

PRIVATE SORROW ELEGY

By Empress Ngoc Han

LE NGOC HAN (1770-1799)

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The daughter of King Le Hien Tong and Queen Chieu-Nghi Nguyen Thi Huyen, Princess Ngoc Han was known for her beauty, intelligence and literary talent.

In 1786, when Nguyen Hue went North from Central Vietnam "to restore the Le Dynasty and eliminate the Trinh" overlordship, she was given in marriage to Nguyen Hue to become his wife and later made Empress. Thereafter she followed him to live in Thuan Hoa (present-day Hue)

In 1788, when Nguyen Hue made himself Emperor under the reign name of Quang Trung, she was made Empress of the Right Palace. A year later, after he defeated the Ch'ing invasion troops from China, she was proclaimed Empress of the North Palace.

In 1792, Emperor Quang Trung passed away after a violent illness, marking the beginning of the end of the Tay Son Dynasty since he was not followed by anyone with his stature and since his son, the crown prince, was still too small.

*Small drafts add to the biting cold of these pepper-walled quarters
Causing the flowers to shrink in front of the balcony...
On the mountain top a smoke obliterates the bridge of immortals
Shielding from view your dragon chariot and leaving me alone in my sorrow...
How shall I lament our history together?
Why did our love come to this broken end?
O melancholy, o tragedy!
A sadness to fill the sea, a tragedy to touch the Heavens!*

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*Ever since your vermilion banner headed North
You raised the Restoration cause, a cause to vie with the Sun!
I obeyed my royal father and became your wife
Following you home in smooth-going orchid vessels, rowed by cinnamon-wood oars.
A hundred, a thousand miles, I would not mind following you
For I was happy that we made such a handsome couple.
I was indebted to you for your love and my nobility
Clearly we were freshly in love, a harmonious relationship like beautiful music.*

*In your generosity you forgave me every misstep
And took time out to repeat our vow
Never to see our love diminished
Even though hills may change into streams.*

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*In your solidarity with the flower you also attended to the tree stump
Giving protection to the whole royal family.
Thus, my ancestral halls are finely kept
And autumn pines still show their green.
Thanks to celestial grace we had a son a daughter
Who grew up like two healthy plants under your sunny guidance.
On the Southern Mountain there arose paeans
To sing of our Heavenly Treasure and display the flowery Mark.*

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*I was led to dream of our growing old together
So we could fulfill the pledge of living a hundred years side by side.
Who was to know that ebbing waves were about to be overrun by the sea:
Heaven changed its heart, and we were to be separated.
Since that day when you felt uncomfortable, either in summer sun or autumn rain
I felt so sorry seeing you fatigued, ill at ease.
Terror and worries sometimes consumed me.
I went and prayed to many gods and searched for all kinds of medicine.
I sent for good doctors everywhere
Hoping against hope for some last minute remedy.
Sadly, though, the engine of Creation is most unfair
And they came for you, to take you amidst the clouds.
Why such a hurry to end our joy in such a tragedy?
For how long have we been together?
Now I am adrift like a cloud, a duckweed:
Such was our love, who can I rely on now?*

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*Through the night, and even day, I toss and turn
Knowing not who can help me quench this yearning
I miss you so much I am led to dream
But dreams are uncertain and I am hung up as if inebriated. A breeze comes and carries
away flower petals
I smell their fragrance and think you are still around.
I hasten to change and go up to meet with you
But o, cobwebs are strung where you used to sit.
An when the tree leaves mirror the moon*

*I immediately thought you were coming under a golden parasol:
Right away I rush forward to welcome you
But o, there was only the dew settling in the midst of nowhere.
Remembering your features I feel as if my entrails are ripping:
Why am I no longer near your dragon face?
Should anyone come from the netherworld,
Please tell him so that I may untie my feelings.
Now a world of darkness stands in-between us:
The more I think the more disheartened I am.
As we have not been able to complete our love in this destiny
Let us vow that we will do so in another life.*

