

# **WORLDWIDE READING: BURMA'S SILENCED POETS**

## **POETRY PACK**

**21 OCTOBER  
2011**

*Please note that these poems are available for free public use only on 21 October 2011, as part of the Worldwide Reading for Burma's Silenced Poets. If you are interested in using these poems for an alternative event, please contact [cat@englishpen.org](mailto:cat@englishpen.org)*

## U ZEYA

*Tomorrow, 22 October 2011, will mark 555 days since the arrest of U Zeya. A poet and journalist for Democratic Voice of Burma - more famous under his pen name Thargyi Maung Zeya – U Zeya was arrested at his home in Rangoon on 16 April 2010, shortly after his son Sithu Zeya had been arrested for taking photos of the water festival bombings in Rangoon. Sithu had reportedly confessed to his father being a DVB reporter after days of torture.*

*U Zeya's trial took place inside the infamous Insein prison where, according to his lawyer, the only witnesses were police. The trial ended in February 2011 and he was sentenced to 13 years in prison under the Immigration Act, Unlawful Associations Act, and Electronics Act.*

*The following poem was written from inside the prison:*

### **My son..... You have become a grown-up**

*Approaching towards your lock up  
With loud steps and a haughty face;  
If you can express passionately your appreciation to this guard  
My son..... You have become a grown-up.*

*When the whole world goes dark,  
Devoting itself to the virtues in martyrdom;  
If you can hope for a new day to dawn,  
My son..... You have become a grown-up.*

*If you can prove it is true that  
Patience, as a state of Mind is  
Mightier than physical strength;  
My son..... You become a grown-up.*

*In admiration of your ancestors' journey  
Hit by the poisoned arrows;  
If you can fly over the poisoned arrows,  
My son..... You have become a grown-up.*

*If you can transform trash into beauty,  
My son..... You have become a grown-up.*

*When you consider your difficulties  
As a new challenge to your opportunities,  
My son..... You have become a grown-up.*

*(Translated by Wai Phyo Aye)*

## **ZARGANAR**

*Zarganar is Burma's leading comedian and an accomplished poet, writer, and director who throughout his career has used his artistic talents to draw attention to political repression in Burma and has spent many years behind bars as a result.*

*In 2008, in the aftermath of the horrific Cyclone Nargis, Zarganar personally organised support from the Burmese arts community and oversaw its delivery to the delta. Zarganar was angered by the neglect and corruption he encountered and spoke out about this in interviews. He was arrested soon afterwards.*

*We are going to read two of Zarganar's poems today. The first - 'What happened with Nargis?' - was written in the aftermath of the Cyclone and clearly conveys Zarganar's enormous frustration at the lack of support for the Burmese people.*

### **What happened with Nargis?**

*What happened with Nargis?  
Rice bags rode by rotor  
4WDs rented at £400  
Bogale prices outstripped Inya Road.*

*What happened with Nargis?  
Holland Beers got salaries  
Strand satphones  
Sold for a grand.*

*What happened with Nargis?  
Saltpans were saturated  
With saltwater.  
It took a hundred thousand people  
To create a thousand jobs.*

*No matter if it was a naga  
Or a narcissus  
What happened with Nargis?  
Nothing. Nothing's happened.  
Nothing's been done.*

*In November 2008, Zarganar, an Honorary Member of English PEN and recipient of the inaugural PEN/Pinter Prize, was convicted of 'public order offences'. He was sentenced to 59 years in prison, later reduced to 35 years. In late 2008, Zarganar was moved to Myitkyina Prison in northern Burma, 1500 km from his family home, where he remains today, and where he wrote this moving poem:*

### **Untitled**

*It's lucky my forehead is flat  
Since my arm must often rest there  
Beneath it shines a light I must invite  
From a moon I cannot see  
In Myitkyina*

*(Translated by Vicky Bowman)*

## **ZAW THET HTWE**

*Journalist and poet Zaw Thet Htwe was arrested in June 2008, whilst visiting his sick mother in the town of Minbu, central Burma. His computer, mobile phone, and personal documents were confiscated, and no details were given to his family about the reason for his arrest or his place of detention.*

*Zaw Thet Htwe had been working with Zarganar and other leading Burmese figures to deliver aid and support to the victims of Cyclone Nargis. On 14 August 2008, he appeared at a hearing held at the Rangoon West District Court within the Insein prison precincts. Initially sentenced to 15 years in prison, he was given a further four-year prison sentence in November 2008, so will serve a total of 19 years behind bars.*

