



# Channels

**Journal of the English Writers Cooperative  
Sri Lanka**

Volume 22 - 2016

**Edited by Premini Amerasinghe**



# ***CHANNELS***

**Volume 22**

**2016**

**Contemporary Sri Lankan Writing**

*Edited By*  
*Premini Amerasinghe*

## **CHANNELS Volume 22**

### **Editorial Board**

**Premini Amerasinghe  
Lakmali Gunawardena**

### **Panel of Judges**

**Poetry:** Sakuntala Sachithanandan  
Shireen Senadhira

**Yasmine Gooneratne**

**Short Stories:** Vijitha Fernando  
Myrle Williams

**ISSN: 1013-9249**

**All rights reserved**

Responsibility for the material published is that of each individual author and permission to reproduce any item or part of any item by any means whatsoever must be obtained in writing from that particular author.

## CHANNELS Volume 22

## Part 1

## CONTENTS

	<b>Page No</b>
<b>Editorial :</b> Premini Amerasinghe	5
<b>Tribute to Ashley Halpe :</b> Vijitha Fernando	6 - 7
<b>Tribute to Anne Ranasinghe :</b> Premini Amerasinghe	8
 <b>Prize Winners - Short Stories</b>	
First Prize - Decisions - Nelani Goonawardena	10 -13
Second Prize - Ravana Ella - Lara Wijesuriya	14 -17
Third Prize - The Kiss - Rohini Gamage	18 - 22
 <b>Prize Winners - Poetry</b>	
First Prize - Saffron Robes - Himangi Jayasundera	24
Second Prize - My Mother-the Child - Nelani Goonawardena	25 - 26
Third Prize - Across the great divide - Keerthi Wijekulasuriya	27 - 28

## Part 11

## Entries for CHANNELS Vol. 22

The Lantern	-	Nanda Pethiyagoda Wanasundera	30 -32
Romeo and Juliet	-	Dilantha Gunewardene	33
Kadupul blooms	-	Hasitha Wickremasinghe	34
My Daughter	-	Hasitha Wickremasinghe	35
The Red Necklace	-	Sakuntala Sachithanandan	36 - 39
Civilizing the English Language		Shelton Amarasuriya	40
Death of a Squirrel	-	Ranjan M. Amarasinghe	41 - 42
Through the Window	-	Himangi Jayasundere	43
Marriage Vows	-	Thaveesh Edussuriya	44 - 47
Despair	-	Vimala Ganeshanathan	48 -49
Farewell	-	Sheila Gunsekera	50 - 51
Flying Visitors	-		52
Coucal			
Babblers	-	Chitra Premaratne Stuver	
The Legacy	-	Myrle Williams	53 - 56
Atonement	-	Malini Epa	57
Wanderess	-	Yashodmi Kaluarachchi	58
Wonders of the sky	-	Isuri Dissanayake	59 - 60
Relocation	-	Lalitha Wirasinghe	61
Galle Literary Festival	-	Lalitha Wirasinghe	62
Crossing the Boundary	-	Rasheeda Zoeb Asgerally	63 - 65

## Editorial

Once more, we display your writing skills in the annual publication of the "Channels". The response was enthusiastic where poetry was concerned, not so good for the short story.

"Channels", as the name implies is a 'conduit' for aspiring writers (young and old) to show-case their writing skills. It is a means to an end, not an end in itself. If one looks up the back issues, several familiar names are there, they went on to become established authors, a few are near-celebrities.

I was impressed by the wide spectrum of contributors, ranging from school children and university students, to professionals and pensioners.

The quality and quantity of short stories were disappointing. One got the impression that they were hastily written after the call for entries was published. Quite a few were flawed-- they either lacked credibility or were on hackneyed themes. Rightly or wrongly, we decided to publish most of them, those with grammatical faults and clumsy construction were considered unacceptable.

Essential pre-requisites for a writer are a fertile imagination and well-developed powers of observation. It goes without saying that a good vocabulary and writing skills are a must. One must be able to spot the potential of an interesting situation or incident.

Having a story to tell is not sufficient, the expression, 'weaving a story' implies the use of several skills, a satisfactory construction held together in a fabric of expressive writing, where several strands are skillfully woven in, riveting the reader's attention. Even for us part-time writers, there has to be a continuity of the writing process, re-writes of sections are invariably required. The ending is all important, it can make or break a story.

The poetry on the other hand was generally good, and appeared to be written over a period of time as the majority of contributors have sent two or more poems. A poem is born as a reaction to an emotion, be it love, anger, despair and so on, before being meticulously crafted.

A final thought, we writers are like leprechauns searching for their pots of gold. Our gold nuggets are those precious ideas waiting to be immortalized in print.

Our thanks to the judges of the poetry and short story competition. Congratulations to the winners. Let this be a stepping stone to greater achievements!

I am indebted to my co-editor Lakmali, for taking on the bulk of the editing, and helping in many ways. A big thank you.

**Premini Amerasinghe**

## Tribute to Professor Ashley Halpe



Professor Ashley Halpe was a member of the English Writers Cooperative for many years, playing an active role in all EWC activities. I remember the times he travelled from Kandy specially to be at our bi-monthly meetings. On several occasions he was a resource person at creative writing seminars I organized when he spoke so eloquently on poetry. Even when his state of health prevented him

from attending our meetings regularly, he always responded so positively and so warmly to any writing by the EWC members, promptly acknowledging them and making comments, always encouraging the writer, giving him/her renewed hope of writing better.

One of his last contributions to EWC activities was his personal commendation of Jean Arasanayagam's work read at the felicitation evening to Jean organized by the EWC two years ago.

We at the EWC will always remember Ashley as a true and sincere friend, a teacher of the highest calibre who eased the rutted path for amateur writers.

Currently professor of English at Peradeniya, Arjuna Parakrama's words as a pupil and later as a colleague, represent the collective voices of his pupils who were constantly inspired by this beloved teacher through the years. He writes,

".....with the passing of Professor Halpe, we have come to the end of an era - an era which those of us were fortunate to be taught by him - will remember with both fondness and gratitude...there are not many academics in the Sri Lankan University system today who can compare with Professor Halpe in terms of his vision, his humaneness and his mastery of the arts, music, literature, theatre and his ability to inspire his students to reach for the best in themselves.'

His prowess in the teaching of English is echoed by those students who passed through his hands at Peradeniya, as expressed by Sumathy Sivamohan, Senior Lecturer in the Department of English at Peradeniya when she says,

'Professor Halpe was an institution in the English Language Circles...'

Professor Halpe is also remembered gratefully by his former students for the role he played in contacting educational authorities for the improvement of University education on several occasions. His talents were not confined to teaching of English. He was equally versatile in the arts, theatre, music, literature.

His varied achievements in academia, the decision he took to forsake the then prestigious Civil Service for a University career have been lauded over these years. The numerous glittering awards he won, his appointment to the Chair of English at Peradeniya at a relatively young age, becoming the youngest to ever hold this prestigious and much prized Chair, the many awards, citations and titles he won continuously, always sat lightly on him.

'Above all, he was a University don in the finest sense of that term, a teacher, researcher, disseminator of knowledge...his contribution to the University of Peradeniya has been significant and substantial..above all, he was a very true, near perfect gentleman...' says Tissa Jayatilleke in the eulogy he wrote on Professor Halpe's passing away early this year.

We at EWC will remember him for all these qualities and more for the friendship he gave us so cheerfully and often at the cost of his health.

Jean Arasanayagam, a contemporary and good friend at Peradeniya, remembers him thus, in her poem..'Requiem for Ashley Halpe and the Lost Generation of Our Youth.'

Here is an extract -

### **Agnus Dei**

#### **'Requiem for Ashley Halpe and the Lost Generation of Our Youth'**

*Our voices rose in harmonious unison, as we*

*Sang in chorus of men and angels.*

*We had yet to create our own words, our*

*Own cadences to the music that throbbed within*

*Our hearts, our brains, words that gushed a thousand fold with time and the swift*

*Passing of the years recapturing echoes from*

*That long ago past that faintly soared before*

*Both words and melody are lost.*

**Vijita Fernando**

## Tribute to Anne



In October 2015, in recognition of her exceptional achievements in the field of literature, Anne Ranasinghe was awarded the order of merit of the Federal Republic of Germany.

In the fifties, Anne accompanied her husband, Dr. Ranasinghe (subsequently Professor of obstetrics and Gynaecology) back to Sri Lanka from the U.K. Here, she had to adapt to a totally different type of life to what she had been accustomed to.

Starting married life in a tropical Island with a fairly rigid social structure, as the wife of a professor with a readymade family, would have been no easy task. Soon, she started her own family.

Juggling her roles as house-wife, mother, gracious hostess, would have indeed been difficult and left her hardly any time to pursue her passion for writing.

It was only in the seventies that she had time to nurture her talent. Anne Ranasinghe is now an internationally acclaimed poet, and has been so for some years..

Her poetry, written in this small Island, was never insular, and resonated internationally: Especially in the hearts and minds of the German people.

Directly affected by the "Holocaust", the darkest period in the history of Germany, her emotionally-charged poetry portraying its impact on her, her family, and society has had a universal appeal.

I joined the EWC in the late nineties. At that time, Anne was the only functioning founder-member. Rather she was the foundation that supported our magazine, "Channels".

Regular meetings were held at her charming residence at Rosmead Place.

Anne had firm ideas regarding this publication, however the atmosphere always remained congenial.

The icing on the cake was the delectable eats, courtesy of Lily, her faithful domestic help.

In those days, it was no problem being the editor of "Channels". All one had to do was to hand the manuscript over to Anne (I have no doubt that she fine-tuned it!) She took over the onus of getting it printed and published.

Unfortunately, as with everybody, there comes a time when one hands over the reins.

Those evenings are sorely missed, Anne. We wish you many more years of productivity!

**Premini Amerasinghe**

## Prize - Winners Short Stories

## Decisions

My plans were laid well in advance, like a strategically thought out military plan. In fact, from the time I was a child, my parents and relations used to be amused at my attitude of planning anything. Picnics, birthdays and any other functions were entrusted to me and you could be sure they went off sans any glitches. This, according to my father, was a rare talent, akin to successful takeover bids of countries.

