VINTAGE

THE LIZARD CAGE

KAREN CONNELLY

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About the Book

Teza once electrified the people of Burma with his protest songs against the dictatorship. Arrested by the Burmese secret police in the days of mass protest, he is seven years into a twenty-year sentence in solitary confinement, cut off from his family and contact with other prisoners. Enduring the harsh conditions with resourcefulness, Buddhist patience and humour, he searches for news and human connection in every being and object that is grudgingly allowed into his cell.

Despite his isolation, Teza has a profound influence on the world of the cage. He inspires the conscience-ridden senior jailer to radical change. His very existence challenges the brutal authority of Handsome, the junior jailer. Even though his server, the criminal Sein Yun, sees compromising the singer as a ticket out of jail, Teza befriends him, risking falling into the trap of forbidden conversation, food and the most dangerous contraband of all, paper and pen.

Lastly there’s Little Brother, an orphan child growing up inside the walls. Teza and the boy are prisoners of different orders, but their extraordinary friendship frees both of them in utterly surprising ways. Overturning our expectations, Karen Connelly presents us with a mystifying world that celebrates the human spirit, and spirit itself, in the midst of injustice and violence.

About the Author

Karen Connelly is the author of seven books of poetry and non-fiction. Her first book of prose, *Touch the Dragon: A Thai Journal*, won the Governor General's Literary Award for Non-fiction in 1993 and was a *New York Times* Notable Travel Book of the Year. Raised in Calgary, Connelly has lived for extended periods in different parts of Asia and Europe, and now divides her time between rural Greece, travels in Asia and her home in Toronto.

Also by Karen Connelly

Non-fiction

Touch the Dragon: A Thai Journal
One Room in a Castle: Letters from Spain, France and Greece

Poetry

The Small Words in My Body
This Brighter Prison
The Disorder of Love
The Border Surrounds Us
Grace and Poison

For Ko Aung Zaw (a.k.a. Zaw Gyi) and Ko Kyaw Zwa Moe, brothers who found each other on the other side of the border

For Ko Moe Thi Zon and Dr. Naing Aung, brothers who lost each other there

For the child in prison

For Lucas, beloved

KAREN CONNELLY

The Lizard Cage

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

The possessor of this stone can fly in the air, and dive not only under water, but underground. He cannot be wounded as long as he has this stone on his body, that is, in his mouth, under his hairknot, in his hands, or under his armpits. He will be free from fatigue and disease … [These] powers do not really belong to him, but only to the stone, which by mere touch can turn lead into silver and brass into gold … Thus, when an alchemist has discovered the "stone of live metal" he exposes himself to the danger of being robbed of it by evil spirits or jealous rivals … Evil spirits will be on the lookout for him out of sheer malice, but the jealous rivals wish to eat his body, because by eating it, they will come to possess superhuman strength.

—DR. MAUNG HTIN AUNG,
FOLK ELEMENTS IN BURMESE BUDDHISM

THE BOY WAS twelve years old when he entered the Hsayadaw's monastery school. As the newest novice, he soon possessed the smoothest bare head; he was given dark ochre robes and taught how to wear them. With his scavenger's eye for opportunity, he saw how lucky he was. The men here gave him food, and a mat to sleep on beneath a wooden roof. He saw also that the school was a poor place, but the monks who ran it were generous with what little they had.

This didn't stop him from jealously guarding his own possessions. He even refused to be parted from his filthy blanket. The monks said it should be thrown away, but he insisted on washing the thick swath of Chinese felt himself. When it was dry, he folded it with haughty care and placed it on his sleeping mat. The old Hsayadaw—abbot of the monastery school—observed this patiently, accustomed to children who clung to the relics of their old lives.

