

No Greater Sorrow:  
Times of Joy Recalled in Wretchedness

Neelan Tiruchelvam  
Second Memorial Lecture  
July 29, 2001

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**Neelan Tiruchelvam**  
31 January 1944 - 29 July 1999

## No Greater Sorrow: Times of Joy Recalled in Wretchedness

... "Nessun maggior dolore  
che ricordarsi tempo felice  
ne la miseria..."

... "There is no greater sorrow  
than to recall our times of joy  
in wretchedness..."<sup>1</sup>

Michael Ondaatje's poem, *The Story* ends with the lines:  
*I no longer guess a future .*  
*And do not know how we end*  
*nor where.*

*Though I know a story about maps, for you.*<sup>2</sup>

Adopting this passage as both beginning and end, opening and envoy, I shall start with a story of my own, about one of the many imaginary maps I carry in my head. The map of which I speak is merely a representation of the political geography of present-day South Asia. It is unusual only in that it is drawn on the analogy of a nautical chart and functions as a navigational aid, indicating the region's most treacherous shoals and shallows as well as its most welcoming safe havens. It is a curious map, for to glance at it is to know that despite the tide of intolerance and extremism that is rising around us

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<sup>1</sup> Canto V, lines 121- 3, Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans R. & J Hollander, Doubleday, New York, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> *The Story in Handwriting*, Michael Ondaatje, Knopf, New York, 1999, p. 63.

everywhere, there still exists a chain of sanctuaries that remain stubbornly open to the flow of opinions, stubbornly hospitable to imagined enemies, stubbornly resistant to the floodwaters that seek to grind all forms of life into uniform grades of sand. I think of these landfalls as an archipelago of hope that lies astride all of South Asia: a submerged reef of trust and goodwill that is waiting for a volcanic eruption to thrust it to the surface.

Within this chain of islands this Centre, and Dr Neelan Tiruchelvam's home, has a place as storied as that of Serendib itself. I never had the privilege of meeting Neelan Tiruchelvam, yet I cannot rid myself of the feeling that I knew him in exactly the way we know our most valued friends. For many years before his tragic death I had heard people speak of his intellectual gifts and of the atmosphere of warmth and openness that he and his wife had created, both in this Centre and in their own home. I count it an irremediable loss that I was never present at any of those gatherings during Neelan's lifetime. In 1999 some friends happened to meet Dr & Mrs Thiruchelvam at Bellaggio in Italy. On their return they told me that he had asked for my number and would soon be calling to invite me to Sri Lanka. I was literally waiting for that call when I read of Neelan's tragic death.

Two years later, when a message arrived inviting me to deliver this lecture, I was both honoured and deeply moved. For let me say at once, that my presence here tonight is a doubly an act of remembrance and mourning: for Neelan Tiruchelvam in the first instance, but also for a part of my own life that I shared with him: of a domain of memory that makes me who I am today. For I too am in a small way a Sri Lankan, and in being here tonight, among other things, I am trying to mourn and commemorate a lost continent within the geography of my own evolution, as a writer and a human being.

I first came to Sri Lanka - it was still called Ceylon then - in 1965, when my father was posted to the Indian High Commission. I was nine, freshly entered into that moment of childhood when we first begin to truly inhabit the world, in the particular sense of committing it to memory. I remember Colombo's red-tiled roofs, like stacks of hardbacked books spread open on a desk; I remember my

school, Royal College, and the stairway where I first tasted blood on my lip; I remember afterschool cricket matches on Layard's Road and wickets knocked over by kabara-goyas; I remember marshmallow ice cream at Elephant House and the pearly insides of mangosteens; I remember the palmtrees at Hikkaduwa leaning like dancers over the golden sands; I remember the causeway to Jaffna, as thin as a clasp between a necklace and its pendant; I remember at Polonnaruwa, a cobra coiled on the floor of a resthouse, looking up as though in surprise at my silhouette in the doorway; I remember a train, toiling up a steep slope till a cloud carried it all the way to Nuwara Eliya.

