Foreword

This is a translation of a poem written by Maung Swan Yi (actual name Win Pe) (born 1937), a Burmese poet who has been residing in the United States since late 2002. The poem was written in remembrance of two of his fellow poets Tin Moe (actual name Ba Gyan) and Kyi Aung (actual name Kyi Lin) who died respectively in Los Angeles in January 2007 and in Mandalay, Burma, in March 2009. All three are Burmese poets with perhaps the most prominent poet being Tin Moe (who had lived in exile mainly in the United States and other countries since about July 1999 till his death in January 2007).

Tin Moe wrote his last poem on the night of 21 January 2007 just about 18 hours before he died the next day. Among well over a thousand poems written by Tin Moe, one of the most famous, due both to its brevity, enigma and beauty as well as its philosophical significance, is a poem which can be entitled as ‘The Guest’. In the original Burmese it runs thus:

Shortened Cigars Stained with Nostalgic Tears

Myint Zan
In my translation it reads:

**The Guest**  
By Tin Moe  
Translation by Myint Zan  
The cigar’s burning down  
The Sun’s brown  
[Will someone] Send me back [to my place]

The translator is unable to do (full) justice to the original but an attempt has to be made. In place of the ‘burning down’ a more literal translation could be ‘the cigar is shortened’. In a translation by Maung Tha Noe (born circa 1933), who is also a friend of Tin Moe, Kyi Aung and Maung Swan Yi, first published in the early to mid-1960s, Maung Tha Noe (from this translator’s memory) translated the first line of the poem as ‘The cigar’s burnt down’ but the cigar has not (totally) ‘burnt down’ as yet. Though syntactically and perhaps grammatically ‘the cigar’s burnt down’ would seem a better translation, in order to get as ‘proximate’ as possible to the original, I have translated it as ‘the cigar’s *burning* down’ partly to rhyme with ‘the Sun’s brown’. A more literal translation though would be ‘the cigar is shortened’. In the original poem the phrases [Will someone], and [to my place] did not appear.

On the few occasions that this translator met the poet Tin Moe in the 1970s in Rangoon, Burma and in December 2000 in Melbourne, Australia, I did not directly enquire from him as to the ‘occasion’ or
the ‘trigger’ which prompted Tin Moe to pen this enigmatic poem, though I have heard a few stories about the ‘origins’ of the poem. These include the claim that Tin Moe penned it at a road-side tea shop when someone ostensibly stated ‘The cigar’s shortened, the Sun’s brown’ and Tin Moe supplied or added the last line of the poem of ‘sending back’. After Kyi Aung, whose native place Ava (Inwa) which is several miles from Mandalay, Burma’s second biggest city and considered its cultural capital, died in March 2009 at the Mandalay General Hospital, the news was mentioned on several Burmese websites including at Moemaka media (www.moemaka.com a mainly Burmese language website). Maung Swan Yi wrote and published the poem in remembrance of his two departed friends at the above website.

It was only around early August 2009 several months after Maung Swan Yi’s poem was first published that I came across the (to me and in the original) affecting reminiscence by Maung Swan Yi of his two friends. Only after reading Maung Swan Yi’s poem did I become aware of the actual circumstances pertaining to the composition of the poem. ‘Shortened Cigars Stained with Nostalgic Tears’ confirms the ‘story’ that I have heard that some person other than Tin Moe composed or at least stated the first two lines of the poem. Until I read Maung Swan Yi’s poem I did not know the identity of the person who uttered them. In early 2004 and 2005 I had the chance to meet Kyi Aung twice in his native Ava and also in Mandalay briefly but had never asked and did not know that he was the ‘protagonist’ of Tin Moe’s ‘The Guest’ poem. Based on my incomplete knowledge I had written in my tribute of Tin Moe in ‘Tin Moe: An Exiled Burmese Poet of Simplicity and Humanity’ (Bulletin of the Burma Studies Group, 79 (2007), 18) about an ‘apocryphal’ story of how Tin Moe composed the poem in a tea shop (which apparently was not the case since he actually he composed it in the ‘Tamarind Villa’ in late 1958 or early 1959 where he and Maung Swan Yi were housemates) and that Tin Moe collapsed and later died in a cafeteria (‘teashop’) in a suburb of Los Angeles on 22 January 2007 which was what had happened. The story I heard that Tin Moe composed the poem in a ‘teashop’ (in late
Myint Zan

Tin Moe, 2006

Kyi Aung (centre facing camera), 2008

Maung Swan Yi at his New York apartment, 30 March 2010
1958 or early 1959) turns out, from Maung Swan Yi’s account, not to be true.

