Salad Days in Burma

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It's November in northern Thailand, right on the brink of seasonal change from sultry to sublime. The rains have ended and the evening brings a wintry nip. We crowd around wooden tables with chipped red paint, sipping strong Shan tea from little blue-and-white cups. I grab my notebook and the feast begins.

For the past three weeks I've been teaching basic journalism to Southeast Asians, and tonight I've invited my Burmese students to dinner. I'd like to repay them for a slew of small kindnesses – for carrying my bag, buying my rice, bringing my tea during classroom breaks. But I'm also hoping for a favour. I'd like them to teach me everything they can about Burmese cooking. I lead them behind a boisterous local market to a small, quiet alley with a little Burmese restaurant tucked inside a garden of leafy trees.

Shredded ginger salad, *gin thote,* arrives with peanut, tomato and onion in a waft of pungent, nasal-clearing goodness. The salad – the *thote* – is the welcome mat of any Burmese meal. This I learned on my first trip to Burma several years before. My students tell me that almost every *thote* begins with shallots fried in peanut oil, garlic mixed with onion, fish paste, salt and something sour, such as tamarind or lime. Chickpea powder, I'm told, is key; it adds a hefty graininess to the salad that I have always loved.

The students order a plate of pork in soybean paste, *wat pone yae gyi.* Sauce is paramount to this dish, I learn. 'The main thing is the juice. It's better than the meat,' says one of the students, who counts eating his wife's cooking among his favourite hobbies.

We try the pork curry, *wat hmyit chin,* with a sweet pickled bamboo that takes months to prepare. 'We have two kinds of bamboo – sour and sweet,' another student explains. This, he says, is like 'infant bamboo, infant of the big bamboo tree.'

A heady dish of fish paste, *nga pi,* comes in a ring of raw vegetables. 'This is essential food,' says the only female in the crowd. 'In Burmese villages some people cannot eat a meal, so they eat this with rice and vegetables, and that's all. Because they are poor.' As a single woman from a family with little money, she rises each morning before the sun to cook for parents and siblings, then goes to work to earn money for the family coffers.

Most of these students are men, and they don't cook at home. But they learn everything by watching the women in their lives. They know as much, in fact, about cooking as their female colleague. Towards evening's end, the eldest in the group leans to my ear, and he says: 'Karen, I want to tell you something because I think it is useful for your story. We all know how to cook our curry because it is in our culture.' Every woman cooks, and she talks to her friends about food. Every man eavesdrops, and he learns the secrets of the Burmese plate.

I ask his opinion of this restaurant. 'Is it the *real* Burmese food?'

'Nearly, *nearly*!' he answers with a big, toothy grin. Translation: it's as good as it gets away from his wife's kitchen.

We're all stuffed and happy, chatting over little cups of tea, nibbling on sweet cubes of jaggery, customarily served gratis. I duck downstairs and open my wallet, but the waitress shakes her head. The bill has been paid, and I never even see it. My students don't have cash to spare. Yet their kindness never runs out, and it's always a few steps ahead of my own.

It's early January. My husband, Jerry, and I are on a plane to Burma, our first return to the country in six years. It's a short flight from Bangkok to Yangon, barely an hour, but it feels like a journey between worlds. Time lags half an hour on touchdown: 10am in Bangkok is 9.30am in Burma, which sets a pace thirty minutes askew to the rest of the region. Author Chris Offutt once wrote that time doesn't move forward; it stays put, and people move through it instead. Humanity has its comings and goings, but time stands still around the commotion.

It's that way in Burma. Little has visibly changed in six years. A few new buildings and billboards, a few cell phones and

internet shops. But little else seems different for the people. It looks eerily similar to what I remember. But the Burmese people move – constantly, swiftly, with necessity. And the moving is never easy: rusty old Toyota taxis with broken windows and missing knobs; buses crammed with bodies, bumping over potholed streets; rickshaws with wobbly wheels pedalled by drivers with cracked and callused feet.

