The Missing Face

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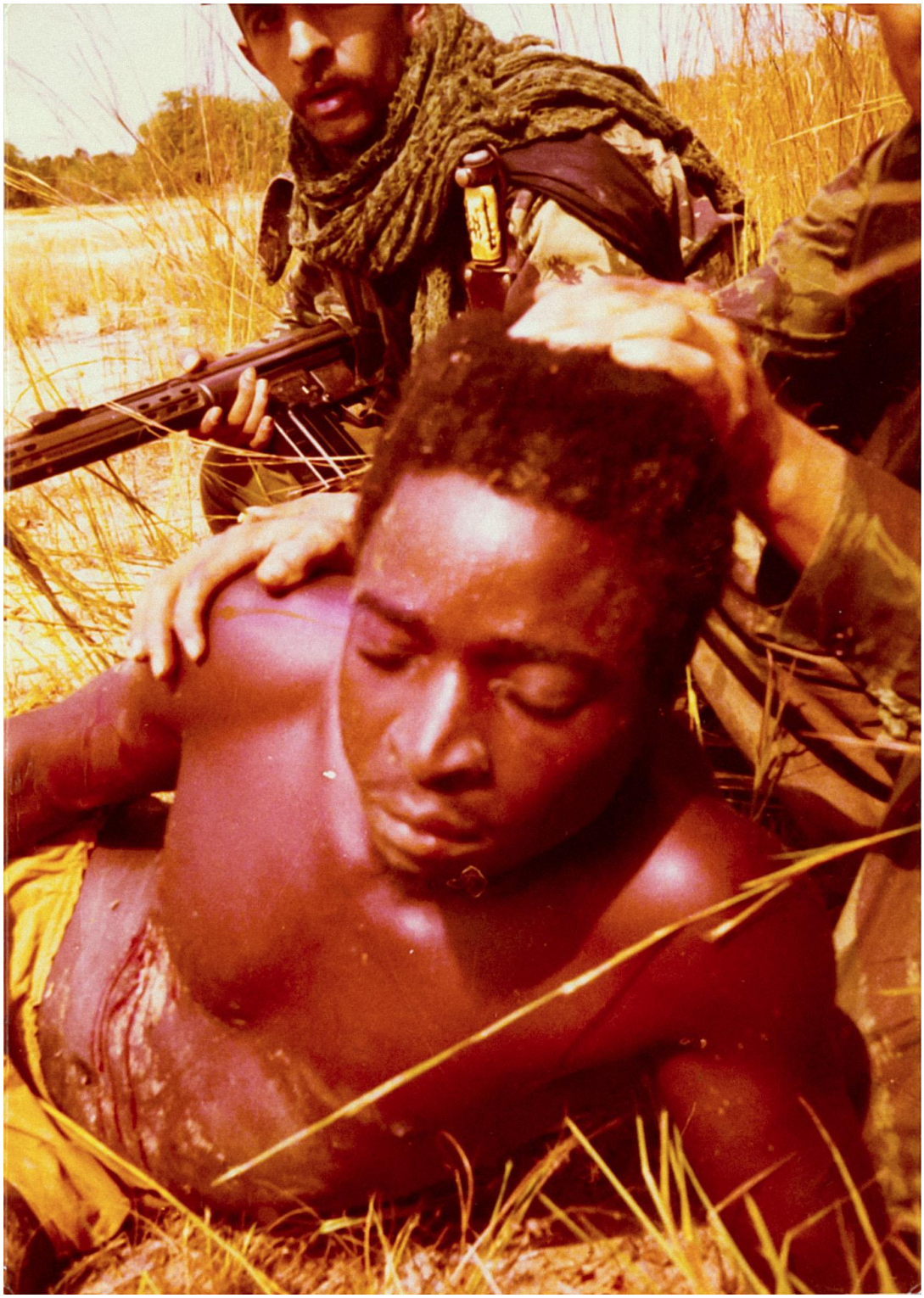
Translated by Patricia Anne Odber de Baubeta



I don't think that second lieutenant in the commandos was afraid of forgetting. That wasn't why he took the photo. He must surely have realised, at the precise moment when war broke out, that it would stay with him for the rest of his life. But maybe he also knew that the things we see, even the most horrible ones, flow over our retina without our being able to seize them, pushed along by the ones that come afterwards, the blade blunted by the passage of time. And he knew, I believe—we all learn it early on—that only with enormous difficulty can we succeed in reproducing in other people's eyes what we ourselves see.

"This what war was about," he told me when he showed it to me. As if the photo summed everything up, drove out the words, made them superfluous. Or—worse—damaging. But I, who wasn't in the war, I only have words to set against this image. I see the photo and I want to know the expression on the face that pointed the camera, the reason behind the gesture that activated the shutter.

