

1993

I Am an Innocent Man

Jean Arasanayagam

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Arasanayagam, Jean, I Am an Innocent Man, *Kunapipi*, 15(2), 1993.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol15/iss2/3>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

I Am an Innocent Man

Abstract

I often cycled past the prawn farms with a friend on the way to school in the village where I was teaching. There were great ponds on acres and acres of land in the coastal village in this Eastern part of the island. On these lonely roads in their deep silence my awareness grew of the life that was evolving in these ponds as the crustacea emerged from the spawn, creating concentric ripples as they swam beneath the water's surface. A subtle movement seemed to stir the expanse of water, breaking fragmented slivers of light, scattering them on the ponds. I was not able to observe these forms of life minutely but there was this feeling that the ponds were seething, alive, and that the prawns were trapped in their aquatic prisons from which they could not escape until they grew large enough to be caught, netted, packed and sent away to titillate the appetites of the wealthy gourmets who could afford them.

JEAN ARASANAYAGAM

I Am an Innocent Man



I often cycled past the prawn farms with a friend on the way to school in the village where I was teaching. There were great ponds on acres and acres of land in the coastal village in this Eastern part of the island. On these lonely roads in their deep silence my awareness grew of the life that was evolving in these ponds as the crustacea emerged from the spawn, creating concentric ripples as they swam beneath the water's surface. A subtle movement seemed to stir the expanse of water, breaking fragmented slivers of light, scattering them on the ponds. I was not able to observe these forms of life minutely but there was this feeling that the ponds were seething, alive, and that the prawns were trapped in their aquatic prisons from which they could not escape until they grew large enough to be caught, netted, packed and sent away to titillate the appetites of the wealthy gourmets who could afford them.

The great expanses of water reflected the stark white light of these arid regions, silvery mirrors that trapped the clouds, sky-reflecting. Light and dark changed the images that floated on the surface. At night, the moon, stirred by the wind, shivered fragmented like the segmented petals of a waterplant scattering irradiations of light. It was when the moon was dark that the prawn stealers came to the farms. They crept through the land in stealth, defying the guards, to net the prawns, even at the terrible cost of being caught, beaten up, even killed.

For me, the prawns appeared to have an even greater price than that placed on human life. They were being reared for profit. Foreign investors had put a great deal of money into this venture and the prawn farms had to yield a good harvest. The crustacea had first to grow, after which their globules of luscious flesh were carefully packed for export abroad. Sometimes the horrible image of death appeared in my mind, the opaque covering on the prawns, like the polythene shrouds which hid the remains of those killed in battle, or in land mine explosions. Those who ate them would not have such disturbing reflections.

The process took time. The prawn ponds were carefully tended. First, the spawn was put in and from the fertilized eggs, the nauplius emerged from its larval metamorphosis to that of the protozoa. The protozoa developed their antennae and eyes and thoracic limbs, all the while growing and multiplying in their aquatic environments, keeping the workers on the farms fully occupied.

The prawn farms provided employment for the villagers, many of them young boys. There were the older, familled men, too, who worked there. The tending of the prawn ponds, the netting, and packaging for sending abroad were the tasks that engaged them. Before the prawn farms were begun, the villagers cultivated their paddy fields and cleared the jungle for their chenas. They had herds of cattle and buffalo which they milked to fill their curd pots. At night the animals would be driven into the jungle and then herded out the next morning.

But the jungles had changed now. This territory was ravaged with fighting between the guerrillas and the security forces. But so was territory elsewhere too. It was always the innocent villagers who came under attack. The jungles became a place where they would seek shelter, fleeing from massacres or reprisals. This happened with all the communities that were embroiled in these violent events. The villagers would carry their few precious possessions with them and find refuge deep within the jungle even at the risk of being attacked by wild beasts or stung by snakes. Many of them died of snake bite but they still fled there at night. There were the sudden attacks, the brutal massacres, huts that went up in flames, the devastation of human habitations where the land was soon overtaken by the thrusting growth of the jungle while the people, displaced, had to move from refuge to refuge, from village to jungle to camps. Within the jungle there existed other networks of communication too. This was where the guerrillas operated from. They had their underground hospitals and storehouses for arms, ammunition, food.

