

Mo Yan,

Red Sorghum (excerpt)

trans. by

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(New York: Viking, 1993)

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THE NINTH DAY of the eighth lunar month, 1939. My father, a bandit's offspring who had passed his fifteenth birthday, was joining the forces of 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-assed 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

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 round purple shadows onto the sorghum fields below. Over decades that seem but a moment in time, lines of scarlet figures shuttled 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

light 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 slow 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 emptied 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 up 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 ears 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.

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 hoofprints of oxen and goats, semicircular hoofprints 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,

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 basket of Sagittarius (representing life), Octans, the glass well, missing one 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

Arhat sat quietly, listening with rapt respect to the whispered secrets of the land, as the smell of stinking river mud drifted over on the wind. Hordes of crabs attracted by the light skittered toward the lamp, where they formed a shifting, restless cloister. Father was so eager he nearly sprang to his feet, but Uncle Arhat held him by the shoulders.

"Take it easy! Greedy eaters never get the hot gruel." Holding his excitement in check, Father sat still. The crabs stopped as soon as they entered the ring of lamplight, and lined up head to tail, blotting out the ground. A greenish glint issued from their shells, as countless pairs of button eyes popped from deep sockets on little stems. Mouths hidden beneath sloping faces released frothy strings of brazenly colorful bubbles. The long fibers on Father's straw rain cape stood up. "Now!" Uncle Arhat shouted. Father sprang into action before the shout died out, snatching two corners of the tightly woven net they'd spread on the ground beforehand, they raised it in the air, scooping up a layer of crabs and revealing a clear spot of riverbank beneath them. Quickly tying the ends together and tossing the net to one side, they rushed back and lifted up another piece of netting with the same speed and skill. The heavy bundles seemed to hold hundreds, even thousands of crabs.

As Father followed the troops into the sorghum field, he moved sideways, crablike, overshooting the spaces between the stalks and bumping them hard, which caused them to sway and bend violently. Still gripping tightly to Commander Yu's coattail, he was pulled along, his feet barely touching the ground. But he was getting sleepy. His neck felt stiff, his eyes were growing dull and listless, and his only thought was that as long as he could tag along behind Uncle Arhat to the Black Water River he'd never come back empty-handed.

Father ate crab until he was sick of it, and so did Grandma. But even though they lost their appetite for it, they couldn't bear to throw the uneaten ones away. So Uncle Arhat minced the leftovers and ground them under the bean-curd millstone, then salted the crab paste, which they ate daily, until it finally went bad and became mulch for the poppies.

which was why she had the complexion of a peach, a sunny disposition, and a clear mind. The crab-nourished poppies grew huge and fleshy, a mixture of pinks, reds, and whites that assailed your nostrils with their fragrance. The black soil of my hometown, always fertile, was especially productive, and the people who tilled it were especially decent, strong-willed, and ambitious. The white eels of the Black Water River, like plump sausages with tapered ends, foolishly swallowed every hook in sight.

Uncle Arhat had died the year before on the Jiao-Ping highway. His corpse, after being hacked to pieces, had been scattered around the area. As the skin was being stripped from his body, his flesh jumped and quivered, as if he were a huge skinned frog. Images of that corpse sent shivers up Father's spine. Then he thought back to a night some seven or eight years earlier, when Grandma, drunk at the time, had stood in the distillery yard beside a pile of sorghum leaves, her arms around Uncle Arhat's shoulders. "Uncle . . . don't leave," she pleaded. "If not for the sake of the monk, stay for the Buddha. If not for the sake of the fish, stay for the water. If not for my sake, stay for little Douguan. You can have me, if you want. . . . You're like my own father. . . ." Father watched him push her away and swagger into the shed to mix fodder for the two large black mules who, when we opened our distillery, made us the richest family in the village. Uncle Arhat didn't leave after all. Instead he became our foreman, right up to the day the Japanese confiscated our mules to work on the Jiao-Ping highway.

