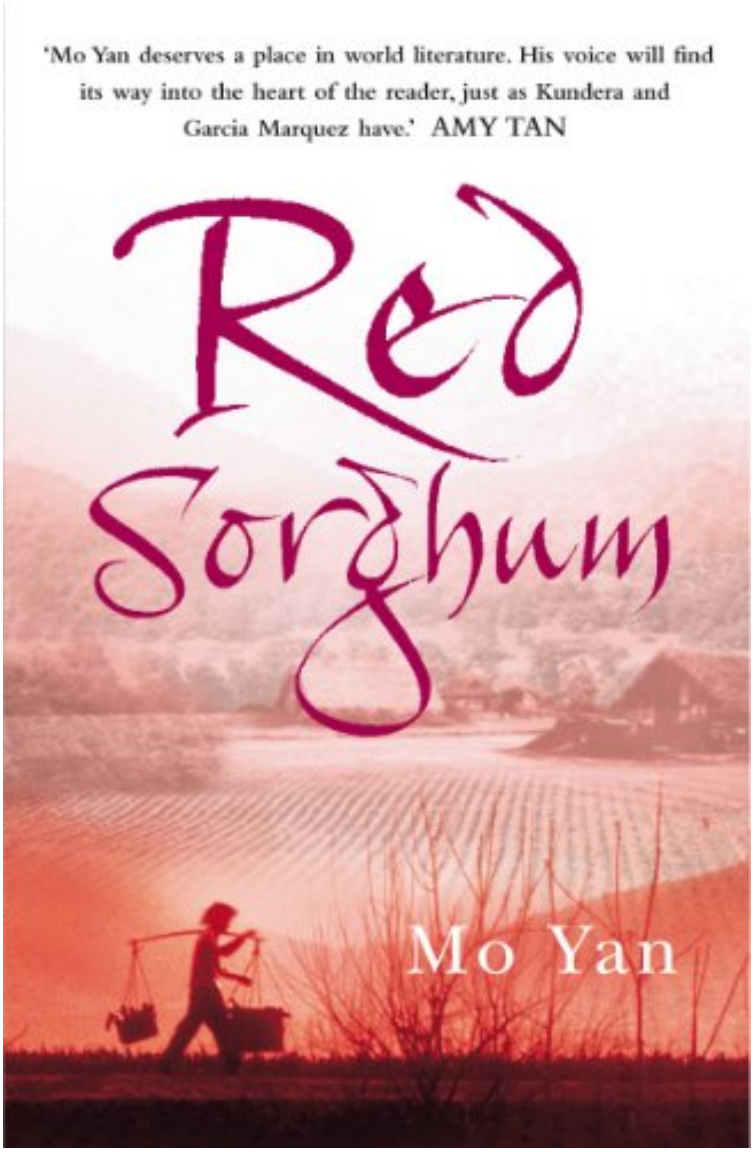
Red Sorghum



Par Mo Yan
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[Free] Red Sorghum

Par Mo Yan : Red Sorghum before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Red Sorghum:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurSpanning three generations, this novel of family and myth is told through a series of flashbacks that depict events of staggering horror set against a landscape of gemlike beauty as the Chinese battle both the Japanese invaders and each other in the turbulent 1930s. As the novel opens, a group of villagers, led by Commander Yu, the narrator's grandfather, prepare to attack the advancing Japanese. Yu sends his 14-year-old son back home to get food for his men; but as Yu's wife returns through the sorghum fields with the food, the Japanese start firing and she is killed. Her death becomes the thread that links the past to the present and the narrator moves back and forth recording the war's progress, the fighting between the Chinese warlords and his family's history.ExtraitSpectacular reviews forRed SorghumRed Sorghum

creates the backdrop for mythic heroism and primitivist vitality through the exotically portrayed setting of Shandongs lush sorghum fields.The Boston Globe[Yans] style is vibrant, alternating between lyrical passages and an oddly conversational tone. This historical tale has a remarkable sense of immediacy and an impressive scope.Los Angeles TimesHaving read Red Sorghum, I believe Mo Yan deserves a place in world literature. His imagery is astounding, sensual and visceral. His story is electrifying and epic. I was amazed from the first page. It is unlike anything Ive read coming out of China in past or recent times. I am convinced this book will successfully leap over the international boundaries that many translated works face....This is an important work from an important writer.Amy TanMo Yan spares us nothing...Red Sorghum fixes our attention on a series of exquisite images...[as] he paints his pictures of a world in chaos, where every day is a struggle to preserve life, if not honor, and there is no safety even in death.New York MagazineRed Sorghum is so unlike any other piece of contemporary Chinese literature that, were it not so clearly set in China, one might imagine it to be a product of another place and time....With this work Mo Yan has helped his country find a new and powerfully convincing literary voice.Orville SchellA masterful translation...The appearance of Red Sorghum is an important event for English-language literature, one which bids well for the power and influence of Chinese fiction in the 21st century.Richmond Times DispatchYan tempers his brutal tale with a powerfully evocative lyricism...A powerful new voice on the brutal unrest of rural China in the late 20s and 30s.Kirkus sPENGUIN BOOKSRED SORGHUMMo Yan (literally dont speak) is the pen name of Guan Moye. Born in 1955 to a peasant family in Shandong province, he is the author of ten novels including Red Sorghum, which was made into a feature film, dozens of novellas, and hundreds of short stories. Mo Yan is the winner of the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature and the 2009 Newman Prize for Chinese Literature. He has won virtually every Chinese literary prize, including the Mao Dun Literature Prize in 2011 (Chinas most prestigious literary award) and is the most critically acclaimed Chinese writer of his generation, in both China and around the world. He lives in Beijing.Howard Goldblatt is the foremost translator of modern and contemporary Chinese literature in the West. The founding editor of the journal Modern Chinese Literature, he has written for The Washington Post, The Times of London, Time, World Literature Today, and the Los Angeles Times. He is currently a professor at the University of Notre Dame.MO YANRedSorghumA NOVEL OF CHINATranslated from the Chineseby Howard GoldblattPENGUIN BOOKSWITH THIS BOOK I respectfully invoke the heroic, aggrieved souls wandering in the boundless bright-red sorghum fields of my hometown. As your unfilial son, I am prepared to carve out my heart, marinate it in soy sauce, have it minced and placed in three bowls, and lay it out as an offering in a field of sorghum. Partake of it in good health!Table of ContentsCHAPTER ONERed Sorghum1THE NINTH DAY of the eighth lunar month, 1939. My father, a bandits offspring who had passed his fifteenth birthday, was joining the forces of Commander Yu Zhanao, 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, Lets 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 Yus 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 redthe Japanese are comingcompatriots, get readyfire your rifles and cannonsSomeone said that the little goatherd was me, but I dont know. I had learned to love Northeast Gaomi Township with all my heart, and to hate it with unbridled fury. I didnt realize until Id 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 fathers 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 suns 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 Fathers 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 pathnothing 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 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 fireda 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. Lets go, son, he said. The two of them, one old and one young, threaded their way through the sorghum field, guided by the moons rays. The odor saturating the field drenched Fathers 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 elses. 