NEW CEYLON WRITING 6

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December 2016

A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to *New Ceylon Writing No. 6!* After a pause of 32 years, the literary magazine of the 1970s returns to inspire and assist creative writers of a new generation. Yasmine Gooneratne (in her essay 'What is the Source of Inspiration?') sketches a picture of the pre-war world of Peradeniya and Colombo, in which the *New Ceylon Writing* adventure first took flight. Smriti Daniels's account of the magazine's early beginnings (see 'Recent Events') relates what happened next, and introduces the editors who have worked on the current issue.

The authors and artists who have responded so warmly to our call for submissions have justified our belief in the talent which found expression in the five issues that preceded this one. We are discovering a new generation of young poets who are not afraid to feel, and express their thoughts. Fiction, essays and criticism continue to hold our interest. We follow new developments in Sri Lankan theatre, that area of the arts which was closest to the heart of Shelagh Goonewardene, our late co-editor and colleague. We attend the festivals, we read the books, we offer support and encouragement to new writers, just as we did before, except that having a presence online from 2017 onwards will help us do it better.

What *New Ceylon Writing* means to everyone who works on the magazine is very like what Professor Ludowyk said of the "Dram Soc" in his 'Letter from London', which we published in the second issue, and have reprinted in these pages:

> *'What it meant most was working on a creative activity with a group of people, and having the feeling that it was worth doing'.*

You will find many different points of view expressed in this issue, ideas voiced in ways that are challenging and unconventional. We hope that you will find this refreshing and inspirational, and join us in this initiative.

And, by the way, if you need advice on a manuscript, or find yourself discouraged or plagiarised, don't suffer in silence! We can help, so contact us on newceylonwriting@gmail.com . We look forward to hearing from you.

CONTENTS

POEMS

Sigiriya, 1889

LARA WIJESURIYA

As the eagle passed me by
I looked back, and tasted fear
At seeing the tree tops far below
But still I climbed, with the rope
Until I glimpsed an uneven floor
My knees were scraped, my whole body shaking
As I dragged myself up to stand
Far below me the white man called my name
His voice lost in the whistling wind.
I turned to the wall and saw
What no man for centuries had seen,
Many goddesses filled the walls
Their colours still fresh and glowing.
What long-dead hand had painted them?

Who last stood on this floor?
A snake slid past; the only one
On whom the goddesses smiled.

I looked down the rock.
Yes, Mr. Alick[1], there is something here.

Note:

1 Alick Murray, a British civil servant, was requested in 1889 by the then Governor of Ceylon to climb Sigiriya Rock and report his findings. He did so with the help of local workers at the risk of their lives, and left a record of the experience, first, of climbing up to view the frescoes he found there, and subsequently of drawing them:

When the pocket was at last reached it was found that the floor was at too steep an angle to admit of anyone even sitting on it. Iron stanchions were therefore let into the floor, and a strong trestle or framework made secure to them. On this framework was placed a platform, and from the platform the work of tracing thirteen of the frescoes in the biggest cave was carried out.

'Mr Alick' (as the workers he employed called him) became the first European to view the famous frescoes that adorn the 'gallery'. He traced them, lying on his back from sunrise to sunset for a week.

"Below me," he writes, "was a sheer drop of 160 feet. The wind at times was terrific, and I literally held my breath as some blast swept into and around the chamber, and ruthlessly tore and carried off the work of hours. On one occasion a blast fiercer than the rest shook the platform to its very base, and the lashings slackened by the dryness of the atmosphere, allowed the platform to sink suddenly a few inches, when its downward progress was happily arrested by the bracing underneath. The only inmates of the chamber were swallows, who occasionally pecked at me resentfully."

Extracted from "Some Adventures in Scaling the Walls of Sigiriya" by Percy L. Parker, an article first published in Volume 1 of the *Harmsworth Magazine* published in 1899. Internet link: http://www.britishempire.co.uk/maproom/ceylon/sigiriya.htm .

Butterflies and Birdsong

RIA RAMEEZ

I often miss the comfort of being a child.
There was no scepticism, you see,
no shadows or suspicions or areas of grey,
none of the inveterate world-weariness
and eternal side-guessing to which adults are inured.
Everything was so simple and conclusive
and the world was sharply defined:
black and white, wrong and right, dark and light.
There was magic to be found everywhere
in butterflies and birdsong, the smell of rain,
and the coolness of muddy water seeping into shoes …
And stack upon stack of now-defunct dreams
balanced haphazardly in towers that reached the sky.

The dream-towers have long crumbled now,
and I stopped picking through the rubble as I grew up.
There is no place for dreams here
only for cold reality and conventions,
the endless rat-race we run till we die,
and for one ugly truth after the other in this mindless clutter we call life.
Every day finds me a little more disenchanted than the last,
and I have forgotten the secret of free laughter.

But every now and then,
on butterfly-filled mornings
or grey-skied monsoon days,
when rain-kissed winds rap on window panes
and puddles made for jumping fill the streets,
I let my mind go back and revisit old haunts
in the hope of meeting the ghost of my childhood self.

I could relearn a thing or two from her you see,
like how to embrace each day and laugh without restraint;
how to rebuild dream-towers,
to feel again the magic of mud puddles,
and take time to spot the infinitesimal miracles
in trivialities like butterflies and birdsong.

Back then it took so little to make me happy.
That is what I miss the most
the butterflies and the birdsong.
And being happy.

Blemish

NIVANKA FERNANDO

Hanging just above her eyebrow
A birthmark like a drop of treacle
In a bowl of coconut milk
Dissolving, reaching out
To claim unconquered territory

Some days, its shape was an island
Perhaps somewhere we had once
Lived out our lives in Sapphic bliss
The next
A storm cloud heavy with rain
Against the blanket sky
Where we laid our heads in rest
Till the Earth called to us once more

The day you left
You took them all with you

When we next met I asked
What happened to your birthmark?
(where I laid my head down to dream)
You said you had it removed

Things to Tell Your Daughter

GRACE WICKREMASINGHE

Don't ever tell your daughter she has small hands as if it's a bad thing.
Hands too small to build or to hold or love or heal.

Tell her small hands are easier to escape or enter within tiny spaces, to slip off handcuffs.

Tell her she's gifted. Tell her that her finger tips can run through the same pages of books and heal the same number of souls as any other. If not more.

Small palms can hold grains of sand tighter and butterflies safer.

To gut fish or burn monuments.

They can rescue birds with broken wings and feed the homeless just as well. They can clap as loudly and hold on as hard.

Some day they might knock on doors of boys with sad brown eyes and sneak them in through balconies and French windows at night. Let her be sensitive to fire and snow alike.

Let her build Lego houses and ladders out of candy sticks as well as with heavy bricks.

Allow her to play with rain water. Cupping raindrops in her hands.

Show her that her hands are magical and that she is strong enough to hold ropes, climb mountains and row boats.

Let her cup her tiny palms and swim through oceans. Tell her to use her feet when her hands are tired.

Tell her that she's not too small. That nothing is too big. That her small hands aren't a metaphor for her soul or her goals or her capabilities. Specially not her capabilities.

Tell her Rome was built with hands like hers. Tell her that Art was carved, painted and poetry was written by hands like hers.

Tell her she could hold snow flakes as well as build another Great Wall.

Don't just tell her that her tiny hands are cute and soft. Even if they are.

Teach her they are so much more.

Teach her they are meant to block bullets and drive rocket-ships.

Teach her they are strong as much as they are beautiful. Tell her that her tiny hands are all she needs.

Tell her to build a world with them or without. Teach her to live without them if she has to.

Tell her hands are just hands until she uses them to create magic.

Remind her that Aphrodite is just as beautiful without her hands.

Teach her that these body parts do not define her. Remind her every day, that she is a goddess. With or without her hands.

Tell her that her finger tips aren't the limit, but only the beginning to freedom.

So the next time someone challenges her saying she's too small or too weak, she'd say "That's not how my mama raised me."

Renaissance

VASIKA UDURAWANA

Existing on a higher plane,
He thought of death in his sleep.
Thinking of the follies of life he painted,
Feeling each canvas like his very own lover. Nothing was stronger than the sensation of her rough whiteness under his brush.
Looking into men's souls,
he laughed at them and called them fools. What talent did they have?
Looking into their eyes he read their minds, seeking some light of intelligence as he tried to bring himself to their level.

But neither friendship nor love did he find in them.
They never saw the world like he did. There was no light in their iris, merely a black glaze of idiocy, unknowing of the future and the ancient past.
Choking on his tears he cried every night,
dreaming of real love beyond his easel. The world was his kaleidoscope with patterns aplenty that danced before his senses. This is lovely!
The delicacy of the vermilion sunset, the granite gargoyles in the baroque church, the courtesan’s marble breasts, the womanly pink lips of a rose...
All was alive and the beauty blinded him.
So it is the lack of substance that is bothering him?

Tirelessly he sought out finer sights, bleeding onto his canvas.
Sleep deserted his soul and he was a pallid spectre at last. He dragged his brushes like chains behind him, scraping against the floorboards.
The universe whipped him,
bleeding a technicolour nightmare onto his canvas.
He had no salvation from his own beautiful torture nor could he shake off the shackles that bound him there.
Another creator was dead at last and the world would be all the poorer for it.

The Beauty of Bucket Lanterns

TAMZIE WIJESURIYA

And I thought its beauty lay
in quiet light gleaming through cellophane colours.
In lanterns like stars in the trees
but no.

The beauty is rough, hidden somewhere else
in scorched fingers,
used matches scattered in the grass.
In large jagged holes
in the lanterns, burnt,
and in hearts that reach with empty hands
to light another candle again.

And somewhere in Kotte they are having dinner
talking all at once, mouths and hearts full
of food, of song, of laughter, and I
am lighting lanterns on my own.

Carefully balancing, tongue sticking out
like a three-year-old learning to write
trying to convince the wires to stay on the trees,
don't slip off, don't –
a flicker to the left, another hole.

I hate it.
But because of this hole, this broken window, now,
the candle easily reaches in to light the one inside.
And light slips out on candle-wick
and walks about the garden.

Void

MINOLI WIJETUNGA

There's a break in the melody

Like the music
Of a three-holed flute
Played for you,
Who knows no key;

Subtle.

There's a lull in the wind

A fragment of silence
Punctured by thunder,
Distracting you,
Who feels not what you fear;

Momentary.

There's a ridge in the waves

Hidden by the foam,
Colouring the green-blue in white,
Entrancing you,
Who chooses what you wish to see,

Invisible.

There's a hole in my heart

A heart-petal
That is not a petal

A lute-string
That's frayed and broken

There's a space in my heart

Like echoes of silence
The vibrancy of a vacuum,

Empty.

There's a world in my heart
Alien to all
And him.

Change

DEEPA DHARSHINI INDRASOMA

Something is wrong
It's oppressive and scorching
And it's not the hot summer
that ignites flames of violence

Something is not right
It's chilly and freezing
And it's not the cold winter
that numbs people to cruelty

It's the second coming
of Pandora's pithos
But this time around
Hope lies dead within the jar.

Colombo

SHIRANI RAJAPAKSE

Prescription walkers
huff and puff their way to good health,
proud of the city's walkways,
the affluent thrusting their
jelly bellies ahead
as they valiantly attempt to compete
with young trendsetters
their ears blocked to reality,
sweating it out by
lakes and parks dressed
in designer clothes stretched taut
across wobbly frames.
They do their thing,
walking, strutting on legs
that can barely hold so much weight,
serious looks on smug faces,
while community dogs stare in amusement,
calling out to friends to come
observe the show.

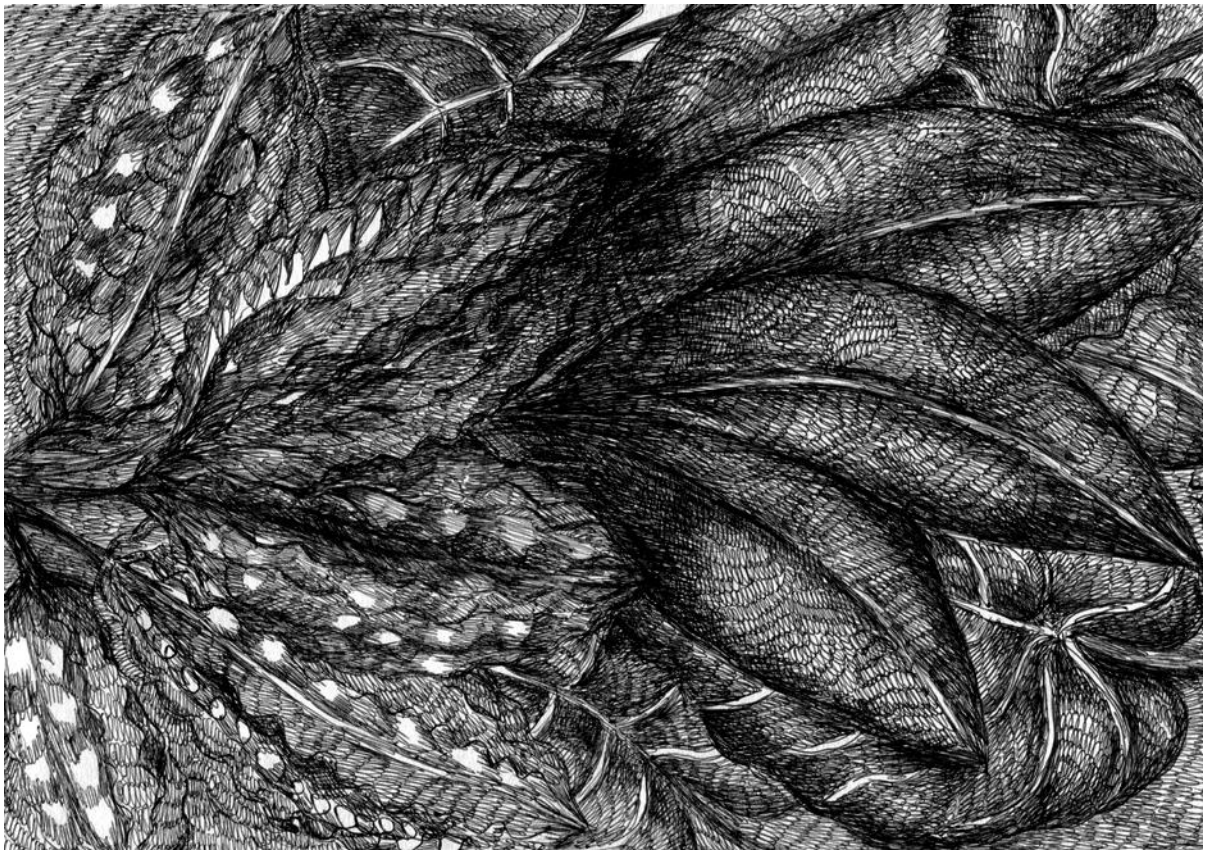
There's a whole generation grown up
on an unhealthy lifestyle, unable to cope,
a last bid to get their act together or
face the consequences,
sprawled on a bed with tubes sticking out
from every corner
while they gasp out in agony and plead
to every God known to man
for a second chance.

Yet hospitals are overcrowded.

They are as popular as
restaurants and watering holes.
Every minute someone's sick, every minute
someone needs medical attention, and
every minute someone dies in
a lonely old home unable to cope, away
from families that have
no use for old flesh anymore.

The Nature of Plants I

JEAN ARASANAYAGAM



STORIES

Despondency

AL AZOOMATH

Translated by S. Pathmanathan

When my wife (after nine years) and the Sirima-Shastri Pact[1] (after fifteen years) paved the way for me to visit the property we had got on lease, my tongue proclaimed “Every village is my own” and my heart whispered, “Matale[2] is my own town.”

How to reconcile this contradiction! My colleagues are awfully proud of their own towns, and they go crazy dashing to and fro. What on earth do they find there? And when they return from their towns, why do they beam with satisfaction?

To me – estate-born but now turned town-dweller – this is a mystery.

My parents were not born there; there is not even a trace there of the previous generations. No birth-records for my siblings, no property, no vote, not even a marriage connection.

Yet, “Every town is my own and everyone is my kinsman”! According to this maxim, one owns the whole world. But the cemetery asserts that we can own only a sod six-foot long. The estate pay-roll barks: “You can’t own even a millimetre of land. Get lost!” I was born in Matale, of course, but is that a valid reason to claim relationship? Even the popular South Indian film star MGR is said to have been born in Kandy.

I am one whose feet have trod the soil around the labour lines of the Dickiriya tea estate. During my very first year in this world, my parents had started doing the rounds of the estates in the district. If I am not estate-bred, who is?

Another reason is, unlike others who moved to Colombo early, I cannot claim to have been born in Kollupitiya or Kurunduwatte[3]. My tenancy of Matale lasted till I was seventeen – till then my parents adored me. That ended when I left the place with a Grade 10 certificate for the capital. Since the sixties, I reckon I might have made – at the most – twenty trips to Matale… When Appa and thambi died; on

occasions like almsgiving; when my siblings got married; when new members arrived; in '77 and '83 when we were chased out[4].

When did an estate lad ever prosper? Can he ever manage a trade union? So in 1974 I became one of the thousands who moved to the city to their detriment.

And after '83, I've never been to Matale; Amma would pay me visits. So there wasn't any motivation for me to go.

But I couldn't forget Matale. That I had no proprietary rights over there was a different matter.

Sudukanda Estate Line No. 2 Room No. 2. Amma lives there. With her are the wife of Kaddaithambi who works in Jeddah[5] and her three children. Also three children of Kuddapanthambi who is no more. Can all this be valid enough reason for me to claim Sudukanda or Matale as mine?

Amma is pragmatic, philosophical even. She should have been born in the West! She is not inclined to leave the Sudukanda nest – for the sake of the children. Otherwise she would be an asset to me or the other siblings.

It is her wish and vow that she should be laid to rest at the spot where Appa and thambi were buried. Who are we, town folk, to deny such personal preferences for the sake of sophistication?

Sudukanda is talking behind my back: "Having abandoned his mother to languish in the estate, the son is living it up in the town!" Two months ago a letter from Amma arrived. Land in the Store Line area of the Dickiriya Estate is to be apportioned… "Better to buy at least ten perches", she wrote to Kaddaithambi. She believes – I too believe – that Jeddah money, not Colombo money, could buy the land.

It is yet to be seen whether, once the deal is through, Kaddaithambi will claim Matale as his town or whether he will run away, like me. After all, we are both sons of the same tramp, aren't we?

So, when my wife and the Sirima-Shastri pact paved the way for me to pay a visit to the leased - out land, my wife thrust into my hands the clothes and other gifts she had bought for Amma out of the money she had saved picking my pocket daily, and pestered me to go. For my part, I too collected a few items and climbed on to the C-90 with my second son on the pillion.

The sky was clear. We took leave. Exactly three hours later, when we reached the Matale town limits, and felt the cool breeze, I was exhilarated. My high spirits might have been caused by the fact that it was a visit after a long time. They could have been due to the change of climate or by the thrill of owning (and riding!) a mo-bike on the very road beside which I once stood as an urchin, wistfully watching the passing bikes. Whatever had caused them, it was certainly not a blind love for my 'own' town!

It's true that the Pact shelters me, but habit persists.

Matale was new to my son. He had been there as a three-year-old – I was carrying him in my arms at that time. I don't know whether he was thrilled to be there again. If he was, I hope no one will turn him against me by asserting that his enthusiasm is the sign of love for one's 'own place': that would hurt me!

Matale seemed to resemble the state of my own mind. Some surviving traditional buildings appeared to smile shyly at me, others turned haughtily away. Some familiar figures plodded by that I seemed to recognize distantly: their backs were bent, their hair grey, they had lost their teeth. I pointed out to my son the Government Dispensary where I had never taken medicine, the friendly hills, the open spaces that had refreshed me, the crematorium, which I had visited – everything, with a kindled consciousness. I was back at the Pillaiyar temple where I used to taste coconut-kernel, and I remembered the Government secondary school for boys that I once attended.

It is this that makes us – the estate-bred – uneasy. We are not destined to be proud 'old boys' of distinguished old schools. Greed for land has buried the late Kandasami's ideals[6] as well as our rights.

With a sigh I passed St Thomas's[7], the banyan tree, Mari Amman temple, Alahar Hill, Sadhananda Beedi Company, Gunasena Mudalali's house, Mandawela Junction, Rattota Road, and the Kaluthawela slope. Beyond the fields on the left, lay hidden the shy Stores Line.

"That's the plot." I showed my son the land Kaddaithambi would be buying.

Did it mean anything to him? Or did he think I was crazy? How can this brat, who doesn't remember the Madulkelle hospital where he was born, think fondly about the Labour Line in which I was born?

As we approached the estate, many changes became visible. Some business secret in the coconut grove owned by 'Loose' Dorai, various goods in the potters' huts, a bus stand in the Parawatta Division…

The current in the Sudukanda tributary with which I was familiar was no different from the Mahaweli. I crossed the bridge. Sudukanda, that nourished me for eight long years! Something welled up from within.

I looked for the spot where Appa and thambi were buried. Not a trace. My tears evaporated as I showed the spot to my son.

Where were the rubber and the cocoa trees? The bare, denuded land reminded me of my grandparents. This land might have been like this before the advent of the white man.

The mo-bike moved from the tarred road on to a gravel-covered lane. In the computer of my mind, memories flashed scenes from my boyhood on the screen: the fights over games of marbles, the discussions of films we had seen on the sly, the free tea taken up the hill… The hills and valleys united to tease my memory.

I was reluctant to take the bike down into that death-trap. There were no familiar faces of people from whom I could make inquiries.

The bike stopped at the mound of the Kali temple. The lane went down an awesome slope. In former days, you could lie down, and roll down this lane which gave

administrative access to the 600-odd acre estate. Throwing caution to the winds, I took the bike ten feet further. The path seemed to scream: "Beware, the bike is worth Rs. 10,000!"

Amma had grieved that this one estate had been apportioned into sixty or seventy lots. No estate: no livelihood, either. What I see is proof of the economic status of the beneficiaries. The state of the lane proclaimed their 'unity'.

As I saw before me the tragedy of a people, of a single estate broken into many lots, I became worried that my two-wheeler might break down.

"We can't afford to have a tyre puncture. Shall we park the bike at the temple and proceed on foot?" I asked.

"Can't we go a little further? Some one might meddle with the bike here," said my son.

"That's not likely."

Kaddaithambi's father-in-law is the priest at the Kali temple. But another consideration prompted me to take the risk: is there a labourer's mother who would not feel proud to see to see her son's mo-bike (from Colombo) parked in front of her humble estate Line Room?

In former days there used to be a shortcut – just half a mile – beyond the temple. Now that shortcut has been criss-crossed by fences. It could be all of three miles by mo-bike.

No need to make inquiries. I decided to go by mo-bike. When we had passed the bend, I saw a familiar figure approaching quite leisurely. He had grown old, but I could still make him out: Appa*'s* colleague Jayasekera *Basunne*[8].

He looked so grand in old age, grey hair and all. Had Appa lived, he would have probably come to look like him. But when he died, at sixty-five, there wasn't a single grey hair on Appa's head. Amma is now sixty-five. Her hair is still black. But my hair has already started turning grey at fifty.

Jayasekera came closer.

"*Basunne*!"[9]. I hailed him, stopping the bike.

He tried his best to recognise me. "Who are you, *mahaththaya*?"[10] he asked, groping. I realised my mistake, and took off my helmet.

"Ha haha!" he burst into laughter. "*Appappe*!" his face beamed with satisfaction.

"Aren't you the eldest son of Malayala Ponniah?" he asked. "I couldn't place you!" he apologised. "Are you just coming? How are you? Still in Colombo, I suppose. By the way, who is this?"

"My second son," I replied.

"Ha, is that so? That means you have an older fellow too!" he exclaimed, making a sign to avert any bad luck that might flow from such admiration.

I wonder how he would react if he happened to meet my eldest, sporting a moustache and a beard!

His enthusiasm knew no bounds. At the top of his voice he inquired about my job, my house, property, health, etc. Standing at the cross roads, being thus exposed, was a novel experience for me. I liked it, though.

For the next half an hour, I became Appa's son, while *Basunne* squatted on a stone by the road. My son was oblivious to the importance of the content of our conversation, and the flashbacks that accompanied it.

The crowd that gathered at the cross roads formed a question bank. It appeared that I had been figuring in Amma's conversations with these folk. My childhood trials and Appa's dreams were the topics of their questions. My answers contained their rewards.

Before they could get bored, I kicked the starter.

"Could park the bike under the white tree and walk the rest of the way, but someone should keep watch," said deaf Thirumalai, reminding me, by implication, of the severe scolding I would receive from my wife if the bike was lost.

"Even the *dorai* of the bungalow pays five or six visits daily on a bike like this!" Watcher Muthuvel encouraged me.

"The road is not that bad. A bit slippery. That's all. If you ride slowly, it's ok," said Jayasekera *Basunne*.

"Go straight to the junction. Turn to the bungalow road and take the short-cut to the lines. You could park the bike at your own door … In fact, you know Sudukanda inside out," said Velannan.

Armed with all these affidavits, I sped on enthusiastically.

Only after passing the white tree did I realise how hazardous the road was.

No point in blaming the affidavit-givers. Perhaps this gravel road was better, less hazardous, than their life-road.

My son got off the mo-bike. Since I knew exactly how many patches already decorated the tubes of my tyres, I dismounted too. Keeping the engine running and opening out the throttle a little, I walked on, pushing the bike.

Another laborious mile and a quarter brought us to Paadamathi. There would be another three-quarters of a mile to go before we reached the slope that led to the Line: the most hazardous part of the exercise. The road on which we were travelling, once a cart-road, had now become a jungle path, suffocated by road-bushes and creepers. The pair of white shorts my son was wearing became soiled as he held on to the carrier, checking the mo-bike's descent.

The fence of our Line appeared at last, old and haggard, with all its shortcomings. The Line was on our right. The short-cut we had taken now appeared to have led us to the feet of Mother Kali[11].

I pushed the bike up the hill. My C-90 had become a 200 CC Buffalo. By a feat not second to that of a circus artiste, I covered the last fifteen feet. And there it stood, on a one-and-a-half-foot foundation, the mansion, my jackpot!

The end-room of the Line was in a state of disrepair.

As my son and I were struggling to get back our breath, Kamadchi peeped out, suspiciously. She had probably come from the Middle East, on vacation.

"Is it Sarasamma's son? Come, come!" She was jubilant. She called out: "Sarasammaaa!"
Jeya's voice would be better than Kamadchi's old voice, I thought. Instantly, Jeya herself came running from somewhere.

"Where had you gone, Radha? Your uncle and some boy are here. Let's lift the mo-bike."

Kaddaithambi's wife Sarojini corrected her. "No, not 'some boy'. It's brother-in-law's second son!"

Soon the Line became a hive of activity, both young and old swarming around us.

"So you are here, at last!"

"Is this your son?"

"Pity, your wife didn't come."

"Radha, hold the front wheel steady!"

"When a crow cawed this morning[12], Sarasamma said a guest would be coming!"

My C-90 commenced doing its rounds in the courtyard.

Amma's unspoken joy knew no bounds. She was moved by the presents her daughter-in-law had sent her. Feeding her son and grandson, her maternal instinct

was satisfied. She felt proud when neighbours took turns calling on us. Collecting some loose earth from the junction before midnight, she performed the ritual to protect us from the evil eye.

