

Touch-Me-Nots

Neethu Krishnan

He is reclined on an easy chair under the cashew tree, flamingo legs pointing to the ribs of the old house. From the kitchen window six paces behind him, bunkered from the sun, I study the sugar-wooled and sun-spotted spindly husk of my portrait-still grandfather, the drizzle of sunset-coloured cashew apples, the only animation in frame.

I wonder what his milky gaze registers of the last, dusty wheezes of the past before him.

The wood-sutured, newspaper-taped, metal-bandaged house droops skeletal stripped of its century-old earthy sinew. The cat ears of the red-tile roof. The quadrisected, ancient, smoke-blackened wooden doors of the kitchen kittens liquified over and under. The diamond-patterned wood, kingfisher blue, of doors, frames, and sections of walls criss-crossing the continuum of the inside and out without divorcing one from the other. The corner room with a constellation of ancestral dates and events including and up to my little brother's birth in the new millennium pencilled in spidery Malayalam on azure walls.

The terrarium of my childhood dismantles brick by crumbling brick, tile after algaed terracotta tile, leaving columns of buttermilk air haunting its place.

Every summer in the school holidays, we'd flee our floating tinderbox flats in Mumbai for our nests in the boughs of Kerala — also called *God's own country* — to where my parents belong. The exhaustion, grime and preoccupations of the city steamed off us as soon as we deboarded the train, their grey strands scrambling to hairball at the railway station in the rickshaw's rearview mirror, awaiting our return a month or two later.

Roads with more potholes than tar delivered us to our final destination: a gravelled, grass-haired path, snug enough for an autorickshaw or a white Ambassador car depositing us four – mum, dad, brother and I – to dentured smiles and moist eyes. From the midst of indoor plumbing, uninterrupted power supply and peopled concrete to the ethereal middle of nowhere, we thus pilgrimed every year. Limbs of bright, tropical green synchronized in winsome 'come hither' waves as our auto whipped past, the welcoming stretches of them like

a high-resolution scenic wallpaper come to life, its colours and contours only sharper, just so, it refocused the eyes to a balmy softness and clarity.

The particulate-free yolk yellow of day, though expected, shocked anew our senses every time. A rainbow of birds, iridescent cobalts to lustrous crimsons, jewelled the velvet green of the forested plot. Squirrels chirped. Mongooses darted by in blinks. Chameleons melted into barks and rocks in real time. Snakes imprinted lazy waves on silty sands then coiled and slithered, their scales glistening sequins of sun on the dense umbrella of emerald. Fruits, flowers and berries discothequed their own riot of fragrances and hues; the acreage carpeted with magenta and white frangipani blossoms, ruby, cream and pink hibiscuses, pearly Arabian jasmynes, waxy golden insides of burst jackfruits and bird-pecked and squirrel-nibbled remains of rose apples, mangoes and papayas.

Painted in shades of the skies, the plantains and the pink flesh of sweet guavas, my grandparents' old house melded into the alcove of wildness like a natural outgrowth from the light alluvium. Its attic pattered with nail clicks, presumably of rats. The kitchen plumed wood smoke all day, sooting the insides including the doors, walls, ceilings, switchboards and knick-knacks a deep charcoal. Even the resident lizards were a permanent comical black, as if the house spawned its own smoke-adapted species. Stray cats domesticated themselves, licking spotless the shaved coconut shells brimming with milk or fish-mixed rice or bones in fish water my grandparents left on the kitchen floor. Frogs and toads catapulted inside, their jellied mustards and olives croaking from shadowed nooks. Spiders gauzed the underside of roofs, their gossamer fractals oil-spill colours in prised sun.

A layering of scents registered themselves as indelible markers of *veedu*, home; slices of morning memory. Fresh wet earth, free of the signature chemical undertone of Mumbai factory exhausts. The crackling, warm scent of dry mulch and weeds Grandfather burned by the long-vacant cow shed located opposite the house that still wafted its signature smell of wet hay and dry cow dung. The cool blue scent of detergent from the stone-washed clothes sunning on the low tin roof of the cowshed; each article of clothing weighed down at the corners with small rocks sharing space with the blue soap dish with the blue laundry soap inside, also set out to dry. The cashew nuts with their hardened, black shells roasting in the fireplace inside the cow shed, dried palm fronds spitting amber sparks and ash as Grandfather prodded and tossed the hot nuts, flicking them out into the golden sand with a twig as they were done, cracking the hard, ebony shells of them open with a stone simultaneously, producing in his callused, wide palms the green-tinged white kidney-shaped kernels for us kids to eat.

Fruits rained, cracking and scattering chunks of the corrugated earthen roof — an inevitability when you prostrated to nature and burrowed yourself under its human-indifferent, bountiful wing.

Power outages, though a constant, were irrelevant. No one had constellations of personal electronics that demanded feeding, or illnesses that necessitated temperature manipulation via appliances. All that went out were incandescent bulbs, the radio, the one fan, and the black-and-white television rarely, if ever, employed. What today is rustic, immersive, nature-interactive — the luxury of social and electronic detox, craved, sought, paid for — was in retrospect, every day, accruing into years, of my childhood holidays, sans the adult-onset mindfulness, introspection and reflection on the punitive speck of human silhouetted against the outliving, ferocious and boundless canvas of nature unperturbed by the presence or absence of a sentient, romanticising, fly-on-its-art audience, of course.