Because the boy had never been to school, he received lessons from his very own tutor, but sometimes the Hsayadaw excused the tutoring monk and sat down to teach the child himself. This seemed like a favor to the tutor, but the truth was that the abbot enjoyed teaching the boy. He had run the monastery school for more than forty years, and this was the first time he'd ever seen an illiterate child dedicate himself so passionately to the alphabet. Learning his letters made the boy shine, and the old man liked to sit in that clean, honest light. They were both happy during these lessons, and their happiness made them laugh at almost nothing, a bird shooting through the leaves beyond the glassless window or the voice of the papaya seller in the street, calling out the sweetness of her fruit. More than half

a dozen times, in the middle of the night, the Hsayadaw caught the boy with a candle burning and a notebook open in his lap, his grubby hand drawing the thirty-three consonants and fifteen vowels of the Burmese alphabet over and over, and he had to force himself to be stern when he sent the child back to bed.

The boy's name as a Buddhist novice was too long and tricky for him to write, so he insisted on learning how to spell his birth name. When he wrote it from memory for the first time, such was his jubilation that the tutoring monk whispered to the Hsayadaw, "He acts like he's discovered the formula for turning lead into gold." To which the abbot only smiled.

When he was not learning to read or trying to write, he was quiet, sometimes sullen. He was a secretive, ever-hungry boy, uninterested in playing with the other children —though he often watched them as if they were animals he was afraid to approach. The abbot endeavored not to pick favorites, but he adored this peculiar child. If only all of them were so interested in reading, and so dedicated to their Buddhist studies. It was apparent to everyone, even the more recalcitrant monks, that the boy had embraced the rituals of worship with surprising devotion. He sometimes spent hours in the temple, just sitting and watching the image of the Buddha. There hadn't been a child like that for more than a decade.

The monastery was full of boys—large boys, small boys, boys with harelips and boys with flippered limbs, boys from poor families or with no families to speak of. The Hsayadaw adopted them all. The old proverb says that ten thousand birds can perch on one good tree; the Hsayadaw was such a tree. His children found refuge in him, and he taught them to seek a greater refuge in the Buddha's Dhamma of Theravada, the teachings of the Middle Way. He did not cane his children or send them off, even if they misbehaved,

because the state orphanages and reform schools were dangerous places.

The boy came to love the abbot with the same anxious tenderness he'd felt for the Songbird. This love declared itself through the laughter they shared during their lessons, through the tears the boy blinked away as he struggled with all the letters and their complex combinations. Once when he was wrestling with frustration, the Hsayadaw told him, "It's all right to cry. It's just a little water that needs to get out. We could put it in a cup if you're worried about losing it." The boy laughed, and his work became easier.

For just over three months he lived this way, making his path through hard terrain as quickly and gracefully as water. But one morning trouser-wearers appeared, two military intelligence agents who asked about him.

The Hsayadaw was calm with a lifetime of meditation, but he was afraid for his favorite son, so afraid that he broke the Fourth Precept: to abstain from telling lies. He knew it was wrong, but he lied to the military intelligence agents. He told the men that the boy was very wild, and had run away. "What did you expect, with the way the child has been raised?"

"Did he take his belongings with him?" one of the men asked.

"Belongings? He was the poorest among the poor—he had nothing but a bag of scraps and an old blanket. Of course he took them away."

The morning meal was just beginning, and the military intelligence agents insisted upon walking slowly among all the children as they sat eating on the floor. But who was to know one particular novice among sixty-seven shaven-headed, hungry little monks? The boy they were searching for was also calm, calm with a short lifetime of surviving by his rat stick and his wits. He went on eating with the other children. All of them kept their heads angled to the floor. The agents called out his name, demanding that he speak

up if he was in the room. The boy didn’t even blink; he would never answer to the voices of the cage again. The men came back that night and performed the same theater, but all they succeeded in doing was making a few boys burst into tears.

Two days later, petulant and angry, they returned at the hour of the morning meal. This time someone else accompanied them, a jailer who knew the boy’s face. The trouser-wearers demanded that each novice lift up his head and look at this man.