I confirmed my leasehold on the apportioned land. I did it for the sake of such fleeting moments of joy in my mother's life. Something more than a satisfied palate is appropriate, after all, to thoughts of one's mother![13]

When we left on the following morning, Amma condensed an entire decade into a question:

"When will you come again, son?"

Notes:

1 The Sirima-Shastri Pact. An agreement between the Government of India and the Government of Ceylon finalised in 1964, the declared objective of which was that all persons of Indian origin in Ceylon who had not been recognised either as citizens of Ceylon or as citizens of India should become citizens either of Ceylon or of India.

2 Matale. A provincial hill-country district in central Sri Lanka.

3 Kollupitiya (Colpetty) and Kurunduwatte (Cinnamon Gardens). Colombo city suburbs containing fashionable residential areas, where wealthy citizens occupy luxurious houses set in large, well-tended gardens. Their style of living, ranging from the comfortable to the ostentatious, features staffs of well-trained servants, expensive cars and all the material things that go with 'good living' – the very opposite of the life-style attainable by estate labourers.

4 '77 and '83. Two important dates in a Tamil estate labourer's history: many Tamil labourers would have had their homes destroyed and their families dispossessed during the Sinhalese/Tamil race riots of 1977 and 1983.

5 Works in Jeddah. The narrator's kinsman, Kaddaithambi, has found employment in the Middle East, and lives there, while his family shares with the narrator's mother the one-room accommodation available to labourers in Sudukanda estate.

6 Kandasami's ideals. The influential and idealistic Kandasami family, owners of Wiltshire Estate, donated a plot of land in the heart of the city of Matale to build a school. (The first group of Indian labour brought by the British to Ceylon came through Mannar to Matale, and was despatched from there to the various up-country plantations.)

7 St Thomas's. St Thomas's College, Matale. Established in 1873 as a small Church school, this institution has become the most prominent boys' school in the region, linked with 'STC', St Thomas's College, Mount Lavinia. As such, the 'estate-bred' narrator would not have attended it: he would have been educated in a school on Sudukanda Estate, intended to serve the needs of labourers' children.

8 Jayasekera *basunne*. The Sinhala name 'Jayasekera' indicates that the owner of the name is Sinhalese.

9 *Basunne* is a Tamil speaker's version of a Sinhala honorific, *Baas Unnehe*, a term of address for a master carpenter-smith.

10 *Mahaththaya*. 'Sir' (Sinhala).

11 Mother Kali. The Hindu goddess of Destruction.

12 A popular superstition, that the cawing of a crow heralds a visitor.

13 'A satisfied palate…' An echo from a Tamil ethical verse.

Two Men in A Corridor

IANTHE PERERA

It was still for a little on the corridor. It was getting dark. The two men sat next to each other. Silence. Then the crash entry of another person being force wheeled in through the doors of the hospital ETU by an energetic attendant trying to finish his work for the day. There was no time to hold the door open; driving a patient's wheel chair straight into a pair of firmly stuck doors did the job, so why find someone to hold the door open.

Mr Jayasinghe could not cope. The crash meant another person entered into a world of tubes and machines and got cut off from everything they cared about. It seemed like if you are meant to die, you should do it in a vacuum, like before you are born. But he was not ready to let her go into a vacuum.

She always chatted on from the time she got up. She chatted while making his tea. He swept the garden. She chatted while he leant on a tree and drank his tea. The hot, sweet tea was a contrast to the chill of the early morning wetness of the garden. He listened to the birds waking up, the scrape of the garden broom of the neighbours sweeping and the chatter.

He hated the chatter. He used to wish for silence. He needed silence for the act of sweeping the *araliya* flowers that had fallen in the yard. Those flowers were beautiful last morning, aromatic, high up in the sky with the deep red, pink and yellow, energy of life in them. The night had taken their outward beauty and transformed them into brown speckled scarred items fallen onto the earth, to be swept away from the earth.

He always wanted silence to do this. The flowers on the earth needed the respect of silence, a burial worth their fight to live. Mr Jayasinghe was often tempted to suggest to his wife that they include some of the flowers fallen on the ground among the puja flowers for the shrine room. He felt they deserved a place in the shrine room as they went to their death. He would not ask; he knew convention would not allow it. She always stayed within convention.

This morning the chatter was less. By mid-morning her chatter was no more. There was silence. He felt his inner self shrivel up. He had never lived without her chatter. The silence he had always wanted made him feel withdrawn and out of control. She wasn't talking, just sitting there on her arm chair, staring into space. He left her hoping she would start her chatter again. She didn't. He called a neighbouring three-wheeler and took her to hospital. She was crashed into the ETU and was gone. 'Please wait outside' was the command given.

He wanted to know what he was waiting for. He did not ask. It was against the convention. You did not question medical people in this country. He felt so deeply, he wished he would stop feeling.

He sat down next to a middle-aged man on the corridor to wait. He held his hands together in a prayerful pose, but he didn't know what to say. He didn't know what he was waiting for. He clasped his hands and he unclasped his hands. He clasped his hands and unclasped his hands.

He had never held her hand when their boy died. He had not been able to touch anybody at that time. She had never understood why he would not hold her hand while she cried. She so desperately wanted to be connected to him, in some way, when a main connection between them, their boy, was gone.

He could not. She had accepted it as one of the many things between them that had never been discussed, but left floating between them. She felt his rejection, but knew she could not question it.

He just could not feel anything then. If he had held her, he knew he would remember, how he had held her the day they conceived their boy. He did not want to do that. It would destroy him in a way he could not explain.

He clasped his hands and he unclasped his hands. He clasped his hands and unclasped his hands. He didn't know what he was waiting for.

Raju sat next to Mr Jayasinghe and watched this man. Raju was relaxed today. He wore his shirt unbuttoned half way so that his gold chain was visible. It was

Ramadan and he had work; it was a happy, silent day. He sat in the corridor waiting for a customer. He had driven a man to the hospital to get his son's wound dressed.

Raju was happy to sit in the cool corridor and listen to the chatter of the ladies who had brought their mother into the ETU. They were quarrelling as to who should stay the night with the mother. All their husbands were drunk for the day. It was a holiday. So the women had to fend for themselves and someone had to be blamed here. Today it was the husbands. A strange lady sat among them. Raju wasn't sure who she was. He had heard the doctor on call address her as 'Madam'. She seemed nervous. An older woman sat next to her talking about things she had trampled and things she had not.

'I knew I had trampled something, nobody told me I had. I knew I had trampled something. If I had trampled something I would have known it, wouldn't I? Nobody told me I had trampled something, so I didn't know I had trampled something.'

The strange lady seemed decidedly uncomfortable with the older lady, he noticed. He wasn't sure why. The old woman was harmless. A woman going to her destination without the pain of reality or knowing that convention said she should not be sleeping on the street. She was always like this, chattering about things she had trampled. He realized that although she was inside a hospital, she didn't know where she was. Perhaps nobody had ever told her that she was mad and needed to go to another hospital down the road.

But who would take her there? Who would take the responsibility for her, to say she was mad and sign her in? Raju wondered if he should. But no, she seemed happy in her own reality of endless monologues of things trampled sitting in public places, with people doing normal things around her. What defined madness, anyway? He could take her home. But maybe she would not like being in confined spaces, walls enclosing her. So he left it.

Raju realised the man next to him was in pain. The man was dressed in a well ironed, long sleeved shirt, buttoned up, sleeves rolled down and shirt belted into impeccably pressed trousers. His hair was grey, combed neatly back, his hair was less grey than his wife's hair, Raju had noticed. Raju watched the hands clasping together and unclasping. The strange lady was also staring at the hands.

Raju didn't understand what that pain was. He had never felt any pain. He never wanted that one relationship which would cause him more pain than good.

He lived on the surface, driving his tri-shaw. Destination mattered to him and how you got there. Why feel pain, when you know you are going to die anyway in pain? Destination was death, so live without going near death. He was happy, driving people to the destinations they needed to go to. Sometimes they did not want to go to a destination, but life took them there anyway. He knew others felt pain. He had not.

Mr Jayasinghe looked close to tears. Raju did what he knew best, he took his phone out. This phone always helped him in difficult situations, when you wanted to pretend to cut yourself off from things around you. The strange lady was also fiddling with her phone.

Mr Jayasinghe, did not know what he was waiting for. He wanted to ask someone. He noticed the strange lady had been looking at him, she must be a medical person, he thought. But he couldn't ask her, convention did not allow it.

His wife would chatter on about how he broke convention at a hospital. She would blame herself for falling ill and say that he could not be trusted to be left alone one minute, to do the right thing. The chatter would go on for days, while he drank his sweet tea, read the morning newspaper, listened to the radio news, ate his favourite lunch of samba rice, potato curry, *gotu kola sambol* and dry fish curry and the string hoppers she made so beautifully with *kiri hodi* and *pol sambol* at night. She cooked well. He was never hungry. He knew she loved him deeply by the way she cooked for him.

They had never told each other that they loved each other. Watching modern day Sinhala tele dramas, it seemed that they had broken convention. They never seemed to need to talk about that aspect. They both had a world where they fitted into each other, as they did when they slept. They fitted into each other like comfortable, old clothes. You never discussed how old clothes fitted; you knew they fitted the best, especially in the world of home.

He wondered if she had got up and started chatting inside the vacuum. He wanted to go in. Maybe she was scolding him for bringing her to the hospital in the old dress she was wearing. He knew the chatter he hated would make him feel instantly better. His world would fit again with her chatter.

He looked at Raju with his phone. Raju asked him if he wanted a call. Mr Jayasinghe instantly said 'Yes'. Raju asked for the number, Mr Jayasinghe gave him his home phone number. Raju dialled and gave him the phone. The phone rang. No one picked it up. Raju asked him who he was ringing. Mr Jayasinghe said it was his son. He needed to do something that seemed normal. Phoning a dead son was the only normal thing he could think of doing to stay within convention.

The strange lady's patient was crashed out of the vacuum. He was being taken somewhere. The strange lady got up and went into the vacuum. Mr Jayasinghe was up instantly. He was drawn to follow her. He went into the vacuum. He saw his wife, curled up on her side, as she always was when she slept. The only thing missing was his hand. She always wanted to hold his hand in sleep. It was one thing he had never questioned; he had always given it, till their son died.

She was tubed into machines that beeped, she had a mask on her face and her long hair fell strongly around her, the way it always did. She carried her personality in her hair. He held her hand. She seemed to flinch and then she was still. The beeping continued, the crashing of others entering the vacuum continued. He held her hand. This time it was his need, not hers. There was silence.

A nurse came crashing into his world, she questioned the right he had to come in to hold his wife's hand, she questioned he had not got their permission to hold her hand, she questioned if he needed them to do their job or not. He got up flustered. He did not know why he needed permission. The strange lady was looking at them. He walked towards the strange lady.

The strange lady seemed to be getting ready to go. He asked her, "Madam, are you going off for the day?" She looked puzzled; her eyes went distant and disconnected. She shook her head.

Mr Jayasinghe asked her, “Do you work here Madam?” He said, “Please, I need your help”. She walked out and he followed her. A nurse caught up with him and said he should not worry anyone else. He started shouting. Convention was broken. He needed to know what he was waiting for.

The strange lady didn’t look back, but he heard her say, “I’m sorry I don’t work here.” She walked out of the vacuum, behind her own patient. She was going towards her own destination. Mr Jayasinghe started to cry.

He had not cried for his son. He could not cry. His wife had never understood why he didn’t cry. He had felt disconnected, but he knew they were always connected in the way they fitted when they slept. Now he did not know if they would remain connected. Nobody knew what he was waiting for. The tears of twenty-three years poured down his face. He wanted to hold her hand while she slept in her vacuum. The vacuum between them, that he had created to preserve his sanity, after their son was gone, seemed to vanish with her in a vacuum.

Raju walked up, held Mr Jayasinghe’s shoulder and gave him the phone. It was ringing. Raju did the thing he knew best to do in a crisis, use his phone. He was trying to reach Mr Jayasinghe’s son for him. The phone rang on. The corridor was still.

Everything Changed, and Nothing Had Changed

FAITH RATNAYAKE

Not even the line of children at the orphanage, although more attention was paid now to child protection, child rights. Different faces, evocative: dressed neatly in their best, hopping impatiently; toes wriggling in bright rubber slippers, waiting for the treat to celebrate a birthday. Prema, as the Chief Guest, smiled. She held her small grand-daughter's hand as she guided the sharp knife, resplendent with a pink bow. As the first slice was cut, the children sang. Prema trembled, remembering another far away morning she could never forget.

Prema was five when she went to the orphanage. Then a man and his wife came to see the children. They said they would adopt her, bring her up as their own. The matron, beaming, said Prema was so lucky, to be in their home, with her new brothers and sisters, and she would go to school. But no official ever visited her new home, to ensure she was looked after. Life was hard in that large house. Prema minded the children, washed their clothes seated on a small wooden stool in the outside washroom. The splashing of water was soothing and she loved the sensation of holding their dresses, little skirts and tiny rompers. She longed to grow up and have her own baby. When she turned ten, she became interesting.

That morning she had rested on the kitchen step, in her too-large faded t-shirt which she hoped shielded her growing shapeliness. It was quiet, peaceful, the family away. She would help the cook with breakfast, and enjoy a cup of hot, sweet, milky tea.

The large garden was beautifully tended, sheltered and secluded. The gardener saw to that. Prema had closed her eyes, holding her face up to the sun, letting the healing rays caress her weary body. Her thoughts drifted to the past, for she had been afraid to look into the future. She had heard no sound, but sensed the warmth of the sun blocked abruptly by the man's lengthening shadow.

THEATRE

Editors' Note:

The three pieces of writing below illuminate the character and some of the capabilities of Sri Lanka's English theatre. First, a letter written to Shelagh Goonewardene in 1970 by Professor E F C Ludowyk, who provided the creative impulse behind the University of Ceylon's 'Dram Soc'; next a profile of Shelagh herself as actor, theatre critic and literary editor. Sadly, neither Professor Ludowyk nor Shelagh are with us now, but the theatre they illuminated goes on, as a review by Devika Brendon of a 2016 production at the Lionel Wendt Theatre in Colombo, of Arthur Miller's play *A View from the Bridge* indicates.

The University Dram Soc: A Letter from London

E F C LUDOWYK

London

10th September 1970

My dear Shelagh,

Now that the sadness of Arthur's death weighs heavy on my heart, I feel that writing about him and the Dram Soc, with which we were associated, will ease some of the burden. I don't suppose that what I write will interest many beside people like yourself. Still I'd better do it while I can, for the number of those who can write about what became the Dram Soc will surely diminish very fast.

The Dramatic Society was the creation of Leigh Smith who was Professor of English in the old University College. It was founded, so far as I remember, in 1992, and its first secretary was Reggie Enright. We used to meet on Monday afternoons at 4.15 and read plays. Our choice was necessarily limited to what was available in as many copies as could be assembled out of the resources of the library, the collection of Leigh Smith, Marrs, Hussey and anyone else obliging enough to help. This limitation – to Shakespeare, Ibsen, Shaw, Moliere, Galsworthy, Goldsmith, Sheridan – was not without its nostalgical gains. Those who read – they were a surprisingly large number when the time which went into the activity and its infrequent solaces are considered – did benefit from the acquaintance they made with international literature. Few women were members of the University College, yet they were active too. I remember Dorothy Anghie, Laurel Tambimuttu, Catherine Paulusz and Miss Naeken taking part in the readings. In front sat Leigh Smith, occasionally "harumphing" in satisfaction, throwing out a correction of pronunciation, and naturally spreading through enjoyment of the proceedings a similar pleasure in the small group gathered there.

Readings of plays went so well and became such an institution that we hoped we could proceed to performing a play in public. L. McD. Robison, who was then in the Education Department, promised to help, and we launched into a few preliminary rehearsals of *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*. It was a lively and amusing play, it was by Shaw and Shaw was in fashion, and – best of all – it called for only one woman in the cast. However, nothing eventually came of these rehearsals. Perhaps it was as well, for the more we went into it the more daunting seemed the difficulties.

I left University College in 1928. The interval between that year and 1932, when I returned, can be filled in now by Justin la Brooy, Travice Pieris, Hans Lourensz, Sidney de Zoysa and my brother, Vyvil, in Australia. Arthus, alas, is no more. I do know that not only did my play-reading continue most successfully, but the first public performance given by the Dramatic Society took place at College House. A. A. Milne's *The Princess and the Woodcutter* was given with much acclaim and great success. It was a short play, but it called for delicacy of touch, skill in music and good comedy.

I came back to Ceylon after three years at Cambridge. No one with the slightest interest in plays up at the university at that time could have failed to have been educated and inspired by the Festival Theatre.

Much has been written about it and the work done by Terence Grey, Anmer Hall and Tyrone Guthrie in educating the taste of a generation of Cambridge theatre-goers. The Festival was one glorious episode in the history of the small repertory theatre in England, soon to be dealt a body blow by the talkies. It never recovered, and now the Festival in Newmarket Road no longer exists. But while it lasted it gave Cambridge – and England – a model of what intelligent theatre could achieve. The names of those who appeared on its boards would read now like a citation of the awards of an academy to those it honoured: Tyrone Guthrie, Robert Donat, Flora Robson, Ninette de Valois, Clinton Baddeley, Rupert Doone etc., etc. If one has spent all one's time at Cambridge at the Festival one would at least have acquired a liberal education.

In 1932 Leigh Smith had retired from University College. The Dramatic Society was flourishing and when I resumed my membership of it naturally I tried to take over at the point where years previously we had failed; performing a play in public for the benefit of an audience not confined to the university. It had already been done, so the task was much easier. Very soon Bert Amarasinghe, who had also been at Cambridge, came into the society himself and that lightened the burden still more. There was a group of highly intelligent and keen students, themselves aware of the function of a university society, ready to launch into public, but conscious that the roots of the society were in its university membership.

The great good fortune of the Dramatic Society when it did first launch out into the wider public in 1933, was its possession of a small membership, large enough to include some of the best spirits of the college and not so small as to be a clique. The

play chosen was a translation from the contemporary Spanish – the Quintero brothers' *Where Women Rule*. It had charm, perhaps a little more sweetness than light; it had to do with getting married – an interest of young students everywhere – and in some respects Andalusia was very much like Ceylon. The very title of the play indicated that the Society had taken on and tackled manfully the thorniest of all problems besetting university societies at the time: the relationships of young men and women in the early thirties in Ceylon, and that of getting them to act in public. I suppose that in a sense Christobel and Monica Gunasekara and the other girls who appeared in that production were pioneers, and perhaps it was something of that pioneering effort that made the play the success that it was. I remember that a second performance was called for, and it was given in aid of the Humane Dry Zone Colonisation Scheme – another pioneering venture of the early thirties. I remember Kenneth de Lanerolle, Muthubanda Dissanayake and S P Amarasinghe. They rose to the occasion remarkably finely and well.

The thirties were the years of the growing expansion of the University College, when the millennium – the fully fledged University – seemed just round the corner, however divided opinions might have been about the site. There were more and more young men and women coming into university education from secondary schools – the English-educated 'elite' about whom such hard feelings are entertained now. It is not for me to investigate their shortcomings. Most of them were well aware of these themselves. They were anxious to make the most of their opportunities, however limited and restricted they were in the system of that time, and some of them found their way into what was coming to be called the Dram Soc.

I think it is well to repeat here that it was – even in those University College days – a university society. Of course most of its members were Arts students, of them many were reading English. But there were always others from other disciplines interested, and the Society could count on the interest and help of other Departments. I remember with what keenness Professor Whiteley of the Classics Department – the best of men – and J L C Rodrigo entered into a production of Sheppard's translation of Euripides' *Cyclops*, for which Dido Caspersz of the Department of Mathematics produced music of his own composition. On another occasion, one of the end of term jollifications of the Society, the Rev. P. Lucien Jansz wrote a little sketch in Spanish, which went down very well with both actors and audience who, though they did not know the language, were diverted by the bravura of the quarrel of the dialogue.

Where Women Rule and the next two plays: *The Rivals* (1934) and *The Imaginary Invalid* (1935) were given in the Royal College Hall, acoustically not the happiest of choices, yet the only 'stage' (if one can call what it provided that) available. There was a great deal of talent however, so the shortcomings of auditorium and stage were not of great consequence. In *The Rivals* Erica Christoffelsz and Bonnie Beling played the main roles. Raju Coomaraswamy and Phyllis Dickman were the youthful leads. Doric de Souza played one of his three or four small roles for the Society, and I remember that it was at a performance of *The Rivals* in Panadura that we had the news of his First and his winning of the University Scholarship to England.

Of these three plays given at Royal College I feel that *The Imaginary Invalid* provided the best example of the great resources of talent available to the Society. Even in those early days there were performers like Kenneth de Lanerolle and Muthubanda Dissanayake who were more than ordinarily gifted. But the playing of Bonnie Bling as Argan in the Moliere was so sustained and controlled that it was impressive in its range and finish. He entered so fully into the role that he seemed not to be the young man we knew but somebody else. With hindsight now one recalls the evidence of the completeness with which Bonnie engaged himself in his world of unreality and made it real. This was the highlight of a play that had on its credit side the remarkable diverting talents of Audrey de Silva as Toinette, David Pate and Yvonne Poulier as the young lovers, and two excellent cameos provided by Pieter Keuneman as Belgrade Argan and Sam Kadirgamar as the lawyer.

I suppose 1935 must be reckoned a date of some significance in the history of the Dram Soc and other university societies, because the PWD in that year began the building of a hall which was, in the confident expectation of Professor Marrs, going to provide us with 'a first-rate stage'. Knowing how specialised the task of providing first-rate stages was, and happening to have a few books on the subject, I took them to Professor Marrs. But neither he nor I (absolutely indirectly though I was concerned) reckoned with the inertia of bureaucracy. King George's Hall when it was ready, was a monument to everything but theatre and stage. It gave us an ungainly platform at an awkward height in a large hall. At the rear was a smaller area which could, after an army of assistants had struggled with the heavy planks which bureaucracy ordained, be used as an inner stage. Acoustically – though this was not, I believe, deliberate intention on the part of the PWD – it was fair.

What the PWD provided, unsatisfactory as it was, was further complicated by an enormous and heavy blackboard, of fearsome proportions, on which the Mathematics Department worked out for the benefit of its students complicated problems, most of which dealt with the vagaries of a piece of string to which a weight was attached. Whether this blackboard still exists I do not know, but it remained on the stage of King George's Hall for twenty years thereafter. Pushed by main force into the curtained wings, it stood guard, unseen, over numerous productions of university societies. A little later a grand piano – on which rugger enthusiasts danced on Colours Nights – came to join it, standing mute and invisible in the opposite wings. These two objects played some part in productions of the Dramatic Society. These were objective reality, of which the producer and designer of sets had to take note. What was put on the stage, how the actors entered and made their exits, were frequently dictated by blackboard and piano. I do not suppose, however, that this was a great handicap. The PWD and University College undoubtedly believed in Dumas' maxim that all one needed for drama was three boards and a passion.

From the members of the Dram Soc we had all the passion that was required – sometimes more of it, sometimes less, but by and large we could, as a university society, carry through most of what we attempted to do. The first of the shows at K G Hall was *The Lady from Alfaqueque* – a return to the Quinteros. I mention it because, once again, some of the characteristics of a university production were in evidence in it. We had a strong lead in Laurel Nathanielsz, she continued the tradition established earlier of the player or players we could, whatever the end result, please and reward audiences. We always had such players, on whom we could depend and who could make up for deficiencies elsewhere. (I remember Dick Daniel in a role he made all his own in the same play.) Like Laurel in later years came players like Simplicius Crusz, Ellis Grenier, Irma Nathanielsz, Roland Sri Pathmanathan, Rebe Caldera, Osmund Jayaratne, Jeanne Pinto, Henry Ernst, Jan Modder, Irangani Meedeniya – the list is very long and to it one should add, too, the equally long list of those who played secondary roles superlatively well – Douglas Amarasekara, Celia Arnolds (she came in at 24 hours' notice to play a part she had watched in rehearsal), George Fernando, Carmen Mendis, Saliya Parakrama, Tony Gabriel, Percy Colin Thorne, Shanti and Duleep Kumar with Tissa Devendra – and so on. Then there were all those whose roles for the Dram Soc earned them a soubriquet by which they were better known thereafter. I think of Krupp – and hope he will turn up some time.

Arthur van Langenberg came in to help us in 1937. With all his talents, his wonderful equanimity of character and his lovableness, he was a strong support. He dressed *The Servant of Two Masters*. I shall never forget the wonderful costume he gave Kumudini Bhonslay. She played her role with spirit, and her voice – with an accent which might have been Italianate – seemed just right. Arthur was more than a single helper – he was a host in himself, and behind him were the various members of his family: Dolly, who scoured the Pettah shops for materials, did wonders with a sewing needle and always got things absolutely right; Trixie, who was a good practical critic, and helped in the most unimaginable ways. I remember how one afternoon between 4:15 and 5:30, when the Hall gradually began to fill she came in with a sewing machine, placed it on the stage, and attached a long hem to the curtain which had shrunk. All of it was done with such good humour and dispatch that you scarcely realised how hard she was working till it was all over. Etta was there helping in a hundred ways. I do not think they ever realised how much we owed to them. I am certain that to them, as to most of us, it was a joint enterprise in which we were all involved.

In 1940 Edith took over the décor of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and did a superlative job. I remember *The Merry Wives* for two other reasons: Merle van Langenberg gave us her help at rehearsals, and lent the comedy a verve that belonged, at times, to the old Keystone days. For the first time older members of the Society played in the production – and Bert Amerasinghe was a terrific Dr Caius, with Bala Tampoe Phillips tumbling at his heels. That was the first of many extraordinary performances he gave on the stage. He is an actor of uncanny insight into the role he plays and, in addition, has remarkable versatility. Audiences of older years will remember his Tobit, the old father in *The Sulky Fire*, and his playing of Creon in Anouilh's *Antigone*.

From 1937 onwards we had been spending some of our takings on a lighting set and with Strand Electric to help – they were extremely useful and practical – we were building up the nucleus of a small set of battens, spots and dimmers for a repertory stage. As these things go, it was fairly good. The best use was made of it by F A S Perera and Bunny Ludekens, who brought some of the people they had trained. They contributed a great deal to the final effect, so it became more and more the kind of joint enterprise which involved as many in greenrooms and off stage as on it.

In 1941 Edith and I were married, and her first connection with the Dram Soc in 1940 became a permanent involvement. She brought professional expertise into costuming

and décor, having worked at both in Berlin in the twenties. Of all the shows the Dram Soc put on, two which linger long in my memory are *Marco Millions* and *The Good Woman of Setzuan*. Both of them were taxing undertakings, possible only because the joint enterprise involved so many talents and so much hard work. We had to cut down O'Neill's play to dimensions capable of interpretation on an amateur stage without losing everything that gave it meaning. The first part of the task was solved by the Sprach-Chor which Edith trained, and for which bits of the impressionistic text came from Canon Jansz. The rest was done by sticking close to the text, and having actors who rose nobly to the occasion. I remember how pleased Lionel Wendt was with the whole show, and how on a very hot night he made numerous pictures of it in his own inimitable style.

The Good Woman of Setzuan was memorable as the first Brecht play to be put on the boards in Ceylon. It had – as was necessary on our 'stage' with its blackboard and grand piano in the wings – logistic problems of its own. These were remarkably well solved by Edith and P A S Perera. For the rest Jeanne Pinto decided, in spite of lots of difficulties and the stupid way she was badgered by oafish students at the university, that nothing would stop her and she played Shen Te with a magnificent verve and spirit.

