Elegy Against—, Ten Years Later

I can’t say his name but I still see his fingers holding onto a sheet of paper, trembling

until he spread and pressed them onto the table in that small room of bad light and bad air

in a place called the Cathedral of Learning. Female students complained: not his words, but the ferocity of his voice, how his face suddenly shone with sweat when he spoke.

That fall I encouraged them all to write their sadness or their happiness. I didn’t try to complicate their language or smarten up their ideas. That fall everything seemed simple and stupid. I bought spent asters from buckets on the street and walked aimlessly on rare days of blue, lucid sky like the skies in Oklahoma where he grew up dodging belt buckles, poor enough to enlist before Kuwait. His name lost but not the poem where he sits with an officer in an open jeep somewhere in the desert as the officer gripes about his wife then pulls out a pistol and shoots at a camel lumbering by. When I read the news, I imagined him bloody
in a claw foot bathtub back home. Surely
in poor Oklahoma the tubs are ordinary, but

how could a plain tub hold his body? I want
the graceful curve, white and smooth and cool

and tender against his large, hard shoulders.
He said he promised the Army never to speak of—

I didn’t know what to believe, there in my office
I just tried to encourage him to write, as if—

Dan. Was it Dan or Dave? How do you guys get
such excellent posture? I once asked him.

They train you not to feel pain, he said, gazing
straight into my eyes.