I had planned this event the same way. A week ago, I had emptied my bank account and gleefully cut up my debit card. Cash in hand is what I needed, for what I had to do.

Getting out of a disastrous marriage was one of the things I did in my life.

I walked out.

For once in my well planned life, I felt like singing. My mouth had a will of its own and it stretched from ear to ear, beating the Cheshire Cat by a proverbial rule.

Who walks out on a marriage gone sour without even a suitcase?

I did.

I did not need a suitcase anymore. In fact all I needed were guts and courage. Had I enough..... I wondered. Well, very soon I was going to find out, wasn't I? The face of my husband, ex now, was something I'll never forget. It was well worth preserving in a photo. His eyes bulged with surprise and his jaw was slack with shock! Helpless! Now that he had no one to be cruel to.

The mere thought of his face, made me stop smiling and rock with laughter. How come a person who bullied and frightened you for years, suddenly resembled a comic strip?

Yesterday, the letter came. The much awaited, prayed for, longed for, the most important letter from my daughter. She wrote that she had landed a lucrative job in the city and they had signed her up for one year.

My heart lifted in relief. This is what I was waiting for all along. I replied at length, saying how happy I was for her and that she was the most precious thing in my life. I told her how much I loved her and admired her courage and spirit of independence which gave her the fierce determination to succeed. I did not for a moment regret the hardship I had to undergo to send her to college and university. It was fully worth it.

The dull ache in my arm reminded me that it was time to take the painkiller. Mopping, cleaning, dusting other people's houses, smiling when I wanted to cry, were things of the past. My char woman's life was over.

I swallowed my painkiller without any thought. Osteoarthritis was a small price to pay, when other people had health problems much worse than mine.

Anyway who can be bothered with little things like pain when there are more important things to think about?

At last, I was free to do as I wanted. I was happy and confident that I had made the right choice,

I had bought some expensive sandwiches- smoked salmon- my favourite and a bottle of apple cider and intended to enjoy my lunch at the City Park. When I walked into the plush restaurant, I felt a little intimidated. But the Maitre de' was too well trained to show any surprise at my unusual request.

I wanted I said, the finest smoked salmon sandwiched between dark beer bread with a bottle of the best of the best apple cider he can give me, for a picnic in the park.

"For One?", he inquired, without a trace of attitude.

"For one", I replied cheerfully.

"Of course, Madam", he replied as if my request was of the utmost importance. (It was, to me!)

"Please be seated , ten minutes at the most".

He glided away. I sat looking around at the creamy walls, and the shining crystal ware laid out on the tables. A little too early for diners. I had counted on that.

I have always loved eating out and would have loved eating in here, but not today. Today, was my special day, planned and executed by me, Nothing and nobody was going to come between my plans and myself.

The plush atmosphere of the restaurant enfolded me in welcome and I almost felt sorry for not being able to linger.

Ten minutes later, I was presented with a basket which contained my food and also presented with a bill, which under normal circumstances would have me gasping and reaching for my smelling salts - (had I any).

But, these were not normal circumstances. I took my basket and walked towards the park.

The park was a good place to be in, sprawling green acres, lush foliage, picturesquely landscaped, beautiful flowers, benches to sit-on and a beautiful bridge, where the river flowed through. One of those peaceful oases where you could calm your mind if you needed to.

It was a beautiful day to be in the park. The proverbial "all's well with the world" day. The sun was shining, the birds twittering and the mothers playing with their toddlers. I drank in the scene thirstily. The leaves dancing gently in the breeze, an occasional pair of young lovers strolling arm in arm, oblivious of the world around them, the dog walkers and the elderly, soaking up the morning sun.

I thought of my life so far and felt a twinge of regret. I suppose everyone is entitled to play what if..... this was my moment to do so.

What if I had studied harder and gone to university? What if I had married for love and not agreed to the proposal my uncle brought me? What if I had no daughter? No! I stopped my thoughts. My daughter was the best thing that happened to me. I bowed my head and gave heartfelt thanks to the Lord above and asked his blessings in all my future decisions.

I felt a cold gust of air, but put it down to an overactive imagination.

I wondered why I had not left my husband before? No guts? No where to go? What will people say? Is this the right thing to do? Now that it was done, these meandering thoughts, though unimportant crossed my mind.

Cruel words, silent condemnations, casual put downs and mocking laughter, chased each other across my mind. But, my heart did not beat with dread. It was a wonderful feeling, to feel so totally free, and at peace with oneself and I was glad to experience it now.

My mother who passed away a few months ago came into my thoughts. A gentle, peaceful person, she would be happy for me, I thought. The sound of a dog barking brought me back to earth. A lovely large dog, ambling along, smiling, its tongue lolling out of its mouth. Involuntarily, I smiled too.

I ate my sandwiches and drank my Cider. Ambrosia and Nectar- My favourite meal, I thought of the price- Then decided what the heck! To hell with it! For once I would indulge myself!

I looked at the bridge. It was a beautiful one, made for walking, a rather ornate affair. The swirling waters below flowed as if it had a life of its own and had far to go. It was time now, I got up and walked towards the bridge, enjoying the warm feeling. I started to walk across and stopped to look down at the water.

I was fascinated by the rushing waters, flowing swiftly, effortlessly dragging pieces of driftwood, foaming at the edges. Such a beautiful sight, like a picture post card.

I held the wooden rail firmly, mesmerized by the waters below. My head felt light as a feather. The gushing, swirling, swishing sound filled my ears, echoing eerily, calling, calling ceaselessly enfolding me, in the place of no pain. The stream and I were almost one.

Suddenly my foot slipped.

I let out a blood curdling scream. Raw fear gripped me. I held the rails with both hands, ignoring the crippling pain in my shoulders. My feet dangled helplessly. There was a fire burning in every part of my body. Where did it come from? I dimly saw people running towards me -- hazy figures. Above all there was a chilling unmelodious, terrifying noise, gut wrenching and unforgettable. I closed my eyes wishing it would go away.

What was that sound?

It was my voice.

Screaming on and on and on. The echoes were screaming inside my head, On and on and on.

Then it hit me like a thunder bolt.

I did not want to die.

**Nelani Goonawardena**

## Ravana Ella

The sun rose through the mist and glinted off the train winding through the Balana Pass. Julius Mandeville leaned out of the window. The train ran over a small bridge spanning a clear valley, and Mandeville caught a glimpse of a herd of running deer. He saw Adam's Peak rising up above the plain. He looked ahead and saw the brand-new but as yet unfinished Colombo-Kandy road curling round the hillside.

In Kandy, he changed from the train to a carriage.

Mandeville watched the Bandarawela stop drawing up. There were roses and other flowers growing in gay profusion around the place. It was like England, yet not quite, in a nice way.

He stepped out of the carriage and hired a cart to take him to his destination.

"Could you please take me to Ravana Ella?" he asked the carter.

"Sir, there isn't a place like that. You must have heard wrong," the carter said.

"No. Ravana Ella. It's a waterfall," Mandeville said.

"I gathered that, sir. It's a legend though. There isn't really a place like that. I can take you to see the other waterfalls though, sir."

"I tell you, it does exist! Oh, never mind! I'll find it myself." Mandeville walked off.

He was sitting in the rest house drinking tea an hour later when the carter reappeared. "Sir, I found out about it! There's a waterfall two miles from here that's supposed to be Ravana Ella, no one is too sure about it but I could take you there to see."

They left town in the bullock cart and made their way through the hill paths.

"Do you know anything more about the legend?" Mandeville asked.

"My grandfather believes it to be true." The carter replied, obviously only too pleased to converse. "He said Ravana hid there with Sita while Hanuman ravaged the city looking for them. Ravana's treasures are supposed to be hidden there."

"Hmmm...." said Mandeville. "The cave is supposed to be behind the waterfall?"

"Yes. It's a good thing you came now, sir, because it hasn't rained for some time so the waterfalls are small."

They reached the waterfall and stood, silently contemplating it. "I've got to get down there, next to those rocks." Mandeville said, pointing near the base of the falls.

The carter looked worried. "Sir, it may be dangerous."

Mandeville paused for effect before answering. "I like danger," he lied.

The waterfall looked bigger up close and Mandeville began having misgivings about this excursion. The waterfall seemed to have the opposite effect on the carter, however. "Sir! Look here! I think we could crawl in from this side."

The place indicated by the carter seemed to be the best place to get in. A rock protruded from the side of the falls, creating a sort of shelter from the water. One would still get drenched, but the chances of being forced under by the water pressure were much less.

Mandeville pulled off his coat and stuffed them in an oilskin raincoat. The carter was wearing fewer clothes so he just jumped in straightaway. They waded out to the middle of the pool and swam a bit towards the waterfall.

"There's a shelf here, come to this side," Mandeville shouted above the splash of the waterfall. He stood on the rocky ledge just in front of the falls. The water came up to his waist. He could see inside now, through the break in the waterfall. The cave was pitch black.

He ducked under the sheet of water and then the world seemed strangely muffled. He could not hear the carter anymore. The light entering the cave was green and shimmery. The cave extended into the darkness.

In a moment the carter had joined him. Mandeville found his tinder box in his oilskin bundle and put his coat on again. Since there was no sun in here he laid aside the magnifying glass lid and, using his flint and striker, lit a candle.

"There is a cave! Maybe..." the carter's voice trailed away.

Mandeville noticed something near the entrance and took the candle over to see it. The whole vertical side of the entrance was carved like a pillar with intricate designs. "The entrance..." Mandeville breathed. The patterns were old, older than the recently- found Anuradhapura carvings. The carter gave an exclamation.

"Sir! A Sandakadapahana!"

Mandeville turned. There, at the edge of the floor of the cave, just above the water, was a moonstone. It was made in the traditional half-circle shape but the animals featured on it were fantastic. There was a tall horse-like creature, an ugly-looking monkey and something that was unmistakably a lion.

