# NEW CEYLON WRITING 7

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**NEW**

**CEYLON WRITING 7**

DECEMBER 31, 2017

# A NOTE FROM OUR EDITORS

Welcome to the second issue of NEW CEYLON WRITING's new series. If you have not yet read the first issue (No. 6, published online last year and, like No. 7, also accessible through our website www.newceylonwriting.com) let us provide a 'back story'.

NEW CEYLON WRITING began in 1969 as an idea generated by a small company of academics between lectures and tutorials in the Senior Common Room of the University of Ceylon at Peradeniya. The Arts Faculty of the University, comprising both Western and Oriental Languages, had been moved from Colombo to the magnificent setting of the hill-country, and Dr Merlin Pieris, who taught Latin and Greek, had been thinking about some poems written in English by his students that had deeply impressed him.

"What a pity it is," said Dr Pieris, "that they have no way of publishing their work …" And there, quite literally, is where the journal began. The impulse that created it was not entirely altruistic. There had been for some time among university academics teaching the Arts a conviction that the English language itself as a University subject was under siege. At this time, teaching the 'Western Arts' at the University of Ceylon (the island's only university, recently split in two by the shift of the Arts Faculty to Peradeniya) was still carried out in English, and the Departments of English and Western Classics at Peradeniya, though numerically small, were nationally and internationally respected for the quality of their teaching staff and of their graduates. The highest degrees awarded were the BA and BA (Hons) degrees. For their PhD's, Peradeniya graduates applied to Oxford, Cambridge and other long-established institutions overseas, Britain (and later the USA) being their preferred destinations.

The passing of the 'Sinhala Only' Language Act in 1956 effectively displaced English, and replaced it with the language of Sri Lanka's ethnic majority: Sinhala. Teachers who had, for generations, trained local students in the use of the English language, and passed on to them their own love of English literature, left the island in large numbers for employment in English-speaking countries in which their children could be sure of receiving the sound 'English education' that would no longer be available to them in Sri Lanka. This created a regrettable gap in the national fabric. Many people benefited from 'Sinhala only'. Unfortunately, students who had worked in English throughout their school and university careers − the poets and novelists of the future − did not.

The effect of this situation on the creativity and confidence of writers in English can be imagined, especially when the sources from which support might have been received in such a crisis – imported English books, imported English literary journals, for example – dried up. Journalistic standards in the English-language newspapers (formerly touchstones of excellence, which students had been encouraged by their teachers to recognize and learn from) declined sharply, and Government-sponsored scholarships, literary awards and prizes were no longer available to writers in English.

It was into this unpromising atmosphere that NEW CEYLON WRITING was born. There was no question of a University-sponsored printed publication: university funding only financed journals that published the scholarly research of academics, not the creative efforts of students. The costs would have to be paid from donations by students and interested staff members. Was this a possibility? Academic salaries were not high, and students, even those who volunteered their help in distribution, could hardly be tapped for financial assistance in a venture unconnected with their studies that gave them no financial remuneration. Besides, a regular printed publication could only be maintained if advertising were solicited to meet the essential costs of paper and printing. But would this not jeopardize the journal's independence? Quite simply, we could not **afford** to print. Typewritten texts were next suggested – the poems and stories to be laboriously copied with carbon paper (there were no photocopiers available yet) onto two or three sheets, stapled together, and distributed by student volunteers once every three months? That was a possibility which was canvassed and rejected. Computers, of course, had not yet become available on our campuses.

After much discussion, it was agreed that NEW CEYLON WRITING could be typewritten on to waxed sheets and cyclostyled. At this point Mr Harold Pieris, a genial and wealthy benefactor of the arts (and a Sanskrit scholar), learning of our dilemma, sent us a generous cheque, and Mr T.B.S. Godamunne, head of the Sithumina Press in Kandy, who had just bought a beautiful new Heidelberg press for his company's use, agreed to print our covers free of charge. A kindly Dean permitted the use of the departmental cyclostyling machine, and Somadasa, the skilled and efficient Head Clerk in the Dean's office, assisted us in his spare time by operating the machine for a small fee. Part of Mr Pieris's cheque was spent on placing a small advertisement in the local English newspapers, announcing the advent of a new literary magazine, and … we were in business!

What did that first issue, the work of enthusiastic amateurs, look like? The text was typed on a portable Olympia typewriter, stencilled and cyclostyled on campus, the journal's pages were collated in the homes of the editors by students bribed with coffee, tea and chocolate cake, and bound by the neat fingers of children at the request of their editor-parents. In designing a cover for that first issue, boards in the 'political party' colours of green, blue and red were avoided , and plain whiteboard selected instead, on which the lettering of the magazine title and our elegant 'Hansa' logo were arranged in black by Mr Godamunne. Successive issues sported different coloured backgrounds. From these tentative beginnings grew the journal which enjoyed a 15-year initial run, during which it featured some of the best and most significant creative and critical writing in English to appear in post-Independence Sri Lanka. From the start the magazine was determinedly independent, seeking no sponsorship or support other than from those who read and contributed to it.

Fortunately, such support was forthcoming, and three issues were published before the departure from Sri Lanka of two of its editors, Yasmine Gooneratne and Shelagh Anghie, forced temporary cessation of publication. Two more issues followed, published in Australia. The last of these (which was issued in 1984), had a grey and black cover memorializing the race riots that had shaken Sri Lanka in 1983.

At the request of readers who wish to see copies of those first five issues of NEW CEYLON WRITING, we have published the texts in their entirety online. You will find them on our website: www.newceylonwriting under the title "Quintet". They contain the early work of many writers whose names are very well-known today nationally and internationally: among them four outstanding poets – Patrick Fernando, Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, Anne Ranasinghe and Jean Arasanayagam. You will also find there the complete text of Lakshmi de Silva's translation of Ediriwira Sarachchandra's play *Sinhabahu*, a selection of short plays by Ernest Macintyre, and an account by E.F.C. Ludowyk of the beginnings of the 'DramSoc'.

There's a great deal more. Please check out 'Quintet'.

We are proud that, by taking the journal online, we are using contemporary technology to bring the early writing of many of Sri Lanka's most distinguished writers into a new century.

In NEW CEYLON WRITING 7, we'd like to think you will find the best of the best. Reviews of play productions and novels, creative new poetry, unforgettable stories, memorials of past times, challenges for the future, quirky humour, unexpected visual pleasures … It's all here. Some familiar names from the magazine's past, many new exceptional talents, but always, and consistently, a steady focus on quality

Welcome to 2018!

# CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

**CHITRA KUMARI ABEYKONE** (‘*Memories of Teldeniya’, p. 32*) is a teacher of English who has worked in both government and private sectors teaching the local OL and Edexcel OL syllabi since 1972. She was educated at Good Shepherd Convent, Kandy, and lives in Sri Lanka.

**JEAN ARASANAYAGAM** (‘*Dutch Bay I*’, *p.10)* is a Sri Lankan writer in English of fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry and plays. She deals with diverse themes in relation to her identity and life. She focuses on inheritance and identity, ethnicity, gender, travel, personal relationships, war and violence. Her work has been widely published and translated in Sri Lanka and abroad and has received several local and international awards.

**LAKSHMAN ATTYGALLE** makes sure that NEW CEYLON WRITING’s computers are functional and operative.

**MEGHANA BAHAR** is an intersectional feminist, human rights activist and communications strategist with over 18 years’ experience working in the global intersections of gender, religion, health and media. Her academic background is in the fields of postmodern/postcolonial literature, mainly writings of coloured women authors, and film, particularly novels into films. She is accessible on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as @playwithcloud, and is a member of the Editorial Board of NEW CEYLON WRITING.

**DR DEVIKA BRENDON** *(* review of Cold Theatre 7’s innovative production of Reginald Rose’s play *Twelve Angry Men*, p. 79; review of Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Golden House*, p.82 ) is an academic, teacher, reviewer and creative writer. Her poetry and short stories have been published in academic and literary journals in Sri Lanka, Australia, India and Italy. She founded the ‘English Only’ Teaching Academy in 2001, and teaches language and literature to students studying the O-Level and A-Level syllabus in Sri Lanka and Australia. She is a member of the Editorial Board of NEW CEYLON WRITING.

**DAS, J.P.** *(“Community”, p. 65*). Our Guest Author (described in *Wikipedia* as ‘polumetis ‘ (Greek,’ the many-minded’) is a distinguished story writer from Orissa, India. Dr Das shares with us a masterpiece of understatement that will resonate with many readers of our region.

**DR LAKSHMI DE SILVA**. Retired Senior Lecturer, Department of English, University of Kelaniya. Her work in translation includes English versions of Martin Wickremasinghe's *Ape Gama* and *Gamperaliya*, and E R Sarachchandra's *Maname* and *Sinhabahu*. She is a member of the Editorial Board of NEW CEYLON WRITING.

**DE SILVA, DR NISANSA** (*'To Ask or Not to Ask', p. 59*) teaches at the University of Moratuwa.

**ISURU EPASINGHE** is a creative visualizer who has contributed his talents to NEW CEYLON WRITING this year. He lives and works in Colombo.

**BASIL FERNANDO** (*The Mighty Migrant', p. 9*) W.J. Basil Fernando is a Sri Lankan jurist, author, poet, human rights activist, editor of *Article 2* and *Ethics in Action*, and a prolific writer. He was educated at St. Anthony's College, Wattala and St. Benedict's College, Kotahena. His books include *Human Rights & Spirituality: Dialogue of Religions on Human Rights*, and *Power vs. Conscience*.

**PALITHA GANEWATTA** (*The Scent of Kinship*, reviewed *p.71* is an Australian Sri Lankan living in Sydney, and currently working in the Australian Quarantine Service. He is a broadcaster/journalist on the Sinhala program of SBS Radio. The author of two collections of Sinhala poems and a novel, he translated a selection of Anton Chekhov's short stories from the original Russian into Sinhala in 2004.

**SAM GAYATHRI** ('*Confessions of a Bookaholic', p.44*) is an avid reader who loves to write about anything and everything, and lives in a world of fictional characters away from reality. He is also a post graduate student currently working on morbid theories.

**ROSANNE GOMEZ** (*'Change', p.11*) is Sri Lankan and a graduate of the University of London with Honours in English Literature. Her professional life has been spent as a teacher and lecturer. She has travelled widely and is interested in the development of the poetry of many countries with which she is familiar. Her own poetry has been published in Sri Lanka and in the UK – one of her poems won a prize in a William Blake memorial competition.

**EMERITUS PROFESSOR YASMINE GOONERATNE** ('*Fact, Fiction, or Fairy Tale?', p.43*). Her last-published novel, *The Sweet and Simple Kind*, was shortlisted for the 2008 Dublin International IMPAC Literary Award; and also (like the three that preceded it) for the Commonwealth Writers Prize. A fifth novel, titled *Rannygazoo: Or, The Mystery of the Missing Manuscript*, was published online in 2015. In 1990 Professor Gooneratne received the Order of Australia for her contribution to literature and education. She was the first Patron of the Galle Literary Festival, and has been the Patron of the Jane Austen Society

of Australia since 1990. She is a member of the Editorial Board of NEW CEYLON WRITING, directs Guardian Angels (a literary editing service based in Colombo) and is a member of the English Writers Cooperative of Sri Lanka (EWC).

**AMEENA HUSSEIN** (**'***Getting Married (The Muslim Way)', p.27*) is a writer of fiction, and is co-publisher with Samantha (Sam) Perera of Perera Hussein Publishing, Colombo.

**DHARSHINI INDRASOMA** ('*Of Marriages and Men', p.8*) has been writing poetry since childhood. Two of her poems have been published by NEW CEYLON WRITING ("Violence" in 1984 and "Change" in 2016). Professionally she is an Associate Member and Chartered Global Management Accountant (ACMA/CGMA) of the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants-UK.

**HIMANGI JAYASUNDERA** (*'Saffron Robes',* p. 7) enjoys playing with words, concepts and visuals. She has a background in journalism and law, is based in Colombo, and travels often to different parts of the island on work. These travels often inspire her scribbles.

**HUGH KARUNANAYAKE** ('*Remembering Valentine Vamadevan', p.90*) is a founder member of CSA (the Ceylon Society of Australia), and lives in Sydney.

**FATHIMA RAMEEZ** ('*Grandpa*', *p. 12*) is a teacher of English in an international school who enjoys reading, especially short stories and fairy tales, and loves writing stories of her own. Her main passion however is art, for which she draws inspiration from many places such as music, books and dreams.

**RIA RAMEEZ** (*'Shadow Play', p.2*) lives in Colombo, Sri Lanka. She is a staff writer at Roar.lk and has long dreamed of being a published author. A feminist, dreamer, and avid reader, she has so far restricted herself to writing whimsical little stories for her younger siblings. However, she does occasionally make brief forays into poetry and fiction too. She hasn't quite found her voice yet, but she hopes to do so soon. Ria likes animals, children's stories and quiet moments.

**FAITH RATNAYAKE** was born in Britain. A member of the Editorial Board of NEW CEYLON WRITING, she is an environmentalist, interested in indigenous medicine, cultivation and healing techniques. She is the author of *Different Accents and Mental Movies* (winner of a State Literary Award in 2006), and *Beyond the Horizon . The Life and Times of Desamanya Dr Abdul Majeed Mohamed Sahabdeen* (2012 ).

**CHRIS REZEL** (*'Devilish Distractions', p. 15*) was formerly a reporter on the *Ceylon Daily News.* He currently lives in Australia.

**SHARON RUNDLE** (review of Channa Wickremesekera's novella *Asylum (p.* 73), teaches at the University of Technology, Sydney. Dr Rundle has expertise in World Literatures, and has co-edited with Professor Meenakshi Bharat an anthology of short stories, *Only Connect*, short fiction about Technology and Us from Australia and the Indian subcontinent.

**SHIREEN SENADHIRA** (*'A Female Heritage', p.55*) is a freelance writer to many magazines and newspapers including *Lanka Woman, Loris, Sunday Funtimes, Montage* and *Mosaic* sections of *Ceylon Today* and *Sunday Observer*. She published a debut collection of stories and poems (Colombo 2007) and a collection of essays (Colombo 2016). She designed the 'hansa' on the cover of NEW CEYLON WRITING's new online series. (2016, 2017). She is a member of both the Wadiya Group of Writers in Colombo and the English Writers Cooperative of Sri Lanka.

**GAMINI SENEVIRATNE** ('*A Conversation Scarcely Begun', p.5*) was educated at Royal College, Colombo, and read for an Honours degree in English at the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya before joining the Sri Lanka Administrative Service (formerly the C.C.S.). He has published five collections of poems privately, and his poems have been included in several anthologies, among them *Twelve Poems for Justin Deraniyagala*, ed. Lakdasa Wikkramasinha (1971), *An Anthology of SAARC Writing* (2004),*Young Commonwealth Poets*, (London 1964) and *New Voices of the Commonwealth* (London 1967). He retired from the Sri Lanka Administrative Service as Chairman of the Coconut Development Authority, and is a frequent contributor to national newspapers.

**SUMITHREI SIVAPALAN** (*'In a Refugee Camp', p.3*) was educated at Holy Family Convent and Vembadi Girls' High School, Jaffna. She is currently in her first year at the University of Colombo, where she is reading for a B.A. degree, with English, Socology and International Relations as her subjects. Her interests include directing and acting in plays. She has published (privately) a book of poems in English.

**SHARON STEPHEN's** fascination with words started early and gained in intensity with her exploration of other fields. A CIM (UK) and LCCIIQ-qualified marketer and certified English teacher, she blends creativity with attention to detail, and wages a continual war on grammatical errors. Experience in training and technical writing honed her skills in simplifying complex ideas for a variety of audiences. When she's not dreaming up (sometimes literally) documentary scripts and other content for clients, she is an emcee for corporate events, absorbing new concepts from every industry she works with. On occasion, her thoughts about the world coalesce into a poem. She is a member of NEW CEYLON WRITING's Editorial Board.

**ROHAN TITUS** (‘*Marmalade*’. *p.49*) was born in Colombo and is a member of Mensa, a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, and a career diplomat in the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. He holds a Bachelor of Laws degree from Bond University and a Master of Arts (Foreign Affairs & Trade) from Monash University in Australia. Prior to joining the Foreign Service, Rohan was Editor-in-Chief of Bond University’s student newspaper, a Member of the Academic Senate, Secretary of the Student Union, Captain of the Law School’s Moot Court team and a member of the University’s Debating team. His most recent publications include “Peace Finding, Peace Monitoring and Peace-keeping: Lessons from the Truce Monitoring Group” in *Without a Gun: Australia’s Experiences Monitoring* Peace in Bougainville, 1997-2001, eds Monica Wehner and Donald Denoon, Pandanus Books, Canberra, 2001. He is a member of the Editorial Board of NEW CEYLON WRITING.

**NELEISHA WEERASINGHE** (‘*Things Familiar I* and *II*’, ‘*Fresh Fields’, pp.1, 59, 89*) is a largely self-taught artist from Sri Lanka who specializes in contemporary landscapes and animal art. Her current body of work mainly comprises two distinct styles, one being intricate and expressive line art work, the other a more spontaneous and brisk approach with texture.

