I sing to elephants. It's what I do. I sing because I like to, and because I believe my elephant neighbors are comfortable in my singing presence. I sing all the time, and it's when I sing that I know more precisely how I feel. My own speech never does justice to my thoughts and emotions: always a little clumsy and coarse, somehow inadequate, and inexpressive.

It's different when I sing. My utterances are more in tune with my intentions.

I'm no elephant whisperer, nor do I claim to have complex exchanges with them by moonlight, but the reverse is true: when they come by, I am whispered out of my den by their calls and cries, by their trumpets, rumbles and whooshing sighs. When elephants arrive in the valley, I scoot out of my sheets at night.

I also sing to the langur across the river, and the whistling thrush when he graces this ridge where I live. I sing to treefrogs in the monsoon. I sing to hornbills when they swoop by, matching their cackles and caws, so they swing their heavy-beaked heads to look at me. I sing to hill mynahs all through the winter, my favorite of all musical pleasures. I sing to crows several times a day. As they increase in number in this once crowless place, signifying changes both local and global, the crows here hold lessons in ecology, as well as in musical discovery. As do the macaques, with their so-called commonplace behaviors, and commonplace sounds.

I am typing this on a sunny monsoon morning in a little garden in this forest in the mountains of southern India, amidst a symphony of our own making, all of us here: a racket-tailed drongo, two treepies, a barbet, a flock of loud hill mynahs, two scimitar babbler, two coucals, a red spur fowl, three sunbirds, two yellow-browed bulbuls, some red-whiskered bulbuls, a wood pigeon, a couple of crows, a nilgiri langur, a quiet chittering troop of bonnet macaques, a number of small undiscernible birds, and me.

My vocal cords get a good workout. Hooting, cawing, cackling, trilling, whistling, squealing, croaking and humming between headvoice, chestvoice and bellyvoice. I learn about fine-tuning, resonance, thick sound and thin sound, staccato and slides. I learn riffs and runs too, along intervals that defy our usual human scales. My vocal range grows and strengthens through years of daily practice. I am able to sing in ways today that I could only have fantasized about before.

Of course, I sing to my nonhuman neighbors because they sing so sweetly to me all the time. It is their generosity that I aspire to match, such music calls forth a response. Back and forth. So easy, so lovely, so perfectly tuned to the mood of the moment.

To live for long years in a place works the body, the vocal chords and the mind in a specific and exact way. Epigenetics is real. We are shaped by our environment, by everything and everyone we touch and are touched by, as well as all the stories and messages passing through. The body receives, remembers and transmits, evokes meaning through its very receptivity and eagerness to relate. The jungle tom-tom beats daily, not as the stereotype of a dark man beating a drum to warn other humans of portentous events, but in the million messages, prompts and invitations that pack any column of air or ground. The land, the forest, this community are all abuzz with vibrations: little sonic ripples, and dances of molecules. The art of listening is to be open to these, to become aware and conscious of the effect of them on your supremely conscious body. For life (tissues, cells, organs, bodies and minds) is suggestible. And moreover, it suggests. Not just now and then, but continually, through touch, movement, speech and song, wave and particle. It is a fact that all living beings are tuned in.

Singing is also my direct announcement to others in the forest: I am here. I walk alone. I come in peace, I am happy, I am sad, I'm looking for jamuns, bombax flowers, crinkled seeds of todayan, otterspoo, for rustlings in the gloaming. I know they hear me whether I sing or not, for they hear so much more than I do, but I sing, in part, because I believe that singing transmits much more than mere presence: it carries through tone, beat, volume, phrase and melody, something about the state of my body, the state of my emotion, and my intention. They can of course, choose to stay or to leave; they are not alarmed, and they know it's me, it's the singing woman from that hill. They know me from my voice, from my body's resonances and reverberations, from the particular notes and melodies I emit. They know me from my habits, the way I walk, where and when I walk, perhaps even why.

It is evident to anyone studying nonhumans that they, the nonhumans, have categories of their own, and recognize exceptions to those categories. Pattern
recognition is not unique to humans, nor is categorization. It is evident to me that my walking alone, or walking with one dog or two dogs, or with small dogs or big boisterous ones, hunting dogs, or near blind dogs, or with another human or several, is not only discernible—all this is actually discerned by different creatures in the forest. It is evident to R that the resident bonnet macaques clearly recognize him. It is evident to L that the plants she tends recognize her. It is evident to me that the energetic state of a person walking in a forest matters more than the person. It is as if we become different persons in our different emotional states. To not recognize me, whether I am at peace or fuming, is the difference between life and death perhaps, or song and shout, or care and callousness, or the enriched possibilities of play and capture. When your energetic state alters through your emotion and your intention, and your movement, nonhumans gather around you in conviviality and peace—or perhaps move away. If you are habitual in certain set ways, if you are always aggressive and insensitive, they learn that too, and remain distant, make other routes, or attack, or just become subject to your ways.

