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ANNE RANASINGHE

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PART 3

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Editorial

Good, Better, Best
Never, never rest,
Till your Good is Better
And your Better Best

This little verse was written in my autograph album approximately 70 years ago by a long-suffering domestic science teacher whose task it was to instruct me (us) in the fine art of cooking and sewing. At the 'Gymnasium' I attended in Cologne – a mixed school of boys and girls with high intellectual pretensions – it would then have been unthinkable for the Principal to 'waste time' setting up cooking and sewing classes on their time-table of Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Classics. So when I arrived in my English school I hadn't a clue where cooking and sewing was concerned, but the curriculum very definitely included both. This verse was penned after I had succeeded in messing up a number of vital garments we were asked to produce; and when Miss Sutton (!) came to inspect my fish-pie for end-of-term marking and sawed through the steel-hard crust, she found to her horror that I had forgotten to cut off the poor haddock's head before putting the whole thing in the oven. Its eyes looked at her accusingly.

You will wonder what a dead fish has in common with a CHANNEL editorial.

More than a year ago the EWC received a short story entry which was twice the stipulated length and therefore also repetitious, not well edited and with a title that gave away all the secrets. BUT the story was interesting, well constructed and with a fascinating insight into a Sinhalese household busy with prenuptial preparations and family participation - maybe fifty odd years ago. We couldn't use it as it was, so contacted the writer, explained our problem and asked her whether she was willing to précis and resubmit it.

She did, although it took a very long time. Never mind. Because that is the story which has won the first prize in our latest competition, and you will find it in this issue.

CHANNELS has been delayed in the compiling. Not because we were not willing but because we were not able: we postponed the deadline twice because, although we received a vast amount of entries, the standard simply fell below our expectations. Printing and paper have become so expensive, and we have so little money that we cannot accomodate material which does not come up to our requirements. We ask for originality, a fresh approach, lucidity, engagement, a clearly typed and edited manuscript according to the usual rules of submission. Excuses such as 'no time', or 'the computer broke down' or 'there was another tsunami warning' or 'I forgot the date' won't hold. A writer also must learn to discipline himself/herself. Internationally no quarter is given for defaulting. We won't either.

In this issue there are, apart from the three prize-winning poems and short stories, 23 entries: 17 poems, 5 short stories and the abridged script of an Oration on the subject of 'The Creative Writer and Social Change', delivered by Sita Kulatunga. We are very grateful to Sita for allowing us to reproduce this very relevant talk.

You will find all the stories to be well written and presented, with divergent themes exploring social injustice, the heart-break of losing a race, patriotism and its significance, the tragedy of aging and a poignant recollection of our insurgency. The prize-winning topics were a theft that wasn't a theft, a fast-moving tale about a lady drug-pusher, and a love story that isn't a love story. Or is it?

As for the poems - all are good, some very good, even outstanding. Fresh, relevant, perceptive, elegant (yes. Elegant!) and both

sad and witty. 'Deflating Mr Eliot' really deflates Mr Eliot.... "Brr! / Mr Eliot, for those who understand you all. hurrahrr / Myself? I'll stick to Walter de la Marre" / (Shelton Amarasuriya.) Or Chitra Premaratne-Stuiver's 'wily crow' which "expressing her delight at fooling / one big stupid bird / who does not know / how to tell a koha from a crow." Then we have Premini Amarasinghe's Eve, not with an apple but with a mysterious passion fruit. "Determined to know more I raise it to my lips / The crisp brown leaves rustle / a suspicion of a slither.... "you will remember that the biblical Eve's inquisitiveness was her undoing; she succumbed to the snake's seduction...

I would really like to quote from all the poems, but space will not permit this and you will find them in this edition of CHANNELS, Volume 14, Number 1, which is the 30th Journal, and we have now been publishing for 18 years - a very long time - produced on a shoe-string budget, with a lot of labour and a lot of love.

And finally a stanza from Ramya Jirasinghe's remarkable poem titled – 'Breadmaker' s Time:'

'This is the breadmaker's time
the poet's time, the lover's time
when nothing moves
into the past or future
only hands
delve twist turn and rise
delve twist turn and rise
again
again'

I think our poetry is coming of age.

At last.

Hurrahrr

Anne Ranasinghe

PART 1

ENGLISH WRITERS COOPERATIVE OF SRI LANKA POETRY AND SHORT STORY COMPETITION 2007

FIRST PRIZE
POETRY

Upside Down

The granite floor clicked against my heel.
Door opened and I waited.
Long pause.

Nod of the egg shaped head.
I'm in.

Another nod.
I'm seated.

I stare at him, speechless.

My mind projects slides of the past
Days at my glorious home.
I remember him well.
Club-footed and clumsy, bowed head.
All replies ending with Ma'm or Baby-hamu.

I looked at my feet with shame.
My shoes are now barely polished by my own hands.

Memories flood my thoughts
Of bags, boxes, shoes and everything,
Polished to a shine by his then young, yet rough hands.
His own bare feet took him to his night school.

He smiled his familiar smile with warmth.
"Relax", said he, with out-stretched hand.
I gave him my file without letting go of it.
"Baby-hamu, please give me the file."

Nearly an hour later I saw him driven away in his car.
Tears filled my eyes
And I couldn't read the board clearly,
Till the bus sped away from the lonely bus-stand.

N. S. Buwanayake

SECOND PRIZE
POETRY

The Third Eye of Hope

He used to be a painter,
And with oils, watercolours and pastels
He painted ordinary things in an ordinary way.

Then one day, as he was walking past an army camp
It happened - his world was painted black
By a burst of light.

He told me he was sad, because the canvas of life
Now stretched into an eternal night -
And only the past was clear, flowing through sleep
And delirious daydreams.

The future was like that black wall
He always saw when he rose from his bed.
He never knew what lay beyond.

He said that time crawled slower than a snail,
Blurring the faces he once knew;
And pleasures recalled brought only pain.

I met him today, after many years.
He now knows a visitor by the sound of his footsteps,
And in the tone of your voice
Can hear your most fleeting emotion.

He talked about tea and its subtleties of taste,
And the delights in a woman's kiss;
How music now unravels its sensuous ways.
I felt that those with eyes do not see much.
Then he took me to a room, and there showed me
A painting. It was something enigmatic and beautiful,
And titled *The Third Eye of Hope*.

Asgar Hussein

THIRD PRIZE
POETRY

Forsaken, misled

Under the tree where answers were found
I walk holding a pot of water
To stop at full circle to empty that pot
With fervent prayers for a friend and daughter
Praying with hope, stumbling through chants
A plea for the precious life escaped
Standing under whispering leaves
In a burst of hope, eyes were raised

Yet as eyes lower, I see the words rise
In thin smoky tendrils over incense
Floating high above teardrop leaves
To a land where prayers make no sense
I hear the water in the diverted pipes
Oblivious to the chanting around
It will not cool, it will not nourish
It will run only to empty ground

Miracles won't come for lives must end
Prayers lie empty for faith is dead
Amidst the waters, amidst the pain
I stand alone; forsaken, misled

Manikya Kodithuwakku

ENGLISH WRITERS COOPERATIVE OF SRI LANKA POETRY AND SHORT STORY COMPETITION 2007

FIRST PRIZE
SHORT STORY

The Ring

"It' s bad luck to lose jewellery just before a wedding." Devika's words sounded familiar to herself. Where had she heard them before?

It's bad luck to lose jewellery just before a wedding. Yes, it was Priscilla *Nenda* who had said that. Devika had not realized till lately just how much she had taken after relatives whom she had considered old-fashioned in her own youth. And Priscilla *Nenda* had uttered those words at this very spot, twenty-seven years ago!

"Ammi, what's lost is lost. Don't let it spoil the wedding. After all, what is jewellery? A load of metal! What if somebody had got killed? I'm only worried about your getting another asthma attack."

Maheshika had an answer for everything. She was impossible.

"That 'load of metal' was some of the jewellery we'd collected through generations."

Maheshika was silent.

And it was she who had opened the door to a burglar, taking him for one of the painters working on the renovation, and gone back to her matinee, leaving him to clear away all their jewellery. Nobody would believe that an Oxford graduate could be so... so... Devika did not have a word to describe her daughter. In exasperation she went back to stuffing the settees – work which had been interrupted by the coming of the police.

"The last time these settees were stuffed was for my wedding. Your *Arcchi,* Priscilla *Arcchi,* Primrose *Arcchi, Punchi Amma,...* they were all here. Today it's just you and me."

Maheshika knew her mother had got into one of her "nostalgic" moods again. She had been like this since they came to Sri Lanka five days ago.

"Rather a lot to stuff a few settees, don't you think?"

"That's how it was those days. Everything was done at home, so there was something for everybody to do. Today things have to be handled by famous labels, in keeping with the hotel's five-star status."

"At least I'm having a home wedding, Ammi," Maheshika reminded her.

Yes, that was a consolation indeed. For her daughter to be married in the same house she herself had grown up and married in. Devika knew what a sacrifice Maheshika had made – both Maheshika and Michael – in deciding to have their wedding in Sri Lanka. They would have preferred to have had their own friends around on that day, but had complied with Maheshika's grandmother's wish of seeing her first grandchild married in their ancestral house.

"Even the flowers were a present. Your father's uncle from Nuwara Eliya sent them, and my students decorated the settees. No professional florist there, either."

"Not even for the bouquet?"

"No. A friend made the bouquet. She did the whole bridal set... It was her wedding present for me." Devika's eyes were on the piano on which were displayed the family wedding photographs.

"Maya was my roommate when we were at Peradeniya. She was good at needlework. She used to help her mother with bridal orders. When her father was sent to prison, it was their sewing that helped them make ends meet."

"I can't imagine you having a prisoner's daughter for a roommate."

"Now, now, my dear, where's your theory of judging-people-by-their-qualities-and-not-by-their-fathers'?" Devika teased.

Maheshika was glad that her mother seemed to have forgotten the family jewels, at least for the time being.

"Maya's father had been sent to prison for a theft from the museum where he was working. Some said he'd been framed to protect a higher official. But nobody knew for sure."

Theirs was a friendship that outlived undergraduate days. So it was only natural that, when Devika was to be married, Maya would come to help with the wedding preparations, leaving her ailing mother to the care of an aunt.

How strange to think that the yellow, withered cotton Devika was taking off the settees was the fresh, pure-white stuff she had put in, twenty-seven years ago! She could still smell the aura of promised wedded bliss in the now wasted fluff. Her sister at her feet, helping her stuff a settee; her mother, Priscilla *Nenda* and Primrose *Nenda,* annoyed at her slowness. Why was it taking her forever to stitch up that settee? How was she going to cope in a foreign country without servants, if she was this slow?

"Akki will have to smuggle Josie to England. Otherwise Mahesh Aiya will have died of hunger by the time she finished cooking a meal."

"And such a dear boy as he is. I only hope he won't spoil you, Devika Duva, the way your father's done."

"That Mahesh has done already, Priscilla Nangi," said mother. "Guess how much he spent on her engagement ring! One could have bought all the wedding jewellery for that amount."

Devika hoped her mother had more sense than to come out with the price of the ring, which was an embarrassing amount, especially in front of her aunts.

"Let me see it, Devika Duva. I never got a chance of having a close look at it."

"Oh, dear!"

"Why, what's the matter, Duva?"

"My ring ... it's gone!"

"You must have left it somewhere. You're always taking it off."

"No, no. I took it off before washing the curtains, but put it on again."

The ring Mahesh had put on her finger at the engagement ceremony was much more than a mere ornament to Devika. How proud she was, of that thin gold band with the tiny diamond – her lucky stone – gleaming white on her finger. She, who had professed to scorn all jewellery as frivolous, meaningless objects.

