

WATER FOR BIRDS

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Most months in the city were hot. One competed with another. As though they were trying to see which one of them sizzled more. The weather was so fond of the city that it hovered over it like an aerial creature. Though it was menacing for everyone and everything below it, the city embraced it with open arms.

Connected to a long wire in between two ashen buildings, one Argentine flag swelled and shrunk in the hot spells of air. Its bright blue rectangles and smiling yellow sun appeared brighter. It would take sunglasses to look into the sky. The golden eye illuminated with all its might.

Hiya owned one of the buildings. She wore a wrinkled sandalwood skin, and her hair reached the end of her earlobes. Curly like noodles. Dense like a forest. It hid secret things inside. Things that her eyes saw and settled inside the forest. Things that never came out of her mouth. The colour of her hair matched with that of the ashen building. The tenants would say that her hair loved the building. Hence, it abandoned its blackness. They wouldn't bring her old age into this made up belief though.

The fan stirred the hot air in her living room as she managed her billowing newspaper. The pages flew and landed on the mosaic floor like many lazy birds from the body of one. It was time for her to set up the nest box on the air conditioner vent with a bowl of water. She would take the box every day, clean it, and set it up again when the sun beat down mercilessly and the whole neighbourhood was awash in its merciless charm.

Everything would glow. Bald heads, car tops, steel roofs, spectacle rims.

From the building facing hers, seven-year-old Subhash watched her take the box inside every morning as he readied himself for school. And when he came back, he would find birds sitting on it, quenching their thirst, their beaks and necks acting fast. They would come exhausted and leave with energy. He would think every day, had not a building risen on the water body in the neighbourhood, the birds wouldn't have to depend on the mercy of the old lady. Before the hot season unrolled, she would tell everyone she meant to keep boxes with water bowls on their window ledges or any space available. But no one would pay heed to her. She treaded alone. Many admired her of course, but they never followed her. Her remaining days were countable. Theirs weren't. She wasn't as busy as them.

Having crossed paths once by chance, Subhash told her about a little relevant knowledge he had gathered from the newspaper.

"Did you know birds often collide into skyscrapers and die?" he asked.

"Yes, the skyscrapers are very tricky killers," she replied, with a smile, satisfied at the fact that someone around her knew about this.

"Do you keep cold water in the box for them?" he added.

"No, it's normal tap water," she replied.

"You should do it though. It's very hot these days," he advised.

Hiya smiled softly at his innocence and said, "Yes, I shall keep it in mind."

The bats were visible against the backdrop of a

pink sky. It was evening. All the home-bound birds were returning to their nests. It was a magnetic pull. An involuntary sense of returning home. Before disbanding, Subhash asked her one last time, "Am I the only one who thinks that a bat looks like a fox with wings?"

She pressed her palm on her mouth this time, laughing a little.

"Visit my place sometimes," she said.

It was a rainy Friday. The rainfall calmed the hot earth, battering the smoke lodged inside, soothing its burned skin. A sense of comfort seeped into the concrete buildings of the neighbourhood. Subhash saw an ambulance come out of Hiya's building and drive through the many tea puddles that formed on the road. The box wasn't taken inside for cleaning that morning. He watched it get drenched and fall apart. He wondered who it was inside the ambulance. If they were dead or breathing a little. If they were to die now or in the hospital. If they were to get cured ultimately. He would know it all after the hot aerial creature flew over the city again and the birds came all exhausted, expecting a water bowl in the box.

That day, it rained all the time. The sunless sky wore the same colour as Hiya's hair and building. Familiar birds took refuge where the soaked box stood. The Argentine sun kept smiling as though it mocked the need of an ambulance.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi wants his life to be like stormtroopers: always missing easy kill shots. Send him prayers at tazrian1234@gmail.com

