

PRIVAL CHOUTEAU, 20s-30s, African-American, sits dressed in simple cotton shirt and pants, speaking as if to a theatre full of people. He is not comfortable and speaks awkwardly. He holds something small, precious and unseen in his hands.

PRIVAL

There are 28 species of--how you say?--venomous snakes in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the largest is king cobra--up to 18 feet, and the smallest, I guess nobody know today. Because of war, scientists can no do field work, to mean I have special--unique--opportunity, a privilege--is that right word?--to study the herps--I mean reptiles--of Indochina--

(notices a reaction)

I apologize--of Vietnam--and likely it is I will describe much new species. In truth, I believe I already collect unknown species of banded krait--highly venomous--

(notices a reaction)

I'm sorry--yes--I know--but please allow--we should distinguish from venom, which need be injected in bloodstream, and poison, which may can enter many ways, through eating or even through the holes--pores--of the skin--

(notices a reaction)

Yes, yes. Fault is mine. The laziness or inattention or poverty of knowledge--

(notices a reaction)

Ignorance no excuse, of course, of course. Certainly at least partially my fault. Definitely my fault. All my fault.

Lights out on PRIVAL and up on LONG, 20s, butch and beautiful, dressed in the uniform of the army of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

LONG

There will be no disrespect, no informality or--what is the American word?--chumminess. The President must always be honored with his proper title.

Lighting reveals NATE, 20s-30s, dressed simply, a 1960s portable tape recorder and microphone in hand. He also holds a piece of paper. He is blindfolded.

NATE

Mister President--

LONG

You may only ask the approved questions.

NATE

(Indicates paper)

Got it. May I--

(Indicates blindfold)

A OLD MAN approaches bearing two cups on a tray. He wears glasses and a drab khaki suit and sandals made from auto tires.

LONG

There is no guarantee that the President will choose English today. His speech is...idiosyncratic.

NATE

Your English is excellent.

LONG

We learn the enemy's language in order to defeat you with swiftness.

NATE

This blindfold--

LONG

(to OLD MAN)

Chu'a! [not yet!]

OLD MAN

Xin lôi, đồng chí. [apologies, comrade!]
(waits with tray)

NATE

Who's there?

LONG

Only a servant. The President today may speak Vietnamese, French, Russian, Cantonese or Mandarin. I assume you are fluent in those tongues.

NATE

Un peu de francais. [a little French]

LONG

Which capitalist publication has sent you?

NATE

Time Magazine.

LONG

(nods to OLD MAN)

For all their wealth they could not afford a journalist with proper languages?

OLD MAN returns LONG's nod and prepares to serve the tea.

NATE

*Xin lô*i*, đ*o*ng chí.* [apologies, comrade!]

LONG

(removes blindfold)

Pidgin Vietnamese will not serve you.

LONG gestures to the OLD MAN, who advances with the tea.

NATE

Much better, thank you.

LONG

I will not apologize for our security measures--

LONG deliberately trips the OLD MAN, who spills the tea on NATE and falls down.

NATE immediately jumps up, scalded,
but more concerned for the OLD MAN,
whom he helps to his feet.

NATE

Ow! Are you all right? *Ça va, petit père?* [are you all
right, little father?]

LONG

Vung ve, vung ve! [clumsy
fool!]

OLD MAN

*Du'ng nho tôi. Ban có tat ca
các quyen?*[Don't mind me.
Are you all right?]

NATE

He might have been scalded. You tripped him! There must be
no disrespect, but this is how North Vietnam treats its
elders--!

OLD MAN

Ça va, Monsieur. You are very kind for a journalist.

(NATE stares)

Very kind to an insignificant old servant.

NATE

Mr. President!

HO

I hope you were not yourself scalded in our childish test.

(to LONG)

Thank you for the charade.

(to NATE)

She was so uncomfortable!

LONG

Tôi có the tro giúp thêm gì không, ông Tong thong? [May I be
of any further assistance, Mr. President?]

HO

No, no, you may go.

(she starts to go)

Perhaps some fresh tea.

(LONG leaves)

Please sit. Comrade Long calls to mind the Trung sisters who
rebelled against the Chinese almost two thousand years ago.
Vietnamese women are strong, *n'est-ce pas?*

NATE
(as they sit)

I am so grateful--

HO
The Trung sisters were only thwarted when the Chinese chose to fight naked, and the female warriors retired out of mortification?

NATE
Mortification?

HO
Forgive my poor English.

NATE
You speak wonderfully, Mr. President--

HO
Uncle, *si vous plait*.

NATE
(indicates tape recorder)
Thank you so much for this interview--

HO
(gestures assent)
That story, of course, is apocalyptic.

NATE
Apocryphal?

HO
Ah. *L'anglais est difficile pour moi*. I always enjoy Americans. Envy them. Accidentally, we have another American guest, a pilot.

NATE
He was bombing Hanoi?

HO
He says reconnaissance. The same in English as French? We found him dangling from a tree in his parachute, but no aeroplane...however, I must not waste your time. What does the esteemed Time Magazine wish to know that is not already common knowledge?

NATE

Well, that's exactly it. So much has been written about you--

HO

Ho Chi Minh, minor deity!

NATE

I thought my angle could be humanizing you, not the political, but the personal.

HO

Your aims are purely political, are they not?

NATE

What do you mean? I'm a journalist, not--

HO

You're a socialist. That's why Time selected you.

NATE

Well, yes, they thought--

HO

I would be more candid--is that correct, like Candid Camera starring Allen Funt?--with a former columnist for *The Young Socialist*.

NATE

I'm sure Henry Grunwald would be delighted to know his strategy--

HO

Not many socialists from Oklahoma--

NATE

I live in Los Angeles now.

HO

Hollywood! Blacklists!

NATE

My grandfather founded the Oklahoma Socialist Party!

(HO smiles)

You knew that, didn't you?

HO
Editor Grunwald is most wise.

NATE AND HO
For a Republican.

They smile.

NATE
May I start by clarifying a few basic--

HO
Seventy-eight years old. Do I look it?

NATE
No, actually. I was going to say you look surprisingly--

HO
In Vietnam age is respected. My father was a Confucian scholar. I grew this beard many years ago to appear more Confucian.

NATE
You remind me of someone, but I can't quite--

HO
By the way, I subscribe to *The Young Socialist*.

NATE
It's mailed to North Vietnam?

HO
Mai oui! It's very well written, but most of the letters to the editor are requests for posters of the late Malcolm X and Che Guevara.

NATE
I'll note your sense of humor in my article.

HO
I am running out your tape with joking. But do mere socialist leanings--

NATE
I'm registered!

HO
--Qualify you?

NATE

I've been arrested!

HO

For socialism?

NATE

No...

HO

What was the original name of the Vietnamese Communist Party?

NATE

Thanh Nien, in English the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth Association, but that was dissolved to form the Communist Party of Indochina which was at odds with the Communist Party of Annam, and both conflicted with the Vietnamese Nationalist Party but together with the Democratic Party of Vietnam they formed a popular front to fight the Japanese during World War Two in what became the League for the Independence of Vietnam, the *Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi*, or *Viet Minh* for short.

HO

(after a moment)

You forgot the League of Oppressed Oriental Peoples.

LONG comes in with two fresh cups
of tea and sets them down.

NATE

Apologies to Phan Bội Châu.

(after a moment)

My hope for this article is that Americans will stop seeing you as a Marxist monster. They're blind to your accomplishments. You're a patriot who only seeks unity and independence for his homeland. Someone they can identify with, warm up to.

LONG

A cuddly communist?

She leaves.

HO

The American people love peace and justice.

NATE

Exactly!

HO

And who understands independence better than the ragged band of barefoot farmers who defied England's professionally-armed mercenary force in 1776?

NATE

You yourself said that wars are not won on the battlefield, but in the hearts and minds of good people.

HO

I said that? I should write a little red book!

NATE

And with more protests in the States, our army will be forced--by the will of the people--to stop propping up the corrupt South Vietnamese government and let all the people of Vietnam vote on unification.

HO

I admire your ambition on my behalf. But why would you do this?

NATE

Peace!

HO

Also admirable, but naive. Cute, even. Is that the proper American word?

NATE

Cute? I couldn't be more serious--!

HO

I am teasing you, Mr. Witowski.

NATE

Time Magazine just declared Richard Nixon the man to beat. President Johnson needs peace as much as you do if the Democrats are to stay in office.

HO

To save America I must become...cuddly.

NATE

Human. We know you as an abstraction, married only to the revolution.

HO

And you will convince America I'm a man like any other man.

NATE

Americans don't trust unmarried men.

HO

I had a wife once.

NATE

Only one?

HO

Qu'est-ce que tu veux dire? [what's that you say?]

NATE

There are rumors of...secret wives.

HO

(laughs)

Americans wonder whether Uncle Ho has romance in his life?

NATE

Something they can relate to.

HO

A love story.

NATE

I suppose.

HO

I admire so much of the West: democracy, freedom, science, technology. I do not admire *The National Enquirer*.

NATE

All right, no wives. But I need a story no one has heard.

HO

Very well. But allow an old man a few little mysteries.

NATE

I understand.

HO

Your strategy seems a bit indirect.

NATE

Sideways. I agree. But let us focus for now on facts. You were born in 1890--

HO

The Ho Chi Minh of ancient legend was born Nguyen Singh Cung in a straw hut. Not as substantial as Mr. Lincoln's log cabin, perhaps--

NATE

You know Abraham Lincoln?

HO

Not personally.

NATE

I meant--

HO

He had a beard...

NATE

The Civil War is my favorite era of American history.

HO

Why is that?

NATE

Our greatest national crisis, a country torn in two--

HO

This is sounding familiar...

NATE

Exactly! Lincoln exercised great leadership when most needed-

-

HO

He is your hero, *n'est-ce pas?*

NATE

He is! He is! Hey! I'm supposed to be interviewing you!

HO

You're American but a socialist. Perhaps I can still save you.

NATE

Tell me about Phan Bôi Châu.

HO

Ah, you are a journalist after all. A most sensitive topic!

NATE

He was your father's friend. And your mentor.

In different light, LONG appears as PHAN BÔI CHÂU, an elderly scholar with glasses and a beard who looks quite a bit like HO.

HO

Every youth needs an older mentor. Phan Bôi Châu inspired Nguyen Singh Cung when he was very young--

PHAN BÔI CHÂU

Vietnam must abandon a thousand years of tradition and look outside itself for new models if we are to oust the French invaders. Japan's modern army defeated Tsarist Russia, so I am going to Tokyo to learn how they did it. Come with me, Nguyen Tat Thanh!

HO

(removing his glasses, white beard and white hair)

Nguyen Singh Cung received his adult name Nguyen Tat Thanh on his tenth birthday. It means "he who will succeed."

HO becomes NGUYEN TAT THANH, with dark hair and a smooth chin, a young man in 1908.

NGUYEN TAT THANH

But honored sir, did not Nguyen Trai tell us 500 years ago that it is necessary to understand the enemy--

NGUYEN TAT THANH AND PHAN BÔI CHÂU

--In order to defeat him?

PHAN BÔI CHÂU

Yes.

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Then why Tokyo? We should go to Paris!

PHAN BÔI CHÂU

That is naive, Nguyen Tat Thanh. Cute, even. Before we go anywhere, we must modernize our country.

PHAN BÔI CHÂU strokes NGUYEN TAT
THANH's long ponytail and prepares
to chop it off.

