NEW CEYLON WRITING



NEW CEYLON WRITING 4

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Cover Design: Hansa - 'The bird of Svarga Loka', symbol of artistic discrimination in Sinhala art and literature. Reproduced from a carving on a wooden pillar in the Daladā Māligāva, Kandy, Sri Lanka

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NEW CEYLON WRITING

EDITOR'S NOTE

A debt to the following, whose generous assistance and encouragement helped to produce NEW CEYLON WRITING 4 (1979) is gratefully acknowledged:

Mr G. Ryan
Mr Jan Schreuder
Dr Brendon Gooneratne
Miss Karen Smith

Mrs Lakshmi de Silva
Students of English at Macquarie University, who assisted in the assembly of NEW CEYLON WRITING 3 (1973)

* * * * * * * * * * *

WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE MORE OF THE WORK OF THE WRITERS WHO HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO NEW CEYLON WRITING? THIS IS WHAT YOU CAN DO:

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Contribute to NEW CEYLON WRITING. Writers of fiction, poetry, drama and criticism are invited to submit mss. (translated into English before submission)

Send in an entry for the prize offered to the best SHORT STORY submitted for publication in NEW CEYLON WRITING 5. With your support, this journal published an outstanding story in its 1972 issue by Suvimalee Gunaratna, whose fiction is now well known in Sri Lanka and has been published and taught abroad.

BECOME A WRITER, NOT JUST A READER. WE SHALL BE GLAD TO HELP IN ANY WAY WE CAN

RETIREMENT OF H.A.I.GOONETILEKE

Sri Lankan scholars and writers in the island and abroad have learned with regret and deep concern of the premature retirement from his post as Librarian of the University of Sri Lanka library at Peradeniya, of Mr. H.A.I.Goonetileke, a scholar whose extensive knowledge of Sri Lankan literature has always been at the service of researchers in the field, and a man whose intense delight in his work provides a constant inspiration to them.

Ian Goonetileke's interest in the literature of Sri Lanka began in 1955 when, as a post-graduate student at the School of Librarianship and Archives,University College, London, he began collecting data for a bibliography on the art and architecture of the island. Nearly twentyfive years later, as the author of the monumental A Bibliography of Ceylon, and of lesser but equally meticulous compilations on such Sri Lankan subjects as the work of Robert Knox, George Keyt and Senerat Paranavitana, he enters 'that super-league to which are admitted those of the calibre of Cordier, Chauvin and others whose bibliographical works remain the essential starting point for all research as well as the vade-mecum for the book-collector'(J.D.Pearson, 1969).

With a personal interest in poetry and poets, Ian Goonetileke contributed to New Ceylon Writing in 1971 a note on Pablo Neruda's links with Sri Lanka (New Ceylon Writing 2(1971)pp.53-54), and makes through his personality and his scholarship a continuing contribution to creative writing in his home-land, building throughout its politically and communally devided society reliable 'bridges for the scholar, artist, poet'.

There is still some uncertainty as to what Mr Goonetileke will do after his retirement in August this year from the Library at Peradeniya, whose standards of excellence he was responsible for raising and maintaining when around him every other University department was accommodating itself to lower levels of 'acceptability'. The loss resulting from his retirement to our society as a whole will, in the opinion of scholars everywhere, be profound; and the more tragic since it seems that it could (and should) have been avoided.

BRENDON GOONERATNE

JOHN STILL'S UNPUBLISHED POEMS

THE DOOR

My poetry has been to me a door,
Not to be opened always when I would;
For obstinately fastened it has stood,
Till I have feared it would not open more.
Then have I wakened in the lonely night,
And found it wide, and passed straight
through the wall
Out to the forest where the hornbills call;
Where trees reach up their faces to the light,
And, spreading, strive in noble rivalry
To make more beautiful their woodland home.
There have I wandered, free among the free,
Until the time to close the door has come;
And like a shadow I have turned and passed,
Still hopeful I shall live beyond at last.

John Still wrote 'The Door' on the 27th of February,1918, while a prisoner of war at Afion Kara Hissar in Turkey. The poems he wrote between 1915 and his release in 1918, closely inscribed on ten sheets of paper and concealed from his guards in a hollow walking-stick, were later published in a volume entitled Poems in Captivity, by The Bodley Head in 1919. In a foreword to this book,Still briefly described his experience of imprisonment:

> In the long years of captivity in Turkey, where each one of us was driven to seek inside himself some alleviation of the daily dullness, many of us there found things we had not suspected to exist. For,to find distraction, we were thrown back more upon our own creative powers, and were helped less by our surroundings than ever is the case in normal life. Some found the wit to write plays, and others the talent to play them. Some discovered the power to draw; and one at least found much music in his mental storehouse. Some developed into expert carpenters, and others, less profitably, into hardly less expert splitters of hairs! Some found in others a depth of kindness more durable I think than the depths of hate this war has generated. I found these verses, all of which were written there, and their discovery made more happy many of the eleven hundred and seventy-nine days I spent as a prisoner of war. Few there were who found no resource, and they perhaps found the more endurance.

To know that Still identified the world of poetry with 'the forest where the hornbills call' will not surprise any Sri Lankan reader who has had his own first view of the island's jungle areas through the glass Still presented to him in The Jungle Tide(1930). Few men of his time, born in the island or outside it, knew its secret places

JOHN STILL'S UNPUBLISHED POEMS

and its ancient, buried cities as did John Still who participated, with other members of the Archaeological Survey, in the excavation of the ruins at Sigiriya in 1906. Ten years later, far from Sri Lanka and its jungles and ruins, Still composed his verse 'Tales From the Mahawansa', trusting to his memory of the ancient work to which he had compiled an index in 1907. Of this work, Still's Index to the Mahavansa, together with chronological table of wars and genealogical trees, H.A.I.Goonetileke has written:

> This index contains every reference to every name, whether that of person, place, book or ceremony; a list of wars and battles arranged in chronological order, and finally, genealogical trees of the various dynasties, with a short alphabetical index to the references from which these have been compiled. A tedious work done with painstaking thoroughness.[1]

The Jungle Tide contains several examples of John Still's verse that takes as its themes the lonely splendours he found in the plant and animal life of the forests. But the poems relating to 'Woodcraft and Forest Lore' contained in Poems in Captivity surpass these in the minuteness of their observed detail, their sensuous apprehension of the jungle milieu, and their sympathy for and sense of kinship with what he has called the jungle's 'human, sub-human and super-human peoples'.

Three unpublished poems written by Still in 1925 have recently come to light. One, titled 'Pain', and a second that bears no title were inscribed by Still in a copy of Poems in Captivity while he was living in Kandy at that time. A third poem consisting of three stanzas, titled 'Death' dated 16th March 1925 and written on a Planters' Association of Ceylon letter-head, has been pasted into the same copy,which is now in the library of Dr Brendon Gooneratne.

New Ceylon Writing is glad to publish in the following pages, six poems by John Still. Three of them,'Fear in the Forest', 'Monkeys' and 'The Loris' are among the best and most sensitive of his published verses. The rest, hitherto unpublished, are printed here with Dr Gooneratne's kind permission.

Editor

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1 H.A.I.Goonetileke, A Bibliography of Ceylon (1970) Vol. 1, p. 278.

FEAR IN THE FOREST (From Poems in Captivity, 1919)

John Still

Alone upon a wooded hill I lay,
Beneath a pale blue sky, where swifts did fly,
And listened while the voices of the day
Rose from the rustling woods and mounted high.
The talk of monkeys, and a whistling bird,
The tireless tolling of the barbet's bell,
The singing of the insects that I heard,
Had no strange tale to tell.

Then far away I heard a sambhur stag
Blurt sudden challenge in the plain beneath,
And at his signal 'twas as though a flag
Warned the whole forest of the walking death.
For, stealing through the woods came silent fear,
Its path betrayed before its footsteps passed;
And soon the belling of the spotted-deer
Told that it travelled fast.

The lower regions of the list'ning hill
Next gave their signal of that moving dread,
The squirrel's indignation ringing shrill,
Thrilling his warning through the woods ahead,
Hanging head downward in his frantic wrath,
With throat pulsating, while a chain of sound,
In high-pitched clinking, link by link sped forth,
The squirrel cursed the ground.

Still, of the thing itself that came so fast
I heard no single sound of voice or tread;
Only each signal station, as it passed,
An urgent message through the forest sped.
And next the monkeys, close below my stone,
Hooted in fury, dashing to and fro,
And in the frightened forest I alone
Knew not what passed below.

On soundless pad there passed that silent fear,
Around the wooded contour of the hill,
While in a glade below piped loud and clear
A plover's cry denouncing it as ill.
Down in the woods a nervous muntjak barked;
A crane rose squawking from a hidden pond;
And floating far I heard new sounds that marked
Fear in the plain beyond.

MONKEYS (From Poems in Captivity, 1919)

John Still

The boughs above the stream are slowly stirring;
The waters lap and flow,
The shadows down below
Melt where the liquid slope goes gently purring
Above its bed of stones.
I hear the murmuring of almost human tones:
Low secret tones, the water's voice is blurring.
And while I strain my ear, I seem to hear
The voices of an age preceding man's;
Soft conversation in the branches near,
And muttered monosyllables discussing plans:
Sub-human language, at the early end
Of history, and a million years before;
Voices of which I only apprehend
The mystery, but fail to follow more.
For they who stir the branches do not know me;
They move among the trees, and only show me
Their outer life, and hide its secret core.

THE LORIS (From Poems in Captivity, 1919)

John Still

In the forest, in the moonlight,
When the boughs are lacing black against the sky,
And all the stirrings of a tropic night
Encompass me with magic out of sight,
I hear your thin weird cry:
I sense you passing by.
Softly and silently your tiny palms
Cleave to the bosses of your secret way,
On where the bearded moss hangs thick and grey,
Up where the silver moonlight glints and charms,
You slowly creep,
While the geckos cheep,
And your enemy, the owl, on silent wing,
Sweeps through the dusky passes of the trees;
Sweeps and is gone, while the cicadas sing.
And still your fretful wailing haunts the breeze
That soughs among the tree-tops where you weep.
Good-night, my little kinsman, I must sleep.

PAIN (1925)

John Still

Would you deny her pain, with all it brings:
Wisdom, and love, and tears more soft than rain?
As well deprive the river of its springs,
And see the valley turn to dust again!

UNTITLED POEM (1925)

John Still

In the forest, far behind,
Came a crash as the passing wind
Gave touch to death, and a King who stood,
Came thundering down, and lay, but wood,
With his crown the wreath that the sorrowing orchids bind.

DEATH (1925)

John Still

I fear not death, for death can but deprive
My soul of things that torture me alive:
The sadness of a body drawing breath
May well find faith and friendliness in death.

I flutter for a little while alone,
A bird far out to sea by tempest blown:
And then, I dip once more, and touch the sea,
And share forthwith that immortality.

Come sleep! Come death! Forgiveness come to me!
My wings grow weary: solemn smiles the sea,
As a mother smiles who lulls her babe to rest.
I stoop to join my shadow on thy breast.

* * * * * * * * * * * *

TO: Yasmine Gooneratne, Editor, NEW CEYLON WRITING
The School of English & Linguistics, Macquarie University, North Ryde, NSW 2113, Australia.

Please place my name on the mailing list for the next issue of NEW CEYLON WRITING.

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N E W C E Y L O N W R I T I N G

NEW CEYLON WRITING is sponsored by no University, literary group or other institution, and is maintained by the interest of those who read it and contribute to it. It was established in 1970 to supply the need created by the collapse of Community, which, with Sankha, Harvest and certain other journals, had formerly provided creative writers in Sri Lanka with opportunities for publishing their work. In its brief existence, NEW CEYLON WRITING has already published the best and most significant creative and critical writing to appear in Sri Lanka in recent years. The first issue was welcomed in the following terms in a review published in the Ceylon Daily News:

> 'In bringing together a variety of writers and in directing a critical eye at the past record, the editor has begun to provide an invaluable service in keeping the lines clear and the heart hopeful for the time when these writers of the present generation can publish their own work and win themselves an audience here and abroad'.

Of the three issues published so far, No. 1(1970)presented an anthology of modern Sri Lankan writing in fiction,drama,poetry,criticism and translation.No.2(1971)took as its theme 'The Theatre in Ceylon',and featured articles,interviews and correspondence on this subject in addition to a theatre bibliography,new poetry and fiction and 13 pages of reviews.No.3(1973)focused on the criticism of Ceylonese literature with several articles,reviews and a select bibliography. No.4 (the present issue,1979) concentrates on poetry, with special sections on the poetry of John Still and Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, new poetry and poetry in translation, besides reviews and some outstanding fiction from Sri Lanka and abroad.

Originally published in Sri Lanka, NEW CEYLON WRITING is now produced in the School of English and Linguistics, Macquarie University, New South Wales. An order form is provided overleaf.

THE FLYING WATCHDOGS OF THE MALDIVE ISLANDS

Raja Proctor

I looked, then looked back again. Flying seagulls were being fished out of the air astern of my ship with hook and line.

'Pilot!' I called to the Rangoon river pilot. 'See what I see?'

He stood beside me, tugging at his goatee beard. A seagull shrieked, the flight of gulls astern screamed and wheeled in panic, and a clawing, fluttering seagull was reeled in over the stern like a fish on a line.

'Never seen it!' he gasped. 'Twenty-four years at sea, and I'm still seeing things.'

I was Master of the s.s. Ocean King, west-bound from Rangoon to Male, the capital of the Maldive Islands, with a cargo of rice. The talkative pilot lapsed strangely silent. An uneasiness made me ask, 'Gulls, albatross, porpoises, I thought sailors left them alone. Bad luck, isn't it?'

The pilot pointed out the pilot vessel and said, 'Getting down in twenty minutes, sir,' making me feel he was glad to get off my ship.

I settled the Ocean King on a course that would take her through the Preparis Channel, across the Bay of Bengal, to the Maldive Islands; then casually drifted to the stern. Tuttu, the Maldivian Serang, was squatting on the vice-bench,trailing his line in the air astern. He grinned, flashing a mouthful of white teeth and nodding his curly black head. The glimmer in his black eyes gave his shining black face a seraphic simplicity. I looked at the flying gulls, the flying line, and asked him 'Why?' He mistook the 'Why?' for a 'How?', half-hitched the flying line to the vice, and got down from the vice-bench. Then, gleefully, he picked up the end of a coil of manilla rope, slipped the whipping off a strand, and from the unwound strand drew out about three skeins of manilla which he twisted into a single line of about forty feet. He handed me one end of the line, attached a sliver of bamboo to the other end, then secured two subsidiary hook lines and tossed the bamboo sliver over the stern. The bamboo sliver hit the wake of the ship, bounced, and was air-borne. Tuttu kept jerking his arm and asked me to do likewise in order to keep the line flying high and low. The gulls kept following, cocking their heads from side to side, and occasionally diving for a tit-bit in the churning wake. Tuttu called for the gash bin and upset it astern. The gulls screamed, rose in the air and dived. I had a strike, a gull had hooked on to my flying hook. Tuttu reeled the gull in as if he were reeling in a bite. The others pounced on the gull, clipped its wings, and banged the

wash-room door on it. Tuttu was delirious over my success, he called for more gash, but I shook my head and hands vehemently. He saw I was not pleased with my success, and followed me as I went forrard.

'Tuttu,' I got the second engineer to explain, 'seagulls, porpoises, albatross; sailors don't catch them? It's bad luck. Why do you catch them? Do you eat them?'

'Eat!' My ignorance shocked him. 'Maldivians don't eat seagulls, Maldivians rear seagulls,' he said, throwing back his head.

'Rear seagulls?' My bewilderment bewildered him.

'Yes, rear them like you rear dogs. Seagulls are our watchdogs.'

'Watchdogs!' His earnestness held back my ridicule.

'We are Muslims. There is a law in the Maldives against keeping dogs, so we keep seagulls as watchdogs.'

'True, sir,' the second engineer backed him up, but I laughed. My laughter did not amuse Tuttu. He proclaimed, wagging an index finger in the sky, 'When I get to Male,I'll show you the flying watchdogs of Male. I'll make you buy a pair for a.hundred and fifty rupees.'

'One hundred and fifty rupees!' I ridiculed him, and moved on.

Seven days later, early in the morning, I raised the Attols and headed for the white breakers circling a translucent blue lagoon.Navigation was a matter of eye, blue water was deep water, pellucid green water was water deep enough for the Ocean King, and light green water in which you saw the coral bunches blooming like hydrangeas, was dangerous water. I anchored under opaline skies in thirty fathoms of water, water in which I could follow the anchor cable down to the anchor on the ocean bed.

The formalities of arrival ended, and the ship was cleared for unloading cargo. I stretched out in my cabin, sipping a glass of iced lime juice, and letting the cool of the revolving fan bathe me. A timid knock on the door had me buttoning up and calling out, 'Come in!'

Tuttu came in, grinning from ear to ear. 'Sir,' he said, 'I go ashore now. Tomorrow nine o'clock, I meet you at the jetty and I show you Flying Watchdogs!'

'Okay, okay!' I waved Tuttu away, unbuttoned and lay back.

Male is white-walled and red-roofed, with sandy white roadways that throw back the hammering heat. The second engineer and I were bathed in sweat even before we stepped

ashore, and Tuttu's grinning, happy face did nothing to ease our discomfort. Tuttu walked us along the sandy white main road, and turned into weaving lanes hedged by shoulder-high walls of white coral. There were no dogs, no cats, only open-eyed children peering at us over the walls, spreading breadfruit trees, and mango trees laden with ripe, yellow mangoes.

'See,' Tuttu pointed out proudly, 'the mangoes ripen and remain untouched on the trees. No land birds, no squirrels in Male!' I swabbed the sweat off my neck and agreed it was a rare phenomenon.

Tuttu's hut was coral-walled, cadjan-roofed, and cadjan-fenced. As we pushed through a stick gate, two squawking seagulls flew down from a pigeon cote atop a ten-foot pole and settled on Tuttu's shoulder.

'Koko and Yalu!' Tuttu introduced his two watchdogs. The gulls gave us hostile looks and flew back to the pigeon cote. The front door was locked on the outside, bolted on the inside, and Tuttu had to knock hard and long after opening the outside before his wife slid back the inside bolt. She was a slip of a girl, in her teens, and smiled as brightly as Tuttu. 'My wife,' said Tuttu, shattering my surmise that this was his daughter.

'They're Muslims,' said the second engineer. 'Their wives are always locked in.'

Tuttu felt that this did not explain all.

'No, no,' he said. 'Very few wives, too many men;divorce easy, and each man allowed to marry seven, eight times.Wives must be guarded, otherwise they are running away, or someone is stealing them.'

'You do need watchdogs, Tuttu!' I said.

'Oh, yes,' said Tuttu, 'flying watchdogs!' and took us to the rear of the house where four seagulls were roaming in a netted pen, looking very much like domesticated fowls. 'For a month,' said Tuttu, 'I keep them in the pen. Their wings are clipped, and they cannot fly away. The next month they roam the compound like domestic fowls, and are fed like them at regular intervals. When they're ready their wings are allowed to grow, but they go into the pigeon cote and stay there. If one gull goes roaming the other stays in the cote. At no time do both gulls go roaming. Always one gull is guarding the house.'

'Guarding your women!' I jibed.

'Yes, yes!' said Tuttu, quite seriously. 'I'll show you,' he said, and shouted across to his neighbour. The two chatted a while, and Tuttu came back to us beaming. He shouted to his

THE FLYING WATCHDOGS OF THE MALDIVE ISLANDS

wife, locked her in, and led us back across the atoll to the market square. Every time we asked, 'What's happening?' Tuttu's hands went up importantly and he said, 'Wait and see! Wait and see!' We waited.

About twenty minutes had passed when Tuttu pointed up and crowed, 'Koko! Koko!'

The gull circled the bazaar till it sighted Tuttu, then swooped down on him and began to squawk frenziedly.

'Come on, come on!' Tuttu urged us as he started to run. 'Koko says there's a stranger in the house.'

Long before we reached the hut we heard the squawking and shrieking of the other gull, and when we got there we saw Tuttu's neighbour brandishing a palm frond and ducking frantically to avoid the vicious beaks of Koko and Yalu. Tuttu's wife's face appeared at a window. Koko lunged for it, and it disappeared inside the house.

'See, see!' Tuttu was dancing a jig. 'My flying watchdogs, they guard my wife. My neighbour came to steal my wife, my gulls found me in the market and told me. See, see! How much better than dogs, eh? Flying watchdogs! What do you say, sir, one hundred and fifty rupees a pair.' He grinned at me.

'No, Tuttu, ' I said. 'I've no wife, only an alsatian, and it costs me a hundred and fifty rupees a month to keep.'

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* *

THE ROYAL LOTUS BATHING POOL - POLONNARUWA

Ellen Dissanayake

A slender, small-ankled queen
steps slowly down, down into clear water.
She bends forward, loosens her bathing cloth.
Her breasts are freed.
Behind the lovely jewel of her face is the blue sky
framed with massed small leaves of the surrounding forest.
Careless and laughing she lets the cloth fall, swirl, sink;
profligate with her beauty she destroys its reflection
as she reveals it to the unmirrored sky
and the clear eyes of her lover watching under the trees.

Six hundred years later we find the park deserted, the pool
arid --
blankly regarded by the gravid sky.
Only a band of grey langurs who soon ignore us
and our hoard of coloured fruits
cavort in and among the trees.
Expecting the storm, insects creep into curled, hot leaves;
taunting thunder they whine and complain.
The juicy flesh of papaya sweetens our mouths
like water filling a dry pool.
Refreshed, aware, we enter history.
Enticed by the fluted lotus shape
we step down, down among the ancient curving stones,
circles narrowing to circles, funnelled,
deep and hidden, the innermost petals.
Together we bathe in heat and centuries
under clouds the colour of langurs,
hearing thunder time and desire.

DILWARA TEMPLE (Mount Abu, Rajasthan)

Ellen Dissanayake

Downwards, from ceilings white stalactites wind.
Webs of ivoried moss secreted by the centuries
encircle lords and ladies, gods, dancers, horsemen,
fabulous beasts,
spread down the pillars of carved marble lace,
cool motionless colonnades
around which come and go
the coloured and inconstant pilgrim tides.

Unmoved, isolate
sit the tirthankaras,
each in his separate ivory cell,
ever-smiling.
Alone in the darkness --
in the empty silence of the night --
their polished eyes glint,
fixed and watchful as stars.

'DEAD ERE HIS PRIME': IN MEMORY OF LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA (1941 - 1978)

The death by drowning of Lakdasa Wikkramasinha in 1978 robbed Sri Lanka of her most original bi-lingual poet.

In the very first volume of poems that he published, Wikkramasinha gave notice that he was preparing himself, as other dedicated poets in other times and cultures have sometimes done, for the writing of an epic poem. In his case, this was to take the form of

> a long poem of my ancestors that I will write ultimately in Sinhala.[1]

It may be reasonably conjectured that certain individual poems he published consequently between 1965 and 1978 represent early drafts of sections of this larger work, intended for re-working or translation into Sinhala at some later date. The sequence begins with 'Hearts of Granite' (1965), and includes 'Stones of Akuratiye Walauwa' and 'The Three Sisters'(1970), 'The Refuge:Doova, Cotta'(1973),'The Flames', '(O Regal Blood)' and 'Weapons'(1975), 'Luis de Camoes', 'The Distaff', 'Poem with a Grimace' and 'The Wisdom Won of Ancient Battles'(1976). Poets who choose to hymn an ancient lineage are rare in these republican (not to mention democratic and socialist) times, and it seems clear that Wikkramasinha's ambitions as a poet were at odds with his consciousness of what Gamini Haththotuwegama has called 'the unequal life of the world around him'. But it is not every writer who possesses family traditions worth celebrating, and Wikkramasinha pursued his aim unremittingly to the end of his life, producing lovingly wrought poems that some commentators deplore, ignore or brush aside in favour of more obviously 'socially conscious' pieces.

The second part of his intention - to write his long poem in Sinhala - was also persevered with, and in 1977 he published his first volume of poems composed in Sinhala (see U. P. Meddegama's review of Wikkramasinha's Avurudu Mangala Davasa - The Anniversary Day - in this issue). Reactions to his Sinhala poetry have been somewhat mixed, their perplexed uncertainties strongly reminiscent of the complaints made by Robert Bridges of the 'oddity' and 'obscurity' seemingly affected by Gerard Manley Hopkins in his innovative verse. But in opening his verse to the spoken Sinhala idiom Wikkramasinha shows himself willing to cross conventional barriers, announces the entire and complex Sinhala linguistic field to be the property of the poet who wishes to possess it, and indicates moreover his awareness of parallel experiments in English verse-writing undertaken by his contemporaries in Sri Lanka and overseas.

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(1) L.Wikkramasinha, Lustre.Poems (1965) p. 51.

'DEAD ERE HIS PRIME': IN MEMORY OF LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA

It is possible that he justified the writing of English verse (an activity that his family traditions and Sinhala sensibility led him at the beginning of his career as a poet to think distasteful, even traitorous) by regarding it as an indispensable part of his preparation for the writing of a major poem in Sinhala.

Wikkramasinha's determination to be heard led him to persist in privately printing his English poems in small paperback volumes. These little books, produced in small printing establishments in Kandy from 1965 on, reached a limited readership until New Ceylon Writing (then in the planning stages itself at the University campus in Peradeniya) brought his unpublished verse to the attention of poetry publishers outside Sri Lanka: as a result, the poem 'To My Friend Aldred' was selected by Howard Sergeant for publication in Outposts in the autumn of 1969. New Ceylon Writing gave Wikkramasinha's work wide circulation both locally and overseas from 1970 on, printing some of his finest poetry in its pages, publishing reviews of his books as they appeared and presenting him also in the less familiar role of a poetry reviewer. Publication in other overseas journals, including Madrona, Quest, Eastern Horizon, Tanggara, Adam International Review and the Journal of South Asian Literature soon followed. In 1977 Wikkramasinha's verse appeared, together with that of other Sri Lankan poets, in Dutch translation. It is regrettable that his death occurred before the publication of a selection from his best work in the Heinemann anthology Poems from India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore.

Besides his constant (some would say obsessive) hymning of an ancestral theme, other concerns have wrung memorable English poems from Wikkramasinha: his verse celebrates thoughts of love and of death, acts of artistry and of cruelty, memories of friendship and the still unobliterated beauty of his home land. But always recurrent in every collection he has published is the theme that seems to have moved him most deeply: poetry and the poet.

In tribute to his considerable talent, New Ceylon Writing prints in the pages that follow a selection from Wikkramasinha's poems and prose writings on the subject of poetry and the poet's persona. Seriousness and satire mingle attractively in these ironic self-assessments, in his personal credo of controlled violence, in his constant evaluation of the poet's function in society, and even in his wry dismissal of the local academic who has told him he will 'never be known'. More truly, perhaps, than anywhere else, 'Hic jacet Lakdasa Wikkramasinha'. We also print assessments of his work made at various times by Sri Lankan critics; and a list of Wikkramasinha's writings and of reviews of his work by others, that have appeared in New Ceylon Writing since its inception in 1970.

LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA (1941 - 1978)

1965

The following poems and notes are taken from Lakdasa Wikkramasinha's first volume of verse, Lustre.Poems, printed at Ariya Printing Works, Kandy in 1965 in a limited edition of 200 copies, and dedicated as follows:

For my Grandmother
Mercy Ellen ne Kirthi Srimeghavarna Disanayaka
Your mind, at 90
Lucid as your blood of centuries.

THE POET

He is the one that, tossing a bomb into
The crowd, takes notes;
The one who, from an unseen distance
Levels on the tripod that black rifle
With sights that see as far as his soul

Trains and levels, manoeuvres for a clear sight
Of the speaker on the platform;
Waits, watching the clock, for the onset of a car
In the left corner of its back seat
Carrying the enemy.

The poet is the one who is always preparing
The ambush, the one who
Covers with layers of
Earth and grass and worn weed,
The spiked pit,
And watches from the level of weeds ahead;

The poet is the bomb in the city,
Unable to bear the circle of the
Seconds in his heart,
Waiting to burst.

POEM - TRIBE

For the tribe,
The police dismantle an handbomb;
The critics take apart a poem -
For the tribe.

LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA (1941 - 1978)

THE MUSE

The Muse is duenna of the poem,
And the poet's succubus;
And lives on the poet's white blood,
And gives of it;

And in giving,
She is Sarasvathi at dawn,
Kali at noon and murderous night
And for me always, Patthini.

The Muse is also any woman
I lust for, as I lust for death.

Two-thirds of the poems I wrote between August and October 1965 are in this book; the section LUSTRE marks a phase of Sinhala sensibility. I go on to the exploration of my persona and deadly position: I have come to realise that I am using the language of the most despicable and loathesome people on earth; I have no wish to extend its life and range (or) enrich its tonality.

To write in English is a form of cultural treason. I have had for the future to think of a way of circumventing this treason; I propose to do this by making my writing entirely immoralist and destructive.

And the trauma of this book has detracted from its architectural cohesion. Nevertheless I see that it has more architecture, and coherence of sensibility than any collection of poems produced in Ceylon.

I wish to comment on a few of my poems which other people may denounce if they wish, but not criticise:

... 'Hearts of Granite' is a compression of a long poem on my ancestors that I will write ultimately in Sinhala. The poem relates to my maternal forbears - a confused and inadequate account is Cyrus D.F.Abayakoon's A History of the Ancient Pinto-Jayawardana Family: Immediate Descendants and Relatives. 1577 - 1934 (Col.1934)

Line 8 of 'The Muse' has lost certainty; for the present I can only say that this poem is too reductive a statement of my experience of the Muse, and of the preordained life of the poet and of poetry.

L WS
3.12.65

LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA (1941 - 1978)

1970

The two poems below were printed by Wikkramasinha in a collection of his verse written between 1967 and 1968 titled Fifteen Poems, bearing the dedication 'For Claire' and produced at Kandy Printers Limited, Kandy in January 1970. A note at the back conveys acknowledgments to Outposts, in which 'To My Friend Aldred' first appeared, and to Edmund Peiris and M.E.Fernando ed., Maga Salakuna(Colombo 1942), for notes and a literal translation of the 17th century Sinhala poem upon which the poet based his own poem 'Birds'.

TO MY FRIEND ALDRED

My dear chap,

In this Kandyan weather there is
no shame in having in your bed
a servant maid -
The same passion moved others too famous in time -
when there were servant maids about

Achilles for one - who gave his heart to
Briseis, a milky slave,
& Tecmessa: enemy blood, as Horace has it;
and Agamemnon fired Troy and burnt his heart to a cinder,hot
for a virgin there;

and though we do not get so Greek here
we are not to such titillations immune
- being classical in our traditions.
And so it is
with you and your Jose
with such long lashes
to whom you have lost your heart.

And no fear, she is not engendered by the low
at all. Dismiss the mere thought; I envisage indeed
such an ancestry
as leading in its heyday
to some king of these parts, or some
noble lord, or at the least

some lonely Scotsman in these hills. Else
she would not have such a loyal, unmercenary mind,
or cook such yams, steaming purple
and pots of jak, steaming yellow
or have a figure

LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA (1941 - 1978)

Straight out of the old poetry books:
Breasts like gourds, and ripe and Oh
nodding like geese, Thighs
like plantain trunks, and Haunches as a king could ride on,
or Keyt

And lastly
in this matter of praise, in your fortune -
Thick black coils of hair on her head, and Elsewhere -
I mean, all's well
that ends there

And all roads lead to Rome!

BIRDS
from the 17th Century Sinhala

Peacocks
On the craggy knolls
Gaudy tail-plumes spread in
Ten directions
Gloat in the sun with long
-drawn cries.

Ears of corn
Incline like golden chaplets,
and the
Deep-green parrots with
Crimson beaks
Clip them, and over Alutvela
Take wing, like sheaves
Of rainbows.

Young swans
From the verge of the forest
Emerge, flight
By flight, like white
Waves onto land.

Here
In Ankelihenne, restless and
Greedy, birds
Everywhere - each
By its mate, at their
Pleasure, feeding
On fruits and tendrils.

- Anonymous

LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA (1941 - 1978)

1971

In November 1971 Lakdasa Wikkramasinha published at his own expense a small anthology titled Twelve Poems to Justin Daraniyagala 1903 - 1967 which he edited, and to which he contributed one poem,and a foreword from which the notes below are taken. The book was published in a limited edition of 100 copies, and printed at Ariya Press, Kandy.

The poem 'From the Life of the Folk Poet, Ysinno' is taken from New Ceylon Writing 2(1971), where it first appeared.

