The birds that flock



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Synopsis

Such is the bubble of hope in which I have survived. It is also a reminder of the fragility of life and its everyday presence, which we ignore. The birds seem to know it better. Outside, there is mayhem.

Almost a year ago, a pair of **doves** made their nest among the tangles of vine on my terrace garden. A few days later, on Earth Day, a baby dove was born. I posted on my Facebook page: "... a new baby dove, hidden in a nest on my terrace – a reminder of the more than human world and our entanglements with it... intertwined deep histories of co-evolutions. Let us stop for a moment to think of our shared existence."

I watched the baby dove struggle to fly, until one day it abandoned its nest and disappeared. Though the dove pair continues to visit my garden almost every day, they haven't built a nest this time. Amid the death and suffering all around today, I cannot help but wonder if this is by choice.

A small earthen bowl filled with water, sitting on the low boundary wall, is a constant hub of activity. Twice a day, I re-fill it religiously, with the growing heat.

Over the past year, my study-cum-library, whose large glass door and window open on to this greenspace, has been my refuge. Never before have I spent so

open on to this greenspace, has been my refuge. Never before have I spent so much time in one room. As I sit and work at my table, I have become familiar with my daily visitors, all of whom stop by the water oasis. Invariably, soon after I have filled the bowl, a couple of tiny **birds** arrive out of nowhere. They are seed eaters, with small beaks, and fearless as they shove their way through the mass of larger **pigeons** to take a drink.

The blue rock pigeons are everywhere nowadays, perched on window ledges, on rooftops, or over air-conditioners. Their acidic white droppings are like territory markers and difficult to clean. Up close they look as innocent as any other bird, but their large numbers are worrying. A pair of mynas are regulars. Landing at about sunrise at 6 am, they peck ceaselessly in the grass. In the afternoon come the pair of doves. Mere visitors now, they once literally lived on the terrace while they were breeding.

In February this year, I was visited by a stunning, shimmering, long-beaked purple sunbird. Hovering around, it was evidently pursuing its plain brownish mate. Some years ago, such a pair had woven a long hanging nest below a flat-leaved fern plant. As nature would have it, the male's lovely coat lasts only during the breeding season.

Then there is the scurry of resident squirrels (I have counted seven, but they are so fast and frisky that one can never be sure). They scamper around all day, sometimes peering inside the room through the glass. They have very sharp teeth and have eaten through my best shirts put out to dry. They did not spare even the new canvas awning. I gave up soon enough and found other places to hang the washing. I do have a special fondness for them though, since my earliest childhood memories are of watching them play around a large mango tree in the backyard of my parent's house.

Recently, I was surprised to see the common sparrow. They have become increasingly hard to find – a far cry from earlier, when one could not open a door without a sparrow coming in. It had to be quickly shooed away to avoid being hit by the ceiling fan! Seeing them again has been a sign of hope – that they have not disappeared but are merely lurking somewhere close by.

Such is the bubble of hope in which I have survived. It is also a reminder of the fragility of life and its everyday presence, which we ignore.

The birds seem to know it better. Outside, there is mayhem. News of loss and despair from friends keeps coming in. Numbing images of the unending and unprecedented sickness and death are rolling out on television in another room. It is closest to an apocalyptic world I have experienced. Something fundamental has changed. It seems the world we have made is collapsing. We need to rethink and reset ourselves.

As I remember the birth event a year ago, I wish the little dove well. It is a deserving inheritor of this planet, one that we need to appreciate and share, not

control.

The writer is an environmentalist, photographer and a bird watcher