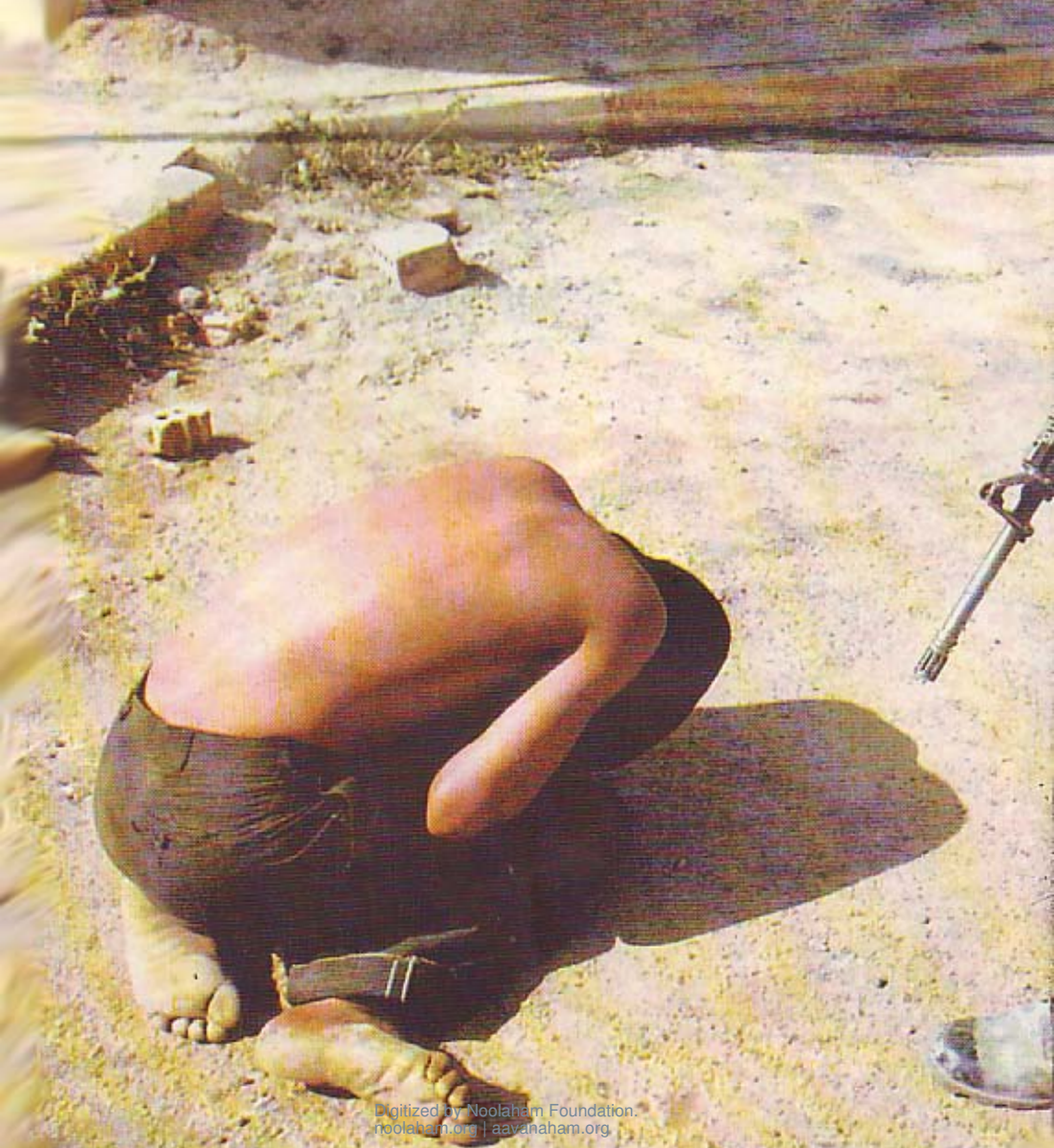


about another matter

poems in translation
S. Sivasegaram



about another matter

translations of poems

by

S. Sivasegaram



Dhesiya Kalai Ilakkiyap Peravai

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Foreword

Professor S Sivasegaram is a well known contemporary Sri Lankan Tamil poet. His poetry is much appreciated in progressive circles for its content and the force with which it is delivered. A few of his poems have been published as Sinhala, English, Kannada and Malayalam translations.

He is among the few serious Tamil literary critics in Sri Lanka and has a reputation as a good translator from English to Tamil and Tamil to English. The Dhesiya Kalai Ilakkiyap Peravai has published most of his writings and takes pride in publishing this collection of English translations of his poems.

It is our hope that these translations will be a welcome addition to the small number of publications of English translations of Sri Lankan Tamil writing, and will serve as a wide window into the world of Sri Lankan Tamil writing, where there is a great deal more to explore.

We hope that the translations will be received with as much interest and enthusiasm as the originals in Tamil have been. As always, we welcome the views of the readers and critics on this publication.

Dhesiya Kalai Ilakkiyap Peravai

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Introduction

Literary historians tell us that Sri Lankan Tamil poetry has a distinctive tradition which begins from the *Sangam* Age, and the name Eezhaththup Poothanthevanar has been cited in this regard. This tradition continued uninterrupted during the period of the Jaffna Kingdom circa 12th century A.C.

While this tradition continued uninterrupted, one should also bear in mind that the hegemonic poetic conventions of South Indian Tamil poetry did have a great impact on the Sri Lankan Tamil poetic tradition and conventions.

Modern Sri Lankan Tamil poetry had its beginnings in the nineteen forties, with the self-styled renaissance. In the nineteen sixties, the Progressive Writers' Association launched a movement to stress the 'Ceylonness' of Ceylon Tamil Literature. In Ceylon Tamil poetry this took the form of the speaking voice, rooted in the rhythms of speech, verse drama etc. In the nineteen eighties, responding to the political travails of the Tamil community, Ceylon Tamil poetry began to speak of the loss of life, the destruction of property and the anguish of displacement. Thematically, ethnicity began to supersede class and caste, and there are poems which searingly indict state terrorism and barbaric military operations. This phase also throws up armed militants, especially women who also wrote poetry. Translations from English to Tamil and Tamil to Sinhala add a further dimension. This, in brief, is the context in which Sivasegaram's transcreations should be viewed. (I am indebted to S. Pathmanathan for helping with this contextualisation).

This collection of Sivasegaram's transcreations is political in the best sense of the word. He is a fluent bilingual who is equally at home in English as in his mother tongue, Tamil. His characteristic tone is a withering sarcasm and his poems go straight for the jugular.

As a committed Marxist, he can see the integral connections between tyranny and oppression in different countries; they are all manifestations of the same phenomenon. He writes (*About another matter*):

It is true that
when I speak about one thing,
it seems to be about another.
It is hard to avoid one
while speaking of another.

Writing about Pinochet is
also writing about Suharto, Marcos and Hitler.
The man who went missing in Chile
remains buried in Chemmani.
The mass graves in Mirusuvil and Sooriyakanda
were dug as one pit.
And the crowbars that demolished Babri Masjid
were forged in the fire that engulfed the Jaffna Library,
the heat of whose flames
blasted the statues of the Buddha in Afghanistan.

The poem *The killing hands* refers to the same phenomenon:

The very hands that buried young boys at Sooriyakanda
buried young men at Chemmani.

In *God bless America*, the poet dons the person of an American citizen caught in the inferno of 11th September who addresses the President of the United States of America:

Your Excellency the President
of the United States of America,
I, an American citizen,
speak from a room in a burning tower
where lights suddenly went off
following the impact of an air plane
that struck like a thunderbolt.

The poem is a scorching indictment of America's crimes against humanity, beginning with the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima:

But my vision pierces through the darkness and
the walls of the building:
half a century of history unfolds before me.
I see bloodstains on the military hands
that uphold American domination.

The poem does not confine itself to a mere expression of righteous indignation. It ends in a note of hope:

I do not lose heart,
for the liberation of America is interwoven
with that of the world.
Let the collapse of this tower be a symbol
of the fall of a terror
that made America the enemy of the world.
Let it be the beginning of the end
of a goddess of evil bearing the trident
of exploitation, oppression and war.

This powerful poem concludes on an ironic note:

Your Excellency the President
I love America
more than I love my life that will soon depart:

not the America that you seek to save,
but the America that strives to save itself from you –
an America that the whole world would love.
God bless that America!

If I have given the impression so far that Sivasegaram is obsessed with America, today's sole hyper-power (In Castro's vivid description), I must correct it. If America looms large, it is because that is today's political reality; it is the sponsor and fount of global state terrorism today.

A poignant poem like *The prison* focuses on gender oppression and suffering:

I attained age.
Eggs, head bath, sari, imprisonment,
broker, donation, dowry, thaali.
I ended imprisonment at home
to be imprisoned elsewhere.
Did not my mother know?
Did not my sisters know?
Did someone forget
to tell me something?

