

Water under the Bridge
(*Exegesis*: Remembering Torture: Survivor Narratives of the 1987-90 Insurgency
in Sri Lanka)

Vihanga Perera

Submitted June 2021

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy at The Australian National University

©Copyright by Vihanga Perera 2021
All Rights Reserved

Statement of Originality

I declare that this thesis represents original work and, unless acknowledged, does not contain in part or in full work by any other individual.

Vihanga Perera

03 June 2021

Acknowledgements

This thesis was written under the supervision of Prof. Rosanne Kennedy and Dr. Lucy Neave of the School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics of the Australian National University, whose guidance and suggestions were useful at every stage of my research. As a member of my panel, suggestions by Dr. Shameem Black of the School of Culture, History, and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, ANU, were valuable and instructive, especially in giving this work its final shape.

I also acknowledge the interest, support, feedback, and constant encouragement by members of the School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics at the ANU, and a warm and supportive group of friends and well-wishers who took a deep interest in my study.

To them, and others who have supported this research in innumerable ways – I extend my warm gratitude.

Contents

List of Abbreviations

Abstract

Introduction: *Water under the Bridge* and Remembering Torture of the 1987-90 Emergency.... **1**

Chapter 1: Between History and Erasure: Situating the Counter-narrative of the 1987-90

Emergency..... **13**

Chapter 2: Reading the Torture Camp and its Narrative Representation: A Theoretical

Framework..... **34**

Chapter 3: From Witnessing to Bearing History: Writing the Camp, Extreme of Torture, and

Writing as a Process of Working-through **54**

Chapter 4: Conclusion: The Conveyed History and the Path Forward..... **95**

Water under the Bridge..... **107**

Glossary to *Water under the Bridge*..... **280**

Works Cited..... **283**

List of Abbreviations

AI: Amnesty International

CJC: Criminal Justice Commission

CP: Communist Party of Sri Lanka

DDC: District development Councils

IPKF: Indian Peace Keeping Force

ISU: Independent Students Union

ITJP: International Truth and Justice Project

JDS: Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka

JVP: Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna

LTTE: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

NSSP: Nava Sama Samaja Party

PRRA: People's Revolutionary Red Army

SLFP: Sri Lanka Freedom Party

UNP: United National Party

Abstract

This study consists of a historically-informed work of fiction and a dissertation situated in the political emergency in Sri Lanka during 1987-90. The fiction is anchored in five intersectional narratives that represent the emergence of violence and its reception in two villages in the Kandy district of the Central Province. The narratives read as retrospective biographies and are built on the presences and absences in storied memories. The project is informed by Michael Rothberg's theory of 'multidirectional memory' and the emphasis Rothberg places on narrative modalities that go beyond conventional realist and anti-realist modes in narrating trauma: 'traumatic realism'.

In the dissertation, the study focuses on the representation of torture camps in published survivor narratives that emerged from the emergency in question. Focused on the work of three survivors – Victor Gunathilake, Ajith Perakum Jayasinghe, and Rohitha Munasinghe – the discussion explores the survivor narrative as a counter-history that challenges privileged partial narratives of pro-establishment literature. While the study explores the processes through which victims of torture work-through their incarceration experiences to foster a critical balance to narrate past trauma, it also investigates the significance of such narratives in post-conflict restoration.

Introduction:

***Water under the Bridge* and Remembering Torture of the 1987-90 Emergency**

This project consists of a work of fiction and a dissertation that share an interest in the representation of the 1987-90 political emergency in Sri Lanka. Titled *Water under the Bridge*, the creative work consists of five connected narratives written as the memories of five persons who experienced the emergency as it reached two villages in the Kandy district in 1988 and 1989. The main events take place in Dodanwala and Halloluwa, which are two adjacent villages about 5 kilometres from Kandy and are set apart by the Mahaweli river. The narrators look back on the past conflict as individuals who – having moved on with their lives – reconstruct the different ways in which the violence they witnessed had an impact on their pasts. As a common premise, both the novel and dissertation draw on political torture and enforced disappearance by the state military. The fiction reflects on the abduction, the incarceration, the disappearance of young people, and the display of burnt bodies in public places as a way of spreading terror among the community. As an attempt to capture the sense of uncertainty such violent incidents brought to the lives of ordinary people, I have embedded these events in retrospective narrations. The dissertation of this project precedes the creative work and was born out of a series of questions I had in relation to incarcerated women and men: what effect does the process of witnessing have for the broader context of writing history? What challenges, especially relating to credibility and legitimacy, do torture camp survivors face as they emerge from their traumatic past and begin to narrate their stories? For me, these were compelling questions in a context where torture and death in military custody continue to be a debated topic in Sri Lankan law enforcement.

In Sri Lanka, torture was widely used as a means of interrogation during three conflicts which occurred on a national scale: the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) led

insurrections in 1971 and 1987-90, and the Sri Lankan state's civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from 1983-2009. Particularly, in the state's counter-attack of the JVP during the 1987-90 emergency, incarceration and torture constituted a vital link of the extra-judicial network the state deployed. My present investigation is anchored on narratives of torture camp survivors during the 1987-90 violence where a conventionally-estimated 40,000 to 60,000 persons – most of them JVP activists, sympathizers, and ordinary women and men – were killed, and where most of the killings were carried out by pro-state actors in state-sanctioned facilities of torture. The stories and subjectivities of these victims have been erased from conventional history while their bodies have often been destroyed as a way of eradicating evidence of a violent past. In the popular narrative, the violent fates of these people have been reduced to a faceless number or a nameless mass of dead bodies. My attention was drawn to the storied memories of persons who survived the 1987-90 torture camp and developed the courage and commitment to narrate their experiences. At one level, I saw these narratives as a voice that represented a generation that was violently repressed by the state military. At yet another level, these survivor narratives presented to me a study in the emergence of a counter-history. The nucleus of my dissertation reconciles these two arcs. It is on the one hand a political argument that is focused on representation and claiming a history that is violently suppressed. On the other hand, my thesis is a close investigation of the procedure by which that history is brought on: the transition from survivor to writer whose witnessing is conveyed as an evidence-based written narrative.

The Emergency of 1987-90 and the Question of Representation

Unlike the JVP insurrection of 1971 and the Sri Lankan civil war, the survivor stories of the torture camps during the 1987-90 emergency remain insufficiently explored. In

particular, their significance as narratives that convey a dislocated history has not been sufficiently recognised or investigated. Even in everyday reference, the emergency is often called the “JVP violence of 1987-90”, or the “Second JVP rebellion”. These referents, in both academic and journalistic literature and the common idiom, indicate the normalization of the violence as being authored by the JVP, or of the JVP having to take greater responsibility for the events that took place. This partial referent, I propose, is a symptom of how the violence has been written into the dominant narrative and everyday use: as a political upheaval for which the rebel party – which was totally defeated at the end – is marked as culpable, and as the responsible agent. It is a reference that undermines a complex political history of over a decade in which the state and the JVP were increasingly polarized as political antagonists: a history of which I provide an overview in Chapter One. As a result of this growing hostility the Jayewardene UNP government at the time banned the JVP in 1983, forcing it to retreat underground. The JVP resurgence in July 1987 coincided with the signing of the India-Sri Lanka Accord in July that year,¹ on which the JVP capitalized to launch a wave of mass protests and demonstrations against the government (Wickremaretna 188-193). The Accord was signed between the two neighbouring countries as a commitment to finding solutions to the political grievances of the ethnic Tamils in the north and the east through broad power devolution. The Accord also made provisions to station in the north and east an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to assist the transition: a move which the JVP determined as a case of “Indian expansionism” in Sri Lanka (Wickremaretna 173, 190-191). The initial protests spiralled into determined actions such as nation-wide shutdowns and disruptions to civic life. Through the shockwaves these agitations created, the JVP managed to gradually transform popular dissent into armed insurrection. Beginning as early as the second half of 1987,

¹ The Accord was signed between the two countries as a commitment to finding solutions to the political grievances of the ethnic Tamils in the north and the east through broad power devolution. The Accord also made provisions to station in the north and east an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to assist the transition. The JVP’s mobilization narrative through the 1980s often focused on the idea of ‘Indian Expansionism’. The Accord, in their narrative, was the realization of an Indian imperial agenda.

violent incidents that included the assassination of government politicians, high-ranking public servants, and persons who were marked as JVP opponents took place. In spite of several attempts to bring the rebels to the negotiations table, the violence continued through 1988 and 1989.

Amidst these complex developments, the torture camp emerged as a crucial space in Sri Lankan realpolitik. In the second half of 1989, the state managed to gain an advantage as it intensified operations that resulted in the arrest and killing of many rebel functionaries and sympathizers. Round ups, sudden sieges, and kidnappings of men and women suspected of being connected to the JVP became frequent. Extraordinary laws and emergency regulations which, up till then, had been used to counteract Tamil militant organizations in the Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka extended to oversee the day-to-day life in the south.² In 1988 and 1989, the use of paramilitary groups – private auxiliaries that operated under political patronage, and included police and military personnel operating in plain clothes, strongmen of politicians, and opponents of the JVP – increased (Watkins 219). Often connected with such camps, the word “disappeared”, to this day, has a specific idiomatic meaning that is tied up to extra-judicial military and paramilitary operations in which civilians/suspects were kidnapped, killed and were disposed under unknown conditions (de Alwis 380), or where dead bodies were left in public places to “instil fear and to command acquiescence or compliance” (Bush 106). This is a manoeuvre that was used by the state in the 1987-90 counter-insurgency operations as well as in Sri Lanka’s north and east during and after the civil war.

The survivor narratives central to my study emerge from this ruptured social and cultural space: a troubled domain where witnessing and documenting are ways through which

² In this dissertation, I use the word ‘south’ (of Sri Lanka) in its idiomatic sense: to refer to the majority ethnic Sinhalese districts of the country.

survivors attempt to redeem a past that has been denied to them, and where they challenge a version of history that doesn't recognize their suffering. Estimates of the number of deaths during the two and a half years of the insurrection remain incomplete. A high number of forced disappearances where bodies were not recovered has made conclusive tabulations even more challenging. The estimations of deaths during the conflict years vary between 30,000 (Samaranayake 117), 40,000 (Watkins 220) and – as cited earlier – as 40,000-60,000 (Senaratne 103; Wickremereetna 15). In 1994, Amnesty International tabled a report in which they claimed “tens of thousands” had been killed or disappeared between 1987 and 1991. Amnesty International outlined eighteen representational cases in which justice for victims and families had either been delayed or denied. Assessing the progress made on the eighteen cases, a second report in 2005 highlighted that during the intervening fifteen years only two cases had resulted in convictions. Amnesty International noted that, since 1991, there have been nine commissions of inquiry appointed by the Sri Lankan state to investigate forced disappearances in the country (“Twenty Years of Make-Believe” 10) out of which – evidence notwithstanding – only a few prosecutions had been carried out for the violation of human rights. “Some of the investigations seemed to have been set up”, AI concluded, “in order to stem public outcry rather than with the intention of bringing those responsible to justice” (11).

I table these observations at the outset to frame the practical realities against which the victims of state violence and their families have had to carry on with their lives and their ongoing quests for justice in Sri Lanka. In most cases legal redress has been slowed or denied, and there has been no official acknowledgment or apparatus set up to take responsibility for the state's shared role in the violence. Simultaneously, the violence resulted in grave social, economic and cultural complications such as social stigma, loss of

breadwinners, economic breakdown, and personal and collective trauma across a broad spectrum.

In Sri Lankan literary scholarship survivor narratives of the 1987-90 emergency are marginalised. By contrast, I argue that survivor narratives of political prisoners should be treated as “literature proper” and – to facilitate reconciliation in a post-conflict world – should be circulated in public discourse. Scholarship that engages the 1987-90 violence has traditionally been studied by researchers in social science disciplines including sociology (Perera S. 1998, Thomson-Senanayake 2014, Watkins 2005), cultural anthropology (Moore 1993; Perera, S. 2016), and political science (Hoole 2001; Hughes 2013, Hyndman 1988; Samaranayake 1999; Venugopal 2010). Critics of global literary studies often explore narrative representations of the 1987-90 emergency through creative Anglophone literature that is available in the English-speaking world (Karunatilaka 2020; Ondaatje 2000), but they rarely demonstrate knowledge of survivor experiences drawn from locally-published narratives. The lack of translations (into English) of the emergency’s witnessing has also prevented these narratives reaching a trans-national space. Additionally, the protracted war in the Sri Lankan north and east – a conflict that had a pronounced ethno-nationalist dimension to it – has arguably taken the focus off the 1987-90 violence, which is a struggle largely in the country’s Sinhalese-speaking (or “southern”) areas. With fields such as memory studies and trauma studies still emerging in Sri Lanka, the country’s literary scholarship has so far failed to imaginatively appreciate the potential contribution of storied memories of survivors. While appreciating these limitations, my dissertation argues that a Sri Lankan case study has much to contribute to the global scholarship of memories of torture, especially as these narratives emerge from a narrative space that has been dominated, to date, by pro-state representations.

The dissertation is anchored in a textual and literary analysis of the torture camp experience in three published survivor narratives: Victor Gunathilake's *71-89 Mathakayan*, Ajith Perakum Jayasinghe's *K-Point*, and Rohitha Munasinghe's *Eliyakandha Wadha Kandhawura*. All three books have been written and published in Sinhalese. In incorporating them into my study, I use my own translations of relevant passages and quotations from the original texts. These survivor narratives contribute to a tradition of literature from comparable sites of violence which include political emergencies in countries such as Argentina, Chile, and narratives by prisoners of the United States-led 'Global War on Terror'. During the eight year military rule in Argentina (1976-1983), over 15,000 people are estimated to have been killed or disappeared (Gregory and Timerman 63), whose survivors and witnesses have "incorporated their traumas into [narratives of the] here and the now" (Roekel 539). This is exemplified in works such as Jacobo Timerman's *Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number* (1981), Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival* (1998), and *God's Assassins: State Terrorism in Argentina in the 1970* (1999) by Patricia and William Marchak. Truth commission findings in Chile present a comparable case study where, under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, at least 2,279 people are believed to have been killed (Flightner 19). The harrowing experiences of witnesses and survivors of the violence in camps are represented in works such as Luz Arce's *The Inferno: A Story of Terror and Survival in Chile* (2004) and Sergio Bitnar's *Prisoner of Pinochet: My Year in a Chilean Concentration Camp* (2017). More recently, work emerging from the Global War camp such as the high security detention facility in Guantanamo Bay (Kuran 2008; Slahi 2015) draw attention to the precarious conditions under which torture continues to be practiced in the twenty first century.

The dissertation is developed over four chapters. The first chapter provides an historical overview of the political circumstances that led to the emergency in 1987. In particular, it draws on developments in Sri Lanka's political sphere during the decade from 1977 to 1987 – the term of the Jayewardene UNP government – which coincided with the JVP's return to mainstream politics in 1978, its regrouping as a political movement, and its proscription by the state in 1983. This chapter also traces the pro-establishment narrative of the 1987-90 emergency which emerged in the immediate aftermath of the conflict through writers like A.C. Alles, C.A. Chandraprema, and Rohan Gunaratne: writers of the dominant history of the emergency who, I argue, draw privileged conclusions to the advantage of the state.

Challenging these partial conclusions by pro-state writers, survivors of torture camps – Gunathilake, Jayasinghe, and Munasinghe included – began to contribute to a new narrative that has steadily risen from the late-1990s. In the second chapter I assemble a theoretical frame, informed by memory and trauma studies scholarship, which I use to investigate and read the camp as a site and torture as a process. The framework provides me a conceptual map to analyse the writing of Gunathilake, Jayasinghe, and Munasinghe in the third chapter; I argue that their narratives bear the impetus of counter-history while representing the voice of marginalized victims. The fourth chapter concludes the dissertation by investigating how survivor narratives can contribute to dialogues in post-conflict justice and social restoration. Drawing on the role of narrative in social healing, I argue that these narratives have the power to transform attitudes and aspirations and to empower working-through in a post-conflict world, and as such, constitute a vital (or urgent) body of literature that merits the attention of the public and of critics. The concluding chapter also signals pathways for further research by developing maps that incorporate memories from multiple conflict sites in

modern Sri Lanka and in advocating the importance of circulating such narratives in public discourse.

Water under the Bridge

A significant part of my project constitutes a historically-informed series of narratives set in two villages in Kandy against the violent backdrop of the 1987-90 emergency. The stories are informed by historical detail, literature on the insurrection (which includes academic resources, commentaries, memoirs, newspaper articles, and anecdotal oral lore), interviews, and audio-visual sources such as YouTube videos. Thirty years later, as the narrators I create look back on incidents from the past, various gaps, erasures, and uncertainties appear in what they tend to remember: memory-cavities which I have attempted to weave into the narratives. Formally, *Water under the Bridge* was crafted to demonstrate a memory map which – as generated by what different people in a community remember – allows for working-through by inviting the re-imagination of a traumatic past. Like witnesses who convey the hidden history of a shared space such as a torture camp, the narrators in *Water under the Bridge* represent a place, a time and a particular political climate. While the narratives testify to a local history that is not included in the grand narratives of the conflict, the collective memory these narrators convey is comparable and verifiable by the memories of compatriots.

In *Water under the Bridge*, I imagine the effect of community memory created by a diverse group who share impressions of a collective experience: an “inclusive renarration of the history of memory” (Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* 21) where “divergent memories... converge” and open up new opportunities (311). Arranged as reinforcements of each other, I hoped to energize the stories within a multi-directional map: a framing principle

I derived from Michael Rothberg's theory of 'multidirectional memory' which – as will be discussed in the second chapter – is key to the theoretical foundation of this project as a whole.

My approach in shaping the narratives was closely informed by theorizations of 'working-through' to which critics such as Saul Friedlander and Dominick LaCapra have contributed. In particular, Friedlander's assertion of two "contradictory moves" – a dialectic of "protective numbing" and a "disruptive emotion" (Friedlander 51) – that shadows narratives of trauma challenged my own reading of the characters I developed through several draft-stages. Focusing on the spectrum between 'objective distancing' and 'subjective urgency', Friedlander cautions the reader against a representation that is too directed towards one or the other of the above extremes while arguing that, wherever possible, an "allowance for a measure of balance" between the two should be maintained (Friedlander 51). In *Water under the Bridge* my objective was to complicate the distinction Friedlander makes which – for discussion purposes – one often compartmentalizes into defined territories. Working over several drafts, I experimented within a range of possible impressions to articulate the tentative and the vulnerable territories in memory, even when they were thought-through and, over time, arranged into rehearsed patterns.

Among the factors which shaped my understanding of violence and the prevailing uncertainty at the community-level during the 1987-90 period were interviews I conducted with a selected group of former residents of Dondanwala, Halloluwa and the neighbouring Anniewatte. I carried out these interviews in 2018 and 2019 as open-ended discussions under the approval of the Ethics Committee of the Australian National University. Having lived part of my childhood in an adjacent neighbourhood to the villages featured in the narrative, I already carried a fragmented memory of the day-to-day disruptions caused by strikes and demonstrations which – as fleeting moments – were carved into memory pictures of early

childhood. Stories that travelled through word-of-mouth in those formative years further shaped some of my childhood impressions. The memories and comments shared with me by the interviewees fostered a map of recollections and impressions to which my own fragmented remembrances could be annexed, opening new insights for me. I have attempted to weave the different vantage points of characters I created as they reflect on the same event from varying subject positions.

At strategic points, *Water under the Bridge* connects with historically-verifiable events such as student movement activism in Sri Lanka – a crucial arena from which both the JVP and pro-state paramilitary groups drew support – during the 1980s. It also characterizes historical figures such as student leader Daya Pathirana and social activist Nandana Marasinghe, both of whom were killed by the JVP in 1986 and 1988. My understanding of the university political scene during the late-1980s was further broadened by commentaries and memoirs set during that time. These included Dharman Wickremaretna's *Ja.Vi.Pe Deveni Kaerella* and Prins Gunasekara's *A Lost Generation: Sri Lanka In Crisis: The Untold Story* which closely reference the role of student politics in Sri Lanka during the mid-to-late 1980s. *Daya Pathirana*, co-authored by Premakumara de Silva et al. to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the death of student leader Daya Pathirana, as well as Anoma Janadaree's memoir *Punaruikthi*, offered vivid descriptions of university political life in the mid-1980s as experienced and witnessed by insiders of student political movements. In addition, I explored news archives, political discussions and commentaries in traditional and new media on the 1987-90 emergency to deepen my understanding of the climate of activism during different stages of the conflict.

At a later stage of the writing, I experimented with placing the witness narratives amidst a host of personal and public archival forms including (fictional) newspaper reports, letters, diary entries, and social media posts. This play, at a fundamental level, was an

improvisation to further experiment with a non-linear, multi-modal frame that accommodated evidence and witnessing of an unconventional range. Its original inspiration was partly derived from photographer Stephen Champion's work *Sri Lanka: War Stories* where Champion overrides the conventional demand of chronology, theme, and linear collaboration in his presentation of a series of photographs from two conflict sites. This adoption helped me to visualize the arrangement of memory outside a realist framework that was reliant on teleology and to challenge myself in presenting five distinct voices, different ways of remembering, and the peculiarities of the ways in which their memories were arranged within one overarching frame.

Chapter 1

Between History and Erasure: Situating the Counter-narrative of the 1987-90

Emergency

The violence that led to the 1987-90 emergency and the complex political situation that resulted from it were brought about by a series of developments in Sri Lanka's political sphere, starting in 1978, for about a decade. It is important to understand these circumstances for an all-round view of the JVP's resurgence as a political revolutionary and the state's oppressive drive against it. In the first movement of the chapter, I trace the origins of the JVP and outline key events that led to its anti-state activism in 1987. In its second part, against the backdrop of the state's victorious war, the chapter investigates the ownership of narrative in the immediate post-conflict moment where state-sanctioned authorship dictated the writing of 1987-90 as a phenomenon. As such, I explore how the extra-judicial impunity that prevailed in Sri Lankan realpolitik at the time was given narrative form by writers with a pronounced bias against the JVP which resulted in the story of the victimized being marginalized and suppressed.

These were the conditions that prevailed against which a counter-narrative that represented the voice, struggles, and the fate of victims emerged through the 1990s: a voice of protest that challenged the partial and privileged conclusions that were drawn to the advantage of the state. In the third movement of this chapter, I identify and frame the survivors' counter-narrative as a key moment in the representation of the 1987-90 emergency and provide an overview of the expansion of such narratives in the immediate post-conflict decade (1991-2000). This discussion will also provide a port of departure in analysing the representations of the torture camp by selected writers whose work I discuss in chapter three.

An Overview of the JVP in Sri Lankan Politics Up to the 1987-90 Emergency³

As a political movement, the origins of the JVP can be traced back to 1965 when, as a result of the ideological split within the Communist party of Sri Lanka, a radical youth group broke away as an independent splinter (Wickramasinghe 232; Piyadasa 106). This initiative was led by Don Nandasiri 'Rohana' Wijeweera who gradually mobilized a group around him as an alternative to the communist Old Left. Basing its foundation on Marxist-Leninist and Maoist revolutionary principles, the movement – which, up till 1970 was known simply as the 'Vyapaaraya' (or, 'The Movement') – gained popularity among a predominantly rural and suburban sympathy base. On the run up to its first attempted coup to seize state power in 1971, the JVP was called a "youth rebellion" (Keerawella 4, 49), a "leftist challenge of the younger radical elements" (Keerawella 48), and a movement against social inequality. Its largely Sinhalese composition of cadre included unemployed youth, students, Buddhist clerics, rural peasants, low-rank employees in the state sector, and – to a lesser degree – the urban working class.

While the JVP organized itself the government, based on intelligence reports, began counter-operations in 1970 in which a large number of JVP cadres and sympathizers were arrested. Through 1970 and the first quarter of 1971 sympathizers were hunted and arrested in the hundreds which – according to the common interpretation of the JVP – hastened them to retaliate. On 5 April 1971, the JVP launched an abortive sudden uprising to capture state power through coordinated nationwide attacks which, within the next three months or so, was completely and violently suppressed by the state. Estimates of persons killed during the 1971 emergency vary between 5,000 (Wickremereetna 15, 24), 5000-10,000 (Senaratne 103) and

³ This overview outlines the immediate political and social context where the emergency of 1987-90 took place. It is presented to signal at crucial developments in the country on the run up to the emergency. I do not attempt a critique of the larger regional and global politics of the time as they fall outside the scope and approach of this dissertation.

8000-10,000 (Thomson-Senanayake 36). In its aftermath, the SLFP-led United Front coalition government set up a special Criminal Justice Commission which tried the suspects of the uprising. At the conclusion of the proceedings charges were filed against 41 leaders who were presented sentences from two years to life. Wijeweera, the 11th accused in the trial, was handed a life sentence for high conspiracy. The CJC inquest is a landmark in Sri Lanka's modern history of political violence for being the only instance where a legal hearing was attempted by the state at the end of a nationwide conflict event. It contrasts with the state's responses to the insurgency of 1987-90 and the military crushing of the Tamil liberation movement in 2009. In both instances, the state forewent a legal approach or an inquiry into 'truth establishment'.

Following the SLFPs defeat in the 1977 election, the elected UNP government under JR Jayewardene effected legislation to revoke the Criminal Justice Commission sentences. This resulted in the release of the JVP leadership and a reorganization of the party at the local and national levels. Though party restructuring was already underway from as early as 1976 through party members who – after serving shorter sentences – had been periodically freed, the release of Wijeweera in 1977 created an enthusiasm as the JVP eagerly sought a place within the democratic stream. By 1978 the JVP had re-launched its national programme with renewed energy (Senaratne 106). By then, a core group of its 1971 frontline had defected and organized themselves as new political groups, while yet others had retired from politics altogether. Those remaining loyal to the party, along with a new generation of activists, fuelled the reformed JVP at all levels. Between 1978 and 1983, the JVP contested District Development Council (DDC) elections – a form of local governments at the time – in select electorates, as well as in the country's inaugural Presidential Election in 1982 in which Wijeweera was fielded as the JVP's candidate (Gunasekara 109; Senaratne 109). Wijeweera polled 4% of the overall vote and was placed third after the two leading candidates, J.R.

Jayewardene (UNP) and Hector Kobbekaduwa (SLFP). The JVP had, however, won a decisive victory among the Leftist parties (Gunasekara 129; Wickremereetna 55-56) to consolidate its place as the forerunner of a New Left.

In the year following the election, developments led to tensions between the UNP and the JVP. In 1983, these frictions spilled over and resulted in a controversial proscription of the JVP by the government which forced it to retreat underground. The banning of the party and the persecution of its members has often been considered as a main cause which drove the JVP back to the path of armed revolution. Therefore, an understanding of the ground situation between 1982 and 1987, and the changing political tides of that time, is crucial for understanding the violent events that unfolded between 1988 and 1990. In spite of its early promise of economic and social stability, the Jayewardene UNP government (1977-1988) deteriorated into an authoritarian regime of corruption, nepotism, intolerance, and violence. Beginning in 1980, the government faced several well-organized trade union actions, student strikes, and mass protests to which it responded without compromise. For instance, reacting to a collective trade union strike in July 1980, the government expelled 40,000 workers from work: an unprecedented incident in Sri Lankan history (Wickremereetna 61-66). Riots targeting the minority Tamil community in 1983 (Hyndman 116-128; Piyadasa 43-53) were led by mobs of ground-level UNP supporters operating under the knowledge of powerful ministers. Jayewardene, in 1982, used the 5/6 parliamentary majority he had in the house, and the executive powers invested in him as President through a new constitution introduced in 1978, to prolong the life of parliament by five years. The unlikely majority in the house was used to pass legislation to strategically weaken his opposition. For instance, backed by the strength of the house, Jayewardene brought legislation that revoked Sirima Bandaranaike – his main counterpart – of her civic rights for a period of seven years under corruption charges. This provided Jayewardene with an advantage when he recontested the presidential

election in 1982. Being re-elected for a further six years, he then proposed to prolong the life of Parliament through a referendum (referred to above) which was won though a poll marked with incidents of violence, intimidation, and rigging (Gunasekara 154-157). In all, critics of Jayewardene's tenure readily characterize the decade leading up to the 1987 emergency as a "dark age" in Sri Lankan politics (Gunasekara 175-180).

The JVP's rise after 1977 was co-incidental to emergent militarism in the majority-Tamil northern and eastern districts of the country. In the north and east, a generation of youth (1956-1976) had grown embittered and frustrated over twenty years of failed negotiations between the moderate Tamil leadership and the state in finding fruitful solutions to their social, political and cultural grievances. After independence, the Tamil-speaking minority felt alienated and excluded from government and policy-making in which they identified a Sinhala bias, favouring the new nation's ethnic majority. In 1956, a nationalist election pledge resulted in the National Languages Act of 1956 through which Sinhala (only) was made the language of state. Between 1957 and 1976, the Tamil political leadership lobbied for equal language status through failed negotiations with successive government leaders. These discussions, headed by the moderate Tamil leaders of the Sri Lanka Federal Party, were carried out within a democratic frame. While the state, in 1958 and 1965, was amenable to the key demands of language equality, the negotiations fell through in the face of growing pressure from hardliner Sinhala-nationalist forces (Wickremaretna 71). By the 1970s, the north had lost faith in political dialogue and an emergent militant tendency was visible. Radical groups emerged in pockets through the 1970s. In 1976, a conference was held in Vaddukoddai in which the idea of a 'separate sovereign state' was tabled and accepted in principle. In spite of its place in Tamil-nationalist consciousness and rhetoric, the concept of a sovereign Tamil homeland became a part of the public psyche only through the radical youth groups in the mid-1970s (Wickremaretna 70). The LTTE first emerged in 1972

as the Tamil New Tigers (TNT) and – amongst a host of other organizations – later developed as the strongest uncompromising force in this armed struggle for a ‘homeland’ anchored on self-determination.⁴

In the political ideology it adopted in the 1980s, the JVP was opposed to Tamil self-determination in the north and east, and was suspicious of India as a divisive agent who intended to exercise control over Sri Lankan affairs. Throughout the 1980s, the JVP political programme paid close attention to the theme of Indian expansionism which was included as a main lecture in its indoctrination programme for new recruits. However, in 1983, on the eve of the Black July pogrom, there was within the JVP a tendency (notably promoted by Lionel Bopage, the party’s secretary at the time) that encouraged amelioration with the Tamil struggle. The dominant view of the party remained against that position.

Following the 1983 pogrom, the government imposed proscriptions on three Leftist political parties (inclusive of the JVP) on charges of being complicit in the violence (Thomson-Senanayake 86-87; Wickremaretna 77). While the ban on the other two parties – the Sri Lanka Communist Party (CP) and Nawa Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) – was subsequently lifted, the persecution of the JVP continued unabated. In his analysis of political violence in Sri Lanka, Jagath P. Senaratne places the banning of the JVP by the government in context by highlighting the impact it had on the internal dialogues of the party. According to Senaratne, as a result of the proscription, “the position of the moderates became untenable, and they left the movement through resignation and expulsions” which, in consequence, “strengthened the extremist wing” (Senaratne 111). These moderates included persons like Bopage who, tempered by their 1971 experience, were “loath to begin another cycle of self-

⁴ During the Jayewardene UNP government organized attacks on Tamils were carried out in 1977, 1981 and 1983. Mobs used in these attacks had the patronage of government ministers (Wickremaretna 72, Piyadasa 49). In 1981, the prestigious Jaffna Library with 90,000-odd rare documents and books was burnt by a mob which included police and military (Wickremaretna 72). In July 1983, in rioting in Colombo and other places of the country Tamil property and businesses were attacked. An estimated 1500 (Wickremaretna 70) to 2000 (Uthayakumaran 8) civilians were killed.

destructive and impetuous armed action”, and for whom the “trauma of the 1971 insurrection” was relatable (Senaratne 111). Between the ban in 1983 and its ‘return’ in July 1987, the JVP organized itself as an underground movement and used its network of fronts (such as trade and student unions) to maintain the ground.

In July 1987, India and Sri Lanka signed a political accord⁵ – commonly referred to as the Indo-Lanka Accord – which was partly aimed at working towards a solution to the question of Tamil alienation through a programme of power devolution. The most urgent detail of the accord was the devolution of power to the regional base by setting up a system of local government. The accord also facilitated an Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) in the north and east of Sri Lanka to oversee this transition and to disarm rebels. This ‘Indian intervention’ fulfilled the JVP’s political prophecy of Indian expansionism. Along with popular disenchantment for Indian intervention – which was also seen in both expressive and muffled dissent by politicians notwithstanding party affiliations – the JVP capitalized on the atmosphere to mobilize the masses against the government.

Though its preparations for a possible future engagement with the state covered the 1984-1986 period, the emergence of the JVP’s second insurrection has conventionally been traced to the aftermath of the Indo-Lanka Accord which was signed in July 1987. Emerging in the first instance as a series of mass protests, demonstrations, and shutdowns (hartals), in the next two and a half years, the anti-government movement evolved into a protracted conflict with high casualties and waves of unprecedented terror. In 1987 and 1988, the advantage of the struggle was equally shared by the rebels and the state, where the former allegedly received the tacit support of some members within the government, the rural masses, and members of the military and police. However, the state gained an upper hand in the counter-insurgency operations in 1989, and by early-1990 – by which time the frontline

⁵ See, Footnote 1

leadership of the JVP had already been destroyed – the rebel-led violence had begun to recede.

As outlined earlier, the number of deaths during the two and a half year emergency is estimated to be between 40,000 and 60,000. This estimate is generally adopted by independent writers even though, from an establishment line, writers such as A.C Alles suggests this number to be no more than about 12,000 deaths (Alles 288). According to journalist Dharman Wickremaretna – who, in the past three decades, has written extensively on the violence in question – the casualties of the emergency include no less than 6661 persons killed by the JVP (Wickremaretna 223). By subtraction, this suggests between 33,340 and 53,340 people were killed by pro-state actors in the two and a half period of the violence. For instance, the People’s Revolutionary Red Army (PRRA) – a prominent pro-government ‘vigilante group’ – is alleged to have carried out 1222 killings, to have assisted the military in running torture camps, and collaborated in apprehending and interrogating suspect rebels (Wickremaretna 236).

In a report issued in 1993, Amnesty International commented extensively on Sri Lanka’s extra-judicial mechanisms in counter-insurgency and, in addition to legal exception introduced by the state, to the culture of impunity that prevailed. The report outlines the extent of the emergency regulations that were in place during the time, including how they were used to manufacture the ground conditions to carry out detention, killing, and the disposal of bodies. The emergency regulations are noted to “give the security forces wide powers to arrest suspected opponents of the government and detain them incommunicado and without charge or trial for long periods” which encouraged “a ready context for death in custody, disappearance and torture” (Amnesty International, “Sri Lanka: Extra Judicial Executions”). During the period, Emergency Regulations were used to enable security forces to dispose of bodies without post-mortem or inquest (Amnesty International, “Sri Lanka:

extra Judicial Executions”). While acknowledging the large number of deaths and forced disappearances, Amnesty International noted how a “thorough documentation of the full number of individual cases has... proved impossible” (Amnesty International, “Sri Lanka: extra Judicial Executions”).

In 1994, three geographically-focused commissions were set up by the People’s Alliance (PA) government (who succeeded the UNP into office in 1993) to inquire into enforced disappearances in the Southern, Central and North Western provinces. One of the PA’s main election pledges was to provide redress and justice to those who were victims of state persecution. In 1997, an additional commission was set up to probe other outstanding cases. The three commissions received 27,526 complaints and inquired into 16,742 disappearances. A further 16,305 complaints were received by the commission set up in 1997 (Thomson-Senanayake 111). The conclusions of the Southern Commission suggested that a “shadow state” was established and maintained through “an unofficial political command” in which police and military men were used by the governing party to “pursue personal and political interests” (quoted in Thomson-Senanayake 111-112) and “were directed to carry out disappearances and killings” by the political elite (111). Incorporating this conclusion to her discussion of political disappearances in Sri Lanka, Thomson-Senanayake concedes that the UNP government set in place “an alternative political apparatus” in order to “pursue personal and political interests by undemocratic and illegitimate means” (Thomson-Senanayake 111-112).

The efficient functioning of this ‘shadow state’ was energized by the Indemnity (Amendment) Act of 1988 that absolved the police and military from legal accountability which, in turn, provided them “the guarantee required... to carry out the President’s wishes with impunity” (Thomson-Senanayake 113). Thomson-Senanayake’s analysis is anchored on the above-introduced parallel political apparatus and its unconventional approach in

countering rebellion, which included the use of an extensive and well-coordinated network of safe-houses as facilities of torture. Quoting the findings of the Southern Commission, Thomson-Senanayake draws attention to the establishment of unofficial detention facilities near army camps and police stations as being widespread while “death squads and paramilitary groups comprising law enforcement officials were promised rapid promotions through the official ranks” (Thomson-Senanayake 113). Creating an exception to the normal practice, these personnel were promised “large monetary rewards in contravention of the Police Ordinance” (113).

The Pro-State Narrative of the Conflict

The emergence of violence between 1987 and 1990 gave reason and justification for the state’s widespread deployment of extraordinary laws and emergency regulations. The complex nature of the conflict, consisting of both legally-recognized and shadow militaries, auxiliary groups, and an enigmatic rebel movement, created widespread uncertainty and fear. For the greater part of the conflict the general public, the government, and rebel sympathizers over-estimated the rebels’ strength (Gunasekara 522). When the insurgency was totally suppressed and the JVP leadership was destroyed in 1990, the status quo of power was decisively restored in favour of the UNP government. In the immediate post-conflict moment three works that purported to investigate and analyse the insurrection – to this day, often considered key texts in referencing the conflict – were published. In order of publication, A.C. Alles’ *JVP: 1969-1989* (1990), Rohan Gunaratna’s *Sri Lanka, A Lost Revolution? The Inside Story of the J.V.P* (1990), and C.A Chandraprema’s *The Years of Terror: The J.V.P Insurrection* (1991) are widely considered to be authoritative documents while at least two of

the writers – Gunaratna and Chandraprema – reveal what they claim to be the ‘inside story’ of the insurrection. Often, the three texts mutually enforce one another through cross-reference and corroboration (Alles 318, 359; Chandraprema 33).

Widely-circulated and cited and available in libraries across Sri Lanka, the accounts by Alles, Chandraprema, and Gunaratna are considered key reference sources in studies of the emergency. Written in English, they also circulate transnationally, which has contributed to the 1987-90 emergency being represented through a pro-state lens. For instance, when I commenced my research at the Australian National University, Chandraprema and Gunaratna’s books were among the limited selection of texts on the conflict in question in the university library, while there were no counter-narratives. The domination of such an academic space - a central hub in global knowledge exchange - by one kind of (pro-state) narrative is symptomatic of the reach of a state-sanctioned document written in English. It also indicates the urgent need to produce and circulate survivor stories – preferably in English, accessible to a global audience.

Of the three writers, Alles, a reputed former judge and a member of the Criminal Justice Commission bench which inquired into the 1971 uprising, shows a close interest in both the first and second insurgencies by the JVP. In 1975, Alles published a book on the 1971 insurgency into which he brought insights from his experience as a member of the CJC inquest. He has also authored a series of books based on famous and sensational murder trials which were circulated for a popular readership. At many levels, Alles’ narrative of the 1987-90 violence is written as an extension (or a supplement) to his assessment of the First Insurrection which, at many levels, is a comprehensive analysis. In comparison, the narrative relating to incidents between 1987 and 1989 read as a hastily-composed addendum. When *JVP: 1969-1989* was published in 1990 by Lake House Investments, a state-owned company, Alles, having retired from a long career in the judiciary, was 79 years old.

Rohan Gunaratna, the author of *Sri Lanka: A Lost Revolution?*, currently lives in Singapore and is quoted in media as a commentator and analyst on terrorism. In 1990, when his ‘inside story’ of the 1987-90 conflict was published, Gunaratna was a youth of 29 and – as some of the incidents mentioned in his book suggest – was in a position (or with a network) that gave him access to sensitive information not publicly available.⁶ Though his position is not explicitly stated, by the time Gunaratna published *Sri Lanka: A Lost Revolution?* through the Institute of Fundamental Studies, a research organization, he writes with the confidence of one who has been given exposure to classified information connected with the state’s counter-insurgency operations.

The third main writer of the pro-state line is C.A. Chandraprema, the author of *The Years of Terror: The J.V.P Insurrection*, who is in 2021 Sri Lanka’s permanent representative to the United Nations in Geneva. His appointment in January 2020, by the government, stirred protest from human rights activists. The International Truth and Justice Project (ITJP) and Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka (JDS) – a working group of exiled Sri Lankan journalists – petitioned Swiss authorities to deny Chandraprema accreditation on the grounds of his being connected to the vigilante group the People’s Revolutionary Red army (PRRA) in the late-1980s. JDS and ITJP claimed that PRRA was responsible “for the murders of hundreds of people, including human rights lawyers, journalists, university students and school children” (Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka). In 2020, ITJP publicized a special dossier in which reference has been made to Chandraprema’s alleged para-military record. In the heyday of the UNP government in the 1970s and 1980s, Chandraprema’s family was known to be closely associated with the ruling elite. His uncle, C.A. Dharmapala, was a top-ranked military official. In the mid-1980s, Chandraprema was also a frontline member of the Independent Students Union (ISU), a group of university students who operated from the

⁶ Few references to Gunaratna’s work prior to 1990 are found catalogued.

University of Colombo which – in the mid-1980s – emerged as an anti-JVP lobby. In the height of conflict, many ISU members aligned their activism with the government and assisted in the hunting of JVP sympathizers. Chandraprema's book was published in 1991 as a publication of the state-owned Lake House Bookshop.

Represented within pro-state literature, the torture camp, at best, is a vaguely-situated space where the agency of torturers and killers has been toned down; and where their identities are anonymous. The pro-state narrative does not outright deny that torture and killing took place. In their histories, Chandraprema and Gunaratna – and, to a lesser degree, Alles – refer to a host of violent activities that took place inside incarceration facilities (Gunaratna 346-347; Chandraprema 296). Their references to the disposal of bodies on streets and strategic places by the military are detailed and demonstrate access to informed sources with sound knowledge of the killings (Chandraprema 243; 305-310, Gunaratna 342-347). In some sections both writers quote at length from statements that were supposedly obtained under duress from detainees and from speeches rebel leaders made prior to being killed (Gunaratna 215-219; 354-355). However, in spite of such crucial knowledge, Chandraprema and Gunaratna refrain from following through by commenting or critiquing perpetrators, or from naming them. While the reader is led to understand that the camps were run by the police, military, paramilitary units, or by a mixture of all, the handlers are not foregrounded or identified. As a result, the authoritative narrative is often a strange tale of persecutions without persecutors, torture by invisible hands, and gruesome execution scenes in which the hand that directed the murder weapon remains hidden.

Many pro-establishment writers and commentators expected that the JVP, after being defeated and presumed to have “completely disappeared” between 1990 and 1993, would not re-emerge (Venugopal 568). As early as 1991, in *The Years of Terror*, Chandraprema had

predicted an end to the JVP as a political movement. Rather than being an objective assessor, the tone Chandraprema assumes at the outset of his book is one of a triumphalist chronicler. Likening the prevailing situation in the country to that prior to the JVP's emergence in 1969, Chandraprema claims that, more than it being a question of "the JVP continuing to exist", the speculation of the hour was "who will take its place now that the JVP [was] no more" (Chandraprema 4-5). Chandraprema rules out the possibility of the JVP ever regrouping as a party, or being resurrected as a political force. The annihilation of the JVP between 1989 and early-1990 thus generated a narrative vacuum in which state-mediated narratives by writers like Chandraprema predominated. In fact, his book was designed by expanding a series of articles he originally wrote to the newspapers during 1990. In 1991, when the book was published, press and media censorship was prevalent, while a Competent Authority was appointed by the state to monitor news items that were published. Chandraprema's assessment of the violence the state employed to strike the JVP down is conveyed as an inevitability – and therefore as being justifiable – which often betrays a moral arrogance and condescension in how he refers to the brutal killings that took place. In Chandraprema's rendition, thousands of extra-judicial killings carried out in torture camps are reduced to the "course of things":

[M]any details about the JVP insurrection of 1987-89 will remain forever buried. Almost its entire leadership and the majority of the rank and file are now dead. Its leaders as they were apprehended, were kept alive only so long as to extract information relating to arms caches, safe houses, and the location of other party leaders, immediately after which they *inevitably died in a "confrontation" with the forces...* Today both *the heroes (if any) and villains* of the JVP lie in ashes scattered to the four winds. (Chandraprema 5; my emphasis)

What Chandraprema proposes here is a culture of forgetting endorsed within an extra-judicial framework. This is further enunciated by his reference to the judicial Criminal Justice Commission hearings after the 1971 insurgency as “much advertised” and “spectacular” trials which “romanticized” the JVP (Chandraprema 5). In spite of its critics, the CJC hearings provided a legal basis for the passing of sentences, and room for documentation and democratic debate over different aspects of the rebellion, in which the voice of the rebels/suspects was heard. On the contrary, the summary executions and swift depositions endorsed by the state during 1989 and early-1990 were, to use Chandraprema’s words, aimed at “burying” a violence, while part of its stakeholders were “scattered to the four winds” as ashes. The extra-judicial operational mode has not only set an obstacle in the path of justice, but also ensured that evidence and testimony needed for a transparent inquiry were removed, perhaps, even making an inquiry impossible. “The story of the insurrection,” Chandraprema writes “will have to be laboriously built up with bits and pieces of information as and when they become available” (5). The survivor narratives that incorporate full length memoirs and perceptive and probing commentaries radically undermine the moral position Chandraprema and writers close to the state have adopted in narrating the violence of 1987-90 while, in their own right, defending the story of thousands who were killed outside the frame of law and were disappeared under the impunity enforced by the state.

In Alles’ narrative *JVP: 1969-1989*, he dedicates six chapters to the resurgence in 1987 of the JVP as a rebel movement, its actions during the 1987-90 period, and its defeat by the government forces in 1989. As mentioned earlier, Alles relies heavily on Chandraprema (Alles 279, 282, 293, 295, 297, 359) and Gunaratna (295, 297) for inside information and insight. The originality of analysis – derived in part from being at close quarters to the CJC inquest – and the effort and thoroughness Alles invests in his analysis of the 1971 insurgency (which occupies the first three sections of the book) are notably absent in commenting on the

1987-90 emergency. Limited to 94 pages, Alles uses that space to catalogue events rather than to critically question the violence and impunity present at the time. Rather than employ forthright critique, he often resorts to euphemism and innuendo in “back-patting” state crime.

As a representative example, Alles acknowledges that the conduct of the state military and other paramilitary operatives employed by the state in combatting the JVP suspended judicial due process (290-291): that “there has been no case reported in [c]ourt where a known suspect has been arraigned before it on specific charges” (291). However, Alles opts not to transform this observation into critique and develop a discussion on the killings of thousands of men and women. Instead, he back-peddles to a safe zone from which he administers euphemism and censorship to the advantage of the state’s position. As such, since “there was no evidence... as to who was responsible for the creation of [such] groups”, the origins of the PRRA – one of the leading paramilitary groups employed by the state to neutralize the JVP – and other vigilante groups, to Alles, were “nebulous” (292). But, as an afterthought, he adds that “it would be reasonable to surmise” that vigilante groups engaged in killings “must have had the *blessings* of the authorities against the common enemy” (292, my emphasis). Alles’ use of the euphemism “blessing” – as opposed to a term such as “direction” or “order”, which denotes culpability and participation – to underline the relationship between the vigilantes and the political elite is aimed at absolving the unnamed, shrouded, and obscured handlers of the killing machine from responsibility. Alles elaborates the goals achieved by vigilantes operating under the “blessings” of the elite as follows:

The vigilante squads were on the rampage determined to destroy the JVP. The brutalities committed by the vigilante squads and the paramilitary organizations shocked the public... The killing of 17 JVP sympathizers including their leader Pathmasiri whose decapitated heads were found displayed round [a pond at the University of Peradeniya]... and

the slaughter of over two hundred villagers including women and children at Mahawatte by the security forces. (295)

As outlined before, Alles often shares violent details such as the quoted passage, but does not address compelling questions that arise from them. For someone who writes with Alles' authority, a follow through option lies in naming the military and Police elite who were in charge of places like Peradeniya and Mahawatte (a village in the Kandy district) and to question the legal and moral implications of such killings. Reduced to shocking details in a narrative of violence – marginalized among a score of such entries – references like the above are placed to follow sections of the book where the resurgence and the violent acts of the JVP are characterized (289-304). Within this linear arrangement, Alles seems to place the excess used by the state to demolish the rebels as a necessary and justifiable consequence of a violent spiral. This is glaringly visible in Alles' references to suspects – particularly, JVP leaders – who were killed while being held in military custody: victims of alleged “skirmishes” or unexpected breakaway attempts that – according to the military and Police – led to an opening of fire that ended with the deaths of the suspects (298). This condemnable form of extra-judicial violence is used by the Sri Lankan Police and can even be said to have evolved as a customary way of removing “undesirable” suspects. In spite of a long and distinguished career in legal practice, Alles' failure to question and follow through such extra-legal maneuvers disempowers the victims and their stories as they get concentrated in a space where punishment outside the law is seen as acceptable. While the reason for Alles' reluctance to critique the extra-judicial excesses of the military and the impunity with which they operated creates speculation, I suggest that it is possible that his long career as a judge – and thereby, a vanguard of society and its structures – refrains him from undermining the state

as a social and legal organization. However, this is an observation I wish to leave open for further conversation.

It is of note that, in spite of his association of Chandraprema's and Gunaratna's writing, Alles refrains from making notable references to incarceration and torture camps. However, calling it "*the most successful* way of combating the JVP" (333, my emphasis), Gunaratna endorses vigilante activism such as abduction, torture, killing, and the display of mutilated and dismembered bodies as being justifiable. He elaborates on this aspect of the government's counter-insurgency approach as a form of "unconventional fighting" (332-333). Within this "unconventional" style of operation suspects who were positively identified as JVP and innocents were killed alike (332) since the aggressors found "it was *difficult* to release" an innocent as their identities had already been compromised (333, my emphasis). In Gunaratna's assertion, the killing squads "were left with no alternative" but to "eliminate those taken into custody" (333). Gunaratna's empathy towards this "difficulty" that inconvenienced the military – and the apology on behalf of extra-judicial execution – is a clear symptom of selective bias and partiality. It downplays a general atmosphere of systematized violence based on information of how records were falsified for deaths that occurred in custody, the preparation of dead bodies for disposal, and detailed descriptions of how bodies were mutilated and prepared for disposal (332).

The absence of critique and follow through as well as the writers' obligation towards the state in not questioning excess violence are hallmarks of the pro-state narrative of which Alles, Chandraprema and Gunaratna are representative. The objectives and ends of their subject positions as writers and interventionists lie outside the scope and direction of the present investigation. Perhaps, the selectiveness and bias with which they characterize the events of the 1987-90 period best serves the political and ideological convictions to which these writers subscribed. For the purposes of my discussion in this thesis it is sufficient to

note that in representations which, with time, have become dominant portrayals of the torture camp, its inherent violence, and the extra-judicial culture of impunity that was prevalent, the voice of the victim has been marginalized or completely erased from being a humanized presence and from fair representation.

Being sanctioned by the state, dominant texts like these are already energized as the ‘official view’ of the conflict’s history. The authority and power therein invested makes the task of survivor narratives an even more difficult one since – writing from the margins – the survivor operates against a counterpart who is superior in resources and political patronage. On the other hand, in addition to having to navigate ruptured and dislocated moments of history, the author of counter-narratives is burdened with the task of having to ‘write against’ a pre-arranged world order that has been immersed into the society through a superior resource network (such as printing assistance, ready reception by national libraries and so on), and in being easily and readily available to the state-governed reading public. The counter-narrative, therefore, emerges as a contestation with a delayed start. Without a guarantee of success, the counter-narratives are often born out of a sense of right and integrity where the writers have no way of knowing for sure whether they are risking their lives and those dear to them in the pursuit of an ideal of justice.

One of the earliest interventions to challenge the dominant pro-state narrative of the 1987-90 emergency was published in 1998 by human rights activist Prins Gunasekara who wrote an extensive commentary from exile in London titled *A Lost Generation: Sri Lanka in Crisis: the Untold Story*. Having fled paramilitary death squads in 1990, Gunasekara lived in England up to his death in December 2018. During the height of the conflict in the late-1980s, Gunasekara opened a Human Rights centre in Sri Lanka’s Southern Province where he led a team who made habeas corpus representations in court on behalf of families of disappeared men and women. Charitha Lankapura and Kanchana Abeypala, two of

Gunasekara's junior colleagues, were shot and killed by government paramilitary in 1990.⁷ Challenging some of the claims, conclusions, and characterizations Alles, Chandraprema, and Gunaratna table in their works, *A Lost Generation* analyses a decade of events that led to the conflict in 1987: a commentary which situates the UNP government as the chief architect of the violence. The title of Gunasekara's book – *A Lost Generation* – suggests a premeditated response to the title of Rohan Gunaratna's *Sri Lanka: A Lost Revolution?*. Perhaps, as a contestation of the "inside story" claim made by Gunaratna, Gunasekara subtitles his work as *The Untold Story* of the emergency. Gunasekara's commentary, therefore, demonstrates both purpose and focus in challenging the grandiosity of the "inside stories" tabled by pro-state writers: a task he sets about by challenging sections of *The Years of Terror* and *Sri Lanka: A Lost Revolution?*.⁸

In my view, the narratives produced by writers such as Chandraprema and Gunaratna – work that purport to be researched studies insistent on the 'inside story' of the violence – are narrative extensions of the impunity that existed at the time. Their documentation of events without commentary or question, and defense of the identity of perpetrators encourage a record where the executioner has already been granted a 'higher' and 'absolved' status; and in which his position as executioner is projected as unquestionable, and his authority as being inviolable.⁹ Aided at times by state resources and with the sanction of the ruling elite, it is clear that writers like Chandraprema and Gunaratna wrote to justify the impunity and prevailing extra-judicial climate during the emergency. Therefore, to critique the practices within the torture camps and to follow-through were counter-productive to the aim of their intended narrative. It is noticeable that both these writers fostered close relationships with

⁷ According to a dossier published by the International Truth and Justice Project in 2020, the name of C.A. Chandraprema is given as a suspect of the two assassinations. He had been arrested and later released in 2000.

⁸ For representational sections see Chapter 7, "The Underground Days: I Meet Wijeweera" (230-259) and Chapter 8, "A President Errs – Tragically" (261-273).

⁹ A critique of Chandraprema and Gunaratna is attempted by Owen Bennett in his thesis "The Patriotic Struggle of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna": the only such study I could find during my research.

successive regimes in Sri Lanka during subsequent years. Following the end of Sri Lanka's civil war in 2009, Chandraprema authored a book titled *Gota's War* (2011) which was a complimentary biography of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka's Secretary of Defence at the time. Chandraprema was appointed as Sri Lanka's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva upon Rajapaksa's election as the country's President in 2019. Under the same government, Gunaratna was appointed to the advisory council of the Institute of National Security Studies.

In the third chapter of this study, I analyse the narratives of witnesses and survivors of incarceration as counteractions that contest the pro-state renditions of the torture camp. Within that discussion I refer back to some of the salient aspects of the 'official' narratives I have referenced in this chapter, and situate the centring of the victim voice through the storied memories of survivor witnesses. In these survivors' challenges to privileged conclusions I locate an energy that democratizes memory, and an 'inside story' that emerges from enduring and living through incarceration. This narrative is supported by working-through and critical revision, which empowers it with the character of a counter-history of a dislocated past.

Chapter 2

Reading the Torture Camp and its Narrative Representation: A Theoretical

Framework

The Camp as a Site of Exception

During the second half of the 1987-90 insurrection, as a part of its crackdown on the rebels, the Sri Lankan military used a process of ‘arrest-interrogate-exterminate’ in which the site of the torture camp became a pivotal space. Within this procedure, suspects were arrested (often extra-legally), examined, tortured for information, and either freed or killed. The site was set up outside the purview of ordinary law as a necessary ‘auxiliary’ space: a space which often operated under an ad hoc, non-formal amelioration of political elites, military personnel, private armies, and groups hostile towards the JVP. The mechanism within the camp was one which overreached the realms of law, justice, and social safeguards that were considered as the standard process. The ‘state of exception’ was set up through a combination of extraordinary as well as extra-legal judicial implements. From the perspective of the state, this manufacture of laws was seen as necessary to extend its exercise of sovereignty during an insurgency. In the legal front, in particular, legislation such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 1979 (amended in 1984), along with emergency regulations, provided extraordinary provisions for carrying out search operations, making arrests without warrants, and detaining suspects outside of due process. These enforcements facilitated and encouraged extraordinary actions across a broad range – from abrupt arrests carried out in unmarked vehicles, to bodies being cremated without a standard judicial inquiry, which under ordinary circumstances would have been deemed controversial. While these (extraordinary) legal conditions were implemented in a situation that was already rife with para-military actors, unofficial armed

squads of political elites (or, as they are called in the literature, ‘vigilante groups’), and unconventional operations by the military and police, the regulations gave cover for the use of excessive and extreme violence. In this broad and expansive scheme of violence, the torture camp was a key site.

