

*In Your Dreams: Travelling the road to Mandalay*ⁱ

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Abstract: Since 2007, I have been travelling regularly to the Thai /Burma border to run creative writing workshops with Burmese women refugees. The stories that eventuate from the workshops are published and distributed internationally. I have never been inside Burma so my knowledge of the country has come to me via other peoples' stories. Recent changes that have taken place in Burma give glimpses of hope for a democratic future and yet I remain on the edges of this country I feel I know intimately.

In his memoir *From the Land of Green Ghosts* (2004) Pascal Khoo Thwe writes about the layers of distinctly different cultures that make up the country of Burma. After attending university in Mandalay Pascal was forced to flee after the arrest of his activist girlfriend. He joined the guerilla forces on the border and then through a chance encounter with academic, John Casey, finally made his way across the border into Thailand then on to England. This extraordinary story is more common than many people realize. When one considers the more than half a million refugees who have fled across the Burmese borders into neighboring Thailand over the last decade it is easy to see the tremendous ramifications that the political situation has had on the people of Burma.

This paper is a meditation on the Burma of my imagination and the many permutations of country, culture and landscape that I have come to know through the people of Burma and their relationship to the lands of their birth. As a facilitator of other people's stories I reflect on the ways in which the personal stories of lives lived inside Burma and on the borders of the country as refugees have helped me understand the situation there. The paper also explores the way narrative and advocacy, storytelling and capacity building have played a part in the democratic changes that are now taking place after more than sixty years of civil war inside Burma.

Keywords: Imagining Burma, freedom and democracy, landscapes of exile

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In your dreams, the words slip out
between the straight iron bars
and over the barb-wired prison walls.
Passing machine-gunned sentinels
in lofty turrets, they tumble
into narrow streets
and gather in town squares.
'Listen, listen!' the words say
to anyone with half an ear for freedom
'Look, look' they cry,
pointing at the prison wall,
that towers before them.
'There are innocents in there,
guilty of nothing but dreams
of peace and hope and harmony'.

But life in a crowded cell with nothing
but the cloying closeness of cell mates
And the stench of bucket toilets
requires more than dreams.
So you conjure whispered words
into the late-night pinpricking of plastic bags,
while you plan a stealthy exchange,
with visitors and family
who bring food, laughter, comfort
and news of an outside world.
As you clutch your pinpricked words
and the rustling plastic bag
in the sweaty palms of your deception,
a profusion of goodbyes hides
the rushing of your heart's blood.

Then the words pass unwary guards.
A smile, a nod, a clicking of stiff, leathered heels
and they are on the streets.
Running down laneways,
past brightly lit market stalls
brimming with exotic fruit and salty fish,
and beggar children with pining eyes.
Past the tea shop on the corner,
and the secret garden of delights,
where the scent of steel flowers from prison
sways under a wretched darkening moon
There, under a harsh neon light,
ink turns pinpricked plastic

into words on a naked page.
And suddenly you are free.
Like the stars that sparkle in a moonless sky.
Like the dawn that wakes the fighting peacock.
Like the sleeping citizens of the world
as they greet the coming of a brand new day.

(Conway Herron, 2012).

The poem above, titled 'In Your Dreams', is inspired by a story I heard while working on the Thai/Burma border with Burmese refugees. It concerns a group of women who submitted a collection of poems, 'Scent of Steel Flowers from Prison' to an anthology of short stories and poems by Burmese women titled, *Burma Women's Voices Together* (2003). A small caption explains this as a collection of poems by women political prisoners, with 'special thanks and appreciation ... to the authors and those who helped smuggle their works from prison' (2003, p.69). I first heard about these women in 2007 when I travelled to the Thai/ Burma border to run creative writing workshops for NGO, Altsean Burma who also published the anthology that featured the poems.

When Will be the Day of Freedom?

Hey Listen
New century, century anew
Repeating changing eras
Though the evil system stays
Smoke of wars
Stretched out century long
Machinery of our country
Will be reversed in full
Fuelled by proclamations
Written with the hearts blood
In the darkness of prison

(Scent of Steel Flowers from Prison, 2003, p. 65)

The women in prison that featured in the 'Scent of Steel flowers' collection having had all their writing implements taken away were so determined to express their feelings about what had happened to them and get their poems out into the world that they worked out a plan. Families and friends visiting the women would bring in plastic bags with food in it. The women would keep the plastic bags and then at night, in their prison cells, they'd 'prick holes' into the bags making the letters of the words of the poems. The families and friends visiting would then exchange old bags for new ones full of food and smuggle the poems past the unsuspecting prison guards. At home families and friends would spread the plastic bags out on cloth and use ink to transfer the words. Then they smuggled the poems over the border into Thailand where they were published in the *Burma Women's Voices*

anthology. This smuggling of words and the ingenuity behind it provides a powerful trope for any writer.

