

ELLEN ADAMS | AFTER THE COUP

When you move back from it—past the “Welcome home” and the heavy stamp on your passport—you carry inside you a universe, ungrounded. A universe does not rest on anything. A universe was never set on the brown or green crayon line of earth, that wax stripe of color any child will draw before learning depth and perspective, before the art teacher explains the higher-up line of horizon. That line in the background means over there, means edge. This universe has no crayon track of gravity, no visual metric for distance.

The universe is a floating thing. The universe floats inside you. It bobs without outcome until it hits an edge; that collision makes the universe edgy and wrong.

Inside you floats the now wrong way to eat a meal, share a meal, fill your plate again. You carry many lonely days that by nature had a purpose—the holding cell before structures like grammar and paychecks and warm nights led you to links and roots and home, into the lives of those now left behind. You carry a confusion too high-context to explain to old friends on the outside of your body. It would require roadside soup and plastic stools, the black streaks on hands after a motorbike oil change, the sudden palm on your forearm and “Daughter” to your face from an otherwise meaningless, anonymous grandmother who’s understood that you speak and understand. It would require that sharing. The stray dogs, the national anthem everywhere, the monks out every day.

The sudden soldiers and tanks on your favorite street. Sudden, then weeks.

It would require *Oddity* to become *Of Course*. The universe holds its internal logic, its geography, your neighborhood, the town. It holds the rest stop halfway from your home to Bangkok. You know the drill: take your perforated bus ticket, tear the coupon off, present it to the hair net lady, get your meal plate back. *Here you go, daughter*. Have it. Habit. It would require all the prior knowledge of thinking and unwitting gestures that make foreign things feel true.

But instead of friends, you go to parties. Loud people have been there, have visited, have seen. Their story is either a search for spotlight or an attempt at shared spheres, but at parties it is hard to remember where your heart is. It is somewhere in the universe, but where is it bobbing now? An edge—ouch—appears right there as the party person exclaims on right here, but where’s the door inside? You cannot understand your physical form, why your face could soften with gratitude at kindness from any stranger in your elsewhere space, but here this acquaintance will not become your friend, will get hard forehead lines. “It sounds like you had a nice time,” you can muster. Yours was not time, not episodic or preterite or holiday. It was space in all directions, and when an edge comes up, so does the word *territory*. Yours was a coup, not guide books.

So you guard your universe like a large family's secret, and you make this new life despite that untold truth: coffee cups with the people of here who have no hint of what's adrift in there, in you. At best, you turn blasé: "Oh yeah, on and off for about four years." You dash it out like summary, the outmost limits of disclosure.

Tanks parked on the street, plastic chairs lined with soldiers. Weeks, then months, on guard. A grandma's stand of chopped fruit, two lanes' width away. Each morning hello, then her eyes toward the mountains. No room anymore here to whisper.

You give a wide berth to your universe, but in your long looks away and your attempts, askance, toward forward, you do not see that you steer clear of yourself. Those were your hands, not just the mechanic's, with the

streaks of oil. That was you in the car with the monks, then on the bench in the forest. That was your street, those were your stray dogs. You cannot explain it to others, so you give up on yourself.

You send it away, where it floats and it floats. Inside, planets spin, moons do move, stars achieve the rote-poetic fates they're programmed to. It takes an earthquake in Nepal to see your universe again, to see the buildings and the lives left standing, the minutiae atop planets. The brown and green crayon lines know the vanishing point best; you long for what isn't, what's left, what you left. You will bob beside the buoy, wrap your arms around it, grieve. You loved a place and lost it—something bigger than you knew. 