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 Wenyis 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 anyones 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, its 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 Yus hands release Wangs neck; he even sensed the purple welts, like ripe grapes, left behind. Aggrieved gratitude filled Wangs 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, 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 foodfresh cow dung and the rotting carcasses of dead animalsamong 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 to its mate in the sorghum fields beside the river. Father and Uncle 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 Fathers 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 theyd 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 Yus 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 hed 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 couldnt 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.Apparently Grandma was an opium smoker, but wasnt addicted, 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 Fathers 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 Arhats shoulders. Uncle...dont 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....Youre 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 didnt 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 theyd 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 listened carefully for a sign from the river, and quickly determined that 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 hed been the target of Commander Yus 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. Whos 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, Commandermy heads goneCommandermy heads goneCommander 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 Wangs face. A dark-blue substance was flowing 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 Fathers 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, youre wounded.Douguan, is that you? Tell your old uncle if his heads still on his neck.Its there, Uncle, right where its supposed to be. Except your ears 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, Im wounded! Im wounded!Commander Yu came back to Wang, knelt down, and put his hands around Wangs neck. Stop screaming or Ill throttle you!Wang Wenyi didnt 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 Yus old bandit friends, a greenwood hero who had eaten fistcakes in the sorghum fields. One of his legs was shorter than the othera prenatal injuryand he limped when he walked, but that didnt slow him down. Father

was a little afraid of him.At about dawn, the massive curtain of mist finally lifted, just as Commander Yu and his troops emerged onto the Jiao-Ping highway. In my hometown, August is the misty season, possibly because theres 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 Yus 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 bloods all gone, Wang whimpered, I cant go on!Bullshit! Commander Yu exclaimed. Its no worse than a mosquito bite. You havent forgotten your three sons, have you?Wang hung his head and mumbled, No, I havent 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 Yus troops numbered no more than fortydeaf, 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 youd 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 didnt know what an ambush was, and even if he had, he wouldnt have known why anyone would take four rakes to the event.2I 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, neer 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 fted 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 familys two big black mules...built a stone bridge over the Black Water River....Arhat, your familys 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 hamstrung the mule....Japs caught him and skinned him alive....Japs butchered people, shit in their pots, and pissed in their basins. I went for water once that year, guess what I found in my bucket, a human head with the pigtail still attached....Arhat Liu played a significant role in my familys history, but there is no hard evidence that he had an affair with my grandma, and, to tell the truth, I dont believe it. I understood the logic of what the old clay-pot was saying, but it still embarrassed me. Since Uncle Arhat treated my father like a grandson, that would make me sort of his great-grandson; and if my great-granddad had an affair with my grandma, thats incest, isnt it? But thats hogwash, since my grandma was Uncle Arhats boss, not his daughter-in-law, and their relationship was sealed by wages, not by blood. He was a faithful old hand who embellished the history of our family and brought it greater glory than it would have had otherwise. Whether my grandma ever loved him or whether he ever lay down beside her on the kang has nothing to do with morality. What if she did love him? I believe she could have done anything she desired, for she was a hero of the resistance, a trailblazer for sexual liberation, a model of womens independence.In county records I discovered that in 1938, the twenty-seventh year of the Republic, four hundred thousand man-days were spent by local workers from Gaomi, Pingdu, and Jiao counties in the service of the Japanese army to build the Jiao-Ping highway.

