

BONES

AN ANTHOLOGY OF BURMESE POETRY

WILL

EDITED BY KO KO THETT AND JAMES BYRNE

CROW

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*ko ko thett
dedicates this book to
his parents and to a little goby*

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When the monsoon breaks in Rangoon, the red brick buildings of the old university stream with rain. You can see the vivid green undergrowth swelling before your eyes as the silver sheets down.

Rangoon University was one of Asia's top universities in the 1940s and 1950s when the first nine poets in this anthology were children but today it is empty of undergraduates. They have been shunted to the outskirts, to huge campuses custom-built for surveillance and control. Yet this university is where Burmese students in the 1920s led nationalist protests against British rule and also brought about a turning point for modern Burmese poetry.

Burmese literature goes back a millennium. Its soul was formed by Buddhism, its language is full of monosyllables and subtle tonalities which make it a perfect habitat for echoes, reflections, intricate rhyme. The earliest surviving writings are stone inscriptions: poetry must already have been written then, since the earliest surviving work that is not an inscription is a very sophisticated poem indeed, 'The Cradle Song of the Princess of Arakan', 1455. From the fifteenth century, poetry was the driving literary medium and until the eighteenth century most of it was in four-syllable lines linked by an internal 'climbing rhyme': the fourth syllable of the first line was rhymed by the third syllable of the second line and the second syllable of the third line – a style called *lei-lon tabaik*, 'four words one foot.' Then new influences swept in, above all the Indian epic *The Ramayana*. The eighteenth century was Burmese poetry's golden age, but in 1885 the British drove out the king and turned Burma into a colony of British India, demolishing poetry's court patronage.

The one plus of the new regime was that English was taught in schools. This opened up a new language and new literature and, in the 1920s, poetry became important in the nationalist movement against British rule. This is where Rangoon University comes in. The new poetry came not from the court but from the students. While marshalling new political energies, they also wanted a new style and voice: like other twentieth-century poets, they wanted a more direct relation with their readers.

They got it in *khitsan*, 'Testing the Times': poetry which rejected *lei-lon tabaik*, and court formalities. *Khitsan* went on into the 1960s and influenced the next generation, including Tin Moe, the oldest poet here. But as the world changes poets want to say new things

in new ways. In the late 1960s and 1970s poets inspired by translations of Vladimir Mayakovsky and T. S. Eliot began to write “rhymeless” poems.

This was controversial; it always is. To rhyme or not to rhyme? Britain’s “rhyming wars” started in the sixteenth century and though they are expressed differently in every decade show no sign of stopping. It is fascinating to see similar battles of form, voice and relation to readers fought out in another language and a different political and cultural landscape.

In every heritage, poets must tread not only between modernist and traditional but also between universal and particular, global and local. What happened locally to Burma in the sixties, however, differed radically from what happened elsewhere. It became ‘a Stone Age cave sealed by stones,’ as Maung Yu Py’s poem puts it (p. 257). Behind all the poems in *Bones Will Crow* is the shadow of ‘a great country... buried alive’. The last line of all here, so at odds with Burma’s monsoon humidity and warm rain, is ‘under the great ice sheet.’

The ice came down in 1962 with the military coup. Students demonstrated in Rangoon University, troops fired on them and destroyed the student union building, and ever since, Burmese poets have been largely cut off from the oxygen of other poets.

Poets need that oxygen (what would poetry in English be, if British poets of the fifteenth century had not been read Italian poems and discovered the sonnet?) but after 1962 foreign books were considered suspect and were hard to find. When the internet arrived elsewhere, it was forbidden in Burma.

If poetry is hard to get hold of it is even harder to write, in a world where censorship is an industry. ‘I wanted to walk but did not know which way to take,’ says Tin Moe:

And the earth
like fruit too shy to emerge
without fruit
in shame and sorrow
glances at me. (‘Desert Years’, p. 35)

But censorship, said Jorge Luis Borges (whose mother and sister were imprisoned for opposing Argentina’s dictator), is the mother of metaphor. It was true of Soviet and post-war East European poets; this anthology makes clear it is true today in Burma too.

