The Third Visit To Burma – 26th January to 19th February, 2010. Written at various stages.

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Dear Fanny,

This account is written to you, as news from Burma belongs to you. I almost did not write this account, as I was often very depressed in my feelings, and preoccupied in my mind. However, as I was walking through a busy marketplace on a hot, hot afternoon, I saw this book, and bought it. From then on, everything became easy.

It is almost the end of January. The winter holiday is almost half done and gone, and I have only been on the open river for a day! Whatever happened to the past four weeks, and were they well-spent? At first, I was sad about the lost time, but upon reflection, I decided that the time spent was worthwhile – although I must still close my eyes, and imagine it carefully as such.... The first week, I was turning in my class grades to the English Department secretary, and folding away the spent materials of the past semester. It had been a hard semester, under difficult operating conditions, and with too many students. Many of these students remain nameless, save on the class-list. I returned to my apartment, and then lost more and more of my mental energy, as these past few months of overwork took their toll. For about a week, I could do nothing much, save stare at the floor. I waited for the day of my departure from Urumqi, cursing myself for having booked the flight so late. Still, three weeks later, I think it was a good move, as it allowed me to depressurize somewhat, and think about many things.

In Beijing, I met with my translators, secretary, old students, and had very good talks with them. However, the most important times were with L.J. After too many years of sporadic visits, I wanted a much better level of conversation – and I got it. On leaving Beijing, I felt as if the trip had been worth it, and was happy. L.J. thus returned to near the top of my friends.

Next, I went to a city near Guangzhou, to see an old student, who is now trying to start up her own trading company. Although she was very busy with her new responsibilities, and could not spend a lot of time with me, we did talk, and I saw the nature of her business. Once again, I am glad that I passed through her city, and saw her : I would do it again.

There is one anecdote that I would like to share from this visit. On the second day, she was busy on the computer, so I left her office, and went across the street to a huge furniture-exhibition center. Although my student thought nothing of crossing six lanes of inner-city highway and pressing through a gap in the meridian fence every day, I could not do it : I walked the long way, down the street to the first crossing. The traffic was overwhelming – a steady millrace of trucks, supplying the world with machine parts and all kinds of furniture. The "Pearl River Delta" is one of the great workshops of the world, but this small city is famous for producing furniture (as well as "boiler-plate" steel, and steel pipes). The highway was lined with all sorts of furniture-supply wholesalers and furniture exhibition shops, showing various types of furniture. The air was heavy, and the sky above, a perpetual dirty-white.

Along this highway, for at least two blocks, was the principal furniture exhibition hall. My student had suggested showing it to me, but I wanted to visit it alone, for I wished to walk here and there, with space to think. Also, I suspected that this building was heavily air-conditioned, and a relief from the sleepless city air. I was not disappointed. The inside was really big, so that

if the ground-level stalls and shops were taken away, there would be enough room to have a modestly controlled NFL football game. The second to sixth floors made up the "walls" of the whole exhibition center, so that there was six floors worth of open space above the whole ground floor... and it was all air-conditioned.

Buyers from all over the world came here, and many furniture outlets had a store or business center. It seemed though, that the major players came from Africa, the Middle East, and India. The prices were very high. It was the sort of place where newly-acquired wealth – from the Third World elites, to local Chinese money – would go shopping. All of the symbols of flagrantly-displayed (but not flagrantly earned) wealth were there – snarling, muscular leopards in imitation gold-plate on massive table-tops; hugely over-stuffed or bulky sofas; business desks the size of double-beds; reproduction oil paintings that suggested an awareness of Europe, but no firsthand knowledge thereof; all the imagined trappings of "coming of age". It was a "nabob's paradise" – and I say "nabob" deliberately, for the Chinese will, I think, follow in the footsteps of the East India Company, but on a scale that the EIC never dreamed of – and they will get away with it, too.

The prices were way, way above what a typical middle-class family could afford. This was a place for shoppers with serious money, and a "gated", hideaway estate to put it in. Mobutu is long gone, but his "spiritual children" are alive and well, for they were scattered here and there, looking for things to buy. From a distance, I could faintly catch a few phrases, but as I drew near, all talk ceased, and the "frozen masks" appeared : the people became barnacles, impervious and off-limits. A few shared nothing at all.

There must have been over two thousand shops in this furniture exhibition center, and I systematically cris-crossed the ground-floor level, and then circumnavigated the second, third and fourth floors. No one bothered me, which was fine, for I wanted to walk, to go around and around in large circles, to hide in my own thoughts, and have no human contact. I must have walked two miles – up and down, back and forth, around each floor. In front of each shop, there was a "door girl" – what the Chinese call "hua-ping" ("flower vase") – whose job it was to stand there, look beautiful, and then persuade the customers to come in. Poor things! They stood there for hours every day, the object of passing scrutiny, for some of the Middle Eastern / Indian buyers were very perverse in their passing comments – a few, but enough to catch my attention. As I walked down the corridors, "sweeping" the shops to the left and the right out of the sides of my vision as I walked past, and sometimes staring intently into the inner recesses of a shop, "vacuuming" out anything of interest (all in a space of two or three seconds, before the girls inside would react and call out to me to enter), I suspended almost all other consciousness. I just walked, and looked at the passing scenery, passively "vacuuming" up everything that caught my eye, and then spraying it over my "filters", for shop after shop, floor after floor, for about an hour or so. What I will do with all these images, and the passively-distilled synthesis that emerges, I do not know. Sometimes, I do not even know why I get up in the morning.

This contemporary version of the original "Vanity Fair" (of Bunyan) had a deep effect on me. As I walked down each corridor, I swore to myself complete and unwavering rejection of these high-priced decoration choices, and of the materialistic, nouveau-riche lifestyle that stands behind them. Their choices... but not mine! I do my shopping at the Goodwill store, and I plan to live in steel containers. I left, and returned to my student.

She was still busy, so I left her newly-rented office, and walked over the flat rooftop, past the landlord's rooftop garden, to look out over the other side. As in my part of the world – mine, too! – lay the other side of this city's wealth. The flat, near sea-level landscape was a mix of

market-garden farmland, "pot-hole" duck ponds, small workshop / factory units under their blue-iron roof, and pockets of shanty-town. I had not expected to see classic, shanty structures here, but there it was. This shanty-hamlet was quiet, and it seemed that the family living there made its living from receiving (or collecting) used bottles, cardboard, and the usual containers, in mixed form, sorting out each load into categories, "re-bagging" each category in huge sacks, loading a sack onto a freight-tricycle, and taking the sack to a truck (not seen), which would then go to some higher-up recycling / processing center. As I watched, a freight-tricycle left.

In such close juxtaposition to the furniture center, the shanty-hamlet had me thinking : was there a place for me there, or nearby such a place? What would the outreach be – tutoring English to some obviously-gifted school-kid, or something else? Maybe I do not belong there; some would even blame me for even considering such a thing! Yet, I will think on this, for I have already been tutoring English to the children of migrant-workers in my own city, Urumqi : I have three girls, and one teenage boy, and I like this sort of work. Perhaps there is something here for me – doing tutoring to gifted and promising students, and not just the masses, with their various range of dubious effort and motivation. I have never liked seeking out the elite, but I have always favored the "grass-roots", and the gifted and diligent who come from there. Even if they are the "marginalia" of society, I still like such people! I also wondered if someone else would be able and willing to enter such a world with me....

I enjoyed being with my student, because I care about her ongoing success, in all areas of her life. She was, and still is, my most "excellent" student. Being successful in today's battlefield that is the emerging middle-class of China is very hard, and there are many stresses to deal with, but I hope she continues to be successful. I shall remember her first rented office space : almost echoing and empty, with the barest minimum of furniture; hidden from the street below and its "river" of traffic by the back side of a huge billboard (but also insulated by the steel plates from all the noise and ugliness); her laptop computer the gateway to the trickle of enquiries from the nations; her hope, as a bird, taking off from the edge of a horizon-less lake. In years to come, I shall remember this. She was upset, as she felt that I was neglected. On the contrary, I saw many things, and liked much of what I saw. It made me think of my father's early years in his N.H. mill building. I think he would have understood her perfectly, for he too "started out" on his own, and wrestled with his business.

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After leaving Guangzhou, I went to Bangkok, to get a visa for Burma. I laid up at my usual watering hole, now thronged more than ever with back-packers (was it a strong Euro, or trouble, anxiety and global depression everywhere else?). I do not seek a new hotel, or a new "Thai experience", as I do not know where to begin, know what I want, how to articulate what I want, or how to acquire what I want. So, I chose to stay in my usual haunts, to stay in my "Thai rut" – to drink the same papaya shakes (no sugar!), to walk the same insane alleys (in search of snacks), to ride the same river-buses to their terminus (to clear my head of Bangkok's chaos, and mine). I know there is another Thailand out there, but I have no interest or ability to have "the graceful experience". Besides, I was going through my annual "moulting" period – that is, I was shutting myself down emotionally and psychologically. I lead a very two-sided form of existence : when I am teaching my students in China, I am almost frenetic, and take on too many responsibilities; about half-way through the semester, I begin to break down, so that by the end of exams, I am ready to collapse; during the holidays, my depression and the exhaustion ravage me, and I lie in

some hotel room, on a nondescript bed, completely unable and unwilling to function... at all. Therefore, the past month(of January, 2010) was spent in this state of debilitation. I have no sense of "daily balance", as the orthodox ones do; instead, I call my perverse system "seasonal balance". Hopefully, by the end of February, when it is time to return to my English teaching in Urumqi, I will be ready and willing to return to the "active ways" – and they are waiting for me, like the circling vultures. Therefore, I wandered the markets, temples, hotels and restaurants of my now-familiar corner of Bangkok like a lost soul. By now, I consider this to be a natural part of my "annual cycle". Besides, the accumulated stress of the past three years needed an outlet, a "psychological delta", for all the inner silt to fall away. For me, there is no better place than a slow boat ride up the Irrawaddy River.

I also cleaned up most of my cluttered e-mail account. In fact, I have enjoyed living in Urumqi, without access to the Internet, as I have been that much more removed from all the memories.

So, Fanny, I finally arrived in Burma, shocked at how much I had spent on this trip's seven plane tickets, and how little I had spent on concrete, tangible forms of pleasure. Still, tickets are necessary, and that budget item always comes first. I went straight to my usual hotel, and stayed there for three days, only going out for shopping, and some touring. The depression was almost crippling by now. However, in addition to my inner feelings, there came what I call the "outer depression" : this comes to me when I enter heavily Buddhist areas – like Tibet, Qinghai, or Burma. Frankly, I consider this depression as a form or outright demonic oppression. All I can do (I feel) is to lie down in some lonely hotel room, and lose a day or two (or three) to the complete paralysis of depression; then I can continue on my way, to some degree. I wonder, is my assessment of these circumstances correct and accurate? For now, it "fits".

I visited the usual places in Rangoon, to buy those personal supplies I cannot easily get anywhere else in Asia – including some of the items I have for you. I also went to the Shwe Dagon pagoda, at sunset, for the colors were very beautiful. I really did not care much about the people, or the culture, or social things; I just liked walking around and around that golden pagoda, on the cool and smooth marble, surrounded by some of the best "eye-candy" on the earth (made by people, that is, and not by Nature). I have long noticed that I like to be alone and undisturbed, but especially so when surrounded by other people (who are of no more significance or attention than trees).

About three days after I arrived in Rangoon, I boarded the ferry. It was much smaller than the boat I used on the first visit to Burma : the "cabin" was, in effect, a shared bedroom; the windows were open, so the mosquitoes could enter easily; the beds were hard boards; the floor was unswept. Nonetheless, I was alone, and could see the river-landscape of the Irrawaddy passing by, at about the speed of a slow bicycle ride.

Fanny, in order to avoid saying much the same as in the last letter to you, I will give a series of "word-sketches", of the more striking things I saw. As for the basic narrative and outline of this trip, it is very simple : I went by two boats, from Rangoon, to Pyay, to Magway, to Bagan, and also to Mandalay. I ate fruit I brought, and from the boat's kitchen I bought stir-fried vegetables. I barely talked to anyone, and spent long hours looking out of the windows at the passing scenery. Since this letter is also a part of "Fragments of China", it will be a series of fragments, or word-sketches, with no real attempt at a unified narrative. After all, the unity is in the fragments.