The ‘state of exception’ is a means by which a modern state – one anchored in social safeguards and democratic values – fulfills sovereignty; where decrees such as the ‘declaration of rights’, as Giorgio Agamben maintains, are reduced to mere “proclamations of eternal, metajudicial values binding the legislator... to respect eternal ethical principles” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 127). Contrary to its being understood as a natural consequence, this encourages one to locate a ‘citizen’ as a condition hailed by the state: a recognition and acknowledgment of a ‘man/woman’ within preconceived social and legal safeguards. The ‘rights of man’ – which are often assumed to be inviolable and unsurpassable – is derived from this condition which makes the ‘man/woman’ “the immediately vanishing ground... of the citizen” (128). The condition of ‘citizen’, therefore, is born out of the state’s exercise of its sovereignty which confers one’s rights, freedoms, and dignity. In spite of disagreements and differences, the ‘state of exception’ in the modern state is accepted as a pertinent tool of authority which the state deploys in order to exercise ‘sovereignty’ in unconventional ways. Be it in intra-state conflicts, or global military operations such as the ‘Global War on Terror’, ‘exception’ is set in place to override the established due process of law, social codes, norms and binding regulations. First presented through Carl Schmitt’s treatise *Political Theology* (1922), the contemporary discussion on the ‘state of exception’ is largely built around the conversations between thinkers that include, apart from Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt and Agamben.¹⁰ Particularly in *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception*, Agamben develops his own response to the ‘state of exception’ with close reference to the argument

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, in *State of Exception*, offers a comprehensive analysis of Schmitt’s study. Agamben’s responses to Schmitt are outlined in the second chapter (pp. 32-40).

between Schmitt and Benjamin in an investigation of how states – from the Third Reich’s concentration camps to the United States’ project of establishing a ‘global war prison’ – seek leverage to forge juridical-political conditions necessary to carry forward agendas outside ordinary law (Agamben, *State of Exception* 1-31).

Since one’s legal safeguards in private and public life hinge on one’s being hailed as a ‘citizen’ governed by the state and the law, the citizen-state relationship is crucial to a study of the torture camp. A detainee under ‘exceptional’ circumstances does not enjoy the same recognition and dignity of a citizen subject in ordinary situations. Camp detention is presupposed by a suspension of rights and privileges through extensive imposition and physical and spatial restriction. As the legal and ethical safeguards that bind the state and the citizen are relaxed, the exercising of sovereignty – with the state’s “power to decide on bare life” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 142) – exerts absolute control over the ‘citizen-subject’, re-configuring him/her as a ‘non-citizen’ and ‘body-object’.

In accentuating the state’s role as the ‘modern sovereign’, Agamben builds into his analysis a study developed by Karl Binding and Alfred Hoche who, during the Third Reich, introduced a classification system to identify and justify what they termed ‘life devoid of value’, or ‘life that does not deserve to live’. This categorization turned on human lives that had “lost the quality of legal good”, so that “their very existence no longer has any value, either for the person leading such a life or for society” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 138). Agamben’s analysis investigates the ideological stimulation under which Binding and Hoche developed their theory and how they justify state arbitration on lives which do ‘not deserve to live’. The use of extermination programmes and gas chambers during the final years of the Third Reich, in part, are understood to be improvised and executed on the Binding-Hoche proposition.

Imported from its strictly judicial-medical context to the site of the torture camp, the inferences of ‘life devoid of value’ – or ‘life unworthy of being lived’ – contribute to a reading of how power is exercised in manufactured ‘states of exception’. Being stripped of their social and legal safeguards and reduced to the state of ‘non-citizens’, the incarcerated detainees are placed in the vortex of an ethical and moral vacuum under an absolute authority which dictated control over life and death. The killings carried out in camps and detention facilities in Sri Lanka between 1988 and 1990 are not fully known or documented. A discernible majority of these victims were taken in and incarcerated under exceptional circumstances prior to their being killed and their bodies being disposed. As survivor accounts suggest, the treatment of detainees in the camps include the most violent and foul treatment of the oppressed by an oppressor. Emergent survivor narratives suggest uncompromising conduct of an extreme bestial nature during the different stages of victims being tortured, humiliated, and made to witness their fellow detainees being killed.

In setting the parameters of ‘life devoid of value’, Binding and Hoche recognize “incurable idiots, either those born as such or those... who suffer from progressive paralysis” who, in the process, “have become such in the last phase of their life.... (and) have neither the will to live nor the will to die” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 138). When applied to the situation of the detainees of the camp – those who are reduced and deprived of agency – this lens helps us to understand the power structure of the state which, within the ‘state of exception’, administered execution as a necessity. The survivor narratives I study disclose recurrent references to detainees who, while still being subjected to extreme torture, plead with the torturers to end their suffering by killing them. Analogous to those ‘lives devoid of value’ in the Binding-Hoche thesis, these incarcerated detainees – owing to the circumstances created by their detention – can be identified in a state where their ‘will to live, or to die’ has been weakened. Yet, by having been exposed to ‘bare life’, and suspended in the uncertain

terrain between 'life' and 'death', the interrogation process seeks an advantage in keeping the detainee within those reduced conditions and in a confused mental and physical state.

As Agamben points out, the 'camp' is a space that is realized when "the state of exception begins to become the rule" (*Homo Sacer* 168). The apparatus of the camp is "given a permanent spatial arrangement" which – while it fosters a "disjunction" between the "growing disassociation of birth (bare life) and the nation-state" (175) – "remains outside the normal order" (168-169). The 'normalization' of the camp perpetuates a legal and moral vacuum – or a "no-man's-land between public law and political fact" (Agamben, *State of Exception* 1) – which, de facto, translates into a prerogative of government. Agamben observes that "whoever entered the camp moved in a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit", while "the very concepts of subjective right and juridical protection no longer made any sense" (*Homo Sacer* 170). The camp manifests a domain where "not only is law completely suspended but fact and law are completely confused" (170). When juxtaposed with the norms and operations of society, the camp represents an apparatus of reversed logic that is arbitrated by the actors who control that space. It presents an irrevocable gulf between a detainee's (many years of) socialization through culture, education, legal provisions and so on, and his/her (sudden) transfer to a state of 'bare life' absent of the very safeguards he/she was inculcated with. Agamben reasons that the camp equates to "the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized" (*Homo Sacer* 171) and exists where power engages, interacts and imposes itself over 'bare life' without regulation, set order, or constitution.

In his writing on subjecthood, law and the capacity of narrative, Hayden White asserts that "where there is no rule of law there can be neither a subject nor the kind of event that lends itself to narrative representation" (White 12). He insists that "narrativity" – conditions that render narrative possible – is presupposed by the existence of a legal system against

which (or on behalf of which) the typical agents of narrative militate (12-13). Derek Gregory contributes to this discussion as he presents the imposition of power over ‘bare life’ outside the purview of general law as a ‘liminal space’. Writing in the context of the ‘global war prison’, Gregory contends that the camp is a “strange hybrid”: one which is “not a prisoner-of-war camp, since its central operation is the continued interrogation of prisoners” most of whom are “denied the status of prisoners of war” (Gregory 56). At one level, Gregory and Agamben agree in their reading of the camp as a site where sovereignty and bio-power coincide (Gregory 57). The years of the JVP insurrection witnessed the perpetuation of emergency laws and extra-ordinary legislation such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act which, with time, came to be ‘normalized’ practice. These are the very laws, as suggested earlier, that supported and prepared the atmosphere necessary for extra-legal apparatuses and mechanisms to operate, and for such operations to be justified. Under such circumstances “the emergency [became] the rule” which led to “provisional and exceptional measures” being transformed into “a technique of government” (Gregory 58).

In the formulation, interpretation, and application of legal measures, the law in itself can be located as a dynamic site of struggle. In view of Agamben (*State of Exception* 6, 86), Gregory alludes to the ‘state of exception’ as a “vacant space limned by the ‘emptiness of law’” (Gregory 63). With the power of decision on behalf of the state having been passed over to legal (and extra-legal) actors, it is a ‘legal space of lawlessness’ – or, at best, a space where the safeguards of law are ‘relaxed’ and boundaries are made ‘less defined’. As survivor narratives often attest, the camp, as a space, continually fluctuates between routine and unpredictability: death at short notice as well as unexpected mercy both carry equal significance.

Torture

In this thesis, I approach the torture camp as a ‘state of exception’ where the captive body has been subverted through processes of systematic torture. In understanding the anatomy of torture, I draw on Elaine Scarry who assigns to torture a three-part distribution: ‘the infliction of physical pain’, the ‘objectification of eight central attributes of pain’ – an octagonal distribution which she elaborates in the course of her reading – and the “translation of the attributes (of pain) into the insignia of the regime” (Scarry 19). In particular, Scarry’s understanding of torture as a symbolic translation of the regime’s power is crucial to my analysis of violence imposed on captives during the 1987-90 emergency. Complementing the discussion on torture which Scarry develops, Diana Taylor investigates torture as a process which “attacks personhood, suspends the rules, and unmakes the world of the victim by turning it into a strange and terrifying place” (Taylor 710). Taylor characterizes torture as a process which “undermines all boundaries and conventions set up by societies to contain and rationalize violence” (Taylor 710-711): a process that “crosses the limit, threatening to corrode Enlightenment distinctions between the human and inhuman” and “eviscerating international agreements differentiating between the legitimate and illegitimate use of force” (711). This process overrides “the rule of law and its established procedures for presenting evidence and proof of wrongdoing” (711) which, as Gregory suggests, brings about extreme forms of cultural and moral inversion. Taylor’s view is consistent with my reading of the oppressive anatomy of the camp as a system where ‘torture’ can be placed in a complementary position with the idea of the ‘camp’, where the apparatus (the camp) and the procedure (torture) contribute to a symbiosis.

The manufactured collapse of order that is maintained during camp torture contributes to a sense of political and moral alienation among detainees: the kind of ‘othering’ which

Frantz Fanon – in particular, in his *Black Skins White Masks* – theorizes. Drawing on Fanon's writing, Stuart Hall analyses the shaping and functioning of dominant cultures as they compel colonized bodies to view and receive themselves as the 'other' (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 394). Adverse mental conditions such as one's acceptance of 'victim' or 'perpetrator' identities are enhanced and supported by prolonged oppressive cultures. Drawing attention to Fanon's reading of racism based on his work concerning Algerian soldiers, Rosanne Kennedy notes that racism is an example of insidious trauma that stems from the perpetuation of the 'colonial environment' rather than from a singular traumatic 'event' (Kennedy, "Mortgaged Futures" 104). As such, the apparatus of the camp manifests itself as a system in which the detainee comes to accept his fate and misery.

During the suppression of the 1987-90 insurrection, the Sri Lankan militaries had a network of torture camps – often, two or three per district – of which the interiors were not exposed to the public. At best, the general public knew of their existence either by word-of-mouth or through local knowledge. The inner functions of the camps were distant and vague. These were zones beyond the fortified gates and barriers to which the civilian had no access; and which, through an authority with overriding powers, were maintained as an 'exception' to the norms known to the world outside the barbed-wire fencing. Agreeing with Michel Foucault's key assertion in *Discipline and Punish*, Joseph Slaughter locates torture within a locale of modernity where it was no longer a gruesome 'public event', but one that had disappeared and ceased to be a spectacle (Foucault 9, Slaughter 209). Slaughter's reading of the camp lays emphasis on modern society's occupation with "evermore invisible methods of clean torture" (Slaughter 209). Enforced through a process of physical and moral 'othering' and the dismantling of selfhood, the camp is a 'doubly invisible' facility of 'clean torture': a 'black site' that leaves little tangible evidence to the outside world. Unlike, and in contrast to,

the popular notion that torture has ‘gone away’, the modern camp results in torture being transferred “underground, to the unseen and unseemly corners of the world” (Rejali 35-44).

In her outline of how ‘normalized terror’ shapes community responses and behaviour, Taylor refers to conditions of “knowing and not knowing” adopted as a “preferred strategy for survival” (714) which comes across as a self-enforced numbing of perception which she terms as ‘percepticide’ (714-715). At a time of entrenched violence, to ‘see nothing’ and to ‘hear nothing’ is not a free or equal choice. It is an extension of the condition under which narrative was disrupted and was taken hostage. Taylor’s insights encourage a reader to be receptive to the factors that compel witnesses to self-censorship. Later, under the restoration of normalcy, as the survivor and victim narratives emerged, they embody and represent a counter-force to different levels of ‘percepticide’: a resuscitation of suppressed memory and a will to bring back to life the suppressed historical experience.

This interplay between torture, expression, and language has informed the work of theorists such as Scarry who, in her study of the anatomy of torture, visualizes torture as both a ‘language’ (Scarry 27) and a ‘weapon’ (40) that is implemented on the human body. Scarry argues that, as a language, torture deconstructs the voice of the prisoner. Prolonged interrogation is a scheme that aims at “shattering” the prisoner’s voice, as it “graphically objectifies the step-by-step backward movement along the path by which language comes into being” (Scarry 20). What Scarry maps is a manoeuvre which goes beyond a mere visible destruction; rather, it embodies a process of un-creation or reversal of being in which the detainee, as a body that has already been deprived of personhood, is ultimately reduced to a deconstructed voice. In her analysis of the infliction and reception of torture, Scarry draws the reader to a three-part configuration: of pain being inflicted in “ever-intensifying ways” in its being “objectified” and “made visible” to outsiders; of its being “amplified”; and – through a denial and translation process – of it being “read as power” (Scarry 28).

As torture camp narratives from the JVP insurrection frequently suggest, the infliction of torture was frequently carried out as a spectacle in the vicinity or within earshot of other detainees where its intensity was visible and felt by others. At the height of torture, the pain – both its infliction and reception – translates into a force that becomes to the detainee the ‘insignia of the state’ (Scarry 19). Treated over time, this resulted in a shock to the consciousness of the detainee, provoking contradictions and convolutions: a state in which “the contraction and ultimate dissolution of the prisoner’s world” was objectified through “the physical objects the torturer uses as weapons, in the torturer’s actions, and in the torturer’s language” (Scarry 38). These observations are supported by the anatomy of and the processes carried out within the camp during the 1987-90 emergency.

An illustrative example of the above-alluded process is found in *Life Means Not to Kill*,¹¹ a biography written by H.M. Gunaratne, who relates experiences of incarceration in solitary confinement in a torture chamber during September and October 1989. Gunaratne – a young graduate school teacher – was ‘picked up’ by a police truck near his mother’s home in a village in the Kurunegala district in north western Sri Lanka. He was incarcerated and tortured in an undisclosed facility for 23 days. The torture routine included beatings, humiliations, mock executions and periods of starvation (Gunaratne 69-72). As the days went by, he came to a stage where he was not fully conscious of his actions, words, or responses; and where he was neither in control nor certain of what he said or did (Gunaratne 87-89). In his memoir, Gunaratne attributes a certain involuntary, semi-conscious quality to these actions, which include what he later realized to be information regarding possible rebel activists in his village. To questions posed to him, he responds “weakly but as if automatically” (87), and while sincerely wishing “that no harm should fall on” (87) the people he was exposing. During this phase of his incarceration, Gunaratne feels as if he was

¹¹ The memoir makes substantial references to incarceration and torture in chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 and 9.

being watched, and his mind being invaded by his persecutors, and he often tries to “control” his thoughts so as to “avoid [their] invasive gazes” (89). He also feels that he heard familiar voices adjacent to and outside his cell, and feels that he heard a gun battle outside (68). Yet, he couldn’t tell for sure whether these were hallucinations, or whether it was reality.

Scarry characterizes torture as a transfer of power from the tortured to the torturer, resulting in a “conversion of the enlarged map of human suffering into an emblem of the regime’s strength” (56). Here, the regime’s strength is superimposed over the withdrawal and shrinking of the detainee’s person while, in torture’s routineness and sheer arbitrariness, the receiver is increasingly reduced to an object-body. In the victim’s confused and broken state, the violence at times appears random, haphazard and ad hoc. His body and mind are violated by various instruments of torture while he is exposed to hurt – his own and that of others – and the overwhelming atmosphere created by the pain and the death of fellow detainees. Within this ongoing process, the state aims at extricating the detainee’s voice, consciousness, and spirit. His experience of the world, at worst, is reduced to a compulsive act of reaction to pain, and a numbing of the mind. Based on this premise, I argue in the following chapter that the autobiographical accounts of survivors, which I read as redemptive and regenerative acts against forced silence, are successful in breaking through this hard layer of suppression and trauma. This redemptive/regenerative movement is crucial to a counter-narrative of history as it bears the agency and the voice of the displaced and the silenced, as credible representations of a shared fate.

Witnessing Torture

Witnessing torture that took place in secret camps and conveying it through narrative, in addition to its being an attempt at documenting a history that has been silenced by force,

can be regarded as an effort of ‘coming to terms’ with trauma and dislocation. In *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Agamben presents a fundamental duality in the act of witnessing: of witnessing being a juridical process in establishing facts concerned with third-party testimony, as well as its being an act which sets testimony of first-hand experience apart from law. Of the two, survivor narratives emerging from a torture camp, in their diverse forms and mediums, belong to the latter category. Going beyond formal written and oral traditions, witnessing, as Dominick LaCapra proposes, can also include nonverbal expressions such as “posttraumatic symptoms” (*History and Its Limits*, 61). Witnessing bears testimony to what are often “shattering experience[s] that distort memory in the ‘ordinary’ sense”: experiences that “render it particularly vulnerable and fallible in reporting events.” (61). Both Agamben and LaCapra mark the significance of emotive and affective factors that are internal to acts of witnessing, including “uncontrollable, disorienting effects of trauma itself” (LaCapra, *History and Its Limits* 62).

The transformation of a torture survivor from a ‘broken victim’ to a redeemed ‘socio-political agent’ is central to my study, as the writers I investigate published their memoirs as an act of political activism and conscious social engagement. The act of writing is in itself a demonstration of agency which suggests self-recovery. Notwithstanding LaCapra’s cautioning that the survivor may “never... fully overcome depression or [the] melancholic” – and, therefore, may not “fully heal traumatic wounds” (75-76) – the writing I explore contributes instructively to a reading of post-trauma self-revival. I also investigate the ways in which these survivor narratives echo one another in underlining and interpreting patterns of violence. These experiences of victims, at best, read as mutually-enforcing signs on a map of violence, charted and brought to life through an alternative imagination which contests a dominant and partial authority with total claims. For this very reason – and in acknowledging the responsibility on which counter-narration is hinged – it is important that the survivor

narratives are not overwrought by symptoms of acting out. With this in mind, I focus on means and processes of working-through by which survivors develop objective revision, reconsideration, and re-imagination (in the narrating of the traumatic past).

Shoshanna Felman and Dori Laub suggest that an event of extreme violence is often characterized by (what they term) a “crisis of truth” (Felman and Laub, *Testimony* 6), whereas bearing testimony and witnessing are understood as being of a part of a process in coming to terms with that crisis. The place of testimony and the importance of witnessing in post-traumatic history is complex and heavily debated in scholarship. At one level, scholarship is divided between those – such as Felman and Laub – who underline the significance of witnessing as a process of ‘truth recovery’ that transcends the legal assumption that “testimony should be evaluated in terms of its accuracy as a description of reality” (15), and those who caution against the inadequacy of testimony¹² as an approach to understanding history. Emphasizing the significance of the trial, Felman associates it with a process that “recovers the victim as an agent of history” (Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious* 124). In highlighting the role played by testimony in the recovery of a history that has been forcefully suppressed, Lawrence Douglas and Ariela J. Gross have contributed to the position that a trial, especially one involving mass atrocity, often has multiple aims including “shaping collective memory and educating the public” (Kennedy, “Memory, history and the law” 53-54). In his reflections of the Eichmann trial, Gideon Hausner emphasizes the significance of the ‘moral aspect’ of a trial; how the “living record of a gigantic human and national disaster”, no matter how “feeble” it was of the “real event”, has a significant and necessary part to play in the scheme of justice (quoted in Wieviorka, “The Witness in History” 390). Drawing on the Nuremburg and Eichmann trials, Douglas’ treatise draws on five case studies

¹²Annette Wieviorka notes the value in testimony for indicating psychological responses but not for writing history (Kennedy, “Memory, history and the law” 57), as it focuses on the present and not the past. Peter Novick argues that “collective memory works selectively... [as] a form of myth-making” that is shaped by the needs of groups and group identity, as they are formed in the present (Novick 4).

of testimony against extreme crime emerging from the Holocaust. Emphasizing the Holocaust narrative of Leon Wells, Douglas establishes the significance of such testimony in its representation of the “tension [the victim] felt between wishing for his own death and the imperative to survive to bear witness to the suffering of others” (Douglas 125-126). However, Annette Wieviorka cautions against the pre-eminence of testimony in the framing of history while drawing attention to what she terms the ‘era of the witness’. Drawing on the same trial event in which Hausner and others hail the witness as a crucial agent in the path of justice, Wieviorka notes with concern the “new socially recognized identity for survivors” as the “bearer of history” (Wieviorka 88). While she recognizes the contribution of testimony in “telling us about psychological responses”, Wieviorka alerts against the inapplicability of those responses in “writing history” (quoted in Kennedy, “Memory, history and the law” 57). The ‘historical approach’ in Wieviorka’s critique and the nature of memory as a site propose a friction which runs the risk of “the complexity of past events and the moral ambiguity of the intentions and actions of protagonists” in historical discourses being reduced to convenient “overarching archetypes” (Kennedy, “Memory, history and the law” 57).

Contrasting with the position of historians such as Wieviorka and Peter Novick, Felman views the function of testimony as “[bringing to] the public sphere the unspeakable dimensions of memory” which include “the intense effect of the memory of horror, conveyed through bodily gestures, silences and gaps in speech” (*The Juridical Unconscious* 124). Felman underlines testimony as what made the Jewish victims “speaking subjects” within the purview of a “legal act of authorship” during the Eichmann trial: a redemption from their being “subhuman... mute bearers of a traumatizing history” (126). Critiquing the somewhat ‘forced distinction’ historians have drawn between memory and history – history as that ‘which happened’ and memory as that ‘which is remembered of which happened’ – James Young is troubled by “the near-blanket exclusion” of the survivors’ voice from normative

histories of the Holocaust (Young 276). At the same time, he is receptive to the concerns historians such as Wieviorka and Novick raise in relation to witnessing and, in turn, prescribes the need to distinguish history from memory: the latter, which Young alludes to as a moulding that “stems from personal involvement” which “incites emotional intensity” (Young 277).

As a vehicle for transmitting the intensity of subjective lived experience, translated as history, the voice of the survivor will be a point I will return to in the chapter that follows. The voice of a victimized individual representing a historical moment – in speaking on behalf of the self and the community – receives authority from distance, analysis, and political consciousness. This pertinent condition re-enforces an anchor of the ongoing discussion: the role of ‘working-through’ in survivor narratives and the narratives as a product of ‘working-through’.

Working-through

Contemporary thinkers have attempted to situate testimony as conveying an experiential truth: a truth that is of a “subtle” kind, born out of the “encounter with the human voice that traversed history” (Wieviorka, “The Witness in History” 396). In spite of its often being of “oblique fashion”, Wieviorka argues that testimony is “indispensable” in conveying “an epoch and... an experience” (396). This ‘indispensability’ is deeply felt in the site of the torture camp, where narrative has been suspended, and the bio-political power balance is dominated by the state. Under such conditions the survivor narrative’s potential to facilitate the understanding of the interiority of detention gains in importance. If not for the narrative that is born from within the camp that space – hidden from the outside world – could not be sufficiently narrated or documented. Based on this view, Rebecca Adelman condemns the

“denial of detainee subjectivity” – the presumption of activist and media discourses that “detainee subjectivity can be transparently knowable” (Adelman 87) to the outsider – as a form of violence. The prisoner’s narrative, therefore, becomes an irreplaceably vital documentation which prompts a critical exploration of the conditions under which these narratives can be accommodated as history.

In his discussion of trauma and the history of traumatic events, Saul Friedlander has commented on the limitations of a classical positivistic approach. While influencing thinkers such as LaCapra, Friedlander is among the early post-Holocaust writers to reflect critically on the leverage memory provides historical narrative. Commenting on narrating traumatic memory, Friedlander emphasizes two “contradictory moves” that often challenge such narratives: a dialectical “protective numbing” and a “disruptive emotion” (Friedlander 51). Differently characterized, Friedlander’s idea anticipates a debate that is recurrent in the juncture of memory, history and testimony: the issue between ‘objective distancing’ and ‘subjective urgency’ in memory narratives. Friedlander cautions the reader against a representation being too inclined to one or the other of the above extremes. For Friedlander, working-through primarily indicates “being aware of both ‘objective distancing’ and ‘subjective urgency’ and the allowance for a measure of balance between the two wherever possible” (Friedlander 51). He recommends a “simultaneous acceptance of the two contradictory moves: the search for ever-closer historical linkages and the avoidance of a naïve historical positivism leading to simplistic and self-assured historical narrations and closures” (52-53). Friedlander’s assertion is significant to my study in its provision of a fruitful insight to visualize the past in the present, and to localize in narrative the tensions between a traumatic past and a post-traumatic present: the two ends mediated by processes of working-through.

Presenting his idea of working-through, LaCapra relies on Friedlander's analysis as he proposes to "take the concept of working-through away from a narrowly therapeutic framework and to relate it to ethical and political considerations.... [in enabling a discourse which is] argumentative, self-questioning, and related in mediated ways to action" (LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust* 210). While LaCapra recognizes the ability to bear testimony as an important aspect of survival, he lays down the condition that such testimony should not be overwhelmed by symptoms of mere compulsive 'acting out'. The critical balance LaCapra encourages in a witness demonstrates a "certain distance from a past that nonetheless remains all too pressing" (La Capra, *History and Its Limits* 76). As such, bearing witness to trauma – in spite of memories that are "painful and at times unbearable" – is facilitated as an act that is entrenched in the 'present' but, is simply not an act of "re-living" the past, or of being "consumed by" its aftereffects (76). To the contrary, the process of working-through which LaCapra proposes "helps to provide some space in which one may gather oneself, engage the present, and [attempt] open viable possibilities" (76): one that mediates between a victim's past and numerous possibilities of his present.

"In working-through", writes LaCapra, "one does not totally transcend but rather attempt[s] to generate counterforces to melancholia and compulsive repetition" (LaCapra, *History and Its Limits* 84). He elaborates this process as consisting of a twin layout, and as being brought into effect through "psychic 'work' on the self" and the "engagement in social and political practice with others"; from "mourning...to more directly socio-political forms of action directed toward institutional change" (84). As he proposes, the act of bearing testimony associates the 'self' of the witness with the realm of the 'socio-political'. The pragmatic and performative implication in LaCapra's reading of working-through as a socio-political investment is crucial for developing a counter-hegemonic approach to mapping history. Within this initiative, survivor narratives of the 1987-90 insurgency can be associated

with and validated within a dialogue that is necessary in the re-imagining of torture camps and the conditions in which they were manufactured and maintained.

The testimony conveyed by the camp survivors I study challenges the state-centered monopoly of authorizing ‘what happened’ and the ‘how it happened’ in a document drawn to the state’s advantage. In conceptualizing how these survivor narratives can complement [or challenge, or transform, or constitute a new] a memory-map, I draw on the framework of ‘multidirectional memory’ developed by Rothberg, who assesses memory as a competitive, various and non-linear energy which is always vulnerable to the dictate of authority. As an approach, ‘multidirectional memory’ encourages mechanisms that facilitate a democratization of memory from claims to ‘total history’. In Rothberg’s proposed model “divergent memories converge” and open up new opportunities and break away from a ‘competitive model’ in which memories are pitted against one other (Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* 311). ‘Multidirectional memory’ is concerned with “the interplay between different pasts and a heterogeneous present” which draws on the “overlap and interference of memories” that help to “constitute the public sphere as well as the various individual and collective subjects that articulate themselves in it” (Rothberg, “Between Auschwitz and Algeria” 162). It encourages a synthesis that is receptive of ‘differences’ and ‘alternatives’ in narrative and a conference that is more open, inclusive and varied in representation. Within this rubric, while opening up ‘new possibilities’ for a reader’s imagination, the reading of a torture history is positioned within a common dialogue between the dominant and dislocated/suppressed narratives which are freed from preconceived or enforced hierarchical bias.

In presenting the frame of ‘multidirectional memory’, Rothberg studies the work of the Algerian writer Charlotte Delbo; in particular her ‘*After Auschwitz* trilogy’ – *Les belles*

Letters, Useless Knowledge and *The Measure of Our Days* – in which Delbo juxtapose “Nazi crimes with those of colonialism and neo-colonialism” (Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* 164). Rothberg analyses how Delbo’s writing draws from three separate conflict planes and forges a model of memory as a non-linear and interactive compendium. Considered as a broad and comparative reference frame, the interface Delbo fosters encourages a critical re-examination of the event-specific narrow boundaries within which discussions of conflict and violence often take place.¹³

By contrast, mainstream Sri Lankan creative practitioners have seldom adopted a cross-conflict conceptual frame similar to ‘multidirectional memory’. One (and possibly the most widely known) such ‘interplay’ between ‘different pasts’ and a ‘heterogeneous present’ occurs in Sri Lanka-based British photographer Stephen Champion’s anthology of conflict photography, *Sri Lanka: War Stories* (2008). Here, Champion arranges photographs from two separate conflict sites from two decades – the Civil War and the 1987-90 JVP insurrection – within a framework that transcends event-specific delimitation. Champion’s collection draws on a range of individual and collective responses to trauma that includes scenes from funerals, sites of burnt bodies, extra-judicially killed persons being mourned by their kin, military parades, combatants in relaxed postures, street scenes at times of curfew, walls bearing angry posters (by different parties embroiled in conflict), scenes from refugee camps, expressions of anxious onlookers, and so on. The photographs are arranged in what appears to be a random distribution in which the author consciously foregoes chronology and linearity.

Both the spirit in which Rothberg proposes ‘multidirectional memory’ – in its being a dehegemonizing tool which undermines ‘total history’ – as well as its complementarity with

¹³ The memoirs central to the present study emerge from a single (and the same) conflict event: the JVP insurrection of 1987-90. However, my study appreciates Delbo’s approach which proposes to map conflict within a cross-event frame. This, in particular, is fruitful to a country like Sri Lanka that has faced multiple conflicts in its post-independence history (1948- the present).

working-through as a social and political investment in challenging dominant history, are central to the overall inquiry of my study. For writers such as Victor Gunathilake, the narrative process begins with notes he wrote down to externalize triggered memories of his incarceration and torture: a self-administered healing exercise. The accumulating notes, in time, directed the shape and depth of what eventually became an extensive work on personal and community dislocation. In his case, what had begun as a ‘private’ document gradually reshaped as testimony on behalf of a community and a generation affected by conflict. “When testimony leaves the intimate sphere and becomes public by entering into the media, the legal system, and other spheres”, Rothberg concedes, “the psychoanalytic conception of dialogue proves inadequate for comprehending testimony’s circulation and potential political impact” (Rothberg, “Between Auschwitz and Algeria” 162). Gunathilake’s writing exemplifies such a survivor who, in the process of working-through, re-invested his energy in a documentation that has a bearing on transforming history and shaping conflict memory of his home district. This aspect of the survivor narrative will be more closely analyzed in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 3

From Witnessing to Bearing History: Writing the Camp, Extreme of Torture, and Writing as a Process of Working-through

The emergence of counter-narratives that challenge dominant assumptions about the 1987-90 violence by writers who defend the state is a significant narrative space. As a body, this developing literature implies a struggle to preserve and convey memory against denial and forgetting. If the suppression of the JVP rebellion in 1987, as Chandraprema suggests, resulted in “a burial”, its counter-narrative contributes to an exhumation and a re-examination of the event in light of further evidence and witnessing. My analysis of survivor narratives in this chapter is centered on representations of the camps and their torture routines, as well as survivors’ resolutions to write and document their experiences. I draw on the work of three survivors of the 1987-90 emergency – Ajith Perakum Jayasinghe, Rohitha Munasinghe, and Victor Gunathilake – who have since published their memoirs for mass circulation. With varying degrees of political activism and indoctrination to Marxist praxis, these three writers had exposure to JVP politics. None of them were known as writers prior to their incarcerations during the emergency. In the case of Munasinghe and Gunathilake, their commitment to recording trauma and displacement became their entries to the world of literature. Munasinghe’s subsequent work on the violent political culture in Sri Lanka during 1987-90 included a wider political and social range. Through the second half of the 2000s, Jayasinghe emerged as a journalist and a blogger who regularly comments on social issues. His autobiographical novel, which draws on his experience of incarceration and torture, was published almost three decades after the event. As a collective, the working-through processes Gunathilake, Jayasinghe, and Munasinghe subscribe to – and are assisted by –

demonstrate a common factor: a desire to survive and convey the story of their ordeal. Their worlds are united by an identification with a communist political legacy from an early age and struggles in daily life during childhood and youth. With suburban or rural roots, they could identify with the JVP's main sympathy base which, till about the late-2000s, was predominantly among rural Sinhalese youth who had experienced social inequality and had been challenged by limited opportunities in the 1970s and 1980s.

In part, it can be argued that these narratives emerge as a resistance to victimization, and as a way of asserting a history that had been denied to the writers (as survivors) and their peers, friends, and loved ones whose lives were either displaced or destroyed by the conflict. From therein rises the will and desire to contribute to a counter-narrative, and to engage with the public to reset – if not correct – the balance of the published history of 1987-90. This will to represent is a powerful impetus that constitutes a part of a return from the debris of subjugation and deprivation the survivors experienced during long weeks of incarceration. Removed from the compelling camp-atmosphere and brought back within the familiarity of a reassuring world, the survivors – with the reenactment of normalcy and order – gradually regain the courage that facilitates documentation and the sharing of experience. The desire to communicate to a public underlines a growing confidence of having returned from the 'reversal' which the detainees were subjected to during incarceration.

In this chapter, I investigate the torture camp memoirs of Gunathilake, Jayasinghe, and Munasinghe as narratives that have worked through a traumatic past. I analyze the formal and subjective aspects of their works, as a means of identifying their strategies of working-through in the conveying of marginalized history. I investigate in part how the works in question can be analysed through a frame of traumatic realism, and the ways in which working-through directs the outlook of the writing. I also draw on and present different coping strategies and influences in the writers' lives which assist in their post-traumatic

recovery as individuals. These arcs of my general inquiry lead to the overarching argument that is at the heart of my analysis: the place and energy of survivor narratives as counter-history to the dominant grand narrative of the 1987-90 emergency.

Against Forgetting: The Emergence of the Counter-Narrative

The counter-narrative of the 1987-90 emergency was one of gradual emergence over three long decades from 1990 to the present (2021). As early as 1990, in spite of strict monitoring by the state and threats faced by dissenters, several journalists serialized and published their investigations probing into human rights violations and killings of persons at the time. Individual journalists who worked for popular and alternative newspapers as well as organized collectives – such as the writers in the *Hiru* newspaper in the early-1990s – were crucially engaged in such reportage. A number of journalists were assaulted while some others were forced into exile or killed.¹⁴ Kularatne Kurukulasuriya and Anura Horatious represent such a group of writers who reported serialized stories on killings that were carried out under widespread impunity. Of note, in particular, are Kurukulasuriya's articles on the controversial massacre of 30-odd students in Embilipitiya by the military which he later published as *Embilipitiya Minee-maruwo* (The Killers of Embilipitiya) in 1991. A provincial town in the country's lower midland Sabaragamuwa Province, Embilipitiya has since remained a focal point in discussions of human rights violations in Sri Lanka. The young boys who were disappeared had earlier been held captive in the Sevana army camp in the Embilipitiya town. It was later discovered that these boys, along with other inmates, had been taken away and killed, and their bodies destroyed. Investigations of mass graves found in the

¹⁴ Dharman Wickremereetna was removed from a Europe-bound airplane by "officers in civvies" in August 1990 under the suspicion of transporting documents related to human rights violations in Sri Lanka (Wickremereetna, "Preface"). Journalist Richard de Zoysa was abducted from his home in February 1990 and killed. It is speculated that some documents related to state crimes in his possession had been removed by a paramilitary group which operated as his abductors.

adjacent Suriyakandha area in 1993 and investigative reports related to them played a decisive role in the outcome of the 1994 elections in which the UNP government was voted out after 17 years in office.

Based on the Suriyakandha mass graves, Sirimal Wijesinghe published a provocative narrative titled *Suriyakandhe Abhi Rahas Mala Minee* (The Mysterious Dead Bodies of Suriyakandha) while, in 2014, Kularatne Kurukulasuriya and Kanchana Madhavi published a highly detailed and extensive account of the Embilipitiya massacres as *Amavaka Sandha Yata* (Under a Moonless Sky). Set within a broader framework, *Amavaka Sandha Yata* incorporates primary and secondary witness accounts by those who survived torture at the Sevana camp and of family members of the murdered victims. Along with writers such as Anura Horatious – the author of the popular *Gini-avi Saha Gini-keli* (Firearms and Fireworks) series which, in the 1990s, sold in the thousands – these writers represent early attempts in cultivating a counter-discourse which investigated state violence and questioned human rights violations during the 1987-90 period. As a commentary and deconstruction of events that led to the July 1987 emergency, Prins Gunasekara's *A Lost Generation: Sri Lanka in Crisis: The Untold Story* (1998) complements this emergent discourse of counter-narratives with a historical and political frame.¹⁵

Although the existence of torture camps had been rooted as a part of mass consciousness from as early as 1988, Rohitha Munasinghe's *Eliyakandha Wadha Kandhawura*, when it was published in 2000, was the first full length memoir to emerge as a retrospective witness narrative of life within a torture camp. Along with Munasinghe's pioneering representations of the torture camp in Sri Lanka, my study incorporates memory-

¹⁵ This corpus also includes work such as Prasanna Sanjeeva Tennakoon's *Rohana Wijeweera* (2011) and H.M. Gunaratne's (pseudonym) *Life Means Not to Kill* (2008). Ranjith Peiris, a one-time JVP activist who later became a supporter of the state in counter-offensives, wrote two books: *Wijeweera Ghaathanaye Abhi-rahasa* (The Mystery of the Wijeweera Assassination) in 1994 and *Pana-ethi Deviwaru* (translated to English as *Living Gods*) in 2015. Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka (JDS), who operate from undisclosed exile, publish in their website retrospective commentaries of the violence orchestrated by the state troops and paramilitaries.

driven narratives of incarceration by Victor Gunathilake in *71-89 Mathkayan* (Memories of 71-89) (2009) and Ajith Perakum Jayasinghe in *K. Point* (2018).¹⁶ In an overlapping period, Munasinghe and Jayasinghe were both simultaneously incarcerated at the Eliyakandha camp, in Matara, in 1989 and 1990. Their narratives corroborate one another and, read together, characterize an extremely difficult survival under physically and morally challenging conditions in a facility that was infamously known as Killing Point (or K-Point). Though Gunathilake's incarceration and torture in police custody in the south-western Kalutara district was of a shorter duration, his narrative reflects the trauma and shock he experience, after the events. He suggests that he, along with three others, was marked to be killed, but survived owing to a mixture of good fortune and sharp instinct. His narrative is significant for its incorporation of primary and secondary witnessing, and as the work of a politically conscious individual who is keen in setting on record the unfortunate fate of those who were victimized and/or killed. To record these stories Gunathilake goes in search of survivors and their families, extending his narrative project from personal to community memory.

The body of counter-narratives of the 1987-90 conflict has, over time, received a strong contribution from Rohitha Munasinghe who, following his torture camp memoir, published several political commentaries, biographies, and works of fiction which gave visibility to the JVP's activism from an insider's position. All of Munasinghe's writing was done in exile in Paris where he arrived in search of asylum in 1990. Among his work is a twin volume bearing the title *Ja. Vi. Pe. Sangawunu Ithihasayen Bindhak* (From the Hidden History of the JVP) of which the first volume (2006) reads as a biographical commentary. Through retrospection, Munasinghe constructs a history of the ordinary, local-level activists and sympathizers who were a part of the JVP during the late-1970s and early-1980s. During the time, he was a frontline member of the party in his native Weligama area in Matara.

¹⁶ These three works are published in Sinhala and – with the exception of Munasinghe's *Eliyakandha Wadha Kandhawura* – have no translations available in English. For the purposes of my study I use my translations of relevant passages from all three texts.

These narratives contribute to a community history of sorts in which the activist stories of men and women who dedicated their lives to the “promise of an equal and fair society in the villages” (Munasinghe, ‘Dedication’ of *Ja.Vi.Pe*) are documented and preserved for a new generation of readers. In addition, since the early-1990s, Munasinghe has contributed to newspapers – both JVP-publications and mainstream media – while intervening with political debates and social issues.

In 2000, introducing *Eliyakandha Wadha Kandhawura*, Munasinghe records how he wished to catalogue “(previously) unpublished incidents that took place in military and torture camps” which – as they look back on “a past that was soaked with blood, tears and sighs” – will be “of significance to the present and the future” (Munasinghe, ‘Introduction’ to *Eliyakandha*). Munasinghe claims that from the very beginning of his incarceration he had a steadfast resolve to “reveal all” that took place around him in the torture camp. His corpus, therefore, can be assessed as a realization of his politically-conscious and socially-committed resolve to strengthen the voice of victims who, under the shadow of the state’s gaze, have been rendered destructible and powerless. Other works by Munasinghe that are relevant to the scope of this thesis include a biography and a fictionalized-biography of two prominent JVP leaders who were captured and killed towards the tail-end of the conflict in 1989. In *Rangala Preme* (Preme of Rangala), published in 2002, Munasinghe attempts a characterization – albeit, with names and places thinly-fictionalized – of Samarappulige Somasiri, a front man of the JVP military wing who, along with two other leaders, was killed in a torture camp in Colombo on 29 December 1989 (Wickremereetna 91, 108). Published in 2016, *Upanayaka Upatissa Gamanayake* (The Deputy, Upatissa Gamanayake) is a biography of the JVP’s General Secretary (from 1984 to 1989), Upatissa Gamanayake. A key actor in resurrecting the JVP after its suppression in 1971, Gamanayake, in the 1980s, was a key coordinate between the underground leadership and numerous fronts the JVP used during that phase of

the party's activism. Gamanayake was captured and killed by the state, and his body is believed to have been destroyed on 14 November 1989 (Wickremereetna 81). In the biographies on Somasiri and Gamanayake, Munasinghe's interest seems to lie in demystifying two idealized – even romanticized – rebel leaders by familiarizing the reader to their everyday work, responsibilities, general outlook and so on.

Victor Gunathilake's memoir which covers both the 1971 uprising and the 1987-90 insurrection, to date, remains his only published work. Published in 2009, the writing of *71-89 Mathakayan* appears to have begun in the early-1990s, soon after his miraculous escape from death (which he refers to in the concluding chapter). The writing of his memoir had first begun as a self-administered therapy for trauma, and as a way of overcoming nightmares and anxiety which he regularly experienced (Gunathilake x). As his project took shape over time, Gunathilake seems to broaden his scope from an outline of military and political activity in the Kalutara district to include victim stories of other men and women he knew. He claims that he personally witnessed "how the earth was soaked by the blood of hundreds of youth" in spite of their "deafening cries for mercy" which, even at the point of writing, rang in his ears (Gunathilake ix-x). He expresses an overwhelming need to "share with society" the torture and displacement of his generation (Gunathilake x). His memoir narrows and familiarizes the gulf between the self and the social as he navigates between them with a politically-conscious imagination. Though written during the mid-1990s, *71-89 Mathakayan* was not published until 2009. This delay is not fully explained in the book, but Gunathilake claims that a lingering sense of insecurity was often felt by his family. The ten to twelve year gap between first draft and final publication – years spent in revision and reconsideration of events – is of deep interest to my study, which is focused on writing as a product of working-through trauma.

Of the three key texts I investigate, Jayasinghe's *K. Point* is the most recent addition to the discourse of survivor narratives discussed in this thesis. Published 28 years after his incarceration at Eliyakandha, Jayasinghe adopts the narrative frame of autobiographical fiction to convey his experience. He writes in the third person, but in a voice that also maintains access to the thoughts and feelings of the story's main character, Rachaka (literally translatable as 'the author', or 'the writer'). As will be discussed in a later chapter, Jayasinghe alludes to a 'distance' which he has established between the past and the present, through which, in hindsight, he understands the complexity of the torture camp as a site (Jayasinghe, Frontispiece to *K. Point*). "Rachaka is not myself," Jayasinghe writes. "But, nor is he not myself". In his narrative, evidence of working-through past trauma and the 'critical distance' he has self-fashioned in reimagining that past are palpable. This is a point I will return to in a later chapter as I investigate the survivor narratives as they constitute conveyances of dislocated history.

A Systematic Undoing of the Self: the Torture Camp Experience

In the 'Preface' to his *The Drowned and the Saved* (Levi 36-69) Primo Levi makes a reference to Simon Wiesenthal's *The Murderers Are Among Us*, in which a hapless group of Jewish prisoners are being cynically admonished by their Nazi persecutors: "none of you will be left to bear witness," the aggressors boast with confidence. "But even if someone were to survive, the world will not believe him". This assurance and bravado seem to be widespread among the Nazi camp guards who, in the confidence of their domination, seem to believe in their firm control over narrative and the right to narrate history. In their confident moment not only do they rule out the possibility of Jewish survival to witness, but they seem to equally undermine the emergence of a survivor narrative. The blind confidence demonstrated in such

total denial is a statement born out of the ‘state of exception’ which draws our attention to the arrogance of authority given birth to in such uncompromising conditions. Levi’s reference is an economical yet effective indicator of the control the camp exercised over both the agency and the narrative of detainees, and the degree to which they were undermined and marginalized as ‘voiceless’. Within this power equation the captive world, at its most fundamental, can be understood as being in an inverse relation to the perceived threat posed by the guards’ bravado. It results in a condition where the hope of survival – through painful and humiliating enforcements – continuously diminishes by the hour, and in which the impetus for representation is shattered. Being perpetuated over time, this encourages a space where voice and agency are suspended and the hope of their ever being regained or redeemed is gradually diffused.

Between incarceration and the writing of that traumatic encounter there is an experiential hinterland: what, in an act of witnessing, becomes the site with which the survivors interact. The material of survivor stories derives from the despairing sights seen and sounds heard in what seemed to be a never-ending sequence of violence. Therefore, the role of the witness and the process of witnessing – of the detainee’s becoming a bearer of what he has seen and heard – is a fruitful departure point for my discussion of narrating the torture camp.

What it means to witness violence from within a death camp has engaged theorists such as Shoshanna Felman who – in her study of Claude Lanzmann’s Holocaust film, *Shoah* – recognizes in a torture victim “a relentless struggle for remembrance, but for the self-negating, contradictory, conflictual remembrance of... an *amnesia*”: a struggle which is often encountered in testimony, and is entrenched within an “impossibility of telling” (Felman, “The Return of” 224-225). While acknowledging Felman – whose discussion is focused on video-facilitated oral narrations – and her assertion of the poverty of testimony when faced by

the ‘impossibility of telling’, I distinguish between oral testimony and the written narrative produced through multiple drafts, revisions, and reconsiderations. As a result of associated techniques and the different cognitive functions that are associated with it, the written narrative is inherently placed within a thinking-through scheme that is fundamentally different to a spontaneous, ‘on camera’ recording of testimony.¹⁷

Torture, to Elaine Scarry, results in a “step-by-step backward movement” – a reversing of “the path by which language comes into being” (20) – that is aimed at deconstructing the prisoner’s agency and voice. As already discussed in the previous chapter, Scarry views torture as a process that obliterates “the contents of consciousness” (Scarry 55) and transfers the power of the body from the individual (detainee) to the torturer/the state. Being reduced to a bare condition at the extreme of incarceration, even if a detainee was determined to survive and narrate his story, the shaping of the narrative emerges post-event, and as a re-imagination facilitated by working-through. This process on the whole signifies a centrifugal movement from the immediacy of the camp’s turbulent and chaotic impressions: an experiential, temporal and spatial distance through which the narrator enters a more meaningful negotiation with his dislocated past. This bargaining, as Cathy Caruth notes, paves the way for a “possibility in history” and a “point of departure” for narration (Caruth 192) where the working-through processes, as Maurice Blanchot asserts, signifies a “watch over absent meaning” (Blanchot 42).

The narration of trauma – both as primary and secondary witness accounts – often encourages narrative frames that transcend conventional forms. The narratives central to my study go beyond the classical realist genre and – as befits each case – incorporate cross-genre features. To understand this permeation through the formal limits set by realism, I incorporate Rothberg’s concept of ‘traumatic realism’ - a frame which he develops through his reading of

¹⁷ In *Holocaust Testimonials: The Ruins of Memory*, Langer illustrates the point by using as an example an interview with Barbara Fischman Traub regarding her book *The Matrushka Doll*.

trauma and the formal experimentation that underlies its narration. His analysis is anchored on the poverty of conventional realist and anti-realist narrative modes in sufficiently accommodating the demands of trauma narratives. In my analysis I use traumatic realism to understand the multi-modal and non-linear constructions in survivor narratives I have studied: a representation of traumatic pasts that requires the writers to develop alternatives to linear, genre-specific narrative. In 1989, as the crackdown of the JVP intensified, deliberate attempts were made by perpetrators involved – the Sri Lankan military inclusive – to destroy incriminating evidence. This is suggested by dead bodies that were either decapitated or mutilated, secret mass graves, and the deposition of bodies into rivers and the sea.¹⁸ The narratives of torture camps, therefore, emerge against such an extraordinary machine of destruction and erasure. Representations of such a magnitude of violence and its resultant trauma seem to motivate writers to transcend familiar structures and forms in search of experimental ‘new modes’. In conceptualizing traumatic realism Rothberg shows how writers engage with diverse experiential aspects that register the traumatic afterlives of violent events, and the formal and linguistic facets that accommodate their narrative experimentations.

Rothberg identifies three fundamental demands that challenge representations of extreme events such as camp torture: the demand for documentation, the demand for reflection on the formal limits of such representation, and the demand for the risky public circulation of such discourses and events (Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism* 7). He presents the paradigm of traumatic realism as a “form of documentation and historical cognition” which is “attuned to the demands of extremity” (Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism* 14). It deviates from the epistemological and representational claims of the realist approach where “the [event] is

¹⁸ A representational example can be drawn from the torture facility at Sevana Army Camp in Embilipitiya, where detainees were “taken away” in a lorry never to be seen again. Witness accounts behold that these detainees were killed in a jungle, and their bodies were set on fire after being doused in petrol (Kurukulasuriya and Madhavi 320, 333-335).

knowable” and where that knowledge can be “translated into a familiar mimetic universe” (3-4), as well as the anti-realist framework where such trauma is only knowable under “radically new regimes of knowledge” (4). Acknowledging the difficulty of “construct[ing] a recognizable narrative out of extremity”, Rothberg draws attention to how certain works, by overreaching “direct reference and coherent narrative” (101), exceed “the frameworks of... classical realism” and “the poststructuralist critique of representation” (100).¹⁹ These key ideas assisted me in my reading and understanding of the formal anatomy of the narratives I studied and their aesthetics in constructing a world of torture through a non-linear, trans-generic approach.

Gunathilake’s 71-89 *Mathakayan*, for instance, demonstrates a complex anatomy consisting of the features of autobiography, commentary, reportage and, in instances, the narrative thriller. Gunathilake effortlessly converges these elements into a single narrative frame through which he sustains credibility among readers without compromising representations that describe victimization. For example, in presenting cases of police violence against individuals who were abducted and killed (94-199), Gunathilake relies on a journalistic tone – arguably, a tonality which is conventionally associated with ‘balanced reporting’ – into which he infuses personal commentary. However, to satisfy the need the storyteller has for dramatization, dialogue and conversation has been woven into the text in strategic places (111-112, 116-118, 152-153, 166-168). The words and phrases that constitute the dialogue, in turn, are derived from interviews which Gunathilake has conducted and from his own first hand experiences. A composition which is overall similar to the anatomy of 71-89 *Mathakayan* can be detected in Munasinghe’s *Eliyakandha Wadha Kandhawura*: a text which, in addition to commentary and autobiography, in places demonstrates a novelistic impression. The preface of the book refers to a return to the camp site where, ten years

¹⁹ Rothberg substantiates his point with reference to Ruth Kluger’s memoir *Weiter Leben* and Charlotte Delbo’s *Auschwitz and After*. Both Kluger (autobiography and commentary) and Delbo (autobiography, commentary, and historical documentary) are introduced as inventing new narrative forms in response to trauma.

before, Munasinghe was caught between life and death for several months. In broad daylight, with the assistance of a driver, Munasinghe travelled up a hill in which – as a prisoner – he had been transported in blindfolds and handcuffs. The rhythm of the vehicle’s engine, as an idea, associates Munasinghe’s present with the memory of his past:

Our driver steered the vehicle along the sharp bends of that narrow road. The engine was on a single-gear journey in the same continuing breath. As I closed my eyes for a moment or two, I felt that this was the same road I was taken along twelve years before. (“Preface” to *Eliyakandha*)

The reference to the “single-gear journey” in a “continuing breath” is a poetic impression of the steep incline of the Eliyakandha hill which requires the lowest gear. In another instance, Munasinghe muses on Kushtarajagala – the imposing mountain rock near his house – in words that evoke an almost poetic rendition of endurance in spite of centuries of change. “Kushtarajagala gazes as before,” Munasinghe writes. “The giant tree that gave shade to the rock and the grave of Gouder, the Dutch-Burgher man, remain likewise” (Munasinghe, *Eliyakandha* 198). The liberal use of literary techniques such as personification of the engine and the rock, as well as the association of ideas that intensify the writer’s sense of post-traumatic displacement, play a crucial role in conveying the witness’ voice. The reference to the rock which Munasinghe claims to “be resilient to centuries of harsh climate conditions” (198) metaphorically represents the endurance which Munasinghe shows in the face of torture. On the other hand, in spite of external elements and the passage of time, the rock – with a certain static and reticent quality – appears unchanged. I argue that in such carefully crafted use of metaphor the writer is experimenting with an idiom that supplements an absence which cannot be (otherwise) voiced through commentary.

Of the three writers, Jayasinghe most explicitly deploys a framework of autobiographical fiction which he uses to purchase flexibility in narrating his immediate story within the larger context of the violence. He uses a voice of a third person narrative which he strategically brings closer to the thoughts of his protagonist and, as occasion demands, zooms out adjacent to that of a detached commentator. The narrative is also marked by references to historical time through specific verifiable incidents such as the presidential election in 1988 (Jayasinghe 30) and the enforcement of emergency regulations in June 1989 (153). He interfuses these with local incidents like the deaths of prisoners (205) and visits from the International Red Cross (246) which places biography and historical detail in a mutually-enforcing synthesis. In my view, Jayasinghe's centering of history – inclusive of dates and events – is a necessary arc, and one that enforces the strength of a narrative that occupies a space between a personal experience and its semi-fictional narrative rendition.

Witnessing the Camp

The narratives on which I base the present analysis are productions of primary and secondary witnessing with elements of memoir, historically-informed fiction, reportage, biography and investigation: a multi-linearity which I argue is born out of the demands of traumatic realism. The references to torture and incarceration are primarily set in two locations – the Eliyakandha camp in Matara and an undisclosed facility in Kalutara – and relate to incidents in 1989 and 1990. Munasinghe's *Eliyakandha Wadha Kandhawura* and Jayasinghe's *K. Point* are both centered on the notorious incarceration/torture camp situated in the coastal Brown's hill in the Matara town, and are published eighteen years apart. This camp was controlled by the Third Battalion of the Sinha regiment and, later, by the Sri Lanka

Artilleries (Munasinghe, *Eliyakandha* 91). Taken together, these narratives are complementary in characterizing a harrowing sequence of torture events in graphic and disturbing detail. On the whole, both writers maintain a detached view and dispassionate assessment of the camp culture, its participants, and its ruthless executions. My first reading of *Eliyakandha Wadha Kandhawura* was stalled by the violent descriptions which, at the time, I felt were too surreal to be true. To continue the reading and to return to the text later on required much mental stamina. I place this personal experience adjacent to the calmness and detachment of the narrator's voice. Specifically, what reached me through the pages of the book was a mature voice that had come to terms with the events it conveyed, and had thought-through those events against the larger socio-political frame of the 1987-90 period.

In 2000, when *Eliyakandha Wadha Kandhawura* was first published, Munasinghe was in France, in his tenth year of exile. His became the first full length survivor narrative of the emergency to be published with the potential for wide circulation in Sri Lanka. The book was published by S. Godage, a leading publisher in Sri Lanka, after the manuscript had been brought to the country through proxy.²⁰ When Munasinghe returned to the site of the former torture camp a decade later, the buildings had been demolished and the land been reclaimed for other developmental projects. By way of a preface to the book's second and third editions, Munasinghe includes accounts of two such later visits to the former torture camp; and of his encounters with new occupants – oblivious of the violent past – who were resident on land that was once a killing field. These visits will be referred to and discussed in the course of the chapter.

