

# François Bizot

AUTHOR OF *THE GATE*



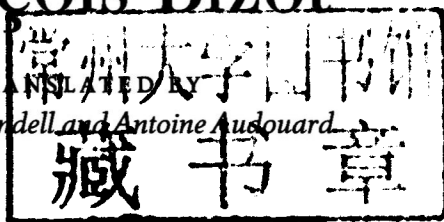
## Facing the Torturer

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—  
Francois Bizot

TRANSLATED BY

*Charlotte Mandell and Antoine Audouard*



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OTHER BOOKS BY FRANÇOIS BIZOT

*The Gate*

*Le Saut de Varan*

## FACING THE TORTURER

In fact, "recognizing" someone—and even more, after being unable to recognize him, identifying him—is thinking of two contradictory things under the same name; it's acknowledging that the one who had been the person one remembers no longer exists, and that the one who is there is a person one no longer knows; it's having to think of a mystery almost as disturbing as the mystery of death of which it is, as it were, the preface and the forerunner. . . .

—Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*

If I were placed in front of that effigy  
Unknown to myself, not knowing my own features,  
From all the ghastly folds of anguish and energy  
I would read my torments, and recognize myself.

—Paul Valéry, *Mélange*

*Phnom Penh, 8 May 2009*

—*Mr. François Bizot, can you describe what you saw at the M-13 Security Camp during your detention there, up until your release and return to Phnom Penh?*

—*Certainly, your Honor. Nevertheless, I would like to start with one of the final events from my detention at the M-13 Camp. On the eve of my liberation—24 December, 1971—I was authorized by the accused, Duch, to organize a farewell dinner for my fellow prisoners, tethered together to rods. I carried them bowls of chicken soup, bought with the money that had been confiscated from me at the time of my arrest. I went to each of them. Those who dared to talk to me, said: “French comrade! Please don’t forget us.”*

*Today it’s Duch who is accused and he is the one bound to the bar, so to speak. On this occasion may I evoke the memory of the M-13 prisoners, who I never stop thinking of, in particular my two assistants, Ung Hok Lay and Kang Son, who were later executed in another camp, because they had worked with me.*

*It is in their name that I wish to testify today.*

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# PART ONE



## ONE

### 1963—Sarah

“BAR-LE-DUC! Bar-le-Duc! Eight-minute stop.”

A train is arriving in a station—like a wheel of fortune at the end of its spin: the sequence of images slowing down, the window cutting a random frame. I remember the scene as if it were yesterday. The twilight already held the cold of autumn fog. An icy drizzle reflected the light of the bulbs through to the end of the platform. From there ran a ramp that led to the track. I didn't know yet that I would soon slip on to it to reach the ballast. That night, my life stopped for the first time.

I was with my mother; my father had just died, we were going to visit my sister. Sarah had taken refuge in my arms, worried by the noise. She had hardly ever gone out since I'd brought her back from the Colom-Béchar garrison in Algeria and entrusted her to my parents. With her big angular ears, her smouldering eyes, her bushy tail, her wild instinct—she sniffed everything with her tiny muzzle, ready to jump and escape at any moment.

She was the prettiest thing. I would have fought for her. The habits of my comrades in the 711th Signal Corps Division were familiar to me, but hers were even more so, down to her oddest whims. At night, I would take off her collar and we would sleep in the sand under the same blanket. After my military service, I had remained so attached to her

that my father kindly took care of her while I went off traveling. He kept her with him in his office, under the drawing table, where he had placed a piece of linoleum that she dug into, yapping, as if it were her burrow. She calmed down in his presence but would bite my mother's fingers.

"What are we going to do with the little fennec now? I don't know how I'll be able to look after her all alone," my mother said abruptly as we were leaving the cemetery.

In the blink of an eye, I slipped away into the cold of the railway station. I had noticed that the narrow passageway leading down from the platform went along a track that was out of earshot from the surroundings. I remember imagining the look of puzzlement on the faces of railwaymen who would, sooner or later, come across her soft blond fur. I fled back, as if emerging from a cesspool, still reeling in vile disgust at what I had just done—a mixture of impressions, brute force, defiance and horror, all magnified by my father's death—my eyes welling with tears.

As I write these lines, I am once again overcome by the same repugnance; that day, my confidence was shattered, and it was shattered for ever.

My mother didn't have to look twice to notice the blood on the sleeve of my raincoat. I felt her eyes rest on me, focus on different parts of my face, as if to discover someone, to take the measure of the man I had become, and perhaps too, poor woman, of her own responsibility in what she was beginning to understand.

Even while my father was still alive, it was clear that I would not stay in France: the beginnings of the life I dreamed of, for which I was eager to change everything, did not lie there. I calmly embraced this desire as a natural urge to go far away into one of those unknown countries that

everyone bears within themselves; I was still dazzled by the creative selfishness my childhood had been immersed in, I was shameless, ready for anything.

Back in the shadows of the train, realising that my mother couldn't look after Sarah, and that my departure was unavoidable—it was an escape to which I clung with every fibre of my being—I considered the pros and cons of my crime, till I regarded it as a necessary and in the end courageous sacrifice. It was up to me to resolve a problem to which no one else could find a solution. As for letting myself off lightly by selling Sarah—during the Algerian War a sand fox was a fashionable pet—the very idea seemed degrading and weak: you only sell things that don't matter.

