

Fox fairy

By Hoa Pham

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I suck the sweet blood from my teeth and wait for the police to come.

The water hawker’s call floats up to the tissue pink white balcony. The ever present buzz of mopeds splashing through muddy puddles accompanying my vicious thoughts.

Loud raucous voices echo amongst the concrete buildings, the languid language that I once would have understood without thinking. Now it’s laborious, consciously sticking English labels onto familiar sounds. If I wait long enough it will come back to me, the phrases circling in my head, the pause that would allow me to say what I mean.

Not that it matters right now. But I would like to be sure of what is going on, the way I never was with you.

I had to visit our family tombs today. There are some things that even a fox cannot do. It was the first time I could come back and not be arrested because of my name.

I carried a bundle of red roses, two thousand dong each, twenty of our cents, and incense in a bag. I left you behind; it would be hard enough on my own. You said you could manage for a day, being a tourist.

Our driver in his badly cut dark blue suit took me out of Hue, following my vague instructions. The locals staring at our dark car trundling through narrow dirt roads made my skin feel like peeling paint. We went out into the countryside, the rain forming a translucent curtain over a backdrop of moist rich emerald green hills.

I stopped the driver to walk by myself.

He insisted to come with me.

I let him.

I went down a descending dirt track, past farms that were not there before. Brown chickens and children followed me at a safe distance. The children seemed so clean, untouched by the mud that splattered my stockings and the thin drizzle that moistened my hair and lips. The girls and boys were tan and small, delicately formed, like the little chickens that ran alongside them. I could scoop up a bony Vietnamese chicken with just one hand, they are juicier and tastier here, untouched by freezers and growth hormones.

The driver smoked one of your cigarettes striding alongside, reminding me of you.

Amongst the concentric walls and overgrown mounds of other graves, I found ours.

Someone had been there before me. The driver surreptitiously read our names scribed in red ink Chinese characters, I could see him repeating it trying to remember it.

I stood in front of the burial mound covered with pebbles, surrounded by knee high concrete walls. At the head was a small altar with a yellow tablet sheltered by a red roof. Even my name was inscribed, I am the last official survivor of this family.

I placed the roses on the mound and lit the red sticks of incense. I bowed three times to the altar, then put the sticks in the little concrete holder custom made for such things.

The smoke spiralled, melting into the rain.

The warm air relaxed me, soothing the chafing of my black heels that stuck and ground in the mud as I walked back. There were two slick horned cattle a distance

away grazing indifferent to my passing. They couldn't catch the scent of me through the rain.

The driver didn't lounge around, he wanted to leave the burial plots. But he wasn't going to push it. He knows how important the dead are.

I took American dollars from my black lipstick holder giving it to the stray children to tend the graves. I let the driver distribute the money and I tipped him too. Perhaps they will do it, perhaps not.

Perhaps I should try to have you buried here. It's very peaceful.

I have a passport picture of you in my wallet taken in a mechanical box at the train station. I'll give it to my cousin's temple with a donation and the monks there will tend to it, putting you amongst the frames of those with no family to pray for them. That will do to ease your spirit.

Back at the hotel I got out of the car and looked up.

You were standing there with her on the balcony, your head cocked, subjecting the girl to your special scrutiny. From the back all I saw of her was her long lacquer black hair flowing over her red polyester jacket shrugging as she laughed.

I should have known. You like Vietnamese women. You like spending your dong like cents, playing up to their inborn hospitality, you can be a big spender in a small town here. You don't realise some of their smiles are because they are uncomfortable, or because of your money. You don't know the difference when they are laughing at you not with you. You told me you like to go out with Asians because they look young forever.

Often the local women that would go into a hotel room with a foreigner are prostitutes, con artists or security agents. She was all three.

I dismissed the driver and went hunting for my dinner.

After chicken I went up to our room. You'd left the door unlocked. Or maybe she did. You were still in the bedroom so I slipped into our lounge. I dived into our shared suitcase dragging out my clothes. I ripped my blouses and skirts, rending silk with my claws. Blood smeared everywhere as I bit and tore. Then I chewed up her fancy black shoes and cheap tan pantyhose. The nylon threads snagged in my teeth but I didn't feel it. I carried it all into the cupboard, choking on the perfume and the sweat.

After I'd finished I hid on the balcony.

As is your habit you came out first in your blue spotted boxer shorts to turn on the TV and watch CNN.

They were running a political commentary on the death of Deng Xiaoping.

She came out looking for her shoes. Of course you didn't know where they were.

She laughed, opening the cupboard thinking you were teasing her.

Then she saw the clothes and the blood.

She shrieked and it split my eardrums. I curled tighter into a ball as she ranted the obvious conclusion in Vietnamese screaming at the door.

In an instant the police were there in their green felt uniforms and gold stars. They took you away. You said you hadn't done anything. That you were an Australian citizen. They also went to hotel reception and took your passport. They also discovered mine.

When the room was finally empty I sprung down from the balcony. I was lazy and scurried down the stairs out of the hotel to my cousin's house. I don't think anyone saw me.

You died in custody. You died in someone's care and it wasn't mine.
Serves you right.

There is a recent local story about a Western man who fell in love with a beautiful Vietnamese woman. Entranced he seduced her into his hotel room, against custom, and slept with her. He discovered the next morning that the woman was a fox fairy and frightened, he tried to kill her. Of course the fox fairy was more powerful and killed him, savaging the man with her teeth and claws. The driver who told me this (possibly as a warning) says you can still see the fox wandering around Hue, carrying a roll of American bills in her bloody mouth.

- from a traveller's guide to Hue.