



# Double Vision

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**For Sam and Dr. Li  
Who encouraged these endeavors  
And my parents, of course**

## Foreword

Growing up comfortably in the suburbs of Houston, I have been isolated from the turbulence my parents faced in Myanmar (formerly Burma) along their paths in medicine. But on occasion, the heavy curtains parted to reveal glimmers of their past. These instances occurred in passing—at the dinner table, in long car rides, and through phone calls. In those moments, I passively listened, absorbing what I could through my second-hand perspective. However, I dug deeper by interviewing my parents, taking a more active role in trying to fill their shoes and redefining my understanding of my relationship with them. The following series of poems—highlighting conversations on medicine in Myanmar, immigration to the United States, and implicit parental expectations—is an attempt to become immersed in this void.

Before starting, I wanted to share some—and not necessarily comprehensive—context about Myanmar. Myanmar has developed a notorious reputation in international media, heightened by the recent Rohingya Crisis and the 2021 Coup d'état amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. This isn't a new development, as frequent conflict, often ethnic-based, has marred Myanmar's existence following independence from British rule in 1948. Immediately after independence, internal strife took place as different parties fought for power. Though a parliamentary government was established, in 1962, a coup d'état resulted in a military dictatorship led by U Ne Win and the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). In 1988, the 8888 Uprising occurred due to dissatisfaction with this rule, which prompted another military coup d'état that overthrew the BSPP and brought about Aung San Suu Kyi's popularity for her role in the pro-democracy movement for the National League for Democracy (NLD). In 2011, reforms took place that promoted a nominal civilian government, though ethnic conflicts persisted. In 2021, another military coup d'état resulted in the civilian government being overthrown and restored military rule. Altogether, military rule has been steadfast in Myanmar since its independence.

Healthcare in Myanmar is commonly considered inadequate; though there is limited information about Myanmar's healthcare system, its inadequate self-documentation is evidence that it is abysmal.<sup>1</sup> Under the first decade of U Ne Win and the BSPP, one of the few bright spots was healthcare, as government expenditures on health surged, leading to improvements in health indicators like life expectancy and an

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<sup>1</sup> Isabelle Risso-Gill et al., "Health System Strengthening in Myanmar during Political Reforms: Perspectives from International Agencies," *Health Policy and Planning* 29, no. 4 (July 1, 2014): 466–74, <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapol/czt037>.

increase in the number of hospitals, hospital beds, and doctors.<sup>2</sup> These positives did not transfer into the present and were balanced by seemingly poorer living standards as consumer items were in short supply, leading to a reliance on the black market.<sup>3</sup> More recently, in 2000, the World Health Organization ranked the performance of Myanmar's health system to be 190th out of the 191 countries in the World Health Organization.<sup>4</sup> Myanmar still has poor health outcomes in many health indicators,<sup>5</sup> which can be attributed to years of underinvestment as current health expenditure (% of GDP) hovered around 2% under military rule<sup>6</sup> and around 5% under the civilian government.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, out-of-pocket expenditure is one of the highest in the world at 76% of total health expenditure in 2018.<sup>8</sup> In practice, these issues have translated to shortages in specialists, drugs rendered unusable because of energy blackouts, and spread of epidemics like tuberculosis.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, researchers from the Humans Rights Center and Johns Hopkins reported the rise of drug-resistant malaria, the circulation of counterfeit antimalarial drugs, and the crippling outbreak of tuberculosis.<sup>10</sup>

The conditions described above are reflective of the development of my parents in impoverished conditions and strife. Many of the aforementioned issues were stated verbatim in the interviews. While facing these challenges, both were able to obtain the necessary medical training to practice in Myanmar, but they had varying degrees of success in the transition to practicing in the United States. Nonetheless, their experiences in Myanmar continue to impact their outlook and their children's outlook on medicine, profession, and life. They appear frequently in my relationship with them

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Butwell, "Ne Win's Burma: At the End of the First Decade," *Asian Survey* 12, no. 10 (1972): 901-12, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2643067>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 909.

<sup>4</sup> Ajay Tandon et al., "Measuring Overall Health System Performance for 191 Countries," Geneva: World Health Organization, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organization, *World Health Statistics*, Geneva: World Health Organization, 2021

<sup>6</sup> The World Bank only has data starting from 2000. The transition to a civilian government occurred in 2011.

<sup>7</sup> World Bank, "World Development Indicators Myanmar Country Statistics," 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/myanmar>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Francis Khoo Thwe, "Myanmar Faces Medical Emergency with Unusable Drugs and Shortage of Doctors," *AsiaNews*, August 23, 2013, <http://www.asianews.it/index.php?art=28811&l=en>.

