

Still Lifes from a Vanishing City



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essays and photographs from Yangon
By Elizabeth Rush

with an introduction by Emma Larkin and afterword by Dr. Thant Thaw Kaung

There is a painting by Klee called Angelus Novus. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm.

Walter Benjamin

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An Introduction

Standing in a building that is being broken apart is profoundly unsettling. The ground isn't stable. Concrete, brick and mortar – the very materials that were once combined in such a way as to epitomize stability – no longer serve their intended purpose.

On my first morning in Yangon, I walked into a demolition site on Merchant Street and climbed the stairs to the building's middle level. A hole had been smashed in the ceiling. Every minute a woman walked over to the edge of it and tossed down an armload of bricks. Upstairs the roof was gone. The walls of the topmost floor were being torn down piece by piece. Piles of rebar, bricks, beams, empty bottles, and abandoned prints of pilgrimage destinations surrounded me. This home was being reduced to rubble and dust.

I told myself to be careful. Then I told myself again. Still, when I tried to walk I fell over. I stepped gingerly, working my way through the demolition site. Like roaming through an earthquake-ruined city without having lived through the event, I struggled to make sense of what had been lost and by whom.

In 2010 and 2011, as Myanmar's military junta prepared to transition to a parliamentary system, they auctioned off over eighty percent of the country's state-owned assets. Some of downtown Yangon's disintegrating colonial row houses were on the list. Surely those who won these properties would be interested in their central location and not in the crumbling buildings themselves. When I heard about the auction, I knew that a particular iteration of a city I loved would soon disappear so I bought a plane ticket.

The situation on the ground was far more extreme than I initially anticipated. At least one building per block was being demolished. The sound of sledgehammers rang out from every corner of the city. As I descended and looked at what remained of the stairs on Merchant Street that first morning, I knew that I would spend the upcoming year documenting the insides of Yangon's colonial buildings. But I wasn't interested in the architecture so much as the lives that took place inside it.

When the British stormed Yangon in 1852, they inherited a proverbial tabula rasa. Tharrawaddy, the reigning king of Upper Burma, had razed the city before the invasion. The British rebuilt Yangon in an utterly European style – everything from block length to window sconces was

made to mimic the metropole. When they left the city, what they built stayed. All different classes of people moved back in, for many of the buildings were purposely subdivided and resettled during the country's mid-century socialist turn.

A remarkably egalitarian city emerged. In almost any other city in the world, these gorgeous turn-of-the-century buildings would have been the property of the extremely wealthy, but in Yangon they tacitly belonged to the people.

My trips to Yangon taught me an important lesson: that it is possible to fashion a life out of what others left behind, to live fully in an abandoned empire. And I wanted somehow to memorialize that city, that lesson, before it was demolished. With over two hundred rolls of Provia slide film, a Dictaphone, and a carefully compiled map of the auction sites, I set out to document the insides of the homes that were being torn down as Myanmar prepared to open, for the first time in fifty years, to western investment.

Quickly I discovered not only were the auctioned properties being bulldozed, so too were hundreds of buildings declared "dangerous" by the Yangon City Development Council (YCDC), as well as other random sites that developers had snatched up on the eve of this ever more exciting era. All around me, Yangon's skyline was collapsing.

U Aung Than lives in an apartment his father built around a stairwell door on the roof of the old Indian Taxation Office. When the building served as a government office, U Aung Than's father was a delivery boy, carrying important tax documents throughout the city. At night, he often slept on the roof instead of travelling the two hours back to his village. "My father expanded brick by brick, building a small apartment around the stairwell. Eventually he got permission to move the entire family here," U Aung Than recalls.

Today the walls are mostly made of concrete and the ceiling is fashioned from corrugated tin, long plastic sheets strung between posts, and straw. During the day, U Aung Than runs a sidewalk tea stand, in the evening he polishes jade to sell, and in the middle of the night he roams the halls of the old Indian Taxation Office and the Myanmar Livestock and Fisheries Development Bank, guarding against intruders.

"The government wants to redevelop the building," U Aung Than says. He points to a sign in the stairwell ordering him, and the two other families who have lived on the roof for much of the last half-century, to leave. "But where to?" he asks me rhetorically. "I was a boy here so naturally I do not want to go."

Two months later I return, bringing with me the images of U Aung Than's home that I captured on my first trip. His mother-in-law still sits on a low stool, peeling garlic. Her granddaughters are busy studying ecology. Boxes and tarpaulin sacks have replaced plastic bags of papers. "We are preparing to go," U Aung Than says. His voice is run through with regret. That night he and I watch Thadingyut festival fireworks explode over the Yangon River from the highest point on the roof. It is the first time in over a decade that Yangon's residents have been permitted to openly revel in the Buddhist Festival of Lights and the last one U Aung Than will celebrate in his childhood home.

Since I first started working on this project in 2011, the changes that have come to Myanmar are profound. A parliament replaced the military dictatorship (although twenty-five percent of the seats are reserved for military). Aung San Suu Kyi, the country's most famous political dissident, was released from house arrest, elected to the aforementioned parliament, and received the Nobel Peace Prize. Over six thousand political prisoners have been freed. President U Thein Sein halted the controversial Myitsone Dam project. The government even instigated a "cash for clunkers" plan: turn in a car built over forty years ago and receive a voucher halving the exorbitant import taxes that once made owning a new car a luxury only the corrupt could afford.

Much of the world, the United States included, has eased sanctions. Foreign capital once again flows in the streets of Yangon. A property boom has catapulted land value in Yangon to rates equal with nearby Bangkok. But it is not U Aung Tan who has benefited. Those who reaped the rewards of the junta's longstanding political and economic chokehold are precisely those who recently purchased most of the country's assets in opaque auctions, cementing the continuation of their monetary success. This basic fact is rarely discussed.

When I left U Aung Than's rooftop perch, I made my way to a long prohibited street fair in the Pazundaung Township. For much of the past half-century, public gatherings of more than five people were banned. The last time Yangon's residents had taken to the streets en masse was during the Saffron Revolution in 2007, when walking outside meant risking your life. The junta reported killed between 31-138 civilians during that monk-led uprising. The three short years in

between had brought radical change.

In Pazundaung thousands of people flooded the streets, their smiles loose and full of wonder. It looked as though they were celebrating ten New Year's Eves all rolled into one. When they saw a foreigner alongside them, their joy turned to awe. My presence helped them believe that some semblance of democracy had finally come to their country.

I bought a glowing pair of moon-shaped spectacles and walked back and forth on Myang Gyi Street for hours. The evening air was balmy. All around me people snacked on gourd fritters, wore glow sticks as jewelry, purchased balloons, and got real tattoos. In the center of the action there stood a man-powered Ferris wheel. When the ten boys whose duty it was to make the great wheel spin climbed all the way to the top, the structure swayed. Riders held their breath in delirious anticipation. Then the boys inched their bodies to the left, and with that subtle shift the wheel began to turn.

For nearly a hundred years, Yangon was a rare and forgotten city – a city no longer focused on hubris but humility, not on survival but quiet tenacity. Almost overnight, it became the latest in a long line of development meccas.

As with every radical change, the process is both disruptive and transformative. Many of the buildings I photographed are already gone. The people who lived in them lost their homes as part of Myanmar's rebirth. And while they have gained some very important basic human rights, they are not well positioned to enjoy those rights. Most of Myanmar's residents lack the skills and education necessary to succeed in the global world their country has entered.

On the corner of Merchant and 36th Street, next to U Aung Than's doomed home, a Korean-owned multi-use skyscraper is rising. Yangon is already being rebuilt largely by money from beyond the country's borders – even shinier this time, with taller buildings and better views. But the most difficult work remains. Keeping Yangon from becoming what it has already been – the capital of someone else's empire – means requiring education and skill-building as fundamental to any further easing of sanctions. As far as the buildings go, preservation ought to extend beyond the physical structures and into the remarkable community that has long made this one of South Asia's fairest cities.