These lines bring home to me the nugget of truth in the cliché: the personal is the political.

His poems on the Trincomalee Harbour and the Kelani River do not dwell, as conventional poems would have done, on scenic beauty, but link them up, respectively, to people waiting for days on end to travel by ship to the North (at a time when the A-9 highway had been closed), and to the bodies of youths killed during the 1987-1989 insurgency and thrown into the river.

Sivasegaram's is decidedly a Third World voice, the voice of the oppressed and the downtrodden everywhere clamouring for justice and freedom. His poems do not play hide-and-seek with the reader, who knows immediately where the poet stands.

A.J. Canagaratna

About the Translation

The translations in this collection are, in terms of approach and content, a fair representation of my writings between 1977 and now, and comprise a third of my poems published as seven collections, from *Nathikkari Muunkil* (1983) to *Innonraip Patri* (2003). As for style, I have left out several that have been written to traditional metre or rely heavily on Tamil idiom and subtleties of the language, in view of the problems they posed to me as a translator, and to avoid elaborate explanatory footnotes.

Although my poetry is generally political, it contains poems of a sentimental nature, of which one or two are included here. I have been sensitive to issues of gender and caste oppression even before my attraction to Marxism, and Marxism has helped me to appreciate the interrelationship between various forms of human oppression.

Tamil is my first language so that I am more at ease to read and write in Tamil. In fact, I acquired my knowledge of English very slowly, although I belonged to the last of the batch of school children to be taught up to the SSC, later GCE (OL), in the English medium, before the nominal switch over to the mother tongue.

Although I prefer to translate from English to Tamil, I have translated some Sri Lankan Tamil creative writings into English during the past decade or so, and trust that I have not done a bad job. Most of them were done on the request of individuals who were keen to introduce Sri Lankan Tamil writers to a non-Tamil speaking readership.

I have also translated a few of my poems in the early 1990's during my long stay in London and two or three were published in 'Saama' the newsletter of a Sri Lankan human rights group. A few more were translated on suggestion by friends but not published. "Akalikai" translated by Lakshmi Holmstorm a few years ago appeared in the collection of Sri Lankan creative writing, "Lutesong and Lament" three years ago along with two others translated by me. Akalikai is still one of my favourites and I am grateful to Lakshmi for re-rendering it with a force of feeling as strong as mine when I wrote it. I am proud to include it in this collection. I am not aware of any other English translations of my poetry. Thus, all but one of the translations in this collection are by me and I have allowed myself as translator the limited freedom that I have allowed myself in translating poetry by others.

I have been encouraged in this venture by a few of my friends including R Patymanabha Aiyar and S Thevarajah and hope that the translations are up to their expectations.

I am grateful to AJ Canagaratna, who I believe is an outstanding literary critic and among the best of translators of creative writing from Tamil to English and English to Tamil, for his kind Introduction.

Finally, I wish to thank the Thesiya Kalai Ilakkiyap Peravai for its interest in publishing these translations.

S Sivasegaram
Peradeniya
May 2004

History eternal

The footprint of a wave
on the seashore.
Wind blows sand.
A wave from the sea
wipes off the footprint
to place its on shore.
Waves rush
 waves surge
 waves tumble
 waves recede.

The footprint
that wiped off the footprint
is wiped off –
again
 and again.

(1977)

The ride

They surge forward in a leap and a jump
as the journey comes to its end.
The million stallions of deep sea
cough out froth as they step ashore.

The warriors who set out last eve
to battle the dark that conquered the sea
return in glory in the morn
by a million stallions their chariots drawn.

(1977)

Mahaweli in April

Bathed in the floodwaters of December
Mahaweli dries itself in the April sun.

Dead tree trunks and roots
break out of prison earth
on the banks of the river shallow and wide.
Dusty silt on the banks washed and scoured
displays footsteps of four months past.

In stagnant water
like a blemish on brown skin
by daylight I see
sand, stone, soil and gliding fish

Creeping like a fine line
on the sands of the valley
Mahaweli shudders in the cold evening breeze.
Moon shatters as it falls in the water
and the bamboo always appears broken.

But again and again
in my mind's eye
flows the mighty river of a century gone.

(1978)

The journey

The day is weak, the night is strong.
 Night wins yet another round.
 Leaves scorched by the night
 trees turning to charcoal.
 Ghosts step back in fright
 at the sight of the tall coconut spreading its mane.
 Beetles scream
 as the shudder of frogs fills my ears.
 The moon trips and drowns
 in a puddle of cloud.
 Darkness grows from strength to strength

The journey is long.
 Slowly, the eyes turn blind
 as staggering feet seek the path.
 It may be dawn tomorrow,
 the road clear,
 and my feet faster.
 Tonight I shall defy the dark
 to advance a mere two steps.
 Has time ever waited for the coming of dawn?

(1980)

Stones.

Above the earth, beneath the earth,
 hillocks and mountains,
 rocks and fragments,
 standing upright, fallen down,
 stones.

Her husband, the sage, was a stone.
 The god was a liar, but
 no stone he,
 only a male deity who lived
 to survive the curse.
 And she who had lived like stone
 coming alive for that instant alone
 truly became a stone.

On a day much later,
 a god who crossed the seas to rescue a lover
 only to thrust her
 into burning flames –
 who feared the town's gossip
 and exiled her –
 a god, yet unworthy of touching a stone –
 stumbled upon her.

Had she not changed again
 stone becoming woman
 to live like a stone with a stone,

Had she remained truly a stone
 she might have stood forever,
 a mountain peak, undestroyed by time.

(1980)

Translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom

Political thoughts of autumn

Cool winds shake the trees.
Leaves ripened on slender branches
abandon the tree to follow wind's way.
The deserting leaves fall to the ground.
Trees lose lushness
leaves turn dry –
the park, a cemetery.
Birds depart, squirrels vanish.
Trees stand erect
like brooms held up by the hands of ghosts.
Could autumn be so cruel?

Days turn cold.
Falling snow settles on the trees
and on the ground.
A film of snow wraps the earth.
Trees stand erect
sans birds, sans squirrels.
White snow is of undeniable beauty
even when body shivers beneath the wool.

Flowers break the crust of the earth,
birds begin once more to sing,
squirrels leap, and here is spring:
leaves arrive to cloak the trees.

Tell me.
Is autumn really cruel?

(1981)

A May Day evening

Silver clouds of the evening
turn to gold as they burn,
the western sky takes a pale red hue
and red echoes on the hills to the east.
Slowly the descending sun falls down.
The dying sun spreads out in red –
even more beautiful in its death.
The bare sky turns a deeper red
to defy the night for an hour and more.

In the far sky
rises a star –
and in my mind
memories of militant comrades.

(1982)

A contemporary tale for children

The earth was dry. The land was parched.
The sky above was bare of clouds
From far beyond the deep blue sky
a flock of birds like a cloud bright white
neared the country and floated high.
The white birds descended gently now
and placed on ground many parcels large.
Surprise opened men's eyes wide.
Before the eyelids shut again
the birds had spread their wings and gone.

With fear in heart, unsure in mind
they unwrapped parcels one by one.
Food and clothes and fancy goods,
of varied kind were there to find.
White birds returned many more times
with parcels for them every time.

Men who awaited dark rain clouds
now awaited birds snow white.

Hands abandoned toil and sweat.
Time fled past and life transformed.
Vultures appeared amid the birds
and they asked for dead men's meat.

It was fair, the white birds said.
Men said yes and as time fled
vultures consumed live men's meat.
Many disagreed, but a few agreed.
"Dissenters could be sacrificed"
the white birds changed their tune and warned
"No more parcels if no vultures".
"Away with vultures", some denounced.
"Away with parcels", they declared.
"Without parcels we'll perish"
said some men in fear of death .

"We will plough the land again"
said the folk of defiant mind.
Some said "Yes", some said "No".
There was war, to the vultures' glee.

Events then took a different turn.
Arrows were shot at vultures too.
White birds began to change their form.
Each a vulture, they became.
A ferocious war was fought and done.

The sky above was bare of clouds.
Men ploughed deep the earth below.
Some still wait for snow-white birds,
arrow in hand and ready to strike.

(1982)

After a heavy rain

The downpour lets up –
dust wiped off, air clear as glass.
The black cloud washed clean
hangs pale and white across the sky.
Fragments of blue sky
pop out through holes
in the wide cloud curtain.
Wind teases the sun
seeking to stick its head
through the western sky, and
rainbow refuses to show.

The western sky gently reddens,
clouds darken in patches.
Night arrives to guard the cold dark.
Beneath roofs
windows light up one by one.
Blankets stretch fence-wise
to encircle bodies.
Lights go out one by one.

On the doorsteps of shops
limbs tighten round crouched figures,
as eyes shut in course of duty.
Eyes wide open
street lamps stand in attention
to keep vigil till dawn
for the arrival of a new day –
like and yet unlike any other.

