

What's
Your
Story?

Inter- national

A collection
of work from
Gambia,
Lebanon &
Myanmar

When the first whispers of Covid-19 began two years ago, few of us could begin to imagine what the following months would bring and the long road ahead we would face worldwide. It became quickly evident that some communities would also experience the devastating impacts of Covid-19 very differently to others.

With countless countries already experiencing political corruption, mass migration, ecological disasters, poverty and much more, Covid-19 only escalated issues. The pandemic yielded violent political coups, gender based-violence, police brutality, with Oxfam reporting that in our poorest countries 97% of support provided was inadequate to meet basic needs. We witnessed a lot happen globally over the last two years and what became clear is that global crises require collaborative, international action.

What's Your Story? (WYS) has been one of WoW's flagship writing projects since 2007, giving a platform to the voices we hear the least from. With funding awarded by the British Council, we were able to expand this project onto an international stage, connecting voices from right across the globe.

Introduction

Employing a groupwork methodology, WYS works with communities to help share our stories, be creative, learn new skills and often make sense of the world around us. Working alongside three partners, Writing on the Wall (WoW) set up and delivered this digital writing project with Gambian based Dole Ndawi, and artist Nazeem, writer and teacher Amie Dodd in Myanmar and poet, essayist and activist Lisa Luxx in Lebanon.

At the beginning of 2021 Myanmar faced a violent coup d'état with thousands being killed or injured and most without internet or any form of communication for weeks on end. The Gambia had faced a similar situation a few years earlier and a falling tourism trade was heavily impacted by Covid-19. In Lebanon migrant women faced extreme poverty, living in 35-degree heat with as little as two hours of electricity a day. The impact of Covid-19 was evident as the everyday essentials we take for granted here in the UK were often not available in these countries. As we began delivery of the project we knew how important it was to share

these experiences and to provide essential support that simply wasn't available elsewhere. Our partners worked to provide physical and digital spaces for these groups to meet up, share their stories, meet socially and provide essential support. The result was a series of online workshops in Myanmar, women's workshops in Lebanon, young people in the Gambia creating songs, stories and poems and digital resources shared between all four countries that have helped shape this critical anthology.

I'd like to thank the British Council for supporting this initiative and allowing us to build international connections during this period in history. To the WoW team for their tireless hard work and ability to adapt to completely new ways of working. To Dole Ndawi, Nazeem, Amie Dodd and Lisa Luxx, you provided space and support for people to share and be heard. My biggest thanks are reserved for all our writers who took part and submitted their words. You are truly inspiring.

Madeline Heneghan
Co-Director
Writing on the Wall

The Gambia

Dole Ndawi delivered WoW's What's Your Story project between July to September 2021 in the Gambia with artist Nazeem leading the project. Representing three different tribes: Mandinka, Manjago and Wolof, twelve young people created new written work and songs that explored their lives, producing a music video to be shared online. Gambia was severely economically hit by the pandemic and had previously

experienced political unrest with Yahya Jammeh's refusal to accept the election result in 2016 and then the collapse of Thomas Cook, devastating the tourism trade. The young people that Dole Ndawi worked with described the WYS project as a space to share their voice, to feel more confident to express themselves, more courageous to speak and to re-find their hidden voice.

Gender based violence and early marriage

by Maimuna Gibba

Gender based violence refers to harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender. Young girls and women have faced much gender-based violence in the Gambia.

They have been beaten, forced into sex or abuse which led them to suffer serious sexual and reproductive health consequences. Gender-based violence has undermined the health, dignity and security of women. When women and girls are sexually harassed, they suffer from trauma and stress.

Gender-based violence

by Sukai Barjo

Gender based violence according to my level of understanding is the violence inflicted on a person based on his or her gender.

Gender based violence also known as GBV exists everywhere.

It is like a contagious disease spreading every day.

A concept of inequality that lingers in the mindset of people.

A concept of inequality between men and women.

I feel so sad when I see inequality that still exists in our motherland even though the times have changed, some people's thinking remains the same.

The class of people most affected by gender-based violence are women who are exploited by people just because they are weak and powerless. But this does not actually mean that they are the only ones affected by this; but men and boys as well who are weak or disabled.

The Perilious Journey

by Martin Wollou

Oh Mauritanian Sea
Have you turned to become a red sea?
Why should you drink the blood of adolescents?
Who have never stolen
Even a drop of liquid from you?

You have shattered and perished the dreams
of innocent families
Wanting to move away from the syndrome
of nothingness to something
Within the blink of an eye
Through their sons and daughters

Oh the ocean vehicle
You are a wolf in sheep's clothing
And an enemy of progress
For a futuristic development
Why did you betray our legal contract
Of selling our souls
To a greener pasture?

Poverty

by Anna Mendy

Tears started dripping from my eyes
Right from my cheeks when I began to write
of poverty.
This is because I cannot pretend.
I am a true candidate of poverty
I adequately know what it means to be poor
Poverty befriended me and my family
Leaving us destitute who scabble barely to survive
We are not isolated in this experience
Many like us fall victims to this 'snare'.

Poverty has reflected significantly in my life
It was indeed very difficult for me to taste what it
means to have a balanced diet
I always thank god any time I see something on the
table for me and the family to eat
I do not expect every time to have lunch or dinner
Anytime I have lunch and dinner, I consider the
day a blessed one.
In my community, children of my age brag about
eating 3 square meals daily.

THEME: POVERTY

Poverty

by Foday Ceesay

I am born from a poor family
And am belittled by society,
As I cry bitterly
Because of poverty

I keep on crying when I see my mom suffering
To make food for the family
My dad is over age
and has been discouraged to work

When it rains I have nowhere to sleep with my family
as our house is made of loamy soil
I sometime sleep outside as we only have one room

I don't normally get good sleep
That why I fall asleep in class
I am sometimes distracted in class,
thinking about the family I come from
Sometimes I have to steal to eat.

THEME: POVERTY

Poverty

by Daniel Mendy

When I was growing bigger
Under Mount Kilimanjaro
I realised that my ideas were always unaccepted
Isolated and neglected because I am poor

In the society where I lived
My presence was not needed
Even if it was requested, I started weeping
Because my heart was ceased
Due to the cruelty implemented on me
I need not be rejected
Because I breathe the same air
I feel shy
Even to pass by

Mo bey yeng bala
Ikafoning alah mang daa
Barl nsa foyey dah reng mansoti
Adun ateleng kuoo bey knoolati.

Mandinka translation

Everyone Left me
As if I was not created by God
But I will tell them God is the king
And through him all things are possible.

THEME: TRIBALISM

Tribalism in my life

by Sirreh Sanneh

I was born some years ago among a small
clan 'Sanneh'

Just to realise I am a Mandika, the majority
tribe in the Gambia

Originally from Manding, Kaabu

Growing up wasn't an easy ride

Living in the midst of people,

People blinded and blind folded by tribalism

My sadness began as I began to wonder

Do these people wonder and ponder

and remember that yonder isn't where you belong?