> Justin Daraniyagala died in 1967 - a very isolated figure, but perhaps the greatest modern painter that Asia has produced. A few months after his death, a retrospective exhibition - sufficiently distinguished by a sense of abasement-.... of his work, much of it up to then not shown, was held, and it was, at this time,proposed to erect a permanent museum to house his painting and other works, including a quantity of his writings. Nothing of course, has happened, except that now, four years after his death, he has become very much the possession of a dwindling, affluent minority of ... Art Fanciers - persons who had projected an unnecessary mystique round him to exploit their private ends. He has been made inaccessible to the poor people of this country to whose culture, especially in the low country, he belonged.
>
> The poems and translations assembled here are offered as a tribute to his painting - and to his quality as a man. It seems necessary that we separate Daraniyagala's reputation from those who now seek to trade on it.
>
> LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA

FROM THE LIFE OF THE FOLK POET, YSINNO

Ysinno cut the bamboo near Hanikette,
And from those wattles made his hut
And had nothing to cover it with, nothing
Like a hundred and sixty
Bales of straw.

So he made his way to the Walauwa at Iddamalgoda
And to the Menike said how poor he was,
And how from his twenties he had made those lines of song
Swearing before her all his fealties.
So she said, Wait for the yala
Harvest and take the straw.

LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA (1941 - 1978)

Ysinno said,O the rains are coming near,
My woman fretting, her kid will get all wet

Then the kind Menike said, O then
You take what straw you need from the behind shed.
And Ysinno being a folk-poet, and his lines being not all dead,
The benison of the Menike of Iddamalgoda
Lives even today.

1973

The prose extract below is taken from a review of Wimal Dissanayake's book of poems in Sinhala, Indracapaya,which Lakdasa Wikkramasinha contributed to New Ceylon Writing 3 (1973). 'In Ancient Kotmalē' first appeared in Wikkramasinha's Nossa Senhora dos Chingalas, his third book of poems; printed in Colombo by Kularatne & Co., Ltd., it was published by Praja Publishers of Maradana and bears the dedication 'To Shanthini'.

> ...These poems ... have the discipline of being literal. But ... they spring from a background - rural middle-class, repetitive and prosaic - which produces verse that, to put it lightly, suffers from being confined in its sympathies. A poem which exemplifies these limitations is 'Mata hataliha pirei'. Here the very great agitation the poet feels on reaching forty is brought about by his realisation that, through all these years, he hasn't been able to accumulate any kind of wealth (danayak), and come by a plot of land... The failure to realise these things when one has reached middle age is tantamount to dying ...
>
> This writing, in a more sophisticated literary milieu, would be classed as Camp: the ironical adumbration of an outmoded way of looking and feeling, as a matter of fashion; but here I believe this is far from being the case. We are still writing within a traditional culture, and it is difficult for one, when it so happens, to get over the lack of a historical identity - to write a major personal poetry, to have major personal concerns - without some conscious antiquity of blood. I say this with some embarrassment. One ramification of this may be seen in Wimal Dissanayake's inability to make of the

LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA (1941 - 1978)

'Nagala kanda' he so often writes about, a part of his personal/poetic landscape: it is not a part of his personal history, which constitutes the reality of his imagination and empowers him with the material of his poetry.

One does not mean however, to suggest that Dissanayake has no 'ambition': the contrary is shown by poems like 'Mama Pidurutalagala kanda vemi' and 'Prartanavak nohot anagata kaviyek'. And his reputation is now a clearly established academic and popular one. And while many of his poems - in theme, imagery and diction -tend to be of a retrospective kind - looking back to the now discounted poetry of the 50s and early 60s, of G.B.Senanayaka, Siri Gunesinghe and Mahagama Sekera ... his translations of poems by Lorca, Neruda, a Spanish lullaby and an African folksong, though presumably from the English, prevent him from falling into the regressiveness and total provinciality that marks Sinhala poetry today.

L.W.

IN ANCIENT KOTMALĒ

In the beautiful principality, in Kotmalē
I will build my house of the good soil's brick
With the timber of the ringing forests,
And I will cover it with the tiles flat,
One on one, as the palms of the farmers -

And in the morning will I see
The sun wounded as my heart with a million arrows,
Rise between the mountain ranges
And spread in the green valley its golden blood.

And I will go into the fields in the seasons -
I will sow the grain, a stream between my hands,
I will cast the grain in falling nets,
It will stream up round the calves of maidens
From the viridian fire of that clay.

And in the kilns of my sun-wed fields,
And under the haven of passing clouds
As I repose, in those almost everlasting days,
In the time ordained, in green calendars
Will come my yearned harvest.

LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA (1941 - 1978)

1975

Wikkramasinha's fourth volume of verse, titled (O Regal Blood) and containing six poems, was printed by Praja Prakasakayo of Maradana and published privately in February 1975. It bears the dedication 'In Memory of my Grandmother Emily Ann Pinto-Jayawardena, 1888 - 1946', and contains on the back and inside flap of a blood-red dust wrapper, the poet's description of himself and his poetry. It also reprints two critical assessments of his work that Wikkramasinha presumably took some satisfaction in; one, from the Ceylon Daily News, described him as possessed of 'a tremendously violent creative urge', and 'hypersensitive even to the point of being physically ill', the other (reproduced elsewhere in this issue) was taken from the Journal of Commonwealth Literature and was apparently regarded by him as something apart from what he terms below 'the neo-imperialistic,hegemonistic design of the so-called 'Commonwealth' Literature'.

Lakdasa Wikkramasinha (b. 1941) was educated at St. Thomas's College, Mt. Lavinia; did Law for 3 years, & lived in the jungles off Yahangala, Uva Province for a couple more. Published work includes 4 collections of verse, including Twelve Poems to Justin Daraniyagala, 1903 - 1967 which he edited ..... A poetry broadsheet Kolaya, started by him in 1973 has since gone to other hands, much to the detriment of the tradition of the Sinhala kavi kolaya ...

In a country which tends to produce deracinated or watery local-colouristic 'English' verse, or academic imitations of 'English Literature', Wikkramasinha remains probably the only writer with a vigorous and definitely indigenous style, a style which extends to his critical writings on poetry and painting ... and which clearly resists the neo-imperialistic, hegemonistic design of the so-called 'Commonwealth' Literature.

1976

The last book of English verse Wikkramasinha published was The Grasshopper Gleaming, which was printed at the Felix Press in Colombo and privately published in March 1976 with the dedication, 'For My Mother'. The book takes its title from a line of verse in the poem 'The Wall':

... against
the white-washed
wall, the grass-hopper

gleams ...

LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA (1941 - 1978)

In the single note provided, the poet explains the meaning of the word 'grass-hopper' as

> Sinhalese mountain artillery, circa early 17th Cent.) set on wooden base usually curving up in a 'makara' design, & resting in front on 2 iron legs extending sideways & outwards; very aptly called grasshoppers by the Dutch (Sprinkhaan) - shape being suggestive of a grasshopper, & giving excellent camouflage effect; of various calibres. 3 of these 'native' field-pieces may be seen in the National Museum, Kandy.

The two poems below are taken from The Grasshopper Gleaming.

THE POET

to Ian & R.

Spavin-legged, he stumbles; savagely
the dogs bark after him. He writes,
awake in the distant night, consorting
with the lovers of women who return sated.

There are night-prowlers; money-lenders
among hoards, asleep in safes of iron.
The poet, death-augur, and sentinel, keeps
his native word true, the very king of grief.

Tough naval captains of this land
are braided of the poet's nakedness; Ministers
of State & Culture, riding past his hovel-house. He is
hidden to death. Denied. Unself-seeking -

Keeping his crooked head-piece out of sight.
Sagely it was said: More a man is denied this world
the more God grants him of His wealth -
& Horace (I would instance) - denied of gesture, friends,
slopped

in his wine-vats - was bitter - a patron to the six-foot
earth. Welcome there, the poet travels, with Reasonable
Peace
as company; having lived. Entreated. Kicked aside the
pillar
that props the state, feeds & roofs the People - Scrolled:

iniurioso ne pede proruas
stantem columnam, neu populus frequens (arm the bloody
mob!)
ad arma cessantis, ad arma
concitet imperimque frangat.

LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA (1941 - 1978)

te semper anteit serva Necessitas,
clavos trabalis et cuneos manu
gestans aena, nec severus
uncus abest liquuidumque plumbum.

te Spes et albo rara Fides colit
velata panno, nec comitem abnegat,
utcumque mutata potentis
veste domos inimica linquis.

Thus Horace, strained of dreams,
sees Gód dark-suited, is lions, green
foxes, counting the six tigers
on which six angels sit
as the Destroyer comes - elephant-musted,
weed-rotten, trumpeting
the poet's grievous splendour.

Blood-hungry men, women with nail-headed
pestles, pound to pulp his brain-bone -
The Tradition of the Drum, & the poet's life
is made 'intense & posthumous.' So -

Dead. Eager, thorn-lashed eyes, streak through every line
of his.
Law-abiding words, swim; jilted phrases are metaphored
to the maelstrom of common speech, passionate abuse,
paddling, in a raft of riches, to the total poem.

Not the Styx, but the soiled
river of cemeteries keep him. Fly -
laid eggs his fruitful tongue. In astonished
departures, the ghostly poet sees

the Undertakers of History make his name
Immortal - in leather books, dust-
jacketed; The Rich, paid discreetly
with shades of withered skin

are enflamed, leave their many mansions,
to learn poverty's riches & the poet's
red spine, so long chained, covers
the long ink-columns of all obituaries:

Iron Destiny & Justice, on that score, agree.

WORK OF A PROFESSOR

What does the Professor do?
He plants brinjals
all day because he's too
intelligent
to do anything else.
But he loves his country;
he loves poetry ...
- and so the Professor
with his brass
forehead, and his quick and sure
voice, keeps telling me, you'll
never be
'known'.

His mind like a bin of millet
and a little boy now
swinging on his shoulder
(with a little brinjal already
in his hand) he
keeps telling me,
I'll never be
known. Among the frizzled white chilli plants
at home, digging and laughing in incomprehension,
I reflect sadly - and feel like death:

I'll never be known.

* * * * * * * *

SOME CRITICAL ASSESSMENTS OF WIKKRAMASINHA'S POETRY

GAMINI HATHTHOTUWEGAMA:

> ... Lakdasa Wikkramasinha is a poet who is not only at home in a whole environment but has also absorbed it into the fibre of his poetry. He is a paradox, because he is also the most verbally gifted of our English writers - one of our English poetic 'naturals'. He is also able to give the medium as it is used here an unexpected strength, by imparting to it the full vigour of his personality. I understand Lakdasa's work - his inward-looking world - less rationally than that of our other English poets... His range is too limitingly personal to make his creative activity fully worthwhile: for an English

> poet in Sri Lanka this could be nearly suicidal. Lakdasa writes in Sinhala too, and I hope the possibility of contact with a wider public would induce greater range; such masculine poets are rare in any language.
>
> (From a review of Navasilu 1 (1976) in Tribune 22,12, September 10,1977.)

> ..... In the Lustre selections there is (in) his own portrait of 'The Poet' ... a definition of the healthy and necessary destructive function of the poet. The poet is the true adversary, especially in a corrupt, false, tyrannical and dehumanised society which he must subvert and overthrow. It is a pity that Lakdasa couldn't keep to this destructively involved and committed view of the poet's creative function as often as we might have wished him to. I think he sometimes submitted to the pressures of a private world, an inward world of obsessions with an out-dated past, and tended to lose the grip he had otherwise struggled to keep on the realities around him...Yet there are, even in that volume - though without the rich austerity he cultivated as he matured - some interesting pieces of conscience, pieces through which he bites into the unequal life of the world around him.
>
> ..... Lakdasa, I feel, always needed something to explode about ... and the best explosion did not come about over a private traumatic experience but through the largest confrontation that his just anger, his enraged humanity ... could experience: from his response to a whole culture and civilization that had made him also commit, as he thought, 'cultural treason'. I think his most valuable, his really momentous poetic statement surfaces in his 'Don't talk to me about Matisse' 1:

Don't talk to me about Matisse, don't talk to me
about Gauguin, or even
the earless painter van Gogh,
& the woman reclining on a blood-spread ...
the aboriginal shot by the great white hunter
Matisse

with a gun with two nostrils, the aboriginal
crucified by Gauguin - the syphilis-spreader,
the yellowed obesity.

---

1 'Don't talk to me about Matisse'(here quoted in full) was first published in Wikkramasinha's (O Regal Blood).

LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA (1941 - 1978)

Don't talk to me about Matisse ...
the European style of 1900, the tradition
of the studio
where the nude woman reclines forever
on a sheet of blood.

Talk to me instead of the culture gene-
rally -
how the murderers were sustained
by the beauty robbed of savages: to our
remote
villages the painters came, and our
white-washed
mud-huts were splattered with gunfire.

Here is the man who had absorbed ... something of the best essence of Western culture, who had these great artists at his fingertips and could appreciate European art genuinely, but could yet denounce the fundamental lie that a culture based on exploitation, plunder and the massacre of the innocents could practice and foster in the form of aesthetic cultural, philosophic and sociological concepts. He calls the bluff that separates and isolates art and culture from the brute facts of history...In this poem Lakdasa achieves such an integration of feeling and thought, so adapting his very personal voice for public effect, achieving such an intensity of visual and aural effect, the finest fruit of his imaging, that he brings to its climax a rich and shattering power.

(From an address delivered at a memorial meeting for Lakdasa Wikkramasinha organised by SLACLALS in May 1978, and published in Navasilu 2 (February 1979)

THIRU KANDIAH:

.... Consider, for instance, the first two lines of the last stanza of Lakdasa Wikkramasinha's early poem 'From the life of the folk-poet Ysinno' ... They remain English, (yet) are, in a remarkably unselfconscious and unpretentious way, strongly Lankan in rhythm and texture. This quality does not derive simply from the use of the Sinhala name 'Menike', a proper noun which, in certain areas of Sri Lanka, is also used by underlings and menials

LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA (1941 - 1978)

as a term of reference or address for the lady of the house and her daughters, though it undoubtedly does contribute to the general effect. There are in addition other linguistic features that mark the lines as being distinctively Lankan English.Consider, for example, the use of the adjective 'kind' as a pre-nominal qualifier of the semi-proper noun, a linguistic ploy that comes easily to Lankan users of English.

Or again, consider the expression, 'the behind shed'.The substitution of the word 'behind' for 'back' is by no means a current Lankan expression, for everyday Lankan speech would prefer'the back shed'. It nevertheless helps draw out in an idealized form an essential Lankan quality in the experience treated while at the same time highlighting the difference between this experience and any 'English' English experience, a difference that is underlined by the impossibility of the resulting phrase in 'Standard' English.

Consider, too, the distinctive quality of the injunction 'You take what straw you need'. The retention in surface structure of the second person subject, as well as the particular collocation 'what straw', which substitutes 'what' for the more 'acceptable' term 'whatever' or 'the', and which has a kind of easygoing expansiveness associated with it, are both characteristically Lankan in quality. When these lines are read with the characteristic Lankan intonational and rhythmic emphases, they create easily and with no sense of striving a fine sense of the generosity of this traditional aristocratic lady, almost casual in the manner in which it is exercised, not costing her anything, but nevertheless large in its responsiveness to the need of the recipient and in the significance it has for him. Note,too, the rhythmic quality contributed by the expression 'O'. This is not an expression found in just that manner in Lankan English speech, but it plays a significant role in creating the distinctively Lankan effects the poet attempts to communicate in these lines, the effects that make us feel, when we arrive at those all-important last three lines, that they are so very right and just.

(From 'Linguistic Self-expropriation in Sri Lankan Creative Writing in English', an article contributed by Dr Kandiah to the Journal of South Asian Literature)

LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA (1941 - 1978)

Lakdasa Wikkramasinha's tragic and untimely death a few months ago, just as he was beginning to develop a more mature style, deprived the Lankan community of the only writer who had, so far, given any indication of being equal to the challenge before him ... of developing a truly authentic Lankan literature in English.

Consider his poem, 'The Cobra':

> Your great hood was like a flag
> hung up there
> in the village.
> Endlessly the people came to Weragoda -
> watched you (your eyes like braziers),
> standing somewhat afar.
> They stood before you in obeisance.Death,
> the powers of the paramitas, took you to heaven
> however.
>
> The sky, vertical, is where you are now
> shadowing the sun, curling round and round in
> my mind.
> They whisper death-stories -
> but it was only my woman Dunkiriniya,
> the very lamp of my heart,
> that died. *

The poem is set in the village, and the poet speaks in the voice of a villager, whose woman, 'the very lamp of my heart', has been killed by a cobra before it was itself killed and hung on display in the village. The focus is on the profound sense of loss he feels at the death of his woman, but the strength of the poem derives very closely from the admirable sense of personal detachment the poet shows in describing the experience and the highly controlled artistry with which this detachment enables him to treat it.

The first stanza ... is so totally devoid of any kind of easy, inward-looking sentimentality that it does not even give a hint of the particular personal tragedy that the poem is about - although, when we do finally arrive at it in the next stanza, we find that we have been prepared by the first stanza to receive, though not to accept, it. The attention is focussed steadily instead on the evocation, in powerful physical terms, of the dominating presence and power of the cobra, a sense of which fills the village to its very corners just as it suffuses the entire stanza. The people of the village,hearing of the event, come

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* 'The Cobra' was first published in The Grasshopper Gleaming (1976).

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in endless streams to see it, drawn not so much by curiosity as by the power it has over them, the power that compels obeisance. And it is finally Death alone, the death that in its great power the cobra is able to inflict on the living, that, drawing its might from the supernatural beings of a mythology rooted deep in traditional antiquity, is able to vanquish it.

This kind of detachment, which enables the poet to keep his attention fixed firmly on the delineation of the larger, non-personal scales of the experience without once lapsing into some kind of private self-pity, is not unrelated to the more fundamental issue of linguistico-cultural detachment... Wikkramasinha loses nothing, achieving the kind of detachment that permits him to bring his true symbiotic self into its own. Nowhere does his role as a villager in the poem lead him to negate his true symbiotic self, being protected from the easy temptation to do this by his detachment from the scene he describes. This does not mean that he denies what the villager essentially is and tries to make him a poor copy of his own symbiotic self. Thus in referring to Dunkiriniya, whom he has lost, he spurns any of the anaemic terms that users of Lankan English might generally choose to confine themselves to for the full-blooded term 'Woman', characteristic of the vitality of village speech and the way of life it represents. He presents the picture of the stream of viewers coming to see the dead cobra without any of the condescension that some habitual users of Lankan English at least might feel at what appears to them to be an embarrassing manifestation of the typical mindless curiosity of the villager. For all this, he does not turn away from what he essentially is, for his view is not simply that of the insider's, he stands back a little from what is going on and observes it from a certain distance. Thus it is that he is able to make the nice observation about the people watching the dead cobra, 'standing somewhat afar', delicately and precisely hitting off their mingled awe,respect and curiosity. And so also is it that he is able to prevent the mere spectacle of the crowd from distracting his attention from what mainly concerns him, the sense of the dominating presence and power of the cobra. Even as he talks of how the people 'watched you', the attention shifts from their eyes, the eyes that did the watching, to the cobra's, with their intense searing power that reduces all else to insignificance.

It is on this detachment, ultimately, that Wikkramasinha's very interesting linguistic achievement rests ... enabling him to use a language which draws its essential resources from the distinctive Lankan system of English. This is not to say that he makes direct or simple use of any of the more obvious forms and expressions that mark this system as being different from the 'Standard' system, incorporating them in their rough and ready form in his writing.Like any creative artist who draws his resources from the colloquial speech of his people, he too takes this speech as it is actually used, refines and idealizes it, and develops out of it an artistic idiom which reflects the essential rhythms and texture of that speech, before proceeding to use it with a naturalness and a sense of appropriateness that help it not to draw self-conscious attention to itself.

We shall find evidence which suggests that this is what Wikkramasinha has done if we turn our attention to his use of language in the last stanza, which gathers up all the suggestions and effects that have been introduced earlier, intense in their power, familiar in their traditional antiquity and massive in their scale, and, even as the verse appears to be quietening down at the end, telescopes them with stunning impact into the intimate personal experience of loss, investing it with a largeness and a significance that are truly remarkable. The distinctive Lankan use of the language with which this achievement is associated has its most obvious manifestation in the line 'They whisper death stories'. Whether this is linguistically consistent with the 'Standard' system or not is no matter; the point is that it is intensely Lankan in quality, using, as it does, the indeterminate pronoun to refer to people whose identity does not matter to what is going on, as well as the process of compounding to pack meaning into expressions, in a manner that rings strongly of typical Lankan habits of speech. The image he uses to describe his woman, 'the lamp of my heart', something which just avoids becoming a mere cliche' by packing 'into itself a new life within the context' 1, invites similar comments. Part of its life derives no doubt from the way in which it catches up the earlier picture of the sun being shadowed, giving a sense not simply of a lamp being extinguished but of the whole universe being darkened

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1 G.Haththotuwegama, op.cit.

as the life that it represents dies. But part of it also derives from its distinctive linguistic quality. On the one hand, it recalls to mind the commonplace 'English' English expression 'the light of my soul'; at the same time, the substitution of the word 'lamp', an ordinary word referring to a common household object in a village home, for 'light' gives it a texture that is different from what is normally expected, with the difference subsisting in the fusion of something English with something Lankan, the kind of fusion that is the essential defining feature of the Lankan English system. And as we begin to respond to this kind of linguistic effect, the more we begin to become aware of the daring and freedom that he throughout shows in his use of the language ... giving rise to such expressions as 'The sky vertical' and 'curling round and round my mind'(does the repetition of the adverb here make it necessary to insist on a preposition 'in' before the phrase 'my mind'?), expressions which, by their absolute rightness for the distinctive Lankan experience being presented, render any attempt to apply 'Standard' norms to them, or to raise the kind of formal grammatical question of the kind given above within parentheses simply irrelevant. So that finally we are able to say of Wikkramasinha, as we cannot of most other Lankan writers, that here at last we have a writer who, to modify the words of Yeats, is able to give us the whole symbiotic Lankan English man - blood, imagination, intellect running together.

(From 'Lankan English Schizoglossia', a paper read at the plenary session on English in the Third World, Tenth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, New Delhi, 10 - 16 December, 1978)

YASMINE GOONERATNE:

Lakdasa Wikkramasinha's Fifteen Poems represents a significant advance on his earlier volume, Lustre, developing an accomplished method and a distinctive personal voice that are interesting for reasons other than their intrinsic virtues: as a poet who writes in the Sinhala language as well as in English, Wikkramasinha's ability to permit his fluency in each language to shape his creative use of the other is noteworthy in an environment hitherto remarkable for the completeness with which it ex-

cludes each language from the literary sphere in which the other operates. The poetry generates disillusionment and a brooding bitterness that amounts almost to violence, the best antidote to which is provided by some witty, ironical pieces.[1]

(From a bibliography of Ceylonese writing in English in 1970, Journal of Commonwealth Literature VI,2(December 1971)

Among other fine things, Fifteen Poems contains a delicate translation, 'Birds', from the 17th century Sinhala, an easy, self-possessed epistle 'To My Friend Aldred', the range of which takes in much more than its ostensible subject of friendship and love (and which has already appeared abroad, in Outposts), and at least four poems - 'Stones of Akuratiye Walauwa', 'Five Swords', 'The Three Sisters' and 'The Refuge:Doova, Cotta' - that give new expression to one of the themes of Lustre. Poems, the poet's sense of the decay of an old,once heroic and beautiful, ordered way of life. 'Nayika', 'The wind flows' and 'Nativity' are poems that in different ways give disciplined utterance to deep or troubled feeling; 'Country School (1967)', 'Galle - In memoriam Adeline Berhans', 'Antonio Barrettu' and 'Camoes' explore the means by which at least one poet has come to terms with the past, both personal and historical.

(From a review of Fifteen Poems in New Ceylon Writing 1 1970)

Wikkramasinha's poem 'Coconuts' (his own contribution to the anthology Twelve Poems to Justin Daraniyagala 1903 - 1967) is one which deliberately eschews any conventionally 'poetic' quality, and in which the poet has served his style as the lightning in his poem serves a tree,

> reducing the branches to ash and exposing
> ekels and pith
> both blackened.

In some ways the anthology seems to stand still or cast back in time as in the reprinting of George Keyt's 1938 tribute to Daraniyagala, 'Neglected Garlands'... A design which seems to have been visual rather than aural or intellectual seems to have guided the editor in his choice ... 'The poems and translations assembled here are offered

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1 This review was reprinted on the cover of Wikkramasinha's (O Regal Blood) in 1975.

as a tribute to his painting - and to his quality as a man', says the editor's Preface of Justin Daraniyagala. Certainly ... (most of) the poems in the collection unite in their conscious application of artistic controls to feeling and emotion.

All in all, the collection is important to Ceylonese poetry and its development, in its combination of characteristic weaknesses with the most hopeful sources of possible future strength. One regrets the absence of Patrick Fernando's verse from the anthology ... Wikkramasinha's achievement as an editor suffers by this omission. In his meticulousness and his capacity for artistic self-discipline, Fernando is the writer from whom a beginning poet has the most to learn, and these qualities bring him very close to the Ceylonese artist that this collection of poems was intended to honour.

(From a review of Twelve Poems... in New Ceylon Writing 3, 1973)

Howard Sergeant, an editor especially gifted with serendipity (that art whose very name derives from 'Serendip', the antique name for Ceylon, of making happy discoveries by chance) published a poem by a Ceylonese poet some years ago that helps to illustrate the multiplicity of literary and cultural influences shaping Ceylonese verse today. A personal poem, studiedly casual in its manner, Lakdasa Wikkramasinha's 'To My Friend Aldred' brings together the classical traditions of West and East that exist in uneasy separateness, for the most part, in even the most educated Ceylonese mind. Reaching beyond the limits it sets itself, to parallels in Greek legend and the verbal symbolism of Indian classical poetry, to the royal pleasures of Kandy's forgotten court and - in ironic contrast - of lonely British tea planters in the surrounding hills, it rests finally on a statement of loveliness of character and person that silences conventional taboo.

This poem, unlike a number of others that have been published abroad, is representative of Ceylonese poetry in the truest sense - not, of course, of a general level of skill or depth of sensibility - but of the cheerful fact that the most vigorous, creative talents in Sri Lanka today write directly out of the local environment, making free and meaningful use of a variety of sources of imagery and association. They have done, it appears for good, with the exclusive diet of foreign models

that substituted until very recently for knowledge and intuitive experience...

In 'Recipe for a Sinhalese Novel', Lakdasa Wikkramasinha makes ironic fun of literary conventions in contemporary Sinhala fiction which

> let a dozen letters arrive, like widows, at this stage -
> Count the pages, cultivate the grass,
> Water the plants with insanity, and lastly,
> bury the dead.

... while 'Stones of Akuratiye Walauwa' reveals another kind of poetic sensibility as the structure of the lines

> There is only the fallow smell of obliterated fields.
> And the twenty-one windows of the house
> That looked inwards into poetry, into the courtyard
> And the grain, drying in the sun, is perhaps
> The last memory
> Witnessed, before emptiness pervades
> Forgotten time

reflects the obliterated history and broken traditions of a community whose dignity survives only in the individual disintegrating memory...

The manner in which Western and Oriental traditions have intergrown fruitfully in poetry is best seen in a new freedom to select, interpret and record according to personal insight and temperament... Lakdasa Wikkramasinha's 'In Ancient Kotmalē' has roots in Yeats's 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', but depicts a rural Ceylon community-life in which the tiles of the house symbolising the poet's life lie

> flat
> One on one, as the palms of the farmers.

The events of April 1971 added a new dimension to Ceylonese poetry. From that date onwards it has become increasingly obvious that the local environment is no longer tranquil, that a familiar society is developing in unforeseeable directions, and that the Ceylonese poet must maintain his responsiveness to these changes if he is to continue to be creative. The swirl of physical violence ... in 1971 reflected a long-standing moral disorder in our society. The English-speaking segment of it was, incidentally, forced to look critically at itself for the first time as a result, and some

reactions spilled over into poetry ... But two among our poets had long anticipated, with insight and sympathy, the true state of our social condition. In 1963 Gamini Seneviratne had written -

> Boys without words, no words to say, no ears,
> when your bafflement needs
> a listen,
> tell your anger on the fingers of these days

and Lakdasa Wikkramasinha had in 1965 presented 'The Poet' as being essentially

> the one that, tossing a bomb into
> The crowd, takes notes; ...
>
> The poet is the bomb in the city,
> Unable to bear the circle of the
> Seconds in his heart,
> Waiting to burst.

(From 'The English Poetry of Sri Lanka', Creative Moment (Sumter, U.S.A.) III,1 and III, 2, Spring and Fall 1974)

Poets writing in English have neglected to draw on the Sinhala and Tamil oral and literary traditions, partly because (having been educated in a country that was formerly a British colony) they have adopted 'with the English language, the literature, the mores, the manners, the ideals and even the superstitions of the British'[1], which included a marked prejudice against the oriental arts as inferior to those of the West [2]; and partly through their own ignorance of the possibilities they offer the poet. Translations made the first breach in this barrier. Mention has already been made in this paper of George Keyt, whose verse translations quite literally introduced Sri Lankans of an earlier generation to a forgotten and hitherto neglected part of their heritage. I would draw your attention to the work in translation of Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, one of the most genuinely creative spirits in Sri Lankan writing. Like most poets who have found their way back to the springs of their culture by way of translation, Wikkramasinha found the rhymed quatrain

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1 C.E.Fernando, 'Between Two Worlds:An examination of attitudes and language in Ceylonese creative writing,' in New Ceylon Writing 3(1973) p. 31.

2 Roger Lipsey provides some revealing documentation on this point in his recent study of the life and work of Ananda Coomaraswamy (1978).

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(common to the oral as well as to the literary form in Sinhala) restrictive when transposed into English. He uses a free verse line, but works out his own techniques of suggesting, where he does not care to reproduce, the disciplines of his originals. 'In the King's Jail' is an example of his work in translation from 18th century Sinhala poetry:

If I noosed at all, it was to try an elephant
If I shot it was at a Royal Swan
If I pleasured it was a Regal Pleasure
And if I died, it was for an High Lady

Now, for a lady I complete this third month
Sleeping the nights alone - an animal;
And as the sparrow's belly ripens with
paddy milk
And the moon wanes, still darker days await
me.[1]

(From 'Cultural Interaction in Modern Sri Lankan Poetry Written in English', a paper contributed to the Workshop on the Interaction of Cultures in Modern Poetry, Honolulu, Hawaii January 10 - February 24, 1979)

Early in 1978 came the news of the death by drowning of the poet Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, whose contributions to Sri Lanka's literature are to be found not only in his strongly individual art and sensitive work in verse translation, but in the determination to be heard that made him persist in printing his verse in small paperback volumes in defiance of what a JCL bibliography (for the year 1965) has called 'the creeping paralysis of public indifference that affects all branches of serious literature' in the country; in the imagination which established a connection between the poetry he loved and the art of Justin Daraniyagala; and in the abilities that have made him one of Sri Lanka's outstanding bi-lingual poets.

(From a bibliography of Sri Lankan writing in 1977 in the Journal of Commonwealth Literature XIII, 2, December 1978)

LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA (1941 - 1978)

A CHECK-LIST OF WRITINGS BY AND ABOUT LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA IN ISSUES OF NEW CEYLON WRITING, 1970 - 1979.

A. LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA'S POETRY AND PROSE

Wikkramasinha, L. 'Birds', NCW 4, p. 17
'Discarded Tins', NCW 1(1970) p. 49
'From the Life of the Folk Poet,Ysinno' NCW 2(1971)p.66;NCW 4, p.18
'If the Monsoon is a Tiger', NCW 2 (1971) p.66
'In Ancient Kotmalē', NCW 4, p.20
'Poem - Tribe', NCW 4, p. 14
Review of Wimal Dissanayake's Indracapaya, NCW 3(1973) p. 72
Selected extracts on the theme of poetry and the poet, NCW 4, pp. 14 - 24
'Stones of Akuratiye Walauwa', NCW 1 (1970) p. 64
'The Muse', NCW 4, p. 15
'The Poet' - I, NCW 2(1971)p.67;NCW 4, p. 14
'The Poet'-II, NCW 4, p. 22
'To My Friend Aldred', NCW 4, p. 16
'Work of a Professor', NCW 4, p. 24

B. WRITINGS ON THE WORK OF LAKDASA WIKKRAMASINHA

Gooneratne, Yasmine. 'Dead Ere his Prime': In memory of Lakdasa Wikkramasinha 1941 - 1978, in NCW 4, pp. 12 - 13

----- Extracts from (1)JCL XIII,2,December 1978,in NCW 4,p.36;(2)'Cultural Interaction in Modern Sri Lankan Poetry',NCW 4, pp.35-6;(3) 'The English Poetry of Sri Lanka',NCW 4,pp.33-5;(4)JCL VI,2,December 1971,in NCW 4,pp.31-2;(5)a review of Fifteen Poems(see below),NCW 4,p..32;(6) a review of Twelve Poems...(see below) NCW 4, pp.32-3.