My intention to sing, as well as how I sing, elicits different responses all the time. Come walk with me, or better still, walk alone in a forest, and sing, and see what happens. Listen.

This singing (song: a soundline of expressive, melodic utterances, with intentional phrases in or out of rhythm, the whole a movement to convey meaning) is what I offer to the forest, in response to the beautiful sounds and songs it offers me.

Only by walking, participating, unfolding into the musical present, repeating, practicing, responding, syncopating, or swelling out with my own song, and noticing all the time how they respond, have I this hunch (and this over many years of practice) that different nonhumans not only recognize me, they also listen.

Today, I observe the mynahs from under a giant fern frond. I listen for several minutes in silence, unmoving, and I note that their every note inscribes a melodic interval into my thinking mind, or my singing mind, and affects my intention to join in. I wait, I listen, I make a small sounded circle in the mist with my voice and breath, a gentle caw trailing away into silence, listening to how the mist and the silence (silence is only all that ensounds beyond my specific hearing ability) and the enriched possibilities of play and capture. When your energetic state alters through your emotion and your intention, and your movement, nonhumans gather around you in conviviality and peace—or perhaps move away. If you are habitual in certain set ways, if you are always aggressive and insensitive, they learn that too, and remain distant, make other routes, or attack, or just become subject to your ways.

I spend most dusk hours and, when I wake up after I've slept enough, most dawn hours, listening. I like twilight hours. I don't get distracted by my eyes, and my ears funnel out into the trees, and into the land. Sometimes I lie down, and pick up little movements and sounds. When I put my ear to the ground, the earth is sometimes muted and sometimes thunderous, and my heart can be heard too, and then I sing.

I walk, and a mouse skitters away. I thump on the ground, and a snake rushes into the leaflitter. I think, and a toe moves. I holler and the yellow-browed bulbuls disappear. I sing, and they stay near.

I use the word sing deliberately, and not the word call. I refrain from saying I called to the elephant. It is truer to my intention to say that I sang to the elephant. Did she sing to me, or speak to another, her baby and sister perhaps, or was that just one of a range of elephant sounds? Did she actually respond to me, or was she about to vocalize anyway, and this is a mere coincidence? How will I know? Besides, if I know, how will I prove it? Moreover, is proof the point? What matters most to me is that she accepted my presence, she was not afraid, and neither was I: we were two animals in a forest, listening to each other; and we did so, dare I say, happily.

This is most definitely a musical engagement for me, whether or not it is for them, and I wait and listen day after day to just tune in, and sing. I believe song and speech are shades of meaning blended in the natural world, not as separate as we make them out to be. The solicitations and promptings, the calls and responses, the cries and murmurings are uttered, performed, and shared in an amphitheatre that is inhabited as it is sung into being every moment. Where modern humans box music into concert halls, into perfectly designed acoustic spaces which exclude the outside from the inside, or package music into machine-transmitted, play-at-will recordings, each time exactly repeated—the song of nature is never exclusive, and it is always new.

I've heard of humans elsewhere singing or playing instruments to nonhumans; I've even heard of bird ensembles conducted by humans—but this is quite different. The ensemble I participate in is being conducted by somebody else, an elemental somebody else perhaps: light, wind, rain, earthy abundance. Why this crescendo now, why this full-hearted celebration now? Why this hush? Why this quiet refrain, now these crickets, now those crickets, now those, there on that tree, now a nightjar, now the loris. I am but one member of a fabulous jungle orchestra. It is more about my tuning in, using every part of my body and voice, than about simply, not mystically, just physically. If so, why would this physical wave, this frequency, this pitch, this note not make an impression that is received, transcribed, recorded, and stored, to be held in another's body, to be recalled as appropriate, when necessary, or in joy, in beauty.
commanding others to do as I please, when I please, for them to repeat or perform on my command.

In the forest, it seems that every creature emits a sound at a specific pitch and a specific volume and a specific interval in order to be heard, as if in an orchestra, a symphony. It is all as fine-tuned as that. Instead of wanting to drown out everyone else, there is rather a tuning in, and adding in, and interspersing, like in a fugue or canon.

