

Dispatch from the Plant Underground

Dispatch 13: In honour of friends



Rhyoglossum notoniana blooms in the monsoon

September 1, 2011

Dear friends,

Where has the time gone? It's a little over a year since I started writing these dispatches. I haven't been regular with them, partly because each dispatch leads to many back-and-forths, to many little sub-dispatches which are all a lot of fun and great food for thought too. Thank you to everyone who wrote back to Dispatch 12: Email Scams. 300 mails came in. I hope I wrote back to everyone!

I started putting together this dispatch some weeks ago. Struggling to write as I often do, sometimes I just note down dialogues, or little things people say in passing, or I write letters to friends. Here is a selection of these from this year, in a dispatch that is more to do with conversation than conservation.

###

First, a metaphor

Popo (whose proper name is Sabyasachi) had this to say in a little essay at the end of his stay at the Sanctuary in March. He'd been with us for two weeks with his classmates from Centre For Learning (a wonderful school in Bangalore).

“Staying at the Sanctuary has been a great experience for me. I felt like I was part of a community of a special kind. It was not a community of just people and a community where people are the centre of everything. It was a community which also consisted of plants – orchids, impatiens, ferns, mosses and many more – trees – erithrina, perseas, ainilis and a lot more: birds, reptiles and animals. And in this community the world did not revolve around people but around everything.

Sometimes I felt like *a flea living on a huge dog* (the Sanctuary) because you keep having the feeling that the Sanctuary is itself alive.

There is a lot to learn in this sanctuary about plants, animals and also about yourself. This is the real wonderland.”

###

Second, the instant graphic novel.

One afternoon, many months ago, I gave five-and-a-half year old Krishna (my cousin Nithya’s son) a large sheet of paper and some colour pencils and pens. He began with no hesitation, speaking as he drew, the narrative and action all happening together in one fluid movement. I realised I was witnessing something special; the art of graphic novels, right from conceptualization to actualization, accompanied by a fantastic soundtrack. Here is an excerpt, minus the graphics and the action.

Krishna: Here is a potato. This is how it grows. These are its roots. These are new baby potatoes. Potatoes have black dots. This is a potato monster, it looks like an octopus, no? Here is another plant. Here is the ground. Beneath the ground are the roots. And this? What is this?

Suprabha: ummmm...

K: This is a shoot. And here is a flower.

S: Is this a lotus?

K: How can it be a lotus? There is no water, it grows in the ground. Here are its leaves. This is an apple tree (a small tree). Here I will draw the apple tree growing (a second tree). Here are its roots. There are more and more roots. Here is the trunk. It grows and grows, here are the leaves. It is a giant apple tree. These are the flowers. The flowers become apples, like this.

S: What happens to the apples?

K: They fall. (Arrows pointing down.). They fall on the ground.

S: There is a famous story of a man who lay under an apple tree and an apple fell on his head and that gave him a great idea.

K: OK, here is a chair. Here is a man sitting on a chair. The apple has fallen on his head.

S: Do you want to name him Newton?

K: No(pe).

K: Here is a parrot. You can tell it's a parrot.

S: It looks like a blue winged parakeet to me.

K: It's not a parakeet, it's a parrot. Here is his beak. (The only red in the whole story).

S: Do you want to use more colours?

K: No(pe).

And it went on and on getting more and more intricate, moving at lightning speed, action all the way. Children should write children's books! I wrote No(pe) like this because I'm not sure what I heard, a No, or a Nope.

Gist of the story: Potatoes that become Potato Monsters that beget more Potato Monsters, and Aliens getting struck dead by Raindrops, and Whale Sharks that could eat Thunder, and an Apple tree that grew up in Seconds and flowered and fruited (transformation depicted), and then the Apples started to fall and One fell on a Man sitting on a chair (not Newton, no) who had a Parrot for a friend, and this Man took the Apple that fell on his Head and smashed the Potato Monster's face till the Apple sauce ran out. And Everyone dies in the End.

I loved how the Whale Shark "scronches" up Thonderrrrr.. And how the Potato Monster got "ssstrook" in its heart by Lightning, and how Raindrops killed the Alien. I've capitalised whatever he emphasized.

