

## Munnarakkunnu or Three and a Half Hills

The intention was to write about this place, these Three and A Half Hills or *Munnarakkunnu* (the name for our neighbourhood), this little garden at the edge of the woods and what it's like to live here, but I got sidetracked by a faint whiff of the wild outback regions of our individual and collective human Mind. For it is in this shadow zone between wildness and intellect, between heart and head, between personal and impersonal, between the marvelous human body with its own sensuousness and the surrounding world that some vestige of hope remains: for the rivers, for the forests, for ourselves.

So friends, I wanted to tell you about the land and the trees and the miraculous recovery of the rainforest here. As forests go, it is a very small patch, but when you enter it you experience it as vast. I wanted, in fact, to tell you about the Return of The Trees. I wanted to call out to you “let the land be, and the trees will surely come back!” I can show you, there are tens of thousands of them out there. Stand on the Water Tower and see how they re-inhabit the 50 acres now. There they are: all surging madly upwards on this once beaten stretch. You can hear them snapping and creaking and soughing as the monsoon winds whip through these hills and valleys. Make note of the fact that the edges between the renewing areas and the old forest are blurring. The best part is, we didn't do a thing. We just let them be.

I wanted to share with you the particularity of this neighbourhood, of this community, and of what it means to live in conviviality and reciprocity with rainforest beings: plant, animal, fungus, human, with all creatures great and small. For the landscape, that is, the land and all who inhabit it, and all the waters and winds that flow through it are a single unified entity. The boundaries of our making, the fences and walls and property deeds, never coincide with those drawn by climate, terrain and biology. Watch the trickle of sweet water flowing year round out of our rejuvenating hillside with its hundreds of species of wild beings, nourishing our fields, and those of our neighbours, to finally join the waters of the Kabini, and you will know this to be an undeniable truth.

I wanted to share with you the magic of frog song, of frogs that were rarely seen 30 years ago, now immodestly spawning, clamouring lustily from every pond and rock wall. Brazen amphibians, lubriciously slipping and sliding everywhere, and calling for celebration when the decline of frogs worldwide has been noted as a sign that things are seriously wrong. Clearly, the added number of water bodies, the cover of trees and the resulting moistness of the forest floor as well as the absence of poisons and pollutants have all helped in welcoming them to this hill.

I wanted you somehow to dance the rainforest dance, the swirling whirling utterly sensuous dance of intoxicating complexity. To feel what it's like to live out your daily life at the feet of a hundred different kinds of trees, hung with moss, festooned with lianas, supporting flocks of colourful birds and countless insects, and to watch them all sway and swing in the storm from below. Indeed, what would this forest be without its trees, without Kakamaram and Todayan and Karivetti and Pala and Iiti? Without Mango and Jackfruit and Jamun and Fig? Or Cinnamon and Dammer and Nutmeg? What would it be without its Iron Wood, the great and magnificent *Mesua ferrea*, the last of whom may still be seen deep in the heart of our local reserve? It baffles the mind: these woods are so ancient and timeless, and so invincible. They have stood perhaps 100 million years: you feel they could just go on and on and on.

And yet, you know the apparent unshakeable solidity of their presence is only a mirage. The great forests of this mountain region are now almost entirely gone. Our descendants will live in the shelter of concrete, or perhaps on barren and desolate wastelands of leached laterite. The work of other creatures upon their lives: upon their minds and their own remarkable and

once wild bodies will cease in a generation or two. And they too will be desolate, forlorn, and wasted.

How strange that we are able to destroy not only something so ancient, but something so vital, so absolutely necessary for our own existence. At least a thousand different species of plants are rooted out of these wet western forests to be powdered and stewed and squished into an array of lotions and potions of great value. Animals are hunted; frogs skewered and fish fished way beyond any sensible proportion. Water, that precious substance, is overused (and thus drying up wells in one of the wettest parts of the country) or abused, turned into a lifeless thing, a sewer. Rocks are quarried and hillsides flattened. Swamps are dredged and paddy fields turned to banana plantations for export. Fires are rampant, and we heard this year that more than half of our district succumbed to burning by fire. Cancer, in this rural area, runs rife from pesticides in water, soil, air, plant, fish and fowl. Traditional multi layered diverse farms, which supplied families with everything from tubers to rice and timber and vegetables and fruit and spice, are being replaced by tea. People who know the most about these woods, like Kartha and her clan, our Paniya friends in the neighbourhood, and who perhaps can care for them most sensitively, are desensitized and displaced, converted into agents of further destruction. Beautiful forested Wayanad, a “backward” district in Gods Own Country stands in grave danger of being completely stripped, even as it fills with resorts catering to tourists from Calicut, Chennai and California, by advertising its (once) natural, wild and unsullied nature.

So this is the scene. This is part of living here. Part of the story of *this* place.

And yet again, and this is what I really wanted to say, that it is possible to do things differently. That the Trees and Frogs and Birds and Insects and Worms and Mosses and Orchids, and along with them the Water and the Soil and the Forest and the Farm and all the Sparkling People can return. It takes some time, some work and some knowledge, some redirecting of things, some care and awareness.

But most of all it takes a big heart. Heart enough to leave things alone, to let all those magical Others get on with their job, they’ll gladly do it for you, in fact. They will replenish the earth. It’s their commitment, their god-given task, their irrevocable destiny. Try asking them. They’ll always, *always* comply.