

“Kilmoras and Hisalus” & other poems from Mussoorie by Rachna Joshi

Reading at IHC
From my new book
The poem ‘Kilmoras and Hisalus’,
About my childhood
In Fernlodge Barlowgunj,
And the denizens
Of that village.

By **Rachna Joshi**

Kilmoras and Hisalus



**Sikandar Hall, Mussoorie
Eating kilmoras and hisalus**

On the way to Naala Pani
Past the Old Brewery
And Sikandar Hall.

Fern Lodge perched atop a hillside
With peach and plum trees
Trailing along a slope.

Below, the cowshed
Where the gwala comes to milk the cows
And to keep encroachers at bay
Who are creeping up the hillside.

Barlowgunj Market
With Chaman Lala's shop

And the schoolchildren
From St. George's
Coming for tuck.

Chachi and Buaji in the kitchen
On stilts
Churning out pots of soup.

The old piano in the drawing room
Which children liked to play.
Patties and pastries in the evening.
Granpa's green fingers in the nursery
Where there were fuschias and begonias
As well as a beehive.
Hydrangeas in the gardens

Rhododendron Squash

Mountains are a special place
Where the mind soars
Above the mundane
and how creativity flowers
among the cedars and rhododendrons.

Granma making rhododendron squash.
Her deft fingers cutting the flowers
And cooking them
In sugar syrup.

This is how I would
Like to remember
My childhood
In Fern Lodge Barlowgunj.
Mussoorie Modern School



Mussoorie Modern School

I remember
The pipes used to freeze
In winter in Chaman Estate.
In the hostel dorms
The matron used to change our clothes.

I remember the Tibetan teacher
Putting butter and salt
In her tea
In the mess.
Thal jus mukh, kator jus aankh.

Mr. Viegas, the Principal,
With his wife Shirley and daughter Candy
In a cottage by the side.
Framed by flowering beds.

Driving to Dehradoon

Driving to Dehradoon
Passing Duckchick
And Chital at Khatauli.
Seeing the travelers and itinerants.

Having pakoras and chai,
With the canal nearby
And the bridge.

Attending the Doon readings
At Hotel Aketa in Rajpur.
With Mountain Echoes, Penguin
And Doon Library.

Shekhar Pathak, Ruskin Bond
And Anjali Nauriyal,
Poetry of the hills.

The stately Rajpur Road
With Daalanwaala and
Welham Girl's High School.
Astley Hall and Ellora's.

The Tibetan monastery
At the end of the road
Near Sahastradhara.

Getting caught in traffic jams
While returning on Easter
From Dehradoon.

Seemadwar

Walking to Seemadwar
After eating khichri
And passing Jagdamba's shop
At Indiranagar.

Mrs. Chaturvedi's house
And HARC.

Shukla Marriage Bureau
And Anurag Paudhshala.

Sun Chasers
Where Sumitaji
Is having a conversation
With the owner.
A budding romance.

Ganga Aarati



Ganga Aarati
At Haridwar
With diyas floated

On the Ganges,
And the waving of lamps.
Chanting and singing.

RACHNA JOSHI

Rachna Joshi is a poet and reviewer who has lived in India and North America. She has written five collections of poems: Configurations (Rupa & Co., 1993); Crossing the Vaitarani (Writer's Workshop, 2008); Travel Tapestry (Yatra Books, 2013); Monsoon and Other Poems (Tethys, 2020); and Unraveling (Authors Press, 2024). She has a master's in Creative Writing from Syracuse University in upstate New York, and has been widely published in magazines and anthologies in India and abroad. She worked as Senior Assistant Editor at the India International Centre, Delhi, for 28 years and lives in Noida, U. P.

Nagaland and other poems



Hornbill Festival Nagaland

Conversations with old friends
Remembering the good old bad old
Days in Nagaland.
Bonding and exchanging of views.

