

AT THE VOLCANO

DAVID SWARBRICK

THE
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FOR AUREEN

WRITTEN IN JANUARY 1995
IN KAKAMEGA & MOUNT ELDON
ON THE BORDER BETWEEN
UGANDA & KENYA.

ONE

Wholly beautiful,
this is a remote
withdrawn
unsaid place;

knowing nothing,

wisdom held
unaided.

The volcano,
burst, blistered,
blasted before time,

rises above savannah,
autonomous.

Nothing of what I have left behind
has followed me here:

no bars, or clubs,
or safari parks
swarming with mutinous animals;

there are no buildings here,
no cables, no pylons,
nothing.

There is nothing,
nothing;

there are no roads even,
nor walls, bridges, hospitals,
barbers, butchers, pharmacies;

museums are absent; and shops,
and markets selling fruit
and sentimental knick-knacks.

TWO

Even the ruins
around this place
have still to be built,
lived in, fought for,
destroyed

by monsoon rains,

by dead and dated wars,
and rebels
hiding from the recent defeats
of old conflicts
that never end;

there are just trees;

just podo trees
rising like citadels
around the titanic flanks
of the volcano;

trunks
thirty feet round;

their branches
forking low,
twisting,
arching
into artless beams,
hewn lintels,
giant joists;

a stronghold,
spontaneous, animate,
built in a high lapsed land,

soaring
above borders
that have worn into wasted lines,
pale snaking imprints
woven invisibly
between every spur and stream,

climbing the sides,
between ridges and peaks,
vents, conduits, lakes –

the crater, cloistered, limitless:

every inch of every border
remembered in old, disputed books
in archives in Nairobi and Kampala;

in the stories the tribespeople
tell each other
every breaking day
in villages far, far away.

THREE

Mostly though, there are no people here:
no trippers;
no travellers, tourists,
not even residents;

just me,
and one bemused young driver
smoking through a pack
of Marlboro lights.

Especially, there are no houses,
no homes
or gardens;

no streets or settlements.

In this place -
in this place here –

no cars sound
no buses blare
their loud exhausted horns;

there are no windows
to open
for music to escape from;

conversation to drift from

no drilling, grinding, crashing, crunching,
no barking dogs
or phones,

no people talking, shouting, singing,
nor even passing each other,
to pass the day
with a nod, a "Hi," a "Humm".

In this place here
there are no rooms filled
with the ordinary things
of life
or of objects passed
from one generation
to the next.

In this place here
it is the trees that talk,
that chatter and discourse
in sudden winds;

it is the birds
that speak, confer, negotiate,
the buzzards, bustards, cuckoos, kites;

and the waterfalls,
slapping over a hundred meters of rock,
the hot springs bubbling,

and hyenas baying at a cornered buffalo.

In this place
it is the sounds you cannot hear
you notice first and last:
the stealthy leopard,
the bushbucks, cobras, lizards.

This is a place
that leaves no trace.

FOUR

I have climbed here
quite alone,
leaving the jeep
where the level ground
ran out.

At the end
of a ragged tread
of off-road tyres
the bush rolls,

scrub to forest;

long burnt grass
- the colour of lions –
reaches to the forest
on the mountain's
sheer as tombstones sides;

the slopes narrow
to a lawless green,

strip out light,
break space
into an elaborate maze
only animals can navigate,
following the antique paths
made by wild elephants.

You hear them,

travelling by night,
scouring the salt caves,
their tusks -
like the claws of massive diggers -
carving deep channels
into the volcano's heart.

Jungle
defends the cancelled land,
morphs into thick shadows,
repeating and repeating
all that it is;

fugitive tracks -
the tread of wary animals -
blur and disappear,
snaking off in the sombre light,

the measured lunatic murmur of insects
twists in tail-winds.

Colobus move.

FIVE

Python creepers curtain
from forty-metre trees;

camphor,
redwood, juniper,

rebuff
the shrinking sun.

A hungry old insistent night
begins to fall;

and in the evening mists
the volcano
appears and disappears;

floats,
through the turning years
since before the day was late;

a temple
over the world
it made;

a dreamland built in fire and ash
in tephra, cinders, lava,

a guarded shangri-la
whose gods have names
now quite forgotten
(if they were ever known at all).

Here, the jehovahs
are perfect, imperfect,
perpetually lingering on
heedless of permissions
craving not to know
what to know
before the world was finished.

SIX

Six continents
and sixty countries
hang here, with me,
fill me, form me -

silent bells
ringing on their own
through my unspeaking
head and heart;

ringing
through all the houses too;

a cavalcade of homes,
hollow, white, enormous,
each replacing the last
a little less exactly,

each haunting the next;

as if the first
could ever return;

as if the first
could ever stop
everything that happened next
from happening next,

or fling open
every door,

and lead,

like Ariadne's Thread,
to the first room,

when the world
was perfect.

SEVEN

The sky shrinks,
a melting line
of red and gold;

clouds marbling
a space defined
by what the jungle
does not claim.

And
in the dying light
an unexpected track
expands,

widens
into an atoll of green grass;

breaks the forest's
tangled symmetry.

A line of double-planted canna lilies
marks a nervous boundary,

a wooden bungalow
on the jungle's edge.

Orchids dangle
out of reach;

bougainvillea,
dip their blood-red flowers
in shafts of light;

from a deep veranda
lawns slope away.

EIGHT

And in this place,
this sudden, random, hit-upon place;

in this place –

between the emptiness
and the histories
I do not comprehend,

the ones I know enough about
to know
nothing -

in this place
I find
what I never thought to find -

the house,
stopped at three decades ago,
replicated so faithfully
in another continent.

What is lost is found.

A drawing room
opens onto a half enclosed veranda;
pillars frame a distant view of plains.

Behind me, African hills
repeat the line
of the Indian Nilgiris,
rising
wedgwood blue
around the empty house.

Only the people change –

this door opening
to a young man -

the old caretaker
fixed in another time and place
waiting on the porch steps,
walking from room to room,
removing dust sheets,
lighting lamps,

his unreadiness composed,

followed by children.

Followed even now.

NINE

There is nowhere
to go
when the gods
are unassigned,

where the gods are local, monumental –
so secret
as to cast no shadow.

I ran from you;
I run to you;

and yearly,
I have traced
each road from Coimbatore,

following the map
where the Madras train stopped
and the car journey began,

searching
for an eight year old's
landmarks;

for the Ooty turnoff;

the dam,
its shoreline, blue with eucalyptus;

for the winding asphalt road
leading across tea plantations

to a mud track
and the house,
lit up,
burning through the dusk
like a shrine.

Crickets sing low.

Unseen birds call like spirits
on an out of season wind -
forgotten bells
singing siren songs
singing ballads,
gilded and magnetic,
honing, homing
a wild liberty;

and I am here, once more:
I am here again,
here, and here and here again.

Dusk sighs across
the sanctuary land;

surrounds the surrendering house.

Underfoot
grass crackles
with dry leaves.

Trees shield and shroud

the old volcano;
Jacaranda blooms
in blues and mauves;
poinsettias arch
in six-foot tips of red –

and all about the frangipani lies,
emphatically white
upon the rust red earth.

What is lost is found.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer.

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish, he gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for various otherwise homeless departments including sales, art and marketing; and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story, a mystery to many, and a secret to most, more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com. The Press also publishes Poetry from the Jungle, a podcast that recasts the orthodox view of the world's best poets and poems.

DISCOVER MORE



A small island surrounded by large oceans, Sri Lanka is a mystery to many: remote, hard to place; a well-kept secret.

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