Such was the paradise from which I was torn in the summer of 1967. This was the year when I reached the age of eleven and was sent away to boarding school in Dehra Dun, at the other end of the subcontinent: this was an institution where India's rulers were said to be moulded and I imagine my father had nurtured some such ambitions for me. To me it was something else altogether: a walled city of woe, in which five hundred adolescents had been herded together to be instructed in the arts of harrowing their peers. That it was my parents who were the agents of my expulsion from Paradise was not the least part of the bewildering pain of my banishment. It was in that sub-Himalayan purgatory that I learnt what it was to recall a time of joy in wretchedness. Now, in the recollection of that emotion, I have come to recognize a commonality with many, perhaps most; Sri Lankans - indeed, with everyone who remembers what it was to live in Serendib before the Fall.

*The last Sinhala word I lost, writes Michael Ondaatje,  
was vatura.*

*The word for water.*

*Forest water. The water in a kiss. The tears*

*I gave to my ayah Rosalin on leaving  
the first home of my life*

*More water for her than any other  
that fled my eyes again*

*this year, remembering her,  
a lost almost-mother in those years  
of thirsty love*

*No photograph of her, no meeting  
since the age of eleven,  
not even knowledge of her grave.*

*Who abandoned who, I wonder now.*<sup>3</sup>

These lines look back – as do I when I think of Sri Lanka – to a childhood long past. But the poem was published recently, in Canada, and I doubt that it would have sounded this exact note, if it had been written at any other time and in any other circumstances. This is not merely an eulogy for Rosalin: it is an elegy of homecoming spoken in a voice that has been orphaned not just by the loss of an almost-mother, but by history itself. It is a lament that mourns the passing of the Paradise that made Rosalin possible.

At the other end of the subcontinent lies Kashmir, of which an Emperor famously said:

*If there is a paradise on earth,  
It is this, it is this, it is this*

In the mid-nineteen nineties, at about the same time that Michael Ondaatje was writing his elegy to Rosalin, the Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali, was writing his great poem 'The Last Saffron'. The poem begins:

*I will die, in autumn, in Kashmir,  
and the shadowed routine of each vein*

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<sup>3</sup> From *Wells, in Handwriting*, Michael Ondaatje, Knopf, New York, 1999, p. 50.

*will almost be news, the blood censored,  
for the Saffron Sun and the Times of Rain...*

The poem ends with these verses:

*Yes, I remember it,  
the day I'll die, I broadcast the crimson,*

*so long ago of that sky, its spread air,  
its rushing dyes, and a piece of earth*

*bleeding, apart from the shore, as we went  
on the day I'll die, past the guards, and he,*

*keeper of the world's last saffron, rowed me  
on an island the size of a grave. On*

*two yards he rowed me into the sunset,  
past all pain. On everyone's lips was news*

*of my death but only that beloved couplet,  
broken, on his:*

*"If there is a paradise on earth  
It is this, it is this, it is this."*<sup>4</sup>

In Shyam Selvadurai's novel, *Funny Boy*, the destruction of Paradise is assigned precise dates and an exact span of time: it starts at 9.30 a.m. on July 25, 1983. It is only a few hours since the narrator and his family have learned that 'there [is] trouble in Colombo': the night before a mob has gone wild after a funeral for thirteen slain soldiers; many Tamil houses have been burned. At 9.30 a.m. the family begins

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<sup>4</sup> From *The Last Saffron* in *The Country Without a Post Office* Agha Shahid Ali, W.W.Norton & Co., New York, 1997.

to ready itself for a hasty departure from their own house. "We are supposed to bring a few clothes and one other thing that is important to us. I can't decide which thing to take." But the boy's mother has already decided; not the least of her provisions for the uncertainties of the future is the preparation for the coming age of sorrow: "Amma is taking all the family albums. She says that if anything happens they will remind us of happier days."