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In Burma, there is no time, even though there are clocks, and day / night, and calendars. It seems as if the division of life into minutes (by people) has been rescinded, and a different order re-instated. In addition, the basic elements of the riverine scenery allow a very different perception of the universe. In Maine state, the close presence of so many trees influences my feelings about the land, and where I am. In Urumqi, once the "poison quilt" of pollution drapes itself over and around the tall buildings, and shuts out the world outside, do I begin to identify with my second home. On this boat, perceived reality is very prescribed. The river-bank, usually a third of a mile away, separates river and sky; in certain lighting, as at evening or dawn, the river-bank fades away, and river and sky are one, it seems. At times, they look the same, and feel the same, so that boats on the river appear to be floating in air. The Irrawaddy River is always full of a fine, light-tan silt, so it is impossible to see down into the waters. During the daylight hours, one can gain some sense of "depth-perception" by studying the ripples, other boats, the far shore, or various floating objects, but at dusk or dawn, there are no such points of reference. Passing canoes appear to be floating in air, or even on the surface of a vast bubble : if the bubble were burst, the canoe, and indeed all the sky would instantly disappear, and fall into another realm of existence. It is this sense of living on the "edge of the bubble" which makes the evenings on the Irrawaddy so very unique and almost fragile – one pin-prick, one cough, one stray drop of soap or detergent on the face of the water, and everything will fly away and disappear. At night, when everything is black, or various shades of "imagined grey", I love to stare hard at the indistinct forms of canoes, as they pass by the moored boat and into sight; framed for an instant by the square window; out of sight. We are both in space, both inside a fragile bubble.

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My "cabin" has bed-platforms of very heavy teak wood : perhaps a former Inquisitor went into the chaise-longue business. I bought two plastic-straw mats at the Rangoon docks, and suspect I was modestly cheated for them. (My motto is: Do not ask, "Will I be cheated or not in the marketplace today?" Rather, ask, "Which cheat do I wish to service today?" It makes everything so much more simple.) In the evening, I light up a mosquito coil (with the brand name of "Godzilla"), crawl onto the teak rack, lay on my back, look up at the faintly visible ceiling, listen to the Irrawaddy outside, close my eyes, and think of (Tudor) England. The coils burn for several hours; I know when it is two o'clock in the morning, because the mosquitoes are back, the coil is all burned out, and the toilet calls me urgently. I dream a lot. One night, my mother came to me, so clearly. She was in her late-30's – fresh, young, and energetic. I had never seen her so before in this way. When I am not dreaming, I think about the Urumqi I left, and what awaits me.

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This ferry is a government-operated boat. I think there is one boat per week between Rangoon and Pyay, and the journey each way takes about four days. I was the only foreigner on this boat, and I liked it that way. There were two decks, with my "cabin" on the upper deck, at the front. Under me was the working area for the power capstan, to raise the anchor. Some windows in the cabin were open, and some closed, and I did not dare change them, as they had that "touch me, and I will break!" look to them.

At the stern end of the upper deck was the kitchen, run by a very kind couple. (I have seen Susan re-personified, all over Asia, and this wife was true to form.) This kitchen was a grubby, lovingly cared for and very home-like place – not the Strand Hotel (in Rangoon) by a long way, but my choice over anything the Strand might offer up. The "eating area" looked like a bar-counter, rather than a dining table; the aging teak was kept in some condition by wiping in the spilt palm-oil from messy eaters' plates. Some passengers were thin and ate one way; some helped themselves liberally; all contributed to the teak surface.

In between the kitchen and my cabin was the upper deck space for the passengers. It was partitioned, lengthways, by a large-mesh wire-grille barrier. Along each half of the upper deck, the passengers "staked out" their own space, arranged their bags, boxes and sacks around the edge, spread out a plastic sheet or plastic-straw mat, and called that space home.

The Burmese are very social and family-centered. Within a few hours, the deck-space was transformed into several microcosms of Burmese family life. Even now, as I write, I can feel the boat shaking, as it plies the Irrawaddy, and hear someone outside pounding food (peanuts, or vegetables, or chilli peppers?). This boat has ceased to be a mere agent of public transportation – it is a set of Burmese families in company, on the move. The feeling is as relaxed as a day-long picnic outing to Maidstone.

(As an aside, I would add that, if there was anywhere on earth I would like to retire and grow old in, it would certainly be Burma, in some sleepy, half-forgotten town : more on that, later.)

The lower deck housed the crew, the "shower-room", various lockers, and space on the deck for the passengers' heavy baggage. This was the most interesting part of the boat, and also the scene of many travel vignettes, which I never grew tired of watching. At various times, the lower deck carried the following : eggs, in wooden-slat crates, packed in coarse straw; terribly heavy sacks of oval-shaped pumpkins; coarse tobacco leaves wrapped in gunny-sack cloth, like a child had unwound a roll of toilet paper, and then re-wound it, carefully packing in autumn leaves, like a botanist's field-collection; large, woven baskets of palm-fronds, full of fresh, red and ripe tomatoes; shallow baskets, an arm-span wide, full of small, red chilli peppers; tall stacks of carefully woven baskets, for re-sale somewhere upriver; bags of woven cane footballs – and red, blue and white plastic footballs, too – for re-sale in one's hometown, since it was 2010, and the World Cup frenzy was just beginning; a few 55-gallon oil drums, presumably full of lamp oil or diesel; large bundles of plastic-straw mats; sacks of small onions, of an almost lavender tint. Most of what the Burmese carried had to do with re-sale – either it was bought wholesale in Rangoon and taken home, or it came off the fields, and brought to market. I am a lover of baskets, and I admired how so many products were transported in handmade baskets. All sorts of raw materials were used, but my favorite were the shopping baskets woven from the (otherwise wasted) plastic strapping used in airports to "secure" one's luggage. Since I saw many such baskets in the countryside of Burma, and the obvious labels of Chinese airports on the strapping, I assumed there was a carefully-arranged recycling and rural labor arrangement in place.

I recommend that such baskets be readily available to <u>every</u> middle class family, and plastic bags phased out!

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As I wrote earlier, the ferry carried all sorts of goods. For those Burmese people who lived along the Irrawaddy, the ferry was of critical importance; the roads did not serve their needs as

well. The river typically ran about 30 or even 40 feet below the level of the prevailing landscape; sometimes, the alluvial silt "embankments" were sheer, like cliffs, and sometimes they were steeply sloped, with worn paths or cut steps in them; rarely did the land meet the waters at the same level. As the ferry worked its way upriver, it sometimes stopped in the middle of open land, far from any village. Perhaps the location was good for a landing, a place where the boat could come up close, and thrust out the gang-plank. An ox-cart would be there, with the intended cargo on the ground, and expectant farmers waiting for the ferry. I often wondered, why did the farmers want to sell up-river, and not down-river to Rangoon? I always marveled at the bold actions of the farmers, who made so much effort to take their products to market.

At one such place, where a side-river met the Irrawaddy, some farmers had put their cash-crop of "oval-shaped pumpkins" into large, plastic "net-bags". There were about twenty such bags – about a ton or more of pumpkins. The ferry came up close, and the gang-plank came out. This plank was made of a very wiry, coarse-grained type of hardwood; I do not know what sort of tree it came from. It was about twenty feet long, fifteen inches wide, about two inches thick, and very heavy and strong. I saw the deck crew, and the riverine stevedores carry heavy burdens along a "wide-span", and roll fully-loaded 55-gallon oil-drums over a "short span". Without such planks, the river-traffic would slow down, for the small space between the river-bank and the boat was the problem, the "weak link" in an otherwise effective, if slow, transportation system. The farmers carried the net-bags full of pumpkins, one by one into the boat. The typical farm laborer Burmese is light, wiry, and very strong. Also, the women were very strong, and carried heavy loads on their heads, African-style. I think that Burma is a good place for female small-business entrepreneurs – they do everything they want, and even seem to be running things. After the last bag of pumpkins came on board, the gang-plank, now filthy with river-mud and half-stuck, was pulled out and washed. The farmers were in a playful mood, and they took off their shirts, jumped into the river, and washed off.

This scene was repeated, at various times and places, along my four-day trip upriver, from Rangoon to Pyay. It was very much the "slow boat to Pyay" experience, but through it, I was able to see something of common, daily Burmese life along the Irrawaddy River. I was also able to be alone with my thoughts, and have a slow, carefully-measured environment to write this letter to you, dear Fanny.

As I write this part of the account, the "cabin" has filled with new arrivals – a family, and one other man. On both decks, the boat is chock full of new passengers, and their heavy baggage. I wonder, why did they all come on board now, and not on the first two days? Seen from another boat, our ferry must be filled to the uttermost capacity.

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A poem. For A.G. 2010/2/1.

Where are you going, oh maid from Pyay?
To the market-place, fresh with news of the land,
With peppers and spices and pumpkins, too.
And I go with a babe in my belly to bear,
The one who will hold me in life's twilight years.
My cheeks are arrayed in "thanaka" fair,

To ward off the suns in the water and sky;
And I've a sister, and brother, and cousin here, too.
We set out together, and cram on a bed,
On a ferry that's bursting with like-minded folk.
And you? Why do you travel along with us,
On a once-weekly boat on the margins of earth?
I answer her not, but stare at the sky,
At clouds faintly scattered and burnished with blue,
At the river's inscrutable current of silt,
And past them all, to the place I would go,
Beyond dreams, and visions, and beckoning hope,
Where lavender's scent is faint in the mind,
And the laughter of children fainter still.

What do you long for, oh maid from Pyay?
For my family and friends, and the ripening fields,
As brown turns to green, and sickle-time gold.
I long for the geese that conquer the mounts,
Who share my world here, with one far away.
And I long for the sun on the river at dawn,
For the harsh silver lamp of the moon in the night,
To a time when I need not my "thanaka" cream,
And my children beside me, wherever I stand.
And you? What do you long for, as day turns to fire,
When afternoon's heat drives us into our thoughts?
I answer her not, but my mind's with the wind,
Caressing the palm-fronds, caressing the mounts,
Past the steam as it rises from the tea in her hand,
And past it all, to the one I would know,
Beyond travels, and pleasures, and the things of this world,
Where lavender's scent remains in my mind,
And the laughter of children fainter still.

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At various points along the lower part of the Irrawaddy (and higher up, too), there were colonies of straw river-shacks. There seemed little purpose for their being there, far from any obvious village or drop-off / pick-up point. Out on the river were several river-gravel boats. Their main purpose, I suspect, was to look for rubies among the gravel, with the gravel transferred to large barges, for the growing construction industry of Rangoon. Usually, the gem-hunters had two boats, tied together. One boat was the usual, hardwood river-boat – long, with pointed, upturned prow, high and tiered poop deck, and one, two, or even three "long-tail" engines at the back. The engines constantly clattered, pushing these very heavy boats upriver. The other boat was fairly similar, except that it had no engines on it for propulsion; its engines powered the gravel processing machinery. (It should be added, there were also single boats, with all machinery on one hull – as I am looking at, now.) Sometimes, the gravel-hunters would use a

single hull, that looked like two-thirds of a mango seed, and was used for gravel, only. Once lashed to the side of a powered vessel, these "mango seeds" could carry heavy loads of gravel. On the second boat (with the gravel-processing machinery), there was a suction pipe hanging off the side of the boat; it went down to the bottom of the river. At this point, I assume that the bottom of the river, there is a "braided" network of channels, where the current carries the gravel. How the people find these channels, in a river so full of silt, is a mystery to me. I saw no sign of "electronic gadgets", such as depth-finders of "fish-finders", on these boats. A pump sucked up water, silt, and gravel from the river-bottom, and passed everything over two filters. At some point, the rubies were picked out; the washed gravel went to the bottom of the boat, and the water and silt went back into the river. When the boat was full of gravel, it left its spot on the river, and went to the large, 100-metre long gravel-barges. Rubies brought the independent operators to these out-of-the-way places, but I suspect it was the gravel that payed the bills. The boat would tie up to the barge, and a work-gang would off-load the washed gravel by hand, bucket by bucket. Often, these work-gangs were composed of women, and they carried the five-gallon plastic buckets on their head, in the African style. They filled their bucket at the bottom of the "mango-seed" boat (or had it filled for them), hoisted their load onto their head, came up the gang-planks, dumped their load onto the barge, threw their bucket down into the hold of the "mango-seed" boat, came back down the gang-planks, and picked up another bucket. These women worked very hard. Between Rangoon and Pyay, I only saw three or four of these "gravel colonies" on the river (there were probably more). Therefore, in addition to the teak-barges coming from the logging depots of the middle-Irrawaddy, there was a fairly steady flow of gravel-barges plying the lower river.

