Vinh Châu, sky blue

Friday evening. Here, just like in Saint-Denis, when the day is done the end of school smells pretty sweet. Settled in town for three days now; deep into our short week. Tomorrow will be special, because we have a long weekend now: seventy-two unbroken hours. *Vinhchâu* emptied out, we can get to work.

Pierrot had sealed the deal with the director in broken English: hospitality in exchange for painting and decorating. There is a lot to do: the railings, the doors, the windows – a rusted framework, eaten into by the climate. Does Mister Tung really think we are qualified? In any case he doesn’t seem to doubt our competence. We get straight to it; what do we need? wire brushes, rolls of proper masking tape – these ones are a joke, fine paintbrushes for the edges, cardboard if we can get it, proper sponges please, sandpaper in packs of twelve. We decide on a light blue.

Sanding, brushing, scraping.

Can’t do this without a *beat*. Sadio takes charge of the sound system and the bass acts like a fan. Gangsta vocodeur atmosphere; the *street* is in the house. A few *vinhchâus* pass by on bikes to admire our progress: the working man as superstar. It’s weird, signing autographs while you are sanding. Sir! Can you ask these kids to stop? I’m dripping paint everywhere, it’s disgusting. Just have to work around this curious carnival: *vinhchâu* won’t leave us alone.

The next day, a small group of middle-school kids provided with masks and gloves set to work alongside us on the ironwork. Bang had beaten them to it, but he doesn’t count: he’s already part of our crew. The tentative approach of the locals doesn’t fit with the intensity of our gestures. Can you possibly go *any* slower? But, between *pauléluards* and *vinhchâus* we’re going with the flow, and breaks stretch out as they multiply. As I am applying the second coat, I zone out gently, tuned in to Bang. His monosyllables evoke one particular scene of ineptitude for manual work. I hear my father, evasive in Vietnamese: at home, he was hands-off. DIY was the domain of an old friend, Portuguese, who always knew what to do, in exchange for a few francs. I hear my mother’s voice: your grandfather Ông had perfect French but couldn’t fry an egg; when your grandmother wasn’t there it was total panic; a scholar doesn’t get his hands dirty.

Mister Tran is our connection with the hardware store, delivering pot by pot on his scooter. The assistant headmaster suggests that we dilute the paint with white spirit to save time and money: *mix with paint*. His white spirit will ruin the Chinese paint: *no thank you*. Mister Tran doesn’t see why we should be worried about reducing the paint coverage: *yes, mix with paint*. No way: *no thank you but no mix with paint*.

We don’t really share a common sense for practical things. You can’t resolve social differences through DIY. I have painted walls, scraped and sanded surfaces; at one point that was how I spent my weekends. *Us* – Pierrot and Clarence and me, we have done some renovation work, the way that homeowners do. *Us* – the technical-school students, we have a horror of manual labor, too close to our parents and what our future probably holds. *Us* – the vinhchâus, this is all totally foreign to us, our hands soft from study. Each of us will do our part. It’s all about the team, not the result: hearts into this, a backbreaking production, paint coats our skin. Three intense days. Finished product handed over, not a drop left to give. Mister Tung beaming with joy. *Pauléluard* proud as punch.

All that is left is to make our way to the grand finale: Vinh Châu against La France, over four legs, 45 minute matches.

I enter the stadium – I *am* the manager striding in with his faithful lads. The astroturf pitch reminds me of Saturday games with my two kids: sweet globalization. It must be the clatter of the monosyllables around me, sends me off on another flashback: my father in Saïgon in black and white, captain of the high school football team. It was one of the few photographs he liked to show us. I am sure he would be proud. We are playing against the seniors before a seasoned crowd. The opposition passes well, but physically they can’t hold it together. I don’t need to give much direction, the boys know what to do. Bart and Sadio devour the midfield, with hot sauce: 5:2. The cheers from the crowd reflected in their eyes.

Ready to serve the same against the juniors – who play better, strangely. They are less about physical presence than collective movement. La France is in disorder; my lads start to fall apart, relying too much on individual brilliance. We peaked too soon. Sadio loses the plot and explodes. He tackles the tricky little forward, goes in for the kill. Studs first, feet off the ground. Feels good to be bad. Because enough already, we are La France.

Suppressed rage among the locals, but still, rage. Sadio won’t stop: feel my forehead against yours and my hands clenched, ready to take you all on. Bart and Fahrad step in: Shut your face, just stop. Sadio won’t step down: he’s ready to rumble. I take him off the field: sit or stand or lie down, do what you like, but shut your mouth. Mister Tung comes onto the pitch, diplomacy with the Juniors, profuse apologies to the referee, calms the crowd, snubs La France. The match starts up again, ending a moment that had lasted too long for me. We win the fucking match. Heads down, back in silence, full of shame. Sadio has fucked up the whole week, because we were behind! It was the last evening. Nobody wants any share of the taste of his anger. Fucks with the nerves.

After the showers, best clothes on for the farewell evening. Sadio is relegated to the far end of the table, on white rice and water. Cordoned off as far as possible from Vietnam. You have just thirty minutes to find the right words. In the pause between two long silences, Sadio goes for it. Blink of an eye he’s standing face to face with Mister Tung, a tear forming and his ass cheeks clenched. I start to translate into English so Miss Húra can pass the message on in Vietnamese, but Mister Tung cuts us off. *No need English*: I can speak the language of the eyes and I have understood perfectly. Mister Tung takes our big idiot by the shoulder, rubs his arms dangling like a wet rag, and shakes the kid’s hand. The waitress catches his smile as it lights up: garlic langoustines, fried fish, a platter for two, with grapefruit segments Nam Roi. Sadio is upgraded to Mister Tung’s table, flanked by Pierrot and Clarence Albertini, all too relieved to comment. Back to what matters. Cold beer and iced tea.

Tomorrow we will leave, with salt tears beading in the *au revoir* of our dark eyes