"I was heart-broken when I lost my engagement ring. I know what you must be feeling, Maheshi."

Maheshika was surprised at this unexpected sympathy from her mother.

"And now you've lost most of your other jewellery, as well, *Ammi*. And all because of silly me. How much more heart-broken you must be now."

But Devika knew otherwise.

"Akki, think back carefully to the last time you took off the ring."

"It was just before washing the curtains this morning," Devika insisted. "And I distinctly remember putting it on again."

"Did you take it off after that?"

"No."

"Last week also I saw your ring at the kitchen sink, Akki. It's a wonder nobody took it, what with the painters all over the place. You're so careless!"

But there had been no painters that day.

"I'm sure it'll turn up," consoled Primrose Nenda. "You're taking it off so often, you can't remember where you kept it last."

From where Devika sat, she could see Maya beading the bridal blouse at the table. Her head was bent over her work lower than usual, and Devika also noticed that the hand that held the needle-and-thread was shaking slightly.

Horrified at her own thoughts, Devika got up and went out into the garden. She knew that Maya was having financial problems. It was only

last week that she had borrowed five thousand rupees to cover her mother's medical bills.

Am I positive I put on the ring after the washing? Devika asked herself... or that I didn't take it off again?

In spite of a thorough search, the ring was not found. Priscilla Nenda' even sought the help of a fortune-teller, who said that a trusted individual was responsible for the loss. But the one Primrose Nenda' consulted two days later, said that it had not, as yet, left the premises of the house, and a third, that it would be recovered, if not soon, then later. The owner of the ring was advised to perform a pooja within three days at the local shrine of God Kataragama, and the culprit would be made to reveal the whereabouts of the lost item. And another said that the offender would lose far more than the material value of the ring...

"It's bad luck to lose jewellery just before a wedding," Priscilla Nenda mourned. "You should have been more careful, Duva."

"As if we'd nothing else to do, now we have to go in search of fortune-tellers and waste time and money on whatever they tell us to do." Mother, more than anything else, was annoyed.

As the days passed by, Devika realized that, indeed, the loss of the ring had caused an unpleasant change in the household, call it bad luck, or what one may. Little Sita, Josie's niece who had come to help with the wedding preparations, went about the place like a frightened rabbit, as if she expected someone to jump at her any time. And Martin, their driver, kept to his room in the garage, and came inside the house only if summoned, in contrast to the enthusiasm he had shown earlier, in doing the various odd jobs around the house in preparation for the wedding.

Despite the aunt's suggestion, Devika's father had refused to bring in the police. Everyone in the house that day, he had maintained, had been there to help. It would not do to even suspect them. Also, the police would consider a solitary ring not worth their while, when they were engaged with solving burglaries where housefuls of jewellery were involved. And there was always the possibility that the ring had not been stolen, after all...

In the pandemonium of the following days, nobody seemed to have noticed that Maya had left. Once the bridal attire was complete, she had faded from the scene, in her characteristically unnoticeable way. Her aunt had written that her mother was more ill than usual, she had told

Devika, and Devika had not been too loud in her lamentations at having to let her friend go.

Would she, at least, come for the wedding?

Definitely, if her mother's health permitted it.

There had been those, during their university days, who had cautioned Devika against Maya."After all," they had said, "she's the daughter of a thief. You shouldn't be leaving your money around like this."

"But wasn't he framed?"

"That's what everybody says about anybody who's been found guilty. Would an innocent man be sent to prison? That happens only in your literature books."

Apparently, Maya's mother had not recovered, for Maya did not attend Devika's wedding.

The ring Mahesh had put on her finger on the poruwa had compensated Devika for her former loss. And in spite of Priscilla Nenda's misgivings,Devika's marriage had turned out a success. Mahesh had proved a good husband, and she was proud of their only daughter. Yes, for all her annoying ways (God only knew where she got them from), Maheshika was a good girl, and she would miss her.

"I wonder where Maya is now," Devika ruminated.

The last Devika had heard from Maya had been a few days after the wedding, in the form of a cheque for five thousand rupees, with a short note of many thanks and best wishes for the future.

Devika recollected the day Maya had left. *That evening, she had gone upstairs to the visitors's room, where Maya had been staying. As Devika clicked on the bedside-lamp, the light fell on the four-poster bed on which the bridal and accessories were laid out, and a lump caught at her throat.*

What she had not divulged to anyone, was her own visit to a soothsayer, noted for her powers of recovering lost items. Driven by the desperation to clear her friend's integrity in her own mind, she had made that trip unknown to anyone.

Even as she stepped into the congested hut of the soothsayer, holding a sheaf of betel in her hands, she wondered whether it was not too late to turn back. After all, nobody in this out-of-the-way place knew her. The few clients seated cross-legged on the floor were not likely to meet her elsewhere. And they would be too pre-occupied with their own problems to be bothered about someone who stepped into the hut and left immediately. Yet while she was hesitating, a rough hand took her arm and led her to the inner room, where the soothsayer stood before a statue of a formidable-looking deity.

"Tell Meni your problem before she gets out of her trance," whispered the assistant.

"Once she comes out of it, it'll take her ages to get back into it."

Devika had been told that the soothsayer divined one's problems without having to be told, but anyway, she managed to stammer something about a lost ring.

"Ah, yes," rang out the voice of the Meni. "This individual seeks the identity of the person who took her ring." She rotated the incense-burner above her head thrice, and made her divine pronouncement:

"Kali Amma says that the last human flesh to come in contact with the ring was of a female with a needle in hand!"

Devika's last hopes were shattered. Now it was too late, too late to undo the terrible knowledge she had come so far to seek.

Did this woman really possess divining powers, or was she reading Devika's own subconscious mind? Was her friend guilty of theft, or was she herself, a suspicious ingrate? Who was the traitor in this precious friendship? Maya, for having betrayed a friend's trust, or she, Devika, for suspecting one so close and dear to her?

All the way back, Devika was debating with herself whether she was ready to forgive her friend if she had, indeed, taken the ring. Looking at the intricate needlework on the bed, she asked herself the same question.

Devika's eyes fell yet again on the photographs on the piano. She remembered how she had willed herself not to let the incident of the lost ring mar the most important event of her life. The photograph of herself as a radiant bride leaning on Mahesh's arm stood testimony to her success.

Even through the sepia photographs, the intricate work of the bridal came out. And one person had created it all; one needle had embroidered, beaded, sequined, all that beauty: a wedding present from a friend.

Where was this friend now? Had she got one of the teaching posts she had applied for, at the time of her own wedding? Was she married, and with children? Or was she friendless and poor? Devika looked at herself as a youthful bridal on the piano, as if the answer lay there. But the bride on the piano only smiled back at her in happy anticipation.

"Do you really think it was your friend who took the ring?" Maheshika dared to venture. She knew what delicate ground she was treading on. But her mother did not seem to have heard.

"Oh, dear!" Devika gasped.

"Why, what's the matter, Ammi?

From among the stuffing, Devika had taken something out: something round, and hard and sharp, and which did not feel like a piece of compressed cotton. Wiping away the fluff around it, she held it closer to her spectacles.

It was a thin gold ring with a white stone.

Neshantha Harischandra

ENGLISH WRITERS COOPERATIVE OF SRI LANKA POETRY AND SHORT STORY COMPETITION 2007

SECOND PRIZE
SHORT STORY

I Had It All

The new flat was everything I wanted, small, central and cozy. I knew we would be very happy here. In fact I was determined we would be. From my window in the kitchen I could see into the next block. The flat parallel to ours was occupied by a broody young man and an old lady and loud music vibrated from their house. Ideal, I thought to myself, just the kind of friends I need. Broody young man, even music, just my cup of tea.

The weeks sped by and we had lived there for two months. The initial settling in was lovely. The new curtains, white with yellow flowers, fluttered in the breeze. The new labour saving equipment in my tiny kitchen gleamed. If you are thinking I had it all I certainly did, including a husband who believed in me totally.

The restless feeling began creeping into my heart during the seventh month of moving in, and believe me I tried hard to fight it. It was then I began looking out of the window more often and was rewarded by a wave from the broody young man. Not so broody after all, I thought to myself. Strangely, the old dame gave no sign that she had seen me looking but went about her business. Most of the time she sat in front of a computer and seemed to be talking on the phone a good part of the day, and all this I could see through my window.

Dumb old biddy, I muttered, after she had ignored my attempts at friendship.

That Sunday I decided to act, much against that little murmuring voice in my head. Ranil would be at a seminar all day, as he was the chief speaker for Effects of Alcoholism on the Family.' Ha, Ha, Ironic. Waving him off cheerfully I went into the kitchen with a spring in my step.

Chocolate chip cookies, that should get him. I hummed as I mixed appropriate quantities. The delicious comforting aroma of chocolate filled our little flat. I would make extra. Naturally I will keep some for Ranil, that eased the niggling voice a little. I carefully patted them and arranged them on the baking tray. I sprinkled them with wafer thin pieces of very very expensive special chocolate chips, my specialty. This I did not spread on the cookies made for Ranil as I knew he did not like the taste.

As I waited for the cookies to bake, my thoughts slipped into the past. Frankly, the little voice in my heart was not niggly anymore, it was yelling. I chose to ignore it. Ranil would believe me, wouldn't he? He always did. He got what he wanted. I was pretty, everybody said so. Long dark hair, a slim figure and eyes that were so innocent, even if I may say so myself. People say eyes are the mirror of the soul. I knew for a fact that mine were not.

It was a stroke of luck, my meeting Ranil at the A A meeting . In case you are wondering what A A stands for Alcoholic Anonymous and not Automobile Association. No, I am not an alcoholic, but I virtuously attended quite a few meetings, coming across lots of do-gooders, none so foolish as Ranil. Yeah, Ok I have not given him a bad deal unlike other wives I know. I haven't slept around, bad-mouthed him and neither do I indulge in discrediting peoples characters. This I know Ranil appreciates and, best of all, he believes in me.

Well, I thought to myself, there is no harm in being friendly.....

The ping of the oven reminded me that the cookies were ready. I laid a white doily on a white plate, carefully, so that the melted chocolate chips looked inviting. They had turned out a beautiful dark brown, moist and tempting. Taking off my miniscule shorts and halter top I chose a navy blue cotton trouser and a white puffed sleeved top. I looked as if I was straight from the convent. Taking the plate I walked out of my flat. The raucous noise led me to the door very easily. Good; he was in there. Raising my hand to tap at the door it opened.

" Hi, "said the youth, wearing a pair of boxer shorts well below his hips. "Beautiful," I thought, what a splendid specimen. Yes, he was beautiful and for a moment my concentration was lost. His eyes were set wide apart, surprisingly dark, with dark eyelashes and thick bushy eyebrows, and a clean cut mouth, turned down at the corners. Hence the

broody look. His hair was brown, luxuriant and wavy. Meeting my direct gaze he self-consciously tried to comb his hair with his hands. "Hi", I replied, in my girl-scout voice. "Thought you and your mum might like some cookies. "I held the plate out. His eyes gleamed. "Thank you", he said. "I .....'There, behind him was the old bat. How did she come up so noiselessly?. Curiously I looked at her, my eyes looked into hers and I felt a jolt very like real fear go through me. Her eyes were dark grey, and shone like polished steel. Surprisingly clear for such a small frame. The boy turned towards her in haste, holding out the plate. "Hey Gran, this lady brought some cookies; you know, she lives across the block". "Yes" she replied in a quiet, resigned, curiously soft voice. "Thank you". Expecting to be invited in, I put my foot forward. Instead the grey eyes held mine for one more uncomfortable second and the door closed firmly in my face. Well I tried, so much for being friendly.

