

Apocalypse '83



Jean Arasanayagam

**Apocalypse
'83**

Cover design: Muhanned Cader

Apocalypse

'83

Poems

Jean Arasanayagam

International Centre for Ethnic Studies
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Contents

Excerpt from Some Aspects of Recent Sri Lankan Literature in English <i>Ashley Halpé</i>	1
Jean Arasanayagam: In Search of Identity <i>Regi Siriwardena</i>	3
Taken from Breaking Bounds: Essays on Sri Lankan Writing in English <i>Rajiva Wijesinha</i>	9
Comments on Trial By Terror <i>Norman Simms</i>	12
'Someone smashed in the door and gave me my freedom': The Writings of Jean Arasanayagam <i>Anders Sjöbohm</i>	15
Poems	
Nallur 1982	20
Ahimsa Sutra	22
Fear	24
1958....'71.....'77.....'81.....'83	25
Personae	27
Innocent Victim - Trincomalee	29
Eye Witness- Nawalapitiya	31
In the Month of July	32
The Holocaust	33
Death of the Prisoners	34
Prisons	36
Political Prisoner	37
A Set of Photographs	39
Now we are Strangers	42

At the Gate Stands a Mob ... July '83	44
Man at the Gate	46
Gutted	48
Molotov Cocktail	51
It's Got to End	52
Refugee - Part I	53
Refugee Camp	55
Poems from a Refugee Camp Refugee - Old Man	
Old Woman - Part I	57
Refugee - Old Man - Part II	59
Night - Refugee Camp	60
Halt!	62
Sentry	64
Refugee Camp 1983	65
Refugees - As We Move On, As We Move On	66
I Watch My Own Death	67
Apocalypse - July '83	69
In Hiding	71
The Silent Enemy - July 1983	72
When Can We Live Again?	73
If the Gun Speaks	74
Exile I	75
Exile II	77
Flamboyants in July (From a refugee camp) 1983	78
Defeat	79
Letting Go	80
Vision of the World	81
Refugee	83
Aftermath	86

Excerpt from Some Aspects of Recent Sri Lankan Literature in English

Ashley Halpé

Apocalypse '83, to borrow Jean Arasanayagam's title, appears to have focused the eyes, the hearts and the imaginations of our writers on the present, with its chiaroscuro of conflict and disaster, suspicion and suffering, hypocrisy and protest. Contemplating the countryside or rural characters had been as Prof. Goonetilleke reminds us in his introduction to *Modern Sri Lankan Stories*, typical of writing in English in this country as authors conscious that they were alienated from the mass of the people and local traditions sought to capture truly national authentically Sri Lankan experiences.

The result was usually a sentimental ruralism, a tendency almost entirely absent from the very substantial output of creative writing in English during the last two years. This writing is deeply aware of crisis, and even where the present situation is not its subject matter it contributes to an understanding of it; one might add that it certainly does not say the same things in the same old way.

Central to a reading of this period is Jean Arasanayagam's book. Flamboyants seen flaming all over the city from a refugee camp remind of blood, and "a skeletal branch left" bears "a crown of thorns;" in the valley she sees that solitary fires still burn and "the men and women of the village" had, during the destruction "stood their faces blank impassive waiting for the blood sport to begin."

The deep involvement with the landscape, the lushness and visual splendour of fruit and foliage which came through in *Kinduri and Poems of a Season* now only intensify the shock of disposition –

"I didn't know this country was not mine",
it seemed I knew this earth too well to feel
its heave and its revulsion

expel my half ingested being
from its twisted guts.

The trauma of becoming a stranger in her own land finds expression in nervous tortured language and in images of violence and pain that are deeply scored into a reader's consciousness.

Not herself a Tamil but married to one, Jean Arasanayagam had once "watched from afar" having her "own identity safe from marauders." *Poems of a Season...* her prose work *Bhairavi* and many of her short stories (*The Cry of the Kite*) showed her gradual giving of herself to it. In July 1983, she arrives at a grimly ironic possession.

Now I'm in it
It's happened to me
At last history has meaning.

The poems convey the gathering of the storm (Nallur, and 1958... '71... '77... '81... '83...) the immediate violence both as she saw it and through various personae, the forced contemplation of what had happened in the period in the refugee camps, the thought of exile – "can I rent a country / as I rent out a room? The recognition "I didn't know this country."

The poetry is courageous sparing the reader nothing, yet not mesmerised by horror for there is room for meditation, compassion for more hapless victims, and even the awareness so conspicuously lacking in the attacker's: the human reality of "the others."

The author probes her own identity, a theme developed further in her most recent book of poems *A Colonial Inheritance* which also explores the complexities of this country's modern history.

Excerpt from BRIEF CHRONICLE.

"Some Aspects of Recent Sri Lankan Literature in English", by Ashley Halpé, Emeritus Professor of English, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.

The critique is from "An Anthology of Contemporary Sri Lankan Poetry in English", edited by Rajiva Wijesinha.

Jean Arasanayagam: In Search of Identity

Regi Siriwardena

Jean Arasanayagam's first love was painting, and when she wrote her early poems, she brought a painter's eye to them:

*A man's shadow walks along the river,
the water moves away from his reflection.
The eye forms a pattern
out of isolated segments of landscape
interposing its design.*

In *Navasilu 2* there is a note on Jean Arasanayagam's poetry – this was in 1979 – by Ellen Dissanayake. The critic (she was American by birth) found in Jean's poetry a voice that was 'noticeably non-western' because of its 'pervasive sense-awareness,' 'its voluptuous language, and imagery.' For my part, I am inclined to relate these characteristics more to her painterly imagination than to any distinctively Eastern sensibility. Of course, the images in her early poems are marked, and sometimes self-consciously Sri Lankan.

*The sun ripens like a sapodilla
Glowing warm red-orange.*

But these youthful poems of hers affect me rather like the poetry of the Anglo-American Imagists of six or seven decades ago: I'm not suggesting an influence, necessarily, but rather an affinity in the poet's conception of what she wanted to do. There's a strong dominance of the visual imagination, there are sometimes brilliant flashes of sensuous perception, but ultimately the poetry seems tenuous,

impressionistic, incomplete. About two years ago, I wrote to Jean asking for a copy of her first collection of poems for the purpose of a programme. I was presenting, and she sent me one inscribed with the words: 'All this existed, had life and meaning, once.' That precisely phrased comment suggests to me that without wanting to disown her early work, she recognises that it belonged to a self she has outgrown. Certainly, one could hardly have anticipated from it the astonishing explosion of creative power in her work since 1983. It is only rarely in her first volumes that the poetry goes beyond the shimmering surface of sense-impressions to a fuller vision. Perhaps the most interesting poem of that period is 'The Inner Courtyard', where the visual imagination is at the service of a larger meaning. Images of emptiness and desolation build up a sense of a tradition disintegrating, a way of life falling to pieces.

But it was in the crucible of July 1983 that Jean Arasanayagam's poetry was completely transmuted. Like many other women of her class, she found herself undergoing the hitherto inconceivable as violence overwhelmed her and her family, and she was compelled to share the terror and anguish of a community to whose fate she was bound not by birth but by marriage. For many of us, her poems in *Apocalypse '83* – some of them written in refugee camps – came as the voice of our collective sense of horror and tragedy. In some of the poems in this volume, for instance in 'Flamboyants in July', the visual imagination is as vivid as it ever was in Jean's poetry, but no longer indulging in the luxury of sensation, scarred instead by the searing images of blood and death:

*All over the city
over the roofs
the great branches
arch with flame
how bright the colour of blood
scarlet pools of fallen flowers
lying beneath the trees*

*and a skeletal branch
left bearing
a crown of thorns*

Yet, if the strength of the best poems in *Apocalypse '83* comes out of the naked immediate response to catastrophe, the very spontaneity of the poetry carries with its own dangers. Poetry, even when written out of genuine passion, anger or lamentation, can acquire force and conviction only through the discipline of language, rhythm, form. Jean Arasanayagam shares the conception of poetry that D.H. Lawrence had: she seems to leave it to her emotion in the act of creation to find its own form rather than shape it by deliberate critical labour. It is a mode of poetic composition (Dionysian rather than Apollonian) that is alien to my own temperament, and the fact that I yet respond to the best of Jean's poems is evidence that in them the strength of the experience has in fact found its own appropriate form.

In any case, for Jean Arasanayagam to grow as a poet, she had to progress beyond the simple human reaction of shock and horror, of compassionate identification with the victims of 1983. To have articulated that at the time was a necessary emotional catharsis for her and for us, and in an act of atonement for our collective guilt. But her poetic development required a growth into a deeper insight into the events. That process is begun in the poem '1958....71...81.....83'. It not only sets 1983 in its place in the recurrent and intensifying violence of our society; it's also the expression of a striving towards self-understanding and self-criticism, in which the poet comes face to face with her own former incomprehension:

*It's all happened before and will happen again
and we the onlookers
but now I'm in it
it's happened to me,*

*at last history has meaning
when you're the victim
when you're the defeated
the bridges bombed
and you can't cross over.*

'At last history has meaning'. That line could have served as an epigraph for her next collection: **A Colonial Inheritance and Other Poems**, which contains, to my mind, the most impressive body of work she has yet given us. The poet who began as a young woman with splintered fragments of sensation has here attained historical imagination and insight. The crisis of 1983 and after has clearly been for her also a personal crisis which has compelled her to examine anew herself, her identity and her place in relation to the past and present of Sri Lankan history. The result is that the poetry gains greatly in scope and depth. And, as often in poetry, a maturer vision is accompanied by the poet's greater control over her instrument. The language in this volume glows with warmth and vigour; the rhythms flow with compelling force; and the best poems have a charged economy of utterance.