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*It is said that Shang and Wu
Lived long lives because of all their meritorious works.
Then why not you, a here wearing homespun cotton and waving a red flag,
You who helped so much in reconstructing the land and assisting the people?
Yao and Shun, too, the books told it clearly,
Also lived long because of their great works.
Then why not you, such a generous benefactor
Whose works are scattered everywhere, like a rain that softens the nine provinces?
Such meritorious works! such benevolence!
Why are you, Creator, so stingy with him?
O if only you let me take his place
I would not mind trading my insignificant self to fulfill my duty as subject.*

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*Sad, how sad is this dew dripping, these sudden drafts?
In this desolation my tears keep welling up
As I think of your engraving last words.
No sound is heard even as I cry, I am wide awake yet I feel as in a dream.
Sad, how sad is a flower that is left when Spring is no longer:
Who, I wonder, can disentangle my lone sorrow?
I had thought of following you all the way
Little concerned am I with the way I may die, in a river or on land. Unfortunately, I cannot
leave our children, still in their infancy:
How can a mother abandon her nursing duty?
I must then delay my leaving
Though my mind is already with you, even though I am still here.
My mind takes me back to Paradise Island where you were the other day
Then to the Galaxy which you subsequently visited.
It follows you real far and follows you near,
Follows you to the Cinnamon Palace, to the Flower Spring...*

*It was still following you when the cock crowed:
What a mortification to be awakened from a dream!
The more I dream, the more I yearn for you:
O when will I get to where you are, in the Pearl Capital?*

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*I though things have settled, suddenly my mind churns up:
What happened to our vow to be forever together?
Why did we ask after each other, day and night
And vow fealty — comparing our words to a gold weight?
Why suddenly this indifference, this silence?
What, I wonder, can measure my loneliness now?
Why were we so intimate, even on the throne,
In the courtyard where the moon was playing with the wind or in the pavilion of music?
Why are we now in two uncommunicating worlds
Where no asking after each other is possible?
A beautiful zither broken in the middle of a musical piece:
The children are orphans now, and I a widow!*

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*Thinking about the situation, I feel so helpless:
The moorhen calls only stress my misery.
How pitiful is this spent life,
Spent yearning and spent looking out for you!
I look east, and see sailboats plying back and forth,
And nothing but water and clouds in the midst of immensity.
After the east I turn to the west:
Hills over hills, nothing but trees and more trees
Turning south, my eyes meet with scattered swallows
While north, they run into impenetrable fog!
In looking in the four directions
I could not find my way, so lost is the world of the immortals.
O for someone who can wield a magic wand
To let me offer to you a token of my loyalty:
This Han mirror where you used to
To see yourself reflected next to my image.
How tragic is our marriage, which seemed so auspicious!
Who could have the heart to break it?
Please, then, take this mirror to him
So he could see clearly my grateful heart.
As your sacred presence is still so evident,
Do you understand, I wonder, my situation?*

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*In the blue palace your child is still very young
Does he not hold a place in your affection as you prepared to go?
An infant still, he is barely a toddler:
What a sight to see him in coarse mourning outfit!
He just mumbles in front of your altar
It wrenches my heart to see him there.*

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*Going through the six pavilions is a drained peach blossom, a weeping willow.
My cicada's shell hardly fits my robes
As I am alone now, far from home...
Following you, I get lost, but neither can I go back, alone!
Sitting at the foot of your throne, I am a spent person
Barely able to raise one of my limbs...
The mourning is universal, reaching even remote caves
When unrelated persons could feel such pain, imagine ours!*

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*Immensity is the mark of this separation
Who could bail out this endless source of tears?
The more I yearn after you the farther you appear:
O nine-tiered Heaven, do you realize my pain?
I look at the moon but it fades away, adding only to my self-pity
And the face of Heng E is all clouded
The more I look at her the more I feel ashamed
At this cold love at the edge of a winter night.
I turn to the flowers but they only add to my mortification
As the camellias are now dew sprinkled
Entrails are torn as I watch the birds:
A lone mandarin duck, a single phoenix I am now.
Each such sight is filled with sadness
O where are they, our happy tete-a-tetes?*

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*In a minute the sea changes to a mulberry field:
Such is the world, can one really complain?
Only our love can be as large as the earth or the sky
And as long as we live suffering is our fate.
I have then only these confessions to make
Please bear witness to my words, o Sun, o Moon!*