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*Yes, I am no longer a man, no longer a man at all. But I have
not yet become anything else.*

—Claude Farrère



the old me

In my twilight years, my possessions are sparse.

Among a few things I keep, there are two items that have been with me for who knows how long. You see, like most Annamese I don't keep track of my age. In fact, a French priest I knew once remarked to me that most members of my race did not even know their own birthdays. Like being born into this world was enough a burden, he said. But they are old, these articles, at least sixty years or so since I got them at sixteen.

One of them is a pocket watch. You open its cover and on the inside there's a woman's black-and-white picture. She has been dead for many years now, but it still stirs me to gaze at her. She looks fifteen or sixteen—I'm not good at guessing a person's age—and her black hair, parted sharply in the middle, coils in a long braid over her shoulder. I say my father was a lucky man, and I'm his fortunate son

who has survived everyone in the family, including my angelic little brother. This watch belonged to a man who betrayed my father so he could step into the woman's life—my mother's. They were part of a gang of outlaws led by my father. All of them were beheaded except the traitor, who was rewarded handsomely and disappeared thereafter.

The other article is a human skull. It sits on my window ledge looking out from its empty eye sockets at birds, trees. Sometimes moths get into the eye cavities and flutter around until they give out and die. But there it sits on my window ledge, aged in ivory yellow—the traitor's skull—and I bear him no more hatred. I polish him now and then, for I know his occult neatness. He used to arrange his slippers outside his sleeping chamber, so precisely even you could draw two parallel lines on either side of them. Only then could he sleep. His loveless, enigmatic life happened to cross mine.



HANOI, 1896. ON THE EXECUTION GROUND

A horde of people thronged the clearing, all hushed and bunched up.

The quiet made my stomach queasy. Lined across, the doomed men faced the crowd. My father was the last one to the far left, where a French priest stood leaning against an outcrop, alone in his black robe and black hat, like Death itself. Clad in coarse white cloth, the men each wore a cangue, all crouched on their knees, their hands roped behind their backs at the wrists.

Watching them, I felt humiliated for my father. Gritty man, if you knew him. Dark-skinned, high forehead. He wore his long black hair in a chignon just like an Annamese woman. His face was unshaved. He could grow a full beard in a few days—unlike most Annamese men, who had no facial hair or only a few whiskers over their lips like a sullen cat. Now he was down on his knees, cinched to a wooden

stake. While his men all kept their heads low, he flexed his neck a few times and then gazed at the sky, bluest of blue.

Why didn't he look our way? Then I saw the mandarin slowly crawling out of his hammock. He now stood thin and hunched in his white turban while the guards moved the parasols directly over his head. But there was no sunlight, only a hazy glow through the gaps in the foliage. The old man scratched himself on the cheek with his talon-like fingernails as he stood like a geomancer about to determine an auspicious burial spot for those about to die. The spectators lowered their gaze. My father threw him a glance as if he were merely a bothersome sight.

Up high a parakeet croaked, then another. Beyond the death line in the long shadows, guards were peeling back the burlap covers of the coffins and now pushed them right up to the stakes and flipped open the lids. I felt damp under my arms and between my legs, and I could hear a churning in my stomach—it wasn't from hunger. A few heads turned our way—they looked at me standing next to my mother, who carried my little brother on her hip no more than twelve feet away from my father, who didn't even look at us but stared at something above the trees.

The guards unbuttoned the collar of each bandit's blouse and yanked it back to bare each man's torso and shoulders. Then they stepped back into the shade. The onlookers wearing hats took them off and clutched them in their hands. The priest, too, removed his and pressed it against his heart while his other hand held the black rosary. Then the executioner—Granduncle—was at the first man. If you ask me why the crowd was so large, you are about to know.

Granduncle bent and pulled the bandit's long hair over the top of his head. Then he spat the quid of his betel chew into his palm, daubed the nape of the man's neck with this red cud, and shoved it back into his mouth. The man turned up his face, and his glazed eyes looked into Granduncle's hard eyes, graphite black. What he



saw was a wrinkled face, sinister-looking because of the pointed chin and the hooked nose. He dropped his head. Down the line his fellow men squirmed on their knees.