Talking of the Hornbill festival,
Weaving and craft traditions,
Bamboo and indigenous knowledge
Folklore and folk songs.
Rice beer and dried pork
Dal, chaawal and laipatta.
Having squash and kachu
And fish pie.
Christmas songs and blessings.

Graduate School

Reading Structuralist Poetics
And Writing and Difference
And S/Z by Barthes brings up
Old memories of

Graduate school in Syracuse.

Poetry workshops,
Celestial Seasonings tea,
And Fig Newtons.
Inspiration.

Chinese New Year

Celebrations in Syracuse
With friends from Mainland China
And Hong Kong.
Dances and food and cheer.

Walking to Westcott store
To get groceries.
Walking back on icy sidewalks.
Going to the International Student's House
For get-togethers and celebrations.

Working Women's Hostel and other poems / Rachna Joshi



Working Women's Hostel

High walls, unkempt lawn–

Inside the lounge, a dusty picture of Adhya Jha hangs
Covered with cobwebs.

From the mess, Rajrani waddles through the door
While Jaswant and Babu Lal laze in the sun,

It's the month of Magh
The coldest of the year.
Freezing in heaterless rooms;
Fingers numb with cold, Sheela and Sonia
Wring socks and undies in dingy bathrooms.

Togged up for outings to Hauz Khas village
We drink orange juice at wayside stalls
And splurge on a bandhni sari for lohri
Or the occasional party where you meet the bohemian crowd—
The bearded painter delighting everyone
With an impromptu sketch;
Visits to Belu mamu near Sangam cinema.

Glued to Aap ki Adalat on TV
We hide the hair dryer
From the snooping eye's of the warden's pet.
Forging signatures in night-out registers;
We eat Manipuri chicken and dosas
And drink beer in camaraderie
Behind closed doors.

Late at night, when all are asleep.
I can hear Dhaneshwari sweeping the floor,
Rotting food, and cats overturning the garbage bins
As Rajwati bunks the third day.

Everyone waits for release
From the hostel,
Which comforts and cramps
Stifles and protects
Sanctuary or cell.

(From Crossing the Vaitarani, Rachna Joshi, 2008, Writer's Workshop, Kolkata)

Jageshwar

Twelve ancient temples in Jageshwar.

The initial pines lead to the inevitable deodar.

Its green, dark needles—vertical layers moving in wayward lines.

We tramped (modern half-breeds, urbane, mixed-up),

To seek the benediction of the ancient world.

Like plants that become deformed in their reaching back,

The roots entwined, the leaves losing sap.

The constraints of caste and region have feathered

And tarred our faces. We are the pariah Indians,

The few idealists,

Who seek oneness in a country torn

By every known difference.

Could I say when I reached the humped group of temples

Guarded by the sentinel wind of the Himalayas

That I desired union? The lingam leering at the obscenity of my prurient soul,

The world, yes—the flesh and paradise,

The same old grind-show of everyman and god.

I have tried to taste of the tree of knowledge,

Have aspired beyond the limits

Of an Indian Brahmin girl,

Born with a bewildering array of puritan forefathers

Who recited hymns and shlokas

For all occasions.

For birth, marriage, childbirth, fornication

Adultery, murder and what have you.

With sacred threads and grey ashes,

They broke the coconuts of inauguration.

I rise like a throwback—I muck up everything down the line,

The generations-old intellect, the strict decorum.
My blood wants the palpability of earthly love,
Not to obscure the predatory passions
Within the sanctified code.

Till I passed Jageshwar,
The clotted deodars, the smokewood huts,
The scattered pines, the humped shrines.
Shaggy closeness of rhododendrons, smells of raw peaches,
The leopard-tracks, the wild bird's cry
The pit-viper's slither, the pariah's bark,
The mountain streams and the twisted trees,
The wooden mounds that burn the dead.
I felt like a girl going to harvest new green stalks,
The first of the season,
In an old village set in the pines—with twelve ancient temples
And the bells chiming for the snows across the valley.

