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Lai mi ka si (I am Lai mi): A Poetry Collection

Thang C. Lian
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Lai mi ka si (I am lai mi)

I strolled 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 as the morning settled. My grandfather was a quiet but happy 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 and disappeared 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.*
**Kan i ton tthan lai (We will meet again)**

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!” *Chuckling*. I don’t think of my sandals, held together by rubber bands. 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 tthan lai.*

We will meet again.
Kan lam tti lai (Let us dance together)

Some say the body dances when it mourns, contorting itself into broken figures—the dance of sorrow, a ritual of grief, the loss of something warm, something familiar, and maybe familial. We dance until our bodies crumble to the floor, heaving from the shock and the hurt and the loss. We empty the ocean inside, and wonder where this river will carry us. We pray and hope and desire that the soul find its way home. In case it doesn’t, we scream and clap and trample the earth. If the spirit becomes lost and hears us, maybe then it’ll return. My love, in this ritual dance for the dead, may the trails of our tears guide you towards rest. Now is the time to wail—now is the time to cry. Our spirit is mourning, our spirit is breaking. Grief is the language of the living to love a little bit longer, to hold onto the passing soul. Grief is the way my body moves to the rhythm of absence, the way my soul says, “I love and care for you, so may your soul find the grace this bitter earth dared not give to you.” I don’t know if the dead speak the language of grief, or if all they see is a dance—bodies moving, contorting, grieving. So watch as I dance for you. Pass on gently, my love: you were loved, you were loving, you are love.

for my uncle who died fighting for his people and family
Thihnak Mei (Death Fire)

In the silence  
The gaps are filled with bones  
Grey and white and cracked  
Terror rattled where they sat—  
Ash and dust and tears  
Tearing at the seams  
Breath doesn’t exhale here  
It stays trapped  
Freedom twists and entangles  
The femur, the tibia, the fibula  
No longer with leg or feet  
Black soot—the fire ritual of pigs  
Rattle and hiss and cry and mourn  
In the silence  
The gaps are filled with bones  
And families must decide  
Which one is mine?
The dead had names

The day the war
Reached our doors
It swung our world
Wide open.

The bitterness
Of loss
Lingered like heavy fog
And dared not dissipate
No matter how hard
We prayed.

Days became numbers
Too heavy
Too big
To even count.

Instead we counted
The number of the dead
And whispered their names
For we feared of forgetting
That the dead had names.

The day the war
Reached our door
It left a hole
In families
That were once
Whole.

This war that’s invaded
This war that’s pervaded
How much longer
Until we shut the door?
About the Author

Thang C. Lian is a student at Duke University studying history and international comparative studies with research interests in Asian American community and political formations specifically focused on Chin refugees from Myanmar.
Lian: Lai mi ka si

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