There remains one mystery from the gravel operations : when the small gravel-operators sucked up the gravel from the bottom of the river, they did not move around, working their way up or down the alluvial gravel-channels at the bottom of the river; instead, they moored in one place, and stayed there until their boat was filled. Why did they do it like this? Anyways, watching these gravel-operators was always a source of interest to me, as the ferry slugged its way up the Irrawaddy, at the speed of a leisurely bicycle ride – very leisurely, indeed.

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Since the first time I went up the river, several years ago, I have noticed something. Simply put, KTV and pop music are altering the social consciousness of the younger generation. Now, you might say, "Well, so what? It happens everywhere!" Yes, but to pass by a village on the banks of the Irrawaddy, in countryside that has remained fairly stable since the Yuan Dynasty (with a few bicycles, steamboats, etc., thrown into the mix of history), and to hear loud Burmese pop music (flavored from the west, of course) – well, that is very disturbing. The "pwe's" (all-night, religious festivals, with the Buddhist abbot chant-preaching, and firmly in charge) have now given way, in part, to the pop / KTV / disco culture, and all that comes with it. I say this as a harbinger of things to come, and not as a sign of a definitive trend. I also see the "longi's" slowly becoming trousers, and jeans, and more shapely shirts. Where is this all going to lead? I will not say, here.

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For about a day and a half, I waited in Pyay for the next boat. This raises a number of issues. First, why did I spend vast amounts of time on the slow boats of the Irrawaddy River, when most of the "normal" tourists were visiting Bagan, Mandalay, Inle Lake, the Shan hill-country, and so on? I do not regret my decision. The countryside is so very riveting : I could sit and stare at it for days, and I do. The view from the river boats provides a good cross-section of rural Burmese life, taken very slowly. (Shall I call it "charcoal-aged" tourism?) This is the only place I know of, from my wide-ranging haunts, where I can truly relax, and see the world go by slowly. Life on the Irrawaddy is never boring to watch. These boats are also cheap (although the galley staff are often looking for ways to get me to buy more of something – but that is bearable). Almost no one bothers me... so far. I am sufficiently far removed from everything that I wish to avoid. A few people speak English, so I can eat, and survive, but almost everyone cannot talk to me : better still. It is "winter" here – cold for them, but very pleasantly cool for me, especially after the freezing temperatures and oppressive pollution of Urumqi's "poison quilt". "Poor, unpopular Burma" is actually one of the most pleasant, beautiful places to visit – for now. When "normal and inevitable" development comes at last, and all its attendant baggage with it, I hope I am long gone. Burma is S.E. Asia's best-kept secret. How long will all this last?

Second, what did I do in Pyay? Apart from a major Buddhist pilgrimage site, its reputation as a trans-shipment port, and some nearby archaeological sites, there is not much to recommend Pyay to the world. However, I like it. I would not be averse to retiring here (although my age-old question still presents itself : what would I <u>do</u> during this time?). Apart from a few visits to the local pilgrimage site (for the breeze and the view, not the site), the "search-and-locate" expeditions for my dinner (point, and smile), and the gentle but not very well carried-off diplomacy with the hotel staff and the ferry office workers for my next boat ticket (don't you trust anyone, even here?), I spent much of my time in the hotel room, psychologically derelict. I flopped on the bed, with no real motivation to do anything (my father's really infuriating words "meaningful" and "gracious" – a.k.a. "my way" and "normal" – come to mind, here). I did not want to think about anything constructive, talk to anyone, or do anything – just wait for that boat. This alternating life is part of who I am, and being alone, whether "down", or "up, a little", is very much who I am. This way of life could never work in group travel, but it seems to get me by if I travel alone. My fear is that the socially conventional would persecute and restrict me for being what I am – harmlessly alone, and different. So I try to enjoy myself, on my terms, in places like Burma – before my time, opportunities, energies and resources run out... and Burma's, too. Nothing endures, here on earth... and certainly not in my hands! So, I am glad that I can see what I can see, and be a passing witness.

Here is one little "review, from Pyay". The local ice cream (Dream Ice Cream) is very good : I came back for more.

Sitting on some cool, shaded marble tiles at the pilgrimage site, overlooking the rooftops of Pyay – rooftops combined with spreading shade-trees, the tops of golden pagodas, birds and rooftop cats – and listening to the occasional, unseen temple bell beside me, or the wooden clapper from the monastery across the way, I felt very peaceful. There is something about Pyay which I liked; I was surrounded by people, culture, beautiful and peaceful scenery, but not any real part of it. Still, such moments of pleasure at seeing the "Golden Land" in its peaceful repose was tempered with my inner restlessness, and the barren emptiness of the hotel room. It was time to move on, up the river again. However, shall I have sweetness only, and no astringent? I think not.

I have now been on the second boat for a few hours, and already, it is filling up – even the so-called "upper class" cabin! I wonder if I will have to give up my hardwood bed. For once, I am openly feeling deliciously selfish, as grandmothers and babies cram onto another bed. The sun has moved its influence onto my side of the boat. It is time for lunch.

It is a heavy-timbered teak river-boat, like any of the others on the Irrawaddy. About thirty feet long and eight feet wide, it has been actively used. The first eight feet of deck are covered, boarded over, and behind it, for about ten or twelve feet, is a covered, 3/4-closed cabin area. Under the cabin roof is a wide bench. Then, the boat is open for the rest of its length. At the back is the "long-tail" engine – old, oily, mounted on gimbals. The engine-locker, or coolant tank, lies just to the left of the engine. The stern transom is very low on the "long-tail" boats, on account of the twelve-foot drive shaft. The hull is painted light-pale green, and the upper works a light blue. The metal surfaces are old, blackened and pitted – even the aluminum or stainless prop is a faded grey. The inside woodwork has long ago lost its paint, and is a faint, polished grey from sunlight and bare feet. It is a rugged and well-used river-boat. After running the bow into the soft mud of the river-bank, the owner hammered in a bamboo stake as a mooring post, set out a gang-plank, two other poles to keep the boat a certain distance from the bank, bailed out the bilge-water by hand, and rested.

Across the river, a narrow strip of cultivated riverbank – varying textures of plant-green and silt-tan – divided earth and sky. The landing-point on the other side of the ferry was full of people, and playing children who skirmished around large earthenware water-vessels on the sand. From somewhere behind the captain's curtain, an old pig, shrieking in *basso-profundo*, was led away to slaughter. The throb of the somewhere distant diesels led us out to deep water, as a deck hand hosed down the cabin toilet, the aged rubber hose spraying arterial bursts of silt-colored water over the walls and floor. I looked out of the only open window in the cabin, out across the river at the other bank. There, beneath 40 feet of river-embankment, a black canoe (no more than a pencil line) moved southwards. Only 40 feet separated water and sky, what was measured and visible, from what was unseen and unfathomable. It was truly the end of the world, the diaphragm between two realities – but how much more so for the old pig.

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What an "ugly tourist" I am! I have barely eaten one meal at the ferry's galley, and I am already asking the chef not to add salt or MSG to the food – pantomiming eating MSG, and having a wildly-beating heart, and falling ill. The chef smiles, and I pay 2,000 "kyats" (about two dollars) for lunch.

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Another noteworthy river-boat went past. This one had a half-decently muffled "long-tail" engine, so that from 100 metres away, the sound was relaxed – even pleasant. (Asia everywhere has a chronic problem with noise pollution. Whoever deals with this problem systematically will be very rich.) There were about seven men on this boat : one at the tiller, one on the roof, one up front, and four under cover in the 3/4-closed cabin area. These four looked the perfect image of contentment, like something out of a Burmese Henley. In fact, I could readily imagine one saying to another, "Marlow, old chap! Would you mind working the pump a few minutes, before you tell another of those ripping good yarns of yours? And Joe – pass me that bottle of

Mandalay Rum, and glasses... behind you, on the shelf above your head!" Their boat flew through perfectly still water, as if through the invisible air itself. Indeed, there was no visible water, for the reflected essence of the sky was completely transfused into it. I watched this scene for a few minutes, drinking my "Imperial Myanmar Tea Mix" out of an old glass beer tankard, before returning to my cabin up front.

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Another late-afternoon on the Irrawaddy, and the boat has been tied up for an hour. Up in the village, behind the first row of screening palm trees and twisted hardwoods, the abbot is chant-preaching; his voice, and the still-potent afternoon sun weave forces of restraint over the village.

The "zone of action" is the mud slope of the river's edge, as it rises out of the water, and goes to the actual river bank. Perhaps, during the next rainy season, this whole area will be altered, swept clean by the new waters. Today, it is the dock-lands of this village – somewhere over the top, behind the palm-trees – and much is going on. There are many coarse-textured water-vessels, made from local clay, arranged in careful piles on the sloping ground. Empty cement sacks, tied in 30-pound bundles, await transfer into the boat's hold. Animals forage at the water's edge, eating plant material and gobs of river-mud indiscriminately. A woman washes behind a moored canoe, her "longi" hitched high, while nearby, a few others wash clothing. The resolute slap-slap of the wet clothes on the river-mud contrasts with the clatter of a passing "long-tail" boat, the give-and-take of business at the earthenware water-vessel market nearby, and the abbot's indefatigable chant-preaching. I can't help but think of Jeremiah's linen belt, left in the mud for a season, at Perath (?).

After a certain time, the loading is done, the stevedores and snack-sales ladies have left, the "ready to depart" bell ring-clatters (and it leaves a distinctly British impression behind it), and the boat leaves the tangible, time-bound world of the shoreline and its village, for the imaginative and time-less cosmos of river, bank, and sky, now becoming more populated with white and golden pagodas.

Earlier today, I heard radio music floating up from the deck below. One of the deck-hands was singing in Burmese, along with the radio. However, what caught my attention was the melody, which came from a popular Chinese song I had heard many times. Now, some of the river-boats have sampan-like, bamboo covers over their middle sections. The mother in this cabin urges her baby girl to urinate, by whispering "Shhh..., shhh...." to it, just like many Chinese parents I have seen over the years (especially country folk). All these are insignificant things, but to me, they have significance – they are the faint footsteps, the harbingers of the vanguard.

****

Sleep was nigh impossible last night. The baby on the floor was quite fine (and yes, her mother had mats, nets and pillows – even a light), but the abbot across the river chant-preached throughout <u>all</u> the night, and when he became tired, someone else continued.

As the barest minimum of dawn-light greyed the river, the ferry set off. There was a new cargo on board of rice, woven palm matting, and cabbages, bound for Bagan. As for the earthenware water-vessels, they were gone, up into the village. That team of ladies hustled for hours to move their consignment. There was nowhere to rest the water-vessels, as the slope of the river-bed was quite steep; nevertheless, the women found a way to stack the water-vessels.

They had to; the rice was coming on board, and the ferry's crew were in a hurry. Water-vessels were carried from staging-point to staging-point, passed on – even thrown over a ditch and caught. At last, they were carefully but quickly placed in special baskets (all "ribs" and "rim"), seven to a basket, and carried up into the darkness, balanced, African-style, on the heads of the women. These are the sort of people who make a country work!

The ferry leaves its mooring-point, and the river-bank piled high with trash from the village. (What the ferry-crew don't see, they don't know about; what the villagers can't see, they don't care about.) Out on the river, a large flock of shore-waders swarm over the water like midges, before flying in the usual way, and going about their day's business. Long lines of drift-net, laid out the evening before, stretch out over the water, the floats just visible. This morning, the cold, sharp breeze, and eddying water from deep in the river, have given a different but subtle complexion to the river. Across the river, there are a few woven straw-mat shacks, alone, as ever, on large expanses of exposed sand-flat. (Perhaps this is where the gravel-boats will come next?)