Tin Moe, Kyi Aung and Maung Swan Yi, all natives of upper Burma and all aspiring and later established poets and writers, attended Mandalay University from the mid-1950s to the late 1950s and beyond. They became friends during the course of their studies. This tribute and the ‘nostalgic’ poem by Maung Swan Yi indicates the way they ‘discoursed’ among themselves about poetry and literature. Tin Moe’s first published book of poems *The Lantern* won the national prize for poetry awarded by the then Burmese government in 1959 and Maung Swan Yi helped include ‘The Guest’ poem in *The Lantern*. In a phone conversation with Maung Swan Yi in September 2009 from his current residence in Queens, New York, Maung Swan Yi indicated that he had to persuade and almost cajoled Tin Moe to include ‘The Guest’ in the *The Lantern*. Maung Swan Yi indicated that Tin Moe was initially quite reluctant to publish a three-line ‘doggerel’ in his collection. Hence Burmese poetry lovers owe it to all three persons, Kyi Aung, Tin Moe and Maung Swan Yi for ‘The Guest’ being published soon after its composition.

Since some of the terms and contexts used in the poem do require elaboration or explanation in order to highlight the cultural, contextual, at times etymological meaning and connotations I have—at the possible risk of effecting an aesthetic and smooth reading of the translation of this poem—inserted explanatory notes at the end of the translation.
In Mandalay on the South of the [Mandalay General] Hospital, a ‘dog-bark’s away’

at the eastern side of the railway quarters

on the other side of ‘the red dirt road’ quarters

ear the tamarind tree

there was a two-roomed house with two trees in the compound

[in] part of the two-roomed house

there lived Ba Gyan and I

the name of the house was ‘tamarind villa’

there was no signage at the house

though verbally, people have referred to it thus

I don’t know who gave this name to the house or when it started

I do not recall, I do not know

what I know is

Tin Moe is the person who was wont to [give such names]

Tin Moe’s name is also Ba Gyan

Ba Gyan and I

[while staying at ‘Tamarind villa’] composed poems together

slept on the same mat

used the same cotton blanket

and the same mosquito net

and used the same [set of] pillows
once a day
Kyi Aung visited us

[also] clutching a packet of cigars
he arrived furtively
wearing a hat

stating ‘[I] have come without going
to school [classes at Mandalay University]’

[the owner of ‘The Lantern’]
Tin Moe, the poem

has just awoken
amidst puffs of [cigar] smoke
coughing

‘Good-Ta-morning’
friend, come, come’
welcomed him

[we] went to the vermicelli soup
[moant-hingar] shop

talked a lot
went to the teashop
talked some more
if we are hungry for rice [and curry]
went to the food shop
eating followed by further eating
talk continued after talk

talk and talk
when one talks much
out of the talk poems arose

tired, we would go back to the house
slouched on the house’s wall
to ease digestion
they, [Tin Moe and Kyi Aung] would puff the cigar
though in the puffing and inhaling [of cigars]
I did not join
[I joined the talks] based on and sentiments about poetry
busy with poetry talk
how happy we were!
that was when we were young
one day
Kyi Aung came
and was about to leave
graping the match-box
wearing [his] hat
stretching body and limb
wearing his slippers, gazing and whimsically [stated]
[Kyi Aung said] ‘Ah—the cigar is
shortened
and the Sun is brown’
while this was being said
in a hurry, Tin Moe
rose from the seat, laid [on the floor]
picked up the pen
impromptu and straight away
composed poetry
you listen to this for a while
‘the cigar is burning down, the sun’s
brown
send me back’ thus was the poem
the title was ‘The Guest’
in amazement, clicked his tongue
snapped his fingers
“hah! ah! Such excellence
nodding his head, tears flowed
three persons rejoiced” as though three
flowers bloom, the past is nostalgia

In ‘The Lantern’ [collection of Tin Moe’s poems]
this poem
I have ‘hooked’ it [arranged to put into print]
the story from the past
I want to be nostalgic
yet I do not want to [be so]
[since] grief follows nostalgia:
unending nostalgia
this sustained nostalgia, left behind
by nostalgia [of events] fifty years ago
hey—how quick[ly] [time moves]
the great Guests
whenever the Sun is down, have left
leaving me behind
following the path of No Return

I, who is left behind
fumblingly
whenever in search of rhymes
with heart aches, and grievances
the smoke from the cigars
would blow through the wind [:]
do they include Tin Moe?
do they include Kyi Aung?
startled
I strain my ears to welcome [them]
I open the door [only] to weep
Notes

