

DUKE UNIVERSITY
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Kan i ton than lai (We will meet again):
A Lai Mi Family Oral History

Thang Lian
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We are *lai mi*

Ka u, big brother, where do we come from?

Little brother, let me begin where others before me began: We are *lai mi*.

Before your spirit found our mother in America, she had never known babies to be born under nauseating lights, probing eyes, and the cool steel pressed against her skin. I imagine your spirit traveling across the green mountains of western Burma to our ancestral homeland in Chin State. I wonder if your spirit was confused, searching anxiously for our mother in Burma. Across the ravines and winding rivers, was your spirit scared when our mother was nowhere to be found? When did your spirit realize that we were no longer in Burma? Did your spirit weep as it flew across the ocean to America, coming to our mother in the early hours of daylight? The spirit, they say, always yearns for the homeland. That much is true for us *lai mi*, our spirits separated from our birthplace.

Little brother, let me share with you the journey of our *lai mi* spirit.

Our people have only walked the mountain earth. Our eyes have only watched the mountain breathe: the fog rising like high tide, a wave of white crashing down on the villages. Our hands have only worked the mountain soil—our darkened brown skin a reminder of the orange sun that beats us down during harvest.

I will say we are many: as many tribes as there are stars in the night sky.

I will say we speak many tongues: as many languages as there are grains of rice in the paddies.

And yet, we remain *lai mi*. Also known as the Chin people, *lai mi* means community—where villages scattered across the mountains rely on each other, doors open indefinitely. We share our neighbors' joys and sorrows, participating in rituals of giving and being given.

Neighbors share harvests, chattering about the good harvest while the children play soccer outside. Life moves slowly in the mountains.

However, our people were stolen and slain by the *Tatmadaw*, the Burmese military. Our villages were ransacked, our Christian God desecrated, and our bodies forced to labor for the army. The mountains could no longer shield us. And so, our people fled our ancestral homeland, descended down the mountains, and threw themselves into the waters separating Burma and Thailand. We ran across cold, unfamiliar earth with unknowing feet while fear and the black of night closed in around us. This was how our spirits fled, without even a goodbye. We didn't have time.

This is who we are, little brother.

We are an ethnic minority borne from the mountain's belly. We are farmers, our hands calloused and darkened by the sun. We are religiously persecuted. We are refugees.

We are *lai mi*.

When the *Tatmadaw* came

For my grandmother and my grandfather, their world—dense forests, rolling hills, and long, snaking rivers—gently tucked itself away along the spine of *Mt. Rung Tlang*, shrouded by heavy blankets of mountain fog. The *Tatmadaw*, however, descended upon the *lai mi* like an angry storm, raping our people, pillaging villages, enslaving villagers under military dictatorship. Yet, my grandmother tells me that this wasn't always so. The elders in *Hakha*, my mother's and father's birthplace (and later mine), recall simpler, more hopeful times where villagers, donned in *thanaka* and chewing *Kun-yar*, tended rice paddies—the women gossiping excitedly while husking rice under the glaring sun.

It was 1945, and nationalism clung aggressively to the sticky Burmese air as Japanese soldiers disappeared from the streets of *Rangoon*. The sun had set on three years of Japanese occupation. In the years following, my grandfather and my grandmother—like other folks—dreamt of a prosperous, democratic Burma emerging from the mountain clouds. Burma had suffered under British military imperialism for nearly 120 years, gutted of its cultures and robbed of its wealth (Myint-U 8-27). With the Japanese gone and the British empire weakened after World War II, maybe the fog would lift, revealing a united Burma. Maybe. For a bittersweet second, yet forever part of the nation's collective memory, General Aung San's anti-imperialist and socialist visions paved Burma's eventual path towards independence from Britain in 1948 (Farrelly 314-315; Palmer-Mehta, 177-178). Bitter, however, because Aung San was assassinated six months before he saw a liberated Burma. A nation's embittered tears flooded the political and social landscapes, plunging Burma into bottomless, corrupt chaos (Kingston 19-20).

