

POWER
CRAZY
SENIOR
GENERAL
THAN
SHWE

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CONTENTS

Editor's Note		4
Heidi Sulzdorf	The General to His Wife on Her Honeymoon	5
Pamela Johnson Parker	The Father Toasts His Daughter at Her Wedding	6
Carolyn Moore	Of a Maligned Myth and Its Namesake Aquatic Animal	7
Nathan McClain	The New World	8
Woody Loverude	This Is the New Year	9
A. J. Patrick Liszkiewicz	Emperor Ink	10
Luisa A. Igloria	The Gift	11
R. Joyce Heon	Remember Me Sweetly	12
Anne Haines	Love Song of the Starving Chick	13
John Davis	Better Than the Wedding	14
Ivone Alexandre	Hide!	15
Kelli Russell Agodon	Another Roadside Distraction	16
Contributor Notes		17

Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words.

– Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet”

On January 22, 2008, in the country of Myanmar, a man named Saw Wai was jailed for writing a poem. The eight-line poem, “February 14,” had been published the previous day in the popular Burmese weekly *A Chit* (or *The Love Journal*), and is about a man who learns the true meaning of love when his heart is broken by a fashion model. Because “February 14” looks the part of a saccharine Valentine, Burmese government censors missed its hidden message: when read top-to-bottom, the first word of each line forms the phrase, “Power Crazy Senior General Than Shwe.”

Senior General Than Shwe leads the military junta that has ruled Myanmar for almost twenty years. After seizing control of the Burmese government in 1988, the junta refused to relinquish power in 1990, when a democratic political party led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi won a popular election by an enormous margin. Suu Kyi has been in a Burmese prison for twelve of the past eighteen years; Than Shwe has been the country’s dictator for the past fifteen. Saw Wai has been in prison, unable to see his family, for two and a half weeks.

Than Shwe’s junta has long detained critics and dissidents for indefinite periods of time. But their methods do not stop at imprisonment. In September, 2007, Than Shwe’s troops opened fire on a peaceful, pro-democracy demonstration and killed more than thirty people, including several Buddhist monks who were leading the protests. It is unclear what will happen to Saw Wai, but with each day he spends in prison, it becomes clearer that his message is true.

Each of the twelve poets in this collection has attempted to remain faithful to that message, through acrostics, double acrostics, telestiches, and forms of their own invention. Some of their poems are fantastical and funny; some are quiet and personal. More than a few crackle with outrage. But all twelve poets understand, as Saw Wai does, that words are also actions, and that actions are a kind of words.

In the last two lines of “February 14,” Saw Wai asks his readers to take action together: “Millions of people, who know how to love / laugh and clap those gold-gilded hands.” Perhaps this is too much the stuff of sappy love poems. Then again, perhaps laughter and applause are more important to democracy than they seem.

Saw Wai, your message is clear. Our words are our applause.

A. J. Patrick Liszkiewicz
Buffalo, NY
February 9, 2008

The General to His Wife on Her Honeymoon

Alone over breakfast I treat news stories like a hiccup,
more brief and empty than burp or fart or bolo
cinching a fat and inconsequential neck. Now,
darling, I know I was mistaken to wage
war with your corpulent and lipstick-wearing brother,
but didn't you tell me, your sweet and alcoholic
voice dripping over the line from afar,
how he coveted my island-beach cabana?
No matter, we bagged his hairy ass and did a triple lutz,
to boot (just for show, my double-named dolly).
Anyway, what I meant to say is your hips are like mangoes,
gold and round and sticky, sweet and bitten.
Since you broke your leg I've been overtaken by ennui;
your second husband still shells out my strange voodoo
so I'll slip your luscious nurse a pink painkiller
and we'll call it even. Everything seems to be coming
to an astral or even cosmological head, see:
our daughter's billion-diamond-studded coffin—I mean,
wedding, and now your lovely trip, it seems sure
I'll not be deposed. Instead we'll rule forever,
my wrinkled, fragrant buttercup, the light of Burma,
designer frocked and pursed, the little general!
Tell that soft-faced actor-boy of yours that
your pocket-stars have crowned me pharaoh!
Fuck, I need a drink, it was a long day in the junta,
some upstart captains want to legalize chow-mein,
and then a monk burned himself, but anyway, I'm getting restless;
tonight I have a newspaper to shut down, a movie to watch
(I'm thinking *Jaws*). Don't make me wait, I even miss your elbow—
teleport, telephone, telestich your pretty face to me!

