NGUYỄN ĐÔNG A

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PERSONAL ESSAYS – STUDIES

KHƠI DÒNG PRESS



Photo: Trầm Hương Tower, Nha Trang

INTRODUCTION

This book, “When The Wind And Sand Still Smell Sweet”, brings together twenty-two literary essays on Central Vietnam. As with several of my recent books, I asked no one to write an introduction for me. It seemed to me that the person best suited to say a few words about the journey of this book was still myself, not because I wanted to explain the work on the reader’s behalf, but simply

because I wanted to tell how it came into being and what state of mind I carried while writing it.

During a two-month trip back to Vietnam in 2025, I made a number of short journeys along the central coast. I would travel for a few days, return to Saigon to rest, then set out again. Central Vietnam was hardly unfamiliar ground to me. I had been there many times over the years, yet those journeys still allowed me to gather more material, take notes, and sketch out new essays. When I returned to the United States, I finished each piece and published them one by one on social media and in several American magazines. Seeing that some readers followed them regularly, especially people who had once been deeply connected to Central Vietnam, I began thinking of gathering them into a book. Years earlier, the same region had inspired my story collection The Scent of Agarwood by the Sea.

“When The Wind And Sand Still Smell Sweet” is the eighth book I have written in the form I continue to call the Literary Essay–Research genre. This time, however, I allowed myself a looser hand, a lighter touch, and more room for the literary voice to show itself.

I wandered like a traveler, though this is not exactly a travel book. These pages mingle many layers, travel writing, local geography, history, autobiography, and a little philosophical reflection. That makes “When The Wind And Sand Still Smell Sweet” different from an ordinary travel guide. The information here is not meant simply to answer what there is to see in a place. It also invites other questions. What has this land endured? Who once lived here? What did they leave behind? And standing before whatever traces

remain, what do we, living now, make of them? That final question is what carries the facts of a journey into the realm of literature, creating a form of travel writing blended with remembrance, culture, and philosophical feeling.

It is travel writing because the self truly moves through physical space. It is remembrance because the present keeps awakening the writer's private past. It is cultural because landscapes are always seen through history, belief, ethnicity, and custom. The philosophical element comes from thoughts that rise directly out of what I encounter, not from any attempt to construct a philosophical system. If I had to reduce the deeper structure of this way of writing to one short phrase, perhaps it would be this, "travel in order to see, see in order to remember, remember in order to understand, understand in order to turn inward." As I confess somewhere in these pages, there are journeys that "in the end become journeys into oneself."

Geographically, the book passes through eight coastal cities of Central Vietnam, Phan Thiết, Phan Rang, Nha Trang, Tuy Hòa, Qui Nhơn, Quảng Ngãi, Đà Nẵng, and Huế. I begin at a seaside city close to the Southeast, stop in Huế, and choose not to continue farther north toward Quảng Trị and the 17th parallel, which history once used as a dividing line. Even so, the stories do not stay neatly inside the boundaries of those eight cities. They often spread into surrounding areas, usually following the geography of the former provinces.

Time in this book does not move in a straight line either. I may be standing in the present and suddenly find myself carried back into some near or distant past, then

return again to whatever lies before my eyes. Fragments of time rise according to the movement of association while I travel, sometimes without warning, much as memory itself has never agreed to obey any predetermined order.

I chose the title “When The Wind And Sand Still Smell” Sweet first because I wanted something light, open, and faintly literary. Yet there is a sensory paradox inside it. Wind cannot be held. Sand usually suggests dryness and harshness. “Smell Sweet,” meanwhile, belongs to the sense of smell and is more naturally associated with flowers, fruit, incense, or perfume. And yet here, the wind and sand are still “smell sweet.”

They are fragrant because within that wind and sand are people, history, homeland, labor, loss, and memory. Agarwood therefore becomes almost a symbol for the title itself. When writing about the dó bầu tree, the aquilaria from which agarwood forms, I found myself drawn to one thing in particular. Only after the trunk has been wounded does resin begin to gather, slowly turning over time into fragrant agarwood. That was why I wrote, “Some things, if they never hurt, can never become fragrance.” Seen across the book as a whole, Central Vietnam is “fragrant” not because it has never been wounded, but perhaps because it has endured so many wounds. War, natural disaster, migration, the loss of kingdoms, changes of dynasty, poverty, typhoons, floods, and the upheavals of urbanization are all historical injuries. With time, part of that pain settles into culture, memory, and character. In that sense, agarwood is not merely a product of the land. It can also be read as a metaphor for the people and history of Central Vietnam.

On the surface, “When The Wind And Sand Still Smell Sweet” is a journey through sea, river, mountain, fishing village, city, Cham tower, communal house, shrine, assembly hall, imperial tomb, historic site, road, and many different communities. I include a considerable amount of material on geography, history, place names, population, and belief. Yet travel is only the outward form. At the deeper core lies a search for the memory of the land and, through the land’s memory, a search for human beings again.

In the very first essay, on Phan Thiết, I did not want to stop at scenery. I looked at the city as “a sedimentary layer of memory,” a place where Cham, Vietnamese, Chinese, French, war, peace, and urbanization lie one atop another. In Hội An that perspective widens further. A trading port built up through successive currents of migration and commerce, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Southeast Asian, and European, eventually became a space that was “multicultural and multiethnic, yet still blended into one whole.”

To me, “When The Wind And Sand Still Smell Sweet” is closer to a geography of memory than to a geography of space. I have long thought of land as something capable of memory, because no land is truly mute. Soil keeps the traces of people. Rivers carry history. Place names preserve migrations. Beliefs hold the memory of communities. A tower, a communal house, an assembly hall, a river, even a dish of food, can become a “vessel of time.”

In Phan Thiết, thinking about place names that once existed and then disappeared, I wrote, “I suddenly felt sorry for place names. They are like people too, born, living for a

time, then quietly forgotten." Once a place name is seen almost as a living being, the work of a traveler-writer can no longer be merely to arrive, look around, and tell what he saw. It becomes partly an act of calling back names already sinking into oblivion. Out of that feeling, when I reached Đà Nẵng, I could no longer see the "Central Heritage Road" as a simple tourism concept. I saw it instead as "a long thread stringing together fallen fragments of time."

History in When "The Wind And Sand Still Smell Sweet" therefore never appears as a complete historical chronicle. It lives in fragments, a shrine, a statue, a street cry, a dish, an assembly hall, a grave, a river, a folktale. The traveler picks up those fragments and tries to connect them, listening for the past to speak in its own way. I see culture as an accumulation of layers rather than a process of total replacement. The history of Central Vietnam is not simply that the Cham vanished and the Vietnamese arrived, nor is it a story in which the old disappears so the new can wholly replace it. Along that long current, there has always been encounter, adaptation, preservation, and renewal. I once wrote, "A people may suffer political defeat and still survive culturally." A kingdom may disappear, yet its beliefs, language, place names, myths, and memories may continue living within communities that come afterward. Seen that way, the story moves beyond the observations of a traveler and becomes a way of thinking about history itself.

What interests me even more is the right of defeated communities to tell history. Writing about the southward expansion of the Vietnamese, the Nam Tiến, I placed two perspectives beside each other. From the Vietnamese side, it was a process through which a national territory took

shape. Yet for the communities that lost their land, that same history meant retreat, changes in identity, and memories that were not always told in their own voices. I am less concerned with judging who won and who lost than with asking what human beings left behind in culture after victory and defeat had passed.

If “When The Wind And Sand Still Smell Sweet” has a central character, then, perhaps, that character is memory. Personal memory blends with communal, urban, national, migrant memory, and even with the memory of cultures that have declined or vanished. Memory takes shelter in place names, objects, customs, sometimes in nothing more than a sound or a scent one believed had disappeared long ago. In Quảng Ngãi, a vendor’s cry and the smell of boiled chicken on a train journey in the early 1980s can lie dormant for decades, then suddenly one day become a bridge connecting the person of the present to the self he once was. Objective geography then turns into emotional geography. A place is no longer measured as near or far chiefly in kilometers, but by the depth of memory.

The people of Central Vietnam in this book are seldom portrayed in an epic voice. I prefer looking at ordinary, uncelebrated people, the net mender, the vendor, the fisherman, the caretaker of a communal house, the sailor, the migrant, the elderly, minority communities, people who live along rivers. What makes them worthy does not necessarily lie in extraordinary acts, but in their capacity to endure, adapt, and keep going. Writing about the Trà Khúc River, I move from floods and drought to the way people in Quảng Ngãi joined forces to fight floodwaters, dig canals, plant bamboo to hold the riverbanks, and build waterwheel

weirs. What I saw there was a kind of humanism rooted in endurance. Human beings do not truly conquer nature. They learn how to live with it.

Nature in this book is not merely background scenery. It is a partner in a long conversation with human beings. The sea feeds people and can also take their lives. A river gives water and later floods their homes. Sand is beautiful and severe. Mountains shelter and isolate at the same time. For that reason, the proper attitude toward nature, as I see it, is not so much conquest as reverence, adaptation, coexistence, and knowing when enough is enough.

I never set these ideas up as a theory, though a certain ecological awareness does run quietly through them. Writing about the cultural life of Khánh Hòa, I once said that culture “is not something meant to be put on display,” but something people “live inside, breathe inside,” and hand down. Extend that thought to nature and the land is no longer merely scenery to be admired. It is the place within which human beings live, breathe, and form a sense of who they are.

Nor should “When The Wind And Sand Still Smell Sweet” be called a philosophical work in any strict sense. I construct no system of ontology or ethics. Still, the journeys contain reflections on impermanence, on existence through change, on the possibility that something can be born from a wound, on the outward journey that finally becomes an inward one, and on the way power, too, is eventually stripped of its sacred aura by time.

Among these ideas, I have thought often about what is lost and what remains. In the section on Panduranga, I wrote, “To be lost and to disappear are two entirely different things. A kingdom has been lost. But a people remain.” I wanted to distinguish political death, the loss of a capital, a dynasty, or sovereignty, from the stubborn survival of culture, language, ritual, and collective memory. In some ways this evokes Maurice Halbwachs’s idea of “collective memory.” History can be recorded in dates, while memory survives through lived experience, when “a Katê festival still carries the sound of ginăng drums… when an old person still looks up at a tower and knows why he must remember.”

By the time I reach the pages on the imperial tombs of Huế, the thought shifts toward time, death, and what outlasts a human life. Through Minh Mạng’s composure, Tự Đức’s confessed loneliness, or the candid “ordinariness” of Hiệp Hòa, what I finally come to recognize is that “the thing that lasts longest is not power. It is character.”

From that awareness of loss and survival, I tried to look at history from the side of the “losers,” especially while writing about the Cham in the course of the Vietnamese southward expansion. I do not wish to romanticize or condemn. I remain troubled only by one question, “what troubles me most is the moment when a people gradually lose the right to tell their own story.” For history is not only the story of what happened. It is also the story of who gets to tell what happened.

The mode of writing that runs throughout this book might loosely be called “describing a scene in order to think.” I rarely stop at pure description. More often I move from

scenery into feeling, from feeling into association, follow that thread into history, then return at last to some reflection. That pattern recurs often. Even familiar rhythms such as “I wondered…” or “I suddenly understood…” appear again and again and may leave some readers sensing the return of certain patterns of thought, but that repetition is also the governing rhythm of the book.

I look at sand and think about time, look at a river and think about a human life, look at a tower and remember a civilization, look at a wounded aquilaria tree and think about fate, look at an emperor’s tomb and consider power, hear a street cry and meet my youth again, look at ordinary people and recognize the endurance of a community. The landscape therefore often takes on the character of a living being. The land “breathes,” the sea “remembers,” the river “thinks,” stone “has a soul,” and the wind “throws memory wide open.” These are not simply turns of personification. They reflect the way I experience nature as something with a spirit of its own, inseparable from human life.

In the end, “When The Wind And Sand Still Smell Sweet” is a collection of travel essays blended with memoir and research. It contains lyrical prose, travel notes, history, archaeology, and at moments even something resembling historiographical essays. These layers intertwine to form a fairly consistent rhythm, from landscape into history, from history into reflection, and finally back into the present. I have tentatively called this recurring structure “the sedimentary loop,” a cycle of movement that appears throughout all twenty-two essays.

The book is also dense with intertextual references. I cite Chế Lan Viên, Hàn Mặc Tử, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Trần Vũ, the Đại Nam nhất thống chí, Cham inscriptions, and many other historical sources, not merely to add factual material but in the hope that voices from different eras might illuminate one another. At the same time, I question the act of writing itself, both literature and history, asking about the reliability of the Hoàng Lê nhất thống chí, for instance, or the line dividing historical evidence from invention in historical novels about Quang Trung.

In the end, everything I have said above amounts to no more than a few thoughts that came to me while looking back at the book I had written. Once a work leaves the writer's hands, it begins another life. I can tell you where I went, what I saw, what I thought, and why I wrote the way I did. But what remains in the book, whether its wind and sand are truly "fragrant," is no longer mine to decide.

That, I leave to each reader to feel for themselves.

Nguyễn Đông A

A NOTE TO THE READER

Sometimes you set out thinking all you're doing is going to look at a mountain, see a river, maybe catch a little sea breeze and lighten the weight in your chest. Then you get there and realize the land has its own way of doing things. Quietly, without making a fuss, it opens one old layer after another in front of you, drawing you from a strip of sand to an ancient tower, from a river to a communal house, from a vendor's cry in the marketplace to a story that has lain still for several hundred years.

I traveled through Central Vietnam. From Phan Thiết I worked my way north toward Huế, seeing plenty of sea, plenty of sand, and more sun and wind than anyone needs to describe. But what held me longest was usually something that, at first glance, seemed small. An old place name. The smell of incense inside a shrine. Water moving beneath a bridge. The hands of someone mending a fishing net. A red Cham brick fired generations ago. Or a vendor's cry that suddenly brought an entire forgotten stretch of life back from the dead.

So this book is not really meant to tell anyone where the prettiest places are, which dishes taste best, or which road is worth taking. I arrive somewhere and often wander off into the stories of people who lived there long before me, then come back from their stories and take another look at myself. The land keeps leading me along that way, unhurried but persistent.

In the pages ahead, Central Vietnam can be heartbreakingly beautiful one moment and dry, harsh, almost brutal the next, a region that has endured more upheaval than seems fair. Yet through all those layers of loss and survival, people still live, rivers still run, festival drums still sound, old kitchens still carry their familiar smells, and towers that seem to belong entirely to the past still stand beneath the evening sky.

That is why I called this book Wind and Sand, Still Fragrant. What is still fragrant, and how fragrant is it? Don’t ask me too quickly. Walk a little farther first. Somewhere along the way, you may come across a scent that has been waiting all along inside your own memory.



Photo: Phan Thiết Sand Dunes

Essay 1

PHAN THIẾT – WAVES THAT NEVER DISSOLVE

AN ARC OF WIND AND SUN

Bình Tuy…

That place name is so old now, yet every once in a while it rises suddenly in my mind. When I was young, back when getting somewhere depended far more on your own two legs than on a vehicle, I made my way there many times, not along any paved highway but through the coastal forest, following a narrow trail that twisted in and out of low brush, white sand, and yellow dunes.

From Bình Châu, there was no convenient coastal road in those days the way there is now. I went straight through the forest. Some stretches were damp but still easy enough to walk, while elsewhere the trail disappeared beneath scrub and grass, and in places I had to wade across dry-season streams. First came the “Cù Mi Boiling-Water Marsh,” a scattering of pools large and small, steaming heavily, thin vapor drifting close to the ground. In the morning it looked as though the earth itself were breathing. They say a French doctor discovered the place in 1928. Later people came to call it the Bình Châu Hot Springs.

Farther into the forest, I would come upon a loose cluster of a little more than ten Châu Ro houses. They stood far apart in the quiet, thin cooking smoke lifting from the

roofs while dogs barked lazily. The people seemed to live outside the clock of the Kinh world. Walk another ten kilometers or more, cross streams, pass through open woods, climb sand hills with your feet sinking and crunching under you, and at last a settlement would appear. That was Hàm Tân, Bình Thuận.

After 1975, this area became part of Thuận Hải, while Bình Châu and Xuyên Mộc belonged to Đồng Nai. One stretch of forest, one belt of sand, and suddenly you had crossed from one province into another. I had many friends originally from Bình Tuy, so this southernmost reach of the central coast was never foreign to me. The sea looked much like Vũng Tàu, Long Hải, Phước Hải, Hồ Tràm, and Hồ Cốc, only lonelier. Continue along the coast beyond the provincial line and you would reach La Gi, then Phan Thiết.

Later the administrative map changed. Provinces were split and merged, names shifted around. La Gi, Phan Thiết, and Mũi Né are now merely wards within a large province called Lâm Đồng. The name sounds as if it belongs up in the highlands. But a name cannot change the soul of a place. This is sea country. It is still sand, still wind, still that salty breath against the skin.

This time, in 2025, I went to Phan Thiết from Saigon by expressway. A little over one hundred sixty kilometers. The car moved straight and smooth, and the trip was nearly over before I had time to feel tired. I was struck by the strange compression of time. A distance that once felt almost like an expedition had become a few hours in a car one morning.

People told me Phan Thiết no longer had many of the untouched beaches it once did. Resorts and luxury hotels had risen everywhere. High-end vacationing, the polished, fashionable kind. I wanted to try that too. Not for the indulgence of it, but to see how my own feelings might have changed. Sometimes we travel not to look at the land, but to look back at ourselves.

The morning wind in Phan Thiết was still the same, wide-open and unannounced, blowing straight into my face. Strangely, though, it did more than touch the skin. It tore memory wide open. A place could be unfamiliar and yet feel as intimate as someone calling your name. Maybe it was because my body already knew the taste of salt, the burning sun, the dry brittle feel of hair after an afternoon by the sea. Those of us who grow up near the ocean tend to be sensitive that way. Phan Thiết curves along the water like a bow embracing the sea. From Kê Gà Cape in the south to Mũi Né in the north, more than fifty kilometers of coast stretch out in yellow, fine sand, some places still empty, others crowded with human noise. The sea lies to the east and south. To the west is Hàm Thuận Nam, to the north Hàm Thuận Bắc and Bắc Bình. Even the names seem sunburned and windblown. The sea here resembles the sea where I live, peaceful at times, flat as paper, then darkening and exploding into a temper. The wind is fierce here. There is more of it. It seems never to take a day off.

I checked into a clean, beautiful resort. There were foreign guests everywhere. I heard Russian more often than English. It did not concern me. I had not come to look at tourists. I had come to look at the land. That afternoon I walked along the embankment beside the Cà Ty River. The

river divides the city in two, its water quiet, moving slowly as though deep in thought. Phan Thiết is flat but never monotonous. River plain gives way abruptly to dunes, then beach, then bare hills. The wind rushes hard, sand scratching underfoot. Thanh Hải, Phú Thủy, Phú Trinh, Phong Nẫm, salty lands where fresh water and seawater tug against each other as the seasons change.

The climate is dry. Very dry. Stand outside talking in the sun for a while and your lips can crack. On paper the average temperature sounds almost pleasant, only around twenty-six or twenty-seven degrees Celsius. Come April or May and you learn what heat really means. Sunlight slams off the sea in blinding white, and the whole landscape seems fired in a kiln. Phan Thiết gets relatively few typhoons and no frost, but the wind is nearly year-round. Maybe that is why people here tend to speak plainly, without much beating around the bush, a temperament shaped in wind country.

But Phan Thiết is more than geography. Its very name carries history. One afternoon long ago, I sat beside the Po Sah Inư towers and heard the story of Prince Po Thit, younger brother of Princess Po Sah Inư and son of the Champa king Par Ra Chanh. The old name for this area was Hamu Lithít, “a farming hamlet near the sea.” When Vietnamese settlers arrived, the sound “Lithít” gradually changed and joined with “Phan,” much as Panduranga became Phan Rang and Panrik became Phan Rí, until this place became Phan Thiết. Phan Rang, Phan Rí, Phan Thiết. The “Three Phans.” The names sound both Cham and Vietnamese. Place names are sediments too. They do not disappear. They settle into layers. Inside the words “Phan

Thiết" are the voices of two peoples and several centuries of migration.

The history here is full of upheaval. In 1697, when Bình Thuận was established, Phan Thiết became an administrative district. From 1773 to 1801, Nguyễn and Tây Sơn forces fought across this land. Standing beside the Cà Ty River, I tried to imagine the clash of weapons from those years and heard only small waves tapping the bank. History, in the end, always grows quiet like water. Under Emperor Minh Mạng, Bình Thuận Province was formally established. Villages such as Đức Thắng, Nhuận Đức, Lạc Đạo, and Trinh Tường were entered into cadastral records. Many of those names have vanished from daily life and survive only on old paper. I suddenly felt sorry for place names. They are like people too, born, living for a time, then quietly forgotten.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Phan Thiết had already become a busy town. Boats traveling between Central and Southern Vietnam carried fish sauce, dried fish, dầu rái resin, and agarwood. Merchant vessels from Guangdong and Hainan stopped here. I imagined the wharves at Phố Hài and Mũi Né crowded shoulder to shoulder, the heavy smell of fish sauce mixed with sea wind. In 1898, under Emperor Thành Thái, the town of Phan Thiết was officially established on the same day as Huế, Hội An, Quy Nhơn, Thanh Hóa, and Vinh. A seaside settlement became an administrative center. The French installed a résident and drew boundaries on paper. After 1975, Phan Thiết became the capital of Thuận Hải Province. In 1992 it became the center of Bình Thuận, and in 1999 it was elevated to city status.

Those are dry historical lines on paper, yet reading them leaves me strangely moved. A land changes rulers, names, and destinies again and again, finally settling into the shape of a young seaside city. Phan Thiết had eleven wards and four communes, more than two hundred square kilometers and over two hundred twenty-eight thousand residents. Vietnamese made up the majority, while Chinese communities were concentrated in Đức Nghĩa and Lạc Đạo. Old tiled roofs remained, old storefront signs remained, Cantonese could still be heard in the market. The economy changed. Tourism, services, fishing, and industry grew together. Ocean Dunes, Phú Tài, Vietpearl City. Tall buildings squeezed in among rows of coconut trees, while resorts pressed against the dunes.

I stood high on a sandy slope looking down and found the city both familiar and strange. The same wind. The same sea. A different pulse.

I asked myself what Phan Thiết was to me. Was it an afternoon in Mũi Né, fine sand running between my fingers like time? Was it the smell of fish sauce aged for years in wooden vats? Was it the Cà Ty River dividing the town in two while bridges drew its people back together? Or was it that moment at the sea, looking into the immense blue, feeling myself empty and then fill again with Cham, Vietnamese, French, war, peace, urbanization?

Phan Thiết is not as loud as many other coastal cities. It takes its time. It is quiet. Persistent. Like sand. Like wind. Like layers of memory buried deep in the earth.

That night I returned to my room at the resort. Outside, the sea still curved like a bow. I had the feeling that

the land's arm remained unfinished, unable yet to embrace all of the past and not yet reaching the future.

I told myself that tomorrow I would keep walking and keep writing. Phan Thiết had not finished telling its story.

CÀ TY – THE RIVER RUNNING THROUGH THE HUMAN HEART

On my first night in Mũi Né–Phan Thiết, I did not notice until darkness had fully dropped and rows of resort lights had turned yellow that nearly everyone around me was foreign. They were not the British, French, Germans, Australians, and others I usually encountered. They seemed almost entirely Russian. Restaurant signs, grocery stores, even menus were written in Russian. Passing the little shops, I heard people chatting in quick bursts, the sounds rounded and heavy, falling from their mouths almost in solid pieces.

I once studied Russian for three years, maybe longer, which is no small thing, yet after several decades all I can remember now are a handful of polite greetings, and even when I say them I am not entirely sure I have them right. A language is like an old road. Leave it untaken long enough and grass grows over everything. But the question of why there are so many Russian tourists now can wait for another time. That evening I had coffee with Nguyễn Thị Liên Tâm and her husband. She is a poet, once active in the Literature and Arts Association, and has also worked in educational administration and holds an advanced degree. Her husband was once a local official as well. Funny how

some people feel familiar almost as soon as you sit down with them. You do not need a great deal in common, only a certain shared rhythm of thought. We talked about literature and the sea, life, the past and present, then circled back to words and writing, happily talking on and on until late. Outside, the ocean kept breathing at its steady pace. I went back to my room and slept late.

Early the next morning, while Phan Thiết was still hazy with salt air, I was already outside. The city was neither fully awake nor entirely asleep, something like the half-dreaming state of a person just emerging from sleep. The sky was pale gray, clouds thin, a light föhn wind brushing over the low roofs. Then, right in the middle of town, a river appeared.

I had come to the Cà Ty. It made no fuss and showed no hurry, flowing quietly like one long breath. The section through downtown is only about seven kilometers long, yet it divides the entire city. Looking down from a bridge, you can see it clearly. To the south are the market, fish landing, harbor, the smells of fish, fish sauce, and boat paint. To the north are government offices, military compounds, new construction, the smell of concrete, glass, and architectural plans. The two banks carry two rhythms of life. One is livelihood. The other administration. The river lies between them, saying nothing and seeming to understand everything.

I had imagined that a river in Central Vietnam would run dry in the sunny season, its cracked bed exposed. But the Cà Ty does not. It holds water year-round. Local people call it a tidal river. Its water is not quite fresh and not quite

salt. It is brackish, rising and falling with the breath of the sea.

People explain the name “Cà Ty” with a story. Long ago, Vietnamese settlers came here and found the river so peculiar that they kept saying, “Kỳ ta, kỳ ta…” roughly, “How strange, how strange.” Over time, the words supposedly changed in pronunciation until they became Cà Ty.

The story made me laugh, yet the longer I stood there, the more fitting it seemed. The river really is strange. It is not entirely a river, and it is not yet the sea. It is a place of transition, where water runs down from Núi Ông, more than a thousand meters high, passes through Ta Da, the Móng River and Mương Mán, then meets the sea at the Thương Chánh estuary and changes its nature. Half from the forest, half from the ocean, much like people who live by the sea, feet on solid ground, lives tied to the open water.

I walked along the Phú Thủy embankment just as the sun was coming up. The river was pale blue and flat, neither muddy nor foul-smelling. The wind felt cool. Such a small river, yet it opens a breathing space through a city growing denser by the day. It occurred to me that the Cà Ty does more than flow through Phan Thiết. It allows Phan Thiết to keep breathing.

A little farther down lies Đức Thắng. From above, the river there is jammed with boats, large fishing boats, small fishing boats, and round basket boats, those blue floating examples of what I think of as “the ingenuity of Vietnamese water life,” scattered across the surface like hundreds of dots. Houses huddle close to the stone embankment, walls bleached and stained by salt, old tiled roofs overhead. The

Cồn Chà fish landing wakes before the city does. Boat engines crackle. People call to one another. Bargaining voices ring sharp. Fish slap and thrash. It is not noise so much as the pulse of life. Basket boats move from river to sea, leaving white wakes behind them. Fishermen dry their nets at the water's edge. An old man mends one silently, staring for a very long time toward the mouth of the river. People of the sea do not look at the ocean for scenery. They look at it because they are waiting.

Phan Thiết Fishing Port sits right in the fishing village of Đức Thắng. Established in 1992, it contains the Cồn Chà fish market. Every dawn, boats returning from a night offshore pull into the landing one after another. The seafood is gleaming fresh. Fish, squid, shrimp, crab are bought and sold directly on stalls slick with seawater. The place is both a seafood marketplace and a support base for the fishing industry. Visitors from elsewhere come too, watching, taking pictures, choosing a few kilograms of fish to carry home. After seven in the morning, the large-scale trading begins to subside and smaller transactions remain. Life slows down, like a river changing with the tide.

A few steps away stands Vạn Thủy Tú on Ngư Ông Street, home to the skeleton of one of the largest whales in Southeast Asia, more than two hundred years old. People here do not simply call a whale a whale. They call it Cá Ông, "Lord Fish," or more intimately still, Ông, "the Elder." They believe the whale rescues those in distress, nudging boats toward shore when storms arrive. Every June during the Nghinh Ông festival, boats are brightly decorated and floating lanterns are released onto the river, drifting toward

the sea. Their lights flicker over the brackish water, beautiful and sad. The river carries human prayers out into the ocean.

The Cà Ty was once called the Mường Hán River, formed from the meeting of Ta Da and the Móng River. It runs roughly sixty-five kilometers and drains a basin larger than seven hundred square kilometers, yet by the time it enters the city it narrows into something as mild as a broad creek. Bình Thuận has seven rivers, most of them nearly dry during the hot season. The Cà Ty alone keeps its water because the tide sustains it. The river lives by means of the sea. Three hundred years ago, boats from Central and Southern Vietnam, merchant ships from Guangdong and Hainan, came in here to carry fish sauce, dried fish, dầu rái resin, and agarwood. Such a small river, yet it once served as the commercial waterway of an entire region.

Every upheaval in Phan Thiết, war, trade, migration, urbanization, has passed along it. A river does not keep anyone's footprints. It keeps memory.

By late afternoon I was still beside the water. The sky turned faintly red. The river darkened to the color of aged copper. Children rode bicycles, elderly people walked, a young couple sat silently looking at the water. Nobody spoke loudly. The rhythm of life softened like a rising tide. I understood why Phan Thiết and the Cà Ty are always mentioned together. Without this river, Phan Thiết would merely be a coastal city. With it, the place becomes a living region. I stood there a long time. The tide rose so slowly you could hardly see it moving, only the waterline climbing little by little along the embankment.

Suddenly I thought that people are much the same. Life does not have to be loud in order to be alive. Sometimes living means flowing quietly, carrying your own life, your own memories, all the things you cannot put into words. And the river before me, brackish, neither sweet nor salt, resembled the human heart more than any river I had ever known.

I had come looking for the sea and ended up finding a river. “Kỳ ta”… Cà Ty.

WHITE WIND OVER THE SALT COUNTRY

At noon in Phan Thiết, the wind is bone-dry. It is not wet like the river-country wind of the Mekong Delta, nor does it press down on you with the muggy heat of Saigon. It is dry, faintly abrasive, brushing over the skin with the gritty feel of sea salt left along the rim of your lips. Today the sun is not savage and it does not pour down like fire. It is white. Silvery white. Bleached white, like the face of a salt field after a long day beneath the sky. I passed Phan Thiết Market through the rumble of motorbikes and sharp vendor calls, with the smell of dried fish and fermented anchovy sauce tangled in the wind, planning to head straight for the ocean and give my eyes a little open space. Then my feet stopped at a narrow street. A local man pointed and said simply, “Đức Thắng communal house is right there.”

I walked in. The moment I passed a tall stone wall, the atmosphere changed. Outside there had been noise, business, pushing and shoving. Inside, absolute stillness. But it was not a cold or empty stillness. It had weight. It felt as if someone had been sitting in the shade for a very long

time, waiting for me. I stood in the brick courtyard and listened to a few tropical almond leaves flutter down, and only then did I realize that what I felt was not mere quiet. It was the sense that “someone is here.” No face in sight, yet nothing felt vacant.

The Đức Thắng communal house stands at the corner of Ngô Sĩ Liên and Triệu Quang Phục, on more than four thousand square meters of square, walled ground shaded by old trees. It is nearly two centuries old. War passed over it. Sea storms passed over it. The city closed in, multistory buildings rose around the market, yet the communal house still keeps its yin-yang roof tiles, wooden beams darkened by time, and the earthy smell of agarwood incense slipping into the wind. An elderly caretaker spoke slowly, with the cadence of someone used to living by the rhythm of ceremonies rather than by the clock. “The village has two observances, one in spring and one in fall. In spring we pray for favorable rain and wind. In fall we give thanks to the spirits and our ancestors, asking that the people may work and live in peace.”

Listening to him, I felt that this was more than ritual. It was a spiritual contract between human beings and the land. People promised heaven and earth that they would live decently and work honestly, and the land, in return, would let the rice flower, the boats come home, the houses stand through storm season. Long ago, people settled along the coast and built their lives against the waves. Every typhoon reminded them that a human life could be as fragile as a dead coconut leaf in a seasonal gale. They worshiped the village guardian spirit, the founders, the later benefactors, those who opened the land and protected the settlement.

Here they honor Trần Chất, remembered as a man willing to sacrifice himself for the people, brave enough to submit a petition asking that a bridge and market be built. At first there was only a thatched shrine with leaf walls. Under Emperor Thiệu Trị it was rebuilt as a proper communal house. Something fragile became solid, just as a fishing village grows, little by little, through sweat and storms.

Inside the main sanctuary, I looked up at intricately carved wooden screens, dragons, qilin, birds, flowers, leaves. Nothing showy, nothing overloaded, only work of restraint and a sure hand. The old craftsmen did not make these things to show off. They made them to last for those who came later. In front is the performance hall, where hát bội opera and chèo bả trạo rowing chants are performed during festivals. I closed my eyes and imagined a full-moon night, drums rolling fast, oil lamps trembling, villagers packing the courtyard. A community is not formed by brick walls. It is formed by nights like those, nights of drums and shouted responses, nights when a shared faith gives off light.

Leaving the communal house, I walked a few hundred meters to Ngư Ông Street. The smell of the sea grew stronger, salt pressing into the throat. There stood Vạn Thủy Tú. “Thủy” means water, “Tú” celestial brilliance. Thủy Tú is an unexpectedly beautiful name. If the communal house belongs to the land, then the vạn belongs to the sea. Fishermen here do not call the whale cá Ông, as I wrote earlier. Most of the time they simply say, “Ông,” the Elder. It sounds strange and intimate at once, not distant reverence but something almost familial. They believe Ông rescues boats, shows the way, pushes vessels toward shore when

storms come. I heard stories of boats capsizing offshore and a huge dark mass rising from below, lifting a vessel and steadily nudging it toward shallow water. Survivors returned and built a shrine in gratitude. At first this too had been only a village communal house. As fishing became the chief livelihood, it evolved into a vạn dedicated to Nam Hải, the Lord Whale.

Vạn Thủy Tú was established in 1762. Three wooden structures run one behind another in the shape of the Chinese character for “three,” comprising the performance hall, main sanctuary, and chamber of the village founders. The building follows the four-pillar style, four great wooden columns soaring upward to carry the roof. Standing beneath them and looking up, I suddenly felt as if I were inside the belly of an overturned boat. Everything seemed oriented toward the sea. As though even while standing on land, people here could never forget that they belonged to the waves. The caretaker led me into the exhibit room. A whale skeleton twenty-two meters long lay there in pale silence. It was so large I had to step far back to see it whole. He told me it was the largest whale skeleton in Vietnam and that nearly a hundred other sets of whale bones were also kept there. I stood for a long time, long enough to hear my own breathing.

Then I understood why fishermen worshipped. People who go to sea live by something they cannot control. A shift in the waves can mean a shift in fate. To leave shore, you have to believe. Without belief, you might not dare live the life at all. Every year there are spring rites, prayers for the fishing season, ceremonies at the height of the season and at its close, rowing rituals, opera, ceremonial boat

crews, races. In truth, these make up the calendar of the entire community. Not a calendar printed on paper, but one written in tides and fishing seasons.

Toward evening I walked along the Cà Ty. The river was gentle and quiet, carrying the passage of generation after generation. Against the pale gray sky stood the Phan Thiết Water Tower, an octagonal structure thirty-two meters high, built between 1928 and 1934, positioned between two bridges like a witness. It does not look especially large beside modern high-rises, but it has presence. It is said to have been designed by the Lao prince Souphanouvong. The tower held 350 cubic meters of water, once a lifeline for the city.

A city is built out of three things, fresh water, a place of worship, and a market. Phan Thiết had all three. Phan Thiết Market dates back to the end of the seventeenth century, following settlers who moved south to open new lands. The fish-sauce trade here is also more than three hundred years old, barrel after wooden barrel of anchovies mixed with salt, left beneath the sun and given time. The smell of fish sauce is not merely the smell of food. It is the smell of time. The smell of patience.

That night I went to the Mũi Né shore. The fishing village was still awake. Boats were coming in, yellow lamps blinking, fish pouring into baskets with a rushing sound, people shouting back and forth, water thumping against wooden hulls. A primordial rhythm, and a stubborn one. A woman sorted fish as naturally and quickly as breathing. A child had fallen asleep slumped over a basket of nets. An old man sat under a tiny flashlight mending a net, stitch after

careful stitch. Watching him, I wondered how many generations had lived to this same rhythm. Perhaps because the sea changes every hour, the people here have had to become all the more steadfast.

The following day I went farther out, up into the dunes. Wind blew, sand moved, forms changed without stopping. Nothing held a fixed shape. Looking at those smooth, flowing slopes, I thought that perhaps this land teaches people to accept change. The Cham came through, then the Vietnamese, the Chinese, the French, each leaving something behind, and still Phan Thiết remains Phan Thiết. The area once belonged to the kingdom of Champa, and the Pô Sah Inư towers remain on Bà Nài Hill, quietly looking toward the sea, a reminder that history never truly disappears. It merely changes its voice.

I followed the coast to the rocky headland and looked toward Am Cậu. Then I turned back past Kê Gà Lighthouse, standing there since 1899 like a somber guardian of the sea. I regretted that I could not make it out to Phú Quý Island this time, that island in the open ocean where people might go to a Buddhist temple and mend fishing nets on the same day, believe in the Buddha and in Ông as well, believing whatever helps keep the heart steady before the waves. I returned to the city as the afternoon grew still. Sea wind passed through Vạn Thủy Tú, past Đức Thắng communal house, through the market, around the water tower, then dissolved into the Cà Ty. I stood in front of the vạn for a long time. Thin incense smoke drifted through the washed-out light of sunset.

And suddenly I understood. A city does not live because of resorts, scenic attractions, or photographs posted for check-ins. It lives because of collective memory. In Phan Thiết, people worship the village guardian to remember the land. They honor Lord Guan and the Nam Hải Whale to remember the sea. They keep the fish-sauce trade to remember labor. They preserve communal houses and fishing shrines to remember one another, and to remember where they came from.

To me, Phan Thiết is a country of white wind. A country of salt. A country of memory, never loud but endlessly deep, like fish sauce aged for years, growing richer the longer it is left to rest.

WAVES THAT NEVER DISSOLVE

Today may be my last day in Phan Thiết. I woke early, not because I was eager to cram in as many sights as possible, but because something inside me kept urging me outward, as though if I did not walk into the city right then, I might miss something very small and very important. The Grab driver had barely dropped me off at the end of the street when I caught the smell of fish sauce in the wind. Salty. Strong. The kind of smell that makes people unfamiliar with it wrinkle their noses, while someone who once lived near the sea finds it oddly reassuring.

It smells like home cooking.

Wind from the Cà Ty still moved through the half-sleeping blocks of houses, past cafés clattering tables and chairs into place, over fishing boats that had come in during

the night. I walked along the riverbank. The river is not large, not violent, not loud. It drifts by like an old person who has seen too much of life to care anymore about winning arguments. Fishing boats lie packed together, their hulls weathered gray, nets hanging out to dry, wind rushing through them like a long sigh.

Suddenly I had the feeling that Phan Thiết was not really a city. It was a sedimentary formation of memory. Layer after layer, more layers than you can count, and each one holds a people, a migration, another loss of homeland.

Of all those layers, the Chinese one made me most curious. Its story begins across the sea. In the late seventeenth century, the Ming dynasty collapsed and the Qing took its place. Chinese history is crowded with war, but that change of dynasty was particularly brutal for those committed to the cause of “resisting Qing and restoring Ming.” They did not merely lose a war. They lost the right to remain where they lived. Many chose to leave their homeland. This was not leisurely migration. It was flight. Flight from persecution. From beheading. From punishment that could wipe out an entire clan. Wooden boats with brown sails carried ancestral tablets, a few sacks of rice, some books, a little gold, and a great deal of fear. They sailed south across the South China Sea. Some stopped in Hội An, some went on to Gia Định and Mỹ Tho. One group put in at the mouth of the river at Phú Hài.

I once stood on Phú Hài Bridge and looked toward the sea. The water there is gentle. The waves are low and the shore slopes gradually. I could understand why their boats might have landed there. A forgiving harbor is the first

thing refugees need, before houses, before farmland. From Phú Hài toward Hàm Nhơn, a trading port gradually took shape. Foreign vessels began calling. Commerce opened outward. The Chinese, already skilled in trade, quickly built streets and businesses. Over time, however, they shifted toward central Phan Thiết, where there was the Cà Ty River, a market, and roads reaching inland.

I kept thinking that perhaps they had not chosen Phan Thiết. Perhaps Phan Thiết chose them. Once here, the Chinese did not immediately dissolve into the Vietnamese community. They clustered according to ancestral region, Guangdong, Fujian, Chaozhou, Hainan. Each group built an assembly hall. An assembly hall was not merely a place to discuss business. It was a homeland in miniature. Inside were ancestral altars, the speech of people from the same home district, familiar writing, foods that tasted like the other side of the sea. People far from home need such things if they are not to lose pieces of themselves.

I entered the Quan Đế Temple, built in 1770. The smell of incense was thick, smoke hanging like light mist. Inside, the air was cool and dark, the red and gold subdued. The statue of Guan Yu had the familiar long beard and red face, eyes fixed straight ahead, stern without appearing angry. I stood there a long while. Then it came to me that people did not honor Guan Yu only because of religion. They honored loyalty and honor. For people uprooted from home and wandering through a foreign land, the deepest fear was not poverty. It was disintegration. The breaking apart of the family. The community. Memory itself. Guan Yu became a spiritual pillar. Vietnamese people simply call the place

“Chùa Ông,” the Temple of the Elder, but for more than two hundred years it has remained a center of life for the Chinese of Phan Thiết, the community’s quiet heart.

During French rule, Chinese residents gathered around the Cà Ty, especially in Đức Nghĩa. In old Phan Thiết Market, vendor calls in Cantonese, Teochew, and Vietnamese blended together. Cloth, household goods, dried seafood, fish sauce, sugar, tea. Many of Phan Thiết’s traditional trades grew vigorously through Chinese commercial networks. They do not make much noise in official histories, yet their presence runs deep through the economy.

Looking at the rows of buildings beside the river, I thought that a city does not survive because of kings and princes alone. It survives because of merchants. I was fortunate once to see the Chinese Nghinh Ông festival in Phan Thiết, held during the seventh lunar month. This is not the whale-veneration festival of Vietnamese fishermen, but the procession of Lord Guan organized by the Chinese community.

Drums begin early in the morning. Streets fill with flags and brilliant red lanterns, so vivid they almost hurt to look at. Guan Yu’s palanquin is carried throughout the city. Each community association has its own procession, its own decorated vehicle loaded with cakes, fruit, spirit money, paper offerings. Lion dancers leap. Martial artists demonstrate forms. Firecrackers snap and explode. Families along the roadside set out offering tables with flowers, fruit, and incense and wait for the procession to pass. Standing in the crowd, listening to the drums pound, I

could feel my own heart beginning to answer them. This was more than a religious festival. It seemed like a declaration, we have been here, and we still remember where we came from. When the procession returned to Chùa Ông for the great ceremony, my throat unexpectedly tightened. A person can lose a homeland without losing roots. And perhaps preserving those roots on new soil is also one way of repaying the land that took you in.

But Phan Thiết is not only Chinese. Long before them came the Cham. This region once belonged to Panduranga, and bore the old name Hamu Lithít, “a farming hamlet near the sea.” In 1697, Lord Nguyễn Phúc Chu established Bình Thuận Prefecture and the land became part of Đại Việt. History turned a page but did not erase the one before it.

I went up Bà Nài Hill to see the Pô Sah Inư towers. They are small, nowhere near as monumental as Mỹ Sơn, but beautiful with a quiet reserve. Deep-red brick, sunlight turning gold across the walls, wind rushing over the hill. Inside is a shrine to Shiva, a surviving trace of Hinduism from the Champa kingdom. Later generations of Cham came to call the complex by the name of Princess Pô Sah Inư.

A people once had a kingdom. Now what remains are towers, Katê festivals, Ramưwan observances, quiet pottery villages, looms weaving brocade. I realized again that history is not merely something printed in books. It is the succession of human beings across the same ground. Cham, then Vietnamese, then Chinese. None disappeared

completely. They only settled downward, like layers of sand beneath my feet.

Below the hill lay the sea. Waves struck the shore in their steady rhythm. For thousands of years, perhaps, that sound has not changed. Only the people have.

Memory lies everywhere in Phan Thiết. Vạn Thủy Tú preserves the Vietnamese fishermen's worship of Ông. There is Dục Thanh School. The Phan Thiết Water Tower, built during the French period between 1928 and 1934, stands silently beside the river like a witness. Cham villages still preserve pottery traditions, and every Katê season flowers again in brilliant color. Each place belongs to another layer of people. Strangely, those layers do not destroy one another. They accumulate.

Today people call Phan Thiết the "resort capital" of Mũi Né. Visitors remember white sand, shifting dunes, kite surfing, expensive vacation complexes. I do not deny any of it. A city has to grow.

But when I left, the thing that stayed with me was not a resort. It was the slow Cà Ty River at dawn, incense smoke hanging inside Chùa Ông's dim light, the wind rushing around the Cham towers, the crack of firecrackers from the Nghinh Ông procession in the middle of town.

I came to understand that a city is not created by tall buildings. It is created by the memory of the people who live there. The Chinese arrived because of upheaval. The Cham are here because of history. The Vietnamese came through the southward movement of settlement. In the end, all of

them lived on the same strip of sand and listened to the same sound of waves.

On my final night, I stood outside by the seawall looking toward the water. The wind blew hard. Once again, the smell of fish sauce drifted by. I closed my eyes and listened to the waves, the wind, even the sound of my own breathing. A homeland is not necessarily the place where you were born. Sometimes it is the place where, amid the smell of sea and incense, among layers of people resting one upon another without erasing what came before, your heart suddenly grows still, as though you had already been there for a very long time, long before you ever knew you existed.

Essay 2

THE WIND IN VĨNH HY – WHERE THE SEA SAYS NOTHING, YET STILL REMEMBERS

I decided to head toward Phan Rang, but I did not choose the quickest, straight-through route. I looped down from Nha Trang, passed through Cam Ranh, then turned toward the sea, as though deliberately stretching out the journey so my heart would have time to absorb the sun and wind of the strip of land once called Ninh Thuận. Though that name may have changed on administrative maps, in my memory it remains intact: fierce sunlight, salt-laced wind, and a distinctive barrenness, beautiful in a way that refuses to blend in.

I was traveling not so much toward a destination as toward a feeling. It was vague, like standing before an old door, knowing there was probably nothing especially new behind it, yet still wanting to open it, simply to see what time had left behind.

I chose ĐT702, the road still spoken of as one of the most beautiful coastal routes in Vietnam. At first, I was in no hurry to believe it, because our country has no shortage of roads that leave people spellbound. Along the coast from Vũng Tàu to Nha Trang, blue sea, white sand, and golden sunshine are hardly rare. But when the road began hugging the mountainside, with an intensely blue sea opening on one side as though no one had ever touched it, and parched mountains thrusting upward on the other with sheer rock faces, I finally understood that the beauty of this road lay in more than scenery. It lay in the way the road carried people through layer after layer of earth, layer after layer of life, and even through strata of memory still buried deep within those waters.

Along the way, fishing villages appeared sparsely, sometimes only a few roofs huddled close together, sometimes fish cages floating quietly on the water. I stopped and watched the men mend nets and the women remove fish from them. They spoke little; every movement had its rhythm and purpose, as though they had known this life by heart for a very long time. I suddenly understood that the relationship between people and the sea here was not simply one of “living off it.” It was a deeper bond—part dependence, part wariness, part love, and part reverence and fear.

I arrived in Vĩnh Hy as the afternoon was already fading, not in the brilliant morning light seen in promotional photographs. The light had softened, and the sea itself seemed tired after a long day exposed beneath the sun. The bay lies tucked among the mountains, enclosed on three sides, with only a narrow opening toward the ocean. That terrain makes the waters of Vĩnh Hy strangely gentle—neither noisy nor overwhelming, only lightly rippling, like someone who has weathered enough storms in life to no longer feel the need to put anything on display.

People once called this place Vũng Găng. Reading a few lines of an old folk verse, I could almost hear voices from a very distant time echoing back:

“Mò O, Dỏ Tó are lovely indeed,

And there is Đá Vách beside Vũng Găng…”

Standing in Vĩnh Hy, I felt as though memory were still hiding somewhere nearby. It had never disappeared; it had merely faded with the years, waiting for someone, someday, to touch it by chance.

I stayed in Vĩnh Hy for two nights. On the first night, I went down to the bay and watched the fishing lights far offshore. Points of light flickered and bobbed on the water, looking like another city—a city without streets or houses, inhabited only by people adrift who still lived and still hoped. I wondered whether anyone aboard those boats was missing the land, or whether, once at sea, the sea itself truly became home. For one moment, I felt suspended between two boundaries: land and water, those who stay and those

who leave, things that can be given names and things that can only be felt.

The next morning, I went to the pier, ordered a strong coffee, sat beneath the shade of a tree, and buried my feet in the sand. The sand was hot yet soft, as though it were breathing. Boats came into harbor one after another; fresh fish glistened, and sweat glistened on sun-darkened faces. Watching the men haul nets and the women sort fish, I realized that what people call a “simple life” is not simple at all. Behind it lies a very delicate balance between labor and rest, hope and acceptance, between knowing what is enough and never ceasing to strive.

I took a glass-bottom boat out to sea. People said that beneath those waters were brilliant coral reefs, like a garden blooming in silence. But that day, the sea did not “open its heart.” Apart from a few fish drifting lazily past, the blue water kept its secrets hidden below. I felt a moment of disappointment, then laughed at myself. It turned out I was like everyone else, traveling somewhere and expecting beauty to reveal itself immediately before my eyes, forgetting that there are things we may never see in an entire lifetime if we are not patient enough to wait.

The boat took me past Bãi Bà Điên and Bãi Đá Tròn, places where rocks lay still, the water was crystal clear, and there seemed to be no trace of hurry anywhere. Back on shore, I followed a gentle slope, listening to the wind moving through dry branches and the sound of water flowing somewhere in the forest. A small, cool stream crossed the arid mountains like a soft thread. I bent down and touched the water, suddenly wondering why, in a land that seemed

so deprived, life always knew how to hide quiet sources of nourishment for itself. Passing Mũi Cá Heo, I stood on a rocky outcrop jutting into the sea and looked down upon the entire bay spread below, so blue that it seemed a person could dissolve into it. The wind blew hard, but instead of making me unsteady, it made my heart feel lighter, as though I could finally let go of a few things I had carried for far too long.

The people of Vĩnh Hy still hold a faith in the sea that is very much their own. They worship Ông Nam Hải, revering whales as divine rescuers of generations of people who have drifted upon the open sea. I heard the story of a royal decree that had once been lost, a document from the reign of Tự Đức that drifted for more than a century before finally returning. The villagers called it good fortune. I thought perhaps it was a kind of memory that knew how to find its way home—no matter how far it wandered, one day it would still return to where it belonged.

I stopped at a floating house and ate a seafood meal featuring firm, richly sweet lobster. The server was neither ceremonious nor eager to please. A few questions and a smile were enough to make me feel that I was not a stranger. Some places do not need to say much about “service.” People simply live in their own natural way, and that very naturalness puts others at ease. I heard that the coral here is strictly protected and that anyone who damages it faces a heavy fine. Looking down into the crystal-clear water, I suddenly felt relieved. At least there are still places where people know when to stop their hands, where they do not insist on taking everything nature is capable of giving them.

On the second night, I returned to the shore of the bay. The wind was still blowing, the lights offshore were still shining, and the sea was as quiet as it had been the night before, but something inside me had changed. I was no longer trying to “understand” Vĩnh Hy. I simply sat there and let the place seep into me, slowly, the way wind wears down stone, the way water nourishes coral, the way memory, after wandering for so long, quietly finds its way home.

Leaving Vĩnh Hy, I carried nothing with me except a trace of windblown salt still clinging to my hair. I had wondered whether, if I returned one day, this place would still be the same, or whether it too would become crowded and noisy and be given names more glamorous than necessary. But in the end, what mattered was not what Vĩnh Hy might become someday. What mattered was that it had once been this way, and that I had once stood there amid the wind and the sea, listening to stories that could never be fully told. Perhaps in life, it is the unfinished things that remain longest in the human heart.

NÚI CHÚA – WHERE STONE KNOWS HOW TO BREATHE AND THE SEA KNOWS HOW TO REMEMBER

I still remember that morning when I reached ĐT702, when it no longer felt as though I were simply traveling on a road, but as though something wild were quietly pulling me forward. People often praise that route for its beauty, but its beauty is not something dazzling laid out before the eye. It seeps in gradually, like sea salt working into the skin, like wind moving through the hair, like sunlight silently burning

something deep inside. And amid that winding road lies Núi Chúa National Park.

I had read that the park was established in 2003, in Ninh Hải District, Ninh Thuận Province, bordering Khánh Hòa. But standing before Núi Chúa, those words suddenly seemed small, incapable of containing the scale of a vast land facing the sea on three sides: Cam Ranh Bay on one side, the East Sea on another, Đầm Nại below, and the national highway behind it, a place that seemed at once enclosed within itself and open to infinity.

The car stopped, and I stood looking at the long mountain range, suddenly remembering the image people often use: Núi Chúa resembles an enormous turtle, its head turned south, its tail touching Mũi Xốp, as though crawling from the sea onto land. The longer I looked, the more convincing the resemblance became, and the more clearly I felt my own smallness before an ancient living presence that seemed to have lain there for millions of years, watching the land rise, the sea recede, rocks split apart, and time quietly mend them again.

The ground beneath my feet bore traces of ancient volcanic magma, granite worn by sea winds through the years, and layers of sand and gravel eroded until almost nothing remained. In many places, the soil was bleached and parched, so fragile that merely touching it made me imagine it crumbling apart and being swept away by a single rainstorm. Elsewhere, gray-brown soil was filled with stones and gravel, so barren that nothing seemed capable of surviving. And yet trees still grew, grass still rose, and life still found a narrow crevice in which to take hold and endure.

Núi Chúa, then, is not merely a mountain mass but a miniature world where the terrain changes from one stretch to the next. In some places it slopes gently toward the sea; elsewhere it rises abruptly, torn apart by valleys, steep slopes, and cliffs. Below 300 meters, the terrain remains relatively gentle. Between 300 and 700 meters, it becomes sharply fragmented. Above 700 meters, it feels as though one has entered another region altogether—rougher and harsher, yet also more magnificent.

Then I understood that the harshness of Núi Chúa lies not only in its rocks and mountains, but also in its climate. Ninh Thuận has long been described as the driest region in the country, with annual rainfall in some years falling below 500 millimeters. The rainy season arrives late and leaves quickly; the northeast monsoon brings almost no moisture, while the southwest winds are blocked by the inland mountain ranges. Standing in that sunlight, sunlight that not only burned the skin but seemed to penetrate thought itself, I found myself appreciating every drop of water, every little stream threading its way along the mountainside. The streams here are neither large nor long. In the dry season, sometimes only bare stones remain in their beds, but when water comes, it can rush fiercely and burst into white foam, as in the Lồ Ồ, Đông Nha, and Kiền Kiền streams. I followed one stretch, listening to water strike stone and looking at smooth granite slabs, imagining that time itself had been sitting here for millions of years, patiently polishing them little by little.

And yet, amid that arid land, there is a lake suspended against a rocky cliff, clear and blue throughout the year, precarious as a dream someone forgot. I stood

looking at it and felt something inside me soften. It turned out that even amid what seemed like absolute harshness, nature still knew how to preserve a gentle place for itself, somewhere to breathe.

But it was not only the mountains that made me turn the car around again and again. It was also the sea.

ĐT702 is called “the most beautiful coastal road,” but to me, beauty alone does not describe it. The road also carries a powerful sense of adventure. Mountains rise on one side, the blue sea opens to the horizon on the other, and you weave through one curve after another, sometimes feeling as though you are flying, sometimes as though you might slide into a bottomless depth. I turned the car around several times simply to find roads leading down to the sea. The GPS showed the way, but in truth I hardly needed it. The smell of the sea and the blue ahead called more clearly than any signal.

Then I reached the rock park. It is called a park, but in reality it is an area of more than three hectares containing tens of thousands of rocks stacked upon one another according to an order only nature understands, as though some gigantic hand had been playing with building blocks for millions of years. Some rocks resemble elephants, some birds, some lovers leaning against each other. One looks like a chair, another a teapot, another like the footprint of some enormous creature left behind from an age long gone.

Sitting on a rock and looking out to sea, I realized that the silence here was anything but empty. It seemed filled with stories told by the Raglai and Chăm peoples, stories of Đá Ba Cái, of fierce spirits, of Núi Đá Trắng, of

places inhabited by deities, or stones believed to have been used to seal the spiritual veins of the land. I do not know how true those stories are, but amid this enormous "collection of stones," I understood why people could believe them. The rocks here seem to have souls. They are no longer merely objects, but fragments of memory hardened by time. I returned again in the afternoon, between three and five, when the sunlight had softened and turned a gentle gold across the stone slabs. The whole landscape suddenly seemed less fierce, as though after a day exposed to sun and wind, it too knew exhaustion and needed a little rest. Around me, some people camped, some lit fires, some did nothing but sit quietly. I sat that way for a long time too, trying not to think about anything, simply knowing that I was there. That was enough.

Leaving the rock park, I continued toward Hòn Đỏ. People call this place "the sleeping mermaid." It sounds somewhat poetic, but when I arrived, I saw that the name was not entirely without reason. Under the sun, the rocks gleamed a deep red, not brilliant, but aged and gentle, casting their color over seaweed, white sand, and crystal-clear water. The strangest thing about Hòn Đỏ is that coral does not exist only beneath the sea. Fossilized coral reefs rise on land in all kinds of shapes, like a piece of the ocean's memory preserved in place. Walking across them, feeling their slight prickliness beneath my feet, I suddenly thought that I was walking upon something that had once lived, once breathed, once belonged to the sea long before it became stone.

I did not enter the water immediately. I walked leisurely along the shore, listening to the waves and looking

into the distance before wading into the calm water to the southwest. There, the waves were gentle, the wind light, and the water so clear that I could see my own feet and tiny fish darting below. Nearby is Từ Tôn Pagoda. I did not go far inside; I simply stood outside and thought about the fact that someone had spent forty years building this place. Suddenly, time was no longer measured in days or months, but in perseverance. Not far away stands the Bà Hòn Đỏ shrine, where people come to pray for peace and safety. Some say there are stones there engraved with ancient Chăm writing; others tell of the incarnation of a queen. I do not know what is fact and what is legend. I only sensed one thing: human faith, whatever form it takes, ultimately seeks a place to anchor itself in earth and stone so it can endure through the years.

Hòn Đen is another world entirely. Not red, not gentle, it is black, sharp, and wild. From a distance, it looks unremarkable, but up close, rocks pile upon rocks, their colors changing from place to place; pointed formations like porcupine quills rise among deep hollows and pools of crystal-clear water where fish, crabs, and coral live quietly. To reach Hòn Đen, you have to wade through the water, climb into a round basket boat, and keep your balance in that tiny rocking craft. Strangely, once I sat down, I felt calm. Those who could swim went into the water; those who could not simply sat and watched. I swam for a while, surfaced in the middle of the sea, looked at the rows of black rocks, and listened to waves strike the cliffs. I felt as though I had stepped into another part of the world. There were no crowds and no noise, only wind, stone, and water, just enough to remind a person how small he truly is.

As afternoon fell, I drove back toward Phan Rang, passing seawalls and coastal hamlets. In many places there was a Lăng Ông Nam Hải shrine, like a sign reminding me that for those who live beside the water, the sea has never been merely a place to earn a living; it is also where they entrust their fears, gratitude, and faith. In the distance, two high-rise buildings stood side by side, appearing like a marker telling me I was about to return to the “modern” part of life. After a day amid Núi Chúa, among rocks and sea, I looked at them and saw nothing remarkable. They simply seemed far away, not far in distance, but far in feeling.

The farther one travels into barren and wild places, the easier it becomes to touch something more primal and more real, something we often accidentally forget amid crowded places where everything is plentiful. I do not know whether it is always that way. But when I left Núi Chúa, it seemed that some part of my heart remained somewhere among the sun and wind, the blue sea, and those rocks that had lain still for millions of years and yet seemed somehow to be breathing.

Essay 3

THE SUN AND WIND OF PHAN RANG – PASSING THROUGH ONCE, YET SOMEHOW STAYING

I remember the moment the car first reached Phan Rang. There was nothing remarkable about the sky, no rain, no storm, only sunshine. It was not a showy, brilliant kind of

sunlight. It spread freely and dryly across everything, like a kind of light in which you could hear the wind moving through every grain of earth. People say that to reach Phan Rang is to understand Ninh Thuận, and to truly understand this land, sometimes you do not need to read statistics. You simply stand still somewhere, feel your skin warming, feel the wind moving through your hair, and suddenly you understand.

Ninh Thuận, the name sounds gentle, meaning “security and harmony,” but the land itself is not easy on people. It lies there between Khánh Hòa, Lâm Đồng, and Bình Thuận, with the East Sea before it and mountains behind it, a terrain that seems at once open and closed, inviting and challenging. Its area is more than three thousand square kilometers, and its population at the time was more than half a million, but what I remember is not the numbers. I remember the feeling that the earth and sky here had been worn away little by little by the wind until only the core remained, bare, dry, and honest.

People often say Ninh Thuận is the driest region in the country. I do not know whether statistics are really necessary to prove it. All you have to do is stand there at noon and look at the faded mountain slopes in the distance and the blinding white salt fields, and the truth presents itself without argument. The northeast winds are blocked at Hải Vân Pass; the southwest winds sweep through without stopping, leaving their rain behind in the Lâm Đồng highlands. Here, the sun and wind remain, like two old companions unwilling to part. The year is divided into two seasons, with little rain and abundant sun, and dryness

works its way into every crack in the earth, every fold of a house, every voice.

Strangely enough, that very harshness sustains people in another way. The Đa Nhim Dam brings water here, making the Phan Rang plain fertile, where grapes, jujubes, garlic, and onions rise from the soil like the land's gentle rebuttal to the sky. I once stood in a vineyard, watching clusters of grapes sway beneath the trellises, and marveled at how stubbornly life persists. Grapevine roots are sensitive to water and cannot tolerate flooding, yet they endure drought, like the people here, who do not need much, only what is right. Grapes in Phan Rang are not merely fruit. They are a kind of memory suspended from the trellis, yielding three harvests a year, with each hectare bringing profits many times greater than rice. Yet what matters is not the money, but the painstaking patience with which people tend the vines, as though caring for a quiet love affair. I ate a grape. Its sweetness was gentle rather than sharp, lingering for a long time, much like the way this land holds on to people, it does not try to keep you, but once you leave, you remember.

Then I passed the salt fields, so white they hurt the eyes, and saw figures bent over beneath the sun. I suddenly thought that everything here seems to be described as "the most": the most beautiful beach, the most beautiful bay, the driest land, the largest salt fields, the greatest number of sheep. But those superlatives are not something people boast about. They feel more like destiny: this is simply how things are, and one must live with them. A flock of sheep passed by, dust rising around them, bells tinkling. The sound was a little sad and yet peaceful, like wordless music.