The rivers ran crimson in 1962 when the *Tatmadaw*, under the helm of General Ne Win, seized power via a coup d'etat against Prime Minister U Nu (Smith 622). Under Ne Win's economically crippling, crony capitalist "Burmese Way of Socialism," crooked military generals disemboweled Burma's riches and brutally gagged protesters (Thompson 34-50). By the 1960s and 1970s, the *Tatmadaw* and their guns emerged from the mountain's fog, arriving in our villages: military rule. I imagine my grandmother, a child of the rice paddies, quietly watching soldiers march across the unpaved streets—unknown to her that her children and grandchildren would witness the same scene unfold. I imagine my great-grandmother, worried for her children, thinking: *first the British, then the Japanese, now the Tatmadaw*. And yet, life, like the clouds, kept moving. It was like this, under the military, you had to keep living—you had to at least try.

By the 1980s, widespread demonetization wiped out people's cash savings, poverty rates swelled, and ethnic conflicts incurred fiercely violent military retaliation (Thompson 34). Like other folks surviving in the margins, my grandmother and my grandfather tried their best to live. The bombs fell, and they continued living; The Japanese came, and they continued living; The British came, and they continued living; The *Tatmadaw* came, and they continued living. By the time my mother and father were born, they inherited a bitter, confusing world: a Burma rammed between a broken past and a breaking present. Of the future, my father and my mother feared more than hoped. In this uncertain twilight, the fear and anger of a nation exploded on August 8, 1988.

8/8/88

When the killings began in 1988, my father was sixteen years old. Civil unrest had been swelling within Burma's underbelly since 1987, beginning with clashes between angry student protesters and the police. When Ne Win's government demonetized 25, 35, and 75 *Kyat* currency notes, nearly three-quarters of Burma's currency in circulation vanished. The nation reeled, devastated because life savings evaporated overnight. Students in *Rangoon*, unable to pay tuition with the cash they had saved, hoarded the streets, standing off against the brutal police (Thompson 34-35). By September of that year, student groups organized riots as whispers of "democracy" traveled carefully. It would take another year for "democracy" to climb the mountains of *Hakha* and reach my father's ears. In response to the student riots, the Burmese government shut down universities. However, the embers of revolution burned cautiously: a fire in the dark night of military dictatorship. Ne Win further stoked the fires when he resigned following an emergency parliamentary conference. Sein Lwin, the Butcher, became president (Thompson 35). On August 8, 1988, the fires of revolution roared ferociously as hundreds of

thousands of students flooded the streets, demanding federal democracy. Burma was changing, and the youth—known to my father as the ‘88 generation—were the bearers of gasoline.

Nearly a week’s walk away from *Rangoon*, in *Hakha*, No. 1 Basic Education High School students organized protests, igniting the revolution’s flames in the rural mountains. My father was a student at No. 2 Basic Education High School: loud, stubborn, and not yet knowing how that auspicious week would reshape his spirit. That day, No. 2 students were absent from the protests.

On August 9, my father and five friends gathered at No. 2. I imagine six teenage boys, wearing ripped school uniforms, anxiously conversing among themselves in the school. I’m certain they understood the consequences of being caught: exile, torture, or murder. Maybe they had resolved to protest, pushed by the tides of urgency and necessity (and maybe guilt-ridden that No. 2 had not participated the previous day). My father, known in the village to be headstrong and proudly opinionated, would agree to rally the fifth and sixth graders. Others, he recalls, took on the labor of securing the village by constructing makeshift gates. The day was a blur of high emotions, adrenaline, sticky sweat, and moving pictures my father can only now recall in murky colors. Maybe it was because of how fast his feet moved as he sprinted from classroom to classroom, each step carried by the winds of hopeful change: a chance to be part of something bigger. By afternoon, No. 1 and No. 2 students had merged, hundreds of students in green and white uniforms standing, chatting among themselves. The sun sat high in the sky, the heat unbearable. Later joined by villagers, thousands marched the hills of *Hakha*, their lungs scorched and stomachs empty. Yet, their fists remained high: *we want democracy now*. Later that day, as the march drew to a close, student leaders organized teach-ins. What was democracy? Who were they fighting against? With their only source of communication via radio, other

students sat, listening intensely for updates on what was happening in *Rangoon*. That day, my father and the students of *Hakha* marched across the bitter earth of Burma, each step turning over new soil: maybe this time it would be different.