Mandeville's heart jumped in a pleasant way, and he turned to face the darkness. "Come on," he said to the carter, "let's go find Ravana."

They came across some steps leading upwards. Before that there had been no further sign of human work. Mandeville ascended the stairs, the carter following. At the top was an enormous door. It was carved and painted with beautiful colours. A big handle made of some yellow metal turned easily and let them in to another passage, apparently hewn out of the rock by ancient workmen.

Now using the third candle, they soon came to another door, this one smaller and undecorated. It appeared to be locked, but its wood was flimsy and they soon broke it down. The candle spread its rays on a sight that left both men speechless. Rich tapestries covered the walls, their colours still glowing, and golden statuettes were positioned in niches in walls. A low, cushioned couch and several tables stood around. Mandeville realized that the first heavy door kept out damp and thus might have contributed to the remarkable state of preservation all the objects in the room seemed to enjoy. They wandered around the room, avoiding contact with the furniture. One tapestry depicted a war between the Yakshayas and the Nagas. Another showed a festival in a city.

Mandeville saw a second heavy door at the end of the room. Motioning the carter towards it, he stepped through and saw a stretch of tunnel, opening onto daylight.

As they approached the end of the tunnel, a green valley became distinguishable. 'What is this valley?' Mandeville asked. The carter shrugged. "I don't know, sir. I've never seen it or heard of one like it."

They stood at the mouth of the tunnel, looking down. A flight of crumbling stone steps, led down the mountain into the valley. Other mountains towered around it. An enormous hawk flew past them and wheeled away. Far below them a flock of parakeets burst screaming from the treetops. A sparkling river ran through the valley, and at the far end, Mandeville caught sight of something that looked like a building. It was white and spires rose up into the blue sky. "What is that?" he asked, pointing and turning to the carter. What he saw over the carter's shoulder, however, left him dumbstruck. He stared, speechless.

From where they were standing, the whole valley could be seen. It was obvious that only a mountain goat could get down to the valley without using the stairs, since the mountainside was almost vertical at that point.

However, Mandeville was staring because he could distinctly make out little, humanoid figures climbing towards them. They appeared not to have seen them, and Mandeville pointed them out to the carter without making too much noise.

"Who are they?" he breathed softly.

The carter had turned pale. "Nittaewo," he said, at last.

"The tiny, supposedly extinct, early specimens of primitive human?" Mandeville asked.

"With poison darts," the carter replied.

"Great!" said Mandeville. "I love a challenge. Would we stand a chance if we went down into the valley?"

"No," said the carter. "They could climb down much faster. They're supposed to be averse to water, though, so our best chance is to return along the tunnel."

Mandeville scowled. "I want to see the palace or whatever!" he said, irritated.

"We can come back later, sir. I don't fancy our chances against such a horde of them." The carter said. The Nittaewo were very close now, and would soon see or smell them. "Let's go!" the carter said, urgently. He went into the tunnel. Mandeville stubbornly stayed outside, and was taking a last long look at the shining white palace far away when angry screams alerted him to his danger. The Nittaewo had seen him!

Their screams brought out hordes more from the trees below, and all began converging on the tunnel's mouth with frightening speed. Mandeville turned and ran.

As he passed the first door it slammed behind him and he saw the carter shoving the couch against it. He helped him pile the other furniture against the door, and then, stopping only to grab a golden statuette, continued their headlong rush. They leapt through the remnants of the broken door. They ran down the stairs and slammed the last door behind them. They eventually reached the waterfall.

The sounds of pursuit had died down, or maybe were drowned out by the sound of the water. They lost no time in ducking out of the waterfall, swimming and wading out of the pool, and gaining the comparative safety of the cart. The carter sent his bullock lumbering at its fastest speed away from Ravana Ella. Mandeville sent up a silent prayer of thanks and resolved to return with a gun.

He could never find the waterfall again, though he searched for the next ten years.

## The Kiss

The gate stood open. This was my chance to enter and welcome our new neighbours. My intention was to make them feel comfortable and settle in.

The house had stood vacant for a few years. Crow droppings stood stark against the black gate and the wall surrounding the house. The garden at that time was the dumping ground for litter. Those guilty of spoiling the environment were the villagers who visited the boutique, immediately opposite the house.

The situation changed before the advent of our new neighbours.

The house was beyond recognition. It was renovated, made bigger with the addition of an upper floor. A fresh coat of paint was applied on the fungus covered building, with its highly polished doors and windows. The outer walls were raised beyond the eye level of curious passers-by. Information trickled through the village that the new occupants were from abroad.

The Reuter of the village was the boutique owner. We had nick-named her Madam Defarge after the character in "The Tale of Two Cities". She did not knit like her name sake, but would jot down every bit of information - all numbers of cars that passed and a description of strangers, if any.

She was a telephone directory and an encyclopedia bound together. You asked her, she had it. She was a news-spreader too. She had the weird habit of whispering everything. Even the price of a packet of biscuits was whispered, so her very walls would not know the price.

If anybody got into difficulties, she would be the first to stretch out a helping hand. So everybody respected her. Not only was the gate open in my neighbour's house, even the door stood ajar.

A lady with greying hair stood at the entrance, I introduced myself, she did the same. She was Mala Perera.

Suddenly, quite out of context she uttered

"Why is she late"?

Apologetically she explained. "She is my daughter. She is not used to driving on Sri Lankan roads". Their daughter had opted to come back, to reside close to them, while her husband worked in Japan.

Just then a car swept up the drive and halted under the porch. A girl in her mid-twenties got out, and walked away after being introduced to me, and we had shaken hands.

That was my first encounter with Sunila.

I wondered why the mother had been so tense about her daughter driving along village roads? Had she been ill while she was in Japan?

The answer to that question I got much later in the most startling fashion.

A few days later the door bell rang around 6 a.m. I was gulping down my morning tea, before my constitutional walk.

It was Sunila at the door.

"Hope you aren't busy Aunty, I have to speak to someone or I'll burst", she cried. She spoke in monosyllables. Her marriage a proposal by her parents. She the victim. They wanted her to marry for money, rather than go in for higher studies. She had been a virtual prisoner in Japan where they had gone after their marriage. Not allowed to communicate with anyone at home, while her husband sent glowing accounts about her.

Though I had always avoided getting involved in others' personal lives, I felt compelled to help out this girl in distress.

For the time being I told her she was always welcome in my home and assured her I would visit her when I was free. To prevent her brooding over her married life, which I presumed was on the rocks, I planned to keep her occupied. For a start I decided on something creative. Making greeting cards was something she began to enjoy. The cards were personalized, decorated with dried flowers.

This therapy worked. Sunila began hunting for wild flowers which she picked, after the dew dried on the petals.

I congratulated myself on hitting on her talent. Sunila always displayed her handy work to me. They were of a very high standard.

One day I got a brain-wave. To rectify her self-worth, I phoned a friend who had an art shop. He began very soon requesting more and more of her work, as Christmas and New Year were approaching.

When Sunila received payment for her first consignment of greeting cards, she rushed over to my house saying, "Aunty, see what I got" displaying some notes of currency. I was overjoyed. My husband's philosophy was, when one is troubled try to console another in trouble. It was proving right. I had recently lost my husband.

Sunila's parents called over to thank me for bringing happiness to them all. They came with a gift of fresh vegetables from their garden. "Whatever pleasure I gave you, has boomeranged on me" I said. From being a hobby Sunila's work became a business. However during the rainy season she could not collect enough flowers for card making. This made Sunila's exuberance and eagerness wane.

One night I heard her weeping bitterly, outside my house. I pulled her inside, dragging the door shut with the other hand. I disliked anyone seeing her in this distraught state.

Her body shook, her hands were icy cold and clammy. I patted her shoulder and soothed her till her weeping subsided. "Aunty," she began still sobbing. "You do everything possible to empower me without even an inkling, of what I have gone through."

"My husband dislikes children, while I love them. You can guess the trauma I had to undergo, when he forced me to forego the ability to have children, Never, ever! I have not breathed a word of this even to my parents. Whenever I relive the incident, I don't know what happens to me.

"At times I even detest my parents who initially caused my unhappiness."

It was uphill work getting Sunila back to her former state of happiness. Specially now I knew her secret, I watched over her, going out of my way to keep her from brooding over the past.

Instead of letting her mope, I planned a different occupation. I bought her a rose bush. Knowing she loved that colour I sought a plant with yellow blooms.

I explained how like a child a plant was. Needing sunshine as well as nourishment and water. She was happy again, tending the plant with loving care. I got a daily report on how the plant was progressing. When the plant bloomed she danced.

Time passed swiftly. Then one day Sunila rushed over with a letter.

“Good news” she cried. “This is from Professor Wong in Japan. She hopes to visit me in November. I have told all about you and she is looking forward to meeting you.” A few days later I received an overseas call from the Professor. She said she was happy. Sunila was under my guidance, and seemed to be in a good frame of mind.

Why was even the Professor over protecting Sunila, I mused. To me she did not seem helpless. Had she been mentally upset before she left Japan, I wondered rather puzzled.

My work of keeping Sunila content was no longer difficult. She was living for the day when her friend would arrive. She also planned to plant a garden of roses.

I would never let Sunila know her parents had begged me to keep an eye on her. Perhaps they regretted ruining their child’s life, by mapping out her future without consulting her.

Professor Wong’s visit materialized. Sunila had prepared a hectic itinerary for themselves. Sunila told me she hoped to visit Vienna, once the Professor had settled down at her new station of work there.

On the last day of her visitor’s stay, Sunila invited me to breakfast with them. She had cooked milk rice. After the meal, the Professor requested that I accompanied them to the airport.

Nothing seemed unusual in Sunila’s behaviour on the outward or homeward journeys. Sunila dropped me off at my home before proceeding to hers. She thanked me for keeping her company.

Quite late that night I had an unexpected caller. It was Madam Defarge with the news that Sunila was ill. As she had noticed that I had spent most of the day with Sunila, she had thought it best to inform me. I rushed over and stopped in alarm. A large crowd had gathered outside Sunila’s door.