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Our hair is from our parents! Cutting it dishonors them!

PHAN BÔI CHÂU

Long hair represents feudal society. Short hair is modern,
free!

PHAN BÔI CHÂU cuts off NGUYEN TAT
THANH'S hair and sings. NGUYEN TAT
THANH dons glasses, white hair and
beard to become HO.

PHAN BOI CHAU

Comb in one hand
Scissors in the other
Cut his hair
To save your brother
Snip! Snip!

HO

While the French were
distracted by the tonsorial
rebellion, Phan Boi Chau
persuaded the Vietnamese
chefs to put datura poison--
you call it jimsonweed--in
the food of the French
garrison in Hanoi.

PHAN BOI CHAU
 Ignorance clipped
 Stupidity gone
 Night cut short
 Comes the dawn!
 Snip! Snip!

HO
 The soldiers got sick, but
 did not die, and a Catholic
 chef confessed to his priest,
 so all the conspirators were
 introduced to Docteur
 Guillotine. Except Phan Boi
 Chau.

A human head rolls toward HO, who
 picks it up.

PHAN BÔI CHÂU
 My presence is required in Japan immediately! But before I
 go, a gift to remember me by.

PHAN BÔI CHÂU trades the head with
 HO for a little red book and
 disappears.

NATE
 Did he really call you cute?

HO
 Twenty-four is always cute to forty.

NATE
 What was the gift?

HO
 The History of Abraham Lincoln and the Overthrow of Slavery.
 Highly instructive for Nguyen Tat Thanh, who in 1911 signed
 up as mess boy on the Admiral Latouche-Treville from Saigon
 to Marseilles--

NATE
Pardonnez-moi, Mr. President, but I notice you're speaking of
 yourself in third person--

HO
 Alas, English! It makes first person sound self-serving--I--
 I--I! May an old man be permitted linguistic eccentricity?

NATE smiles and nods. HO once
 again removes his glasses, white
 beard and hair to become young BA.

BA

On board the ship Nguyen Tat Thanh was known as Ba. He lit the boilers in the cold hold, fetched vegetables to the hot kitchen, joyfully polished the brass and emptied buckets of human piss and shit.

PRIVAL appears as AMADOU BABACAR, a Senegalese sailor.

BA

At night he wrote French letters for the crew, other victims of colonialism, including a Senegalese sailor named Amadou Babacar.

BA and AMADOU sit together with paper and pen. AMADOU holds a small Senegalese drum as he dictates to BA. Lights out gradually on NATE.

AMADOU

My beautiful Safara--

(punctuates with a beat of the drum)

BA

(writing)

Safara--what does it mean, brother Amadou?

AMADOU

It mean her name.

BA

But does it have meaning that describe her? Pretty bird? Soft breeze?

AMADOU

It mean Safara. It is her! She is not bird or wind.
(drumbeats)

BA

Vietnamese name "Hoa" mean "like flower."

AMADOU

She is like woman. Write! No make false meanings!

BA

My beautiful Safara.

AMADOU

Your French is terrible. My beautiful Safara, I am lonely but you not here.

(pauses while BA writes)

The ship stink. French infidels smelling very bad.

AMADOU beats rhythms with his drum to punctuate his dictation, more beats and pauses as BA writes.

BA

Most unclean, brother, agree.

AMADOU

I miss you smelling. You taste. Like honey. You mouth all sweetness. You nipples moist with milk.

(looks to see if BA hesitates)

BA

--With milk.

AMADOU

I wish to suck. To taste milk. Taste mouth. Taste tongue quick like agama lizard.

BA

Tongue like lizard!

AMADOU

Touch you belly.

BA

Caress.

AMADOU

Caress?

BA

Better than touch. Gentle.
(demonstrates)

AMADOU

(shrugs)

Make better. You ass in my hand. You finger in my
dirtyhole. My tongue in sweet honeycave. Deep, juice,
smelling dawn. I am hard of you.

BA

For you.

AMADOU

In you. On you. You my bed. Lost in you, my Safara. Soft
sand Safara. My pizzle in you puzzle.

(drumbeats going crazy)

You honey, my honey. Drip, drip, drip! Drown in honey!
Sweet soft sand! Strong man, good girl, good! Good like
goat! Go like goat, girl!

PERE MALCHIEN, a French priest
played by NATE, rushes in.

PERE MALCHIEN

Do you mind? It's two in the morning!

AMADOU

We no mind.

BA

Apologies, father! I am helping Amadou write letter to wife.

AMADOU

Not wife, daughter.

BA

Daughter?!

AMADOU

Why write letter to wife?

PERE MALCHIEN

Writing is quiet! Why all this devilish, juju--
(snatches the drum)

--Jungle drumming?!

AMADOU

(trying to get drum)

Tabla sacred! Not juju!

PERE MALCHIEN

Not Christian!

BA

He's Sufi!

AMADOU

Sacred to Tasawwuf--please--!

AMADOU lunges for the drum, but
PERE MALCHIEN throws it overboard.

AMADOU

My tabla! All I have of home!

PERE MALCHIEN

It's your own fault. You knocked it out of my hand.

AMADOU

My father's father make that drum!

AMADOU dives overboard to retrieve
his drum, sound of a splash.

BA

Amadou!

PERE MALCHIEN

He won't be able to find it floating out there in the dark.

AMADOU disappears or swims away.

BA

Man overboard! Amadou!

AMADOU

Sacred! Tabla sacred!

PERE MALCHIEN

Look at him paddle!

BA

Stop ship!

PERE MALCHIEN

They won't stop. He abandoned ship.

BA

I can no see him!

AMADOU

(in the distance)

Allahu akbar!

PERE MALCHIEN

(laughing)

Muslims die with curses on their lips!

BA

Brother Amadou!

AMADOU

(faint)

Safara!

PERE MALCHIEN laughs.

BA

The next day Amadou's drum was found stuck to a lifeboat davit. It never went over the side at all.

(picks up the drum)

Amadou drowned for nothing.

PERE MALCHIEN

Nothing!

Lighting change as PERE MALCHIEN's laugh amplifies into the sound of bombers approaching. PERE MALCHIEN and BA disappear in the darkness as LONG rushes in shouting.

LONG

Americans! Americans! They're coming! Comrades, report to bomb shelters! Be orderly! No pushing!

Bombs fall and explode. Screams and shouts.

LONG

Take shelter!

LONG disappears as more bombs explode and lights come up dimly on PRIVAL bracing himself in a bomb shelter.

After another explosion, NATE dashes in and sits next to him. Another blast. Suddenly PRIVAL turns toward NATE and grabs something off of him.

PRIVAL

Oh, no you don't!

NATE

Pardonnez-moi!

PRIVAL

Sorry!

(speaking into his cupped hands)

Shhh! It's okay. It's okay.

NATE

You're American!

PRIVAL

You're from Texas!

NATE

Oklahoma!

PRIVAL

Sorry--the accent--

Three loud chirps.

NATE

What's that?

PRIVAL

(shows gecko)

Common house gecko.

(puts it in his pocket)

If they chirp three times, it means you're telling the truth. Just once and it's a lie or a bad omen. So you are indeed from Oklahoma.

NATE

Prival Chouteau?

PRIVAL

Do I know you?

NATE

You're the only Negro pilot shot down in the north--

PRIVAL

I was not shot down.

NATE

Operation Rolling Thunder? Second Air Division--over Thai Binh two months ago.

PRIVAL

Yeah...

NATE

I'm here to get you out.

Three chirps. PRIVAL pats his pocket gently.

PRIVAL

About time! Thought they'd abandoned the nigger to the jungle.

NATE

An A-7's coming back this way in three days to pick us up. I just have to get you across the river with me to Viet Hu'ng--

PRIVAL

That wasn't the plan.

NATE

They think I'm a journalist, but I'm from CORDS.

PRIVAL

You are not!

LONG appears with a machine gun.

LONG

No speaking to the black man!

NATE

He's American--we just--

LONG

White men do not talk to black in America. Why should it be different here?

NATE

We talk--

LONG

He is a prisoner!

HO

(from the darkness)

Please speak correctly, Comrade. Airman First Class Chouteau is our guest.

LONG

Ông Tong thong, ban nên ở trong n'oi trú an riêng của ban.
[Mr. President, you should be in your private shelter.]

HO

(with cigarette, joining them)

It's lonely in the presidential bomb shelter. Better to die with friends.

LONG

They are enemies.

HO

While they are our guests, they are friends. Airman Chouteau is a particular friend as he has volunteered to help us.

NATE

Help, how?

HO

He's offered to testify in a film that he's been so well treated that he'd rather stay in Vietnam than return to the United States.

NATE

Talk about sideways!

HO

In Vietnam we respect him as a man. What sort of homecoming would a black soldier receive in America? Here he walks in full human dignity.

NATE

Conditions are improving--President Johnson--Dr. King--

HO

All Americans want to be movie stars, *n'est-ce pas?*

PRIVAL

I haven't agreed.

HO

Contract negotiation. So Hollywood. Mr. Widowski, would you like to resume our conversation since we must remain underground until the all clear?

LONG

Most inappropriate.

PRIVAL

What conversation?

NATE

I'm interviewing President Ho--

HO

Uncle Ho!

LONG

For Time Magazine!

NATE

(getting out his tape
recorder)

You would like to continue with Airman Chouteau present?

HO

I've nothing to hide. Is that not the point?

PRIVAL

Then I have a question.

NATE

It's *my* interview.

HO

I'm interested in the Airman's opinion as well as his questions. They will certainly differ from yours.

NATE

I'm a journalist. He's--

LONG

Black.

NATE

In the military. My questions are carefully considered--

LONG

Approved in advance!

NATE

This could be the best interview yet of the President--

HO

Why must Americans always be the best? Is very good not enough?

PRIVAL

Mr. President--

HO

Uncle!

JAY

--Your war of independence
has killed millions--

LONG raises her gun, but HO stops
her with a small gesture. She
lowers the weapon.

NATE

Do you realize how hard it
was to get this interview?
Don't fuck it up, you stupid--
!

PRIVAL

--Of Vietnamese, not to
mention thousands of French
and Americans, Laotians,
Cambodians--

LONG

Uncle Tom!

PRIVAL

How is your conscience, sir?

PRIVAL

Is that English word familiar to you? Conscience? All those
deaths?

NATE

Careful or you could be next.

PRIVAL

Is independence worth that loss of life?

LONG

Ask George Washington.

HO

Or Abraham Lincoln. You love your Civil War, Mr. Widowski. How many died?

NATE

About 350 thousand Union and 250 thousand Confederate--

HO

Six hundred thousand in the North and the South! Was brother killing brother worth it, Airman Chouteau?

LONG

Would you rather be a slave?

PRIVAL

It's not the same--

HO

We were slaves of the French, our lives not worth a penny. We drown, they laugh.

NATE

Our war ended slavery in less than five years. You've been fighting for more than twenty-five.

HO

Has slavery ended, Airman Chouteau?

(PRIVAL is silent)

Your Civil War's lasted a hundred years. I've been to your country, I've seen your Ku Klux Klan. You're still fighting in the streets, North and South--*j'espere pas!*--maybe forever.

PRIVAL

Your international communist revolution is directed by the Soviets, the Chinese. Millions dying for ideology.

HO

Freedom is ideology?

PRIVAL

The freedom of worldwide Communism.

LONG

Worldwide capitalism is better? The rich devouring the poor?