Shifting Light by Emma Larkin

WHEN I FIRST walked the streets of downtown Yangon in the mid-1990s it was, to my mind, a secretive and impenetrable place. Nothing encapsulated this more than the darkness that descended after sundown. The electricity supply was erratic and without street lighting much of the city was cloaked in a blackness that was both sinister and compelling.

If it was a clear and cloudless night, you navigated by moonlight. Otherwise, you might have the good fortune to fall in step with a silhouetted stranger who would silently illuminate the way ahead with a hand-held torch. More often, on those nights when your own torch was left at home or out of batteries, you were left to stumble blindly along the broken pavement. It was always a relief to pass through the occasional pools of shaky orange light leaking out from the window or doorway of a private residence. Even better, to encounter the shocking brightness of a late-night teashop lit by fluorescent tubes that were run off rumbling portable generators. I remember a pavement night market, set out each evening in the gloomy shadow of a disused church, where freshly caught fish shone, silver and slippery, in the eerie light of candles wedged into bottle tops or nestled inside tin cans. Among the derelict outbuildings at the sprawling Secretariat compound, soldiers lit campfires to cook their meager dinners; beyond the flames loomed the ghostly ruins of the main building, built a hundred years ago as the headquarters of the colonial British government. Outside of these small enclaves of shifting light the city was, or appeared to be, completely dark.

The country was then ruled by a reclusive military dictatorship that had been in place in one form or another since 1962. Elsewhere around Asia, cities like Bangkok, Singapore and Shanghai had developed at rapid-fire speed. As skyscrapers sprouted and street fronts gave way to the flashing neon signs of fast-food franchises and global brand names, older structures were either demolished or – in the rare instances where they were preserved – spruced up and reinvented as elegant restaurants and art galleries, patronized mostly by nostalgic western tourists. In

this fast-changing region, Yangon remained stubbornly un-changed; its colonial-era cityscape unconsciously preserved by the stultifying economic and political restrictions of the ruling generals. The grandiose buildings of the British Empire – designed during more prosperous times to house banks, government offices, the head offices of teak and oil merchants, emporiums of imported goods – were still standing, but decades of neglect and dense tropical humidity had taken their toll. Spreading patches of damp and mildew rose from their foundations, sometimes entire trees found purchase in the once splendid pediments and cornices. Beyond the main thoroughfares, in the alleyways that make up the grid of downtown Yangon, stood rows of old shop houses where generations of families had patched together homes within the dilapidated, dysfunctional architecture of a time long passed. Flimsy partitions, impossibly steep stairwells, and mezzanine floors were erected to create ever-more living space; tiny but habitable, if only just. Rusted wrought-iron elevators were eternally paused on whatever floor they happened to be on when they gave up the ghost. Strings dangled from upper story windows, attached to hooks and bulldog clips so that deliveries (newspapers or steaming-hot tea poured into tightly knotted plastic bags) could be made with minimal effort. Time passed in Yangon, of course, but it did so slowly.

Then, in 2010, the military regime appeared to loosen its reigns on power. It held a dubious general election and later allowed the beleaguered National League for Democracy to enter the political fray. Economic sanctions imposed by Western governments were eased and, as international investors and tourists took notice, the tectonic plates of time beneath Yangon began to shift.

Elizabeth made good use of the strange days just before this awakening to venture into the lost world of downtown Yangon, but it was not the large edifices of Empire that attracted her attention. Rather, she focused on the shop houses and private residences that line the alleyways and it is here, in these forgotten and secluded spaces, that the city’s real secrets have been kept. After all, it was

not – in the bad old days of the Burmese regime – just those who were overtly political who had to succumb to the silence. In a world where anyone accused or perceived of being on the wrong side of the regime could end up in prison with no legal recourse, people turned inwards by necessity. Only behind closed doors was it safe to indulge in private obsessions and the day-to-day worries of making ends meet. Elizabeth’s images capture the interior lives diligently maintained despite the dictatorship’s powerfully effacing reach.

I was once introduced to an archaeologist, now deceased, who kept in his house treasures of the ancient Pyu era he had uncovered on various digs; he knew instinctively that they were safer in his home than in national museums operated by a voracious government with no sense of civic value or shared history. Others hoarded secret libraries, unpublished writings, and unsung songs. There were also family archives; the dappled portrait of a grandfather who had come down from the mountains or over from India or China to make his fortune, or a framed graduation certificate dating back to a time when Burma’s education system was the envy of its neighbors.

While Elizabeth records the enduring sediment of personal histories she also, inevitably, follows a trail of destruction. City Hall recently announced its plans to transform Yangon into a mega city within the next 30 years and these buildings – hitherto disregarded – now sit on prime property at the heart of a hopeful Central Business District with ambitions of becoming a bustling Asian hub. The dreaded red signs appear with ever-increasing persistence. Erected by the city municipality, they declare a building unsafe for human habitation and indicate in no uncertain terms that whoever dwells within must seek accommodation elsewhere as the old prepares to make way for the new. Yangon’s grander colonial edifices await developers willing to invest in boutique hotels, bespoke residences and offices, or high-end restaurants, but the smaller, less-recognized structures depicted in this book stand before the wrecker’s ball.

Elizabeth’s images warn us, times up! Ready or not Yangon has to catch up with the rest of the world. The time has come to synch the local errant currency to a global market, lay fiber-optic cables, and tune into fast-paced Twitter feeds. And while we must welcome this end to an enforced hibernation another secret is divulged – the illicit, guilty urge to buck against the trend of perpetual change and keep Yangon the way it was. But pragmatic urban planners would no doubt remind us that we shouldn’t romanticize what it is like to live amid the debris of a folded Empire. These anachronistic buildings were constructed to different standards of safety and comfort. There are no fire escapes here, and in the dank narrow gaps that run behind the alleyways, rotting sewage festers in century-old drains and vermin proliferate. Even the wealthiest of philanthropists and most well-intentioned preservationists will struggle to muster the funds needed to maintain the now-precarious social and architectural fabric of downtown Yangon.

Here, then, are the dregs of history. In the pages that follow, witness an excavation of lives lived for too long behind closed doors. Elizabeth’s photographs document, in meticulous detail, an end and a beginning; the beginning of a new city, a city where time has very suddenly begun to speed up.

Emma Larkin

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Plates















A Shelf

The fragrant, clean light that follows an early season monsoon taps through the living room. Its brilliant journey calls forth the objects arranged on the opposing wall, each of which is an argument for its owner's dignity. Five bottles of nail polish, all a slightly different hue, rest on a single, slender shelf. Each bottle stands alone, not touching the others. Two of the seals are unbroken. Above them a ledger of debts hangs from a rusted clip, to the right a paper panel with red and gold Chinese letters, and below sits another shelf of ointments, medicine, and a small container of toothpicks. All five nail polish bottles perch on the right half of their shelf – fashioned from some scrap of cove molding and painted a mossy green to match the wall. On the left side lie two nail clippers which, when displayed so, look like the bodies of drowsy grasshoppers.

The approach is one through darkness – the stairwell unlit and steep. This upward-reaching tunnel smells of dampness and old teak. The stairs flex a bit underfoot, but not so much as to give the sense that I might fall through. Like so many of the buildings in the center city, this is a British row house. Its radiant stained glass fanlights are covered in a century of soot. Below each faint and dusty half-moon, twined teak shutters keep out the mounting heat of midday. Through the slats in these shutters, hypnotic bars of light escape and travel around the apartment, the off-chance of their brightness christening where they fall.

On the roof, several satellite dishes turn their empty bowls to the sky. They look like cup coral on the ocean floor, designed to collect what little light filters down. In the evening, the dishes do not work, for rarely is power provided after dark. Yangon oscillates between too much light and not enough of it. This wobbly relationship to radiance demands courage from the city's inhabitants and defines each day.