When shall we come to our salvage

When will we protect our servitude

Absolutely not with this attitude

We will never gain gratitude

When all we know is discrimination

I begin to wonder what is wrong with me

What wrong did I do?

Was I wrong to be born a Mandinka?

Do I not have the right to mingle with other singles?

Is it because we do not belong to the same ethnicity?

What should this be3 the problem?

I try to fight the thoughts of my people

But this battle is harder than I was thinking

Cos they don't wanna be corrected

Not actually by an innocent young girl like me

That is why I wonder is it a crime to be younger?

Some people are dying and suffering because
of tribalism.

THEME: TRIBALISM

Tribalism

by Neneh Darboe

Long ago, Momma taught us to love, care and not hate
But nowadays, tribalism has brought separation
These days Momma hides us from the outer world
Because she thinks that the world is no more safe

Tribalism oh tribalism, can't you leave our land the
way you came

We were united, happy and peaceful before your came

You brought separation, malice and wars between tribes. . .

Even for me to go out it is no longer safe

All because of the effects of tribalism

All the wars, fights and problems it has caused - it's
getting too much nowadays

Even men are afraid to marry a woman from
another tribe

Tribalism has broken a lot of compounds or places.

Different tribes from some of the compounds don't
get along that much

If tribalism continues – what does the future hold for me?

It will all get better if we decide to fight against it

People are killing each other and developing hatred

I remain human – I won't support a tribe – not even mine

I have the same blood running through my veins

We are all human from the same creation and origin

From the same soil we came, from there we shall return

Wake up my people, wake up and put an end to this

Just like you cry and feel pains and smile, I also do
the same

I wasn't born to support and help tribalism. But to
fight and war against it.

No tribe, no African, no black, no white, all human

Together lets rise and stop the enemy called
tribalism.

Tribalism must end...

THEME: TRIBALISM

Tribalism

by Joya J Mendy

Oh tribalism, tribalism
A bag of rubbish
A container of trash
A foe to the mass
A mark of disunity
A segregationist
How much I hate you

An enemy of development
Slaughterer of progress
Impediment to congress
A true giver of stress
A malicious beast
Donor of pure wickedness
How much I hate you

A father of nepotism
Swallower of egalitarian
Weapon of the devil
Destroyer of cohesions
Harbourer of grudges
An invisible cheat
How much I hate you...

THEME: A LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT

A letter to the president

by Saikou Jarju

This goes to you Mr President
It is with a profound sense of dejection
That I vocalise to you on the disconsolation of
our reality
And how I believed we could get through the slow
rate of development, restrictions, and the dreadful
nightmares we ensue

My mind is not at rest because of my respective
observation with respect for this country
And my body has transformed into a sleepless frame
due to the slow rate of development in this country.

I think it is really important for me to inform you
as the head of state about my observation regarding
this country

I spent years observing this county and her children
Sooner I discovered I was dealing with a very dark
chapter in our history

I realised that what I was dealing with was to study
the entire activities of the government.

THEME: A LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT

A letter to the president

by Fanta Suso

Dear Mr president,
Apparently our nation is so broke, but I hope you
can pay attention to begin with.
I am sending this letter as a concerned daughter.
Daughter of the soil
A broken citizen.

With a broken heart, age of 14 speaking for
my people
The venerable in the province, who were able to
access a ballot paper,
but farmers can't access the fertiliser for agriculture.

We need to say no to tribalism, no to corruption
and not to nepotism
For a moment this is not political.
This is a letter to remind you sir,
that it's embarrassing to call you dad when we
cannot even cry on your shoulder...

THEME: MY STORY

My life my story

by Omar Bojang

My name is Omar Bojang
I am a boy with 2 brothers and a mother without a
sister not living with my father
But as a result of distance, I have been staying with
my mum only and my 2 brothers.

My mother and uncle decided to take me to Arabic
school (Darra)

The reason they did that was they believed I was
stubborn, so they took me to Darra
I was in Darra for 4 years and it was very tough for
me during that time.

In Darra if you can't recite a Surah (a Quranic verse),
they will give you ten strokes on your back
By then I found it difficult to recite the Quran
Sometimes I would dodge from Darra all because of
the serious punishment
I can still remember there was a day that I didn't
cram my Surah.

I went and sat on top of a tree,
I waited until they closed from Darra,
I came down after and I went home.

One day my mother asked me 'would you like to go
to English school'.
I said yes and she said Ok, now I will take you...



Lebanon

Lisa Luxx, poet & writer, worked in Lebanon providing urgent aid to migrant women. The project provided creative space for the group to work together, sharing and discussing stories. The group considered the different languages they were working across as a site of creative potential rather than a barrier, with storytelling, creative word games and the translation

processes stitching together the disparate parts of this small community. During the workshops in Lebanon, the socio-economic situation rapidly deteriorated. The summer of 2021 saw electricity cut down to one or two hours a day, which left much of the country without internet access, lighting, air con, or fresh food.

Nehna

ana ismi patience

ana ismi resembles myself

ana ismi a memory of my uncle

ana ismi a wish of good health from
my mother

ana ismi something small that tells
you of something large

ana ismi came from the grape tree

ana ismi an energy and light.

What I Have

My father didn't give me anything.

All I asked of him was to leave me this tree.

I told him I told him I don't want the ground just
leave me this tree.

Don't bother yourself,
because I love it for it gives me the feeling
of safety and familiarity.

I hold on like this tree holds onto the ground.
Every time I see it growing,
every spring the seeds come down and I play and
enjoy them.

This tree taught me how to hold on to life.
No one else taught me when I was a kid.

I lost my mother when I was 8 and I watched over
myself.

I hold on like this tree.

Whenever I feel myself weak, I remember this tree
and I remember my son.

And I hold on to my little tree and he holds on to his
big tree.

I'm his big tree.