My mother was thirteen years old when she joined the march. “I only remember the heat and candy,” she tells me. With her slippers falling apart, my mother used rubber bands to tie them together. In her makeshift sandals, she marched, enticed by the candy store owners handed out to energize protesters. I imagine an empty blue sky, the sun at its zenith, thousands of *lai mi* strewn across the hills, some sitting together in large groups, anxiously waiting for reports. When I ask my mother what went through her head, she says simply, “Family.” My mother knew that Burma would not change soon, and her family would not be safe. For my mother, her family came first before a country that had given up on her.

My father believed fervently in his nation. My mother endlessly put family first. Two proud souls caught under an August heat, I wonder if they realized August 8 would send a scarlet monsoon crashing down, forever reshaping their futures. But, for now, my father was sixteen years old, and my mother was thirteen. For now, they could dream of a different Burma.

For now.

Back in *Rangoon*, when midnight struck, the bullets rained down on peaceful demonstrators. Sein Lwin, the Butcher, had ordered soldiers to lower their guns, to not fire into the night, but into the crowds (Thompson 35-36). Terror, hysteria, and blood. My father tells me stories he heard: the rivers of *Rangoon* were red from the blood, bodies strewn lifelessly across the streets, the fires of revolution extinguished by a cold, murderous gust. That morning, the government announced that the military had seized the nation. Schools shut down, and the army stormed villages. From the morning fog, the ghastly figures of the *Tatmadaw* emerged from the

base of the mountains. For my father and my mother, this was their first time. For my grandmother, it was all too familiar. Soon, the military rounded student leaders, dousing any remaining embers of the youth civil disobedience movement. Because there was no communication, student leaders in the mountains had very little time to escape. Although my father avoided arrest, his friends fled to bordering countries on foot, taking the dying embers of democracy and the clothes on their bodies. Tired and disillusioned, murmurs of escape routes to Thailand and Malaysia traveled through the mountains like a secret. My father listened carefully and made his escape in 2002, leaving my pregnant mother until he could save enough money to send for his wife and eventual firstborn son. My father was thirty years old and my mother twenty-seven. I imagine my mother watching as my father's figure disappeared into the fog. I envision my mother touching her belly, feeling the beating heart: their only connection to one another. My parents told me this was what had to be done because they had for so long and were tired. This was their last fight: to leave the mountains and risk death so they could live.

Ka nu

I was delivered into my mother's hands in August of 2002. I imagine my mother crying painfully, trying to bring her child into a torn world. I wonder if she was scared. I was born early before morning had crept through the mountains. My grandmother and the village midwife were huddled together in our house, candles guiding their knowing hands. My father had fled to Malaysia eight months ago, and it would be five more years before I could compare his face to mine. My grandfather named me Thluachuah Thang following *lai mi* tradition: the *lai mi* words for "blessing" and "grow." My grandfather dreamt radically for his first grandchild, believing that I would grow into my name. When my father was born, the villagers had told my grandfather to prepare for death. My father, born prematurely, could barely fit my grandfather's

outstretched palms. Thus, my father was named Tin Lian: to grow strong. For my mother, that I was born was enough. That alone was a blessing.

My mother and I lived with her siblings and my grandmother growing up. When her father died, my mother assumed the caretaker role: for her son, mother, and siblings. I now understand the weight of keeping together a family as the world broke around her. When I ask my mother about her life's story, her words are straightforward: things to feel, things to do, things to get through.

My mother was born in *Hakha*. Growing up, my mother did not have much. "We were living in penury," my mother reminisces. "When I was in second grade, your grandfather started to build our house. Your grandfather was a carpenter, and your grandmother stayed at home. When I was in third grade, I finally had a home."