I stopped at Mỹ Nghiệp weaving village, about seven kilometers from Phan Rang. I crossed rice fields, turned into the village, and heard looms creaking and shuttles clicking, like the sound of time weaving itself anew. The Chăm people here still preserve their traditional method of weaving, from growing cotton and spinning thread to dyeing it with plant leaves, eventually creating cloth patterned with quails, star-shaped flowers, and chicken-eye motifs. It looks simple at first, but the longer you look, the deeper it becomes, as though every thread carries an unspoken story. Standing there, I suddenly thought that some things do not need to be modernized, because their age itself has already become a form of perfection.

Phan Rang lies beside the Cái River, a small town that at one time had only a few tens of thousands of residents, yet sits directly at the intersection of major routes: National Highway 1A, the North–South Railway, and the road to Đà Lạt. It is a place both passed through and paused in, a place of transit and preservation. I walked along Độc Lập Street and saw new buildings, yet somewhere among them still lingered the shadow of the old town, of another time.

Then I looked up at the hill and saw the Pôklông Giarai towers standing there, silent and deep red beneath the sun. People tell stories about kings competing to build towers, about victory and defeat, about gods, but as I stood looking at them, all I saw was endurance, stone that seemed alive, standing through century after century, watching people come and go, as though it knew everything and said nothing. Ninh Thuận was once the land of Panduranga, once a center of the Chăm people, changing names and

rulers through the eras of the Nguyễn lords, Emperor Gia Long, Minh Mạng, the French, the Republic of Vietnam, the period after 1975, and later administrative divisions. History has passed through here as often as the wind, but in the end what remains is still the land, the towers, and the people.

What makes a place what it is? Geography? History? Or small things like a cluster of grapes, a loom, a flock of sheep passing through the afternoon sun? Or perhaps it is the way people endure and adapt to things that are not easy. In Ninh Thuận, I saw one thing clearly: beauty is not born only in favorable places. Sometimes harshness itself forces people to live more deeply, think differently, and preserve what deserves to be preserved. I went farther, crossing bridges and roads where the railway, highway, and sea lie so close together that it feels as though a few steps could touch all three. A land where everything is close and everything is far, close in distance, far in feeling.

As afternoon fell, the wind kept blowing. The sunlight softened, though the air was not exactly cool. I sat looking toward the sea, thinking about the scarce rainy seasons, the long dry seasons, the Katê and Rija Nưga festivals, and people who preserve tradition while living in the present, and suddenly something inside me grew quiet. It was not sadness, but a kind of stillness. When I left Phan Rang, the sun, the wind, the lightly sweet taste of grapes, and the feeling of this land continued to drift through my mind. This place does not hold people with easy beauty, but with something else, perhaps the honesty of the land, perhaps the patience of its people. And often, places like that are the ones people remember.

THE WIND OF PHAN RANG BLOWS THROUGH HISTORY – I WALK AS THOUGH LOST IN AN OLD RIVER

I returned to Phan Rang on a dry, sunny afternoon, beneath a sun that was not violently scorching but quiet and persistent. It seemed not to want to hurt anyone, only to remain, to cling, to seep gradually into the skin, slip into every strand of hair, then quietly anchor itself somewhere in the memory of a passerby like me, so that after I left, what remained was not a clear image but a dry, deep feeling that continued to smolder.

People call this place Phan Rang, or in full, Phan Rang–Tháp Chàm, a name that evokes land and people, a layer of cultural sediment that is easy to miss unless one is willing to stop for a while. It was once the center of Ninh Thuận, a coastal province at the southernmost edge of Vietnam's South Central Coast, south of the Trường Sơn Range, where mountains embrace a narrow plain on three sides and the land opens toward the sea, like a hand at once closing and opening, holding and releasing.

Standing in that sunlight, I heard a local man laugh and say, "The wind hits like a blow, the sun roasts like a furnace." It sounded like a joke, but the more I thought about it, the truer it seemed. The wind here does not merely pass over you. It passes through you; it lashes, it pushes, either driving you forward or forcing you to stand still. The sun is not loud, but it endures, so steadily that it feels like part of the earth rather than something falling from the sky.

In textbook terms, the climate here is tropical savanna shading into semi-desert: little rain, abundant sunshine, a dry season stretching from December through August of the following year, and a brief rainy season lasting only a few months at year's end, with annual rainfall of only around seven to eight hundred millimeters. Those figures sound dry and abstract, but standing here, I understood that they are not merely data. They define a way of life. A land with little rain forces people to learn how to wait, how to endure, how to preserve every drop of water, every harvest, every small opportunity.

Amid that dryness, the Dinh River, also called the Cái River, crosses the land like a blue vein. More than a hundred kilometers long, it rises in the mountains and flows into the East Sea. This river is not merely water; it is living memory. The Chăm call it Kraung Ding, meaning "river of the town," a name that sounds both near and distant, as though the river flows not only through the land but through life, history, and upheavals people sometimes cannot fully comprehend. I stood on its bank and watched the low-season current drift slowly by, thinking of the rainy months when floodwaters rise, then of the dry months when the river depends on releases from the Đa Nhim Dam. Suddenly the river seemed human—sometimes strong, sometimes weak, sometimes flowing freely, sometimes dependent on help, yet continuing to flow regardless.

But if there were only nature here, perhaps Phan Rang would not trouble my thoughts so deeply. What made me linger was the history of this land, a history scattered across place names, words, and stories that seemed to have drifted away. Phan Rang, or Pan(da)rang, comes from

Chăm, which in turn traces back to the Sanskrit Pāṇḍuraṅga, the name of an ancient deity. Hearing that, I suddenly felt that this name was not merely a place name but a trace of a world that once existed, believed, worshiped, and lived fully upon this land. This was once the center of the principality of Panduranga, the final surviving part of Champa after enormous upheavals. After 1471, when Lê Thánh Tông's campaign brought down the capital of Vijaya, the Chăm lost nearly all their territory. They gradually retreated south and ultimately gathered here. Phan Rang became a final refuge that still refused to let go.

I kept thinking about that. Why would such a small, dry, rain-starved region be chosen as a capital, a center? Was it because the land was difficult to inhabit and therefore easier to defend? Was it because it lay at "the end," making whatever remained there more precious? Perhaps so. Lands at the edge, at the end, often have little left to lose, and therefore preserve more. I walked along slopes descending from northwest to southeast, saw low mountains layered one behind another, narrow plains opening toward the sea, and terrain caught somewhere between enclosure and openness. That terrain blocked rain-bearing winds and concentrated dryness here, yet it also meant typhoons visited less often.

I thought of wars and partitions, of a time when this river became the border between two worlds. In 1653, when Nguyễn Phúc Tần sent troops against Champa and established the Phan Rang River as the boundary, the river no longer merely flowed; it divided. It divided land, people, and memory. On one side was Đại Việt, on the other Champa. One side was advancing; the other retreating.

That boundary lasted for more than a century.

One hundred and thirty-seven years.

Not a short time.

I wondered what the people living on opposite banks thought when they looked across at one another during all those years. Did they see an adversary, or a part of themselves slowly drifting away? Or had they simply grown accustomed to living within a boundary none of them had drawn with their own hands?

Then, when Minh Mạng abolished the principality of Panduranga entirely in 1832 and brought the territory directly under the imperial court, that boundary disappeared as well. But I knew that some boundaries do not exist on maps. They exist in memory.

They do not disappear.

They simply become invisible.

I continued on. The wind kept blowing, the sun remained spread across the land, and the earth stayed dry, yet something inside me slowed. It was not sadness, but the feeling of walking upon layers of sediment. Every step was another layer of time; every glance, another touch upon the past.

I wondered what the Chăm who remained thought when Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh brought troops here, when Chăm territory was renamed Thuận Thành, when administrative names changed. Did they feel they had lost their country, or only that they were gradually losing a way of life? Or had

they become accustomed to retreating, like the sea withdrawing with the tide, not resisting, but not forgetting?

No one answered.

The land was silent.

But that silence was not empty.

It was full.

Full of what had never been said.

I realized that history here is not ultimately about who won and who lost, but about what remained afterward. Not power, not borders, but quieter things. A name surviving in spoken language, a river still flowing under its old name, a tower still standing, a craft village preserving an ancient method of weaving, a festival still celebrated even though the royal court is long gone. What remains most of all is the way people continue to live. I felt as though I had crossed a river, not to reach the opposite bank, but to understand that there are currents we do not need to understand completely. Sometimes it is enough simply to stop and listen for a while. And often, that “enough” is what stays with us longest.



Photo: Chăm Tower in Phan Rang

Essay 4

WIND LEANING OVER TRẦU HILL – THE HANDS THAT KEEP THE CHĂM FLAME ALIVE

I remember the feeling of first setting foot in Phan Rang–Tháp Chàm. The sun was not merely sunlight, but something with a voice of its own, dry and persistent, clinging to the skin and to memory. The wind did not simply blow; it passed through, rustling, slipping into every opening in my clothes and every layer of thought. Standing in that land, I suddenly felt myself becoming smaller while history

grew larger, thicker, heavier, like layers of Chăm brick stacked upon one another for centuries without a visible line of mortar.

To come here without speaking of the Chăm would truly feel incomplete, and what would be missing would not merely be information, but part of the land's soul. The Chăm, also historically called the people of Champa, are a people who carry with them the memory of a kingdom that once stretched from Quảng Bình all the way to Bình Thuận, existing from the second century until the early seventeenth century—a strip of land that is at once history, scar, and memory unwilling to sleep. Standing beneath this sun, I wondered how many footsteps had crossed this land, how many retreats, how many returns from Cambodia and distant regions.

The Chăm follow a matrilineal system. It sounds simple at first, but the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like a current flowing against the usual direction, something uniquely their own and remarkably enduring. Their homes, the Thang Yơ and Thang Mưyân houses, are not merely dwellings but an order, a way of arranging life, where the youngest daughter keeps the Chick Atâu-la basket as though preserving the family's entire memory. I imagined an afternoon in some quiet plây, roofs facing south, no large trees because spirits might dwell in them, only a few sparse tamarind shadows, and in one corner of the yard a young woman silently guarding something no one could see yet everyone knew mattered. The way they eat, live, and believe, from abstaining from beef and pork to dishes such as Vabai soup and sour porridge, is not merely custom, but an identity traveling through time without

dissolving. I thought that sometimes the simplest things are the hardest to erase.

And eventually all of those things gather themselves together and rise into form and mass as towers. I had seen the Po Klong Garai Towers from afar before, the way one looks at a dream not yet understood. But that day, I climbed. I truly climbed. Step after stone step, breathing in broken rhythms, sweat forming, the sun pouring down like fire, and yet I felt lighter inside, as though I were entering something that had been waiting for me for a very long time.

Standing before the tower, I did not feel as though I were standing before a work of architecture. I felt as though I were standing before a question. The bricks fit tightly together, without visible mortar, without a seam. Yet they have stood there through rain, wind, war, and all the attempts people have made to explain them without ever fully understanding. Some say the entire structure may have been fired as one mass; others suggest tree resin or dầu rái oil. But the more theories I heard, the more I felt that the mystery lay not in technique but in something deeper, as though the hands of the ancients had not merely built a tower but placed within it a faith that needed no explanation.

The tower has three levels, narrowing as they rise, like something striving upward while still understanding its limits. Above are figures of Apsaras, Garudas, Nandin. I stepped inside. The walls were smooth, without carvings or decoration. Strange. All the beauty was displayed outside, while the interior remained silent. Standing there, I suddenly thought of people: however brilliant the outside may be, the inside can sometimes be just as empty. Po Klong Garai is

worshiped there, a king who not only ruled but was later elevated to divine status. A human being passed through life, entered belief, then became a symbol. I heard the story of him: “a child floating on water, afflicted with sores, scorned by others, then licked by a dragon and transformed into a handsome man, then becoming king, building towers, and defending the land.” It is a legend with a little truth, a fairy tale that is also history. People say he did not want to fight the Khmer army, so he chose instead to compete in building towers. I stood there thinking about that for a long time. Perhaps sometimes the greatest strength lies not in winning a fight, but in finding a way not to fight at all.

About fourteen kilometers from the city, the Hòa Lai Towers appear not so much as ruins as a wound that has formed new skin but never fully healed. People call this place Ba Tháp, the Three Towers. But standing there in the middle of a long, broad field where the wind sweeps across without anything to stop it, I understood that the name was both sufficient and insufficient. This was once a much larger complex, a sacred space built beginning in the early ninth century, when the Kingdom of Champa was in the maturity of its art and faith.

The entire complex occupies the highest ground in the field, apparently by deliberate choice: towers were built not only for worship but to look down, command the surroundings, and assert a presence. The rectangular foundation once held enclosing walls, a gate tower, long buildings, and numerous auxiliary structures. Today, all that remains are traces, like unfinished sentences blurred by the wind.

I approached each tower.

The central tower—or rather, what remains of it, is a source of regret. It is said that in the late nineteenth century, the French and local officials demolished its upper section to obtain bricks for paving the imperial road, which later became National Highway 1. Standing before the surviving foundation, I felt as though I were looking at a piece of history cut short, not by time, but by human hands. The two remaining towers, the North and South Towers, still stand, though not so much standing strong as enduring. The North Tower is taller, and its wall pilasters still retain delicate details. Garuda birds spread their wings as though trying to lift the entire tower from the ground. False doors curve into arches, with seated human figures within them. Everything seems to preserve some lingering breath of the past.

But it was the South Tower that made me linger longest. It is the largest and the most nearly intact. Yet precisely because of that, it possesses a strange unfinished quality. Many decorative details on its walls remain in sketch-like form, as though the ancient craftsmen had departed midway through their work, leaving it incomplete. The attached pilasters stand closer together, narrowing the spaces between them; the false doors are broader but no longer contain standing human figures. The composition changes, like an experiment never completed.

I looked up at the corbelled arches, the most distinctive feature of Hòa Lai. Those curves are more than architecture; they are a language. From the mouths of Kala monsters, bands of ornament unfurl downward and spread across the entire doorway. The wall spaces between the

pilasters are carved with foliage, not ostentatiously elaborate but accented just enough to emphasize the structure. Above, decorative bands stretch like endless garlands. And somewhere among them, Garuda wings still spread, though time has worn away their details.

One unusual feature is that the tower walls are not perfectly vertical. They flare slightly outward toward the top, so subtly that it is difficult to notice unless you stand there looking for a long time. Yet that slight inclination gives the entire structure a sense of movement, of rising, of struggling to escape gravity. Scholars have described this as one of the oldest and most beautiful Chăm tower complexes. I would not argue. But standing there, I did not think of beauty in the conventional sense. I saw only one thing: this place had once been built out of enormous faith. And even if towers collapse and bricks disappear, that faith still seems to hide somewhere within every crack.

Leaving Hòa Lai, I continued on, as though an invisible thread were pulling me toward the other towers of this land. The Pôrômê Tower appeared with a different character. It is not as ancient, but symbolically it feels more concentrated. People often call it a “version” of the Pô Klong Garai Tower. Standing before it, however, I saw no imitation. I saw continuity, a way for later generations to learn from those before them and then add something of their own.

What held me longest was not the overall architecture, but the details inside. There is an eight-armed linga bearing the face of the deified king Pôrômê. There, god and human are no longer separate. That face is not a distant symbol; it is specific, the face of someone who may once

have lived, looked, and spoken. Standing before it, I felt almost as though it were looking back at me. Then there is the image of Lady Thu Chí, the king's wife, a woman and virgin figure enshrined in her own sacred space. It is not a rigid image. The body is full, the gaze alive, the beauty not so heavily deified as to become alien, but still retaining the closeness of a Chăm woman. There, art does not exist merely to glorify gods. It is also a way to preserve human beings in everything earthly about them. I left Pôrômê with the wind still blowing as though from a thousand years ago. The towers remained, some intact, some lost, some unfinished. But they all shared one thing: they were not silent. You simply had to stand there long enough to hear them.

Leaving the towers, I continued on, as though an invisible thread were pulling me down toward the plain and the craft villages. Mỹ Nghiệp weaving village was not noisy, but neither was it still. The looms beat out a rhythm; small metal pieces chimed, sounding like time weaving itself anew. I sat watching an elderly woman, her hand passing the shuttle, her foot keeping rhythm, her eyes still engaged in conversation, and saw an entire lifetime contained within every thread. People say this craft was taught by the goddess Pô Nagar. I do not know whether the story is true, but watching how they preserve the craft, I believed there was something real in it. A piece of brocade is not merely cloth. It is a story. It is dog-foot and bird-foot patterns; it is dye made from leaves, bark, mud, and things that might otherwise seem meaningless. I suddenly thought that people are always searching for grand languages, forgetting that some things can be spoken through color, pattern, and

silence. Yet amid that beauty, I also heard sadness. Machine-made goods are cheaper, faster, and everywhere. People buy what looks authentic without needing the real thing. Looms are dismantled. Young women at the looms smile less often. I stood there not knowing whom to blame. Sometimes loss does not come through destruction, but through convenience.

Leaving Mỹ Nghiệp, I stopped at Bàu Trúc pottery village. If weaving is sound, pottery is form. But what surprised me most was that the potters here do not use a wheel. Elsewhere, the clay turns. Here, the person turns. The craftsperson stands and walks around the mass of clay, hands shaping, feet stepping, eyes watching, like a slow dance. I stood watching and suddenly felt something almost sacred in it. Clay, seemingly lifeless, was treated as though it were alive. They mix earth with sand, let it rest overnight, knead it with their feet, shape it by hand, then fire it outdoors with straw, wood, and wind. No enclosed kiln. No machinery. Only experience and instinct.

A water jar keeps water cool beneath the fierce sun. A vase takes the form of an Apsara. A cooking pot bears patterns like waves. I touched them and felt the warmth of earth, people, and time. They say this craft dates back 3,500 to 4,000 years. I do not know how precise that figure is, but I do know that some things endure not because they never change, but because they change just enough not to lose themselves.

After completing the circuit, I looked back at the towers in the distance. The wind still blew. The sun still burned. But something inside me had softened. I suddenly

understood that what makes the Chăm who they are is not the towers, not the pottery, not the brocade. It is the way they preserve themselves while everything around them changes. To preserve without closing oneself off. To change without being lost. That may be one of the hardest things in life.

I stood there a little longer, then turned away.

But my heart had not yet left.

PANDURANGA – A REST IN THE MUSIC BENEATH THE WINDS OF NINH THUẬN

Standing in Phan Rang–Tháp Chàm beneath the scorching sun of this windswept land, I suddenly stopped seeing a city. Before me, every layer of earth, every tower, every gust of wind seemed to be turning up an old name.

Panduranga.

Not a place name.

An echo.

Wind blew in from the sea, carrying the salt of the East Sea, dry and persistent. I stood still and listened. Not to the wind itself, but to something deeper within it, as though sounds had once existed here, then been buried by time without ever completely disappearing.

“Can you hear it?”

I turned around. A Chăm man stood there, dressed in a long white robe with a cloth wrapped around his head,

his eyes seeming to preserve some part of the past that I could not touch.

“I only hear the wind.”

He shook his head very slightly.

“Listen more carefully. You’ll hear horses’ hooves, ceremonial music, people calling to one another during rituals for the gods. This was once the heart of a kingdom.”

I did not answer. But in that moment, the name Panduranga suddenly grew heavy. It was no longer a historical term. It felt like a heartbeat that had stopped but whose echo could still be heard somewhere inside the chest of the earth.

Beginning in 757, this place was once a center of power within Champa, a southern principality that repeatedly broke away, repeatedly stood on its own, and refused complete submission. Through upheaval after upheaval, it survived until 1832, when the Nguyễn Dynasty formally abolished its autonomous status.

Such a long span of time cannot simply be called survival.

It was resistance.

I bent down and picked up a stone. It was rough, heavy, nothing remarkable. But when I closed my hand around it, I suddenly understood what the man had meant.

Panduranga was not soft.

In 1471, when the capital of Vijaya fell before the advance of Đại Việt, almost all of Champa's northern territory was swept away. The Chăm retreated south, contracted, gathered themselves together, and clung to Panduranga as though to a final shore.

A people who had once built towers, mastered the sea, and offered incense at the feet of the goddess Bhagavati now had to live within their own memory.

But they did not kneel.

Ancient inscriptions record that the people of Panduranga rebelled, even resisting their own royal court when authority was imposed upon them. King Jaya Paramesvaravarman I called them "licentious, wicked-hearted, frivolous, rebellious." It was a condemnation, but also an acknowledgment: they would not bow their heads.

I looked into the distance. The Chăm towers were still standing.

Not like works of architecture, but like exclamation points in history.

In Panduranga, even royal bloodlines carried division and rivalry, the areca and coconut clans. Sri Harivarman IV once claimed descent from both, while the two continually struggled for power. Authority here was never stable. It was like waves, forever colliding and changing direction. Yet amid those conflicts, one thing remained constant: the will to survive.

From Mỹ Sơn and Trà Kiệu to this land, temples and towers continued to rise. Sanskrit once resounded through

ceremonies. Statues of goddesses, inscriptions, arches, all were traces of a civilization that lived not only upon the land but opened itself toward the sea.

Merchant ships from Srivijaya, Java, and the Khmer world once called at its ports.

Panduranga was not a fringe.

It was once a gateway.

And then all of it receded.

Only the wind remained.

I emerged from those thoughts as the afternoon began to soften. The road carried me toward Đầm Nại, a body of water lying deep inland, like a quiet pause amid all the upheavals that had just passed through my mind.

The lagoon is broad and open without being showy. Seawater enters through the Ninh Chữ channel and meets fresh water from canals, creating a rich ecosystem that the naked eye cannot fully see. I stood there looking at the still surface and kept thinking: some things do not need to be loud in order to endure.

From the lagoon, I went to the sea.

Ninh Chữ Beach stretches out with white sand, clear water, and a gentle slope like an invitation. Casuarina trees stand still, green and resilient. People say this was once Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's private retreat. Now it is open to everyone. Yet the beauty here is not the kind that makes people gasp. It is the kind that makes them stay longer than they intended.

The next day, I continued along National Highway 1A toward the boundary between Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận. Then the sea at Cà Ná suddenly appeared, broad and somehow still wild. People call Cà Ná “the sleeping princess.” I do not know whether the name fits. But standing before the sea, watching granite outcrops break into the white sand and water so deep blue it seemed possible to fall into it, I understood why no one wanted to wake this place. Wade only about twenty meters offshore and the water remains shallow, yet coral reefs are already beneath you. Caves, projecting rocks, and strange formations create a feeling both intimate and remote.

People say three days are enough to see Ninh Thuận.

I do not believe them.

Some places open wider the farther you travel, not by revealing more destinations, but by revealing more questions.

Panduranga is such a question.

How much is enough, not for a journey, but for understanding?

I cannot answer.

I only know that tomorrow morning I will leave Phan Rang–Tháp Chàm.

But some things, I suspect, will not leave me.

Essay 5

PANDURANGA – WHERE THE TOWERS REMEMBER FOR HUMANKIND

The more I read about Chăm history, the more I realize that it has never been merely a collection of dry pages filled with dates, names, and the rise and fall of kingdoms. Behind every upheaval lies a wound that never had time to heal, a foundation thought long cold that somewhere still trembles, an echo believed extinguished long ago that remains quietly beneath the earth. In Panduranga, the final land of the Chăm, that history is even more brutal, as though fate chose the narrow coastal strip of Ninh Thuận as the place where human endurance would be tested to its absolute limit.

In 774, Austronesian forces consisting of Javanese and Malays landed from the sea at Kauthara and advanced into Panduranga, capturing the city of Virapura. King Prithi Indravarman led his forces in fierce resistance and was ultimately killed while surrounded. An inscription found at the Po Nagar temple preserves the memory of that invasion in language that does not conceal its hatred. The attackers are described as “dark and thin people from a distant land… of wicked nature.” They seized the linga of the god Sri Sambhu, burned the Po Nagar temple, and carried away the golden statue of the goddess Bhagavati. Reading those words carved in stone, I thought about how the Chăm recorded their own pain. They did not weep over it. They quietly carved each event into stone, as though they

understood very early that once memory becomes an inscription, it can endure longer than spoken stories, sometimes even longer than the people who witnessed the events with their own eyes.

The royal family raised Cri Satyavarman to the throne, but as soon as the new king took power, he was forced to flee north for refuge. There, with the help of the Chăm and local highland peoples such as the Ba Na and Hrê, he assembled an army and marched south to Kauthara, driving the Austronesian forces back to sea. To me, this is one of the most beautiful details in the history of Panduranga, though rarely mentioned. In a moment of mortal danger, the boundary between lowlands and mountains suddenly became insignificant. What remained was simply the will of people who shared a refusal to lose their homeland.

Returning to Virapura, Satyavarman built another palace within the city of Krong Laa and inadvertently established a new custom: planting a Kraik tree before the palace as a royal symbol. That tree would return centuries later in the story of Po Rome, carrying a strange destiny with it. The destroyed Po Nagar temple was also rebuilt in brick and completed in 784. Two years later, Satyavarman died, and his youngest brother succeeded him under the regnal name Indravarman I.

Upon hearing of Satyavarman’s death, Javanese forces invaded again in 787. This time they destroyed the Hòa Lai tower dedicated to the god Bhadradhipatisvara, abducted women, looted treasures, then divided their forces in two. One group returned home, while the other remained

to occupy Panduranga. It was not until 799 that Indravarman I finally drove them back to sea. Twelve years of occupation, twelve years in which the people lived beneath the feet of foreign forces, after which the country had to begin again from ashes. The king rebuilt Hòa Lai as three new towers, Kalan Ba Tháp, dedicated to three deities. It was as though every brick laid down then served not only to rebuild a temple, but to declare that this land still refused to submit.

Indravarman I continued suppressing rebellions from the north, northeast, east, and southeast, most notably the Yakshas uprising from the south, involving highland tribes in Angkor territory. He died in the early ninth century and was succeeded by his brother-in-law Harivarman I. Whenever I read about this king, I feel a mixture of grandeur and defiance, a particular kind of indomitable spirit belonging to this southern land.

Harivarman I did not merely rebuild his country. He decided to strike back. In January 803, Chăm forces attacked Châu Hoan and Châu Ái, present-day Nghệ An and Thanh Hóa, bringing back substantial goods. With additional provisions obtained from the north, the naval forces of Hoàn Vương sailed out to punish Kelantan in Java and Patani in Malaysia, places that had once contributed troops to raids against them. Reading this, I cannot hide a certain exhilaration, as though watching someone once driven into a corner finally stand upright again.

But history never moves in only one direction. In 808, Harivarman I again attacked Châu Hoan and Châu Ái, this time suffering defeat at the hands of Governor Trương Châu. Fifty-nine members of the royal family were captured

alive, and more than thirty thousand soldiers died in battle. I often stop for a long time at that number. Thirty thousand human beings, in historical records, merely a few words, but behind every number there must once have been a face, a home, a mother waiting for her son, a wife waiting for her husband. History often seems cold not because it contains no tears, but because too many tears have been compressed into numbers. The following year, 809, Harivarman I marched again and won. That persistence, coming immediately after a defeat that had cost tens of thousands of lives, I do not know whether to call courage, stubbornness, or both. The states of mind of people from the past sometimes seem beyond the vocabulary of our own time.

Under his son, Vikrantavarman III, the Kingdom of Hoàn Vương entered a prosperous period. Inscriptions describe the king wearing golden cords set with pearls and jade, sheltered beneath a white parasol spreading in four directions, adorned with a crown, belt, bracelets, earrings, and a necklace of rubies, radiating light “like glittering vines.” Chinese historical records also note that the king, officials, and court ladies wore luxurious fabrics, gold necklaces, and strings of pearls. From these accounts, it is clear that this prosperity was not merely the language of royal praise, but the genuine wealth of a maritime kingdom.

After the Hoàn Vương period, Panduranga returned to the position of a principality within the broader Champa federation, while the capital shifted first to Trà Kiệu and later to Đồ Bàn. Yet the fate of this southern land did not become any easier. Situated between major powers expanding their

influence, it continued to face intrusion, invasion, and occupation.

For twenty-one years, from 854 to 875, Angkorian forces repeatedly attacked Panduranga, occupying territories along the left bank of the Đồng Nai River and at times crossing the Langbiang highlands to raid the region. The Khmer Empire was then at the height of its power, Angkor's shadow stretching across much of Southeast Asia, and Panduranga lay directly within its reach. In 1145, the Cambodian king invaded Vijaya and killed Indravarman III, king of the Champa federation. Panduranga became a refuge for Prince Rudravarman IV and his son. The people of Panduranga raised the son, Srivanandana, as king under the regnal name Jaya Harivarman I. To me, this was not merely compassion, but the survival instinct of a community that understood that amid catastrophe, people have a chance of enduring only when they know how to depend on one another. In 1149, Jaya Harivarman I marched north, defeated the commander of the Cambodian expeditionary army, and liberated Vijaya. At the most dangerous moment, a principality at the far south had rescued the entire federation.

In 1190, Cambodia attacked again. Vijaya fell again, the king of Champa was captured, and the kingdom was divided in two. The north came under Cambodian rule, while the south remained Panduranga under its own king. In 1191, Prince Rasupati rebelled and expelled the Cambodian forces, while the former king, after being released, sought help from Panduranga. The king of Panduranga marched north, drove out the invaders, then unexpectedly deposed the former king and took the federal throne himself. From

ruler of a southern principality, Sri Suryavarman became king of all Champa.

But the cycle did not stop. In 1203, Jayavarman VII of Cambodia sent troops against Sri Suryavarman, defeated him, and occupied Vijaya for seventeen years. Fighting, losing, retaking, then losing again. History kept turning in an exhausting and bloody circle.

Looking back at these events, I often think of a paradox peculiar to Panduranga. This was a principality willing to send its troops north to fight for the survival of the entire Champa federation, yet it was also the very region that repeatedly demanded autonomy and even independently sent diplomatic missions to China as though it were a sovereign state. At first glance, the two things seem contradictory, yet both existed within the same political entity.

Champa, after all, was a relatively loose federation. The more I read, the more I feel that this looseness was not entirely a weakness. For Panduranga, it created room for the region to develop its own vitality and character, close enough to share a common destiny, yet independent enough not to disappear into the center. More broadly, perhaps a community survives for a long time not because all its parts are bound as tightly as possible, but because there remains just enough space between them for each to remain itself.

Then the fifteenth century brought the greatest and most painful turning point in Champa's history. In August 1470, the Chăm king Trà Toàn led one hundred thousand troops in an attack on Châu Hóa. In response, Emperor Lê

Thánh Tông mobilized 260,000 troops against Champa, a force more than two and a half times larger.

The war of 1471 was brief but ferocious. Đại Việt forces set an ambush offshore at Sa Kỳ to block retreat by sea while surrounding the city of Chà Bàn in multiple layers, raising ladders against the walls and breaking through the eastern gate. In the end, forty thousand Chăm soldiers were killed and thirty thousand captured. King Trà Toàn was taken toward Nghệ An but died on the way because, as the historical records put it, he “became ill from excessive anxiety.”

For some reason, amid an entire war filled with bloodshed, that detail is what leaves me silent longest. To die in battle can still be seen as the end of someone who carried a sword. But to die from the anguish of losing one’s country, one’s realm, everything inherited from one’s ancestors—that is a quieter and lonelier death. Such wounds do not appear upon the body and shed not a drop of blood, yet they quietly consume a person from within until even life itself no longer has the strength to resist.

After that defeat, Vijaya fell and Champa lost all territory north of Cù Mông Pass. The remaining land was divided into three regions: Hoa Anh, Nam Bàn, and Đại Chiêm, with Đại Chiêm consisting of Kauthara and Panduranga. General Bố Trì Trì retreated to Panduranga, proclaimed himself lord, and submitted to the Lê emperor. From then on, Panduranga officially became the last remaining territory of a kingdom that had once stretched from Quảng Bình to Bình Thuận.

I imagine a map being folded smaller and smaller. With every fold, another region disappears from sight, though its memory does not. In the end, only Panduranga remains, a narrow strip of land wedged between sea and mountains, so small that one more gust of historical wind seems enough to scatter it completely. Yet it was precisely this small place that sheltered what remained of the soul of an entire kingdom.

The seventeenth century brings us to the story of Po Rome and Ngọc Khoa, a story remembered to this day in very different ways by the Chăm and Vietnamese. That fact alone suggests something important to me: history rarely contains only one memory, because every community tends to preserve most deeply the part that once caused its heart the greatest pain.

Po Rome ascended the throne in 1627. This was a relatively stable period for Panduranga and one of the brightest eras of the surviving kingdom. He built the MaRen irrigation dam in Ninh Thuận, expanded trade with European merchants, exported agarwood and high-grade kỳ nam, strengthened the military, and nurtured ambitions to gradually recover lost territories. In these accounts, Po Rome appears to me as a king of vision, unwilling simply to stand by and watch his realm continue to shrink.

But history never has only one side. In Đàng Trong, the Nguyễn lord was then straining to confront the Trịnh family in the north. If Champa became strong enough to attack from the south, the entire balance could shift, potentially leaving Đàng Trong divided. Within this strategic situation, the adviser Đào Duy Từ proposed using marriage

to neutralize the threat. Princess Ngọc Khoa traveled to Champa with a group of merchants. Po Rome became enamored of her, and the marriage was quickly arranged. At court, Ngọc Khoa took the Chăm name Bia Ut Yuôn and soon became queen, while Po Rome's two previous wives withdrew into the inner palace. A series of developments followed. Trade with the Portuguese abruptly ceased, while increasing numbers of Vietnamese crossed Panduranga on their way south into the region of Thủy Chân Lạp to establish settlements. Reading about these developments, I often think that history sometimes changes direction very quietly. At first, there may be only a marriage, a group of merchants, a newly opened road. No war drums, no flashing swords. Yet by the time people look back, the entire situation has somehow changed.

Then comes the story of the Kraik tree, a sacred tree regarded as the protective symbol of the kingdom, said to have been planted by Satyavarman in the eighth century and preserved by generations of Chăm. One day, Ngọc Khoa fell ill. After various treatments failed, she said the Kraik tree was the cause. Court officials strongly objected, but Po Rome nevertheless ordered the tree cut down. Chăm tradition recounts that "the soldiers who tried to cut it died on the spot, so the king himself took up a sword; after exactly three strokes the tree fell, and blood poured from it for seven days before stopping." Ngọc Khoa then recovered, while Champa, according to Chăm tradition, lost the protection of the gods.

I often sit for a long time with that story. People today naturally find it difficult to believe in bleeding trees or angry gods. But if we gently peel away the outer layer of myth,

something worth considering remains inside. Every people needs symbols that sustain shared faith. A country does not stand solely because of fortifications, armies, or wealth, but also because of sacred things that make people willingly believe they belong to the same community.

When that symbol is destroyed by the leader himself, perhaps the first crack does not appear in the tree trunk but in the hearts of the people. Whether Ngọc Khoa truly plotted anything or whether everything was merely coincidence woven together by history and legend is now very difficult to determine. But the consequence is clear: Po Rome gradually lost the spiritual support of his subjects, along with the sacred foundation that had sustained the authority of a king.

In 1651, Nguyễn Phúc Tần sent troops to attack. Po Rome was captured, imprisoned in an iron cage, and taken toward Thuận Hóa, but committed suicide along the way. Ngọc Khoa's fate then disappeared into the fog of legend. The Chăm preserve two versions. In one, she was executed for having bewitched the king and then took her own life. In the other, she asked permission to return home to visit her sick mother, and Vietnamese forces subsequently followed that route south.

What troubles me most is that this story seems to have had no true winner. A king lost his country, a woman vanished among conflicting legends, a kingdom continued to weaken, and two peoples carried two different layers of memory for centuries afterward. After every struggle for supremacy, what remains longest is often not victory, but regret for everything that might have been different.

The years that followed brought a slow and painful decline. King Bà Tấm succeeded to the throne and was forced to submit to Đàng Trong while secretly rebuilding his strength. In 1653, before he had accumulated sufficient power, he launched an attack and was defeated. Nguyễn forces crossed Hổ Dương Pass and pursued him all the way to his capital. The king fled, and his son was forced to send a letter of surrender. The Nguyễn lord established the Phan Rang River as the boundary and annexed Khánh Hòa into Đàng Trong. Panduranga shrank once again.

In 1693, after years in which King Bà Tranh harassed Phú Yên, Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh marched in, captured Bà Tranh, and transformed Champa into Thuận Thành Prefecture. The Chăm rebelled, and this time the Nguyễn lord was forced to retreat. In 1694, autonomy was restored on the condition that Panduranga accept the presence of Bình Thuận Prefecture, which administered the Vietnamese community within Chăm territory. The two communities lived intermingled within overlapping political jurisdictions, and conflicts inevitably followed.

By the final decades of the eighteenth century, Panduranga had once again become a battlefield, this time between the Tây Sơn and Nguyễn Ánh, two Vietnamese forces fighting each other on Chăm land. Chăm leaders split into factions, sometimes supporting one side, sometimes the other, searching for a path to survival in the narrow space between two larger powers. In 1802, Nguyễn Ánh triumphed and became Emperor Gia Long. To reward the Chăm who had supported him, he restored Panduranga and appointed Po Saong Nhung Ceng, an ancestor of Bà Thềm

in Phan Rí, as king. He was the final ruler listed in the Sakkaray Dak Rai Patao.

In 1828, Thuận Thành was placed under the protection of Governor-General Lê Văn Duyệt. In 1832, after Lê Văn Duyệt's death, Emperor Minh Mạng abolished the autonomous system and established Ninh Thuận Prefecture directly under Bình Thuận Province. The Kingdom of Champa, after roughly seventeen centuries of existence, officially ceased to exist.

I often linger over a question that seems to have been answered many times already: why did Champa collapse? There are many reasons, and most are valid, because history is rarely determined by a single event. There was pressure from Đại Việt's southward expansion, prolonged warfare that exhausted national strength, a loose federal structure that struggled to concentrate unified power against an increasingly centralized monarchy, and the successive loss of seaports and international trade routes after each territorial defeat.

After 1471, foreign ships became increasingly scarce. By the milestones of 1611 and 1653, important arteries of trade had nearly been severed. To me, the process resembles a very slow death. A kingdom that had grown through the sea, become wealthy through the sea, and opened itself to the world through the sea began to lose its lifeblood once separated from its important ports, even while its walls and citadels still stood. Some countries do not truly collapse on the day their fortresses fall, but on the day ships stop coming to their harbors.

Then there were political marriages. Huyền Trân is associated with the story of the two prefectures Ô and Lý in the early fourteenth century; Ngọc Khoa married Po Rome in the early seventeenth. Behind those marriages were political calculations far larger than the lives of the two human beings caught within them. History sometimes seems strange to me. The fate of an entire region can change direction after a wedding rather than with the sound of swords.

Then came the prolonged civil wars among the Vietnamese themselves, from the Trịnh–Nguyễn conflict to the struggle between the Tây Sơn and Nguyễn Ánh. Chăm territory repeatedly became the battlefield for conflicts the Chăm themselves had not created. Eventually, they could no longer fully determine their own fate and could only choose which side might bring them less harm. Thinking about that, I understand that there is a sadness deeper even than defeat: when a community gradually loses the right to choose its own destiny.

Yet medieval history, in Vietnam as elsewhere in the world, was filled with unions and divisions, kingdoms rising and falling, peoples expanding their territories while others saw theirs contract. Such was the pattern of an age, and it is difficult to reduce it through today's moral lens into simple categories of good and evil, right and wrong. Even so, whenever I read of deaths, separations, or people forced to leave the very land their ancestors had built, my heart still grows heavy. The laws of history may be cold and impersonal, but the pain of individual human beings has never been abstract.

And yet, after all of that, what makes me think most deeply is not how Champa disappeared.

It is that the Chăm are still here.

After wars, territorial losses, repeated contractions of their homeland, pressures to assimilate, and periods in which they were pushed to the margins of history, they remain present on the very land they once inhabited. Today, roughly one hundred thousand Chăm still live in Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận. They still celebrate Katê, still burn incense beneath the ancient towers, still speak the Chăm language, still preserve matrilineal traditions, and still tell their children where they came from.

Only then did I understand that the existence of a people has never been measured solely by maps and borders. If we look only at maps, Champa disappeared long ago. But if we look at language, faith, customs, memory, and people who still recognize their own origins, Champa has never completely vanished. A state may end in a particular year. A culture does not necessarily surrender on the same day.

That is why, whenever I look at the red-brick towers on Trầu Hill, Bà Nài Hill, or the small hills of Ninh Phước, I no longer see them merely as ruins of a vanished civilization. They seem like silent witnesses standing behind history, preserving what armies could not seize, decrees could not rename, and time itself could not easily erase from memory.

Land can be lost. A capital can fall. A king can be locked inside an iron cage. But the way a people remembers

itself, the way they stand before a tower and recognize within themselves the continuing current of their ancestors, no sword has ever been able to touch that. Perhaps the deepest victory of a people lies not in never having been defeated, but in still possessing, after every defeat, enough strength to remember who they are.

Panduranga taught me this not through lessons written in books, but through wind, sand, and red bricks that have stood silently beneath sun and rain for more than a thousand years. The longer I looked at the towers, the more I understood something seemingly simple: time can fade the color of brick, chip the corners of towers, and blur the names of kings in human memory, but it cannot easily fade the will of the people who laid the first brick.

And sometimes I ask myself: are those towers standing before history, or has history passed by and left them behind?

Perhaps neither.

They stand behind history.

Behind armies that came and went, kings who ascended thrones and lost kingdoms, borders drawn and erased, marriages, betrayals, revenge, victories, and surrenders. All the things that once imagined themselves so great have ultimately passed away. Only the towers remain standing. And strangely, the longer they stand, the less they resemble monuments to defeat. An ordinary ruin makes us think of what has been lost. The Chăm towers of Panduranga make me think of what refused to be lost.

One afternoon in Phan Rang, if you stand long enough at the foot of a tower and watch the final sunlight of the day slide slowly across the red bricks, perhaps you will stop wanting to ask who won, who lost, who expanded a realm, who lost a country. The questions that once filled volumes of history suddenly grow small beside another, much simpler question: after everything history takes away, what can human beings still preserve?

The Chăm have answered that question through their very presence.

Not with an army.

Not by recapturing a capital.

Nor by forcing history to rewrite its ending.

They answer with a Katê festival in which the ginăng drums still sound, a dance still passed from one pair of hands to another, a language still spoken within families, a child still hearing stories of ancestors, an elder still looking up at a tower and knowing why remembering matters.

At that point, I suddenly saw a limitation of history that I had rarely considered before. History can record with great precision the year a kingdom began and the year it ended. It can identify the exact day a capital fell and the reign under which a territory changed hands. But history has great difficulty identifying the precise moment when a civilization truly disappears.

Because sometimes that moment never exists.

A civilization can leave the map and continue living in memory. It can lose its palaces yet retain its language, lose its crown yet retain its rituals, lose its borders yet retain people who recognize one another through a phrase, a custom, a tower. And then I suddenly understood: perhaps maps are what people use to determine where a country exists, while memory tells us how far a people has traveled through time.

Evening falls quickly over Panduranga. The sunlight withdraws from the hillsides, wind from the sea sweeps across the dry land, and the red bricks gradually darken. I imagine that centuries ago there were evenings just like this one. The people who built the towers are gone. The kings worshiped within them are gone. The kingdom that built them is gone as well. Even the names of the surrounding lands have changed many times.

And yet the tower still stands.

Suddenly, it no longer seemed lonely to me.

On the contrary, perhaps we are the ones merely passing through.

The towers have watched generations arrive and disappear. They have watched armies that imagined they would rule this land forever vanish in turn. They have watched borders solemnly drawn by human hands only to be erased by human hands someday afterward. Perhaps after seeing so much, they no longer need to say anything.

They simply stand still.

And strangely, their silence allows me to hear many more voices.

Within it I hear the voices of the people who built the towers, whose names are no longer remembered. The voices of those who once fled their villages in war. The voices of soldiers who died and survive in historical records only as numbers. The voices of mothers no historian ever named. The voices of kings who once believed their realms would endure forever. And the voices of Chăm children today still running beneath the shadow of a structure built more than a thousand years before they were born.

Only then did I understand why those towers continued to haunt me.

Not because they reminded me that Champa was lost.

But because they quietly proved that being lost and disappearing are two entirely different things.

A kingdom was lost.

But a people remain.

A border was lost.

But memory remains.

An age was lost.

Yet every afternoon, sunlight still falls upon those bricks almost as it did more than a thousand years ago.

That is how a civilization truly passes through history. It does not need to speak in order to prove itself, nor

does it need to fight for a place in human memory. It need only endure quietly long enough that, in the end, time itself must stand as its witness.

And suddenly I thought that perhaps the towers never needed our pity. They have endured too much loss to require the pity of those who came later. What they need is only for someone to stop long enough, look up, and understand that beneath those darkened bricks lies not only the past of the Chăm. There is also a reminder for all of us: human beings will lose many things along the road through history, but the final thing we must never lose is the memory of who we once were.

I left the towers with that feeling.

The Phan Rang wind continued blowing across the sand. The sun still glowed red upon the old bricks. Below the hill, the noise of present-day life continued flowing forward. Only the towers seemed to be going nowhere.

But thinking about it more carefully, perhaps they have traveled farther than any of us.



Photo: Nha Trang Beach

Essay 6

NHA TRANG, WHERE TIME STANDS STILL

I first came to Nha Trang in the late 1970s, and I stayed for many days. Back then, the roads were still rough and broken, like scars that had not yet healed across the body of the land. Vehicles were scarce, dust was everywhere, and every trip seemed to leave you carrying a dry layer of time on your shoulders. And yet, strangely enough, the moment I stepped onto that land, I felt something inside me grow unexpectedly lighter, as though a breath of salty sea air had slipped through the seams of

my clothes and quietly washed away the weariness of the road.

Nha Trang was still a very small place then. Along Trần Phú Street there were only a handful of low-rise hotels, four or five stories at the most. Neighborhoods such as Lộc Thọ, Vạn Thạnh, Vạn Thắng, and Phương Sài had begun to look somewhat urban, but go just a little farther and you were back among rice fields, narrow dirt roads, and people who lived slowly and gently, as though they had no quarrel with time and no need to race it anywhere. I followed a relative of mine, a genuine local who knew the place inside and out, nearly everywhere, from town to village, from the shoreline to the outlying districts of what was then Phú Khánh Province. Along the way I listened to stories about the land and its people, about yesterday and today, and without quite realizing it I kept storing them away inside myself, not so much because I wanted to remember them as because I felt some need to hold on to something that was already drifting away.

One afternoon I stood beside the stretch of the Cái River where it makes its way toward the sea at Nha Trang. The water moved lazily, almost as though it were lost in thought, and I heard someone say that the name “Nha Trang” had come from “Ea Trang,” or “Aia Trang,” meaning “a river where reeds grow.” For some reason, hearing that made something inside me sink a little, not with sadness exactly, but with a distant feeling, as though I had brushed against a layer of memory that was not mine and yet somehow felt familiar. I imagined the old days, reeds whitening both banks of the river, wind whispering through them, water threading its way past sandbars, and I

wondered whether the names of places might be like people themselves, carrying the memory of a vanished age and stubbornly refusing to disappear with it.

This land, after all, once belonged to Champa, and traces of the Cham people still remain here and there. They are not always obvious. They linger more like fragments of memory dropped along the road of time, mingling with the wind, the stone, the weathered color of old brick. Once, when I visited the Po Nagar Towers and stood looking at those red bricks darkened by centuries of sun and weather, I suddenly felt as though I were standing between two layers of time laid one upon the other. On one side was a past, silent but enduring. On the other was a present growing steadily busier and louder. Neither overwhelmed the other. They simply existed together, quietly, as though this land had long ago grown accustomed to carrying more than one soul within a single body.

I was told that at the beginning of the twentieth century, this place was little more than a fishing village of around three thousand people, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Cham living shoulder to shoulder by the water, making their living from fishing, small trade, and farming. It was a life so plain that you might think history would never bother writing it down. And yet in 1924, when Emperor Khải Định issued an edict establishing the township, the name Nha Trang formally took shape, marking another step away from its old, undeveloped beginnings. From there, one wave of history followed another, through the French colonial period, its elevation to a town in 1937, the upheavals of the twentieth century, and finally its designation as a city in 1977 under Phú Khánh Province. Khánh Hòa was separated out again

in 1989, and in 2009 Nha Trang became a Class I urban center. Each change came like a rising tide, carrying the place farther from the shadow of what it once had been. What surprised me, though, was not how much Nha Trang had changed, but how it managed to keep something unmistakably its own, something almost impossible to name. It reminded me of a person who knows she is beautiful and therefore has no need to show off. She simply is, quietly and confidently, like the sea itself, saying nothing and still making you look.

Years later, I returned. My plane came down at Cam Ranh Airport, more than forty kilometers from the city, and Nguyễn Tất Thành Road stretched ahead like a long ribbon laid between mountain and sea, joining old and new with remarkable ease. I traveled Trần Phú Street again and saw high-rise hotels standing shoulder to shoulder, Sheraton, InterContinental, Novotel, Vinpearl, all rising beside one another. For a moment I felt something both familiar and strange, as though two different ages had come face to face and were quietly studying each other without speaking. Looking inland from the sea, you could clearly make out three layers of buildings. Closest to the shore stood towers more than twenty stories high, rising like markers of the modern age. Behind them came rows of three- and four-story buildings, and farther inland the skyline gradually dropped lower. It seemed like an unspoken arrangement between human ambition and the natural world, neither overwhelming the other nor entirely giving way, a peculiar balance that few places manage to preserve.

The sea, though, was still the same. Still blue, still opening onto a vastness that somehow quieted the heart. I

stood looking toward the horizon, where islands such as Hòn Tre, Hòn Mun, Hòn Tằm, and Monkey Island lay scattered across the water like outstretched arms offering shelter. Suddenly I understood why people call this place the “green pearl of the East Sea.” It is not because it sparkles. It is because of the depth it holds, the gentleness, the natural shield that heaven and earth arranged here long ago with such effortless grace.

One afternoon I headed toward the mountains to the north and looked up at Cô Tiên Mountain, its three neighboring peaks forming the shape of a young woman lying on her back, her hair spilling behind her, her face turned toward the sky. That image stayed with me much longer than I expected. Not simply because it was beautiful, but because it made me think about the way nature here does more than exist. It tells stories, through shape, through form, through things that have no need for words. And once again I found myself wondering whether every place possesses a soul of its own, and whether, if we are willing to stop long enough, we might actually hear it breathe.

To the south lies Đồng Bò Mountain, nearly a thousand meters high, and then Chín Khúc Mountain and Hòn Rớ. Together they surround the city almost like a pair of embracing arms. The old expression, “four waters returning with the tide, four sacred beasts gathering together,” no longer feels merely like something handed down from the ancients when you stand here yourself, in a place where mountains, rivers, and sea do not exist separately but overlap, fold into one another, and hold one another close.

I followed the lower reaches of the Cái River, looking at little river islands and sandbars such as Ngọc Thảo and Xóm Bóng, listening to stories about branches of the river that once flowed there, then disappeared, or were filled in. Suddenly history no longer seemed confined to books. It was right there in the movement of the water, in places where earth had accumulated or washed away, and in names that somehow survived after the landscape itself had changed.

People say Nha Trang serves as a rear base for the Trường Sa Islands, with Trường Sa Lớn nearly five hundred kilometers away. Five hundred kilometers sounds far enough. But standing before the sea and looking into that enormous open distance, I no longer felt that distance as separation. It seemed more like a line connecting one place to another, mainland to open ocean, the present to another space that most of us can only imagine.

The climate here has its own peculiar gentleness as well. It is not as harsh as in many parts of central Vietnam. There is plenty of sunshine, but the heat is rarely unbearable. Most of the rain comes toward the end of the year, and winter never grows truly cold. It is a climate mild enough to let people slow down without forcing them into a constant struggle against the elements. Perhaps that was one reason Alexandre Yersin chose this place as his second homeland, living here, conducting his research here, and eventually remaining here in death, as though he had found somewhere quiet enough to think thoughts meant to last a long time.

The more often I came here and the longer I looked, the more I realized that Nha Trang was not merely a seaside city. It was a meeting place, between mountain and sea, past and present, the wildness of a land once thick with reeds and the prosperity of a modern city filled with dozens of hundred-meter towers. It stood somewhere between a fishing village of three thousand people and a city of more than half a million, between a place that once had little more than a small market beside the water and one now filled with shopping centers, resorts, and broad roads opening north and south like two doors thrown wide to a new age.

If someday this place becomes a centrally governed city, more crowded, brighter, faster, will that old soul still remain? The question crossed my mind, and then I realized that perhaps the soul of a place does not reside in its scenery at all. Perhaps it lives in the way people look at that scenery, in whether we still remember that this was once a river lined with reeds, once part of the land of Champa, once a small fishing village by the sea.

This time I would not stay long in Nha Trang, and before long I would leave again. But I knew something would not leave with me. Something would remain quietly inside, like the thin film of salt that clings to your skin after swimming in the sea, barely visible yet unmistakably there. Because passing through Nha Trang is not merely passing through a city. It is passing through a layer of the land's memory, a place where, if you are willing to stop and think long enough, you may hear the sea wind speaking of things that seem ancient and yet somehow have never grown old.

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL OF MORE THAN THREE HUNDRED YEARS IN THE LAND OF AGARWOOD

I had been to Nha Trang before, and what began as a first impression of a city beside a brilliantly clear blue sea gradually gave rise to a strange thought. If I stood only in Nha Trang and spoke only of Nha Trang, then I had touched little more than the outermost ripple of the water. The deeper part, the quiet and enduring part, lay behind the city, in a broader and older land called Khánh Hòa. And so I began working my way backward, the way someone follows a river upstream in search of its source.

“Khánh Hòa is the land of agarwood,
High mountains, open sea, where loved ones come and go.
Sweet bird's nest carries the affection of home,
Deep rivers and carved stone bear the nation's vow.”

I had heard those folk verses before and once thought of them as little more than an old song. Later, though, they began to seem like a kind of map, one drawn not in ink but in memory, fragrance, and the human affection tucked quietly inside every word. I read them again while standing in Nha Trang, breathing in the sea wind, and suddenly thought that the “agarwood” in those lines could not simply mean a valuable product of the land. Perhaps it was the fragrance of the earth itself, of its people, of a region that had passed quietly through several centuries without losing its essential character.

The Đại Nam Nhất Thống Chí once described this land in words to this effect, “The customs are honest and kind, the habits rustic. Scholars are straightforward and contemplative, the people frugal and good-natured, wearing

mostly white cloth and having little taste for showiness. Those along the coast make their living by fishing, those near the mountains grow rice and mulberry, raise silkworms and weave cloth... Most live simply and have little regard for luxury. At weddings and funerals, people commonly help one another."

Reading those lines felt almost like meeting someone I already knew. Out on the streets, whether I encountered a fish seller, a motorcycle-taxi driver, or an old woman sitting quietly on her front porch, I could still sense that old quality of thuần hậu, that fundamental decency. It was not meekness or weakness. It was kindness with roots beneath it, something grounded and stubbornly durable, like the sandy earth of this region.

I wondered what had shaped people that way. Eventually my thoughts returned to 1653, the year Vietnamese settlers began moving into this region, joining the native inhabitants, the Cham, and the various peoples scattered throughout the mountains and forests. Not every encounter was peaceful, of course, but over time they learned to live alongside one another, depend on one another, and face the natural world together. That old expression about putting your backs together and your shoulders to the same burden was more than a slogan here. It was a way of living, and when people live that way long enough, it becomes part of who they are.

I traveled farther into the mountains and heard stories about the Raglai people, the ancient lithophones of Khánh Sơn, and long narratives sung aloud, the great oral epics passed from one generation to another. I could not

hear all of them, nor could I understand everything I heard. Yet there was something extraordinary in the sound itself. It was more than sound, really. It felt like a way of preserving memory through rhythm. And I found myself thinking that culture is not something meant to sit behind glass in a display case. It is something people live inside, breathe inside, and quietly hand down without having to explain very much.

Back on the plains, I encountered another kind of culture, village communal houses, shrines, temples, and festivals. People honored village spirits and the founders of traditional trades, and when they went to sea they worshiped Cá Ông, the Whale God. Belief here contained fear and intimacy at once, reverence without remoteness. The different faiths did not remain sealed apart. They flowed into one another, from the Cham Po Nagar to the Vietnamese Thiên Y A Na, joined by the lively yet strangely profound rhythms of Bá Trạo singing. I began to understand that Khánh Hòa's particular gift was not preserving everything unchanged. Its gift was knowing how to receive, transform, and mingle different things without losing itself in the process.

On a map, this province does not look particularly large, but traveling through it reveals how complicated the terrain really is. On one side the Trường Sơn Range descends toward the coast, on the other the sea opens outward, while narrow strips of plain are squeezed between them. Traveling the length of the province means passing one mountain pass after another, Đèo Cả, then Cổ Mã, the road repeatedly divided by the landscape. Yet perhaps because of that very separation, individual regions

managed to preserve their own character instead of being blended together too quickly. Looking at the map, seeing how little flat land there was and how limited the farmland, I began to understand why people here had always turned toward the sea. The sea is not merely scenery. It is livelihood, hope, and danger all at once. Perhaps that is why the people of Khánh Hòa can seem so openhearted and yet so cautious at the same time.

Only after traveling the Khánh Hòa coastline did I fully appreciate its length. From Đại Lãnh southward, past Vân Phong Bay, Nha Trang Bay, and down to Cam Ranh Bay, each stretch has its own character, yet they share something, shelter opening suddenly into vastness, almost like a hand alternately closing and releasing. I once stood at Cam Ranh looking over that deep, broad bay and suddenly understood why so many powers throughout history had wanted to hold it. Strategy was certainly part of the answer. But nature itself had made the place almost too perfect.

Then my thoughts went again to Trường Sa, far away geographically and yet strangely near in the way people here speak of it. Nha Trang is more than a tourist destination. It is also a rear base for distant islands. Those nearly five hundred kilometers cannot be measured by geography alone. They are also measured in awareness and responsibility. Standing before the sea and looking toward the horizon, I suddenly felt that the beauty of this place carried another meaning. It was not merely something to admire. It was something to protect.

The climate here is unusual too. It is neither as harsh as the more northerly parts of central Vietnam nor as

unpredictable as the South. It remains comparatively mild, with abundant sunshine and most of the rain concentrated in one season. I often come during the dry months, when the sky can be so intensely blue that staring at it too long almost hurts your eyes, even while something inside you grows calmer. People sometimes say that where the climate is too pleasant, people naturally learn to take life more slowly. I have no idea whether that is true, but people here do not seem to hurry. Sometimes I wonder how a place with so many mountains, so little flat land, rivers that are short and steep, and terrain so often divided by natural barriers could still develop and sustain such a rich cultural life. Perhaps those very difficulties forced people to become inventive, adaptable, and more dependent on one another. And perhaps because there was never an abundance of easy things to rely upon, they returned to the most basic things of all, human affection, memory, and faith.

Today I am back in Nha Trang, standing in a city that seems to grow larger by the day, while all I can see in my mind are the layers of land and people behind it. If you look at Nha Trang merely as a destination, you see beauty. But if you see it as the accumulated result of several hundred years across the larger land of Khánh Hòa, you begin to see depth. And that depth has nothing to do with whether buildings are tall or low, whether streets are crowded or empty. It lies in the way generations of people have lived upon this land.

I keep thinking that visiting Nha Trang without traveling through Khánh Hòa in your imagination is like listening to only part of a song. It may be beautiful, certainly, but not enough to stay with you for very long. Only when you

quiet yourself and listen to every passage, every rhythm, do you begin to understand that this “land of agarwood” is not merely a name. It is something to live, something to remember, something to carry with you for a long time afterward, like a fragrance you cannot see and somehow cannot shake.

KHÁNH HÒA, WHERE THE LAND SPEAKS AND THE WIND REMEMBERS

I arrived in Nha Trang this morning while the sunlight was still young and gentle. The sea breeze came across the water almost weightlessly, like someone softly touching my shoulder without saying a word, leaving me with that peculiar feeling of something both near and far, real and dreamlike. I stood motionless beside the water for quite a while, not exactly watching the sea, but listening. Something vague was stirring inside me, as though this land were not simply appearing before my eyes but quietly finding its way into me, slowly, almost without my noticing.

People often say Nha Trang is beautiful, and its beauty is easy to see, easy to name, easy to photograph and carry home in the form of a souvenir picture. But when I began to look a little farther beyond the beach, the palms, and the brightly lit hotels, I realized that Nha Trang was only one part of Khánh Hòa. It was the bright part, the visible part. Behind it stretched an entire land dense with layers of sediment, and every layer seemed to possess its own voice, its own memory, its own private sorrow, things not everyone has the patience to sit still and hear all the way through.

Once again I followed the Cái River toward the sea. The water moved slowly, almost dreamily, as though thinking something over, while houses crowded the banks. In my mind I tried to see the place more than three hundred years earlier, in the spring of the Year of the Snake, 1653, when the forces of Hùng Lộc Hầu, acting under the orders of Lord Nguyễn Phúc Tần, advanced into the territory stretching from the northern bank of the Phan Rang River to Đá Bia Mountain and established the district of Thái Khang. It sounds like a dry administrative name now. To me, though, it suggests a beginning that must have been raw, uncertain, and terribly precarious.

I imagined those first footsteps on the land. There were no clearly established villages, no proper roads, only forests, rivers, the sea, and great stretches of wilderness where every piece of ground had to be bought with labor and sweat, sometimes even blood, with no certainty that whatever was gained today could still be held tomorrow. Thái Khang was divided into the prefectures of Thái Khang and Diên Ninh, and through the years the names changed again, Bình Khang, Diên Khánh, then Bình Hòa, then the Bình Hòa administrative region. The names followed one another like waves, each coming ashore once, leaving a mark, then withdrawing, while the sand remained behind, accumulating, growing thicker, heavier, deeper. In 1832, Emperor Minh Mạng renamed Bình Hòa as Khánh Hòa Province. From that point on, the name “Khánh Hòa” attached itself to the land, its people, and their common memory, becoming a marker they could return to no matter how far time carried them away.

But I knew that stopping there would mean seeing only half of Khánh Hòa. One half belonged to the Vietnamese story, to administrations and dynasties. The other half, deeper, older, and more distant, belonged to the Cham, to Kauthara, to an age when this land did not bear the name Khánh Hòa at all, but another name, another soul, another way of seeing the world.

I had also visited Hòn Tre and stood looking across Nha Trang Bay, the water blue and smooth as an enormous sheet of glass, while images of ancient stone tools came to mind, traces of an early agricultural society in which people worked with stone hoes, their own strength, and an immediate physical bond with the earth, with no distance and no intermediary between human beings and the ground that sustained them. Then there were the Khánh Sơn lithophones, music made from stone, mountain, and forest, discovered in 1979. Sometimes I think that before human beings knew how to write things down, they already knew how to strike stone and speak through sound, to one another, to heaven and earth, perhaps even to the gods. It was a language without letters, yet full of meaning. I never heard those instruments played in the mountains of Khánh Sơn, but standing once in a quiet forest and listening to the wind moving through the canopy, I imagined those notes ringing out, clear and deep, like a call from an age so distant it no longer seemed to belong to history at all, but to some primordial memory of humankind. Then came the Xóm Cồn culture and the Sa Huỳnh sites scattered across Diên Sơn, Bình Tân, Hòn Tre, Ninh Thân and elsewhere, each one a tiny point on a map. Connect those points, however, and

they begin to form a much larger picture, an unbroken current of culture flowing across time.