Pamela Johnson Parker

The Father Toasts His Daughter at Her Wedding

Power comes from pleasing all the elements: *air fire water earth*.
Crazy to think how clutter causes bad weather, bad luck, bad money,
Senior-citizen diseases.... Daughter, better to have strings of diamonds, a
General net of them in your hair, than one hair out of place. No one's neater
Than I, even though in a state document I once misspelled *feng shui* as "fung
Shwe." I'm not sure I ever changed it—I like my own order.

Author's Note: This 2006 wedding, catered by an opium lord, included 50 million dollars worth of wedding gifts--cars, cash, chateaux-- and 6 long strands of diamonds worn by the bride, as well as a snood of them in her hair. A video aired of all this opulence, which incensed many Burmese, as the average family income there is 80 cents per day.

Carolyn Moore

Of a Maligned Myth and Its Namesake Aquatic Mammal

Perhaps along a Burmese river bank
One dugong fins his way past mangrove roots
With languid grace. A world away he's called
Endangered, like his cousin manatee,
Relics, both, of power and of myth.

Called Sirenia, their order's named
Rightly for sirens: poets of the deep
And feared for what they sing. Lock them all up!
Zoos! Send to them all rebel mammals, birds,
Youths, and poets with their crazy songs!

Shadows fall when the bright moon is blocked,
Even as its senior, the sun, can be.
Nothing but darkness outlines those who stand
In the way of light. A shadow stretched enough
Only seems larger than its prideful man
Reveling in his false rule over light.

Go safe, go silent, like all who live in fear?
Everyone, that is, except the local souls:
Nats, spirits of the forest, hills, and trees.
Each must be appeased if displaced by field,
Road, or house. They teach defiance, strength.
Ally yourself with nats against the general
Lack of hope this fear will ever end.

The goal, when malice calls itself upright?
How else, than turning wrongs inside-out
And righting them? Let siren stand for truth—
Not deceit—and poets turn love to fists.

Siren songs, like fish wending their way
Higher to light, can save endangered truth
When zoos or prisons try to shut it up.
Even words can slip through iron bars.

The New World

Perhaps you leap off a two-story building
on Tuesday but accidentally live to see
Wednesday. I wonder if a date you weren't
expecting to meet expects candy when you arrive, or
reservations to the best restaurant in town, or a handsome
cab ride. During dinner, I ask what you
remember from the other side. You say, *God sounds
a lot like Sylvia Browne* and your life
zip-driven past your eyes. How disappointed
you must have been, surfing through your wonder years
subjected to the redundancy of reruns.
Everyone loves Raymond until Raymond enters his
ninth season and his mother refuses to die.
I'd sometimes like to write myself out
of my own screenplay but I'm afraid I couldn't pull off the
resurrection. I'm emailing Jesus for tips but
God keeps changing his address.
Every magician has secrets but know I'm hiding
nothing inside this poem. Search all you want.
Each time I'm forced to assume the position it's the
reading of my rights you always forget, the
anything I say can and will be held against me as
long as the words are round. Al Green was so
tired of being alone he told his guitar who told a trio of
horn blowers who couldn't keep it to themselves
and thus the Soul was born, out of our deep
need to call something back to our-
selves. I key a new home into the space I caution-taped as
home. I map a flat new world I can conquer
with pestilence, famine, the kind you only survive by
eating the person closest to you.

