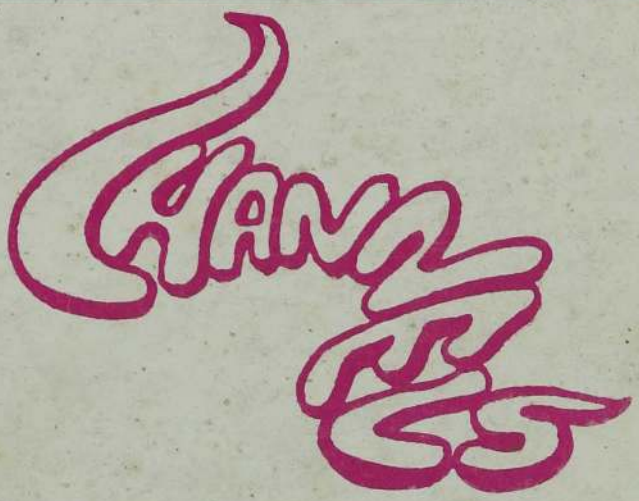

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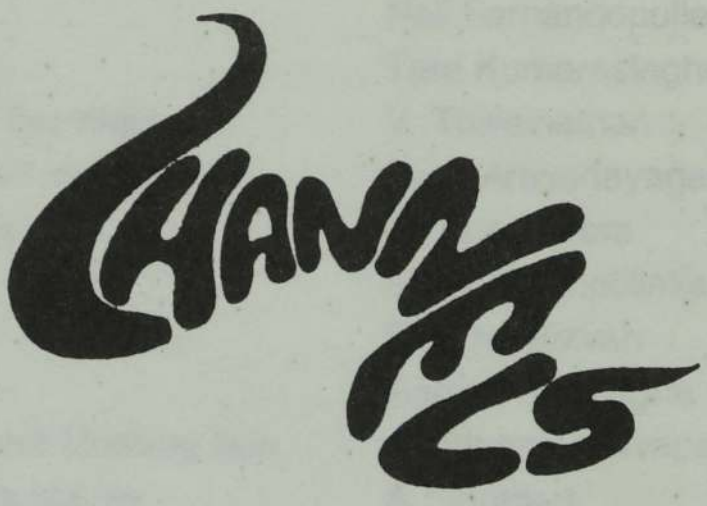


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**CHANNELS**
**Volume 8, Number 2**
Edited by Wilfred Jayasuriya

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# EDITORIAL

This issue of Channels is a representative collection of short stories, poems and a drama. Though the large majority of the contributors are relatively little known in Sri Lankan English literary circles, the literary diet is quite tasty and will satisfy the reader.

I am going to introduce some of the entries in this editorial, hoping that the reader will enjoy them more by being thus talked about.

We start with Patrick Jayasuriya's story, KIRIMETHAWE'S DECISION. The title, it turns out, is mock heroic. The characters are all small fry from Uva and Kirimethawe's decision is to become a kattadiya, for once, instead of continuing as a native physician. The girl patient recovers but is it because of the kattadiya or because of the marriage arranged? Such an "indeterminacy" also haunts Neil Fernandopulle's CALM, which is about a betrayal. The story is seen from the point of view of a woman whose husband gives refuge to an army deserter, but the deserter is betrayed. The cause of the betrayal is not cleared in the story. We are left with the woman's version of the triangular relationship but one can only guess. This kind of story telling, of which one of the better known examples is William Faukner's A Rose For Emily, is sometimes characterised as "the unreliable narrator" method. It leaves an intriguing after-taste and thereby claims excellence.

In contrast to such a method is Thillainathan's A WIND FROM THE WEST, which is about revisiting the war in Trincomalee, after finding refuge in the west. The feelings of those who remained and of those who got away and come for a visit are not described, as Fernandopulle describes feelings in CALM, but they are left to emerge from a "minimalist narrative," where actions speak but not the actors. The enigmatic reference to "rescue work" at the end of the story leaves a "reverberation" in the reader's mind.

In her poem FINDING MYSELF IN HISTORY Jean Arasanayagam comes back to her perennial theme of identity. The ego sets forth like in Walt Whitman's "Song Of Myself" into endless space and time and seeks validity in alternate forms, because it is dissatisfied with itself. Images are heaped on images and there is a continuous process of death and rebirth of the self. In so presenting herself, Jean has created her own voice, very akin to Walt's.

Ramya Jirasinghe's UNTITLED has echoes of Prufrock and expresses the disgust of the woman who is desired and yet rejected, the rejection being the more memorable experience. Unlike the woman whose monologue about betrayal in Fernandopulle's CALM ends with satisfaction at the fruitfulness of her womb (whose child was it?), the speaker, in this poem, has only the strength of her anger to redeem her life.

Amirthanjali Sivapalan's incantatory verse, in AND WE LOST THE MORNING SUN, by its repetitive words and rhythm expresses and irreparable sense of general loss, which is a characteristic of the feeling of loss that whole communities feel in historical situations as that faced by Jaffna Tamils. I am reminded of a English translation, by Jeyaraj Canageratne, of a poem in Tamil, titled "Last Evening, This morning" which is also about the total destruction on the familiar scenes in Jaffna town and which ends with

This is the way
Our life's lost today
This is the way
Our evening is lost.

In A. Santhan's little short story THE CUCKOO'S HOUSE, the same theme emerges and the feelings of the protagonist makes him burst into tears, because there is no recourse. In his poem THE BIGGER MATCH the same writer compares the two public obsessions of Sri Lankans, cricket and the war, in poignant detail.

Rajiva Wijesinghe's AT DIFFERENT LEVELS take us to another plane of emotion. It appears that, in the midst of loss, we can smile and even laugh at the social scene, when familiar situations are reversed. There is a public school baila about the doctor's daughter and her affair with the Burgher man, and what the doctor did to the Burgher man, "inky pinky parlez vouz." In Rajiva's story, the Burgher man had turned tables on the upper class and with wonderful puns, double entendres, innuendos and Spoonerisms, he discourses on the twists and turns of the class and sex war that rage in his heart and in his "cosy nook with the nosey cook." It is a performance par excellence and well deserves "a leg up" (inky pinky parlez vous)! The artistic success lies, I think, in the contrast between the formal correctness of the language as well as of the sentence structure and the disruptive contents of the discourse. A similar contrast between style and content makes PUPPY LOVE by Fahima Rizvan, a success in story telling.

We have a selection of stories and poems by younger authors: Shala Goonetilleke (RAIN), Sandamali Wijeratne (THE DIVISION BELLS), Tara Kumarasinghe (A VITAL ORGAN), Marisa Wickremenayake (DREAMS) and Nadina Perera (THINK ABOUT IT) which indicate a larger pool of writers for the future.

J. A. Karunaratne's Poem DESPAIR uses some unusual images and verbal collocations (for a Sri Lankan writer) but he lives in Finland and his feelings can be located as those of an expatriate.

Mahesh Rajasuriya's KAAKA AND ME is so clinical in its narrative that one might conclude that this is a live presentation of a psychiatric problem. The fear that prevails in the family of an army officer because of his cruelty and the terrible effort made by the son and daughter to

escape is vividly narrated. The sanity of the narrator, the son and victim who relates this story of insanity, is never in doubt and that gives centrality to his narrative. It is an extraordinary story, rarely found in "literary" journals.

A LETTER FROM THE MIDDLE EAST by W. P. Somawardhana is also a story of inhuman cruelty, ending in death. It is more a record than a narrative and it is impressive because of its authenticity.

The remaining poems: Jinadari Wanigasundari's JOURNEY, Gertrude de Livera's THE TIGER, Rex Baker's REGENERATION, Vajira Chandrasekera's THE DISCOVERED COUNTRY, Lakshmi Wijesinghe's TO BEG I AM ASHAMED and Alfreda de Silva's THE VOICE OF SILENCE all have a special effect to convey, a special voice to listen to.

Menike de Silva's WHAT HELD ME BACK, a short story and Nedra Vittachi's drama CAVE WALK will also find echoes of recognition of familiar experiences, which we have gone through, and which here are artistically presented.

All these writings, I have mentioned, as well as any I may have inadvertently missed, make for good reading and I am proud to present them on behalf of the editorial board and the ENGLISH WRITERS' COOPERATIVE.

I would also like to thank the members of the Editorial Board for their assistance with the selection of material and for proof-reading the copy in my absence.

**Wilfred Jayasuriya**

# KIRIMETHAWE'S DECISION

Nanda's illness took a turn for the worse on Saturday night. Soma Herath was distraught at her daughter's deteriorating condition. The house was in a hush. Mr. Herath, who had taken a week's leave from his job at the kachcheri, went about his duty of organizing the best attention, medical and supportive, for his only daughter.

Kirimethawe, the only notable native doctor in the village, had treated Nanda from the onset of the first symptoms of sweating, giddiness, and general enervation. There was constant fever. A pallor had hung on her delicate, fair features which were framed into a melancholy forlornness by the rich, dark, Kandyan tresses, even then parted in precision at the exact centre of her comely young head. Kirimethawe's attention had initially assuaged the family's anxiety as he was much trusted by the Herath household. Though his lack of a formal medical training and paper qualifications was well known in Keppetipola it was widely recognized that he had a strange knack for effecting all manner of cures.

However, after the third day, when the symptoms continued unabated, it was decided by family conference, assisted by the advice of friends such as Samarawickreme, that recourse be had to western medical treatment. The choice was between the Nuwara Eliya Hospital and the Welimada Private Clinic.

Samarawickreme advised "The Welimada Clinic is run by Dr. Bolo Jayasekere. But he is a homeopath."

"I thought that's a bad word?" inquired Kirimethawe.

"Oh no, no! That is something else," said Samarawickreme, thinly hiding a snicker in his long whiskers.

"Dr. Bolo told me the other day that what he called allopaths were all quacks. He thinks it is a mystery that those allopathic doctors have been accepted for so long. He says they know nothing of the real causes of illness, and that they only treat the symptoms with all sorts of modern drugs that leave bad side effects," stated Mr. Herath.

"But Private Clinic fees are very high," ventured Kirimethawe. Mr. Herath was a man of means in Keppetipola. He had six paddy fields at Boralanda on the Haputale road of which half were luxuriantly productive. He also owned two houses, rented out at a reasonable rent, besides his own great house. These, plus the half-share in his wife's name in the vegetable transporting lorry of antique vintage made him the richest man in the village, not counting the monk of the local temple who of course was the largest landholder.

Mr. Herath however, was a very prudent man. Not parsimonious exactly, but very careful. He grudged his family nothing in their wants and treated his friends very hospitably. But it was finally decided to take

Nanda to the Nuwara Eilya hospital because there was still a greater faith in the reliability of the Government Hospital as against the innovative treatment of the Homeopathic Clinic at Welimada.

The old green Chevrolet with its clumsy exterior embellishments that belonged to Takaran Baas took them to Nuwara Eliya on the morning of the fourth day of Nanda's illness. Soma Herath, concerned and dutifully conscientious, sat by her daughter with an extra towel and a flask of hot tea. Mr. Herath was on the other side and Samarawickreme also accompanied them in the front seat. Wimal stayed at home to look after the pets and Kirimethawe kept an eye on Wimal. Nanda seemed to positively revive as they took the bend by the Haggala Gardens, passing the rare dark green primeval forest that undulated from that height.

The diagnosis was influenza which was then epidemic in the Nuwara Eliya and Welimada districts. The prescription was short and indecipherable to the layman. She was also given an all purpose anti-biotic at the hospital. The parents were satisfied they had done the best for their daughter and returned home for a late lunch. Nanda was at once put to bed and given her medicine.

After an initial quick recovery Nanda relapsed into a listless sickliness that disheartened everybody. She even stopped inquiring about Sudhu, her cuddly kitten. The medication was continued as directed, but to no effect. The anxiety of the Heraths and their friends grew. Kirimethawe sulked.

"Maybe Dr. Bolo is right about these allopaths. They know nothing," he said with some trace of professional in-fighting.

But Kirimethawe felt defeated personally. It was his failure as the local medicine man which had turned Mr. Herath to these allopaths and homeopaths. He had tried even the rare root from the Mahiyangana jungle which he had jealously preserved for the past twelve years. He didn't care about his loss of professional prestige in the village but was deeply hurt he could not help his beloved friends in their crisis. He wished for Hanuman to bring him the rarest root from the highest Himalayas to assuage the deathly anxiety in the Herath household.

Kirimethawe lost confidence in himself and in his medicine. He kept to himself. He remembered Kira who had never lost his over-powering self-confidence. Kira had been a famous exorcist in Badulla to whom Kirimethawe had gone as a teenager to be trained in the occult art. But then he had lost his nerve after several months and turned to practising medicine instead. It was after that one rare occasion when Kira had consented to a malevolent devil dance and driven death into an enemy of his family. Kira had habitually performed only beneficial services - fertility for barren woman, increase of crops and the curing of those possessed. Kirimethawe still remembered the four flaming skulls,

the intense chant and Kira lying on the fresh grave at midnight at Badulla cemetery.

What he had learned in those six months under Kira he still remembered. As he recollected Kira's power a new life grew in him. He decided that this was what he must now do to save the Heraths all their anguish. If he succeeded then he would give up all his herbs, leaves, infusions and decoctions. He would change his vocation.

The Heraths accepted the suggestion without any hesitation. Samarawickreme was very helpful in organizing the Yakun Natum. But Mr. Herath told Kirimethawe that there was an important condition he should observe. It had to be done within a week.

"Kirimethawe, we have a proposal from the Ekanayake Walauwe for Nanda. The young man is highly spoken of and is already a successful attorney in Colombo." Kirimethawe said he would perform the exorcism within seven days.

On the day of the Yakun Natum Nanda was told of the fortunate proposal. She was shown a photograph of Rohana and shyly said she had no objections to the matter being pursued. But it sent a current of excitement through her whole body, beginning with shame in the mind, a quick blush on the facial skin and a secret yearning in the heart.

The beating drums, the flames and the possessed Kirimethawe beat strength into her breast. The long flames, as they danced against the dark, had the grace of her own youthful figure and her body danced with the flames. It was a great performance. Confidence flooded into everybody's body and mind. The rosy colour which was cast on her previously pallid cheeks by the furious flames ignited by Kirimethawe did not leave her the next morning.

Nanda recovered her health so completely that she was married the following month. She and young Rohana, after a honeymoon in an old colonial bungalow on the Haputale road looking onto the gentle Rahangala Hills, went to live in Colombo. Kirimethawe had seven requests for his services as exorcist the same week.

**Patrick Jayasuriya**

## CLAIR DE LUNE

Golden-lined lady,
That moves so lightly,
So silently
And distantly

## MEN HAVE SET THEIR ROMANCE

By thy light
But I've heard the report
That that beguiling light
Is but borrowed light,
That thou art pock-marked
And full of dust
And now what I dreamt
Is.....

## SUSPENSION

The telephone rang
It came like short
Gusts of wind-blown rain
Hitting a glass window pane
I did not pick it up!
A long time it was ringing
I listened a long time
Wondering who it could be.
Who was seeking shelter
From lonely pain
At that time of the night.
Or did it toll the end
Of a friendship?
Or bring the beginning
Of a new one?
Or was it some trivial thing
Some one wanted to clear up?
I did not pick it up
It rang and rang and rang
And then it stopped.

**Patrick Jayasuriya**

# CALM

The chirping of birds was the first thing that Kanthi heard. But it was the light streaming through the gaps in the door that had woken her. Every morning from her mat she would imagine what the day would be like, the only clues being birds and the beams of light.

It was going to be a pleasant day, she thought. It was going to be warm and green.