(1982)

To the victims of Welikada 1983

Like the *Nandhi* stepping aside to make way
the tall iron gates of Welikada Prison
open on their own.
Murder in the prison cells
surrounded by stone walls,
unknown to jail guards.

In this new era of enlightenment,
who will believe
if a miracle
occurs just once –
so it occurs once more time.
Frozen by the sight
the stone wall turns dumb.

(1983)

Hitler diaries

It's true that
the Hitler Diaries are a fake.
It's true that Hitler is dead. Yet
Hitler's diaries are still written
in deed, in reality.

Today, in this land of Lanka
Hitler's words emerge
from the abstract into reality.
Shops, homes and people set ablaze
make words penned in fire.
Guns and swords
underline each sentence in red.

Every street, home and garden,
every school, university, office,
temple and prison –
wherever there is a Tamil on this land,
blood, flesh, lymph, bone,
skin and hair spread sheet-like.

Swords, guns and torches
in a thousand hands
driven by racism
write on to make a deep imprint.

Manipulating behind the scenes,
the opportunist state
sheds crocodile tears –
or rubs salt into the wound.

(1983)

Differing views

The sky, the hills, the land, the river,
the tree, the leaf, the flower and dead leaf
melt and vanish
in the tightening grip of the thickening mist.
Eyes lose skill of sight.

A while after dawn
mist loses grip
retreats into the valley –
out of sight.

You have the choice
to lose heart that evil will return
or take heart that it will be overcome.

(1983)

A farewell

The grip slackens of the nightlong mist.
Hills stand erect one by one
on all four sides of the town:
they ask you to stay,
they block your way.
Heads curious and confused,
clouds wander aimlessly.
Before sun's arms could stretch out to wipe
the rose's tears soak the ground.
Fingertips scatter the tears of friends.
A whistle blows amid rising noise.
A departure so heavy occurs with ease.
Dearest friend
you leave this land for which you wore yourself out
to wear yourself out in another land.
Return to us tomorrow.
Every hill on this transformed land
will bow its head in welcome with us.

(1983)

Reasons

My friend, you ask me why
dustbins on wheels by the roadside overflow and stink.
They are kept there to ensure hygiene in the city.
My friend, you ask me why
houses burn while the armed forces implement the curfew.
They are kept there to preserve the peace of the land.
My friend, you ask me why
detainees are tortured while the police guard remand prisoners.
They are kept there to ensure order in the land.
My friend, you ask me why
political opponents lose their rights with judges on
commissions of inquiry.
They are kept there to preserve justice in the land.
My friend, you ask me why
government ministers promote those found guilty by law.
They are kept there by you and me
to enact and implement the laws.
My friend, you ask me whether
we voted for all this.
We are kept here only to be cheated by them.
You should know by now:
everything here, from the dustbin down, is in its place
for good reason.

(1984)

Friend and foe

A springtime with the sky cloud-cast
days cold, dark and filled by ceaseless rain.
But buds went on to open and flowers bloomed.

The warmth of a winter with blue skies and sun
no sign of snow.
No flower bloomed and no leaf grew.

(1985)

Adam's Peak

On a mist-free morning
viewed from anywhere on land
all the way to the south-west coast
and from the sea
the mountain projects an erect and clear view.

On a clear day
if you stand on the rock
you could see all the way to the coast
and the ocean beyond.
Sometimes, they say,
on a clear day
if you are lucky
a full round garland of rainbow
will encircle your shadow
cast by the early morning sun
on a curtain of far away mist.

During pilgrimage season
a procession of yellow butterflies
wings its way towards
Lord Saman who guarded the mountain
in the millennia before Buddhism arrived.

People, of four nationalities
four religions
from four directions
see four different feet in a single footprint.
The golden summit of Adam's Peak
rises above the silver mountain
amid competing claims
free of hostility.

In these days shrouded in darkness
black boots of the government forces and
alien shadows
spread monstrously wide
in every direction.
But the procession of yellow butterflies
in the season of pilgrimage
moves on unhindered towards the mountain.

We are people.
Can we not light up the sky,
can we not liberate the land!

(1988)

Of things precious

The shawl over my dad's shoulder and
the blouse covering my mum's breast
while they stroll along this street
are of cotton cloth, but
prettier than gold embroidered silk.
The long name that my mum and dad gave me
is old fashioned, but
sweeter than poetry to my ears.
The old chair on which I sat in my school
was of cheap timber, but
more majestic than a throne.
The cup from which I sip tea in the restaurant
is local porcelain, but
worth more than a gem-studded golden bowl.
The temple that I go to
is not world renowned, but
greater in glory than the famed temples of Madurai and
Kanchipuram.
The brackish water I draw from the village well is
more sacred than the waters of the Ganges and Kaaveri.
You ask me how –
Listen:
Each one was a reward of struggle
by me, mum, dad, grandma and granddad.

(1988)

The fool and the full moon

The fool once sought to stop the moon
roaming the sky,
erected a wall long and high.

Seeds of paddy they drowned in mud,
sticks of sugar cane they threw in a ditch,
and rejoiced that they have gone for good.

The cuckoo bird not allowed to sing
became expert in roaring.

Hoofs of cows with horns sawn off
soon turned into sharp-edged swords.

A breeze blocked off by rising walls
surged forth as a hurricane.

A tiny spark once tucked away
spread out as a blazing flame.

The fool shut tight both his eyes
and sang aloud that his task was done.

(1989)

Kelani '89

In the morning mist
weighing heavily on the iron girders
of the railway bridge
until they mellow and melt,
in the noon
when men struggle
on sun-baked asphalt streets,
in the evenings
when sodium lamps
stand on the concrete bridge
munching darkness,
Kelani,
witness to two-thousand years of politics,
flows calm and majestic.

In summer
when sand-laden barges drift slowly
in the rainy months
when huts drown, banana trees fall
and men shudder in the cold
Kelani
calm and majestic.
In these troubled days
when corpses, without fail,
drift daily on the waters,
Kelani
calm and majestic –
like the Buddha
seated in meditation
at every street junction.

*I am reminded of the words of the graffiti on an ancient statue
of the Buddha, reportedly by an insurgent during the uprising of
April 1971: "You have sat still for two thousand years. Enough.
Now it is time you arose!"*

(1989)

A tribute to trees tall and erect

You love to tread on grass,
short shrubs, you kick and trample.
Trees tall and erect refuse to bow.
Sword in hand you cut them down

Fools you know not the wonder of trees
that rise from root and fallen seed.

The day your weapons weigh you down
and metal yields to make a rope
that binds your hands and wrings your neck
the fallen will rise –
like a forest around you

(1989)

The alien

He is not of my land
nor does he know me.
He knows not my language.
He knows not my faith.
Yet he knows
the oppression I suffer,
my pain, my sorrows, my anger, my fury,
my struggle.
He speaks up for me
and my struggle.
Does it matter if he is from another land,
or another planet?
He is my brother.

You speak my language,
worship at the same temple as I,
dress and move the way I do,
and speak much about
national oppression, liberation and motherland.
You also collect money from me. And
you try to order me about,
curse me in anger when I defy you.
You dare to get others to attack me.
Even if you emerged from the same womb as I,
bear in mind:
anyone who seeks to dominate me
is forever an alien to me

(1990)

It is all important to smile

The customer is always right.
Do not argue, say not a word in defiance
Keep that smile .
If cash fall short in the till
the fault is yours –
the machine never lies, the master is honest.
To deny, don't even try.
You may lose two days' wages.
But remember to smile.

The one who squeezed you bottom and
 the one who pinched your waist
 may be known to your master.
 Take no notice, tell not a soul –
 for always the woman is at fault,
 Avoid any pained expression on your face –
 it is important to smile.
 The master
 who takes ten of your hours to pay for just eight,
 the guardian of time,
 an honourable man,
 who provides you tea at the cash till.
 Why antagonise in vain –
 remember to smile.
 When the day's work is done
 rush back to home and husband –
 he eats what you cook and always complains.
 Dear woman
 with the smile on your face
 even when slapped and kicked by the brute
 what is the great need
 to stop and to smile on your way home?
 Don't stop on you way, go
 switch on the smile
 when you get home.

(1991)

Famine

Our parched earth
 eats the sun, inhales hot air, excretes dust
 in abandoned fields.
 The shrubs that the sun spared the cattle ate.
 The cattle that survived we ate.
 Our wide-open eyes once looked out
 into the sky for the moon and the street for out guests.
 Now they keep awake for trucks and aircraft.

Mr NGO take pictures
of the dried up breasts
 that cheat the child's mouth that struggles
 to keep apart the hollow cheeks
of its bloated stomach, heaving ribs, and
 eyes that search deep within the skull.
Paste them on the begging bowls.
Let the pennies that fall be consolation to the consciences
 of those that throw them,
be evidence of the greatness of your civilisation,
be the cross planted atop the grave of our pride.

