

Ecology by A.K. Ramanujam
by Gayathri Ramachandran

"September just went by here in Chennai. And we are halfway through the Tamizh month of Purattasi, a month well-known in communal lore for a second brief summer heat-scorch, before the monsoon rains arrive. And while the heat is real -- my body can testify to that -- what marks September for me is a different visual and tactile experience -- splotches of chewed splatter on the pathways -- spat-out remnants of Punnai fruits, that the fruit bats leave behind every morning, following their nightly feast.

This is what my family and I do on September mornings; we use the coconut-frond broom to scrape Punnai fruit spit from the concrete pathways near our well and water tanks. We sweep it to one side and then mulch the whole collection of chewed, half-eaten, and intact, fallen Punnai fruits into the garden, in the mulch bed surrounding our Punnai tree. Punnai is the Tamizh name for the tree *Calophyllum inophyllum*, a sacred temple tree of the 'neithal tinai', the coastal landform that Chennai belongs to. Punnai is native to my part of the world (Tropical Asia), and found in parts as far apart as Indonesia, East Africa and Australia. The tree in our garden was not planted by us. It is likely to have been planted by bird-drop. Or much more likely, fruit bat-drop.

Every September morning when we are engaged thusly in our morning sweeping activities, I recall with a wry grin how there are folks who live in this city of mine who want suggestions for trees to plant around their homes. Except, they say -- the trees should not shed leaves, ideally. Or copious quantities of flowers. Or attract birds and other creatures that will rain their droppings (manure) on parked cars. In response, someone I know, who is involved in urban tree-planting activities here, remarked -- "Sounds like you want a tree made of plastic then?!".

I wonder what is in us, in these days and times, that has forgotten how to stretch to accommodate other beings? Maybe not everyone is willing to take a hard, careful look at their lives and walk down the road to asymptotic minimalism. But surely, we can all try to stretch a little, from wherever we are at the moment, to see if we can create a little more space for other creatures that we share this planetary home with? What would that look like? What minor, temporary discomforts would we choose to endure as we re-learn to share space again, and unlearn self-centeredness? Here is a poem from A.K. Ramanujam, poet, translator, folklorist and philologist, that speaks to this enquiry -- Gayathri Ramachandran"

ECOLOGY by A. K. RAMANUJAN,

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The day after the first rain,
for years, I would come home
in a rage,

for I could see from a mile away
our three Red Champak Trees
had done it again,

had burst into flower and given Mother
her first blinding migraine
of the season

with their street-long heavy-hung
yellow pollen fog of a fragrance
no wind could sift

no door could shut out from our black -
pillared house whose walls had ears
and eyes,

scales, smells, bone-creaks, nightly
visiting voices, and were porous
like us,

but Mother, flashing her temper
like her mother's twisted silver,
grandchildren's knickers

wet as the cold pack on her head,
would not let us cut down
a flowering tree

almost as old as she, seeded,
she said, by a passing bird's
providential droppings

to give her gods and her daughters
and daughters' daughters basketfuls
of annual flower

and for one line of cousins
a dower of migraines in season.