

lighted that such a book existed. There was something else, another university press book, Cambridge or Harvard or Chicago, about death.

“Oh, this could really help me right now,” I thought, but when I opened it I kept coming across references to Heidegger, and I knew that Heidegger was not going to help me that week. Allan’s wife and sister made sure we left with some books. It was hard to take them and hard not to take them.

I found Basho. Two, in fact. *Narrow Road to the Interior* and *Basho’s Haiku* (Barnhill’s edition). I took both, not knowing which was the one Allan had been seeking in his last weeks. I took them with me to a cabin that clings to a high bluff on the Sonoma Coast. I had finished *Burmese Days* and was digging back into Larkin’s *Finding George Orwell in Burma*. It’s brilliant, I thought. I’m jealous about what she brought off.

I had spent a week there thirty years ago: early days, it now turns out, in Burma’s total grip by an oppressive military regime. I sat in my chair in the window that looks out on a river bluff, thinking about the Israeli who gave us a ride in the blackest of nights after an overnight train ride north from Rangoon dumped us in the middle of nowhere. We had no idea how we would push on, but it was a relief to watch the train pull away after spending hours under blared lights and train speakers emitting unrelenting, deafening propaganda. Only the deaf and truly exhausted slept. Days later we bounced across the hardpan of Burma’s sun-bleached interior on the wooden slat-boards of a 1940s school bus, eating sweet potatoes, hoping to get to the border before being thrown in jail.

Finding George Orwell in Burma is about finding his books in the place that made them. Locating story and place; locating a man and his reading. Like Orwell, surely, John Flory thirsted to talk with someone about what he really saw. He was a curious man fascinated by Burmese life. He wanted to befriend and know it and discuss the contradictions of being a *sahib* in this place oppressed by his kind. He embraced it yet was clear-eyed, this character who recognizes talk as *need*.

Michael was sitting beside me reading as I recalled our own Burmese days. There had been the cab driver who drove us from the airport in a 1956 Chevrolet. By the time he deposited us at a Rangoon guest house, our trade, of

Johnnie Walker Red Label and a carton of cigarettes, left us with all the Burmese currency we would need. The fog was sweeping up the river and wrapping the cabin in cotton wool. All that penetrated was the sound of a cow lowing on the opposite shore. Larkin described a time when, devastatingly, the Burmese educational system was dismantled: it had meant the end of critical thinking. It became impossible to have a conversation about what really mattered with someone who would appreciate all of the layers.

Into the silence of the cabin I said aloud, “I’d like to talk to Allan about this book.”

Michael didn’t say anything. My words hung in the air between us like something stretched taut that you know you mustn’t pull.

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