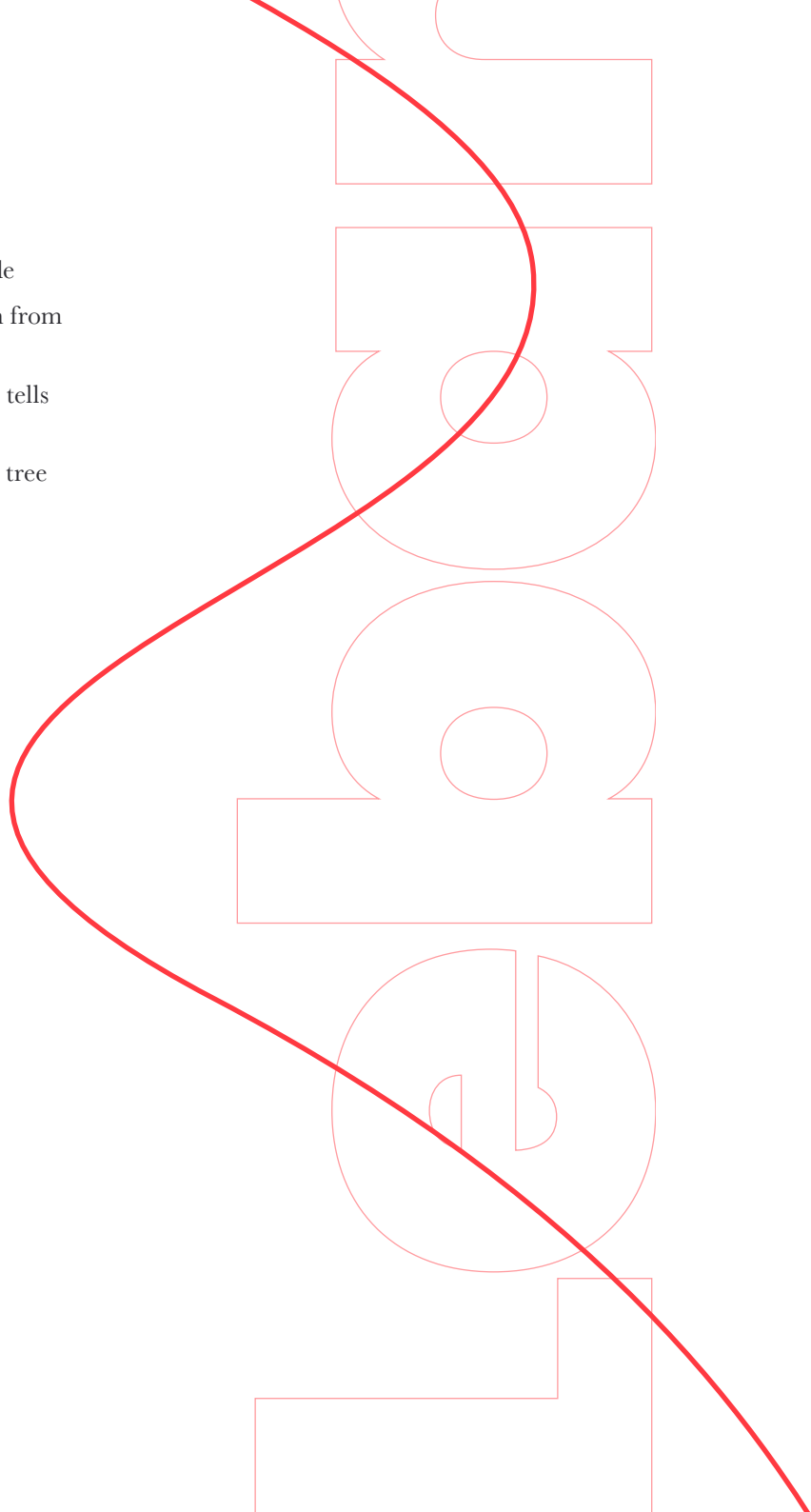
I always give to those surrounding me from this tree.
Because I lost my mother when I was 8 years old.

I had to look after myself.
I always held on like this tree.

ةركف ع يل ع عم ةرجش لاه يكحب أمئاد
ةرجش لاه فوش حور يدب يلق
ونأل لوضف

So what my father has left for me
Is all that I have, this tree.

I left everything else
and decided to keep this tree.



After

There was a strong storm
Later the flowers bloomed
And the sun gave me energy.

Her Strength

I said 'strength'
He is strong through my daughter
She gives me power
She is my strength
All her life she learned by herself
And this is how my daughter strengthens me

She gives me power
She needs to be this way
I need to be this way for my daughter
It's for her that I want to be strong

يوق ريص مع

My daughter.

From the Mountains to the Seaside

ولحريتك سقطلان انبلب ونا دجنع
ةقس م نوكتب قوفل علطي ب ام ني و
ةقس م شم آلسم توريبع لزنيب اذاو
فيصل بحبو
ولحريتك سمشلا

Akh, Lebanon

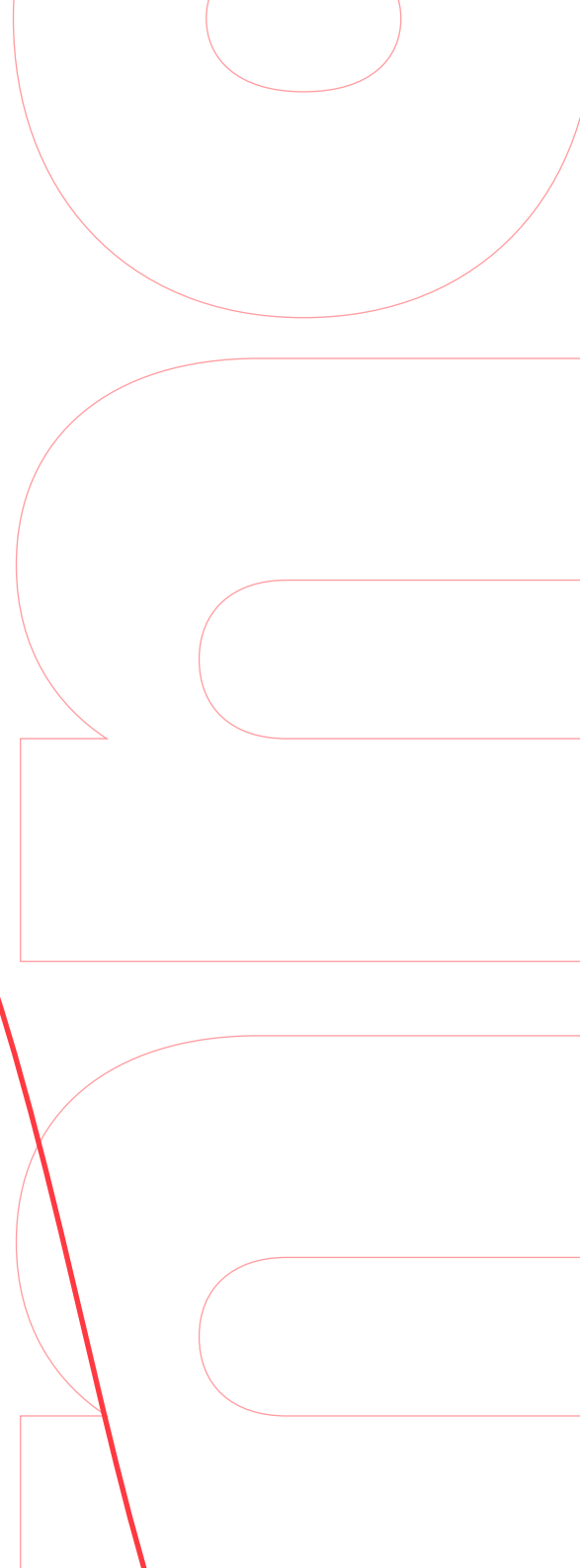
If only we knew how beautiful you are.

Where I Got my Strength

I became strong through my children
I learned on my own
This strength came to me because of my children
My mom also made me strong
I became strong because I believed I will
become stronger
My children made me strong in everything
If I close my eyes and think of strong I see
My children
Without a doubt
My children
My children.
My children.

