

I Speak Barley At School

*From a student essay on trying to pass
the University's entrance exam.*

"I speak barley at school," he wrote.

Later, I listen to a student read
A graphic story of being raped by a friend—
I look out the window to escape
the deep shame of being a man.
Below in the pond, the koi
barely move in the murky water.

I think of his misspelling.
It's *barely*, of course, not *barley*.

It's not a language of grains they speak.
Not a dialect of rice or wheat.
Most of them barely speak
in class though they might know
the glib dialect of American teen-agers.
A student from Korea told me
His first English word was "chill."
Privilege has many dialects.

From China, Vietnam, Korea,
Thailand, Cambodia they've come —
the Far East to us, the "real" Americans
who time and privilege have taught
to speak and write the proper
English we teach to newcomers
so they will fit in and lose the telltale grammars
of their mother tongue and seal the stories
we cannot imagine in their silence
—the mother left behind
to make room in the boat for her son
(she would rejoin them later
but she never did); the father who escaped
the killing fields to become a symbol
for the glib talking heads
of the American dream, for people
who somehow found the promised land,

Jeffrey Arnett

where fields of swaying grain feed us too well
but not the poor who deserve to go hungry.
Where no one is allowed to speak barely at school
because we are one nation under God,
our God, not theirs, indivisible,
with justice for some, sometimes,
and as much as they left behind
to come here,
we want them to give up
even more.