“I have informed her father” Madam Defarge said. Soon the father arrived with three men. The hired men crept up to the door, slipping on milk rice and stepping on broken glass particles.

They hammered down the front door. Within was pandemonium. Furniture turned topsy-turvey. Sunila screaming and smashing glasses. The crowd surged in. Her father carried strips of torn sheets. The men stealthily moved forward.

“If you dare touch me, I will kill myself” yelled Sunila. The men receded.

I hovered in the background. My heart ached for Sunila. She was cornered like a hunted deer. Mine was a spontaneous reaction. I walked up to Sunila, stroked her head and kissed her.

There was a stunned silence when she got up as if in a trance. The crowd parted making way for her, as she walked meekly towards the hired van awaiting her. She opened the door and got in. It was quite clear that she had acted this scenario before.

**Rohini Gamage**

## Prize - Winners Poetry

## Saffron Robes

I dreamt of saffron robes floating gently on water  
Calm, smooth, soothing  
Unruffled by the winds, unwavering against the waves  
But saffron robes are on fire  
Fire, they scream  
As they run for cover  
Trying to douse it first with clean water, then anything their flailing hands can grab  
But the heat is growing  
And smoke is swirling like an old man's beard across the skies  
Through the towns and into the villages  
A fiery language that no one understands pounds the hot misty air  
As the mighty dragon in saffron robes exhales  
Yellow, orange and then red  
As red as the rubies in its eyes  
It stamps across the town in anger, waving its head, breathing fire  
The saffron robes flying and flapping this way and that, fanning the flames  
The city is now burning, grey ashes crumble  
I wake up from my dream  
of saffron robes floating gently in clear water  
Encircling me in kindness, tolerance and *maitri*  
I open my eyes and my world is on fire  
A strong, engulfing, saffron-coloured fire

## My Mother- the child

"Where are you going?"

Amma`s querulous tone inquires.

"To work Amma," I reply gently.

"Stay!", she commands. "I'll give you my pension".

I get ready to step out.

"Give me some water", she demands.

I comply.

My heart sinks.

The delaying tactics have started.

I know she is not thirsty.

The doorbell rings.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Good morning Mala", I say.

"Good morning Miss", Mala says.

Duwa", yells my mother.

" I can't stay with this wicked woman!"

I ignore and kiss her powdery cheek.

The faded eyes look sadly into mine.

The gnarled, frail fingers pluck at the sheet.

"Bye Amma, Be good" I say with the false

Cheerfulness a mother uses to a child.

She mumbles something and falls back, resigned.

I walk quietly out of the door.

Ten minutes later I'm on the phone.

"Mala", I ask. "Is Amma alright?"

"Of course Miss", she replies comfortingly.

"She forgets about you the moment you leave".

I don't know what to feel.

Will I be a child one day?

**Nelani Goonawardena**

## Across the great divide

Thangamma knew no Sinhala, I knew no Tamil

Yet, we both comprehended

Each other's underlying sentiments

For our fallen heroes

North and South of the divide

Precious lives snatched in their prime

Some for a cause

And for the others, it was their duty

We argued vehemently, for "our" people

Yet the salient wish was peace

Our pivotal point of consensus

The distant boom of gun fire and shelling

Shattered the tranquility of a quiet dinner

Tempted to lick my fingers

After tucking into Thosai and iddly

Dripping with a spicy sambar

My city manners repulse me

I affectionately gaze at her lined face

A mother to me in an alien land

Which I have stealthily trespassed

As the morning sunrays cast a glimmer

In the statuesque Palmyra trees

My gracious hostess touches my forehead

Wishing me a safe journey

Across Elephant Pass

Back in Colombo in a plush shopping mall

I spot a Diwali Card, with endearing words

Emotions overpowering, with trembling hands I scrawl

Dear Thangamma,

May the Deities protect you until we meet again

**Keerthi Wijekulasuriya**

**Part - II**  
**Entries For CHANNELS**  
**Volume - 22**

## The Lantern

Escaping the oppressive heat and stifling sweat of Colombo in March 2016, I went to Kandy. The owner of a house in Anniewatte, living abroad, offers his home to me whenever I feel like going back to my birthplace. A birthplace invariably forges an eternally strong bond invites you, succours you and returns you reinforced with life-giving spirit. Balan cooks well and keeps the house scrupulously clean so no call to be vigilant about creepy crawlies or worse, an intruding reptile whose kind must surely be slithering around the adjacent hills.

Alone, with Balan busy in the kitchen, I pour myself a pre-dinner mug of thirst defeating beer and settle down to read. Just as I am dozing off, darkness douses the house in a flash, and continues. Soon a beam of light silently penetrates the shrouding dimness and I see a torch making its way to me, with Balan behind. Later he brings a lantern, yes, one of those long ago *lantherumas*, and places it on a table in the sitting room where I remain curled in an easy chair. The lantern light fascinates me: so dim yet so comforting, pushing back the gloom and fear of uncertainty that encroaches. I look at the friendly lantern - its metal base, its circular glass 'chimney' with the faint candle light within, its metal top closed and its handle lying vertical against the glass. And in the next moment I am transported back to my childhood to a home in Katukelle along Peradeniya road. I am walking along a darkened road with family, late in the evening of my eleventh birthday and a light pierces the gloom and is handed over to me. Immature and innocent though I be, I sense, more than realize, that light is much more than a mere illumination. And now in my adulthood, life's experiences having enriched me; tragedies suffered and troubles surmounted made me wiser, I realize that women bonding is one of the greatest of life's blessings.

We were three pairs of neighbouring siblings who would play cricket, hopscotch and other games almost every evening, but when the boys were busy with an after-school activity, I would go to Jean's home, there to play 'house' or dress up trailing borrowed-with-no-permission saris and hobble around on Jean's Mum's high heeled shoes. Faces were daubed in makeup and the utopian illusion we basked in was that we were chic. Anyone suddenly coming across us would scream in panic; that is what adult me thinks. As a child I preened in my pretend grown-up camouflage. Jean had play tea-sets and plenty of dolls and hidden treasures like cans of corned beef and cheese to tuck into when playing house fatigued us or our obstreperous students - the dolls - harassed us.

We two also indulged our childish, irrepressible literary bent. On many evenings taking Carmen along, we walked to the school grounds with paper, pencil, eraser and a board each to place our pages on. The school premises were at that time generously left open till six o'clock on weekdays so kids with no garden space could walk in and play. Carmen was not a co-writer; rather was she the supplier of refreshment. While we bent our heads over serious literary composition, she would scale the hill at the back of the school gathering *ambul pera*, those delectable small guavas with their unique flavour. Jean selected whether we wrote a story each or went into paragraphs of creative writing over a subject pronounced by her. 'Ghosts' she would call out and that would be our story or descriptive essay of the evening. After concentrated writing and reading to each other, Carmen would be with us or we would holler to her. Emptiness within was assuaged by mouthfuls of guava fruit and due praise lavished on Jean who always surpassed me in her creative writing, particularly if it called for the mystique of imagination. We were just ten years old but talent was visible early on, in Jean's case I hasten to add.

On my eleventh birthday I was disappointed that the box of handkerchiefs I hankered after was not beside me when I woke up. My older brother and sister guffawed when I timidly mentioned my desire and at every opportunity thereafter would mercilessly tease me. *Who does she think she is? Princess Elizabeth? Wanting a box of handkerchiefs!* Widowed Mother could not afford such nonsense luxuries. A couple of hankies were in hand for taking to school in the pocket of the three pleated skirt of my uniform.

So I woke up with a pang of disappointment. But this emotional reaction is short lived in young lives. I was back to reminding all family members it was my birthday. I received gifts from each sibling, mostly handmade like a notebook from my brother. But my second sister gave me a pair of flamboyant butterfly hair slides. It was she who would do up my hair, most times tiny plaits with jaunty ribbon bows to match the dress I wore. Mother said her gift was a contribution to the noon *dané* at the Dalada Maligawa, which as you know is a most elaborate affair with all of 32 curries included. So in the late morning, it being a Saturday, we went to the Maligawa and were even invited into the inner sanctum when Mother mentioned to the monk in charge that it was my birthday. I should have appreciated that signal honour, but no, I still hankered after a box of handkerchiefs - the pinnacle of sophisticated elegance to me.

In the afternoon as a concession to this youngest in the family, round sponge cakes and rock cake - conforming to its name and hard on teeth - were bought off the Kandy Bakers breadman who came around on deliveries with his large, cylindrical, black oil cloth covered carrier on his head. Then later, it was temple going; the friendly head monk tying a *pirit nool* around the right wrist of the just-turned-eleven girl. We returned in the late dusk, the street lights

casting our shadows longer and shorter and non-est as we moved from one lamp post to the other along Halloluwa Road and then Peradeniya Road. The stars above were brilliant. The stretch of Peradeniya Road in which we were, however, was mysteriously dark. How come? To me it was an ogre that had suddenly swallowed the lamp posts, in preparation for devouring me. I moved closer to Mother, my protective Rock of Ages. She too commented on the enveloping dark. We were drawing closer to Jean's house and we noticed that it, along with immediate neighbours' houses, were minus lights. There was a gathering of shadowy figures at the gate of Jean's house. I saw a flicker of light among them. A firefly? A glow-worm caught by Jean's father? Suddenly, crossing the road, they approached us. The little light guided them, getting sharper and brighter. Then came a lilting rendering of 'Happy Birthday Dear Nanda' with adult male and female voices harmonizing. Jean came forward with the light in hand, kissed and hugged me, and handed over an exquisite lantern - her gift to me. It shed a pale light but to me it surpassed my imagined Aladdin's lamp rubbed and flaring a blue light. I did not want the genie - only the light! Jean's mother carried a ribbon cake with eleven candles lit and bravely wafting their tiny flames in a breezeless dusk. I shakily sliced the wondrous cake with the beribboned knife that Jean's sister held out to me. We enjoyed chunks, standing right there on the road. My brother carried the rest home.