----- Review of Fifteen Poems,NCW 1(1970)p.86.

----- Review of Twelve Poems to Justin Daraniyagala, NCW 3(1973)pp. 76 - 8.

Hatthotuwegama,Gamani. Extracts from (1) a review of Navasilu 1, in NCW 4, pp. 24-5;(2) a memorial address delivered in 1978, in NCW 4, pp. 25-6.

Kandiah, Thiru. Extracts from (1) 'Linguistic Self-Expropriation in Sri Lankan Creative Writing in English', in NCW 4, pp. 26-7;(2)'Lankan English Schizoglossia', in NCW 4, pp. 28 - 31.

Meddegama, U.P. 'New Trends in the Language of Sinhala Poetry', review of Avurudu Mangala Davasa, NCW 4, pp. 137 - 142.

THE GOAT PEN

From a Play in three Acts by James Goonewardene

ACT I, SCENE I

(A bare stage, in partial darkness. In the centre is a bamboo enclosure built to resemble a goat pen, in which PUNCHIRALA and his wife MENIKE are making frantic attempts to find an opening, a way of escape. They seem like newly-caged animals. Outside the enclosure a drummer beats a fast thovil tattoo. A masked dancer dressed like a lion dances round the enclosure, holding a flaming torch up menacingly)

PUNCHIRALA: We are caged here. We're trapped, and there's no escape!

MENIKE: Is there never any escape?

PUNCHIRALA: Not in our life time.

MENIKE: Yet outside the world is so vast.

PUNCHIRALA: And the cage - the goat pen - we are in will get smaller.

MENIKE: Why should it get smaller?

PUNCHIRALA: Because of ignorance and stupidity.

MENIKE: Of ignorance?

PUNCHIRALA: The ignorance of our fellows and the stupidity of our master.

MENIKE: But why should our cage get smaller?

PUNCHIRALA: Because all the time the world outside gets bigger.

MENIKE: You talk in riddles, Punchirala.

PUNCHIRALA: It's no riddle. It's plain reason. You see only as far as the boundaries you set yourself.

MENIKE: Is there no hope?

PUNCHIRALA: Yes, there is.

MENIKE: In what is there hope?

PUNCHIRALA: In breaking the bonds that keep us tied to ignorance. Or in death.

THE GOAT PEN: A PLAY

MENIKE: In death? What of our children?

PUNCHIRALA: Speak not of the children.

MENIKE: I must speak of the children.

PUNCHIRALA: Speak not of the doomed. They are doomed by the smallness of the world they are born to. Look up, Menike - look up, and see for yourself. Masked men will always threaten them.

MENIKE: You speak in riddles again, Punchirala.

PUNCHIRALA: Truth will only be seen as a riddle. Truth will be hidden from our children as it was hidden from us. You will see masked men posing as lions to hide their idiot brains.

(The tempo of the drumming increases and the frenzy of the dancing grows. PUNCHIRALA and MENIKE fall to their knees in exhaustion and remain there, hands clasped as if in prayer)

ACT I, SCENE 2

(In the verandah of a crumbling old walauwa, a tattered curtain hangs in the doorway askew. A sesath leans crazily against the doorway, and a mounted pair of elephant tusks stand in the centre. KETHPOLA is seated here. Before him, held down by two men and forced to kneel on the floor, is PUNCHIRALA, a sinewy, well-proportioned young man, defiant and unyielding)

KETHPOLA: You deny you have taken things, stolen, robbed, pilfered? You deny you have eaten stolen food, taken my books?

PUNCHIRALA: I admit nothing. I have stolen nothing which was not my right to take.

KETHPOLA: (Enraged) Right to take! No one has rights on this estate. I give you food, or I withdraw it. You talk of rights? Every day something disappears, and you say you have taken nothing. What you take is yours by right? This is madness. Rights, rights - a word that has never been uttered here before... And books, what use could my books have been to you?

PUNCHIRALA: I have taken nothing which could have been of any use to you -

KETHPOLA: Ah - (thunders) you admit it, then. You stole.It doesn't matter what you stole from me? Come now, you stole the other things as well, besides the books. Every day something is stolen.Today it's a jak fruit, tomorrow it's a coconut. Then something else. The estate is being stripped down to the grass. It has got to stop. I am going to make an example - of someone. Of you. Better you than someone else.

PUNCHIRALA: I am innocent.

KETHPOLA: Innocent? The dog that steals from the kitchen is innocent too. You owe everything to me.Every thing you do is dependent on my will. You take only what things I give you. It is my right to give - your duty to take what I give. The moment you deny my right to own and to give, you are guilty. My ancestors decided the way things should be, and they were right. This modern demand for unlimited rights is the path to damnation. That's why you're guilty. I'm going to have you whipped. It'll be an example to other presumptuous jokers. All right, Punchi Nilame,take him out and have hom whipped.

PUNCHIRALA: No, you cannot have me whipped. It cannot be done now. The new rulers do not allow it. You cannot whip people as you please.

KETHPOLA: (He sounds disappointed, even long-suffering) Why must you create problems? Why don't you submit to this? Dogs are whipped - do they argue about it? Go, take him away, Punchi Nilame.This man disturbs me with his arguments.

PUNCHIRALA: (In a tone of disbelief) You can't be sane. You, the last of the Kethpola family - you must be the maddest of them all to think that the world is only as large as this puny estate.

(A hush descends. The stillness lasts a long moment. KETHPOLA rises from his seat, and takes a couple of steps in PUNCHIRALA's direction)

KETHPOLA: Kethpola ... You took my name. You ... addressed me by name. You realise the enormity of the crime you have committed. This is how large your ambitions have grown. Punchi Nilame, take him away and have him whipped.

(Silence. KETHPOLA begins to brood, walks up and down the stage for a while)

If need be, I'll put blinkers on them. I'll blind them, and stop their ears. It will be a delicious experience. I raise my finger and they will bleat. When I lift it again they will get up on their hind legs, and dance.

ACT I, SCENE 3

(PUNCHIRALA is tied to a post in the courtyard.He seems to have accepted his fate. A few people stand looking on. Among them is PUNCHIRALA's wife, MENIKE. Unable to bear the sight of her husband tied to a post, she runs across to KETHPOLA and falls at his feet. KETHPOLA appears even more pleased with his decision)

MENIKE: My husband has stolen nothing. He would never steal. A proud man takes, and takes openly. Don't you see the difference? He is innocent. Those who cringe steal secretly, and all you do is to fatten them further.

KETHPOLA: (Strutting angrily up and down) Innocent - there we go again. Innocent - I decide innocence.(He stops suddenly, and gazes at her) You too - you don't talk like a slave. You talk of innocence, and your man's pride. Pride? What pride can dogs have? Come here, woman, come closer.

MENIKE: No, don't touch me. Stay away from me.

KETHPOLA: Don't you want to save your man?

MENIKE: You'll have to save him if you wish to save yourself.

KETHPOLA: (Puzzled) This is strange talk. You are as bad as your husband. To save myself ... I must save him...?

MENIKE: Yes. Only then can you save yourself.

KETHPOLA: (Stands still, looks first at PUNCHIRALA, and then at MENIKE) Then he must be whipped, and he must die.

MENIKE: He cannot die. If he dies, you die too. Your fate is bound with his.

KETHPOLA: We shall see about that.

MENIKE: It will be too late.

KETHPOLA: Destiny has willed me master of this estate, and when I decide he must die the matter ends there. Slaves must never be allowed to enter into discussion with their masters. A slave, a peasant, must think like a peasant, and do as a peasant must do - an occasional pinkama, a perahera, some nadagam, some kolam, and some kokis and kavum* They must not want anything more.

ACT I, SCENE 4

(On the verandah, KETHPOLA is seated with a look of gloating on his face as the sound of PUNCHIRALA being whipped comes to his ears. Suddenly there begins the sound of PUNCHIRALA's screams and MENIKE comes running in)

MENIKE: Stop this whipping, stop it before it's too late. Oh God, how well Punchirala understood all this, understood the evil that has started to haunt this place.

KETHPOLA: Do you dare question my actions, woman? Slaves must never be given too much learning. It always leads to trouble, to revolt and rebellion. Keep them ignorant, and they will be as good as trained animals. Punchi Nilamē was right to warn me of this. How often did he warn me, and I paid no heed.

(KETHPOLA leaves his chair, and advances towards MENIKE, who retreats)

MENIKE: Your Nilamē - it was he then - it was he that put blinkers on you, so that you will not see you are destroying the thing you must save.

(KETHPOLA seizes her without warning, and she struggles to free herself.)

KETHPOLA: No one put blinkers on me, woman. He took them from me.

MENIKE: Let me go, let me go.

PUNCHIRALA: (Off-stage) Madman, let my wife go. Don't lay your filthy hands on her. I'll be back, I

promise. You'll never be rid of me. Do you hear? You'll never be rid of me. I'll be back. I promise.

KETHPOLA: (To MENIKE) You see, he's stubborn. He threatens to come back. How can he come back when he's dead? I'll turn him into a carcass - where will he be then?

MENIKE: You know yourself that you cannot destroy innocence. Innocence always returns.

KETHPOLA: It's not innocence, woman, it's obstinacy.He is as stubborn as a mule. I must go and see that the thing is done properly. There must be an end to this now. I have no choice.

* 'An occasional pinkama, a perahera, some nadagam,some kolam and some kokis and kavum': Kethpola refers to the religious ceremonies and processions that are part of traditional Sri Lankan (and therefore of village) life,to the folk plays that entertain the village folk(nadagam and kolam), and to the sweetmeats (kokis and kavum) cooked for special festivals such as the Sinhala New Year.

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Michele Leembruggen

This is the house
where we shall live
through sun and stormy weather

It is a shell
and it will hide
our pain and secret pleasure

Here is the path
and here the door
within the door a lock

Deep in our house
we two will sit
and laugh at those who knock.

CASSIA FISTULA

Michele Leembruggen

yellow tree
you that are yellow
deepest yellow
yellow as deep thick yellow
can be
your yellow voice calls
to me

I stand beneath you
and all I can see
is yellow
yellow
yellow
yellow completely
surrounding me

I am totally absorbed in you
yellow tree.

MUSING

Michele Leembruggen

I sat upon the red rock
and I mused
upon the waste of talent, life,
the energy unused.

I pondered long and hard
as I sat there...
my aunt (who, passing, saw me) said
'It's RUDE to stare.'

NEW CEYLON WRITING'S PRIZE-WINNING SHORT STORY -

THE PRIMATES

S.I.Francis

Long last Anand was to have a baby, or rather his wife.

'The doctor,' said Anand with bewilderment, 'has asked me to get a toad test done.'

'It costs twentyfive rupees at the Hillwood lab,' I advised. 'But you can get it done free at the Government Clinic if you know someone there ... Wait a minute ... Ah, yes! Chidambaram, the lab man. Used to play bridge with me every evening. I'll ring him up.'

I dialled Chidambaram, and he promised help. 'Ask him to get the sample early morning,' he said. 'Ask him to get a clean bottle, absolutely clean, thoroughly washed and spotless - that's important. Let him collect the sample and come and see me.'

'You are a buddy!' I said to Chidambaram, and 'There you are!' to Anand, who blushed.

The day after the next I brought the report from the laboratory. The toad had reached a high state of excitement. Chidambaram had wagered his reputation on it. So I, the sweet harbinger, when poor Anand looked up at me in eager expectation, extended my hand in congratulation and told him: 'One hundred percent prega!'

Anand immediately reddened. There was nothing he had wanted more in all his life. For six long years he had waited, seen medical specialists, gone on pilgrimages, offered prayers and made vows, but had ultimately resigned himself to the fact that the joy of parenthood was to be denied him. Sumitha, his wife, had become even more frustrated. The despair was evident in her pale, silent face and lonely eyes that spoke the negation of her womanhood.

Now this sudden rapture! Soon Anand got himself into a frenzy of activity, from consulting gynaecologists to scraping the walls of his house.

'What are you doing that for?' I asked, spying him at it through the windows of his house one evening while returning from work.

'Colour washing,' he explained. 'The landlord has only put on lime. It peels off, it's very warm, and it smells bad. Won't you come in?'

He was covered with the white flakes he had scraped off the walls. I stood in the doorway and watched him smile.

'Do you, by any chance, know how to make a child's cot?' he inquired. 'Do you have even a rough idea of its

/construc-

tion? I've got some timber here and can make it myself.Cots are very expensive. A small one costs two hundred.'

Tch! tch! Anand was nesting.

'You know,I was never the do-it-yourself type,' I said. 'But you can buy a second-hand cot for the time being, and go in for a larger one as baby grows up.'

'Where can I get one?' he inquired.

'Read the ads in the Sunday papers,' I said.'Go in for a dropside cot with a piece of wood sticking up for a mosquito net. That's essential to keep the mosquitoes and flies out ... Oh,hell! I had forgotten. We do have a little cane cot in the attic at home.It's a bit soiled, but you can clean it up somewhat, give it a fresh coat of paint - blue for boy, for girl pink - the mattress piece has to be replaced. It's dirty. All the babies in our family spent their first few months in it - Nimal, Asoka, Suresh, Shanti, everyone.You can have the cot free, and for keeps. Come for it anytime you want it.'

'Thank you! Thank you very much! You've saved me a lot of money, and a lot of trouble.'He beamed with joy.

This was truly a pleasant diversion for me;something to stir the turbid contents of my soul.I have come to that stage in a man's life when people around him begin to drop down and die.There was Viswa, my office mate, only in his late forties, who had left a note for me saying that we'd start early on Monday, meaning drink, not work; but had risen on Sunday morning, coughed out blood and fallen dead. The autopsy had revealed that he had had no liver, every bit of it having disintegrated.

Now old Siya too is going to die, so my wife tells me. 'Shame on you! Go and see him, and just say kohomada*, at least, he might die any moment now.'

But what was the point? Even his old woman, the achchi, had accepted the fact stoically, and explained it to him in very simple words. 'Ain't it enough you lived this long. O my Jesu Christu! Eighty two years is enough. You must now prepare to depart.' So there it was. But they were great believers in the world to come (hence the preparations for departure). Death was but a threshold, once across it and there was the golden stairway ascending into heaven. But not so to me, alas! I had looked down in fear, and seen the mud.

---

* kohomada,' 'How are you?' or 'How are you getting along?'

The fear of visiting the sick was an inhibition I had suffered since the day I went to the Government Cancer Hospital where Puthakka had come for treatment. She had been a sort of relative of ours who had come from the native backwoods, and it was our duty, especially that of my cousin Siva who owned a car, to pay her a visit. We had gone with a couple of packets of biscuits wrapped in cellophane. Too late, we realised that she could not eat. She had cancer of the tongue, though it had not been revealed to her then.

We had gone to see her on a dismal rainy evening, and the ward in which Puthakka had been accommodated gave out the odours of a stable. The mustiness was, as we came in from the rain-wet terrace through a row of wet and dark-leaved bougainvillea with passionately red sprigs of flowers, at first unbearable. Puthakka came and sat with us, followed by two mangy cats mewing mournfully. She was a great lover of cats, and the skinny lice-ridden kittens contributed in no small measure to the stench in the ward's dense atmosphere. Yet, in a few minutes of regular breathing, we assimilated the smells and the stench was no more. We had become acclimatised.

Puthakka grinned, she was confident that with the ray treatment the doctor had assured her the little growth in her tongue would disappear. But, as we learned, the reality was quite otherwise, and it was now merely a matter of time. In a few weeks the cancer would spread to her throat; there would be no food for her, and in a few more days no speech either. She would be literally starved and strangled to death. We left her still smiling confidently in the foyer of the ward.

A few months later she died exactly as the doctor had predicted to us. She had used a slate and pencil to write her wishes and requests when the cancer, having spread to her throat, had made speech impossible. One night she had run to the slate and scrawled frantically that she must be rushed to the hospital, but had collapsed before the children could run for a car ...

Now here was this old man dying, dying of old age. One of these days I would have to go and sit beside him in the musty room and say some words of comfort in my unfamiliar mother tongue.

What shall I tell him?

Get up and walk! You are not going to die. It's all in your mind, you see. Get up! Just potter around the garden. In the sun! With a walking stick. Get up and go! See your grandchildren at play ... cricket, marbles, flying kites ... Listen! The utopian laughter of childhood. Take a tot of brandy now and then to circulate the blood. If not these, then go and sit on the top deck of a bus in the morning hour of half past eight and watch the pretty mini-skirted stenographers going to work on the sunny side of Galle Road - Oh, the million desires at that bewitching hour between the 12th milepost and the Fort, where my office is!...

The placid Dottie, wife of Wije, lives at No. 96, a small house, and lives, to all appearances, a quiet life. She had married for love and had two children, boy and girl. But one morning their little world had suddenly exploded. When I returned from work that evening I learned that Dottie had left with the children, in a huff.

'There is some trouble there,' my gossiping wife said in the night. 'Their house is closed, and Wije is eating at the thosai boutique. Some fracas between them.'

'Probably booze and women,' I said, having known Wije, man to man.

But the next morning Dottie was back with the children. Wije had wearily traced them, and brought them home. Then Dottie had revealed all, in a startling apocalypse, to the women of the neighbourhood.

Wije was a monster. Dottie had only wanted him to fetch a bucket of water. He had refused, and had wanted to know if he was her servant, following up the query by clobbering her with a broom. In the early days of matrimony she had merely said 'Thank you' to every beating, in truly Christian spirit. But on this occasion she had let him have it. She had leapt at him like an enraged tigress, slapped him left and right, pulled his hair and clawed his face. She had then picked up the children and walked out, while Wije had sat benumbed with shock and disbelief.

Dottie had then gone on to unveil a terrible portrait of her hubby. In the distant days of love he had held her hand and reassured her, when she had accused him of adultery with a Mrs Ferreira, that it was really nothing. 'Don't be silly,' he had protested. 'I have had no one else, no one and nothing. Perhaps a stolen kiss now and then. But nothing, nothing serious, with anyone else. I swear.'

Then the night of marriage, the horrible first night at that remote guest house by the ocean in the night-long sound of the fall of waves. She had been frightened. How could little, frail, delicate Dottie accommodate a virile, massive person like Wije. In fact she had gone into the bathroom, and looked at her tenderness in the mirror. She had been shocked.

'What the devil? Why are you so cold? Come, now! How wonderful Mrs. Ferreira was!'

'What wonder?' Dottie had asked weakly. 'You said only kissing.'

'What kissing. She gave me everything. She even bore me a child.'

From that moment onwards she had hated him. He had peeled off his banian and rolled over in the bed, pivoting his brawny body. 'You see that scar right across? One night her husband

chased me with a knife and I ran out. I could not escape without creeping under a barbed wire fence and zip! ... Right across my back, the barbs raked my flesh. They had to take me to hospital, and put in twentysix sutures.'

One of his pastimes was a regular booze at the club. He would come home, sometimes with his drunken friends, in the middle of the night in an old car, reeking with the smell of sweat, cigarette smoke and arrack.

'Get up! Get up! What have you got to eat?' he would demand. When there was hardly anything he would wake up the children, get them dressed, and all of them would drive out jam-packed in the rattling old car. They would tear down the road singing drunkenly, stopping now and then to pick up miscellaneous victuals such as vadai, roti, rolls and bananas, to end up on Marine Drive in the dead of night for an alfresco supper.

'I want to live my life,' Wije would declare. 'I like a lot of chillies in my curries. Of course I am sensual. All my friends laugh at me for having married you - ugly devil! I wish I had married Margaret Zilwa.'

'That tart? She would have kicked you out by now,' Dottie would retort furiously.

Somehow she found herself a job as a salesgirl in a shop. Promptly Wije had stopped giving her any money. 'Now that you are earning, you must provide,' he would argue. Now that she had found herself a job she hoped he would go away or drop dead suddenly. Of what use was he? He merely came home drunk at night, and made love gestapo style ... And, God! It had all started out as love, blessed love, in the mist-bound moonlit hills of home. 'Oh, if only I had my life again,' she would weep and plead in the lonely dark nights, while Wije caroused with his cronies in the club ...

The garrulous Mr Lal, the neighbour on my right, middle-aged, greying at the temples and slightly balding, has a sense of fulfilment about his home, his wife and children, but not about his garden. Perhaps, having provided his family with a good home and affluent circumstances, and the best of schools for his children, he feels he has nothing more to do. He is never inside his house, except at the hours of food and sleep. But his garden is another matter; ever incomplete, ever in the process of creation, destruction and recreation. Perhaps, secretly or instinctively, he is partaking of the divinity which they say sustains by such processes the universe and everything in it. But as a matter of fact he loves trees and plants, things that grow, things in which the sap of life is still active. From my room upstairs I often see him coming home at night in a taxi, its horn blaring stridently. All his children rush out to meet him at the gate, and escort him home. Truly, if he

goes to work in the morning like a lord, he returns in the evening like a king.

He goes indoors merely to change his clothes, and in a trice is back among his trees and flowers, wandering about his garden, bare-bodied in the dark.

'Mr Samboo, gardening is my weakness,' he has often confessed to me. 'There is nothing here, not a plant or a tree or a herb that I have not planted at some time or other. My wife never understands me.'

But his trees and flowers also serve a distinct purpose in his life: the day he gets angry with his wife, he is out with a manna knife and with swift, sure strokes vents his anger by furiously lopping off the branches of trees and uprooting the plants. On such occasions we get free vegetables, fruit, and croton sticks to plant in our hedge; all flung over by an irate Mr Lal.

Then he starts all over again: sends for fresh earth and manure and redesigns his garden, perhaps nearer his heart's desire. Now, the latest is roses. It is now a garden full of roses, the best specimens available, the full-blown, pure white Queen Elizabeths taking pride of place.

Once in a while he comes home after a drop or two at his club. On such nights he gathers his children around him, and gives them a talk on the astronauts and man's conquest of space, or explains to them how and why men, women and children are getting killed in the wars in Indochina and the Middle East.

Once in five years we have our General Elections. This year the quinquennial turmoil is on. The flags are out and the bunting, party shirts are worn, scurrilous pamphleteers abound. Views are expressed with vehemence, and ideologies aired vociferously. Now and then sporadic instances of violence such as a shooting, a stabbing or a stoning are reported. In my room, listening to impassioned speakers screeching out of loudspeakers, shattering the stillness of the night with reverberations of sinister intent, I become frightened. I suffer claustrophobia. What would I do if there were a riot? They might attack me for some frivolous reason, as they killed our chief clerk a few years back. They mauled him with iron rods, bashed his head in, poured petrol on him and set him alight, all because he did not know a few Sanskrit verses which the mob had insisted he recite. They could come for me for one of a million reasons, from my genesis to my God.

I often contemplated the narrow stairway and, like brave Horatio, thought: on yon narrow passage an army may well be stopped by three. I have gone on to plan my defence in detail. My landlord will be Spurius Lartius and Mr Perera in the flat below will be Herminius of Titian blood. They

both have guns. In any such alarming eventuality I will suggest to Lartius and Herminius that they come upstairs with their wives and children and other odds and ends of things they have accumulated over the years. Then I shall shatter some bottles and broken glass on the stairway, rig up a barricade with barbed wire and, if possible, connect it to an electric point. Then we shall be snug and impregnable against the mob; and when they come for us we will let their feet be lacerated by the broken glass and the barbed wire. We will electrocute them, shoot out their brains. We will disembowel them, and strew their entrails on the gravel road. We will kill them before they kill us!

Suddenly there is a loud, urgent knock on the front door. I am startled out of my noxious thoughts. I hurriedly go up to the door through the dark hall, switch on the light, and pull the door open. I see before me a slip of a young man, wind-blown and almost evanescent in the gathering gloom of the night. His face is flushed with a great joy. I can scarcely recognise Anand.

'Well? What the devil, man! Is the end of the world nigh?'

'No! We have been blessed with a baby boy. Come down and have a look!'

Indeed, the days have gone, and the months.

I put my hand on his arm to share his joy, and shouted for my wife. 'Rani! Rani! Here's Anand. He's got a baby boy.'

'A baby boy! How wonderful!' my beloved gushed, wringing her hands.

'By the way,' I said to Anand, 'What about my present. The cane cot I promised to give you. Will you take it with you now, or shall I bring it myself? It's a tiny thing, you see, very light, almost a basket -'

'No!' He stopped me short. He was agitated and blushing. 'No! Thank you very much. We bought a new one for baby. Come and have a look at him, please.'

The infant lay asleep in its new cot. Once in a while it pouted, to suck in air. The women flocked round the mother in an inner room. Mr Lal came in with a bottle of double distilled arrack which he immediately opened, called for glasses, and passed around. Anand stood by, grinning the fatuous grin of all new fathers. The greying Mr Lal looked for some time intently at the red bundle of flesh in the cot, then gently touched its side with the tip of his forefinger. At once a tiny arm shot out with the protective instinct and intelligence of the living. Mr Lal seemed almost moved to tears.

THE PRIMATES

'Wonderful thing,' he declared, taking another drink. 'A baby, they say, is a sign that God still has hope for humanity. Just look at it. It could have been born anywhere in the world,' he said reflectively. 'But to us this child is born, born amongst us, born on our own road, our child...'

He passed the bottle round for more drinks. When we left, the baby had woken up and was wailing for its feed. I could hear the new cry of hunger, the identical universal cry of all new born babes all over the world, for the satiation of hunger. I heard it down the lane as I walked back with Rani, and up the stairs.

'Really, what was that great talker, old Lal, trying to say?' asked Rani.

'Something about the baby being born anywhere. Well, what I say is, if Anand slept with Sumitha at No. 37, where else could the baby be born but there, and to them?' She added: 'But Mr Lal is always that after liquor.'

'Of course, darling,' I assented.

The night is still. They are all asleep. The moon has risen, silently filling the world with its soft light. The sky is sprinkled with stars. In Mr Lal's garden the white roses stand as though in a dream. They at least have a reason for existence - they are beautiful in the moonlight.

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SHORT STORY COMPETITION.

S.I.Francis's 'The Primates' is NEW CEYLON WRITING's prize-winning short story for 1979.

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ADDITION AND SUBTRACTION

Lakshmi de Silva

There are two kinds of failures; those that press
The high wind down, keep unregretful calm
And these the wind rides - proud and violent men
Whose minds are helium-driven. Those suppress
The wind and reap sound profit. These shall reap
The force that whirls the irised manyshape
Of cloud and brilliant vapour. Those escape
The cry of wind within the drumming breast
The restless urgency that longs for roads
To lead to tasks sufficient for its strength
While they accomplish only what the length
Of reason and good sense can measure well.
But these, unfortunate winged creatures, swell
The surge's cry and breast the clamorous dark
And beat the thick-glassed wire-protected panes
They call and call to the unanswering light
Nested beyond them. Born to their unease
They cry its anger and its fierce delight.

WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD

Robert Egeter van Kuyk

Endless this road is, unshaded and heedless of men or cattle,
That tread warily where time is resumed in a pebble,
And distance measured by the vultures' determined circles.
The stranger who comes in dust clouds like a swarm of
locusts,
His doings are of less consequence than a calf gone astray,
Or clay pots in the market place, or reeds to thatch a hut.

For are not here the carved stones from forgotten men
Bearing dumb witness to what has been here once,
What has never left but for changing forms?
The jasper hills disintegrate in river beds winding down
emptily,
Fossil remnants again.
But beyond them, close to the green reeds framing lakes,
Dark and handsome men walk still, ever in their own world
Shouting and laughing, cursing or brandishing the spears
of virility:
Eating what comes their way.
For this is their way, let no one trespass!

Remember:
Gnarled trees, beasts gambolling near the track,
And: the silken expanse of water that lodges with equanimity
Crocodiles and rock islands, drowned trees like Gregorian
chant.
And: green canopied tracks to a spring, and who knows how
much farther?
And: an obsidian night settling on butterfly wings.

And: colours breaching the surface of green, perfume of frangipani.
Remember?
How insignificant we were in our expensive cars
On the road into Gamu Gofa province.

THE GARDEN

H.D.M. Loyola

Here all wisdom is
in this lush morsel of home-soil.

A single tree looms outspreading
wingspan branches
shedding creeper streamers
in the night air humming
the strange universal undercurrent

skeletal jasmine creeper tangle
revealing endless mind tangles;
sorted out
yielding pure and perfect lines

blind mind-eyes seeing
leaves, branches, dead petals
needing
light-winged garden creatures goose-stepping
emitting lighter melodies
that mask or reveal
endless polyrhythms

centuries it takes to discern
these, spiralling
spirit through and away from
heart and mind
to knowledge of perfect co-existence

the garden flowering always
in rain or wind or sunshine
while death and laughter draw
dust-pools swirling through the house

HALF A LOAF: OR, THE TRIALS OF A TRANSLATOR

Lakshmi de Silva

Translating Sinhala poetry into English is an exacting as well as a fascinating task. Sinhala kavi is essentially a poetry of parallels; its pith and point lie in an exactness of correspondences. Image reinforces image, sound echoes sound, not merely for the sake of richness and euphony, but also for the sake of structural strength.

'In its fang does the viper's venom start
Its sting is the insect's venomed dart
In its tail lies the scorpion's venomous art
But a vile man is venom in whole, not part.'

'They bend to a fellow-creature at the height of their pride
Aspiring to pleasure, in pain they abide;
For the sake of a living in battle they died
In soldiers alone can such folly reside.'

(Alagiyavanna)

Sometimes the linking that is evident in the illustration above is implied, but not supplied by the words, for the poet counts on an alert and responsive listener. The following folk-poem, transliterated and translated, serves to illustrate some of the problems this raises for the translator, and suggests the difficulties he encounters in attempting to deal with the extra-linguistic dimension.

'Pun sanda sēmā pāyāla rata maddē
ran kendi sēmā pīrāla pita maddē
māra senaga vata karagena yama yuddē
Leuke mathindu ada thaniyama vela maddē'

Here the folk-poet describes the execution of a nobleman (a successful and popular general) on an ill-founded charge of negligence in discharging his duty. There is a seeming lack of organisation in the verse; a careless reader could assume that the quatrain is dominated by rhyme rather than by reason. Yet there is a connection between each line, a connection established by the responses evoked by traditional references.

The first line, 'Like to the full moon rising over the land', is magnificently evocative of the splendour of the feudal lord, the great general; yet there is more. 'Full moon' is the conventional poetic comparison for a beautiful face, whether male or female. Alagiyavanna's Pabavati has a 'pure face, glowing like the autumn moon', while a poet of the Matara period compliments a gentleman on possessing

'a face like the full moon, gladdening the beholder'.

From this glimpse of Leuke's face, the mind moves easily to the hair framing it, the yellow-white hair of age, smoothly combed: Leuke has come well-groomed to meet the headsman. The third line is complex in its effect. Leuke faces the hostile horde of Mara. In Buddhist terminology Mara in one of his five aspects is Death. Neither poet nor reader can escape the memory of sermons heard, the vivid pictures on the walls of every temple he has visited since childhood, describing the Buddha in calmness and solitude facing the assault of the demon army. Consequently Leuke is invested with the serenity and the grandeur of the Buddha himself. Richer still in evocative power than simile or visual image is the bare statement of the final line: the lord (who had been constantly surrounded by his retainers in the paddy-field and by his bodyguards in battle) now stands alone.

So much for the verse. How far the following version retains the quality of the original the reader can judge;I am only too much aware of its shortcomings.

'As the full moon shines, rising over the land
His hair combed at his back like golden strands
Today surrounded by Death's warring bands
Alone upon the field Lord Leuke stands.'

I have failed to match the rhymes and patterning of the first two lines - a far less serious loss than the fact that I have conveyed only the bare meaning of the third line.Yet such losses are inevitable in the traffic between two cultures.

We come to the vexed question - freedom or fidelity? There is the flippant chestnut that translations are like women, either beautiful or faithful. Experience shows us that some are neither - and fidelity, at least, is a virtue compatible with modesty. The 'free' translator sets himself to capture the spirit of a work by a writer generally greater than himself. The literal translator strives to preserve the form, fearing like the ancient Egyptians that the soul cannot be preserved once the body is lost.