We extended the usual programme of one play every year or two, or even three, having so many past numbers of the Dram Soc to depend on. The latter gave a memorable performance of Anouilh's *Antigone*, Irangani Meedeniya and Bert Amerasinghe playing Antigone and Creon, and Johann Leembruggen bringing into his playing of the soldier incredible reserves of power. To those older members and others, we owed later on the great success with audiences of Pirandello's *Naked*, in which Winston Serasinghe for the first time gave the Dram Soc the satisfaction of counting him among its players.

Looking back on it now I remember a few chance remarks or brief encounters, which as they remain in my memory belong here since they did have point. I remember Robert Nicholl Cadell telling me, as we talked on the lawns of King George's Hall after a performance of *Lady Precious Stream*, that he'd have been better pleased at seeing something written by a contemporary playwright in Ceylon. He was right. I remember his remark with keen regret, because our friendship was so short, and I learned to

value it all too late. I think this was something which the Dram Soc should have tried to do. It has, I think, to be put down to the debit side.

Then I remember Ralph Keene. He, too, is dead. He liked the plays he saw, but he remarked quite rightly that it was good, very good perhaps, amateur work. Of course it was. That was – in the cliché – the defect of its quality.

I remember Dr Amarasinghe – the father of Upali and Anoja. I remember a conversation I had with him. He liked what the Dram Soc was doing and he supported it because he felt it educated. That was a very great compliment to its work, and however much result tended to fall short of intention, some such moral aim as Dr Amarasinghe had in mind belonged to the purpose of our playing.

The reactions of audiences and the press – for very often the press provided the audience with its reaction – were on the whole sympathetic and appreciative. So, too, was the attitude of the Vice Chancellor of the University. In 1950 it was the University which sponsored the visit of Robert G Newton, under British Council auspices, to Ceylon. I think you must have seen his production of *Twelfth Night*, in which a number of public figures in the world of amateur drama in Ceylon took part. Robert had lots of experience in production and those who played with him did learn a great deal. I remember Dennis Bartholomeusz's good performance in the play, and Sonnie Wijeyesinghe. Had he not fallen ill, Robert would have done Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* with Dennis as the Playboy. It would have been a very interesting experiment.

The rest of it you probably know as much (of) as I do. Jubal, who was in Perth, Australia, at the time, and was well known to Professor Allan Edwards, came to Ceylon in 1951 as guest producer for the University. He had been trained by Max Reinhardt, had his own (very) successful and well known theatre in Vienna, and gave a much needed professional touch to the plays he did for the Dram Soc, for the Sinhalese Society, and for other groups. He had a wonderful extrovert personality, and made easy contact with people. But he was a sick man, and pushed himself too much in the work he did.

You probably saw *Liliom*, which had some very memorable things in it. Sera was as usual a magnificent figure, Ranjani was very sweet and winsome in the main female

role, and all along the line there were little gems of small parts. Edith did the sets and costumes, and it was a great success. I remember the absurd song, or lilt, which opened the play – worked out by Edith and myself in a car travelling from Colombo to Menikdiwela.

In the same year, or it could have been a year later, Jubal opened (I expect that would be the right term) the Lionel Wendt Theatre with a truly moving production of *The Lower Depths*. Not everybody's cup of tea, but extraordinarily well done, and mounted on the stage against – I suppose that would be the word – odds that were insuperable (chief among these the rush to get the theatre ready). I remember how hard actors had to work; how Jubal fluctuated between the extremes of delight and despair; how dutifully Harold came into it to get things smoothed over and ensure that everything would finally be ready; and how Edith and Gunadasa nearly killed themselves with the set.

To my mind the best of the shows Jubal did for the Dram Soc was *The Insect Play*. He worked on it at Peradeniya for two and a half months. I will remember going to a rehearsal at the end of that time, hearing Gehan's ringing laugh which opened the play, and knowing how wonderful this transforming power of a good producer could be. That was a very good show, and a very happy one. Once again right along the line there were fine performances given in it by Francis Pietersz, by Frederick and a wonderful ensemble by the 'ants'. I remember going with the show to Jaffna and trying to get the stage ready – we did it, but what a strain it was – between 10 pm and 6 am on Friday night and Saturday morning. The Town Hall was then being used by the Supreme Court of Ceylon, and nothing could be touched until its sittings were over on Friday. Our bus reached Jaffna at 10 pm and then we set to work: Bunny Ludekens, Gunadasa and scores of other helpers, literally making a stage out of a platform. Edith did some wonderful sets, specially designed for travelling. They were all made at Menikdiwela and transported to Colombo.

You know all about *Androcles and the Lion*, because you did such a fine role in it. It was a play I had long wanted to do, because I thought it offered so much to actors and had the right proportion of jest and seriousness which Shaw rarely succeeded in getting in most of his other plays. I wish I could have done it with a clearer mind. I think you will remember how hard we worked, how tired we were. That Doric, Roland, Thambi and Dissa were ready to come into it was very great kindness and a gesture

of friendship which I appreciated. (I wonder whether you saw Thambi in *Tobias*; he was great, and he was even better in *Androcles*.) I think the show had some good, quite good things in it: I remember the scene between yourself and Unamboowe as the Captain, Roland's emperor, and Thambi and Frederick. Francis's performance was full of charm, I thought. Once again Edith did some fine sets and costumes.

This has been an extremely long letter. It was something I wanted to write a long while ago. I am sorry that it was Arthur's death which prompted me finally to it. I don't know what I should say at the end. As you will see I have referred only to the Dram Soc shows I worked on – Bert did an excellent *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* in which Chandi Meedeniya first showed her mettle, and the year before that Ibsen's *Pillars of Society*, in which Jeanne Pinto first appeared. Looking back on it all, I remember such fine and moving things on the stage as Chandi in *Naked*, Yvonne Dabrera and Malcolm Wright in *Right You Are*, Roland and Rene in *Marco Millions*, and so forth. If I could do it again, of course I think I would do it better. What it meant most was working on a creative activity with a group of people, most of them young, and having the feeling that it was worth doing. Perhaps there was some snobbery, some arrogance and some narcissism involved, but I still think that it is worth keeping the lines open for internationalism. After all that is, by definition, one of the functions of a University, and we were a University society.

I am sure I have forgotten much and remembered what it not so important.

Yet here it is.

Yours,

Lyn Ludowyk

A Lady of Letters: Shelagh Goonewardene 1935-2013

YASMINE GOONERATNE

During the 1980s, Shelagh Goonewardene became a theatre critic for the Sunday Times in Sri Lanka. Far away, in Sydney, I read her theatre reviews, sent me in the form of newspaper clippings by our Peradeniya contemporary Dr Lakshmi de Silva (critic, translator and regular theatre-goer, who was teaching at the University of Kelaniya) and commented in a letter to Lakshmi of 9 October 1980 how glad I was to see that Shelagh, though now married and working as a secretary in Colombo, was back doing some regular writing:

> *'I always thought it was a loss for everyone concerned that she devoted her considerable talents to becoming the perfect secretary. Hestia, at least, permits some of the arts to bloom beside the hearth, but I'd imagine a 9 to 5 job in an office would leave very little space for the imagination to work in.'*

Although most people remember Shelagh as an actress, or as a theatre critic, I knew her to have always been, in every sense of the phrase, a lady of letters. As a schoolgirl at Bishop's College in Colombo, she had read voraciously, her favourite subjects in the classroom and out of it being History and English. As an adolescent she had spent most of her pocket-money on books, accumulating while still in her teens a small library of her own. During school holidays she wrote letters to friends who shared her interests which, as she grew older, included the cinema and local theatre.

Her interest in Shakespeare's plays was strong; and, looking back, I have come to think that her response to the poetry of his plays and her ability to memorise it may have given her the insight into character that she later demonstrated on the stage, an insight usually possessed by professional actors who have been privileged to spend many hours in the world of his plays.

When Shelagh abandoned an academic career to marry Tony Anghie in 1959, and I left Sri Lanka for three years' postgraduate study at Cambridge, we maintained a regular correspondence, largely about theatre, books and films. This continued after

my return and marriage and her own eventual re-marriage and emigration to Australia, in which country I settled with my family in 1972.

Shelagh's considerable talents as a writer, of which I had known for some time as a sympathetic friend and regular correspondent, were perceived by C R Hensman while we were both still at school, preparing for the Higher School Certificate examination which was also the gateway to university studies at the University of Ceylon. Dick Hensman, who was himself an Honours graduate of the same University, was at that time teaching English to the senior classes at St Thomas's College, Mount Lavinia. He had learned of Shelagh's interest in literature and drama from his wife Pauline, our English teacher at Bishop's College. He invited the two of us to attend weekly 'extension' classes with him at their home in Mount Lavinia. Under Dick's guidance and with Pauline's encouragement, we read new books, listened to recorded classical music, and addressed ourselves to a range of new ideas. We also wrote essays, and reviews of the films we were seeing at the weekends. When Dick established the literary magazine Community in 1953, and invited us to contribute to it, Shelagh produced her first major essay on a literary subject: Symbolism.

Being trusted with writing on such a topic at an adult level, for adult readers, was heady stuff for the mere school children that we were at the time. Our mentor, who was at that time producing literary programs for Radio Ceylon, had recently established the Shakespeare Society in Colombo. He also enrolled the two of us in his Little Theatre Group (made up of his senior students at St Thomas's College and his wife's at Bishop's College), so that we found ourselves taking part regularly in play-readings, and acting in small parts on the stage and on radio. This was where Shelagh's love of drama, fuelled by school plays at Bishop's and nurtured by theatre aficionados like Irene Edirisinghe, Patricia Pantin Munro and Arthur Van Langenberg, really began, developing in time into a lifelong dedication to the theatre. She thought of drama as a 'Total Art', and eventually adopted the phrase as the title of her best known book.

"We loved the theatre," [wrote Shelagh to me in 2003, while I was reading *Applause at the Wendt*, that remarkable volume in which Neville Weereratne celebrates a half-century of achievement at the Lionel Wendt Theatre in Colombo] "but we also felt that we were serving the great playwrights to the best of our ability. What we did really affected the lives of some of us beyond the reach of the stage: it shaped us as people.

Not everyone felt like that – for some it was just 'good fun', but for a few it was a really important part of our lives. It also fulfilled the talents of really good actors like Winston Serasinghe who would never have had the opportunity of showing his true mettle if not for all the forces that shaped the theatre of that time."

Her scintillating interpretation of the heroine of Anatole France's play *The Dumb Wife* while at University, and later of Ophelia in *Othello* and of Linda Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* for Stage & Set, together with her reviews in the local press of theatre performances in Sri Lanka, link Shelagh firmly in the public mind with the stage. Her quality as a writer did not come into view until 1995 when, fired by indignation, 'pity and terror' at news of the tragic death of Richard de Zoysa, the journalist/actor she considered 'the most gifted actor of his generation' in Sri Lanka, she collected those thoughtful and perceptive reviews into a single volume she titled *This Total Art*.

This ground-breaking book was a natural development from Shelagh's lifelong commitment to the art of the theatre. Its nine parts, based on an intimate knowledge of Sri Lankan theatre in all its aspects, and of local conditions as she had experienced them at first hand, make extraordinary reading for their range and depth, their vitality and their power. There is space in them for affectionate portraits of theatre personalities such as E.F.C. Ludowyk, Winston Serasinghe and Jubal, for sharply defined vignettes from actual stage productions, for advice and instructions offered to drama students of the future, for lamentation, and for philosophy. Distanced from Sri Lanka by residence in Melbourne, Shelagh's perspective on memories of the past is at once informed by deep feeling for the predicament of the country she has left behind and illuminated by unquenchable hope for its future. Here is an extract from Part 8, a 'requiem' for Richard de Zoysa whose brutal murder, just before his thirty-second birthday, marked for Shelagh the loss to Sri Lanka of 'the brightest star in the theatrical firmament':

> *'As time passes, I reflect that it is a strange irony of fate that Richard, whose contribution to the quality of Sri Lankan life was in the field of culture, and whose perceptions and convictions had their source in a strong core of belief in humane values and civilized behaviour, should meet his death for purely political reasons. I would have thought that the world of the artist, the thinker, the truth-seeker and intellectual, to which*

Richard belonged, and the squalid world of politics, were miles apart. But pondering further, one realises that throughout human history, thinkers and intellectuals have lost their liberty or their lives because their first allegiance was to Truth rather than to what was politically expedient at the time. Richard now belongs to this illustrious company.

Before Richard's death, I had felt myself increasingly caught up in the concerns and claims of a new country and the effort involved in rooting myself afresh. Sri Lanka had receded gradually into the furthest boundaries of my consciousness and only a faint outline of the past persisted.

The news of Richard's death changed all this. I was stirred again by vivid memories and sensations – the sights, the sounds, the physical textures of that other, well-remembered world came rushing back to engulf me in a tide of feeling…

That tide of feeling remains high. It motivates a desire to see that Richard is not forgotten in the country that gave him birth. It is his memory that prompts my reactions to what is happening now in Sri Lanka. I view the endless tale of battle, murder and destruction with the concern and pain that he must have experienced at what he saw and heard in his daily life as a journalist. Everything that happens takes on new significance because, in his own way, Richard, who loved his country, gave his life for it, and therefore has enhanced its value, its uniqueness, its particular place and role on the stage of world history. He has compelled those of us who have left Sri Lanka, perhaps forsaken it, to see it with a fresh vision and renewed concern for the fate of its people.'

By the decisive act of leaving our homeland, Shelagh and I had both deliberately cut our creative lives short: she did not find in Melbourne the richness of theatre experience that had nurtured her spirit in Sri Lanka, and an unexpected poetic impulse in me which had just begun to take root in Sri Lankan soil, wilted before it had an opportunity to flower in Sydney. Neither of us would have willingly left Sri Lanka, but the requirements of our families gave us no choice. It was a matter for constant regret that circumstance located us in two different Australian states, and

we visited each other as often as we could. But there was one advantage to separation which we appreciated: it made letter-writing a necessity, indeed a lifeline. After the introduction of email made communication quicker and easier, our letter-writing continued.

Separated as Shelagh and I were for considerable periods of our adult lives, and sundered by great distances, it was not often that we had opportunities to work together on literary projects. We sometimes proof-read each others' writing, of course: her trained eye invariably spotted typing errors and misprints, which made her a wonderful editor. Her lively sense of comedy caused her to sympathise with my constant inclination to satirise, but she did not hesitate to advise, always with the utmost tact, when she felt there was a need to counsel restraint. "A little bit over the top, don't you agree?" She was tolerant of other people's errors, kind in her response to the many drama students who sought her help, and modest regarding her own achievements. But her standards were high: once, and once only did I know her to lose her cool. It was over misrepresentation of her literary work – when the editor of a magazine to which she had contributed an article, took it upon himself, unasked, to impudently 'correct' her syntax!

On three separate occasions, our collaboration went further than proof-reading or literary editing. The first of these was in 1972, while we were both still in Sri Lanka, when we co-edited *New Ceylon Writing 2*, a special issue of that magazine which we dedicated to the Sri Lankan theatre. More recently, in Australia and sadly, we jointly composed obituaries for our mentors Pauline and Dick Hensman following the deaths in London of that devoted couple to whom we both (among many others whose lives had touched theirs) owed so much. The Hensmans' passing removed from our lives one of those influences which, as Shelagh wrote of the theatre, 'shaped us as people'.

Not long after the death of a beloved daughter, Shelagh herself embarked on a final journey. This, an essentially literary adventure, had been preceded by two other 'odysseys': the first a search for healing (from cancer), the second a 'parallel spiritual one which tested my faith and fidelity'. The practice of meditation, which she had incorporated into her daily life several years before, had upheld her at that time, and enabled her to face the physical trials with serenity. In the wake of that experience, she wrote later, came 'an unexpected gift' of a literary kind, the ability, not only to read poetry (which she had always enjoyed doing), but to write it. Many years had

passed since I had shared with her, through our letters, a somewhat similar experience of my own, when the death of my father in 1969 opened the flood-gates of memory to admit my first completely original poem. Such experiences, which do not take place in the conscious mind, are difficult to describe: but in the introduction to her second book of verse, *Poems to the Creator*, Shelagh Goonewardene used her 'considerable talents' to give full literary expression to the joy she had found, late in life, in the 'pleasure and delight' of poetic composition:

> *'The acute awareness of one's own mortality sharpens all perceptions and sensory impressions… Nature becomes a treasured teacher and companion, the seasons reflecting the changing phases of life itself… Writing poetry on a regular basis was a new experience for me. For forty years of my life the theatre had been my chosen vocation. On the stage as an actor, I had worked to faithfully convey the ideas and stories of playwrights through portraying their characters as effectively as possible. Now I found that instead of living their words I would choose words that I could live in myself. I discovered the sheer pleasure and delight of exploring and experimenting with the resources of language to create and articulate my own thoughts, ideas and feelings.'*

Marie Berise Nash S M notes in her Foreword to this book that the poems gradually draw the reader beyond the beauty of Creation, 'uniting us to the transcendent beauty of the God experienced sometimes by the mystics'. The last poem that Shelagh wrote, extracts from which are here published for the first time, she sent to me in a letter on 9 February 2013. It is a psalm inspired by the Psalms of King David, asking for deliverance from suffering and pleading for God's mercy:

> *Be pleased O Lord to deliver me*
> *Look down, O Lord, to help me.*
>
> *How long, O Lord, how long?*
> *Although I have striven for over a month*
> *To keep my faith and hope steadfast and strong*
> *My enemy is still not subdued.*
> *His hold does not loosen*
> *He forces me to live in a false reality*

That obscures my vision of You,
Hides my own identity
Traps me in anxiety and low spirits
So that I seek in vain to find You.

O do not leave me Lord
Or let this illness lock me away
From your dear Presence,
For You are everything and I am
Nothing, without You.
Fill my darkness with your blessed light
So that I can see my path more clearly.
Make me well again dear Lord
Heal my body of its brokenness …

With my remaining strength I cling to your promise
That You will not allow the enemy to prevail
You will not test me beyond what I can bear
You will not let me fail …

So Father bless your weakened child
With health restored, full and complete,
So when I reach your judgment seat
I can to all cry out and say:

Bless God and praise His Holy Name
In all the heavens proclaim His fame
For when on earth I called to Him above

In desperate need and grief,
His everlasting arms enfolded me
In compassion, mercy, peace and love.

Unconscious Desire becomes a Tragic Fate: Review of Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge*

DEVIKA BRENDON

'Until you make the unconscious conscious,
it will direct your life and you will call it fate.'

C G Jung

The recent production by the Workshop Players of Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge*, staged at the Lionel Wendt Theatre in Colombo was stark, and riveting.

The play's director, Jerome de Silva, had invited me to view a rehearsal two weeks before first night. Even at that stage of the process, it was clear that the production would be intense, vivid, pure and true to the intention of the playwright, whose consistent concern was to show how his characters' hidden fears and desires emerge to affect their lives.

The action takes place in an Italian immigrant family in post-WW2 Brooklyn, New York, and the claustrophobia and voyeurism of this setting is evoked by the simplest of sets: steel benches in a square, skirted by see-through plastic sheeting in the foreground, and a set of steps leading up to a central doorway/archway which leads in turn to the streets outside. At times the steel frames operate as seats, tables, benches or couches.

It is clear to us, viewing through the see-through sheeting, the steel frames, and the mediating guidance and commentary of Eddie's lawyer, Alfieri, that Eddie is in love with Catherine, his wife's sister's daughter.

The extended family situations in which many Sri Lankans live are spoken to very powerfully by this production. Blurred relational lines are sharpened by physical proximity and patriarchal values, so that the man of the house, the hard-working provider, sometimes feels unconsciously entitled to more than familial affection when a niece becomes an adult while still living at home.

If Catherine were allowed to pursue her independence by getting a job and moving out of her relatives' home, meeting and marrying a worthy partner, and living an adult

life, her uncle's unacknowledged feelings for her would gradually subside, like flood waters that have exceeded their limit, and return to their usual level.

It is usual to castigate and scapegoat child molesters and paedophiles for unnatural behaviour. This play, and this production in particular, shows us a more complicated view of human relationships: three adults caught in an explosive triangle which is tragically detonated by the arrival of a young man who Catherine 'likes' enough to wish to marry.

Initially, we see Eddie's dislike of Catherine's suitor as comic: Rudolpho, in this production, is portrayed as a vibrant, attractive and outgoing personality, with brazen platinum blonde hair and a life-force, enthusiasm and exuberance which act like a magnet on Catherine.

Rudolpho's characterisation literally lights up the stage, and his expansive body language explicitly challenges the shadowy limitations and restrictions among which Catherine has grown up.

This is sensitive and explosive material, and the actors bear their interpretative burden with strength and integrity. Each of them is 'in' their character at each moment, through a story which crosses a spectrum of emotions.

The initial annoying girlishness of Catherine, a part sensitively played by Mayanthi de Silva, is seen to dissipate as she moves through her residual attachment to her uncle, and sheds her infantile mannerisms. Her high-pitched girlish voice, her childish, endearing, confiding gestures, curling up on the floor, sitting on her uncle's knee, are more appropriate to a 7-year-old than a young woman of 17.

We see that the physical intimacy with which she has learned to be familiar while growing up, is inappropriate at a point in her life when she should be becoming independent. As the situation centred on her increasing individuation intensifies, and she becomes aware of her growing attraction to Rudolpho, we see Catherine gradually withdrawing her consent to Eddie's approaches.

This development in her demeanour affects the dynamic between them: the greater emotional distance between them that is mirrored in the physical distance, the right-

angled oppositional body positioning, and the emotional barriers erected through the actors' stances operate powerfully and subtly to show how inappropriate her uncle's continuing desire and craving for contact with her has become.

The confined spaces of the set naturally intensify the action that takes place: we can visualise Catherine sitting on the edge of the bath, talking to her uncle while he is shaving. The mirrored panels on the walls of the set enable us to see the characters observing themselves and each other, extending and magnifying our sense of the impact of their everyday interactions, and our own ability to see into their private lives.

Symbolic visual tableaux contrast with the energetic dynamics of the escalating action. When Eddie calls Catherine a 'Madonna', it is a sign of heartfelt and even spiritualised admiration. When he consults the lawyer for advice, one of the men is seated while the other stands, then paces in the foreground. Simultaneously, for a few moments, we see a smoky, partially-lit, effigy-like vision of Catherine, framed in the doorway at the head of the stairs: backgrounded, elevated and centred, a fantasy image visually evoking the deep undisclosed yearning he has for her. We see what he cannot say.

The actress playing Eddie's wife (and Catherine's aunt) Beatrice, is the third angle of the triangle. She holds her space with dignity. Practical, loyal, clear-sighted and realistic, she speaks plainly, but in vain. The cross-purposed contradictions of their frustrated affection are shown in the rigidity of their words and actions towards each other, in contrast to the proxemics between her niece and her husband.

The scene in which she tells her niece to behave more like an adult if she wants to be seen as a grownup by her uncle, is a masterpiece of kindness and concern, fused with self-restraint. Beatrice is portrayed in this production as a woman of deep feeling, who wants to 'be a wife again', to her husband. The lessening of their intimacy, alluded to in this phrase, reveals that Eddie, by coming to view his wife more as a mother figure, has unconsciously cast his youthful niece as the focus of his desire.

When, in the closing scene, set in the exposed street outside the apartment, with the whole neighbourhood looking on in silent shock and dismay, Beatrice takes Eddie's dying body into her arms, it is impossible not to see the evocation of the Pieta in her

anguished and protective position in relation to him. She is Mary of the Sorrows, Mater Misericordia, with all that that implies, for her marriage and her role in it.

The cast spoke in recognisable Brooklyn and Sicilian accents, and their gestures and body movements conveyed in well thought-out detail their characters and the varying emotions they were expressing. The emotional marital estrangement between Beatrice and Eddie is shown through the seating arrangements while they are eating: with Eddie and Catherine seated together on one side of the stairs and Beatrice, by default, on the other. The space between their polarised positions is, literally and symbolically, where the vision of Catherine manifests itself.

There was a fluidity, a spontaneity and a naturalness in the action which can only have been the result of thorough preparation, and complete identification and inhabiting of their roles by the actors. The camaraderie and casual, affectionate, joking intimacy Eddie experiences with his mates, which is interspersed with the drama of his interior life, is shown to sharply alter as his isolation increases, when they cut and shun him, before the inevitable crisis.

'The essence of drama is conflict', we are told while studying Literature at school. Here we see that conflict manifested on the stage. We see that the placement and positioning of the characters shifted across the stage in structured, emotionally electrified triangles: two young people growing attracted to each other, dancing or talking, watched by the jealous man of the house; the aunt gently warning the niece to behave more like an adult and not a little girl, and the uncle who is the subject of the conversation coming in and asking what they are talking about; the husband and wife awkwardly discussing their estranged marriage, and Catherine coming in on them at the wrong moment; the uncle and niece playfully teasing each other, and the aunt standing aside, silent, seething, with her back turned, cooking the meal they will share; the lovers discussing their future, in a few private moments, and the enraged uncle coming in through the side stairs to confront his rival; Marco openly challenging the uncle on behalf of his younger brother, whose honour has been irrecoverably insulted.

The Workshop Players have successfully brought Miller's vision to life. As the lawyer, Alfieri, tells us, 'I felt I should be calling the police every moment'.

An Interview with Mayanthi de Silva, Lead Actress

A View from the Bridge – A Workshop Players' Production

New Ceylon Writing: *Your Director has said this will be a production of his play of a kind that has never been seen in this country. What are the most innovative and confronting aspects of it?*

Mayanthi de Silva[1]: Our director took a very avant-garde approach in directing and producing this play. In truth, there was much deliberation that took place to execute it right, in order to ensure that each of our valued audience would have a powerful experience as well. The risk was worth a shot for sure.

As a cast, this not only added quite a bit of pressure on the acting requirements made of us, but also freed us to move and immerse ourselves in the story better. There was the least amount of restriction in terms of how we should portray ourselves, except that which was intentionally represented by the four low-walled set. The glass walls not only added depth and perspective on a production level, but to some the mirrors served as a 3D effect, which allowed one to search into the souls of the actors.

That said, I reiterate that the approach to the play allowed an audience to build their own perception about character and plot. That was what made this entire experience so special and innovative.

NCW: *Could you outline the process by which you workshop a performance like this? Is it in a way like removing layers of convention or assumption about the characters to get to a more intense and stark and genuine and spontaneous emotional state?*

MS: As a cast we invested as much time as possible dissecting the plot, the characters, the relationships and the writer's intention; as individuals too we had to 'channel in' to who we were portraying and how or why we should portray it in a particular way. Miller's writing is extremely layered, and understanding it with as much comprehension was important to us – not only to honour the writer but also to better execute our approach to the script in a realistic and impactful manner.

Jerome guided us through some effective methods that aided this process – one of which was to meditate on six key questions he called the "6 Ws" and encouraging us

to simply and extensively imagine the scenes. He even took us through some relevant theatre methods, including Stanislavski techniques, to aid our journey in bringing this story to life.

NCW: *How instinctive is acting? How much is learned?*

MS: In any form of theatre one must be directed, and learn the basics in theatre. How much is learnt and how much is instinctive really depends on a few aspects such as the vision and technique of the director, the maturity of an actor and the nature of the script.

With a play like this once the basic guidance and framework was directed, we were allowed to explore ways in which we wanted to portray the characters, move and allow the whole experience to become as natural as it had the potential to be – in fact, Jerome constantly advised us to do as we were led and refrain from affecting the realism.