Poetry is the commonest form of literature in Burma, and the most censored, yet poets are constantly inventing new ways of saying what they want, while trying to make sure both that no black oblongs cut out words on the page, and that nothing happens to their families or themselves.

The mother of metaphor is hard at work here behind the wonderful vitality, inventiveness and surreal humour. As in the 'beards' of Zeyar Lynn (p. 151), who in the 1990s renewed poetry yet again by turning from feeling, writing poems apparently from the head rather than the heart. Even under an ice sheet, poets find ways of moving forward, forging fresh ways to make the familiar strange so readers can see their own lives with new eyes.

The poetry landscape here is particular to Burma but also universal. In Pandora's 'The Scene of the City Siege by the Daft' (p. 239), the daft 'do as the Romans do' for 'the daft virus is airborne'. 'Lily' in Eaindra's poem (p. 223) feels like 'a tiny she-snake from the wicker-basket of the snake-charmer' but also 'serves beer,' pours 'a froth of giggles' for 'masters,' and feels like 'God's glitch' – in a voicing which could come from any morally live society. In ko ko thett's work, 'the burden of being bama' (p. 213) means 'living on/sawdust and shrimp paste,' but also (in 'Permanent Installations', p. 217) feeling a moment's kinship with 'a fox on a suburban path at midnight' as any suburban inhabitant of London might do.

This is a world of surveillance and vigilance and its poetry is up to it – these poems are vigilant too. What comes across most, from this wide variety of voices and styles, is a zest-filled alertness to the here and now, to 'rice seedlings dancing in the breeze,' (p. 211) counter-balanced by the long view: by 'history,' a word you hear often in *Bones Will Crow*. History, the poets' friend, means in this collection a bunch of very different poets taking an ancient tradition forward under almost impossible restrictions; and renewing it, as poets must, by challenging and re-forming the voice and the design: the way a poem hangs together.

We are pattern-making animals. We use form to make sense of the world around us and poetry is one of the most intense ways of doing that. Pattern is what we perceive; pattern is what we make in response. Most of us in the West are unlikely to share many elements in the world to which these voices are responding. Neither its pain (*dukkha*, the Buddhist concept of suffering, is always in

the background), nor its imaginative and cultural subtleties. But the human world these poems speak to through their images, humour, vivacity and grace, is ours too. There is so much here to learn from, to admire – and to love.

Ruth Padel

How have we selected a handful of poets for *Bones Will Crow* from probably more than a thousand living Burmese poets, not to mention the late and great ones?

We first thought of including *khitsan* poets, some of whom remain 'contemporary' and living – most prominently, Dagon Taya (b. 1919) and Kyi Aye (b. 1929). There are a great many poems in the *khitsan* canon, the first modern Burmese poetry movement that came to life in colonial Burma with the publication of *Khitsan Stories* (1933) and *Khitsan Poems* (1934) by Rangoon University students.

Burmese for contemporary is *khitpyaing*, which literally means 'parallel with the times'. The question that kept returning to us was how poets from Burma are responding to the times in what has been seemingly a hermit state since the 1960s – the decade which can be properly termed post-*khitsan* and that provides a starting point for *Bones Will Crow*. The poets represented here have come a long way from *khitsan* in their characteristic use of free verse, speech rhythm, colloquial language, *khitpor* and what Zeyar Lynn calls 'non-*khitpor*' poetics.

Zeyar Lynn introduces 'Burmese' poetry as 'Burmese / Myanmar'. The official name of the country is 'Myanmar', which also refers to what we call Burmese, the *lingua franca* of Burma, though the Burmese themselves often recognise either term. We are not trying to transcend the political, nor submit to it. For practical reasons alone, we have kept 'Burma' and 'Burmese', the terms most familiar to readers in the West. The same argument can be applied to our general preference for exonyms over autonyms. However, when it comes to near-untranslatable Buddhist concepts (such as *dukkha* and *metta*) and specific cultural references (for example, *yane* and *thanaka*), we have retained the originals. Burmese words are transliterated into English by conventional sound-to-sound correspondence or 'Burglish', often forgoing their tonal phonemics for the ease of the non-Burmese reader. A glossary can be found at the back of the book.

