

Translator's *Note*

At the request of the author, this translation is based upon the Taipei Hong-fan Book Co. 1980 Chinese edition, which restores cuts made in the Mainland Chinese edition, published in 1987 by the People's Liberation Army Publishing House in Beijing. Some deletions have been made, with the author's approval, and minor inconsistencies, particularly in dates and ages, have been corrected.

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Mo Yan

From *RED SORGHUM*

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NINTH DAY of the eighth lunar month, 1939. My father, a bandit's offspring who had passed his fifteenth birthday, was joining the forces Commander Yu Zhan'ao; a man destined to become a legendary hero, to ambush a Japanese convoy on the Jiao-Ping highway. Grandma, a padded jacket over her shoulders, saw them to the edge of the village. "Stop here," Commander Yu ordered her. She stopped.

"Douguan, mind your foster-dad," she told my father. The sight of her large frame and the warm fragrance of her lined jacket chilled him. He shivered. His stomach growled.

Commander Yu patted him on the head and said, "Let's go, foster-son"

Heaven and earth were in turmoil, the view was blurred. By then the soldiers' muffled footsteps had moved far down the road. Father could still hear them, but a curtain of blue mist obscured the men themselves. Gripping tightly to Commander Yu's coat, he nearly flew down the path on churning legs. Grandma receded like a distant shore as the approaching sea of mist grew more tempestuous; holding on to Commander Yu was like clinging to the railing of a boat.

That was how Father rushed toward the uncarved granite marker that would rise above his grave in the bright-red sorghum fields of his hometown. A bare-arsed little boy once led a white billy goat up to the weed-covered grave, and as it grazed in unhurried contentment, the boy pissed furiously on the grave and sang out: "The sorghum is red—the Japanese are coming—compatriots, get ready—fire your rifles and cannons—"

Someone said that the little goatherd was me, but I don't know. I had learned to love Northeast Gaomi Township with all my heart, and to hate it with unbridled fury. I didn't realize until I'd grown up that Northeast Gaomi Township is easily the most beautiful and most repulsive, most unusual and most common, most sacred and most corrupt, most heroic and most bastardly, hardest-drinking

and hardest-loving place in the world. The people of my father's generation who lived there ate sorghum out of preference, planting as much of it as they could. In late autumn, during the eighth lunar month, vast stretches of red sorghum shimmered like a sea of blood. Tall and dense, it reeked of glory; cold and graceful, it promised enchantment; passionate and loving, it was tumultuous.

The autumn winds are cold and bleak, the sun's rays intense. White clouds, full and round, float in the tile-blue sky, casting full found purple shadows onto the sorghum fields below. Over decades that seem but a moment in time, lines of scarlet figures shuffled among the sorghum stalks to weave a vast human tapestry. They killed, they looted, and they defended their country in a valiant, stirring ballet that makes us unfilial descendants who now occupy the land pale by comparison. Surrounded by progress, *I* feel a nagging sense of our species' regression.

After leaving the village, the troops marched down a narrow dirt path, the tramping of their feet merging with the rustling of weeds. The heavy mist was strangely animated, kaleidoscopic. Tiny droplets of water pooled into large drops on Father's face; clumps of hair stuck to his forehead. He was used to the delicate peppermint aroma and the slightly sweet yet pungent odor of ripe sorghum wafting over from the sides of the path—nothing new there. But as they marched through the heavy mist, his nose detected a new, sickly-sweet odor, neither yellow nor red, blending with the smells of peppermint and sorghum to call up memories hidden deep in his soul.

Six days later, the fifteenth day of the eighth month, the night of the *Mid-Autumn* Festival A bright round moon climbed slowly in the sky above the solemn, silent sorghum fields, bathing the tassels in its light until they shimmered like mercury. Among the chiseled flecks of moonlight Father caught a whiff of the same sickly odor, far stronger than | anything you might smell today. Commander Yu was leading him by the hand through the sorghum, where three hundred fellow villagers, heads pillowed on their arms, were strewn across the ground, their fresh blood turning the black earth into a sticky muck that made walking and difficult. The smell took their breath away. A pack of corpse-eating dogs sat in the field staring at Father and Commander Yu with glinting eyes. Commander Yu drew his pistol and fired—a pair of eyes was extinguished; Another shot, another pair of eyes gone. The howling dogs scattered, then sat on their haunches Once they were out of range, setting up a deafening chorus of angry barks as they gazed greedily, longingly at the corpses. The odor grew stronger.

"Jap dogs" Commander Yu screamed. "Jap sons of bitches!" He his pistol, scattering the dogs without a trace "Let's go, son," he said. The two of them, one old and one young, threaded their way through the sorghum field, guided by the moon's rays. The odor saturating the field drenched Father's soul and would be his constant Companion during the cruel months and years ahead.