In this volume, the poet explores her dual identities – the Jean Solomons she was and the Jean Arasanayagam she became. Recollections of her childhood upbringing take her back to the colonial past:

*on the whatnot with its curlicues
were portraits of uncles in cream tussore
and Edwardian collars, aunts in
Brussels lace, pin tucks, bouquets of arum
lilies, trailing ferns of maidenhair.*

And beyond her lifetime lies that of her ancestors – the conquerors who began that history. It's a history she cannot entirely slough off because she is bound to it indissolubly by birth and family, by the very texture of her skin, her face, the 'curve of lip or lid'; yet the life of the poetry comes from the tension between the claims of lineage and the poet's

consciousness of the violence and plunder on which that culture was built. The destruction and slaughter she has known in the present find their antecedents in the pillage and murderousness of the past:

*What did they leave behind
in peaceful parks and gardens
statues of warring generals
astride monstrous bronze horses
rearing their brutal hooves high
upon a pedestal
a gun upraised.
In the garden of the museum
a cannon rests. Within glass cases
artefacts of time. Minted coins abraded
silver larins, golden guilders, stuivers,
ancient swords stained with rust
and blood. Firearms antique,
and in my face – a semblance.*

The other face of the volume is in the poems in which Jean unravels the thread of her relationships with the family and the Tamil culture to which she linked herself by marriage. These poems maintain a complexity of judgement and a subtly poised ambivalence of feeling. She is able to use with the inwardness of sympathy the language of Hindu belief and ritual, while rebelling against the clannishness, the authoritarianism, the attachment to property, of a conservative society. It is striking that in these poems she speaks without reticence of intimate family conflicts, as if the larger crisis she has lived through has released her of any such inhibitions. And she can speak with the dignity and price of one who has passed through the fire and has therefore earned the right not to be regarded as alien. This rich and delicately fused amalgam of emotions has gone into the making of what is, for me, her finest poem, 'Lines to a mother-in-law'. The poem is at one and the same time a self-assertion against exclusion and ostracism, and on the other hand a transcendence of

bitterness and resentment through compassion achieved as the fruit of suffering. It deserves not to be mutilated in quotation:

*Do we finally forgive each other?
Time is passing and you're growing
blind they tell me, dead cataracts fill
your eyes, your memory is confused
you summon ghosts from the past,
it will be late, hurry
you must remember my face,
don't confuse it with that of any stranger
who came knocking at your gate.
I have become part of your life
even as an impostor
taken the family name and lived with it
through my own passage as it
passed through an alien heritage
of changing climates changing seasons.
You must remember before it's too late
the colour of my eyes, the shape of my limbs
time is passing it's
growing darker my sight is failing too.
Soon we will no longer recognize each other
we're both walking in the same direction
both with halting gait
stepping towards a certain destination, death.
You had your rituals and I mine
fire was your natural element
the fire of the sacred yaham
the fire of the burning pyre
I too have passed through fires
for your son's sake, the absolution
of Sati's flames.*

Regi Siriwardena is an eminent writer, translator, literary Critic. He is also the editor of *Nēthrā*, a journal published by the ICES. This Paper first appeared in *An Anthology of Contemporary Sri Lankan Poetry in English*. Edited by Rajiva Wijesinha.

Taken from *Breaking Bounds: Essays on Sri Lankan Writing in English*

Rajiva Wijesinha

The suffering that the Tamils and their families experienced however, not only in the riots of July 1983 but also in the run-up to that event with its fostering of prejudice and resentment, changed things radically. An anguished awareness of the transformation of the national landscape was boldly and prophetically expressed from the beginning of 1983 in poems such as 'Nallur', which is a cry about death and destruction that is paradoxically full of pulsating life. This I would suggest springs from the intense self-identification of the poet with the scene described; and underpinning this is the assured use of locations and images that belong specifically to this context.

*the leeching sun has drunk its blood and
bloated swells among the piling clouds...
mingling with fragrance from the frothy toddy

pots swinging like lolling heads...
Thirtham now no longer nectar of the gods
brims over but is bitter, bitter...
the gods are blinded
by the rain of bullets,
six faced Arumugam
all twelve eyes
close in darkness*

(Emphasis added)

The immediacy with which Arasanayagam conveys her message, developed even more forcefully in 'Remembering

Nallur- 1984', springs, I would suggest then, from her total immersion, through the compulsions of social and political reality, in the idiom of a particular time and place. At the same time, I would be very wary of describing her extravagantly unorthodox syntax as distinctively Sri Lankan, as opposed to the vocabulary and the cultural background. The piling on of images she employs does not seem to me to be necessarily alien from standard English and, as in the case of say Raja Rao, as indicated above, I would take issue with those who discern some sort of specifically oriental tendency in such sentence structures. Faulkner after all does the same sort of thing, and Joyce, and insofar as one can judge from translations, Marquez too.

For one must, I think, distinguish between the stretching of syntax to its limits and the deliberate adoption of fundamentally different forms, as, say, Tutuola uses or Naipaul in his presentation of dialect. In asserting the existence of different Englishes we should take care not to assert as a norm what writers themselves would describe as a distinctive specialized style they use to emphasize a personal vision. That I would suspect is Rao's purpose in his evocative meanderings; I can state with certainty that Arasanayagam is not through her strained syntax attempting to reproduce standard Sri Lankan speech patterns, but is on the contrary seeking to express heightened emotions, an intensity of emotion if you like, that is peculiarly hers.

Having said that, I should also mention that there is some significance in the desire and the confidence to experiment in such a fashion, which would not have occurred earlier except in the non-natural context of the baila rhythms. Together with the willingness to use in easy admixture words and images that are specifically local this to my mind indicates that the language has at last come of age in Sri Lanka.

Albeit its superscription is taken from the Book of Isaiah, the first few stanzas of Remembering Nallur-1984 are replete with instances that clearly make the point.

Discarded

*the threaded garlands of flowers streaming
down the braids of young girls in their peacock silks,
discarded too, the garlands of the gods,
tarnished the brass trays with their camphor
tulsi, flowers and fruit...
the shrivelled mango leaves blow into ash
the conch blast echoes
over the veedhi of Nallur...
where have they now vanished
the Bakhthi singers in their trance
bodies bent backwards leaning against
wind, borne by its surge
across the empty plain singing the thevarams*

Such concerns, expressed vigorously without self-consciousness, contrast clearly with the formalities of an earlier period and as such seem to me despite difficulties with regard to the vocabulary to communicate much more forcibly.

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Comments on Trial By Terror

Norman Simms

To those of us in New Zealand who view Sri Lanka only through the lens of the television news cameras as they swept over scenes of violence and destruction during the last few years and whose awareness of the customs and people of that distant land is tinged by the romantic associations of exotic place-names such as Ceylon, Kandy, and Trincomalee—for us the poetry of Jean Arasanayagam comes with the kind of shock that only great poetry can give. This is the shock of insight and compassion. In a world where we tend to be dulled by the nightly electronic images of terrorism and war, whether these are factual reports of real lands and real people or only the refracted nightmares of video and film, the poems in *Trial by Terror* awaken dormant emotions and generate new paths of thought, connecting our own personal and cultural experiences with those of people, of whom we have only faint glimmerings. Hers are not polemical verses, however, shrill in the cacophony of ideological complaint, no matter how legitimate; neither are they mere satiric diatribes, casting blame and scratching out, with squeals of horror, paradigms of paradises lost. They are works of immense self-control and mastery of the poet's craft, with a surface that is clear, steady, and awesome, redolent with powers from deep inside their texture.

If Wordsworth wanted poetry to be emotions recollected in tranquility, the poet in a land where civil war prevails is denied this luxury. For where otherwise civilized communities find themselves lurching into acts of madness as the earthquake of modernization turns the firm basis of their beliefs into a seething mystery beneath them, only the outsider, though no less a potential victim, can find even a precarious ledge to crawl onto. Arasanayagam is such an outsider: a woman of Burgher origins who is married to a

Tamil husband, hence at once historically and only superficially outside yet emotionally and physically within the space of danger. She has eyes and can see, ears and can hear, a heart and can feel and above all, she has the poet's imagination and can, (even as the madness impinges on her own life and that of those she loves most dearly), transform the suffering of Sri Lanka into a poetry which gives to her, homeland-to Tamil and Sinhalese, to Buddhist and Hindu alike—the very dignity that the violence denies.

The poems in *Trial by Terror* were begun in the dark days of 1983. They record, with seemingly objective detail, the scenes of terrorism, conflict, and degradation that began to tear apart the life of Sri Lanka. The poems view from within the minds of refugees, the fear and agony of confinement, displacement, loss of dignity and hope. The craft of the poet is to make of the suffering—the concrete sensory experience of the bereaved and the victims, the turmoil of hope and despair in their minds, the voices of their own attempts to articulate the pains—something more and other than mere pathos and complaint.

If the poems are an enraged cry of frustration in the face of the irrational and unwarranted violence Sri Lanka has brought on itself and suffered through the conscious and unconscious consequences of colonialists, if the cry is forced inward and emerges with the added power of understatement, the frustration is transformed into hope that is built into the very poetic enterprise itself, as it metamorphoses suffering into meaning.

That muting of the outraged, half-inarticulate cry, that transformation into hope, that metamorphosis of agony into significance occurs through the medium of poetry, its ability to speak in figurative language, to draw analogies beyond the normative range of logic, to perceive new sense in old mythologies. Hence, for example, a quiet, brief poem such as "If the Gun Speaks."

*If the gun speaks
There will always be silence*

*The silence of fear
if the gun speaks through blood
and bullets
Scarlet hibiscus
Like gouts of blood
Stud the image of Ganesh*

Here simple repetition of words and phrases and the inevitability of the conditional sentence lead the contrast between silence and speech to burst forth in a natural image; (the flower) that is at the same time and predominantly the image of divine life (the god Ganesh), yet the quietness of the texture is broken by the incongruity of the word *gouts* and the force of the verb *stud*; so that as we read the poem, we are forced to reevaluate words, images, concepts, and frames of reference again: in the suffering of the poet's subject, nothing is as it was before, nothing can be taken on trust, at face value, on the basis of traditional understanding.