We appeal to the leaders and masters
 of the land that dumps grain in the sea
and to the gentlemen who bury fruit deep underground
 and watch over mountains of meat and butter:
We want not your generosity. We want not your grain,
 your eggs, butter, blankets and clothes.
Just stop dropping arms and ammunition
 in the begging bowls of those who ride
 on our hunched backs.
That alone would do.
Even if we die today,
starved of your shower of kindness
tomorrow, heads erect, we will rise from the dead.

(1992)

Debt: a Third World view

Your grandfather seized my grandfather's paddy field.
Your father robbed my father of his house.
You seize of the fruits of my labour.

I am like the tractor that works your paddy field,
like your milch cow.
Fuel for the tractor
fodder for the cow
a pittance as wages for me.
The tractor has rest when the work ends in the field –
it will not go hungry.
The cow, at worst, will have hay to eat.
I have no wage –
and no work for my stomach.

I come to you in hunger.
You remind me of the money I owe you
the mounting interest.
You sermonise on the glory of effort
the fruits of labour
the benefits of saving.
My effort and labour
became your savings.

During festival and funeral
you give alms.
When there is death in your house
my belly is aroused by anticipation.
I do not wonder whether
the rice that you serve me
will take your father and grandfather and
you tomorrow
to heaven –
for I know not heaven.
But do not expect gratitude from me
for the rice that you serve me.

I worked out the capital and interest
on the paddy field seized from my grandfather
the house lost by my father and
the labour that I am robbed of daily,
I now know who owes whom.

(1992)

Distance and reality

On a fine day
I looked through the window of the aircraft and
all was clear.

Greying heads of old mountains
drunken rivers staggering in confused curves
vast forests wrapped in glowing autumn embers
of the fire lit by the summer's sun
awkwardly spreading fields rendered barren by harvest
sprawling grass-woven greens.

From above and afar
it was clear that the task was simple:
pick out the hills to bridge the passes one by one
place a snow mountain atop the volcano
rearrange all seas as squares
lakes as circles, hills as cones
islands as triangles, rivers as straight lines
the continents parallel.

I carefully noted my thoughts
on the paper serviette given with the meal.

I got off the plane and started to walk.
Trees, walls and house roofs towered over me.
I tripped on a stone.
I crushed the paper with my notes
cast it aside and bent down gently
to move the stone out of the way.

(1992)

Temples are sacred
The flag mast is sacred
The crucifix is sacred
The rosary is sacred
The mosque is sacred
Worship is sacred
The *Gurudhwar* is sacred
The vihara is sacred

Things sacred

The river, the temple pond
the banyan tree, the margosa
the bo tree, the *bhilva*
and the *aruga* grass are sacred
The grazing cow is sacred
The shaven head
the long hair
the naked body
the sacred thread, the saffron cloth
the white cassock and
the prayer mat are sacred
The service and rituals
alms and fasts
meditation and festivals
and vows are sacred
Religions are sacred
Histories are sacred
Wars are sacred
Death is sacred
Killing in the name of religion is sacred
In this sacred land of India
Everything but human life
is sacred.

(1992)

The omniscient

I met him at a conference.

He spoke at length on women's liberation,
women's rights, male chauvinism,
class exploitation, oppression, struggle, revolution,
socialism, and the new world of communism.

When women opened their mouths to discuss
women's issues, birth control, abortion,
abuse by men, insults, sexual violence and rape
He declared that they knew nothing,
thumped the table and swore that
everything will be all right after the revolution.

He knows more than any woman
about women's problems.

All will be well with the arrival of his revolution.
Even menstruation and birth pangs shall cease –
for he knows everything.

(1993)

A death

He died in a bomb blast
Blood and flesh scattered at the site of the explosion
They picked up the fragments
and fitted them together within a box –
the embalmers are highly skilled
but know not the art of bringing back life
The wife and children of the deceased lamented aloud
Wiping off tears
those standing around offered words of consolation

My friend's mother saw the pictures in the paper
She did not cry
The man who caused her son's death is dead
She did not laugh
No death will bring back her son
The death of a killer is not the death of killings

However
the sound of firecrackers in the neighbourhood
heard through the night
still rings in my ears
Life has little to celebrate
So, they celebrate a death

(1993)

Prison

Periakkaa attained age.

Then came eggs, sesame oil, head bath, sari,
rituals, family, friends, feast, quarrels, arguments.

Play halted, schooling reached a slow end.

Home became her sanctuary
and prison.

Broker, dowry, donation, jewellery, horoscopes, caste, education,
employment, pension, hope, disappointment.

Broker again.

Bidding, bargaining, hope, disappointment
lies, boast, astrology.

Again proposals, bargaining, lies, solicitor, registrar, astrologer,
priest.

Then *periakkaa*'s wedding,
head bath, sari, *thaali*, husband, rituals, family, friends, feast,
quarrels, arguments, sobbing, consoling.
Periakkaa left the prison of our home.

Cinnakkaa attained age.

Eggs, sesame oil, rituals, imprisonment,
broker, dowry, registrar, husband.

Cinnakkaa went off
ending her imprisonment.

I attained age.

Eggs, head bath, sari, imprisonment,
broker, donation, dowry, *thaali*.

I ended imprisonment at home
to be imprisoned elsewhere.

Did not my mother know?

Did not my sisters know?

Did someone forget
to tell me something?

(1994)

Welcome

Welcome to London Heathrow
Immigration and Luggage this way
Wait behind the yellow line
Passport? Visa?
(Scanning up and down from top to bottom)
Is this your passport?
Where did you get the visa?
With whom are you staying? Address? Telephone?
For how long? Why? What for?
Show me your air ticket.
Wait a minute
Get behind the yellow line
to a side
Next
Next
Next
You may come
Go that way
to Medical Check-up
Take off your shirt
Stand against the X-ray machine
Breathe in, straighten your back, move closer
Wait a minute
Take your passport
You may go

Luggage this way
A lonely bag making circles on a track
Trolley
Customs
Nothing to declare: follow the green light
Stop there
You
Where are you travelling from?
Where did you board the plane?
Where were you before that?
For how long are you here?
On what business?
Are you bringing anything for anyone?
Did you pack your bag?
Open the bag
Do not touch anything
Close the bag
Come with me
Inside this room
Raise your hands
Take off your clothes – everything
Shoes too
Stretch your legs apart
(Searching inside and outside)
All right, put on your clothes
You may go
Way out
Welcome to London Heathrow
Black *****

Sambhavaami yuge yuge

You knew that it was hard yet possible
to break through the formation
but impossible to break out.
Still, you cleaved the wall woven of
armed warriors on chariot, elephant, horseback and foot –
death, a near certainty
But you knew the need of the moment,
that you were the man of the moment.
Your will power made
valiant warriors let slip weapons and missiles
and shudder in fright.

Your will power
gave no thought to battling single-handed
the many great warriors who encircled you in attack.
It made a wheel of the fallen chariot
a mighty weapon
held aloft in your hand.
O Abhimanyu! The cowardice and cruelty
of the saga of stripping a woman of her clothes
in the court of the Kaurava king
that sowed the seeds of war
repeated themselves around you.
Your death became *Yama* to the unjust and
a turning point in the battle of *Mahabharatha*.

“Whenever righteousness falls
and unrighteousness flourishes
I shall appear from era to era
to uphold righteousness”
declared you uncle, but never turned up.

In an era when saffron clad impostors
pretend to be his incarnations
you reincarnate without pretence –
as man, as woman, as liberation army, as defiant nation.

In the final reckoning
this era is yours.

(1994)

Final hours

The evenings of summer never go waste.
The final hours of the leaves
inherit the colours of the evening sky.
Death follows.
The park's caretaker
tired of gathering the autumn leaves
looks up in despair
to count the unfallen leaves.
The manager of the state hospital
(needs to be mindful of cost) counts the elderly
who refuse to die.

(1995)

The street

It took a long while for
the moon to cross the road in the sky
with clouds rushing along:
of little use were
the squares of light on concrete walls by the roadside –
it took a long while for
granddad waiting by the roadside
to cross the road.

(1995)

The faces of war

1

Desire to live drove him from his land.
Wearing the face of the night he fled to Colombo.
Uniforms wearing the face of the night
dragged him away.

2

He claimed that the face on the identity card was his.
It was not they said.
He pleaded that the card was ten years old,
but the face was his.
When his body floated in the lake
its face was not his.

3

When the child who wore the face of a fighter
met the fighter who wore the face of a child
they could not exchange faces.
The fighter sobbed like a child
for the child who died in a shattered mirror.

4

He never bore sword or gun –
yet a bard who sang the greatness of valour
and the glory of martyrdom.
When his son bore arms
he blessed him to return in victory.
They said that the boy was victorious
but did not return.
While all paid tribute to the hero
tears that washed the face of sorrow
gagged his mouth.

5

He dug pits to bury every face that could have seen
his face that he had hidden away long ago.
The face that he hid sprouted from every pit.

6

Some said that her face was her mother's.
Others said that it was her grandmother's.
Her face wore the fire of the smoke
worn by the faces of her mother and grandmother.