Gender representation is an ongoing issue for poetry in Burma. Burmese poetry (and Burmese society in general) continues to be male-dominated, even though there are encouraging signs of progress, particularly in the blogosphere. Ultimately we accept that a ratio of one to five in favour of men is an unfair balance for

any anthology, yet this equation might be considered somewhat favourable in light of the apparent gender imbalance in Burmese literature today.

As translators, we have felt privileged to receive invaluable comments and feedback from many of the poets themselves, including Maung Pyiyt Min, Khin Aung Aye, Zeyar Lynn, Eaindra, Pandora and Maung Yu Py. Along with all the poets who appear in this anthology, our sincere gratitude goes to Vicky Bowman, Htein Lin, Ruth Padel, Maung Tha Noe, Christopher Merrill, Anna Allott, Justin Watkins, Niall McDevitt, Kyi Aye, Khet Mar, Sandeep Parmar, Kyaw Wunna, Moe Cho Thin, Moe Moe Hnin, Patricia Herbert, Yusef Komunyakaa, Deborah Landau, Timo Virtala, Ian Bourgeot, Kyaw Kyaw Latt, Gerhard Köberlin and Yee Yee Htun.

ko ko thett & James Byrne

WHAT IS 'CONTEMPORARY' IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
MYANMAR / BURMESE POETRY?

There are three main ways in which the term 'contemporary' is used and understood in the current Myanmar / Burmese poetry scene which reflect notable changes in the country's poetic landscape of the new century. Today, post-modern, language, conceptual, performance and online poetics mingle somewhat uneasily with *khitpor*, whose origin dates back to the Moe Wei movement of the early 1970s. *Khitpor*, originally avant-garde and regarded as 'modern poetry', has become mainstream as it ages, in the way literary movements often do. Teasing out the differences in the use of 'contemporary' may shed light on the current situation of Myanmar / Burmese poetry and the trends and tendencies of its emergent poetics.

The first interpretation of the term takes the neutral view of seeing diverse poetics as existing at the same time, 'of the time(s),' so to speak. It is neutral in the sense that while it accepts the different styles and modes of expression that have emerged, it overlooks the underlying oppositional and conflicting ideas about poetry, and the struggle for recognition that new poetics face. Its espousal of 'peaceful co-existence' of *khitpor* and non-*khitpor* poetics in general plays down the conflict the latter had to face in carving out a space in *khitpor* hegemony, a struggle which is still far from over. Since the turn of the millennium, numerous articles and interviews in which poets and critics have taken sides concerning the issue of the 'legitimacy' of *khitpor* over 'illegitimate' or 'anti-poetry, especially language-oriented poetry, have appeared. After the new non-*khitpor* poetry was accepted, albeit grudgingly, voices calling for a view of all styles and modes of poetry as being equally valid and contemporaneous have emerged; hence, the broadest use of the term '*khitpyaing*' to signify contemporary Myanmar / Burmese poetry.

The second view of 'contemporary' is held by some *khitpor* poets who want to represent themselves as those who write 'of the time(s)' in both form and content, in order to distinguish themselves from non-*khitpor* poets whom they regard as 'stunt' writers and 'word-salad' makers rather than serious poets who engage with socio-political issues of the day. However, although remain-

ing mainstream, they sense a threat to their thirty-or-so years of supremacy while recognizing the need to renew and revitalize their craft.

Some, especially the proponents of 'People's Poetry,' hold that the serious writing should be only in *khitpor* mode. To them the terms *khitpor* (modern) and *khitpyaing* (contemporary) are synonymous, and can be used interchangeably. What is important is the subject matter. This seems to be an echo of Dagon Taya, the grand old living legend of literature in Myanmar / Burma, who famously said: 'You may do away with rhyme, not with ideology.' The famous axiom was first heard during the 1970s, when *khitpor* poetry itself was a contested idea, a site of struggle between Marxist-Leninist poets and experimental 'modern' poets such as Phaw Way, Aung Cheimt, Maung Chaw Nwe, Thukhamein Hlaing, Myay Chit Thu, and Thitsar Ni.¹