Sixty years ago, the government divided and parceled out many of Yangon's old colonial buildings, granting rooms, and sometimes whole floors, to random people who could never afford such lavish construction. They were trying to facilitate the creation of a catchall, quasi-homogenous Burmese identity. They placed accordion players alongside seamen, Indians alongside Armenians, teachers alongside seamstresses, mohinga sellers alongside jade polishers.

Today, the first floor of this fin-de-siècle home is an informal retail shop where spices hang in bags from strings. The top of each translucent, mangosteen-sized sachet has been tied

off with an elaborately looped yellow elastic band. Cardamom on one string, star anise on the next, then chili peppers, and finally annatto seeds. Some residents can only afford a single meal's worth of cooking oil and so a few tablespoons are ladled into the same tiny plastic satchels and sold for fifty kyat. Those too hang in the window. In the back, an elderly man listens to the low static rumble of the radio and looks up as I pass his display.

The grandmother upstairs sends down for some Max Cola when she opens her door to me. Her house has little in it and every object on the shelves, on the table, in the kitchen is selectively chosen. Roaring and opalescent, the bare humanity of her selectivity awes me immediately. It floats through this house as wind moves through a pitch of birch. Stirring one object, then the next, coaxing the contents of the entire room into a sort of sublime, quiet, effortless conversation.

In the living room, next to the line of nail polish bottles, a bangle hangs on a hook that sprouts uncannily from a cartoon decoration. Two puffy marshmallow characters cling to each other either out of fear or fondness. And the hook, so out of place, emerges where their pink and yellow bellies touch. A map of the world is tacked beneath their embrace. Somewhere someone sanctioned this map, made it available at stores, allowed the printing press to print ten thousand copies. It is perhaps the most common domestic decoration I have come across. When I was a kid I loved maps. The journeys they implied were always within reach. But here the map means something else.

Hours later, my friend Thuya and I will be drinking sugar cane juice by the High Court and he will say, "We are like the people by the window. We see the world going by but we cannot touch it." I look back at this image of the map on Ma Htike Htike's wall and see that it pacifies by encouraging a limited sense of wonder. On the wall the world remains a geometric image. Myanmar is on the map. It is blue and Norway is also blue. Beneath the map on another slender shelf are two aerosol cans: one for air freshener and the other to kill bugs.

The wall is defenseless against the meaning that I take from it. But I did not arrange these items just so. It was the work of Ma Htike Htike, and so each object obeys – before they bend to my interpretive whim – her hands. They are slender, non-expressive hands that mostly lie at her sides unless purposefully engaged. Ma Htike Htike's husband passed away, and her son, whose wife has also passed, works on an international cargo boat. His

daughter lives here with Ma Htike Htike. These women survive on the money he sends back. I don't know how much he mails each month or whether the money always reaches them. But I can see that each item on this wall represents intentional expenditure beyond the ordinary.

The wall on which the shelves and map hang has been painted green many times. When a layer is sufficiently worn and sun-bleached, it is covered over; that is if there is money enough to afford the paint. Sometimes many years pass when the wall needs a new coat but does not get one—the years when Ma Htike Htike's husband had fallen ill, for instance.

At the top of the room, a line of portraits and paintings balances on the cove molding. Each frame is attached to the wall by a guy-wire. The bracket is near the top so that the upper half of each image hovers out over the room – a design choice that was made very purposefully with the viewer in mind. The photograph of a baby in a red singlet crawling towards the camera is Ma Htike Htike's granddaughter. She is in high school now and is every bit as slight and sincerely pretty as her grandmother.

Next to the baby photo, a woman performs a traditional dance and next to her, another woman plays a Burmese harp. They posed and their well-positioned likenesses were cast in permanent paint. Moving right along the beam there is a landscape of the Mandalay Palace and its moat. Mandalay remained free for twenty-six years after the fall of Yangon to the British. It was the last royal capital of the last independent Burmese kingdom.

Years later, a Burmese man who had left his home to study at a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania would tell me that this painting is a symbol of Burmese imperial pride. I had mistaken it for a souvenir from a family trip.

I flip through my storehouse of photographs of Ma Htike Htike's house to find an image of the matron herself. She has a round face, perceptive eyes and the arms of an ex-dancer. Her longyi rests high on her hips, and tiny, silver-rimmed glasses sit equally high on her small nose. Her fingernails are not painted red. Nor are her granddaughter's.

I look at her and then I look back to the wall. The light is tapping through the room again. A laminated black and white photograph glows green – as digital prints of old, scanned photographs often do – with age. In its rows of uniformed school children line up in front of a sign that reads, "Elementary School" in Chinese. This image was probably taken in the

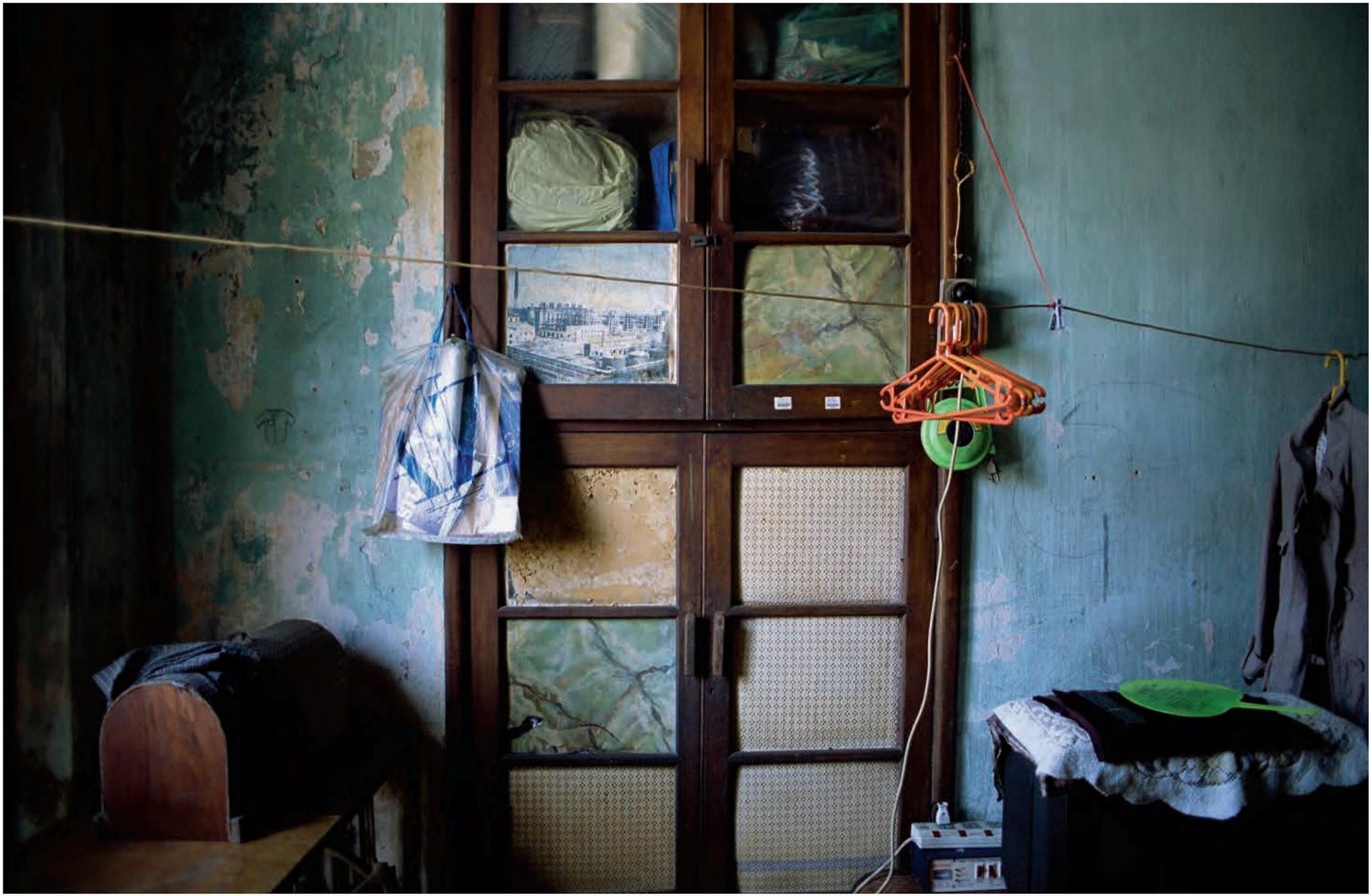
1930's, back when the number of people immigrating to Yangon surpassed the number immigrating New York City. Ma Htike Htike's husband, the accordion player whose image hangs from a rusty hook, was Chinese. Most likely he is one of the school children in the photograph – a first generation transplant, searching for an opportunity, tossing down wobbly roots in Yangon.

