

The Day after the Coup

A green wall of jungle blazes outside
the window of the English Department room.
The professors wear their uniforms today,
creased and rumpled from being folded in trunks.
In stifling heat, we're made to stand at attention
like laurel leaves shrunk stiff in a cold snap.
Stocky soldiers in camouflage fatigues
weave between us. The sergeant grunts sharp
questions. Like a schoolmaster, he jabs at papers
with the grooved steel tip of his bayonet.

Later, we take chicken and *som tam* salad,
to three teachers in jail. Kwaam sits
cross-legged on cement in striped
prison shorts, his shirt draped over his neck
like a towel. Purple bruises shine
through the sweat on his chest.
We pass packets of yellow papaya
between the bars. His house burned down
last night. *Professor*, he whispers to me,
how do you like our Thai prisons?

Professor Som's still missing. *I hope he stays
in the mountains*, Suthep says. It's night.
We talk on his porch as frogs whistle
love calls in the canals. He's my boss, the newly
appointed dean. Moths fly into the candlelight
and fall, splashing, in a wide water pan
he set on the table to catch them. Turned low,
his police radio murmurs about students barricaded
in a Bangkok university, fighting tanks.

Communist dogs, he growls. *They have guns
in their rooms, make trouble for everyone.*
I ask what will happen. He shrugs.
The soldiers will kill them. I take the pan
and pour the moths onto the ground,
set it back on the table again. One flops over,
legs grasping at air. Others lie drowned
on the grass. Suthep says good night,
pinches out the flame with his thumb.