Almost all of us in this little human community at the edge of a forest consciously or unconsciously imitate nonhuman movements and vocalizations in our chats with each other. Most of my neighbours will imitate distressed cows, or aggressive dogs, or alarmed birds, or each other. Most of the adivasi folks I’ve met can do excellent mimicries of various nonhumans. Our speech is infused, like a rich brew, with the speech of others. This is normal. Even my eighty-year-old urban-grown mother will imitate a macaque or a pigeon from her balcony. All that I’ve done is to take an old childhood pleasure of mine, musical improvisation, into the forest in response to the song and speeches of nonhuman others.

During a recent visit of some schoolchildren, we included mimicries into our daily natural history sessions. I would ask the twelve-year-olds to come back with a call, or a sound, and we would do a round of grunts, cheepings and squawks. These were urban kids, more self-involved than my rural neighbour kids, less curious about the habits of creatures, less responsive to the changes in tone and texture of the land, and more able to imitate Beyonce or a jingle from an advertisement than the call of a crested serpent eagle. (To be fair, kids imitate whatever their intimate environment offers them). But they were also more responsive than other urban kids, perhaps because their school is a little outside the city, in a rocky open land which year by year is more full of wild creatures reclaiming their homes under the protection of wise teachers and young students. We would do rounds of an adapted version of ‘Old MacDonald Had a Farm’, and bring in sounds of hornbills, jungle fowl, brown fish owls, mynahs, cows, dogs, cats and nilgiri langurs. What would start stiffly would sometimes end in a hilarious uproar, or sometimes in contented listening silence.

What are they saying, these frogs outside my window, tonight? Trimmommwa aum tek tek wynnookhlywe, thickthick thrice thrice, (silence), thweatwa. I have listened to them
for so long, and still I cannot transcribe their speech. But
I listen, and wait, then I croak softly, trying out different
parts of my tongue and throat, opening and closing my
mouth, moving my jaws, lifting my head, stretching my
throat. I look out into the darkness, continue listening,
then croak again. I hear the other one responding from
further away. What are they singing, what are they
saying, and who is it for? Is it just for each other, or is it
to all within hearing range? Do the singers know who
can hear and who cannot? And would it not serve them
to assume we can all hear, to include us all? How do the
gekkos, and the owls, and the trees, and others present
here in this moment, make sense of this back and forth?
And are they responding? Is this field of listening itself a
response, and like in a vast concert hall with a thousand
humans listening, does the pianist feel their attention,
and does he switch them off, shut them away, and listen
to something else - his muse, or his memories, or his
intention? And what is his intention if not to play to
the breathing body of this specific audience, and does he
assume they all understand the music, or does he just
play, with every cell in his body? Does he need
their listening, as I do water or air, this elemental flow
through every cell; and without them having to speak or
sing, or clap? Can he feel it flow back, that stream of
listening, that opening, soliciting, embracing, tuning
in? A thousand hearts, and two thousand ears, and two
thousand collectives of cells, more than seventy percent
water, a field of cytoplasmic rippling as the notes of 'Au
Cher de la Lune' play out and through the whole room;
a moment of love, the pianist, the piano, the music, the
room, the thousand bodies receiving through the two
thousand tympani vibrating!

After about fifteen years of living here on this part-wild
cropland garden on this ridge, one day I struck out. I
started to swim in a forest pool and then to walk a trail
in the bottom of the valley where only wild creatures live.
I started to inhabit certain places there, in reed thickets,
rock outcrops, the buttressed base of specific trees. I did
this at different times of the day and night, over a couple
of years. Mostly I went alone; sometimes with one or more
dogs. Slowly, I started to feel like the homeless guys on
the Mananthvadi to H. D. Kote road, mad men in rags
and dreadlocks, eyes turned skyward, inward or outward,
avoiding you, avoiding the object, their dusty bags on the
road beside them, the gentlest men in the world. It was
in going to the wildest places on the land by twilight, and
many times in the night, often by moonlight, when my
eyes fell quiet, that my ears opened out and shot through
a sonic barrier to confound the rest of me.

One day I fell in love with verbs. After this, nature,
life, everything, appeared more and more in verb form,
and less and less in noun form. Immense detail, shape-
shifting detail flowed through the land and my senses as
they slowly came alive. I was struck through my heart,
knowing I could never do justice to unfolding, glowing,
gleaming, darkening, caressing, touching, expanding,
hiding, speaking, squawking, rushing, whispering,
tensing, murmuring, opening, fading, loving, hating,
seeping, soughing.