<sup>10</sup> Yasmin Anwar, "Burma Junta Faulted for Rampant Diseases," *UCBerkeleyNews*, accessed August 12, 2021, [https://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2007/06/28\\_Burma.shtml](https://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2007/06/28_Burma.shtml)

through snide comments, bitter disagreements, and differing expectations. Unsubsidizing confusions abound in me. Why can we never get along about career choice and professional development? Why is praise rarely expressed but criticism frequently handed? Why does their leash seem to tighten as I become more independent? I aim to address and meditate on these conundrums in the following poems by detailing prominent moments in their childhood, medical training, and immigrant experiences to provide potential rationalizations and increased sensitivity to their respective backgrounds. Even more essential to the heart of my work, I hope to fill in the vacant jagged edges, the unspoken aspects of our relationship, and grow closer to them by understanding them not as parents but humans—perfectly imperfect—in the double vision of our generationally fissured immigrant realities. Maybe one day, when I gain the strength, I'll personally express to them the sympathy and acceptance of their outlook I gained from the creation of these poems. Perhaps I'll even share these poems with them.

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# The Thermometer

Trapped, caged  
confined to these glass walls  
the mercury rises and falls  
outside a war waged

Inside a little girl and her doctor father toiled  
treating what they could  
more than they probably should

The little girl kept the mercury clean  
Making sure it always had its sheen

Slip  
Crack

Out came the precious mercury  
Free from its cage  
Free from its form  
Free to explore

The little girl was scolded  
and vowed to stop these complaints  
When a mercurial boy was molded  
she raised him in restraints

# Tumble

an inconspicuous fixture  
on a brick throne  
rested a cooking cauldron

a hardware seller  
in a self-made shop  
labored a family breadwinner

one morning  
down fell the cauldron  
handles broken

an omen

my father on the train  
one false step  
death

only his body returned

and we wondered if what pushed him  
was a demon or his demons

and I decided  
my body should be cold from the start  
so my son would never grieve the departure of its warmth

## Restless Nights in Bago

counterfeit pills  
work their magic by death  
limited supplies  
lead to early goodbyes

in Burma, land of many Buddhists  
peace is nowhere to be found  
but my practice yields to prayers  
as the lives that count on me  
have no chance from the start

it is nighttime  
outside my window  
the monsoon begins to roar

to the boy with cholera  
*I hear buzzy mosquitoes*  
to the man with stab wounds  
*I sense lurking militants*  
to my own father  
*I still see your shadows*

I am sorry

their faces flood me  
the monsoon rises  
they howl with the storm

the monsoon departs  
its canvas falls apart  
a final lightning strike  
signs their certificates

I am a doctor  
death is my nurse

# Welcome to America

Gone are the days of running from toxicity  
Here's to relying on running water and stable electricity

Gone are the days of performing arduous labors  
Here's to relaxing with the neighbors

Gone are the days of brutal censorship  
Here's to open scholarship

Gone are the days of rampant hypocrisy  
Here's to meritocracy

The reality entails an irreparable familial schism  
We disperse like white light through a prism

The reality entails entering the empty unknown  
My windows reveal a view of ice and snow

The reality entails a difficult language to master  
My pronunciation spells disaster

The reality entails a divergence in my dreams  
My two children poke through the seams

# Steadfast

morsels of joy  
bring me closer

my sight set on medicine  
though the hand that was dealt  
makes it hard to restart

I get back on my feet  
a new toolkit in tow  
one that only feeds

the journey awaits  
I must not hesitate  
the struggle is here  
I know no fear

but for now  
I prepare sushi

## Renouncement *...of physicianship*

A dream come true  
A gleaming white coat in my possession

Reliving a code blue  
An expectant mother's fatal fear

A baby's wail pierces the sterile theater

How could that be?

My sickly baby is reluctantly remedied  
My pleas are left unanswered

The baby's cold shoulder grounds me to the reality  
Its permanence dampens my vitality

The tearstained remains of my white coat  
Is the warm blanket that keeps him afloat

And so my dreams are stillborn

## Renouncement *...of motherhood*

A dream come true  
A gleaming white coat in my possession

Reliving a code blue  
An expectant mother's fatal fear

A baby's wail pierces the sterile theater

How could that be?

My sickly baby is reincarnated  
My pleas are finally answered

The baby's cold shoulder lifts me to possibility  
Its impermanence restores my vitality

The stainless sleeve of my white coat  
Is the warm blanket that keeps me afloat

And so my dreams are not stillborn

## Mother's Love

You were always one step behind  
Only your first breaths were ever early  
I was worried and could never unwind

Instead of reading you whined  
Though the others learned in a hurry  
You were always one step behind

Be big and strong your father would remind  
And carry the name of our family proudly  
Still I was worried and could never unwind

Scribbled letters needed to be refined  
I know your vision was always blurry  
But you were always one step behind

Your heart's desires were artistically inclined  
So only one of us knew your doctor's destiny  
Yet I was worried and could never unwind

But I knew your goals would turn into mine  
In the end you even chose medicine freely  
And soon I will have my peace of mind  
For my renouncement will be redefined