The next week was fairly uneventful, The young man was not listening to any music and the old woman seemed to be talking more on the phone, and glued to her computer. In fact, was I imagining it or did her eyes follow me all the time? Another peaceful week went by. I was happy, married life suited me. I had a car, I drove myself, visited friends, attended parties and kept busy. As the wife of a consultant surgeon we were invited to many functions and could have gone out every night if we wished. Ranil was a quiet man and preferred to be at home. He loved home cooked food and I loved to cook for him. As I said before,

I had it all.....The restless feeling in my heart continued. I ignored it and bought flowering plants, and little pots for the window sills.

It looked very summery. Occasionally I thought I could feel the old lady's grey eyes on my flowers as they bloomed in profusion, but I chose to ignore the feeling. I'd give her time, I thought. She would have to return the plate I gave her with cookies, wouldn't she? All I needed was patience and this I had in plenty.

My childhood was a happy one. I had loving parents and two sisters. We were close. Even now they would be horrified at my way of employment. Being friendly was in my nature, thus I was always above suspicion. My innocent eyes were my best weapon, combined with the aura of respectability, which I wore with great aplomb. That completed the picture. My marriage was now five years old. Ranil, I know, would have liked children. As a matter of fact so would I. Ranil had great faith in God

and he prayed , not knowing of course that God and I had a different sort of deal. At least I was not willing to bring an innocent life into this mess. Not till I had sorted myself out, and that did not look like it was going to happen for a very long time.

A couple of days later the restless feeling in my heart resurfaced. Time I thought to bake another batch of cookies. This time my heart was not in my baking but I mixed the ingredients carefully, as before, and soon the aroma of chocolate filled the air. I waited for the ping of the oven to tell me my tempting batch was ready .The sudden ring of the doorbell gave me a shock. Ranil couldn't be home so early I thought. It was just three in the afternoon . I opened the door. There stood the old bat from the block next door . The only thing was that she didn't look like an old bat anymore. In fact she looked like a tough old piece of steel. "Hi" I said brightly, "come on in, just making your grandson some more cookies." "Yes" she said, thoughtfully stepping in, "I got the aroma of chocolate". We stood ill at ease. Somehow for a mature person she exuded the feeling of a solid wall. Her eyes took in the flowers blooming happily on the window sill, the bright curtains flapping, a neat quiet flat beautifully kept.

"You like flowers", she said. It was a statement not a question. I kept quiet. Something compelled me not to scrutinize her closely. She looked back equally steadily. Curiously, the steady gray eyes seemed sad. Suddenly I caught a glimpse of a silver chain on her neck, and a number on a tab and felt a jolt of fear go through me. She caught my eye, and said " So now you know who I am. I recognized you the moment you stepped in through the door. My grandson and I ate the cookies," she continued. "You have it all now, but you people never learn, do you ? " I said nothing, the end had come too quickly for my liking. Every place we moved I had managed to stay at least a year till I was found out. Being a drug dealer was not an easy job. As she stepped out of the flat she said, "You have a choice, stay clean, or lose it all. See you, Carol". The door closed gently behind her. Just my luck, I fumed, to get the flat across A. J. Parker, Narcotics Detective Agent for Life that's what the silver chain meant. Oh well....may be I would persuade Ranil to move again....it was no fun being here with that woman watching every move of mine. The carefully planted flowers, an excellent hiding place for my weeds... chocolate chip cookies very special....very very lethal. I felt a vague regret.

Nelani Goonawardena

ENGLISH WRITERS COOPERATIVE OF SRI LANKA POETRY AND SHORT STORY COMPETITION 2007

THIRD PRIZE
SHORT STORY

The Touch

Savithri lay on her bed for a long time. She tried to recall Ananda's facial expressions, his features, his smile, and most of all, his touch. She could still feel his fingertips moving ever so slowly, softly, gently, on her skin. A warm tingling, giving rise to wonderful, indescribable sensations. Feelings that were almost unbearable. Almost. A heady rush of distant memories. Memories of Sumith.

She had met Ananda in Colombo two weeks ago, at a seminar on AIDS. He was a doctor, and had come as an observer. They had hit it off from the beginning. He was shy and withdrawn, with an innocence about him. During the lunch break they had sat together, and talked. He was forty years old and still unmarried, When she offered him a paper serviette after lunch, he carefully tore it into two halves, took one half for himself and returned the other to her.

"So thrifty, probably carrying the burden of parents and other dependents on his shoulders", Savithri thought to herself. His shyness and humility were endearing. He seemed to be genuinely surprised when she told him that she had two daughters in university.

"You must have married very young", he concluded.

"No", she had replied, laughing.

He had laughed with her, casting shy glances towards her. She found herself liking him very much.

She told him about her persistent illness, chronic rheumatism. Yes, she had seen a number of consultant doctors. Yes, she had taken medication, but the pain had not abated. He said he might be able to help.

Rheumatism was his pet area. He often went on field duty to Pepiliyana, and could easily drop in at her residence and examine her.

On the day he was to come, she made a few goodies, and dressed casually to await his arrival, True to his word, he came. It was a morning. Victor had been told about the doctor's impending visit. He had seemed glad.

Savithri suggested they should have tea before the examination, and he had agreed without hesitation, smiling shyly. He said the cutlets were delicious, and asked whether she had made them herself. When she said "yes", he had smiled again.

After tea, he opened his bag and took out a stethoscope, a small hammer, and a few other instruments. Then he looked around questioningly.

"What do you need?" she inquired.

"A bed. We need one."

For a moment Savithri was troubled. Apprehensive. Her pain was in the knees mostly. He could have examined her in the parlour, on a sofa, surely. After all, she was alone at home with the servant woman.

Hesitantly, she showed him into Victor's office room, throwing the curtains over the door as she entered. There was a low couch there for Victor to rest on.

"Will this do?" she asked him guardedly.

"This will be fine." He gestured her towards the couch.

He was very professional and thorough, He asked her questions, and she gave him answers, Her initial fear was subsiding. He felt her pulse. Savithri thought he was taking too long a time over this simple task. Before she could withdraw her hand, he moved his fingertips up her arm softly, ever so softly. Butterfly wings on a rose petal. A silken touch, sensual. Involuntarily, she shivered. Then he bent down and whispered in her ear "I want to kiss you." She slipped from the couch in a flash, and was out of the room. Breathing unevenly, she rushed to her bedroom and sat on the bed

to compose herself. A few minutes later she went to the kitchen. Anulawathie was busy cooking, quite unaware of her agitation. She had clearly heard or seen nothing. Savithri went quietly back to the parlour. The doctor came up to her, shoulders slumped, with averted eyes.

"I am sorry. I am extremely sorry. I don't know what happened to me."

"It is alright. Please leave now", she said.

'Shall I write a prescription?"

Savithri nodded. He took a prescription form and wrote on it. Leaving it on the tea-poy, he went out, without a word. In a few minutes she heard an engine come to life, and the crunch of tyres on the gravel. H e was gone.

Savithri sat still for an eternity, running everything through her mind. When she invited him home, not in her wildest dreams had she entertained any thoughts of a romantic involvement. But now she was perturbed. Something stirred in her, something far away, something frozen in a moment.

She awoke to the realization that it was the touch. The soft, tantalizing touch. She looked at her arm. She drew her fingertips along it. The way he had. Excited, she went to the office room, and lay on the couch. Closing her eyes, she drew her fingertips once again along her arm. She caught her breath. It was Sumith's touch. The same sensations, The same expectations, The same delight. The touch she had never thought to experience again. The touch that set her body on fire. Made her heart beat wildly.

Sumith had been her schoolgirl sweetheart, He was a young teacher then, and loved her madly. He wrote letter after letter expressing his love, gently, appealingly, imploringly.

Savithri had responded. She herself was so very shy that she never mentioned the word 'love' in her letters. She wrote about her friends, teachers, and what they did in school. When he vowed eternal love, she was afraid, for she felt she was not for him. But she had been frightened to let go, to lose a love that comes to you only once in a lifetime.

They had met several times at the bus stand, and at the railway station. His sister Nandani was always there. One day he suggested they should go somewhere and talk in peace, about themselves, and about their future together.

Savithri wanted to say 'no.' She was afraid, but at the same time tempted. No harm could come to her through him . Besides, Nandani would be there.

They went by train to Mirigama, where a friend of Sumith's had a beautiful estate. They sat by a gurgling stream and talked. Nandani had taken a book with her. She sat under a tree, out of earshot. They talked for hours. When it was time to leave, Sumith softly took her hand and whispered "My love, may I kiss you?" Savithri imperceptibly leaned towards him. She didn't say anything, but her heart was beating in anticipation. He moved his fingertips along her skin, up her arm. Touching , caressing, promising. Then he took her in his arms and kissed her. First on the forehead, then on the cheeks, and finally her lips. The first kiss. For a long moment he held her, and then murmured "I will love you for ever."

What happened in the aftermath was a hazy dream. The discovery, the turmoil at home, end of school career, hasty marriage to a young civil servant, giving birth to two daughters, and living a melancholy day-to-day life. Giving and taking lethargically, like an automaton.

And now this. The return of the magic, the thrill, the excitement reminiscent of the first love.

Two weeks passed. Savithri felt she had to see Ananda again. He had told her where he worked. He did not work in a hospital but was attached to an institute of public health. She would go to see him. The following day, after Victor had left for office, she dressed herself with care. She knew she looked nice in light blue. It gave a pleasant sheen to her complexion. She hired a three-wheeler and went to the institute. Her heart pounding, she got down from the vehicle and walked across to the portico.

A lady was coming out of the doorway. Mangala, a hall-mate at the university.

"Savithri, after such a long time. What has brought you here?"

"I came to see a doctor. He is treating me for my rheumatism." Savithri thought it was safer to tell the truth.

"Oh, Ananda. He is a genius with rheumatism."

They talked for a few minutes. She was the Co-director of the institute. Yes, we must meet and have a long chat one day about the good old days, but right now, the institute is busy organizing a massive exhibition, so she had to rush.

"Why don't you come and help us?" Mangala had asked her as they parted.

Savithri climbed up the steps. Mangala had told her where to find Ananda. She knocked on his door and entered. He was talking to a colleague.

As he raised his head, she saw the look of stark surprise and bemusement in his eyes. It was fleeting, though. He beckoned her to a seat. The colleague rose to leave.

"You look beautiful," he said in sheer admiration. She smiled, knowing that he meant it.

He told her they were getting ready for an exhibition. She told him that she knew about it. He asked her whether the drugs he had prescribed had given her any relief.

"Yes, I am very much better," she answered truthfully.

"How are your husband and the girls?"

"They are fine. Victor is very busy with the provincial elections."

"Is he blue or green?"

"Neither, but he hopes his cousin, who is contesting, will win."

Ananda was extremely courteous. The perfect gentleman. When she indicated that she had to go, and that she had come to see Mangala, he offered to give her a lift home.

When she got down at the gate, she asked him whether he would

come in for a cup of coffee. He declined graciously, politely.

"I will come some other time. Maybe after the exhibition." He smiled, waved and was gone.

Savithri sat down in a dark corner. Was she being a fool? Was she throwing herself at him? Going behind like a cheapskate? He might think she was a pushover, and despise her.

"My God, what am I doing? Am I going mad?" she asked herself.

In the days that followed, Savithri did nothing but think. She had to see Ananda, to cultivate a friendship. But why? She was not intending to have an affair with him. No, never. she would never be unfaithful to Victor. He was such a good husband and father. But her heart ached to see Ananda. There should be a way to do it without degrading herself.