Although education at the local No. 2 Basic Education High School was expensive, my grandfather earned just enough to send my mother to school. However, my mother recalls times when she didn't have enough pencils. Between bouts of laughter, my mother tells me that she would cut pencils in half, sharpening them ever so slightly when the tip dulled. Until she was in tenth grade, my mother did not own a crayon, let alone a box full of colors. For my mother, everything was a luxury, including paper. When preparing for exams, my mother would shred used parchment, stitching the pages together for reuse. My mother survived by doing the best she could do. "Everyone did; we were all so poor."

My mother's first and last memories of *Hakha* were about how poor her family was. In Burma, students would come home to eat lunch in between classes. My mother didn't have anything to eat, so she would go to school hungry. In a family of eleven people, there wasn't enough food or money to go around. My grandmother didn't work because of the mantle placed

on women to take care of the house and family. From sunrise to sundown, women sat down, picking rice grains to eat for the family before grinding them to cook. Women also fetched water from the village well, hauling water pots on their heads to the well and back. Women were vital because they took care of the family. There was a mutual understanding for the *lai mi* that without both the man and woman, survival would be impossible. Because people were so poor, my mother says, there were many *lai mi* who gave up on living. It was hard to live.

When my mother speaks about the military, the words tumble out of her. My mother was terrified of the *Tatmadaw* growing up. In Burma, the military descended upon villages at night, banging on doors. It was never during daylight; it was always when everyone was asleep. The military came with their guns, rounding out all the men in the family. The men were then forced to carry the military's equipment to wherever the army traveled: porters. If the men didn't listen, they were beaten or murdered. The men weren't fed up in the mountains and became gravely ill. Some porters were eventually forced to go to war zones. In our village, one man went to the war zones. He died there. My mother recalls soldiers patrolling the village at night. My grandfather was old, and her brothers were teenagers.

The soldiers were pounding on doors, demanding the men to come out. The men ran to the jungles. With the first thud on the family's door, my grandfather and uncles dashed outside, hiding in the jungles. They carried with them nothing but the clothes on their bodies. Even during the monsoon season, they ran when the rain flooded the mountains. They did not come out until the soldiers left. My mother says about the soldiers, "We are *lai mi*. The soldiers didn't think we were human. The soldiers weren't human, and they weren't animals either—they were demons."

The military also checked if families were complete. In Burma, people did not have identification cards or social security cards. Instead, people were given a piece of paper that listed our names and birthdates. When the soldiers went on patrol, they would demand people to show their paper, stamped by the government. Soldiers checked to make sure every member of the family was present, inquiring about the whereabouts of those not there.

My mother remembers a time when she was most angered and saddened. When my uncle returned home from a neighboring country, he was arrested by the soldiers because they thought he was a runaway student. Although my grandfather and mother warned him to not wander about because the military was making rounds, he didn't listen. My uncle was contained at the high school and beaten up by the military; they had hit him with their rifles on the head. My aunt came running to our house that night, screaming that my uncle had been taken by the soldiers. At first, my mother didn't believe her. When my aunt insisted, my mother and aunt ran to the gymnasium near the high school.

As the only one who spoke fluent Burmese, my mother pushed through the doors of the military encampment. The soldiers stood up and yelled at her, "Why did you come in without permission! What are you doing here!" My mother shouted back at them, telling them they unlawfully arrested her brother.

"I was so stubborn, filled with nothing but anger and sadness. I wasn't scared," my mother recalls. "I told the soldiers that they would be very sorry if they didn't release my brother." However, the soldiers insisted they had not arrested my uncle until my aunt pointed to a police truck revving its engines. Inside was my uncle, beaten and detained without having committed a crime. That was the way the soldiers worked. "They never needed a reason to arrest people, the way a person walked, talked, or looked was enough," my mother says.

My mother remembers pounding the car until the driver got out and screamed at her. Screaming at the driver, my mother demanded the driver release her brother. Tired of my mother's pestering, they released my uncle and accompanied them to our house. They warned my uncle to never venture outside again.

“There are no good stories about the military. They're animals.”