I must add that there is also much you learn from each other as a cast, when opinions and perspectives are shared. This is something I really appreciated, as my cast was such a solid support system.

NCW: *Is there any cultural limitation or restraint that you feel in performing roles specifically set in other countries and historical eras?*

MS: It is naturally challenging but a welcome challenge. This particular script has a dual-cultural flavour to it as well, which made it so much more interesting and challenging for us as a cast.

As Sri Lankans, our dialect has a British influence to a great extent, so having to switch to an American dialect was personally, a mental shift. It was even more interesting because my character wasn't just American, she was from Brooklyn, New York. There was also a lot of adaptation that I personally had to do in shedding habitual Lankanisms and modernistic mannerisms to bring out the 1950s context and style as well as I could. But with proper research, focus and practice it isn't entirely impossible.

NCW: *Arthur Miller specialises in everyday, believable tragedy which has an impact as powerful as a Classical Greek drama like* Oedipus. *Is this a fair statement to make about this play?*

MS: Absolutely fair. Though set in the early 1950s, *A View from the Bridge* deals with some extremely timeless everyday themes such as inappropriate relationships, injustice, identity, illegal immigration, incest, infidelity, ignorance, emotional manipulations, abuse and so on.

Our discussions about the play opened us up to so many parallels of people we know, or stories we have heard, of people experiencing such issues even in Sri Lanka to date. We as a culture do not speak up against social injustice, or if we do, it would be a matter of gossip with no real legal solution or healing to those concerned. To quote one of my favourite characters, Beatrice: “we gonna pretend like nothing ever happened”. This is so true of our older generations, who would rather brush the issue under the carpet, silently wallow in their own sorrows and pretend that the elephant in the room does not exist, because as women they are naturally subdued in patriarchal society.

I chose to play the role of Catherine because she was strongly representative of multiple young children – male and female – whose very existence unfortunately takes place amidst a field of predators. I am personally passionate about working towards helping such kids in some capacity someday, so playing this role meant a lot to me. Catherine is forced to grow up after being nurtured and protected as a child just because her very protector becomes her greatest nightmare. It doesn’t help that she is also used by the aunt’s cousin, whose actual intention may have been to use her to get his citizenship – I guess this is open to interpretation really. How many kids do we hear of in such typical situations – it all starts with one glance, or thought, just like Eddie?

NCW: *Do you feel the outcome of this situation in the lives of these characters, and their tense and conflicted relationships, is inevitable, in this play?*

MS: Quite apart from the inevitable impact of legal systems at the time, the lack of education, poverty, the aspiration of an American dream and patriarchal culture were all contributing factors to the action of the plot. Therefore, the outcome portrayed is

the most probable; unless one of the characters had a change of heart in terms of intention – which is something we will never know.

NCW: *What have you learned about yourself, from taking on this particular role? Could we know the insights you have gained?*

MS: If you put your mind to doing what you love and do so in prayer and faith, while constantly checking to see if it is true to who you are – possibilities are endless. Even the hardest days are easier to get through especially since most of us have full-time jobs or studies and other commitments. Above all else, God remains a constant guide who sees you through.

I learnt that no matter what, family and friends will be a constant strength and support system – even if you are afraid to take a risk, they will still cheer you on.

I learnt to sharpen my focus, especially mentally, between day to day work, home routine and stage.

I surprised myself regarding how much I was able to give – I was very nervous about taking on such a big role. I am also thankful to the amazing people I worked with from whom I learnt so much – each production has its own unique set of lessons, and to become better each day, you have to be open to learning and knowing when the lesson is relevant.

NCW: *What challenges do you personally face in preparing such an intense and mesmerising performance?*

MS: Remembering my lines was quite a task for me.

I took some very risky decisions with this role in how realistically I had to portray the relationships of our characters. Though I was worried about how to go about it, we all soon settled into it and worked it out in a way that did justice to our approach of realism and spiritualism, but also maintained healthy boundaries.
The emotional journey was also very mentally and physically draining. More often than not, it left me with a lingering headache.

NCW: *Do you ever discover unexpected depths or variations in your interpretation of the character you are playing when performing which you had not expected to come up in rehearsal?*

MS: Yes, very much. Each rehearsal is different and the more you spend time with your role and your fellow actors, the better the understanding in learning to work with variations. It keeps things interesting and motivates you to do better.

Our technique was to live in the moment, forgetting yourself completely. Breathing life into the character and allowing the character to take over is a very spiritual experience – this is when an audience sees the character, and not the actor.

When this happens there are so many unexpected moves, sounds, emotions that surface to complement the character better – these are represented in subtle nuances or big movements that you never thought of originally. This comes from a lot of focus, being aware of the story of the character and the training of the mind.

NCW: *What in your view are the qualities of character and attitude which make a person an effective and capable actor?*

MS: Fundamentally, absolute commitment and respect is an actor's responsibility – to the art you have chosen, the people you work with, time and the space you work in. After all, in Sri Lanka the arts platform is yet to be given its due respected place and if as beneficiaries of this platform we don't honour it enough, then no one else will. Discipline and focus are also key – especially as we are not full-time actors and some of us work or study, have homes to report to, etc. You have to learn to be responsible with how you balance life and avoid letting anyone down in the process.

In life we come across diverse people, so learning to be a team player, selfless, understanding and positive is absolutely necessary. I believe there is no room for 'stars'; if you are part of a cast or crew, everyone's role matters to create an effective, emotionally affecting, and successful work of art.

Note:

1 Mayanthi de Silva is a past pupil of Methodist College, Colombo 3, and is currently employed at a leading advertising agency in Sri Lanka.

Vibrant Visuals

DEVI ARASANAYAGAM

ESSAYS

Looking Back: Memories of a Black July

CHIRANTHI RAJAPAKSE

Some time in the 1950s, when my mother was a young girl, she lived with her family in Colombo. Their house was on the main Galle road. Next to it was another house which was also owned by my grandfather, and was rented out to a Tamil family. During the communal riots of the 1950s, Tamil houses in the area were attacked and damaged. Afraid that they too might be targeted, the tenants left their house and hid with my mother's family. But several of the rioters came looking for them. Finding the house empty, they became aggressive and wanted to attack it. Hearing this, my grandfather came out to speak to them and defuse the situation. The obvious thing would have been to appeal to their sense of humanity, to point out that hurting people, anyone, is wrong. But that is not what my grandfather said.

"I own this house and I'm Sinhalese," he told the crowd. "If you damage this house you will only be harming Sinhalese people. What is the point of attacking your own people?"

It wasn't the most politically correct argument but it had the desired effect of discouraging the crowd who moved on without causing any damage.

When I first heard that story as a child, it confused me. As far as I could remember everyone used to say that the war in Sri Lanka started in 1983. If so, where did this story about riots in the fifties come from? What had happened then? Why didn't I know anything about it? Books, the facts so carefully memorized at school, didn't help much. Sri Lankan history was taught at school with painful thoroughness, but the teaching of history ended in 1948 and the granting of independence from British rule. (Did whoever wrote those textbooks decide that nothing worth recording in Sri Lanka had happened since 1948?) I don't know whether this has changed much – I suspect it hasn't.

As a result, anything I knew about our recent past was learnt in patchwork fashion, through incidents or events mentioned in passing by parents and relations, and through articles read at random in newspapers. The communal riots of the 1950s, the 1980s, the JVP insurgency of the 1970s, the events, the reasons for these, the effects

they had upon our lives and our society, none of these things were even touched upon. It's curious, because as children we were being constantly told that we should (justifiably) be proud of our country's history. Where does history end? In the last two hundred years? One hundred? Are the events of the past forty years not part of our history as well? The last twenty-five? For a country that prides itself on its history, it seems that we have been pathetically inept at recording or understanding our recent past.

One result of this is that it leaves both sides vulnerable to propaganda. No account of history is entirely impartial, but in the absence of any kind of account at all, all that remains is the conflicting propaganda of both sides. There is Tamil propaganda and there is the propaganda of the Sinhalese. Neither is entirely correct, neither is entirely a lie, and the difficult and complicated truth lies somewhere in between.

One exasperating thing about this situation is its vagueness. It's an unfinished story. What happened to that family? They stayed with my mother's family for a few days and then they left. With whom? No one remembers. They never came back to live in Colombo and seem to have left Sri Lanka soon afterwards. Where did they go? Australia? Britain? Canada? No one knows exactly. Perhaps they went on to live peaceful lives in different countries, perhaps they now have only vague memories of the island which was once their home, perhaps they have moved past all this. Or perhaps they are among those who, driven by remembrance of past grief, supported the war that has recently ended and its propagation of violence. Where do such stories end?

There are many things that could easily have changed the outcome of that day. If my grandfather had not been Sinhalese, if he had used different words, the result could have been very different. But – nothing happened. The house stayed as it was, nothing changed. My grandparents continued to live there, their children grew up, moved away, came back, grandchildren visited, the normal pattern of a family reasserted itself.

My grandparents passed away a few years ago. With their deaths something has changed. No one now lives in the house that was their home; and through them, our home for more than fifty years. With their passing, we have lost not just a house, but a home, something much more precious but also more difficult to define or to mourn

for. It's curious that this last war which was fought with very concrete and dangerous weapons, in such a brutal fashion, also originated in something so abstract and difficult to define as the concept of a home. For most people, home is somewhere where they can always return and will be accepted regardless of circumstance, a place that belongs to everyone but exclusively to no one. This is as true for countries as it is for families.

The other curious thing about this incident is my grandfather himself. He was, unlike most Sri Lankan men, uninterested in issues of politics and race. I don't mean that he was particularly enlightened, he was simply indifferent. He was a rather distant figure who spent most of his time at work or playing cards, so I find it hard to imagine him being involved in such an incident (I can imagine him however, storming out in annoyance at his card game being disrupted).

Most intriguing to me are the words he used. He identified himself as Sinhalese, which was not something he usually did. He was a Sinhalese who spoke mostly English, a Buddhist who never visited the temple, an example of the many contradictory things that it is possible to be in Sri Lanka. But the name on his identity card identified him as a Sinhalese and, on that particular day of chaos, more than fifty years ago, it seems that that was all that was important. I think he understood that very well and though he was himself indifferent to matters of race, yet, faced with a difficult situation, he did what numerous politicians both then and afterwards have done in order to survive – he played the race card. You and I are of the same race so we must support each other. To hurt me would be to hurt yourself. He did not believe it himself but he said it, knowing that in that place, at that time, it was the most effective way to manipulate an emotional and unreasonable crowd. It is a sentiment that has been repeated many times over the years by each community, a sentiment that is repeated still. It is seen presented in a more subtle fashion, every time an election takes place. It can be a seductive and comforting argument; it assures you that you will be offered protection because of the community to which you belong, rather than because of who you are.

In the days immediately following the end of the war, on almost every road in Colombo were posters telling us that the war was over. There were none that addressed the more complicated question of the reasons for its beginning. With the

passing years that question seems to have been almost forgotten. Sometimes I think it's better so, that there is relief in moving on.

But sometimes I see what used to be my grandfather's house. And I remember that family, and I realise that there must be people somewhere who still remember that day. And I wonder what moving on means when memories still persist.

Where Has All Our Laughter Gone?

ROHAN TITUS

Dear Putha,

As a teenager, I loved reading P G Wodehouse, Oscar Wilde and Jane Austen. Few could match them for sheer brilliance. Not only were they able to keep me amused with an endless flow of sparkling wit, but they were able to make subtle, stiletto-like points, hidden among the jokes and jollity, about English class prejudice and society. A similar joy was felt at the cleverness of more recent authors, the late and much lamented Terry Pratchett and Patrick O'Brien in particular, and still is felt when I read something new and delicious by Alexander McCall-Smith. There is a delight to reading their writing the pithiness of a ripe pun, a witty observation or a deft play on words that comes from encountering a writer who is confident and at ease with the English language. All these authors, past and present, are shrewd observers of the human condition, and able to make the most piercing observations through humour:

> *'What is that you are saying, Fitzwilliam? What is it you are talking of? What are you telling Miss Bennet? Let me hear what it is. Of music! Then pray speak aloud. It is of all subjects my delight. I must have my share in the conversation, if you are speaking of music. There are few people in England, I suppose, who have more true enjoyment of music than myself, or a better natural taste. If I had ever learnt, I should have been a great proficient. And so would Anne, if her health had allowed her to apply. I am confident that she would have performed delightfully. How does Georgiana get on, Darcy? I am very glad to hear such a good account of her. And pray tell her from me that she cannot expect to excel, if she does not practise a great deal… So much the better. It cannot be done too much; and when I next write to her, I shall charge her not to neglect it on any account. I often tell young ladies, that no excellence in music is to be acquired, without constant practice. I have told Miss Bennet several times, that she will never play really well, unless she practises more; and though Mrs Collins has no instrument, she is very welcome, as I have often told her, to come to Rosings every*

> *day, and play on the pianoforte in Mrs Jenkinson's room. She would be in nobody's way, you know, in that part of the house.'*
>
> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)

I miss that skill of humour as a gentle weapon; perhaps it is to modern writing what beauty is to 20th century architecture or harmony to modern, serious music? So it is, perhaps, with writing. All authors strive to achieve a reaction from their readers, and it is easy to see how the stronger the reaction, the more the author could mistakenly believe that they have achieved success. Tapping into stronger emotions is so much easier, whether evoking anger, shock, horror, lust or revulsion, than crafting something witty and lasting. This is *a fortiori* the case when one is reduced to tweets. Is there a mistaken belief that a mild point can be overwhelmed by an assault on the emotions? Or a perception that lightness and humour have been explored to their ultimate end-point, and in order to be new, one must be harsh, utilitarian and use at least one emoji? There may be empirical evidence to support such a theory. If you are aware of any, please let everyone reading this know. The 21st Century has seen an exponential increase in quantity of material available to people: might not writers believe it is harder for the single, clear note to be heard?

So this then, is a defence of the importance of being frivolous; a defence of whimsy and a celebration of the value to society of the being of bearable lightness. I have three points to make: humour and lightness are as fitting genres for a serious writer in times of darkness as they are in times of hope; mild writing can be just as persuasive in making a case as graphic or utilitarian writing, and finally, that a well sharpened point evoking laughter can have greater longevity than a harsh criticism.

It would be easy to complain about the darkness of modern writing or the seriousness of material submitted for publishing around the world if we lived in a current day ethno-religiously adapted version of *Blandings Castle*. Lord Emsworth is clearly oblivious to the faint echoes of the Munich Beer Hall Putsch. Jane and Lizzie Bennet restrict themselves to the small doings of Meryton and Pemberley, ignoring the gore of the Battle of Vitoria. But of course, part of the contemporary reader's enjoyment of these works was the very fact that Wodehouse and Austen took their readers far away from the horrors of the world they lived in. It would be foolish to assume they

did so out of an ignorance of that world. Clearly, Wodehouse knew all about Hitler and how to mock him:

> *'Don't you ever read the papers? Roderick Spode is the founder and head of the Saviours of Britain, a Fascist organisation better known as the Black Shorts. His general idea, if he doesn't get knocked on the head with a bottle in one of the frequent brawls in which he and his followers indulge, is to make himself a Dictator.' 'Well, I'm blowed!' I was astounded at my keenness of perception. The moment I had set eyes on Spode, if you remember, I had said to myself 'What ho! A Dictator!' and a Dictator he had proved to be. I couldn't have made a better shot, if I had been one of those detectives who see a chap walking along the street and deduce that he is a retired manufacturer of poppet valves named Robinson with rheumatism in one arm, living at Clapham. 'Well, I'm dashed! I thought he was something of that sort. That chin…Those eyes… And, for the matter of that, that moustache. By the way, when you say "shorts", you mean "shirts", of course.' 'No. By the time Spode formed his association, there were no shirts left. He and his adherents wear black shorts.' 'Footer bags, you mean?' 'Yes.' 'How perfectly foul.'*
>
> P G Wodehouse, *The Code of the Woosters* (1938)

Therefore, these authors must have had a purpose in steering clear of the major events of their day. Unlike C S Lewis' Narnia series, or Tolkein's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (both works that I love), where fantasy is used to look at the real world, Wodehouse and Austen took the big issues of their day and transferred them to the mundane and ordinary stage of common life, there to ridicule them. This is a powerful approach. It is the soft word that makes the listener lean in to hear more clearly what is whispered, rather than the deafening bellow of the live studio audience at a reality show knock-out round. Contrast is a wonderful thing. When all the world's writers are braying like asses, would not one prefer to be heard, faintly cooing like a dove?

My second point, that mild writing can be just as persuasive in making a case as harsh and confronting writing, or cold, factual utilitarian writing, is rather difficult to prove because we are asking you, the reader, to quantify the longevity and amplitude

of your emotions. Let's assume that such a thing could even be measured and documented: I'm sure some one's done it in superbly clinical conditions. But it really doesn't matter. We live in a post-truth age, so there's a simple pleasure in making a bald assertion and demanding that the reader, if you are with me so far (and I'm sure you are), will simply accept whatever I say at this juncture. That is what the combination of an argument with which you are already sympathetic, a faint nod towards scientific method and the delight of whimsy will buy you in the 21st century. And let's be absolutely honest with each other: were I to have laid out a scientific study over the last two generations which bore out the value of whimsy over stone cold observable fact, you would no less be mine right now because I'm not appealing to your higher reasoning, but to the primeval, lizard part of the human psyche that says "Hell yes! I enjoy a chuckle and I so agree with that!" And we both know a lizard likes the sun, pleasure and doesn't want to think very much at all beyond "Where is my next crunchy bug?" If you liked and agreed with this paragraph, then I need not argue point two further. If you are yet to be convinced, then I suspect you are that rarity; a scientist or a statistician reading a journal on literature (and therefore an outlier from my target audience in any case).

Lastly, I turn to the well sharpened point, which, while evoking laughter, can have far greater longevity than heavy criticism. There is a wonderful (possibly apocryphal) story in which Lady Astor accuses Winston Churchill of being drunk; to which he replies that she is ugly, but come tomorrow and he will be sober. Without condoning the man or his gender politics, here is a Hera-to-Zeus-to-Hera-Occasion; eternal, yet of the moment. And again, with the same *dramatis personae*, "Winston, if I were your wife, I'd poison your coffee"; "Madam, were I your husband, I'd drink it".

Long after the world has forgotten the intellectual genius and achievements of the Mitford sisters, of whom Nancy, Lady Astor was but one, we will remember these exchanges. Few opponents could cross blades with Winston Churchill. Neville Chamberlain will forever be a 'sheep in sheep's clothing', thanks to Churchill's wit. But where is this wit in current public debate? Could it be, that we live in a fallen, name-calling age? No more the heroic Divine versus Titanic struggles of mythology and Pope's "Rape of the Lock". We are now left with mustered indignation and jokes about flatulence. And where now in the public discourse is the ruby-bladed repartee between Gladstone and Disraeli? Perhaps it is there, but we are not following their feeds and don't know which hashtag to google.

This takes us to a little revelation about human nature: ours is to hope. Other than a Labrador seeing you unwrap a slice of salami, I am unaware of any creature that lives as much in anticipation of hope fulfilled as the human being. The delusion of the election cycle being but one example. We can tap into that hope. We can tell the human story through graphic and horrifying reality, or we can hope for change by deliberately gentling the way people think. If we care about the world we live in, then what we write matters. I would contend that the transitory emotions – anger, indignation and grief – are far easier to evoke, but far more futile. We change the world through changing people's minds.

And nothing changes a person's mind as much as thinking about something from a different perspective. Strong emotional responses entrench thoughts, but subtle, persistent ideas might start the process of changing a mind and lest I become too serious and undermine my entire thesis, the more humorous the idea is, the more likely it is to remain in the mind. I recall reading in Spike Milligan's autobiography of an exchange of letters with a German gunner who had fought against him in Tunisia in 1943, and who became a friend after the war; the German signed off the correspondence by saying something like "glad I missed you in Tunis". Milligan's work reflects on the deeply xenophobic views of his childhood and shows how his thinking shifts from fairly crude racial humour to more subtle, inclusive and universal humour as he grows older and gains a deeper appreciation of everyone's shared humanity. Sometimes, the scope and scale of the tragedy unfolding around us is so great that human comprehension must either revolt entirely or make light of the situation. Both are valid responses.

Making light does not inherently imply diminishing the importance, as we have seen. Making light often means simply reducing to the level of normal human experience something that is obscene in its full description. In Afghanistan, some soldiers would take selfies of their feet before dismounted patrols (there are many land mines and improvised explosive traps). Or get intricate tattoos patterned up and down both arms and across their torsos so the correct limbs could be put in their coffins in the event of a large explosion dismembering many victims. There was collective laughter when someone took a photo of three booted feet instead of two, and when someone's friends used permanent markers to draw fake tattoos on his arms while he slept (replete with uncharitable assertions) just before a patrol. Grave-side and war-zone humour have a starkness which only those who were there can appreciate fully. Long

after the current war in Afghanistan has dimmed in memory, and the historians have pontificated on what happened and what it all meant, it is this humour that will remain and be recalled when those who experienced it first-hand gather together (though I hope for some, that solvent has made it fade).

So I return, after our *kleinen bummel* around the rose garden on the importance of humour, wit and lightness in writing to our own little *Mango du Monde*. So, Roji Maama, I hear you say, what does this all mean for us? I'm so glad you asked. I was recently sent some of the works of E M W Joseph a.k.a. 'Sooty Banda', a Sri Lankan of a previous generation, whose poetry is bang on the coconut when it comes to the points above:

BALLADE OF PLANNING

Yes, Lanka will be re-named Paradise
(That's if the World Bank signals it's OK)
This isn't just a rumour? No. How nice:
And what will life be? One long Holiday.
Won't there be forms to fill, and dues to pay?
Yes, yes, but only if and when we can.
Why are you gaping? I mean what I say.
Another Sage has come up with a plan.

O happy Lanka, land of Gems and Spice,
Where jargon flourishes, and men decay!
O Land of Lions that gave birth to mice,
At last the Welfare State is here to stay.
Which stated simply means: No work, all play.
A state unheard of since the world began …
So thank your lucky stars and shout Hooray!
Another Sage has come up with a Plan.

Nor is this all. Expert, sage advice
Which none but fools will want to disobey,
Will point to you the Path of Sacrifice …

Why are you running? Don't you dare to stray!
The cops, like cheetahs leaping on their prey,
Will pounce on you, and shove you in a van!
Stop! Stop! I want to join you, if I may!
Another Sage has come up with a Plan.

Envoi

Prince, are you crazy? Put that gun away!
The glorious future beckons! Be a man!
Gird up your loins! Let nothing you dismay …
Another Sage has come up with a Plan!

E M W Joseph

Did you enjoy that? What's that I hear? More please? Alas, Sooty is no longer with us. His seat at the table is empty, waiting for you to write in and fill it.

With love to all the family,

Roji Maama

Ground Zero: A Survey of the English Literary Scene in Sri Lanka

DEVIKA BRENDON

In a healthy and flourishing literary culture, we would observe not only a good number and variety of excellent novels, plays and collections of short stories and poetry being written, published, bought, read, reviewed and commented on each year, but a number of well-publicised and well-attended events such as festivals, conferences, seminars and writing workshops taking place, aimed at celebrating and promoting literature. In addition to this, we would see cities which not only have a cafe culture and a proliferation of bookshops, but in which a number of public and private book clubs meet regularly to encourage discussion and enjoyment of the act of reading.

At first glance, it looks as if literary activities in Sri Lanka are occurring frequently. Poetry P'lau meets on the first Saturday of every month at Hansa Cafe in Fife Road, and The Wadiya Group meets on the last Saturday of every month. Members of both groups listen to readings of one another's creative work, and offer appreciation and encouragement in an informal and convivial way. A quixotic roundup of 'who said what' at Poetry P'lau, and matters which came up in discussion, is sent around by email. The Write To Reconcile initiative is holding annual creative writing workshops, and producing regular anthologies of the work of young and emerging writers, from all sectors of Sri Lankan society.

However, the positive activity of creative writing in Sri Lanka is often kept deliberately informal, low key, and word of mouth, and is not often translated into published work. If it were, we would surely see it and be able to buy more of it. We are told that there is a vibrant and flourishing literary scene in Sinhala occurring in tandem, but there is no evidence of it accessible to those who are not bi-lingual. If the talented writers of Sri Lanka were published as a matter of course in bi-lingual format, and their works made accessible to an English speaking readership, we would surely see a much more dynamic, inclusive and progressive literary culture.

We would see A-level students in local as well as international schools enthusiastically choosing to study English Literature as well as Language. We would see the work of Sri Lankan writers in English extensively anthologised in the local English syllabus, and discussed in English literature classrooms. We would see and

hear Sri Lankan writers talking about their work at international festivals such as the Fairway Galle Literary Festival, side by side – and in equal numbers – with writers from Britain, America, Canada and India. We would see Sri Lankan writing in Sinhala and Tamil being widely translated into English, and made available to an international as well as a local market.

At the moment, however, young Sri Lankan students, the writers of the emerging generation, could quite legitimately believe that there are few writers of talent writing in English in this country, because they are not being published by international publishing houses or awarded international prizes. Local authors' voices seem to be drowned out by the works of Indian and African as well as British, American and Canadian authors, and the few local writers who have achieved international recognition are frequently either attacked, mocked, misunderstood or belittled by members of the local literary community; ignored; or glorified into quasi deities: another kind of invisibility.

Students in Sri Lanka who wish to study English Literature at university often apply to study it in India, or Singapore, or another country where English is the primary medium of teaching; and where they can be sure that their teachers will have been taught, and taught at an excellent standard, in the medium of English. English language in Sri Lanka is now increasingly seen only as a vocational skill, something which can get a local student a position of better status in a company or professional industry. Where analysis and interpretation of literature is not taught at school at A-level, a literary culture cannot readily be fostered. This is occurring all over the world, where the Arts are being described by governmental authorities and decision-makers as 'non-essential' studies. Given the historical politicisation of English in this country, this situation is even more serious for us.

The Sri Lankan English literary world is a small community, and, underneath the recent flurry of festivals and activities about which we are notified in the papers, its most evident characteristics are its stasis, its fixed hierarchies, and the lack of generosity exhibited by its members, many of whom seem to have an 'every man/woman for him/her self' mentality. This general lack of generosity is not obvious at first, because many writers form social cliques which proudly – and indeed fiercely – support each other. But it is observable that the most well-known

and successful writers in Sri Lanka often seem to operate as individual entities, independent of clubs, groups and societies.

Young writers complain of lack of mentoring, writers in their thirties and forties seek international online publication and support, due to the lack of recognition and encouragement they find locally, and all writers point to a lack of practical editorial and mentoring assistance which could help them develop their talent into something more than potential. Older writers speak of having always had to work alone, and of thus developing into frustrated, ageing, amateur writers rather than professionals; and some even fail to recognise any peers, believing themselves to be 'the only ones working in their field'!

This is a personal survey of the English literary world in Sri Lanka, in 2015-16. I use the word 'survey' to highlight from the outset the absolute subjectivity of its perspective; and to focus on its topographical intention. My aim is to do what the travel guides to Sri Lanka do: to map the observable terrain, and register the landmarks. It is a geological undertaking: to note the forms which have resulted from the simultaneous operation of pressure and time, on the English literary scene in Sri Lanka.

Ideally, every writer in a flourishing literary culture would be able to develop long-term, supportive professional relationships not only with other writers, but with editors, reviewers, publishers, academics, journalists and critics. Their literary output would be encouraged throughout their working life, from emergence to maturity, and the quality and effectiveness of their work, their skill and mastery of their literary craft, would evolve and improve with each publication.