Suddenly she remembered Mangala's invitation to help at the exhibition. She may not have meant it, but still. Quickly, she dialed Mangala's number at the institute. Mangala answered. Savithri told her that she was bored at home, with Victor busy at the election. Could she come over to help with the exhibition?

"Of course, come today if possible. We need as many hands as we can get."

The exhibition lasted four days. Unfortunately, Ananda was attached to another section. She passed him several times in the corridor. He was always so polite. Once or twice a day she visited 2B, his section, on one pretext of the other. He gave polite answers to her inquiries. She was puzzled by the extreme. Had he forgotten the day he came to her home? Was he playing hard to get, to hurt her?

Came the last day of the exhibition. Incidentally it coincided with the day of the provincial elections. The votes were being counted. Savithri decided to take the bull by the horns. She walked boldly to 2B. They were busy packing up, with Ananda supervising.

"Ananda, can you give me a lift home? Victor will be very late. He is the returning officer you know."

He hesitated for a second. "Yes, can you come over when you

have finished?"

"Yes, I will."

Savithri told Mangala that she had to hurry home. She was worried about Wimalasena, Victor's cousin, who was contesting the election. Somebody had rung up to say that he was not doing very well.

Quickly she wound up her tasks, and walked to 2B. It was in disarray. Shreds of paper, crumpled up papers, and all sorts of odds and ends were strewn around the floor and on the furniture. But where was Ananda? He had said he would take her home. She rushed to the window to see whether his car was in the compound. It was not.

Something burned inside her. He had left. He had seen through her. He had sneaked out like a coward, without a word. He had wished to escape. She walked slowly down the steps.

"Want a lift, Mrs. Seneviratne?" It was Dr. Dassanayake.

"Yes, thank you."

She was silent all the way home.

"Anything wrong?"

"Yes, Victor's cousin is losing."

"Politics is a gamble. These things happen."

Back home, she sat brooding in a dark corner in the verandah. "Why, Ananda, why? Why did you do this to me? I was content with my life with Victor. Now I am not so sure."

Try as she might, she could not cry. She heard Victor's car at the gate. Simon ran to let him in. Victor walked up to her.

"Wimale lost."

Tears rolled down Savithri's cheeks. She cried as she had never cried before.

"Why are you crying? I didn't think that you would take Wimale's

defeat so much to heart. Hush now, it's alright."

Victor put his arms lovingly around his still sobbing wife, and gently led her into the house.

Chandra Dayaratne

PART 2

ENGLISH WRITERS COOPERATIVE OF SRI LANKA ENTRIES FOR CHANNELS VOLUME 14 NUMBER 1 2007

August 4, 2006 in Muttur

Panic in Muttur.
A silent procession wends its way,
Bundles slung, babes on hips,
Balancing pots on their heads,
To Kantalai;
That haunted expression seen before,
Across the world through endless time,
The pathos of leaving a loved home.

Safe in Muttur.
That's what they're told
Silently they trek back home,
Return to a lie
Of unsettled disputes
And raging battles.
Panic pervades.

Oppression in Muttur.
Bewildered people
Run here, run there,
Anywhere, somewhere,
Away from Muttur,
To make-shift homes
Live there,
Die there,
Chasing elusive safety
And peace unknown.

In Muttur
Mystery shrouds
Seventeen massacred bodies
Lying in a row,
Bound and gagged,
Shot without mercy,
They only came to help.
In war-torn Muttur
Panic persists.

Priyeni de Silva McLeod

Sambuka - The Low Caste Tapasa

A grieving Brahmin
Carrying the corpse of his young son
Cursed Rama
And threatened a hunger strike
Unto death if the sin
That caused his son's death
Was not found and expiated.

Rama called his council
Eight learned Rishis and Narada
Who advised him
Of a Sudra
Aspiring to be a Tapasa
Transgressing Dharma
Doing only what Brahmins should do

Great Rama's duty
It was to find and punish
The evil doer and reassert Dharma
End the premature deaths
Among the twice born.
So promptly he set out
In his aerial car for the hunt.

At last, in a wild region
Rama espied
A man practising austerities
Inquiring his genealogy
Found the Tapasa was a Sudra
A practising Yogi aiming mocsha
Named Sambuka

Great Rama cut off Tapasa's head
Instantly without a warning
Expostulation
Or any address
For a Sudra deserved
No explanation, no pity
Had no rights.

Even before the severed head
Fell to the ground
The dead youth regained his breathing
And Deva's descended from heaven
Singing Rama's praises

Sages commended his action
And gifted a divine bracelet.

Such is the greatness
Of caste preserving Dharma
The divine justice of wrath
Against the Sudras seeking holiness
Crossing of the boundaries laid by Vedas
Misconstruing as good what was evil
Sadu, Sadu to Rama the righteous avenger.

(Tapasa - An ascetic)

Basil Fernando

In The Heart Of A Brother

"The desert is not remote in southern tropics,....
"The desert is in the heart of your brother."

T.S.Eliot, Choruses from 'The Rock'1

He lay on his back, spread out as if awaiting crucifixion, unmoving, arms stretched straight outward on either side of him like thin, black lianas impressed in the dust of the estate road.

Above, in the sunset colours of the sky, endless ranks of jerking, silent bats rose and fell as if on strings, moving eastward, moving ever eastward to the feeding and the engorgement of the night.

The man in the road lay unaware of the bats. Neither did his eyes, though open, see the great orange globe melting down into clouds at the edge of the sky, although everything was bright with a final, dying brightness.

But for all their not seeing, his eyes wept silently, and his cheeks dripped with the sorrow of days past and nights long gone, when sorrow would pile onto sorrow, into months and years of penury and suffering and desolation.

From the long, curving lip of the road, the green carpet of tea, that was now becoming a swiftly-shifting pattern of dark and light, swept downward into the valley. In the deeper hollows far below, chill and darkness already sat.

When the recovery detail stumbled over Velu in the light of a half moon some hours later, he was snoring gently, wrapped in the strong, anaesthetic fumes of the *kasippu* he had been drinking all afternoon, crouched by himself on the broken slabs of pavement in front of the township's 'Wine Store'.

The recovery detail comprised his 'registered' wife of the last thirty five years or so; another female of uncertain age and family relationship (if any), on whom he had also, from time to time in the past, bestowed conjugal favours; an adolescent son, a chip who, following the example set by the old block, now had a taste, when opportunity arose, for the delights

of the Wine store; two pre-teen grandsons, who bounded hither and thither, and kept up an endless stream of comments in a major key; and lastly and least, an amazingly robust pi-dog who pranced round the grandsons, tail swishing furiously.

When they set out, the recovery detail had also included Velu's mother-in-law who insisted on coming, not because of any love for a wandering son-in-law, but because she sensed material for innumerable, future exchanges with fellow crones during warm afternoons squatting by the line-rooms.

However, when the detail left the path from the lines to slither and stumble down the short cut to the hairpin bends of the estate road below, the old lady felt the customary agonies of pain in her right leg, spine and left shoulder, recompense for years of plucking tea leaf in all weathers, and hauling it in sacks over impossible terrain and distances to the weighing-shed.

She therefore opted out of this expedition, reluctantly, and groaned as she sank down into a tussock of weeds between the tea bushes. She wished she was within reach of her half-bottle of pain-killer (known at the Wine Store as arrack), which she kept secreted away in a covered hole in the broken cement floor under her bed.

There was no hope, of course, of her wish being fulfilled because the painkiller was necessarily an expensive, secret remedy, and no one could be called out to, even if they were within earshot, and trusted enough to be asked to fetch it. The old lady therefore made further expressions of despair, fuelled now by the burgeoning pains that usually left her breathless and half-conscious.

And as the sounds and chatter of the others dwindled away down the steep and narrow, broken way amidst the tea, the ghosts of decades past, planters, and *kanganies* or supervisors, and miscellaneous bullies, who had disdained her, lorded it over her, came now and closed around where she sat as if mocking her wretchedness.

Velu awoke to a lusty thumping on his chest. It must have been going on for a while because the hurt of it was already etched deeply into his rib-cage.

He became aware of other discomforts: the hardness of the

ground on which he lay, the cold of the night -wind, the strident tones of his wife, Mariamma, as she thumped him, making all the familiar imprecations he knew and hated. He wished then, more than anything else, for another cupful of *kasippu* and quick death.

His son hauled him to his feet, and he stood there unsteadily, quivering in the faint light of the moon, the chill wind cutting through his scant clothing like a pruning-knife. His grandsons reached as high as they could, and pummeled whatever parts of his anatomy were within their reach, ostensibly to awaken and sober him up, but more to enhance the fun the evening had brought them.

His sarong fell off, his grandsons doubled over and whacked each other with raucous laughter, the dog lifted its head and barked, his wife's imprecations redoubled, and his paramour of other times averted her gaze.

His son and wife struggled with him up the longer route of the estate road to lines, with the others trailing along, each at their own pace. Their particular line was a squiggly row of seven, jerry-built rooms in front of which was a bare compound of brown earth, dipping suddenly over the edge into a sloping, untidy field of tea bushes.

A knot of neighbours were in the compound, speaking loudly and volubly and all together, grouped around mother-in-law whom they had discovered and helped up over the edge from the field below. They fell silent at the slow approach of the recovery detail and the star attraction, the tottering Velu supported by his son.

An older man called out to Velu: "*Aiyyar*, have you been down to the Factory Office for your good lady's wages? And what did you buy with it? Baby food?"

Another of the men had the good grace to stifle a guffaw, but the girls and young women tittered helplessly behind their palms.

Velu turned his bleary, unfocused eyes towards the group, all of whom were now trying, without success, to conceal their amusement.

"Yes," he said. "And may your sons shoot up straight and tall and sturdy, and carry you on their shoulders when you become more decrepit and infirm."

Although the words were not in themselves malign, indeed could be considered benedictory, the way he said them suggested that, in some convoluted way, he meant them as an insult.

Still leaning heavily on his son, he moved away towards the door of the family line-room, held open by Mariamma, his wife, silent for the time being.

Before going inside, he half-turned again towards the neighbours having thought of something else to say.

"May your women take in basketfuls of perfect green leaf by day, and unwrap and bestow on you, in the evening, waist-cloths full of money given them by their *kanganies,* and by night may they conceive for you many more lusty sons."

He staggered in then, his right hand raised in solemn, mock salutation.

Velu awoke in the stillness of the night, ravaged with thirst, and sat on the side of his low bed contemplating the throbbing in his head.

His, and his wife's mother's, were the only beds in the single room. Sleeping forms were strewn all over the floor, some uncovered, some huddled in blankets and sheets. Mariamma, ensconced in the thickest blanket of all, had pride of place by her husband's bed.

Velu, rising, picked his way unsteadily through the sleepers to the door, guided by the half-light from outside.

The night was cold and bright, with crystal-clear stars augmenting the moon. He made his way to the single tap at the end of the compound, opened it and bent down and drank greedily.

He stood then and looked out over the moon-lit valley, and called to mind the goodness and beauty of those he had known and loved here, in this the only place he had ever known.

Back in bed, the anger and angst of old age settled again in his bones.

He lapsed gradually into dreaming, and by then he was weeping

again, in his sleep, not now out of drunkenness, but out of hunger and helplessness, and from recollections of watching gargantuan eating and frolic.

The Great White Master sat apart with rich food and drink set before him, and the lesser masters laughed and spoke loudly, each to each, perhaps of the simple foolishness of those who plucked and pruned and weeded, perhaps of how adroitly they, these young masters, had chased balls over the carefully-tended turf of their drinking clubs.

