

Regi Siriwardena Memorial Lecture



Translations: 'Attempting the Art of the Impossible'

by

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## **Translations: 'Attempting the Art of the Impossible'**

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We are here today to celebrate the 88th birth anniversary of Regi Siriwardene, a translator par excellence, especially of poetry that he passionately loved. Regi was that rare translator who became so enamored of the poetry of Pushkin that he learnt Russian in order to be able to read Pushkin in the original. Having done so, he then went on to translate his favorite Russian poems into English for us.

A critic, a dramatist, a creative writer, and a translator, Regi was a Renaissance man. My first encounter with him was in his early years as a critic, reviewing first night performances of plays for the newspapers. I remember, as a young undergraduate acting in a university Dram Soc play, waiting with baited breath for the morning's newspaper and Regi Siriwardene's review. He was that rare caliber of critic, sensitive, well read and immensely competent, who we knew would assess, evaluate, and comment on the quality of a performance without patronage or malice but with deadly honesty. What Regi Siriwardene said about a play, we knew, had a tremendous impact on audiences. That was his early reputation and those characteristics and generosity of spirit remained with him throughout his life – as generations of friends and colleagues will vouch.

Today I decided to talk on translations – what Robert Frost described as ‘attempting the art of the impossible’ -- because it was that impossible art that he and I were both often engaged in, and which we discussed over the years. Regi was a translator who was passionate about the work he translated and it is only that passion in a translator that can make the impossible possible.

Translation has been, is, and will always be the lifeblood that feeds Sri Lankan life and literature. How so? We know that being a small island located at the cross-roads of sea routes that connected the western and eastern worlds, over the centuries Sri Lanka has been a contact point for different linguistic, ethnic and cultural forces. How do peoples and cultures function in such situations of contact if not by translating, interpreting, absorbing and transforming all that they encounter. This has been the cultural and linguistic legacy of Sri Lanka from its earliest beginnings, and both the society and the literatures have reflected such exposures.

It is sad that while there are many references to the work of translators of Buddhist texts there is so little record in our histories, of this other group of translators who must have played as crucial a role in the economic and political life of the country. Parker in his work *Ancient Ceylon* has a reference to a high ranking Vedda chief Panniki Mātiyo who, in the reign of King Buveneka Bahu the VI was sent to meet some Indian princes who had arrived at Pomparippu with their armed followers.

“Panniki Mātiyo proceeded to the spot with a large force of veddas to inquire into the cause of their coming. He translated into Tamil the words of the Veddas for the benefit of the visitors, made them show him the presents which they had brought for the king, and sent his royal master a full report stating that they carried swords slung from their right shoulders, and shields in their left hands,

but that they stated that they came as friends and were in want of food” (Parker 1984:101)

Had Panniki Mātiyo with his knowledge of Tamil not been there to translate and communicate, a violent confrontation might very likely have occurred, when all that the visitors were seeking was food!

This is a rare reference picked up by Parker from the *lekam mitit* which are only now being looked at as serious sources of historical data. For the most part, this multilingual category of people who like the Minister Pannikki must have performed such vital functions for the state and the society have been written out of our early history. They must have existed throughout the ancient and later colonial period, and performed important services but it was only under the British colonial regime that they were given some kind of minor recognition for their services. Ironically, I learned only the other day, that the word ‘thuppahi’ which today has such derogatory connotations, was the word for ‘translator’. I was so surprised I got Gananath to check it in Sorata’s dictionary. It was correct. Probably the word was used in Portuguese times and its gradually sinking status in the Sinhala lexicon says much!

Although archeological evidence indicates that the Greek, Roman, Chinese and Arab traders and travelers of the ancient world all left their footprints on the island, so far, there has been little evidence indicating any lasting impact on the local languages and literatures from these early contacts. Not so with the coming of Buddhism. From around the third century B.C.E, literary and linguistic contacts were established with the major languages of the Indian sub-continent, Tamil, Sanskrit and Pali. Over the centuries Sri Lankan Buddhist monasteries fostered a study of those languages in order to access the vast hoards of Buddhist textual and commentarial works that were springing up around the religion. Sri Lankan monks transcribed,

translated, and transformed, texts from those languages into Sinhala, while we know from extant Buddhist commentarial texts that monks from South India and South East Asia and as far away as China translated Sinhala Buddhist texts into Sanskrit and Pali, or their vernacular languages. In fact many Sanskrit Buddhist texts especially of the Mahayana tradition would today be lost if not for the Tibetan and Chinese translations that kept them alive. Monk translators of Buddhist texts unlike other categories of translators thus were greatly respected and the historical records are full of their enormous contributions to the religion and society.