Among the villagers, who in the midst of violence carried on their peacetime occupations and worked on the prawn farms, there were others who had no employment. The prawn ponds were a great temptation to them. Not that it would have mattered if a few prawns had been taken, whether to be sold or eaten by the villagers; yet every prawn in these ponds seemed to have a price on it. For these acres, which had once belonged to no one, were now in the hands of the foreign investors, those nameless people whose presence was only felt as a power that existed beyond this coastal village. It was now private property, enclosed and fenced in. No trespassers, and the trespassers would be the villagers themselves, were allowed in. But there was interference from certain other groups that had interests in this territory. Certain of the guerrillas operated in this vicinity. Not only were the different guerrilla groups waging war with the State troops, but they were in conflict with each other too. On the one hand the guerrillas had their advantages, on the other they were disadvantaged. They lacked air power, but they could depend on their knowledge of the terrain, their being part of the community and their ability, with a small band of fighters to contain a large number of their enemy. But their tactics also involved the civilians who were often caught in the cross fire. The guerrillas managed to slip away, vanish into thin air as it were, while the villagers were caught, rounded up and made to pay the penalty.

On several occasions, one particular guerrilla group would break into the prawn farms. It became a nuisance and an inconvenience to the foreign investors. All they were concerned about were their profits, not the political ideologies of a particular group. They wanted their prawn farms protected from any marauder, it did not matter who.

One of the most powerful guerrilla groups offered protection. Their offer was accepted and a large sum of money was paid which went to their cause. They would protect the prawn ponds and prevent the prawns from being stolen. This guerrilla group was very efficient at its job but they had to be ruthless when it came to keeping out the prawn stealers, even if they were their own people, the people from the village. As I reiterate, they were very conscientious at their job. They mounted guard at night but this did nothing to deter the villagers who came in by stealth. One of them was caught and warned. He came again. This time he was beaten up severely. The final time arrived when he was caught yet again. This time he was killed. The victim's wife wrote to the Army Command complaining that there were terrorists operating on the prawn farms and that they had killed her husband. Because of this it was now only a matter of time before the State troops would move in with their commando units. This was a war situation. The policies on both sides allowed for no compromise. If any terrorist was caught he would be given short shrift. There would be no give and take. On either side, extermination would take place. Where the guerrilla was concerned, this often constituted a problem. They moved freely among the people. They did not always wear uniforms. This meant that any young or even middle-aged male was suspect.

Often the foreign investors were seen with their uniformed guerrilla guards, posing for photographs. No one could be absolutely certain whether they had any political interests in these areas. They simply came and went. They pursued their other lives. The guerrillas remained. So did the villagers. In a situation as volatile as this, there is room for underhand goings-on. Collaborators, quislings, informers and traitors, those hooded people will always be there. Sometimes through fear, sometimes through compulsion, sometimes for thirty pieces of silver. The traitors, too, if they are caught, are made to pay with their lives. There are 'kangaroo courts', summary executions, lamp post killings.

Yet another man who was in the habit of stealing prawns was caught by the guerrilla group. He was a strong, fearless man. The guerrillas beat him up badly. He warned them and said, 'Finish me off now because if I escape I will revenge myself on you.' But they did not kill him. They bound him up tightly and left him in a room. Meanwhile they relaxed in that man's house and watched television. There appears to be a certain naivety in their actions, a naivety which lay in their confidence in their own power. The man managed to free himself and crawl out into the dark, carrying information to the army headquarters. Everything led to a confrontation with the guerrillas at the prawn farm.

And where did I fit in? I am an innocent man. I was the school teacher in the village and I was respected by all the people. Not only am I not a killer, but also I stay out of trouble. I play safe. But do not be mistaken. I am not a weak man. I am very strong inside. I can look after myself too, handle firearms. I learnt how to use a gun from my father who was a farmer. He had to protect his crops from marauding animals. I know how to handle an AK-47 too, although I have not yet learned how to handle the more sophisticated weapons. I am very particular about my appearance too. I always take pains to appear clean and tidy, so that the people may always have a good impression of me. I do not want anyone to think that I am a terrorist, or a militant, or a guerrilla or one of 'the Boys'. The image I always wanted to project is that of an innocent man. My face is clean shaven. My cheeks smooth. My clothes are always immaculate. I dress in spotless white clothes, freshly washed and ironed, white veshti, white shirt of crisp white cotton. I am careful not to show hostility or aggression towards anyone and I have practised, through yogic exercises, the sending out of friendly rays from my inner being so as to counter any hostility towards me. I sometimes think I see a radiance surrounding myself. I feel I am wrapped in a shining, protective light. I am protected from all evil forces that threaten me. I have a great sense of responsibility towards the children I teach, both boys and girls, and I do a lot of social service among the people too. I record the songs of the old men on my cassette tape so that they will be remembered for all time even though it is ironic that a man's life span cannot be predicted. No, especially not in these times.