In its heyday, the Eliyakandha camp was also referred to as Killing Point (Jayasinghe 116) – or, as K. Point – from which Jayasinghe adopts the title for his work. When Jayasinghe published his narrative, in which he draws on his prolonged incarceration of over

²⁰ For undisclosed reasons Godage has declined to reprint the book. (*Eliyakandha*, Preface).

a year at the Eliyakandha facility, almost thirty years had passed. Upon release in the early-1990s, Jayasinghe became a school-teacher enrolled in the state teacher service, but later joined private sector employment and earned a reputation as an emerging political commentator and a writer. At present, Jayasinghe continues to write on Sri Lanka's current tide of post-war Sinhala nationalism and centralist tendencies of government which he opposes. This evolution offers a glimpse of the socio-political experiences and changes in Jayasinghe's life in the course of thirty years leading, in his mid-fifties, to the writing of *K. Point*. Of equal significance is Jayasinghe's ideological shift since the late-1980s, as he has completely broken off from JVP-politics while, in the present, his writing gives impressions of a liberal, social democratic tendency.²¹ It suffices to conclude that Jayasinghe's mapping of his Eliyakandha experience comes after many personal, ideological, and circumstantial changes which – as factors that shape 'distance' and 'balance' – can be argued to be influential in his reconstruction of a traumatic past.

Unlike Jayasinghe's prolonged incarceration, the time Munasinghe spent at Eliyakandha was limited to two months, after which he was transferred to the remand prison in Boossa, in Galle, and then, to the Koggala rehabilitation center. The latter facilities were regulated internment spaces. In November 1990, on receiving conditional freedom, Munasinghe smuggled himself out of Sri Lanka, later arriving in Paris through a circuitous land route. It had been almost a year since his capture on 14 November 1989, which coincided with the day the JVP leader Wijeweera was captured and killed by the military. On this day, Munasinghe's house in Weligama was surrounded by armed personnel who arrived in a van. According to the prevalent practice of such operations at the time, the arrest was carried out without a warrant or the standard due process. Munasinghe's brother-in-law was also 'taken in' in the same instance. After being taken to the nearby Weligama army camp,

²¹A survey of Ajith Perakum Jayasinghe's writing – prominently in his blogs and web-based journalism – indicates this shift of outlook.

Munasinghe was blindfolded and assaulted. He suspected his arrest to have been prompted by “a tip off to the army by the [government] MP of the electorate” (Jayatunge). His JVP connections prior to the party’s ban in 1983 would have been known to people of his hometown since he was an active party member in the Matara district. Munasinghe supposed that the government/UNP politician of the area may have suspected him of still maintaining undercover JVP links (Jayatunge).

At the Weligama army camp Munasinghe was for the first time introduced to routine torture. The blows directed at Munasinghe came from a range of implements which included “wooden clubs, plywood strips, s-lon pipes, rubber pipes, wires that had been twined into one, and canes” (Munasinghe, *Eliyakandha* 5). “Except for the beatings that targeted the bones and joints,” he recalls, “the assaults by wooden clubs stopped being unbearable after the first seven or eight blows”. Assaults that used wires, canes, and rubber pipes caused Munasinghe unbearable pain. His skin split and Munasinghe had begun to bleed. (Munasinghe, *Eliyakandha* 5). In many instances, Munasinghe’s experience mirrors that of Rachaka: the name Jaysinghe gives his narrator-protagonist in *K. Point*. Rachaka is a mid-tier functionary at district-level who, along with a few others, gets captured by a routine army patrol. The story leaves space for speculation that the arrest was caused by a betrayal of a turncoat. Upon arrest, Rachaka gets blindfolded and transported in a van to a makeshift military camp. Brought on by intimations to torture stories he had heard through hearsay Rachaka is haunted by the ordeals that awaited him in the camp. He anticipates being

beaten... hung from his fingers, his nails being removed, of being laid on a bunk with the guards stomping on his back while others beat his soles... of his hands and legs being tied together through which a shank was sent which was then placed on a support, so that [he] could be spun like a wheel in suspension... of being tied up in a way that [his] arms were

yanked and were hanging behind, of being beaten while chillies were burnt under one's feet, and of being pressed with hot electric irons. (Jayasinghe 64-65)

Such harsh treatment in military and police custody have haunted the public imagination since the early-1970s and have found their way into people's narratives of military and police brutality. Stories emerging from the 1971 insurgency further grounded the later narratives of the 1987-90 period. Similar patterns can also be located in an expanding corpus focusing on victim marginalization, which includes an expansive literature emerging from Sri Lanka's long civil war with the Tamil liberation movement. Jayasinghe's references to captives being tortured in degrading ways often resonates with other instances recorded by writers contributing to literature on incarceration. Such instances include – but, are not limited to – the use of chili powder (Kurukulasuriya 9), hot irons that left disfigurements (Kurukulasuriya and Madhavi 165-166), and the bodies of detainees being burnt by cigarettes (Gunaratne 66): patterns and practices of extreme violence that are left out of dominant narratives of the conflict. These are important revelations which, as Adelman suggests, unless they emerged as testimony from within the camp, cannot be known otherwise (Adelman 84-85).

The map of violence to which Munasinghe and Jayasinghe contribute is further nuanced by Gunathilake's 71, 89 *Mathakayan* which he writes through the second half of the 1990s. Gunathilake was a one-time JVP sympathizer who, in 1989, was incarcerated by the Theubuwana Police in the Kalutara district. The physical and mental trauma he had sustained periodically caused traumatic symptoms even many years after the event. His narrative has two inter-woven sub-narratives. In the first half, he recounts his experiences during the abortive JVP insurgency of 1971 when – as a school boy in his mid-teens – he was attracted to the party (11-67). Even though he did not take part in the actual attack that was carried out

on 5 April 1971, he was arrested by the Matugama Police and, pending trial, was held in custody for over two years. Following the inquest, he received a general pardon and returned to his village where he continued his education. Later, he secured an appointment as a clerk in the state corporation sector. Even though the narrative does not indicate a direct involvement with JVP politics, Gunathilake insinuates that he was a sympathizer of the party from the time of his release till about 1983, when the JVP was banned. Of particular relevance to my study is the second part of Gunathilake's narrative in which he reports the insurgency and counter-insurgency of 1988 and 1989. This section includes observations of army, police and paramilitary movement in the Kalutara district, short biographies of persons known to Gunathilake (and who he had researched on) that had been killed or were disappeared, details of several prominent rebel activists who were killed by the military, evidence of direct political patronage in violence, and references to torture camps and mass graves in the district. While cataloguing the activities of the Matugama, Kalutara South and Kalutara North Police stations, and the makeshift army camp at Mahagama Rest House, Gunathilake makes detailed references to extra-judicial practices carried out in the Soranathotawatte torture camp, the Pelawatte army camp, and the Upper Karannagoda area. Gunathilake's narrative is extensively informed by interviews and meetings he had had with victims of the violence and relatives of victims, former policemen, former counter-insurgency personnel, and other villagers who had borne witness to the events. The extensive research, in turn, is an attempt to go beyond his personal trauma in order to gain a critical and comparative purchase from the community at large. Through his approach and temperament Gunathilake becomes a 'conveyer of history', as he builds on sources, points of view, and experiences in characterizing a historical moment.

Gunathilake's troubles started when a paramilitary group he later identified as the 'Green Tigers' made an abortive attempt to kidnap him through a midnight raid of his home.

The group was led by a politician of a local council and others (Gunathilake 101). Gunathilake writes of these men as “having perfected many hunts, were well-experienced” in such operations who had with them “unregistered vehicles and the latest weapons.” (101). Being alerted by barking dogs in the night and having sensed his house being sieged Gunathilake, with his wife and two young children, had immediately withdrawn through the back door to an adjacent paddy-field (102). Concerned of his safety, Gunathilake had later presented himself to the local UNP politician to get his name ‘cleared’ from being a rebel suspect. In spite of the politician’s assurance that Gunathilake will no longer be threatened, a few months later he was captured by the police who stormed a funeral in the village. In this instance, Gunathilake had been indicated by a ‘bogeyman’ whom the police had brought with them to identify JVP sympathizers.

Often consisting of open tents, inadequate, makeshift latrines, and inadequate sanitation, the overall condition and the facilities of the torture camp were carefully groomed and consciously-maintained aspects of a machine of violence: a physical layout that extended to and ensured the conditions needed for the intended degradation and de-personalization of the captive. As a structure, the camp identified, encouraged, and achieved moral and physical breakdown of the prisoners. For instance, prior to his being transferred to Eliyakandha, Munasinghe was detained at the Weligama army camp where periodical beatings of blindfolded detainees continued under numerous pretexts while their festering wounds, attracting flies, went unattended (Munasinghe, *Eliyakandha* 13). Treatment of a corresponding kind continued – if at all, in more precarious forms – when Munasinghe was relocated to the Eliyakandha camp. The main building of the Eliyakandha camp was an old manor house on the top of a hill that had been modified to suit the purpose of a detention facility. Additional sheds of coconut-thatch roofing had been set up to meet the influx of prisoners while more tents were later put in place when epidemics began to be widespread.

Unable to meet the sanitary requirements of diarrhoea patients, the camp guards handcuffed all patients to a metal chain which was then tied to a tree near the makeshift (open air) latrine (Munasinghe, *Eliyakandha* 100; Jayasinghe 208). Medical negligence was rampant as no standard medical treatment was administered for epidemics or for injuries. The prisoners were forced to perform daily ablutions, take meals, and move from a point to another within a count of five (or ten). These absurd prescriptions signify a suspension of ‘normality’ and a total inversion of the values, norms and standard practices of a society in favour of reducing the detainee to a non-subject.

The rampant culture of violence had its own punishment methods and torture schemes. One such widely-used method was the clubbing of prisoners who, their bodies levelled against the wall, were queued up with their weight on their hands (Munasinghe, *Eliyakandha* 44-45). This seems to be a routine scheme commonly used in addition to other ‘new methods’ that were periodically invented and tried out. Jayasinghe makes reference to a physical drill which he alludes to as ‘Meeharak PT’ (loosely translatable as ‘the physical drill of buffaloes’, or ‘the physical drill of the retards’) which was made of a series of intense physical exercises that often proved unbearable for physically and morally fragile prisoners. He explains:

Meeharak PT begins with ‘irsi potion’.²² When you are in ‘irsi potion’, they release a volley of assaults on your upper back with clubs that are the size of mammoty-handles or hose pipes. When you try to hold your breath against the barrage of beatings... you feel as if you are falling into a ditch that has no end. What is even more difficult is the mental pressure of awaiting your turn as they come clubbing one after the other. It is entirely up to you to survive and live after an assault which is strenuous enough to cause one’s death. (Jayasinghe 130-131)

²²‘Irsi potion’ is the camp jargon for standing on one’s hands with the body trained along the wall.

The torture routine described above demonstrates the “step-by-step backward movement” which Scarry suggests reverses “the path by which language comes into being” (20). The feeling of “falling into a ditch that has no end” – a condition that is difficult to characterize within the boundaries of language – while embodying the suspension of the ability to narrate, also illustrates the transfer of the power of the body from the detainee to the torturer/the state. Jayasinghe further qualifies this scheme of routine torture to include hard drills such as push-ups, roll-forwards and roll-backs, and running with concrete pillars (or some such weight) on one’s back (Jayasinghe 131). The ones who failed the tasks were ordered to jump off the height of ten or fifteen feet (131). Jayasinghe represents the case of a young man who was ordered to jump down a mango tree and broke his spine. Abandoned and deprived of medication he, after having “struggled between life and death for many days”, had died a painful death (Jayasinghe 131). I propose that these harsh drills and the torture they accompanied enforced on the prisoners a “new order” which – enacted periodically – was aimed at shattering the consciousness and the confidence of the detainees, resulting in physical and moral subjugation. This systematic subjugation, at yet another level, included the introduction of alien objects into a prisoner’s body such as barbed wire, which often resulted in the death of the prisoner due to internal injuries (Munasinghe, *Eliyakandha* 23). Witnessing and recording these brutal acts by the torture camp is significant in its potential to represent the voices of those who succumbed to those harsh treatments and whose voices – as Munasinghe characterizes them – were reduced to “death howls” (Munasinghe, *Eliyakandha* 17, 23).

In early-1990, with an increase of captives being sent to Eliyakandha, the overall facilities and the treatment of detainees deteriorated further. In Jayasinghe’s words, Eliyakandha became “a concentration camp” which didn’t even have the necessary numbers

of “officers... torturers... or killers” to match the influx of prisoners (132). In Munasinghe’s characterization of this period, one of the guards – a ruthless torturer whom Munasinghe refers to as ‘Amu Kurahan’²³ – sadistically exercises his authority by mixing up extreme punishments with the “most foul of the Sinhala language” (Munasinghe, *Eliyakandha* 18). Representations of prisoners who were beaten to death or were left to die from torture injuries have often been characterized as screams (Munasinghe, *Eliyakandha* 18), groans and moans (18), and plaintive sounds (92-94). In several instances, these feeble utterances – the remains of a reduced status – trail off into silence as the prisoners succumb to their injuries in a peripheral corner of the torture camp (Jayasinghe 211; Munasinghe, *Eliyakandha* 18, 26, 94). This shattered status of the prisoner where language is obliterated and the body and mind is completely dominated by the torturer with authoritative foul usage exemplifies the inverted logic of the camp.

The extremity of such treatment was routinized to the extent where, innocence or guilt notwithstanding, “beatings and torture were normal” (Gunathilake 135). Soon after his being arrested, Gunathilake was brought to an unidentified army camp where, during initial interrogation, he was heavily and routinely beaten: where he lost three front teeth as a result of a single blow to the nose (184). In *K. Point*, Jayasinghe shares an anecdote received from a detainee who was transferred to Eliyakandha from a camp in the Anuradhapura district which had been notorious for breaking the prisoners’ teeth. “Their mouths were rammed with a club so that at least the front teeth got dislodged,” Jayasinghe claims (Jayasinghe 144). If they didn’t break, the assault was repeated. Once, a newly transferred prisoner had been ordered to self-extract two of his teeth with a rock by the morning. Overnight, the prisoner had somehow managed to complete the assigned task to the satisfaction of his persecutors (144). These attacks on one’s nose, mouth, and teeth – as well as instances where prisoners’ throats

²³ Literally translatable as ‘the tender millet (club)’: possibly because this officer often boasted of giving the prisoners a ‘tender millet treatment’ with his club made out of the bark of a millet tree.

are stamped on or chests are beaten (Gunathilake 185) – symbolically illustrate the demolition of the space to narrate which I have drawn on above.

In contrast to the pro-state narrative where perpetration is often anonymized and the personality of the victim is generalized, the passages I have quoted above draw on the trauma, grief, and pain of inmates at a personal level. As witness accounts, they contribute to the mapping of a pattern of systemic violence that moves between individual cases and signal at overarching tendencies of the camp in general. I argue that these are crucial representations without which a comprehensive and transformative understanding of the camp, as well as meaningful reconciliation, is unachievable. The demonstrated presence of working-through in these descriptions plays a significant role in qualifying them in historical discussions. For instance, Munasinghe writes with clarity about ‘Amu Kurahan’, the sadistic soldier. Yet, the immediacy of the memory notwithstanding, Munasinghe does not harbour a personal grudge or hatred towards his aggressor, but views him and his actions with a detachment that is unshaded by sentimentalism. As a result, in a text that counter-narrates a history where Amu Kurahan’s use of “the most foul of the Sinhala language” dominated, Munasinghe is able to adopt a composure and tonality that indicates an inner reconciliation. A similar echo can be detected in Jayasinghe’s reference to the brutal act of the guards’ order to a prisoner to self-extract his front teeth. While the description evokes pity and a sense of anguish in the reader, Jayasinghe does not follow through with a value judgment or a subjective analysis of the perpetrator. This is a tone and composure he maintains consistently throughout the novel. When juxtaposed with the preface of *K.Point* – where Jayasinghe endorses that both the victims and the torturers were “collective victims of an era” – it demonstrates an understanding and response to torture and trauma which has the power to instruct a mature post-conflict discussion.

Dehumanization and Depravity

The extremity of torture at Eliyakandha resulted in subhuman treatment, dehumanization and bestiality. Such harsh administrations of extreme forms of violence – normalized and set within a perpetuated reversal of order – encouraged perversity in individual torturers. Both Jayasinghe and Munasinghe draw on such instances, thereby challenging the view of the camp as represented by the dominant narrative. The insights provided by witness narratives to bestiality and depravity also signal the prisoner's reduced state as a 'body-object' – a condition brought about by the suspension of normality and the reversal of order – which I referred to earlier. At its height, depraved actions by camp guards and torturers take proportions that seem illogical and irrational. This includes the use of a python that was kept to terrorize the captives (Jayasinghe 212; Munasinghe, *Eliyakandha* 87), and of prisoners being ordered to jump off tall trees (Munasinghe, *Eliyakandha* 87). In instances, a physically diminutive internee was used as a 'human club' to assault fellow detainees, after which the torturer "vigorously swung [the human club] around his body" and "threw him on the rocky ground without a care" (Munasinghe, *Eliyakandha* 90-91).

The conduct of the camp officials and guards towards the sickly and epidemic-ridden prisoners makes disturbing reading. At its height, the treatment of the sick constitutes willful negligence and deprivation of medical care. When measles, diarrhea, and skin diseases broke out, in spite of sickness, the prisoners were shown no leniency, and were kept short in their water supply, bathing, and toilet facilities. In extreme cases of diarrhea, out of fear for being punished, the prisoners were forced to relieve themselves into bags and hide them in their person (Jayasinghe 154). In a particularly disturbing passage, Munasinghe records how a group of prisoners who had been newly transferred to Eliyakandha from another camp – who were weak owing to prolonged starvation and diarrhea – were beaten whenever they asked to

use the toilet. Whenever their clothes were soiled they were beaten for negligence. These prisoners, who were known within the camp as the ‘Ethiopians’,²⁴ were subjected to (what Munasinghe terms) “creative sadism” by a guard named Nandhe:

“I am now about to give you an antidote for diarrhea. Down on the ground with your heads down!” [Nandhe] ordered. Then, calling on several prisoners from other sheds and huts he assigned them a certain task. “Go and collect husk-tips from that pile of coconut husks and push them up their asses using a stick – like this”.

The order was put into practice. The helpless prisoners screamed in pain and whined. The other torturers who joined the inhuman torturer derived some cruel entertainment as they jumped about and made gleeful noises.

.... The same evening, taking the same group of prisoners out of the tent and making them lie down, [Nandhe] ordered their anal cavities to be blocked by a small piece of stone over which a layer of cement... was cast. (Munasinghe, *Eliyakandha* 99)

The subhuman and bestial treatment advocated at the camp is crucial to the undoing of the human condition and the reduction of the prisoners from their former status of being integrated, social individuals. In his analysis of the global war prison, Derek Gregory observes that bestial treatment, which often included cultural and religious taboos and inversions of social mores, was used to morally deteriorate the captive. For instance the display of naked flesh, the use of animals and animal-like treatment, the removal of space between people and forced contact, according to Gregory, are among the frequently used techniques to achieve this end. He argues that the “physical and intimate touching by

²⁴An ‘Ethiopian’ – or a ‘Somalian’ – is an idiomatic reference among the Sinhalese to a malnourished person, or even a person made thin by starvation. Note that the degrading name is enforced by the very military who authorize the prisoners to be starved.

strangers”, “nudity and sexual exposure before other men”, “homosexual contacts”, “the humiliation of men in front of women” and in “filth” and “enslavement” were methods that consolidated power and imposed superiority (68). These processes are carefully mediated and maintained to bring about physical, moral and spiritual breakdown.

The sub-humanization of the detainee as a physical, moral and psychological mass has psycho-sexual overtones so that, as Michael Taussig observes, “it is not the victim as animal that gratifies the torturer”, but “the fact that the victim is human” (quoted in Gregory 87) and that for torture to continue and for it to be satisfactory, the torturer “requires its victims to be less than human... but it also requires them to be human” (Gregory 87). The punishment given to the diarrhea patients by the torturer Nandhe by introducing to their bodies alien objects – as well as the captives’ being deprived of water and sanitation – stems from this ‘human, but less than human’ designation of the prisoner which Taussig outlines. In civilized conditions, sanitary hygiene plays a frontline role of one’s sense of self. For instance, in Sri Lankan culture, water is central and crucial to basic sanitary hygiene: it is generally considered abnormal not to use water in daily ablutions, or not to take a thorough wash twice (at times, even thrice) a day. The free gravitation towards animalism can also be seen in something as deceptively innocuous as the term ‘Meeharak PT’ which is the name used for the extreme physical drills given to the detainees. ‘Meeherak’, in Sinhala culture, refers to the hefty buffalos – often taken to symbolize primal instincts, lack of intelligence, idleness, and so on. In the physical drill set, the reference of ‘meeharak’ has nothing to do with the activities per se, but is a characterization of the detainees. When it could have been called literally anything, the choice of the word ‘meeharak’ indicates the normalization of the above-referred to ‘human, but less than human’ animalization. In an instance, Jayasinghe adopts the phrase “human cattle-shed” (154) as he relates to the prisoners’ “perspiring and unwashed” condition, where they “did not brush their teeth, did not properly wash their

bottoms and were covered in festers, rashes and itches” (154). Three decades after the traumatic event, the dehumanizing referent to ‘human cattle’, to Jayasinghe, comes as a convenient metaphor that facilitates memory. This immediacy of this metaphor indicates the depth and force with which the degradation has been delivered to a former detainee who, in many other ways, has reconciled with that past, and has set his energies to re-humanize it.

Regaining the Self: Narrating the Torture Camp

Post-trauma recovery of a survivor implies an overcoming – or, indeed, the coming to terms with – this experiential rupture and reversal of which a fundamental challenge is to negotiate with that past and its brutality, and to shape them into narrative. In her *Days and Memory* Charlotte Delbo reflects on her ‘recovery’ after being incarcerated in five different camps between March 1942 and June 1945, including twenty-seven months in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Delbo’s illustration consists of what she terms as a ‘reconstruction of personality’ and a ‘possession of oneself’: a regaining of the sense of self that was shattered by incarceration and torture. “Slowly our thinking began to revive,” Delbo writes. “You had to *reconstruct* your personality, so to speak. That is, you had to *resume possession* of yourself, collecting the scattered pieces which reappeared all of a sudden or else came back to light little by little, pieces you had believed lost and that you had now to stick back together” (quoted in Levi and Rothberg 48; italics mine). Encouraging such recovery, the ‘telling of the story’ – or, rather, the will to communicate that past – presents itself as a means of redeeming one’s agency over a twisted universe. “Our dead, our millions of dead, our suffering, our humiliation would be inscribed in history,” Delbo concedes. “We were coming back. We had a tale to tell” (quoted in Levi and Rothberg 48). The desire to write traumatic histories is both a personal and a political response. It is a response that is facilitated by other idiosyncratic

aspects which includes how one reintegrates with society, post-event. For instance, during his incarceration Munasinghe demonstrates a strong determination to survive the camp and to write his story. For him, he is duty-bound to the hundreds who suffered beside him and others whom he knew as young men and women who were killed as JVP activists. Different from Munasinghe, for Gunathilake his memoir began from short notes he trained himself to write as self-prescribed therapy. However, in each case, the courage and the confidence to write their story – and to allow for it to circulate in print – is derived from one's return to circumstances that are reassuring. In attending to this 'return' of one's voice – or, as Delbo terms it, the "coming back" of the "tale" the survivor carried with her – I aim to identify the 'distance' and 'critical balance' in trauma narratives and how revision, reflection, and reimagining work in contesting dominant histories.

As already established in the second chapter, the state-endorsed narrative tends to shroud the actors who ordered, carried out, or assisted in torture and killing during the 1987-90 conflict. Out of self-interest, this can be proposed as a textual-variant of the impunity which satisfied state agents to carry out these actions. As a result, in spite of detailed descriptions of the rebels killed, their dying words, the surroundings and so on, the pro-state narrative omits details of the persons who operated the killing machine. As a product of working-through, not only does the survivor narrative draw on these 'deselected' and 'erased' agents as factual information, but it introduces such details with detachment and balance. The survivor narrative documents killings and perpetrators without which the understanding of a historical event cannot be complete; the absence of which makes the narrative irresponsible. The narratives in question rarely – if at all – show animosity, rage of any kind, or emotional prejudice against the torturers or the camp as a whole. The personal response of writers like Gunathilake, Jayasinghe, and Munasinghe often come across as a measured, emotionally-disengaged representation that is rarely

compulsive, like in a response of ‘acting out’. While laying emphasis on factors that shape the writers’ ‘working-through’ process, the following section draws on their transition from survivors of torture to their being bearers of an otherwise unknowable, unacknowledged history.

Gunathilake’s 71-89 *Mathakayan* began with a series of notes he wrote to cope with anxiety and interrupted sleep at night (Gunathilake, ‘Preface’). With time, these notes developed into a manuscript which expanded in its scope to document the collective victim memory of the Kalutara district including details of the regional political leadership who led private armies, and police and military activism engaged in kidnappings, torture, and killings (104). Based on primary and secondary witnesses whom he interviewed Gunathilake reports on district-level UNP leaders of the time such as Lakshman Wijemanna,²⁵ Sarath Ranawaka and Meryll Kariyawasam (133) to have overseen paramilitary groups. Gunathilake claims that “all the MPs of the Kalutara district had knowledge of each and every person who were disappeared or kidnapped in their respective electorates,” while “some kidnappings and disappearances were carried out under their blessings.” (135). As it pans out from the private domain to incorporate the collective suffering of a community, its inclusive energy empowers the narrative. The violence the regional political elite carried out against terror activities by the rebels contributes to a comparative picture of the dangers and threats that prevailed during the time: widespread uncertainty which the politicians had to combat through vigorous and ruthless means by giving “leadership to the security divisions while obtaining intelligence from their loyalists” (133). In spite of his being a member and sympathizer of the JVP during the 1970s and early-1980s, Gunathilake also demonstrates an appreciation of the

²⁵ At present, Lakshman Wijemanna is a senior member of the UNP. He was a Member of Parliament from 2001 to 2020. In August 2020, he failed to secure re-election.

precarious situation that faced the ruling elite in striking against the rebels when many other government-affiliated politicians and activists caved in before threats. While the focus of the narrative remains on the victim of state violence, Gunathilake seeks narrative-balance by acknowledging instances such as the miraculous escape of politician Lakshman Wijemanna following an attack on his vehicle by the rebels, and of Sarath Ranawaka who barely escaped a landmine targeting his vehicle (133).

Secondary witness accounts play a key role in Gunathilake's investigation. To draw a wide and holistic picture, Gunathilake interviews many survivors and family members who had witnessed or borne witness to witnesses of the violence at many levels. His, therefore, is an attempt to frame within a single narrative the post-event memory of a community, which includes stories of both victims and their persecutors. As an illustration of the range and depth Gunathilake introduces to his project in terms of the variety of testimony he absorbs I wish to share the representations to follow.

In a reprisal attack by the Meegahatenna police on a village near the Paranawatte temple in Neluwa, the Buddhist temple's chief monk was brutally assaulted and killed (111). Earlier, the villagers had evacuated their homes, but the monk had stayed on with his elderly assistant. Two Police jeeps had arrived at the temple and the monk had been dragged into the open, abused, and heavily beaten. While Gunathilake's source is not explicitly stated it can be speculated that he extracts the information from the elderly temple assistant who had witnessed the attack from a hiding place. The beatings had caused the monk to cough and throw up blood. His body had been burnt on a tyre. "The body was seen in front of the temple for about a week where it slowly burnt" Gunathilake writes. "The reason for killing this monk... was that a group of policemen were attacked in front of his temple" (112). A Buddhist monk belongs to a dignitary level in the village and would generally be considered with reverence. However, Dharman Wickremereetna reports that 722 Buddhist monks had

been killed during the 1987-90 period. 681 of these killings were carried out by the security forces and paramilitaries (Wickremereetna 827). While Wickremereetna tables these figures based on his field notes as a journalist during the conflict, Gunathilake's witnessing provides collaboration and veracity to state violence against rural clergy which, to the present, remains a marginalized discourse.

Gunathilake's report on Piyadasa, a boatman at the Upper Karannagoda jetty, and his family represents the ruthlessness with which some operations were carried out by the military in search of rebel suspects. Having been assaulted and abducted one night from his hut close to the jetty, Piyadasa was taken to the police station at Thebuwana. Having been subjected to further torture he had then been incarcerated at the Bombuwala army camp (Gunathilake 117). The abduction was a part of the army's attempt to track down Piyadasa's son, Priyantha Kumara, who was suspected to be a rebel leader of the area. Recalling the incident, Piyadasa shares with Gunathilake information of having witnessed many young men being tortured during his sixteen day incarceration at the army camp (117-118). While Piyadasa was kidnapped from his hut at the jetty, a second contingent had proceeded to his house and set it on fire, almost killing his wife and daughter. Piyadasa's subsequent release took place on 7 September 1989 following Priyantha Kumara's death in an army ambush after which his body had been burnt: "[i]t's all over for your son. Go and prepare his almsgiving,"²⁶ [Piyadasa] was told before being let loose at Karannagoda" (Gunathilake 118). When Piyadasa reached home, about five hundred yards from his house, his son's body had still been burning on a tyre.

A third representation by Gunathilake I wish to incorporate in this discussion addresses a glaring absence in the 1987-90 narrative as a whole: the representation of women detainees who face a double erasure in how mainstream history has been written. While, at

²⁶ In the Buddhist tradition in Sri Lanka, a memorial almsgiving is held on the seventh day after a person's demise.

first, their voices have been suppressed on account of their being detainees, their being women from suburban and rural society seems to have added to their voices not being present in emergency-related literature. The absence of female torture narratives (or the slowness of its emergence) does not indicate female victimization during the 1987-90 period to be scarce. To the contrary, the JVP had an organized female wing while a number of women students were active at different levels of the movement. In addition, among the many civilians who were caught in the complexities of the struggle there were women who sympathized with the movement. Stories of women who have suffered during the height of terror – mostly as young widows of disappeared men – has been recorded in documentary films such as Nandana Weeraratne's *Palutava: How to Deal with Pain*.²⁷ However, as yet there is no published memoir (as yet) by a female survivor, which can be attributed to a host of reasons; the stigma of a largely patriarchal culture towards a 'violated female body' and the shame of violation are prominent. In spite of reports by human rights organizations and academics who acknowledge conflict-related rape and assault of women in Sri Lanka²⁸, where survivor narratives are concerned, documenting and representing sexual assault brings a much needed gender dimension to an understanding of torture. Pulsara Liyanage – a member of a radical Left group that was active in the mid-1980s – published a memoir drawing on her activism, arrest and detention by the Sri Lanka police which she titled *Holding Out* (2017). However, Liyanage's is an account of a "privileged political prisoner" (Perera) whose arrest was conventionally carried out in accordance with the law and was treated in custody with respect. Liyanage doesn't share the fate of women like A.D. Swarnalatha or Chamani Muthuhetti – two women whose disappearance Amnesty International reports in a brief published in 1990 – who, according to witnesses, had been "beaten and raped" in the

²⁷ The documentary examines the lives of women in a rural Sri Lankan village in which the majority of men – mostly breadwinners – were killed by the military.

²⁸ See Amnesty International's *Sri Lanka: extra Judicial Executions: 'Disappearances', and Torture, 1987 to 1990* (33, 39) and Sasanka Perera's "Beyond the Margins of a Failed Insurrection: The experiences of Women in Post-Terror Southern Sri Lanka" (10) for representative examples.

Kotigala army camp in the Southern province (Amnesty International, *Sri Lanka: extra Judicial Executions* 33). Amnesty International further records testimony of male prisoners who, in captivity, were forced to sexually abuse women prisoners (39).

In his commentary *Ja.Vi.Pe Sangawunu Ithihasayen Bindhak*, Munasinghe raises the question of “women who were abducted solely for sexual purposes” and “were held in camps in batches of ten or fifteen” (3), and of whom “not even a word” (3) was heard or spoken in the conflict aftermath. Sex slavery in facilities that were designed for such purposes has not been documented in any mainstream sources on the 1987-90 conflict. Dharman Wickremereetna’s *Ja.Vi.Pe Devana Kaerella* – arguably the most comprehensive study on the conflict published to date in Sinhalese – reflects on many atrocities as points of discussion, but fails to address the issue of female prisoners. Contributing to this under-represented discourse, Munasinghe wrote a short story titled “Kanyaaviya” (The Maiden) which was published in his collection *Raaga Sutra* (149-169). “Kanyaaviya” follows the story of a young (woman) university undergraduate who is abducted and brought to a torture camp run by the military. Overcome by shock, the girl is unable to meet the sexual demands of her abductors. She is then taken away and thrown over a bridge into the river after being shot and killed (Munasinghe, “Kanyaaviya”169).

Gunathilake’s contribution to this scarcely represented space partly takes place as a witness of two schools girls being shot by the military, whose bodies were thrown into the river. Gunathilake uses his first-hand knowledge of the shooting incident as a point of entry to an informative discussion on the abuse of women prisoners in a hidden torture camp in the Kalutara district. Gunathilake identifies the bridge where the killings of the school girls took place as the Kalawellawa bridge where, during the emergency, such killings had been frequently carried out. Inspecting the bodies floating downstream he ascertains the girls to have been between seventeen and nineteen, and in school uniforms (Gunathilake 148). The

absence of undergarments indicated the girls to have been sexually abused. “Their faces were uncovered” Gunathilake remembers. “One of them had been shot on the chest leaving large wounds on the back... the other had been shot on the head, which made a part of her face disfigured” (148). He concludes that the girls may have been captured from another area and, after being kept in the camp for some time, had finally been killed and thrown into the river. (148).

Gunathilake concludes that sex slavery of women was prevalent in the Soranathotawatte torture camp in the Kalutara district. In reconstructing the Soranathotawatte camp, he relies on the memories of a driver who was formerly employed by the camp – an Anura, who freely confessed the happenings in the facility during the insurgency period.²⁹ Overall, the Soranathotawatte camp closely echoes the machinery of Eliyakandha. Gunathilake concludes that at any time Soranathotawatte had “batches of about fourteen” (155-156) women in captivity, and that these batches were periodically ‘recycled’ and ‘kept fresh’. Though not extensive, the allusion is significant in situating a reduced and silenced voice – a space of victimization that was yet further neglected by patriarchal stigma. I argue that the working-through process by which writers like Gunathilake and Munasinghe attempt to bear history have equipped them with the energy and the intent to step outside prevalent patriarchal foundations of their communities: foundations which would have more or less been a part of their shared reality with the world. Munasinghe not only raises the question of the absent female voice, but also – within his limitations – composes a story that unravels a gruesome side to the camp in question. In Gunathilake’s narrative, he foregoes the judgment a conventional society might level on him as he reveals an almost voyeuristic occupation of watching two girls being killed from a hidden vantage point.

²⁹ Later, Anura becomes disinclined to share his ‘stories’ with Gunathilake, after he learns that Gunathilake means to write a book on the emergency.

Reflecting on memory narration, Saul Friedlander draws on the importance of commentary that “disrupts the facile linear progression” and “introduces alternative interpretations”: two factors that emerge from and are encouraged by working-through (quoted in Levi and Rothberg 211). In Friedlander’s scholarship, this disruptive juncture is a critical point for the survivor’s voice to emerge without “the temptation of closure” (Friedlander, “Trauma, Transference and ‘Working Through’” 52) which makes its challenge on partial conclusions of the dominant narrative pronounced. However, the writers I study demonstrate that working-through is also governed by situations and support systems which survivors provide for themselves. Though it cannot be generalized, the three writers I study have in common the support of family members, accommodative associates, and self-administered coping mechanisms which play a decisive role in a country like Sri Lanka where the informed acceptance of post-traumatic conditions is still emergent.

At the outset of this chapter, I introduced Jayasinghe as a writer who, over the past three decades or so, had undergone palpable transformations both in terms of ideology and professional status. At present, Jayasinghe’s political engagement in the media suggests a liberal outlook modeled on social democratic values which were fundamentally different to the JVP ideology of the mid-1980s. These changes to outlook and temperament have to be factored in a reading of Jayasinghe’s post-conflict recovery. In the preface to *K-Point*, Jayasinghe acknowledges how the thirty years between the torture experience and the writing of it helped him to foster a balance and detachment that enriched his retrospective understanding of the event. These intervening years had allowed Jayasinghe to “shake [himself] off” from being limited to a “character in [the] book”, and to self-elevate to a position from where he was able to review the past comparatively:

After thirty years, having shaken myself off from being a mere character in this book, when I look down at Eliyakandha from the vantage point of the deep skies, I see all of them at the camp as victims of a cruel fate of a dark era. To cultivate this sensibility, it took me thirty years. I consider it fortunate that I wrote this story only now and not before. (Jayasinghe, “Preface” of *K-Point*)

These are the words of a navigator who is invested in seeking alternative points of entry in arranging events of a violent past. The words also signal at a deviation from clichéd categories and emotive readings of a grievous past and a commitment to frame the violence through a new imagination. This maturity in Jayasinghe’s retrospection is reminiscent of Primo Levi’s warning against mapping violence through an ‘us-them’ polarization which simplifies the torture camp as a binary of victor and victim.

In Gunathilake’s case, having been held in custody for two years following the failed insurgency of 1971, he had experienced many hardships in prison. Part of Gunathilake’s memoir is dedicated to these memories of time spent in several prisons between 1971 and 1974. In writing *71, 89 Mathakayan* Gunathilake convincingly situates himself as a member of the “proletariat class” (Gunathilake 105), and takes pride in others – notwithstanding the adversity of torture – who stood by their class identity (Gunathilake 46). These writers demonstrate an ingrained stoicism which, as a result of their daily struggles in life and their ideological convictions, seems to condition their resilience against adversity, and assist in their post-traumatic coping mechanisms.

Munasinghe’s memoirs and commentaries centrally draw on communist ideology and aspire to being a literature of working-class activism. In the twin volumes of *Ja.Vi.Pe Sengawunu Ithihasayen Bindhak* Munasinghe contrasts the community-minded, class-conscious grassroots-level activism he was a part of between 1978 and 1982 with the rampant opportunism and internal disunion of the JVP’s Paris chapter he was a part of between 1990

and 1994. The ‘decadence’ he attributes to the ‘Paris comrades’ whose activism Munasinghe contrasts with the zeal and commitment of his own peers in the Matara district forms the central focus of the concluding half of *Ja.Vi.Pe Sengawunu Ithihasayen Bindha – I* (134-163; 207-234).

A dominant feature of Munasinghe’s writing is his desire to record ‘unsung’ heroism of the ground-level cadre and the lesser-known leaders of the JVP such as Upatissa Gamanayake and Samarappulige Somasiri, about whom he composed two biographies. As mentioned before, *Ja.Vi.Pe Sengawunu Ithihasayen Bindhak I*, in particular, is a celebration of many low-rank activists in Munasinghe’s native Matara – most of them killed by the security apparatus – whom he situates as a people who sincerely believed in and were committed to a communist ethic. By doing so, he strengthens the localization of his own grievances within a political doctrine and a collective consciousness which he shared with neighbours, friends, relatives, and peers of his activist group. As such, his pain is already more than a personal grievance as it shares with the trauma of a community. The sense of community is often complemented with family, kinship relations, and friendships – as members of the same family or peer group were often found together in an incarceration camp.

In a study that covers five provinces in Sri Lanka, Sasanka Perera investigates how the violence of 1987-90 disrupted inter and intra family relationships in rural communities (Perera S. 3-18). Though Perera’s study primarily focuses on experiences of women, the discussion characterizes the breakdown of community values, the sense of solidarity, and security while highlighting patterns of grief-sharing among families mourning their losses. The insurrection had changed what it meant to lose family or kin and to grieve for a ‘shared fate’. While on one hand, the conflict affected many families of the same community – which gave them the opportunity to share grief more openly – in other scenarios emotions and an

impulsive show of grief had to be curbed for the survival of family members: a situation which can be understood through Diana Taylor's notion of 'percepticide', except in the case of these villagers the dulling of perception often worked as a conscious self-imposed strategy. Families with rebel connections were often 'punished' together, while their houses were burnt in acts of revenge. This led to situations where open displays of emotions were suppressed. Munasinghe relates to "mothers who left the site of a body burning in a tyre" and others "who held tears back and muffled [their] feelings" by pretending not to recognize the remains of their sons and loved ones. Munasinghe explains:

This was done not because of a want of noble motherhood, but out of fear that her recognition – her connection with someone branded with the stamp of terrorism – will bring harm upon her other children. It was out of the fear that an unknown gang of militants will set your hut on fire and kill the rest of the family. (Munasinghe, *Eliyakandha*192)

In an interview with Ruwan Jayatunge, Munasinghe assesses himself as having always been "mentally strong and reticent in facing challenges" (Jayatunge). Held in 2018, the interview is both frank and forthright on Munasinghe's part, where he freely confesses many intimate details of his conflict-experience including the names of his persecutors. Compared to his early writing – particularly, *Eliyakandha Wadha Kandhawura* and *Rangala Preme* – twenty-nine years after his traumatic experience, there is a marked difference in the openness of Munasinghe's responses. In his early works he resorts to the use of aliases, of which some are more thinly-veiled than others. With time, his confidence seems to have grown to narrate with authority and to dictate with a growing confidence. Working-through, as such, is not merely an internal process, but one which absorbs from and responds to external social circumstances where the conditions that encourage narrative such as political

stability, accommodating surroundings, and the emotional support of family and associates play a pivotal role.

Throughout this chapter I have analysed the narration of the torture camp as a site, and torture as a process, and their characterization in survivor narratives by three detainees of the 1987-90 emergency. By juxtaposing these memory-reliant representations I investigated how working-through has assisted the writers in detaching themselves from the events they represent, and how their retrospective vision and imagination benefit from ‘critical balance’ (Friedlander’s term). In my discussion I also underlined approaches adopted by these writers in preparing their stories with an evidence-base, such as the incorporation of primary and secondary witnessing with interviews, investigation, and the documentation of stories by local victims. The discussion also drew on how – necessitated by the demands of representing the torture experience – these writers transcended the formal boundaries of conventional realist narratives and sought purchase in frames that overlapped classical genre and exploded linearity and teleological constraints of story-telling.

The significance of working-through is demonstrated in the writers’ tendency to narrate with a detachment and even composure, refraining from value judgment and – overreaching conventionalities of their communities – in their being able to set in circulation discussions that are risky and taboo. Having undergone trauma and having systematically worked through it, the writers have enhanced a worldview that is anchored on community and that centres the voice of victimhood: a vision that has set them on the path of constructing narrative that has the power to facilitate reconciliation in the post-conflict world.

In the following chapter – which is also a concluding movement to the dissertation – I investigate the potential of victim/survivor narratives in transforming the thinking and the social attitudes in a place like Sri Lanka, where multiple political conflicts have taken place

in a short period of time. In that discussion, I argue that an expanding floor of survivor narrative has a power to heal wounds of conflict and their being encouraged as public discourse contributes to fruitful social restoration.

Chapter 4

Conclusion: The Conveyed History and the Path Forward

My reading of the survivor narratives of the 1987-90 insurrection in Sri Lanka followed my assessment that they are a valuable contribution to the understanding of that historical moment of conflict – albeit, as conveying a history that had been denied expression by the dominant narratives that ‘gate-keep’ memory. It is a literature that emerged from the “ashes” of a political moment, where narrative was leveraged by the Sri Lankan state to its advantage. As pro-government writer C.A. Chandraprema suggests, if the suppression of the rebellion in 1987 resulted in “a burial” of the JVP (and, by extension, those who were victimized on its account), the counter-narrative I study contributes to an exhumation and a re-examination of that event. As a concluding movement to this study, I intend to raise the question of the path ahead in a country like Sri Lanka, and the role played by the kind of survivor narratives I have discussed, in bringing on social reconciliation and justice. This section is developed within the paradigm of post-conflict cultural memory, and is receptive to the need for such reconciliation to reach over material gestures such as monetary compensations to victims’ families. While I do not make it my task to draw firm conclusions, I intend to map possibilities for Sri Lanka where the publication of survivor narratives within multidirectional frames permits an alternative thinking for post-conflict times.

Responsibility and Activism for ‘Truth’

In introducing torture camps and the killings of rebels/rebel suspects during the 1987-90 violence being reported in pro-state narratives, I likened them to strange tales of persecutions without persecutors and to torture and execution by invisible hands. I further

likened them to a textual extension of the impunity that had been granted to the military by prevailing extraordinary laws. Since the violence was engineered by the military and the police – or, formations containing one or both of these elements – the victimized people had no independent body or safeguard to address their grievances. As a result of the conflict's final outcome where the rebels were totally defeated, the state absolved itself from responsibility and for acknowledging its role in the conflict. The state's response to the violence of 1987-90 can be best described as one overridden by passive obligation. In part – and particularly during the term of the SLFP-led People's Alliance government that took over from the UNP in 1994 – the state appointed commissions of inquiry upon whose findings a compensation scheme was set up for victims. In spite of such reparations the state hasn't been successful in tabling a resolution acknowledging and admitting responsibility for the killings of civilians during 1987-90. Nor has it committed to addressing social, psychological and ethical considerations of the conflict within a policy frame that encourages active healing of wounds. Neither responsibility and culpability nor the emotions of suffering persons and victims have been foregrounded in attempts to address the conflict aftermath. The state's recompense schemes can be seen as means to appease public sentiment without transforming society in a collective working-through.

On the other hand, as a political movement, nor has the JVP sufficiently reconciled with the society over its actions during the conflict. Since its return to mainstream politics in 1994, the JVP has remained vague and inarticulate in its retrospective assessment regarding actions during the 1987-90 period. Since 1991, the JVP has organized an annual commemoration of 'fallen comrades' every November which took the shape of a didactic platform with speeches and symbolic acts of remembrance. The event is solemn and customary, and indicates little revision or re-assessment of the past. Prominent JVP leaders give memorial speeches in such platforms that often open corridors between the past and

present day politics. However, the JVP has not openly or publicly reviewed its role in the conflict. A ‘confession’ published in 2012 by the Frontline Socialist Party – a breakaway group of the JVP – remains the only documented re-assessment of the JVP’s role in the insurrection to date. But this document was more of interest to activists within Sri Lanka’s Left discourse, rather than a widely circulated publication that has caught the public imagination. In 1999, a memorial for the victims of the Embilipitiya youth massacre – aptly baptized the “shrine of the innocents” – was set up in the vicinity of the Sri Lankan parliament in Battaramulla: an undertaking that was supported by the relatives and families of the victims (Kurukulasuriya and Madhavi 358). Situated over 170 kilometres from the site of the disappearances in Embilipitiya the memorial, with time, became neglected from disuse. In 2012, it was demolished by the state as part of an urban beautification project. Drawing on the scarcity of such memorials and the lack of state support to maintain them, Gehan Gunatilleke endorses the view that “Sri Lanka is yet to adopt a culture of memorializing atrocities against civilians” (Gunatilleke 71). This absence of a culture of memorialization, as well as the state’s inclination to dictate the terms of memory, remains an ongoing debate in Sri Lanka’s north and east where, after a decade since the end of the civil war in 2009, the community of the former LTTE-controlled areas are denied commemoration of their dead and the disappeared.

In 2015, Gunatilleke published a report in which he recorded the attitudes of victim families to conflict-related memory in Sri Lanka. Titled *Confronting the Complexity of Loss: Perspectives on Truth, Memory, and Justice in Sri Lanka*, the report draws insights from persons suffering from multiple conflict-events that include the 1987-90 emergency and the civil war with the LTTE. Gunathilleke concludes that in spite of “truth telling and justice projects” that have emerged “sporadically”, the influence of commissions, and reports by non-state actors within the human rights lobby, Sri Lanka – as a country – is yet to fully

understand the “level to which concepts such as truth, memory, and justice permeate the public consciousness” (Gunatilleke 1). Gunatilleke interviews witnesses and survivors of the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom, the Sri Lankan Civil War, and the 1987-90 insurgency, opening out dialogue at multiple levels. He observes that some participants were “cynical about the idea of justice” and perceived justice as not being equitably granted across society, post-conflict (76). In spite of some respondents who bore a “positive, aspirational attitude towards justice” (77), Gunatilleke reports that many respondents were sceptical of justice ever being served (76).

The cynicism of these respondents towards justice can in part be attributed to the superiority with which the state has organized society in the aftermath of ‘victorious’ conflicts where truth establishment and legal processes, as in the 1987-90 event, have been suppressed or, as in the post-civil war context, have been slowed. In the absence of a programme to transform the imagination of a post-conflict society the mental scars of war, not having been addressed or treated, remain neglected. As a result, the possibilities of a post-conflict justice scheme have been reduced to small monetary donations which are inadequate to encourage new thinking or to heal emotional distress. Like the branded criminal – or the one silenced by being brought within one’s death – the victims continue life in an enforced (and implied) moral inferiority, damned by the state’s non-recognition of their emotions and subjectivity. This moral defeat is heard in the voices of participants who spoke to Gunatilleke and claimed that “things like ‘justice’ and ‘law’ exist only in books” and that “justice prevails only in certain places, and not in other places” (Gunatilleke 76). In such a situation, even if remorse is silenced and suppressed there is no encouragement for victim families to forgive or to reconcile.

The place of forgiveness in post-conflict restoration and in social and attitudinal transformation remain crucial yet elusive for many conflict societies. Daniel Philpott outlines forgiveness as “the most dramatically restorative practice . . . which involves not merely a victim releasing her perpetrator of claims but also her constructive invitation to a better future” (Philpott 6). He concedes that a “victim retains his own freedom to decide how he will respond to the perpetrator” where the victim maintains “control over whether the standing victory of the injustice is defeated” (264). In her commentary of truth-seeking in post-conflict Sri Lanka, Ambika Sathkunanathan builds on Philpott’s assessment and explores how it can be anchored in a map of reconciliation. In Sri Lanka’s post-war context where the government, as Sathkunanathan observes, shows “reluctance to investigate past crimes”, the victim forgiving the perpetrator will “only further entrench the ‘standing message of the injustice’” (Sathkunanathan). In a discussion hinged on civil war in Sierra Leone, Rosalind Shaw emphasizes the need to contextualize transitional justice by not subscribing to preconceived alternatives (Shaw 209-210). Endorsing the view of Kamari Clarke and Mark Goodale, Shaw observes how – unlike the universality of human rights – justice is contextual and how it has to be identified as a “functioning discourse” in practice (Shaw 210). Shaw’s study, while inviting an understanding of pragmatic factors such as poverty, state collapse, and insecurity that shape the direction of a post-conflict society, cautions against “transitional justice truisms” such as “truth plus justice equals sustainable peace” (223).

In spite of the state’s reluctance to admit its past mistakes, from the standpoint of activism, both taking responsibility and acknowledging culpability are important for a society to address its wounds and to begin moving ahead. Such a programme receives support from the widening survivor narrative platform which, since 1971, has drawn from three national-scale political upheavals in Sri Lanka. Narratives born out of working-through that critically

engage with traumatic pasts can potentially fertilize a community's re-assessment of a given order of events. As Levi and Rothberg assert, "incorporating self-reflexive commentary" – like that which appears in survivor narratives – "into historical narration would allow the understanding of history to proceed without leading to a permanent closure that denies the contrived presence of the open wounds of the past" (Levi and Rothberg 190). The encouragement and recognition of survivor narratives and testimony – and their being set in circulation in the widest possible way – opens avenues for documents which first emerged as counter-publics to move towards being public discourse.

Over the past decade or so, survivor narratives of the 1987-90 emergency have begun to spread and inspire the public imagination. While these narratives are yet to be accepted in state-mediated educational and cultural spaces, the reception and response they draw from social and political alternatives is promising. For instance, in 2019 and 2020, two films with the 1987-90 emergency as their backdrop, were released and screened in public theatres in Sri Lanka: an act that would have been controversial and unthinkable a mere decade ago. These films were concurrently screened internationally and were entered in reputed film festivals. One film – *Ginnen Upan Seethala* (Frozen Fire) by Anuruddha Jayasinghe – is centred on the JVP from 1977 to its destruction in 1989. The events of the 1987-90 emergency are central to the film's political critique. Released in August 2020, Visakesa Chandrasekaram's *Paangshu* (Earth) follows the quest of a mother seeking justice for her disappeared son during the height of violence in the late-1980s. These developments in the creative industry offer hope (which must be cautiously accepted) for a greater appreciation of narratives that emerge from conflict, and for new options to creatively negotiate with the past.

Drawing on memory narratives that emerge from conflicted pasts, Rothberg argues that the circulation of such memory has the potential to "open up possibilities for unexpected acts of solidarity" (Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* 180) where, in the form of testimony,

they engineer “counterpublic spheres dedicated not only to exposing the dirty secrets of the state” but also to refigure “what counts as a collective” (180). Rothberg’s analysis of the counter-public witness within multidirectional memory proposes the importance of a writer like Charlotte Delbo in an environment where torture continues to take place within what Naomi Klein terms “the casual amnesia” of the current torture debate (Klein quoted in Rothberg 180). Rothberg’s assessment draws on French Leftists of the 1960s (Delbo included) as activists who created discourses based on conflict memory to enhance a radical counterpublic space. But, the fostering of a counterpublic by itself does not constitute socially transformative activism. It has taken France almost four decades to come to terms with the violence during the Algerian war and its conduct as a colonial power. What can be understood is that state accountability – its admission of responsibility for violence – is slow and hesitant, and that the history borne by survivors can contribute to the transitional process of a society between the period of conflict and post-conflict justice. The expansion of the conflict-related counterpublic – the narrowing of its gap with a public – benefits a country like Sri Lanka where both general political participation and public literacy are at a high level. Circulation that goes beyond mere “exposure” is vital for testimony and documentation to have a life beyond the ethics they represent (Rothberg, “Between Auschwitz and Algeria” 184), and for them to become political. When applied to the body of counter- and survivor narratives to which Munasinghe, Gunathilake, and Perakum Jayasinghe contribute, this line of reasoning enforces the importance of centring narratives that emerge from the margins of conflict against the partial and privileged conclusions of entitled narratives. In a post-conflict juncture, responsibility entails going beyond the superficialities of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, or blame-passing; and in conferencing with the multi-linearity of voice and alternative shades of truth. It is the role of activism to use the testimony of writers like those studied here to lobby relentlessly for such an eventuality.

The Narrative's Power to Heal

As noted earlier, the state's agenda of post-conflict 'healing' remains poor and wanting in empathy. In particular, families of victims of both the Sri Lankan civil war and the 1987-90 emergency have been engaged in a long struggle for justice in the name of their dead and the disappeared. While the committees appointed by the People's Alliance government (1994-1999) has compensated some of the victims of the 1987-90 violence through monetary reparation, compared to a sustainable transformative approach where accountability and truth are established, it remains an inadequate course. In the case of the civil war – fought for 26 years and ended in 2009 with a heavy loss of civilian lives – the state has been equally slow and hesitant in setting up a justice programme in spite of continuing pressure from the international human rights regime and organizations such as the UN. Having carried their struggle for truth for almost three decades, the downtrodden victim families have, on occasion, been compelled to accept monetary reparation in place of justice. Belonging to disempowered backgrounds and with their families disrupted, the money – however insignificant – is seen as a form of relief. But there are families who refused to accept this reparation (Gunathilake 176), and others who believed in a 'higher' course of justice (76). In these discouraging circumstances, the survivor narrative resonates and helps the grieving families to identify with the voice of their own sons, husbands, and brothers. It embodies a collective identity that is comparable to other torture situations, with an energy to empower a collective nation-wide torture map. As Ann Rigney concedes, memories of individuals tend to look for "confirmation and interpretation within a social framework" (Rigney 366). From a social-constructivist approach, Rigney explores the memorial dynamics of literary texts where she identifies cultural memory as "the historical product of cultural mnemotechniques

and mnemotechnologies” as they expand from “commemorative rituals to historiography” (366). She identifies therein a way by which “shared images of the past” can be “actively produced and circulated” (366). As Rigney advocates, being remembered is more than a matter of “being recorded in some archive” in a latent form (Rigney 368), and calls for activism that engages memory with social consciousness.

