

In retrospect, I was fortunate not to be wearing my uniform, stained with Linh's blood. I had shed it in favor of the madras shirt and chinos in my rucksack, but the General, having lost his luggage at the airport, still wore his stars on his collar. Outside our barracks and in the tent city, few knew who he was by face. What they saw was his uniform and rank, and when he

5 said hello to the civilians and asked how they were faring, they met him with sullen silence. The slight crinkle between his eyes and his hesitant chuckling told me he was confused. My sense of unease increased with every step down the dirt lane between the tents, civilian eyes on us and the silence unbroken. We had barely walked a hundred meters into the tent city when the first assault came, a dainty slipper sailing from our flank and striking the General on his temple.

10 He froze. I froze. An old woman's voice croaked out, Look at the hero! We swiveled to the left and saw the one thing charging us that could not be defended against, an enraged elderly citizen we could neither beat down nor back away from. Where's my husband? she screamed, barefoot, her other slipper in her hand. Why are you here when he's not? Aren't you supposed to be defending our country with your life like he is?

15 She smacked the General across the chin with her slipper, and from behind her, from the other side, from behind us, the women, young and old, firm and infirm, came with their shoes and slippers, their umbrellas and canes, their sun hats and conical hats. Where's my son? Where's my father? Where's my brother? The General ducked and flung his arms over his head as the furies beat him, tearing at his uniform and his flesh. I was hardly unscathed,

20 suffering several blows from flying footwear and intercepting several strokes from canes and umbrellas. The ladies pressed around me to get at the General, who had sunk to his knees under their onslaught. They could hardly be blamed for their ill temper, since our vaunted premier had gone on the radio the day before to ask all soldiers and citizens to fight to the last man. It was pointless to point out that the premier, who was also the air marshal and who

25 should not be confused with the president except in his venality* and vanity, had himself left on a helicopter shortly after broadcasting his heroic message. Nor would it have helped to explain that this general was not in charge of soldiers but the secret police, which would hardly have endeared him to civilians. In any case, the ladies were not listening, preferring to scream and curse. I pushed my way through the women who had come between the General and myself,

30 shielding him with my body and absorbing many more whacks and globs of spit until I could drag him free. Go! I shouted in his ear, propelling him in the correct direction. For the second straight day we ran for our lives, but at least the rest of the people in the tent city left us alone, touching us with nothing except contemptuous gazes and catcalls. Good for nothings! Villains! Cowards! Bastards!

35 While I was used to such slings and arrows, the General was not. When we finally stopped outside our barracks, the expression on his face was one of horror. He was disheveled, the stars torn from his collar, his sleeves ripped, half his buttons gone, and bleeding from scratches on his cheek and neck. I can't go in there like this, he whispered. Wait in the showers, sir, I said. I'll find you some new clothes. I requisitioned a spare shirt and pants from

40 officers in the barracks, explaining my own bruised and tattered condition as being the result of a run-in with our ill-humored competitors in the Military Security Service. When I went to the showers, the General was standing at a sink, his face rinsed clean of everything except the shame.

45 General—

Shut up! The only person he was looking at was himself in the mirror. We will never speak of this again.

And we never did.

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* venality: open to corrupt influence and bribery

How do the stylistic choices guide your sympathies and create drama in the passage?