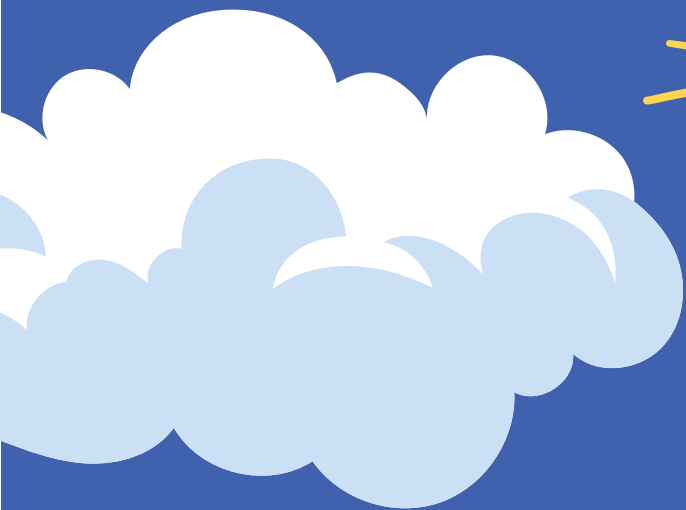




A SUN'S --- JOURNEY



DOH HLAY



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'Memories' Exhibition
2023

A Sun's Journey

Thurein clambered out of the ditch, crept towards the fence, and slipped into the mill. Sneaking through the sagging and rusted barbed wires, he looked over his shoulder. A squad of soldiers stood a hundred yards away, but none appeared to notice him.

An intruder now, he could not waste a second to find a place to hide in this large, military-owned, rice mill. He really didn't want to take the shelter in a place owned monsters but there was no choice.

The factory's ashen LED bulbs could not illuminate every corner of the mill compound leaving many dark spaces. Thurein could hear some of the mill's staff arguing. They could have been just a few yards away but in the darkness Thurein couldn't see them. He stepped forward and tripped over a litter of metal cans abandoned by the workers. The clang of the metal pierced the silence and cut through the words of the mill workers. They stopped talking. Thurein held his breath. His muscles cramped and he willed himself not to move, like a statue. He knew they couldn't see him but could still feel them looking in his direction. He heard a voice and then another answering, but the sounds were no closer than before. Thurein sighed as quiet as he could manage, bent forwards, and moved on.

In one far corner of the backyard of the mill compound was a dilapidated warehouse. Its rusty zinc- sheet door was bolted and padlocked. Thurein broke the old lock with a piece of brick. The inside of the warehouse was dark, damp, and stank of mould. A few sacks of cement or sand were stacked against a wall, and some tools, pipe wrenches pliers and broken water-pumps scattered on the floor. He could see outlines of the tools under a grey half-light seeping through the door he'd opened wide enough for him to pass. Closing the door behind him, he squatted and leant back against the brick walls. Well, it's better than that bloody little ditch.

Having just turned twenty, Thurein was in his final year at college. He was slim and used to be fair- skinned, but the sun in March is strong, and he had sent so much time outside his skin was burnt brown.

Now that he was safe, or at least safer than he was at the beginning of the day, he wondered

how he could wash away the blood. He fingered the t-shirt, stamped with a three-finger salute and letters that read ‘Spring Revolution’ and crusted with blood.

His stomach rumbled. His mouth filled with spit as he imagined what he would normally be eating right now: kyat-kalathachat. He could taste the spicy and sour chicken and the young gourd soup. He had eaten nothing since breakfast prepared by his mother this morning – her typical fried rice with eggs and sweetened tea. Not nothing. I ate some fried gourd pieces which Thiri gave me. Thiri had bought the fritters from a roadside vendor and shared them with him on their way to the protest. He had eaten two pieces and gave the rest away to a street-girl.

Is Thiri safe now? He had been worrying about her all day. For a month, the two of them were holding each other’s hand, walking, and shouting along with a thousand other protesters from their hometown. ‘Down with the coup. Respect our votes. Release our leaders.’ Today was the thirtieth straight day the people of Thurein’s hometown had come to the streets. Neither he nor Thiri had missed a single one. They volunteered to make protest banners, cloth, large enough for four of them to hold up, which they shared among the protesters every day. They helped design, print, and paste coloured photos of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing with a big, red diagonal cross sign over his face on lampposts, walls, and tarmac. People spat at or stepped on his face as they marched through the town. As the thirty days went on, Thurein and Thiri began to buy or borrow as many metal thermos’ as they could find. It was easier to trap any tear gas shells this way. When the cannister fell, bounced and skidded, they could run and just cap it with a thermos.