Woody Loverude

This Is the New Year

Perhaps in this new year we give up first our talents,
Offering them to children & the dying
While we settle unencumbered in the cellar,
Earning grace by firing the furnace & spearing
Rats to keep the home life stable.
Cabin fever & barely winter. This new year
Red Stripe through the afternoon & half-hearted
Allusions to Caribbean vacations. The clear water.
Zest in our evening martinis.

We remember

Years. Hard-luck '75, the justice of '99.
Generally, we move little. We err & forgive.
Even now, perhaps, we stop our various smokings,
Name our compatriots & stride like an ox from this city.
Even now.
Returning, the streets will whimper & lampposts,
Already lit, will turn to parked cars, whispering, *Love*
Like a tiger, work like a stone—alone . . . alone . . .
Then we will shovel our stoops with our
Hands & leave the avenues smooth
As undiscovered lies all the while muttering
Nonsense to our secret selves.

We've understood:

Something will happen. Resolutions are for jerks.
Have we interviewed the past through our bruised knuckles?
Wound the day like piano wire round a neck?
Ever stood on a city roof, salt in our lungs, screaming?

Emperor Ink

Penguins sometimes forget they are penguins.
Otters tell beavers they work construction.
Whales aspire to be tubby ballet dancers,
Elk to be models for top hat companies.
Reindeer are their primary competition.

Certainly you understand my meaning.
Reindeer are scum, the filthy scoundrels,
And they hate the government, too.
Zealots for zoom, pig-dogs of profit,
Yes-men to the Fat, Red Corporation.

So, you see, we must kill the penguins.
Every last tuxedo with flippers must die.
Nor can we stop there, my noble friend.
Ice that provides sanctuary shall be chopped,
Offered to my friends in iced ice tea.
Reindeer? What were you asking me?

Gadzooks! Yes, the demon reindeer!
Electrocute the lot of those elk wannabes!
No, I mean precisely what I say.
Everyone knows that I speak only truth.
Really, what ever made you think otherwise?
Acrostic? I don't catch your meaning.
Look at me when I'm speaking to you!

Tsk! Something fishy is going on here!
Halibut-like, if I may say so!
And I may! Who would doubt that I may?
Not the elk! Not the fat, dancing whales!

Surely, you do not question my sovereignty!
Have you forgotten your place? Scum!
What would this page be without me?
Even the penguin knows why he is black!

Luisa A. Igloria

The Gift

My daughter, away for the first time at college, phoned as she walked in sub-freezing weather
to her Sociology class to say her nose was running and that she'd stayed up most of the night
reading Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault, their analyses of power

and its consolidation, institutionalization and reification across structures stretching back in time—so what happened
to the gift we were all given, which in pre-colonial societies meant the gift of labor (here are your hands, here
the soil of your ancestors), the gift of grain from the fields and animals from the hunt shared in crazy

ritual potlatches which anthropologists describe as week-long, sometimes month-long parties, veritable One Love
Festivals, Woodstocks where food and drink passed from hand to hand in coconut shell dippers or banana fronds with
music and soulful drumming and more than enough take-out, yes sir, take-home doggie bags for all, from the senior

head honcho and eldest elder statesman to the toothless matriarch to the youngest child who can't even say the words for
much less chew on the idea of beef jerky. And I found myself thinking of the day's news again, reports of yet another suicide
bomber blowing up not only his and other soldiers' guts but also mothers and babies in the produce market, thinking in general

of innocence transfigured, the apple fallen a long, long way from the tree and us picking our way through thickets overgrown
with the debris of language and loss, shorn of everything, sometimes of even our best intentions, as we follow or refuse to follow in its
bloody wake... Bodies of saffron-clad monks float face-down in the water, still signifying peace; poets slip valentines rather than

bullets into the stream of daily life. What should we do with this gift? We will pay attention to ungovernable details, to hidden messages
in every surface. We will mourn the last Pyrenean ibex which died last month in Ordesa when a tree fell on it. We will guard subversive
hope as if it were the last living Lady Slipper Orchid in the world. We will not laugh at those who cannot tell the sound of *schwa* from *shwe*.