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It is mid-morning : I do not really care what day it is, or what time, or where we are, for all these things are irrelevant now. The sun is on the other side of the boat, the other two families are happily conversing, and playing with their children. Their world is one of carefully maintained relationships; I hardly ever see them looking out of the windows at "the passing scenery", or else "contemplating nature". On my side of the boat, the window is open, the cool air is in full spate, and the glories and peaceful scenery of the Irrawaddy are passing by. After the "poison quilt" of Urumqi, this is very much appreciated. I often wonder why I take so long to come back here.

By now, we have either cut or skirted two ranges of hills, although at times one can see the classic water / sand-bank / sky scenery. The hills are dry, and in some places show evidence of having been burned a few years ago. The trees which remain are neither new, nor old. The teak-barges which go by seem different from the ones I saw on the middle-Irrawaddy (between Mandalay and Bhamo) – the tree-trunk logs are longer, and thinner. Five years (?) ago, the logs were easily four feet in diameter; now they are two, sometimes three feet in diameter. Could the forest have already yielded up its best children?

Among the riverine settlements, there are so many white-and-gold pagodas. (Have some meat with your pepper...!") So much of the life of the people happens on or near the river; the hills seem empty, devoid of something, and shrouded in haze. I hope that the river which is visible is not a "Potemkin-river", and that beyond, the land has not been razed to the dust, save for the stubble of old-growth tree stumps, stretching for miles east and west, as far as a logging skidder can go!

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For the first time on this boat (between Pyay and Mandalay), I have the whole cabin to myself. Gone are the parents and children who look poor and destitute, but have all manner of provisions in their gunny-sacks; gone are the monks, who one is implicitly expected to loan one's second mat to. Gone is the silence of embarrassment and the language-barrier; gone is the shame of eating high-grade, Chinese tangerines from Rangoon's uber-yuppie / elite supermarket,

while others nibble at armor-piercing plugs of long-ago, deep-fried rice, wrapped in palm-leaves from their back garden. Gone is the mask of, "Well, who shall I be today?"; gone is staring out the window, because it is safer than occasionally looking around within, and enjoying the shabby, yet utterly Conrad-ian atmosphere of this ferry's forward / upper-deck cabin. After breakfast, as the great road-bridge of Magway faded away to stern, I borrowed an old broom, then cleaned and arranged the cabin to satisfaction. This is now the ultimate writer's cabin, with a view of the passing scenery that "Lonely Planet" travelers would crave, and the Irrawaddy and its river-traffic more endearing than any bride on the wedding night.

At any moment, I expect the door to pop open, and one mother, her two screaming children, her mother-in-law, and five gunny-sacks to come in. I rescue my own bed, the Tudor "chaise-longue", by flinging myself on it full length, then pull down the mosquito net. The room is re-invaded, the short-lived dream-abode of Marlow vanishes, and I sigh. On the altar-table at the front of the cabin, the glass-encased Buddha sits unmoved, surrounded by long dried-out flowers and leafy twigs, burnt-out incense-sticks, dusty and unused replacement incense, and the occasional gob of spilled candle wax. Only the water cup before the Buddha remains filled, and it shakes from the ferry's engine vibrations.

I brought some books, to read in between writing, looking out the window, sleeping, and eating. Only favorite genres or periods of literature come on these river-trips : they are the ultimate "invited guests". I have various Anglo-Saxon accounts by Bede and the gang, a Byzantine history, and the Orkney Sagas... "marginalia", all! Yet, on this trip, my mind is not fixed on the books; I only read them, so as not to interact with the others in the cabin (not that I would have anything worthwhile to say to them!). I came here for a "date" with the Irrawaddy, and she is beautiful unpretentious, and (almost) outside the constraints of dimensions.

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I need to use this writing cabin to the full, before a new party of "women, with children" come in here. It is almost impossible for me to let my authentic character come out into the open, blossom, and set decent fruit, while I am obliged to interact with others.

Outside, the ferry is passing over shallow water, and the deck-hands are sounding the depth, using long bamboo poles, painted white and red, every half-metre. Dip, plop, call out, raise it up. Dip, plop, call out, raise it up. We leave the shallow area, and move upriver cautiously, at a walking pace. I prefer going upriver, as life becomes slower, much more deliberate, and the usual constraints of life are suspended for a while. When going down-river, there is a new urgency, and less margin of error.

This is my last black-ink pen. I neglected to bring along a supply. I will have to find some others, quickly....

The government-run ferries are fine, but they typically service larger river ports. For the hundreds of small services – "village-to-village", or one farmer's produce to a single market destination – there are the independently-operated wooden river-boats. Some are about one hundred feet long... well, maybe sixty feet long. They have three "long-tail" engines at the back, are covered over their entire length, and can carry a lot of cargo. Usually, their cargo is rice in sacks, charcoal, and dirty, old and suspicious-looking rows of 55-gallon oil-drums. The smaller wooden boats, such as a farming family might hire to bring their rice or tobacco crop to a market town, are smaller – about thirty feet long, with one or two "long-tail" engines at the back.

Just now three such boats passed by, on their way down-river to Magway. What struck me

was where the cargo went, and where the people sat. The men sat together on the roof at the back, the cargo was stored in the middle, under cover, and the women (and children?) sat up front. Most of the boats seemed to follow this pattern. Although I like the large, government ferry better (as I can walk around, eat at the galley, pee in quiet in the toilet, and have privacy), I also like to look at the smaller wooden boats, as they pass by. They are very much the mainstay of the Irrawaddy's commerce. For anyone who wants a "hard-core" exposure to this river and its people, this is the place to be. The larger, sixty-foot wooden cargo boats frighten me : there is something inside them that I do not want to discover. No, there is nothing wrong with them per se, or their cargo, or their people. I am, after all, a dreamer, an impractical person much of the time, a soft-skinned bubble floating above a sea of needles. It is these boats which make this culture operate, who succeed through very hard work, danger, listless boredom, unfair terms of life, and a lifetime suspended between water and sky – without them, Burma would stand still, going nowhere, with the monasteries acting out the roles of medieval manors. I think the people who work on these boats are very hard men and women. I would not last an afternoon there.

Everything here is so fragile. Take away the river (and the old forests), and this charming land becomes a desert. The thousands of white-and-gold pagodas are beautiful, as they are the jewels along the river, set on hills, amidst the green and brown landscape. Yet remember : this white and gold is only skin-deep; the green exists by the grace of water. Under the thinness of these beautiful things lies hard, sun-cooked clay. Has anyone ever thought of translating Shelley's "Ozymandias" into Burmese, painting it onto a large bill-board sign, and placing that sign at the entrance to Bagan?

I fear for Burma. There is so much of beauty here, but the beauty is fragile, under restraint, and facing extinction from many directions. (Lest the police criticize me for writing this, I am not referring this time to the government : I have other things in mind, which are of another level of importance!)

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We have traveled slowly this morning. The river grew wider and more shallow, and all the boats made slow headway, bumping into silt-bars. The boats all carry painted bamboo poles for depth-sounding, and the barge-tugboat combinations all have their own "long-tail" boat to run ahead and scout out river conditions. The river is very wide here, and it is more often made wider still by mid-river islands. The limestone hills are hidden by distance and a painfully off-white haze. The country villages, set among oasis-like clusters of well established shade-trees, are now far away; as usual, the closest buildings are the fisherman's shacks, made of bamboo poles and woven palm-frond mats. Out here, the shacks, the canoes, and the river-boats are the only features resting on the "bubble of eternity". The ferry's captain asks passing boats for news about the river-depths, ahead.

Half a mile away, a dog harasses a flock of egrets. The dog is small, set against the long stretches of river-bank. I feel I am looking up at the ceiling, squinting hard to study the wood-mites and other small insects wandering up and down a strip of molding. Behind me, the land has more character, but since the late-morning sun is coming from that direction, I will turn my chair around, and appreciate it in the afternoon. Today, the Irrawaddy is full of interesting things to look at!

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I do not deserve a splendid day like today. It is early afternoon, and there are very few people on the boat. Consequently, I have had the "upper-class" cabin all to myself. This boat has gone from government ferry to private motor yacht in a moment (and it could just as easily be taken away). The river runs a little deeper here, so the boat is making better headway. The mid-river islands, the mud-flats, the "river-bank lagoons", and the steep "silt-cliffs" are very good habitat for all kinds of birds – geese, various shore-waders, swallows, and others. There is also a ferociously strong population of insects here to sustain the birds, and this is partly due to the fact that there is little or no form of industry here. I hope this state of affairs remains so for as long as there is an earth. Lest you, the reader, think I am being overly "environmentalist", know this : I have lived in the ongoing ecological disaster that is China for 10 ½ years now, and by contrast, the Irrawaddy River (although not without fault) is a very pleasant place to be.

I really do not deserve this kindness, but this day, this river, this cabin, and the kitchen staff and their three cooked meals a day have all been given to me – to look at, to enjoy, to remember, to write about, and to share with others. In time, I hope to add this story to the book, "Fragments of China".

Outside the cabin window, the river runs tighter, faster, and with its surface more agitated; the silt-bars are pocked in many places with small piles of gravel; the land beyond is a combination of open sand, sparsely-planted crop land – greens of corn and yellows of oilseed flowers – and dark lines of woodland on the horizon; in the sky above, blue shares space with different forms of clouds. Now I can hear the bow-wave, just under the open cabin window, as the boat pushes forward.

There seems to be more evidence of the land beyond being farmed : more irrigation pumps, newer pumps, too, with bright-yellow hoses disappearing up the bank and over the top. Yes, yellow is the color of choice, here.

Someone told me a few days ago that the size of the fish caught in the Irrawaddy is getting smaller and smaller; as elsewhere the people are over-fishing their natural resources. I hope that more moderate "local sense" prevails, something in between the naked avarice of the "robber barons", and the over-zealous measures of the hyper-environmentalists. Is there still some place left on this rapidly-polarizing world for more balanced, "middle-of-the-road" ideas?

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On the left, the prevailing landscape continues, but on the right, it is new. Here, the river meets the silt-bank at almost the same level, so the edge between water and land looks like an "edge-less" swimming pool. The silt-bank becomes field and then tree-line, at about one kilometre from the river – but then that too has the "edge-less" swimming pool effect. Beyond, for many miles, is the vast, dry plain that leads up to the archipelago of ruined temples – that is, Bagan. What an awful, dry and forbidding place! Whatever drove those leaders of long ago to make so many temples, in what is now the middle of nowhere?

We are in shallow waters again. For the third time today, we passed a tug / barge combination that was grounded in shallow water. Getting out of that mess looks very, very hard. A few miles back, the ferry passed many farmers who were drying out red chilli peppers. About two acres were covered in red. Sometimes, I can see streaks of yellow, beyond the left bank, from the oil-seed flowers. By the way, I favor the "left" view, since the writing table is on the left side of the cabin.

I think the ferry is now carrying sacks of rice, bamboo poles, two 55-gallon oil-drums of "something", pumpkins, one motorcycle, and who-knows-what in the hold. On this stage of the trip, the ferry is not being fully used.

Fanny, perhaps you (and other readers) are so bored with this letter. Like the Irrawaddy itself, it goes on and on, a flow of unrefined observations and "stream-of-consciousness" writing, badly in need of an editor. (I can see my aunt, as she says, "Too much punctuation! Too many compound-words!") Yes, this is all true, but I really want to write things down as I see them, without taxing myself in any way because of the editing process. However, my mind is constantly weighing, slotting and re-sorting words as I write; this is why I so like to use a pen and paper, and not a computer. However Fanny, please know this : the Irrawaddy is one of my favorite places to travel, and any writing that comes from it is inspired by you (and the river-scenery), and goes to you (and after your own pleasure, to others). To you, fair earthly muse, I dedicate this first press of oil – the "stream-of-consciousness" form of travel-writing, as I visit various parts of Burma!

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At sunset, I was foolish. All day long, the river scenery had passed by – the Irrawaddy in all its "middle-lower" glory. All day long, an unrivaled procession of traveler's "eye-candy" passed by, and for the final treat came a glowing, almost purple-red sunset. I thought, "I will quickly go off to the toilet", and I did. When I came back to my seat – and it was the best seat on the boat, the best seat in all Burma at that moment – the sun had disappeared into an "imaginary horizon", (about 3 degrees above the real horizon). I knew about this "imaginary horizon", and that the sun sets quickly in the tropics, but didn't act on it. I was careless and complacent, so I lost a sunset. There have been many "metaphorical, lost sunsets" in my life.