*This is his poem, '32':*

### **32**

*She is named after the name of the month she was born into.  
Her name can be easily remembered.  
If I remember correctly, she turns to 32 today.*

*My beloved doesn't know about Perestroika.  
She doesn't keep a pet in her house.  
She never goes to the video rental shop.  
But she loves a cup of tea and Malai.  
When she is aggressive, she snatches her mother's share.*

*Since 18, she's been carrying the family's burden.  
She knows her responsibilities.  
Her family is not well-off.  
But she's inherited her mother's beauty and her father's pride.  
My beloved loves the sound of a screaming sea but hates a screaming cat.*

*She possesses a beauty which will last longer than truth.  
She possesses hair which is straighter than lines of rain drops.  
She possesses eyes which are brighter than the moon.  
She possesses legs which are sweeter than music.  
When she takes a stroll along Emerald Street; the radios turn off.  
And the faces inside the milk shop are moving simultaneously  
As if they are doing a Yane dance.  
And they start composing poems to her beauty.*

*Her beauty is gifted by justice.  
If there is nothing wrong with you, with the Earth;  
You should let her rejoice.*

*She is named after the name of the month she was born into.  
Her name can be easily remembered.  
If I remember correctly, she turns to 32 today.*

*I am a poet; a former prisoner.  
Sitting inside the shop;  
I take 20 minutes to decide if I want a glass of milk or not.  
[I only took 9 seconds to love her!]*

*I was trying to sell nature, stars, truth and revolution at my grand store.  
This seller falls in love with her. Fall in love with the girl of Emerald Street.*

*The first time I fell in love with her it was in 1998,  
The time during the Fall of University Avenue.  
The struggles were cut off into small pieces like the old teak trees.*

*Using my heart as bait, I caught her at last after many attempts.  
I treasured Emerald Street where my little fish belonged.  
I treasured it more than mines of natural gas, jade and gold.*

*Now, this little fish is like the owner of a blank raffle ticket.  
After her husband set off a long journey,  
She is left with empty hands, a broken-heart and a daughter called Bon Bon.  
She is named after the name of the month she was born into.  
Her name can be easily remembered.  
If I remember correctly, she turns to 32 today.*

*(Translated by Wai Phyo Aye)*

## **NAY PHONE LATT**

*Blogger and poet Nay Phone Latt was arrested in Rangoon on 29 January 2008. Nearly nine months later, on 10 November 2008, he was sentenced by a specially-assembled court to a combined 20 years and six months in prison under the Criminal Code, the Video Act, and the Electronics Act for his blog and for owning a copy of a banned DVD. The court, formed to prosecute political dissidents within prison walls, was closed to the public, whilst Nay Phone Latt's mother was banned from attending the hearing. Nay Phone Latt was not allowed legal representation after his lawyer was sentenced to prison time for contempt while protesting unfair hearings.*

*On 20 February 2009, a court in Rangoon reduced Nay Phone Latt's sentence by eight and a half years, leaving him to serve 12 years in prison. He is currently being held in Pa-an Prison in Karen state, 135 miles from his home in Rangoon, making it difficult for his family to visit. He is believed to be in poor health and to have been denied medical treatment, but has continued to write poems in prison.*

*Nay Phone Latt was the recipient of the 2010 PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award, and is an Honorary Member of American PEN.*

*Here is his poem, 'Irawaddy Flowing on the Road':*

### **Irawaddy Flowing on the Road**

*I won't cry, Mother.  
On the nights  
I closed all the doors  
Turned off all the lights  
And slept quietly  
I sighed asking myself  
What mistakes had I made.*

*The first day  
Next to the road enveloped  
By the echoes of love  
Covered by the monks  
I put my hands together with tears  
My legs still pulled back  
By fear, Mother.*

*The second day  
With bare feet in the wind and rain  
Where love overflowed  
The youth and people  
Surrounding the golden-colored stream  
A new Irawaddy  
Flowed on the road.  
That day, I became the Irawaddy, Mother.*

*The next day was very simple, Mother.  
Against your worries  
Ignoring the aches and pains  
For sure I became  
A brick and a grain of sand  
For the brave monks, Mother.*

*Being a Buddhist  
From a country where Buddhism flourishes  
You, I'm sure, will be happy  
For the actions I took, Mother.*