Still, the place that held me longest was Po Nagar. On my most recent visit, the afternoon sun had softened and golden light settled over the red brick, making the towers seem warmer and somehow more solemn at the same time. Their beauty did not announce itself or ask to be admired. It was quiet and enduring, much like the way the Cham themselves had lived here and left their traces behind.

Kauthara, the region that is now Khánh Hòa, was once an important part of Champa. Here the Cham raised temples and towers to Yang Pô Y Na Gar, the Mother Goddess of the land, creator of earth and water, rice and life itself. Standing there before the carvings, statues, and patterns worked into the stone, I had the strange sensation that I was not merely looking at them. Something was looking back at me, an entire civilization that had once flourished here, believed in its gods, and entrusted its understanding of the universe to these bricks.

The surviving inscriptions in Sanskrit and ancient Cham are like scraps of paper that time somehow failed to erase completely. The question now is whether we, who came afterward, still have enough patience to read them. I found myself thinking that a land once called the principality of Kauthara, then Thái Khang, Bình Khang, Bình Hòa, and finally Khánh Hòa, had not simply exchanged one name for another. Each name had become another layer, another memory laid over what came before. Nothing entirely vanished. Some things merely sank deeper.

Then history rose again like a gathering sea.

The Tây Sơn uprising began in 1771, and much of Khánh Hòa's population supported Quang Trung, Nguyễn Huệ. I cannot help thinking that the choice involved more than politics. Perhaps it also reflected a belief in change, in the possibility of something newer and fairer. Then Nguyễn Ánh returned, retook Diên Khánh, built the citadel, established his administration, and moved the provincial seat. The walls of Diên Khánh Citadel that I see today are silent and weathered, but once they must have watched armies come and go, hopes rise and then suddenly die.

I once walked beneath those walls in punishing sunlight and felt as though the heat were coming not merely from the weather but from inside the masonry itself, the heat of history, of years that knew little peace. When the French opened fire and began their invasion, Khánh Hòa was pulled once more into the whirlpool.

I reread the story of Trịnh Phong, of the “Bình Tây National Salvation Corps,” and of the battles at the Cù River, Hòn Thơm, Hòn Đá Lố, and ordinary people seemed to rise before me. They were not professional soldiers. They did not have proper equipment. Yet they fought. They even built a dam across the Cái River to stop French warships, an act that sounds almost reckless from a safe distance, but perhaps when there is nothing left to lose, recklessness becomes another name for refusing to surrender. In the end, the insurgents were captured or dispersed. Trịnh Phong was beheaded, and his head displayed at Dầu Đôi. Reading the story, I felt as though some portion of that grief had remained behind in the earth.

Then there was Trần Quý Cáp and his line, “Ngô dân thử cử, khoái, khoái, khoái.” I read it again and again, and each time it sounded different. Sometimes joyful. Sometimes painful. Sometimes like laughter bursting through tears. A joy that has to be repeated three times may perhaps be a way of reassuring oneself, of holding on to a little hope in an age when hope could shatter as easily as glass.

I left those stories behind and returned to the Nha Trang of today, the city bright with lights, traffic crowding the streets, waves still coming steadily ashore. Yet inside me there remained a hollow space, as though everything visible around me were only the surface, while beneath it another current continued to move, slower, deeper, heavier.

I wondered what would happen if someday people saw Nha Trang only as a tourist destination and forgot that it belonged to Khánh Hòa, forgot all those overlapping layers of history, culture, and human lives that had made it what it is. Would that count as a loss? Perhaps memory itself does not disappear, I thought. Perhaps we merely stop calling it by name. And once something is no longer named, it gradually retreats into silence.

One evening beside the Nha Trang shore, the sea wind began blowing harder than it had when I first arrived the day before. The waves came faster too, as though the ocean were no longer simply breaking against the beach but trying to say something, something longer and deeper. The strange thing was that on this return I no longer had enough time to sit quietly and hear all those whispers through. I felt as though I had arrived at the exact moment the land was

beginning to open itself to me, and yet I was already preparing to leave. Still, even from that brief encounter I knew one thing clearly. I had touched a place that was anything but simple, a place made of many overlapping layers, many quiet depths hidden beneath the bright surface of a seaside city.

Every step here seemed to fall not merely on sand or pavement, but on pieces of memory that had settled into the earth long ago. Some things could not be seen and yet remained present, a very light weight that became perceptible only if you stood still long enough. And every breath of sea wind no longer felt like wind alone. Something in the past seemed to stir within it and brush softly against the mind, making it impossible simply to look without also thinking.

For me, Khánh Hòa ceased long ago to be merely a name on a map. It became something like an open field of memory, growing deeper and wider the farther I traveled and the longer I thought about it. A young city is growing inside that field every day, yet behind its youth lies a depth easily missed by anyone unwilling to stop. And I know that I have reached only the beginning of understanding it. The rest will probably require many more returns, or perhaps an entirely different way of seeing.

I have written before about Nha Trang and Khánh Hòa, about the times I stayed here long enough to believe I had grown familiar with the place. I gathered fragments of what I had seen, heard, and thought, and put them into words as a way of keeping them. Yet the more I wrote, the more I understood that everything I knew consisted only of

pieces and never the whole. This time I had only five or seven days, barely enough to settle into the rhythm of life before I had to start thinking about leaving again. Oddly enough, that brevity made me pay closer attention. It made me see more clearly certain contrasts I had once passed without really noticing.

On one side stood the Nha Trang of high-rise buildings stretching along the shore, enormous entertainment complexes and resorts polished down to the smallest detail, places where the beach could almost seem reserved for those wealthy enough to enjoy it. Not very far away was another Nha Trang, small fishing neighborhoods and working people whose lives remained tied to the sea in an entirely different way, not as a place for leisure but as the source of tomorrow's living. The two images existed side by side. Neither erased the other, yet neither truly merged with it, like two currents traveling together without ever becoming the same water.

Standing between those two realities, I did not know where to begin writing. Beauty is easy to write about because it presents itself openly before your eyes. What lies underneath takes time, and time is exactly what I have least of right now. Perhaps the only thing I know for certain is that I will keep writing, not because I understand this place, but precisely because I do not understand enough.

Tomorrow, I will continue.

Essay 7

KAUTHARA, WHERE HISTORY STILL BREATHES BENEATH OUR FEET

I once wrote about the last principality of the Cham people in Phan Rang, a place where wind and sand sweep endlessly across the land, while memory somehow seems to grow thicker beneath a dusting of time that has never quite settled. So when I arrived in Nha Trang and stood beneath that wide blue sky opening out from the sea, I suddenly felt there would be something missing from my journey if I did not follow the traces of Kauthara. It was a kingdom whose name sounded impossibly distant, and yet something of it seemed to linger everywhere, in every layer of earth, every slab of stone, even in those things we might have thought time had already erased from view.

Kauthara, a name derived from the Sanskrit word “Kauṭhara,” was never merely the name of a piece of land. It also evoked a sacred realm, a place where gods had once dwelled, where human beings looked up at heaven and earth and were reminded of how small they were. I thought of that as I stood before the Po Nagar towers, looking at the deep red bricks stacked one upon another, joined without mortar yet enduring century after century, like a form of memory that needs no one to preserve it and still refuses to disappear.

The territory stretching from Phú Yên down to Cam Ranh Bay was never especially broad, mountains on one side, sea on the other, and yet it seemed to be a meeting

place for many different currents. Small rivers quietly carried silt toward the coast, gradually building the coastal plains grain by grain, much as the land itself had patiently sustained generation after generation of people who once lived upon it. I imagined an ancient Kauthara that was more than a gentle strip of coastline, a place where winds, boats, merchants, and wandering peoples crossed paths. Everyone who passed through left something behind, while those who stayed had to learn how to live with ceaseless change.

People say Kauthara ranked second only to Vijaya in prosperity. Yet standing before Po Nagar, I could not feel that this was a land that stood “second” to anywhere. Some things do not need to show themselves off in order to retain their majesty, much like a person who has lived through so many rises and falls that there is no longer any need to speak loudly about who he is. Kauthara felt that way to me, deep, reserved, almost secretive, and the quieter it became, the more it made you want to bend closer and listen.

The Cham worshiped Yan Po Nagar, the goddess of the earth, of fertility, and of the source of life itself. Those ideas alone make her feel close to human beings, close to the most elemental concerns of any community struggling to survive upon its own land. I have often wondered whether, on some long-ago night when the sea wind swept through these towers and torchlight flickered in the darkness, some Cham person once stood exactly where I stood and wondered about the future of his people. Or perhaps they were like so many human beings throughout history, simply living, fighting, loving, and praying, unable to see what lay ahead.

I traveled from Nha Trang down to Cam Ranh and then turned north again, and more than once I had the feeling that I was walking across a map drawn not in ink but in layers of loss and survival. The Javanese came, burned and plundered, and carried away a statue of Shiva. The Khmer came as well and took away the statue of the goddess. Then the Vietnamese moved gradually southward, not only with armies, but with columns of migrants, newly raised roofs, and fields opened on old ground.

In 1653, Kauthara was formally incorporated into Đại Việt. In a history book, that is only a date, a single brief line on a page. In life, it must have been an entire drawn-out process, as Cham living space and political power contracted little by little, while their memory also receded deeper into the very land they had once called home. One detail has stayed with me, the statue of Po Ina Nagar was carried back to Phan Rang. I have always imagined that moment as something more than the ceremonial relocation of a sacred image. It feels instead like the quiet retreat of a faith itself, as though even the goddess had to leave alongside a people gradually losing their old homeland.

Standing before the sea at Nha Trang, watching one even line of waves after another roll toward shore, I remembered something I had once written, “But I know that history does not live only in books. It lies beneath my feet…” Yes, history is still beneath our feet. The trouble is, we do not always care to bend down and listen.

I once wrote about the wars that pulled Champa into the merciless struggle of competing powers, “History has never been gentle with the weak. Champa, once a mighty

kingdom, was swept into the vortex of war. Caught between two jaws, Đại Việt from the north and Cambodia from the west, the kingdom was forced again and again to shrink back in defense, only to rise once more…"

Turning through old pages of history, I came upon burned citadels, defeated kings, and crowds of refugees fleeing toward the sea. In the contests of dynasties, an entire people can sometimes recede gradually from the stage of history, leaving behind moss-covered stones and memories that refuse to be forgotten.

But history books never tell everything. If we want to understand a land that once belonged to a people whose kingdom has disappeared, it is probably not enough to read records of victories and defeats. We must walk on their ground, look at what ruins remain, listen to the wind moving through ancient towers, and try to imagine the human beings who were born there, grew up there, loved, prayed, and called that place home. That is why I came, to gather a few fragments of memory scattered through the dust and wind of time.

CAO MIÊN, AN EQUAL MATCH, AND TEARS OF BLOOD

From very ancient times, Champa and Cambodia existed side by side as two great powers resting against the Trường Sơn mountain chain and the broad river basins of the Indochinese Peninsula. Dense primeval forests and tangled waterways meant that the borders between kingdoms were far more fragile than the lines we draw on

maps today. A military movement, a season of high water, or the rise of a new dynasty could be enough to transfer an entire region from one realm to another. For that reason, warfare between the two became almost a permanent thread running through their history.

The Cham called the Khmer “Kambuja,” a name freighted with both wariness and grudges accumulated across generations. The two sides fought over fertile riverlands where rich silt could feed tens of thousands of people, and for that very reason those lands became battlefields again and again. Generation after generation passed through them, until little remained but ruined fortifications, inscriptions whose letters had been worn away, and stories that had drifted so far into the past that much of them had become legend.

Around the eleventh century, under Harivarman IV, Champa began directing its strength westward, while Cambodia was entering a period of expansion of its own. When two great ambitions turn toward the same space, collision is almost impossible to avoid.

I imagine those long-ago dry seasons, Cham armies crossing the mountains and following the rivers, long lines of men stretching across sun-baked grasslands. On the other side came Khmer forces from Angkor with their war elephants. Primeval forest, deep rivers, and treacherous terrain were not merely scenery, they directly determined the fate of armies that had marched far beyond the lands they knew. Fighting between the two sides went on and on, sometimes with Champa pushing westward, sometimes with Khmer forces sweeping back toward the sea. Neither

side was strong enough to erase the other from the map, but whenever war flared, the first to bear the cost were the ordinary people living in borderlands that kept changing hands. The rains came, jungle roads turned to mud, rivers rose, armies withdrew, and peace treaties followed. Yet peace between those royal courts usually lasted only until the balance of power shifted again. Marriage was used to steady the border, princesses sent to foreign courts as living pledges of goodwill. But political bonds of that kind were rarely strong enough to survive the ambitions of the next generation. One king died, another took his place, and war could begin all over again as though those years of peace had never existed.

After so many clashes with Cambodia, Champa increasingly had to divide its strength between the west and the north, where Đại Việt was growing stronger and expanding step by step toward the south. From that point on, Kauthara and the other Cham territories caught between those two directions of pressure became increasingly vulnerable.

Today, standing before ancient fortifications, collapsed temples, or surviving Sanskrit inscriptions, I can still feel some echo of that age of war. Not because I can hear the elephants or the clash of weapons, but because those remains make it possible to understand how many generations once lived in a world where borders, power, and human fate could all change in the course of a single campaigning season.

The confrontation between Champa and Cambodia, then, was never simply a story about which of two peoples

won and which one lost. It was also part of the history of an entire peninsula, where Cham, Khmer, Vietnamese, Lao, Thai, Chinese, and many other communities met, fought, traded, intermarried, and blended into one another. History may appear to have closed that chapter, yet its traces remain in rivers, forests, and old stones, waiting for someone in a later age who is willing to listen.

NAM ĐẢO, AN ENDLESS SEA OF RAGING WAVES

If Champa's confrontation with Cambodia unfolded mainly on land, the threat from the Austronesian world came riding in on the waves. Offshore, fleets of ships carried not only goods and merchants, but sometimes weapons and the ambitions of powers from far beyond the horizon.

From very early on, Champa was a kingdom inseparable from the sea. The Cham were skilled shipbuilders and sailors, and they took part in the great trading networks of the region. But the sea was never merely a highway of commerce. It was also a battlefield without boundaries, where vessels from Java, Sumatra, Borneo, and other distant islands of the Austronesian world might arrive as trading partners one season and raiders the next.

From the eighth and ninth centuries onward, fleets sailing from the islands to the south repeatedly attacked Champa's coast. Prosperous ports visited by Arab, Indian, and Chinese merchants naturally made tempting targets.

Gold, silver, ivory, silk, precious goods, and human beings themselves could all be swept away after a single swift raid.

In 774, a major attack struck the region of Panduranga. Temples and towers were destroyed, sacred images were carried off or damaged, and ordinary inhabitants and religious communities were caught in the violence. What made such seaborne raids so frightening was their speed, they could appear suddenly and disappear just as quickly, often before local forces had time to assemble an effective response. Disturbances of this kind continued for centuries and forced the Cham to adapt. A people whose life depended on the sea could not afford merely to fear it. They built larger ships, organized coastal defenses, learned to move quickly on the water, and gradually turned the sea itself into one of their advantages.

Nor were the Cham always on the defensive. During many periods they actively sent warships far from home, defending trade routes and confronting powers that threatened them. Although the historical record concerning Champa's naval conflicts with Java, Sumatra, and the sphere of Srivijaya still contains many dark gaps, one fact remains fairly clear, Champa was never a kingdom that simply stood there and took the blows. It was once a maritime power capable of reaching beyond its own coastline.

Those confrontations helped forge the Cham tradition of seamanship. Sometimes an enemy is the harshest teacher of all. From shipbuilding techniques and the reading of monsoon winds to the art of maneuvering at sea, every conflict survived left behind another lesson. After

the thirteenth century, as Srivijaya declined and the political landscape of the islands shifted with the rise of new powers such as Majapahit, the pressures Champa faced from the sea also began to change. But the memory of centuries spent living among violent waves never disappeared.

Today, traveling through Cham villages in Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận, watching boats offshore and hearing old stories passed from one generation to another, I still have the feeling that the sea has never stood outside the history of this people. Their kingdom is gone, but part of their spirit seems to remain out there, traveling endlessly with the waves of the East Sea, toward a horizon with no shore.

ĐẠI VIỆT, THE UNENDING WAVE OF SOUTHWARD EXPANSION

If Cambodia was Champa's great adversary in the west, and the sea brought threats from the Austronesian islands, then from the north came Đại Việt, which gradually became the most enduring and ultimately decisive pressure upon Champa's fate.

The confrontation between Champa and Đại Việt was not simply a chain of wars. It was also a collision between two cultural worlds and two different forms of social organization. On one side were the Cham principalities, deeply influenced by Hinduism and closely tied to the sea and maritime commerce. On the other stood Đại Việt, rooted in agriculture, governed by an increasingly centralized state, and driven by a growing need to expand its living space

southward. For centuries the two sides fought and negotiated, made peace and broke it, maintained diplomatic relations and then turned against one another, but the border, on the whole, continued to move south.

In 1069, King Lý Thánh Tông led an army against Champa. After that campaign, the three prefectures of Địa Lý, Ma Linh, and Bố Chính passed to Đại Việt. One war changed a border, and once the border moved, villages, fields, and the lives of ordinary people changed along with it. Out of those seemingly modest shifts, a much longer historical process began to take shape.

During the Trần dynasty, relations between the two states continued to rise and fall. There were wars, peace agreements, and political marriages. The story of Chế Mân and Princess Huyền Trân became one of the most famous milestones, when the territories of Ô and Lý became part of Đại Việt. Once again, the border moved another distance southward.

Yet those changes were still not the decisive blow. By the fifteenth century, the struggle had become a matter of survival for Champa. In 1446, Đại Việt forces entered Đồ Bàn. The Cham later recovered some of their position, but the balance of power would never be what it had been before.

Then, in 1471, everything changed. Lê Thánh Tông mobilized a large army and marched into Champa, and after fierce fighting Đồ Bàn fell. Enormous numbers of Cham were killed, captured, or forced from their homes, while the political structure of the kingdom was shattered at a fundamental level.

After that catastrophe, Champa could no longer maintain its former status as a major power. Its northern territories fell one after another into the hands of Đại Việt, while the surviving Cham communities were forced to draw back toward the south, especially into the regions of Phú Yên, Khánh Hòa, Ninh Thuận, and Bình Thuận. Beginning in the seventeenth century, the Nguyễn lords continued moving south. The remaining Cham lands came under increasingly intense military and administrative pressure. Kauthara was lost in 1653, and Panduranga too was gradually brought under Nguyễn control.

Eventually, the kingdom of Champa ceased to exist as an independent political entity. The Cham people, however, did not disappear. They are still there, in the Cham villages of Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận, in the sound of the ginăng drum, in dances and ceremonies, in ancient towers, and in stories handed down through families about a time when their country stretched along the coast.

A kingdom may lose its name on a map, but a people does not therefore vanish from history.

THE END OF A KINGDOM AND THE SOUTHWARD FOOTSTEPS

The Cham towers still stand beside the river of time, while the kingdom itself has withdrawn deep into the past. Wars with Đại Việt, Cambodia, and powers arriving from the sea, combined with internal upheaval, came like wave after wave striking the same cliff face. No single wave reshaped the stone. It was the wearing force of centuries.

Champa's decline was much the same. It did not come from one battle or one enemy, but from prolonged warfare, internal division, changes in the routes of commerce, and ever-growing pressure from neighboring states. Among all those forces, the southward expansion of Đại Việt proved the most profound and enduring.

The Vietnamese did not expand their territory through warfare alone. Every shift of the frontier was followed by migrants, new villages, reclaimed fields, the gradual establishment of administrative systems, and a new cultural life settling over an older landscape. That combination turned the Southward Expansion into a process lasting many generations, something far deeper than a mere succession of conquests.

After successive Cham territories were incorporated into their domain, the Nguyễn lords continued farther south, entering lands belonging to Cambodia and gradually expanding toward the Mekong Delta, Hà Tiên, and Phú Quốc. As time passed, the frontier was enlarged less and less by any single method, and instead through an interwoven mixture of military force, migration, land reclamation, marriage, diplomacy, and political agreements.

Seen from one direction, this was the process through which the territorial shape of modern Vietnam came into being. Seen from the viewpoint of communities that lost their land, it was also a history of retreat, shifting identities, and memories not always told in their own voices.

I used to think of history as an unforgiving game of chess, where nations unable to defend themselves are driven backward by stronger powers. The more I travel,

read, and look at what remains, however, the more complicated the story seems. A people can lose politically and survive culturally. A kingdom may disappear, while what it leaves behind continues quietly in religious belief, language, place names, mythology, and the memories of communities that come afterward.

And perhaps the greatest loss is not land itself. What troubles me more is the moment when a people gradually loses the right to tell its own story. Once their history survives only in the words of others, they can easily be pushed into the background, even while their descendants are still alive in the world.

Yet the deeper I traveled into Khánh Hòa, the more clearly I saw that the Cham had never disappeared. They no longer live here in communities as numerous as those in Ninh Thuận or Bình Thuận, but their traces remain, in Vietnamese Mother Goddess worship, in shrines bearing thoroughly Vietnamese names whose roots lead back to an ancient Cham deity. Am Chúa, Miếu Ông Thạch, and many other places made me think of cultural layers resting one over another. No layer vanishes entirely. It changes its name, changes the words used for it, changes its rituals, and then quietly enters the daily life of the people who come later.

I wondered whether that, too, might be a way of surviving. Perhaps something no longer intact in its original form can enter another culture, become part of it, and continue to exist even when almost no one remembers its old name clearly. The thought left me both sad and strangely relieved. Sad, because a people who once had a kingdom,

kings, cities, and temples of their own now survives largely in layers of cultural sediment. Yet relieved as well, because apparently not everything that is lost disappears altogether. More and more, I came to feel that Kauthara was not simply a lost land. It was a meeting place between sea and mountain, Cham and Vietnamese, memory and the present, what has vanished and what remains. Sometimes it may be precisely those places that no longer belong wholly to one side or another that preserve the soul of history most faithfully.

I sat for a very long time watching the late sunlight fall across Po Nagar. The red bricks changed color beneath the sunset, and at moments I could almost imagine the entire tower breathing. The sea wind came in carrying salt and a feeling I could not quite name, something like the scent of voyages that left harbor long ago and never came home. In that moment, I thought history sometimes ceases to be something remembered through numbers and dates. It becomes something felt. And if human beings can still feel something while standing before what has been lost, perhaps those lost things have not entirely departed from this world. I would never claim that I understood Kauthara. I only know that I passed through that land with more than my footsteps, with something deeper and quieter inside me.

KAUTHARA, WHEN HISTORY BECOMES NOTHING BUT A FEELING

I stopped in Nha Trang one afternoon after the sun had begun to soften. Dry golden light fell across the surface of the Cái River, thin as a layer of memory that had only just

settled after so many upheavals. Standing on a bridge whose name sounded both strange and familiar, Hà Ra, I suddenly felt as though I were standing between two currents of time. On one side was the city, full of engines and lights. On the other stretched a deep, receding past, where the name Kauthara seemed still to be whispered very softly.

Some say Hà Ra may be a Vietnamese transformation of the old name Kauthara. Watching the water move past, I felt my own thoughts flowing backward toward the layers of earth history had laid over this place. Some things have lost their visible shape without truly disappearing, like an old fragrance drifting past, unmistakably there, yet impossible to hold.

I remembered the story of Hòn Điệp, a small island in Vân Phong Bay. Tradition says a fairly isolated community once lived there, known to outsiders as the “Hạ People.” The story says they lived in only a few dozen houses, had little contact with the outside world, carried things on their heads instead of on shoulder poles, were darkened by the sun, and seldom spoke. At one point the district magistrate of Vạn Ninh summoned them to be entered into official registers, and when he asked their names, many had no family names at all, so he assigned the surname Đinh to the men and Trần to the women. At first hearing, it sounds like an odd little anecdote. The more I thought about it, though, the sadder it became. A community had lived for so long without needing surnames of the kind demanded by government records, and then one day they were given names so that they could be entered into the books. I do not know how much of that story is historically true, but the feeling it leaves behind is

very real, human beings can be forgotten by history so completely that even their names end up being chosen by someone else. I wondered whether those people ever asked themselves who they were. Or perhaps they simply lived like the grasses and trees of the island, with no need to name the past and no knowledge that one day someone far away would stand thinking about them.

That thought followed me to another remnant of the past, the Võ Cạnh stele, one of the oldest Sanskrit inscriptions ever found in the lands of Champa. The stone was discovered at Vĩnh Trung in Nha Trang and is now preserved in Hanoi. Its letters are worn away and the text is incomplete, yet that very incompleteness somehow makes it more haunting. There are things of which only part survives, and precisely because of that, later generations become all the more eager to imagine what has been lost. I had read of scholars who studied the stele, from archaeologists of the École française d'Extrême-Orient to Louis Finot and those who came later, trying to reconstruct, fragment by fragment, writing that had nearly vanished. What can still be read suggests ideas of coming and going, living and dying, and compassion for all living beings. It is an ancient inscription from a vanished world, yet those reflections suddenly seem astonishingly close to us. Human beings understood long ago that nothing remains still. Kingdoms change, citadels fall, place names are pronounced differently, and even stone inscriptions wear away. If that is so, what remains at the end? Perhaps the human heart.

I continued toward the Po Nagar towers. Their shadows fell across the river, majestic and yet touched by

the sadness of someone who has endured too many upheavals and somehow remained standing. There is an old song,

“Whoever returns to Xóm Bóng, stop by home,
And ask if the dance once offered to the Lady is still there.”

It sounds like a question, but also like a reminder. Some dances are gone and the dancers themselves have long since departed, yet their spirit seems to linger in the wind, in the water, and in the way people here still speak the words “Tháp Bà,” the Lady’s Tower.

The Cái River flowing beneath the towers was once tied to layers of old Cham place names, which gradually changed as they passed into Vietnamese speech. One land, many names, many peoples arriving one after another, eventually overlapping just as the cultures of this place overlap. The Cham worship of the goddess encountered the Vietnamese tradition of Mother Goddess worship, until Po Nagar was gradually received by the Vietnamese through a more intimate name, simply “Bà,” the Lady, the Mother.

I climbed the stone steps and looked at bricks fitted so tightly together that, after centuries, they still leave those of us who come later in wonder. Scholars have studied those building techniques extensively, but standing before the tower, I found myself thinking about something other than technique. Perhaps before anyone can create a structure that outlives human beings, there must first be a faith strong enough to make such a thing possible.

Inside the tower it was dark and cool. The Lady sat there, silent yet powerful. In the imagination of generations,

she protected the land, the harvest, childbirth, and the fragile lives of ordinary people. I stood before her without praying and without asking for anything, and still I felt myself grow calmer. There are times when a human being does not need to ask for one more thing. Sometimes it is enough simply to stand quietly before something that has existed longer than your own life.

I remembered the legend that says the Lady was born from clouds and sea foam, that she had many husbands and many children, and that her children became gods governing different regions. Read through the rational mind of the present, such stories may seem fantastic, but beneath them lies the way ancient people understood the world. Earth was not merely earth, mountains were not merely mountains, and the sea was never simply the sea. Everything possessed a spirit, a power of generation, a bond linking human beings to the place where they lived.

And that spirit was called Mother.

That may be why Po Nagar, after wars, destruction, repairs, and rebuilding, is still standing. It is no longer intact as it was in the beginning, but enough remains to tell the long story of a kingdom that once existed and of human beings who lived, believed, loved, and suffered the pain of loss on this very ground.

I walked among the reliefs, looking at dancers, boatmen, and human figures caught in the ordinary act of living, their daily lives preserved in stone. Suddenly I wondered whether people in the distant past already understood how brief a human life is and therefore wanted to leave some trace of themselves in materials more durable

than flesh. Perhaps the truly frightening thing is not death, but being forgotten. Yet stone wears away too. Letters blur. Statues lose their hands, their faces, even the names of those who made them. Memory seems as fragile as wind, and still, sometimes, memory travels farther than stone.

Evening slowly settled in. The sound of water rose steadily from the river, while the city in the distance began to light up. Nha Trang today is so different, crowded, brilliant, forever in motion. Yet somewhere beneath that modern surface, I still sensed that the old Kauthara had not entirely vanished, that somewhere remained the faint presence of a world that once lived beside the river, faced the sea, and lifted its eyes toward sacred towers.

I wondered, if everything before my eyes today also disappears one day, what will remain. Perhaps a stone inscription whose words have worn away. A place name distorted through generations of pronunciation. A song whose full lyrics no one remembers anymore. Or perhaps nothing tangible at all, only a fleeting sensation felt by some future person standing in a place and knowing that many human beings once lived there, loved there, believed there, and quietly went away. Maybe that feeling is what lasts longest.

I left the towers after the sky had gone completely dark, feeling lighter in one way and a little heavier in another. Lighter because I felt as though I had touched something very deep in the land. Heavier because the more one understands, the more one sees that the past cannot be kept unchanged in our hands. We can only carry it with us. And even what we carry will fade. Still, when I think about it,

some things do not need to be preserved forever. It may be enough that, for one moment, we truly touched them, knew that they had existed, and felt our hearts tremble because of them.

That is enough.

Essay 8

AM CHÚA, WHERE FAITHS MEET

One morning, with the salt of the sea still lingering in the air, I left Nha Trang and drove west along a small road toward Diên Khánh. For some reason I felt a little lighter, as though I still wanted to escape the noise on the surface and work my way down into some deeper layer of this land. A place where people do not merely live, but remember, believe, and worship.

The road to Am Chúa winds along the slopes of Đại An Mountain, also known as Dưa Mountain. The name sounds simple and rustic, as though the place never wanted to become a celebrated attraction and would rather remain a quiet corner where people might come seeking peace. The car stopped at the foot of the mountain, and I continued up the stone steps on foot. A light wind was blowing. Everything was quiet. Yet the quietness was strange, not empty at all, but full. Full of something difficult to name, as though someone were present there without appearing.

People say Am Chúa is the place where Thiên Y A Na first emerged, back when she was still a little girl living with her adoptive parents, before she became divine at the Po Nagar towers. I stood in the small courtyard, looking at the simple three-bay shrine tucked beneath the canopy of a strychnine tree more than three hundred years old, and felt my thoughts grow quiet.

I remembered the old story inscribed on a stone stele in 1856, the story that this place once belonged to an elderly woodcutter and his wife who grew watermelons and discovered a little girl stealing from their patch, then took her home and raised her. At first it sounds like a simple tale, but the longer I thought about it, the more deeply it sank in, because within that simplicity people had placed something immense, the coming of a goddess. A goddess who had once been a child. I wondered whether the ancients deliberately told the story that way in order to bring the divine closer to human beings, to make the sacred something not far away in the heavens but present in ordinary life, in a house, a melon patch, in the compassionate glance of an old woodcutter looking at an orphaned child. Then the story moves on like a gentle stream. The girl was originally a fairy maiden who longed for her former realm, transformed herself into a piece of agarwood, floated out to sea, drifted to China, met a crown prince, bore children, and then returned. A cycle of departure and return, much like the “gatāgati” I had once read about on an ancient inscription, coming and going, leaving and returning. Yet the part that made me linger was not the magic, but what happened when she came home. Finding her adoptive parents dead, she repaired their

graves and taught the people how to farm, weave cloth, and trade. A goddess returned, and the first thing she did was not to reveal her supernatural power, but to become human. She taught people how to live.

Standing before the shrine and looking toward the distant fields, I suddenly felt the story was no longer merely a legend. It seemed more like a people's way of explaining their own beginning, saying that they had learned how to live from a Mother, whether that Mother was historical or imagined, because the debt of gratitude remained as real as the ground beneath their feet. Perhaps that is why, from the early Nguyễn dynasty onward, she was officially invested with the title "Hồng Nhơn Phổ Tế Linh Ứng Thượng Đẳng Thần," and ceremonies held here once carried the formality of state ritual. Yet what interested me even more was that the Vietnamese were not the only people who came here. The Cham came too. Two peoples, two sets of memories, two systems of belief, meeting beneath one small roof.

Meeting without conflict.

Meeting to worship together.

That, more than anything else, is what matters about this land. Not who arrived first and who came later, but how people found a way to live together and believe together in something shared, even when they called it by different names.

Some call her Po Nagar.

Some call her Thiên Y A Na.

In the end, she is still Mother.

I walked around the shrine and placed my hand on the trunk of the ancient strychnine tree. Its bark was rough and uneven, yet it felt wonderfully real and close. It was unlike sacred statues dressed in robes and decorated so elaborately that the embellishment sometimes seems to obscure whatever was original, the thing I have always believed matters most. The “soul” of an image.

I thought of the statue inside the Po Nagar tower and of a scholar who described the goddess as “both Mother and a figure bearing qualities of Uma, associated with the Linga and Yoni, symbols of generation.” The body is not something to hide, but an affirmation that life begins there. Yet over time, people covered the statue in robes, crowns, and jewelry, almost as though the original form had become too honest, too intimate, too human. Perhaps when the gods begin to look too much like us, we feel a need to raise them higher so that some distance remains.

Or perhaps the opposite is true. When human beings no longer understand the divine, do we feel compelled to decorate it in order to reassure ourselves? That question followed me down the mountain and led me to another place, a small corner of the grounds of Thiên Lộc Pagoda, where there is a carved stone known as Miếu Ông Thạch. It is a green stone bearing the form of a linga and yoni. The symbol is unmistakably Hindu and unmistakably connected to Champa, yet here it now rests in a Buddhist setting, facing the shrine of Bà Sáu, beside a lotus pond and a statue of Guanyin. Standing there, I felt everything layered over everything else, Cham and Vietnamese, Hinduism and Buddhism, ancient and modern, sacred and ordinary. There were no sharp borders, only presence. People call it a Cham

remnant, an artifact several centuries old, evidence of cultural exchange. Yet standing before it, I found myself thinking less about dates than about a simpler question, why was a symbol like this still being worshiped? It was not in a museum. It was still part of life. That meant it was still “alive.”

I remembered studies of the Mỹ Sơn sanctuary and the role the linga once played in linking kingship, religion, and the Cham understanding of the cosmos. Yet here in a small Buddhist temple, it no longer carries precisely that original meaning. Local people have “understood it again,” given it another life in their own way.

So is that cultural blending?

Or assimilation?

I stood there for a long time without finding an answer. Then I realized the question might matter less than the fact that the stone was still there, still receiving incense, still being called by a name. Things that are still believed in are still alive.

Afternoon slowly deepened. Sunlight slanted through the pines and fell in shifting patches across the rippling lotus pond, while a light breeze seemed to slow the entire world. I thought about the journey of a goddess. From sea foam into the river, up the mountain, down to the plain, across to another country, then home again, transformed and worshiped, called by many names, continuing to live in human hearts through generation after generation. A life that was not one life. A name that was not one name. And suddenly I understood that perhaps the important thing was not who she originally was, where she came from, or whom

she belonged to. What mattered was what she became in the human imagination. To remember and to believe. Those are reasons to keep going, even when life is not easy.

I rose and left the temple no longer wanting to distinguish so sharply between Cham and Vietnamese, root and branch, fact and legend. Sometimes the more we insist on separating things, the farther we move from the essential truth the ancients were trying to preserve. Human beings, however different they may be, can still kneel before the same sacred thing. And in that moment, they are alike. I do not know how much more I came to understand about Thiên Y A Na or Am Chúa, but I do know one thing. Some roads do not lead us to an answer. They lead us to a feeling, and once we have touched that feeling, the questions themselves grow lighter, like wind passing over a mountain, needing no one to hold on to it and yet somehow remaining.

XÓM BÓNG, WHEN THE PAST STANDS BEHIND YOU

This time when I returned to Nha Trang, I felt much the same as I had before, except that for some reason there was a constant ache rising in my chest, as though I were about to meet an old friend I had not seen in years, someone with whom I had never quite finished saying hello. My group of friends was still making its way out of Saigon and would not arrive until the midday flight. As for me, I had not lost my old habit. I still liked to go ahead alone, slipping through side streets, feeling my way around, listening to the land through the solitary rhythm of my own heartbeat. So that morning, before the seaside city had fully awakened, I was already

making my way toward Xóm Bóng, a name that sounds vague and almost dreamlike until you step inside and discover that it has flesh and blood, breath and memory, memory as thick as the silt along the banks of the Cái River.

Xóm Bóng lies there beside the slow-moving water near the Po Nagar towers, like a real shadow, not some empty phantom but the shadow of time itself, of generations layered one upon another and still somehow living together. Long ago people said that a “bóng” was the spirit of a dead person entering the body of the living, and women who served as spirit mediums were therefore called “bà bóng.” Hearing that, I suddenly felt that Xóm Bóng was no longer merely the name of a neighborhood. It was more like a doorway into a world half earthly and half spiritual, where people lived not only by food, work, and shelter, but also by faith and by placing their hopes in what could not be seen.

Xóm Bóng has changed greatly now. A new Xóm Bóng Bridge spans the river, broad and straight, while traffic streams across it like new blood being pumped through an old body. The old stilt houses that once perched precariously above the water have nearly vanished, replaced by orderly rows of homes and restaurants glowing with light from early morning. Yet standing there and looking at all that change, I still sensed the old rhythm of life somewhere beneath the surface. It had not disappeared. It had merely sunk into a deeper layer, like sediment lying on the riverbed, invisible from above but still intact.

I walked along the riverbank as the first light came up, and several modest seafood stalls were already setting out their wares. The smells of fish, fish sauce, and cooking

smoke mingled in the air, rough and earthy, yet strangely familiar. People say Xóm Bóng is where downtown Nha Trang meets the northern part of the city, where modernity meets ordinary working-class life, where tourists meet locals. To me, however, it is also where something else comes together, something no map can draw. It is where memory meets the present.

I stood looking toward the Po Nagar towers and suddenly remembered the old stories about the “cô bóng” and “bà bóng,” the female ritual dancers and spirit mediums who once gathered here to practice their dancing and singing so that, when the annual festival came, they could climb to the towers and offer their dances to the Lady. People say those dancers were the reason the neighborhood came to be called Xóm Bóng. The more I thought about it, though, the more I felt the name came not merely from an occupation but from a role. Their role was to keep the flame of a belief alive across generations.

I remembered reading somewhere about the land of agarwood, where “this neighborhood once trained the ritual dancers known as vũ nữ múa bóng, whose dances shone brilliantly during the Lady’s festival before gradually fading away beginning in the reign of Bảo Đại.” Thinking of that, I felt a faint but deep absence hidden inside the bustle of the present, like a piece of music still playing after several of its most important notes have gone missing.

But if we travel even farther back, to the age when the Cham still stood beneath the towers singing praises to their gods, the word “bóng” takes on another possible meaning. In the Katê festival there is a woman known as the

Muk Pajau, a female ritual performer who sings and dances as an offering to the gods. Perhaps the word “Muk,” passing through Vietnamese mouths over generations, somehow became “bóng.” I would not dare claim certainty. But the way cultures change, bend, and blend often resists neat explanation. It is like river water, forever flowing and mixing until one day it has become a new current without anyone noticing exactly when the change occurred.

I stood there lost in thought. Could Xóm Bóng be a place where two cultural currents, Cham and Vietnamese, met not to erase one another but to reflect each other? On one side stood Shiva, the linga and yoni, and ancient rites. On the other stood the Holy Mother, the Vietnamese worship of the Mother Goddess, and the ordinary human longing for protection. Between them were very ordinary people, living, believing, and passing along the stories they themselves believed.

The Po Nagar Festival is still crowded every year. Kinh, Cham, and Raglai people come from many places. They offer incense, pray for peace, perform ritual dances, and sing devotional songs. Those dances may have changed and absorbed new elements, yet something essential remains, gratitude. People do not dance merely to put on a show. They dance to tell some sacred presence, “We still remember.”

I once watched a ritual dance at the foot of the towers. Young women in brilliant costumes moved their arms as softly as silk, their feet keeping time with the drums, their eyes distant as though fixed upon some other world. There was something beautiful in it, and sad, and

mesmerizing all at once. I could not tell for whom they were dancing, whether for human beings or for the gods. But I knew that in those moments they seemed no longer entirely themselves. I am told there are not many people left who truly understand the old art of múa bóng in depth. Most of those who know it and have preserved it are already old. Whenever I think about that, something inside me sinks. A dance, a ritual, a name, all of them can fade if no one remains to remember.

Then I found myself asking another question. Do these things ever truly disappear? Or do they simply change form, the way “Muk” may have become “Bóng,” the way a Cham goddess became a Vietnamese Holy Mother?

I left Xóm Bóng after the sun had climbed high. The new bridge was still gleaming, traffic kept moving, and the shops were crowded. Everything was vivid, alive, entirely of the present. Yet as I walked away, I felt almost as though someone were whispering beside my ear. There are things we imagine have passed away, when in truth they are merely standing quietly behind us, waiting for the day we finally turn around and notice them.



Photo: Nha Trang

Essay 9

BETWEEN A BUDDHIST TEMPLE AND A CATHOLIC CHURCH, LISTENING TO MY HEART AGAIN

For the past two days, I had been wandering around with a group of friends. They were close friends, to be fair, but they were all pretty well-off, some living in the United States, others in Saigon. They were accustomed to high-rise hotels, chilled rooms behind walls of glass, and dining tables arranged almost like ceremonial altars to pleasure, where

every dish had to be unusual, expensive, and worth telling somebody about afterward. Watching them choose seafood, I sometimes felt as though they were selecting a badge of honor. Everything had to be top grade, big, alive, heavy, and preferably rare. Me, I would much rather wander around alone, eating wherever I happen to end up, as long as there is enough in my stomach to keep me walking. But since we had come together, together we would go. I figured I might as well treat it as a change of pace. Sometimes the very things that do not suit us open up another way of seeing, something we might never notice if we insisted on traveling alone forever.

Early yesterday morning, we boarded a yacht near Trầm Hương Tower and cruised around the bay to watch the sunrise. My friends kept marveling at how beautiful and romantic it was, carrying on almost as though they had discovered something no one had ever seen before. I leaned against the railing, looked out at the sea, then back toward them, and found myself strangely unmoved. A sunrise over the ocean, to me, is not something you “go see.” It is something you live with. Nearly every morning I am up early by the sea, taking a few pictures, listening to the wind and the surf. That kind of beauty seeps into you slowly. It is not something you gasp at for a moment and then leave behind.

They asked me where we should go next. Nha Trang certainly has no shortage of places, but I hesitated. It was not the distance that bothered me, but the distance between the ways we experienced things. Go too far, discover we were not on the same wavelength, and the whole thing might turn into another forced excursion. After thinking for a

moment, I said, “How about Long Sơn Pagoda, then we’ll stop by the Stone Church.” Familiar places, close by, easy for everybody. They agreed immediately.

At Long Sơn Pagoda, I stood at the foot of Trại Thủy Hill and looked up. The great white Buddha sat above us in silence, filling an entire piece of sky. The temple is also known as the White Buddha Pagoda. Long ago it was called Đằng Long Tự, and it dates back to the nineteenth century. It has survived relocation, storms, wars, restoration after restoration, and somehow it is still there, a witness that has seen more than it will ever tell.

I began climbing, one step, then another, then another, all 193 of them, and each seemed to carry another thought upward with me. Along the way lies the seventeen-meter-long reclining Buddha, so serene that death itself no longer seems frightening. It looks more like deep sleep after a lifetime of weariness. I stopped there longer than I expected, not so much to worship as to ask myself a question. What kind of life am I living that leaves my heart forever suspended somewhere in between, never quite settled? Farther up is the great bell, weighing a ton and a half. I reached out and touched the bronze lightly. I did not strike it, only rested my hand against it, and still I could hear a low, distant resonance inside my head, as though something were sounding from very far away. Sometimes the bell does not ring from bronze at all. Sometimes it rings from somewhere inside us.

At the summit, the twenty-four-meter Kim Thân Buddha sits upon a lotus pedestal overlooking the city. The wind was stronger up there, carrying both the salt of the sea

and the dryness of the land. From that height, Nha Trang looked bustling and crowded, yet oddly small. It occurred to me that human life is much the same. Down below, everything seems terribly important. Climb a little higher, and suddenly much of it becomes lighter.

What stayed with me most, however, was not the height, but the lotus petals beneath the statue, where images commemorate seven Buddhist monks who set themselves on fire in 1963 in protest against a period of persecution. Their flames went out long ago, but what those flames meant has never cooled. I stood there while the wind snapped around me, and something inside me fell silent. It was not sadness exactly. It was something deeper, a settling of the heart.

Coming down the hill, we stopped at the Mountain Church. From a distance, the church, also known as the Stone Church or the Six-Way Intersection Church, rises from Hoàng Lân Hill like a solemn mass of stone. It does not show off, yet there is no ignoring it. Its official name is Christ the King Cathedral, but the names ordinary people gave it somehow carry more affection. People name things in ways that bring them closer, make them easier to remember, make them feel like their own.

I climbed the fifty-three stone steps, and every footfall seemed to return in the faintest echo. Statues of saints stood along either side, motionless yet somehow watching. Along the walkway are niches containing the ashes of the dead, placed where sunlight reaches them, where wind passes and living feet continue to come and go. I found something unexpectedly warm in that way of keeping

the dead close to the living, neither cold nor separated from everyday life. Perhaps death is not really leaving. Perhaps it is simply another way of being present.

Construction of the church began in 1928 and was completed in 1933 under Father Louis Vallet. More than five hundred explosive charges were used to level Bông Hill and prepare the foundation. Hearing that number gave me a chill. Not because of the destruction itself, but because of the will behind it. Stone was blasted apart to build something meant to endure beyond stone, faith. Inside, the space rises high overhead, its vaulted ceiling almost compelling the eye upward. Light streams through stained glass and falls in shimmering patches, as though light itself knew how to pray. Along the walls are the fourteen Stations of the Cross, each one a fragment of suffering that somehow contains peace.

I sat down in a pew. I asked for nothing and recited no prayer. I simply sat there, and somehow my heart became quiet. Outside, life is always pushing us somewhere. In here, for once, there was nowhere else I needed to go. I thought of Father Louis Vallet, a foreigner who came here, lived here, died here, and was laid to rest at the foot of the road leading up to the church. A man who spent his life “far from home.” Yet if he chose it willingly, perhaps it was not exile at all, but a complete choice.

Outside, my friends were doing their own things. Some were taking pictures, others simply looking around. I had no idea what they saw or what they felt. To them, perhaps this was a beautiful sightseeing stop, an impressive building worth visiting. To me, it felt like a hymn written in stone and light, and in the countless footsteps of

generations climbing and descending those stairs. Long ago, there was little here beyond a sparsely populated fishing settlement and a few hundred Catholics scattered through the area. Over time the church rose, a parish formed, a diocese was established, migrants came south from northern Vietnam, and new communities branched away. Each parish became like another branch of a river, flowing outward while carrying water from the same source.

I stood in the courtyard looking down over the city. A light wind moved through the open space. Suddenly I realized that this outing, though it had begun with my own reluctance, had led me to places where I might not have lingered nearly as long had I come alone. Afternoon was fading. I turned to the others and said, “All right, let’s head back to the hotel and rest.” My voice was easy, like someone who had just finished doing something. Though I suppose it might also have sounded like an order.

But I knew that sometime that night I would end up walking back to the beach, standing there while the water slowly disappeared into darkness. Across the way, the streets would probably be noisy again, lights blazing, people coming and going, while on this side the sea would remain what it has always been, quiet. Some things say more the quieter they become. And some journeys that seem to be taken with other people turn out, in the end, to be journeys into ourselves. By then I no longer cared much where we went, where we stayed, or whether any of it was fancy. What remained was the question of whether, standing there between a Buddhist temple and a Catholic church, between past and present, between noise and silence, I had

managed to hear even the faintest voice within my own heart. If I had, then the trip had been worth it.

THE COAST ROAD, A JOURNEY INWARD

Today was strangely beautiful, clear without being glaring, the sunlight golden but gentle, while the sea wind blew wide and free, yet softly, as though some unseen hand had just brushed the surface of the water. That was what gave me the idea of taking my friends along the coastal road from south to north, letting the wheels follow Trần Phú before continuing onto Phạm Văn Đồng. We would stop at a few familiar places. Nothing needed to be extraordinary. I only wanted them to see how Nha Trang reveals itself on an ordinary day.

Really, if I were to describe it properly, this coastal road is like an arm wrapped around the entire city, with houses, streets, and human life on one side and the open sea on the other. From Trần Phú Road, Nha Trang Bay stretches out blue and wide, with Hòn Tre in the distance. The largest island sits there like a broad, silent back holding off the wind. Once across the Cái River, the road becomes Phạm Văn Đồng. It still hugs the sea, but the feeling changes, becoming more spacious, more drawn out, as though the city has begun loosening its grip and allowing more wind and ocean to slip inside. Keep going and eventually you reach Lương Sơn Pass, where the mountains begin pressing down toward the coast, forcing land and sea to make room for one another.

My friends asked what the plan was, where we would start and how far we would go. I could hear their excitement, though I knew most of it was reserved for places with a reputation, not necessarily for the quiet stretches in between. I told them we would start on Lê Hồng Phong, head toward the mouth of the Quán Trường River, come out onto Trần Phú, then make only a few stops, the Nha Trang Institute of Oceanography, Bảo Đại's villas, then north past Hòn Chồng, the Đó Theater, with a glance toward Cô Tiên Mountain. After that we would stop at Marina Beach so my fancy friends could get their pictures, then head back. At night, anyone who wanted dinner, drinks, or a bar could do whatever they pleased.

One friend asked why we were not going out to the islands. He had heard there were beautiful ones close to shore. I laughed and told him tomorrow or the day after, because we did not have enough time today. The truth was, I also wanted to leave something for later. When you race through everything at once and try to see it all, sometimes you end up remembering nothing.

By the time we reached the Nha Trang Institute of Oceanography, I no longer felt as guarded as I had the day before. Maybe I had adjusted to traveling with the group, or maybe the place itself simply had enough gravity to pull a person in without any mental preparation. In simple terms, this is one of Vietnam's oldest marine research institutions, established in 1922 during the French colonial period, when it bore the long-winded name of the Indochina Oceanographic and Fisheries Service. Names changed, wars came, the country was divided and later reunited, yet the institution remained, like an old man sitting quietly in the

corner who happens to know far more stories than everyone else in the room. I entered the museum and looked along rows upon rows of specimens, more than twenty thousand examples representing thousands of species, from fish and coral to creatures I would not have known how to name even if somebody asked me. Huge fish lay motionless behind glass, eyes wide open and seeing nothing. Then there were whale skeletons nearly eighteen meters long and three meters high, said to have been excavated from the Red River Delta after lying underground for more than two hundred years. I stood before those bones for a long while and suddenly felt tiny. A creature that enormous had finally been reduced to dry bones. Yet while it lived, surely it had crossed immense reaches of ocean and felt water flowing around its body just as I was feeling the wind now.

In the live aquariums, brilliantly colored fish moved through the water among glowing corals. There were sharks, rays, and sea turtles. It was beautiful to look at, yet something inside me felt uneasy. I wondered whether this was beauty in its truest sense when everything had been placed inside a controlled environment, when an entire sea had been reduced to glass tanks.

Then I thought of the exhibits about mangrove forests, coral reefs, and seagrass beds, and all the signs urging people to protect the environment. Suddenly those appeals no longer sounded like slogans. They felt necessary. Because if we fail to protect what remains, perhaps one day the only way we will see the sea is through glass, just as we were looking at those fish.

My friends were delighted, taking pictures nonstop. Someone kept asking about ticket prices, opening hours, and artificial diving activities. I caught bits and pieces of the conversation, but my mind had already drifted somewhere else. Sometimes knowing too much about a place can make us forget how to feel it.

Leaving the institute, we headed toward Bảo Đại's villas. On Chụt Mountain overlooking the sea stands a complex of five old villas, Xương Rồng, Bông Sứ, Bông Giấy, Phượng Vĩ, and Cây Bàng. They were built beginning in 1923, originally for marine scientists, and later became a retreat for Emperor Bảo Đại and Empress Nam Phương during the years from 1940 to 1945.

I walked among the villas, looking at aging plaster walls and faded tile roofs, while the surrounding trees remained green, their branches spreading as though they knew nothing about time. Some places had deteriorated badly or been abandoned, while the ground had been torn up by unfinished development projects. The sight left me with an unpleasant kind of sadness. I was not sad because the place was old, but because something seemed to be forgotten at the very moment everybody kept talking about progress. At Nghinh Phong Villa, I looked down toward Hoàng Hậu Beach, where there is a rock on which Bảo Đại is said to have once sat fishing. The wind came hard, carrying the sound of waves striking the rocks below. Suddenly I thought about that king, a man with royal residences everywhere, Đà Lạt, Nha Trang, Vũng Tàu. Yet in the end, did he really possess power? And if he did, that power passed away just like the sea wind.

After leaving Bảo Đại's villas, we stopped near the cable-car station and looked toward the Vinpearl Nha Trang cable line stretching more than 3.3 kilometers across the sea from the mainland to Hòn Tre. Its pylons rise out of the water in the form of Eiffel Towers, conspicuous enough by day and probably even more dazzling at night. My friends wanted to go immediately, but I held them back. Not because I disliked the idea, but because I was afraid that feeling of having to "fit everything in" would make us miss everything else. A trip that becomes too greedy rarely leaves much behind.

I watched the cabins glide past slowly and steadily, each crossing taking nearly ten minutes, carrying people over the sea like a bridge between two worlds. On one side was the familiar mainland. On the other was an island filled with modern entertainment. Human beings really are remarkable now, I thought. We can build a road through the air above the sea. But then another question came to me. We have become so good at crossing distances outside ourselves, but what about the distances within?

The car continued north. The sea remained beside us, the wind kept blowing, and the sunlight began to soften. My friends talked cheerfully in the back, making plans for dinner and deciding where to go that night. I heard them without really listening. Wind slipped through the window, carrying that familiar salty smell. Looking outside, I saw the sea traveling alongside us, neither fast nor slow, as though it had no need to catch anyone and no reason to wait.

It suddenly occurred to me that this coastal road may look like nothing more than a transportation route, but stay

on it long enough and it becomes a current of thought. Every stop offers another cross-section. Science at the Institute of Oceanography, history at Bảo Đại's villas, modernity at the cable car. They all occupy the same narrow strip of land, as though Nha Trang had gathered different eras together and set them side by side. Whoever wants to understand may understand. Whoever wants merely to pass through may pass through.

As for me, I did not know how much I had understood. I only felt something indistinct settling quietly inside me. I had thought I was traveling a coastal road to look at the sea, but perhaps I had really come to look back at myself. There are times when we seem to be rushing forward, when in truth we are moving inward, slowly.

WHEN WOUNDS TURN INTO FRAGRANCE

We drove for a while, and the Nha Trang sunlight began turning a softer shade of gold, no longer harsh as it had been at noon but almost lazy, drifting along like a fisherman stretched out in a hammock after a good meal, letting the breeze wash over his face. From the car I watched the blue sea appear and then suddenly open into a vast expanse. We had reached the main beach along Trần Phú, the city's front porch, so to speak, the place where all you have to do is stand still and Nha Trang introduces itself without needing another word.

We stopped for a while at Trầm Hương Tower. Truthfully, it is not monumental, and it does not overwhelm you the way certain landmarks do in other seaside cities. Yet

it has a posture entirely its own. It looks like a stick of agarwood incense slowly burning, quiet and smoldering, spreading its fragrance without any need to announce itself. Standing beneath it against the blue sky, I suddenly thought it resembled a wound that had healed, beautiful now, yet never forgetful of the pain.

People call agarwood “the fragrance of heaven,” “Thiên Hương.” When you think about it, the name makes sense, because agarwood does not come from a tree that has remained whole and untouched. The Aquilaria tree begins producing resin only after it has been wounded, struck by lightning, broken, rotted, sometimes even ravaged by bombs and warfare. Quietly, it begins healing itself. Year after year the resin accumulates, changes, and penetrates deeper into the grain, until one day people call what has formed there agarwood. Standing beneath the tower, I suddenly felt that the story of the Aquilaria tree was a little like human life. No wound is entirely meaningless. Some things never become fragrant unless they have first known pain.

The old stories say that heaven’s fragrance travels on the wind and settles into wounded trees. It sounds vague and mystical, but perhaps that very mystery makes it easier to believe. Without a little sacredness in the story, how else could anyone explain a piece of decaying wood becoming so fragrant that people carry it into rituals, temples, and those moments when they need to speak with heaven and earth?

In Khánh Hòa, people also believe agarwood belongs to Lady Thiên Y A Na. Out of compassion for her

people, she created the agarwood tree and gave its fragrance the power to ward off illness and bring good fortune. That belief does not survive only in books or ceremonial prayers. Even today, the people who go “đi địu,” searching the forests for agarwood, still believe it. They say you find it only if the Lady gives it to you. If she does not, you can stand right beside the tree and never see it. Hearing that made me think of all the things in life we search for endlessly without finding, until fate gives the slightest nod and suddenly they are lying right in front of us. An old prayer has also been recorded, “Long ago, the goddess Inư Nưgar gave birth to the earth, agarwood, rice…” Read aloud, the words carry the breath of a distant age, yet they do not feel distant at all. The smell of agarwood, the smell of rice, the smell of earth, put those three together and you have the scent of a life, of a people. Then come legends as long as rivers, stories of a fairy maiden entering a piece of kỳ nam agarwood, floating out to sea, traveling all the way to China, and eventually returning. Those stories may be true or they may not. What matters is that people need them. Some things are too precious to be explained by science alone. Without a little mythology, the explanation somehow feels incomplete.

Agarwood itself, if we want to be precise, is divided into grades. “Kỳ nam” is the highest, light and soft, rich in oil, producing blue smoke that rises straight when burned, almost as though it had a soul. Then comes “trầm,” containing less oil, its white smoke drifting lazily through the air. “Tốc” is considered the lowest grade and contains relatively little oil, although varieties such as tốc hương possess distinctive fragrances of their own. In the end,

though, there is still no single official standard for these classifications. Different people see different qualities and assign different values.

My friends took a few pictures, and we moved on toward Hòn Chồng. Even from a distance, the rock formations looked strange. Stone rested upon stone as though someone had deliberately arranged them, yet nature alone had done the work. I stepped down, felt the coolness of the rock rise through my feet, and looked toward the sea. On one large boulder is an indentation shaped like a handprint. People say it belonged to a giant. One story says he was fishing and a powerful pull on the line forced him to brace his hand against the stone. Another says he was watching fairy maidens bathe, slipped, and left the print behind. Either story is fine with me. What matters is that the handprint is still there. Looking at it, I suddenly thought that time does not always carry everything away. Some things remain, like an imprint.

In the distance stood Cô Tiên Mountain, its three peaks resembling a young woman lying down with her hair spread behind her. I pointed it out to my friends but did not dare suggest that we climb it. That mountain is no casual outing. When I was younger, I climbed it with some fishermen friends, men strong as oxen. Back then we could reach the top and still have enough energy to sit around smoking, laughing, and talking. Looking at the city people traveling with me now, soft as anything, I could only smile.

But inside, I remembered.

I remembered starting up the mountain at four or five in the morning while darkness still covered everything and

the wind blew hard. The trail was steep, the rocks rough, the vegetation sparse. Once we climbed high enough, the marina appeared below, and then the whole city began opening before us. The soil on the mountain was fine and white, clinging to our clothes like chalk dust. At the first summit, the wind was cool, and from where we sat all of Nha Trang lay beneath our feet, gentle and graceful. I sat there listening to the wind. And I could also hear the neighborhood loudspeakers drifting upward from the city below. Such an ordinary sound, yet heard from that height it became strangely unfamiliar, as though I were standing between two worlds.

People say the best times to climb Cô Tiên are sunrise, sunset, or at night when the city lights come on. From above, Nha Trang can look like a phoenix made of fire. But climbing that mountain is not something to take lightly. The slopes are steep and slippery. You can fall. There are snakes. Carelessness can start wildfires. Local people advise climbers to carry plenty of water and not go alone. It sounds like simple advice, but perhaps it is really another way of saying, never become careless around something you do not fully understand.

Leaving Hòn Chồng, we stopped at Đó Theater. The building is unusual, shaped like an enormous traditional fishing trap, constructed of steel with a golden sheen and patterns suggesting coral and pearls. It is modern in its beauty, yet it borrows its form from something very old and very rural.

Near the end of the day, we arrived at Marina Beach. It is a small beach with calm water and almost no waves.

The sand is white and clean. Order a drink and you can sit there all day. If you want, you can rent chairs and umbrellas or use the freshwater showers. There are also areas where coral and fish are kept, and the water is clear enough to see everything below.

None of us went swimming. My friends only wanted pictures. Most of the people there looked fairly well-off, nicely dressed, posing for photographs, laughing brightly. I looked around and realized that the sea itself had not changed at all. Only the people were different. Some came to swim, some to look, some to capture a moment and carry it away somewhere.

Afternoon faded and the light grew softer. I sat looking toward the sea. A whole day had passed, apparently nothing more than sightseeing and taking pictures, yet somewhere along the way I felt as though I had passed through the fragrance of agarwood. A fragrance invisible to the eye, quietly clinging to you afterward. Some things only begin to make sense after you have passed through them. And sometimes, once you understand, you no longer feel the need to say anything.

THE SEA WIND OF NHA TRANG AND AN AFTERNOON AT THE OLD CITADEL

This morning I did not wake to the alarm on my phone, but to something vaguer, almost like the sea wind calling from very far away. It slipped through the crack in the door, brushed lightly against my skin, then reached somewhere deeper, and before I had fully opened my eyes

I already wanted to go. I wanted to leave the hotel room with its lingering smell of air-conditioning and step outside into sunlight and wind, into that salty presence of the sea that I had not felt this completely in a long time.

I went down to the harbor with my friends. Every time I arrive at a harbor, I feel as though I am standing on a boundary. On one side lies the mainland with all its familiar order. On the other is the sea, wide open, borderless, promising nothing and refusing no one.

Nha Trang Bay looked gentle that morning. The water was blue without glare, the waves soft without being sleepy, almost as though the bay were saving part of its strength for another hour of the day. They say there are nineteen islands in the bay, each with its own shape, name, and fate. Nineteen sounds like nothing more than a number until you stand here looking at those distant green shapes rising from the sea. Then they begin to resemble a map of stories no one has told yet.

The largest island is Hòn Tre, while the smallest is Hòn Nọc, only four hectares, so tiny that from a distance it probably looks like little more than a smudge on the horizon. Yet I found myself wondering about that little scrap of land. Had anyone ever lived there, loved someone there, waited there, or left and never returned?

I have visited many islands, enough that at times I thought I had grown accustomed to the sea and its untouched beauty, from islands close to shore all the way to distant Côn Sơn, where the waves break against stone like the sound of time shattering into pieces. Yet the more I travel, the more I realize something strange. The place we

remember is not necessarily the most beautiful one. It is the place where we see ourselves most clearly.

That is why grand amusement complexes and places developed to near perfection no longer excite me very much. Not because they are not beautiful. They are simply too complete, too polished, leaving no empty space where my own feelings can enter.