As they sprawled at table, from these young gods came the huge sounds of their devouring, and the drunken laughter of their drinking. And in the wide, polished hallways, other lordlings sprang and danced like the young cockerels do, Velu thought in his dream-sleep, on the dung-heaps of our habitations.

In the trees outside, overhanging the revelry, the giant fruit-bats hung upside down in the dark, and grumbled, and gorged themselves also.

*

"What the hell," asked Travis Delcote, at ease on the spacious verandah of his Bungalow, "was Velu up to last night?"

Ravi hesitated, sipped his tea, then said, "Oh, just the usual, Sir. Went to town with his wife's wages, back drunk as a lord. This time he passed out on the road by Field Number Ten, slept there in the moonlight for a couple of hours until found and carried up to the lines by his people."

Delcote said, "Is that all? Appu brought in gossip, with my bed-tea this morning, that the labour in Upper Division were riled about insults he had hurled at all and sundry last night. Heard that?"

"There was some murmuring among a few of the women at muster just now, true, "Ravi replied. "But I wouldn't give it much thought, Sir, if I were you. Velu is a good old stick, Sir, really..... ."

The roar of a 500 c.c. Norton motor-cycle died in the driveway, and Delcote's other Assistant Superintendent came rushing up the steps to where they sat.

"Hari thoppi, Sir, " broke out Thusitha, beside himself with boyish excitement, and then pulled up short, remembering whom he was talking to.

Pained by this insufferable solecism, and in a native tongue at that, Delcote gave him the slow stare of an upper-crust Britisher constantly concerned to show that he had sacrificed much of his life building Empire, far from pining family and affluent living in agreeable climes.

Thusitha wound down and started again. "News, Sir, I bring bad news, Sir," he said.

Delcote asked, with wry Scottish humour, "What is it, Paul Revere? Are the British coming?"

Thusitha, who never once understood his Superintendent's allusions, said, "No, Sir, not the British. The workers, Sir. The workers are coming, Sir. The men are going to beat up old Velu."

Delcote tried hard not to grin, and the more urbane Ravi, who had gone to the School by the Sea, turned away to look out over the lawn and hide his amusement.

*

That afternoon, at Delcote's bidding, Ravi drove Appu up the hill to the lines on Upper Division to fetch Velu back to the Bungalow. Delcote and Ravi both felt that, in the circumstances, protective custody was the best for Velu (and for the Estate) until tempers cooled.

Appu spent a good one hour communing with Velu and Mariamma in their line-room. Meanwhile, Ravi sat in his car agonizing, as he frequently did, over the condition of worker accommodation. What real changes had there been, he wondered, over the last one hundred and fifty years?

What adults there were in the other line-rooms remained firmly indoors, but the children entertained themselves peeping out at him.

Eventually Appu emerged, flanked by a down-in-the-mouth Velu and a feisty Mariamma. Making up rear were Mariamma's mother (visibly bolstered by her painkiller, and therefore happier), the younger son, and a couple of the smaller children with the pi-dog.

Appu got into the back of the car with Velu, presumably to keep him from decamping going round a bend. They set off, watched by suddenly-emerged adults, and chased, until they reached an impossible speed, by children and the dog.

When Delcote had retired for the night, Appu and Velu sat side-by-side on the kitchen step, in silence.

Appu was inordinately fond of Delcote's port, a drink or two of which he surreptitiously helped himself to, every night. Now having taken his portion, he hospitably passed the bottle to Velu and went in to a call of nature. This proved a grievous error. When he emerged some minutes later, Velu was nowhere to be seen; neither was the precious bottle of purloined port.

Velu was located, after a short search, at the front of the Bungalow under the largest of the fig trees, where the bats were already at their nightly feast. The port was nearly all gone, as was Velu.

When he saw Appu coming, Velu made a clumsy, inebriated jump for one of the lower branches, hung on, hauled himself up and sat there straddling the branch, just out of Appu's reach.

Having got his wind back, he stood up swaying precariously. He began shinning up the trunk to the next branch.

Appu called out, panic in his voice: "Take care, ah."

But Velu was beyond caring. He kept going upwards, interrupting the bats' feeding and causing them to flutter out of his way. All around was foetid bat odour, and the sweet, acidulous scent of figs, split open and ripe.

At last he stopped, a long way up, and listened to the rustling, trembling laughter of wings, as the bats moved and jostled. The wings were laughing at him, he knew. And suddenly, explosively there was even louder laughter from below, the roaring laughter from the tables of the Great White Master and the young gods; the metallic scraping and squeaking of the dancing shoes of the Lordlings in the hallways; the huge dancing lamp lighting up the lawn. Velu knew then that they had come for him.

As if in obedience, Velu fell head downwards to the foot of the tree

Thusitha, come from the factory to report to Delcote on the start of the night's black tea manufacture, braked violently when he saw the body plummeting down from the tree. He silenced the roaring from the big, explosive Norton, switched off its lights, and went to see what he could do.

Wester Modder

Crumbling Shadows

Black red embers rise over the pyre
Like fireflies flitting excitedly in the dark

Behind a wooden face a heart breaks
Leaving only heaving shards
Grief held tight in shadows awaits
The silent darkness where all is still

Waiting for relief, for the incessant rain
For far away thunder, growling under breath,
For patters and roars that swiftly drown
The pits and falls that litter within

But pain flows free as in a gutter nearby,
In slow drawn breaths, hushed waters gush
Winds dismember the crumbling shadows
Before dying silently; smashed against walls

The colours of death dart to the sky
Eager for the imminent untainted new life
But I lie awake, wrapping old memories
In decaying shadows, to shield from the rain

Manikya Kodithuwakku

Breadmaker's Time

The breadmaker bids for time:
she steals
yeast seconds; kneading minutes; baking hours; rising days.

Sandy yeast granules,
feeding on sweetness,
discover life through water
warmed by the day's heat.
Birth and life are instant.

White flour flies into the air, seeps defiantly
through the hands of the 3 o'clock afternoon
into the breadmaker's hourglass,
and begins its descent.
This is her time.

Frothing liquid yeast, wheaten powder are
rolled into dough;
a live flesh that grows pliant, satiated,
each time
the hands dig into its body.
delve twist turn and rise
delve twist turn and rise
again
again

Her hourglass listens to the sound of
a human working;
the body, breathing, softly breathless, offering itself to its
crafting hands.
The sand stops flowing.
This is the breadmaker's time,
the poet's time, the lover's time,
when nothing moves
into the past or future.
Only hands
delve twist turn and rise

delve twist turn and rise
again
again

Then
arms hot,
fingers pungent
knuckles throbbing white,
are wrenched out and
the breadmaker returns to their time.
To rise one hour,
To bake, seared in two hundred degrees,
for 30 minutes.
To rest, cooling on wire racks,
for ten.
To go back to conversations, obligations,
for a lifetime's duration.

She carries the loaf; steaming, crusted,
to the family.
Steps into the dining room.
Serrated steel cuts through
and a hand
lifts butter onto silver, spreads it, melting,
on the breathing surface in one stroke.
Someone suggests: "it should have stayed a bit longer in the oven."

She sees the sand plunge, emptying
the upper dome in one fall.
The breadmaker's time vanishes like
the slices on the table.

Ramya Chamalie Jirasinghe

On the Edge

Dudley ran his fingers through his thinning grey hair and kept checking his watch as he waited for his sister Rupa. She lived in Colombo and often visited him at their ancestral home in Kandy, which was now his permanent abode.

The toot of a horn made Dudley shout: "Arnolis, quickly open the gate." Arnolis, the old family retainer, hobbled to the gate, his arthritic legs straining with every step.

The car stopped under the porch and Rupa's ample figure emerged from the back seat. "Ah, how nice to see you *nangi* - why didn't Charlie *aiya* and Mother come?" he asked. Rupa remained silent for a moment. "Oh - they - they just couldn't come. What's this about you getting headaches again?"

Rupa kissed her brother on both cheeks.

" Yes - yes - sometimes they get really bad. Then I just have a good long sleep. When I spoke to mother last Tuesday she said that she's got some good oil for my headaches . Did she send any ? " Rupa shook her head.

They went into the spacious sitting room. The ebony furniture stood solid on the rose patterned carpet. Photographs of family members, which adorned the walls and tables, gazed somberly out of their frames. Dudley and Rupa chatted as they drank tea, ate chunks of butter cake and tiered vegetable sandwiches. Dudley dabbed his face with a large monogrammed handkerchief.

After a while Rupa said, " Dudley, would you like to come back with me to the town house ?"

"Oh yes - the town house!" he said, clasping his hands together. They used to go to school from the town house and spend their holidays in Kandy. Although he preferred living in the old spacious house in Kandy, Dudley liked visiting the town house off and on. It was close to the cinemas and he could visit old friends. Mostly, he could be with his mother and brother again.

Dudley immediately sent for the gardener and told him to pluck

some plantains and coconuts for him to take to Colombo. He got the cook to pack up the remaining butter cake. Then he rushed to his room, flung open his cupboard and tossed some clothes onto the bed for Arnolis to pack "Put in my good suit, Arnolis, I'll need it incase there's a dinner or some function - like a wedding." His eyes lit up.

Arnolis folded the clothes carefully and placed them in the open suitcase on the bed.

Rupa wandered through the house remembering her childhood , remembering how they used to come here for their school holidays. The day Dudley had a blackout and how they had to rush him to hospital. A tumour. The next few days were a blur in her memory but she did recall how she used to visit Dudley in hospital after his brain surgery. How for weeks he hardly moved and hardly spoke.

They brought him back home and after many months he began to walk and even say a few words. The doctors considered it a miracle that he had recovered so well. But Dudley wasn't the same. He couldn't remember things and someone always had to be there to keep an eye on him. He spoke of long ago events as though they had just taken place, people who were no longer there. Rupa wished he would come down to Colombo and live with her and Sena. They could look after him. Now she had to make a trip to Kandy at least once a week to see how he was. Some days Dudley would be depressed and these were the most difficult times for him and everyone else too. He even tried to commit suicide once. She had to persuade him to leave this place.

Pedris the old cook had turned out a splendid dinner as usual. Soup and a course of roast chicken with vegetables on the side. Trifle pudding to round it all up, followed by coffee. Just like old times when Rupa was a young girl. Dudley always enjoyed his food and spent time savouring the various flavours. Rupa was tired and would have liked to have gone to bed, but Dudley insisted they drink their coffee in the living room, so she couldn't refuse.

"Why don't you come and stay with us Aiya- we have a separate annexe and you can live there and we'll be right next door."

"For a few days, a few days - I'd love to of course - but this - here -" he rolled his eyes and lifted his arms, " this is where I belong." He sipped his coffee. Rupa sighed. The usual story - it always ended like this. He'd come

down for a few days and then clamour to get back to Kandy.

Rupa slept in the bedroom formerly used by her mother and father. The old four-poster bed still stood strong. She lay on the soft pillows and looked up at the canopy high above her. Transparent curtains draping the sides were drawn together, secluding her outer world. The ceiling fan droned as it twirled its blades. Soon she was fast asleep. She woke up early and looking out of her window saw Dudley tending his rose garden. He was smiling and talking, whether to the roses or to himself she couldn't tell. His face bore a childlike innocence and was radiant with happiness. What are we going to do with Dudley, she thought. I can't really take him totally away from here because he's so happy here, but how can we keep this arrangement going. The house costs so much to maintain and running it is such a nightmare. If only he would decide to come with us.

The breakfast table was laden with food. Bread, boiled eggs, pol sambol, kiribath, lunumiris and tinned fish curry. Dudley was in no hurry to leave - "First we must eat well and then get on the road."