An illustration of the constant back and forth process of translation that took place in the ancient world can be found in a colophon to a fifth century C.E. Pali text, the *Dhammapadattakata* or *Dhammapada* commentary. Here, an Indian Buddhist monk, states that he is asked by his Elder, to go to Sri Lanka and translate into Pali, for the benefit of the larger Buddhist world, a religious literary text that existed in Sinhala. The monk duly translated the Sinhala work into Pali. Then, with the not untypical superiority of one who believes in the primacy and importance of his own language, he says of Sinhala original:

Because it is composed in the dialect of the island it is of no profit or advantage to foreigners. It could perhaps conduce to the welfare of mankind. Therefore I shall discard this dialect and its diffuse idiom and translate the work into the pleasing language of the Sacred Texts [i.e.Pali]<sup>1</sup>

Over time the Sinhala original was lost, but the Pali translation remained in circulation in the Buddhist world. Then in the thirteenth century, a Sri Lankan monk decided to translate

1 The Prologue to the *Dhammapadattakata*, in *Buddhist Legends Part I*, translated by E.W.Burlingame, Harvard Oriental Series, Vol.28.

the *Dhammapadattakata*, now only available in Pali, back into Sinhala. Acknowledging his original source and thus claiming to be engaged in the work of translation, he however, clearly states his own position. As if placing his work against that of the fifth century Pali translator he states with mock humility:

We have abandoned the strict Pali method and taken only the themes in composing this work. It may have faults and stylistic shortcomings but ignore them. Be like swans who separate milk from water even though the milk and water have been mixed together, or like those who acquire learning and skills even from a teacher of low status, because it is only the acquisition of knowledge that is important . . . So consider only its usefulness and apply the healing salve of the *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* to remove the hazy film of Delusion that clouds the Eye of Wisdom and go happily and in good health along the highway of Right Action to the city of Nirvāna.<sup>2</sup>

The Sinhala translator's remarks suggest a self-conscious move on his part to 'restore' the diffuse idioms of the Sinhala that the Pali translator so assiduously sought to eliminate. The excessive elaboration and piling up of images have a tongue-in-cheek quality suggesting a scholarly debate on the topic of translation, across the centuries.

What we have here is a glimpse of how the work of translation especially of texts, was viewed, and what stylistic liberties were considered permissible so long as the central content remained the same. Each scholar was working on a translation but in doing so each was staking a claim not just for the primacy of his own language, but the belief that a translation must conform to the

2 *The Saddharmaratnāvaliya* of Dharmasena Thera, Colombo, Gunsena and Co., 1977. English translation is by me in *Jewels of the Doctrine*, NY 1998

nature and stylistic demands and conventions of the language into which a work is being translated. In doing so a translator sometimes creates a literary work in its own right which then becomes an integral part of his/her own native literature. The *Dhammapadattakata* thus became a standard work of the Pali religious and literary canon, as has the *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* in Sinhala literature. The irony that both were translations of yet another original Sinhala text is a fact that is generally forgotten, noticed only by the stray scholar delving into origins and sources!

A recent illustration of a modern translation that has been as quickly absorbed into the translated language is Bertold Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. It was translated into Sinhala by Henry Jayasena as *Hunuvataye Katāva*. and staged by him in the 1960's. The work is a fairly close rendering of the original, but the translation moves so smoothly, so idiomatically, so seamlessly into Sinhala, that generations of viewers who have seen and been entranced by the production, know it only as Henry Jayasena's play. Even though a production note may refer to it as a translation of the Brecht play, that fact has little significance for the majority of its viewers, or for that matter for the many readers of the now published Sinhala text, who know it only as Henry Jayasena's work.

The scholarly debate in the colophons to the two texts I quoted spans centuries and raises questions that have engaged scholars and translators throughout history. How close must a translation be to its original? How important is it that it should conform to the language, literary style and idiom of the language into which it is translated? What role does the translator play in making this transformation? Does the translation then remain a translation of an original text or does it become, as sometimes happens, a transformation even a transcreation and thus a different literary work in its own right? These are questions that are still valid today and which are worth considering.