Some of the boys could not hold back their tears as the big man approached them. He limped from child to child, asking questions to frighten them, to make them talk. But they had nothing to tell him. His eyes scanned the room. He barked at the other trouser-wearers to make sure they found every flea-bitten brat in the monastery compound. Then, turning to the Hsayadaw, he asked more questions. Were some children out collecting alms? Were others washing clothes or running errands at the market? The Hsayadaw replied with great patience and a serene expression. All the young novices were present, here, in this very room. Only older boys were sent to do errands. Every child under fourteen was having breakfast. Except for the boy who had run away, days ago, the one they were looking for.

The jailer lowered his voice. “If you are lying to me, old man, you will live to regret it.”

The Hsayadaw smiled his generous, open smile, all large white teeth except for the missing ones; his eyes nearly disappeared into many wrinkles. He replied, “Sir, how many men have told you the truth and lived to regret it?” He lowered his voice, so the novices wouldn’t hear him. “Leave this place now, you who hunt a child like an animal. This is a monastery school. It is not your prison.”

Then the Hsayadaw turned away, walked barefoot over the creaky floor, and sat down among his children. That day the abbot was so happy he had to restrain himself from

dancing. He had outwitted the authorities. The day after the military men had visited the first time, the Hsayadaw had sent his favorite son to a safer place.

WRAPPED IN HIS novice robes, the boy left his first sanctuary in Rangoon and went to a small monastery in Pegu, then to a much larger one near Inle Lake and a different place after that, farther and farther north, eluding a force he equated with the men in the cage who had hurt him. Sometimes ordained monks took him in hand. Sometimes trusted novices became his guides, though they were barely older than he was, perhaps fifteen or sixteen. It was a slow, mindful, meandering escape, for it was unclear where the boy should go. He and his caretakers often walked or caught rides in the backs of open trucks.

The young monks aroused no suspicion. Even government army officers and soldiers came out to give them alms at dawn. The boy was like any other poor novice, brother to the little nuns they sometimes passed on their journey, orphan girls dressed in the dark brown or pale pink robes of their abbeys. When they arrived at a beautiful, bird-filled monastery in the hills near Mandalay, the boy thought perhaps this place was his new home, because it was very peaceful, and very far away from Rangoon.

But it wasn’t far enough. The Hsayadaw sent word that the authorities were still looking for the child. They left again, traveled down into the mad bustle of the market streets of Taungyi, then Loikaw, then from village to village, through the mountains and valleys of Shan State, where the people spoke a language that recalled the sinuous chatter of birds. In a village whose name he never knew, the novice was given into the care of other, older monks, Shan men.

After leaving his dear Hsayadaw, the boy became more silent and withdrawn, but he followed the strangers with an uncharacteristic submissiveness, born of fear and the weariness of constant movement. He did not know where he

was or what would become of him if he lost them too, these older brothers. The monks were kind to him, feeding him, trying to draw him out with jokes and questions in heavily accented Burmese. Among themselves they spoke Shan, known on the border as Tai Yai, one of the many tongues in that unnamed country between nations.

From the Burmese Shan hills, along the edges of Kayah State, they journeyed into Shan and Karenni territory of Thailand, down into a valley of tall thin trees and pale morning fog near the town called Mae Hong Son. Though the boy wore Buddhist robes, he arrived like so many other refugees from Burma, a dark face drawn tight around feverish black eyes. Alternately shivering and burning with malaria, he clung to his bundle of relics from the other side. They were wrapped up in his simple sling bag, which he carried on his back or in his arms wherever he went, as an older sibling carries the infant of the family.

He recuperated in the monastery at the foot of a mountain near Mae Hong Son. Once he entered monastic life again, he felt better, though the abbot of his new monastery did not smile and laugh like the Hsayadaw.