Now Father and the others could hear long-drawn-out brays from the mules they had left behind in the village. Wide-eyed with excitement, he could see nothing but the congealed yet nearly transparent mist that surrounded him. Erect stalks of sorghum formed dense barriers behind a wall of vapor. Each barrier led to another, seemingly endless. He had no idea how long they'd been in the field, for his mind was focused on the fertile river roaring in the distance, and on his memories. He wondered why they were in such a hurry to squeeze through this packed, dreamy ocean of sorghum. Suddenly he lost his bearings. He

they were heading east-southeast, toward the river. Once he had a fix on their direction, he understood that they would be setting an ambush for the Japanese, that they would be killing people, just as they had killed the dogs. By heading east-southeast, they would soon reach the Jiao-Ping highway, which cut through the swampy lowland from north to south and linked the two counties of Jiao and Pingdu. Japanese and their running dogs, Chinese collaborators, had built the highway with the forced labor of local conscripts.

The sorghum was set in motion by the exhausted troops, whose heads and necks were soaked by the settling dew. Wang Wenyi was still coughing, even though he'd been the target of Commander Yu's continuing angry outbursts. Father sensed that the highway was just up ahead, its pale-yellow outline swaying in front of him. Imperceptibly tiny openings began to appear in the thick curtain of mist, and one dew-soaked ear of sorghum after another stared sadly at Father, who returned their devout gaze. It dawned on him that they were living spirits: their roots buried in the dark earth, they soaked up the energy of the sun and the essence of the moon, moistened by the rain and dew, they understood the ways of the heavens and the logic of the earth. The color of the sorghum suggested that the sun had already turned the obscured horizon a pathetic red.

Then something unexpected occurred. Father heard a shrill whistle, followed by a loud burst from up ahead.

"Who fired his weapon?" Commander Yu bellowed. "Who's the prick who did it?"

Father heard the bullet pierce the thick mist and pass through sorghum leaves and stalks, lopping off one of the heads. Everyone held his breath as the bullet screamed through the air and thudded to the ground. The sweet smell of gunpowder dissipated in the mist. Wang Wenyi screamed pitifully, "Commander—my head's gone—Commander—my head's gone—"

Commander Yu froze momentarily, then kicked Wang Wenyi. "You dumb fuck!" he growled. "How could you talk without a head?"

Commander Yu left my father standing there and went up to the head of the column. Wang Wenyi was still howling. Father pressed forward to catch a glimpse of the strange look on Wang's face. A dark-

... substance was howling on his cheek. Father reached out to touch it, hot and sticky, it smelled a lot like the mud of the Black Water River, but fresher. It overwhelmed the smell of peppermint and the pungent sweetness of sorghum and awakened in Father's mind a memory that drew ever nearer: like beads, it strung together the mud of the Black Water River, the black earth beneath the sorghum, the eternally living past, and the unstoppable present. There are times when everything on earth spits out the stench of human blood.

"Uncle," Father said, "you're wounded."

"Douguan, is that you? Tell your old uncle if his head's still on his neck."

"It's there, Uncle, right where it's supposed to be. Except your ear's bleeding."

Wang Wenyi reached up to touch his ear and pulled back a bloody hand, yelping in alarm. Then he froze as if paralyzed. "Commander, I'm wounded! I'm wounded!"

Commander Yu came back to Wang, knelt down, and put his hands around Wang's neck. "Stop screaming or I'll throttle you!"

Wang Wenyi didn't dare make a sound.

"Where were you hit?" Commander Yu asked him.

"My ear . . ." Wang was weeping.

Commander Yu took a piece of white cloth from his waistband and tore it in two, then handed it to him. "Hold this over it, and no more noise. Stay in rank. You can bandage it when we reach the highway."

Commander Yu turned to Father. "Douguan," he barked. Father answered, and Commander Yu walked off holding him by the hand, followed by the whimpering Wang Wenyi.

The offending discharge had been the result of carelessness by the big fellow they called Mute, who was up front carrying a rake on his shoulder. The rifle slung over his back had gone off when he stumbled. Mute was one of Commander Yu's old bandit friends, a greenwood hero who had eaten fistcakes in the sorghum fields. One of his legs was shorter than the other—a prenatal injury—and he limped when he walked, but that didn't slow him down. Father was a little afraid of him.