Jerry and I spend eighteen hours on an overnight ferry through the Irrawaddy Delta, to the city of Pathein. We sleep in the open, on the hard metal floor above rumbling engines one deck down. Each passenger is given a rectangle of space, approximately two and a half feet wide and five feet long, on which to keep body and luggage. I count 130 people squeezed together, head to head, toe to toe, all of them crammed into a space the size of a three-car garage. Everyone is kind and polite, taking careful steps so as not to tread upon another passenger's mat while moving between the deck and the fetid bathrooms.

Vendors pass through, shouting offers of fish and rice, fried fritters and fruit, and a spectacularly spicy and bitter tea-leaf salad known as *laphet thote*. It's a national snack made from pickled leaves, crispy dried yellow peas and beans, sharp raw garlic, potent red capsicum, a drizzle of oil, a hint of sour. It's a pleasantly bitter sensation, sour but savoury, with a unique crunchy, oily, moist consistency that ends in dragon-fire breath born of so much garlic and chilli. Jerry brings me a flimsy plastic plate with a dollop of salad, and I lap up one luscious green bite after another.

We sleep that night to the constant chug of the engine beneath us and wake to a saffron sun, lifting over the mangroves of a vast delta.

It's three months later, and we're back in Burma. Yangon is a sauna in April, its pavement like hot coals, its air like blistering steam. It's the season of waiting – for rain, for relief, for release.

I'm teaching creative nonfiction writing to a small group of journalists. For days, we hash out the differences between fiction and nonfiction – blatant distinctions to me, but not to my students. Is a how-to manual fiction or nonfiction? A movie review? If a reporter writes a truthful article but makes up the main character, do I call it fiction? (I call it verboten.)

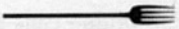
The students hurl questions at me for hours. So seldom is the truth allowed in print that Burma's best writers tell it through imagined stories – this I learned on my previous trip. Forty years of that, and readers' minds are blurred. People know the difference between truth and lies, but they no longer distinguish between fact and fiction. So we discuss Dexter Filkins, John McPhee, Peter Hessler, Susan Orlean. We read Chris Jones' prize-winning story 'The Things that Carried Him', and I email him a list of students' questions about method and story structure (to which he replies at great length).

At lunch break, we take our conversations to the corner canteen. We sit at tiny tables with little stools beneath leafy trees eating homemade curries, soups and *thotes.*

Right around this time, I pitch pickled tea as an article for a new travel magazine, and the editor jumps. When I tell the class interpreter that I've been assigned to do a story on *laphet thote,* his eyes begin to dance. He teaches me a term, *shoo-shee,* which is onomatopoeia for the sound one makes when fanning the lips after eating a piquant plate of the salad. The Burmese don't just *like* this dish. They feel it in their teeth. They gobble it up, then swipe a finger through the juices and lick that finger clean. That last taste, a young reporter tells me, is better than the salad. It is the concentrated essence of every ingredient combined.

I set off with one of my students on an afternoon mission to find the best of the city's *laphet thote*. We trudge through scalding heat and black puffs of smog belched from old buses as we angle towards Sule Pagoda. There we find a long-time shop that serves excellent salads made to order – each customer can select the number of chillies, the amount of oil and the desired amount of pickled tea.

But this is not the way most Burmese eat *laphet thote*, my student tells me. A small plate of *laphet* typically costs 500 kyat (50 cents) at the corner shop. 'This is expensive,' he says. So people of few means – as in, mostly everyone – buy the ingredients in their local market and take them home to prepare. Every market has a *laphet thote* aisle with sacks and bins of pickled tea, dried beans, seeds and peas. 'Many Myanmar people eat *laphet* salad and rice for their dinner,' my friend says. 'They are very busy and they have not much money.'



A week later, I'm in Mandalay to teach a three-day workshop. Early one morning before class, Jerry and I visit a well-known family-run factory that has packaged and sold *laphet thote* ingredients for more than a century. 'The business has been handed down for six generations,' the owner tells me. That history hangs in photos across the family's mint-green living room walls.