There is nothing to rival the peace and contentment of that moment in which an author's approval sets the seal on a translator's labours. But too many poets are beyond the reach of a postage stamp, and one is left with a multiplicity of tiny, but crucial, decisions and doubts, for the Sinhala poet of every period is magnificently equipped to frustrate a twentieth century translator. He has, for instance, a shamelessly opulent diction that is in striking contrast to the austere language of English poetry, shorn as it is today of the periphrasis and inversion commonly

employed in earlier periods before poets had

Lit upon the gentle sensitive mind
And lost the old nonchalance of the hand

to quote Yeats's perceptive phrase. The Sinhala poet is permitted to elide or lengthen syllables as occasion demands ('vetha' becomes 'vetheya', 'manakal' becomes 'manakalaya') whereas the translator must avoid using 'o'er' for 'over' or 'morn' for 'morning' lest his lines assume an oddly archaistic cast. Sinhala offers a choice of three forms for any word - 'late' can be the Sanskritic pramada, Helu pama or the intermediate paramada;'full' can be pun, punna, purna or pura; 'moon', chandra, sanda, handa. In other words, one cannot attempt to match the aural splendours of Sinhala verse. Fortunately, one need not, since English poetry is spoken, not sung: the voice requires no ladder of sound to reach the heights of desolation, no vowels that vibrate like a violin, as it does in Kavi. Sinhala has, too, a far richer fund of synonyms. One need hardly sigh if the word deals with objective elements - for instance, if Sinhala offers over twenty-four related words that signify 'woman' in contrast to a mere dozen in English:

1. Woman 2. Female 3. Lady 4. Dame 5. Damsel
6. Maid 7. Maiden 8. May 9. Burd 10. Fair
11. Wench 12. Lass.

1. Sthri 2. Ithiri 3. Geheni 4. Kanthava 5. Katha
6. Kal 7. Latha 8. Liya 9. Landa 10. Lamissi
11. Lalana 12. Angana 13. Yuvathi 14. Tharuni
15. Kella 16. Vanitha 17. Manavikava 18. Amba
19. Mathugama 20. Magama 21. Babalath or Bavalath kenek 22. Nari and the more poetic terms - Miyulasi; Digasi; Piyabanda; Sukomali.

Yet, when 'love' with no auxiliary words has to do duty for delicate shades of feeling - adara, alaya, alma, senhasa - the privation is real.

Being an inflected language, Sinhala is free of the rigid positioning that governs word-order in English, and this flexibility is most evident in poetry; for example, in Dayananda Gunewardene's Gajaman Puwatha we find both

Vana bari vena neth kandulu vihidena

and

Hadavatha pupurana vani aho bari vana.

It may be objected that I am dealing mainly with elements that affect technique;if so, I do it of necessity.The excellence of classical Sinhala poetry rests so often on brilliance of execution that the modern translator must

HALF A LOAF: OR, THE TRIALS OF A TRANSLATOR

frequently admit defeat for lack of an equally flexible medium. Ranjini Obeyesekera, whose sensitive rendering of folk-poems is an achievement in a difficult field, has identified a related and insurmountable problem faced by the translator - 'the impossibility of capturing the sound patterns so subtly evocative in the Sinhala but sounding so trite when one attempts to transpose them into English rhyme'.*

The position is further complicated by the fact that until the twentieth century, the major tradition of Sinhala poetry totally lacked any personal element. Hence there is little that is original to convey; it is in the manner of saying it, rather than in the idea itself, that poetic power resides. The peasants sang of their own love or loss; the sightseers at Sigiriya scribbled epigrams on the mirror-wall, recording their spontaneous reactions to the beauty of the famous frescoes; but the masters kept to traditional themes. The greatest English poets expressed themselves through their lines; the greatest Sinhala poets concealed themselves behind theirs. They eulogised, narrated, described and moralised, dispensing brilliance and euphony, and displaying like their contemporaries, the Elizabethans, an ingenuous delight in their own ingenuity. In fact, to a translator accustomed to the unremitting search for freshness of imagery and individuality of expression in English poetry, the stock of conceits traditional to Sinhala can prove something of an embarrassment even while he responds to it fully in the original. Secure in a heritage handed down from one generation of the learned to another, the Sinhala poets were happy to enrich their lines with echoes from the models they revered. Yet it is not only the fear of dealing in cliches that hampers the translator. When the mind encounters a phrase such as 'pa thambara' in Sinhala, it by-passes the literal aspect of the image and goes directly to the reverence it conveys; but in English, 'lotus-feet' remains obtrusively picturesque. To excise a mere flourish is easy: but when one attempts to render the work of a writer such as Alagiyavanna Mukaveti, there is so much that seems worth preserving - if only it were possible. This poet delights in dazzling word-play, and a translator is reduced to a state of mingled admiration and frustration by a line such as

Siya patha siya siya patha siya patha namadu

which signifies 'I salute the lotus feet of Him (the Buddha) who is kin to the hundred-leaved relative (the Sun) of the hundred-leaved (blossom - i.e., lotus). The Buddha being of the Solar Race is kin to the sun; the sun is evidently kin to the lotus because the flower blossoms only under its rays.

* See New Ceylon Writing 3 (1973)pp. 7 - 15, for R.Obeyesekere's article 'Some Folk Poems from Ceylon', which includes 15 Sinhala poems rendered into English by this translator.

HALF A LOAF: OR, THE TRIALS OF A TRANSLATOR

Here, of course, a great deal depends on allusion; a reader unfamiliar with traditional Sinhala poetic diction can no more get at the sense than a man unfamiliar with a coconut can get at the kernel. How then is the translator to deal with the problem of allusions? A foot-note? Or perhaps an additional line, woven naturally into the text, that can enlighten without distracting?

Problems - problems, perhaps never to be finally or fully solved. Yet the translator persists, impelled by the desire to share the delight he has experienced.

* * * * * * * *

TO THE VIRGIN

Alagiyavanna

Swan Maid of gold
Lady of gentle virtues manifold
You whom the mother of three worlds we hold
Christ's mother, man's world in your care enfold.

(Translated by Lakshmi de Silva)

ON WOMEN

Alagiyavanna

With raiment, food, and every luxury
Constant caresses, sweet words, chivalry
That man who seeks a woman's love to get
Sets out to bind the wild wind in a net.

(Translated by Lakshmi de Silva)

THE REPLY

Elapatha Mudali

Do bulls eat grass for lack of finer fare
Do boughs grow warped because the earth lacks space?
Why spare yourself from blame, make scorn my share?
Am I to blame now for a whore's disgrace?

(Translated by Lakshmi de Silva)

FROM THE PATTINI CYCLE

As the green twig shoots and grows
As furled bud takes blossoming guise
As the water-lily blows
Swiftly O my lord arise

Desire's fire blossom cored
Led me sorrowing from far lands
Low you lie upon the sand
Rise, O rise my golden lord

Unknown torments will I frame
High the wall of fire shall flame
Vengeance for my lord I claim
Shame shall blot the Pandyan's fame

Bitter sorrow floods my eyes
All my body burns in grief
Pain is mine beyond relief
O,my gracious lord,arise.

(Translated by Lakshmi de Silva)

ANNOUNCING

SRI LANKAN WRITING FROM HEINEMANN EDUCATIONAL BOOKS (ASIA) LIMITED:

E.R.Sarachchandra, Curfew and a Full Moon.A Novel about Sri Lanka (1978)

Yasmine Gooneratne, ed. Stories from Sri Lanka (1979)

Yasmine Gooneratne, ed. Poems from India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore (1979)

GROUNDLINGS

Subramani (From The Fantasy Eaters)

There was already a small crowd in the Regal's lobby. Mostly women from the Shantytowns wrapped demurely in orange and mauve saris. And schoolgirls skirted, bloused and dimpled, as in a recent teen-age extravaganza, and reeking of talc. A dishevelled youth peered lackadaisically at the girls, who remained largely unimpressed.

The Gujerati ticket-vendor regarded them truculently from inside his cage.

Having been warned of the groundlings we arrived a good forty minutes before the performance was due to begin. We lingered in the lobby chewing peanuts, and gazing at stills of voluptuous starlets in a variety of melancholic poses. When the crowd closed in we jostled for position first in the queue, then without it. In the struggle we were pressed farther from the entrance watched by two burly bouncers.

Every now and then one of them would step level with the crowd, render a massive jolt and disappear behind the sinister curtain while his mate stared, his eyes glinting with morbid hostility.

We rocked in swirling eddies, drenched in sweltering perspiration.

Now the lobby was a maelstrom of acrid perfumes, body odours and inane chatter. Just then a band of men in imitation leather jackets and faded dungarees came out of the cinema (they had apparently decided to skip the song and dance routine), clouded the lobby with cigarette smoke and returned with bags of peanuts.

We coughed, and looked in vain at the ceiling for a fan.

Our position was usurped by the schoolgirls; they giggled mischievously, giving us side-long glances. We looked back in desperation: the sea of perspiring faces extended to the pavement. There was no way out.

It was then I spotted Mrs Gupta, squat and fair, a large vermilion dot decorating her forehead. She was leading a brood of Shantytown women. Apparently surprised to see us, she hesitated and waved. We reciprocated with great alacrity, looking helplessly in her direction.

Mrs Gupta carried her grandchild, and Chaaya, her belly swollen with her fourth indiscretion, was frantically bridling in her other children. Mrs Gupta beckoned, indicating a tiny cleavage in front. We struggled savagely through a fissure. Clutching the baby with her right arm meanwhile, Mrs Gupta prepared her left elbow and swung once, twice, and we forced ourselves into the opening.

GROUNDLINGS

The 2 p.m. matinee was over. We surged forward in a wild skirmish, compelling the 2 p.m. mob cascading down the stairs to flee through whatever exit they could find. The bouncers snarled as we slipped and stumbled over each other, knocking ourselves against seats and outstretched legs, groping for empty stalls. Mrs Gupta grabbed my wrist and hurled me into the middle of a row of vacant seats.

When we had settled in our stalls she grinned, fanning herself vigorously with the end of her sari. The make-up on her face had cracked, revealing thin sprouts of hair on her upper lip.

We had lost Chaaya. The baby, still bundled in a woollen shawl, lay on Mrs Gupta's lap. 'My nati,' she intimated, beaming inwardly. Dutifully I caressed the baby's cheek; it clucked and gurgled happily. Before I could object the baby was on my lap. 'Wait,' cried Mrs Gupta, and waddled into the crowded aisle.

The circle was filling slowly. They came in pairs: men oiled and groomed, and women bejewelled and resplendent in glittering red and turquoise saris. We gazed from below: the men steered their wives to the waiting seats, fussed briefly (the women not wanting their husbands to sit beside other women), switched positions and settled down to watch the advertisements.

The creature on my lap was becoming increasingly petulant. It gave a prodigious yawn, scratched its nose and bawled. I rocked my knees, tickled its ear and hummed a ditty. The schoolgirls, who had found seats in front, looked back and tittered.

I felt something sticky sliding down my pants: the wretched thing was unloading God knows what! It continued to blare. Women who were cuddling babies looked, and sent sympathetic nods. In harrassment I whirled around with the baby. Fortunately Mrs Gupta was shuffling down the aisle with bags of beans and a bottle for the baby. She swooped on the screaming creature (dropping the beans on my lap), fondling it and crooning strange endearments.

Soon the shanties and the baby were all forgotten. We were consorting with stars. Shrouded in darkness, we watched the screen lit up by the magic lantern.

The girl is dancing in the rain. Nubile and seductive, she is waiting to slide into her lover's arms in a most un-Hindu fashion. We urge him on, and when he retreats we deride him. Her clothes are soaked so that all her proclivities are thoroughly accentuated. No longer restrained by the contradictory impulses of modesty and excess, she pouts, placing her hands on her waistband, and wriggles her behind - for us.

GROUNDLINGS

We become loud and unmanageable. Heads begin to rock and swivel amidst incessant shushing and tut-tutting. We crane our necks awkwardly. The bouncers stir again, flashing their torches on our excited faces, restoring us to order.

In the circle men and their wives sit coldly in their seats as if bound to their congenital guilts. Only occasionally does one hear a slight flutter and an uneasy cough.

The protagonists are building a house. And they are singing of the price of rice and oil. Inflation! The advertisements had promised poverty and hardship. But there is little to disturb us from our inchoate dreams. Inflation is merely a song and poverty only stirs a bitter-sweet feeling, a soft ache. The house is totemic; concrete, steel and ugly scaffolding are meant to lend verisimilitude. Then there is our court-jester to save us from unnecessary anguish. He is a bellicose Sikh. Each time he appears brandishing his cutlass we chortle at his oafish ways. Mrs Gupta nudges me, slaps me on my thighs and generally works herself into a galloping hiccup.

The melee announces the denouement. Almost magically the blackmarketeers are beaten into submission. The sacrificial victim is the rain girl, now sari-clad and plainly Hindu. She suffers immolation, dumb as a cow, to save the world, but all this is not simply a facile solution, relieving us of the burden of interpretation. For us it is a flight from a world which forever negates magnanimity, denies heroism. Here nobility stands a chance.

And so linked through our cultural residue we rediscover the ancient deities: the disillusioned university student is our holyman in search of truth and spiritual beauty, and his betrothed is the cow-girl in quest of her Krishna. They satisfy the need for gods. I look at Mrs Gupta. She is blowing her nose, in the post-cathartic state, quietly into her sari. The instinctual response of a sensibility debased by fantasy. Her nose flower glistens like a firefly in the dark.

We jostled our way out with the somnambulant crowd just waking to consciousness as if after a long, drug-induced dream. Outside rain exploded thunderously on the streets, and taxis skidded past the cinema, horns blaring.

We drove Mrs Gupta to the Shantytown. Her home, a tiny shack, patched together out of heterogeneous scraps of timber and wood, had come up suddenly like scores of other sluttish huts. One week-end we saw a pile of crate timber and flattened barrel-sides, and the following week there was a scraggy hut. The hutment straggled up to the ridges of a barren creek.

From a shack the radio was whining a tediously melancholic Hindi tune. In the yard barefooted children in rags scampered after a paper ball.

GROUNDLINGS

In the half-light the shacks looked primitive and sad, like abodes of human debris which had fallen by life's wayside.

The advertisements had said the show was 'the real reality'. Now it seemed so utterly irrelevant; we shouldn't have gone. But then it's always the same feeling.

At the end of the week we were looking through the papers again. 'Manoranjan', the ads said, 'India's answer to'Irma La Douce'.'

We booked 'upstairs'!

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* *

WITH THE PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE VILLAGE FAIR

V.P.Rao

(1) The Young Man

He thinks I don't know. My old one thinks I don't know. But I know. I haven't topped the varsity for nothing.I know the reason why he wants me to go to the photographer at our Sunday Fair. He wants me photographed urgently, at once; that is, my mother wants it. I know why. I have heard all.

These villagers have come dressed for the shandy; it is both business and pleasure for them. What fun! Clouds of flies trapped in choking dust and bright silver sunlight: more dust at the cattle enclosure there, for one who cares. We make our way between the shanty stalls. I can close my eyes and tell: here they sell hot chillies,here sour tamarind, sweet mangoes, brown sugar slabs, acrid asafoetida next; turn the corner, enter the next row of stalls and the green smell is here: life-giving chlorophyll. We walk through corridors without walls, of scents and dust and flies and humans; all suspended in sunshine, throbbing with voices and the music of sounds, of hawkers and brokers, hagglers and buyers, bulls, buffaloes, cows and calves lowing in the next compound.An elixir of life and the living and dirt, decaying refuse and the dying.

Most of the faces in the milling haze grin at me as if I am a prize bull being led by a broker through the crowd. They bump, jostle, brush, and make way. And look up into our faces and grin and fold their hands to my old one. We elbow our way, through the muslin of dust and pleasant suffocation.

He wants a photograph of me: a 'poto'. That means expense; the old one will have to spend; he rarely carries currency notes, they say behind his back; that is the 'golden rule': don't carry, don't spend. If they hadn't given me scholarships I wouldn't have left High School for College and then spent those three years, wonderful time, at the University; the old miser - that is what the villagers call him behind his back - he would have been happy to put me to bagging paddy and counting coconuts. Now he is vexed there is not one copy of my photo left in the house. He doesn't know I have destroyed them all.

The villagers wonder - you can tell the way their mouths drop open helplessly - a photographer is not like a barber, you need him once in a lifetime, if at all. But they are deferential, inquisitive but shy. Only a few kids gather, their mouths working on monkeynut or sugarcane or parched gram or just picking their noses, a side-show for them after the merry-go-round and the monkey-man. They stare

with frank fascination at this mystery man and his magic box on the spindly legs. Our photographer extraordinary.

Yes, this photo-man is a source of delight. With his contraption on the skeleton legs, concealed grotesquely under that stained hangman's hood-cloth. There is another black cloth, for me to stand against and be shot. A back-cloth, to give the subject majestic dignity and regal splendour. Peer closely at the back-cloth, peer through the illusion of the dust-layer, you will find the back-cloth boasts of - it is discoloured by a royal abode of some sort painted all over, complete with Corinthian columns, the work of some mute Michelangelo. Or is it the Capitol itself? Greek or American makes little difference. No, an Oriental version. A back-cloth for all subjects, peasant or president, teacher or coolie.

The villagers buzz round the old one. What is the matter, munsif, getting ready for your son's marriage? says the tamarind trader. Aha, the munsif wants his son to go foreign, to go abroad, to Amrika, says the cattle broker, showing off his knowledge of the world and a couple of fine Ongole stud-bulls. Nice people these; they respect money.

The photo-man shows father specimens of his workmanship, pinned up for display in one corner of the back-cloth, images of his victims hung up like trophies on poles.They all have, as far as you can make out, a dazed helpless expression, as if uncertain what the hooded box had in store for them. The old one is not interested. Get done, he says. Yes, get done.

(2) The Photo-man

I must make sure of the price first. Couldn't trust this munsif. What does he want? A photo of his son? A real photo? Cash down first - why did I have to leave that credit-tomorrow sign at home, of all days, today? ... now, now, a photo of the young fellow, why? I say, why? Why does he want to throw away his ill-gotten cash? No doubt, at all: there is money in it for this miser. It is an investment ... But I will make a nice photo. I will fashion the boy in profile. Like Jawaharlal Nehru, by Crash of Otway ... But no, the old widow-son wants full frontal exposure for his son, he wants as much of the boy into the plate as I can, from top to toe. Like the statue of the panchayat president, he says. Perhaps he will publish it in the papers and invite tenders, in sealed covers, with details of property, cash, moveables, immoveables, dowry proposed - no, he can't say dowry openly - there is a law against dowry. He will just invite proposals. The highest bidder wins! The wedding of the year and I should click away, click my finger sore. Click your head sore - are you mad? more likely he will fetch a town photographer. But then why doesn't he go to town for this blessed photograph now?... That's none of my business, anyway. I must make as much out of this as I can. He is a miser, and there is nothing more to it. I must make an extra big print, and hang it out prominently above the back-cloth for display. That would be good publicity. A prize, really. That omen of the brahmin's wife has surely worked ... Ah, I must remember to pass the word to the president. The munsif is getting ready, so the president might like to have his daughter done in sepia, book in hand, like Queen Victoria, in oval frame.

'Smile, please'

There was no need, really. The young man is grinning away. God, I hope he has not chosen his girl already! That is a meaningful smile.

(3) The Father

What I call wasteful expenditure. This son-of-concubine wouldn't give me one copy - I must have three, and pay for all of them. Three or none. This is foolery. But the world is full of fools. I am the biggest of them all. Haven't I married a woman who knows to give birth to daughters all the time, and in a fit of absent-mindedness gives me a so-called son. This great son of mine is a fool for taking so long with his studies. So long and so seriously, he has been quite consumed by them. Studies, giddies. And these fools! They have come here to make their pauperish bargains, but they won't mind their business but would know if I intend marriage for him. No such luck, you fools! And that one there in the heavens is no better - otherwise why would he give me this son and ... The town doctor said it. He called me, all alone, into his room and told me this nonsense about the boy's kidneys dying bit by bit, dying away, think of that, every minute. Rotting like coconut fibre soaked in water. Tomorrow or six months hence - and visit the town hospital meanwhile, and keep visiting meanwhile. Does it matter? The poor boy is finished. Even if somebody's kidney is stitched into him. I offered mine,but it is too late, said the doctor. It is a meat-piece of a few inches, he said. But he would gamble, the doctor said he would try. And he himself is not sure of the outcome, he said it. The only outcome is to ruin the family - to fatten that doctor fellow! There is a limit to every thing. But how few people know this truth! My woman wouldn't understand, nobody can understand me, I am fated to be a

WITH THE PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE VILLAGE FAIR

lonely man. Nobody understands me. So much the better .. But God, this tall handsome boy is finished, the poor boy is turned pale of late and is already shrinking - oh my poor boy, I thought the lad had taken after my father ... a standing crop, ready for harvest, ready for adult life - a beautiful man-high crop - now blighted, marked for burning - oh, my boy, my only son, oh... But what can mere mortals do? We will put him on the eastern wall in the front room above the first window, or in her puja room, with Rama and Samkara and Sai ... It could be tomorrow? ... what waste ... But finished is finished. Now I must look for those Ongole bulls that thief was parading for sale. It will keep my mind occupied.

(4) The Young Man

But doctors can be fools, too. They can err. Don't they mis-diagnose? People do live on, doctors be damned is perhaps a mistake somewhere. Something can have gone wrong with those blessed tests. There is the possibility, at least. Isn't there? Young people fare better, Nature helps. Young bodies can take any punishment, the doctor might be wrong yet ... Meanwhile, meanwhile chin up, chest forward and - smile please.

- Smile please

yes, smile, please - once more, with pleasure... as if a body can do anything else, as if there is any choice ... Six months is not today. Today is ... today, isn't it? yes, of course, today is today. Today is ...? - shandy day, and today being shandy day one should go after things like Ongole bulls ... Damn this photo business, I had almost forgot and this has me once again in it, groping, up the sides of the pit. A sand pit, floundering. Like an ant in a doodle-bug's trap. All right, all right, hold it, ho-o-old it -(I must control this mind, this runaway bull)... what is now? How about going in for a statue, father? But he has set his heart on those stud bulls ... In the opinion of this House, Life holds no Terrors ...

(5) The Father

My wife has told me. The boy is talking to himself - the bulls be burnt, let's get home first.

* * * * * * * * *

POEM FOR EDIRIWEERA SARACHCHANDRA

Yasmine Gooneratne

Unexpectedly, we share an evening
oppositions forgotten
disagreements overlooked

The talk flows, grows
rich in wine and poetry
then rising strongly on the wings of Sanskrit
circles steadily, air-borne

A child falls asleep, secure
in the music of words, wrapped
in the warmth of understanding

For nothing matters now but words
and the art of pressing into their fine gold
in whatever language lies to hand
the jewelled truths of the heart

Coffee comes round once, twice.
His young wife smiles, and
Hebe-like
pours out more wine.

When I leave
the evening is not over, indeed
has only just begun

And he, cross-legged on the floor
eternally young
has just begun to explain

To hearts melting, it seems,
in the warmth of their response,
the finer points of rasa.

Driving home in a thin rain
we know the friends we have left behind
will take a taxi back
through Honolulu's traffic

At two, or three,
or four this morning
They know
there is only one of him

They know
we are not yet so rich
that we can compose our minds with ease
to the loss of a national treasure.

CANBERRA MEETING

Yasmine Gooneratne

The grey sky outside
neon flashes within
drain the gold from her skin
as she stands, clipping meal tickets
smiling uncertainly at me.
We commune briefly over the dollars and cents.

'You Ceylon?' I had guessed it all along.
'You Sydney?' 'Yes,' I say.
'You like it there?' 'Yes,' I say,
forgetting we have something that we share,
never thinking to speak to her in our own language.

No doubt the context imposed itself upon us
no doubt she forgot to use the language too
but I see it as an opportunity lost
for living
Perhaps at the sound of the familiar phrases
the gold might have flushed back,
rushed back
to her skin

POETRY'S OVER

Yasmine Gooneratne

Poetry's over
for me, man
the words don't come
no pictures form
no tears fall
no life there, no throb,
just existing.
And here I went to thinking I was
poet born
just because a time of feeling bad
gave me a few
good verses.
That time gone for ever, man
I feeling happy now
I just existing and
poetry's over

Why don't I write like other poets, man?
Words strung together, and at the end
no meaning only a mixed-up
memory. Because I know
that's not poetry that's just
pretend. Enough rubbish in print, man
not to want to add my two cents'
worth and call it poetry. So I again

pick up my pen and try to shape
the separate thing a poem is
Not easy, you always wanting to give up
but always there is the hope
that at the end there will be
a poem

CRITICISM

Yasmine Gooneratne

The living tissue it divides
and questions every part
It saves an aged poem's hide
and speeds its faltering heart.

THE PLAGIARIST. For Ellen Dissanayake

Yasmine Gooneratne

Preening himself, he struts, then seeks to try
the feathers slyly plundered from our wings
trusting the borrowed plumes will lift him high
above the mire of his imaginings.

How thrash his arms! He thinks that they grow light.
How throbs his heart! So like a little owl's
that hops and flutters in its dream of flight,
then tumbles back into the nest it fouls.

KAZUKO SHIRAISHI: JAZZ TANKA

Yasmine Gooneratne

Eyes play like wagtails
in her golden lotus face
bright bird of Japan
whose voice, alert surfer, rides
waves of trombone, sax and drum.

Tilak Gunawardena

Sundari was six years old when her Aunt Biddy disappeared.

Aunt Biddy was one of Sundari's earliest memories,clearer, dearer even than the frail outline of her own mother, the fragile, talented person everyone talked about with hushed voices and pitying glances at the poor child, motherless at five, who had disappeared (the first to do so in Sundari's experience, soon to be so fraught with these puzzling events, each foreshadowing and recalling the others) in a thick,heavy atmosphere of disinfectant and hospital sheets, angular features stretched in a grimace Sundari now knew (having seen it repeated oddly in the mirror when the nail-scissors turned in her hand and gashed it) to have been pain. Aunt Biddy flowed into the vacant space, filling it with her loud, comforting presence, arranging the outings to parks and the children's cinema and the promenade by the sea that succeeded each other until the antiseptic memory gave way to a series of other impressions; impressions of a large house with many corridors and dogs who lay wheezily in its corners, of an old man (her grandfather) with a bristly chin and cheeks who was to be kissed and curtsied to each morning, of the busy civil servant, her father, who left the house each morning before Sundari got up and returned nearly always too late to say much more than a 'How's my girl today? Happy?'

Happy. Aunt Biddy and Sundari were happy, she knew, in the long tropical evenings when the cane armchairs were carried out into the veranda and they sat among the scents of Grandfather's climbing roses and his shortening cigar, with the fireflies like stars in the araliya tree. Father and Aunt Biddy would begin the pleasant ritual that always followed dinner, the talk of what was happening seventytwo miles away in Moratuwa, where all their friends and relatives were, where they had played together as children. Aunt Biddy was not a real Aunt, Sundari knew, not a member of the family like Aunt Catherine, her mother's gaunt and unfriendly sister, or the plump, comfortable Aunts and Uncles, her father's brothers and sisters, who populated the big,untidy, rambling old house in Moratuwa where they all seemed to live cuddling together like a flock of cooing pigeons. Sundari loved Moratuwa, and Aunt Biddy often jumped into the train with her in the days after her mother's death, and before she had grown tired of watching the sea appear and disappear through the lines and lines of coconut palms and counting the catamaran sails on the blue horizon, there they were on the Moratuwa station platform. The buggy would be waiting for them, and after that the heaven of the great, bushy garden to explore all over again, the loving peck of one Aunt and Uncle after another, the picking of young coconuts fallen on the grass, and the shivering chill of sparkling well-water on her skin, while Aunt Biddy sat in the veranda and talked with any available Uncle or Aunt of what was happening

in Colombo, and how successful Michael was being in the Ministry.

'It's the best thing for them both,' Aunt Biddy was saying once as Sundari, climbing the veranda steps with a skirt-full of antigonon buds, sat down to thread them together. 'Better than glooming away, the way he was doing just after Shanthi's death. Not much time for the child, of course, but that can come later. For the present, I'm there.'

And she was there, untidy, brisk, delightful. 'Yes,' returned Aunt Prue, sewing away at a basketful of cotton checked dusters, 'what Michael would do without you I don't know, Bridget. That is what I am always saying. Though no relative of ours, you are more to us all than another sister would have been. Michael is lucky to have an old friend like you to be with Sundari.'

But Aunt Biddy had another life, a life apart from Sundari and her father. One day Sundari was introduced to that life, the big city hospital where Aunt Biddy was a nursing Sister, and the smell of disinfectant revived old memories - oddly, horrible no longer, for they were connected now with Aunt Biddy, with her comfortable presence and not with absence and loss. Sundari liked the hospital, she liked to watch Aunt Biddy chivvying the junior nurses about, she liked the flowers in the vases and the charts on the beds.

'Don't get married,Aunt Biddy,' Sundari said once.

'Get married, dear? Who would marry old, ugly me?' Aunt Biddy was busy counting bandages, but had time to sound amused.

'You might marry a doctor like old Doctor Kunam. You might marry Father. I wouldn't mind if you married Father.That would be lovely. But don't marry Doctor Kunam. Then you'll have to come and live with him in the hospital for always.'

'Nonsense.' Aunt Biddy was at her briskest. 'I'm not getting married. And you don't have to get married to live with people you love for always. I'm not married to your Father, but I'm going to live with you for always and always.'

And yet Aunt Biddy disappeared. In spite of her faithful promise to Sundari she vanished, never to be seen again, except in the distance at Church, at the far end of a large, crowded room when Sundari's Aunt Catherine got married, and once, much later on, when Sundari was at boarding school. Nothing of her remained except some picture books of nursery rhymes that she had given Sundari, and those disappeared too, one day, to be replaced by new ones with 'To dearest Sundari from your loving Aunt Helen' in neat, graceful handwriting on the inside cover.

Aunt Helen was the passion of Sundari's life. She longed to grow up to be like her, tall and willowy, moving in a cloud of fragrance, rustling in silk saris and soft laces. Aunt Helen's petticoats were edged with broad, fine lace, quite unlike Aunt Biddy's tough, poplin garments. She had long black hair that she wore a dozen different ways, she played the piano beautifully, and Father worshipped her just as much as Sundari did. After they married, on a grey wet day against which Aunt Helen's white and gold wedding sari shone like a lily, there didn't seem to be much time any more for quiet conversations on the veranda among the creepers and the roses. Father and Aunt Helen would be in their own room, with the door shut and the curtains drawn. 'Never mind,' Aunt Biddy would say, 'we'll read a story, shall we, Sundari?' But she did mind. There was old Grandfather, smoking quietly, his thoughts a hundred years away, and nobody but each other to talk to. And although in the morning they were there again, Father and Aunt Helen, smiling and gay, it was not the same.

Aunt Helen got on charmingly with Aunt Biddy. 'The silly old dear,' Sundari heard her say once to Father. 'I don't know where we'd be without her.'

'Hardly old, Helen,' her Father had replied. 'She's five years younger than I am.'

'Yes, but <u>you're</u> old, aren't you, Mike? An old, old man of nearly fifty, what I'm going to do with you I don't know. And so spoilt! You've been petted and pampered by adoring old Biddy for so long, you can't do a thing for yourself. But lucky me, having her around all the time makes running this old house so easy ...'

The delicious meals old Banda cooked were ordered by Aunt Biddy as they always had been, even when Sundari's mother had been alive. They were meals cooked in the southern way, carrying the provincial flavour Sundari loved, for Banda had come with Michael to Colombo from Moratuwa, where he had been first trained in the old Moratuwa house by Michael's mother.

'It would be nice to have a change <u>some</u> times,' Aunt Helen would smile teasingly. 'But I can't cook a thing myself, and it's such a comfort to have Biddy here. Do you know she worships you, Mike? The funny old thing. And some of the pampering comes my way too, so I can't complain.' And she would laugh her childish, delightful laugh and play with her stepdaughter's hair. 'We're all spoilt, aren't we, Sundari? Daddy, and you, and even me.'

Aunt Helen and Aunt Biddy would have many long, confidential talks together, and Aunt Biddy would tell Aunt Helen how Father liked things done. Sometimes they talked of Shanthi, and her life with Michael, of which Aunt Biddy had been a spectator too. From one of these conversations Sundari learned that she was herself to be, one day, 'an heiress'.

'At twenty one,' Aunt Biddy told Aunt Helen and her mother, who had come to live in the Colombo house with them, 'that's the age Shanthi intended it all to go to her. But till then, everything is in Michael's hands.'

Aunt Helen's mother was very interested. 'I've never heard of anyone so generous and trusting,' she said. 'But Shanthi would have been glad to know Sundari has a step-mother like Helen, so fond of the child.'

'She always longed for a brilliant daughter, you know,' said Aunt Biddy, 'not a son. A daughter who would have all the talent she could never use, who would be famous as a writer, an artist, something out of the common run. That's why Sundari's education is all taken care of, everything's in order for her to go to Ashcombe School when she's old enough.'