One day, a few weeks after his arrival, two Shan monks explained to the boy that he would be leaving the monastery very soon; a Burmese man wanted to adopt him. Contrary to their expectations, this news caused the boy great distress. He protested to the Thai abbot, stating his case in a heartrending mixture of Burmese, Shan, even a few words of Thai. He did not want to leave the monastery; he did not want anyone to adopt him. He wanted to be a monk. The abbot promised the boy that he could return to the monastery if he wanted, but it was his duty to meet the person who was offering him a different life. The abbot told him that while he stayed with the Burmese man, he didn’t have to live as a Buddhist novice: he could give up his robes, he could eat after noon. But the boy said no. He would wear his robes, he would continue to observe a

monk’s diet, and he would return as soon as possible to the monastery.

The next day the Shan monks delivered him to a house built on the outskirts of the town. A net hammock was stretched between two trees in the weedy, dusty garden. A grown man was sleeping there, his mouth hanging open like a child’s. The monks and the boy stared at this man, but he did not wake. They left their slippers in the dust, walked up a few wooden steps, and stood silently at the open door. When the boy coughed, Burmese men inside the house turned from their desks and greeted them.

One of the monks whispered to the boy, “You must not cry.”

The other monk added, “And don’t be naughty.” Following a brief chat with one of the men, they left the boy standing there barefoot. He could not bear to watch his brother monks disappear down the road, so he closed his eyes.

“Have you eaten rice yet?” one of the men asked, meaning *Are you hungry?* The boy did not open his eyes. He responded coldly, “I am keeping the Precepts. I don’t eat after noon.”

The man smiled and said, “That’s a shame, because the abbot said you were free to join us for dinner. And we’re going to have an excellent dinner tonight. Aung Min has gone to the market just for you.”

This made the boy open his eyes very wide. His forehead crumpled, and though his mouth opened, no sound came out.

The man thought he should explain. “Aung Min is the man who wants to adopt you. He’ll be back within the hour, then we’ll eat together.”

The boy felt the room sway around him. He sat down cross-legged where he’d been standing. Suddenly everything made sense. Now he understood where the journey had been leading him. *Aung Min.* Instead of making him happy, the revelation made him burst into tears. The

men did their best to cheer him up, but he was inconsolable. His crying quickly turned to sobbing, wet gasps and heaves occasionally punctuated with choking.

The boy's sobs were so loud they woke the sleeping revolutionary. He had children of his own, whom he had left behind in Burma. He woke thinking, I have dreamed of my son. Then he realized he was awake and a child was still crying. He swung his legs out of the hammock and took the stairs two at a time. Crouching next to the boy, he murmured in a low voice for a long time. Eventually he put his arm around him and whispered unbelievable things one after the other. "You are safe with us. We won't hurt you. Aung Min is a good man, he'll take care of you. We're happy you've come to find us. Hey—do you want a tissue to wipe your nose?"

"No. That's okay."

The boy blinked up at the man, sniffed, and slid out from under his arm. Standing, he rearranged his robes and guessed which was the bathroom door; he entered and came out with a washed face. Then he surprised them all by asking if he could have a candle, please. For his prayers, he said. They were gathered in the main room of the house; there was a little altar high on one of the walls, above a photograph of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Separated from the monastery for a few hours, he already missed the comforting rhythms and habits of the monks.

Kneeling before the makeshift shrine with its gold-coated plaster Buddha, holding a yellow candle in his hand, the boy uttered another humble request, for incense. The revolutionaries glanced at each other. What a strange little bird this kid was! Someone disappeared into a bedroom and returned with a dusty package of joss sticks. The boy opened it, drew out several sticks of incense, and asked for a lighter. He knelt and lit the candle and the incense and genuflected three times, forehead touching the wooden floor. The men went to the outdoor kitchen behind the house

and talked in low tones about the child who was praying inside.

Aung Min arrived soon after, pulling up on a noisy motorcycle. Carrying bags from the market, he came in the back way. Yes, his men said, the boy was in the house, he was fine. Yes, he had brought his little sling bag; he rarely put it down. Aung Min peered in at the child through the half-open door but didn't want to disturb him.