After a few moments, I looked out at what remained. (As I write these very lines, the next morning's sunrise took place, and I missed that experience, too. Same foolishness, in reverse : nothing learned.) Hundreds of swallows flew low over the water, decimating the insects. I think dragonflies and swallows must be the world's most efficient aerial predators. Once again, the day was extinguished, night came on, and the ferry finished its day's travel, mooring at the small town of Sah-lyeh.

It was a quiet night at first. The deck-hands, dinner having been served and the boat readied for the night, went into town for a drink and provisions for the galley. It was very dark and unfamiliar beyond the few florescent lights nearby; I did not know anything about this town, or the language, or the people, or how to find my way back to the boat in the dark; I faced my chair inwards, facing the cabin and the door to the rest of the boat, and sat down to think. Shall I say, "I say down to think, as the night deepened"? No, for in the tropics, the night falls at once, heavily, and stays that way until dawn. I will not rehearse here what I thought; suffice to say, I sat in the darkened cabin for a long time, thinking of many things, trying to review the past, and make plans for the future, and not getting very far with it. In time, the deck-hands returned, one by one over the steep and uneven slope of the river-bank. Their pocket-flashlights wobbled in the darkness like uncertain stars in an "undisclosing" universe, but they came back up the gang-plank, and went to bed.

Fanny, in case you are wondering why I sat alone in a darkened cabin, there are at least two reasons. First, I like to be alone – very alone. I did not know when the next wave of mothers and babies, grandmothers and monks would come into the cabin, and I wanted to enjoy the

hyper-isolation as long as I could, at full-strength. Second, I had no viable or feasible alternatives. (After all, any foreigner who travels well away from the established and "socially accepted" tourist routes should expect to spend such nights alone, as I did. I will save the "socially acceptable" parts of Burma for when I am willing to be more integrated, or when I wish to introduce Burma to another person.) Third, there were thousands and thousands of flying insects out over the river. The swallows having gone to bed, and the bats and geckoes being too few, the river belonged to the insects, and they came out in force. They gathered in large clouds around solitary light-bulbs. Rather than be tormented all night by the insects, I sat in a darkened room, with the windows closed, a "mosquito-coil" lit up and smoking the room, and a mosquito net over my bed for later. Thus, I was peaceful, as the insects went elsewhere.

Some way into the night, the disturbances began. Larger then usual waves rocked the ferry. (Was there a teak-log barge out on the river at this hour, in the dark?) In the bar, somewhere not far away in the darkened town, some people were watching one of the late-night broadcasts of the World Cup. Not to be outdone, the abbot in the monastery across the river turned on his loudspeakers, and broadcast chant-preaching, mixed with antiphonal responses from some techno-chorus. This auditory artillery duel, between the bar's TV and the monastery across the river (like in the Straits of Dover, in WW2?), went on for a while, and then fizzled out. However, the evening's peacefulness had been spoiled. I slept uneasily, cramped, and disturbed by the urge to visit the toilet. My body was full of tea, and my mind was filled to bursting with the day's surfeit of "eye-candy".

As a final note, I think I can identify the most egregious trouble-makers, in terms of the "noisy abbots". Their pagodas have daiquiri- and turquoise-colored lights on top, and they can be seen from across the river. So, like batteries of coastal artillery, they strike from a distance. Nothing within range has any hope of sleeping, during a "pweh" (religious festival).

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Dawn, 05:45 hrs., at the start of the fourth day. The barest of dark-grey streaks mark the river-bank of the other side of the river. No colors of life have appeared yet in the sky above, or in the reflected water below, save a lighter shade of grey. The earth has been formed, but the color has been washed out of it, and the next day's painter has not yet arrived. It is a moment of ephemeral and significant tranquility. The neon pin-pricks atop the pagodas have been turned off, and the pagodas, the monastery, nay, the very community of buildings they rest on, have been "air-brushed" away into one universal, almost formless dark-grey streak – the opposite river-bank. If only more of the day could repose, as it does now!

The deck-crew awake once again. Someone knocks out the mooring stakes with the same hardwood mallet that drove them into the river-bank last night. Bells ring, the horn blows, and the ferry departs. I look out of the window, at the swallow-holes in the silt-banks, as they grow smaller and smaller.

There must have been immense numbers of insects around the ferry last night, for there are quite a few sparrows fluttering up and down the sides of the vessel, picking up insects. Sparrows are not as good at catching insects as swallows, yet these sparrows seem to be having a feast.

The next two days (#4 and #5) promise to be good, in terms of "eye-candy". We have entered the part of the Irrawaddy River near the plains of Bagan, with its thousands of river-bank pagodas, and ruined temples of another age.

A few hours before lunch, the land changed; in fact, many things changed. The hills to the

left grew into limestone mountains (although the great plain of Bagan remained the same, behind). The villages suddenly appeared, and became larger, more beautiful, and above all, more opulent. The houses were teak-framed, and set in well-established groves of trees. Huge hedges of sisal bounded one estate. The people on the shore-line had brighter, cleaner clothes; the boats were in better condition, and were cleanly painted in bright colors, or else were stained in tung oil or creosote. Riverside homes – real bungalows, with yellow walls, green corrugated-iron roofs, white-and-blue picket fences, and brightly-dark bougainvillia growing up the walls – passed by. Behind the first row of foothills, the road-bed for part of the Pan-Asia superhighway slashed across the face of the mountains. For me, there can only be one master-mind for the sheer scale and audacity of such immense volumes of crushed-stone roadbed. Going back to the shoreline : the people "felt", looked, behaved, even played and washed their laundry in a different way. Perhaps money – and now, too, washed gravel for road-bed – was starting to reach them. However, what caught my attention the most were the new-generation, smaller-scale "long-tail" engines mounted on some of the canoes : these engines were quiet, much more quiet than the usual "beast-machines" that were disturbing the peace of the river. The monasteries too, near the river, or high off at the mountain tops, were more magnificent and sparkling. This was a neighborhood on the move. After so much time staring out of the window at scenes of dignified poverty in a dimension-less environment – symbolized by the woven palm-frond beach-shacks, the long spits of silt or sand, where only shore-wading birds and quiet fishermen in canoes lived and worked, and the absolute primacy of water and sky – I was surprised at the sudden changes. What were its causes? Would it endure, and for all?

Across the Irrawaddy, the temples and pagodas rose up from the plain of Bagan like a forest of goose-bumps and "Hershey's Kisses". It was like there was a whole city of them. Having said that, I will (still!) not visit Bagan, and wait for another time. The Irrawaddy River, all the way from Rangoon to Myitkyina (in the north), all by boat, is more than fair compensation. This is why I like to travel alone; I am beholden to no one, and can go, within limits, where I wish.

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Up ahead are the pagodas and temples of Bagan, and also a large white river-liner. This is where the <u>real</u> tourist income comes from; this is where the "normal" and the "mainstream" travelers go. I am already out of place. However, this is not my topic here : I wish to write about houses, and development on the river-front land of the Irrawaddy, especially between Pyay and Sah-lyeh (Sale). My father was a housing developer, so I have had much time to mull over opinions.

Apart from certain exceptions, like pumping-stations, bridges, an old British bungalow from the early 20th century, and of course the towns along the way, the river-front land along the Irrawaddy River is very undeveloped. The dominant structures are the shacks and villages of the farmers and fishermen, the pagodas and monasteries of the abbots and their monks... and that is it! It is a very simple scenery. Add in the constantly moving flotilla of all sorts of boats, and the Burmese who operate them, and you have the soul of the place. The Irrawaddy River is one of the last truly virginal river-landscapes around. Of the 45 or so countries I have visited, I have never seen anything like it. It is a "working landscape" (the farmers and fishers), but it has mostly been able to maintain a certain "serenity of the unspoiled"; so many other places have lost their former "je ne sais quoi", and developed into stupid, mundane ugliness.

Let me come to the point! Let <u>no one</u> – whether private, corporate, or "bigger" – ever alter

and pervert this river-landscape in the name of "development", or profit! It just should not happen. Here, I am not referring to the basic tenets of what is loosely termed "rural and small community development". I am glad to see smaller and quieter "long-tail" engines, the bright yellow irrigation pipes (and their slugging pumps) watering the fields, the long road-bridges crossing the great river at Pyay, Magway and Sale. I hope the condition of the people will get better, and their agriculture, and all the other "usual" things. However, please do not turn this river-valley into another "Riviera-on-the-river"! If you think I am crazy to even imagine such a thing could ever happen, then I say this – as my father's son, and as an accomplished traveler by backwater routes – all the variables and raw-materials for such a thing to happen are in place (but not yet exploited), and the people who will develop and inhabit this future Riviera are at hand, and have only to be advertized to, and summoned. This can, and just possibly, might happen.

Oh, Burma! You have been warned. You are now hunted, sought after for your patrimony, and for the patrimony of others, that shall be hauled over the face of your land. I am not afraid to write these words, for I have gone over the land myself, kept council with myself and what I saw, and then stated my opinions. I may miss sunsets, but I will not miss this, or keep myself silent.

The land behind me was a little too "touristy", with some of Bagan's pagodas and temples all surrounded by five-star hotels, and other "over-the-top" buildings; therefore, I turned my back on it all looked up occasionally at the "usual" river-scenery on the left side, and wrote these pages. I think I will now stop and look around, for there is a huge pagoda behind me, and the golden reflections coming off it look to me like more than gold paint. I will have a look.

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Last night, we moored at Pakokku, on the north bank of the river. I have a feeling that I will come back to this place again, as I try to explore the western parts of Burma – if such an opportunity happens. The galley-cook arranged a bicycle and side-car pedal rickshaw for me, as I really had to shave off four days of stubble, and wash my hair, by now very dirty. Pakokku is deeply hidden among the overspreading shade-trees, and the rickshaw driver took me to the barber's shop by back ways. Naturally, many people showed up to see me get shaved. I was also able to change some money (always bring new, small bills when you are in the "back-country"!), and call ahead to the next hotel to book a room. The rickshaw driver was able to find someone to change money, and a private phone. The Burmese are certainly very hospitable – but not to pay for services would be unthinkable. Like the river-boats on the "bubble of eternity", the people lead a simple life in a financially fragile eco-system. As the rickshaw driver returned me to the ferry – for darkness had already fallen – I thought, maybe this would be a good place to live and work for some years. Do they want English teachers, here?

During the night, which was cold, I think a rat was rummaging around my bags.

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This time, on Day #5, I saw most of the sun-rise, and the quintessential elements of a morning on the Irrawaddy – the sights that people who read coffee-table books would kill for. The early morning was cold, so I watched the gravel-boats at work somewhat listlessly. We passed a place where the teak logs were gathered, from all over the forest north of this stretch of the river, and loaded onto barges heading south. I saw mostly two-foot and three-foot diameter logs, although

there were some four-foot logs. How much longer will all this go on for?

I think the gravel-boats in this area deliver their washed river-gravel more locally – for the road-projects, I suspect. Lower down the river (perhaps), the gravel went for Rangoon's construction needs. Getting gravel is such a labor-intensive process!

I also have a sense that people – in the form of raw, hard-working, manual labor – are being moved around from here to there. I suspect they are involved in the road-building, or other infrastructure projects. Somewhere, out beyond the "riverine bubble", very large and far-reaching enterprises are under way. As for me, I am quite content to "sniff these few pollen-grains", move on to the next sight, and return to my English teaching job in a few weeks, back under the "poison quilt". There are many impressions to share with you, Fanny! Writing for you keeps my hopes up, and my eyes sharp.

One obvious fact, which I had quite forgotten, was how clean the air is – even with a few "long-tail" river-boats around. Anything is better than the "poison quilt" of Urumqi! Slowly, imperceptibly, my lungs are cleaning out, and my nervousness is dissipating. Not all is well inside, but it is better. I still want to forget about everything that is not Burma; I don't want to think about Zhi Da, or Urumqi (but I do think of you, a lot). If I was traveling with other people, this unique form of rest, recovery and restoration would be almost completely impossible. Sometimes, being alone on the Irrawaddy has the force of opium, or death; the isolation is so pleasant.