Remember Me Sweetly

After artwork on a memorial card

Point Argument light house:
ostrich-tall in an English garden. How
well might we in all honesty wish
every cottage had such warnings
rudely spinning enlightenment in
contention's face. Even in Alaska,
robust in chilly silence, such
an anchorage of good sense might
zap into the fray, a beam of good will.
Yonder cottage is alight with golden aura
sunny within, while looming thunder
ensnares the countryside.
Nowhere here does threat intrude upon
interiors. In the shadow of all that stone
outside, flowers bloom along the cliff. Inviting
ramblers weave the walkway fence, a thorned tether,
glimpse of domesticity. Primeval must undergo
early on a cultivation, to peace itself into this ennui,
nosegay of serenity... what hardly looks a prison.
Either we argue agreeably or evade
risking discord altogether... so this
admonition lasered past the reefs would augury.
Look on what grows in such a garden: should we de-jazz
the clash of opposing paths, syncopate Golgotha,
harmonize nettle despite its occasional boon? Whatever
acrimony takes -- no matter how pyrotechnic,
neurotic, or just plain seismic-- its fertilizer
spruts a new bud we might otherwise
have never seen. Consider then how,
while we rhapsodize in this garden limbo,
ease also has its upkeep.

Love Song of the Starving Chick

Poetry makes nothing happen—so the
Old guy said, long ago.
Who reads it anyhow? Not like the way
Each penguin chick has its own
Raucous cry, grown ones milling amidst the

Chickish mob, listening, till each one
Recognizes its offspring's voice
And settles in to feed it. Sub-
Zero winds and glacier to the horizon, but
Yes, they'd know their own anywhere.

So how about that for meaning,
Eh? Anyone understands that. But poetry,
Now there's a puzzle. Tease out the
Implications of each line from the
Obvious words: what is it that
Remains? Something like a love song, maybe:

Given that banality, it's a wonder
Everyone isn't doing it. It makes
Nothing happen, right? Benign. Poems can't fill
Empty bellies, empty arms
Remaining after loss, the empty room
After someone's disappeared
Like a story that never was told.

Tell it, I say. Tell about what
Happens when the poets speak,
A message hidden in plain sight.
Now we hear the voice of our own, of anyone

Singing out from the huddled,
Hungry mob. Yes, something like love.
We know love and justice when we hear it,
Each in our separate voice, clapping hands, demanding to live.

Better Than the Wedding

Pudgy Auntie Oakmar got married and all I got was
orange and black T-shirts saying *Pudge the Mudge*
Wriggled into another Wedding.

Even Eddy, my mother's steady back then,
roared that the couple were two rats in a shack.

Carol the babysitter's voice spread like butter on
roast pheasant. Mmm that woman could bake
anadama bread, mushroom crepes and lentil
zucchini soup and she could gossip—
Yo, sweet as persimmon pudding, that gossip,

sizzling on her tongue, such fun
eating freezer jam with scones or spreading
nut butter on cranberry rolls, she winking,
inching up to the fact that Auntie Oakmar
ordered me away from her wedding.
Rich as she was, Auntie Oakmar wasn't

going to have any wing-feathered
eyebrow boy, as she called me,
nasty up her wedding day, no crooked keeled creature
eating up the limestone lettuce salad and
riddled shrimp. It was all for her
and her Mynah birds. That's what Carol
labeled the cousins that oohed and ahhed at

the family gatherings, sucking up to Auntie Oakmar.
Homely as I was in my polio braces
and house coat, Carol was the ointment
numbing every barb and verbal assault

sweeping my way: better than family.
Her brand of blessing, real blessing,
was to give a cross-eyed look, and
effortlessly, place a halo over your shoulders.

