

# Dispatch from the Plant Underground

## Dispatch 4: Thoughts from the Tower

23rd July, 2010



View from the Water Tower on a monsoon morning.

Hello everyone!

Thank you for all those wonderful mails. The Sanctuary has been hugged by a lot of people in the last 24 hours!

Regarding these dispatches, I think for now, I'm going to just write when I feel like it, which may be everyday for a few days followed by a gap. Please feel free to not read, or to read now and then. I rather like the fact that different people will probably read different dispatches. For me, this is a good moment to get some thoughts out to whoever is listening. The monsoon is very inspiring and it's very quiet, and very very beautiful. The home crew is down to a handful of humans (and dogs and cows!), it's just us, with the rain and the plants and the wild light.

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It was intermittently sunny today: a glittering and spangled brilliance shifting suddenly to dark, sombre depths. It hasn't rained much at all. Very worrying. But when I hung my clothes out to dry on the line, it showered promptly!

I had a Vitamin D binge on the Tower this morning. I haven't been up there in weeks. Rockbees swarmed westwards right over me, three landed on my head. I reflexively swung round to open the trapdoor and got thigh deep in the water (the 10 metre high Tower was full!). I do know that swarming bees don't usually sting, but I was already standing on the second step and closing the door over me before I realized this! Entrenched reflexes!

The south-west wind was fresh. The sky was disconcertingly blue with beautiful tall clouds. The sunlight and warmth felt incredible on my skin. Several different species of butterflies were flitting on the treetops, level with where I was lying on the lid of the tower. Macaques could be heard chittering near the river. Three Yellow Browed Bulbuls and a couple of swooping Black Drongoes kept me company. A raptor lazily circled to the north.

I saw that the Utricularia (bladderworts) were peeping out of the carpets of moss. I saw that the moss itself was luxuriantly thick, juicy with trapped water and iridescent green. The ecology of monsoon plant succession was well on its way on the mortar between the stones. There was the dratted Eupatorium (invasive species) even, looking a little lost. The Oakleaf fern on the other hand was looking good. Grasses rimmed the lid, swaying merrily in the breeze. Soon the Tower will no longer be a vantage point, it will be fully encircled by the canopy of regrown trees. Already several views are closing!

The Tower gives me a lot of thoughts on human effects on the land. When you are in the garden, under the trees, in the womb of the Sanctuary so to speak, you are so surrounded by life that you can forget the big picture, you can forget hubris. Go up on the Tower, get your head out of the woods, and you have an instant reality check. Phone towers, land clearances, traffic in the distance, lights in the night, fires in the dry season.

I remembered how it was when I first came here as a visitor 19 years ago, how remote and isolated it felt then.

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Today I was thinking a lot about history. I was thinking about origins and journeys: of humans and others, mine, the plants, the tribes that have lived here for millenia. I began to mull over how the Sanctuary began. A half hour later, after some dozing in the sun, a chain of thoughts started up, and before I knew it, they started turning into a book in my head. I wondered a little about the subject, this was not immediately clear, there were so many strands, who and what would it actually be about? Would it be fiction or non-fiction?!

Where would I begin?

Would this story begin for instance in the rubble of postwar Berlin, sixty some years ago? Is this when the Sanctuary grew its first shy roots? In the life of a boy-child in a one room tenement in Kaiser Friedrichstrasse in Charlottenburg?

Or would the story start way earlier? Are the roots of this place older, and closer, did they form as the forest rose out of the metamorphic rocks of Gondwanaland, as the Indian plate nosed its way into the underbelly of Tibet?

Or is it that they are more troubled and complex, neither here nor there, are the roots in fact, born from a clash of cultures? First the colonial regime and its battles with the tribal chieftain Pazhassiraja and Tipu Sultan, then wave upon wave of settlers who cut and cleared the forests through the 20th century. Poor settlers from coastal Kerala who displaced the Paniya and Curchiya tribes, the elephants and tigers and bison, the ironwood trees in their fern filled groves.

Lying there upon the tower lid, I figured that origins are by definition mysterious. And it is this very mystery that teases my mind, threatens even to become an addiction. My own life in the process could get re-cast as a fossil hunter and it worries me that my skills as a writer are not

equal to the riches rapidly tumbling out, from the land, from my mind, from the light. The light!

I guess I could just tell this story as it occurs to me. But I know my weakness, I will get hopelessly distracted by the play of time with biological diversity, and with human history. I will get lost thinking about change, metamorphosis and growth. This play, this dance, this suggestion of the past into the present (and thus the future), always casts a spell on me, and I find that time is a tricky river to navigate.

The purpose however is clear. The story of the Sanctuary (and all other such places) needs to be told, in some manner, by somebody, as a gift to future generations. The gift is the hard-won knowledge of forest restoration. The time will come, in fact some of us believe it is here already, when this will be the single most urgent thing to do, a time when allying with nature will indeed happen, when all hands will be on deck, like the rebuilding of countries after a war, after apocalypse, after collapse.

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I'll stop for today on this note. The night is well on its way. Frogs are ticking, crickets are busy, dogs are howling, a gibbous moon rides into the sky.

To bed, then.

Take care, everyone.

Suprabha

P. S. I am attaching the pdf file with the first three dispatches.