

Dispatch from the Plant Underground

Dispatch 6: Bestiaries in a world gone wrong

2nd August 2010



Dear friends,

I am hugely embarrassed to have sent out the incomplete draft of Dispatch 6, as opposed to this one, especially after working on it so much, and also to have open copied everyone. All that came from running low on battery while getting sudden momentary connectivity. I made a wrong choice and uploaded the wrong draft with a gun to my head! I hope you've all ignored the previous one and that you take a little more time to look into this version here.

In a way it's good all that happened. It reflects certain issues that plague us all! You also get to see work in progress!

###

I wanted to thank all those who had written in, many different people this time, many for the first time. I heard from several old friends too, and this was really wonderful. I was away for three days and came back to find a treasure trove of sweet letters. I hope I managed to reply to everyone in person. This dispatch comes out of very different sets of thoughts that have been running through my head these last few days, different experiences and some oddly contrasting issues. I'd like to take you through bestiaries, human nature, travel and education.

###

I do really think sometimes that I live in a bestiary (a place of real and strange animals, a book or compendium of animals where every animal represents a moral lesson through allegorical tale). Yes, a bestiary and not a garden. Or maybe I live in a bestiary in a garden in a forest.

Here are some fellow beasties I met today: several Pillbugs, 4 Fairy Bluebirds, 2 Hornbills, a Ratsnake, a Malabar Tree Nymph, a Southern Birdwing and a Common Mormon; a troop of Bonnet Macaques, 2 Scarlet Minivets, 2 Yellow-browed Bulbuls; three different frogs, a large purple earthworm, many cicadas, and many more uncountable spiders, ants, wasps, grasshoppers, bugs, beetles and leeches. I also met a hanging hive of rock bees. And some fish and snails in the pond. And a Calotes (lizard) on a tree.

That's just me on a little walk, and that's only the animals I could see, not the ones I heard or whose traces I recognized: chew marks and nibbled leaves, cocoons broken open, earth structures and hollows, slime trails on tree trunks.

And that's in the rainy season. Imagine how much more is visible and audible in the dry season.

And that's a tiny fraction of what Sandy and Suresh (who is of the Kurchiya tribe) see.

And that's not including the plants, or the fungi or the bacteria. Can a bestiary include plants? Why not? If a garden can include animals, then surely a bestiary can include plants.

Any of you also live in one? A bestiary, I mean? I don't have another word to describe a place bursting with gleeful and passionate lifeforms. Today I was deeply struck by the passionate nature of life. And of the rain and the wind and the river and the light and the swaying trees. I felt it in my steps as I walked, and in my dream as I napped in a greenhouse full of funny and intriguing plants, each a character in a marvelous story rich in detail, plot and meaning. If ever I write a book it will be full of fantastic plants and definitely it will feature ones that have a sense of humour. I think I'll also include plants that are genius strategists with undercover agents and the like.

But, back to bestiaries.

Even the house I live in is a bestiary. Other than the humans and the rambunctious canines, in my room alone, there are several large spiders, an ant-mimicking spider and a jumping spider (as I write this now) and often one of those scary tarantula-like things. I chucked one out yesterday. There is an itinerant brown cricket on the lintel under the eave. A pink and yellow toad by my doormat, who hops into my laundry basket when the dogs gallop in. A large forest cockroach with mottled brown papery wings who scuttles in and out of the gaps in the window. Possibly a catsnake or two in the roof. Possibly a wolfsnake or two curled under the broom on the porch. Two, if not three different species of ants, a ghostly frenetic one that loves the heat of the laptop. Beautiful glossy earwigs that hide behind the books in the cabinet.

There are many other visitors who drop in every now and then: leaf insects, stick insects, brocaded moths, tree frogs, a dark terrifying cricket with huge mandibles and strong spiny legs; a gecko, crane flies and mosquitoes, praying mantises, a rat or two, and of course fleas with the dogs. The other night a bat flew in (and out).

Many nights I hear the long high pitched whistle of the Slender Loris as she traverses the wood, upslope from my room. I feel strangely at peace when I hear the loris. Many nights when it is not raining I hear soft hoots and gurgles, tickings and chitterings, maybe Nightjars, maybe Tinkling Frogs, maybe Bandicoot rats. Some dawns the Whistling Thrush and the Puff throated Babbler sing me out of my sleep.

And that's not to mention: the shrews and caecilians and civets and King Cobras and wild boar and Brown Fish Owls and many many more that I rarely see or have never seen, but only heard stories of.

###

I've been with friends in Coorg for three days. Coorg is the district just north of here, in the state of Karnataka. I often think of Wayanad as the poor cousin of Coorg. Similar landscapes, similar agriculture. But Wayanad looks chewed up, as the landholding size is very small, a few acres. The estates of Coorg tend to be at least 20 acres in size. And many are several hundred acres. As a result the landscape appears different in texture and patchiness between the two districts.