If I did not see a certain genius in the arrangement of pictures and bottles on this wall then what little right I have to take these photographs would dissolve. Still I must admit, finally, that the nail polish, the paintings, the green paint, the all of it, cannot be divorced from the circumstances that bore them. It is an old story, a story in which most humans are not characters at all but rather akin to the deep seams of bituminous coal buried in the earth. And yet through some strange chink in the whole humanist story-telling endeavor I am able to heap my praise upon the bare necessity of those that live here now. For to set aside the individual for the sake of witnessing only history and its poverty seems unwise. Were I to pity Ma Htike Htike, I fear I would steal her existence from her and with it would go the elemental beauty of the shelf that she fought so hard for and won.

Across the wall's grease-slicked planks I see the sun and bars of light skate, slowly turning the photos and the medicine bottles to dust. Here are small indulgencies and sanctuaries. There is grace in rhythmic arrangement of the objects and the way that each stands alone, gathering up its dignity and self-possession. In a cluttered cabinet, a bottle of nail polish is just some colored enamel. But the meaning of the nail polish bottle expands, doubles or even triples, here in this room. I think sometimes that the bottle's bright red appeal to beauty can save us from the plight of too much history. There is an incandescence that gathers around a person, and no matter the circumstances it goes on burning like a flame on a wick, emanating through shame, and want, and joy, and whatever else. When there are only a few objects in a life, you can glimpse that person's incandescence as you look at the little they possess. I look at this shelf and see the divine light that Ma Htike Htike's life throws. This, at least, no amount of power can control.













On the Roof

It is best to state my aims: I am reaching towards the ineffability of home through the cataloging of individual living rooms and their contents. I believe that it is possible to reach the sublime by drawing close to and worshipping the real. And little is more real than a person's home.

In English, the phrase "make yourself at home" appeared on the scene in 1894, roughly thirty years after the British laid down a grid atop the ruins of pre-colonial Yangon. I imagine the arrival of the phrase had as much to do with English colonization as it did with the widespread urban involution that took place over the preceding century across much of the English-speaking world. Up until that time the act of being at home somewhere unfamiliar had not occurred frequently enough to warrant the conjuring up of such a saying. And yet these words about being comfortable in a place not wholly one's own also suggest the inverse meaning. That a person could or even ought to be at home in a foreign land hints at a condition quite the opposite to what the phrase proposes: the feeling of being uncomfortable or out of place.

Home comes from the old-English word ham. Some five hundred years ago ham meant hamlet or a collection of homes, their whole comprising the lodestar around which life was oriented. Or put another way, a person's social network and topographical surroundings were all part of the same larger idea: Home, if you will, with a capital H.

Nowadays, if you look up home in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the first entry is: a house, apartment, or other shelter that is the usual residence of a person, family, or household. Only the fifth entry suggests that home might also be related to the world and the community beyond the dwelling's walls.

The evolution of the word home goes a long way towards explaining why ours is an age plagued by isolation. It has become a commonplace observation, especially in North America, that we are a people grouping for a renewed sense of place, of home, and community.

This subtle lack of "at home-ness" drove me to create this book and is the question that sits at the center of not just this collection, or of my work, but at the center of my life.

I have found small and varying cures for this ailment. I moved away from Oregon, which seemed to be the greatest cure of all, nearly a decade ago for work, putting me directly in line with most North Americans, who move to a new home at the staggering rate of once every four years for better employment opportunities. Such is life in our age. It is a way of being that was completely unthinkable one hundred and fifty years ago. So what then is it exactly that makes a home today, and why does it seem that the more "at home" we become the more distant home feels?

I am not sure that the people featured here are any more at home in their apartments than, say, a Mainer living in Park Slope, Brooklyn might feel but there was and still is, something about the apartments and homes in Yangon that I sensed might help me, us, them to better understand what home is as the 21st century opens. Home is not going extinct (thank goodness, I had feared the worst) but it is evolving, as definitions tend to do.

When asked to describe their homes, the Yangonites whose living rooms are featured here did not give descriptions of the physical attributes of the structures within which they reside nor of the surrounding topography or culture. Instead they spoke of the events that took place at home and of the people they lived alongside.

The longer I listened to them, the more I began to wonder if home has become the people we grow in tandem with as much as it is the physical structures we inhabit. The decoration of the home serves as a trigger – the oil spot on the wall reminds one woman of the time she sizzled Nga Myin to celebrate her sister's wedding – that helps inhabitants to conjure exactly whatever it is they wish to remember (and inversely sometimes that which they wish to forget.) In the end, a hundred different truths reside at each of our addresses.

On Mahabandoola Garden Street a group of birds tumbled wildly over some scattered rice left behind on the sidewalk. I stopped to revel in their dance. The damp from the previous day's monsoon was seeping out of the cement with the heat of the sun, filling the air with rising white wisps of moisture. Behind the birds, the Sule Pagoda's golden dome practically hummed, reflecting the morning's mounting light. The pagoda, which sits in the dead center of the old city and is the only architectural element that King Tharrawaddy did not raze in anticipation of British attack in the early 1850s, was being re-gilded. In a city awash in fancy construction projects, it had seemed to me one of the few changes that all of Yangon's residents would be able to enjoy, as entrance was free.

But a few days earlier a friend reminded me that most people could not afford to have their names engraved on a tile of gold for the pagoda. This honor – or parami, which in Buddhism refers to the perfection of certain virtues that cleanse one's karmic history – is reserved for the wealthiest, and often bloodiest members of Burmese society. As I snapped a few photos of the birds and the dome I thought about how the inhabitable and accessible areas of the city were shrinking. As Yangon's buildings grew taller, brighter, and more spacious, the city was also becoming smaller somehow, out of reach.

On the corner of Merchant and 36th street I sat down for a cup of milk tea under the great red awning of yet another turn-of-the-century building. The white Ionic columns inspired my stop. I sat sketching the building's façade, sipping tea, and mustering the energy needed to walk through the doors, into the foyer, upstairs, and hopefully, if all went well, into a stranger's living room. That was where your son found me. You will never believe this, but he waved me in, so I settled my bill, put on my backpack and began to follow him up the dark stairwell.

I can still see his hand, in the irregular shafts of light, flapping wildly behind him. Up we wound in a stairwell that was otherwise mostly dark, passing gated entries and office placards. I had to feel my way, trailing my own hand along the damp walls. On the landing between the fourth and topmost floor, sunshine finally fell around the single oversized window's iron transoms. Two giant sponges lay at the base of the wall beneath the window

to catch the rainwater that spilled in during the previous week's monsoons. A waterline ran down the wall to the sponges, which were over-full and puddling already.

The landing around the window at the top of the stairwell is different from the floors below. A single bamboo pole balances between the top of the doorframe and the top of the windowpane. It flexes beneath the weight of wet shirts and slacks. Taped on the door is a Buddhist dharma wheel; the edges of the paper curl in the humidity. Your son pushes the door open and we are, well, it was hard to say where we are exactly.