In 1968, Maung Tha Noe, an eminent linguist and literary scholar, published his influential book of translations of Western modernist and romantic poets, *Htinn Yuu Pin Yeik* (The Shade of the Pine Tree) which, some say, led poets like Aung Cheimt to discard the rigid 4-3-2 rhyme scheme and revolutionize Myanmar / Burmese poetry with the introduction of free verse or blank verse. In the same year, Mya Zin, another literary scholar, brought out his *Manifesto of Modern (Burmese) Poetry*. The term 'modern sensibility' was then added by another notable poet and scholar, Minn Hla Nyunt Kyuu. These three scholars, who were soon dubbed the 'Zin-Noe-Kyuu' gang by the leftist poets, were seen to have favoured experimental and innovative invigoration

¹ Thitsar Ni, a respected and well-known poet, critic and writer, published his collection of articles 'Clarification of Modern Poetry and the Evolution of Myanmar Poetry' in June 2007 in a bid to situate Modern Poetry (a term he consistently uses instead of *khitpor*) in the historical development of twentieth-century Myanmar Poetry. He deems himself the pioneer of postmodern poetry with his book *Arrow of Myinsaingthu*, first published in 1978 and again in 2006. In the foreword, he wrote that he had planted the seed of postmodernism in Myanmar literature as early as 1974. The poems included consisted of calligrammes and visual poems. Recently, he has also come up with a book startlingly titled *The End of Poetry*.

of the poetry at that time.²

It was Dagon Taya who intervened and brought about a reconciliation between the leftist and the experimental-conscious poets, and *khitpor* became the third poetry movement in modern Myanmar / Burma, after *khitsan* (the 'testing the times' of the 1930s) and Taya's own 'New Literature Movement' of the following decades. Even though I personally lament the loss of the experimental wing of *khitpor*, which seemed to have obeyed Taya's stress for ideology, it was no doubt the right call *vis-à-vis* the oppressive regime of General Ne Win and his military-backed Myanmar / Burmese Socialist Programme Party (1974-1988). To the old guard of People's Poetry, 'contemporary' implies a veiled anti-government sentiment, and the term would have remained ideological had not the Soviet bloc collapsed, the Cold War ended, the Berlin Wall come down, the Tiananmen massacre occurred, and Myanmar / Burma's 1988 pro-democracy movement been brutally crushed.

The third use of the term 'contemporary' may indeed be truly 'contemporary' in the sense of 'most recent', having appeared around 2003. A sense of divorce between *khitpor* on the one hand and the twentieth century on the other is explicit here, and undoubtedly, Zaw Zaw Aung, the leading proponent of post-modernism, helped to bring forth a wind of change by introducing the major tenets of post-structuralism / post-modernism. For the first time the younger generation, who knew only a few Marxist

² 'Fed up with all [these] clichés and hackneyed phrases of Socialist Realism, a search for new poetry began in earnest in the late 1960s. The veteran poet of *Khitsan* [*khit san*] fame, Min Thuwun, ran a weekly poetry workshop at his home in the university campus. Mya Zin, a translator who usually renders Burmese poetry into English, and Maung Maung Nyunt a.k.a. Nyunt Kyu [Min Hla Nyunt Kyuu], a poet and a language scholar, wrote articles on modern poetry. I myself published an anthology of translated verse (English, European, and American, Romantic, as well as modernist), the first of its kind in the country. One anthology followed another. A great hullabaloo ensued – those who opposed anything modern and were self-appointed custodians of old values railing against those who advocated modernity. Against all such odds modern Burmese poetry was embarked on a new course.' – 'Modern Burmese Poetry', an article by Maung Tha Noe in *Moe Ma Kha*, October 2008. moemakha.org.

luminaries, could read Lyotard, Foucault, Barthes, Derrida and other continental philosophers. In poetry, the Russian Futurist Mayakovsky, the Chilean poet Neruda, and the East European trio of Popa, Herbert, and Holub, were previous models before the appearance of post-Soviet poets Prigov, Rubinstein and Dragomoshchenko, the New York school of Ashbery and O'Hara, the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets Bernstein, Perelman, Silliman, Andrews and Hejinian the Conceptualist Goldsmith, the 'Post-Language' poets, the Flarfists, and the Nobel Laureates Milosz and Szymborska, among others. Access to the internet was definitely a major cause for international poetry to enter the Myanmar / Burmese poetry scene, which previously had been cut off from the world at large and the UNESCO World Poetry Day became an annual event in the country.

