
A LESSON REMEMBERED

(On The Merchant of Venice)

For Nimal and Richard

Jean Arasanayagam

You write me a letter from a camp
For political detainees, a rehab camp, you tell me,
Remembering a lesson we once shared
In those days when the posters were up on the walls
The graffiti scrawled with their violent slogans
Tattooing the crumbling plaster,
When the killings took place on both sides
And the traditional funeral rites, alerted.

The College was closed, we walked home miles
I picked a water plant on the way
Still flourishes after all those years
In my garden, proliferates.
I do not destroy it.

I continue reading your letter
Was it you, Nimal, who yourself gave
English lessons to your fellow cellmates
After your arrest for your radical ideologies,
You wrote prison poems too, where are they?

Now, you remind me of my words,
"You always questioned us as to why people
Have stooped to violence."

Is it a question you now ask your students
As they sit before you with impassive faces
Uniformly clad, their hair closely shorn
Skins clean-shaven, eyes dulled
Their fiery utterance stifled,
Minds cleared of all seditious thoughts?

Secretly planning their future strategies
If they are allowed their freedom,
Allowed to live?

Yes, we read the canonical literary texts
But then, there were all your unwritten narratives.
Anil told me of his six years in jail in '71,
During that first insurgency, a young student
Indoctrinated, inducted by his teacher
In that arid zone of the island.
His eyes, I remember, thick, sable lashed
Grey green changing to azure, eyes that glittered
While he told me of being bastinadoed as he
Swung, suspended from the rough rafters
Of a ceilinged torture chamber,
What happened to Anil? He never contradicted
My interpretations of the romantic Poets, talking
Of emotions recollected in tranquility ... Whose?

Not ours anyway. Ultimately married 'respectably',
Got his academic qualifications, went to the Middle
East as an English teacher, is still alive somewhere,
A staid citizen, perhaps.

Bandara drifted in and out of my lecture
Room, a veteran of '71 too, was happy to
Show me the scars of healed bullet wounds
On his neck and shoulders,
Had so little time in-between conducting his own
Cell lectures that he had little time for preamble
On mine when we discussed Leonard Woolf's
"Village in the Jungle." Vanished soon afterwards
To those hideouts in other, remote jungles.
Is he still alive, I wonder?

Now, nearer this new age
Ananda with his delicate, perfectly shaped hands
On which blows had once rained down
Arrested for his subversive ideologies both
Social and political began his story,
"I read your poem "Political Prisoner"
Found empathy in those lines,
Remembered how we planned our prison escape
From Bogambara jail which we now see just across
The road, prisoners looking out on the world,
Clutching the bars, steel barriers keeping us apart.
Escape we did, some of us,
The others were recaptured."

Thinking of you again,
Nimal Each of us circling in unknown orbits
I go back to your letter
Do you now ask the same questions
That I asked of you from your new students
As you plead with me in turn

"Why can't we live in unison one with the
Other,
Why can't we go about our day to day
Work, in peace, unhindered?"
And your students, are they silent
Or are they silenced now that the texts
Have changed, our discoursed more complex,
More radical.

Illusion overwhelms the earth
Reality subverted, goes merely underground,
Resurfaces.
Your words, Nimal, require a reading between
The lines, a going beyond the surface meaning

Of language, into the deep, deep structure
Of our minds.

No, there will never be a clear-cut answer
To such naïve questions as we then asked
Each other, now we question-is it too late-
The complexities of our individual philosophies,
Our ideologies no longer static
We place ourselves before the firing range
Bare our naked breast to the fusillade of shots.

Why?
Because we are different?

Here, far from you
Resurrecting the lines I spoke
When I received your letter
I re-interrogate myself

Are there answers to be found in failure,
Failure imposed upon you by another or by others,
Are the minute cracks that first appeared
On the crumbling edifices of our past
Widening each day on the neglected icons
Of heroes and martyrs whom we so easily forget,
Their lives too, lost causes.

We too groped, each one of us, searching for answers
Found that Venice still exists, everywhere,
That Shylock too was a human being
A man to be pitied, shown humanity
When all others shunned him.

When I myself was a young student
I was taught that Shylock was a villain
A monster of depravity, the epitome of evil forces,
His nature unnatural.

Did life, did literature then have one sole interpretation?
And was that what we, uninitiated, unquestioningly
Followed, accepting, never countermanding,
Silent, our tongues, with injustices imposed upon
Ourselves, the hoi-poloi?
Shylock was the usurer, with base, inordinate
Appetites, money grabber, would-be-murderer,
And all those Venetians, goodly men
Victims of the Jew-wolf, Christian hater,
Skinflint, equating – to evoke our mockery-
His daughter with his ducats.
Shylock, the Jew, yes, the Jew,
Didn't he wear that invisible Star of David
Even then, somehow his blood, his cast of mien
His countenance, his race, his creed marking
Him out as different, not one of us, his fierce
Tongue, rasping, his demented maunderings
Licking the edges of history to draw blood
Generations of men, generous and loyal
Only to their own kind.
Today I look back on those years

Recall those lessons where I both learned
And shared that discovery of our own humanity
With you, Nimal and with you, Richard
And with all those within that radiant circle
Of revelatory light.

There were no morals to be drawn
Only the clear truth that we were, all of us, one,
Engaged in dialogue that took us to those Venetian
Streets, to that Rialto where we mingled
With the bartering market crowds
That surged around us, treading upon each
Other's hells on our frantic haste to cry our wares,
Emptying and filling our purses, buying and selling,
Bartering our souls that led to perdition.

Yes, with you I learned, look back now upon
Those lessons that I shared with you
The most important being that we cannot distinguish
Between the blood that runs in all our veins
Whether it be that of Jew or Christian.

Then who are we to spit upon and curse
Those whom we think are not our own kind,
Call them names, not human but beast,
Dog, cur, offspring of ravening wolf or criminal,

Step into their shoes, wipe the curses,
The insults heaped upon their brow,
Shake off the spittle that naked, stains
Those tribal cloaks, our Jewish gaberdine.

Who is it can cut that pound of flesh
And not shed blood and say
This then is Christian. This Venetian
This of the Jew
Are these thoughts then not murderous?
My pen is poised upon a sheet of paper
Still unwritten on, thoughts cross my mind
Questions, answers, interchange and interchanging
A dagger plunges into history's breast
We do not pause to think of consequences.

Belmont too is here
But not for us
Music, harmony, love
Belong to another world
But then, Jessica lives here too,
So, is there hope still
Or are our thoughts disloyal, traitorous?

We still wander freely with that motley
Crew upon the uneven cobbles of the Rialto
The coins still change hands
We listen to raucous voices bargaining
To purchase the weaponry of hatred. ■