1. A colloquial Burmese usage meaning a place where a dog’s bark can be heard.

2. In or about the years 1958 and 1959 Ba Gyan and Win Pe (Maung Swan Yi) lived at the same house in Mandalay ‘a dog’s bark away from Mandalay General Hospital’. About forty years later starting from mid-1999 Tin Moe became an exile first in Belgium (where one of his daughters lives) and later in the United States, living most of the time in either a suburb of Los Angeles with another of his daughters or occasionally in Fort Wayne, Indiana’ where a large expatriate or exile(d) Burmese community lives. It was in Los Angeles that the guest’s (a refugee from Burma) cigar’s burnt down and the lantern-owner died. Maung Swan Yi came to the United States in late December 2002 and the two poets did meet in the United States fairly often though Maung Swan Yi was living in Queen’s (Quarter) in New York, a far place from the ‘Tamarind Villa’ in Mandalay of yore of fifty years ago and from Baldwin Park, a suburb of Los Angeles where Tin Moe lived some of the time during his exile—and where he died. Kyi Aung, who had never left Burma, met his end in Mandalay quite near his native place of Ava.

3. The phrase is literally translated as ‘the poem Tin Moe’ ကဗ်ာတင္မုိး rather than the ‘poet Tin Moe’ ကဗ်ာဆရာတင္မုိး for that was the term Maung Swan Yi used inferring that Tin Moe, in a metaphorical sense, was ‘poetry’ or at least produced or embodied poetry.

4. I have exactly transliterated ‘Good morning’ as ‘Good-Ta-Morning’ as it was the wont of some Burmese perhaps including Tin Moe to pronounce it that way.

5. ‘Moant-hingar’ a Burmese food, if not delicacy, is loosely translated as ‘vermicelli soup’. One website states that Moant-hingar မုန္႔ဟင္းခါး ‘is a mix[ture] of the thick fish soup and thin rice noodles [together with] roasted chilly powder, a squeezed lemon, fish sauce and coriander’ [are added to it] ‘Myanmar food’ http://www.uniteam-travel-myanmar.com/food.html (accessed 4 September 2009). The food is available in road-side stalls and the customers usually eat it from low-lying tables while sitting on stools.

6. This is a ‘play’ (though not a pun) of two Burmese sayings one of which asserts ‘talk, talk, too much talk, from the talk [one’s] origins (literally ‘birth’) စကားစကားေျပာဖန္မ်ားစကားထဲကဇာတိျပ is revealed’ and another which reminds that ‘talk, talk, too much talk, by talking too much mistakes are made’ စကားစကားေျပာဖန္မ်ားစကားထဲမွာအမွားပါ. Maung Swan Yi, appears to be asserting (apparently going against the ‘grain’ of conventional wisdom) that ‘out of talk, too much talk’ (and for those with a poetic bent) poetry or at least talk about poetry and poems can also arise.
7. The ‘guest’ to the Tamarind Villa all those years ago was, of course, Kyi Aung and the guest helped Tin Moe write *The Guest*. In this particular paragraph Maung Swan Yi narrates how the guest was affected by *The Guest* poem. And it was the guest Kyi Aung’s words that inspired Tin Moe to compose *The Guest*.

8. Initially I was uncertain about the phrase ‘three flowers’ and thought that it might have been a typographical error. With the removal of two ‘dots’ in the phrase သံုးပန္း *thone-pann* (‘three flowers’) in the Burmese spelling the phrase could be transformed into သံု႔ပန္း *thoant pan* (‘prisoner’). Hence I have translated the poem initially as ‘prisoners of joy’. When I telephoned Maung Swan Yi in early September 2009 to check the meaning of the phrase he stated that it was ‘*thone-pann*’ (‘three flowers’). As a translator, I am of the view that the phrase ‘prisoners of joy’ rather than ‘three flowers’ [rejoicing at the fruition of the poem] could be equally—if not even more—appropriate. This is so since the next phrase ‘nostalgic past’ (the past as nostalgia) could be construed to indicate that by being nostalgic of his two departed friends in remembering things past (or ‘in search of lost time’—to quote directly from Marcel Proust’s masterpiece) the poet’s memory can be held ‘prisoner’ to the joy and later (see the end of the poem) the hurts emerging from them. It is said that when one translates poetry one ‘loses’ but also at the same time ‘gains’ from what is stated in the original. Though the phrase ‘prisoners of joy’ rather than ‘three flowers rejoiced’ is a modification or innovation of the translator it is indicative of the addition or ‘spill-over’ that occurred in the translator’s mind in reading this part of the poem.

