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Educating the Body

Lessons learned from the tropics.



MY SKIN FAILED ME THAT FIRST SUMMER IN GUYANA. I tried pasty lotions and wide-brimmed hats, long sleeves in the midday heat. Still, I turned bright red: I shone like a cherry. *Miss, like ya get burn up?* my students said, pressing a finger onto the red glow of my shoulder. *Ya must careful! Sun hot!* But there was nothing I could do. Skin peeled from the part in my hair. Light streamed through my gauzy curtains, and when I left the house it burned through my clothes. It colored my days and savaged my pores until I was red and raw, until I could no longer remember what it was to be touched without wincing.

There are no vestigial British aristocrats in Guyana, none of the prim, post-colonial garden parties you might imagine in Barbados or Jamaica. The English lost sanity in the heat, counting mosquitoes by the thousands. Eventually they gave up and sent Scottish farmers, leaving behind generations of

McCurdy's and Douglasses. I was one of only a few hundred white faces in the country, and the others were ravaged like mine. Guyanese call albinos "devil-whip." Blue-eyed and freckled, their skin is tawny and thick like a scar. The Guyanese with Portuguese ancestors have wrinkles that crumple their skin, starburst lines radiating out to their bleached hair. Every evening in my mirror I saw the day's burnings. In their faces, I saw a lifetime's.

Coastal life in Guyana is a temporary concession between two powerful neighbors: to the North, the Atlantic which mingles its muddy brown into the clear Caribbean Sea miles off the coast; to the South, the "Interior"—vast jungles, savannahs, riverways, and mountains, inhabited by some of the rarest flora and fauna in the world. The land is massive, thousands of tracts of virgin rainforest stretching across to Venezuela and Suriname, down to the Brazilian border. I lived, as the majority of the population does, in a narrow band of cultivation along a one-road highway, just miles from blackwater creeks that wind down to Kaieteur, one of the most powerful single-drop waterfalls in the world. Humans have created a viable habitat here, growing rice and sugar, irrigating fields, and building roads. These tasks are backbreaking and the results require constant diligence to maintain. When abandoned, the land quickly reverts to overgrowth. Life here is a constant campaign against an encroaching jungle.

There is lore that North Americans adjust over time, that their blood thins (or is it thickens?) in the constant heat. This did not happen for me. From the night of my arrival at Timehri airport, I sported small beads of moisture across my forehead and nose. My Guyanese friends laughed at my inability to "acclimatize," and took to pointing out how often I was sweating when they were not even hot. My constitutional deficit plagued me, and I wondered how others managed to rise to the demands of tropical living. Sun and insects were the grounding factors of my life, the burns and bites a

constant reminder of where I was, and the physical battle I was always losing.

The sun was at the heart of it, impassive, granting its twelve hours of sunlight to all equally. Yet its constancy made it seem a foreign sun, very different from the one that had once merely tanned my skin and warmed my face. Because Guyana is just north of the Equator, daily, throughout every month of every year, the sun is at its strongest, rising at 6:00, setting at 6:00. It often seemed to pulse with white light, and it is this sensation that I remember most, a constant rippling that emanated from this blinding yellow ball in the sky.

From the sun came the heat, which bore down separately, an unwelcome layer resting on me, as willful as another being. It felt like many small children clinging to my body: one at my hip, two on my legs, another splayed across my chest and head. At first they are manageable, benign, but they soon begin to get heavy. You can't put them down, they are clutching at you. Other times it seemed a parasite. My body was inhabited. I became a complex system for the simple act of diffusing heat.

My burns always surprised me. They seemed to appear from the inside out, a new layer of skin forcing its way to the top, then peeling off in delicate ribbons. My fingertips, as they had applied the lotion, were often visible in the outline of crimson. In a vain attempt to stem the pattern, I once sat under an awning for hours at a school event. My colleagues laughed at me at the end of the day: *Miss Katrin, like ya still get red!* Every part that wasn't covered—my face, arms, and neck—was singed. I learned later that I had been burned from the reflection of the sun off the grass.