HO

Should Vietnam become the US, the US Vietnam?

NATE

(struggling to regain control
of the interview)

That's the question, isn't it?

PRIVAL

What question?

NATE

Is Ho Chi Minh more a nationalist or a communist?

LONG

Equally!

PRIVAL

He was a communist agent for twenty years!

LONG

Proudly!

NATE

But Vietnamese for almost eighty.

HO

Eighty! *Mon dieu!* The answer is simple. When Nguyen Tat Thanh arrived in Paris in 1914 he was a primitive nationalist, angry, naive.

NATE

Yes, yes, what changed?

HO

Liberté, égalité, fraternité.

NATE

Paris?

HO

Mais oui! Who doesn't love Paris?

PRIVAL

Paris made you a communist?

HO startles them all by suddenly
bursting into song.

HO

*Allons enfants de la Patrie,
Le jour de gloire est arrivé!*

HO gestures to LONG, who joins him
in singing *La Marseilles*.

HO AND LONG

*Contre nous de la tyrannie,
L'étendard sanglant est levé,
L'étendard sanglant est levé,*

Lighting change and HO removes his
glasses, white hair and beard to
become NGUYEN TAT THANH. The
others disappear. HO's singing is
passionate, not at all ironic.

HO

*Entendez-vous dans les campagnes
Mugir ces féroces soldats?
Ils viennent jusque dans vos bras
Égorger vos fils, vos compagnes!*

HO is joined by LEO POLDES, a
French Marxist. In separate light,
LONG as MADEMOISELLE MESMER dangles
a coin in front of a hypnotized
POTEAU (played by PRIVA).

HO AND LEO

*Aux armes, citoyens,
Formez vos bataillons,
Marchons, marchons!
Qu'un sang impur
Abreuve nos sillons!*

Lights out on MESMER and POTEAU.

LEO

Bienvenue, mesdames et monsieurs a la Club du Faubourg! Thank you, Mademoiselle Mesmer for that fascinating demonstration of hypnotism. The program is always eclectic at Club du Faubourg, and our next guest speaker this evening comes to us from Indochine, the proud colony of Annam. Please welcome Monsieur Nguyen Tat Thanh.

NGUYEN TAT THANH

(nervous)

Citizens, I been in P-P-Paris for much time now, and learned startling fact: not all Frenchmen evil. French in France entirely different breed from those in the colonies. You export the worst of French society.

NGUYEN TAT THANH gesticulates rather wildly as he speaks.

MADEMOISELLE MESMER

Speak up!

POTEAU

I can't understand him!

NGUYEN TAT THANH

(louder)

Forgive my poor French. But in a socialist club such as this, it is disappointing to see hyp-hyp-hypnotism--

MADEMOISELLE MESMER

Hip, hip, hip!

POTEAU

Who is this, Charlie Chaplin?

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Hypnotism as entertainment when the French assassin-administrators of colonial Vietnam use o-o-opium--

POTEAU

O-o-o! Careful, your hands will fly away!

Hisses from the audience.

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Opium and alcohol to hypnotize and enslave the people of my
count-count-count--

MADEMOISELLE MESMER

My cunt isn't enslaved. Is your cunt enslaved?

More hissing.

NGUYEN TAT THANH

My country! If socialists don't take side of co-co-colonized
peoples, how you make revolution?

Lights out on NGUYEN TAT THANH and
up on PHAN BÔI CHÂU, now looking
older.

PHAN BÔI CHÂU

Dearest Thanh, I admire the way you are absorbing France,
your days at the Bibliotheque reading Shakespeare--

Lights up on NGUYEN TAT THANH
retouching a photograph. The Wolof
drum sits beside him.

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Also Dickens, Hugo, Zola and Tolstoy--

PHAN BOI CHAU

Please stay away from Marx! His radicalism will win Vietnam
no friends.

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Marx is too focused on Europe. Have you read Lenin?

PHAN BÔI CHÂU

Lenin is destroying Russia. Communism will be the death of
Europe!

NGUYEN TAT THANH

That's the idea.

PHAN BÔI CHÂU

Haven't we learned radical talk and violence only set us
back? What are you doing to that photograph?

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Adding color. I have to make a living!

PHAN BÔI CHÂU

Colored photographs! Everyone wants too much these days!

NGUYEN TAT THANH

European socialists are blind to our problems, self-centered. Only Lenin understands the colonies.

PHAN BÔI CHÂU

Our small country can only be liberated by world-wide revolution?

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Comrades from the mother countries are trying to kill a snake by treading on its tail.

PHAN BÔI CHÂU

Since the West hates them, the communists must be good?

NGUYEN TAT THANH

In Vietnam only the bourgeoisie understand Communism, and they prefer to bear the colonial collar and gnaw the dry bones tossed their way.

PHAN BÔI CHÂU

Cute. You're in love with words but you're a terrible speaker with your hands like wild birds.

NGUYEN TAT THANH

I'm still learning French!

PHAN BÔI CHÂU

You have my Lincoln book?

(NGUYEN TAT THANH produces it)

Study his speeches, his manner of presentation. *Améliorez votre français.*

(Strokes NGUYEN TAT THANH's hair)

Stop embarrassing us with inarticulate sputtering.

Lights out on PHAN BÔI CHÂU as
NGUYEN TAT THANH reads from his
little red book.

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Mr. Lincoln never beat the air, never sawed space with his hands, never acted for stage effect: was clear in his ideas, simple in his words; he spoke and acted to convince individuals and masses; he used in his gestures his right hand sometimes shooting out that long bony forefinger of his to dot an idea or to express a thought, resting his thumb on his middle finger.

NGUYEN TAT THANH puts the red book inside the Wolof drum then tries the bony finger trick. LEO POLDES appears.

LEO

You need a good luck charm for your next speech.
(holds up a small crucifix)

NGUYEN TAT THANH

I am not Catholic.

LEO

But Jesus was a communist, don't you think?

NGUYEN TAT THANH

(accepting)

I am going to a demonstration at Pere Lachaise--

LEO

The fiftieth anniversary of the martyrs of the Paris Commune?

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Maybe Jesus will protect me from the Catholics.

Lighting change puts LEO in the dark and illuminates a GENDARME (played by PRIVAL) who immediately charges at NGUYEN TAT THANH.

GENDARME

Communist dog!

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Mercy!

GENDARME knocks him backward against a tomb. THANH hits his head and is knocked out for a moment, the comes to and holds up the crucifix to ward off further blows.

NGUYEN TAT THANH

In the name of our Lord and Savior!

GENDARME

(laughs)

I am not Catholic! I am Sufi!

He gets ready to hit THANH again.

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Wolof?

GENDARME

(hesitates)

Naam? [yes?]

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Caameñ! [brother!]

GENDARME

Caameñ! [brother!]

GENDARME helps THANH to his feet.

EUGENE

(off)

Gendarme! What are you doing?

GENDARME takes off. EUGENE (played by NATE) appears in fancy French clothes circa 1830.

EUGENE

Monsieur, are you hurt?

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Only a little. Thank you, but he would not have hit me again.

EUGENE

Why not?

NGUYEN TAT THANH

He is from Senegal and I knew a few words of Wolof. Are you part of the demonstration?

EUGENE

No.

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Then why are you here dressed for the nineteenth century?

EUGENE

I always appear to anyone who throws themselves upon my tomb. Although it's usually women.

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Your tomb?

EUGENE gestures and the name
"Eugene Delacroix" appears on the
tomb.

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Monsieur Delacroix! A great honor! I am Nguyen Tat Thanh.

EUGENE

I know who you are. I have something to show you.

EUGENE gestures, and his painting
Liberty Leading the People appears
in the sky.

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Liberty Leading the People! I saw this at the Louvre!

EUGENE

Study it, Nguyen Tat Thanh, for it is your destiny!

NGUYEN TAT THANH

Revolution!

EUGENE

Liberté, fraternité, égalité! Worth fighting for! Even when you have to fight France, *n'est-ce pas?*

NGUYEN TAT THANH

I will!

EUGENE

Your French is getting better. Don't be afraid to speak up, Nguyen Tat Thanh. And change your name to something more profound than "he who will succeed!"

Lighting change isolates NGUYEN TAT THANH. He speaks to a crowd, this time with confidence and verve.

NGUYEN TAT THANH

While waiting for the sacred right of nations to self-government, the people of the ancient kingdom of Annam, currently a French colony in Indochina, present the following demands:

(uses the bony finger trick)

Total amnesty for political prisoners. Court reform and the end of star chambers. Freedom of the press and of opinion. The right of association and to peaceably assemble. Freedom to emigrate. Education. Schools. The rule of law instead of rule by fiat. A Vietnamese delegate to the French Parliament, freely elected by the Vietnamese people.

A delegate played by NATE calls out.

JEAN LONGUET

(off)

Monsieur, this is unnecessary! I have spoken for years on behalf of the natives!

NGUYEN TAT THANH

(bony finger)

I invoke the dictatorship of silence.

(after a moment)

The "natives" must speak for themselves. We must free ourselves if the beneficent French cannot let us go. And if that means joining the Communist International, under Lenin's leadership the only organization addressing the colonial question, so be it!

JEAN LONGUET

(off)

And you are, Monsieur?

NGUYEN TAT THANH

My name...is Nguyen Ai Quoc.

Lights out on NGUYEN TAT THANH and
up on NATE, back in 1968, seated
with tape recorder in hand. PRIVAL
is seated as well, his gecko in his
hands.

NATE

Thus Nguyen the Patriot was born.

PRIVAL

The scales fell from his eyes.

NATE

No one's going to believe Delacroix appeared in Pere Lachaise
and showed you *Liberty Leading the People* painted upon the
firmament!

Lighting change reveals HO (with
glasses, white hair and beard) no
longer in the bomb shelter, but
comfortably seated in the stilt
house.

HO

Thanh hit his head on Delacroix's tombstone and had a vision.
Imagine what would have happened if he'd fallen on Oscar
Wilde's grave.

NATE

You don't want to come off as delusional.

HO

Thank you for looking out for me.

PRIVAL

So the West created Nguyen Ai Quoc?

NATE

I'm still hoping for secret wives. Aside from the brief
appearance of the hypnotist, here hasn't been one woman in
your story so far!

HO

That is how they stay secret. I am not a Latin lover like Che Guevara. Were I as handsome as he, we'd have already won this war. No one in America has posters of me!

NATE

Actually...

PRIVAL

Lenin was your hero, wasn't he?

The gecko chirps three times.
PRIVAL puts it gently in his pocket.

HO

I suppose that's so, since your gecko agrees. I arrived in Moscow just before he died, missed seeing him alive by mere hours.

NATE

I want to hear *that* story!

HO

I had to settle for Paul Robeson and Sergei Eisenstein.

PRIVAL

You met them?

NATE

This is *my* interview!

HO

You Americans and your film stars!

HO

Who's your favorite, Mr. Hollywood? Bette Davis? Judy Garland?

NATE

(with some embarrassment)

Garbo.

HO

And her best film?

NATE AND HO

Camille.

NATE

You saw *Camille*?

HO

I've been to Paris many times. I saw *Camille* there, an American film of a Dumas novel subtitled into French, *quel dommage*. I've suffered from tuberculosis on more than one occasion, and every--

(coughs demurely)

--Broke my sentimental heart! The death scene, when Robert Taylor tries to cheer her with the memory of the lucky clover, not realizing she's already gone!