They left an hour later. Paddy fields with their iridescent green stalks and acres of coconut plantations gradually gave way to crammed concrete buildings as they neared a town. The air conditioning in the car sheltered them from the scorching heat. The traffic closed in as they neared Colombo and they inched along,

"Before we go home I have to take you to see Sena." said Rupa, "He'll give you something for your headaches."

"Oh - I hope we are not delayed" said Dudley pulling out his handkerchief and wiping his face. The receptionist let them into a room where a fair. bespectacled gentlemen sat behind a desk. He smiled when he saw Dudley and Rupa.

"Ah Dudley how nice to see you! I hope you are going to stay with us for some time and not run off like you usually do," Sena said.

Rupa looked worried. " He's getting headaches again."

Dudley looked at his watch. "I hope this doesn't take long - I'll be late to see mother and Charlie aiya."

Sena looked at Rupa for a moment. Then he said "This shouldn't take long."

Rupa sighed as she remembered her mother and brother who had died years ago.

Anthea Senaratna

For Destry
(my son who died too young)

It's hard to think you're sleeping
In this quiet resting place,
You who never could sit still,
Going at a heady pace;
Loving life the way you did,
The stir of living things,
The busy streets, the thrum of wheels,
The rush of beating wings.

On motorcycle rocketing
You climbed Hantane's crest,
You scoured the Knuckles ranges,
Explored with boyhood zest....
And now, so young, you've gone to sleep
To lie in Death's embrace
Or have you gone exploring
Some other lovely place?

How can this graveyard hold you,
Your bright quicksilver mind?
No! You are boldly on your way,
New delights to find!

Carl Muller

The Woman With The Two Kids

I feel a vacuum in my heart
when I see the deserted abode.

Where have you gone
with your two kids?

I dare not ask anyone.
for your whereabouts –
my pride of being a gentleman.

I still remember the day
when my fingers went into my pocket
to find a coin for you.

Your kids were two small creatures;
they grew up to be toddlers
on the squalor of the pavement,
braving the wind, sun and rain.

The elder was cuddling and playing with his baby sister
in the garden of your lap, with your legs outstretched.

You were feeding with the milk of woe
from your lean breasts.

So it was a ritual for me;
to drop a coin onto your spoon-like palm,
and you to murmur "God bless you"
with desolate eyes.

I used to think
how could a beggar woman
plead for my happiness
when she herself is not blessed.

But I was happy
because she gave me a chance
to gain merit every day.

Blessings to you, dear lady;
from you flows merit
to my hungry soul.

A. A. B. Q. S. Bandara.

Afterwards

Again
it rings
piercing
the midnight sky
and reluctantly
picked up
but not a word
only sobbing
sobbing
sobbing
so telling
as heart strings
so tense
so sharp
and bitter
unlike
the soft words
and enchantment
of hours ago
now only
a stone's throw away
yet so far
for one lying alone
restlessly wondering
what the dawn
will bring.

R. D. K. Jayawardena

The Patriot

The first time I remember him is when he punched me in the stomach for eating his share of ice-cream. This was when I was four years old, and since then we shared many better and worse experiences. Rohan, my brother was tall and handsome, and even though we had many fights and quarrels over almost everything, there was a special bond between us, a tie that could not be broken by anything or anyone. It was always difficult to get the bigger part of a chocolate or the larger share of cake because Rohan would always be the first to grab it, but in the end he would say sorry and give me a bite from his share. When the computer was bought I was twelve and he fifteen, and we fought over who would own it. After a while my brother "consented" to give me full control over "Word" and "Power Point", and I was so excited. My brother's first cricket match caused a big sensation in the house and my father, mother and I prepared for it weeks ahead, and went armed with banners and pom-poms on the special day. The ball struck Rohan's finger and blood dripped out; yet he bravely played on, and this was when I realized what a great "fighter" or "hang-on guy" my brother was. He would never give up until he achieved his goal, and even in schoolwork he was the same. My parents held pride in their voices whenever they spoke of him and so did I. I felt that my brother could achieve anything he wanted to, and felt unusually happy when this player with the injured finger won the cricket match for his team by scoring the highest number of runs.

It was always a pleasure to chat to Rohan and share the happenings of the day. Each year we grew closer to each other and I was envied by my friends for having a big brother. Even when Rohan fell in love I was the first to hear of it, and I can still remember the day he came up to my room and shyly said "Nangi, I've got a girlfriend". I couldn't stop laughing and hardly heard his next few words, "But don't worry. You'll always have a special place in my heart no one else can fill". When I received my O/L results Rohan was overjoyed and took me for a special "treat", which was having lunch out with him. We studied the Bible together, listened to music and even discussed fashion and clothing. There was never a dull moment with Rohan for we could be fighting over a trifle, or else chatting till the world around us slipped away. Rohan was the hero of my life, my comfort in times

of distress, my fighting partner, my friend in times of loneliness and boredom and the only big brother I ever had. Such was our relationship.

One fine, sunny day when my parents had gone out on some business, Rohan came from town, looking extraordinarily serious and subdued. "Hey, what's up Ro! It won't hurt to smile when you see your sister!" I cried out. "Nangi, I've got to tell you something" were Rohan's only words and we went up to his room to have another one of those "chats". I asked him what this big secret was. "You've always known that I love to fight and fight to the end when I'm at something" he said, and all I could say was "Oh, yeah", wondering what on earth could be brewing. Rohan quietly said: "Well, Nangi, please forgive me for not telling you, but a few months ago, with Mother's and Father's consent, I sent in an application to join the army and today I received a letter letting me know that I've been accepted. I have to go to Colombo in a week and register at the army base." I was speechless, confused beyond words and could do nothing but stare at him. A lump came into my throat "But...but...how can you?" was all that came out of my mouth, and I was sobbing in his arms for how long I do not know. I can vaguely remember him saying "I love my country and want to serve it in the best way I can. I know I have the strength to fight and my conscience will not let me wait idly at home." I did not want to hear anything that would take my beloved big brother so far way from me, to unknown places where the safety of life could not be ensured. I begged, pleaded, cried and asked him to change his mind, but at the back of my mind I knew it was all in vain. My 'fighter' brother had set his mind on this and nothing or no one could change his decision. The choice was his and it was made.

The day came when Mother and I packed his bags for him, loaded them with goodies, and tearfully hugged Rohan 'goodbye'. We prayed as a family before this parting, and it was not easy to keep back the tears. Daily life without my brother around was unimaginable, and I did not want to even think of the danger lying in wait for him. When Rohan finally looked into my eyes and hugged me farewell I could bear it no longer, and a torrent of tears gushed out of my red, swollen eyes. I watched his tall, straight, smart figure going out of the gate and into the wide, strange world!

From that day onwards I found myself missing Rohan more than I could have ever imagined. Life went on as usual, and I even got a job as an accountant in a nearby store, but at the back of my mind always lurked the thought that it would be at least eight or nine months before I got to see my

brother. I had letters from him often, and it was always a treat when he was able to call from his army camp and chat for a few minutes. As time wore on and I grew up into a young woman I felt our relationship growing ever stronger, richer and more intimate, for though we were far apart we were not so in spirit. I felt I knew Rohan's army camp inside out because he explained and described everything to me when he had the time and energy. Rohan's first visit back home was no less wondrous than a dream, and I wished I could hold onto that moment, those few hours spent together, forever. Rohan's visits were something to look forward to each year and this became the greatest event in our family calendar.

Time passed by and a few months after Rohan's fourth visit I came back home from work with plans for my twenty third birthday party in two weeks time. To my utter amazement and despair I found my mother sobbing, her shoulders hunched, her hands all crumpled up, while Father, with his arms around her was trying to comfort her and at the same time trying to control himself from breaking down. My thoughts immediately flew to Rohan and I heard a voice strangely unlike my own screaming "What is this? Tell me what happened!" My father limply handed me an envelope in which there was a small, mean, cold little note that read,

Dr. and Mrs. Abayasekara,

It is with great regret that we inform you that your son Rohan Abayasekara was killed in action. Please accept our sympathies. The remains will be brought to your house on Monday, the twelfth of March.

Yours truly,
(sgd.)
Army Officer II

The world around me crumbled, and with it went the happiness and ambitions of twenty three long years. Life was no longer livable and I dragged myself to my room and lay there unable to move or think. The lively spirit in me died that day and I could not bear to even think of what lay before me, a lonely, hard, empty road where no loving brother would be waiting to embrace and encourage me, to spur me on to greater heights. I found no tears in my eyes, only a barrier in my mind which stopped me from thinking and yet gave me pain, intolerable beyond explanation.

The remains of my darling big brother, the best 'fighter' I have

ever known, came the following day. The sound of silence was unbearable. I felt a nauseating sickness, and anger, hurt, regret and sorrow churned inside me like torrents of water. Through eyes that did not really see I looked first at Rohan's legs, then his stomach and his hands. Then I turned my head and saw his face. Even though his body was charred, wounded and blackened Rohan's face was the same even in death, strong, proud and beautiful. I looked out of the window at the world outside, the busy life going on, as always. And no one knew; and no one cared that my brother had died for them.

Shalini A. Abayasekara

A Thousand Ships

Once when she was
in his arms
he told her
in the warm afterglow
of love
that she had a face
that could stop ships

but right now
he is yelling at her
no one should trust
a good- looking woman
because she can
never be faithful.
He isn't listening to her explanation
so her mind escapes the present
to an uncomplicated past
spent laughing in lecture halls
and canteens that served
plain tea in glasses
and hysterical TT matches
in the gym.
to a term paper she wrote long ago,

to a metaphor of a compass
and a lyric about
a mandrake root.
Donne would agree with him of course
tell him it would be easier
to go and catch a falling

star.
Somewhere between his accusations
and her defence
the brutal silence is filled
by the sound of a TV

Brad Pitt is talking on HBO
of the making of "Troy"
and that famous woman
whose face launched ships
He's saying (in that affected voice of his)
"It sure is amazin' how somethin' as innocent as love
can set off such violence"

Vivimarie VanderPoorten

Dying Can Be Funny

Two clowns were shot today
somewhere in South America.
Spectators thought
they were playing dead
and laughed
until they cried
until the red painted mouths dissolved
and dripped
down yellow striped shirts
down purple pants
until they made
pools on their pointed shoes

Vivimarie VanderPoorten

A Place With No Room

Its forked tongue
licks the air as
the serpent, coiled tight
against a wall,
tries to unwind
its form.
The tongue flicks,
forking, stabbing
for water in the air.
Sunlight
in a garden.
This room is full.
There is no crevice
for the length of a snake
that has been
winding slithering
poisonous-harmless
feared-trembling
venerated-
death defying
life sustaining
Buddha sheltering.
this dancing Naga.

There is no room here,
in this sanitised house.
Here
where the serpent's skin,
speckled grey-green
rainbowed by light,
is
stripped
burnt
and
hung.
its
charred
scales
highlighted
against an
insidious
saffron:
a
lesson
in
darkness

Ramya Chamalie Jirasinghe

Another Eve

Every evening
in one particular spot
a solitary passion-fruit lay
on a bed of dry leaves,
of an indescribable shade of purple
dropped from a vine
atop a tangle of trees
the size of a small apple

For one brief moment,
I am Eve
tantalised by the perfection
of a mysterious fruit
stroking its smooth surface
determined to know more,
I raise it to my lips

The crisp brown leaves rustle,
a suspicion of a slither

Premini Amerasinghe

The Hero

I still remember the day I saw a tractor for the first time.

It was early morning and my parents were attached to the black and silver transistor radio like metal blocks to a magnet. For some reason, the radio had suddenly assumed an important role in our house - even more important than I! Every time a voice spoke on the radio my parents would react in several predictable ways: their eyes would stare at the radio as if it were a film; at times my mother would slap her forehead with her palm. She generally did that when things were really really bad.