7

They killed the fathers of the children and
drove away their elder brothers.
When the children took to arms
they wore the face of humanism and
shed tears for them.

8

He is a trader.
He wears the face of a recruiting officer.
He does not trade in goods-
he buys people, sells death.

9

The government has two faces.
The face of war declares, "War before peace!"
The face of peace declares, "Peace after war!"

10

A prison of stone walls and doors of steel bar
detains people in the name of law,
provides each meal and permits to see the sun.
A prison of barbed wire and wooden doors
detains people in the name of humanism
and calls itself a refugee camp.

11

When the peasants wear the faces of refugees
war is sown and disaster is harvested
in paddy fields wearing the faces of bush land.

12

The lines on this face are not wrinkles of the skin.
The lines furrowed by poverty are deepened by war.

13

Statistics of those who died of hunger and illness
carry humane officials of charitable organisations
in air-conditioned cars to feasts and festivals.

14

Airplanes approach and fear of death threatens.
Caste consciousness wears the face of human kindness,
smiles with a grin from bunkers and shelters.
Airplanes recede but fear of death persists.
A bucket of water washes away human kindness and
soaks the undone *verti*.

15

The soldier opens the bag and inspects every item.
The gun on his shoulder is of no avail:
I shudder within as does he.

16

The sea too is under siege.
The fishing nets that spread out to bathe in the sea
slump on the sand and soak in the rain.
Warships and gunboats break the back of
the waves that should carry fishing boats.
Within the heart that craves peace
the sea rumbles and
the wind casts sand in curse.

17

I went to the *vihara* to see the Buddha.
“Why have you lowered your eyes?” I asked.
“I haven’t the heart to see anything that’s done in my name”, he
said.
“Is it right to remain with arms folded?” I asked.
“The state would place a gun on unfolded arms”, he said.

18

The mosque where they pray here is just like
the mosque where they prayed there.
Why are they unable to pray here
the way they prayed there?

19

The task of implementing the peaceful solution
was assigned to the armed forces.
The earth soaked up the blood
of those who could not understand
the words of peace spoken by the bullets.

20

I asked those who speak of
violations of human rights because of war
if they would speak of the
violations of human rights that led to war.
When they opened their mouths
the face of the humanitarian vanished
and I heard the voice of the politician.

21

The answer to question “Whose is the war?” is
“Whose is the peace?”

22

I asked the artist

“Why do you paint the face of this land in yellow and red?

Don't you know any other colour?”

“Poetry speaks of war and death.

When martial music from musical instruments ceases

I hear the lament at the funeral.

What colours do you want from me

while I live between the burning and the burnt?”

The touch of the brush dipped in colour set the canvas afire.

23

War has lost its rules of engagement.

Battlefields have lost their borders.

Weapons have lost their targets.

Warriors have lost their faces.

Arms dealers count the money.

Statistics bury the people.

24

The people left bag and baggage
when the soldiers came to conquer.

The people left bag and baggage
when the soldiers came to liberate.

25

“This profession is my fate, for there is no other way”
said the prostitute.

“I steal because of hunger, for there is no other way”
said the thief.

“This war is for the good of this land, for there is no other way” said
the government.

Why was the regret in the words of the prostitute and the thief not in
the words of the government?

26

They await the return of those who
went to school, to work, to the market and to worship
with the same certainty
as they await the return of those who went to war.

27

It is the same war.

Those who were against it yesterday are for it today.

When seated in the magic chair
the face of the war looks different.

28

The faces of war change places too often.

Victory and defeat, advance and retreat,
firmness and frailty

change the directions in which they view.

Destruction alone looks in all directions.

29

Q: Why are the faces of the dead always identified as
those of combatants, terrorists and the enemy?

A: Because bullets and missiles shall always be on target.

30

Ghosts do not come to gulp blood in the battlefields of our era, nor
demons to consume flesh.

The ghosts and demons that consume us from afar have faces like
yours and mine.

31

We could talk of peace, we could talk of war.

Those talking of peace could peacefully
sell arms to those who talk of war.

32

The bombs of that side descend from the sky.
The bombs of this side walk down the street.
Is this a wrestling match or a game of chess
for us to lecture on rules of engagement?

33

I cannot say when this war would end
but I can say now itself that
whenever it ends another would begin.

34

He went away because he could not stay in the village.
When he decided to return the village had gone away.

35

I wondered where the cat that always sat on the fence would sit
when all fences fall in the war.
The cat was seated on the war.

36

The came at night.
They raided each house.
They killed everyone they saw.
Having lost his whole family
he still does not know
why they were against him or
what they had against him.

37

Even though they had their roofs
they lived in bunkers when the bombs fell.
War took away the roofs and the bunkers
but bombs continued to fall.

38

"Get me the warhorse, I'll ride it to peace" he said.
We put him on horseback
but the horse continued towards war.
After mounting the horse
what matters is to be on horseback and
not where the horse is bound.

39

If this war is for liberation, when do we speak our minds?

40

"What do you see in my face?" asked the war.
"Wreckages" said an old man.
"Funerals" said an old woman.
"Patterns of blood" said an artist.
"War drums" said a young man
followed by a woman singer who moaned, "Songs of lament".
"Landmines" said a cripple.
"Crippled epics" said a poet.
"The disabled" said a nurse.
Before a doctor could say "Shortage of drugs",
"Import opportunities", rushed a distributor.
"Higher prices" said the head of a family.
"Additional income" said a trader.
"Dearth of goods" grudged a young woman.
"A big haul" gloated a smuggler.
"My share" reminded the man at the checkpoint.
"Weapons still unsold" said an arms dealer.
"My commission" chipped in a broker.
"Bomber aircraft" shuddered a boy.
"Land-to-air missiles" muttered a pilot.

"Cancelled leave" complained a soldier
 "Wartime allowances" claimed his officer.
 "Compensation for the dead soldier" envied the neighbour.
 "My fate" cursed his wife.
 "The departure of my pal" said his friend.
 "Heroic deaths" declared a propagandist.
 "Liberation" swore a woman fighter.
 "The end of terrorism" roared a minister.
 "Madness" laughed a sage.
 "Children in hunger" bemoaned a mother.
 "Bread queues" said a girl..
 "Unmotorable roads" protested a taxi driver.
 "Empty temples" sorrowed a priest.
 "Shut down schools" interrupted a teacher.
 "Long holidays" shouted a student.
 "Cancelled concerts" said a dancer.
 "Plays without a stage" said an actor.
 "Many more reports" observed an NGO officer.
 "Loads of war stories" said a journalist.
 "Loads of lies too" added a reader.
 "Me" said a voice in whose direction lay
 the neglected corpse of a refugee.

(1995)

A report on reports on human rights violations

Although humanity is divided
 human rights are indivisible. However,
 violation of human rights are not.
 Whose rights are violated and who violates them
 determine whether what is violated is a human right.
 Reports on the violation of human rights are divided
 so that human rights remain undivided
 amid a divided humanity.

(1995)

A lesson on theft

Theft is on the rise.
Lock your doors, shut your windows,
always be on the alert.
They were on their alert.
Yet, theft was on the rise.
Put behind bars all suspects,
build more prisons.
They built.
Yet, theft was on the rise.
Strengthen discipline in prisons,
heighten security.
They placed watchdogs, jail guards, security alarms
and search lights on twenty-four hour alert.
Yet, theft was on the rise.
They transported prisoners with caution
in shuttered vans.
Yet, theft was on the rise.
They fitted burglar alarms on house walls,
installed search lights,
placed on guard stocky watchmen and tall dogs
on either side of high boundary walls,
and travelled in cars with dark bulletproof windows
driven by armed drivers
to beaches and gardens blocked off by
electric fences and stone walls.
Yet, theft was on the rise.
The nation became one of two kinds of prison –
one for those within the reach of law and
one for those outside the reach of law.
Yet, theft is on the rise.

(1996)

The new world order and peace

They desire peace.
They denounce without fail
the errors of their ancestors.
They very much regret
the blood that was shed,
the wealth that was stolen,
and the land that was confiscated
everywhere that their ancestors set foot.
They are ashamed of the
coffee estates and tea gardens
and cane fields and gold mines
that grew out of the flesh of those
uprooted by their ancestors.
They very much want you
to forget the past and be their friends.
Besides, they are know well that
your life is in a state of wreckage and poverty,
your culture is in ruins and
that you are rejected by the gods.
But remember:
even when they wage war to
stop you from disrupting world peace by
agitating, fighting, and rising in revolt
to assert control over your land and labour
and defy their hegemony,
they crave peace –
as long as the world remains the way it is.