**MAITHREE WICKREMESINGHE** (*‘ Building Bridges’, p.38).* Professor Wickremesinghe heads the Department of English at the University of Kelaniya.

**ED WRIGHT** (*‘Thaththa is a Bird Now’, p. 4*) is an Australian poet and author. He lives in Newcastle, Australia where he runs the independent writing school The Creative Word Shop. He visits Sri Lanka annually, and is the author of *When Sky Becomes the Space Inside Your Head*, a prize-winning novella, eight books of non-fiction, and reviews regularly for *The Australian*. The poem in this issue is about Dr Wright’s father-in-law, who was fond of his home in Kandana.

**SHAMEELA YOOSUF ALI (‘***My Soul is a Rain Forest’, p. 94***)** is a journalist, writer, researcher, artist and a bilingual poet. She speaks and writes about women’s empowerment, education, culture and art on various platforms. She is currently translating a Syrian novel into Tamil.

# QUINTET & HOW TO ACCESS IT

## JOURNAL ARCHIVES

The Editors take great pleasure in announcing that the first five printed issues of NEW CEYLON WRITING can now be downloaded in PDF format via the website:

***https://www.newceylonwriting.com/quintet***

**It can also be accessed through the direct link:**

***https://www.newceylonwriting.com/our-story***

We view this move as a crucial step towards preserving a valuable period of the Sri Lankan English literary memory reel.

Interested readers will find within the pages of the Quintet, the early work of many writers whose names are well-known today, nationally and internationally.

We hope and wish that NEW CEYLON WRITING will continue to provide a connection to that significant past, inspiring a new generation of writers to continue the tradition, adding to the burgeoning, rich landscape of English literature in Sri Lanka.

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***Things Familiar  I***

Neleisha Weerasinghe, Acrylic on paper

# *POEMS*

## Shadow Play

**Ria Rameez**

Tiptoe
Through the dark;
Fear-filled, angst-ridden, terror-gripped.
Shadows swoop and swirl,
Clutch at pajama-clad legs and small, bare feet,
Tug at the teddy grasped in a sweaty-palmed grip,
Pool in wide eyes,
Reach tentacled arms to gather sound effects -
Night sounds, fight sounds:
Crickets chirping, fridge humming, dog barking, pipes gurgling;
Chairs flying, hands slapping, heart bleeding, voice pleading.
Quietly now, quietly, the play has begun.
Don't sneeze, don't cough,
Wipe the tear, don't let it fall,
Don't trip, don't slip,
Check your steps, don't breathe at all.
Is that your heart you hear thudding like hoof-beats in your ear?
Still it.

Hold Teddy tightly to your chest and climb down,
One step, two steps - crouch
And watch through the banisters
The nightly shadow play.

The shadows roll crazily, their casters hidden from view,
Thrown against the wall;
Morphing, merging, madly lurching in a parody of dance.
Big shadow, small shadow, father shadow, mother shadow.
Father looms, a story book ogre come to life,
One hand wrenching her hair, or clutching her throat, or gripping her arm -
It's hard to tell, with shadows -
And the other swinging in a sadistic drumbeat -
*Thud, thud, thud, slap,*
Like a pestle pounding on a raw side of meat.
Mother's quiet cries (so as not to wake you) fill your ears,
And words (Bad Words) hit you in the face like thrown stones.

Keep still, hold back;

Don’t run to her like you are dying to or he’ll only hit harder.
You are too little by far to help her yet.
Just watch…for now.
Watch
And don’t turn away, don’t block the sounds,
Bite down on your knuckles,
Swallow your screams, your fears,
And feel them settle down against your crashing heart.
Leave them there to go septic
Until you grow up and out of this helplessness
And they can bleed clean.

Till then, all you can do is crouch, night after night
And watch the shadow play.

## In A Refugee Camp

**Sumithreyi Sivapalan**

In a refugee camp

A little girl cries

Thinking of her baby doll

Lost

When her playhouse shattered.

Her mother

Rocks her to sleep,

Grieving for another baby

Buried

# Thaththa is a Bird Now

for K.

**Ed Wright**

I thought I saw you
briefly
in the garden
through the doorway.

It was wet and we had just
scattered  your ashes in the Kelani river
that morning.

The fan was slapping the thick air,
and you were ruffling your feathers,
you wore black with three stripes of muted blue.

You seemed at home,
unbothered by the squeals of your grandchildren
you perched at a teasing remove, like a koan,
and I thought, if not a spectacular choice
for a new life,
it was nonetheless a wise one.

Small gardens bring great contentment,
the wild is made familiar,
our ignorance seems less bleak.
There is bread on the wall
to steal from the ***lena****,
and nothing in the shadows
to hunt you.

Was it you whistling along
to the warm tears
of your remembrance,
thinking
how good it is to belong,
better still

to  belong with wings?

* ***lena*** squirrel (Sinh.)

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## A Conversation Scarcely Begun

**Gamini Seneviratne**

And so a time will come for disputations
between friends. Luminous and dark
the sky, the stars silent. You
will bristle and I'll grow hot.
Harassment without an end, you are right.
Nothing but a few syllables skirting
questions. Have I burned
your fingers? What answers
could an idiot propose? I am scalded
from top to toe. Between friends
disputations occur. The merest
light cinders in the wind and lovers flare.
Let my will command
my blood to lie asleep.

II

Divide my sleep into waking and total rest,
be to me then as lover and as spouse.
May the day too bring no mediation
of words, may we exchange that
whatever it is we sense, may your heartbeat be
as it beat when last we met.
May no words despoil nor other articulations
scatter debris in our hair.
The wormwood, yes, might tint our tongue,
flavoured with ambiguities.

III

May I not after all these years reclaim
my right to dream? I think I may.
You've turned  up too
in the midst of sleep, perhaps you'd like to know
what happened.  Let us pass
that up, dreams being what they are
Let it suffice that it broke my sleep and even so
whatever they were are easier to live with
than the nightmare of these days, these deaths.
Unclear, unspoken dream,
may it remain
between us as  parapets
link neighbours and reticences friends.

# Saffron Robes

**Himangi Jayasundera**

I dreamed 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

***maîtri* or** Mettā. A Sanskrit word meaning benevolence, loving-kindness, friendliness, amity, good will, and active interest in others. It is the first of the four sublime states and one of the ten pāramīs of the Theravāda school of Buddhism.

## Of Marriages and Men

**Dharshini Indrasoma**

Women talk
Of how within walls
their marriages fail

Alcohol addiction
Pornography addiction
Physical abuse
Mental abuse
Philanderer
Controller
You name it
reasons galore

Women talk
Of why they stay
within marriages trapped

Society demands
Children's needs
No means to live
Legal complications
Afraid of change
Too afraid to go
Not strong enough
to walk away

God created they say
man in his own image
And marriages they say
are made in heaven!

# The Mighty Migrant

**Basil Fernando**

A great reservoir is half empty
The rain is very much expected.
Beyond its borders is the forest
Dwelling place of peacocks, wild pigs
And elephants.

In front of the reservoir is an electrified fence
To prevent elephants roaming into the roadway.
Just behind the fence
Sits a youthful elephant.

A passing vehicle stops to admire
And to feed the great animal.
There are a few vendors
Selling what the elephant
Likes to eat, baby corn, mangoes, bananas
Pineapples and water melon.

"This elephant do not like wood apples,"
Said a youthful vendor
"How long has this fellow been here?"
Asked a passer by,
"Four years," replied the youth.
"Does he go away at night?"
"No, he never leaves this place."

There must be some story behind
Its leaving the herd and the forest.
Like so many youth in the country
It too is a migrant venturing beyond
Fixed borders.

# Dutch Bay 1

**Jean Arasanayagam**

I pass like a shadow along the straight road
invisible to probing eyes, anonymous, unnoticed
until I reach the peaceful haven, confront that tranquil bay
no one perceives that I keep metamorphosing
from dolphin to cormorant or from bird
to plant in this tranquil landscape where the
speechless waters of the bay and the still tongues
of rippling waves leave no echoes of human
voices from the past,

here, there are no warring vessels, anchored
to disgorge their human cargoes of brine-
soaked flesh, soon their sun-bleached beards

their untrimmed whiskers, wearing those frayed
flax and linen wraps will pace through this quiet landscape,
quaff their coconut wine, grill fish flavoured
with pungent herbs, their roving eyes apportioning
out territory, imposing stringent laws upon the populace,
their minds crowding with thoughts of revenues, cinnamon,
pepper, dye root, gems, elephants, endless lists
in compilations of trade and wealth acquisition,
settling in, erecting fortresses in medieval style
the maritime buccaneers and adventurers from
the far ends of the earth,

we pace the ruined ramparts,
gaze at the bay, where no longer sailing
ships are anchored,
the new sports are non-aggressive,
kite-surfing, dolphin watching, boating,
crossing over in catamarans
to the spit of land that divides the bay from
the sea

but we savour the same food of centuries past,
the sizzling prawns, curling circles of squid,
soft-shelled pink crabs fresh from the evening
catch fill our plates.

I gaze out at the bay, the wind whipping strands

of hair into my eyes which capture a static
landscape that preserves the unchanging
colours of ocean, sky, mangroves blotting out the
history vanquished by time,
no thud of boots echoing in the dark,
no figures looming up through the shadows,
no guttural speech of an unknown language
disturb the night,
close my eyes,
I sleep a dreamless sleep.

*Kalpentyn*

## Change

**Rosanne Gomez**

The piano sang with joy beneath her fingers,
birthday present from an indulgent father;
then wept a fortissimo of grief
for the boy she loved,
lost in an accident.
Later, there was the slow steady largo
of another love, generously offered.

Children came. They thumped it
with sticky, jammy fingers,
and danced to the tunes she
played for them, whilst outside
birds sang in the jasmine-scented garden.

All too soon they were singing
rude Youth Club songs, rocking
rolling and jiving around the piano.
Laughter died away and they left.
Then it sang of loneliness and loss,
and yet of love sustained till the
sad quiet fugue of death drew to a close.
The house was empty and the piano stilled.

Now we return to the sealed silence
of air-conditioned apartments,
far above the trees and birdsong;
yet out there, in the home of a friend,
the piano sings a joyful ritornello.

# *STORIES*

**GRANDPA**

Fathima Rameez

The monsoon rains had come down, washing the world and bringing new life. From the trees, a hidden coucal sounded its deep-throated call. The blood red hibiscus blossoms looked like scattered rubies in the distance. Everything was bursting with energy and pulsing with hidden life, as if the world itself had been reborn. Everything, that is, except me.

I remember nothing of the car ride to the bus stop. I stared out of the window, looking at everything and seeing nothing. From time to time my mother would squeeze my hand and ask me something. Was I all right? Was I hungry? Did I want a drink of water? The bus stop was crowded with beggars, street hawkers and labourers all going about their everyday lives. I followed my parents in a daze. The bus smelled of sweat and cigarette smoke mixed with the heady smell of incense. I sat in the front while my parents took the seat behind me.

Resting my head on the cool window pane I felt the bus lurch forward and start its one-day journey across the country. I was travelling all the way from Colombo in the west to Ampara in the east to say goodbye to Grandpa. When my grandfather went on that epic journey in search of heaven, no one expected it. True, he was old. But he was also as hale and hearty as any man half his age. I remember how when I was a little, he taught me to fly. He would pick me up and toss me into the air without so much as breaking a sweat while my parents used to puff and pant and say I was getting too big to be carried. And when he threw me, instead of falling down, like I thought I would, I flew. I know, because I could feel the wind in my hair and the heat of the sun on my face and see nothing but the wide empty sky. I couldn't fly for long. I always came down to earth in seconds. But then as the world goes, all good things are gone too soon. Like Grandpa.

The bus rumbled on. I didn't eat, I didn't speak, I didn't cry. I stared out of the window, watching the landscape change from the congested roads of the city to the green and yellow fields of the country. Around mid day, the bus made a stop to pick up more passengers. A little boy and his father were among them. The boy scrambled into the seat next to me. He was very red in the face and clutched a book in his pudgy hands. *Dalambu pancha* it said across the cover. After about thirty minutes of fidgeting and rustling, I felt a meek tap on my shoulder. He held out a packet of *Tipi Tip.*

"Take one," he said in Sinhala. I shook my head but thanked him all the same. My answer didn't seem to please him however. The packet rustled in my face.

"Take one," he said again. I sighed and took a pale yellow star. The boy smiled happily.

"Ammi said sharing is good," he explained. I nodded.

"Where are you going?"

"Ampara." That seemed to excite him.

"I'm going there too! To see Ammi."

"Oh," I said sadly, "I'm going to see my − my grandfather."

"What's he like, your grandfather?" the boy asked. For the first time, I really looked at the person next to me. He could not have been more than eight or nine, with a friendly face and untidy hair. Maybe it was the fact that he was a child and unlike grownups, he wouldn't judge me. He wouldn't tell me that I never really learned to fly. So I told him all about my grandfather; how he used to take me for walks along the paddy fields; how he could make the most delicious *murukku* in the world; how he laughed; how he told me stories; how he lived; how he loved. In turn, the little boy told me all about his mother; how she insisted on sharing; how she didn't like when he blew spit bubbles; how she didn't like mango *achcharu*.

"I would like to meet your grandfather," he said. "He sounds nice. And I want to taste his *murukku*. I love *murukku*."

"You can't," I said in a choked voice. "He's dead."

The boy looked up at me. He crunched a yellow star. "Ammi's dead too."

I stared at him. "But you said you were going to see her. You said she told you to share and – and …"

He didn't seem to understand my confusion.

"We used to live in Ampara. That's where Ammi died. Then Thaththi and I came to Colombo, but we haven't forgotten Ammi. We go to see her every *Poya* day." He crushed the empty packet and stuffed it into his pocket. "Thaththi says that I should never say Ammi is not here. He says that if I'm here and he's here, then she's here too. We still love Ammi even though she is dead. You can love dead people, can't you?" I swallowed and turned away so that he wouldn't see my tears.

"Yes," I said. "We can."

I never saw that little boy again. But I will never forget him. In that journey of one day, he taught me what most people take a lifetime to learn. He taught me that love is very powerful. It took me some time to start living again, but instead of seeing empty places where Grandpa should be, I found him in more places than I could count – the letters he had written to me when I was learning to read, the worn old slippers that sat on the shoe rack undisturbed, the smell of *murukku* frying. In time I came to realize the wisdom in the little boy's words: Grandpa may be gone but as long as I was living he was too.

**DEVILISH DISTRACTIONS**

Chris Rezel

DISTANT drumming forces the day to dance to its rhythm. It rises beyond the hills, fills the heavens, splinters silence, dispels thought.

The blank page stares at me accusingly. Not a meaningful sentence since morning.

The familiar swish of a sarong before Sammy places my 10 o'clock tea on the table.

"The drumming announces Asoka's *tovil*[1]," he says. "It will go on all day long." He adds: "All this devil madness when there's work on the estate. Asoka should be plucking coconuts. I still haven't found a replacement."

Writing suspended. I cover the typewriter and go into the courtyard. I break off a temple flower[2] and breathe in its syrupy fragrance. I crouch for a closer look at red ants spilling from beneath a bush. Scouts run ahead, followed by advance troops, the formation zigzagging to silent commands. Midway, crowded in by soldiers, comes the large queen, sluggish, pushed along, almost carried. Then workers hoisting pupae, paper-white placards. At the tail end a group labours with part of a beetle, a feast not to be left behind.

The previous week an eagle circling Nelumwewa may have seen something similar. Binocular vision would have spotted me, standing by the town's main road, opposite Flower Drum Hotel, the Chinese eatery that serves stray dog for beef. That's what rivals claim. Shortly three vans roll up, one behind the other, music blaring, stopping to say the local MP has come to address a rally. A sea of green shirts and saris follows, there's a shouting of slogans, a hoisting of placards. Inching along is an open-top jeep, with a plump, smiling,

[1] Exorcism ceremony.
[2] Frangipani.

heavily-garlanded man sitting beside the driver, minders swarming around. Bringing up the rear is a bus with people throwing fliers about that list the MP's good deeds.

"The *tovil*…what time does it start?"

"After dark."

Sammy is standing at the counter alongside the back-veranda sink. He's making string hoppers for lunch, pressing steamed rice flour through a hand-held mould and twirling coils of fine noodles onto small, round, wicker frames for re-steaming.

"I'll be going. Join me."

Sammy seems horrified.

"Such places must be avoided."

"Why?"

"They attract evil."

"How far is Asoka's home?"

He calculates, looking at the rafters. "Maybe an hour's walk."

"I'll ask Kamal."

Kamal and I walk on a ridge through a lime-green field of young rice. Two crows, yelling curses, flap onto a scarecrow's fluttering arms, undeterred by ragged coat and pants, or chalked-on face on a soot-blackened clay cooking pot. We startle an egret that takes off in a clutter of porcelain-white. It soon streamlines, wings striking rhythm, squeezing its neck into a reversed S, trailing stick-like legs.

We head for a cluster of betel-nut palms[3], their slender trunks rising sixty feet to fountain in a spray of fronds. All around, distant hills hold up heavy clouds.