At one level, Rigney’s advocacy for ‘active memory’ can be placed adjacent to that of Saul Friedlander who warns against the risk of conflict events and their participants being reduced to data (Friedlander quoted in Levi and Rothberg 211): numbers and lists without individual or collective emotion. To the contrary, Friedlander encourages discussions of conflict in “the starkest factual information” and in ways that counteract the “loss of historical weight” (211). By encouraging the survivor narrative as a public discourse and by making people more adept to the history such narratives represent, the suffering of victims during the 1987-90 violence is humanized while their displacement is made visceral. This proposition, in turn, drives the discussion back to what Benjamin Stora – writing in the backdrop of the Second World War and the Algerian War – proposed as a “truth cure” that consists of an “experimental documentary oeuvre” (Stora 53-54) to heal post-conflict society, which I briefly alluded to in the previous chapter. With a focus on a multi-linear vision that draws attention to distinct experiences of torture, the documentary body which Stora conceptualizes mirrors the survivor narratives on which I anchored my discussion. The notion of a survivor’s narrative being a “cure” can be juxtaposed with what Primo Levi sees as a “warning monument” in the architectural leftovers of the former concentration camps. In his *The Truce* Levi narrates his return to Auschwitz in 1965 and 1982. “I didn’t feel anything much when I visited the central camp”, Levi concedes. “The Polish government has transformed it into a kind of national monument. The huts have been cleaned and painted, trees have been planted and flower beds laid out” (Levi, *If this is a Man/The Truce* 433). Part

of the camp had been converted into a museum in which Levi witnessed “pitiful relics” on display: “tons of human hair, hundreds of thousands of eyeglasses, combs, shaving brushes, dolls, baby shoes” (434). The transformation of the former camp leaves in Levi the impression of a museum. However, when he visited the Birkenau camp, where nothing had been changed or dressed up, Levi’s impression changed drastically:

There was mud, and there is still mud, or suffocating summer dust. The blocks of huts (those that weren’t burned when the Front reached and passed this area) have remained as they were—low, dirty, with draughty wooden sides and beaten earth floors. There are no bunks but bare planks, all the way to the ceiling. Here nothing has been prettied up. With me was a friend of mine, Giuliani Tedeschi, a survivor of Birkenau... She showed me that from the tiny window you could see the ruins of the cremation furnace. (Levi 434)

In its being preserved as a snapshot of the past, the Birkenau complex facilitates an association with the past atrocity which is significant for post-conflict reconciliation. In not being appropriated or refashioned –instead being preserved as a lingering present of an altogether different world order from 1945 – Birkenau visually and spatially ‘warns’ of the horror that was the camp, and by doing so preserves memory while discouraging forgetting.

The Sri Lanka state response to the 1987-90 insurrection is the closest its majority-Sinhalese districts have experienced to a genocide of that magnitude. As persons who experienced the shock and numbness of that destruction, Gunathilake, Jayasinghe and Munasinghe preserve those sites – albeit, as textual trans-creations – in their literature - preservations which, I propose, align with Primo Levi’s case for ‘warning monuments’. Rigney proposes memory as “always a form of counter-memory” (Rigney 365) with a potential in containing “everything that is missing in history proper” (365). Rigney locates in domains like literature, which lie outside academic history, “more authentic” forms of

memory that are closer to the experience of “ordinary people” (365). I propose that the same observation is relevant to an understanding of witness and survivor narratives as renditions of a past that emerge from spaces and people more intimate to the experience of the ordinary, day-to-day sufferings of conflict victims. Unless they have been re-designed for different use, the camps where the writers I studied had been incarcerated, have by now been destroyed. For instance, the summit on which the Eliyakandha camp was situated – even as early as 2001 – was given away for a telecommunications project. The steep climb up the hill (which has a prominent place in Munasinghe’s narrative) is now the venue for a popular motor racing event. However, unlike a shattered building to an abandoned prison complex, transformed into narrative in Munasinghe’s and Jayasinghe’s writing, Eliyakandha is preserved as ‘a present’ in its complex history. In a country like Sri Lanka where justice and restoration are slow – and where the state plays a hesitant role in social reintegration – such textual preservation performs a dual function of being a ‘warning monument’ as well as an intermediate form of justice for those whose deaths and disappearances have not been fully accounted for.

As suggested by the observations I have made in this concluding section, the survivor narratives that I have studied are at a crucial transitional junction in post-conflict activism. It is a juncture where history, memory, justice, and the struggle against forgetting meet, converge, and enforce one another, and – having emerged from a shattered and silenced past – where they challenge a dominant narrative that gate-keeps a controversial history. By encouraging non-linear multi-directionality that reaches beyond conventional frames, the survivor narratives – both as form and as text – demonstrate a radical engagement which facilitates new approaches to conflict and violence. In its capacity to to facilitate a witnessing public, such narratives suggest a powerful political statement that can be meaningfully

invested in mediating between conflict and the post-conflict world. By being placed within formal curricula and classroom spaces, these narratives – of their being formally transferred to the country's future generation – is a hope with which I conclude this dissertation.

Water under the Bridge

Contradictory Reports Confirm Rebel Leader Dead

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka, 14 November – Earlier, today, the Sri Lankan government announced the capture and death of Rohana Wijeweera, the leader of the insurgent Marxist People's Liberation Front (JVP), who is believed to be the guiding force behind the Front's two year war against the state. He had been captured by a special commando unit, while living incognito with his family in Ulapane, off Gampola.

In a press briefing attended by several high government ministers, it was also revealed that operations were underway to bring within the law the remaining rebel insurgents. "It is only a matter of time – more of days, than weeks," an official confided. Earlier, security sources reported a rapid development in the capture of key frontline members of the rebel organization – who, since 1983 have been underground and have been waging open battle since July 1987 – and were hopeful of a final solution before the end of the year.

There were, however, conflicting reports of Wijeweera's death. Wijeweera has been leader of the Marxist revolutionary party since its inception in 1965. According to the government spokesman Wijeweera was killed after his capture as he led security forces to a hidden hideout used by the rebels in Colombo. Another rebel politburo member who had been taken alongside him, identified as H.B Herath, had drawn a hidden weapon and fired at his leader. In the gun battle that followed both militants were killed by security forces.

In a contradictory rendition, a high-ranking official source claimed that Wijeweera had died in "unspecified circumstances" shortly after his capture on Monday, near the tea estate where he had been hiding.

Our reporter learns that President Ranasinghe Premadasa has given special instructions to the Inspector General of police Ernest Perera to investigate on the matter.

The insurgency, now into its third year, has claimed the lives of thousands of Sri Lankans – almost all of them Sinhalese in the non-Tamil regions of the island – and has brought about economic breakdown, social depravity, and mass hysteria.

The rebellion was sparked by opposition to a Sri Lankan-Indian peace plan to end the Tamil rebellion in the north and east of the country. The JVP interpreted this attempt as a plan to partition the island nation, giving partial autonomy to the largely Tamil-Hindu north and north-east of the country.

A SON

The year the troubles began I was four years old, and still in the nursery. The year before, I remember changing houses and coming to live in what I later came to know was the village of Dodanwala. When we first arrived there, I didn't know that there was a place called Dodanwala, that it was to Dodanwala we were going, or that Dodanwala was so beautiful. Looking back, perhaps, my consciousness of childhood begins with this village. In any case, that is where the continuous narrative of my memory begins. Of whatever happened before Dodanwala, what I have are just shards and scraps; random moments, like wood splinters.

I still remember the house we moved into; I still remember the landlord, a kindly old man with a cookie-like face. I remember making this connection as a four year old – the connection between the face and the cookie. The face-side of a milk biscuit, to be precise. He visited us on occasion. I remember him seated in the sit-in room: a spacious open room with the settee my father had inherited from the family, and a matching teapoy. We had two bedrooms in the house. The second room was where we kept the TV. The ironing and the folding of clothes was done here, too. When I came down with mumps, they isolated me in this room and kept me there for two weeks until I was cleared. For the whole of that time, father slept with me. That was the first time I had been isolated in father's care. Sleeping with him was a new experience – a warm, comfortable experience. He was known in the family as a big snorer. But, he let me tuck my feet between his feet. He radiated so much heat. When the snoring became unbearable, I would wake him up.

The house was just a ten minute walk from the Halloluwa-Dodanwala bridge. If one took the bus (Kandy-Dodanwala, bus 699) the second stop after the bridge was right in front of our house. There was one other stop before us – near the village temple. This was in no way a place for a bus stop. A curvy double-bend began where the bus, blind to the vehicles

coming the other way, stopped to drop off people. Not that there ever were many vehicles on the village road. Just the bus and a few cars, bicycles, and the occasional lorry or van.

The milk-biscuit landlord's name was Jayasinghe. He lived by renting out the two houses he owned. Our compound was a small one at the front. Dark under the canopy of three tall mangosteen trees, a small shaded front yard. The house was like a shoe box with its small side facing the main road. Along the lengths, there were two unroofed corridors leading to the back of the house – to the kitchen and the back shed. Then, behind our house, on an adjacent upper elevation there was a second smaller house – an annex, really. It was this annex my uncle, a gangly giant, moved into in the year of the troubles. My uncle, aunt, and my cousin brother and sister. On three sides, our house was surrounded by an estate where arecanuts, cloves, and pepper grew. Where they had a shed with several well-groomed cows.

This was Peiris-watte, owned by the bald-headed Rajaratne. The estate had an imperious old manorial house up front. Rajaratne had rented out this property, and lived with his family in a smaller cottage further back into the watte. Wife, daughter, and two sons. At the foot of Peiris-watte, where the wide estate gates opened, land had been given for a boutique shop. Boutique Uncle had snow-flake hair which he brushed back. He always wore a white sarong. Uncle was an outsider to the village. He had three sons. One of them lived with Uncle in the small wood hut he had put up as an annex to the shop. I forget his name now – but, this son drew signs and boards for the villagers. Sometimes, I used to watch him as his brush dipped into small red and blue colour tins of paint. Surprisingly, I don't remember him in any other way. Only as a painter of signs. But, that can't have been more than a side interest.

Dodanwala was a village known for its fruits. This part had been the king's orchard when, long ago, the Kandyan kingdom was powerful and strong before the British came. In

any case, there was a wide variety of fruit trees not found elsewhere in the Kandy region. Mangosteens, rambutans, and durians among them. In the woods on the hill side, there were plenty of wild-berries, herbs and flowers to find. The part of Dodanwala we lived in wasn't exactly the village – it was more the boundary between the residential semi-urbanized area and the start of the village. Coming from the Kandy side, the colonial-era Halloluwa-Dodanwala bridge was on the left. Passing the bridge, you met the small post-office which, back then, was an important place in village life. Then, the road curved into a loosely drawn 'S': a cursive double-bend which was the length and breadth of my childhood universe. All my adventure, suspense, angels and demons were there contained. They are clear imprints, thirty years later, even today.

When my father passed away in 2004, he was a little over fifty; death caused by a regular heart attack. Father had been a quiet, methodical man who was aloof in his ways. When it couldn't be avoided, he spoke a few words. If it could be done that way, he merely grunted or gave a snort. But, the balance he filled with a sharp sense of humour, and he dressed smartly. For half his life, he held a bank job and gradually rose to an executive position. Taking time, he built a house and became to his middle class family a success story. It was to this house we shifted when we left Dodanwala. It was a bigger and better house with a splendid view of a hill. We no longer paid rent. My cousins were told by everyone to grow up by taking my father for an example. Even as a teenager, I used to wonder: this man who could be known but in degrees, in what colour did he see the world? What really occupied his mind behind the spread sheets of newspapers? Did he really love me, or was I (for him) more an issue of circumstances?

You had to get through the funeral. Like in a wedding, it was an interlude between the before and the then-after. It wasn't real – it was performance. I thought of a hundred different things, standing in front of his remains. A burden I hadn't known, or hadn't had a reason to

know, was already weighing down my shoulders. What about our future which, up to yesterday, was all based on father's income? All these people gathering to share this hour of grief was all alright; but, what would happen when they left? Except for the feel of the hair, the body in the coffin was already an artefact. And I wondered, as I had done often before, if he had been a happy man? (What was happiness? How was it measured, post-mortem?) Was happiness to start off your life as a laboratory technician and end up as a bank executive? Had it to do with raising high achieving kids and putting a warm meal on the family table at night? Was it stressing over ledgers and contracts by day, but knowing you had enough to rejoice over at night, watching the cricket highlights on TV?

Sunday was a special day in father's week. All afternoon was spent reading papers. He dozed off half way, but woke up with time to continue till about a quarter to six. He bought all four English papers. *The Observer*. *The Times*. *The Island*. *The Leader*. Pro-government. Moderate. Moderate. Oppositional. Did he really read all that – 400 pages of weekly prose? Did the press really affect his opinion; or like his mind, were his convictions about the world already determined? My earliest interest in these papers were the pull-out supplements: the television guide and the women in the glossy pages. I was confused by beaming pictures of the new president, Chandrika Kumaratunga. She had a smile that left a deep flutter. I was ten years old.

But *happiness*? A white collar job and a mortgage-free house with a balcony that opened into a mountain range across the river into Halloluwa did not offer you the elusive privilege of being *happy*. When the time came for the coffin to be closed and the final prayers to be chanted I quietly stepped into the background and watched as the priests took over. He had been a good man. He had done more than some other fathers I knew would ever do. I was ever grateful to him for the start he had given my life. For all that he brought us in his relatively short life - may his soul rest in peace.

Let me come back to my father at the right time.

The Dodanwala I remember was thick with leafy overgrowth which, throughout the day, kept the village cool, and with the chorus of cicadas and endless homeward bats, nearer to dusk, the sensation was eerie. Right across from us, on a land lower than road-level, lived a banker family. The father worked outstation. Early on Monday morning he left, briefcase in hand, and came back for the weekend on Friday night. His wife, keeping to herself most of the time, worked in a Kandy school and took the bus with us. Set apart by a croton fence from theirs was the house of the bald-headed municipal-councillor Wijemuni. The Kandy newspaper carried a photo of him (the same photo) once in a while. The steps leading to the village temple were at the bend on the Kandy side. The temple land bordered the property of Gunathilake, a village bigwig. On the other side of the temple: the imposing house of 'Liyana Mahattaya' (or, the Secretary) - a majestic, regal structure, which overlooked a dark, dense wasteland of wood along the ridge of the elbow bend.

When father took me on walks during the weekend, we passed all these houses. What back then seemed like a long walk was actually a stroll up to the bridge near the post office. We slowly crossed the bridge as it gently swayed and went to Halloluwa on the other side of the river, where we bought the Sunday papers.

Walking home, we sometimes stopped to watch the Mahaweli river flow under the creaking bridge: a glimpse of the longest river, as it continued east, to the Bengal Bay. Father smiled at the people who gathered at the shops near the bridge, such as the shop-uncle's son who opened his barber place. The red and yellow 'saloon' sign was a self-designed masterpiece. Passing Liyana Mahattaya's house at the bend, set off from the main road, a

labourer couple lived in a small poor-folk's hut. Sriyani did chores for a daily wage, and Banda did labour jobs as work came by. It was mainly Sriyani's hard-earnings; Banda's evening drunken monologues were well-known in the village. Once, he even came by our garden gate and dashed out a soliloquy, accusing father and mother of spoiling his woman. Sriyani had refused to give from her savings for his drink. But, the next day, having sobered up, with greater theatrics, Banda was at the gate at sunrise to apologize. He called on his own head all kinds of curses.

Late in '88, word of the JVP needled through the fields and forests of Halloluwa and Dodanwala. The organization imposed a ban on alcohol and public nuisance. Anyone caught drinking outside was disciplined through humiliation. Banda had been drunk one evening, and balancing himself on the stone gully at Rajasinghe Mawatha junction (not a mile from our place), he had gone on a tirade badmouthing the JVP. A group of masked men had called on Sriyani's home that night and asked Banda to step out. Sriyani and the children were told to go back to sleep. Shot thrice through the chest at close range, Banda's body was found the next morning. It was disposed of for all to see near the gully he had earlier used for a pulpit. The elders were careful about the story when they spoke about it in hushed whispers, behind our backs. But, somehow I picked up the pieces and put the puzzle together. It didn't mean anything much back then. Afterwards, every time I saw Sriyani the story came back to my head. Naturally, I didn't ask her anything. And as if nothing had happened, Sriyani went on with her work.

On the day the rebels informed all villagers by chit to take part in a protest, men in masks came to check houses for those who went against their order. The protest was one of a

series and the second or third for that week. The piece of paper had been signed by the hand of death. So, leaving my mother, my new-born infant brother and myself at home, father went in the morning. The three of us snug in the master bedroom, the child being rocked to sleep. Perhaps, I didn't realize the full meaning of what was going on. But I knew that I had to keep quiet and lay low. The tension in the house had fed into me, as well. Then, piercing the tense silence, a banging came on the front door. From where we sat, we heard hurrying feet circle the house outside. Demanding in loud voices if anyone was in, they banged the windows. Almost as if on cue, the baby woke and began to howl. The game was now up, and angry beating continued on the front door.

Mother had no choice but to open up. She carried the baby against her breast and pulled back the door. Two men with coarse cloth masks stepped into her way. They were both armed, but held their weapons low. Partly covered in a long cloth, I saw the barrel of a gun. The questions were dispassionate and rude – why hadn't she gone to the meeting? She told the men that father had already gone and that she had no way of leaving the baby behind. One of the men curtly asked whether she was the only woman in the whole village who had children and as to how she went to work on other days. Then, his partner made a knowing gesture and discouraged the other. He said something to the effect of it 'being alright' if 'aiya' had gone for the meeting; and for mother to shut the door and to keep the baby quiet. It was an easy let off – a let off that intrigues me up to this day. It wasn't odd for the rebels to address villagers as 'aiya' or 'akka' – a familiarity, in this case – but, to let mother off the hook without kicking up a fuss? At that moment, I felt relief. The incredibility of it only struck me much later. Closing the door, we listened. A moment later, we heard the dropping of the gate latch.

Not everyone who defied the 'movement' was forgiven as easily. The principal of a nearby school had scoffed at an order and had been punished with humiliation. Carrying the

weight of his wife, he had to stand in front of the school. He had worn around his neck a notice: 'In future I will never defy the orders of the movement'. The JVP issued strict orders against the brewing of the illicit local liquor, *kasippu*. Though outlawed, kasippu breweries were run in the safety of forests set back from the roads. Unless raided on short notice, they almost always went under the radar of authorities. But even in an unlikely ambush, the police could be bought off, while well-connected brewers received ample notice by police working on their payroll. The JVP's no-alcohol, no-tobacco policy was stern. Shops were given ultimatums against selling either item. Some liquor shops were set on fire. *Kasippu* brewers were given a customary warning. On the second offense, they were shot and their bodies were tied to lamp posts.

Then came the rebel order for all villagers to surrender their national identity cards. The movement would send their agents at night to collect the cards from each house. The head of the house had to be ready and hand in the cards when the movement knocked. Sunk in the terror of darkness, with muffled light-wicks in shaded kerosene lamps, the village waited. The masked men came in a group of three or four. Restless dogs barking into the night gave the sign of approaching strangers. At the rap on the door the man of the house pulled back the latch, and handed the cards over. These were the cards you presented at state departments, banks, offices, libraries, businesses, and at checkpoints. It was your gateway to public life, services and trade. There were two cards in our house – for mother and father. The children were ordered to stay in bed and we waited in anticipation. I could hear the dining room clock on the other side of the wall.

When the knock finally came, father picked himself up with a deep sigh. In the half-lit dark he walked out of the bedroom door. Following him, mother stood just outside the doorpost from where the front parlour was visible. The sleeping child to my left, I lay on bed. Eyes shut tight I prayed against hope that the baby wouldn't wake. In less than five minutes,

the episode was over. The cards my parents had been issued as teenagers in the late-60s were no longer theirs. When I opened my eyes, both father and mother had come back into the room. As they sat down, I felt their weight compress the mattress. Neither spoke for a while. Then, as if to break the silence, father said, “So, then, that is that”.

By 2016, I had left my extended family and surviving boyhood friends. Life had taken me elsewhere. I had chosen not to take much luggage. It had been several years since I had shown up at a family funeral or wedding. The last Christmas reunion I had been to was soon after the war had ended in the north. Boys I once grew up with touched glasses reliving the bravado of soldiers who had bombed hospitals, temples, shelters and schools. The crushing of the Tamil Tigers, to the last shell, had been ruthless. Incarceration, torture, rape, enforced disappearances and denials followed the war. On an unusually hot Colombo night, someone vamped out *White Christmas* on a piano in the hotel lobby. With someone I don’t quite remember, I got into an argument about the war.

“What about the hundred odd monks they killed at bloody Aranthalava? The Pettah bomb? The bomb on the Central Bank? The bomb on the temple of the Relic?” he was shouting over the piano, the clatter and din. A list of Tiger-attacks – a list I had heard ‘patriots’ of this age parrot a hundred million times. Ego-narrow bastards who hailed militarism, and that was easily 90 per cent of them. The Tigers were ‘terrorists’ and the army were ‘patriotic heroes’. In referring to an army-man, no one any longer used the word ‘soldier’. The linguistics had long changed in an age of militarist nationalism: ‘war hero’. That was the word now. “Do not insult our brave ‘war heroes’.” “It is all a Western Conspiracy to lead our ‘war heroes’ to the electric chair.” This kind of talk churned my

bowels. Not a militarist, I condemned the release of a single bullet. Any bullet. It was somewhere here that I lost my cool and took a swing that missed the mark. Caught unawares, and losing his composure, my interlocutor stumbled onto some chairs. It was not all drink because I remember wanting to break his nose. With a curse, he sprang back to his feet. I was clenching my fists when a mediator walked between us. I have since kept away from school reunions.

One night, for no particular reason, I was thinking again of my father. Who was he, when he was not reading the newspaper? My brother, who had a political bent and edited a human rights quarterly, was by now in Oslo studying that country's prison system and rehabilitation. We were infrequently in contact and had no deep ties. Googling up the time in Oslo, I called him to scent him out: what did he know about father? When father passed on, my brother had still been a clumsy adolescent and most probably too young to have read the subtext. Once he had passed away, none of us really discussed him. As a family, we never laid our griefs and sorrows out to dry. But, now the image of the two masked men meekly walking out of our front gate had returned. And with it had come a fleeting feeling that they had in fact given us an allowance when they let my mother off the hook. A see-no-evil from a friend to a friend.

Now, a quarter of a century later – twenty-seven years to be exact – I was in the stranglehold of the strangest of ideas: did my father play an unobvious, hidden, second role? Could it be that he – the grunter with a poker face – was in league with some of the rebels who operated in the village? I felt strangely excited. Brother refused to do face time, but I insisted and got my way on Messenger. When the camera connected he was still adjusting his side for a better angle. With neglected stubble and an egg-shaped head he bore no trace of the sweet whiny child he had once been. He didn't remember crying the family into the hands of

rebels. He didn't remember anything about the troubles. All he knew of the trouble years he had learned from books.

When I suggested that father could have been in league with the insurrection, brother laughed. "Father being an auxiliary of the JVP?" he guffawed. "Give me a break, aiya!" he scratched his fringe. "Look, he was too – how can I say this? – *settled* and *practical* to actually go into any of that." But my idea amused him nonetheless and we found a common ground here: reminiscences of our immediate progenitor who had now been gone for fifteen years. In small details, I dramatized for him the episode with the masked men on the day of the protest. I paused and zoomed in on micro gestures and the confirming silences as they had happened. The dialogue that had ensued, as I remembered, word for word. The childhood memory, at the same time, was both fuzzy and clear.

"Come! Come! Fellow was Sirima's man." My brother broke my chain of reasoning. From '94, for 10 years, Chandrika did two successive terms as president. Brother reminded me how content father was, even when Chandrika faltered and made what (in hindsight) we called her worst blunders. In '98, it was the country's Independence golden jubilee. What better way to celebrate fifty years since renouncing the British than to invite the Queen to Kandy to preside over the celebrations? With a week remaining, to the temple of Buddha's tooth relic – Kandy's leading cultural site – the Tigers sent a lorry of bombs. The lorry exploded at the entrance, but enough damage was done to cut down the touring party. In the end, while the celebrations were shifted to Colombo, only Prince Charles came. On TV we watched the live telecast – Father made us all watch the tedium of that parade. The heat was unbearable and the prince's cheeks were flushed. When I mocked the ridiculousness of bringing back British royalty, father pulled me by my shirt. His temper was lost. Three buttons came off.

Personally, I cannot ever imagine living through the insurgency years from '87 to '90. As a child, I got by. But, as an adult, I couldn't have survived. There was no way I would have been patient enough to see it failing fast from bad to worse, with the leaders I trusted (in my father's case, the SLFP) lost in their inner struggles and tugs of war. I told my brother that it is *here* that father may have chosen a viable alternative: if not as an endorser, at least as a sympathizer. It would have been only too natural for him – to overlook, to cross fingers in tacit, mute, unspoken support. It was solidarity not for the rebels, but for any force that went against the government. The dictatorial UNP regime, in his eyes, would have been seen as sucking too much blood.

“Impossible!” brother exclaimed. “Your imagination is running wild. Father was a family man by then – two kids to feed, a third on the way.” In my memory, the visuals are undisturbed. The familiar hum of his old Kawazaki motorbike. His dirty yellow helmet which had faded with time. Him leaving home for work in the mornings. His office bag against his stomach and spectacle case peeping from his shirt pocket. Gardening in an effort to home-grow vegetables. Training vines along supporters that he stationed between plots. His marked mannerism was to touch his beard when he spoke. I now saw it in brother, calling off my speculation, as he laughed; that father had to be a ‘sympathizer’.

He wanted me to continue. I was thinking of all the familiar faces from the old village that could have fit the faces behind those masks. One was ready to take mother to task, but the other quickly stepped in and defused the tension. This minion of god, who was he? What was his connection and – more crucially – what divine knowledge did he possess? In the retreat that followed and the gentleness with which I heard the latch fall on the gate, there was something that whispered, ‘I am your friend’. These visuals are affected by time and my need for them to fit a plotline. They were becoming unreliable. To slow my mind, I closed my eyes.

Brother's explanation was less romantic; it was textbook stuff. To the rebels our parents were well-meaning, respectable middle class folk who lived a quiet life. They harmed no one, and they had no confrontations. Their minor flaws and irregularities were permissible; they didn't harm the movement in any way. Mother was a teacher and among the village folk that called for dignity and respect. Then, I reminded him of the number of school teachers and principals who were killed by the rebels for various reasons. But, mother had stayed back with a newborn child while father was already at the protest, he said. That makes her offence too innocuous to warrant a backlash. Those masked men must have certainly been from the village. They must have had a general estimate of our parents and their goodwill.

I ran some water and made myself coffee. For a while we meandered on a cascade of unrelated topics, until I brought my brother back to the height of terror. This had to do with the banker couple who lived across the street. An order from the rebels demanded the gentleman there resign from his post. The neat letter he had been sent had carried an intimidating and menacing tone. The rebels' so-called 'Patriotic People's Movement' (which was their military wing) was reputed to issue such communiques. This young family-man of two had been given an ultimatum. My question was why this one banker was bullied, when across the street lived a second banker – my father – who came to no harm. Brother argued, saying that our neighbour was employed in a state bank and that our father worked for a private enterprise. "Wouldn't that make it even more justifiable for them to ask father to resign?" The Marxist rhetoric of the rebels was anti-capitalist and the bank our father worked for was quite elite in the tier of such institutions. But, the rebels' struggle at that particular point was different, brother retorted. It was not a battle against elites and capitalists, but a tussle to wreck the state machine. Like our family had over the years, our talk, too, disintegrated and scattered into unrelated themes.

As far as I knew, the banker across the road didn't resign, but left our neighbourhood almost overnight. I never found out where he went or whether he actually got a transfer to a place where he was not marked. One morning, the village woke up and their rented home had been left behind.

One evening, not soon after, as he drove back to the depot after finishing the day, bus driver Banda was shot and killed. My childhood dream was to become a bus driver. The two buses on the village route as well as their drivers and ticket-issuing conductors fascinated me. Dodanwala to Kandy had its hills, curves and several sharp bends at a stretch. I knew by heart where the bus had to change gear and the idiosyncrasies of each driver from how they held the gear lever to how their bodies moved as they took a bend. Banda made elaborate gestures when he took the sharp turns at Anniewatte junction and Primrose Hill. At the lonely stretch just after the Disability School, Banda had been waylaid and shot. The bus without its master had gone headlong into the nearby field. The broad-chested, sturdy man who drove the second bus was fondly called Loku-aiya (or, big brother). With a neatly trimmed, curvy moustache, he had an arrogant, stern bearing about him. Loku-aiya continued to run his turns without any fear. Almost like a proclamation, he had said that anyone was free to shoot him; that he would only abandon his turn over his dead body.

Every morning, at ten minutes to seven, Loku-aiya's bus shifted gears as it entered the double-elbow and slowed down to the halt near our house. A few of us, my mother and myself included, lined up to board the rumbling TATA. Picking up twos, threes and fours from bus stops along the route, passing the sharp bends at Anniewatte and Primrose Hill, Loku-aiya pressed on with knowing expertise. The casualness of familiarity spoke in every

move the bus made. We arrived in time at the gate of the convent school nursery. My mother at my heels, I hopped out of the bus.

The nursery was set in a quiet hill on the back boundary of the convent school. Cowed by the white uniform frocks of all ages, you had to walk through the school and then up a flight of steps. More walking then after, and a second step-arrangement that ended in the nursery quadrangle. In size 3 shoes and a small, pinned handkerchief, it was quite a climb. My plastic water bottle was suspended from a cord. How much more of this? And for how long?

Parents handed the children to teachers at the main gate. They smiled encouragingly and exchanged greetings with all parents. They lied to the bleary-eyed four year olds that the day would be filled with fun activities. They lined up their charges two-by-two and escorted them up the hill. I always felt that this walk up the steps to the nursery had some larger meaning – something spiritual, ritualistically religious about it. The long journey that was life? The promise of ordered movement towards the summit of things? Half way through, between the two flights of steps, Mother Mary looked down on the passing flock. Baby Jesus was safe in her hands.

The nursery was a spacious L-shaped building with five classrooms of fifteen-twenty children in each. Our day-to-day curriculum involved the use of abundant paper, glue, colours, beads, numbers, words, and songs. After a short interval at ten, the day wrapped up a little after twelve. Each day, the last hour was a relaxed session of games or songs. Twice a week, class by class, we went to the music room where, in a room set off from the main building, we sang songs. The room had two parts, and the back opened into the west wing of the convent. As she played the old piano, the teacher dropped her head. In a semi-circle, we stood and followed her lead.

Behind the convent was a sharp outcropping of rock, and spreading from there, a hilly wood which no one used. The border of that wasteland reached one frontier of the Bahirawakandha hill. By now, periodic interruptions to school had begun. On some days, curfew was declared by the government. On certain others, the rebels – whom some people had by now begun to call the ‘lesser government’ – imposed their own curfew. On some days, transport was not sufficient. Yet, on others, mothers rushed to the nursery at noon. “An emergency in our area! Buses stop after twelve, they say!” Unsolicited holidays where I woke up late and played all day. No songs to memorize, cues to remember, or parts to play in groups of grumpy friends. Unknown to us children and unseen by our eyes, even as people had begun clashing and levelling guns at each other and ramming into teeth polished rifle-butts, we still had a world to fall back on.

One day, we were singing the same songs we had already sung too many times. The teacher admonished someone for dropping his voice at the end of a line. Let us start again, she said – one more time. I could read the thoughts in those baby-minds. ‘Do not exhaust your breath; or, she will start it *once again* – one more time’. The song was addressed to a person named Clementine. The tune was one of the saddest yet. Her problems were alien. Then, suddenly, three men walked in through the half-open music room door. An unscripted staccato: the teacher stopped.

Even as they rushed in, the man who led the trio urged the teacher to play on. He said something in a gentle voice that didn’t rise above casual friendliness. He spoke deferentially, with warm respect. The three of them slipped behind the small arc of our choir and disappeared into the back part of the room which was cut off from the singing area with a curtain of the convent’s colours. This was where other instruments were kept: a room which was off limits to us students. The man at the rear fondly touched the head of the girl next to me, and smiled as he moved. A second later, the leader came back among us and pleaded

with the teacher again: “Continue with the song, teacher. Please! Everything is alright!” and the teacher’s fingers faintly touched a random key. Then, pulling herself together, she continued from where she had stopped. The man squatted between the piano and the curtain and smiled at us. He made a sign with his hand for us to follow the teacher’s lead. Even though his attention seemed to be on the quadrangle, on the other side, as we sang to Clementine, he nodded happily and smiled.

A minute or two later, as we were starting the next piece, the leader got a signal from the others in the back of the room. He quickly withdrew towards the curtain and disappeared through it. The curtain hardly moved. The teacher went on playing for a further minute or two. It was the strangest music I have ever helped to make. Then, mid-verse, the teacher stopped abruptly. She realized that the men had left the music room through the back door. With a theatrical heave, hastily commanding us not to move, she rushed out through the front door. Just outside, she scanned the quadrangle and the nursery beyond.

Later, it was through what mother was telling my father back home that I learnt the complete story. Perhaps to dissuade me from following its full meaning, she was relating the incident in rapid English. A soldier and two policemen had stormed the nursery. They had been chasing three men who had been trapped in a police ambush. The men had jumped over the convent wall and run up the nursery hill. While the police had run into the classroom block, the runaways were hiding with us, in the music room. Where did they run off to from there? Did they run through the thickets and brambles further up the wasteland behind? The policemen had apologized for causing shock and inconvenience. The teachers had been at a loss, trying to bring under control the dozen children who bawled.

I heard about some incidents that took place in the village much later. Often, I had to patch pieces together, picking a line from here and pasting it on an anecdote from there. Growing up, the elders didn't speak of these in front of us kids. Some of them related incidents that were no longer seen to be controversial. There were others who spoke about the violence by hushing up the disturbing details.

The killings of Banda the labourer and Banda the driver had been the earliest signs of trouble to come. In the second half of '88, the troubles increased, but with the coming of '89, more uncertainty began to loom. It was in early-to-mid '89 that the government began to come down on the rebels without mercy. Even from my childhood memories, I remember talk of four men being killed, and their bodies being left at a nearby junction. If not early-December, it had to be the last week of November. This was as we were rehearsing for the nursery Christmas show. I remember coming home that day and someone appearing in the kitchen to report this incident to mother. I was seated at the pantry table, eating. Across the bridge, Halloluwa had already become a terror zone. Crackdowns ended with men being bundled into jeeps, being smoked out of hovels, forests, and tree-tops. Pleading faces and wailing women I have seen in newspapers and documentaries I paste onto my imagination of Halloluwa. Round ups in which fifteen-twenty men got arrested.

In the heart of the Dodanwala village, three masked men had visited a retired government man one night. Rapping on the door, they had introduced themselves as 'the patriots'. They had come in, ordered the people in the house into a storeroom, and locked them in. It had been past mid-morning the next day when they were finally freed by a maid who had come to do the house work. The house had been ransacked and family valuables had been taken. The Police was informed and statements were taken. That night a second masked group had come. Word of the previous day's robbery had got around and the second group

had come to apologize. They claimed to be ‘patriots proper’, while the men of the previous night had been ordinary thieves.

The retiree had his wife and two children – young women, both school teachers – at home at the time. Across a paddy field, theirs was a house set back from the main road. Road access to the house was from near the old bakery further down. A few days after the incident, a third midnight knock stirred the house. When the door was opened, three masked men had stepped in from the dark, producing two others who were in a state of terrorized embarrassment. “Are the ones who came to rob your house among these two?” The retiree could not be exactly sure. It had all happened too suddenly. He had been too confused to make clear notations.

Then, when a sign was given by the masked leader, one of them had gone back into the dark and produced some of the household items that had been stolen. Some silverware, pieces of jewellery and some curios. “Recognize any of these?” On cue, the men in custody raised feeble voices to confess their doings from the previous night. Confused and perplexed, they seemed utterly drained of life. Later, the thieves had been tied up to the lamppost at the junction near the bakery. When the baker arrived to run the oven at dawn, like a spectacle under the misty light of the lamp, he had found the two lifeless bodies with their heads dropped low.

A police Deputy Inspector who had made headlines for his ruthlessness in the South was transferred to Kandy in mid-’89. Handpicked by people high in the government, he left a deep print in the inventory of police notoriety. Villages that were suspected as rebel pockets were flushed. Working day and night, specially designed units were sent to round up villagers, and to pick up suspects and sympathizers. Men and women who were in their youth at the time are now in their late-50s and 60s. They remember those days as if it all happened last week. Years later, whenever I returned to the old village to see friends and people I knew,

I would drop in on them to talk. They recalled the morning Halloluwa and Dodanwala woke up to fifteen dead bodies sprawled along the bridge that connected the two sides. At about three in the morning, for about thirty or forty seconds, there had been continuous rounds of gun-fire. Even as the first to arrive had sent word to the police, the stray dogs had been sniffing, pulling at a resting elbow or an outstretched leg. The whole village had been stunned by the gruesome spectacle. I read about what happened to the village of Mahawatte in Kundasale, which ran out of mourners when almost two hundred people were massacred in one night. Their houses were set on fire and mourners were threatened. This village was about ten miles from Dodanwala. The following day, a curfew was imposed to cover all of Kundasale. When the curfew was finally lifted, against the better judgment of my mother, father had got on his motorcycle and rode to Kundasale to inquire after a friend for whom he feared.

The trouble in Mahawatte sent shockwaves across the adjoining areas. Never had anyone imagined such destruction was possible. Seeing my father pull up at the front veranda, his friend had rushed out to hug him tightly. The anxiety on his wife's face had been visible. Over a cup of tea, while telling father the story of the village that bordered theirs, the wife excused herself to tend their young infant, who had woken up in the next room. As soon as the wife had withdrawn and her voice could be heard coaxing the baby back to sleep, the friend burst out in tears and sobs. Later, father took him to the shop for groceries and baby-milk. Then, he set off to return home with good time before the sun set. When I learnt this story in such detail, it had been another fifteen years and my father was already dead. His friend, now living in a different part of Kandy, had come to see me on a matter where he needed help. The child of yesterday, now a bright young girl of sixteen, was seated next to us. She needed some extra tuition ahead of the year-end O-Level exam. It wasn't exactly tailor-made for that – but, the Mahawatte story was told over tea.

My uncle's son and daughter were the ringleaders of our neighbourhood play-gang. At seven, Harini's authority was undisputed. Her brother Hiran was five – the right age for a deputy. Self-absorbed, grumpy but obliging, I was running on four. Their rented house – the smaller house behind ours – was set well back from the main road. Their backyard rose into an incline which, at its highest elevation, reached the Peiris-watte boundary set off by an old barbed-wire fence. We had sufficiently pulled apart two wires to allow us to creep through. Joined by the Rajaratna kids – a daughter of six, two sons of four and three – we wandered the large expanse of their land in search of wild fruits and flowers. At other times, the three of us played in the backyard slope. Some days, my cricket-crazy uncle threw balls at his son who practiced his forward defence while I watched.

Of course, the Rajaratna children knew their forest better than anyone else. In the many hours spent there, the gang-leadership quietly passed over to the Rajaratna girl who took us from grove to grove with knowing expertise. When we all returned and crossed the fence at the barbed-wire border, the leadership automatically switched hands. Rajaratna's cowsheds were in the cultivated part of the estate. Selling the milk, he produced his own compost fertilizer and used the manure on his crops. When my uncle set up for himself a shed with two-three cows, Rajaratna helped him with his hands-on knowledge.

Up the incline, at two strategic points, trenches had been cut – we never really found out why. They were a good four feet deep and three feet wide. They were too big merely to break the water flow down the hill. When the rains came, these trenches filled like tanks. Using planks of the right length we built bridges on such soggy mornings. The day was spent walking up and down – from side to side – or in sailing boats, watching them drift under the

bridges. Once, a bridge collapsed with my cousin brother who went into the muddy tank, arms held wide.

Then, we rolled discarded motorcycle tyres from my father's Kawasaki down the hill. The barbed-wire fence at the back was the starting point. Released in tandem, the tyres came down tumbling, taking with them pieces of small plants and shoots. One of us stayed at the bottom to referee and to stop the tyres. It was a precarious task – being referee and stopper. Given the lay of the land, a tyre unstopped posed the threat of keeping rolling, until it crashed through the croton fence to a neighbour's land. This is what happened most of the time. It took skill for a stopper to hold on to both tyres. If they came down together – neck to neck – you were lucky. But, this was hardly ever the case.

It was at the boutique-uncle's shop that I first heard the idea of a tyre-pyre: of bodies being covered in rubber tyres that were then set aflame. I was seated on the short parapet wall until Sriyani – who had taken me with her – was buying groceries inside. From behind the shop, from where he had set up his workbench, uncle's son the painter was talking to someone. The idea itself sounded bizarre – a grim, unimaginable prospect that was nonetheless blood-curdling. Set fire, how? What kind of tyres were they – bicycle or bus? And how many? Later, when I asked Sriyani she just hushed me to silence. It was all big-people talk, she said. But my natural curiosity was already aroused. It was an irrational wastage of tyres that could be used in a hundred other ways! Balls of mud caked into them, people used old tyres as makeshift steps. Villagers who didn't have money to spend on cement or concrete, used tyres to build a flight that was true to the footing. Others used them to grow plants in. Some made hanging swings out of them for children to play. Somehow, it never registered – there was no *reason* why a tyre had to be thought of in *that* way – as a stake for three-four-five bodies, mangled and petrol-doused. After Sriyani's remonstrance, a

strange instinct prevented me from seeking adult clarification. It was the cousin sister I asked: “But, how can a tyre catch fire so easily, just like that?” She, too, placed her finger on my mouth and hushed me into silence. “Don’t eavesdrop on elders’ talk!” she mimicked Sriyani.

Once in mid-’89 – probably not too long after the new year – father came home with a friend who carried a big cardboard box with holes in it. They came in father’s motorcycle, the friend carrying a bag which he kept on top of the box on his lap. When the lid of the box opened, we were surprised to find that inside was a small indifferent parrot. He said it was given to him by another friend. My mother was the least impressed. She complained of having to feed the bird, and of the prospect of droppings. “It is a sin to cage animals in any case,” she said. The parrot neither cared about us nor spoke. It seemed disinterested and out of place. The next day, father came home with a small cage into which the parrot was forced. There was no change to its set ways. As a parrot was an unusual pet everybody came to take a look. Perhaps, these attempts to socialize the creature traumatized it further. It stepped back to the cage’s furthest edge. For a week, different fruits were tried, but without success. Then, father decided to set the bird free. “These birds belong with nature,” he justified. “Then, why on earth did you bring it here in the first place?” my mother asked. He grunted in reply and took the cage to the front veranda. With the little wire-door open, he left it in one corner. At first, the parrot seemed confused as to what it must now do. But, sometime later when we came back to check, the cage was empty. The bird had gone.

Letter from Ayukanthi Gunnepana to Her Sister

At our Ranawana Home,

Katugastota.

16-07-89

Dearest sister,

I hope you are not too upset with me for my delay in replying your letter which I received a fortnight ago. It was all my fault, but with our son preparing for the Advanced Level exam next month there are too many things to worry about. But, right now, there is much uncertainty whether the exams will be held at all. The *boys* seem to have renewed their attacks. And here we were thinking that – finally – it had all come to an end. Where is the lasting solution the president promised us when he took oaths last February?

Dear sister, how are matters at your end? I hope business is not too bad, in spite of all these interruptions. I always think of you the moment I hear of shut downs and curfews. Since [my husband] is in the Insurance Coop at least we are lucky. At least we have a steady income at the end of the month come rain or shine. I hope you will write to me without hesitations if you face unexpected difficulties at your end? I know how tough you are as a person, my dear sister. But, this is a bad time for business – specially, in your line.

Yesterday, they had captured some fellow at the checkpoint near the dispensary here. In the shops they were saying it was a high up in the *boys'* commanding chain. It seems he has been

living on rent not too far from the school on the hill near our place. I really hope all this ends very soon!

We think of you and your family often. Please be careful in these troubled times. Don't defy orders if the *boys* force you to do something. It is hundred times better to get killed by the police or army than to be shot like dogs.

May the blessings of the triple gem keep you safe! I will write again soon.

Your ever-loving elder sister,

Kanthi.

A BROTHER

In 1989, when the government crackdown of the JVP rebels reached its peak, I was still in my village home in Halloluwa. I worked as a clerk in the concrete factory across the river, on the other side. At the time, I was no more than 24 – a carefree man of small ambitions. Every morning I used to walk the short distance to the factory. Years later, when I became a writer – when papers and magazines began to accept my stories – I became somewhat popular as a romance author. Boys and girls in their teens and early-twenties took to my style of writing love. Reviewers compared some of my stories to those of Karunasena Jayalath.³⁰ But, then, at one point, I wanted to write the story of 1989: the story of how the death squads first came to the village, how uncertain things happened and, figuratively speaking, how I got caught in the crossfire. I wanted to call my story *The Water under the Bridge*.

With intervals in between, I kept at it for six or seven months. It wasn't an easy story to write, but the more I wrote, the more my mind became engaged. Images returned with familiar clarity and with them, the memories feeding on them took shape. The book never got completed; other deadlines carried away my strength. But, here, I reproduce a part of that incomplete manuscript: the early chapters of it from the beginning up to when my brother disappeared. In the story, I refer to myself as Dharmasiri. The story's narrator is me, as I look back on all that happened from where I am today – a family man with the comforts a modest middle class income brings; but one, still, very much tied with the past.

³⁰ A popular youth romance writer in the late-1970s and early-1980s.

The Water under the Bridge

1

It was an October afternoon in 1987. Dharmasiri was coming home on a half-day. A crowd had gathered in front of a tea shop. From a distance, it seemed as if something bad had happened. Slowing down, Dharmasiri peeped in to see what the problem was. There were young and old faces concentrating on a transistor radio. It was only then that Dharmasiri remembered that the Cricket World Cup was on. In some ground somewhere in India, the West Indies was playing Sri Lanka. He stepped in and asked them what the score was. “Richards is hammering our boys left-right-centre!” someone quipped. Just then, the commentator on air announced another four hit. “Waste of time – these Cricket matches,” Dharmasiri said, more to annoy the fellows, but also to take the sting out of the beating their team was taking. This was the day West Indies hit 360 – an unheard of feat back then, for a 50-over game. Vivian Richards scored 181 of those runs.

Quietly, Dharmasiri walked on, greeting the few familiar faces he met on the way. Halloluwa town was just a few shops back then – in fact, no different from what it still was, twenty years on. It was a quiet hour. Dharmasiri stopped at his usual small grocer to buy a few cigarettes. “Not following the match?” he asked Alwis Mudhalali as he wrapped Dharmasiri three Bristols. “What match, Dharmasiri malli?” the shopman sniggered. “It is now two months and the troubles seem to be getting worse.” He furrowed his forehead. “Was expecting rice and flour today,” he paused. “But no – nothing! Later they had called the post office and left a message: the boys have put barriers on the road and turned back the lorries at Galagedara.” Dharmasiri listened, said something to console poor Alwis, and turned to leave.

“Now, *this* is the real match, malli. But, if this goes on for two-three more weeks, everyone is going to be on the losing side.”

Halloluwa was where Dharmasiri grew up: his village, the place where his whole life was lived. It was a comely little place on the Gannoruwa-Katugastota Road. Between Gannoruwa and Gohagoda it spread as a small kadamandiya – a little junction with a few shops. Across the road, the Mahaweli flowed in the lower valley. From there, towards the inland hills, the village spread with its fields and forests. From Halloluwa, if you knew your way through the paths that cut through the villages, through Yatihalagala (the road to Yatihalagala branched off the main road just a hundred meters before the Halloluwa shops), you could go as far as Muruthalawa and Alagalla. It was a beautiful village: it was Paradise. A few scattered neighbourhoods, patches of paddy, a few cottage industries, and acres of wild fruit trees. Near the shops, the bridge connected with Dodanwala. It was a colonial-era bridge of strong iron beams and sturdy iron cords. Bending over piles of river sand from morning to dusk, several sand-haulers worked on either bank.

From the Halloluwa shops, two roads spiralled towards the hills. One road led through Bogahakandha: a curving mountainous track which went through the heart of that leafy hill. Dharmasiri used to play for the local volleyball team. Their traditional rivals came from Bogahakandha, with whom Halloluwa Storm maintained an enviable record. But that was before all the troubles started. Then, there was the road that led to Barigama, which later became famous because of a high end resort. The Barigama road began at the elbow bend near the bus terminus. It snaked through long stretches of paddy: a shady, self-sustained neighbourhood set back from the bustle of life. Dharmasiri’s father had built his home along this Barigama road and was a much-respected carpenter with a thriving clientele. Mangala, his sister, had by now married and moved to a town closer to Colombo. His younger brother Sunanda was studying at the Kelaniya University.

Twenty-three or so, Dharmasiri worked as an overseer-come floor manager at Con-Way, the concrete factory at the Rajasinghe Mawatha junction on the Dodanwala side. Con-Way produced slabs, bricks and ornamental pots. Dharmasiri kept the factory ledgers, supervised the labourers, and ensured the day-to-day flow. Screened from the road by dense trees, the factory itself was at a lower elevation. The river flowed by its side. Twenty to twenty-five men and women worked under the self-made, portly Pathirana mudhalali; or, as some called him, Con-Way mudhalali. The old, battered Con-Way tipper went in and out of the factory twice or thrice a day making a whirring riot as gears shifted to the accompaniment of furious steering and unsteering by the old driver.

The factory itself was two floors and Dharmasiri's desk was at a strategic upper elevation from where he overlooked the mixers and the labourers at work. From where he sat, he could also see the tops of vehicles and the silhouettes of people as they moved both on the Dodanwala road as well as the Rajasinghe Mawatha road towards Getambe. This was the desk where Dharmasiri's brief career as a voyeur began. His innocent object of desire was a young woman who carried thaacci after thaacci laden with wet, freshly-mixed concrete between the loading dock and the potters' bench. Already, he had been transformed into an amateur poet – a few lines in free-verse; a fervent declaration or two. Whenever he came face to face with this muse, though, Dharmasiri became self-conscious, so he either looked at his sandals or the other way. Did the woman know it, then? He often wondered. More the question that teased Dharmasiri: did the *other* sundry women who worked there know?

At the time, the work suited Dharmasiri's modest ambitions. He was in any case undecided whether to apply for the course at the Technical School in Aruppola or to find some landscape and gardening work at the Agriculture Institute. He had completed a vocational course in garden management, but outdoor work was not his preference. However, the Technical School had been closed as a result of the troubles, so he'd decided to stay on at

the factory for longer. He watched the pyramid of pulp as it drained out of the mixer into the dock, where hands moulded it into uniform shapes. The workers broke for an hour at noon, and tea was served while the work went on at a quarter past three. During the midday break, Dharmasiri walked over to the Dodanwala bridge close by, where a friend from his high school days had recently opened a barber shop. Like Dharmasiri, this friend – Dammika, or Kota (Shorty) – was a man with deft hands. He was also the village painter who drew for rates that could easily crash the sign-board industry.

Dharmasiri composed with the fervour of a man who had just discovered that art. Through adolescence and late-teens Dharmasiri had been reserved and mild. Girls came and went. His interest was grounded just for that moment. Even where he began to invest, Dharmasiri's gentleness was often mistaken for a brotherly impulse: as the smile of a friend or the thoughtful gesture of an elder sibling. He was automatically relegated to a zone from which a comeback was quite difficult to stage. He was by no means dashing – the striker of the college football team, the opening bowler with matching biceps, or the orator who melted the school assembly – and whatever little progress he made had been in his dreams. Poetry was an early-twenties thing. His first 'poems' to Amitha (at first, he loathed to call them poems) came in short bursts of two-three lines at a time. The last time he had written poetry was for the high school magazine on patriotic or moral themes.

Amitha had been at Con-Way for over six months when, unknown to her, on the floor above, the first verses in her name began. No one knew much about her, and it wasn't Dharmasiri's place to step forward and inquire. His anxiety for knowledge grew and, in his head, every time he isolated Amitha from the rest, a giddy beat steadily rose. Dharmasiri was aware that he ran a high risk of being caught staring at this subordinate worker. So, each time he became aware of Amitha moving in the periphery he drew over himself a mental shutter and made sure no one watched him. Amitha was of a slight build. She moved swiftly and her

face rarely betrayed an expression. She had a gentle but firm way about her – a worldly mask that said she had seen something of life. She received the amount of male attention that was normal for a woman of her status in that position. The occasional wisecrack, the veiled remark; to which Amitha responded suitably and let life carry on. She always moved in a group of three or four other women with whom she had her meals and tea. Dharmasiri attributed to Amitha the quality of a coloured light that never changed from red.

Then, one day, Dharmasiri's notebook finally ran out. Eighty pages of poems, scrawls, scrap-offs and cast away lines. During the break he walked over to the shops near the bridge. From the retailer there Dharmasiri bought a new exercise book and a couple of cigarettes, and as the shop woman passed through the counter his change, Dharmasiri's attention was caught by the dull green cover of the exercise book: a cheap State Printing Corporation bind which was sold in small shops. Printed on its cover, the book had a short verse which endorsed the value of education. The author of this moralistic composition: the Honourable President Ranasinghe Premadasa. Turning around, Dharmasiri smiled a quiet smile to himself.

2

One afternoon on a Saturday, Dharmasiri came home to find that his friend Dammika was at his house. Dammika was seated on his bed reading the sports supplement of the youth paper. Dharmasiri's mother suggested that she would make some tea. Dammika was always the shortest in any group he was a part of, and after leaving school he grew shoulder-length hair and groomed a beard to match which didn't quite go with his height. But, now he'd shaved both off. It seemed as if Dammika had travelled back in time to his high school days. He regretted shaving, but explained that anyone with a beard ran the risk of being bundled off

as JVP. “And from there, you never knew,” he jovially quipped. “Why go asking for it, right?” Dammika had come over to ask from Dharmasiri a favour: could Dharmasiri help him with the art exhibition he was planning to hold? The transporting and handling of the frames needed trusty hands. Dharmasiri readily agreed, but added that painting landscapes just then was no different to Nero fiddling away as Rome burnt. Dammika casually brushed aside this rebuke and said that the troubles may go on for years, but that art mustn’t wait.

Up to the Halloluwa shops, Dharmasiri walked part of the way with his friend. As they were about to part, Dammika caught his friend unawares by asking him who Aparna was. As Dammika began to chuckle with the delight of a mischief-maker, for a moment, Dharmasiri froze. In his poems, he never referred to Amitha by name, but used the convenient veil of Aparna. The name Aparna gave his muse a mystic – almost exotic - aura. Dharmasiri recovered to mock-reprimand his friend for shamelessly probing into others’ privacy and books. “How am I to know they were private?” Dammika asked. “It was just lying there on your writing desk!” Naturally, his curiosity was aroused, said Dammika. Not that Dharmasiri was known to be bookish.

Soon after, things began to take a rapid turn. Though things had quieted down for a while after the presidential election, violent incidents were on a steady rise. The newly sworn-in President Premadasa (in addition to his writing poetry to be printed on SPC issue) was trying his best to coax the JVP to the negotiation table. Rumour was that the rebels, too, had tacitly supported Premadasa’s election. Some boldly speculated the two parties might have a backdoor agreement. Premadasa was a man born to poverty on the fringes of Colombo – in many ways an outsider within his own party which was traditionally made up of elite suit-wearing types – but, who toiled and persevered to rise through the ranks. As prime minister, he had been the common man’s face in JR’s government. JR was grooming two protégés from his own class to succeed him the day he retired. But, in 1988, the troubles with

the rebels mounting, Premadasa forced his President's hand and won the nomination for the top chair. But that was in December and January and now, a further four months had come and gone. The tension was mounting once again.

That year, Dharmasiri saw bodies of young men who had been left to burn just outside the village. Three bodies, mangled and twisted at awkward angles, morning dew settled on their charred, subhuman remains. They were topless with the carbonized leftovers of the garments they had worn. The remains were now gutted into the deep-grilled flesh. This was the first time anyone in the village had seen anything close to this and they were stunned into silence. What had so far reached the village only as rumour had now fully materialized. Some people needed an explanation about what the coils of loose wire around the bodies were: the remains of tyres that had been used in the act. Within that week alone six other charred tyre-pyres came and went: one by the old bridge, from where the road branched towards Yatiwawala; three, adjacent to the main road by the Gohagoda Primary School, and a half burnt pyre of three that had been doused by a shower. Half-burnt and horrendous, these bodies were neither human nor beast. Other than four boys from Yatihlagala, the rest were not known to Dharmasiri's side of the river. Two of them were known to Dharmasiri in a casual way. They had earlier disappeared – one from a boarding house in Colombo, and the other while returning home from Kandy town – and the police had denied any knowledge of their whereabouts.

One of those boys was selected for the next cycle of university entrance. He expected to get into Applied Science at Peradeniya or Kelaniya. The universities were disturbed twice or thrice a week with protests and boycotts. In a few months, the authorities were pressured to shut down the campuses for good while the students began to agitate to keep them open. That day, it was Dharmasiri's father who brought home the news: a boy whom he knew quite well, too, had been killed. He was distraught and struggled to control his feelings. Father had been

to the site of the mangled pyre and, once he got back home, he simply dropped on a chair in the veranda. Covering his face, he sobbed into his hands. The boy had been a go-around in the temple's welfare society. As a lay-patron of the society, Dharmasiri's father had known the boy closely and had been quite fond of him. There was very little difference between the death of this boy and that of a nephew or a niece.

