Introspections of an urban animal.

As a child, I spent a lot of time outdoors. For a boy growing up in the heart of Bangalore city, that didn't mean lush green jungles or endless golden grasslands. My memories of the spaces of my childhood exist almost entirely as a kaleidoscope of running around football grounds, walking back from school and exploring urban neighbourhoods. If I tried to build an ecosystem from my memories, the only biotic factors would be people - friends, family, acquaintances and strangers. The abiotic factors would be buildings, streets, billboards, and a diversity of functional infrastructure like goalposts and monkey bars. Motorcycles, cars and buses were forces like tides and currents that moved life along some predetermined path.

If I dig deep, a blurry memory surfaces of picking and eating fruits from a Black nightshade plant or a Singapore cherry tree. Even the rose bush that grew in our garden only exists in my memory as a source of gifts to earn brownie points with my teachers. I didn't have a relationship with any of those natural actors, so they rest as afterthoughts in my memory.

It doesn't matter that I come from a country with many communities and cultures that live closely with the natural world because I grew up in a city. I wasn't moulded to see nature as cohabitants but as resources waiting to be extracted for my benefit. I was a child of the global city. I wasn't taught that I was a part of my world but above it. I wasn't one animal in a system of interdependence but a protagonist trying to win life instead of living it.

I internalised my culture and began to climb imaginary ladders. The thing about these social ladders is that they're great when you're still climbing them - perseverance is such a mesmerising state of mind. When someone gets to the end of the ladder or stops halfway to catch their breath, they realise there is no real up or down but just a sense of detachment. The emptiness paints the world in grey. Looking back, I now see why I felt comfortable on cloudy Bangalore mornings - everyone could share the sight of my grayscale world.

This was an odd state of existence, I knew the names of different colours and what they looked like but I lacked the diction to make sense of what they felt like. I could tell them apart visually but emotionally colour had no meaning. What difference did it make to me if a car was white or red? All I knew was that it was a car and not a bird. Seeing the colour green on something that doesn't have any meaning inside your mind, is not unlike reading the word 'green'.

It was around this time of greyout in my life, that I decided to start a garden on my terrace. I bought pots, bags of soil, seeds and several saplings. I had no idea what I was doing. Fortunately, I had people around and I asked for help. Over the next few months, I toiled blissfully - watering them at dawn, regularly refreshing the soil with fresh nutrients and moving the fast-growers to bigger pots. The garden grew to 52 species of plants. I had the deepest relationships with those 52 individuals. It was an intensity I had only felt with a handful of humans. The tendrils of the clock vine growing on a pillar had already climbed into my mind and made a home where the plant would live forever. As my garden grew inside me, I began to see colour. Brown and green became the primary colours of my world, and mixing different shades of these two colours resulted in every other colour. The light greens and pale browns of Euphorbia gave birth to flowers of red and yellow that brought warmth to my mind. The deep green rain lilies against the medley of browns in the soil sprouted gorgeous flowers of white and shades of pink that plunged my imagination into alternate realities.

I was surrounded by these colours all my life and I could see them but for the first time in my life, I felt them. I think colour as electromagnetic radiation reaches our visual senses and we are often programmed by modern education systems to stop our experiences there - because it is functionally sufficient in an urban context. Through my garden, I found that colour was so much more than a name assigned to a wavelength of light, and all I needed

was a deep connection with something to truly perceive it. This garden growing in the middle of a bustling city became a dictionary of my senses.

I became a part of my garden, and my garden became a part of me. The leaves spoke to me when they didn't receive enough water, they also spoke to me when they got too much water. The green on their leaves didn't just pass information from the plant to me but regularly evoked thoughts about beyond our shared space. Thanks to my garden, I could use my newfound language to enrich and express my experiences in different spaces. For instance, I found that colours in other natural spaces were now enriched with new meanings. The green reflected by leaves in an evergreen forest now permeates every corner of my mind and body. At dawn, the deep green of the leaves sprayed with the golden rays of the sun pierce the canopy filling me with peace and hope, and I feel a lump in my throat and a tear or two resting on my lower eyelid. Around mid-day, the same patch of forest reflects shades of green that induce a sense of safety and the inexplicable urge to take a nap. At dusk, when every shade of green turns into a dark silhouette against an inky blue sky, I feel small, vulnerable and alone. As the quiet blackness of the night sets in, I find comfort in the yellow fires and incandescent bulbs that mimic the comforting presence of the sun.