The drumming has got louder when Kamal says some believe envious persons have cast a spell on Asoka. Others scoff at the claim. They believe his disturbed mind is due to the loss of Sonali.

"Asoka and Sonali were close as children. Their parents wanted the families joined in marriage. After the insurgency, in the years that Sonali was in hiding, Asoka's parents urged him to marry another girl. He refused. In spite of that, they began a search for a new bride. That upset Sonali's mother. So when her daughter finally showed up, she in turn started looking for a different son-in-law. The talk is, there's another man now. That's why Asoka's lost his senses."

He pauses to shoo away a stray dog that wants to follow us.

"Up-country villagers are foolish. In the South, instead of throwing money away on a *tovil*, people will first carry out a *kochchi*[4] test, a sure way to find out if a person is pretending. You hold the person down and squeeze the chilli pod into his eyes. A truly possessed person doesn't react."

I wince at the suggestion.

"What are you talking about, Kamal? Anyone would yell out, man, devil or god."

Walking alongside a burial ground I lament the fallen Horlicks' bottle spilling paper flowers onto a grave. Close by, wilting wreaths deck a mound of turned soil, edges marked with upright sticks strung with coir rope and *gok-kola*[5] streamers. Further on an ellipse of ash settles down where almost-burned logs smoulder.

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[3]*Areca catechu.*
[4]A fiery chili.
[5]Young coconut leaves stripped lengthwise.

Kamal quickens his pace to get to the footpath's outermost edge.

"Funeral ash is evil. Only *pirith*[6]-water purifies it."

On the edge of the cemetery, surrounded by cared-for tree ferns, is an open-sided mausoleum with pillars and an arched roof, the structure fronted by two large urns. Within is a man's uneven statue in *Ariya Sinhala* suit[7], as tall as I am, skin tone more Caucasian. Shiny-black hair, eyes, and eyebrows sit unnaturally.

"He owned a rice mill," Kamal says, turning aside to spit contemptuously.

I fail to check my dull response.

"Must have been very rich."

He grabs the opportunity. "Another capitalist. The sweat of others

greased his cart."

I stay silent, as if choked, annoyed with myself for having given him a chance to flaunt his JVP[8] credentials once again. I've learned he was just a porter for some insurgents. One day I'll tell him that.

The day is turning monochrome when a shower of munias[9] patter into a tree, joining kin for the pre-roost sing-along, the shrill tumult a factory at full rush.

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[6] Water consecrated during an elaborate Buddhist ritual.
[7]Formal dress of Sri Lanka males - a white, hip-length, long-sleeved tunic worn with a white sarong.
[8]*Janathā Vimukthi Peramuṇa,* a Communist and Marxist-Leninist party, formed in 1965, better known by its English initials.
[9]Small birds of the finch family.

Deafening drumming guides us to the home. . Men, women and children are sitting on mats on forecourt grass, facing a veranda. Behind them are tiers of older folk, on benches and chairs.

At one end, lit by flaming torches, is a box-shaped altar of woven palm leaf. It sits on the top of a scaffolding of poles, the structure trimmed with banana pith and *gok-kola.* Drummers and dancers stand beside it.

In the shadows, on the yard's outer boundary, younger men and boys have gathered, some settled on the low branches of surrounding trees.

A Petromax lamp hanging from the rafters of the front veranda throws a harsh light on a group seated on the raised floor below, their feet on the entrance steps. Among them, supported by men on either side, is a huddled form under a white sheet – undoubtedly the '*possessed*' Asoka.

A dog sniffs my shoes as I stand undecided. Then an elderly man hurriedly approaches, along with a boy carrying a chair. Kamal introduces him as Asoka's father. I bring my palms together in greetings.

There are murmurs of '*Sudu mahatheya*[10]*'* as the chair is set down beside a bedstead with coconut-fibre-rope webbing in place of a mattress, on which elderly men are seated. Asoka's father calls over a youth who is handing out glasses of black tea. I accept, brushing aside recollections of the scanty rinsing of drinking glasses at Mulhamy's *kade*[11]. I am glad of the bitter sip that immediately dehydrates my tongue, then douses it with sugary sweetness.

[10]The white gentleman.
[11]Café.

"Please ask if you need anything," the father says, raising his voice over the drumming. "I must leave now. There's much to do."

Kamal too takes leave, setting out for the shadows at the back. I nod warmly at my neighbour on the bed, a weathered elderly man smoking a pungent cheroot. The *beedi* stings my nose.

"The ceremony only just began," he says, indicating a bare-chested man striking a drum with his open palms, his silver armlets flashing. The drummer half sits in mid-air, feet apart, knees bent, drum strapped around a white-sashed waist, propped against thighs.

The beat gives way to singing by men in white leggings and crimson tutus, feet and clinking castanets keeping time, jingling wrist and ankle bells joining the rhythm.

"Only now they invited the gods into the *mal yahanava*," the elderly man tells me, indicating the altar. He names the gods: Natha, Vishnu, Kataragama and Saman.

Worryingly, below the altar, its feet tied together, is a white rooster lying on its side.

An elderly singer steps forward and begins an energetic dance, his bare feet pounding the ground, the bells on his limbs jingling, the mirror-work ornaments on his head-dress and body dazzling with each twist and turn. He prances aggressively before the white-sheeted Asoka, then in front of the spread-out spectators, his eyes fierce, his lined face set, stopping occasionally to vigorously shake a cluster of leaves at cowering faces, forcing people back, creating more dancing space.

"*Goraka*[12]leaves," says my acquaintance. "The tree the devil lives in."

[12]*Garcinia gummi-gutta*.

A second drummer takes over, the beat is louder, faster. The dancer leaps and pirouettes, stamping powerfully, his head turning first this way, now that. He executes dizzying spins, twists and turns, scattering sweat. He tilts during his circuits, threatening at any moment to tumble. The spectators shrink back in ripples. Now, as if he had been electrocuted, he shakes spasmodically, his head jerking wildly from side to side, his hands flopping about lifelessly, his legs trembling.

The drumming softens, the pace lessens, the chanting grows louder. The dancer slows to the altered tempo, his legs stamping out an intricate pattern. The drumming flares, deafening, urgent, re-energizing the dancer. Slowdown again, measured pace, heightened chanting.

Tense eyes are glued on the dancer. He always seems about to misstep, falling in with the drum only at the last moment.

A younger dancer relieves the older man.

The shadows behind have turned rowdy with taunts.

"All a sham."

"Asoka needs the *kochchi* treatment."

"Old man! Sit down … otherwise your bald head will feel this *weralu*[13] seed!"

"Sonali's the devil."

" Women are always causing trouble."

[13] *Elaeocarpus serratus*; a small olive-like fruit.

The men on the bed grumble. “The youth of today … no respect for anything.”

“No-good loafers.”

There is a sudden loud tearing sound, and everyone turns around. It’s followed by hoots and laughter. At the back two boys dust themselves off amid a fallen branch.

Soon after that, I feel I need a break, the tea having had its usual effect. I walk a short distance among people coming and going, before leaving the footpath to elbow my way into a cluster of shrubs. I delve in deeper and am startled by noisy rustling. Two shadowy figures draw apart. One scurries off, the man’s distinctive bearing reminding me of the tailor at the bathing pond the day the two girls were bothering water snakes. A well-set man turns unhurriedly and leaves. I recognise Tilak, Sonali’s new husband to-be, pointed out to me by Upul a few days ago. He’s taking a chance being here. Asoka’s friends can turn on him as the cause of all the trouble.

The man on the bed says it’s almost time.

“Sharp at midnight the devil will dance.”

His head indicates the white-sheeted Asoka. I am assured by him that the *Gurunnansa*[14] is skilled in the mantras. He never fails to force the devil to dance. He is from the South. Luckily Asoka’s father had heard of the group’s visit to the region.

[14]Honorable teacher / principal (dancer).

Three drummers now combine to present a dizzying medley. Palms strike forcefully, creating a thunderous din, the stepped-up beat unrelenting, a throbbing concussion in the head. They play as one. Loudly, softly. They play individually. They come together, building-up, reaching crescendo, making ground and body reverberate.

The smell of gunpowder thickens the air, thrown by dancers to flare hand-held torches.

The crowd's turned edgy. Restive necks crane, some people stand despite shouted complaints.

"Sit! Sit!"

"Stop pushing!"

"Move over!"

*Gurunnansa* makes incredible leaps, faster pirouettes; firestorms devour chunks of night, illuminating startled faces. He makes high-speed passes before the crowd, wild and frenzied, sweat gleaming, hair dishevelled, a blur of spinning ornaments and flame. He is frenzied, enraged, wild.

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He picks up the rooster by its legs. Flips it carelessly over a shoulder, dances chanting towards the devil. He drops the desperately flapping bird on the devil.

The white-sheeted Asoka flinches. Then everyone's standing. Surging forward. Cutting off my view. I too stand. But it's only heads before me.

The men on the bed protest. "Sit! Sit! Everyone must see! We sacrificed a night in order to see this!"

Slowly, reluctantly, order returns. People sit in ones and twos, then entire rows. Asoka's now dancing, as frenzied as *Gurunnanse.* The elderly dancer leads him into energetic and complex moves. I catch snatches of talk between them.

"Demon, there's blood for you here, and tasty food … Leave this man."

"What about arrack?"

"Yes, demon … As much as you want … fresh blood too … but leave …"

"You want to trick me!"

"Not so, demon. A feast's ready. The tastiest food … and blood … your favourite!"

A sudden, piercing yell and everyone's on their feet again. They surge forward. I elbow my way to the front. The elderly dancer is being carried away, his body shuddering violently, his head flapping from side to side.

Torchlight tunnels through night's coalface. Four men and two teenage boys have joined us, they are heading home too. One moment we are talking and laughing loudly, too loudly, alerting the darkness to our presence. The next everyone's silent, perhaps in respect for the burial grounds and the murky headstones.

A shoulder nudges mine, we're crowding each other.

A reassuring voice cracks the silence, rephrasing earlier ridicule.

"Sham … from beginning to end! That's what it was."

Kamal clears his throat. "What did you expect? They are foolish people. Even Karl Marx said gods and devils are a moneymaking scam."

"True enough, even Lord Buddha never mentioned devils," says a youth. . "He never spoke about otherworldly beings. He taught that Mara, the demon who tried to tempt the Buddha, was not a devil. He's just an idea, so that we can discuss evil, those feelings that obstruct the search for truth."

Kamal refuses to be sidelined. "Only revolution will take people out of ignorance."

Kamal and I part at Bungalow Hill, the rest having gone their way earlier.

As the key gropes for the keyhole, a weak light behind frosted panes brightens. Sammy meets me in the hall, lantern held waist-high, throwing weird shadows on his face.

"All went well?"

"I suppose so. The demon danced. I'm told that means he was expelled. But I didn't see much at the end. People were disorderly. After the demon was banished, the chief dancer collapsed. Asoka too collapsed. He was carried into his home."

"Is there anything you may need? Tea, perhaps?"

"No. I must get some sleep before daylight.

I wash and head for the bed, glancing into the next room where the dimmed hurricane lantern on the dining table outlines Sammy lying on a mat against the far wall, his noisy just short of snoring.

Weariness delights in the bed's welcome. But my thoughts drum feverishly. There are so many stories to tell. The visiting agent arrives in seven days' time; replanting should begin; the weeding of the Cadju Block must be checked; Kamal wants to make Marxists of everyone; jail and third-degree have unhinged him; it must be 2am; Jessie'll be asleep in a frigid London; those men in the bushes … I certainly surprised −

Far away, hoarse, strangled cries, agitated thrashing. It gets louder, closer, more urgent. I'm underwater, desperate for air. The choking and struggling builds up. It's happening on the surface. I kick to ascend. Slow going. Too, too slow. Makes me frantic. There's chaos somewhere. Scuffling, gasps, gurgling. The dining room! That's where. Someone's being throttled! A throaty "Sir! … Sir! … Sir! …"

My shouts are stillborn. My voice has fled. Grab the club! Flee! But 10,000 volts of trembling fear holds me rigid.

"Sam-me-eee!" I hear my voice now. Broken up.

It's Sammy pleading. "Sir! Sir!"

Club in hand I rush out, crash into a body. I'm shouting.

"What…? What is it?"

My palm strikes out, connects with a face.

"Don't hit, Sir. Don't hit." Sammy wards off further blows.

"*Maha Sohona*[15], sir! He was strangling me!"

Terror deflates like a pricked balloon. I raise the lantern's wick, darkness retreats, but not accelerated heart and breathing.

"Are you mad!" I'm still shouting, shamed by a loss of control, horrified by my own panic

"Maha Sohona, sir. He must have followed you."

Sammy massages his neck.

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[15]The great cemetery devil, the most feared of Sri Lanka's many demons.

# *ESSAYS & ARTICLES*

## GETTING MARRIED (THE MUSLIM WAY)

Ameena Hussein

When I was a child, a wedding in the family was a time of excitement, fun, splendour and ceremony. My sister and I, being the youngest in the extended family for the longest time, were co-opted to be flower girls not only for the weddings of my young aunts and older cousins, but also for my great-aunt's cook and my grandmother's young charges when it was time for them to get married. Influenced by all the pomp and ceremony, we played 'getting married' as children, using a bed sheet that doubled up as a veil, a sari belonging to my mother as the wedding dress, and our beds as our thrones. The hapless bridegroom would be the polygamous toy rabbit who was serially married, not just to us, but to our dolls as well. It was fun, and we were innocent.

Like any other wedding, the Muslim wedding is an extremely happy event, full of laughter and joy and happiness, excitement and preparation, food and trousseaux and new clothes, shoes, jewellery and everything else that goes with it. It is a month of visiting relatives, it is a fortnight of lead-up, it is a week of post-marriage celebrations, and then the newly married couple settle into married life.

But as I grew older, I began to see a different side.

There is a startling difference between a Muslim woman and any other Sri Lankan woman who gets married. The Muslim woman never signs her certificate. She is not a party to her contract of marriage. Instead, it is her father or a 'guardian' (*wali*) who signs a marriage certificate with the man who will be her husband. In fact, there is no space or box on the marriage certificate for a Muslim bride to place her signature.

For me, this ceased to be acceptable. Why shouldn't a Muslim woman participate in her own marriage? Why, regardless of her actual age, is she reduced to the status of a minor, being obliged to have a guardian who gives her away in marriage? And since it is a legal

form of marriage in Sri Lanka, the state is complicit and endorses and approves this system, although it is a clear violation of the Muslim woman's rights as an adult person. Any other contract that is conducted in our normal daily life is generally signed by two or more concerned parties, and I am sure there are many Muslim women who have signed contracts, be it in relation to work, business or official government. We are aware that the contract once signed is binding and formal. We understand that should the contract be broken, it is the two parties that signed the contract who would be affected by its terms. And we realize that it is only the persons who signed the contract who can end it, whether by mutual agreement or disagreement; and if anyone is being sued for breach of contract, it can only be one of those who signed the contract. To hold a person responsible for a contract they did not sign, would be fundamentally flawed. Ask any lawyer. It will not hold water.

So why does this same simple logic not apply to a Muslim marriage? And once again it begs the question: why can't a Muslim woman sign her own marriage certificate? Why does a male guardian have to sign on her behalf? And why is she responsible for a contract she has not signed? In doing research for this article, I realized that the role of the male guardian or *wali* in a marriage does not exist in the Quran, the holy book of Islam. It is rife, however, in the Hadith, which were written long after the Holy Prophet's death, and record traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, revered and received as a major source of religious law and moral guidance, second only to the authority of the Qurʾān.

Shall we examine what the Quran says about marriage? I have listed the relevant verses at the end of this article, but shall paraphrase their essence here. This is what the Holy Quran says about marriage:

* Men cannot marry idolator women, and women cannot marry idolator men.

*Men cannot marry their step-mothers, even if such step-mothers are no longer married to their fathers.

* Incest is prohibited.

* Men cannot marry women who are already married, unless they are running away from their idolator husbands.

* Men must pay a dowry to a woman upon marriage.

* A Muslim man can marry a Muslim slave woman, but he has to ask permission from the slave woman's guardian and pay her a dowry before he marries her. Marrying a slave is to be resorted to, however, only if a man cannot marry a free woman.

* Those who are single are encouraged to get married.

* Spouses and children should be a source of joy to one another. God created spouses and He has placed love and care in their hearts towards each other in order to establish tranquility and contentment in their relationship.

* Muslim men may marry Jewish and Christian women provided that they pay a dowry to the women they marry.

It becomes clear fairly quickly that some regulations as laid down in the Holy Quran are completely irrelevant for us today. Slavery, thankfully, does not exist, and incest is illegal in every part of the world. Other regulations have become universal over time, and we must all hope that husbands and wives love and care for each other.

There are some regulations legal in other countries that are not legal for Muslims. Muslims are not permitted to marry their step-mothers (and I take the liberty to add 'step-fathers'), even if those individuals are no longer married to their parents, even though non-Muslims may do so, even in Sri Lanka.