So that morning, I chose somewhere close.

The boat engine came alive and cut through the water, its sound tearing across the surface. Waves opened on either side and closed again behind us as though nothing had happened. I sat quietly watching the city recede, the buildings shrinking and eventually blurring into the distance, while a familiar feeling returned inside me. The feeling of leaving what I belong to and moving toward what I do not yet know.

About twenty minutes later, the boat reached Hòn Miễu. The island lies so close to shore that it almost seems like an extension of the mainland, yet the moment I stepped off the boat I sensed a rhythm of life entirely its own. Everything moved more quietly here, as though time did not run on the same clock as the city.

The name “Miễu” sounds plain and intimate, like the name of a little roadside shrine in the countryside where someone might stop to light incense, not to ask for anything grand, but simply to feel a little more at peace. On the southern side of the island stands the Trí Nguyên communal temple facing the sea, like a marker reminding people that

even in all this immensity there is still somewhere to come home to.

I followed the island's narrow roads and visited the Trí Nguyên fish lake, where seawater is enclosed by walls of coral rock. The water remains level with the sea outside, yet feels calmer and gentler. Fish of every kind moved through it, mackerel, tuna, scad, rays. Until then, many of those names had belonged mainly to meals in my mind. Now the creatures were alive before me, yet somehow partly motionless, as though they inhabited a world half real and half restrained. Lobsters nearly as large as a man's forearm rested in rocky hollows, eyes open, bodies still. Looking at them, I could not decide whether I was seeing something beautiful or something sad. When we admire beauty, are we sometimes admiring something whose freedom has already been taken away?

I climbed up to Trí Nguyên Aquarium, a structure shaped like an old ship along the shore, sixty meters long and thirty meters high, like a fossilized vessel stranded in time. Standing on the deck and looking outward, with the wind stronger and saltier around me, I suddenly felt smaller. Not small in the sense of weakness, but small enough to understand that I do not need to make myself enormous in this world.

Leaving the aquarium, we crossed the island to Bãi Sỏi. There is no sand there, only pebbles, round and smooth, as though each one had been polished by water for hundreds or thousands of years. I went down barefoot, feeling the stones shift beneath my feet, the slight coldness of rock and the warmth of sunlight blending into something

immediate and real. It had been a long time since I had paid attention to sensations that simple.

Ahead of me was the sea, clear enough to see the bottom. Behind me was forest, thick with vines and tangled vegetation, like a green wall protecting the island's last piece of wildness. I stood there for a long time without taking pictures or talking. Some moments disappear the instant we refuse to be quiet enough to receive them.

We left Hòn Miễu after the sun had risen higher, and the boat carried us farther out toward Hòn Mun. From a distance, black cliffs came into view, steep and sharply defined, like a cut between sea and sky. Their blackness did not feel dark or sinister. It felt deep, the color of something that had endured tremendous upheaval and then settled into silence. The island is called Hòn Mun because its rock is black like ebony, unusual and hard to forget. Yet what held me longest was not the cliff face, but the world beneath the water.

They say more than fifteen hundred marine species can be found here, a number approaching the diversity of entire seas elsewhere, something I probably would have heard and forgotten had I not been standing there myself. From the boat I looked down through clear water and saw patches of coral below, schools of tiny fish moving past. Some places need no explanation. Their existence is proof enough. The World Wildlife Fund once recognized this as one of Vietnam's richest areas of marine biodiversity, and standing there, I felt it was more than that. It seemed like one surviving piece of the rare beauty nature has somehow managed to keep.

I did not dive or touch the coral. I only watched. Yet I felt an odd longing to move closer, accompanied by the fear that if I came too close, I might damage what I wanted to admire. Some kinds of beauty are better loved from a distance.

By afternoon, I returned to shore. My friends still had plans. They could visit Hòn Nội and its double beach, luxurious Hòn Tằm, or Điệp Sơn with its pathway through the sea, and farther away there were Bình Ba and Bình Hưng.

I was sure those places were beautiful. But I had had enough for the day. I turned inland toward Diên Khánh. The road from the sea was not long, yet it felt as though I were crossing into another layer of time. Rows of trees, low-roofed houses, people moving without hurry, all of it reminded me of something older than memory itself.

I visited a few old friends. One was stooped with age, another walked slowly, another sat in a wheelchair. We did not say much, yet every sentence carried weight. Certain names came up, people who had died, things that had happened long ago, and nobody needed to finish the story. A little silence was enough for everyone to understand.

Then I went to the old Diên Khánh Citadel. The wall appeared before me, not particularly high or monumental, yet there was something solid and stubborn about it, as though it no longer needed to prove anything after standing there for more than two hundred years. The citadel was built in 1793 under Nguyễn Ánh, during years when the country remained divided and war was everywhere. I walked beside the moat, looking at earth, moss, old bricks, and suddenly

time no longer seemed like something that passes. It seemed like something that accumulates.

Every layer of moss was another layer of years. Every crack held another upheaval. I climbed onto the wall and looked outward, imagining soldiers long ago standing in the same place, staring toward the sea and waiting for something, perhaps an enemy, perhaps simply a peaceful day of the kind they rarely knew. The wind passed through. There were no guns now, no armies, only leaves, wind, and a great emptiness inside me.

That morning before the sea, I had felt small. That afternoon on the citadel wall, I felt late. Late for many things. Late for people who had already passed through my life. Late for words I had not managed to say or write. Late even for the person I myself had once been. But then I understood that late does not mean finished. It only means I have to live differently now, more truthfully.

By the time I left the citadel, afternoon was fading. Golden sunlight spread across the earthen walls, covering everything with a thin layer of memory, indistinct yet difficult to forget. I did not keep turning around. I simply walked away. Some places do not need us to look back. They remain inside us anyway. Suddenly I understood that in the morning I had gone out to sea, toward immensity and the infinite, while in the afternoon I had gone to the old citadel, toward what had passed and what had been lost. Another day was over. One day, two directions. Perhaps a human life is much the same.

I do not know whether this journey was more remarkable than the ones before it. I only know that after

standing amid the sea and then standing within an old fortress, I felt myself somewhere between them. Between what remains and what is gone, between noise and silence. Perhaps living does not require much more than that. To know where you are standing. To stand between layers of waves and layers of time.



Photo: Gành Đá Đĩa, Phú Yên

Essay 10

THE WORDLESS CURRENT, WHEN TUY HÒA HOLDS YOU WITH WIND, STONE, AND WORDS

I thought Tuy Hòa would simply be a place I stopped by so I could say I had seen it. At first, I traveled like anyone else. I went to the beach, climbed mountains, visited towers, looked at rocks, tried a few local dishes, and planned where I would go next. Yet the longer I stayed, the more I sensed something here that refused to fit neatly inside the word “tourism.” It did not clamor for my attention. It simply remained there, like wind passing through the body, like stone lying still beneath waves, like a written character we use every day without remembering when it first became part of us.

By the time I realized what was happening, it was already too late. I was no longer standing outside looking in. I was inside it, inside a river flowing without words, inside a wind that holds on to nothing, inside a memory whose beginning I could not locate, yet which grew thicker with every step.

If this piece of writing can be called a journey, then perhaps that is the kind of journey it is. I made a circle through the land and came away unsure whether I had traveled through it, or whether the land had traveled through me.

WHEN A JOURNEY IS NO LONGER A JOURNEY

I arrived in Tuy Hòa late one afternoon. The Central Vietnamese sun had softened, though the wind was still blowing hard, as if someone had thrown open a great door facing the sea and simply allowed the air to pour through the city, wrapping itself around everything, cool and carrying some faint sense of distance. I figured I would stay a few days, see a handful of places, get a feel for xứ Nẫu, then move on. I was only stopping by, after all. I was not promising the place anything deeper.

I chose a hotel beside Phú Yên's large central square. Someone told me the owner was Singaporean, though I never found out whether that was true. The rooms were tidy and clean, the staff quiet and courteous, enough to give a traveler like me somewhere to stretch out and set his thoughts down for a while after a day on the road. From there I could walk to the beach or turn into the streets of the city without needing much transportation. I could walk slowly, look slowly, live slowly.

The wind was unusually strong my first night in Tuy Hòa. It struck the windows with a rushing, murmuring sound almost like surf. I went outside on foot, but before I had even gotten my bearings I ducked into a roadside restaurant to get out of the wind and find something to eat. I tried bánh canh hẹ, then chicken hotpot with é leaves, two dishes everyone said I absolutely had to have. They were right about the gentle flavor of the herbs and the warmth of the hotpot on a cold, windy night. It settled something inside me. The steaming tuna eye was another matter. I stared at it for a while and finally tried it, but truthfully, it was not for me. A

specialty may be a specialty, but that does not mean everything belongs on your own tongue.

That night, lying in bed listening to the wind, I found myself thinking about this land. Tuy Hòa has changed, administrative lines have been divided and recombined, new jurisdictions and new provincial arrangements have come and gone. But step back a little and look deeper, and the land itself has not changed. The earth is still here. The rivers still flow. The mountains still stand. Human beings rename things and then imagine we have somehow made history new.

The next morning I got up early and walked to the beach. Tuy Hòa's shoreline seems to run forever, with fine golden sand and steady waves, without the frantic crowds of better-known tourist beaches. The wind was still strong, striking sideways across my face, cold enough to wake every part of me. I stood looking toward the horizon and suddenly felt a strange emptiness open inside. It was neither sadness nor happiness. I simply felt smaller. I went back, drank a cup of hot coffee, and decided not to rush off somewhere far away. Some places have to be understood up close before their distance makes any sense.

I walked along the Đà Rằng River. It is really the lower reach of the Ba River, carrying within it a life far longer than anything human beings have recorded. From the highlands of the Central Highlands, from places bearing names such as Ea Pa and Krông Pa, it passes through countless landscapes and countless human lives before finally reaching the sea at the Đà Diễn estuary, like a long story arriving at its ending without ever exhausting what it

has to say. The old name “Đà Rằng” is said to be a Vietnamese rendering of the Cham “Ea Drăng,” meaning “the river of reeds.” Just hearing that softens something in me. A river is not merely water flowing. It is memory flowing.

Standing on a bridge and watching the water drift below, I wondered how many generations had looked at their own reflections there. How many cultures had passed through and left traces beneath the soil? From Lâm Ấp and Champa to the Vietnamese who followed the Southward Expansion, building villages and settlements, then the ancient coins later unearthed and the remnants of old trading ports. They lie like layers of sediment, quietly accumulating through time. I wondered whether I was traveling through a tourist destination or walking through a history book without words.

Near noon, I climbed Nhạn Mountain. It rises only about sixty meters, but because it stands in the middle of the plain, the eye naturally settles upon it. At the summit is Nhạn Tower, a Cham structure dating to the twelfth century, still standing in silence like a witness that refuses to speak. Its deep red bricks fit tightly together without mortar, enduring centuries of rain, sun, warfare, and change. I put my hand against one brick and felt warmth. I could not tell whether it came from the sun or from time.

The wind was stronger on the mountain. Looking down, I could see the Đà Rằng curving broadly through the landscape, the city becoming smaller, and the distant sea gleaming silver-white. For one moment, I stood completely still. I did not reach for my phone. I took no picture. I said nothing. I only listened, to the wind, and to my own heart.

I remembered a few lines of old poetry,

“Over the Đà River, clouds and water carry the days away,
And after parting, only a few spans of bridge remain…”

For some reason, in that place, poetry stopped being words and became feeling.

From Nhạn Mountain, I could see Chóp Chài in the distance. I still had energy that afternoon, so I decided to climb that one too. Nearly four hundred meters high, it rises alone from the plain, square and massive, like a great block of stone forgotten beneath the sky. Only from the climb do you understand the breadth of Tuy Hòa. Fields stretch outward, the sea opens wide, and the city rests neatly between them, like a stopping place between two infinities. At the summit of Chóp Chài, the wind was strong enough that I had to plant my feet firmly to keep from swaying. Looking around, I saw something with perfect clarity. Human beings really are small. Ambition, noise, rivalry, all the things we fight over, bring them up here and suddenly they weigh almost nothing.

That evening I returned to my temporary home, passing through Phú Yên Square. Lights were on and a few people wandered around. It was neither crowded nor noisy. A city with just enough room to live, just enough room to breathe.

Then I went back to the beach. It was still long, still windy, still filled with waves. Yet this time I no longer felt the emptiness I had felt that morning. Something had been added inside me, perhaps a “river of reeds,” a mountain high

enough to fill the eye, a lower hill crowned by a Cham tower, and stories words could never completely tell.

The wind kept blowing. The waves kept breaking. I stood there for a very long time, until I understood something simple, something it had apparently taken me an entire day to reach. Some lands do not hold us through their scenery. They hold us through something deeper, a memory, a current. And once we recognize that, a journey somehow stops being merely a journey.

WHERE THE WIND STOPS AND THE STONES BEGIN TO SPEAK

In Vũng Tàu, I once stood at Mũi Nghinh Phong with wind blowing so hard it nearly knocked me over, strong enough to make coherent thought difficult. So when I heard that Tuy Hòa also had a place called “Nghinh Phong,” the name felt both strange and familiar, as though winds at two ends of the country had arranged something between themselves long ago and each place had kept the same name to remind us that some things remain vividly present even though they cannot be seen.

This morning, before heading north, I stopped at Nghinh Phong Tower. It stands beneath an open sky, not particularly tall, but unmistakable in form. Two masses of stone rise separately and then draw together, almost like a doorway made for wind. Its architecture is said to draw inspiration from the legend of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ, whose hundred eggs became a hundred children. I looked at it for a while, but instead of thinking about the legend

itself, I found myself thinking about separation. Half went to the mountains, half went to the sea. A beginning already carrying a fracture within it.

Wind poured through the opening between the towers, making faint sounds like a flute someone had forgotten. Standing between those stone masses, I felt swallowed by an emptiness just wide enough to hear the wind passing through my body. I wondered whether human beings are sometimes like this tower, standing between two sides, past and present, land and sea, faith and doubt, allowing the wind to pass through and keeping whatever happens to remain.

I did not stay long. Partly because of the wind, partly because something inside me had begun urging me farther away. I got in the car and headed toward Gành Đá Đĩa. It is only about forty kilometers from Tuy Hòa, yet the distance is enough for the landscape to change gradually. The city fell behind, replaced by fields, small villages, broad skies, and fewer people. With every kilometer I felt lighter, as though another layer of noise were being peeled away.

Then Gành Đá Đĩa appeared. The first time I saw it, geology and science never entered my mind. I simply thought it was strange. Black stone columns were stacked tightly and neatly upon one another, as though someone had spent a thousand years arranging them one at a time. Seen from a distance, they really do resemble a gigantic honeycomb, or stacks of plates somebody left behind beside the sea.

I moved closer. Waves struck the rocks, water sprayed upward, sunlight flashed across wet surfaces, and

the color of the stone changed constantly, deep black one moment, brown the next, then silver beneath a thin wash of light. I bent down and touched one slab. It was cold. Yet the coldness felt like more than temperature. It felt like the coldness of time. They say this place formed from volcanic lava flowing out of the Vân Hòa Plateau millions of years ago. The lava cooled and fractured into polygonal columns, while the sea continued wearing them down and separating them into the “plates” we see today.

I understood the explanation. Yet standing there, I still found it difficult to believe. How can nature possess that much patience? How can millions of years be gathered into one scene before my eyes, so that someone like me, who will live only a handful of decades, can stand there looking at it and imagine he understands?

I walked along the edge of the formations. In some places the columns tilted and curved as though they were moving. Elsewhere they stood upright, layered like steps descending into the sea. Every angle offered a different shape, none exactly repeated. Then I stopped and watched the waves striking stone, and old folk tales came back to me. One story says this was once heaven’s treasury of gold and silver, which turned to stone when evil men tried to steal it. Another says immortals descended here for a feast and left their dishes behind until, over time, they became stone. They sound like playful stories at first. Yet thinking about them more carefully, I realized they were never really meant to explain the place. They were meant to preserve the feeling that this place does not belong to us. It belongs to something larger and more distant, something human beings can reach only through imagination.

Before leaving, I turned once more toward Gành Đá Đĩa. By then the sun was higher, the light clearer, and the landscape had lost some of its mystery, yet gained a harder, more solid presence. It reminded me of a person who has told his whole life story and afterward has nothing left but silence. I thought of other columnar basalt formations around the world, in Ireland, Scotland, Jeju. Yet for some reason, standing here did not feel like standing before a "wonder." It felt more like standing before a page of scripture without words, a page nature had written with fire, water, and time. If human beings become quiet enough, perhaps we can read it.

On the way back, the wind kept blowing, but I no longer felt as though it were carrying me away. Something had settled instead, slowly and more deeply. I remembered Nghinh Phong Tower early that morning. One place to hear the wind. Another to look at stone. Another to see the sea. They seemed unrelated, yet a nearly invisible thread connected all three, the human being standing in the middle, listening and wondering where he belongs.

And in that rare silence, I realized something small enough to keep close. Some places do not teach us anything new. They simply remind us of something we have forgotten, that we are small, and still have the right to listen.

MẮNG LĂNG, WHERE WORDS CALL ME BACK

When I first came to Tuy Hòa, truthfully, I planned only to pass through. Stop by, see enough to say I had been here, then leave. My plan was to make a loop north to Gành

Đá Đĩa, then head south toward Mũi Điện and Bãi Môn, stand at the place said to greet the first sunlight on mainland Vietnam, and call it a trip. I did not have much time, so I would go no farther. That was the plan.

Like everyone else, I went out to Tuy Hòa Beach and passed Nghinh Phong Tower, that new structure people say was built to capture the wind, the waves, perhaps even the soul of the sea inside its stacked masses of stone. The day before, I had also visited Nhạn Mountain and looked down upon the Đà Rằng River drifting slowly along, its water blue with that faint sadness peculiar to Central Vietnam. Not loud, not melodramatic. Just quietly sad, like someone carrying a private story they do not feel comfortable telling.

Then something strange happened. After Gành Đá Đĩa, instead of returning or continuing south, I turned off the planned route. An unplanned turn. I headed west, toward Mằng Lăng.

Something unfinished had been tugging at me. When I wrote about Qui Nhơn and touched upon the history of quốc ngữ, the Romanized Vietnamese writing system, I had not gone far enough. It had not satisfied me. I had not reached the deepest part of the story. So this time, almost as though someone had gently taken me by the hand, I turned toward one of the places where the written language began, toward a place where Vietnamese letters once took their first uncertain steps.

I reached Mằng Lăng beneath a perfectly clear sky, blue and bright enough to hurt the eyes. Clouds floated weightlessly like smoke from a country kitchen. Along the road, wild grass swayed and bobbed like children standing

shyly at the roadside, whispering to one another about the stranger passing by. Something in that landscape slowed me down. I no longer wanted to hurry or keep to a schedule. I walked as though I were entering an old story.

The church appeared before me, not especially large, but quiet, solemn, ancient. Like an old person who speaks very little and somehow causes everyone who approaches to lower their voice. “Mằng Lăng,” the name sounded unusual yet intimate. I learned that it was a local variation of “bằng lăng,” the tree I had seen throughout southeastern Vietnam, with its sturdy trunk, grayish bark, and forests of purple blossoms in season. People here say the area was once covered in bằng lăng forest. The old residents cut those trees to build a chapel and eventually gave the place the same name. Standing there, I thought about how some things begin with extraordinary simplicity and then travel very far. Like this name. Like quốc ngữ.

Mằng Lăng is more than a church. It is a marker in history. Beginning in the seventeenth century, Jesuit missionaries traveled here from Nước Mặn. They learned Vietnamese, spoke Vietnamese, wrote Vietnamese. And through those first sermons and unfamiliar written forms, a new system of writing gradually began taking shape.

About a kilometer northeast of Mằng Lăng Church once stood an old citadel established in 1626 by Lord Nguyễn Phúc Nguyên. This was not empty country even then. It was a meeting place, between Vietnamese and Westerners, between faith and writing. Princess Ngọc Liên, daughter of Lord Nguyễn Phúc Nguyên, also established a chapel here in 1636, making this riverside region an early

center of religious life. A small act, perhaps, but one that opened into a much longer current.

The present church was begun in 1892 and took fifteen years to complete. The roads were difficult, materials scarce, workers few. It must have been grueling. Yet when finished, the church carried the form of European Gothic architecture, curved vaults, long corridors, lines reaching upward as though trying to touch the sky. What makes it especially beautiful, however, is the way distinctly Vietnamese details enter that Western architecture. Wooden doors are carved with lotus flowers, betel and areca, phoenixes. Nothing feels out of place. Instead, it feels as though two cultures have sat down together, talked, and come to understand one another. Time passed, storms and rain took their toll. In 1924, a major typhoon collapsed the wooden ceiling. It was repaired and lowered afterward. The building is no longer exactly what it was at the beginning. Yet the façade remains, blue-gray, mottled, weathered by moss, standing there like a witness with no need to tell its story aloud.

Inside, I saw the grave of Father Lacassagne, who began construction of the church. One human life resting here, bound forever to one building. It made me think that some people do not need to travel far. They need only remain in the right place and make that place part of history. Within the church grounds is also a statue of Blessed Andrew of Phú Yên. He was young, only nineteen, when he was martyred in 1644. Standing before his image, I did not feel tragedy so much as something upright and bright. A way of living in which you know what you believe and are willing to follow it all the way.

To the left of the church is a small shrine built into an artificial hill, designed like a grotto. Inside is the story of Andrew, brief but deep. I stood there quietly for a long while, not asking for anything, but asking myself whether I could ever hold onto a belief with that kind of strength. Then I entered what may be the true heart of Mằng Lăng, the place preserving Phép giảng tám ngày, The Catechism in Eight Days. The book was printed in Rome in 1651, in Latin and Romanized Vietnamese, compiled by Alexandre de Rhodes, known in Vietnamese as Father Đắc Lộ.

I stood before the glass case looking at those slanting lines of print. Back then, the letters must have seemed awkward and unfamiliar. Yet from such beginnings, quốc ngữ gradually acquired shape and form. I put my hand against the glass. I could not touch the book itself. Yet somehow I felt as though I were touching something deeper.

A voice, from far away, very far away.

“Write.”

Write so your voice can remain. Write so those who come later can still understand those who came before. Write so thought does not remain locked inside the heart, but takes form in words, as a literary soul writes through expressive prose and poetry finds its own cadence.

I stood there much longer than I had expected. By the time I stepped outside, the sun was high. The two bell towers remained silent. A light wind moved through the trees. Nothing seemed to have changed.

But I had.

I turned back one last time, not to memorize the shape of the church, but to remember the feeling of having passed through a place where faith and ordinary life met almost imperceptibly. Nothing loud. Nothing showy. Mằng Lăng, an earthy, ordinary name, a quiet place, and yet words took root here. I left without thinking about what other attraction I might squeeze into the rest of the day. Only one small thought stayed with me. Some places we visit are not places we choose. They are places that call us back, because something unfinished inside us still needs to be understood.

SOWING LETTERS IN XỨ NẪU, WHEN LANGUAGE BECOMES FAITH

I once wrote a short piece titled “Alexandre de Rhodes, People Still Remember.” When I finished it, I did not think much more about it. Yet the more I traveled, the more I looked, the more I lived among the written words I use every day, from signs outside roadside restaurants in Tuy Hòa and school notebooks smeared with purple ink to dry official documents that nevertheless bind entire human lives, the more I understood that the phrase “people still remember” was not really a declaration. It was a quiet fact. We remember not through monuments, but by living inside the very writing system he helped shape.

One afternoon in Tuy Hòa, a small city where the sea wind seems forever to be blowing, I sat beside the Đà Rằng River watching the water move sluggishly past, and my thoughts returned to language. I could not understand why a land that seems, at first glance, to be all sun, wind, fish,

and shrimp should also preserve such a deep story about writing and about misunderstandings that have persisted for so long.

I wanted to tell that story again. Not to argue, but to understand it all the way through. In the past, I admit, I was irritated by historical writing that began with a conclusion already decided. People often placed Alexandre de Rhodes inside a predetermined frame and then made everything fit it. Some quoted Divers voyages et missions en Chine et autres royaumes de l'Orient and concluded that he had helped pave the way for colonial invasion.

They cited this sentence,

"This is a position that must be seized, and once it is taken, European merchants will discover there a rich source of profit and resources."

Read that way, who would not be startled?

But when I went back and examined the original text carefully, that sentence was not there. I remember discovering this and feeling not anger, but sadness. The kind of sadness that comes when you realize people are talking about someone they have never been willing to sit down with long enough to read completely or understand fairly.

Then another passage is brought forward,

"I believed France to be the most devout country in the world, and that France might provide me with many soldiers to conquer the whole East and bring it into submission to Christ…"

The word “soldiers” is emphasized as though it were irrefutable proof.

But I see it differently.

I have lived with words long enough to understand that words never remain motionless inside dictionaries. They live. They change meaning. They breathe according to context.

Years ago, a friend of mine might say in Vietnamese, “Tui đang cưa con nhỏ đó,” literally, “I’m sawing that girl.” Look it up according to the literal dictionary meaning and you might think you were dealing with a criminal case. Yet everybody understands that he means he is trying to win her over romantically. Nothing sinister about it. The same goes for the word “storm.” An “internet storm” or a “storm on the soccer field” does not mean hurricane-force winds.

So it is with “soldats” in a religious context. Yes, they are “soldiers,” but soldiers of faith, people who preach, apostles. They are not soldiers carrying guns. If every use of “conquest” must mean military invasion, then Jesus himself becomes an invader whenever he speaks of the “Kingdom of Heaven.” Yet that kingdom possesses no territory. It exists in the human heart. Misunderstand one word and sometimes you distort an entire human being. And when the distortion goes that far, it becomes deeply unfair.

Sitting in Tuy Hòa, I thought again about the beginnings of quốc ngữ. Francisco de Pina arrived in Đàng Trong in 1617 and began transcribing Vietnamese sounds. Alexandre de Rhodes came later, in 1624. They learned Vietnamese, spoke Vietnamese, lived among Vietnamese

people. I imagine the scene, a Western priest sitting in a riverside settlement, listening to people speak and trying to capture every sound in writing. Surely he made mistake after mistake. Surely people laughed at him. But they kept at it.

It would be more than two hundred years before France opened fire at Đà Nẵng in 1858.

More than two hundred years.

That is longer than two human lifetimes. Yet some people still tie those two moments together as though everything had been planned from the beginning. I do not believe in that kind of connection. I believe in things more concrete. Alexandre de Rhodes spent twenty years in Vietnam, was expelled five times, and still returned. He kept learning. Kept writing. Kept recording.

In one of his books, he wrote of arriving at the capital of Đàng Ngoài and of people coming in such numbers to hear him preach that he had to preach four or six times a day. Reading that, I imagine a crowded, restless, curious scene. People came to listen not because they had been forced, but because they wanted to understand. And within that desire to understand, quốc ngữ began finding a place for itself.

The Dictionarium Annamiticum Lusitanum et Latinum of 1651 did not appear out of nowhere. It was the work of many people over many years. But Alexandre de Rhodes gathered that work, organized it, and brought it into the light. He drew on accent marks and conventions from European languages, along with letter combinations used in

Greek, Italian, Portuguese, and other traditions, adapting them to represent Vietnamese sounds and tones, the complex tonal structure of a largely monosyllabic language unlike anything those Latin letters had previously been asked to carry.

To me, the achievement of giving Vietnamese a workable Romanized written form is enormous enough by itself to deserve a place in national memory. No street sign bearing his name is necessary. No statue is required. No noisy argument is needed. We need only look at the writing we ourselves use every day.

From Mằng Lăng and other small communities, quốc ngữ began to spread. At first it lived mainly in prayer books and sermons. People learned to read by reciting the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary beneath flickering oil lamps during periods when Christianity was prohibited.

Writing traveled with faith. And faith does not always make noise. It can smolder quietly. I imagine nights in old Phú Yên, the sea wind rattling outside, while inside a thatched house a handful of people sat together reading letter by letter, sounding out sentence after sentence. Fear waited outside. Inside was a small light. Quốc ngữ grew up in places like that.

Then, toward the end of the nineteenth century, the French brought the script into colonial administration. They intended it as a tool. What they could not have anticipated was how Vietnamese people would make it into something else. They used it to write newspapers, literature, ideas. Beginning with Gia Định Báo in 1865 and continuing through later publications, quốc ngữ went to work. It was no longer

merely a script for prayer. It wrote about life. It wrote laughter. It wrote pain. It even wrote resistance.

I think of quốc ngữ as underground water. At first it moved silently beneath the earth. Then one day it surfaced and became a great river. Without it, perhaps Vietnamese people would have remained dependent far longer on a writing system distant from the sounds of their own spoken language, one requiring years of study before literacy could be attained and making widespread education far more difficult. But when a child can write his own name, he begins to know who he is.

Sitting in Tuy Hòa and looking toward the evening sea, I suddenly saw everything connecting in a strange way. A church. An old book. The words we write today. Faith itself. Catholicism in this region is more than churches and ritual. It traveled along a road made of language. Through it, people learned to read, learned to write, then learned to think. And from there, they learned another way of becoming human.

I remembered something I had once written about Alexandre de Rhodes, “Whether a street is named after him does not matter… because the quốc ngữ associated with his work is here, being used every day…” Thinking about it now, I still believe that sentence. But it was incomplete. Because this is about more than letters. It is also about how those letters brought human beings closer together, helped them understand one another, and gave them a way to name themselves in the sounds of their own language.

I sat there for a very long time. I did nothing and took no pictures. I simply thought about how strange this

business of writing really is. At first we imagine writing as something outside ourselves, something we learn and then use. But sitting long enough in Tuy Hòa, watching the Đà Rằng move slowly and the little waves breaking offshore, I suddenly understood that perhaps writing is what "holds" us, rather than the other way around. It keeps our spoken language from dissolving. It gives memory somewhere to cling. It gives a Vietnamese person, wherever he may wander, a road home through every sentence he writes and every word he speaks.

And its roots began in something that was not originally ours. There is something almost moving about admitting that. Yet Vietnamese people have never been afraid to accept what is useful and good, as long as once it reaches our hands it can live, grow, and become ours. Quốc ngữ was the same. From prayers read in darkness, from people learning letters under threat and fear, it grew until one day it no longer belonged to one religion or any particular group. It became a common voice. It became breath.

And perhaps the deepest truth is not about the achievement of one person or one era. It is that from a borrowed alphabet, Vietnamese people created a place in which to preserve their own soul. So whether one particular name is remembered may no longer matter as much as we think. Some things travel beyond the need to be mentioned. They live in our mouths when we speak, in our hands when we write, and in our hearts whenever we try to give words to something.

And as long as we can still speak Vietnamese and write Vietnamese, we are never entirely lost to one another.

THE EAST WIND AND A MORNING I COULD NOT HOLD ONTO

This morning I went to Mũi Điện. I was heading toward an outer edge of the land, a place where the mainland can no longer hold our footsteps and finally has to release them to the wind and sea.

Mũi Điện, also called Mũi Đại Lãnh, is a headland reaching into the sea from a branch of the Trường Sơn range, facing directly toward Bãi Môn. I already knew those facts. I had read them somewhere. Yet standing there, all those words fell away, leaving only a feeling. The land seemed to stop here. The wind did not.

People say this is one of the earliest places on mainland Vietnam to receive the sunrise. I was not there when the sun actually came up, yet standing beneath that enormous blue sky with the sea opening endlessly before me, I could still feel the idea of being “first.” The first light. The first moment of a day. The first of something difficult to name, perhaps a beginning, perhaps only the continuation of countless mornings that have already passed beyond our ability to remember them.

In the distance stood the lighthouse, straight and solemn. The French built it in 1890. It has passed through upheaval, war, damage, and restoration, yet it still faces the sea like a tireless watchman. There is a lighthouse like that on Núi Nhỏ in Vũng Tàu, one I used to climb to when I was

young. I do not know why, but lighthouses have never struck me as romantic in the way people often describe them. To me, they seem lonely. It is a durable kind of loneliness. They do not stand there to be admired, but to do a job, guiding ships out in the darkness, in fog, in those hours when people are most likely to lose their way.

Getting to the top here means climbing more than a hundred steps. Standing below and looking at the winding path while wind struck sideways across my face and grains of sand rattled around me, I suddenly felt genuinely old. When I was young, mountains did not require trails. You simply aimed yourself upward and went. When you got tired, you rested, then climbed again. Now sometimes looking at the climb is enough to make me tired.

Still, I climbed. Not quickly and not in a hurry. One deliberate step after another, listening to the wind the whole way. The wind here is not some gentle breeze meant to caress you. It hits. It pushes. It seems to test how firmly you can stand. The higher I climbed, the more exposed everything became. At times I had to stop and hold the railing, not because I was tired but because the wind was too strong. At the top, I took out my phone for a picture and my hands trembled, not from emotion but from the effort of keeping the phone from flying away. After only a little while up there, I understood why people do not stay long. Not because it is not beautiful. The beauty is simply too forceful. It does not allow you to remain still. It pushes you back down.

I descended to Bãi Môn. The beach sits tucked between two mountain ridges and, seen from above,

resembles a half-closed bow embracing a patch of clear blue water. It is not long, perhaps four hundred meters, with fine golden sand sloping gently toward the water. The sea is mild there, completely different from the wind above. The wind still reaches the beach, but it has softened, as though it has just come through a fit of anger and is now breathing quietly.

I sat down on the sand and listened to the waves. They were neither loud nor violent. They had their own rhythm, steady as someone telling a story without requiring the listener to understand every word. I watched the little whirlpools form where the water reached shore, watched the curves of water dissolve into the sand, and everything inside me grew lighter.

I stood there doing absolutely nothing, yet somehow felt as though I had just passed through something very deep.

Then I thought about Vũng Rô, not far away. I did not go. Not because I was lazy, but because some places should not be approached in a hurry. When I was a child in Saigon, I once saw things people said “the government had just recovered from Vũng Rô,” bundles of rifles, wooden crates, ropes that still smelled of the sea, displayed either at Tao Đàn or perhaps the zoo. I no longer remember exactly. At the time, I did not understand much of what I was seeing, but the name “Vũng Rô” remained in my mind like an indentation that never quite disappeared. Only when I grew older did I understand that every land contains more than scenery. It contains memory.

So I left it for another time.

Toward evening, I walked across the square again and returned to Tuy Hòa Beach. I did very little. I simply sat and looked at the sea. Evening wind is different from morning wind. It is softer, almost as though it has begun letting go. A few people passed by here and there. The city was neither noisy nor sad. It simply moved to its own rhythm.

I had written about the river, the mountains, and the sea of this city. I had written about an old Catholic church and the story of quốc ngữ. But sitting there, I wondered whether I had written enough.

Probably not.

And perhaps I did not need to.

Some places cannot be completely written. Not because they are too large, but because parts of them do not live inside words. Like the wind that morning at Mũi Điện, passing through my body, through my hair, through memory, then disappearing without leaving anything tangible behind, while somehow making the feeling of it all the stronger.

I looked toward the sea. Tuy Hòa Beach stretched on, very long. The wind kept rushing through. The waves kept moving.

Who knows how many generations have passed this way, how many stories have sunk beneath the surface, how many things have begun and ended, then begun again.

I sat there for a little while.

And then, that was enough.

Tomorrow, I leave.



Photo: Thi Nai Lagoon, Qui Nhon

ESSAY 11

IN QUI NHON, HEARING HISTORY BREATHE BENEATH THE SEA WIND

This afternoon I set foot in Qui Nhon. The Central Coast sun still lingered over the sea, golden and a little harsh, yet strangely enough, it seemed to quiet something inside me. I plan to stay exactly three days, such a short

stretch of time that I may have to leave before I have even learned the feel of a street or committed the smell of the sea wind to memory. Three days, at best, might give me one morning to walk the length of Qui Nhon Beach, one afternoon to stop by Eo Gio and Ky Co, then stand on the bridge looking down over Thi Nai Lagoon with the wind blowing wide and hard around me. The sea, heavy surf, an enormous sky, water running away toward the horizon, I have seen such things in many places and written about them many times. Standing before that immense sweep of sky and water, I found myself wondering whether, with so little time, I could still discover some new feeling worth putting into words about this land.

I have written about Qui Nhon before. Back then my thoughts leaned toward poetry, at other times toward religion, and on another occasion toward the Cham, toward that peculiar feeling that comes over you when you stand in the shadow of weathered, moss-covered towers and look up into an impossibly blue sky. I have also written about Do Ban, the old capital of Champa, where every ancient brick seems somehow to retain the warmth of people who lived there centuries ago. But what about this time? I stood before the sea, and one old folk verse kept circling through my mind:

“Whoever goes to Binh Dinh, come and see,
Even the women know the staff and martial arts.”

The more I thought about it, the more that little folk verse seemed like a shard of mirror, reflecting something of the character of an entire region. Binh Dinh is not merely a coastal province of sun and wind, fish and shrimp. Beneath

those layers of sand lie layers upon layers of history, packed as densely as geological sediment. Perhaps that is why the verse kept worrying at my mind, because Binh Dinh is not only a land of the sea, it is also a land of martial arts. And once martial arts enter the conversation, it is almost impossible not to think of Tay Son, still known as the martial heartland of Central Vietnam, the birthplace of the commoner hero Nguyen Hue, who would later become Emperor Quang Trung. I had barely gone anywhere, yet already history seemed to be flickering behind every road and moving through every gust of wind.

Binh Dinh, in truth, has a past far older than the quiet face it wears today. If northern Vietnam had the Dong Son culture and the South had Oc Eo, Central Vietnam was once home to another great cultural center, the Sa Huynh culture. Some three or four thousand years ago, beginning in the Metal Age, Sa Huynh communities were already scattered across the coastal dunes from Quang Binh all the way down to Dong Nai. Across that broad region, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Binh Dinh contain an especially dense concentration of archaeological sites.

Names such as Hoi Loc, Nui Ngang, Doi Diep, Truong Xe, Go Loi, and Dong Cuom may sound like ordinary country place-names, yet beneath the earth they preserve a vast storehouse of ancient memory. In 1978, while surveying Hoi Loc, a sand dune lying between the sea and Thi Nai Lagoon, archaeologists uncovered hundreds of fragments of old pottery, broken pebbles, ash, and charcoal. Those small traces were enough to show that a community had already been living here roughly 2,500 years ago. Suddenly I imagined some unimaginably distant afternoon

when another person might have stood before this same sea as I was standing now, watching the waves break and thinking about his own life. Seen that way, history is sometimes nowhere near as remote as we imagine.

After Sa Huynh came Champa. For centuries, Binh Dinh was one of that kingdom's most important centers. Do Ban, its capital, was here, and so was the port of Thi Nai, once a bustling trading harbor filled with merchant ships from India, China, and the countries of Southeast Asia. Even today, traveling through Binh Dinh, one still encounters Cham towers standing high and solitary against the sky, Banh It, the Twin Towers, Canh Tien, and the soaring cluster of Duong Long, rising like spearheads made of red brick.

Researchers consider the Cham towers of Binh Dinh to belong to the mature period of Champa architecture, when Cham aesthetics blended with Khmer influences and developed a beauty all their own. I once stood before one of those towers late in the afternoon. The slanting sunlight turned the ancient bricks red as glowing coals. Looking at them, I suddenly wondered whether the craftsmen who built those towers centuries ago ever imagined that their work would remain standing for hundreds of years, silently watching history pass before it.

In 1471, following Le Thanh Tong's southern campaign, this region formally became part of Dai Viet. From that point forward, Binh Dinh entered another chapter of its history. Early in the seventeenth century, Lord Nguyen Hoang established Quy Nhon Prefecture, and the name Quy Nhon began appearing in the historical record. After numerous administrative changes, Emperor Thanh Thai

officially established the township of Quy Nhon near the end of the nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century, it had quickly developed into one of Central Vietnam's busy urban centers, complete with a railroad station, hospital, hotels, theater, harbor, and more. Time kept moving, while history laid one layer over another like waves upon the sea.

Near midnight, I stood on the Thi Nai Bridge. The wind was strong, and the lagoon below was black, immense, almost without boundary. Perhaps because this place once lay at the meeting point of so many historical currents, Sa Huynh, Champa, Dai Viet, Tay Son, every return leaves something inside me a little unsettled, as though I were standing at a crossroads of history. Wars came and went, governments changed, provinces were merged and separated, and it was not until 1989 that Binh Dinh returned to the administrative form we know today.

Yet among all those layers of history, one legacy remains a source of particular pride to the people of Binh Dinh, the Tay Son movement. Here, people speak of the three brothers Nguyen Nhac, Nguyen Hue, and Nguyen Lu almost as naturally and intimately as they might speak of members of their own family. The Dong Da Festival, held every year on the fifth day of Tet, is almost a collective memorial day for the entire region. The rapid pounding of Tay Son battle drums rises through the air as though the horses of another age were still galloping over mountain passes and across rivers. The forceful, decisive movements of Tay Son martial arts also reveal that martial tradition here is more than a set of fighting techniques, it has become part of the character of the people themselves. Hence the old verse:

“Whoever goes to Binh Dinh, come and see,
Even the women know the staff and martial arts.”

It sounds playful, but beneath the humor lies unmistakable pride. The traditional martial-arts schools of this region all observe ceremonies honoring their founders, though different schools revere different masters. Some honor Bodhidharma, some Guan Yu, while others pay homage to the three great Tay Son heroes. On the founder’s memorial day, former and current students gather, light incense, make offerings, then perform martial arts before the altar. Even hearing the custom described, I could feel how deeply the old principle of remembering the source of the water one drinks has entered the lives of martial artists here. Martial arts, it turns out, have their own moral way as well.

Evening falls quickly in Qui Nhon. The sun disappeared behind low mountain ridges, leaving behind a pale orange sky while the sea wind continued to blow free and strong. Sitting by the shore, I thought about all the layers of history that had just passed through my mind, from Sa Huynh to Champa, from Do Ban to Tay Son, from the ancient harbor of Thi Nai to the city of Qui Nhon today. Thousands of years of history seemed, in the end, to have gathered themselves into the sound of the waves before me.

Perhaps that is why, from the moment I arrived, I could not stop thinking about Nguyen Hue. I was not deliberately trying to remember him. It was simply that the wind, the sand, and the martial drums of this country seemed somehow still to carry something of his fierce spirit. Sometimes all a person needs to do is stand before the sea

long enough, and history can be heard breathing very softly beneath the wind.

People usually remember Qui Nhon for its beautiful sea, for Eo Gio, Ky Co, Cu Lao Xanh. Three days here really is far too little. Yet in a place as thick with history as Binh Dinh, perhaps one afternoon before the sea is enough, listening to the wind sweep across Thi Nai Lagoon and the waves break below the Phuong Mai Peninsula, to understand that there are places people visit for more than scenery. Sometimes they come to listen to time.

THE WINDS OF QUY NHON AND THE UNANSWERED QUESTIONS ABOUT QUANG TRUNG

I spent the whole day wandering by the sea, wandering in the literal sense, with nowhere in particular to go, simply letting the wind pull me wherever it wanted. Early in the morning I went out to Eo Gio, then crossed over to Ky Co, and by afternoon I was back in the city. When the sky began turning the color of honey, I walked out again to Quy Nhon Beach. In this seaside country, there seems to be more wind than conversation. It brushes across people's faces, lashes the rocky slopes and the parched cactus bushes clinging to the mountainsides, then somehow blows strange questions straight into my mind.

Eo Gio lies on the Phuong Mai Peninsula, about twenty kilometers from the city. It takes its name from the shape of the place, something like the hollow of a saddle, with tall cliffs on either side embracing the sea. It was only when I first stood before that narrow inlet that I understood

why people so often describe the sea of Central Vietnam as both fierce and beautiful.

The cliffs rise almost vertically, dark and riddled with cavities like secret doors opening into the earth. Small flocks of swallows skim low, then wheel through the wind. The waves do not roar so much as murmur and mutter, as though carrying on a private conversation with the foot of the mountain. Down inside the cove lies a strip of yellow sand, resting gently like an open palm, while the water is so clear that patches of green and red coral can be seen shimmering beneath the surface. Far offshore, several little islands rise out of the water like sea creatures that have fallen asleep. Along the cliffs are caves with wonderfully plainspoken local names, Ky Co Cave, Ba Nghe Cave, Bat Cave. Just hearing those names, you can almost smell the wind and salt and feel the breath of life in a fishing community. Local people say Eo Gio has nearly twenty swiftlet caves. Early in the morning or toward dusk, looking down from above, you can see little flocks crossing the blue sky like quick strokes of ink flicked across a sheet of paper.

I climbed to the top of the mountain. The rocky path was rough, the wind tremendous, and every step had to be tested before I trusted my weight to it. But once I reached the top and looked down, Eo Gio suddenly resembled a great ship poised to put out to sea, with blue stretching ahead of it all the way to the horizon. I stood still and listened to the wind. The wind here is powerful, hard-driving and relentless, much rougher than the wind along the coast where I live. Back home at Nghinh Phong Cape, it usually takes a storm to bring wind like this. And suddenly I

wondered whether lands of violent winds are somehow more likely to produce extraordinary men.

From Eo Gio I went on to Ky Co. The beach has an unusual geography, mountains shelter it on three sides while the fourth opens directly onto the great sea. The water is jewel-green, the sand fine and white, and boulders lie scattered about as though someone had absentmindedly left them behind. At low tide, people can edge along the cliffs and make their way into small caves. Some visitors pitch tents and spend the night, some dive to see the coral, while others simply stretch out on the sand and let the sea wind dry the weariness out of them. That afternoon I sat on a large rock facing the water. The waves were heavy, the wind stronger still. And right then, for reasons I could not explain, one name surfaced in my mind, Nguyen Hue.

I saw in imagination that commoner warrior of long ago, riding out from Tay Son into battle, his sword flashing like lightning. Standing amid such powerful winds and rough seas, it suddenly seemed not altogether accidental that I should think of him.

Binh Dinh, a land of wind and stone, has produced more than its share of remarkable figures, but the first name that still comes to mind is Nguyen Hue, who later took the throne under the imperial name Quang Trung. I remember reading Nguyen Huy Thiep's short story "Phẩm tiết" ("Virtue"). There, Nguyen Hue does not appear as some hero wrapped from head to toe in glory. He is intensely human, defiant, violent, politically calculating, even somewhat cruel. He is a man of flesh and blood rather than

a bronze statue. When I finished the story, I was both fascinated and troubled.

The truth is, I have long carried certain reservations about him. Part of that comes from my Southern memories, in which the Tay Son were not always regarded kindly, particularly because of the story of Tay Son troops entering Gia Dinh and burning and destroying Cu Lao Pho in Bien Hoa, once a flourishing Chinese trading port in Dong Nai. Yet history also shows that whenever Tay Son forces drove south, Nguyen Anh repeatedly found himself fleeing before them. Nguyen Hue's decisiveness and the extraordinary speed of his campaigns alone make it impossible to dismiss him lightly. The more I read, the more I realize that history is rarely as simple as later generations would like to tell it.

Books sometimes contain things labeled "history" that, on closer examination, contain a good deal that is anything but historical. Excessive glorification of the Tay Son can itself become a way of pushing them farther away from the human beings they actually were. For decades, people became accustomed to seeing the past through a fairly simple lens, anything associated with Nguyen Anh could easily be branded treacherous or brutal, while almost anything associated with Quang Trung was elevated toward heroism, even sainthood. But history has never come in only one color.

Once we leave historiography and enter literature, the distance becomes greater still. Historians, at least to some degree, must proceed cautiously before their evidence. A novelist, once armed with the words "creation" and "fiction," can travel much farther. In Tran Vu's novel Mùa

mưa gai sắc, Nguyen Hue is rendered in an entirely different fashion, including a scene in which Princess Ngoc Han is drawn into a violently sexual encounter:

“Hue took up a whip… the thorned whip elephant handlers used to lash their elephants in battle... tiny purple bruises of blood rose across Ngoc Han’s back…”

Nam Dao, in Gió Lửa, likewise writes:

“That night, she let Hue torment her… in a frenzy of pleasure before he left for war…”

Reading passages like these, I cannot help asking myself whether this is history or simply a novelist’s imagination. Could a princess of the northern Le court, having just watched her dynasty collapse, really have so readily “given” her affection to the very man who helped bring it down? There is no easy answer.

Some critics once accused Nguyen Huy Thiep of “distorting history.” His reply was chillingly matter-of-fact:

“No one goes to war against a corpse. People merely exploit corpses in whatever way benefits them.”

That sentence sent a chill through me. Could the “corpse” also mean historical truth itself, something each age digs up, trims and reshapes, then puts to use for its own purposes?

Even Hoàng Lê nhất thống chí, a work frequently cited in discussions of this period, is ultimately a kind of unofficial history. Its historical characters possess inner lives and individual destinies, but the work itself remains a

chapter-based historical novel written in classical Chinese. The more I read, therefore, the more cautious I feel one must be when standing along that uncertain boundary between history and literature.

Then there are other sources. Father Thomas Thien, in a report concerning the Tay Son campaign to the North, once wrote:

"One of Nguyen Hue's generals… routinely cut off ears and flayed the faces… of village chiefs who refused orders… If they had no money for ransom, they would be executed…"

Other documents claim that the Tay Son employed Chinese pirates in their northern campaigns. Details of this sort rarely find their way into standard school histories. History, I have come to feel, always contains dark spaces beyond the reach of myth's bright light. Yet if we stare only into those dark spaces, we can just as easily fall into the opposite extreme.

Across many historical studies, Quang Trung, Nguyen Hue emerges as an exceptionally gifted military commander. He led armies from a very young age and fought dozens of major engagements over roughly twenty years, crushing Siamese forces at Rach Gam and Xoai Mut, then defeating the Qing army at Ngoc Hoi and Dong Da in 1789. Historian Phan Huy Le once observed, "Quang Trung was not only an outstanding military leader, but also a politician of exceptional talent." His reign was far too short, yet it still left traces of economic, military, and educational policies, his encouragement of the Nom script, his

expansion of foreign trade, and his willingness to employ gifted men such as Ngo Thi Nham and Phan Huy Ich.

Can a man like that really be contained within the two words “brutal tyrant”? Yet placing him on a saint’s pedestal may bring us no closer to the truth. Perhaps he possessed qualities that later generations rightly admire while also carrying the limitations and shadows of a man living in an age of chaos. Our need to choose a clear, uncomplicated image may be precisely what makes posterity simplify history into something much simpler than it ever was.

Late in the afternoon, I returned to Quy Nhon Beach. The surf had grown stronger, and the wind came rushing in. I thought about the Tay Son traces still scattered across Binh Dinh. In Phu Phong stands the Tay Son shrine, on what is believed to have been the old family homestead of the three brothers Nguyen Nhac, Nguyen Hue, and Nguyen Lu. In its garden still grows a tamarind tree more than two hundred years old, beside a laterite well from which, tradition says, the brothers drank as children. People also say the water possesses a sacred vitality, and visitors often draw some up to wash their faces. I tried it once myself. The water was wonderfully cold. Whether there was anything sacred in it, I cannot say, but when I raised my head and looked into the canopy of that ancient tamarind, I suddenly imagined a child named Nguyen Hue running beneath these branches centuries ago, at a time when no one could possibly have known that one day he would shake the entire country. History sometimes begins in places that ordinary.

At Kien My stands the Quang Trung Museum, preserving tens of thousands of objects associated with the Tay Son movement. In An Nhon there is also the Imperial Citadel, built over the remains of Do Ban, the old Cham capital. It served for a time as the Tay Son headquarters, and after the dynasty fell, Gia Long destroyed the fortress and built tombs for Nguyen generals over the old site. One small patch of ground, dynasty after dynasty passing across it, later generations building upon the remains of those who came before. That alone is enough to remind us how merciless history can be.

Toward evening I returned once more to the Quy Nhon shore. The sky darkened, the surf remained heavy, the wind still strong. I stood looking at the sea for a long time and asked myself a question that may never have an easy answer. Who, in the end, was Quang Trung, Nguyen Hue? A commoner hero, a gifted reformer, or simply a man swept by his age into a hurricane of power? Perhaps all of those things lived within him, and perhaps no single name can ever contain an entire human being. I came to understand that history is not a bronze statue standing motionless in a public square. It is more like the wind at Eo Gio, passing through one age after another, changing direction, changing voice. No matter how great a person may be, once placed within that current, he becomes in the end a figure leaning into the storm of his own time.

I turned my back on the sea, but inside my head I could still hear the winds of Binh Dinh blowing across more than two centuries. Vietnamese history can sometimes feel like a whirlpool, one generation builds something up, the next tears it down, and another comes along later to search

among the fragments and tell the story in its own way. History is like the sea as well. Seen from a distance, it appears to be nothing but blue. Dive beneath the surface and you discover coral, hidden reefs, currents moving against one another, and countless regions of brightness and darkness intertwined. Nguyen Hue, Quang Trung is much the same. Somewhere between praise and accusation, the man himself probably remains buried beneath layer after layer of historical surf, and the more clearly we hope to see him, the more cautious we must become about the things we think we already know.

Night falls quickly over the sea at Quy Nhon. I stood looking offshore, and somewhere inside the wind I seemed to hear the imagined pounding of battle drums from more than two hundred years ago. Then a very simple thought occurred to me, perhaps history does not require us to choose sides. What it asks of us, more than anything, is enough calmness to look back at a human being in the fullness of both his light and his darkness. Like the sea before me, without rough waves, perhaps we would never fully grasp how vast the horizon really is.



Photo: The Twin Towers, Qui Nhon

ESSAY 12

FRAGMENTS OF VIJAYA'S SOUL BENEATH THE SHADOW OF THE CHAM TOWERS

I have written quite a bit about the Cham people of Central Vietnam. Those pages are scattered through my two books, Hồn phách núi sông and Cánh cò sông nước. Yet the strange thing is, the more I write, the more I feel as though I have merely brushed a thin layer of dust from the surface of an ancient statue. Beneath that dust lies an entire civilization, quiet, proud, and sometimes profoundly sad.

Today I am back in Quy Nhon. The wind from Thi Nai Lagoon still comes sweeping in. It carries the salt of the sea, mixed with the faint earthy smell of sand and soil along the lagoon. I stood still for a long while, looking toward the horizon where dark green mountain ranges seemed to drift through the evening haze. And once again one word came into my mind, “Vijaya.” People who come to Quy Nhon usually talk about Eo Gio, Ky Co, or the long beach curving like the back of a crescent moon. I am different. Every time I return, my thoughts circle back to a vanished capital.

Vijaya. A kingdom, an age, a Cham dream of power. And if we travel even farther backward through history, this land of Binh Dinh belonged to more than Champa alone.

Long before the Cham arrived, people of the Sa Huynh culture had lived here for thousands of years. Burial jars, coarse gray-black pottery, glass beads unearthed around Thi Nai Lagoon, all of them seem like whispers from prehistory. Then, through the shifting currents of Southeast Asian history, the Cham appeared. In the year 192, a man named Khu Lien rose in rebellion against Han Chinese rule in Nhat Nam Commandery and established the kingdom of Lam Ap. From that seed, a maritime civilization began to grow.

The Cham were not like the Vietnamese. Their gaze turned more readily toward the sea than toward the rice field. They traded, sailed, and established commercial ports. They worshiped Shiva and the goddess Bhagavati, the sacred mother of their land. Over time, Lam Ap became Champa. And Champa was not a centralized state in the way Dai Viet would later become, but something closer to a

federation of principalities, Indrapura, Amaravati, Vijaya, Kauthara, and Panduranga. Each region had its own center of power and its own aristocratic lineages. Among them, Vijaya, roughly corresponding to modern Binh Dinh, became the heart of Champa from around the tenth century onward.

From Quy Nhon, I drove northwest for a little more than twenty kilometers, along a road that brought me into An Nhon. There lies a place people call the Citadel of Do Ban. Unless you know what you are looking for, you could easily pass it without realizing what it once was. I have been there several times. Today the ancient citadel is reduced to low stretches of brick wall, eroded mounds of earth, and a few weathered stone gateways sitting silently among the fields. Yet more than a thousand years ago, this was a glittering capital.

Vijaya. I stood in the wild grass and looked around while the wind rustled through the dry fields. In the distance, a few moss-covered Cham towers rose above the rice paddies like stone fingers pointing toward the sky. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine it. This place must once have teemed with life. The capital had three defensive enclosures, an outer city, an inner city, and an imperial compound. Thick brick walls surrounded it, soldiers guarded its gates, and inside stood palaces roofed with small shield-shaped tiles and wooden galleries intricately carved with ornament. Beyond the walls were markets, houses, and merchants arriving through Thi Nai from Java, India, and China. A maritime capital, a thriving commercial city of Southeast Asia.

But history never stands still. I suddenly remembered Xuan Tien's song "Hận Đồ Bàn," The Sorrow of Do Ban. It is heartbreakingly sad, almost like the long sigh of a people who have lost their country:

"Desolate forests bury so much anguish, bitterness, and hatred.
A thousand winds cradle a thousand echoes in the boundless dark…"

Hearing that song in Binh Dinh, one can understand why such melodies were born. The history of Champa here was both magnificent and brutal.

Among Champa's kings, the ruler most famously associated with Do Ban was probably Che Bong Nga, a man who terrified the Tran dynasty of Dai Viet. In 1371, he led a fleet of warships directly against Thang Long. The capital of Dai Viet fell, and the Tran king was forced to flee. For nearly twenty years afterward, Cham armies repeatedly advanced northward. Historian Le Quy Don once wrote:

"The king entered and left the city as though entering a place where no one lived."

But war always has its seasons of strength and decline. In 1377, here at the capital of Do Ban, Cham forces laid an ambush in which King Tran Due Tong was killed. It was one of Dai Viet's most devastating military defeats of the medieval period. History sometimes resembles an endless chess game. Today you win, tomorrow you may lose. In 1390, Che Bong Nga was killed during another northern campaign. His death seemed to close the last great

age of Champa's power, and afterward the kingdom gradually weakened.

Then came 1471, a year the Cham could hardly have forgotten. King Le Thanh Tong mobilized an enormous army, said to number more than two hundred thousand men, and marched against Vijaya. Do Ban was encircled and besieged. After savage fighting, the city fell. Historical records state that tens of thousands of Cham were killed and thirty thousand taken prisoner. King Tra Toan was captured and taken north. From that moment, Vijaya disappeared from the political map, and Champa was reduced to territories farther south.

I stood before the gate of Do Ban for a very long time. For some reason, an odd question came to me. How did the last Cham leave this place? Did they go in the darkness of night? Did they flee through smoke and fire? Did they turn back one final time to look at the red towers glowing in the evening light? No one knows.

History generally records the victories of those who win. The quiet footsteps of the defeated usually disappear into silence. Yet Champa did not vanish completely. Other principalities remained, and after 1471 the Cham gradually withdrew southward, establishing Panduranga in the region of present-day Phan Rang and Ninh Thuan. Panduranga survived for more than three additional centuries. In 1832, the Nguyen dynasty abolished the final autonomous status of Thuan Thanh. With that, after seventeen centuries of existence, the political history of Champa formally came to an end. It had endured longer than many states in Southeast Asia, yet its ending came quietly.

Evening descended quickly over the fields of An Nhon. I left Do Ban just as the sun touched the edge of the mountains. Sunset stained the old brick walls red, making them appear to flare up one last time. I turned around for another look. In the distance, the Cham towers of Binh Dinh, Banh It, Canh Tien, Duong Long, were still standing. Silent and proud, like the last soldiers guarding the memory of a vanished kingdom.

Then I understood something. A people can lose a country, and a capital can become a ruin, but the soul of a civilization does not disappear so easily. It survives in Cham dances, in the red bricks of ancient towers, in the wind crossing Thi Nai Lagoon every evening. And sometimes it survives in the melancholy of a traveler standing motionless in the ruins of Do Ban, listening to history sigh beneath the moss of time.

THE RED BRICKS STILL BREATHING BENEATH THE TOWERS OF VIJAYA

There are places people pass through and forget. Binh Dinh is different. Anyone who has been here even once is likely to carry away one particular image, the red Cham towers standing silently beneath the open sky, proud and solitary, so beautiful that they make you stop and look for a long while.

I have stood beneath a Cham tower and tilted my head back to look upward. The red bricks fit tightly together, rising high and slender, each course seeming almost to lift toward the sky. How did the ancients build these towers?

Even now, there is no completely settled answer. Archaeologists have described the Cham towers of Binh Dinh as products of the mature period of Champa architecture. Here, Cham and Khmer artistic traditions mingled and created a distinctive style unlike the earlier tower complexes elsewhere in Central Vietnam. Hearing that only made me more curious. On a map of surviving Champa monuments, Binh Dinh still possesses an unusually large number of ancient towers. With thirteen towers remaining upright, it ranks behind only Quang Nam in the number of surviving Cham towers. Yet numbers do not tell the real story. What moves me more is that every tower feels like a fragment of memory left behind by Vijaya, the Champa capital that flourished for centuries around Do Ban and An Nhon. Those bricks are more than architecture. They are history.

I remember one morning years ago when I headed toward An Nhon. A narrow road threaded through rice fields green with young plants. Low mounds rose here and there in the distance, and a local pointed toward them.

“That’s Do Ban Citadel.”

Today only a few sections of brick wall and some eroded foundations remain. Yet amid that landscape one tower still rises tall and straight, Canh Tien Tower. Nearly twenty meters high, it is graceful yet solemn. Its body is divided into four diminishing levels, and at each corner smaller structures project outward like birds spreading their wings. That is how it came to be called Canh Tien, the Fairy Wings Tower.

I stood there looking at it for a long time. The bricks have darkened with age, but the lines remain crisp. Inside, engaged pillars are covered with sandstone slabs carved in curling vine patterns, supple as ancient climbing plants. Higher on the corners are stone figures, sacred serpents, elephants, mysterious creatures drawn from Hindu mythology. This tower once stood at the very heart of Vijaya. More than eight hundred years ago, it must have been surrounded by palaces, plazas, temples, soldiers, merchants, the life of a thriving capital. Today there is only wind moving through the fields. History can be terribly quiet, and terribly sad.

On the way back from Do Ban to Quy Nhon, another Cham complex is easy to find right inside the city, the Twin Towers. I have visited them many times. The two towers stand side by side on a broad piece of ground surrounded by areca palms, coconut trees, and frangipani giving off a faint sweet fragrance. It can be so quiet there that you can hear leaves fall. The Twin Towers, also known as Hung Thanh Towers, were built sometime between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. One rises about twenty meters, the other is slightly lower.

What makes them unusual is that they do not follow the fully tiered square form typical of many Cham towers. Their bodies are square, but their upper sections sweep upward into high, pointed arches. At the corners, figures of the divine bird Garuda extend their arms as though holding up the roof itself. Look closely and the Hindu influence in the architecture becomes unmistakable. War and time once damaged the towers badly, but restoration beginning in the early 1990s brought them close to their original form.

Standing between the two towers, I once had the strangest sensation, as though I were standing between two ancient soldiers who had somehow remained behind to guard the memory of a vanished city.

Yet when people talk about the most beautiful Cham towers in Binh Dinh, many will name Banh It. The hill on which they stand lies between two branches of the Con River. Seen from a distance, four towers rise from the reddish earth, their rounded shapes appearing and disappearing through the morning mist. I still remember a friend who once went there with me looking up and saying, “You know, they really do look like banh it.” And they do. That resemblance is how local people gave the towers their name.