LONG comes in bearing a large glass jar full of dead, coiled snakes.

NATE flinches when he sees it.

NATE

What's that?

HO

I ordered some wine.

LONG prepares to serve wine from the glass jar, pressing a tea cup into the snakes, filling it with liquid and pouring it into small glasses.

NATE

Snake wine?

PRIVAL

You can ferment anything.

LONG

My family is well known for snake wine in the Mekong Delta. A southern recipe.

LONG serves HO.

PRIVAL

(touching the jar,
fascinated)

Ovophis tonkinensis, *Bungarus flaviceps*, *Daboia siamensis*,
Ophiophagus hannah!

NATE

Ophiofaggy who?

PRIVAL

King cobra! Pit vipers! A red-headed krait! And a couple I don't recognize.

LONG

(handing PRIVAL a glass)

Taste.

NATE

Ummm...

No one drinks. HO laughs.

HO

Gentlemen, you're both doing us a favor!

(pause)

If we wanted to poison you, we'd be much more subtle than a jar of vipers! *A santé!*

HO drinks.

PRIVAL

I'm from the South, too.

PRIVAL tastes the snake wine. It's powerful, but he's had worse.

HO

Let it not be said that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam is inhospitable to its guests.

PRIVAL

(points to the jar)

Do you know anything about that snake?

LONG

The black and white?

PRIVAL

It looks like a krait, but I've never--

LONG

It swims in mountain streams. Very dangerous.

(handing NATE a glass)

Why do you care so much about snakes?

PRIVAL

My aunt was murdered by a rattlesnake ten years ago.

NATE

A snake can't commit murder!

It just bit her by instinct.

LONG

Was she working in a paddy

when bitten?

PRIVAL

She was murdered with the snake. Raped and murdered.

NATE tastes the snake wine.

LONG

I am sorry. Did you love her very much?

NATE

This is pure alcohol!

PRIVAL

She raised me, my only family. So gentle, an art teacher.

NATE

Wait. Raped with a snake?

HO

What do you mean, Airman?

PRIVAL

Aunt Sarah carried student work from art class in a plastic tube. Three men chased her down one summer night in Bogalusa, Louisiana. Snake-handling Pentecostals. Threw her in their car and raped her. Then they put the tube inside her and forced a diamondback in head first.

NATE

(repulsed)

Ohhh!

(sets the glass aside)

LONG

Were they white men?

NATE

Of course they were!

HO

Comrade Long, come with me.

NATE

But weren't you going to tell me about Lenin? Eisenstein?

HO

It is enough stories for today.

HO leaves. LONG starts to follow.

LONG

Have more wine.

LONG leaves.

NATE

You're fucking up my interview with your fake stories!

PRIVAL

What about you and your fake ass-kissing?

NATE

I'm gaining his confidence.

PRIVAL

He sees right through you. So do I.

NATE

What do you mean?

PRIVAL

How are you sposed get us out of here?

NATE

There's a landing strip at Viet Hu'ng.

PRIVAL

And you're from who now?

NATE

Civilian Operations and Revolutionary Development Support.

PRIVAL

The Phoenix Program.

NATE

It's new since you got caught.

PRIVAL

I'm with the Phoenix Program!

NATE

You're with the Air Force!

PRIVAL

Ostensibly.

NATE

Holy shit. They just said--

PRIVAL

What the fuck kind of operation sends you in blind without telling you who you're rescuing?

NATE

I was recently recruited--

PRIVAL

No shit!

NATE

If you're with Phoenix, you're not here by accident.

Silence.

NATE

What's your assignment?

PRIVAL

Intelligence.

The gecko chirps once.

NATE

Prove it. The gecko says you lie.

PRIVAL

The US prevented the unification elections in 1954.

NATE

No, that was the French--

PRIVAL

We did it. And I got confirmation here in Hanoi. You're not in CORDS. You don't know anything.

NATE

We okayed the assassination of Diem.

PRIVAL

Nuh-uh--we tried to prevent it--

NATE

We made it look like we tried to prevent it.

The gecko chirps three times.
Silence for a moment.

PRIVAL

This your first Search and Rescue?

NATE

We don't normally, but--

PRIVAL

I'm special.

NATE

You are. You can't make that film. It would hand Nixon the election.

PRIVAL

Something worse is gonna do that.

NATE

What?

PRIVAL

Sposed to be a major offensive in about six weeks.

NATE

How do you know?

PRIVAL

Ho nghi tôi không hiểu tiếng Việt. [They think I can't understand Vietnamese.]

NATE

Where?

PRIVAL

Everywhere.

They drink. Lights out on them and up on HO and LONG in separate space.

HO

Did that snake torture story sound familiar?

LONG

Black women in America suffer--

HO

Vietnamese women! That kind of rape is an interrogation technique of the CIA.

LONG

Airman Chouteau may not be an airman.

HO

Observe him closely. But not too closely.

LONG

What do you mean?

HO

You look at him like a butterfly gazes at a plum blossom.

LONG

I've never seen an African up close before.

HO

He is not African. He is American.

(folds a piece of paper)

As for Mr. Widowski--

LONG

His interview is a waste of time. Americans will never--

HO

I am not concerned about Americans. He will say what he wants in his article--it is our story but his to tell. However, if a sympathetic profile appears in an important American magazine, that will matter to our people, including yours in the south. Mr. Widowski is not wrong, just naive.

LONG

Cute.

HO

I am coming to admire his methods as well as his aims. Very--sideways. We must give him some of what he wants, a little drama--

(indicates the paper airplane
he's just finished)

But we should seem reluctant. That will make his *chè ba mau* more tasty. Does Airman Chouteau know about General Giap's plans for Tet?

LONG

I believe so.

HO

Make sure he does.

LONG

He thinks we don't know he understands Vietnamese.

HO

If his superiors leak that news to Johnson, perhaps he will negotiate peace on favorable terms before anyone has to die.

LONG

Then General Giap will have us killed.

HO

Keep them in snake wine.

HO throws the paper airplane into the darkness. Lights out on HO and LONG and up on PRIVAL and NATE. They've had a bit more snake wine.

NATE

Do you think Uncle Ho's a homo?

PRIVAL
 Commies execute punks.

NATE
 He kind of...flirts.

PRIVAL
 All politicians flirt.

NATE
 And all that movie talk--

PRIVAL
 You did it, too, Mr. Hollywood.

NATE
 To draw him out.

PRIVAL
 So cuddly he's queer? Put that in your profile.

NATE
 I'm not doing a profile. But if people knew--

PRIVAL
 You'll kill the commies by calling them cocksuckers?

NATE
 You notice how some of his stories are a little--

PRIVAL
 Senile? Exaggerated?

NATE
 They don't always make chronological sense.

PRIVAL
 Hell, no.

NATE
 He's making a myth. Aesop's fables, parables. Cult of personality.

PRIVAL
 You talk to him like he's Jesus Christ.

NATE

You gotta credit what he's done: defeated the French,
outsmarted us--

PRIVAL

You going commie?

NATE

But he has a Judas side. I'll ask him what finally happened
to Phan Bôi Châu. He won't want to talk about that.

A paper airplane arrives.

NATE

(reading it)

"Would you like to hear how I died?" What does that mean?

LONG appears.

LONG

The President is generally pleased with the interview.

NATE

Good.

PRIVAL

But?

LONG

Please do not ask more about wives. It is sensitive.

NATE

Okay, but it would appeal to--

LONG

I am his wife.

PRIVAL

You are?

NATE

That's a scoop! How long have you been married?

LONG

(after a moment)

I am his wife--what is the French?--

Epouse-- NATE
 Epouse du jour. LONG
 His wife today. NATE
 His...concubine? PRIVAL
 I am his plaything. LONG
 May I include that--? NATE
 That is up to him. I am serving the Revolution. LONG
 By managing him. PRIVAL
 It is not...easy. The President is brilliant but unpredictable. LONG
 Chaotic! PRIVAL
 So no talk of wives? NATE
 Yes, do you agree? LONG
 I agree, but it's odd... NATE
 Good. LONG
 (re: paper airplane)
 What does he mean about how he died? NATE

HO

(appears)

When Nguyen Ai Quoc traveled to China, he changed his name to Ly Thuy.

NATE

(turning on his tape
recorder)

Another alias!

HO

The French were spying on him wherever he went since he was considered subversive, so he needed to become someone else. What he became was married.

NATE

What?

NATE looks at LONG, who shrugs.
Lighting change puts everyone in
the dark except HO, who removes his
beard to become LY THUY.

HO

Ly Thuy went to Canton to work with the Peasant Movement Institute. He needed stability and help learning Chinese, so he inquired with friends about finding a Chinese wife.

TANG TUYET MINH, played by LONG,
appears, kneeling. She is shy and
much more traditionally feminine
than LONG.

LY THUY

I know it is traditional, but I will not pay a bride price.

TANG TUYET MINH

There is no one to pay. I am the orphan of my father's third concubine. So when he died I was sent away.

LY THUY

Have you any education, Tuyet Minh?

TANG TUYET MINH

None, your honor.

LY THUY

I am not your honor. But I may be husband. Call me Ly Thuy.

TANG TUYET MINH

Ly Thuy.

LY THUY

Do you know about Revolutionary Youth League struggle against French in Vietnam?

TANG TUYET MINH

(stares for a moment)

I am Chinese.

LY THUY

Do you favor Kuomintang or Chinese Communist Party?

(TUYET MINH just laughs as
she has no idea)

Forgive my poor Cantonese.

(out)

Despite the reasonable objections of his colleagues, Ly Thuy married Tuyet Minh. It is rumored they had a daughter together.

NATE

(in the dark, or briefly
illuminated)

Rumored!?

LY THUY

Sadly, Chiang Kai-shek ordered the massacre of thousands of communists in Shanghai and Canton, and Ly Thuy fled to Hong Kong hours before Chinese officials raided his residence.

NATE

And Tuyet Minh?

LY THUY

She stayed in Canton. Ly Thuy imagined she was relieved to be free of a much older husband, *triste mai vrai*.

NATE

That was quick.

LY THUY

Upon arriving in Hong Kong, Ly Thuy became the Chinese journalist Song Man Cho and very soon was romantically involved with Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, *une belle fille*, a delegate to the Vietnamese plenary conference of 1930--

NATE

I'm sorry to interrupt, Mr. President--

SONG MAN CHO

Uncle!

NATE

But can you tell me what became of Phan Bôi Châu in China?

SONG MAN CHO

You wanted a love story, *n'est-ce pas*?

NATE

Phan Bôi Châu is an important part of your history--

SONG MAN CHO

My drama, do you mean? Bigger than life, like the movies?

NATE

Truth, Uncle. I'd prefer to tell the truth.

SONG MAN CHO

Tres bien. I will give you truth *and* love.

NGUYEN THI MINH KHAI appears,
played by LONG, much more assertive
than TUYET THUY MINH.

MINH KHAI

I attended co-education high school in Vinh, then learned about the revolution from Tran Phu. I joined the Tan Viet party shortly after.

SONG MAN CHO

Do you believe we can evict the French from Vietnam?

MINH KHAI

The French are a mighty elephant. We are a tiger. If he doesn't move, the tiger will be crushed by the elephant's powerful tusks. So the tiger moves.

He hides in the jungle during the day then springs forth at night, tearing at the elephant's back with his claws. The elephant swings his tusks to fight, and the tiger is gone, evaporated into the dark forest. The next night, while the elephant's wounds are still fresh, the tiger attacks again, and the elephant bleeds a little more. Night after night, until the elephant dies from loss of blood. This is how we will defeat the French.