From being a land and a people exposed to many languages we know how the educational policies introduced after 1956 transformed us into a society of self-consciously mono-lingual persons. The resulting breakdown in communication and growing alienation resulted in the long and disastrous civil war. What was even more disastrous for the society at large was that the old tradition of multi-linguistic skills was completely lost, producing a people with no access to other languages, its literatures and its cultural riches. This was particularly true of the Sinhala educated. Unlike the Tamil educated whose language was also spoken on the sub continent providing them minimal access to a larger world, the Sinhala educated were confined to a language that as the 5th c. scholar remarked 'was not spoken anywhere else in the world.'

There was a silver lining to this seeming desperate situation. The educational emphasis on the vernaculars and the inward turning of creative and intellectual energies and talent resulted in a temporary flowering of literary works in the native vernaculars. The early influences on modern Sinhala literature had been by writers like Martin Wickremesinghe and E.R.Sarachchandra, who because of their knowledge of English had access to the world of European and Russian philosophy, thought and literature, and could integrate those influences into their writings. However, subsequent generations of young writers educated solely in Sinhala, lacked such exposure and were forced to fall back on their literary past or draw on their own creativity. There was energy and vitality in the works of writers like Mahagama Sekera, Parakrama Kodituwakku, Simon Navagathagama, Monica Ruwanpathirane, Buddhadasa Galappathy and other writers of the sixties and seventies generation, but over time certain limitations and an element of stagnation seems to have taken over. Modern Sinhala literature for the most part, did not move beyond mid-century 'Realism.'

This is true I am told of much of Sri Lankan Tamil writing too. Later literary movements in the world that transfigured realism in exciting new directions in the works of Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie, or Toni Morrison, could not touch their closed world.

What then was the fate of translations in such a closed context? The earlier tradition of linguistic cross-fertilization and the constant back and forth translations of texts withered. The Buddhist monasteries, formerly a hive of such activity, produced little or no new translations even of classical Pali or Sanskrit texts. Then in the latter part of the 20th century with the opening up of the world to globalization Sri Lanka's population became suddenly aware of the need to communicate and function in a global context. This pressure to establish contacts with the outside world has ironically provided once again a need and a space for translators. As a result, the past two decades have seen an enormous number of books translated and published in Sinhala from other languages, accessed mainly through English. Many of the English and Russian classics, hundreds of works of fiction, drama and even some theoretical texts on subjects such as economics and sociology are now available in Sinhala and Tamil. The quality may vary. Some are but a poor rehash of the original works, by translators who have only a cursory knowledge of the language they are translating from, directed to a readership that they know has no access to the original. But the demand for translations is so great that publishers are willing to accept whatever comes. The Sinhala readers' market is flooded with such poor translations, and translations have once again become the sustenance of the Sinhala reader.

There have been far fewer translations from Sinhala into English perhaps because of the fewer number of translators still fluent enough in English to translate into it.

We are now faced with an important question. Is a second rate or imperfect translation better than not having any translations at all? This is especially pertinent to a country like Sri Lanka with an educated vernacular readership eager to access works from other countries. To answer this one has to frame it within the larger question: what do translations do? If it is that translations of creative literary works extend one's experience beyond the known and the familiar, stimulate one intellectually, heighten emotional sensitivity, and expose one to other unfamiliar worlds, then I think an imperfect translation is better than none. Again, if a translation extends the reach of an extant literary work to a larger group, hitherto socially and culturally excluded for lack of certain linguistic skills that come with a restricted if not elitist education, then again I think a poor translation is better than none. If translations serve as a source of empowerment – when texts, especially religious texts, are translated into the vernacular and made accessible to many – then too I think an imperfect translation is better than not having one. The ideal is always for the perfect translation – which may be as Robert Frost said, attempting the “art of the impossible.” It is no doubt for this reason that good translations happen rarely, and that too only when done by translators like Regi Siriwardene, passionate about the original work and wanting to make that transference as close to the original as is humanly possible. This is especially true when it comes to translating poetry. Minas Savvas calls it ‘a protean enterprise.’<sup>3</sup> No doubt. But I do not believe that this should stop attempts at translation. Besides there is always the thought that there will inevitably be other better translations as time goes on. As Savvas says it is like a relay baton that one hands to the next generation, or as Pound put it ‘to enable the original poem to

3 Minas Savvas, “Translating Verse”, *The Colorado Quarterly*, Vol xxiii No2. Autumn, 1974.

speak in a new locale and to the present.' This I believe is what the 5th century Pali translator and the 13th century Sinhala translator were doing with their respective works and what translators have done throughout the history of humanity.