*I won't try to spell out to you  
Things about some people  
Who are not worth thinking about.  
The worst among the craziest people  
Is the one crazy for power.  
His lips have the power to give orders.  
Under him are  
Heretics  
For whom hell is too good.  
In their hands are weapons to kill.  
How can I hand over  
This country's future to them, Mother?*

*Spirits of some of the dead monks  
Covered with wounds they took from beating  
Came to talk to me, Mother.  
(May all the living things in the east  
Be free from all kinds of danger, be free from anger  
Be free from all kinds of poverty, and be in peace.)*

*With love light  
We lit up peace.  
Yes, mother.  
Everything was peaceful  
Before the noises from  
Shields hit by the batons  
Tear gas explosions  
Gun shots  
Loud swear words  
Then .... the sounds of yelling and beating.  
The entire country was complete with love and peace  
Love of the monks, Mother.*

*The spirit of a student  
Who had to give permission  
For a bullet from the heretics  
To enter his heart  
Came to talk to me, Mother.  
(I paid obeisance to the monks.  
I donated everything the monks needed.  
Along with the monks, I spread my love  
To all living things.  
I didn't do anything wrong.  
With the purest mind  
I just did the most appropriate thing.)*

*Yes, Mother.  
I'm not walking on the road  
Built by the students, the youth, the people, and the monks*

*For fun.  
We went onto the road because  
We understood our race and our religion  
We understood what was right and wrong  
We knew we should stand by the truth.  
Also, to lessen inappropriate things that keep happening  
We came out onto the road  
With little strength we had  
With little hope uncertain.*

*The white chest of the youths  
Far away from fault  
They had the heart to shoot and covered in red blood, Mother.*

*In that revolution  
Even the platforms of the pagodas  
Turned into battlefields, Mother.  
The heretics enjoyed drinking  
The blood of the monks  
The blood of the students.*

*They say that to change something  
We need to sacrifice our lives, Mother.  
Please ask those with answers  
How much more do we have to sacrifice  
For peace, for justice, for truth, Mother.*

*Let's forget about guns that are not to shoot into the air  
Bamboo batons not for display, Mother.  
One sure thing is  
However much they kill  
However many people die  
The Irrawaddy on the road will  
Forever be flowing in our hearts.*

*Translated by Than Than Win  
<http://www.pen.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/4899>*



## MIN KO NAING

*Min Ko Naing, whose name literally means "conqueror of kings", is a legendary figure of the student movement in Burma. During the 1988 nation-wide democratic uprising, his statements, speeches and poems aroused the democratic aspirations of the people. Viewed as a threat by the military regime, he was arrested in 1989 and sentenced to 20 years in prison.*

*Min Ko Naing was released after 15 years in prison, in November 2004, but was re-arrested in August 2007 with thirteen other leading political activists for organising peaceful protests against food prices. These protests led to the 'Saffron Revolution', widespread peaceful anti-government protests led by Buddhist monks that began on 18 September 2007, and were violently suppressed by the military authorities on 26 September 2007. On 11 November 2008 Min Ko Naing was sentenced to 65 years imprisonment for his role in organising the demonstrations.*

*Min Ko Naing is currently being held at Kengtung prison, Shan State where he has reportedly been held in solitary confinement. He is said to be in poor health as a result of torture and ill-treatment suffered during his previous imprisonment.*

*The following is one of his most famous poems, 'Faith':*

### **Faith**

*In memory of our comrades,  
Who have sacrificed their lives for our national cause,  
I make this pledge of faith.  
In this unfinished revolution,  
Should my blood be not red enough,  
Splash your blood over me  
As a potion to make me brave.  
In this unfinished revolution,  
Should my soul be gripped with fear,  
Be hesitant and lack courage,  
Let your souls enter into mine  
And steer me along.  
In this unfinished revolution,  
Should I  
Become traitor to our proud people  
And act inconsiderately and recklessly  
With your firm  
Peacock hands  
Crush and punish me.  
In this unfinished revolution,  
Should I have to sacrifice my life half-way  
It is no sorrow to leave this world.  
As a duty fulfilled, I will believe  
My soul enhanced with joy,  
And holding up our peacock flag flapping in the wind  
I will come to where you are.  
Welcome me with open arms.*

*(Original translation by Kyaw Thura, with thanks to two anonymous reviewers for revisions.)*