Some Observations:

1. In contrast to other South Asian countries, there appear not to be many writers of international renown currently writing in English in Sri Lanka. The writers of renown do not take long to enumerate, and many of them are now members of an older generation, who were formed by an era before what I will call the inception of 'Literary and Linguistic Partition / Segregation / Apartheid', in the late 1950s. Or they have studied English in Britain, Canada, Australia or The United States.

2. The works of literature in English which are published and win prizes and awards in Sri Lanka today often seem to have lacked an editing process which would not only have resulted in clearer copy, but would have presented a text which has a more integrated and powerful structure. The texts themselves do not seem to be on a par with works from other countries. Narrative originality in many manuscripts is obscured by clichés. When asked, local writers often say that they edited their work themselves, in the absence of any literary editors. Several writers have said that they 'cannot afford to pay for their work to be edited'. This assumption on their part means that they not only do not negotiate with people who have editorial skills, but that they do not even ask. Or they ask for a professional editorial service 'as a favour'.

3. These literary works, after a launch and promotion event, are then subjected to unprofessional reviewing. Reviews published in the print media are often either overly descriptive rather than analytical, or written by personal friends, and thus frequently sentimental, emotive, over-praising and uncritical; and reviews published on online blogs are at times belittling, scathing and hostile. Both kinds of review are unilluminating of the work itself, and thus unhelpful to the reader and potential writers who read the reviews. Some reviews are over-friendly in tone, and some are obviously sponsored promotions. At the informal verbal feedback sessions in the writing groups described above, it would be felt as discourteous to express stringent criticism in a gathering of comrades, and spoil everyone's pleasure.

4. Critical appraisal of literary works are made in the form of journals or academic papers given at presentations which are attended by potential creative writing students. The 'critical' comments made are often descriptive rather than analytical, and the commentator excuses him/herself by saying that 'criticism is always subjective', that its criteria are nebulous, and that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, etc. The critical focus is frequently on the ideas or themes of the work and their political relevance as seen by the reviewer, or on the writer's perceived socio-economic status, rather than on the quality of the literary work itself. When marking students' work, at university, at A-level and O-level, examiners accord lower marks to generalised assertions and descriptive writing, and the highest marks to specific, substantiated interpretation and analytical work, which requires higher order thinking and greater effort to engage with the work. By this definition, many of the reviewers and critics in Sri Lanka offer low-grade appraisals of Sri Lankan writing in English.

5. Creative Writing seminars and workshops presented at literary festivals are (of necessity) quite generalised. Presenters sometimes fail to adapt their comments to the level of understanding and requirements of those attending. Some academic speakers are pretentious, pompous and too philosophical, some are too self-absorbed to be aware of the needs and expectations of their audience, some are rambling and incoherent, some are inadequately supported by technology such as working audio equipment, clear visual aids and printed notes.

At the university and college level, literature lecturers are often found to be dismissive and contemptuous of students rather than encouraging and supportive. To be fair, it must be understandably frustrating for them. Students who have not been properly taught at school level need quite basic foundational bridging courses before they can understand the concepts and skills they are expected to learn at university level. 'Guru bakthi' and passive learning traditions do not help bridge the knowledge divide. Few academic presenters hold themselves accountable to their audience. I have witnessed presenters who had agreed to speak on a particular topic, changing their mind on the stage and speaking on some other topic altogether, which the audience could not discern, and for which they had not signed up. Q & A sessions, if not properly moderated, do not open up issues for thought or discussion, and, even in 2016, many women in the audience at these events feel intimidated to speak, or question the speakers.

6. For the past 33 years, the focus appears to have been on the prizes offered, and the status and financial reward associated with the awarding of the prizes, and not on the process by which a good literary work is created. Only very recently has any organisation announced that it would establish mentoring workshops and opportunities to encourage writing between the awards offered at festivals. A large creative writing seminar was held at the BMICH recently, and it was by all accounts a success – but it is noticeable that the initial accounts were written by those who sponsored it. In future years, the positive impact of this initiative can be assessed more objectively.

7. There has been a great deal of questioning of the quality of prize-winning texts, of the credentials and quality of the judges of the awards, and of the literary judging process itself. But this criticism has not resulted in much visible alteration to the award adjudication procedures. This undermines the credibility of the awards, and leads us

to question whether the winners of the awards have actually written a text of enduring value. Award organizers speak of the literary criteria which they develop, but do not often publicly share these criteria, or give insight into how they actually apply them as standards to the work they are assessing.

8. 'Subjective' criticism abounds, in a literary world which is so small, and where most writers and critics are known to each other personally, either as friends or frenemies. This 'criticism' is then taken personally. No one benefits. The literary quality of the texts does not improve. People get flattered, or offended. The narrow English writing world remains small, and its people remain petty and acrimonious. Some people refrain from making critical comments out of fear of causing offence. Blandness ensues.

9. Feedback on the quality of the presentations at literary events has only recently started to be called for. The ability to evaluate the success of an event, with the intention of improving the standard of what is offered, is one which has been lacking: ranging across the quality and credentials of the presenters, the effectiveness of the presentations, the visual aids and technical support, and the impact on the audience. 'What IS feedback?', asked one organiser of a literary seminar in 2015. 'I have never heard of it being asked for!' Feedback is requested by organisations which are capable of self-evaluation, and which seek to improve the quality of what they offer. How is it asked for? How is it collected? Is it taken seriously – or personally? Is it acted upon? Or defended against, because it is invariably perceived as an attack?

10. Writers in English in Sri Lanka are often seen as Literary Figures, and icons, and there is frequently only a superficial and tokenistic awareness of their work, even in the literary community. Literary Celebrity status is coveted. There are observable cliques and 'golden circles'. There is a perception that writers who are comparatively wealthy, or appear to have had the wherewithal and good fortune to be educated internationally, are unjustly privileged, and disproportionally over-represented in the prize and award lists. 'It's the same old names and faces, the usual suspects', many people comment. English is seen as an instrument of colonial oppression. Those who can use it well are felt to be 'aping the West', or 'strutting around in borrowed plumage'. National pride is felt to be eroded by such English-speaking citizens of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. Educated overseas? Speak with a British, American or Australian accent? Ensure that you insert local words into your

discussions, like including handloom textiles and handicrafts in the decoration of your home. Ideally, one day, your feeling for your country of origin can be expressed in a room which is filled with European furniture, in English language which you do not consider to be your ‘second’ language. Today is not that day. Sri Lankan literature, in English, for many tortuous reasons, is, clearly, still in the process of becoming de-colonised.

Even at generally productive groups such as Poetry P'lau, the discussion can easily become dominated by self-indulgent political rants and grandstanding on the part of the most vocal members of the group. Anti-elitist dogma and pro-Marxist ideological viewpoints undermine the professed equal standing that should ideally be extended to all participants. The forum can, as a result, feel at times less than inclusive, skewed as it is towards the grizzled warriors and young guns whose energy takes up space in this forum that they feel is denied them in the larger world.

The striking anomaly is that English is beginning to be regarded as a 'lesser' or secondary language by many Sinhala speaking writers, yet is simultaneously acknowledged as the international language of world literature. English is complained of as having a stranglehold on our thoughts and words, but there seem to be fewer works of lasting excellence published in English in Sri Lanka today than ever. Writers of English literature in Sri Lanka are in danger of becoming hunger strikers, starving on principle at a literary feast: if they write exclusively in English, they are seen as 'cut off' from, and contemptuous of, local culture. Yet if they do not wish to write of rural scenes and praise regional folklore, their work is described as being produced in a 'vacuum', and their right to write, the validity of their creative perspective, is offensively questioned. Perceived privilege is equated with a cocoon-like existence and intellectual vacuity; although the opposite is actually often the case, as the ability to study and travel overseas is likely to open one's mind and broaden one's horizons as a writer. Often these comments focused on a writer's privilege are infused with personal resentment, and operate to obscure the objective value of a writer's work, not only from the person commenting, but from those who read their comments uncritically.

11. More formally organised literary groups are frequently attacked from without, and white-anted from within. Their members are often members who pay their annual fees and attend events out of personal loyalty or social familiarity. These groups do

not seem to attract new or younger writers, because they often do not adapt to the realities of the existing literary world, with its focus on professional rather than amateur writing. Thus, the focus of these groups becomes self-promotion and support of the work of its own long-time members, rather than the finding and nurturing of new literary talent. There seem to be no organised mentoring structures in place, and no editing or reviewing skills being passed on to the emerging generation. This is a tragedy, because many of the best writers in Sri Lanka are from the older generation, and are, remarkably, even in their eighties and nineties, still publishing creative work. They have a great deal of skill and experience to pass on. Unfortunately, there seem fewer people able to receive this legacy, every year that fewer students study English Literature at school and university.

12. The comments made by writers about the prize-winning work of other writers often show an 'attack dog' mentality towards the writers whose work is being discussed – particularly if those writers are women. This is because one of the positive aspects of the Sri Lankan literary culture is that it is noticeable that many women writers have achieved literary awards and accolades for their work. Unfortunately, this success has led to them being frequently criticised, apparently merely for being 'notable'. The most denigrating commentary has generally been from men, particularly men who had not achieved a similar level of success or acclaim for their work at the time they were writing their critical comments of other writers.

Free expression of opinion is not an entitlement to social and moral critical irresponsibility, particularly in the context of the fragile English literary culture in this country. Personal anecdotes of a kind more suited to the content of society gossip columns, and superficial or sensationalist statements of a self-indulgent nature,
which only require the expressing of a personal opinion, seem to be too frequently substituted for actual criticism of the work, which would require more thought, more effort, and more knowledge of literature.

A Sri Lankan writer whose collection of poetry was awarded a national prize for Best Emerging Talent this year, commented very frankly in a recent interview with me about the 'staleness' she observes in the current literary scene: the skewed equity, the blurring of personal and political issues, the palpable worship of wealth, and envy of those who are perceived to inhabit the Big End of Town, the nepotism and cronyism, the perceived classism and resultant anti-elitism, and the abuse of

power which leads to discouragement and the sense of stagnancy which (until relatively recently) many writers I have spoken to have struggled with, in the English literary world in Sri Lanka. Overall, there is a sense of generational dysfunction, cumulatively increasing. 'The blind leading not so much the blind, but the multi-handicapped', was one writer's memorable assessment of the state of English literary education in Sri Lanka today.

These are qualities which characterise the society as a whole, the context in which Sri Lankan writers produce their work, so it is not surprising that the literary world reflects the wider issues of the society. However, cutting off existing aspects of the frail English literary culture from the opportunity of developing and expanding, via contact and engagement with English literature, and telling each other that the resultant dysfunction 'is just the way we are', is not going to lead to the cultural progress we all wish for. Flowering of literary skill and talent is a beautiful and natural occurrence in a writer's creative development, but fruit resulting from that flowering is a desirable outcome that should manifest seasonally, and variously, and is currently not doing so. Structures to enable this should be set in place and vigilantly maintained, if English literary culture in Sri Lanka is not to falter and fail. Pleasant as the dilettantish writing culture is, it may not sustain us for much longer.

The most pernicious and destructive aspect of our current predicament was obviously political in 1956, and is now, in 2016, socio-cultural. Can any Sri Lankan writer's work in English be judged purely on its literary merits? Or will each writer's bio data be used as evidence against the finding of literary value in their work? By their fellow Sri Lankans? And is it surprising, then, that it takes courage – or even brazenness – for a writer to publish their work, in the knowledge that they will then be 'damned' by their own literary community for doing so?

The prevalence and easy access to a public platform generated by computer technology has created a plethora of young, ambitious and self-promoting writers who publish their work on blogs and via social media. This is the age of the 'open mic', the public chatroom and the democratisation of critical commentary. Unrestricted expression of personal opinion, often skewed by personal bias, passes for reviewing; self-indulgent rants lacking not only in rhyme or rhythm, but reason, are called 'poetry'; and the quality of fiction writing

is, unfortunately, showing the shapelessness and indeterminacy of work by writers who have not been able, or have not made the effort, to access the benefit of a second opinion.

In Sri Lanka in 2016, it is evident that endemic and pervasive language limitations, both imposed on us and internalised, have led us to a cultural and literary deficit. Estranged from a living and renewable source, creative stagnancy is difficult to remedy. Defensiveness, defiance and cultural cringe are prevalent in writers who are in a bind such as the one in which we find ourselves, today. The more frequently internationally unrecognised forms of English are promoted as adequate, in pro-nationalistic preference to the kind of English taught to the writers who were educated in English in the 1950s, the fewer writers in Sri Lanka will be recognised internationally as writers of talent and brilliance.

A Woman Writing: Does it Raise a Question?

SHIREEN SENADHIRA

Does it raise a question? Well, certainly not, at present; but it really did early in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or even before. Why? Because in those early times, societal prejudices were against women writing. Until the early twentieth century, women's writings had been looked at very differently and with a much more critical eye than the writings of men. Society had academic standards for women's writings, as opposed to the varying standards applied to the works of male writers. The prejudice was indeed a set-back, and it was initiated by men. This was an ongoing issue, and it began with the development of literacy.

It was then a question of gender. During the above mentioned two centuries and the early twentieth century, most female writers had little opportunity to publish their work. In those times, publishing houses were owned and managed by men, who depreciated the works of female writers. Women often resorted to the use of pseudonyms; for example, 'George Eliot' was the pseudonym of a nineteenth century woman writer whose real name was Mary Ann Evans. Pseudonyms are still being used today, for various reasons. In the case of male writers, nothing like this happened because they never had to hide their gender, much less their identity, to publish their works: it was all very easy and straightforward. They also received praise for their accomplishments in literature. The need for female writers to use pseudonyms was only a fraction of the conflict, prejudice, and societal standards forced upon women in those times.

Published women authors were more numerous in the early twentieth century than in any preceding century. Women's access to higher education increased exponentially during the century, providing them with many skills that they used to develop their art. The growth of market economies, cities, and life expectancies changed the way of women's lives too. In Europe and the United States women were expected to conform to new societal pressures and this made the women in those countries aware of the social, legal, and political inequality that had been forced on them. Many women began to interest themselves in social reform movements such as religious revivalism, the abolition of slavery, temperance, and the right to vote, causing other women to become aware of these movements. All this gave women writers a context, an audience, and a forum in which they could express their views.

Most scholars would agree that many women writers expressly or tacitly accepted the separate sphere of domesticity that the age assumed of them. But as the century progressed, an increasing number of women began to express in their writing, their dissatisfaction with gender relations and the plight of women in general. Throughout the Victorian era, the "woman question" regarding woman's proper place in art and society was a subject that was hotly debated, boosted largely by the rapid rise in literature by and for women.

Does a woman need a room of her own in which to write?

In 1928, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was invited to speak on the subject of 'Women and Fiction." She accepted this invitation, and delivered a series of lectures at two women's colleges (Girton and Newnham) at Cambridge University. Later in 1929 these lectures were published as an extended essay titled, *A Room of One's Own* which is well known and much discussed even today.

The essay is seen as a feminist text, and is noted for its argument for both a literal and figurative space for women writers within a literary tradition dominated by men. It explores the history of women's literature as a high level investigation of social and material conditions required for writing literature: the conditions being leisure time, privacy and financial independence. Her argument at the time was, if women produced inferior work it was because, burdened with household duties and financially and legally bound to their husbands, they were routinely denied time and space to produce creative work. There was no way that women could have rivalled men in literary achievements at those times because women were not allowed into universities and libraries, let alone given opportunities to express themselves creatively. Her essay brought up the harsh truths about society; its basic argument being that the material conditions of the life of artists will inevitably affect the work they produce.

All that Woolf said as above was a very important contribution in 1929 in the history of literary feminism. She really wanted a woman to have space, time and some money so that she could be free of encumbrances and thus be able to give her best to her writing. In addition, at that time, the writings of women showed their anger. Spiritedly they persisted and kept on writing.

What would many women of her own time have thought of Virginia Woolf's desiderata?

During her lifetime, Woolf enjoyed the privacy that she wanted, as well as the security and support offered by her devoted husband Leonard Woolf. Though Woolf stresses a woman's need of economic independence, the ideal of her thoughtful writing is of a genteel and leisured class of women. This, of course was not the norm for the majority of women at that time.

The Brontë sisters and many others, who wrote before Woolf's time, were not as fortunate as she was. We can imagine the Bronte sisters spending many hours pacing their small parlour at the Haworth parsonage. They would have been like caged and restless animals; and all the while thinking and speaking of their projects and ideas for novels. These they put down in writing which became very famous later. The same goes for George Eliot (1819-1880), a Victorian British writer who, living in a single room, wrote *Middlemarch*, a book comprising tales of provincial life with significant themes that included the status of women, the nature of marriage, religion, hypocrisy, political reform and education. She referred to many historical events such as the 1832 Reform Act and the succession to the British throne of the Duke of Clarence (later to become King William IV). She depicted the society of her time so well that the book became a classic.

Taking an example from Asia, Gajaman Nona (1746-1915), a woman of letters of the south of Sri Lanka wrote a ballad of 32 verses celebrating the virtues of her father at his death, and included descriptions of the rituals and customs of the time. This long poem, one among many poems and writings, displayed her unparalleled skill. She was famed for her spontaneous repartees in verse. Many consulted her for her writings and this was done amidst strenuous struggle in life. Three times widowed, she raised three small children, despite having been left impoverished at her father's death.

Would the authors of *Wuthering Heights* and *Middlemarch* have written greater novels if they had enjoyed what Woolf wished for? Is it not possible that their way of living, the congestion in cramped rooms, the physical and emotional hunger, the head-on encounter with barriers of class and male superiority that they shared with many of the women of their time, brought about the genius in their writing? Would the

passion of Catherine Earnshaw, her wild spirit rebelling against class and family, have been unfolded in *Wuthering Heights* if Emily Bronte had enjoyed leisure and privacy? The same goes for Gajaman Nona, George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë in their unforgettable writings. To write as these women and others did, they certainly would have had to go beyond a room of their own.

The need to write

What does writing do? It helps generate ideas and prompts a search for more levels of the subject in hand. Writing helps us to remember and record information. Thoughts come and go, but writing remains and it assists future reference. By writing them down, our attitudes to issues and the development and inferences of our thoughts can be easily recaptured. At present, with advanced technology, writing skills may not seem that important, for there are many software programs which automatically edit grammar, spelling, punctuation and supply missing words in sentences. Eventually however, people will have to write for themselves as students or professionals. They will have to write reports, draft letters and effective emails, and create lengthy agendas; and for all these, writing skills are needed.

There certainly is mystery and magic in the phenomenon of writing: we experience the overwhelming desire to put pen to paper; and witness in our own minds the wonderful process of thoughts being changed into words. Why is it that we share thoughts, stories, opinions and experiences through the written word? Perhaps we express ourselves more strongly and accurately when writing than we do when talking. This goes to show what words can do. Civilisations are recorded in history and history is written in words. If not written in words, it has been drawn on walls and this was before writing happened. Therefore, it can be seen that written words are constant and remain so.

The early twentieth century showed women becoming more active and influential as writers and artists. A change in style and content of women's writing was displayed as well as an increase in the depiction of feminine images and themes in literature. Women authors such as Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Sinclair and Dorothy Richardson focused on topics pertinent to women. They wrote on the myriad difficulties women face while defining their identities in a changing world. In addition, some of the other major writers of this period throughout the Western world (among

them Gertrude Stein, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf) completely redefined their role in almost every sphere by mid-twentieth century.

Their fight for equal rights and recognition for women continued beyond this time. The first major changes appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century with women writers, artists, photographers and activists paving a new path for future generations of women to follow.

Why do we write?

Everything that is important is written. We write because there is power in written words. Reading words is really different from hearing words spoken. When we read stories, we live in the world of the story and enter into the hopes, feelings and fears of characters. Our imaginations are engaged, and are not limited by other senses such as hearing, touch and smell. Also, while reading, we can extend our minds to cross spaces, distance and time. We can change rules as we really cannot do in real life. In this way we can soar with the written word to places and spaces beyond the usual, and thereby enhance the lives we lead. Words really do say and have it all. We can express feelings with words and writing, that cannot be expressed by sound. It is not too much to say that if we ponder the written words deeply, we can sometimes sense the writer's presence in their own words.

The Individual, the Society and the Group

FAITH RATNAYAKE

I can call myself a Sri Lankan writer. As a young British woman from South East England, now living in Sri Lanka for fifty years, I had some struggles with a new but strangely familiar environment. But I always knew I must write, and events and people in the Sri Lanka of those years inspired me. As a six-year-old, I loved Worzel Gummidge, but my mother made me write original stories. I am concerned with setting, and write equally of Sri Lankan and English situations — more so about my adopted country. My range includes strange stories, things happening to people and nature. A lot of me lurked in such stories.

English literature developed in colonial Ceylon under British rule, but soon established its own unique identity. Inevitably, nationalistic cultural policies caused a flowering of national language culture, in both Sinhala and Tamil. However, English continued to be the link language. When social, cultural and economic spheres expanded, the use of English to express a national culture inevitably waned since Sinhala, officially declared as the country's national language, was used to express nationalist cultural and political aspirations.

Economic and political changes on the world stage brought about, however, a revival of English as a medium of expression. Wilfred Jayasuriya, in his *Sri Lanka's Modern English Literature – A Case Study in Literature Theory* (Navrang, New Delhi 1994) has documented these developments.

From the 1990s onwards, Sri Lankan themes have been explored by local writers, in novels, poetry, social science studies and drama. They have reached the public in the form of printed books, as stage plays, and through newspapers and journals. The need for an international language encouraged the rise of an English-speaking section of society. Many informal writing, religious and professional groups began dealing with uniquely Sri Lankan themes from the perspective of their own particular spheres and experiences.

The need for English language as a link language continued: unfortunately, English language teaching in secondary schools did not (or perhaps could not) rise to the challenge, doubtless hampered by the departure of many trained and skilled teachers

following the political changes of the 1950s. Knowledge of English became paramount, as fluency in English was essential to secure employment in sought after fields as banking, commerce, international trade and diplomacy. The establishment of institutes such as the British Council, which initiated development in English teaching, brought about heightened interest in other European languages, particularly French and German. In recent years, Korean and Japanese language knowledge has become essential for migrants seeking employment in those countries.

In this period, senior writers in English developed groups to foster and develop the art of writing poetry, fiction, drama and other forms of literature. The English Writers' Cooperative, founded in 1989 through the efforts of Dr Rajiva Wijesinha, and the late Anne Ranasinghe and Maureen Seneviratne, set out to create a 'channel' to invite writers to publish good creative writing, of poems, plays, *belles lettres*, and translations into English. *Channels*, the EWC magazine, highlighted an interesting dominance and majority of women writers, including well-established well-known writers of literature. With profound, and even drastic, events causing changes in the political, economic and cultural spheres, many writers wrote their own stories, also expatriates who felt the need to detail their experiences. When stability was finally achieved in the economy, in politics and within the diverse communities, the atmosphere became more conducive to forming and expanding specialist writing groups and art and dramatic societies.

One such group, formed on the initiative of senior writers to encourage younger talent, is the English Writers' Workshop. Popularly named the Wadiya Group (meeting at a beachside venue), this gathering of practising writers has attracted young female and male writers, some still at school. The informal nature of the Group, with a Honorary Treasurer and roster for organising, encourages creativity. The presence of acclaimed writers throughout the Group’s history from 1995 fostered an atmosphere where positive criticism and sharing of ideas and concepts can flourish. The members help each other to encourage uninhibited writing. The initial sponsors were Anne Ranasinghe, Punyakante Wijenaike, Sita Kulatunge and Pauline Hensman, with Christine Wilson and Haig Karunaratne present on the last Saturday of each month, generously giving their encouragement and critiques. Punyakante still joins in, as did the late Sita Kulatunge. In 1997 the Wadiya Group published its first magazine, *Waves*. After a hiatus of some years, a new edition is under preparation, and members hope to see it in print before the end of 2016.

Back Stabs and Back Scratches: From the Outside, Looking In

CARL MULLER

[From *Firing at Random: Selected Essays (2001)*]

Writing the way I do, it was soon evident to some that I should belong to some literary circle or another. Others, however, tished and tushed. "He couldn't and he shouldn't," they said, "the man's an outsider…"

From my seat outside the circle, I look in and am asked to recognise and revere, for my sins, the revered jam jars of superior literary life. I find this Sri Lankan cultural scene too insular, too parochial. Even the critics are too close to the writers and generally produce a chorus of undiscriminating praise or harsh verdicts because, in the latter case, there are various jealousies between literary cliques and claques...

What affects our jam jar-wallahs is the way the academics, critics and shiploads of their stooges, keep stroking them into a sort of complacence. They are therefore in that perpetual state of jam-smeared stock of a Mutual Admiration Society… These jam-jarrers are being puffed too much, not tested or challenged enough, are so complacent on their clouds of sycophantic praise that they are convinced utterly of their merits and never conscious of their defects!

It takes courage to tell the truth in Sri Lanka's small literary community. The most that critics dare to say is that so-and-so's writing is largely local or that so-and-so's pre-eminently Lankan appeal lessens the force of universal appeal; or that so-and-so is so splendidly parochial that the claim on country is increased. Fine; but what of the claim on literature? Has that been increased too? Not bloody likely, I say. More often than not, it's diminished.

Yet, the features of this whole boiling persist. I know I am stamping hard on sacred toes, but, being what I am, I will say and be slaughtered. Throughout the 20th century and, more so, into the 21st, the telling features of Sri Lankan literary life are a puffery of mutual admiration, the frequent lack of challenging commentary by critics (except as the result of various jealousies between literary groups) and the placing of the scum that floats in the mildewed jam jars at the top. These rancid beings are looked

upon as Olympian, iconic and are the subject of feverish celebration and fervent veneration. I have even read book reviews by people who begin by saying: “Pingona H Halibut, who is a friend of mine, has written another marvellous book.” What am I supposed to make of the adulatory review that follows?... Shouldn’t Pingona’s friend have disqualified himself?

The writing fraternity/sorority in this country is so small, so inbred, that every writer knows every other writer and there are many scores to settle. Each is out to either back-scratch or back-stab. They meet at seminars and workshops, drink and sleep together, and their critical perceptions are distorted by envy, malice, dislike. Many naked emperors are now in the writing business, and no one has the courage to point out the obvious…

Is it any wonder then, that lots of excellent books simply seem to disappear while lots of dreary ‘masterpieces’ win prizes and grants and are not read by many?… So many good writers in Sri Lanka recognise the chill of being marginalised and know the distinct lack of warmth of demeanour. They may attend a seminar or literary workshop and have to face turned, haughty backs and a sort of arctic hardness...

Sri Lankan literary criticism is now largely dedicated to the self-praising uncritical culture that has dug in, triumphed, percolated, spread, then deadened… What are we to expect? Gentle stroking, flattering attention, the support of easily –inflatable egos, inanity and large dollops of saccharine!… Where are the fearless, lively questions, the sharp challenges?... It has got so bad that people think it suicidal to question or enrage them. And so they reign – filled with a consuming uninterest in the world of ideas, philosophy and cultural speculation.

You’re telling me? I’m telling you. I was trapped once in one of these fatal circles and was lucky to extricate myself with my sanity intact.

What is the Source of Inspiration?

YASMINE GOONERATNE

The late 1960s: I was teaching at Peradeniya, when a colleague, Dr Merlin Pieris (Western Classics), remarked to me that he wished there was a magazine or journal in circulation within the university in which our talented students could publish their stories, poems and essays. “Even a two-page sheet,” Merlin said, “would be a good thing.”