The men talked over the work of the day, and cooked, and smoked cheroots. Slowly they fell silent, one by one, and began to listen as a small voice grew luminous and full in the twilight. The words of the chanted prayers came flooding back like those of an old song. Several of the men had made the same prayers, en masse, during the street protests of 1988, when they were university students. They forgot about the cheroots between their fingers. One by one the red coals went out. They stood in the darkness until the boy finished praying.

When someone turned on a light, everyone noticed the aroma of cooked rice. They stepped quietly into the house. The man who had held him earlier bent down to the boy and whispered, "We hope you will eat with us." And the boy said, "Yes, thank you, I will." The strange company, silent boy and serious men, sat down on the floor together; in the middle of their circle, various plates and bowls sat steaming, set down on old newspapers. Aung Min and the boy were introduced hesitantly, because it had been Aung Min's name that triggered the crying fit. But when the boy came face to face with the famous student leader turned revolutionary, he was polite and grave.

Aung Min watched the child hover protectively over his plate. He ate with his hands, like the men, but not a single grain of rice or bit of curry escaped his fingers. The man smiled at the boy, who glanced at him without raising his head, jaws still in motion. Aung Min realized that this was an

old child locked in an old hunger. Did anyone have candy? he asked. No? What about ice cream?

Plied with sugar, the boy began to talk, first about the cold delicious cake, which he had never eaten before. How did they keep it so cold? The men smiled to see so much delight come from a sweetness they had long taken for granted.

They asked the boy about his journey. He told them. They asked him about the monastery in Rangoon. He explained about the Hsayadaw and the other children and the trouser-wearers who had tried to find him and take him away.

Aung Min leaned forward, and the boy saw that the man wanted something, badly. For the first time in that house of strangers, he felt a stab of fear.

“Little Brother,” Aung Min said, “I want you to tell me about the prison.”

The boy looked down at his hands. He didn’t know what to say. To tell about the prison was to tell about his life, but he wasn’t sure what he had to keep secret. Stammering slightly, he said, “We call it the cage.”

Aung Min chose his words carefully. “I want you to tell me about your friends there.”

This was easier. First the boy talked about his lizard, and the beetle in its box, and the great Tan-see Tiger, who gave him soap and a new towel before he left. Then he said Saya Chit Naing’s name. “And books,” he said. “My friends were books.”

Aung Min’s head tilted, almost imperceptibly, to the right. One of the monks at the monastery in Mae Hong Son had told him the boy was just learning to read. How could books have been his friends?

The boy started talking about a nat, a spirit who lived like an invisible monkey in a tree on the prison grounds. Several of Aung Min’s men glanced at each other.

Clearly this child was many things. Inarticulate and superstitious. Malnourished. Uneducated. A variation of the

boy’s story had preceded his arrival, but as they sat there listening to him talk about a tree-dwelling spirit, a contagion of sighs moved around the circle. The child wasn’t telling them anything they wanted to hear.

Sensing their impatience, the boy abruptly stopped talking and shrugged his shoulders. He stared hard at Aung Min as he chewed his rice. He knew exactly what the big man wanted to know about: the Songbird. Still gazing into Aung Min’s eyes, he finally swallowed and said, “Teza. He also was my friend.”

The men stopped picking their teeth or reading the newspaper beneath the dirty plates. Aung Min stopped smiling.

The boy pulled his sling bag into his lap. He reached into it and retrieved his meager possessions one at a time, laying them out on the floor in front of his crossed legs. Tattered postcards. A lime-green T-shirt and a turquoise sarong. A thanakha tin. His new towel. The boy touched the large matchbox with his fingertip. There were little bones inside, and a single tooth.

But Aung Min didn’t care about any of that. “Little Brother, what else do you have in there?”

The boy felt the pounding rise in his chest. He put his hands on the sling bag and squeezed the cardboard edges through the fabric. It belonged to him. He glanced warily around the ring of men.

“It’s mine,” said the boy.