All through the day, the family waits in the once-beloved home that has now become a prison. As the hours pass, the narrator seeks consolation in his journal, recording rumours and reports. He hears that the government has distributed electoral lists to help the mobs locate Tamil homes; he is hugely relieved when he is told that a curfew has been declared, and is therefore doubly dismayed to learn that the announcement has made no difference, the mob is still on the rampage. He hears of the police and army watching in silent indifference as a Tamil family is burned alive in a car. At 11.30 p.m. the boy writes: "The waiting is terrible. I wish the mob would come so that this dreadful waiting would end."

The next entry is written a little more than half a day later, but in that brief span of time the world has become a different place. Nothing will ever be the same again: the boy's childhood has become a place apart; this is the moment when history, the connection between time past and time ahead, has ended and memory has become an island that is severed forever from the present and the future. "July 26, 12.30 p.m.: I have just read my last entry and it seems unbelievable that only thirteen hours ago I was sitting on my bed writing in this journal. A year seems to have passed since that time. Our lives have completely changed. I try and try to make sense of it, but it just won't work."

What has happened is this: the long wait has come to an end soon after the writing of the penultimate journal entry. On hearing the chants of an approaching mob, the family has taken refuge in a Sinhala neighbour's house. Huddled in a storeroom, they have listened, as their house is burnt to the ground.

The morning after, they have looked over the remains of the house: the sight has made little impression; it is almost incomprehensible; the boy notes that his vinyl records have dissolved into black puddles, that the furniture has cracked open to reveal the whiteness of common wood. "I observed all this with not a trace of remorse, not a touch of sorrow for the loss and destruction around me. Even now I feel no sorrow. I try to remind myself that the house is destroyed, that we will never live in it again, but my heart refuses to understand this." It is only later on being told of the destruction of his grandparents' home, that he is able to grieve: "...I thought about childhood spend-the-days and all the good times we had there. These thoughts made me cry. I couldn't cry for my own house, but it was easy to grieve for my grandparents' house." A precocious prescience has led the boy to grasp the precise nature of his grief: he ascribes it not to the immediacy of his own experience, but to the memory of better times - to that act of remembrance than which, as Dante's, Francesca da Rimini tells us, there is 'no greater sorrow': that is to say, in the recollection of better times.

This depiction of the violence of 1983 - and to my mind **Funny Boy** is one of the most powerful and moving accounts of those events - was published in 1994 in Canada, where Shyam Selvadurai's family had settled after leaving Sri Lanka. I draw attention to this only to underscore two facts: that **Funny Boy** was written by a recent immigrant to North America and that it is an act of recollection that tells the story of a departure. These facts appear unremarkable, yet there is to my mind a puzzle here and it lies in this: an immigrant's story is usually a narrative of arrival, not departure. And nowhere is this more true than in North America.

North America is famously peopled by immigrants, and nowhere else on earth is the experience of immigration so richly figured as it is there: in popular culture, literature, film and indeed every aspect of public life. In photography, the emblematic image of this experience is that of a family of immigrants standing on the deck of the ship that has brought them across the Atlantic. In these pictures the immigrants' eyes are always turned in the direction of the waiting

shore; towards the Statue of Liberty and the towers of the shining city ahead. Many of these immigrants have suffered terrible hardships, yet we would search in vain for similarly powerful images taken at the hour when they boarded the ship: that moment holds only passing interest in this story. This is because, classically, narratives of immigration into North America are stories of arrival, not departure; stories of suffering but not sorrow or regret; they are stories of hope, founded on a belief in the redemptive power of the land ahead. The vitality of these stories derives in no small part from the obvious parallels with the Biblical story of the Promised Land, which is, of course, equally a story of hope and of arrival. Those who followed Moses out of Egypt did not linger to cast glances of melancholy longing upon the Nile. They looked only ahead; their memory of Egypt was of unmitigated suffering; there were no times of joy there to be recalled in wretchedness. It is the forward glance then that is the mark of an exodus; these eyes that look ahead towards the far shore, confident in the belief that the bonds of community will hold not perish in the process of migration. But this is not the direction in which Selvadurai's narrator has turned his gaze. Here is the novel's penultimate sentence: "When I reached the top of the road, I couldn't prevent myself from turning back to look at the house one last time." And this is how he ends his story, with the narrator looking back, through the rain, at the charred remains of a home that was once filled with happiness.

