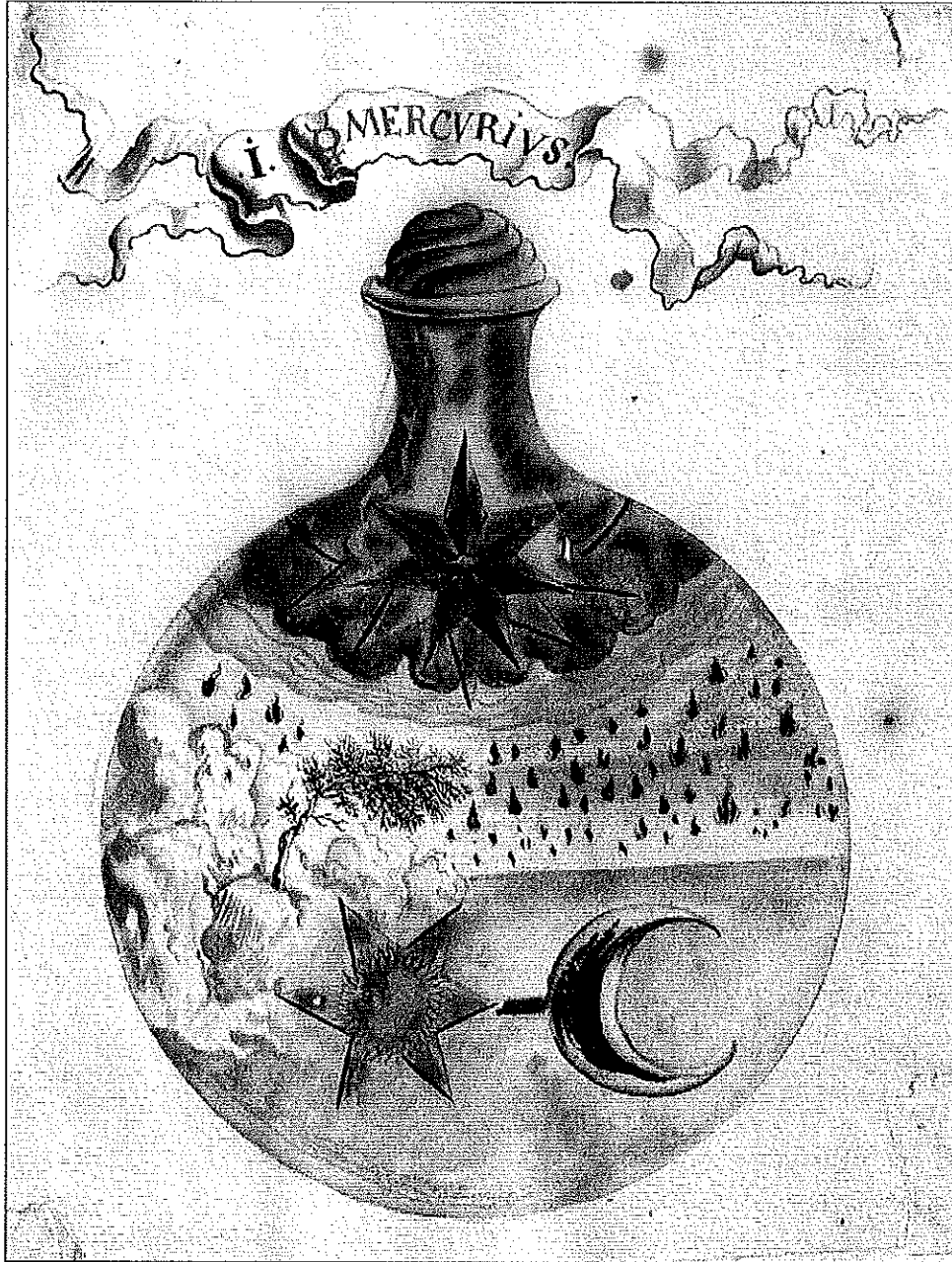


Remembering Death

A Historical Fiction



By: Ella Happel

I remember the fighting, the screams, the death. I remember my father, my only ally and friend, leaving our home that fateful morning. He told me to live his legacy, and to never forget it. He knew he was riding to his death, but he still kissed my forehead. He still promised he would return, promised he would be there, promised he would love, promised he would support, promised he would guide.... but he lied. He was a gentleman, a loving father, unfit for war. He was gone by the hour, never to be seen again.