(From Configurations, Rachna Joshi, 1993, Rupa & Co., New Delhi)

Writing Poetry

Those days I wanted
To write big poems,
Full of words, blood images, multiple voices, epilogues
And prologues.
It was the first flush of love
After reading the Waste Land.
I wrote about violence, assumed roles, hammered out
Universal truths
In short, I was prolific.

And then condensation—
Like the tower we saw from the cockpit.
Imagining from it Delhi's green trees, yellow laburnums,
Neat roads;
Leaving out what passed between

Your strange disheveled being—my robust, fanciful self.
And now it seems such a marvelous paradox,
Like a dinosaur that has lived on.
Poetry is dead, Marxism defunct, what survives is computers.
I'm going to California to be a beach bum.

Why has the fragile, the knotted, the perplexing gone?
Einstein who could put $e=mc^2$ on a sheet of paper
And still play the violin.
Words engulf me...intertextuality, semiotics, phenomenology.
Maybe writing was not what I thought.

It is to me warm and moaning, like Gilbert's Pewter,
The Science of the Night, The Fly, The Seagull.
It is so many things...so many sacraments.
It is Tuesday afternoon...reading what Kath or what Karen
Or what Ruth has to say.
It is Yeats...it is Sheila invoking the loons.
It is my mother at home,
To whom I write of my attempts, my trials, my failures
It is hysteria at times.

And when I glance out...the world has moved away
My childhood has come again...the words I heard
Are still true.
The red mud and dry pine needles of Shillong Peak
Still flow down while I, ten years old, and my brother,
fourteen,
Squabble up the mountain trail.

Our boots are muddy, and this is North America.
There is still a blue lake, the leaves are withering.
O look! They fall...and the orange sunlight
Falls full on the trees—the leaves yellow, and brown and red.
And you, my friend, talking of Walden, of Relativity, of
intuitions,
Showing me at other times your paper machines, your
laboratory,

Your crazy oak tree from the forest of Sherwood.
The trail never ending...the low voices of otter.
It is a deerslayer country, it is the land of the Mohicans.
(From Configurations, Rachna Joshi, 1993, Rupa & Co., New Delhi)



MONSOON

The Yamuna swells
across field and marsh
as wind and water lash the city.

A curtain of rain
catches scooter and cyclist
in its wake.

Rain falls through me
Through my past
Through memory
Through grandmother's eyes
When they would water.

The magnolias fall to one side
and the Ashok and Eucalyptus
shine with silvery glow.

Telephone lines go bust
electricity and power surge and wane
and connectivity is a poor Morse Code.

E-mails dysfunction
Friends blotted out
News blotted out
What happened to Khashoggi
Did Obama get elected
Or did Urijit Patel resign.

Rain flows out
washes the roads
and fuses the landscape.

The rain unravels like music
Mallikarjun Mansur singing Megh Malhar
Fuzon belting out Saawan beeto jaye piharwa
Jagjit Singh singing of saun da mahina
And woh kaagaz ki kashti, woh baarish ka paani.

A loving refrain
it inundates my being,
envelopes the spirit
washing out the day's drudgery.

Crossing the Yamuna by metro
I see again scattered hutments
and withered fields of grain
needy farmers waiting
for the river to replenish their fields
by forgetting its banks
and spilling itself widely.

The river will withdraw into its channel,

silt-laden banks will sprout again
lush and green.

I too feel like rich accumulated
silt, ready for the language
of change to grow in me, say
things I've never said before.

(From Monsoon and Other Poems, Rachna Joshi, 2020, Tethys, New Delhi)

In The City Alone ... and other poems / Rachna Joshi

I walk through the old market
fascinated by cowbells. Himalayan cedars
and pines cover the slopes around.
Dew soaks through the foliage
and the cold vapours settle everywhere,
branches and leaves hang in a myopic mist
green, white and light blend.