But nowhere in the Holy Quran do I find stipulation of a *wali* with regard to marriage. The word *wali* does appear 35 times, but only in the spiritual context that it is Allah or God who is your *wali* or guardian. This means that the requirement of a *wali* or signing of the marriage contract by the *wali* on behalf of a Muslim girl /woman who is not a minor, is an innovation brought about by Hadiths. This would explain why, even within the Muslim schools of law, there is variation. In the Hanafi school, for example, a woman getting married does not need a *wali.* Would that be possible if a *wali* were stipulated in the Quran for a marriage? No, it would not.

Much of Muslim jurisprudence is, of course, based on the Hadiths. But since Hadiths were created by man around 150 or 200 years after the Holy Prophet's death, it means that such jurisprudence it is not divine. And therefore the practice of *walis* signing marriage certificates on behalf of their charges can be revised or reformed, to reflect the times in which we live.

The Sri Lankan Muslim marriage certificate needs to have a box that requires the signature of the woman getting married as much as it requires the signature of the Muslim man getting married. For how can a marriage contract between a man and a woman be valid when two men have signed it?

*Marriage: Verse 2.221; Verse 4. 22; Verse 4.23; Verse 4.24;Verse 4.25; Verse 24.32; Verse 25.74; Verse 30.21; Verse 5.5*

*Wali: Verses 2.107; 2.120; 2.257; 3.68; 3.122;4.45;4.119; 5.55; 6.14; 6.127;7.155; 7.196; 9.16; 9.74; 9.116; 12.101; 13.37; 16.63; 17.111; 18.17; 18.26;29.22; 32.4; 33.5; 33.17; 33.65; 34.41; 42.8; 42.9; 42.28; 42.31; 42.44;45.19; 48.22; 74.11*

(Based on 'A Marriage contract between two Men', in the *Sunday Times Plus*, 18 June 2017, p. 8)

# MEMORIES OF TELDENIYA

Chitra Kumari Abeykone

In the nineteen sixties, Teldeniya was one of the finest suburbs of Kandy, the city that is the hill-country capital of Sri Lanka. It consisted of a beautiful valley, surrounded by hills. A river wound its way through it, transforming the whole valley into a bowl of paddy fields and lush green vegetation. Apart from the beauty of this river, it is connected with a very important historical event. When the last king of Kandy, Sri Vikrama Rajasingha was captured from his hideout in Medamahanuwara, he was brought to the river's sandy bank to untie the creepers with which he had been bound. The bridge that was built at this point on the river was named 'WellaLihuThota', later known as 'Wellethota'.

The people of Teldeniya belonged to different castes and creeds, and worked in various occupations and trades. There was a temple in the district, a *kovil*, a mosque, and a chapel, ensuring that everyone enjoyed the freedom to choose and practise their own religious rites.

The town was rather small but it offered everything one could need or wish for: a bus stand, a post office, hospitals, schools, a police station, a court complex, a cinema theatre, a public library, a rest house and a clock tower. There were banks in the town, studios, sawmills, grinding mills, shops, a laundry and an undertaker's establishment. Behind the bus stand were public lavatories, for the convenience of long distance commuters. A bakery and several fruit stalls had been set up near this spacious bus stand. A petrol shed, a beef stall, and a fish stall were also in evidence, making the whole area seem like a huge supermarket complex, where you could purchase anything, from scrap to valuable items including gold. Talking of schools, there was the Dumbara Vidyalaya (a junior school) , Maha Vidyalaya for seniors, a separate girls' school, and a Tamil school, all run by the Government. I don't think any other suburb possessed so many facilities in one place.

Teldeniya, especially from a child's point of view, was a marvellous place in which to live. People were accustomed to bathing in the river and washing their clothes in its waters, dashing them on the large stones found on both its sandy banks. The sounds of their activity echoed in the air, making the place lively. It was customary for people to buy their household provisions at the *iridha pola*, or 'Sunday Fair', a gathering ground to which farmers of the region brought their harvest to be sold. Television wasn't available in those years, so everyone went to the movies. Attired in their Sunday best, they walked or drove up to the theatre.

Ethnic and religious festivals were enjoyed by everyone, equally. '*Theru*' was one of them. This featured a man hanging horizontally in a cart that was drawn along the main roads. He was suspended from iron hooks fixed on to his skin, his head turned down, and dangling all the way. What a sight that was! This was one of the ways in which Hindus fulfilled their vows to various deities. Some devotees danced to the rhythm of lively drumbeats, carrying a curved wooden structure called a *kavadi* on their shoulders, while others shouted '*Haro hara'* , an invocation of the god Krishna , asking for the removal of suffering and the grant of salvation. Everyone (and not Hindus only) contributed money, and was served with *ghee* rice (rice cooked with whole spices in clarified butter) as a goodwill gesture.

Vesak was not only a religious observance. Crowds of people paced the streets to witness and admire the illuminated arches (*pandals*) and beautiful lanterns that decorated walls, roofs and overhanging trees. Children seated in an open carriage sang *bhakti gee (*devotional songs). Nostalgic memories of these festivities still linger in the hearts of people who lived in that era.

Teldeniya was unique. It was beautiful. There was peace and harmony everywhere. People smiled at each other with sincerity: Amunugamas, Vaithilingams, Farooks, Pereras, Gajasinghas, Liyanages, Kodithuwakkus, Wevegamas, Rajapakses – people from different communities and families − lived together peacefully.

My grandfather, being the village headman, held a responsible position. He was short and stout, but his dictatorial manner and his powerful personality commanded people's respect. His house stood amidst acres of land, the edge of his property bordered by that beautiful river which wound its way down through rice-fields. A gravel road led through the paddy fields to Grandfather's house, dividing them into two sections.

Grandfather had seven children, all of whom lived in his nine bedroomed, two storied, old-fashioned mansion. The sitting room (*sala)* contained chairs and benches of different heights. This was a common sight in so-called *walauvas (*manor houses*)* of the past, where people sat according to their respective positions and castes in society, the ramifications of this caste-based community being well-known to everyone. The dining room was long, and comfortably accommodated eighteen people at a single sitting. The sumptuous, delicious meals served there were appropriate to the state in which Grandfather lived.

My grandfather's attention was mainly focused on providing for his children, for the workers, the drivers, and the domestic aids he employed, and for the animals he reared with such care. It was basically a one-man show. He owned cattle, goats, chickens, rabbits and an elephant, parrots, cats and dogs. A unique personality, he was the hero of my childhood, and is so still. He was dexterous, and made full use of each day. Early each morning he would visit the cattle sheds and chicken pens on his property, getting them properly cleaned. He would sometimes milk his cows himself, to ensure the quality of their milk. Then, immaculately clad, he stepped out for work; and when he returned for lunch he brought with him fresh beef, fish and other eatables.

Midday was set apart for the dogs, and for Grandfather's children and little grandchildren. He would take us all down to an area of the river that was entirely his private property: he had made a pathway to the river through his land and no one dared to trespass on it. Having reached the river, he would bathe us with the greatest care, rubbing and covering us with bubbling soap. As children we really enjoyed the luxurious life created for us by Grandfather, swimming and bathing in a private pool of our own! Everyone looked forward to lunch after our river-bath, we were hungry, and the food at the *walauwa* was delicious. Following an afternoon nap, Grandfather would leave on his second round of

official work, returning in the evenings to attend to his garden, hedging, trimming, pruning and watering. He possessed an orchard with a variety of fruit trees.

Lionel *Mama (*'Uncle Lionel'*)* was the eldest of my grandfather's children. He would go abroad from time to time, to the Maldives, the Philippines, to Australia, and settled down later on in England. Possessing something of a 'colonial mentality', my Uncle might have felt that going to England was prestigious. The picture I had as a child of my uncle Lionel was of a smart, tall and handsome person whom everyone respected, who carried himself with dignity and was always well dressed to suit the occasion. He still visits us from time to time, and then I see an even better image of him.

My mother, the second in my grandfather's family, married and moved from place to place in the island, accompanying my father who, as a Government doctor, was subject to transfer.

The rest of the family lived in Grandfather's house until, one by one, all had left. My memories flash back to the pleasant times I had with my uncles, aunts and cousins. My childhood memories were full of fun and frolic. However, as my grandfather was a strict disciplinarian, we looked forward to his occasional absence as a chance to enjoy ourselves in our own way.

Sonny *Mama*, third in the family, kept late hours, and would sneak in at night to get in without waking Grandfather. (I remember him making up a bed once in the cattle shed, and his mother − my Grandmother − smuggling out food to him.) He would have been up to mischief! Fair, rather short but handsome, he was considered the calm man in the family. Padma *Nanda (*my Aunt Padma*),* a cousin of his, used to live with us, and Sonny *Mama* fell in love with her. She was a kind girl, but as Grandfather did not consent to the marriage Sonny *Mama* had to attend her wedding, bottling up all his feelings. What a trauma that would have been for him! Now he is happily married (to someone else) and has three children.

Then comes Lakshman *Mama*, the Romeo of the family, very handsome, dark, lean and tall. For some reason, I always remember him getting caned by Grandfather. I did not understand, and could never gather why he was beaten. He was very intelligent and clever, but my grandfather lacked the vision to educate his children. My uncle Lakshman left home at the first available opportunity to join the police. I am sure he still regrets that he didn't get an opportunity to study in Kandy.

*Loku Punchiamma*, my youngest aunt and the third in the family, was the prettiest of Grandfather's four daughters. She paid a lot of attention to maintaining her attractive appearance. She married Wije Bappa from Matale, and left home.

Ira Punchi and Jayanthi Punchi were boarded at Kandy Convent on the advice of our elder uncle. My sister and I were also at the Convent boarding, which was managed by European nuns. Though we did not excel in our studies we learned many things in life there. We got the opportunity, for instance, to mix with other ethnic groups. Manners, etiquette respecting people from other ethnic groups and communities, who practised religions other than our own, were some important aspects of life in a multicultural society that we were made to understand.

I am indebted to my parents for providing us with a good education at the Convent. Only now do I realize how much my father would have spent on us with his hard earned money, the frequency with which his sleep was disturbed by a call to treat patients whenever there was a knock at the door. My father's patience knew no bounds. He was loving, kind and calm. Up to now I have never come across a person with such noble qualities. My mother did a great deal to improve the standard of our lives. She was a good hostess, an excellent cook who accomplished her tasks with the greatest care, scrupulously clean in everything she did. She was not only a mother to us but to her siblings as well.

At Teldeniya, my uncles and aunts, my sister and I blended into one family. Our school holidays were the most exciting things in life. People now pay fortunes for such holidays. River baths, walks, trees, birds, food and drink, playmates and leisure were in abundance. We climbed trees, swam, ran, played cricket in paddy fields that had been

emptied in the last harvest and were lying fallow, played cards, and Hide and Seek. We enjoyed our childhood to the fullest. We were up on trees like birds. Whenever we wanted we were free to roam around in acres of land that surrounded the house, like any animal would. We played 'toy houses', acted out films, sang and danced. We even indulged in some risky and unsafe adventures, such as plucking coconuts. My aunt was only twelve years old when she climbed coconut trees to pluck young fruits for us to enjoy! We also enjoyed fresh goat milk, when we held one of my grandfather's goats by the ears and drew milk from its udders straight into a curved jackfruit leaf, and gulped it down. There was a variety of leaf growing wild on the property which we mashed with water, and allowed to set into a jelly, adding a little bit of pilfered sugar and water. I've never come across those leaves since! Surprisingly we survived all these unsafe and unauthorized activities. Another pastime we loved was catching fish in the rivulets, using our skirts as nets.

Grandmother was a quiet lady from a well-to-do family. Her sudden death was a real trauma for my grandfather. Everyone missed her and only realized after her death how much she had done for the family in a quiet way. She was a serene, kind lady.

After some time, Grandfather remarried, for there were four girls still unmarried and left at home who required looking after. He did not seek a bride from a wealthy family, but instead found a strong young person from the same caste as our own, since caste was considered a major qualification for marriage. Our new grandmother performed her duties so well that she was accepted by all and blended into the family, adding to it a new baby boy.

To our childish minds, our grandfather seemed to be eternal. When this strong man bade us farewell, he left that huge house empty. Never would it be the same without him. My heart sank as it met this, the first shock of my life. The glamour of the place faded away gradually with the demise of my dauntless hero. The legend, the hero who controlled the whole area was no more. With the implementation of the Mahaveli Project, Sri Lanka's largest river basin development project, Teldeniya went under water. Medauyanwatte is no more; but the memories will last forever.

# BUILDING BRIDGES

Maithree Wickremesinghe

It gives me great pleasure to join you – young women and men writers – as you launch your work in the anthology ***Testimonies of Silent Pain***.

I will be speaking in English. As Professor in a Department of English, I am a firm believer in the potential of Sri Lankan English as a link language that could build bridges among the communities in the country.

Allow me to begin my speech by thanking 'The Social Architects'* , for inviting me to be present on the occasion. It is, indeed, a privilege to be here. I have had the opportunity to skim read a couple of personal stories – though only in Sinhala, I grant, but I believe that these powerful pieces have the capacity to provide an interface – for the meeting of diverse minds, and hearts and spirits. I would like to congratulate TSA for this initiative as well as their other work in the field of ethnic and religious reconciliation.

A couple of days ago we marked eight years since the end of the war.

It is often claimed that time is a great healer. But I would like to question whether this is so for everyone?

Yes, certainly for some people – both in the divides of the South and the North, the war seems to have become a distant, though scarring, memory. Life has gone on, been lived, people have moved to new cities, countries, and continents; found new jobs and livelihoods, married and had children, begun to treasure and relish life once again.

But for others, especially those who have been directly affected in the North and the East, those among the two fighting forces, and those lacerated by battle and bombardment, the war still remains a festering abscess. Life remains a daily struggle: to deal with loss – the loss of life, of family and loved ones; of occupations, possessions, inheritances, and heritage. And most crucially, the loss of self – in body and mind.

Consequently, many Sri Lankans still remain deeply conflicted and wounded – given histories of intolerance and prejudices, insecurities of sporadic political violence, unaddressed structural inequalities, as well as frequent failures in governance to stem xenophobic campaigns – against the Tamils, Muslims and Christians of our country.

While there can be no return to cherished experiences and precious moments, we can however attempt to ensure that such injustices, injuries and atrocities do not take place again

in this country – ever.

There is no doubt that the government has the greater responsibility to ensure that the requisite legal frameworks, policy implementation mechanisms, modalities and conditions are put in place – for peace to be sustainable, for truths to be expressible and acceptable, for justice to be transitional, and for reconciliation to be meaningful.

Moreover, the government has the duty to institute a new political culture that values free speech and diversity in opinion and dissent; that is proactive in preventing ethnic and religious violence, and that is able to hold fast to such aspirations – despite powerful forces and challenges of corruption and nepotism, militarization, commercialization and politicization. And we are all aware of a number of initiatives by the government itself, as well as by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs)* and groups such as TSA towards meaningful reconciliation and sustainable peace.

However, we are all equally aware of other active forces that are working towards fulfilling their own venal self-interests, political agendas, quasireligious aims, and parochial objectives at the expense of peace and harmony.

In such a situation, we all have an equal responsibility in nation-building − even those of us who are not in government or who are not working in the field.

Remember: we all have the potential for self-initiative, for proactivity, and for resistance. Perhaps not on a grand scale, but certainly at the level of the individual and the personal. In other words, when it comes to lasting peace and genuine reconciliation, let us not forget that –

* we have the power, as individuals, to anticipate and be pre-emptive in what we say, do and practise;

* we have the power, as individuals, to advocate and self-initiate changes that are just and inclusive

* and most importantly, we have the power, as individuals, to question and speak out;

* and to rise up and resist fear-mongering , prejudice and injustice as and when they occur.

If you really think about it, it only calls for everyday, ordinary, individual action – not only to prevent a culture of impunity but also to institute a culture of accountability.

Once again, congratulations and thank you.

(Based on a report in ***The Sunday Times,*** 4 June 2017, p. 10)

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***The Social Architects**, a research and advocacy group, was created in early 2012. Since then, its work has garnered a significant amount of attention – both in South Asia and in other places such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom.

It is a diverse group of writers, activists, scholars and working professionals. Most of its members are from Sri Lanka's North and East, but the group also includes people who were not born in Sri Lanka.

TSA's mission is to inform, to educate and to provide timely, thoughtful analysis on Sri Lankan affairs – particularly … human rights trends, and the root causes of Sri Lanka's longstanding ethnic conflict.

***NGOs and INGOs**. An international non-governmental organization (**INGO**) has the same mission as a non-governmental organization (**NGO**), but it is international in scope and has outposts around the world to deal with specific issues in many countries.

The address given by Dr Maithree Wickremesinghe, guest speaker at the launch of an anthology – ***Testimonies of Silent Pain*** − that was published in 2017 by The Social Architects, Sri Lanka.

# CONFESSIONS OF A BOOKAHOLIC

**Sam Gayathri**

Wind chimes … Lifeless bells that enlighten my depressed soul with the sensual caresses of a cool wind. Nights are always the best time for me to sit along with my loneliness and wonder endlessly about morbid things. As I stare at the windchime hanging in front of my dorm I realize I've been the lifeless soul enlightening other selfish existences on earth, and by that I mean the people I've got to know all these years of my life.