The complex was built from the late eleventh to the early twelfth century and consists of four structures, the main sanctuary, the gate tower, the fire tower, and the stele tower. Each has its own form, each its own lines and character. I walked around the hill and looked down from above at rice fields spreading into the distance, the Con River winding through them, and National Highway 1A running far away like a silver thread. I found myself thinking that perhaps the Cham chose this hill not only for religious reasons but because the setting itself is extraordinarily beautiful. The towers occupy a point where sky, river, and fields seem to meet, a place sacred enough to belong to the gods.

Farther west toward Tay Son stands another tower complex that can stop a person in his tracks, Duong Long. Three towers stand close together. The central tower rises

about twenty-four meters, while the two flanking towers reach roughly twenty-two. They look massive even from a distance, and up close they become stranger still. Unlike many Cham towers built primarily of brick, Duong Long makes extensive use of stone, especially in its decorative elements, carvings of deities, animals, and ornamental motifs. Researchers have called it one of the grandest architectural ensembles of Champa. Wind and rain have worn down its carvings, yet enough survives to let us imagine an age when Champa art had reached extraordinary heights.

Many other Cham towers remain scattered across Binh Dinh. Binh Lam Tower sits quietly among the rice fields of Tuy Phuoc, unlike many others built on hills, it lives almost inside the surrounding village. Square, three-tiered, strong yet graceful, it seems thoroughly at home there. Phu Loc Tower, by contrast, stands on a high hill above the plain like a red-brick lighthouse. Early French researchers called it the “Tour d’Or,” the Golden Tower. Then there is Thu Thien, small and elegant beside the Con River, and Hon Chuong Tower in Phu Cat. Much of the latter has collapsed, but it is still regarded as occupying the highest site of any Cham tower in Binh Dinh.

Each tower is like a red period marked on the map of history. After traveling among so many of them, I began to understand something. These towers were never isolated monuments. They were sacred markers surrounding old Vijaya, the center of Champa’s power for centuries. Vijaya is gone, and Do Ban is now a ruin, but the towers remain, like the last witnesses.

After wandering all day, I returned to my lodging in Quy Nhon. The sea wind was blowing hard and waves were breaking in the distance. Overhead, clouds burned red like bricks fresh from a kiln. I remembered again what it feels like to stand beneath those Cham towers, always the same mixture of wonder, melancholy, and sadness. Perhaps they are beautiful in the particular way of things whose golden age has already passed. And I thought that maybe the Cham towers of Binh Dinh are more than ruins. They are like quiet red lamps of history, still glowing after centuries, reminding those who came later that a kingdom named Vijaya once existed here, that there was once a capital called Do Ban, and that people of extraordinary skill once built structures before which we still stand today, looking upward in admiration until, finally, there is nothing left to do but fall silent.

WHERE THE SEA LULLS A POET'S SOUL

This morning I had planned to visit Ghenh Rang and Tien Sa. It is almost a habit of mine whenever I return to Quy Nhon. But I was told that the area around poet Han Mac Tu's grave had been closed for repairs after several major storms last month. That makes sense. This is Central Vietnam, after all. When storms sweep through here, everything gets turned upside down at least once, from fishermen's roofs to the little roads winding around the mountainsides.

I have only one day left in Quy Nhon, so I changed my mind and decided not to head toward Quy Hoa. But truthfully, whether I go there or not, Ghenh Rang remains

etched in my memory as clearly as a carving in stone. I have been there more times than I can remember.

Ghenh Rang lies about three kilometers southeast of downtown Quy Nhon. Seen from the city, it resembles a low mountain ridge running along the shore, gently curving in and out like an arm of stone reaching around the deep blue water. The sea here is peculiar. It does not have the pounding violence of many beaches. Instead it is clear, blue, and contemplative, and if you look long enough, you begin to feel as though you are sinking into some faraway expanse of sky.

Along that rocky slope lies Bai Da Trung, the Egg Stone Beach, also called Queen's Beach. Smooth, rounded boulders crowd together there, each one as large as a basket or earthen jar, polished by the sea over who knows how many centuries. I remember the first time I stepped onto those stones. I walked slowly, overtaken by a strange wistfulness. They hardly seemed like stones at all, more like the fossilized eggs of some enormous prehistoric bird lying motionless beneath sea and sky. Tradition says this was once a retreat of Queen Nam Phuong, wife of Emperor Bao Dai. She is said to have bathed here and sat upon those smooth, rounded rocks looking out toward the open sea. Whether every detail of the story is true hardly matters now. The name "Queen's Beach" took hold, remaining with this shore like a faint echo from another age.

But for me, Ghenh Rang is more than beautiful scenery. There is a grave there, and every time I stand before it, I feel the sea wind pass through me in a different way. The grave of poet Han Mac Tu lies on Thi Nhan Hill.

From the foot of Mong Cam Slope, a stairway winds upward through casuarina trees while the sea wind rustles their branches. Walk slowly enough and you can clearly hear the waves below, steady as the breathing of the ocean. On a high rise, with the mountain at his back and his face toward the sea, he lies there. A man who lived only twenty-eight years. Twenty-eight years, when you stop to think about it, is terribly short compared with the lives most people are given. Yet in that brief span he left Vietnamese poetry lines that burn like streaks of fire in darkness.

People tell how Han Mac Tu contracted leprosy, a disease that society once treated almost as a curse. Once his illness became known, he had to leave his friends and the literary world that was opening before him, withdrawing quietly into the Quy Hoa leprosy colony. And thinking of that always brings Quy Hoa back to me.

National Highway 1D follows the mountainside toward it. Gray cliffs rise on one side and the blue sea opens endlessly on the other. When I drove there, I slowed down and let the cool sea wind pour into the car. Some stretches of road were deserted, and there was nothing to hear but the turning of the wheels and the distant sound of waves.

Quy Hoa appears like a small village tucked between mountains and sea. There is no noise, no frantic bustle. The houses are low, the roads narrow, trees spread shade everywhere. The sea is quiet here. Not empty quiet, but a profound kind of peace, like the stillness left inside a person who has endured so much suffering that eventually nothing remains but calm. Beside that shore stands the Quy Hoa leprosy hospital. Calling it a hospital makes it sound grander

than it is. The buildings are low, their walls pale yellow, their tiled roofs old, while tropical almond and casuarina trees whisper in the wind. There is something so plain and unpretentious about the place that you instinctively slow your steps.

Then I thought again about its history. Few people realize that this stretch of Central Vietnam's coast, from Binh Dinh south into Phu Yen or north toward Quang Ngai, was among the earliest places Western missionaries reached. Jesuit priests were preaching the Gospel here as early as the seventeenth century. Through generations of upheaval, this region gradually became one of the oldest centers of Vietnamese Catholicism. The Apostolic Vicariate of Qui Nhon dates to 1850. But its age cannot be measured simply in years. It must also be measured in persecutions and long seasons of suspicion, when the Nguyen court regarded Catholicism as a "Western heresy," followed by wars and historical upheavals layered one upon another.

Within that larger history, Quy Hoa carries another story, one of compassion. In the late 1920s, a French priest named Paul Maheu came here. He did not choose a large city or a prosperous district. He chose an isolated stretch of coast because the winds were gentle, mountains offered shelter from storms, the climate was mild, and the place could become a refuge for people cast out by society because they had leprosy.

In 1929, he established the Quy Hoa leprosy colony. Three years later, once the first facilities had taken shape, he returned to France. Before leaving, however, he asked the Franciscan order to send six sisters to continue caring

for the patients. Their names are no longer clearly remembered. They left behind no books, and there are no monuments to them. Yet they lived here. Day after day, they cleaned wounds, supported the dying, cooked porridge, changed bandages, and prayed beside sickbeds. Their work was so quiet that, had no one preserved the story, we might imagine this had always been just another hospital.

Later, two French doctors, Charles Antoine and Ozithe, rebuilt the facility on a more permanent basis. By the years just before 1945, more than five hundred people with leprosy had been admitted, most of them men and women abandoned by both family and society. Then came war and hunger, yet the hospital survived. Fathers Nguyen Xuan Ban and Huynh Bien continued its work, and at times nearly seven hundred patients lived there. I once stood among the old hospital buildings and felt something inside me grow quiet. Quy Hoa is not famous because it is beautiful. It is famous because compassion lived there.

Then, one day in September 1940, a poet entered the colony. His real name was Nguyen Trong Tri, his baptismal name Pierre, but we know him as Han Mac Tu. He had discovered he was suffering from leprosy in 1935, just when his talent was at its brightest. Illness forced him into hiding, into flight, into a quiet and unsettled life from place to place. On September 20, 1940, he entered the Quy Hoa leprosy colony. Only fifty-two days later, on November 11, 1940, he died.

During that brief period, a nun, Mother Juetta, cared for him. People later recalled that in his final days he could sometimes be seen sitting on a stone bench with a pencil in

his hand, looking toward the sea. At other times he walked slowly along the corridor, thin and frail, almost like a shadow. Perhaps he was still writing poetry.

On the morning of November 9, Mother Juetta brought him his medicine and quietly told him, “This afternoon a car will go and bring the chaplain to administer the Anointing of the Sick.” He simply nodded and answered, “Yes.” The following morning, he received Communion for the last time. Before dawn, Sister Julienne softly told him, “Between now and morning, you will go.” And he did.

Che Lan Vien once said of him, “There was no one before him and no one after him. Han Mac Tu was like a comet streaking across the Vietnamese sky, trailing a dazzling, brilliant tail.” Critic Phan Cu De wrote, “In Han Mac Tu’s surrealist poetry, one can no longer distinguish illusion from reality, form from emptiness, this world from the world beyond…”

I once stood looking at the sea at Quy Hoa for a very long time. In my mind I heard words Han Mac Tu himself once wrote, “I write poetry? That means I am too weak! I am tempted... I lose my mind, I go insane...” (Preface to a Poetry Collection, 1938). For some reason, I kept returning to one simple thought. In those days, people with leprosy were treated as though they were already dead in the eyes of society. They were pushed beyond the edges of ordinary life. Yet precisely there, in that forgotten place, priests built a hospital, nuns held the hands of the sick, and prayers were spoken quietly beside their beds. And it was there, too, that an outcast poet was finally allowed to lie down in peace.

It occurred to me that perhaps poetry and compassion sometimes meet in the quietest places on earth. Like this one, a little village by the sea, an old leprosy colony, a poet sleeping in peace. And the sea, still singing him to sleep.

THE FIRE OF FAITH, GLOWING QUIETLY IN THE SEA WINDS OF QUY NHON

Three days. At first I thought they would be nothing more than three days of wandering around, stopping by the beach, eating fish, looking at the sky and letting myself breathe a little. Yet the farther I went, the more it felt as though someone were quietly leading me, not merely toward scenery, but deeper into something heavier and more contemplative. The land here refuses to remain silent. It keeps whispering stories, stories of people, of Nguyen Hue, of Champa, of memory, and stories of faith as well.

This morning Quy Nhon seemed almost impossibly gentle. The sky was perfectly clear, a weightless shade of blue, and the sea breeze drifted lazily through without any harshness or urgency. Coconut palms leaned into it, while little waves rose and fell as though breathing. Yet beneath that peaceful scene I felt restless, because I knew this land had once been one of the great cradles of Catholicism in southern Vietnam. It was a quiet cradle, but one filled with lives that had believed, endured, and sometimes died for no greater purpose than to keep a small flame from going out.

Suddenly I felt as though I were standing upon layers of earth made thick not by alluvial soil but by history. Not the

history of swords and armies found at Do Ban, nor the court histories of Hue, but something quieter, footsteps moving through darkness, prayers spoken under the breath, people living every day on the narrow boundary between faith and death.

That morning I abandoned my original plan to return toward Ghenh Rang and Tien Sa. I did not head straight for the beach either. Something kept pulling me inland, toward older traces, and eventually I stopped at Lang Song. The road from central Quy Nhon runs northeast for only about ten kilometers, yet traveling it feels almost like moving backward through time. Rice fields and rivers spread along either side, and open green spaces stretch away beneath the sky.

Lang Song Minor Seminary did not impress me through grandeur. Its power lay in its stillness, the kind of place that makes you lower your voice without realizing it. I stepped inside and slowed down, almost afraid of disturbing the old and sacred atmosphere settled over everything. Between roughly 1841 and 1850, there was little here beyond bamboo walls and thatched roofs. It was poor, simple, hardly anything to speak of. Yet from that makeshift place came men who would travel throughout Central Vietnam preserving and teaching their faith. By 1927, a more substantial church had been built, followed by a printing house, the bishop’s residence, and other buildings. It all grew gradually, quietly, solidly.

I stood for a long time before the old printing house and thought about Father Paul Maheu, a man skilled in printing who had learned the trade as far away as Hong

Kong, then brought that knowledge here to what must once have seemed a remote corner of the world. Under his direction, the Lang Song press became one of the three major centers for spreading the Vietnamese Romanized script, Quốc Ngữ, in that era. A small shiver passed through me. The letters I am writing now, the script I use to tell stories and preserve memories, were once printed in places like this. Not in some great metropolis, but in a quiet country place where people worked without making much noise about themselves.

I found myself wondering what actually creates a culture. Is it great monuments and magnificent institutions? Or can it be nothing more than a small room, a printing press, and a handful of people convinced that what they are doing matters? I had no answer. But something in me grew quiet.

Leaving Lang Song, I continued on. Then, almost as though the meeting had been arranged long ago, I found my way to Nuoc Man. The name itself sounds plain and earthy, so ordinary you might imagine there could be little to say about it. Yet it was here, in July 1618, that four Jesuit missionaries, Francisco Buzomi, Francisco de Pina, Christophoro Borri, and Brother Antonio Dias, arrived and opened one of the earliest chapters in the missionary history of southern Vietnam.

I stood beneath an old banyan tree where, people say, a chapel once stood. Nothing definite remains. There is earth, wind, and a few faint traces. Yet some places retain their spirit even after their physical form has disappeared. Here, Father Francisco de Pina learned Vietnamese. He

listened carefully to the speech of local people, recording sounds, testing them, correcting himself again and again. Out of those sounds, the earliest forms of Quốc Ngữ began to emerge. Alexandre de Rhodes would later help systematize that work into a more complete writing system.

I laughed softly to myself, not from amusement so much as surprise. So the script I am using right now, the letters through which I write and tell stories, also had part of its beginning in a windswept, sandy place like this. I wondered what would have happened without those long nights beside oil lamps, without awkward conversations between foreigners and local people trying to understand one another. Would Quốc Ngữ ever have come into being in the same way? History does not always begin with grand events. Sometimes it begins with very small acts of patience.

If Nuoc Man was where the seed was planted, Go Thi was where it sent down its deepest roots. Many times I had traveled along the highways of Binh Dinh, glancing around for the little sign marked “Go Thi.” The name sounds like nothing more than a low mound beside a rice field. No one would guess that this unassuming place was once the center of an enormous Catholic jurisdiction.

Go Thi lies in Phuoc Son, Tuy Phuoc, roughly twenty kilometers from Quy Nhon. There is little around it but rice fields, wind, and a scattering of houses. Yet a Catholic community has lived here for more than four hundred years. From sixty Catholics before 1750, the community grew to roughly seven hundred and fifty by 1850. When I heard those numbers, I stopped hearing them as statistics. They

became roots in my imagination, quiet roots going deep into the earth, invisible but strong enough to keep the whole tree standing. In 1839, Go Thi became the episcopal seat for the Church in southern Vietnam. Bishop Étienne Cuénot Thể lived here for twenty-one years through an era of severe persecution. By day he remained hidden. By night, he traveled.

I kept imagining that scene, a solitary figure moving quietly through rice fields, bamboo groves, and pitch-dark country roads. He traveled to meet the faithful, to preach, to administer the sacraments. It was only a small flame, but it did not go out.

Beside him stood Saint Andrew Nguyen Kim Thong, a layman with no clerical office and no worldly title, yet he became a source of support for the community. He was arrested, exiled, and died far from home. The bishop was arrested as well and later died in prison. Two deaths, but not an ending.

I sat beneath a frangipani tree in front of Go Thi Church, watching people come to Mass, sweep the courtyard, and pray. Everything looked so ordinary that no one passing through would imagine blood had once been shed here. Yet it was precisely that ordinariness that caught in my throat. Because I understood that when something survives suffering, it is no longer an ordinary thing.

That afternoon, I returned to the sea at Quy Nhon. The water was quiet as a long sleep, the waves breaking at a steady rhythm while twilight poured orange across the surface. I sat there doing nothing at all, simply looking. Early the next morning, before leaving Quy Nhon, I went once

more to Thi Nai Lagoon. Mist lay over the water. Fishing boats were setting their nets, and the sun rose slowly. The long bridge stretched across the lagoon, joining the mainland to the Phuong Mai Peninsula. In the distance were Hai Minh fishing village and Cu Lao Xanh, places where life still seems to move slowly, steadily, enduringly. Standing there, I felt something inside me soften.

Three days are not long, but they were enough for me to understand something. I had not come here merely to go to the beach. I had touched deeper layers. That afternoon, as I left Quy Nhon, the car passed the fields of Binh Dinh and quiet mounds of earth like Go Thi. I no longer looked around very much. I simply sat still. In my mind, Quy Nhon was no longer just the sea. It had become a country of memories, and among those memories was the memory of faith, of men and women who lived and died to preserve something they believed to be true. And suddenly I understood that some fires do not need to blaze. It is enough for them to keep glowing quietly, because sometimes a quiet flame can cast its light across hundreds of years.



Photo: The Salt Fields of Sa Huynh

ESSAY 13

QUẢNG NGÃI — THE SEDIMENT OF THE LAND, THE DEEP CURRENT OF ITS PEOPLE

QUẢNG NGÃI, THIÊN ẤN MOUNTAIN AND THE TRÀ KHÚC RIVER

While writing my two books on Catholicism, The Man on the Cross, published by the Vietnam Writers' Association Publishing House, and Rice Fields & the Silence of the Word, published through Barnes & Noble

Press, I traveled up and down Central Vietnam more times than I can remember. I went to meet people, to visit churches, to walk through those windblown, sandy reaches where faith somehow takes root and keeps growing, stubborn and enduring as wild grass. The strange thing is that every time I return to a place I already know, I still feel like someone arriving for the first time. The feelings are different, what I want to write is different, and somewhere along the way, through all those passing years, something inside me seems to have changed as well.

At the end of 2025 and the beginning of 2026, I had only a month or two to revisit a few of those old places. I began in Phan Thiết, and then, as though some invisible thread were gently tugging at me, I found myself heading north again toward Quảng Ngãi, that coastal province where so many of my friends were born and raised, among them writers and journalists.

The train pulled into Quảng Ngãi Station on an afternoon flooded with sunlight. Central Vietnam sunlight is not the rich, golden kind you find farther south. It is white, sharp, and dry, falling straight onto rooftops, alluvial flats, and concrete roads still powdered with dust. It does not caress anything, it simply throws everything into hard, honest light. Only when I stood there again did I fully grasp where Quảng Ngãi sits in the geography of the central coast, Quy Nhơn, Tuy Hòa, and Nha Trang to the south, Tam Kỳ, Hội An, and Đà Nẵng to the north. Caught between the land of Quảng and the country people affectionately call xứ Nẫu, Quảng Ngãi feels like a quiet carrying pole balanced across the shoulders of the coast, commotion at either end, while the middle keeps a certain low, contemplative note all its

own. It is more than eight hundred kilometers from Saigon, roughly a hundred and forty from Đà Nẵng, and less than two hundred from Quy Nhơn. Those are the numbers, anyway. But I have never measured Quảng Ngãi in kilometers. I remember it by the way my heartbeat seems to soften whenever the train comes to a stop at that little station I first knew so many years ago.

Back in the early 1980s, aboard a train bound for Đà Nẵng, I once heard the North–South traders suddenly stirring and calling out, “We’re at the chicken station!” Golden boiled chickens, their skins glossy and fragrant, were passed through the carriage windows. One cry from a vendor, one savory smell, and somehow it stayed lodged in my memory for decades. I could never have imagined then that years later I would return to that same place again and again, trying to understand more deeply the soul of a land I had once glimpsed only through a train window. This time, too, I chose not to fly, though I could easily have landed at Chu Lai and gone straight into the city. I like traveling slowly. I like watching the colors of earth and sky change along the way, feeling the sea wind slip through each little station and every bend in the tracks. Some places, if you arrive too quickly, give you nothing more than their name on a map. You may get there without ever meeting their soul.

Quảng Ngãi has a tropical monsoon climate, the kind of sun that quickly browns the skin, while the weather grows gentler from October through March, when the air turns cool and nights often carry the steady murmur of rain. Yet even the rain here is not sentimental. When it comes down, it tends to swallow both sky and water in white. I once stood beside the Trà Khúc during flood season and watched the

river heave and surge past me, and suddenly I understood something about why people from this region often speak with such firmness. When you live between savage floods and the parching breath of the Lào wind, you do not acquire much taste for talking in circles. Every word seems to need the strength of a stake driven deep into soft ground.

After the administrative boundary adjustment of 2014, the city expanded across both banks of the river and gradually stretched toward the sea. There are not many skyscrapers here to make you crane your neck, nor is the city dressed up in dazzling colored lights. Yet its rhythm is lively enough to keep loneliness away, while its quiet spaces remain wide enough for a person to hear the sound of his own heart.

One morning I got up early and walked along the Trà Khúc. The river looked like a green thread stitching two pieces of earth together, with lush alluvial flats where people grew melons and corn, their voices and laughter drifting through the pale morning sun. Downstream, the graceful Cổ Lũy Bridge reached across the estuary. Standing there looking toward Cửa Đại Cổ Lũy, where fresh water meets salt, I found myself thinking of all the generations who must have stood at that same edge of water, seeing a boat off, then waiting for the day when its sail would appear again on the horizon.

From the mainland, looking toward Lý Sơn, the island lies about fifteen nautical miles offshore, rising from the sea like a surviving fragment of some prehistoric volcanic age. Thới Lới Mountain broods in silence, while the deep crater of Giếng Tiền resembles the earth’s dark,

unfathomable eye. It is a small island, yet it holds more than fifty historical and cultural sites, six of them nationally recognized. But to me, Lý Sơn is more than a tally of heritage sites. It is the memory of the sea.

I had heard many stories about the Lễ khao lề thế lính Hoàng Sa, the ceremonial feast honoring the Hoàng Sa soldiers, and about the brave flotillas that sailed from here toward the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa archipelagos in wooden boats, carrying imperial orders along with dangers they understood better than anyone. They left knowing they might never come home. Even now, hearing those stories puts a knot in my throat. The sea is beautiful, yes, but holding on to the sea has never been a romantic story.

Quảng Ngãi also carries within itself layer upon layer of culture, Sa Huỳnh, Champa, then Vietnamese. I once visited the Sa Huỳnh cultural region and stood looking at burial jars unearthed after thousands of years beneath the ground. Only then did I begin to understand how long human beings have held fast to this land. History does not live only in books. It lies under the soil, beneath the sand, inside every broken shard of pottery lifted today by a living hand.

One afternoon at Mỹ Khê Beach, the sand was fine, the waves gentle, and the sun burned red as it slowly sank into the distance. Barefoot children raced along the shore, their laughter ringing bright and crisp through the wind. Nearby stood Sa Kỳ Port, where boats were preparing to leave for the island. Travelers bound for Lý Sơn often spend the night nearby and depart early the next morning. I simply sat beside the sea, tasting salt in the wind, and suddenly everything inside me grew quiet. I wondered why I had

traveled so much. Was it to write, or was I really searching for somewhere my heart could finally drop anchor?

South of Quảng Ngãi, the Sa Huỳnh salt fields blaze white beneath the open sky. Salt workers bend low over the flats, raking crystals made from sunlight, wind, and sweat. At sunset, the shallow fields reflect a sky burning red. I once walked barefoot across that salted earth, listening to the crystals crunch beneath my feet, and came away understanding a little more about a livelihood both punishing and proud. The salt is bitterly briny, but the people are not.

Once I went up to Ba Tơ and visited the Bùi Hui grasslands during the myrtle season in June. The hills were drenched in purple, H'Re voices and laughter traveled on the wind, and in the early morning the mist grew so thick it blurred the paths. Standing beneath that immense sky, I felt very small. A thought passed through me, in a life moving faster every year, do we still possess enough inner calm simply to stand and watch a hillside of ripe myrtle? At Ba Làng An Cape, dark volcanic rocks lie stacked upon one another like the fingerprints of time. I climbed to the lighthouse, the wind snapping around my ears, while the sea below looked impossibly clear and blue. Out there, I could hear my own heartbeat more distinctly. I felt small, yet strangely free. Another day I wandered into Bàu Cá Cái, a mangrove forest covering dozens of hectares. In autumn, the white mangrove trees shed their leaves, leaving pale, silvery trunks and branches that, from a distance, resemble some surrealist painting. I knew this was a protective forest, part of the region's effort to respond to climate change, yet standing amid birdsong and the sound of water, what came

to me was much simpler. When human beings know how to give green back to the earth, the earth will not betray them.

Today I followed the little slope up to Thiên Ấn Pagoda once again. The mountain is not high, yet high enough that from the temple courtyard I could look down and see the Trà Khúc curling through the city like a length of deep green silk. Wind moved through the old trees with a soft rustling touch, gentle but tinged with loneliness. From up there, the history of Quảng Ngãi suddenly seemed to rise before me, from the establishment of Quảng Ngãi Province in the early nineteenth century, through upheaval after upheaval, war after war, years filled with smoke and fire, including painful pages such as Sơn Mỹ. History has passed, but its scars remain, in the soil and in the people. And I found myself wondering whether a city without much glitter might hold on to its soul a little longer, or whether, sooner or later, it too will be swept into the same whirlpool of development that has carried so many other places away.

Coming down the mountain, I rented a motorbike and rode through streets that were never particularly wide. Quảng Ngãi does not have an excess of luxury resorts. There are enough hotels and homestays, little coffee shops tucked beneath the eaves of houses, low plastic stools, small glasses of dense black coffee sending thin wisps of steam into the air. I passed markets and schools, saw children spilling out after class, their white shirts spotted with sweat while they laughed and talked as though they had all the energy in the world. The city lives, works, buys and sells, yet never seems to hurry hard enough to leave a person breathless. Strangely enough, when I am here, I never feel much need to hurry either.

Toward evening I returned to the bank of the Trà Khúc. Lights along both sides of the river slowly came on, their yellow reflections wavering across the water before settling into softness. Wind blew inland from the estuary carrying the faintest trace of salt, just enough to dry my lips and make something inside me sink into stillness. I sat without speaking and listened to the river as though it were breathing very quietly in the dark. In that moment, I understood why people who left Quảng Ngãi decades ago still turn their thoughts back toward it. It is not necessarily because this place is breathtakingly beautiful, and certainly not because it possesses wonders meant to overwhelm the eye. What keeps it alive in memory, perhaps, is the plain sincerity of its land and its people, an affection that does not put itself on display, does not advertise itself, and has no need to make noise in order to be recognized.

The sea here is not so fierce that it frightens you. The mountains are not so high that they overwhelm you, and the people are not so loud that they wear you down. Everything seems to know the value of proportion, of enough. Enough to live, enough to love, enough that after you have gone far away, some small place inside you still wants to return. Years ago, I passed through this coastal country too quickly. I felt it, certainly, but not deeply enough. When I wrote about it, my words sometimes seemed thin and pale, like river water in the dry season. I thought I understood, only to discover that I had barely been standing at the edge. This time, here between Thiên Ấn Mountain and the Trà Khúc River, I came to understand something more. Some places do not hold people with brilliance or spectacle. They hold

them through a quiet endurance. They never call out. They simply remain where they are, and wait.

I, who once thought I had traveled far and written plenty, suddenly felt something inside me soften and fall silent. How enduring have I really been? How many evening bells from Thiên Ấn have I truly listened to? How many of the Trà Khúc's deeper currents have I ever touched? I asked myself those questions, then said nothing. The wind kept blowing, the river kept moving, slowly but without stopping, and somewhere a temple bell seemed to go on ringing inside me. Perhaps before I write more about Thiên Ấn Mountain and the Trà Khúc River, I still have to learn how to stand still a little longer, how to be quiet without being shallow, how to say less and let the words carry more weight.

TRÀ KHÚC — A GREEN SILK RIBBON FLOWING DOWN FROM THE GREAT FOREST

One scorching noon in Quảng Ngãi, beneath that white-hot sunlight thrown back from the sand and the river as though reflected from some enormous mirror, I stood on a bridge looking down at the Trà Khúc and suddenly heard the faintest sigh somewhere inside myself. The river lay below me, supple without being fragile, drifting slowly yet never truly still. People in Quảng Ngãi say "Thiên Ấn Mountain, Trà River" as naturally as though the words had always existed in their blood and flesh. When they speak of the Trà River, they mean the Trà Khúc, not the Trà Bồng, the Trà Câu, or the Vệ.

Even the name Trà carries a distant echo of Champa. A number of researchers believe Trà was one of the four great surnames of ancient Cham rulers, Ôn, Ma, Trà, and Chế, while Khúc suggests the bends and turns the river makes on its journey from the mountains to the sea. I remember Cao Bá Quát's line, "Trà giang cửu khúc hồi hoàn," the Trà River winding back through nine bends, and nothing could better suit the shape of this river. The Trà Khúc never travels in a straight line. It curves, turns, doubles back, as though even a river can grow attached to the lands it has passed.

From Đắk Tơ Rôn, a peak rising more than 2,300 meters in the great forests of Kon Tum, water gathers from four major tributaries, the Rhe, Xà Lò, Rinh, and Tang. They meet at Ly Lang before turning eastward. Roughly one-third of the river's 135-kilometer course threads through mountains and forests at elevations ranging from 200 to 1,000 meters, where the channel is narrow, steep, and swift. Once free of the mountains, the river opens into the plain, laying down fertile silt before emptying into the sea at Cửa Đại Cổ Lũy, once known to the ancients as Chiêm Lũy lịch môn.

I like standing along the middle reaches, looking into that deep green water and thinking about how far it has come. This is a Central Vietnamese river with a relatively modest watershed, a steep bed, savage in the rainy season and parched in the dry months. Most rain falls from September through December, when floods can arrive with terrifying suddenness, while from January through August fields in many places crack beneath the drought. The great floods of Mậu Dần in 1878, Giáp Thìn in 1964, and Kỷ Mão

in 1999 are no longer merely dates in a chronology. They have become aching memories handed down through generations.

Out of that harshness, the people of Quảng Ngãi learned endurance. They learned to join forces against the floods, dig canals to redirect water, plant bamboo to hold the banks, and build great waterwheels that turned day and night, lifting river water toward their fields. Whenever I hear about those old waterwheel embankments, I can almost hear the slow creaking of enormous bamboo and wooden wheels standing in the current, raising bucket after bucket into troughs that carried water toward sugarcane and rice fields.

Later, the Thạch Nham irrigation project gradually replaced those wheels, carrying water farther and irrigating tens of thousands of hectares of drought-prone land. But every human project carries a price. Some downstream stretches grew shallower, the river lost some of its old fullness, and people began considering additional weirs to hold back water and restore green life to the Trà Khúc. Hearing that leaves me both hopeful and uneasy. A river that has carried human life on its back for generations now finds itself burdened in return with all the calculations and ambitions of human beings.

But the Trà Khúc is far more than geography and irrigation.

Folklore tells of a sorrowful love. “A gentle young woman fell in love with a poor young man, but old customs forbade them to be together. On a stormy night they met beside the river landing, held each other and wept, then

threw themselves into the silver current... She let her scarf fall upon the water... and that ribbon of silk became the graceful river flowing from the mountains to the sea." Standing beside the river, I sometimes wonder whether a legend like that is why the Trà Khúc can be gentle and fierce at once, faithful yet defiant. And perhaps some unfinished love buried in myth is also why those who leave ache so fiercely for home, while those who remain keep waiting with a longing that never quite goes away.

"When I go away, I miss my homeland,
I miss Trà River goby braised with pepper."

Those two simple folk lines sink deep. Goby, tiny thài bai fish, don, clams, eels, swamp eels, the river gives people food, and from that food grows an entire flavor of home. I once sat on a sandy bank watching women rake for clams and gather don, their hands moving quickly, backs bent low, yet their eyes still bright with some small and private happiness.

In the twelfth lunar month, the Trà Khúc runs clear and green, sometimes so still its surface seems like a sheet of glass. Sandbars rise from the water, white and purple reeds swaying in the wind, while farmers come down from Bình Sơn to plant watermelon. They enter the fields before dawn, then wait until the afternoon cools and storm clouds gather before working again. At harvest they may stay awake until nearly midnight. When the season ends, they return the land to the river and move elsewhere to make a living. Live from a river long enough, and perhaps you learn that you must also know when to give something back.

For centuries, the Trà Khúc was also a commercial road connecting the estuary, the plains, and the uplands. Tam Thương Wharf, whose word thương referred to granaries and storehouses, once held emergency grain reserves as far back as the reign of Tự Đức. Boats from Thu Xà carried goods upriver toward the provincial town, while boats from Hà Nhai and Đồng Có came down to trade pepper, bananas, and mountain jackfruit for salt, fish sauce, cloth, and lamp oil. The river opened a road, and that road, in turn, opened people toward other worlds.

On the northern bank, Châu Sa was once the site of the Tam Ty administrative headquarters under the Lê, and later the provincial capital of Quảng Ngãi also stood on the left bank. The territory of Chiêm Lũy Động, ceded by the Cham king in 1402, may, according to a number of historians, have extended only as far as the northern bank of the Trà Khúc. The river, then, did more than divide a landscape. It recorded the footsteps of territorial expansion and the great shifts of history.

I followed the lower river toward Cửa Đại Cổ Lũy, where fresh water finally meets the sea. People in Quảng Ngãi usually shorten the name to Cửa Đại, distinguishing it from Cửa Đại Chiêm near Hội An. In earlier times it was also called Cửa Đợi, thought to be a phonetic variation of Đại. Old records describe an estuary 230 trượng wide, with pronounced tides and military officials stationed there to guard it. Nearby lies Cổ Lũy village, where evening mist drifts over water and a fishing settlement settles into silence, giving rise to the old phrase Cổ Lũy cô thôn, the lonely village of Cổ Lũy.

I reread a few lines by Nguyễn Cư Trinh:

“The wars of some forgotten age have long been put to rest,
Yet the old ramparts remain around the orphaned hamlet…”

The verse feels like sea wind striking the face, raw and stinging, with a sadness that seems to have no bottom. Then I remember a moonlit night in 1942, when Hàn Mặc Tử drifted along a coastal river, which some believe was Cửa Đại, and wrote of a river that seemed first a ribbon of white silk, then a pathway of moonlight spread in gold.

Those who came before us saw the river as silk, as moonlight. I wonder what those of us who arrive later can possibly add. Perhaps nothing. Perhaps it is enough simply to remain quiet, lower one small oar into the water, and let the golden light slip through our fingers.

From the middle reaches, Thiên Ấn rises like Heaven’s seal pressed down upon the river. Across from it stand Núi Tròn and Viên Sơn, shaped like an overturned bowl. One is square, the other round, together evoking that old East Asian vision of wholeness. Yet an old folk song carries an altogether different sorrow:

“At dawn I go down to Quán Cơm and see Hó Mountain,
By evening at Đồng Có I see Núi Tròn.
I come home and lament to husband and children,
Why did I leave, only to have my heart and soul worn away?”

Listening to those words, I think of the years when the country had lost its sovereignty, of uprisings, of Nguyễn Vịnh and countless others who fell, their names surviving

only in folk memory. The mountains remain. The river remains. Yet there were times when human hearts were shattered by the upheavals of history.

After the Beginning of Spring, little islands emerge in midstream. Watermelon growers move back and forth across them all day, and after dark boats travel from Tam Thương past Ông Bành sandbar, beneath Thạch Bích and Trường Xuân bridges, their wavering lights sometimes turning the river into something resembling a floating street.

Today, as many as seven road bridges span the lower Trà Khúc, tying the two banks together and opening new arteries of movement. Standing on one of those bridges and looking down, I no longer see the old waterwheels turning steadily as they once did. I see only my own shadow trembling lightly on the river.

The Trà Khúc has passed through generations of human lives, dynasties, wars, upheavals, and transformations. Once it carried trade toward Lý Sơn and farther still toward Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa, nurturing an entire “Trà River cultural subregion” rich with work songs, folk singing, and salty, earthy verse. It gave the people goby braised with pepper, gave poets a ribbon of moonlit silk, gave those who opened new lands a boundary marker, and gave the exile a homesickness that refuses to fade.

I stood there listening to the water moving beneath my feet. It made little noise, yet it never stopped. And then I understood that the Trà Khúc is not merely the largest river in Quảng Ngãi. It is a lifeline, a vessel of memory, an invisible ribbon of silk binding human hearts to home. And I, a traveler who had come here from the South, suddenly felt

that somewhere inside me, too, a quiet stretch of river had begun to flow, flowing on and on, without end.

THIÊN ẤN NIÊM HÀ — HEAVEN'S SEAL UPON THE RIVER

The sunlight of Central Vietnam does not greet you warmly the way southern sunlight does. It is sharp and fierce, sometimes dry and weary as the sigh of an out-of-season Lào wind. Quảng Ngãi rests beside the Trà Khúc, a river that has watched generations pass, rice crops ripen and disappear, worlds turn upside down, while its water keeps drifting along as though it has never learned what weariness means.

From a distance I could already see Thiên Ấn outlined against the sky. The mountain is not high, barely more than a hundred meters, yet its square, solemn shape makes it resemble an enormous seal set down in the middle of this country of wind and sand. The ancients called the scene Thiên Ấn niêm hà, Heaven's seal upon the river. At first it sounds like one of those elegant phrases scholars invent, but once you stand before the mountain, the name takes on a spirit of its own. Thiên Ấn has the shape of an almost symmetrical trapezoid, with a relatively flat summit and four fairly square sides. Seen from afar, it really does look like a great seal pressing itself against the green water below. I stood on the riverbank looking up, and without knowing why, fell quiet. The mountain said nothing. Neither did the river. Yet somewhere inside me, something seemed to have sounded.

The road up the mountain twists and climbs, steep enough to make you slow down. I took my time, not because I was tired, but because I wanted to look carefully at the leaves flickering in the sunlight and the patches of woodland that still retain something wild. Long ago these slopes were densely forested, with tigers and leopards roaming through them. People dared only climb up to gather firewood and then hurry back down, and few would risk spending a night there. The mountain possessed a sacredness born partly of solitude and partly of fear, as though some invisible gaze were always watching from the darkness beneath the trees.

About four hundred years ago, a Buddhist monk from the north found his way into those mountains. His secular name was Lê Diệt, his Dharma name Pháp Hóa, a native of Fujian and a monk of the Linji tradition. Whenever I hear his story, I picture a solitary figure in a plain brown robe building a little hermitage on the summit, with the Trà Khúc spread before him as a natural forecourt and the Long Đầu range rising behind. One man, one small hut in deep forest. The story goes that one day a group of travelers followed the mountain path upward, drank from a spring, and encountered the monk. His virtue touched them, word of him slowly spread, and the humble hermitage eventually became a pagoda. It is a simple story, yet many large histories begin from seeds just that small.

I entered the grounds of Thiên Ấn Pagoda, an ancient temple begun in 1694 and completed in 1695, one of the oldest Buddhist temples in this region. It stands at an elevation of about a hundred meters, its grounds covering roughly a hectare, surrounded by forest trees whose leaves catch the wind and turn it cool.

To the left of the main sanctuary is the Buddha Well. It is roughly twenty-one meters deep, lined with laterite darkened by time, its stone surface porous and rough yet astonishingly durable. I leaned over and looked down. The water was deep green, crystalline, almost entirely free of cloudiness. According to the old story, the mountain had little water, so the monk decided to dig a well. He reached eight meters without finding a spring, and just as the work became most difficult, a young monk arrived seeking shelter and began helping him dig. When water finally burst from the earth, the elder monk bent down in delight to drink. By the time he raised his head again, the young monk had vanished.

The folk verse still remembers it:

“The monk dug a well upon the mountain,
When water came, he vanished without a trace.”

Even hearing the story now sends a faint chill along my spine. Some believe the Buddha was testing the monk’s heart. Others say a guardian spirit appeared to help him. Researchers have also suggested that the well may date from the Cham period, since Cham communities were extraordinarily skilled at finding underground water, and many ancient wells along Central Vietnam’s coast still remain sweet year-round. Perhaps the monk simply deepened an older well and reopened an ancient spring. Standing beside it, I felt no desire to draw a hard line between legend and archaeology. Some things lose part of their sacredness when we insist on explaining them all the way to the bottom. The well has remained clear and cool for hundreds of years and has never run dry. Perhaps that

alone is enough to give people somewhere to place their faith. Faith in the water, faith in the Buddha, and deeper still, faith in the quiet goodness within human beings.

Inside the pagoda is a great bronze bell cast in Chí Tượng village, now part of Đức Hiệp in Mộ Đức. The bell stands roughly two meters high, its mouth about seven tấc wide, its body decorated with finely worked dragons facing the moon. Local people call it the divine bell. Tradition says that when it was first cast, no matter how people struck it, it would make no sound. Then in 1845, the monk Bảo Ấn, the temple's third patriarch, dreamed that a guardian spirit told him the bell must be brought to Thiên Ấn. Only after prayers were offered did the bell finally ring. I did not hear it that day, yet standing inside the sanctuary I could imagine a low, full sound spreading through the trees, rolling down toward the Trà Khúc, touching distant rooftops before dissolving into the wind. Temple bells are rung for wandering souls and for prayers on behalf of the dead, but perhaps each peal also touches the restless, shadowed places inside the living. In 1717, Nguyễn lord Nguyễn Phúc Chu, a devoted Buddhist ruler of Đàng Trong, bestowed upon the temple the title Sắc Tứ Thiên Ấn Tự. The plaque now displayed there was recreated in 1916. Looking up at those imperial characters, I felt as though the age of southern expansion had quietly returned around me.

Central Vietnam, from Quảng Ngãi down to Bình Định, was once a broad zone of Vietnamese and Cham encounter. Buddhist temples built upon or near older Cham remains are hardly unusual, and every architectural layer recalls something of the long southward journey of earlier generations. A brick, a stone, an old foundation can

sometimes preserve the footsteps of settlers, the beat of horses' hooves, the surf at Sa Kỳ, the shadows of people moving south to clear land and establish villages. Standing there, I understood again that history does not always arrive with drums and thunder. Sometimes it sleeps inside a piece of laterite, a well, or the fading memory of a bell whose sound disappeared into the wind centuries ago.

Leaving the temple, I walked northwest toward the grave of Huỳnh Thúc Kháng. The patriot and scholar rests on the mountaintop among wind and cloud. I stood before his grave and looked down over the city, the river curving through it, rice fields spreading outward, and farther still the East Sea hazy beyond Sa Huỳnh and the hard-working fishing villages along the coast. I wondered whether, lying here, he had ever thought of the Trà Khúc below, whether "Heaven's Seal upon the River" might have seemed to him a reminder of the courage and character of the people born from this land. Wind swept freely across the summit of Thiên Ấn. Suddenly I felt myself becoming smaller, and somehow that smallness taught me to be quieter.

In 1990, the pagoda was designated a national historical site. On full-moon days, the first day of the lunar month, and during Tết, visitors arrive in crowds, some to burn incense, some to drink from the Buddha Well, some simply asking for a little peace. Yet what stayed with me after my visit had little to do with the official designation. It was the feeling of standing on the summit and watching the river move below, of bending over an old piece of laterite and realizing that my own life amounts to only a few decades passing through an immeasurably longer time, of hearing an ancient legend and no longer needing to determine whether

every part of it was true. Thiên Ấn is not high, yet it is high enough for a person to climb it and come back down in a different state of mind. The mountain is a seal impressed upon the earth, and everyone who visits seems to carry away an imprint of his own.

I left the mountain at noon, with the sun directly overhead. The Trà Khúc continued drifting along. Thiên Ấn remained silent. Only I knew that somewhere inside me a spring had just been opened, quiet, enduring, without display, like the Buddha Well that has lasted hundreds of years and still has not run dry.

SA HUỲNH — SEDIMENT BENEATH THE GOLDEN SAND

I once traveled to Sa Huỳnh along National Highway 1, that road running the length of Central Vietnam like a long thread stitching together province after province, memory after memory. Every so often the North–South train passed with a distant whistle, a long, haunting sound that seemed to awaken layers of earth still sleeping beneath the sand.

Sa Huỳnh lies in southern Quảng Ngãi, where the brackish Nước Mặn lagoon opens toward the East Sea, beside the freshwater An Khê lagoon surrounded by an immensity of white sand. Yet even that description is not enough. Today Sa Huỳnh is not merely an estuary or a small coastal township. It is an entire coastal landscape along the province's southernmost edge, extending through Phổ Thạnh, Phổ Châu, and Phổ Khánh in Đức Phổ.

From the dunes, An Khê Lagoon looks as smooth as a green mirror. Beyond it lie rice fields, low rooftops, and thin trails of cooking smoke rising in the late afternoon. Wind moves continuously through the casuarina trees, making them whisper without end. Standing there, I thought how some places have no need to announce themselves. They simply stop you in your tracks, and before you quite understand why, you find yourself wanting to bow your head before their depth.

Long ago, this place was called Sa Hoàng, “golden sand.” Even the name carries sunlight in it, and the gleam of grains slipping between your fingers. Later, because the name conflicted with the taboo surrounding Nguyễn lord Nguyễn Hoàng, it was changed to Sa Huỳnh. A tiny shift in pronunciation, with centuries hidden behind it. History is often like sand. Wind may rearrange the surface, but the deeper layers remain where they have always been.

This estuary occupied a notable position during the Việt–Cham war of 1471 under Emperor Lê Thánh Tông. From very early on, it also participated in Southeast Asia’s maritime trading networks, perhaps, according to some scholars, as early as the first millennium. I closed my eyes and tried to picture brown sails on the waves, the beat of oars, voices calling to one another across open water. Long before this place seemed quiet, it had already been a meeting ground, a marketplace, and sometimes a collision point for different streams of culture.

Yet what sends the deepest shiver through me in Sa Huỳnh is not the sound of the waves. It is the jars beneath the sand. In 1909, a French customs officer named M. Vinet

heard local residents tell of strange objects exposed by shifting dunes. He investigated and excavated a “field of jars” at the Phú Khương dunes beside An Khê Lagoon. According to a report published by the Bulletin of the École française d’Extrême-Orient, roughly two hundred jar burials were found there, buried relatively close to the surface, averaging about 0.80 meters in height and containing pottery vessels along with ornaments of precious stone and glass.

Two hundred jars. Think a little further, and they become two hundred human lives, two hundred destinies, and untold stories buried by time. Walking across the sand, my steps suddenly felt strangely light. Beneath that fine surface had once lain an entire cemetery of ancestors. The great pottery jars used for burial reveal more than a funerary custom. They suggest a way of imagining life and death. The dead were placed near one another in fields and clusters, almost as though even after leaving the world of the living, human beings still needed a community to belong to.

After the discovery of 1909, excavations in 1923 and 1934 continued expanding what scholars knew, particularly the work of M. Colani, who documented fifty-five jars at Thạnh Đức and 187 at Phú Khương. In 1937, the term “Sa Huỳnh Culture” was formally proposed. From the name of one small place, Sa Huỳnh became the name of an archaeological culture dating back roughly 2,500 to 3,000 years. Alongside Đông Sơn in the north and Óc Eo in the south, Sa Huỳnh is regarded as one of the representative centers of prehistoric culture on Vietnamese soil.

I used to think history lived in books. Sa Huỳnh taught me that history can also lie in sand, waiting for a shovel, a gust of wind, or a hard rain to bring part of the past back into daylight. After 1975, Vietnamese archaeologists continued excavating and discovered more than five hundred jar burials. The concentration was so remarkable that Western scholars once referred to the area as the “Sa Huỳnh jar field.” At one point, some believed these were cemeteries left by Malayo-Polynesian seafaring communities, but the discovery of numerous habitation sites, from coastal plains and nearshore islands to mountain valleys, strengthened the argument that this culture was indigenous to the region. The prehistoric people who lived here were the people who created these burial grounds. Learning that somehow eased something in me. What belongs to the earth should, in the end, be returned to the earth under its rightful name.

The grave goods inside the jars are astonishingly rich, agate beads, gemstones, glass, double-headed animal earrings, slit-ring earrings, beads of sea blue, green, and dark red. At Phú Khương, archaeologists found flat square agate beads, along with diamond, hexagonal, and octagonal forms. Thạnh Đức yielded nephrite earrings and large glass bead necklaces. In 1998, at Dương Quang in Mộ Đức, a set of diamond-shaped agate beads was discovered beside a jar burial, thought to have belonged to a woman and perhaps to have signified authority. In the Sa Huỳnh Culture Exhibition Hall at Gò Ma Vương, more than seven hundred artifacts rest silently behind glass. The deep red of the agate seems almost to retain human warmth, while the blue glass still calls to mind water and sky. I stood

there looking at it all and wondered who the woman wearing that necklace had been. Had she ever stood beside An Khê Lagoon, looking into its quiet water and thinking about her own life the way I was thinking about mine?

But Sa Huỳnh is more than burial jars. It also has a pottery tradition still alive today. In Phổ Khánh, pottery villages such as Trung Sơn and Vĩnh An have existed for more than three hundred years within the heart of the heritage area. Potters still work the clay by hand, combining hand shaping with slow wheels, then firing their pieces with plant material. Phổ Khánh pottery is unglazed and unpolished. It asks for nothing more than earth, fire, and the patience of the hands that make it.

I once sat watching an elderly woman shape a cooking pot, her hands moving slowly but with certainty. Every form requires a different touch, and if the clay is to be fine, evenly fired, strong, and beautiful, each movement has to be careful. Watching her hands, I suddenly thought that pottery is not so different from a human life. Sometimes one moment of carelessness is enough to leave a crack, enough to break the whole thing. Sa Huỳnh pottery has been recognized as part of Vietnam's national intangible cultural heritage, yet for the villagers themselves, such honors still come second to ordinary life. Pottery is food on the table before it is heritage. It is breath. It is a trade handed from parent to child that each new generation is still trying to keep alive.

Around the "heart" of An Khê Lagoon, people still grow rice, fish from small boats, harvest sea salt, and cultivate stone-lined terraced plots. Sa Huỳnh salt is known

for its whiteness and strong flavor, crystallized beneath the unforgiving sun and wind of Central Vietnam. Passing the salt fields, I watched workers bent low under the heat, their shadows stretching across the glittering flats. The salt crystals were pure white. Look closely, though, and you could almost see the sweat inside them.

The Sa Huỳnh cultural landscape is now protected at Long Thạnh, Phú Khương, Thạnh Đức, at Champa sites throughout the Sa Huỳnh region, around An Khê Lagoon, and along Lạch An Khê and the Cửa Lỗ River. Core zones, buffer zones, and development zones overlap and support one another, and in archaeological practice, a buffer zone where an important new site is discovered may eventually become part of the core. I like that way of thinking about space. Human life can work the same way. Something we once thought belonged at the margins may one day become the very center of our memory.

From Sa Huỳnh north toward Dung Quất, and then offshore to Lý Sơn, with sites such as Gò Quê, Xóm Ốc, and Suối Chình, the coastal dunes continue quietly guarding traces left between three thousand and two thousand years ago. Sand can cover the past, but it cannot erase it. In the century and more since the first discovery in 1909, continued research and four major conferences on Sa Huỳnh culture, held in 1985, 1990, 1999, and 2009, have opened one door of understanding after another. Each discovery lifts another corner of the curtain, though I believe there are still things beneath the sand no human hand has touched. When the Sa Huỳnh cultural site was recognized as a Special National Monument, it was more than a source of pride for Quảng Ngãi. It was an acknowledgment of a

prehistoric culture whose significance reaches across the region and beyond. If the north has Đông Sơn and the south Óc Eo, Central Vietnam has Sa Huỳnh. Those three centers seem to me like three different heartbeats within the same Vietnamese body, beating from a very distant age.

Evening settled slowly over An Khê Lagoon. The red sun dropped toward the horizon, and the sand around me flared into brilliant gold, making the old name Sa Hoàng suddenly feel intimate and real. I sat alone, listening to the wind pass through my hair, hearing the surf from beyond the estuary, and imagining that somewhere beneath the deep sand I could still hear the faint whisper of those buried jars. Sa Huỳnh taught me something simple that becomes deeper the longer I think about it. Human beings return to the earth in the end, but the way we lived, the bracelet we fashioned, the jar we shaped, the grain of salt we made, may remain longer than we do. The sea stays awake. The sand sleeps. And I left Sa Huỳnh carrying another layer of sediment inside me, quiet, enduring, and golden as the sand.

Essay 14

HỘI AN – LAYERS OF TIME

WHEN NIGHT RETREATS INTO TIME

I had just arrived in Da Nang. The car moved along in an easy hush, gliding over broad streets so smooth and

immaculate they seemed freshly laid down from some new-cut slice of time, still carrying the scent of something untouched. People like to call this “the most livable city in Vietnam.” Whenever I hear that phrase, something in me quietly resists it. Not because I mean to deny the city its virtues, but because the words livable city seem to carry a faint undertone of calculation, praise that has been weighed and measured rather than an affection rising naturally from the heart. To me, what makes a place worth living in has little to do with how modern it looks or how loudly people sing its praises. It has more to do with whether there are people there for you to love, sounds that stay with you after you leave, and some small corner where you can look around and know, without anyone having to tell you, I belong here. As for Da Nang, on this afternoon when I had only just crossed its threshold, I wasn’t ready to venture too deeply into it. I held that first impression back the way one saves a fine glass of wine, not drinking it right away, but setting it aside for a moment worthy of it. And strangely enough, before I could even put a name to what I was feeling, something else occurred to me. There are places, perhaps, that do not ask us to love them at first sight. They simply stand there quietly and wait until the heart has grown deep enough, seasoned enough, and then we are the ones who find our way back and learn to love them.

The car turned southwest toward Hoi An. The road gradually narrowed, the noise thinned out, and it felt as though the world behind me were slowly receding into the distance. Something inside me settled with it, softening with every turn of the wheels. I had been to Hoi An more than a few times, but I had never stayed overnight. This time, I

stopped. Not to sightsee, but to wait. I had the feeling I was searching for something without a shape, some stray piece of memory, some old trace that somehow belonged to me and had been lying here quietly since another lifetime. I chose a room beside a little island tucked into one of the branches of the Thu Bon River. From there, all I had to do was walk across a bridge and I would be in the old town. In the late afternoon I stood by the railing and watched the water drift lazily past, and it seemed my own heart was drifting with it, weightless and unburdened. The river here does not clamor or rage. It seems to understand the value of silence, as though it has spent centuries listening to layer after layer of memory settle upon its banks.

Hoi An lies about eighteen miles from Da Nang, not far by any ordinary measure, yet far enough for two entirely different rhythms of life to exist. Blessed by geography, it became a thriving international trading port in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a place where merchant ships from Japan, China, and the West converged. I closed my eyes and tried to picture those long-vanished sails, the cries of merchants hawking their goods, conversations unfolding in languages from distant shores, all of it mingling into one great symphony of sea and humanity.

Long before that flourishing age, this land had already belonged to the maritime Silk Road. Ancient civilizations had passed through here, people had come and gone, leaving behind cultural sediments that centuries could not easily erase. Then, in the nineteenth century, trade routes shifted and Hoi An gradually withdrew into shadow, yielding the spotlight to Da Nang, where the French began

building a new city. I sometimes think it was precisely that retreat that saved Hoi An. By falling behind, it escaped being swept into the whirlwind of urbanization, escaped being made so relentlessly new that it forgot what it had once been. Beginning in the 1980s, people started looking at Hoi An differently, no longer as an old town that needed to be modernized, but as a heritage that deserved to be preserved. In 1999, UNESCO recognized it as a World Heritage Site. Yet to me, the title is only a name. Hoi An's true worth lies somewhere else. It lives in every roof, every alleyway, every lantern descending into the evening like a suspended drop of time.

I walked into the old town as dusk began to gather. Ancient houses, some of them standing since the seventeenth century, pressed close together in quiet rows, like old people who have lived long enough that they no longer feel compelled to say much. Among them stood Chinese assembly halls and traces of French architecture, all blended so naturally that the boundaries seemed to have disappeared. Hoi An reminded me of someone who has lived a long, complicated life, someone who has known countless encounters and partings and, through them all, acquired a quiet beauty that has no need to show itself off. Life here has never been frozen into a museum display. People still live in these houses, still conduct their business, still preserve their customs, festivals, and deeply personal ways of worship. I found myself wondering what had kept all of this alive through so many upheavals. Surely not laws or prestigious titles alone. More likely it was the quiet, stubborn affection people have for the place they call home.

Night came down. I sat beside the Hoai River watching little flower lanterns drift slowly over the water, each one carrying a prayer. In that space, I felt myself grow smaller, no more than a passerby moving briefly through an immensely long current of history. Even the name “Hoi An” is like that. It did not emerge clearly at some single, identifiable moment, but gradually took shape, appearing in old works such as Duong Van An’s Ô Châu Cận Lục and in maps contained in the Thiên Nam Tứ Chí Lộ Đồ. The name feels almost like mist. No one can quite say where it begins, yet somehow it remains. Westerners called the town Faifo, a strange-sounding name that opens the door to all kinds of associations. I thought of Alexandre de Rhodes, who recorded that name in his Vietnamese-Portuguese-Latin dictionary of 1651. Names change, but the current remains, much like the river before me, forever moving and somehow never lost.

Sitting there a little longer, I began thinking about all the peoples who had lived on this land. There were the Pre-Sa Huynh communities more than three thousand years ago, reaching all the way to the Cham Islands, then the people of the Sa Huynh culture two thousand years ago, and later the Cham of the Kingdom of Champa. They seemed like successive waves rolling over one another, each carrying its own traces, until eventually all of them flowed into a single current.

The Sa Huynh people lived by the rivers and the sea. They grew rice, made pottery, forged iron, and traded with distant lands. Chinese coins reached them, as did glass beads from southern India, while influences from the Dong Son and Oc Eo cultures found their way here as well.

Thinking about it, I realized that from very early on this had been a crossroads, a place open to the outside rather than turned inward upon itself. Perhaps that very openness became part of Hoi An's essential nature.

Then came the Cham, a people whose gaze turned naturally toward the sea. They developed this area into an important part of the Champa kingdom. According to many studies, the spatial axis running from the Cham Islands through Hoi An and Tra Kieu to My Son formed a continuous cultural corridor. I imagined those ancient roads, the people moving back and forth along them, exchanging not merely goods but beliefs, ways of living, even ways of understanding the world.

That night I did not go to sleep early. I let myself drift with Hoi An like a small lantern floating on the river. I had no idea where it might carry me. I knew only that somewhere inside that slowness was a kind of peace I had not touched in a very long time.

HỘI AN – LAYERS OF AN EAST-WEST CURRENT

Standing in the heart of the old town, where every brick seemed still to hold the breath of time, I found myself thinking again about the layers of history that shaped the face of Hoi An. This was once the trading port called Faifo, a gateway through which an entire region opened itself to commerce with the wider world.

After the historic marriage of Princess Huyen Tran in 1306, the territory north of Hoi An nominally became part of Dai Viet. In reality, however, it remained a living space of the

Cham people. The indigenous population quietly held on to the land and to its way of life from one generation to the next.

It was not until the beginning of the fifteenth century, under the Ho dynasty, that profound changes truly began to take place. The opening of the Thien Ly road, administrative reorganization, and especially the policy of moving settlers into Thang Hoa laid the first stones of a gradual process of Viet settlement and cultural integration. Vietnamese settlers came to clear the land and build new lives, bringing agricultural techniques, village organization, and above all the determination to put down roots.

History, however, gave the Ho dynasty too little time. The Ming invasion quickly swept away much of what had only begun. During two decades of occupation, the territory south of Hai Van once again became something of a political vacuum. The Cham continued their presence, while the Vietnamese lived in an uneasy, cautious balance. Villages had not yet fully taken shape. They were more like seeds beneath the soil, alive but waiting for their season.

Only in 1471, when Emperor Le Thanh Tong led his campaign southward, did the situation decisively change. Quang Nam was formally established, the administrative system strengthened, and Vietnamese villages began to emerge with greater clarity. Names such as Vong Nhi, Cam Pho, and Hoai Pho became more than places on the landscape. They marked a community taking root.

By the late sixteenth century, history turned again as the Nguyen lords established their rule in the South. With strategic vision and relatively open policies, they did more

than consolidate territory. They transformed this region into a gateway for trade. The old prophecy, “Hoành Sơn nhất đái, vạn đại dung thân,” was more than a prediction. It became a direction in which history itself seemed to move. Hoi An gradually changed from a frontier settlement into a trading port. By the early seventeenth century, its name began appearing in written records and inscriptions. The area was no longer a loose collection of scattered settlements. There were streets now, markets, bridges, warehouses. The population grew, occupations diversified, from farming and fishing to handicrafts and commerce. Boats no longer merely connected one village to another. They opened a road to the great sea beyond.

Yet the soul of Hoi An was never made by the Vietnamese alone. It was shaped as well by successive waves of newcomers from the north, the east, and eventually the West. Chinese migrants came because of political upheaval and because they were looking for opportunity. They established Minh Huong communities, assembly halls, and merchant associations, bringing their customs, beliefs, and sharp commercial instincts. The Japanese, during a brief but brilliant chapter, created a quarter of their own. They brought copper, iron, and currency, and carried away silk and agarwood. Marriages with local people created bonds that ran far deeper than commerce. At the same time, merchants from India, Southeast Asia, and Europe began arriving. Hoi An became a meeting point in the emerging currents of global trade. Its urban culture consequently developed a character all its own, multicultural and multiethnic, yet somehow blended into a coherent whole.

No golden age lasts forever. In the eighteenth century, the Tay Son wars and intervention by the Trinh forces brought devastation to Hoi An. Bustling neighborhoods fell into ruin. The wealthy and powerful fled, taking their fortunes with them. The town recovered afterward, but never fully regained its former position. In the nineteenth century, nature also began rewriting its destiny. The harbor silted up and the river grew shallower. The Nguyen dynasty's restrictive policies toward foreign trade weakened the port even further.

Under French colonial rule, Hoi An entered another phase. It served as a provincial capital under French administration. Urbanization advanced, Western architecture appeared, and roads were planned and laid out. Yet at the same time, Da Nang was rising, gradually replacing Hoi An in its old role as the region's principal port.

Then one day, Hoi An slipped behind the march of history. It was no longer a commercial center, its waterways no longer crowded with trading vessels, and the old town seemed to fall asleep. Yet being "forgotten" became an unexpected blessing. Hoi An escaped the full force of modern urbanization, and its historic structure was never completely shattered. The rooftops, streets, assembly halls remained, preserving the contours of an earlier golden age. So when the world rediscovered Hoi An toward the end of the twentieth century, it found more than an architectural heritage. It found the living memory of a port that once connected East and West. Standing in its streets today, one does not see merely an old city. One senses all the people who passed through it, Vietnamese, Cham, Chinese, Japanese, those who came, those who stayed, those who

mingled until together they made the Hoi An we know today, quiet and unfathomably deep, like the river itself flowing silently through the centuries.

