

Suang U's Letters from Thailand

*I walked away in pre-dawn light from Po Leng,
through fields we farmed for years.
I remembered the scrawl I left for you
on the kitchen table: "Forgive me, mother."
On a freighter big as our village and packed
with immigrants, I sailed from China
to Thailand. Writing this letter to you
on the boat, I felt a hand on my shoulder.
A Chinese importer praised my fine calligraphy,
adopted me as his son, promised a job.*

In Shanghai, a Communist official
picks up Suang U's letter, runs his finger
over the Thai stamp Suang U glued
to the envelope, slips the steel blade
of a letter-opener under the flap.

*Mosquitoes swarmed our boat in Bangkok harbor.
My new father took me by trishaw
through shop-lined streets bursting with bolts
of silk, tree-lined canals, and fire leaping from woks.
The Chinese driver said I must leave the old
dreams behind. A fine, fat yellow sun, mother,
a great many fruit trees, what do they do
with so many coconuts and pineapples?*

In Shanghai, the official opens another
letter. He's hooked on Suang U's story
and the Chinese money folded neatly
inside the paper. He slips the letter
into his drawer with the others.

*I sat close to my boss' daughter on the grass,
teaching her to read from a romance novel
about Old China. Like the heroine in the story,
she left her pearls for me between
the pages. I called her "the face of the moon."
Why don't you answer me, mother?
I want you to see my new bride.*

In Shanghai the official, now a censor
for the Party, raises an eyebrow and smiles
when he sees the Thai king on the stamp.
He fondles the long letters, takes them home

to read in the evening after dinner
with his tea. Just like a novel, he chortles
to himself. Far better than bland news
or stale propaganda about Mao.

*Ten years now, I have my own import store.
I sit under my shelves stocked with tea pots,
teak furniture, hand-woven silk. Bright neon glows
above my metal grate at night. Lazy Thais jeer,
call me "foreigner" and "chink face." They're drunks,
gamblers, fighters. My years feel empty
as a leaking rice sack. My daughter shamed me,
married the son of a Thai street vendor, her pushcart
filled with gelatinous squares of rose and green,
her fingers sticky with coconut, her toothless smile.*

Letter after letter, the official Chinese censor
reads about bright skies, gold chedis reaching
to the heavens and markets filled with spices,
so many strange foods: *rambutan, jackfruit,
durian*, not listed in his Chinese dictionary.

*Electric wires smoked and sparked. Silk, red and gold,
grew wings of flame. Later I wandered through
the collapsed shop, sunk in ashes. My son
had no room for me. My Thai son-in-law smiled,
handed me a lotus, an orchid, took me in.*

In Bangkok, a Thai customs official opens
a trunk. Hundreds of letters, 22 years worth,
lie scattered among the clothes. *They're mine*,
the official censor yells. He has defected,
wants asylum in the land of plenty. In a jail cell,
he tells the police the story of the letters.

In Po Leng, Suang U's mother walks by Dazibou,
and the children painting angry red slogans,
condemning the old ways of capitalism.
She's too poor to matter, and passes away
with the only note from her son
she ever received, *Forgive me, mother*;
clutched in her hand.