SONG MAN CHO

Do you find animal stories erotic?

MINH KHAI

It is not my story. It's from--

SONG MAN CHO AND MINH KHAI

--Phan Bôi Châu.

MINH KHAI

I admire him very much.

SONG MAN CHO

I do as well.

MINH KHAI

But he will never accept communist principles.

SONG MAN CHO

Do you feel he obstructs our path?

MINH KHAI

For now he is a useful distraction for the French.

SONG MAN CHO

(shows red book)

He gave me this.

MINH KHAI

I have something for you as well.

She produces a small ceramic tiger.

SONG MAN CHO

(accepting it)

Does it come with an elephant?

She kisses him. Lighting change.
SONG MAN CHO is alone.

SONG MAN CHO

It is not clear whether Song Man Cho married Minh Khai, but they lived together on the peninsula of Kowloon across the bay from Hong Kong. There is no truth to the rumor that Minh Khai had anything to do with the betrayal of Phan Bôi Châu to the French in Shanghai.

Lights up on PHAN BÔI CHÂU in the
back seat of a taxi driven by
CABBIE (played by PRIVAL).

PHAN BÔI CHÂU

Communism will be the death of China, don't you agree? Why are we stopping? I'm going to the train station. Excuse me--

Suddenly an AGENT played by NATE
jumps into the seat next to PHAN
BÔI CHÂU.

PHAN BOI CHAU

What? Who are you?

AGENT

Phan Boi Chau, you are under
arrest for Vietnamese
revolutionary activities
against the government of the
Republic of France.

PHAN BÔI CHÂU

Help! Driver! Help!

CABBIE turns around in his seat to
help AGENT arrest PHAN BÔI CHÂU.

CABBIE

Sois tranquille monsieur, ne résiste pas! [Be quiet,
Monsieur, do not resist!]

PHAN BOI CHAU

Let go! Help!

AGENT

*Je vais mettre la main
dessus. Prends sa bouche!*
[I'll get his hands. Get his
mouth!]

CABBIE covers the struggling PHAN BÔI CHÂU'S mouth. Lights out on them.

SONG MAN CHO

There are some who say Song Man Cho, Ly Thuy or even Nguyen Ai Quoc leaked Phan Bôi Châu's whereabouts to French agents, but it remains unconfirmed. With Phan Bôi Châu detained in Shanghai, the resistance in Vietnam was in tatters. Tran Phu had died in prison, Nguyen Phon Sac--

A head rolls out. SONG MAN CHO picks it up, sadly.

SONG MAN CHO

--Was executed. Song Man Cho was the only one left, and he was hiding from the French in British Hong Kong.

SONG MAN CHO sits in the back seat of the taxi, with CABBIE in the front seat.

CABBIE

(Cockney)

Where to, Guvnor?

SONG MAN CHO

Kowloon Ferry Terminal, please.

CABBIE

You hear about Japan?

SONG MAN CHO

What now?

CABBIE

Invaded Manchuria, they did. Talk is that the Nationalists and communists may team up to get the Japs out of China.

SONG MAN CHO

You don't say!

CABBIE

All's I can say is I'm glad to be in British China.

SONG MAN CHO

Why are we stopping? This isn't the Ferry Terminal--

Suddenly an AGENT played by NATE
jumps into the seat next to SONG
MAN CHO.

SONG MAN CHO

What? Who are you?

AGENT

Nguyen Ai Quoc, you are being
detained for subversive
activities.

SONG MAN CHO

I'm not Vietnamese! I'm Chinese! My name is Song Man Cho!

CABBIE turns around in his seat to
help AGENT arrest SONG MAN CHO.

CABBIE

Quiet, Guvnor, don't resist!

SONG MAN CHO

Let go! Help!

AGENT

I'll get his hands. Get his
mouth!

CABBIE covers the struggling SONG
MAN CHO'S mouth. Lights out on
them and up on ROSA LOSEBY, a
British woman, as she gathers
flowers.

ROSA

My husband's getting a writ of habeas corpus to force a
public trial--

A weak cough in the darkness.

ROSA

--Which means you can challenge the banishment inquiry on the
basis of improper procedure since they asked you questions of
a political nature.

Another cough. Lights up on SONG
MAN CHO, languishing in prison, not
looking very well. ROSA brings him
the flowers, arranges them for him.

ROSA

How are you feeling?

SONG MAN CHO

Aside from bad rice, decayed fish and tough beef, I am very well.

(coughs)

I pass the time writing poetry and hunting bedbugs.

(coughs)

Sometimes I sing.

(coughs)

ROSA

You don't sound at all well. Like you have consumption!

SONG MAN CHO

(coughs)

I'm fine.

(coughs)

I've decided to grow a beard.

ROSA

What inspired that?

SONG MAN CHO

(coughs)

Abraham Lincoln.

(reads from little red book)

An eleven year-old girl wrote Mr. Lincoln a letter when he was running for President: "I have yet got four brothers and part of them will vote for you any way and if you let your whiskers grow I will try and get the rest of them to vote for you. You would look a great deal better for your face is so thin. All the ladies like whiskers and they would tease their husbands to vote for you and then you would be President."

From the darkness, NATE interrupts.

NATE

Excuse me, Mr. President, but this tale is veering toward legend and away from truth.

ROSA and SONG MAN CHO look at each other and shrug.

She leaves and he puts his glasses,
beard and white hair back on,
becoming HO. Lighting change
reveals NATE and PRIVAL in the
stilt house with HO.

HO

But, nephew, is Uncle Ho not already more personage than
person? More idea than man? The people need a leader, and a
leader needs a legend.

NATE

Your accomplishments are extraordinary. You needn't
embellish with an Abraham Lincoln origin myth for your beard!

HO

That--

(produces the red book)

--Is not a myth.

The geck chirps three times.

HO

You wanted a story no one has heard.

PRIVAL

(paging through the book)

You kept this through all your travels?

HO

Mr. Lincoln has been *mon ami* for almost fifty years. One
needs a friend in prison, isn't that so, Mr. Hollywood?

NATE

I wouldn't know.

HO

You said you were arrested--

NATE

I didn't go to prison!

LONG appears.

LONG

Chù tịch nu'ò'c, Tu'ò'ng Giap yêu cầu có mặt. [Mr. President, General Giap requests your presence.]

HO

Certainly. Nephews, enjoy your evening.

LONG

Nó là cấp bách. [It is urgent.]

HO

Of course.

They leave.

PRIVAL

You think that's really him?

NATE

What do you mean?

PRIVAL

Most world leaders have doubles.

NATE

For public appearances.

PRIVAL

Isn't that what this is?

NATE

A double wouldn't exhibit such personality, intimate knowledge--

PRIVAL

Flirtation--

NATE

No double could be so good at being Ho!

PRIVAL

He might if he'd been doing it for years. Uncle Ho's had a thousand names--maybe Nguyen Singh Cung, Nguyen Tat Thanh, Nguyen Ai Quoc, Ly Thuy, Song Man Cho--all those third-person stories--are different men cobbled into the legend of Ho Chi Minh.

NATE

Does it matter? This is the man we have before us. The President of North Vietnam.

PRIVAL

I'm supposed to kill him.

NATE

You can't do that!

PRIVAL

You gotta crush on him? I gotta kill you first?

NATE

No--!

PRIVAL

I will, if I catch a whiff of you giving me away.

NATE

Then why'd you tell me?

PRIVAL

I don't want to kill the double. Why were you arrested?

NATE

You can trust me.

PRIVAL

Where?

NATE

Los Angeles.

PRIVAL

Recently.

NATE

None of your business!

PRIVAL regards NATE silently for a moment.

PRIVAL

I need your help to figure out the truth. Is that Ho Chi Minh or a decoy?

NATE

My assignment is your extraction, whether you kill him or not.

PRIVAL

We're running out of time. Comrade Long told Ho General Giap needed to see him urgently. They must be ready to deploy.

NATE

When the plane comes for me, you'll sneak on board. We can map your route tonight.

(off PRIVAL's look)

No one's watching us.

PRIVAL

Oh, yes, they are.

NATE

Trust me, they're not. They assume we're not going anywhere because we'd be stuck once we got outside Hanoi. There's a path behind the presidential compound that looks like it leads down to the river. Let's scout it at least.

Lights out on them and up on HO
with GENERAL VO NGUYEN GIAP (played
by LONG).

HO

I need more time.

GIAP

Everything is ready to go.

HO

If we do both the interview and the film, we may not need the offensive at all. There is a chasm in America, and it's widening.

HO coughs.

GIAP

We've been fighting for more than twenty years. This could end it. Push the Americans out for good.

HO

Or push Nixon into the White House. That would be a disaster for us and for the US. The fallout could last fifty years.

GIAP

You and your politics! Politics without an army is a cobra without venom.

HO

The cobra doesn't waste his venom on prey too big to swallow.

HO coughs several times. GIAP waits.

GIAP

How much time do you need?

HO

A couple of weeks at most. Once the interview is published, the American protests will begin immediately.

GIAP

It must be some interview.

HO

He's falling in love with Uncle Ho.

(off GIAP's look)

With the drama of Uncle Ho.

GIAP

You have one week.

Lights out on them and up dimly on NATE and PRIVAL evading a revolving searchlight in the darkness. They speak quietly.

PRIVAL

All right, dead end.

NATE

No, it's a tunnel. I saw it in the daytime. We can just crawl--

PRIVAL

Through a tunnel that we have no idea where it goes?

NATE

Probably a network, like the Cu Chi Tunnels in the Mekong Delta.

PRIVAL

Full of Viet Cong!

NATE

Let's at least look.

To avoid the searchlight, they
crawl on their bellies toward an
open pit. PRIVAL gets there first.

NATE

Well, go ahead.

PRIVAL

Something moved down there. I can't see--

NATE

Wait till the light--then go--

PRIVAL

Don't push!

NATE

Sorry!

The searchlight passes over them,
somewhat illuminating interior of
the hole.

PRIVAL

Wow.

NATE

What is it?

PRIVAL

It's a booby trap.

NATE

Pongi sticks?

PRIVAL
Worse.

NATE
What?

PRIVAL
Snakes.

The searchlight swings by again,
this time stopping on them,
illuminating both the men and the
hole. Rising up out of the hole is
a hooded cobra poised to strike.

PRIVAL
(face to face with the cobra)
Naja siamensis!

NATE
(frozen)
What's that?

PRIVAL
Thai spitting cobra.

The cobra spits in PRIVAL'S eyes,
some of the venom getting on his
shirt. He reels back and cries
out, and NATE grabs him.

NATE
Shit!

PRIVAL
They always aim for the eyes!

NATE
Can you see?

PRIVAL
Get a medic before I go blind!

Lighting change and melodramatic
music.

SONG MAN CHO is draped rather beautifully in a chair, looking weak. He now has a dark beard. ROSA sits quite close.

SONG MAN CHO

I apologize, Rosa. I'm too weak to greet you properly. Thank you for forcing the prison to transfer me to the hospital.

(coughs weakly)

ROSA

Frank is very resourceful. I have good news!

SONG MAN CHO

There can't be any good news now.

(coughs)

ROSA

He's persuaded the Home Office to accept you, so when you're well, you'll be released and go to England by way of Singapore, then to Moscow.