The agricultural loss was incalculable, and the villages bordering the highway were stripped clean of draft animals. It was then that Arhat Liu, a conscript himself, took a hoe to the legs of our captured mule. He was caught, and the next day the Japanese soldiers tied him to a tethering post, skinned him alive, and mutilated him in front of his compatriots. There was no fear in his eyes, and a stream of abuse poured from his mouth up until the moment he died.3SHE TOLD IT EXACTLY like it was. When construction of the Jiao-Ping highway reached our place, the sorghum in the fields was only waist-high. Except for a handful of tiny villages, two crossing rivers, and a few dozen winding dirt paths, the marshy plain, which measured sixty by seventy-odd lior about twenty by twenty-five mileswas covered with sorghum that waved like an ocean of green. From our village we had a clear view of White Horse Mountain, an enormous rock formation on the northern edge of the plain. Peasants tending the sorghum looked up to see White Horse and down to see black soil that soaked up their sweat and filled their hearts with contentment. When they heard that the Japanese were building a highway across the plain, they grew restive, awaiting the calamity they knew was coming.The Japanese said they would come, and they were as good as their word.My father was sleeping when the Japs and their puppet soldiers came to our village to conscript peasant laborers and confiscate their mules and horses. He was awakened by a disturbance near the distillery. Grandma dragged him over to the compound as fast as her bamboo-shoot feet would carry her. Back then there were a dozen or so huge vats in the compound, each brimming with top-quality white liquor, the aroma of which hung over the entire village. Two khaki-clad Japanese soldiers with fixed bayonets stood there as a couple of black-clad Chinese, rifles slung over their backs, untied our two big black mules from a catalpa tree. Uncle Arhat kept trying to get to the shorter puppet soldier, who was untying the tethers, but the taller comrade forced him back with the muzzle of his rifle. Since Uncle Arhat was wearing only a thin shirt in the early-summer heat, his exposed chest already showed a welter of circular bruises.Brothers, he pleaded, we can talk this over, we can talk it over.Get the hell out of here, you old bastard, the taller soldier barked.Those animals belong to the owner, Uncle Arhat said. You cant take them.The puppet soldier growled menacingly, If I hear another word out of you, Ill shoot your little prick off!The Japanese soldiers stood there like clay statues, holding their rifles in front of them.As Grandma and my father entered the compound, Uncle Arhat wailed, Theyre taking our mules!Sir, Grandma said, were good people.The Japanese squinted and grinned at her.The shorter puppet soldier freed the mules and tried to lead them away; but they raised their heads stubbornly and refused to budge. His buddy walked up and prodded one of them in the rump with his rifle; the angered animal pawed the ground with its rear hooves, its metal shoes glinting in the mud that sprayed the soldier in the face.The tall soldier pointed his rifle at Uncle Arhat and bellowed, Come over here and take these mules to the construction site, you old bastard!Uncle Arhat squatted on the ground without making a sound, so one of the Japanese soldiers walked up and waved his rifle in front of Uncle Arhats face. Minliwala, yalalimin! he grunted. With the shiny bayonet glinting in front of his eyes, Uncle Arhat sat down. The soldier thrust his bayonet forward, opening a tiny hole in Uncle Arhats shiny scalp.Beginning to tremble, Grandma blurted out, Do it, Uncle, take the mules for them.The other Jap soldier edged up close to Grandma, and Father noticed how young and handsome he was, and how his dark eyes sparkled. But when he smiled, his lip curled to reveal yellow buck teeth. Grandma staggered over to Uncle Arhat, whose wound was oozing blood that spread across his scalp and down his face. The grinning Japanese soldiers drew closer. Grandma laid her hands on Uncle Arhats scalp, then rubbed them on her face. Pulling her hair, she leaped to her feet like a madwoman, her mouth agape. She looked three parts human and seven parts demon. The startled Japanese soldiers froze.Sir, the tall puppet soldier said, that womans crazy.One of the Jap soldiers mumbled something as he fired a shot over Grandmas head. She sat down hard and began to wail.The tall puppet soldier used his rifle to prod Uncle Arhat, who got to his feet and took the tethers from the smaller soldier. The mules looked up; their legs trembled as they followed him out of the compound. The street was chaotic with mules, horses, oxen, and goats.Grandma wasnt crazy. The minute the Japs and the puppet soldiers left, she removed the wooden lid from one of the wine vats and looked at her frightful, bloody reflection in the mirrorlike surface. Father watched the tears on her cheeks turn red. She washed her face in the wine, turning it red.Like the mules he was leading, Uncle Arhat was forced to work on the road that was taking shape in the sorghum field. The highway on the southern bank of the Black Water River was nearly completed, and cars and trucks were driving up on the newly laid roadway with loads of stone and yellow gravel, which they dumped on the riverbank. Since there was only a single wooden span across the river, the Japanese had decided to build a large stone bridge. Vast areas of sorghum on both sides of the highway had been leveled, until the ground seemed covered by an enormous green blanket. In the field north of the river, where black

soil had been laid on either side of the road, dozens of horses and mules were pulling stone rollers to level two enormous squares in the sea of sorghum. Men led the animals back and forth through the field, trampling the tender stalks, which had been bent double by the shod hooves, then flattening them with stone rollers turned dark green by the plant juices. The pungent aroma of green sorghum hung heavily over the construction site.Uncle Arhat, who was sent to the southern bank of the river to haul rocks to the other side, reluctantly handed the mules over to an old geezer with festering eyes. The little wooden bridge swayed so violently it seemed about to topple as he crossed to the southern bank, where a Chinese overseer tapped him on the head with a purplish rattan whip and said, Start lugging rocks to the other side. Uncle Arhat rubbed his eyesthe blood from his scalp wound had soaked his eyebrows. He picked up an average-sized rock and carried it to the other side, where the old geezer stood with the mules. Use