The river is wide, the glare harsh, the ascending sun hot and more oppressive, but I am sitting on the shady side of the boat, at the writing table, and cooled by the breeze. I know that if I was shoveling the washed gravel, as it came bouncing and funneling down off the wire-mesh, onto the iron catching plate, and flinging it away into unfilled parts of the gravel-boat's hold, at the rate of thirty strokes a minute, I would not feel cooled and relaxed, happily contemplating the Irrawaddy! Under the skein of this observed beauty lies something very different. I leave such literary descriptions to those "naturalist" writers, following today in the footsteps of Jack London. As for me, I am just a dreamy-eyed shadow, writing of "ephemera and marginalia", a lesser-known chronicler of "back-water Asia, at the crossroads", whose long travels are really not far removed from "taking the cure" at Baden-Baden. I must respect my niche in the eco-system very, very carefully, or I will court disaster.

Once again, one of the deck-hands is working the bamboo sounding pole : plop!, wait, call, raise it up; plop!, wait, call, raise it up. The boat moves on cautiously, through a confusing network of channels, and various horizons at different distances – confined by unseen things, yet lost under immense spaces. At the top of the nearest river-bank, thirty-five feet over the waters, five children watch the ferry pass by. In time, they disappear into the forest grove and their village, and the ferry fades away into the bright haze. Perhaps only death could bring about a more complete separation.

Out here, on this part of the river, there is almost no visible settlement. The river-fishers are here, but their woven palm-frond shacks have become a torn blue sheet, held up at the edges by sticks. As ever, the fishers set out their nets, and wait patiently in their black canoes, resting on their piece of the "diaphragm of eternity", smitten from every direction by the reflected sun-darts. The forest-line is far receded, and in some places, barely visible. Due to the pump-stations, more and more areas of sand-flat are under cultivation. I used to think that the forgotten isle, the rocky crag, the far-off peak were places of ultimate isolation... but no, they are not. Perhaps it is these fishermen's shacks, at the very end of the sand-spit, or lost in one of the sub-channels or a far-off delta, or under the crumbling cliff of Irrawaddy silt, with boats full of

strangers passing by (daily, weekly, monthly – once a life-time – what does it matter?), which are the most isolated places. I fear the almost total lack of any geographical features, and the crushing weight of an empty sky above, would either transport one into a nirvana-like state of emptiness, or else plunge one straight into madness.

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I look for features; I hunger after them – anything my lost consciousness can cling to, so as to say to myself, "I am here, at this point of being in the cosmos." A trail of river-froth (natural, not pollution) is on the face of the river, and I try to make some sense of it. All else is still and silent. A brightly-painted, turquoise-blue river-boat appears and disappears among the channels across the river; naturally, it catches my full attention. A family of three is canoeing somewhere; what draws my eye to them are the oar-blades, which are painted a bright red. (I say "oar-blades", because the Irrawaddy canoes use both rowed oars, and canoe paddles; the person up front gives the power, and the person at the back helps to direct the canoe.) Behind me, sections of the 30-foot high cliff of silt crumble and fall into the river. Where two rivers meet, the water is two different colors, and the "point of mixing" is very distinct, and not gradual.

It is almost 11:00 am, and that is a distant time for me : it is lunch-time, and the galley staff are waiting.

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For the rest of the day, I was unable to write, as unresolved issues, questions and various future conflicts crowded around me : they all had to do with my life in Urumqi. To some degree, the "poison quilt" never went away, and that is unfortunate. However, the river-scenery was still the same – desolate and inhabited with hardship by the Burmese fishermen and their families. I also finished reading Bede, which was dragging, and started "The Secret History", by Procopius, which instantly promises to be interesting.

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Dinner was the same, but the insects were not. There is a kind of mayfly-like insect on the Irrawaddy. It has four lacy wings, with the longest pair about one centimetre long. The body is not that long, but the two antennae are proportionally very long – three centimetres, or longer. For some reason, they swarmed around certain light-bulbs, but not others. These insects can fly very fast, and they came from all directions to join the light. There must have been two or three thousand lacewing mayflies swarming around each of the three light-bulbs on deck. The deck-hands turned off two of the light-bulbs, and the swarming insects instantly converged on the third. This light-bulb was at the top of the stairs going down to the lower deck – about twelve steps. From the light-bulb to the bottom step – a distance of twelve feet – was a column of swarming lacewing mayflies. At once, they reminded me of the swarming virgin-queen termites in West Africa, two or three nights after a rain-shower, as they came out by the tens of thousands, ready to start a new termite colony. They were obsessed with the light. Therefore, when the ferry's lights came on at dark, I kept my cabin lights off.

However, my night with the insects was far from over. When we arrived at the town of Myin-mu for the night, we moored near some bright lights. The inside of my cabin – being

white – and my shirt, and the mosquito net all lit up in the dark, and this slowly attracted the lacewing mayflies, and they started to find their way into the cabin by any way they could. They crawled through holes in the wall, under the doors, through the ventilation slats above the windows – any way they could. I heard the soft sussuration of the swarm, as it slowly took over the cabin. In disgust at the next boat, a "high-end" river-liner, complete with teal-wood fittings from top to bottom, and very bright stern-lights, I left the cabin, and walked about on the deck. That was too hard : the sleeping farmer's babies woke up and went off like burglar alarms; their parents stirred in their sleep; I bumped into the unseen guy-ropes of the mosquito netting "tents" which had been set up on deck, while I was in my cabin. What is more, my white shirt gave off some faint, reflected glow, and the insects followed me. Fortunately, this disturbance did not trigger off a chain-reaction of barking from every pariah dog in the village. In further disgust, I went into the cabin's small toilet, closed the door, and shared the darkness with the imaginary ghekko population. At least it was quiet and "insect-free" there. In a while, I went to bed, crawled inside the mosquito net tent, and had many dreams.

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The night was cold, and I gave up pride and used one of the ferry's supplied blankets. (Before, I would sleep on the "Tudor chaise-longue", on the teak-wood boards, with a plastic-straw mat, a baby-pillow and baby-blanket, my coat for a cover, and the mosquito net. I must be getting lax.)

Today, the sight of the river waking up was virtually picture-perfect. No tour company on earth can match the performance of the IWT government ferries, as they ply the Irrawaddy. They are the very definition of the word "authentic". The Irrawaddy is still one of my favorite places to travel, to be alone with my thoughts within, and the almost limitless "eye-candy" without, and to avoid almost all form of significant social communication with others.

Dawn having already broken, but the cold not yet departed from the river or my bones, I crawled out slowly from under the green-and-white mosquito net. Dead lacewing mayflies lay thinly scattered on the worn-teak planks, on the other beds, on the "altar-table" at the front of the cabin – the place of honor. The dead flies lay everywhere. "Serves you right, cameradoes", I thought, as I looked out the window. The "high-end river-liner" was still there, its crew slowly preparing for departure. It was three decks of quiet, substantial luxury for the high-end tourists. Almost everything visible was built or else furnished in teak-wood, oiled to just the right shade of brown. The lower deck was for the rooms, the middle deck was for the restaurant, and the upper deck, partly under a dark-blue canvas canopy, was for open-air cocktails and perusal of the river. The tourists joined their boat after dark the night before, arriving with their luggage by coach. I did not talk to them. Most were in their 50's and 60's, and might have come from Europe. We were separated by fifty metres in fact, but also by an intangible gulf that I now consider un-bridgeable. It was a symbol, a reminder of shared origins, upbringing and exposure to life, transformed by choices, many choices constantly made, divergent life-experiences and way of thinking, established into two worlds on either side of an immense chasm. Yes, I could have put on the right clothes, walked over, and talked to someone (if their crew had let me come on board), but it would have gotten me nowhere. "Used to be one-of-us" is far more damning than "never was one-of-us" – and the sophisticated classes in this regard are utterly and coldly merciless. Now that my father is dead and gone (2009), and my mother long-gone (1988) and her influence fading, I will progressively experience these consequences. This encounter with

the river-liner and the way of life it represents is a symbol, an emblem of the last third of my life.

Yet know this : I made my choices; I do not regret (most of) them; in fact, I think I chose well; I used my education, experience, and what was offered me to formulate an identity on my terms. Were my mother still alive, Fanny, I think she would be bragging over cocktails with her London friends. So, ending up as an English teacher in "back-water" China is not all that bad.

(Our ferry is stuck on the mud, and we are still a day from Mandalay.)

The river-liner unmoored, spun around like a hippo that had taken the right ballet lessons, and headed downstream. The teak-wood stern was actually the front; the real stern was all white-painted steel, ultra-modern engines, and power. It throb-glided down the river, and the river-bank resumed its former state, as if foreigners had never passed through.

Not long after our ferry left Myin-mu, it grounded in some shallow water, about 100 metres from the (now) north, or left bank. The crew made some attempts to free the boat, by wiggling it back and forth, but the keel was stuck to the silt. So we just sat in mid-river, waiting for the river-current to gradually release us. Every hour or so, the crew would start up the engine, to see if the river had done its work, but to no avail. The engines fell silent, and we all sat around, waiting. The river-current washed around the boat, making a sound which would have been pleasant, had I not been so frustrated, and wanting to arrive at Mandalay. Some of the crew hailed a canoe from the village, which was right next to us, and they looked for a telephone, to inform the ferry company of our delay. In an open area outside the village and its protective covering of large shade-trees, many farmers were piling high some form of straw – not from rice, but maybe some peas, or beans, or some form of Burmese alfalfa. Ox-carts came and went, moving commerce here and there, along village-to-village pathways I knew nothing about. Do not be deceived by the image of "slow, lumbering ox-carts, with their wood-and-crankcase oil-axles screaming out for lack of greasing". Some of these hump-backed Zebu / Brahmin-type cattle were quite frisky, and under the right driver could move fast, if only for short distances. It was a scene like this which kept me occupied and diverted during these hours – but only to a point, for I was weighing my travel options.

We were stuck on the river-bottom, with no imminent sign of coming unstuck. The ferry's owner, who spoke a little English, told me that another of the company's ferries would be passing by the next day (going the other way), and would take us back to Myin-mu, where there were buses to Mandalay. One thing which struck me was how apparently indifferent people were to vessels which had gone aground, although at times, the crews would share information about water-depths in the navigation channels. At this point, a tourist boat came by, but I chose to step out of view. For about one month, I will have gone without any meaningful conversation with any other person (travel and shopping-related talk does not count), and that has suited me just fine. This is why I like Burma so much : it is so much easier to disengage oneself completely from society, and stay for a while in a fragile bubble of unexplainable beauty. So, I should really take this time of being stranded as a blessing, another way-station during the long pilgrimage of isolation.

In time, somehow, we broke free of the mud and continued towards Mandalay.; however, the day had been gutted by the fires of today's misfortune. Soon after, the ferry moored at a small village, which was also a ferry-crossing for cars and trucks, and there we spent the night. The village was small, but it did have a few public phones, so I called the hotel again. (Perhaps I should travel in Burma during the hot, "off" season, when all the hotels have vacancies, and prices for rooms are so low.

****

I have been reading "The Secret History", by Procopius. Although people might wonder why I would want to read about the misdeeds of both Justinian and Theodora during the Byzantine empire, I really like the way that Procopius develops character as a writer – especially of Theodora. What a "nympho-vixen"! Perhaps this was the best book to read, while we were stranded in mid-river, with the Irrawaddy slowly swirling around the ferry.

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At five in the morning of the sixth day, about fifty miles from Mandalay, the village we had tied up to was silent, dark, and motionless. A digital electric-chime called out five o'clock (but not the sleeping hours), and with minutes, a war of sounds broke out throughout the village. The abbot started chant-preaching, but soon met stiff opposition from many children reading something in unison. Were the children following the abbot, or the school-master (so early?), or the commissar? The roosters joined in, and then the radios came on. It seemed as if many overseas broadcasting services were out there, all fighting for a part of Burma's soul. However, the most amusing part began : the captain of the nearby river-barge / tugboat combination woke up, and started to call out to his crew; it was time to start up the boats and move on. However, in the darkness, nobody answered him. Becoming more anxious, he called out again, first in a cajoling way, playfully, and then as his crew staggered back on board one by one, with rising humor. Finally, everyone returned on board, and the barge left.

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Well Fanny, about six days have gone by since the last entry. I went through a time of silence: I did not want to write; I was sick of the river. Well, here is the brief summary.