(1996)

Phrases for a tourist brochure

Welcome dear guests
Welcome
This nation rolls out the red carpet at the airport
for you to walk in comfort
It brings together its palms in greeting
Welcome Ayubowan Vanakkam

It garlands your necks
makes you happy and
transports you in luxury cars
to its air-conditioned hotels
This nation that grins in gratitude for
the coins that you shed out of kindness
carries your suitcases and
waits by the poolside with long towels for you
This nation
reserves for you its beaches
on which it forbids its children to set foot
When you tire of whiskey and Coke
it climbs the tree to pluck king coconut
In its evenings
it wears masks and costumes
and performs dances to entertain you
It sits stark naked
awaiting you in your bedroom
If necessary
this nation is willing to offer
its children to you
Dear guest
even if you go away
at the end of this holiday
do please return
Masters of the masters
who mortgaged this land to you –
keep coming
until this nation shakes itself out of its daze.

(1996)

The money tree

All went in search of the land of the money tree to climb the tree and pick fruit, to shake the tree and gather fruit. Men went. Women went. The strong and the weak went. The literate, the illiterate, the good, the bad, the haves and the have-nots, all went. The money tree bore colourful fruit in abundance: the Dollar, the Deutsch Mark, the Yen, the Pound Sterling. They went from country to town in search of the money tree. They went from town to big city and from one country to another. They walked their way, they went by car, they went floating on sea and in the air. They went on horseback, they went hiding beneath the chassis of road vehicles. They leapt over electric fences, they crawled through sewerage ducts. They went towards the money tree in every way that was possible. They went weeping at the thought of leaving kith and kin. They went laughing, they went with anxiety. They went with certainty, with doubt, with hope. All who went, went with expectations. They paid homage to the money tree, sang hymns in praise of the money tree, rendered service to the money tree. The money tree gave them a little to eat and clothe, gave shelter to stay, gave means for entertainment and pastime. It took back as price the fruit that they picked and gathered, robbed them of their freedom. Those who did not know that the money tree has no land of its own and that its roots spread all over the globe to suck the wealth of all lands poured scorn on those who knew and dared to speak. They declared aloud that the purpose of life was to serve the money tree. They truly believe that their pilgrimage to the money tree was not in vain.

To this day, everyone helps and everyone hinders everyone that goes in search of the money tree.

(1996)

Butterflies of my dreams

Countless butterflies flapped their wings
in my childhood's sleep
butterflies that my mother saved for me
butterflies that my mother's mother saved for my mother
and I saved for my children

In these nights that reek of gunpowder
my children scream in their dreams

Who stole my children's butterflies?
And who but I could restore them
to the hours of sleep of the children of my children?

(1997)

Not speaking about ***

(Writing poetry to conform to rules of censorship)

By government order
there is total ban on news about ***
It is prohibited to broadcast
over radio or television
publish in newspapers
communicate by fax, phone or e-mail
any news about ***.

That is government order.

Besides, responsible officials could
snip off electrical wires
of the sirens of ambulances
that roam the city streets day and night;
stop altogether
public appeals from the blood bank;
plug with a ball of cloth
every mouth that sobs in sorrow
for a son, a husband, a lover, a brother, a friend
who will never return.

On the other hand
could we not stop making *** –
if there is no ***
there may be no need to
ban news of***.

(1998)

The killing hands

The very hands that buried young boys at Sooriyakanda
buried young men at Chemmani.

The very hands that protected the killers
even after the killers were identified
(with the remains of the dead in Sooriyakanda
bearing silent witnesses)
stopped excavation at Chemmani.

Foundation is laid in mass graves
to uphold the power of the oppressor.
When bones emerge from the graves
pillars of power start to totter.
Empty spaces where the corpses lay
await falling state power.
That is why the hands of state power
halt the excavation of mass graves.

Whatever racialism the state may preach
its killing hands do not racially discriminate
in the region across which the mass graves stretch.

The same state, the same armed forces,
the same killing hands, the same inquirers,
the same deception, the same cover-ups, and
the same mass graves
many times again.

(1998)

A quiet night

Wee, wee, wee, wee –
the scream of a child in the neighbourhood.

Wee, wee, wee, wee –
the howl of a dog outside.

Wee, wee, wee, wee –
the screech of beetles far away.

Afar and out of sight
a war is still on.
Afar and out of ears' reach
shots roar,
men shiver, men scatter, men fall dead.
The earth that gave food to eat
and water to drink
is once more drinking blood.

The news broadcast goes on softly
in the middle of a quiet night of the city:
“The attack by the terrorists
has been fully repulsed.
The government forces lost no ground,
lost no lives”.

Wee, wee, wee, wee –
the scream of ambulances.
Before silence rules the night's streets
ambulances rush,
the truths of war within.

(1998)

A poem for Pinochet

When a little of their profits went missing
a lot was said about democracy.
As rifle butts propped up democracy
human rights disappeared one by one
Voices arose
about the rights that disappeared and
disappeared one by one
as they arose
Questions arose
about the voices that disappeared and
as questions arose
their authors disappeared one by one
Questions led the way to mass graves and fell silent
Grass grew on mounds of earth and
mass graves went missing one by one
Assured that questions had dissolved in time
slowly he stepped out
A question that broke its silence tripped his feet
Another tied his hands
Another grew into a prison house
They did not turn up to save him
from the questions that surrounded him.
Their profits are pouring in for now, and
what does it matter if he goes –
if ever profits fall
there will always be a new killer and
new mass graves

(1998)

Trincomalee harbour

This harbour has seen many a ship.
This harbour has seen many a soldier.
Ships that mother spoke of, ships that granny spoke of,
ships that I have seen.
White capped, white clad, white skinned sailors.
Was it fear, curiosity or wonder that
slipped through the gap
in the door slammed shut
to widen mother's eyes and granny's eyes?
The harbour sets free the sailors from their jail on sea.

Feet wide apart, sailors sway sideways
as they walk along the street.
The harbour sends back to jail
the returning sailors
pauperised after squandering their money.
Evening fireworks on board
belies the darkness of the harbour sky and
makes us forget that they are warships.
Ships that mother spoke of, granny spoke of,
ships that I have seen
never came again.
It is long since multi-coloured flags
discarded from the ships
fluttered over palm leaf decorations
at weddings and temple festivals.
This harbour has seen ships since –
merchant vessels, fishing boats
Now, like before, warships, unlike ones before,
come and go.

People hang around
at the edge of the harbour, the coast of the sea, the jetty
in someone's house, the police station, on the street
in government offices, refugee camps
awaiting a ship –
a ship to return home.

Ships that mother saw, granny saw, I saw.

Just one ship
to return home.

(1998)

Monkeys: an inquiry

Monkeys

Monkeys

Monkeys

Monkeys atop trees in town,
monkeys atop boundary walls,
atop house roofs,
all along the street,
atop vehicles,
monkeys in every direction that eyes view,
on every spot that eyes reach,
monkeys on their own, monkeys in groups.

“From where are these monkeys?” I asked.
“The forests of the south” some said.
Some insisted that they were from the west and the north.
Some corrected it to add that
monkeys of the hilly forests from behind the Fort
should also be counted.
Some narrated tales and debated among themselves
whether they were of the kind that once long ago
built a bridge of stone to cross the sea.
“Isn’t there trouble to anyone from the monkeys?”
I inquired.
“If there is no monkey problem there will be another.
Tell us if there is a place on earth without trouble?”
they responded.
Spy monkeys peep into houses
through gaps in the door and holes in the roof.
Officer monkeys enter the house
whenever they like
by pushing open doors and through windows,
eat whatever food they find
and sometimes take away.
Guard monkeys frighten children
and at times play pranks with young women.
“Does not anyone do anything about the monkeys?”
I asked.
“What can one do?” they asked me in return.
They explained calmly that
whatever one may do, monkeys keep coming and going.
“There is no trouble from monkeys
if you carry a picture of *Hanuman*” said some.

One complained that a monkey tore up
his picture of *Hanuman* and his identity card.
Another checked him and explained that
he was not devout enough.

However
all of them have got used to living beside monkeys
and complaints about monkeys have subsided.
Besides
there is now good opinion in town about monkeys since
they do not kidnap anybody or
commit sexual offences against women or
detain anyone with or without inquiry.

The case for the monkeys that
the reason for their arrival was
the war in the jungles
defoliation and
the lack of food
is now broadly accepted.
Some declare that
when the war ends
they could hand over the town to the monkeys
and move to the jungle.
But
the war does not seem to end.

(1998)

The gecko

As always
he walked
along the quiet street.
A speeding vehicle,
unknown faces.

An insect on the wall,
a tongue that whipped past
like lightning.

Who saw any
who saw him
go missing?

(1999)

A dialogue on hijacking

The passenger asked the hijacker of the plane:

Look at the old gentleman: he is longing to return home.
Look at that woman: her child is waiting for her. Look at that
young man: he has to report to work tomorrow. Is it fair that you
hijacked this plane and made it our prison?

The hijacker asked the passenger:

Look at my friend there: the home that he was itching to
return to had been demolished. Look at that woman militant: the
child that was waiting for her was killed in a bombing raid. Look
at that young militant: there is no place for him to go to work. Is it
fair that they have hijacked my nation and made it our prison?