Our friends, Sujata, Annu and Maya have a lovely place called Rainforest Retreat near Madikeri. I really like going there because I get another view into the same region, and I get to spend time with people who care about forests but do something quite different. People who have other talents and understandings. Friends who generously share their passions and concerns and wear their wisdom lightly.

Their land has three little valleys, steep sided hills, wonderful trees laden with epiphytes, clear streams adorned by ferns, and also a coffee and cardamom plantation, as well as fruit orchards, and a great variety of spices.

I find when I spend time with Sujata and Annu, I start speaking a slightly different language and I start to listen to slightly different aspects of the same things. I enter the fascinating dimension of proteins, polypeptides, alcohols and esterases, acids, pheromones, volatile organic compounds, amines, bacteria, fungi, sugars, viruses and the whole business of pathogens and disease. I enter the world of biochemistry, signalling systems, rapidfire exchanges between plants and insects, plants and plants, between soil organisms and plants, between soil minerals, soil organic matter and organisms. I enter the exquisite dimension of smell as revealed by Sujata's frequent urgings, "smell this!".

I usually feel ignorant, inadequate and hopelessly lost. The detail of things unseen overwhelms me. Nevertheless I always find it refreshing even if a little daunting, this biochemical world. I also find it restful sometimes, just hearing about all this great intelligence at work.

The conversations this time that were steered by young Maya touched upon other unseen magical things: that were more my zone of comfort and equal fascination. Maya is currently studying (and writing about) fairies, mermaids, elves and gnomes, in other words, the biodiversity and taxonomy of sprites. Maya is also an expert on dolphins and whales. Maya knows a lot about rainforests and the creatures that inhabit them.

Maya has grown up in the rainforest.

###

And so have Sandy and Anna. They have both grown up here at the Sanctuary.

Which makes me think of education, upbringing and the landbases we experience and imbibe when we are very young. I tend to think of children as the fruit of their homes, neighbourhoods. When they come up the Sanctuary entrance (the groups of kids who visit here), I watch their bodies moving up the laterite stairs one step at a time, or maybe two. Some struggling, some leaping. Some fearful, some excited, some bold and confident. Some watchful, alert, some noisy and enclosed. So much can be read from these movements, about the places these children are from.

A lot is spoken by the body itself. States of ignorance and knowing are revealed as much or even more so, by the body's engagement with its internal and external realities, as by what is spoken, uttered. I am aware of this for myself.

It seems with children so much is just natural and effortless. Learning is effortless, language is effortless, observation is effortless, play and sleep and relating are all effortless. I see this

with kids who have grown up here, how effortless is their participation in this complex dynamic rainforest world, how at ease they are with plants and animals and trees and land and river and fish. I see even with youngsters who are not familiar with this world here, give them some time and they magically unfold into supple, dynamic new beings, shaped anew by the forest and the terrain and the life they encounter.

But when all this is abstracted, made into a formal topic or a subject with boundaries, this effortlessness gets lost. I see how some kids know so much about birds, say, from books or documentaries, that they can't see the real thing. They are actually ignorant. This is even more true of adults.

I see how too often, education as we commonly know it, enforces closure, a held state of defence and fear, in people. Education and modern industrial life. I see how willynilly all that training, and schooling and urban living, leads to people who shut out the rest of the living world, which is daily in greater and greater peril.

Our educational work at the Sanctuary begins with ourselves as learning individuals, and we ask a few really basic questions. What is seeing and how can we see better? What is it to listen? And how can we listen better? What is it to relate to an idea of something and to the actual thing, be it a person, a plant, an emotion, a happening, a process? What comes first: the idea or the experience? What are the implications of either? What causes closure, shut down? What facilitates opening?

I have been thinking about education because we need to plan out our next season's programmes. When the monsoon goes, people appear on the horizon. There is so much we can all do together. I write this now, so that you can, if you like, tell me things you value in the area of education and learning-in-nature.

####

Wolfgang walked up to me in the kitchen yesterday when I was perched on the side of the woodstove, and said, "Maybe you should learn *I Pity the Poor Immigrant* and sing it to me". So I learned the song and later we sang bits of it together and listened over dinner to Dylan's plaintive young voice rendering these sad lyrics in a sad way. I later decided to learn *I am a Lonesome Hobo* as well. Both songs are from the album John Wesley Harding.