While the sun was of constant concern, it was flying insects that taught me the most about the life and death of the body. Sunlight and heat are general conditions, but the attentions of a fly or mosquito are a personal torment. They act as one unit, one encompassing blight: one fly is all flies, one mosquito all

mosquitoes. It is rare to spend a moment in Guyana when something is not flying or landing near or on you. The air I breathed was often a swarm; I swallowed more than I care to remember.

Every time a fly walks on you it is a foreshadowing of your death. Tropical flies are persistent and, after awhile, there is no energy left to brush them off. They are satisfied to just watch and circle, like buzzards, exploring every crevice of your body to determine how useful you will be to them if you die. At first it is a ticklish feeling not entirely unpleasant, but each time you have to accommodate its legs, its disregarding death-filled eyes, you lose a little bit of your body. Flies leave you with no dignity. Their work is to scavenge you, even as you live.

Mosquitoes are a constant reminder that to live is to suffer. Malaria, passed by mosquitoes and endemic in Guyana, does not usually kill you. One type of the disease, *falciparum*, will make you very sick, with skyrocketing fever and jaundice. The other, *vivax*, quietly enters your liver, forever. Mosquitoes are a kind of religion in Guyana, demanding rituals for prevention and destruction. Weeks are spent clearing standing water, where they breed, patching holes in nets, burning toxic green coils inside and enormous pyres out. Regardless, the air is thick with them for months on end.

Regions of Guyana close their schools during mosquito season. A friend recounted being chased by swarms, carrying repellent with her as an urban woman carries mace. On a boat trip across the Berbice River, I once watched as the back of my companion's white shirt was spotted with twenty, then thirty, black dots. I brushed them off; twenty more appeared. They are most active after dusk, but at times I imagined that at every moment, a mosquito was on me, near me, or—paranoid from the incessant whining high in my ear—inside me. Exiting the mosquito net in the morning, the first bite is an outrage, the second an insult, the third an annoyance, the fourth, or millionth, a bitter defeat. Eventually, my skin

stopped reacting to the mosquito saliva, did not swell, hardly itched. But the humiliation of the initial prick is eternal, the insertion of the microscopic proboscis a violation, a theft of blood to perpetuate a species that is a bane. Mosquitoes steal their lives from us.

The Guyanese word for the cumulative effect of tropical indignities is “stink.” Stink is curdled sweat, sweat that has turned rancid. It is every drop of a day’s working, sitting, breathing sweat, from the first beads as you walk out in the morning, to the most recent emission from your exhausted pores. Stink is about exposure: the battles with light and heat that demand carrying a handkerchief to mop your face and covering babies’ heads with knit caps. It is the lost tranquility from tangles with flies, the lost sanity from encounters with mosquitoes. Stink is a wringing out of your body until the worst smells emerge, and, if not purged, the worst disease.

There is but one redemption. To reclaim the unscathed body that emerged into the world that morning, you must bathe. Bathing happens in small concrete rooms under an open pipe gushing only cold water. During blackouts, when water does not come to the pump, it is done from a bucket. It is a singular pleasure.

This is how the Guyanese taught me to do it: First, let the cold water run over you. Wash off the top layer of powder and perfume, blood, cow dung, mucus, tears, mango juice, and minibus exhaust. Heat draws down; blood recedes from the surface. Turn off the water and soap your skin to a thick lather. Do not overlook an inch or a crack because here is where the rash will begin. Scrub the dust from your hair. After you are thick with foam, munificent suds cresting, let the icy water run its numbing deluge. A simple alchemy—skin, water, soap—but it never fails to restore the memory of that first skin, before the burns and scars, before the day.

This cycle of daily physical corruption and ablution became a marker of my two years in Guyana, proof of the

regularity of miracles. My mind was educated before I came to this country, but my body was not. I had never experienced such relentless exposure to the extremes of the natural world. Surviving the physical environment was not just a personal quest, it was part of my work. In the end, the lessons were simple: rest, bathe, heal. Take the world into your body, and then, as gently as you can, let it go.



Katherine Jamieson is a graduate of the Iowa Nonfiction Writing Programs, where she was an Iowa Arts Fellow. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, Ms., The Writer's Chronicle, Meridian, and The Best Women's Travel Writing 2011. "Educating the Body," is part of a longer manuscript about her experiences living in Guyana. Read more of her essays, articles, and stories at katherinejamieson.com.