



Book Review

by Charles Moody, September 2022

Footfalls: Poems of the Camino, by Suzanne Doerge, Shanti Arts Publishing, 2022

Footfalls is a wonderful book of poetry, inspired by, and written on, the Camino, with beautiful black and white illustrations complementing the poems. The author walked the Camino in 2016 with her life companion, often falling behind to reflect and write, and then continue on her own. Her poems are not abstract or esoteric, but deeply personal and easily accessible, conveying experiences that we can all identify with: the close quarters in the albergues, the camaraderie, the moments of elation and despair, an awareness of the stream of humanity that has flowed along the Way, a glimpse of the divine in solitary moments, and sadness at the harm we have wrought upon each other and the planet.

She walks with the memories of her late artist friend Beth, who, she imagines, has bequeathed her sight (“Delight”).

And she walks with the shadow pilgrim, her inner self, who ultimately, perhaps, gives her the answer to her quest (“Shadow Pilgrim”).

The poet captures the routine and the magic of the pilgrim’s day, from dawn to dusk. So many of these experiences we have shared.

We rise from our bunks, hammocks,
and pallets on the floor amidst whispers
and rustling of belongings.
We pull on yesterday’s clothes,
stumble into tired shoes or plastic sandals,
splash our faces, brush our hair,
crave café y pan somewhere en route. (“Companion Travellers”)

And on leaving the albergue,

Early risers labyrinth through dimly lit streets
past houses with their eyes shuttered closed
into the wonder of dreaming slopes. (“Wonder”)

And then, on reaching her lodging in the evening, anticipating a good night’s rest after a long day, she hears the symphony:

first in that corner, a trombone inhales,
then in this corner, a French horn blares.
Oh dear God, hear that groan
next to me, a saxophone. (“Orchestral”)

Suzanne conveys beautifully the inner journey of the pilgrim as well. She is conscious of walking on sacred ground trodden by “twelve hundred years of pilgrim soles”:

Our footprints hollow the landscape;
the landscape hallows our feet. (“Impressions”)

She conveys the ambivalence of the pilgrim who on one hand, is drawn to join the faithful at communion, but on the other, reminded by the gilded altar of the dark history of the Church:

I can’t hear the invitation to communion anymore.
His invitation, drowned out
by the cries of the Inca, Maya, Aztec, Aymara
Then, as today—
mining the heart of the sacred— (“All that Glistens”)

As pilgrims, says the poet,

With each swing of our arms, we flow as one
stream into the timeless desire
of humanity to make itself whole. (“Timeless Desire”)

But we cannot escape what we have done. This contrast between the purity we seek and the reality of what we have wrought is beautifully conveyed in “Dipping into the Common”, an ode to the village fountain, where the pilgrim slakes her thirst.

Water, freely given, like the river
that once flowed pure.
Giggling springs before
they were silenced,
given a bar code and tossed
in high risings of waste.

The poet is sensitive to the sound and rhythm of the language. Sometimes the verse is rich in alliteration and assonance,

Rocky roads—erosion and ruts
erupt in blisters and punishing sores.
Thirsty creek beds, baked, predict
brittle fissures that chisel the skin. (“Impressions”)

And vivid imagery,

Yawning villages of narrow, cobbled streets,
terracotta tiled roofs and long-serving metal hinges
wheezing open timeworn, wooden doors. (“Village Sueños”)

In one whimsical, extended metaphor of a poem, the pilgrim is allotted Bunk 132, a berth alongside many other boats in the harbour.

Sojourning sailors, we slip into a sea of dreams:
emergency exit lights—our stars,
clothes dangling from rails—our sails.
Boats creak as we toss and turn,
propelled by murmurs of mother tongues
blowing in from across the globe.

Eventually, woken by the foghorn of a snore, the sailors descend ladders and step ashore, hoping to reach another safe harbour at the end of a day. (“Bunk 132”)

The breadth of experience shared in these poems is quite remarkable: the rustle and bustle of the albergues at predawn and lights-out; the personal moments of joy and suffering and reflection; the appreciation of beauty in nature, in antiquity and in humanity along the Way; and the inner journey, as well, towards an understanding of life and self.

Footfalls: Poems of the Camino is a book to read before you walk the Camino to catch a glimpse of the rich experiences that lie ahead, and one to read when you return, to recall those magical moments. Highly recommended!