The shockwave of the pyres was still fresh when the counter-strikes began. One night, in an adjacent village, the local village officer – or, grama niladhari – had been forced out of his house. Dinner had just been served and, on the table, the curries were still warm. His eight year old son and eleven-something daughter had burst into tears as his wife had pleaded with four masked men. The leader had explained that the grama niladhari was collaborating with the police, feeding the government's killers with the names of patriots and innocents alike. The wife was told to shut the door and to stay in with the children. The family hung on to one another in the ominous cold. And then it came – an explosion that shattered the silence of the night. At the bend not too far from his house, the officer was found tied to a lamp post, shot dead.

The next day, the village was under siege and cordoned off. Combing it section by section, a contingent of thirty-forty uniformed men broke into the village. They lined up the men and the women in separate rows. They marched off no less than twenty men from the village. Some of them were later released, bruised and battered. Possibly eight or ten of them never came back home. They took in anyone who was not originally from the village. They took in relatives and friends who had come to visit. As the last military jeep sped away, the rising dust clouds signalled the parched taste of war.

For Dharmasiri's parents, there was one relief; that their younger son was away, in the safety of the university. Not that Sunanda was a politicized boy or one likely to be caught in any mischief. On the contrary, growing up, he bore the brunt of school bullies who took

Sunanda's gentle ways as a target. The parents never feared for Dharmasiri, as he was well-liked and well-known in the village. His father had moderate views and as a master carpenter his expertise was sought by all. He took pride in his trade and whatever political opinions he had he kept them to himself. However, Dharmasiri was certainly worried. Moving among a younger crowd, he knew there was much uncertainty. Village affiliations no longer helped anyone as the killing squads came from outside. Some of the boys found in charred piles had had no politics in them. Their only vulnerability had been their gender and their age.

3

When the rebels came one night to collect the ID cards in Dharmasiri's neighbourhood, he stayed up with his parents for the after-dark call. Four men, faces covered, stepped in after a knock on the door. A rehearsed lecture was delivered by the leader. In a few words he explained why these cards had to be collected. By the door of an ante-room Dharmasiri stood while his mother watched from near the cabinet. Half wrapped in cloth, two men carried shotguns and stood close to the walls, immersed in the shadows. Stealthily, without making it too obvious, Dharmasiri glanced from one face to another. Then, for a moment his eyes rested on the eyes of the man standing closest to the front door and – for a second – he almost felt a chill run down his spine. Was he being tempted by his own fancy? Of average height, medium build, the man wore a skull cap, while a folded cloth covered his face. He had intelligent and alert eyes. They scanned, measured, and took note of the room – and avoided direct eye contact. Then, for a brief split second, their eyes met – and unmet. If not for its impossibility, Dharmasiri was intuitively certain who this fellow had to be.

When the masked men left father turned the lock. Down the road dogs barked into the night. Father returned to the living room, sat on a chair, and let loose a sigh. The identity

cards were gone. At some point, they would all have to apply for a new card. That was sure going to be an endless process. Hopefully, these boys would return the cards! Telling the others not to stay up for too long mother retired for the night. Seated beside him Dharmasiri kept his father company. Had father noticed it, too? The carpenter was thoughtfully rifling through his curls, lost in thought. To break the uneasy silence Dharmasiri said that he suspected quite a few of the Con-Way workers to be closely involved with the rebels. The movement was arming itself with auxiliaries that included men and women who were formally not party cadre.

For two days and nights, Dharmasiri waged a war within. Every moment that passed and every time he thought back to that other night, he was convinced that it was Sunanda who had come with those men. That height, that stature. And of course, those eyes – the way they moved about scanning, taking note. And then, when their eyes met, he knew that he was right. On the third day, giving way to his anxiety, Dharmasiri left saying he wanted to visit his sister who lived in an outer-Colombo suburb. If time permitted, he said he would go to see Sunanda at the Kelaniya University. The parents were not too happy, but Dharmasiri insisted that traveling by day was free of risk. Taking a Colombo-bound bus, he left early in the morning. He arrived at Kelaniya a little after ten. This was just his second time there, and he tried to remember the layout from that day he'd first come to admit his brother for the degree.

For a working day, the university was quiet. In fact, Dharmasiri felt that an eerie sense of desolation had descended. He was now in the Arts Faculty canteen where he was noticed as an outsider and confronted by a group of boys. Dharmasiri said that he'd come looking for his brother, and for a while there was confusion as to whom Dharmasiri referred to as K.L. Sunanda Bandara. In the indoctrinated university subculture students were rarely known by their proper names. Each student was given a 'card name' by which he was known. But, soon

it was ascertained that this Sunanda was none other than their comrade Keerthisinghe – a frontline player of the students union; who (and Dharmasiri felt this) seemed to be much respected by the boys to whom he spoke. However, it seemed that Sunanda was not on campus at the time, and no one knew of his whereabouts. What should he now do? Dharmasiri left a message to be contacted at his sister's home. If he came back early enough, could Sunanda give him a call?

When Sunanda called, Dharmasiri was reading the paper as his sister spoke to him, while keeping an idle eye on her two year old girl. The child was building with her blocks what at the same time looked like a crematorium and a house. She took after her grandfather, Dharmasiri thought. Building was in her blood. The sister spoke of shutdowns, protests and how the school in which she taught was regularly interrupted. To Dharmasiri there was no novelty in any of these. When the phone rang, the sister answered. From the familiarity of her greeting Dharmasiri knew that it was Sunanda calling. Sunanda expressed surprise that his brother had come to the university that morning. Was it something urgent? Was everything all right at home? Dharmasiri said that he came to see his sister, and wanted to meet him, too. Mother had given a parcel of home-made sweetmeats, but since they couldn't meet, Dharmasiri had now given it to their sister. At a place just outside campus, Sunanda agreed to meet his brother the following day.

The next day, when they met, Sunanda was relaxed and full of brotherly affection. The unexpected visit was well received. Dharmasiri was never a man of words, and he let Sunanda talk. He merely gazed at his younger brother's eyes. Underneath his right eye, Sunanda had an unmistakable, crescent-shaped birthmark. Dharmasiri strove to remember but it was in vain: the facial mask of the rebel had been drawn too close to the eye. The brothers spoke about the tension and the uncertainty that had begun to spread into the Kandy villages. Sunanda scratched his jaw and expressed his worst fear: that there is a real threat of the

universities being shut down and the military taking over the campuses. It was no secret that the JVP students were operating from universities, using their freedom as cover. “Even though students like myself have no connections with the movement, these times are tricky,” Sunanda said without excitement. The build and expansion of his shoulders – it was difficult to be sure. In a shirt and casual trousers Sunanda looked different from the ‘Sunanda’ who had come. “Is everything all right?” Sunanda asked again, out of the blue.

Whether Sunanda knew that Dharmasiri suspected could never be known for certain. In the course of their conversation, even Dharmasiri’s conviction began to falter and ebb when Sunanda spoke of the JVP students in a roundabout way. It seemed that he had very little to do with them. “These political students are the ones to keep away from, aiya,” Sunanda said a few times. “Don’t know what kind of trouble they are asking for!” Sunanda looked his brother straight in the eye. His eyes held the gaze. His mouth didn’t falter. “Can’t the university do anything about these students?” Dharmasiri asked, dropping his voice. Sunanda just smirked and nodded his head. “No chance,” he said. “They are too powerful to be browbeaten.” But, then, Dharmasiri’s confidence gradually came back: No, it was Sunanda that night. Of course, it was him! It was sibling-instinct – the innate call of the older brother who always looked after the favoured, younger sibling.

When Dharmasiri finally took his leave, he only said what any brother or friend told another during that time: to watch out and to be on the alert; to think twice or even thrice before doing something – anything. “I am not knowledgeable about these student affairs,” Dharmasiri said. “But, please be careful – if not for anything else, for our mother’s and father’s sake.” Dharmasiri gave Sunanda some money. It was a common gesture from an adult to a child. Walking towards the university, Sunanda stopped his brother a good hundred yards from the gates. With an affectionate squeeze of the shoulder he told his elder brother that they should part there. “Just to be safe – just to make sure in case I am watched.”

Looking after the back of his retreating brother, Dharmasiri stood there for a full moment. He then crossed the road and awaited a bus to take him back home.

Around this time, an island-wide shutdown was ordered by the Patriotic People's Movement: what was commonly understood to be the rebels' military wing. Even to the end, the JVP maintained that the PPM – or, the *deshapremis*, as they were known among the people – was an entity with which their party had no connection. This was merely a myth of convenience. The *deshapremis* issued intimidating decrees on letterhead. In these they passed daring judgments and directions for the people to follow. As the 'commander' of what they called the 'combined operational headquarters' for their battalions, a Keerthi Wijayabahu (a compound of names of two ancient kings) often put his hand on these decrees. The rebels' so-called battalions were named after ancient Sinhala heroes and the JVP's own martyrs. The island-wide curfew was organized to mark the killing of a senior JVP member who had been arrested at a checkpoint and whose charred body was later found.

All businesses and public affairs were to be shut down for two days. No buses were to run. At the village level, personal communications were made to the shops. Posters were put on display. His business obediently shut down, Dammika sat in front of the shop, having a friendly chat with people who came and went. He set up a crude bench under a tree next to the bridge, and by noon a small crowd gathered there to spend the time. Past one o'clock, as Dammika prepared to walk over to his father's place for lunch, a police jeep coming along the Dodanwala road halted. His muscular elbow jutting out, a man who radiated importance sat in the front. He was a Police Inspector who had been to Dodanwala a few times. The men got down from the bench and let loose their tucked up sarongs. After a rehearsed reprimand the policeman ordered Dammika to open his shop room. Pleading, Dammika said that he was scared and that even his fellow traders were not there that day. He was alone and exposed.

Dammika was ready to compromise by staying on the bench till evening, but he pleaded again and again – he didn't want to open the shop.

The policeman assured Dammika that there was no reason for these threats to be taken seriously. If the majority of people stood firm and strong, these threats would be revealed as idle bravado. These terrorists should not be allowed to tamper with routine and order. Assuming a genteel pose, Dammika begged further and in the end the Inspector gave in, but admonished him saying that it was people like Dammika who made his job ten times more difficult. He threatened to beat the barber up and put him in jail for a day or two if he even dared to move from the bench before regular closing time. The jeep trailed off and the men were now once again free to talk among themselves. "Who the devil comes for a haircut on a day like this?" Dammika asked out loud. "Hair aside, this was a day for chopping off heads – my head."

For two days, the shutdown went on. On the third day – a Wednesday – routine returned as Dharmasiri set off for work after a light breakfast. To the factory it was just a half an hour's walk and he liked a morning stroll. Neighbours greeted one another and often Dharmasiri met workers from the factory who joined him for half the way. Now, as he walked through the Halloluwa shops, a woman he knew from work hurried towards him. Eyes shot with despair, she whispered to Dharmasiri that the night before Amitha's husband had been shot and killed. He was taken out of his home and shot in the head and chest after being dragged to a junction nearby. This was totally unexpected and Dharmasiri felt the shock take over. His stomach churned and he felt a weakness in his knees. The woman kept on talking but Dharmasiri couldn't grasp all she said. In a tremulous voice he asked her, "What are we going to do now, Sumana?"

In the factory, the men and women were discussing the death. The women were in hushed whispers. Some of the men spoke in a matter of fact way. They all knew that this

could happen to any one of them – and with such ease. The man had been killed to be made a lesson of. He was a shop-help at a reputed Katugastota bakery, and had braved the curfew to help the proprietor with some held up orders. Among the village folk there is a saying that at a time of flood the water begins to recede from the lowest point. An example had to be made, and the rebels had put a bullet through the weakest in the chain. The machines began to run, but the Con-Way people worked preoccupied. Dharmasiri watched from his chair as workers moved about the main dock. He pictured a broken Amitha overcome with shock and grief. In his mental image Amitha lay distraught, sprawled in the arms of a comforting neighbour.

For Amitha's man, the rebels had ordered a funeral without ceremony or formality. No more than fifteen were permitted to take part. To perform the last rites, a single monk could be summoned. The house was watched all the time. A week after the cremation, the shock still lingering in the air, Amitha left the village and returned to her childhood home. She didn't return to work at the factory. With her husband killed, there was no reason for her to continue in that village. Her own relations welcomed her back.

A few days after the funeral at Amitha's, Dharmasiri went to see Sunanda a second time. To avoid disappointment, he wanted to call his brother ahead of his visit, but he couldn't get through. He had called the university post office, but the message he left hadn't been delivered. He then tried Sunanda's hostel, but when he called again, the message he received was that Sunanda was not on the campus. Dharmasiri had no clear idea why he wanted to see his brother, or what he wanted to say. But he knew he had to see him – the cause would make itself clear in due course, he felt. He wanted to tell his brother what he felt about these killings – these innocents who lived hand-to-mouth being shot like stray dogs and a note being pinned to their miserable, dead bodies. "The punishment for traitors is death".

When he came to Kelaniya, Dharmasiri sat on a bench by the deserted canteen. Three or four sat in a group in one corner, but they were not going to order anything. As before, a couple of students approached Dharmasiri and inquired who he was. When he told them, they either didn't seem to know Sunanda's whereabouts, or they feigned ignorance. The boys spoke with respect and even offered to get Dharmasiri some snacks and tea. As the hour passed, a shortish, clean-shaven fellow with a small nose came up to Dharmasiri and sat beside him. In ordinary trousers and a tucked in shirt, he had his hair well-oiled and brushed back. He was friendly and courteous. He called himself Kithsiri, one of Sunanda's friends. Were Dharmasiri's lunch arrangements made? After a suitable role play, Dharmasiri asked after his brother.

Short-nose clasped his hands decisively and pushed them towards the table's centre. "Aiya." In a matter of fact tone he spoke to Dharmasiri. "How much do you know of your brother's role as a leader here?" For a moment, this blunt approach confused Dharmasiri. He wasn't sure what to assert or withhold. Who was this Kithsiri, anyway? He knew what he had to say in response: that he didn't know about his brother's involvement in the campus except for exam grades the brother wrote home about from time to time. Kithsiri definitely seemed to be a friend, but Dharmasiri didn't want to say anything out of hand. Definitely not about the ID cards.

Kithsiri sighed and nodded his head a few times. He told Dharmasiri that Sunanda (or, as he called him, Comrade Keerthisinghe) had decided to go underground. "For his safety," he said. But why? Safety from whom? What was there for him to fear? "It was our committee's decision," he said. Dharmasiri liked the blunt nature of this unimpressive man. Yet, it didn't do much to relieve him of his bewilderment. Committee? What committee? Whom did this Kithsiri definitively refer to as 'we'? "I shouldn't have told you even this much, brother," Kithsiri went on. "But, you have travelled far – you have travelled all

morning”. Dharmasiri looked at him searchingly. Is there something you are not telling me? Something – *bad*? In his own way, Kithsiri was simply implying that Dharmasiri must not come back; not to speak or to say anything. Kithsiri asked him to go home and be safe. When the time was right, Sunanda would return. Until then, it was best that no one knew – where he was, or with whom. The whole area bordering the university was manned by spies, he said. “Be careful when you leave. You may be followed.” Kithsiri walked Dharmasiri half way down the hill leading to the main gate. Then he stopped. “Remember, aiya – If anyone asks, say that *he* has not been in touch; nothing less, nothing more.” As he walked away, Dharmasiri turned back and looked behind him. Kithsiri was still standing, watching him go. From his upper elevation, he smiled at Dharmasiri, lifted his hand and waved goodbye.

What was Dharmasiri now going to tell his mother and father? Since the bus he got into was crowded, he stood holding on to a bar and looked out at the passing scenes. The bus stopped here and there to pick up more people. People jostled around him and the conductor wriggled about with a ticket machine at his hip. Sunanda was the prodigy of the family. The one who won prizes at school and promised to blossom into bigger things. As the youngest, he was also petted and looked after – almost spoilt. He had about him an intelligence which was only sharpened over time. Sunanda was always destined for more than just lumber. It was almost Warakapola – more or less the midway point – when Dharmasiri secured a seat. Though he sat down and continued to look out, he was too restless and anxious. Soon, he wanted to stand up again.

Even if Sunanda was undercover for ‘safety’, what did that really mean? What did they – the family – now have to do: pretend they knew nothing and shut up and wait? Or were they to inform the police that Sunanda had *disappeared*? But, if Sunanda had been involved with the rebels, how would the family avoid being implicated in a stupid mess: a

mess they would bring on themselves? Surely, the police weren't going to believe that the family knew *nothing* of the son's comings and goings! To make a police complaint was, perhaps, the established practice. But, in this case it was from the police that Sunanda was hiding. Dharmasiri felt his forehead smart. Tears filled and burnt his eyes. Sunanda surviving on the run was against all the odds. If, indeed, he was being hunted, they only had to look in the faces on the street for a crescent-shaped birthmark. Unless birthmarks can be removed or disfigured, Sunanda didn't have too much of a chance.

4

Dammika's father was known among Dharmasiri's crowd as Sudhu-uncle: his cotton-white head of hair was a signature among the boys. Very rarely was he called by his given name. He was a good-natured fellow who started the boutique-business after retiring from his government job. In the annex to the small shop Dammika spent most nights with his father. They were from a Katugastota village where uncle had his house which was now entirely used by his newly married elder son. Uncle's shop was at the foot of Peiris-watte. This was a quiet part of the village. Adjacent to the shop lived a banker, and a second banker had rented the house across the road. When Dammika was scraping the till to set up his barber shop, the village boys used to tease him: "Why don't you get a loan from your *valuable* neighbours!" He even had a choice of which bank to use. When he finally set up his business near the bridge, most of Dammika's time was spent at the shop. Only his sign painting was done on a workbench behind Sudhu-uncle's boutique. The paints, thinners, brushes and stencil blocks were kept here. If the shop smelt of thinner and fresh paint, it was a sign that Dammika was working, drawing. He had a knack for design and took pleasure in this kind of work. His charges were next to nothing.

The wave of uncertainty rose and fell. Some days, the tension was in the air. Then, fewer people were seen outside and it felt like nightfall at a half past six. Even as the first cicadas were heard, the men already started on their way home. After helping the aunty who ran the grocery to shut her business and after seeing her off to the bus, Dammika was among the last to leave in the evening. Then, he walked the ten minute distance to his father's boutique. One evening, as he was walking home, Dharmasiri met Dammika near the Halloluwa shops. It was a pleasant surprise since, as he approached the bridge on the other side, Dharmasiri had noticed that the barber shop was closed. To meet Dammika on the Halloluwa side at this hour was unusual. Dammika suggested that they have a cup of tea in a nearby shop. Since his home was almost in the vicinity, Dharmasiri said that that they ought to go home instead. But Dammika seemed to be in a hurry and, to humour his friend, Dharmasiri gave way. As they walked, Dammika said that he was leaving the village for a while. He had been told by 'some' – he didn't specify by whom – to stay away. To feign levity (Dharmasiri was sure), Dammika kept chuckling. But, Dharmasiri knew him well enough to see through his act. "Why, machan, is there something wrong? Some danger, maybe?" Dammika smiled again and shook his head. Nothing like that, he said. He simply felt he should spend some time away. But, where *could* he go? He wasn't sure. It had to be to one of his aunts' in Gampaha or in Kuliyaipitiya.

The tea shop they walked to mainly catered to the sand-haulers who worked on the river bank. It was far from impressive. With a familiar greeting to the man at the counter, the two friends sat down. They ordered a cup each. They talked, making the frail and shrunken shop-man a part of their conversation. They went on about mundane things: tea-shop talk on the price of vegetables, the quality of bakery products, and the religious festival in Kandy. The shop-man had fixed ideas but was flexible with contradictions. Politics were avoided. As they paid and prepared to leave, almost in a careless way, Dammika told the shop-man that he

was leaving the village in a day or two. He said that he wanted to try to get some proper work elsewhere. He complained about how difficult it was to make a profit trimming hair in troubled times. So, where would he now go? The shop keeper asked. “Probably to my aunt’s town.” He didn’t specify where.

Though it meant he was now going in the opposite direction, Dharmasiri walked Dammika to the bridge. Between them, there was silence. Dharmasiri knew that Dammika was trying to say something. At the bridge they stopped and Dammika turned to his friend and squeezed his shoulder. “Now, you listen to me,” he said. “I know what you will say – about being unable to leave your parents behind,” he looked around. “But I think the time has come for all of us to play safe. Take some time off,” he softly said. “Somewhere where no one is at risk. Somewhere where you won’t be marked. Right now, being young is the curse, my friend.” He hugged Dharmasiri and crossed the bridge.

Dharmasiri watched but Dammika didn’t turn back or look. He kept walking towards the Dodanwala side. What was Dammika doing, going from place to place announcing his pending exile? Was this his way of issuing word that he was clean, and his fleeing was not out of guilt or shame? Perhaps he suspected the teashop man to be a tipper, a spy who let the police or the politicians know. Dammika should be crazy to go around like this. If, indeed, he was on some ‘wanted’ list, this would only hasten their efforts to get their claws around him. When he saw Dammika reach the other shore, Dharmasiri turned around to go home.

A fortnight later, Dharmasiri was walking to work a little earlier than his normal time. He was entering the double bend just before the gates of the factory came into view. He carried a bill-book, two ledgers and his afternoon lunch. Along the way, he greeted others who, like him, were already out. Halfway into the bend, he saw the drive that went up Riverdale Gardens. A van was slowly coming down the drive. It paused before entering the

main road. As the van waited, Dharmasiri came closer. When he realized the danger he was in, it was a fraction too late. Doors opening, the men who came at him were clad in civilian clothing. Dharmasiri hardly had time to take in their faces. He was pulled into the van and the door was slammed shut. The van turned towards Kandy and accelerated. There were no seats. Dharmasiri was forced down, his arm twisted and held back, and blindfolded. As the fist gripping his hair forced him down on the deck, and as the van picked up speed, someone's bent knee dropped on his upper back. The questioning started then and there. Was he Dharmasiri – factory-worker and mongrel JVPer? From his helpless position being disrespectful was difficult: "Dharmasiri – Yes. But, I am not JVP." This earned Dharmasiri his first blow: a blunt hit on the back of his head; maybe a weapon, or perhaps a boot. The impact sent his face onto the iron deck of the floor. "the fuck up, you thug – you are the man we want, alright. No need for affidavits!"

The ledgers and the bill book lay tossed on the road. In the scuffle and the shoving, the lunch had been stepped on where it had fallen. An approaching factory workman had seen the abduction. He had been walking behind Dharmasiri at some distance, making it a point not to pace up to his superior. As the van flew away, the workman rushed and picked up the ledgers and the book. Three or four others were already in the factory yard waiting for Dharmasiri to come and open the doors. Rushing down the gravel path, their work fellow came panting with excitement: "They took the clerk! They took the clerk!"

5

The thick, crudely wrapped blindfold was a stripped part of a battered t-shirt. When it was finally taken off, Dharmasiri tried to adjust to the insufficient light in the room. He was forced down on a cement floor. He felt the coldness of the pipe (or pole) to which he was

tied. The pipe ran up the length of the room. His lip had split where he received a blow; his head felt as if it had been pivoted on a spinning top. Through his settling vision Dharmasiri saw on the other side of the room an unkempt face staring at him with curiosity.

Dharmasiri was taken to a small, bare room – no bigger than a cubicle, really – where he was questioned by a man in a faded green t-shirt. He had no recollection of his abductors and couldn't say for sure whether any of them were actually there at his interrogation. Two men who stood on either side of Dharmasiri punched him even as questions were fired at him. Blows rained on his head and shoulders. Seated a few feet away, the interrogator made some entries in a file. Of the blows, he seemed visibly disinterested.

Name in Full? Kaluwawala Liyanagamage Dharmasiri Bandara. Age? Occupation? Address? His head hurt so much that Dharmasiri could barely speak. Marital Status? Do you answer to the name Dharme – *Egoda*³¹ Dharme? Now *this*, for Dharmasiri, was a difficult one. For, yes, 'Dharme' was a common enough shortening of his name; and yes, many friends casually referred to him as such. But, did anyone ever call him *Egoda* Dharme? Dharmasiri wasn't quite sure. The pain welled inside him. He hesitated as he tried to run the question in his head. Then, he tried to explain. A mighty hit on the side sent his head in the opposite direction. "Just a yes-no would do – no need for lectures!" he was told.

Wasn't he the one who helped to smuggle two rifles from Akurana (on the Katugastota-Matale road) to Halloluwa? Wasn't he the one who brought to Halloluwa the gun that was put on bus driver Banda: the gun that was then smuggled from Halloluwa to Dodanwala and, job done, back across the river to Halloluwa? Dharmasiri was shocked. Did he smuggle a gun to shoot the CTB driver Banda? "Where were you on the nights of the 14th and 16th of June?" Dharmasiri didn't know. 14th and 16th of June – he wasn't sure what date it

³¹ Egoda (adj) – 'of the other bank'

was today. He pleaded that he didn't know and that he couldn't remember. A short-armed club landed on the side of his chest. "Think!" they told him.

On the 14th of June – Dharmasiri later learned – a police jeep had been ambushed near the Agriculture Research Institute along the Gannoruwa Road. On the night of the 16th a landmine had gone off near Katugastota's station road. It had just missed a convoy on patrol. Dharmasiri's interrogators were convinced that he had knowledge of one attack, if not both. He stammered that he didn't know – he couldn't be the man they were after. He felt like he had to throw up. He was the overseer of the concrete block factory, he said. For as long as he remembered his family supported the UNP. He was never interested in politics, and he had never seen nor spoken to rebels.

The interrogator wrote something down and opened a second folder. Edging forward on his seat, he drew closer and gazed at Dharmasiri a full minute. "Dharme," he said in the end. "Dharme – all we have to know is in *here*" and with mock-affection he patted the folder. Dharmasiri looked at the coarse file cover. For no particular reason his mind snapped back to the exercise book he had once bought. President Premadasa's poem on the merits of book-learning. When he looked up, he saw the interrogator watching him. In a small voice Dharmasiri said that he didn't mean to be difficult; that he will help them in whatever way he could. But that he knew nothing of guns or landmines. The interrogator smirked, and assured Dharmasiri that he could speak freely. What they already knew had been checked for veracity, and there was no need to shirk or to be in suspense.

Dharmasiri felt that whoever led the questioning was working based on a list. They may have a few confirmed names and another list of 'suspects'. From confessions they obtained they were trying to fit the two lists together. Others may have been brought here before – boys from the village, to be forced to accept crimes. To say, yes – yes, it was I. The one who gave clearance to the smugglers who waded the water at night. Who watched out for

police and army patrols as rebels met in the woods to discuss strategy and plans. Names were thrown at Dharmasiri – did he know them? When did he last meet them? Who were their friends? Out of five names they repeated, three made no sense, nor provoked any recollection. The fourth and fifth names were those of a Kapila and a Dahananyake. One, a given name, and the other, a surname. Both were commonplace names. In Kandy alone there could be a good thousand of each. But, who were the Kapilas and Dahanayakes of the area? The Kapilas and Dahanayakes of Halloluwa. Dharmasiri stammered that there were two Kapilas: one in Bogahakandha and the other, a mixer in the Ayurvedic pharmacy. The latter lived near the Gohagoda Primary. Bogahakandha Kapila had a fault with his left foot and so he dragged it a bit. He worked in the municipality and had a family. The interrogator paused and made eye contact with one of the others in the room. Dharmasiri couldn't see what response he got but, if only by a fraction, he seemed to lose his cool.

“You are smooth, my brother,” the interrogator then smirked. “Let's have a rendezvous with one of your old mates” he said. “Maybe that will help you recall your sorry landmine days.” The blindfold was put back on Dharmasiri. They untied him and frog-marched him along several passages. Dharmasiri heard the echo of heavy boots as they went. Then, he was made to sit on a cement floor and his hands were cuffed to a pole behind him. When the blindfold was removed there was a face peering at him from the other wall of the room. A young face that had been beaten up, with a swelling on its lip. Dishevelled hair and a stubbled fringe. His body was sunk among the shades of the half-dark room. Dharmasiri regarded him with anticipation. Any moment, he expected it to dawn on him – the identity of this poor and miserable creature. A fellow sufferer.

Within an hour of the abduction, the whole village got to know. The carpenter's eldest son had been nabbed by an unlicensed van. When two women rushed to Dharmasiri's home

with the disturbing news, his mother showed no panic but got someone to go in search of her husband. Even though it was not one of his visiting days, she suggested that they should immediately call the grama niladhari (the head priest of the Dodanwala temple) and let him know. The message had already reached the Con-Way owner, Pathirana mudhalali, who – through a higher up in his network of influential customers – had called the police to check what had happened. At first the police had denied any knowledge.

Pathirana then contacted the head priest of the Dodanwala temple, and pleaded with him to intervene on his behalf. The priest was a well-respected elderly monk who also presided in a citizens' council Dodanwala had set up to discuss security issues since the troubles first began. By phone, the priest contacted both municipal councillors and set before them Dharmasiri's case. Portly Pathirana mudhalali came to Halloluwa in his Datsun car and took Dharmasiri's father with him to make an official complaint. They were driving to the very police station they suspected to be behind the kidnapping. Their complaint was taken, but they were also directed to make a complaint to the police in the neighbouring town. Though this was not the standard practice, the two men followed through.

Pathirana seemed to take this quite personally. Everyone knew he was quite fond of Dharmasiri, and he acknowledged as much candidly. He had a heavy step and a light heart. He was a self-made man and had no airs about him. What was a small cottage industry when he first started out had by now expanded to a small network of factories. Men who bought from him were there in all walks of the community. Traders who placed bulk orders with him came with their own lorries from towns close by. Pathirana mumbled, cursing the lack of efficiency. "These are what I call good lessons, dear sir," he confided in Dharmasiri's father. "Very good for some of these people to take what I give at half rate," he pointed at the police buildings they left, "but, try asking them for help in our hour of need, and..." he let the sentiment trail away.

Being from Halloluwa, Dharmasiri's family rarely visited the temple in Dodanwala. But, his father was known there, and of his carpentry skills the temple had amply benefited. Above everything, the master carpenter was respected as a humble and generous gentle man. The head priest kept trying, then visited the government party member at his home. A lawyer, he lived in an imposing house further up the road towards Kandy. It was through him that the search party made some progress by early evening. The police now ascertained they had Dharmasiri in their custody. They were making some verifications through a statement they had obtained from the boy. It was just a routine fact-check. There was nothing to worry about – Dharmasiri would be turned loose once it was done. "These are worse than the '71 troubles – much worse," the priest said as they left. "If this goes on for much longer, we all will have to find full time work inquiring after the boys they take." Dharmasiri's case was just one, he assured. Every week this happened – sometimes twice or thrice. At least, now they could be content that the boy's life was out of danger.

Shaken up with the day's happenings, Dharmasiri's father now tried to contact his younger son at the university. All day, his body and mind had been taxed, but he felt it was his duty to let the second son know. Even better, perhaps, he should ask Sunanda to come home. The family needed him. In a raised voice directed at no one in particular, he said this wasn't the time to be selfishly hung up with studies. "The family must stay together is what I say," he said it for the mother to hear. The mother knew her husband was worried. The subtext was quite clear: he no longer felt the distance between the university and the home was safe. He tried to contact Sunanda through what was at the time the standard practice: by leaving a message with the post office or with the hostel where Sunanda stayed. Then, you called back at a suggested time. Father got no response from the post office. Next, he got the operator to call the hostel line. A person who claimed to be a 'roommate' had left a message

to be conveyed to father. With two other friends, Sunanda had gone to tutor in a needy school in a rural district. They were not expected back for several weeks.

Since the message was left to be conveyed, and since he wasn't speaking to its bearer, the many questions that arose in father could not be vocalized. It was a woman who spoke to him from the university, and father asked – When did the boy leave on such a crazy mission? It was very unlike his son to hang up his studies for the spread of altruism! The woman – probably a clerk or a simple operator – didn't know; but, she said that university was anyway interrupted, and therefore, it was understandable that these boys spent that time helping the needy. Father simply replaced the phone. He paid for the call, but his face remained heavy. The girl at the post office asked him if everything was alright. “Gone educating school children in the dry zone!” he said, in mock anger. “The whole world is going up in flames here, and this boy is sowing charity in the wilderness!” It wasn't contempt. It was more – so, the girl realized – a parent's regular complaint. At not being informed. At not being kept in the loop. “Uncle mustn't worry,” she said. “Actually, being away from university these days is not a bad idea. University itself is a mess, they say. Not much work gets done. And then, there are political groups on these campuses.” She gave father his change. “It is good that Sunanda stays out of there for a while.”

On the third day, they untied Dharmasiri's hands and took him to an open patio at the back of the building. He saw a tank that was half filled with water. On a rack by its side, a leftover piece of laundry soap. The man who brought him there wore civvies, and watched as Dharmasiri splashed water on his face. Wherever the water touched, it smarted. The feeling of fresh water overpowered his pain. Watching him, his keeper smiled at him apologetically: “These are difficult times, brother – I hope you understand! Hope you don't take it too personally.” Dharmasiri took this as an apology and decided to smile. “Take your time. Have

a good wash. We also have some rice for you. You eat fish, right?” The mention of fish made his lower lip twinge. The prospect of coming into contact with chilli. But, finally, a proper meal for all his trouble. “Even egg is alright,” he smiled back.

Dharmasiri was released to Pathirana mudhalali and his father. They had been asked to come by the police. The officer who presided was a lean and tall customer, who was cordial but had in him a certain engraved ruthlessness. With an affected air, he apologized for the inconvenience all of them had been caused. There was nothing for them to fear anymore. There had been a loose link in their information chain. In seconds, they had realized that they were questioning the wrong man. They had checked Dharmasiri’s record. He was clean. They were quite satisfied. But, the questioning helped, since Dharmasiri was now properly screened. It was better to eradicate suspicion than to let it grow. “Cooperate with us,” he urged the two elders. “Alert us of suspicious activities. You see? We have a process and a method. Those who have done no wrong have nothing to fear.”

6

At first, Dharmasiri didn’t want to go out. He wanted to lie in bed and do nothing. As to how fortunate he was, he had not the slightest doubt. Things could have been much worse – far worse than he cared to imagine. What if Pathirana mudhalali had been half as important? What if he’d been taken in by a third, fourth or fifth force: not the legal police, but a private army? He shuddered to think. His split lip gradually healed. Where he had been beaten on the ribs and shoulders, the swelling began to fade. Then, he gradually walked out around the garden. He set out for the shops in the town. The people asked him about it: they wanted to hear the story. Some had heard a second- or third- hand version of it. They asked for clarifications and cross-checks. Was it a rifle-butt or a wooden plank? At first it was all

something he didn't want to recall. Then some of them insisted. Dharmasiri made a standard story that took him three-four minutes to share.

Father cautioned him to be careful. Not to go around talking or revealing what he had heard and seen. "These things get around. They will then come and take you again. It has happened," he said. "Haven't you seen it in the papers?" But, Dharmasiri wasn't a simpleton. He was the most cautious and farsighted person he could think of. He knew how to tell and what sections he had to withhold. When he began to tell the story, it felt as if a weight was being lifted – gradually, little by little, every time. Dharmasiri realized that he was actually cultivating an attitude. The tenth, eleventh and twelfth time you rehearsed the same story: you now knew where to add emphasis, where to sound nonchalant, and where to give an air of disinterest. He didn't aspire to the status of folk hero. He knew that he had returned from the dead.

Whoever set Dharmasiri up had marked the wrong man. A miscued siege on an *Egoda Dharme*. Who, then, was this Dharme from the 'other side of the river'? Full three decades passed, and the dust had long settled. Trees had sprung up where all those boys had been taken, killed or left on display. Among the many confusions life brought Dharmasiri, he still wondered as to who that Egoda Dharme could have been. Even after moving out of his home village in the mid-'90s, he kept coming back. For the new year holidays when the schools closed, with his children and family Dharmasiri always came home to stay for a week. Wasn't Halloluwa his idea of paradise? So, why sever ties with it? The shops he knew as a child were gradually pulled down to be replaced by bigger, sturdier buildings. More houses were built. His mother passed on when Dharmasiri's eldest was just three. The mother never quite recovered from the shock of her youngest son not returning. Everything they did,

and every avenue they tried, led nowhere. The son didn't return. No message, no story, no body – not even a word.

Dharmasiri didn't tell either of them that someone had told him weeks before that brother had gone into hiding. Later, when the father found out for himself, it was too late for Dharmasiri to say that he already knew. It was a wrenching time – Dharmasiri used to feel a powerful contraction of all the organs inside his body, especially when he came back home. The way they handled him, he knew that survival had been a game of probability. He never forgave himself for this instinctive feeling, but he knew that his younger brother's chances had not been as blessed.

Soon after his return, Dharmasiri called on the chief priest of the Dodanwala temple. He wanted to meet the elderly monk and express his gratitude. The son was accompanied by the father. For the priest's benefit, Dharmasiri narrated the whole story. He went through the rounds of questioning, and the beatings he had to endure. In the isolated room, he recalled how he was asked to identify a spiritless boy. With dishevelled hair and an unkempt face, the boy had looked at Dharmasiri with pleading, sunken eyes. Of life, he seemed to have given up all remaining hope. The boy had confessed all about Dharmasiri's doings, they told him; except that the boy kept gazing at him as if this was the first time he'd set eyes on Dharmasiri. Later, when Dharmasiri was taken away for further questioning and brought back, the boy had gone. His corner was empty and showed no signs of ever having been occupied.

As he told his story, Dharmasiri broke down and cried. He was never a man of words or one who showed much emotion. He was the quiet kind who bottled up more things than he shared. When the welling began to spill, Dharmasiri didn't make an effort to hold it back. Being a morning hour, the surrounding temple garden was quiet. The chief priest listened

with an averted gaze. A younger monk stood by the door to the inner chamber. His arms were folded, and he was frozen. The father didn't make an attempt to comfort or console. Perhaps, he felt it was best for emotions to be released like this. Slowly, Dharmasiri composed himself and turned back to relate the rest of the story. He was grateful to the priest, he said. He owed his life to everyone who came forward on his behalf. Dharmasiri prostrated himself.

At length, the priest demanded whether Dharmasiri, too, could 'go away' for a while. "Like our Sudhu mudhalali's boy, that Dammika," he said. Was it the priest who had asked – perhaps, hinted – that Dammika to go away? One needn't be surprised if he had his own channels, or if he used his judgment in a worldly way. "But, if you don't really want to go or have no place to go as such," he said, "you may even stay here at the temple – this temple is quite safe." There were young men who now spent their nights away from home. Hidden by themselves or in small groups of two or three, they hid in woods, known haunts and hills. Some slept the night on top of tall trees. "It is a wretched time, no doubt," the priest said. "To have been witnesses to what we have seen, surely in our past lives we have all sinned."

When father and the son took their leave, they walked towards the temple's steps which went down towards the main road. Turning to the side, Dharmasiri saw that someone had left the pipeline open. Someone had been filling the pond, but he had then gone on some other errand. The water rose towards its mark. Both father and son looked around for the acolyte. Then, Dharmasiri walked towards the pond and, pausing there for a moment, he regarded the fish. Between the reeds and lotuses, they swam in circles. When he turned the tap-head, the water flow ceased. By now, his father had walked up beside him and joined the son in observing the fish. Was it not sinful to rear fish in a temple, Dharmasiri wondered. The novelty of this idea made him smile. In the tone of one who had reached the end of a long journey, he then told his father the truth about his brother. That Sunanda was involved in politics in the university. He was now in hiding – for his own safety. Still, he didn't tell his

father about the ID-card gang: that he thought his brother had been there among them. The carpenter said nothing. He simply nodded and sighed. “Let’s hope that fool comes home soon,” he said. “The gods are benevolent, but we can’t depend on them all the time.”

Vignaraja's Monologue from Malith Bandara's play, '90s Children.

Vignaraja:

I remember waking up one night at about two o'clock. Rita had heard it, too – dogs were barking, barking. I knew straight away something funny was going on. So, I slowly got out of bed and through the dark quietly went to the kitchen that side (indicates with gestures). From the kitchen side-window you can see the road behind. It was those behind-road-dogs, all right. They were barking at a truck that had parked. Then, suddenly, the dogs stopped. They weren't barking anymore. One or two began to howl. Howl – just like that; from barking to howling. These dogs, you know – they can sense death. That's what happened. (Pause).

Then – Dhag! Dhag! Dhag! It was like the sound when you drop potato sacks. Dhag! Dhag! I knew from the sound of it, but didn't dare go out. Then, the engine started and the truck went off. Dogs kept howling, howling – and then, they also stopped. Just when the sun began to rise in the morning, I went to see. Four bodies. Totally naked. Not a thread on their bodies. Right next to the church on the behind road (indicates with gestures). People were looking from a distance – looking for a moment, like a show along the way wherever they were going.

You know that mad fellow from the next road – the one who always mutters to himself? The mad fellow was also there, watching. Suddenly, he went away and from somewhere – I don't know where – brought an old, torn sack cloth and put it over the genitals of the body that was on top. "School girls coming down the, lane!" he said (laughs). Imagine that – *school girls coming down the lane*, and he wanted to cover the private parts of... These men have been

abducted, tortured, killed, and then dumped! They were there like a horror to see. And this man – this mad fellow... It was like a scene from an absurd play.

The Student: And then.... What happened, then?

Vignaraja:

Nothing! Dogs had mauled the hands and the legs. I went home. There was nothing more to see. I think that mad fellow was there until the police came. Then, they chased him off, I think.

Song: The Bodies that Sailed

For the thousand rafts
Like sail-less bodies
That head to the ocean
Down one hundred streams

An elegy – a song
That seeks a comforting tune
Among restless wails
In sleepless dreams

Whose names never went
On a chiselled gravestone,
Whose goodness drained
From where their lives were halved

Who still linger in the hearts
Of eyes that in silence swell
And in stories and tunes
The river fish carved.

As you sweep through currents
And rapids the way down

What they burnt out of colour

Becomes a golden brown

No more of the earth

But, transformed among waves,

A disfigured magic

Of hope that was drowned,

But, a torch that never dies

In deep rivers that are still.

A relic of sacrifice

And an unyielding will.

A FRIEND

Back then, they used to call me the Eagle Hawk.

At his Makola Road hostel room, Charith used to have an unframed postcard-sized photograph propped up against a backrest of unreturned library books. Charith assigned to this photograph such value. It was a prized possession. In expressions of post-adolescent innocence, six or seven of us were smiling for the click. As freshmen on our first ever faculty trip, this was our only picture – a neat capture near Baker’s Falls. Four Leyland buses and a good two hundred of us. An average of fifty in a bus. But, we made it, somehow – an overnight stay and two days of fun, frolicking and good companionship. The photograph: as I remember, I was the second or the third from the left. Charith and Ravi were on each side of me. Kithsiri – or, Kittha as we called him – with his hair parted in the middle, unlike his famous Presley-style brush-it back. ‘AK’ Gunasinghe with a foolish grin and arms folded. And behind us, the glory that was Baker’s.

Anyone who glanced at that photo was quick to make assumptions about where I got the name, Eagle Hawk. Bony, stooped neck. Small, tilted-egg shaped head. Protruding front teeth. Nicknames often hinged on you looking like a bird or a beast. And they stuck – nicknames stayed with you for years and years. Even when you changed your circle and moved on in life, you were still married to your nickname. But, no – I became the Hawk only after I joined the student movement in university. It was an epithet of respect, really: Eagle Hawk. I could be a predator and a hook for the movement – it was a skill I possessed that I put into good use. A good thirty-forty boys came into the movement through me. And so my

name was a medal of honour. Much later, even when I became a fox, a porcupine, and a chameleon for my own survival, I didn't do my role justice as I had when I was the Hawk.

Our hang-out hole was Charith Muwandeniya's hostel room. We were there at all times and in all seasons. It wasn't unusual for us to be there till two in the morning, even three. Three or four of us even slept there on such nights. The hostel aunty was quite flexible with us. We brought with us good company, and she knew us as loyal friends. We talked and argued about so many things; it wouldn't do to give a list. These arguments went all night. We had so many stories; someone would then say, okay, we are leaving in half an hour! And two hours later, we were all still there. The odd one out was Charith's room-mate: a fancy pants Kandy-boy who still used a mirror to comb his hair and prayed before a miniature Buddha statue. He seemed to suffer under the heavy burden of the world. Often, he sighed to himself before strutting out for lectures in leather sandals. But, he had to tolerate us – he had no other room.

During the new-year holidays in 1986, I stayed back on campus for some union work. By this time, our union was assigned some key responsibilities by the Party, and I was involved in the culture and arts front. There was some struggle for ideological control in Colombo University, where our union was challenged by another set up. I will come to that in due course. Overall, we were coordinating for the Party, for the Party was underground by this time. Its second string leaders were our own comrades. They led the struggle against the privatization of education, and brought that energy to other struggles of national importance. That April, we had organized several education camps targeting school boys and girls. Most of the other students had gone home. This included Charith and others who were in Daisy aunty's hostel. One night, I had been out late in the drizzle and woke up the next day with a terrible cold. Aunty was famous for her coriander and ginger remedy for colds, and when I couldn't bear it any longer, I went looking for her. Hers was slightly different from the

common coriander *kasaaya* and it worked like a shot. As I walked past Charith's room (which I expected to be closed) I found the door open, with Fancy Pants on his bed reading a paperback Gogol. A Sinhala translation of *Dead Souls*.

Fancy Pants had a fancy birth mark. A horizontal crescent just under his eye which looked like a moon lying on its back. It pretty much reminded us all of the flag of Pakistan. "Well, well, Mr. Pakistan." I walked into the room and dropped myself on Charith's bed. "You read novels, too? Never knew! What is this one –" and as he turned the book's cover for me to see he must have read it in my expression that I seemed impressed by his choice of author. I nodded approvingly and settled myself on the bed, my back to the wall. "Not well, men," I pulled my nose twice for his benefit. "Bad cold and so I came to see Daisy aunty." Why wasn't he going home like others? Not high on celebrating new year? We got to talking and he said that he had a few tutorials to finish and needed a couple of days extra. Pakistan gave me what he said was an ayurvedic remedy for phlegmatic colds. A complicated formula. The herbs were rare, too. I waved him off saying that Daisy aunty's drink was my proven brand.

We spoke for some time, and at some point we started discussing literature. It began with *Dead Souls*, but as we carved into the themes of the classic we realized that it was only a start. We were soon on Dostoyevsky, Gorky and Aitmatav. Locked away in a two-penny room with Charith who – with all due respect – had read a total of two books in his entire lifetime, Pakistan suddenly began to shine in my eyes. He quoted with the same ease with which he took his tea: long passages from *The First Teacher* and *Mother*. It was pretty standard stuff – but, still, it was a rare thing to find in the university someone who actually read. "Pakistan," I told him, "We must meet again – soon."

That week, we met a couple of times. Like two frogs by a familiar well when the sun set, we debated about the world. By way of opinion, it was remarkable how much we seemed

to share. Quite soon, I called him by his proper name, Sunanda (he was later to be popularly known within the movement as Keerthisinghe, or as Comrade Keerthi). We went into hardcore topics. We compared notes on how each of us saw where the prevailing capitalist order was taking society fast. I analysed for him the route map of imperialism since 1978. How the government encouraged new imperialist needs. Each of the twelve amendments to the constitution (which were only nine years old by then) tightened the grip on democracy. We also debated Tamil nationalism in the north. I explained to him the Party's position on it and why Tamil militarism had to be defeated at once. The Tamil militants were Indian lackeys. India just wanted a chance to poke her finger in our business. Sunanda listened with interest. He contributed intelligently. From how he engaged, I knew I had justified my epithet.

I had won into our movement someone who – in my assessment – was the most advanced, all round guerrilla of my peer group. I spoke to the Party almost immediately. I asked them to appoint an inductor to hold for Sunanda the first of his five lecture course.

Those days I could still hold a decent conversation on the key Russian masters, but my personal favourite on social injustice was Victor Hugo. When I read *Les Miserables* in translation I was merely ten or eleven. But, I had gone back to the text many times since. It wasn't a particularly good translation (that, I now know), but for an adolescent heart it communicated. Between Hugo and Alexander Dumas, I had discovered a religion and a manifesto: a thousand pages which philosophized every aspect of life I needed to know. The two masters covered every fathomable possibility. They built into their plots every situation humanity can ever experience. They decoded the measures one had to adopt in the name of

honour, dignity, justice, and truth. By this time, I was also taken with Brecht, the writings of Che, and the ballads of Victor Jara. Combined, they played an imposing role in my reading of universal socialist struggle.

This digression is necessary to understand the shift that was about to take over my life within the next year or so. It was true that I had invested my time and my life in a movement that was developing a people's struggle against oppression. Being unfairly proscribed and its cadre being persecuted, the Party had been pushed underground, leaving us suddenly to play all frontline roles. I was ready for the task and to give more than my best. But, in my soul, I had artistic preoccupations. Arts and culture were the focal points in my politics. For me, revolution and transformation were a cultural project; and the arts carried the movement forward.

I say these things in hindsight, after much reflection: I don't think I understood the situation all those years ago. What at the time I felt was radical and genius were fairly cosmopolitan views found in numerous schools of socialist thought. Except, at the time, I didn't know of their existence. The Great Tradition of the Left was something I had to learn while growing up. I was third-born in a family of four, at a time the country was fledgling pretty much like our family. My father tilled tenant-land for survival. Survival, I say, because it was by no means sustenance. The land brought more trouble than harvest. It was either my father's stubborn will or his courage that kept him waging that endless battle. But little by little, season after season, the battle claimed him bit by bit. Back then, our village in Buttala was too remote for the imagination. This was way before the *Gam-udhaa* movement under Premadasa (who was then prime minister) where he built new villages and gave people land to till. At seven or eight, they sent me to live with my aunt who lived in Akuressa, in Matara. They say that someone saw in me a future, and being placed in the home of a school teacher

was considered more favourable for my future prospects. My aunt had no children of her own. Akuressa became my second home.

My childhood was mechanical without highlight or spirit. The borrowed cliché would be, that there were no postcards to send back home. This was complicated by the fact that I never fully connected with my village after I had left. I lived in Akuressa, going home for school holidays once every three months. But, once I got there, there was nothing much to hold me down, or to make me want to stay. When I was fourteen, my mother passed away, succumbing to her asthmatic condition. My elder sisters were already done with schooling. They thought they wanted to leave the village for jobs in the city, but my father insisted that they work close to home. He was overprotective in a peasant way, and needed support to raise my youngest sister who still went to school. None of this was too promising. Though I never planned it as such, my trips back to the village – like the village itself – dried up with time.

By then, I had become a voracious reader. I lapped up all the books the school's small library had to offer. Then, when I started senior school, I shifted to the public library in Matara which I visited whenever I went to the old fortress town. By the time I was fourteen, I had already read the *Manifesto*. By sixteen, I was done with ten of the *Twelve Volumes*. My political consciousness had begun to blossom. Among the beautiful minds of so many influential peers I was fast gaining a grip on society's shame and ills. It was like a gradual sunrise when, little by little, the world gains visibility. When the JR government opened the way for the privatization of education, school students were drawn to the protesting frontline. Shouting anti-government slogans, they flooded the streets. Dressed in white, bearing a leaflet in which revolutionary lines were printed, we marched down the streets of Matara in a chant: you senile grandpa JR, roll and stuff the white bill up yours.

But, I wasn't blinded by ideology or party loyalty. I marched for a common and egalitarian goal. I sweated and invested my energy to consolidate in our beautiful land a just and equal society. But, even at that young age I knew that any struggle or social force had no meaning if it was blind to culture and the arts. A lack of English proficiency was the worst barrier to accessing culture. The English they taught us in school was poor. Our teachers were better only because we, the students, were worse. Besides, we came from homes that spoke no English. The English we knew was not a tool to access culture. It was a class marker that prevented culture from being embraced. But, I didn't let my bad English deter me in my search for arts and culture. The great literature of the world, their film and theatre had so much to offer. What my weak English prevented me from reading, I covered from end to end in translation.

When I was eighteen or so, I went for a socialist drama workshop. It was a school by the well-known street dramatist Gamini Hatthotuwegama (or so I was told), which targeted high school students and immediate school-leavers. My Advanced Level exam was just four or five months away. By this time, my drama-craze was at such a high that I decided to sign up. Hatthotuwegama was a cult figure in theatre and a socialist, too. In the 1970s he took street-theatre out into the roads as a form of protest art. As a boy, I had seen them perform at the Matara bus station. It all seemed slapstick material for a while until, with a sudden sad twist, the play became a critique of the Open economy. However, when I went for the workshop, Hattotuwegama wasn't there, although there were two or three well known dramatists who had links with trade unions. I immediately recognized H.A. Perera who moved from group to group with a checklist. And there, for the first time, I met in person the man of whom I had read so much – almost a folk hero of the '71 uprising: Nandana Marasinghe.

Marasinghe was a former JVP-er. When the April insurgency broke out he was just a second tier district-level leader. When the coup failed, the cadre was lost without proper leadership or guidance. Some of the frontline leaders were already dead, and the movement didn't have a proper retreat plan. But, then, out of the circumstances, several de facto leaders emerged to take things into their hands. Marasinghe was one of them – and he was now standing there, in the same room as I. It was a surreal moment, really: one of those occasions where you feel goose bumps out of excitement. Daring men like Marasinghe, 'Wobbly' Samaratunga and Upasena of Kagama kept the beaten revolutionaries of 1971 together, leading them through hills and jungles towards the wild preserves that were to be their hiding places. They coordinated with each other with great difficulty – one isolated group with another – often relying on the benevolence of rural peasants. A small flailing camp of the revolution's leftovers actually managed to avoid capture, and survived in these conditions for years.

When the troubles were over, Marasinghe severed ties with the JVP and aligned himself with a splinter group that broke away from the Party. They called themselves the Janatha Sangamaya – the People's Conference – and drew their numbers from former JVP cadre who were no longer convinced of armed revolution. They worked at a local level, with rural groups and grassroots organizations. The early to mid-'80s were Janatha Sangamaya years. They forged links with non-governmental actors, multi-faith movements and so on. The JVP didn't look kindly on the Janatha Sangamaya. So, technically, Marasinghe was not in my camp – he was a detractor.

When I met Marasinghe at the workshop, he didn't speak ideology, but only of society and culture. He wore a casual bush-shirt and slippers, leant against the wall of the large hall, and was friendly to one and all. A large beard covered his face. Around this time he was busy producing a film, and was involved in several reading circles. In his home town

in Anuradhapura, he was a community leader and worked closely with the peasants. Some in the workshop egged him on, asking him to verify the heroics they had heard about. With a good-natured smile Marasinghe brushed all that off. All that bravado belonged to another age, and a different time. Approaching Comrade Marasinghe was not difficult, and on the first day he had much to tell me, from the sage to the novice. “An art that is rooted in society and gives back to society – That should be our ultimate achievement,” he said. “Like the tree that rises out of the land’s nurturing and drops its fruit to nurture the land.”

When I joined Kelaniya University to study the Sciences, I was already an arts man at heart. I was internationalist in my approach to art, and also well-read in the classics. With the help of others, it was I who introduced Latin American literature to the university’s arts society. At that time, the fashionable readings came from Russia. But most of them read merely the titles – to know the cover seemed to be their way out. The Latin American material had an urgency the classics lacked. I was also taken by theatre around this time. I had already unsuccessfully auditioned for a play by Somalatha Subhasinghe. I somehow managed to find a place in the chorus. Later, I acted in two university productions, wrote the lyrics of some of their songs, and helped the students’ union to stage Federico Garcia Lorca’s *Blood Wedding*. When we had to make contact with the play’s producers, I asked for comrade Marasinghe’s help. Having met a few times we were by now acquaintances, and he had cultivated a liking for me and my views. By his own initiative, the comrade tried to find for our play a generous sponsor, as well. I know that he spoke to several NGOs, but in the end nothing productive came out of it. In characteristic good humour, he wrung his shoulders and said: “Well, I’ll keep on trying.” I later wondered whether it was our political links that scared away potential donors.

When we finally staged it, Comrade Marasinghe came for the play. He had a genuine regard for Federico Garcia Lorca and was thrilled that one of his best plays was being

produced for a university audience. The issues Lorca raised resonated closely with the problems of our own peasantry. Those tensions were not those of rural Spain alone. The months I spent in the Dumbara Valley made me think time and time again of Lorca. When the play ended, the comrade did just that: he spent time with a group of us from the university's Arts Council discussing the finer points of the play, drawing parallels between our struggles and those of Lorca's Spain. With passion, he spoke of Lorca's last play, *The House of Bernarda Alba*. He insisted that we should somehow try to get that play translated and staged on campus. "*Bernarda Alba* is the play for our times – it is the most powerful allegory of power's arrogance," he insisted. After the thrill of having staged a play, with re-kindled interest, we listened to him as he drew up these plans for us.

This was what my life was like in late-'86, on the eve that someone came with the news of student leader Daya Pathirana having been hacked to death.

Daya Pathirana led the Independent Students Union – whom everyone called 'indos' – at the Colombo University. They were independent only in name and tagged a 'separatist' line in relation to the north-east question. The indos had fostered links with Tamil groups in the north and won the confidence of Tamil-speaking students in the university. In four to five years, they had grown and begun to dominate the campus. They opposed the Party, and began to terrorize students who were not with them – who were with *us*. It was largely Pathirana's charisma and the hold he had over his group. By the second half of '86, the hostility was brewing out of control.