My life goes on, day in, day out, at its usual, regular pace, for I allow very little to disturb me. Every day, I cycle past the mangroves on the road to my school. The mangroves flourish and grow dense and dark, a thick screen of leaves and succulent stems swollen with water. Their aerial roots grow and spread above the surface of the lagoon as if struggling to reach the light and breathe the air. A wild tangle of thick, rope-like roots trap the sediment that flows from the water. The roots stand out of the stiff mud banks like fortress walls. Colonies of trees grow out of these embankments. Symbiotic forms of life thrive in this environment. Tiny fish and molluscs thickly seed the water. Small armoured steel-grey crabs scuttle about in the rich mud. And in turn, all these forms of life are prey to water snakes and iguanas. The landscape will never change on these lonely roads but people have begun to change. Sometimes, need impels a man to risk his life to carry away the prawns in stealth from the ponds, prawns which he used to take freely from the lagoons in the past. No man is safe anywhere any longer, even in his own territory. Although I am an innocent man I too must learn that fear and danger can touch me as well. I must begin to prepare myself. Death lies within the jungle and outside of it too, anywhere, on the road or even in my classroom. Meeting death is not like meeting a friendly stranger.

Then the rains came. For twelve days it had rained continuously, drenching the earth. The vegetation sprang up fresh and green, the roads flowed with rivulets of muddy water. As the rains ceased I felt a change in the air, a change in my own life. The nights were clear and chill. Stars shone with a knife-sharp brilliance in the sky. But there was an ominous feeling that made my blood run cold in my veins. My ears were alert to stray rumours. The time was ideal for military operations to begin. There was news circulating in the air that supplies of diesel and petrol were being brought in. The grapevine buzzed.

On that particular day, that fateful day in my life, I woke up early, at four a.m. I was staying over in the school premises during that time. I went to the well to have my bath as was my habit. I heard the sound of helicopters in the air but I did not pay much heed at that moment. Suddenly a pick-up appeared, driving at furious speed towards the village where the prawn farm was. The alarm had been given that the attack was to take place there this morning. There were guerrillas in the pick-up. They were armed.

The sound of the helicopters grew louder, a curious chugging sound which increased as they came nearer. I stood at the well, watching skywards with the water still streaming down my body. The helicopters were flying low. This was unusual. Then I saw them preparing to land on the vacant site which was the playground of the school. Men in camouflage uniform were disembarking from the helicopters. Some of the guerrillas had jumped off the pick-up. They had taken cover beside the school buildings. At that moment the guerrillas started shooting – they were just three or four young men. The men from the helicopters began to return fire. One of the guerrillas climbed a tree and took sniper shots at the men. I stood petrified. I couldn't move. The folds of my thin veshti were wet and clinging to my loins. I felt myself apart from all that was taking place. Detached, because I was not part of what was going on, uninvolved, yet, by virtue of being a spectator, in some way involved. I could feel everything that was happening move within my body, my limbs. Fear laid a lash on my tongue. I could not even cry out. The dawn had suddenly darkened.

