

RAINBOW HAIKUS

Anthology of ignored coexistences that define me

Of the formative presences I have had the privilege of hosting in my life, my beloved city of Kolkata remains a prominent one. A couple of years ago, while flying over Kolkata I wrote:

"How true it is, what they say about unrequited love, the essence of its romance is realised in its destructiveness. As I leave you yet again, there is a group of friends in North Calcutta, occupied by the clicks of their fingers on the Carrom board at the parar rock.¹ As I meticulously plan my schedule for the week ahead in the comfortable silence of an empty airplane, you like a proud mother raise many a political analyst in the backseats of yellow taxis. Customary comments about Didi are exchanged between the driver and the passenger, both inebriated by your infectious passion and maddening spirit.² As I reach my destination in the morning, a woman will haggle over the price of Rui Maach at Gariahat and your culture of adda will have become someone else's' muse.³ Kolkata my star-crossed lover; perhaps the next time we see each other you'll have a fashionably different skyline, and it will take a while before I can find my comfort in your warm, familiar embrace but until then, I will continue to make failed attempts at explaining to the less fortunate what 'nyaka' means."⁴

I'm not the first hopeless romantic to be utterly in love with Kolkata, and I won't be the last, and this collection of Haikus is yet another love letter to my city.

Nature has been another one of the formative presences in my life. However, growing up in a mega metropolitan city, I didn't see much of it. It had to be sought out. Unsurprisingly, my collection 'Rainbow Haikus', is inspired by the colours of the rainbow. I thought purposefully of what each colour means to me, and I thought of the first time I saw a rainbow. What might have been an ordinary event for many children my age, was spectacular for me. Each time I see a rainbow now, I remember the aspirations of little Rohini.

In the haikus that follow, each colour is represented by the attribute I associate it with. These are attributes I aspire to embody. The haikus on the other hand, are about convergences of nature and urbanity in the streets of my neighborhood.

¹ Carrom is a board game of South Asian origin. Para translates literally to neighbourhood, although the word neighbourhood is unable to capture the sentiment. And finally, 'rock' in this context, refers to flat cement platforms on either side of an external short staircase at the façade of a house. These 'parar rocks' are central to life in most parts of Kolkata. Different groups of friends and comrades gather here to chat, play games, perhaps pursue a forbidden romance, or just exist.

² Didi literally translates to elder sister, but the Chief Minister of West Bengal (the state in which Kolkata is situated) is colloquially referred to as Didi.

³ Rui maach is rohu fish. Adda as a noun refers to a place of union, a hangout spot perhaps. As a verb, it translates to jovial conversations for long durations of time. But this definition does not adequately convey the emotions that the Bengali word does, and I'm not sure that there is an English equivalent.

⁴As the text suggest, any attempt at explaining what nyaka means will end in failure. But here's another failed attempt: Exaggerated coyness to signal delicateness , often used to depict behaviours of those who present as female.

Rohini Roy

Strong

they remain immune
steps, storms, garbage, construction
the pavement mushrooms

Happy

accidents allow
strays to live till two, but still
happiness is now

Perseverant

hawkers selling wares
voices drowned by traffic sounds
stop, resume with flair

Kind

fresh and dry twigs whole
crows weave nests for cuckoo eggs
on telephone poles

Tender

smellscapes are war zones
trash, fumes, all claim victory
jasmines win the throne

Passionate

oh, *kalbaishakhi*
sweet respite on summer noons
you inspire me

Grateful

carelessness makes space,
thinks moss of its host, a house
for care and some grace

Rohini Roy

Violet Strength

Pavement mushrooms, or as some call them, sidewalk snacks, are the variety of mushrooms that grow along pavements. To me they signify strength because among urban influences multiple times their size, they grow. They grow where they want, when they want, and how they want. As a child, I would spend hours sitting on the pavement staring at these mushrooms and as I look back, I realise how inspiring it was to see something so small, yet so mighty.

Indigo Perseverance

The unique calls of various street vendors define the Kolkata soundscape. In the age of innovative marketing, social media advertising, and guerilla campaigns, they simply walk the streets, and sell their goods. Oftentimes their voices are drowned by the sounds of traffic and construction, but they've adapted to it, by adopting shrill sounds that are unique to each of them.

Blue Tenderness

My idea of tenderness is deeply linked to my idea of strength, inspired by my mother who to me is the perfect embodiment of both. Summers in India for me have been defined by two things, mangoes, and jasmine. It has always been fascinating to me how, with the onslaught of summer, even the most putrid of the city smells give way to sweet jasmynes.

Green Gratefulness

South Calcutta, where I am from, has many gorgeous, dilapidated, abandoned houses. When I was young, my father would take me on walks through different parts of the city on weekends. We'd stare at the houses, and our little game was that we'd make up stories about the people we imagined living in them year ago. While being abandoned invokes feelings of sadness, it also makes me think of the spaces that it creates. Well maintained houses do not have moss growing on them, plants growing out of them. Abandoned houses do. I always imagine that the moss is grateful for the abandon.

Yellow Happiness

Anyone that knows me, for even a brief moment, knows how much I love animals, especially dogs. Back home, I have a huge community of strays that I am fortunate to be loved by. I'm always overwhelmed by the happiness they are able to bring to me. Most often people think that they are not sentient, don't understand the trials and tribulations of 'homelessness.' I like to think that they think the whole city is their home, that they're the luckiest because they aren't bound up in buildings like us, and that every day, knowing full well what the world has in store, they choose happiness.

Orange Kindness

It is popularly believed that in a bid to survive, cuckoos have evolved to be selfish creatures who make their eggs to resemble other birds', throw the existing eggs out of nests and leave their future-children to be raised by the labour of others. To me, this also appears to be a misguided understanding of sentience, or at least a possibility of such. Maybe there exists a social contract. Maybe the crows and other birds choose kindness in a bid to survive, and aren't duped by the cuckoos, but are simply helping them out.

Red Passion

Kalbaishakhi translates literally to "that fateful thing" and refers to localized rain and thunder showers that announce their presence usually during summer afternoons and evenings. For anyone that has experienced a Kolkata summer, wetness is the enemy. Humidity is off the charts, to the extent of making one sick. But then comes along the kalbaishakhi, in full force, tasked with the impossible challenge of reclaiming wetness as good. Yet each time, it succeeds.