them sparingly, he said. They belong to the family I work for. The old geezer lowered his head numbly, then turned and led the mules over to where teams of animals were working on the connecting road. The shiny rumps of the black mules reflected specks of sunlight. His head still bleeding, Uncle Arhat hunkered down, scooped up some black dirt, and rubbed it on the wound. A dull, heavy pain traveled all the way down to his toes.Armed Jap and puppet soldiers stood on the fringes of the construction site; the overseer, whip in hand, roamed the site like a specter. The eyes of the frightened laborers rolled as they watched Uncle Arhat, his head a mass of blood and mud, pick up a rock and take a couple of steps. Suddenly he heard a crack behind him, followed by a drawn-out, stinging pain on his back. He dropped the rock and looked at the grinning overseer. Your honor, if you have something to say, say it. Why hit me?Without a word, the grinning overseer flicked his whip in the air and wrapped it around Uncle Arhats waist, all but cutting him in half. Two streams of hot, stinging tears oozed out of the corners of Uncle Arhats eyes, and blood rushed to his head, which began to throb as though it might split open.Your honor! Uncle Arhat protested.His honor whipped him again.Your honor, Uncle Arhat said, why are you hitting me?His honor flicked the whip and grinned until his eyes were mere slits: Just giving you a taste, you son of a bitch.Uncle Arhat choked off his sobs as his eyes pooled with tears. He bent over, picked up a large rock from the pile, and staggered with it toward the little bridge. The jagged edges dug deeply into his gut and his rib cage, but he didnt feel the pain.The overseer stood rooted to the spot, whip in hand, and Uncle Arhat trembled with fear as he lugged the rock past his gaze. With the whip cutting into his neck he fell forward, landed on his knees, and hugged the rock to his chest. It tore the skin on his hands and left a deep gash in his chin. Stunned, he began to blubber like a baby; a purple tongue of flame licked out in the emptiness inside his skull.He strained to pull his hands out from under the rock, stood up, and arched his back like a threatened, skinny old tomcat. Just then a middle-aged man, grinning from ear to ear, walked up. He took a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and held one up to the overseer, who parted his lips to accept the offering, then waited for the man to light it for him.Revered one, the man said, that stinking blockhead isnt worth getting angry over.The overseer exhaled the smoke through his nose and said nothing. Uncle Arhat stared at the whip in his twitching yellowed fingers.The middle-aged man stuffed the pack of cigarettes into the pocket of the overseer, who seemed not to notice; then, snorting lightly, he patted his pocket, turned, and walked away.Are you new here, elder brother? the man asked.Uncle Arhat said he was.You didnt give him anything to grease the skids?Those mad dogs dragged me here against my will.Give him a little money or a pack of cigarettes. He doesnt hit the hard workers, and he doesnt hit the slackers. The only ones he hits are those who have eyes but wont see.All that morning, Uncle Arhat desperately lugged rocks, like a man without a soul. The scab on his scalp, baked by the sun, caused terrible pain as it dried and cracked. His hands were raw and bloody, and the stiffened gash on his chin made him drool. The purplish flame kept licking at the inside of his skullsometimes strong, sometimes weak, but never dying out completely.At noon a brown truck drove up the barely negotiable road. Dimly Uncle Arhat heard a shrill whistle and watched the laborers stumble up to the truck. He sat mindlessly on the ground, showing no interest in the truck. The middle-aged man walked over and pulled him to his feet. Elder brother, come on, its mealtime. Try some Japanese rice.Uncle Arhat stood up and followed him.Large buckets of snowy white rice were handed down from the truck, along with a basket of white ceramic bowls with blue floral patterns. A fat Chinese stood next to the baskets, handing bowls to the men as they filed past. A skinny Chinese stood beside the buckets, ladling rice. The laborers stood around the truck, wolfing down their food, bare hands serving as chopsticks.The overseer walked up, whip in hand, the enigmatic grin still on his face. The flame in Uncle Arhats skull blazed, illuminating thoughts of the hard morning that he had tried to cast off. Armed Japanese and puppet sentries walked up and stood around a galvanized-iron bucket to eat their lunch. A guard dog with a long snout and trimmed ears sat behind the bucket, its tongue lolling as it watched the

laborers.Uncle Arhat counted the dozen or so Japs and the dozen or so puppet soldiers standing around the bucket eating their lunch; the word escape flashed into his mind. Escape! If he could make it to the sorghum field, these fuckers wouldnt be able to catch him. The soles of his feet were hot and sweaty; the moment the idea to flee entered his mind, he grew fidgety and anxious. Something was hidden behind the calm, cold grin on the face of the overseer. Whatever it was, it made Uncle Arhats thoughts grow muddled.The fat Chinese took the bowls from the laborers before they were finished. They licked their lips and stared longingly at kernels of rice stuck to the sides of the buckets, but didnt dare move. A mule on the northern bank of the river brayed shrilly. Uncle Arhat recognized the familiar sound. Tethered to rolling stones beside the newly plowed roadbed, the listless mules nibbled stalks and leaves of sorghum that had been trampled into the earth.That afternoon a man in his twenties darted into the sorghum field when he thought the overseer wasnt looking. A bullet followed his path of retreat. He lay motionless on the fringe of the field.The brown truck drove up again as the sun was sinking in the west. Uncle Arhats digestive system, used to sorghum, was intent on ridding itself of this mildewy white rice, but he forced the food past the knots in his throat. The thought of escape was stronger than ever; he longed to see his own compound, where the pungent odor of wine pervaded the air, in that village a dozen or so li away. The distillery hands had all fled with the arrival of the Japanese, and the wine cooker now stood cold. Even more he longed to see my grandma and my father. He hadnt forgotten the warmth and contentment she had bestowed upon him alongside the pile of sorghum leaves.After dinner the laborers were herded into an enclosure of fir stakes covered with tarpaulins. Wires the thickness of mung beans had been strung between the stakes, and