An heiress! What would she do with all her money when she was twenty one? Would she be artistic and brilliant? Would she perhaps be beautiful? At seven Sundari was none of these things, just two big eyes in a thin face, and a talent for hiding in corners that had at first amused Aunt Helen, and at last irritated her. By that time Aunt Biddy had also ceased to comfort and amuse. Her influence in domestic matters had collided with that of Aunt Helen's mother; and when at last, irritated beyond endurance, Aunt Helen had finally told Michael that she could bear the quarrels no longer, Sundari's fondness for dark corners increased. Aunt Biddy's hurt, sorrowful disappearance did not affect Sundari too much, however; there was all the excitement of starting school at Ashcombe, her mother's old school, the new uniforms Aunt Helen was getting beautifully tailored for her, the stacks of initialled underclothes.

'But why send her to the boarding school?' the Moratuwa Aunts and Uncles twittered, in reproachful letters to Sundari's father. 'Shanthi wouldn't have liked it.'

'Helen is expecting a baby in April,' he replied, 'and with Biddy no longer here, how can Helen manage Sundari as well?'

'Besides, what Shanthi's wishes have to do with it I can't make out,' Aunt Helen would say from the sofa, where she lay embroidering blue scalloped edges on a small muslin baby shirt. 'She wanted Ashcombe for Sundari, didn't she? Well, that's where you're going, aren't you, darling? Really, Mike, your family makes me tired. We can't make a decision of our own without having to explain it to a host of people who have no concern in the matter at all. You'd think they'd have some consideration for <u>me</u>.'

The Christmas before Sundari went to Ashcombe, she paid a visit to Moratuwa. She was sent there with her ayah, since Michael and Helen were forced to remain in Colombo, busy with Christmas festivities. But Helen met her at the station on

her return, the back seat of the car filled with gorgeously wrapped presents for Sundari, a doll, a teddy-bear, a tea set of real china. 'And did you have a lovely time,precious?' she asked.

'Now, now, be careful,' said Aunt Helen's mother warningly, as Sundari flung herself at her beloved and hugged her. 'The baby.'

'The baby?' Sundari looked hard at Aunt Helen's rounded waistline. 'Is the baby there?'

'Yes, he's here. See? Feel him.'

Scrabble, scrabble, kick. 'Does it hurt?' Wondrous Aunt Helen, making a baby out of magic.

'No, just uncomfortable.' The old lady raised her eyebrows but said nothing. 'Well, tell us all about it.What have you got there?'

Sundari showed her new picture books.

'What's all this?' said old Aunt. 'Cinderella? And The Babes in the Wood? A very nice book to give a child whose mother is dead, it'll frighten her out of her wits.'

The book was replaced by another, and that January the Moratuwa house, complete with Uncles and Aunts, disappeared. They were, it seemed, a Bad Influence. But Sundari hardly had time to miss her visits to them, because her life adapted itself so quickly to the boarding school routine of early rising bell, Chapel, breakfast, bath, lessons, interval, lessons again, rest-period, tea, homework, supervised games, dinner, Chapel, bed. The pattern was varied at weekends by regular letter-writing sessions (Sundari wrote every Saturday to Father and Aunt Helen), and occasional visits from relations. One day Aunt Biddy came to see her. Sundari was pleased, but slightly embarrassed by the tears in her visitor's eyes. And she was asked questions the answers to which she didn't know. How was Michael? Was he working as well as always? Did he miss Aunt Biddy? Did Sundari miss Aunt Biddy? Did Sundari love her still? Was the baby expected soon? Did Father and Aunt Helen want a boy or a girl? Sundari wanted a brother. The other girls talking to their visitors were looking curiously at Aunt Biddy. Sundari wished she would go away. She went.

In April, when Sundari went home for the holidays, the new baby had arrived. He was very small. She was allowed to hold the bath powder and the big powder puff while he was being given his bath, a ritual presided over by old Aunt,who was an expert in such things. Two shining enamel jugs stood ready, one containing hot water, the very hottest, one containing cold. Three bath towels were draped over a chair,

three of fine mull embroidered with ducks and tiny fish were folded beside them. The soap sat in its blue dish, the eau-de-cologne and Johnson's Baby Oil stood on a small white table at a side. Aunt Helen was not allowed by old Aunt to take any part in the ritual herself. But Sundari was, and what a delight it was to puff the powder over her little brother's soft golden skin, taking the very greatest care not to let it go up his nose or into his eyes, and to admire him as he lay dressed in one of his innumerable embroidered shirts afterwards. She loved him dearly.

'How affectionate she is,' old Aunt commented once, with what sounded like surprise. 'No, Sundari, you can't hold him. See, even his mother doesn't hold him while he is having his bath. Not until he's older and bigger.'

Sundari would hang over the baby's cot, gazing at the tiny turned up nose and the lashes lying long and black on his fat cheek.

'I hope she won't do him any harm,' the old lady said once to her daughter. 'You shouldn't leave scissors and sharp instruments lying about. You never know.'

One day Sundari hugged her baby brother so hard that she woke him up, and he screamed. Old Aunt came rushing into the room. 'You little wretch, what have you done?' she shouted at Sundari.

'Hush, Mother, what's happened?' Michael had come in.

'Goodness only knows what's happened.'

Old Aunt snatched baby up from his blue pillows and examined him closely, apparently for a puncture. He yelled with fright. 'I was out of the nursery for a minute, one minute, and this is what she does.'

'What did you do, Sundari?' Father usually called her duwa, daughter. Sundari's heart sank at this formality. She came out of the corner into which she had instinctively retreated, and stood before him.

'Nothing.'

'What do you mean, nothing? Why is he screaming?'

'I don't know.'

'I don't like giving orders in your house, Michael, but if you know what's good for your son you won't let that child near him. This is all Helen's fault, letting her help with his bath, and heaven knows what else. What I say is, can I keep an eye on her all the time?'

And the baby disappeared from that day, from Sundari's immediate presence to the end of whatever room she happened to be in. When Sundari went back to boarding school at the end of the April holidays her brother was not brought to see her, but she was often visited by Aunt Helen, who unfailingly brought her the very latest news of him. He was laughing now, he was so good with his bottle, he was sleeping soundly, he was beginning to crawl, he was standing, he had walked, he said 'Mama' and 'Dada'. Aunt Helen took a great interest in Sundari's progress at school. 'A quiet child,' the Principal had noted in her term report. 'Tends to keep to herself too much for her own good. Likes reading, and is good at composition. Needs encouragement.' Aunt Helen provided plenty of encouragement.

'Your mother wanted you to do well at school,' she often said. 'We're so glad that you like your studies. Here are some more books I chose for you this week.'

'Didn't Father send anything?'

'No, dear, he didn't have the time. But he asked me to give you his love.'

On one occasion, Aunt Helen asked, 'Has anyone been to see you?'

Sundari managed somehow to forget Aunt Biddy's visit.

'Never mind. Daddy's coming next week-end, to take you out. I thought you would like to go to a ballet.'

But when Saturday came, the outing with her father was cancelled by telephone. The baby was ill, and neither Father nor Aunt Helen could leave him. Sundari began to keep a diary in imitation of one of the heroines in a book Aunt Helen had given her. It was something to do, though there wasn't much to say.

Sundari's brother grew older. He was a placid little boy, sunny-tempered and smiling, and the darling of the household. Aunt Helen was pregnant again.

'Well, you should think about it now,' Sundari once heard her say during one of her brief visits home. 'You're not getting any younger, you know.' There was a new shade in her sweet voice, not quite the teasing playfulness of earlier times.'We have one son now, perhaps we will soon have another. What's going to happen to these children?'

'Don't cry, Helen.' Old Aunt was in the room too, then. 'You see, Michael? Heaven knows I don't wish to interfere in your affairs, but if anything were to happen to you tomorrow, what is to happen to your children? Sundari is all right, she is, after all, an heiress -'

Again that word. But the magic had disappeared from it, it was surrounded now by thoughts of darkness and death.

'Yes, she'll be rolling in money, simply rolling, all that inherited wealth. And what will Helen's children have? Nothing. Nothing.'

Nothing? But of course Sundari was going to share it all with Anil, all. How could she be an heiress, and be vain and proud like the wicked princess in a fairy story? Could she see her brothers beg in the streets? Let them wait till she was twenty one, they would find out how generous she could be.

'Think of what the boy will feel,' Aunt Helen sobbed on. 'Anil's a boy, after all, think of what he will feel, at the difference between them.' Sundari's heart melted with pity for Aunt Helen.

'But what more can I do?' Sundari's father asked. 'I only hold the property in trust for her.'

'It's all Shanthi's fault,' old Aunt said. 'She obviously didn't trust you, Michael. If only she had left all her property direct to you, instead of the small part she did leave, you could have divided it equally among all your children, instead of this unfair business of making one an heiress and the rest paupers.'

'Think of Anil's education,' said Helen. 'Surely you want to see him go to Cambridge as you did? Why should he have a second-rate education here?'

'Yes, it's plain to see he doesn't care what happens to you or to your children. It's only Shanthi who matters, and her precious daughter. I don't believe in interfering in other people's affairs, Michael,but I think it would be only fair to Helen and the children if you were to start investing the money you earn now, and begin running this house and your family concerns on the income from Sundari's estates. Your doing that wouldn't affect her interests - she's inheriting the property when she is twenty one, isn't she? That's only fifteen years from now. You should do what you can for your boys while you have the property still in your hands.'

Sundari did not hear her father's reply. But she would not have understood it if she had, for income and investments meant nothing to her. She was not encouraged to handle money, or spend it. Her pocket-money was saved in a money-box, and drawn on for the purchase of birthday presents and Christmas presents for Anil, Aunt Helen and Father. She decided she would save up even more carefully than before: it would be her own contribution to help Anil go to Cambridge. Well, until she became twenty one, that is, and could place her inherited riches at his service and Aunt Helen's.

That Christmas Sundari received a Christmas card.'From your Auntie Biddy, with love and kisses,' it said, and there were half a dozen X's scattered among the holly berries and the candles. Old Aunt tore it into small pieces, put them in an envelope, and sent it to Aunt Biddy's home in Moratuwa.

'Mad, aney,' said the Moratuwa Aunts and Uncles to one another, on hearing of this oddity. 'Absolutely mad. What Michael has done to himself and his daughter by taking that vicious old woman into his house, I don't know. Helen's no different. They're mad about money, they'll drive him till he drops.' Sundari pretended she didn't hear.

Since a new younger brother was expected to arrive on Christmas Eve, and Sundari herself was judged now to be old enough to escape the direct effects of Moratuwa's bad influences, she was on a Christmas visit to her southern relations, who fluttered round her excitedly.

'My, how the child has grown. That's a pretty dress, Sundari - did Aunt Helen make it for you?'

'No, she bought it for me,' Sundari said. 'Aunt Helen can't sew, but she buys lots of nice things for me.'

The Aunts exchanged glances.

'Yes, there must be lots of money to spend now,' said Aunt Prue. 'Is it true your father has given up carrying out repairs on The Retreat?'

The Retreat was a beautiful old house in Kandy, the property of Shanthi, which Michael and Helen had visited often in the early days of their marriage and which Helen, with her wonderful taste, had had elaborate plans for renovating.

'I don't know,' Sundari said truthfully. 'We haven't been there at all this year.'

'What did I tell you?' Aunt Eliza inquired triumphantly of Aunt Prue. 'Do you think she will put money into maintaining Shanthi's property? All this child will get one day will be a broken-down, leaking old house in an overgrown garden, and the tea estate all gone to seed.'

'It was a lovely house once,' said Aunt Prue wistfully, looking up from her sewing. 'Do you remember the house parties Shanthi's mother used to have there? She was a great one for entertaining. How often we were invited up there as girls - breakfast on the veranda with that view over the Lake, and the beautiful garden.'

'Well, there won't be much left of it if Michael doesn't put his foot down,' said Uncle Arthur. 'An old house like

that goes down very fast if it isn't properly maintained.'

'I don't think they are neglecting Mother's property,' Sundari said uncomfortably. 'It's only that things are so expensive these days, Aunt Helen says.'

'But not too expensive to be doing the grand on the income from your poor mother's estates,' replied sharp Aunt Prue. 'And I hear that all the ebony and calamander furniture from The Retreat has been taken to Colombo to be restored. Is it all going to be put back into The Retreat, where it belongs? I don't think so. Furniture like that is worth a fortune today. When Sundari gets that house there won't be a stick of good furniture in it, mark my words.'

'I don't like going to Moratuwa very much,' Sundari told Aunt Helen when she returned to Colombo in January.

'Why, angel? Aren't they nice to you any more?'

Sundari hesitated. 'They're nice to me, but they keep going on and on about Daddy and you.'

'What do you mean - 'going on'?'

'They say you're not letting Daddy look after my property.'

Aunt Helen's beautiful eyes opened wide. 'Your property, Sundari?'

Sundari blushed. 'I mean, Mother's property. 'I don't feel comfortable going there any more.'

The disappearance of Moratuwa and her Southern Province relations from Sundari's life a second time was immediate, and this time final. She was relieved, too, that all talk of money and money matters ceased from that time on, in her presence.

'Financial matters are for men to work out,' as Aunt Helen said, reclining on the calamander couch, playing with the new baby. 'When you grow up, treasure, you and Anil Aiya and Daddy can puzzle your heads over all those silly money matters. Sundari akka and Mummy have more important things to do, haven't we?' She kissed him. The baby gurgled delightedly and clapped his hands at Sundari, who clapped back.

'Really, Sundari, he loves you so much, I'm getting quite jealous.'

Sundari spent a lot of time now with her brothers. She had, as Helen said, a wonderful way with children, and what else was she to do, anyway? She didn't have many friends. As each school vacation began, the boarders at Ashcombe scattered

to tea estates in the hills and Government Bungalows in the out-stations. The few 'day-scholars' who lived within visiting distance did not belong to families that Aunt Helen and Father considered suitable for Sundari to know. When, after weeks of pleading, one of them was invited to spend a day with her, the child was clearly uncomfortable and never came again, in spite of the treat of Banda's special chocolate cake, and the film to which Michael took the two girls after tea. Still,it was an event, and was recorded in Sundari's diary, with a red circle around the date. A little play she wrote in English class that the form successfully produced at the end of one term earned praise, again duly recorded and circled. Another red circle decked the date on which Sundari took part in a school debate with three much older girls, their opponents being the star debating team of St. Alban's College, the exclusive boys' private school that Ashcombe regarded as its brother-institution. Not that she had done well herself, the stammer that had begun to plague her returned in the first few seconds of her prepared speech. But it had vanished once the speech began to get under way, and in the end it was considered (even by the lordly St. Alban's young men) that the debate had been fairly matched, and a success. At a very demure teaparty afterwards, strictly chaperoned by the Principal and by Sundari's English teacher, she had been spoken to for the first time in her life by a youth who was not a cousin or related to her by marriage.

'Your parents do not wish you to take part in debates or in the school plays in future,' the Principal informed Sundari at an interview later that week.

'But why? They didn't tell me anything about it?'

'It's not really your business to ask why, when your parents have made a special rule about something for your own good. I must say I approve. Taking part in plays, acting parts on the stage, debating - these are not really activities in which a girl from a family such as your own should be taking part. I agreed with your parents that your teacher, Miss Muller, is making a mistake. After all, it's not as if you are going to become some kind of professional person!'

Sundari's disappointment over the ban was soothed quite a bit by Aunt Helen's suggestion that she take up Domestic Science as a subject. Also, in view of the fact that she was outgrowing every garment she possessed, Sundari was taken by Aunt Helen's mother to buy herself material for some new dresses. Old Aunt had good taste, she chose exclusively pastel shades for Sundari, and at the dress-maker's afterwards, insisted on choosing patterns of which the skirts were a decent length. The dress-maker, whom they interviewed in an inner room of the establishment, out of earshot of a platoon of meek-looking young women seated sewing and embroidering on a row of benches in the veranda, thought the colours were most suitable, 'just right for her age', but ventured to

suggest that skirts were being worn rather shorter that year. There was no appeal, however, from Aunt's decision. 'This is the right length for you,' Sundari was told, when she mentioned that her friends at school were wearing their skirts rather short. 'Short skirts are all very well for girls with names like Crusz and Kelaart' - Sundari's two closest friends at school had turned out to be, to old Aunt's disgust, from emancipated Burgher families and not from conservative Sinhala ones like her own . 'It isn't as if your legs are very nice, either, it's better to hide them as much as possible.'

Old Aunt and Sundari had tea afterwards at the very special, grown-up restaurant at which Aunt Helen and her mother invariably refreshed themselves during their frequent shopping expeditions. Sundari ordered cream cakes and an ice cream milk shake, and sat waiting for them to appear. She looked up, to see old Aunt's eyes suddenly narrow in disgust.

'What do you think you are doing, you little slut?'

Slut? Slut? Sundari knew the word. She had read it in Joseph Andrews (recommended to her that term by Miss Muller).

'Put your knees together, and keep your eyes on the table. Wait until your Father and your Aunt Helen hear about this.'

The cream cakes tasted like dust in Sundari's mouth.They rode home in silence. When they got there, Sundari learned that she had been ogling a middle-aged gentleman at a neighbouring table.

'Looking round at him, with her bare thighs all exposed - disgusting!' Old Aunt bore Anil away before his tender ears could be corrupted by hearing of such behaviour. Sundari felt glances connecting over her head. She did not look up.

'I didn't do anything like that. I never even knew he was there.'

'Then why was he staring at you?' asked Aunt Helen. 'Nobody would stare unless you practically invited him to do so.'

'I think it's a good thing you are giving up debates and play-acting,' her father said at last. 'These things seem to excite you too much. You are sent to school to study, not to show yourself in this way. We are all very disappointed, Sundari. I thought you were a good girl.'

So the ban on extra-curricular activities was part of the discipline of becoming a good girl. Sundari's diary grew no more red circles. She became instead more circumspect, even a little wary. The entry for that day carried no mention of the incident at the restaurant. Instead, the space was occupied by a description of her beautiful new clothes, and of old Aunt's kindness in taking her shopping for them.

As she had half-expected, a few days after her next school vacation had begun and Sundari was back at home with her diary and her books, old Aunt's attitude to her grew more relaxed. She even grew genial.

When Sundari was nearly sixteen, and her brothers ten and nine years old, Anil was taken on a 'tour' of Europe by his grandmother. This was disguised as a pilgrimage to Lourdes, since the country was going through a period of austerity, and only genuine pilgrims to shrines overseas were allowed visas. Old Aunt was, of course, a genuine pilgrim. Though not, admittedly, of the Roman Catholic faith, she was a regular church-goer, and moreover believed very sincerely that an ingrowing toenail that had been giving her agonizing pain had been relieved through the personal intercession of the Virgin Mary. It was now necessary that thanks should be personally rendered to the holy Virgin at Lourdes itself, and since a visit to Britain was perfectly possible on the return journey, Aunt Helen began drawing up lists of essential items, unobtainable in austerity-bound Sri Lanka, that her mother could purchase at Selfridge's and Harrod's.

Michael suggested that Sundari go too, but the old lady could not, she said, take on such a responsibility. Besides, as it had been decided that Sundari was not going to sit for the University Entrance examinations at seventeen ('Everyone knows that the University is full of riff-raff, it's a sink of iniquity,' old Aunt said), it was most important that she should study for, and pass, the G.C.E. examination next year. In any case, a growing girl should be under the eye of her parents, not wandering round the world. And money was, after all, limited. An overseas passage cost a lot of money, as Michael must well know. It was only right and fitting that Anil should have a chance of visiting Cambridge, his father's University, and the College at which he would himself be one day an undergraduate.

'I hope you don't mind too much, darling,' Aunt Helen said anxiously to Sundari. 'You see, Daddy and I can't afford just now to pay for a jaunt like this, and Mother says it's her money after all, and she'd like to spend it on her own grand-child. Daddy and I are paying nothing towards the trip, it's entirely Mother's idea.'

'Of course I don't mind, Aunt Helen,' Sundari said. 'It wouldn't be much fun anyway without you and Daddy. I'll wait till we can all go together.'

Aunt Helen was pleased. 'This child is becoming such a help around the house,' she told Michael one day, 'that I'm selfishly glad she didn't decide to accompany Mother. 'That cake she made yesterday was really delicious.'

Sundari blushed with pride.

'Some man some day will be a very lucky husband,' smiled

Aunt Catherine, who was visiting at the time. Sundari thought the day was turning out quite beautiful.

'Oh, I don't know. Marriage isn't the right thing for everyone,' said Aunt Helen, 'though you and I, Kate, find it suits us. Sundari might be happier unmarried than tied to someone who has his eyes on her money.'

Aunt Catherine's smile disappeared.

'After all,' Aunt Helen went on, 'Sundari will always have her brothers to look after her. I always think that's one of the finest things about our culture, the affection and loyalty members of a family feel for one another, don't you?'

'Sundari is a credit to you both, Helen,' returned Aunt Catherine. 'And we're all very proud of her. I hear she's doing very well at school, and that her English teacher thinks she will do well at University.'

'University?' Aunt Helen laughed her light, pretty laugh. 'Shanthi would never have liked that. To expose her daughter to the risk of meeting all sorts of people from goodness knows where! That sort of thing is all right for the boys, but we want something better for our only daughter.'

'Would you like to go to University, Sundari?' asked Michael.

Sundari's eyes met Aunt Helen's. 'No Daddy, I'd rather stay at home,' she said. 'I'm happy here.'

About this time a wave of excitement began to gather on the outer edges of Sundari's existence, grew larger and larger, and finally broke into her life. Aunt Helen's younger sister Pauline came to stay.

'She is not pretty, like Aunt Helen,' wrote Sundari in her diary, 'but she's great fun. And Uncle Colin is so nice. It must be wonderful to be in love like that. Their friends are a bit odd, new people Daddy and Aunt Helen don't know at all, people interested in music, painting and writing. The house seems full of life, different somehow, since they came to stay with us.'

When Anil and his grandmother returned from their travels, old Aunt was very disapproving of what she called the 'turmoil' in Michael's house, and fearful of its effect on Sundari.

'Helen must be mad to let Pauline have so much influence over that child,' she said one day to Michael. 'Whenever I see her, she's hanging on every word they say.'

'Something is wrong,' said the diary. 'Why doesn't old

Aunt like Aunt Pauline and Uncle Colin? Has she done something shameful too? Did someone stare at her in a tea-shop? I don't care. She's clever and amusing. It's exciting to be with her and with Uncle Colin, just to listen to them. I wish they would stay here always.'

'Pauline wasn't a good daughter, not like your Aunt Helen,' old Aunt told Sundari one day. 'Don't listen so much to what she says, it's all rubbish. What's important is to be good and sensible, and think always of others, as your Aunt Helen does. Look at all she's doing for you - classes in this, lessons in that, taking you with her here, there and everywhere. Anyone would think she didn't have any other children. I hope you appreciate her, Sundari.'

Sundari did appreciate Aunt Helen, she loved her, the diary said. But Pauline was that most exciting of all things to Sundari, a writer.

'I took out some of my old Eng. Comp. stories and two poems, and asked Aunt Pauline to read them,' said the diary. 'She said she liked the poems, but thought the stories were <u>really</u> good. She suggested ways she said might, if I cared to try them out, make them even better. I shall work on them tonight, after dinner. Perhaps I may become a writer one day, a great novelist. Miss Muller said I shouldn't have given up the idea of going to University, but perhaps that won't matter after all. I'm going to show Aunt Pauline the play I wrote last year.'

But that week Aunt Pauline and Uncle Colin disappeared. The stories were re-written, but there was no one to read them. The poems were put away once again.

'I don't know why they went away,' said the diary. 'People I love never stay near me, perhaps I'm too bad and wicked to deserve anything good to happen to me. It's no good hoping to be a writer when you're the kind of hopeless person I am, Aunt Helen says writers of great literature are all fine characters too. I would like to marry for love, it would be so romantic, especially if it turned out happily, as it has for Aunt Pauline. But it wouldn't turn out like that for me, everything goes wrong for me. I'm not even pretty -who'd fall in love with me? Besides, old Aunt says, as I'm to be an heiress it will be my money that a man will be interested in. I'm lucky I have Aunt Helen to advise me. She is so kind, she's even forgiven me for being an heiress. She stands up for me against old Aunt, she reads my new stories, she suggested today that I take up flower-arrangement.

'I <u>couldn't</u> run away, as old Aunt says Aunt Pauline did, and marry for love, it would be wrong, it would be wicked. Besides, it would never turn out right for me. I'll never be pretty and lovable like Aunt Helen, but perhaps I might grow to be like her, inside. She loves and cares for

me, even when Daddy is angry with me. I don't think I'll ever get married, but if I do it'll be to someone Aunt Helen chooses for me.

'Then I'll be safe. Anyone Aunt Helen chooses for me is sure to be all right.'

ANNOUNCING

<u>THE CRNLE REVIEWS JOURNAL</u>

The Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English publishes the first issue of its <u>Reviews Journal</u> in 1979.

The <u>Reviews Journal</u> offers a unique critical guide to reading in the literatures of the Commonwealth and beyond. It goes deeper than annual bibliographies and provides a comprehensive coverage of New Literatures only obtainable from a wide collection of regional journals. It does not compete with these, however, since it deliberately avoids the long scholarly article. The Journal is likely to become a valuable tool for students, teachers, academics, librarians and the interested general reader. The CRNLE, and its <u>Reviews Journal</u> benefit from the advice and active participation of such recognised scholars and writers as Wole Soyinka, C.D.Narasimhaiah, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Yasmine Gooneratne, Arthur Ravenscroft, Alastair Niven, Leonie Kramer, Nissim Ezekiel, Vincent O'Sullivan, William Walsh and Anna Rutherford, to name but a few.

Articles in the first issue cover creative writing and literary criticism from West and South Africa, India, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Singapore and the Caribbean.

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WOMEN WRITERS OF SRI LANKA

Ryhana Raheem and Siromi Fernando

In a country like Sri Lanka where English is used for non-technical purposes only by a small anglicized minority, the output of creative writing in English is necessarily small. In this article we deal with two women writers.Both these, as all the other women who have engaged in creative English writing in Sri Lanka come from an English speaking, westernised upper class. Both of them, Yasmine Gooneratne and Punyakante Wijenaike, were schooled at the same private girls' school in Colombo. Yasmine Gooneratne, after a brilliant university career, settled down to academic life in the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya. Both here and after she joined the staff of an Australian university, she has distinguished herself by her research and her writing.Her writing is the fruit of experience not only in the life of the academic community and outside society, but also of her personal life as daughter, wife, mother, friend. Punyakante Wijenaike on the other hand, went directly from school life to life as housewife and mother. Her work is based on her observations of society, particularly in the rural unwesternized countryside of Sri Lanka. Thus,though linked by social class, they contrast interestingly in terms of training and range of interest.

There are other women writing in English in Sri Lanka, but these are comparatively minor figures. Poetry and fiction are the only fields explored, for Sri Lanka has still to see the emergence of a native Shelagh Delaney. Special mention should be made of Anne Ranasinghe, who has published two slim volumes of poetry, Poems(1971), and Plead Mercy(1975), and a collection of short stories,With Words we Write our Lives Past, Present, Future(1972). Christine Wilson writes mainly of the very British world of tea planters. Her work includes The Bitter Berry, The Mountain Road (1958) and I am the Wings(1961). Maureen Seneviratne, a journalist and radio broadcaster, has published a number of short stories in newspapers and journals, in addition to her 1969 book on women in Sri Lanka history, Some Women of the Mahavamsa.

Among these women writers, Yasmine Gooneratne stands out as a figure who has to her credit a substantial body of poetry which is characterised both by its technical perfection and its depth of feeling. Her two major collections of poetry, Word Bird Motif(1971), and The Lizard's Cry and Other Poems (1972) are a significant contribution to English creative writing in Sri Lanka.

Her writings include three critical volumes, English Literature in Ceylon 1815 - 1878(1968), Jane Austen(1970) and Alexander Pope(1976), as well as poetry published in a large variety of local and foreign periodicals, but

this article will refer mainly to her poetry of the 1971 and 1972 collections.

Belonging to a western educated minority, she writes at a stage when the social patterns of Sri Lanka have changed a great deal from those of her childhood. At a time when both the upper class from which she came and the western education she received are being displaced by a new class structure and a more mother-tongue oriented culture and education, hers are the experiences and predicaments facing the whole of this anglicized minority. They are confronted with changed values and moral outlooks, a disintegration of the social patterns they took for granted, and a piecing together of new patterns that seem strange and even repulsive. They face the painful alternatives of emigration to lands where something of the education and culture they value can be maintained,or adaptation to and absorption into the new conditions. While these themes and preoccupations make her very much a part of her own social milieu, her importance to creative writing in Sri Lanka hinges on the fact that the sensitivity and sincerity with which she probes these themes, coupled with a high level of technical sophistication, give her poetry a quality that should place it high in the ranks of modern Commonwealth literature.

Perhaps the most dominant quality of her work is its technical perfection. Her technique and style reveal a sure command of English literary modes which permits her to move with ease and poise from the sonnet form('Winchester, 1969) to the lyric ('Song of the Little Press Barons'); to the looser, episodic structure of the longer 'The Lizard's Cry', based on the traditional Sri Lanka verse form of the sandesa (a message borne by a courtly messenger) and reminiscent also of Eliot's 'The Waste Land'; and to the couplet which, in a satirical piece such as 'Arrangement for Wires and Flowers', achieves much of the deftness and adroitness of the Augustan satirists.

In 'The Anniversary', in which she writes with deep feeling of the severance of a personal relationship, she conjures up a scene of the announcement of the death of the person from whom she has parted, with a vividness and dramatic forcefulness reminiscent of Donne's 'The Apparition':

> Our curious broadcasts of Obituaries
> Between the News and Current Rates of Teas
> ..... may make my body able
> To half-ignore an inescapable
> Stir of the heart, and go on cutting bread
> The morning that they tell me she is dead.

In 'The Scribble (for Devika, aged five)', a superb ear for word music and the flexibility of her verse enable her to capture the suppleness and delight both of squirrels and young children, and convey the enchantment of adults with the acquisition of language in their young. In her portrait of 'Doctor of Letters' the skill and consistency with which she works out the unconventional sexual imagery gives this searing satire its interest as poetry. Thus Yasmine Gooneratne writes very much in the mainstream of English literary tradition, but rooted also in her own social milieu, using the resources of her background and situation to forge the highly polished and perfected technique that is so particularly her own.

To commend her for technical prowess alone, however, would be to miss other fundamental qualities of her work. In subject matter many of her poems range round incidents from her personal life. Personal relationships, love, parting, parenthood are subjects she uses, and her response to such subjects is based on a fine and sensitive observation of detail, which gives her work its intense warmth and penetration. In 'Rocks on Marine Drive' she takes up the thematically conventional topic of parting and reunion. But by the carefully remembered details of the rocks and the white foam churning back from the departing launch she is able to present with sincerity and poignancy the doubts surrounding parting, and the joy and security of reunion. 'The Brow-Spot' is a similar example of poetry based on the little, intimate details of personal life. Based on the local belief that a dot traced on the forehead of a child wards off 'evil eye', it celebrates the gaiety and abandon of children which make nonsense of such beliefs and superstitions. It is the observation of the details of the child's actions, seen very much with the watchfulness of a mother's eye, that gives the climax of this poem its wonderful sense of release and gaiety.

'Peradeniya Landscape (To Chitra)' is again in this same style of carefully remembered detail:

> Examination time is here. Again
> The April jacaranda in the park
> Sprinkles the burning grass with purple rain.
> Threading the April heat the students mark
> Its lovely canopy as we did, take
> The long way round beside the little lake
> As we did once, to walk beneath its shade.
> Behind our splendid hills each cooing pair
> Still make the most of Spring before it fades,
> The Library's still crowded, not a chair
> To spare behind the wooden barricades.

> To see it now, you'd never think a thing
> Changed, though one knows quite well the future dawns
> Less brightly for them, and a muttering
> Protest hushes birdsong on these well kept lawns.

Within the slow, graceful movement of this piece she evokes strikingly the beauty and romance of the Peradeniya Campus in which she studied and taught, passing almost imperceptibly and yet extremely effectively to the last three lines in which she brings out the frustration and student unrest that were features of her last years at Peradeniya, using the backdrop of 'birdsong on these well kept lawns' and the idyllic loveliness of the Campus as a poignant contrast to the 'muttering protest' and disgruntlement of the students.