It is the direction of the gaze that identifies this as a story, not of an exodus, but of an expulsion; the story of an irrevocable sundering of the dual bonds that tie members of a community to each other and to other like communities. In the experience of an exodus there is an unspoken ambiguity: the sufferings of displacement are tinged here with the hope of arrival and the opening of new vistas in the future. An expulsion offers no such consolation: the pain that haunts it is not that of remembered oppression; it is rather that particular species of pain - so well documented in the literature of Partition - that comes from the knowledge that the oppressor and the oppressed were once brothers. And we know, from that line of Boetius, which Dante was later to give to Francesca da Rimini, that among fortune's many

adversities the most unhappy kind is to nurture the memory of having once been happy.<sup>5</sup>

This is where recollection turns its back on history, for it is the burden of history to make sense of the past, while the memory of expulsion is haunted always by the essential inexplicability of what has come to pass; by the knowledge that there was nothing inevitable, nothing pre-destined about what has happened; that far from being primordial, the enmities that have led to the sufferings of the present are new and unaccountable; that there was a time once, when neither protagonist saw the other as an adversary - a time that will be irrevocably lost with the dissolution of the history that made it possible for many parts to be a whole.

That which I, in the fever of my pride, am struggling to put into words, has been much better said in Agha Shahid Ali's poem, *Farewell*:

*At a certain point I lost track of you.  
You needed me. You needed to perfect me:  
In your absence you polished me into the Enemy.  
Your history gets in the way of my memory.  
I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy.  
Your memory gets in the way of my memory...*

*There is nothing to forgive. You won't forgive me.  
I hid my pain even from myself; I revealed my pain only to myself.  
There is everything to forgive. You can't forgive me.*

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<sup>5</sup> Those lines of Dante's from which the title of this essay is taken, is thought to be based a passage from Boëtius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 'among fortune's many adversities the most unhappy kind is once to have been happy', (Hollander & Hollander, *The Inferno*, p. 99).



*If only somehow you could have been mine,  
what would not have been possible in the world?*<sup>6</sup>

There is nothing arbitrary then about the ending of Selvadurai's novel: the story ends here because it must. To carry it any further would be to link it to the present and the future, to imply the possibility of a consolation. And this, of course, the writer could not do, for the reason why there is no greater sorrow than the recalling of times of joy, is precisely that this is a grief that is beyond consolation.

In 1983, at the time of the Colombo riots, I was hard at work on my first novel, **The Circle of Reason**. I was living in New Delhi, where I had succeeded in finding a minor appointment at Delhi University. Some of my colleagues and mentors at the University – Veena Das and Ashis Nandy for example – had close connections with Neelan Tiruchelvam and ICES. They were thus able to acquire many of the documents, records and testimonies that were produced by ICES and other Sri Lankan researchers, such as the group led by Dr. Kumari Jayawardene. Newspaper accounts of the riots were shocking enough, but the picture that emerged from these independent reports was more menacing still. They left no doubt that some parts of the machinery of state had been used to target a minority population. I don't remember whether we asked ourselves what would happen if this pattern were to spread through the subcontinent. The question was perhaps too grim to pose in an India that was beset by insurgency, calamity and revolt.

A year later with Indira Gandhi's assassination, the tide crested on our own doorsteps. I remember that day graphically: I remember taking the bus across Delhi; I remember the eerie silence in the University; I remember the evil that gleamed in the eyes of the thugs who began to attack Sikhs wherever they could find them. I have written about these events in detail elsewhere and will limit myself

here to noting only the close parallels between the patterns of violence in Colombo in 1983 and in New Delhi in 1984. In both instances, inexcusable crimes were committed by insurgent groups in the name of freedom; in both cases, the information-gathering function of government was turned to the sinister purpose of targeting minority populations; in both there were clear instances of collusion between officials and criminals.

