

*Life in Sri Lanka is a stark mixture of images and feelings these days. David Furnival lives in a mixed community experiencing the richness and stresses of Sri Lankan everyday life. This reflection offers you a flavour.*

## Letter from Trincomalee District

The newsprint I've just read resonates, "It must be made clear that before accusing others you must have the strength to know what you do yourself". Above the T.V. flashing bright sequenced lights halo a calm white Buddha. The seemingly seamlessly endless flow on the screen causes me to look down. My attention is held by the surging human tide crossing the lagoon. Attempting to direct it, a single soldier futilely flaps his arm. The film loops, under his waving khaki sleeve people become recognisable; the man with a suitcase above his head, a woman clutching her parrots' cage, a child lifted up on adult shoulders. My gaze settles back on the newspaper, "We have seen how Afghanistan is bombed. Those who come to preach to us have seen how Afghanistan is bombed. It must be made clear..."

"We crossed the lagoon neck deep in water. Some children fell in the water. I don't know how to describe that." The web-pages dark lines flicker, the computer monitor's white light fills the emptiness of the room. Earlier in the sun-bleached compound my friend was teaching me '*santhosam*' the word for happy. He left with a wide grin and I turned towards my room. Shouting and wails. There's a surge of people towards, and then faster away from something fearful. The tri-shaw is started. My friend rushes to it carrying a child's stricken body. As quickly as they leave everything shuts. Soldiers take position and the streets empty.

Fear's impotent rage and a generation of murder and mistrust thicken the air around the men the night of the accident. This air unbidden seeps through barred doors urging something to happen. Its undercurrents gathering eddies grow around a strip-lit hospital bed. Sitting too collectedly I listen to the child's family praying desperately in the cavernous chapel. Aware too, that in this time between Mahgrib and Isha prayer, the driver's friends and family will be silently praying. I recall in another town days of threat and skirmish by turns satiating and increasing the need for blood to flow. In that other town's night the muezzin's heart breaking despair echoed across its silent streets calling to prayer those who already sheltered there in fear.

Here in the next morning's streets air flows more freely. One child's life has given itself back to those it could have taken. We all breathe together. Breathing a long breath in I wonder if this is how we make the world time and again. Someone of a past generation said; "all wars, just and unjust, are waged against the child". Children fall below the feet of adults carrying suitcases and bird cages. Children fall silently in Sri Lankan lagoons and Afghan mountains, where seemingly no one hears. Do they envy my friend's nephew who last night threatened the world with his death calm face?

Unformed by small lungs shouts of happiness, bird song or cricket chirps, the air is uncoloured, matt. Below me is the stump of a felled, charred palmyrah palm. Bomb-cleared emptiness. The air was wrenched out of here and too lately returns. Hours pass, days, weeks, nothing seems to grow. A poet says;

At a certain point I lost track of you.

*They make a desolation and call it peace.*

Now, today a green flash of parrot, children are squatting round a frond of palmyrah fruits. Two hands cut and cup a dark purple fruit inviting me to join in. They insistently mime the scooping out of the soft sweet flesh from the impervious cores' hollows. Before I know what I'm doing its juice is running down my face. The children's faces laugh happily in the gentle evening sunlight.

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