In many of her earlier poems Arasanayagam had explored the qualities of life as the wife in a mixed marriage, the woman who feels an outsider in her own country while nevertheless passionately committed to its culture and life. There, in poems known to readers of Sri Lankan poetry in general Commonwealth anthologies, her-measured voice gave insight into the private fate of a small segment of the population of the island nation. Here; like Ann Ranasinghe, a Jewish-German poet of Sri Lanka, who also writes out of the profundity of compassion and sympathy for the plight of all humanity represented by the suffering of Sri Lanka's strife-torn communities, Arasanayagam reaches out from the pain of the involvement to the creativity of the poetic act, not only giving voice to the silences and the blind cries of the refugees and other victims but also discovering the essential humanity in the moments of supreme inhumanity, thus pointing toward hope, reconciliation, and renewal.

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'Someone smashed in the door and gave me my freedom': The Writings of Jean Arasanayagam

Anders Sjöbohm

Perhaps Jean Arasanayagam would have remained a strictly disciplined word-painter and observer if external events had not interfered and disturbed the balance in her life and thus also her aesthetics. Being married to a Tamil grew increasingly dangerous in a society where the two major communities of her country, the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority, were becoming more and more antagonistic. In July 1983 this antagonism culminated in bloody riots. Among the more than ninety thousand Tamils who had to flee were Jean Arasanayagam, her husband and their two daughters. At that time they lived in Kandy in central Sri Lanka, and Jean Arasanayagam lectured in English in a teacher's college in the neighboring university town of Peradeniya.

These terrible experiences were a decisive turning-point for Jean Arasanayagam as a writer. She wrote a collection of poems, *Apocalypse '83* (1984); a partially overlapping collection, *Trial by Terror* (1987), was published in New Zealand. In these, hardly a word is said about either Sinhalese or Tamils or about aggression or racism on the part of either. Neither, on the other hand, do they deal with religious conflicts or economic crisis. And far from being a weakness in the collection, this constitutes strength. The subject matter of the collections becomes unlimited and universal.

Jean Arasanayagam's poems concentrate on the essence of carnage hatred, on the impenetrability of pure evil to understanding. In the mob there is no room for mercy nor feelings of solidarity. With hard rhythms and hectic invocations, Jean Arasanayagam rivets on a depiction of pure hell. The fate of human beings, the suffering of the anonymous and innocent, is made sharp in a few lines:

In the month of July
a man fled from his pursuers
he climbed a tree
the mob aimed stones at him
until they got him down
probably fell off, his grasp loosened
slippery with blood, his body already battered and then
they trampled him to death.

In one sense the reader still recognizes the problem complex from *The Cry of the Kite* and elsewhere. Time is a destroyer, human societies are fragile and unstable, nature regains that which it has lost. In spite of the fact that Jean Arasanayagam herself is a victim, she is also a watcher and a questioner, a painter with an eye for the details of landscape.

Changes, however, are portrayed as much more violent and brutal in *Apocalypse* '83 and *Trial by Terror*. Rather than temples slowly crumbling, there are plundered, burning houses. Rather than the sorrow and bitterness and estrangement and decay, there is the horror of those who have been packed together in school corridors and classrooms. The pyres, once on the shores of the Jaffna peninsula, are now burning in the middle of the streets and pavements in Kandy.

Chaos, humiliation, horror, loss of safety and a sense of home, loss of identity itself. . . But this naked, personal zero point also means a paradoxical sense of freedom: 'Someone smashed in the door/ And gave me my freedom / To walk out into the world / Free, free from the prison of myself' Jean Arasanayagam can no longer be just an observer, she has had to share the conditions of the pursued and defeated:

It's all happened before and will happen again
And we the onlookers.
But now I'm in it
It's happened to me
At last history has meaning

In an interview Jean Arasanayagam has said: 'I was alien to my husband's family. I was alien in society because I was

married to a Tamil. I was made to feel I didn't belong. I had to answer a lot of questions. I became my own interrogator.'

In *Apocalypse* '83 one cannot help noticing that Jean Arasanayagam shapes death with overtones of a sacrifice, a rite with bludgeons and axes, a cult ceremony in a spirit of pure evil. In *A Colonial Inheritance* death is present on every page. The collection ends with a long and powerful poem, 'Remembering Nallur 1984', the culmination of a series of poems and pieces of prose Jean Arasanayagam has dedicated to the greatest religious festival in Jaffna.

The Nallur festival is consecrated to the Hindu war god Skanda, son of Shiva, one of the highest divinities. In Jean Arasanayagam's poem, the festival partly has a new significance. The giant wheeled chariot with idols, drawn on enormous ropes by innumerable men stripped to the waist, has become the chariot of a death cult. The devoted god seekers, the repentants who roll around in the sands, oblivious of the crowds, are no longer red-stained by the earth of Jaffna but by bullet wounds. The god seekers no longer threw themselves in front of the chariot in moments of ecstasy, but are run over as victims. Death represents the truth of the time: the brutal violence, our sacrifices, the piles of dead bodies; those who have been sacrificed:

They still come, in violent surge of waves
in oceans of re-incarnate birth, insistent,
pulled by the moon's fatal tides that draw
them compulsive to the sands for their
ritual sacrifice, prostrate themselves
closer to the beating heart of earth
now trod upon by tramp
of soldier's marching boots.

others still come, drawing with
their bodies' ropes the chariot that bears
their own flower strewn bier

as one by one they fall, one by one
swept over by the waves of frothing blood. . .

In Jean Arasanayagam's writing, religious symbolism is a central theme. In her early books the supernatural is a burning question; in *The Cry of the Kite*, the writer tells how her experience of the landscape made her 'search through sea, through temple, the enigmatic smile of the stone goddess by the freshwater spring - to see through the flame which burnt in the little shrine by the sea, into the eye of Shiva.' Shiva is the most terrifying of all the Hindu gods, the destroyer of that which is good as well as that which is evil, who allows new forms and creations to germinate. These are destructive forces, the presence of which Jean Arasanayagam must have felt all her life, both good and evil.

In *Apocalypse '83* and *Trial by Terror*, Christian symbolism is also present. The victims share the agony of Christ, a Gethsemane and a Golgotha at the same time: 'And the hammering of nails echo through / The night-forests of trees cut down.'

Sometimes it seems as if Jean Arasanayagam is trying to say that the old gods are gone and with them the peaceful god seekers. In *Trial by Terror*, a soldier takes the gods away, their hands bound, to prison camps in the South - 'at last perhaps they know what it is to be human.' There is new religion, with a temple *gopuram* built of 'bones and skulls'.

It is a dark conception of the world we meet through Jean Arasanayagam. Life budding from death - her own identity from the bloody birth of colonialism, trees from dead buried bodies, worms from the graves - is cold comfort. But the fact that Jean Arasanayagam keeps writing (rather than becoming silent) shows that she is all but resigned. 'For many of us, her poems in *Apocalypse '83* came as the voice of our collective sense of horror and tragedy' wrote Sri Lankan critic Reggie Siriwardene.

To conclude, it is worth quoting a section from 'Narcissus', an unusual poem printed on its own in 1986. In 'Narcissus' Jean Arasanayagam gives us the classical myth with her own interpretation. She does not let Narcissus drown

after he falls in love with himself, seeking the image in the water. In her poem, all nature is Narcissus' 'glassy pool', a petrified picture. Until:

. . . now the mirror shows
a myriad faces and through their eyes
appear a thousand others to tantalise
and set ablaze the frozen fire of a silver vein.
Time reveals to a heart estranged
friends that are ghosts and lovers strangers.
Suddenly the pool grows black
the eyes that watch, close
blind in darkness and the mirror cracks.

We see a mirror cracking, a world crowding in upon our minds with painful knowledge, blindness and darkness. 'I stand and call an unknown dark / to wrap me in its densest shroud'; Jean Arasanayagam writes in a poem in *Out of Our Prisons We Emerge*. Life and creation have to be paid for by the proximity of pain and death.

*This article by the Swedish critic Anders Sjöbohm
was translated from the Swedish by Linda Schenck
and Shelley Wright.*

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NALLUR 1982

It's there,

Beneath the fallen fronds dry crackling
Pile of broken twigs, abandoned wells of brackish
Water lonely dunes

It's there

The shadows of long bodies shrunk in death
The leeching sun has drunk their blood and
Bloated swells among the piling clouds

It's there

Death

Smell it in the air

Its odour rank with sun and thickening blood
Mingling with fragrance from the frothy toddy
Pots swinging like lolling heads from
Blackened gibbets,

It's there,

Amid the clangour of

The temple bells, the clapping hands, the
Brassy clash of cymbals,

The zing of bullets

Cries of death

Drowned in the roar

Of voices calling Skanda

By his thousand names

Muruga, Kartikkeya

Arumuga.....

"We pray, we cry, we clamour.

Oh Sri Kumaran, be not like the god

Who does not hear deaf Sandesveran.

Thirtham now no longer nectar of the gods
Brims over but is bitter, bitter,
And at the entrance to Nallur
The silent guns are trained
Upon a faceless terror.

Outside,

The landscape changes

The temples by the shore are smoking

Ruins charred stone blackened,

On empty roads are strewn

The debris of warfare,

Stained discarded dressings

Burnt out abandoned vehicles

A trail of blood

Soon mopped up by the thirsty sun.

Turned away from bloody skirmishes

Of humankind, the gods are blinded

By the rain of bullets,

Six faced Arumugan

All twelve eyes

Closed in darkness.