Spirit, do not cry

When I came into her life, my mother was a woman hardened by military rule. Even before my birth, my mother and father had planned for our eventual escape to Malaysia through Thailand. I didn't know much about my father, except the few times he called. I would hear his low, scratchy voice through the telephone and picture a man who looked like my grandfather and a little bit like me. Always, the picture would become formless when the call ended. When people told me about my father, I would listen intently. Sometimes, my father was funny. Other times, he was stubborn. In my head, he was all of these things except a father. Fathers, I thought, are supposed to be with their families.

With my mother tasked with caring for her siblings, my grandmother and grandfather quickly became parents. I would stroll to my grandfather's house each day, excitedly waiting by the door as he stretched out his sore muscles and drank warm tea. After what seemed like an eternity, he would put on his boots and a scarf. With his rough, calloused hands grasping mine, we would slowly creep up the hills like ants. My grandfather was a quiet man; he laughed more than he spoke. When he did say something, I listened attentively: “You are *lai mi*, do not forget.”

I am *lai mi*, I will not forget.

When I was not with my grandfather, I was with my grandmother. I would wait for her by our door as mother cooked, igniting embers by blowing into a bamboo pipe. My

grandmother—carrying a basket using a tumpline—traveling down the hills was like God descending from the mountain's peak. Often, my grandmother would bring succulent fruits like guava. Where my grandmother went, I would follow behind; I was her shadow.

The night before we left, my grandmother slept with my mother and me: three generations closing the gap before physical separation would forever push us apart. I remember my mother and I getting on the bus in the morning. I remember my grandmother standing outside. For the first time, I was no longer her shadow. My grandmother wept, hot tears that streamed down painfully. I didn't want to cry; I wanted to show my grandmother that I was strong.

As the bus' engines revved, grandmother wailed. No words were said between us. No one had to. I was leaving, and my grandmother was not coming with us.

I am lai mi, I thought. This is my home.

When the bus began to move, grandmother waved goodbye. Hollow cries banged my eardrums. A funeral was taking place, but it wasn't for the dead: it was for the spirits of the living. Once we left the mountain, disappearing into the fog, we would never return. My grandmother wept for our *lai mi* spirit, forced to leave its ancestral homeland.

I am lai mi, I thought. This is my home.

The bus croaked down the dirt roads of *Hakha*, and the cries grew distant. Then, turning my face away from the window, I felt my spirit cry.

I am lai mi. I have no home.

I consoled my spirit. *Don't cry, spirit, don't cry.*

Fleeing to Thailand

In January of 2007, my mother and I fled to Malaysia. Our escape to Malaysia began in Kawthaung, a town bordering Thailand. From Kawthaung, we rode a fishing boat to reach Ranong, a town in Thailand. My mother bought a lot of snacks, scared that we would go hungry. But, unfortunately, on the fishing boat, everything was swept away by the waters—including my favorite red hat.

Out on the Andaman Sea, we huddled atop a fishing boat; aboard, a dozen too many bodies for the boat to reach land safely. I recall the frigid coldness of my mother's hands, tightly gripping mine. Her eyes darted back and forth: sky, land, sky, land. Was it a reflex, I wonder? This power to keep survival alive within her, to be a sentry in the night holding her son safe, what thoughts swam in the currents of her mind? Soon, burdened by the weight of its passengers, the canoe's rims dipped ever so slightly to kiss the river: fear. My mother's eyes, however, remained steady: survive. My mother's murmured prayers echo in my ears: "*Aathang*, don't worry. Listen to what they say." My heart sank when the sailors screamed, "Children on one boat, adults on another!" With the arrival of another boat, I cried and screeched while two girls reassured my mother that they would take care of me. To be separated from my mother was to tempt Death. To be separated from my mother was to offer my body and soul to the angry sea. It is fitting, I suppose, that I do not remember what occurred during our separation. I only remember the sturdiness of the earth when we reached the shores of Ranong.