9. A more literal translation would be ‘Nostalgic Past’ or simply ‘Nostalgia Past’ since Maung Swan Yi juxtaposed together these two words. I have taken the liberty and paraphrased the statement ‘[t]he past is a foreign country’ to ‘The past is nostalgia’. Indeed from a foreign country (the United States) Maung Swan Yi expressed his ‘nostalgia’—with acknowledgment to Marcel Proust—in ‘Remembrance of Things Past’ or ‘In [Nostalgia] for Lost Time’.

10. I have proximately translated the Burmese phrase Yan Hnyo ရန္ၿငိဳး as ‘grievance’ when it can also mean, in the context of the poem, a sustained sense of grievance and ‘unforgiveness’ arising out of hurts done and received. Just as time moves unforgivingly and relentlessly the heartache and the sense of grievance equally relentlessly cloud the memories of the poet through the suffocating and grief-inducing ‘cigar smoke’ which makes the poet—as the last lines of the poem movingly states—open the door(s) (of cognition and nostalgia)—only to weep.
Afterword

A few weeks after the editor(s) sent the translator a lightly edited translation of Maung Swan Yi’s poem and my comments for possible emendations the translator met Maung Swan Yi at his studio apartment in Queens, New York, in the United States on 30 March 2010. I did not discuss with the poet much about my translation of his poem beyond stating that it was scheduled for publication and that the editors and publisher wished to obtain a better copy of the photos of the two late poets Tin Moe and Kyi Aung. During our conversation Maung Swan Yi also ‘reminisced’ about the late Tin Moe and Tin Moe’s (charming) almost child-like idiosyncrasies especially when they were students at Mandalay University in the mid to late 1950s. When at the end of the meeting and while I was about to leave his apartment I casually asked him whether he has written his tribute of his departed friends with ‘tears as investment’ (or ‘capital’). Maung Swan Yi did not reply—perhaps the only time during our conversation he had not responded to my questions. I might add here that there is a Burmese saying that ‘silence means admission’.

My (perhaps for him as well as for myself) slightly embarrassing and partly self-conscious query—as I was moved and touched each time I re-read, even when I occasionally think about the last lines of the poem—was answered by Maung Swan Yi in silence. I would also point out that the phrase ‘tears as investment’ or ‘investing in tears’ was used by Maung Swan Yi himself in one of his article/reviews published in the mid-1990s. When the Burmese writer Paragu (born 1921) published a book reminiscing about some of his writer colleagues, a chapter of it was a touching tribute by Paragu of the late respected, leftist Burmese writer Bhamo Tin Aung (1920–1978). Maung Swan Yi in his review of Paragu’s book stated how moving Paragu’s tribute of Bhamo Tin Aung was and that he (Maung Swan Yi) ‘wondered’ whether Paragu ‘invested’ his tears in writing the tribute. As I asked Maung Swan Yi the question I used the exact phrase he had used in describing Paragu’s tribute of Bhamo Tin Aung.
The next day, on 31 March 2010, I attended a partly religious ceremony near Maung Swan Yi’s apartment in Queens, New York, where he held a ceremony to feed food to Burmese Buddhist monks ဆြမ္းေကြ်း as is his wont to do so every Wednesday which is the day of the week he was born. I briefly discussed with him my translation of the heading of his poem as to whether it should be ‘Shortened Cigars Covered with Nostalgic Tears’ or ‘Shortened Cigars Soaked in Nostalgic Tears’ or ‘Shortened Cigars Stained with Nostalgic Tears’. This thought has been on the back of my mind, so to speak as to which particular phrase covered/soaked or ‘stained’ I should use. Partly due to the fact that he was hard of hearing and (had to) use a hearing aid and partly due to the intricacy of the language barrier and also due to shortness of time the poet said that he was unable to respond or suggest. After much ‘internal conversation’ (almost) struggle I have decided to use the word ‘stain’ instead of the more literal translation ‘Shortened Cigars Covered with Nostalgic Tears’ or ‘Shortened Cigars Soaked in Nostalgic Tears’. For the tears may have soaked the cigars (metaphorically if not literally) but the theme of the ‘stain’ of nostalgic reminiscences and hurts was the enduring poetic imagery, impression and cognition that I felt as I read and reread ‘Shortened Cigars Soaked in (and Stained by) Nostalgic Tears’.