The sniper on the tree had the advantage. Three officers fell. Another of their men too. And one of the drohi. The commando unit had been taken completely unawares. I stared death in the face. Everything around me was caught in a thrall of silence. The pick-up drove away with the guerrillas. They laid a mine on the way to the farm. A truck with the security forces was following the helicopter trail. Suddenly there was a tremendous sound, a reverberating explosion as the mine exploded. The truck with the men was blown to bits. I heard later that ten men had lost their lives. Others had reached the farm before the mine was laid. The fighting then began. The sounds of shooting, blasting, explosions travelled through the flat terrain of the countryside. There was bitter fighting between the forces

and the guerrillas who defended the place. What, or whom were they defending? The vested interests of the foreigners or their own position? But the guerrillas never remain long in a vulnerable position. They don't get caught. They slip away. They vanish. There are always others who invariably suffer in the crossfire. The foreign investor was out of the country at this time. He was safe. But the matter did not end there once the guerrillas had escaped and the battle had abated. The others who were left, the unarmed, were rounded up. All the males above the age of fifteen, ranging from forty to fifty men, were lined up and shot. The rest were taken behind a temple and clubbed to death. Eighty-seven of them died. One expects no mercy during these times. One shows no mercy either. There is a war on. An unending war. These are the consequences of war. As I said before, it is the civilians who suffer, especially the males. They are all suspected terrorists. Many were rounded up from the cluster of eleven villages too and killed. The wind travelled towards the villages bearing the odour of blood. Later on a tractor was seen being driven towards the farm to take the bodies for mass burial. The roads were clogged with mud and this impeded the operation. It was a time of crisis and as they had done before, the villagers, with a mat, a pot of water, some food and a few of their precious belongings, took refuge in the jungles at night. In spite of the snakes and death from their venom, they preferred this uncertain safety.

But what about myself and my responsibilities towards my children? I dried my body and put on my clothes. I waited for my students to arrive. At about 6.30 the children came running to the school. It was very early, too early for lessons to begin, but they were searching for a safe place, away from the shooting. I put them into two classrooms – the school buildings were in different blocks – and shut the doors. I tried to lock them but the locks wouldn't work. I tried to calm them. 'Don't move,' I said. They were in a state of terror with the sound of the shots and explosions blasting the air. They would be safe here for the moment. The messages will come later. Messages that are always brought by the women. They go from place to place on their secret missions, searching for food, searching for bodies. They also search for their sons; they wait by the camps to get a glimpse of them peering through a grill or a half shut door. They wait, they are patient. And then they came, just as I expected – the grandmothers, at about 1.30 in the afternoon, in search of their grandchildren, anxious because they had not returned home for the mid-day meal. The battle had been raging and the sound of shots had warned the villagers of the attack. Now the search operations would continue. The helicopters were flying over the school; bullets were whizzing all over the place. The grandmothers stood petrified, like logs; they couldn't move. The children could not be kept inside anymore. They came running out to meet the grandmothers. The helicopters flew low and splattered the building haphazardly with bullets. Two bullets whizzed past the children.

No one was hit or wounded here. The children looked up fearfully at the bullets that were being sprayed from the helicopters. They didn't dare run for shelter back to the buildings so they cowered beside the walls. When the shooting ceased they were led away, back to their homes. I remained behind.

When there is trouble the boutiques and shops put up their shutters. I was able to get only a packet of biscuits from a boutique close by. I had no other food. I waited in the school. I didn't want to move out. I closed the door behind me and watched through a keyhole. I heard the tramp of boots, the sound of voices. I saw the soldiers walking past, peering into the school premises. They were watchful, alert. They came to the gate. I was afraid that they would open it and walk in, but the buildings looked empty, silent, abandoned. If they had come inside and found me I would have been suspected of being a terrorist. There would be no time to answer questions. I would have been shot.

It seemed hours to me. I was kneeling by the door, I could see them passing. My state of mind was such that I imagined they could see me. But it was only I who could see them. They moved past and away. I began to breathe again after they had left but I knew that it would not end there. The mopping-up operations were on. The existence of the school teacher was known and the next day a woman came to the school bringing a message that I was summoned to the army headquarters. I had to go, but I was afraid, afraid more than anything else of interrogation. The interrogators were very skilled at their task. Clever. They were trained for this. I had only one hope. I told the woman to carry a message for me. I had a friend, the Superintendent of Police. He was a man from the south. We often met and spoke. We could communicate in English and Sinhala. I had only him to rely on. He would know that I was an innocent man. But I was innocent only because I did not carry firearms. Whoever has witnessed death as I have seen it, men falling, hit by bullets, dying under a clear sky, not knowing sometimes from what direction they were fired upon, could not think himself to be innocent. Nor could I do anything about the killings on either side. It made me feel a sense of guilt as if I were a participant in all that happened. I had knowledge. I was a witness. That alone would remove my innocence.