The land is empty now

The pitted limestone

Invaded by the sea

Drowns vanishes.

Waves of rust swell and billow

Beating into hollow caves and burial urns

Filled with the ash of bodies

Cremated by the fire of bullets.

AHIMSA SUTRA

Do not kill
Practise ahimsa
Do not kill
Leave off hinsawa
Learn loving kindness
Do not kill
Relinquish hatred
Do not kill
Practise not envy
Jealousy, lust for murder
Do not kill, do not burn
Do not harm, do not destroy.

There was no time left for the
Obsequies of death, no time left
At all for the sacred rituals, no time
For penance either, walking on
The smouldering embers of the trench.

You expiate your sins
In fire's absolution
Your body now the pyre
That burns in public streets
Consumed in flames
The gutters now your burial urn
Scattered in wind your ashes.

Kovils went up in smoke
The ther of sandalwood
The cross, the churches all in flames
Great fires raged
But the conflagration of hatred was much greater.
Close to a burnt out house
A new house rises boulders
And sand and brick pile up.

People walk past ruins of splintered glass
And blackened shells
With averted faces
Men bend and lift to build
This new structure, carry the burden
Of the brick and stone for shelter
These hands build while those
Of others broke so many walls
Hurled bombs and wielded rods and axes.

All that we, now displaced, must learn
Is to live again
And to every enemy
Show forgiveness.

FEAR

Fear chokes the throat
Clogs the tongue
Fear of the mob
Fear of the night
Fear of the sunlight
Fear of the day
Which reveals the foe,
Fear makes the body
Tremble shivering with ague
And burn, burn, burn
With fever, the stunned eyeballs
Crowded with images of death
Turn blind as stone,
Fear in slumber fear in dream
Fear as we talk
Or walk along a street
Fear of the watchers as they wait
And stare in our direction,
Fear in each look, each stance
Fear of the moment to begin
Fear as they come to kill us
Fear as we flee,
Can my ghost still have substance
As we linger here
When there's no longer flesh
Left to cringe?

1958 '71 '77 '81 '83

It's been a long journey
Still not over
So many landmarks
Each a tombstone
History in each monument
Of the slaughtered
I can name the years,
I travelled through them.
Once, it was no concern of mine
I had my own identity
Safe from marauders
I watched from afar
The burning had not reached me.

The next time the guns sounded
Their echoes came from cities, villages
And jungles far away
Men slept with guns by their side
The wounded crawled
Blinded and maimed,
Bodies drifted down river
As coconuts, driftwood and decomposing
Corpses in the flood, borne like flotsam
In the current
Or lay piled on streets
And public market places
Rotting spoiled vegetables.

It happened again and yet again
The tedious repetition
Of violence spilt blood smashed glass
Walls crumbling like crushed origami
Flames bursting
Smoke billowing

Loot filched from the "enemy"
All day the sirens screamed
Fire engines racing through the burning
Cities, gunfire popping over the hills.

History repeats itself
Or so I'm told
Is it only in deeds of violence?
Battlefields strewn with
The nameless dead
Each grave a file
Misplaced, of lost identities
History repeats itself
So the act has continuity.

Arson, murder, rape, looting ,
Battering clubbing hacking burning
Count and recount the numerous ways
On the blood splattered abacus
Keep count although your fingers
Touch death, reveal the
Statistics before we all forget.

It's all happened before and will happen again
And we the onlookers
But now I'm in it
It's happened to me,
At last history has meaning
When you're the victim
When you're the defeated
The bridges bombed
And you can't cross over.

PERSONAE

Have you ever killed, tell me?
Or burnt or slashed?
Does the bullet speed away from you
Like a bird takes wing to nest
Within a body warm with blood?

Have you ever killed, tell me?
How sharp the blade must be
How firm, how hard the impact of its
Fall from your brute hand,
Does it chop flesh and bone at once
Slice through the throbbing organ
Dismembered carcass
Leaping on the block.

Have you ever killed, tell me?
Or burnt or smashed or axed
Hated a stranger one like you
Turned his face into a searing mask
And watched his eyeball
Like a whirling comet
Drowning in sockets of blood?

Have you ever been silent tell me?
When words you must speak out
Choke you and clog your throat
To drink the bitter gall and vomit
Till your guts twist and writhe
With the poison of guilt and hate.

Have you ever turned away from those
Tell me, who once were friends
Avert your gaze from ruined homes
And piled up bodies licked by flames

Or have you gazed and gazed
With eyes of lust upon the dead
The dying and the burning.

Have you ever shut the door, tell me?
On a man woman or child
Not of your race or creed seeking asylum
Fleeing from mobs and hordes
Of murderous men
Brandishing the out-thrust torches, axes,
Or rods, clubs, knouts and chains?

Have you ever known, tell me?
Once, walked with, spoken, rubbed shoulders
With friends, wept over the respected dead
Upon the biers borne by mourners,
Now we meet and pass each other by
How strange that we should
Stare or look away
Never even remembering that
We were friends

Careful to keep on masks of disguise
Beneath which lies the naked
Countenance of hate.

INNOCENT VICTIM - TRINCOMALEE

Yesterday the rice I ate
Was cooked by my mother
Today the food I eat
Is that of strangers.

Tomorrow?

Pity is the salt that flavours my food
The pity of strangers
That now become my kin.

I sleep on a mat
Among others
All who are strangers
When I wake up,
I do not see
Either my father, my mother or my sister.

We ran into the jungle
In fear, even the wild elephant
Or hooded reptile
Did not make me so afraid
Until
They came, strangers.

My parents had gone to the temple
Why didn't the gods protect them?

My sister four years old
Stood idly by the roadside
Waiting for their return.

When they came, strangers.
I was afraid

I ran into the forest
God Kandaswamy protected me

My mouth, my throat were dry.
My tongue parched. We had no food
No water, no thought of sleep
We walked. Through thorns, we walked.
Hiding our shadows. Darkness hid our flesh
We walked. And walked. No voices. An elephant
Trumpeted. A peacock cried. Muruga! Protect
Me. I have entered your sanctuary but I
Have not yet broken a coconut as offering
This I will do
When I return.

When they came strangers,
Our house went up in flames
Thrown in like faggots, my parents
Blazed crackling, they burnt
Like two lizards in the fire
My sister too, she, tiny
Chameleon turned first green, then
Livid red
Brands they bore
Swords. shining blades
Soon they will forget
Me and all the others
And the night
My house went up in flames.
Together with
My sister. father. mother.
And will they come again?
Strangers?

EYE WITNESS- NAWALAPITIYA

A young boy speaks of carnage
Eyewitness to death
From three streets he says
They converged upon this township
They were without mercy in their
Killings, hacked men as they ran
From their burning buildings
Flung into the fire gashed
With knives, great axe blades
Flashed, clubs, poles and iron rods
Struck them down;
Among the victims
A young man three months married,
Father and sons.
It began at noon
And ended somewhere at midnight
These are now the cities of the dead,
How can men walk through bloodstained streets
Breathing the smoke that choked
Their dying breath and feel
Strength in their loins
Sunlight on their skins
Flinging their weapons aside
See, they now return to hold their
Children, fondle them, embrace
Their women, hold in their hands
A plate of rice, bend their heads
And offer flowers at the temple.

IN THE MONTH OF JULY

Childhood is far away
Beneath a tree
Playing with pebbles
Skilfully tossing them from
Back of hand
To palm
Requiring a certain skill and
Magical ritualistic incantations.

As one grows older
The pebbles grow too
Into great stones and
Rocks hurled with violence
Smashed skulls spilled brains
Splattering the pavements.

In the month of July
A man fled from his pursuers
He climbed a tree
The mob aimed stones at him
Until they got him down
Probably fell off his grasp loosened
Slippery with blood, his body already battered
And then they trampled him to death

THE HOLOCAUST

Every word must be wrung out of
The throat of the poet
Strand by strand each vocal chord
Must sound strong their timbre
To denounce this monstrous evil
They're razing the cities to the ground
And digging trenches for the dead
The pits of hell yawn wide open
And the conflagration mounts higher
Higher for the daemonic feast
Of barbequed flesh.
Screams are stifled in the shooting
Flames crackling
With burning bodies
Writhing in the marvellous
Excitation of death
They're human
Our avengers,
We're not.

DEATH OF THE PRISONERS

It is not all over yet
Still not blunted
With so many deaths
The sharpened knives and axes
Crowbars rods
Recent bloodstains fresh
From necklaces of blood
Studded with disc of ivory bone
To which adhere flesh hair and skin.
Barred doors and locks and iron bars
Fall apart like paper walls
Before the onslaught of the ravaging mob
There remain, three or four survivors
Three priests and certain sundry ordinary men
Eyewitness to the horror of their murder
Four hundred or so prisoners and their gaolers
Assailed each cell
Each man alone defenceless
Clubbed to death pierced with
Sharpened crowbars
Hacked and chopped their flesh

The eyes of that prisoner
Stabbed with pointed steel
As he knelt before his murderers
Taunted with a dream
What was his wish
When as a common criminal
Condemned to death?
That his eyes be given to a child
To see the freedom of his race
The way he chose--for him there was
No other path but terror, murder, violence
His vision now screams to the world

That has to see
What he no longer lives to see
Being both blind and dead
Now within each cell
The flesh of guilt
Transubstantiates to innocence
Our hands must hold the cup
Eat of the bread--Christ's broken body
Drink of the wine--Christ's shed blood
To purge and cleanse us of our sin

How many others too
Must make the sacrifice?
Repentance never comes
The charred Cross falls and crumbles
Into ash
The soldiers fling their dice and gamble
Bartering Christ's garments at its foot
The thunder that we hear heralds a storm
The murderous thunder of the rabble
Mounting on the roadways of the world,
Their cries rising in the raucous revelry of death.