“I just want to look at it.” But Aung Min had trouble keeping the hunger out of his voice, and the boy, an expert in hunger, hunched protectively over his sling bag.

“The Songbird gave it to me.”

“I just want to look. I’ll give it back to you.”

The boy blinked, his eyes burning. Why did they always have to take everything away? He clenched his teeth. *No.* “You have to promise.”

Aung Min tried to smile, but a grimace appeared on his face. Each word came out sharp and hard. “Little Brother, just let me see the notebook.”

The boy glared at him, then yanked down the cloth edges of the bag to reveal the stained ledger, which he picked up and held tightly in his hands.

No one said a word; no one moved. The two of them could have been in the room alone. The boy pressed the notebook down against his legs and opened the cover. “The book is mine, so *I* will show it to you,” he said. His palm splayed wide on the paper. He stared unblinking into the man’s eyes.

Aung Min raised his eyebrows. Bloody kid. He stood up, waved his hand impatiently. The men on either side of the child shifted away. He sat down next to the boy, who slowly turned the first page of the notebook, the second, the third. Aung Min saw only blurred numbers, handwritten rows of accounting. He swore under his breath. The figures meant nothing to him.

Then the boy turned another page, and the words began.

The handwriting was as familiar as the voice Aung Min often listened to on a dusty cassette player.

PART ONE

THE SONGBIRD

. 1 .

JULY 1995

THE SINGER IS lying on the floor, a gray blanket pulled up around his chest. With slightly narrowed eyes, he stares at the ceiling. A single lizard is up there, clinging to the plaster. What if it were the last lizard in the world? Then what would you do? Teza opens his mouth.

It’s not the last lizard. Rather, it’s the first. Most of them won’t appear until evening, little dinner guests neatly dressed in khaki. When the halo of insects has formed around the lightbulb, the reptiles run to and fro in their jerky, mechanical way, jaws snapping. Sometimes their mouths are so stuffed with insects that they can barely shut them. Gluttons. Showoffs. Any hungry mammal would be jealous. With all that eating, you’d think they’d get fat, but unfortunately the lizards are very skinny, like most of the human inmates. Teza closes his mouth.

In response, his stomach growls, the sound as loud as his normal speaking voice. A predatory animal has taken up residence in his gut. Never mind the parasites, a small panther is mutating in there. A feral dog. Evening with its lizard bounty seems very far away.

To confirm that sad thought, the iron-beater begins to strike eleven A.M. Teza counts each blow of a hardwood pallet against an iron bar in the compound, at the base of

the watchtower. *Clang, clang, clang*. The time-keeper whacks the iron as hard as possible, so that the prisoners will hear him and know their time is passing. All ten thousand of them, especially the couple thousand politicals whom the singer counts as friends and comrades, are *very* far away. The nature of the teak coffin—of any solitary cell—is that it converts everything into distance. Time, space, food, women, his family, music, anything he might need or want or love: it is all far, far away.

From solitary, the whole cage is a foreign country to him. He lives on the very edge of it, straining to hear the other voices.

TKEEP! TKEEP! TKEEP!

The lizard sings. Not like a bird, though Teza remembers from first-year biology that this common cling-to-house lizard is brother to a tiny prehistoric sparrow. Then the desert wind blew and the rain fell and the scales grew into feathers. As he stares at the lizard on the ceiling, he can imagine it: the front two legs and feet stretched out, webbing, blossoming into wings. The back feet articulated into clawed toes, which curled deftly around the thin branch of a tree. And birdsong ribboned through the steamy jungle.

But before that, who knows how many millions of years ago, there was just this somewhat alarmed chirping *tkeep tkeep tkeep* to inspire the Neanderthals. Like Junior Jailer Handsome. Here we are again, the singer thinks, smiling. Back in the Stone Age, among cavemen, in a cave. His stomach growls.

The iron-beater is still. It’s past eleven o’clock now. And Sein Yun has not shown up with breakfast. Teza watches the lizard run from the light, stop, run to the wall, stop. It runs down the wall and whisks itself out the air vent high above his head.