Curled up in the sofa now, well past the Biblical age of three score and ten, I see the dainty lantern in my mind's eye and almost taste the cake of so long ago. I go out to the jasmine perfumed garden and gaze at the extra brightness of clusters of stars and the steady light of a planet or two way up high. Colombo never gives a star gazer such a brilliant display. And then my mind clouds over. I had been rude to my best friend of my childhood in a newspaper article I wrote. Jean was an internationally recognized author by then and me a mere scribbler. It certainly was not envy that made me write the comment. '*Honesty*' I had told myself. '*Write what actually happened - Jean exceeded the time given her.* And I did. Jean announced to a mutual friend she'd never speak to me again, adding: '*I thought she was a friend of mine.*'

I bravely phoned Jean the next morning. My heart stopped its pounding and I held my breath. Making the caller known to her produced a minute of silence. Then, '*Hello! How good to hear you, my very best friend of long ago. Do come visit me.*'

The magic of the lantern held.

**Nanda Pethiyagoda Wanasundera**

## Romeo and Juliet

There was a bible  
 On the book rack, papers decayed  
 By weevil and termite bites  
 It was the book that no Catholic read  
 After all, reading the bible  
 Is like sleeping with the enemy-the evangelists  
 She slept for years in the deepest slumber  
 While in the shelf below  
 There were Shakespeare's life works  
 That too sparingly read  
 After all everything that appeared to be  
 Catalogued in 14 line sonnets  
 Were too mundane to read  
 After all this century tweeting is lit  
 And blogging is epic poetry  
 And kindle is the bookstore  
 And a book rack is the sophisticated man's  
 Status symbol and ego maker  
 After all a library has more makeup on  
 Than the trophy wife  
 And in these modernist times  
 There are more sugar daddies than Romeos  
 After all the book and the reader  
 Aren't they simply a modern-day twist  
 To two star-crossed lovers?

**Dilantha Gunewardene**

## *Kadupul blooms*

Pouting buds, eight in all  
carried the promise of a resplendent bloom  
under the nudging moonbeams to blossom  
unseen, in the night's anonymity  
Last night before the storm  
before the gathering clouds  
eclipsed the moon  
I stepped out, gently  
to the breathtaking sight  
of silver white petals, spreading,  
stretching, to gather the mist  
and night's coolness in their depths  
A bride adorned in floral splendour  
draped gracefully on the arm of her groom-  
the Kohomba tree, in a long embrace  
I took in your beauty, with the fragrant breeze  
that passed from you to me  
and left undisturbed your time of bliss  
till dawn your drowsy petals closed once more  
leaving me with the memory  
of a stolen glimpse  
of a fleeting glory, under a fading moon

**Hasitha Wickremasinghe**

## My Daughter

My first glimpse of you  
 a tiny arm reaching up,  
 fingers spread to grab a star  
 from your own sky  
 and replace our sun,  
 creating a new orbit for our world

Now, as days run into nights  
 and nights into days  
 moments of wonder strung together  
 weave new patterns  
 in our lives

This night, and every night  
 as the world sleeps and all is still  
 you and I  
 snuggle in a chair  
 I, cradling you to my heart  
 you, suckling sleepily at my breast  
 we create Earth's sweetest moment  
 and I read its substance in your eyes  
 and savour  
 that sweet moment  
 of complete innocence  
 and perfect peace

Hasitha Wickremasinghe

## The Red Necklace

The old door swung open, creaking. Theivani shuffled in and kept her heavy bag on the earthen floor. There were potatoes, chicken, and eggs in the bag. A carton of ice cream! Two packets of Lemon Puff! One of *kadalai maa murukku!* (murukku made of chick-pea - flour) .And rubbing shoulders with the chicken and the Lemon Puff - a half bottle of the stuff that cheers!

She smiled, wrinkles breaking out in her once winsome face. Just think of it! How happy the children would be with the food! Gopi and Bala were at "claars" which was the term she vaguely used for the tuition classes they attended and in which she placed her implicit faith for their future : the assurance that they would not end up like their parents, toiling on the tea fields. She herself barely knew to sign her name in an ungainly scrawl.

Her smile lingered on her lips as she delightedly fondled the red plastic beads of her brand new necklace.

Smiling broadly now, she raised her hand as though to switch on a light. Aaah! How the old crumbling walls glowed, all at once! Everything took on such a joyful sheen! How bright were the pots and pans lying beneath the hearth!

*Kadavaley!* (Tamil - God !) They looked new! Even the firewood in the old attal reflected the all - encompassing light. Oh, look at the row of glittering steel cups and plates! She blinked, no longer knowing whether she was dreaming or not. The new rolls of rush mats there in the corner with new pillows on them with clean flowered chintz covers - frilled , the way she'd always longed to have them ! The little table where the children studied, now loaded with all manner of things they were always in need of - pencils, pens, drawing books, exercise books - all in a pile ready for their eyes !

God's picture on a wall with her lamp and vase of plastic flowers and a garland of fresh orange *kaddahambaram* flowers. Old family photos on another wall, with her favourite film idol, villainous - looking Rajanikant's photo alongside (his smile so seductively crooked or so she thought ), the glass on them all, glinting in the light!!

A rat scampering across the attal rattled the firewood. Startled, she woke up from her dream. Her hand fell from where she'd kept it raised, pretending for a moment to switch on a light.

She sighed and looked around at the accustomed gloom of her little hovel. A cobweb brushed against her nose. The same drab battered old aluminium utensils lay stacked under the hearth, scrubbed hundreds of times over the years, along with some old blackened earthenware pots. Theivani had only imagined the new utensils, steel cups and plates, mats and frilled pillows.....

Brushing away the cobweb on her nose and the dream in her head, she briskly dragged a can of kerosene from under the hearth. She lit a chimney lamp which immediately threw her grotesque shadow onto the pitted walls.

But - her dream would soon be a reality! There would be light - bright light soon in her house!

Her secret! She wiped her kerosene smeared hands on her saree. She could not help but draw out the precious wad of notes from inside her jacket, admire it and kiss it. It had been her turn to collect the cheettu money this time 'round!! Her hands trembled. Fifteen Thousand Rupees! Fifteen Thousand extra rupees - less, of course, the little bit she'd spent.

Her smile broadened into a grin. How happy she was that he didn't know, so he would not be able to snatch it away as he did her monthly balance pay. Even he would finally approve of her plan to get a supply of electricity to their home, for which she had saved so assiduously. He would be happy, surely, to see their children studying in the bright light instead of struggling in the flickering light of the sooty chimney - lamp.

She also thought of the "tot" she'd purchased at the tavern as a special celebratory drink for him and herself. She giggled. She hummed a tune which had been their favourite in times past.

**"What've you got there, HA ? Give it here!"**

Theivani whirled around, hastily thrusting the wad of notes into her jacket. She saw his tottering silhouette in the doorway. His speech was slurred. His eyes were narrow red slits in the once handsome face which looked gaunt in the lamp light.

She opened and closed her mouth, speechless.

Her mind raced. "I - I've brought you a chicken and a drink, too!" she stammered. He was before her in a few lurching steps.

Thrusting his callused paw between her flaccid breasts, he pulled out the wad of notes. He teetered, eyes popping.

Desperate, Theivani decided to fight for her money - she couldn't lose her dream - NOW !! Ferociously, she clawed at his hands, screaming "Give it me! It's MINE! It's MINE! It's for a supply of CURRENT!"

She hung onto him but he was the stronger and quite used to kicking her away from him at will.

"IT'S MINE, YOU BITCH!" he shouted, exercising his marital rights as invented by his forefathers and endorsed by him.

"NO! NO! Please! It's for us ALL !" she started sobbing piteously, groveling at his feet where she'd fallen, seeing one Rs.500/- note falling from his hands and floating down.

"Take that, then, you bitch!" he laughed kicking at the note and turned. Quickly, he disappeared into the night,

Her dream was ended? Just like that? NO, NO, NO!! She could not bear it. This was not the first time he'd grabbed money from her - her balance wages. But this time, it was something she'd carefully saved over many months! Something which had been hers, at last, to spend as she decided!

She howled loud and long like an animal, banging her head on the floor.

She saw the can of kerosene standing on the floor close to her where she'd fallen. Dragging it to her, she poured it over herself, and struck a match to end her suffering - or so she imagined.

The searing flames told her otherwise. Her bellowing brought all the neighbours running. Her two boys returning home from tuition too ran up to see their whole world go up in flames .

Half an hour later, they were trundling her in an old hired van towards the closest hospital, miles and miles away. The outer layers of her head and torso were disintegrating in blood, slime and soot. She was screaming, or moaning at intervals. Already her teeth were bared in a grimace, her lips having been burnt off immediately but she did not have the respite of losing consciousness. The red beads of her necklace were melted and embedded in her skin, indistinguishable among her blood and bared knotted arteries.

He visited her in hospital in between bouts of drinking.

Unctuously he spooned yoghurt, sago *conjee* and thambili (king-coconut water) between her teeth at intervals. Surreptitiously he wished for her death so that he'd be rid of it all.

He felt her hatred towards him emanating from her, along with the ever-present smells of putrefaction and disinfectant.

She rolled her eyes in skinless black sockets and kept saying, pleadingly: "You'll get the current, wont you? Have you applied?" She was determined to survive and return to see her house lit up.

Yes, yes, he said. Yes, yes, yes. His eyes slid away guiltily. He thrust another spoonful of *conjee* between her teeth to shut her up, thinking of the few hundreds of rupees left after all the drinking and the sharing of *biryani* and roast chicken with Kokila, a pretty wench with a bouncy bosom who was a sweeper at the main bus stand. They were now meeting regularly in the evenings at the closed up shack. The children had been palmed off on Theivani's mother.

The starched smart nurses indicated clearly, that the task of keeping Theivani ant - and - fly - free was not theirs. He picked off the ants and waved away flies dutifully whenever he was there.

Eventually. she was crawling with ants as he could not visit her regularly.

The rich dinners and orgies in the hut dwindled as did the money, and disgruntled Kokila regained her former waist line.

One day, he answered Theivani impatiently: "Yes I have got the current!" to her anxious query. She could have jumped for joy but she could only raise her claw - like blackened hands. She rolled her bleary eyes, laughed hoarsely and grimaced in appreciation.

