

2019 Wind & Water Writing Contest

Honourable Mention

Salt Lassi by Deborah Dacombe

Genre: Non-Fiction/Travel Memoir

In my stillness, I become aware of the call of a raven. It's demanding and confident, a loud grate against the distant answer of the train that passes through town. The train clatters on the tracks, and it's warning bellow echoes through the hills that wind and weave through this part of Sri Lanka. I listen as the noises are carried on the wind up to the hills. Mesmerized, I imagine all the interactions that are happening. How the raven speaks to its mate, the shape of its head and the beak opening wide with each "caw". How the people scramble off the tracks when they hear the train coming. I can see them in my mind's eye standing by the tracks, waving to the passengers as it noisily moves on past. Mothers holding children's hands. The smiles of the toothless little boys.

I bring my focus back. Neat rows of carefully plucked tea bushes cover the landscape in my gaze. In this light the leaves of the tea are a citrus green; almost vibrant against the contrast of eucalyptus trees that grace the shadows of the hills. A moment on and a peacock wails and sweet birds chirp and chatter. A voice in the distance starts the Muslim call to prayer.

I could spend the day noting the sounds, textures and views from the balcony. I could record all that my senses become aware of. Maybe I will. For in travel to other lands and cultures I am always in the moment. I immerse and delve deep into spaces in time. There are no worries, no agendas, no commitments. No real plans other than to explore this new culture, these warm peoples, this landscape that beckons for us to walk amongst the plantations of tea and down dirt roads.

Later, we walk on the dusty red earth that weaves in and around the tea bushes. Small clouds of dust settle on my black waterproof sandals that are my shoe of choice for all activities. I can walk miles in these shoes, wade through streams and clomp up from the ocean with sand sticking between my feet and the foot bed, sometimes chafing the skin between my toes. I'm building up callouses over weeks and weeks of wear as my shoes soften and meld to the curves of my feet.

The path we walk in this moment veers around the hill to reveal a woman in a sari walking towards us. She is beautiful with high planes on her cheeks and straight white teeth. She smiles and says good morning. Her sari is a deep red with hints of peacock blue and golden yellows. She carries a parasol.

The path leads to a small village. Houses are perched on the hillside, haphazard in their placement. Smaller and well trodden paths lead to each home. Dogs lie on the path. One wanders lazily in front of us, oblivious to our attempt to avoid stepping on its paws. It stops to scratch its raw skin. Bald patches and dirty fur, thin and sad looking. It's the fate of many dogs in this country.

Teenage girls on their way home from school wear the countries public school uniform of white belted dresses that fall below their knees. School ties are the only difference from school to school, village to village and city to city. All of the girls of this age wear their long, shiny black hair in pigtails, some with ribbons tied into bows at the bottom of their plaits. They smile shyly and say hello. Some practice their English and ask us how we are. Lean long limbs and bodies, dark brown skin and white straight teeth. The younger girls often wear shorter bobbed hair and they love watching us. They smile and giggle and wave, and want us to see them.

The houses are simple cement structures with solid wood window panes and doors, made from local hardwood trees. Some homes have flowers around their boundaries, blue hydrangeas, red geraniums

and multicolored bougainvillea. Many of the homes have vegetable gardens, some terraced. Beans climb poles. We see onions, carrots and cabbage all in neat rows. Freshly laundered clothes dry on bushes and rooftops.

I know I am blessed. I have no phone to answer and no pressing meetings to prepare for. I have no job to return to after this time of exploration. I am young of heart and body, yet “retired”. I travel with my husband and he, like me, understands the gift we have been given to experience all that we do. We travel well together, read each other’s minds and enjoy our simple way of being on the road. Carry little and “take it as it comes” is a common mantra.

Being in the hills means there is a coolness in the air. The breeze rustles the palms and the noises from town grow louder and then fade. I drift in and out of which sense is dominant, first seeing what lays in my view, then listening more intently while becoming more aware of the breeze that passes over my skin and the smell of tea drying from the plantation around the hill.

Simple interactions with locals. The taste of Ceylon milk tea and salt lassi’s. A man moving his head in the way only Tamils do. It’s not a nod or a shake it’s a bobble. Tuk tuk drivers hustling for business. Female street dogs feeding their puppies roadside. Meditation in exploration such a satisfying way to be.