What most distinguishes these 'contemporary' poetries, according to this third use of the term, is the freedom to experiment with diverse poetic styles, modes, and even across genres. In a word, 'contemporary' poetry is non-*khitpor*. It is not 'lyric' poetry. It is not the poetry of self-expression. In the backdrop of an excessive, emotionally-drenched mainstream poetry, it has turned somewhat cerebral, a poetry of ideas rather than an expression of feelings. Non-*khitpor* is new in the Myanmar / Burmese context. It has all been the direct result of 'the turn to language' – contemporary literary theory having played a vital part in its inception. Collages of found language, extensive use of disjunctive and polyvocal strategies, catalogue or 'list' poems, prose poems, and 'hybrid' poems abound. This is what I would call 'Contemporary', with a capital C, the new opportunity and practice of freedom of forms, the Myanmar / Burmese poetic spring. Moe Way, among others, and the pemscool³ online poets are 'Contemporary' in this sense.

The turn to experimentalism and innovation in form by the loosely-linked, non-movement, non-school, non-group 'Contemporary' poets, however, does not in any way mean that they do not

³'pemscool' is the name of a group of 5 'emergent /anti-mainstream / Flarf-oriented' poets in their early 20s who started out as online poets (i.e. not 'print' poets) but who have now had two collections of poems published .

engage with social and political issues. Far from being apolitical, their poems in their very formation oppose the lyric, voice-centred, epiphanic-closure modes of the mainstream. This opposition to the mainstream (or dominant) is itself political in the Myanmar / Burmese cultural context. Subversive sentiments seep through the lines, flicker in polysemic juxtapositions, and disappear into some safe areas of permitted space in the poem. The indeterminacy of such poems may be anathema to *khitpor*, but these poems drive poets and readers alike to make their own meanings within the given poetic context. The drawback is that most of these poems cannot be rendered into English (or any other language) without doing damage to the aesthetic, the construction of free-ranging meanings, and the potential for different ways of readings.

As such, the value-free use of the term 'contemporary,' *khitpor*'s refashioning itself as contemporary and non-*khitpor* as Contemporary poetry reflect the truly contemporary gush of freedom for post-avant experimentalism currently seen in Myanmar / Burmese poetry today. Where is all this leading us? What are the clearly observable trends? One is the oppositional tactics being used by *khitpor* against non-*khitpor* poetries in an attempt to reclaim itself. The usual binary oppositions are evident: authentic versus inauthentic, original versus imitation, lived experience versus theory-based, mastery of language versus uncontrolled language play, poetic language versus unpoetic language, coherent versus incoherent, structured versus chaotic, emotion versus intellect, domestic / homegrown versus foreign / imported, organic versus gimmick, accessible versus difficult; the list goes on. However, some established *khitpor* poets, most prominently, Maung Pyiyt Min and Khin Aung Aye, have incorporated Contemporary techniques into their recent works, creating interesting hybrids. Khin Aung Aye's most recent book of poetry titled *54 lines dictated by a pure mind* (2011) is a distinct departure from the his earlier *khitpor* mode.

Another trend is moving away from the perpetually controversial concept of 'poetry' towards 'writing'. Since the poems of younger poets are dismissed as non-poetry, some of them are labelling their work 'writings'. One such poet, a younger poet in his late 20s, Lunn Sett Noe Myat, called his latest book of poems *Written Lines and Composed Sentences* rather than poetry, deliber-

ately to demarcate his 'writings' from mainstream poems. One of his poems / writings, 'These are Writings', ends with: 'These are / not (poetic) compositions any more (these are) writings such enjoyable feeling such sensation.'⁴ In a way, this move signals a turn from expression to construction, from transparent language to expressive lyricism; to becoming more aware of the mediating and constituting role of language and exploring ways of constructing poems that also 'bare the device'.

