

# From a Borrowed Land

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*For Richard*

## *New Words, New Clothes*

I discarded the words first.

And then, for a while, mute silence.  
I watched and learnt like a mynah bird.

𑌎 became A  
𑌆 became E  
𑌇 I changed  
to a short, sharp I.

After a while through whispers and croaks  
new words emerged  
in the borrowed tongue of a borrowed land.

Tentative, tiny and uncomplicated  
brand new, pain-free little words.  
Their strange scrolls flowed around me.

*F was once a little Fish*  
*Z was once a piece of Zinc*  
*X was once a great king Xerxes*

For the first time I formed an F, wrote  
a Z, sounded an X. In the borrowed tongue  
of a borrowed land I dressed myself in them.

I abandoned two millennia  
of poetry, mythology and history.  
No Pallavan or Cholan could claim sovereignty

over my mouth, my tongue, my mind.  
In the borrowed tongue of a borrowed land  
in single, stuttering, borrowed syllables  
I began to talk again

and the new words began to flow.



## *In Your Old Age*

Appa, do you remember evenings  
on the veranda, eating cutlets,  
and patties and fried nethali?  
The smell of freshly made string hoppers  
of hot coconut sambal flecked with  
green or red chillies? Do you remember  
playing bridge with your friends, drinking  
whiskey and arrack? Surrounded  
by laughter and companionship  
the tinkling of Tamil  
of youth majestic with hope and vigour  
of the peace of a life abandoned  
when the Troubles began?

Now you sit wrapped in a fug of silence  
so thick it will not let the light in.  
Will not speak of the music of the wind  
in the palm trees, or the song  
of the skylark by the Murugan temple.  
It clots the green of the paddy fields  
and the red of the hibiscus  
strangles the scent of the open jasmine.  
Trophies of a life lost to you  
years before your words began to crumble.  
Appa, in your muted world  
what do you remember now?

## *The Sinhala Only Act, 1956*<sup>1</sup>

Tamil words that lilt, soothing as a lullaby on a mother's breath. Their <i>isaioli</i> nourishing our <i>uyir</i> , a life force marked on a stave imagined a millennia ago. In whispers of promises they show themselves as <i>paadal</i> and <i>kathai</i> and <i>kavithai</i> .	melody life songs; stories; poetry
Our generations were formed by their fluid <i>naatiyam</i> , our voices tuned to their scripted <i>sangheetham</i> .	dance hymns
And when we dreamed, our dreams erupted in அs and இs and உs: building blocks of a nation now without a homeland, a people now without a place.	Aa; Ee; Uu
And when in '56 they tried to silence your <i>innisai</i> , gag your <i>uyiroli</i> and eradicate your <i>meiyelluthal</i> we took to the streets carrying your <i>unmai</i> as our arms. Warriors of the <i>Tolkaapiyam</i> <sup>2</sup> on Galle Face Green paying with our blood for your right to be. <i>Oru naadillaathe aatkal</i> , in exile, bearing the music of your beauty, still.	sweet melody; vowels consonants truth A people without a country

1 The Sinhala Only Act (1956) demoted Tamil from being one of the national languages of Sri Lanka. The Act was met with protests on Galle Face Green in the heart of Colombo. The law was repealed a few years later.

2 This is the earliest written Tamil grammar, believed to have originated, in written form from oral sources, sometime between 10BC and 5BC. This text is a fundamental cornerstone of Tamil Literature.