Sorghum stems and leaves sizzled fiercely in the mist. The Black Water River, which flowed slowly through the swampy lowland, sang in the spreading mist, now loud, now soft, now far, now near. As they caught with the troops, Father heard the tramping of feet and some coarse breathing fore and aft. The butt of a rifle noisily bumped someone else's A foot crushed what sounded like a human bone. The man in front of Father coughed loudly. It was a familiar cough, calling to mind large ears that turned red with excitement Large transparent covered with tiny blood vessels were the trademark of Wang Wenyi, a small man whose enlarged head was tucked down between his shoulders.

Father strained and squinted until his gaze bored through the mist: there was Wang Wenyi's head, jerking with each cough. Father thought back to when Wang was whipped on the parade ground, and how pitiful he had looked. He had just joined up with Commander Yu. Adjutant Ren ordered the recruits: Right face! Wang Wenyi stomped down joyfully, but where he intended to "face" was anyone's guess.

Adjutant Ren smacked him across the backside with his whip, forcing a yelp from between his parted lips: Ouch, mother of my children! The expression on his face could have been a cry, or could have been a laugh. Some kids sprawled atop the wall hooted gleefully.

Now Commander Yu kicked Wang Wenyi in the backside

"Who said you could cough?"

"Commander Yu . "Wang Wenyi stifled a cough "My throat itches.

"So what? If you give away our position, it's your head!"

"Yes, sir," Wang replied, as another coughing spell erupted.

Father sensed Commander Yu lurching forward to grab Wang Wenyi around the neck with both hands. Wang wheezed and gasped, but the coughing stopped.

Father also sensed Commander Yu's hands release Wang's neck, he even sensed the purple welts, like ripe grapes, left behind. Aggrieved gratitude filled Wang's deep-blue, frightened eyes

The troops turned quickly into the sorghum, and Father knew instinctively that they were heading southeast. The dirt path was the only direct link between the Black Water River and the village. During the day it had a pale cast; the original black earth, the color of ebony, had been covered by the passage of countless animals: cloven hoof prints of oxen and goats, semicircular hoof prints of mules, horses, and donkeys; dried road apples left by horses, mules, and donkeys,- wormy cow chips,- and scattered goat pellets like little black beans. Father had taken this path so often that later on, as he suffered in the Japanese cinder pit, its image often flashed before his eyes. He never knew how many sexual comedies my grandma had performed on this dirt path, but I knew. And he never knew that her naked body, pure as glossy white jade, had lain on the black soil beneath the shadows of sorghum stalks, but I knew.

The surrounding mist grew more sluggish once they were in the sorghum field the stalks screeched in secret resentment when the men and equipment bumped against them, sending large, mournful beads of water splashing to the ground. The water was ice-cold, clear and sparkling, and deliciously refreshing. Father looked up, and a large drop fell into his mouth. As the heavy curtain of mist parted gently, he watched the heads of sorghum stalks bend slowly down. The tough, pliable leaves, weighted down by the dew, sawed at his clothes and face, A breeze set the stalks above him rustling briefly? the gurgling of the Black Water River grew louder.

Father had gone swimming so often in the Black Water River that he seemed born to it. Grandma said that the sight of the river excited him more than the sight of his own mother. At the age of five, he could dive like a duckling, his little pink asshole bobbing above the surface, his feet sticking straight up. He knew that the muddy riverbed was black and shiny, and as spongy as soft tallow, and that the banks were covered with pale-green reeds and plantain the color of goose-down, coiling vines and stiff bone grass hugged the muddy ground, which was crisscrossed with the tracks of skittering crabs

Autumn winds brought cool air, and wild geese flew through the sky heading south, their formation changing from a straight line one minute to a V the next. When the sorghum turned red, hordes of crabs the size of horse hooves

scrambled onto the bank at night to search for food—fresh cow dung and the rotting carcasses of dead animals— among the clumps of river grass. The sound of the river reminded Father of an autumn night during his childhood, when the foreman of our family business, Arhat Liu, named after Buddhist saints, took him crabbing on the riverbank. On that gray-purple night a golden breeze followed the course of the river. The sapphire-blue sky was deep and boundless, green-tinted stars shone brightly in the sky: the ladle of Ursa Major (signifying death), the of Sagittarius (representing life); Octans, the glass well, missing of its tiles; the anxious Herd Boy (Altair), about to hang himself, the mournful Weaving Girl (Vega), about to drown herself in the river. . Uncle Arhat had been overseeing the work of the family distillery for decades, and Father scrambled to keep up with him as he would his own grandfather.

The weak light of the kerosene lamp bored a five-yard hole in the darkness. When water flowed into the halo of light, it was the cordial yellow of an overripe apricot. But cordial for only a fleeting moment, before it flowed on. In the surrounding darkness the water reflected a starry sky. Father and Uncle Arhat, rain capes over their shoulders, sat around the shaded lamp listening to the low gurgling of the river. Every so often they heard the excited screech of a fox calling.