I could no longer ride my bicycle along the roads past the prawn farms intent on the great ponds with their water mirrors reflecting clouds, stirred by the swimming of the crustaceans beneath their surface. What was the use of hiding away in the jungle, there were worse risks there – the helicopters could spot you, or the snakes that were in the thickets could sting you. The STF also had armoured vehicles that go through the jungle. I preferred to stay outside the jungle. I was no terrorist. I did not like to listen to the stories that the guerrillas came and told me about their exploits. Killing was nothing to boast of, but people had lost their humanity, so they boasted. I was as yet not guilty of taking human life. Perhaps

here then, only here, was preserved what was left of the innocence I once had.

I had to answer the summons to go to the army headquarters but, as I say, there was fear and trepidation in my heart. The road was lonely, not a single other person walked along it except for myself and the woman who brought the message to me. My shadow appeared to extend and diminish, extend and diminish. At moments I even lost consciousness of its shape and form. My ears were buzzing as if voices, confused voices, intermingled with the whirring insect sounds that emerged from the jungle, had penetrated through those channels. The interrogation had already begun in my mind. I was rehearsing the questions I would be asked, interrogating myself. It was a preparation for what I would have to face. I reached the kadé. The soldiers were standing around with their guns. Their expressions changed when they saw me. Their faces were hostile. I was on the other side as far as they were concerned, a terrorist. I looked closely at their faces to see whether I could recognise any of them. My students used to describe them to me, faces without names, yet, by studying their expressions you could sometimes discern what their natures might be – their faces were young, as young as those of my students, but we looked at each other across tremendous, insurmountable barriers. One face struck me. It belonged to a short, squat looking soldier. He had a look of aggression on his face. He watched me warily. I would have to be careful of him. These men must have wondered, silently thinking their own thoughts about me. I felt I could read their minds.

'He is one of them. How did he escape? These terrorists are elusive. He must have slipped out of our hands. They vanish, then they appear. They lay mines. They take sniper shots at our men. How did he alone escape from the prawn farm?'

I felt fear psychosis assail me. I tried to calm myself, control the trembling in my hands. I was helped by the fact that I had practised yoga. From my inner consciousness I was sending out friendly rays, but the hostile expressions did not change. I tried to still the thudding of my heart. It sounded thunderous in my own ears. If they were to place a hand against my heart they could feel its rapid beat. This was a way they had of testing you, testing to see whether you were a terrorist. I was afraid of two things, one of being interrogated, the other of being shot. I tried sending out rays of friendliness towards the interrogators. I always wanted to have good thoughts towards everybody. I did not want anyone to feel that I was a terrorist. But at this very moment when I was fearing for my life a police jeep drew up. My friend the police inspector was in it. I felt as if I were scooping out a hollow in the desert and had discovered water to quench my thirst. The relief I felt was like the discovery of an oasis. I bathed my face in this sense of comfort. It felt like cool water against my parched lips and throat. The inspector greeted me in a friendly manner, 'Ah, Das, what are you doing here? Where have you been all this time?'

I was still very conscious of the expressions of the soldiers around me. Now they began to change, ever so slightly, like the breeze that shifted lightly, rippling the surface of the prawn ponds. Like the ripples starting in their concentric circles and growing wider with the movement of the crustacea beneath the water. Thoughts began to flicker across their faces. But there was still silence now that the gun shots had ceased. No one would come to net the prawns for a long time now and they would grow and procreate in their underwater world undisturbed by any marauders. They would crowd and jostle against each other as their numbers grew and soon, perhaps, they too would begin to war against one another and turn cannibalistic as the space that contained them became smaller. Then, too, the prawn ponds would begin to smell of death like the landscape around them. Death has an odour and the wind carries it in waves from village to village. It is not easy to move these bodies that lie strewn about because the roads are clogged with mud after the recent rains. The flies must be buzzing about them. The guerrillas have slipped away, vanished into the jungle, disappeared along the pathways and tracks that only they are aware of. And we do not know how long it takes for some to die; death does not always happen instantly. But it is only a matter of time and the women will go. They will follow perhaps the odour of death and find the bodies, identify them, carry the news back, the death couriers.