She closed her eyes again and she lay still. She lay very straight, in the posture of a corpse. She breathed out. She tried to imagine herself a corpse, lying there, in the centre of their house. She had seen dead people at funerals, she could see them now. She could see dead animals, dead people some faces that she knew, some unknown, some faceless. All dead.

Her eyes opened and she turned to the man on her right. He was watching her. He had been watching her for some time. Her eyes were suddenly fixed on his. He smiled. She looked away quickly towards somewhere between the kitchen doorway and the thatched roof.

She could hear him breath out deeply. She could feel it over her cheek; warm, moist breath. His hand fell lazily over her breasts and moved about searchingly till it slipped below the loose end of her cloth.

She smiled to herself and kept staring at the thatched roof. His hand ran over her belly, slowly, in large, gentle circles.

She turned to him. She looked at his face — his lips, his cheeks, his brow. The sun had tanned his face to a deep hue of brown. The sun and the earth and the rain and everything out there beyond that door seemed to have signed their name on his face, as things that possessed him, those to whom he belonged. She looked into his eyes, searching for more than she could see in them; for some secret thought that ran through his mind, his unspoken fears, his most silent desires; for words that lay at the edge of his lips, all unknown to her.

He took his hand away from under her cloth. He took it away before she could hold it. She wanted to hold his hand in hers, she wanted to kiss it, to run it over her cheek, to hold it between her breasts, close to her pounding heart.

"You sleep a little longer. I'll go out and come later to eat," he said, getting up on his elbow.

"You must eat first," she said, "Where are you going?"

He smiled and gently stroked her hair back from her forehead. She touched his face, running her fingers over the stubble on his cheek — short, hard stubble. She wanted to hold her lips against his face. She wanted to feel the prickly pain of stubble abrasing her lips. She wanted to hold him close to her; so that every part of her body would embrace him, consume him.

He stood up and, after dusting his sarong twice, he folded it in and walked towards the door. Daylight flooded the house like water through an open sluice-gate.

Vimal stood at the doorway, an aura of light encircled him and diminished his features into silhouette. She could only see his lean, tenuous form against the door post. From the direction he was looking she could guess that he could see the distant forest horizon and the fields that lay closer. Their own paddy field would be a beautiful emerald in this light. She didn't move on her mat, not wanting to disturb his stillness, his thought. The greenness of the tender rice plants must be so beautiful to the man who planted them. She watched him looking at them.

"Sarath wanted to break the bund there and cultivate the other patch beyond the rock." Vimal said, perhaps to himself. "He said, we'll do it for yala, if the rains are good."

Kanthi wanted to look at her husband's face as he spoke. She wanted to know more than she could hear from the tone of his voice. She didn't move, she didn't want to be seen looking at him.

He turned around and looked at her. "I don't think...." he stopped. Then he walked out leaving the door slightly ajar. Maybe he thought she was asleep. Maybe it was something he didn't want to say. She lay still on her mat. She stared at the narrow strip of daylight till it pricked her eyes so that even when she closed them, she could see glaring white swords of light criss-cross her vision in a delirious frenzy.

She wished she could die there. She wished she could melt into nothing, into non-existence. She closed her eyes and tried to feel it. She tried to think of herself drifting away. Maybe it was death; she was feeling death come over her. Maybe it was something else, something more unreal, more distant. It numbed her thoughts.

She got up and walked towards the door. She was there in time to see Vimal squat on the edge of a rice plot near the rock and gently tend the shoots.

The sky had seen the last of the monsoon, and all that was left in it was a gentle breeze. The kumbuk trees fluttered the fringes of their drooping canopies, each standing alone like guardian deities over their different fields.

She scanned the expanse of green and sighed deeply, despondently. A slight ripple rolled over the tender leaves as the wind folded over them. In about two months they would be ripe. The harvest would be good.

Thanks to Sarath. She could almost hear him say 'nangi'. The word came so naturally to him. It was difficult at the start. She was filled with fears, with misgivings about the whole scheme. But it was a part of the deception she had to play. They had to deceive the whole village.

She walked into the garden and drew in a deep breath of air. There was a light, familiar smell of wood smoke in it, maybe from somebody's garden sweepings. From where she stood she could see

four houses. She could hear the distant voices of children and their mothers shouting after them. In each house people prepared for the tasks of the day. Nobody knew the truth.

Kanthi walked up to the well by the side of the house and looked in. The water was dark and placid. She wrapped her cloth over her shoulders as she removed her jacket, and then threw the jacket over the jasmine bush nearby. She looked into the well again. The water had been cold yesterday. She loosened her hair and ran her fingers through her long, thick tresses. Her long hair was the subject of many admiring comments from the people in this village when she married Vimal and came here. Sometimes Sarath would watch her comb her hair, and he would smile.

She had to call him 'aiya', as a part of their pretence. She hated it. She hated the whole scheme. But people believed their story so easily. What fools they all are. Some even observed how much they looked like brother and sister.

She adjusted the cloth around her and, before she tied it in a knot around her chest, she looked down at herself. Her breasts were full and round, and between them her belly had expanded more then she had ever imagined. She could hardly see her toes now.

She lowered the bucket into the well, and watched it descend slowly. Then she stopped it midway. She twisted the bristly coir rope around her hand and pressed it with her fingers till it hurt. It was a burning pain. In two months the paddy would be ripe, and they would harvest.

She drew the water slowly and placed the bucket on the edge of the well. Then she lifted it over her head and tilted it. The cold water burst over her face, flooding her eyes and ears. There was a loud roar like thunder in her ears. For an instant it sounded like some distant explosion, like a bomb from some battlefield far away. In that instant she could even hear people screaming, guns firing. She could see fire burst over the surrounding forest and pour into their ripe fields. The rice burned. She gasped for breath.

She quickly opened her eyes, rubbing the water from them. She blinked several times till her vision cleared. It was green. Everything was still green. Her husband was still there, surrounded by undulating sheets of green.

Sometimes he would laugh when he heard her calling Sarath 'aiya', he would tease her playfully. She was playing her role so well. The people in the village didn't know much about her family.

She never expected it to be like this. First it was meant to be for a few days only. But then, their game worked out so well that the days became many, became months.

She didn't have a brother of her own, till then. He worked with Vimal in the fields. They prepared more plots than Vimal could, alone. The monsoon came on time. They planted seedlings together. He worked hard, not out of obligation or out of pretence. She was happy to

see him work. She was glad that it gave him so much satisfaction. For once, he was creating life. He had spent too much time destroying it.

Soon it wasn't difficult to call him 'aiya'. She gladly cooked food for both of them. She would sometimes sit in the evening with her husband and listen to Sarath's stories. They would burn cashew shells and the air would be full of the heavy smell. She'd gaze into the fire and try to imagine what life was like beyond the forest among a different people; alien, hostile people who may be looking at the same forest from the other side wondering when to spread their destruction beyond.

Tigers, terrorists, whatever they were called, she had never seen them. She had only heard of what they did. She knew that they were in the forest. Sometimes in the night she would be woken by what she thought was their signal — a low, empty moan. She would lie awake, not wanting to stir even the breath in her lungs.

She wrapped the towel around her hair and stepped away from the well, walking carefully over the wet floor. Life is such a fragile thing. Death is so easy. She tried to think of herself as the author of death — the death of a plant, an animal, a person, a person known to her, a person dear to her.

She had always thought of the war as something that men did willingly. Because it was easy. It is so easy to kill. But then why would they want to take back those who didn't want to fight? How can you force a man to fight for his country? She had thought about it a lot. She sometimes asked her husband, but he had different answers, different worries. "If Sarath goes back to the war, he will get killed. If he doesn't, they'll kill him when they catch him."

"Who?," she would ask, "Our own people? Why would they want to kill him? He is one of us. He is not them. He fought for his country. How can you kill him just because he doesn't want to fight anymore?" But Vimal was quite sure that that was the punishment, if Sarath got caught. Maybe that was the Law, but she was quite sure that it never happened that way.

She went into the kitchen and lit the fire in the hearth. She blew gently at the sticks of firewood, coaxing the flames into life. She took a handful of rice from the large black pot near the stove and started washing it. Last year's harvest was not very good, just enough to live on. But life had to go on, like it has, for centuries. Some things can never change; they should not. Her people, the people of the ancient kings, had cultivated this land, the same soil, with waters from the same streams, the same monsoons, the same sky.

She had heard of entire villages being destroyed, everyone, children, women, unborn children, hacked to death. Vast acres of rice had burned. To cultivate is the noblest of vocations. They killed farmers.

She poured out the whitish water from the washed rice.

She listened to the twigs crackle in the fire. In the flames she could see the long evenings she and her husband spent listening to Sarath. She could see the fireflies bobbing hypnotically in the cashew smoke. She could see him in the flames. She could hear him.

He was Vimal's friend. They went to the central school in town together. But he was more than that. He was a farmer now. He was a farmer like all their ancestors had been. He was one of them; as certainly a part of their landscape as the kumbuk trees and smell of wet earth.

Vimal would sometimes spend long hours with Sarath, talking about themselves, their predicament. Her husband began to develop a strong opinion of the war, the unseen enemy. She saw it set ablaze some dormant cinder within him, that burned with patriotic zeal, with some demented fervour that surfaced with every thought of losing his land, his life, his very connection with timeless history.

But he had his own battle to fight. He had to protect Sarath. No one should know their secret He had to shield him from death on both fronts. It was first his duty. It soon became his sacred obligation.

She broke a coconut over an earthenware pot and then went out to throw the water away. Her husband was at the well washing himself. She stopped to look at him. He believed that the war had to go on. If the only way to avoid being killed was to kill, then there is little else to believe in. But Sarath should not go to war, Sarath was his friend. She could remember the time he was torn between what he believed in and what he desired. She could feel the battle going on in the deep recesses of his conscience, its only manifestation was the silent, emotionless expression on his face.

He came in, just as she finished scraping one half of the coconut. He stood in the kitchen doorway, looking at her. She lifted her eyes towards him briefly, then continued her chore.

She could remember times when he would spend almost the whole night talking to Sarath about the war. She would lie on her mat and listen to the faint sibilants of their conversation. Vimal would then come into the house and fall heavily on his mat. He wouldn't sleep for a long time. Sometimes she heard him talk to himself in the night, sometimes in his sleep, sometimes even while he knew that she was there, near him, ready to listen. Suddenly, the very thought of existing, of being alive, had joined the many uncertainties that are endemic to these paddy lands; it spread like an invasive weed over everything. But he was left with one certainty - no one else knew the truth. No one would suspect that Sarath was a deserter. Their pretence was intact. It was all he had to rest his head on, after a long day of work.

She dished out the hot rice and the sambol and offered the plate to him. He came up to her and took it. He sat on the short stool near the door and began to eat. She watched him. He ate slowly.

They came suddenly. They surrounded the field where Vimal and Sarath were working. She was so scared when so many of them, all

carrying guns, descended on them. She had always imagined that if they came, they would ask him to come back. They wouldn't hurt him. After all he was one of them. They were all his people.

But Sarath tried to run away when he saw them. They had just prepared the fields, and he was deep in the brown mud. He stumbled over it several times as he ran. He had always said that if they caught him, he'd tell them that Kanthi and Vimal knew nothing about it. He didn't want them involved in it. He ran. She wanted to scream. She wanted to tell them not to kill him. She wanted to call him "aiya" and insist that it was all a mistake. For a moment she had life and death in her hand.

They held him with one hand and their guns with the other. He was theirs, he was their inalienable property. They took him even before he could wash off the mud. They didn't know that he had become a farmer now. Maybe they didn't even know that these lands had been cultivated by kings. Maybe they didn't care.

Vimal stood in the middle of the field throughout the whole struggle. He didn't move, he didn't talk. He didn't talk for many days after. He didn't get out of the house. He didn't eat.

The days that followed moved like a funeral. The entire village had got to know, but nobody spoke a word about it. But their words were loud in her ears. They were in the smile of the young girl at the post office, they were on the lips of the village women who spoke to each other as they bent down to chose vegetables at the market, they were in the frown of the old man straining to push his cart full of king-coconuts to the bus-stand. She could hear their very thoughts. 'Who informed them?' 'Who betrayed the soldier?' Nobody else knew that he was a soldier.

Kanthi knew that her husband was thinking the same things, asking the same questions. Maybe he knew the answer. Silence was his refuge from the truth, it was his prison.

She watched him eat the steaming rice. He lifted his eyes from the plate, towards her, almost as if he too was recalling those last moments. For a moment they were fixed on hers. For a moment they were thinking the same thing, feeling the same thing. She was one with him. Her most secret desires, her hopes, her dreams, her darkest wish, were his. She was one with him in the unspeakable truth.

"Enough?" she asked as he handed her the empty plate. He nodded. As she reached out to take it, he smiled. The last time she saw that smile on him, he was a total stranger. That was the beginning of their life together. It was beginning all over again now. She felt a profound, rare communion with her man. At last she was alone with him. No one else, nothing else was there. She lay her hands on her belly. She felt an overwhelming joy, a deep calm.

Maybe he will never find out who did it. But even if he did, she was sure now that he would understand, he would forgive, he would be

grateful. As certainly as the paddy would bloom and the harvest would come in, and the baby would be born. As sure as the perennial streams would flow and the ancient kumbuk trees would acknowledge the benevolent winds. She was sure.

**Neil Fernandopulle**

## A VITAL ORGAN

She was born
He was born
Same day
Same hour
Different wombs.
At five
She played with dolls
He cleared up.
He set the table
She ate
He washed up.
At six
She left for school
He was left
To clean her room.
She did her homework
He sat and watched.
At seventeen
She got a car
He got a wage.
She left school
To join the club.
He left the kettle
On the stove.
She married
A rich man.
He married
A driver's life.
She sat at the back
With her thoughts
He sat at the front
With the steering wheel.
It's all in the womb.

**Tara Kumarasinghe**

# A WIND FROM THE WEST

Ravi is about to take his little son, Kugan, out when Neela breezes in . "Forget the beach," she commands. Her eyes twinkle with mischief. Kugan looks up at his mother in alarm.

"You know what? I ran into Latha, your old flame, this morning. She'll be dropping in with her husband any moment now. I'm sorry it just slipped my mind."

The delicious smells that waft up from the kitchen belie her words, but Ravi is oblivious of everything.

The hot wind scorches Ravi's back.

Latha migrated to a western country with promises to come back to him in no time. For a few months, after she had left, Latha lavished him with a flood of passionate letters. And then they began to trickle and finally dried up.

One Sunday morning Ravi's telephone rang. It was Latha at the other end.

"Good morning, darling, Why the long silence?"

"Good evening," She sobbed. "I know you'll never forgive me for this, Ravi. I ..... I've just returned from my honeymoon."

"Thanks for the information," Ravi snapped. "Good luck and good-bye."

"Please ..... Don't hang up on me. Let me explain," Latha pleaded, but Ravi had slammed the receiver down.

Ravi is in a stupor, sweltering in painful memories.

The doorbell announces the visitors and a gust of biting wind ushers the visiting couple in, leaving a trail of dust in its wake.

The men sit facing each other. Latha sits in front of Neela. Her back is turned towards Ravi. Kugan is seated comfortably on Latha's lap enjoying the chocolates Latha has given him.

Pleasantries are exchanged and delicacies enjoyed. The aroma of good coffee elevates their spirits.

Latha's back is turned on Ravi.

Climate and cost of living and cricket exhausted, the men turn to politics, leaving their wives to share their childhood memories.

"So the LTTE terrorists have let you down badly, eh?" Latha's husband sneers.

"Nobody calls them terrorists around here."

A gust of wind slams a window shut.

"No politics please," Latha admonishes her husband. Apparently she had been dreading this tense moment.

"They took to their heels when the army marched into Jaffna, leaving the people in the lurch. And they kill innocent people, even their own kith and kin. I'd still call them terrorists."