Between August and October of that year, we were busy launching a new patriotic front where all students could lobby. This was a crucial step in our campaign against the threat of rising Indian imperialism. We branded it the Deshapremi Shishya Vyaparaya: the Patriotic Student Movement. Under this unifying umbrella all universities were threaded together with comrade Ananda Idamegama as its invisible leader. When we launched the movement at Jayawardenepura, Moratuwa, Ruhuna and Peradeniya there were no incidents. I was involved in the organizing of the Kelaniya meeting. We managed to pull in a crowd from among the students and the Buddhist monks.

And then, it was the time to take things to Colombo. We knew that Colombo would be contested terrain. In fact, the ground was already carved out. The indos used the gym-area as their 'headquarters' and any rival entering that area was dealt blows and clubs. When all hell broke loose that day, there were huge poles and iron bars flying. Bicycle chains and knuckle-dusters were thrown in. It was gangster warfare where both sides suffered. Soon after, there was an ugly incident concerning our comrade Senaratne who had gone to the Colombo campus for another matter. The indos had got hold of Senaratne, and taken him by force to the gym, and held him captive. They claimed that Senaratne was a spy.

To even out the attack on Senaratne, our comrades at Jayewardenepura waylaid the road in front of their university and got a busybody from the indo-camp who used to frequent that area to see a girlfriend. Our comrades had dragged him to some hall and beaten him purple. Tensions were mounting fast. Then, in the third week of December, Pathirana was abducted and killed.

My personal assessment of Daya Pathirana wasn't a positive one. His death made him larger-than-life – a martyr: a kind of student union superman. In fact, he was always sectarian and reactionary. The acceptance of the Tamil struggle for a homeland was not patented in the student politics of the Sinhalese south. To consolidate themselves, the indos saw it as a

ground to build on. But, Pathirana just talked. Even within his union there were better theoreticians. I know this because I knew Pathirana from our days in high school. He, too, was from Akuressa. Words came to him easily, and he had a confidence and a swagger. It was in how he held his fag, how he released a long trail of smoke rings. But, these were not reasons good enough to have him killed.

That evening, when the news first came, none of us knew who had actually scored. Indeed, it was a dangerous goal to have kicked. Pathirana had been tricked out of the university, bundled into a van, taken to a jetty in Bandaragama where his throat was slit. It was not until the next day that things became clearer. Pathirana had had another with him – a fellow named Somasiri – who had been dealt with in the same way. After slitting Pathirana's throat, the attackers had turned on this near-nobody. Some movement close by had distracted them and the attackers had fled after a half-done job. Had Somasiri been properly gutted, Daya Pathirana's death would have lived and died unsolved. But Somasiri was saved by a boatman from the nearby jetty. The news came to us at night, a little after ten. We were all having a talk in someone's hostel room. It was AK who brought the news, and he was equally bemused and bewildered. "Someone has done the job on Pathirana!" But, who could have possibly done it? Deep down, I knew almost at once: that our hand had to be involved in this. It *had* to be us. There was no other party who would have wanted Pathirana out. But, to *hack* him?

I remember that night as being unusually chilly. The initial thrill of the news passed and the gravity of what had happened began to settle in. I immediately knew that if we were in some way involved we may have to pay severely, down the line. But, as to how adverse and destructive it could get – I simply hadn't the faintest clue. I don't think anyone did, because the way the indos came back at us as voluntary killers for the government couldn't have been known at that point. They joined paramilitary groups and helped in running down

our cadre. The death squads they assisted cut our fellows' bodies in halves. They manned and ran concentration camps. In the most gruesome fashion imaginable, they took a good two hundred comrades from us. But, when I look back, had Pathirana continued to be their leader – had he not died – I feel that the indos wouldn't have sided with the government's killing machine. I cannot know for sure, but I feel as such, when I try to map it all through Pathirana's eyes.

When I woke up the next day, I still believed that killing Pathirana was wrong – wrong on so many levels, tactless and rash. When it was finally known that our movement was responsible for the killing, I tabled my opposition at a committee meeting we had. "This is a serious tactical blunder," I said. "Extreme and unnecessary!" There were twelve of us there that day, and only two others saw sense in my words. Pathirana was the first university student leader in history to be killed by a fellow group of students – For Pathirana, there were no precedents. "We may have differences in opinion. We may even throw punches and use bicycle chains on each other to prove a point," I pressed on. "But, we were all in the same struggle for free education and social justice." The chair made a stern rebuttal and argued me down. This was a desperate time, he said. And reactionary forces could not be tolerated. We had to make hard choices and stay focused on our path ahead.

I was disgruntled when I went in search of Sunanda. He was by now resident on campus, and was rising within our union. He was at the frontline of many of our activities, and was a respected member of the propaganda arm. He shared a room with a chap from Pelmadulla, Ratnapura – an innocent soul who didn't know much about anything. Much later, when the troubles were at their height, he disappeared after being 'picked up' at a check point. With Sunanda I argued about the tactical blunder of having killed the leader of the ISU. We were exposing ourselves to revenge politics, and at a critical moment, too. Sunanda let me vent, and heard me out. Not for a moment was he discomposed. But, the response he gave

me with a straight and serious face was too rehearsed and too cliché: that actors like Pathirana were the Third Enemy we were invariably set against. If this killing didn't happen now, it would have only been a matter of time, he said. With all respect, I told him that I disagreed. I told him to mark the day and the time, in case one day we lived to look back and regret.

The newspapers had it all. A mutilated Daya Pathirana, stripped to his underwear, lying unceremoniously with his neck awry. He looked far from his usual charismatic self, down-sized in some way – utterly reduced. Death was so poignant. This was especially the case with exaggerated headlines meant to increase sales in government newspapers we all (Pathirana included) hated. The story was out: the kidnappers had posed as secret police. Pathirana and Somasiri had been walking with two of our comrades from Jayewardenepura who had come over on the pretext of suing for peace. A van pulling up beside them had ordered all four of them in. Then, at a fixed point away from the city, the Jayewardenepura comrades had been let out. Pathirana and Somasiri were taken to a wood near the Hirana jetty. Pathirana was stabbed and then cut with an axe. After he had been found, Somasiri was transferred to a Colombo hospital.

Of Pathirana, there is a frozen image in my mind which refuses to dissolve. A vintage shot from our school days. Pathirana played for the First XI of his school in Matara. He was lanky and tall, complete with a radiant swagger. I was from a rival school. Every year, the two schools met for a two-day game. I watched him from beyond the boundary, as he patrolled the outfield near the cow-corner rope. Boys from our school were abusing him, hurling insults and taunts at him, to make him lose composure. Pathirana didn't seem to hear or care. An all-knowing, self-assured brigand who was too confident of his judgment, and was too big for his own shoes. An unnecessary death, all the same.

Still in the first quarter of '87, there was already a feeling of the ground underneath us beginning to crack and give way. I knew that, by batches, cadre was being prepared for war. They were being taken to camps in rural hamlets and jungles, to be given weapons training. This was our preparation for the inevitable counter-revolution. In the university and outside, there was no difference. In the canteen and on street corners, the tension was visible. Two policemen had already been shot to death. An attack on the Pallekele army camp by one of our groups from Peradeniya University secured a stash of machine guns, rifles, and over three hundred rounds of ammunition. After having been posted in the north-western province, AK had decamped (or not – we never got to know). We lost contact with him until, much later, a report came that AK had been killed. Sunanda worked tirelessly as an inductor, holding classes and debriefing sessions. He was a born orator, and was rising through the ranks in the education wing. He was earmarked for greater and bigger things. He spent days moving from session to session in the outback of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kurunegala. When the war began, he was brought back to the university, but as to what responsibilities he had taken by then I wasn't quite sure. He had made it to an upper-middle tier.

By now, I had become increasingly apprehensive about how things were taking shape. Something sinister and destructive was afoot, and there were so many opportunities – I felt – we could take to avert an all-out clash. History, I dare say, could have been quite different. Extremely different, if only the opinionated ones had been swayed. When my turn came, I received my weapons training in a rural farm that belonged to the movement. We were there for a week and a day. No one knew anything until we reached the farm in ones and twos. We were amused to see that we were being trained by members of a Tamil guerrilla group. Their political ideology was for a free and separate state for Tamils in the north: an Eelam. This was pretty strange as, to say the least; our Party was all-out against the idea of 'Tamil

homeland'. Our leader even published a book on the subject which became quite popular. It was not a time to ask too many questions. In scrub jungle and with half-decomposed leaves hanging on me like tinsel, as I struggled to steady my aim with one eye cocked, it was a Tamil guerrilla who breathed behind me, deftly adjusting my aim with an encouraging touch.

In addition to their group leader, there were three of them. They were, in all, four battered-looking men, undercover as rural peasant farmers. To be frank, they looked much worse than the twelve of us who rehearsed under them. The leader aside, the others looked barely eighteen. They had either dropped out or been forced out of school. Weapons, perhaps, came easier to them than they did to us. When I met them and my own compatriots in the silence of that jungle, I knew that my life was changing fast – too fast. In the movement, my responsibilities had been the cultural front, and yet they'd now sent me to take aim at dummy targets. At once I felt a strange elation and a trepidation. When I returned to Colombo, 200 KM from where I was, I wanted the revolution to have already started.

When the training was completed, the twelve of us returned as we had come: in ones and twos. In a small lorry, they dropped us off close to the nearest town. The bus routes went three different ways as they skirted the hamlets. I took the bus to Matara and changed routes to Akuressa. Back home at my aunt's after such a prolonged absence, the warmth of my family was sincere. I stayed that night and carefully went through the room I now rarely used. In case of a search by the police, I scanned for 'incriminating' items that were left there. For the first time, I felt that there was no turning back from where I stood. I was rowing downstream fast and now the bottlenecks appeared.

In 1971, entire homes were burned down on mere suspicions, solely for the possession of red-coloured books. Any kind of Soviet writing, including novels and text books. I took stock of what books were there: both mine and my uncle's. Essential communist reading, and books of a left of centre slant. Uncle was an old Sama Samajayist – a

Trotskyite – who later voted for Madam Sirima. But, if he was to ever get framed as the guardian of a weapon-trained rebel, he was bound to lose a limb or two, if not, god forbid, his life. I made a mental note to tell him that the books should be bundled up and hidden. This collection was small, but it was a lifetime's investment.

When the Indian intervention took place, as others prepared for the main protest march in Colombo on the day the Agreement was signed, I was in two minds. The build-up period had been too long, and it had given the government enough time to anticipate and prepare against all forms of opposition. Their intelligence was at work and just the night before, 80-odd activists – students and politicians among them – had been arrested and kept in custody for the duration of the Indian premier's visit. They clearly anticipated trouble, and were one step ahead of us. Then on the other hand, not to go ahead and attack would defuse the tension among our ranks. *This* was the cue they had been working towards. The Indians had finally intervened. Then to step up on the adrenaline: if not *now*, then *when*? The Indian intervention came on the back of a military blockade of the north. The army had pushed the Tamil rebels to the confines of the Jaffna fort. The Jaffna peninsula had been cut off and reduced to dwindling rations of food, medicine and other essentials. It was as if the government planned to weaken Jaffna and force it into submission through starvation. As it later became known, the central government in India was urged by Tamil Nadu to relieve the situation in Sri Lanka's north. For most of us it was unthinkable. India wanted to send ships with essential goods to the north, but these ships were turned away by our navy. The following day, at short notice, Indian aeroplanes cut through our air space, dropped relief packages to Jaffna, and went home.

No one knew what was going to happen now. It depended on how the reactionary government took the punch. India now forced JR to go for a broad power-devolution to benefit the north and east. JR's cabinet was split in its views, and while several key players

showed open dissent, the old fox went ahead with the Indian pact. He was ready to set up a province-based council system: an interim tier that promised broader regional participation. It gave partial-autonomy to the Tamil districts. In his turn, the Indian premier agreed to send 10,000 troops to 'settle the peace'. He agreed to use his men to defeat the separatist rebels, the Tigers. The posters we spent nights to stencil were on display near and far, island-wide: 'Lanka to be India's 26th state'. 'Indian expansionism afoot'. 'Keep India away from the motherland'. Then, as it all heated up, a handwritten slogan on the city's walls, simple and precise: 'Kill JR'.

On 29 July, they signed the accord. The Party organized a protest march unlike anything the country had seen. Close to 20,000 people thronged the capital. On the 25th, I was sent to work in the central zone, coordinating between Kandy and Matale districts. To spread what began in Colombo to other districts, I had to report to the district secretaries and to work among small five-member cells at the village level. There were others who worked at the same level as I did, and looking towards a wave of disruption we were assigned a host of tasks. We had to be ready when the signal came from Colombo. The streets had to be taken. The town had to be brought to a standstill.

For the first time, I was coming out of the barracks into the open. Up till this point, my role had been in either recruitment or on cultural and educational fronts. Now, I was in organizing: a name, face and a traceable address. As to what happened in Colombo during that first week, I only got to know a bit later. The news came to me in pieces. What was broadcast on the radio and appeared in the newspapers had taken the shape of the government's view, and the accounts were heavily sanitized and doctored. Alternative

mediums were both scarce and unavailable in the provinces. All of that week, I moved between the pockets of Matale and the suburbs of Kandy. Four, five and sometimes even six locations in a single day. I was paired with a district-level comrade who rode a second-hand moped. Bypassing the main road, we rode from Matale to Kandy, and back. When we came to Katugastota (which lies in between the two towns), he either went over the reservoir dam through Polgolla, or took the Katugastota-Gannoruwa road which went along the river through Gohagoda and Halloluwa. The Polgolla dam almost always had men on duty at the army checkpoint. “Just relax. Just sit still,” he said whenever the bike was called to a halt. He posed as an agriculture researcher, for which he had a forged (or confiscated) an ID from a government institute. I posed as his junior. Our national IDs had been taken by the JVP, we said. Much later, this comrade was arrested at an army checkpoint. Later, I learned that he had been killed, and his body was sent down the river.

The bike-rides had their calming moments. Matale and Kandy were green territory. The landscape, especially the villages that had cropped up around the Dumbara valley, was picturesque and the peasant lifestyle blended into nature. For a moment, we even forgot the gravity of the work that lay ahead. In this part of the world, my partner was a university academic conducting research on Dumbara valley folklore. In Kandy, he was an agriculturist. In the villages, we met and spoke to our comrades. With others, he discussed the oral folk traditions, myths handed down from earlier generations, and – as we came to Kandy – the chronic issues faced by small scale agriculture. He carried documents and research papers in a battered, leather side bag. He urged me to build character. “Be what you are supposed to be. It is like theatre. You will like it. Specially, you!” he said.

By this time, after long discussions, the Party was in a broad front in which a host of political groups, civil society people and human rights activists participated. They called it the Maubima Surekeeme Vyaparaya: the movement for the safeguarding of the motherland.

We had several leading Buddhist monks in leadership roles. Human rights people like Prins Gunasekara played key coordination roles. Comrade Idamegama was the Party's main representative to the MSV. The main protest on the day they signed the accord brought together people from main and small political parties alike. By about 10.30 in the morning, the crowds pouring into the protest area had become an uncountable mass. The hatred towards the government was so intense. The accord they were signing behind closed doors was seen as the most dangerous treaty ever. Lanka was about to lose its sovereignty. Not too far from where the restless crowds converged, the police and military began to appear. The uncertainty and the tension mounted. By about 11.30, several powerful speeches were made. The mass python began to move along. Then, the tear-gassing began. Canisters dropped in the middle of the tightly gelled human phalanx. In a second, it began to break into disarray. Shots were fired – first into the sky, and later at the exploding, restless mass. The protesters struck back, throwing canisters at their assailants and setting buses on fire. Dark vapours burst in thick clouds. The newspapers carried these accounts. Much later, in the books that were written about the march, these incidents were included with accompanying photographs.

After the tear-gassing incident the protesters split into several processions and recommenced their march along four separate routes. At different points these marches were confronted and attacked. In shooting led by the police, twenty one were killed that day. However, the extent of the tragedy didn't reach us in Matale until late. The mid-day and evening news gave only cursory accounts. We waited for more detail. By the next morning, the protest sent shockwaves through the island to its remoter areas. We were ordered to organize mass demonstrations in both Matale and Kandy. The machine we had carefully built and maintained over time now had to be taken out into the open. The police had been ordered to suppress whatever demonstration with force. In five days of protesting, 132 were shot to death. Over 700 were locked up in police cells.

On the third evening, we rode to Katugastota and took Lady McCallum's drive to Dodanwala. Dodanwala was a quiet village across the river from the Halloluwa/Gohagoda side. The road was curvaceous and shaded almost all the way. When we reached a large estate, my agriculturist-comrade turned the bike in and rode up a well-paved road that went by neatly cultivated coconut patches. Coconut was not endemic to this part of the country, but the estate was rich with tall trees. We stopped where the drive ended and, from there, we walked. Moving from one patch to another, sure-footed and nimble in a careless way, my comrade led the way. We finally came to a partitioned shed with three well-groomed cows inside. Behind the shed, a big-bellied, bald-headed man bent over stacks of grass. He was sorting out the next day's feed.

The cattle-owner greeted my comrade with a smile and exchanged a few pleasantries. He didn't ask who I was, but paid me the courtesy of a welcoming smile. The comrade-colleague introduced me as a 'brother' from the university. In some detail they discussed a fiscal matter after which my comrade asked the man if 'the gadget' had arrived yet. He nodded in a nonchalant way and put aside his scythe, wiped his hand on the back of his sarong, and began to lead the way. Behind the shed, in a lower part of the property, there was a manure plant to which three ducts from the sheds were trained. On three sides of the plant were pyramids of freshly turned manure. With the ease which comes from knowledge, the bald man made a quick opening in one of the castles and pulled out a folded gunny sack. Without expression, he handed it over.

With sounds of delightful approval, the pretender-agriculturist pulled out from the sack the trigger-part of a shot gun which was cased in polythene. Deftly, he turned it in his hand and gave it to me to hold and feel. Without its barrel, this half-a-gun seemed strange and alien, but I weighed it in my hand and quickly gave it back. It had been brought there hidden in the false bottom of a cardboard box. The comrade looked at me, and awaited my verdict. I

slowly nodded my head as if to say that the ‘gadget’ was of acceptable quality. We put it back into the sack and buried it in the dung. The thanks we offered him, the bald man brushed off as if such formality inconvenienced him. We made our way back to the bike. He didn’t say much, but my comrade was in deep thought.

Then, suddenly, he asked whether I wanted to know what that episode had all been about. He spoke as if he was struck by an after-thought. Well, clearly, that trigger-part had been smuggled there – more precisely, brought in the false bottom of a birdcage – and was kept there for a third party to come and take away. The comrade said that our boys from the other side of the river (who already had the gun-barrel separately delivered to them) were to come and secure this part tonight. He asked whether I wanted to meet the man who had helped to bring it over. It was not the time to transport triggers in false bottoms, and so, it had been quite a daring act. But, I said no. The first lesson I had been taught in the movement was to know as little as possible. And, where possible, to know nothing at all. When you knew absolutely nothing, there was very little to reveal. The movement was built in insulated compartments. I was quite amused that my comrade volunteered to expose a coordinate I shouldn’t and didn’t have to know. I told him as much. He only smiled and patted my back.

From August to early-October that year, the Dumbara valley was home to me. I lived in the hut of a party-loyalist’s home. In favourable times, the hut had been a storage room for surplus grain. My belongings were few. There was easily too much space for me there. The villages closest to where I stayed were Udurawana and Doragamuwa, each a good 10-15 kilometres set back from the road that linked Katugastota with Madawala and Digana.

Forgotten by modern development, but blessing the peasants who turned the land, the Dumbara valley spread to the faraway horizon.

The farmers looked upon the Party as they did the earth that nourished them. A generation up, they were attuned to self-sufficiency. The surplus was carted to weekend fairs, or sold to middlemen who pushed the produce up the long production chain. But, the coming generation (which included their sons and daughters of my age) looked out to the world, to a footing in the town with a respectable job. When it was their turn to have sons and daughters, they would no longer have a connection with the soil. It was this interim generation – my peers, if you may – on whom the Party pinned its hopes. We gave leadership to them against capitalist inequality and hypocrisy. To their fathers and mothers, we were all their sons.

The villages had their own networks of roads and paths – in fact, the main road on which buses and vehicles ran was the faraway boundary that marked the beginning of a different world. If one knew the village paths, the main roads were hardly even necessary. You could travel anywhere without crossing the motorway. Except, of course, you drew attention. Especially, if you used a moped. You had to choose between the convenience of taking the folk path, and toning yourself down to be immersed in the surroundings. The guerrilla is a chameleon and not a lion. All that Margaret Mead theory didn't ring true the moment you got into the guerrilla's suit.

In September, my comrade the folk researcher got posted to some other district. He was there one day and the next he was gone. He didn't tell me much, and I didn't ask. He had to take leave of the villagers. When he spoke to them, their grief was real. I didn't know whether he had knowledge of ancient soil conservation methods, or whether he had learnt it by reading up, but he had been helping the villagers in practical ways. These men and women who knew the land through lifelong engagement respected his views. He said that he had got

a transfer; that he would leave me behind for a few months. I was to collect more on folk life for the book he meant to write.

He would have left his bike, he told me, but he badly needed it where he went. Hopefully, I would manage the work until I was put in touch with another coordinator. He recommended the peasant family I stayed with, but also cautioned me against staying in the same place for too long. Keep on moving, don't collect moss. If someone gets on your trail – as was bound to happen one day – make sure your path is convoluted: a track which only a guerrilla could work out. Our last minutes were prolonged and our wishful talk ran the risk of betraying our nerves. The first killings of traitors had just begun. All non-patriots and traitors of our revolution were being hunted. We would meet again, then; for, in the path we had chosen there was only victory. On his bike, he went away. Our destiny was that we wouldn't meet again. He was killed less than a year from then, although until a decade or so had passed, I wouldn't know it.

My mornings began with the cries of village fowls, and I apprenticed at milking cows in the cattle shed next door. The two houses were set apart by a vegetable patch, and in the faint light I walked the small path between rows of chillies and gourds. A small breakfast followed, each of the families encouraging me to share their morning meal. In spite of their difficult circumstances, they played their role as hosts with dignity. Then, I left for organizational work, meeting members of the five-member cells. Messages came to me through pre-arranged, pre-understood channels. At commonly agreed-on meeting points I met the adjacent links of the commanding line. Meetings were always short and swift. Sometimes we met at a known restaurant, a shop, the library, the bus stand – even the public convenience.

The family I stayed with had a daughter and a son. They studied at the village school in Doragamuwa. The girl was about twelve, the young boy fourteen. Some days, I rehearsed their work and gave them a hand in their homework exercises. Algebra had just been introduced to the girl in Grade 7, and she struggled to relate to the letters that had now come into what she had known as a number game. I could empathize with her, as this had been my plight when I was her age. She threw fits and tantrums to my great amusement, but as we began to work out the math, we laughed at her temper. If the son obtained good results at the O-Level the following year, he could apply to a better school in Kandy to continue the senior grades of his high school life.

One of those weeks, a meeting was called for all district coordinators and secretaries working in the area. The meeting was presided over by one of the politburo members who also coordinated the organization network across the island. He was one of the main people who led the Colombo protest in July. His presence – and at such close quarters – was such a stimulation for all of us who worked at the grassroots. The collective adrenaline rush was perceptible. It was like touching a charged battery by its terminals. Outside, it was mild rain, but the meeting was intense. He briefed us on what was happening at the party-level, and speculated about the events still to unfold. He checked with each one of us the preparation of our divisions.

The organizer was known to some of us as Michael. His assignment to us was to make lists. Three lists that had to be passed up the links: one, of households in the designated region that had guns – licensed and otherwise. Guns used for hunting – shotguns, locally-manufactured half-bore ones – and those used for security in estates and factories. Ones stored in old manorial houses and those issued to headmen and the sort. The second list: what information could be found on local police and military-men. Their comings and goings, friends and foes, extension of families and relatives. Strengths and weaknesses. And third – a

list of troublemakers who openly canvassed against the Party; those who played an active role in supporting the ruling class. Anyone from vagabonds hanging about local tea-shops to grama niladharis; boatmen to school principals, idle-mouthed low-lives to government workers in buttoned up shirts. The meeting was adjourned for ten minutes to serve tea. When everyone returned to their seats, Michael was not there. Just like that, he had already gone, disappeared in the wind.

In our almanac, October is a monumental month. Here, we celebrate the glory of the great October revolution. After a prolonged struggle, the birth of Soviet Russia took place in this very month. It was a testament to humanity's ceaseless energy against the cruel and the unjust, and its ability to build culture and ethics of government against iron and blood. It was an otherwise ordinary October evening near the Kandy railway station. Pedestrians and traffic fought each other. Wares were being shouted, and diesel emissions pricked the air. On one side, there was the post office building. Across the road, the small drive that led down to the entrance of the railway station. Over the past few years, a few boutique-shops had cropped up. They sold biscuits, fruits and newspapers for commuters. Traveling from Kandy to Matale – a negligible 30 kms – took more time by train than by bus; yet, it was much safer that way. For one, you never ran the risk of being checked in the train as, even in the case of an emergency, makeshift checkpoints were almost always set up only on the roads. More so, between Katugastota and Matale, the rail line ran by the fringes of all the villages. Whatever village you wanted to go to – from Alawathugoda, Wategama, Udurawana to Ukuwela – you just had to slide off the train.

I crossed the road in front of the post office and stepped into one of those kiosks to buy a couple of cigarettes. As it was universally known that the rebels didn't smoke, I had made a habit of carrying a cigarette or two in my pocket. This was textbook material really: method acting – getting into character. The average policeman was not trained to think like a guerrilla. He thought like a cop. So I always made it a point to shave and keep my hair short and neat. I walked in crowds whenever possible, and bought a cheap wristwatch which I wore in the town. When I went to the village, I removed the watch and slipped it in my pocket. It would be a giveaway if I was detected wearing a watch in peasant country. Observe. Internalize. Characterize. The boutique man wrapped three cigarettes for me (always buy Bristol and not Gold Leaf – cigarettes were classed) in a piece of paper that came with the packet. As I turned around to leave I saw the headline of a daily that hung to be sold: 'JVPer of Yesteryear Shot in Broad Daylight: Nandana Marasinghe Killed in Cold Blood'. For a moment, I saw stars. My brain warped and refused to absorb or comprehend the headline. In a flash, my mind went back to the night we staged *Blood Wedding* at the university.

Comrade Marasinghe had good connections with several NGOs, and was plugged into movements like the Janatha Sangamaya. As a leader, he emerged from the failure of the insurrection. While they were in prison, when a malicious attack was brought on comrade Wijeweera, Marasinghe is said to have saved his life. It is this Marasinghe that had been shot and killed yesterday – branded a 'traitor' by the very party to which he had given his youth; by the very leader whose life he once saved.

As the train slowly rocked up the Matale line, I probed my thoughts for direction. I read the news report several times. The train kept getting more crowded. I gave up my seat to one of the older women who was standing, and edged towards the corridor between the carriages. The more I thought the matter over, the more let down and furious I felt. What on earth were these pariahs thinking, putting a gun on a man who was one in ten thousand? At

least, have some gratitude for what he had done for the party when he was in the firing line! This was too outrageous to even begin to justify. What chances did I have of going to Anuradhapura for his funeral? I must *somehow* go there – it was not a matter of party affinity here; this was a matter of dignity and love. This was about being civilized. If the movement couldn't demarcate the two – affinity and love – then, too bad: but, this was a man who had taught and encouraged me. I had to go there – I simply had to see him before they cremated his remains.

I hurried off the train when it stopped at Wattegama. Wattegama was a small township halfway between Kandy and Matale. Without thinking, I rushed to the bus stop to see if I could catch a bus back to Kandy. Quite intuitively, I decided to go to Kelaniya, to the university. I wasn't sure what I wanted there, but wanted to see who was left in our old hang out places. Perhaps, someone from our crowd who was involved with the production of *Blood Wedding*? I hadn't been there for two months and I had had no contact with any of our crowd. I had to pitch comrade Marasinghe's killing to those losers and see how they stood on the matter. So, now I had to return to Kandy, and from there take a bus towards Colombo, and exit at Kelaniya. It was lucky that I checked how much money it would cost, for I realized that I didn't have enough cash. Wattegama was not a familiar town. There wasn't anyone from whom I could obtain a loan. I decided to wait for the next train that went to Kandy (for which I had to pay) and from there to take the evening train to Colombo. I had to risk it, if it came to that, and travel with a ticket for a closer station. Or, better still – go without a ticket at all.

In the 1994 election, the UNP government had been defeated and finally sent home. It was by now four years since the JVP was steamrolled, and our movement was nipped out. Almost all the frontliners we knew had been killed or disappeared. The faces we knew from meetings, rallies and party conventions – along with their banter and good humour – were no more. And the UNP leaders who led the murderous rampage: they had perished, too. A few of them were killed by our gunmen, but the vast majority of them were taken down by assassins sent by their own leaders. Then, some others were claimed by bombers sent by Tamil separatists. But, one way or the other, they all paid for it – by October '94, they were gone.

I wonder, then, before it all started – before the killing of the sixty-odd thousand, all that police and military violence, torture camps, decapitated bodies tied against lamp posts, heads pitchforked, mutilated remains floated downstream or burnt in street corners – had they known that none of them would be there a mere seven years from then, would they have still made all that effort? Wijeweera, Gamanayake, Saman Piyasiri, DM Ananda, HB Herath (Michael), Wimalaratne, Shantha Bandara, Ranjithan Guneratnam – the obituary began with these comrades: comrades without epitaphs. And then, it went on to absorb a nameless, faceless, sixty thousand others – levelled in the same mass grave in history: vanquished general, corporal, and bystander, all together.

And to think that I fancied myself as having mastered plot-reversal and irony! When Wijeweera was captured and killed, the top man behind that mission, the silk-haired Defence Minister Wijeratne, gave a scripted briefing to the press. Comrade Wijeweera had been captured from his hideout where he had been posing as a retired planter. Ironically, Minister Wijeratne himself was a planter who had been parachuted into a top chair in the UNP. He was then made Minister of Defence: his ruthless, slave-driving, slave-killing soft skills as an estate-owner were now put into national service. Wijeratne was asked by some insolent

pressman whether Comrade Wijeweera had his beard when he was subdued. In his arrogance, Wijeratne had quipped: “He had his beard, but he wasn’t wearing his cap”. In ’91, Wijeratne died in a car-bomb that shook the heart of Colombo. He was traveling from his home to his office. The pressure bomb had been fitted underneath his car. In immaculate white, Wijeratne was seen dead inside the mangled vehicle. Surely they could have pulled the body out and saved it from the flames? Why didn’t they do so? The blame of the attack was pinned on the Tigers. But, was it the Tigers who blew Wijeratne up, and let him burn to a cinder, his flesh melting and dripping – a morning horror for all to see? There were many conspiracy theories.

After a sixteen year rule of blood and brains down its walls, the castle was sinking on its knees. A Freedom Party-led coalition was on the rise under the Bandaranaike daughter, Chandrika. She had returned from exile and appeared smiling from mass-print posters on lampposts and walls. The Dove of Peace. The Hope of the Nation. Symbolically, she held a lotus flower in some, while in others she waved at the people with beaming eyes. She was going to contest the presidency. A new hope and a new beginning. Three days before the decisive election, during a last promotional meeting, a bomb explosion killed thirteen UNP leaders – their presidential candidate among them. The Tigers were blamed. It was a sad end to an era and a generation.

As all this happened in the capital, I was still in hiding – underground, if you may – living simply and under an assumed name. A six-year exile in a remote fringe was no evening walk: and that, too, while the country burnt from border to border. I first retreated to Trincomalee in the east, and in ’91, through a contact, I found a place in Mannar, the one-time pearl fishery town in the north-western coast. Through Father Malcolm of Mannar I made contact with the fishing communities in the islands that stood off the peninsula. These men lived a hard but simple life and were all Christians. They lived within their community and were hardworking folk fighting the sun and the sea. Of the petty problems that spared

lives or which caused lives to end, they had little concept or interest. Their closest mainland contacts were middlemen of big business fishery, and coordinates of bootleggers.

Under the good father, I kept watch over a small school on behalf of the church of St. Lawrence. Two dozen kids of ages six to fourteen came to school at any given point. My days on this uncharted, uncared-for island locally known as Uyirthappiya thivu (Tamil for the Survivors' Island) is a story for another chapter. Between this haven of love, sincerity, undying camaraderie, and the compassion of St. Lawrence's paint-peeling interior halls, I had finally discovered my oasis for troubled times. The father walked tall among his flock, drank out of their cups, and took meals off their beaten stainless-steel. He conversed and listened to the minutiae of their issues, from the scarcity of the catch, draconic demands of vendors, to the remorseful laments that followed drunken stabbings among closest friends. In the evenings on the beach he played football with some of the boys, or read for whoever happened to be at the church.

To me, the father spoke of politics. He had high hopes for Chandrika, who was set to be sworn in after a landslide win. "She polled an unprecedented 62% of the vote," the father whistled. "No one in the history of the country had won so handsomely! And I doubt one ever will, either." I watched the sea but didn't confirm these hopes. "Of course, you think otherwise?" regarding me, the father asked. "It's for the future to tell, father," I compromised. "Let's not have our hopes up too early." But, in my heart I knew that the Dove of Peace wouldn't last long. The war against social inequality needed a different class of a general.

It was about eight when I got off the train at Kelaniya station and walked up the small path towards the main road. Keeping to the left of the road, I walked the short way leading up

to the campus. In case of an emergency, I could turn into a lane or the shrubbery on the university side. The main road was already deserted. When I arrived at the university gates, the whole place was sunk in darkness. From where I stood, the drive way to the university curved up the hill. Here and there, isolated single lamps gave a dim, yellowish light. Without lurking, I quickly walked inside and started up the road. It all seemed deserted until, a good hundred yards in, a voice broke through the dark. Two shadows were walking towards me from the dark. “Comrade?” It was a question – one coming out of surprise. I couldn’t register either of their faces, but they had already recognized me. They smiled with familiarity. It was the confusion of finding the right face in the wrong place. I patted them on their shoulders. I shared appropriate pleasantries.

One comrade was stocky and fair, and he was vaguely familiar to me. The other, who first accosted me, asked whether I had had any meals yet. As the students had taken it over, the canteen was still open. Then, we walked in that direction, but they stopped at the base of the Arts buildings and casually excused themselves. The lanky, stubble-faced one touched my arm. “It’s really good to see you after so long, comrade. Good to see you back – Maybe, tomorrow we can speak more!” Then, they turned back. They seemed to have been placed on watch, to keep an eye over the main entrance area. The road leading up could be easily covered from the plateau where they first stopped me. But, was there a point of having a watcher that deep, and not close to the gates? The exercise should be to prevent the enemy from entering our territory, and not to watch from the distance! Were they alone, or were there others in the darkness, too? Before I turned around and made my way to the canteen, I watched them casually walk away.

There were six or seven of them in one corner of the canteen. Only one set of lights was on, and one part of the room was dark. They were mostly juniors. There were possibly also one or two comrades from outside. As I entered, there was a moment’s silence as they

turned to take note of me. There were smiles of recognition and nods of acknowledgement. With a general wave, I appreciated their welcome. In the corner table, with his arms folded and legs drawn out, I saw the man whom I really wanted to meet. As I came in, he was in animated conversation with another comrade – comrade Kalinga – and stopped midsentence. His was an admixture of confusion and surprise, but he pulled himself together and shot up from his seat. “Sahodaraya!” he exclaimed – more ‘brother’ than ‘comrade’ – as I walked up to them. We embraced and I sat down beside them. Sunanda seemed happy to see me – amused, but happy. Without missing a beat, he made me a part of their conversation. With comrade Kalinga, he was discussing the safety of those who were left back in the university.

What was I doing there and in that unlikely hour? Was anything amiss? In front of Kalinga, I wasn’t yet prepared to speak too freely. So, for a while, I took the talk in circles, analysing the broad picture of the political situation, and giving them a cursory idea of how we operated in the villages. The university was being watched, they told me, and infiltrations had been made through plain-clothes men. The whole neighbourhood outside and some of the hostels outside were infested with spies. Two of them had been caught on campus, beaten within an inch and chucked onto the pavements outside. What was the purpose of having watchers half a mile into the land? I asked. Mustn’t the blockade be at the mouth of the entrance? Sunanda explained that the main gate area was lighted from the street lamps on the road. They had smashed the electric bulbs on the road leading up and created a veil of darkness. I still didn’t agree, but I refrained from comment. Had it been me, it would have been the lights on the main road I’d smash.

Perhaps because he understood my need to speak to Sunanda alone, Kalinga excused himself for a bit and went towards the canteen kitchen. For a minute, we were silent and I forked my brains as to from where I should start. Now that I had been finally given an audience I wasn’t even sure what I had to say. From the bag I carried I pulled out the

newspaper. I passed it along the table to where Sunanda sat. He glanced over the headline, folded the paper, and tossed it on the chair next to him. “I know, comrade – I heard the news,” he muttered. For a moment he was looking down. “I was actually expecting you, sahodaraya, to come this way any time – but, not tonight. Not today!” he tapped the table lightly as he spoke. He often did this when he was deeply moved. “I don’t know what to tell you,” he went on.

It was wrong, he said; but... I was trying to gauge how sincere Sunanda was in what he was telling me. But... the movement has its reasons for carrying out what seems unjustifiable from where we stand. We don’t know the whole story. We cannot see what caused the trigger to be pulled. But, yes – It was a shocking bit of news; hopefully, an anomaly. “But, these ‘mistakes’ must be tabled for discussion, thoroughly critiqued at a general meeting, and understood as not being the way forward,” I said. Sunanda was by now caught between his affection for me and his loyalty for the party. He had two lines to toe and he had on the back of that the responsibility of maintaining the trust of a cadre. “Our struggle must be from within, comrade; and that, too, while ensuring the party walls receive no harm.”

Kalinga was ambling across the canteen hall. He carried with him three cups, his fingers twined around their handles. The panacea of all kinds of university ills and aches – cheap and watery plain tea served in chipped enamel that had touched ten thousand mouths. “Comrade must also be tired,” Kalinga settled back in his chair. I hadn’t had a bite since my afternoon meal. Promptly, without a hint at comrade Marasinghe’s death, Sunanda began to talk of the work designated to the university’s Buddhist monks. It seemed that Kalinga was coordinating that work on behalf of the movement. Nothing registered as I watched his lips move. His eyes darted all around in an attempt to keep Kalinga, myself and his talk in one frame. Sunanda took down notes – he was making a list for Kalinga. Whom to contact and

for what purpose. Ariyadamma thero, Rathanaiothi thero, Narada thero – his clear, curvaceous hand put names down one after the other.

At a quarter to midnight, we came out of the canteen – Sunanda and myself. Kalinga stayed back, spending the night there with a couple of others. I had other known faces to greet and inquire after, but when that was done I was ready to leave. The hour was late and those faces were worn. No one asked after my business there and I had no reason to volunteer my whereabouts. The worst fear they had was the Vice Chancellor taking the drastic step to shut the university down. If the campus was closed and the students were asked to vacate, the movement lost both a sanctuary and a cover. Within the safe anonymity of its wide student body we could move about in assurance and make our tea. “In Colombo campus they are almost certain to pull the shutters down,” Sunanda confided. The plan was to protest against such a closure, threatening the administration not to cave into state pressure.

“And now, comrade, what is your decision: what do you think you must do?”

“I don’t know. I’m not feeling too good about things.”

“I know how you feel. I must say, it is a very chaotic feeling to have – specially, at a time like this.”

I nodded agreement. “I think I might want to confess to the movement; or at least to the union – I don’t know. I need to clear my head and spit out what bothers me.”

We walked through the dead buildings of the night. Picking our way through habit, we walked towards the back of the campus beyond which we had student hostels and residences. Neither of us was in a particular hurry. I was now fully decided that I wanted to confess my reservations: both the Daya Pathirana incident last year and the gunning down of people like comrade Marasinghe. ‘Third column traitors’ or not, these were acts against the

socialism I was brought up to believe in. There was no way for my conscience to be clean as long as these fish-bones were stuck down my throat. Sunanda heard me through and let silence take over. For a while, it was only the calming rhythm of slippers on the gravel as we walked.

“Tell you what, comrade,” Sunanda said, finally. “I know you well, and I know how bound by your conscience you are. What you have in mind is standard practice – a confession to the party, and sharing your reservations,” he paused. The gloomy hostel walls began to come into view. The square of a half-lit window and the dull pink of the wall-paint felt surreal as the half-moon fell through the branches of a tree. “But, under the circumstances, comrade, I think it is best you don’t do this just now,” he said. “Look – it is going to be a very trying two or three months ahead of us. There will be some disturbances and troubles. I think we must use our brains at a time like this and not the heart,” he touched my shoulder. “Seek the best course of action even though our conscience is hurt by it.” With affection, he pressed it tight. That night, there was no way for him to know that that October was just the preface; that the carnage would carry on for a full two and a half years. That, with it, it would take the best part of us.

“My roomy is up there,” he looked at the hostel building. “We can surely find space for you tonight. Besides, I want you to stay over with me tonight. And tomorrow, you can go where you want to go.” His arm was now fondly across my shoulder. We walked through the front door and climbed the spiral stairs onto the second floor. “Also, make sure you inquire after your homefolk,” he said. “Never lose track of the people at home,” he went on in a lowered tone while, in the darkness, he struggled to fit his key to the furrow of the keyhole.

Communique from the Patriotic People's Movement

Joint Command Headquarters of the Combined Military Forces of the Patriotic People.

17-07-88

To the patriotic people of our beloved fatherland now besieged by vicious agents of Indian imperialism and its local agents, the spineless capitalist UNP government,

Beloved fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and comrades,

For many years now, we, the Patriotic People's Movement, have been forewarning the people of our country of the danger that is Indian encroachment of our beloved fatherland. Motivated by regional power agendas and capitalist intentions, this imperialist demon has fostered plans to make our country – the country for which our forebears sacrificed their lives, shed their sweat and blood – a colony of a rising regional empire. The capitalist government in our country has proven their role as shameless pimps in surrendering the sovereignty of our land to their imperial demands. What our movement prophetically foresaw and forewarned for several years came true with the conspiracy that was the 'Indo-Lanka accord' – a treacherous piece of document as vicious and as cowardly as the agreement by which the country's sovereignty was betrayed to the British red armies in March 1815.

Following this inglorious betrayal, we demanded all our patriotic people rally into a front and lobby for the removal of the capitalist government who has proven their incapability to rule the country or to safeguard its independence. Now, for almost a year, the capitalist cronies have periodically shown their inability, leave alone steering the country forward, to ensure

day-to-day function in face of mass mobilization. Its response to the voice of the people – people who, at every street corner and square, repeatedly demanded the government to go home – has been rounds of live bullets, vicious crackdowns, arbitrary arrests, and forcible disappearances. And have these cowardly acts deterred the people? Have these fear tactics thwarted the patriotic impulses of the sons and daughters whose kith and kin come from a war-like, independent bloodline? For one patriotic life you take, we say, we will take twelve. One for twelve: the more you come down on us – we tell the senile puppet ruler of this country – the more forcefully the patriotic elements of our fatherland will stand up against you!

Trusted patriotic people of our fatherland,

This devious government seems to be running out of ideas. First, they tried threats and fear tactics. Then they used rubber bullets and high-tension water sprays. Next, it was the time for live bullets, death squads, and sieges on innocents. They brought the war to our villages and homesteads. They bent the law to fit their modus operandi and violated all known common decencies in bringing death on its own people. But, at each step they failed. The bullets – rubber or metal – were met with defiance, their spies and informants were put to the spear by the people themselves, and the people's demand for justice and patriotic rule was pushed with greater determination and force. And now? The government's latest ploy to break the people is a carefully designed campaign of disinformation: blatant lies distributed through the disease-spreading twin-harlots, the State Broadcasting Corporation and the Lake House newspapers, to confuse the people of a pending peace deal between the government and the Patriotic People's movement.

And so we declare the news items carried in the Sinhalese press on 12-07-88, 14-07-88, and in the English press on 14-07-88, and collaborating news reports in the television and radio news on 13-07-88 and 15-07-88 to be CATEGORICALLY misleading. Further, we demand the government and their cronies in these agencies to make public apologies, while issuing statements that revoke and withdraw their malicious lies. The Patriotic People will carefully watch over how these revocations take place. We will be forced to take necessary action in situations where these just demands are not upheld to the satisfaction of common decency and responsibility.

Trusted patriotic people, comrades, and friends,

This incapacitated government of crony capitalism has left the people of our country – our friends and loved ones – no option but to fight for our sovereignty and independence. By inviting an alien force into our country and by welcoming them to interfere with matters of state it has surrendered our mandate: the democratic mandate granted to govern us through just and reasonable means. We are left with no choice. Our only way is to fight on and decapitate the arrogant heads that float among clouds, their feet too far above the ordinary brothers, sisters, and comrades to whom this soil is their heritage and legacy; and to which they are firmly bound as they are to their parents, ancestors, kith and kin.

Glory to the patriotic people and their relentless sacrifice! Ultimate victory to our fatherland!

Signed,

The Commander-in-Chief

Joint Command Headquarters of the Combined Military Forces of the Patriotic People.

“Kill the Brutes by Hook or by Crook” – Top Government Politician.

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka, 22 September – A very senior politician of the government was quoted by a Colombo newspaper and news channel yesterday, 21 September, as calling on a total annihilation of the “Patriotic People’s Movement” (Sinhala: Deshapremi Janatha Vyaparaya), widely believed to be a proxy organization of the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, or JVP.

The politician was quoted while addressing a meeting in Kelaniya, in the immediate outskirts of Colombo, where he demanded a “killing of the brutes” irrespective of measure or method. Conceding that the government has tolerated enough provocation for over a year, the politician insinuated the need for stern and unwavering action to turn the tide on whom he termed “miscreants of Asia’s oldest democracy”. While no names were mentioned, it was clear that the politician’s insinuations were aimed at the JVP who, for over a year, has engaged the UNP government in an ongoing conflict. The JVP’s strength comes from deep grassroots-level connections whom they have mobilized as a force against the Colombo-based government. Their key demands include for the government and cabinet to resign and to reverse an India-mediated power-devolution package to facilitate the grievances of Sri Lanka’s Tamil-majority north and east.

This statement comes ahead of Sri Lanka’s preparation for elections in a few months where informed sources strongly suggest a change of heads for the country’s top office is likely. Earlier last week, a leaflet bearing the insignia of the so-called Patriotic People’s “Joint Command Headquarters of the Combined Military Forces” had been simultaneously distributed island-wide which trashed pro-government media reports of a pending peace deal

between the rebels and the government. The strongly-worded document bearing the signature of the “commander-in-chief” of the elusive command headquarters of the “Patriotic People’s Movement” challenged the government of misleading and confusing the people with fabricated stories, and demanded a public apology.

A MOTHER

During the last year of the troubles, even as bodies began to turn up near the bridge or at the crossroads between Anniwatte and Dodanwala, I was still determined to be the skeptic. There was no way for any of the Dodanwala people to be involved in cold-blooded murder! The allegation itself was preposterous; the decree of a madman, who didn't know these boys. Whether the forest-fringes of Dodanwala were used by rebels as a hideout or not was an altogether different story. But, the boys being killers? Even when the old temple monk began to scratch his head in doubt, it was I who stood up to him – “No, your reverend sir, you are being hit by the uncertainty around us,” I said. “We shouldn't doubt what we know is true.”

If you looked at it from the point of view of service, twenty years was a *lifetime*. Twenty years was the sum of the best you could give a place and a people. I'd known Dodanwala for twenty years – and this knowledge came from treading the soil: walking from home to home, feeling for the pulse of life being nurtured in wombs, monitoring the health at delivery and after, organizing and running clinics, coordinating vaccines, dropping by feeding ceremonies and, on the first day the children were introduced to the alphabet at the auspicious time. On the surface, all that was there was a part of career and cultural life. Then, the lengthy, heart-to-heart, woman-to-woman talks: reproduction health, family squabbles, dirty drinking habits of men, planning the home economy, advice on debt, recommendations of various kinds. It wasn't only in Dodanwala, either. When the vacancy at the Anniewatte mothers' clinic wasn't filled, there was talk of that being shut down entirely. For two years I filled in, until it was permanently made a part of my responsibilities. The Lady McCallum's Drive houses that didn't get covered by Katugastota and Mapanawathura clinics – not many, though; probably ten-fifteen families at a given time – also came to me when the schemes were reshuffled in 1985.

Even years after their children had had their last vaccine, or a daughter had had a child, the warmth of these families lingered. It was given new life through casual visits, meetings at community events, and temple events. To know the secrets of three divisions – from mothers, daughters, to toddlers – was no ordinary privilege. It was a responsibility. And it was precisely *this* that made me intrigued, concerned and inquisitive – all in one – when the first posters appeared; when little chits were being passed around. I remember the day I stopped by the post office. The old postmistress (now no longer with us) – the most charmingly clueless woman on either side of the river – was engrossed in the paper, sipping her morning cup. “Ah, if it isn’t our midwife madam,” she took off her round-rimmed glasses. On my side of the small post office counter-window, a menacing poster had been glued to the wall. ‘Send home the unpatriotic government!’ The postmistress had heard or seen nothing – but, there it was, spilling venom from the wall.

But, the rascals on the Halloluwa/Gohagoda side across the river were another story: a pretty bad story, in any case. From the first, I knew from where the troublemakers came from, caused a stir, and as to where they retreated for cover. Halloluwa, Gohagoda, and the interiors of Yatihalagala towards Muruthalawa through the forests and hills: sanctuaries made for guerrillas, with isolated pockets to which no one came or went. Plenty of hiding and cover bordered those surly villages with plenty of clumsy, opinionated, disgruntled men. I know the Halloluwa-side, too: quite a good community of respectable folk who put their sweat on the land and led simple, true-to-heart lives. But, then, there were also the half-baked ones who were prone to mischief. Ones who didn’t have an idea of their own. Even today, I am convinced that the ringleaders of the ‘deshapremis’ came from that side of the river. On that side, the stretch from Getambe to about the Halloluwa-Dodanwala bridge, the river ran through so many bottlenecks. Then it spread out after and – except on rainy days – the river was both calm and slow. Was it that hard to cross this river then, when no one was watching?

You only needed a skilled hand and a raft to paddle from bank to bank. All the rafts (used in sand-hauling) were Halloluwa and Gohagoda-owned. All sand-haulers' hands in the area came from that shore. So did all the rebels – the gun-toting crowd.

In that order, every second and fourth week we had the maternity and infants' clinics. In Dodanwala, we always used the community centre. Dental clinics for children and eye check-ups for elders were organized with the coordination of the district authorities. There were also numerous awareness programmes at the schools and the temple's dhamma school to which I contributed. Healthy food habits, community health and epidemic awareness: shuttling from one to the other, mine was the life of one of those clock-towers with four faces. A different time showed on each face. There was always someone to consult me on something or the other. Looking back, it seems more incredible than impossible – and all of that was carried out from morning to night, on a pair of feet that never tired or swelled.

When the signs turned bad, with police and political assistance, Dodanwala set up a security/peace council in the village. The whole idea was to create awareness and to have a rapport between the authorities and the community. It was an initiative by several village elders and the chief monk of the Dodanwala Subhodharamaya temple. Soon, I was asked to be a part of the proceedings, as there were no female officials involved. We generally met at the smaller temple that was far into the village. Unlike the big Subodharamaya on a hill near the bridge, the smaller temple was set back from the road between two paddy fields. Subodharamaya had among its devotees quite a few high ups and people with influence. Its improved facilities testified to the fact. The patrons of the smaller temple were ordinary people. I always wondered why these meetings took place in the smaller temple, and not in the one that courted attention. The village officer – the grama niladhari – an inspector of the police, several village elders, and the two municipality members met every third week. They discussed the situation of the village. Not that much came out of these meetings but it was

good to have an open dialogue. The rebels operated by night and what we saw in early light was left for us to mull over during the day. Hand-made posters, door-to-door issues of threats made at night, leaflets that threatened to bulldoze the government – at first, they looked like the pranks of a mischief-making gang of boys. Then, the first killings began: the killing of ‘traitors of the motherland’ whom they had judged. Traitors who stood in the path of their so-called ‘patriotic movement’ and the country.

At the meetings, only the police spoke openly about what they had in mind. Others used euphemisms; they were hiding behind words. No one had the confidence of taking a side. Even when they accused others of mischief, it was done half-heartedly from the safety of not wanting to provoke the unknown. No one said the word ‘JVP’ in the open. “Deshapremi’s” – patriots – was the catchphrase. Depending on who used it, in what context and with what nuance, the word changed its colour. It was like water that was poured into a glass. The Subodharama chief monk presided in a fatherly tone, and often insisted that matters must have a peaceful outcome. The troublemakers were ‘misled youth’ who had ‘grievances’; and it was our duty to identify them, advise them, and hold them by the norms of civilization. The use of brute force we heard in other places should not come to Dodanwala. The police inspector assured his commitment to the ways of peace. He pleaded for full cooperation to hold the village together. The principal of the Anniwatte School (which is now no longer there) spoke of the need to thoroughly search certain neighbourhoods (he emphasized a few places) of Anniewatte. He was certain that in these places the rebels had support and safe-houses. The elderly Mr. Tennakoon (also called ‘Liyana-mahattaya’, or the secretary), said that all political parties, ideologies notwithstanding, had to unite and to be a safety net in safeguarding the village. Four days after this meeting, Liyana-mahattaya was found gunned down in his own bedroom.

At the next meeting, the shock of Liyana-mahattaya's killing reverberated in the hall. Very little was said that day, and the police inspector informed us that a surveillance patrol was now set to operate at night. Liyana-mahattaya's seat from the previous week was empty. He was seated with the municipal councillor of the ruling party, a lawyer. The lawyer himself was not there; he was at a special meeting with their party organizer for Kandy. The night patrols were to scan the land between Anniwatte on the Kandy side and Wattarantenna on the Katugastota end. They were to coordinate with other patrols in adjacent divisions. The inspector's moustache twitched and he shifted on the chair, radiating authority. However, this patrol wasn't going to do anyone any good. The patrol only covered the main road. Set back from the road there was an expanse of dense forests and continuing hills that made Dodanwala's spine. The hills connected and, at convergence points between Lady McCallum and Anniewatte, they met in Mapanawathura, Galkandha and Bahirawakandha. Any thick-skull with enough local knowledge knew the paths and byroads through any part of these nooks. Then, as the meeting was about to close, the principal of the Anniewatte School reiterated the need for a search. He said that some of his school boys had rebel connections. Their houses should be searched. He was even ready to provide some names and addresses.

Now, this was stepping over the line: to bring the police to a school and the homes of boys was a drastic, unnecessary step. Between the Anniewatte tunnel and the bus terminus, his school was set on the top of a small hill. A school of no more than fifty-sixty children – a small school, in any case. One had to climb an equal number of steps to get there. Half way, you had to pause for breath. As you looked down you saw the occasional vehicle on the Anniewatte road. Two buildings, a small house for the Principal and an abandoned volleyball court. No one came here anymore except the fringes of the fringes. It was a school for nobodies. I knew very well where the children who enrolled there came from. They were from the poor families that lived along Riverdale, Galkandha, Circular and other by-roads on

the Anniwatte side. There were also a few from the poor, working class families that lived on the other side of the tunnel.

These children may come from difficult backgrounds, I told the principal. Their parents' struggles were real, and most of them shared a hand-to-mouth existence. They were clearly the vulnerable among us. Were the principal's allegations based on proof? I asked. It was a drastic step, to call in the police. It only aggravated matters and gave wings to mistrust. My words weren't spoken in a huff. On the contrary, I was using a consciously slowed down monotone. I just wanted some good sense spoken, and it wasn't my wish to provoke the principal. It seemed that he had heard talk of these boys cliquing together with strangers who came and went at odd hours. Some senior boys – fifteen-sixteen year olds, but ones who had experienced the gutter – had become arrogant and indifferent to order. He suspected the work of an outside hand. The inspector understood the principal's concern, but he seemed to be the patient and practical kind. He assured the man that there was no reason to worry. The police kept watch over some of the neighbourhoods that threatened the principal's peace of mind. So far there had been nothing to cause a panic. "It is good that sir is vigilant and all attention," he said with an appreciative smile. "You have taken this situation seriously. We will also be extra-vigilant in future."

When the meeting adjourned, I walked up to the inspector. "I personally think the principal is wrong in suspecting boys like that," I said. The inspector smiled and, tipped his cap back to give it the right balance,. Why did I think that the school master was wrong? he asked. As if I didn't know the odds those families were up against, day-in, day-out. Shanty-homes that were mainly wooden boards nailed on wooden boards; where two rooms made the house. Mother, father and children all scraped hard to make the meal. Did anyone think these people had the energy to go around toppling governments? "But, surely, madam," the inspector looked at me penetratingly, "Surely, these *dheshapremi*-types claim to fight for the

working class? Surely, you know that the workers and the underclass play a forward role in their mischief?” Such ignorance! If he believed all the gibberish that’s sold on political stages, this man surely did no justice to the stripes and pins he wore. “The proletariat of Riverdale Road”: there sure was a ring to it. At least the proletariat whose children were brought for vaccines hardly had the time to visit the free government clinic. They never failed to show gratitude or be thankful for the health care system and the nursing staff. The police inspector heard me out, but said nothing. He just smiled.