'Look, I'll try to get you transport in one of the helicopters but at the moment it is difficult. I had hardly sitting space myself,' said my friend the police inspector.

He drove off and I realised that I would have to go and wait in the camp. I had to be patient. It would take time. The press and TV crews were using the helicopters and the search operations were still continuing. I had to have faith in my friend. I was a survivor in the eyes of the others. A survivor and a terrorist. How had I managed to escape was the thought uppermost in their minds. I was still not safe.

In the camp the soldiers were young boys, even younger than myself. They were like my students. I did not want them to be the first to begin asking me questions. I preferred to be the one to ask them the questions. We got into conversation. The soldiers were curious but wary. They wanted to know about the massacre on the prawn farm. They wanted to know how much I knew, how many deaths had taken place. They knew how many of their own men had been killed preparatory to the operation. They asked me how many had been blasted in the land mine explosion. I could not tell them all I knew. My safety lay in concealment. I had to pretend that I did not know too much. I did not tell them the exact number of the dead. I said that only a few had died, five or six. I concealed myself like a wily prawn that went deep into the pond to escape being netted, settling itself in the silt, not letting its antennae appear above the surface of the water. I felt myself metamorphose into one of those crusta-

ceans. I felt so much safer then in my mind. My human role could only spell vulnerability.

I was an innocent man. My hands had never tied the fuse wires in a land mine, nor did I boast like the others of the killings that were so easily performed. They were death searchers, who moved in and out of jungles hopping like jungle ticks from one pelt to another, following blood trails. Now, even here in this camp, I felt I had to create my own prawn pond, change my shape and form until it was safe to assume my human lineaments again. I had learnt much from those bicycle rides on those lonely roads. I was careful not to create enemies. I moved like a tiny land crab scuttling about the mangroves, cautiously, so that no bird would swoop down on me from the air. The soldiers were not sure of me at all. Even at this point they would keep me back for interrogation. They were very skilled in this art. I could perhaps not match their subtlety. I was still in a very delicate position. No one knew who I really was. And the other prisoners might think me an informer, a traitor, one of the drohis.

'How many died at the prawn farm?' the young soldiers asked.

'Only about five or six,' I answered. They must not know how much I knew.

'We feel sorry for the poor people who died,' they said. 'But how are we to know who is a terrorist and who isn't?' said another. 'They mingle with the people, with the civilians, and we cannot question each one of them individually. It is either them or ourselves. But in war who has time for pity? We see our men blown up in landmines. The flesh has to be scraped off the Claymores. They are shot by snipers. Reprisals and massacres take place – are these happenings not inevitable in a time of war? Killings will go on. The civilians will always suffer. They have to bear the brunt of the killings. Sometimes they, too, are caught in a situation from which they cannot escape. They cannot betray their own boys. They are caught in the crossfire. If they inform against their own kind they will be called drohi and they will have to die, tried in the kangaroo courts, tied to lamp posts and shot. If there is a landmine explosion the security forces have to search for the guerrillas, but who can get hold of a guerrilla? He knows the terrain so much better than we do and he can disappear. So it's the civilian who is left – any male above a certain age is suspect, so they must pay. Death comes out of the jungle, it happens on the open road. Are we not all expecting death at any moment?'

Questions for which I have to find my own answers torture my mind. This is a time of war. Of course we have become used to the new conditions. Each man has his pre-arranged role to play. When the guerrillas ask the villagers to provide food for them, they do it. After all, the guerrillas do not have time to till the soil or gather harvests. In turn they protect the villagers in whatever way they can with their arms, play their own role. The women have to search for food. They move freely about on the roads so they can bring back news or carry news. Then there are those, the men,

who use their own weapons. One does not always find loyalty. There is plenty of betrayal too. Betrayal means arrest, torture and death. Those who betray are also terrorists. And if you, in these circumstances, cannot speak the truth, aren't you betraying yourself too? And is it worth paying the price for safety when you see so many others dying on both sides, often people who are unable to defend themselves? Yes, on all sides. Among all communities. Children who have lost their parents. Parents who have lost their children, husbands their wives and wives their husbands. They have no homes. They have no hope. They are haunted by the sights they have witnessed.

