Swamp Life

GEOFFREY PHILP

ABSTRACT
A set of haikus by Geoffrey Philp.

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At the start of the pandemic, I began writing haiku to take my mind off the intrusive thoughts about my health and loved ones. Instead of thinking I would die after I coughed or sneezed, I focused on the plants and animals I saw on my morning walks. Out of this practice, I began noticing things that often go unnoticed, such as tassel flowers sprouting out of the sidewalk or coat buttons swaying under Royal palms. And although Miami has only two seasons, wet and dry, this daily practice made me more aware of the growth cycle of trees, many of which I had been previously unaware.

The change has been humbling. I always had secretly prided myself on being the kind of writer Henry James describes as “someone on whom nothing is lost.” For example, I used to believe that trees in Florida were just trees and that they were always green. Imagine my surprise when a West Indian Mahagony began losing her leaves.

At first, I thought she was dying because of nearby construction, for she was the only tree on the block losing her leaves. I took pictures of her every day until I left for a three-day residency at the Betsy Hotel. When I returned three days later, she had a brand new coat of leaves. As Mikey Smith would say, “Mi cyaan believe it.” In my former life, I don’t think I would’ve noticed the change. I would’ve kept walking through my neighborhood without seeing anything, even when I thought I was so aware. Which leads me to ask, how much have I missed? How much don’t I know?

Writing haiku, especially the ones Andrew Moss calls my “Japanese-Yoruba kintsugi fusion,” took me out of myself and into the trees and rivers. It also restores, to borrow a phrase from Sylvia Wynter, “the great contract of the imagination” when a writer “and a place enter into a relationship.” 1 But most of all, writing haiku has made me look forward—even more now—to the fleeting season of the pouis when Miami is blessed with offerings to Oshun.

Alligators thrive
in these canals—the swamp
offers little hope.

Toward twilight
the crickets start their symphony
with moonstruck cane toads.

Outside my window
a Wolf moon prowls, and nothing
can sate her hunger.
Under cloudy skies
while streetlights still shine, clock vines
burn from the bushes.

While the moon lingers
in a February sky, sounds
from a distant train.
Through the flame tree’s dried branches, the sun rises in a mockingbird sky.

A roar of thunder deepens stains on Jacob’s Coat beaded with droplets.
Atop the pouis
a dove coos the way lovers
mourn what could have been.

After summer rains
under oaks, a natal palm
gives birth to a star.
Under the palm trees  
thinking about the blue skies  
and Gordon Rohlehr.

Geoffrey Philp is the author of two short story collections, two novels, three children’s books, and eight books of poetry, including his forthcoming collection from Peepal Tree Press, Archipelagos. His poems and short stories have been published in The Oxford Book of Caribbean Verse, sx salon, World Literature Today, Pree, Punch, The Johannesburg Review of Books, The Oxford Book of Caribbean Short Stories, Visible, Rattle: Poets Respond, and Decolonial Passage. The recipient of a Silver Musgrave Medal in Literature from the Institute of Jamaica (2022), Marcus Garvey Award for Excellence in Education (2022), and a Luminary Award from the Consulate of Jamaica (2015), one of Philp’s poems, “A Prayer for my Children,” is featured on The Poetry Rail at The Betsy—an homage to 12 writers who have shaped Miami culture. Philp lives in North Miami Beach and is working on a collection of poems, “Letter from Marcus Garvey,” and a graphic novel for children, “My Name is Marcus.”

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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