

EDITOR'S  
NOTE

Here are the winners of our latest SLR writing competition. We received a multitude of submissions with wide (and wild) interpretations of the number "twenty-two". The panel of judges credited the writers and poets presented here for their originality, command of language, expression of thought and new perspectives. Entries have been edited for formatting and grammatical purposes. "What's in a number?" one could be so bold as to paraphrase the Great Bard. You'll have to read today's SLR to decide!

MUNIZE MANZUR



NAVEED SHADMAN HOSSAIN

"Mmm..."  
He seemed to be in a paradoxical state of discomfort and pleasure.  
"It's as if you've never tasted anything spicy before," I said. "You have to pay for that, mind you."  
"Of course I will," he grinned.  
Soon enough, the hot sauce began its attack and he began to draw in cool air to soothe his burning tongue.  
"Oi, give me a cold Coke!"  
"All right, hold your horses." I replied, walking over to the refrigerator. A few minutes later he had emptied the bottle. I shook my head at him wearily.  
"You're one strange customer," I quipped. "You spend over thirty minutes deciding what to order, and then the next thirty

## WINNER (SHORT STORY)

## Change

minute you slowly eat a couple of French-fries. Now, it's as if something has possessed you. You finished a burger in less than...what, five minutes?"  
The man let out a roar of laughter, earning him a few questioning glances from the other customers.  
"Seven minutes and thirty seconds to be more precise, my friend!" he bellowed, glancing down at his watch. "Bill, please!"  
By the time I brought his bill, he had already taken his wallet out.  
"I hope I haven't caused you any discomfort!" he laughed. "I just have..."  
he stopped dead. It was as if he had seen a ghost!  
"Are you alright?" I asked cautiously.  
"Oh no, oh no, oh no..." he stammered, "This can't be!"  
"What is it, sir? Are you short on money?"

"No it's not that...it's..." He thrust the paper in front of my face. "I didn't know there was VAT!" he wailed. "I chose my meal in such a way so that I would get back an even number, divisible by five and two! I was supposed to pay four hundred and fifty taka and now I see a six percent VAT! Argh...just take it!"  
He handed me a crumpled five hundred taka note, seemingly exhausted from his sudden outburst. I was at a loss for words. "Fella must have some form of OCD," the cashier said to me when I told him about it. I handed him the money. "Here's the change," the cashier said.  
When I walked back to the table, the peculiar customer had fled, leaving behind a clean plate and an empty bottle. I stood confused, holding twenty-two takas in my hand.

## 1st RUNNER-UP (SHORT STORY)

## 22 Shaliks Are For...

AHMED BHUIYAN

The beeps of the monitors were mute for him. Everything was fading away. Food no longer had any taste; he simply chewed and swallowed to appease the nurses who watched him with eagle eyes. When they held his wrist they would apologize if they had to use force, not realizing that his sense of touch had diminished to the point where he no longer felt their fingers. Only his eyes remained sharp and focused. They would take in everything they could, desperately burning the visions into memory. He kept thinking: if this had to be the last thing he was going to see, he would remember it with as much detail as possible.  
His bed faced a window through which he could see a giant tree. It shaded his room from the direct sunlight. The leaves of the tree, small and pointed, glistened with the morning rain. As he watched the swaying leaves, he saw a tiny brown bird with orange-yellow markings. He racked his brains trying to remember the name of the bird. Ah, Shalik.  
The nurses heard him mutter something, but they could not decipher it. They asked him if he needed anything. He shook his head, his eyes still locked on the small bird.  
"One for sorrow," he said as he watched the bird walk on the branch, pecking at the leaves, looking for something to eat. Soon it was joined by another shalik.  
"Two for joy," he added.  
Soon the two birds were joined by two more and he groped his memory for the childhood rhyme for four. It took a moment. "Four for boy."  
He smiled to himself, satisfied with himself for remembering the rhyme.  
The four birds were joined by four more. He did not know the rhyme beyond four, but as the birds hopped and chirped on the branch, he tried to continue the rhyme, making it up the best he could.  
"Five for a girl. Six for a pearl. Seven for...for..."  
Words failed him. His brain felt foggy, but he kept muttering to himself. The nurses ignored him, realizing that his time was near.  
The branch became more and more populated with shalik



birds. Five more joined in, bringing the total to thirteen. The branch was beginning to bend under their collective weight. Yet, it did not break as more birds perched.  
Finally, there were twenty-two shaliks. They were not hopping around, not poking at the branch for grubs to eat. Instead, they were unusually calm and still. They were all staring at him through the window.  
He could feel his heart slowing down. The world began to turn grey. Noises faded away. All he could see were the birds staring at him.  
"Twenty-two...Twenty-two for my soul."  
Then he was gone.