We Can't Help Ourselves

There is beautiful atmosphere surrounding us
In the type of weather in which one can't get sick
During which we should go out because we can't
help ourselves
And the dirt has been swept from the ground.



The Question

My last word,
I actually have a question.

In everything,
I am like a grapevine
I'm like the grapevine
I have everything in surplus.

The people love me,
My son loves me,
A lot of people love me.

But I'm still waiting for my mother
You know?

I keep a question in my heart
And I'm still waiting.

Maybe after this life
I'll find a mother's love

This is always the question
I have everything, and I still have this question.

I will find everything in my son.

I Used to Like the Rain

The rain brings memories and confusion
When the lightning comes it brings bad things
The noise is cruel
I suffer from it I have terrible memories.

Freedom as Pride

وببتكفا يش يدنع انا ونا س ح ب د ج ن ع ة ر م ل و ا
ل ا ي خ ي د ن ع
When I chose the word 'freedom' I remembered a day
From the past two years
It was the first step for me
We woke up early morning in the village
We always woke up to the sound of birds
And the sound of trees swaying
I really like waking up this way
I don't like using alarms
I woke up to these sounds
I got dressed and headed out
I wanted to go to the institute
And the kids I teach came out
From the windows and on the balconies and they
called out
Good morning, Miss Aya!
From all around me
I was just walking on the road
And everyone was calling out
Good morning, Miss Aya
And there was one student
Who always reminded me
I'll see you at 11, Miss!
So I went to the institute and took attendance

It was time to get to the bus to board the students
And go to the school to teach them
I really love the words *Good morning, Miss*

So I finish delivering the kids
I went back home
I gather some knives
For the hospitality school
Where I'm always received as a chef
Because I study and work the most
So they call me *Chef Aya*
I really love the sound of knives knocking against
the cutting board.

The Snow is Parted by the Flowers

There was a terrible storm
And it was pouring
Later the rain fall
Turned to snow
White snow
And it became really calm outside
Because whenever it's raining
Most people go indoors together
Once there is snowfall
And it's calmer than rainfall
Everyone can finally go home.

And they can't leave until after
The ground is covered with snow.

Flowers start to bloom from underneath
And flowers start to bloom everywhere
And trees becoming green again
The sun comes out inside me.

Myanmar

On February 1st 2021 the Myanmar Military staged a violent coup d'etat, arresting the President U Win Myint and Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the opposing winning political party, the National League for Democracy. The Junta arrested and tortured thousands during peaceful protests and unarmed Myanmar nationals still continue to face violence. Despite these immense challenges, the What's Your Story International project

went ahead, led by writer and activist Amie Dodd. Sessions were delivered online with the group writing independently and sharing. The role that creative activity can play in uniting and developing communities was evident in the feedback from the group "at first I felt the sense of escape from loneliness. It was a heart-warming experience to listen to each other's feelings and console each other."

A City That Brings You Closer to the Stars

ကပြန်တော့ နန်း ၊ စေတံ့ မပြီ။ သင်္တာန်ပြီ။

Most people always prefer the newer things in life, don't they?

I don't usually, but I do like discovering new places. I think I like the interesting and captivating experiences one gathers when one visits a new city. As a wanderlust who loves climbing, I always find myself travelling to mountainous areas.

I once went to a city where the locals only climb the mountains at nighttime. On religious festival days, a lot of local people make their way up to the pagoda on the top of the mountain to say prayers. Since I wanted to meet many locals, I chose to climb the mountain during one of these religious festivals.

Looking down at the symmetrically built houses at the bottom of the mountain, I thought to myself that the people living here must be a united community. I saw locals quietly checking me out, the stranger, from afar as I walked around the place. I, the stranger, also found the local traditions unfamiliar.

When the day came for us to climb the mountain, some of the locals were busy with cooking, packing, preparing small donations to leave at the pagoda on the mountain top. I was also buying candles and incense sticks to burn at the pagoda even though I was concerned that I wouldn't be able to light them due to the strong winds up there.

If they say mountain climbing is best done at night then I guess I'll also have to do it at night, I thought, but still, I wondered whether climbing at midnight in the dark was dangerous. Will the pathway to the top be flat and smooth? Will we be safe? Is the whole town going up the mountain to say prayers? A string of questions occupied my mind as I waited

for 11 pm - the time the locals told me to wait to start our journey up.

People in this new city were polite, warm and kind-hearted. As we started going up the mountain, they helped me with all my bags, leaving none for me to carry, since that I am a newbie and a stranger to climbing with them. Contrary to me, both of their hands were full of lunchboxes, water bottles and many other items. They didn't even need to do any warm up exercises before climbing since they are accustomed to it.

The fashion of climbing here is not to go with big mountain-climbing backpacks. Ladies climbed with velvet sandals, because according to them, velvet is a soft material that helps them walk - this captivated me. I wanted to leave my overcoat behind as climbing will make me sweaty, but as per suggestion from the locals, I was to wear it. When in Rome, do as the Romans do.

Some part of the pathway is stairs, some very smooth, some steep. Along the journey, at some points, lots of people gathered, where at some, it was as if I was alone in the dark with crickets' noises echoing around me. Sometimes I didn't even know if I was alone or with people as the human voices and footsteps drifted near and far.

I continued my way upward, resting when I felt tired, feeling the midnight breeze, thinking about the mountain peak, looking back at the base of the mountain where the new city resided with its flickering lights, looking at the stars and waving to the locals passing by who had already started their descent after visiting the pagoda. Finally, I reached the top.

When I arrived there, it was 2 hours past midnight. Still, there were a lot of people there. Mostly youths. Young ladies with Thanakha paste adorned on

their faces, young men singing and playing guitar, elders saying prayers at the pagoda, children playing around, all of this made me feel like I had arrived at yet another new city.

The group I climbed with said prayers at the pagoda first. Then we settled down in a little corner. Everyone has their own thing to do. The people from my group started to unpack their lunch boxes and called me over to join them. I politely refused and headed to an area where I could lie down and watch the stars.

Where I come from, people climb mountains to see sunrises, sunsets or to see the scenery. Here people climb to be nearer to the stars. Warmly wrapped in my overcoat, I watched the black velvet sky with stars sparkling like diamonds.

At around 4am, after I lit the candles and incense sticks I'd brought with me, me and my group started our journey back to the mountain base. Climbing down the mountain while looking at the seven stars constellation was somewhat unique. Sometimes at path corners, we would meet people who were climbing up with fire batons. It was at the crack of dawn that I felt as if I was in a deep dark forest.

I might have heard tigers and wild animals' noises around me. I put my faith in the good gods and goddesses protecting the mountain and its visitors to keep me safe as I continued down the path.

I arrived back in the early morning at 6am. In that moment, I really was not sure if the experience I'd just had was real or I had been dreaming all along.



The Art of Cutting

ည ပြင်ခြင်း အနုပညာ

by Swe Zin Nay Min

Hair.
Hair, they say, is a woman's glory.

