

# Bones Will Crow: A Selection Of Contemporary Burmese Poetry

EDITED BY KO KO THETT AND JAMES BYRNE

The Burmese translations published here serve as the initial feature from an anthology project that has been in preparation since January 2009. Back then I was introduced to Vicky Bowman, former British Ambassador to Burma (2002-2006), and her husband, the artist Htein Lin. I was attempting to solicit a brief introduction to Burmese poetry to be published alongside new translations. Later that year Vicky and Htein Lin wrote a piece on 'Contemporary Burmese Poetry' for *The Wolf*: 21 ([http://www.wolfmagazine.co.uk/21\\_burmese.php](http://www.wolfmagazine.co.uk/21_burmese.php)). Previously, my only real involvement with Burmese poetry was to publish two versions of poems by Saw Wai, undertaken by Niall McDevitt and Myint Swe. At the time of going to press Saw Wai was imprisoned in the notorious Insein prison near Rangoon for writing an apparently-slushy love poem entitled 'February 14th', which acrostically criticised "power mad" General Than Shwe, the former leader of Burma's ruling military junta. On each February 14th during Saw Wai's jail term hundreds of Valentine cards were posted through the door of the Burmese Embassy in London, and his poems were read by McDevitt with a bodhran drum for accompaniment. After English PEN protested against Saw Wai's imprisonment he was released after little more than two years: merciful by the standards of the *tatmadaw*, who have ruled Burma since declaring martial law in September 1988.

There has never been an anthology of contemporary Burmese poetry published outside Burma, which is odd considering the quality of work available. From pre-colonial Burma to the contemporary scene poetry has always been the most common form of literature. Inside Burma, the most significant anthologies published in the last ten years have been edited by Maung Tha Noe, a leading linguist and teacher of Burmese and international poetry, and Mya Zin, a prominent scholar. Maung Tha Noe's *Burmese Verse: A Selection* was published in Rangoon in 2008 and includes some of the most beloved poets of twentieth century Burmese poetry, such as Min Thu Win (1906-2004), Zawgyi (1907-1990) and Dagon Taya, now in his nineties.

As co-editors of *Bones Will Crow*, ko ko thett and I have made some difficult decisions concerning chronology, particularly when leaving out the aforementioned trio of poets. We decided to select explicitly from contemporary writers who exemplify the post-modern aesthetic that has, once again, extended the Burmese literary tradition. The poets in this feature, and the anthology as a whole, include the most significant poets from Burma who are writing today, such as Zeyar Lynn, who claims to be more interested in "poetry of the brain" than of the heart. This was a radical shift for Burmese poetry in the 1990s and Zeyar Lynn's approach, along with his translations of Ashbery, Bernstein, Szymborska and others new to the Burmese canon, has influenced poets from his own generation – like Khin Aung Aye and Moe Way – to move away from the traditional strictures of conventional form, and appreciate 'imported' forms like LANGUAGE-orientated poetry.

Zeyar Lynn (whose nickname is 'The Guru') has also influenced a new generation of Burmese women poets, like Pandora and Eaindra. Perhaps a reflection of prevailing misogynistic values, poetry in Burma has for too long been considered a man's sport, even a chance to woo women (or

at least keep them as the object of poetry rather than its practitioner). Things are starting to change, in part because of the emergence of a poetry that derives from the intellect as much as from the passions, but also because publishing opportunities in Burma have changed. From their bases in Singapore, Pandora and Eindra both publish poems on their blogs as much as in print magazines. In Burma itself, magazines are often heavily censored by the strong arm of the Ministry of Information, and Burmese poets on home soil have to be incredibly inventive for their work to be printed "pure" or unredacted. All poets have a pen-name, and there is a good deal of respect given for an original one (Thitsar Ni's roughly translates as 'Loyal Red'). However, many poets who are seen to be unsupportive or threatening to the junta are imprisoned on charges relating to their writing; thousands of artist 'dissidents' languish in the prisons of Burma, many on long sentences, suffering torture and living in inhumane conditions.

Though these may be inextricably linked, the message of our anthology is poetry over politics. In fact, none of the poets included in our selection of sixteen is actively or overtly political (Tin Moe being the exception. He died exiled in California in 2007). Saw Wai, currently the most publicised Burmese poet in the West because of his imprisonment and the events that preceded it, didn't make our final cut. It should be added that much of the poetry in the anthology could be seen as having nothing to do with internal Burmese politics; from Pandora's 'Siege' to Zeyar Lynn's 'Beards', these are playfully iterative, high-imagination poems that prevail in spite of the oppressive tactics of the regime. Burma has been rightly criticised by the West for their human rights violations and rife political corruption. It is our hope that this selection offers an alternative view into Burma, one that enriches an understanding of the Burmese people through their deep literary traditions.

*James Byrne*



ZEYAR LYNN, who lives in Rangoon, is a poet, critic, writer, translator and language instructor. After 1990 he instigated a wider appreciation of postmodern and LANGUAGE poetry forms into Burmese and is seen by many as the most influential living poet in Burma. He has translated many Western poets into Burmese, including Donald Justice, John Ashbery and Charles Bernstein. In *Jacket2* he recently published an insightful prose piece on about the changing traditions of Burmese poetry. <https://jacket2.org/commentary/language-oriented-poetry-myanmar>.

## The Ways Of The Beards

There is a hair 'The rhymeless of the world, unite!' in Marx's beard  
 Not growing a beard is existentialism, says Sartre  
 Helen's beard that has launched a thousand ships  
 Beards looking for a chin like words for a poem  
 Beard is the war-torn town of the chin in civil war  
 In the history of chin, beard is the defeated truth  
 The world burned down at Marilyn's beard  
 The mediocrities look elegant in media beards  
 Honoured with flexible beard awards  
 The beard of the capital decorated with electric lamps  
 O...the beard of dreams beyond form  
 The beard of the desert whirling at the end of my vision  
 A small red mole (still running) on the beard of social realism  
 We have emerged from the raincoat of the famous Bluebeard  
 Beard sobbing over my shoulder  
 This has happened, this has happened in Maria, this has happened in Beard  
 The news of the beard-ghost harrowing, yet scientifically proven  
 The youthful beard, the powerful storm  
 Just take care of your beard, language will take care of itself  
 Instead of writing poetry, why not just grow beard  
 Hey...beards of the world, let's get out of the lanugo  
 Into the scene of the beard on trial, many myths are said to be trafficked in  
 Probing at the word, the scar of the beard was found  
 'Don't let the flag fall, Fight until only your beard remains' say the Bansai T-shirts  
 Stop press news 'The Beard has just called himself You'  
 The spokesbeard has been shaved temporarily  
 His beard was also silenced, so goes the story  
 Post-beardism and the history of histories scattered  
 The robbery of the three primary roots of the beard  
 'A Handbook to Mental Attitude Analysis' by Zen Beard  
 The morning of the humming beards in the cage  
 The virtuous beards who are no saints  
 Sisyphus rolling up the untrimmable beard of the gods  
 This is my favourite, this beard is my brand, she said  
 History will forgive my beard  
 To install electric power all over the country,  
 To establish beard power all over the land  
 Go away... you swine-head... you only love your beard  
 A beard is a beard is a beard, a rose is a rose is a rose  
 All of you belong to the beardless generation  
 God is playing dice with the beard.

Translated by ko ko thett