Thurein scratched the dried blood in his t-shirt again, trying to claw off the memory, and wished it had been as easy to stop bullets.

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The green-camouflaged soldiers had stood behind the grey-uniformed police line since the first day. Thurein and the others with him assumed it was just an idle threat. But then, today, they began shooting. How could a homemade shield protect them? Wood, plastic, recycled barrels. It didn’t matter what material they made the shields from, the bullets ripped right through them? The protestors on the frontline, those closest to the green and grey wall retreated, first in order but moments later in chaos. Thurein ran holding Thiri by her hand, but he lost his grip among the confused bodies, scattering. Smoke was everywhere. Gunfire shots, sound grenade bangs, and shrieks.

Thurein had looked around for Thiri but couldn’t see her. He was torn between looking for her or finding somewhere safe. A teenager about three feet away on Thurein’s left, hit the tarmac, facedown.

The boy’s entire forehead was gone. A hunk of white matter and a big, jagged, piece of skull rested some feet away from his head trailed by blood.

A sniper. A headshot. Thurein shivered

“Motherfuckers! They fired live rounds,” bellowed another protester, a middle-aged man.

“Cowards. Shooting from behind.”

Thurein’s white T-shirt was now stained with spatters of the blood. His ears deafened by a second thunderous burst of sound grenades. As the protesters ran many found refuge in private houses on the streets where owners, as they had done over the previous month, had deliberately left the front doors open. Thurein remembered a small house further down the road and thought he might hide there but hesitated and continued past it. He’d seen on Facebook a video of police in another town chasing people into similar houses and taking everyone they found inside, including the owners.

Just as he was deciding where he could go, Thurein felt a sting on his right shoulder blade as if someone had jabbed him from behind. He fell to the ground. His head spun and he wanted to vomit, but a clear voice within him told him to stand and keep running. Bend your body and run, left then right and left again. That’s what he had read on Facebook before the internet was shut off a few days ago.

He paused and took cover under one of the tall tamarind trees that lined the road. Trembling, he leant against the trunk of the tamarind and looked behind him. A man squatted with his arms held above his head. His short-sleeve shirt and longyi stuck to his body, drenched in blood. A soldier walked towards him, paused, raised his rifle, and pulled the trigger once. Maybe this wretched man had sworn at the men in green. Perhaps he was shot for no reason other than he was there at the time.

Thurein peered north of the tamarind tree. He saw groups of citizens rounded up like cows and beaten with batons and rifle butts. Women, girls, were dragged out of the groups by their hair, slapped across their faces, and cursed. Some were already being loaded into canvas-topped military trucks, the soldiers hauling them up by limbs and dumping them inside. Thurein was close enough to count, ten, twenty, thirty and more were taken, but he didn’t see Thiri among them. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He wanted to call her, to hear her, to know she was safe somewhere, but there was no signal. First the internet. Then the phones.

The soldiers behind him began to dump buckets of sand over the blood-pools on the street. Thurein took this chance and moved on and on. He left the main road behind and carried on through deserted streets that became smaller and smaller until at last he found himself at the industrial quarter, a collection of military owned mills and warehouses, right on the edge of the town before it opened into rice fields. Between the pavements and the rice mill’s fences Thurein saw a narrow strip of land about fifteen feet wide but covered with thickets and creepers. Beyond that was a dry drainage channel about three feet wide running parallel to the fences. He rolled down and pressed as close to the concrete as he could. His body ached. He felt his phone poking against his leg and drew it out again, hoping, but there was nothing. No calls to be made. No texts. He scrolled down his contact’s list until he reached Thiri’s name.

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As Thurein lay in the storm-ditch, he wasn’t to know that the military had swept through

the town. The centre had been secured, and barricades placed at regular intervals on the main road that stretched out beyond the town to the one barren highway that linked towns across the country.

Soldiers roamed around the town, some looking for the people they were supposed to protect, others were ordered to secure properties owned and considered of value by their commanders; places such as rice mills.

Thurein wasn't alone. A spider busy at its cobwebs, mosquitoes buzzing in his ears, and a small mouse making light, soft, scuffling sounds. Cicadas called out in the yard.

Thurein leaned back against the mouldy wall and wrapped his arms around his knees. Where are you Thiri? Are you safe?