I've gotta give plenty of time to comb out this long hair every single morning. And then again I have to do yet another comb-out before bed so said precious hair does not get damaged.

I understand my mother wanting to see me with long hair but I find it quite strange that my boyfriend also treats it as if it's his own. I once cut the hair on my forehead into a fringe since it kept falling in my eyes and he called me to complain about it the entire night.

'Maung, maybe you can waste your phone bill talking about this all night but some of us have work tomorrow,' I said.

As I prepared to hang up the phone, he screamed at me from the other side so loud that my eardrums almost popped. I got angry, answered back, thus leading to a huge fight until the early hours.

To be honest, since we are both very busy, we only meet like once a week.

'Don't forget to wash your hair and let it down when you come to meet me, *Chit*.'

He always says this whenever we arrange to meet. But I can be sarcastic back.

'If you like long hair so much, why don't you grow some yourself, *Maung*?'

'Why should I? I just like girls with long-haired.'

Aren't I right? If he likes it so much, then why doesn't he have a full set of locks on his head? Back and forth fighting doesn't only exist in politics, it also exists in relationships.

'Why do you love me?'

'I have no idea but that day, seeing you walking towards me in the sunset with your hair swaying left and right, I fell in love.'

So, if I hadn't have been walking with my hair down, he wouldn't have fallen in love with me?

Frankly, I have wanted to cut my hair short for a long time. I have been too busy to go to a hair salon that the hair just kept growing.

'A Burmese girl should have long hair.'

I'm sick of hearing this from him. We've been in a relationship for long enough, I cannot tolerate any more talk about my hair coming out of his mouth.

He tries his best to love me, I know. He's just not sure whether he loves me or loves my hair.

One day, I firmly made up my mind. A war is only fair after an official declaration to fight, right?

'I am going to cut my hair, *Maung*.'

'What?!'

He was so loud that the people sitting at the nearest tables in the coffee shop turned to look.

'I am going to cut my hair and donate it.'

'What... what are you saying? There's plenty of ways to do good deeds, donate something else. Why does it have to be your hair?'

'It's not like you didn't know. I want to cut my hair and donate the money I get.'

'How much do you think you can get from this hair of yours? Do tell me! How much?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Come now. Get up. Follow me.'

Where do you think we went while grabbing my hand? Straight to the shop that buys and sells hair.

'Excuse me, *Daw Daw*. How much can we get for this girl's hair?'

Don't ask how fast she got to us, scissors already in hands, just was already at our side before he finished. It's quite obvious how used to cutting hair she was.

'Excuse me! What are you up to? No, no, we are not cutting hair. I am just curious of how much we can get for it.'

They both glared at each other.

'Her hair looks in great condition so I'm sure I can pay a good price.'

'Okay, tell me then. How much?'

'Well... I am not so sure..'

The woman felt and lifted my hair with her hands as if she was trying to weigh it. I felt like a idiot holding my own hair and standing between my boyfriend and the woman.

They didn't have time to stop me. All of a sudden, I grabbed the scissors from the woman and cut off my own hair. You could even hear the swish of the scissors.

'Oh no no!'

The cutting was done when he grabbed my hands. He was about to cry. His face was like a rotten moon in the dark of night.

He looked at me, deeply, in the eyes once more, and painfully, he turned away as soon as possible. I let him go.

From that day on, I lost both my boyfriend and my hair.

One day, I met my old love in a temple at Shwedagon Pagoda. A girl was with him, long hair flowing freely in the wind, just the way he likes.

I just said my prayers near them while pretending not to see them. I opened my eyes and turned my head, only to meet the gaze of a man who was saying prayers with an angry look, features curled up like unironed clothes.

I lifted my face, smiled, with a smirk.

'Tsk!'

His angry exclamation turned his now-girlfriend's head and she was looking at him with doe eyes. I stood up before they did.

I took two steps and then turned to look back to give them a Mona-Lisa smile to their surprised faces. I felt rather satisfied.



A New Town

မမြို့ သစ်တောမြို့

by Kaung Myat

After getting what I needed, I let my friends know that I was ready. Since they were too, we were going to start our dream journey.

Our dream is to live free from the dictatorship. After the military coup took over in Myanmar, my friends and I haven't been back to work and have spoken out about how we do not accept this dictator. We have marched on the roads and demonstrated against the military coup every day since February 6.

The coup d'état quickly revealed their true selves. Lawlessly arresting more people day by day. They started bullying the people with weapons. The protesters were beaten and arrested in their homes at night, which caused less protesting on the streets. Soon we came to realise that there was no other choice but to attack back with our own weapons against this armed bully. So, after we took a little time to prepare, eight of us: my friends and I: informed our parents and went out.

Some parents gave a speech, take care, they said, and prayed for us, but some parents were so worried that they wouldn't let them to go.

Thura's mother cried and tried to stop him. Thura became the one his family relied on after his father's death. He took care of his mother and two little sisters. His mother said she couldn't allow him to leave because he is the main supporter for the family. Thura put national interests ahead of family matters.

Min Thant came from a military family but he'd always had a strong belief to stand up for what was right and protested with us. He chose to take up arms against his own family.

My sacrifice couldn't compare to theirs.

We were connected to the armed uprising camp by a man called U Maung. We made it to a small town of ethnic militants with his help. We had to avoid military checkpoints along the way. Although it was a difficult journey, we dare not groan about it because it was a step towards our dream.

In the early days at the camp, we worried we wouldn't be able to do it all. We were all used to working in an air-conditioned room and playing video games. We'd hang out at night just like most young people cruising through life easily but now, here we were, intense training and exercise every day. We struggled and couldn't be seen complaining about food the way we did at home.

When I saw that some girls were in the training too, I watched them, but I couldn't do what they did but I didn't know why. I tried my best to survive. Soon enough we got used to it.

We encouraged each other and overcame the difficulties. We even got used to eating only fish paste with boiled bamboo shoots and bean soup.

In the evenings, we relieved the stress of the day by making a camp fire, playing guitar, singing revolutionary songs, and encouraging one another to swear allegiance to overthrow the dictator.

As all of us separated from our families felt homesick, though they never mentioned it. I missed my family meals with everyone round the table. And I missed my bedroom. And I missed my guitar which I used to play whenever I felt down. I also missed my little dog, Ma Hu Yar who is so fond of me and eats only when I feed him. I wanted to go home.

The leaders gave us access to our phones one day a week as they knew that all of us missed our families. It was convenient to talk on the phone where we were, but to use the internet we had to go to a hill not far from the camp.

On the day I was allowed to use my phone, I asked my superiors for permission to use the internet and went out to a hill, with my friend Min Thant, where we could get internet access.

I hadn't had contact with home for over two weeks, so I made a video call to my sister via Messenger and told her I was safe, that it was okay staying here and the only problem is the food. All of us are helping each other like brothers and sisters. I saw my family were relieved to hear this.