Maybe he wanted proof, in the eyes of the others and in his own eyes, that he was there, that he executed those gestures, saw those images. If anyone had doubts, he'd show them the photo. If he himself had doubts, all he had to do was pull it out of the yellow envelope. Because there are moments when everything seems like a dream and we question the impalpable matter of our memories. Perhaps this photo guaranteed the permanency of the implausible, the unbelievable.

"This was in the Caboiana, one of the toughest regions in Guinea. In 1972. These hands holding onto the guy are Penedo's. In the foreground was the rice paddy, the bush was there in the background, and this guy" (he points to the dead man) "there in the middle of the turmoil, he was one of the unlucky ones."

This photograph draws a dividing line between me and the second lieutenant, it creates a distance between us. I spend the rest of the conversation trying to bridge this divide, but I never succeed. Perhaps he himself is unaware of the chasm the photo digs in between us. He's a man like me, just older, old enough to be my father. But he isn't a man like me. He killed, he watched people die, he felt death put its hand on his shoulder

and he had to shake it off. Or else embrace it, clutch it to his breast. The death of the enemy, the death of the comrades, his own death, always lurking. What does this do to a man? Can you make friends with death? He talks about the weapon he used in the bush, a Kalashnikov seized from the enemy, with the same devotion with which I talk about a beautiful novel, the same tenderness with which I recite a poem by Ruy Belo. He asked private Penedo to pull the corpse up high, gripping it by the head and shoulder, for the face to be seen clearly in the photo. Then he pressed the button.

This photo is also a trophy, there's no point pretending otherwise, and it allows the second lieutenant to point out another dividing line to me. The dividing line that he himself drew and made of point of never crossing. He tells me that the men in other commando companies in Guinea cut off the ears of dead enemies and kept them in bottles preserved in alcohol in their lockers. I ask him what those men did with the severed ears. "They brought them back here." There are still macabre relics like these in Portuguese homes, at the back of locked cupboards, in garages and storage spaces. Trophies that are only shown to closest friends, perhaps only to other veterans of the overseas wars. Legacies that one day some heir, a son or grandson, will have to get rid of discretely when they clear out the dead man's house. Perhaps not realizing what it is they are throwing out. Or perhaps suspicious, but preferring not to know. There are things about other people we prefer not to know. There are things about ourselves we prefer not to know.

I ask the second lieutenant questions, preparing the ground for the most important question of all.

"Yes, that dead man remained there in the bush, we didn't take him with us."

"Yes, he was armed. The guy was armed. He was part of the group. I don't know how many guys we killed in that operation. I've no idea. We took his weapon, just like we always did."

"Did I always have the camera with me? Almost always, it worked with a roll of film. Afterward I bought one that took slides."

"That's how the bloke was dressed, in shorts. The guys always dressed

like that."

"No, he wasn't barefoot, that's just what I was going to say. He had sandshoes or espadrilles. The ones who weren't fighters, they used to go barefoot."

The second lieutenant never cut off their ears or ever let his men cut them off. And he didn't let his men kill a prisoner either. All the men he captured in the bush, wounded or uninjured, were taken to the barracks. Taking this photo was as far as he allowed himself to go in the war. This was the trophy he allowed himself to collect. He asked Penedo to pull up the dead man's head and shoulder and he clicked the shutter. Is that inhuman? There's a sliding scale of inhumanity, but the humanity or inhumanity of a gesture is measured by our purpose in carrying it out. For the second lieutenant, this photo marks the limit before entering the realm of the inhumane. This is why it's so important for him to explain the reasons for this photo to me. So that I understand what led him to draw the line here, on this threshold, not further forward or further back.

I am reminded of what Michael Herr wrote in *Dispatches*. "There's no way around it, if you photographed a dead Marine with a poncho over his face and got something for it, you were *some* kind of parasite." Then Herr adds: "But what were you if you pulled the poncho back first to make a better shot, and did that in front of his friends? Some other kind of parasite, I suppose." Herr is talking about reporters in Vietnam, not combatants, but he stresses that, at heart, there is little to differentiate the stance of one group from the other: it wasn't money that had taken them to war, it was something more basic. Each, in his own way, was a volunteer. Herr uses the first person plural, 'we'. He's talking about himself and his colleagues, which gives him leeway to cut to the chase, to be relentless. I can't talk about "us". Even so, I rehearse questions about the photo I have in my hands.

"What were we if we photographed the body of an enemy we'd just killed? And what were we if, before pressing the camera button, we asked someone to hold up the corpse to get a better shot?"