In September 2012, I was invited to read some poems, at an event called 'Wear the Wild Words' combining the work of costumier Denise N Rall and three other local poets besides myself; Stefanie Petrik, Virginia Barratt and Moya Costello. The organisers asked me if I would like to focus my performance on the work I had been doing on the Thai/Burma border. I decided to read from the collection of poems by the women in prison and write my own poem, inspired by the story I had heard. One of the concepts behind the event was that the poets would wear clothing designed by Denise when they performed and so I worked in collaboration with Denise on the content of the costume, sorting through some of the materials worn by the ethnic peoples I had been working with that I had collected on my travels – traditional weaving from the Karen, Karenni, the Shan, the Mon and other ethnic groups. Denise then designed a jacket made from these materials. On the night we explained to the audience how the jacket had come together. Few of the people gathered there would have known about the make up of the various ethnic groups on the Thai/Burma border but for me the symbolism of wearing the jacket was profound, honouring the women I had worked with as well as helping tell the story of their ongoing struggle for democracy. When I sat down to write the poem 'In Your Dreams' I was surprised at how easily the poem flowed out of me. But poems are like that and this story had been part of my consciousness for a long time. The surprise was not at the ease of writing but in how much I could see the landscape and how firmly the terrain of Burma was fixed in my imagination. Often people mistake my trips to the border as actually travelling to Burma and being in that place the refugees describe as 'the inside' as if the country of Burma is a prison in itself– and it is for many. Recent changes that have taken place in Burma give glimpses of hope for a democratic future and yet I prefer to remain on the edges of this country I feel I know intimately. What I say to people who ask me if I've been to Burma is; no I've never been inside Burma because I don't want to support the military regime. But I *have* been there in my own dreams; not in physical actuality but via the many stories I have heard and read over the time between 2007 and the present and from my experience of being in towns like Mae Sot, so close to the border that it feels like the country is the same, and so filled with Burmese refugees that people actually call it 'Little Burma'.

I have always thought that Orwell's time in Burma marks a key turning point in his life. It was those years when he was transformed from a snobbish public-school boy to a writer of social conscience who sought out the underdogs of society. As a policeman in Burma, Orwell saw the underbelly of the empire; not the triumphant bugles or bejeweled maharajas, but the drunken sahibs pickled by heat in mildewed clubs, the scarred and screaming Burmese in the prison cells. He witnessed first hand the devastating effects of repressive governance and it troubled him deeply. (Larkin, E., 2009, p.vi)

Since independence in 1948 and then the beginning of a brutal civil war in 1962 the people of Burma have been struggling for the right to democratic freedoms we in the west take for granted. For anyone encountering the story of Burma it's difficult to ignore the brutal

history and not to come face-to-face with the dilemma that Emma Larkin describes waiting for Orwell in his encounter with Burma in the early twentieth century. Through the workshops I have been running I have gained intimate knowledge of the different cultures and the political situation through the women's stories. But my knowledge of the country, its peoples and its terrain, have come to me second hand through stories from the women I work with and from texts written by other writers that I have read. In exploring the Burma of my imagination I also tell the stories of the Burmese people for whom these stories are personal negotiations with a country they love and know far more intimately than I but one where that love brings them into a vexed relationship with the country itself.

Mandalay is one of the few place names in Burma that has not been changed by the Burmese military government. In 1989 the regime renamed streets, towns and cities across Burma. Maynmyo the old British hill station that Orwell visited became pyin-Oo-Lwin, and Fraser Street in Rangoon became Anawwrahta Lan in Yangon. Most of the old names were Anglicized Burmese names that had been used by the British colonial government, and the regime claimed that the changes were a long-overdue move to discard these colonial tags. But there was a deeper rooted motive, the generals were rewriting history. (Larkin E., 2004, p.11)

The 2008 uprising where students launched a national demonstration they called *shiq lay-lone* or four eights was an auspicious date and time for Buddhists of eight minutes past eight in the morning on the eighth day of the eighth month of the year. After these demonstrations and the massive crackdown that ensued following the spread of unrest across the nation, the junta decided to change the name of Burma to Myanmar in a bid to seize control of the spaces where people lived. As Emma Larkin writes: 'when a place is renamed, the old name disappears from maps and, eventually, from human memory. If that is possible then perhaps the memories of past events can be erased' (2004, p.11). I use the name Burma rather than Myanmar in order to refuse the legitimacy of the renaming of the country and to acknowledge the long history of the fight for democracy by the peoples of that country.