After I hung up the call, I realised that my friend Min Thant looked seriously upset. I asked him but he kept silent. I picked up his phone and I saw a Facebook post of a photo of state-run newspaper article, Min Thant's father had posted it. It said his father's inheritance would not be left to his son because his son had left home, disobeying his parents' advice. I didn't know how to console him.

About 100 people are in our camp now.

Over two-thirds of them are young people like me. Some are under 18 years of age - Medical students, engineering students, all coming to work on the ground. All of us hate the oppression and unanimously agreed that the military have not respected our peaceful protest and have chosen to resort to armed violence, so this is what we must do.

Friends Once But Always Strangers

မသိခဲ့ လေသောအသိများ

by Awe Nge

‘Yes? What’s the matter, Nge?’

Her firm, cold voice stopped me in my tracks. I remembered the sayings; If you have to say something, speak up and *Things don’t get heard without speaking, like drums don’t play themselves*. So I had to get it out.

‘Hi, Ma Nan, I am at the office today since our boss came over. Since it’s Sunday, did you go to church?’

‘Yes, I did, Nge. I just got back home actually.’

‘Ah I see. By the way, as I was cleaning my room, I found a damp box filled with ants. I opened it up to see if there were books inside.’

‘Oh really’

‘Yes. I think it was left behind last year when you guys moved out. Same size, same design but different colours of T-Zar branded clothes and I thought to myself it must have been yours. There are about fifteen of them.’

‘Oh is that so? I don’t even remember actually. Hmm, it’s a bit difficult to come over to pick up. Are they still in good condition, Nge?’

‘Yes, they seem to be. I have shaken off the ants and hung them in the sun. What should I do with them?’

As I listened to her voice softening, I got ready to say what I had been meaning to all along.

‘So, Ma Nan, I have contacts with kids from southern Shan State and we donate clothes and books to places that are in need. If you are not going to pick them up, then...’

Before I’d finished speaking, she interrupted.

‘Oh Nge! You should have said so from the beginning. Of course. Please give them away. You are donating to those in need. Go, go ahead. I am happy to do it, of course, Nge. Thank you for informing me.’

‘Hey you. Who were you speaking to on the phone?’

‘Oh, hey, Ma Phyu, back from lunch?’

‘Not exactly, I was actually at a clinic with someone. I had to accompany her there and lend her 2 lakhs’

‘Really? You’re such a boss. I envy you. Always helping people out.’

‘It wears me out to be honest. By the way, what’s with the clothes hanging in the sun?’

They say, *if there’s a question, there must be an answer*.

I told her everything about how I talked so gleefully with Nan.

‘Oh I remember now! Those are not Nan’s clothes. They are Big Sis Khin’s. Nan and I bought those clothes from her at wholesale price. Nan just took everything Big Sis Khin had, chose the ones she liked and never gave back the extra ones. Oh my god, why did you have to go ask her about this?! Show me. Show me the clothes.’

‘I see.’ In that case, Big Sis was the one I needed to talk to. No matter. Big Sis Khin is a dear friend of mine. She is always ready to help with anything. She has such a good heart and, always eager to give to those in help.

‘Nge... look, the clothes are really outdated, but I will take the cucumber one and the fuchsia ones for my niece. You were about to give them away anyway, right? Oh, do ask Big Sis Khin though. I am sure she will wanna donate too.’

‘Okay, okay.’

As she took the newest looking clothes from the pile, I felt a sense of relief. Greed is such a burdensome thing. Then I called Big Sis Khin to tell her about the situation.

‘Oh my dear, I don’t even remember to be honest but let me ask my nieces at home. They were the ones selling those clothes’

‘Yes, yes, of course, Big Sis’

Two weeks later, I actually happened to meet her in person. She said, ‘Oh I haven’t asked them yet. Please keep them for now.’ I called her again two months later. “‘Will you come pick them up?’ I said. ‘Please keep them,’ she replied. The next time we met was when she came to my office.

‘Oh my gosh, my dear, I’ve just remembered again now, when I’ve seen you. I will make sure I ask them this evening.’

They didn’t have a clue what the clothes looked like anymore but they decided that they weren’t able to let them go.

It’s been about a year since I’ve had any contact with those greedy, proud kinds.

Sometimes I wondered about the clothes. I wondered, if they were alive and able to walk by themselves, where would they go? What are the chances of them getting up and making their way all the way to southern Shan state? Chances are pretty slim, I thought, pretty slim.

Let It Be

ရၢ် ဝေတော့

by Aye Moh

It's so true when they say, 'Time and tide wait for no man.'

After months and years passed, Teacher Thaw's teaching career reached its 10 year anniversary. If she is asked if she is happy to teach, she would say, 'Yes, of course.' Innocent faces and habits of young children, still untainted by the difficulties of life, is such a pure thing. As an adult who is surviving and enduring the full pressures of life, Teacher Thaw usually wears a pretend smile in front of them.

The end of the month means that her salary is going to be paid into her account soon. Teacher Thaw taught new classes this month. The thought of earning more makes her smile with genuine joy as she walks. Pay day is the reward for teachers who have been occupying themselves with kids from all walks of life for a whole month.

Teacher Thaw is the youngest of her siblings, but she was not the one who took care of her mother when her older brother and sister got married. Now Teacher Thaw is over 30 years old, and she looks after their mother without any help from her siblings. She can keep both herself and her mother content with her earnings. She fulfilled everything her mother would need. She would always buy something for her mother on her way home from work too. She never eats out by herself. If she does, she always brings something back for her mother. She not only takes care of her small family, but also relatives from her father and mother's side. She always makes sure to buy something for her nephews and nieces too when their birthdays arrive. During Thadingyut festival, she makes sure to pay respects to her mother, and all the elders in her family,

including her uncles, aunts, brother and sister by gifting them clothes, gadgets and money, whatever she deems as appropriate for the gift receiver. When her nephews and nieces come by to Thaw and her mother's home to pay respects to Thaw's mother (their grandmother), Thaw makes sure to gift them back some pocket-money too. Giving is Thaw's greatest joy.

However, no brother, sister, uncle, aunt of hers has ever given the ever generous Thaw something back, not even one thousand kyats. No nephew or niece has ever given her a birthday present. Her mother who lives with her has never acknowledged Thaw's generosity and giving heart.

'You are single, Thaw. And you earn a lot. It's natural to expect things from you.'

They always say this. Thaw doesn't know if she should feel proud or regretful. She is always giving but she does not even receive back words of appreciation. Every time this thought intrudes her thinking, Thaw feels unsettled. She feels guilty. You should always be giving to those who rely on you, right? Why is she expecting something back from them? Her heart feels hollow.

'Mom, this is 3 lakhs to use for household necessities. This is for your personal use, 50 thousand kyats.'
'Is that all of your salary?'
'Yes. I kept some for myself, to buy some snacks for home and for transportation fees.'

Thaw does not give everything she earned to her mother anymore. From experience, she knows it's difficult to ask for the money back when she needs for personal use. If something occurs, it's best to have some money in hand. Asking for money back from her mother does not go smoothly. Her mother does not seem to like this new arrangement, but Thaw can't help it. She needs some independence for herself too.