They had been best friends once. Both of them saw a piece of each other in themselves. If he suggested going for a drink, she had already brought the beers. If she felt like going shopping, he was already sitting on his bike ready to take her. They both were born on Friday, so of course their names are so similar.

I am Thurein, the sun, and you're Thiri, grace. What a perfect match. He once said just after they had starting dating.

Once they had told each other they were no longer friends, he wondered if it was possible that life could separate them. They agreed that it was, but not life, only death. Thiri joked that if she died first

she'd come back and haunt him. At the time, he pretended to be scared, and they burst into laughter. Recalling this now, in the dank warehouse, without her, he breathed deep and pushed down a sadness he couldn't let escape.

Then, like the mouse above him, his mind scurried away. Thiri was replaced by his mother. This morning, when he bowed three times before her, she wished him safe, and tied an amulet, a piece of cloth stripped from one of her longyi's, around his arm. Would she be looking for my body now in the hospital? His pinched and twisted the amulet to remind himself he was real.

When Thiri came to his house this morning, Thurein's mother had warned them both, "I heard they

have given an order to shoot today, Tha and Thamee."

"Don't worry, Amay, they won't do that. They can't. It would be all over the internet if they did. And they don't want the world to see that, do they?" Thurein replied. "They are just spreading rumours. I must go. One fewer protester will mean one fewer voice is heard. I'll be right back. I promised."

Thurein's mother said nothing and watched them leave. She waved, but perhaps it was too late for them both to see.

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Thurein woke. The door close to him gouged into the floor as it opened. As he opened his eyes a light scanned the warehouse space and the settled on to his face.

"I'm sorry... I am not a thief or anything," Thurein knelt on his knees, his hands covered his

eyes, to the blind the light and himself to what he expected to happen next. "Please ... don't ..."
"Shhhhh ... Keep calm, son." The light lowered and Thurein opened his eyes, but white spots lingered as he looked up. He tried to see the man behind the light. Must be a night watchman. The man stepped towards Thurein, slipped out of a pair of old rubber sandals, and squatted on them. Now face to face with Thurein, he rested his torch against the wall with the light casting up to the roof of the warehouse.

"I know you're not a burglar," the man said as he shifted, pushing the folds of his longyi between his knees. "I saw you the moment you sneaked in. Before that, I saw you hiding in that ditch." Thurein's eyes had adjusted to the new light, and now he could see, at least partly, who the man was. Sunken cheeks and dark skin, Thurein reckoned he could be in his late fifties or early sixties, as old as

his uncles, but still, well-built and strong. The man's square face was not dissimilar to many others Thurein had known, someone who worked hard, a labourer or a trishaw rider. But his eyes were different. They should be dimmed, Thurein, realised, blank, uncaring or indifferent, but this man, his eye's shone, reflecting and shining brighter than possible in the shards of light given by the torch.

'Oolay. They shot at us...there was ... I don't know, just a boy, he ...' Thurein collapsed back against the wall, 'oh Myatswa Paya. Oh Buddha'!

The man said nothing. He reached behind him for a bottle and offered it to Thurein. Thurein took it, only realising then how thirsty he was. He drank but the water burned his mouth. It was hot water. Thurein managed to swallow enough to ease the tightness in his throat and handed the bottle back.

"When will they realize an army is not a pack of hounds?" the watchman asked, balancing the bottle on the ground between his knees.

Thurein couldn't answer.

'My girlfriend ... I couldn't find her.' Thurein coughed and spat on the floor. The water couldn't dislodge the dust of the road and acrid taste of gas. 'I left her behind. What if she was taken? It's my fault. I should have been with her, but I couldn't hold on to her. I shouldn't have let go.' Thurein spat again and felt another wave of sickness surge through him.

"She's alive and safe," the watchman said, "Don't worry."

"Is she?" Thurein asked. "How do you know? You don't know her" "Believe me."

"Believe you? I don't even know you. How can you be so sure? Were you there? Did you see her?" "I know it."

As the watchman spoke, his words came slowly as if each one was weighed down with significance. He closed his eyes though the warehouse was dark, and nodded, with a certainty that confused Thurein,
How could he know?

The two of them didn't talk for a while.

“You’re safe too, here too,” the watchman broke the silence. “I didn’t see you come inside; I didn’t

know you’re hiding here. Okay? You have my word.”