We stand in an L-shaped kitchen, the shorter half of which is just the little overhang that houses the stairwell. The door on the left of the small kitchen lets out into another room, and as I pass from the kitchen into it I begin to understand that we stand in the middle of your family home. Improvisation is the word that comes most easily to mind when describing this place.

Every room has been built informally around that stairwell door. It is as though Robinson Crusoe's fort has been transplanted to the top of the Department of the Interior. Some walls are constructed from hard wooden planks, others from tin, and some from concrete, brick and mortar. The roof is fashioned from a different jumble of materials – straw, plastic bags, tin sheeting, hardwood planks and bamboo poles. In some places clear sheets of plastic loop beneath bamboo rafters, the billows of which hold a bit of water and green algae.

U Aung Than, your home perches deliriously on the roof of the old Indian Taxation Office. When we first met, months ago, you were fighting to stay here – in the building where you had been born, in the high-up hideaway your father built by hand. He had worked as a delivery boy for the government offices two floors down and had been permitted to sleep in the stairwell on the roof. Piece by piece, he expanded his kingdom in the sky.

When we met, you were forty-two years old, and had lived on the roof your entire life. The junta had recently posted a sign declaring their intention to redevelop the building they had

abandoned when they relocated the capital to Naypidaw five years earlier. You and the two other families who lived around the two other stairwell doors on the roof had put eviction off for a couple months but the end was near.

Your living room is uncommon in so many ways, including its scattershot fullness. Along the southern wall twenty-two bags of 'important papers' hang on five hooks. The bags are made of thick plastic – some are striped, many are yellow, some blue and more white. In the half-chimney between your chair's armrest and the metal chest-of-drawers an additional document collection is stored. When the Indian Taxation Office closed you retrieved both of these pieces of furniture with your son, carrying them up the wide stairwell at night. The inside of the chest is full of papers too, which include an invitation to work abroad from long ago (you turned it down,) carbon copies of the letters you wrote asking that you be allowed to stay here, your marriage certificate, and years of receipts from your various businesses. Behind all of this excessive documentation, blossoms of moisture warp the wall's pigment, recalling the blue clusters of a flowering hydrangea.

When the capital was relocated, you say you were permitted to sell off the furniture from the offices below. The teak desks earned eight hundred dollars each, and helped to support your family for the last half of a decade. There were two left when I first arrived. You had been saving them for a moment of crisis. Two months later they were gone.

When I hear this I can't help but think about how a home used to be an ecosystem providing not just shelter but sustenance too – forests yielded firewood and sometimes venison. This type of dwelling seems to me to be the hardest to imagine leaving behind, for the shape of one's life takes on the shape of the land that surrounds it. I had hardly expected to find a similar symbiotic relationship on the roof of a building with imposing Ionic columns, and yet there you were, proverbially pulling in the occasional buck from the forested floors below.

Two teenage girls, your daughters, sit beside a television set in the living room; and an older woman, with thick cataracts, perches on a low stool at the edge of the habitation.

The girls study and the woman peels garlic. The dividing line between this open, airy home and roof is unclear. But as I get closer to your mother-in-law, what lies beyond the rooftop slowly comes into view. I can see the Yangon River from here. I walk over to the edge and look down.

From this angle Yangon appears war-torn, as though bombs had fallen at a rate of about one per block, taking out homes and shops. That's how many pocked-marked demolition sites there are. The dull clatter of the sledgehammer hitting brick rings out. Between this building and the river, a Korean skyscraper rises. Your son stands by my side and together we look out as sand-heavy boats snake downstream.

That is when you arrive. Someone told you that a foreigner was in your house and so you rushed home in your neatly pressed shirt and found me here. You, who I would get to know so well, and you whom I would never photograph, you, U Aung Than, arrive. A light slick of sweat swims across your shy face. I remember that and your leather belt and the seriousness of our handshake. You look more professional than I, for my outfit borders on touristy caricature. I am wearing, if I remember correctly, fishermen pants the color of an elderly monk's robe, a light button-up top covered in blue flowers, and flip-flops.

That first day, months ago, you had asked for my passport number and name. I suspected you did this so you could check to make sure that I would cause no trouble. This told me as much about you as it was intended to tell you about me. You are a man who has ways of finding out who I am. You flipped open a small spiral bound notebook that you keep in your breast pocket. I wrote both my name and my passport number at the top of the page. And so we began here – wanting to trust each other and not knowing entirely how. Later you will say that it was my face that told you what my name would later confirm.

It will take some searching but eventually I discover that long before this was the Myanmar Livestock and Fisheries Development Bank and before it became the Indian Taxation Office it was originally the A. Scott & Company Building. Alexander Scott, a merchant from Scotland, imported wine and exported cheroots. Here he manufactured soda water for

the colony. When the British left, the building would become government property, hence its later uses. Through these transferences in ownership, the southernmost corner of the building's roof belonged to your father and now to you too, although no piece of paper properly attests to the ways in which you made the old A. Scott & Company headquarters your own.

In the center of the roof there is a glassed-in room. Your father called this something like "the observatory," his first experiment in rooftop building. It looks like part-widow's watch, part-greenhouse. When the Indian Embassy moved, you stole their sign and hung it on the door as a joke. Inside, in the evenings when the sun has dipped below the horizon, your son comes here to study and play checkers with his sisters as you once did when you were a boy.

Here, U Aunt Than, I have brought with me the photos that I took on that first visit to your home some months ago. Here is the Max Cola poster with the astronauts from 1996 that hung in the kitchen. It was a gift from your uncle who never told you where it had come from. Here is the living room, with its single teal electric fan tacked onto the rough-hewn tree trunk that you mounted across the room for the sole purpose of holding that fan. How the days became less hot thereafter.

Here is the satellite dish, and the ladder that you prop up against the highest reaches of the roof. You venture out to this crow's nest when you need space and time to think. Here is an image of your son looking at a photo of his classmates before he hands it to me as a gift so that I remember him. How could I forget?

Here are your son's trophies and the trophy case you purchased especially for him. You still remember the night you carried it up the five flights of stairs in your arms. You still remember your anticipation and his delight. Here is the string of lights shrouded over the Hindu portrait and the lucky owls you purchased years ago to bless this house. Here is your wife's hair dye and the hair dye boxes. Some of them are foreign and she refuses to throw those out.

Here is the bed where the two of you have slept for nearly twenty years as two nested commas. Here is the home that housed your family for two generations. Here are the things you own, but most importantly here, just outside the frame, are those who did the owning and those whom you have aged alongside.

I remember the day you gave me a tour of the rest of the building, most of which I promised not to write about or photograph because you could get in trouble. You are the only person with the keys to unlock these doors and I had to wonder if your selling of the teak desks was actually unsanctioned. I changed your name to protect you just in case. In fact, I changed every name in this book, substituting one friend for another. Now I tend to think of each person also as the alias that I gave. I am surprised when I go back to my original notebooks to find that U Aung Than lived nearby in a different house, with a different family. U Aung Than, to whom am I speaking, and where do you live? Most likely nowhere nearby now.

Here is a series of small deaths imperceptible to all except the owner: first a name, then a home, and finally some aspect of the recalling. U Aung Than, you live in my mind just as surely as I live in yours, and somewhere between the two we know that even though a home might be taken away, the right to feel at home can't be. No matter how loudly the blood may go on begging to return, we mustn't forget that in the gaze of those we surround ourselves with, all of the paper owls and roof perches that we have loved and lost still live, if only as an echo.























Holding Hands

On my second- to- last morning during my first long stint of work in Yangon, I discovered an open door on the corner of Bo Aung Kyaw and Merchant Street. The building was as majestic as you might expect, given that it stood just a block south of the Secretariat. Above the door a wooden sign no bigger than a breadbox read "Gandhi Hall." At the threshold I paused for a moment as I often did, trying to feel out if this was a place that would grant me safe passage.