Yesterday, her married older brother came to visit her mother. It's been two months since he last visited, so her mother seemed to have called him to come visit. As soon as Thaw arrived home, her mother followed her around to tell her about her day with her son. She seemed rather happy about something. Her eyes were bright and smiling. Thaw raised her hand to stop her mother's non-stop talking and drank water. A full day with non-stop classes had made her throat dry.

'Okay mom, you can talk now. I needed to ease my thirst.'

'Your brother came by today.'



The Tree City

သစ်ပင်မြို့

by Thet Zun

A bus was travelling on a scorching hot highway that passes through green fields. It's not a very big bus. At most, it could fit 9 or 10 people. What I noticed, as the bus was continuing its journey, was the old man who was sitting right across from me. He seemed to be around 70 years old. What caught my attention was that everyone in the bus except him was wearing a mask. I also noticed that the old man would sometimes glance at us like he pitied us. He may have been old but his eyes and his posture looked very youthful.

The old man took out an old piece of paper from his old bag and tried to give it to everyone in the travelling bus. No one wanted it. They all refused politely. Every time someone said no, the old man looked pitifully at the person and sighed heavily. Finally, it was my turn. I didn't need the paper either. What was I supposed to do with it? For a travelling person, that piece of paper was nothing but mere trash. But I took the paper. The old man looked at me with satisfied eyes. Then he told me, 'Young man, you are so lucky.' I smiled back. As I looked at the paper, I had a hard time making out what was written because the letters were smudged and not clear. On the paper, it was written 'Those cursed by the earth.' I didn't understand why the old man would say I was lucky after giving me a piece of paper where something like this was written.

As I was lost in my thoughts, the bus stopped moving. The bus became filled with confused, agitated voices. The driver told us it was going to take time to fix the bus. As the travelers were informed that they might have to sleep for a night on the side of the road, the complaining and agitated voices filled the bus again.

Some said they would not reach their destination on time. Some said nothing could be done but wait. The old man approached me and asked, 'Young man, my city is just a few steps from here. Would you like to come with me? You can catch a bus from there which would take you to your destination faster than waiting here.'

His question caught me off-guard. It's not that far to reach my destination too, so rather than sitting and waiting here, I figured it would be better to follow him. We got out of the bus and walked towards his city. I could see it as he pointed towards it.

Since he was not wearing a mask, I offered him one and he refused politely. 'I don't need it,' he said. Wasn't he afraid like others that he might get infected with the virus?

Didn't he realize it's easier to catch the virus at his age? I couldn't contain my curiosity and ended up asking him, 'Why are you not wearing a mask, sir? Are you not afraid that you will get infected?'

'You cannot breathe well under that piece of cloth. I like living like this, rather than being under a mask.'

'I also want to breathe freely, sir. But as long as this disease exists, I have to protect myself.'

'We don't need those in our city. You will see.'

I didn't respond back. As we approached the entrance of the city, I found the name of the city quite amusing, maybe because I had never heard of such a name. The city is called 'The Tree City', but I didn't see any trees.

When he noticed that I was grinning, the old man said, 'What are you grinning for, young man?' I glanced at the sign at the entrance and said, 'Nothing much. I just find it quite amusing.'

Listening to my answer, the old man smiled interestingly. He looked at me and said,

'Some things cannot be decided at first glance, my boy.' As he handed me a seed, he told me to make use of it if I wanted to live in this city. He went on his way after the seed landed in my hands. Why would I be trying to live in this city? I was confused. What am I supposed to do with this seed? I thought to myself disappointingly, taking out my water bottle to drink what little was left inside. When I tried to find the old man again, I couldn't anymore. I saw other locals who were also not wearing masks. I was the only odd one with a mask on.

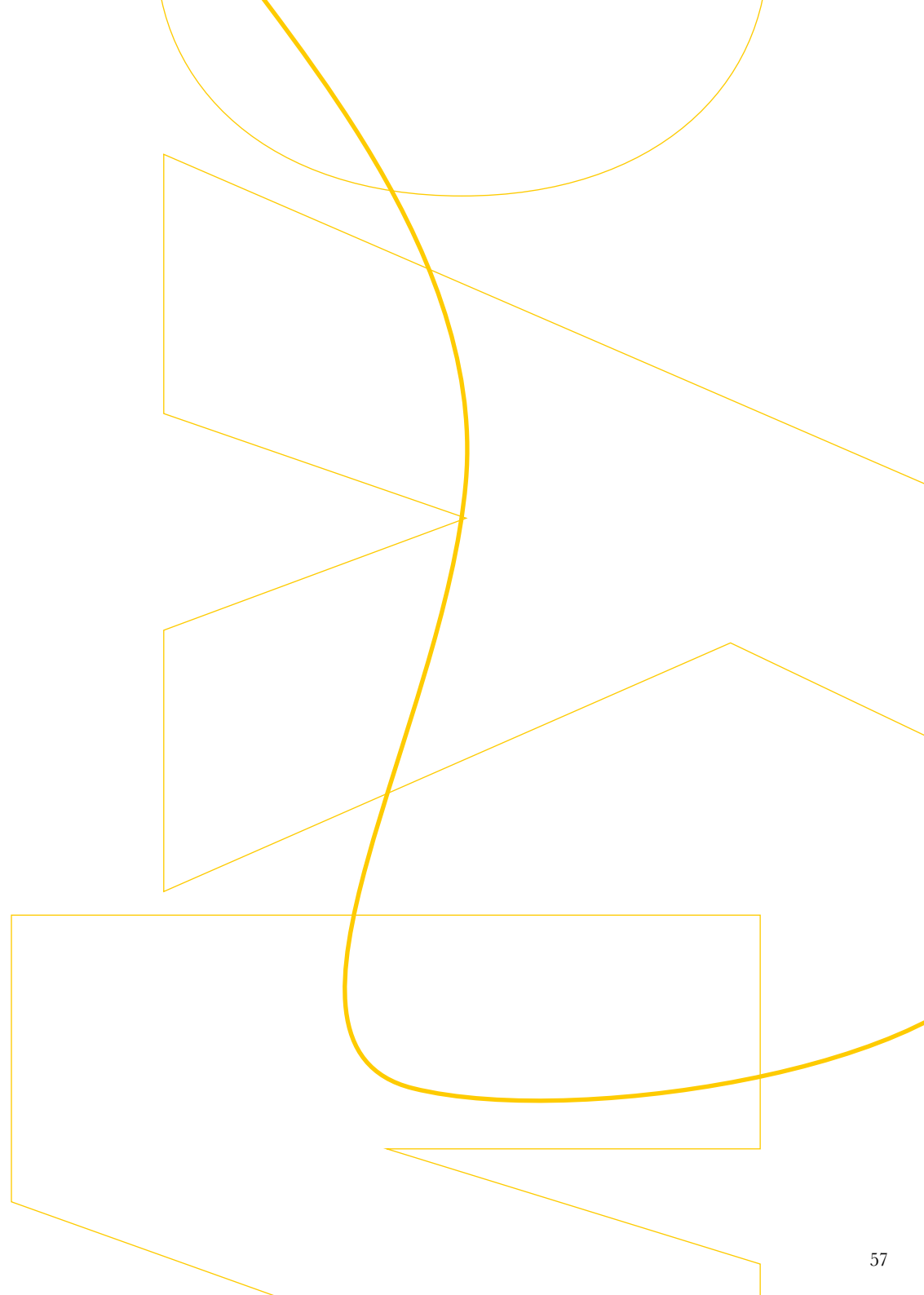
A middle-aged man approached me and handed me a water bottle. I drank hurriedly to quench my thirst. The man spoke to me as I was drinking, 'Young man, drink as you want but don't drink it all. Make use of what's left.'