the gate was made of thick metal rods. The Jap and puppet soldiers were billeted in separate tents several yards away; the guard dog was tethered to the flap of the Jap tent. Two lanterns hung from a tall post at the entrance of the enclosure, around which soldiers took turns at sentry duty. Mules and horses were tethered to posts in a razed section of the sorghum field west of the enclosure.The stench inside the enclosure was suffocating. Some of the men snored loudly; others got up to piss in a tin pail, raising a noisy liquid tattoo, like pearls falling onto a jade plate. The lanterns cast a pale light, under which the sentries long shadows flickered.As the night stretched on, the cold became unbearable, and Uncle Arhat couldnt sleep. With his thoughts focused on escape, he lay there not daring to move; eventually he fell into a muddled sleep. In his dream his head felt as though it were being carved by a sharp knife, while his hand felt seared as if he clasped a branding iron. He awoke covered in sweat; his pants were soaked with piss. The shrill crow of a rooster floated over from the distant village. The mules and horses pawed the ground and snorted. Stars winked slyly through holes in the tattered tarpaulin above him.The man who had come to his aid that day quietly sat up. Even in the relative darkness of the enclosure, Uncle Arhat could see his blazing eyes, and could tell that he was no ordinary man. He lay there, watching silently.As the man knelt in the enclosure opening, he raised his arms slowly and deliberately. Uncle Arhats eyes were riveted on his back and his head, around which hung an aura of mystery. The man took a deep breath, cocked his head, and thrust out his hands, like arrows from a bow, to grab two metal rods. A green glare shot from his eyes, and seemed to crackle when it struck an object. The metal rods silently parted, admitting more light into the enclosure from the lanterns and overhead stars, and revealing the shoe of a sentry. Uncle Arhat saw a dark shadow dart out of the enclosure. The Jap sentry grunted, then, in the mans viselike grip, crumpled to the ground. The man picked up the Japs rifle and slipped silently into the darkness.It took Uncle Arhat a moment to realize what had happened. The middle-aged man had shown him the way to escape! Cautiously, he crawled out through the opening. The dead Jap lay on the ground, face up, one leg still twitching.After crawling into the sorghum field, Uncle Arhat straightened up and followed the furrows, taking care not to bump the stalks and get them rustling. He found his way to the bank of the Black Water River, where the three starsRigel, Betelgeuse, and Bellatrixhung directly overhead. A heavy predawn darkness had fallen around him. Stars glistened in the water. As he stood briefly on the riverbank, he shivered from the cold, his teeth chattered, and the ache in his chin spread to his cheeks and ears, finally merging with the throbbing pain in his festering scalp. The crisp air of freedom, filtered through the juices of the sorghum plants, entered his nostrils, his lungs, and his intestines. The ghostly light of the two lanterns shone weakly through the mist; the dark outline of the fir-stake enclosure was like an immense graveyard. Astonished at having gotten away so easily, he strode onto the rickety wooden bridge, above splashing fish and rippling water, as a shooting star split the heavens. It was as though nothing had happened. He was free to return to his village to let his wounds mend and to go on living. But as he was crossing the bridge, he heard the plaintive braying of a mule on the southern bank. He turned back for Grandmas mules. This decision would lead to a grand tragedy.Horses and mules had been

tied to a dozen or more tethering posts not far from the enclosure, in an area saturated with their foul-smelling urine. The horses were snorting and eating sorghum stalks; the mules were gnawing on the tethering posts and shitting loose stool. Uncle Arhat, stumbling three times for every step, stole in among them, where he smelled the welcome odor of our two big black mules and spotted their familiar shapes. Time to free his comrades in suffering. But the mules, strangers to the world of reason, greeted him with flying hooves.Black mules, Uncle Arhat mumbled, black mules, we can run away together! The irate mules pawed the earth to protect their territory from their master, who was unaware that the smell of his dried blood and new wounds had changed his identity to them. Confused and upset, he stepped forward, and was knocked down by a flying hoof. As he lay on the ground, his side started turning numb. The mule was still bucking and kicking, its steel-crescent shoes glinting like little moons. Uncle Arhats hip swelled up painfully. He clambered to his feet, but fell back. As soon as he hit the ground, he struggled back up. A thin-voiced rooster in the village crowed once more, as the darkness began to give way to a glimmer of stars that illuminated the mules rumps and eyeballs.Damned beasts!With anger rising in his heart, he stumbled around the area looking for a weapon. At the construction site of an irrigation ditch he found a sharp metal hoe. Now armed, he walked and cursed loudly, forgetting all about the men and their dog no more than a hundred paces distant. He felt freefear is all that stands in the way of freedom.A red solar halo crumbled as the sun rose in the east, and in the predawn light the sorghum was so still it seemed ready to burst. Uncle Arhat walked up to the mules, the rosy color of dawn in his eyes and bitter loathing in his heart. The mules stood calmly, motionlessly. Uncle Arhat raised his hoe, took aim on the hind leg of one of them, and swung with all his might. A cold shadow fell on the leg. The mule swayed sideways a couple of times, then straightened up, as a brutish, violent, stupefying, wrathful bray erupted from its head. The wounded animal then arched its rump, sending a shower of hot blood splashing down on Uncle Arhats face. Seeing an opening, he swung at the other hind leg. A sigh escaped from the black mule as its rump settled earthward and it sat down hard, propped up by its forelegs, its neck jerked taut by the tether; it bleated to the blue-gray heavens through its gaping mouth. The hoe, pinned beneath its rump, jerked Uncle Arhat into a squatting position. Mustering all his strength, he managed to pull it free.The second mule stood stupidly, eyeing its fallen comrade and braying piteously, as though pleading for its life. When Uncle Arhat approached, dragging his hoe behind him, the mule backed up until the tether seemed about to part and the post began to make cracking sounds. Dark-blue