To an outsider, an open door is an invitation. I could always play the ignorant foreigner to my advantage and carried around a Lonely Planet Guidebook for that exact purpose. Once, when being interrogated by secret police, I had paraded its damp pages before the policeman's snout. "You mean this isn't the old Governor's Mansion?" I said in a confused and sweet tone. "Who knew?"

I stood on the threshold for a moment, got really quiet, and listened. No inner voices wrestled in my mind, so I slid the gate aside and, with my breath trapped in my chest, wound up two, three, four flights of stairs.

On the topmost floor the door to the building's interior was ajar. I pushed it and a huge breezy hall opened in front of me. It was a grand room and almost entirely empty. Despite the heat of the day none of the fans spun.

The room was a theater of some kind. At the far end was a small stage with red curtains and scalloped valances. Scattered between where I stood and the stage, a handful of Corinthian columns kept the ceiling from collapsing.

Just to my right, Hamar Oo was bent over what must have been a twenty-five-year old textbook. Her study table was small and along the side that met the wall about ten different books were piled up. Not one appeared to have been printed in the 21st century.

I was, at the time, roughly the same age as those books and looked even younger, despite

my linen pants and conservative top purchased secondhand from a street vendor specializing in clothing for respectable, older women. Hamar Oo, who it turned out was twenty years old and also looked much younger, jumped at the sight of me so right away I explained to her that I was taking photographs of the interiors of Yangon's old buildings that were to be demolished.

Hamar Oo did not look at me like I was trouble. Anyone old enough to study radiology was also probably too old to trust me immediately, but Hamar Oo was exceptional and I was grateful.

Her black hair was plaited down the right side of her head and pulled back into a very low, meticulous ponytail. She wore a silly bright pink t-shirt with a coy, blond cartoon girl printed on it. The t-shirt had the appearance of trying to be more than it was. A flared cotton collar of printed orange fabric was sewn around the neck, and two baggy pockets adorned the sides. It was a confused piece of clothing and yet perhaps it served a purpose, for in it Hamar Oo's body looked like that of a young teenager – boxy, limber, underdeveloped.

She reached out her delicate arm and looped it in mine. Hamar Oo did not pull me into the hall, but rather, through quiet suggestions made by pressuring the inside of my own arm, led me there. Along the wall nearest to the entrance five woven mats covered the floor. In front of these mats a clothesline sagged between two of the hall's decorative columns, an improvised partition. This was, I reasoned, for Hamar Oo did not speak of the objects gathered there, where her family slept.

Gandhi Hall both was and was not her home, Hamar Oo said. Originally she came from the delta region south of Yangon. But then Cyclone Nargis had hit, flooding her village, washing away her house, stranding her and the rest of the family on the roof for days. When the water receded they made their way to Yangon and took up residence in a single room apartment, which they quickly could not afford. So they moved here, where there was no landlord and not rent to pay.

Her father had been a county clerk and now he worked as a day laborer for a steel company when he was needed, as did her two older brothers. About a year after coming to the city, Hamar Oo had passed the entrance exam for university and so the entire family stayed on, precariously living in Gandhi Hall, putting every ounce of their earnings into this bright girl's future.

Lining that one small portion of the hall's periphery was the entirety of the family's possessions. There wasn't much – some face creams, a stick of thanaka paste, notebooks, t-shirts, the mats and longyis – a basketful of flotsam washed up at the flood line.

When I saw the room, all I could think about was its colonial past and the circumstances that left Hamar Oo and her family squatting in it. The hall's largeness crept up on the clothing and the mats and made these everyday objects appear both dignified and completely inconsequential. I couldn't help but wonder whether Hamar Oo got both a sense of self-worth and first-hand insight into the unjustness of colonization by living in such an opulent structure. I asked her about the building's colonial history – she knew nothing. And then I asked her how she felt living in a historically significant colonial building. She said she didn't think about it much. It was an oddly liberating discovery. For everything the English had deprived the Burmese of, perhaps an unmediated experience of the present was not on the list.

I had wanted to press her further and yet I didn't. How do you ask a person about their understanding of their own poverty through the lens of history while using the English of third graders? And besides, out of mutual respect, there are some questions you do not ask.

Over time, I learned to ground my enthusiasm for the city's closeness to the markers of fortune in an awareness that what shelter residents had was often only passing. They did not judge themselves kindly (or not) for inhabiting a sliver of a once fancy structure. Hamar Oo and her family would eventually find themselves adrift again, that much was certain.

When I returned to the United States I researched the building and found that at the turn of the last century the hall housed the offices of the English language newspaper, The Rangoon Times. This was the first paper to appear under colonial rule and it was the last, ceasing circulation only when the Japanese occupied Burma in 1942. The Indian and Burmese governments purchased the building in 1951 as a memorial to Mahatma Gandhi and handed over its management to a Board of Trustees. For much of the intervening half of a century, they managed Gandhi Hall as a gathering place for the local community.

It wasn't until the country opened and the dust settled, about three years after I took the photos featured in this book, that I discovered one of the most important events in recent Burmese history had taken place in the very room where Hamar Oo and her family slept. In July of 1990, the National League for Democracy (NLD) drafted the Gandhi Hall Declaration, demanding that the military hand over rule of Myanmar.

The two years prior to this had been contemporary Myanmar's bloodiest. In early 1988 unrest spread through the country, leading to the resignation of Ne Win, whose military rule had stretched more than twenty-five years. Demanding a democratic future, tens of thousands of protestors took to the streets on August 8, 1988. Martial law was quickly imposed, the 1974 constitution repealed, and the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) was formed to crack down on the uprising. Estimates suggest that the SLORC killed somewhere between three-to-ten thousand people in the month and a half that followed.

Two years later, the SLORC held the first general election in Myanmar since 1960. No one knew why this repressive regime would opt to hold an election, but many supposed that it was a charade intended to appeal to western investors. The NLD won 392 of the 485 contested seats but for months nothing happened. At Gandhi Hall, elected NLD members met, and in open defiance of many laws restricting freedom of expression and the right to congregate, called upon the SLORC to convene the parliament in September of that year. According to some sources, as many as ten thousand civilians gathered around Gandhi Hall to show their support for the NLD.

I have yet to find a single image of the event, so thoroughly did the junta erase it from the history books. Instead of beginning to transition away from a single party system, as was promised, the junta imprisoned the elected members of the NLD. For many, the day they drafted the Gandhi Hall Declaration was to be their last public appearance.

When I entered Gandhi Hall some twenty-one years later, it was empty except for Hamar Oo and her family. They had been squatting here for nearly a year. They paid no rent, had no landlord, and made do with what was here. There was no electricity and no running water. They carried what water they used up the four flights of stairs. At night Hamar Oo studied by flashlight and, when there wasn't money enough for batteries, by candlelight. They used the hall's old public bathrooms, and when they wanted the plumbing to work they poured a few cups of water into the ceramic basin, forcing their excrement down. Two of the stalls were "closed" when I got there, having reached the limits of improvisation already.

In the hall almost everything that could have suggested its long and convoluted history was packed away – everything except a single portrait of Gandhi on the stage at the far end of the room. Painted from a famous photograph, the portrait shows Gandhi wearing small round glasses. His upper torso is shrouded in a khadi, a piece of homespun cloth that became one of the many symbols of Indian independence. This image, so perfectly succinct in its politics, sat on a stage in a famous-hall-turned-squatter-home, in an uncanny country that is as isolated as it once was exploited.

The portrait stood, if that is the right word, on the floor, propped up by a few moldering books. The frame was sturdy and simple and lent the image a spare kind of heft. A thin sheet of plastic floor covering – the kind that was used throughout the city to preserve that old teak from water damage – rippled and puckered beneath the portrait. Long strands of spun tinsel looped cheerfully across the proscenium. A blood red velour curtain hung along the back wall. I could make out the faint outlines of some lettering there, the final word in the string of four read "celebration."

When I asked Hamar Oo about the portrait, she told me that Gandhi Hall had been a place for weddings and other parties. She didn't know that her home had been the site of one of the most dramatic political acts of defiance in her country's recent history.