At about dawn, the massive curtain of mist finally lifted, just as

In my hometown, August is the misty season, possibly because there's so much swampy lowland. Once he stepped onto the highway, Father felt suddenly light and nimble, with extra spring in his step, he let go of Commander Yu's coat. Wang Wenyi, on the other hand, wore a crestfallen look as he held the cloth to his injured ear. Commander Yu crudely wrapped it for him, covering up half his head. Wang gnashed his teeth in pain.

"The heavens have smiled on you," Commander Yu said.

"My blood's all gone," Wang whimpered, "I can't go on!"

"Bullshit!" Commander Yu exclaimed. "It's no worse than a mosquito bite. You haven't forgotten your three sons, have you?"

Wang hung his head and mumbled, "No, I haven't forgotten."

The butt of the long-barreled fowling piece over his shoulder was the color of blood. A flat metal gunpowder pouch rested against his hip.

Remnants of the dissipating mist were scattered throughout the sorghum field. There were neither animal nor human footprints in the gravel, and the dense walls of sorghum on the deserted highway made the men feel that something ominous was in the air. Father knew all along that Commander Yu's troops numbered no more than forty—deaf, mute, and crippled included. But when they were quartered in the village, they had stirred things up so much, with chickens squawking and dogs yelping, that you'd have thought it was a garrison command.

Out on the highway, the soldiers huddled so closely together they looked like an inert snake. Their motley assortment of weapons included shotguns, fowling pieces, aging Hanyang rifles, plus a cannon that fired scale weights and was carried by two brothers, Fang Six and Fang Seven. Mute was toting a rake with twenty-six metal tines, as were three other soldiers. Father still didn't know what an ambush was, and even if he had, he wouldn't have known why anyone would take four rakes to the event.

I RETURNED TO NORTHEAST GAOMI TOWNSHIP to compile a family chronicle, focusing on the famous battle on the banks of the Black Water River that involved my father and ended with the death of a Jap general. An old woman of ninety-two sang to me, to the accompaniment of bamboo clappers: "Northeast Gaomi Township, so many men, at Black Water River the battle began, Commander Yu raised his hand, cannon fire to heaven, Jap souls scattered across the plain, ne'er to rise again, the beautiful champion of women, Dai Fenglian, ordered rakes for a barrier, the Jap attack broken . . ." The wizened old woman was as bald as a clay pot, the protruding tendons on her chapped hands were like strips of melon rind. She had survived the Mid-Autumn Festival massacre in '39 only because her ulcerated legs had made walking impossible, and her husband had hidden her in a yam cellar. The heavens had smiled on her. The Dai Fenglian in her clapper-song was my grandma. I listened with barely concealed excitement, for her tale proved that the strategy of stopping the Jap convoy with rakes had sprung from the mind of my own kin, a member of the weaker sex. No wonder my grandma is fêted as a trailblazer of the anti-Japanese resistance and a national hero.

At the mention of my grandma, the old woman grew expansive. Her narration was choppy and confused, like a shower of leaves at the mercy of the wind. She said that my grandma had the smallest feet of any woman in the village, and that no other distillery had the staying power of ours. The thread of her narrative evened out as she talked of the Jiao-Ping highway: "When the highway was extended this far . . . sorghum only waist-high. . . . Japs conscripted all able-bodied workers. . . . Working for the Japs, slacked off, sabotage . . . took your family's two big black mules . . . built a stone bridge over the Black Water River. . . . Arhat, your family's foreman . . . something fishy between him and your grandma, so everyone said . . . Aiyaya, when your grandma was young she sowed plenty of wild oats. . . . Your dad was a capable boy, killed his first man at fifteen, eight or nine out of every ten bastard kids turn out bad. . . . Arhat hamstringed the mule. . . . Japs caught him and skinned him alive. . . . Japs butchered