I am a 20-year-old Shan woman and a citizen of Burma. I love my country, my people and my religion. However, now I am staying in another country that has a different culture. ... I wish I could say I'm proud of my nation, but people inside Burma face many difficulties in their lives as ruling generals ... ignore the hardships that people are facing. Living in other countries people are sometimes treated badly and discriminated against because they are from Burma. Therefore, while I am in exile, I avoid telling others that I am originally from Burma. (Laminlay, 2010, p.29)

The workshops I run are held in a number of townships that figure significantly in the ongoing struggle of the ethnic groups of Burma to gain recognition for the inequities of their treatment under the auspices of the military junta. Mae Sot, Chiang Mai, Mae Hong

Son and Sangkhlaburi are all towns along the border between Burma and Thailand. Individually the groups that make up the people of the border, have a history of their own, like the Shan who were a separate kingdom, now called Shan State situated on the northern border with Thailand but also bordering Laos and China. The quote above comes from Laminlay in a story from *Burma Women's Voices for Peace*. She identifies firstly as a Shan woman and then as person living in Burma. 'In May 1886 the Shan States were declared part of British India' (Elliott 2006, p.39) along with others such as Kachin, Karen and Mon states when the British declared Burma a province of India. In 1947 Aung San Suu Kyi's father, Aung San, seen by many as the architect of Burmese independence, managed to broker an agreement called The Panglong Agreement between the ethnic minority groups that enabled the foundation of a unified Burma. Then his assassination and the subsequent declaration of independence in 1948 marked the beginnings of a long-running civil war with devastating consequences that have continued to resonate into the present day.

When I first visited the Thai/Burma border I knew very little about the political situation or the configuration of different ethnic groups that go to make up Burma. Over the years since then I have come to understand much more and the history of Burma and the people in it has come to mean a great deal to me. The women who attend the creative writing workshops have often been part of organisations on the border and have spent much time gathering statistics on human rights abuses but have trouble describing their personal experiences in a visceral sense. As a Shan woman recently said to me: 'Ah the stories you hear are all the same – the soldiers came to my village and burnt it down, I fled with my family into the mountains, we only had rice and bamboo shoots to eat, I made it to the border and now I long to go back but I can't.' I was shocked at her seeming indifference, but then she started to tell her own story and I understood that this was just to give herself the courage to tell it. She grew up in a Shan village that the Burmese military came to regularly looking for guerrilla forces meant to be hiding there amongst the villagers. While they were there the military would abduct young fit people to be human porters forcing them to carry heavy supplies through the jungle and walk ahead so that they'd be the first to tread on the landmines that proliferate around the villages. If the guerrilla forces were there, there would be heavy fighting with bullets flying through the thin walls of the village huts and as children she and her siblings would have to hide under the beds for fear of being shot. 'They found a man next door who was hiding from the military, they shot him in front of us', she said matter-of-factly, 'then they raised our village to the ground. That's when we had to leave. I spent a year in the refugee camp near Mae Hong Son. Now I am here.'

At the time of hearing this story I had just returned to Bangkok from Mae Hong Son having run a workshop there a week earlier. It's a short plane trip straight up the side of the mountains that circle Chiang Mai and the border to Burma. If you drive from Chiang Mai to Mae Hong Son by car it takes seven hours due to the steep winding roads that take you up the hill to the summit of the mountain range and tablelands beyond where Mae Hong Son is tucked away. To walk from Burma on the other side to the refugee camp near there would entail a climb of similar proportions. To get to the workshops I would be driven on the back of a truck from the township of Mae Hong Son to the village where the workshops took place. This village has been built by refugees close to where the refugee camp is. It's the closest I have been to an actual Burmese village. The villagers proudly took me round

the small group of thatched roofed houses set high on wooden stilts with wide shady verandas around them and chickens running wild underneath. My workshops were run in a large open walled area with a cement floor and thatched walls and roof. But there was electricity, a computer and a large screen I could run a power point presentation on. The students who came in to the workshop from the refugee camp walked for an hour there and back each day. The car that I drove in with some of the participants from Mae Hong Son is a luxury few can afford making walking an essential aspect of survival there. As we drove along the winding dirt road through the forest each morning we would pass other trucks going to and from villages scattered round the area taking itinerant workers to various places where they could earn just enough money to keep their families. Many of the workers are stateless people, refugees without permits hiding amongst the thousands that have fled across the border that stretches along the northern and eastern borders of Burma to the far reaches of the Irrawaddy delta.