"Nobody calls them terrorists around here," Ravi repeats. He boils over with rage but he manages to control his temper.

"They do sometimes engage in acts of terrorism, don't they?"

"Granted. But at least they lay down their lives for us. You fled the country to save your skin. How dare you come back and preach to them?" Ravi blows up, unable to control himself any longer.

Neela looks puzzled. This is not the Ravi she knows. He has never been known to take a vociferous stand on anything.

"Whatever happens to us is beyond our control. It is fate that decides everything," Latha butts in.

"Fate, my foot! It is hypocrites and turncoats who hide behind fate." Ravi thunders.

Latha's back stiffens. Neela's face becomes cloudy. There is a streak of lightning in her eyes. She slips out, carrying the tea-tray.

Latha's husband gets to his feet and manages a smile. "I think it's time I found a taxi," he says and vanishes.

Suddenly the wind drops; not a leaf stirs. Latha's back is rigid. Ravi is fidgety. Not a word passes between them. Minutes slip by. Footsteps are heard. The women dutifully embrace and the men nod.

The couple are gone. Kugan pesters Ravi to take him out. Ravi pays no heed to his entreaties, which makes Kugan whine in desperation. Ravi stares ahead vacantly forgetting the presence of his beloved son.

Neela storms in and spanks Kugan. A chair crashes to the floor. Kugan dashes the box of chocolates against the wall. Then he spreadeagles on the floor and screams fretfully. Neela flees the scene and pots and pans begin to clatter in the kitchen.

Ravi sits up with a start, gently picks up Kugan and surveys the debris. He heaves a deep sigh, thinking of the rescue work lying ahead.

**V. Thillainathan**

## FINDING MYSELF IN HISTORY

Have I a history of my own
Or is my history a contrivance formed
From that of others? An account autobiographical
Out of those numerous biographies, written
Or still to be written.

I find myself, the narrator,
The story-teller in the market place
Providing both prologue and epilogue
To what each one imagines a saga.

Their only voice is mine,
But did they, as individuals,
Want to be remembered?

Drinking in the moisture
From the dew and heavy rains
Sweeping over the lands,
Theirs was the ancestral seed,
I, the hybrid vine, the full gourd,
The root entrenched seed.

The walls of my abode
Washed with coatings of white lime
Hide the old scars and stains
Filling in the pitted holes of weaponry.

Time is the fingernail
That scratches off the plaster
To reveal those martial designs,
Tapestries traced out by perennial invaders.

Would they have wanted me as their scribe
To document their lives in diaries, in epistles
In this vast body of search poetry, in my fictions,
Examined in each other's roles whose reversal is ironic,
Leaving me guilt corroded.

Reading their discourse I too am compelled
To embark on their journeys, walking, riding
With them through mountain or valley or crawl
As a giant tortoise would, along the sea coast

Bearing that coat-of-arms on the hard backed
Shell, taste the cold, unpalatable morsels left
On the platter of history, share the remains,
Mind fossilised, of the viands and victuals.

Who then am I? Does anyone question or desire
To know, think me some kind of changeling
Who strips the caul of history from my eyes?

Voices in the blood struggle for recognition,
Those syllables unintelligible to me at times,
Yet carry their messages which to encode
Or decode, is mine.

I am not a native tree but dropped
From bird seed in that migration,
Yet nourished by the virgin soil,
Surviving the parching drought,
The starving seasons.

**Jean Arasanayagam**

## THINK ABOUT IT

Restlessness sometimes comes
from a rebellious mind;
Fancied loneliness can be the outcome
of an awakening heart;
Sleeplessness might be due
to the hunger of instinct;
Hopes and dreams are sometimes
a prelude to fulfillment;
Fear may be the tremor
of a spirit craving completion;
Emotions are so complex
and yet so simple.

**Nadine Perera**

# RAIN

She sat by the large glass window of the restaurant and watched the people rushing in the street outside. It was raining and the people seemed to think that if they ran they could avoid getting soaked, but she could see it made absolutely no difference, since they were wet anyway. Maybe it's that "herd" instinct that most people have, Mala thought. No one seemed to appreciate those wonderful drops from heaven and no one seemed to notice the beauty of the rain. She sighed and looked at her watch. Jerry was late as usual. Meeting every day at the small restaurant had become almost a ritual, they both worked in the same area and it was convenient to meet each other during their lunch breaks. But she always seemed to get there before he did. This thought made her smile because it pretty much summed up their relationship — she was promoted before he was, was married before him, and was also divorced before him; she even seemed to grasp and understand certain things before he did.

She finally spotted him dashing across the street, holding a folded newspaper over his head; she wondered if he realised how ridiculous he looked, except for a small rectangular block over his head the rest of him was quite wet. He walked into the restaurant trying to brush the rain drops off his clothes. He spotted her and starting walking towards the table.

Mala had met Jerry at a business seminar they had both attended a year back. They had met a few times socially subsequently, and then became unusually close friends. He was a little awkward and shy at the beginning, but once he got to know her better, started to relax and really talked to her, she realised he was a sensitive and sweet person with a wonderful sense of humour. He was intelligent but never set his personal goals too high, fearing failure, generally being intimidated by life and all its challenges. Mala's directness and almost brutal honesty seemed to shock him at first, but later he appreciated the way she would always say exactly what she thought and felt; even if it made him feel uncomfortable, he could always count on her for an honest opinion. Their views on almost everything were completely different, Mala was usually the extremist ignoring all the different shades of grey in-between, believed in positive and strong action, always wanting to make the world a better place, while Jerry seemed to support the underdog, sympathising with revolutionaries and idealists fighting the most hopeless causes. They would argue incessantly, but they both respected the other's right to his or her own view and different opinion, and it made them appreciate their friendship even more.

"Hi, I'm sorry I'm late, I had to help someone finish a report", Jerry said as he sat down. This was typical of Jerry, he would always help people. Mala felt that certain people took advantage of him, since he

would willingly do anything for anyone if he possibly could, but she realised that he did not see it this way, and it would only hurt him if she said so. "It's all right, the rain has kept me entertained," said Mala. "The rain is wonderful, but I wish it wasn't so damn wet!" Jerry laughed as he proceeded to wipe himself with a napkin. Mala started going through the menu, even though she knew she would probably order what she always did; she always hoped she'd see something new.

Jerry watched her from across the table, she was so beautiful, her short hair slightly damp from the rain, but that only made her look more lovely in his eyes. She was the best friend he had ever had but he wished they could be more than just friends. There really wasn't any chance of that happening though, since she had made that extremely clear from the start.

He remembered that night so clearly. They had gone out for dinner, he had made it romantic in the most subtle way, and knew he was definitely ready to take their relationship a step further. But he wasn't sure how she felt. They had a wonderful time, and he thought things were going quite well. Then while having coffee she had said, "Do you think we could be close friends for a long time, Jerry?" "Why do you ask?" he had replied, not looking up, concentrating on his coffee cup as if it held all the answers, hoping that she would say that she was insanely attracted to him and that it was time they made some sort of serious commitment to each other. "Well, you know how people always say that men and women can never really be close friends because the sexual aspect always gets in the way? They say that both wonder what it would be like to sleep with each other, and therefore they could never really be good friends," Mala said. This had shocked him and he hadn't known what to say, he realised she was looking at him, and he started to panic. "Well then, the only thing to do is sleep with each other and get this whole sex thing out of the way" he had said, only half jokingly. She had laughed. "I suppose it does sound a bit ridiculous, I'm sorry I mentioned it." He was sorry too, for then he knew now he could not tell her how much she meant to him. That had been almost six months ago, and even though he would never find the courage to tell her, he still cared deeply for her, and she still meant the world to him. He could not risk losing her friendship.

They ordered their food, and sat staring out of the window, each lost in their own thoughts, Mala smiled. "I think one of the best things about our relationship is that we can sit together quietly and feel so comfortable with the silence." Jerry nodded. "Yeah, I know what you mean. If you don't know someone that well you always feel compelled to say something, just to fill those uncomfortable moments, even if what you are saying is something really stupid . It feels almost as bad as being stuck in an elevator with a bunch of strangers, not really wanting to look at anyone, and desperately wanting to get out as soon as possible."

"No, the uncomfortable silences you have with people you actually know feel worse," said Mala.

Their food was served and they spoke about everything that was currently taking place in their lives, it seemed amazing how well they both related to each other, almost complementing each other with their radically different views and thoughts.

When they were ready to leave, they stopped at the entrance for a moment and stood watching the rain, feeling the damp wind on their faces. They both were reluctant to leave. Mala looked serious and seemed to be contemplating something deeply. "Do you ever get the feeling that while you are rushing around doing what is expected of you, life is passing you by, and that you are somehow missing some integral part that is really important?" she said. "Always," he smiled. But she said "No, I'm serious, it's like you are forever planning your life, never really living it, always protecting yourself from things that could go wrong, always thinking how great it would be when you get that new car, or when you get that raise you so badly want, or how much fun you'd have when you finally go on that vacation you feel you need, its almost like you concentrate on all those minor details so much you never really see the big picture." Jerry groaned. "Are you starting to analyse your life again? Not that I'm saying its not good to take stock of yourself once in a while but you usually take it to extremes, Mala, then you get depressed, and torture yourself thinking about all the mistakes you have made and what you could have done to make it all better." Jerry looked concerned. "You know as well as I do that you have to make your life what you want it to be, and if you are willing to make a few changes then I don't think you really miss the big picture — you don't see just a tree, but the entire forest, so to speak". Mala said: "I suppose you are right, it's just that sometimes I feel I'm searching so hard for something, and I'm not even sure what it is."

"Sometimes you don't see it because it's already there, right in front of your eyes," said Jerry softly, staring out at the rain. He turned to her and smiled sadly and then walked slowly away, seemingly oblivious of the rain and of the storm he had created within her.

**Shala Goonetilleke**

# PUPPY LOVE

It was on a gusty December day that they labelled the rooms of their new house.

"Baby's room."

"Attic, we already have a baby's room!"

"Second baby's room."

"No Puppy, we don't even have one baby yet and I am not going to have a single if you tease me any more."

Kitten pummeled Puppy unmercifully as he laughed, white teeth glinting. She was very happy. The air was cool and Puppy's body was warm. From the wide-open windows, kottang leaves could be seen and heard. They flapped green and red, like cheerleaders' flags. But Puppy wanted her attention. He impatiently brushed off the thick mop of hair that fell over his forehead and turned Kitten's face towards him, asking playfully, "Now what do you want an attic for? Mmmm... why?" he insisted, tenderly. Kitten glanced at him with mischievous eyes and replied suggestively, "To hide away from you," then shrieked happily as Puppy romped after her. They flew from room to room, jumping over sofas and beds, laughing all the while. Chairs, cushions and pillows whizzed around as Puppy and Kitten dived in and out of the three small rooms. Within five minutes the apartment looked as if burglars had ransacked it. Its occupants however, were oblivious of anything but their own happiness. Now they flopped across their large, unmade bed, parallel to each other but with their feet on either side of the bed, their faces all but touching.

They were momentarily tired but even in that moment Puppy turned to nibble Kitten's velvet ears, then propped his head on one elbow to stroke her thick, short hair. He was vibrant with energy and therefore restless. But his eyes had an expression of wonder, a fascination that kept him motionless. Kitten observed the latter with a small smile. She knew he was conquered and was glad of it. "When can we move in?" she purred, rubbing her sleek, small head against him sensuously.

"Now if you like," Puppy whispered deliriously. Then with one lithe movement he had rolled over her, holding her captive with his strong but trembling limbs.

**Two diary entries of Kitten's.**

**December 97**

We've been so happy here that I'm sad to move on. But there really is no room for a baby. I'll never forget these precious, love-filled days. Goodbye dear, dear flat and thank you.

**8th February 98.**

The house looks huge compared to the flat even though we've spent the last month or so filling it up with odds and ends. Must quickly have a kid.

That'll help to fill it. There's a lovely garden too and Puppy is weeding it at the moment. He is getting it spruced up for his mother who is to stay with us for two weeks. I've stocked the fridge and pantry shelves. Puppy teases me about being nervous. I suppose I am a little!

* * *

"But he's always preferred his meat well-done." Mrs. Silva was quite definite. Kitten felt her hair bristle all over. "He has never complained," she replied, a little louder than necessary.

"As for the ladies fingers," continued Mrs. Silva heedlessly, "he loves them fried with coconut milk. I'll make it, shall I?"

When Puppy returned he knew that Kitten was upset although she said nothing for fear of offending him.

"What's the matter, precious Pusskins?" Puppy held her tightly but stiffened when he heard her complaint.

"I thought that you were different to other women but you are all the same." He sounded bitter and Kitten instinctively moved away from him. "She happens to be my mother. Why can't you give in a little? It's not forever, is it? She's only going to stay until she gets better."

**Two diary entries of Kitten's**
**20th February**

The feelings filling my mind must be released. They are too bitter to keep within. Ever since Puppy took his mother's side against mine, I feel heavy and inert. She moves around my house as if it was hers and I can only bear it by pretending not to care. How I wish we were back in our little flat!

**1st March**

I am no longer free to welcome Puppy back after work. She's at the door before me. I don't cook either. My recipes, it seems, are too extravagant.

I have nothing to do and nowhere to go, so I sit in the attic (it's the only place in the house that she cannot invade because of her operation) and I wait. I wait for her to go.

**Mrs. Silva's speaking to a friend on the phone.**

Yes, I have just moved in. Well, you know I had a hernia operation? So I am recuperating at my son's home. Bad for me to climb stairs so I can't stay in my flat. Luckily my son had just bought this luxurious house recently. Yes, there is plenty of room.

Of course I am. But I almost expected if, you know. I still remember clearly how he would comfort me when he was small. We were poor then. He would say, "Don't worry Amma, I'll buy you a lovely

house when I'm big." That was when he was small but this house is almost like that dream come true!

* * *

"Puppy!"

"Yes, what is it?"

"I haven't mentioned it for two whole months now but are you going to tell your mother to go or not?"

"How can you put it so crudely darling? I didn't think you could be this way." Kitten sat unmoved.

"You haven't answered me," was all she said.

"I'll tell her, I'll tell her!" Puppy raised his voice angrily. "You think it's so easy to tell such a thing to one's own mother?"

"I wouldn't know, would I?" Kitten answered stonily, "I mean, she's not my mother." Puppy glared at her furiously.

"You know what's happened to you, Kitten?" He was shouting so loudly that his mother came to see what it was all about. "You've turned catty, that's what has happened! Kitten has grown up into a Cat." He laughed and moved aggressively towards her.

He was trembling with anger but Mrs. Silva held his arm and steadied him. It was as if she had already anticipated a fight. Kitten sat without flinching. As still as the cat that she had become, she absorbed the hatred directed at her.

They were on the verandah and after mother and son went inside, Kitten still sat, frozen, stone still. Twilight had set in and the mosquitoes had started humming, vaguely at first, then insistently. Crows were flying home and cawing good night to their mates, both at the same time. But it was well after the last caw when Kitten finally went to bed.

**Two diary entries of Kitten's**

**15th April**

Read the past two entries. Looks like I'm the one who has to make the first move. We are not speaking now and communicate by looks or by notlooks. If looks could kill, would I be victim or murderess?

**20th April**

Unspoken words sound louder than the loudest of angry words and I am going deaf. In addition I feel sick all the time and know that I am pregnant. Once I would have rushed to Puppy with the news. Now he will never know. It is my revenge. Luckily they think I'm sulking when I don't eat.

I don't want to live in this house. And I don't want Puppy either. The curse of a cat is deadly and I curse them both. I hate him and that wily mother of his and I want to have nothing more to do with them. I believe I have the strength to fend for myself. Puppy would sneer if he

hears this but cats have their superior qualities too. Like 'the cat that walked by himself' I will be strong and independent. And unlike dogs who are ever dependent, weak-minded namby pambies.