That same week, I had to go to the monthly health clinic at the Galkandha temple. The temple was in the Anniewatte East division and didn’t come under me. This was a good chance to meet with friends and have a good half an hour. Besides, there were expectations – women you knew from both sides of negligible village boundaries who liked to see you come. The health department people responsible for Anniewatte East were already busy with their work. In their paddle-motions, babies were being transferred from mothers’ laps to state-issue scales. Measurements were called, and numbers were entered in cards: age, weight, height. Pen torches were held into baby eyes. Questions and cross-questions. Supplements and nutrients were recommended. The hum of village talk in the corridor where the women waited rose and fell. My colleague Lekha was directing the maternity section.

Lekha was a graceful woman of medium height. She had a determined quality about her, and penetrating, hazelnut eyes. Without taking away her focus from the ripe belly she was pressing, Lekha acknowledged my entrance with a slight sound. The mother who was being examined had with her a younger girl – probably a sister. They both smiled at me. “Any news that is good news, akke?” Lekha asked me. “Nothing too good, nothing too bad,” I said. She pressed the mother’s belly, concentrating on her inspection. Her charge was in her early twenties – probably her first time. “Nothing to worry about, sister,” Lekha straightened

herself. “Both mother and baby are on a cruise.” In spite of her smile, the woman’s anxiety was quite visible. “This is your first time, sister?” I asked her. Meeting my eye, the woman nodded. Lekha took some time over her, meting out friendly but stern advice. She signed the examination book and directed her to the nutrients section.

Getting her junior to mind the clinic, Lekha asked me over for a cup of tea. We walked along the makeshift health center in the temple’s sermon hall. The tea things were closer to the monks’ quarters, up in its far corner. “We must look after our seniors when they come visiting us, mustn’t we?” Walking me to the interior, Lekha joked with her colleagues. Out of earshot, she complained about the short supply of vitamins and nutrients for young mothers. “As you know, akke, we do three clinics on this side,” she said. “But, when it comes to the third clinic we always – *always* – run short of stock.” Her eyes danced in disapproval. “We write back to headquarters, we personally inform the department heads, but still...” But still – the supplies dwindled as they looked on. Perhaps, it was to do with the running of three clinics with the supplies for two: something we didn’t do in Dodanwala. Lekha immediately corrected my misconception: “It is the old story, akke: stocks are siphoned off – stocks go missing between order and delivery.”

The tea came in a thermos: Lekha’s own flask which she drew from her capacious midwife’s bag. In the distance, at the periphery of our vision, the humdrum of clinic-life went on as she poured herself a cup after handing me mine. She hadn’t been here too long – maybe two years, if not three. But, the impact Lekha had had on the welfare of this part of Anniewatte and Mapanawathura was impressive. It was largely her dogged personality and no bullshit attitude to work. Besides, the colony she was in was a difficult one. It was not only the scarcity of supply or the negligence of the bureaucracy. This part of Anniewatte had an economic gulf between the haves and have nots that stood out. The ones who invariably

came to the clinic were those forgotten by modern society – and in Anniewatte and Mapanawathura, that number was growing.

“That girl we last saw,” Lekha continued after a pause. “Well, she is from near the tunnel, at the bend. We were laughing at something she said as you walked in.” She broke into a smile and I was reminded that they – all three of them – were relaxed and jocular even as I entered the examination area. “It was something about that Anniewatte school principal, did you hear?” and, for a moment, my heart jumped at the mention of the man who had sat with me at the security meeting the other day. Lekha had a penchant for dark humour and, at times, her idea of a joke was far from conventional. “So, it seems that the *boys* had given that arrogant fellow a fitting punishment,” Lekha went on. “He had been asked to stand in front of the school carrying his wife, with a placard around his neck that said ‘I will no longer hobnob with dogs of the regime’.” As if to dispel my disbelief, Lekha looked at me and nodded firmly. I could visualize the Principal holding up his wife – a quiet, self-minding, petite woman, really – with the notice in large, rounded letters.

“And? Did he do it?”

“Not like he had a choice! That’s what that girl said, anyway.”

“In front of the school?”

“For a whole hour.”

Everyone had found it downright hilarious. The students, the staff, the villagers. Some of the teachers had actually pleaded with their superior to hold back – that he did not have to put himself through such humiliation. Then, others had warned him against forsaking the order. The decree had been clear – A morning hour. Placard around the neck. Woman held at waist height. The school watched in bemused silence. Boys cackled from the safe distance of

the classrooms and corridors. Once the hour was up, the principal had walked back to his office, summoned some of the senior staff, and adjourned school for the day.

But, this was in no way acceptable. The man was a restless and anxious madcap; but, surely, to humiliate him in front of his work place was not the answer? And the village found this funny? Did Lekha find it amusing, too? “As a story it is funny when you first hear it,” Lekha said. “But, sister, what are these things happening around us now? This is a very ominous sign of the days and weeks to come!” What if someone was to walk into our clinic tomorrow and order us to wear placards around our necks and stand in spectacle: ‘We will no longer serve in the clinic of the traitorous regime’? What if health camps and visits to the homes of expectant mothers were to be construed as ‘treachery’ and ‘foul play’? Especially so, as these decisions were made to bring the system to its knees?

On my way back, I decided to go and meet the principal. From Galkandha temple, my walk back was along the Anniewatte-Dodanwala road, from which I forked towards Kandy through the Anniewatte tunnel. The school was not far from there, and the Principal was bound to be at his quarters. I had never liked the man – a pompous, arrogant, and restless sort – but I liked his wife and felt for her. He had not been to school since his humiliation two days earlier, and as I climbed the steep flight leading up and then walked over to his quarters across the volleyball pitch, there was only stillness. The house was shuttered. There was no sign of man, woman or child.

“Ari Sir! Ari Sir!” I thumped on the front door. There was no bell to ring and on the side of the small veranda there was a small wooden chair with a towel eased along its backrest. Flower pots, a mound of fertilizer manure, and garden ware. I banged on the door a few more times and pulled myself up to leave when, from the side of the rectangular building, Principal Ariyaratne’s face popped out. With an exclamation of familiarity, the man stepped around the corner and walked my way. A sheepish smile was drawn on his face, and he

seemed more haggard and restless than ever. He wore a stained white baniyan and a striped Palayakat sarong. Lines of anxiety had taken over from whatever rude confidence this man had had just the other day.

“If it isn’t our midwife nona!”

“Ari Sir! I was on my way after work and I thought of dropping by to see you and the lady.”

“Of course, of course – come in, come in!” and with his characteristic long stride he led me up the veranda.

“I hope I am not interfering with...”

“What nonsense – me and our nona were in the kitchen doing...” and breaking off, with a practiced jerk, he pulled the door that had no handle or lever. Creaking, the door came ajar, and I was led inside.

A small square room that served as a sitting space overarched into a dining area. An old-school settee set and a tea table stacked with the week’s newspapers made the main furniture. A small cabinet was locked away with silver, and a simple bookrack was half lost in a gloomy corner. Through an open arch that led to an interior, the school mistress came out smiling. She had heard my voice, no doubt. This was the first time I came to this house in almost three-four years; the first time I had met the lady in months.

The school mistress was in all ways a much more likeable woman than the Principal. She worked at the girls’ school at the Katukele junction and was soft-spoken. She was unobtrusive and timid in her ways. The couple must have easily been here eight years, and our occasional meetings – on the road, in the grocery, while awaiting the bus – were not altogether rare. I tried to imagine the grumpy and anxious man huffing and puffing as he

laboured under the weight of this timid woman. And in front of the school building, too. What could her thoughts have been, being carried like a sack of onions for the world to see?

“So, the moment I heard about the disgusting matter I told myself that I was going to drop by the school house,” I said. “It is appalling, to say the least – whoever they are and no matter what revolution they think they are running, such behaviour is unacceptable! It is downright disgusting and unbecoming!” The principal looked at me but said nothing. His wife nodded and showed agreement. “Ari Sir might remember how I spoke defending the school boys at the security meeting the other day, but I must apologize to Sir, as I never thought this kind of rascally behaviour would happen.”

In a few words, Principal Ariyaratne told me the story. Then, he stood up and announced that he would run the water for some tea. Brushing past the few furniture items that stood in his way, he disappeared through the arch into the inner chamber. Looking over her shoulder at the retiring man and then looking back at me directly and firmly, the school mistress let out a muffled grin. “When everything is said and done, it was quite funny,” she said in an urgent whisper. “Our one – you should have seen him struggling to carry me at that height! Sweating, fuming, cursing to himself!” We both exchanged smiles. It was surely no laughing matter, this. But, the school mistress’ attitude to the calamity was refreshing. For me, it suddenly opened a side to her personality I never knew existed; a dimension that couldn’t be known on the street. “But, midwife noney,” she said, “Our one is deeply affected by it. He is a man who has given all his life to the boys and their studies. This has cut him deep. Maybe, nona can also speak to him – try to reassure his troubled mind.”

Later, over tea, the principal opened his heart. “Someone in there is leaking information!” he accused. By ‘there’ he meant the security meeting we were having in the village. “Some spy is there giving out everything that is being discussed,” he made a gesture of contempt. “Now, even you madam – even you should be careful what you say and do!”

and the mistress nodded approval. “Everyone in the village knows madam’s mouth is bad when it comes to injustice and all kinds of wrongdoings, and that madam says what madam has to say even if it is the president, but...” The principal assured me that these are times where any person – irrespective of status or goodwill – could easily be eliminated. “And madam, most probably you will still disagree with me because that’s how madam’s heart works – but, these *boys* are up to no good. *These* boys are behind all the mischief happening here in Anniewatte.” He was prepared to stake his thirty year career that some of his school fellows were neck-deep in rebel activity. “I will keep quiet as I have this one to look after and my own child. But, sooner this pestilence is removed in whatever way the better for the whole country.”

I walked down the steps leading away from the little school. As I briefly looked up, the couple looked down at me. Seeing me turn back, the school mistress lifted her right hand in a wave. I tried to explain to the principal that there was no reasonable proof that someone leaked information from the village meetings, but he claimed that there was no other explanation. In future, he planned not to sit at those meetings – the government can do whatever it pleased. I explained to him that that might not be a good idea, as that only benefited the rebels – to further break down order and organization. He simply stuck his head in both palms and dug his elbows into his thighs. “Antho-jataa, bahee-jataa” he whispered a Buddhist maxim: both within and without, it is chaos.

Well, for me, this allegation that someone from inside collaborated with the rebels was no less preposterous than that of Dodanwala boys in league with mischief-makers. Who, then, could this planted ‘double-agent’ be? Surely it couldn’t be the two chief monks from the temples? One could equally rule out the Police Inspector, the government member, as well as the Liyana-mahattaya, who was by now dead. That left Gunathilake mahattaya and Artigala mahattaya – two strong, traditional UNPers with undisputed aristocratic roots in the village.

Ariya mahattaya – the book printer – was too gentle and dignified to even be thought of as a rebel’s acolyte. To think any of these respected village elders would be in league with the JVP was downright ludicrous. Then, of course, the one unaccounted for was the member of the opposition: another local boy who had won the trust and confidence of all and alike. He had been a municipal councillor of Dodanwala for a good decade. He was everyone’s local ‘go to’ man – party notwithstanding – in all matters, from recommendations to municipality negligence. In fact, I had already made up my mind to bring up Lekha’s complaint about short supplies in nutrients with Wijemuni when I met him next. I was confident that he would be able to help out in some practical way. It was no secret that his political party was a mere technicality. If tomorrow he was to switch sides and contest, he would still retain his popularity and win. He had nothing but his credibility to lose by breaking bread with subversives. I decided to rule out the conspiracy theory. Only a school master can come up with such drama; such fantasy.

The event that shocked all Dodanwala – the display of twelve dead bodies along the Dodanwala-Halloluwa suspension bridge – happened between Principal Ariyaratne’s incident and the next security meeting. Dodanwala had no idea how to respond to such a mass... such a – I still don’t know what one should call it. Burnt bodies and mangled corpses on public display were making news in the papers. The TV and radio broadcasts gave details and numbers. But, until it happened that day, such a horror had been a distant reality, a faraway matter one read of, but was guaranteed of not experiencing. Now, unannounced, it had suddenly come to our doorstep.

It must have been a Tuesday, as that was one of my off-days for Dodanwala. I, who had seen many things over the years in that village, was not there for this one horror when it happened. The next day, when I came back, there was no sign of the bridge having been sullied by blood or flesh. As usual, it swung under the weight of a passing villager, the shock of the day before cast to the waters that flowed. None of the men who had been brought and killed – or killed and brought there to be dumped – had been village lads. No known faces, or familiar names. At that point, most of us were too alien – too *new* – to this phenomenon to know what was happening. Why would they make a show of unknown, strange men? Why would those bodies be cast away at our bridge, on unfamiliar land? It was only later that we realized things for what they were; that this was a warning: a red light to all signed up mischief-makers in the village.

I felt the shock of the village in the voices that intimated to me with the details of the previous day, the muffling of certain words and phrases, and in the way some things were now being thought of before being said. Even the barber-fellow near the bridge – who was generally chatty – was deeply philosophical. For once, he was arresting his idle thoughts even as he spoke. “Looks like things just took a nasty turn, nona,” he said. “Looks like the war has just arrived home.” Piyaseeli, the grocer next to the barber, nodded in agreement. The barber was educated up to the Advanced Level and had an aesthetic bent. He drew signs and boards. He was also fascinated by the small village and had dug up its past. Dodanwala had once being the royal orchard of the last Kandyan king. Using archaeological records and folk tales as a guide, the boy tried to uncover the lost passages and gardens of the royal park. He was no regular barber. “What do you say to this, madam?” he asked me. “All these security meetings you have on one side, and this kind of – *barbarity* – on the other: how can you explain it?” He wasn’t being angry. It was a measured, calculated tone.

“This is unacceptable, Dammika putha – Do you think I, for a moment, disagree on that?”

“But, nona, do you really think the police and the politicians who sit at meetings to philosophize on village security *cannot* know about any of these?”

“That is something we have to find out.”

“Come now. Can fifteen bodies be unloaded on a bridge in the thick of night *without* the puppeteers at the top not knowing *anything*?” his voice was gradually giving way to anxiety.

“Putha,” I addressed him as my own boy – as a son. His trepidation and his deep disgust showed on his face. “Putha, these things are not black and white just like that. You have heard of the many interim groups and hired killing squads, haven’t you? We shouldn’t be too quick to speak – specially, in these times.”

I remember Piyaseeli – who, up to now had said nothing – interjecting at this point. “And you!” she spoke to her much younger neighbour in mock-admonishment. “And you better watch that mouth of yours which is already too big for your own good. One day, it is that mouth of yours that will cause your downfall.” The barber-fellow said something suitable and brushed off Piyaseeli’s accusation. “This is our midwife nona I am speaking to... and of course, to you: our Piyaseeli akka.” He smiled. But, I wondered, could anyone be a hundred percent safe to confide his or her mind to another? ‘Our midwife nona’ and ‘our Piyaseeli akka’ indicated a trust and reliance that were unbreakable and that could not be overwritten. They were coated with such inclusive endearment. But, I agreed – the grocer was correct. These were not the times to go around peppering people with controversial opinion.

“What Piyaseeli says is correct, putha,” smiling, I wrung the young shoulder.

“But, nona – I say this because it is you: this kind of barbarity only justifies the boys’ taking up arms.”

The young fellow was right. Only, it wasn’t my role to admit it to his face. As an elder, my duty to the community was to dissipate tensions; to put sawdust where it was damp, and to prevent any slippages. But, the fellow was correct: how could an invisible force come

to a village in the dead of the night and unload a dozen mangled, impaled corpses along the bridge and take off without the politicians or the military not being aware of it? What was the point of sitting at security meetings, being put to sleep by a bureaucracy that gave you pre-rehearsed speeches on community responsibility, neighbourhood safety nets, scheduled patrols and a hundred other things? When they were gone you woke up to the horror that stayed with you for the rest of your time. And I knew – even as I walked away from the shop area, I knew that the police inspector would admit to nothing. If I was to ask him of it the next day, evasiveness and feigned ignorance would dominate his response.

The police inspector was his usual diplomatic self at the special meeting called at the Subhodharamaya temple. “There are some unidentified, previously unknown groups operating. Ongoing investigations are taking place. Even we are not quite certain from where these groups are operating. But, quite soon, as soon as there’s a breakthrough, I might be able to share something positive.” He gazed vacantly on a distant corner of the room, Gunathilake mahattaya sat with a heavy face. Principal Ariyaratne had excused himself from attending, and the ruling party member was absent, as well. The chief monks of the two temples seemed to have given the police inspector the right to preside. It seemed as if no one really wanted to speak out, as if we were cowed into listening and observing. Was this a mere ripple effect of the twelve mangled, dead bodies? Or, was there an eerie presence of some superior and invisible force in the room? In any case, today, ours was not a conference, or an exchange of ideas. A star-pinned uniformed man was dictating things. Even Artigala mahattaya – probably the most educated of us all, and the book publisher Ariya mahattaya were alluding to the incident in euphemism: how such ‘incidents’ could have far-reaching ‘impacts’ on our community: how this was a ‘black day’ for us all. On top of that, standing on his audacity, the inspector rambled on about ‘unidentified death squads’ and ‘investigations’ that were

ongoing. Surely, we were too old to beat around these bushes? What was the point in wasting each other's time?

And so I decided to shove my way in and speak up.

“You reverend sirs and gentlemen must excuse me for putting things this way,” I said, “but I don’t think we are going anywhere by swallowing medicine which the tongue doesn’t taste.” There was silence all around, barring a body or two adjusting their seats. The effect was that of a soundtrack which stops mid-sentence. In no uncertain terms, I pitched in two points which everyone gathered there already knew: that the common villager didn’t for a moment believe that these ‘unidentified gangs’ were unknown to the police. To say that these killers – whoever they were – were ‘unidentified’ was a lie. That was simply washing hands of responsibility. Secondly, the people of the village must not be terrorized. There may be rebels who have infiltrated the village – even using the cover of the village for their so-called ‘revolution’ – but, to terrorize the daylights out of the ordinary villager, the one who lived from hand-to-mouth and counted the coins at the end of each day, was abominable, and had to stop at once.

I couldn’t have done better by pulling the temple bell on a silent night. I could feel my words echoing back to me in their deafening boom. I don’t think the inspector was impressed. The monks listened in composure, but they weren’t exactly enlightened by my speech. Like a wax replica, Ariya mahattaya stiffened in his seat. Then, when it was all over, the policeman said this much: “With all due respect, midwife madam, we understand the scepticism of the people, their frustration. But, surely, to point the finger at the army, or at our department isn’t going to do anyone any good?” he paused. “It will only worsen matters – and in the most irrational way, to say the least. As I said before, investigation results are pending, and as I am

present here today to discuss these issues with the reasonable and educated representatives of Dodanwala,” here, he made a hand gesture of inclusion, “I am fully committed to bring peace to the village.” But, his backhanded slap didn’t pass unnoticed: ‘the reasonable and educated’ folk of Dodanwala. That was rich, coming from a khakhi-uniformed bootlicker. I felt my blood rush in from all directions.

But, Ariya mahattaya took over almost as soon as the inspector had finished. “Now, look,” he said in his soft but purposeful way. “Look, we are here to discuss the most practical approaches to calm the tides of terror we face. And yes – what our respected midwife madam says has weight. We mustn’t leave those concerns aside. After all, she is someone who can best represent the pulse of the people, and the anxieties and worries of the common folk,” he glanced at the two reverends, paused, and continued. “On the other hand, the task assigned to the police is also tough and sensitive. Nor is Dodanwala their only serving area. I know that the CI has two other meetings after ours today” and Ariya mahattaya looked at the CI, who nodded in approval. “So, I think as reasonable people we must be a bit patient when weather intervenes, yet not lose sight of the match we must play to win.”

“CI mahattaya, the point I am making is that we have to be truthful to one another here. Beating around the bush is not going to help us.” Even as I spoke, I could see the Subhodharamaya chief monk earnestly hoping to catch my eye. This was the much learned, much revered old head who was held in high esteem not only in the village, but also in the elite Asgiri and Malwathu temples in Kandy. He was practicing his wisdom – his time-tested understanding of cause and effect – by trying to beckon me to slow down; to hold it back. But, I had a little bit more to say. “If the people were to lose faith in the police, mahattaya, *that* alone would be the tragedy. The police – like us in the health service, or those in the teaching service – are state-servants on whom these poor folk rely on at all times. We mustn’t

let certain incidents break that confidence and make us look like fools in the eyes of those we are meant to serve.”

The Subhodharamaya chief monk then cleared his throat. He paused, fanned himself with the watapatha-fan, and for a moment said nothing. He had indicated his intention to speak and everyone now turned towards him. “What both of you – our CI mahattaya and our midwife nona – say carry equal weight. On one side the pressure of holding together society from the outside, and on the other, the challenge of keeping it from falling apart from the inside,” and as he looked around slowly, a few heads were readily nodding in agreement. “Mahattaya, we will support you in your best efforts to bring to our village normalcy and peace. We trust your efforts, and we have utmost confidence that you will always take the rightful path. As for the people’s fears,” and he paused for a moment. “– let us handle that. We in the village – these gentlemen, this nona here and us from the temples – will together speak to the people. If it serves the purpose better, we will speak to the village folk one by one,” and he smiled at the CI, and to the room in general. Then, his eyes rested on me, as if to search whether this solution was acceptable to me.

The meeting ended quite amicably. Some of our views were not exactly complementary, but there was a general air of relaxation and agreement. I walked up to the police CI and told him that I may have spoken with unchecked heat. He smiled it off and said that he had heard in advance of my way of tackling issues, and that he was not the least surprised when I spoke up. A committee of this sort could only benefit by a strong, unperturbed voice, he added. He will look not only into the security arrangements of the village, but would also personally follow the matter of the mass execution on the bridge. Ariya mahattaya walked up to me as the assembly finally began to stream out. He offered to give me a ride in his old Ford up to the concrete plant at Rajasinghe Mawatha junction. After a suitable preamble on nothing but everything, Ariya mahattaya commented on my stepping

up. It was civic-minded and in line with social justice: the kind of representation the poor folk needed.

“Indeed,” I said, faking a sneer. “Indeed, when the men folk go dumb as if they had swallowed a boulder, it falls on someone else to step up and speak!”

“Too true! Too true!” he chuckled in his quiet way.

Silence took over as we moved on. The Dodanwala road was known for its sharp bends and elbows, and every time he took a corner Ariya mahattaya gave a gentle press on the toot. He drove as if he was expecting a collision every moment.

“But, this nona here has to bear something in mind,” he finally said. “Our village here is small, nona – just a small pea in the gunny sack. And what we are now seeing here (quite unfortunately) is just a ripple of a far worse tragedy unfolding in other places of the country. Surely, you are aware of all this – it is in the news, the paper, the radio. Ah, well...” and he drove a bit more. “But, I know your bond with the village and the people. How long has it been now: fifteen years? Eighteen? (Not that it matters). But, when we work with some people for that long without a break, they sometimes become an added part of who we are – very much like a prosthetic arm, do you see?” he smiled. With calculated toots in between, it wasn’t too difficult to see where this book printer was going with his narrative. “But, nona, in a matter like this – an armed guerrilla uprising against the government (the government has its faults – no one denies that fact. Their conduct is unpardonable, to say the least) – we need to think with the brain and not our heart; no matter how good that heart is.”

I still wonder how hard it would have been for this man to have come out and said that bit to a woman – a well-meaning, good natured woman who had the community in mind – whom he saw as running loose like a cow estranged from the herd. He was a true gentleman, Mister Ariya. Possibly, he saw me lining myself up with danger, giving the wrong signs and signals, volunteering myself for the firing line where the gunfire was one-

directional. Nevertheless, he was a good man, though he was as soft as the pages on which he printed. But, I wouldn't hurt him by contradicting him. I would have given much to see him say all of this to me in front of an audience. Before turning into Rajasinghe Mawatha, Ariya mahattaya dropped me off at the junction, right next to the bus shelter. He smiled at me once more. Adjusting the weight of my bag, when I returned his smile, he nodded to himself and changed the gear and turned back to the road.

Sri Lanka Police cannot be trusted. In a word, it was a corps set up out of a motley crew of school drop outs, school time boxing knockouts, excess-testosterone build ups, conmen in search of a license, and men in uniform who grew into chicanery. The troubles in 88-90 were a turning point in the glorious history of the Sri Lanka Police. It was an impasse and deadlock – an even exchange of punches between the government and the rebels – which armed the cops with the worst kind of anything so long as it bolstered its buffer-role of safeguarding the political class. The rabble within the police twisted the arm of the common man, hammered him blue, robbed his pocket, slept with his woman and walked out of his house after eating from his dining table. Since the man was common and had no influence or connections, he sat on the veranda and read the paper or chewed betel while all of this happened. He even saluted the rabble policeman out as he belched and gave the familiar farewell, “So, I will come again, then?”

The police – oppressor of the common and the weak – then licked the boot heels of their superiors, the hierarchy with two-three-and-four stars, who, in turn clicked those licked heels as they gave smart salutes to the illicit hooch barons, professional petty thieves, seasoned rogues in VIP suits, unlicensed loggers offset by ministerial blessings, sand-haulers,

quarry-runners, unlicensed-anything with similar patronage....and the list went on. Luckily, back then, there were no drug barons – in or outside the parliament – or their stooges who conjured condominiums overnight in which politicians, judges, lawyers, police and military bigwigs and big bad businessmen alike partied from evening to the break of light. But, this was the corps of law enforcement that was now pledging to be righteous, transparent, and the defenders of civil dignity.

The Police was a boulder set in place between the dissenter and the politician; the threat from society and the party in the condo. The JVP troubles gave politicians a reason to bloat this unsavory rock, giving it a free hand to do whatever was necessary; and with both legal and extra-legal impunity to keep the party from being interrupted. Everything else was negotiable: protection, promotion, fast-tracked career rises; even, an entry into politics and parliament. The only deal was that the party shouldn't be inconvenienced. Between the lowly random villager in an unnamed, unnumbered shack-house in the corner of a small road and the arrogance of the political chess table, there was an unimaginable, unbridgeable cavity. The police was kept as the hound dog who obediently watches over that gulf.

The moment it arrived – I do not know from where it came or as to who endorsed it – it hit me like a thunderbolt. It was, perhaps, the only time in my thirty year service I was caught off guard. I had been restationed with immediate effect to Maskeliya in the plantation country! I had been transferred. 'Assume duties with immediate effect'. 'Report to so-and-so on such-and-such a date'. I had done my beat here for twenty years and no one had even turned this way to see whether I even existed. Perhaps that was the reason why I continued in these two divisions for this long: the work was running as smoothly as a well-oiled machine. I was doing the work of three people, possibly even four or five – I never bothered to measure or count. Maskeliya!? I seriously had to pull out the Lanka Atlas to find out where this cold, mist-ridden place was *exactly*. Instinctively I knew it was around Nuwaraeliya – a

good 70 km from Kandy – but where exactly? In the town of Maskeliya, or among the coolies in the tea estates? Years later, after many other things, we could surely recount these anecdotes summarized in two or three lines. But, when it happens – *as it happens* – you suddenly realize that you are not as strong or as independent as you think you are; that you are the tiniest and weakest person in the entire universe.

When you passed the small town of Nawalapitiya, the roads suddenly began to get narrower as the bends become more curvaceous. The climb gradually began. Around every corner, as there was something new to spot or take note of, the long bus ride wasn't as tedious as I anticipated it to be. The scenery was simply breathtaking, and it was getting better and better as we rocked and swayed towards the heart of the hills. I had no family to take, and my heart was in a bag stowed away in the rack above my seat. Everytime the bus took the impact of a pothole and came out of it with a small jerk, all of us – a good fifty or sixty of us in various sitting and standing positions – nodded along with that rhythm, and the bus suddenly looked like a well-choreographed spectacle. Whoever was assigned with the redoing of the roads was lagging behind.

After an eventless journey, I arrived in Maskeliya around three in the afternoon. But, the station I had to report to was further off, away from the town. Following directions, I took another smaller bus – a bus the right size to run on those curvy, hilly bends – which went on the Upcot road towards Norton. Now I was properly entering estate-territory: on one side, acres and acres of tea estates began to take over from the scenery. Then, coming through a bend, on my left was the vast Maussakele reservoir. Packed on either side of me, lost in their own internal conversations and chit chat, was a posse of estate-bound workers. They talked among themselves in Tamil. In that bus, I don't think there was a single soul who spoke a morsel of Sinhala. From the lap of a woman who was in a conversation with her neighbour, a dark, thin boy was gaping at me with mouth open. That gape said it all: I had arrived in

another country. Another country in which I had to rebuild from scratch. I smiled at the boy who was probably seven or eight – or, perhaps, more – but since to stare was the only reaction he seemed to know, I stuck my tongue out a bit and wobbled my head. No response.

I knew that probably half of them were equipped in some half-baked Sinhala – the Sinhala they needed for trade, work, and to run about day-to-day – but the first challenge for me in this Siberian outpost was already quite clear: I had to pick up Tamil, and fast. Some Tamil. Meager Tamil. The nouns and verbs. With the trained third eye, I knew that some of the talk on the bus was solely focused on me. My dress and my bags would have given them reason to whisper; but, I was a stranger nonetheless – a lone female counting the potholes in the depths of the estate-country – and there was no way for them to know for certain. Tomorrow, if not the day after, they will know a bit better. Until, then – patience!

My hurried departure from Kandy didn't leave me enough time to say farewell to all I would have liked to; to have taken proper leave of those wonderful people who had made for me Dodanwala a beautiful work station for almost eighteen years. With time, the village had become more of a second home than a work place, really; a place where you felt you were simply mopping, arranging the flowers or snapping out the occasional weed, than working to govern public health. Ah, that list would have been endless, and the emotional entanglements would have made farewell hard. All the hugs and embraces they had never given me and the tearful recollections of past times, childbirths and the uncharted visits to secure a need. The many secrets shared about a hundred thousand different things. Perhaps, a hurried, unceremonial retirement was the best way out. Just leave as if it was normal. As if it was just a small detail in an elaborate plan. There will be plenty of time to return to them, for stories to be told, and for records to be set in place.

But, I had to speak to a few: the old postmistress, who was a dear friend in many ways, and the Gunathilakes, both the gent and the missus, who had taken a deep interest in my welfare. A personal goodbye was inevitable and it would have made me feel bad had I not made those final visits. To Lekha at the Anniewatte East clinic, I had to mention my transfer. I made it a point to call at her place. To say the least, Lekha was shocked. We must petition, she urged, her hazel eyes flashing. We must protest through the Union. This was clearly a ‘punishment transfer’, aimed at keeping me quiet and on a short leash. But, no: I told Lekha that was not my way. By whimpering, I would fall on my knees before those hoodlums. By reacting, I will be showing that I was affected by their arrogance. And that was not my way. I would go ahead and take up the challenge, like lifting with its handle a cup of tea.

I had to visit the chief monk of the Subhodharamaya temple. In between scenes, I was leaving Dodanwala with a job half done. This man alone had to bear my confidence regarding a few things I had to say. With a heavy heart, I walked up the steps that led to the calm little retreat. It was the last meeting of the day for me, an evening hour where I was guaranteed that the monk and the temple were free. It was the young monk who received me. “We hear with some regret that our nona will have to leave us very soon?” he asked in a caring tone. “Wait here – I will inform the naayaka hamuduruwo that nona is here,” and he disappeared into the dwelling quarters of the monks. What is the right way for a monk – a man who has been taught detachment all his life, one who practices letting go on a daily basis – to respond to a ‘punishment transfer’ that dropped from the sky? I stood by the short parapet wall viewing the surrounding silence for possibly the last time.

The chief monk was followed by his younger deputy. There was no change to his fatherly, set face. As he half-turned around and half-whispered to the other, his immense bald head reflected light. “Why don’t we summon the others as well?” He wanted the other two monks – one of them a young samanera cub – to be there for my send off to be more

wholesome. Approaching the chief monk's chair and bending low I took leave of him and stood away at a suitable distance. Not being a Buddhist, these were things I always did with a certain inner-stiffness and the funny feeling of being an alien; but, having had to go through these customs as a part of being on the road for so long I had, by now, in my forty eighth year, achieved some kind of ritual perfection.

When our group was complete, the senior cleric began the preliminaries. Was I now all packed and ready to go? Had I managed to secure suitable accommodation to move into? Did I know what kind of work awaited me? What was the general situation in Maskeliya? I knew that this was just formality. From Gunathilake nona I had already learnt that the monk had even tried to intervene on my behalf; speaking to the high ups in Kandy that I should be retained as my services to Dodanwala were irreplaceable. He had been told that my transfer had been overdue by years: a system anomaly, a blockage in the pipeline. My work was so commendable that a community which was in greater need of those services should benefit from it now.

"When I first met this nona," he began – his eyes vaguely cast over the temple garden, his face turned towards particularly no one – "it was soon after the troubles in '71," and he paused. "Dodanwala back then was not the village we have now – far fewer families. Even our temple was much smaller with less facilities. Even these living quarters – we didn't have that entire left wing. Nona might even remember?" and I nodded. "How this temple has flourished in the last fifteen-twenty years is a reflection of how the village has grown. It was a difficult time – '71. The boys' uprising had just been crushed, boys were scattered on the run, families were struck with death and fear, jeeps patrolling were coming and going just like now. And then, in the middle of all that confusion, this nona came to our village – young, determined, ready to stand up to injustice, ready to take the side of the poor," a further pause. Like a tape put on fast-forward, memories began to cascade.

To stand up to injustice, he said, was my defining quality. That even in an assembly of men, as a lone woman I would stand up and speak. My voice was so powerful, he sneered in a way so that the sarcasm was not lost on even to the youngest cub, that it reminded people faraway of long overdue transfers. “Some of you might not know,” he waved a finger at the others, “that this nona is of the Christian faith,” and the others nodded. “Am I right, nona?” and, while verbally following it through, I assented with a nod. “But, for her, her service to humankind transcends all superficial, man-made boundaries. We are majority Buddhist in this village, but in our midwife nona resides a Christian, a Muslim and a good Buddhist. And that is why I have no doubt whatsoever she will succeed in her new posting, even though the loss of her departure will be heavy on us.”

At the end of his speech, I told the monk that I had bad misgivings about what was to come. There had been a lull following the election, but now signs were once again ominous. More than that, the guns were almost certain to fall on the most vulnerable, least connected homes and families. We saw it in '71, and even this time, we heard it in the news and read it in the papers how the most rural of the rural – the communities without clout – were being targeted and snapped like vermin. Just last year, in Mahawatta – and that is a mere fifteen-kilometers away – a whole village was erased: a village known to be of predominantly an underprivileged caste. Dodanwala, too, had so many families who could be framed in these diabolic schemes. So many labourers, sand-haulers, small-time farmers, day-wage workers, idlers, and disgruntled men. Those who had no lifeline or a connected middleman to turn to: I really feared for them. They were the ones who could easily be transformed into a charred pyre in doused petrol.

The chief monk walked with me up to the landing where my descent from the temple began. “I uphold your courage, nona,” he said, stopping by the jasmine bush. “But, go with a clear mind. Everything I can do in my capacity will be done without any reservations.

Sometimes, at times like these, being in robes is a blessing...” he smiled, “... but, on the other hand, sometimes it is not.” With a quick, final word, I turned around and began descending the steps. That last line – the blessing of being in robes (or of it not being a blessing) – has remained to this day both cryptic and poetic. Time and again, I have tried to shake out of it a meaning; but, it was that kind of sentence that confused you the more you thought about it. As I came back onto the main road, across me was the overgrown abandoned wasteland: a shrouded stretch of many trees and bushes which set the river apart from the road. Walking up and down the road, I would have passed this unused, unattended plot more than a thousand times. As I stood there for the four o’ clock bus to come, for no obvious reason, I felt a strange affinity – almost a sister-like bond – with that dark acreage. In an hour or so, the cicadas would begin their evening chitter from the heart of that growth. By then, I would be already gone. I would no longer be there for that haunting chorus.

PC Perera's Personal Log (06.09.1988 to 10.11.1988).

06-09-88: Assigned duty in special team K-3. Reporting to IG Nazar.

08-09-88: Raid on Waratenna and Bogahakandha, Halloluwa. Combined raid. 21 numbers.

09-09-88: Raid on tip off with K-3 team. Safe-house off the river. Nest empty.

11-09-88: Deployed to security division of Minister A.D.B. 3 day stint.

16-09-88: Halloluwa raid – successful. 5 more.

18-09-88: 28th birthday. No leave until next weekend. “Be happy in your work.”

23-09-88: IG Nazar re-assigned. Not sure of his replacement. K-3 to be dissolved?

24-09-88: Moved to record statements from boys. Temporary assignment.

26-09-88: Rumours of ceasefire. Boys asked to lay down arms. Rumours of positive response. Old story? Hope not. Good show.

28-09-88: Recording statements. Women's work.

29-09-88: K-3 merged with K-5? What on earth does this mean?

30-09-88: K 3-5 merger placed under IG Narasinghe!!! Ruined.

03-10-88: Raid of Hamangoda, Gohagoda. Surprise meeting with Vijitha Malalasekara who was goalie at school. Married and settled in Hamangoda. Small world. 5 numbers.

05-10-88: 3 released from previous raid. 2 others brought in by K-1.

06-10-88: Statements whole day! What a life.

08-10-88: K-1 trooper vehicle attacked near Katugastota town. 2 casualties. Cordon and search operation of area by K-1 and 3-5 merger.

11-10-88: 31 or 33 numbers. Lot of action. Not happy about the school boy.

12-10-88: School boy died this morning. Unnecessary.

14-10-88: Assigned to 3-5 merger patrol. Roster system. From Anniewatte East to Lady McCallum's Drive.

15-10-88: Like patrol inspector's sense of humour. Insists Anniewatte-Dodanwala is the safest route to patrol. "Those rascals sleep at night".

17-10-88: Tip off of activity along the river bank. K-1, 3-5, and para-troops combine search of both banks for 4 miles. Outcome - negative.

20-10-88: High profile civilian death in Dodanwala. Village shocked.

21-10-88: Dodanwala temple monk – Troublesome creature. Doesn't understand service life.

24-10-88: Statements – again. Women's work. Prefer day-patrol.

27-10-88: Leave application held up. Rebel announce two day hartal. Nice timing.

29-10-88: Raid off Yatirawana (K-1 and 3-5 combined). 13 taken. News had got out. The horses had bolted.

01-11-88: 5 released from raid. K-1 jeep ambushed. 2 casualties.

02-11-88: Rumours of jeep ambush being set up by inside info being leaked out. A cat among the pigeons?

04-11-88: Military man arrested in Nugawela. Not sure if it's an infiltrator.

06-11-88: Leave approved – finally. 3 days. Fingers crossed. Weekend plus Poya day.

10-11-88: Military fellow released on 09 November. False alarm. But better to err safely.

PC Perera's Personal Log (08.07.1989 to 15.07.1989)

08-07-89: Removed family to Anwarama³². Wife and kid should be safer there. The local nursery must do.

09-07-89: Memo received to turn in service pistol. Grapevine has it new weapons to be distributed.

11-07-89: Death threat received by mother and father. Second threat in 10 days. What must I now do?

12-07-89: Brother will take mother and father to his place. No other way. Can't take chances.

14-07-89: A day making reports. Summarizing statements is a headache. Applied for 2 days of leave. Might not get approved.

15-07-89: Major breakthrough! Rebel 3rd in command for the district captured at checkpoint.

(NOTE: On the evening of 17.07.1989, at about 6.30 PM, two unknown gunmen walked into PC Perera's brother's home in Pasyala, Nittambuwa, and shot his father and brother at point blank range. Three others, including his mother, escaped the assault. The father, 64, succumbed to his injuries.)

³² PC Perera's in-laws resided in Anwarama, a village off Mawanella (50 KM from Kandy).

A GUNMAN

1

In '71, I was just five years old. One morning, our little shack was surrounded by the Police. They came out of the nearby jungle. One of them threw me out, kicking me in the back. They raped my mother and sister. My sister was eight. They set fire to our shack. I still remember the coconut-leaf roof going up in flames. It made a deafening kara-kara noise. My mother's agonized screams, her double-bent body fresh from her assault crying for help. My sister lay beside her, and I called, "Sister! Sister! Wake up!" She stayed motionless. That was the last time I would see my dear sister. No neighbour came. They feared for their lives. My father never came. He hadn't been home for weeks. That is how we left the hills and came to Gohagoda, where my mother had grown up.

Mother married a second time. Kudappachchi drove a lorry. Then, we had another sister and a brother; both were much younger than me. We had settled down in Pathegama, off the Halloluwa-Katugastota road: a small hamlet set well back from the bustle. An untarred narrow track went up a hillock and descended to a sharp drop. And down there, cutting into the nearby woods and shrub-land was Pathegama, the village in the lowland. Seven-eight families, all wage-workers. I finished school and began to work in the timber yard. Sawing and filing, loading and unloading. Then, in the evenings, a dip in the river that was running shallow across the road. Share a smoke with my friends, an occasional drink in the bushes. Weekends, we sometimes went to Katugastota for a film. The cinema was falling apart, but that didn't stop us from having a good time.

The bigger question was what we were going to do with our lives. Our lives were wasting away. Sometimes I sat on the hill and looked down on Pathegama. When the sun set

behind the woods, it cast an unreal light through the trees that fell on the village. These miserable men and women knew their fates as if it had been written on stone. A lifetime of toil living on scraps and sale-clothes, a drink in the evening, and when they die – not even a hole. In '86, after kudappachchi died I applied for a security job in a Kandy firm. Not enough height, they said. Mother urged me to follow a technical course like Dharmasiri aiya of the cement factory. No more studying for me; I was done with formal education. Mother was making tea in the small kitchen when a visitor was talking to me in the ante-chamber. We were discussing jobs for people like us. “Machan, why don’t you put for the army? Interviews happening all year!” he casually said. Mother had been stirring the tea after adding sugar, and I heard her stop. This visitor was a village boy. He had no clue about where we’d come from.

My contact with the movement came through Premasiri aiya who came and went to the yard. He measured me up and down and gave me a good-natured smile. One day, when there wasn’t too much work or too many of us about, Premasiri aiya got talking to me. Would I like a smoke? He smoke beedis, but I didn’t mind. The rising prices of goods (the beedi price had just gone up by a few cents), the thriving lives of the mudalalis and other big-bellied businessmen, the double-tongued implement of the law. A woman who had plucked some mangoes from a neighbour’s tree out of poverty had been given a sentence of three months. A politician who had been summoned on a rape-charge had been let out. Mustachioed and curly-haired, Premasiri aiya had a habit of tucking up and letting down his sarong from time to time.

One day after work, as we were filing out of the yard, a young fellow was seated on a parked motorbike on the other side of the road. Our eyes met, and he smiled. Quickly, he crossed over and greeted me as if he was a long-known friend. He said that Premasiri aiya had sent him to meet me. He was doing agriculture research in the area, but he wanted to talk

to me about something else. Did I have a few minutes? On his bike, we rode to an isolated patch by the edge of the river. This was comrade Senanayake (and as I found out much later, Senanayake was just one of his names; one that the movement had given him), and we spoke into the evening. Seated there, we saw the dark descend over the river and the men and women walk home. Comrade Senanayake was reasoning with me – perhaps, I could join the ranks of the movement.

The JVP had been banned for three years. It was scoffed at for conspiring against the government. When the Tamil riots happened in '83, the government laid the blame on the JVP and had it proscribed, hurrying its leaders and activists into hiding. As the JVP that was steamrolled in '71 was rising again like a crushed plant does with the rain, the government was worried. The government was capitalist, and it had the support of capitalist countries like the U.S and India. These two countries had an understanding and shared interests in the region. Control of Sri Lanka was important to both. On the other hand, the JVP was socialist. It shared in a vision for public-ownership and the welfare state. The big businessmen and multi-national agents would have no place in such a society. So, according to the government, the JVP had to be crushed.

From underground, the red comrades of the JVP were organizing themselves. They said that this system must not go on; it needed to be overhauled. “Take the simple case of timber,” the comrade said. “First of all, how much timber do you think is produced in this country? And how much of it is done legitimately?” He explained to me how deforestation was a pathetic issue, especially in the hill country across which our rain-forests spread like a net. “When a license is issued, there is a commission collected, my comrade. And with that commission comes for the trader the power to cut up and above the legal amount,” he said. “If this continues, in another ten years, all our mountains will be in this river” He absent-

mindedly pointed at the flowing Mahaweli. “And then, the profits,” he continued. “How much of the profit do you think comes back down the chain to the labourer?” I had no answer. “How much do you think?” he asked again. “1/16th of the profit.”

Every recruit to the party is given an indoctrination. The proverbial ‘five lectures’. The first three lectures were done by a man from campus whom comrade Senanayake set me up with. He was an articulate speaker who also joked quite a bit. For the last two lectures I had to go to the Marrs Hall residence of the Peradeniya campus. One day, at Marrs Hall corridor, with some other campus comrades I met who later became a celebrated student martyr, comrade Shantha Bandara. He had left the campus by then, but was in charge of the responsibilities there, coordinating with various groups. That was also the last time I went to Marrs. With the basic orientation done, comrade Senanayake drafted me into a cell-unit of five that operated in the Gohagoda area. This was the first time I met four others – all people I knew, but I had no idea were JVPers – who had gone through the same process to be members of our core five-cell unit.

When mother found out about my involvement with the party she brought down the roof. She argued, cried, pleaded and begged. Was I going out of my mind? Had I no memory of what these involvements finally brought? In the silence of the house, while the little ones slept, in a voice that was barely under her control she hung at the edge of desperation. Her agony was visible in the dimmed flicker of the lamp. I said nothing. My silence had turned her dilemma into a monologue. Then, all at once, mother fell on her knees and was touching my feet, sobbing, her shoulders shaking. I bent down and violently pulled her up, gripping her arm at the elbow.

For a day or two, our little house bore the silence of the gulf between mother and son. The awkwardness was obvious. “What is it, Amma? What is going on?” the little ones would

ask. Mother would shake her head. She knew that my mind was made. “Made of the same stuff as the old man,” she would mutter for me to hear. “Stubborn! Headstrong!”

I knew that I had had my way. Even if it was against her will, she agreed to have my back. I quietly explained to her what had stuck in my mind of everything that had been drilled into me. The growing threat of Indian encroachment. The feeble government with its selfish, insincere ministers. The need for this injustice that had dug holes for our grandfathers and fathers to stop at last, so that we could take our destinies into hand even for a slightly more equal society. I don’t think it came out right, or as convincingly as it did when comrade Senanayake or comrade Shantha spoke. But, there it was – and I believed in what I felt as I spoke those words. And that belief meant that I had grasped it right.

My weapons training was given in a rural jungle adjacent to a party-run farm in Bundala. There were eleven others. To hold still and not get thrown off by the shot was the challenge for most of them. For some reason, the weapon didn’t feel alien to me. It was more or less like a carpenter’s tool – except that it issued a shot with smoke. The supervisor comrade was the jolly, jovial type. Whenever a shooter got the act wrong, he alleviated the tension with mock anger. “Some comrade has put his life on the line to confiscate that bullet, you imbecile.” In mock annoyance he would walk up and down. “Ten like you and we can hang up the revolution and fire it elsewhere!”

The others who were in my unit are not relevant at this time. It is sufficient to say that between those comrades and myself there was no big difference. Two of us were from Gohagoda, while two others came from Ihalagama, on the hills behind our village. The other comrade was from the Kondadeniya side, closer to Katugastota. We were accountable for a good ten square miles and a good hundred odd families. When things began to heat up, our workloads began to double and triple. Posters, chits, leaflets, spreading of rumours. Then,

with the protracted struggle came the risk of detection. Most of our operations were done at night and safety was almost taken for granted. The footpaths were familiar and the road was well known. Even if we had to put up a poster, we almost knew each shuttered shop front, each lamp post by heart. Even the villager who accidentally bumped into us at night simply bade us good night. Their hearts and spirits were with us, even though in some ways their hands were tied.

Between comrades in Halloluwa and us there had to be a careful link. Together, Halloluwa and Gohagoda were an important part of a chain across the big hills that surrounded our part of Kandy. In my eyes, this was the beauty of it. While the police and the army huffed and puffed in their jeeps and convoys, roaring up and down the roads in and out of the villages, the comrades set up communication channels through the hills, using paths that no outsider knew existed. Sometimes even villagers had forgotten some of these tracks which were now being used to stitch together two fibers of a network that was too fantastical for the imagination. By walking through the hills and woods alone, you could go to Muruthalawa through Yatihalagala; and from there to Pilimathalawa on the Kandy-Colombo highway.

In the same way, across the river, through Dodanwala, the line continued beyond Mapanawathura and Anniewatte to Katugastota, Polgolla, into the heart of the Dumbara hills. In fact, Dodanwala was an ‘in between’ or a kind of ‘buffer’ where one main part of that chain link ended and the other took over. Even when the tensions began to pick up, police patrols would come and go, often concentrating on the main junctions and the bridges that linked the two sides. The two bridges that were open for motor traffic were 10 kilometers apart – one in Gannoruwa and the other in Katugastota. Then, there was the Halloluwa suspension bridge. Patrols would come and sometimes drop off a trooper or two who would

hide in the thicket cocking their rifles at the bridge-gateway. Then, an hour or two later, the returning truck would pick them up.

Sometimes, we watched all this drama from our own hidden vantage points. Patrol to patrol had its own personality, too. If there was a show of lackluster nonchalance or an obvious air of clumsiness, it was likely that they were police – most likely, khaki pants stuck midway without promotion. But, I had also seen perfect stillness from deployed soldiers camouflaged against the night. It must have been no later than 2 AM one night when, watching from a hopper shop (closed for the night) which we had access to, two of us awaited the deployed patrol at the bridge to be picked up. We had to put up a particular poster. I was with a Bogahakandha comrade, and our beat was the stretch from Halloluwa to the Gohagoda school. The little thicket – an overgrowth caused by municipality negligence – was so still that we almost believed that the soldier we knew was there had somehow left without our noticing. I was getting impatient and egged on my comrade saying that we might as well go. But, the comrade's instincts were sharper. He held me back with a muffled curse. Merely ten minutes passed before there was a crack of dried sticks breaking under the pressure of a boot, and a silhouette carrying a rifle came into the open. Rifle mid air, he walked towards the bridge. Giving him a precise advantage, a second silhouette emerged from the bush. Keeping an even distance between them, they began crossing the bridge.

We never used the bridge at night; we never used that bridge if we had as much as a box of matches on us. If, by chance, anyone was found coming on that bridge at midnight – be it a guerilla or a gunny-sack weaver – he wouldn't stand a chance. He would never see daylight again. To cross the river, we always used a raft from further down: a raft the sand-haulers used, which was left idling for the night by their hauling site. Later in '88, we used a rope which a swimmer took across stream and tied to the trunk of a tree, which we then held

on to as we waded across the current. This was in many respects the safest way to cross over, though it left you soaked and shivering. A spare set of clothes had to go in your bag.

The first killings started in our parts in early '88. This was after the first search operations by the police and army had started. Cordoning off parts of the village, they carried out waves of combing operations and made a few arrests. At this time, their intelligence networks were still shoddy and off the mark. Most of their arrests were on tip offs and on a whim. Most of them were inaccurate. At first, on our side, their attention was mostly on Halloluwa (including the Bogahakandha side) and the Kulugammana hamlet, which was further in along the Barigama road that branched off at the Halloluwa town. Fairly early on, some posters had been found in an abandoned, half caved in house in Kulugammana and about eight boys were taken in on suspicion. When put on the grinding mill, someone there had mumbled some names from neighbouring Bogahakandha. Some of those who were just picked up at random never came back. The few that were released went underground.

We beefed up operations. When Bogahakandha-Halloluwa was being neutralized, more responsibilities fell on us in Gohagoda. Maybe it was my size, but there was a feeling that I didn't arouse too much suspicion, or stand out in a group. Till about the middle of '88, I slept at home – mostly on the open veranda (or, the pila) on the side – and got about my responsibilities without getting in anybody's way. The pila was a safe zone, as from there you could see anyone coming down the road without actually being seen; and behind me was an unattended, abandoned thorn-bush which annexed the small forest from which we collected the wood for our fires. It was around this time that the news of Premasiri aiya's death came to us. He had been arrested at his house by some men in civvies and had been taken away. His body had been found about half a mile from his home.

Then came a period where boys close to the movement – some of them not even members, but just sympathizers in many ways – were being taken in. These were well-focused, well-informed crackdowns and it was clear that someone was turning us in big time. We ran our famous poster threatening death to all collaborators. As a mark of protest for the kidnappings and killings going on, the party had ordered a one day curfew across the district. Our posters coincided with the curfew. The whole Kandy district woke up to a day of shut down. On both sides of the river, from Gannoruwa to Katugastota, the additional poster stood tall and firm: ‘Collaborators, beware! Spying on our patriots for the capitalist government will result in dire consequences!’

We informed comrade Senanayake that we couldn’t hold back any more. The police had taken an initiative to have pocket meetings, reaching out to the people, trying to calm down the tension. The deaths and kidnappings were attributed to ‘unknown forces’ and they insinuated that the rebels were responsible. Any commonsensical person could see that they were trying to hold together the shattered confidence of the people. In doing so, they also had the benefit of the minority who really believed the police – who may, at some point, gently tip over. This was now a psychological game, and it couldn’t any longer be played by one side. Comrade Senanayake was a good peace-time organizer. He was brilliant on foot and tireless in his work. He preferred to delay retaliation. He liked to use the phrase, ‘let us wait and see how things go.’

Things were going badly for us. A sudden siege at Bogahakandha took that village on the hill by terror. Almost all the men were taken in that night – almost all. Some were later released with the elders and village bigwigs intervening. But, two of the Bogahakandha links were kept back. When inquired after, the police claimed that they were never brought in. This created an outrage. Then, the Police admitted that these comrades were being held in detention, but they said that they were needed for further questioning. To this day, now thirty

years later, those families still hope against hope that their husbands and fathers will come home. Their parents, however, have all passed away by now. Until they died and were buried they walked from post to post, commission to commission, one bigwig to another, asking for a final word – were their sons alive or dead? Just that word, so that they could make up their mind, offer some alms on behalf of the dead spirit, and feel at ease. Luck simply didn't work their way.

The night they ransacked Bogahakandha, Dharme aiya, whom we took to be the leader there, had escaped with the automatic weapon we shared among us. He had been at a safe-house when the siege began and had retreated to the hills and into the jungle. What happened to Dharme aiya afterwards is not clear, but possibly the party repositioned him elsewhere. With his cover blown there was no way he could move about in our parts again. But, Dharme disappeared and with him our gun went away. On another day, the police came and searched Dharme's house and threatened his parents with imprisonment if the son wasn't handed in. Dharme's father, who used to be a clerk at the bus depot, didn't work anymore and the mother was feeble and old. Both parents would have been in their late sixties. The Police beat up both the mother and the father. They almost torched the old house. One of the policemen there prevented the arson. But, the father dislocated a knee. (Later, we managed to hunt down two of those policemen, including the one who prevented the house from being set on fire. The one who broke the father's knee got away.)

Our unit was livid beyond our senses. We felt as if a roof we had taken time to put up was tottering and caving in. For two days we tried to get across to comrade Senanayake, but neither he nor his motorcycle had been seen. We were losing patience. Comrade Senanayake had promised us a reasonably new automatic which was still coming. In our desperation, we decided to make a move. In one night, we took down two losers whom we had identified as tippers with the village-made shot gun we had. One, a garrulous no-good type who wasted his

life compiling tall stories at tea shops all day; who, we had information, was sneaking information to the government MP on the other side. He was pleading on Buddha's name for mercy when we marched him to the river bank. We pulled down our masks for him to have a final reckoning as to who had him booked. We didn't want him to go in ignorance.

Down the river, we took a raft and crossed the river and docked in a part closer to the Subhodharamaya temple which no one used. This area was abandoned jungle and not even a dog came that way. Two of our Dodanwala comrades joined us there. Parallel to the river we walked for half a mile and took out our second prey who had been gently asleep after another day of sneaking information. It was intriguing how these men without conscience who chose to deal with the devil evoked the Buddha and other gods when the end of the road was becoming clear. We tied him to a lamp post at the foot of the street and shot him to death. Comrade Nimal (not his real name) who led our unit requested the Dodanwala comrades help us get hold of a gun. Even they knew comrade Dharme had been relocated, but they didn't know that he had taken our automatic with him. Comrade Nimal was careful not to criticize Senanayake in front of the Dodanwala people. He sternly mentioned that we couldn't go further across the shore without hitting back in some way.