PRISONS

We are now in prisons
In the open streets of the world
Prisons
Locked within our fears
And dangers
The warders range freely
Among us
We are surrounded
The keys to our cells
Are swords and iron rods
And more than that
The steel of hatred and suspicion
In the eyes of the crowd
Transfix us as we press
Against invisible walls
Peer through bars.

We can only survive
If we show we don't exist
Neither word nor look
Must reveal our identity
We must forget all that we know
Or learned of love
Either of men or country
In our personal histories.

A man lifts both hands
And in obeisance bows his head
Before the temple of the Dalada
But a while ago
He uttered words
Of hatred against his neighbour
But then he is another man
And of another race

POLITICAL PRISONER

For Steve Bikko and others

In a prison cell
He lies dead
When did it happen
We were all asleep.
It was somewhere towards dawn
We did not hear
His silent scream
Or grating whimper
He died alone
Who mourned
Was it a person or a nation?
In a prison cell he died
His breath twisting round the bars
No one sat by him
Although a multitude stood outside.
In a prison cell
He died we read it
The next morning
In the papers
In cold dead print.
Perhaps you passed it by.
He died alone, quite alone
In his prison cell
Four walls a roof
Locked doors and little else.

You'd be in there too
But you wear masks you're clever
At disguise you'd rather not
In order to be safe, speak out your
Thoughts aloud,
You don't want bullets passing
Through your ribs to burst your lungs,

Let others spill their blood and wound their flesh
Your lips in silence clamp down tight.

Guns continue to sputter
Bombs go off.
If you step from the forest
Onto the road in pools of blood
You'll slither
But look the hangman's noose
Drops lower it's a ring of rope
That slowly tightens round your neck
Snaps the bone
Watch it come
Swinging close
Do you recognize the face?
Cry out in recognition?
He is one of yours
Is he the friend
And you the foe?

A SET OF PHOTOGRAPHS

Among others shown to me
Of Birthday parties, enormous cakes
Heart-shaped iced with green and white and rose,
Red candles. illumination for the living
Not for the dead
And balloons floating, ethereal fruit
Streamers and orchid blooms, little girls
In frills and flounces, shoes and socks and
Happy faces hugging Teddy bears and dolls,
But she must blow the candles out
And in the darkness of those years
So quickly lost we hear new echoes
Pounce behind their laughter.

Turn over the page,
A wedding in Paris,
The banquet went on for hours and hours
So many covers lifted from those silver platters
Toasts and speeches, Champagne corks popped.
Vin rouge vin blanc flowed sparkling in cut
Glass decanters, on the white-spread table
Platters of roast duck, terrines of pork and ham
Pate-de-fois gras, truffles, bon-bons, gateaux,
Cheeses, coloured fondant, fruits and shimmering ices
Turn over another page,
A room in a house in London
Mother and daughter wrapped in furs
Among the glittering candelabras
Living in a sugar-coated city
Domes and streets drenched
In falls of snow
And somewhere else
Flowers, flowers, flowers red and white
And pink and purple, walking among the cobbles

Of the quartier Latin in the tranquil shadows
Of Sacre Coeur,
At Notre Dame did you see the grimace of death
On the faces of the caryatids and gargoyles
Sculpted on columned pilasters?
Walking in the sunlight on white pavements
The abbatoirs are hidden.

Another set of photographs
Unframed, a whispered secret,
Massacre in a prison,
Sheet after sheet
Sliding into my hands,
I touch each print
My hands are thick with blood
I look into a morgue
A slaughter house
Extermination chamber,
Picture after picture
Of murdered men in prison cells
Some caught unaware.
Asleep on bunks and pallets.

Who were the guilty?
The murderers or the murdered?
They're all silent. Who?
The dead or the guardians of the law
The jailors or the jailed?
No one's left to protest
Their innocence,
They're silenced once and for all.
Who? The so called criminals?

No questions. No one questions.
No one's left to answer.
Only the rattle of keys,

Scrunch of bone and cries of death
No one heard the pleas for mercy
Stifled in one breath.

We're all waiting on the streets outside
While the slaughter still continues,
Will they wipe the stains inside
The cells, scrape off the flesh and bone
And scalps, lower the coffins
Into secret graves.

The cells are empty now
All those whose hands dealt death
Have found reprieve, the innocent
Too have found their peace,
The floors, cleaned out, the walls white washed,
Concealed the deadly haemorrhage of death.

NOW WE ARE STRANGERS

It's final now the parting
It's over, this obsessive wandering
In a landscape rank with foliage
The earth repels the root, the bitter soil
Rejects the seed, canopies of leaf
Lift parting their branches in a snarl
To bare the mud and slime coiling
With reek and stench of corpses
Hacked or raped or burned

Why love that which can only
Wound, the heart festering
Bleeds and suppurates.
Monolith stone
Hidden cave
Ancient murals
Despoiled with blood
Displaced our histories
Our necks festooned with
Tattered documents
Of raped identities
Our public shame.

We have no country now no
Land, nowhere to be what
Once we were, you made us turn
Away with hate and fear
Placed between us walls
Edged with jagged glass splintered
And sharp, erected barriers.

Now we are strangers
Either we stay awake dark nights sleepless
Throbbing with fugitive dreams
Locked within a cell

Wait for the release of death
Or embark upon a ship
That takes us routeless
Without maps
To fare forth
On a voyage without end.

AT THE GATE STANDS A MOB JULY 1983

At the gate stands a mob
Wielding swords like Samurai
Waiting to give battle to a
Single man defenceless
Great stones and bricks
Rods and poles
They carry in their hands
To wound and bash his head
Axes to hack his limbs
And bombs to burn his house.

With folded arms men and women
Of the village stood
Their faces blank, impassive
Waiting for the blood sport to begin.

The house next door
Goes up in flames
Through the garden
The throngs surge in
To watch the pyrotechnics
On display, violence thrills,
It's not their house but that of aliens,
Mothers lift babies high
Over the flowering shoe-flower hedge
Others rush in leading children by the hand
The old men watch, silence their only comment,
The young stand in the mob
"What do you say"? One man laughing asks
"Shall we throw a bucket of water.
Put out the flames?"
There's no answer, they turn away
The roof crackles sharply and caves in
The people have all fled

The wind blows smoke in my direction too
I am in the thick of the mobs
It is time for me to flee.

MAN AT THE GATE

Man at the gate
There's no time to introduce
Ourselves before we start
Our dialogue. You hold onto bars
And call the others, why the crowd?
Why don't you face me alone
I'm unarmed, you're not,
You've got beside your poles and axes
Hatred burning through your eyes,
Your words scorch me searing
The edges of my life, why do you hate
Us? We've never met before,
Seen each other on the road,
In the market place or in a bus perhaps
But never once exchanged a word
Do you think it's easy to snuff out a life
With just one blow? You're not killing
Vermin, stamping on a crawling squirming worm,
It's me. Look, eyes, limbs, mind, heart
Bearing the same habiliments as you.
However, for this moment
You're my tribunal
I must plead my cause
Before you, my hands are empty
Though we are at daggers drawn
What do I think of when I face
You, the others don't exist
They're a murderous crowd with masks
But it's yourself that I contend with
It's face I won't forget
You'll continue to haunt me
As I flee through nights of hell
As you compel me to walk out
Of my home and flee seeking refuge

In some hole among others who like me
Are fugitives,
You'll be the assailant in all my nightmares
Blocking the exits to escape
Lurching towards me with great
Stones in your hands, poles, axes upraised
Blind hatred in your face.

You're the man of the moment
Leader of the mob
The hero -- this is your only chance
To prove so many things to the world
And to yourself - you're given all
The freedom to burn and murder
Threaten, fling burning brands, hurl bombs
Why don't you stop to think
That for you there'll never
Be a monument
This is your only, the only
Glorious moment
To be acknowledged
As the greatest, strongest, bravest
Spokesman of the cowards who live
Behind their walls and screens'?

Watch me, licking my wounds
Cringing in the dust
While behind their doors and windows
Shuttered, locked, the neighbours
Stand and stare quaking in fear and terror
Pretending I'm not there.

Man at my gate
You've still a long, long way to go.

GUTTED

Gutted houses
Gutted lives
Charred wood
Charred flesh
Shattered brick
Shattered glass
Hammer blows of fists
Iron rods
Breaking walls
Breaking doors
Clubs, poles
Pulped flesh smoke choked breath
Slashed limbs, stab wounds, human
Torches blazing in the streets
Eyes wild frenzied of the mob brutal
Cries blood curdling screams human
Bloodhounds scenting alien blood
Marauding gangs stalking the innocent,

Blood wells up, flows disgorged
From gashed fountains and springs
In charred gardens
Wine dark blood streams
In sunlit air crimson buds
Newly open swiftly crumple
Pervasive odour of scorched
Flesh charred and blackened
Stumps like broken statuary
Strewn on burnt out lawns.

Flames soar licking hot with pulsing tongue
Each edifice consumed by fires of hate
Lust for death makes rapid panthers
Springing from dark lairs

Flanks freshly steaming with the heat
Of hunt the unarmed defeated
Skulk in jungles fleeing from
The orgiastic love for death
Hiding among the mana grasses, thorn
Thickets tea bushes or seeking
Cover in homes that grant temporary
Asylum to those who crossed
A borderline to this brief safety
We are prisoners of fear
Crouching in dark locked rooms
Drawing each breath in blood
Heart leaping at each
Closer murderous cry,

Some fall at doorsteps as they flee
Stabbed to the heart, axed down
And poled frail birds whose wings
Foiled in their flight were crushed,
Melted like wax in mounting fires.

