

*From the Archive of Censored Materials* by ko ko thett

**Reader's report by Kyi May Kaung**

With his acclaimed first book, *Bones will Crow: 15 Contemporary Burmese Poets* (ARC, UK 2012 & NIUP, US 2013), co-edited by James Byrne – and his numerous other contributions of Burmese poems to international journals – Burma-born poet, literary translator and anthologist ko ko thett has almost singlehandedly put contemporary Burmese poetry on the global map.

Until 2011 much of the poetry written in Burma was underground, and in samizdat form, of which ko ko thett probably knows too well as he was a dissident poet at Rangoon Institute of Technology in the 1990s until he left the country for his political troubles in 1997. In 1997-2002 when I wrote and presented a Burmese and international dissident poetry program for a DC-based Burmese language program broadcasting to Burma, I thought at the end of the first program that I would exhaust my material and it would die a natural death.

Instead, poems came to me out of the woodwork, from the nascent Internet (email in those days) and through air mail or snail mail, sometimes from poetry fans who painstakingly hand-copied silvered-out poems from Burmese magazines by first carefully scraping the *gnwe hmin* or silver ink off. After 2005 and the advent and great popularity of blogs in Burma, this task of reading and primary collection and selection might have grown easier, but given the volume of what is being written today in poetic form in Burmese, it would still be a considerable task.

As *Bones will Crow* introduces the work of 15 contemporary poets from the 1960s onwards, ko ko thett now turns to even a younger and more 'contemporary' generation and towards a more radical direction, the sort of poems that were 'inked out' or would have been banned if the Myanmar censorship had remained in place. Hence the title *From the Archive of Censored Materials*. The poems all reflect the

anxiety associated with a people under a transitional polity and economy, but also, as a blurbist of *Bones will Crow* puts it, are testament to the fact that literature is local and global all the same.

As for the literary merit of his selection and the translation itself: Perhaps the majority of Burmese poets writing today, including ko ko thett himself when he writes in Burmese, have managed to forge a plain style, almost like a sonnet or the poetry of Sharon Olds, but without a line limit.

Thus the plain form or structure, plain-spoken poetry as it were, can ‘carry’ the weight of all these allusions or backhand sentences which are/were necessary to evade the censors’ eagle or vulture eyes inside Burma. It must also have helped that many of the poets like ko ko thett, myself, and others are part of the Burmese diaspora which is now scattered all over the world.

In any case it works extremely well, and the international poetry lovers are the beneficiaries.

That said, I would like to quote a little from a few poems:

Sein Khet Soe:

*What will you bring for Tomorrow  
When you come back from September?  
One thing for sure, a squirt of a poet says –  
‘We will continue to crave Democracy  
Even when the month is over.’*

Paing:

*Wanted: General Aung San  
157 actors showed up for the screen test for General Aung San the biopic.  
Out of 157, 13 were selected. Out of 13, 3 finalists have been chosen.  
None of them are good enough – There is a call for another screen test.  
. . .  
General Aung San exists only in the public conscience.  
(General Aung San has been dead since 19 July 1947.)  
General Aung San doesn’t live in real life anymore.  
Even if General Aung San’s own reincarnation comes to the screen test*

*We aren't sure if he will be qualified to act General Aung San . . .*

While ko ko thett has primarily focused on poets not featured in *Bones will Crow*, he has kept two junior women poets from the anthology, Pandora and Eaindra, in this selection. Pandora, whose poem for Pussy Riot has been published by English PEN, is too audacious a Burmese poet to me. In contrast, Eaindra, is subtler, and arguably more Burmese in that respect. Most notably is the introduction of Maung Day (b 1979) and Mae Yway, the youngest in this selection. Maung Day's 'Submission to a National Day Special Edition' discovers 'Words are gratis for guests / Upon close examination / Decorative letters on an old signboard / Turn out to be a revised translation...'

Mae Yway (b 1991) is certainly precocious when she claims in her piece about Yangon's physical and mental landscape that could also be London's or NY's:

*Good & evil need not be separated,  
they ain't end up in the same category anyway.  
After six months, we'll move out. After one year, we'll move out.  
The roll of papers in hand has taken flight after the ground plan.  
Among the woofing mutts from upstairs, downstairs,  
from the left, from the right, & from the street,  
this howl of mine might as well be instinctual.*

(from *Such and Such are the Window Displays of the City* by Mae Yway)

My last quote is from a poem by Ko Yway (not a relative of Mae Yway), which to my mind reflects very well, the "talk through the side of your mouth" tech-speak so popular in the much vaunted "change" since Fall of 2011.

Ko Yway:

*The letter that wasn't sent.*

*Darling, I have floated all my longings down the stream for you.*

*Too bad! All the streams are being dammed.*

*You know better. In the newspapers a while ago*

*They talked about 'poverty alleviation'*

*Was it called 'elimination of the poor?'*

*I am not really sure.*

If I were a publisher, I would snap it up pronto.

**Kyi May Kaung** has a doctorate in political economy from the University of Pennsylvania. She worked for the Burmese Democratic Government in Exile and The Burma Fund and in international broadcasting for close to 15 years. She has published two books of poetry and been anthologized in the Norton Anthology, *Language for a New Century*, and in *Fire in the Soul*. In 1993 she won the William Carlos Williams Award of the Academy of American Poets. She was a Pew finalist twice in Literature. Most recently she published a widely acclaimed novella *Black Rice*, available on Amazon.com