Gregory Rabassa, one of the most distinguished translators in the 20th century of South American writers into English, in a recent book of memoirs, plays on the Italian cliché *traduttore, traditore* (translator, traitor) suggesting that the translator, "is a treacherous knave." He thus raises yet another issue of the ambivalent, complex relationship between a translator and his author.<sup>4</sup> This other dimension crops up especially when translating contemporary works.

While the profit motive may be what drives many to produce quick half baked translations that publishers readily accept, especially in a context such as that of Sri Lanka today, yet there are also serious translators who struggle with a text for years in order to try to do justice to it. A.K Ramanujan translating early classical Tamil poetry into English for a modern audience says, "The effort is to try and make a non Tamil reader experience in English something of what a native experiences when he reads a classical Tamil poem. Anyone translating a poem into a foreign language is at the same time trying to translate a foreign reader into a native one."<sup>5</sup> This is no easy task. What is it then that drives such translators to take on what we all admit is a near impossible task? My question relates to those serious translators who attempt to bring the very texture and essence of a creative work of literature to readers who are unable to access it in the original language. What is it that drives such a person to use all

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4 Gregory Rabassa, *If this be Treason: Translation and its Discontents*, New Directions Publication, NY 2005

5 A.K.Ramanujan, *The Interior Landscape: Love poems from a classical Tamil Anthology*, London 1970:p.11

his or her creative energies to perform this almost-impossible task? It can only be described as a labor of love -- one that brings little recognition, and even less monetary rewards. It is, I believe, the result of a passionate engagement with an original creative work that has moved one, and a burning desire to translate it into a language that one knows so that others can enjoy it too. This is how Regi Siriwardene approached translations and this is how he felt about his Russian poets Pushkin and Akhmatova.

Sometimes too by some happy accident, one's education and nurturing have been such that one belongs simultaneously to two linguistic and imaginative worlds. Translation becomes then a habit of the mind, a constant almost unconscious activity as natural as breathing. I will take the liberty here of attaching a part of an earlier essay I wrote dealing with my own personal experience as a translator.

I am seated at a window looking down on a tree-shaded lawn in Princeton, New Jersey. It is summer and the late evening light flows through the trees extending on and on into an infinity of light and shade and time. And I am back in another world, another garden -- sunlight filtering through rising mists onto rain-washed leaves and the breaking of a tropical dawn.

What is it in the psyche of the exile, expatriate, immigrant or one belonging to two worlds that makes the intensity of one experience instantly evoke another -- always the duality, the here and the there, the then and the now? It is not just nostalgia. Nor is it a romantic evoking of a past. It is rather a trick of the mind that instantly triggers a memory, holds it suspended a moment, and in that moment forces distinctions, qualifications, refinements of thought and language.

This is not to imply that this kind of experience is peculiar only to those of us who switch back and forth between countries and cultures like switching screens on a computer. It is just that perhaps it happens more often, more persistently, consistently, more consciously, to those of us who live in two imaginative and linguistic worlds.

I search now instinctively for words to express the peculiar quality of that 'other' light, similar and yet so different. In Sinhala one calls it *lāhiru* the 'tender sun' But the moment I use the word 'tender' in English it sounds a rather forced metaphor, has nothing of the naturalness or peculiar resonance the Sinhala word evokes, a resonance enriched by its frequent use in Sinhala poetry. Suddenly Chaucer's lines surface in my 'other' consciousness:

Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote  
The droughte of March hath perced to the roote,  
And bathed every veyne in swich licour  
Of which vertu engendred is the flour:  
When Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth  
Inspired hath in every holt and heth  
The tendre croppes and the yonge sonne . . .

I stop short at 'yonge sonne'. Yes that's it. The dawn sun piercing the mist of a hill village in Sri Lanka can best be evoked for me in English by Chaucer's description of a rain-washed spring day. 'Yonge sonne' is perhaps as close a translation as I will ever get of 'lāhiru'.<sup>6</sup>

Translation then becomes second nature. It is an ongoing activity like breathing. How does this constant process affect

6 Ranjini Obeyesekere, "The Act of Translation", *The Massachusetts Review*, 1999

creativity? What happens when one changes worlds, switches cultures, or is trapped between linguistic worlds? Sometimes like Joseph Conrad or as some Sri Lankans like Regi have done, one makes a switch and goes on to create in the acquired tongue. Sometimes one continues to write in one's own language while living in another, as so many of the Russian and European émigré writers have done. Sometimes one creates one's own language, a curious amalgam of the two – imposing on the one the structures, tonalities and even some of the vocabulary of the other, as Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul have done. Sometimes, deprived of the vitality and stimulation of one's first language, the world of friends, colleagues and above all audiences, one stops writing in either language – as many have done. Then there are those of us who expend whatever creative energies we have in the activity of translation. We make the instinctive process of our daily living become a conscious activity, disciplined and channeled to perform a specific function – that of making a literature in one language accessible to speakers of another.