Over 3000 villages have been destroyed or forcibly abandoned in the past decade - an average of almost one a day. Over half a million people have been compelled to leave their homes and become internally displaced persons (IDPs), living homeless in forests, temporary settlements, or government-controlled relocation sites after attacks by the military. Lacking anything but the most minimal humanitarian aid, denied the stability of a home and livelihood (not to mention essential services like medical facilities and education), they are never at peace. A million more people live as refugees and undocumented migrants in neighboring countries. (Witness, 2012, online)

In his memoir *From the Land of Green Ghosts* (2004) Pascal Khoo Thwe writes about the layers of distinctly different cultures that make up the country of Burma. Pascal is Paduang, one of the clans from the border of Shan and Karrenni States. His memoir starts with his grandmother Mu Tha, telling a Paduang creation story while her 'brass neck rings gleam in the candlelight' (2004, p.7). But Mu Tha is also Catholic. Her religious duality stems from the early 20th century when Italian missionary priests brought the alphabet to a largely oral culture. As Koo Thwe writes: 'There are at least ten major ethnic groups and a hundred sub-tribes' (2004, p.11) living alongside Indians, Europeans, Chinese and other groups in Burma. Burmese is the official language and English is spoken by an educated few, while the many ethnic groups speak numerous other languages situated along the borders to Thailand, India and China. The main religion practiced in Burma is Buddhism, but Hinduism and Islam also have many followers, as well as Christianity; while a strong sense of pre Buddhist animism continues as an undercurrent to daily life. Khoo Thwe writes about his life as young child growing up in a remote area of a Shan State then becoming a student in Rangoon in 1988 and having to flee back home and then on to the Thai/Burma border after the arrest of his girlfriend who was raped and beaten by the military and then disappeared after taking part in the 1988 uprisings. From here he eventually made it to the UK to study at Cambridge. His early innocence and then politicization and the poignancy of what happened is made startlingly apparent when he writes:

For me using words like 'boycott', 'strike', 'demonstration', 'human

rights', 'democracy', 'student union', and the like was like learning a new language – or perhaps like learning a long forgotten one. It was astounding and unthinkable, that the students were actually going to defy authorities. (2004, P.157)

After realizing he has to flee he makes the long trek from his village to the border with the military following closely behind, ending up in a Karenni camp that was an eight hour walk to Mae Hong Son where he would regularly go for supplies. It's at the house of a friend in Mae Hong Son that he finally makes contact with academic, Doctor John Casey, who helps him get to the UK. On the day of his leaving he says goodbye to the friends he has made on the border and walks back from the camp to Mae Hong Son:

... I could see the lights of Maehongson I glanced back: the jungle and the mountains had disappeared completely under the blanket of darkness topped with a blue-black sky strewn with stars. My imagination was running wild, and I felt myself suspended as in a trance between a grim past and a future that had no features I could discern. (2004, p.257)

In *Restless Souls*, Australian journalist Phil Thornton writes about the town of Mae Sot, dedicating his book, to the Karen people. Mae Sot is three miles from the Moei River that separates Karen State Burma from Thailand. Its geographic location makes it a central contact point for Karen activities with their freedom fighters hidden in the surrounding hills, making the town 'unofficial headquarters for Burmese opposition groups and activists' (Thornton, 2006, p.3). These refugee camps are set up by the Karen leaders to keep in place a government apparatus and to maintain a strong sense of community in order to 'look after the needs of women, youth, health, agriculture, law and order, defence, religion and education, and have working structures to defend and maintain the morale and welfare of their people. Most importantly, they give their people hope' (2006, p.3). This kind of political/ geographical arrangement is repeated in many towns along the Thai/ Burma border and again along Burma's other borders with China, India, Bangladesh and Laos (see Conway Herron, 2007b).