We discussed *Harvest* and *Sankha*, two university magazines of the 1940s that were now defunct, and wondered whether either of us, or both in collaboration, could perhaps devise a modest substitute, a ‘two-page sheet’ that would serve the purpose. Should such a magazine restrict itself to campus contributions, or engage a larger readership? As a result of this conversation, a small notice was placed in the local newspapers, inviting contributions from the general public. The number and quality of the responses surprised us. We had tapped, it seemed, a hitherto invisible and unsuspected spring. Merlin and I sorted, read, and discussed what we had received. Among the letters sent to us was one from a writer who signed herself ‘Anne Ranasinghe’. Her letter enclosed a poem titled “From Auschwitz to Colombo”. I read the poem (which is now familiar, I imagine, to most readers of English poetry in Sri Lanka, and to many readers overseas), and was immediately taken by the powerful, yet controlled emotion that it expressed.

Here I should mention that Sri Lanka had, on the whole, escaped the horrors of World War II including those of the Holocaust in Nazi-dominated Europe. I had no real knowledge at that time of what their German Jewish identities involved for European writers. Anne Ranasinghe’s poem, with its stark evocation of the Nazi methods of killing, and of the horror of losing a mother in such a terrible way, affected me deeply. I showed the poem to Merlin, and we decided that if poets of such quality existed in the Sri Lankan community, they needed to reach the widest possible audience.

With this idea in mind, we cast around for a suitable title for our ‘two-page sheet’ (“Compact”, I remember, was one that we briefly considered) and took advice on economical ways of getting into print. We were informed by a writer who had sent in poems and stories to us of the existence of a creative writing group based in Colombo. I cannot recall the name of this group, but I do remember that the four

words in that name added up to the initials M.I.C.E. (I remember this because Merlin, with whom the group also corresponded, sending him notices of forthcoming meetings and workshops, told me with amusement about 'the mice who kept nibbling at him'.) M.I.C.E. was planning a meeting at the Colombo home of one of its members, Mrs Loranee Senaratne, which was to be attended by an officer of the local branch of the British Council, and by a Sri Lankan novelist (whom I shall here call 'Dr Q'). Merlin and I were invited to attend this meeting, and speak to M.I.C.E. members about our plans for a new magazine published from Peradeniya.

That meeting had several outcomes, some of which have been of importance to the development of Sri Lankan literature, and also to my own writing. The first emerged from Dr Q's talk.

He was scheduled to address the group on the subject of new writing in Sinhala, and his own work in fiction. At that time Dr Q's novels, all of which are written in Sinhala, were literally closed books to most members of M.I.C.E., who belonged to Colombo's English-educated social elite. Ignorant for the most part of Sinhala or Tamil (studied briefly and superficially at secondary school, perhaps, and since forgotten), and of English novels set in the island which had been written many years earlier by the British authors William Knighton[1] in 1854 and Leonard Woolf[2] in 1913 – not to mention the novels written by a Sri Lankan physician, Dr Lucian de Zilwa[3] – that elite looked overseas for example and inspiration: to the Pulitzer Prize list, and to the new publications imported by local booksellers from England or America. Following the surge of national feeling that had accompanied Independence, a considerable amount of new writing in Sinhala was being published and discussed. I received the impression that the M.I.C.E. membership, like many others among the island's English-educated elite, was feeling somewhat threatened by the indigenous world of writing developing in Sri Lanka of which they knew little or nothing, and they expected Dr Q, known to be an extremely sophisticated individual, widely read in European and American literature, to tell them about the new writers (whose work they could not read for themselves) in language that they could understand.

Their expectations were defeated. For one thing, Dr Q surprised and discomfited his audience by addressing them in the natural accents of the Sinhala-educated. (It's quite possible that the presence at the meeting of a British Council representative provoked Dr Q to deliberately avoid an 'elocutionised' English delivery.) Whatever

the cause, he discoursed in his own, essentially home-grown manner, pronouncing English in his own, essentially Sri Lankan style, on the influence upon his own work of the great Russians, of Chekhov and Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Turgenev. The contrast was striking, and (to me) extremely amusing. I returned to Peradeniya convinced that our projected magazine should work actively towards helping Sri Lankan English writers connect, or re-connect, with the indigenous sources available (though what these might be were as yet unknown to them).

A second outcome was that the visitor from the British Council disclosed to those present a scheme he had devised according to which he proposed to prepare a plan (or 'plot') for an English-language novel in ten or twelve chapters, set in Sri Lanka. Each member of M.I.C.E. would undertake to write one of the chapters, thus receiving an opportunity to create and develop Sri Lankan characters, and make them interact in a Sri Lankan setting.

I'm afraid I disliked the idea from the start. To me it smacked of 'neo-colonial' condescension on the proposer's part, and I believed also that participating in such a project would inevitably involve a voluntary abandonment of originality on the part of the writers involved. I had by that time read the work of some of the M.I.C.E. members, and liked it enough to hope very sincerely that they would not erode their talent and their inspiration by writing to a formula provided by someone else. I left the meeting more determined than ever that any journal with which I was connected would encourage writers to follow their own paths. No 'pattern' would be imposed on them, to which they would feel obliged to conform.

And that was the beginning of the journal *New Ceylon Writing*, which for many years provided English writers in Sri Lanka with an independent forum for their writing, putting them in touch with one another and with the best in indigenous writing.

The outcomes of that meeting which affected my own journey as a writer included a poem that I wrote on returning to Peradeniya, and published in 1971:

THE ENGLISH WRITERS' CIRCLE

The members of the English Writers' Circle
Nourish with anxious care the fitful flame

Their tiny fire sends flickering into darkness,
Watch apprehensively the tendrils come
Hand over hand, across their little clearing,
Sense the great shadows moving in the night
Just out of reach, and hear the whispering
Of a forgotten tongue beyond the light.

They have lured one of the strange beasts in
To stretch himself before the firelight's glow,
A genuine lion, jungle-smell upon him,
To tell them of a world they do not know.
He speaks, alas, of Turgenev and Chekhov
Whose purposes he finds to square with his,
Forgetting the intense dilemma of
His hosts, who see no point in them, and miss
In their revulsion at his 'that and this',
The lesson that his self-assurance teaches,
Confidence born of natural sympathies.

They scan the sea for sails, they comb the beaches,
And do not see within the great resplendent
Cave, William Knighton, in whose eyes bright torches thrust
New light, or Woolf, lonely imperial agent,
Trace his first letters in the jungle dust.

A second outcome of that meeting for me was, that many years later, when I had begun writing novels, I created in *The Pleasures of Conquest* (1995) a character who initiates a 'project' similar to the one proposed that evening by the gentleman from the British Council. Stella Mallinson, an American popular novelist on a visit to a mythical tropical island called Amnesia, exploits the talents of local writers by enlisting them in the creation of a novel. My own novel – and certainly this section of it – was largely a satire, but I am struck, looking back, by the fact that my memory of that meeting in Mrs Senaratne's drawing-room had stayed with me for over thirty years, to emerge as creative fiction.

Notes:

1 Knighton. The first English-language novel written about Sri Lanka was William Knighton's *Forest Life in Ceylon* (1854). 2 vols.

2 Woolf. Leonard Sidney Woolf published the second English-language novel about Sri Lanka, *The Village in the Jungle*, in 1913.

3 De Zilwa. Dr Lucian de Zilwa's novels about Sri Lanka include *The Dice of the Gods* and *A Chandala Woman*.

INTERVIEWS

"Value Yourself and Your Own Gifts. *Prevail."*

JEAN ARASANAYAGAM

Interviewed by *New Ceylon Writing* (November 2016)

When *New Ceylon Writing* (NCW) met Jean Arasanayagam in Kandy in mid-2016, we said that we would like to interview her regarding her experience of, and insights into, the literary conditions that have been operating in Sri Lanka over the last 30 years. This seemed to the editors of NCW a topic that needed to be addressed, since it is 32 years since *New Ceylon Writing* was last published. NCW felt also that Jean and her husband, as creative writers and teachers who have lived continuously in the country, are in an excellent position to comment on a good many of the issues that we wished to raise.

NCW: *Why, in your opinion, is Sri Lankan literature in English not well known internationally, in comparison to, say, the writers of India?*

Jean Arasanayagam: Basically, I think India has a different view towards its writers. Writers are valued, and looked up to by the populace. I have also observed that much of Indian writing is transferred to the area of filmdom. I am thinking especially of Satyajit Ray's *Apu Trilogy* which was based on Bengali novels by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, and of *Umrao Jaan*, too, based on an Urdu novel by Mirza Hadi Ruswa. Of course we have Martin Wickramasinghe – so many of his books have been filmed (from *Madol Duwa* to *Gamperaliya* and *the Uprooted Trilogy*). But there is in India, I feel, a direct connection between literature and films that we do not enjoy here.

Sri Lankan expatriate writers who write on Sri Lankan themes are extremely popular here: there is a kind of 'glamour' attached to their writing and experience – is it perhaps because they live in Western countries? Much depends on publishers, too. Many Indian publishers collaborate with famous and well-known international publishers, book reviews which appear in literary journals give a great deal of exposure to writers. Of course we still make much of the literary icons of the past in Sri Lanka, but in the case of modern-day writers there are many 'interventions' – bias, (racial) prejudice, lack of translations, availability are some of them. Few

educational institutions have good libraries, they merely offer minimal exposure to texts listed in O-Level and A-Level syllabi.

There are some local writers – Anne Ranasinghe, for instance – who are focused on often by the media. She is outstanding, of course, as a writer, but she has moreover projected her tremendous iconic personality into the public limelight with constant reminders of who she is, and of her experiences. None of us – nor the coming generations – will ever forget her. Anne possesses great clout with the international (especially German) syndicate, which will always be haunted by a tremendous sense of guilt over the Holocaust.

I also feel that 'neo-colonialism' associated with ideas of 'colonial elitism' still plays a great part in the foregrounding of writers, not only from the West but also the subcontinent of India: they are given extendable space in the literary landscape of our society. The biggest 'showbiz' event in our literary world is the Galle Literary Festival – I don't think that we local writers can ever attract an equal amount of attention (with standing ovations) and eager jostling crowds to view the strongmen and strongwomen of our literary world.

However, I have had my say abroad, many times over, and I can rest on my laurels and memories – I feel the Galle Festival needs to grant more exposure to local writers, but there is no apparent urge to do so.

NCW: *What suggestions can you make for encouraging the production of excellent literature in English in the future?*

JA: The talent is there – tremendous talent and of course a multiplicity of theme and experience at hand. But we are very much in need of Creative Writing courses in colleges and universities. With our ethnic mix we have innumerable supplies of material at hand, and there are Fine Arts departments in some of our universities. However, although the clientéle is there, practical methods and strategies are needed to attract young writers, and help them to gain the technique and knowledge to produce literary work (in all three languages).

NCW: *Do literary festivals, events, and book clubs have a role to play in promoting literary culture?*

JA: 'Literary festivals, events, and book clubs' – I wish there were creative writing modules in them all, and also in the universities. Our universities do not utilise Sri Lankan writers.

NCW: *What issues have bedevilled the creation of a vibrant literary culture in English in Sri Lanka?*

JA: Most destructive of all 'issues' has been that created by language: divisiveness generated by language is an inheritance that has been passed down the years from colonial days. To counter it, more attention should be paid to translation, but the translations must attain the truth and authenticity of the writer's original thought and style. Additional to these are personal aversions, subjective criticism, prejudice towards preconceived ideas of what constitutes 'literature', the reluctance to accept diverse points of view, resentment at originality and stylistic innovation, patronizing attitudes, critically 'unacceptable' themes… These factors abound in Sri Lanka, and they contribute to the bedevilment of a vibrant literature. But the writer must continue on the destined course upon which he/she has embarked, notwithstanding all the negative vibes and negative reactions that block the way. Will power, sturdy belief in one's own creative talents and gifts, the ability to be strong in mind and will – that divine energy within oneself – all are crucial to the continuity of a writer's career. One must avoid, at all costs, giving in to the temptation of writing to please or placate a readership.

NCW: *How can local schools and universities help promote interest in creative writing in English?*

JA: I remember the performances of renowned musicians who visited schools in the past to give us recitals of classical music – piano, cello, violin – these were tremendous experiences, vividly recalled even today. Eminent writers should be invited by schools, colleges and universities to be Writers-in-Residence, or even to visit and address students. What a radical change would result from that encounter and interchange of ideas!

NCW: *What advice can you give to young writers who seek to develop their writing skills in a life-long way, and not just to win prizes or short-term recognition?*

JA: At the end of the day, it is the sense of personal fulfilment that counts: also, that one does not pause or stop at any point, but maintain progression and continuity. All the hype is really short-lived, a readership is always looking forward to something new, something to stir the mind and the imagination. Experience that is close at hand to a writer must be faced, countered, responded to, not pushed out of sight.

Writing skills? These should never be counterfeit but original and authentic. They can transform our ideas into tantalizing new vistas. Fables, myths, fantasy, sci-fi, mystery, magic realism (by which I mean writing that incorporates fantastic or mythical elements into otherwise realistic fiction), these create a world that is a writer's oyster. Language is just a tool for use in sculpting a writer's own creation. Writers must note, observe, jot down, document, capture ideas as they appear: otherwise, I believe, they vanish. Writers should keep journals, make use of every scrap of paper. If writers are serious about what they are doing, they should record everything. Years later, a single phrase or word or sensory experience can surface and, in doing so, provide writers with the necessary impetus.

Writers should read the work of other writers – from whatever part of the world they come, and in whatever genre they are writing… Do you remember that stunning book, *A Confederacy of Dunces*[1], whose author committed suicide because he thought no one would read or accept his writing? His mother published the book after his death. It is one of the most remarkable books I have ever read. Finally – don't be put down by adverse criticism. Value yourself and your own gifts. *Prevail.*

NCW: *What influence does the older generation of writers have on the younger and emerging generation of writers in Sri Lanka?*

JA: Perhaps some of the literature programs in universities are outdated. Students are compelled to read or study writers whose ideologies are no longer of interest to them. They can accept or disagree, but they cannot change the established modes of teaching.

Emerging generations have their own personal agendas. Frankly, I don't think that many young writers want to accept the influence of older generations: and if they do accept and draw on it, they may not want to admit it. Their reaction would be to reject it totally. In India, the situation might be different. I personally think young writers need

to choose and follow their own paths, unhindered. As regards my own writing: even from my youthful beginnings, I wanted to go my own way.

I loved the poetry of my own generation… It was *New Ceylon Writing*, you know, that brought such writers as Patrick Fernando, Anne Ranasinghe, Yasmine Gooneratne and Lakdasa Wikkramasinha into prominence. I still read them with pleasure, but I've always created my own model.

NCW: *Are you and your husband hopeful or despairing about the future? Given your experiences over the course of your long writing life in Sri Lanka?*

JA: I'm certainly hopeful about the future. Arasa and I were young writers ourselves once upon a time, and continued along hitherto undiscovered routes, pursuing our individual destinies, not as writers alone but as youthful seekers and searchers, accumulating all the devices and varied experiences we encountered along the way. No mountain top was unassailable, no unmapped landscape deterred us from our persistent pursuits.

Young writers today are part of a churning, evolving universe. They are free to choose their paths in life; no one stifles them. We need to give ear to all they say. We have to read in translation, too. I am not acquainted with online writing, but I can recognize that creative writing journals, broadsheets, and even little groups can (and need to be) encouraged. I didn't have it easy along the way.

Note:

1 *A Confederacy of Dunces* is a picaresque novel by American novelist John Kennedy Toole which reached publication in 1980, eleven years after Toole's suicide. Published through the efforts of writer Walker Percy (who also contributed a foreword) and Toole's mother, the book became first a cult classic, then a mainstream success; it earned Toole a posthumous Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1981, and is now considered a canonical work of modern literature of the Southern United States. The book's title refers to an epigraph from Jonathan Swift's essay *Thoughts on Various Subjects, Moral and Diverting*: "When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him." Its central character, Ignatius J. Reilly, is an educated but slothful 30-year-old man living in the Uptown neighbourhood of early-1960s New Orleans who, in his quest for employment, has various adventures with colourful French Quarter characters. Toole wrote the novel in 1963 during his last few months in Puerto Rico. (Source: *Wikipedia*)

"Working on A Poem is One of the Great Privileges of Life"

ANNE RANASINGHE

Interviewed by *New Ceylon Writing* (November 2016)

This interview with Anne Ranasinghe turned out to be the last she ever gave. It was conducted in difficult conditions, because Anne did not use email or computer, and was physically not well for most of the year. She therefore required that her answers to the questions be written by hand, and then be transcribed onto computer. The last edits were being made when she passed away in November, on a Saturday night. We knew she was elderly, and that she had been ill, but we had thought that, in some way, she would live forever. The friend who told us of Anne's passing told us that Anne loved the interview, and that she was happy that we had 'done it her way'. Vale Anne Ranasinghe.

NCW: *In speaking of literature and life, I would like to begin, if I may, with your personal view of the nature of literature: in particular, your approach to poetry and story-telling, in both of which genres your achievement is a considerable one. Although it does not presume to teach 'creative writing',* New Ceylon Writing *welcomes the opportunity to hear about the experience of a practitioner such as yourself.*

Anne Ranasinghe: Literature deals essentially with the life of man, his reaction to his environment, and the forces and motives that shape human conduct. From the beginning of the First World War in 1914 to the end of the Second World War in 1945 more than seventy million people have died violently or have been exterminated. There is no way that we can ignore this fact, the enormity of it, nor that it signifies a horrifying new dimension to the possibility of human evil. An awareness of the unpredictability of human conduct should perhaps infuse our writing with a sense of urgency to counter the possibility of ever-increasing darkness. Even here, on the other side of the world from Hitler's Europe we have had our own experiences to lend substance to these fears.

For me it is not possible to concentrate entirely on poetry. Poetry is – how shall I put it? – the rare champagne. To write poetry there must be an experience so intensely felt as to exclude all other forms of writing: love or anger, fear or remembrance, and above all the perception of great beauty create a moment that wakens, or demands, a poem. There is then a period of gestation, a distillation of the experience, and out of this grow the first words of the poem. It is a momentary vision, a crystallisation which compels you to follow, sometimes through innumerable twists and turns, rarely straight on; for an hour, or two, or three – and sometimes over a period of months, even years. Right to the end of the poem.

Working on a poem is one of the great privileges of life, and I find it incredible that there are poets who believe a first draft is also a final draft, and must not be touched. That the first inspiration is holy. Either they are much better poets than I am or they are plain lazy and don't like the tremendous effort that chiselling a poem into shape entails.

As for short stories, no one will deny that the first and foremost function of the short story is to tell a story for the sake of the story. Somerset Maugham caustically remarked that there are some among the intelligentsia who regard pure story telling as a debased form of art, and he stipulates that extraneous knowledge and information should be used cautiously lest the story be swamped by the facts. Structurally a short story should have a beginning, a middle and an end; and, like a poem, it should have such concentration of mood and singlemindedness of purpose that no digression or deviation is permitted. There is a framework, and all action, all detail should serve to consolidate this framework, with no loose ends or spillage. Everything must add to the oneness and completeness of the story. It is this limitation that creates the very essence of it, distinguishing it from the novel.

The short story as we know it today is supposed to conform to certain principles, some of which I have just mentioned. Additionally, it should be of a certain length, and concern itself with but a single anecdote, episode or situation. The number of characters introduced should be limited. In actual fact I doubt very much whether a writer planning a short story gives too much thought to these mechanics. There is a story to be told – and of course, ultimate success depends on the reader/audience, who have their own expectations: they want to be entertained or thrilled, shocked or made curious, or perhaps emotionally involved.

I write a short story out of a compulsion more or less similar to what makes me write a poem, but for me a short story is much harder to write, and takes a great deal of time. I spend a great deal of time on polishing and re-polishing. In order to get started I have to live my story for some time, I carry it around with me, and its full structure – beginning, middle and end – is more or less worked out in my head before I start writing. All my stories have as their core something that really happened, something that stirred me or upset me, or goaded me into comment. The problem is too large to be worked out in a poem: so I use the short story.

NCW: *You have described yourself as "extraordinarily lucky"; and stated that, although you "fell a number of times, you always landed on your feet". These are optimistic statements, and express an extremely resilient attitude to life. How important is resilience in the living of life, especially of creative life? And how significant is optimism, as a quality that a creative writer should develop?*

AR: I didn't actually say that, although I did 'fall' a number of times, and invariably 'landed on my feet'. It was my 'Mother-Aunt' who made that statement! 'Mother-Aunt' in this context means 'being in loco parentis': as a thirteen-year- old, alone in England, I became her responsibility and her husband's. After one week of getting 'to know' one another, I was speedily dispatched from their nice home in London to my school in Dorset. Naturally, there were many differences of opinion over a period of four years. I won my greatest victory when, after leaving school, my Mother-Aunt' apprenticed me as a 'Junior Probationer' at a beautiful home for blind babies for two years, to earn my living. My job consisted of potting the children after each meal. While I loved the kids and the place, at just seventeen I considered this a 'waste of my time'. I began secretly to apply elsewhere; and landed a two-year training at the Moorfields Eye Hospital[1]. I had hoped to study medicine, and although I did very well in the Oxford Matric I could not win a scholarship as I was still a German citizen. I had no money. My uncle, who was a Doctor of Chemistry, maintained that 'in any case, women always get married', and was not prepared to help.

This was 1942, and World War II was in full swing. Moorfields (at age seventeen or eighteen) was a great adventure. I was in London, and at the beginning of 'growing up' – in sometimes very dangerous situations. We were hit at the Hospital by a 'Doodle Bug': these were aeroplanes without pilots, controlled – we were informed – by German soldiers at the French border. When they stopped the engine, or the

machine ran out of fuel, the Doodle Bug dropped to the ground, causing a massive explosion[2].

You ask whether optimism is a quality a creative writer 'should develop'. How? To become 'optimistic', you need opportunity. Sometimes you create your own opportunity, and then 'fall on your feet'. Sometimes there is just no opportunity. The worst situation in which to be is when you have created an opportunity, and then somehow missed out on it.

Finally – creative writing may come partially from many things: talent, a particular home environment, encouragement, extensive reading, readiness to see the world from your own point of view, from some or all of these. But it is not just a gift: you have to work it out, and cherish it, and at all times to be faithful and convinced by your own thinking!

NCW: *In response to an honour bestowed on you in 2015, the Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, you have said that you "will treasure it for what it signifies". Since you have also said "I was born in Germany, was saved by England, and lived a very fulfilled adult life in Sri Lanka", and have described yourself as "belonging to all three", what does this award 'signify' to you?*

AR: With regard to the medal I was given by the President and people of Germany, my statement of acceptance was phrased in this manner: "I will treasure it for what it signifies and will continue to ponder my eligibility". I am sure everyone who has read me over the years would fully understand the conflict.

But I regret the feelings involved by the many German contributors, and after 'pondering' the issue, I made my decision. It doesn't mean the past is erased or forgotten: on the contrary, I live with it day by day. But I have found a means of compromising.

With regard to my statement that "I was born in Germany, was saved by England, and lived a very fulfilled adult life in Sri Lanka: I belong to all three", that is very true. I was born in Germany, brought up in the seeming security of an established tradition of obedience, affection, reasonable independence, encouragement (especially to study), and exposure to all the available Arts till I was thirteen years old.

I have (somewhat ineptly) translated Federico Fellini, who has encapsulated my situation exactly:

Nobody may forget his roots,
They are the foundation for our whole life.

Where England is concerned: Coming from the incredibly terrifying experiences of Germany, and although I was on my own, the atmosphere and daily life were unbelievably safe, the people friendly and helpful, the school fantastic. I spoke very little English, but was carefully taught by a group of devoted teachers. The freedom to use all the facilities available, the beautiful country open to visits without restriction, and the access to the Arts. Until the war curbed that way of living. But even during the worst days of the war, I was never made to feel an enemy, but joined in all defensive activities.

As for Sri Lanka: I have lived here now for sixty-seven years. I am sure I don't need to explain that – although no one ever forgets that I am a 'foreigner' – I have been accepted, nurtured, and encouraged. I am deeply grateful to 'belong' as far as it is possible.

NCW: *You have described this book of your selected works, Four Things, as 'a rather unconventional book'. Could you please explain what you mean?*

AR: When Dr Jürgen Morhard, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany, first offered to sponsor a book of my selected poems, I was really delighted. My friends had been encouraging me, but I was reluctant – at my age – not having thought it through. But then, the temptation was too great, and I accepted.

However, when in January this year I had to start on it in order to complete the book before Dr Morhard had to leave Sri Lanka, I began to panic: I just hadn't a clue what to use, how to choose, how big, and most important, to make it reader-attractive. Priyanthi, my printer, and I have no other help. Also, Dr. Morhard wanted a German section included.

I suddenly had an idea: a priest living not far from my father's village, Hr. Pfr. Paul Gerhard Lehman, had earlier used my poetry for a small German journal, to write my family story. With his permission, I used his 60-page essay as my 'Einleitung' or

Introduction. He talked to some journalists in the area – as a result one of them sent me a set of photographs for a calendar, and I was allowed to choose a view from a balloon of my father's village. A picture arrived of myself many years ago, and then I remembered all the translated poems – mine into German – and I realised I had enough material. I received some more beautiful and relevant pictures, divided the whole collection into relevant sections, and divided them by content.

Then I decided to use attractive book covers (of my 20) to separate them.
It became more and more complicated.

Having gathered by then 350-odd pages, I suddenly noticed there was no thought of a cover. Major problem. How to find a meaningful, attractive (and unique) design?

As I mentioned in *Four Things*, I was visited by a friend with his young daughter. She brought me a small gift – a ceramic dish with what I thought an unusual design.

With some manipulation it became a suitable back-cover. The girl is delighted – she is twelve years old! – and of course features in the Acknowledgment Page of the book.

When we had put together the whole 'unconventional' material, a letter arrived from a children's school in Germany. We thought it so delightful that we added it to the very last page of the book, to leave a reader relaxed and charmed, as we were.

NCW: *Your book positions the works in German as well as in English, and the format shows your ability to think and write poetically in both languages. Do you prefer one language to another when dealing with specific subjects?*

AR: This question really deals with the ability to translate, the art of translation. In 2002 I gave a talk at the British Council in Colombo, some parts of which may be appropriate to this subject. The title of the talk was 'Moonlight stuffed with Straw', a reference to an observation made by Heinrich Heine, the 19th century German poet, that his own German poems when translated into French were like 'moonlight stuffed with straw'. Vladimir Nabokov, nearer our own time, expressed his opinion in the poem 'On translating Eugene Onegin'[3]:

What is translation? On a platter
A poet's pale and glaring head,
A parrot's shriek, a monkey's chatter
And profanation of the dead.

There is, however, another approach, less traditional, which allows the focus to shift, at least partially, from the author to the translator and gives him/her a chance to be both daring and original. It shifts from strict literalism in translation to one that does experiment and tamper with usage to challenge and stretch language with the same vitality that the original possessed, and maybe create a greater vitality born of new linguistic and metaphorical contrasts. Especially in a multi-lingual context, translation can not only negotiate between languages, but could come to occupy literary space in its own right[4].

Translation can be seen as a living spark between past and present, and between cultures. When you translate a poem you immerse yourself in another language, or at least you try to, and then you begin to realize the limitations of your native tongue – or maybe the tongue of your usage if you happen to have lost your mother tongue by living in exile or as a refugee, which of course has happened all too frequently in the course of the political upheavals of the last century.