Of course there was a lot of "scronching" and monsters getting chopped and cut in half, a lot of drama! And there was a continuous soundtrack, to things growing, moving, falling, flying, eating, cutting, swimming, climbing, shining, hiding, collapsing. I loved the action. I loved little Krishna's muse that day.

Writing all this out, is part of what I do when I have my educator's hat on, which is really more to do with listening and following, than any instruction!

Time well spent!

###

Third, the nature of experience.

I was in Coorg last month with Sujata, Annu and Maya. I've written in an earlier dispatch about them and their lovely home, the Rainforest Retreat. One afternoon I had an amazing conversation with Maya who is now thirteen. She shared some of her poems and writings. I felt honoured.

Then we talked about the different worlds she enters, this one *here*, and that one *there*, and that other one on the roof, the characters here, and the ones there. The precision of her narrative, both in speech and writing, was exquisite. Whichever world she described or inhabited, the detail was incredible, from what she wore to what she did, to conversations with others, and the land or the animals and the light. She is different in all her worlds, but there is something constant too. Maya said, *I am me but I am different here, and different there.*

She talked of her Experiences and how she goes about having one. *I am conscious, I lie down and close my eyes and then I enter my imagination and sometimes it goes wherever it wants to go and sometimes I do something, I decide. When I write it down, a day later, it flows so fast I make mistakes in spelling and grammar, but it happens all very fast. I don't think, and stop, I just write it as it flows. And here I might invent as I write.*

I got to read: Experiences 1-9; The Chronicles of Maya's Imagination; the fiction (which she prefers) and the non-fiction; and also Dreams, the only world that she cannot control at all.

Maya carefully explained to me that each world is distinct, they are not mixed up. They are all real. The one that happens inside your head, is real, it is alive and full of happenings and

characters. This one here, in the house with parents and dogs, is the one she occasionally visits, where she *really* lives is *there*.

I quizzed her on her use of the word experience. She says they are experiences because they happen to her, and though they are not of this world here, they are *real*.

We talked about favourite books, poems, movies and songs. We then climbed up onto the concrete edging to the roof of their house, she a lot more elegant and sure footed than I.

We stood awhile and looked around. She told me that she talks to the land from here and with a fairy friend. I asked her where her friend sits when she comes. She looked at me as if I was daft. *I am not pretending that she is sitting to my left or to my right. But she is with me. I know she is.*

Then she showed me the three Dendrobium orchids on the roof. She had noted the first one quite a long time ago, and then another one after a spectacular moonlit evening. And now there is a third.

Over dinner we traded accents, Coorgi English and Malayali English and Queen's English and Kansas English and many other Englishes, as well as ideas of proper English and improper English. We talked in Kannada too.

In the afternoon the next day we looked through Inkspell, a fantasy series all about characters that get read out to real life and then read back in. We then pored over the quotes at the start of each chapter. I got hooked by Charles Causley's "I am the Song" (*I am the song that sings the bird. I am the leaf that grows the land....*) and then I pulled out from my files, Robert Graves's version of the "Song of Amergin" (*I am a stag: of seven tines, I am a flood: across a plain....*).

Maya and I compared these two lovely poems. She pointed out that while they sounded similar, Charles was doing something different in his poem. The song sings the bird, the earth lights the sun, the word speaks the man.

I found this useful advice for writing. According to Maya, who is all of thirteen, it's less about the writer and more about the other.

###

Fourth, some rainforest etiquette

Sometime ago I was sitting on the trail overlooking the river at the Sanctuary, when two neighbours strode into a clearing below me not knowing I was there, and cast their machetes down and (what looked like) two large flatbreads. They washed their faces, swilled the water out of their mouths, wiped their arms and legs with a pink *torth* (cotton towel) each and sat down with obvious eagerness to do something. Eat?

I called out, as I knew one of them, Babu, a young Kurchiyan, and I didn't want them to be embarrassed by me. They were momentarily startled. We then fell into a conversation, back and forth about elephants, wild boar, their health, my health, their parents' health, my parent's health, the dogs, the rain, my human friends at the Sanctuary, the otters and so on.

Then they asked me how the bees were. I was surprised and told them we have none right now.

After a few minutes silence, they asked if we'd bought any honey from our old neighbours at the Paniya hamlet. We sometimes buy wild honey from the Paniyas, and give them a good price. They would sell in the market in town for less. This year they hadn't brought any.