Through the riots and their aftermath, I, like many of my friends and colleagues, worked with a citizen's relief organization called the Nagarik Ekta Manch. After the immediate crisis was over I returned to the manuscript I was working on. This novel, **The Circle of Reason** was the story of a journey, and its central section told the story of a group of immigrants – South Asian and Middle Eastern – living in a fictitious oil-rich sheikhdom in the Gulf. Looking back today, it strikes me that **The Circle of Reason** could, within the parameters that I have used here, be identified as an exodus novel, a story of migration in the classic sense of having its gaze turned firmly towards the future. The book ended with the words: 'Hope is the beginning'.

I was working on the last part of the book in 1984 when the riots broke out. After the violence it was a struggle to bring the manuscript to a conclusion: my attention had turned away from it. Unlike Shyam Selvadurai, unlike the Sikhs of New Delhi, I was not in the position of a victim during the riots of 1984. But the violence had the effect of bringing to the surface of my memory, events from my own childhood when I had indeed been in a similar situation.

Somehow I did manage to finish **The Circle of Reason**, and soon afterwards I started the novel that would eventually be published as **The Shadow Lines**. When I began to work on the manuscript, I found that the book was following a pattern of growth that was exactly the opposite of its predecessor's. **The Circle of Reason** had grown upwards, like a sapling rising from the soil of my immediate experience; **The Shadow Lines** had its opening planted in the present, but it grew downwards, into the soil, like a root system straining to find a source of nourishment.

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<sup>6</sup> From *Farewell*, in *The Country Without a Post Office* Agha Shahid Ali, W.W.Norton & Co., New York, 1997, pp. 22-23.



It was in this process that I came to examine the ways in which my own life had been affected by civil violence. I remembered stories my mother had told me about the Great Calcutta killing of 1946; I remembered my uncles' stories of anti-Indian riots in Rangoon in 1930 and 1938. At the heart of the book, however, was an event that had occurred in Dhaka in 1964, the year before my family moved to Colombo: in the unlit depths of my memory there stirred a recollection of a night when our house, flooded with refugees, was besieged by an angry mob.<sup>7</sup> I had not thought of this event in decades, but after 1984 it began to haunt me: I was astonished by how vivid my memories were and how fully I could access them once I had given myself permission to do so. But my memories had no context: I had no way of knowing what had happened, whether it was an isolated incident, particular to the neighbourhood we were living in, or whether it had implications beyond. I decided to find out what had happened. The first step was to ask my parents, but I soon discovered that they too had worked hard at the effacement of these recollections. They confirmed the broad outlines of what I remembered but neither of them could recall the year in which these events had occurred. I went to libraries and sifted through hundreds of newspapers and in the end, through perseverance, luck and guesswork I did find out what had happened. The riots of my memory were not a local affair: they had engulfed much of the subcontinent. The violence had been set in motion by the reported theft of a holy relic from the Hazratbal mosque in Srinagar. Although Kashmir was unaffected, other parts of the subcontinent had gone up in flames. The rioting had continued for the better part of a week, in India as well as the two wings of Pakistan.

The process by which I came to learn of this was itself to become a pivotal part of the narrative of *The Shadow Lines*. While searching for evidence of the riots, I came across dozens of books about the

Indo-Chinese war of 1962. This was an event that had evidently created a torrent of public discourse. Yet the bare fact is that this was a war that was fought in a remote patch of terrain, far removed from major population centres, and it had few repercussions outside the immediate area. The riots of 1964, on the other hand, had affected many major cities and had caused extensive civilian casualties. Yet there was not a single book devoted to this event: a cursory glance at a library's bookshelves was enough to establish that in historical memory a small war counts for much more than a major outbreak of civil violence. While the riots were under way, they had received extensive and detailed coverage. Yet, once contained, they had vanished instantly, from both public memory and the discourse of history. Why was this so? Why is it that civil violence seems to occur in parallel time, as though it were outside history? Why is it that we can look back upon these events in sorrow and outrage and yet be incapable of divining any lasting solutions or any portents for the future?