(2001)

Their politics

The row of plastic banners hanging across every street,
the posters that deface the walls
with the portraits of politicians, and
the cut-outs that stand four man tall
will finally end up as rubbish –
just like their politics.

But even as they are destroyed
they add to the filth, block the drains and
pollute the environment –
just like their politics.

(2001)

Old habits

Then
if I spoke in Tamil
the English class teacher would
scold me, strike me, levy a fine.
If he found a Tamil story book on me
he would confiscate it, tear it up.
I would mutter in protest in Tamil.

Now
if I spoke in Tamil on the street
the Sinhala racist
would stare at me, and if possible
come with a gang to assault me.
If he saw a Tamil newspaper in my hand
he would snatch it and tear it up.
I still would mutter in protest in Tamil.

(2001)

In the name of humanity

“In the name of humanity let him go” –
the plea of the spokesperson for the Pope.
The name of humanity is powerful,
its voice too is powerful, but
their power depends much on the subject of its mercy.
When its voice comes from the Vatican and
pleads for Pinochet
it could gently caresses the ears that longed for it
and soften the stony hearts of state power.
Had only this very voice been heard
a quarter century ago
before or after the killing of Allende
there may have been no need for
today’s appeal for Pinochet
in the name of humanity,
Chile may have forgotten Pinochet.
The voice of humanity
when it rings for the killer reaches further than
when it rings for the killed, and
touches frozen hearts.
That is why
Your Holiness the spokesperson for
the spokesperson for God
I plead in the name of humanity
“Please do not plead for this killer
in the name of humanity”.

(2001)

God bless America

Your Excellency the President
of the United States of America,
I, an American citizen,
speak from a room in a burning tower
where lights suddenly went off
following the impact of an air plane
that struck like a thunderbolt.
I know not the direction in which you are.
Nevertheless,
since the all mighty American intelligence
has ears in every direction and
since my legs are too weak
to stand while addressing to you,
I remain seated and
speak in the direction in which I view.

Your Excellency,
forgive my inability to stand
facing you while addressing you,
for it is not out of disrespect, and
be kind to listen to my words.

Darkness reigns in this room while
that thundering sound still ringing in my ears
cuts through the screams of fear that fill them.
It bears the sound of the explosion
that declared American nuclear might
fifty-six years ago in Hiroshima.
Embedded in it is the roar
that later spread
through Korea, then Vietnam and
heard until yesterday in Belgrade and
still raging in Iraq.

The voices of fear and the screams of death
that flood my ears
echo the voices born of every throat
that was strangled on every land
that lost its sovereignty to America
for the supremacy of American sovereignty to prevail.
Thoughts that were denied expression
in every language that was killed and
in every language that is killed
are spoken aloud in it.

The heat of the fire that encircles and
lays siege to the building
is rising slowly but steadily.
Its every degree rise
takes me close to the Vietnamese peasant
who experienced the heat
of napalm bombs sprayed across Vietnam
by American war planes.

Amid the heat of the air, the odour of smoke
and the toxic fumes

that enter my lungs through my nostrils
I sense that
I now receive a share of the poison gas
distributed to Kurdish villagers
with the blessings of America
and chemical fumes gifted to the city of Bhopal
early one morning by Union Carbide.

Now darkness has subdued this room.
I could only guess where the walls are.
But my vision pierces through the darkness and
the walls of the building:
half a century of history unfolds before me.
I see blood stains on the military hands
that uphold American domination.
The blood of
half a million communist suspects in Indonesia and
the blood that flowed over many lands
from Vietnam through the Dominican Republic to Panama
are deposited there.
I am not intimidated by its sight.
Amid the imprints of blood
many faces known and unknown
parade before my eyes.
For every face that feared and
every face that surrendered
I see a hundred of defiance:
Mossadeq, Lumumba, Allende ...
For every face that fell to conspiracy
smile a hundred that vanquished conspiracy:
Mao, Kim Il Sung, Ho Chi Minh ...

Before Castro could be toppled in Cuba
Chavez stands up in Venezuela.
From the boy who throws stones in Palestine
to the armed militant in Colombia,
the Philippines and Nepal,
the defiant Iraqi and Afghan,
fighters join in parade in a long march begun years ago.

Now I realise that
Qadaffi, Saddam Hussain and Osama bin Laden
could be eliminated
but not terror –
for the source of terror is not elsewhere
but here.
I do not lose heart,
for the liberation of America is interwoven
with that of the world.
Let the collapse of this tower be a symbol
of the fall of a terror
that made America the enemy of the world.
Let it be the beginning of the end
of a goddess of evil bearing the trident
of exploitation, oppression and war.

Your Excellency the President
I love America
more than I love my life that will soon depart:
not the America that you seek to save,
but the America that strives to save itself from you –
an America that the whole world would love.
God bless that America!

Law and the society

Since law is secure in the hands of
the experts, the judges and the lawyers
it is possible for the thief caught red handed to
slip through the gaps between legal technicalities;
it is possible for one who murdered in broad daylight to
escape by a legal rope ladder;
it is possible for the judge to admonish
the drunken agent of death to drink in moderation.

Law is where it should be with those who should keep it.
Those in possession are possessed
by those who possess wealth.

When a bus knocked down a woman to death
those who did not know the law
delivered justice by smashing up buses
because they thought that the law
despite being where it should be
had failed to do the its job.

Then
those who were in careful possession of the law declared,
“It is wrong for people to take the law into their hands”.

How good would it be
if only people really took the law into their own hands.

(2002)

Wiping out memories

I carefully remove every little item
that reminded me of you.
I removed the picture on the wall,
the nail on which it hung
and plugged the hole where the nail sat.
I incinerated every one of your letters and
shredded the paper envelope that held them.
In case your gifts would return to me if
I throw them in the garbage heap
I dug a hole and buried them.
I uprooted every plant in my garden
that you may have touched.

Why is everything that should not remind me of you
reminds me of you?

(2002)

Eighteen years since Welikada

Who killed the caged parrot?
Was it the cat that came in secretly?
Was it he who kept the cage open?
Was it he who caged the parrot and clipped its wings?

The judge has arrived.
“Silence!”
The cat is his.
It was his friend who opened the cage.
It was his relative who caged the bird
and clipped its wings.
Let the inquest go on.
The verdict is to be delivered.
“Silence! Silence!”

It is the parrot that is guilty of
premeditatedly caging itself
with the intention of blemishing
the good name of the judge.
Since it is not possible to punish the parrot
those who question the verdict may be punished.

“Silence! Silence! Silence!”

“Guards, kill everyone with your guns
and preserve peace!”

(2002)

About another matter

It is true that
when I speak about one thing,
it seems to be about another.
It is hard to avoid one
while speaking of another.

Writing about Pinochet is
also writing about Suharto, Marcos and Hitler.
The man who went missing in Chile
remains buried in Chemmani.
The mass graves in Mirusuvil and Sooriyakanda
were dug as one pit.
And the crowbars that demolished Babri Masjid
were forged in the fire that engulfed the Jaffna Library,
the heat of whose flames
blasted the statues of the Buddha in Afghanistan.

The news of the Sharpsville massacre
narrated to me the massacre of My Lai
and Jallienwallah Bagh.
Was it not with the rope that hanged Kattabomman
that the heroic Bhagat Singh was hanged?
Is the memorial in Katcilaimadu
merely for Pandaravanniyan?

Were the pre-war German concentration camps for Jews
ever closed down? And from where
did the concentration camps for the Malayan communists,

the model villages of South Vietnam,
and the refugee camps in Tamilnadu begin?
The world is divided in two
with one roll of barbed wire.

The signboard that denied entry to a South African
in South Africa
stopped a Tamil from entering a Tamil temple.
People were burnt alive in their huts in Keel Venmani with
the torches carried by the Ku Klux Klan.
The identity card demanded of a Tamil
on his way to Batticaloa
is shown by a Palestinian to an Israeli soldier.
Is not the language of the Kurd under Turkish domination
the language destroyed in Ireland
by forces of English occupation?.

The day the liberation movements of the Kurd and
the Tamil were banned
was the day the ban on the IRA was announced.

Are not what Harry Truman dropped on Hiroshima
and Winston Churchill on Dresden
falling on Baghdad today?
The forces sent to keep peace in Northern Ireland
also went to keep peace in Northern Lanka.

Does the one who declares that
“There is little in similarities,
and it is the difference that matters”
know that the difference between
Manamperi of Southern Lanka and Padmini of Tamilnadu
is that Manamperi was dead and that Padmini was married?

The hues of flags, the names of countries,
the tunes of national anthems,
and the designs of uniforms differ.
The reason why writing about Israel offends
the Saudi Arabian official,
writing about Kurdistan offends the Lankan official, and
writing about Kashmir offends the Filipino official,
on account of breach of local rules of censorship
is that there is a unity that differences fail to conceal.
That is correct too –
can one writing about one avoid writing about the other?