But sometimes you encounter that one person in life who leaves a permanent imprint on your life and makes you think of them in every decision you make and in almost everything you experience in life. Logan was my saviour in every way possible, he was seemingly the best thing that ever happened to me in all the years of my life. He was omnipresent, provocative and most of all he was the first person I'd seek to be with for all time.

It's been three years of relationship with Logan and each day feels like a new chapter in an entirely forsaken universe. First impressions are never the best as they say, it's a presumed, opinionated thought. I thought of Logan as the stereotypical rich spoiled brat he presented himself as, but of course I was wrong. As much as I wanted to be friends with him I didn't want him to feel that I was so desperate for his friendship. I wanted him to realize my worth, and make him want to feel worthy of being my friend. Eventually after one of our shared classes he offered to take me out for a cup of coffee: firstly it was a rainy day and apparently he loved coffee and rains, secondly he wanted to make me feel better as I had got schooled by one of my professors, so that led to our first and forever meaningful conversations.

"Live life by moments" was what he'd always say, moments that make you feel worthwhile, moments that make you feel like you meant something to someone, moments in which you appreciate what you have accomplished, moments that make you want to live all of your life again, remember how exactly you felt in each of these moments and recall them as your past happenings. I never realized how profound it could make me feel, until, whenever I was

emotionally devoid of feelings, I recalled my moments with Logan as my past happenings, because Logan has that power of making me feel even when I can't bring myself to feel. His mere presence in my thoughts is sufficient to fill all my emotional voids. He transformed all my nightmares and fears to new memories. The simple gestures of affection, a smile with just a mere glance that lights up all of my soul was, insanely, enough to heighten my feelings. Of course this is cheesy stuff every girl would expect but I'm not every girl and he's no guy everyone would have the privilege of knowing.

I guess when you're attracted to someone you learn to overlook their imperfections, and you actually fall for the words, the gestures, the simplest of smiles they give and even just a slight nod. That's how it is with Logan, I've never seen him in person but I don't have to, 'cause it's the words that made me fall for him even if he is a fictional character, and I am looking at him through the eyes of his fictional girlfriend (strange isn't it?). I'm pretty sure you might be thinking I am insane and obsessed with a fictional guy, but being in a relationship with Logan is purely, intricately, an emotional attachment which gives me more comfort than any other existing acquaintances.

# FICTION, FACT OR FAIRYTALE?

A Literary Adventure in North-West Sri Lanka

**Yasmine Gooneratne**

"And the Lord of the Jungle was Tha, the First of the Elephants. He drew the Jungle out of deep waters with his trunk; and where he made furrows in the ground with his tusks, there the rivers ran; and where he struck with his foot, there rose ponds of good water; and when he blew through his trunk , – thus, – there the trees fell. That was the manner in which the Jungle was made by Tha; and so the tale was told to me."

"It has not lost fat in the telling," Bagheera whispered, and Mowgli laughed behind his hand.

( From 'How Fear Came to the Jungle' one of the stories in Rudyard Kipling's ***The Second Jungle Book)***

Was a Black Panther's dry, sardonic remark, made in a famous children's book, your first encounter with literary irony? It might well have been, because Kipling's tale of a little boy growing up among wolves in an Indian jungle was immensely popular at the time of its publication, and has remained a favourite ever since, worldwide, in many translations, and most recently in its 'Disneyfied' forms as animated cartoon and feature film. In the teeth of post-colonial readings of Kipling that have attacked his 'imperialist' attitudes and ignored his skills as a storyteller, *The Jungle Book* has retained its ability to enchant adult and childish minds alike. The voices of Mowgli's animal friends speak to us directly – especially the voice of Bagheera the Black Panther. Dry, quiet, controlled, it is much more effective in getting results than all the affectionate sentimentalities of Baloo the Bear or the bluster of Shere Khan.

That voice is recognizable in the human 'voices' one meets later, in the world of literary fiction. Think about the narrator's voice in Austen's *Emma*, the tongue-in-cheek teasing of Pope's 'The Rape of the Lock', the dialogue of contesting personalities in Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*, the despairing truth uttered by 'Paul D.' in Toni Morrison's *Beloved.* It is very rarely that the cinema achieves – or *can* achieve – the presentation of irony in a manner that mirrors the ironic 'voice' of literary fiction.

This is a conviction I have often found myself explaining to literature students who, on being asked whether they have completed reading the novel set for the week's study, reply confidently: "No, but I've seen the movie." I can only tell them that irony at its best is simultaneously a writer's weapon and defence, that no movie-maker, however skilled, can fashion a substitute for it, and assure them that wherever they meet with irony in their future reading, the encounter will invariably be a delight … much, *much* better than the movie.

With these ideas in my mind, I watched the latest cinematic version of *The Jungle Book.* As many viewers have attested, this interpretation (also by Walt Disney, but not a cartoon) has many virtues, one of them being spectacle; i.e., it appeals to the eye. What its makers have failed to do – perhaps they didn't even try! − is to devise a screen play which engages the inner ear or the mind, as the original still does. Disappointed, I turned to re-reading the other stories that are part of *The Jungle Book*, but are often overlooked, even by the same reader who might fully appreciate Kipling's tales of Mowgli and his friends.

One of these is 'The White Seal', which begins, not in an Indian jungle, but on the beach at Novastoshnah, a northern island in the Bering Sea where Kotick, a baby seal, is born amongst thousands of others. He is unusual because he is white. As he grows up, he swims with his mother to the South Pacific, and back to the island at the end of the year. There he witnesses many seals being clubbed to death and skinned by Aleutian islanders. He resolves to look for a safe place for seals where there is no danger from men. He scours the world for such a place, and after many wanderings across thousands of miles of ocean, he happens upon a community of vegetarian mammals that he recognizes as creatures he has heard described by his undersea informants as 'sea cows'. They lead him to a safe haven they have found (and

now inhabit) in shallow waters beneath an unidentified cliff, where ‘meadows’ of sea-grass abound. He returns to Novastoshnah to spread this good news; and, after many struggles, persuades thousands of the seals to follow him to the safe beaches where no man comes.

So much for Kipling’s story, the ‘fiction’ of my title. Now for the facts.

My re-reading of ‘The White Seal’, which I had first encountered as a child, happened to coincide with reports in a local newspaper of the sighting off the north western beaches of Sri Lanka of the dugong, the nearly extinct mammal whose cousins are known elsewhere as ‘manatees’. Dugongs are medium-sized marine mammals, one of four living species of the order Sirenia, which also includes its closest modern relative, Steller's sea cow (*Hydrodamalis gigas*), which was hunted to extinction in the eighteenth century. The dugong is the only living representative of the once-diverse species of manatees.

The dugong is also the only sirenian in the family Dugongidaeong, and is the only strictly marine herbivorous mammal in its range, which, the encyclopaedias tell us, spans the waters of some forty countries and territories throughout the Indo-West Pacific. The dugong is largely dependent on seagrass for subsistence and is thus restricted to the coastal habitats which support seagrass meadows, with the largest dugong concentrations typically occurring in wide, shallow, protected areas such as bays, mangrove channels, the waters of large inshore islands and inter-reefal waters.

The dugong has been hunted for thousands of years for its meat and oil. Traditional hunting still has great cultural significance in several countries in its modern range, particularly northern Australia and the Pacific Islands. The dugong's current distribution is fragmented, and many populations are believed to be close to extinction. The IUCN lists the dugong as a species vulnerable to extinction, while the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species limits or bans the trade of derived products. Despite being legally protected in many countries, the main causes of population decline remain anthropogenic and include fishing-related fatalities, habitat degradation and hunting. With its long lifespan of seventy years or more, and slow rate of reproduction, the dugong is especially vulnerable to extinction.

More facts:

Scientific reports on marine life in the coastal areas of north western Sri Lanka tell of the existence in Palk Bay and surrounding areas of dugongs (called **Mudhu Ooro** or 'Pigs of the Sea' by local fishermen) which are hunted for their flesh to an extent that has brought them to the brink of extinction. Photographs support these findings, and organizations exist to protect dugongs and research their habits. They are very rarely seen nowadays, and reports from the Sri Lanka Navy's divers do not record sightings.

And yet, and yet … Since a thirty-year conflict that involved these very coastal areas would have discouraged exploration unrelated to military strategies; since dugongs are still making their appearance for sale in the market towns of the north west; since hunters are generally familiar with the habits and habitats of their targeted prey; and since sea grass (the dugongs' favourite food) grows in quantity here, might not some or all of all these factors combine to suggest the hidden and unacknowledged presence of dugongs off our north western beaches? Human nature being what it is, might not hunters be keeping their knowledge to themselves, carefully hidden from scientific researchers and divers who might interfere with a very profitable occupation?

And now for the fairytale.

In the early years of marine exploration, manatees and dugongs were often taken by sailors to be 'mermaids'. The tales invented by Hans Christian Andersen and other storytellers, of kingdoms under the waves, peopled by mermaids and mer-men who fell in love with humans and occasionally lured them to their deaths are still with us, although they have usually been 'Disneyfied' to suit contemporary taste and dwindling literary abilities. *The Little Mermaid*, Disney's charming animated cartoon version of the Andersen story is beloved for its brilliantly witty characterization of Sebastian, an entirely fictional Hermit Crab, just as 'The Bear Necessities' has replaced 'Maxims of Baloo' in the cartoon *Jungle Book.*

These contemporary interpretations, clever as they often are, are not particularly helpful in helping us learn more about Sri Lanka's dugongs. Only scientific research, possibly backed by Government and Non-Government agencies, and possibly engaging the attention of the Navy's expert divers, can do that. The friendly cooperation and trust of local communities can help us establish the link between fact and fiction. (Mr Malaka Rodrigo, a regular reporter on marine life for the *Sunday Times*, informed me that having a friendly drink with dugong hunters of local fishing communities – hard-drinking men, no doubt − could go far in encouraging confidence and eliciting information. Any volunteers?)

For many centuries Sri Lanka has been known and honoured for the protection of our island's wild life. Many generations of readers have praised Kipling for his accurate and detailed accounts of animal behaviour in the wild. Is it too fanciful to assume that a safe haven for dugongs and other threatened species might exist beneath a cliff in north west Sri Lanka?

I'd really like to know for sure.

Wouldn't you?

STOP PRESS! ***Sunday Times*** 12 November 2017

## Rare sighting: Five live dugongs

### Malaka Rodrigo.

The dugong is the world's most threatened marine mammal and is likely to disappear from our waters soon. Occasionally carcasses of dead animals emerge reminding us of their plight, and the sighting of a live dugong is very rare.

This week, however, a local tour operator Samith Ishan Fernando got lucky and was able to photograph a group of five dugongs. Mr.Fernando runs a boat service for tourists along the Puttalam lagoon where they usually spot dolphins. But on this day he spotted a creature that he immediately knew was different from a dolphin. When he took his boat closer he was overjoyed on seeing the now rare sighting of not just one but five dugongs. "They were spotted in the water for about ten minutes before disappearing," Mr.Fernando told the *Sunday Times.*

A closeup of one among the five

Records indicate that at least twelve dugongs were killed last year in Sri Lankan waters. Considering their rarity, this is a worrying prospect as many killings probably go unrecorded, points out Prasanna Weerakkody of the Ocean Resources Conservation Association.

The dugong is also known as the 'sea cow' for its habit of grazing on seagrasses on the ocean bed.

This species is threatened because of over fishing and coastal development. The seagrass that they feed on is also fast disappearing.

In 2015, the "Dugong and Seagrass Conservation Project" was initiated to conserve these mammals and their seagrass habitats around the world. Plans are being made to declare a marine protected area with the aim of protecting dugongs, said Dr Lakshman Peiris of the Department of Wildlife Conservation.

Pix by Samith Ishan Fernando

http://www.sundaytimes.lk/170326/news/threatened-dugongs-thrown-a-lifeline-234096.html

http://www.sundaytimes.lk/171112/news/rare-sighting-five-live-dugongs-268084.html

Sheala Fernandopulle, 'The Dugongs under an imminent threat'. In *Daily Mirror* 22 December 2017 p.A16.

# MARMALADE

Rohan Titus

My best thoughts often come to me in the morning. There is a calm, a stillness to the start of the day that is both contemplative and preparatory. The outrages of the news, the social media and our fellow human beings have yet to wrinkle my brow, and I can look forward to breakfast before having to bother with whatever comes after.

]Many mornings, I wake before my wife and put on the kettle, pull out the toaster and sit at my sunny kitchen table. I often think to myself that there are so many potential epiphanies in ordinary things. And this is often when they occur.

For instance: contemplating my usual breakfast, I realize that writing is like marmalade. Some people are consumers, some producers, and some are both. Very few who enjoy making marmalade don't care to eat it. So too it is with writing. Most writers enjoy reading other peoples' work as much as they enjoy having others read theirs. My consideration of marmalade has made me realize that we must go back to basics with things. Where once our parents and peers shared with us both how to cook and how to write, people today simply have not had the good fortune to learn from the previous generation how to make decent marmalade or how to write. We go to the shop and buy what we need for the former, and expect that simply having the tools (computer and email having replaced pen, paper and publishing) we too can write. How wrong we are!

What makes a good marmalade? Clearly oranges and sugar are involved, but how much of each? What kind of oranges? What type of sugar? And what else? Much as cutting up oranges randomly, to sling them into a pot and tipping in sugar with a 'hope for the best' strategy might appeal, it is unlikely to produce the sort of marmalade that I thoroughly enjoy with my cup of tea on a warm square of buttered toast in the morning. And so too it is with writing. There is a recipe. Even the best chefs will follow a recipe; the very, very best will

know it by heart, and allow for some variation based on flair, intuition and the nature of the ingredients, that will turn their marmalade into something very special, but even the most pedestrian, yet diligent, follower of a recipe can produce a reasonable marmalade.

Which brings us back to writing. A recipe lists all that is needed for the marmalade and the order in which to process it. So too must a writer follow the recipe for a short story, poem or review. Don't add the oranges whole to the pot – cut them up. Don't burn the sugar. Stir often. Similarly, think about the structure of what is to be written. One should begin at the beginning, progress through the middle, and on reaching the end, one is advised to stop.

The reader cannot know the writer's mind. If it is intended to convey a thought, some vehicle must move that thought from the writer to the reader. The only means by which that can be done are the words on the page. If one thinks to oneself that the reader is being taken on a journey of the imagination with the writer, then imagine the reader to be busily filling in the gaps between words with their own suppositions.

The writer should give the reader enough but not too much. When one is making marmalade, one counts on the consumer to have the bread and butter and implements necessary to create toast and spread the marmalade on it. In writing, one assumes the reader will have the wherewithal to supply what the author does not provide. Too many assumptions by the writer are as tedious as explaining the obvious. But it is always helpful to provide some sort of context or framework, an imaginative ingredients list that helps the reader obtain a common point from which the writer can take them on a journey.

Before setting pen to paper (or finger to keyboard), one must think and plan. What is to be written? For whom is one writing? What can one assume, and what must one provide? What structure is best? If one is to write a thousand words, one should be well into the thick of it by the 600-word mark. If there is to be a beginning, a middle and an end, then the introduction should end before 300 words have been reached, and the end should be in sight before 900 words are read.

One should also think about the novelty of the writing. A recipe for store-bought marmalade that is followed too closely will result in the same bland, unsatisfactory homogeneity that one can obtain in any store. What hook or twist will tantalize the appetite? In making the perfect orange marmalade, my wife's (and therefore the best) recipe includes a hint of lemon or grapefruit, giving a hint of sourness that excites the senses. The eyes tell us it is orange marmalade, but the tastebuds hint at something different. A well-written piece is similar. The reader needs something unexpected. A slight teasing of the literary senses can lift a bland work to something zestier.

And, tedious though it might seem to be, always have a trusted proof-reader. Respect for spelling, grammar and punctuation alone will not make a world class piece of literature, but their abuse will eternally damn many submissions from the paradise of being published.

As I finish my toast, I often think how nice it might be to have another piece. If the marmalade is particularly good, with just the right sweet and tang; pairing perfectly with the salt of the butter and the hot, crunchy-cased softness of the bread, I'll succumb. The 'brand' of the product builds a name for itself, so next time I am offered recipes by the same cook, I am tempted to try them. Good writing will make the reader seek out more works by the same author, just as the best recipes are shared between friends.

# A Female Heritage

**Shireen Senadhira**

The spectacle of women leading in all spheres of activity nowadays indicates that a fundamental shift is taking place. Women were not so well-adapted for leadership roles in primitive and early historical times. But as the emerging world economy becomes less based on physical strength and more dependent on intelligence and emotional balance, women find capability and courage to forge ahead. Not every form of female bravery is noticed, nor is every form of it documented; but with the stoicism, resilience, courage and kindness inherent in them, women have emerged victors when confronted with various situations in workplace, office, debating forums and in leadership. As for more domestic situations and everyday problems, it is surely worth thinking about Margaret Thatcher's observation that 'Any woman who understands the problems of running a home will be nearer to understanding the problems of running a country'.