But a visiting relation told her that the house was shut up in darkness except when he took "her" there for their *biryani* feeds by lamp light.

Theivani died within two weeks and was buried in her bandages.

**Sakuntala Sachithanandan**

## Civilizing the English Language

Like the "Peace of God which passeth all understanding",  
(It certainly passeth mine!), so does the English Language.  
Spattered with inconsistencies, incomprehensibles, and unnecessarily long  
Alphabet clogged with redundant letters and other oddities, mayhem,  
Illiteracy, disorder, anarchy rages down the Anglo-Saxon Tongue.  
Take inconsistencies, the commonest of the anarchists. For instance  
To say "tongue" as in "lung", two misfits, 'ue' are needlessly placed at the end.  
"Bough" whose 'ough' should read "oog" in all common sense,  
Is sounded "bow" as in 'owl'. Even God doesn't know on what grounds!  
A crude infringement no less of the Common Law of Sound.  
The rust of Indiscipline alas! pervades the English Tongue  
While "Bough" is 'bow' as in 'owl', "Rough" 's'ruff', "Cough" good heavens is "corrff" !!  
Some six different sounds to say 'ough', when any letter upfront will do.  
In a jungle of letters spelled "Laugh", the 'augh' (ho ho) is called 'larf'  
Rather than spelling it simply as "larf". Can anything be considered more daft.\*\*\*  
Next take Incomprehensibles, for example the word "Doubt".  
Who is that upstart up there standing by 't' grinning proudly and prim,  
Yet with no special function, as "doubt" can still sound 'dowt' without him.  
Impostors strutting the Language with self styled importance!  
'P' stands in prayer in front of the "Psalms". 'K' looks up at a 'Knoll'  
Both honoured upfront, yet gagged for God's sake. Allowed no talking at all.  
Like being invited Chief Guests and then ignored at the Ball!  
Redundancies abound, for example the "X". Why have a "Q" when "Kw" will do?  
'Is 'Q' so sexy to always be escorted by 'u'? With 'W' at hand do we need a 'V' too?  
So civilizing a sick English Language from indiscipline, anarchy is surely essential.  
Now, some English Scholars no "dowt" might tear me to pieces. Why need I bother,  
I'll be on 'leev', long 'leev' in fact. Unfazed by the din they create!

## Death of a Squirrel

Admittedly, I was ill-prepared  
 For such an unjustifiable accusation  
 Made by my very own, teen-aged daughter  
 As her grief-stricken cries echoed  
 Disturbing the tranquil air,  
 And also my peace of mind  
 For how can I be answerable  
 or even feel guilty, for the atrocity  
 Solely committed by our otherwise  
 Loving and adorable dog .  
 Who had the audacity, to dash inside  
 My study room, and instantly, to catch  
 The squirrel, while its battered body  
 Remaining limp, silently accusing me  
 For my lapse of forgetting to close the door  
 Of the study room, as I was instructed  
 Umpteen times, by my idol of  
 A guiding star, who strangely enough  
 Now very much pacified, watches a soap-opera  
 Spellbound, forgetting the death of squirrel  
 As something uneventful, while my heart  
 Lingers with a feeling of melancholy

Grieving about the irreparable loss  
Or that poor creature's life, snuffed out  
Swiftly and unexpectedly, bowing down  
To irrevocable dictates of mother-nature  
Which itself I find a rare marvel  
Deserving accolades, for its intricate design  
Lasting seemingly till eternity

**Ranjan M. Amarasinghe**

## Through the Window

I glimpsed your smile  
 In the whirlwind of a bend  
 Your hair swirling  
 Your *diyaredda* wet and clinging in the water  
 Hands pressed against his body  
 A secret rendezvous  
 A forbidden moment in the village river  
 But in a second you were gone  
 You and your lover  
 Lost in the broken wall of trees,  
 Melting in the golden glints of the sun  
 Gone with the movement of wheels beneath me  
 Carrying me away  
 Your secret safe with me

Himangi Jayasundere

## Marriage Vows

I stand, fascinated by the scene outside the window. Rays of sunlight illuminate trees in their blooming glory, the birds seem to be singing for my benefit alone, and, in a way, they are. A gunshot shatters the stillness of the air, lifting the shroud of dank mustiness to reveal the vibrating undertones of my own anticipation, which seems to have infected the very air around me. Brushing my coat excitedly, I turn away from that transfixing window to face the staircase.

John Doe was the strangest man I ever met. At our first meeting, when asked why he changed his name to one so ill omened, he smiled his trademark charismatic smile and replied,

“Becoming a nonentity is sometimes the best fate some of us can hope for, and anyway, my parents named me \*Nemo so I have not strayed too far from the point they were trying to make!”

This drew a laugh from me, and I found myself drawn to this distinguished man with the piercing eyes who spoke so, so softly. The man whose gaze I could not ignore, those eyes seemed to have seen too much and too little at the same time. What they were looking for, I did not realize till much, much later, wrapped up in a cocoon of my own self-importance as I was.

A thought crosses the feeble wisps of my reminiscences, “why is he late?” I wonder out loud, as if saying the question out loud will somehow draw out an explanation from thin air.

But then I remember the last words John told me,

“Wait for me, my love. I won’t be long”

And that is what I intend to do. I turn back to the window, now darkening, birds frozen in suspended animation, trees ever green. My mind re - winds to the days that window overlooked a dismal grey concrete parking lot. Having never seen any cars in it, I pointed it out to John, commenting that the fact that such a cheerless place existed when it could be brimming with life and wild things, was a crying shame. And what a contrast to our previous residence, a beautiful seaside villa located in an inaccessible rural hamlet. As, at the time it was one of his lucid moments, John replied,

“What would become of the joys of this world without sorrows to complement them?”

At which point I asked him to quit sounding like my grandfather. The next day John left on a mysterious errand, arriving some hours later with a package in his hand and a mischievous gleam in his eye. Unwrapping the package, he produced a laminate of one of the finest paintings I had ever seen, of a garden in full bloom! “Help me stick this to the window!” he cried enthusiastically. Horrified, casting aspersions on his sanity, I asked him how much it cost. Looking comically serious, he replied,

“I didn’t just buy a painting! I bought your happiness too. And on that my dear, I would spend my last penny! And in fact, I rather think I did!”

He was right. Since our families disowned us, we had so little colour in our lives. The painting stuck on the window was what I looked for every time I entered the kitchen. Our own personal haven. It was a window to a past life. A welcome escape from the cruel world.

My gaze snaps back to the present, and is drawn by the empty whiskey bottle by the sink. As one of the pioneer same sex couples in our country we were always sliding down a slope to almost certain destruction. Denial of marriage hastened our journey, sending John on a downward spiral of narcotics and alcohol. In the span of a few weeks he went from well to do man about town, to a shambling ruin of a man. A shell of what he had once been. When John was dropped from his job, I could no longer support our lifestyle on my meager accountant’s salary alone, we had to sell the villa and move into the decrepit apartment which I now stand in.

Of course I tried to save John from himself many a time, and John himself had rare moments of terrible clarity, when he knew what he had become, and what he was doing to his lover. I could see doubt, self-loathing and the effects of the narcotics eating him from the inside. His piercing eyes no longer shone with energy. His once steady hands shook like leaves in a breeze. He became a shadow, his vitality dissolving into hollowed cheeks and a bent back. Even when we went on holiday together to take our minds off real life, the specter of suppression dragged behind us like an invisible ball and chain. Watching other happy heterosexual couples just compounded John’s misery, so we returned back to that gloomy dungeon we called home.

“Well that didn’t work out quite as well as expected” he said, as the ghost of his former smile crossed his face for an instant vanishing like breath off a razorblade, and relapsing once more into the crevasses left by depression and heavy drug use.

In a last ditch effort to save John, I challenged him; if he managed to go clean for three months, we would apply to adopt a little girl like we always dreamed.

The transformation was gradual, but magical. Out of the ruins rose a man stronger, more mature than the man he was all those years ago. One golden day, John came up to me and said, “This is my last bottle of whiskey. Will you share it with me?” and I, who had been a teetotaler for twenty two years, drank deep.

Once the bottle was over, John, the old drama queen, placed the bottle by the sink saying, “let this be a monument to this day. A reminder of the man I once was. Thank you for saving me, my friend. If you ever see me relapsing, please feel free to hit me with that bottle,” he said that old mischievous smile lighting up his face.

Watching him was akin to watching some kind of apotheosis. Using his incredible willpower, John kick started his job, and devoted his free time to building a nursery for the child, soon to be ours. I found myself glowing with pride.

Finally, three months passed, and it was application time. We walked away from the interview high fiving each other, sure that that the baby would undoubtedly be ours.

Then, one day a letter arrived.

“We regret to inform you that current legislation does not permit adoption of minors by same sex couples. Have a nice day”

It was the first time I saw John cry. The next day he disappeared on one of his mysterious errands. He returned clutching a package. When I asked him about it he said it was something that would hopefully bring happiness to same sex couples in the future. Sitting down beside me, he told me his plan. It was one final act of desperation. One chance for redemption. Not for us, but maybe for our country, and the countless people “like us” she would produce.

That was two days ago. Two days of happiness and laughter. Culminating in... fireworks!

We chose the nursery. It seemed ironically apt. I remember looking at myself, just after I passed, childlike in his arms. Smoke rising from the barrel could have been from the candles lit to herald my passing. It's strange, I thought, looking at myself for the last time, I might have been asleep.

I pull myself back to the present. Maybe, as John said, our deaths will raise heads across the country, maybe questions which need to be asked will be asked, and some laws will be undone. Maybe we will change the world.

Yes, I will wait for him, as I always have. We will be together soon.

Till death do us part.

*\*Nemo- a Latin word which means "nobody" on translation.*

**Taveesh Edussuriya**

## Despair

Two hundred thousand languish on Vanni's scorched earth, starring in "The saddest show on earth".

How can we forget fleeing, at the dawn of our doom.