There are days, months, times when the going gets bleak, even in the most positive of actions. What could be more beautiful than working in a forest garden, what could be better than a life in paradise, what could be more rewarding than working with living things? Very little, but then when a bunch of people get together they can make the most beautiful of actions feel difficult, sometimes like hell! And this is true in the art world, the music world, the conservation world, the alternative world, the education world, any world where two or more humans have to function together: lovers, friends, siblings, spouses, co-workers, family, community, neighbourhood and nation.

The failure of the monsoon, illness, accidents, penury, violence, conflict, theft and vandalism, war of attrition between egomaniacs, any of these could happen in a World Gone Wrong. And our ability to deal with these effectively, greatly influences our work. These are of course, very small issues compared to global climate change, state sponsored terrorism, genocide, ecocide, the continuing extinction of so many species. Really small stuff, but this is what most people's days are occupied with.

The Sanctuary is a place where the local and the global play themselves out, the personal and the political, the individual and the collective. For the greater part we do very well, because all of us believe wholeheartedly that we have to address these core issues on all fronts. But that doesn't mean we don't have trouble or that we always know what to do.

These days here are a few things that trouble us.

We are faced with severe shortage of working people in the Sanctuary. Skilled and unskilled persons. It is a huge place in some ways, because our charges are so many. How do we take care of hundreds of thousands of plants, both indoors and outdoors, with the number of people we have? Overwork leads to many problems. Typically organizations that run on

voluntary work are overstretched often. If you look ahead at the calendar, as Wolfgang and Laly and Suma have to do, and plan the repotting and planting out and care of all these plants, it is actually amazing that they are as calm as they are!

We are faced with age, disease and death (like everyone else in the world!). What happens when one of us is no longer able or falls unwell or leaves or dies? What happens to all the plants?! In a small team, even one person down or away, has huge implications.

We are faced with tough decisions amongst us, and the universal issues of working and living together. The daily stuff: good most days, rotten, some. How do we listen to each other, what are our non-negotiable areas, how do we get navigate our way through these?

We are faced with the juggernaut of progress and development bearing down on us, the forests, the neighbourhood. When men in SUVs turn up on our doorstep enquiring for land to purchase, men with a lot of money going after critical pieces in our watershed or bits bordering us, we know the implications: skyrocketing prices, ugly buildings, and the latest craze, resorts. How do we keep them at bay? Can we keep them at bay?

We are now and then faced with security threats, which happens when you "own" something, or are protective of something, or have borders and boundaries, or assets, or causes even. Over the years we have faced everything from theft to political scandals. Our delinquent Rottweiler brigade is partially a security measure, thousands of people come here, there are no armed guards, the place is pretty open. How do we keep the place friendly and welcoming but strong, focussed and steady? How do we prevent damage of one kind or another? What are our worst fears?

I am just naming a few. Some of you have asked about how it goes for us on a daily basis. Some of you wonder about our future. Some of you are just worried about how we manage to do so much with so little. The work after all is of a public nature and concerns everyone, but there's only a handful of people (and a lot of plants and animals) holding it together. A handful of people with a huge responsibility for very vulnerable species from a very vulnerable biome.

I would like to, if you don't mind, and I hope my colleagues and fellow Sanctuarians don't mind,

gently and slowly open out the many aspects, layers and interpretations of life here, life everywhere. It seems to me, and I know Wolfgang shares this, and Sandy too and others here, that it is very urgent and deeply necessary for all of us (you guys too) to address the predicament our world is in. My own style is to be personal and political in a somewhat candid and simple way. I tend to open all the drawers and look in as well as travel a lot and look around. I'd like to start at home, but not remain here! Others will have other styles.

I was very touched by those of you who have written in about some of your concerns. I really appreciated hearing about all that. Maybe someday we can have a forum to share more between all of us. There is such an urgency for this.

Incidentally, the number of people these dispatches are going out to is more than I started out with. Encouraging, but daunting! So I've uploaded through Facebook and Scribd, a pdf file of four dispatches. I'll upload 1-6 as soon as connectivity allows.

###

Two last things: the monsoon was fantastic for a few days. The river swelled and flooded over the bridge. I had to wade across with Sandy's help to leave for Coorg, and by the time I got back, there was a boat ferrying people and supplies back and forth.

But now, today, it's very dry. Elsewhere, especially the coast, we hear it's hammering down.

Chaiti and a group of young non-resident Indians (from the US) were here for a few days as part of the travel and education programme of Inspire. They were here when it rained really hard! I didn't have much to do with them, they were busy with a lot of processing and reflecting work at the end of their journey together, but it was great to have some more bodies here in the monsoon!

And now the night is deepening. My clock says it is 23:55 hrs. There is some light rain. Falaafel (dog) is snoring. Some frogs are active. Many small insects, mostly moths are fluttering on my

glass pane.

And I shall bid ye farewell and go now to sleep.

warm wishes

Suprabha