As we made our way to the back of the hall, Hamar Oo stopped in front of a square of plywood sheets laid out on the floor. The square was about fifteen feet wide and fifteen feet across. I could not tell what it was at first, the sheeting looked paper-thin and its many layers were warped from moisture. On top of the sheeting hundreds of small Brillo-like cocoons lay. I peered a little closer.

"Cat feces," Hamar Oo said so matter-of-factly that I can still remember being taken aback by her forthrightness and her vocabulary. "There are three creatures that live here," she said, "birds, cats, and humans. There are many, many birds, ten cats, and eight humans."

I looked up and saw that a huge portion of the ceiling was missing; it had collapsed during the same storm that had set Hamar Oo and her family adrift. The family had arranged the fallen paneling to mimic the missing section exactly; that way they were physically reminded not to step into this dangerous area beneath the hole in the ceiling. The cats had turned the warning into their litter box.

I followed Hamar Oo to the back rooms where her brothers had pulled all of the event chairs, stacking them haphazardly along the building's southern wall to rid the hall of clutter. She slipped her hand into mine then and I will never forget its weight.

Shortly thereafter, her father arrived. He was suspicious and didn't speak English. He kept looking at me and at his daughter, not trusting either of us. He wanted her to keep the family secrets, and he did not know if she knew which ones to guard. Hamar Oo's mother, whom I had sensed hiding from me in the recesses of the grand space, appeared then too, bolstered by her husband's arrival. She wanted to know if I was able to bring her daughter to the United States to study. I knew I could put her in touch with the private university where my own mother worked, but even with my help, the chances of Hamar Oo and her

family being able to accomplish the many steps necessary to obtain a student visa were small. So far-fetched was the possibility of going to North America that many in Myanmar equated my standing in their living room with a visit from a genie born from a lamp. That I had arrived in the middle of their precarious existence was proof enough of my transformative powers.

Though I was unable to bring Hamar Oo to the United States, there was value to our meeting that we both felt. We had led our entire lives in realms imagined but completely unknown to each other. For one afternoon our vision overlapped and it was astonishing. I felt that I had a child's eyes that were opening for the first time on a world I had no name for but there Hamar Oo stood amidst it all. And I recognized in her something familiar – that seemingly boundless hope for the future that makes a young woman's face so beautiful.

John Berger reminds us that to see is to be seen. I have recently begun to wonder if we can reverse the statement: to be seen is to see. Last year I turned thirty. And last year I heard the same snippet of self-reflective wisdom from three different women in their sixties. Nothing is worse than not being seen, they told me. I ought to enjoy being looked at now – at the store, walking down the street, waiting in line to purchase a new shirt – because one day it will cease. One day, no one will look. According to them this was the most difficult part of getting older.

Hamar Oo, you have lived so much of your life as an invisible person, as someone who does not get attention. No one noticed when you were on the roof of your home in the delta after Cyclone Nargis; no one noticed when you lived here in one of the more famous buildings in Yangon as a squatter. Then someone did. Will you please tell me what you saw when you looked at me?

When I returned to give you these photographs, to share what I had learned about the hall's history and to ask you what you saw, the room was still there but you and your family were not.

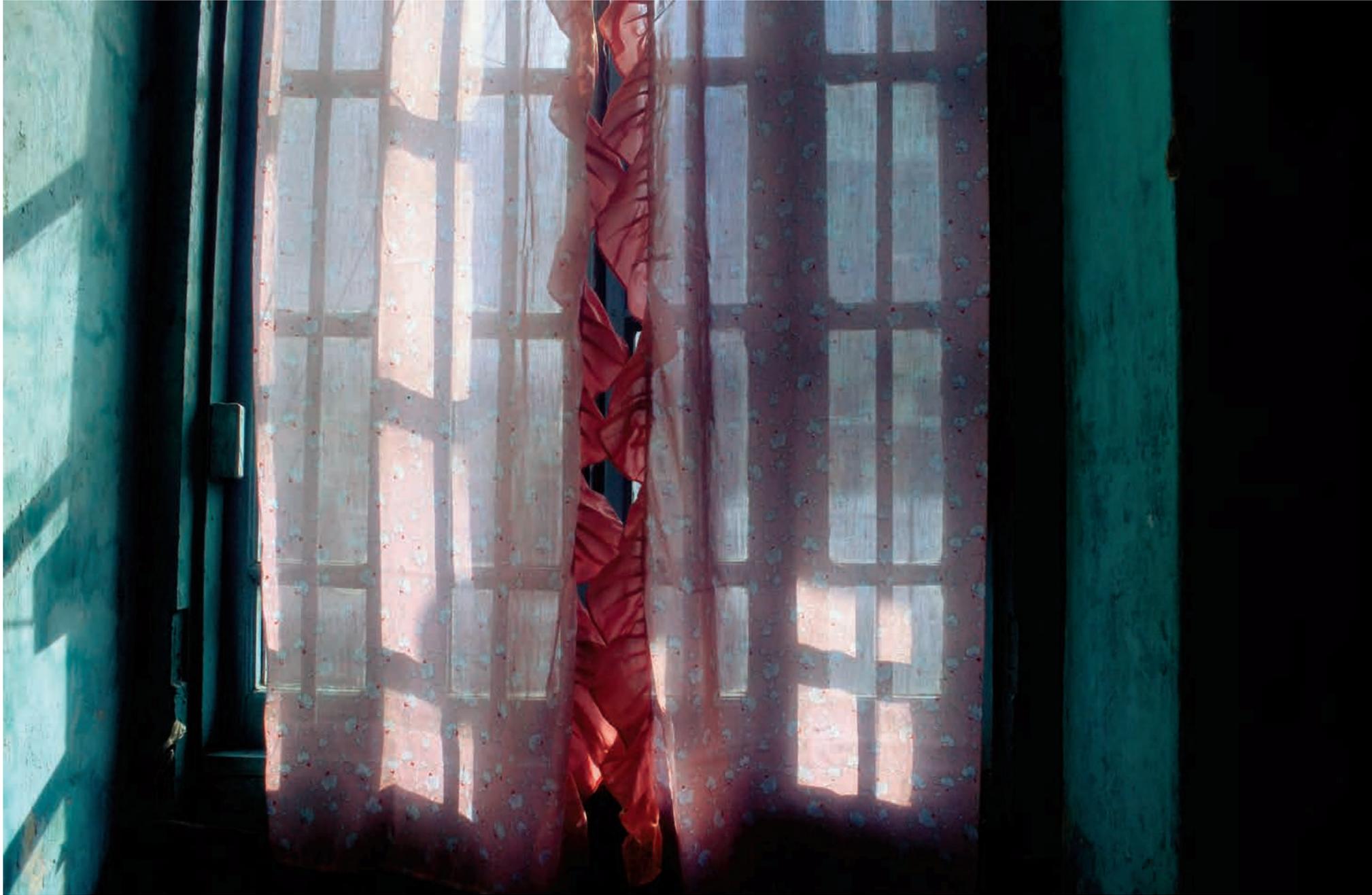


















Afterword by Dr. Thant Thaw Kaung

I could hear the dripping sound of water from the roof as I walked the grounds of the Secretariat Building. Bushes adorned with bright coloured flowers surround this enormous crimson red compound. As I walked into the building, I was greeted with an old and crumbling staircase that might have been gorgeous at one time. The smell of mold and pigeon droppings filled the air. I had to be careful not to step on the broken glass that had dropped down from the windows. Standing in this massive building, I found it hard to believe that such magnificence and majesty was hidden by massive trees and high-rise buildings in the middle of downtown Yangon. The Secretariat was at one time the central nerve of British Burma, but now, it stood silently behind the gates, slowly withering away back into the Earth, forgotten and neglected.

The city of Yangon was once one of the grandiose capitals of the British colonial period and it is still unique in terms of the presence of hundreds of heritage buildings erected during the late 19th century to early 20th century. However, much of the city's unique architectural heritage has been demolished in the past 10 years.