A related effect of the *Khitpor*-Contemporary conflict is that some *khitpor* poets are deliberately making their poems more accessible to general readership as a reaction against 'difficult,' 'experimental,' 'theory-based,' 'intellectual,' 'elitist' poems. Ironically, the two chief *khitpor* poets 'simplifying' their poems are Aung Cheimt and Thukhamein Hlaing. An example is Aung Cheimt's 'Hamburger Eater', published in *ICON* magazine in September 2010:

HAMBURGER EATER

So, you are a hamburger, aren't you?
 So, you are a hamburger, aren't you?
 So, you are a hamburger, aren't you?
 So, you are a hamburger, aren't you?

If such a poem had been written by anyone of lesser stature, it would surely not be considered poetry at all. But, Aung Cheimt is Aung Cheimt, and if Aung Cheimt wrote it, it must be poetry. Full-stop. It just means that non-*khitpor*, contemporary poetries will have to try harder to be accepted as poetry, as 'new' poetry, as 'poetry of the time'.

Zeyar Lynn

⁴ At Lunn Sett Noe Myatt's book launch, a veteran leftist poet and editor, Maung Sein Ni, called on Lunn Set to carry on the fine tradition of 'reflecting' the times in his poems, while I addressed the hope that he, and the poets of his generation, would carry on 'experimenting' in poetry and write of the twenty-first century. Thus, the lines between *khitpor* and contemporary poetry were drawn publicly.

TIN MOE



PHOTO: KYAW WUNNA

TIN MOE (1933-2007) was born in the village of Kanmye, some eighty miles south-west of Mandalay. At 26, he published his first collection of poems, *Hpan-mi-ein* (The Glass Lantern), which won a national award. He moved to Rangoon in 1967, where he worked in the translation and publication department of Rangoon University for twenty years. After the pro-democracy uprising in 1988, Tin Moe became an 'Intellectual Committee' member of the National League for Democracy, writing poems (such as 'The Years We Didn't See the Dawn') expressing his disillusionment with the military government's socialist dictatorship, as a result of which he was held without charge for six months, then confined for four years in Insein prison. In 1999, he escaped Burma and took political asylum in the United States.

In 2002, Tin Moe won a Hellman and Hammett grant and in 2004 the Prince Claus Award for Literature in the Netherlands. Author of twenty-five books, eighteen of them poetry collections, he died in Los Angeles in 2007.

မိုးမသောက်တဲ့နှစ်များ

၂၀၂

မနိုးတဝက်၊ နိုးတဝက်နဲ့
အိပ်မက် မက်နေတဲ့ကာလ။

လျှောက်ချင်လှပေမဲ့
ဘယ်လမ်းကလျှောက်ရမှန်းမသိ။

မသိတဝက်၊ သိတဝက်နဲ့
နေ့ရက်တွေပါး
ဗိုက်ခေါက်သား၊ ဂုတ်သားတွေတက်
အသက်အရွယ်သာကြီးလာရော
ဘယ်ခရီးမှမပေါက်ရတဲ့ကာလ။

ကာလဆိုတဲ့ယူဇနာ
ဘူတာစဉ် ရထားဖြတ်သလို
အမှတ်မဲ့ ဖြတ်နေခဲ့ပြီ။

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ကမ်းခြေတလျှောက်
ပန်းအကြွေတွေ ကောက်ရင်း
စမ်းရေသောက်ရတာလည်း မရှိမဟုတ်။
ဒါပေမဲ့
မရှိတစ်ဘဝ ရှိခဏမျှသာ...။

ကျေးတောကင်္ဂါ
ငေးမောပြီးမြို့တက်လာ
တို့ရက်တွေဟာ
ရာဇာမဟုတ်တော့။

ဇာတာအစုတ်နဲ့
ဝါစာကမာလုပ်ပြီး
ဇရာတောအုပ်ထဲ ဝင်ရပြီ။