A feature of English creative writing in Sri Lanka today is the search for an idiom and vocabulary that is true to our particular use of English, and a means of fusing Sri Lankan experience with a linguistic and literary tradition not fully our own. Sri Lankan writers have tackled this problem in various ways, at the lower end of the scale posturing in rather artificial and contrived attempts to be indigenous. There is the temptation to sentimentalise and idealise rural Sri Lanka and its indigenous cultural traditions, and the effort to coin a Sri Lankan idiom. Yasmine Gooneratne does not resort to artificialities of this type. On one hand she delights quite unashamedly in a westernised cultural background, as in her reminiscences of Christmas and idle afternoons in 'Going Back: Koslanda 1963'. On the other hand her particular brand of indigenousness rests on a deeper response to her Sri Lanka as it was and is, than on a superficial attempt to indigenise vocabulary and content.'Perahera Elephants' captures the colour and atmosphere of a local festival procession without posturing. 'Touch Me Not' provides a fine example of how the local background gives the writer a rich source of imagery, and is thus an essential part of her writing. The 'touch me not' plant in Sri Lanka has fine leaves which close up tightly at the slightest touch. A very common weed, it provides the writer with a fresh and striking image by means of which to describe a hidden and unsuspected part of her psychological make-up, a 'green and guarded sense' which treasures its privacy and to which 'the tenderest touch is violence'. Her sensitive presentation of telling detail, her awareness of fine gradations of movement and behaviour in everything around her,make poems such as these indigenous in a truer, deeper way than a good part of creative English writing in Sri Lanka.

Yasmine Gooneratne's poetry ranges from personal poems to satire directed at academic life and at society in general. Some of her satiric writing, as in 'Arrange-

ment for Wires and Flowers', takes facets of urbanised Sri Lanka life and exposes its absurdities with a relentless but scintillating wit. In 'The Coming' her satire is directed at the so-called politicians of this society, regarded by the humbler peasantry as saviours, and putters-right of all social evil. This role is obvious in the title, suggestive of the coming of a Messiah, and in the opening stanzas, with their capitalization of 'he':

> The year He came, the rains had failed again
> And the crops wasted .....
> All that morning, the people had grouped and collected ....
> He will speak to us, they said, He will remake his promises
> He will bring prosperity to our parched land ....
> He will fill the hungry with good things ...

The irony and the pathos of the piece derives from the contrast between the faith of the people and the slickness of the urbanised Messiah who turns up, his extravagant rhetoric 'We are the poor, we are the hungry' a strange echo of their situation, his sleek car and pointed shoes a strange contrast to his words. But pointed as the satire is, there is yet a gentleness in its tone and movement, a maturity in its probing of society, that brings the poem to a climax in which pathos rather than ridicule surfaces:

> He has not come our way again. And still
> The wells run dry, and though we sow and till
> The withered fields lie open to the sun;
> The dust creeps in through cracks in baked mud-walls
> And clogs the streams and channels, one by one.

This tone of balanced, adult probing is not the note of some of her other satiric writing. In fact, much of her satire is characterised by bitterness and even venom. Always witty and technically accomplished, her work frequently degenerates into adroitly but thinly veiled personal attack. 'The Squirrel and the Bear: A Cautionary Tale' is one of the most masterly of this type of poem, devastating in its wit and superbly arrogant handling of the rivalries of academic life. 'Lexicon', on the other hand, is nothing short of spiteful, its garish show of wit dragging it far below the level of her more mature poetry. This same bitterness of tone, and mood of disillusionment with academic life pervades the long poem 'The Lizard's Cry' in her second collection. Beautifully composed in the manner of a traditional sandesa, and also of 'The Waste Land', the verse form is adapted to an examination of the local political and academic situations. Although in flashes the piece achieves the balance and dignity of her maturer work, its effect as a whole is of a taut and almost hysterical disillusionment, nowhere

better seen than in her witheringly contemptuous portrait of a 'Doctor of Letters' and the portrait immediately following, 'Doctor of Science', a shrill and venomous attack on a fellow don, in which the degeneration of quality is evident not merely in content, but in the overall looseness of versification itself.

This inability to channel strong personal feelings of resentment and frustration into mature poetry is sometimes evident in poetry that does not deal with academic life, and in which an adopted persona does not seem to afford sufficient disguise. An example of this is the surprisingly snobbish and callous piece 'Post Office Queue'. Addressing her 'sister' of the lower class standing next to her in a post office queue, the persona with the terse conclusion

> But to ask in English for a stamp is not yet a mortal sin;
> Your insular virtue need not make me dirt.

demonstrates a defiantly upper-class attitude that misses entirely the point and pathos of social barriers, and reveals a mood of childish insensitivity quite different from the mood of 'The Coming' or another very upper-class, but nevertheless warm and moving poem 'Going Back: Koslanda 1963', in which the poet lovingly details memories of a childhood holiday home, building up an unashamed picture of joys and comforts of a past era.

The impression one gathers from the poetry of this category is of a writer grappling with an intense personal problem, and this conflict is externalised in her poem, 'The Wall':

> Build the wall high
> shut out Memory
> solid and stout
> crush every doubt
> lay the bricks double
> stifle all scruple
> set them and seal
> the structure with steel.
>
> Build it to last
> Regret must not pass
> into your city
> neither shall Pity
> spikes ranged above
> issue warning to Love
> glass chips as a border
> maim that thieving marauder.

Despite the bitterness in it, this is an excellent piece of verse, achieving through its tight organisation round a single image, and the piling up of one ruthless phrase after another, a powerful and penetrating presentation of the desire to wipe out completely regret and compassion for the past.

In another of the maturer poems of this category, 'The Brave Man who keeps Snakes as his Pets', she expounds, as it were, the philosophy of bitterness underlying them. She first describes a man who keeps snakes as his pets in his laboratory.Changing scene, she describes the bottled snakes her father used to collect. Then, in a dramatic shift from the literal to the metaphorical, she turns to the snake-like venom of the human psychology:

> I think it is wisest, when you have to live with
> snakes
> That are not safely pickled and stoppered,
> To let them doze companionably in cupboards
> Well fed, content,
> To let them lash harmlessly in a transparency of
> words
> Where you can observe their curious markings
> And admire
> Their vicious grace,
> And exercise them, when they need a run,
> In the airy enclosure of a poem.

Although linked in content to the 'bitter' poems, the lightness and deftness of touch, the grace and technical perfection and poise of the maturer, more balanced poetry is very evident in a poem of this kind.

Thus Yasmine Gooneratne's poetry is of unquestionable quality and excellence; in the maturer work marked by superb poise and control, and in a freshness and sincerity of response to personal circumstance; in a sizeable portion of her work showing evidence of some personal dilemma, sometimes worked out into harsh and biting satire(the not so 'airy' enclosure of a poem), or in childishly defiant and flippant work, but sometimes, as in the last two poems discussed, revealing itself in more complex and satisfying poetry.

Turning to the second writer, Punyakante Wijenaike, we consider it a measure of reflection on the state of fiction in Sri Lanka that she is the only 'major' woman writer of fiction. Her works in English to date consist of a collection of short stories, The Third Woman(1963), and two novels, The Waiting Earth(1966) and Giraya(1971). In addition, a number of her stories have been published in newspapers and journals; three stories from The Third

Woman have been translated into Russian and published; several have been selected for inclusion in Stories from Sri Lanka, an anthology of short prose fiction to be published by Heinemann in 1979; in 1967 she also brought out a Sinhala translation of The Waiting Earth.

Though Punyakante Wijenaike shares the same social background as Yasmine Gooneratne, her interests and achievements are very different. As a writer, Punyakante Wijenaike has neither the technical excellence nor the literary sophistication of her contemporary, whose virtuosity is evident even in her earliest work. Punyakante Wijenaike's course as a writer is faulty and patchy,for she does not have the same sure command of her chosen medium as Yasmine Gooneratne. Again, unlike Professor Gooneratne, Punyakante Wijenaike falls into the trap of selfconscious idealisation of indigenous habits and traditions. In her short stories and novels alike, this is revealed in the painstaking descriptions of the rituals and ceremonies of rural life. The puberty ceremony in The Waiting Earth and the ritual exorcism in Giraya are two such examples of description for description's sake. In neither case do the rituals advance our comprehension of either plot or character. However, it is this very interest in village life that predominantly characterises Punyakante Wijenaike's writings. It is an interest which is a curious ambivalent mixture of instinctive sympathy for, and detachment from a way of life that is almost as strange to the city-born writer as Samoa was to Margaret Mead. As a woman, her interest in this way of life centres on the undercurrents that make the pattern of this life. Her gaze falls on the trivia that occur and recur in village society - the births, the wooings, the marriages, the deaths. And though neither excellent nor perfect, the work of Punyakante Wijenaike gives an interesting picture of a woman writer as she develops from the sentimentality and simplistic plots of her early short stories to the more ambitious scope of her novels, one of which examines the tragedy caused by unfulfilled ambition and the other attempts to capture the strains and tragedy of an old order yielding place to the new.

Her earliest publication, The Third Woman, is a collection of fifteen stories almost all set in her favourite milieu, rural Sri Lanka. Artistically, this is the least successful of her works for the stories generally reduce to mere strings of incidents, the village setting turns out to be idealised and remote, and the characters flat, drab and stereotyped - the heroines always young and comely are constantly compared to gems and flowers, the villains always faithless and the wisdom of the old never to be disputed. The writer's lack of skill can be seen in stories such as 'The Harvest' and 'The Tree Spirit'.Both

these stories lack unity, for the writer's attention shifts abruptly from one character to another, suddenly making a lesser character the central figure. Thus in 'The Harvest', what seemed to be the love story of Maggie Nona turns out to be a statement of the man Gunadasa's desire to find a new life in the city. 'The Tree Spirit', the story of a peeping Tom told from the point of view of the girls spied upon, dissolves into an irrelevant and spiteful quarrel between the girls.

Occasionally, however, one comes across stories of skill and dramatic intensity in which psychological realism of character and action happily coincide to create a meaningful and closely wrought pattern of significance. The best of these is the story of 'Ukku and Ukkurala', a tale of a mahout's love for his elephant. The swift and sure pace of the narration shows the author to be at ease in this story. She draws with sensitivity and sympathy the old mahout's anguish and sense of loss at the betrayal by his beloved elephant, which transfers its love to its new,younger and more active mahout. And the story moves skilfully to its tense, ironic ending where Ukkurala's impulsive instinct of revenge rebounds on him for the once placid animal turned killer at his command, having killed Mahasena the new mahout, now turns on him.

A similarly successful story is that of 'Siripinahamy' which deals with the same theme of love between man and animal. Here the love described is that of an old beggar woman for her stray outcast dogs. The story is set not in the usual village hut, but in a broken-down dwelling in a shanty town on the outskirts of a city. The old woman's attempts to save the dogs from the dog-pound are described sympathetically, a sympathy which is untouched by undue sentimentality. In fact the author's manner of telling the story in a flat, journalistic tone lends an air of detached realism to this tragic tale. The hostility of the other shanty-dwellers towards Siripinahamy, and the testy impatience of the one man who does attempt to help her make a vivid contrast to the old woman's pathetic unquestioning devotion. In this story, too, the ending turns on a tragic irony, the dogs are saved from the fire in which the old woman attempts to kill herself and the dogs; but Siripinahamy herself dies, and thus all her efforts are negated.

These two stories reveal that this writer's strength lies in her ability to hint at the underlying, often tragic forces that belie humanity's attempt to better itself. It is a pessimistic view, expressed through the relationships that constitute a person's life. As a woman, she embodies this concern by portraying not the abstract, but the little, seemingly trivial domestic decisions and actions that contribute to the pattern of life. It is in this that she is akin to the tradition of Jane Austen, rather than that of George Eliot. In her second book, The Waiting Earth,

Punyakante Wijenaike brings her concerns to a more successful conclusion. This novel, large in scope, deals with a poor man's dream of 'a small piece of land with roots running deep within it, a piece of land whose yields will belong to (him) by right, and on which perhaps a small house too, a house the wind of misfortunes cannot blow away...'

The main figure of the story is Podi Singho, but as is usual in Punyakante Wijenaike's work, the more important figure is that of a woman, the wife Sellohamy, who patiently endures all that her man forces her to undergo in pursuit of his dream. In this novel the village emerges from its shadowy remoteness to become a more real and dynamic world. In a Sri Lankan village, the houses, the village shop (the boutique), the fields and the village well form important focal points of village life. In her novel, Mrs Wijenaike creates a sense of the constant movement between these and other locations, thus recreating the activity and life that goes on in a Sri Lankan village.

This realistic picture of village life shows the development of the author, as does her successful portrayal of more complex characters. Though Punyakante Wijenaike still tends to see most of her characters as white or black in spirit, as heroes or villains, there are also figures who do not fall facilely into either category. One such figure is Podi Singho himself, driven by his dream, and desires and hopes for his family to errors of judgment that almost destroy them all. Another more tragic figure is his daughter Isabella Hamy, driven like her father by ambition and a desire to change her life. Her dream of enlightened freedom is symbolised to her by the village school teacher.Seduced, made pregnant, and abandoned by him, she drowns herself in the village well. The depiction of the betrayed girl's bewildered wandering through the jungle and her suicide is both powerful and memorable.

But Punyakante Wijenaike's most effective creation is the character of Sellohamy. Her loyalty and her reticence make her a hapless victim of both father and daughter.Yet she somehow triumphs over them, for unlike them she does not seek to revenge her misery on her own family. With quiet desperation, she tries to keep the family together, and though she is not able to save Isabella Hamy or prevent her son from ruining himself, she, rather than Podi Singho, is the solid foundation of this village family. Punyakante Wijenaike's espousal of Sellohamy's cause is sincere, and in Sellohamy she creates a character that is truly Sri Lankan in her quiet acceptance of the cruel reversals of fortune, and in her dignified attempts to ward off or soften these blows by adhering to the wisdom that have endured through the ages.

WOMEN WRITERS OF SRI LANKA

Giraya, her most recent novel, has a more tightly-knit structure set within and about an old 'walauwa', the Sri Lankan equivalent of an English manor. The novel is dominated by women, the old mistress, her ancient woman servant, her daughter Manel, and her daughter-in-law Kamini who tells the story from the point of view of an outsider who does not, and is not allowed to belong to the ancient family. This novel is the most contemporary of all Punyakante Wijenaike's work, the old walauwa standing as an unyielding and decaying symbol of feudal power which refuses to give way to the forces of modernisation and democratisation around it. The technique used by the author for telling the story differs from her usual straightfoward mode of narration,for here it takes the form of entries made by Kamini in her diary. But though the author attempts to deal with themes that preoccupy contemporary writers - the liberation of women, the industrialisation of society, even homosexuality and lesbianism - the novel is a failure. This is largely due to the author's over-insistent rhetoric and over-blown symbolism. The inhabitants of the old house are supposed to be held in the vice-like grip of its mistress like a nut held in the grip of a nut-cracker (the'giraya' of the title). But the reader fails to see why both Manel and Kamini could not have escaped from the household as both seem quite free to wander where they wish. As a social document, Giraya represents Punyakante Wijenaike's attempt to assimilate and delineate in fiction the changes in contemporary Sri Lankan society. As a novel, its unnecessary melodrama and inconsistency of plot and character make it fall far short of the quiet strength of The Waiting Earth.

The two writers discussed above illustrate the varying levels of performance achieved by two women in their chosen fields of poetry and fiction. Yasmine Gooneratne, assured and highly competent in her craft, draws upon a wide background to create poetry that is varied in form and individual in content. Punyakante Wijenaike is a lesser artist, but her scope is wider and at her best she reflects a sensitive and instinctive sympathy for the trials and aspirations of the rural people, especially the women, of Sri Lanka.

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BOOK REVIEWS

CHOOSING A SETTING: REVIEW ARTICLE

Ediriwira Sarachchandra, Pemato Jāyati Soko (Love is the Bringer of Sorrow). A lyric drama translated from the Sinhala by D.M.de Silva. Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Institut fur Englische Sprache und Literatur, University of Salzburg. 1976. lx + 55 pp.

Ediriwira Sarachchandra, Curfew and a Full Moon. A Novel about Sri Lanka, translated from the original Sinhala by the author. Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd, Writing in Asia series, 1978. 223 pp.

In the first critical assessment of Sarachchandra's achievement in the theatre to appear in English and a sensitive, detailed analysis of the dramatic structure and poetry of two of his plays (Maname and Sinhabahu), the Sri Lankan critic Reggie Siriwardena justified his own assertion that

> the gulf between (Dr Sarachchandra's plays) and Western opera lies in the fact that the music in (the) plays, though beautiful and moving, is not the main vehicle of their dramatic content; the role of the music is that of a subordinate partner to the poetry, underlining, intensifying, enriching the meaning and the emotion which is inherent in the words.
> ... Listening ... we often feel that the melody is generated by the life of the words, intensifying and accentuating their underlying speech rhythm.
> ... We are fortunate indeed in the coincidence that we should have an outstandingly gifted dramatist writing in the form of poetic and musical drama at a time when we have an audience which is still sufficiently close to a traditional culture to respond to such a form.1

D.M.de Silva's introduction to his own translation of Sarachchandra's most recently written play into English verse adds to these judgments his own admiration of the dramatist as poet,and a very just appreciation of the part played by Sarachchandra's work as a whole in giving expression and focus to the Sinhala sensibility. Presenting the plays in their political and cultural context,de Silva brings together in successive examinations of their

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1 Reggie Siriwardena, 'The Drama of E.R.Sarathchandra', Community 6 ('Ceylonese Writing. Some Perspectives'II) Colombo 1962, pp. 110 - 115.

structure and style, the various aspects of Sarachchandra's complex achievement; as here, in a discussion of Manamē, the play which revolutionized Sinhala theatre in 1956:

> ... Here the nādagam's formal conventions of language, music and dance were manipulated with a personal distinction that left the rustic entertainment far behind. The folk play rambled endlessly; here was a tight economy of structure. In place of the artless imitation of literature, here was literature itself. Most important of all, here in place of rudeness and mere buffoonery was courtliness, elegance, grace: it was an apotheosis of the humblest art forms by a national genius. The quality of being distinctly Singhalese was equally present in the fable also, with its traditional predilection for the destinies of royal persons. The jewelled words of their utterance were part of that idiom revalidated for modernity by Singhalese resurgence; capable consequently, of generating nationalist enthusiasm, and this not naively, because here the traditional formulae were actually felt to be poetic expression.

In his examination of Pemato, de Silva pays special attention to its innovative character, notes the ways in which it recalls 'the classical tradition of Singhalese civilisation and the Sanskrit inheritance which perennially enriches it', and analyses in detail the significant divergences from the original (a moral tale in prose and verse dating from the 14th century) by means of which Sarachchandra moves from mere exemplum to tragedy, and to a compassionate exploration of the human predicament.

The translation itself is particularly pleasing because de Silva does not, unlike many translators who fall into temptation, make use of his opportunity to put on a personal 'performance'. A poet in his own right, this translator has turned his own expression with devotion and delicacy into what seems on the surface the simplest of settings for Sarachchandra's 'jewelled words':

> Low-lidded eyes and lovely speech
> Dear glow of colour and the delicate
> Face like a lotus -
> If not the sum of all these things,
> What is a woman?
>
> Soothing the eyes with a cooling unguent
> Laving the hearing with a music soft
> Pleasing with subtle scents,
> Bringing to life before you
> The marvel of the vanished ages
> The mystery of a previous birth,
> Caressing into quiet sleep

> Your body with a gentle touch -
> If not the sum of all these things,
> What is a woman?
>
> (Act II)

The problems of a translator who must render Sinhala poetry as rich as Sarachchandra's into an English form that will simultaneously satisfy modern readers within and outside Sri Lanka are many. It must be remembered that Sri Lankan English evolved during a period of the island's history in which the colourless, flavourless language of bureaucratic expression offered itself as model and, except in those areas in which a few innovative translators and poets have extended its range, still keeps within those limits. 'The translator into English,' writes de Silva,

> finds in it nothing to correspond ... A dialect of the Miltonic kind ... would inevitably entail (an) artificiality and strained magniloquence ... alien to (the effect) intended and achieved in the Singhalese. On the other hand, a trendy rendering into modern spoken English ... would be completely false to the distinctive and essential formalism of Sarachchandra's literary style.

In selecting an appropriate idiom he has chosen to strive after

> a consistent formality..; formal enough to accommodate occasional archaism for particular effects, and simple enough to avoid impressing itself unduly upon the reader with the suggestion of preciousness.

No doubt something has been lost, even in translation as scrupulous as this, but less richness has run through than de Silva modestly fears. He appears to have evolved his own ways of capturing, through means consonant with the traditional techniques of English verse writing, some suggestion of the variety and the lyrical beauty of the original. The total effect of de Silva's rendering is not, perhaps, entirely new to English verse drama; reading the play, one feels one has met it before in the poetic dramas of W.B.Yeats or of James Elroy Flecker. But it is new to Sri Lankan drama in English, and this has its own importance.

It is perhaps inevitable that the reader of the translated Pemato should catch, from time to time, certain familiar echoes from well-known literary sources. For one thing, Sarachchandra is himself well-read in the dramatic and poetic literature of East and West; for another, D.M.de Silva is himself a university teacher of English and as such is especially vulnerable to such 'influences'.

Uddāla's lament at the end of Act II carries echoes of 'The Waste Land':

> ... a desert
> Where no one comes
> There
> Is no place of shadow
> There are no springs that move
> Bringing refreshment ... (p.16)

'Consider,' chant the Singers in Act III, echoing Congreve, 'the way of the world'(p.25); and a little later there is surely a reminiscence of Fitzgerald's version of the Rubaiyat in the lines 'Shall not the power of love / Take it and break it/ And make from the wreckage anew/ The world of its dream?'(p.30). Since they serve no literary purpose(such as that achieved by apt and deliberate allusion) in the translated play, it would seem that such literary echoes are unconscious. But they are also few in number, and though their presence adds nothing of value to Sarachchandra's conception, they are so unobtrusive that they take nothing away from it. Perhaps the exercise of translating Sarachchandra's fine verse has had a salutary effect on de Silva, whose own original verse has very rarely managed to shake itself free from literary echoes. One can only hope that other verse-writers who find themselves habitually 'quoting' without purpose or acknowledgment follow his example in the hope of similar results.

Not least among the virtues of de Silva's achievement is the fact that, by striving constantly for a classic simplicity of phrasing that does his original justice without attracting undue attention to itself, he has produced a text that can be read aloud or acted effectively on the stage; a point of some importance, since Pemato is essentially a poetic drama rather than a dramatic poem. Sarachchandra's plays have, of course, already crossed the sub-cultural boundaries that separate the members of Sri Lanka's different communities and the speakers of its different languages from one another; considering the depressing chauvinism that Sri Lanka's cultural resurgence - at its worst - generated in the 50s and 60s, it is a sign of Sarachchandra's quality as a writer that it is not only in Sinhala homes that (as de Silva rightly states in his introduction) his name 'is today a household word'. Now, for the first time, the Sinhala expression of the island's most creative author takes to itself an English dress that was not designed in some other land for the uses of another people, but bears the authentic stamp of a fabric made in Sri Lanka.

Since de Silva's translation is not couched in the language of our common, everyday speech, it is not to be regarded in quite the same light as the innovatory work

in English-language drama of Ernest Macintyre. D.M.de Silva draws on other, more literary, resources: his chosen language is an artistic heightening of Sri Lankan English in its more formal moods, a blending of its liturgical expression as heard in churches or published in translation of the Buddhist scriptures with the styles and tones (thoughtful, ironic, often capable of admitting both elegance and passion) that Sri Lankan English poetry has made its own in recent years. The result is an idiom that provides Sarachchandra's original with an appropriate English equivalent:

> Uddāla: Why do you come here all the way
> From Northern Madura seeking a living?
> Is there such a superflux
> Of skilled musicians in your country?
> Tell me,
> Who is this king you have
> Who will not take into his royal service
> Men of your skill?
>
> Swarna-tilakā:
>
> Good and gentle lord that is a story
> Heavy with a weight of grief. In me
> You see the cause of all the ills
> That strike my father.
> Long years at home
> We plied the craft of music
> And so lived happy.
> But there came a time -
> I do not know if all the good we did
> In former lives ran out on us,
> Or it may be
> That all the ill we did
> Came down on us -
> I only know
> We fell a victim to the royal wrath
> Without a reason.
> We were forced to go
> Out on the roads my lord without a home
> Leaving all the places we had known. (Act I)

In short, de Silva brings to his translation the sensitivity and skills of a poet, and through his rendering of this play he has extended the range of possibilities available to Sri Lankan writers in English as well as in other languages. He does not always, perhaps, tread as delicately between modernity and formalism as he does in the passage I have just quoted. It is a pity that such phrases as 'Compassionate our frailty'(p.5), 'Weak as a withered leaf/Drifted/On a wandering wind'(p.6), 'plenteous pearls'(p.6), 'Why..? In this unpeopled region/Should a woman haunt?'(p.7), 'This chronic lingering'(p.21),'I

shall keep alone/ And not come to the lecture-rooms from now'(p.24), 'lifting his hugeous trunk'(p.31), 'How could I ever feel distaste of you?'(p.27), and 'The crowds who crowd to watch him'(p.32) were permitted to survive a final draft. But such flaws are more than compensated for by a general felicity of phrasing that marks such isolated short passages as the description by the Singers of a woman's eyes (p.15) as well as such extended sections of the play as the duet of Uddāla and Swarna-tilakā at the end of Act II(p.16), the debate among Uddāla's pupils in Act III(pp. 22-26), the final duet between the married lovers in Act III(pp. 27 - 30); the chant of the pupils that accompanies the abduction of Swarna-tilakā (pp. 32 - 33); and the whole of the last act from Uddāla's entry after Swarna-tilakā's death to the end of the play (pp.35-38).

The distinction of D.M.de Silva's work as a translator of Sarachchandra's essentially poetic expression gains added value in an unexpected way when the reader passes from Pemato Jayati Soko to Curfew and a Full Moon, the first of Sarachchandra's novels to appear in English.

> 'Reflecting a troubled time and a consequently troubled spirit, this book speaks directly to our feelings and misgivings. Its questionings and anguish are something that every thinking Ceylonese must share, particularly since April 1971 shook not only our complacency but our consciences.'

Lakshmi de Silva's words, written of a book of poems published in the year of the youth uprising that provides Curfew with its subject, its background and its location in time,[1] are most applicable to Sarachchandra's study of life on the university campus at Peradeniya during those weeks of violence, anxiety and despair. The author, who for many years held the Chair of Modern Sinhala Literature at the (then) University of Ceylon, selects as the focal point of his novel (his own translation of the Sinhala original) the experiences of a professor of archaeology whose sympathy for his students gradually involves him, against his will and the promptings of caution (not to mention his ingrained respect for traditional values and past glories), in the impractical efforts of the insurgents to establish through violence a more just and equal society in Sri Lanka. Deeply disturbed by a growing conviction that 'he had wasted his years studying an ancient civilization which did not help him to understand

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1 Cf. New Ceylon Writing 3 (1973) p.69.

the problems that were present around him,' the sensitive professor finds partial relief and a focus for a new kind of idealism in the remarkable, if misguided, heroism of the youthful rebels:

> Whether they were right or wrong is another matter. But they were prepared to risk their lives and all that was dear to them for a common cause that they believed in. How many people of such mettle can you find among the Sinhalese of today?

Sarachchandra's conservative university academic who had 'never been anything but a pucca bourgeois' leaves his home at the end of the novel under armed escort in a police jeep, bound for a cell in an insurgent prison camp in Colombo. The process by which this change comes about forms the novel's plot, the incidents of which are based so closely on fact that to read the novel is to re-live the nightmarish experiences of 1971 and to tread again, this time in the company of 'Professor Amaradasa', the path of pity, anguished self-doubt and anger taken by so many Sri Lankans during that troubled summer 1.

Sarachchandra's conscientious objectivity in recording facts and incidents combines with a prose style stripped of metaphor and devoid of imaginative flights to capture the atmosphere of unreality and weird fantasy prevalent at the time. Presented in this flat, unemotional manner, an incident such as that in which a group of students flushed with political power force the University's vice-chancellor to summarily dismiss two senior administrative officers from their posts takes on something of the quality of absurdist drama. Indeed, much that occurs in the novel - the futile exchanges among members of the Faculty Club, the puerility of what passes for research and academic discussion, the intrigue that flourishes at every level within the University community - might be read as examples of satiric exaggeration, were it not for the fact that conditions at the University of Ceylon had, at the time of which Sarachchandra writes, already deteriorated beyond the reach of satire. Described as 'a novel about Sri Lanka', Curfew and a Full Moon corresponds so closely to the realities of Peradeniya in 1971 that it could claim attention as social/historical documentation rather than as a work of art. Names apart, many characters in the story are readily recognizable and identifiable: Sarachchandra's accounts of them are not in the least satiric, but seem on the contrary to be perfectly straightforward descriptions of well-known Peradeniya personalities who were (and still are, where retirement, time, or

1 Despite the strict press censorship that was in force at the time, New Ceylon Writing printed a selection of new verse written for the most part in reaction to the 1971 insurgency. See 'A Troubled Summer', New Ceylon Writing 2 (1971) pp. 82 -4.

'rationalization' has not removed them) part of the campus community. Viewed as documentary, however, Curfew is not entirely reliable, as comparison with such an account of the uprising as A.C.Alles's Insurgency 1971 will quickly reveal. Sarachchandra provides numerous instances of the 'ruthless repression' of the rebellion by the army and the police, including the true story of the rape and public murder of a young woman insurgent by an army officer. It is significant that the incident, surely equally horrifying, of the murder of a physician by insurgents in the presence of his helpless wife and terrified children(which Alles prints together with the other in order to indicate the extremes to which violence was carried on both sides) has not been included in Curfew. Sarachchandra's novel shares with Tarzie Vittachchi's Emergency '58, and communicates, a spirit of passionate response to the tragic events that involved a whole society.But, despite his very real attempt to approach his subject objectively, he does not entirely succeed.

Neither, unfortunately, is the book wholly satisfactory when viewed as fiction. Descriptions of Peradeniya landscape read more like Sanskritized Sinhala verse than like English prose: in the spring months, the reader is informed, Peradeniya 'is like a vast pavilion decked gaily, as if for a festival, with festoons of flowers hanging overhead', while 'the shimmering vault of the noon-day sky resounds to the cry of the kovula rising higher and higher up the scale and ending in a crescendo of longing'. As I have indicated already,Sarachchandra's dependence on a language devoid of flavour and richness can occasionally be very effective in maintaining objectivity on reported events. But it does not blend easily with elaborate phrasing as in the passage I have just quoted. There is also to be considered the fact that an uncertain grasp of English creates such phrases as 'bloated up with their success', 'probe into the truth', or 'hanging on to every syllable' which occur frequently with jarring effect and deprive the reader of literary pleasure. The recent publication by Heinemann of Iwan Simatupang's Indonesian novel, The Pilgrim, in Harry Aveling's English translation (and indeed, D.M.de Silva's success with Pemato) indicate what might have been achieved had Curfew been entrusted to a skilled and sensitive translator.

These weaknesses are in some measure compensated for by the last part of the novel. By means of a letter written by an imprisoned insurgent to his former teacher, the reader sees the tragic events of 1971 through the eyes of the helpless individuals caught up in them.There is also Sarachchandra's personal lament, haunting every page of the novel, for the passing of an era in which the University he served had been a true centre of

civilized inquiry and of disciplined, artistic practice. Despite conscientious and realistic reporting on successive incidents involving torture, death, intrigue and subversion, the novel's most significant passage remains (for me) that brief moment in which the author's persona regards with wonder and envy the charismatic effect on an undergraduate audience of a youth leader, representative of Sri Lanka's new and politicized society. While doing so 'Professor Amaradasa' stands 'at the top of the bowl' of the open-air theatre on the campus, in which Sarachchandra's innovative and influential dramas have played year after year to enthusiastic capacity crowds.

Y.G.

(Based, with some alterations, on reviews contributed to the CRNLE Reviews Journal and to Kunapipi)

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BOOK REVIEWS

NEW FICTION

Lloyd Fernando, Scorpion Orchid. Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd. 1976
James Goonewardene, The Awakening of Dr Kirthi and Other Stories. Lake House Investments Ltd. Colombo 1976
Raja Proctor, The Illicit Immigrant. Lake House Investments Ltd. Colombo 1977
Lorna Wright, Just Another Shade of Brown. The Australian Freedom From Hunger Campaign, Sydney. 1976

Lloyd Fernando's first novel, Scorpion Orchid, is set in the early 1950s, in the period of social upheaval and inter-racial disturbance that preceded the independence of Malaya and Singapore. Four young men, children of 'the last colonial generation', find the bonds of their friendship (formed during their shared undergraduate days of carefree ragging, study and banter) subjected to severe strain as they try to adjust to the changes taking place in the turbulent, perplexed society around them. Santinathan, a Tamil student originally from South India, has been left behind in Singapore to complete his University degree by his family who have returned to their homeland at the first signs of trouble.

> Too many changes were taking place, there was too little order, too much unease, uncertainty. It was a good country in which to earn a livelihood for a while, that was all.