Several hours after the deep-powdery blue devours green at dusk and swallows it into darkness, the earth turns, as it always does, back towards a velvety blue sky. The cycle repeats endlessly and with each rotation comes a spectrum of colours, thoughts and emotions - each essential to establishing the identity of the other. I would not know the feeling of hope if it was all I felt. The moments of despair in my life paint the background against which I see hope. And I would not know despair if I didn't long for joy. The spectrum of visible colours, like the inner workings of my mind and the functioning of entire ecosystems can be viewed as delicate balances of interconnectedness. Our minds are filled with diverse thoughts and emotions, each giving meaning to the other, creating a personality. Our communities are filled

with diverse viewpoints and cultures, each lending context to the other, and birthing society. Our world is filled with many life forms and processes, each inextricably linked to the other, creating ecosystems.

That's what I had unwittingly created on my terrace, an ecosystem.

There were times when I wasn't altogether and those days I would not make my bed because I'd barely sleep in it. My garden would resemble my unmade bed and the state of my mind. I would neglect my responsibilities to my garden. Was it apathy? Was it a deliberate attempt to hurt my plants so they could feel what I felt? Either way, a few days and several wilted leaves later, I felt a deep sense of guilt. Those were among my first days of consciously contemplating empathy for lives other than humans. I recognised the pain I had caused the plants. It was pain that was undeserved. It was pain that could have been avoided by the actions of another being. It was a pain that resembled mine.

Those were also among my first days thinking about the interconnectedness of all things. Each living thing in my garden had a role to play. Bees navigated the city to find the large white flowers of the clock vine in my garden. They would hover carefully as they came in for a well-executed landing into the flower. They collected their nectary reward after unwittingly picking up a pollen package for delivery inside a clock vine flower elsewhere. Inside one of those flowers sat a gorgeous white crab spider waiting for an unsuspecting bee to fly into her deadly embrace. On a leaf beneath the indistinguishable crab spider and flower, a stunning green lynx spider regularly hunted herbivores visiting the clock vine. Jumping spiders adorned the rest of the plant at regular intervals and played the part of both predators of insects and spiders, and prey for other spiders and insects. The gorgeous blues and reds of spider wasps would flit around the plant in search of one of the many puppy-eyed jumping spiders. Ignoring them all, an adult cranefly came to lay her eggs in the soil from which the clock vine grew. Cranefly larvae are detritivores (read: chefs for plants) - they break down

organic matter in the soil and the broken-down nutrients become plant food. I could see this explosion of ecology taking place in a space no larger than a bathmat. On just one plant, life had assembled itself, and my role was to simply water this plant every other morning. I was getting more than I was giving, and I could only hope that the insects, spiders and fungi in my garden felt the same way. We were greater than the sum of our parts. Together we were something truly remarkable. For the first time in my life, I found a sense of belonging and it came from knowing my place in my garden, and nature.

It was on one corner of this clock vine that I met an orb-weaver spider late one night that sent me on a journey of fear, curiousity and eventually, deep affection. Through many nights spent with this eight-legged cohabitant of the garden, I found the euphoria of asking questions. With each question she seeded in my head, I went down a silken spiral of looking for answers and finding more questions. It remains the greatest gift I have ever received from another living being.

Through nearly three decades of living in Bangalore and other cities around the world, I had only seen the human layer of this world. My worldview was as grey as the concrete that dominated my memories. A garden in the middle of an urban maze - a garden I was a part of - helped reconnect me with the rest of this world. And thanks to everything that my garden taught me, I can experience nature in all its shapes, forms and colours. Nature, as I've found, isn't just something buried deep in a forest or tucked away inside a coral reef. Nature is everywhere. The fiery explosions in the sun, the swaying of grasslands, a person returning home from work or a single speck of dust floating in the rays of the morning sun. We are all intertwined in a web of interdependence.

To truly appreciate this tapestry, I needed to understand it. I could only understand it when I cared about it. That deep-rooted sense of empathy and belonging came from regenerating my relationship with the natural world. Like any relationship, it took time and

work. Within an ecosystem, each element (biotic or abiotic) plays a crucial role in the lives and *unlives* of everything around them. I do my best to do things and when appropriate, not do things to mitigate my impact on this balance. I keep a keen eye on the colours around me, and the ones inside my mind.

My kaleidoscope of memories now contains colours I didn't imagine existed.