



An apprenticeship in observation

By Ranjani Rao

At the [Singapore Writers Festival](#) last year, well-known travel writer Pico Iyer mentioned that his latest book, *Autumn Light, Japan's Season of Fire and Farewells*, was completely based on his observations of his immediate neighborhood in Nara, Japan where he spends many months each year.

In contrast, every January I plan trips to exotic destinations, the number of locations restricted by my limited budget and annual leave. I travel sometimes with my family, sometimes with my girlfriends; occasionally alone. Travel allows me to escape from the confines (and comforts) of daily life. Travel to an unfamiliar place rejuvenates my senses, stimulates inspiration, and allows original thoughts to emerge effortlessly.

How had Iyer managed to find something new and noteworthy in the same old streets and buildings in which he had lived for decades? His book was ostensibly about autumn. Was he chronicling the seasons in Japan?

My home in sunny Singapore is blessed with 365 days of uniformly hot and humid weather, interspersed by occasional thundershowers. I was sure even a keen observer like Iyer would have trouble writing a whole book about it.

How could I have known that a few months later, like Iyer, I would be relentlessly circling my own neighborhood, thanks to the lockdown imposed in response to the [COVID-19 outbreak](#)?

Bukit Batok Nature Reserve sits behind our condominium development of 420 units layered across multiple floors in six towers, arranged in a circle around a large swimming pool. Our unit on the seventh floor of a block nestled at the apex of a steep slope offers a spectacular sunrise and sunset view from our living room, a fact that we have not appreciated much in the six years we have lived here.

After a long day at work, and an hour on a crowded bus or train, the last uphill stretch has been the source of much misery and complaint. Now that our cozy family of four is holed up indoors, we are beginning to see our home, and its location, in a new light.

In the pre-COVID days, we took walks around our neighborhood after dinner. Now, the husband and I don masks and step out for a walk after lunch. We do it on days when the sky is overcast, or if it has just rained, and if we don't have work calls to attend. The

paths are familiar, the streets and structures, unchanged. The difference is not in what we see but how we see things.

We wave to the security guard and turn left at the main gates. A refreshing sea of green welcomes us. Cars zip by at high speeds, but instead of being vaguely aware of faint shapes whizzing by with a soft swoosh at night, we can now appreciate the expensive makes and models and read the advertisements plastered on the buses that continue to run despite low ridership.

Lawns that used to be perfectly manicured, lie in complete disarray. Crabgrass and other weeds multiply in wild abandon, creating a random evolving pattern that changes every day. Everything looks radiant after a rain shower, even the drooping branches of trees that are in desperate need of a trim.

I stop to admire the mature trees lining the walkways, having always taken the cool shade provided by their lush foliage for granted. Their dark, ancient roots rise out of the ground like a thick braid. Leaves, like yellow-brown confetti, collect in layers on what was once a pristine lawn. It is a different, but equally beautiful mosaic.

Flowers I used to name by their color alone - pretty purple, funky fuchsia, bright yellow, have become more interesting. Like co-commuters on a train who you see every day, it now seems rude to not know their real names. From Google, I learn about pink

bougainvillea, serene spider lily, and red button ginger; flowers that are common in this region. My favorites are the ubiquitous Ixora and the rare frangipani.

Forbidden to interact with fellow humans, it seems like a good time to learn about other creatures that live in the vicinity. A new generation of baby monkeys swings wildly on the trees behind my kitchen window. Striped squirrels can be spotted during the day but the flying squirrel comes out at night. Monitor lizards languidly criss-cross the trails near the quarry at Bukit Timah Nature Reserve. Wild boars have been sighted in the past but thankfully, I haven't seen any yet. Easily alarmed by common chameleons, I shook for hours after spotting a slithering snake one evening!

Unlike reptiles, birds are a constant source of joy. I don't care much for the aggressive Javanese mynahs that fly into my kitchen, but I love the tiny yellow sunbird that often perches on my window. A flock of green parrots roosts on the majestic flame of the forest tree while spotted pigeons daintily skip alongside the pool which has been closed off until further notice. When I spot a collared kingfisher or a busy hummingbird, I feel envious of their unencumbered freedom.

There has been a definite shift in the months since I began to [work from home](#). Has my neighborhood changed or is it just me? When was the last time I had the energy and attention span to spend on the ordinary moments of life that I take for granted?

Like Santiago, the protagonist of Paulo Coelho's *Alchemist* who travels the world to find treasure close to home, these weeks have been a reminder that what we seek may be hidden right in our own neighborhood. All we need to do is devote ourselves to the task of finding the beauty and the treasure embedded within, but also obscured by, our everyday life.

In [Autumn Light](#), I came across this quote by John Burroughs – *To learn something new, take the path you took yesterday.*

It has taken a pandemic for me to truly understand it.