It doesn't work. The ditch that the photo has dug between me and the second lieutenant doesn't go away. I look for common ground between

myself and the grammar of this photograph. For a long time I stare at the dead man's closed eyes. He looks as if he is fast asleep. I try to get the second lieutenant to ask questions conjugated in the first person plural. Only he can pose them.

"The man at the back, with the G3? That's Caselas, private Caselas. What does he have around his neck? No, it isn't a bandana. It's a kind of mosquito net, because of the mosquitos, at night. He used to wrap himself up in it. I never wore a net. I wore a black bandana round my neck."

"I snapped this bloke where he fell. We didn't drag the blokes from one side to the other. They lay where they fell."

"Was it normal for me to take photos of the dead during operations? No. There was no time for that. Often we were transported by helicopter and had a clearly defined target. Let's suppose we had to go to this zone in the photo and the target was inside that bush. The helicopters would set down here in the rice paddy. And we would run as fast as we could towards the target, there inside the bush, and then… if there were people there, there were people, if there wasn't anyone, there wasn't. If there was no one in the camp, which often happened, it was always a matter of running, keeping on the move, to be picked up as fast as possible. Otherwise, in no time at all, we would come under heavy fire. There was no time for photos."

My gaze escapes to what is missing in the photo, to what is absent from the image. The left eye of the soldier with the mosquito netting around his neck, Caselas, is cut off at the edge of the photo. Truncated that way, the expression on his face is somewhere in between indifference, fatigue, and melancholy. I can't quite decipher it. I wish there were sadness in Caselas's face, to give me something to hang onto, some kind of faith in my fellow human being. And of course Penedo's face is missing, Penedo who is holding up the corpse, and who, I am very much afraid, might have been tempted to smile. Or did he remain serious? And what difference does it make anyway? Would the expression on Penedo's face that the photo withholds from me be the key to measuring the inhumanity of the gesture?

Before I can ask the question burning on my lips, the second lieutenant gives the answer.

“I took this photo because I could. It happened. Maybe the photo shocks you. It doesn’t mean anything to me. Us guys were used to all that. We either killed or got killed. There was no alternative. Because if we didn’t do it, the other guys did. It was all the same. Right or wrong? That’s another matter.”

He talks, he doesn’t stop talking. This image, which seemed to push the words far away, has finally unleashed a torrent of words that sound vaguely like a justification. But the second lieutenant has no reflections tinged with grief, remorse or sorrow. Just complaints born of nostalgia. His only sorrow is due to the dizzying speed with which he has seen time pass. He tells me they were all volunteers, no one was obliged to be there. They were there in the bush for around two months until the whole company had undergone its baptism of fire, and only then did they go to Bissau, the capital. In a ceremony held in the barracks, Spínola summoned them one by one and asked them: “Do you want to be a commando?” They all said yes, and the general stuck a badge on their chest. He tells me that if he were to go back into the army, he’d like to be a commando again. Out in the bush he always wore black gloves to protect himself from mosquitos. It was also a fancy of his, an obsession. The helicopters would set down in the clearings, the combat group would jump to the ground and run to attack the enemy, if they could find them. The dead guerrilla fighters lay where they fell. No soldier cut off ears, because the second lieutenant didn’t let them. No one killed prisoners, not even the wounded. The second lieutenant forbade it. On that day, because there was a brief pause on the edge of the rice paddy once the shootout was over, the second lieutenant asked private Penedo to pull that dead man up and he took a photo of him. Because yes, that’s how it worked out. It happened. There are no whys or wherefores.

Borges wrote a short story called “Pedro Salvadores” about a man who spent nine years locked in a cellar without seeing the light of day, secretly fed by his wife, in order to escape the persecution of a dictator. To begin with, Salvadores dreamed of the “dreadful night when the steel sought his throat, the open streets, the plains.” But as the years elapsed, “he couldn’t flee and he dreamed of the cellar.” Borges ends the story thus: “Like all

things, Pedro Salvadores's destiny strikes us as a symbol of something we almost understand." The second lieutenant's destiny also strikes me as a symbol of something I almost understand. Before reaching a fuller understanding, however, I stop. There are things about ourselves we prefer not to know. I leave private Caselas's gaze to its own devices, I simply imagine him as weary and relieved. I retreat from the closed eyelids of the dead man without a name. I sidestep his atrocious death throes. I work around the face that is missing in the image, private Penedo's face. I carefully avoid what might be his smile. I prefer not to construct the visage behind the camera. I change tack, withdrawing to the sites with fewer sharp edges of the when and the how, abdicating from the why that the photograph demanded of me when I first saw it, and I ask the second lieutenant if he too used a Bowie knife like the one I see beside private Caselas's armpit and whose handle, I now notice, looks to me as if it is made of bone.

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