I stopped in my tracks as I was gulping down the water from the bottle. Was I supposed to continue or not? As I was thinking about my next action, the man left me too.

I looked at the seed in my hand and the little water that was left in the bottle. 'So they want me to plant a tree? Why haven't they planted any themselves?'

As I was drowning in my thoughts, I felt a sudden suffocation. I glanced at my surrounding to see who could help me. No one looked at me as they carried on their way. I couldn't stand up straight and fell down. The seed in my hand fell to the ground too. Suddenly, I heard the two men's voices in my head, 'If you want to stay in this city, make use of this seed, son.' 'Young man, drink as you want but don't drink it all. Make use of what's left.'

I mustered up what strength was left and poured the remaining water on top of the seed. Surprisingly, I was able to breathe again slowly. I couldn't open my eyes yet but I could hear the sound of leaves. Then, I noticed something unique, my breathing. It felt the freest it has ever felt.



Dealing with Obsession

ဥပါဒါန်ကို ရင်ဆိုင် ငြိမ်း

by Lynn Lynn Htoo

**Primer Hotel, Yangon, Myanmar.
12th October 2016.**

The Rural Young Women's Development Program, led by the Future Shine Community, was being held in the ballroom.

May remembered the specifics of the program timetable.

Thirty young promising women had been invited to attend. Among them, Nwe Ni Phyu, and Kyal Ta Gone, friends of May's, were on the invitation list. They were astoundingly intelligent and full of capacity to be of assistance to the community. They had been friends for almost a year but didn't know much about each other.

Her nerves got tangled up with anxiety with Nwe Ni Phyu. Whenever she met with her, my insecurities and emotions popped up frustratingly. Kyal Ta Gone was a fashionista, one who can effortlessly dress herself, follow the latest trends, at once, without even thinking.

May considered herself to be rather normal. She didn't love to wear accessories or buy any branded things. A typical bookworm and fascinated only in realising personal potential.

The word for it differs for each of them but the goal is synchronised in this moment - to help the community out.

They went to the hotel by taxi together. After getting out and when taxi driver charged them, Nwe Ni claimed 'It's too much!' May stared at her, with a look of dissatisfaction. Why did she say this when it wasn't expensive? She noticed May's expression.

Kyal Ta Gone instantly covered it.
'Guys! I have already paid. No worries! Let's go!'

The program had already started. They were seated at a table. Program director, U Myint Wai Tun (Mr.), delivered a speech for all the attendees. After dealing with the Q&A's, he officially invited the young women, leading for their rural communities, to a session of planning and participating as a sub-committee members in a proactive project.

The three friends talked to each other for a while and made a strong decision to lead a project for their community. They voted in a systematic way to take up the proper responsibilities. For each specified project, the budget amount was a total of 7 lakhs in Myanmar Kyat (294GBP) to be offered by the main program.

After taking votes, the group assumed responsibilities for How to be Safe from Lightning. Ten groups of girls took charge of their own commitments. Afterwards, all attendees and the program director, U Myint Wai Tun gathered together to be photographed as a token of record and memory.

Soon after, a week later, the three friends made a plan to give their assistance for their female peers, to those who need information about safety from lightning. For May, her role was to educate them effectively through a workshop activity. Nwe Ni assumed the role to facilitate better access for young, economically-challenged women to attend the workshop. Kyal Ta Gone would arrange for the workshop snacks.

The workshop was held in a rented house in the suburbs of Yangon for a whole day.

There were forty-three attendees for the lightning safety workshop.

The women came from rural areas and most of them were illiterate. They'd had no chance to join

even a government school. They merely lived hand to mouth. They all had had some worries before coming, but after a while, they relaxed and realised it was not a burden for them. May informed them about the tremendous dangers that lightning can have and May informed them in a systematic, simple way. They even asked a lot of questions when workshop was over.

They enjoyed the nutritious snacks we offered and chatted friendlily amongst themselves. May was satisfied when she watched them. They too deserved the opportunity to receive this sort of precious knowledge and life education.

Kyal Ta Gone and Nwe Ni Phyu were also very pleased with how it all turned out.

This was back in October 2016.

On this particular evening, the three girls sat together and calculated the budget expenses. To our astonishment, some budget expenses had been left off the list.

Maybe we had made mistakes.

Nwe Ni told them not to worry about it and she will sort it. Kyal Ta Gone replied 'Okay, fine. We are reassured, dear.' 'Me too, Nwe Ni.' May replied reluctantly, but her face blushed.

May has a premonition, to do with their friendship. If she says something to her about it, she thinks their friendship will not survive it.

Kyal Ta Gone had already gone back home, without a worry.

Two days later.

On the round-up meeting for the project they were gathering in the offices of Future Shine to submit the workshop's reports and paperwork. Each and every group seemed to be very satisfied with their delivery

including our group. But for May, she felt so strange on this day. She wasn't really happy.

All the women were cheerfully shouting 'We did it!' Nwe Ni proudly cheered too.

The three girls hugged and enjoyed that day.

Accidentally, May caught a glimpse of the project paper which noted the expenses. Beside her name, she noticed something. It was not real indeed. She didn't spend that much on fares for taxis like it said there, she thought... that amount exceeds way more than she'd really spent.

She looked for Nwe Ni in the crowds. She caught her eye. Nwe Ni just looked back with her starry eyes and smiled knowingly.

May was enraged. Goosepimples running all over the surface of her skin.

May didn't have any chance to explain - she blushed and froze - nothing was to be done. She was confined to the moment by their enjoyment.

On the way home, May questioned and scolded herself. 'Will you volunteer like this again, May? Will you do this to yourself again?'

Another two years passed. May ghosted her friends and focused on her own qualifications as much as she could.

She had decided never to try to help anyone else again.

But when a natural disaster crashed through her village, floods, she was requested to offer her assistance to people with whatever she could. She hesitated, but again, she led the way, and decided to try and get a lot of aid for her village as they were the victims of heavy water flood damage.

One of those days day, she went to see the leader of the village and she came across Nwe Ni, who was

clearly expecting a baby. She didn't intentionally greet her. May just continued along her own path. A stray thought comes into her mind, 'How's Kyal Ta Gone? Is everything okay with her?'



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