

### DISPATCH 003 – Fading Blossoms

Everything's coming up roses this August at SAVAC. Our storytelling project phullo, phallo, phirse (grow, flower, and feast again) is in full swing, with rose growers, herbalists, artists and mystics each sharing the ways in which roses tint their world. In our garden, many of the rose bushes, gifted so lovingly by network members, have moved past the high noon of full bloom, their colours gradually fading into muted hues, petals falling away, and hips beginning to form. They seem to hark to shortening days, brisk evenings, and pale blue mornings— a soothing balm to temper the blistering heat of July. In this time of transition, our companion Lata Mani reminds us, “Life does not merely bloom. It also fades, and in its waning, there is as much, if not more, to behold.”

We may be tempted to trim away the faded blooms, or throw away the cut stalks which have graced our kitchen table for a week now. In this moment, we may consider Mani's question:

Why is it that we shy away from fading blossoms? Why do we turn from the second half of the life of cut flowers, seeing their fading as an affront to our sensibilities? Can we imagine an aesthetic framework that would allow for flowers to fade before our eyes, taking whatever shape and form they must as they transform? [...]

[...] It would seem that the plant has taken birth simply so we can enjoy it in what we would call its prime. But how would we know what there is to notice, contemplate and enjoy if we refuse to allow ourselves to witness its entire journey?

In each story cycle of *phullo phallo*, roses bloom forth from the recesses of memory and fade into contemplative modes. Our storytellers consider family histories, fraught relationships with beauty (and by extension vanity), the medicinal and heart opening effects of roses, the tantalising glimpse of the divine within the folds of its petals, and the fading scent of showy new varieties, which become ever more distant facsimiles of what they signify. In these vignettes, they seek to convey that, “in any single frame of nature that the human eye can encompass, we will see the totality of birth, life and death.”

---

**Lata Mani, *Fading Blossoms*, in “SacredSecular: Contemplative Cultural Critique”  
London: Routledge, 2009**

Bright tongues of purple and yellow stand firm and tall in their green jackets. Each petal arches out from the centre. Bold, beautiful irises.

Bright tongues of purple and yellow relax into the water and stretch skyward. Bold, beautiful irises, touched by the admiring gaze of all who walk by.

Bright tongues of purple begin to curl imperceptibly at the edges, toward the centre from which they have been unfurled by the light.

Slowly they move past the high noon of full bloom, the afternoon of their lives signalled in the gradual retraction of each tongue. This inward movement is matched by the subtle fading of purple over several days... to lavender...to lilac...and finally to light blue. The yellow fades by degrees into a kind of cream.

Each day its limbs are further withdrawn, narrower in girth. The stems seem to thin before one's eyes. Walking by, one wonders whether it is time to drain the water and place the flowers with the garden clippings waiting to be hauled away by the city.

But wait! Life does not merely bloom. It also fades, and in its waning, there is as much, if not more, to behold. I decide to conduct an experiment. I leave the flowers in the vase. Each day the prana or life force contracts even more into some invisible core. The stems pale, and become more and more insubstantial. I wonder how long I shall have the courage to let this scene unfold in full view of visitors who enter the house.

For faded flowers represent careless housekeeping. Flowers are to be bought fresh. One is then advised to place them in water after trimming their stems. To ensure long-lasting blooms, one may stir in a teaspoon of sugar or the tiny pouch of crystals sometimes distributed by florists. One is instructed to change the water every two days and to avoid placing the flowers in direct sunlight. For anything in excess of indirect light will lead them to fade faster. Aided by this counsel, one chooses an appropriate vase, arranges the stems, and enjoys them.

But time has a way of passing and all things are by their nature subject to change. Soon the blooms begin to look less vigorous and as this happens they are spirited away from view. Why is it that we shy away from fading blossoms? Why do we turn from the second half of the life of cut flowers, seeing their fading as an affront to our sensibilities? Can we imagine an aesthetic framework that would allow for flowers to fade before our eyes, taking whatever shape and form they must as they transform?

Organic flowers at the farmer's market, the gifts of summer in California. I buy a bunch of pink and white roses. The buds are heavy, each so full of fragrant petals that they are drooping under the weight of their amplexity. Round, robust, fragrant, they bow their heads to all passersby. Their cycle to full fade is different. Where the irises become skeletal by the end, the roses continue to retain their fullness. Their heads simply drop lower and lower. They do not shrink, but stoop, draping themselves over the lip of the vase that holds them.