The Qin was a northern dynasty, determined to invade and claim all the other states. Some surrendered, some cowered in fear, but we fought. We lost friends and family, love and hope. Qin ruled all, and we didn't stand a chance.

Fools tried to help, with each failed assassination attempt taking more and more out of us, until we just went through the motions, day after day, just barely surviving.

Then, everything changed.

I hear a swift knock at my door, 3 thuds in quick succession. I've heard that knock before. It's a uniform, hurried knock, the knock of an official. The knock I heard when they came to inform me that my father, my only support, had fallen. I rush to the door, distraught with worry, knowing the officials never came for good news.

"Are you Mr. Charles?" a royal messenger asks, standing behind a massive sheet of parchment paper, leaving only the tips of his shoes visible.

“Yes...” I hesitate, wondering if I should lie. I had never done anything wrong in my life, had always stayed in the middle of the pack. But if the emperor accused you of crime, there’s no way out, guilty or not. “...That’s me.”

“The royal emperor himself has sent me here to ask of you, the most prestigious alchemist outside of the kingdom’s walls, to create a potion for immortality. Do you accept?”

I’ve never heard of such a thing, but I if I didn’t deliver, I would be made an example, killed for not following orders. “I’ll need a few weeks.” I tell him as firmly as possible, my voice cracking in anticipation of the chaos this will insue.

“I will be back in two days time for the medicine.” The messenger turns and marches back to his stead, leaving me in the doorway with a million questions.

I sprint to my lab, knowing each moment is precious. I have only two days to make an impossible potion, and my head’s on the line. My lab’s in the cellar, complete with with herbs, dangerous liquids, acupuncture needles, a cage full of test monkeys, and an old grimy window. I get to work, starting by choosing my liquids. I quickly rule out mercury, my heart still sore from the terrible incident. It was all my fault. I let my guard down, let myself love something. I grew too fond of the monkeys, taken to calling the mischievous runt who always took my shiny coins *Qìezéi de xún*, the stealer of hearts. I was hoping Mercury would give him a sparkly glow, so he might run around, chasing his own tail, trying to catch himself. It was supposed to be a harmless prank, a joke to get back at him for stealing my coins all those years ago. So he drank a whole bowl and I went upstairs to sleep, ready to see the results the next day. Giddy with excitement, I ran downstairs into the cellar, only to find that my companion, my innocent friend had perished. I

swore that I would never let myself love anyone ever again, because I knew they would always fail me. It didn't matter if it was my father, our state, or a tiny monkey; I was on my own.

I shake my head, clearing my thoughts. I don't have time to dwell on past failures, because I have a potion to make. I grudgingly take acid and rosemary off the shelf and get to work, laboring nonstop day and night. I watch the sun rise and fall through the one filthy window in the cellar, knowing each minute passed is a minute wasted. So I keep going, frantically trying combination after combination, until I glance at the window and realize the day has come. Exhausted and afraid, I know the messenger will come to my door once sunrise ends, giving me less than five minutes to prepare. At this point, I have no choice but to create a fake potion, one believable enough to save me from execution. I grab a flask of water and pour it into a vial, adding a few drops of indigo dye. It turns dark, and looks like an authentic cure for age. Just as I finish my solution I hear a knock at my door, and I start towards the stairs. But then I hesitate. I think of all the hushed whispers of my people, the lives lost to the Qin, the pure hatred of the emperor. I turn around slowly as a smile spreads across my face.

I was always against assassination attempts, because I knew they always ended the same way. The attacker would be put to death while the emperor remained without a scratch. But here I am, with a clear and easy way to end it all. Who would I be if I denied my nation this chance? This chance to grow, to build, to flourish. It'll be chaos, a dark age in which anyone may rise in power, even a mere alchemist. My whole life, my entire existence had been leading up to this moment. This is where I can make my father proud, where I can truly live his legacy as he had

told me to do so long ago. This is my only chance of redemption, and I can't throw it away. So I set the dyed water down and picked up a different liquid. Mercury is perfect for the job.

The messenger reprimands me for taking so long, but snatches the tube out of my hand. He walks away with calculated, precise steps, and I shut the door with a sigh. In my sleep-deprived, delirious state, I think off how much I miss *Qìzèi de xún* before collapsing into my bed.