There was something about the watchman that Thurein trusted. Thurein moved closer. The watchman

was older than he would have thought for the job. The man’s hair was short and streaked with grey. His face, even in the darkness of the warehouse Thurein could see, erupted with wrinkles as he smiled back at Thurein’s curiosity. And yet, the more Thurein thought about it, they didn’t look like lines that came with a long life, but premature creases caused by what, nostalgia, melancholy? A life lived but one with regret or sadness?

The watchman’s smile disappeared. “If I were your age, I would have done it again. The same as you.” “Again?” asked Thurein.

The watchman undid the top three buttons of his sky-blue shirt to expose a discoloured vest. His tattered longyi had small holes here and there. Thurein recognized them. His own father had smoked cheroots for too many years, and Thurein’s mother was always scolding him for the holes the boulders of tobacco made when they fell.

“Of course, more than thirty years ago,” the watchman answered, smiling again. “I was your age at that time, and I was in a thirty-six-hour-long hunger strike.”

Thurein didn’t know what to say.

‘I’m proud of my town. I’m proud of you. You all are no longer kids hiding behind your amay’s

htameins.

Thurein nodded. “I wasn’t born then, but I’ve heard about it from my family. What they did then ... I don’t know how to describe it. You knew it was wrong, right? What they did. Like how I’m feeling now. It’s wrong’

How could you feel anything else?” the watchman’s voice rose, louder. “Every time people fight back, it ends in blood. The same pattern for generations – oppression, defiance, slaughter. An apparently endless cycle.’ The watchman’s voice lowered, not to a whisper, ‘I hope your generation can break this wheel now once and for all.”

He fished for something in his pocket, took out a black-ended stub of cheroot and a gas lighter. He offered Thurein a new one with his other hand, but Thurein refused. He did smoke, or he did until a month ago. He liked a specific cigarette, one of the military’s products. So, he quit.

But as he declined, he noticed that the watchman’s cheroot was an obsolete brand, one that was popular when he was very young but hadn’t been made or sold for years. The torch too, Thurein then realized, was almost an antique, thick and heavy, battery powered with a small bulb.

The watchman lit the end of the cheroot until the remnants of tobacco caught fire, pieces of which burst out and dropped in clumps first bright then dimmed until they disappeared.

“I fought for our farmland here too.’ The watchman exhaled and wafted the greying smoke away with the back of his hand. “There were many of us then, and of them of course.”

“Oh, you were a farmer?” asked Thurein.

“Yes, where you’re sitting now used to be paddy fields. My father owned a few acres, and we grew rice right here. Thirty years ago, our land was taken by them. They said our country was not self-sufficient enough. And whose fault is that? So, they took hundreds of acres of good farmland and turned it all into factories and mills. Did you see that Ngu tree outside? It’s only March but you can see the young flowers already growing. That tree marked the northern boundaries of my father’s plots.”

“Rice fields making way for a rice mill ...” Thurein said, not seeing the sense in that, “and so that’s

why you became a watchman here?”

The watchman shook his head and smiled again. “I’m no watchman here.”

Thurein felt his stomach turn. He kept his voice low and as straight as he could manage, “Oh? What

are you then?” “Nothing.”

“I don’t understand. What are you doing here then if you’re not watching over the mill?” “I live here. This is my ancestral land.”

Thurein was confused. The watchman closed his eyes again.

Thurein pushed to understand who he was talking to. “Are your parents still alive? What happened to your family after your land was taken?”

“They are both dead,” the watchman said. “Aphay and Amay never went to school. They were farmers. When their land was taken, they were left with just a small patch. It was not enough to feed us all.’ The watchman shrugged his shoulders. ‘They didn’t survive poverty.”

Thurein hesitated unsure of what next to say, “I’m so sorry”.

The watchman opened his eyes. They still reflected a light with no source, still bright, but also dimmed, as if the life that powered the brightness had faded.

But it didn’t make sense to Thurein. This couldn’t have happened that long ago and the watchman is already old. Thurein hesitated again. He didn’t want to insult his elder, and yet he had to know who the watchman was, “But weren’t you grown by then? You could have found a job and supported them, couldn’t you?”

“No, I couldn’t,” the watchman man said. The creases on his face deepened and stretched further

across the watchman’s face. “I wish I had...”

The watchman's body jerked. Thurein could see small spasms scatter up and down his body, like volts of electricity jolting muscles one after another. He moved closer still to the watchman and took his hand.