Yet whom do they destroy?
Those who to each other are unknown
Who know not nor will ever know
Each others histories or personal
Loves and hates, no longer to equate
A child's toy with a human life
As cradles burn
As beds of lovers go up in flames
The only ecstasy is death
Bathed in the blood of murderer
Even the guilty now absolved
Of every sin, become saints.
Whom do we destroy'?
Wrenching apart like broken fingers
Fractured bones unclasped from palm,

They go back to their lairs and dens
Piled with loot clothe themselves in
Other skins.

They have destroyed themselves
Yet do not know it
Waiting for the next call
To stream into the streets with burning
Brands and bombs and clubs and poles
They make their gleeful beds on carnage.

In each man who is alien
To their tongue and speech
They see both enemy and prey.

Within the flames of burning cities
Writhe and twist their purgatorial souls
Within the fire great monsters rise
Hulks of dark brutal giants bruted
Against the fearful midget-kind diminished
By fear, who make no stand, no gesture of defence.

What chance, what hope
When all is wrecked.
A dead body floats
In the calm waters of the lake,
Beaten and mutilated,

Beggars still hold out their empty palms
To all who pass, they alone in poverty can see
No difference.

Perished on pyres with rituals of hate
Or immolated within the walls of burning rooms
A few survivors hold in their hands
Corpses of husbands, wives and children
Pieces of charred and broken brick.
Here there is no longer any home
For those of alien breed.

MOLOTOV COCKTAIL

Heady, bursting out of the glass
Cache fire gushes into the
Amphitheatre of this world
Swirling around and
Falls into the arms
Of the ambushed crowd
Smithereen glass and flesh
Scatters
Mosaic embedded with red
Rubies, ivory bone.
There's a wonderful ballet
Out there. Look! The rhythmic
Movement of the upswing arm
The graceful pas-de-deux
Pirouettes of violence.
The ballet of the madmen,

In their hands they hold
Flame birds, release them
Into skies
Flight explodes
Wings ignite
The smell of death and burning
Clings within my garden
Reminding me
That with our departure
All the pigeons
Have flown away, and
The fallen mangoes
Rot upon the soil
Buzzing with bluebottles.

IT'S GOT TO END

It's got to end
Now that it's happened.
It's got to end, you've got to clear
The streets of rubble, sweep up the charred bone
And the ashes, you've got to make the roadways
Clear, help the traffic move again
Rebuild the damaged bridges.
The boats sail the waterways,

You've got to take away our tears
Help us to freely move through
The world's corridors and passageways,

We've got to speak our thoughts aloud
Not utter them in furtive whispers
Behind locked doors.
The bombs, the guns the grenades and the swords
Must all be put away, the bitter words
The tears, the violence, the killings
 And the murder
 All must stop.
Weren't we all one
In diverse ways
Before the slaughter and the burnings
Had begun
Now why must we stand opposed
With barriers of steel and flames
Waiting to ford rivers of blood?

REFUGEE - PART I

I am fleeing from my home
I look around my house
What do I take with me as I leave
It's easier to leave it all behind
Nothing's important but the poems
I have written, the lives I have lived
In each one of them
Which once destroyed
Can never be remembered.

I rush to a friend
Thrust them in her hands
All, all of them
Except the new ones to be written
Lurking in each cell,
Gestating in the mind
"Look after them for me", I say
And walk out.
It's curfew and I'm on the road
A jeep speeds towards me
"What are you doing ?
Don't you know it's curfew
We can shoot on sight".

The house next door burns
Spluttering, the roof caves in
Crackling, a great hole appears gaping on
A blazing room
Black clouds of smoke
Billow, breaking glass shatters, the
Silence, smell of scorched wood
Creeps into my garden
The crowds rush in through the open gate
To watch the circus of destruction

A man returns to his burnt out house
Our neighbour.
He weeps.

All he can salvage
Is a fan, a flask, a pair of shoes
Just one pair left to continue an
Unfinished journey.
He walks out through a broken
Door leaving behind the charred
And smashed remains of his life

And five bags of paddy still
Burning.

REFUGEE CAMP

And is this refuge here within these walls
We are brought here for a kind of temporary safety
Flung into a van escorted by uniformed men
With guns for our protection or is it
Theirs?
Their faces blank turned away
From our weeping,
We are brought here among others
Who seek asylum spreading mats
Sheets bundles and baskets on the floor
Set aside from others of our kind
Somehow different.

Have I all these years been blind
Do we now in exile share only the
Territory of our fears?
All around us people sit or sleep
Children cry, news comes to us
This one's house is burned that
One's raped or murdered.

In sleep the stench of death assails
Our dreams
Acrid smoke creeps in through open windows
Pervasive, wafting through classrooms, halls and corridors.

A uniformed officer wanders in,
"Why do you shut all the windows?
Open them, everyone,
You're crowded here,
Don't you want to breathe
The freshness of the air outside"?
And then another comes
"Close the windows

Close them all
Don't make targets of yourself
For the mobs outside
Can't you see the fires"?

The city still is burning
The flames mount up
When will they subside
Whom do we obey
So fearfully
We are truly liberated
From our fears inside.

**POEMS FROM A REFUGEE CAMP
REFUGEES - OLD MAN, OLD WOMAN
PART I**

They sit where you ask them to sit
They sit against the wall they sleep against the wall
They curl up on mats embryos in sleep
Some curse and grumble others silence keep
There's a baby four days old
It sleeps beside its mother father's lost somewhere
Dead or just deserted, no one knows or cares
She groans, so soon after labour, asks for rags,
Old clothes, there's a young boy sick and fevered
Stretched upon the ground
Buses come in, disgorge their loads
Empty their entrails of humans, bundles,

Old men, women, children
With bowls and plates they stand
Lining the stairways and the passages
In queues for food, rice, sambara,
A man awake night after night,
Upon his head unsutured wounds
Stuck together with plaster paces endlessly
The crowded corridors.

An old woman stands in the centre
Of the courtyard, white saree wrapped
About her, earlobes empty of thodu
She does not move
She doesn't stand on familiar ground
Round her neck there is no thali
She sees nothing, no-one round her
That she knows or recognizes
The silent throngs move on
Coiling snakes, empty, their poison sacs and venom

We face each other,
'Have you eaten'?" I ask
She does not answer
A young woman comes up leads her away
But gently, its not important to her
In what direction she must go
Out or in there's no guarantee there's safety
The town is burning, burning
The streets are filled with marauders
New fires start out
Before the old ones die down
Or are put out.

REFUGEE - OLD MAN - PART II

On a blackboard resting on the floor
An old man sits we place within his
Hands, knotted, trembling with ages palsy
Starched white garments, some one else's skin.
He cannot understand, "These are not mine."
He says? "Not mine", he whispers,
"But take them they are for you,
Wear them, you have nothing else,"
Leaving your burning house just as you were,
He prays, hands clasped, bowed head.

Thanks us, accepts them.
I forget him when we move on
To the next camp in our crowded
Buses, herded in like cattle,
Still we're lucky, we've escaped the slaughter.

Old man, white haired, spectacled
Drinking a bowl of hot milk
Is he still there
Moving on to another camp I wonder
Sitting in a corner back to the wall
Or is he, still in darkness
Groping somewhere for a familiar wall?

NIGHT- REFUGEE CAMP

Lying on a thin sheet
The ground is icy cold
We sleep shoulder to shoulder
Head to head swathed in winding sheets
We are the dead
Waiting to be pushed into incinerators
Someone turns, sighs, breathes,
From what infernos has he or she escaped?

The great bulk of some old unknown
Fugitive woman bunched up on a mat
Gulps of snores through her volcanic
Mouth and nostrils growl
The hot lava of her nightmare dreams
Engulfs us in their molten stream
In her twisting guts the subterranean
Thunder of her fear pulses and gushes.

Within this school room bats of flame
Wing wheeling through the night.

I cannot sleep.
The searchlights on the trees never dim
Smoke from the burning city rises
Red flames through shuttered windows
Glow from a nearing distance
I too am consumed within my own infernos
The flesh takes long to burn
The bones to brittle charcoal turn
Flames in windblown gusts light up
The skyline, scattering sparks,
In the night sky a few stars glitter
I toss besides my husband and my children
Stretched out within the territory of our doom
Where nothing's private neither sleep nor dream

Waking, breathing, eating, defecating,
Spectres and wraiths writhe through the brain
Which now becomes one enormous tragic eye
That reflects the crouching beasts
Marauding through the dark
Leaping on tender breast of fawn
To tear its living heart
Trapped in the tenuous tissue of shed blood.

Towards dawn
Blisters and weals appear upon the sky
Red streaks slashing
The billowing grey smoke clouds.

At each sound or cry
The stomach heaves in dread
The pierced entrails disgorge
The cry of fear.

A child cries, a mother comforts,
Croons holding close to nestle, bending
Makes her body into the hammock
Of the womb.....

HALT!

Guns waver towards us
The car stops
On the centre of the road
We're anxious to move on
To reach our temporary home
A camp for refugees
Darkness, silence is sharp
Roads deserted.
Checkpoint. Hand clicks the trigger
Spotlights turn on us
Hands clutch guns
Nervous eyes dilated stare in our direction.

So it is in the forest
With the hunter and the hunted
But we cannot turn away and leap
Into the fastness of the shadowy trees.
You sit before us
Your head unmoving turned to stone
Your cap some kind of official symbol
Ablaze with bands and badges
Rests on a windscreen's ledge
The driver speaks one word
"Police".
Fear chills us
Each one of us isolated
I remember we reached home safely
I mean the camp for transients
Curfew on; stretched on a mattress on the floor
A sleeping guard, the others stand
Guns against the wall or in their hands
Someone's huddled over a phone
I'm silent
I've no message for the outside world
No one to ring me back

If I turn the numbers on a dial,
No one hears it ringing in an empty house.

'Did you notice?
He held the gun the wrong way," you said,
"Pointing towards us not away,
The gun could have gone off
At any moment".

"He was young, nervous
Probably just out of school
Still in training", I said.
"Careless, they haven't learnt
To hold guns correctly", he replied.