The Dodanwala situation had deteriorated by now, as well. In fact, they agreed to our taking down of the collaborator as a warning for others. The Dodanwala comrades believed it was this loser – a village nobody, really – who had tipped off a massive search that had taken place deep in the village a couple of days back. Luckily, the comrades, in turn, had been warned ahead by one of our boys within the police, and safety measures had been taken. The police had been looking for poster material and other propaganda documents. By the time they arrived, all that had been moved ashore. But, the Dodanwala comrades wanted to send a message. Things were getting risky.

Senanayake called an urgent meeting a couple of days after. Three of us met him at a safe coordinate, and Senanayake came with the campus comrade whom he went around with on his bike. His generally calm disposition was gone. He blew his top. “Are you fuckers going mad?” he asked straight away. For every move that was made in our area, as well as Dodanwala – for every bullet that was shot, for every life injured or taken – he had to be responsible, he said. Comrade Nimal jumped in: “Then, who is going to be responsible for the lives lost here on our side?” Senanayake had no ready reply for that. The campus comrade spoke up, then. “Comrades,” he said. “Comrades, the problem is when you comrades take a stern decision like this and follow it through – something like a *killing* – the ring above us starts questioning us. And if every unit started operating like that, without orders, there will be chaos and disorder. Do you follow my point, comrade?”

Comrade Sunil (not his real name) on our side spoke up, backing Nimal: “You comrades who come and go don’t have to face the fire, here. Things need to be balanced or everything will give way overnight. The situation right now is you can’t even step out to pee at night without some army or police dog hiding behind a bush. It is not like we haven’t told you, comrade Senanayake, to get us a gun. We have been telling you ever since Dharme aiya went underground.” Perhaps Senanayake felt the numbers ganging up against him. “I know, I know,” he said. “I can’t be plucking automatic rifles from the sky. I am trying my best to coordinate a good weapon. There is a weapon coming down here from Kurunegala. It is coming in two parts, so it will take a bit longer.” Nimal was heated up. He wasn’t going to back down. “Comrade can keep comrade’s weapon. By the time it gets here there won’t be any boys left to fire it.” The meeting was losing shape. The campus comrade was slowly scanning our faces, one after the other, just to take measure of where we all stood.

“Nimal, listen to me,” Senanayake said, taking a deep breath. “We are right now in a tight balance. It is 50-50 either way. Our Gohagoda cell has done some great work all this

time. No one is underestimating the hardships you had to push past. Specially so, after the Bogahakandha raid, you have taken that added responsibility....” But, at this point, Sunil cut in again. “Senanayake mahattaya, this talking is enough now. This talking won’t do the job. We need to act, mahattaya. Act! The pressure is coming on our side. We need to put it back on them. And for that we need to strike a few times. Targets that can send the message home.” Both Senanayake and the campus comrade looked torn. They also had so little time to make a decision. The meeting was out of their control.

At this point, the campus comrade stepped up. “All right, comrades,” he said, “what do these comrades suggest that we do now? After all, you are our ground-troopers. After all, you have a better idea how the ground lies at this point.” So far, only Nimal and Sunil from our side had spoken. It was now my cue to speak. This was perhaps the first time I had really spoken out at meetings. I was generally known as the quiet, ‘listening-type’. And what I had to say I had thought out well and rehearsed in my head: “Since Bogahakandha and Halloluwa fell, we have an emergency issue we haven’t really acknowledged. We are low on men, low on weapons. Our enemy has encroached. There’s also a psychological issue – the people are now equally divided on both sides. And, all the people in both villages can easily tell the enemy who is from the party and who is not. Comrades, we suggest that we combine the Dodanwala and Gohagoda units and redistribute the responsibilities.”

To redraw the map – combine Halloluwa, Gohagoda and Dodanwala across the river as one slab and make a ten man team to control it (nine, in reality, as Dodanwala only had four). Senanayake’s face was disfigured with lines of disapproval. But, the campus comrade showed no emotion. He was thinking, assessing: “What will happen if we can’t keep these maniacs with us tonight? Will the party send me to a faraway Siberia?” seemed to be his thought. “We redistribute and take the psychological war back to them,” came in Nimal. “We have a list of collaborators. We take them down.” The campus comrade then assured us of the

importance of keeping the five-cell units in tact. “At least until we inform the party about the situation here and get a word from them – keep the boundaries as they are. As for collaborators – we can discuss that point here among us.”

On comrade Nimal’s signal, Sunil took out a crumpled piece of paper and unfurled it carefully. This was the list we had come up with the Dodanwala comrades. An extended list of two parts – one for each side of the river. When they heard that the Dodanwala crowd had sat together with us to draw a list to be taken down both Senanayake and the campus comrade would have felt cold. They were probably going to have this same meeting with Dodanwala, too. But, this meant that the two shores had allied and taken things into their own hands. But, both those comrades were careful not to show their indignation. They scanned the list in failing light. On our side, we had five to start off with, including Ariyaratne mahattaya, the garrulous school master, trader Gunasoma and Piyadasa the tea kiosk man. Dodanwala wanted the government MP taken down, along with couple of old-timers there – the village elite crowd – and a couple who were suspected of sneaking information. Ariyaratne mahattaya had close links with the Police and had begun to badmouth the party in his classes at school. Trader Gunasoma was believed to have tipped off several boys who were friends of the party. He was probably behind Premasiri aiya being caught, as well. Piyadasa ran a tea shop for the labourers at the river bank. A few boys who used to frequent the place were among the ones whose homes were target-searched at Bogahakandha. They were all taken away. “Start with the tea shop man,” Senanayake finally said. “The trader next. Give the teacher a warning. Give him a chance.” Everyone seemed content. There were nods and shakes. “Give me another week. I will get the automatic.”

The meeting was over.

It all started going wrong when comrade Senanayake suddenly stopped coming. Without a word or a cue, we lost all contact with him. Then, we heard that he was taken in at a check point. To this day, I believe that comrade Senanayake was set up. I don't know who did it. He had a wife somewhere and a small child, as I knew. I don't know what happened to them, either. But, I had my suspicions and I have them still – Senanayake's side-kick, the campus comrade, disappeared soon after (or just before). My feeling at the time was that the campus comrade either changed sides, or cracked under pressure. Either way, no one saw him anymore. Maybe he's still somewhere living a new life, given to him as a reward. After all, Senanayake was a fairly hefty fish at the time; he was like the signal house in our part of the circuit.

And then, this is what adds to my skepticism – comrade Nimal decamped around the same time. One bright sunny day, a mobile patrol stopped a random bus and took in comrade Nimal who was traveling in the back seat. He put up a fight, but was hit on the head and tamed. By this time I had stopped work in the lumber yard and was doing day-wage jobs as they came my way. I was by the sand-hauling dock when the news came to me. It is no exaggeration that my whole body froze. Comrade Nimal was our de facto leader – one who had also been involved in '71 – and the artery that led to the rest of us. It was as if I had a blackout. If he murmured or croaked, we were truly and properly fucked.

Immediately, we decided to change our lodging places. There were four of us – myself, Sunil, Kondadeniye Somey (not his real name) and Bandare aiya (name thinly veiled) from the hill behind our village. Somey lived along the Kondadeniya road and was a grade III clerk in the Kandy North depot in Nugawela. He was the eldest among us and a family man. Our newly acquired automatic was hidden in Bandare aiya's house. Cut off from the rest and

half way up the hill, his house was the safest place. But, again, he was married though he didn't have children yet. Comrade Sunil was a swarthy customer, mustached and sharp. We were the only bachelors. Though Sunil proposed it and I readily seconded it, only the two of us could in reality relocate overnight. Only the two of us could move without feeling the weight of family or responsibility.

We were now at Bandare's little veranda. The decision had been proposed and taken. The plan was for myself and Sunil to go to Kondadeniya and update Somey aiya. "But, is this fuss all necessary?" asked Bandare, rubbing his potbelly. "Comrade Nimal won't crack: he is the strongest of us all," he said. Sarojini akka, who knew about her man's comings and goings, listened intently but didn't say a word. Trepidation was written all over her small, clock-like face. Sunil grunted, hawked and spat into the yard. "We can't take chances," he said. "Just yesterday, I would have sworn Nimal aiya wouldn't ever crack. Just yesterday, I would have also sworn that Nimal aiya could never be caught – at least not like a small kitten taken out of its box." We were all trying to follow Sunil's drift.

"I have a feeling that Nimal turned the side of his sarong."

"Sarong? Turn the side? That means?"

"I think he staged that arrest. I think he cut a deal."

"Sunil aiya!" I blurted.

"Comrade! What are you saying?"

Sunil was unmoved. He looked at us piercingly. "Just a hunch, brothers. This was all too unlikely," he said. "I know that Nimal quite well. I think I know him well enough. The match is getting harder. We are losing too many wickets. I just think that that Nimal cut a deal to bail out. But.." he paused and sighed. "But, I hope I am wrong. I only hope the

unlikely just happened.” We were all silent. Anxiety was sinking deep into me. “However, when all is said and done,” Sunil aiya said, “it is best to err on the safe side. Comrades – let’s relocate. Let’s back down to safety.” Bandare aiya and Saro akka exchanged quick looks. “What about the gun?”

Sunil aiya got me to go along with him. We ‘doubled’ on his bicycle, as he peddled casually towards Kondadeniya, on the Katugastota side. Saro akka insisted that she should stay back at home, and that Bandare aiya should change places. The risk was too great for akka to stay back alone. That was Sunil aiya’s assessment, and Saro akka accepted that without protest. The automatic would be wrapped in three rounds of polythene and buried in a place commonly agreed on by all three. Aiya and akka were to leave for akka’s parents’ village and watch from there how events would mature. Sunil aiya was smiling at the known faces, shouting greetings or giving a ring on the bell. In between, he spoke anxious words. From what he pattered out, it was clear as day that he believed Nimal to have – as he said – flipped the side of the sarong.

We passed Hamangoda and passed the Tekkawatte road. Suddenly, Sunil aiya made a disapproving grunt. “Maley,” he murmured adding a softness to that articulation of ‘little brother’, “Maley, we were wrong to have come on the main road. We should have cycled through the village. Let’s cut off here,” and he took a turn to the left from near the famous Hamangoda bo tree, and turned into the road that went through the village. This was a circuitous route to where we were heading, but Sunil aiya had made up his mind. “Hereafter, we must keep off main roads when we can. Remind me if I forget,” he said. “And also remind me not to go together with you again – hereafter, we must all move alone.” We cycled along. At this evening hour it was all lonely paddy field and people in singles or small groups busying about. He turned into Kondadeniya road – a small, neglected track, really – and we got off the bike and walked the small incline. Then, as the road went into a smooth down,

again, I mounted after Sunil aiya. “Maley, you have become heavier – how come you have put on a few?” he asked in a jovial tone. The bicycle freewheeled down the slope. “Are you tired, then? Shall I get off?” I asked, not without concern. Sunil aiya smirked and steered on.

We had to wait for the good part of an hour for Somey aiya to come home. The akka there made for us some tea and we sat on the small open veranda which opened into a front yard the size of a toddler’s palm. This akka I didn’t know at all, but Sunil aiya seemed to be on good terms with her. She wore a gown made of cheettha-clothing which wasn’t very uncommon among the villagers, and had a reddha draped around her body, over the gown. She divided her time between us and the cooking to which she kept returning from time to time. The children were not in sight, but we heard their muffled voices from inside. Probably, they were studying. Earlier, I was introduced to her by Sunil aiya as a ‘friend of the party’ and her smile broadened. Two dimples broke out on either side of her mouth.

When Somey aiya came, our presence immediately spelled for him something uncanny afoot. An uncharted visit by unexpected visitors. Away from the others, in a suitable corner of that yard of a child’s palm, Sunil aiya laid the cards in the open in the most casual voice that was assumable. Nimal’s arrest. The urgent need to relocate. To strategically retreat. Somey aiya looked crestfallen. He went towards the small table on the side of the veranda and left on it the little bag he carried. At the same moment, akka came to the veranda.

“Why don’t we prepare some tea for these mallis,” he said looking from akka to us, and from us back to her. “Already we had!” Sunil aiya stepped up. “Akka gave us tea the first thing after we came.” Suddenly, Somey aiya seemed to have nothing suitable to say. The tea already having been served certainly didn’t help matters. For a moment, there was awkwardness between us.

“Aiye,” Sunil aiya spoke decisively. “Let’s talk this out while also including akka in this discussion. We need all heads together,” he said. Somey aiya looked from Sunil aiya to

akka, and back at him. I slowly moved back on to the veranda and leant against the short parapet wall. Sunil aiya sat on the rickety chair on which I had earlier been seated. Somey aiya sat on its counterpart. His wife took off the reddha she had been using as a wrap-around, neatly folded it into four, and hung it on the back of her husband's chair.

Sunil aiya explained in a few words what akka had to know: "Akke, as you know we have been working for the party all this time even though the party is banned. Also, some of this violence caused by the Deshapremi boys has been easily pinned on us. That is how propaganda works even though it puts all of us in grave danger. Now, there is reason to believe that our identities are about to get revealed. We can't know this for sure, but it is possible that it will happen. One of our main comrades has just been caught by the police. It's now all up to that comrade what he must do – he can keep quiet and die. Or, else, he can give up all – and still die." There was a pause for emphasis. The murmur of children's voices continued in the faraway background.

"Change location sounds strategic," Somey aiya repeated slowly. But, from the way his chin dropped and brows narrowed I knew that he was staring at an abyss. Where to and how? Again, he looked around in his characteristic way. "Alright, comrades," he said. "We will do something. Let's take the decision and split. It is also getting dark. Better not be out about at night." The decision was taken and agreed on. We would change locations and await contact from Sunil aiya. Sunil aiya will go back along the chain of coordinates and seek orders from up when everything was safe. It was now beginning to get dark, but we still didn't move. Something kept us loitering at Somey aiya's. The idea that we should get to some safe point before it was dark – the very dark that had so far been our safety rug, our coat of invisibility – broke my nerves. Wasn't it a sign that the game had turned by half a circle? We hung around the small veranda, not saying much; more as if in our subconscious we knew that the three of us wouldn't possibly ever meet again.

It felt like a very long time. Then, akka broke the party: “You two mallis should go now. Go to safety as soon as possible.” Somey aiya nodded, first at us and then at his wife. Sunil aiya stood up and motioned me to follow him. “Then, we will go and come again?” he casually took the couple’s leave. With a nod to Somey aiya and akka, I followed Sunil aiya’s lead. He pushed his cycle down the little gravel path leading away from the comrade’s house. At the small gate I turned back once more and saw the couple watching us under the halo of a single bulb that hung from the roof. As I turned back, Somey aiya raised his right hand and gave me a wave.

I had to leave my home behind. Mother couldn’t obviously go anywhere and nor could the children who were schooling down the road. I had to fall back and watch from some distance, even if it meant that Nimal or some other traitor led the Police or one of those half-caste groups right down the village road to our doorstep. I told mother what had come to pass. Everything Sunil aiya told Somey aiya and that akka, in that way and in those words: mother listened to me in the silence of the house. “Amme, I must go into hiding and no matter what happens amma must not come looking for me.” My heart was pounding so hard and my voice was cracking up no matter how hard I tried to keep it together. Whether one resulted in the other I didn’t know. “It might be a few days, it might be a few months,” I said. “But, if anyone comes inquiring after me, amma must tell them that I had gone away. Left without notice. I will leave a letter. Amma must show it to anyone who comes asking for me.” Her lips were trembling in the lowered flicker of the half lamp. A woman who had lost a husband to revolution; who had rebuilt her life not once, but twice.

With mother I left a note as if written to her. A note telling her that I am leaving to join the struggle that will define our generation. That she must not seek for me or make inquiries on my whereabouts. In the letter I requested her to let go of all hopes she has for me

and to give me her blessing for wherever I am heading. If, indeed, Nimal had turned sides and had sold me for my worth, none of this letter writing would help my poor mother. Nimal can write his own full book about my comings and goings, and quote from line to line each poster I had helped to put up. He could concoct anything – simply anything he so wished – and I would have to pay. In my absence, my mother and the children would have to pay. They could slice the whole family into shreds, throw them all in and set up our little home in flames. No one would see it. No one would hear the roof burn.

Through the forest behind us, there were several tracks made by us who regularly ventured into the thickets for all kinds of things. To fetch firewood, to collect herbs and jungle fruit, to let the cows idle or graze. When you pressed further on, you came on a rock area from which another track went in the direction of Bandare aiya's part of the behind-hill. This was almost like a T-junction of jungle tracks. The third track went down in a spiraling slope for a bit and again broke into two – one of which disappeared into the boundary forests of Kulugammana village. You crossed the thicket, waded through the small creek and the paddy lands of that friendly neighbour begin to appear. I was going to wait it out at Kulugammana – not too far from home, but far and remote enough. The Halloluwa-Barigama road curved past the village, and a small single door bus – which we called the 'half loaf' – ran along these curves.

Kulugammana was thought to be a 'freed zone', as earlier the enemy had combed all the villages on that part starting from the other side of the hills. Several Kulugammana boys were also taken in, and a few were later sent home. I was going to put up at an old school friend's, who was also very helpful to me in the days before I got my timber job. He was yet to marry, and his mother had always been kind. His father was a pompous, self-absorbed kind, but he worked in a factory away from home as an operator. His sister had just finished schooling and was hopeful to start work at a newly opened garment factory a few miles away.

The house was set back from the road, and at its ridge ran a small abandoned paddy field (which was then being used for garden produce) across which the forest set in.

Every three days, I visited agreed on meeting places hoping for a message or a meeting from Sunil aiya. We had agreed on two places, and on that meeting we would determine the next rendezvous. He had a similar agreement with Bandare and Somey aiyas. Ordinarily, only Sunil aiya was supposed to know at a given moment where all four of us were – but, we overlooked that dramatic detail and made our general whereabouts known to all. This was suddenly no longer a matter of being comrades following the orders that came from an unseen leadership to whom we were bound by conviction. It was now, primarily, a brotherhood thing – a survival game for which a bond that went beyond the party needs was necessary.

This went on for six or seven days. Nothing happened to stir our anxiety. In fact, life seemed to have lulled a bit in terms of action and adventure. Sunil aiya made contact with the party and it was confirmed that comrade Senanayake had been taken in at the Polgolla bridge. Even if that comrade was to return, we were to report back to base; we were not to have contacts with him. Nothing was conclusively known of the campus comrade. He was last known to leave Kandy for Matale, but he hadn't reached his destination. Nimal aiya's status was also not known. The party promised to give us a clear briefing on Nimal's position very soon. We were to stay vigilant and ready. The party had promised to send to us a comrade from outside – a much loved, well respected big fish in the hierarchy – to restructure and reorganize the entire stretch from Gannoruwa to Katugastota on our side. Where necessary, help from Dodanwala would be taken. Finally, positive and uplifting news – perhaps, the best news for a while.

I went home late the same night. It was past eleven, and I knocked myself in from the back door. Amma was both relieved and grateful to see me. I informed her that the danger

was not over – that it would never be over until the government came to its senses – and that being away was more of a relief for me than actually being seen around the house. A bed not slept in for weeks and months, the evidence of neighbours who wouldn't have seen the familiar sight of me idling in the front porch, and even the little ones' word that I hadn't been home for a long time would carry some weight – any kind of weight – or so I hoped. "Finally, I became a burden for you, didn't I amma?" I asked her. She sighed and only smiled. "You had to do what you thought was right," she said. "Same as that other good-hearted but irrational man," she added. In her heart she resented the path I had taken. But, now there was only one way this could go. "Amme, if things go worse from here, I am going to retreat – possibly to the east or a part where I cannot be easily discovered. Amma must be strong and not go looking for me. This situation can only get tighter." This would prepare her and myself – both of us – for anything. A prolonged separation, or a permanent cutting off. That night I spent at home and we sat talking and talking never wanting it to end. Finally, embracing her a million times, I stepped out of the back door at a quarter past four.

Three days later, Somey aiya was arrested at his work place. He had not moved from his house even by then. His children were in school; his family needed his depot job. On the day after, myself and Sunil aiya trekked into the jungle to recover our automatic from where it was hidden. Behind a bush we lay hidden for a good three quarters of an hour to make sure that we were alone; that the surroundings were clear. Then, we reached the hiding place where we had marked with a rock the exact spot. The earth had been freshly turned. Our weapon was gone. A cold sweat began to break down my back. We quickly left the site and walked briskly for a good half a mile before we even stopped for a word. The alarm in Sunil aiya's eyes poured out like bright light. "Maley," he said, "Maley, I don't know what to say!" Neither did I. Two days later, I had already decamped and, like a shot, was on my way to hiding underground. I had got into an early morning bus at Katugastota and was seated

looking out of the window as we went down the Galagedara pass, driven by a reckless driver pressing on to Kurunegala.

After a day's long journey, on the second night, I arrived in Kurunegala, 40 kilometers away from Kandy town. From there, I found my way to a small time coconut estate in Melsiripura. The watcher here was an in law on my kudappacchi's side. To him, I had to confess the truth: that I had life threats from the JVP, and I was fleeing home rather than take the heat of their kangaroo court. Maybe, he believed me, maybe he didn't. But, he didn't ask me any questions, he let me stay the night. Most probably, he knew from whom I was fleeing.

After a confused night spent almost all awake, early the next morning I prepared to leave before sunrise. Watcher aiya cleared his throat. Where am I now going? Do I have any plans? I would be looking for some work where I can lay low for a while. "Such work is hard to find, malaya," he said, looking far away. "Especially in these times, suspicion is easily cast. Anyone from outside is taken away." But, these are chances I had to take. I would go into the colonies, where work was available during harvesting season, bide my time there and assess the situation for my next move. "Malaya must stay here a day or two. The owner of this estate, Harry mahattaya, is a good UNP man. Very popular among the villagers and town-folk alike. Nothing to fear here. No movement comes meddling here." Watcher aiya spoke determinedly. Was he inferring that no army or police came in here, the estate of a pro-governmental man?

For five days I shared Watcher aiya's hut and stayed in during day time. It was a good twelve to fifteen acres of coconut with one side flourishing with mixed-crop trenches. Watcher aiya said that he would look up a mudhalali who might have work for me. The harvesting season brought in hands looking for work. I told him that he didn't have to step in;

he could just find me a contact. I didn't want too many people involved in this now. Kurunegala was one of the worst affected districts from the troubles. Terrible things – things far worse than what we ever had to put up with – had already taken place. Surveillance was strong. Spies were worse. “To them it doesn't matter whether you are red or green, malayo,” Watcher aiya said. “You are young, a man, and an outsider. That is more than enough,” he muttered slowly. I was now at the brink of telling this well-meaning man – not even a proper relative, just my late step-father's distant nephew – the truth and coming clean. Then again, the less he knew the better it was for all.

On the sixth day, Watcher aiya found a way to send me in a lorry heading for Maho. The lorry owner was a mudhalali for whom Watcher aiya had worked many years before: the man who had given him work when he first arrived here without a roof or a floor; the very man who had later recommended Watcher aiya to do the security and overseeing work at the estate where he was now. The lorry was on its way back home and aiya entrusted me to the driver and the three fellows returning with him. I was introduced as a ‘brother’ – a malli – who had come looking for work. “Work?” the driver looked at me from head to toe and smirked. “Yako, what work can he do? Stand for the scarecrow in the paddy fields?” and he laughed. Not that his sense of humour was funny, but given his superior position – and given our desperate score – all of us laughed along. Small body, thin belly. In a way, it was good – it meant that I didn't stand out.

Parting from Watcher aiya, I finally croaked to him what I couldn't tell him for all those five days: for him – if it was in some way possible – to inquire after mother and the children. Not to do it in an obvious way: but, if he could, just to tell them that I was safe without revealing much. That they must wait for me to return some day. Watcher aiya sighed and pressed my shoulder. I got in the back and sat with the helpers who were sprawled there

with the gunny sacks of this and that they were taking with them. The lorry rocked and swayed on its way. I knew that at some point – somewhere, any minute, in some lousy way – I was going to get snapped. It was inevitable. It had to happen. But, until it happened, I had to live a different life: a life that wasn't me, and a life where I should be gradually erased ounce by ounce.

3

It was after a year and a half they managed to take me in. I first worked at Maho in the fields during the harvest, and then after managed to get work as a wage worker. There were quite a few of us from outside, and I was one of the younger lot. I pretended to be from the east, who had wanted to come inland looking for work. There was trouble in the eastern districts with the Tigers and the Indian army, and Sinhala villages often came in between the titans. There was a lot of sympathy for those villagers who were settled in the east through government schemes in the '50s and '60s. The Tigers targeted them as colonized settlements in their traditional homeland (a misconception, in my book,) and the Indian army harassed them out of contempt for being Sinhalese. The boys in those villages either did small-time farming or trade, joined the military, or migrated inland (like me) in search of jobs.

Alternately, I worked in the shop bazaar, Watcher aiya's mudhalali benefactor's storeroom and in his lorry. When field work was available I took that up. All this was quite all right, except I had no address or a home town to give. Even this was not an issue as almost none of us had identity cards. These were issues for over-thinking; I was more than prepared to take it day by day. Maho had been deeply affected by the troubles, and many homes had lost their children. In one way or the other, the people had felt the thunder of gunfire. Quite a few village bigwigs, including old school Marxist leaders from non-JVP left groups had been

shot and killed by the party. Gamini (KB) and Amarasinghe were two such members who were shot between April and August in '89. This was just before I came there. The combing of the Maho villages that resulted had been dreadful for the hometown men. In the same way, a couple of government politicians had been removed.

I was sharing a quiet cigarette at the end of another November day with my fellow crew when the capture and death of Wijeweera came on the news. For a moment there was an awkward silence among the three or four gathered there. Wijeweera had been masquerading as a planter in the hill country, a mere fifteen miles from Kandy. When he had been taken to a safe-house to recover some documents another leader who had been taken along with him had pulled from somewhere a hidden weapon and started shooting. The Police had fired back and both Wijeweera and this other leader (later publicized by the media as H.B. Herath, alias Michael) had been killed. Their bodies had been immediately cremated under the provisions of the emergency laws. Disbelief is what was written on the faces of all the fellows. No one seemed to want to comment, but their brows were arched and their smiles gave way to strange smirks. When the death was being described, one fellow – an older, robust type – hawked and spat on to the side. Whether his contempt was for Wijeweera or for the government cannot be known.

In the next three months, the whole movement was wiped out. With Wijeweera and his deputy Gamanayake gone, people expected the ruthlessness to decrease. On the contrary, the government began hunting down and decimating anything and everything that even had a morsel to do with the JVP. People still believed that the party would come back after regrouping. This talk was heard in tea shops and in the bazaar. The military leader of the Deshapremis, Keerthi Wijayabahu, was still active and was thought to be uniting the dispersed forces. Then, in late December or early January, Keerthi Wijayabahu's death was

also announced. The name that shook the whole country and brought it to a standstill had been captured and killed in a Colombo torture camp.

To keep up appearances, every three months or so, I asked for leave to visit my home village ‘in the east’. On one such occasion I actually visited mother at night. Things hadn’t changed except she was a bit worn out. Both Sunil and Bandare aiyas had come looking for me, but she had told them that I had left the village looking for a job. Sunil aiya would have understood what she implied, and had never come back to see her. There had been no police or searches of any kind, but mother had destroyed the letter I had given her. She had decided to go with her story: “son left the village looking for work at a factory he said he knew through a friend in Gampaha. The village life doesn’t suit him, and the troubles here make him feel desperate.” Gampaha? Why Gampaha? That was a suburban town a good eighty kilometers towards Colombo. “Well, how can I say Colombo? Any idiot will know that you don’t have the head to go that far!” and she laughed. “Be safe, where you are! No need to take risks and come like this. Give this some more time to blow over. You can come later. I will manage here. The children are also now grown up.” It had only been six months. The children, where they slept, seemed more or less the same: too young for anything. Too helpless for the world.

Then, that September, the lorry was stopped at a check point. We had been to Ampara in the east, traded and loaded stock, and were returning home. By now, the security situation in the north and east was becoming a concern with the Tigers mounting heavy attacks on the Indian forces. The JVP had fizzled out. Whatever cadres or sympathizers that remained – from canvasser to the boutique owner who sold the JVP a rice packet – were behind bars with broken bones and slice-wounds. The lorry was taken off the road and the driver produced his license and documents. Routine questions were asked while the men clumsily went through the sacks we carried. They were more concerned about Tigers infiltrating from the east. They

desultorily but good-humouredly joked about the Tigers hitting back at the largest army in all Asia. Loyalty is sometimes an uncannily funny thing. It is here that one of our louts quite unnecessarily said that I was from a village close to Kantale, in Trincomalee.

The soldiers asked me a further question or two, but nothing seemed to be amiss. What was I doing so far from home? Who else was there at home? How did they fend for themselves? Did I go home often? Routine, still. Then, we were cleared and the lorry took off. But the boys knew that they had said something which – in some way – was unnecessary. They joked about it and put it behind them as we pressed on. A good seven or eight miles down, we were coming on a double-elbow bend where the road curved along a deep and round ‘S’. On one side was a hill, and on the other, a deep precipice. Even as we entered the bend and took the first turn we could see ahead of us and across the chasm a jeep and two military-style motorcycles; and beside them half a dozen, fully armed men. They didn’t even have to stop our lorry, for the lorry came to a standstill. Cocking their guns two men stood across the road while a third walked up to us bobbing a walkie-talkie. He looked at us all one after the other. They only wanted me.

4

When they took me in, they first questioned me about the East. Where was I from? When did I get to Maho? Who was my contact at Maho? I knew my story couldn’t go far, as I had no idea of the Kantale situation. They were questioning me to ascertain whether I had Tamil Tiger connections – that much was clear. They were not thinking of the JVP or my involvement there. The only luck I had was that violence had escalated in the north and east, and with the kind of networking they had, not much was immediately confirmable from the deep east. There were a lot of grey areas – from administration, de facto superiority, to access

to information. This would buy me a day or two – at most, a week – but, it had to fall through at some definite point.

I was a survivor without mother or father – both killed in a Tigers attack in a border village in 1985. I had since been living with aunts and uncles in Kantale, but the situation there wasn't enough for me to make a life. My schooling had been interrupted and I had dropped out in a junior grade. Joining the military was the only option, but I wasn't made for that kind of thing. My relatives were then becoming increasingly indifferent and hostile, so I decided to run away and come to the inlands looking for work. I worked for this mudhalali, who was reasonable, and I wanted to save and go back to the east when the Tiger troubles were over. No one believed me, but this is the story I stuck to. Perhaps, they interrogated the mudhalali and the fellows at the shop – and perhaps, there were some discrepancy in the responses they got – but, I guess the basics were consistent. They did everything they could do to me, but I held on to my story like life. One soldier who was there kept on insisting that the Sinhala I spoke was the wrong sort – that my speech and intonation were definitely not from that part of the east. Probably, he had failed a Linguistics degree and joined the army. That alone, however, wasn't enough for them to roast me – literally.

I was then transferred and kept under the suspicion of collaborating with the Tigers. This was a curious in between period – a period where the Tigers were not friends, but not exactly enemies either – and it wasn't exactly clear to anyone what being caught as a 'Tiger collaborator' should mean. It was a well-known secret that earlier the government had armed the Tigers through the back door. They were pumping the Tigers with light weapons, heavy weapons, trucks, mines and other technology for them to take on the Indian army and to push it back. Had I somehow been caught during that time – before the Indian troops left in March '90 – maybe I would've had a better chance of being released. But the climate had changed and the troops knew the Tigers wouldn't settle for negotiation. They were now armed to the

teeth and would hit back at the army with their own weapons. Before I was finally remanded under a carefully drafted false charge-sheet as a ‘suspected collaborator’, they managed to break my leg which, over the first weeks in the remand prison healed the wrong way.

On a rainy day some time in ’94, I came out. Stripped of my assumed identity and held under various charges, I had been on the rack for three years. I was determined not to give anything away: not to crack and spill where I was from, and who I was. So, I had to serve my term. One after another, they brought various half-dead souls in front of me. One after the other, they brought ex-party men – turncoats, traitors and prostitutes who had betrayed the party’s soul – and let them scan me. My identity wasn’t disclosed. They did everything they could to break me. They broke me and brought me to the brink of death. I knew that if I survived, sooner or later they would have to turn me loose. And if I started to vomit now – after this long, after such denial – it would be the end for me, and for so many more. So, I stomached it all. When I finally walked out free, the broken bone of my right foot miraculously felt alright. There was very little I could do with my left arm, but it didn’t bother me anymore.

It is a funny feeling, walking out of a fortress that had held me for the past two years into the main road that burst with motor horns and shuffling people: a rhythm and chaos that had no connection with me. After four years, it was not at first clear as to where I must start from. I had on me nothing but a paper bag in which I had a spare shirt and sarong folded into eight. That, and five hundred rupees I had collected while I was in. Well, then, let’s start with a smoke and a tea-shop meal. I had to quit smoking when I was taken in to the party. But, all that was just rubbish after what I had been through.

The bus was now biding its time at the halting place near the Katugastota film hall. I was seated at the back, looking out of the window. Men and women walked about oblivious to the mid-day heat. It was the time schools closed, and in small groups boys from the nearby school were racing out to meet the buses and vans. As the bus edged out onto the road, I was trying to pick out what had changed. The conductor was hanging at the door, shouting the route ahead to catch the attention of a potential passenger: a needless exercise, really, as everyone in the village knew which route the Halloluwa bus took. But, it was a rap that defined the vocation of bus conductor. The familiar walls and lamp posts. Grass sprouting out of neglected bends. Even the revving sound of the engine as it dropped a gear going up an incline felt too familiar. Perhaps nothing had really changed.

Passing Kondadeniya and Thekkawatte, we came to the halt across the famous bo tree. Like a flash my mind went back to that day Sunil aiya huffed and puffed, with me balancing on the bar, as we peddled in search of Somey aiya. For the first time in a long while, a dead weight sunk into my depths. I had now returned to that frame where thoughts of these past ghosts, dust and debris were inescapable. While you were away, you only had to worry about that moment – of surviving that hour, that minute, that second. You closed down keeping yourself intact, turning a rough shell to everything else. In custody, they called me many things – gal ibba (hard-shelled tortoise), katta (thick-shelled one), pygmiya (the pygmy). But, it all meant the same thing. I was closed, shuttered and turned in.

As the bus became gradually empty, I felt more visible. Probably I had changed without my realizing it, as I could feel people eyeing me. Perhaps I looked familiar but not familiar enough. A thick moustache and a deep tan were new additions. My body had grown and my arms had toned. The fact that I dragged my leg when I walked would only be seen when I stood up to get off the bus. I could pick out the faces without a second glance. I only

hoped that none of them held a grouse over me. My poor village was anyway too loyal to us: they took in good faith whatever inconvenience we caused. I didn't expect anyone to be in any way sympathetic now, when we had crashed on our heads.

The conductor took from me a twenty and carefully handed me back the change. He smiled furtively – that in between smile one smiles to one self as much as to the other. When my stop appeared around the bend, I got up and called out, "Getting off up front!" and edged towards the door. For a renegade coming home – a soldier of a lost generation creeping back home in all his damnation – I sounded pretty confident. From here, I had to climb a hill, and pass down an incline. This was when I realized how badly they had done in my leg. It is as if those fucking morons knew that one day I would have to come back home.

No – only the government seemed to have changed. A familiar face or two smiled at me from the cover of their small verandas. "Ah, lamaya!" called out an elder after a long struggle to pull out the old me from underneath my mask, "Lamaya, when did you come back home?" Not much annoyance or irritation. Sounds *normal*. After the second climb, at the flat summit from where the village spread like a square rug, I could pick out our house – small, wasted, worn down by trouble, and the same. When I walked up to it, I realized that the door was closed. It was an unusual hour and mother would not be back until evening from wherever she worked. I walked into the veranda and peeped around the edge in the direction of my old sleeping place on the long corridor. No – nothing had changed. I sat down and waited. A sound from the front of the house brought me back to the veranda. First it was a startled gasp at finding a man coming from around the house; and then, when disbelief took over and left, recognition and joy shot out of her.

"Loku aiya!" she cried, like she always did, calling me 'big brother'. Her fuller, rounder face and her school uniform casting on her a grace I had forgotten. Surely, she has grown taller and fuller – even womanlier. "What time did aiya come?" she asked, stepping

towards me, without a second thought holding on to my arm. “Amma won’t come till later – she’s gone to work on the other side,” she smiled. “Wait! Let me open the door. Key is in my pocket,” she pulled out the battered-looking key I knew so well and dangled it in front of me as if it was some trick. The old, rusty front door key! I had not thought of that key for so long. “Where’s malli?” I asked after our brother, trying to hold my feelings in place. “Gone to Halloluwa, after school. He will come. Has aiya had anything to eat? Any lunch?” We went in. My beautiful two-roomed, dingy-cornered, smoky-kitchened house. It was good to be back.

At home, it was a happy reunion. A wordless exchange of a torrent of complex feelings. They were mostly embraces and kisses. When mother came, the flurry began anew. Holding on to me, she cried: all she had been bearing for three years just tore open in a volcano of relief. As mother cried, my brother – now fourteen or fifteen – burst into tears, as well. I hugged the little one close and stroked his crew-cut head. Only my sister watched this spectacle with a broad and beaming smile. Perhaps that was the first streak of happiness in that house for a very long time. Mother immediately went in and started rummaging inside the old cupboard for some spare cash she had set aside. She was going back to Halloluwa to see whether she could get some good fish for our evening meal. Brother volunteered to go instead, saying mother was tired already. “*You?* Who does nothing in this house?” mother snapped in mock irritation. “Do you even know how to choose fish?” and everybody laughed. “Of course I can – Just give me the money and watch me!”

But, my village – was it safe for me? What was being thought of me here, about my absence? My being caught and jailed? How did the people really know? By now, the arrests had stopped and life had returned to some kind of normalcy. At least, on the surface things were calm and quiet. The troubles were being forgotten. I didn’t want to get in the way of this

process every time I walked through a street with my leg. Mother's feeling was that things were taking a turn. The UNP President Premadasa – the ruthless tyrant who buried our comrades like minced dog – had been killed in a Tiger bomb blast in May, the previous year. The village had celebrated the news by lighting crackers and by preparing festive food. Mother felt that the tide was turning. She felt that the UNP would surely be voted out when the elections came later in the year. Madam Sirima's daughter had returned from exile and had already won Colombo in the local election. She would next contest for Prime Minister, and then for President. The Freedom Party diehards in our areas, after life in the bushes for all this time, were now walking more in the open, saluting all with smiles newly cobwebbed and brushed. These were all good signs, mother surmised; good signs of better times to come.

A Facebook note by [name withheld] after having watched Visakesa Chandrasekaram's film *Paangshu* (Earth): a film which depicts the story of a mother in search of justice for her son who was disappeared during the 1987-90 emergency.

Today, for the second time, I watched *Paangshu*. It is a film I recommend everyone to watch, for it invites us to review with detachment something that cuts too close to the heart: the loss of a son and your need to win justice for his disappearance. But, this is the story of almost 200,000 men and women in our country since the 1980s. According to Amnesty, over 100,000 of these have been enforced disappearances. Poor mothers and fathers – people like Baba Nona in the film – are still searching for their beloved along the mazes of a feudal quasi-democratic system and its highly untrustworthy law courts. Isn't it sad?

Of course, I have a personal interest in the 1988 troubles. After my father was killed by “unknown gunmen” I remember the struggle my mother had to burden on to keep our family together. Being a simple school teacher, the economic weight was too much for her; but, compared to countless others, we were moderately well off. For a time, mother also went along that misty maze in search of justice. Commissions were appointed, hope was renewed. But, that was that. The labyrinth went on and on. From time to time – unnoticed by us – its walls quickly opened and shut like trapdoors. The killers went through those openings, and suddenly there were none. Only a long line of traumatized and agonized women running up and down corridors were left.

Paangshu is powerful in capturing that dilemma of a generation into a single frame. Do not be emotional, the film maker seems to say. Take a step back, and look beyond the personal: look at the system that breeds violence and uses that violence to rule a people. My father was taken to establish control over the society. To this day I do not know what my father's political convictions were. Nor do I think those who killed him knew, understood, or

cared. For them, my father was another body necessary to send a message across society to behave and heed their call. *Paangshu* gives me reassurance of that fact.

Suddenly, I feel that I can breathe easy.

A Glossary of Idiomatic and Sinhalese Terms in *Water under the Bridge*

Aiya: (අයියා) Literally, elder brother. A respectful form of address to a familiar older male or older male peer.

Akka: (අක්කා) Literally, elder sister. A respectful form of address to a familiar older female or older female peer.

Amma: (අම්මා) Mother.

Deshapremis: (දේශප්‍රේමී එක) Literally, the patriots. An idiomatic reference to the rebel military wing during the emergency.

Dry zone: The ecological zone in Sri Lanka widespread in the northern, eastern and south-eastern regions with an annual rain fall of 1200-1900 mm.

Gam-udhaa: (ගම් උදා) A housing project for the poor initiated by Ranasinghe Premadasa – Prime Minister, 1978-1989, and President, 1989-1993 – in the 1980s and early-1990s.

Grama niladhari: (ග්‍රාම නිලධාරී) State-appointed officer to coordinate between village affairs and the state.

Identity / ID cards: The state-issue card verifying a person's identity.

Kasippu: (කසිප්පු) Illicit alcoholic brew. Also called moonshine or hooch.

Keerthi Wijayabahu: Keerthi and Wijayabahu, historically, are the names of two Sinhalese kings. Merged together, they often appeared on communications issued by the rebel military wing. It is also considered the nom de guerre of the rebel military command, Saman Piyasiri Fernando. Fernando is believed to have been captured and killed by the military in December 1989.

Kudappachchi: (කුඩාප්පච්චි) Literally, lesser father. In kinship terminology, younger paternal uncle. Idiomatically used to refer to one's stepfather.

Lake House Newspapers: Newspapers published by the state-owned Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited. Idiomatically, a reference to pro-government newspapers.

Lamaya: (ලමයා) Child.

Leyland buses: A brand of public transport buses prevalent in the 1980s with chassis imported from the Ashok Leyland company in India.

Liyana Mahattaya: (ලියන මහත්තයා) Literally, ‘he who keeps records’. Idiomatically, a clerk or an executive ledger-keeper.

Loku-aiya: (ලොකු අයියා) Literally, elder/eldest brother. Idiomatically, it may be used as an address of respect or as one that suggests superiority or authority.

Mahatthaya: (මහත්තයා) Literally, gentleman. Respectful term in addressing a male of high status or superior position.

Mawatha: (මාවත) Literally, road. A mawatha is typically narrower than a *veediya* (a street) but is broad enough for vehicles to travel on.

Maley: (මලේ) An affectionate derivation of *malli*, literally meaning younger brother. A familiar reference to a younger male or younger peer.

Mudhalali: (මුදලාලි) A businessman or a merchant.

Nona: (නෝනා) Literally, lady. Respectful term in addressing a female of high status or of superior designation.

Paangshu: (පාංශු) soil earth.

Sahodaraya: (සහෝදරයා) Literally, brother. In Sri Lanka’s Sinhalese-speaking Left, the word is used to signify a “comrade”.

Sama Samajayist: A member of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, the Trotskyite party in Sri Lanka which began in 1935.

Sirima's Man: Idiomatically, a staunch supporter of Sirima Bandaranaike (Prime Minister 1960-65, 1970-77, 1994-2000) and, by extension, her party the SLFP.

Sudu: (සුදු) (adj.) White or fair.

Thaacci: (තාච්චි) A type of small metal utensil used to carry sand, cement etc. in work sites and factories.

The Boys: Idiomatically, the rebels.

T-junction: A junction where two roads connect in the shape of a T.

Tyre-pyre: Remains of burnt bodies using petrol and discarded tyres: a common way in which the military disposed killed men during the emergency.

Watte: (වත්ත) A big plot of land or an estate.

Works Cited

- Adelman, Rebecca. "Fictive intimacies of detention: affect, imagination, and anger in art from Guantanamo Bay." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2018, pp. 81-104.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press, 1998.
- . *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Zone Books, 1999.
- . *State of Exception*. University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Alles, AC. *The JVP: 1969-1989*. Lake House Investments, 1990.
- Amnesty International. *Sri Lanka: Extra Judicial Executions: 'Disappearances', and Torture, 1987 to 1990*. Amnesty International, 1993.
- . *Sri Lanka: When will Justice Be Done?*. Amnesty International, 1994.
- . *Twenty Years of Make-Believe: Sri Lanka's Commissions of Inquiry*. Amnesty International, 2009.
- Arce, Luz. *The Inferno: A Story of Terror and Survival in Chile*. Translated by Stacey Alba Skar. University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.
- Bennett, Owen. "The Patriotic Struggle of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna: An Appraisal." Unpublished Dissertation. RMIT University, 2013.
- Bitar, Sergio. *Prisoner of Pinochet: My Year in a Chilean Concentration Camp*. Translated by Erin Goodman. University of Wisconsin Press, 2017.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Writing of the Disaster*. University of Nebraska Press, 1986.
- Bush, Kenneth D. *The Intra-Group Dimensions of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Caruth, Cathy. "Unclaimed Experience." *Yale French Studies* 79, 1991, pp. 181-192.
- Champion, Stephen. *Sri Lanka: War Stories*. Hotshoe, 2008.

- Chandraprema, CA. *The JVP Insurrection 1987-1989*. Lake House Bookshop, 1991.
- . *Gota's War*. Independently Published, 2012.
- Delbo, Charlotte. *Auschwitz and After*. Translated by Rosette C. Lamont. Yale University Press, 1995.
- . *Days and Memory*. Marlboro Press, 2001.
- De Alwis, Malathi. "'Disappearance' and 'Displacement' in Sri Lanka." *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2009, pp. 378-391.
- De Silva, Premakumara et al. *Daya Pathirana*. Sanghinda Printers and Publishers, 2011.
- Douglas, Lawrence. *The Memory of Judgment*, Yale University Press, 2001.
- Ezrahi, Sidra DeKoven, "Representing Auschwitz." *History and Memory*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1995, pp. 121-154.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. Grove, 1967.
- Felman, Shoshanna. *The Juridical Unconscious*. Harvard University Press, 2002.
- . "The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah." *Testimonies: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, edited by Shoshanna Felman and Dori Laub. Routledge, 1992, pp. 204-283.
- Flightner, Ramona K. "Chilean testimonial literature: The collective suffering of a people". Thesis submitted to The University of Montana, 1999.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Pantheon, 1977.
- Friedlander, Saul. *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*. Indiana University Press, 1993.
- . "Trauma, Transference and 'Working Through'." *History and Memory*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1992, pp. 39-59.

- Ginnen Upan Seethala*. Directed by Anuruddha Jayasinghe, Cinepro Lanka International, 2018.
- Gregory, Derek. "Vanishing Points: Law, Violence, and Exception in the Global War Prison." *Terror and the Postcolonial*, edited by Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton. Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2010, pp. 55-98.
- Gregory, Steven, and Daniel Timmerman. "Rituals of the Modern State: The Case of Torture in Argentina". *Dialectical Anthropology* vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 63-71.
- Gross, Ariela. "The Constitution of History and Memory." *Companion to Law and the Humanities*, edited by Austin Sarat et al., Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 416-452.
- Gunaratna, Rohan. *Sri Lanka: A Lost Revolution? The Inside Story of the JVP*. Institute of Fundamental Studies, 1990.
- Gunaratne, HM. *Life Means Not to Kill*. Edited by John Holt. John Holt, 2008.
- Gunasekara, Prins. *A Lost Generation: Sri Lanka in Crisis: The Untold Story*. S. Godage and Bros., 1998.
- Gunathilake, Victor. *71-89 Mathakayan*. Independent Publication, 2009.
- Gunatilleke, Gehan. *Confronting the Complexity of Loss: Perspectives on Truth, Memory, and Justice in Sri Lanka*. Law and Society Trust, 2015.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 392-403.
- Hausner, Gideon. *Justice in Jerusalem*. Harper and Row, 1966.
- Hoole, Rajan. *The Arrogance of Power: Myths, Decadence, and Murder*. University Teachers for Human Rights - Jaffna, 2001.
- Horatious, Anura. *Gini-avi Saha Gini-keli*. Sarasavi Publishers, 2019.

Hughes, Dhana. *Violence, Torture and Memory in Sri Lanka: Life After Terror*. Routledge, 2013.

Hyndman, Patricia. *Sri Lanka. Serendipity under Siege*. Spokesman, 1988.

Janadaree, Anoma. *Punaropakathana*. Author Publication, 2013.

Jayasinghe, Ajith. *K Point*. Creative Content Consultants, 2018.

Jayatunge, Ruwan. “Eliyakandha Wadha Kandhawurin Penne Ape Samajaye Vikurthiyai – Rohitha Munasinghe.” *Lanka Web*, 25 September 2018, www.lankaweb.com/news/items/2018/09/25/%E0%B6%91%E0%B7%85%E0%B7%92%E0%B6%BA%E0%B6%9A%E0%B6%B1%E0%B7%8A%E0%B6%AF%E0%B7%80%E0%B6%AF%E0%B6%9A%E0%B6%B3%E0%B7%80%E0%B7%94%E0%B6%BB%E0%B6%BA%E0%B6%B1%E0%B7%94%E0%B7%83%E0%B6%B8%E0%B7%8F/

Journalists for democracy in Sri Lanka. www.jdslanka.org

Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka. “Swiss urged to refuse accreditation for alleged death squad member.” *Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka*, 3 February 2020, www.jdslanka.org/index.php/news-features/politics-a-current-affairs/926-swiss-urged-to-refuse-to-grant-accreditation-for-alleged-death-squad-member.

Karunatilaka, Shehan. *Chats with the Dead*. Random House India, 2020.

Keerawella, GB. “The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and the 1971 Uprising.” *Social Science Review* 2, pp. 1-55.

Kennedy, Rosanne. “Memory, history and the law. Testimony and collective memory in Holocaust and Stolen Generation trials.” *Memory and History: Understanding Memory as Source and Subject*, Edited by Joan Tumblety, Routledge, 2013, pp. 50-67.

- . "Mortgaged Futures: Trauma, Subjectivity, And the Legacies of Colonialism in Tsitsi Dangaremba's *The Book of Not*." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 40, no. 1&2, University of North Texas, 2008, pp. 86-107.
- Kurnaz, Murat. *Five Years of My Life: An Innocent Man in Guantanamo*. St. Martin's Press, 2008.
- Kurukulasuriya, Kularatne. *Embilipitiya Minee-maruwo*. Anura Horatias, 1994.
- Kurukulasuriya, Kularatne and Kanchana Madhavi. *Amavaka Sandha Yata*. Fast Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2014.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *History and Its Limits*. Cornell University Press, 2009.
- . *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*. Cornell University Press, 1994.
- . *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- Langer, Lawrence L. *Holocaust Testimonials: The Ruins of Memory*. Yale University Press, 1991.
- Levi, Neil and Michael Rothberg, editors. *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*. Edinburgh University Press, 2003.
- Levi, Primo. *If This Is a Man / Truce*. Abacus, 2019.
- Liyanage, Pulsara. *Holding Out*. Stamford Lake (Pvt) Ltd., 2017.
- Marchak, M. Patricia, and William Marchak. *God's Assassins: State Terrorism in Argentina in the 1970s*. McGill-Queen's UP, 1999.
- Moore, Mick. "Thoroughly Modern Revolutionaries: The JVP in Sri Lanka." *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 593-642.
- Munasinghe, Rohitha. *Eliyakandha Wadha Kandhawura*. S. Godage and Bros., 2000.
- . *Ja. Vi. Pe. Sangawunu Ithihasayen Bindhak – I*. Stamford Lake Publishers, 2005.
- . *Ja. Vi. Pe. Sangawunu Ithihasayen Bindhak – II*. Fast Printery, 2015.
- . *Raaga Sutra*. Fast Publishing, N/A.

- . *Rangala Preme*. Sarasavi Publishers, 2002.
- . *Upanayaka Upatissa Gamanayake*. Nugegoda: Sarasavi Publishers, 2016.
- Novick, Peter. *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*, Bloomsbury, 2001.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *Anil's Ghost*. McClelland and Stewart, 2000.
- Paangshu*. Directed by Visakesa Chandrasekaram, Havelock Arts Studios and TVT, 2018.
- Palutava: How to Deal with Pain*. Directed by Nandana Weeraratne, Cell Productions, 2013.
- Partnoy, Alicia. *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival*. Cleis, 1998.
- Peiris, Ranjith. *Living Gods*. Kindle Ed., Ranjith Peiris, 2019.
- Perera, Sasanka. "Beyond the Margins of a Failed Insurrection: The experiences of Women in Post-Terror Southern Sri Lanka." *Edinburgh Papers in South Asian Studies*, Number 11, 1998, pp. 2-21.
- . *Violence and the Burden of Memory: Remembrance and Erasure in Sinhala Consciousness*. Orient Blackswan, 2016.
- Perera, V. "Holding Out: Pulsara Liyanage's Memoir of a Privileged Political Prisoner." In *love with a whale*, slwakes.wordpress.com/2017/07/21/holding-out-pulsara-liyanages-memoir-of-a-privileged-political-prisoner, Accessed 2019-07-02.
- Philpott, Daniel. *Just and Unjust Peace: An Ethic of Political Reconciliation*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Piyadasa, L. Sri Lanka: *The Holocaust and After*. Marram Books, 1984.
- Rejali, Darius. *Torture and Democracy*, Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Rigney, Ann. "Portable Monuments: Literature, Cultural Memory, and the Case of Jeanie Deans." *Poetics Today*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2004, pp. 361-396.
- Rothberg, Michael. "Between Auschwitz and Algeria: Multidirectional Memory and the Counterpublic Witness." *Critical Inquiry* 33, 2006, pp. 158-184.

- . *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford University Press, 2009.
- . *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- Samarnayake, Gamini. "Patterns of political violence and responses of the government in Sri Lanka, 1971-1996." *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 11, no. 1. 1999, pp. 110-122.
- Sathkunanathan, Ambika. "Justice in Transition? Victims, Forgiveness and Truth-Seeking in Post-War Sri Lanka." *LST Review*, vol. 25, 2015.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain*. Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Schmitt, Carl. *Political Theology*. University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Shaw, Rosalind. "The Production of 'Forgiveness': God, Justice, and State Failure in Post-War Sierra Leone." *Mirrors of Justice: Law and Power in the Post-Cold War Era*, Edited by Kamari Clarke and Mark Goodall, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 208-226.
- Slahi, Mohamedou Ould. *Guantanamo Diary*. Back Bay Books, 2015.
- Slaughter, Joseph R. "Vanishing Points: When Narrative Is Not Simply There." *Journal of Human Rights*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2010, pp. 207-223.
- Stora, Benjamin. *La Gangrène et l'oubli: La Mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie*. La Découverte, 1991.
- Senaratne, Jagath. *Political Violence in Sri Lanka, 1977-1990*. VU University Press, 1997.
- Taussig, Michael. *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*. University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- Taylor, Diana. "Double Blind: The Torture Case." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 33, 2007, pp. 710-733.

- Tennakoon, Prasanna Sanjeewa. *Rohana Wijeweera*. Pahan Publications, 2011.
- Thomson-Senanayake, Jane. *A Sociological Exploration of Disappearances in Sri Lanka*. Asian Human Rights Commission, 2014.
- Timerman, Jacobo. *Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number*. Knopf, 1981.
- Traub, Barbara Fischman. *The Matruska Doll*. Putnam Publishing Group, 1979.
- Uthayakumaran, Luther. "Pain at midnight: Representation of trauma and justice in Sri Lankan civil war literature; and *Judgment*, a novel." Doctoral Thesis, University of New South Wales, 2014.
- Van Roekel, Eva. "Traumatic Home: Argentinian Victimhood and the Everyday Moral Comfort of Trauma". *Ethos* vol. 46, no. 4, pp. 537-556.
- Venugopal, Rajesh. "Sectarian Socialism: The Politics of Sri Lanka's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)." *Modern Asian Studies* vol. 44, no. 3, 2009, pp. 567-602.
- Watkins, Jonathan D. "The State, Conflict and the Individual: The Effect of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) Insurrections in Sri Lanka on the Mental Welfare of a Population." *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2005, pp. 216-229.
- White, Hayden. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.
- Wickremereetna, Dharman. *Ja.Vi.Pe Dheveni Kerella*. Independent Publication, 2016.
- Wieviorka, Annette. *The Era of the Witness*. Cornell Press, 2006.
- . "The Witness in History." *Poetics Today*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2006, pp. 385-397.
- Wijayalath, C. *Wijeweera Ghathanaye Abhi-rahasa*. Nawa Maga Printers, 1994.
- Wijesinghe, Sirimal. *Suriyakandhe Abhi Rahas Mala Minee*. Independent Publication, 1993.
- Young, J. "Between history and memory: the voice of the eyewitness." *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma*, edited by in A. Douglass and T. Volger, Routledge, 2003, pp. 275-283.