When I first heard about the government's privatization plan for many of Yangon's heritage buildings in early 2007, I was immediately worried about how these buildings were going to be preserved. I started to see many heritage buildings knocked down in the central downtown by private business owners, cronies mostly.

Apart from these privatization efforts, another factor caused the disappearance of Yangon's magnificent buildings. With the speculation of the imminent arrival of many new foreign investments, people played the real estate market, causing prices to skyrocket in 2008. Moreover, many owners joined with developers to get notice from corrupted government officials to place "Dangerous Building (DB) status" on their holdings, stating that the structures occupying their lots were not sound and thus had to be knocked down.

Last but not least, the final factor that contributed to the damage and deterioration of these buildings was the fact that the government had moved out to the new capital (Naypyidaw) in 2007. Consequently many of the old government buildings became vacant.

There was no proper planning for the maintenance of these buildings and hence they have not been used during the six intervening years. The grand Secretariat Building was once maintained as the Office of Ministers of Independent Myanmar. Today it is abandoned.

In early 2010, a local foundation called Yangon Heritage Trust (YHT) was established with businessmen, architects and activists under the leadership of Dr. Thant Myint-U. YHT has organized several conferences, seminars and workshops to inform the public, as well as to the authorities, that Yangon is our city and its buildings need to be preserved properly. With the continuous advocacy of YHT through various media, the Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC) recently announced that demolishing would be done only with the permission of the YHT's approval. All of the demolishing was stopped by 2013, but the city needs to be rebuilt through conservative development. We eagerly would like government awareness for proper conservation of the remaining heritage buildings, otherwise the city will remain in its existing condition. Merely stopping the demolition is not enough. Proper preservation and conservative development of these buildings has to begin.

At present, immediate engineering assessment of all Yangon's heritage buildings is urgently needed and conservative renovation of these buildings is required. If the city's architectural wonders are left alone, many of these unique buildings will soon collapse and will be lost forever.

We have been trying to advocate that the social and economic lives of people staying in these buildings need to be improved as well. Still Lives from a Vanishing City is the result of an enormous effort to document and photograph the people living in these buildings. Elizabeth Rush interviewed and photographed hundreds of the people living in Yangon's heritage buildings, making a record of their lives. This book, an archive of sorts, is invaluable since no one formerly knew how these people resided in these heritage buildings.

As Elizabeth points out, many people have stayed in these buildings for several decades. And many of those were forced out due to the government's privatization plan to build high-rises in the downtown area. Some of the projects have been saved by the YHT but

some were not. We have advocated to the government as well as to the people that conservative development of Yangon can be done by preservation of these heritage buildings in the downtown central business district. New and high-rise buildings can be built somewhere else in the city at a separate location away from this heritage area. We are proposing that just under 1% of the total area of Yangon should be preserved. However, our biggest challenge is the vicious eagerness of developers who want to build modern high-rise buildings to earn millions of dollars. This challenge is even bigger after recent reform processes that have further morphed the real estate prices downtown. Today in Yangon square footage is as expensive as and sometimes even higher than in nearby Bangkok. But these changes do not benefit the people. As Elizabeth rightly points out, the benefits of the sales of these old buildings turned skyscrapers are going into the hands of cronies who own construction companies and not to those whose lives have been turned upside down.

Yangon, at one time, was an extravagant city, showing off the splendour of British imperialism. It acted as a flourishing regional port for a large section of Southeast Asia. It had all kinds of wonderful Victorian-style buildings such as hospitals, huge covered markets, post offices, high courts, a secretariat and many commercial merchant buildings. This heritage is quite rare to see, undisrupted, nowadays in Asia. In Yangon these buildings were mostly forgotten due to the military rule and isolation of our country for over six decades. Now, since most of the sanctions have been eased, it is the right time to show off the great buildings of this city. But government initiative is quite slow in response to this urgent opportunity and if it is missed it will never come again.

At present, according to the heritage building list, there are only 189 buildings that belong to the government. But the list is incomplete as there are many privately owned buildings that need to be protected and preserved as well. Therefore, a proper conservation law has to be enacted as soon as possible to preserve these buildings properly. The current Protection and Preservation of Cultural Heritage Regions Law passed in 1998 and amended in 2009 can protect any building that is over 100 years old but it remains unclear as to how this law applies to urban areas. At present, the Yangon Heritage Trust is expanding the list

of heritage buildings by including privately owned buildings and religious edifices of various faiths.

Apart from preservation of these heritage buildings, we all must strive hard to have a green city as well as to have a nice and scenic riverfront for our Yangonians. We have to thank the goodwill of the current government together with the Yangon City Development Committee because they have started to renovate some parks into really nice recreation places for the people. Recently, the Maha Bandoola Garden has become a really lovely place of tranquil greenery right in the centre of the city for people to visit and enjoy. However, we are very sad that Yangonians do not have a chance to have a good riverfront view as it is still blocked by commercial warehouses and some blocks have already been taken over by the crony companies to build high-rise buildings.

One good point at the moment is the government's restriction on the building of high-rises that can block the view of the great Shwe Dagon Pagoda. However, there also should be some laws that restrict the blockage of the view of old heritage buildings by large and oversized billboards.

These buildings hold stories about a lush and vibrant part of Myanmar's history and the fact that they are going into ruin simply cannot be ignored. In each building, a part of our national heritage is preserved; a part of our history and past will always be retained there in the bedrock of the city. The time has come for us to step up and put all of our efforts in to try to preserve these buildings. A small yet rare window of opportunity has opened up and we must act as soon as we possibly can, to allow our history to live on with these grand relics of our past ...

Dr Thant Thaw Kaung, CEO, Myanmar Book Centre and Director Yangon Heritage Trust

November 2013





Thanks:

In a recent interview Junot Diaz said that books take time in part because in the process of writing them the author has to become the person who is capable of finishing the book. The writing of a book requires a humanity greater than that which the writer possesses at the outset. But where does that additional humanity come from? Certainly from the people we surround ourselves with. Their love and attention buoys and their well-tuned eyes continue to turn over our texts even when we can no longer look.

This book took, from start to close, five years. Gratitude for friendships, kindnesses, inspiration and love ran the length of this project and I wish now to repeat what, hopefully, you all know already.

First and foremost, to the people of Yangon who welcomed me in when I knocked. I ate so many delicious homemade breakfasts in your living rooms, and so thoroughly enjoyed the hours I spent beside you, listening to your stories. Your generosity is immense and continues to circulate in my memory and in the world as I work to share all that you so selflessly gave to me. Thank you also to all of my impromptu translators, the children of Yangon.

Thank you to my mother and father, John and Martha, none of this would be possible had I not been so well loved by the two of you. The deep-seated contentment your love has given is a well I draw from often and with profound respect. Thank you.

Thank you to Indaka at the American Burmese Buddhist Association who, when pressed for advice, told me simply to go with an open heart and that the world would take care of the rest.

Thank you Albert Wen and Things Asian Press for supporting this book from the very first day. You came to me five years ago asking if I wanted to make a photography book of modern day Myanmar. When I told you that I wanted to photograph the living rooms in soon-to-be-demolished homes in Yangon, you did not bat an eye. Instead you trusted me. So few young writers or photographers are ever this generously supported and it is on your faith and kindness that I built my career. I cannot thank you enough.

Thank you to Carole and Bill Cowie, my second set of parents. Thank you Leah Brecher Cohn and Suzanne Lecht, my other mothers.

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Thank you Fiona and Zoey and Heather and Anna for being fantastic hiking and biking companions. Our trips bring me the peace and joy and sense of adventure every child trapped in an adult body needs. Thank you David and Becky, growing up alongside both of you has been an honor.

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Still Lifes from a Vanishing City
essays and photographs from Yangon
By Elizabeth Rush
with an introduction by Emma Larkin and afterword by Thant Thaw Kaung

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