Peter d'Almeida, Eurasian, finds life in the changing society of Singapore insupportable, considers emigration to Australia, tries Britain, and eventually returns 'home':

> I love Malaya. I love Singapore. I didn't know how much until I came here. I've started saving up now for my return passage.

The other two young men in the group, a Chinese and a Malay, are drawn (like their friends) towards Sally, a young woman who gives love generously until her rape by unknown assailants affects their relationships and sends all five on separate paths to destinies which have been foretold in part by an old medium of whose identity they remain uncertain to the end, and whose message seems at best equivocal.

On the fringes of this conflict are other figures, minor in comparison but well-drawn. There is Ellman, a young Englishman in Singapore, who

> wanted his options open...He really did want to make up his own mind about the novel society he found himself in...At the end of his second year he gave up trying to understand the country, and settled for looking at his surroundings as a satisfying alternative to the queues and the rationing he had left behind. He was pleased with the letters he wrote to friends at home who, he knew, would envy him his life in the tropics. He thought he did his ironic descriptions of the people he met rather well.

There is Ethel Turner, an Englishwoman on the University staff, whose confident 'knowledge' of Singapore conditions -

> 'Thank God the British are here ... If we left tomorrow, there'd be such a lovely bit of mayhem that we'd have to come back to keep the peace. No, I'm afraid we have to grin and bear it - the white man's burden, I mean' -

insensibly shapes Ellman's responses to them. When, against a background of racial tension in Singapore, Ellman (conveniently forgetful of his inheritance of generations of European warfare and unrest) puts this point of view to three of the four young men, the effect is pleasantly ironic:

> 'I mean you've been here all along for the money,' Santinathan said.
> Ellman said, 'We brought law and order. You may underestimate these things, but -'
> 'Law and order! For what?'
> 'It's no use going to the past - or blaming the past - to try to explain what we are today,' Guan Kheng said. 'We'll face up to our problems in our own way.'
> 'You have too little in common. The moment we go you'll fight and kill each other till one community gets the upper hand - or the Communists walk in.' Ellman spoke of the countries of Europe, of their common history, their common classical heritage, their music, their art, and their poetry intertwining.
> Sabran sat listening.

The events and incidents that make up a necessarily disjointed plot (pulled four different ways at once by the separate activities of the four young protagonists) are brought into occasional harmony and given a wider symbolic significance through the author's technique of placing beside them from time to time, selected literary extracts that recall the past or reflect Malaya's larger history. Thus, following a description of a union meeting at which humour triumphs over racial and linguistic differences, Fernando presents an extract from the Hikayat Abdullah in A.H. Mills's translation:

> It was then that they found at the point of the headland a rock lying in the bushes. The rock was smooth, about six feet wide, square in shape, and its face was covered with a chiselled inscription. But although it had writing, this was illegible because of extensive scouring by water. Allah alone

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> knows how many thousands of years old it may have been. After its discovery crowds of all races came to see it. The Indians declared that the writing was Hindu but they were unable to read it. The Chinese claimed that it was in Chinese characters. I went with a party of people, and also Mr Raffles and Mr Thomson, and we all looked at the rock. I noticed that in shape the lettering was rather like Arabic, but I could not read it....
>
> ...Mr Coleman was then engineer in Singapore and it was he who broke up the stone; a great pity, and in my opinion a most improper thing to do, prompted perhaps by his own thoughtlessness and folly....As the Malays say 'If you cannot improve a thing, at least do not destroy it.'

This technique, sparingly and effectively used, allows a discreet authorial irony to play continually over the events described, and ends the novel on what I take to be a note indicative of Lloyd Fernando's own attitude to the future of Malaya - a note of mingled confidence and caution:

> When we had sailed upriver for about an hour and a half, we came to Kampong China. I saw that there were several hundred Malays and Chinese waiting on the shore with spears and weapons. The three of us landed. They asked us, 'Where is this boat from?'We answered,'This boat is from Singapore.We bring letters and are on our way to Kelantan.'Then came Tengku Siak and Tengku Tanjong with hundreds of others asking for news from Singapore, and the price of merchandise. I told them what they wanted to know,and then I asked,'Where is the Datok Bendahara?' They answered,'The Datok Bendahara and the Kapitan China have gone upriver to Jelai, the place where they are digging for silver.' 'That's a fortnight's journey upriver,' I said. And they said, 'All along the river as you go upstream there are homesteads, and in the river there are fierce crocodiles.'

Scorpion Orchid is an impressive first novel, bringing a remarkable objectivity to the harrowing events and conditions it describes, occasionally presenting seemingly trivial incidents with a poetic insight that uncovers an all-too-familiar reality -

> He could not bring himself to look at Guan Kheng's eyes from a fear of finding a truth there like a toad among the leaves

- and particularly appropriate to the educational series of which it is a part, since it unobtrusively teaches how to write, and write well, about Asia in fiction.

Disillusionment, rather than confidence or caution, marks the title story in James Goonewardene's The Awakening of Dr Kirthi. A skilled, idealistic young surgeon becomes gradually convinced that the practice of his profession in Sri Lanka's conditions of 'mismanagement, hypocrisy, humbug ...(and) nepotism' in hospitals and outside them is tantamount to murder. He has, as he sees it, no option but to leave the island. His friend Kumar, who at the beginning of the story had been disturbed by the suspicion that Kirthi's idealism was too close to the chauvinism generated by post-Independence feelings in the society at large -

> The absence of a humane environment and the cruelties people were exposed to at the hospital was something they quarrelled about often. Dr Kirthi would rationalize all this, find excuses for the shortcomings on the ground that one had to draw a distinction between rich and poor countries.
>
> 'You can't rush things,' he would say,'they take time to be accomplished, and one has to make allowances for the lack of resources in a small country'

- is left behind on Kirthi's departure. Ironically, his thoughts (unlike Kirthi's) linger on the safe side of action and change:

> He did not know what to think. He had been all too smug and self satisfied, sitting pretty in an easy,comfortable job at the university like a slug, a limpet on a rock, never moving this way or that way, bellyaching about conditions elsewhere, but himself, immovable on the rock - a limpet on a rock stuck fast in one position. So on he went, thinking, seated inside his battered Fiat, thinking but having no desire to change anything in his life. Why did one have to move around when one could be happy, staying still in one position, only moving about a bit, now and then, to exercise one's limbs.

This story, like the extract from To Sow a Storm presented in Heinemann's anthology, Stories from Sri Lanka, indicates that the permanent value of Goonewardene's writing lies in its honesty and courage in exploring themes related to the injustice and disharmony created in Sri Lankan society by political opportunists who irresponsibly bend the nation's divided interests to their own advantage. There is no space available in a short story for the romantic village idylls that weaken both Goonewardene's published novels, A Quiet Place and The Call of a Kirala, and give the decisions of their respective protagonists to quit life in Colombo an unattractive appearance of escapism. Here the struggle within the hero is much more convincingly realised, as incident builds on incident to show him that not only have conditions become inimical to the actual art of healing,but afford plenty of scope for parasites to prosper. In this context, the surgeon's decision to leave a comfortable,

lucrative (and in Sri Lanka, much honoured) position is seen for what it is - a personal and brave, though lonely, refutation of the

> grandiose phrase that was supposed to explain everything (and his own departure) away ... as a reflection of ... failure to come to terms with the course of history.

Goonewardene presents the last stages of the family's departure with feeling and truth - even the 'final stretch of road'(to the airport) 'seemed to invest itself with desolation'. The hospital, in retrospect, is compared by Dr Kirthi to 'penal settlements and Nazi ghettos'. It is not a pleasant story, but its unpalatable truth-telling is something new in contemporary Sri Lankan fiction.

Kirthi's lonely individualism is seen in a different context in another story in the collection, 'The Doughty Men of Puranatota', as a group of tradition-bound villagers unite (their will stiffened by ritual and pooja, and the suggestion of blood-sacrifice) to destroy the bridge that seems to threaten their 'independence' and will certainly end their insularity. In its own way the story is symbolic of the chauvinistic folly Goonewardene fears and abominates, an aspect clearly brought out in the closing paragraphs as the villagers move deliberately towards their destructive task -

> He felt a slight coil of fear stir in his belly.He did not know it as fear.He did not know what it was, only, he felt somewhere in the recesses of his mind that it would be good for him to agree with Girigoris hereafter.... When the leader turned they followed his example and turned themselves. They had become a pack. They began then to go at a trot, all moving together, a compact and tight little group.

'The Dark Journey' is another story that focusses on a confused individual caught up in destructive forces that he does not understand. Velauthan is an immigrant from South India, making the 'dark journey' by boat across the Palk Strait to Sri Lanka's promised land:

> He was an ordinary little man who knew nothing about national boundaries, of politics and governments.How could he understand the enormity of the step he had taken? He was landing on foreign soil without passport or papers of any kind, without an identity, a stateless bit of flotsam.

The journey, undertaken in the terror of a night-crossing with a group of equally frightened refugees from destitution and hunger, ends in mental and spiritual darkness as Velauthan's son dies and his little family splinters apart -

> Advancing towards them, with rifles in their hands, was a batch of coast-guard men.
>
> 'Lord Siva, Creator and Destroyer of the Universe, Protector of the weak, Subjugator of evil, come to our aid at this moment of our suffering,' muttered Velauthan silently and quickly, a prayer he had learned as a child and had come back to him so vividly.... Then his mind went blank. When they took Letchimi into the jungle, not far away, and raped her, there was nothing he could do.

Raja Proctor's The Illicit Immigrant builds the subject of Goonewardene's story into a short novel, written in a different tone and from an entirely different point of view. Jagadesan, captured by the patrol-boats, apostrophises Sri Lanka -

> Illankai, Lanka, Ceylon! he appealed to the country.
>
> After all, he buoyed himself with argument, what am I? A starving, dispossessed cultivator hit by drought and famine.
>
> What do I want? Work ... Work in a land where no one wants to work, where there's a demand for hard work. What's wrong with my coming here to work?I'm helping them, they're helping me. Their land will improve me and I'll improve their land.
>
> I'm not stealing, I don't want to live there for ever. Surely they must see it that way..... they'll understand.

Experience leads to some modifications in Jagadesan's thinking. Brought by circumstances to living on the immoral earnings of women fellow-immigrants, he remembers:

> With women or money you can get anything done in Illankai, Lanka, Ceylon.

Caught up in race riots, he manages to extricate himself and returns to India, satisfied but still perplexed:

> Repatriation,he repeated the word and it had no terrors for him. The quest was over ... Illankai! Lanka! Ceylon! He saluted the fertility of the land that had given him re-possession... Those hills! he exulted as he remembered his bit of heaven. But its people? The hammerhead forehead lined deeply, he shook his head sadly. They could not be explained.

The Illicit Immigrant is written in Proctor's familiar vein, full of fast, lively action and (after a somewhat laboured beginning)convincing dialogue. Humour and a worldly-wise authorial approach reduce potential tragedy to mere incident and make of Jagadesan's experience no 'dark journey', but a progress towards a better understanding of himself, if not of that mystery, Sri Lanka.

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Lorna Wright's Another Shade of Brown is a novel set in Sri Lanka's tea-country, its characters the pluckers, the estate staff, the estate superintendent and (as background and setting) the larger Sri Lankan society. Published by the Freedom from Hunger Campaign and additionally blessed by the sponsorship of Action for World Development, the book(according to its postscript), claims to have

> brought to our attention with fictional characters the realities of the lives of tea estate labourers in Sri Lanka. Moreover, it represents yet another dimension to be added to the efforts of those struggling for the liberation of both the tea workers and the Sri Lankan tea industry from the controls of 'big business' that have kept them depressed, even after independence ...

'This work,' the author writes, 'is the result of three years of research.It is a simple narrative, and has a message. I have attempted to tell you of a third world problem in its human intensity, outside of the statistical, academic jargon that too often today proliferates.' Unfortunately, in abandoning the 'jargon' of political scholarship and ideological debate, Lorna Wright has adopted another kind of jargon only too familiar to readers of popular novels. Setting out to depict the deprived lives of plantation workers with the best authorial intentions in the world, all she succeeds in establishing is evidence of a debased style and a deprived imagination. One after another the familiar cliches are trotted out. The sari becomes once again the ultimate in seductive estate-wear -

> A short-sleeved jacket, without ... assistance from the world of corsetry, was holding, he noticed with a certain degree of strain, firm and full breasts.The raised arm taking the jacket up an extra inch or two appeared to have got the hemline and edge of the garment harshly lodged beneath them. A long plait of thick black hair, with a spray of flowers down the middle, fell teasingly in and out of the hollow of her back. The flimsy voile sari sat firmly on her tiny waist,while the slack drapes slipped around, covering at one moment, uncovering at another, her slim body.

There is plenty of this kind of writing, and it is good to note that in illustrating the novel Aubrey Collette has by-passed where possible the need to provide accompanying pictures for such passages, producing instead some spirited character studies: these include a sketch in his best vein of the cook Selliah making 'a triumphant entry with his chocolate cake'(p.163) another of a planter's party underneath whirling fans (p.85), some drawings of village life and two especially striking representations of estate coolies crammed into an immigrant boat(p.20) and on their long march towards work on the estates(p.24).

BOOK REVIEWS

Far from being (as the blurb claims) 'a haunting blend of passion and dispassion', Just Another Shade of Brown will do, one hopes, more for the Sri Lankan tea industry than it has done for Sri Lankan fictional writing. Singularly lacking in both interest and wit, its only touches of humour occur when physical descriptions of female characters are carried to wildly (but it would seem, alas, unconsciously) comic extremes:

> She was a sculptor's dream... A model for an artist's brush, or would the chisel and hammer of the sculptor do her greater justice? Silhouetted against the skyline, the tip of her nose in perfect symmetry and protrusion, matched in sharpness the peaks of her full breasts. Not even the course (sic) cotton, drawn from shoulder to waist across her bare body could cage or depress that firmness. Pushing solidly, it seemed to scream for release. The outline of her mouth was hardly visible but he was certain it was sweetly arched and small. Very positive, it would carry a smile that would not turn down at the corners, or rip across her face. It would be quiet, shy, timidly inquiring in abandonment and surrender. Enough.

Enough, indeed.

Y.G.

NEW POETRY

Edwin Thumboo, Gods Can Die. Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd. 1977

Edwin Thumboo (ed) The Second Tongue. An Anthology of Poetry from Malaysia and Singapore. Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd. 1976

Sirancee Gunawardana, Clouded Yellow. Privately published. Colombo 1978

Jean Arasanayagam, Kindura. Privately published. Kandy 1973

Ashley Halpe, Silent Arbiters have Camped in my Skull: Poems. Tisara Prakasakayo, Dehiwela. 1976

In the poetry written by Edwin Thumboo in the last twenty five years, the reader finds discomfort, and an irony that masks feelings of discouragement, sometimes even of despair. Here is a poet to whom the discipline of writing offers controls of a kind other than the merely technical: wit leaves little room for self-pity, and none for complacency. Words to Thumboo

> are dangerous, especially
> The simple kind you leave behind for others,
> For undesirable relatives and assorted purposes.

Lorna Wright's Another Shade of Brown is a novel set in Sri Lanka's tea-country, its characters the pluckers, the estate staff, the estate superintendent and (as background and setting) the larger Sri Lankan society. Published by the Freedom from Hunger Campaign and additionally blessed by the sponsorship of Action for World Development, the book(according to its postscript), claims to have

> brought to our attention with fictional characters the realities of the lives of tea estate labourers in Sri Lanka. Moreover, it represents yet another dimension to be added to the efforts of those struggling for the liberation of both the tea workers and the Sri Lankan tea industry from the controls of 'big business' that have kept them depressed, even after independence ...

'This work,' the author writes, 'is the result of three years of research.It is a simple narrative, and has a message. I have attempted to tell you of a third world problem in its human intensity, outside of the statistical, academic jargon that too often today proliferates.' Unfortunately, in abandoning the 'jargon' of political scholarship and ideological debate, Lorna Wright has adopted another kind of jargon only too familiar to readers of popular novels. Setting out to depict the deprived lives of plantation workers with the best authorial intentions in the world, all she succeeds in establishing is evidence of a debased style and a deprived imagination. One after another the familiar cliches are trotted out. The sari becomes once again the ultimate in seductive estate-wear -

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> are dangerous, especially
> The simple kind you leave behind for others,
> For undesirable relatives and assorted purposes.

... When you mean to be polite,
Careful, explicit, considerate, circumspect,
Adopting the proper tone,
You are likely to be quoted as saying
He won't ...

('Words')

Words, in fact, will not - as Eliot complained - stay in place. And Gods Can Die gives us an opportunity to watch a mature poet, alive to the problems of living in an Asian society closely related by cultural ties to our own, fitting his words to the disparate, often perplexing, often infuriating contradictions of a community in the process of change. Directly, in 'Conformity' (and indirectly too, in many other poems in this collection) Thumboo asks

Am I stolen,
Indexed,
Into this large conformity?

His eye takes in, and questions, significant incongruities in the Singapore scene:

The Executive beams
From plush Diethelm chair,
Table priced to match.
Cigar in the air,
Large.

.... Proud, uncouth, man,
Is this the tapper's son
Six years away from Jemaluang
Beneath this slim executive tan?

('Plush')

In 'An Ordinary Man', the protagonist, 'Mr Quek', finds the necessary transition from conservatism to modernity almost (but not quite) beyond tolerance:

Out of the blue Malayan sky,
Out of that blessed place,
Out of some obscure administrative slip
He was transferred to the Federal Capital.
The Head Office was bad,
Its work uncertain, routine irregular,
The contact with inconstant men most painful.
Bahasa Kebangsaan proved only too real.
The peons no longer offered to draft his letters
Or run his errands.
And the instructions on 'Malay Without Tears'
In thirty easy lessons, were in Malay,
Confirming his worst fears.
One had to sink or swim, he thought, then
Sank into the language, and fell silent.

In 'Catering for the People', Thumboo's ironic yet compassionate gaze focusses on the larger society of which he (as his use of 'we' indicates) is himself a part:

There is little choice -
We must make a people.

We have a promising amalgam -
Youth, anger, a kind of will, a style of politics,
And bargain hard, sell common and unlikely things;
....
We are flexible, small, a boil
On the Melanesian face.
If it grin or growl, we move -
To corresponding place,
Keeping sensitive to trends, adapting,
To these delinquent days.

Poetry as questioning and shapely as Thumboo's is rare in these 'delinquent days' of social realism. His portraits present a realistic picture of life, filtered through a kindly, yet searching intelligence. From time to time memories of an European literary past are deliberately conjured up, to express a sense of alienation, and to throw immediate detail into effective relief:

Therefore
Give us this day O Lord
Our daily bread.
Hungry sheep look up; some are fed.

Whatever the dialect of Your tribe,
O Lord,
You'll surely help those
Who also help themselves.

('Christmas Week 1975')

As an editor of his own poetry and that of others, Thumboo is somewhat less satisfying. The Second Tongue could have been cut by one third without loss of quality; better still, it could then have been made to include more of Thumboo's own verse, and that of Wang Gungwu, Gerald de Cruz, Richard Ong, and Wong May. In his desire to be fair, Thumboo has been, I feel, somewhat over-generous. Still, Ee Tiang Hong, Lee Tzu Pheng, Muhammad Haji Salleh and Arthur Yap are all substantially represented. Seven poems from Wong May, five from Wong Phui Nam (including the sequence 'Nocturnes and Bagatelles' and the resonant 'Poem for a Birthday') and eight from Thumboo himself do their several and distinctive talents some justice.

In a substantial and detailed introduction which puts the literature (and in particular the poetry) of Malaysia and Singapore into helpful perspective, Thumboo provides brief but valuable critical impressions of a number of poets and their work. Here a poet such as Wang Gungwu who

exercised considerable influence on other writers and on his contemporaries in public life in the 1950s, and is today a social scientist and a scholar of distinction, is given his due. In the process, Thumboo re-states with characteristic tact and timeliness the proper relationship that should exist between social realism and imaginative literature:

> Wang and his fellow-undergraduates were sharply attuned to political and other changes in Malaya/Singapore and elsewhere in Asia, and thought and felt a new consciousness. His approach to matters of style was informed, relatively bold, and discerning. It reinstated the poem as poem, corrected over-anxious socio-political perspectives. Diction loosened to admit tones ranging from the satirical to the acutely personal.
>
> (Introduction, p.xvi)

Thumboo reveals himself as an informed, sensitive commentator on the Asian literary scene, presenting with unaffected sincerity and appreciation points of view that are not his own. Comparing the verse of Muhammad Haji Salleh with that of Ee Tiang Hong, he writes that Muhammad's

> sensibility is rooted in Malay traditional culture, rural life and their concomitants. His themes are drawn from changes in this traditional society, from its confrontation with the forces of modernisation, especially their disruptive aspects. The sombre tone, a distinctive mixture of joy and sorrow, is one of the unique aspects of Malay culture which Muhammad captures splendidly ....
>
> Tradition here is more earthly and nourishing than in Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. It is a tradition of empathy, an interest in ancestral ways, literate but not literary, framed by bonds with padi fields, the tenor of season and immemorial ceremony... In such a milieu feelings find and sustain each other readily because life is integrated, customary rather than institutionalized, creating a type of understanding that amounts to a full possession of a situation, issue, or problem. It allows the past to enter completely the emotional matrix of a subject because the circuits of perception have been laid, as it were, by the unremitting demands made on the senses, by the close, constant contact with the life of man in nature. Ee takes the country to town; it is comfortable, civilized, and a source of metaphors. For Muhammad it is an essential constituent of his vision and it teaches him how to recognize and absorb tragedy without being overwhelmed.
>
> (Introduction, pp. xxii - xxiv)

I have quoted at some length here in order to indicate the depth and value to writers and students in Sri Lanka and of other Asian regions, of Thumboo's critical insights. Interwoven with his political and social awareness is a sense of deep involvement with the literature of his country, not only as an academic or a critic but as a poet. Of Wong Phui Nam he writes that

> He saw - as others did - that the real enterprise was how to make 'the sum total of conditions in a society' move the creative personality. Unless a poet feels and meets them through a network of relationships, he has no validating identity.

The last sentence quoted above expresses a view that corresponds to the criticisms both Professor K.L.Goodwin and Patrick Jayasuriya bring against some Sri Lankan verse (see pp. 124 - 30 below). Thumboo states, writing of Arthur Yap,

> But each poet has to define his or her own exploration. Some show a certain caution, nurse their resources - stylistic and emotional - to gain a slower but less erratic development.

Comparing Singapore's linguistic situation with that of Malaysia (where 'an authoritative view expressed during a recent forum at the University of Malaya has it that those writing in English are a small group, usually influenced by western culture and therefore have little relevance to Malaysia') Thumboo's carefully maintained stance of academic detachment does not quite succeed in concealing his relief, as a poet, that

> although there is a desire for national identity, no direct, formal attempts are made to foster one in the arts. The impulse to know other literatures, to feel their presence, remains intermittent and individual. Unlike in Malaysia, the literatures have not been brought into any explicit, doctrinal relationship.

He adds, 'The present bilingual push, if sustained and successful, could perhaps produce bilingual poets, but, more certainly, encourage poets to become aware of a second, perhaps third, culture as resources for their own poetry'. In short, The Second Tongue, by virtue of the quality and appositeness of its introduction and the interest of its contents, has much to concern the Sri Lankan reader, teacher and student. Edwin Thumboo is a poet (and an editor) under pressure, both personal and linguistic, and his ability to retain objectivity in today's Asian literary milieu is, like Lloyd Fernando's (see 'New Fiction', above) both admirable and heartening. His remarks are, as he says of Yap's poems, 'subtle commentaries; they reveal rather than explore'.

Both Clouded Yellow and Kindura are examples of the current tendency among Sri Lankan poets to publish their work privately in limited editions. Of the two collections, Clouded Yellow is outwardly the more unusual, being bound between woven palm-leaf covers and decorated with individually hand-painted illustrations. With few exceptions, Sirancee Gunawardana's verses result from moments of self-communion and private joy or sorrow, although these often take the outward form of a visual image, a bird, a butterfly, or, as in 'Song of the Nidikumba',a flower:

> The fragile
> Clinging Nidikumba
> Its subtle pink daintiness
> Splashed with dew
> Devastating
> Tenderness
> Splits the rock.
> Splinters into a myriad pieces
> The hard cabook heart within
> While soft pink petals look up
> At the sun.

Less satisfactorily, some of her poems are straightforwardly descriptive, a jotting down of sense impressions of Sri Lanka's intensely varied landscape. 'Wilpattu '74' seeks to convey the atmosphere of scrub jungle:

> .... Bronze wings quiver,
> A rustle of leaves and monkeys appear.
> Softly on the mouldy sand
> The heavy-footed iguanas crawl ...
> A leopard rolls over and yawns
> In the shade of a Palu tree.
> The stillness of the Nelun villa
> Is shattered by the shrill call
> Of the Jacana.

Jean Arasanayagam, too, celebrates the distinctive quality of a jungle landscape. In 'The Sanctuary - Kumana', she writes, like Mrs Gunawardana, of birds and animals, but with a distinct difference:

> In this seared landscape
> Burned into whiteness of salt and sand
> Where dead trees bare their bones
> Stark elemental structure,
> The heat confuses, scorches wits,
> Yet, the eye separates each bird,
> Each plant, each leaf
> For individual introspection.

Though both writers, as is most evident, respond strongly to the visual imperatives of the natural landscape, Jean Arasanayagam's is the more painterly eye, and she brings

to her poetry a far more sensuous awareness of her surroundings. It is immediately obvious that modern European painting and the older arts of Asia are a major source of Jean Arasanayagam's inspiration. The frescoes of the Bodhisattva at Ajanta, Japanese origami, the art of Marc Chagall and George Keyt have each their poems; and in the artistic representation of the mythical 'Kindura' -

> Feathers slice off your waist,
> Tail plumes splay the air,
> Claws grasp earth,
> Fingers touch flute,
> Music twitters from those human lips.
> Your imperturbable profile
> Does not suggest
> Discrepancy or disembodiment,
> Yet your folded wings
> Unruffled feathers
> Suggest an immobility
> Of flight arrested ...

the poet seeks, and finds, her own self-image and a design for the cover of her beautifully produced book of verse.

The poems in Kindura brim with visual colour:

> Honeysuckers puncture green-bronze berries,
> Parakeets' red beaks split globules
> of golden juice clustering on branches,
> Butterflies' pollened wings
> Shafting in flight among crimson
> Canna lilies, green chameleons ...
>
> ('Afternoon Pictures')

Their air is 'sunflecked, pointillist', seas are 'turquoise ... bright with morning sun', the poet's body in frenzy is 'striped like a tiger lily', in dream 'silver ... in moon-cold light'. The general effect of such writing is refreshing and exhilarating, not only because the pictures it paints are fresh and original, but because it is not only to the visual sense that Jean Arasanayagam appeals. An ability to translate feeling effectively into physical sensation produces poems such as 'Catharsis' -

> To free your limbs
> From the embrace of your lover
> And feel waterfalls of loneliness
> Engulf you
> In their coldness.

and 'Afterwards' -

> Serpents of light coil round
> Your sleeping face and your
> Immobile lips are at peace
> Stung into silence
> With the honeyed venom of kisses.

The recurrent themes of her poetry, apart from her constant delight in capturing in words the sensuous impressions yielded by rock and sea, tree and bird, temple and street, appear to be those of different kinds of love in separation and in fulfilment ('Retrospection', 'La Mort', 'Mithuna', 'Afterwards', 'The Moment Ceased to Live', and 'Death of a Mother'); various aspects of childhood ('Lonely Child', 'Children's Park'); the transience of youth ('Time's Ambush', 'Collaborationist', 'The Ripening Sun'); alienation ('Journey into Exile', 'Ruined Gopuram','Exile') and explorations of her own personality in a variety of moods and moments. Some of her poems are experimental and imagist; among these, and of varying quality, are 'Masks', 'Catharsis', 'Afterwards', 'Tattoo', 'Matrix', 'Woman and Waterfall', 'The Idiom of Fear', 'Cobwebs', 'A Desert Sun' and 'Earthquake'. In the best of these she achieves an effect very like the complex shock transmitted by one of her own arresting paintings.

'A Missionary Lady' is a poem that stands out in this collection; there is nothing else quite like it either here or in Jean Arasanayagam's second book of poems, Poems of a Season Beginning and a Season Over. There is social comment contained in the phrase 'that alien pattern of living'; and in her use of the word 'us' it is evident that the poet speaks for her generation. But the sum of the poem is more than this, with its detached, yet compassionate observation of a human personality:

A MISSIONARY LADY

In the garden,
Early morning,
The English missionary
Sits eating ripe papaw
Scooped out with a silver spoon.
Already the trees are fruiting
And purple magenta bougainvillea
Cascades into her ordered garden.
Birds sing, marbles of sound
Clinking against each other
And the braids of her auburn-grey hair
Are shell-coiled round her ears,
As if to shut out the noise of birds
And human voices.

.....

You made us puritans
You preached a stern morality
And yet you wept, lonely
Over an exile's letters,
The hot sun left your skin dry, mottled,
Your patterned silk gowns
Clung with time, more closely, to your angular
limbs,

Your fine-boned hands, sensitive as butterflies,
Yet so impersonal.

Enclosed within a safe garden
Among the lazy tortoises and purple lilac,
It took us centuries to break away
From that alien pattern of living,
Nor can I weep over, or regret
Its final disruption.

Social comment is not, in any case, within Jean Arasanayagam's particular field of interest. Although, like most of the poets of her generation, she has been moved to write verse by the events of April 1971, her characteristic interests emerge in the way the debris of the insurrection is made part of a painter's composition:

On the other side of the mountain
thick blood flows from the jungle,
On the trampled grasses lie
Scattered bodies like fallen trees,
Fear and death stalk among
Laced branches and foetid caves ...
Sun and rain fall on festering eyerim,
Ants creep in trails
On shattered bodies...
Blue foliage trembles in the pelting rain,
Trees disappear in thick mists,
Now there are no mountains
Only falling rain
And bloated bodies
Casually drifting downriver.

('April 1971')

Few Sri Lankan poets write verse that bares a poetic personality with so much honesty to the reader. 'Painting A Picture' could have been alternatively titled 'Writing A Poem': here she describes the experience, to her simultaneously intimate, painful yet irreplaceable, of creating a work of art -

You become in this act
Of solitary gestation,
The mother of all earth,
Peopling the world with beings
Whose eyes swivelling out of darkness
Into the light of first creation
Tear apart your life,
Peeling off the green membraneous sheath
To reveal the nacreous stalk.

Y.G.

Ashley Halpe's personal delineation of his poetic stance is expressed in 'not lionish':

> up, all put to the test -
> I cannot will not do it, will not trust
> the heroic mode, the epic solitude,
> won't hold time, life, joy as dust
>
> am an only just.

There is a puckered self-consciousness and self-dramatization here, but also self-awareness and a desire to look inside himself. Having rejected the 'epic solitude', what alternative is presented? Many of the poems in Silent Arbiters have Camped in My Skull indicate a satisfaction in 'bright words, favoured breast and fondled rump'('not lionish'). There is also to be found a desire to 'face life', and share personal responsibilities in a mature manner. The poems describe the writer's relationship with his wife, his family and friends, and an outsider's apprehension of an external world alien to him, for which alienation he feels guilty but does not know how to amend. A poem such as 'Vignettes' -

> tip to tip, finger and nipple
> touch and nudge. Warm breast at warmer breath
> stipples

merely describes a physical relationship, an experience that seems only skin-deep and of a boyish indulgence.'The lovely skill' expresses an innocent satisfaction with the innocuous flesh:

> ... knowing that there was room, and there was
> time
> to touch an inch of ankle, nudge a cheek,
> finger the soft of groin and hard of head,
> and the floating point of nipple; abandon to
> the long slow tingle of flesh under gentle
> breath

which is better conveyed in 'epiphany' and in 'libido sciendi'. The feeling, however, is the same, related to an adolescent, innocent delight in the act of sex:

> ... it is
> the vulnerability of desire, redeemed
> by orgasm not seized but given
> with tender cradling with
> trembling reaching; it is
> the hot tumbling clutching leaping
> of accustomed mates certain of ecstasy.
>
> ('libido sciendi')

There is a trace of smugness in 'accustomed mates certain of ecstasy', though the language here succeeds in carrying the poem's emotion. But we have also to note Halpe's debased use of the word 'soul', a recurrent habit: 'the sprawled soul, the thighs flung out'. No doubt it corresponds to

the current usage of the word, but is the currency of poetry down to the level of 'soul food'?

In view of the complacency expressed in the quoted examples, it is no wonder that Halpe appears frightened out of his cosy bed and guilty when confronted with bloody revolution. In 'April 1971', he splutters violent adjectives to express his confusion:

> I do not know
> the thin reek of blood, the stench
> of seared flesh, the
> cracked irreducible bone ...