* * *

Two days later Kitten was not to be found. As stealthily as a cat Kitten had sneaked out, taking her belongings and leaving behind only a letter.

The letter was brief but the letters were swimming around in a pool of words and Puppy's hands were trembling. Mrs. Silva took the letter from him while thinking sadly and angrily: "The poor boy, he needs looking after. I must be the rock that he can lean on unlike that flimsy creature who has deserted him without a thought of her marital vows." So, holding the letter in one hand and his shoulder with the other, she said aloud and with every intention of keeping her promise to him, "I'll read it out for you."

*Dear Puppy,*

*I have grown into a cat, you say. But you, I am sorry to say, haven't grown up at all.*

*Even if you do grow up eventually, it won't help because cats and dogs don't get on. Added to this my feelings for you are absolutely dead. So I am glad to write that I don't regret leaving you one bit. And as for your mother, I think she will prefer to remain a sick old B.....*

Mrs. Silva never could keep to that particular promise of reading out the letter to her son.

**Fahima Rizvan**

## UNTITLED

I know them all now.
The rich kids in blue jeans
coming back from MKOP
at 2.00 in the morning,
and those who never look at me
as they tear my guts apart
in the humid rooms separated by
plywood walls.

I know them all now
for they have all savoured me
and I the salt
when they leave me enough
for her rusks and my rent.

But it is you I know best.
You who would never dream of
touching me,
you who burn me with your moral
indignation.
I know you best.

Better than I know
your fathers, your sons, your husbands.

(They have all savoured me you know).

But it is you I know best
for you walk into my arms
each time they do.

**Ramya Jirasinghe**

# AND WE LOST THE MORNING SUN

We walked many years
Lost many days, lost many nights
Many roads we lost.

We lost the fields with tender stalks
With tender green paddy, lost our fields.

The tobacco crouched like tired old men
The 'padam' and the fragrance
Of the smoked leaves we lost.

Lost the shores, the boats and the nets that
Brought in the fish with the morning sun -
The morning sun we lost.

Our homes, our wells, our temples we lost
Our refugee camps too; the plastic sheets
That held out the rains,
Even those plastic sheets we lost.

We lost our own to fever and want,
We lost them on a dark, damp night
When the only bridge was blocked;
And we lost the right to bury our dead.

We walked many years, we lost many roads
We lost many years,
We walked many roads.

**Amirthanjali Sivapalan**

Smoked tobacco leaves - the mainstay of the economy of the North.

'padam' - the tobacco leaves arranged in circular formation to be smoked.

Plastic sheets - Roof cover donated by NGOs to refugees for temporary shelters.

# THE CUCKOO'S HOUSE

The distant burst of a shell brought him back to earth from his reverie.

Even the cuckoo was shocked. The bird raised its head and listened for a second. Its eyes glittered like two red beads. With the agility of a snake, the cuckoo whose feathers had a shiny black sheen sprinkled with white spots slipped into the thick foliage and disappeared.

This tree is a multi-storeyed house for these birds. From its perfectly upright tall trunk branches radiate in all directions at regular intervals. The tree is on the other side of the wall, but very close to the boundary and shady, so that the people of his uncle's household living on this side could enjoy the shade. It shelters the verandah and the courtyard from the hot forenoon sun.

Again there was another blast. Then, a third followed within a minute. His ears listened for any further explosions....

He had seen cuckoos only in this tree, and had been watching them almost from the first day of his coming. Two of them were pure black, the other two spotted. They look for the ripe berries on the tree, peck them, go whenever and wherever they want and return. They live here. One may hear their chirping and the flapping of their wings even during the middle of the nights. What a simple and trouble-free life!

His own house was in the direction from where the sounds of explosions came. The shelling started a month ago, and within this month five or six of the houses in their village had been razed to the ground. But, luckily, all the people had evacuated their houses on hearing the first sound of gun fire. That was the only way for them to save their lives.

The people came to this place with whatever they could carry. They thought this place was safe. They sought refuge with relatives. Those who had neither relatives nor friends went in search of temples or schools.

What would have happened to his house now?

To have a house of his own was a long-standing ambition in his life. It became a reality only a couple of years ago, after long toil. But now-? Would he be able to go back one day and live there again with his family? He heaved a long sigh.

He felt like an alien although his uncle and uncle's family were kind and considerate to him and his family. He felt stifled. He could do nothing and, worse still, he could see nothing ahead. It was intolerable.

He spent the major part of the day in this verandah, staring at the blue sky or watching the tree.

He shuddered. This time the sound was close. No, it wasn't a shell, but some heavy object striking a hard surface.

With the second thud that seemed to emerge from the other side of the wall, he noticed the tree shivering and the small yellow leaves falling...

"What? Is someone cutting down this tree?" he wondered. The sound continued.

"But, why? For what purpose? Its timber will not be of any use, even to cover a bunker!"

The poor birds... what will happen to them?

Where will they go?

He couldn't bear it. He wanted to go to the boundary wall and shout: "Don't fell the tree!"

The impulse was so strong that he got up. But then, overwhelmed with grief, he stopped himself, sat down again on the steps and burst into tears.

**A. Santhan**

## DREAMS

They remain a part of your soul forever
Shattered into a million pieces.
I remember how foolish I must have been
To think that they would come true.
They hold nothing for me now
Except to remind me of my blind faith
In life and all its wonders.
Sometimes I wonder if, perhaps,
It would have been different
If it could have worked out the way
I wanted it to.
But - no!
I am who I am.
It would not have mattered anyhow.
They would have still been out of my reach.
It would have made no difference.
It was Fate that stepped in and added
A couple more to the pile of broken dreams.

**Marisa Wickramanayake**

## THE BIGGER MATCH

As a Lankan you
should feel proud
wrote my friend
a cricket fan
an outlander,
of your heroes' feats
in the playing fields
the world over:

You too must be celebrating
all those victories?

No, friend
I'm not one
of that sort
can't take interest
in that sport
I reply.

Neither have I time
nor the mood
to indulge
in such things.
You know why?

Instead
I worry about
an unending game
with no overs
in my land.

The game goes on daily
spanning the decade
still vigorously
with no one to cheer
the heroes in action
no telecasters or even
commentators, but
only distant reporters.

The toss says neither
tail nor head, but
for the players it's
either life or death.

We don't reckon
the wickets bowled
nor do we add up
the runs' toll
but we count
the lives that fall.

No one can count
this efficiently
the score goes up
in centuries
and at times
abounds in multiples.
It breaks all
world records.

And further -
real valour, will and
offering selves, like
heavy shower pouring
in the wild.

Worst thing
both teams
the land's children
really they're
blood brethren.

The sponsor says
this is a game for peace
and to keep the
land in one piece.

Who will come and
stop this game?
Who will come and
make things sane?
I wonder.

So, my friend,
write me please,
if possible,
as a human
how should I feel?

**A. Santhan**

## AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

When she joined the hotel it was inevitable that we should be thrown together, on other people's tongues if not, so to speak, our own. The Oriental, Colombo's most glamorous hotel, until that is the next one thrust itself up, was staffed entirely by Europeans at the higher levels except for both of us. Significantly, I like to think, while they looked after food and fittings and suchlike, it was we who were in charge of people, I as Personnel Manager, she in Guest Relations.

I was, which made a change from our previous acquaintance, senior to her, for the Personnel of course had come in long before the Guests. Strictly speaking, our status and our salaries were the same but apart from the advantage of chronological precedence I also had my perks, most notably a live-in suite with ready access to food and drink. It was the same sort of position her father had enjoyed when I had first come across them, and I could see now why he had been so very loth to leave. She lived with him now in a relatively squalid dump by the Dehiwela Bridge and, though she was very restrained about the old man, it was apparent that she would have welcomed the liberation and the luxury of a suite.

It was not very likely that she would get one. My own privilege sprang primarily from the good relationship I had established with our General Manager, a gentleman whose views on Personnel resembled my own. We would certainly both have described ourselves as Professionals to our fingertips, conscientious and skilled, but that is never any reason to suppress personal inclinations. In any case a certain aesthetic element is undeniably important in such matters, where Guest Relations are concerned for instance, and in that respect we certainly made Miss de Livera's task that much easier.

The Manager had reason to be content with my policy as regarded staff, both in general and in particular instances. He ranged much more widely than I did, though I suspect that was due as much to temperament as to seniority. As far as I was concerned, as time passed, I found myself almost entirely restricted to what, remembering Dr. Spooner, I liked to call my nosy little cook. I have never been able to resist a sharply upturned nose and this, whichever way you looked at it, my cook possessed to perfection. I even went so far as to have another key cut for my cosy nook on the top floor so that, at unexpected moments as I lolled about there when off duty, the nose would appear around the door as a harbinger of greater joys to come.

Miss de Livera unfortunately possessed no such outstanding feature to supplement her social distinction. She was however undeniably attractive, in a sort of classic fashion, and certainly looked very little older than she had done a decade before when I had first seen her, and

when it was rumoured she was already nearer thirty than twenty. Had she been younger it would have been most unwise for her father to have been made our Headmaster. Even when they lived off the premises she was constantly in, at the most public times, to supervise the building of the house being put up for him, expanding and refining it so that when it was finally ready, though it had cost much more than originally estimated, the Treasurer of the Board could quite doggedly claim that it was fit for so distinguished a Headmaster who was nothing less than a de Livera. The patio certainly suited his daughter, and the more susceptible of my peers thought it an adventure to watch her as she sat there in striking attire, apparently sublimely unaware of the effect she wrought.

The Treasurer of the Board was her boss at the time, for just before her father's appointment she had taken charge of Public Relations at the Paint Company over which, amongst other things, he presided. Later, when the scandal broke, it was rumoured that her relations with him had been even closer than that but, having come across him while I was at school, I can almost certainly say that in that respect relations would have been strictly public. She moved swiftly enough away from him as far as possible, into the Oriental in fact, after he had been forced to resign; while her father, though he too had had to leave his job finally and the house he had relished so much, also distanced himself with splendid insouciance from his erstwhile ally. He was far from being a de Livera, and though he might think he could insinuate himself into the charmed circle by providing certain comforts, not all the paint in the world could gloss over his manifest unsuitability.

That old Mr. de Livera had clung on for so long and connived at so much at which his ancestors would have shuddered was entirely due to his daughter. While she still remained unmarried, he could not bear to fade into obscurity and lose his last chance of presiding over a suitable settlement. The more cynical of their relations however also added that it was his unexpected elevation that had finally done for her. Overwhelmed by attentions he had never received before, he had allowed his hopes to be inflated and had aimed far too high, and thereby cut her off from a number of relatively respectable young men. At intervals it was rumoured that she was eating her heart out for some deserving youth whom vaulting ambition had denied her.

Even the passing acquaintance I had had with her while I was at school convinced me that this was not the case. She was far too conscious of her own worth to languish after anyone. At the time I merely thought her cold and proud. It did not occur to me to wonder whether this was due to inclination or to up bringing. Soon after she joined us however I had reason to refine upon my observations. She continued cool and aloof to the staff beneath us, but with everyone else she was charming. In her job she was certainly most effective.

My friends who, remembering the past, viewed our ripening acquaintance with interest had an alternative theory. In their view, since I was a Burgher, I was quite beyond the pale as it were. Like the guests at the hotel, I was no threat and so she had no need to put up her guard when dealing with me. The only answer to this was that they were still obsessed by her father's former position as their Headmaster, and as such were jealous in schoolboy fashion of my new relationship with someone who had seemed far beyond them in their youth.

Certainly, whatever my friends might have pretended to think, in the opinion of the aristocracy I was clearly to be taken seriously. Of course some of them managed to imply that this was because at her age it was a case of any port in a storm. Nevertheless I could not complain at the role in which I was cast. I had to some extent contributed to this myself by the interest I took in her. I will not deny that originally this had been because of who she was, but as time passed I found her interesting enough in herself.

Interest of course was all that I was prepared to give. There was no question of anything further developing. In a field like mine there is no point in tying oneself down when there are still areas to explore, and certainly not to a section of society that would have assumed I was laid under obligation by the connection. It might have been different had I needed some sort of a leg up, assuming indeed that they were in a position to provide it, which I doubted. In my current position I had nothing to gain by the connection, and everything to lose including the diversions offered by my cosy nook.

But even at the time I had an inkling that, were the connection to be made, such deprivation would have been self imposed, springing only from my own sense of my obligations. Joyce would not have been puritanical about such escapades. Though the proprieties were generally observed and nothing untoward ever said, except occasionally by the Manager, there are never many secrets in any close-knit community; though Joyce was not one to engage in idle gossip with her fellows, it was clear that she kept her ear to the ground, or wherever was appropriate, and had a good idea of what was going on. Once indeed she even asked about my cook, and though it was in the context of the expert confectioner who produced the wonderful house chocolates, dark and delicious, I had no doubt that she knew what she was about. I had to take her into the kitchens for a demonstration and, luscious though she pronounced what she sampled, it was not the chocolate in which she was interested. Marginally embarrassing though I found the whole business, my sense of irony was also roused by the fact that her interest was clearly reciprocated.

Exactly how much of a catalyst I had been I was to find out only later. At the time my benign attitude towards a situation I was slow to

comprehend in its entirety was upset by the approach her father adopted. He used to come into the Oriental quite often, attracted by the fact that the Manager had decreed he was to be given a whiskey whenever he appeared. He was fond of his whiskey, but apparently no longer received gifts of bottles as abundantly as he had done when he presided over the school. At the same time, though he clearly appreciated the Manager's generosity, and even looked deeply wounded when the whiskey was delayed, he was careful enough not to come in more than once or at most twice a week, so there was not much reason to regret or reverse the decree.

'It is good business,' the Manager said to me once, when I remarked upon the ritual. 'He knows so many people, that old man. They stop and talk with him in the lobby and almost always buy him a drink. He has a certain dignity, so that anyone would like to see him in a hotel like this and have a drink with him. Why, I have known him to have eight drinks in one day, one after the other, after we have given him the first one, and from his manner you would have guessed he had paid for all of them instead of none at all. You must be careful that his daughter is not like him in such things.'

I may of course have been unfair in assuming that it was the whiskey that attracted him. It might have been simply the bright lights and glamour that he missed so sorely after his fall from grace. What it certainly was not was what he claimed, a request from his daughter that he drop in to give her something. Though she was dutiful and always spared him some time when he called, it was apparent that far from having initiated his visits she was embarrassed by them.

'I don't generally like this sort of place,' he would say, basking in one of our upholstered armchairs and cradling his glass. 'But my daughter wanted me to bring something for her. She's very busy here, you know, and they send the car for her so early that she forgets things all the time. She'll be forgetting her own name next, if I'm not careful. You know what these young people are like. But I suppose we can't complain. She seems to be happy here. Can't say I would have liked all this glitter myself, and you never know what sort of person you might meet, but the young are different. They're not like us you know.'

This was early on, and I used to feel sorry for Joyce. As the days passed, however, and our acquaintance ripened, it became clear to me that far from wasting any sympathy on her it was on myself I had to expend it. His daughter's forgetfulness became a thing of the past as the excuse for his visits, and he took on instead the role of a knight in shining armour, riding beneath the flamboyant banners in our lobby to rescue her from a fate worse than death.

'There's this Burgher johnny who wants to marry her,' the story went. Not only had I been told about it gleefully by my acquaintance who

had connections with the family, I had even heard it myself for, sitting in our lobby and drinking our whiskey, he pretended to have no idea who I was even when I was quite near.

'They say he was in college, but of course that must have been some years before I went back there. Apparently he wasn't the sort who came to Old Boys' Day. The family is not too bad, they say. Still, it's a bit difficult for me to take. Never had anything of the sort in our family before. Of course she hasn't made up her mind yet and we're still hoping she won't have him, but you can never tell these days.'