This awareness of movement makes me move too.
I practice singing with the birds and frogs, in a full-
bodied way. I stand up, bend my knees, sway a little,
relax the belly and shoulders, so the base of my spine
is consciously connected to the top of my head. I
also use a lot of open vowel sounds, as well as a host
of lip rolls, and trills. When movement is married to
a specific expression or set of expressions, when your
singing becomes action singing - in other words, a
dance - you experience what seems to be an infinitude
of combinations, extensions, mergers, as well as depths
and weights. You experience the give and bounce of life.
This kind of music - sound movement combined with
body movement, performed to an audience in a setting
that is unique to each moment - is the form of jungle jazz,
or contact improvisation. The present moment is when
it happens, a magical discovery of communion through
this dialogue of bodies. But years of practice have their
own genius: they improve your agility and delivery.

Do you ever sing in this way: by taking a line from a
beloved song and repeating it dozens of times, each time
a little different, improvising with vowels, consonants,
the upturn and downturn of melody or phrase, or a
particular word, expanded, and shrunk, belted out or
whispered, again and again, until it feels just right, in
this context, to this audience, in this moment?

Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky with one
hand waving free...

Yes, to DANCE beneath the diamond sky with
one hand waving freeeece...

The same with a hornbill phrase.
Kaw,
kaaaw, caAwaaw,
KraaAWAAW,
Kraaakk

Today I joined the crow pheasants.

In the half-hour session of listening and imitating, I
noticed these things through my body: the calm regular
rhythm, the steady announcement and response, one
here, one there, and one further away. The slight
differences between their hooscchoo. One whose beat
was faster, with an earlier accent on the first notes and
then the fall. One who steadily and slowly descended, at a lower pitch than the first. The third one who came in was louder, with a force in the voice – I would say aggression, not the calm sweet steady vocals of the first two. Then he settled down, and then there were three.

I know I don’t get the exact intonation, or even the number of hoots. But it gets closer all the time. There will come a day when my voice will be mistaken for one of theirs. My heart’s desire is to perch in a quiet place, and start hooting, and he will appear.

I heard about moose hunters in Sweden who blow horns to lure a moose, and then shoot them dead.

I heard about tourists using electronic birdcalls to lure birds out of their hiding.

I witnessed Shorima, our guide in the Amazon, a thousand kilometres upstream of Manaus, call a wild bird, the Capitan du Matto, with a whistle.

I hear racket-tail drongos often imitate other birds. One day, many years ago, S and I overheard one imitating a giant squirrel, a motor, a crow, and then a series of other birds in succession.

I read that mockingbirds can imitate hundreds of other birds.

To experience directly without recourse to authorized systems of knowledge is to be adrift in the open ocean, no anchor, no bearing, no rescue ship in sight. To listen to the night sounds of the forest is a particularly disorienting experience. The ventriloquists are busy, the eyes are dimmed, and the cranium is resonant with its own music; but the main problem is in accessing any thread of meaning. When I fully experience this lack of meaning, when I am aware of my utter lack of comprehension, when I cannot find a single marker or orientation to direct my mind, I can feel the physical impact of every sound, and also of every thought.

It is true that my purpose is ambiguous too. I am not here to investigate species, or acoustic ecology; I am simply here to listen (if at all I can ascribe purpose) and to join in.

There is, of course, a questing of sorts. But it feels more as if I’m being summoned, rather than pursuing any specific line of enquiry. Why do I continue to come here? Why this spot, today? Why again, and again? It seems my research becomes more and more naked somehow, and has its own willfulness; it responds to the summons of others who keep other hours. I walk these trails day after day, year after year, decade after decade, and as I make my own regular presence felt, with
many sit-spots all over the land, I mostly just ask simple questions.

So what’s going on?

Today, it’s noisy. It almost hurts. Frogs, crickets, frugmouths and hoverflies are busy. Busy with what? They are working up a sonic frenzy. Why do I say frenzy? Energetically this feels strong, powerful, and borderline delirious compared to a couple of nights ago. Many more crickets are out tonight. Many more frogs, and at least half a dozen frugmouths on the trail.

When I return to the house on the hill I ask S a couple of questions, imitate the calls of the birds I was unsure of. He responds briefly, it’s this or that, and if he doesn’t know he just looks back, in silence.

I prefer S to any field guide. He’s my best field guide – not because he knows everything, but because he has known things from infancy. His knowledge of this place goes back a long time; thirty-five years, a kind of metacognition gifted to him by this place, in his body and awareness and knowledge and familial bonding with the creatures of this land.

Given time, and a settling down of our ideas and preconceptions, we would perhaps have recourse to that infant wisdom we all came into this physical world with, that rippling openness to all sensory stimuli, that vibrant sea of awareness in which every sound causes a unique impression in our minds. When one is rested in this, as little children are, a different depth of discernment is born, and the more direct it is to one’s own experience, the more subtle the discernment is.