SONG MAN CHO

If only I could. If only I could! I shall never go anywhere again.

He pulls out some camellias and coughs. ROSA embraces him.

ROSA

Don't say such things, my dear, even if you can't travel yet. Think of how happy you were, and how happy you shall be again.

NATE

(appearing in separate light)

No, no--this isn't--

SONG MAN CHO

Perhaps it's better I live in your heart, where the French can't see me.

SONG MAN CHO dies in ROSA'S embrace, eyes wide open.

NATE

It's fake, this is fake-

ROSA

Think of the day you found the four leaf clover and all the good luck it's going to bring us!

(sees that he's dead)

No! No, don't leave us!

NATE

This is *Camille*!

ROSA

Come back!

ROSA buries her face HO'S lap.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

SERGEI EISENSTEIN (played by NATE)
and PAUL ROBESON (played by PRIVAL)
sing The International.

SERGEI AND PAUL

(singing)

Arise, ye prisoners of starvation!
Arise, ye wretched of the earth!
For justice thunders condemnation:
A better world's in birth!

No more tradition's chains shall bind us;
Arise, ye slaves, no more in thrall!
The earth shall rise on new foundations:
We have been nought, we shall be all!

LINOV (played by HO and wearing the
dark beard) appears next to SERGEI
and PAUL.

SERGEI AND PAUL

'Tis the final conflict;
Let each stand in his place.
The International working class
Shall be the human race!

LINOV joins SERGEI and PAUL,
singing in French.

SERGEI AND PAUL

'Tis the final conflict;
Let each stand in his place.
The International working
class
Shall be the human race!

LINOV

*C'est la lutte finale
Groupons-nous, et demain
L'Internationale
Sera le genre humain*

SERGEI

Well. Do you think he would have liked that?

PAUL

I didn't know him, unfortunately. Who was he, exactly?

SERGEI

Nguyen Ai Quoc, best-respected of the Vietnamese revolutionary leaders--

PAUL

And he died in Hong Kong?

SERGEI

In prison.

LINOV

Tuberculosis, they say.

PAUL

Did you know him, Comrade?

SERGEI

Are you Vietnamese?

LINOV

He no been in Vietnam since 1911. Sadly, Comrades, Nguyen Ai Quoc was not most affected leader.

PAUL

Effective?

LINOV

I am sorry. Forgive my poor Russian.

SERGEI

The only way to be effective in Vietnam was to rally international forces for twenty years. I greatly admire Nguyen Ai Quoc and his perseverance!

LINOV

Apologies. I mean no disrespect.

SERGEI

The Vietnamese students from the Stalin School for the Study of the National and Colonial Questions have gone to great lengths to honor him today! The man died a hero!

LINOV

Unfortunately accomplishing little.

SERGEI

At his memorial--!

PAUL

(trying to make peace)

What is your name, Comrade?

LINOV

Linov. I apologize arriving late. My journey to Moscow was...arduous?

SERGEI

Difficult?

PAUL

Strenuous?

LINOV

Before riding train across Siberia from Vladivostok, I boarded ship from China by way of Singapore.

PAUL

Starting in Vietnam?

LINOV

From Hong Kong. I no been in Vietnam since 1911.

PAUL and SERGEI look puzzled and suspicious. LINOV laughs.

LINOV

You know famous American book *Tom Sawyer*?

PAUL and SERGEI still look puzzled.

LINOV

By Samuel Clemens.

PAUL

Mark Twain.

LINOV

Tom Sawyer attend his own funeral.

PAUL

You're Nguyen Ai Quoc?

LINOV

It is much more easy avoid French assassins when you already dead.

SERGEI

You vain thing! Just to hear yourself praised!

LINOV

Thank you for passion in defense of me, Comrade Eisenstein.

SERGEI

I'm flattered you recognize me.

LINOV

As soon as I see you, I think maggots on meat!

SERGEI

(to PAUL)

That's from my movie--

PAUL

I'm Paul Robeson.

LINOV

Old Man River!

PAUL

I've sung other songs...

LINOV

You just keep rolling along!

PAUL

Do you find, Comrade Quoc--?

LINOV

In Moscow I am simple Comrade Linov--

PAUL

Do you find the Soviet Union respectful of you as a man?

LINOV

Better than the French!

PAUL

And Americans! Here, I am not a Negro but a human being for the first time in my life. I walk in full human dignity.

SERGEI

What will you do here in Moscow, Comrade?

LINOV

I have been assigned to serve the 144 Vietnamese students of the Stalin School.

SERGEI

Teaching?

LINOV

Leninist theory. But I no have patience for it!

SERGEI

Theory is dull, I agree.

PAUL

But essential! Surely there's an effective way to teach it.

Lighting change isolates LINOV as he lectures to a class.

LINOV

The giant banks have merged with industry
 To exploit resources in each colony.
 Ensuring that the workers don't rebel
 The businesses must bribe their leaders well.
 So governments export more capital
 But not near enough to bridge the gap at all.
 The British, Germans, Russians and the French
 Confronted one another in a trench
 The empires were capitalism's whore
 So bureaucrats began a world war

MINH KHAI appears, auditing LINOV'S
 class. She wears a red dress.

LINOV

And who are the victims of politics?
 The colonies' natives out in the sticks.
 Don't become cannon fodder!

Let's stop this marauder
And follow the lead of the Bolsheviks!

Lighting change. LINOV goes to
MINH KHAI.

LINOV
I didn't know you were in Moscow!

He tries to kiss her. She avoids
it.

MINH KHAI
That was the most outrageous oversimplification of Lenin I've
ever heard.

LINOV
Was the limerick too much?

MINH KHAI
I'm here to report on the meeting of the Indochinese
Communist Party in Macao.

LINOV
I am sorry I was not able to attend.

MINH KHAI
Your theories were condemned as opportunistic and
nationalist, impediments to the development of communism in
Vietnam.

LINOV
We'll get nowhere if we alienate the other nationalist
parties, the Catholics--

MINH KHAI
A formal resolution declared you an accomplice of
imperialism, propagandist for constitutional reform, advocate
of Franco-Ammanite collaboration and union of classes.

HO
Are you breaking up with me?

MINH KHAI
Your goal is nothing less than persuading the people from the
revolutionary road.

LINOV

Am I permanently banished? Sentenced to death? Are you here to assassinate me?

MINH KHAI

We are writing a brochure.

Lighting change. LINOV is alone in Lenin's mausoleum. LENIN (played by NATE) lies in his glass casket.

LINOV

Comrade Lenin, the unborn revolution in Vietnam is consuming itself in the womb. Ideological purity poisons practicality. That, of course, is merely my opinion. And I stand accused of collusion with the French and Vietnamese nationalists, of weakness, of opportunism by my lover--my former lover.

(takes a moment)

Your words have inspired me for twenty years. Your life gives mine meaning and hope. I am here in homage to your genius.

LENIN

Don't be a pussy!

LINOV

Comrade!

LENIN

The Vietnamese revolution wouldn't exist without you. What melodrama! Self-pity! Who are those whelps in Macao to condemn the founder of their party? You're Nguyen the Patriot--stop acting like some--spineless--vagina--!

LINOV

Spineless vagina?

LENIN

The National Socialists have just come to power in Germany. A gift!

LINOV

A gift? They're executing all the communists from Hamburg to Munich!

LENIN

In preparation for war.

LINOV

That's what everyone fears.

LENIN

An imperialist war of retribution fueled by national humiliation. Another world war. Do not fear it. Embrace it.

LINOV

Embrace the deaths of thousands, millions?

LENIN

Convert world war into civil war.

LINOV

Revolution?

LENIN

It worked for me!

DARYA, a stylish Russian woman
joins LINOV in the mausoleum. She
wears a red dress.

LINOV

(to DARYA)

Comrade, how dare you profane tomb of Lenin with bourgeois silk dress!

Lights out on LENIN.

DARYA

I made this dress with my own hands!

LINOV

And decadent high heels!

DARYA

Is it so very bad that the Revolution allows the granddaughter of a serf to walk proudly and once a month enjoy caviar on a cracker?

Lights out on DARYA.

LINOV

I am not only assaulted for suggesting toleration of the bourgeoisie and rich peasants, but also accused of not following policy that changes with every season like ladies' fashion!

Lights up on SERGEI with two glasses of vodka. He gives one to LINOV.

SERGEI

We're all under investigation, Comrade. Neither *Battleship Potemkin* nor *Ten Days that Shook the World* saved me from charges of "ideological failure."

LINOV

What you do?

SERGEI

(shrugs)

Denounced myself as a formalist then enjoyed my state vacation in a mental ward in Kislovodsk. How's the vodka?

LINOV

Like snake wine.

SERGEI

(sits next to LINOV with an album)

I also indulged in sketches.

They turn the pages together.

SERGEI

This series is called *The Boy with Three Legs*.

LINOV

I see that.

They turn more pages.

LINOV

Most...artistic.

SERGEI

I was tortured, did you know that?

LINOV
Artistically?

SERGEI
Actually.

LINOV
Surely Comrade Stalin would not--

SERGEI
He didn't do it personally. I can't say I enjoyed it, but afterward I found myself collecting...implements.

LINOV
I am sorry.

SERGEI
Oh, no! I don't feel the least bit damaged, psychologically. Obsessed, perhaps, but in an entirely innocuous way. May I-- show you--?

LINOV
What kind...implements?

SERGEI produces a metal, pear-shaped object.

SERGEI
This one is medieval in origin. It was inserted--carefully-- in the rectum--or vagina--and gradually blossomed--inside--

LINOV
(stroking it)
It is...beautiful...

SERGEI
In a way.

LINOV
It is called what?

SERGEI
The name is rather romantic, calling to mind soft, ripening summer fruit.

LINOVA

When in fact is quite hard. What is name, please?

SERGEI

Le poire rectal.

LINOVA

Ah. French.

Lights out on them and up on PRIVAL, blindfolded, being fed by LONG. Behind them on a shelf is the jar of snake wine. PRIVAL holds the gecko in his hands. LONG puts food in PRIVAL'S mouth.

PRIVAL

What is that?

LONG

Lê.

PRIVAL

Translation?

LONG

Pear.

PRIVAL

The texture isn't quite--

LONG

You are afraid I'll poison you? You're already helpless. It's Asian pear.

The gecko chirps three times. PRIVAL smiles and puts it in his pocket. She brings out a glass jar containing a pickled Thai spitting cobra.

LONG

You can't see it, but we killed the cobra that blinded you.
(puts jar in his hands)

PRIVAL

For revenge?

LONG

Do not flatter yourself. Souvenir.

Puts jar on the shelf next to the
snake wine.

LONG

How can you love snakes when one killed your aunt and another
blinded you? They are your enemy. They are death.

PRIVAL

I don't love them--I respect them. Study them.

LONG

To defeat them?

PRIVAL

I heard of a herpetologist who was collecting snakes in Burma
years ago--it's kind of a scientific legend. He came back
into camp and asked his colleagues what they'd found, and one
of them pointed to a burlap bag with a live snake in it, a
false krait.

LONG

Very dangerous!

PRIVAL

Not the false ones. They evolved to look like the deadly
ones so predators would leave them alone. Since it wasn't
venomous, he reached into the bag to take it out. And the
snake bit him. It was a real krait.

LONG

Did he die?