Inasmuch as I addressed these conundrums in *The Shadow Lines*, it was in these words: "Every word I write about those events of 1964 is the product of a struggle with silence. It is a struggle that I am destined to lose – have already lost – for even after all these years I do not know where within me, in which corner of my world, this silence lies. All I know of it is what it is not. It is not, for example, the silence of a ruthelss state – nothing like that: no barbed wire, no checkpoints to tell me where its boundaries lie. I know nothing of this silence except that it lies outside the reach of my intelligence, beyond words – that is why this silence must win, must inevitably defeat me, because it is not a presence at all; it is simply a gap, a hole, an emptiness in which there are not words.

"The enemy of silence is speech, but there can be no speech without words, and there can be no words without meanings – so it follows inexorably, in the manner of syllogisms, that when we try to speak of events of which we do not know the meaning, we must lose ourselves in the silence that lies in the gap between words and the world...Where there is no meaning, there is banality, and that is

<sup>7</sup> I have described this event in detail in my book, *In An Antique Land*, (Granta Books, London, 1992): pp. 204-210.

what this silence consists in, that is why it cannot be defeated – because it is the silence of an absolute, impenetrable banality.”

I can still feel the sorrow and outrage that provoked these words – emotions that owed much more to the events of 1984 than to my memories of 1964. Just as terrible as the violence itself was the thought that so many lives had been expended for nothing, that this terrible weight of suffering had created no discernibly new trajectory in the history or politics of the region. When we grieve for the appalling loss of life in World War II, our sorrow is not compounded by the thought that the war has changed nothing: we know that it has changed the world in very significant ways, has created a new epoch. But in the violence of 1984 – to take just one example – it was impossible to see any such portents. It was hard to see how a further partitioning of the subcontinent could provide a solution: on the contrary it would create only a new set of minorities and new oppressions. In effect, it would amount only to a re-casting of the problem itself, in a different form. In the absence of such meanings, there seemed to be no means of representing these events except in outrage and in sorrow.

It follows then that the reason why I – and many others who have written of such events – are compelled to look back in sorrow is because we cannot look ahead. It is as though the events of the immediate past have made the future even more obscure than it is usually acknowledged to be. Now, close on two decades later, I find myself asking: Why is this so? Why was it that in the 1980s, history itself seemed to stumble and come to a standstill?

The past, as Faulkner famously said, is not over; in fact the past is not even the past. One of the paradoxes of history is that it is impossible to draw a chart of the past without imagining a map of the present and the future. The discourse of history, in other words, is never wholly innocent of teleologies, implicit or otherwise. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and perhaps even earlier, it is the State which has provided the grid on which history is mapped. Ranajit Guha, in a recent lecture on Hegel and the writing of history in South Asia, says: ‘It is the state which first supplies a content, which not only

lends itself to the prose of history but actually helps to produce it. In other words, the actions of the state provide that essential element of continuity that makes time, as a collective experience, thinkable, by linking the past, the present and the future. The state as thus conceived is not merely an apparatus of rule but ‘a conscious, ethical institution’, an instrument designed to conquer the ‘unhistorical power of time’.

It was perhaps this politically insignificant but epistemologically indispensable aspect of time’s continuity that was most vitally damaged by the conflagrations of the 1980s. Even before then, it had often been suspected that elements of the state’s machinery had been colluding in the production of communal violence: after the violence of the eighties this became established as a fact. It became evident that certain parts of the state had been absorbed – had indeed become sponsors – of criminal violence. No longer could the state be seen as a protagonist in its own right. It is for this reason that I have used the self-contradictory phrase ‘civil violence’ here, in preference to other more commonly used terms: because these events signalled the collapse of the familiar categories of ‘state’ and ‘civil society’.<sup>9</sup>

The flames created by our recent past are so plentiful that only poets noticed the unsung death of a teleology. “Everything is finished, nothing remains,” writes Agha Shahid Ali of a poet who returns to Kashmir in search of the keeper of a destroyed minaret.