Then Babu asked if I wanted some. I wasn't sure what he meant, so I asked him if he had 50 or a 100 kgs. Then they pointed to the flat round objects and said, "No, here's some."

They had just harvested two *Apis cerana* combs from a hollow in a tree.

I thanked them and said I didn't want any. Besides I was on a little cliff of sorts and couldn't get to them. Then we fell silent. I looked out for the brown fish owl. Babu and his partner fell into a murmur.

I called out, "I come here every day to meet the owl, but he's not around."

They said they had just seen him fly downstream. Then they asked me if we had owls up at the top of the hill. I was a little nervous answering because I knew that there'd been some owl theft recently. I answered vaguely.

I pulled out my notebook and wrote for awhile. They sat talking and then one of them coughed.

Babu said, "Why don't you have some honey, it's good for you. Come down."

I really didn't want to split their wild delicacy. I said, "No thank you, I have a stomach upset."

Then he said, "This is very medicinal, come and have some."

Then I said, "I am weak and feverish, I can't walk through the stream."

After this we fell silent. 10 minutes passed. They sat there talking. I sat on the hillbench enjoying the afternoon light through the trees.

Then suddenly, Babu split some comb, got up decisively and told me to walk to a path further downstream, saying he was going to leave it for me on a stone there.

I realized then that they would not eat so long as I was present. And I was sitting there, not wanting to be rude by leaving. They didn't want to be rude, and I didn't want to be rude, but I'd missed the signals. Poor guys, I'd been keeping them from their lunch.

So I walked to the stone at the crossing, and found a *Colocasia* leaf with three little pieces of comb full of honey and bright orange pollen.

I picked it up and walked back (he watched me from across the river and said, "You are so weak!") and I said "Yes, everybody is sick at the Sanctuary, we are all suffering from a stomach flu", and then he said, "Eat the honey comb, it's good for you."

So I sat on the bench on the hill, and they sat on the grassy verge by the river, and we three ate our honeycombs in silence with great relish.

###

Fifth, a quip

Some time ago, I mentioned to Wolfgang that the stream has a lot of plastic now, and that I didn't recall seeing so much plastic there in previous years.

He said: *looks like civilization has arrived.*

###

Sixth, some confabulation

By telephone with Claude Alvares (in Goa). The line was hissing and crackling. I had to fill in some gaps.

Suprabha: Claude, hi, this is Supi, hello hello, can you hear me, the connection is really bad.

Claude: Hi Supi, Diesel's fine (Diesel is his dog, and Diesel and I have a special relationship. Claude must have assumed I called about Diesel)

S: Claude, can I interest you in a course I want to run? I'd like you to meet with a group of youngsters for a couple of days and talk to them about your fight for Goa's environment. You want to come to the Sanctuary, or would it better to meet you there? I want them to learn about how you've used the law.

C: Better in Goa

S: It's going to be a radical course, not just an alternative one.

C: Teach them how to sabotage infrastructure then. I can only talk to them about strategies of legal resistance.

S: Yes, definitely monkey wrenching needs to be part of the curriculum.

C: Ha ha, that's a great word, monkey wrenching, that Dave Foreman guy right?

S: Like those women pouring water into engines to stop machinery, by diluting the diesel.

The connection got cut. I imagined Claude enroute between roadblocks (against miners) and the high court. I heard the conclusion to our conversation.

C: Diesel's great!

###

Seventh, from a letter (1)

I write today from my friends' home in Coorg, at the Rainforest Retreat. I've been out walking the two days I've been here, for a few hours each afternoon, in the rain. I've gone alone.

The plants and trees here don't fully overlap with the ones at the Sanctuary. There are different trees here, many whose names I do not know, but recognize from my travels here. There are so many epiphytes here, far more than where we are. The trees more mossy, more laden with

orchids, *Dendrobium*, *Bulbophyllum*, *Trias*, *Eria*, *Oberonia* species. The trees are huge in the valleys, and shorter on the hilltops. It's nearly 400 metres higher here than at the Sanctuary, no wonder the trees are so different. There are scrubby hilltops, which could be succeeding grassland, or degraded forest. It's not clear to me what is happening here on these ridges.