He's excited to have foreigners here, beneath dusty old whirring fans, around an elaborate lacquered tray with partitions separating all the ingredients for a proper handful of salad. We're given small silver spoons to dip into the moist pickled leaves, crispy dried garlic, crunchy peanuts, roasted sesame seeds, dried yellow beans, dried green beans, pumpkin seeds, prawn powder and dried insects (which live in local spirulina ponds).

'My favourite is pickled tea leaf with tomato and all the ingredients,' says the man's 76-year-old mother. 'We mix and enjoy very much. We also add sliced cabbage.'

Our host is also an architect, and he tells us about a market he designed, a boisterous place where traders buy and sell the dried ingredients – beans, peas, seeds – eaten in *laphet thote*. We must see it! he insists. He invites us on a tour, and makes plans to pick us up at our hotel later in the week, after my workshop has finished.

We never make it to the market. My teaching ends the evening before our scheduled visit. That night, Jerry and I catch a quick dinner of rice, curry and dhal at a Nepali restaurant around the corner from our hotel. When we return, men in green uniforms clog the hotel lobby. They have orders from Naypyidaw, the new political capital, to put us on a train to Yangon that night. No questions, no answers. No phone calls allowed. We must pack and go – the train leaves in less than two hours.

Two officers escort us to the station, and the four of us cram into one small cabin with a wheezing fan for sixteen hours of aching heat. The train rumbles along. Sooty grime cakes our skin. Exhaust spews through the windows. We rumble through the blackest night, through a countryside with no lights.

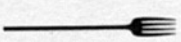
The officers offer us water. They don't want to be here, but they have no choice. They begin to peel off their uniforms, removing layers in the cloying heat. They never touch us, never search us. They sleep, while my mind races with questions. I pull out my journal and write against the shaky vibrations of the moving train. In the morning, our captors buy us coffee.

When we arrive in Yangon, we are shuttled across the city, back and forth, first to the airport, then to Immigration headquarters forty-five minutes away downtown, then back to

the airport, where we're given room to wash and eat in the air-conditioned airport lounge. The authorities take our passports and book us on the next flight to Bangkok. Then, finally, when we are sitting in our Thai Airways seats, in the very last row of the plane, our passports are returned to us with little black stamps across our Burmese visas, one small word written in faded capital letters: 'Deportee'.

We never learn why. Rumours abound; most are ludicrous. The most plausible of all: our plans to meet the *laphet thote* man at his market, which might have been run by someone in the ruling junta – about which we knew nothing at all.

These things happen in Burma – our friends all have stories. We knew a man in Yangon who referred to his colleagues by the number of years they will spend in prison – *currently serving two years, currently serving ten years, currently serving twelve years.* That man's passport was confiscated the last time he returned from an overseas journey. Jerry and I were sentenced to leave – the Burmese are sentenced to stay.



It's summer. That perfect time of year when the temperature of air and skin agree, when the hot desert sun gives way to a blue-black sky with nighthawks making their rounds.

Plink.

My computer sounds, and up pops a little orange Gmail window. Halfway around the world, the Burmese are just waking for the day, and one of my students has come online.

'Good morning Karen … how are you today?'

It's a young woman from Yangon, who tells me she would like to become a better journalist for her readers. If she has time, she says, she will translate some of her articles into English and send them to me.

This is how I keep abreast of my students' lives. The government can brand my passport and put me on a blacklist but it hasn't – yet – been able to impede the miracles of Facebook and Gmail chat. So, early in the morning and late at night, my Burmese colleagues and I tap our way through conversations about story structure, censorship, imprisonment, human rights – and the pleasures of home-cooked meals.

'I miss & love you,' my student writes.

She invites me to a traditional Burmese dinner. Someday. *'If we can meet again.'*

Note: I have not identified the Burmese in this story. Several of them asked me not to use their names, for their protection.