Danger is the new climate
In which we live
And learn to breathe.

SENTRY

There's a man at the door alert
With a gun -a sentry - he smiles
And stands alone - for him there is no fear
For me, unarmed, there's no defence,
It doesn't matter anymore
There's nothing left to protect,
The body's tomb is broken into,
Desecrate, the precious phial of the
Heart turns into poison seeping into
Veins with lovely death.

My ghost stares at me through glass
My body in its fleshly tomb
Already immolated.
Beyond my wraith stand multitudes of shades
New risen from Hades to conduct safe passage
To another land, another crossing

In the valley solitary fires still burn
Smoke billows acrid burning fills the air
We are all consumed ,
In this inferno struggle
A few survivors huddle in their ruins,
The rest have perished.

REFUGEE CAMP 1983

This single garment that I wear
The sweat and grime it bears
Gives me now some status
Some identity, I know who
Now I am with others
Whom I sit and talk
And sometimes weep with
We're all the same
Each branded
With a name
-Refugee-
This plate I hold
Stretching out both hands
For rice from the great cauldron
In the courtyard of a school
Still my hunger as well as yours
But it's a hunger of a certain kind
Soon appeased
Unlike the hunger to be
Free of fear and danger.

A few folded clothes
For a pillow, lying on
A cement floor, childrens'
Desks and chairs mark my boundaries
I am at last in the safety zone
Neutral territory
Displaced together with
A hundred thousand
Or more human beings
- All refugees -

REFUGEES- AS WE MOVE ON, AS WE MOVE ON

If it's for food or clothes,
They stretch out their hands, hold out their
Children but always standing in those long
Endless queues; what do we put in their hands?
A biscuit, a slice of bread, a plate of rice,
Old clothes, a cup of milk, plain tea, sugar
Dropped onto the palm
Bottles, mugs, bowls fill, replenish,
Empty, replenish sometimes twice, thrice
The residue lines the bottom or the rim
Buckets of milk, wood fires burning
Old blackboard frames thrown in
Waiting for the cauldrons of water to
Boil, clothes wrung out lying on the grass.

Stench from excreta and urine
Disinfectant sprinkled everywhere is to
Destroy bacteria, vermin, yet we like
Human insects emerge creeping out of
Corners there's still a spark of life in us
Although our spines are broken
Clipped our wings.

A blue bottle buzzes over a mound
Of faecal matter, it zooms
Settling on another pile travelling
Perhaps to some other camp
We'll meet it sooner or later
As we move on, as we move on.

"I WATCH MY OWN DEATH" REFUGEE CAMP 1983

I watch my own death here
It's happening all the time
Bit by bit the slow torture
Of dying and yet not completely
Dying, each part grows numb
Sets in the stasis of the limbs and brains
Death of each cell yet each part clings
Onto the remaining pain of life.

There are those who try to summon
Me to live by words or fond embrace
But this can only be brief tarrying
Before the final entry to an unmarked grave.

Who's left to mourn all that I was or hoped
To be, anonymous through hate and enmity
Cold glance, silence, averted face
Splinters the already frozen heart.

The aftermath of holocaust
Places me within a different territory.
Between the frontiers lie
A no-mans land of barbed wire, watch towers
Guns and sentries.

It is easier now to die than live,
One waits for the burning to be over
One waits for the final conflagration
To end, seeing death and murder face to face
In the eyes of enemies, strangers, predators,
The degradation of the fugitive, the hunted
Fleeing from the burning mazes, threats and death.
I watch my own death
Happening as I look over the city

From a window's ledge in a school
Stepping over the welter of bodies
Sitting or lying in the long halls and corridors
In the bowels of hell.

APOCALYPSE JULY 1983

Never again will words say the same things
In the same old way nor lips that touch
Seeking to know love as once we did
Learn secrets through the whispered
Breath to search each other out.

Now we no longer lovers are
Nor friends but find ourselves
Hostile and strange armed with suspicion
Each to the other somehow
Suspect.

Always now is the remembrance
Of death, that of ours so near
And those of others who never willed it
At that moment in the sun
While gardens flowered and trees fruited

Squirrels scurrying on the branches
The sky blackened with smoke
The moon turned red
Men leaped and danced
Heaving from wombs of turmoil
Never the rains came to put off
Burning fires, scorched flesh
Turned livid, the bloom
Rubbed off, singed hair
In tendrils curled, vanished
In whiffs, blowing a breath of ash into your eyes.

Pile up, pile up the brands
Lay them athwart each other
Build up pyres and stakes
The iron strikes against the innocent flesh
Flames hiss,

Caught in the burning
The all consummate kiss of death.

Have you and all the rest
So soon forgotten? Your eyes
Stare in my direction
In this stark light
The aftermath of ruin
Blinding your vision of the holocaust,
Fires, smoke and sulphur
Brimming the earth and rivers,
Of horses breathing fire and locusts
Settling on new harvests of corpses.

Are these the revelations
Of the Apocalypse?

IN HIDING

"Where have you been?"
"In transit".
"When did you return?"
"I haven't yet,
I'm still there
In hiding
It's my persona
That you see
Just a shadow on a screen
Moving and acting out a scene
Not epics of heroic deeds
But the drama of defeat.

We slide across the street
Phantoms of fear

The anonymous people
Waiting for the fires to die
And the "All Clear" that never sounds
I've got to grow a new skin
But the camouflage is from within
It's a two faced mask I wear
Meet my new persona
The heat of rage
That kindled thought
The fires of life
Are all put out
And all we do
Is tread and tread the ashes
As they spread
From the burning stake
The smouldering flesh
The memory of the dead.

THE SILENT ENEMY- JULY 1983

Now all silence must cease
Heads that are bent, faces averted
Lift up and look the enemy
Straight in the eye, you find
Yourself gazing into the eyes of innocent
Men who smile as children do
Laugh, make love
Men who banter and pass the
Time of the day under the
Same sun.

You pass each other in the street
Do you remember the flaming petrol
Bombs searing the quick and
Burning flesh, the skin once so
Cool and fresh now white bone
Curling into ash,
They who that morning woke
From slumber and ventured as you did
Onto the roadways of the world
Breathing the same air
Panic seized them, fear roughly
Slung them from the hammocks
Of their lives,
Pushed into the flames
Or forced to flee climbing over
Walls, set on fire, sometimes
Refused asylum or running
Wildly on those endless
Streets leading into
Nowhere, out of their minds,
Watching before their eyes
The sharp knives cut and slash
Peeling the skin off like a rinded fruit
The juice of blood spurt out.

WHEN CAN WE LIVE AGAIN?

When can we live again
The corridors of a school
Lined with tired men
Beaten and cut chased from burning homes
Lying without pillow, without mat,
Their eyes are wide awake watchful in the night
We are caught within the thrall of fear
Dragnets of fire enclose us
Cowering behind walls of flame.
Men curse and grumble women weep
Hold close in their embrace other weeping
Strangers now grown close as kin,
Children scream and play they do not understand.

The smell of burning hangs about the street
Pervasive breezes drift about the charring walls
Searchlights trained from the tops of trees
Make a false daylight,
A police officer walks among the refugees
We knew each other somewhere else
In some other age, some other time
Students on a campus in the years gone by
Silent then voluble in the shock of recognition
Each talking a different language
I fumble for words that say nothing
Of my plight, lose his name
Stare back into the past, amnesic, all
Landmarks obliterated
My hair a tangled knot
Sweat streams down my face
Now we meet, suddenly discovered friends
At crossroads, veer off, taking different tracks.

IF THE GUN SPEAKS

If the gun speaks
There will always be silence
The silence of fear
If the gun speaks through blood and bullets.

Scarlet hibiscus
Like gouts of blood
Stud the image of Ganesh..

Splayed out on every limb
Every flower
An open wound.

In the temple veedhi at Nallur
The glittering ther
Moves slowly on the sand
Drawn by ropes of humans.

Crack!
A thousand coconuts
Break, their sweet milk
Bleeding from the fleshy kernel
Streams over bared bodies
Naked heads.

After the guns go off
There is only silence
And crackling flames
Spread like a sea of fire.

Already ash
A mutilate land
Burned on a thousand pyres.

EXILE I

I am already there
In another country
Not of my birth
Clinging to my soles
The loose soil the clinging
Earth, pebbles and stone
Detached, the root
Perishes withering in the sun
Fruits I will never taste again
Ripen in my garden
And falling rot,
So many hands pushed out
This craft to sea
Those hands were wrapped
In blood, feet cut in fallen masonry
Crushed debris,
On the horizon vanishing fast
Cities ablaze,
Curling into sky grey whorls of smoke
Erupted thick as pluming scum.

Where can I find asylum
For myself and foundling family,
Can I rent a country
As I rent out a room,
Lodging for the night
Or for several moons?
Will they greet me as I step
Ashore with waving flags
Bouquets, beribboned, speeches, songs?
I know it will be different, this welcome
We're only here on sufferance
I'm always going to be a stranger
I'm going to knock on doors
That will not always open.

I'm here within the casket
Of my exile, drive in another nail

Then shut it tight, the lid falls into place
Now that the execution's done
The solemn pallbearers step into place.

EXILE 11

You tell me to pack up my bags and go
But where? I turn my face towards
Country after country
Silently I lip read their refusal
What do I call myself
Exile, émigré, refugee?
The sunlight is a web
That silent weaves through
Light, caught within its spokes
The delicate seeming threads
Strengthen, draw tight.
Noosing what's left of life.

If I remain
There's no escape
My dreams slide through
My brain like silent knives'
Sharp blades
 As I live through
 So many nights
 So many deaths.