Is the arching but full rose more pleasing than the lean but withering iris across the room? We humans judge shape, form, colour, texture and size without thought to nature, to the cycles of life and death, birth, maturing and fading. Our aesthetics are so narrow that, for the most part, there are only a few moments in the life cycle of a flower that we un-hesitatingly embrace. It would seem that the plant has taken birth simply so we can enjoy it in what we would call its prime. But how would we know what there is to notice, contemplate and enjoy if we refuse to allow ourselves to witness its entire journey?

Flowers are not merely objects for our consumption or testimony to our notion of beauty. They are also lives to be witnessed, admired, appreciated, just as they are. If they are generous enough to accept being placed by us in all manner of insalubrious locations, could we not extend to them the courtesy of witnessing them as they move through their incarnations according to the rhythms of their particular species?

We tend to mete this kind of partial appreciation not merely to flowers but to other things as well: our own bodies, those of others, our own lives and those of others. For, like it or not, our dislike of fading blossoms is but a reflection of our distaste for anything that fails to conform to a rather limited conception of health, body, beauty, vigour, life. What does it mean to live so partially that we cannot embrace the multidimensionality of life and death? How does our habitual practice of everyday eugenics shape our view of the world and of Creation?

We can learn a great deal by observing the rest of the natural world of which we are a part. Nature simply is. It makes no attempt to stage-manage its appearance, by setting up a contrast, highlighting some aspects or marginalising others. In any single frame of nature that the human eye can encompass, we will see the totality of birth, life and death. Unlike humans, nature privileges neither particular moments of its existence nor certain aspects of itself relative to others.

Within the parameters of our limited human perception we may well prefer roses which withdraw with a quiet unobtrusive dignity, to those which drop their petals with abandon and in no particular pattern. And perhaps we would rather not mention the star-gazer lilies that spill the powdery residue of their stamens onto our clean tablecloths, or the water in the vase that darkens and emits a faintly acrid smell as flowers fade. Can we imagine extending our sensoria and expanding our consciousness to include the dusk of flora?

Our notions of order and disorder stand in stark contrast to the dynamic artistry of the integral beauty of things as they are in nature. For nature (unlike humans today) revels in all aspects of creation and destruction, destruction and creation. And until we do the same, we shall forever be trapped within the prisons of our preferences, by our sense that youth, vigour and health represent the prime of life and the acme of desirability.

The mirage of perfection. The pursuit of the rigid. Living as though change were not a constant. This is what we will be courting if we persist in the impossible task of living contrary to the laws of the universe. And sorrow as well as disappointment, regret, perhaps even envy, will become our constant companions.

In all spiritual traditions, spirit or divinity is said to be immanent as well as transcendent. Indeed it is the immanence and transcendence of the sacred that makes the divine omnipresent. If we seek transcendence without honoring immanence, we naturally take flight from materiality except when matter conforms to some notion of aesthetic appropriateness shaped by prevailing social convention. Despising matter except when it conforms to our

sectarian sense of the beautiful paves the way for violence toward all forms of sentence, toward all that is alive.

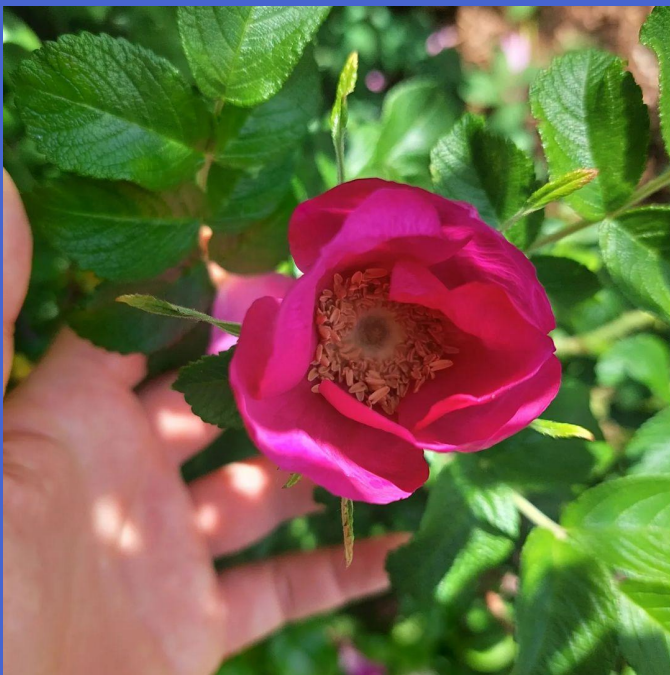
If life is most desirable when it exhibits youth and/or health, then everything other than what we designate as such automatically becomes a precursor of death. If, on the other hand, we opened out our definition of life to include all phases of existence without favour or prejudice, we could admire existence as bud. As bloom and as fading or faded blossom. For birth and death, creation and destruction are not opposites, but inevitably co-implicated and contemporaneous processes. Life, death, bloom and fade are intimately coupled. It is only by means of a conceptual violence that their separation is effected.