But mostly, I just enjoy myself every time the frog choruses begin. This din is incredibly musical, and gloriously celebratory. I invent stories, I unleash my own imagination. I too am beckoned by the night to sing.

Have you ever heard a butterfly or an ant? I swear I just did.

To hear them one has to be prepared to hear nothing, or what appears to be nothing, silence. One has to get past the tinnitus, past your baseline brain sound, past the wordstream, past the big sounds in the environment, past the little sounds, then the fainter ones, and further, further and further, and still further, softer, quieter, until you go so far out and so far in, past the sound of the mist, past the sound of the sun, past the silence, past the confusions. Did I actually hear that, did that actually make a sound, did I just make it up, am I hearing what I think I’m hearing? Then you will hear the ant.

Head on the ground. Watch that ant as she moves. If her movement does not inscribe a shape into your awareness, if the action of the ant does not make a direct impression into your mind, if the synesthetic unfolding of the senses does not happen, then you have neither looked nor listened.

Perhaps certain assumptions are in the way.

These are sounds beyond human hearing.

What then of the deaf woman who plays the xylophone?

Only some creatures are privy to sound, and to sound-making:

What then of corn roots clicking as they grow?

Only the ears hear.

What then of elephants picking up sounds from their footpads?

Or stridulating cicadas, with tympani on their knees, whipping up an earsplitting medley, in the forest?

The ‘ability’ of the ears, or the eyes, or the nose (or for that matter, any part of the body, or mind, or person), as well as the ability to process information, is surely limited, for everything is limited. But it is also true that limitations are relative, and all too often defined by assumptions, by previous experience. And it is of course entirely possible that a great deal of limitation occurs due to entrainment – in other words, conditioning, deeper somatosensory conclusions made about one thing or another which in turn trigger (mal)adaptive behaviours. The actual movement of matter or energy is not limited in the same way our thoughts are (though the reverse is also true, that our thoughts are not constrained in the way the real world is). The impinging waves upon surfaces, the give and bounce of membranes, the pull and shove of electrons, the frisson of ‘knowing’ whether or not one has seen or heard: these are powerful far-reaching and subtle extensions into the surrounding medium. Or another way of saying all this is: the more you listen, the more you hear. And if you accept the ‘data’ received through technological amplification, and furthermore accept the interpretations, then surely your ears, your hearing extended through attention into listening, and your perception expanded through synesthesia and active experiencing, are just as valid. For all these are just as informative, while bearing a quality of meaning as thick as a swirling cord of love between a pair of courting slugs, or as subtle as semiotics, the language of signs employed by all the old peoples in their wild and diverse homelands and the rest of nature; and by the rest of us too, except for our increased entrainment to machines.

I leave you now, my dear friends, with a welcome to this jungle orchestra. I know you’d all love it. My belief is — and my daily experience too — that I live in a glorious never-ending symphony, or a musical drama, an opera. A real one, with a fabulous cast of real flesh-and-blood (and sap) characters, with an unfolding narrative that is always mysterious — though it is rhythmic and purposeful too. Nothing is exactly repeated, everything
has meaning – everything. Everybody is busy and impassioned – everybody. Even if the script changes with the lighting, the specific audience and the setting. Drama packs the wheels of time. Certainty dances with uncertainty. Action words are demonstrated, speech is scintillatingly melodic, consequence as impactful as a thunderclap or the caress of a butterfly’s wing. As the days pass and the years merge into decades, I feel sure that the beat is set by drummers strung across the galaxy, whom I have yet to see. The best part? This humdinger of a musical, this one we create anew with all our lives as well as all our deaths, this action-packed real-life symphony performed in an amphitheatre of our imaginations and our bodies, is free.

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MEENAKSHI SUBRAMANIAM is an artist living and working near the Periyar tiger reserve, surrounded by cardamom plantations and all things spice, in the hilly, wet part of the Indian state of Kerala.

She grew up in Bangalore and received an education in classical dance, music, philosophy and art. It was a chance meeting with Fr K. M. Matthew, one of India’s great botanists, ecologists and environmental pioneers, which focused her attention on painting directly from the natural world.

Her finished works are based on extensive field work and trekking in the forests and mountains of India. The depiction of specific collections of species is intended to be both visionary and ecologically accurate, speaking directly to issues of biodiversity and environmental richness. Her medium is usually acrylic on canvas. Her technique involves continuous re-texturing, thin layering of several washes and over-painting to create more dimensional quality – a technique which echoes her belief that mountainscapes and forests are places in which we can learn to unlearn much that is damaging to us in modern life.

To see more of her work visit her at:

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