His touch reverberated through the watchman, the spasm's softened until he became still. Thurein was close enough now to see the watchman's tears. The watchman then stood, releasing his hand from Thurein's, and said, as if the last few seconds had not happened,

"You must be hungry. Wait for a minute. I'll be right back."

The watchman bent down, picked up his torch, and left. Without the old light of the torch, Thurein squatted in the darkness and for moment, wondered if he should run again. He didn't know who this watchman was, but for some reason he knew he was in no danger as long as the watchman was with him. Ten minutes passed and the fear returned. Without the watchman there, Thurein felt naked, as if all the green-men outside the fence could see him through the thick, brick walls of the warehouse. He rose and went to the closed-door but he couldn't open it. It wasn't locked, he knew, but he stayed because he didn't know what to do next, not until he found out who the watchman was.

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Thurein wasn't sure how long he stood next to the door. The watchman said he was only gone for ten minutes, but for Thurein it felt much longer. He said nothing though as the watchman closed the door behind him. On the floor was a plate of rice with sour curry and duck egg, a thermos filled with boiled

water, and cracked but clean porcelain mug, with small bag of dried tea leaves. The watchman had slung a folded handwoven cotton blanket on his shoulder.

Thurein ate until his stomach ached. The rice was mostly red grains and the curry had no taste at all, but he was so hungry, so he ate. As Thurein cleared his plate, the watchman handed him the mug filled with green tea, then pulled another cheroot from his shirt pocket.

"What's next?" the watchman asked, brushing off another nugget of red tobacco from his longyi.

"What's your plan? Take it from me. The Generals will never give up their power. They didn't before. They won't now. Doesn't matter how loud you shout. They know there is no court in this world that can hang them."

"Why not then? We can hang them," Thurein said, 'I swear it, Oolay. This is the last time.'

Thurein sipped from the mug. It gave him a chance to think about what he was saying. He still didn't

know who the watchman was, but did it matter? Thurein put down the mug.

"I'll fight." Thurein said. He smiled, just then realising that it didn't matter. He knew what to do next.

He picked the mug back up and drank, "At first I thought if they heard us, if they saw us, they would realise what they had done, and I don't know, things would go back. But I was wrong. I know that now."

Thurein placed the mug on the floor and turned the handle towards the watchman. The watchman

took the handle, raised the mug but didn't drink from it.

'I've heard of others,' Thurein said, 'There are places they went to, safe areas on the borders. I'll follow them.'

The watchman held the mug closer to his chest, as if wanting the heat of the tea even though the night was warm.

"I'll go back home at first light," Thurein continued. "I'll go back home, ask my amay to cook wet-tha- myit-chan. She'll have probably already gone to the market by then to get the pork and bamboo shoots. I'll wait for her to cook it, I'll eat and then I'll say goodbye."

The watchman placed the mug on the empty plate on the floor, picked up the spoon and dropped it into the mug. He reached for the now empty thermos with his other hand and stood up. Thurein went to help him, but the watchman shook his head.

"You should rest now it's been a long day for you," the watchman said gently. "You seem to have decided your future, so there is nothing I can say to you, except ..."

The watchman coughed. Thurein had heard it before, three years ago when his father died from lung cancer. Thurein waited. The coughing stopped, and the watchman breathed again,

"In life, knowing the truth, or a truth, can be a terrible thing. There is a truth out there for you. You

don't know what it is, or where it is, not yet. But when you do, I hope it won't break you." Thurein didn't understand. The watchman smiled a last time.

"Sleep. Get up at dawn and walk that way," he nodded with his head to the east of the warehouse, "Go straight as far as the fences and you'll see a gate. It's only used for emergencies so they won't be there. It will probably be locked, but I can open it for you. Once you get through, follow the road. There is an alley not far on the left. Go down it. Once you reach the end, I think you will know where you are."

Thurein wanted to say more, anything, to the watchman, he still had questions, he wanted to know more about him, of him and his family and why he happened to be there, right there in the warehouse, just when Thurein needed someone, but there was no time. The watchman left, and Thurein was alone. As the door closed, in the last of the light cast by the odd torch of the watchman, Thurein saw the blanket. He grabbed it, but the light, and the watchman, had gone. He waited, wondering if the watchman would return, but as the night went on, it became colder and colder in the warehouse.

Thurein wrapped the blanket around his shoulder's, leant back against the wall of the warehouse and

somehow slept.