But if you are really into translation, it is a very exciting adventure, and an enormously stimulating challenge. It strains your resources to the limit, making you aware of what you lack in facility and power of expression. Ultimately, it brings you face to face with the genius and structure of the original, and instils in you an urgent desire to do justice to it.

I have attempted translations from the German both of prose and poetry. One poem I have translated into English is 'Herbbsttag' by Rainer Maria Rilke[5]:

HERBSTTAG

Herr: es ist Zeit. Der Sommer was sehr groß.
Leg deinen Schatten auf die Sonnenuhren,
und auf den Fluren Laß die Winde los.

Befiehl den letzten Früchten voll zu sein;
gibe ihnen noch zwei südlichere Tage,
dränge sie zur Süße in den schweren Wein.

Wer jetzt kein Haus hat, baut sich keines mehr.
Wer jetzt allein ist, wird es lange bleiben
wird wachen, lesen, lange Briefe schreiben
und wird in den Alleen hin und her
unruhig wandem, wenn die Blätter treiben

Rainer Maria Rilke

DAY IN AUTUMN

Lord, it is time. The summer bore high yield.
Now cast your shadow on the sun dial,
Release the winds across forest and field.

Command the last unripened grapes upon the vine
to swell, grant them of southern warmth a few more days,
urge them towards fulfillment, and then grace
with a sweet richness the heavy purple wine.

Whoever has no house now will not ever build.
Whoever is alone now will remain alone,
wake through the night, and write long letters filled
with sadness; and wander through the town
restlessly when autumn's leaves are blown.

Translation: Anne Ranasinghe

"Say what you will of its inadequacy," wrote Goethe in 1827 to Carlyle. "Translation remains one of the most important and valuable concerns in world affairs." And George Steiner[6] added, "Without it we would live in a condition of silence."

NCW: *Dr Jürgen Morhard comments on your ability to 'find a new home in words'.*

AR: I am not at all sure what he means by that; but it is true that once you become involved in writing a poem or a short story, you become part of it, in the sense that your surroundings disappear and you 'live what you write'. I have also been told that the reader becomes absorbed as if he or she were participating – but I am sure that probably happens to other 'creative' writers.

In this context, however, I would like to refer to the poem "The Song has died from the Lips of the King" (in German, translated by Pfr. Paul Gerhard Lehman – page xliii – liii – *Four Things* – Introduction. In English page 60 – 63, *Four Things*.)

In November 1983 I returned to Essen and saw the remains of the beautiful Synagogue[6]. Built in 1913, and considered the most magnificent in Germany, the whole interior was destroyed by fire in the "Reichskristallnacht". The outer structure remained.

During the Hitler period Jews were totally isolated, and especially for us children the Synagogue became, before its destruction, the only place where we could meet and lead some kind of social life, exercise, study jointly, listen to music and so on.

So I decided to write a poem, reproducing in detail the beauty and significance of the Synagogue as far as I could, with the help of a book that my mother had sent earlier to England. It is a treasure, and I still have it.

Pfr. Paul Lehman has done a fantastic work in translating that poem, written in English, in his Introduction to *Four Things* (see pp. 60 – 63). But more than that: I have used 80-odd Biblical references which explain the original contents; and Pfr. Lehman has identified, numbered, and recorded each one in his German version. Unfortunately, I had no time to add this to the English version, but items can easily be identified.

NCW: *Dr Morhard commends you for 'using your personal stories and the lessons learned from the past', noting that you have 'helped to reconcile the past with the present', and that you have taught the younger generations that we should not allow a repeat of history's great tragedies'. How and when did you realise the nature of the profound legacy your creative gifts could offer us? Could you also comment on the*

state of the world today, from your perspective? Do you think the role of creative writers and thinkers has become even more crucial than it was before?

A: When I asked some children in a school in Essen what they knew about Hitler they were enthusiastic about the motorways he had built, and said that he had eliminated unemployment. Their fathers had told them that Germany was a better place under Hitler. When (during the making of a film about my writing) a Gallup poll questioned people in Essen at random as to what had happened to their erstwhile Jewish fellow citizens and taped their answers, some said they did not know. Others said the Jews had "gone away", but they didn't know where. And some laughed and said most of them had been gassed and went up in smoke. I have the tape. It is not an invented story. Even the laugh.

Since the reunification of East and West Germany there has been an upsurge of a vicious neo-Nazism and anti-Semitism that is more than reminiscent of the Hitler period, but covers a wider clientèle: apart from Jews, first the Turks and now all foreign and especially dark-skinned and dark-haired immigrants. I have mainly written 'At What Dark Point' for Sri Lanka, because readers here are still largely ignorant of the wider ramifications of the Nazi horror, and the bestialities that are possible. I think they should know. Knowledge is to some extent protection. In 2004 'At What Dark Point' was translated into Sinhala.

George Steiner[7] raised the question: How is it possible that the tortures and murders could be committed at Treblinka or Dachau at the same time as people in New York were making love or going to see a film. That problem is as relevant today for those of us who were not there (or are not there), but lived – or live – as on another planet. How can we teach the generations to come to feel deeply about those deaths that the world was powerless to prevent, or be alert to the deaths that can be prevented today, to which we can put an end?

NCW: *In recent times, 'elitism' and 'classism' have been identified in the writing of those who are thought of as being 'privileged' in this society. Does a person's socio-economic background have any impact, in your opinion, on his/her world-view, or affect their authority to speak to contemporary issues? Why is a person's 'status' such an issue in contemporary Sri Lanka?*

AR: I hesitate to answer, as I myself have been identified, and indeed attacked, as being 'privileged' in this society. Actually, my past is such that I have not, nor will ever, 'shake it off'. There is something contradictory in the fact that on the one hand you are not accepted as a 'full' member of this society (and correctly so) and on the other you are attacked publicly (by reviewers in the press, for instance) for being 'privileged'. As a matter of fact, I resent this: I have been a hard-working woman all my life, and am surprised that I have managed to stretch my very limited means to support me for ninety-one years.

And yes, I do think a socio-economic background has an impact on one's world-view; and certainly I feel no inhibition or lack of authority hampering my discussions of literary writing or contemporary issues. But I think I should explain that people who wish to express their 'displeasure' have seldom taken the trouble to study the item they are criticising or reviewing: on the contrary, in their reading they have totally misunderstood what has been written. I have never had any objection to serious and constructive reviewing – quite the contrary. But I do feel resentment and injustice when I receive misrepresentation intended to destroy.

NCW: *Dr Lakshmi de Silva, translator and literary critic, has identified three categories in your poetry. Those who identify you as solely a 'Holocaust Poet' fail to recognise the diversity of your subject matter and your interests. Could you comment?*

AR: Lakshmi is, I believe, correct in her assessment. It is likely that some of the 'Holocaust Poems', which appeared not so long after World War II was over, overshadowed what followed. Professor Yasmine Gooneratne published my poem 'Auschwitz from Colombo' in *New Ceylon Writing* in 1970 without knowing who I was, or how I came to be in Sri Lanka.

The fact is, that I had a busy and varied life, which changed dramatically after my husband's death. My poems served as a kind of catharsis, arising out of powerful impressions, with no special objective. During a period of perhaps sixty-five years they covered the events of a lifetime, and so I am not surprised that readers could not identify or 'recognise the diversity of the subject matter'.

I hope that my last book, *Four Things*, may help them to do so.

NCW: *The poem 'Amaryllis' is one which fuses specific detail with intense symbolism and connotation, in a manner that opens it up to universal readers. How important has the rich, detailed experience of the sensory world been to you as a writer?*

AR: 'Amaryllis' is a favourite poem of mine. I was sitting at my desk in my office, and watching this unbelievable happening: I wrote as it happened. The whole process was so smooth, so elegant and beautiful, I became totally involved and charmed. There was no question of choosing words or making corrections: this plant was as alive as I was, with its own distinctive personality.

And then, the tragedy
that the Amaryllis will bloom only once
because the soil and climate are alien.

NCW: *How important has it been to you to find understanding in your readership? Has that need changed across your lifetime?*

AR: I am always delighted if my writing is found interesting or useful. But, basically, it is not important. I have to be satisfied, and that has not changed over the years.

NCW: *What advice would you give to young writers in today's Sri Lanka? Can you comment on how you think the literary culture in English can be improved, to foster Sri Lankan creativity in literature?*

AR: a) Parents should introduce children to books at an early age, reading to them and with them till they can do so on their own.
b) Visits to bookshops.
c) Membership of libraries.
d) Family discussions of 'special books'.
e) I found the most valuable 'reading years' between being approximately seven or eight and the time I had to start working for a living, i.e., seventeen or so. I have continued reading all my life, but of necessity the working and domestic obligations limited me.

f) Schools should play a much greater part in stressing the life-long value of the reading habit. But as I am no longer in touch with them (my own children are now of 'retiring age') I may not do them justice.

g) Foreign languages are of great importance. My own parents insisted that I should join the Latin class among the boys. My friend and I were the only two girls to do so. I have never regretted learning Latin, and still remember sections after 80-odd years.

Notes:

1 Anne Ranasinghe's 'Moorfield', which is not on the net, has been altered to 'Moorfields', which is (Ed.).

2 "In June 1944, the Germans started sending V1 Flying bombs to bomb London. We called these V1s "Doodlebugs". A doodlebug was really a bomb with wings. It looked like a small aeroplane and had no pilot – a bit like a cruise missile, but slightly bigger. Thousands of these doodlebugs were launched against London. I remember them very clearly. They made a sound like a lorry engine going very fast. They kept flying until they ran out of fuel. Then they simply fell to the ground and exploded. Whenever we heard a doodlebug everyone looked up and followed it with their eyes until it had gone over past where we were standing. If the engine stopped before it got to us that was the time to worry! Sometimes a doodlebug dropped to earth immediately and sometimes it would continue to glide, gradually losing height. Very scary!" (Source: WW2 People's War (An archive of WW2 Memories). BBC)

3 *Eugene Onegin* is a novel in verse written by Alexander Pushkin that was published in serial form between 1825 and 1832. The first complete edition was published in 1833, and the currently accepted version is based on the 1837 publication. Its innovative rhyme scheme, its natural tone and diction, and its economical transparency of presentation all demonstrate the virtuosity which has been instrumental in proclaiming Pushkin as the undisputed master of Russian poetry. (Source: Wikipedia)

4 A striking (and easily accessible) instance in Sri Lanka's English literature of a verse translation that has, via scholarly and meticulous transliteration, 'come to occupy literary space in its own right' may be seen in George Keyt's English verse translation of Sri Jayadeva's 12th century masterpiece, *Gita Govinda* (Bombay 1940), which is based on Harold Peiris's transliteration from the Sanskrit original. (Ed.)

5 Rainer Maria Rilke (1875 – 1926) is considered one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. According to Holroyd, 'the poetry which Rilke wrote to express and extend his experience... is one of the most successful attempts a modern man has made to orientate himself within his chaotic world." (Source: Wikipedia)

6 The former Synagogue of Essen, built in 1913, has served as a memorial, a discussion forum and venue for various events since 1980. Before 1933, Essen was home to over 4,500 Jews – about 2,500 of them perished in ghettos and death camps in the east. (Source: Wikipedia)

7 Professor Francis George Steiner (born April 23, 1929) [i]is a French-born American literary critic, essayist, philosopher, novelist, and educator. He has written extensively about the relationship between language, literature and society, and the impact of the Holocaust. George Steiner's career spans half a century. His field is primarily comparative literature, and his work as a critic has tended toward exploring cultural and philosophical issues, particularly dealing with translation and the nature of language and literature. (Source: Wikipedia)

BOOK REVIEW

A Writer's Gift to His Country

DEVIKA BRENDON AND YASMINE GOONERATNE (13 December 2014)

Translated by Ranga Wickramasinghe and Lakshmi de Silva

Punya Heendeniya and Henry Jayasena in a still from *Gamperaliya,* the movie

Sixty-five years is a long time for a gift to await unwrapping, but at last, in 2014, all three volumes have become available in English translation as a single three-part publication, under the title of *The Uprooted Trilogy*. Published in the form of three neat paperbacks, *Uprooted*, *The Age of Kali*, and *Destiny*, the texts vary somewhat in literary quality: none of them benefited from professional literary editing. (*Destiny*, in particular, could have done with some editorial advice relative to pp. 122-123, where a detailed description of a surgical operation on an infected abscess, derived, we understand, from the author's observation of the late Dr P R Anthonis at work, and therefore valuable in itself as a memento of friendship between two great men of the time, but quite out of place in a novel, is inserted into the fictional text.) The three parts can, however, be read as a continuous work in the style of a three-volume 19th century English novel. *Gamperaliya* in translation is certainly a substantial book (222

pages), the other two are much slighter in size. But even a reader who has acquired the short attention-span of a teledrama addict would find *The Uprooted Trilogy* a much less daunting proposition than a novel by George Eliot or Charles Dickens.

In order to assist new readers who may be unfamiliar with both book and author (and where necessary to point up the differences between the films and the fiction), we give below a brief summary of the plot – or 'plots' – of the three parts of *The Uprooted Trilogy*.

Part I: *Gamperaliya*

Published in Sinhala in 1944, *The Uprooted* depicts the crumbling of traditional village life under the pressure of modernisation. That life, which is symbolised by the Mahagedera (Great House), located in the village of Koggala, is the ancestral home of the Kaisaruwatte family, Sinhalese people of quality who belong to the rural gentry of southern Sri Lanka. The head of the family holds the distinction of 'Muhandiram', which confers upon him both official authority and social leadership: the Muhandiram and his equally well-born wife, Matara Hamine, are the acknowledged leaders of Koggala village society, respected and looked up to by every person in the community. Like them, their children (two daughters and a son) have been brought up in the unostentatious but nonetheless dignified consciousness of an ancient lineage. In this close society, where every individual knows the family background of

everyone else, high-born or not, personal aspirations must give way to social considerations. And so, when Piyal, a personable young bachelor from a neighbouring family, is hired to teach English to the Muhandiram's younger daughter Nanda, and falls in love with his beautiful student, marriage with her cannot, according to the elders of her family, be a possibility: Piyal's family, though respectable, is well known to be of lower social standing – his grandfather is remembered to have been at one time a vendor of vegetables to the Mahagedera kitchen.

Although the Mahagedera in its pride would most certainly regard a marriage proposal from him as an insult, Piyal, who is intelligent and energetic, aware of his own abilities and deeply in love, is hopeful that it will be accepted. (Regi Siriwardena's film script, imaginatively substituting an European fairytale for the *Robinson Crusoe* of the novel, shows that Piyal cannot not see why, in the words of the text he is teaching Nanda to read, a commoner should not marry a princess – when and if he can become wealthy enough to win her as his wife.) Nanda is, in her turn, attracted to him, but, restrained partly by her duty to her parents and her lineage, and partly by the confusion in her own mind as to whether she is in love or not, cannot articulate her feelings either in speech or in letters. Consequently, she submits, at her parents' urging, to marriage with Jinadasa, a young man with little to recommend him beyond an acceptable appearance and an unexceptionable family background. The latter, though it is by no means comparable to their own, the Muhandiram and his wife are willing to accept. Piyal, disappointed and resentful, leaves the village to better his prospects in the city. Nanda devotes herself to her social role of good wife and dutiful daughter, and tries to forget him.

This is not an easy thing to do, as Shakespeare demonstrated long ago: like the lady in *Twelfth Night*, who 'never told her love, but let concealment, like a worm 'i th' bud, feed on her damask cheek', Nanda pines 'in thought'. Her melancholy results in a psychological condition, the treatment of which drains the financial resources of her family. Despite the Muhandiram's efforts to preserve his family's prosperity, his finances dwindle and the Mahagedera, the symbol of his status, begins to show signs of dilapidation and decay. The ladies of the family, hitherto accustomed to dress, decorate, and conduct themselves in a style befitting that status, are forced to adopt various stratagems in order to conceal their predicament from those outside the immediate family circle.

Uprooted describes these stratagems in detail: they include maintaining strict domestic economy in matters of household diet, crocheting lace for sale through discreet third parties, pawning their valuable personal jewellery, and gilding silver beads for everyday wear so that the most critical eye would take them for pure gold. Such seeming trivialities are not trivialities at all, for a great deal is at stake.

[This theme is carried to its logical end in *Destiny* when, seated alone in her husband's Jaguar, Nanda's daughter Nalika,

'removed the valuable jewellery that adorned her ears and her neck. She had lost her son. She would not be able to prevent her daughter leaving her. As [the car] neared Anoma Villa, she saw the image of her face in the car mirror. She was shaken by the grief and the fear she saw in the reflection.' (*Destiny*, pp. 219-220)

The gesture (a potent symbol that was, unfortunately, omitted in the film made of *Yuganthaya*), signifies Nalika's recognition of her situation: she has lost the love of her children, her status in society, everything she values most.]

After the loss of his first child, and the death of his father-in-law the Muhandiram, Jinadasa, unable to support his wife or himself, leaves for the interior, hoping to make a better life for his family. He never achieves his goal and a six-year silence ensues, during which Nanda returns to the Mahagedera, and Piyal, far away in Colombo, becomes a successful city businessman. When Jinadasa is rumoured to have died, Piyal makes a second proposal for the girl he has never ceased to love. This time he is successful, and the lovers can now come together in marriage.

Although her new life takes her away from her mother, her sister Anula, and the ancestral house in Koggala, Nanda is pleased to leave the village for the comforts and opulence of city life with Piyal. Her happiness is haunted, however, by feelings of guilt, born of the knowledge that the gossips of Koggala society attribute Jinadasa's unhappy end to his wife's liking for high style and good living. Piyal, becoming aware that Jinadasa is still a presence in Nanda's mind, is angry and jealous. His attitude very nearly sends her back to the Mahagedera. Piyal's love for her is unshaken, however; and although Nanda's family pride initially resists her husband's apologetic overtures, both the novel and the film that was made of it in 1964 end on a note of reconciliation.

Part 2: *Kaliyugaya*

A drastic change of theme and temperature is immediately evident in the opening pages of *The Age of Kali*, which was first published in Sinhala in 1957. Although village values are still strong in Tissa and Anula, attempts by Piyal and Nanda to persuade their parents and her sister Anula leave the Mahagedera and live with them in Colombo are not successful. As long as she is alive, Anula, a repository of folk stories that fascinate the children, provides a link with the village for Nanda and Piyal's son Alan and their daughter Nalika. But when Anula falls ill in the city and eventually dies, that link is broken for Alan.

Nanda, who is permanently resident now in the city and is energetically seeking acceptance in what she thinks of as Colombo's 'high society', listens angrily to the 100-page letter of analytical reproach that her self-exiled son Alan has written from Britain, where he had gone with Irene, the Burgher girl he married in protest against what he had seen as his parents' closed, insular minds. Although she had learned to read English under 'School-master' Piyal's tutelage (cf. *Uprooted*), had taken lessons in English conversation for a year in order 'to socialize' since settling in the city, and has consistently spoken English at home in order (she claims) to assist Alan with his studies while he was growing up (p.3), Nanda appears to avoid reading Alan's letter. Tactfully edited extracts from it are read aloud to her by her younger brother Tissa, who has himself changed from the playful, precocious lad the reader first met in *Gamperaliya*, into a thoughtful, sometimes cynical, observer of the social scene as it changes around him. His comments on Alan's letter as he reads it, are rejected by his sister:

> *"So Alan [has] given up his studies and gone to England with a girl because we tried to educate him?"*
>
> *"Alan has not suggested anything of the kind," said Tissa.*
>
> *"Tissa, don't you see that he is writing … with that in mind, to blame us?"*
>
> *"I don't think so. Your conscience knows it was wrong of you to have opposed Alan's affair with Irene so harshly."*

"We never thought and will never think what we did was wrong."

Although Nanda 'aggressively' rejects her brother's truth-telling, asserting that their unsympathetic treatment of their gifted son was entirely justified since it was meant for his own good ("When a child who is still studying has an affair with a woman, is it wrong to stop him?"), her restless mind cannot find comfort. Memories crowd in on her: she recalls her sister's death – was it brought about by her own neglect? – and guiltily remembers occasions on which she had been unfaithful to Piyal, in mind if not in body. She might try to close her mind to Tissa's observations, and stop her ears from hearing Alan's reproaches, but she cannot escape 'the intuition that… her pride in her family lineage was just a mask for hiding her self-centred thoughts and feelings'. (p.24) In the violence of her conflicting emotions – guilt and sorrow (vigorously repressed), and seething anger (violently expressed) – Nanda speaks more truly than she knows:

"This must be the beginning of Kaliyugaya, the age of destruction! When did you learn to preach this outrageous sermon, Tissa?"

"Only after coming to Colombo," murmured Tissa. (Chapter 2)

From this point on, the family's history is a tale of unremitting change that frustrates the social-climbing Nanda, and is interpreted by her as decline, a punishment inflicted by a revengeful fate (*karma*). Nalika, the daughter for whom she has planned to arrange a brilliant marriage with a successful young doctor which will lift the family into the 'professional' class, admits to a relationship with another young man her mother cannot approve: Saviman (Simon) Kabalana is, according to Nanda, the son of 'an unscrupulous man who collects taxes from slum-dwellers on behalf of rich landlords'. Nanda learns that her daughter's intended husband had spent his childhood amongst 'children of the slums', and that his father had become 'a contractor for the city council, to remove garbage from the city streets, earning thousands of rupees from each contract' (p.156). It is clear that Nanda has not given up her pride in her family lineage, choosing to forget, perhaps, that her husband Piyal had been rejected by the Mahagedera on his first application for her hand, for similarly prejudiced reasons.

Piyal, free of family pride but regretfully aware that he had sometimes resorted to dishonest practices himself in advancing his own business interests, does not share his wife's biased attitude to the Kabalana connection; but he has problems of his own. Disillusioned by the estrangement of his cherished son Alan, worried by apparent irresponsibility in his second son Chandrasoma, and anxiously dreading a break with Nalika, Piyal has begun to lose his grip on his businesses. His earlier entrepreneurial energy is giving way to feelings of futility. By the end of the novel, he has died; and although Alan and his second (English) wife manage to attend his funeral, England has 'engulfed' them both.

Part 3: *Yuganthaya*

Destiny opens on a new scene. The neglected Mahagedera, decaying with time, is little more than a memory in the minds of the fourth generation. It does not appear at all in the film that has been made of the novel. Instead, a generational clash between Saviman Kabalana, the son-in-law whom Nanda had instinctively dreaded acquiring, and their son Malin, is the focus of both film and novel. Saviman Kabalana has developed into a powerful business magnate who opposes the formation of the labour movement, while Malin, driven by ideas developed in Britain and powered by socialist theory, hopes to bring about social change. Challenging his powerful father's uncompromisingly capitalist methods of making money and running his business empire, Malin rejects also the social snobbery of his mother Nalika Kabalana (Nanda's daughter, who has achieved her ambition of entry into Colombo's wealthy social world). It would seem that Nanda's family pride, which was a key theme of *Gamperaliya,* has taken the form, in the new generation operating in the 'new' society, of social snobbery. Nanda's younger brother Tissa, Nalika Kabalana's elderly bachelor uncle, who still moves between Koggala and Colombo, is the family's only remaining link with village life.

Malin, who is covertly encouraged by Tissa, has another supporter: his young sister Chamari. She (like her brother, and her self-exiled uncle Alan, before her) values her own independence, and has a kindly and charitable sympathy for the poor that is more reminiscent of her grandmother Matara Hamine than either of her parents. The film of *Yuganthaya* stops short after Malin obtains a parliamentary seat, by means of which he will presumably succeed in raising the living standards of the poor. The novel goes beyond that, projecting a future for Chamari as the wife of her brother's

England-returned friend Aravinda, a highly qualified surgeon with a village background not dissimilar to that of the Mahagedera family in past times.

When Martin Wickramasinghe died (in 1976, at the age of 86), independent Sri Lanka had become a republic, and undergone many changes of government. He had outlived both the Emergency of 1958, and the JVP uprising of 1971. He was fortunate that he did not live to witness the horrors of 1983 and escaped the sorrows and dangers of the LTTE war, although allusions made in Alan's letters to underhand political moves made by Sri Lankans at home and abroad might cause the reader of *Destiny* to credit its creator with unusual prescience, and wonder what kind of sense Malin Kabalana, as an idealistic socialist MP, would have made of today's murky political scene.

The publication of all three novels together is certainly a boon to the English reader who has had to wait 70 years (from 1944 to 2014) to read this classic of our literature in its entirety. One aspect of the staggered publishing history of the novels and their English translations might, however, be seen in some lights as an advantage, for as a result of it Martin Wickramasinghe's work may encounter in some Sri Lankan readers today a much more sophisticated response than it would have met with in the 1950s. Study of post-colonial and world literature in English, which has developed in educated Sri Lankans an awareness of literary works that were once unknown or unavailable to local readers, and introduced them to new ways of assessing literature, has made its way into our schools and universities. Illuminating comparisons can now be usefully made between *The Uprooted Trilogy* and a long line of substantial literary works from both within and outside Sri Lanka that have common links relating to period, theme and style: among the latter would certainly be Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and E.M. Forster's *Howard's End*, not to mention the works of the Russian masters that Wickramasinghe himself read so assiduously. In Africa, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is an obvious candidate for literary comparison, while among works set in Asia one could cite Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle*, R K Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets*, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's *Pather Panchali*, and the Indonesian author Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Buru Quartet*.

A brief overview of some of the titles cited above may convey some idea of our reasons for suggesting them as comparable with *The Uprooted Trilogy*:

Pather Panchali (1929) was adapted into a film of the same name by the late Satyajit Ray, the distinguished film-maker to whose work in Bengali, Peries' Sinhala movies have been frequently likened, and with which they (especially *Gamperaliya*) have been frequently compared. *Pather Panchali*, like *Gamperaliya*, deals with the life of a well-born rural family, both in their ancestral village in a rural setting (Bengal) and later when they move to Varanasi in search of a better life. Like *Gamperaliya*, it depicts the anguish and loss they face during their travels. Originally published in 1929, *Pather Panchali* was followed in 1932 by a sequel *Aparajito*, which was later also adapted into a film of the same name by Satyajit Ray, and that was followed by *Apusansar*.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Buru Quartet* is a series of four novels chronicling the development of Indonesian nationalism and based in part, like *The Uprooted Trilogy*, on the author's own experiences growing up. The English titles of the books in the quartet are *This Earth of Mankind*, *Child of All Nations*, *Footsteps*, and *House of Glass*. The quartet includes strong female characters of indigenous ethnicity, addresses the discriminations and indignities of living under colonial rule and, like *Yuganthaya*, explores aspects of the struggle for personal and national political independence.

Besides the fact that Thomas Hardy's rich evocation of Dorsetshire in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* has many parallels with the Koggala landscape depicted in *Gamperaliya*, Hardy from the first sources Tess's tragic character arc in her mother and father's unrealistic desire to resurrect their ancestral lineage and restore the family name. The scene in which Tess gathers her younger siblings and retreats to the ancestral family vault, which is the only piece of land to which she has legal claim, may seem to readers of the English Victorians as a sequence very reminiscent of Wickramasinghe. *The Uprooted Trilogy* is really a story cycle, and it is cyclic in moral structure too, tracing the rise and fall of a family across the generations: rising through energy and enterprise, falling through pride, inability to adapt, and insularity. It traces the rise from the Village to the City, and thus traces the aspirations of many modern Sri Lankan citizens, all of whom have rural origins, and are making their way in a post-modern commercial world, tempted by the bling, glitz and glamour of urban life, with its elegant veneers and sophisticated allurements.