In spite of the obvious poverty in Mae Sot there is something magic in the way the Muslim call to prayer in the morning and evening rings out over the town while saffron-robed monks walk streets teeming with motorbikes stacked with families and tuk-tuks filled with passengers wend their way around each other. In the evenings after the workshops I often walk through the markets to the town, stopping at the stalls while young children follow pleading for money. Not far from the town of Mae Sot is Dr Cynthia Maung's hospital; a famous clinic that people trek to from Burma risking their lives to cross the border because there are no decent health services where they live. The staff in the hospital deal daily with landmine victims, starvation, malaria, dengue fever and the myriad repercussions of the Burma situation.

In 2010 I arrived in Mae Sot just as the elections were being called and just before Aung San Suu Kyi was freed. There had been trouble over the border from Mae Sot between the Burmese military and ethnic border groups and more than thirty thousand refugees had fled

into Mae Sot within a couple of days. Late in the evening, after the first day of workshops, we rode down to the border to see where the refugees were being housed. I stood up on the back of the motorbike as we drove past the oval and peered over the high white-plastered walls topped with barbed wire that separated those of us on the highway game enough to risk police checks, from the refugees camped on the other side. Flickering campfires and the shadows of those who had fled with whatever they could grab before crossing the bridge just a few metres away from us was all I could see beside the uniformed figures of the Thai police. "We'd better turn round we're almost at the border and one bomb has already exploded on the Thai side this afternoon", my companion warned and we sped back down the highway to the safety of our motel rooms and television newscasts (see Conway-Herron, 2010, online).

It was one of the hottest days in January though it was still winter time. Under the hot shining sun a group of people were travelling full of energy and joy. They were heading to participate in the 60th anniversary of the Karen Revolutionary Day and I was travelling with them. We left Mae Sot in Thailand. Along the way there were green trees on each side of the road and they made me feel calm and excited at the same time. (Zin Lin, 2010, p.33)

The quote above is from a story, 'My Motherland and Me' in *Burma Women's Voices for Peace* by Kay Zin Lin. She was born before the 1988 uprising or ("8888") as she writes it. The feeling of joy she has in attending the anniversary of Karen Revolutionary Day, starts her thinking about the past and the difficulty she has had in getting a quality education in a country where 'the universities are often closed by the junta' (2010, p.34). Kay Zin Lin did not have to flee Burma but decided to go with a friend of hers whose family had to flee after being sought by the military. She wanted to 'find a job or an opportunity to keep studying' (2010, p.35). She found out a lot more about the democracy movement in Burma and the situation for refugees and migrant workers after leaving Burma. In spite of feeling as if the plight of the people of Burma in neighbouring countries is beyond words, at the end of her story she writes:

I started writing poems, short novels and articles reflecting the lives of refugees. Although I am away from my hometown, I am happy that I can help my people that escaped to neighbouring countries for different reasons. Even though my help is only a small part compared to the democracy movement I am glad that I can work for my own people who are in need. (Zin Lin, 2010, p.36)

In 2010 while on the Thai/Burma border I watched Aung San Suu Kyi addressing the crowds that flocked to see her at the gate of her villa in the city of Rangoon where she had been under house arrest for fifteen of the last 21 years. 'If we work in unity, we will achieve our goal. We have a lot of things to do' she told the people that crowded around her (CTV 2010: online). With a conservative estimate of more than 2,000 political activists still in prison and a growing refugee population worldwide at the time of her speech, this was an understatement. Since the elections Aung San Suu Kyi and members of her party have won

a place in the Burmese parliament and she has been able to travel overseas for the first time. But, in spite of her travelling to the United States and the UK and the lifting of sanctions there is still a lot that needs to be done before full democracy is restored in Burma. Recent fighting in Kachin State has forced at least 10,000 people to flee their homes and there have been problems in Arakan State where conflict between the Rakhine and the Rohingya peoples have lead to soldiers, and police in Maungdaw Township, Northern Arakan State, 'to arbitrarily arrest local Rohingya for their alleged involvement in the June riots' (Burma Bulletin, 2012, pp.4-5). While the military still dominate the parliament resolution to these and other conflicts inside Burma will be slow to come to resolution. Still the hope that lies in the freeing of Aung San Suu Kyi, giving her an opportunity to call for compliance with the rule of law and respect for international standards of human rights in Burma, keeps the military in check in many regards.