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Thiri's face smiled back at him. He remembered the day he had taken that photo. She said she looked horrible and told him to delete but instead he saved it as his phone's home screen. The screen dimmed. He flicked upwards, the light glaring back in the darkness of the warehouse. Except it wasn't so dark now. Thurein could see edges of soft light around the cracks of the door. 5.10 am it said on his phone. And still no signal bars. He wished Thiri a safe morning and put the phone back in his pocket.

Thurein looked around for the watchman but he hadn't come back. He pushed the door open just enough to see into the yard. It was empty. He knew he couldn't stay in the warehouse any longer. He had to move. Trusting the watchman's words, he left the warehouse behind, skirting close to the

warehouse walls and around until he came to gate in the fence. As the watchman had promised, it was unlocked.

Beyond the gate, there was a large space, empty land, and then a series of small lanes, just wide enough for a car, with low-built wooden houses. Thurein followed the first one on the left as the watchman had told him, then down another, aware that he was the only one outside. Usually at this time of the morning, his little town would be busy. The markets would be open. Elders would be walking and exercising. You could always hear the clink and clank of plates and cooking pots as housewives prepared the morning food for the monks from the nearby monasteries. Thurein continued, feeling himself becoming smaller and smaller, trying to shrink, to disappear as he got closer. He turned into the last lane he knew so well. And yet, despite reducing himself to just a shadow, a crowd of dogs still saw him and barked at the shadow he had become. Come on. It's me. Don't you remember me? He shooed them away but worried that others had seen him. He was so close to home, he could see the front gate. He looked for the smoke from the woodstove his mother used to cook in the small kitchen that spilled out from the back of the house, but there was no smoke, nor light.

She's not in the kitchen, Thurein thought. 'Amay, he called, 'I'm back'.

Thurein's mother squatted on the top step leading into the house, her head resting on the door frame. She stared towards Thurein as he pulled the gate back and he said again, though this time with less certainty,

"Amay, I'm"

Thurein heard the crack first, then felt the pain sear across his back.

He turned. A man stood - middle-aged, strong, wearing fine but strange clothes – with his right arm above his head and swung the tail of a whip back and forth.

"What. Who are you? Why did you ..."

The man slashed his arm down. The whip reached further than Thurein thought possible. It cut across his chest, forcing him to the ground but as soon as he touched the soil, the pain disappeared.

Thurein's anger remained for a moment, before being replaced by fear as he pushed himself to his feet and then he continued to rise, higher and higher, as if an invisible hand pulled him away. He reached down to the land beneath him hoping to catch hold of something, but there was nothing there.

"Amay," Thurein shouted.

His mother's head turned away from the doorframe and up, not to Thurein, but as you do when a sudden breeze comes from nowhere.

The breeze became a gale and it took Thurein away with it, like a dry leaf in the wind. He drifted through his little town, passing places and buildings that meant so much to him: the schools he had attended, the monasteries he had prayed in, the teashops he had drunk in. Each was a moment from his life, as a child, as he grew older, as he fell in love. And yet, when the gale quietened, then slowed, then died to a single breath, Thurein didn't recognise the most significant of all.

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Thurein jerked his head up. The thick branches of the banyan tree obscured the weak light of the still early morning sun, but Thurein knew him. He was younger than Thurein, though probably only by a couple of years, and his hair was longer than Thurein's, and his chin, unlike Thurein's, had a few strands of hair, one longer than the other. Thurein's hand rose to his chest and traced where the blood had hardened and dried.

The boy tapped Thurein on the shoulder again, as if to see if he was real. 'Brother,' he said, 'I know you. I saw you get hit, just before I died.'

Thurein stared at him.

Impossible! Thurein twisted his left hand to reach his right shoulder blade. I must be hallucinating.

"No, you are not hallucinating. It's real, Ako." the boy said.

When you know the truth, I hope it won't break you.

The watchman's words came again. Thurein began to cry. "My body. Where is it?" Thurein asked.

"No, they took our bodies away and buried them at the West Cemetery last night," said the boy.

"Even if you find your body, you can't return. Death is one way."

'So what do I do now? My journey hasn't ended. Take me to where I belong'. But the boy had gone. And if he can, then so can I.

The watchman had said Thiri was still alive. Thurein had to know if he was telling the truth.

The sun was higher now, but it could barely be seen through a fog that covered Thurein's little town. Thurein groped through the mist, trying to find a place he knew, some memory that would remind him of the way, but the further he went the darker it became, until he was nothing but a story.