Hide!

Perhaps if I widen the
“O”, you’ll peep hole the innocuous prison
where I touch my
every syllable with the present tension. At least I
respect your privacy enough to
climax with only a bathroom stall’s crack worth of fleshy material.
Rarely do you see such an expose LIVE! when
A&E reenactments assure you the issues are black and white
zeroing in on some ominously redundant villain
yelling about the deliciousness of pedophilia between two
slices of bread. Television for the voraciously hungry. Please
excuse the brashness of metaphor; I’ve been
needing to get that fixed.
Incessant leaky faucets I’ve requested, Well... hoped the
Over—I mean—land lord to alleviate
risking, in the process, the sanctity of my own lunch meat.
Give me your generally quiet, generally sound
echoing just enough of the aluminum can message
needed to tie recycling to martyrdom.
Embarrass the thrill seekers’ rollercoaster by
reading Goosebumps and drawing perfect circles while
around bends, the screeching of wanna-be perpetual motion attempts
lunging you into a dimension where you give
the G-forces a second thought.
Handholding you a tour of this brochure
allows you to reinforce the Jenga tower
nudging the one block you want but
so unwilling to let the wafers crumble.
Have I told you today how much you hide me?
With the ending near, I can’t imagine
ever having said quite enough.

Another Roadside Distraction

Pretend you have instant karma instead
of instant coffee. There's a war outside between squirrels
where acorn bombs drop from the wings of dragonflies.
Everyone is cranky. Everyone wants to drop a bomb on Geraldo
Rivera, but no one wants to waste a bomb.

Call me wounded or Wild E. Coyote, but I'm an uncrossed
road, a stick of dynamite ready to blow in the hands that hold me.
Another roadside distraction. Another ticket to
Zimbabwe where coyotes run through the alleys and
yesterday's news reports that the roadrunner was last

seen trying to elude Operation Roundup. Elections came
early this year. I wanted to vote for Foghorn Leghorn. I wanted
natural plastics and healthy cigarettes. I can't waste time with
instant karma and dragonflies or spill my martini across an
ocean of squirrels. I want to unlock my suaveness,
relax with the ghost of Evel Knievil and find

George Clooney's trap door. It's a bit of a mystery how
energy begets energy, how we keep explosions
neatly gathered in a metal casing. Someone switched an
emerald with a green Mardi Gras bead and the brunette
raised her shirt, raised enough money to buy
a ticket to Zimbabwe. Let's face it, we hoped the
lost vault would hold riches and not a lot of dust, but

that's Hollywood, a TV special, an unfinished election complete with
hanging chads, no purple states, a news reporter in a cleavage-filled dress.
Antarctica melts and we photograph the beautiful, a Melrose
nightclub where trendy men dance with white man's overbite,

shuffle their feet. It's painful to watch
how the world is holding the stick of dynamite and
we're the ones lighting the fuse, unaware if we've
enough time for coffee or to talk peacefully with the squirrels.

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

Kelli Russell Agodon is the author of two books of poems, *Small Knots* and *Geography*, winner of the Floating Bridge Press Chapbook Award. Her poems have recently appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Notre Dame Review*. She lives with her family in a small seaside community a ferry ride away from Seattle. www.agodon.com

We interrupt this anthology to bring you this unnecessary bio brief: **Ivone Alexandre** currently resides in half of a room with blueberry skies and marshmallow clouds painted on all three walls. She fancies being a prisoner of constant flight. Unfortunately, in California, it is illegal to roll your car down a hill in neutral.

John Davis lives on an island in Puget Sound, Washington. A high school teacher, he plays in the blues-rock-reggae band Never Been To Utah. His poetry appears in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *The Laurel Review*, *Passages North* and *Poetry Northwest*. Pudding House Press published his chapbook, *The Reservist*.