And then there was a very small, almost imperceptible moment when I stood still while the crowd kept moving around me, and I understood that what remains in the end is not what people built, but what they lived. And that, more than time itself, is what keeps a place from dying.

HỘI AN – WHERE THE TILED ROOFS SIGH IN MEMORY

Once again I stood there in the haze of late afternoon, with the sunlight beginning to soften over the moss-covered roofs. Something inside me softened with it, as though someone from a very old and distant place had quietly called my name. Perhaps what holds people in Hoi An is not merely its streets, its lanterns, or the Hoai River drifting lazily past. Perhaps it is the soul of its architecture, a wordless soul that smolders quietly beneath the surface, slips into you without warning, and suddenly makes your heart tremble.

This time I was in no hurry. I wasn't walking just to say I had been there. I wasn't taking pictures simply to have the pictures. I walked slowly, really slowly, almost afraid that if I moved too fast, the old world around me might crack apart and disappear. The ancient quarter fits inside an area of barely two square kilometers, yet somehow it feels immense. Immense in the way memory is immense, in the way layer upon layer of time can make a small place seem

endless. The streets are short and narrow, bending gently as if drawn by a human hand rather than laid out with a ruler. I followed Bach Dang along the river, then turned through Nguyen Thai Hoc and Tran Phu. The names themselves ought to have sounded dry and ordinary, yet here they seemed strangely alive. Some stretches slope ever so slightly, barely enough to notice, but enough to make you feel that you are going deeper. Not merely deeper into the town, but deeper into another layer of time.

Tran Phu Street, the street everyone calls the “backbone” of Hoi An, was far quieter than I had imagined. It carried itself with the calm of an old man who has already seen everything there is to see. Along it stand the Chinese assembly halls, Cantonese, Fujian, Chaozhou. Each has its own character, yet all bear the unmistakable imprint of people who had left their homeland and tried to rebuild some part of it here through timber and tiled roofs, incense and worship. I stood before one of those halls and looked into its shadowed interior, and suddenly I felt that some small part of me resembled those people. I, too, was someone far from home, carrying things I could not quite put into words.

Nearby stood the Quan Cong Temple. People call it a symbol of the Minh Huong community’s religious life. To me, though, it felt more like a spiritual anchor, something solid in the middle of an endlessly changing world. I did not go inside. I simply stood outside looking in and let my thoughts wander. Wherever we go, whatever we become, do we not eventually need somewhere to place our faith, somewhere to entrust the things we cannot carry alone?

Yet what held me longest was not any grand monument. It was the houses. At first glance, Hoi An's houses look simple, but the longer you study them, the more human they become. Their facades are narrow and their interiors stretch deep into shadow, rather like a human life, whose outside never tells you everything about what lies within. These tube houses extend from front to back through successive layers of space for commerce, family life, and worship. I stepped into one old house where light fell gently through an interior courtyard, soft rather than harsh, illuminating without glare. A tiny courtyard, a few potted plants, a small pool of water, just enough room for the wind to pass through and for a human being to breathe. The old builders did not construct houses merely as shelters. They built them so people could live in conversation with sky and earth, rain and sunlight. Business happened in front, family life farther back, worship above. Everything intertwined without becoming confused. There was a quiet, enduring order to it all. Layers of yin-yang roof tiles curved gently overhead, weathered yet sturdy. The tiles were made from earth, simply fired, nothing elaborate about them, and perhaps that very roughness was the source of their durability. Standing beneath an eave and looking up, I wondered whether human beings sometimes need a little more roughness in us too, just so we can endure.

Farther on, I began noticing traces of the French period. Western-style facades appeared between traditional timber houses, yet strangely enough they did not clash. They blended. Hoi An seemed unwilling to reject what was new, but equally unwilling to abandon what was old. Instead, it kept both and transformed them. I began to understand

why this place had not been swallowed whole by urbanization as so many others had. Hoi An survived not because it refused to move, but because it learned how to flow. To flow without losing itself.

By late afternoon I made my way to the Hoai River landing. A few little boats rocked gently there, each carrying only a handful of people. I stepped aboard and sat down, listening to the water slap softly against the wooden hull. The boatman handed me a little paper lantern and told me to set it on the water and make a wish. I held it in my hands and watched the tiny flame tremble, and something in me unexpectedly stirred. I did not ask for anything grand. Only one small thing, don't forget...

Night settled over Hoi An and the lanterns came alive. The town did not blaze with hard, dazzling light. Its glow was soft and warm and golden. Lanterns hung everywhere, in countless shapes and colors, yet somehow nothing felt gaudy. I walked through the crowd, hearing conversations and laughter, the clink of glasses and cups, footsteps passing in every direction, and still I felt as though I were somewhere strangely private. Young people posed for photographs, Western visitors ate and drank, and everything unfolded as naturally as breathing. I wandered without a destination and felt no need for one.

Later I returned to the resort area on the islet to watch an outdoor performance called Hoi An Memories. The stage was enormous, the cast large, the lighting and music meticulously produced. Five acts followed one another, moving through scenes of daily labor and village life, Princess Huyen Tran's wedding, boats and commerce,

separation and reunion. They call it “a symphony of light and emotion.” I had seen many productions of this kind in places farther away, shows more modern, more spectacular, more technically extravagant. Yet strangely, here, in this place and with this particular story, it touched me more deeply. Perhaps it wasn’t the technology at all. Perhaps it was memory. When the final act ended and the lights slowly faded, I remained seated for a while. No clear image stayed in my mind, only a vague feeling I could not quite name. And suddenly I understood. Hoi An is not a place merely to “see.” It is a place to feel. You need only touch it once, and somehow, without asking permission, it stays with you.

Essay 15

HỘI AN – WHERE TIME KNOWS HOW TO STAY

Hoi An on a morning when the sunlight was gentle rather than fierce, the sky hovering overhead as though it were still half asleep, the Hoai River lying motionless like an old length of silk, revealing layer upon layer of silt left behind by time. I walked without hurrying, almost afraid of disturbing the meditative stillness resting over every moss-covered roof and every weather-stained yellow wall. This was a place where every brick, every door seemed capable of speaking, if only I were willing to listen.

Hoi An is not a city meant simply to be looked at. It is a place you touch through feeling. Here, history does not lie quietly between the covers of books. It works its way into

every breath. Walking these streets, I felt as though I were moving through an encounter that had been unfolding for hundreds of years, a place where Vietnamese and Chinese, Japanese and even distant figures from the West had once arrived, built their lives, and left behind something that words can never quite capture, something you can only feel.

That is why the architecture here is so unusual. It belongs to no single style and submits to no fixed mold. It reminds me of a person who has lived long enough to carry many layers of memory, each one bearing the imprint of another age. The houses have the quiet bearing of the East, with their subdued yin-yang tiled roofs, yet there is also something of the West in them, a certain openness, almost like a deeper breath. Assembly halls, communal houses, pagodas, and temples stand alongside one another without competing for attention or crowding each other out, as though every difference here learned long ago how to coexist. I visited pagodas, temples, and shrines where people come not merely to ask for blessings, but to preserve an invisible bond with the past. Hoi An was once a major Buddhist center of Dang Trong, the southern realm, and no one really needs to tell you that. Step into these spaces and you can sense it for yourself. However many restorations and changes the pagodas have undergone, they still retain something distinctly their own, a silence with depth to it, never clamorous, slowly soaking into you the way water seeps into earth.

Chuc Thanh Pagoda, spoken of as the earliest pagoda here, dating to 1454, no longer preserves its original form intact, yet its spirit remains. I stood there looking at the statues and old inscriptions and felt as though I were

standing in the middle of a current that had never stopped flowing. Here religion is not separate from life. It flows into life, sustains it, and sometimes endures the same upheavals human beings themselves must endure.

Then I went to the Quan Cong Temple, commonly called Chua Ong. It stands right in the heart of town, vivid red and solid, almost like a spiritual anchor for the whole neighborhood. I passed through the great doorway and saw Quan Cong seated there, red-faced, long-bearded, his gaze stern and unwavering. What struck me was that although I knew he had been a historical figure, a general from the Three Kingdoms era, standing before his image I stopped thinking about history and began thinking about faith. People worship him not simply because he was formidable, but because he was able to hold on to himself amid every temptation. A man whose heart could not be turned by fame or profit, whose integrity could not be corrupted by wealth and privilege, whose resolve could not be broken by poverty, and whose spirit could not be bent by force. We have all heard sentiments like these before. But stop and really think about them, and how many people can actually live that way? Perhaps that is why he became a god in the eyes of those who revered him. Not because he was perfect, but because he struggled to preserve something extraordinarily difficult to preserve.

I continued on to the assembly halls, spaces deeply marked by the Chinese presence in Hoi An. The Fujian Assembly Hall was where I lingered longest. There was something brilliant and sacred about it. The red pillars, sweeping roofs, elaborate carvings all seemed to tell the long story of people who had left their homeland carrying

their beliefs, their memories, and their longing with them. Thien Hau, the Heavenly Empress, is worshiped there as a mother of the sea. I stood before her image and listened again to the story of Lin Moniang, the young woman who tried to save her father in a raging sea, and for no reason I could quite explain, my heart sank a little. People who made their living on the ocean faced death every day. They needed something to believe in. Over time, that faith became inseparable from life itself.

A little farther on, I sought out the ancestral houses. They were neither as bustling as the assembly halls nor as brilliant as the temples. An ancestral house carries a quieter dignity all its own. Here people do not worship gods. They honor the very people from whom their own lives came. I stepped inside one clan ancestral house and saw wooden boxes containing relics and biographical records of generations of family members. Time itself seemed to have been carefully folded and arranged there, orderly and intact. One detail stayed with me. Behind one ancestral house was a small piece of ground where the afterbirth of newborn children had once been buried. Above it grew a starfruit tree. I cannot quite say why that image moved me so deeply. Perhaps because it reminded me that no matter how far human beings wander, we still need somewhere to return to, even if that return can happen only in memory.

By noon I reached the Japanese Covered Bridge. It had been restored to resemble what it once was. I leaned against the railing and watched the water move quietly below. The bridge is not large, only about sixty feet long, yet it carries an extraordinary weight of meaning. Japan, China, and Vietnam seem to meet within its house-above, bridge-

below design, at once a bridge, a structure, and a place of worship. People tell all sorts of stories about it, stories of sea monsters, stories about the Years of the Monkey and the Dog, and plenty more besides. I was not particularly concerned with whether any of them were literally true. What seemed clearer to me was that this bridge resembles Hoi An itself. It is a connection. It does more than join two banks of a stream. It joins cultures, eras, and human lives.

Standing there, I thought about Hoi An, a place at once diverse and remarkably ordinary. It is unlike Hue, with the imposing dignity of an imperial capital. Hoi An feels closer to the ground, closer to everyday life. Culture here does not sit on a pedestal. It lives in meals, festivals, and in the simple way someone lights a stick of incense inside the family home. Belief in Hoi An is much the same. People worship all manner of things, ancestors, the Five Household Deities, Quan Cong, Thien Hau, the Buddha. Strangely, they all exist side by side without much conflict. People seem less preoccupied with deciding what is “right” or “wrong” than with simply having somewhere to place their faith. Perhaps what makes Hoi An what it is has never been merely its old buildings. Perhaps it is the way people here have managed to preserve a balance between old and new, difference and harmony, faith and ordinary life.

As afternoon faded, the lanterns began coming on again, and the old town slipped into another garment, shimmering now beneath their glow. I left the streets and headed back to where I was staying. My heart felt neither heavy nor light. I only had the sense that I had just passed briefly through a place where time did not move in the ordinary way. And I wondered, with everything changing so

quickly now, how much of itself a place like Hoi An will still be able to keep. Or whether one day it, too, will become a memory, like those old stories people continue to tell long after no one is actually living inside them anymore.

THE FULL-MOON NIGHT AND THE SILENT ALTARS

I came back again, walking the same old streets, and yet every turn seemed to open another layer of thought. It was as though Hoi An would not allow me merely to pass through. It kept drawing me deeper, into the ways people believe, the ways they worship, the ways they live alongside things that cannot be seen and yet somehow endure more stubbornly than the old tiled roofs themselves.

I passed an old house whose door stood slightly open and caught sight of thin strands of incense smoke rising inside the silent room. It brought me back to the matter of worship here. This is not simply the familiar ancestor worship found throughout so many Vietnamese towns and villages. There is also what people call Ngũ tự gia đường, the worship of the Five Household Deities. At first it sounds distant, almost esoteric, but the more I thought about it, the more intimate it seemed. People in Hoi An believe that just as a country has its ruler, a household has those who watch over it, and those guardians are not necessarily among the living. There are five deities, the Kitchen God, the Well God, the Gate God, the ancestral patron of one's craft or calling, and Cuu Thien Huyen Nu. Each watches over some small corner of family life. Nothing grand or abstract about it. These are the ordinary things of existence, the stove where

meals are cooked, the well where water is drawn, the gate people walk through every day. I stood there thinking about it and found something wonderfully sincere in the way people of the past placed their faith. Their gods did not need to live somewhere far away. They placed the sacred right where they lived, among the things their hands touched every day.

In the houses here, I noticed, the principal altar generally occupies a solemn place in the center of the home. Look more closely, though, and each deity has a place of its own. The Kitchen God belongs in the kitchen, the Gate God stays by the entrance, the Well God near the mouth of the well. Faith is not gathered into one isolated corner. It is scattered throughout the house, woven into the routines of everyday life. Perhaps that is why people learned to live with greater care, because whatever they did, somewhere in the back of their minds remained the feeling that someone was watching.

Then my thoughts wandered a little farther. Hoi An is home to many religions, Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, Protestant Christianity, Cao Dai, yet I sensed little hunger among people to fight over who possessed the truth. Buddhism remains the largest tradition, but not everyone who practices Buddhist customs is exclusively Buddhist. A family may never have formally taken refuge in the Three Jewels, yet still worship Guanyin, observe vegetarian days, chant prayers. Some homes devote an entire large room to Shakyamuni Buddha, placing the Buddhist altar even higher than the ancestral altar, almost as though quietly marking where worldly life ends and the inner life begins. Faith here

does not seem to require much explanation. It simply needs to be present.

A few steps farther, though, I encountered an image with greater force and sharper edges. Quan Cong. In Hoi An, he is not merely a general from the pages of history. He is a living deity in homes and shops throughout the town. People worship him as a guardian of trustworthiness, loyalty, honor, and straight dealing in a commercial world where fortunes and loyalties can change overnight. I remembered standing the day before inside a Chinese temple, looking at his image, red face, deep-set eyes, long beard, and feeling almost as though I were being confronted with a question, How do you live without going crooked? People believe in him not because he never made mistakes, but because he was willing to hold fast to what he believed was right all the way to the end. In a place that was once a great trading port, a world built upon bargains, contracts, promises, and handshakes, perhaps people needed exactly such a god, someone to remind them not to slip.

Then I turned into another assembly hall and met Thien Hau once again, the Mother of the Sea, whose name sailors call when the waves begin to rise. I had heard her story many times, yet hearing it again somehow still felt new. A girl named Lin Moniang, born in Fujian, different from other children from the beginning. Quiet, rarely crying, strangely able to perceive things others could not. She tried to save her father during a storm, but could not save him, managing only to rescue her two brothers. I kept thinking about that part, the fact that she could not save everyone. Perhaps that failure is precisely what makes a deity feel close to human beings. A god who has known helplessness

can understand human helplessness. In later generations she was deified and worshiped across China and Vietnam, and her cult spread to Japan, Taiwan, and elsewhere. More than a thousand years have passed, and people still call her name when they venture out to sea. Standing there in the assembly hall watching incense smoke rise, a thought came quietly to me. Faith does not always need to settle the question of right and wrong. Sometimes it simply needs to last.

And that was not all. Each community in Hoi An preserved deities of its own. The Hainanese worship the 108 Chieu Ung martyrs, men who died at sea and were later deified. The Chaozhou community worships Ma Yuan, a general celebrated as a hero in Chinese history, yet a name that carries a very different weight when remembered through Vietnamese history, particularly in connection with the uprising of the Trung Sisters. Standing there, I felt a slight uneasiness. The same man can be a god in one place and a painful memory in another. But then I thought that perhaps Hoi An does not choose judgment so much as preservation. It keeps even those things that are uncomfortable, because discomfort, too, belongs to the truth.

The afternoon gradually faded as I walked toward the river. Somewhere nearby came the sound of drums and voices calling back and forth as people prepared for the next day's ceremonies. I thought again about the festivals here, not festivals staged merely for display, but occasions when a community gathers and reminds itself not to forget. There are village communal-house ceremonies, processions for guardian deities, and the Long Chu festival. For that one,

people make a dragon-shaped boat, carry it in procession, then burn it and send it drifting away, as though placing sickness, misfortune, and every dark thing aboard and sending them all out to sea. I pictured the scene and found it both sacred and sad. Sometimes burning a boat may also be a way of burning away a fear. In the fishing villages, people race boats, perform bả trạo chants and dances, and hold ceremonies honoring Cá Ông, the Whale God, the great creature believed to rescue people in distress at sea. I was told that whenever a whale washes ashore, people bury it with proper rites, almost as they would bury a member of the family. Fishermen in the coastal region where I grew up did much the same. I do not know whether to call it superstition or gratitude. But I do know this, if a belief helps human beings live with greater kindness, it deserves to be kept.

Night came, and I returned to the old town only to realize that tonight happened to be the full moon. The electric lights had all been turned off, leaving only moonlight and lanterns. Walking among the crowd, I felt as though I had wandered into another century. Somewhere came the sound of bài chòi, then laughter, voices calling out, and the glow of lanterns drifting downstream. One name came back to me, Kazimierz Kwiatkowski, the man who helped preserve so much of what surrounded me. Someone who came from far away, yet understood the value of the “old” better than many who had lived inside it all their lives. Strange, when you think about it.

A MEAL IN TOWN, A WALK THROUGH THE VILLAGES

Once again I entered the old quarter, moving through crowds shoulder to shoulder, the shuffle of shoes and sandals mingling with laughter and conversations in a dozen different accents. People come here in tremendous numbers. At times it feels like a marketplace that never ends. Vietnamese visitors, Western travelers, everyone arrives eager for something. And it seems the first thing people are eager for is always food.

To many visitors, Hoi An is one enormous open menu. People seek out cao lầu almost as though eating it were a required ritual. Beyond the old quarter, newer rows of buildings have gone up in imitation of the old, brightly lit, carefully arranged, calling customers in. Restaurants crowd against one another, signs competing for attention, as though the whole city had laid out one enormous table for whoever happened to arrive. As for me, I have to admit that my palate never lingered here for long. I tried the food several times on earlier visits and eventually left it at that. When I think of Chinese food, my mind goes instead to the streets of Cho Lon, where the flavors are deeper and the culinary soul somehow feels closer to my own.

But Hoi An is about far more than whether a particular taste suits you. This is a land born of convergence. It has none of the immense fields of the Mekong Delta, nor the broad expanses of the Red River Delta. Hoi An has narrow strips of earth and alluvial flats along the rivers, patiently built up by silt over the years. That half-river, half-sea environment created a cuisine all its own,

with fish and shrimp appearing more often than meat, the saltiness of the sea mingling with gentler, sweeter flavors from the land. Walk through a market and you will see more fish than meat. Fish is so deeply woven into daily life that even the food section of the market is commonly called the fish market.

The cooking here is therefore rustic and complicated at the same time. Cao lầu, the dish everyone talks about, is itself a story with no final answer. The Chinese do not claim it as their own. The Japanese say it bears some resemblance to noodles from the Ise region. Yet in the end, it remains unmistakably Hoi An, a mixture, a quiet distillation of the old trading port. The noodles are made from rice, soaked, ground, pressed, and dried, a process elaborate enough to resemble a ritual. Unlike pho, it is not submerged in broth, and unlike many bowls of bún, it does not depend on a deeply seasoned soup. Cao lầu occupies a place of its own, dry and firm, served with char siu pork, crisp pork cracklings, and fresh herbs. No bowlful of broth, yet somehow nothing seems missing. Some say the name cao lầu refers to eating “upstairs,” where merchants once sat on upper floors overlooking the street as they ate. I have no idea whether that explanation is true. But sitting in a small restaurant watching the crowds pass below, I found myself thinking that perhaps the “height” in cao lầu has less to do with where one sits than with how far memory reaches.

Hoi An has plenty besides cao lầu, mì Quảng, bánh bao, bánh vạc, bánh xèo, and more. Each dish tells another story about the land, its people, and the cultures layered over one another like sediment. The white, delicate skins of bánh bao and bánh vạc are thin, almost translucent. They

are made from carefully selected rice and water from old wells, then filled with shrimp, pork, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, and other ingredients. The workmanship can be so meticulous that you find yourself looking before you eat. Eating in Hoi An is not always about getting full. Sometimes it is about seeing a culture laid out before you on a plate.

Leaving the old quarter, I headed outward. Go only a short distance beyond the crowds and Hoi An changes. The noise disappears, the lights fall away. There are only fields, narrow country roads, and a quiet sweep of green. I made my way to Tra Que Vegetable Village. Fields stretched along both sides of the road. The young rice was green, though the green here seemed deeper and somehow sturdier than in the fields I had seen in southeastern Vietnam or the Mekong Delta. Perhaps it comes from the soil, perhaps the water, perhaps simply from the way people tend the land. They say the village dates to the sixteenth century. It occupies a patch of land almost like a small island embraced by water, blessed with a mild climate, a place where people from the Sa Huynh era through Champa and Dai Viet chose to remain. A piece of earth where history did not merely pass through, but stopped and stayed.

I saw an old man turning the soil and shaping planting beds. He spoke to me as naturally as if we had known each other for years. Vegetables here are grown with organic fertilizer, including a local herb called é, whose fragrance is unlike anything else. I stopped at a little shop and tried a glass of tea made from it. The scent was light, a little like lemongrass, though not quite. One of those fragrances that refuses to be easily named, rather like Hoi An itself.

Farther into the village, I stopped by the grave of a Nguyen-dynasty mandarin named Nguyen Van Dien. I was told that his service was recognized across the reigns of three emperors, Gia Long, Minh Mang, and Tu Duc. His grave is simple. Standing before it, I found myself thinking of the enormous tombs people build today, monuments covered with dragons and phoenixes and costing fortunes. I wondered which lasts longer, stone, or the memory carried by the people of a village?

Tra Que still holds traces of those who came before. I stopped at its ancient stone well, the old Tra Que well. It is square, built from stacked bricks without mortar, with four stone pillars along the rim. Its design follows the old principle of “square above, round below.” An entire philosophy tucked into something as ordinary as the way a well is dug. The water remains clear, though it seems no one uses it anymore. I stood there for a long while. Not really to look at the water, but to listen for something very old, as though time itself were still resting at the bottom of that well.

On the way back, something became clearer to me. Hoi An is not merely its ancient quarter. It is a circle, from food to fields, restaurants to wells, past to present. And every time you make that circle, if you move slowly enough, you begin to see that it is not Hoi An revealing itself to you. It is you who begin to appear within it.

THE WATER THAT FLOWS THROUGH MEMORY

People say the Hoai River is only a small branch of the Thu Bon, and once you begin following a branch of

water, sooner or later you feel compelled to travel upstream and find the place where it was born, much the way we follow a memory backward in hopes of understanding our own beginnings. That was what I did. I let my thoughts drift with the water, leaving the gentle old town behind and traveling in my imagination toward the distant mountains, where the river begins in its first cold, immaculate drops, like the breath of earth and sky before the dust of human life has had a chance to touch it.

The Thu Bon is immense, its watershed covering some 10,350 square kilometers. The number alone makes it seem less like a river than a world unto itself, a vast territory of memory extending through generations of people in Quang Nam, beginning in the Ngoc Linh massif. This is one of the highest mountain ranges in central Vietnam, standing in silence like an old man who has seen too much to speak easily, keeping within himself the secrets of deep forests and mist, and of waters flowing toward two different worlds. One stream turns westward and eventually joins the Mekong through the Se San River. Another turns east toward the South China Sea through the Thu Bon. A single mountain divide, yet it sends water toward two separate destinies. There is something quietly sad about that, I thought, rather like human beings who sometimes find themselves moving in opposite directions because of nothing more than an invisible boundary between them.

I imagined the headwaters threading through forests and around stones, passing through places such as Nam Tra My, Bac Tra My, Tien Phuoc, and Hiep Duc. There the water is known as the Tranh River, a name that sounds gentle and a little melancholy, like a brushstroke still wet on

an unfinished painting of earth and sky. Only when it reaches Nong Son and Duy Xuyen does the river come to be called the Thu Bon, as though by then it has grown large enough, traveled far enough, lived enough of a life to carry a proper, mature name. At Dai Loc, it meets the Vu Gia River. The two currents merge without commotion or spectacle, yet together they form a great river system that sustains an entire region, feeding the dreams, memories, griefs, and joys of the people of Quang Nam. It occurred to me that perhaps human lives are much the same. We have to pass through winding stretches, through meetings and separations, before our lives finally gather themselves into a current that means something. Before reaching the sea at Cua Dai, the Thu Bon divides once more into several branches. Some water works its way through the Vinh Dien River toward the Han River, while another branch empties into An Hoa Bay, almost as though the river cannot bring itself to leave the land in one clean departure. It keeps reaching back, dividing itself, lingering just a little longer with the earth and the people who have lived beside it.

The lower reaches of this river, where Hoi An and the Cham Islands lie, are more than beautiful scenery. They form a remarkable ecosystem where fresh water and salt water, forests and sea, human beings and the natural world weave themselves together like a piece of music without words. All you have to do is stand quietly and listen, and something inside you begins to soften. There have even been proposals for UNESCO recognition of this broader area as a biosphere reserve. To me, though, it became a kind of heritage long ago, a heritage of feeling. Yet every river has its pain. In the great floods of 1964, 1978, 1999,

the waters rose and carried houses away, and with them pieces of people's memories. Riverbanks collapsed, channels shifted, and even Hoi An's ancient quarter came under threat. I stood beside the river watching its quiet surface move past and wondered how many episodes of fury were concealed beneath that calm. Human beings can be like that too. Peaceful on the outside, while somewhere within us a whole storm may be raging unseen.

I had been to the My Son Sanctuary, where the Thu Bon passes nearby, almost as though the river itself wanted to stop for a while and listen to history whispering among the ruins. I remember the first time I entered that valley. Mountains surrounded it, and the silence was so complete I could hear the wind brushing against ancient brick. Something inside me sank into stillness, as though I had stepped into an old dream. The Champa temples there, built beginning in the fourth century and associated with King Bhadravarman I, were dedicated to Shiva and deeply shaped by Indian influence. They are the remains of a civilization that once flourished magnificently and now survives in red bricks stacked together with such mysterious skill that people still debate exactly how the builders achieved it. I stood there with my hand against an old brick wall and suddenly felt myself shrink. Time stretched outward, and everything I called my life seemed only a tiny passage inside an endless current. People compare My Son with Angkor Wat and Borobudur, but to me My Son carries a sorrow all its own. It is a quiet sorrow, like someone who was once enormously wealthy and powerful and now sits among the ruins, blaming no one, complaining about nothing, left only with memory.

I had also gone to Tra Kieu, once Simhapura, an ancient capital of Lam Ap and, from 605 to 757, a center of power in a kingdom that time eventually swallowed. History pushed it aside through wars and upheavals stretching from the eras of Han and Tang power to the long southward movement of the Vietnamese. Standing on that land, I once found myself wondering how many capitals eventually become ordinary villages, how many dynasties end up as stories people tell, and if that is so, what in this world truly lasts?

Perhaps only the river.

One afternoon in Hoi An, I sat beside a narrow creek drinking coffee and watched round basket boats spinning through a water-coconut forest. Tourists laughed around me, and present-day life kept flowing along, lighthearted and carefree, seemingly unaware of everything that had happened here hundreds or thousands of years before. I climbed into one of those basket boats myself. It rocked and spun until my head was dizzy, and for some reason I found myself strangely happy. Maybe every now and then we need a little unsteadiness just to remember that we are still alive.

Late in the afternoon, I returned to Da Nang, the modern city beside the Han River, where a little of the Thu Bon's water, too, has passed through as though offering one last greeting before going out to sea. Standing on the Dragon Bridge and looking down at the water beneath my feet, I realized that every river eventually reaches the ocean. But not every river manages to carry its memories all the way there.



Photo: Non Nuoc Beach, Da Nang

Essay 16

THE RIVER STILL FLOWS, BUT THE CITY IS NO LONGER THE SAME

This morning I found myself in Da Nang, with the sea breeze blowing softly, as though some unseen hand had gently turned back a page of an old memory, one not yet yellow with age but already dusted with the faint color of time. Not long before that, I had still been wandering around Hoi An, through places where people are trying hard to preserve the spirit of an older world with replicas,

reconstructed versions of the ancient town, boat rides, basket boats, all sorts of things that are pleasant enough to look at, but when you think about them more carefully, they begin to feel more like memory recreated than a life still breathing on its own. I did not stay long. I did not have enough time to look deeply beneath all those layers of performance, so I turned back toward Da Nang, almost as though I were returning to a place where the new does not have to pretend to be anything else, where it can simply be new, openly, naturally, without embarrassment or strain.

I chose a hotel near My Khe Beach for no reason more complicated than wanting to step outside early in the morning and see the sea right there, hear the surf, and know that I was still standing before something human beings had not yet managed to revise too thoroughly. The sea is still the sea. The waves are still the waves. But the eyes I look through are no longer the same as they once were.

Da Nang is hardly unfamiliar to me. Nearly half a century ago, in those first years after 1975, when getting from one place to another was still difficult, I came here with an older friend of mine and stayed for almost a month, roaming everywhere with local people, living a kind of life that, when I remember it now, seems both deprived and deeply honest. Even then, the coastal road was considered wide by the standards of many places, but all that width lay inside a vast emptiness. It was quiet, lonely, almost mournful, with hardly any traffic coming or going, no resort lights, none of the bridges that now cross the river, while Ba Na remained a distant highland that was not easy to reach. The city in those days had little more than the sea, fishing villages tucked close against the surf, the Marble Mountains

sitting in silence like an old man who keeps his counsel, and Han Market in late afternoons when only a few figures moved through its aisles. The sadness of Da Nang then was not really the sadness of poverty. It was the sadness of a place that had not yet discovered the shape of its own future, a city that did not yet know what it would become. It was like a body just recovering from a long fever, still tired, still quiet, not yet thinking about dressing itself up.

Time moved on. Every few years I came back, usually by train, when the journey could still take two or three days instead of moving at the pace it does now. Sometimes I stayed in Da Nang for a week, sometimes longer. Every time I returned, it seemed as though the city had put on another layer of skin. At first it was only a few roads being widened, then little by little the bridges appeared, one after another, crossing the Han River like fresh strokes drawn across a canvas. The Han River Bridge, the Dragon Bridge, the Tran Thi Ly Bridge, each one seemed to be making the same declaration, this city was no longer willing to stand still. More than once I found myself wondering whether Da Nang's soul might actually lie in that constant movement.

People like to call Da Nang Vietnam's "most livable city," a major center of the central region, a place important to both the national economy and the country's transportation network. There is truth in that. The city sits in the middle of Vietnam like a hinge joining North and South, sea and mountains, past and future. It is a gateway, a stopping place, somewhere people pass through, yet also somewhere many people end up wanting to stay.

But I do not look at Da Nang through statistics. I look at it through feeling, especially the strange feeling of standing in a city where almost everything seems to work a little too smoothly. The roads are broad, traffic jams are relatively rare, the airport is bright and busy, the seaport receives vessels large and small, while routes like the Hai Van Tunnel have shortened distances and tied together regions that once felt far apart. Everything operates like a well-designed machine. And perhaps precisely because of that, I sometimes feel something missing, a little uncertainty, a little disorder, that feeling that you might wander unnoticed into some forgotten corner and suddenly discover a part of the city that belongs to no brochure and no one else.

Da Nang today is beautiful, clean, brightly lit, even luxurious. Coastal roads like Vo Nguyen Giap run south toward Hoi An along what people call the “five-star road,” lined with hotels and resorts, each one displaying its own architecture, its own version of prosperity. And yet, walking among them, I sometimes remember the empty beaches of long ago, when all you had to do was sit down on the sand and feel yourself become smaller in front of the sea.

There is something else I cannot help thinking about. Farther offshore, the city’s maritime territory reaches toward the Hoang Sa, the Paracel Islands, a territory under occupation, a space that still belongs to us on the map, yet in reality feels so distant that sometimes people seem to stop speaking about it altogether. The sea in front of me remains blue, but that blue does not entirely reassure me. I stand there watching the waves and wonder whether a city can grow this quickly, become a center for so many things, industry, tourism, services, and still manage to preserve

something deeper, something that lasts longer and holds more firmly.

Nature here has always been varied, from the sea and the peninsula to the mountains in the west, where the long ridges of the Truong Son Range descend toward the coast. The land rises gently, breaks, opens, then closes again. Even beneath the surface there are geological layers stacked upon one another, quiet fault lines that, if ignored, can become dangerous. I think about that when I look at the new construction. Not everything we build will stand. Not everything that grows will endure. Lately, people have spoken more and more about the environment, wastewater, coral reefs that no longer recover, areas such as Tho Quang that have suffered years of pollution. The numbers used to measure water quality, contamination, bacteria, all of that sounds dry and technical. But in truth, those numbers are nature speaking under its breath, not screaming, yet warning us all the same. I feel as though I am standing between two currents. One is the current of development, swift, forceful, unwilling to wait. The other is quieter, the current of nature, memory, and those things that cannot easily be replaced. Between those two currents stands the human being.

Da Nang today is more crowded, more varied, home to dozens of ethnic communities, with people arriving from every part of the country, carrying private dreams of their own. The city feels like a harbor where anyone can put in, then move on from there or choose to stay. I do not know how far Da Nang will continue to change. Perhaps there will be metro lines to Hoi An, tramways moving through the inner city, more bridges crossing the river, more urban districts

pushing out toward the sea. Perhaps everything will become more modern, faster, more convenient still. I only hope that, among all those things being added, nothing disappears so quietly that no one notices it is gone.

I turn once more toward the Han River. The water is still flowing, slowly and quietly, as though it has no idea how much the banks on either side have changed. The river moves the way it did in the old days. Only what human beings have placed upon it has changed. Six bridges span it now, each with its own silhouette, its own way of presenting itself, like glittering pieces of jewelry fastened onto a body that was once extraordinarily plain.

It is beautiful, I cannot deny that. Yet that very beauty makes me stop for a moment, because there are times when I can no longer tell whether I am seeing the beauty of the river itself or only the beauty human hands have arranged upon it. Then a thought comes to me quickly, almost without warning. Maybe what disappears is not the landscape, but the way we once looked at it. The city keeps growing every day, but memory does not. Memory stands still and quietly recedes until, one day, we turn around looking for it and see only something faint, like a trace of water that has already dried on the hand.

DA NANG, WHERE THE WATER CARRIES TIME

I sat there one afternoon when the wind was just strong enough to stir the surface of the water, in a café tucked along the Han River near the swing bridge. The river moved slowly, neither hurrying nor stopping, as though time

here did not run at all but simply passed by in silence. Watching the water, I suddenly realized that human memory moves much the same way. It makes no announcement, raises no noise, but patiently slips through every stretch of a life until one day you look back and discover how full of it you have become. I kept staring at the river, and for reasons I could not explain, one name rose in my mind, Da Nang. A name so familiar that you would think there was nothing left to consider. Yet the longer I thought about it, the more it opened into depths difficult to name, intimate as something that has belonged to me for years, yet distant as something I have never truly touched. It is plainly there, unmistakable, and still somehow hazy, like a call echoing from somewhere behind time itself.

They say the name Da Nang appeared very early, in Duong Van An's O Chau Can Luc in 1555. Back then, of course, it was not a city, not the crowded urban center it is today. It was simply the name of an estuary, a place where water met land and waves met shore, where voyages began and where many partings must also have happened quietly. Something about that idea of a "river mouth" strikes me as a little melancholy. It is as though Da Nang, from its earliest beginning, already carried a destiny of opening outward toward the world and, along with that openness, toward upheaval.

There are many explanations for the name. Some say it comes from the ancient Cham word "Danak," meaning "great river," and standing here watching the Han River drift past, I think, yes, that makes sense. The river is not especially violent, but it is wide enough and deep enough to hold an entire city against its breast. Others say the word

came from “Daknan,” meaning a broad expanse of water, and that makes me imagine something larger than a river, a whole territory of memory, a place where water does not merely flow but spreads outward, covering things, seeping into the earth and into people.

Then there are other explanations, words connected to Mon-Khmer languages, “Da duong,” “source,” “peaceful river landing.” Sitting there, I could almost hear all those sounds overlapping in my mind. Every era, every people, every community that passed through this land left behind its own pronunciation, its own understanding, its own way of remembering with affection. In the end, the name “Da Nang” seems like a cup filled with layer upon layer of meaning, water, source, refuge, peace. The more I think about the name, the less it feels like a simple place name and the more it resembles a state of mind, somewhere a person can arrive, stop for a while, lean against something solid, then continue on.

From the name, my thoughts move deeper, toward the land before it was called what it is called today, when the Sa Huynh people lived here thousands of years ago. I picture those people farming, going out to sea, living with the earth while also living with the water. Perhaps they did not draw such a strict boundary between the two. Theirs was a civilization of wet rice and mulberry cultivation that also opened outward toward the sea and trade. Even hearing that, you can already sense something of the temperament of this country, never entirely closed in, never cramped within itself, always leaving one door open toward the horizon. At Dinh Khue Bac Garden, traces of their lives have

been found, where they lived and where they buried their dead.

Then came Champa, when this land belonged to Amaravati, with dynasties, towers, temples, beliefs, ancient wells and stone statues. Traces of those worlds remain hidden even now around the Marble Mountains, at Phong Le and elsewhere, places where, unless you pay attention, you can walk straight past without realizing that you have just stepped across a thousand years of history. What matters most is not merely what survived, but the way the Vietnamese who later came here did not erase everything before them. They absorbed it, altered it, folded it into their own culture. That blending endured like water sinking into soil, difficult to see, yet capable of changing everything.

History kept moving through conflict between Champa and Dai Viet, through the marriage of Che Man and Huyen Tran, a marriage exchanged for an entire territory. From then on, Vietnamese settlers began coming in, establishing villages and communities, opening land and pushing farther south. The process was not always peaceful, but gradually this region settled, took form and developed a life of its own. Under the Nguyen lords, Da Nang became the outer port of Hoi An, then little by little replaced Hoi An as larger European ships began arriving. There was something quiet yet decisive in that transformation, a place that once stood behind stepping forward to the front. With that came ships, merchants, languages and cultures from elsewhere, turning Da Nang into a crossroads, a place almost incapable of remaining still.

But that very position meant Da Nang was never merely a trading port. It was also a defensive stronghold and an important military position. Fortifications such as Dien Hai, together with strict regulations governing the arrival and departure of ships, showed that the Nguyen court looked at this place not only with economic interest but also with anxiety, concerned for the safety of the imperial capital lying farther inland.

Then the French came, and Da Nang became the place where they first opened fire. Perhaps that was no accident. A city open to the sea, a place built to receive ships, is also a place easily penetrated from the sea. History is not always fair, but it can be brutally logical. From there Tourane emerged, a Western-style city with a harbor, an airfield, companies and new roads. The city grew larger and more crowded, yet I find myself wondering how much of the original “Da Nang” survived inside all that modernity.

Then came war, the years of American landings, an airport roaring with activity, a population rising sharply, the city becoming a military center. I imagine those days as noisy, tense, endlessly unsettled, a Da Nang utterly different from the afternoon in which I now sit. After 1975, and then in 1997 when Da Nang became a centrally governed municipality, growth accelerated. The city changed and expanded so quickly that sometimes people hardly had time to realize how many stages they had already passed through.

And yet, amid all that change, there is one thing I still see as unchanged, the water out there, drifting along as it must have drifted a thousand years ago, seeming to have

witnessed everything. I sat there and finished the coffee that had gone cold without my noticing, while something inside me strangely warmed. Perhaps Da Nang is not simply a city. Perhaps it is a current made of water, history, people, and names that were once spoken, disappeared, then returned in another form.

And maybe even the name “Da Nang” I am speaking now is only a small ripple that rises and fades inside a current far longer and deeper than any of us can see. History, human lives and memory keep quietly depositing one layer, erasing another, and no one is able to preserve the whole. Sitting there, I thought I was looking at a city, but perhaps I was only touching one very thin slice of time. Everything appeared so clear, yet so fragile, like water beneath a bridge that seems almost still even though it has already moved away before you realize it. The hardest thing is not leaving a place. It is knowing that even if you come back, the moment that has just passed, the way you looked at it, the way you felt it, will never again be entirely the same.

THE HAN RIVER, A CURRENT OF THINGS THAT NEVER SLEEP

I went back to the Han River, near the Dragon Bridge, where a steel dragon lies quiet during the day and, once night falls, suddenly breathes fire and sprays water like some mythical creature fashioned out of machinery. It is proud without feeling distant. Across the way stands the Carp Transforming into a Dragon statue, shaped like a fish rising from the river, like the city’s own restless dream of transformation, a dream that refuses to sleep. I walked

slowly along the riverfront and past the Love Bridge, where padlocks hung in rows and the river wind made them ring lightly against one another. For no particular reason, I thought of a faraway corner of Seattle, in America, where young people also lock their promises into place, though nobody knows whether those promises will hold years from now.

Da Nang at night is never completely dark. It glows softly, as though someone has draped a thin garment of light over the river, reflected from the bridges, buildings and boats drifting lazily by. I stood watching several cruise boats gently cut through the water, their lights shimmering across the surface, and thought that when a river runs through the heart of a young city like this, it does more than flow. It carries the city's breathing with it, the way people live, the way they dream, the way they grow a little every day.

The Han River is a little more than seven kilometers long, several hundred meters across, and deep enough to hold layers of silt along with layers of memory. It begins where the Cam Le and Vinh Dien rivers meet, then runs from south to north, a direction that already seems unusual, almost as though the river has deliberately chosen to go against the habit of other rivers, before finally emptying into Da Nang Bay, where the sea opens wide, sheltered from the wind and gentle, like a great embrace waiting for everything carried downstream. I do not know why I like standing along this part of the river so much. Maybe because from here the bridges are especially clear, spans that connect more than one side of traffic to another, they connect one era of transformation to the next. The Han River Bridge, Thuan Phuoc Bridge, Tran Thi Ly Bridge, Nguyen Van Troi Bridge,

Tien Son Bridge. Each has its own shape and story, its own way of telling the city's story in steel, concrete and light.

But when all is said and done, the bridge that holds me longest is still the Han River Bridge. I remember the first time someone told me it had not only been designed by Vietnamese engineers, but built in part with money contributed by the people of the city themselves. Hearing that changed the way I saw it. It was no longer simply a piece of infrastructure. It felt like a promise, a shared faith cast into physical form. I walked slowly up onto the bridge, wanting to feel each step. At night the LED lights came on, the illuminated cables crossing one another like branches, each carrying its own colors reflected into the river and making the already peaceful water seem quieter still. I stopped in the middle and looked down. My own reflection mingled with the lights and the dark water until I could no longer distinguish one from another. People say that if you want to understand Da Nang, you should watch the Han River Bridge rotate. Once I stayed awake late just to see it. Near midnight, traffic thinned and then stopped entirely. The city suddenly fell quiet. As the middle section of the bridge slowly turned aside, opening a path for larger vessels, I felt something strange. It seemed to me that this city understood not only how to move forward, but also how to make room, how to step aside so that a larger current could keep moving. Something about that moment stayed with me. A bridge capable of "turning," of changing its shape in order to adapt, may not be so different from a city or a human being. If we insist on remaining rigid and motionless, we may not get very far.

I left the bridge and returned to the riverbank, where cafés, stone benches and quiet people sat with thoughts of their own. Da Nang is not loud in the way Saigon is loud, and it is not contemplative in quite the way Hue is. It lives somewhere in between, lively enough for you to move quickly, peaceful enough for you to slow down. My mind wandered back toward the old stories about the name “Han,” about iron chains once stretched across the water to block enemy ships and waves that once rose violently in defense of the land. Deep beneath this river there must still be many things, wrecked vessels, fragments of memory, names no one says anymore. On the surface, the water looks gentle. Far below it, perhaps an entire layer of history has never gone to sleep.

That night I went on toward the sea, following the broad road to My Khe Beach. The sea at night is different from the river. A river embraces the city, while the sea opens into infinity. To the left, the Son Tra Peninsula lay dark and long like some enormous sleeping animal. Far to the right were the Marble Mountains, silent masses of stone that seemed to contain a thousand years of sediment. I stood there listening to the surf, the wind and the sound of cars behind me. This city is strange in a beautiful way, nature on one side, human life on the other, yet neither cancels the other out. If anything, each makes the other more vivid.

Then my thoughts began wandering again, and I asked myself what I was really looking for in places like this. A beautiful view? A story? Or only the feeling of standing beside a moving river and knowing it will never return, while somehow sensing in it something deeply familiar, as though I had been here long ago. Then I understood, perhaps I had

not come looking for the Han River at all. Perhaps, in its own peculiar way, the river had been the thing that kept me there for a while, in the middle of a night that was not especially long.

THE HANDS THAT LIFT A DREAM

This was not my first time in Da Nang. The familiarity of it feels like returning to an old river landing. The water still moves, the wind still blows, but something in the human heart has changed, grown deeper and quieter. People talk endlessly about Ba Na Hills as a “road to paradise,” so often that the phrase has almost become ordinary. Strangely enough, I had only been there once before. Go farther back in time and there was no recreated attraction at all. But the land of Ba Na had been there for ages.

During these few short days, I had no appetite for rushing from one place to another just so I could say I had “checked in” everywhere. I gave a full day to Ba Na, almost like keeping a private appointment with modernity. Beyond that, I quietly chose only two other directions, up to the Son Tra Peninsula to look at the sea and over to the Marble Mountains to put my hand against stone.

People say Ba Na sits on the summit of Nui Chua, nearly 1,500 meters above sea level, in the great Truong Son Range, roughly thirty kilometers from the city. I knew the facts well enough, but only when I sat inside the cable car, suspended between cloud and forest, did that distance stop being a number and become a journey, a passage from the noise of the streets into the silence of the mountains.

The clouds here are not merely something to admire. They are alive. They crawl across your face, slip over your shoulders, circle around you like breath. At times I looked down and saw primary forest stretching below, dark green and unfathomably deep. They say hundreds of animal species live there, including rare ones once listed in Vietnam's Red Data Book. Truth be told, I did not see a tiger, and I did not encounter a gibbon. What I did feel was that the forest was alive and that I was passing through a very ancient memory of the earth.

I have heard many explanations for the name "Ba Na," and every one of them sounds plausible in its own way. Some people say the French saw so many banana trees that they called the place "banane," which gradually became Ba Na in local pronunciation. That seems possible, considering how deeply the French colonial era left its marks here, in language as well as architecture. Others say the name comes from the language of the Co Tu people and means "my mountain," and there is something immediately warm and intimate about that, a simple but weighty declaration, this land is home. Then there are those who connect the name with Thien Y A Na, the sacred mother figure present in both Cham and Vietnamese folk traditions, suggesting that "Ba Na" carries something holy, a mountain landscape bound to the image of a goddess. I do not know which explanation is correct, and I am not sure I need to know. Sometimes what is beautiful about a place is precisely that it refuses to remain fixed inside one definition. A little uncertainty, a little mist, leaves room for the imagination.

The climate up here is remarkable. One day can seem to contain four seasons. The morning has the cool

softness of spring, noon turns bright and sharp like summer, afternoon settles gently like fall, and by evening the cold can have you huddling as though winter has arrived. I have known fog on Son Tra and Hai Van, but the cold of Ba Na feels different. It is not only temperature. There is something in the air that makes you slow down without meaning to and lower your voice. The French must have fallen in love with this climate. In 1901, Captain Debay came here under orders from Paul Doumer to explore the region and identified the mountain area as a potential retreat. From there construction began, eventually turning Ba Na into what people called a “second Da Lat.” Hearing those stories, I imagine long-ago summers when French officials escaped up here, living in European-style villas in the middle of Vietnamese forest, drinking wine in cool stone cellars. Few traces remain now. Yet the Debay wine cellar still runs deep into the mountain, damp and cold, holding on to a fragment of memory that has not entirely dissolved. Some old villas have been reconstructed and decorated with historical photographs, but walking through them, I cannot help feeling that they are fragments assembled again after the fact. Beautiful, certainly, but no longer carrying the original breath.

War came and went, and Ba Na was abandoned for more than half a century. Forest took over and slowly swallowed what people had left behind. Standing among the new buildings, I found myself thinking that perhaps the forest once believed it had won. Then people returned. Beginning in 2007, Sun Group invested heavily, bringing cable cars, amusement areas, a French Village and much more. The first cable route, more than five kilometers long,

once held a world record and carried visitors from the foot of the mountain into the clouds. Now there are five or six lines, cabins moving constantly, carrying thousands of people each day. I cannot deny that Ba Na Hills is spectacular. Still, surrounded by all that spectacle, one question keeps trailing me. Am I standing in nature, or inside a dream constructed by human hands?

Walking through the French Village, I saw stone walls, steep roofs and plazas recreating medieval France. Beautiful, no question, and nearly perfect for photographs. Yet I found myself missing the old villas that had vanished. Real beauty often lives inside imperfection. At least that is what I think. I stopped at Linh Ung Pagoda on Ba Na and looked at the towering white Buddha in the clouds. A light wind moved through the air. Somewhere in the distance a bell rang. For a moment, all the noise below seemed to stop at an invisible boundary. I stayed there a little longer, simply standing.

I continued through the flower gardens, the entertainment areas and groups of laughing visitors, but in the end it was the Golden Bridge that held me longest. The bridge is roughly 150 meters long and hangs more than 1,400 meters above sea level, supported by two enormous hands. People crowded every angle, taking picture after picture. I stood there too, but I did not raise my camera. Some say those hands are the hands of a god. Others say they are simply an artistic design. To me, they looked like the hands of the earth itself, rough and cracked, yet patient enough to lift human beings upward and offer us another point of view. The international press praised the bridge heavily, CNN, BBC, Time, everyone seemed ready to call it

an icon. I have never cared much for titles like that, but standing there watching clouds move below me, I understood the appeal. It is not merely that the bridge is beautiful. It gives people, if only for a moment, the feeling of being lifted.

By late afternoon, the fog thickened. Ba Na slowly disappeared into a pale coldness, like a dream beginning to close. I did not stay. To see everything properly would probably take two days. Instead, I chose to descend and return to the sea. On the drive back toward the center of the city, My Khe Beach appeared, familiar and broad, with the wind running freely across it. The sea does not need anything to lift it. It simply opens out, immense and free.

I sat down on the sand and thought about Ba Na. A place that is memory and present at once, a dream rebuilt into physical form. So many things we pass through, believing we have come merely to see them. In truth, perhaps we come so that we can understand where we ourselves are standing, held for a while between invisible hands that quietly raise a human life and then let it down again, almost weightlessly.



Photo: Golden Bridge, Da Nang

Essay 17

DA NANG, BETWEEN MOUNTAIN AND SEA, AND THE THINGS THAT CANNOT BE MEASURED

I have said it before, and somehow it still feels as though I have not finished saying it, Da Nang is a city with a stance all its own. It stands with a certain steadiness and quiet confidence, like someone who knows exactly what he has in his hands. The city does not seem desperate to prove itself. The way the mountains hold the opening of the sea,

the way the river passes through it, already says more than any tourism billboard could.

To the north is Hai Van Pass, the “Most Majestic Pass Under Heaven.” I did not travel it again on this visit, but merely hearing the name brings back a feeling of height, danger and beauty so obvious there is no need to argue about it. To the west lies Ba Na Hills, where I had been only yesterday and still seemed to carry the cold scent of cloud in my hair. Northeast is the Son Tra Peninsula, a patch of primeval green that looks as though it survived from a time before the land became crowded. Southeast are the Marble Mountains, stone standing in silence while holding layer upon layer of story inside.

And that is not all. Within the city are old communal houses, pagodas, small shrines and Da Nang Cathedral with its Western profile, standing beneath the central Vietnamese sky while somehow keeping a character entirely its own. I stopped by the Museum of Cham Sculpture and looked at the ancient Cham statues, worn, weathered, yet glowing with something deep, as though time had not diminished them but had exposed further layers of meaning.

From here, Hoi An Ancient Town is only a short trip away, and farther out stands My Son Sanctuary, two World Heritage Sites like milestones in collective memory. Farther still are Bach Ma National Park and Phong Nha–Ke Bang National Park. People call this the “Central Heritage Road.” It sounds like tourism language until you actually travel it. Then it feels more like a long thread sewing together scattered pieces of time.

This morning I did not want to think too much. I simply wanted to ride along the coast, starting on Vo Nguyen Giap Street and heading north around Son Tra. The road is wide and smooth, with the sea on the right so intensely blue that if you stare at it long enough, you can forget where you were headed in the first place. I rode slowly. Every so often I pulled over, stood for a while, looked, then continued without hurry.

I passed Bai Chay and Ho Xanh, the reservoir that holds water for the city, its surface so still it seemed to be hiding something. Then came Bai But and the rocky area people call Obama Beach. Each place is slightly different, yet they share one thing, nature here has not been completely broken apart. Monkeys sometimes run into the road, looking around and begging for food. Watching them, I found myself amused by a strange question. Between us and the monkeys, which one has wandered into the wrong world?

The road curved along the mountain. Looking back, I could see the city in the distance, high-rises clustered together and slowly shrinking into the haze. I passed several small beaches, beautiful and still relatively wild, though right beside them were already food stalls, umbrellas, chairs and voices calling customers. The border between nature and commerce is very thin here. A few more steps and the world changes.

Eventually I reached a large resort, supposedly a five- or six-star place, where the road was blocked. I turned around and headed uphill instead. The mountain road on Son Tra is broad and easy to travel. I saw small groups of

people hiking, talking loudly and laughing as they went. Son Tra is sometimes called Monkey Mountain, and there really are plenty of monkeys here. But to see it merely as a mountain with monkeys would be a shame. There are legends of “fairy sands,” of celestial maidens descending to bathe in the sea, of immortals playing chess on Ban Co Peak. Beyond the stories, this is one living body in which mountain, forest and sea remain bound together.

Son Tra itself was once an island, with three mountains rising from the sea, Hon Nghe, Mo Dieu Peak and Co Ngua Peak. Over time, sediment from the Han River accumulated and connected the island to the mainland. I like that story. The land has a life of its own. It moves and changes. It does not always stand still the way we imagine. The mountain rises nearly seven hundred meters and serves like a natural observation tower. In the old days people watched clouds and wind from here to predict the weather. Now we have apps and radar, yet when you stand high up and watch the sea change color, the old ways still feel somehow more intimate. Son Tra is a nature reserve and home to rare species such as the red-shanked douc langur, one of the most beautiful primates in the world. But beside that beauty are less beautiful stories, illegally cleared land, resorts creeping in, forest habitat being divided. Passing construction sites, I felt my heart sink a little. The moment we begin calling something “development,” it often means that something else has already begun disappearing.

I stopped and walked up to Linh Ung Pagoda at Bai But. Da Nang has three pagodas named Linh Ung, but this is the most prominent. It sits halfway up the mountain facing

the sea, in the traditional position described as “backed by the mountain, facing the water,” and even before you know anything about it, the place feels settled and secure. The pagoda was built in 2004, with architecture blending traditional and modern forms, curved roofs, blue tiles, dragons and phoenixes winding along the structures. I walked through the three-entrance gate and followed the stone path between two rows of Arhat statues, each one wearing a different expression as though each carried a separate burden. Above everything stands the sixty-seven-meter Guanyin statue. There are multiple levels inside it, with shrines dedicated to various Buddhas, but I did not go in. I simply stood outside and looked. Sea wind carried salt upward through the temple roofs and stirred the small flags. Some people burned incense. Others took photographs. I stood between those two currents, not quite a pilgrim and not quite a tourist, only a man looking for a little quiet.

They say the three Linh Ung pagodas, here on Son Tra, at the Marble Mountains, and on Ba Na Hills, form a “sacred triangle” protecting the city. It is a lovely idea, and part of me wants to believe it. Yet something still troubles me. The pagoda is beautiful, large, carefully planned. Visitors arrive in great numbers. Everything is clean and clearly arranged. But the feeling of age, that quality I still associate with the soul of Buddhism, seems a little thinner. In its place is something newer, brighter and perhaps somewhat more commercial. I felt something similar once on Ba Den Mountain in Tay Ninh. That does not mean it is bad. Only different.

Perhaps it could not be otherwise. A city receiving nearly nine million visitors a year, earning tens of trillions of

dong from tourism, with more than a thousand hotels ranging from Hilton properties to other international names, cannot simply remain still. Everything has to move. The question is what, within all that movement, can still be held onto.

I left the pagoda and headed back down the mountain. The sea appeared again, broad and blue, needing no decoration. The wind grew stronger and cleared my head. I found myself thinking that Da Nang resembles someone growing very quickly who must also learn to protect whatever lies deepest inside. That part cannot be measured by statistics or visitor numbers. As for me, I am only passing through, watching. I carry the question away with me, not as a question for the city, but for myself.

THE SEA MURMURS, THE MOUNTAINS REMAIN STILL

I come from the coast. People like us need only catch the smell of salt wind for something familiar to rise inside, like meeting an old friend with whom there will never be enough time to finish the conversation. I have known many beaches from the South through central Vietnam. Every place has surf, sand and sun, yet strangely enough each one has its own spirit that cannot be confused with another. But when I arrived in Da Nang, I knew I had not simply come to another beach. I had entered another country of memory, broad, open and somehow deeper than the surface of the water itself.

The coastline here runs for some seventy-four kilometers. On paper, that sounds like only a number, but standing in the wind and looking at an unbroken strip of blue stretching into the distance, I understood that this kind of “length” is not something you measure with a ruler. You measure it by feeling. The bay opens across twenty-six kilometers, the Son Tra Peninsula reaches another thirty-two, and the stretch toward Dien Ngoc adds sixteen more. Together they feel like one long arm curving around the sea and, in passing, around the footsteps of strangers like me.

While I was here, I often went to My Khe Beach early in the morning, when the sun still seemed hesitant about climbing too high, and again in late afternoon, when the light softened almost like an apology. The beach itself is only about nine hundred meters long, not especially large, yet it is the liveliest stretch. Somehow the crowds at My Khe do not suffocate you. They feel more like a seaside marketplace in which everyone has a little share, in the surf, the laughter, the bare footprints left in the sand. The waves are gentle, the water warm year-round, and coconut palms lean toward the shore like old fishermen resting on their walking sticks, watching life with a thoughtful but almost endearing air. I have heard people say the water has a salinity of around sixty percent, that it is clean and safe, swimmable almost any time. Jet skis, surfing, parasailing, kayaks, everyone seems eager to try something. At one point I thought about going up in a parasail myself and looking down at the entire coast from fifty meters above. Then I changed my mind, not because I was afraid, but because some beauty is already enough when you look at

it from the ground. Why insist on flying up high enough to see everything?

Leaving My Khe, I passed names I have heard many times yet somehow still find fresh each time they are spoken, Non Nuoc Beach, Nam O Beach, Bai Rang. Each has its own character. Non Nuoc feels soft, curving around the foot of the mountains. Nam O remains wilder, with green moss covering the rocks like a painting not yet finished. Bai Rang is quieter, its small waves arriving as though they are trying not to disturb anyone.

But today was my last day, and I no longer wanted to travel far. Suddenly I felt that my heart needed something other than the sea, so I returned to the Marble Mountains, a place I had visited many times and which still manages to feel new every time I return. The mountains lie roughly eight kilometers from central Da Nang, right along the road toward Hoi An, almost like a pause in the journey where you can set aside the surrounding noise and enter a different world. Six limestone and marble mountains rise out of white sand. People say they were once islands and that sediment gradually joined them to the mainland. Standing there, I thought there was something human in that story of “islands becoming land,” things once separate somehow finding a way to connect.

The old name “Non Nuoc” has long lived in folk verse:

“Evening clouds cover Son Tra,
Thunder rolls over Non Nuoc, the sky is turning to rain.”

The name “Ngu Hanh Son,” the Marble Mountains, appeared later and is tied to the philosophy of the five elements, Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth. It sounds philosophical, yet also strangely close to everyday life. I am no philosopher, but walking among these mountains, I have often sensed some kind of balance, as though everything here has its proper place, with nothing quite excessive and nothing missing.

I have climbed Thuy Son many times, the largest and most beautiful of the mountains. From high above, the city lies in the distance and the sea wraps itself around the land. I have also visited the old Linh Ung Pagoda here several times, nearly two hundred years old and tucked into the mountain. Renovation has changed it somewhat, so it feels different now. Inside remain finely carved statues of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Arhats. Yet what stays with me is not the craftsmanship. It is the stillness, a kind of silence that does not come from the absence of sound, but from the way the mind itself suddenly settles.

I walk through the Marble Mountains not quite as a sightseeing visitor, but more like someone feeling his way back through ancient layers of memory, of earth, stone and stories that have settled like sediment and now wait quietly for somebody patient enough to listen. Each mountain, path and cliff face seems more than scenery. Each is like a silent mouth that opens only to those willing to remain still long enough.

I began at Kim Son, the Metal Mountain, tucked between Hoa Son on one side and Tho Son on the other. Its shape resembles an enormous bell placed mouth-down on

the ground, quiet yet somehow imposing. At the foot of the mountain, the Truong River once continued toward the Han River, but today only broken traces of it remain, some stretches turned into rice fields, others into ponds. Standing there, I thought human beings are not so different. There are currents we imagine will never disappear, and then time gradually fills them in until only fragments of memory remain. Leaning against Kim Son is the old Quan Am Pagoda and the deep Quan Am Cave. I stepped inside, where weak light entered through cracks in the rock and made everything seem half real, half imagined.

From Kim Son I moved on to Moc Son, Wood Mountain. The name suggests greenery, yet the mountain itself is surprisingly bare and dry. It runs parallel to Thuy Son but carries a character entirely its own, jagged, rough and uneven, like a wall worn down by time. People say it was once magnificent, with white stone rising everywhere, but years of quarrying scarred the slopes and altered much of its original shape. Looking at it, I felt unexpectedly sorry for a mountain. In truth, perhaps the sorrow was for something larger, the fate of things that were once beautiful and whole, then gradually deformed by human hands.

It was not until I reached Thuy Son that I felt I had touched the true “soul” of the Five Elements. This is the largest, highest and most beautiful of the group, not because it stands about 160 meters tall or spreads across roughly fifteen hectares, but because it contains so many layers of meaning. The old name was Tam Thai, after three summits aligned like three stars near the end of the Big Dipper. There is something wonderful about a folk name reaching all the way into the cosmos, making a person feel

small beneath heaven and earth. I climbed the stone steps slowly, as though each footstep were turning another page of memory. On Thuong Thai are Tam Thai Pagoda, Tam Ton Pagoda and Vong Giang Dai. Looking down from there at rivers twisting through the land and the horizon opening wide, I suddenly felt a great empty space inside me, not because I lacked anything, but because I was too full. Nearby is Hoa Nghiem Cave, home to the Pho Da Son stele dating from 1640, which records the names of fifty-three people who contributed to the building of the pagoda, including Japanese donors. So centuries ago this was already a meeting place for people arriving from many directions. They came, contributed, then left their names on stone. The stone remains. The people are gone.