The boat finally arrived at Mandalay, where I got off. In all, I gave two weeks of my life to the Irrawaddy River. I do not regret that, for I was able to see many beautiful sights. The Irrawaddy remains my favorite river. Looking into it, I can discern nothing, save silt and sometimes up-swellings; looking over it, at the world around the river-boat, I can see life itself passing by. The five boat rides, taken at different times over the past several years, gave me my most enduring images of Burma. It is only fitting, Fanny, that you should have the first word-harvest from the Irrawaddy experiences, before all others.

I did not stay in Mandalay long. The next day, I took a "shared taxi" to Lashio, in the Shan State region of Burma. I only stayed in Lashio for the night, before returning to Mandalay on the narrow-gauge railway. That journey was so long and tiring! When I finally got back to my hotel (in Mandalay), I was really exhausted; the next morning, I took sick, and I had to sleep throughout the morning. Since I usually travel alone, becoming sick is a real problem, and can be dangerous. However, it must be that way, as I like being alone so very much. Over these past four weeks, I have not had a substantial conversation with anybody. I feel it was necessary.

Mandalay was a good place to go shopping. I like to buy special Burmese products – items which cannot be found elsewhere, and which would be useful to possess in my Maine state home in the forest. So, I went out shopping. I never tire of walking up and down the aisles of those covered markets which serve the common, daily needs of the people. All of life is there. Although I have not been a good participant in life, I have nonetheless enjoyed observing parts

of it, and the common, everyday market is where I like to be.

By now, I was able to forget about Zhi Da, my school, and detach myself from much (but not all) of my past affairs. For now, only the daily wandering life in Burma matters – the next hotel room, cold drink, or bus ticket. Of course, all of this will end, but until it does, I want no interaction with the past way of life.

In time, I left Mandalay, with bigger and heavier suitcases, and took a night-bus to Taung-gyi. One thing I have neglected to say in this letter – the Burmese seem to like staying up throughout the night! Their abbots chant-preach all night at times; many people like the parties called "pweh", and they stay up all night. Like the Chinese, the Burmese people are socially oriented. So, the driver of this bus played DVD's (and kept on some of the lights) for most of the evening! Needless to say, I had no real sleep....

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Many people have been to Inle (In-lay) Lake, so I will not describe this place in detail. Why repeat what so many others have already said? In short, Inle Lake is very shallow, long and thin (north-south), and hemmed in by mountains to the east and west. This place is certainly a very beautiful and peaceful resting place. All over Asia, there are certain places that are peaceful and out-of-the-way, and Inle Lake is one of them; if I wanted to "disappear" for a few months, I would get a room in a cheap hotel here. Yes, there are many "high-end" hotels and resorts at Inle Lake, with perfect accommodation, but those places do not interest me. I like the "six dollars a day" back-packers hotels, and a simple Shan-cuisine restaurant nearby.

I stayed in a small town near the lake. Naung-shwe (town) is not large, but it is full of fishermen, lake-villagers coming in to sell produce or buy supplies, and "low-end" tourists – like me. The classic means of water transportation on the lake are long-boats. They are about three or four feet wide, and very, very long – about thirty feet long! They have a loud, two-stroke engine in the back, and can carry whole families and all their baggage, too – vast amounts of cargo. These boats are the direct (and motorized) descendent of the large "freight-canoes" which the French-Canadian fur-trappers and "voyageurs" used in the past. These boats glide through inlet creeks, and shallow, weed-lined channels, and they fly over the open water, especially when empty. The first whole quarter of the boat rises up out of the water, creating an extremely pleasant "prow experience". Even though the boats are hardwood, and very heavy, their owners guide them everywhere, as with the lightest of touches. I very much enjoyed riding over the lake waters in a long-boat, looking at the scenery, and forgetting about everything else. However, what I really liked was having no responsibility for running the boat, or having to speak to anyone else on the boat; I detest participatory boating. Here, it was just "me and Nature", with the boat-operator way in the back. The boat-ride on Inle Lake was a full compensation for all the past hassles and inconvenience of past day-trips down the Essex River, to Crane Beach and back. I shall remember that boat-ride.

As part of the "half-day on Inle Lake" package, the boat-operator took me to the usual tourist places – small workshops trying to sell all sorts of stuff to the tourists, and a Burmese Buddhist temple that trained its cats to jump into the air through hoops. However, I also went to a workshop where the local artisans made hand-made textiles. Like all the other buildings on the lake, the workshop was made of teak, and was up in the air, on teak-log stilts; it could only be approached by long-boat. Upon entering, I took off my shoes and socks, and walked soft-footed on the cool and smooth floorboards of polished teak. After the mendicant atmosphere and high

prices of the other tourist-oriented places I had visited that day, this cloth workshop instantly captured my interest and attention. Moreover, the sincerity of the sales-lady made a clearly successful "first impression".

She took me around the workshop. There were several "hand-and-pedal"-powered looms, making a variety of silk and cotton fabrics. The sound of the wooden spool-shuttles slap-clacking back and forth was very reassuring. If there had been a small, screened-in day-room in the corner, out of sight but able to catch the lake breezes, I would have loved to fall asleep on a cot then and there, lulled into peaceful rest by the slap-clacking shuttles. I was not interested in the silk and cotton products, but I was very much attracted by the workshop's "lotus-stem fibre" scarfs.

This is the scarf which you now have. You are the only person I have given this scarf to, Fanny. The lotus plant has three main parts – the edible root, the large leaves, and the stems (from the leaf, to the water-level). If you break off part of a lotus-stem halfway, and peel backwards, you can draw out the fibres, which are silky-thin, like spider-silk. (This process is similar to "de-stringing" celery stalks, to make them softer to eat.) Needless to say, it takes a very, very long time to peel so many lotus-stems, to collect enough stem-fibre, to spin enough thread, to have enough raw material... to make one scarf. It is a very extravagant product. The sales-lady said it can keep you warm in winter, but it feels cool to the neck in summer. I hope you like it. When I saw these carefully-made scarfs, I instantly thought of you.

Every time that I make a foray into S.E. Asia, I always wonder what I will get for you, Fanny. At times, the prospects seem futile, but somehow, the local markets produce something of local interest, enduring value, and exquisite beauty. Only for you, Fanny!

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I wandered through the market of Nuang-Shwe, on the lookout for something to take back to my forest home in Maine state. Sometimes I wonder why I lug all this "stuff", this "impedimentia" all over the world. I have been criticized for this habit. However, I enjoy looking at these things, and remembering the associations they call to mind. I find some parts of the world today to be homogenized, too polarized, too socialized. That is, they all look and feel the same; the people take extreme and opposite views, with little room for a "center" position; too much "civilization" makes new ideas, or modest risk-taking, or just being different more difficult. When (or if) I am old, I hope the artifacts of travel will give me some pleasure, as I look at them, and maybe (!) use them. Many people have collected a wonderful set of beautiful things over the years, and put them in tastefully-decorated houses, located in "attractive" parts of the country; I gathered the artifacts of the Asian proletariat throughout my wandering life, took them home in plastic, Chinese carpetbags and stored them in my shipping containers, hidden away in the backwater forests of Maine state. One of these days, I will have to unpack the carpetbags, cardboard boxes, and parcels of too many a journey, and turn my group of containers into a real home.

I wonder : can the "ideal wife" be found in a Burmese open-air market, put into a carpetbag, taken out at home (in either home – in Urumqi, or in Maine state), rescussitated, and be able to get on with life? Of course not, but it is a revealing idea.

Anyways, I digress as usual. The open-air market of Nuang-Shwe was full of people, squeezing their way here and there. This was different from many of the other markets I have gone to, where I could walk here and there more freely. Here, I had to think where I would walk

to, move forward twenty feet, stand out of the way of the passing flow of people, look around at the market and try to enjoy it (that is, quite apart from just navigating it), choose my next destination twenty feet further on, and proceed. All the produce and needs of the people of Inle Lake was here; one just had to be willing to brave the crowds and wander around in search of something.

People move around in a very slow and unhurried manner, as they shop for what they need. The sellers wait patiently, calling out their wares, or sitting quietly : who knows where their minds rove? However, it is the people who carry in the supplies from outside into the market, their wiry muscles tense and flexing under the weight of really large baskets of produce, who attract my attention. They are typically small, wiry, and very strong men, heavily tattooed, and always in a hurry to go from one place to another. No one gets in their way. They are the true driving force of Burma's commerce. I have (so far) never seen a fork-lift truck in Burma; all that needs to be loaded or unloaded onto a truck, or a river-boat, or which needs to go into or out of a market, goes on their shoulders. Nothing would happen without them. When I consider the savage harshness of life, and the even harsher sun that these people must live under, I think these carriers of burdens are very remarkable people.

I have noticed something here, which I also saw in Urumqi : that is, many clever and fairly well-educated people are doing menial and (almost) oppressive work. Could this be due more to the current economic global depression, rather than to "social injustice"? Over the past few months, I have met a whole series of people who were like this. The global economy is drying up; the environment is less able to produce things to sustain populations; the feeling of "bountiful plenty" is no longer here. On the outside, the open-air market appeared as it should, with people going here and there, buying supplies. However, I was told that the waters of Inle Lake are becoming more and more shallow, the fish are becoming fewer and smaller, and the watershed is drying up. People come to Inle Lake to see the local, lake-oriented culture, but all I could think of, as I went from place to place, was of a group of people, thrown into an impersonal arena, to fight for their lives. It often seems that these arenas are set in beautiful landscapes. I could not look a single person in the eye.

I found that afternoon's beautiful booty – baskets, shoulder-bags, six-inch needles, and your ear-rings – and then went back to my cheap hotel. These trips out in the sun are hard for me; I am not the hero of a thousand journeys that I once imagined myself to be. I also like to hide in my cool hotel room.

Nearby my cheap hotel in Nuang-Shwe is a Shan-cuisine restaurant. The Shan are the large ethnic group who live in eastern Burma, up against the Chinese border. Their land is very beautiful – a sort of blend of parts of the English countryside with Yunnan Province. It is also very hard to get into, on account of the mountainous terrain. The road and rail links up to Lashio (northern) and Taung-gyi (southern) are very slender; the roads are narrow, like tertiary English country lanes, and the narrow-gauge railway is very slow and fragile. This gives the Shan state a certain insular feeling; cut off the transportation links, and you have a ready-made "Lost World", without the dinosaurs. Anyways, about the restaurant : I have always liked the Shan restaurants, because their dishes are clearly and openly displayed in stainless-steel pots; all one has to do is point. (Even after so many years overseas, I am still functionally incompetent when choosing my dishes.) I went to this Shan restaurant to have my dinner.

However, here there were no open pots, so I chose out of the menu. Since Inle Lake is the only place in Asia which I feel to have unspoiled and unpolluted fish (yes!), I ate local fish – and I was not disappointed. It was very good indeed. However, the tomato soup was the best I have

ever tasted. Given that I rarely pay any appreciative attention to what I eat ("eating is no more than a re-fueling process; cooking is a waste of time"), these comments should be taken as significant. I wonder how the tomato soup could be re-created....

The restaurant had an upper balcony level, with five tables and no other people, so I went up there. Everything was done up in weathered teak-wood. How pleasant to live in a land where teak is as common as 2 x 4's and plywood are back home! The balcony immediately overlooked the canal that led down to Inle Lake; the canal was chock-full of black long-boats, packed together like dozens of rigid eels in a narrow ditch. Looking west, I had a good view of the mountains. The evening came on. An almond-sliver moon rose into the darkening sky with imperceptible slowness. For one of the first times in my life, I wondered about what it must be like to enjoy one's food. I was not able to, but the thought was there, in embryo. By now, the western mountains had faded into the darkness. On two mountain slopes, many miles away, someone was burning the land. I do not know if the burning was designed to keep the teak-forest healthy and free of ground-level trash vegetation, or if someone wanted to open up some more land for hillside cultivation. I sat in the darkness and watched the orange lines, now burning low, now briefly flaring up, as a dry bush caught fire, or someone threw accelerents into the flames. From a distance of ten or more miles, everything was silent, not-quite-distinct, more imagined than real. I ate my tomato soup, while the distant orange lines of fire ate up part of the mountain. At that time, there was not much activity in Nuang-Shwe; the people were inside with their families, inside after a long day on the glaring lake waters.

