
CHECKPOINTS

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**Checkpoints I**

On our way to the North, we pause at checkpoints,
look around us, young soldiers in trim khaki
uniforms bodies stalwart, yet slender, faces fresh
with youth unmarred by memories of a three
decades war pluck green mangoes from the
laden trees, branches overhanging with clustering
fruit, teeth biting into tart flesh, reminders
of their lives in remote villages in the South,
student days, school boy memories, running
wild and free on stretches of unmined land,
swimming in swift-flowing streams far from
camouflage uniforms and deafening artillery fire
in the jungles and the deadly war zones.

This is the new King's Highway, no room for
brigands, highwaymen, guerrillas, concealed in
dense jungle cover, mines going off, ambush,
the beheadings, the amputations, the feared
terror of taking the last breath.

The Killinochchi Highway, the road straight,
pointing in the direction of our ultimate
destination, yes the wars are over,
tender lips, tongues, pucker at the tartness,
the sting of sour-sweetness, youth is too impatient
to wait for ripening, the guns for the moment
are laid aside, they go back, the young soldiers
to their campsites, taste the everyday rations
doled out, three square meals a day at any rate.
Before we resume our journey, a soldier rushes
up to our vehicle and slips in a parcel of mangoes,
the driver will take them home, he has brought
a whiff of homesickness from the South,
we will eat ripe mangoes when we reach
the North.

I think to myself, remember stories from the past,
child soldiers in uniform armed, often cannon
fodder on the battlefield, wearing cyanide lockets
round their tender throats, come upon laden
mango trees on a reconnoitring sortie,
aim at the fruit, training their guns at
the childhood-tempting trees, shoot at the
fruit till they tumble down onto the earth
handling the AK47's adroitly, strip the tree
and then proceed with the unfinished journey
to the battle front.

Will they return?

Childhood is over.

There is no return to that lost innocence.

Never.

Checkpoints are familiar to me in the South.

Years later, I am an innocent passer-by.

1983

“Halt!” was the peremptory sentry order as we drove
during the night hours past curfew
to our safe haven at the Refugee Camp.

The gun was pointed at me.

If it went off and there was fear on
both sides would there be blood splatter
on the car seats from gunshot wounds.

No. Not this time.

“Did you notice?

The gun was pointed from the wrong end
of the weapon, I was told by the police officer.

We drove on.

Choked notwithstanding with fear and terror.

1983

Faraway time.

The mangos were ripe and ready for plucking,
the pliant stalks severed by the curved iron hook
tied with strong rope to the firm pole,

reaching the branches, bringing down the dangling
fruit, one by one, picked up with care,
carried into the house, arranged on gunny sacks,
spread on the floor, waiting for their ripening
the golden nectar dripping from succulent flesh.

Our going away was hurried, unplanned.

The camps for fugitives from fear being
set up, to spell uncertain safety.

Refugees.

Crowding at the doors of a school
waiting, waiting to push themselves in.

A processional of uninvited guests
awaiting hospitality which was never
denied, the walls bursting at their seams
with the press of bodies, strangers to each other.

We too inched ourselves in,
sweat impregnated bodies,
no change of clothes at hand,
searching for space, space, space
in any classroom niche or passage.

Insect life.

Overwhelming overspill
waiting to feed on crumbs.

Evening.

All we could see were fiery flames
and orange-red, sunset-coloured flamboyants
from the windows of the classroom
before the darkness of pluming smoke
billowing in the wind, obscured our vision.

We returned home after those fugitive spells,
home, from where we had been spirited away
seeking a temporary, uncertain safety.

Opened locked doors,
the stench of rotting pervading the rooms,
not the longed for fragrance of ripened
mangoes,

blackened, splotched oozing skin,
the juices gelid,
a thickened lava flow from split gashes,
the gunny sacks damp and sodden,
the fruit all spoilt and staling,
but the seed will push our roots,

is there hope that the seed will thrust out
roots, entrenched themselves deep within
grope within the fissures of the earth to emerge,
grow into tall strong trees,

clusters of creamy mango blossoms appear
hope-buds of re-awakening.

Checkpoints II

I feel their loneliness, their isolation
they come from distant landscapes,
villages from the South of the island,

young men far from their homes
I have lived in their villages,
eaten the food cooked on their hearths
fish in the South wrapped in the pungent
sharp amalgam of ground spices, goraka,
pepper, garlic, dried chillies, curry leaf
crushed beneath the oblong pitted stone
to a fine paste, fish from the sea,
blood fish and I have eaten the food
from the hills, tender jak and manioc yams.

What do the young soldiers eat here?
They are healthy and strong, uniforms crisp,
skins smooth, hair black and silky,
I think of my students young men, women,
they look so much alike to me in their
identical garb, now that the wars are over
they dream of return to incomplete uncompleted
hopes combing the long dark oiled strands
of their hair letting it hang loose about their
shoulders....

the mango trees are laden with fruit,

hand plucking is easy, they feel they
are back in the village, before our vehicle
takes off one of the soldiers, runs up to
the closing door, slips two mangoes inside.

Ambalevi, Karathokolumban...
tasting sweet ambalevi and the bitter taste of their
own blood spilled from wounded bodies,
finding myself in a wasteland
yet I see myself as a survivor following all
those unborn strateginess for survival.

Wild creatures now have longer genealogies
while the human lineages exist in tattered scraps
of indecipherable names of men and women who had
their day, remembered in obscure maps of unequal
apportioning out of inheritance left to any vagrant
claiming the family name to falsify an identity,
deface those inheritance maps with forgeries,
all the grandeur that was bandied about in
that feudal stronghold scrawled over with
forgeries, counterfeit names inscribed upon
those documents pinholed by silver fish,
obliteration, unrecognizable to the myopic
gaze of those who have lost their undefended
birthright.

The knee-length wilderness I once viewed decades before
is now a full blown growth, thick un-impenetrable
jungle, no footpath leads me to any destination,
I know where it begins but not where it ends,

nor do I venture to plunge headlong into that
darkness, here I would not find the Burning Bush
of Moses as I part the screen of dense green leaves
but I know that there is power contained with
those secret enclaves, those rare sightings of the
deities my husband worshipped, fill those tree-
enclosed shrines with their presence, emerge
at the opportune time, those fleeting images
reflected in those transient visions hold out hope
that the land is not benighted.

JEAN ARASANAYAGAM is a Sri Lankan writer of Dutch Burgher extraction, married to a Tamil. Her writing engages with a variety of genres, and she is the author of no less than 28 poetry collections, 12 plays and 12 works of fiction. Among them are *With Flowers in their Hair*, *Apocalypse 83*, *Mind Zones*, *All is Burning*, *Dragons in the Wilderness* and *Fault Lines*. Her themes focus on gender, ethnicity, inheritance, identity, travel, diverse cultures in a plural society, colonialism, postcolonialism and her own life and times. She holds an Honorary Doctorate from Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine. Jean is also a painter.