At Trung Thai there is Heaven's Gate and Van Thong Cave, sometimes called the "Cave to Heaven." I crawled in. The farther I went, the narrower and darker it became, and I had to grip the rock to climb. When light finally poured down from above, I stopped short. It felt strangely like having passed through one dark stretch of life and then glimpsed light at the far end. Down at Ha Thai, I visited Linh Ung Pagoda and then Vong Hai Dai to look toward the sea. The sea was far away and somehow still close, reminding me that everything may be connected, whether or not we recognize the connection.

Then I crossed to Hoa Son, Fire Mountain, which is really a double mountain divided into Yin and Yang. Two opposites joined by a ridge of stone, almost like a physical answer to the idea that everything carries two sides and that the two cannot truly be separated. On Am Hoa Son I saw the stone inscription "Pho Da Son Quan Am Dien," a

remnant of a faith once deeply rooted here. On Duong Hoa Son, where a busy river landing once served boats and traders, only faint traces remain. I stood there imagining the commerce of another age, then looked at the stillness of the present. Time suddenly seemed like a tide, rising and falling beyond anyone's power to hold.

People say there was once a stele here associated with King Le Thanh Tong, engraved with the Chinese lines:

"A thousand years ago, a sea route,
A thousand years hence, a famous mountain."

Reading those words sent a shiver through me. The earth itself has a life. Stone itself has a destiny. Even the ground beneath our feet is not necessarily permanent.

At Tho Son, Earth Mountain, the lowest yet longest of the group, shaped like a dragon stretched across the sand, I saw traces of the Cham people. They are not especially obvious, but there is enough to know that another life and another culture once existed here. History, I thought, does not disappear. It merely sinks lower, beneath layers of earth and stone, waiting for someone to uncover it.

And amid all those mountains, caves and traces of earlier worlds, I heard again the legend of the dragon egg, the Golden Turtle deity, the old man and the young girl. It is a long tale, rich in detail, sounding like a fairy story and an allegory at the same time. I imagined the old man living alone by the sea, then one day a storm rises, a dragon appears and leaves behind an egg. The Golden Turtle comes ashore, gives him one of its claws and tells him to guard the egg. The old man is frightened, yet he accepts the

responsibility. I found myself wondering whether I would have done the same, accepting some enormous duty without knowing where it might lead. The egg grows and finally hatches into a girl, while the shell breaks into five pieces and becomes the five mountains. By then the story no longer feels like merely a story. It becomes the old people's way of explaining the formation of land, life and even themselves. Something invisible breaks apart into many pieces, and each piece carries its own nature and destiny. The girl grows up and leaves. The old man leaves too. The mountains remain. People come, settle and establish villages around them. Standing in the Marble Mountains, I suddenly felt like someone who arrived very late among things that had been here forever, while still somehow imagining them as new.

I also remembered the story of Emperor Gia Long once hiding here, being rescued and promising to return, a promise he never fulfilled. Later Minh Mang fulfilled it in his place, visiting three times, naming sites, building pagodas and erecting steles. He wrote that every visit felt like the first. Reading that, I understood. There are places that feel new not because they themselves have changed, but because we have.

Then there is the story of Princess Ngoc Hoa, who left the golden palace behind and fled here to become a nun. A poem attributed to her says:

"Look upon the affairs of the world, a tangled game of chess,
The longer you look, the filthier it appears…"

I read it and felt sad, not exactly for her, but for that thing we call “the affairs of the world,” the endless confusion people stare at until they grow tired and want to leave. But where do you go? Up a mountain? Into a pagoda? Or inward, into yourself? Her name does not appear in the royal genealogy, people say. Perhaps she never existed. Yet the story lives on, is still repeated, still moves people. Some things do not have to be factually real in order to become meaningful.

I walked through Am Phu Cave, the Cave of Hell, where people say the road descends toward the underworld. There are two paths, one going up and one going down, good and evil, light and darkness. I stood between them and could not say which side I belonged to. Then I smiled. Most of us are probably like that, one thing at one moment, another at the next. No one belongs entirely to one side. In Huyen Khong Cave, sunlight came down from above through incense smoke, creating a space I could not quite name. I stood there for a long time without praying for anything and without thinking much at all. I simply felt a little lighter. In the end, I walked out to Vong Giang Dai and looked down over the green water. The wind carried the smell of the sea. I suddenly understood that this journey had not been about learning more, but forgetting some of the noise, the calculations, leaving room for something simpler.

The Marble Mountains are not merely mountains. They are memory, history, layers of time laid one over another, from the era when Emperor Minh Mang gave them their names to accounts in the Dai Nam Du Dia Chi, and even the French phrase “Marble Mountains.” Each is like a wave layered over another wave, none entirely erased.

Perhaps, then, the Marble Mountains are not five mountains at all. Perhaps they are five ways for human beings to look back at themselves between earth and sky, among stories that are old yet somehow never stop becoming new. I left carrying nothing tangible, only the feeling that I had just listened to a very long story and still had no idea where its ending might be.

AT THE FOOT OF THE MARBLE MOUNTAINS, WHERE STONE BECOMES SOUL

Leaving the Marble Mountains, I followed a small road down toward the foot of the hills and made my way to Non Nuoc Stone Carving Village, a living field of memory made from earth and stone, human hands and layers of time. The air there seems dense with stone dust and the clicking of hammers and chisels, the patient rhythms of work that have sounded for centuries without truly stopping. More than three hundred years have passed, yet the village remains. Quiet and persistent, like the very stone from which it was born.

The village lies beneath the mountains, about eight kilometers from central Da Nang, in Hoa Hai. Yet geographic distance feels almost meaningless once you arrive. Step through the entrance and suddenly everything becomes another world, a “land of stone,” where lifeless blocks are awakened into form until they seem to possess souls of their own. Local tradition names Huynh Ba Quat, a settler from Thanh Hoa, as the founder of the craft. He was said to be the first to recognize the possibility of art inside those mute blocks of marble. The work began with rough tools and

ordinary objects needed for daily life, grinding stones, tables, seats, fishing weights, then gradually expanded alongside the changing history of the region.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the Nguyen dynasty was constructing citadels, tombs and palaces, Non Nuoc stone carving entered a period of great prosperity. Skilled craftsmen were awarded ranks and invited to work in many places. Some were summoned to the imperial court in Hue to carve structures bearing the marks of the dynasty. Stone was no longer merely material. It became a language of power, belief and aesthetics. The craft passed from one generation to another not merely through explanation but literally hand to hand, fathers guiding the hands of sons. Old occupational titles such as “Mr. Vo,” the man responsible for finding stone, and “Mr. Van,” the man who roughed out the initial form, sound both humble and solemn, like roles named so long ago that they have become part of the village’s memory.

In earlier times the stone came directly from the Marble Mountains. Skilled workers could listen to the sound of a block and know whether it was hard or soft, whether it might become a Buddha or only a simple grinding stone. Later, when the mountains needed protection and quarrying was prohibited, the village had to look farther away, bringing stone from Nghe An, Thanh Hoa, Ninh Binh and Yen Bai, even importing onyx from Pakistan. That was more than a change in raw material. It marked a transition in an entire tradition. Today, amid electric saws and lathes, you can still glimpse the old hammers, chisels and specialized hand tools that have accompanied the craft since its beginnings.

Machines relieve some of the physical burden, but the soul of the stone still lives in the human hand.

I stood watching a craftsman put the finishing touches on a statue. Every line was being worked into the stone not only with technique but with some difficult-to-name affection. Perhaps for these people, stone is not lifeless at all. Perhaps it is something that needs to be “released” from its rough outer form. The village produces almost every imaginable kind of object, from everyday teacups, kettles and vases to statues of Buddhas, Arhats, the Virgin Mary, Cham figures, mythical creatures and contemporary forms. Each piece carries a story, a cultural layer, a mark of its time. Yet what I remember most is not the variety of the work, but the rhythm of the village itself. Nearly five hundred workshops, thousands of people working through day and night. Women quietly grinding, washing and polishing, completing the final stages in which the finished pieces truly “come alive.” Young apprentices learn the trade, carrying the tradition beyond the narrow limits of family inheritance. Each year the village still honors its founding ancestor on the sixth day of the first lunar month and holds the ancestral memorial on the sixteenth day of the third lunar month. Those ceremonies may seem small, but they are threads that keep the craft village from dissolving completely into the current of modern life.

I also stopped at the Stone Sculpture Memory Museum beneath Thuy Son. Inside are old tools, early works and stories of artisans such as Nguyen Long Buu, Nguyen Sang and Le Ben, all appearing as parts of one continuous current. It is not merely a museum of objects. It is a museum of memory, of labor, culture and human lives.

I left the stone village carrying a feeling I could not quite explain, something heavy as stone yet soft as the forms human beings have carved into it for hundreds of years. Back at my hotel in the center of the city, the noise of traffic suddenly felt unfamiliar. In my mind I could still hear the tapping of chisels. I could still see rough blocks slowly becoming recognizable forms. A journey had come to an end, yet some things seemed determined to remain behind in me, quiet and enduring, like Non Nuoc Stone Carving Village itself beneath the mountains.

Essay 18

CLOUDS DRIFTING OVER THE PASS, WAVES BREAKING AT THUẬN AN

I have been to Huế more times than I can remember. So many times, in fact, that on certain mornings, sitting over a cup of coffee somewhere in a corner of Saigon, all it takes is for someone to casually mention the word “Huế,” and instantly I see that pale, hazy sky hovering over the Perfume River, hear the delicate toll of a temple bell lingering through a drizzly afternoon, or feel again the faint chill of a breeze slipping in from the Tam Giang Lagoon late at night. The strange thing is that Huế has never been, for me, merely a place to arrive at and leave, another stop to check off so that a journey feels complete. It is more like a living province of memory, and every time I return, it opens itself to me a little differently than before. Even so, there are things that time seems unwilling to touch. The whistle of a train carrying

across Huế Station near daybreak. Old roofs darkened with moss, quietly tucked beneath rows of trees standing motionless in the wind. Or simply the smell of the Perfume River mingling with the coolness at the tail end of a season. Small things like these are enough to make the heart suddenly grow quiet in a moment entirely its own.

Some trips to Huế I made with my family, everybody laughing and talking all the way there. Other times I went with friends, drifting from one little place to another, staying up late to listen to Huế songs on the river, then getting thoroughly drunk on conversations that began nowhere and ended nowhere. But there were trips when I went entirely alone, carrying an old backpack, a few changes of clothes, and my camera. People often say traveling alone is lonely. I have always felt that certain places ought to be traveled alone, because only then can you hear everything they have to say.

Getting from Saigon to Huế is almost too easy now. The plane barely has time to tire its wings before Phú Bài appears beneath a thin veil of cloud. A little over an hour, and you step out of the fierce, sweltering heat of the South into a land with an atmosphere all its own, lightly cold, contemplative without quite being sad. But truthfully, I seldom choose to fly. I prefer the train.

People complain that trains take forever, that they are exhausting, that they waste time. Sure, they take a long time. But that slowness gives you permission to watch the country pass outside the window without hurrying it along. Little hamlets tucked beside brilliant green rice fields. Small stations disappearing into the smoke of late afternoon.

Children standing beside the tracks, breaking into enormous grins and waving both arms when the train goes by. Then there are stretches where the railway hugs the sea, white surf exploding against the foot of the mountains below, while the blue sky spreads so wide that if you stare at it long enough, your heart seems to drift away with it.

In the late 1970s, I once took the train from the South all the way to Huế. The journey lasted several days in old railway cars, and everyone seemed perpetually dazed with exhaustion, their hair coated with a layer of soot and dust from the long road. Things are very different now. The trains run faster, the sleeping berths are neat and clean. Yet the railroad seems never to have lost its own peculiar leisurely rhythm. I still love hearing the iron wheels roll steadily over the rails, watching evening slowly settle beyond the window, or hearing the train whistle stretch through the middle of the night, sounding once and then gradually dissolving into the silence. I sometimes think this country is still trying to preserve a few pockets of slowness like that, places in time where people caught in the commotion of ordinary life do not always have to rush themselves forward.

Traveling by long-distance bus has its pleasures too. Sleeper buses run through the night while the windows are black as ink, and every so often the yellow light from a roadside café sweeps across the face of someone nodding off to sleep. Then come the rest stops in the mountain passes, cold wind tunneling through the darkness, drivers standing around smoking, their cigarette smoke mingling with the fog until everything turns indistinct. I sit there eating a steaming bowl of instant noodles, listening to trucks roar along the highway, and somehow my whole spirit feels

lighter. Trips like that do not need to be luxurious. Just being on the road is enough. Seeing the long road open ahead of you and hearing the country breathe in the darkness is pleasure enough.

This time I came to Huế from Đà Nẵng. I did not want to hurry straight into the city. I wanted to stop at Thuận An first, spend a night by the sea, sit listening to the wind move across the lagoon, and only afterward make my way slowly into Huế. The older I get, the more I enjoy traveling without a definite plan. I want to let my heart drift wherever the road carries it instead of racing against an itinerary. Early that morning, the car left Đà Nẵng and began climbing Hải Vân Pass. Just hearing the name of the pass was enough to stir up a wind inside me. In the old days it was called Ải Vân, the Cloud Gate, and also Đèo Mây, the Cloud Pass. On one side rise range after range of forested mountains. On the other lies the deep blue sea. The Trường Sơn Range thrusts itself toward the open ocean and suddenly rises into an immense wall of stone dividing earth from sky. The pass runs more than twenty kilometers, climbing over five hundred meters, twisting across the mountains like a great python asleep among the clouds of Central Vietnam.

As soon as we started up the pass, I rolled down the window. The sea wind rushed in, cold and fierce. Far below, the water was so blue I felt I could sink into it and forget every sound of the human world. Long bands of golden sand curved around the sea like silk. The mountain road wound along the slopes, appearing and disappearing among the clouds. There were moments so beautiful that a person simply fell silent, with nothing left worth saying.

This country truly is strange. There are places so beautiful they seem to have been created for no other reason than to soften the human heart. But Hải Vân is far more than scenery. History lies there in layers so deep that sometimes, standing among those mountains and clouds, you almost imagine you can still hear horses' hooves, armies shouting, voices of the long-dead echoing from the rocks. Before 1306, this region still belonged to Champa. Then the marriage between Chế Mân and Princess Huyền Trân altered the map of history. Hải Vân Pass became the boundary between Đại Việt and Champa. Sometimes I think Vietnamese history carries its sadness through great partings. A political marriage. A land passing from one realm to another. A mountain range standing motionless while dynasty after dynasty goes by. All the people of those days are dead now. The mountains and clouds remain.

As the car neared the summit, clouds gathered thick around us. Curves in the road appeared and vanished again as though we were traveling through an old dream. I suddenly remembered a line from Lê Quý Đôn's Phủ Biên Tạp Lục: "Hải Vân lies close against the seashore below and pierces layer upon layer of cloud above, forming the boundary between Thuận Hóa and Quảng Nam." One sentence, and somehow it contains both the grandeur and the loneliness of this mountain pass.

People in Central Vietnam used to fear Hải Vân terribly.

"By land, we fear Hải Vân,
By sea, we fear the deadly waves at Hang Dơi."

The folk verse sounds almost like the sigh of generations traveling north and south. Before the tunnel was built through the mountain, the pass road was narrow and dangerous, and vehicles climbed in convoys to the summit, then waited so they could descend together because the road was only wide enough for one-way traffic. I imagine those old vehicles crawling through dense fog, their engines laboring and booming against the mountains while every passenger sat tense, as though crossing the narrow border between life and death. That danger was part of what made Hải Vân legendary.

At the summit, Hải Vân Quan emerged through the clouds. The old fortification stood mottled with moss and age. One side bears the words “Hải Vân Quan.” The other is carved with “The Most Majestic Gateway Under Heaven.” The car pulled over, and I walked inside. Wind whipped through the openings in the ancient stone walls. French and American military bunkers still sat exposed on the mountaintop like scars from wars that had never completely healed. How many armies had passed this way? How many young men had stopped here before entering a war without knowing whether they would ever come home? So many beautiful places in this country were once battlefields. Beauty and pain seem forever tangled together, almost as though by fate. Standing inside Hải Vân Quan, watching clouds drift through ruined doorways, I suddenly felt how small human beings are. Hundreds of years of power, war, borders, conquest, and struggle, and in the end what remains is moss and mountain wind.

The car began descending toward Lăng Cô. Suddenly the whole world opened into an enormous

painting. I have seen many beautiful stretches of sea, but Lăng Cô Bay possesses a beauty entirely its own. It does not overwhelm you with brilliance at first sight. Its beauty is subdued, misty, contemplative. The sea is intensely blue. White sand stretches into the distance. Lập An Lagoon lies perfectly still beneath the mountains like a mirror. Farther away, Phú Gia Mountain fades into the mist. Behind it all, Hải Vân Pass rises like a great wall shielding the entire coast from the wind.

I got out and walked along the beach. Morning in Lăng Cô was strangely quiet. There was only the steady breathing of the waves and the wind whispering through the casuarina trees, sounding almost like someone calling from very far away. Small boats lay tilted on the sand as though asleep. The smell of fish sauce, sea salt, and seaweed mingled into that unmistakable scent belonging only to coastal country.

At Lập An Lagoon, when the tide recedes, a path appears through the water. I walked slowly along it. On both sides the water lay flat as glass. Oyster rafts sat motionless in the lagoon. Far away, several women in conical hats rowed small boats, their figures tiny against the immense open space. Suddenly I thought of the Mekong Delta in the South. Boats there too. Water everywhere. Lives floating with the rise and fall of the tide. But the water of the Mekong is soft, gentle as a lullaby. The water here carries something colder, something faintly sad. It is as though every wave still holds the shadow of old typhoon seasons and of boats that never came home.

People say the name “Lăng Cô” may have come from “An Cư,” which the French later mispronounced as “L’Anco.” Others say there were once so many white storks here that the place was called Làng Cò, the Village of Storks, which gradually became Lăng Cô. I have no idea which story is true. But I like the way ordinary people preserve memory through stories like these. A place name is often more than a name. It is the soul of the land. People also say Emperor Khải Định came here for a summer retreat in 1916 and was so taken with the scenery that he had the Tịnh Viêm summer palace built. I picture that monarch from the twilight of Vietnam’s feudal age standing before the sea at Lăng Cô, watching clouds drift across Hải Vân, listening to waves breaking beneath the mountains, and despite himself feeling his heart soften.

By late afternoon, mist began settling lightly over the lagoon. Flocks of white storks flew back toward Lập An. The sight was so beautiful I almost did not dare breathe too deeply. That evening I ate seafood at a small restaurant by the shore. The oysters had just come out of the water and still carried the sea’s salt on them. The woman who owned the place spoke in that soft Huế accent, gentle as wind. She pointed me toward a simple place where I could spend the night. Night in Lăng Cô was profoundly dark. Far offshore, fishing lights flickered like low-hanging stars. The sea wind blew hard and free. I walked along the beach for a long time without feeling tired. Standing still and watching the waves, I suddenly thought that a human life is a little like the sea at night. There are immense stretches of darkness that seem impossible to cross, yet somewhere out there a few small

lights always remain, just enough to keep us from losing our way.

The next morning I left Lăng Cô for Thuận An. The coastal road stretched beneath the early sunlight. Fishing villages were waking. Someone mended nets. Someone carried baskets of fish. Someone pushed a boat ashore. The salty smell of the sea rode the wind endlessly into the car. Thuận An is different from Lăng Cô. If Lăng Cô is beautiful like a dream, Thuận An feels closer, earthier, more familiar. The sea is gentle. The waves roll in easily. The long beach is covered in fine white sand. Early in the morning, the fishing harbor is packed with people. Boats pull into the docks amid voices calling back and forth loudly enough to fill that whole corner of the sky. I love sitting and watching places like this. A country's real life is not found in grand buildings or slogans hung high above city streets. It lives in the laughter of fishermen returning from a night at sea, in the smell of fresh fish at dawn, in the callused hands hauling nets through the cold wind.

At Trấn Hải Thành, I stood looking at the old fortress, bleached by time and sea wind. More than two hundred years ago, this was a strategic gateway protecting the imperial capital of Huế. Under the Nguyễn Dynasty, an entire network of forts and defensive posts crowded this river mouth. In the old days, people defended a country with cannons and stone walls. Today, sometimes even preserving memory seems difficult enough. I stopped at the Temple of Thai Dương Phu Nhân. Incense smoke drifted through the sea breeze. Women from fishing families came to pray for safety before their loved ones went offshore. Vietnamese folk beliefs have always moved me. They are

not doctrinaire. They are simply a deeply human kind of faith, humble but profound. People believe that somewhere beyond that violent open sea, someone is quietly watching over the small and vulnerable lives that must venture onto it to earn a living.

Evening settling over Tam Giang Lagoon has a beauty that makes it difficult for the heart to remain still. The water stretches vast and open, glowing like burnished bronze beneath the last rays of sunlight lingering at the horizon. Wooden boats drift lazily across the lagoon, moving slowly through an expanse so wide it seems endless. Far in the distance, where the Perfume River finds its way to the sea, fresh water and salt water meet in a quiet mingling, almost like the boundary between nature's tenderness and its violence. Once again I sat there for a long time, hardly wanting to speak. There are places where the closer you come, the less you feel like saying. I wanted only to hear the wind crossing the water, to watch the colors of the lagoon change with the fading light, and to let memories buried deep inside me rise on their own, without summoning them or trying to hold them back.

That night I stayed in Thuận An, a place that needs no glamour and no brilliant display to make a person linger. Sometimes what keeps us somewhere is simply a beautiful sadness. It might be the late-autumn mist floating over Lập An Lagoon, an evening wind sweeping through the Thuận An estuary, or merely a patch of cloud drifting slowly across Ải Vân, making you look up and keep looking until, without realizing it, your heart grows quiet. I often think that people return to a place not necessarily because of how beautiful it is. What draws them back is that once, somewhere there,

they experienced a moment that made the heart truly fall silent amid a life filled with too much noise, a rare moment when they could finally hear the very faint voice of their own soul.

BETWEEN THE VAST LAGOON AND THE LAYERS OF CLOUD OVER BẠCH MÃ

I stayed only one night in Thuận An. One night listening to the sea sigh beyond the window, while wind rustled through the thin curtain like someone walking across my memories. Before dawn, while the sky was still dim, I was already awake. Fishing boats beyond the estuary had lit their lamps in the middle of the night and were now slowly making their way back to the harbor. The smell of fresh fish, salt water, and wet nets mingled in the cold wind, reminding me of the fishing villages along the eastern coast when I was a boy, where people likewise lived by the tides and entrusted their fates to the endless rise and fall of the water.

I checked out early. The woman who ran the guesthouse was still half asleep, her hair hastily tied up, and in that Huế voice as light as morning mist she asked where I was going so early. I smiled and told her I was heading toward Tam Giang Lagoon, then up to Bạch Mã National Park, and would not enter Huế until evening.

Outside town, dawn was just beginning to break. The road along the lagoon was still damp with the night air. Far away, the water lay perfectly still, like an enormous sheet of glass no one had yet touched. Clumps of nipa palms bent quietly toward the lagoon. A water bird shot across the sky

and disappeared into the silver mist. Tam Giang is the kind of place that can make your heart sink into stillness even if you merely pass by. Long ago, people called it Hạc Hải, the Shallow Sea. Then water from the great rivers flowed into it and divided into three channels, giving rise to the name Tam Giang, Three Rivers, the Tả, Trung, and Hữu. This immense body of water stretches across district after district of Huế, all connected like a living organism sustained by silt and sea wind. I once read that this is the largest brackish-water lagoon system in Southeast Asia, covering more than twenty thousand hectares and containing a vast living museum of thousands of plant and animal species. But standing before the lagoon that morning, I stopped thinking about numbers. All I could see was a natural world so primordial that time itself seemed never to have aged it.

A small ferry carried me across the lagoon. The water beneath the boat was neither blue like the sea nor muddy like a river. It had a strange color somewhere in between, the color of fresh water and salt water mingling through hundreds of years. Wind swept freely across the open lagoon. In the distance, rows of fishing stakes stood across the water like thin strokes of ink someone had forgotten beneath the sky. The boatman told me that in places the lagoon reaches seven meters deep. When the winds are strong, the currents turn vicious and can flip a boat as easily as anything. I suddenly remembered the old folk verse:

“The road into Huế winds and turns,
Green mountains and blue waters, beautiful as a painted scene.

Loving you, I too would gladly come,
But I fear Nhà Hồ wilderness, I fear Tam Giang Lagoon."

You hear those lines so often that after a while they sound ordinary. But only when I sat in the middle of that immense lagoon did I understand that the old people's "fear" had been real. Before the waterways were improved and widened, these waters were notoriously treacherous. Wind and waves driven in from the Thuận An estuary collided with river currents flowing outward, creating dangerous underwater whirlpools. People crossing the lagoon by boat in those days must have felt as though they were stepping across a thin boundary between life and death. Huế is strange that way. Even its dangers are beautiful.

The sun slowly rose in the distance. Fiery red light spread over the still water, flowing across the lagoon as though someone had poured hot honey over its surface. I understood why people become obsessed with watching sunrise and sunset at Tam Giang. Nothing here is dramatic. Everything is quiet. Yet that quiet goes very deep. The beauty does not overwhelm you all at once. It seeps gradually into the heart the way water works its way into earth.

I reached Đầm Chuồn after daylight had fully arrived. Fishing huts stood scattered over the water like floating houses from a fairy tale. Several women were making bánh xèo with rabbitfish, and the hiss of hot oil filled the quiet lagoon with an irresistible smell. I sat in an old wooden hut with my feet dangling close to the water and ate a tiny crab barely wider than three fingers, astonishingly sweet and firm. Coastal people and river people have something in

common, they know how to live simply and still be happy. A good catch, a hot meal, a little open-air breeze, and life already feels worth living. From Đầm Chuồn I continued into Rú Chá. The path through the forest was tiny, with old chá trees crowding thickly on both sides. Their exposed roots twisted across the earth like the aged veins of this mangrove country. Sunlight filtered through the canopy, leaving wavering patches of light and shadow on the ground, beautiful in an almost haunting way. I walked slowly. Rú Chá makes a person lower his voice without being asked. Wind murmured through the trees like distant conversation. Standing there in the forest, I suddenly felt completely cut off from the world outside, from car horns, noise, and the fatigue people carry around every day. I longed for peace. Real peace is not always found in money or comfort. Sometimes it is found in a morning spent on a boat watching mist dissolve over a lagoon. It is in the soft splash of an oar entering the water. It is in a mangrove forest where no one is pushing, crowding, or rushing.

I also stopped at the fishing village of Thái Dương Hạ, a village almost completely surrounded by water. Boats crowded close against the houses. Barefoot children ran across narrow wooden bridges. Old men sat on their porches mending nets, their eyes serene, as though they had already watched all of life pass before them. People of the lagoon live slowly. Their slowness is not laziness. It is the way people live after spending generations watching the water rise and fall, until there is no reason left to hurry. The floating markets here are not packed with boats, nor are they loud with vendors calling out. The Ngư Mỹ Thạch floating market unfolds gently in the early morning. Boats

carrying fish and shrimp quietly pull alongside one another. Buyers and sellers speak softly, almost as if they are afraid of disturbing the water. Sitting in a boat and watching it all, I felt an enormous tenderness. This country is beautiful not only because of its mountains and scenic wonders. It is beautiful because places like this still exist, places where an ordinary way of life has not yet disappeared.

Leaving Tam Giang Lagoon, the car turned back and headed uphill toward Bạch Mã National Park. The landscape changed quickly as we climbed from the plain toward the mountains. The air grew colder. Dense forest crowded both sides of the road. Low clouds brushed across the slopes. The last time I came here, I had traveled from central Huế, following the national highway toward Đà Nẵng. This time I simply left everything to the driver and the GPS. It is convenient, sure, but sometimes I still miss the old days of traveling with a paper map and stopping to ask strangers for directions. It was more trouble, but it was fun. These days everyone travels with their eyes on a screen. They arrive at their destination and sometimes cannot remember a single thing they passed along the way.

Only when I reached the entrance to Bạch Mã National Park did I realize how badly I had underestimated the climb. The summit was still nearly twenty kilometers away. The mountain road twisted endlessly. Just thinking about walking it made me feel faint, so I gave up on that noble idea and hired a motorcycle ride to the top. The bike raced through old-growth forest. Mountain wind struck my face with an icy sting. The smell of decaying leaves, damp earth, and moss blended into the unmistakable scent of

tropical forest. In some stretches the fog was so thick I could barely see the road ahead.

Bạch Mã rises more than fourteen hundred meters above sea level. It lies like a natural boundary dividing North from South, the northern Trường Sơn from the southern Trường Sơn. The mountain carries both the cold breath of deep forest and the salt of the sea, because the coastline lies less than twenty kilometers away. I have always liked standing in places where worlds meet. Mountain and sea. Cloud and water. Past and present.

At the beginning of the last century, the French tried to turn Bạch Mã into a mountain resort for the upper class. They built villas and hotels and opened a road up the mountain. Then war came. Everything was abandoned. The old houses slowly decayed deep in the forest. So many places in Vietnam have a story like that. Beautiful places, visited by war, then covered over by the dust of time.

At the summit, the air turned genuinely cold. The first place I went was Hải Vọng Đài. From there, looking down, Cầu Hai Lagoon, Chân Mây Bay, and the coast of Thuận An spread beneath the mountain like an enormous map. Clouds floated across my face. It felt as though one more step might be enough to touch the sky. I sat at the stone railing for a long while without saying anything. The more I travel, the more I believe that places of true beauty usually make people silent.

Then I went to Đỗ Quyên Waterfall. The roar of the falling water filled the ancient forest. People say that in summer, rhododendrons blaze red along both sides of the cliffs and the sight is extraordinary. I had come in the wrong

season for flowers, but the sound of the water alone was enough to make my spirit lighter. After that came Ngũ Hồ, the Five Lakes, a chain of five pools hidden in the forest, their water so clear you can see all the way to the stones below. I sat down and dipped my hand into the icy water. It felt as though all the dust accumulated inside me was being washed away with the stream. A group of young people passed nearby, laughing and talking loudly before disappearing into the forest. Watching them, I suddenly remembered that I had once been young like that too. Back then you think a human life is terribly long, that your strength is endless, that time itself will never run out. Then one day you discover that a few uphill stretches are enough to leave you gasping for breath. I no longer had the strength to complete the whole Ngũ Hồ–Đỗ Quyên Waterfall trail. Two or three hours through the forest is no longer as easy as it once was. So be it. I go as far as I can. I do not need to travel in order to conquer anything. As long as I still have enough feeling left in me to be moved by a mountain, a stream, or an afternoon when the mist begins to fall, that is enough.

By the time I came down the mountain, dusk had already set in. The car moved through pitch-dark curves, its yellow headlights shining into a thin veil of fog. By the time we reached Huế, night had completely fallen. I was exhausted. I had planned to go sit beside the Perfume River for a while, just to feel that I was finally in Huế, but forget it, I had nothing left. The city quietly turned on its lights behind a fine curtain of drizzle. I pulled my suitcase into the hotel and heard, from somewhere very far away, the sound of a temple bell.

Tomorrow, then.

There was no need to meet it right away. Huế was still there. The Perfume River was still flowing. And sometimes it is precisely that unfinished feeling, the fact that you have arrived but have not yet gone out to meet the place, that makes you more restless and eager, even after you have been there more times than you can count.



Photo: The Imperial City, Huế

Essay 19

HUẾ — A PLACE YOU LEAVE WITHOUT EVER TRULY LEAVING BEHIND

This morning I woke up in Huế with a faint chill gently working its way through me. The cold here does not bite into your skin or cut to the bone. It is delicate, almost like a strand of silk suspended in the morning air, slipping softly inside your collar, resting for a moment on your shoulder, then disappearing. So when you first open your eyes, you have the odd sensation that you are still lying somewhere inside the final moments of last night's dream, not yet fully awake, not quite stepped out of that hazy world. I walked to a little coffee shop on a street lined with old trees, ordered a hot black coffee, and sat watching the steam from my cup mingle with the damp breath of the earth left behind by the rain during the night. People in Huế can sit over coffee for an awfully long time. They do not seem to drink it simply to wake themselves up. They drink it as though they want a little more time to sit with themselves before stepping out into life.

For breakfast, I had a simple plate of hot bánh cuốn. The wrappers were thin and tender, smooth as young silk just lifted from the steamer, folded around minced pork, wood-ear mushrooms, and fragrant shiitakes. The woman who owned the place told me to sprinkle on a little golden fried shallot, add a few sprigs of fresh herbs and several thin slices of Vietnamese pork sausage. Somehow, everything tasted exactly right. With Huế cooking, refinement often lies

in the smallest details, just enough of this, only a little of that, yet leave out one tiny thing and the whole flavor seems to fall apart.

Suddenly I thought of a friend who used to wander around Huế with me more than thirty years ago. Back then, the two of us were sitting in a little place much like this one. He was unwrapping several little leaf-wrapped cakes, peeling away the leaves and eating while complaining the entire time.

“Good Lord, what kind of food comes in ten different kinds, and every one of them is only this big?”

Then he delivered his final judgment with absolute certainty, and everybody at the table nearly choked on their tea laughing.

“That’s how the kings and emperors used to eat. Nothing but stuff like this.”

I still remember it now. We Southerners are used to bowls filled to the brim and plates piled high. We are accustomed to a generous way of feeding people, almost as though we are afraid a guest might leave without being completely full, afraid there might not be enough. Huế is different. Huế is like a refined lady from an old and distinguished family, everything measured, graceful, discreet. Never so much that it becomes excessive, never so little that it leaves you disappointed, only enough to make you linger over a flavor, remember a feeling, and carry something of it with you on the road home.

I finished my coffee and breakfast and still had no idea where I wanted to go that day. In Huế, that hardly

seems to matter. This city does not appear to have been made for people who insist on planning every hour down to the last detail, nor does it particularly welcome hurried feet. Spend enough time here and, without realizing when it happened, you begin walking more slowly, speaking more softly, living at an easier pace.

Some cities we visit mainly to look at things. We look at the scenery, the streets, whatever is unfamiliar, and then we move on. Huế is different. Huế is not merely something to see. It is something to remember. And even the remembering works strangely here. It does not necessarily begin while you are standing in the middle of the city. Usually you have to walk long enough and wander far enough, and only after you have gone away do you suddenly realize that Huế had been seeping into you all along.

Huế today is a centrally governed municipality, a Class I urban center and one of Central Vietnam's major centers of culture, education, and medicine, with a population of more than 1.4 million people and an area of nearly five thousand square kilometers. Yet what fascinates me is that amid all the changes of a city developing day by day, Huế still seems determined to preserve a rhythm entirely its own. The more the city expands, the more I get the feeling that it is quietly guarding some old piece of its memory. That is the very Huế-like paradox of the place. It is a modern city that continues to live slowly and contemplatively. Somehow, time here has never learned to hurry.

People have called this land by many names. Phú Xuân. The Imperial Capital. The Ancient Capital. Each name

carries the imprint of a different age. But for me, “Huế” remains the most intimate and evocative of them all. One short syllable, yet somehow it has tremendous depth, like a faint voice calling from some distant province of memory. Hearing the name Huế, you do not simply remember a place. You can almost hear time itself quietly resonating from moss-covered rooftops, from an old river, from rainy seasons that have passed through hundreds of years.

According to old records, the name “Huế” appeared quite early. Tradition has it that Emperor Lê Thánh Tông once mentioned the name in the line:

“... brass from Laos, rice from Huế...”

Later, the French merchant Pierre Poivre, who came to Phú Xuân in 1749, also recorded the name “Hué” in his memoirs. A name that has survived quietly for centuries, passing through wars, upheavals, and endless change, and somehow remaining there in the end like a soft sigh from the earth. That is why Huế is unlike other cities. It does not fight for your affection. It simply stays where it is. Love it if you will.

I wandered along several old streets, looking at low-roofed houses and ancient trees drooping their shadows over pavement still wet from the night’s rain. Huế lies between mountains and sea. To the west it rests against the Trường Sơn Range, with mountains such as Bạch Mã, Động Ngai, and Động Truồi. To the east it opens onto the immense silver waters of the Tam Giang–Cầu Hai lagoon system. The rivers of Huế are short, widening as they move downstream. A little like the lives of the people here,

perhaps, seldom fierce at the beginning, but growing deeper as they go.

I found myself thinking again about Huế's weather. It is a place whose rainy season seems out of step with the rest of the country. When the South is drowning under sheets of rain, Huế may be burning beneath the sun. Then, when Saigon is blazing bright, Huế disappears beneath days of rain that seem unwilling to end. Rain in Huế is not like rain elsewhere. It does not come roaring down violently and then disappear. It drizzles and murmurs and lingers, stubborn as a sadness that refuses to leave. Once I stayed in Huế for nearly a month during the rainy season. I woke to rain in the morning, drank coffee while watching rain in the afternoon, and lay in bed at night listening to it tapping against an old tile roof. At first it made me melancholy. Eventually I got used to it. The roads around Huế have expanded enormously now. National Highway 1, the North–South Expressway, Phú Bài Airport, Chân Mây Port, Thuận An Port, all of them connect Huế to the outside world faster and more closely than ever. Yet somewhere deep inside the city, I can still feel an older Huế lying quietly where it has always been, as though nothing ever changed. People still speak softly. They still move slowly. They still preserve a certain restrained, gracious manner of living that many young people today find almost strange.

I strolled along the southern bank of the Perfume River. Beneath the shade of old trees, French colonial buildings appeared with the quiet bearing of witnesses who have lived too long alongside this city. Quốc Học High School still glows red in the morning sunlight, a red that has endured countless seasons of rain and sun without seeming

to fade. Hai Bà Trưng School still carries the unmistakable dignity of an Indochinese age long since receded into history, standing there as though entrusted with the memories of an entire region. And Morin is still Morin, composed beside the old river, like an elderly gentleman of experience who has watched the world change countless times and yet retains something of the elegance of his golden years.

In Huế, many buildings seem to have outgrown the ordinary meaning of architecture. They are no longer simply structures of brick and stone assembled by human hands. They feel more like fragments of historical memory that somehow acquired physical form and remained standing while time moved on. Along both banks of the Perfume River lies an entire country of the past, resting quietly beneath the trees, inside the thin mist and under the accumulated sediment of generations.

The Tomb of Minh Mạng appears majestic, symmetrical, solemn, like an ancient poem in classical Chinese written across a dark green pine forest. Every line of the place carries the composure and discipline of an era that believed deeply in order and ritual. The Tomb of Tự Đức bears a very different sadness, something gentle and deep, lingering like unfinished confidences left behind by a gifted emperor who also knew profound loneliness. Khải Định's tomb is elaborate, brilliant, almost extravagant in its difference. Its mixture of Eastern and Western architecture has drawn both praise and criticism over the years. But stand there long enough and look carefully, and you begin to realize that it tells more than the story of a building. It preserves the traces of an entire age wavering uneasily

between the old shore and the new, between values disappearing and foreign influences rushing in.

Then, from a distance, Thiên Mụ Pagoda rises beside the river like a figure that has been standing there since time beyond memory. The temple sits silently between sky and water, and merely seeing it from far away is enough to awaken a feeling of solitude and contemplation. I have never encountered another temple that gives me that sensation quite so strongly. The bell of Thiên Mụ seems to ring for more than reminding people of the Buddhist realm. Its sound feels as though it rises from somewhere deep inside the human heart, calling each of us home to ourselves and to all the things the commotion of life made us forget long ago.

Huế offers countless places where a traveler can stop. Ngự Bình Mountain. Vọng Cảnh Hill. Tam Giang Lagoon. Rú Chá. Hổ Quyền. The Temple of Literature. Hòn Chén Temple. Thiên An. Phủ Cam. Từ Đàm. Từ Hiếu. Every place carries its own story and its own beauty, enough to make a person stop, look, and remember.

Yet after wandering many times through the roads, temples, imperial tombs, rivers, and lagoons of this land, I gradually came to understand that what keeps me attached to Huế is not really the scenery. What holds a person most deeply is the atmosphere of Huế. Something light and elusive, like incense smoke drifting out of an ancient temple on a deserted afternoon. You cannot quite see it, yet somehow it quietly seeps into you without your knowing. Within that atmosphere lies the contemplation of a land that has survived tremendous upheaval, war, loss, and change,

and after everything has still managed to preserve its own particular gentleness.

That is why Huế carries such a rare and beautiful sadness. It is not heavy or gloomy. It is a sadness as light as mist, just enough to make the heart dip a little whenever you pass through it. Its beauty is so quiet that sometimes, standing in Huế, you instinctively lower your voice and slow your steps, almost afraid that laughing too loudly might disturb a peace that has been settling here for generations.

People in Huế live closer to religion than people in many other places. You do not have to search far to notice it. Walk down a few streets and you can already feel it. Buddhism is everywhere, in ancient temples hidden beneath green trees, in little pagoda roofs glimpsed between houses, in monasteries perched among pine-covered hills or tucked beside still rivers. Religion in Huế does not stand apart from ordinary life. It seems to have dissolved into the landscape and into the everyday habits of the people. What makes me cherish Huế even more is that in a land where many faiths coexist, the city retains an uncommon serenity. Phủ Cam Cathedral raises its modern architectural lines into the open sky. Redemptorist Church bears the deep, contemplative imprint of time. Thiên An Monastery rests quietly among pine trees, where wind and bells seem to become one sound. Cao Đài temples, shrines, and ancient sanctuaries also exist naturally beside them, without strain or opposition, like different plants growing on the same riverbank and sharing the same sunlight and water.

I walked until late afternoon. The city began turning on its lights slowly, deliberately, the way Huế people seem to have lived for generations, never frantic, never rushing. One by one, bands of yellow light appeared beside the river. Motorbikes slipped across Trường Tiền Bridge, leaving tiny moving points of light in the falling dusk. Wind rose from the Perfume River carrying the cool breath of the water, a chill so light it barely touched the skin.

In a few days I will leave this place. But I know that, as on all the previous occasions, Huế will refuse to stay quietly inside memory. Someday, during a sudden rainstorm in some other city, in the smell of freshly steaming black coffee, or when I happen to hear someone sing an old folk refrain, Huế will return. Memory is strange that way. There are things we desperately try to remember and cannot. Yet there are places where one passing fragrance can bring an entire stretch of life back intact. Huế often returns like that. Quietly appearing again, then making you ache for the memory of sitting beneath an awning while rain tapped against the world beside the Perfume River, aching for the sound of a distant temple bell crossing the silence.

Other places we sometimes pass through and simply move on. Time covers everything with a thin layer of dust, and gradually memory fades like the colors in an old photograph. Huế is different. Huế is like the scent of incense lingering on your sleeve. You think it has faded, but it has not. You think you have forgotten, but somewhere inside you, it remains.

HUẾ — WHERE THE RIVER FLOWS THROUGH DYNASTIES

My thoughts wandered again toward old Phú Xuân, the way thoughts wander when you sit alone at night listening to the Perfume River drifting past a landing. Suddenly I had the feeling that I was standing before a land that possesses not merely great age, but a soul almost unfathomably deep and layered.

Huế sometimes does not feel like a city at all. Huế feels like an ancient dream. And dreams like that do not begin with moss-covered roofs or citadel walls scarred by bullets. They begin much deeper, so deep that when people today bend down and unearth a stone ax at Phụ Ổ or a shard of pottery at Bàu Đưng, it can feel as though they have just touched the lingering warmth of some prehistoric hand. I remember once standing in Hương Trà, looking at old stretches of land lying quietly beneath the afternoon sun, and suddenly wondering whether four or five thousand years before me, another human being might have stood on this very ground watching the sunset exactly as I was doing.

The history of Huế is not the kind of history that lies quietly inside books. It is in the earth. In the grass. In the calls of birds at dusk. In the layers of silt the Perfume River quietly deposits and quietly carries away. Traces of the Sa Huỳnh culture at Cồn Ràng and Cửa Thiềng, Đông Sơn bronze drums discovered at Phong Mỹ, all of it makes me think about the strange destiny of this land. Huế has never belonged to a single bloodline, a single voice, or a solitary culture. It is a meeting place for layer upon layer of humanity, migrations and civilizations passing through and leaving

their footprints behind. Huế's contemplative character is not simple at all. It is what remains after the tremendous movements of history have finally settled.

Many times I have sat beside the Perfume River, watching its greenish, clouded water drift lazily by, and suddenly thought of Princess Huyền Trân, who once journeyed "a thousand miles across mountains and rivers" from home. A young woman left the imperial capital of Thăng Long in exchange for the two territories of Ô and Lý. Behind one marriage lay the destiny of an entire people's southward expansion. Later generations often tell the story as a historical event. But the more I think about it, the more I sense an abyss of a woman's sorrow inside it. On her first night in a foreign land, perhaps that young woman missed her old home, the smell of cooking fires, even the northern voices that from then on would exist for her only in memory. From that point onward, Thuận Hóa entered Đại Việt almost as a matter of destiny. The land became a meeting place of Vietnamese and Cham cultures, North and South, warfare and poetry, the clash of weapons and the ringing of temple bells, the songs of Huế drifting across the water.

I have always felt that Huế was built out of partings. The Cham withdrew southward. Vietnamese settlers followed the frontier and arrived. Displaced families built villages beside Tam Giang Lagoon and at the foot of Ngự Mountain. Soldiers died along distant borders. Mothers waited for husbands. Children grew up amid smoke and war. During its first several centuries, Thuận Hóa hardly knew a truly peaceful day. That was why there came the prophecy, "A single range of Hoành Sơn may provide refuge for ten thousand generations." When Nguyễn Hoàng came to

govern Thuận Hóa in 1558, I imagine he carried more than ambition with him. He carried fear. Fear of the Trịnh family's power in the North. Fear of death waiting in the shadows of the court. Yet from that very fear arose the Nguyễn lords' domain, lasting several centuries and eventually helping shape the entire South. Look closely at history's turning points and they often resemble wagers made with fate. Thuận Hóa in those days was still a difficult frontier, thick with dangerous wilderness and battered by endless war. Yet it became a refuge for an entire lineage. Thinking about that, I realize Vietnamese history was written not only with swords and weapons, but also with the quiet endurance of human beings facing adversity.

Huế first began taking urban form around Kim Long and later Phú Xuân. On the surface, the Nguyễn lords' repeated moves of their administrative seat were matters of politics. At a deeper level, however, they were part of a search for a spiritual center for Đàng Trong, the southern realm. Eventually Phú Xuân was chosen. I have passed through Kim Long before. Its old gardens lie silently behind neatly clipped hedges, traditional timber houses appearing beneath the shade of aging areca palms, and I understand why the people of the past chose this place. There is something discreet yet elegant in the very posture of the land.

Phú Xuân gradually grew. From Kim Long and Dương Xuân to Bao Vinh and Thanh Hà, the city stretched along both sides of the Perfume River like a soft ribbon of silk. Lê Quý Đôn once described the prosperity of the "Capital City of Phú Xuân." Yet no amount of writing can fully capture the golden age of a capital that served as a center

of power for centuries. I imagine Western merchant ships arriving at Thanh Hà, vendors calling along the waterfront, oil lamps flickering late into the night, mandarins in formal robes and hats passing through crowded market streets, while somewhere across the river a melancholy instrument plays, its music flowing like water. Huế has always contained that contradiction. It was a capital of power and, at the same time, a dwelling place for loneliness.

The more I read about the Nguyễn Dynasty, the more fragile its splendor seems to me. Nguyễn Ánh retook Phú Xuân in 1801, established the Nguyễn Dynasty, and made Huế the capital of the entire country. The Imperial City rose. Fortifications. Vermilion towers. Magnificent palaces. Court ceremonies. Royal processions. Night-watch drums. Together they formed a majestic and enclosed world. Yet behind those gilded walls lived countless silent human fates. Once, on a gloomy afternoon, I stood for a very long time inside the Imperial City. The old bricks felt cold beneath my feet. Wind traveled through the corridors with a long, hollow sound. For reasons I could not explain, I kept thinking about very young imperial concubines confined for life behind layer after layer of red doors. I thought about emperors lying awake through the night surrounded by power and still utterly alone. About high officials walking with bowed heads through a court filled with danger. Sometimes the more magnificent a capital becomes, the more sorrow it contains.

Then the French came, and Huế entered another age. Royal decrees established the municipality, urban plans were drawn, Western-style streets appeared south of the Perfume River. Colonial administration and imperial

government overlapped in complicated layers, leaving Huế simultaneously old and new, Eastern and Western.

On afternoons when I walk along Lê Lợi Street and watch the green trees cast their shadows over the river, Huế suddenly seems like an aristocratic woman who has survived tremendous upheaval. The old beauty remains in her face, but her eyes carry the weariness of time. Huế did not develop with Saigon's clamor, nor with Hanoi's bustle. Huế moved slowly. So slowly that many people mistook it for standing still. Yet it was precisely that slowness that preserved the soul of the place.

After 1975, Huế was merged with neighboring areas into Bình Trị Thiên, then later separated again. In 2025, Huế became a centrally governed municipality. History continues flowing. Yet I do not think administrative changes are what matter most. What matters is that Huế has somehow preserved its own expression, its own unmistakable bearing, in an age of concrete and speed.

Once, very late at night, I sat drinking coffee beside the Perfume River. Through a thin veil of mist I heard a distant temple bell, and suddenly I understood something more clearly. Huế has survived until today not because of its palaces, but because of memory. A land whose memory remains alive can never truly die. That is why Huế culture has such depth. It blends Đông Sơn with Sa Huỳnh, Vietnamese with Cham, Confucianism with Buddhism, the imperial court with folk traditions, poetry with music, ceremony with everyday life. Huế is like a piece of agarwood left soaking in water for a very long time, the longer it rests, the more quietly its fragrance emerges.

I once believed Huế's beauty lay in its scenery. Only later did I understand that its greatest beauty lies in the way Huế people live. Their voices are soft as wind, their clothing discreet, and there is restraint and refinement in the way they arrange a meal, place flowers in a vase, or offer someone a cup of tea. People in Huế seem always to preserve a quiet space somewhere inside themselves, never displaying too much. Many people say Huế is sad. I do not think Huế is sad. Huế is simply too deep for the shallow-hearted to remain there long.

The Complex of Huế Monuments, Royal Court Music, the Nguyễn Dynasty Woodblocks, the Nguyễn Dynasty Imperial Archives, the poetry and literature inscribed on imperial architecture, these UNESCO-recognized legacies are not merely titles. They are evidence that there was once an age when this people lived with extraordinary beauty and artistry.

I once heard Nhã nhạc, the Royal Court Music, performed inside the Imperial City during a Festival night. The music rose slowly, drifting like smoke. Among yellow lights and ancient palace roofs, I suddenly felt the distance between present and past disappear. Somewhere in the Huế night, it seemed the old dynasties were still walking.

And then there is Ca Huế.

I remember a night on a boat on the Perfume River, listening to a Nam Ai melody so sorrowful it seemed to reach straight into the marrow. The moon lute sounded in lingering phrases. The singer's voice was not loud, yet it gradually entered the listener's chest the way water sinks through

layers of alluvial earth. There are sorrows ordinary words cannot carry, so the people of Huế entrust them to music.

Huế is also beautiful in its nhà rường, its traditional timber houses. Old wooden homes with intricately carved columns and beams, gardens filled with thanh trà pomelos and areca palms, alive with birdsong in the morning. Whenever I enter an old Huế garden house, I feel as though I am stepping into another layer of time, one where everything moves slowly and has its proper place.

Huế cuisine is the same.

People in Huế prepare food the way other people write poetry. A tiny dish of bánh bèo is arranged with painstaking care. A bowl of bún bò carries the fragrance of fermented shrimp paste and lemongrass. A bowl of fiercely spicy cơm hến reveals another piece of ordinary life with every bite. Huế values refinement more than abundance. People here eat with their eyes, their noses, and their moods as much as with their mouths. One night I sat at a little roadside place listening to rain patter against a corrugated metal roof while eating a plate of piping-hot bánh khoái, and suddenly it occurred to me that perhaps a city can enter the human heart through things this small.

That night, when I left the bank of the Perfume River and started back toward where I was staying, I turned around for one last look at the dark water moving slowly through the old city, and something suddenly rose inside me. That river does not simply flow through a place called Huế. It quietly flows through dynasties that have vanished, through upheavals whose traces are gone, through human lives long since dissolved into dust, and in the end somehow

finds its way into my own heart as well. I suddenly understood that there are places we pass through and later forget, like a page in a book we have closed. But there are other places where, once you have passed through even a single time, no matter how heavily time lays its dust over everything, the place remains quietly within you, embedded like a memory that cannot be erased. Huế, for me, is one of those places. The farther away I go, the more present it becomes, like an unending current, silent, persistent, and haunting.

Essay 20

HUẾ — A SADNESS AS THIN AS INCENSE SMOKE

That morning, I sat down at a coffee shop on the bank of the Perfume River, right in central Huế. The place was modest, almost plain compared with many of the other cafés around town. Low chairs, an old wooden table, a glass of black coffee carrying the faint scorched aroma of roasted beans. It was the kind of smell that somehow belonged in a city that had lived through so many rainy seasons. The sunlight over Huế that morning was gentle, and the sky still looked half asleep, pale and hazy. The river in front of me moved so slowly that at times I had the feeling it was not moving at all, that it was simply lying there.

Sitting there watching the Perfume River in the early morning, I suddenly understood why people keep talking

about Huế, and why, after years away, they still turn back in memory toward it. Huế is not beautiful only because of its scenery, or because of its history. Huế is beautiful because of its sadness. A sadness as thin as incense smoke, like the sound of a temple bell falling onto the water during a rainy afternoon. You think it has already dissolved into the air, and yet somehow it stays inside you.

The Perfume River lay before me like a soft strip of silk draped across the city. People in Huế call it Hương Giang. Even the name sounds poetic. The river runs about eighty kilometers, beginning in the two branches of Tả Trạch and Hữu Trạch deep in the Trường Sơn Range, joining at the confluence of Bằng Lãng before flowing on toward the city. I once read that Tả Trạch passes through fifty-five waterfalls, while Hữu Trạch passes through fourteen. Before becoming the gentle river that winds through the old capital, those waters carry with them the breath of the forest, the scent of leaves, alluvial soil, and the sound of mountain winds. Maybe that is why people long ago believed that the Perfume River itself carried the fragrance of forest plants. In Huế, beauty often seems to live half in reality and half in imagination.

Sitting there watching the jade-green water drift slowly past, I suddenly remembered a line by Nguyễn Trọng Tạo:

“If the Perfume River turned to wine, I would come and drink,
I would remain sober while palaces reeled in drunkenness.”

Some rivers merely pass through cities. Others pass through the spiritual life of an entire people. The Perfume

River has watched dynasties rise and fall. It has reflected the golden walls and palaces of the Nguyễn emperors. It has heard horses' hooves, the clash of weapons, crying, chanting, and the music of Huế drifting from dragon boats in the middle of the night. The river moves past Kim Long, Nguyệt Biều, Vỹ Dạ, Đông Ba, Gia Hội, and Bao Vinh, almost as though it were moving through layer after layer of Huế's memory. That is why the Perfume River carries more than silt. It carries history.

People often say that if you want to understand Huế, you have to spend a night on a boat on the Perfume River. I have done that several times already, so this time I did not go. I preferred to sit quietly on the bank and watch. I am older now. I no longer feel much need to collect experiences for their own sake. I would rather stand a little farther away and listen to what moves inside me. Still, I remember those nights on the dragon boats very clearly. The moon was pale. The wind was cold. Lights from Trường Tiền Bridge trembled across the water in streaks of color that looked almost unreal. A zither would sound through the night, followed by a Huế singer's voice, slow and melancholy. It could sound like the lingering sorrow of women long gone from the imperial palace. Huế at night is unlike any city I have ever known. It does not become noisy in order to entertain you. It becomes quiet so that you will remember. Then the rain begins. Rain here does not pour violently the way it often does in the South, nor does it cut through you with northern cold. It falls steadily, stubbornly, with a mood of its own. Looking through that silver curtain of water, I have seen Trường Tiền Bridge standing silent in the gray river, trees on both banks fading into mist. Far away, Thiên Mụ

Pagoda rests against the dark sky, its bell dissolving into the water. People in Huế do not live slowly because they deliberately choose to. Nature here seems to make them that way. The river flows slowly. The rain falls slowly. Temple bells linger slowly in the air. Even pain in Huế seems slower than elsewhere. It does not erupt violently. It seeps gradually into the heart.

The Perfume River passes through Huế like a soft brushstroke. Trường Tiền Bridge is like a fateful horizontal line joining two banks of memory. At night you can see its colors changing from far away. It has been that way for years. Trường Tiền, or Tràng Tiền, people in Huế call it either name, and perhaps the name matters less than the fact that they still remember the bridge. It stretches more than four hundred meters, with six spans and twelve arches, or twelve arches and six spans, depending on the old local way of counting. It curves over the river like an ivory comb.

Nguyễn Bính once wrote:

“The bridge curves like an ivory comb,
The long river like a palace maiden’s loosened hair...”

Read those lines and all of Huế seems to be inside them. I have stood on that bridge looking down at the water and thought how strange it is. It does not merely connect two riverbanks. It connects whole eras. There was once a rattan bridge, then an ironwood bridge, then the steel bridge built by the French in 1899. It survived the great flood of the Year of the Dragon that swept away several spans, then war brought destruction, reconstruction followed, and the bridge’s name changed again and again with history. Thành Thái Bridge. Clémenceau Bridge. Nguyễn Hoàng Bridge.

Finally, Trường Tiền again. Names change. Regimes change. However long people live, eventually they die and everything changes with them. Only the river remains. Sometimes history seems to me exactly like the Perfume River. It keeps flowing past emperors, wars, promises, and separations. People imagine they control their age, but in the end each of us is only another figure crossing the bridge.

I remember the old folk verse:

"Trường Tiền Bridge, six spans and twelve arches,
I cannot catch up with you,
Poor me, my love..."

At first it sounds like nothing more than the sorrow of two lovers. Yet sometimes it feels more like the helplessness of human beings before time.

Leaving the river, I headed toward Ngự Bình Mountain. It is not far from central Huế. The car crossed Dã Viên Bridge and followed several tree-lined streets. The air grew cooler, then Ngự Mountain came into view. It is not grand or severe like mountains in the North, nor wild like those of the Central Highlands. It simply stands there, quiet and square, like a great screen raised between earth and sky. In earlier times it was called Bằng Mountain or Hòn Mô. Under Gia Long, it became Ngự Bình. The name itself already carries the sound of royal authority. This mountain served as the geomantic screen of the imperial capital. From the time Lord Nguyễn Phúc Thái moved his seat to Phú Xuân, through Nguyễn Phúc Khoát's development of the capital, and later Gia Long's construction of the Imperial City, rulers took Ngự Bình as the protective screen before the capital. It stood in front of Huế like a screen placed there

by heaven and earth. People in old Huế believed deeply in feng shui. To me, feng shui is really a kind of conversation between human beings and nature. The people of the past did not place a capital at random. They chose a site with water before it and mountains behind it, a configuration of land they believed could settle the human heart. And strangely enough, every dynasty eventually disappeared, while what belongs to nature remained. Heaven and earth take no side.

On the summit of Ngự Mountain, wind passed through the pine forest with a soft whistling sound. I remembered the story that during the Nguyễn Dynasty, every high-ranking official was required to plant a pine tree on this mountain. One emperor followed another, and over time an entire green forest took shape. The sound of pines in Huế is deeply melancholy. It does not roar like ocean surf. It murmurs like someone telling an old story. From the heights, the Perfume River looks like a ribbon of silk wrapped around the city. In the distance lies the Imperial City, its moss-covered roofs, its royal tombs resting beneath old trees. Suddenly Huế seemed to me like a beautiful woman who has already passed through the springtime of her youth. She no longer dazzles, but the longer you look, the deeper her beauty goes. People often speak of “the Perfume River and Ngự Mountain” as Huế’s destined pair. One soft, one contemplative. One water, one earth. Like yin and yang standing beside one another through all of time.

Then I went to Bân Mountain. There, the statue of Quang Trung stands magnificently beneath the open sky. The towering figure rises in front of a long relief depicting the Tây Sơn uprising and the lightning-fast march north to

defeat the Qing army. I stood before the monument for quite a while. Certain historical figures become more haunting the longer you think about them. Nguyễn Huệ burst into history like thunder and disappeared far too soon. Bân Mountain was where he proclaimed himself emperor at the end of 1788 before marching north to Thăng Long. I imagine that night. Huế was cold, wind moving across the fields around the mountain. Tens of thousands of Tây Sơn soldiers crowded below the ceremonial platform. Nguyễn Huệ wore his battle robe, offered rites to heaven and earth, and read his imperial proclamation.

"Humanity, righteousness, loyalty, and trust are the great foundations of the way of man..."

Hundreds of years have passed, yet the words still carry tremendous force.

Then came his famous vow:

"Fight so we may keep our long hair,
Fight so we may keep our blackened teeth,
Fight so their wheels never return,
Fight so not a piece of their armor comes home..."

Those words were more than a military exhortation. They carried the spirit of an age.

Standing on Bân Mountain, I thought again about how painful Vietnamese history can be. Great heroes often live very short lives. The Tây Sơn Dynasty blazed like a torch and then was swept away. After Quang Trung died, the traces of the Tây Sơn were almost entirely erased. Bân Mountain became one of the few places still holding some fragment of memory of that dynasty. History can be cruel

that way. And yet perhaps it is precisely the brevity of certain lives that makes some people immortal.

As afternoon slowly faded, I returned to the area around the foot of Ngự Bình. There, among the pine forests and quiet roads, graves are packed together in enormous numbers. Tombs cover the slopes beneath the mountain that was once regarded as the geomantic screen of the imperial capital. I stood there for a long time. On one side stood a symbol of dynastic power. On the other, the anonymous resting places of hundreds of thousands of ordinary people. The contrast weighed heavily on me. There has been talk of relocating more than a hundred thousand graves to create a “cultural space.” The phrase sounds civilized enough. But standing among those old tombs streaked with moss, the word “relocation” suddenly felt terribly cold. Every grave represents a human life. Beneath that earth might lie a mother who once sold sweet soup at Đông Ba Market. A soldier who died after the war. A young Huế woman who once sat on a boat listening to Ca Huế on the Perfume River. A man who spent his life far from home and eventually returned to rest beneath Ngự Mountain. Huế sometimes seems to hold on to its dead more carefully than it holds on to the living. Wind moving through the pines above the cemetery had a hollow, endless sound. I suddenly remembered a very sad thought, in the end, every one of us becomes a handful of silence beneath heaven and earth.

Perhaps Huế’s sad beauty comes partly from places like this. Huế does not try to hide decay or disappearance. It lets time show itself plainly on moss-covered walls, old bridge spans, deserted tombs, temple bells, and even in the eyes of its people. Many cities try desperately to stay young

forever. Huế does not. Huế grows old calmly. Perhaps that is why it has depth.