*‘Nothing will remain, everything’s finished,’  
I see his voice again: ‘This is a shrine  
of words. You’ll find your letters to me. And mine  
to you. Come soon and tear open these vanished  
envelopes.’ ...*

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<sup>8</sup> Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World History*, lecture III.

<sup>9</sup> It is not without interest that the corresponding administrative term – handed down from the Raj – is ‘civil disturbance’.

*This is an archive. I've found the remains  
Of his voice, that map of longings with no limit.<sup>10</sup>*

Buried within the poet's 'shrine of words', lies a map: a chart 'of longings without limit'. It is not the fall of the minaret but the loss of the map that is the true catastrophe: it is this loss that evokes the words '*Nothing will remain, everything's finished*'.

Shahid's is not the only lost map: in *The Story* Michael Ondaatje invokes another.

*For his first forty days a child  
is given dreams of previous lives,  
journeys, winding paths,  
a hundred small lessons  
and then the past is erased.*

*Some are born screaming,  
some full of introspective wandering  
into the past – that bus ride in winter,  
the sudden arrival within  
a new city in the dark.  
And those departures from family bonds  
leaving what was lost and needed.  
So the child's face is a lake  
of fast moving clouds and emotions.*

*A last chance for the clear history of the self.  
All our mothers and grandparents here,  
our dismantled childhoods  
in the buildings of the past.*

*Some great forty-day daydream  
before we bury the maps.*

The old maps are gone and two of the finest poets of our time, Michael Ondaatje and Agha Shahid Ali, exiles from twinned Edens, have borne witness to their loss; gone are Michael's 'forty-day daydream' and Shahid's 'longings without limit'. Writers who look back in the wake of that loss can only build shrines to that past. And yet the mystery of the sorrow that is entombed in their work is that their grief is not just for a time remembered: they grieve also for the loss of the map that made the future thinkable.

And yet, is it conceivable that a terrain would disappear because of the loss of the chart that mapped it? Is it really possible that the loss of the map of our longings would entail the end of our future, sound the cue for our exit from that narrative which Hegel calls World History?

It is certainly true that everywhere in this region, institutions of state are under siege; in some areas, they have virtually collapsed and exist only as instruments of extraction and thinly-disguised criminality. There is not a country in South Asia that is not struggling with insurgencies; not one that can claim to control the entirety of the territory that is allocated to them on official maps. Yet, none of this diminishes in the slightest the fact that the Indian subcontinent resides in a present that is brimming with vigour and dynamism; a moment in which thousands of young people have chosen to dedicate their lives to public service; in which voluntary organizations have flourished and multiplied, often changing people's lives dramatically for the better; in which dotcom companies thrive and skyscrapers are built; in which centuries are scored, films are made and novels are written. Even while acknowledging that our consciousness of our times is framed by the omnipresence of horror, it is impossible to deny the reality of the explosive energy that is being generated from our surroundings. This too is different from the remembered world of my childhood: in those days the present was an Elsewhere that we read about in books and magazines, and occasionally glimpsed in

<sup>10</sup> *The Country Without a Post Office*, pp. 48 – 51 (**The Country Without a Post Office**, W.W.Norton & Co., New York, 1997).

Hollywood films. Today the shock of the new hammers upon our senses everywhere in the subcontinent. History, as a brute fact of time, will not be denied: we live in it, it is all around us, lapping at our walls.

The future exists, no less than the present, and the loss of the map that charted the way to it means only that we have reached the limits of our imagining: because 'what should occur now is unremembered'. Yet, why did we imagine that what should occur here was what had occurred in a continent thousands of miles away?