"When we were fleeing, I was not frightened. I was not frightened for myself, but I was terrified for you. Your father told us one thing: do not be separated." My mother would later reconstruct my memory, moving the fleeting pictures I have in my head of Thailand. My mother, separated from me, was scared. She was scared because she heard the stories, tales of mothers

forever separated from their children. My mother distinctly recalls her brother's journey to Thailand, one that ended in blood. When her brother attempted to flee after my father's successful journey, he had a blood vessel pop in his leg and underwent life-threatening surgery. He limped back home with only one leg properly working, a crooked figure emerging from the fog. My mother's powerful voice did not carry out on the Andaman Sea: two fishing boats drifting along the currents of a vast, deep ocean. No matter how hard she reasoned with the sailors, my mother could only understand so much of their broken Burmese: "Don't worry, ma! You'll be reunited soon."

"I was scared. I was angry. I was nervous," my mother would share. However, she had no choice. She wanted to believe that we would meet again, so she believed their words.

My mother began doubting our decision to flee when we had to ride a truck. The truck had no windows, and it was pitch black inside. "We were like criminals packed into prison trucks," my mother says.

We had no place to put our hands, feet, or bodies in the truck. We were stuffed into the truck like sardines: four to five stacks of refugees on top of one another. We were like animals being prepared for slaughter. The truck had no windows, so the smell of blood, sweat, and fear covered us like a thick blanket. I remember overwhelming nausea that overtook me, and I wanted to puke. My mother, unable to do anything, told me to puke because nobody cared; everyone was fighting to survive. We were already stuck inside a pool of vomit and urine. For what felt like an eternity, we rode on the truck, not knowing where we were, casting ourselves into the darkness of uncertainty. Although my mother told me to stay strong and looked determined to do the same, she feared and prepared for Death. After a few hours, the truck came to an abrupt stop. Quickly, we streamed out of the truck, exasperated and gasping for breaths.

The driver told us to wait for a van to take us to our next spot. Slowly, the truck's motors revved and lurched forward before disappearing. I remember how dry my lungs were—maybe from the shock or the fear: perhaps both. They say fear makes you forget how tired you are until you're alive again.

People didn't talk. Nobody looked at each other. We all knew each other's stories without speaking: dignified people now without homes.

When the van arrived, my mother and I waited near the back. The driver motioned for my mother and me to get on. My mother jokingly told me how scared she was of getting on, knowing that we would be crammed. However, right before getting on, the driver asked my mother if I was her son. With what little English my mother knew, she said, "Yes." The driver told us to sit right beside her in the front during the trip. Dehydrated, I kept pestering my mother for water. My mother told me to ask the driver for water. With my hands, I acted out drinking water. The driver gave me a bottle. And so, under the guise of darkness, we rode.

When the driver dropped us off, she left us with gum. Whatever Burmese *kyat* my mother had, she gave it to the men from our village who had also fled with us. After exchanging it for Thai *baht*, we bought snacks from the local village. Neither my mother, a vegetarian, nor I ate. When night closed in on us, we were told it was time to leave. My mother remembers a particular scene. As soon as our guide opened the door, I was the first to peek out my head, intending to leave before the rest of the group. Within seconds, the guide slapped me across the face, and I began crying. My mother was so angry.

"Why did you slap my child?"

"Do you all want to die? I am responsible for surveying the area and making sure everyone is safe. Had the border patrol been outside, we would have all died."

“Why didn’t you tell us? How would a child know if he’s not told? Why did you slap him?”

The people around us tried to console my mother, anxious that her voice would carry into the night. Most of the people we had fled with were our villagers. They told my mother that I was only a child. The guide was doing his best to protect us. My mother, years later, would say to me, “I was so angry. I told all of them that I was not going to be quiet. Why did he have to hurt my child?”

Our journey across the border was arduous and lengthy. We walked through the bramble, trying our best to keep up with everyone else. When the car arrived to take us to the border between Thailand and Malaysia, everyone was told to run. They screamed at us, and with my mother carrying me on her back, we ran through the night. My mother, exhausted, put me down and told me to run ahead. I don’t remember much. Putting one foot in front of the other, I ran toward the car. I don’t remember if I looked back to make sure my mother was okay; I only remember the pain that shot through my legs, eventually turning numb. I imagine my mother’s small figure slowly straddling behind me. Hungry and without strength in her legs, I envision my mother trying—as she always does—to live. My mother says that she was not fearful. I would like to believe her.