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On the next evening, after a day I forget, I was back up on the upper-balcony of the Shan restaurant, trying another fish dish. This time, the boss' Burmese cat followed me up. I gave him the fish-head. Out to the west, there was no burning, but I wonder if everyone in town knew whose fields had burned, and who had been up there the night before. The cat made a clean job of the fish-head, so that very little remained. I went to bed. By now, I was ready to go home, to return to Urumqi – where I dare not eat the fish – and get back to work. It was time to go home; I had seen enough of the Irrawaddy, and my main travel objectives were accomplished.

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As expected, the night-bus from Taung-gyi to Rangoon was a sleepless, narcoleptic affair, with the usual KTV songs and Burmese soap-operas. I sat next to a man – a monk, kind, generally quiet – who when falling asleep thought nothing of squirming his way over the "50-50" line between our seats, and making himself comfortable... and he wasn't fat! As the comic soap-opera got underway, he laughed along with most of the other bus passengers who were Burmese. I say this, because a sizeable minority of the passengers were foreigners, like me, who were returning to Rangoon from Inle Lake. It is just as well that many people were watching the TV – the road that led off the Shan state plateau was barely wider than a driveway (or Apple Street, in Essex), with many hair-raising bends. Even the monk clucked his tongue in concern and alarmed disapproval. This was the second "main" road connecting the Shan plateau with the rest of Burma, and it was very tenuous. We passed several large trucks making their way up to Taung-gyi, and our (large) coach passed them very carefully. I wonder if Borneo was like this, with the thickly forested mountains, switch-back roads designed for 1940's Bedford trucks, and

steep drops into the invisible valleys below. Somewhere an hour or so ahead, lay the flat central parts of Burma. At various points, the bus passed small groups of workers who were doing their "corvee"-work. Some were spreading crushed stone, shaking it out of hand-held baskets; others were spooning out hot oil onto the road; the rest tended the fire that heated the road-oil. This scene is repeated, to varying degrees, all over the country, I suspect. I saw it myself, several times. Also, along many roads, there were waiting piles of crushed stone, brought in by dump-trucks, and left there. At certain other places, there were "crushed stone depots", where big blocks of limestone were brought in from the quarries, broken up by the crushing machines, and then stockpiled. Maintaining road infrastructure is a burden for any society, but certainly when so much is done by hand!

The above observations apply to the tertiary roads. For Burma, as a former colony of the British Empire, this is very important, as the 1940's "English country lane" infrastructure is to be seen everywhere. I also saw signs of really big road projects at certain places. In these road-works, I sensed Burma's next chapters.

At about ten o'clock in the evening, the bus came to Nai Pi Daw, the new capital. I did not see the "forbidden city" part, but the signs of infrastructure money were to be seen everywhere. It was like the Beltway, and the beginnings of road-side development, but no sign of Washington (city) inside. We sped down a real highway – two lanes, each way – with hundreds of lamp-posts passing by. However, the road sometimes wandered here and there, as if aware of its English country lane ancestry. Since Burma is such a dark country at night, with so much human activity right by the roadside (and little visible sign of it away from the road), it was strange to see strands of orange dots heading off into the distant darkness.

We stopped for the "late-dinner break". The coach did not pull off the highway, but stopped behind other buses on the right (slow) lane! This meant that buses passing through only had one lane to travel in, and even if they made an effort to slow down, they came through very quickly. The "cafeteria" part of the rest stop was on the other side of the highway, so I crossed over, and went in. (Imagine doing this on I-95!) Of course, there were fewer vehicles out on the road. The sky was full of stars; the Big Dipper was upside-down. Inside the cafeteria was the usual, noisy scene, with under-age boys hustling tables, dashing tea into cups and onto the saucers. The earth underfoot was packed, but a little soft. I stayed there only for a short time to relieve my thirst and my boredom, and then went back outside, to the (relatively) quieter strip of land that divided the Nai Pi Daw - Rangoon highway.

This is where the interesting nuggets of life were. A few people had built a fire from cast-off pieces of teak-wood 2 x 4's, and were keeping warm. (The night was pleasantly cool for me, but uncomfortably cold for many Burmese people.) The monk was there too, and he urged me to get warm. Everyone hunched near the heat, looking into the quiet flames, and saying little. Every so often, a passing truck or bus would generate warnings, the bus would pass by, like a log going down the mill-race, and then all would settle down again. I looked again at the pilfered teak-wood in the fire, yielding itself up ever so slowly. This collection of "travel-stories in exotic Burma" is really not about the scenery, or the Irrawaddy River, or the many people I saw; it is about the teak-wood of Burma. I thought of the furniture exhibition hall I wandered through in Guangdong; I also thought of the river-barges, loaded with teak-logs; I then thought of the log-depots along the river and at the ports – in many places. This is part of Burma's patrimony. I went to the bus, and snuggled in the two-thirds of my seat that the monk had left me. I am sure that this fire of 2 x 4 teak-wood cast-offs would burn on for a long time, but will it be that way with the overall forests?

The bus continued down the main highway of Burma, its progress marked not by each passing hour, but by each KTV song, by each soap-opera – and then the silence of spent energy and exhaustion. Everyone was too tired to sleep, and the Big Dipper was still upside down : everything is upside down, here.

We arrived in Rangoon at four or five in the morning, at a bus depot nearly 35 kilometres from the city center. It was dark, dark, dark. The buses were funneled into another checkpoint, like hippos in a diminishing water-hole. At some point, two policemen came on board to check ID cards. They looked nondescript enough, with white shirts, the "long-gi" lower-garments, and that not-quite-impassive-but-almost-tired look on their faces – but at the sight of them, everyone's ID card came out by reflex, like startled sea-anemones in reverse. We were checked yet again, and then we got out.

I joined up with some backpackers, to share the taxi-fare into Rangoon. The taxi touts were asking outrageous prices, so we walked away. Distressed, one of them said, "Please! Wait a moment!" Having by now lost all patience, I quipped, "Baby – for you, the 'moment' is over", and we walked away. Finally, one taxi driver agreed to take us into the city.

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I think about all the places I have been to – or, I should say, passed through. There are very few "famous places" on that list; for example, I have been to Burma and India three times, but I have not "done" Bagan, or the Taj Mahal. However, the list of nondescript places and roads is enormous. I have been to so many public toilets, bus stations, train stations, dingy hotels, filthy restaurants, waiting-rooms, police checkpoints, empty miles across empty country, vendor-stalls of a thousand different people, maelstroms of buses with people getting on and off, bus seats, traffic intersections choked with traffic, barber-shops where I washed my hair, park-benches (forget the parks), dingy museums with no decent labels and poor lighting, and courtyards. This, for me, was the real Asia : full of people, yet devoid of "meaningful" human contact; the forests and each tree an endless source of interest, and the people like walking trees; the famous tourist sites studiously neglected, but the pariah-dogs and floating puddle-trash in a Calcutta bus station carefully observed; the peaceful oases of "cultured civilization" breezed through in a few moments, with the transient and worn-down resting-places of the traveling poor re-visited again and again. In time, I took pleasure in visiting any public toilet I happened to pass nearby, and try to "feel the moment", and "gauge the local environment" in those brief moments. Perhaps roving male dogs do have a purpose to their life, after all. Lest you think I am mad (which I am not), I wish to say that one can measure, to a point, the nature and condition of a culture by studying, over time, some mundane aspect of its "human activities". To wit : my father studied the American economy by carefully examining his grocery-receipts in his car after doing his shopping, a practice he followed for at least thirty years, and which rewarded him with a means of understanding what was going on around him; as for me, I have consulted my "sociological tea-leaves" while visiting and using a vast array of Asia's public toilets. Moreover, when the pace of life became too hectic or overbearing, I found brief moments of refuge in the dark, dank and dripping sanctuary of those places. They almost never let me down, so as a result, they became my "Zen-gardens". Over the years, a few places in Asia have become (by no design of mine, re-visited crossroads of migration, since I find myself passing through again and again. I visit their public toilet, and I feel, for a brief moment, at home once again, and re-established. I believe that the key to "emotional and psychological survival" is a foreign land is never to ask

"Why?" : both the quest and the answer will upset everything. Besides, I do not believe I will find, or be told, or be given the answer, and even if I was, I wouldn't like it. So, like the Micronesian's "map" of bent sticks and cowrie-shells, my "map" of the Asian cosmos is devoid of people, and made up of bus-routes, with a public toilet at the intersections. This has worked for me. As my father often said : "If it works, don't fix it."

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There were a few days left in Rangoon, before the exit-flight to Bangkok. So, Fanny, I did some last-minute shopping, and saw some local places, mostly nondescript. In fact, over these four or five weeks, I have done a lot of shopping, and for what end? I bought your things, as I have long enjoyed doing. There was a little girl (in my city) who I teach English to; she specifically asked for "some Burmese candy", so I made the acquisition of local candy into a serious project. There were books for others, and a few "token souvenirs" for the inevitable claimants. A few friends got this, or that. However, I bought a wide variety of items for myself, which would baffle most people who saw them. Simply put, these were items which I wish to take home, to my place in Maine state, to use as decorating in various rooms. These "artifacts of travel, and of places visited" will become touch-stones of memory and experience, when I am older, and less able to be in Asia. You may say, "Of course you can retire in Asia, and be happy! Welcome!", but a part of me feels this will not be possible, for a variety of reasons. So, I am planning an alternative place to retire to. (Naturally, I would rather retire in Asia.) So, I shopped in Rangoon for these things. In fact, I find the markets of Burma to be the best places for shopping – but that is a matter of personal taste, here.

I wonder, Fanny, if you would like to shop in the Burmese markets. For that matter, would you like to visit Burma, and see what it is like, to feel the way of life, or even to live and work there? I do not know about that, but I do know that you are the only person I would write these heartfelt Burmese letters to. I hope that you can find some adventurous friends to join you, and together, you and they can come to Burma, and see it for yourselves.

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On the subject of "Chinese traveling to other countries", I saw something new (for me). In the back-packer's guest house in Rangoon, I saw small groups of four to six young Chinese people doing the "back-packer's circuit", and staying in the guest house too. So, they have entered the "Innocents Abroad, 1870's" stage, have found out what the western back-packers are doing, and are doing it too – and, they are traveling during the Spring Festival / Chinese Lunar New Year period! This is all a good thing, I think : the liberation of a people is not fully consummated, until travel by much of the population is a behavioral reality – that is, overseas, and at the time and means of one's choice. They will learn very quickly, and will enter their "post-WW2, Americans all over the globe, 1950's" stage in short order.

However, there was one Chinese woman I met at Nuang-Shwe (near Inle Lake), who encouraged me. She was looking for a guest house for her group (which I never saw), so I recommended the guest house I was staying at. There was nothing "super-charged" about her : she seemed a typical college student, or someone recently graduated, who was taking the plunge, and choosing to visit Burma. Remember, most of the people I mention Burma to in China say, "Oh! It is so poor, and un-developed, and dangerous!" I wonder what she had to go through to

get her parent's consent – or maybe, she went to Hong Kong or Bangkok, and took an unauthorized "side-trip", and told no one at home. In any case, full credit to her! Do you approve, Fanny?

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I must admit that the travels in Burma were not all about "easy times". (As if living and traveling in Burma were easy – they are not.) I often went through periods of intense depression – especially after a hard journey between two cities, and while resting up in some hotel before the next bus-trip. Having no one to talk to was also a big factor. (I think, for about four weeks, I did not have a "significant conversation" with anyone. Although this was necessary on the one hand, after the different stresses of Urumqi's "poisoned quilt", it was also very hard.) So, in the hotels, where the rooms were often small and seedy, I had serious episodes of depression. I shall not elaborate. However, when I got out again, and was walking around, among people – the semblance, but not the reality of "community" – I felt somewhat better. However, I cannot keep on moving forward forever, like sharks must, lest they sink (they have no air-bladder)!

Still, now that it is over, I am still glad that I went to Burma alone, even with all the depression, slow travel, heat, and other minor frustrations. I do not wish to share Burma with anyone – that is, experientially, "in the saddle", in a travel-community.

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That is all, for now. I know that this account of Burma is full of the "purple passages" which George Orwell rightly put down, but there it is. It is perhaps impossible to truly portray Burma. However, this land is dear to my heart, Fanny, which is why I share it with you, and you alone! I hope you will go!

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