Reading about the lives of certain women of our times arouses much admiration for their courage and fortitude. We gather inspiration from such characters. Rarely a day goes by without someone saying or doing something that we read about in a magazine, book or newspaper, which prompts us to do something similar, usually in the form of an idealistic image or a lifestyle. Modelling themselves in this way, women have survived and evolved. It's a way women can define themselves and become, hopefully, better versions of themselves. A good way to do this is to go beyond family, friends and colleagues to find inspiration in the lives of brave and strong women.

*"Who will weep for you? Not John and not Mary.*
*Neither Percy nor William. Not Gladys – nor Sybil*
*Hardened by the cold and tough as the seagulls.*

*But a sad woman from Krakow will. She was born next to Wawel castle,*
*In a country where we were taught to cry our eyes out by the birches,*

*By the robins in the park, by Chopin, by black cherries.*
*From a land with a culture of tears, a land of melancholy ...*

*I raise a toast to you with a cup of tea,*
*I serve you with my grief – my country's natural resource."*

The above is a translated poem by one of Poland's greatest poets, **Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska** (1891–1945), known during Poland's interwar period as 'the Polish Sappho' and 'the queen of lyrical poetry'. She grew up in Kraków, in a bohemian family of painters and writers. For her, as for other poets in the newly-united Poland, the years between the First and Second World War were a time of remarkable creative optimism and self-expression: they perceived themselves to be rebuilding culture in a country that had regained its independence after a century of oppression. Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska was part of a circle that actively championed women's rights. She was also a playwright; and on 2 September 1939 her satire on Hitler premiered in Warsaw even as the German armies invaded. She was a brave and strong woman indeed, to write and act as she did. With great difficulty, she escaped from Poland with her husband (a pilot in the Polish Air Force). They made their way to Britain, where he served alongside the RAF. In exile Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska felt stripped of language, her milieu and her identity, yet she kept writing. She was published in the émigré press although her passionate pacifism created enemies: she condemned the war for its destruction of everyday life.

Very few of **Mame Seck Mbacké's** poems have been published in translation, and yet her poetry is not only stylistically innovative but rich with references to Senegalese history and culture, engaging with issues of war, immigration, initiation rites and the African landscape. Here is an example: some lines from 'Waltz for the Harmattan' (translated by Georgina Collins).

*The Place Concorde*
*Discord of the People*
*Snow in heat*
*Nostalgia for the Africa*
*Of my nights*
*Of Samba Creole*
*Crooning*
*Along with Pigalle.*

When the Harmattan, that hot and dusty trade wind which blows in from the Sahara during the winter months, meets the cooler summer winds of the monsoon it has been known to create tornados, generating chaos that is symbolized by the historical, political and cultural turbulence reflected in this poem. It was published with others in a collection titled *Les Alizés de la Souffrance* in 2001.

Today, Mame Seck Mbacké lives in Paris. Her poems take the form of is a succession of small pictures chiselled on a strange music: cascades of precious words, as many shimmering streams, which end by marrying to form a single great river. The tone is sometimes nostalgic, sometimes disillusioned and caustic. She tells her readers: "I am the heir/ Rich of all pain." She also tells us that there is faith which saves, and that in the depths of sorrow and helplessness, hope can arise, despite the gaping wounds inflicted by a drifting world where the dryness of hearts breaks the impetus of fraternity. Spirituality, in fact, can save us from moral disaster. Ideas such as these, perhaps, gave her the strength to survive departure from her own country to live in a foreign land.

## Brave and strong women of the distant past

Now that we count as our contemporaries **Angela Merkel**, Chancellor of Germany**,** and **Theresa May**, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, two powerful world leaders, and more than twenty other women who head the governments of nations east and west, we can reflect that those days are gone when women were made to feel inferior to men and told that

they were unfitted for political responsibility. Women, it was said, were tender hearted and soft natured: a general opinion that persisted despite the historical evidence relating to numerous undaunted women at war. The grit of such women, and the resilience, policies and determination, vision and mission they demonstrated forced men to acknowledge their capability. An example from the distant past is provided in India by **Chand Bibi** (1550-1599), an Indian Muslim regent and warrior, who was the queen of Ahmed Nagar. When her husband, Adil Shaw of Bijapur, died, the country was thrown into chaos as favourites of the late king fought each other for supremacy. However, Queen Chand Bibi defended the Kingdom against the Mughals during the siege of Ahmednagar to lead her region well.

Among other brave women from the past should be ranked **Cleopatra VII Philopator** (69-30 BC), known to history simply as **Cleopatra**, the last in a dynasty of Macedonian rulers founded by Ptolemy. The last active ruler of Ptolemaic Egypt, she was briefly survived as pharaoh by her son Caesarean. After her reign, Egypt became a province of the recently established Roman Empire. Cleopatra VII ruled ancient Egypt as co-regent (first with her two younger brothers and then with her son) for almost three decades. Clever, well-educated, and proficient in several languages, she served as the dominant ruler in all three of her co-regencies. Her romantic liaisons and military alliances with the Roman leaders Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, as well as her supposed exotic beauty and powers of seduction, earned her an enduring place in history and popular myth though they tend to obscure the strength of her personality. This is how Mark Antony described her:

> "And one day she discovered that she was fierce and strong and full of fire and that not even she could hold herself back because her passion burned brighter than her fears."

**Queen Hatshepsut** (1508–1458 BC), the 5th pharaoh of the 18th dynasty of Ancient Egypt, was the eldest daughter of king Thutmose I. Hatshepsut was the only queen ever enthroned as a king,

and she took all the king's divine names (except, understandably, that of "The Strong Bull"). . During her reign Egypt enjoyed peaceful, prosperity and a stable economy.

## Modern Times

Nearer to our own times, we should recognize **Lady Margaret Cavendish,** a seventeenth century Englishwoman (1623-1673) who helped to popularize the ideas of the scientific revolution. A colourful personality, she was outspoken, and although she was widely ridiculed for her eccentricities, she was one of the first to argue that theology is outside the parameters of scientific inquiry. As England's first recognized female natural philosopher, she also argued strongly for the education of women and for their involvement in science.

**Mary Wollstonecraft** (1759 –1797), another English writer, was a philosopher, and an advocate of women's rights. Wollstonecraft's call for equality and her advocacy of women's rights struck England's eighteenth century society like a bolt of thunder splitting a tree. She is best known for her essay ***A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*** (1792), one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy, in which Wollstonecraft responded to educational and political theorists of her time who did not believe women should have an education. She argued that women are not naturally inferior to men, but appeared to be so only because they lacked education. She suggested that both men and women should be treated as rational beings, and demanded a social order founded on reason. She argued that women ought to have an education commensurate with their position in society, claiming that women were essential to the nation because they educated its children and because they could be 'companions' to their husbands, instead of viewing themselves and being regarded by others as ornaments to society or as property to be traded in marriage. Wollstonecraft maintained that women were human beings who deserved the same fundamental rights that were accorded to men.

She was prompted to write ***The Rights of Woman*** after reading Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord's 1791 report to the French National Assembly, which stated that women should only receive a domestic education, using her commentary on this specific event to

launch a broad attack against sexual double standards and to indict men for encouraging women to indulge in excessive emotion.

Even closer to our own times was **Emmeline Pankhurst** (1858–1928), a British political activist and leader of the British suffragette movement who helped women win their voting rights. In 1999, ***Time*** magazine named Pankhurst as one of the 100 Most Important People of the 20th Century, stating that 'she shaped an idea of women for our time; she shook society into a new pattern from which there could be no going back'. She was widely criticized for her militant tactics, and historians disagree about their effectiveness, but her work is recognized as a crucial element in achieving women's suffrage in Britain.

There are many other names that should be added to this heroic roll-call. **Amelia Mary Earhart** (1897-1937), an American, literally gave women wings in 1928. She was the first female aviator to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, and received the US Distinguished Flying Cross for this achievement. She also set many other records, wrote best-selling books about her flying experiences and was instrumental in the formation of The Ninety Nines, an organization for female pilots.

Also on the list of courageous women of our times is **Rosa Parks**, an African American who refused in 1955 to give up her seat to a white passenger on the bus going home after work. Overnight, she became a symbol and figurehead for the Civil Rights Movement in the United States of America. **Malala Yousafzai** of Pakistan is a Pakistani activist for female education and the youngest-ever Nobel Prize laureate. She is known for human rights advocacy, especially of education for women in northwest Pakistan, where the local Taliban had at times banned the schooling of girls. Her advocacy has since grown into an international movement.

**Frida Kahlo** (1907-1954), a Mexican artist, famously said: "Feet, what do I need you for when I have wings to fly?" This statement was made after her legs, damaged due to a bad bus accident, were operated on, confining her thereafter to the use of a wheel chair. Undaunted by physical disability, she went on to paint her revolutionary ideas, her political convictions, her painful and personal experiences. In painting her personal reality, Kahlo

created arresting visual documents about the experiences of being a woman at a particular place and time. A number of paintings are explicit criticisms of the United States. In Kahlo's 1932 ‘Self-Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States’, the artist stands in a landscape between the industrialized United States and a preindustrial Mexico, an apt image for the present condition of her part of the world.

## Closer to home

Taking other examples at random from our own part of the world, Sri Lanka’s history reminds us of **Dona Catherina** (1593-1613), also known as Kusumasana Devi, who was ruling Queen of Kandy in 1581. Kusumasana Devi's life is unique in the annals of the history of Sri Lanka and her achievements in her short life span of nearly 32 years, are unparalleled in our country.

**Ehelapola Kumarihamy**, another heroic Sri Lankan woman, not only gave her own life but those of her children to uphold her honour and that of her family in the period just before the Kandyan region was ceded to the British in 1815.

## To Ask or Not to Ask

A speech given at the Toastmasters Club, USA

**Nisansa de Silva**

A little horse approaches a river which has swollen due to recent rains. White waters run, foaming with the currents. There is no bridge. The little horse is about to step into the water when he hears a cry:

"Stop!"

It's a squirrel who seems to be in a panic. The squirrel says:

"Do not go into that water. It's too dangerous. I lost a friend to this river."

The little horse listens to this advice, and turns to go back home. Now he sees a bull. The little horse asks the bull if it is safe to cross the river. The bull replies:

"It is nothing, only my legs get wet. I cross this river all the time."

Let us pause the story of the little horse and look at our own lives.

In our lives we get advice from various people. Sometimes when we ask for it. Sometimes without invitation. Most of the time people offer it with a benevolent intent. . Asking for advice is all well and good if your question was something like: what is 2 plus 2. Because the question is objective the answer will also be objective. But if the question is subjective, the reliability of the advice declines rapidly. The more subjective

the question is, the more unreliable the answer. A question like 'Should I take this subject or that at university?' might get a fairly consistent answer if you ask your batch mates or your seniors, while a question like 'Should I ask her out?' would get a plethora of different answers. The problem is in the fact that the questions we have are unique to each situation.

Most of the advice that you get without asking is what Socrates was describing when he said:

"Everyone tells you what to do and what's good for you. They don't want you to find your own answers. They want you to believe theirs."

This is the advice you get because the person giving advice saw that you are going in a direction that is not compatible with his or her set of beliefs.

The eco-system of producers and consumers is perilous ground for taking advice. Sometimes the customers are more ill-informed than the seller about their own needs. So most market surveys are doomed to fail. That is what Henry Ford was referring to when he said:

"If I asked my customers what they want, they would have asked for a faster horse."

The other another side of this argument, where the producers advise consumers to buy things, is not without fault either. That is the origin of the phrase:

"Oh, marketing! It makes us buy things we do not need, with the money that we do not have, to impress people that we do not like."

The confused little horse from the story ran home to his mother. The mother listened to the story and said:

"You are not as big as the bull; but you are not as small as the squirrel. So look at their sizes and decide what is good for you."

So the yearling ran back to the river and looked at the bull, and looked at the squirrel, and thought about what they said. Finally, he carefully took a step into the water. And another, and another. It was not as easy as the bull said. But it was not as deadly as the squirrel said, either. He successfully crossed to the other side.

This story tells us how to use other people's advice. It is a simple three part process. The first part is internalizing. The great Austrian composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart believed that music is not in the notes but in the silences in between. A very peculiar belief to have for a musician, one might say. But it is not as strange as you might think. Say there were no gaps between notes. Then all you will hear would be an endless calamity of noise. It is in the silence between the notes that we take in what we have heard, and internalize it. Similarly, you need to listen to what others say and internalize

it. Give it some time. Make it yours.

The second part is comparing your abilities. The bird who sits on a small branch does not put its faith in the strength of the branch, and in the hope that it will not break by its weight. It puts its faith in its own ability to take flight **IF** the branch fails. Take the internalized advice, and compare and contrast it with what your abilities are. Others will give advice according to their experience. But you know who you are, and what you can do.

Thirdly, reflect. Give a moment to silence. Listen to the silence. Because when you listen to the silence, the only voice your mind hears is the voice of your heart. To the troubled mind, there is no voice sweeter than that.

Use that knowledge to build a path of your own and execute it.. Do not follow something because someone told it to you. Be it an elder, be it a friend. Do not take advice because you read it in a book. Do not take advice because the leader of the philosophy you follow is alleged to have said that. Take advice when it agrees with your reason and common sense. That is one thing I read in Buddhist literature, I internalized it, compared it with my abilities, reflected

and finally have come to accept.

Remember the process: internalize, compare, and reflect. Internalize, compare, and reflect.

Now that I have given you advice on how to take advice, take a moment and listen to the '**whisper'** silence.

*Things Familiar II*
Neleisha Weerasinghe, Acrylic on paper

## OUR GUEST AUTHOR: J.P. DAS

# Community

People who lived on the outskirts of the small town, where the man moved about, knew little about him. They didn't know to which caste or religion he belonged. As a matter of fact, no one knew what his real name was. He was a madman, and everyone called him *Pagal*, a lunatic. His not having a name or caste or religion posed no problem since he kept to himself, and had very little contact with others. He never spoke, so it was not known where he was from, or what his language was; people had long since given up bothering about it. There was even some doubt as to whether he was really dumb, or had simply decided not to talk.

Be that as it may, Pagal was now a well-known mobile institution of this suburb.

Pagal had no fixed place of residence nor any regular arrangement for his meals. He ate whatever was available, and slept wherever he found a place. He never begged, nor did he refuse anything given to him. All day long, and sometimes through the nights, he continued to pace the streets, and people were familiar with the special sound of his tread in a pair of heavy boots. When he was not to be seen in the street for a day or two they thought of him, and it was always reassuring to listen to his footfall in the quiet streets on winter nights.

A problem concerning Pagal arose, however, whenever there was a communal riot. Every two years or so, political parties would decide on a riot for various reasons. Though the riots were grim and bloody affairs in the city, resulting in murder and plunder and rape and refugee camps, they took a different form in the suburb. Communal disharmony never went beyond mutual abuse, fisticuffs and breaking of furniture in the shops.

Pagal posed a problem on such occasions because of his unkempt beard. At a casual glance he looked like a Muslim because of his beard. However, if one gave him a second, serious look, he also resembled a puritanic Hindu like the Jagadguru. During Hindu-Muslim riots, Hindus found an easy victim in Pagal, and belaboured him. For them, Pagal was then a fanatic Muslim. During the height of the riots, Muslims, because of their inferior numbers, kept quiet, but as soon as the situation normalized a bit, they came out to retaliate. They too got hold of Pagal, called him a Hindu Fanatic and a Sadhu Maharaj and gave him a beating. Pagal thus got it from both sides, but even on the worst days of the riots, he never kept away from his patrolling of the streets.

The communal riots had their own unwritten rules and conventions. The people in this suburb knew exactly when trouble would start. Leaders from the town would descend on the suburb the previous night, conspire with their henchmen over cups of tea, and leave very early in the morning. The disturbance was then formally launched from the tea shops under the old banyan tree.

There were two tea shops next to each other. One was called the Hindu Tea-stall; the other shop was named after Gandhiji, but since it was owned by a Muslim, everyone called it the Muslim Tea-stall. The Muslim owner was an old man whom everyone called Mahatma. Though police and other Government officials would be fully unaware about the plans for a communal disturbance and arrived at the trouble spots after everything was over, the news of imminent trouble reached the people well in time. On the day of riot, old Mahatma quietly went to the shop before day-break and put away the cash box and fragile things in a safe place and locked the shop again. The events which followed next had this standard scenario:

Pagal finished his night patrol of the streets at about nine in the morning, and sat down under the banyan tree. He knew that he would be asked over for tea from one of the tea shops. No one offered him tea. He pretended unconcern and kept waiting, not knowing that it was riot day. A little later, groups of young men gathered under the tree. Soon they started shouting slogans about Mahatma Gandhi, Bharat Mata, Hindu Unity and so on. When the sun became a little hotter, the slogans changed to Down with Muslims, Blood for Blood, Traitors Quit and so on.