Eventually, my mother and I safely reached another car that took us to a house near the border. We stayed there for the night, and the next day, we rode our last car. Finally, we had crossed the border; we arrived in Malaysia.

I do not remember much about Malaysia, only that it was our temporary home. I remember seeing my father, a myth I had conjured for so long. So different yet so similar to the stories I heard, I learned to live with a father and a mother.

I learned to be quiet in Malaysia, for the wrong words could send us back to the mountains. I learned quickly that we were lucky, that we were blessed. For the few who crossed the border, many perished. At night, I would stare at the ceiling fan whirring quietly, trying to shut out the snores. I imagine lifeless bodies floating in the Andaman Sea, bodies that looked like mine. I imagine mothers whose strength betrayed them when needed most, pushed down by the guns of police. In my head, these people don't have faces.

These people could have been my mother.

These people could have been me.

As I quietly lulled myself to sleep, my mother on one side and my father on another, the mountains of Burma faded, replaced by towering skyscrapers. I was six years old, and already, I had touched the sky from two points.

When I return to Burma, I thought to myself, I will tell grandmother all about it—that you don't need mountains to touch the sky.

We lived, we cried, we were human

When I think of Burma, I envision myself crawling up the hills, grandmother slowly walking behind me, supported by a sturdy stick I found somewhere along the way. The air is sticky, the clouds rise high above me, and on that hill, I turn around. "Grandmother, come on! You're so slow!" *Chuckle*. I don't think of my sandals, held together by rubber bands. I don't think about the breakfast we didn't eat. I think only of my grandmother, her petite frame, like a caterpillar, inching up the mountain's shoulders. We lived. We cried. We were human.

It has been fifteen years now. Sometimes, it is easy to forget. Sometimes, I think really hard, and nothing appears in my mind: Burma is quietly fading. It scares me. I embarked on this journey of remembering, of relearning to love, because I am scared of forgetting. There are

pictures of Burma without sound, scent, or flavor in my head. Often, people's faces are empty, their humanness blank. Thus, speaking with my grandmother, father, and mother is my attempt to make the pictures move—to hear, to smell, to taste Burma. To once again reach the hills, to be a child once more.

In those fifteen years, much has happened. On February 1, 2021, a military coup d'etat swept across Burma. I was in my room in America when it happened. I was safe. My family and the other *lai mi* in Burma continued living; they continued resisting. Hundreds of thousands of people, like in 1988, marched: a deluge of anger, sadness, tiredness. Thousands, like in 1988, have perished. When I called my grandmother, I asked her if she was scared. She laughed. She told me that she's never once known life without the military in her lifetime. Then she cried. She cried because she missed me, she cried because she is now weak, she cried because she can't sleep at night when the gunshots don't stop. Then she prayed. She prayed for her grandson, she prayed for her children, she prayed for her country.

Fourteen months later, the people of Burma continue living. They continue fighting. When I ask my father and my mother if they have hope for Burma, they nod without hesitation. My mother says, "*Lai mi* means family. We stand by each other, protect one another, and care for each other. We are strong. When you graduate from college, our people will have won this fight."

I immortalize her words on paper because I believe them to be true.

Since our escape from Burma in 2007, our family has yet to come home. For my father, it has been twenty years. When I call my grandmother and my grandfather, they tell me they are holding on—they will not die. "*Aathang*," my grandfather says, "Until you finish college and return back to us, we will hold onto the living world."

For us *lai mi*, rarely do we show affection with words. Maybe it is because spoken words lose life the moment they've left your body, while action moves the spirit with care and intention. And so, through the movement of my fingers and the words I carefully and intentionally place onto paper, I say and act out my love: for my grandfather, grandmother, father, and mother.

To my grandmother and my grandfather, may these words reach you safely. When we meet again, it'll be atop the hills of *Hakha: kan i ton tan lai*.

We will meet again.

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