In *A Fate's Brief Memoir*, Shahid writes:

*... I hate VALUES...*

*I only prize a crisp prose: it sharpens  
the dulllest life. O I've gone one. Well spread this news:*

*PAST PRESENT FUTURE: not for us those prisons –  
like the Norms! What a name! One thing we know:  
we won't be compared to our Icelandic cousins;*

*they have no manner. Our ties are zero,  
thinning with melting dew. We collapse all time –  
the privilege of those with time; we go*

*on. ..."*

This too we must recognize, that we do indeed go on; time in its ungenerous superfluity has cursed us with the privilege of persistence. But if ours is not to be the time of our Icelandic cousins, where then do we look for its patterns and its portents? Perhaps our mistake lay in looking too far afield for the maps of our future: if we look at other

more proximate histories it is evident that a clear presaging of our present was occurring next door, while we had our eyes fixed on the far horizon. In Burma, within six months of the end of colonial rule, there were sixteen insurgencies; the legally recognized government controlled no more than a few square miles of territory in the vicinity of Rangoon. To read of everyday life in Rangoon, in the nineteen-fifties is often to glimpse an eerie presaging of life as it is in many parts of the Indian sub-continent today: there too we see the ominpresence of rebellion and insurgent violence; we read of a quotidian existence that was built around the constant threat of terror. Nobody in the subcontinent took notice of these portents: they could have been happening on another planet. It was impossible – epistemologically impossible perhaps – to see any connections or continuities between a situation such as this and the future of an Indian sub-continent, that was believed to be securely lodged within the grand narrative of World History. It was similarly difficult to see any connections between India and a country such as Thailand, which had indeed never entered that narrative at all, having escaped colonial rule. Today, when Thailand has succeeded in constructing a political and social order that is the envy of many of its neighbours, it is easy to forget that through the fifties and sixties, Thailand too was a state ringed with volatile borderlands and insurgencies. But where Burma has stumbled from catastrophe to catastrophe, Thailand has succeeded in moulding a dark historical possibility into an eminently livable reality. This too is history – a history created outside the limits of an idealist history of the world, but none the worse for it.

I invoke these examples and precedents, not as alibis for passivity and certainly not as an extenuation of the terrible crimes that have been committed in south Asia in the name of history. I invoke them instead as a reminder that we are, even at this moment, even in the unforgiving instant of the present day, living in history, which means that everything we do today, everything in which we are complicit, will accrue towards our future. I invoke them as a reminder that to accept the fact of living in the reality of history – as opposed to a historical teleology – is to accept also the indeterminacy

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<sup>1</sup> 'A Fate's Brief Memoir', pp. 59-62 (*The Country Without a Post Office*, W.W.Norton & Co., New York, 1997).

of what lies ahead; to know and acknowledge that the future is truly and genuinely inscrutable; that we cannot passively await the promises of a redemptive teleology, any more than we can await the intervention of heavenly powers. There is no reassurance in history. The human past, like the present, is dark, ugly and saturated with suffering. There is nothing in it that can diminish by one iota our misgivings about the future. But our history is ours alone, it is not that of France, or Britain or the United States, or indeed that of Burma or Thailand. There is no mechanism that can be trusted to lead us securely into that golden land where the passage of time is ruled by the march of reason. This means not that we should resign ourselves to the vagaries of forces that we are powerless to influence, but precisely the opposite: that we accept the responsibility of the indeterminate; accept that the small battles of everyday life are no less meaningful than the large conflicts of state; accept, in other words, the full burden of right conduct, as applied to the challenges of our era. This was to my mind, the message and the meaning of the quietly heroic life of Neelan Tiruchelvam and it is this that makes him an exemplary figure for our time and our place. I choose to believe that it is Neelan himself who is the map of Michael Ondaatje's poem, *The Story*:

*With all the serves of history  
I cannot imagine your future...*

*I no longer guess a future .  
And do not know how we end  
nor where.*

*Though I know a story about maps, for you.*

(Michael Ondaatje, *The Story*)