Pagal, looking unhappy without his morning cup of tea, also joined the crowd and behaved as if he too would shout slogans with them, were he not dumb. The crowd now marched towards the Muslim shop. Mahatma, who knew all the young men and was familiar with the drill, took the kettle from the stove and came outside. The boys now pulled out the shop's signboard, threw it on the ground, and two of them started jumping on it. They broke the glass panes, took out biscuits and cookies, and distributed these among the crowd. The Hindu shopkeeper also considered it an occasion to distribute eats from his own shop. As a matter of fact, he locked up his cashbox and came out to join the slogan shouting. The attendant of the Hindu shop used the stove of the Muslim to prepare cups of tea for the crowd.

Soon it was noon and the shouting was feeble and weak, and it was time to call it a day. However, someone reminded the others that they had not yet manhandled a Muslim, without which no communal disturbance would be complete. They all now looked at Pagal, and four of them rushed at him calling him a bloody Muslim. Someone pushed Pagal and he fell down. They kicked him around for a while, and then dispersed shouting slogans about Mahatma Gandhi.

In the afternoon, the Hindu shopkeeper and his servant went back to their shop. Mahatma came back from wherever he had hidden himself, and started rearranging his things. The madman got up and looked around as if nothing had happened. Mahatma offered him a cup of tea. Lest the Muslim appear to be more generous than he, the Hindu too gave the madman buns to eat and forced him to take a second cup of tea. By the time police arrived an hour later, Mahatma had straightened out the signboard and had hung it up. The whole incident was forgotten by the evening, and people gathered under the tree as usual.

Communal disturbance in the suburb was a tame affair since it had rather strict rules and conventions. The scene of the disturbance had to be outside in the street, near the tree, which was a public place. There was a limit to the damage to be done. The strictest rule was that no one would raise his little finger at Mahatma; not even speak to him harshly or impolitely. The rule had been broken only once, when a youngster, new to the game, had

called the Mahatma a Muslim. The others had taken the youngster to task and had sent him home crying.

In course of time, however, there were changes in these rules. Younger people took over leadership from the elders. The young leaders in the suburb started collecting money from the shops. When leaders from the city came to the suburb for organizing a riot, the discussions were now somewhat different.

"What happened here during the last riot?" the leader asked.

The young followers were a little embarrassed to answer the question since nothing much had really happened during the previous riot. A clever one among them, however, saved the situation by making a slightly exaggerated claim.

"We ransacked all the Muslim shops."

"How many were killed?" asked the leader.

The question put them all to shame. There had been quite a few deaths in the city, but in this suburb the only physical action had been the beating of the madman. The clever one alluded to this incident, and said,

"We broke the legs of a Muslim."

The leader did not seem to feel happy about it and said,

"You people seem to be an effeminate lot. Communal riot is a serious matter, but you are treating it as child's play. I thought that I would spend fifteen minutes with you, and brief you about the plans for tomorrow. I now see that I have to spend more time with you. Can you arrange some drinks, or are you going to tell me that all the liquor shops are closed?"

The leader and his men spent the better part of the evening with the youngsters, charting out detailed plans for the commotion. However, word was passed around in the morning among the people of the minority community that they should leave their houses. They all did, for the times were different now, but Mahatma said,

"One does not leave one's house in times of trouble."

During that riot, the hooligans set fire to Mahatma's shop, and did in fact break Pagal's leg. But it must be admitted that no one showed any disrespect to Mahatma. Days after the riot, Pagal limped back from the hospital and Mahatma put his shop in order. Elections came, and leaders started lecturing about communal harmony. Mahatma said,

"Didn't I say that everything would be normal again?"

Everything was normal, but not for long. Besides Hindu-Muslim riots, one now saw Hindu-Sikh riots. 'Hindu-Sikh Bhai Bhai' slogans gave place to 'Hindu-Muslim Bhai Bhai' slogans. To Pagal's misfortune, he was now made into an Akali and the young hooligans ran after him calling him a *langda* Sardar, a lame Sikh.

That there was going to be another communal riot soon was known to all except the police. It was also known that it was going to be a severe one this time. The Muslims left the city and its suburbs, and went away to villages which were expected to be safe. Even the Hindu tea shop owner locked his shop and went to his village. Elderly people of the locality went to Mahatma and asked him to leave the city for a few days, but he did not agree.

"Last time too you were giving me the same advice," he said, "but as you know, nothing happened."

Next morning saw the hooligans running after Pagal. This time, however, they had knives in their hands. Even Mahatma failed to recognize them, for theirs were indeed strange faces. When Pagal came limping to the tea shop, Mahatma ran out of the shop straight into the crowd, to protect the madman.

"Kill the bloody Muslim," someone shouted.

A knife flashed, and Mahatma fell down bleeding. There was pandemonium thereafter. In a minute everyone started running away, and the place was cleared but for Mahatma's body. Pagal came over, kneeled before Mahatma and tried to pull him up, but Mahatma was dead by then.

A jeep drew up. For the first time Pagal spoke, and shouted for police. However, the people who came out of the jeep were not policemen, but respected political leaders. They were not effeminate and chicken hearted like the young men of the suburb, and were not scared of a dead body. Pagal looked up at them and asked for a doctor, but the visitors only laughed with derision. Two of them caught hold of the madman as a third filled up a canister with petrol from the jeep. They tied up Pagal to the banyan tree and poured petrol on him.

One of them said,

"This man looks like a lunatic. Is he a Hindu or a Muslim?"

The leader went to Pagal and asked him,

"What community are you from?"

Pagal did not reply. He had become mute as suddenly as he had started speaking. They laughed again. The leader took out a cigarette, lit it, and took a few puffs. He smoked for a while, and threw away the stub. Then he passed on the matchbox to the fellow standing next to him.

(*Translated by the Author)*

# *REVIEWS*

Palitha Ganewatta

***The Scent of Kinship***. Sarasavi Publishers, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka (2006)

Where is 'home'?

An elderly visitor from Sri Lanka is introduced to 'scenic' Sydney by his daughter and his son-in-law, recent immigrants to Australia … An arrogant young University graduate from Sri Lanka thinks Australia owes him a living … A working-class Sri Lankan family is caught up inexorably in he rush and scramble of big-city life in Sydney … A young father senses with dismay that his children are drifting away from the values of 'home' … A local Buddhist temple offers solace to lonely and isolated Sri Lankan immigrants …A homesick young Sri Lankan housewife writes home to her mother … Sri Lankans eat, drink and make merry in their very own version of an 'Aussie' barbecue … They are all here, in Dr Palitha Ganewatta's thoughtful and sensitive exploration of the lives of Sri Lankan Australians.

*The Scent of Kinship* is an English translation of a selection of Sinhala short stories that reflect aspects of the author's experience of living and working in Australia. Simply and lucidly expressed, mostly in the form of diary entries, letters home and conversation, the reader arrives at very clear conclusions regarding the quality of Australian life from the immigrant's point of view, and often sees, hears and senses more about it than the diarist, letter-writer or speaker is consciously aware.

**NEW CEYLON WRITING** presents two reviews of Channa Wickremesekera's novella *Asylum,* by Sharon Rundle and Yasmine Gooneratne.

Links: Author's Pick 23: Sharon Rundle
http://www.sundaytimes.lk/140629/plus/booksarts-104929.html

*Asylum.* Palaver (2015)

Channa Wickremesekera is a Sri Lankan-Australian who has published five novels, *Walls* (self-published, 2002), *Distant Warriors* (Perera Hussein Publishing House, 2005), *In the Same Boat (Bay Owl Press, 2010), Asylum (*Palaver, 2015), and *Tracks* (self-published Sri Lanka, 2015).

Born in 1967 in Colombo, Sri Lanka, he attended Royal College Colombo and then Monash University in Melbourne, where he obtained his Ph.D. in South Asian History in 1998. Although he began writing fiction early in life, he placed this passion on hold while at university. He returned to fiction writing after obtaining his doctorate, self-publishing his first novel, ***Walls***, in 2002. He has written five novels and novellas, including ***Distant Warriors*** (Hussein Publishing House 2005), ***In the Same Boat***(Bay Owl Press 2010), ***Tracks*** (self-published 2015), and ***Asylum*** (Palaver 2015), all of which deal with issues of migration and displacement.

As a scholar specializing in South Asian military history, Wickremesekera has written two monographs that focus on India and Sri Lanka: ***Best Black Troops in the World: British Perceptions and the Making of the Sepoy, 1746–1805***(Manohar 2002) and ***Kandy at War: Indigenous Military Resistance to European Expansion in Sri Lanka, 1594–1818***(Vijitha Yapa Publications 2004). A third book on the separatist war in Sri Lanka was be published in late 2015.

He lives in Melbourne.

**SHARON RUNDLE** (Reprinted from *Author's Pick* 23, 1 January 2016)

For the purpose of my research, I've been reading a lot of novels by South Asian-Australian authors with ties to Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. I've read marvellous narratives from established and emerging writers. To choose one novel from this array of fiction, is an enormous challenge. After long and difficult deliberation, I plumped for one that provided a new perspective, was surprisingly enjoyable, beautifully structured and written in a page-turning style.

Sometimes the best way to encourage discussion and provoke deeper thinking is through humour. Ideas that may seem simple on the surface have wider ripples and deeper currents than appear at first. So it is with ***Asylum*** by Channa Wickremesekera.

A young prison escapee decides to break into a home and take hostages,after the news that he is on the run with a gun is broadcast through media and police reports. The house he chooses is the home of Afghanis of Muslim faith. The mother wears a *niqab*, while her sometimes sullen, sometimes giggling young daughter, Aisha, wears a *hijab*. The mother understands English but prefers to speak in her Dari language. Through her family, she is the main negotiator with their captor. Her son Khalid, the male teenage narrator, is the perfect choice as the cynical observer with typical 'attitude' -

> *"I've seen bigger guns than that in Afghanistan with kids half his size"* (p. 23).

Khalid is also a principal player in the drama that unfolds as police surround the house. Negotiators are brought in to help, with mixed and sometimes hilarious results. What could be a disaster turns into a tragi-comedy as the actions of the police and young man on the run with a gun become farcical when faced with this unexpected turn of events.

The Afghani family face another even deeper dilemma. Should they offer asylum to this person seeking refuge, as their religion decrees they should? Should they lie to the police for the greater good? Which would give lesser offence to God? What are they to do in such

an impossible situation? The intruder is only a scared, tired, hungry, delinquent boy, after all. Khalid has heard it all before:

> *"How you should look after people who take refuge with you, even if they are your worst enemies. Even if they had killed your own mother and father. I always thought that sort of thing happened only a long time ago and if it happened now it was only in the movies. Never thought we will have to practise it."* (p 40).

While the family debate the best plan, mum keeps cooking and feeding them all, including their captor Rusty.

This novel has impact and lingers in the mind long after it's read. To my mind, ***Asylum*** should be on the HSC reading list. Suitable for both adults and young adults, the deceptively simple style and endearing narrator in ***Asylum*** allow for serious ideas to be discussed without polarizing the audience. Many readers may be surprised by such a fresh perspective and by what they learn through humour.

**YASMINE GOONERATNE**

> The peace of a quiet Melbourne suburb in which Afghani immigrant Rustum Khan, his wife Mehri, and their two teenage children Khalid and Aisha live tranquil, ordinary lives is abruptly shattered one bright Friday morning by the arrival on their doorstep of an unexpected and unwelcome visitor. The Khans are normally a hospitable family, and have some acquaintances among their Australian neighbours, but this is different. The intruder is a stranger, instantly recognizable as the criminal whose image has just appeared on a TV

newsbreak: a boy , ‘tall dirty blond hair, the face skinny, kinda malnourished, lots of freckles’, who has made the news by breaking out of a juvenile detention centre in Victoria, shooting a guard, and evading capture. He is now ‘on the run’, and is supposed to be dangerous. As, indeed, he is, for in his hand is a gun.

This description is given us by Khalid Khan, the narrator of this delightful book, and it is through Khalid’s intelligence and observant eye that the reader registers the dramatic events which follow the runaway’s appearance. By the end of the day, the Khans have lost their TV and computer monitor (shattered by gunshots) and their mobile phones (which have been flung into the fire):

*‘No TV, no telephone, no Internet and no texting, and hopefully nobody will know he is here pointing his gun at us’.*

Their sofa is in shreds. What they have not lost is their dignity, their sense of humour, their courage or their compassion.

As their front and backyards fill with policemen armed to the teeth and a police helicopter patrols their roof-top, good sense asserts itself. Mehri, an orthodox Muslim who wears traditional *hijab* and *niqab*, speaks her home language of Dari when everyone around her (including her family) speaks English, whose preferred domain is her kitchen, and whose strict religious principles guide her in all situations including this one, sees to it that the runaway is given food and drink, and insists that the family will on no account hand him over to the police.

*“We can’t hand him in,” she says. “It’s not right.”*

*I look at mum in disbelief. Is she crazy? I mean, the little prick comes into our house, holds us at gunpoint, threatens her and shoots up our TV, computer and sofa and throws our mobiles in the fire and she thinks we shouldn’t hand him over!*

*But it's Aisha who puts it into words.*

*"Are you crazy?" she asks, in Dari. "After all he has done?"*

*But mum is unmoved. It takes a lot more than an indignant son and daughter to move her. Like a cowering, beaten kid, for instance.*

*"Look at him," she says. "He is helpless. We can't hand him to the police. He depends on us."*

Unexpectedly, the Khan family and their 'guest' find common ground. To start with, in a coincidence of names: the Australian Russell (or 'Rusty', as the gun-toting visitor calls himself) has never heard of Allah, yet discovers that his reluctant host, an Afghan named Rustum, is also known to friends and associates as Rusty. The Afghan's son and daughter, distanced from Russell by their skin-colour and clothing, share his devotion to football:

*"Which footy team you go for?"*

*"Essendon."*

*"Oh, really?" I say. "So does my sister."*

*Rusty looks at Aisha over his shoulder. He seems interested in her for the first time. The power of footy.*

*"That's cool," he says. "Who is your fave player?" he asks her.*

*Aisha glances in the direction of the kitchen to see if mum is watching. Dad is watching her but she knows that the power of mum is greater than the power*

*of Dad and footy put together. Confident that mum is not looking, she answers.*

*"Howlett."*

*"Yeah, he is good," Rusty agrees, and returns to his food.*

*"Aisha!" cries mum from the kitchen.*

*"Howlett is shit."*

*I have to say that. For the sake of my team, even though I think Howlett is good.*

*"Howlett is better than all of Carlton shits put together," Rusty sneers through a mouthful of rice. I look at Aisha, and she is rapt.*

*"Aisha!" yells mum. She is obviously not happy about Aisha getting too cosy with Rusty and Howlett. Mum wouldn't know Howlett from Harry but she knows we are talking about footy players and that footy players are young men running around in skimpy shorts. Not the kind of thing a Muslim girl should get excited about, at least not in her presence.*

Considerations of football apart, Rusty has created a moral dilemma for the little family. It should be easy to call the cops in, and surrender the runaway. The Khans are certainly tempted to do so. Their captive obviously expects that they will, and finds it hard to understand why they do not. The answer to the question is to be found in Verse 6, Chapter 9 of the ***Holy Koran***, a well-thumbed copy of which lies on the dining-room table of this Muslim family, but of which young Russell, of course, has never heard:

*If one amongst the pagans ask thee for asylum, grant it to him so that he may hear the word of Allah; and then escort him to where he can be secure. That is because they are men without knowledge.*

Slowly, but surely, the balance shifts, its movement directed chiefly by Khalid's *niquab*-wearing mother who stands firmly by her religious principles ("the power of mum", says Khalid), by Russell, who discovers that this "f—— weird" family of foreigners care deeply, as all right-thinking Aussies should, about the football results, and by Khalid himself, who feels a sneaking admiration for the young man who can still show fight when all the cards seem to be stacked against him.

The end of the book, when it comes, packs a surprise which I will not spoil by revealing it here. I would only urge readers to get several copies of ***Asylum*** for themselves and their friends – it has a message for everyone who can read and think beyond the confines of their own limited conditioning, and understand (as Russell did, and Khalid eventually does) the value of a multi-cultural experience.

*The Sunday Times Sri Lanka*, June 29. http://www.sundaytimes.lk/140629/plus/booksarts-104929.html,


**Reginald Rose*, 12 Angry WoMen***

*Cold Theatre 7, Colombo (November 2017)*

**Reginald Rose's drama *Twelve Angry Men* concerning the jury of a homicide trial was broadcast initially as a television play in 1954, and was presented at the Lionel Wendt Theatre in Colombo over a short season (Thursday 16 to Sunday 19 November 2017) by Cold Theatre 7. NEW CEYLON WRITING attended on alternate nights, and reviews the two productions here.**

I have taught this play as a literary text several times, and was interested to see that this year a production was being put on which cast twelve men one night and twelve women on the other night, alternately over a short season from Thursday to Sunday in November, at the Lionel Wendt Theatre.

The story concerns the intense and illuminating deliberations of a jury whose members are required to come to a unanimous decision about the fate of a young man who is accused of murder. The final decision is arrived at in the climactic last few minutes of the play, and the setting is itself one of the crucial aspects.

The claustrophobic room where the jury are in closed consultation is a perfect example of the escalation of human emotion in situations of enforced proximity. In the motion picture film which was made of this play in 1967, the action takes place during a heat wave, and the stress of the characters is visible, and almost tangible: their shirts sticking damply to their bodies, their frustrated attempts to get the creaking old air conditioning machine to work, their palpable thirst for the water cooler.