The words spoken over the radio did not make any sense to me. But one word stuck to my memory like a leech to a foot: 'Curfew.' I assumed that the word meant something bad, something black - because, though I could not understand it, I could feel it and touch it. Things were not alright! In fact I wanted to ask my parents what the word meant, but changed my mind in the last minute! My parents were hopeless when it came to explaining anything new. Their long and winding explanations usually confused me, and I ended up being called "a small brain." I did not like that.

The sound of the tractor came into our lives like a giant exclamation-mark from the sky. Now it was the radio. Then suddenly it was this reverberation that drowned the sound of the radio. My mother cried "Aiyoooo!" My father punched the table and cursed: "Stupid tractor". I got from my tiny study table and ran out. I followed the horrible sound which was a perfect combination of several different sounds: a kerosene oil cart. a water pump and a giant bus.

The tractor was a funny machine by all means. It was a giant red-coloured grass hopper. Someone's painting that had gone wrong. A Lego set totally mismatched. A monster with the head of a giraffe; neck of an elephant and body of a crocodile. I was fascinated by this initial visual impact.

Then I started to absorb its different sections: the silver-coloured blackened-out smoke pipe; the complex engine clearly visible and open to the world; an uncomfortable seat resting atop a spring-like object; two giant wheels which scared me to death for I have never seen such big wheels in my life; the long and large wooden body supported by two tiny wheels; and the proud name: *Massey Ferguson.* Of course, my English alphabet during

that time had only 10 letters. So the best pronunciation I could arrive at was: *Mess son.*

The tractor was parked in the next door garden. There was no one around. It took me some time to hear him. First I heard a moan. I listened. Moan - loud! Was it the tractor? Why not? If foxes in my story books can talk their way out of trouble or pianos can run away with violins, why not a tractor that can moan?

I was excited. I climbed the big mango tree in order to get a good view of the garden next door, I settled down on my favourite branch, tightened my legs around it before moving a thick clump of mango leaves with my arms so that I could get an uninterrupted view of the beast below

The first thing I remember was the colour red. Red, red,red.

There was red all over the wooden body of the tractor. And the red moaned. I looked and looked until things became pretty clear.

A man was placed on the giant wooden body of the tractor. He was bleeding and his body broken at several places. That sight was eerie because from where I stood the wooden body of the tractor and the man on it reminded me of my grandmother in her coffin. The only difference was that the man was hurt and bleeding.

I just could not take my eyes off the man. His body and clothes - he was wearing a sarong - were covered with blood. His stomach seemed to be the focal point of his agony because he desperately tried to touch his stomach with weak hands.

I climbed down from the mango tree; ran with all my might to the point along the barbed-wire fence which was the unofficial doorway between our garden and the next. I crept out of the loose point along the barbed wire and ran to the tractor.

I peeped. I was panting. Our eyes met. Me and the man in the tractor. A young man, dark, tall and well built. He could have been my favourite cousin brother, Dhanushka.

The man managed a big grin, the moment he saw me. That grin was a brave rebellion against pain. His lips parted. He said something. "Talk loud", I told him.

"Malli... wa...wa...water." the man managed to blurt out with all his strength. I looked around. If I remember right, something urged me on. Something told me that I didn't have all the time in the world.

I knew the next door garden well enough because I regularly roamed that territory to help myself to all the fruits in the trees. I knew where the rats lived, where the ants lived and where the occasional slithery snake came from. I ran to the garden tap. The usual metal bucket was there. With all my might I turned on the rusty tap. The water hit the metal bucket like a hammer hitting a wall. "Hurry, hurry!" I screamed at the water which continued to ignore me and gather inside the bucket at its own rhythm.

I carried the bucket with both hands, a task that was hindered by my physical strength and age. It was comical, because I kept turning on one axis at times; then I almost lost my balance; the water violently shoved against, the sides of the bucket in protest over this harassment; I did the impossible at last. I had the bucket close to the tractor. That was when I realized that I could not lift the bucket. Why didn't I think about that? I was a 'small brain' - my parents were right!

I had a bright idea. I took water into my small palms and threw it at the man. I was the squirrel who tried to empty the ocean with its tail as a sponge in order to save its drowning family. I worked violently like the women who pounded flour in the kitchen. The man in the tractor licked all the water thrown at him. He was desperate for water like a road dog for food.

"Putta, don't!" The sonorous and authoritative voice of Inspector Jayasundara. pierced the air like the voice of our school principal over the microphone. Inspector Jayasundara, I always suspected, was born with an inbuilt amplifier in his throat.

I knew I did not have the time. I doubled my efforts. The water bucket was a half empty

I went for my last desperate action like the Jewish zealots inside the Masada fortress. I lifted the bucket and tried to pour the contents into the tractor and lost my balance. The bucket and I went tripping over right into the hard and unforgiving ground. I bruised my hands- which meant Dettol on cotton wool and a lot of pain.

I got up with the greatest difficulty. I was about to pick up the bucket again, when it was snatched from my hands.

Inspector Jayasundera gently lifted me up.

"Don't give water to these bad people, putha."

With those kind words he handed me to my father over the barbed wire fence. I stayed stiff like a corpse until the smooth exchange was over. My arms ached and I did not want to look at them.

The next day the newspaper delivery man arrived and radio lost its significance. My father promptly buried his head in between the big white paper with lots of letters.

I kept on staring at my bruises which had turned black.

My father recovered his buried head from the newspaper:

" Putha, our neighbour Inspector Jayasundera is a hero! He has beaten the bad JVP people. He has crushed the rebellion!"

"What is a reb...." ,I changed my mind.

I still remember the day I saw a tractor for the first time. Because that was the day I stopped believing that tractors could moan.

Lal Medawattegedara

A Line

Draw a line, write a line, then
Stay in line, hold the line, a glance
Between the lines is fine but don't
Turn corners, cross, cut in or go over
Between two points of no return
Between two points of view
But
A line of thought is rarely straight
An open line
However fine your point
A line of free communication
But drop your weapons
Drop your line
Consider the shortest distance
From x to y
Let x be me and y you

Shireen Senadhira

Rain Shame

Rain
Shame
On you
Wiping and mixing my tears
Gliding this way
And that
Flowing and glowing
Moving and weaving
Washing and cleansing
Weeping for me...
Yes, things look suddenly brighter
Greener,
Darker, dustless
Cleaner
More defined

Rain
You are
Making things look
So like their original selves
So shamelessly naked
It's not just the trees
Freshly awakened,
It's the girls
In their soaked cotton white blouses
Wet black hair
Glistening faces
Water shining on their arms
It's not just the roads

Seemingly hot as though with new tar:
It's the men
Cycling in their soaked wet sarongs
Drops of water trickling down their faces
Legs shining
Pedalling faster

Rain

Himangi Jayasundere

Glory off Season
(A Tribute to 'Flame of the Forest' in Bloom off Season)

Weaving through this familiar path,
just turn the corner and gasp!
Those before me stop and stare,
shielding eyes from the noon's glare.
It must be that deepest green you wear,
no other green could possibly compare.
Green is in - it becomes your frame
in bursting forth in trifoliate leaves.
Crimson and scarlet blooms ablaze
on a mission to set the forest aflame.
Shock and awe - isn't that your game?
Holding your own against a bright blue sky
luscious red flowers richly perfumed
in the cool waters of the monsoon rain.
Reddish brown soil dresses your feet,
accessorized by moss of palest green.
Graceful limbs reaching fullest extension,
white clouds twirl by in utter enchantment.
How does it feel to be in glory off season?
Calm and stunning - ethereally elegant
never rattled by worries, untouched by age,
no line or wrinkle.
Waiting in silence but not exhaustion
almost as if ready for a lover's tryst
One with the others, yet very much yourself,
swaying to the rhythm of the forest.
Centre of attention seems the intention,
No wonder your name is 'Flame of the Forest'
kissing the breeze, flirtatious, flamboyant
draped in glory - though it's not yet the season.

Flame of the Forest or Royal Poinciana is a perennial plant/tree found in Sri Lanka. It is easily identifiable among other trees by its trifoliate leaves and beautiful red flowers that usually bloom in season.

Yen Anne Shih

The Bicycle Race

With sharp communal intake of breath, they are off. Sirens wail, flags wave, supporters cheer. Bikes of many makes, sizes and colours bunch together. Tyres screech on the hot tarmac. Three wheelers buzz and whirr, careening from side to side of the road, yellow and black striped banners flap as the passengers cheer on their boys.

Puffing at the slight incline, Lasantha strains to keep on track. He wears a red t-shirt, dark blue racing shorts but no shoes or slippers. He is thin and dark, a seasoned cyclist. This is his twentieth race. So that makes him thirty-four years old. Young enough, but time is passing.

It is the New Year, the month of April. Hot, humid. Dust and grit fly into his face as the wheels spin away before him. Last year, or was it the year before, sand spun from his wheels into those other faces. Before that, he was confident and sure of himself and his machine: confident that all the others would always be trailing him.

As they reach the new highway, he can hear the police loud- hailing the traffic and pedestrians. Motorists reluctantly slacken speed; move their vehicles out of the way. Buses belch past, the passengers strain to catch a glimpse through the grimy windows. Knots of idle passers-by dawdle on the roadsides, telling each other,"bicycle race'.

Lasantha feels the strain. Cramp creeps up his leg muscles. His breath is laboured; the ache dull in his chest. Sweat slowly rolls down his face. A lorry thunders past and the rush of hot air whips his tormented face. An elderly man ahead, just a few metres ahead, pedals an ancient machine. Instead of handle-bars it has a metal box attached to the front, and a long bar to steer with. He squeezes a bulb horn with a long trumpet. Peepa, peepa, peepa. He bangs on the top of the metal box to attract the crowds. He has pedaled this route, selling ice-cream, for thirty years, since he was a young man: since he took part in cycle races.

'Aah' . Lasantha's throat is dry. He closes his eyes and throws his head back, then opens them quickly. How wonderfully a mouthful of cold ice-cream would slip down, soothing the dryness. But he remembers the doctor's warning. *'No ice water or ice drinks. It can set off an attack.'*

They leave the town centre now and head out to where paddy

fields line the highway. Along the sides of the road, gaily coloured plastic bags lie, filled with the discarded rubbish of the neighbourhood. Flies swarm round the heaps of bags which have split open . A large black bull with curved horns pushes his soft muzzle into the heaving mess. His soft chomping mocks cattle grazing. He moves majestically into the middle of the road, indifferently ignoring blaring horns. The grass is greener on the other side.

The riders split and move past the bull. The straight stretch of road is filled with riders; their legs pump, their backs swing. Some stand on the pedals to gain greater momentum. Sweat and grime streaks down their grim, set young faces.

Lasantha is familiar with the route. There is the long uphill climb, past the Temple, then a sloping downward with a sharp turn to the right. He fixes his mind on the Temple. If he can recite three *gathas* before reaching the Temple, he will make it. He can make it; he must make it.

That morning, his grandmother had boiled an egg for him to eat, stroking his head as he sat at the wooden table in the kitchen. "*Eat, putha, eat. You are much too thin.*" She fussed over him. She had brought him up. She worried about him; how he struggled with his coughing at night, often too tired to eat after he returned from the welding shop where he worked. All the time breathing those nasty fumes.

The long uphill climb begins. Lasantha gains his second wind. He licks his dry lips and is just getting into stride. Then a stream of water hurled from a bucket hits his left side. It almost knocks him off the bike. His hands slip on the handlebars and he wobbles painfully. The water pastes his hair to his head. It drips into his eyebrows and he blinks to clear his eyes. He wants to wipe his nose, to smooth his hair, to wipe the moisture from the back of his neck. But he is losing speed.