rays of light flowed from its fist-sized eyeballs.Scared? You damned beast! Wheres your arrogance now? You evil, ungrateful, parasitic bastard! You ass-kissing, treacherous son of a bitch!As he spat out wrathful obscenities, he raised his hoe and swung at the animals long, rectangular face. It missed, striking the tethering post. By twisting the handle up and down, back and forth, he finally managed to free the head from the wood. The mule struggled so violently that its rear legs arched like bows, its scrawny tail was noisily sweeping the ground. Uncle Arhat took careful aim at the animals facecrackthe hoe landed smack on its broad forehead, emitting a resounding clang as metal struck bone, the reverberation passing through the wooden handle and stinging Uncle Arhats arms. Not a sound emerged from the black mules closed mouth. Its legs and hooves jerked and twitched furiously before it crashed to the ground like a capsized wall, snapping the tether in two, with one end hanging limply from the post and the other coiled beside the dead animals head. Uncle Arhat watched quietly, his arms at his sides. The shiny wooden handle buried in the mules head pointed to heaven at a jaunty angle.A barking dog, human shouts, dawn. The curved outline of a blood-red sun rose above the sorghum field to the east, its rays shining down on the black hole of Uncle Arhats open mouth.4THE TROOPS EMERGED onto the riverbank in a column, with the red sun, which had just broken through the mist, shining down on them. Like everyone elses, half of my fathers face was red, the other half green; and, like everyone else, he was watching the mist break up over the Black Water River. A fourteen-arch stone bridge connected the southern and northern sections of the highway. The original wooden bridge remained in place to the west, although three or four spans had fallen into the river, leaving only the brown posts, which obstructed the flow of the white foam on top of the water. The reds and greens of the river poking through the dissipating mist were horrifyingly somber. From the dike, the view to the south was of an endless panorama of sorghum, level and smooth and still, a sea of deeply red, ripe faces. A collective body, united in a single magnanimous thought. Father was too young then to describe the sight in such flowery termsthats my doing.Sorghum and men waited for times flower to bear fruit.The highway stretched southward, a narrowing ribbon of road that was ultimately swallowed up by fields of sorghum. At its farthest point, where sorghum merged with the pale vault of heaven, the sunrise presented a bleak and solemn, yet stirring sight.Gripped by curiosity, Father looked at the mesmerized guerrillas. Where were they

from? Where were they going? Why were they setting an ambush? What would they do when it was over? In the deathly hush, the sound of water splashing over the bridge posts seemed louder and crisper than before. The mist, atomized by the sunlight, settled into the stream, turning the Black Water River from a deep red to a golden red, as though ablaze. A solitary, limp yellow water-plant floated by, its once fiery blooms hanging in withered pallor among the leafy grooves like silkworms. Its crab-catching season again! Father was reminded. The autumn winds are up, the air is chilled, a flock of wild geese is flying south....Uncle Arhat shouts, Now, Douguan, now! The soft, spongy mud of the bank is covered with the elaborate patterns of skittering claws. Father could smell the delicate, fishy odor wafting over from the river.Take cover behind the dike, all of you, Commander Yu said. Mute, set up your rakes.Mute slipped some loops of wire off his shoulder and tied the four large rakes together, then grunted to his comrades to help him carry the chain of rakes over to the spot where the stone bridge and highway met.Take cover, men, Commander Yu ordered. Stay down till the Jap convoy is on the bridge and Detachment Leader Lengs troops have cut off their line of retreat. Dont fire till I give the order; then cut those Jap bastards to pieces and let them feed the eels and crabs.Commander Yu signaled to Mute, who nodded and led half the men into the sorghum field west of the highway to lie in ambush. Wang Wenyi followed Mutes troops to the west, but was sent back. I want you here with me, Commander Yu said. Scared?No, Wang Wenyi said, even though he nodded spiritedly.Commander Yu had the Fang brothers set up their cannon atop the dike, then turned to Bugler Liu. Old Liu, as soon as we open fire, sound your horn for all youre worth. That scares the hell out of the Japs. Do you hear me?Bugler Liu was another of Commander Yus longtime buddies, dating back from when he was a sedan bearer and Liu was a funeral musician. Now he held his horn like a rifle.Im warning you guys, Commander Yu said to his men. Ill shoot any one of you who turns chicken. We have to put on a good show for Leng and his men. Those bastards like to come on strong with their flags and bugles. Well, thats not my style. He thinks he can get us to join them, but Ill get him to join me instead.As the men sat among the sorghum plants, Fang Six took out his pipe and tobacco and his steel and flint. The steel was black, the flint the deep red of a boiled chicken liver. The flint crackled as it struck the steel, sending sparks flying, great big sparks, one of which landed on the sorghum wick he was holding. As he blew on it, a wisp of white smoke curled upward, turning the wick red. He lit his pipe and took a deep puff. Commander Yu exhaled loudly and crinkled his nose. Put that out, he said. Do you think the Japs will cross the bridge if they smell smoke? Fang Six took a couple of quick puffs before snuffing out his pipe and putting it away.Okay, you guys, flatten out on the slope so well be ready when the Japs come.Nervousness set in as the troops lay on the slope, weapons in hand, knowing they would soon face a formidable enemy. Father lay alongside Commander Yu, who asked him, Scared?No!Good, Commander Yu said. Youre your foster-dads boy, all right! Youll be my dispatch orderly. Dont leave my side once it starts. Ill need you to convey orders.Father nodded. His eyes were fastened greedily on the pistols stuck in Commander Yus belt, one big, one small. The big one was a German automatic, the small one a French Browning. Each had an interesting history.The word Gun! escaped from his mouth.You want a gun?Father nodded.Do you know how to use one?Yes!Commander Yu took the Browning out of his belt and examined it carefully. It was well used, the enamel long gone. He pulled back the bolt, ejecting a copper-jacketed bullet, which he tossed in the air, caught, and shoved back into the