My grandparents are lounged in the kitchen of our decade-new, two-storey house, a cashew-tree canopy away from the old. They refuse to use our bedrooms or bathrooms, afraid of soiling our whites: floors, walls, switches. With their mud-caked feet. With Grandfather's cashew-sapped fingers he forgets to wash after twisting off the nuts from their juicy apples. With the occasional diaper-spilling accidents of his that Grandmother insists on remediating herself, outside our house, under the municipality taps. But they don't say it in so many words. They blame the Marbonite tiles as being too slippery for their arch-flattened, old feet made for and acclimated to coarse earth and cemented floors.

The reconstruction of the old house is almost complete. I venture out at night, kisses of southwest monsoon cooling the air bearable, almost pleasant.

The rebuilt house is wet-cement grey, its slaty insides discombobulating. The rarefied, time-worn, tangible quality that whispered, palms against pink guava walls, is lost. It feels bereft of something vital: its soothing, antiqued essence.

Or I could be projecting.

In the cold, stony kitchen, Grandmother, indifferent to her restructured surroundings, waddles about, arranging and rearranging utensils and condiments, eager to re-home Grandfather in his familiar orbit.

I step out of the strange new house and shuttle my gaze between the grey of it and our white a few feet away. The vision materialises out of nowhere, like a pastiche of the present over the begone, a double-exposure of day against night.

The gargantuan tamarind tree – that once reached for the sky where our white-distempered house now stands – flutters its feathery leaves, shaking free in its claps a few tamarind pods. Little me and my brother perch on the throne of piled, uncut rubble under the mammoth, sun-swallowing foliage and a cloud of fat, drunk mosquitoes. We chew absently on bitter tamarind leaves and giddily sort our treasures of shiny red-brown seeds and whimsical pastel feathers. To our front, beyond the barbed, ankle-high fence, are the touch-me-nots. A single touch quivers their leaves to unpeeling folds, unfurling only when it perceives the threat of us passed. Their flowers, however, stand proud. Lavender pink starbursts, fibrous rays sprayed to perfect globes at the tips of stems.

Superimposing the pink-asterisked quilt green tonight, however, is an unoccupied two-storey mirror of ours. Its property-demarkating concrete walls in place of the low fences of my childhood total eclipse from each other our house and the path. The path, where bell-collared elephants and their mahouts once jingled past, who swaggered in with a single wave of our arms to curl in their rubbery trunks fresh coconut leaves and plantains by the bunch, our offerings to the playful, smiling giants.

The loss is unsettling.

I fix my gaze back at the grey house, away from the ghostly white where a megalith of nature once wrapped the sky. The sentimentality is hollow, embarrassing. After all, you can't plug devices into a tree or section private rooms for the urban in you.

You do not notice the omnipresence of heat until a sudden-onset illness transmutes your body into a wary, human temperature sensor with an appallingly low tolerance threshold, shutting down at the tiniest increment from its life-limiting new norm, maroons you to a bed.

When the blazing coin in the sky, once basked in, now anathematized, taps its scorching, humid fingers, you fold without thought or intention, the ground and skies shifting, spinning. The amethyst-flowered weeds or the millipedes or the mint-green butterflies do nothing to distract from the systems running amok, shutting down in fits and starts, in a body you no longer exercise control over. With scorching chain links of humid heat around your throat, your head, your entire being, all you wish for is the heat to retreat back to its womb of sky and restore for you a breathing space – a tiny room-sized cuboid of its void.

When the manufactured cool, your new sanctuary, your holy embrace, slowly, over days, unfurls you leaf by traumatized leaf, unlike the touch-me-nots that snap open like they shut, in one clean go, still eye-wateringly fresh, their delicate feathery leaves still unruffled,

undamaged green, your eyes and ears cannot care less about the red-whiskered bulbuls or the Indian golden orioles or the white-cheeked barbets gemming the greens in the tropical hot daylight outside, a discouraging wall away.

The life-ascertaining, wondrous embrace of sunlit wilderness impossible to get bored with or be satiated by, shuns you, cruelly, repeatedly, making it impossible for you to unsee the spider silk webs of ableism, that you too once took for granted, like the rest of thermoregulated, unwilting in the heat humanity. But never one to be perpetually bitter, you look for the resilient, unaffected, lavender pinks in your personal field of touch-me-nots: the grace of monsoons, winters, sunless cool nights.

So, what if the tamarind still sprawled? Or the untamed, chimeral house still breathed? Or the field of touch-me-nots feathered the acreage green, its leaves and flowers shivering in the breeze like the fur of a gentle sleeping giant underfoot?

An unironic touch-me-not in the grip of illness, I could only have enjoyed the solace of their existence as mere relics – peeped at from behind dark-tinted glass for a few minutes, like a miser counting and recounting their stash of wealth they never use or intend to.

But the solace of dark glasses, the safe vantage to watch a sturdier new replace the crumbling old, and the alternative roof and floor to house the grandparents when the century-old threatened collapsing-in would never have been were the tamarind tree to stay anyway. The rhapsodising, then, of the tiny fraction forgone is pointless, indulgent, redundant.

A coconut thumps in the distance. Crickets and frogs choir. Fibrous baby mangoes pebble the shiny new tin awning. For now, all is as should be. For now, there's more than ever has been. For now, Grandfather, sleeping on his old bed in the new house, is still a good two days away from sublimating with the spectral vestiges of the old.

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