Sarah mattered. Sacrificing her was not, in my eyes, a minor crime; far from it. The little animal shared the behavioural traits of all living beings—fear, aggression, a need to nest. Mine was in no way a slight or trivial action; it grew from a resolution no less serious than if I had decided to kill a person. I was convinced that it had been just as difficult to create the fennec as it had been the *Homo sapiens*. Without much feeling, I had already witnessed from afar the deaths of a good handful of men of my age, chosen with indifference. In war, isn't it the duty of men to kill their brethren? This had cured me of the belief in any supremacy of human beings; I'd lost any illusion that they, alone, were endowed with a soul, with a spiritual life. It seemed to me that the value of each living being could be viewed as in direct proportion to the amount of suffering one felt in losing it. How could the death of a little pampered, humanised animal—which I pictured emerging from the same layers of the universe as me—affect me less than the death of a complete stranger whom I had no reason to love?

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General de Gaulle did not allow the hens from his chicken coop to be served to him, because every morning, during his walk in Colombey-les-deux-Églises, he watched them scratch about in the grass as he went by, and thus saw them live. It was the same with me: I could only remain indifferent to the slaughter of an animal if I had never seen it before.

At the time all children had a patron saint. Mine was Francis of Assisi and I was proud of my protector. I fought, as he did, for the integration of all creatures, in a kind of bill of rights for living beings. At my first communion I was given pictures of the wolf of Gubbio and of the Sermon to the Birds; for me, there was no clear-cut separation between the world of animals and our own, and I worshipped the invisible, spiritual, presence that I felt living within them. Though science and philosophy after St. Francis insisted on the radical difference between men endowed with reason and “animal-machines,” I never felt foreign to the animal kingdom.

My feelings have not changed since then. This way of dividing the living world saddens me. It remains one of the limits, one of the thresholds that I have never been able to cross.

When I arrived in Cambodia in 1965, I silently saw, as everyone else did, live turtles being flipped on the grill; the backs of otters gashed open with machetes in order to keep their fetters intact; the bloody snouts of pigs tied to racks rubbing against the road—every animal a victim of our indifference, of this detachment that separates man from the others, the same detachment that allowed the Khmer Rouge to smash babies’ heads against a tree or wall.

When we kill, let's say, "because we have to," the important thing is our way of seeing and thinking at that moment—our way of sensing the forbidden, the weight of the danger—without explanation. In the same way, after World War II, I had quickly understood that the meat that rationing had deprived us of for so long was also somehow taboo.

We were living in Nancy then. When I went to the Essey stadium with my father, we would avoid passing by the slaughterhouses, whose stench invaded my child's brain. I could vaguely sense what it was they did there, even if I was unable to imagine for a second what the walls of that closed empire actually concealed. Later on, the rumour that a multitude of dehumanised people, mostly Jews, had been led to slaughter reached me surrounded by the same aura of mystery—did they have no souls either?

I always remember a conversation with my father in around 1954. We'd just left the cigarette shop that was on the corner, across from the brasserie d'Amerval. He had told me that in the beginning living beings had appeared under water. They had left the water to go on land, and then, as they evolved, had managed to fly into the air. We had agreed that this was Progress—the evolution of life, in several stages, from low to high, towards an ideal end. But some of these creatures, too attracted by the low, had only managed to raise themselves up by clinging to trees.

This group included the most intelligent beings, and most of its members had quickly decided to return to ground, with the aim of building their empire there, even if it meant living as carnivores, and paying a high price for their situation. Their trick was to make their foolishness appear inspired. We, mankind, were their faithful heirs.

From that moment on, nothing survived on earth, below ground or in the water that these beings didn't track down, fool, chase and destroy. Everything had to submit to the voracity of their desire.

Only the birds had escaped this domination, by flying swiftly away, with the splendid lightness of their feathered wings, while the other species had been deprived of their rights. The invention of knowledge, like that of good and evil, dated from that time. Birds had become the only creatures able to dive deeply into the very dream of life, to exist peacefully, far from the world and from gods, at a distance from the human species, from the killing fields and other concentration camps.

Presumptuous and immoderate, men had also tried repeatedly to reach the skies, but the too-great weight of their limbs would bring them back to earth. This tension within them, between weight and lightness, became the most tragic aspect of their condition down below. Since then, the idea of going to the great beyond, to the place where birds disappear, swallowed by the sky, has become the sole goal that they pursue without ever attaining it.

To my child's mind, this tale said it all: this was why men had endowed angels with wings and why, with their souls debased by their own weight, they were eternally striving for the myth of a lost paradise, whose path to heaven they continually sought.

Like every time in those moments when I walked alongside my father, feeling his hand gently resting on my shoulder, I had the feeling that these words were engraving themselves in my memory, forging what would later become my first adult thoughts.



A number of Germans were garrisoned in Nancy, where the rumour of an Allied landing was already gaining ground. I was walking with my mother up the wide path of the Pépinière Gardens, which led to the old oaks of the playground. A little way off, an SS officer was approaching us. When we came even with him, I stuck my tongue out at him. The officer stood stock-still. My mother, frightened, immediately gave me a sharp slap.

“Madame, why do you hit your son? If I were you, I would be proud of him,” he said in French, with a click of his heels, before continuing on his way.

That day, from the example of my mother who rarely hit me, and never as hard as that, I understood that fear could push anyone beyond the normal limits of their behaviour.

In the following years, I often heard my parents recount that scene. When we had guests, my father would affect an air of surprise each time before beginning it; and he liked to call attention to the moral of the story which, aside from a few notions about the ardour of my budding patriotism, wasn't necessarily what everyone had been expecting.

That was my first encounter with a thought that would grow within me over time: even though people were—or precisely because they were—full of good intentions, they could find themselves mixed up in criminal undertakings. To fight them was a necessity that followed a set of rules: a true spirit of resistance forbade any compromise with an enemy officer, however likeable he might seem.

After the Liberation of France, the first books I read told of the adventures of merchants who went to buy slaves in