PRIVAL

The neurotoxin is slow, and the scientist knew how it would
attack his nervous system, shutting down first his large
muscles, so he'd be paralyzed. He instructed his colleagues
how to take care of him, and if they could keep him alive
until the venom passed through his system, he'd survive. In
a couple of hours, he couldn't move or talk.

LONG

Why didn't they take him to a doctor?

PRIVAL

They were in the middle of the jungle, far from help. His diaphragm--

(puts her hand on his
abdomen)

--Became paralyzed, so he couldn't breathe. His colleagues gave him mouth-to-mouth--

LONG

What is that?

PRIVAL

They breathed into his mouth. Gave him their oxygen.

LONG

(her mouth close to his)

Like a kiss?

PRIVAL

When the venom stopped his heart, but they pushed on his chest to keep it beating--

LONG

How did they do that?

PRIVAL

Give me your hand.

She does. He makes one of her hands into a fist and presses both against his chest.

PRIVAL

Feel my heart? They pushed again and again like this--

(sets a rhythm)

--So his pulse didn't stop and his blood could flow--

LONG

Did it work?

PRIVAL

For a while. But finally the venom won. Because he didn't respect his enemy.

LONG

That is a terrible story.

She takes her hand away. Awkward
silence for a while.

PRIVAL

Mr. Widowski thinks Uncle Ho's a fag.

LONG

What is that?

PRIVAL

Homosexual.

LONG

Isn't Mr. Widowski a homosexual?

PRIVAL

No, just a journalist.

LONG

Not everyone is what they seem. You seem American, but your
name is French.

PRIVAL

Chouteau is an old New Orleans family.

LONG

Catholic?

PRIVAL

(nods)

I studied herps at Xavier University of Louisiana before I
was drafted. Why?

LONG

We were once a Catholic country. The priests said "the
Virgin Mary has moved to the south. Shouldn't you?"

PRIVAL

Dominus vobiscum. [the Lord be with you]

LONG

Et cum spiritu tuo. [and with your spirit]

PRIVAL

Lapsed?

LONG

(after a moment)

No.

PRIVAL

And you're really his...plaything?

LONG

I am not the only. Some stories are very sad.

PRIVAL

He told us about the Chinese wife, others--Minh Khai--men like that make me sick, using women--

LONG

He will not speak of the son he had with Nông Thi Xuân.

PRIVAL

Who is she?

LONG

Uncle's great regret. She always wore the red of revolution, but it didn't save her from Uncle's enemies in Hanoi.

As LONG puts a piece of pear in PRIVAL'S mouth, her finger slips in. He reacts. Lights out on them and up on NATE interviewing HO while they both enjoy some snake wine.

NATE

(laughing)

Now I remember who you remind me of!

HO

Who is that?

NATE

Colonel Sanders. An ascetic Colonel Sanders!

HO

I am not the military type.
(coughs)

NATE

Neither is Colonel Sanders. He sells chicken!

HO

In America?

NATE

Kentucky Fried Chicken. It's one of the biggest chain restaurants in the US.

HO

I resemble a famous capitalist!

NATE

Maybe some day you can come to America and meet him.

HO

Or he can come here.

NATE

Bringing American capitalism to Vietnam!

HO

Is his chicken tasty?

NATE

Finger lickin good!
(off HO's look)
That's his advertising slogan.

HO

Ah.

A bit embarrassed, NATE turns on
his tape recorder.

NATE

You were telling me about Sergei Eisenstein and, ah,
implements of torture.

Lights slowly come up on PRIVAL,
still blindfolded, smoking next to
a reclining WOMAN.

HO

Oh, yes, and to prove it--

(produces the rectal pear)

NATE

(not taking it)

He gave it to you?

HO

He washed it first.

HO slowly cranks the poire open.

NATE

Oh, god.

HO

It has a certain *je ne c'est quoi, n'est-ce pas?*

(coughs)

NATE

Can you imagine...?

HO

For what were you arrested?

NATE

Misdemeanor, charges dropped.

HO

What was the charge?

(pause)

Do you not trust me after all I've trusted to you?

NATE

(after a moment)

Kissing.

HO

Kissing is illegal in the land of the free?

NATE

Kissing in the wrong place at the wrong time.

HO

When is the wrong time for kissing?

NATE

Midnight on New Year's Eve.

HO

But that is tradition, is it not?

NATE

Yes, everybody does it.

HO

So it was the wrong time because it was the wrong place.

(silence)

To unlock more of Uncle Ho, you must unlock Nate Witowski.

NATE

Things that are difficult to say in America are impossible here.

(silence)

This is a communist country!

HO

And I am President.

NATE

(after a moment)

Fourteen were arrested five minutes after midnight.

HO

For kissing.

NATE

That wasn't the word they used.

HO

You do not need to use the word with me.

NATE

(indicating recorder)

May we--?

HO

Of course.

NATE

What's your position on torture?

HO

It is regrettable at best.

NATE

Do you condone its use?

HO

I do not. However--

NATE

Not even on American POWs or soldiers of the south?

HO

This is not a cuddly question.

NATE

You're a head of state and your country is at war. You can't control everything--

HO

The President is responsible for everything--

NATE

But sometimes overzealous cadres--

HO

(grabs recorder, shuts it
off)

You are trying make me admit--

NATE

Regrets are human, mistakes. Americans already assume the DRV uses torture, they know about your land reform policy, the reeducation camps--

PRIVAL lies down next to the WOMAN,
disappears under a sheet. After a
moment, lights on them fade.

HO

I've put a stop to those.

NATE

And we know the French tortured Vietnamese--

HO

That wouldn't excuse--

(coughs)

NATE

But it's true reeducation camps existed--

HO

Years ago! And they will not return as long as I am president! Torture, self criticism--speaking bitterness in self-denunciation--

(coughs)

NATE

Struggle sessions--

HO

(tearful)

Never effective in China nor here--only destroyed good, dedicated comrades--forced false confessions--

HO has a scary coughing fit. He wipes his hand on his pants as he coughs: blood.

NATE

Oh! Mr. President! I apologize--

(shuts off tape recorder)

HO

Yes, I regret! I cannot save everyone!

NATE awkwardly and reluctantly takes HO in his arms to comfort him. The pear falls to the floor, and NATE picks it up while holding HO. Maybe he cranks it once. HO embraces NATE more tightly, intimately. It's weirdly tender.

NATE

I'm sorry, Uncle.

Lights out on them, and up PRIVAL and WOMAN lying together. Sound of a baby crying, briefly. After a moment, the WOMAN sits up. She is wearing red. Until she speaks, she seems to be LONG, but she has a softer voice.

XUÂN

What an awful dream! I heard our son cry, and went to him, but he wasn't in his bed. Vu Ky was holding him, trying to make him be quiet, but the baby didn't like Vu Ky and wouldn't stop bawling. Vu Ky put his hand over the baby's mouth--I was afraid he would smother!

Under the sheet, PRIVAL is restless.

XUÂN

I tried to take the baby, but Vu Ky snatched him away, and suddenly your enemy Tran Quoc Hoan was there and held me in his arms like I was a baby, too. I struggled to get free, called for you--Uncle!--but he put his hand over my mouth and pushed me down to the floor and got on top of me. I blacked out. When I woke up, I was lying by the side of the road, my eyes open to the sky, and I knew I was dead. I knew I'd never see you or our son again.

The baby cries again, and XUÂN leaves. After a moment, she calls out from off stage:

XUÂN

Uncle!

HO sits up from under the sheet (no longer PRIVAL), alarmed.

HO

Xuân, where are you?

Lights out on him and up on NATE and PRIVAL (still blindfolded).

NATE

Is it healing?

PRIVAL

If I'm lucky it's just conjunctivitis, but it feels like corneal ulceration, and if the venom got into the anterior chamber, the ophthalmic effect could indeed be permanent.

NATE

All I understood about that was "permanent."

PRIVAL

Maybe.

NATE

You're awfully stoic. I'd be going out of my mind.

PRIVAL

I've had worse.

NATE

Uncle showed me a torture implement.

PRIVAL

He threatened you?

NATE

If so, it was very subtle.

PRIVAL

Displaying the instruments isn't subtle. He's getting to you. You think he can walk on water.

NATE

Or heal the blind.

PRIVAL

Don't forget, he's a communist. He killed Catholics. We had a chance to take him out--permanently--back in 1945, which would have prevented this mess, saved American lives. Don't worry. No girl is gonna get in my way.

NATE

Maybe I'll get in your way.

PRIVAL

If that was a threat, it wasn't subtle, just stupid. You saw instruments, but I was actually tortured until Ho figured out a way to turn me into propaganda.

NATE

He hates torture, trust me.

PRIVAL

Trust you? You were blackmailed into this assignment after your arrest.

NATE looks shocked.

PRIVAL

You're not CIA, you're just a punk. You can't stop me. It'd take a miracle to stop me.

NATE rips the bandage off, waves a hand before PRIVAL's unseeing eyes.

PRIVAL

(after a moment)

See? No miracle.

Lights out on them as NATE puts the bandage back over PRIVAL'S eyes.
Lights up on LONG and HO.

HO

I wonder if he's an assassin.

LONG

Airman Chouteau? He cannot see!

HO

No, Mr. Widowski. The Airman is just gathering intelligence.

LONG

Widowski--no--he couldn't assassinate you.

HO

Not assassinate me. Assassinate the Airman to prevent him starring in our film.

LONG

He hasn't yet agreed to the film.

HO

What will persuade the Airman? General Giap has us on deadline.

LONG

Chouteau says he's Catholic.

HO

Do you believe him?

LONG

Yes.

HO

If he can't be inspired, we cannot save him--

HO

--From Mr. Widowski.

LONG

He is very close--

HO

Don't interrupt your President. I have been to the United States--you have not.

(she's silent, chastened)

Americans erase every problem with assassination. No one knows Widowski was here, Chouteau never existed.

LONG

Does Mr. Widowski obstruct our path?

HO

For now he is a useful distraction for the CIA. But I like him. And you like the pilot.

(smiles)

The interview's more important to us than to Widowski. However, I think he wants it. So we must give him what he wants. And inspire the Catholic Airman as well.

Lighting change puts HO and LONG in the same room as PRIVAL and NATE.

HO

I am sorry about your eyes, nephew. Do you think you will recover your sight?

PRIVAL

It's been too many hours.

HO

Leave the bandage on. Rest your eyes a little longer and listen.

LONG

Listen to the fantasies of your impotent Uncle.

NATE

Comrade!

PRIVAL

Impotent?

HO

Comrade, what have we said of interruptions--?

LONG

It is time to interrupt! I'm tired of these tales, these fabrications! They're all he has left. He's lost his political skill, his thinking is confused. His lungs are bleeding, his body is paper, his touch a breath of wind.

LONG takes PRIVAL'S hand, puts it on HO.

LONG

Feel his bones push against his skin. Take his weak bird claw in your strong hand--

PRIVAL pulls his hand away.

LONG

He is but a symbol, his ideas rejected. Soon he will be honored as nothing more than the director of Marxist-Leninist studies.

HO

It is true, Comrade Long, that I am old. And exhausted--

LONG

When you are gone, they will rape and kill me just like Nong Thi Xuân who bore your son. You cannot save me, cannot save yourself--

HO

I regret--

LONG

You love the revolution more than any human being!

HO

(tearful)

The revolution *is* every human being!

LONG

Don't give me your famous tears! You are less president than prisoner. General Giap will launch the offensive despite your objections--while the south is celebrating Tet we will surprise them--

HO

He must give us more time--

LONG

Your time is over!

