

Cheran

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A letter to a Sinhalese Friend

It will not take long
for you
and your friends
to recover from the shock
of meeting me, an ordinary man,
from an uneven and distant land
where, you had heard,
we sow led-shot from guns
instead of seeds; a place
half full of two-storey houses,
half-full of terrorists.

As we sat side by side
on the steps leading down
to the milky stretch of water
covered in glinting fine threads,
shreds of the moon's curtain—
water that changed colour when its
muddy depths were stirred
and changed again with the shadows
of passing clouds—
my heart melted
when you sang a Sinhala song
in your sweet voice.

Once long ago—
I was a small boy then—
waiting at the Maho station
from the Batticaloa train,
I walked with my father for a while,
Some distance along the railway lines.

Midnight.

The quiet sound of a lullaby
murmured through the wind.
The shock of that gentle sound
intercepting the baby's cries
struck my heart that night
with sudden sadness.

Today too
I am enveloped by
a fine grief.

Did our different languages, after all,
put such distance between us,
that we could not smile together
savouring
the beauty of falling ponnochhi flowers
blown down by the tumultuous Aadi winds,
and those sudden moments of hesitation
when the long-tailed peacock
stopped and turned around in its stately walk?

I could not pluck for you
the single peacock feather you desired
nor, in the early hours of the night
accompany you, as you wished,
across the moonlit grass.

Your eyes could not hide
these small disappointments
nor can I
forget your gentle affection.
We went our ways without maiming Nature,
Leaving the flowers to blossom
and the grass to flourish

you to the south
and I to the north

At daybreak, when
The coolbreeze descends
from the huge trees
along the mountain ranges,
as you take your walk
brushing your teeth,
you will remember the days
when we worked together

excavating an ancient city at Maanthai
and your brief friendship.

Tell your people
here too, flowers bloom
grass grows
birds fly.

Carta a una amiga cingalesa

No tardaréis mucho
tú
y tus amigos
en reponeros del susto
de conocerme, un hombre ordinario,
de una tierra desconocida y distante
donde, habéis oído,
sembramos balas de fusil
en lugar de semillas; un lugar
ocupado a partes iguales por casitas de dos plantas,
y por terroristas.

Cuando nos sentábamos juntos
en la escalera que acaba
en la lechosa cinta de agua
cubierta de hebras brillantes,
jirones de la cortina lunar
(agua que cambió de color
cuando se agitó el turbio fondo
y que volvió a cambiar con la sombra
de las nubes viajeras)
se me estremeció el corazón
al oírte entonar una canción cingalesa
con tu voz tan dulce.

Una vez hace mucho tiempo—
yo era un niño todavía—
esperando en la estación de Maho
al tren de Batticaloa,
caminé un rato junto a mi padre,
por las vías.
Medianoche.
El quedo rumor de una nana
susurraba con el viento.
El sobresalto de ese sonido gentil
truncando los llantos del niño
impactó en mi corazón esa noche
con repentina tristeza.

Hoy también
estoy envuelto
en un fino dolor.

¿Es que nuestros distintos lenguajes, en fin,
habían creado tal distancia entre nosotros
que ya no podíamos sonreír juntos
saboreando
la belleza de las flores ponnochi al caer
derribadas por el agitado viento Aadi,
o los repentinos momentos de duda
del pavo real con su inmenso abanico
al detenerse y virar su pomposo paseo?

No pude arrancar para ti
la pluma de pavo real que anhelabas
ni, en la noche temprana
acompañarte, como deseabas,
por el prado iluminado por la luna.

Tus ojos no podían ocultar
estas mínimas desilusiones
ni yo puedo tampoco
olvidar tu afecto sutil.
Seguimos nuestros caminos sin daño a la naturaleza,
permitiendo brotar a las flores
y crecer a la hierba.

tú al sur
yo al norte.

Con el alba, cuando
la fresca brisa descienda
entre los grandiosos árboles
desde las montañas,
cuando tú des tu paseo
mientras te cepillas los dientes,
recordarás esos días
en que trabajábamos juntos
excavando una ciudad antigua en Maanthai
y nuestra breve amistad.

Dile a tu gente
que aquí, también, nacen las flores
la hierba crece
las aves vuelan.

Meeting and parting

These divide us:

Long mountain ranges,
a rainbow,
an invisible sun,
perpetually falling
winter rain,
the arrogant light
of my dark face.

These unite us:

The heartbeat of waves,
an endless telephone wire
which falls across continents and oceans,
and,
too frightened to question the future,
a tender heart.

Llegar y partir

Esto nos divide:

Extensas cordilleras,
un arco iris,
un sol invisible,
una incesante
lluvia de invierno,
la luz arrogante
de mi rostro oscuro.

Eso nos une:

El latido de las olas,
un interminable cable telefónico
que cruza continentes y océanos,
y,
demasiado asustado para cuestionar el futuro,
un tierno corazón.

Colour

In the street, dry now after a fall of snow,
beneath the streetlamp with its dim light,
the tip of his nose frozen and red,
a small Canadian flag pinned carelessly
upon his ragged, drooping overcoat,
centuries of dirt and stains and beer-froth
on his long, dense brown beard,
a forest green army cap on his head,
now shapeless,
buffeted by snow, wind and rain,
with hunched back, crooked nails and
long, curly, tangled hair, he lies huddled,
his blue eyes blinking frequently, part sunken in darkness
part crazed. He begs for money
and thanks those who fling him coins.

I refused.
'Fuck you, Paki, 'he said
turning his face away.

Color

En la calle, ahora seca tras una nevada,
más allá de la farola con su delgada luz,
con la punta de la nariz roja y helada,
una banderita de Canadá clavada al descuido
en el impermeable roído y demasiado grande,
centurias de mugre y manchas y espuma de cerveza
en la larga y poblada barba castaña,
una gorra militar de color caqui en la cabeza,
deforme,
aporreada por la nieve, la lluvia y el viento,
con la espalda encorvada, las uñas torcidas y
el largo y rizado cabello encrespado, yace encogido,
con ojos azules que no paran de pestañear, sumido entre la
oscuridad y la locura. Pide dinero
y da las gracias a quienes le tiran alguna moneda.

Yo me negué.
'Que te jodan, Paki,' espetó
volviendo la cara.

Cheran was born in Alaveddy in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, and he presently lives in Toronto, Canada. He is a major Tamil poet and playwright who has published several anthologies of poetry in Tamil. His work has been translated into English, Dutch, German, Swedish, Sinhala, Kannada and Malayalam, besides Spanish. Also a Human Rights activist, Cheran is a professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Windsor, Ontario. The poems presented here appear in the collection *A Second Sunrise*, and were translated into English by the late professor Lakshmi Holmström. This anthology has been translated into Spanish by Isabel Alonso Breto, and will be published in 2019 by Editorial Navona. She would like to also thank Sascha Ebeling, co-translator of the collection into English, for kindly allowing permission to use his translations of Cheran's poetry as a basis for her own.