And at this point he would look down with dignity at his empty glass, so that unless he was unlucky another drink was immediately ordered for him.

I suppose in a sense I should have taken it as a compliment that he referred to me so often. His technique, developed to perfection, doubtless after many years of serving as an underling in obscure government departments where rightful notice had not been taken of his lineage, had been to bring up the topic of whatever he wanted with multiple disclaimers so that he had a fallback position in case things did not work out the way he wanted. In this way he could feel that his prestige, which was the most important thing of all, remained intact. To a great extent the technique had worked. Even now, though his ploys had worn a bit thin, he had emerged from the recent flasco with less discredit than the unfortunate manufacturer of paint, on whom he had subtly managed to have most of the mud flung. As far as he himself was concerned, the prevailing impression was that he had wanted nothing and what he had received had been simply thrust upon him.

But apart from keeping himself clean, on the surface at any rate, what the technique also accomplished was the establishment of a sense of obligation towards him. What he mentioned as on offer came to be taken as his due. So it was that as time passed, it began to be generally accepted even amongst my own peers, to say nothing of her more anxious relations, that there was some sort of an understanding between us. It went so far that I even began to wonder whether I should not feel under a certain degree of obligation myself. It was I think absolutely in self-defence that I began to talk more openly to Joyce about my cook; not directly, of course, but in such a manner that had she been on the ball, as I had no doubt she was, she must have realized how very far I was from proposing to marry her.

Nevertheless she came when I decided in my official capacity to have a picnic for just the minor staff. She was the only person at a higher level whom I invited, for the plain if not quite simple reason that I had heard her father was becoming even more proprietorial about me and I began to feel that if I did not act soon I would be close to being overwhelmed. Accordingly during the trip I could almost be said to have

made a display of my cook, who was as always more than quick about anticipating and catering to my more mundane requirements. I pointed this out to Joyce with more than proprietorial pride, and I think she got the message.

That seemed to me the inescapable conclusion from the fact that, though as I have mentioned she was not one to mix more than necessary with the minor staff, she spent the whole afternoon engaged in deep conversation with, if one can use the word, her rival. I was busy with all the others, going up and down amidst the groups spread out under the palm trees by the sea, but I stopped by them often enough and was quite impressed by the intensity of their conversation. Of course, given the profitability of the trade and the status of the Oriental, even our minor staff came from respectable enough schools and backgrounds, and their English was in some cases quite as good as our own, especially after practice; yet I was still surprised at the manner in which Joyce managed to draw out someone I had hitherto thought of as shy and inarticulate, except in certain special contexts. It seemed to me however an entirely good thing.

It is a tribute to Joyce and the solid exterior she had maintained that I thought little more of the incident. I was in fact so pleased by what I thought of as her indulgence to me that when she asked to see my suite I broke my rule about entertaining hotel personnel there and took her up for a drink. She was enchanted by the view, and was just going on to tell me how much she envied me my cosy little nook, when the inevitable happened. There was the sound of a key in the lock and my cook's head appeared around the door.

Joyce's aplomb was admirable. 'Thank you for the chocolates,' she exclaimed in the moment it took the startled face to vanish. My own reflexes were slower, and by the time I got to the corridor there was no one to be seen. There was no point in pursuing the matter. I turned back to find Joyce producing a box of the splendid chocolates from her bag.

'I'm sure I don't deserve it,' she said. 'But it was an absolutely sweet present. It was very kind of you to introduce us, and to make sure I knew all about the chocolates.'

That, tactfully, was the only subject she raised with reference to the untoward apparition. I am ashamed to say that it did strike me at the time, if only in passing, that she was not very different from her father, though in a girl of course it seemed much less reprehensible. How very much more remarkable she was than the old man did not however take me much longer to discover. A few weeks after the incident I had gone off to the East coast for a break with some friends, and while we were there a curfew was declared. The sensible thing might have been to have stayed on to the end of our holiday, but we were frightened things would get worse so we travelled hastily back. I was thus, because of my holiday and the curfew, doubly unexpected when I got back to the hotel.

I cannot actually claim to have caught them in flagrante delicto, but it was near enough. They were in the sitting room together when I burst in, too close for any comfort; in any case the look on my cook's face was enough to give the game away. For a split second I was furious, as much with my earlier naiveté as with them, and then I saw the funny side of things and began to laugh.

So at any rate I did not make an ass of myself. Joyce was much more accomplished. Years of breeding had trained her to make the most of such situations. She said airily that the management had only given her a measly little room by the stairs for the duration of the curfew, and she had assumed I would have had no objection to her making use of my well-stocked quarters. Now I was back however she would of course promptly clear out of the way.

She stopped only to collect her things, and swept elegantly off. It did not take me very long to forgive my cook, who slipped thankfully into my view that had I only been asked in advance there would have been nothing wrong whatsoever. The situation was certainly too rich for any other attitude to be adopted. In time it occurred to me that I had been very remiss in not having asked Joyce also to stay. To say the least, it would have placed the aristocracy in a most entertaining new light.

On reflection however I was glad I had not. That might have seemed both premature and a trifle importunate. The suggestion would come much more suitably from my cook rather than myself. A few days later it was accordingly made, and taken up, and since then there has been, so to speak, no looking back.

I suspect that the Manager is rather perversely jealous, for he keeps telling me, not entirely frivolously, that the whole situation is quite indecent and that something ought to be done about it, namely that I should get married. He seems to have little doubt that I would be quite content to marry Joyce, having been here long enough to be impressed by her family credentials. I should be sorry to disillusion him, but there is really no way in which I would allow myself to be tied down like that. Besides, I could not bear to have to buy her dreadful father measure after measure of whiskey while listening to his complaints about everyone and everything including doubtless myself.

At the same time I agree with the Manager that a wedding would really set the seal on the whole business. Joyce I have no doubt would rather like to marry me, for the drawbacks, if you can call them that, are not really serious. As to that I am confident enough now about my own desirability. Ironically I am the one who has to take social considerations into account least of all. I do not say that I would not have swallowed even the old hypocrite, given the richness of the rest of the situation, had I needed that sort of a leg up, but that is most definitely not the case.

My cook however could certainly do with a leg up, and I see no reason why I should not assist. It would also be a piquant kick up the appropriate part of their anatomy for the aristocracy. I am sure I am skilled enough in the Management of personnel to be able to arrange the whole business satisfactorily. When the engagement is announced, even if we have still not been introduced, I shall take great pleasure in buying Mr. de Livera a drink.

**Rajiva Wijesinha**

## DESPAIR

If I were to search in the birdless sky
with my old and blurry eyes
I am sure to find a vulture
circling far above.
Soon he will fix his eyes
on the upturned suppliant face
and swoop. The heart flutters
the fledgling without hope.

What was given is all that I have
I know; but knowledge is no solace
when caged anguish explodes
into a dry and eerie screech.
Idly, I watch
the slaughterer stare without desire
at the presumptuous cow
grazing in virgin meadows
wondering,
does the slaughterer ever meditate?

Unredeemed we live and struggle
under the falsely pregnant clouds
that flock each day
only to dissolve by evening.
Each night the stars mock
and the foxes howl
while we toss, turn and whimper;
we dare not growl.

**J. A. Karunaratne**

## PERADENIYA CAMPUS (1989)

The last notice of the explorer's club
is eight years old.
The grass grows tall and wild.
The campus is deserted .....
The familiar couples in love are gone.
The wacky boy-men shouting pithy epithets
at girls passing by,
are gone.
The faculties are empty,
so are the libraries .....

What pain must you know,
to suddenly have your dreams
snatched away.
To know a lull of monotony, nothingness,
replacing the vistas of a better world .....

We climbed Hantana,
getting lost in the mists.
We cleared the grass around the temple.
Making friends from Dondra-Head
to Point Pedro,
(they even married in the end - despite the ethnic crisis)
Washed the floors of the king's court
in Kandy,
I do not remember why.
Our professors played us Bach and Beethoven,
besides teaching medicine.
They even talked to us
then .....
We fell in love and out of love.
Pursued our distinctions and honours,
with glee.
Of course there were the tears, but
they didn't eat up our souls.
We emerged,
glorious. Ready to conquer the world.

Why do we do nothing ?
To give you all this and more.
Why have we forgotten what it was like,
to be like you ?

**Arundathi Kurukulasuriya**

# THE DIVISION BELLS

6.30 p.m. Sri Lanka Advanced Time. The Venerable Welimadawatthe Ananda listened as the bell tolled for the evening Bodhi Pooja. That sound took him back to times long forgotten. Times of togetherness, sharing and friendship. He had left memories behind him now and had learnt to look at things objectively, but sometimes his mind could not help wandering back to the past. He couldn't help wondering about what might have been.

It had been the age-old girl-next-door story. And yes they had been inseparable and had done everything together, just like in the books. Her name was Anna Sathyanathan. They had studied, played, laughed, cried and even prayed together. On Poya Days they went to the temple. Anna loved standing in line for the Bodhi Pooja, and passing trays of flowers and sanctified food and drink. Easter and Christmas meant that Ananda tagged along with Anna's family for mass. On occasions they even visited the nearby kovil to touch fire and listen to the multitude of drums and bells. They had a strange fascination with bells. Especially ones which chimed at religious places. Even when they grew out of the innocence of childhood they seemed to find joy in the same things. They planned to go to university together and had long discussions about their future lives. With maturity their relationship changed and soon their discussions turned to their future life together. But they kept their feelings hidden, as they knew they'd encounter parental opposition. While they were friends, differences did not matter, but now their parents would see things in another light. They decided to deal with the problem after getting through university. But soon the shadow of racism fell across Sri Lanka and they had more problems than they'd ever dreamed possible.

1983 saw Anna's family home burnt to the ground with all their possessions. Ananda's parents secretly sheltered them, till the worst had passed. He remembered how his father had been forced by the rioters to chant gathas at their gate, to assure them that everyone in the household was "our people". After a while Anna's father didn't see much point in their continuing to struggle in Sri Lanka and decided to make a fresh start in Canada. That's when their secret finally came out. They begged and pleaded with their parents to give them a chance, but they were adamant in their decision. They would not even consider marriage. Ananda couldn't understand it. His parents had willingly helped Anna's parents, risking their own security; they loved Anna like their own daughter, but the thought of including her in their family was unthinkable to them. "If it was just mixed races only we wouldn't mind. But religion too? We don't want Catholic grandchildren," they reasoned. Anna's parents didn't want Anna to be banned from Church for marrying a

Buddhist. As a last resort they even thought of eloping, but they could see the hopelessness of that situation. And neither really wanted to let down their parents. So Anna's father hurried up their migration plans and soon they were gone. Ananda wrote to her faithfully but his letters were all returned to sender. He didn't know whether she'd attempted to write and had been stopped or whether she had just thrown him out of her mind. Either way life went on.

Ananda passed out of university and got a job, but he lost his aim in life. And the increasingly troublesome events in the country depressed him further. He decided to take to robes. It seemed ironic to him that he should seek solace in the very thing that had broken his heart. Nevertheless he had found answers to most of the questions he was seeking, though some questions still remained unanswered.

The bell had stopped tolling. He stared at it wonderingly, like he had done many a time before. He was still fascinated with bells and he still pondered on their significance. But now he just shook his head and walked towards the Bo Tree. He had duties to perform.

6.00 a.m. Toronto time. Sister Anna listened as the bells pealed for morning mass. That sound took her back to times long forgotten.

**Sandamali Wijeratne**

## CAVE WALK

*ROHAN ON STAGE WAITING FOR SOMEONE. DEVI ENTERS.*

Rohan: I thought you'd never come. How did you make it?
Devi: I had classes.
Rohan: But won't they go to pick you up, or something?
Devi: No they won't. I'm going to my best friend's for dinner afterwards and they'll drop me off.
Rohan: What if they call your friend?
Devi: She doesn't have a phone and they don't know her address. *(Laugh and hug).* How did you manage?
Rohan: Seminar.
Devi: What if she calls?
Rohan: She won't. She's visiting her mother. No phone.
Devi: You suggest something. I don't know this forest at all. Have you been here before?
Rohan: Yes, that's why I suggested it. It's beautiful, especially before sunset. Everything falls exactly into place at the right time.
Devi: Were you waiting long?
Rohan: Just a few minutes. While waiting I discovered this cave.
Devi: Did you go in?
Rohan: Just a few yards. It's a little spooky.
Devi: How exciting. Shall we explore it? Come on, Rohan, be romantic.
Rohan: Romantic? Good gracious! I'm sure it's full of bats and things. Hardly material for romance, unless it is Dracula's wedding or something.
Devi: You're not scared, are you?
Rohan: OK, come on. Nothing like a little adventure, I suppose. Wait, what if we can't find our way out?
Devi: Of course we can. It's only a silly little cave. If you're in and can't get out it's like being married!
It's lovely! *(Laugh echoes. Shouts:)* I love Rohan!
Come on, now it's your turn.
Rohan: I love Rohan!
Devi: Idiot! You're supposed to shout you love me. This is the only place you can shout it loud.
Rohan: I love you. *(Echo)*
Devi: What are those? *(Pointing to stalagmites etc.)*
Rohan: They 're stalactites and stalagmites. The mites go up, the tites come down.
Devi: They remind me of something.
Rohan: Oh, don't be silly, darling. You're going to need more guts than this when the word gets out.

Devi: Oooh, look at those crevices. What do you thing is in them?

Rohan: We'll find out *(Flings a stone into crevice)* There you are, nothing to worry. *(Bat flies out. He jumps. She screams.)*

Devi: What was that? *(Echo on 'that,).*

Rohan: A bat. *(Echo on 'bat')* Bat. *(Echo)*

Devi: Don't, you're frightening me.

Rohan: Do you want to turn back?

Devi: No, let's go on. *(They continue walking).*

Devi: Well, what did she say?

Rohan: Nothing.

Devi: Nothing?

Rohan: I mean I didn't speak to her.

Devi: How can you say that when the whole purpose of our meeting here was to discuss it.

Rohan: Was it? Everything is so nice here, we can forget about all that for a while.

Devi: But you know how important it is.

Rohan: We won't meet like this often.

Devi: *(Irritated)* We won't meet like this at all if you keep on refusing to do something soon.

Rohan: Come on, darling, don't spoil the day. I'm not refusing to talk to her, it's just that I need a little more time.

Devi: Why?

Rohan: I don't think I'm ready to talk to her just yet.

Devi: Oh, talk, talk. What's the use of all this talk. It does not alter the fact that I'm a Sinhalese.

Rohan: Naah, it's not the Sinhalese part that bothers her, it's that your mother's a politician.

Devi: But I remember your telling me your father's mother had some strange connection.

Rohan: Come on let's go back.

Devi: What would you do if you can't marry me? Supposing something terrible happens which prevents it?

Rohan: Well, what of it?

Devi: Will you marry someone else?

Rohan: I guess I will. *(She let's go of hand)* Don't be silly, darling. It's like asking me if I could still love you if you were a man.

Devi: Would you?

Rohan: I should hope not! *(Pause)* What would you do?

Devi: I should hope I could still love you if I were a man.

Rohan: No, no, it's not like that. What would you do if you could not marry me?

Devi: If I can't marry you, I won't marry anyone at all.

Rohan: And remain lonely for the rest of your life?

Devi: I don't know about that. I know people who are lonely being married.

Rohan: But you can't just remain unmarried?

Devi: Why not?

Rohan: I don't know, it's like not going to school, or something.

Devi: I'll do a job.

Rohan: What about the evenings and the weekends?

Devi: I'll do the one thing I won't be able to do if I were married.

Rohan: Now we are back where we started. Let's start again.

Devi: There's water dripping from the roof. We didn't come to a place like this.