Late in the afternoon, I returned once again to the river. The lights on Trường Tiền Bridge began changing colors. The Perfume River slowly darkened. Several dragon boats switched on their lamps and drifted across the water like floating pieces of memory. I sat there for a very long time. I had spent the entire day circling the river and Ngự Mountain, and somehow the day had disappeared without my noticing. Yet something inside me still refused to let go. That is how Huế works. It does not hold you with spectacle. It holds you with what remains afterward. And after all, I had hardly seen all of Huế yet.

THE BELL OF THIÊN MỤ AND THE EVENING SHADOWS OVER HỔ QUYỀN

Today I wandered through another part of Huế. This city is strange. No matter how long you walk through it, there always seems to be one more thing you have not quite touched. You stand before a mist-covered river and glimpse, on the opposite bank, a roof, the shadow of a tree, the sound of a bell. The more closely you look, the less clearly you seem to see, and yet your heart is pulled toward it a little at a time. Huế does not attract people through brilliance or noise. It does not overwhelm you with anything too enormous. It moves slowly, contemplatively, as thin as incense smoke. And once you step inside its world, somehow your own life begins to soften. Your voice lowers. Your footsteps grow lighter.

That morning I went up to Thiên Mụ Pagoda. A fine drizzle fell along the road beside the Perfume River, that peculiar Huế rain, not enough to soak your clothes, yet enough to deepen the green of the grass and trees and lay a thin ash-gray veil across the river. Thiên Mụ Pagoda sits on Hà Khê Hill along the northern bank of the Perfume River, about five kilometers west of the city center. It was founded in 1601 under Lord Nguyễn Hoàng, the first Nguyễn lord of Đàng Trong. But standing before Thiên Mụ, you stop thinking very much about dates. What makes you pause is the atmosphere around the temple. Call it Buddhist presence, spiritual energy, sacred force, whatever you like. Something ancient and holy seems to live there. It feels both real and dreamlike. I climbed the stone steps, listening to my shoes touch the old surface, and felt my mind grow quieter. Huế has many pagodas, but Thiên Mụ carries itself differently. It seems like someone who has lived a very long life, having passed through countless historical upheavals, wars, and the rise and fall of dynasties, and yet it still sits there in silence.

People in Huế tell an old story that a woman dressed in red with green trousers once appeared at night on this hill and foretold that a true lord would come and build a pagoda here, gathering sacred energy and strengthening the spiritual lifeline of the southern land. Who knows whether the legend is true or simply a way the old people entrusted their hopes to earth and sky. A nation’s history is not built only from swords and citadels. It is also built from belief. Nguyễn Hoàng was then expanding toward the South, carrying ambition into a land still filled with uncertainty. Seeing the terrain shaped like a dragon turning its head

beside the river, he had a temple built here. When you think about it, the people of the past were remarkable. They built a pagoda before they had fully built their power. Perhaps before you can settle the people, you first have to settle the relationship between human beings and heaven.

I walked farther into the temple grounds. Pine trees stood motionless in the light wind. Every so often the temple bell sounded, dissolving into the mist and seeming to fall onto the surface of the Perfume River. Phước Duyên Tower rose before me, tall and graceful. The seven-story tower was built in 1844 during the reign of Emperor Thiệu Trị and stands like a brilliant mark against the Huế sky. Looking up from one level to the next, I felt again that the beauty of Huế architecture does not lie in display but in restraint. Everything is measured. Even majesty carries humility. Rain, storms, and war did not spare this place. The pagoda suffered destruction, buildings collapsed after the great typhoon of 1904, and it endured the turmoil of the Tây Sơn period and the Nguyễn Dynasty. Yet somehow it still remains. I think about human lives, how one disaster can sometimes scatter everything. Ancient temples, meanwhile, quietly endure for centuries, preserving memory on behalf of an entire land.

Inside the temple grounds stands the blue Austin automobile associated with Venerable Thích Quảng Đức before his self-immolation in 1963. I looked at the car. It is simply an old automobile, nothing especially remarkable in appearance. But history often does not reside in the shape of an object. It resides in the pain that object once carried. I suddenly remembered the lines of Quách Tấn:

“Those burdened by the endless troubles of fame and gain,
Arriving there, even their hearts must find relief.”

That is exactly right. Thiên Mụ does not make people happy in the sense of helping them forget the world. It makes them see themselves more clearly. In crowded places, we often feel alone. Yet there are also places where standing alone can make us feel strangely comforted.

Leaving Thiên Mụ, I went to Từ Đàm Pagoda. If Thiên Mụ carries something legendary and imperial, Từ Đàm has the character of a temple that walked alongside the modern history of Vietnamese Buddhism. It sits on Sư Liễu Quán Street and is not overwhelmingly grand, but the moment you enter, the feeling changes. There is peace here, but a peace mixed with a spirit engaged with the world.

The temple was originally founded in the late seventeenth century by Zen master Minh Hoằng Tử Dung and was first called Ấn Tôn Pagoda. Later, Emperor Thiệu Trị changed its name to Từ Đàm because of a naming taboo associated with Miên Tông. “Từ Đàm” sounds soft as cloud and smoke. People explain it as “the auspicious cloud of the Buddha’s teaching.” Hearing that, I felt it fit the place. During the 1960s, Từ Đàm became a center of Buddhist activism. Standing in the courtyard, I imagined thousands of monks, nuns, and lay Buddhists gathering here, banners filling the space, chanting mingling with voices raised in protest during a period when the country was fractured and uneasy.

I looked at the bodhi tree in the courtyard, said to have been propagated from the sacred bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya in India, where the Buddha attained enlightenment.

Inside the main hall, the arrangement is simple, without an overwhelming number of statues. At the center stands only the image of Shakyamuni Buddha. The silence is so complete you can hear your own footsteps.

In the afternoon I stopped at Hổ Quyền. From the serenity of Buddhist temples, I stepped into a place that was once an arena of death between elephants and tigers. Suddenly Huế's history seemed like a current filled with contradictions. On one side, the sound of temple bells. On the other, the cries of animals. Hổ Quyền stands in the Trường Đá area of Thủy Biều. It was a unique arena under the Nguyễn Dynasty, where elephants and tigers fought to the death in ritual spectacles watched by emperors, mandarins, and ordinary people. Standing before the old moss-covered walls, I imagined the past, when the emperor would travel by dragon boat from Nghênh Lương Pavilion along the Perfume River to watch the fights. Before Hổ Quyền was built, they say elephant and tiger contests took place on Dã Viên Islet. In one event, as many as forty elephants reportedly killed eighteen tigers. Just hearing that sends a chill down the spine.

I stepped into the arena itself. Grass grew thick and green. The silence made it almost impossible to believe that the place had once been stained with animal blood and filled with crowds shouting. Human beings are strange creatures. We build temples to pray for peace, then construct arenas to watch living creatures tear one another apart for entertainment. History is not always beautiful. Perhaps that is partly why it feels real. I looked at the tiger cages opposite the emperor's viewing platform and thought about the fate of animals under the old monarchy. The tigers had their

fangs broken and claws cut before entering the arena to ensure the elephants would win. The fight had been unfair from the beginning. And if you think about it more broadly, many human struggles are not so different. One side enters the fight armed with all the power in the world, while the other has already had its teeth and claws removed before the contest even begins. Evening comes quickly in Huế. The light faded from the ancient walls. Wind rose from the Perfume River with a light chill. I left Hổ Quyền with a heaviness inside me, as though I had touched one of history's darker depths.

Then I stopped at the Temple of Literature. One thing I love about Huế is that everywhere you go, you seem to find traces of learning and letters. Even its silence smells faintly of old paper and inkstones.

"At Văn Thánh they planted pines, at Võ Thánh
they planted tropical almond trees,
Looking toward Xã Tắc, two rows of mù u stand."

That folk verse, which seems to have wandered in from nowhere, suddenly came back to me as I stood before the Temple of Literature. The complex was built in 1808 under Emperor Gia Long.

I passed through Đại Thành Gate, looking at the old roofs and rows of stone steles standing silently beneath the afternoon sky, and felt a certain tenderness for an era when scholarship carried such dignity. Thirty-two stone steles bear the names of 293 Nguyễn Dynasty doctoral laureates, among them figures such as Phan Thanh Giản, Nguyễn Khuyến, Huỳnh Thúc Kháng, and Phan Đình Phùng, names nearly everyone knows. I stood reading them one by one

and felt my heart sink a little. People in the past did not study merely to become officials. At least many of them carried something called moral integrity. Today, sometimes I look around and see people studying only so they can climb over one another, and it makes me sad. Huế's Temple of Literature is no longer intact as it once was. War, time, and upheaval destroyed many structures. But the spirit of the place remains, reverence for knowledge.

I walked slowly among the stone steles and thought about human life. Some people hold tremendous power while they are alive, own large houses and expensive cars, then die and no one remembers them. Others leave behind only a few lines of a name carved into stone, yet centuries later strangers still stand there reading it. Perhaps the thing that lasts longest is not power. It is character.

By then the Huế afternoon was almost completely gone. Down below, the Perfume River drifted on as though it had never known weariness. The rows of pines around the Temple of Literature stood perfectly still. I sat on an old stone step and watched the last light of the day slowly fall across moss-covered roof tiles, and for some reason one day in Huế seemed longer than many other days elsewhere. Stranger still, when darkness finally came and I left the Temple of Literature to return to the city, I could still hear very clearly in my mind the bell of Thiên Mụ from that morning. Its sound seemed to travel across the surface of the Perfume River like a soft reminder that a human life, in the end, is only a short journey through countless layers of historical mist. Sometimes what remains longest is nothing more than an echo inside the heart.

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THREE RINGS OF WALLS CLOSE IN, AND THE SILENCE OF A DYNASTY

I have been to Huế many times. Once I came in the middle of the long rainy season, when the Perfume River was the dull gray of lead and the sky hung so low it seemed ready to press down on the roofs of the ancient citadel. Another time I came in the dry season, when Huế sunlight was parched and golden, spreading across layers of weathered glazed tile until the whole Imperial City looked like the lingering dream of some age impossibly far away. There were other visits after that. Yet not until this time did I really sit down and think carefully about Huế's three concentric enclosures, the Imperial City, the Royal City, and the Forbidden Purple City. I was no longer thinking like a tourist making the rounds of historic monuments. I felt more like someone walking slowly into an old chamber of memory.

People usually call this place a World Cultural Heritage Site. The phrase sounds grand and prestigious. But standing before these walls, blotched and darkened by moss, I found myself thinking of them more as calluses on the body of history. You can see them. You can touch them. And if you stand there long enough, you may even hear a low sigh somewhere beneath the old brick and stone.

That day I bought my ticket online and walked through Ngọ Môn, the Noon Gate. Late-afternoon sunlight hovered faintly over Huế, and the air carried the dry, slightly harsh breath of a Central Vietnamese summer. I walked

more slowly than I had on earlier visits. At first, Huế's three rings of walls seem merely an architectural arrangement. But the farther I went, the more they appeared to me as three layers of power stacked one inside another, and at the same time three degrees of loneliness, three distances separating one human being from another.

The outermost enclosure, the Kinh Thành, runs for nearly ten kilometers. Its walls rise more than six meters high, and at their base they are as much as twenty-one meters thick. I stood looking at that massive fortification for a long time, unable to stop wondering how people in the old days could possibly have raised such an enormous body of earth and stone with human labor alone. Thirty years. Tens of thousands of laborers digging moats and building ramparts. Houses were moved, waterways filled in, graves relocated. Historical records tend to reduce all this to a handful of figures, but behind those figures were countless lives worn down by exhaustion. How many sighs must have been buried beneath this earthwork? Generations later, people stroll along the ramparts and admire their beauty. Few ever imagine the price that grandeur demanded.

Then comes the Hoàng Thành, the Royal City, where the court convened and the imperial ancestors were worshiped, where every ritual of power was staged with a solemnity so exact that it could feel cold. Deeper still lies the Forbidden Purple City, the sealed world of the royal household. Outsiders could only imagine what went on there from fragments of stories, incomplete accounts with beginnings and endings missing. Three rings of walls, three levels of separation, each admitting fewer people than the one before it. Yet there, at the very center of what was

supposed to be absolute authority, I found myself thinking how terribly lonely human beings can be.

Beginning in 1803, Emperor Gia Long ordered surveys for a new capital on the land north of the Perfume River. Ngự Bình Mountain stood before it as a natural screen. On either side, Cồn Hến and Dã Viên Islet formed what geomancers described as a dragon attending and a tiger crouching in submission. A graceful bend of the Perfume River embraced the capital like an arm made of water. The old geomancers called it minh đường thủy tụ, an open court where waters gather and vital energy converges.

You have to admit, the city is beautiful. So beautiful that merely looking at it, you can sense how much faith the people of that time invested in the Mandate of Heaven and the hope of permanence. But the older I get, the more I realize that history often moves not according to the beauty of feng shui but according to the cold realities of geography and circumstance. Huế was beautiful, yes, but vulnerable. Vulnerable in the sense that if Thuận An seaport were sealed off, the capital would be almost completely isolated. The Imperial City also sat in the middle of Central Vietnam's narrow, steep coastal plain, where rainy-season water rushes down from the mountains as though tearing the earth open on its way. Huế was far from both the Red River Delta and the Mekong Delta, which made transporting troops and provisions from either region an ordeal. In 1822, the British envoy John Crawfurd observed that Huế was not a suitable location for a capital. He went even further, suggesting that Vietnam was the Asian country most vulnerable to European conquest. It hurts to hear that. Yet history would eventually prove that his judgment was not entirely wrong.

Walking along the ancient wall, I kept thinking about the impossible position of the Nguyễn Dynasty. They did not have many choices. Phú Xuân was the ancestral base of the Nguyễn lords. Thăng Long, meanwhile, was still filled with people who mourned the fallen Lê Dynasty. Moving the capital north would have meant voluntarily entering a world thick with suspicion. The Nguyễn court was like someone who knew he was walking into a geographical trap but had no choice except to keep going. And people were not the only problem. Nature refused to cooperate as well. Between 1801 and 1888, Huế endured forty major floods. Just reading that number sends a chill through you. In 1818, floodwater rose more than four meters. In 1844, more than a thousand people died, two thousand houses were swept away, and the flagstaff at Kỳ Đài collapsed. In another flood, water poured all the way into the Royal Palace, rising more than three meters and even destroying the Tư Dung Gate. Standing inside the Royal City beneath a blazing sun, I suddenly imagined muddy floodwater roaring across these brick courtyards. Gilded palaces sinking into mud, people shouting over the howl of rain and wind. Behind the ceremonial robes and stately crowns of a dynasty, I could suddenly see the frailty of ordinary human beings. No royal power stands beyond the reach of natural disaster.

Ngọ Môn rose before me in the afternoon light, the Pavilion of the Five Phoenixes glittering beneath green and yellow glazed tiles. Suddenly I remembered the old folk verse, “Ngọ Môn, five gates and nine towers...” Those five entrances divided the world into sharply defined ranks. The central gate was reserved for the emperor. The two beside it were for civil and military mandarins. The two outer gates

were for soldiers, elephants, and horses. One gateway alone embodied an entire social order. Ngọ Môn faces south, the direction of light, the direction in which the Son of Heaven was supposed to sit, “facing south to hear all under heaven.” The ancients believed an emperor should face the light so that he might rule the realm with wisdom. That is why nearly every major structure within the citadel faces south. Looking at those sweeping roofs gleaming in the sun, I thought that perhaps every dynasty begins by believing it is headed toward the light. History, though, sometimes turns out the lights sooner than anyone expects. It was here, on August 30, 1945, that Emperor Bảo Đại read his abdication proclamation, ending the Nguyễn Dynasty and bringing the monarchy to a close. I keep imagining that moment, a man in imperial robes, carrying the authority of generations of ancestors, reading aloud the words that ended his own age. He must have been terribly sad. Or perhaps he was relieved. Sometimes a dynasty that has lived too long in exhaustion ends not with a cry, but with the sound of someone finally exhaling.

Crossing Trung Đạo Bridge and passing Thái Dịch Lake, I entered the Great Audience Courtyard before Thái Hòa Palace. The broad stone-paved court lay absolutely still beneath the sun. Long ago, on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar month, civil and military mandarins filled this space, arranged front to back according to rank as neatly as pieces on a chessboard. Civil officials stood to the left, military officers to the right. From the first rank down through the ninth, everyone had a prescribed position. Very few were allowed inside the palace. Far more had to remain outside in the courtyard. Looking at the worn paving stones, I could

almost hear the rustle of ceremonial robes and the distant calls of court officials conducting rites beneath an afternoon sky.

Thái Hòa Palace is imposing and somber, its eighty ironwood columns lacquered red and gilded with gold rising as though they were holding up the entire dream of empire. The numbers nine and five appear everywhere, nine steps, nine dragons, five levels on the upper platform. They were the numbers of heaven and of the emperor. The ancients were remarkably skillful at using mathematics to sanctify power. I stood for a long time studying the Chinese poems decorating the enameled panels along the eaves. I know only a little classical Chinese and could not read them all, but I could still feel the peculiar atmosphere of the place, where poetry and authority twined around each other like vines around the pillars of an old communal house. Here, beauty was not merely something to enjoy. It was also a way of reinforcing power.

The deeper I walked into the Forbidden Purple City, the heavier my heart became. Many structures are now nothing but bare foundations beneath the sun. Cần Chánh Palace is gone. Kiến Trung Palace was destroyed. Càn Thành Palace no longer survives intact. War, scorched-earth resistance, the Tet Offensive, bombs and shells swept through like wild animals clawing apart the memory of an age. Empty ground can look sadder than ruins. Ruins at least leave you something to see. An empty space can make it seem as though nothing ever existed there at all.

I have read accounts of daily life inside the Forbidden Purple City, and sometimes I feel sorry for the

emperors. An emperor might be served fifty dishes at a meal, surrounded by palace women waiting on him, fanning him, preparing his betel, singing him to sleep when he rested. It sounds like the absolute height of luxury. But then I wonder, was a man eating alone before fifty dishes, sleeping amid dozens of attendants, really happy? Or was he so lonely that ceremony had to be used to fill the emptiness? The greater the power, the more tightly life was confined. Suddenly I found myself admiring Emperor Duy Tân enormously for one simple reason, he broke protocol and allowed his wife to sit down and eat from the same tray with him. Such a small detail, yet it tells you that some ordinary human part of him had survived.

Then I thought of the imperial consorts. Old Huế had an expression, đưa con vô nội, sending your daughter into the Inner Palace. It sounds gentle, but there is heartbreak inside it. Once a daughter entered the palace, her parents might as well have lost her. Even when they were permitted to see her, they had to remain separated by a bamboo screen. Many women spent their entire lives inside the Six Institutes without knowing how the streets beyond the walls were changing. Suddenly the Forbidden Purple City seemed to me like an enormous gilded cage, beautiful, luxurious, and suffocating. Nguyễn imperial consorts were given relatively free passage outside the palace only twice. Once because of a natural disaster, and once during the war of 1885 when the capital fell. What a painful thought, freedom arrived only when catastrophe did. Sometimes people have to wait for their whole world to collapse before they can finally walk out of the cage.

But Huế is strange that way. No matter how sad it becomes, beauty keeps appearing inside the sadness. Duyệt Thị Đường, the old royal theater tucked into the southeastern corner of the Forbidden Purple City, has gently curving roofs reminiscent of pagodas and communal houses, towering ironwood columns, and a ceiling painted with the sun, moon, and pale-blue constellations, like a miniature sky. I walked in when no one else was there, and the room was quiet enough for me to hear every footstep on the wooden floor. I sat down in a corner and imagined the old ceremonial drums sounding, actors and actresses singing beneath the glow of oil lamps. Upstairs, the emperor watched the performance, while behind thin bamboo blinds sat the unseen faces of imperial women. In Huế, power always seems to travel with concealment. Even the enjoyment of art had to be hidden behind screens. My favorite story is the one about Emperor Thành Thái once taking the stage himself to play Thạch Giải. An emperor who enjoyed disguising himself, stepping down from the throne and becoming an actor. The French later sent him into exile. Duy Tân was exiled too. Father and son, two emperors who refused to bow their heads. Perhaps Duyệt Thị Đường remembers them more clearly than the history books do.

Then I went to the Nine Dynastic Urns before Thế Miếu. Nine bronze vessels stood motionless in the afternoon sun, massive and solemn, like nine old men who had watched every change this country had endured. Minh Mạng ordered them cast from more than twenty-two tons of bronze. Mountains and rivers, plants and trees, birds and animals, boats and stars from throughout Vietnam were engraved upon them. An entire country reduced into bronze.

A dream of permanence cast into solid form. I lightly touched the cold metal and kept thinking about the number nine. The ancients believed it was the number of heaven, the number of absolute completeness. Each urn bears a posthumous designation, Cao, Nhân, Chương, Anh, Nghị, Thuần, Tuyên, Dụ, and Huyền. The sequence sounds like a complete life cycle, from beginnings to the deepest reaches of existence. But history does not follow the beautiful circles human beings design for it. In the end, the Dụ and Huyền Urns corresponded to no emperor at all. The final Nguyễn emperors were deposed, exiled, or abdicated on their own. The dynasty collapsed, while the Nine Urns remained. Perhaps that is where history hurts most. People create something to proclaim the permanence of a dynasty, and in the end the dynasty disappears while the object remains standing there as a mute witness. Suddenly those bronze urns reminded me of elderly survivors left behind after an entire extended family has scattered and died. No one remains to talk to. There is only the crushing weight of memory in silence.

Evening descended slowly over Huế's Imperial City. Golden sunlight stretched across the old brick courtyards. Shadows from ancient trees flickered over glazed roofs. I walked out of the Forbidden Purple City with a vague sadness lingering inside me. Huế has been restored for years, and restoration continues. Trillions of Vietnamese đồng have been invested in reconstructing fortifications and monuments, while thousands of households have been relocated from heritage areas to restore the historic space of the citadel. It is necessary work, and work worth doing. But walking through those concentric walls, I understood

that some things can never be reconstructed. No one can bring back the voice of a palace woman singing an emperor to sleep late at night. No one can recreate the soft click of a consort's wooden sandals along the corridors of the Six Institutes. No one can restore the ceremonial drumbeat heard by Thành Thái or the look in Bảo Đại's eyes on the day he abdicated. Physical heritage can be rebuilt. Spiritual memory cannot. It survives only in the feelings of those willing to stand perfectly still among old walls long enough to listen.

By the time I reached the Perfume River, dusk had settled over Huế. The water moved slowly, carrying the earthy smell of river wind. I sat quietly looking toward the distant citadel and suddenly felt that history was like a great river flowing through human lives, through dynasties and wars, past glazed roofs that once seemed destined to shine forever. In the end, what remains is sometimes nothing more than the faintest sigh from the past, something you might hear only if your own heart becomes quiet enough.

A REALM OF THIÊN THỌ AMONG REFLECTED WATER AND ENDLESS PINES

I arrived at Gia Long's tomb late in the afternoon, when the sunlight had lost its brilliance but still held enough gold to lay a gossamer sheen across the surface of Dài Lake. From a distance, the water seemed to be glowing from somewhere deep within itself. The wind coming down from the mountains was not strong, only a mild breeze, yet it was enough to set the roadside pines trembling and whispering. It sounded as though someone were speaking very softly in

the hazy evening light. I remembered the words of L. Cadière, the Frenchman who spent nearly his entire life wandering through the world of Huế. He once advised that anyone who wanted to understand Gia Long's tomb should visit in the afternoon, when sunset crosses the lakes and the pine forests begin casting their shadows over the hills. When I first read that, I assumed it was simply the romantic language of a scholar inclined to romanticize scenery. But now that I was actually here at precisely that hour, I understood. There are places where, if you arrive at the wrong time, all you see is brick, stone, and trees. Come at the right moment, though, and the landscape somehow opens itself to you, allowing you to step inside its quiet spirit.

Gia Long's tomb is not beautiful in a way that overwhelms you immediately. It lacks the elaborate polish and deliberate display of some other Nguyễn imperial tombs. Its beauty is quieter and deeper. It reminds me of an old person who has lived through a great deal and no longer needs to say much, yet somehow makes everyone nearby lower their voice.

The road into the tomb complex is broad and long, lined on both sides with towering pines and chinaberry trees whose branches meet overhead to form a dark-green canopy, shutting out much of the sky. I walked slowly, very slowly. I do not know why, but in places like this I always feel that I should not hurry, should not speak loudly, and certainly should not laugh and carry on. Every stone and every tree seems to have absorbed so much time that anyone entering the place is naturally drawn into the same unhurried rhythm.

Then two tall ceremonial pillars appeared ahead. They stood alone and dignified, like two old soldiers who had remained at their posts through generations of rain and sun. I had heard that the entire complex once contained as many as eighty-five such pillars. Later there were forty-two. Now only two remain visible. I stood looking at them for a long while and was struck by an odd thought. Loss does not always reveal itself through wreckage. Sometimes it reveals itself through emptiness, through the space where something used to exist, a space you can feel only after standing long enough before the silence of time. I thought about human life. So many people once occupied our lives fully and vividly, then one day they leave and are gone. At first we assume we will eventually forget. But no, we never quite forget the emptiness they leave behind. It remains like a hollow in memory, quiet but deepening with the years.

Gia Long's tomb, also known as Thiên Thọ Lăng, lies amid a wild mountainous region in the upper reaches of the Perfume River, surrounded by forty-two mountains and hills that gather around it like a court assembled by heaven and earth. Đại Thiên Thọ Mountain rises in front, solemn and steady as an old grand minister who has never abandoned his post. I was told that Gia Long personally came here twice to inspect the terrain, once in 1808 while repairing the tombs of the Nguyễn lords, and again in 1811 while searching for a burial place for his mother. The ancients took the selection of burial ground so seriously that divination was performed seven times before Thọ Sơn was finally declared auspicious. The emperor even ordered his fourth prince to divine once more. The hexagram obtained was Dự, and only after an official from the Ministry of Rites examined it and

gave his approval was the matter settled. Hearing the story, I felt an enormous tenderness toward human beings. Emperor or not, after decades of warfare and the founding of an entire dynasty, a man standing before death was still as anxious as anyone else. He still needed someone to assure him that the place where he would lie down would be peaceful. At the farthest reaches of power, human beings remain fragile. Perhaps that fragility is precisely what keeps them connected to the rest of humanity.

Once inside, I could see clearly how Gia Long's tomb blends into nature rather than imposing itself upon it. Mountains were not carved apart to make room for buildings. Lakes were not filled in to create perfect geometric shapes. Everything seems to have been allowed to follow the natural contours of the land. The ancients called this "the unity of heaven and humanity." I think of it more simply. Human beings cannot conquer nature through force. We survive only by learning how to rest ourselves within it.

Construction began in 1814 and continued for six years, involving hundreds of laborers and naval soldiers. What stays with me most, however, is not the scale of the project but one small detail in the historical record. A violent windstorm collapsed the building where Gia Long was staying at the construction site, injuring his forehead, eyelid, and leg, while many others were killed or seriously hurt. After the accident, however, he punished no one. Instead, he distributed medicine, money, and rice to people living nearby. In my imagination, the emperor appears not seated on a throne but standing amid fallen timbers, blood still on his forehead, his leg throbbing with pain, yet thinking first

about the people around him. Certain qualities reveal themselves only in moments of crisis. Sometimes a single small action is enough to make later generations look at a person differently. I have always believed that what lasts longest after a human life is not the power someone possessed, but how that person treated others while possessing it.

The principal tomb stands on Chánh Trung Sơn. Before it lies Dài Lake, broad and level as an enormous mirror reflecting both sky and mountain. Seven successive brick-paved terraces lead upward toward the Bửu Thành enclosure. Along the ceremonial path, stone mandarins, elephants, and horses have stood motionless for centuries. Crossing courtyard after courtyard, I could hear my footsteps softly striking the old bricks. I had the strange sensation that I was walking backward into another layer of time, while the modern world outside gradually blurred and disappeared.

Then I stopped before the paired tombs of Emperor Gia Long and Empress Thừa Thiên Cao, Tống Thị Lan. The two stone graves lie side by side with a simplicity that hardly suggests imperial power at all. Yet that very simplicity is what makes them so moving. For more than two hundred years they have remained beside one another among the hills of Huế, while beyond them dynasties changed and historical upheavals swept through like floodwater.

The ancients called it càn khôn hiệp đức, the joining of the virtues of heaven and earth. I simply saw two lives that had traveled an extraordinarily long road together. Tống Thị Lan stayed beside Nguyễn Ánh from the years when he

was a fugitive, fleeing the Tây Sơn, drifting from Phú Quốc to Siam, surviving a time when human life could be as fragile as a lamp burning on a stormy sea. Yet she remained with him until the end of her life. When she died, Gia Long decided to build a joint tomb so that one day he could lie beside the wife who had shared his deepest trials. Suddenly I understood why he personally supervised the construction for so many years. Some structures may look as though they are made of brick and stone, but in truth they are built from feeling. Standing there in the late afternoon, looking at those two graves beneath the hazy sky, I found death less frightening. It no longer felt like a cold separation. It seemed more like a long rest after two people had weathered an entire turbulent life together. Love became devotion. Devotion became obligation. And obligation became a bond even death could not untie.

To the left of the main tomb complex stands the Stele Pavilion on Thanh Sơn Hill, containing the Thánh Đức Thần Công stele composed by Emperor Minh Mạng in honor of his father. Wind moved freely through the pavilion from every direction, while the sound of distant pines arrived in deep, muted waves. Looking up at the great stone stele, I found myself thinking about fathers and sons. Minh Mạng was famously stern and disciplined, hardly the kind of man who easily displayed emotion. Yet he was the one who completed the tomb his father had left unfinished. Love without many words. Grief without much display. Everything was expressed through what he did. Standing inside the Stele Pavilion that afternoon, history suddenly stopped feeling remote. The emperors and empresses of the history

books became ordinary human beings again, carrying love, regret, longing, and loss just like everyone else.

I continued through the other tombs in the Thiên Thọ complex. Thiên Thọ Hữu Lăng, the tomb of Trần Thị Đang, is quieter and smaller, yet possesses an understated depth that is difficult to describe. She was Gia Long's second wife and the mother of Minh Mạng, and she lived to the age of seventy-seven through the many upheavals of a newly established dynasty. Her tomb faces south. A crescent-shaped lake lies before it, and farther away Mount Rệ rises like a vast natural screen. Two lantern-shaped ceremonial pillars reflect in the water like sentries keeping watch through the night.

Walking along narrow paths carpeted with fallen pine needles, listening to the wind running along the hillsides, I suddenly felt as though I were visiting an enormous family that had been asleep for a very long time. In life, people once gathered together as a royal court, as families, as villages. In death, they gathered again beneath the mountains beside lakes and pine forests. It made me think that perhaps human beings spend their whole lives searching for somewhere they belong. When we are young, we look for a place in the world. When we grow old, we look for a peaceful place to lie down.

The tomb of Thoại Thánh, Gia Long's mother, lies a short distance to the north. Its grounds contain a large square lake once filled with water lilies. Paired dragons along the steps are carved with extraordinary precision, every scale and curling wave carefully rendered. I bent down to study the details and suddenly felt a tightness in my

throat. Surely the craftsmen who made this place understood that they were not simply building a tomb. They were helping a son build an expression of devotion to his mother. I have always believed that the structures that endure longest do so not merely because their materials are strong, but because of the feeling people place inside them. Without feeling, stone is only stone. Once the human heart enters it, a building acquires a soul.

Evening came quickly. By the time I left, darkness had begun spreading across Dài Lake. The distant pines had merged into dark masses. The wind was a little colder, carrying the earthy smell of damp grass and decaying leaves down from the hillside. I turned for one last look. The same mountains. The same lake. The same two stone graves lying side by side. Suddenly the phrase vạn niên cát địa came to mind, auspicious ground for ten thousand years. No human being lives ten thousand years. Dynasties disappear. Citadels collapse. Of the eighty-five ceremonial pillars that once stood here, only two remain. Yet perhaps a few things can travel through time longer than any human life. A love. A devotion. A way of living. Or simply the feeling a place leaves in the heart of someone passing through. I walked out through the tomb gate feeling both heavy and light. Not exactly sad, not exactly happy. It was as though someone from a very distant age had quietly reminded me of something simple. A human life does not really require that many grand things. Live faithfully. Love completely. And at the end, be allowed to lie beside the person you love. Perhaps that is enough to become ten thousand years.

Essay 22

TOMBS ALONG THE PERFUME RIVER, WHERE EMPERORS ENTRUSTED THEMSELVES TO THE EARTH

I do not know when I first began to love Huế. Every time I set foot in this old imperial capital, something stirs inside me, an odd, almost inexplicable emotion, as though I were walking back into a dream from another lifetime. I returned to Huế on a late-autumn morning, when a thin veil of mist still floated above the Perfume River and the first rays of sunlight had not yet managed to pierce the delicate clouds, like a gauze curtain someone had forgotten to draw aside.

For this journey, I made a different plan. I would not visit the Imperial City, nor would I stop at Thiên Mụ Pagoda as I had before. In Huế, perhaps the more familiar a place becomes, the less often you should return to it, because every reunion somehow adds a little more weight to the heart. This time I wanted only to travel toward the tombs resting quietly beside the river, the places where the emperors of the Nguyễn Dynasty chose to entrust their bodies and their final dreams to the earth. I would visit the tombs of three Nguyễn emperors, Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị, and Tự Đức. Three tombs, three destinies, three ways human beings confronted the limits of their own lives. If there was time, I would visit a few more.

Minh Mạng's tomb, also known as Hiếu Lăng, stands on Cẩm Kê Mountain about twelve kilometers from central

Huế, in a location that took the ancients fourteen years to finally approve as auspicious ground. Fourteen years. As my boat traveled upstream on the Perfume River, I kept repeating that number under my breath, amazed by it. Minh Mạng was one of the most powerful emperors of the Nguyễn Dynasty, the man who reformed the machinery of government from the central court all the way down to the provinces. He renamed the country Đại Nam with an unmistakable confidence and pride. Yet finding one patch of earth where he could lie after death required fourteen painstaking years. Perhaps nothing reveals human nature more clearly. While alive, we worry about governing kingdoms. When preparing to leave, we worry about finding somewhere to rest. Here, that final resting place was not merely a plot of earth for a body. It contained an entire worldview, a philosophy of human existence translated into bricks, roof tiles, ponds, trees, and stone.

The boat reached the landing and I stepped ashore. Immediately the atmosphere changed. It was cooler and greener, quiet in that particular way only very old places seem capable of being quiet. Passing through Đại Hồng Môn, the immense three-gated entrance with twenty-four rising and falling roof sections and motifs of carp transforming into dragons emerging from the limestone ornamentation, I knew I had crossed a boundary. It was not a boundary in space, but one in time. According to historical records, this gate was opened only once in its entire existence, to carry Minh Mạng's coffin inside. Then it closed and remained closed forever. I shivered. A gate opened once and has stood silent ever since. Death, too, requires its own ritual, and sometimes that ritual is absolute silence.

The Bái Đình courtyard spread before me, smoothly paved with Bát Tràng bricks. Two rows of stone civil and military mandarins, elephants, and horses had stood in attendance without moving for centuries. Standing between them, I suddenly felt very small, as though the weight of history had settled over my shadow. Those stone figures seemed to be staring toward some fixed point, toward a ceremony that ended long ago, a ceremony whose central figure has rested beneath the earth and green pines for more than a hundred and eighty years.

Then I reached the Stele Pavilion and the Thánh Đức Thần Công stele. The inscription was written by Emperor Thiệu Trị about his father, recounting Minh Mạng's life and achievements. A son wrote about his father in words carved into stone, leaving wind and time to decide which would prove more durable, human feeling or mountain rock. Looking at the old Chinese characters descending across the stone, I thought of something people often forget. An imperial tomb is not merely a place for a body. It is also where the living entrust their feelings for the dead. Sometimes that feeling becomes large enough for people to build an eighteen-hectare complex containing forty structures and mobilize nearly ten thousand workers and soldiers, all to say, in the end, I remember my father.

What distinguishes Minh Mạng's tomb from other imperial tombs is not simply its scale or grandeur, but the philosophy embedded in every architectural line. The entire complex has been compared to the figure of a person lying comfortably at rest. The head rests against Kim Phụng Mountain. The legs extend toward the river junction where the Tả Trạch and Hữu Trạch branches meet to form the

Perfume River. The two halves of Trừng Minh Lake fall naturally at the sides like relaxed arms. The architects designed a death, or more accurately, a resting place, to resemble an ordinary person lying down after a long and exhausting day. That is where the humanity of the design lies. Even an emperor, once dead, is simply a human being who wants to rest comfortably.

I followed the path along Trừng Minh Lake beneath lush old trees whose shadows fell across the still water. Even the name Trừng Minh suggests clarity and purity. Its two halves connect behind Sùng Ân Palace and embrace the temple complex like two green lungs within a living body. Sùng Ân Palace houses the ancestral tablets of the emperor and his first wife, Empress Tá Thiên Nhân, Hồ Thị Hoa, a woman whose short life was sadder than death itself. She gave birth to Thiệu Trị and died thirteen days later. She was only seventeen years old. She never lived a single day bearing the title of empress, nor did she live long enough to watch her son grow up and become emperor. Gia Long mourned her so deeply that he ordered the character “Hoa” in her name to become taboo, forcing numerous place names throughout the country to be changed. A small story, yet once you hear it, you understand that the death of a single person can sometimes alter the map of an entire nation.

Beyond the temple area, I climbed seventeen stone steps toward Minh Lâu and Bửu Thành. Three stone bridges, Tả Phù, Trung Đạo, and Hữu Bật, cross Trừng Minh Lake and lead to Minh Lâu, the two-story, eight-roofed pavilion standing on Tam Tài Sơn with a cold dignity. Minh Lâu means the Pavilion of Light, a place where the emperor

was imagined contemplating life on clear, moonlit nights. Standing before it, I wondered what an emperor sitting here beneath the moon would have thought about. His kingdom? Affairs of state? Or the day when he himself would lie beneath this earth, his feet extending toward the river junction, his eyes closed while water flowed past him through century after century?

Beyond it lies Tân Nguyệt Lake, shaped like a new moon and embracing the circular Bửu Thành, yin holding yang, the moon surrounding the sun. The philosophy is simple yet unfathomably deep, translated by the ancients into stone and water. Through countless rainy seasons and burning summers, the arrangement has preserved its original meaning. I crossed Thông Minh Chính Trực Bridge, climbed thirty-three steps, and stood before Bửu Thành, a circular brick wall three and a half meters high and 273 meters around. Beneath the earth within it lies the underground Huyền Cung, where Emperor Minh Mạng rests. Behind Bửu Thành stretches a dark-green pine forest. Wind moving through the needles sounded like someone sighing from a great distance. For a while I simply stood there and listened.

Nearly six hundred carved panels containing poetry appear throughout the Stele Pavilion, Hiển Đức Gate, Sùng Ân Palace, and Minh Lâu. Together they have been called a “museum of poetry” representing Vietnamese literature in the early nineteenth century. A tomb containing a museum of poetry. Suddenly the people of that age seemed far more fascinating than I had imagined. They did not merely construct burial places. They built cultural spaces, spiritual legacies where later generations would come not only to

bow before their deaths, but also to lift their eyes and read poetry.

From Minh Mạng's tomb, I continued to Thiệu Trị's Xương Lăng, about eight kilometers from central Huế, backed by Thuận Đạo Mountain and facing northwest. That direction alone says something about the destiny of this tomb. No major Nguyễn architectural complex before it had ever faced northwest. Thiệu Trị had reigned for only seven years when he became gravely ill and died at forty-one, still in the prime of his life and reign. Before dying, he managed to leave instructions for his son and successor, Tự Đức, concerning the construction of his tomb. He asked that a high piece of ground near the mountain be chosen, somewhere convenient for soldiers and laborers, and that they not waste manpower and resources constructing too many palaces.

The final instructions of a dying man who was still concerned about the burden placed on his people. When I first read those words in the historical records, they moved me. Not because of the emperor's greatness, but because of the human feeling hidden behind the dry language of history. A man near death still thinking about soldiers, laborers, resources, and economy. Perhaps the sentiment was entirely sincere. Perhaps it was partly how he hoped to be remembered. Either way, it is worth stopping to think about.

Tự Đức did not exactly follow his father's instructions. When he personally inspected the tomb works in 1848 and found the project "somewhat complicated and extensive," he nevertheless appeared satisfied. In an

inscription of more than twenty-five hundred characters that Tự Đức composed himself, he recalled his father's command to practice economy, adding that "his precious words still echo in my ears, how could this little son dare violate his wishes?" Yet the tomb was still built on a substantial scale. It is the eternal contradiction of devoted children, we mean to follow our parents' wishes, but somehow our hands and feet end up doing something else.

What impressed me most at Thiệu Trị's tomb was not even the architecture, but the landscape surrounding it. There is no massive brick or stone enclosing wall. Instead, green rice fields, orchards, low hills, and winding streams form a vast natural enclosure. Standing before the tomb and looking outward, I saw green fields stretching toward the banks of the Perfume River, with undulating mountains farther beyond. It hardly looked like a burial ground. It felt more like a peaceful afternoon in the Huế countryside, a place where the living and the dead could look out together across the same field.

Around Thiệu Trị's tomb lies an entire family constellation. Hiếu Đông Lăng, the tomb of his mother Hồ Thị Hoa, the young woman I had thought about at Minh Mạng's tomb, lies slightly forward. Xương Thọ Lăng, belonging to his wife Từ Dụ, perhaps the most influential woman of the Nguyễn Dynasty, stands behind and to the left. Farther forward on the left is the "Tảo Thương" burial ground, where the emperor's children who died young were laid to rest. Looking at this family map, I thought again about how even after death people want to remain near one another, a mother near her child, a wife near her husband, children who died too soon near their father. Family love

needs no language and no history book. It is visible in the land and directions people chose for one another after death.

Từ Dụ was born in 1810 in Gò Công and died in 1901 at the age of ninety-one. She became the only Thái Thái Hoàng Thái Hậu, Great-Great Empress Dowager, of the Nguyễn Dynasty. Hers was the longest title, one of the longest lives, and one of the most enduring influences at the Nguyễn court. Across almost an entire century, she watched seven emperors ascend the throne or be removed from it. She watched the court gradually collapse beneath French power and saw those closest to her disappear one after another. Yet she remained, composed and outspoken, condemning corrupt officials, offering Tự Đức practical political advice, and even remembering to ask that taxes be reduced for the people when the French built Trường Tiền Bridge.

There is the story of Emperor Tự Đức bringing a rattan cane to his mother and asking to be beaten, an emperor lying down before his elderly mother to accept punishment. It is not really a story about submission. It is about family, about the sacred bond between a person and the woman who gave him life. She brushed the cane aside with her hand and said, “All right, you’re forgiven! If you go out and make the officials and soldiers work hard, then reward them, and tomorrow morning attend court.” It sounds like something any ordinary mother might say. There is no fury in it, only a reminder and then the matter is finished. Yet responsibility and love are both contained within those few words.

At the end of that day, I reached Tự Đức's tomb, Khiêm Lăng. I spent more time there than anywhere else, sitting longer and thinking more. The tomb lies in a narrow valley only six kilometers from central Huế. Tự Đức had it constructed while he was still alive, using it both as a retreat and as a place prepared for his eventual death. Life and death existed there side by side in a strange partnership.

Nearly fifty structures within the complex carry the word Khiêm in their names, Khiêm Cung Gate, Hòa Khiêm Palace, Lương Khiêm Palace, Minh Khiêm Theater, Lưu Khiêm Lake, Tịnh Khiêm Island, Xung Khiêm Pavilion, Dũ Khiêm Pavilion. Khiêm broadly means humility, deference, modesty, a virtue highly prized by Confucian scholars of the time. Yet there is an irony. The emperor who placed the word "Khiêm" on building after building was also the ruler against whom the Chày Vôi rebellion erupted because construction of his tomb was so costly and burdensome to the people. The people lamented:

"What kind of Ten Thousand Years is this Ten Thousand Years?
The walls are built from soldiers' bones, the moats dug with the people's blood."

After the uprising, the emperor had to rename the project from Vạn Niên Cơ to Khiêm Cung. The humble name came after rebellion, born not entirely from self-awareness but under pressure from reality.

I stood before the twenty-ton stone stele in the Stele Pavilion, carved with the 4,935-character Khiêm Cung Ký, which Tự Đức composed himself in 1871. This is what makes his tomb different from the others. Despite having

103 wives, he had no biological heir. There would be no son to compose an inscription praising his virtues after his death, so he wrote his own. Four thousand nine hundred and thirty-five characters recounting his life, his reign, his illnesses and misfortunes, recording his accomplishments and confessing his faults before history. A man writing his own eulogy while still alive is not necessarily an act of arrogance or despair. It may instead be a peculiar form of courage, the courage of someone lucid enough to look death directly in the face and decide what he intends to say when he meets it.

Lưu Khiêm Lake lay blue-green before me, with Tịnh Khiêm Island in its center, once planted with flowers and stocked with animals. Xung Khiêm and Dũ Khiêm Pavilions reflected in the water, places where Tự Đức once sat watching flowers, writing poetry, and reading. His tomb was not merely a place for dying. It was a place for living, living fully in the way a poet might understand life, admiring flowers, watching water, listening to music. Minh Khiêm Theater, to the left of Lương Khiêm Palace, is considered one of the oldest surviving theaters in Vietnam. I walked inside and stood among old wooden columns still bearing delicate carvings, trying to imagine voices and music rising through this room on some afternoon more than a century ago. A theater inside a tomb is not something I would ever have thought to imagine. Perhaps precisely because of that, I found it difficult to leave.

In a quieter corner of the complex, I sought out Kiến Phúc's tomb, known as Bồi Lăng, the modest burial place of the seventh Nguyễn emperor. He reigned for only eight months before dying suddenly in 1884 and was buried within Tự Đức's tomb complex because he had been the late

emperor's adopted son. The tomb is small, secluded, and easily overlooked, but its very obscurity gives it a haunting quality. A reign of eight months. A little tomb hidden in the shadow of a larger one. Few visitors. Few people remember. History can be cruel that way.

As evening fell, I sat beside Lưu Khiêm Lake and watched the last sunlight turn the water and moss-covered roofs gold, while green pines stood straight as sentries who had never abandoned their posts. Three tombs, three emperors, three ways of confronting the finite nature of human life. Minh Mạng, with the grandeur of a philosophy translated into architecture. Thiệu Trị, with the simplicity of fields and family surrounding him. Tự Đức, with the loneliness and courage of a man who wrote his own eulogy. I do not know whether any of them was happy. Nor am I sure happiness means very much anymore to men who have lain deep beneath the earth for more than a century.

But I know one thing. These tombs are not merely graves. They are questions fashioned from brick and stone, ponds and trees, questions their builders left for later generations, and for me, sitting there that afternoon. Questions about living and dying, about what remains after everything else has passed away. Perhaps the answer is not in the history books or in stone inscriptions thousands of characters long. Perhaps it lies in the quiet of this particular afternoon, in wind passing through the pines, in the faint scent of lotus rising from a distant pond, in the way time continues flowing evenly through everything, never rushing, never hurrying, never caring who was emperor and who was commoner.

The Perfume River keeps flowing. The tombs remain. And I, a traveler from the South passing through Huế, stood quietly in a late-autumn afternoon and suddenly understood that some places are not meant simply to be visited and left behind. You visit them, and then carry them with you. What remains after such an encounter is not merely memory, nor exactly sadness, but a sense of how finite a human life is beside the endless current of time.

THE LAST TOMBS OF A DYNASTY, BEYOND THE OLD CITADEL WALLS

I can no longer remember how many times I have wandered around Huế on all my visits here. What I do remember vividly is the feeling that my feet grow heavy as though stuck in mud while something inside me keeps pulling me farther along. Beneath layer after layer of this old imperial ground, stories remain that refuse to lie still. This morning, when the little boat reached the Perfume River landing and the water was still cloudy with the color of old rain, I assumed this journey would be much like the others. I would see a few ancient structures, hear a few more historical stories, and return. But the deeper I traveled into the Nguyễn imperial tombs, the more I realized that I was walking not merely through architecture, but through the surviving fragments of lives from a vanished dynasty. Each tomb seemed like an emperor’s final monologue before disappearing from the world. As the dynasty approached its end, those monologues became shorter, more exhausted, filled with silences history never bothered to explain.

After visiting the tombs of Gia Long, Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị, and Tự Đức, four places built when the Nguyễn Dynasty still possessed enough confidence to turn death into philosophy and enough power to transform burial grounds into declarations of Heaven's mandate, I began to notice that the tombs of the later emperors spoke in a different voice. They no longer possessed the composed bearing of a dynasty in its prime. Everything became tighter, more hybrid, more unfinished. Even the atmosphere felt different. The early tombs belonged to men who believed history would remain theirs for a very long time. The later ones carried the sadness of people who had begun to understand that their time was running out.

I reached Khải Định's tomb beneath a gray midday sky. Châu Chữ Mountain lay silent in the distance like the bent back of an old man carrying that strange monument upon his shoulders. Even from below, I could see that this tomb resembled nothing else in Huế. It stands like a heretic intruding upon the ancient world of the Nguyễn court, out of place yet deliberately determined to announce its difference. Hindu-influenced towers, modified Roman arches, railings vaguely resembling crosses, Buddhist stupas, all crowded into a relatively small area dense with detail. I stood outside the entrance for a long time, strangely unsettled. Something about the building was at once flamboyant and lonely, much like the emperor buried beneath it.

Khải Định ascended the throne in 1916, when the country was already under French control. He knew perfectly well that he was no longer an emperor in the sense that Minh Mạng or Tự Đức had been. The throne he occupied had lost too much of its actual power. Perhaps that

was why he chose to leave his mark through architecture and art, through a kind of luxury touched by desperation. People still tell how he asked the colonial administration to raise the land tax by thirty percent to finance his tomb. Every time I think about that number, the monument seems to have been built from the sweat of thousands of peasants bent over their fields. It is beautiful, but its beauty is not light. The weight of its age presses upon every brick.

I climbed the 127 stone steps toward the principal sanctuary. With each step, the ordinary earth below seemed farther away. Two rows of mandarins, soldiers, elephants, and horses stand in attendance in the Bái Đình courtyard, their faces sharper and colder than those at the earlier tombs. They no longer possess the same classical solemnity. The influence of early twentieth-century Western sculptural techniques is already visible. Everything here seems to declare that the Nguyễn Dynasty had been dragged into another age, an age in which the old world could no longer preserve its former purity.

Then I entered Thiên Định Palace. Even now, I am not sure how to describe what I felt. It was not exactly awe. Nor was it uncomplicated admiration. It was like standing inside a dream assembled from tens of thousands of pieces of porcelain and colored glass, a place where beauty and chaos twist around each other until they can no longer be separated. Walls, columns, and ceilings are covered with glittering raised mosaics so dense they almost overwhelm the eyes. The traditional Four Seasons, Eight Precious Objects, and Five Blessings appear alongside alarm clocks, tennis rackets, and kerosene lamps, modern objects that had never before entered the decorative language of an

imperial tomb. That mixture stayed in my mind. Khải Định was the first Nguyễn emperor to truly inhabit a world in which the boundary between East and West had burst apart. He could no longer keep the court sealed inside its old robes, so everything collided with everything else, almost as though collision itself had become destiny.

I looked upward at the three paintings of Nine Dragons Hidden in Clouds on the ceiling of Khải Thành Hall. Nine dragons coil through clouds, painted by the artist Phan Văn Tánh, who reportedly spent months lying on his back to complete them. I imagined that craftsman, his back aching, arm exhausted, eyes straining amid the smell of paint and the dust of construction, patiently making something that would outlive him by a century or more. Thinking about it, I suddenly felt more affection for the craftsman than for the emperor. Every dynasty eventually disappears, every throne eventually stands empty, but the worker's hand remains in every shard of porcelain and every brushstroke.

The Bửu Tán canopy above Khải Định's bronze statue held my attention for a long time. A reinforced-concrete mass weighing roughly a ton somehow appears soft as velvet and silk. That kind of beauty can only emerge when people love art enough to disregard apparent limits. I do not know whether Khải Định was a good emperor or a poor one. History has argued about him enough already. But standing there, I believed he genuinely loved beauty, loved it so much that he wanted to imprison his entire life inside a building where every corner had to shine.

Beneath the bronze statue cast in France, his remains lie deep underground, reached by a long tunnel

from behind the Stele Pavilion. One man sits eternally upon a throne. Another lies beneath the earth. The same life somehow divided into two different destinies. Behind the burial chamber appears the image of a setting sun. I stared at that sun and thought, this was the true sunset of the Nguyễn Dynasty. After Khải Định, no emperor built a tomb for himself. From this point on, imperial tombs ceased to be monuments to power. They became something more like a long ellipsis at the end of a dynasty dissolving into history.

By the time I reached An Lăng that afternoon, the sunlight had faded and long tree shadows lay across the old brick path. The tomb complex sits so close to central Huế that the fact itself feels painful. Earlier emperors had considered mountains and rivers and searched for auspicious terrain for decades before choosing where they would be buried. Yet Dục Đức, Thành Thái, and Duy Tân, grandfather, father, and son, lie here simply and close to the old capital, almost as though history no longer had enough time to let them choose. Their stories troubled me throughout the afternoon.

Dục Đức was emperor for three days before being deposed and eventually starved to death. Three days, hardly enough time to grow accustomed to people kneeling before you and addressing you as Your Majesty. Walking through the empty courtyard, I kept thinking about a human being falling from the highest point imaginable into an abyss in the space of a few days. Folk tradition says that when his body, wrapped in matting, was being carried away for burial, the carrying pole broke near An Cựu and his corpse fell to the ground, so he was hastily buried there. No one can say with certainty how much of that story is true. But the mere

fact that people preserved it tells us something about the depth of compassion they felt for his fate.

Then there were Thành Thái and Duy Tân. Father and son both resisted the French and both were exiled to Réunion Island in the Indian Ocean. People in Huế called such a fate biệt xứ, separation from one's land. The words sound mild, but they cut deeply. Exile is more than being sent away. It is being torn out of your homeland like a tree ripped from its native soil. Thành Thái was eventually allowed to return. Duy Tân died in a plane crash in Central Africa in 1945, and his remains were not brought home to rest beside his father until 1987. Forty-two years in foreign earth. Thinking about that stretch of time made something inside me turn cold. Even after death, he still had a very long journey to make before he could come home.

An Lăng has no imposing ranks of stone statues. No thousand-character stele praising imperial achievements. No grand aura of kingship. There is only the quiet atmosphere of lives that never had the chance to fully unfold. Inside the burial enclosure are screens decorated with the characters Song Hỉ, Double Happiness. I stood looking at those two characters for a long time. Hỉ belongs to weddings, so why would it appear in a tomb? At first it seemed strange. Then I wondered whether the people of that age were trying to say that death, too, might be a homecoming, that perhaps only after suffering ends can happiness begin in another realm. Or perhaps it was simply another sign that the rules of an old age were coming apart, that even the building of imperial tombs could no longer preserve the strict order of earlier times.

From An Lăng, I found my way toward Hiệp Hòa's tomb. The road twisted through an old cemetery and silent pine-covered hills. I still remember the feeling of walking among so many graves. Suddenly emperors and commoners seemed exactly alike. The earth of Huế receives them all without a word.

Hiệp Hòa was emperor for four months before being forced to drink poison. He was not worshiped at Thế Miếu. He received no imperial tomb according to royal rites. He was buried merely with the status of a Quốc Công, a duke of the realm. At first his grave occupied only about thirty square meters, marked by a small cement stele bearing a few simple lines in Vietnamese. An emperor, and that was all the earth he received at the end of his life. Standing before his grave, I felt something cold and bitter inside me. Power is far more fragile than people imagine.

What stayed with me most, however, were the words Hiệp Hòa wrote about himself, "The beloved youngest son of the late emperor, of mediocre ability, unequal to bearing the throne." I read that sentence again and again. Among the countless historical inscriptions praising royal virtues and achievements, Hiệp Hòa's admission that he was "mediocre" suddenly felt extraordinary. Being truthful about yourself is one of the hardest things a person can do, especially when that person is an emperor. That one admission makes him more memorable to me than many rulers who occupied the throne far longer.

Not until 2013 did people from Huế living in Đà Nẵng and Saigon contribute money to restore his tomb. They were not his direct descendants. They owed him no obligation.

They simply felt that someone who had been forgotten for too long deserved to be remembered. Standing beneath the newly erected ceremonial pillars, I felt an enormous affection for the people of Huế. They live slowly, remember for a long time, and often preserve in their hearts the things everyone else has forgotten.

Near the end of my journey, I visited Đồng Khánh's tomb. It was quieter than I expected. Few visitors came. There was no commotion, only wind and the muted scent of old wood inside Ngưng Hy Palace. Đồng Khánh died at twenty-five before he could build a tomb for himself. The project continued through four reigns and took thirty-five years of piecemeal work to reach completion. That patchwork quality made me sad. A strong dynasty builds an emperor's tomb like a declaration. A declining one cannot even bury its dead king without leaving the work unfinished from one generation to the next.

Ngưng Hy Palace is beautiful in an unusual way. It is not overwhelmingly majestic, but intimate. Carvings and paintings of fishermen, woodcutters, farmers, herdsmen, music, chess, poetry, wine, chickens, ducks, plants, and stories from the Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars fill the interior. Looking at those ordinary images inside a royal building, I had the strange feeling that the Nguyễn Dynasty near its end had grown tired and no longer tried so hard to remain elevated above everyday life. It had begun returning to the simplest human things, family, filial devotion, nature, home. Even the statues of court officials no longer carry the imposing weight of earlier reigns. They are thinner and more fragile, made from brick rather than stone. Looking at them,

I suddenly saw the entire dynasty growing thinner with the passing years.

Kiến Phúc, meanwhile, lies hidden in the modest Bồi Lăng beside Tự Đức's tomb. A sixteen-year-old emperor who reigned eight months and died before leaving much behind except a few ambiguous lines in the historical record. His tomb is so low and unobtrusive that visitors can easily pass without noticing it. Standing there, I thought about lives so short they never have time to form a destiny of their own before history swallows them.

And then Bảo Đại. The final Nguyễn emperor is not buried in Huế. No imperial tomb. No mountains or rivers. No ranks of stone attendants. Only a grave in Passy Cemetery in Paris. An ending so quiet it sounds like a door closing.

Evening descended very slowly. I sat beneath a pine tree while the last light filtered through the branches in blurred streaks across the ground. I remained there long enough to hear the dry wind passing through the pine forest like someone sighing.

The four great tombs of the early Nguyễn Dynasty, Gia Long, Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị, and Tự Đức, speak in the voice of an age that still believed in the Mandate of Heaven. The later tombs carry the breathing of a dynasty learning to accept its own decline. Khải Định, with his extravagant fusion of East and West. An Lăng, where the quiet graves hold two emperors who resisted the French. Hiệp Hòa, with his small, forgotten burial place. Kiến Phúc, with his painfully short reign. Đồng Khánh, whose tomb took several reigns to finish. These places tell more than the stories of individual

emperors. They tell the story of a country entering a convulsion no one possessed the strength to stop.

Walking through those tombs, I came to understand that a grave does not merely reflect the character of the person beneath it. It also reflects the age that produced that person. Minh Mạng could contemplate death through Confucian philosophy because his era still possessed an intact faith in the old order. Khải Định could construct something so thoroughly hybrid because by his time every boundary was beginning to collapse. And the emperors at An Lăng lacked monumental tombs not because they had no desire for them, but because history no longer gave them the opportunity even to desire such things.

Of all those emperors, the one who stayed with me most was Hiệp Hòa, the man who called himself “of mediocre ability, unequal to bearing the throne.” Honesty with oneself remains one of the rarest things in history.

When I finally emerged from the pine forest, the lights of Huế had come on. The distant city glowed faintly yellow through the evening mist, while behind me the imperial tombs were slowly disappearing into darkness. I suddenly felt as though I had walked through the final pages of a dynasty. All that power, glory, tragedy, and unfinished business had become silent graves beneath the mountains. Yet their silence was precisely what made it difficult for the heart to settle. More than a century has passed, and still the late-season sunsets of the Nguyễn Dynasty do not seem to have faded completely. Somewhere in Huế they continue to glow faintly, enough to leave a traveler with wet eyes on the road home.

AFTERWORD

Only after closing the final page did I realize how far I had traveled, from the hot sands of the South all the way to the Perfume River, across so many seas and mountains, rivers and villages, citadels and traces left by people long gone.

Yet when I think about it carefully, the journey does not really seem to end in Huế. Some places we leave and simply move on. But there are lands that quietly follow us long after our footsteps have gone. The smell of salt on the wind, an evening bell, a red tower in the sunlight, a river drifting beneath a bridge, the sun-darkened face of someone we met only once, somehow these things settle into memory and stay there. After enough time, we no longer know whether we are remembering the land, or the land has begun remembering on our behalf.

After traveling the length of Central Vietnam, I have come to see that what survives and what disappears is not nearly as simple as I once thought. A capital can become ruins. A dynasty passes away. Place names change, borders shift, and everyone who lives long enough eventually returns to the earth. Yet a dance survives. A way of speaking is handed down. Incense still burns at an old shrine. Someone still wants to tell an old story. Things that seem fragile can sometimes outlast fortifications.

I traveled through Central Vietnam in wind and sand, encountering many old wounds left by history, and just as many ordinary lives quietly continuing upon those very wounds. Along the way I came to understand something

else. Some things do not lose their fragrance by passing through pain. On the contrary, years and wounds can make that fragrance deeper.

This is where the book ends.

As for the wind, let the wind keep going.

As for the sand, let the sand keep flying.

And if, after you close this book, something still lingers inside you, the sound of a wave, the shadow of a human figure, the smell of old earth, or simply a vague tenderness for things that are slowly disappearing, then perhaps this wandering journey has not truly ended after all.

And as long as someone remembers, the wind and sand will still carry their fragrance.



Photo: The Imperial City of Huế

NGUYỄN ĐÔNG A – A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Nguyễn Đông A, a Vietnamese American whose birth name is Nguyễn Thành Sơn, was born in 1957 in Long Điền, Phước Tuy Province. He has lived in Long Điền, Bà Rịa, and Vũng Tàu in Vietnam, as well as in Oregon and Maryland in the United States. He pursued undergraduate and graduate studies and conducted scholarly research in such fields as linguistics, literature, and history at the University of Education, the University of Saigon, and the Institute of Social Sciences in Saigon.

His recently published works include:

1. Shimmering Floral Garments, a photography book, Culture & Arts Publishing House, 2017.
2. Sparse Blades of Grass, a literary work, Writers' Association Publishing House, 2017.
3. A Rolling Stone Gathers No Moss, a literary collection featuring 32 authors, edited by Nguyễn Đông A. Published in the United States by Khơi Dòng Publishing House, 2021, and in Vietnam by the Writers' Association Publishing House, 2021.
4. The Soul and Spirit of Mountains and Rivers, literary essays and research on Southeastern Vietnam, Writers' Association Publishing House, 2022.
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