To reverse the violence of this severing of one into two, we need to unify aspects of indivisible reality that are currently divorced in our perception. By doing this we heal our consciousness as also our relationship with the phenomenal world. We live in a time when doing with matter as we please has become a principle of life. We would thus do well to ponder our relationship to matter so that we can understand the consequences of how we have rent apart that which has always been and is, by nature, a single whole. Only then will it be possible to reunite what was never separated except in our consciousness, and consequently by our actions.

---

## FIELD NOTES

In conjunction with *phulo*, *phallo*, *phirse*, we would like to feature some herbalists who also work with roses. Click the links attached to access their websites and instagram and learn more about their practice.

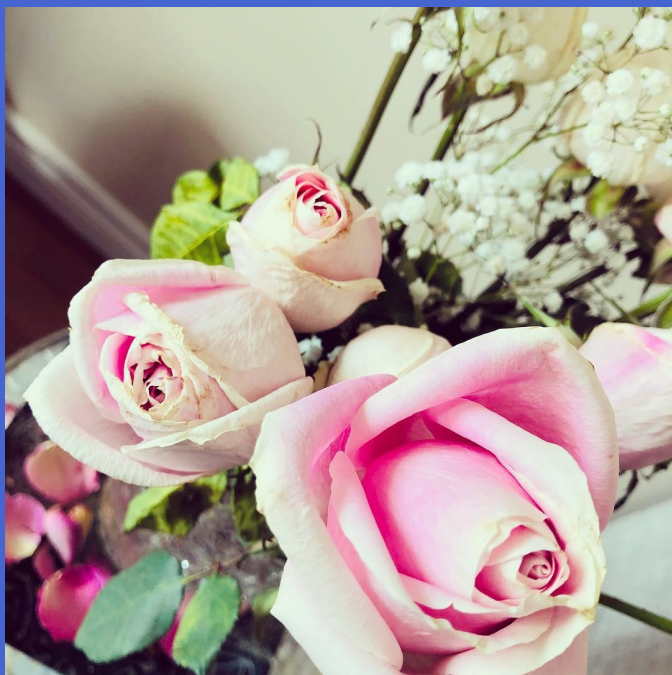


Shabina Lafleur-Ganji  
(@shabbyshabzz)  
(@seedsoilspirit)



[Dr Sairupa Krishnamurti, ND \(Toronto\)](#)  
(@dr.sairupa)

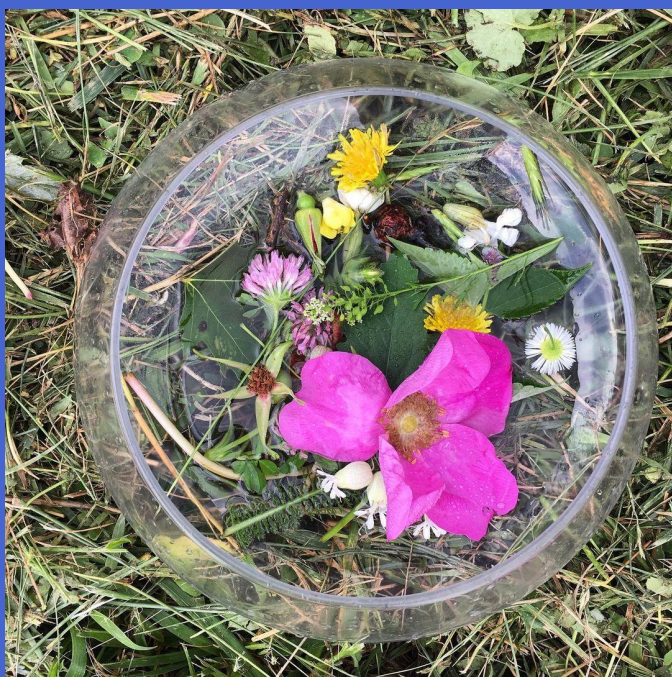




**Ismat Dhala-Nathani**, Ayurveda (Toronto)  
([@ismatdhala](#))



**Layla K. Feghali** (California/ Lebanon)  
([@riverroseembrace](#))



**Mandana Boushee**, Herbalist (Ithaca)  
([@wildgather](#))

We would like to thank Shabina Lafleur-Gangji ([@shabbyshabzz](#)), a Guelph-based community herbalist and co-director of the [Seed Soil + Spirit School](#) for compiling this list.