Wipas SRITHONG

The Tongue

In my country there is little respect for human rights, so for me the concept of universal values is imperative.

Since the military launched a coup and established a dictatorship in 2014, many Thai writers have given up criticizing the growing hostility of the junta towards human rights. Not only has the threat of punishment for dissent and the increase of censorship discouraged them, but with time, enthusiasm has also waned. I formed a group with other writers to protest the junta, but the movement dissolved. Fatigue and futility exhausted us. It's not that we became politically inert—some began to support identity politics and LGBT rights. But this was a safer path, secretly desired by the junta. It helps them project Thailand as a modern, progressive nation while it continues to dismember freedom of speech, democratic processes, and the protection of civil liberties.

The military, middle-and-upper classes disaffected with the elected government, and tradition are at the core of this police state. Tradition is a part of progress, and progress is built on collective achievement over time. But Thai tradition, in my view, favors hierarchy and centralization over meaningful reform. It has become a solid mass and complacent, and lost its malleability. It confines us. A culture that has paved the way for our current political crossroads needs to be undermined, and values perpetuating inequalities, destroyed. 'Preserving tradition' has become shorthand for an ideology through which the junta is steadily sabotaging democracy, justice, and the independent media. There is no room for criticism or difference in opinion. As seen in Thai fiction today, only the mad and ghosts get away with speaking taboo truths.

Life has returned to normal after the upheaval. But this 'normalcy' bothers me. Surrounded by those who supported the coup, I've turned to fiction to guide my walk in the darkness. These books speak the truth to me. It seems fiction is the best way to reach and understand the truth, in the way that we understand ourselves: not through the accumulation of facts, but through memory and our own narrative. I've realized, amidst the deluge of reports since that day, that we need writers of literary fiction to explain what happened and uncover the hidden truth. This is why, in the last decade, I've started writing fiction about what is happening in my country.

When I was a kid I lived in a small town in Southern Thailand. One evening, while coming home with my friends from the park by the river, we decided to play a game: we raced home, and agreed whoever came in last would be deemed 'caught' by the river ghost. But I didn't hear the starting call, and fell behind as the others disappeared around the flickering streetlight on the corner. I chased after them in the semi-darkness, but stumbled, and my knees slammed into the concrete. It was so painful that I squeezed my eyes shut to withhold my cry. My body tensed and I clenched my lips, but in the end my cry came. Everything released. My body shook and rolled on the ground. My scream burned my face. Every part of me became a tongue writhing to describe the pain and twisting to explore the intensity of the agony. The world became a cruel, horrifying abstract. My friends left me on that dark and empty road, alone and with nobody to hear me.

Back to 2010. After the coup displaced the elected government, the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) protested the interference of the military and others in the democratic process, and called for fresh elections. The military's crackdown against these protests left at least ninety-five dead and hundreds injured. In my novel, I describe the jubilant public cleanup of the protest site that occurred just days later, and which was only fifteen minutes from my house. At that time, the screams of the people being shot and the wails of that boy returned to me. The cry of pain is universal. I try to write knowing how lonely and painful it is when a voice has no audience and disappears into silence.