Hundreds stampeding out of trees, lagoon, were turned to ash.

The deadliest of bombs rained down from the skies

The rich clutched their gold. Wet torn clothes clung to the poor.

"Captured" The army drove us further, trapping us in an arid, feet burning fenced plain.

No better than caged animals in a zoo.

Soldiers the "War Heroes:" and we "The Internally Displaced". Forever?

Water rationed. Fish curry from a can; whilst we crave for our ocean's bounty, our sun kissed wells..

The wind whips us, blows away our egos, rights, our fighting spirit.

'O God' we praised you, our palms perfumed with entwined jasmines. Now beg 'Mercy', hands in dust.

Twenty sleep in a tent. Crouch weeping on ragged clothes.

Square mile zones in camp, named Ponnambalam, Arunachalam, Kadirgamar

A mockery of their names.

Shops, Cooled Banks appear enticing the rich. They wary, Will twenty two carat gold return as fifteen?

The dying, the old and the feeble, lie unattended, helpless

"Death is normal in camps" says the WHO expert. has he ever seen a camp with a barbed wire fence?

Has he seen the disturbed minds needing counsel and gentle care?

Who comes to heal? Not wise men from the east but untrained youths, a ploy for winning votes.

We weep at the fence seeing our dead taken along. Wonder where to?

Will funeral rites be done? Remember guiltily our kin shot, bodies strewn in tractors, on green fields.

We dared not look back, had no time. Have we become immune to death?

The one eyed U.N , the forked tongued Indian stood at the fence. Release? Spoke inane words. Smiled.

White teeth in dusky faces smiled back. A cruel pantomime.

Our homes, 'Blossom', 'Moonlight', on beloved streets. Now the anonymity of "Camp A," "Tent B, Space C".

The soldiers shout " Weapons, mines galore found in your fields"

We suspect the army digs, recovers, reburies, really searching for our buried hard earned gold.

The monsoon rains are due with its raging waters

May take us back through that lagoon, those trees. Soulless, forgotten, buried in our patch of green.

No money to bribe the 'Brass' and flee this man made hell.

Thousands may linger here sorrowing, bereft of hope and forever named," The Internally Displaced".

**Vimala Ganeshanathan**

Editors note,

At the end of the war, we heard all about the heroic rescue of those stranded in the war zone by our troops. We saw them being escorted into boats, given food and water, before depositing them in refugee camps.

To us, who were relatively untouched by the war, the refugees soon became an impersonal issue.

This "poem", written by a Doctor who visited these camps, and got first hand accounts, surely shatters our complacency.

At the time of writing, the number still languishing in camps are fourteen thousand families.

## Farewell

The time will come, as it surely will,  
When I must leave you...  
No more will my soft caress  
Evoke that joyous response  
That thrills every fibre of my being  
Filling my heart with warmth and purifying my soul  
Long years have we been together, you and I  
Our souls intertwined- and now I must go  
How can I describe the moments of wild ecstasy  
I have shared with you?  
Or how can I forget the solace and comfort  
You have showered on me at times of loneliness and despair?  
How I will miss your dear voice,  
Speaking to me in a language that only you can speak!  
Tinkling with sweetness like the chimes of faraway bells...  
Soft as an evening prayer...  
Or restless with passion like the waves of the swelling sea...  
Furious at times like rolling thunder...  
Then warm and tender as a mother's lullaby...  
And so together we weave a fantasy all our own...  
For in the gay, capricious abandon of your voice  
I hear the sound of gurgling brooks, children's laughter,  
The whisper of rustling leaves, the humming of birds and bees,

And the gentle patter of falling rain...  
 Must all this come to an end, my beloved,  
 My first and last love?  
 Will there be a new love in your life when I am gone?  
 To whose touch you will respond  
 With the same exuberance as you did to mine?  
 Or will you just stand in a corner,  
 Mute and dust covered, lonely, forgotten, and uncared for?  
 Oh my beloved piano... Farewell!

**Sheila Gunasekara**

## Flying Visitors

### Coucal

The large stately Coucal  
struts around my garden like he owns it  
showing off matching cinnamon black feathers  
and striking blood red eyes.

Yet, he stoops to eat the lowly snail  
crunching it alive with his strong beak  
causing agonising pain.

He shows no pity for his fellow being.

### Babblers

A flock of sandy grey Babblers  
spend their Happy Hour in my garden.

They flit around like Hi Society women  
interacting with each other

using a variety of calls;  
musical, trilling, shrill, riotous.

They are joyous, gregarious, excitable  
on a Natural High without a drop!

While I listen, to their happy babbling.

I sit alone in a sour mood  
guzzling a double whiskey feeling envious

Chitra Premaratne Stuiver

## The Legacy

Ruwanthi looked at her reflection in the mirror. A woman approaching forty looked back at her. The oval face was there-the eyes with their laughter lines- as ready to smile as to spot a fault. - but why did she look so haggard? On the defensive? What did she fear?

She was afraid of the future. She found herself increasingly isolated. She had seen enough of life to realize that if she continued to follow the road map set by family traditions and values, she would end up like a bit of dead wood cast on the sands of time!

The even flow of her life had abruptly altered when the school, which had been her family , had announced that they were going International. She had been a devoted teacher, beloved by the pupils and appreciated by the out-going Principal. In the new regime, qualifications took pride of place. She was given the "golden handshake".

But it was unthinkable for girls to aim at careers in their family. The one approved goal was to make a "good marriage". One could do a little teaching while waiting for this to happen. Unfortunately, she got involved in the teaching, and broke so far with tradition as to reject all proposals that came her way. There were three sisters. Lily the eldest - prim and unflappable- set the right example by moving smoothly into matrimony after a brief stint as a music teacher. She, Ruwanthi, caused some anxiety with her strong will, but it was Shireen, the youngest, who caused the catastrophe by "falling in love", and marrying out of her class and community. Her poor parents never recovered from it. "I'm sure it hastened their deaths" was Aunt Serena's dark opinion.

Ruwanthi picked up the newspaper listlessly, going over the positions available. Then she saw it. A lady of mature years and comfortable circumstances was seeking an unencumbered, young person over thirty, of good background and education, to fill a post as her companion. 'Surely, I could fit the bill', she thought, and noted the contact details.

Now, a week after, Ruwanthi found herself nervous, as she dressed for a Very Important Occasion- Aunt Serena's birthday. Serena had scaled the heights of the mid-eighties, and everyone -relations and friends-who valued Serena's goodwill would be there at the dinner to celebrate. She was now the head of the Family - her opinions carried weight. She had inherited the family Home-The Manse, and the unspoken question that hung in the air was-who would she bequeath it to?

Ruwanthi looked at the Pashmina shawl she had bought as a present. How would it compare with the more opulent gift she was sure Lily and Eric would dazzle the old lady with? She pulled herself up with some distaste. Lily and her husband made no bones that they were running in the "Manse Stakes", ever since Aunt Serena hinted that she would leave the house to the person who would look after it in the manner it was accustomed to! At one point she did hint that she favoured Ruwanthi, for she was single like herself, and she would care for the house. Ruwanthi had a fleeting vision of a luxury she could only dream of- her own property. Then, coming quietly down to earth, she decided. She was not going to be in the running. She would have her own life.

As she entered The Manse, she remembered how, as a little girl she accompanied her family into what seemed a palace out of a fairy tale. Everything shone, and the floor was like a mirror. Today, it was just a larger than average bungalow fighting to survive in a harsh environment. The floor still mirrored, but she averted her gaze from the brown patches on a once immaculate white ceiling. When was the roof last repaired? she wondered.

It was the custom for the immediate family to meet early so that the latest news could be handed around with the cool drinks and bites. As usual, Lily and Eric fussed around seeing to Serena's comfort, while she listened intently- Mohan was sending his son abroad for higher studies, Nelu had turned eighteen -- time for a suitable partner, Joe's business was not doing well... Serena had something to say to each. Her once imperious voice was cracking, but her mind was astute.

Ruwanthi was wondering when the spotlight would fall on her- when she heard the words-

"Ruwanthi, I hear you have left the School? Why?"

Ruwanthi gave the reason.

Serena's next words were - "So, what are you going to do?" (She must be assisted in finding another source of income).

"I might try something other than teaching", she ventured.

"Why not teach music? You played the piano well."

Ruwanthi winced, and said gently-"I'd rather not go back to that."

She heard Eric guffaw, adding- "People are selling their pianos and buying computers!"

Ruwanthi wondered why she did not feel grateful to Eric for his support. She ventured-

"There are new openings, Aunty. It does not have to be teaching only"

"Well, have you anything in mind?"

"I could be a- a-companion to someone!"

"A companion! What sort of job is that?" Serena demanded. A low buzz arose as the family tried to clarify the concept. It was Eric who decided what it stood for-

"It's some sort of glorified Ayah, if you ask me!"

Shocked by this appalling rudeness, Ruwanthi was trying to find words to contradict him, when Serena's voice cut in like a jagged saw-

"Ruwanthi, whatever you do, remember how it would reflect on the Family. We have a Name. ..." There was more in the same vein, but Ruwanthi had stopped listening. She was so incensed that she decided to leave as soon as it seemed correct.

Lily tried to disperse the tension with a change of subject. Almost coyly, she asked Serena if she could have the Willow pattern tea service displayed in the cabinet. She did a lot of entertaining these days, and "it would be nice to use something so- so genuine".

Serena's equivocal reply was that it had been in the House for generations.

"Yes, of course!" replied Lily in her most accommodating manner.

As Ruwanthi said goodbye, Serena said, privately, "You know I will not be here for ever. Whoever takes over must be someone they can look up to!" This only filled her with consternation.

Ruwanthi took stock. Following her instincts, she had checked out the advertisement- a palatial house in the suburbs. As she entered, the strains of Chopin's Berceuse, played exquisitely, reached her- like a good augury. The pianist was a vigorous woman in her sixties, silver hair cut short, eyes keen, yet friendly. As they talked, Ruwanthi recognized a kindred spirit. A date was agreed on. A door was opening to a new and challenging life. She would not let the spectre of tradition get in the way. She would have a quiet talk with Serena.