Teza scans the brick wall around the vent. His eyes have learned the different colors of reptile and wall, lizard skin

and skin of man, brick and spider. That's what he wants to see now. The spider.

It's the color of a tiny, dirty copper pot. When the bulbous back catches the light, the copper becomes iridescent, an alchemist's metal. It glints gold, then a sheen of blue-green rises toward copper again. At dusk the creature deepens to red, then fades with the invisible sun. When Teza first came to the teak coffin, the spider was almost indistinguishable against the red bricks. But now the singer can find him in seconds.

A fine web is strung high in the corner where the two walls meet, below and to the left of the air vent. The spider often rebuilds his web in a different place. When Teza wakes each day, he checks to see if his companion has chosen to abandon the darkness of the cell and build his new home outside. The singer thinks he's the sort of spider who should have green leaves around him. But the spider stays.

The Chief Warden thinks Teza cannot see out of this narrowest of windows. In a manner of speaking, he is correct. The vent is too high. Even when Teza jumps he sees nothing save another fraction of the very high outer wall and a corrugated tin overhang. But the spider sees. He crawls the outer wall, up and up. From the top, the spider witnesses the whole city, the gold stupas, the green trees, the streets, millions of men and women, the lakes Inya and Kandawgyi, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's famous house on University Avenue, and his mother's two-story flat, surrounded by laundry and orchids. Daw Sanda loves her orchids dearly.

The spider perceives all this and more, much more: the sky with its white-backed, blue-bottomed clouds full of rain, the horizon curving like a belly. The spider sees.

And Teza watches the spider.

The fabulous copper-pot spider.

Is it male or female?

The singer has decided the spider is male: it's too depressing to imagine a woman here. He would hate to have a woman see him now.

The singer feeds his male comrade-spider secret messages, just a few words at a time, all his body can hold. Soundlessly, the spider takes in the messages and spins them out when he crawls into the world. The glimmering threads are Teza's words.

I love you. I think of you and send wishes of health.
We have dared everything; we must win.
I take strength from the knowledge that you keep fighting.
I am still alive. Teza.
Remember the meaning of my name.

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FORBIDDEN TO WRITE or receive letters, he has devised dozens of ways to send a message. Every political prisoner has an elaborate fantasy of messages. Sometimes the right moment never comes, or the message gets trapped in the cell with the man who wrote it, incriminating him as only words can. But sometimes the messages escape, slip through to the other halls, where friends live. Sometimes the words pass through the first brick wall surrounding the prison, and the second one. They move secretly through the great iron gates. Hands take the place of the prisoner's legs; messages walk out into the world and speak.

The methods he has imagined are no different from his comrades'. Anxious fingers swivel scraps of paper into cigarettes and cheroots. Words are scratched onto walls and plastic bags, pinpricked onto dry leaves, stuffed into the handles of baskets, held under armpits, in mouths, wrapped in clothes, breathed nightly in prayers. The brief missives, puny as insects, as embryos, are regularly caught and

crushed, torn out by the guards and warders and swept away. If the prisoners are caught sending messages, they are beaten violently; they must bleed, that is the general rule. It's also fine to knock them unconscious. Then their sentences are extended by two years, by four, by seven, by seven times two.

The singer sits down.

The spider crawls out. Like the singer's grandfather, the spider always goes outside for a morning view of the world, even if it is raining, as it is today. As it was yesterday. It will rain off and on now for months. Teza cannot see the rain, but he hears it drumming, muttering, sighing, turning over and over, out of the sky to the earth back to the sky, washing away the layer of filth created by men, which encourages them to create more.

Sometimes his dreams are very simple: rain falls into his cupped hands. In the base of that shallow well, there is a small lizard. Its tongue flicks at the clear, oversized drops, drinking the rain, which also washes Teza's palms, runs through his fingers. The lizard licks at the rainwater, perfectly calm, fearless. The singer feels the small reptilian heart beat lightly against his human skin.

