the same tune - the only melody they had learned. This was confirmation bias. The creatures sought only what they had already believed and ignored unfamiliar calls. The river that once flowed clear, was now fighting against a new current. These two opposing streams were unable to blend. Cognitive dissonance raged. There was a clash between old knowledge and new uncertainty.

And in the heart of the forest were the vines that began to creep. They went from delicately threading through the shrubs to tightening their grip, as they wound themselves around the trees. This was the social contagion of memory - ideas, even false ones, spread until they seemed as if they had always been true.

Yet beyond the thicket and the vines, there was a clearing in which the sun still touched the earth. Here, the light was strong and the ground was soft. Here, a single tree stood unbound. It had shed its vines. It had listened, but it had also questioned.

And because it had, the forest was not lost.

Not yet.