When the cloth that bound the feet
of the Chinese woman was cut loose,
the Indian woman who ascended the funeral pyre
to perform *sati*

walked away alive.
The Russian revolutionary
freed Asia and Africa from colonial rule.
A Palestinian woman militant
liberates the whole Arab womanhood.
The Colombian guerrilla,
the Mexican Zapatist
and the fighter of the Philippine People’s Army
are but one.
Forget not that the Kashmiri freedom fighter
is only struggling for the Lankan Tamil.

Thus,
when one speaks about any one thing
it is possible that it is also about something else –
really, about everything.

(2002)

Notes

Mahaweli in April is a reflection on the condition of the once mighty river Mahaweli, the longest in Sri Lanka. The view described is from the bridge linking the Faculty of Engineering with the rest of University of Peradeniya.

Ahalya in an interpretation of the story of Ahalya, the wife of the Hindu sage Gautama, turned to stone by a curse by the husband for being tempted by Indra the Lord of heavenly beings into committing adultery. Ahalya, according to the epic, Ramayana, was returned to human form by prince Rama in his youth. The story has been variously reinterpreted in subsequent Indian literature. The interpretation here raises a fundamental question concerning adultery.

Political thoughts of autumn was written at a time when the left movement in Sri Lanka suffered a mood of pessimism following the electoral humiliation of the parliamentary left in 1977. The writer was in London on leave at the time of writing.

To the victims of Welikada 1983 refers to the killing of 53 Tamil political prisoners in the Welikada Prison in Colombo during the anti-Tamil violence of 1983 by Sinhala inmates on two successive nights. To this day, those responsible have not been identified. The poem draws on the legend of Nandhan, a dalit devotee of Shiva who overcame various social obstacles to visit the Shrine of Shiva near Cithambaram. The legend goes that the statue of the sacred bull, Nandhi blocked his way and, on the command of Shiva, Nandhi moved aside to make way for Nandhan. Although Nandhan is revered today among sixty three great saints of a Saivaite revivalist movement, later studies suggest that the Brahmins of Chithamparam conspired to throw Nandhan into the sacred fire and then claim that he integrated with the great light of Shiva.

Hitler diaries is a more general comment on the violence of 1983. The diaries referred to were supposedly written by Adolf Hitler and their 'discovery' caused a sensation in 1982. but the discovery was soon exposed to be a hoax.

Adam's Peak, although not the tallest peak in Sri Lanka, is the most prominent. It is revered by people of all major faiths in the country, in view of an impression of a gigantic foot print atop the rocky peak. Silver mountain refers to Mount Kailash in the Himalayan range, held sacred by Hindus.

Of things precious refers to the rights that the people oppressed by caste won through a series of struggles. The caste system and untouchability denied to them even the most basic rights, ranging from using a well or entering places of worship restricted to people of 'high caste', to wearing a shirt or a blouse and having a name of their choice.

Kelani '89 is a comment on state sponsored violence against youth suspected of participation in the anti-government violence of 1987-89. Between 50 000 and 100 000 political killings were committed in this period, mostly by the state and its agents and to a less, but significant, extent by the Sinhala nationalistic Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, which claims itself to be Marxist. The earlier JVP insurrection of April 1971 led to the killing of an estimated five to twenty thousand youth by the armed forces of the state.

A tribute to trees tall and erect was written in protest of the killing of Rajini Thranagama a human rights activist and a Lecturer in Medical Faculty of the University of Jaffna in 1989, allegedly by the LTTE for her overt criticism of the organisation. It was translated by the author in the same year to be read in a memorial meeting.

The alien refers to the harassment of Tamil refugees in Europe by individuals claiming allegiance to Tamil liberation movements in Sri Lanka.

It is all important to smile refers to the plight of Tamil women refugees employed as shop assistants in stores across London.

Famine was a response to the NGO hype on their service to the starving millions in the Third World.

'Things sacred' refers to religious violence in India, which has since spread unabated.

The omniscient was a response to male chauvinistic comments by a 'radical leftist' who insisted on dismissing every complaint by women participants about male chauvinism during a seminar in Paris for Tamil writers in exile.

Death refers to the assassination of R Premadasa by a suicide bomber in May 1st 1993. President Premadasa's critics have held him responsible for the killing of a number of his political opponents.

Prison is about rituals performed when girls come of age and issues of gender oppression. *Periakkaa*, *cinnakkaa* refer, respectively, to the older and the younger of two elder sisters.

Sambhavaami yuge yuge is a well known line from the Bhagavat Gita from perhaps the most frequently cited stanza, where Lord Krishna pledges to his dear friend and devotee Arjuna that he will reincarnate to uphold justice when injustice prevails over justice. The humiliation of Draupathi the wife of the Pandava princes and the grandmother of Abhimanyu led to the great war of Mahabharatha and the cowardly killing of Abhimanyu the son of Arjuna by several armed warriors surrounding the disarmed youth makes the Pandavas even more determined to win the war. *Yama* is the god of death in Indian Mythology

'Final hours' concerns reforms to the health service in the UK and the pressure on state run hospitals to restrict spending on patient care.

Faces of war is an extensive comment on the war in the North-East of Sri Lanka.

*Not speaking about **** was written in response to government censorship rules about reporting on the war.

The killing hands was written in protest of the frustration by the government of a full inquiry into the alleged existence of mass graves near Chemmani, a site in the north of Sri Lanka where many of the hundreds of Tamil youth who went missing in the late 90's under the PA regime. Sooriyakanda in the south of Sri Lanka was where scores of Sinhalese school boys were buried under the UNP regime in the early 1990s.

A quiet night was written in response to the ceaseless wailing of ambulances in Colombo along the road from the Ratmalana airport to hospitals in the city.

A poem for Pinochet was written following the arrest in London of the former Chilean military dictator General Pinochet.

Trincomalee harbour links childhood memories of the days of the British naval base with the war situation where people were stranded in Trincomalee without boats to take them home to Jaffna.

Monkeys: an inquiry was written following a visit to Trincomalee when people were complaining of monkey menace.

'Old habits' was inspired by reports of gangs of Sinhalese in Colombo harassing people carrying Tamil newspapers.

In the name of humanity is about the plea by the spokesperson for the Pope to Chilean authorities to be kind to the former dictator General Pinochet.

God bless America was written shortly after 11th September 2001.

'*Law and the society*' was in response to the criticism by the media of the angry response of the public to the killing of a woman and child by the reckless driving of a bus.

Eighteen years since Welikada, another killing took place in Bindunuweva in 2001 October where LTTE surrendees were held in detention. The killings were carried out by gangs of organised thugs and involved law enforcement personnel.

About another matter. Chemmani and Mirusuvil refer to mass graves for Tamil youth killed by the armed forces in the late 1990s and Sooriyakanda to a mass grave for Sinhalese schoolboys, killed by a pro-government militia in the early 1990s.

Kayattaaru was where Kattabomman, the anti-British South Indian Tamil chieftain was hanged by the British colonialists. Bhagat Singh, a Marxist fighter for the freedom of modern India, was also hanged by the British. Katchilaimadu has a memorial for the Lankan Tamil chieftain of the Vanni region who fought British aggression to be slain there.

Manamperi, a young woman insurgent of the 1971 JVP uprising, was cruelly raped, humiliated and killed by soldiers in southern Lanka, and Padmini, a woman of a depressed caste group, was brutally raped by policemen in Tamilnadu, India in the mid-1990s when she went to the police station to inquire about her husband who had been killed in custody.

Keel Venmani is a village in Tamilnadu where a hut inside which a large group of people of a depressed caste group was set alight by goons on the instruction of upper caste land owners.

Sati (also written 'suti') is a cruel Indian Hindu custom where the widow was cremated alongside the dead husband. This custom was made illegal under British rule owing to Hindu reformist pressure, but is still practiced in a few places

***The poet,
the poems
and
the translation***

*This collection of
Sivasegaram's transcreations is
political in the best sense of the
word. He is a fluent bilingual
who is equally at home in
English as in his mother
tongue, Tamil. His characteristic
tone is a withering sarcasm and
his poems go straight for the
jugular..*

*Sivasegaram's is
decidedly a Third World Voice,
the voice of the oppressed and
the downtrodden everywhere
clamouring for justice and
freedom. His poems do not play
hide-and-seek with the reader,
who knows immediately where
the poet stands.*

A.J. Canagaratna

A poem for Pinochet

When a little of their profits went missing
a lot was said about democracy.
As rifle butts propped up democracy
human rights disappeared one by one
Voices arose
about rights that disappeared and
disappeared one by one
as they arose
Questions arose
about the voices that disappeared and
as questions arose
their authors disappeared one by one
Questions led the way to mass graves and
fell silent
Grass grew on mounds of earth and
mass graves went missing one by one
Assured that questions had dissolved in
time
slowly he stepped out
A question that broke its silence tripped
his feet
Another tied his hands
Another grew into a prison house
They did not turn up to save him
from the questions that surrounded him.
Their profits are pouring in for now, and
what does it matter if he goes –
if ever profits fall
there will always be a new killer and
new mass graves

(1988)



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