When I think of Aung San Suu Kyi I also I think of the women I have met, on the border and the amazing mix of gentleness and strength combined with extraordinary courage they all have. This reminds of the passage at the beginning of Daniel Mason's novel, *The Piano Tuner*, (2004):

In the fleeting seconds of final memory the images that will become Burma are the sun and a woman's parasol ... the sun which rose in Burma was different to the sun that rose in the rest of the world. He only needed to look at the sky to know this. ... Now this sun hangs above a dry road. Beneath it a lone woman walks under a parasol, her thin cotton dress trembling in the breeze, her bare feet carrying her away towards the edge of perception. ... The woman walks into a mirage, into a ghost reflection of light and water the Burmese call *than hlat*. Around her the air waivers, splitting her body, separating, spinning. And then she too disappears. Now only the sun and the parasol remain. (Mason, 2004, pp.1-2)

There was so much hope in Aung San Suu Kyi's speech and this hope is one of the core factors to Burmese resilience. The women on the border are part of a large network of refugees who are being trained for leadership roles through NGOs such as Altsean Burma; groups such as the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO), Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) and overseas support groups such as Burma Campaign UK and Burma Campaign Australia. These organisations are actively campaigning alongside other prodemocracy movements inside and outside Burma. An essential part of their campaign is the connection between narrative and advocacy, the way in which giving voice to the experiences of exile and oppression gives strength and empowerment and brings attention to the issue of true democracy in Burma.

I returned to the Thai/Burma border at the end of 2012 and when I told my local Federal MP Janelle Saffin that I was going back again she smiled and asked, "have you thought of going inside Burma?" Janelle and I have discussed the situation in Burma a lot and she is well versed in what happens there having spent a long time working on the border herself. It was from her that I first gleaned a glimmer of the changes that have happened since 2010

and the freeing of Aung San Suu Kyi. "Do you think I should? I replied and she nodded. I thought of my students and the words of Yue Ka Lit when she writes in the conclusion of her story:

I was born in Burma, which is full of natural beauty, has a wealth of precious jewels, and diverse and beautiful ethnic groups. I believe that people from Burma would remain in their beautiful country if they could. If the government changed and forced labour, intimidation, and economic crisis no longer existed, how beautiful would it be in our motherland? (Ka Lit, 2007, p. 20)

Talks continue between the Burmese regime and Thai authorities about the repatriation of Burmese refugees along the border with the announcement that perhaps upwards of 120,000 refugees might be returned within the year. But the general consensus is that, due to ongoing instability in the ethnic areas in Burma and a lack of safeguards in place for returning refugees, this is not wise. I wonder how the women I know on the border are feeling. Do they feel safe enough to return? Perhaps some of them already have. Perhaps I will get to Burma and travel the road to Mandalay in the near future but, in the meantime, I am content with the Burma of my imagination brought to me by the wealth of stories available to me from those women on the border still waiting to make the journey across the border and into their beloved motherland.

Postscript

The beginning of 2013, like any new year, brings an element of hope for what the future may bring. Having returned to the Thai/Burma border running workshops in Chiang Mai and also my beloved Mae Sot I have met a new bunch of students as well as some old friends from previous years. The feeling amongst them is cautious optimism. Many of them would love to go back home but they are unable to trust what might be in store for them there. The Thai government seems determined to send refugees back while western business people and tourists are queuing up to make the most of the new 'openness' in the country. This ambivalence about the future is well warranted and epitomized to me by the following story I heard while there. When Aung San Suu Kyi was scheduled to visit Thailand people were told she was going to visit Doctor Cynthia Maung's hospital, the Mae Tao Clinic. Hundreds of refugees gathered there to meet her, some of them walking more than three days to Mae Sot to see her. Doctor Maung has won numerous Human rights Awards, for the work at the hospital and she is recognised internationally yet the visit to the hospital by was deemed too political by the Thai authorities at the last minute and all those people were left waiting without even catching a glimpse of her.

While I was on the border Debbie asked me if I wanted to run the writing workshops inside Burma next time. My heart lurched with pleasure and anxiety at the thought of it. But yes that would be one excellent way of being inside and supporting the movement towards democracy in Burma as well as realizing my dream of riding the road to Mandalay.

Tomorrow

Sharpness of a needle
a pinprick of sacrifice
Cruelty of the oppressor
unable to dull
the sparkling stars
Confronted with wisdom
and awareness
the rocky monolith
will quake
Gather strength
End the mourning
Days of ceased longing
Day of celebration, day of remembrance
On this Golden day
The sound of the young peacock'sⁱⁱ greeting
will resound in the sky
My friend ... listen for it

(Scent of Steel Flowers from Prison, 2003, p. 67).

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ⁱⁱ The fighting peacock is a symbol used by the democracy movement

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