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THE LIZARD DREAM makes him think of food, and food makes him think of Sein Yun, and that makes him mad. Where is that sneaky little bastard?

The yellow-skinned palm-reader with the long dirty nails and the jumpy manner has been Teza's server for a month and a half. He's an uncommon criminal, Sein Yun, but useful. A couple of weeks ago, the palm-reader brought in—from where, Teza will never know—some first-rate papaya, cut in cubes and served on a white plastic plate, as if a pretty lady vendor on Anawrahta Street had brought it into the cage herself. No warder or jailer would ever lower himself to the

task of serving a prisoner food of any kind, or of emptying out his shit pail. Such work is reserved for criminal prisoners like Sein Yun who are trying to reduce their sentences.

Teza's previous server was Sammy, who has a new job now, as one of the iron-beaters. At least that's what Sein Yun said last week. Teza likes to imagine Sammy out there, at the base of the watchtower, the great bulk of his long dark arms beating out the hours. Sammy is an Indo-Burmese of startling proportions, over six feet tall, the whole length and breadth of him thick with muscle. But when he was a server, all his strength meant nothing to the singer, because the giant has no tongue. His awful tongue-lessness was intended—and received—as an added punishment for Teza.

The only thing you want to do in solitary—besides everything else you want to do—is speak and be spoken to. Sammy could only grunt. The first time Teza addressed him, the Indian's sad mouth yawned into an empty purple cavern. The web of skin from the lower palate connected to a small, wriggling stump of flesh. The singer's first reaction on seeing that ugly amputation was not sympathy, or horror, or even distaste. Teza was so overwhelmed with self-pity that he wanted to cry.

Whatever the palm-reader's faults may be—clearly he has many—he also has a tongue, and uses it. Sein Yun is clever, happy to share his quick wit. Most important, he likes to pass on cage news. The singer already feels disproportionately grateful to him simply because he can talk.

If he would just show up with the breakfast tray, Teza would bow in gratitude. He tilts his head toward the teak door and listens. Nothing, no footsteps. Only his growling gut.

In December he will celebrate his anniversary: seven years, married to the cage. For seven years he hasn't been eating enough, but right now his hunger has passed from

aching into acute. His muscles, organs, bones, have all grown teeth; he can feel his body steadily devouring itself.

His arms and shins and the backs of his knees are insanely itchy (scabies), as are his bites (bedbugs; rather, matbugs, for he hasn't slept on a bed for as long as he's been hungry), and his hair is so filthy it's beginning to smell like bad meat. All that is fine; he's used to it. Hunger is his only serious concern. He's used to being malnourished. That isn't the problem. The problem is that the food parcel, which keeps him from starving, is late by an entire week. And the last parcel, which came through three weeks ago, was a dud.

His mother sends them. But before the food reaches him, it has to pass through the holding room to be checked for contraband. Three weeks ago, warders he doesn't know, or Sein Yun, or some other lousy thief, took all but one of the dried salt fish and most of the deep-fried dried beans too.

Why did the bastard bother leaving *one* fish? What kind of slap in the face was that? The jerk was just laughing at him. Was it Junior Jailer Handsome? Handsome has only recently started to oversee the teak coffin. He and Sein Yun came together. As Sein Yun replaced Sammy, so Handsome replaced Senior Jailer Chit Naing, a man who's been a great friend to Teza. Chit Naing would never touch a prisoner's food. But Handsome is a mean bastard.

Who knows? Anyone could have stolen it. Teza is grateful to Sein Yun, but the man's always on the make. He's even friendly with Handsome. It would make good business sense: Junior Jailer absconds with the fish and Sein Yun sells them in the prisoner halls.

If the Chief Warden permits these thieves to steal Teza's food, what does he expect him to live on? Cockroaches? His political ideals? Lizards?

He strikes the wall with his open hand. Then scolds himself for hurting his palm. He touches the bricks again, gently, as if to apologize.