Again, there is no lack of feeling:

> I sit through night hours
> trying wonted work, compelled
> into blank inattentions
> by these images
> young bodies tangled in monsoon scrub.

He is sensitive to others' sufferings, and concerned. But the generalised effect of 'all their miseries and defeats' indicates a great distance from the afflicted, in contrast to the minutely observed points of pleasure in the two poems quoted earlier. 'Thin reek of blood', 'the stench of seared flesh' and 'hot hate' are the phrases of generalised reaction.

The limitations of Halpe's ability to respond to the political insurrection of 1971 are also seen in a poem appropriately entitled 'the dream'. The difficulty of imagining a mild Professor ambling off to join the guerillas in the jungle on his way to the lecture room is not helped by the nature of the writing:

> I too have dreamt much; one dream
> I have to tell you. I dreamt
> that I got the two children to school
> ....
> and took my way into the jungle
> ....
> I was among the guerillas.

It is a dream, and how easy it all sounds in that pleasant, conversational tone. And then:

> I awoke, shuddering
>
> glad of the still warmth
> of my wife beside me, glad
> of the slow accustomed whitening of the window...

But Halpe is not insensitive to the social problem:

> Should I be haunted? Do even ghosts become familiar?
> ...
> I have learned nothing.
> But often gladness

goes suddenly slack, speech
falters, or a gift alters

even in the giving. Silent arbiters
have camped in my skull.
I learn. Neither crucified nor self-immolating,
I dream.

With his concern goes, unfortunately, a sense of complacency. This is conveyed by the long (aometimes long-winded) conversational social communications which are a feature of many of these poems. Their tone is not appropriate to the urgent, probing inner questioning that seems to be the theme of the verse. The reader feels that the social problems described are external to the poet, who still manages to regain the confident attitude that he,personally, is still safe. Perhaps the fact that the handling of the language is competent, even professionally competent, but that it does not have the quality of creative distinction, may be related to the over-all complacency expressed in this group of poems.

A sense of social injustice is also expressed in 'cold spell', accompanied by the distancing of journalistic observation:

Behind the estate bungalow, the grandson
had found an old tube of toothpaste.
He had split open the tube
and was eating the paste

There is feeling here for the deprived, the rather detached quality of which is conveyed by the language itself. Thangamma, Selvam and the grandson, characters in the poem, are figures as impersonal as 'the Superintendent' and 'the Minister'. The scales of justice are held evenly but incline occasionally towards sentimentality. Halpe seems ashamed of his fortuitous personal position.

The inadequacy of the poet's attitude to society in verse dealing with the external world is also summarised in 'when one eate':

The 250,000 people
get 4,800 loaves of bread a day.
At the Kurigram Central Gruel Kitchen
everybody gets two platefuls
of gruel
....
The delegates to the great World Food Conference
in Rome -
how much did they eat that week?

Here again we have a generalised look from above at deprivation and social injustice. 'Kurigram Central Gruel Kitchen' sounds fictitious, and the rhetorical question about the delegates to the World Food Conference seems naive

because the amount of food consumed by them that week would hardly determine whether people starved at 'Gaybanda'(a fictitious name?).

The number of poems referring to the tragic insurrection of 1971 in Sri Lanka indicates that Halpe does possess personal sympathy and a social conscience.But it is peculiarly that of the well-to-do Western-oriented class in the midst of the mass poverty and turmoil in Asia. He does not seem to be equipped to come to terms with the hard facts of social injustice, and flaps his phrases ineffectually.

The poet has evidently had the privilege of travelling and teaching abroad, as indicated by 'Bristol elegies,1959-1962' and the poems in 'From the New World'. In the former, the disjointed, impressionistic description suggests that the poet is as alienated from his surroundings in England as he is in Sri Lanka:

'a penny-blest accordionist by a bus-queue'

'a tidily built old man, wrinkled round his cigarette'

'The conversation of a string quartet:
strange politesse, which astonishes
the simple heart, heard
at the back of the soul'

To this Professor of English, England seems to have been of no other significance than of social alienation and physical discomfort. He returns home

after three years' exile ...
to new road signs, an increased population,
and unaccustomed hates.

In these poems dealing with the outside world, and with his personal relationships with those close to him, Halpe's problems are not exclusively personal to him but those common to an entire class of well-off English-educated Asians. He tries to come to terms with these discomforting facts in personal terms, but nowhere is success indicated, the prognosis being a return to smugness:

Headed home we catch
scents of New Year cooking across half the world.
('from the New World')

The poems relating to his experiences of a stay in the United States show again the familiar feeling of alienation:

Spring's parade amusesm for we foreknow
disastrous heavy Summer, thunderstorms,iced tea,
floss, freckles, festivals, Bermuda shorts ...

Here 'disastrous heavy Summer' has nothing in common with the foreboding of 'long hot summer' in the vocabulary of American political protest, but is merely a summer that is merely physically too hot for Halpe. The revolution had not

arrived in America to jolt him into an awareness of the deprivation, social injustice and racism there.

The poems written in America describe relationships with American friends. There is a note here of a genuine attempt to bridge the gap of alienation, but the relationships achieved do not register strongly enough to be of much significance:

> what's between you and us, it's made
> clarities sing upon midwinter wind -
> strange ...
> that you should yet have been the emissary
>
> of a world ample yet wary
> full of itself, yet generous to the brim.
> Friend of a friend, punctiliously kind
> you seemed till all the subtle game was played
>
> Then lovely-awful loomed your mystery
> such life, such strength, shaped with such mastery!
>
> ('Monticello')

They are 'lovely-awful', 'strange', and a 'mystery'. In the American poems we encounter again the easy tone of social conversation, and an implied belief in personal relations. But often we find a preciousness in both the language and the attitude of the poet, not restricted to the occasional filigreed phrase -

> 'no book-club latitudinality for chiaroscuro'
>
> ('Coolemee in midwinter')

However, 'Coolemee in midwinter' is, it seems to me, the most realised and satisfying of the poems in this selection. It successfully posits the conflicting forces that the poet appears to be grappling with in most of these poems: his sense of alienation and his awareness of larger, threatening forces outside his limited personal experience -

> Our host, too, disturbed no dust on chronicles,
> no book-club latitudinality for chiaroscuro;
> rather, a lovely chuckling pride, a fund of banter,
> apologies for the heating, invitation to the piano,
> watching us grow
>
> (I thought he watched) grow, simply,
> wiser. Puzzled by the invitation, scenting Encounter,
> we'd proclaimed ourselves in sari and sherwani,
> wondering
> ... what ashy subtleties might lie in store
> of genteel lore ...

A much surer command of thought and feeling than appears elsewhere is reflected in Halpe's control of movement and diction:

> Deeper than hush
> the potent silence schooled my blood and eyes. I saw -
> just a tree; tall, black, old; its spidery shadow
> on glittering snow ...

Here, more solidly than in the other poems, is a sense of the limitations of understanding only on social terms. Outside the comfortable social relationship achieved, there is an apprehension of something dark and foreboding:

> Stark, clear, true, shadow and tree
> foil me of cadence, will not be
> subsumed in rhetoric, but steadily
> affirm that night and tauten memory.
> So let it be.

The feeling of the inadequacy of the social evening, pleasant as it was, and the sense of a dark threat outside is finely conveyed through the physical details of the house, while the house itself looms into a larger symbolic presence:

> and down the night-filled drive the old house
> watched and waited,
> oh, not for us, but in a waiting watching
> full of itself, hunched on its knoll, stooped
> with a big man's stoop..

P.J.

Ashley Halpe's first volume of poetry is filled with the intensely personal, self-expressive poems that he has had published in journals and anthologies over the last ten years. This is not poetry of many personas; Halpe has found more enterprise in walking naked - or, at any rate, with only his own mask. His love poems express quiet joy and satisfaction; his occasional poems are opportunities for displays of subtle intellect; his political poems express self-doubt and puzzlement.

In the love poem 'epiphany', the aggression of 'love-lust' is immediately softened by the word 'cradles'; the 'if only' in the final movement of the poem gives vent not to any painfully felt dissatisfaction but to a romantic wish for a perpetual distillation of the softer side of love...

His occasional poems are written chiefly out of experiences in Europe or the United States. One of those inspired by living in the United States is 'Visiting Coolemee'. Perhaps beguiled by the name, Halpe is even more Yeatsian in syntax, diction, and thought than usual. The protective self-confidence in one's feelings and intellect, the protective stylish gestures learnt from Yeats, are dented by the grisly events of the Sri Lankan insurrection of April/May 1971... The mask borrowed from Yeats is largely

resumed in 'News from Home', which begins with the words

> The ceremonies of innocence once more abused
> old authority asserting
> prerogatives of hindsight, weighing
> down on hurt faces, eager plans ...

But puzzlement and self-doubt creep back at the end...

If Professor Halpe's poetry has a general fault, it is that his love of language, especially his love of Yeats's language, acts as a mask for genuine feeling.The poems are presented as being chiefly about himself, but one is disappointed when the self is cloaked in the language of Yeats or, less often, Eliot ('the old botched speech' in 'four attenuations iii') or Dylan Thomas ('adult-expert'). It is a fault that he is well aware of. 'Pity is too easy; in what role/ can duty and delight restore my soul?' he writes in 'concerto'. In 'at the ridge of thirty-five' he announces that 'the image that would hold me whole/ eludes me'.....

K.L.G.*

TELLING IT LIKE IT IS

Adil Jussawalla and Eunice de Souza (ed) Statements.An Anthology of Indian Prose in English. Orient Longman, Delhi 1976

A.J.Gunawardena, Ranjith Gunawardena, Reggie Siriwardena, Chitra Wickramasuriya, Uvais Ahamed, Jezima Ismail, Jeanne Moonesinghe (ed) Reading With Understanding. An Anthology of Literature in English. Department of Educational Publications, Sri Lanka 1976

M.Stewart and T. Doyle, Hey, English is Fun. A Thematic English anthology for use in Australian secondary schools. Macmillan, Australia. 1976

David Clarke (ed) Insight Through English 2. Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh (1968) 1977

'The anthology is intended to present to the student various kinds of good writing: informative, argumentative,descriptive, emotional, imaginative and creative. We have not

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restricted our conception of literature to creative writing alone...(and) hope that through the reading of these extracts the student will obtain an understanding of the various ways in which language is used as a means of expression and communication.' The aims expressed by the editors of Reading with Understanding are shared by the editors of all the anthologies under discussion, with significant variations in the principles on which the extracts have been selected. Both Insight Through English and Hey, English is Fun make imaginative use of pictorial material which is keyed into, without necessarily illustrating in any definitive way, certain selected passages of prose or verse. Statements deliberately confines itself(as does Reading with Understanding)to the printed word;and to Indian authors, claiming that

> by restricting the student's area of study to Indian responses to largely Indian situations, we are not following a chauvinistic or narrowly parochial approach to academic study, but ... feel there are very real gains to be had by confronting the student with the work of lively minds who share his environment, and to a greater or lesser extent, his hopes and struggles.

The editors of Reading with Understanding, conscious that they are working in a milieu in which students are all too often prepared for examinations by teachers who dictate to them notes drawn from a history of English Literature or from critical works (or in 'tutories' that distribute duplicated 'notes' prepared by teachers in institutions of tertiary education - who may even have set the examination papers!) have compiled their textbook in the hope that both teachers and students will be obliged to confront the text itself, and formulate their own responses to it. They direct their efforts not exclusively to the teaching of English literature, but to literature through the medium of the English language. Accordingly, the extracts have been taken from a variety of sources, including translations from other literatures into English.

Eunice de Souza and Adil Jussawalla are, both of them, poets and teachers in their own right, and they have collaborated in producing an admirably fresh and thought-provoking book. Statements gets off to a flying start with an extract from Aubrey Menen's Dead Man in the Silver Market, a description of the transformation of plain 'Mr William Ponder' into 'Sir William Ponder, KCIE' in the twilight years of the British Raj in India. For precisely directed, perfectly sustained irony it would be hard to match Menen, whose ability to pinpoint not only the comic aspects of British behaviour but the inconsistencies of India's complex society is admirably demonstrated in his account of the swimming-pool overlooked by the balcony of

Mr Ponder's Bombay apartment:

> Few people would deliberately prefer to live within easy reach of the splashes and shouts and confusions of such a place. But this pool was in a sense the heart of the Indian Empire. Nobody could swim in it who was not a European.
>
> I should explain that the word European substantially meant, 'English'. But if the pool had been strictly closed to anybody but the English, the Americans would have been barred as well. This would have been awkward, so the word 'European' was coined as a gesture, however carefully measured, in their direction. This had the disadvantage of letting in the Latin consular officials and their wives. But this misfortune was accepted as unavoidable; no undue fuss was made about it.
>
> The English community defended its action in closing the baths to Indians, but I do not know that any Indian ever attacked it. Among the Hindus, those who might have felt hurt - the upper castes - felt, on the contrary, quite sympathetic. They themselves would view with horror and loathing the prospect of getting into water which already held an Englishman.
>
> As for the lower castes, they would not have been particular, but they, too, were disgusted that there was no rule to prevent women using the water every day of the month, if they so desired.
>
> All told, the pool performed its function - which was to inflame the Englishman's racial pride while cooling his skin - without causing much bad blood.
>
> Ponder used it often, though he was no swimmer, and he was able to look at it all his leisure hours. No doubt the sight of it helped him over those awkward minutes with his English friends when conversation turned on Home. Ponder trod carefully during these times, not always with complete success. But it must have been reassuring for him, when his friends had made their slightly too affable farewells, to look down at the pool and feel that however much he might be out of it in London - Ponder had no club: Ponder had no 'place in the country': Ponder had,it seemed, no friends at Home - nevertheless here, he was literally and undeniably in the swim.

By juxtaposing, in the extract as a whole, Bombay's growing political unrest with a dead-pan description of Government House parties, Menen simultaneously manages to view Britishers in India with an ironic Indian eye, and conveys the sense of dislocation and mutual incomprehension that characterized the relationship of the rulers and the ruled:

> Time was short. English statesmen were visiting Delhi at ever-shortening intervals assuring Indians that nothing held them back from Freedom save their own divisions. They invited Indians to find some common basis of agreement and locked up the leaders of the principal party in jail, possibly to secure them peace and quiet for reflection. When the people came out on the streets and built barricades, they let the leaders out again, this being the only way left to get the people to go back to their homes. The Governor, serene, played 'The Campbells are Coming' after his dinner parties, but nobody had much faith in the Campbells....
>
> They made (Ponder) a K.C.I.E. The 'K' stood for Knight, the 'C' for Commander and the 'I.E.' for nothing at all: by the time Ponder's envelopes were coming in with the correct form of address, the Indian Empire had gone to join such episodes in English history as child labour, the persecution of the Quakers, and the Liverpool slave market - things which, as I was taught at school, show the greatness of the English character because they have stopped doing them.

The other extracts in Statements resemble Menen's 'The Last Nabobs' in having interesting and important things to say to Indian students about the development and the present condition of their own society. Prakash Tandon tells 'A Story of Partition'; Kusum Nair in 'An Unfinished Revolution' describes the tragic transience of some of Mahatma Gandhi's socio-economic reforms; Romila Thapar in 'The Past and Prejudice' questions the validity of the stereotyped thinking about Indian history produced by influential British and European historians and philologists such as James Mill and Max Mueller. Khushwant Singh describes the famine Bihar experienced in 1968, and records the responses to it of apathetic officials, news-hunting journalists and the indifferent rich:

> 'I simply refuse to believe these stories about people dying of hunger,' remarked a lady at the Bankipore Club as she put down her frosted crystal beer mug. She was fair, well-filled and dripping with jewels.
>
> 'Papers report deaths from starvation in some villages,' replied her husband.'On the other hand All India Radio quotes official sources as saying they have the drought situation completely under control. One does not know what to believe.'

Geeta Kapur provides a critical account of the achievement of the Indian painter, Amrita Sher-Gil; K.P.S.Menon writes of the award to Boris Pasternak in 1958 of the Nobel Prize

for Literature, his voluntary renunciation of it under pressure from Soviet officialdom and his fellow writers, and his death in 1960; F.N.Souza in 'Nirvana of a Maggot' writes an account of his 'own activity in matters of paint and words', that takes in a lively description of the city of Bombay, of existence in a Goan village, and the achievement of Mahatma Gandhi; and D.D. Kosambi discusses the relationship that does and should exist between men of science, the rulers, and society as a whole.

Each of the selected extracts leads the reader to a thoughtful questioning of accepted conventions, giving at the same time useful models of different kinds of writing. Very full notes and exercises ensure that the usefulness of Statements at every level, including those of vocabulary, comprehension, grammar and usage, and composition, is not overlooked by the Indian student for whose paperback library it has been compiled.

The editors of Reading with Understanding have placed their main emphasis on contemporary writing, but have also included poetry and prose from the literature of past centuries, intending that every extract 'should be read for its relevance to human experience today'. The entries are thematically arranged in twelve groups, and in each group there appears at least one passage with a Sri Lankan or Third World origin. Thus, in the section headed 'Society', the poem 'Secretariat' by the Sri Lankan/German writer Anne Ranasinghe appears side by side with Wole Soyinka's 'Telephone Conversation', Blake's 'The Garden of Love', Bob Dylan's 'Blowing in the Wind', Ogden Nash's 'The Terrible People', George Orwell's 'A Hanging', Premchand's 'The Thakur's Well', Jacques Prevert's 'Lazy Morning' and other passages. A lively section on 'School and Learning' includes Po Chu-I's 'Escorting Candidates to the Examination Hall' in Arthur Waley's translation and Mr Murdstone's fiendish sum about five thousand double-Gloucester cheeses from Dickens's David Copperfield. 'Identity' juxtaposes a 12th century Kannada poem with Lennon and McCartney's 'Eleanor Rigby', D.H.Lawrence's poem 'What is he?', Yasmine Gooneratne's 'Words to a Daughter' and James Thurber's story, 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty'.

The result is a fresh and stimulating look at ideas and techniques, in taking which the Sri Lankan student is assisted by a series of questions and exercises following each extract. The anthology spans large areas of space and time, indicating unobtrusively to the student that English 'literature' is now written competently and imaginatively by people all over the world without distinction of race, age or sex. The inclusion of work produced or translated by Sri Lankan authors in an English literature textbook breaks significantly new ground; the presentation of a single play, and that the Japanese Kyogen comedy The

Bird-Catcher in Hell, in the section on 'Drama' aroused some controversy when this anthology first appeared. It was argued that some European drama, and especially Shakespeare, should and could have been included; the debate (as often happens these days in Sri Lanka) rapidly deteriorated into an exercise in public mud-slinging and name-calling as 'experts' who were aggrieved at having been overlooked as prospective editors of this textbook attacked the credentials of those who were chosen to compile and edit it. Three of the editors defended their choices in a paper entitled 'Teaching Literature: A New Approach', which should be included as a preface in the next edition of this unconventional and stimulating anthology.

Insight Through English is intended for students between the ages of fifteen and seventeen in British secondary schools, and according to its editor, represents an attempt to break away from the traditional division of English into Language and Literature. The passages chosen seek to involve the pupil through their variety and interest, to make him look critically at words, and to stimulate his own creative writing. Some idea of the principles behind David Clarke's choices may be gained from Section 7 of this book, which is untitled but contains passages that relate to money and its uses in society. The section begins with an extract from W.H.Auden and Christopher Isherwood's The Ascent of F6:

Mrs A: Give me some money before you go
There are a number of bills we owe
And you can go to the bank today
During the lunch hour.

Mr A: I dare say;
But, as it happens, I'm overdrawn.

Mrs A: Overdrawn? What on earth have you done
With all the money? Where's it gone?

Mr A: How does money always go?
Papers, lunches, tube-fares, teas,
Toothpaste, stamps and doctor's fees,
Our trip to Hove cost a bit, you know.

Mrs A: Can we never have fun? Can we never have any
And not have to count every single penny?
Why can't you find a way to earn more?
It's so degrading and dull to be poor.
Get another job ...

There follow extracts from Alan Sillitoe's Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, from George Orwell's Down and Out in Paris and London, from John Braine's Room at the Top and from John Steinbeck's The Pearl, each supplied with a list of questions and exercises. The section carries two photographic illustrations: one, titled 'Small Boy sent

out to Beg', appears to be of American or European origin, the second, titled 'Famine in India' shows a young Indian woman lifting up into her arms an unkempt, emaciated child. The question keyed in to the first illustration asks the student to comment on Orwell's argument that a beggar 'has not ... sold his honour; he has merely made the mistake of choosing a trade at which it is impossible to grow rich'. The question relating to 'Famine in India' runs:'Is hunger a crime? If so, whose crime is it?'.

Other sections include extracts from the work of D.H. Lawrence, Ted Hughes, Gerald Durrell, Edmund Blunden and Siegfried Sassoon, Carl Sandburg, Peter Porter, Somerset Maugham, Evelyn Waugh, Robert Graves, William Saroyan, Dickens, Louis MacNeice, H.G.Wells, Richard Hoggart,T.S. Eliot, Jane Austen, Dylan Thomas and Robert Browning. It will be seen from this list that the anthology does not cast back to a period earlier than 1813, and that from it the student can obtain a picture of developments in Western society (with some sidelights directed to Third World areas) in the last 150 years. It shares the general aims and some of the methods of Statements, and gains an additional interest and contemporaneity through the selection and placing of its illustrations, which include photographs of police in San Francisco putting down a race riot, of British policemen arresting a demonstrator, children playing in a deserted lot in Glasgow, of Jewish civilians being rounded up by Nazi troops in a Warsaw ghetto in 1943, a child casualty of the Vietnam war, and some fascinating World War I recruitment posters,including the famous 'Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?'

Hey, English is Fun is the most unconventional of the four textbooks under review. It uses a variety of illustrative material, and resembles Reading With Understanding in including material both old and new, drawing some of its materials (among them Yasmine Gooneratne's poem 'The Peace Game') from sources in Asia.

T.G.

NEW TRENDS IN THE LANGUAGE OF SINHALA POETRY:

REVIEW ARTICLE

Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, Avurudu Mangala Davasa (Colombo 1977)
Senerat Tennekoon, Hendirikka Malak (Colombo 1976)

Poetry dominates contemporary Sinhala literature, and hundreds of slender volumes of Sinhala poems are being published every year. Many a young poet tries to bring out his compositions in the form of a cheap anthology after being turned down by leading publishers who have no room on their publishing lists for the work of unknown writers. Hard-earned savings are spent on publishing poetry in this way, and through the activity of poetry-loving (or even philistine) friends copies are sold in sufficient numbers to recover, or partially recover, the expenses of printing. It is under these disheartening conditions that young Sinhala poets engage themselves today in creative activity.

The established poets (or leaders in the free verse tradition) who published a substantial amount of verse in the 50s and 60s seem to be no longer interested in writing poetry. In their stead a new group emerged in the 70s who were more committed to exposing the social conditions of contemporary life and to propagating certain political ideas than to exploring the aesthetic aspects of their art. Their predecessors had been interested in developing the language as well as in employing new subject-matter, and had not rested content with imitating the language and rhetoric of the classical poets. They had made attempts, with varying success, to evolve and develop a suitable idiom for the effective expression of the experiences and sensibility of a modern age. The majority of the young socialist poets of the 70s have not, however, shown as much interest or skill with regard to innovations in poetic language and technique.

Avurudu Mangala Davasa(The Anniversary Day) by Lakdasa Wikkramasinha belongs in spirit to the 60s despite its recent publication. This author, who before his premature death in 1978 had created a place for himself as a promising young poet writing in English, here made his first attempt to write Sinhala poetry. His poems are not sugar-coated political/ ideological pills, but seem rather to be essentially experiments in language and subject-matter. One finds here neither the sentimental vocabulary of the new Sinhala poet, nor his hackneyed themes. Among Wikkramasinha's contemporaries in Sinhala writing, it is perhaps Senerat Tennekoon whose work can be most usefully compared with his with regard to the novelty and variety of their subject-matter and the attention paid to the possibilities of language in the writing of poetry.

In Avurudu Mangala Davasa Wikkramasinha ignores equally the currently popular poetic style characterized by a limited number of sentimental words and the manner of the Sinhala romantic poet. His language seems, at first glance, to be

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drawn from the vocabulary of the classical poets of the 13th and 14th centuries. There seems even traceable, perhaps, a resemblance in it to the language of the Sigiriya Graffiti (e.g., such words as 'sarayura','mini kayura', 'ivisi', 'nokalunu' on page 1). A closer examination reveals, however, that Wikkramasinha's language is quite different, and exists apart from all these possible sources.

Let us consider a few of the poems in his collection. 'Vili Hiruva' is a poem the meaning of the title of which is not immediately clear. The poem is composed in a language interspersed with archaic forms as well as with entirely new words which are found neither in literary nor in spoken Sinhala:

'gōnusu nokalu valleya
siṭi rudu rupuvan navatila haramiṭi nogolleya.

parasidu ayaṭa ivisi nobiyamina
anura nadana ekalada lāvatu ehemina'

Although the vocabulary in the extract above recalls the Sigiriya Graffiti, the words themselves are not found in the language of those celebrated lyrics. Nor are they to be found in the language of the Gi poets of the classical period.

The language of 'Gegiri Hamāraya' (interpretable, possibly, as 'The Festivities are Ended') is similarly unexpected and intriguing, but here, more than in the former poem, words have been selected from the vocabulary in common usage. The ambiguity, however, of words such as 'vipina', and 'boltata' renders the theme of the poem somewhat obscure. A possible interpretation is that this poem, the tone of which is light and humorous, concerns the comfort, peace and pleasure to be derived from sleep. Another significant feature of Wikkramasinha's poetry is his skilful sustenance of a refrain:

'kisidu potek nata hō
mamānayehi galuna maduratma balmak
dan mā
maga hara yannaṭa pasubaṭavana taniva
atulviya yutuya, piṭaviya yutuya
kesēdayi nodannemi'

(Rough translation: 'there is not a book, nor
the sweetest self-centred glance
I am now
reluctant to leave, alone
must I enter and exit,
I do not know how')

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'Avurudu Mangala Davasa' (The Anniversary Day), the poem that gives Wikkramasinha's book its title, is easier to understand than most of the other compositions since it employs common and idiomatic language:

'age hāricciya mā langa ----- mage mituriya
kāmaṭa gatot gattē
moreyyāven udurāgat raṭa kavum vargayaki
kisidu samāpta tūrya vadakayan hō
madyapānayen vāsita komaliyan hō
nindagama sannas karanalafa bohōseyin
hita noriddavana pihiṭima ati kivindun'

(Rough translation: 'She has left her 'haricci' with me ----
my girl friend
if (she) ever takes something to eat
it is only some exotic cake taken from 'moreyyava'
without any music (to) complete (it)
or any sweet girls scented with wine, or
poets of amiable demeanour
who are often endowed with villages')

The allusions indicate that the poet is familiar with the language of classical literature. He has also experimented successfully in blending that idiom with contemporary speech. At times, however, his attempts at innovation lose some of their force as a result of his use of strange and unusual words.

Although such words (e.g., 'ranallek', 'nahunek', yatimina') are scattered through 'Vanakama'(The Immoral Deed'), Wikkramasinha uses common speech in this poem with forceful effect:

'ahu ahū hameka dan kiyannē
vanakamak karuvānem umba yakāta harilā yako
ali pali gevāpan kiyālayi ---
numut kāgē sita yaṭa vuvada
ati nisayi evannaku
mā ē vanakama kalē'

(Rough translation: 'everyone hearing this tells me now
you rascal, if you've done anything wicked
take the consequences now ---
yet, it's because there's some one like that
hidden under everybody's mind
that I committed that wicked deed')

In 'Minīmaru Bandaragen' (From Bandara, the Killer), the poet draws on another area of the Sinhala language, i.e.,

the jargon of ritual and prayer. Wikkramasinha's ability to create brilliant imagery can be seen in such poems as 'Amavaka rā ākāse' (In the Sky on the Night of the New Moon):

'vavulan karakenava
duganda piyāpat vanamin hemihita
nāki valākul yaṭa'

(Rough translation: 'the bats are circling
swinging evil-smelling wings
under old clouds')

In 'Apolinayā Katuva' , the poet draws upon the idiom of young people in urban areas:

'chūn velā yanakota'
'rōsa gavume kolat naha anē
mage saramē katut a ban'

This kind of vocabulary is diverting in its effect. Sometimes its humour is mingled with sympathy for human suffering as in 'Daval hīne' (The Day Dream), which is a poem about the misery of a prostitute's life. In 'Pandupul Sēlaya' (The Robe of Pandupul) and 'Pasgammana Kande Ala' (The Yams on Pasgammana Mountain), the source of influence with regard to both metre and language is Sinhala folk poetry. But these poems too, due to the same factors that affect the others, yield up their meaning with difficulty. The following extract demonstrates the influence of folk poetry upon Wikkramasinha:

'induru digin āpu atā erāvanā
sāra malak genā atā erāvana
sāra podak murugāsan nala sakuna
kesel ruvan kara puvanā sāya nanā'

These poems would have been of remarkable quality, if not for Wikkramasinha's use of absolutely rare or non-Sinhala words. Reaching beyond the limitations of many of his contemporaries, Wikkramasinha has explored a large number of strata in the Sinhala language. Further, his field of experience prevents his work from falling into the common mould of today's popular poetry.

In comparison with Avurudu Mangala Davasa can be considered Hendirikka Malak (A Hendirikka Blossom), Senerat Tennekoon's latest collection of poems. While advocating 'Socialist realism' like many other modern Sinhala poets, Tennekoon has successfully developed a pleasant and effective style. The first poem in his book is a good example:

'gini kavicci cimini dige
puluṭu husma ihala aran

dumburu pāta dum goba goba
paktariyen uḍata yanava
man alugosuvek vageyi
pēmavatiye umba tāmat
vatta pahala tun tumba mal
pipena dihā balanavāda
hendirikka malak vā ge
kalpanāve tavenavāda? '

(Rough translation: Through the burnt chimneys
inhaling the smoky air
shoots of brown smoke
emanating from the factory
I am just like a hangman

Pemavati, do you still
linger, admiring
the Tumba blossoms blooming in the garden?
(You, who) resemble a Hendirikka flower,
are you still drawn into painful thoughts?)

It is evident that Tennekoon draws images from both rural and urban life. In poems such as 'Kahavanu' (Gold Coins), 'Kalbanda' (The Pretty Lady), 'Nikini mahē vahina vassa' (Rain in the Month of Nikini) and 'Mīnaccilā' the poet has drawn upon his experience of many different strata in local society. While depicting various social conditions, the poet tries to expose injustice and corruption and to convey a sense of sympathy for the oppressed masses. In some poems he depicts the whims or hopes of a village girl or the feelings of a farmer of the Vanniya (Sri Lanka's dry zone), while in others the reader is shown the plight of labourers or the miserable aspects of a prostitute's existence. In a number of compositions in this collection Tennekoon draws a nostalgic picture of the countryside, while indicating his dissatisfaction with the life of the city. Wide experience and a lively creative imagination distinguish him from most other poets writing today in Sinhala. Although unnoticed by critics at the time of its publication in 1975, his earlier work Layime Hēdava (The Gloom of the Shacks) may also be regarded as a remarkable example of contemporary verse-writing.

In poems that seek to express the quality of life in a rural society, Tennekoon makes use of village speech, mixing his spoils with the vocabulary of the folk poet. In this he is following the example set by some earlier poets, among them Mahagama Sekera and Gunadasa Amarasekera. In the following short poem celebrating the pleasant and cheerful sentiments generated in him by the sight of the hedge around his house in full bloom, the poet invites birds to sip the nectar of the flowers, and draws the attention of

his children to the enchanting sight:

'navasi gahe uḍa-polkiccan inda
bilin atta uḍa-demaliccan laga
aturu katāven doḍanu ahenne
devaṭa pattenuyi sadda ahenne
duvē putē bola- varella duvagena
duppat ape vata dihā balallā
mal vāran kavi pada kiyahalla
konḍa kurullan pavul varella
goṭṭa goṭṭa mal pani genayallā
ratlihiniya kotalangā pipilā
punci asvalin ruva balapallā
duppat ape vaṭa malvara vīla'

If Tennekoon were to concentrate more on developing an individual style and an attitude to poetry that relies more on the suggestive power of words, it is likely that he will make a valuable contribution to contemporary Sinhala literature on lines similar to those adopted by Siri Gunesinghe and Mahagama Sekera. The work of Wikkramasinha and Tennekoon, though not always, nor entirely, successful, is refreshingly clear of the defects of monotony and repetitiveness which are to be found in the work of too many of Sri Lanka's popular younger poets.

U.P.M.

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