**FLAMBOYANTS IN JULY (FROM A REFUGEE CAMP)
JULY 1983**

The flamboyants flame
All over the city clusters of
Scarlet as if the clouds
Were pricked with blood
The blue air shimmering
Rent with contusions and
Weals, a welter of wounds,
White clouds suddenly
Bursting out with plumes
Of flame a gush
Of blood

Why do I think of you
Compulsively in your cell
Your body crisscrossed
And covered with raised
Welts, those bruises too darkened
Like thunder clouds
And the scarlet stripes
That went deep beneath the skin.

All over the city
Over the roofs
The great branches
Arch with flame
How bright the colour of blood
Scarlet pools of fallen flowers
Lying beneath the trees
And a skeletal branch
Left, bearing
A crown of thorns.

DEFEAT

Caught in the crossfire
Where do I turn?
Who is the enemy?
They point a finger at me.
Whose hostility do I face?
What do they see me as?

Not one of them.

That is enough.

To neither side do I belong
But the insistent crowd
Tars me with the same brush.

I don't want refuge

With either side

Nor safe asylum

Where none can exist.

This is where I stand
Feeling the firm earth give,
Sinking into the treacherous
Hollows of shifting
Sands,

This was my territory

Once

My roots were here

But plucked with bloodied hands

Flung aside and scattered

Only the soil disturbed

And wounded shows

The emptiness.

LETTING GO

Letting go,
It's time, the time has come
From your hands grasp
Slips away the past the present
The imagined future
Which perhaps will never be,
Letting go from your hands clutch
The precious things that mattered
And that you now have lost letting go,
Letting go the documents of your identity
Scrawled defaced tattered torn
In shreds and rags
Tossed in the wind,
Time there was
When it had its value
But now it's time to loosen your grip
Unclench your hand
Letting go your hold
On love and fame
And name,

Letting go of hands that try
To hold you back
As you plunge
Into a chasm
Where there's only
Dark,
Letting go falling into the well of death
Where at last the splintered bone
The shattered body
Rests.

VISION OF THE WORLD

Suddenly woke up to find
That the world had changed
Someone smashed the windowpane
And the view was not the same
Someone smashed in the door
And gave me my freedom
To walk out into the world
Free, free from the prison of myself
Free from the passion for possessions
That all these years had hemmed me in
And cluttered my mind and life,
Rooms were empty where dust had gathered

Cleared their litter of books and clothes and furniture
Suddenly woke up to find
The world had changed
No one spoke about the weather
Although the climate's different
And cold winds blow icy
From North and South and East and West
Suddenly woke up to find
The world had changed
Someone smashed the windowpane
And the view was not the same

We spoke of death
As if he were a next - door neighbour
Felt his icy touch through burning flames
And blazing torches and explosions
The news was not of welcome or arrival
But of exile, migration and survival
Each day on the calendar
Was a Red Letter Day
Red because it's the colour of blood
Spilt and splashed and flowing
Each day was important
Not because a child was born

But because a nation's people were decimated.
A plane crashed, a dying man made prisoner

A child's corpse carried
High above the bomb blast
Shattered glass and wreckage

Suddenly woke up to find
The world had changed
Someone smashed in the windowpane
And the view was not the same

So what's to do, we're changed too
Mankind, survivors of the holocausts
The mass graves, burnings, hangings and the rape
Assassins and death squads

Suddenly woke up to find
The world had changed
Someone smashed the windowpane
And the view was not the same.

REFUGEE

I've no country
I've got no name
I've no bag
And I've no claim
I'm a refugee

I've no home
No kith and kin
If I want a country
I must plead and cringe
I'm a refugee

A visa and passport
To safety I'll need
But my voice is a whisper
That cries I'm not free
I'm a refugee

They say you'll help me
On humanitarian grounds
But I've first got to prove
That everything's gone

Nobody wants me
I don't belong
Society shuns me
But who's done the wrong?

The climate's icy
We're chilled to the bone
We're all waiting
For the new winds to blow

Give me a tent
I'm under the sky
If it rains we'll be wet

And scorched if it's dry
I've no roof the tiles are awry
The walls are shattered
There are corpses in the rubble
I'm now a refugee

I'm a misfit and outlaw
But I didn't burn men
Or beat them to death
I didn't destroy and I didn't smash up
But I'm a danger to my neighbours and friends
So I'm a refugee

I've no identity
I've nowhere to go
I'm not a person
Don't exist anymore
I'm just a refugee

I've a face
But I've got no name
I talk in whispers
And move in stealth
Because I'm a refugee

My vessel's sinking
And my boat is tilting
I'm on the ocean without a map
Fling me a lifebelt
Before I'm sunk
Because I'm a refugee

You send me out with a begging bowl
The world will fill it somehow I know
It may be with crumbs or it may be with bombs
Either way it's the dice of the gods
Because I'm a refugee

Where was my country
I no longer know
May be Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Laos
Vietnam, Chad, Afghanistan,
Does it matter? I'm on the run
We're all fleeing from, the burning and the bombs
We're all refugees

And if there's someone
Who still cares
To know where I'm going
But can't follow me there
Have the envelope ready
With the stamp stuck on
There'll be an address someday
If I reach somewhere
When I'm no longer
Just a refugee.

AFTERMATH

It seemed I knew this country
Once belonged waiting for my journey to
End here, the ground grown familiar to
My tread, the earth fecund with plant
And sun and rain, bud spilling nectar
On the drought parched earth, the coupling
Reptiles on a stubble field and lizards
Pouring out of ant-hills like molten brass
Among the stalking birds,

It seemed
I knew this earth too well to feel
It's heave and it's revulsion
Expel my half ingested being
From its twisted guts,

My birth is now my death
The country is my grave
My days in exile spent waiting for
The end where my beginning was
Where once I had belonged I stopped
Finding the hills crested with smoke
The river a burning barrier whose flames
Spread into cities and fields
Where the white crane fed
Roosting on trees,

Turning and turning on the winds
Spit roasted then charred to a cinder
White ruffled wings fanning
Out from branches
Then pleated and scattered
Falling in lakes of blood
My image floats upon its surface
Turning into a crazed

Fish flipped over belly upwards
Black shapes of crabs scuttle
Reptiles twist among the grasses
Flames rear like golden egrets
Stretching their necks towering over
Far and above and over with
Wings of fire, spreading, lifting
Into flight falling into the inferno
In which burns all human kind.

The offering of pity
Placed me outside the pale
Already condemned to walk
Forever lonely on the earth
A leopard aged
Stalking its languid prey
My shadow pressed upon the earth
Shrinks and vanished footpads
Dwindling with the end of day.

I didn't know this country was not mine
Never could belong to me never could be
Shared, I never knew I could no longer
Belong, never, never ask
For any corner of this earth
To be a part of me
Even the grave would be in alien soil.

Reading books on history
I was the man who rolled down boulders
Cut down trees, laid trunks across a pathway
In ambush for those alien invaders
Toiling through the leech-infested ferns and
Rocks and swollen rivers,
I was one of you
Because I thought
This is my land and this my people

I was misguided like all the rest, our area cordoned
Off we became the condemned
Left at the thorn gates
The knives out-thrust towards us
The powder casques were damp with
Rain the shots all failed,
We were completely routed,

I was the new invader
My long folk memory belonged somewhere
Else beyond an ocean choked with fish
And sodden gulls, drowned ships and
Men weighed down with rusting armour.

I cry to my ancestors, I cry
Blood frothing at my mouth
The wound deep within its rib cage
The head bludgeoned and bruised
Now vultures soar with talons and claws

That cut and pierce the throats of innocent men
And burn, burn, burn
Crackling and crisp the bone
Sundered from scorched flesh.

Hills that I knew with dreaming temples
Which as bone are stained with hideous fungus
As from the grave green with mould,

I didn't know this country, I didn't know
That I didn't belong until I was surrounded
Hunted out forced to disclose my identity
To spell out danger.

My face contorted with fear
My eyes flew out of my head
My tongue lolled out as if the dangling

Noose had already tightened its threads.
A few offered pity
A sip from the water pot
In a famished land
Leaving my thirst unquenched
My throat rasping, spewing blood,

A few offered pity
Was it what I wanted
Would it give me what
I had lost forever
Waiting for the fires to go down
The smoke to diminish
So that I could see those eyes
That meet mine and those of others
With hate and death, the sight gouged out,
Eyeballs pricked and sightless
Go hurtling through the dark like
Shiny red-veined marbles
Tossed in games
Lost toys soon buried
And forgotten,

I probe, touching now a nerve
A vein
Or touch the bone letting the new
Blood flow to heal old wounds.

Upon the hill the gibbet swings
Where slowly vultures gather.



Apocalypse '83 opens with "Nallur 1982" with its prophetic vision of the tragic and violent events to come as a result of the ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhala and the minority Tamils raging in the Island.

The poems in this collection had their genesis in the camps, those temporary safe havens, set up in Kandy and Colombo for the refugees.

The writer and her family together with thousands of others found themselves in two such camps, first in Pushpadana College, Kandy, while the next stopover in transit was in the student Halls of Residence at the University of Peradeniya, where the writer and her family stayed and where she continued writing her poetry and her play, *"The Captain Has Come"*.

Jean Arasanayagam records the authentic experience of living in the refugee camps during that traumatic era of anguish, fear and despair. The poems serve in their witnessing, the catharsis of pity as well as hope in coming out of that traumatic experience. For the writer it was both regeneration and a re-routing of her life and writing.

Dr. Norman Simms comments on her poems and says "your work is seen to be so much a part of the conscience of the world... the most valid approach lies in valuing the very diversity of human experience and expression. And to be able to do this in the midst of war and violence and despair - how rare is yours, a voice of sanity".

Jean Arasanayagam's most recent publication is *The Dividing Line* (Indialog : 2002). *Apocalypse '83* was first published in 1984, and won the National Award (Joint) in 1985 given by the Arts Council of Sri Lanka.

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