In this production, the lighting and the spatial proxemics were perfectly judged. Each character was lit as their turn came to express their position, and the recreation of the events was done in silhouette and with precision of placement. The restless movements of the more dynamic members of the group contrasted strongly with the rigid stances – from hesitancy or from reluctance - of those who remained seated. The subtle alliances which were formed as people influenced each other or responded to the influence of others was mirrored in their body language and their softening or hardening facial expressions.

I attended the performance of 12 Angry Women the first night, and 12 Angry Men on the night following, and was struck by the differences in gendered interpretation of stress and ire. The men showed their anger much more physically and with raised voices and bodily exertions – smashing their fists on the table, pushing chairs to the side. The women were more emotionally deadly in their dealings with each other, showing their disfavour with verbal sharpness and slashing glances.

The arc of the dramatic action is essentially cumulative, and incrementally so, as people's opinions are shown to be relatively subjective rather than based on the facts of the evidence. The play is very relevant to contemporary issues we face in our own lives in 2017: the need to take the time to sift through issues, to go beyond the surface of each matter, to consider and deliberate before coming to a conclusion, the reactivity and biases we face in ourselves as well as in each other, as we try to determine the best course of action in a complex situation. We become aware of how our feelings influence our choices as we assess and evaluate others, and the weight and significance of coming to judgment on our fellow human beings.

Issues of compliance, conformity and coercion are also illustrated, as one juror stands firm against all the others initially in his/her belief that the young man accused of the murder could not have been the person who committed the act. One by one, each person's opinions and reasons for believing in the guilt of the accused are brought forth. The evidence of the train passing by at the time of the incident, discussion of what the person in the apartment block saw - or could actually see - from the window, the physical estimation of the distance from the room to the door, the availability of the weapon (which was not as rare an instrument as was initially supposed), the possibility growing in the minds of the group that there was in fact reasonable doubt that the accused did the deed, all add up to create a powerful portrayal of human nature.

The role of the jury is to interpret the actions of the accused from the perspective of their own understanding of the law. Each jury member comes from a different social and economic background, and their inherent biases towards each other in this regard are shown clearly through the dialogue and the phrasing of the words by the excellent cast. 'Ad hominem' – dispute the idea, not the man − is a vital rule, and it wins the day here − eventually.

In contemporary society, we frequently see how difficult it is to achieve true consensus in many areas of life, both personal and on a larger social and political scale. We see arguments and es sparking all over the internet, and in board meetings and staff meetings and in any organization where people with differing perspectives attempt to collaborate and co-operate. Egotism, territoriality, pettiness, rivalry and fear-based judgment are rife.

This is where drama, with the powerful physicality of the actors' living embodied presence in front of us, can vividly illustrate the challenges we face in a way which demonstrates the potential errors of our ways − and their remedies. We see the characters struggling to recognize their own biases and prejudices, and to try to guide each other, in the light of their growing awareness, to respect the life of another human being who is unknown to them, but in whose life their decision ultimately makes them major investors.

# GLASS, BRASS, GOLD & GRANITE

**Salman Rushdie,** ***The Golden House***
Penguin Random House, India

In many ways, writing and architectural construction are similar. The elements used in the construction of a work determine its beauty, its usefulness and its lasting value. Reading Salman Rushdie's latest work, I think of glass, brass, gold and granite as the constituent elements. And understructures of white marble, as in the hotels which are not named, so often not named that their identities come to mind.

GLASS because so many aspects of it are transparent. The fake news and faux Facebook profiles and identity theft culture in which we live provides him with the perfect camouflage. The writing appears to drop names and clearly show its characters to co-exist with real players on the world stage. He operates in strategic, glassed wall interstices. The green haired Joker in this surreal gothic Gotham is wild. The family evokes that of the Corleones in *The Godfather*. The female

figures (always less finely drawn in Rushdie's stories) are partially erased before they utter a word, and thus are virtually stereotypes. Rushdie's real life alleged misogyny is displayed in the interviews given by some of his ex-wives, and in the digital world we live in these opinions exist side by side with the fictional portraits of women and men in his writing. He is a celebrity superstar, an actual inhabitant of the golden houses his fame and infamy have built. The universes for him are parallel, the cities and realms fuse and intersperse.

Rushdie's writing is like Swift's: satiric, sardonic, both bitter and benign. And it is like Donne's poetry: full of verbal conceits, a display of learning, a bringing together of images from dispersed semantic fields. He is in his glory when the dichotomies and dualities of human life and contemporary post colonial and comic book infotainment culture scrape against each other and catch fire in his prose.

BRASS because Rushdie's forceful brazenness has always been an aspect of his writing which appealed to me. There is tension, and anger, and passion and fury inspiring his intellect.

The need to be the smartest arse in any room, hugely noticeable in Rushdie's earlier work, is subsumed into a greater purpose in his best writing. Needing to have the last word in any dispute must surely have been a problem for him all his life, and it is a relief to see and feel him more at ease, in this book. *Fury*, written in 2001, has a similar cover - a towering American monolith, scraping the sky - but do not judge it equal, or judge it a prequel to this sequel. In a sense, *The Golden House* is more kin to *Shame*, in its targeted take-down of a dominant culture, infiltrated by its own corrupt progeny. *The Golden House* is not just reminiscent of the White House and King Midas, and its characters evocative of the truism that all that glitters is not gold, but of Darth Vader, and Death Star and its destruction in George Lucas's *Star Wars* franchise. Rushdie's familiarity with popular culture and his zesty appreciation of it is a big 'value added' to his panoramic portrayals of late 20thC/ life.

GOLD because it is soft, malleable, ductile - and valuable. The ancient symbol for gold was a perfect circle with a dot in its centre. The structure of this book evokes that perfect formation, and draws us into its alluring, beckoning core. Not to *The Heart of Darkness*, human degradation in a primeval steamy jungle, but of the heart of civilized madness, in chill marbled cities. The madness of commercialism, of otherisation and objectification, has become internalized, and normalized, and Rushdie is no longer angry, but resigned. He has gone from boil to simmer, and it brings out the flavour. This is not detached superciliousness. This is what happens when all hope in any redemptive force is gone, and all that is left is the ability to write about it: the ability to weld, and weave, and wield, the creative, world-creating word.

Criticism can be made that Rushdie is just a highly educated heckler, who believes in nothing, and that his writing does not inspire hope or change anything for the better. It deconstructs cultural myths rather than affirms them. He is emphatically not a supporter of the reactionary fundamentalisms, slogans and received sociocultural wisdom he sees as impairing our potential to become more free, in this era. I think his fictional critiques create an alternate version of reality which provides us with the vital tools of scepticism, cynicism and logic. His vision of humanity is never wholly nihilistic, because it does not sneer or lose sight of the potential for betterment, or the aspiration for emergence and evolution, in all human beings.

'Here is Nero Golden, lifting his ban on the media, showing a photographer from a glossy free magazine around his beautiful home ... He speaks of his wife as his inspiration, as his lodestar, as the source of his "renewal"... A woman like Mrs. Golden, she is the elixir of life ... Look at her! Can you doubt me? Did you see her *Playboy* photos? Of course not ashamed, why would one be ashamed? ... She's the jackpot, no doubt'.

(Page 141)

A few weeks ago, Hugh Hefner died, saying that he had prepared for his passing by purchasing the plot in the cemetery next to the remains of Marilyn Monroe, who was the first centrefold in the first *Playboy* magazine. His death came too late for Rushdie to write about it, but his satiric vision is so on point that his portraits are predictive. Rushdie would have pointed out that Hef made Monroe buy her own copy of that inaugural magazine issue, even though she was a major contributor to it.

GRANITE because Rushdie's mastery of his chosen art form is enduring. He has been able over his career of thirty-five years to take the volatile, ephemeral issues of the day and distill their meaning into something dangerous and beautiful. His most specific political attacks (S*hame, Satanic Verses*) have one him personally more harm than good, but his universal riffs, his verbal pyromania, his vibrant joy in his own power of language to convey unambiguous meaning in uncertain times, is compelling and life-affirming. He tells us children's stories with adult themes, in sly, sleek, sinuous and fabulous language.

*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* was filled with deep feeling, the words resonant with the sound and rhythms of music, and the paradoxical, acrid tenderness of being alive in the serried, sequentially interaligned, globalised contemporary world.

*The Golden House* is similar in scope, and ablaze with synergy. But the romantic love stories here go awry. Something more interesting and illuminating displaces them. Look at the 'Monologue of D Golden Regarding [His] Own Sexuality & Its Examination By The Professional'. A transcript between a Professional (Psychiatrist) and her patient/client, about why his/her romantic life is not working. It encompasses a critique of Feminism, an exploration of Postmodern Post binary gender awareness, and the concept of Free Will, made to fit for our times:

> 'What if we're a federation of different states of being and we need to respect those states' rights as well as the union. I'm losing my mind trying to work all this out and I don't even know the words, I'm using the words I know but they feel like the wrong words all the time, what if I'm trying to live in a dangerous country whose language I haven't learned. What then.' (Page 254)

Fictionalized transcripts of interviews between the writer and his shrink? Pure gold.

Rushdie's latest book looks at the structures of power, the spaces created by greed, narcissism and vain glory, at the heart of

commercial and economic empires in the early 21st Century,
an era where no one in the whole world is safe.

‘Give Me What I Want, And No One Gets Hurt' sings the lead singer of U2, Rushdie's friend, in the brilliant song 'Vertigo'. Government here is brazenly not of, by or for the people. The disconnects between people who should be allied hum and buzz, like electric fences in *Jurassic Park*. Celebrities and white noise and superficiality and Mammon all cohere in a frieze which is a snapshot of a new 'Horror', against which the characters move to enact their kismet.

The pain here cannot be kept out of the beautiful spaces human beings create as monuments to their own capacity for self love. People die, and are immolated in bonfires of their own vanities. It is epic, in every sense, allusive and idiosyncratic. There are wide spaces in this book of marble vistas of words, stone screens of syntax with peek-a-boo coyness and voyeurism on demand, there are improbable natural objects apparently growing organically in a cultivated verbal iconography which is reminiscent of Spenser's *Faerie Queen* with its stylized stateliness and subtle inlaid bejewelled motifs.

Any minute now, the rented space of this fabulous place could be shattered, like 'the hotel that cannot be named', into a billion glittering pieces. This book is attention demanded, and rewarded, by a grown up provocateur. It is a work of both generosity and extortion. Read it through again, when you get to the end, and see how the apparently disparate fragments shine, in your mind's eye. That last paragraph, where the heirs to this afflicted lineage are seen through the lens of the virtual CCTV camera:

Now there are the three of us,... in an unspecified room ... The camera begins to turn faster, then faster still. Our faces blur into one another and then the camera is spinning so fast that all the faces disappear and there is only the blur, the speed lines, the motion. The people - the man, the woman, the child - are secondary. There is only the whirling movement of life.'

(page 370)

*Fresh Fields*
Neleisha Weerasinghe, Acrylic on paper

# *OBITUARY*

**Remembering Valentine Vamadevan**
**(3 March 1933 – 1 June 2017)**

*Into my heart an air that kills*
*From yon far country blows:*
*What are those blue remembered hills,*
*What spires, what farms are those?*

*That is the land of lost content,*
*I see it shining plain,*
*The happy highways where I went*
*And cannot come again*

(**A. E. Housman** (1859-1936)

Valentine Vamadevan (popularly known as Vama, and self-described as Vama Vamadevan) passed away on the1st of June, suddenly and unexpectedly. His funeral was attended by a large gathering of relatives, friends, and many from the Wattle Grove community in Sydney, in which he lived for over two decades.

Born on 3 March 1933 to his parents Vaitilingam Subramaniam and Thangachi Nagalingam, he commenced his schooling at Chundikully School and moved later to St John's College, Jaffna. On completing his secondary education, he entered the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya, graduating with a Bachelor's degree in Arts. On graduation, he joined the Sri Lanka Police Service as a probationary Assistant Superintendent of Police (A.S.P.), his exemplary career in the police service reaching its pinnacle when he was appointed Deputy Inspector General (D.I.G.) in the early 1980s.

Meanwhile, he had pioneered various police initiatives. A prominent member of the Police Horse Brigade, he was a competent horseman , and the chief organizer of the Police Hewisi Band, which he proudly led at the Edinburgh Tattoo in the 1970s.

A sad note in the life of a man who devoted his energies to making the land of his birth a better place for all, was struck when his home in Talakotuwa Gardens in Colombo was attacked by a band of (hired thugs) during the notorious communal riots that enflamed Sri Lanka in 1983. The impact of that incident must have made an indelible mark on Vama's psyche: he left Sri Lanka with his family the following year, never to return even for a brief holiday.

Vama and Charmaine, with their two young children Shivi and Rajeev, arrived in Australia in 1984, and were warmly received by friends whom they had known in Sri Lanka, and others who were to become their lifelong friends. They settled down in the quiet suburb of Kogarah in southern Sydney, and later built their own home in Wattle Grove. Vama took to a career with the Correctional Services Department , and worked at the Long Bay Gaol for over a decade before opting for retirement.

Although emotionally scarred by the events of 1983, Vama maintained a never-failing affection for the land of his birth. This manifested itself in his quest for publications which dealt with Sri Lanka. He acquired whatever he found, and consolidated it into an admirable collection of books.

Vama was a stalwart, indeed a pillar of the Ceylon Society of Australia. He was not only a Founding Member and the Founding Treasurer of the Society but, together with his wife Charmaine, was a proactive member engaged in all of the Society's activities. Prior to the official launching of the Society twenty years ago, a few of us met informally to set the foundation of the Society, and to 'brainstorm' ideas on how the proposed Society should take shape. These informal meetings were held at the residences of the founding group; and Vama and Charmaine hosted the second preliminary meeting, which was accompanied by a sumptuous dinner. Declining health prevented Vama from playing a more prominent role in the CSA's work during the last few years, but he and Charmaine continued to attend meetings on a regular basis, and were always stalwart supporters.

Vama made many learned contributions to the CSA Journal *The Ceylankan,* bringing to the reader many aspects of Sri Lanka in times past. He also authored a book of his own, ***The Muslims of Sri Lanka,*** a product of his tireless research and interest in the old country. Perhaps it was his interest in the history of Sri Lanka that led him to publish his own memoirs entitled ***The Ceylon We Knew***, which recounted his life in Sri Lanka, and summed up a very eventful and distinguished career in the police service.

If I may touch on a matter which afflicted his health, it is only to focus on his stoic resolve to handle the loss of his kidney function which dogged him for years, compelling him to dialyse his kidneys three times a week during the last fifteen years of his life. He never complained about this added dimension to his regular chores, but faced it with a steely determination that won the admiration of his physicians.

Charmaine, Shivi, Rajeev and their families may find some consolation in the knowledge that their loss is shared by many others who had the privilege of knowing Vama. May he find eternal peace.

**Hugh Karunanayake**

(Based on an article published in ***The Ceylankan: The Journal of the Ceylon Society of Australia.*** Journal 78, Vol. XX, No. 2 May/June 2017)

Shameela Yoosuf Ali
*"My Soul is a Rain Forest"* Acrylics on paper

# *How to Submit Your Work for NCW No. 8*

**Submission Deadlines:**

**30 June 2018**

Prose: (Includes stories, essays and reviews) Please submit either one prose piece up to 2500 words, or two pieces of short fiction maximum of 1000 words per story.

Poetry: Please submit up to 3 poems. Each poem should have a maximum line count of 50 lines (excluding the title and stanza breaks).

Artwork: Please submit up to 3 pieces in jpeg format.

Your cover letter should include the following details: Title of submission, genre, word count (for prose), line count (for poetry), a brief biodata (5 lines or less), and your full contact details (your name, postal address, email address and telephone number). All submissions must be prepared on computers (hand-written submissions will not be considered for publication).

Please email your submissions to the magazine at its email address newceylonwriting@gmail.com any time between 1 January 2018 and 30 June 2018, state the genre in which you are submitting and add your last name. It should be "genre_last name" for example Fiction_ Perera or Poetry_Perera.

# A LITERARY PRIZE WORTH NOTICING

## The DSC Prize for South Asian Literature

NEW CEYLON WRITING doesn't make a practice of encouraging the offering of money prizes as 'rewards' for good writing, but the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature seems to be an international literary award worthy of attention from serious writers, only because it would bring $25,000 U.S. to the winner, but because **it is driven by neither ethnicity nor gender, and is open to any author from any part of the globe, as long as the work is based on the South Asian region and its people**.

This must surely be unique in today's literary world. It is not generally known, for example, that the Booker Prize is awarded exclusively to works submitted by British publishers.

The DSC Prize was awarded in 2017 **to ANUK ARUDPRAGASAM**, a writer from Sri Lanka, at a ceremony held in Bangladesh. The prizewinning novel (title: *The Story of a Brief Marriage*) is set in Sri Lanka. This year the DSC Prize received 60 eligible entries, with participation from publishers from the South Asian region as well as from the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia and South Africa among
others.