In the past the villagers used the jungle for their cultivation. They still do. They cut down the trees, they clear the land, burn the scrub and plant their chillies and vegetables and grains. They set up watch huts to protect their crops from the animals, wild boar and elephant. In the past those were the only marauders. Their herds of cattle were driven into the jungle at night. In the mornings they came out for a milking. The milk was made into curd – there was time for it to settle and grow firm. Now, often, the everyday things of life cannot go on – there are curfews that disrupt life and people have often to abandon their homes. Now humans herd themselves in the jungles. There are deadly poisonous reptiles in the thickets. Perhaps the villagers prefer to have at least this choice, to choose the freedom to die in whichever way they want. I did not join the villagers who called me to spend the nights in the jungle. I preferred to remain in a silent and deserted schoolroom. I did not know how much longer I, too, could remain safe. Killing is now a legitimate pastime. At any time, at any point in the road, a land mine could explode. A party of villagers might be travelling in a vehicle, a bus, truck, lorry, van, and they can be blown to smithereens. Not only men, not only army personnel, but women and children too. They may have been going to market to buy their provisions. A bomb goes off in a bus. People, often innocent people, are dragged out of buses and shot. Massacres, reprisals, horror and violence. Men open fire on those who are praying in mosques. Villages go up in flames. Where do they take refuge? In mosques, in churches, in temples and refugee camps. And so it goes on, on all sides, among all communities. No mercy, no pity is shown on any side. And I myself, did I go up to those who had fallen when they got out of their helicopter, touch a still warm brow and utter one word of comfort? I thought I had no enemy. Then whom did I call my friend?

We are all trapped in our different camps. We have to devise our own weapons for protection if we do not carry them. AK-47s or T-56s or grenades. The silent men are trapped in their hoods. Their thoughts, too, are bitter if they have lost kith or kin. Or they might do it through simple greed. I feel pity for the young soldiers who remind me of the students I teach. They wear the sacred thread on their wrists for protection. Their faces are often bland, smooth. They, who should have expectations of life,

can only have expectations of death. Their hands clasp the guns strongly. That weapon is, after all, their life. We have to deceive ourselves over and over again for what we do. I could do nothing to stop the killings of those officers or the soldiers or the informer when they got off that helicopter. Am I guilty then too? I was safe. The guerrillas would not harm me but I cannot say that I had nothing to do with those deaths. They were taken unawares with no chance of defending themselves. True, they shot back, but at whom? At an unseen enemy. My prior knowledge of what was to take place did not stop me from being silent. I witnessed the panorama of death. Where did I belong? My life had become like one of those ancient epic plays, but I was only the observer. I was no hero. Would the rest of my life be like this because I wanted to protect my innocence? Was I not already besmirched and defiled by being the witness to violence and death?

I wait in the camp until I get a seat in the helicopter that will take me back to Kallady. The plane, when I got in, I observed, was navigated by a foreign pilot. He turned his face away from me. I saw another mercenary too, tall, strong, armed to the teeth. I recognised the countries they belonged to but I kept silent. This was no time for familiarity, for asking questions. In time our own people will also carry arms to other countries to fight for other causes. We accept this fact of history. Identity does not count for a mercenary. He chooses to put it aside, even lose it when he fights for a cause that has no meaning for him.

In the helicopter I was tense all the time. I was flanked by soldiers on either side. A childish thought came to my mind. What if I were secretly pushed out so there would be no more trace of me? After all I had been through, was this a game I played with myself to release the fears and pressures that had built up within me?

I was taken back to Kallady camp and interrogated there. They wanted to know all the details of what had taken place, about those violent deaths, the number of deaths, about how much I knew.

'We want to know the truth about how many died.'

Again I had to pretend that I did not know. The truth, once it was out, would endanger my life. All I wanted was to go back to the people, the villagers, to live among them peacefully. I don't want a lot of possessions or goods or wealth. I want to go back and teach in my village, listen to the songs of the old men as they clear their throats and begin to sing their folk songs. After they die who will remember these songs? The young have no time to learn them. There will be nothing to remember except the horrors of this eternal war that goes on, day after day after day. The people are tired, tired of war.

I will go back to my school. Place my fingers on the bullet holes that pit the walls. Look out on the field where I saw death. Remember. Perhaps in time, forget. But – an innocent man?