That act of translation for all its 'impossibilities' has its own rewards. On those few and far between occasions when, after hours of struggling with a word or phrase, an idiom or an image, one suddenly hits on just the right way to put it, the exhilaration is as satisfying as any that comes from the production of a creative work. It is a creative act which may pass unnoticed by the reader, is hardly ever acknowledged by the author, but which does provide the kind of deep satisfaction that inspires a translator to continue with his or her work. A good translation makes the reader feel close to the original. The translator who made that transference possible must in a sense disappear – no longer come between the reader and the original. Thus a good translator is rarely acknowledged by the reader. However, the knowledge and satisfaction of that achievement is sufficient for the translator. If the task of translation did not have its own



rewards few would undertake it and we would have few really good translations. We would not have a Gregory Rabassa to introduce us to the works of the South American continent or a Constance Garnett who in the mid twentieth century brought the major Russian writers to us (however inadequate her work may be considered now), or an A.K Ramanujan who opened up the forgotten world of ancient classical Tamil poetry for readers like me.

Translators may be dismissed by some as 'traitors' or even sometimes charlatans who transform a creative work of literature into something else, purely for monetary gain. Reading translations may be looked down upon especially by those who can go to the original works. But when one surveys the history of literatures around the world one might ask which one of us has not been touched by, moved by, or inspired by, works from other literatures available only in a translation, however inadequate? As William Dresiewicz writes in the New York Times, "Does there exist a reader, no matter how erudite, who doesn't approach at least some books in translation – by Mishima, Kundera, Ibsen?"<sup>7</sup>

Until recent times what mattered to classical scholars whether Western or Eastern, were a handful of languages whose literatures were considered important to classical scholarship, Greek, Latin, Arabic, Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese, Russian. But with globalization and the opening up of the world, a vast number of languages and rich literatures have surfaced. No one today, even with the technological innovations of present day society, can access them all except through translations. Translations have thus extended the reach of literature not only down through

<sup>7</sup> William Dresiewicz, "The Interpreter" *The New York Times*, March 15 2005

the class system but across the globe. With tightening cross-cultural and international ties, not only will translations and translators be in ever greater demand but those very factors will produce more and more 'good translators' truly fluent in the languages with which they work and able to produce ever better approximations of an original creative work.

I shall conclude with a specific example to illustrate the kind of problems translators face and the kind of decisions one is forced to make.

The opening lines of a poem I have recently translated deals with the life of the Buddha and the many eons spent in the cycle of existence (samsara) during which he perfected certain specific virtues referred to in the literature as 'pāramitā' (perfections).

The original verse I have struggled with is as follows:

<i>Sārā sankya kap laksaya perum</i>	<i>purā,</i>
<i>Solasā śankya kap laksaya perum</i>	<i>purā</i>
<i>Sūvisi sankya kap laksaya perum</i>	<i>purā</i>
<i>Mōrā pubudu mala lesa buduva</i>	<i>lovturā</i>

The literal translation

For four *asankyas* times a hundred thousand kalpa (eons)  
he fulfilled the (Perfections)

For sixteen *asankyas* times a hundred thousand kalpa he  
fulfilled the Perfections

For twenty four *asankyas* times a hundred thousand kalpa  
he fulfilled the Perfections

Then as a flower bud matures and comes to bloom, he  
became a Supreme Buddha.

The first insurmountable was the translation of the word *asankya*. It means 'uncountable', 'incalculable'. But in making it a number, the term is transformed into a unit that can be counted and

in counting the ‘uncountables’ (in this case four, sixteen and twenty-four of them) it is as if one extends the very concept of incalculable time. The phrase is familiar in Buddhist cosmology and is used in literature almost as a formula to describe the enormity of samsāric time. But translated for audiences with no such familiarity, it either requires footnote explanations or has to be ‘transformed.’ To ‘fulfill the Perfections’ is another such Buddhist concept almost impossible to translate. The translator then must try to keep this sense of uncountable time that is counted in increasing multiples as well as the idea of the Bodhisattva spending those vast periods of samsāric time cultivating the ten Perfections in order to become a Buddha. My first attempt was to keep as close as possible to the original and to footnote the concept: So I went with the literal translation.