Of the ones I recognized: *Ficus*, *Elaeocarpus*, *Psychotria*, *Myristica*, *Wendlandia*, *Schefflera*, *Apodytes*, *Aporosa*, *Clerodendron*, *Solanum*, *Cyathea*, *Strobilanthes* (several species), *Calamus*, *Caryota*.

There are endless wattle plantations, some stretches with a native species understorey.

Eighth, from a letter (2)

Today (near the Rainforest Retreat) I saw a pair of black woodpeckers very close. I heard them before I saw them. Crimson crests startling in the dark misty greygreen light.

There were many birds in that area, drongos, minivets, bulbuls, some hill mynahs, a couple of Malabar grey hornbills, and tree pies, so I stopped, spread my raincoat and sat down, then lay down when the sun came out. Then two woodshrikes came by and also some flycatchers. Without binoculars I had no way of telling the small birds, and I don't know their different sounds either. I have a problem with bird names, as I have bad eyes, so I tend to not pay attention with my eyes, and I hate using binoculars. My ears pick up their different calls and songs well, but I struggle to match names and calls.

I'd been on this path several times, and knew it quite well by now, and always this particular descent, at the end of which stands a giant dying (perhaps dead) tree, takes my breath away. I sat there in the dead tree's naked presence, angered by the thought that it had been killed by political vandals who wanted to widen the road and only stopped after a lot of protest. They had killed many trees by then. This one had been ringed four years ago and it was still standing.

A Malabar whistling thrush began to sing while I sat there. I whistle-sang back to him. I find the intervals haunting and also hard to get right, but I keep trying. He humoured me, and continued singing. We did a call and response thing for maybe ten minutes or more

Two kids came by, and found me lying on the road, in a dry spot, on my raincoat, sunbathing in a pool of golden light whistling to the whistling thrush. They smiled openly and engagingly. I told them (in Kannada) there were a lot of birds around just then. I motioned in the direction of the thrush's song. They smiled even more and said he's around a lot, this bird, and then they asked if I was alone. I said no, there are all these birds around. They smiled even more, and said the sun's out. Then they asked if their friends had gone by. I said a while ago I'd seen a small band of kids much further along the road. They waved and went on to join their friends, leaving me alone with my whistling thrush friend and a flurry of winged beings (damselflies, butterflies, birds, wasps and drongoes snapping up cicadas) making the most of the same pool of sunlight, with the giant sombre dying tree, and the low streaming clouds moving fast, pregnant with rain.

###

Ninth, an aside

I was driving through Bangalore with old friends from the US.

In a long discussion about the state of the world and the disastrous end effects of civilization, one of them said, “Sometimes I want to smash churches. Religion (and she meant mainstream organized religion), has done some of the worst damages to this world.

I responded, “Yes, organized religion was perhaps the first and longest lasting corporation.”

We continued this reflection by email. She added, “Particularly, when adherents come to believe that my religion is the only true one (and best) thus causing divisions and wars.”

I thought, “Just like any corporation.”

###

Tenth: Addenda

Tasha, our wonderful female Rottweiler died after a three month illness from a pregnancy (delivering 11 pups) that drained her of Vitamin B1, the canine equivalent of beriberi. Our vet, Dr. Chandy worked hard in diagnosing her problem and we all struggled to keep her going, learning to give shots, including intravenous shots, ourselves, twice a day for weeks on end. She nearly died four times. Finally it was all too much. On July 17th she gave her big heart and enormous energy over to the other side.

A newly described species of bush frog has been proposed and named by Anil Zachariah, an old friend of ours, and a great herpetologist and vet. He has named it, surprise surprise, *Raorchestes theuerkaufi*. After Wolfgang, whose full name is Wolfgang Theuerkauf!

For the educators among you, I have attached a pdf file of an article I wrote for the Journal of Krishnamurti Schools. This (or a version of this) will appear in the forthcoming issue. It’s called “On the Threshold of Touch”.

I’ve also attached two separate pdf files of Dispatches 12 and 13.

The Landscapes and Lifeskills Course will run again this winter. By now many of you would have received the first announcement. Soon we will send out the introduction to the 2011-12 programme. We have received several enquiries already. Please write to me if you know of a young person who might be interested.

It’s cold, wet and windy as I write. It’s pouring, in fact. The monsoon shows no sign of abating. The river has risen again. The electricity and connectivity are not steady either. I hope this dispatch makes it!

Warm wishes

Suprabha