chamber.Here! he said, handing it over. Use it the way I did.Father took the pistol from him, and as he held it he thought back to a couple of nights earlier, when Commander Yu had used it to shatter a wine cup.A crescent moon had climbed into the sky and was pressing down on withered branches. Father carried a jug and a brass key out to the distillery to get some wine for Grandma. He opened the gate. The compound was absolutely still, the mule pen pitch-black, the distillery suffused with the stench of fermenting grain. When he took the lid off one of the vats in the moonlight, he saw the reflection of his gaunt face in the mirrorlike surface of wine. His eyebrows were short, his lips thin; he was surprised by his own ugliness. He dunked the jug into the vat of wine, which gurgled as it filled. After lifting it out, he changed his mind and poured the wine back, recalling the vat in which Grandma had washed her bloody face. Now she was inside, drinking with Commander Yu and Detachment Leader Leng, who was getting pretty drunk, no match for the other two.Father walked up to a second vat, the lid of which was held in place by a millstone. After putting his jug on the ground, he strained to remove the millstone, which rolled away and crashed up against yet another vat, punching a hole in the bottom, through which wine began to seep. Ignoring the leaky vat, he removed the lid from the one in front of him, and immediately smelled the blood of Uncle Arhat. The two faces, of Uncle Arhat and Grandma, appeared and reappeared in the wine vat. Father dunked the jug into the vat, filled it with blood-darkened wine, and carried it inside.Candles burned

brightly on the table, around which Commander Yu and Detachment Leader Leng were glaring at each other and breathing heavily. Grandma stood between them, her left hand resting on Lengs revolver, her right hand on Commander Yus Browning pistol.Father heard Grandma say, Even if you cant agree, you mustnt abandon justice and honor. This isnt the time or place to fight. Take your fury out on the Japanese.Commander Yu spat out angrily, You cant scare me with the Wang regiments flags and bugles, you prick. Im king here. I ate fistcakes for ten years, and I dont give a damn about that fucking Big Claw Wang!Detachment Leader Leng sneered. Elder Brother Zhanao, Ive got your best interests at heart. So does Commander Wang. If you turn your cache of weapons over to us, well make you a battalion commander, and hell provide rifles and pay. Thats better than being a bandit.Whos a bandit? Who isnt a bandit? Anyone who fights the Japanese is a national hero. Last year I knocked off three Japanese sentries and inherited three automatic rifles. Youre no bandit, but how many Japs have you killed? You havent taken a hair off a single Japs ass!Detachment Leader Leng sat down and lit a cigarette.Father took advantage of the lull to hand the wine jug up to Grandma, whose face changed as she took it from him. Glaring at Father, she filled the three cups.Uncle Arhats blood is in this wine, she said. If youre honorable men youll drink it, then go out and destroy the Jap convoy. After that, chickens can go their own way, dogs can go theirs. Well water and river water dont mix.She picked up her cup and drank the wine down noisily.Commander Yu held out his cup, threw back his head, and drained it.Detachment Leader Leng followed suit, but put his cup down half full. Commander Yu, he said, Ive had all I can handle. So long!With her hand still on his revolver, Grandma asked him, Are you going to fight?Dont beg! Commander Yu snarled. Ill fight, even if he doesnt.Ill fight, Detachment Leader Leng said.Grandma let her hand drop, and Leng jammed his revolver back into its holster.The pale skin around his nose was dotted with dozens of pockmarks. A heavy cartridge belt hung from his belt, which sagged when he holstered his revolver.Zhanao, Grandma said, Im entrusting Douguan to your care. Take him along the day after tomorrow.Commander Yu looked at my father and smiled. Have you got the balls, foster-son?Father stared scornfully at the hard yellow teeth showing between Commander Yus parted lips. He didnt say a word.Commander Yu picked up a wine cup and placed it on top of Fathers head, then told him to stand in the doorway. He whipped out his Browning pistol and walked over to the corner.Father watched Commander Yu take three long strides to the cornerthree slow, measured steps. Grandmas face turned ashen. The corners of Detachment Leader Lengs mouth were curled in a contemptuous smile.When he reached the corner, Commander Yu whirled around. Father watched him raise his arm, as a dark-red cast came over his black eyes. The Browning spat out a puff of white smoke. An explosion erupted above Fathers head, and shards of shattered ceramic fell around him, one landing against his neck. He shrugged his shoulder, and it slid down into his pants. He didnt utter a sound. The blood had drained from Grandmas face. Detachment Leader Leng sat down hard on a stool. Good shooting, he said after a moment.Good boy! Commander Yu said proudly.The Browning pistol in Fathers hand seemed to weigh a ton.I dont have to show you, Commander Yu said. You know how to shoot. Have Mute get his men ready.Gripping his pistol tightly, Father darted through the sorghum field, crossed the highway, and ran up to Mute, who was sitting cross-legged on the ground, honing his saber knife with a shiny green stone. Some of his men were seated, others lying down.Get your men ready, Father said to him.Mute looked at Father out of the corner of his eye, but kept honing his knife for another moment or so. Then he picked up a couple of sorghum leaves, wiped the stone residue from the blade, and plucked a stalk of grass to test its sharpness. It fell in two pieces the instant it touched the blade.Get your men ready, Father repeated.Mute sheathed his knife and laid it on the ground beside him, his face creased in a savage grin. With one of his mammoth hands, he signaled Father to come closer.Uh! Uh! he grunted.Father shuffled forward and stopped a pace or so from Mute, who reached out, grabbed him by the sleeve, jerked him into his lap, and pinched his ear so hard that he grimaced. Father jammed his Browning pistol up into Mutes rib cage. Mute grabbed Fathers nose and pinched it until tears came to his eyes. An eerie laugh burst from Mutes mouth.The seated men laughed raucously.A lot like Commander Yu, isnt he?Commander Yus seed.Douguan, I miss your mom.Douguan, I feel like nibbling those date-topped buns of hers.Fathers embarrassment quickly turned to rage. Raising his pistol, he aimed it at the man wishfully thinking of date-topped buns, and pulled the trigger. The hammer clicked, but no bullet emerged.The man, ashen-faced, jumped to his feet and wrenched the pistol away. Father, still enraged, threw himself on the man, clawing, kicking, biting.Mute stood up, grabbed Father by the scruff of his neck, and flicked him away. He flew through the air and crashed into a thicket of sorghum stalks. A quick somersault and he was on his feet, railing and swearing as he charged Mute, who merely grunted a couple of times. The steely look in his eyes froze Father in his tracks. Mute picked up the