Silence for a moment. PRIVAL and NATE are stunned.

HO

You speak bitter truth. I have made my will directing that I be cremated and the ashes scattered across--

LONG

When you are dead your will will not be done. Already scientists have gone to Moscow to learn the secret of preserving Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov forever.

HO

No, no, I will not be displayed like some Catholic relic--

LONG

I am Catholic!

HO

An obscure Communist saint--

LONG

It is too late.

HO coughs and gestures to NATE, who turns on his tape recorder.

LONG

You died long ago and won't come back to life.

HO

Leave us!

Liberated and frightened by speaking out, LONG departs quickly. HO pauses as if defeated. PRIVAL moves his head as if trying to hear what's going on in the silence. NATE looks to PRIVAL, confused.

HO

To return safely to Vietnam after thirty years, he needed a new name: Ho Chi Minh. As another World War distracted the West, he hid in the wilderness of the north, gathering around him nephews who would become the Viet Minh, guerilla fighters, tigers in the night. In 1944 an American reconnaissance plane lost its engine near the Chinese border. The pilot was found by a Viet Minh unit and they marched him through the jungle for a month. He spoke no Vietnamese, and could only communicate with his escorts by saying:

PILOT

(appears, played by PRIVAL)

Viet Minh! Viet Minh!

HO

To which they replied:

LONG

(appears)

America! Roosevelt!

(disappears)

HO

But then he arrived at the cave.

(to PILOT)

How are you, pilot? Where do you come from?

Overwhelmed after his month-long march without hearing English, PILOT embraces HO.

PILOT

You sound just like my father!

HO

Then I will be your uncle.

(hands PILOT food)

After you've eaten, let us plan the defeat of the imperialist Japanese!

PILOT

(stuffing his face)

How can I help?

HO

We have young troops but ancient weapons.

PILOT

We have plenty of modern weapons. But we can't attack the French. The Chinese will give you troops so you can move against the French when the Japanese leave.

HO

When the Chinese came to Vietnam, they stayed a thousand years. Better to smell French shit a little longer than to eat China's forever.

PILOT

(out, giving a report)

Once Ho united the many nationalist factions, we equipped his soldiers with M-1s, carbines, bazookas and trained them in their use. They learned fast! They're only communist out of necessity. If we help them kick out the Japs and tell the French not to come back, they'll embrace our way of life. The Viet Minh only want freedom from French tyranny. Ho asked me if I knew the words of our Declaration of Independence, and I was ashamed--he knew them better than I.

HO

Are you familiar with the third verse of the *Star Spangled Banner*?

PILOT

There's a third verse?

HO

(sings)

And where is that band who so vauntingly swore,
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion
A home and a Country should leave us no more?

As HO sings, GIAP appears and hangs the flag of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. PILOT reacts to the creepy racism of the obscure (but real) third verse of our national anthem.

HO

Their blood has wash'd out their foul footstep's pollution.
 No refuge could save the hireling and slave
 From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave,
 And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave
 O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Lights out on PILOT.

GIAP

When the Japanese surrendered in Tokyo, we prepared to replace them as their puppet government fell in Hanoi. We were ready to march--

HO

Wait.

GIAP

Troops are stationed, the people are gathering--

HO

Let's wait to hear from Truman.

HO

I sent him a telegram.

GIAP

Truman!?

HO

Roosevelt wanted the French out of Indochina. Surely Truman is intelligent and sympathetic to independence--and American self interest.

GIAP

What did the telegram say?

HO

For strictly humanitarian reasons I beg your Excellency's attention on the following COLON during winter 1944 and spring 1945 two million Vietnamese died of starvation owing to the starving policy of the French who seized and stored to rotteness all rice available STOP Therefore I earnestly appeal to your Excellency for any help available STOP In the name of my people I beg your Excellency to accept my hearty and anticipated thanks FINAL STOP Respectfully Ho Chi Minh.

GIAP

Truman hates communism!

HO

Ideology matters little if we have no country.

GIAP

Uncle, do you know the difference between poison and venom?

HO

They're the same.

GIAP

Venom is injected against your will. You can be tricked into taking poison.

(HO rolls his eyes)

The French fangs injected us quickly with their venom. If we accept help from the Americans, we're slowly poisoning ourselves.

HO

War is fast. Peace is slow.

GIAP

We must march now!

HO

We must wait.

Silence for a while as they wait.
Lights slowly change, illuminating
NATE and PRIVAL.

NATE

Did you ever hear from Truman?

HO

No.

PRIVAL

If you had--if America gave you aid--

NATE

And stood up to the French on your behalf--

PRIVAL

--Would you have aligned with the West instead of Russia and China?

HO

That is a very hard question, nephew.

NATE

(mutters)

And this is *my* interview.

PRIVAL

You could have had independence without blood. No war with France, no war with us, millions of lives--Vietnamese, French, American, Cambodian, Laotian--

NATE

What are you--?

PRIVAL

--Saved, if Truman had answered your telegram.

HO

Perhaps he never saw it.

PRIVAL

But what would you have done?

NATE

That's my question!

PRIVAL

Would you have given up your communist dream for your nationalist dream?

HO

Aid is influence.

PRIVAL

So, yes.

NATE

May I publish that in my profile?

HO

Will it make me cuddly enough to win the hearts of Americans?
Because it would turn my people against me.

PRIVAL

Not all of them.

HO

If you mean Comrade Long, I have been aware of her
Catholicism for years.

PRIVAL

You have?

HO

It is no crime to be Catholic in the Democratic Republic of
Vietnam. Despite her harsh words, she will not be
disciplined.

PRIVAL

Uncle, remove my bandages.

HO

You are free to take them off--

PRIVAL

I'd like you to do it.

NATE

Are you giving up your American dream for your Catholic
dream?

PRIVAL

Please, Uncle.

HO

Bien sûr.

HO removes the bandages. PRIVAL
blinks.

NATE

Can you see?

PRIVAL
Everything's blurry, but--

HO
Yes?

NATE
(gives PRIVAL the jar with
the spitting cobra)
Can you see this?

PRIVAL
(examines jar)
Thai spitting cobra! Beautiful!

NATE
Beautiful?

NATE PRIVAL
How can a deadly snake be beautiful? I'm not blind!

PRIVAL
(puts down the jar)
At least not totally!
(hugs HO)
Thank you, Uncle!

HO
Je n'ai rien fait! You were already healed.

PRIVAL
Uncle.

HO
Yes?

PRIVAL
I would like to stay.

NATE
In Vietnam?

PRIVAL
And make your movie.

HO

You are most welcome, of course.

NATE

You won't go back to the States?

PRIVAL

The snakes are better here. Where is Comrade Long?

HO

On duty outside the bomb shelter. She will be pleased to see that you see.

PRIVAL goes.

NATE

It's not too late to get aid from America.

HO

We are at war with America.

NATE

Your country, but not you. You're not Vietnam. Comrade Long was telling the truth, wasn't she? You're a prisoner here as much as Chouteau. Under house arrest. You're a figurehead stripped of responsibility.

HO

The people need inspiration.

NATE

Inspire them from America. Come meet with your enemies as you've always done and make them your friends. President Johnson would welcome you and negotiate peace. America cannot win in Vietnam. Johnson's only looking for a way to leave without losing face.

HO

I can help him.

NATE

Yes! When the plane comes to take me to the Philippines, you can stow away.

HO

That would be a betrayal of my people. Abandoning them.

NATE

Saving them!

HO

I would lose face.

NATE

If you stay, you will lose your life. Our doctors can save you. Yours have already made plans to stuff you and put you on display like Lenin. In the West they say you've been dead for years. That Nguyen Ai Quoc died in Hong Kong in 1934 and Ho Chi Minh is just a double carrying on the legacy.

HO

People in America believe that?

NATE

Come prove you're alive!

HO

It is a terrible gamble. And a temptation.

NATE

You are dying, Uncle. You don't need to sacrifice yourself to save your country.

HO

I will...think about it.

NATE

My plane comes tomorrow at 5 in the morning as originally scheduled. You can arrange with someone personally loyal to you to smuggle you aboard.

HO

Personally loyal? Comrade Long?

NATE

Me.

HO

You are loyal to the United States.

NATE

The United States sent Airman Chouteau here to assassinate you.

(pause)

That is his assignment.

HO

And you have betrayed him.

NATE

To save you, Uncle.

Lighting change illuminates the Vietnam flag and isolates a pensive HO. After a moment he stands, invigorated, and begins to speak.

HO

All men are created equal. They are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights. Among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These words are from the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. They mean that everyone on earth is equal from birth, that everyone has the right to live and be happy and be free. In 1791 during the French Revolution the Declaration of the Rights of Man asserted: All men are born free and with equal rights. Nevertheless, for more than eighty years, the French imperialists, abusing the standard of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, have violated Vietnam and oppressed our fellow-citizens. Today, September 2, 1945, the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, solemnly declares to the world that Vietnam is a free and independent country. The entire Vietnamese people pledge all their physical and mental strength and to sacrifice their lives and property in order to safeguard their independence and liberty.

(pause)

People of Vietnam, have you understood?

A roar from the unseen crowd:
 "Yes!" Sound of US P-38s flying overhead. HO looks up, smiling.
 Joyful shouts from the crowd:
 "Americans! Americans!" Another cheer from the crowd.

Lights out on HO and up on PRIVAL
and LONG methodically preparing
snakes, lizards and frogs for
storage in jars of ethanol. They
work in silence for a moment.

LONG

We need to finish and clean up before the film crew comes.

PRIVAL

Just a couple more. If the tissue rots, valuable scientific
information will be lost. I'm almost certain this is an
undescribed species of keelback.

LONG

The American plane to the Philippines has left by now.

She starts cleaning up.

PRIVAL

Yes.

LONG

Do you regret--?

PRIVAL

Look at all these herps!

LONG

Do you not love your country?

PRIVAL

What's a country?

LONG

You are sounding like an international communist.

PRIVAL

With Mr. Widowski safely gone, there is nothing more to
decide.

LONG

You could have gone with him.

PRIVAL

I should never have told you his assignment. If anything happened to him, it'd be my fault.

LONG

I told you I would honor the confidence.

(pause)

Uncle is seeing him off.

(pause)

Do you not believe me?

PRIVAL

Do you believe Uncle?

She silently retrieves the Wolof drum, pulls off the head and takes out the little red book, the crucifix, the ceramic tiger and the *poire rectale*, placing them on their work table. PRIVAL nods. HO comes in and regards them. He has a stain on his shirt like the venom stain PRIVAL had from the spitting cobra. HO pulls off his beard and white wig. PRIVAL, shocked, stands up. HO produces NATE's tape recorder and puts it with the other artifacts. PRIVAL, stunned, slowly sits down. Lights fade on HO and LONG. PRIVAL is seated as at the beginning of the play.

PRIVAL

All my fault. Everything. If I had--

(collects himself)

I am expert in reptiles. I know false krait from true. Venom from...poison.

Lights up on HO and LONG as they change into modern attire. HO produces a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken. LONG has a smart phone. She may take a selfie. They eat chicken.

PRIVAL

I am not believable. Confession seem inaccurate, made up. A story no one heard before. A love story between Vietnam and America. Mine to tell, because I am alive, but speaking bitterness is awkward. Forgive my poor Vietnamese, comrades. I will improve. That is truth.

The gecko in his hands chirps once.

END OF PLAY