Granduncle barked out an order. The man thrust out his neck and chest and opened both knees. Granduncle rolled up his white trousers past his knees, walked back two steps on an angle, and gripped his saber against his chest with both hands. The parakeets had gone silent. In that eerie quiet the mandarin's order rang out abruptly: *Chém!*

The slashing saber shot a white gleam, and the bandit's head fell like a coconut, rolled once on the ground, and rested with its eyes open skyward. The neck gaped, spewing blood. The onlookers cringed and many hid their faces behind their huge hats as the blood darkened the ground quickly. One guard ran up, grabbed the severed head by its ponytail, and dropped it inside a rattan basket. The priest muttered a prayer, clutching his rosary. My throat was dry.

Suddenly the bandit next to the dead man broke down crying. He turned his face toward Granduncle and then toward the mandarin who stood placidly fingering his gray whiskers. "Mercy . . . Your Highness!" he stuttered. "I have a wife and three children . . . not a bad person . . . never killed no one . . . swear to Heaven . . . Your Highness . . . look down, I beg you . . . have a heart . . . I'm forever in debt of your compassion." Someone cried in the crowd. Then the sounds of sobbing made me clench my jaws. I can tell you this: It would kill me if my father went to pieces like that man.

My father shouted across, "Stop crying, idiot!"

But the man didn't stop and now turned his face skyward pleading with Heaven and all the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Two guards rushed up, seized him by the head. One told him if he did not keep still, it would be messy when the blade fell on his neck. They restrained him as Granduncle quickly marked the spot with his quid of betel chew, then they cleared out. Already the man had wet his

pants, and his crotch went dark. His knees were spread out, his neck jutted, his whole body shook because of his sobbing.

The priest closed his eyes at the muffled sounds of women's crying. The mandarin's shrill voice rose, and I saw the saber swing. The head rolled on the ground, the body jerked sharply forward as if following the part just taken away from it. My stomach sucked in.

While his men cast a half glance toward the lopped head, my father kept his eyes on the ground. His face was stony. I'm sure he knew his end was near. I'm sure he heard the sniffing and sobbing all around him. But did he fear death?

In the heat I could smell the sweet ferns. I heard the mandarin again and again and I closed my eyes. But something told me not to.

I opened my eyes just as Granduncle stepped up to the last man on the row—my father. I observed my father's calmness as his uncle went about the preparation routine. Suddenly my knees knocked. Years later, I recalled the French priest's words on men's weak will. He said God created man with flesh imbued with weaknesses they must overcome. In moments like this the emotions they showed would not belie their nature.

Deftly Granduncle swept up my father's hair to expose the back of his neck, and my father took a deep breath and strained his neck forward so his uncle could mark the spot where the saber would fall. As Granduncle walked back, my father puffed out his chest, opened his knees wide in a V. Their casualness has stayed with me to this day. Like everyone wanted to see men revolt—in tears or violence—against Death. How did Granduncle feel?

I shut my eyes. Unless you could feel the hollowness in my chest, you would never know how dead I felt that day. Something else you should know: I wasn't close to my father before he died, and his impending end, certainly gruesome, didn't bring me any closer to him. Eyes closed, I saw in my mind my mother, small and insignificant, standing several feet away from my father in her faded



brown tunic, her head wrapped in a black turban, hugging my little brother whom she carried on her hip. The boy's cheek was pressed against her shoulder while he slept. The older boy—me—stood barefoot, bareheaded in his white blouse, patched here and there with brown cloths.

I opened my eyes, saw Granduncle step back. Just then my father flicked his gaze toward us as Granduncle swung his saber. An arc sparkled. Without a sound the head fell. I shrank back, seized by the sight of blood jetting like a spigot, my fists clenched so hard my knuckles hurt. In the stifling quiet Granduncle wiped the saber's blade against a white cloth hung from his belt, turned, and walked away into the gloom of shadows where soldiers stood holding spears, all standing in a daze like the rest of the crowd.

The priest remained by the outcrop while the soldiers deposited headless bodies into open coffins, except my father's, which my mother placed in one of the caskets with the help of others. The heads, as we found out, would be hung at the entrance of Chung, the village my father's gang robbed and partially burned.

When the soldiers headed back out, the parasols were at the front, the mandarin ensconced in the hammock. He was smoking a pipe and its strong smell stayed in the air after he had passed, trailed by soldiers who bore the coffins. The crowd gathered. Already flies came and touched down on the wet blood puddles. A column of huge black ants also gathered, perhaps for the sugar in the blood that had begun to dry.

Soon the crowd made its way out with several people carrying the coffin for my mother. We walked slowly, muted, in black and brown, mostly brown, the color of our blouses, like tribespeople on their way to a burial ground.