## 2nd RUNNER-UP (SHORT STORY)

## The Missing Piece of a Singular Life



LABIB AHSAN

Many years had passed since I last saw him. He used to sit under the bridge during the hot summer days; the quintessential *jhaal-muri-wala*. I used to watch him every day from the window of my school bus. The journey from my house to my school was a long one, made even longer by the traffic of Dhaka. I used to anticipate these little checkpoints on the road just to make my journeys a little less tedious. The colourful billboard, the bypass road divided from the main street by a single piece of bamboo, the bustling fish market,

the small iron gate of an old house and the ever present *jhaal-muri-wala*. Those were my milestones.

He was an old man with a long white beard. His skin was tanned and shiny. I don't know what colour his hair was. As a matter of fact, I don't know if he even had any hair. He used to tie a red piece of cloth on his head which hid his hair completely. He always wore a white shirt and a red *lungi*. I never saw him clad in anything else. That used to fascinate me. Back then I was not aware of the fact that a large number of people could only afford a single *lungi* and a shirt. I often entertained myself thinking of the old man's closet. I used to imagine it filled with fifty white shirts and fifty red *lungis*. Like the cartoons, his clothes never changed.

I watched the old man for three years. Then my family moved to a new residential area. I transferred to a new school. I lost my green bicycle. I had my first big fight. My first crush. My first facial hair. My first girlfriend. My first break up. I went to college. Graduated. Got a job. Got married. Many years passed. Twenty-two to be exact. Never again did I see the old *jhaal-muri-wala*.

Not like that makes a difference. I mean, who cares anyway? What difference does it make? Why would the world notice the absence of a poor old *jhaal-muri-wala* who once had a closet full of fifty white shirts and fifty red *lungis*?

His family would notice. And once, an 8 year old boy would have too. The boy, whose existence was unknown to the *jhaal-muri-wala*. Isn't that enough?

## WINNER (POETRY)

Boy With Pink  
Sandals

Yasmin Alam

From my balcony I look down at  
Dhanmondi lake, leafy park, busy street  
And watch slices of life unfolding.  
A little boy plays in the park.  
A naked child, small and dark.  
Grandma washes him in the lake  
He squirms and giggles and squeals  
Jumps out with pink sandals on his feet  
And runs about with unbridled glee.  
I watch this scene and think:  
*Nengtoo baccha*, beggar boy,  
How many such moments of joy  
Will come your way?  
Life will be hard and cruel for you.  
Where will you be at twenty-two?

## 1st RUNNER-UP (POETRY)

## Wish

Tausif Bari

I wept endlessly the day I turned twenty-two,  
You were not there to wish me anymore.  
Just a year back all I had was you  
And I couldn't have asked for more.

The poet said, the ocean refused to stop kissing the shoreline,  
No matter how many times it was sent away.  
Was it us she was talking about?  
Because it was not like this, on my last birthday.

Today I turn twenty-three,  
I yearn for your voice, your smile, your kiss.  
Maybe when I turn twenty-four,  
You will again be my bliss.

## 2nd RUNNER-UP (POETRY)

## Like a Bird

Md. Ziaul Haque

I wish I could,  
Fly for 22 days like a bird!  
And rule over the clouds,  
Being glad.  
I'd see things hidden,  
And know the unknown,  
I'd find a branch to rest on,  
Watching how the cattle are drawn.  
I'd circle around the flying kite,  
And look at the happy faces  
Of the children of light,  
And watch over their races.  
I'd drink fresh water,  
From nearby ponds,  
And resume my flight after  
A few seconds.  
I'd take wing across the seas,  
Drawing pleasure in the beauty,  
Of the mountains and trees,  
Before returning home safely.