It is, of course, sadly true that great – even the greatest – novels seldom make it into the movies without some kind of distortion. This occurs chiefly because novelists and film-makers have different objectives in view, and the genres in which they work, though related, are by no means the same. Any knowledgeable film critic can cite dozens of examples in support of this statement: despite the charm of Greer Garson and the gallant bearing of Laurence Olivier (its principal stars), the film made of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in 1947 is a well-known instance of such distortion.

Coming closer to home, the movie made by Dev Anand in 1965 of R K Narayan's masterpiece *The Guide* is another. (Readers interested in following up this latter reference could look up Narayan's brilliantly humorous essay 'Misguided Guide', which tells the story of the travesty that was made of his novel by well-meaning Indian movie-makers.) Fortunately for Martin Wickramasinghe's trilogy, the genius of Peries, Siriwardene's sensitivity and subtlety, and the responsiveness to text and direction of a perfectly chosen cast that included Punya Heendeniya as Nanda and Henry Jayasena as Piyal, saved *Gamperaliya* from becoming what it could very well have become in less competent hands – just another romantic story of thwarted love with a fortuitous, happy ending, obscuring Wickramasinghe's serious theme: the gradual replacement of the traditional economic and social structure of the village by commercial city influence.

We see how timely this translation is and how relevant to contemporary experience, when in modern Colombo traditional village life is represented only in architectural statements of whimsy, when traditional rural images and artefacts are routinely described as 'iconic', and fashionable ladies in Colombo invite each other almost apologetically to partake of 'just a simple rice and curry lunch'.

Although there is no evidence that Wickramasinghe, whose major interest in the European novel was apparently centred on the Russian masters, had ever been influenced by Woolf's novel *The Village in the Jungle* (published in 1913) or, indeed, had even read it, both authors open their books with powerful evocations of southern landscapes in Sri Lanka and reflections on the effect such settings have on the characters who live in them. Both writers show us how deeply formative our social contexts are; and how, in contrast to the individualism and fragmented familial contexts of the Western world, whose lifestyle of conspicuous consumption is one to which our middle and upper middle classes aspire, people in the South Asian context

can never really make their life choices independently of their sense of social obligation and the responsibilities conferred by their family ties.

In translating and publishing his late father's masterpiece, Dr Ranga Wickramasinghe has made a valuable gift to the nation, and indeed to the world. It was high time that the trilogy really did become the possession of "the people" as its author intended, rather than remain a treasure owned exclusively by a Sinhala readership. This classic work in its English version, whole and entire, can now – at last – take its rightful place among the world's great books. Our thanks are due to the dedicated translators who made the miracle happen while we were still alive to see it.

The Nature of Plants II

JEAN ARASANAYAGAM

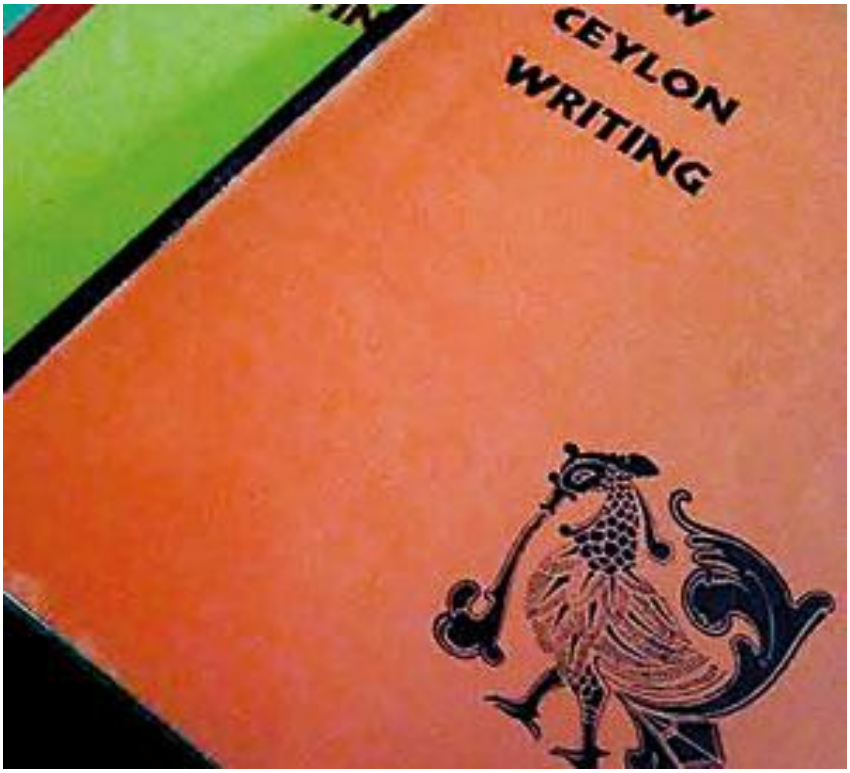
RECENT EVENTS

New Ceylon Writing Returns

SMRITI DANIEL

New Ceylon Writing made a welcome announcement this year, when the literary magazine sent out a call for submissions. *New Ceylon Writing*, first published in 1970, enjoyed a 15-year run, during which it is said to have featured some of the best and most significant creative and critical writing in English to appear in post-Independence Sri Lanka. Even then the magazine was determinedly independent, seeking no sponsorship or support other than from those who read and contributed to it.

Professor Yasmine Gooneratne, who was one of the two founding editors, remembers well how the first edition was produced in 1970. When the idea came up in a conversation among a group of academic staff in the Arts Faculty staff room of the University of Ceylon at Peradeniya, it seemed to her a very good one. But they had to make do on a budget.



New Ceylon Writing's original covers

She remembers the process: “The text was typed on a portable Olympia typewriter, stencilled and cyclostyled on campus, and the magazine’s pages were collated in the homes of the editors. In designing a cover for that first issue we avoided boards in the ‘political’ colours of green, blue and red, and opted instead for a plain white board, on which the lettering of the magazine title and our elegant ‘Hansa’ logo were arranged in black by a kindly printer, T.B.S. Godamunne & Sons at the Sithumina Press in Kandy.”

Speaking to the *Sunday Times*, Professor Gooneratne says the magazine in 2016 will remain the same in most respects: A non-political, non-profitmaking journal dedicated to the creative work of Sri Lanka’s writers in English that aims to practise and promote the highest artistic and ethical standards of literary expression. “As before, it will publish poetry, fiction, reviews and essays, as well as commentary on recent significant literary and cultural developments and notices of new and forthcoming books”.

In other aspects however, the magazine will have moved on from 1985 – for starters, it will be available online. Replacing the original one or two members of the 1970s, the editorial board started off early in 2016 with six published and practising writers: Yasmine Gooneratne, Devika Brendon, Lakshmi de Silva, Shirani Rajapakse, Faith Ratnayake, and Vasika Udurawana. Later that year, Rohan Titus joined the board. “*New Ceylon Writing* has specifically included on its board bi-lingual writers with expertise in translation, to ensure that there is encouragement and equity for writers submitting their work in these languages,” says Professor Gooneratne, adding that the decision to withhold the Tamil prize in this year’s inaugural Fairway National Literary Award is one prompt for the writing community to help aspiring novelists and poets improve the quality of their work, prior to submitting it for prizes such as this.

“Many of our writers are naïve, tolerant, diffident, and for those very reasons they are extremely vulnerable,” she says, highlighting a range of issues from a need for authors to be more receptive to criticism, to the importance of improving their knowledge of the publishing world, fees and copyright issues. Professor Gooneratne is unambiguous about the toothless reviews often carried in local papers, often penned by friends and colleagues of the author. “Such a review is worse than useless, neither author nor reader can gain anything of value from it,” she says. The *New Ceylon Writing* team know what they hope to see from new writers. “We’re

hoping to encounter energy, quality, originality and wit." Quoting a colleague who said, 'War, disaster, crime, violence and corruption have become dominant themes in our literature nowadays: it's a reflection of the reality we have experienced,' she adds: "We hope the revived *New Ceylon Writing* will reflect more varied and positive developments and contribute to these positive developments."

Speaking of falling standards in the publishing industry, Professor Gooneratne says that *New Ceylon Writing* will support a new generation of writers and poets by helping them discover and master their own unique voice, and will in addition offer professional assistance in 2017 to writers already working as journalists. The team is aware of and determined to avoid becoming trapped in the familiar cycle of promoting the work of a small, closed group of writers and publishing self-congratulatory and 'friendly' reviews.

"*New Ceylon Writing* was formed by a generous and richly resourced culture, very different from our current one. Despite the occasional production of some individual works of great talent, an abundance of good writing in English has been noticeably lacking in Sri Lanka in the past several years. This has to change, and we are proud to be a party to that change," she says.

~ Based on an article by Smriti Daniel for *The Sunday Times.*

The Fairway Galle Literary Festival

Following a much-regretted 3-year hiatus, the Galle Literary Festival (now re-named the 'Fairway Galle Literary Festival') the seventh in the series, was held for the first time over three consecutive weeks in January 2016: in Kandy 8th to the 10th, in Galle on the 13th to the 17th and in Jaffna on the 23rd to the 24th.

The Festival included authors from overseas such as Sebastian Faulks, Meera Syal, Hugh Thomson, Sonali Deraniyagala and Mona Arshi in its 2016 line-up; and also welcomed Gregory Pardlo, winner of the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, and *New York Times* bestseller and Forward Prize winner Claudia Rankine. The children's author Andy Stanton, creator of the *Mr Gum* series, as well as the historians Tom Holland and Mark Tully, also attended.

The British Council and the Goethe Institute continued their partnership of the Festival by sponsoring the presence, respectively, of the scientific author Kenan Malik and the crime novelist Andrea Maria Schenkel.

The Festival further showcased a large contingent of authors from the Asian region. They included Anuradha Roy, Jeet Thayil, Professor Sayed Islam, Samath Subramanium and the Malaysian-Australian rapper, poet and first-time author Omar Musa.

Among the authors who represented Sri Lanka were the 2012 Commonwealth Prize winner and DSC Prize winner Shehan Karunatilaka; the poet Ariyawansa Ranaweera, and Jayatilaka Kammallaweera, one of today's most widely published Sinhala authors.

The Festival continued to develop its relationship with other art forms and mediums, facilitated by 2016's unique line-up of talents which included artists, dramatists and musicians. Fiona Shaw, an icon of theatre, TV and film from the UK-based Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, was joined at the Festival by filmmaker Visakesa Chandrasekaram, the Chamber Music Society of Colombo Ensemble, led by violinist Lakshman Joseph de Saram, and theatre group The Grassrooted Trust.

Besides drama, art and music, there was a heightened emphasis on architecture: this included talks on architecture and architectural tours, as well as a strong visual arts presence. There were three exhibitions open for the duration of the Festival, at key locations around the Galle Fort. The 2016 Fairway Galle Literary Festival's fascination with food continued with the attendance of Master Chef Italy Runner-Up Almo Bibolotti, New York-based Vis-à-Vis Executive Chef Charles Disanayake, and Meera Sodha, whose inaugural undertaking, 'Made in India: Cooked in Britain: Recipes from an Indian Family Kitchen', made it to the top 10 in UK bestseller ranking.

"By being associated with this unique event, we hope to contribute towards the development of arts and culture in Sri Lanka. For a country to thrive, peace and prosperity alone is not enough. Its people need to be culturally enlightened and proud of their heritage. Many of the activities we support are focused on improving the appreciation of fine arts amongst Sri Lankan audiences. Fairway National Literary Award is another one of these endeavours," said Hemaka de Alwis, Chairman of Fairway Holdings, the 2016 Festival's title sponsor.

While the 2016 Fairway Galle Literary Festival program featured the return of several audience favourites, there were many new events to look forward to, like the inaugural mini, weekend festivals in Kandy and Jaffna, where international authors and thinkers participated. These attracted people who might not otherwise have attended, significantly increasing the festival's island-wide reach. A new audio visual initiative had its first airing at this year's festival, the 'Thinking Out Loud Series', which facilitated greater audience contact with invited international writers, performers and thinkers, while additional non-literary exhibits were held, depicting drama, film, architecture and visual art pieces, as part of the Festival's growing 'A Greater Focus on the Other Arts' movement.

The Festival's outreach activities were further extended through its partnership with the Serendipity Trust. They included an extensive community outreach program with the full support and sponsorship of MAS Holdings, throughout Galle, Kandy and Jaffna over the course of the festival month; with activities including the Galle Children's Festival, the GLF Schools' Day Events in Kandy and Jaffna and teacher training and development initiatives. Concessionary ticket rates were offered for students and teachers to attend the Festival.

Additionally, the 2016 festival played host to two important literary awards, the newly constituted Fairway National Literary Award (FNLA) and the well-established DSC Prize for South Asian Literature.

Annasi & Kadalagotu Literary Festival

The A & K Lit. Fest, a literary festival for people from all walks of life, was launched in April 2015. Starting life as a one-day festival beginning at 10:00 am and continuing throughout the day, it expanded the following year to two days, and was held on 14 and 15 May 2016. The concept being about making literature available to a large cross section of society, tickets were priced at just Rs. 100/-. The event featured works of both well known and lesser known local writers in English, Sinhala and Tamil, and included Q & A sessions, book launches, discussions and performance poetry. There were also entertainment options such as acoustic music and street painters painting portraits. Because this event was envisioned by Captain Elmo Jayawardena, he was given the task of officially launching the A & K Lit. Fest website, which can now be accessed through http://www.aklitfest.com .

Anne Ranasinge Receives a Very Special Award

In 2015 the German government honoured poet and writer Anne Ranasinghe with the award of a medal representing the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany. This order was established in 1951 and is awarded to both German nationals and foreigners with ‘achievements that served the rebuilding of the country in the fields of political, socio-economic and intellectual activity, and is intended to mean an award to all those whose work contributes to the peaceful rise of the Federal Republic of Germany.’

Mrs Ranasinghe’s life and work was celebrated in a ceremony held on the evening of October 13.

Over the course of a long career, Anne Ranasinghe has been recognised both nationally and internationally as one of Sri Lanka’s foremost poets. Her body of work also includes numerous short stories, essays, and translations. Her works have been broadcast on radio, published in seventeen countries and translated into nine languages.

She has won numerous prizes for her writing including the Sri Lanka Arts Council Prize for Poetry 1985 and 1992 and non-fiction in 1987. In 1994, she won the Sri Lanka Literary Award for the best collection of short stories. She is a founding member of the English Writers’ Cooperative of Sri Lanka.

Anne Ranasinghe is interviewed in this issue of *New Ceylon Writing* (see pp. 131–143).

Publishing Online

In 2015, an article by Mr Daya Dissanayake in the Daily News titled 'Buy Nothing' described an unusual project that had begun as 'an experimental hyper-local gift economy' on Bainbridge Island, Washington State in 2013. 'The Buy Nothing Project,' wrote Mr Dissanayake, aims to,

> *'offer people a way to give and receive, share, lend, express gratitude through a world-wide network of hyper-local gift economies in which the true wealth is the web of connections formed between people who are real-life neighbours… The Buy Nothing Project is about setting the scarcity model of our cash economy aside in favour of creatively and collaboratively sharing the abundance around us.'*

Mr Dissanayake's article suggests that a somewhat similar project might be started, involving the 'giving, receiving… and sharing' of literary works, in such a way as to cost writers nothing to circulate them, and readers nothing to receive them and pass them on in an act of sharing. 'Publishing' a novel as a 'read only' text on line (with or without a password restriction) is an experiment in using the simple technology of email to circulate quality writing at no cost to writer or reader. The knowledge that such experiments are being tried out has inspired some local writers to share their own work in this way.

Writers who are interested in reading work that has been published online in this manner, or in circulating their own work among a select circle of readers without resorting to self-publishing, are welcome to contact *New Ceylon Writing* at newceylonwriting@gmail.com to find out more about this initiative.

Our Cover

*New Ceylon Writing'*s cover presents a modern interpretation of the *hansa*, the sacred bird of Dvarga Loka, who possesses, according to legend, the ability to separate milk from water when these two are mixed together, making the bird a fitting symbol for the literary critic who takes seriously the need to distinguish between good and bad literature.

Readers or collectors of rare books who have seen or might even own one or more of issues 1 to 5, will be familiar with the image of the *hansa*, in a version based on decorations at the Dalada Maligawa in Kandy, which appeared on the covers of all five issues. The background colours of those covers varied, from plain white (Nos.1 and 2) to yellow (No. 3), apricot (No.4) and grey (No.5). The funeral colours of grey and black for No. 5 were judged appropriate to a magazine that was published in 1984, a year of national mourning for the dead, following Sri Lanka's race riots of 1983.

For No. 6 (published online in December 2016) the editors, working towards a joyful revival of the magazine and with it the literary culture which suffered severe damage during the 3 decades of war that followed the events of 1983, have invited Shireen Senadhira to provide the 'new' *hansa* glowing on our cover, and express their thanks to Meghana Bahar for the layout and formatting of the publication as well as the creation of its online home.

Thank you, Shireen and Meghana!

CONTRIBUTORS

DEVI ARASANAYAGAM, a daughter of two distinguished Sri Lankan authors (Jean and Thiyagarajah Arasanayagam), was born in Sri Lanka and grew up there, completing her education in the US. She is the co-founder of the Fort York Food Bank (FYFB), which opened in 1998 to serve the needs of a vulnerable population by providing basic food supplies to members of the community in need and helping people get back on track. She has contributed an abstract painting to this issue of *New Ceylon Writing*.

JEAN ARASANAYAGAM is a Sri Lankan writer in English of fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry and plays. She deals with diverse themes in relation to her identity and life. She focuses on inheritance and identity, ethnicity, gender, travel, personal relationships, war and violence, to mention a few. Her work has been widely published and translated in Sri Lanka and abroad and has received several local and international awards for writing. An artist who works in many media including batik, she has contributed two of her micro-pen drawings to this issue of *New Ceylon Writing*.

AL AZOOMATH was born in Badulla in 1942, and now lives in Colombo. He started writing in the 1960s, and his poems, short stories, and novels have been published in several newspapers and magazines. The story 'Despondency' was first published in 2001, in *Vellai-Maram* (The White Tree), a first collection of short stories, and is reprinted here by courtesy of Mr Azoomath and his translator S Pathmanathan (see below).

MEGHANA BAHAR is an intersectional feminist, human rights activist, communications strategist and writer with over 17 years' experience working in the global intersections of gender, religion, health and media. Her academic background is in the fields of postmodern/postcolonial literature, mainly writings of coloured women authors, and film, particularly novels into films. She is accessible on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as @playwithcloud.

DR DEVIKA BRENDON is an academic, teacher, reviewer and creative writer. Her poetry and short stories have been published in academic and literary journals in Sri Lanka, Australia, India and Italy. She published her first book of poetry at the age of 16, and was awarded the Sydney Union Poetry Prize, the Adrian Consett Stephen Short Story Prize, and the Henry Lawson Memorial Prize for Poetry at the University

of Sydney. She founded the 'English Only' Teaching Academy in 2001, and teaches language and literature to students studying the O-Level and A-Level syllabus in Sri Lanka and Australia. In 2015 and 2016, Devika has been contributing reviews, opinion pieces, responses, feature articles and interviews to *Ceylon Today, The Sunday Island, The Sunday Times Plus, Groundviews* and Roar.lk. She founded the Reviewing and Editing Project (REP) in 2015.

SMRITI DANIEL. In a career spanning over a decade as a prolific freelance writer, Smriti Daniel has followed her diverse interests across a number of subjects ranging from the arts, in particular literature, to science reportage and travel writing. Her long-form pieces have explored the intersections of culture, politics, development and history. Her articles have appeared in *The Sunday Times, Al Jazeera, Scroll.in, SciDev.Net* and *The Hindu* among many others.

DR LAKSHMI DE SILVA. Retired Senior Lecturer, Department of English, University of Kelaniya. Recent publications: *12 Centuries of Sinhala Poetry – A Sri Lankan Anthology* (Translated with the Originals and Transliterations) Vijitha Yapa Publications, First Edition October 2004, Second Edition 2009. Her work in translation includes English versions of Martin Wickremasinghe's *Ape Gama* and *Gamperaliya*, and E R Sarachchandra's *Maname* and *Sinhabahu*.

NIVANKA FERNANDO is a poet and an artist. Her first foray into the literary world was through a collection of poetry and short stories titled *Bittersweet Serenade*, followed by a psychological thriller-horror novel, *The Savage Dance*. She is presently a full-time novelist with a somewhat popular book series on Kindle, much to her suspicion and disbelief.

EMERITUS PROFESSOR YASMINE GOONERATNE's last-published novel, *The Sweet and Simple Kind*, was shortlisted for the 2007 Commonwealth Writers Prize and the 2008 Dublin International IMPAC Literary Award. A sequel to the latter, titled *Rannygazoo: Or, The Mystery of the Missing Manuscript*, was published online in 2015. She is the Patron of the Jane Austen Society of Australia, and in 1990 received the Order of Australia for her contribution to literature and education.

DEEPA DHARSHINI INDRASOMA has been writing poetry since childhood. One of her poems 'Violence' was published in *New Ceylon Writing* (5-1984). Professionally,

she is an Associate member and Chartered Global Management Accountant (ACMA / CGMA) of the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants – UK. She has been working for 24 years, mainly in INGOs (ITDG-UK and BasicNeeds-UK). As Planning and Performance Manager, BasicNeeds-UK she was managing the planning and project monitoring of the organisation and its country programmes in Africa and Asia (Ghana / Uganda / Tanzania / India / Nepal / Pakistan / Laos / Vietnam / China / Sri Lanka).

CARL MULLER. A prolific Sri Lankan writer, best known as a novelist for his trilogy about a Burgher family in Sri Lanka: *The Jam Fruit Tree, Yakada Yaka* and *Once Upon A Tender Time*. He has won awards for *The Jam Fruit Tree* (1993) and his historical novel, *Children of the Lion*.

S PATHMANATHAN is a poet, a teacher and a translator. His translations have appeared in the *Journal of South Asian Literature* (1987), *Penguin New Writing in Sri Lanka* (1992) and *A Lankan Mosaic* (2002). He is the recipient of two State Literary Awards, four Provincial Awards, the Governor's Award and the Kalabhooshanam Award. Recent publications include two anthologies of Tamil Poetry and Tamil Fiction. His translation of Al Azoomath's story "Despondency" appears in this issue of *New Ceylon Writing*.

ENOKA IANTHE PERERA is a speech and language therapist and lecturer at the Department of Disability Studies, Faculty of Medicine, University of Kelaniya. She has a BA (Colombo), BSc SLT (Kelaniya) and is presently reading for a PhD (Colombo). Her need for expression through art forms grew from living amidst the beauty of topography, socio cultural and human diversity juxtaposed with violence in Sri Lanka. She paints and writes to express scenes, emotions and sensations; inward symbolic images connecting outward realities.

CHIRANTHI RAJAPAKSE writes both fiction and non fiction. She is a contributor to magazines and newspapers including *100 Words* Magazine (International Writing Program, University of Iowa, U.S.A.) and *Channels* Magazine (Sri Lanka). One of her stories was selected as the Regional Winner for Asia, a Short Story Competition organised by the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association (2000). She has worked as a journalist and feature writer for Wijeya Newspapers. The site https://chiranthiwriting.wordpress.com has some of her writing.

SHIRANI RAJAPASKE is a Sri Lankan poet and author. She won the Cha "Betrayal" Poetry Contest 2013 and was a finalist in the Anna Davidson Rosenberg Poetry Awards 2013. Her collection of short stories, *Breaking News* (Vijitha Yapa 2011) was shortlisted for the Gratiaen Award. Shirani's work appears or is forthcoming in, *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine, Litro, Silver Birch, International Times, Writers for Calais Refugees, The Write-In, Asian Signature, Moving Worlds, Citiesplus, Deep Water Literary Journal, Mascara Literary Review, Kitaab, Lakeview Journal, Cyclamens & Swords, Channels, Linnet's Wings, Spark, Berfrois, Counterpunch, Earthen Lamp Journal, Asian Cha, Dove Tales, Buddhist Poetry Review, About Place Journal, Skylight 47, The Smoking Poet, New Verse News, The Occupy Poetry Project and anthologies, The Best Asian Short Stories* (Kitaab 2017), *Flash Fiction International* (Norton 2015), Ballads (Dagda 2014), *Short & Sweet* (Perera Hussein 2014), *Poems for Freedom* (River Books 2013), *Voices Israel Poetry Anthology 2012, Song of Sahel* (Plum Tree 2012), *Occupy Wall Street Poetry Anthology, World Healing World Peace* (Inner City Press 2012 & 2014) and *Every Child Is Entitled to Innocence* (Plum Tree 2012). https://shiranirajapakse.wordpress.com .

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

FAITH RATNAYAKE was born in Britain. She is an environmentalist, interested in indigenous medicine, cultivation and healing techniques.

SHIREEN SENADHIRA is a freelance writer to many magazines and newspapers including *Lanka Woman, Loris, Sunday Funtimes, Montage* and *Mosaic* sections of *Ceylon Today* and *Sunday Observer*. She published a debut collection of stories and poems (Colombo 2007) and a collection of essays (Colombo 2016). She has designed the 'hansa' on the cover of *New Ceylon Writing*'s online issue (2016). She is a member of the Wadiya Group of Writers in Colombo and the English Writers Cooperative of Sri Lanka.

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

VASIKA UDURAWANE has been writing creatively for many years but it was only in 2013, with the first Write to Reconcile workshop that he began to learn from the best, to fully utilise and hone his abilities. He has been writing both prose and poetry ever since and is currently working on a collection of his own. Whether or not it will be successful is doubtful because he's learned how much of a gamble an emotional outpouring about bitterness and love can be. He is currently a first year student at Peradeniya University and is a natural history writer for the science news site Earth Archives.

RANGA WICKRAMASINGHE, a physician, has done much to carry forward the writing of his late father, the novelist Martin Wickramasinghe, including the administration of the Trust established in Martin Wickramasinghe's name and the translation (with Dr Lakshmi de Silva and others) of his novels and stories.

GRACE WICKREMESINGHE, a law student at the University of London, is currently ranked third in World's Universities Debating Championship - Public Speaking 2016 and was the youngest and only Asian in the finals.

LARA WIJESURIYA is a student at Holy Family Convent, Bambalapitiya, who will sit for A / Level examinations this year (2016), her subjects being English Literature, Mass Media Studies and Sri Lankan and World History. She sings Alto in her school and church choirs and is the second in a family of four siblings. Enjoys photography and plays the guitar.

TAMZIE WIJESURIYA (her given name Timaandra) is currently studying archaeology, English and classics at the University of Peradeniya. The eldest of four children, she looks to her slightly mad family, nature and extremely involved dreams for inspiration in her writing. She writes poems, mostly due to her inability to think up plots and because they’re shorter.

MINOLI WIJETUNGA is a teacher who aspires to live by Emily Dickinson's lines of "helping one fainting Robin unto his nest again". Having a Bachelors degree in English and English Language Teaching, she is looking for her own “great perhaps".

How to Submit Your Work for the 2017 Issue

Submission Deadline: 31 May 2017

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

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

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

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

Please email your submissions to the magazine at its email address newceylonwriting@gmail.com any time after 1 January 2017, state the genre in which you are submitting and add your last name. It should be “genre_last name” for example Fiction_ Perera or Poetry_Perera.