However, after several readings I felt this was too heavy-handed, especially as the opening verse of the poem. It would be incomprehensible to modern non-Buddhist readers. I therefore changed the verse in several ways.

and then ended up with the following verse:

Through incalculable eons of measureless time he perfected  
Virtues to become a Buddha.  
Through incalculable eons multiplied still more times he  
perfected those same Virtues  
Through yet more multiples of incalculable time he  
continued to perfect those Virtues  
Then as a bud matures and comes to bloom, he became a  
Supreme Buddha.”

I’m still not satisfied. Which translator ever is? There are likely to be many more visions and revisions before I finally stop and say -- this is the best that I can do – hoping some day another translator may come up with a better solution to the lines. This ongoing challenge is what keeps a translator

energized. When that rare moment comes, when just one line is as perfect as it can be and one knows it cannot be bettered --- then the sense of accomplishment is heady, even if it can be savored only by oneself. I will quote here a four-lined folk poem I once translated. It is a pāl kavi (watch-hut poem) similar to many of its genre and fairly well known even today. They are melancholy expressions of hardship and loneliness by poor farmers, cultivating jungle plots, forced to spend sleepless nights in tree huts to chase away wild animal marauders. I tried and failed to keep the four end rhymes in my translation but I did experience the rare satisfaction of having captured something of the essence and mood of the original Sinhala folk poem.

The Sinhala version is as follows:

<i>Laksana himavatē mā vī pāsen</i>	<i>nē</i>
<i>Duk dena ali ātun pannā harin</i>	<i>nē</i>
<i>Rākmena deviyanē vel bat budin</i>	<i>nē</i>
<i>Duppat kama nisay mama pāl rakin</i>	<i>nē</i>

After many attempts my final translation reads:

In lovely lonely fields the big grain ripens,  
Grief-giving elephants and animals wild I drive away.  
Protect me gods, the rice from this field, I live on  
And because I’m poor, in watch-huts spend my days.

Here is another folk poem -- a love poem -- where in four compressed rhymed and internally assonant lines a distant world of learning, youth and love, all now lost -- is evoked.

<i>Taksalāva sanda mudunen thiyen</i>	<i>nā</i>
<i>Duksalāva hita yata kārakāven</i>	<i>nā</i>
<i>Malvelāva bambarun rōnata en</i>	<i>nā</i>
<i>Makvelāda mata ada nidi noyen</i>	<i>nā</i>

Taxala lies far beyond the moon  
 A whirlpool of sadness churns beneath my mind  
 Bees come for honey when its blossom time  
 Why is it sleep comes not to me tonight?

Here is a translation by Ramanujan from early Classical Tamil poetry. I was struck by a kind of thematic connection even though the style and structure are very different. The classical Tamil poets used a kind of blank verse, but their poems have the same terse concentration of thought and resonant image.

#### What she Said

The still drone of the time  
 past midnight.  
 All words put out,  
 men are sunk into the sweetness  
 of sleep. Even the far flung world  
 has put aside its rages  
 for sleep.  
 Only I  
 am awake.

I will now read a few short poems by Regi Siriwardene. One is a translation of the Russian poet Akhmatova. Akhmatova's first husband was shot by the Soviet regime in 1921. Her son was imprisoned for many years. Several poems deal with the hours of agony and despair -- poems she committed to memory and carried in her head for years because she dared not commit them to paper.

Memory of the sun shrinks in the heart  
 yellower the grasses.

The wind just stirs the early snowflakes  
 as it passes.

The narrow canals freezing over  
 no longer flow.  
 Oh, nothing will ever happen here  
 not any more.

In the empty sky the willow's transparent  
 fan is shed.  
 Maybe its better that we two shan't lie  
 in one bed.

Memory of the sun shrinks in the heart.  
 What now? The dark?  
 Perhaps. This night's chill should be  
 winter's mark.

Then I will end with one of his own poems.

#### To the Muse of Insomnia (2)

Lying awake, in the dark while a poem forms  
 slowly in the spaces of the mind, like a crystal growing  
 molecule by molecule, I remember Akhmatova who bore  
 her poem within her for many years, knowing  
 it was too dangerous to betray to paper, nourished it  
 with hearts blood, agony, terror, tears  
 (husband in the grave, son in prison) carried it  
 through the womb-like darkness of the terrible years  
 till the first gleams showed of the approaching dawn,  
 the moment was come, her daughter ready to be born.



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