Rohan: Don't be stupid. How could you have noticed a thing like that when you did not even notice the waterfall.

Devi: Don't call me stupid!

Rohan: I'm sorry. Let's try this way then.

*(Dim Slightly)*

Devi: You should never have brought me here.

Rohan: It was your idea.

Devi: You should have stopped me.

Rohan: I tried to, you called me a coward.

Devi: That's a lie, I never called you a coward.

Rohan: You implied it.

Devi: If the cap fits put it on.

Rohan: Look, I'm only trying to explain why I did not stop you.

Devi: You did not stop me because you didn't have the guts to do so.

*(Dim Slightly)*

Devi: I feel I have been walking over two hours. Have we lost our way again?

Rohan: Wait a minute, I think I can recognize certain stalagmites.

Devi: Rohan don't lie to me. All stalagmites look alike. You don't have to lie to cover up.

Rohan: Damn it! We lose our way and it's my fault.

Devi: Of course it's your fault, it was your idea.

Rohan: My idea! I tried to stop you.

Devi: It was you who told me about it.

*(Dim)*

Rohan: You and your bright ideas, exploring caves!

Devi: It was your idea.

Rohan: I wouldn't have suggested it if you didn't carry on.

Devi: I suppose you'd say the same thing about marrying me.

Rohan: Oh, for Christsake, who cares whose idea it was, we are both in this together.

Devi: I care. It seems to me you're the kind of person who shifts the blame when things go wrong.

Rohan: Oh, for Christsake!

Devi: Please don't go on about Christ, you know jolly well who wanted to come into this cave. I don't know why you did that.

Rohan: I did that

Devi: Don't. I'm frightened.

*(Dim fade in, she is on her knees praying)*

Devi: Dear God, please don't let us get lost and die here.

Rohan: You think He is listening?

Devi: Yes, isn't that why we pray?

Rohan: Then why did He not listen when you prayed that you could marry me?

Devi: You want to know? Because I never prayed for it, that's why.

Rohan: While you are at it can't you ask Him for some cigarettes?

Devi: If you don't believe in God, at least respect the fact that I do.

Rohan: It's not that I don't, it's that at this particular moment I wish you wouldn't keep flinging yourself here and there, wasting your energy.

*(She starts to cry. Fade)*

Devi: I really don't think we're getting out of this place. What if we can't get out?

Rohan: Oh, don't be such a fatalist.

Devi: *(Staring blankly)* I really don't think we're going to get out of this place.

Rohan: You said that once. Please don't keep saying it.

Devi: But what if we can't?

Rohan: If we can't we can't. There is no point in going on about it like a demented parrot. *(Pause)*

Devi: Rohan, do you really believe we're going to get out?

Rohan: Shut up!

Devi: Rohan if you're going to harass me like this I'm going to do something.

Rohan: It's you who are harassing me. You're getting on my nerves.

Devi: I'm warning you, if you go on torturing me I'm going to scream and scream and never stop.

Rohan: It's you who are torturing me.

Devi: You are such a big bully.

Rohan: Keep your mouth shut.

Devi: I always knew you were one.

Rohan: Shut up!

Devi: Cowards are the biggest bullies.

Rohan: Shut up

Devi: Bully! Coward!

Rohan: Shut up or I will kill you!

*(Fade out. Fade in)*

She is lying down.

Rohan: How long have we been lost? Hours, days or weeks?

Devi: I wonder if it is night or day. I would have thought that we are creatures of habit and we ought to know instinctively if it's night or day. If it is morning my brother will be getting ready to go to school. My father will be coming in after his morning's game of golf. I of course will be in bed dreaming of you. Dreaming of you? I wonder if I'll ever be able to do that again.

Rohan: We don't have enough air to breathe and you are jabbering some nonsense.

Devi: I sink into my bubble bath and lie there while the water washes away the lethargy of the night's sleep and makes me glad to be alive.

Rohan: *(Running from wall to wall.)* There must be some hole somewhere in this cave.

Devi: And then I go down to breakfast. Today I'll have ham and poached egg on toast. Before that I'll of course have my fruit juice.

Rohan: There must be some escape somewhere in this rock.

Devi: After the juice I will have loads and loads of marmalade.

Rohan: My lungs feel they are being filled with concrete.

Devi: Such a lovely breakfast.
(Fade. Fade in. Light on both crawling) Into centre light.

Devi: I'm going to die.

Rohan: Don't keep saying that.

Devi: I'm going to die.

Rohan: If you don't stop saying that I am going to help you to.

Devi: You'll be doing me a favour. Must you be so cruel when I'm going to die?

Rohan: We're both going to die, woman. So don't make a federal case of it.

Devi: I don't want to live alone here. *(Praying)* Please God, I don't want to live alone here, please don't let him die first.
*He kicks her. She falls.*

Devi: You're scared of God aren't you? You who laughed at me praying. You're scared he'll grant my prayer.

Rohan: I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to kill you.

*Somehow they have got out. Outside.*

Rohan: Shall I call you in the evening?

Devi: Should you?

Rohan: Don't answer a question with a question. Shall I call you?

Devi: Do you really want to?

Rohan: Quite frankly I don't know.

**Nedra Vittachi**

## *TO BEG I AM ASHAMED*

He cried, dashing across
the dried up fields
towards the village temple.
Seeking pity, clothed in shame
with high sales pitch and outstretched arms
his mother sat in tourists' path
watching and waiting for food.
Hands clasped, head bowed, the little boy
touched the feet of the ancient monk
and asked to learn to read and write
to find release from such decay.

A form not planned took shape.
As from a chrysalis on trembling leaf
a fledgling monk emerged
with shaven head and saffron robes
eyes deep and dark, soft spoken.
He sought some order in his world
with disciplines newly learned
from teachings at the temple.
Midst mournful chants that filled the air
and ringed by light of quivering lamps
he preached the sacred five fold path
to simple village folk.

But in the morning light
a man transformed strode forth
to sluggish fields that rudely shook
to rhythms that he called.
Men stamped cracked ground and drew the plough
and stood all day knee deep in mud
till aching limbs and blistered hands
cleared the litter of the years —
hopeless morass, tangled mess,
that wilderness of weeds.
Caressed by sun and monsoon rain
the challenged heaving earth replied
till long black scythes skimmed the grain
with ever quickening strokes that cried
"No" to servitude.

Babel of ancient lore now turned
to slow sonorous song
Furrows of fields fanned out to reach
an ever growing throng
And so it went till, before high noon
head bowed in grace and boyish, monk
from within his robes drew out a bowl
to receive the food the village gave
in humble obeisance.
He stood transfixed in fields of gold
but then turned back to temple gates
to tread his chosen path.

**Lakshmi Wijesinha**

## THE VOICE OF SILENCE

Death is heralded by a whisper.
You're gone before I can
Hold it in memory.
Lilies wilt under the sun,
Wreaths of orchids burn.

The lilt of song
Mingles with the resonance
Of prayer and benediction,
And the congregation's long-drawn "Amen".

Over the lake's green water
A bird shrills and is gone.
The wind drops,
And its murmur ends.

A vast imponderable quiet,
An awesome silence
Descends on the evening,
And waits to be unravelled.

**Alfreda de Silva**

## KAAKA AND ME

The earliest memory of my sister is a beautiful one. She was dressed in a pretty lace gown. She was the flower girl at Sonali Aunty's wedding. Everybody wanted to touch her or take a photograph of her innocent face which was made to look smaller by a pair of large intelligent eyes.

She was two years older than I. She called me Choot, and I called her Kaaka. Our father was an army officer who treated us like his soldiers. Or worse. The slightest mistake we made in the occasional study session with him was enough for one of his almost soundless slaps across the face which left a stinging pain lasting for hours.

I once remember we, — thatha, amma, Kaaka and myself were shopping at a big supermarket. Kaaka had wanted a greeting card to send to a friend of hers and she had forwarded the appeal well in advance. It had been granted and that day we went to a gift shop and my sister selected a nice colourful card with a cuddly bear on it saying : "You Are Seven."

But our father stated clearly that the card was "inappropriate" and himself selected some other dull-looking card with tall yellowish candles on it. It was not a painting but a photograph. However my smart sister cleverly switched the two cards as they were brought to the cashier. I was afraid to death. This was enough for a caning.

I still remember my father, as we approached the elevator, asking my sister to produce the card for some reason or another. Kaaka's face turned into a bizarre picture. My knees were shaking. I did not want this to happen. I could not bear to watch my sister being hit by my father. It always hurt me.

He looked at the card for a while and calmly asked amma to go down the elevator and wait in the foyer. He beckoned us to a small corner which was not even well hidden. He looked at Kaaka's face, bending down so his face came to the level of hers. And he kept on staring at her wide-open eyes.

I wanted to cry. I knew the hiss of a swift slap was around the corner. I wanted to close my eyes. But I would still hear it. I wanted to stop him and save my sister, but I was afraid. I wanted to run but I could not. I wanted to do something. I wanted to kill my father.

His hand worked with such dexterity that the passers-by were not sure whether he hit her twice or touched her face. She did not cry. Her face was grotesque, bloated, the mischievous smile completely vanished. I was crying.

"You are in this too." He turned to me and slapped me and I almost cried aloud. Had I uttered a sound, I would have been sure to receive two canings, one tonight, the next the following night, on the healing wounds.

The most interesting thing, as I observe today, is that he always managed to find a cause (sometimes numerous causes) to punish both of us at the same time. We were never punished alone. We were never taken to amma's room alone.

Amma slept in a separate room from thatha's. And it was in this room that he used to cane us. He would first drive amma away and drag us to the room. Then he would lock us in and go away, giving us ample time to imagine what awaited us that night.

Most of the time it was a caning. Sometimes he used flexible wires, four of them, each about two feet long, twisted together, which left spiral reddish marks on the skin.

It was the site of caning that differed with every beating. He should be given due credit for that ability of his. One day it would be the buttocks. The next the back of the shoulders. Sometimes back of the thighs. One day he made us lie down on the bed on our sides and lift one leg so the inner aspect of the thigh of the other leg was adequately exposed for the sharp kisses of the cane.

The quality of the canning was essentially the same for both of us even though the individual reasons for the punishment varied greatly. Actually it was the number of strikes that differed. My sister being older and less cowardly, always got more. As we grew we got even more. Towards the latter part of our childhood the canings became less frequent but more severe.

But there are nice memories too. I loved my sister and she loved me. We were rather indifferent to our mother. She was very passive. I do not even remember her face clearly. We did not have friends. We were not allowed to. So Kaaka was my friend, my sister and sometimes my mother.

Her puberty changed many important things. Canings almost stopped. The modes of punishment were confined to slapping, verbal abuse, starvation and isolation.

It was during that time the Amarasenas came to the newly built house next to ours. They, too, had a girl and a boy. They were twins and were 15. To our greatest surprise we were allowed to associate with them. We were permitted to visit them every Saturday from two-thirty to four o'clock. They used to visit us too. But quite soon they dropped that habit.

But none of this, the new friends or my sister's womanhood, hindered our friendship. We always loved each other. Day by day our love grew.

Then I noticed a difference in me. Suddenly I was very inquisitive about Draveen Aiya (the Amarasena boy's) body as well as about mine. His tall lean body which was rapidly shedding its additional fatty tissue was the center of my interest at that time. I wanted to see him naked.

I wanted to find out whether he too, like me, had grown small hair at the base of his penis. One day we were playing badminton at their place and after a good sweat he removed his T-shirt revealing his beautiful chest and the tight abdomen.

His nipples were darker and coarser than mine and there were small hairs. His abdomen had small longitudinal ridges with a navel in between them, just above the waistband of his sports pants.

I told these things to Kaaka. Who else could I talk to? She gave a small laugh when she heard the hair business and said: "It is quite normal to grow hair there at his age." She was a bit concerned at my interest in Draveen Aiya. But the very next day she informed me that that too was quite normal for a boy of my age.

I was amazed at her extensive knowledge on the facts of life. She told me that she read a lot. She had also learnt a thing or two from Damani Akka, Draveen's sister, and her classmates.

She said to me that she was attracted to Draveen too. I wanted to know exactly in what manner. Was it his body, as it was in my case, or his personality, or was it that occasional, characteristic, sheepish grin of his ? Or was it his loud, aggressive voice ?..... She never told me. She said that she was not that much bothered to analyse her attraction to Draveen.

Then it happened. It happened just after her O/Level examination was over. She kissed Draveen ! She kissed him in public !

I was coming home after my boring private-Maths class on Saturday. At the gate I knew that something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong. All those memories of canings which I thought had long been forgotten, rushed to my mind in a flash. And in vivid detail too. The intense anxiety which we had hated more than anything in this world was suddenly overwhelming. I wanted to turn back and run. But I could not.

Kaaka had already been locked up in amma's room. Thatha was waiting for me.

"You idiot, you are the pimp, huh ? You were the pimp for your shameless sister, gal booruwa." *

He got hold of my shirt collar and hauled me across the living room so heavily and quickly and violently that all my books and my pencil-box were thrown everywhere on the floor of the living room. I was crawling on all fours when he shoved me into the room and locked it from outside. Kaaka was inside.

She had already been treated to a few slaps, something which had never happened before: individual punishment. But it was quite obvious that we both were awaiting the major punishment which was to come later.

I was vigorously fighting my fright. That same fright which covered me like a white cloud and made me a coward in the early days

was pouring in. But I did not want to be afraid. I was a man. Therefore I needed to be angry, not afraid. But I was afraid and I wanted to kill my father more than ever.

It was this mental suffering that made me never forgive my father. The periods of infinite waiting, periods of intense fright, shame .... not the actual beating which only left marks on the surfaces of our innocent bodies.

"What did you do?" I barely managed to ask her.

"I kissed Draveen in their living room in front of his mother."

I could not believe my ears. I could have believed that my sister kissed Draveen, even in front of his mother, even made love to him, but I could not believe she was talking to me in that tone. She was .... so far away from me. I had never felt any gap between us even after her puberty, but now I saw her in my mind as a grown up tough woman standing on the edge of a deep, wide canyon, and me, a helpless child on the opposite edge.

That was the first and the only time in our lives we left things unresolved. I did not ask her another single question. Nor did she speak another single word.

I was not afraid anymore. Neither was I angry. I looked at my sister and observed her. She was beautiful. Her breasts were heaving as she was breathing slowly but deeply to calm her nerves.

On a previous day I had told her that she had beautiful breasts. She blushed but quickly regained her composure and said : "Don't get so obsessed with your sister, Choot, or you will find yourself not turned on by other girls."

The beating started at midnight. This time it was very different. He came in as if he had totally lost control, he had obviously lost his chilling calmness for the very first time in his life. He did not bother to take out the cane or the flexible wire. Instead he simply used his hands. One hand grabbed Kaaka's hair and the other went on slapping her face. After a few slaps hands would switch.

I was terrified. All my now-I-am-a-man air had completely evaporated without leaving a trace. I was more terrified than ever before.

Then he came to me. Only after a few blows did I realize that he was screaming incoherently, something he never did in his life, not even during punishment time. He was frothing too.

I did not feel the pain. The first few blows anaesthetized me. I cannot remember how long the beatings went on. After they ended we were immediately separated; this too, had never happened before. I was put in our room, and she continued to be locked in amma's room.

I did not sleep that night. When day broke sleep came to me. It was mid-morning when I woke up from my troubled sleep. Our door was not locked anymore. But I was yet to understand that the room was no

longer ours. From that day onwards the room became mine. She had gone. Where I did not know.

I thought she was temporarily moved to some far-away relation's place, probably to Sonali Aunty's at Bandarawela. After a few days I asked my mother. May be that was the first time I spoke to her in months. She said that Kaaka was at Sonali Aunty's but heaven knows when she would be brought back. That was the most dreadful news I had ever had to take in my life.