It was not to be.

Two days later, the Family was rocked by the news that Serena had suffered a stroke.

Surrounded by the best of medical care, Serena kept everyone in a state of prayerful suspense, as they made their dutiful visits. Many whispered opinions were exchanged regarding the "succession".

Ruwanthi explained the complication to her prospective employer who suggested that she suspend the appointment, allowing matters to take their course, graciously adding that if Ruwanthi would ultimately take it up, the appointment would be back dated.

Feeling happier, Ruwanthi went to visit Serena. She was shocked at the change in her: she looked weak and unfocussed, and vulnerable. Filled with compassion, Ruwanthi bent as she beckoned to her to come close.

"I had to give it to her", she rasped between heavy breathing "She wanted it, they both wanted it so much!"

Ruwanthi, not quite understanding, nodded in a comforting way. Of course, she thought, she's talking about the Willow-pattern Service. "That's perfectly alright. Aunty" she whispered, and Serena gave a wan smile as she sank back into the pillows.

Ruwanthi was not to know that her words broke the one fetter that tied Serena to a life she could no longer bear. "She said it was perfectly alright" she whispered to the wondering nurse who came to check on her that night. They were her last words.

The funeral was on a grand scale. During the final rites, Ruwanthi was conscious of sympathetic glances cast in her direction. Only the family lawyer who was almost a relative, felt bold enough to put their feelings into words.

"Many of us felt you would get The Manse" -

Ruwanthi's feelings were somewhat mixed, the predominating one being -relief. She smiled and said-

"Never mind Mr. Saram. Everything happens for the best"

"True, true. For one thing- I wouldn't like to see you struggling with the heavy mortgage the house is under!"

Ruwanthi's eyebrows shot up, before she lowered them down to an expression more appropriate to a funeral. She whispered- "My deepest sympathies, Eric and Lily!"

**Myrle Williams**

## Atonement

Eyes downcast  
 In pensive mood  
 Virgin white attire  
 Snowy jasmines nestled  
 Within cupped hands  
 A pilgrimage  
 Every morning-after  
 To redeem, reconcile  
 To fall at the feet  
 Of the All-knowing-One  
 Seeking solace  
 Mindless of the leering  
 And the sneering  
 In measured steps  
 Along the very street  
 Walked the night before  
 In crude flamboyance  
 Her twilight trail, which  
 Knew well her wanton gait  
 Her painted smile  
 How they belied  
 Her sickened soul!  
 This woman of sin  
 Who bleeds within...

**Malini Epa**

## Wanderess

In my dreams

I walk through the streets of the city that I dream of,

Passing familiar, unfamiliar figures,

A girl with a red rose tucked & pinned in the hair

selling garlands of orange marigolds and roses

A man sitting by his paintings to be sold

where I stop and gaze at the painting of a lass

in a crimson red sari, her expressions subtle & serene

Shisha embroidered goods reflect a number of wanderesses

in each and every little piece of mirror stitched,

I still find my heart dancing to the tunes of jhumkis & bangles

The free, untamed mind wanders one more time in the streets

breathing smelling, discovering admiring, feeling & living in its dreams....

**Yashodmi Kaluarachchi**

## Wonders of the Sky

Ever seen a plane,  
 Jet or helicopters fly by?  
 Well, here are a few things  
 Of the *real* wonders of the sky  
  
 Our source of life,  
 Bright, big and fun  
 If you guessed it right,  
 Yes, that's the sun  
  
 Covering the sun,  
 Is it a horn that's too loud?  
 Or a bunny? Or a car?  
 No, it's a cloud  
  
 And out of those clouds  
 Comes a very lovely rainbow  
 It never forgets to greet you  
 With a smile and friendly "hello!"  
  
 Nightfall comes  
 Summoning the moon  
 When you see her silver body,  
 It's better than noon

There are many, many stars  
Many shine so bright,  
Blinking and shooting,  
They illuminate the night  
All these form clusters,  
And galaxies and more  
There's so much in the universe  
That we've never seen before  
There are so many things to learn, but I'll stop for today,  
I don't want to bore you but I like it anyway.

**Isuri Dissanayake [eleven years]**

## Re location

Oh no. Not today.  
Not the bulldozer .  
I haven't thought  
Salvage all or salvage nothing?  
How can I decide  
What part of my life to save?  
An earthquake would have been better.  
Then, one has no choice  
One is swept away without warning  
With the debris.  
Perhaps I should pretend this is an earthquake  
Sit. and do nothing.

**Lalitha Wirasinghe**

## Galle Literary Festival

Thin straps, plunging necklines -  
A world apart.  
A world brought together  
By a language - writers and readers -  
The famous and the unknown  
"So nice to see you !  
it's been so long - are you . . . are you . . . ?  
Or how marvelous, how exciting"  
The din between the sessions  
The colours and styles  
Reminded me of a flight of butterflies  
A kaleidoscope of people - clothes and colours.  
A merry mass, interacting, reacting  
A jumble of sounds.  
Then, thought provoking sessions  
Questions, Conversations  
In a common language  
A world apart.

**Lalitha Wirasinghe**

## Crossing The Boundary

Ajith had fainted. He felt stifled and it was not just because of the prevailing oppressive heat or the poor ventilation inside the overcrowded court-room of the Colombo High Court complex. He had heard the detailed reading of the verdict delivered by the judge, which to him was harsh and cruel. Through misty eyes he had seen the judge, the court officials and the rest solemnly leave the room. With a mocking gleam on his face the prosecuting lawyer had swished passed him, the flapping dark gown giving Ajith visions of what could be the black curtains of Hell.

Ajith recovered from his temporary unconscious state overcome by a feeling of being sick. When the prison guards brusquely shoved him into the waiting Black Maria, the metal of his shackles clashed against the van door - a loud reminder of the misery that lay in store. He was led into a different part of the Welikada Prison, quite cut off from the Remand section. As the heavy double doors of the cell were being bolted, Ajith passed out again.

In one's deepest sleep and even in delirious states of fever, some amount of alertness remains. The wonder of the human brain continues to baffle us. Yet, it was this ingenious brain power that had pushed if not reduced him to his current position, Ajith thought desolately as he came around. His surroundings were bleak. The cell, roughly square was small and suffocating; the floor was stone cold. It stank, not so much of stale food and excrement, but reeked of gross injustice and pain. When he looked upwards at the roof towards the strange noises that were coming, he saw several rats. As he watched, they came with hungry-looking eyes towards some left over crumbs of bread. It reminded him of the hunger that had been in his eyes and the adrenalin that had rushed through his veins in his eagerness to make his endeavour fruitful. Yet, Ajith reminisced sadly, it had been rodents that by contributing to his earliest experiments had caused this suffering. His cell-mate, apparently sentenced for smuggling heroin, sat slouched in a corner and seemed keen to hear his story. So Ajith began...

"It seems like just the other day. A wealthy, politically-powerful industrialist barged into my office - a gene laboratory affiliated to a private hospital in Borella. Being a 'big-shot' he had violated the rules by ignoring the 'No Entry' board and demanded from my staff that he be allowed immediate access to my private work area. Luckily my previous client, a dairy expert from a farm in Ambewela had

just left, with whom I had contracted to clone a species of champion cows. My doctorate in Genetic Engineering coupled with over a decade of experience at the renowned Roslin Institute in Edinburgh, had paved the way for me to establish myself as a clone scientist. The trouble is that very few people here believe in the immense potential of cloning. Most of my old friends from Royal College avoid me like the plague and even refer to me as 'Mary Shelley's mad assistant!'

Not only the authoritative tone of voice and the way he insisted that I sign several documents, but everything about this man made me a little wary to take on his work. Nevertheless it meant a welcome change from working with animal embryos and most of all the remuneration sounded too tempting to miss. Well, the bachelor businessman who had never cared about marriage or having children had apparently begun to feel differently about such issues. With my help he wanted the opportunity to have a son who would not just bear his name and have a pointed nose like him, but also possess every scrap of genetic material that had made him what he was.

I knew the procedure well. I had donor egg cells in my freezer. I gave the man a date to present himself at the hospital theatre to obtain some of his cells. The fusion of cells was a success, but I got carried away. I had been clearly instructed to make only one 'copy' but I felt an urge to try something I had not attempted in the past. Ethics and morals evaded me. At that moment no task seemed too daunting and in a split second I split the embryo into two. It was thrilling. My unreal ecstasy had not allowed me to think of the 'real' repercussions. Finding two females to carry the 'look alike' to term was not a problem, as the money involved was phenomenal. When it dawned on me that the business tycoon would be furious if ever he found out, I sent one of the women outstation but continued to monitor the progress of both until they delivered. Needless to say, one baby boy was handed over to my client who as expected was overjoyed. The other was registered as an inmate at a well known orphanage even before he was born.

My field requires me to travel to Europe and the United States often, as I have to keep abreast with the latest discoveries and technological advancements. Having been warned by a colleague to whom I confided what I had done, I kept a constant track of the whereabouts and well-being of the woman who not knowingly had carried 'forbidden progeny'. Every time I visited the orphanage and looked at that boy I secretly gloated on my achievement. Instead of one, I had made two and now there are three of the same in the world!

When the boys were just over three, I have to this day absolutely no idea how, but the businessman now doubly rich and with ten-fold more political clout had got to know of my misdoing and filed action against me. The court-room is not unfamiliar to me. I have been summoned many a time to prove paternity but never have I been among the guilty. What a twist of fate! I had no case. There is no panacea for committing such an atrocity. If ever I come out, I still will no longer enjoy the love and respect of those I know. The Pharaohs built the Pyramids so that the impermanence of flesh could be compensated by the permanence of stone and people throng in their thousands to witness this 'Wonder of the world'. When Reproductive Biology created the first test-tube baby the planet was in awe and admiration. When I transgressed slightly from it, here I am - made to pay a heavy price. I guess my world will always be a cell...."

**Rasheeda Zoeb Asgerally**

\*  
\*\*









*Eric*

English Writers Cooperative - Sri Lanka

Rs. 250/-