He sucks in air and blows it out again, as the familiar feeling grips him. He dreads the rising panic. He cannot breathe. Yes, he can, he must. He promised his grandmother. This would be his last bicycle race. He must do it for her, and he must win.

His thoughts race as he tries to repeat the stanzas taught by the monk in their local temple. The face of the monk appears before him, the wise old eyes that had seen the promise in the face of the young orphaned

boy. His grandmother had wanted him to become a novice *Samanera*. He was her only grandchild, but the compulsion and the force of custom had made her feel obliged to offer him to the to the Order. But the monk had gently reminded her that the boy would be her support in future years.

The ache in his chest sharpens. He cannot rise and stand on the pedals, to increase the forward thrust of the machine. A buzzing noise puzzles him, until he realizes it is inside his own head. He feels dizzy.

The bicycle seems to take on a life of its own. It veers across the road at the top of the hill, and rolls into the grounds of the big Temple. Bumping and swaying on the pebbles on the sand-strewn courtyard, it comes to a halt in the shade of the *Budu-ge*. Lasantha slowly slips from the saddle.

When he stirs he is looking up into a circle of worried faces. Old ladies' wrinkled worried faces. Firm hands hold him and bathe his face with cool water. He is resting on the verandah, on a mat, with his head pillowed on a cushion. His breathing comes easier now, and he finishes the third *gatha.* He thinks of his grandmother, and smiles. *'Ah, he's feeling better'* and the old ladies beam fondly.

He lies back and looks at the pale blue sky. A cool wind ruffles his hair. When his clothes are dry, and he feels stronger, he will slowly ride his bicycle back home and his grandmother will pat his arm and soothe him with gentle grandmotherly words. He will take his bath at the well in the garden.. Then she will heap his plate with rice, and vegetables, and dry fish. And he will be bathed in her smiles.

'Never mind, putha, you did your best' she will say. As she always says. And he will put his bicycle to rest in the closed-in verandah at the back of the small house.

Faith Ratnayake

One Big Stupid Bird

A wily koha laid her egg
in a crow's nest
and flew away free
to a far-off tree.
She sat on her perch and sang
note after jubilant note
in her own inimitable style
expressing her delight at fooling
one big stupid bird
who does not know
how to tell a koha from a crow!

Chitra Premaratne-Stuiver

The Vulgar Tongue

His ayah spoke it once
or twice, when irritated
at the minions.
His mother, never.
Any curiosity on his part was
cut short because
you don't need it for Oxford,
do you?

So that he knew 'paliang'
was rude despatch,
yakko, a devil,
and how it was all gauche; godey.

He learnt classics,
cultivated culture. Never lost
his Oxford manner.

Yomal Senarath-Yapa

Deflating Mr Eliot
(with rolling 'r' s)

Corr Mr Eliot, corr,
How I abhorr
Your morrbid vorrses.
Till you came forrward (or was it Ezra..neverr
Mind), with your abstruse 'free vorr-
Se,(like "Christ the tigerr"
Coming "in the juvescence of the yearr..")
And similar hogwash) trips to Parr-
Nasus were metaphysic delights. Rememberr
Pope's heroic couplets? Marrvel's, Spenserr's?
("But at my back I always hearr
Time's winged chariot hurrying nearr")
Poetry, uncondescending and clearr!
The lilting charms of the pentameterr
Whether iambic or otherr-
Wise, soothed the senses. De la Marre,
Wordsworth, Shelley, gave the five metrical meterrs.
("Thou wast not meant for death, immorr-
Tal bird" sang Keats to nightingales, in regularr
Lines.) "On poets' lips we slept", Misterr,
Till disturrbed by your irregularrs:
Long, short, stop, start, Greek, French, Vernacularr!
"For Thine is
Life is
For Thine is the" supposedly a whimperr?

Your 'big bang' of modern verrse, Misterr
Eliot, is a wasteland Sirr,
Full of potholes of intellectual pedantry.
You tell us that one Websterr
Knew "thoughts cling round dead limbs". Grrr!
Webster, can you make that clearerr
As Elly laughs up his sleeve at us? Dearr oh dearr!
So others had to follow you. Auden, Spenderr
Obfuscating language with more semantic terrorr!
("Noons of dryness see you fed
By the involuntary powers")? Ha, ha, hrr.
"The living curve"! That's McNiece's purr
Explaining it's "breathlessly the same". Brr!
Eliot, for those who underrstand you all, hurrahrr,
Myself? I'll stick to Walter de la Marre.

Shelton Amarasuriya

PART 3

ENGLISH WRITERS COOPERATIVE OF SRI LANKA CHANNELS VOLUME 14 NUMBER 1 2007

"The Creative Writer and Social Change" was the theme of this year's Pulimood Oration held under the auspices of the O.G.A. of Visakha Vidyalaya. Sita Kulatunga, a past pupil of Visakha in Mrs. Susan George Pulimood's time, was the orator. What follows is an abridged version of the oration which was of one hour's duration."

The Creative Writer and Social Change

The creative writer creates something out of human experience, and that creation can be both literary and political simultaneously. It's a debatable subject whether fiction can achieve the kind of impact that Noam Chomsky or Arundathy Roy achieve through non-fiction. Arundathy Roy's *"God of Small Things"* is literary, political and social. Her Bush-bashing journalistic writing too is quite interesting and realistic.

When we take a historical view of literature, we see that it has been religious, propagandist and political within limits. However, today neither critic nor writer believes that art is for art's sake. Art indeed should serve man. If so, it is an instrument of social change.

The creative writer engages the reader in multiple and complex ways - emotional, moral, symbolic, social and intellectual. Creative writing can do a great deal in moulding character, both individual and public. It can contribute to bringing down hypocrisy, corruption of all forms and promoting equality and respect for all beings. The changes that creative writing brings about are not sudden. They are subtle and well near imperceptible. Breaking down age-old barriers of superstition is not easy.

In creative literature both the writer and poet use the normal channels of communication: language, narrative, story, imagery, symbol, etc. It uses our sensibility to form, sensual experience, rhythm and repetition.

The serious creative writer is invariably motivated by the betterment of society, although he or she is no preacher. If she becomes pedantic, she is no creative writer. It may be an ideology that one believes in: or it may be an ideology that is abused by a dictator whom one wants to decry.

The different genres that fall within creative writing are the novel, the short story, poem and drama. Folklore created by those who were not highly literate has left a significant mark on our socio-cultural traditions. *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, epics of great length, are epics of heroism and are a mix of Hindu folklore, drama, poetry and divinity that may appear naive to today's sophisticates. About a thousand years after *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the Gautama Buddha was born. His amazingly creative use of language, its brevity, aptness of the used word, the intellectual approach and the imagery he used to clarify a point, are illuminating.

In the 5th century there was this great awakening of Greek literature. The influence was felt globally. In Sri Lanka, many a Sinhala dramatist has gained from Greek drama (Oedipus, Antigone).

Post colonial awakening of drama in Sri Lanka brought political satire to the stage. *Amavatura, Kavyasekaraya, Budugunalamkaraya, Guttila Kavya,* all have religious stories. But each one is different from the other. *Subhasitaya, Lovavedasangarawa and Sirith Mal Dama* all dealt with moral life . Almost all these contained some verses in praise of the Buddha, and the King and/or patron. This tendency for panegyric writing, one could argue, encouraged the propensity of the Sinhalese to praise their leaders in excess.

Ven. Vettewa's unconcealed contempt for Hindu Gods is another instance where we find straight-forward criticism of an alien cult. He indeed made an attempt to bring about social change.

This was a time when the clergy as well as the elite were well educated. Ven.Sri Rahula was an example. Knowing six languages, he was called Shad Bhasha Parameshwara. The writers' education enabled them to reach foreign sources.

Jataka stories appeared around the 5th century B.C. They were translated into Sinhala long after. We can consider them the forerunners of the Sinhala short story.

English Literature

I talk about English literature because it has been so close to us and because we have lived with it and enjoyed it . The most distinguished work of 14th Century English literature was Chaucer's *'Canterbury Tales'*. And a little later, when Ven. Sri Rahula was doing wonders with the *Samudraghosa vurta* in Sri Lanka, there appeared that man from Stratford-upon- Avon on the literary scene in London. The Elizabethan times - the Golden Age of Literature-had arrived. The metaphysical poets who followed took their art very seriously. The word 'metaphysical' was established by Dr. Samuel Johnson. Donne drew images from all sources. The metaphysical image/poem is vivid imaging of a moment.

Dryden and Pope are both known for satire. Pope uses a range of emotions, extending from humour and contempt to moral indignation. The works of these creative artists had great impact on global society because this was the time when the British empire was expanding.

The Romantic poets of the late 18th Century, such as Wordsworth and Blake, are definitely worth mentioning because they influenced Sri Lankan poets to a considerable extent.

In the Victorian times that followed English fiction came into prominence; George Eliot, Charles Dickens and Jane Austen are just a few of these fiction writers. They brought about social change. Dickens, for example, sensitized us to suffering of children, employed while ignoring their young age. There are creative writers among journalists and vice versa. Dickens was one such, and so was Ernest Hemingway, an American writer.

At the beginning of the 20th century, creative writing was affected by Marxist thinking. France's Jean Paul Sartre's writing had an ideological satirical flavour. George Orwell's *'Animal Farm'* is a satire on the Russian Revolution. The Black writing in America had a strong social impact. Sri Lankan writers like Martin Wickramasinghe and many journalists came under the red influence. No account of fiction can be complete without mention of Russian writers such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Chekhov who influenced our short story writers.

Alongside the Indian freedom movement came the cry for freedom in Sri Lanka. The patriot, writer and orator Anagarika Dharmapala was known as a forceful, aggressive speaker, but his writing was also contributory to social change. It woke the people against the

colonial empire.

Piyadasa Sirisena, the creative writer, was directly influenced by Dharmapala's thinking. In Piyadasa Sirisena's novels the heroine always wore the saree. Western dress came in for utter contempt. This nationalist movement, mostly conducted in writing, managed to convert women's dress from western attire to saree. The Tibetan monk S. Mahinda was another who used his pen as an instrument of change.

Martin Wickramasinghe brought new insights and greater sophistication into fiction. His criticism of the West was more subtle. In his trilogy *Gamperaliya, Kaliyugaya and Yuganthaya,* he tries to portray the changes in society, and how the attendant trauma and alienation was faced by those who resisted change.

Gunadasa Amarasekera's ideological motivation is part and parcel of his literary endeavour. He has also helped to remove the Victorian sanctimoniousness from Sri Lankan creative writing. You may remember the stir that *Karumakkarayo* made.

There are many Sinhala writers today, who try to titillate the youthful readership of little education. Of course, there are also serious, highly motivated writers all over the country.

Among the English writers, Punyakanthi Wijenaike, Manel Ratnatunga (who has written both fiction and non-fiction), Anne Ranasinghe (who writes both poetry and fiction), Carl Muller- (critic and writer), Neil Fernandopulle, Ashok Ferrey, Tissa Devendra; - (writer and journalist), and Ransiri Menike de Silva come to mind as those who have made valuable contributions.

Much is spoken of post colonial writers. Some of the very good post colonial writers (such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka) are from Africa, and also from India.

Writers of the diaspora (people who have found refuge in the rich western countries) are prolific producers of written work. Pakistan's Salman Rushdie (of Muslim Fatwa fame) and India's Vickram Seth, also live mostly in the West. Some diaspora writers try to highlight what happened in their own countries, and try to shock their readers with exotic descriptions.

Sita Kulatunga

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