The following year was hell to me. I hated every bit of that year especially the first two months. Every single hour, every single minute, every single second I hated. Many times I felt like jumping under a moving train.

Sonali Aunty did not have a phone. Kaaka never phoned home either. One day about two months later, mother showed me a letter from Kaaka. It was written very formally. She had asked me to behave well and do my exams well. "One day we would perhaps meet here."

The last sentence had some significance. For a whole day I could not unearth it. Then it suddenly came to me. It was the word "here". She wanted us to meet there, at Bandarawela. That meant Bandarawela had been good to her and I was to reach her there the first possible day.

This gave me new life. Even though thatha had started his regular beatings again (excluding caning), I had my own secret : I was planning to run. The consequences of which I did not dare to think of.

The beatings were quite appalling, mostly because I had to endure them all by myself, but at least they spared Kaaka. Somehow within six to eight months I managed to save enough money for a train ride to Bandarawela. It had been quite a laborious task as I was hardly ever given any money.

And it took two more entire months to build up guts to run away. Ever night I put off the day of running. Every beating drew it closer.

One day I tucked a T-shirt deep into my schoolbag and went to school with thatha in his official car. He dropped me at the gate and waited for a few seconds as he always did, to make sure I went in. I did go in but as the car sped away I turned back, gave some feeble excuse to the prefect at the gate and jumped into the street.

I had never ever travelled in a bus. So I took a three-wheeler to the railway station. I knew what the usual rates were; I had done my homework.

I was trembling with fright inside the tiny taxi which was itself shaking horridly, adding to my nervousness. It was not the beatings which invariably awaited me that scared me (by that time I was quite accustomed to physical abuse), but it was my own psychology. I knew I was a coward.

As the train slowly ascended the hills to Kadugannawa, I gradually calmed down. My fear slowly started to be superceded by other feelings. But it was there, like a hyena lying in the savannah ready to attack at the shortest notice.

And then I noticed something which was quite unexpected in the desperate situation I was in. I was feeling excited. Yes, I was excited. I could not figure why.

I changed into the T-shirt before getting down at Bandarawela. From there I took another taxi. Sonali Aunty lived only about a kilometre away from the heart of town. Even though nearly five years had lapsed since my last trip there, dimming my memories, I had the address.

Sonali Aunty's front garden was at a slightly higher level than the road, and was partially covered by a bush-fence. Kaaka was in the garden watering the lawn. Somehow she did not notice the rattling of the Bajaj.

I just stood on the road and looked at her. She did not see me for a while. She was, I noticed, even more beautiful. She had become much fairer. It seemed she was happy.

She suddenly stopped what she was doing and looked at the boy on the road who was staring at her. Those intelligent eyes, free from the perpetual anxiety and fear, which now belonged to another life, were simply breathtaking.

Involuntarily I dropped my schoolbag from my shoulder on to the ground. She dropped the garden-hose. We could not move. I do not know for how long we stood staring at each other. We simply could not move.

Then I started to pick my bag up and walk towards the gate. We embraced each other silently, but weeping heavily, on that rich upcountry lawn.

After dinner we were seated on the patio. It was not very cold that evening. No one bothered us. Sonali Aunty's husband went to town, probably to call thatha and inform him that I had got myself safely to Bandarawela.

"Why did you do this ?" Kaaka asked me, looking at the far away lights shining through the darkness and the mist, which belonged to the houses on the opposite hill-top.

"You wanted me to, didn't you ?"

"Yes .... I did." She confessed. "But ..."

"I know. I didn't have the guts. I thought I'd never do this."

Our armchairs were very close. She kept her hand on mine.

"Why did you do it?" I asked her. I always knew that she had never been interested in Draveen to the extent of kissing him, let alone doing it in front of his mother. "You didn't really love him, did you ?"

"No, I didn't." She was silent for while. When she started to speak again her voice was very calm and still. "I wanted to break free. My life was too unbearable. I wanted to run away from my father. I wanted something big to happen. Something that would give me the break."

"But it was getting better. He even stopped caning, didn't he ?" I argued feebly knowing very well that the next moment I would hear the naked truth from my sister.

"You know better. Sheer absence of caning doesn't mean life. It is not life when you have to make a special request if you want to change the covers of your text books. It is not life when you can't wait ten extra minutes after school to talk to a friend. Do you think I had a life ? Do you have a life ?"

And then there was silence again. I knew she had not wanted to say it and make me feel the coward which I really was.

Anyway she was right.

She had managed to change her life. She had broken free. Even though that break came so violently, it came. It came like a blessing from heaven.

And then I realized it.

I had done the same thing. I too had broken away. Life would not be the same ever again. Never, after what I had done today. My father would kill me or I would kill him. Or else he would keep away from my life, as he did from Kaaka's.

Then I knew why I was excited during the train ride despite the inevitable punishment. I understood why she gave up the happiness we had every weekend with the Amarasenas. I understood why she gave away our friendship. I understood why she challenged her ruthless, unforgiving father with such a bold move .... she wanted to change her life.

I felt an irreversible maturation process taking place in me that day. I would never be the same person again.

I did not want to kill my father anymore. That burning hatred was no longer there. I and my sister had achieved something that most would not ever dream of; despite being so young, we had changed our lives.

We were squeezing each other's hands till they pained.

**Mahesh Rajasuriya**

* gal booruwa = stupid donkey

# A LETTER FROM THE MIDDLE EAST

Infectious Diseases Hospital
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

06th July, 19

My dear Padmi,

At first I thought that I should not write this letter to you , but after much cogitation I decided that I ought to since you, as my wife, must share my sorrows as well as my joys. I implore you not to disclose anything in this letter to my mother, lest it should adversely affect her already bad health.

The letter you sent to P.O. Box 42809 on June 12th was received by me on the 27th, but I read it today. It was a soothing balm for me who is recovering from this terrible illness. Refreshed by reading your letter, I am going to write my whole story.

I told you about my stomach trouble in my previous letter. I got it soon after I came to Saudi. I stopped eating meat, food prepared in oil and fatty foods, but this did not improve my condition. Later I bought some medicine at a near-by pharmacy, but that too did not help. Then I went to Shimizi General Hospital. The doctor on duty refused to give me any medicine as I had already taken medicine from a pharmacy. He asked me to come again a week later, in order to get my stools and urine tested.

It is very difficult to get anything done at hospital as we cannot converse in Arabic. Furthermore, we do not have time to spend at hospitals, as we work like slaves at the shop for eleven hours a day. So I could not help neglecting my illness.

In the meantime Ramazan came round. Working hours were changed and we had to work a late night shift. My normal shift was from 7.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m. and again from 5.00 to 10.00 p.m. making it altogether 11 hours. The other cashier worked from 1.00 p.m. to 6.00 p.m. and again from 7 p.m. to 1 a.m. following day, making the usual 11 hours. Though all employees in Saudi Arabia work only 6 hours a day during the Ramazan season, our boss insisted that we must work 10 hours a day, reducing only 1 hour from our normal working hours. Thus late night shift was scheduled from 3 p.m. to 8 p.m. and again from 10 p.m. to 3 a.m. the following day, making it altogether 10 hours.

During the first week, it was my turn to work the late night shift. Lack of sleep worsened my stomach disorder. The Philippine cashier asked me to do the late night shift throughout the Ramazan season, but I objected vehemently, and threatened that I would either do it every other

week or resign and go back to Sri Lanka. At that point he yielded and agreed to do the late night shift every other week.

During my second late night shift, I got mumps. My jaws were swollen, but my beard hid this. I could neither eat nor swallow anything. At the same time I was suffering from fever. With all these ailments I had to work too. I didn't want to complain to our boss because, on an earlier occasion, he angrily yelled at one of our Sri Lankans to "Go to Hell," when he pleaded with our boss to take him to a dentist to extract a decayed tooth. If I were to receive the same response from him, despite the consequences I would certainly have strangled him, even if they were to sever all my limbs. So I worked silently enduring all these aches and pains, all by myself.

During the last two weeks of Ramazan, I couldn't eat anything. As soon as I took a mouthful of rice, I started to retch. I was in serious agony and just managed to survive by drinking a large cup of Horlicks, three times a day. Throughout this period I worked while shivering with fever. I vomited seven or eight times a day. The Philippine cashier never asked me what was wrong with me. We worked together from 3.00 p.m., to 8.00 p.m. during which time only a few customers came, but he never had the kindness to say, "You go and rest; I shall manage alone." He was indeed a very selfish man.

In Saudi, private hospitals and private doctors are very rare. If I had been aware of such a place, I would not have let my condition worsen to such an extent. One day I met a Sri Lankan and he told me of a clinic which was situated not very far away. I finished my work at 12 noon, and went in search of that clinic. I had to walk almost two miles in the scorching sun, before I finally found the place and met the doctor. It was a Monday. He gave me some medicine and asked me to come back the following Thursday to have my stools and urine tested.

I barely managed to pull myself together to work, in order to get my salary at the end of the month. Last year our boss had paid a bonus of SR 400/- to all employees of our establishment for Ramazan. We expected at least SR 500/- per head this time. Only SR 150/- was paid as the bonus, while I was in the hospital. The Philippine cashier had crumpled the notes and kicked them.

On Wednesday night my condition worsened. My headache was unbearable. I was shivering with fever. Vomiting continued. I knew that if I walked that distance again to see the doctor, I would drop dead on the way. How could one walk two miles in this accursed desert without having had any food for two weeks and at the same time suffering from a terrible illness?

Despite all these sufferings, I reported for work the following morning. The Sudanese Manager had informed our boss that I was seriously ill. His simple response was, "I can't help that, he must work

till 12 o'clock and then he may go to hospital". So I worked till 12 o'clock and went back to my room and tried to sleep.

That half an hour was the worst I have ever suffered in my life. My head was aching. I was very cold and shivering with fever. Every ten minutes I vomited. In Sri Lanka, I used to boast to my friends that I have never cried in my life. But on this particular day I cried several times during these few hours. At last I sent one of my colleagues to the shop to look for somebody to take me to the hospital. Luckily there was a customer who volunteered to do this. The big Egyptian who worked with me carried me downstairs and put me in the car. Two of my Sri Lankan friends accompanied me. I didn't know where that clinic was. After a big search, that customer succeeded in taking me to the clinic. My friends were amazed that I had managed on the earlier occasion to walk such a long distance alone, while being so feeble.

The Customer who took me to the clinic was a Palestinian. He was a person who had lost even his mother country. He was, however, close to being divine. He accompanied me into the clinic and offered to take me back to the shop. I thanked him and told him that we would get back by taxi. He insisted, "No, I will take you back. This is my duty, we are brothers, I must look after you".

The doctor hadn't yet arrived. My saviour had bought a lot of goods from our shop. He made me promise to wait for him, and taking those goods he went away to his house. True to his word, after about 15 minutes he came back.

Now the time was 3.30 p.m. The doctor had not come yet. I was thirsty beyond endurance, because whatever I had drunk during the day I had vomited. So I asked one of my friends to bring me a glass of water. We Sri Lankans are a strange lot. While giving the tumbler he warned me not to drink the water in the presence of that customer, as it was fasting time. So I asked whether he would mind if I drank that glass of water in front of him. He consoled me, "You drink your water. Allah knows that you are ill." I couldn't hold back my tears. I wept for about five minutes just like a small kid. He patted me, "My dear friend, don't cry. I will look after you, Allah will help us."

By about 4.00 p.m. the doctor came to the clinic. He examined me and gave a letter to have me admitted immediately to the "Shimizi General Hospital". That customer took me to the hospital in his car as a father would have done for his own son. If we had gone on our own, we would have got lost on the way without being able to find the place, as we knew no Arabic. My friends told me that perhaps I might have helped this man in similar circumstances in one of my previous births.

The doctor who attended to me said that he couldn't have me there, as I was suffering from an infectious disease and I should be admitted to an infectious diseases hospital. Speaking to my benefactor

in Arabic, he said, "Why did you bring this man in your car? Clean your car. Wash your hands and body too, properly."

My good Samaritan was quite terrified. He had three small children at home. During the previous week, one of them had taken seriously ill and he had saved the child after a terrific battle. So he did not dare to take an unnecessary risk. He stopped a taxi, gave fifty Riyals to the driver and asked him to take me to the infectious diseases hospital. I tried to return his money, but he refused to take it. I suppose the satisfaction he gained by helping me was more precious to him than the fifty Riyals he spent. As I was getting into the taxi he spoke words of comfort: "My friend, don't be afraid, you will be O.K. Allah will look after you," and he bade me good-bye.

When we reached the hospital, it was about six in the evening. As soon as I was admitted, I was given saline. This was the first time in my life I had been given this fluid. During my nine days stay at the hospital I was given more than fifteen bottles of saline. The marks left by the needles are still visible. Since third of July no more saline was given. So my dear this is how I escaped from a narrow death.

So Padmi, now the critical moment is over. So far our boss has not given me even a telephone call. My friends visited me twice at the hospital. They had to hire a car in spite of all the vehicles our boss had. They were not even permitted to use the office telephone to give me a call. They gave me calls from the telephone booths on the street. I will not work any more for this merciless fiend.

I worked out that, according to Saudi Law, I am entitled for nearly twelve thousand Riyals as overtime, holiday pay etc. I will fight for this and only then will I come back to Sri Lanka. If I had been admitted to hospital one day later, I would have been dead by now. But I am still alive. Even if I don't receive what is due to me, I will fight till my last breath, particularly for the sake of the others who are being treated like slaves. May God Bless you till we meet again.

Yours lovingly,

Priya

* * *

The body of the young man in a metal coffin was a little disfigured. His face was black and the mouth slightly open. The body had been sent by air. His old mother was wailing, holding a crumpled air mail letter to her bosom. It had been received a week earlier. His young wife was lying unconscious, supported by some women who were fanning her, and spraying drops of water on her face.

The young man had gone to the Middle East only six months after their marriage. He might have dreamt about a big house, a vehicle,

plenty of money and luxuries. His wife may have reigned in a kingdom of her own creation, with beautiful clothes, perfumes and a thousand other things which he might have sent her from abroad. But now all that is over. Their dreams are shattered and their dream world has collapsed leaving no trace of it behind.

"What a pity he has died so young," an old woman said, supporting her head in her palm. "It is a good lesson for everybody who goes abroad in search of Saudi Gold." A village philosopher sprayed the sand in the yard blood-red with his saliva full of betel juice. A number of girls offered the visitors cool drinks.

The younger brother of the dead man is a close friend of mine. I obtained from him the air mail letter which had fallen from the old mother's hand. It is that letter you have just read.

**W. P. Somawardana**

## JOURNEY

With sweat pouring
All over their
Bodies
People
From every nook and corner of the bus,
One unknown to the other,
Step into the vast world outside
Having passed through another journey
Of Samsara
To proceed
Each on his own chosen way

**H.K.Y. Jinadari Wanigasundara**

## THE TIGER

I helped you find a girl
And now she is your life.
The physical bond
That made her wife
Has eaten up your soul -
You are like a tiger
Who thinks that something I will do or say
Will deprive him of his prey.
That is why the other day
You sprang on me;
Clawing all the way.

Some time during the night
The animal in you took over,
In my own compound I have to be wary -
Of the tiger that can spring in the dark.

**Gertrude De Livera**

## REGENERATION

Pregnant still, she heaves herself
Across the beach towards the waiting sea,
Her mission unaccomplished.
An eerie moonlight filters through night cloud
Illumines her sad journey
From empty nest she'd brushed out of the dune
Back home to gentle water.

No laying of her burden
Nor cradle for her eggs in caked wet sand,
She must seek a kinder place
Upon a dry and sympathetic shore
Where the rainbow circled moon
Will shine again on her maternity
And the cool relief of sea.