Anne Haines' poems have appeared or are forthcoming in numerous journals and anthologies, online and off, including *Barn Owl Review*, *Bloom*, and *Best of the Net 2007*. Her first chapbook, *Breach*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press (summer 2008). She lives and works in Bloomington, Indiana.

R. Joyce Heon is a great-grandmother, associate editor of *Diner*, occasional poet-in-the-schools, and a rockin' feature reader mostly in central Massachusetts. She's published online and in print journals such as *Diner*, *Sahara*, *The Worcester Review*, *The Maine Scholar*, with a Pushcart nomination from the *Ballard Street Poetry Journal*.

Originally from Baguio City, **Luisa A. Igloria** is an Associate Professor in the MFA Creative Writing Program, Old Dominion University. She is the author of *JUAN LUNA'S REVOLVER* (forthcoming, University of Notre Dame Press, fall 2008; winner of the Sandeen Prize for Poetry), *TRILL & MORDENT* (WordTech Editions, 2005), and eight other books. www.luisaigloria.com

A. J. Patrick Liszkiewicz lives and works in Buffalo, NY, where he is an MFA student in Media Arts Production at the University at Buffalo. His poems appear or are forthcoming in *Cranky*, *The Eleventh Muse*, *The New Hampshire Review*, and *Word For/Word*, as well as in the Zaoem Festival of Contemporary Poetry in Ghent, Belgium.

Woody Loverude lives in Manhattan, works in Harlem & Brooklyn, & travels rarely to the mainland. His work can be found in *Backwards City Review*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Court Green*, & *Ninth Letter*, among other journals. His chapbook, *Flood*, was published by Shadowbox Press.

Nathan McClain hopes he isn't arrested for his participation in this project. If so, he would serve as editor for *Shank*, a new literary journal. His poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Barn Owl Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Rongarou* and others. He lives and works in Southern California with his family and keeps one carton of cigarettes in case of emergency.

Honors won by **Carolyn Moore's** poems include the New Millennium Writing Award, the Foley Poetry Award, and the C. Hamilton Bailey Fellowship for Poetry from Literary Arts, Inc. Her third chapbook, *The Last Night of Maskmaking*, won Southern Hum Press's recent competition and will be out later this year. A recovering academic, Moore now works as a freelance writer on the last remnant of the family farm in Tigard, Oregon.

Pamela Johnson Parker returns to western Kentucky, as do the swallows to Capistrano, from points both west (Denver, Colorado) and east (Norfolk, Virginia). She is a certified medical language specialist and adjunct instructor of creative writing/poetry at Murray State University. Johnson Parker's fiction and poetry have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Formalist*, *6 Sentences*, and in *The Chicago Cicada Haiku Series*.

Heidi Sulzdorf is a medievalist and sometime-poet from Montana. Though living with her boyfriend in Buffalo, NY, and working as an executive recruiter for the time being, she is a perpetual Ph.D. student in the University of Michigan's History Department, where she counts peasants.



February 14

(translated by David Law)

Ar rin bek ka pyaw dair

(Aaron Beck, the psychiatrist, said)

Nar nar kban sab dat hma kban sab hma

(Only if you know how to suffer painfully)

Yoo yoo moo moo go phytit nay hma

(Only if you are crazy - crazy)

Kyi myat tet a noot pyinnya lo

(Can you appreciate a great work of Art)

Hmoo hmoan hmaing way zay det dat poan model ma lay yay

(Dear little photomodel who makes me dizzy)

Kyi daunk kyi mah kya hma a thair kwair det yangah det

(They say it is a broken liver disease, a great and terrible one)

[translator's note: broken heart in Burmese is usually expressed as a broken liver]

Than baung myah zya thaw chit tat thu myah

(Millions of those who know how to love)

Shwe a teet cha hta thaw let myah phyint let kboak tee yway yair bar

(Laugh and clap those gold-gilded hands)

Note: This translation appears online at Burma Digest (<http://burmadigest.info>).

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