May she labour there unseen
By thieves, intruders, even watchful friends
Who would guard her privacy.
The heroine of Nature's stern routine
That yields no love or comfort,
The mother turtle will give birth again
Then slip beneath the waves.

**Rex Baker**

## THE DISCOVERED COUNTRY

Have you been to pain?

It's such a crowded lonely place
Full of solitary people, all convinced they are
Utterly alone.

It burns, doesn't it?
None of your mental anguish, we're talking
Pure
Old fashioned physical agony here, it's the only pain
That counts. It burns, you'd like to grasp and
Smother it
Beneath your outstretched fingers, but your flesh is weak,
You dare not, you can only pound on the unforgiving walls, let your hands
Bleed penance.

You mutter threats

Go away, take it away, or I shall curse you, how dare you do this to me
You have no right, I order you to stop, I command it

You plead for mercy

All right, I've had enough, I'll do whatever you want, I'll sell my soul,
I'll buy it back, please take it away, please

You murmur reassurance

There, there, it's going, it's almost over, just a little while, there, it's going away

You mouth defiance

I didn't mean it about selling my soul, you tried to trick me but I've tricked you

You really ought to go there, you'd never forgive yourself if you came here and left without having been to pain. It just might be
The only reason we come here at all.

**Vajira Chandrasekera**

## WHAT HELD ME BACK?

I met Mr. Ranwella at the Annual Get-together of my husband's firm. The small clique of senior officers and their spouses relaxed in the lounge over-looking the lake beside which the hotel had been built. We kept away from the main celebrations, as our presence would have embarrassed the junior staff and their families.

When lunch was served we were invited in and introductions were made. I had seen most of these officers at various times, whenever I had occasion to visit my husband in his office, and it was satisfying to be able to identify them by their names.

Mr. Ranwella was one of those who worked directly under my husband, and had been with the firm for many years. He had a long face and thinning hair. I had heard his name being mentioned by my husband occasionally, and had wondered idly, whether he was connected to my former classmate, P.B. Ranwella.

At that time, my father had been the Principal of our school, which was co-educational. The girls and boys studied together in healthy rivalry; and, because they were in the minority, the girls were determined to show the boys that they were equal to them in every way..... if not actually superior!

The girls were, in general, more alert than the boys, who were comprised of varied types. There were some who were too mature for the class, but embedded there for lack of sufficient intelligence to proceed further. The rest were younger and livelier.

This was in the mid-forties, and most of the students were from the villages. Many of them were the children of farmers. Others came from urban backgrounds, but there were no class distinctions amongst us at any level.

P. B. Ranwella and his sister travelled by train from a little distance away. He was a quiet boy, with close-cropped hair and a long face. He was fair, and that was the only physical attribute he shared with his elder sister. Heen Menike had a broad bone structure, was square-faced, and had teeth that protruded a little. But she was pleasant-looking and smiled often.

On the other hand, "P. B." as we called him, was of slim build, serious looking and he rarely smiled. He was not unpleasant, quiet in class, and did not join in the mischief of his friends, yet enjoyed it from afar.

But he was very intelligent. Although he came from a totally vernacular speaking background, his English was as good as mine, and I came from a Western oriented environment. He absorbed all the subjects with equal interest, displaying no special aptitude for any particular one. He secured very high marks in all the tests, and was my

closest rival. We took turns at reaching the first position in class, and it was generally accepted that both of us had achieved a level higher than the others.

I never grudged being beaten by him, because he was such a harmless boy. Whenever he received his report first, he looked happy and proud, yet glanced apologetically at me. I did not display that much graciousness towards him though whenever I beat him. I knew that the other girls looked up to me to keep our flag flying, and reaching the pinnacle of achievement left me no room for humility. But "P.B.", whenever he came second, would look at me and grin shyly, as if to say - "Next time, it will be my turn!"

Covertly watching Mr. Ranwella that day, my mind went back to my childhood classmate. They shared the same name and it certainly was not common. I had gathered during the course of the afternoon that they both hailed from the same district as well. Could they be the same person? Mr. Ranwella was quieter than the other officers, and more serious. He did not join in the conversation, but nodded his head in agreement at times. And he rarely smiled. These characteristics he shared with "P.B.", but there the resemblance ended.

Was this bespectacled, faded man the same boy I had studied with, long ago? I tried to juxtapose the features of a twelve-year-old boy upon the face of a fifty-five-year-old man, and failed. It did not fit. How could it? It was difficult to merge the two together... yet the possibility existed.

I remembered an intelligent boy. This man appeared dull. I had heard my husband describe him as "being eager, but a little slow on the uptake". Apart from the gap at the physical level, there was this difference in character too. Was I mistaken in expecting him to be "P.B.", or had the years between destroyed the cheerful, intelligent youngster I had known? Deprivation of the chance of a better life could surely have made this change in him?

I wanted very much to find out, to ask him direct and get a definite answer. I was on the verge of questioning him several times.... yet each time something held me back. I just could not make myself do it.

I did not meet Mr. Ranwella again after that day. Even if I had, I know that I would not have asked him that vital question... although it seems so important to me even now.

If he had been "P.B." how refreshing it would have been to fill in the years between; to have gathered news of those long ago friends I had to leave behind when we left that town.

I still wonder what made me recoil from finding out the facts. Were there more factors involved than I had suspected?

Perhaps I feared facing the disappointment of learning that the boy who had shown so much promise when young had grown into this

dull, uninspiring individual. Or.... because I had suspected him to be "P.B.", I was sensitive to his position, and did not want to embarrass him. It would not have been easy for him to accept the fact that once he had been on equal terms with his boss' wife, but was now socially inferior to her.

Had I, on the other hand, been trying to save my husband from an awkward situation? It would have created difficult working conditions for him, especially if Mr. Ranwella expected concessions due to the fact that he had once studied with me. Who knows, after so many years, what type of individual he had turned out to be?

But it could also be that the reasons were far less simple.....that I had simply been ashamed to admit in public that I had been in school with him. That I had once attended a Government Central School, and had studied along with the children of cultivators and carters.

However deeply I probe my conscience, the answers to these questions will always remain elusive.

My husband retired from the firm a few years after that. We later heard that Mr. Ranwella had succumbed to a heart attack. My husband attended the funeral, but I did not accompany him.

**Ransiri Menike Silva**

# FROM ANOTHER SPHERE

Madame Rameau lived about ten miles from our home which was on the edge of Kurunegala, the capital of the North West Province of Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was known in those days. Her place was deep in the countryside. We boys, my two older brothers and I, had been shown the roof of her rambling house from a distance as we drove through the countryside in Uncle's T-Ford. Though her place was reached by following twisty paths and across several rice fields, they said it was easy to find your way to it because of Madame Rameau's dogs - they said she had about twenty. In fact a press reporter told my cousin that a local who was trying to direct him to the place had given up repeating the final tortuous details, and had said, "When you get to the edge of that set of fields, you'll hear dogs barking. Just follow your ears and you'll be there!"

It was also reported that Madame Rameau had clairvoyant powers.

So imagine our excitement when we, who had never seen her, were told that we were to have a visit from her. Sriya, our cousin, who was old enough to be like an aunt to us, had coaxed Uncle to buy a dog from Madame Rameau, and she was coming home with the dog. It appeared that Madame led a solitary life and was averse to entertaining people at her place; she would, however, visit other people's homes if business or the spirit called.

When she arrived Uncle received her with great respect and invited her to the sitting room. However she declined, saying it was too warm; she would prefer to sit in the cool open verandah. Three of us, sitting on the floor on the edge of the verandah, were able, while the adults talked business, to take a good look at Madame and the little dog.

The first thing that impressed us about Madame was her size - she was large! Even seated in the big cane chair that creaked under her weight, she was a formidable figure which was accentuated by the small dog at her feet.

She had a European complexion and we knew she was a Burgher lady; "Burgher" was the word used to denote anyone of Portuguese, Dutch or mixed European ancestry. I learnt later that the name she had assumed came from a French forbear.

The other thing we noticed about her was that she had a bad limp. She had a long green dress which reached down to the floor, and we could hardly see her shoes. However, when she sat down we could see that her right ankle and foot were very thin and fitted into a small, specially designed brown shoe. The other foot, massive by comparison, had been squeezed into a court shoe. Now we knew she had a withered foot; and why she limped so badly. My eldest brother said that she wore the long dress to conceal the deformity, and to confirm his theory, he added, "Normally Burgher ladies wear short dresses."

Madame Rameau had a heavy, square face that went with her body; and her thin brown, greying hair was swept back and tied in a bun at the back. In repose the expression on her face was rather serious, but when she spoke in a soft low voice with gentle animation her face came alive; and when she smiled, which was rarely, her face was transformed into that of one who had seen a heavenly vision.

From time to time the little white Scottish terrier made as if to go into the sitting room, especially as Sriya was gazing at it with adoring eyes. Each time she did this Madame just said "Topsy" in the gentlest of tones, and it returned to its place by her feet - till the next time !

Anyway the transaction was completed and Topsy became ours. When Madame rose to go Topsy whined and Sriya was distressed; but then Madame took the dog in her arms, whispered some words and handed her to Sriya. Topsy appeared consoled, and with head cocked to one side, she watched her former mistress go with great interest but no great sadness.

As Madame limped to the gate, she turned to us and said, "You boys are really enjoying life, aren't you!" And then conferring one of her marvellous smiles on us she limped her way slowly to the buggy that had brought her.

Topsy was now the newest and youngest member of our family. She was a favourite with everybody, including Uncle who had been a bit sceptical of the idea of having a dog in the house. We boys had a rollicking time chasing Topsy and being chased by her in the garden and in the verandah.

The household consisted of Uncle, who had retired from the Public Service and was a widower, Nimal, his son, who was a surveyor, Sriya, his daughter who till recently had been a primary school teacher in the neighbouring school, three of us, and three servants. Our father's business in the Hill Country had crashed, and we had been sent to live with Uncle's family till father sorted things out. That is how we had come to be part of the family.

Sriya ran the house, but this was after the death of Nimal's wife Lalitha. She had died about three years before, shortly after our arrival. When we first saw Lalitha we stared at her open-mouthed for we had not seen a lady so beautiful - she looked like an eastern princess in the story books. There was a tiny mole on the side of her chin which people thought enhanced her beauty. Her vivacity and silvery laugh added to our wonderment. When she married and came to live with Nimal's family she took over the running of the house, and proved to be a devoted wife and daughter-in-law. She ran the house very efficiently and with style, entertaining visitors at least once a month. She was very kind to us but there were some ground rules which we had to observe. We were a bit afraid of her - her flawless beauty and her perfect poise were perhaps the reason for that.

Sriya was no beauty and had a much quieter personality. The sisters-in-law got on very well — something of a rairity in old Ceylon! Looking back I wonder whether it was a case of opposites attracting each other!

Lalitha had died in a tragic drowning accident at Mt. Lavinia. Nimal's efforts to rescue her had failed. He was heart-broken. There was a large portrait of her in the dining room, and Nimal never sat to a meal without glancing at the picture.

Everybody was pretty miserable after Lalitha's death, for she had lit up the place with her beauty, charm and conversation. In retrospect, I think that life became bearable for the adults largely because of the presence of my brothers and me in the house - we were all at primary school at this time. After the initial shock of Lalith's death we returned inevitably to our games, story telling and homework, and the adults, in caring for us, began to find it easier to bear the burden of grief, and to partake in the natural optimism of children.

Sriya had been very close to both her brother and her father, and when Lalitha died leaving no children the bonds became even stronger. Life began to revolve around her. She gave up her teaching and devoted her time entirely to the running of the house. This she did with great competence and care. Though she did not have Lalitha's beauty or flair, she possessed a warmth which was very precious to us boys as we had lost our mother about the same time as father's business failure.

With Topsy's coming every one appeared to be smiling more often. Then one day quite unaccountably, Topsy fell ill; she wouldn't eat, lost her liveliness and finally lay down. The nearest veterinary surgeon was miles away in Kandy, and Sriya was in a panic with the thought that the dog might die. It was decided to send for Madame Rameau. That very afternoon Madame came, accompanied this time by a Labrador.

Sriya carried Topsy out into the verandah. She seemed to recognize Madame, raised her head briefly, whined and fell back. Madame took the little thing briefly on to her spacious lap and comforted it, and that seemed to have a good effect on Topsy. She lifted her head and kept it lifted and looked round a bit. Madame then took some pills from her large hand bag and gave some to the dog to chew. She told us to give it some water which Topsy lapped up eagerly. There seemed to be a marked improvement in the little dog's condition. It looked around, jumped off Madame's lap and started to make friendly overtures to the Labrador who seemed to look pityingly on the small dog. Sriya was overjoyed. Madame smiled and said, "I think she will be all right."

On the strength of the general happiness generated by Topsy's recovery, Uncle was able to persuade Madame to join the family for a cup of tea, and we all trooped into the dining room. We all sat down. After a little time Madame raised her eyes and saw Lalitha's portrait. She looked

at it slowly, and after a pause she said, "I saw that young lady two hours ago on the street."

Sriya and Uncle exchanged glances, and Uncle said, "Would to God you had seen her, Madame. That was my daughter-in-law. We lost her three years ago today." Madame Rameau rose to her feet slowly and limped towards the picture and stood in front of it.

She studied it intently, turned round and walked back slowly to her place and sat down. There was a pause. And then she said quietly, "Yes, it is the same lady. The expression in her eyes is unmistakable. And of course the little mole."

Sriya and Uncle were looking at each other as Madame continued to speak, more to herself than to those around her. "Yes, I can see her now. She had a rather unusual motif on her saree — sea-shells held together by strands of sea weed."

There was a long silence. At last Uncle found his voice and asked, "Where did you see her, Madame?" Madame seemed to be lost in thought and Sriya repeated the question. Madame's voice sounded as if it came from far away; "open market....shopping finished...returning to buggy.... an accident.... a crowd ..... young man hit by car.....lying dead.....the young lady appeared.....bent over the body.....disappeared."

The silence that ensued was broken only by Topsy walking round and nudging our legs to take notice of her new-found strength.

There was a knock on the verandah door and my eldest brother ran out. He came back almost immediately and said, "There is a policeman." Sriya rose and went out and we all followed her into the verandah. A policeman was standing there with his cap in his hand. "Madam, is this the home of Mr. Nimal de Silva?"

"It is," said Sriya, her voice trembling slightly.

"Are you his wife, Madam?"

"No, I am his sister," and turning to Uncle, "and this is my father."

"I am sorry to have to tell you, sir, that your son has been hit by a car. Presumably he was walking home from the bus stop after work."

Uncle and Sriya were speechless. At last Uncle said, "Come in for a moment, officer," and led him into the sitting room.

Uncle asked, "How badly is he hurt, officer?"

There was a pause. "I am terribly sorry, sir," another I pause. "Your son was killed. We have tracked down the driver of the car."

There was a pause and Uncle put his arm round Sriya who was too dazed to cry.

"If it is any consolation to you, sir, and Madam, the doctors said he had died instantly and would not have suffered."

They walked back to the verandah and Uncle said, "Thank you, officer for informing us so promptly."

"I am truly sorry, sir, but we have to ask you to come over sometime today to identify the body. We'll contact you."

"Of course."

The crunch of the officer's boots on the gravel died away, and the silence that ensued was like an eternity.

Into that silence the voice of Madame came pure and sweet above all joy or sorrow, like from another sphere. "While the police officer was the bearer of bad news, I am glad I have been the bringer of good news: your son, Mr. Silva, and his wife are re-united. So do not weep too much or too long."

With that, and a smile of infinite compassion and peace bestowed on us all, Madame Rameau bent down, cuddled Topsy, and, followed by her Labrador, limped towards the waiting buggy.

**Sydney Perera**

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