pistol and pulled back the bolt; a bullet fell into his hand. Holding it in his fingers, he looked at the notch in the casing from the firing pin, and made some unintelligible hand signs to Father. Then he stuck the pistol into Fathers belt and patted him on the shoulder.What were you doing over there? Commander Yu asked.Father was embarrassed. They...they said they wanted to sleep with Mom.What did you say? Commander Yu asked sternly.Father wiped his eyes with his arm. I shot him!You shot somebody?The gun misfired. Father handed Commander Yu the shiny dud.Commander Yu took it from him, examined it, and gave it a casual flick. It described a beautiful arc before plopping into the river.Good boy! Commander Yu said. But use your gun on the Japanese first. After youve finished them off, anybody who says he wants to sleep with your mom, you shoot him in the gut. Not in the head, and not in the chest. Remember, in the gut.Father lay on his belly alongside Commander Yu; the Fang brothers were on his other side. The cannon had been set up on the dike, aimed at the stone bridge, its barrel stuffed with cotton rags, a fuse sticking out behind. Fang Seven had placed a bundle of sorghum tinder next to him, some of which was already smoldering. A gourd filled with gunpowder and a tin of iron pellets lay beside Fang Six.Wang Wenyi was to Commander Yus left, curled up, holding his long-barreled fowling piece in his hands. His wounded ear was stuck to the white bandage covering it.The sun was stake-high, its white core girded by a pink halo. The flowing water glittered. A flock of wild ducks flew over from the sorghum field, circled three times, then dived down to a grassy sandbar. A few landed on the surface of the river and began floating downstream, their bodies settling heavily in the water, their heads turning and darting constantly. Father was feeling warm and tingly. His clothes, dampened by the dew, were now dry. He pressed himself to the ground, but felt a pain in his chest, as from a sharp stone. When he rose up to see what it was, his head and upper torso were exposed above the dike. Get down, Commander Yu ordered. Reluctantly, he did as he was told. Fang Six began to snore. Commander Yu picked up a dirt clod and tossed it in his face. Fang Six woke up bleary-eyed and yawned so heroically that two fine tears appeared in the corners of his eyes.Are the Japs here? he asked loudly.Fuck you! Commander Yu snarled. No sleeping.The riverbanks were absolutely still; the broad highway lay lifeless in its bed of sorghum. The stone bridge spanning the river was strikingly beautiful. A boundless expanse of sorghum greeted the reddening sun, which rose ever higher, grew ever brighter. Wild ducks floated in the shallow water by the banks, noisily searching for food with their flat bills. Father studied their beautiful feathers and alert, intelligent eyes. Aiming his heavy Browning pistol at one of their smooth backs, he was about to pull the trigger when Commander Yu forced his hand down. What the hell do you think youre doing, you little turtle egg?Father was getting fidgety. The highway lay there like death itself. The sorghum had turned deep scarlet.That bastard Leng wants to play games with me! Commander Yu spat out hatefully. The southern bank lay in silence; not a trace of the Leng detachment. Father knew it was Leng who had learned that the convoy would be passing this spot, and that hed brought Commander Yu into the ambush only because he doubted his own ability to go it alone.Father was tense for a while, but gradually he relaxed, and his attention wandered back to the wild ducks. He thought about duck-hunting with Uncle Arhat, who had a fowling piece with a deep-red stock and a leather strap; it was now in the hands of Wang Wenyi. Tears welled up in his eyes, but not enough to spill out. Just like that day the year before. Under the warm rays of the sun, he felt a chill spread through his body.Uncle Arhat and the two mules had been taken away by the Japs, and Grandma had washed her bloody face in the wine vat until it reeked of alcohol and was beet-red. Her eyes were puffy; the front of her pale-blue cotton jacket was soaked in wine and blood. She stood stock-still beside the vat, staring down at her reflection. Father recalled how she had fallen to her knees and kowtowed three times to the vat, then stood up, scooped some wine with both hands, and drank it. The rosiness of her face was concentrated in her cheeks; all the color had drained from her forehead and chin.Kneel down! she ordered Father. Kowtow.He fell to his knees and kowtowed.Take a drink!He scooped up a handful of wine and drank it.Trickles of blood, like threads, sank to the bottom of the vat, on the surface of which a tiny white cloud floated alongside the somber faces of Grandma and Father. Piercing rays emanated from Grandmas eyes; Father looked away, his heart pounding wildly. He reached out to scoop up some more wine, and as it dripped through his fingers it shattered one large face and one small one amid the blue sky and white cloud. He drank a mouthful, which left the sticky taste of blood on his tongue. The blood sank to the base of the vat, where it congealed into a turbid clot the size of a fist. Father and Grandma stared at it long and hard; then she pulled the lid over it and rolled the millstone back, straining to place it on top of the lid.Dont touch it! she said.Looking at the accumulation of mud and gray-green sowbugs squirming in the indentation of the millstone, he nodded, clearly disturbed by the sight.That night he lay on his kang listening to Grandma pace the yard. The patter of her footsteps and the rustling sorghum in the fields formed Fathers

confused dreams, in which he heard the brays of our two handsome black mules.Father awoke once, at dawn, and ran naked into the yard to pee; there he saw Grandma staring transfixed into the sky. He called out, Mom, but his shout fell on deaf ears. When hed finished peeing, he took her by the hand and led her inside. She followed meekly. Theyd barely stepped inside when they heard waves of commotion from the southeast, followed by the crack of rifle fire, like the pop of a tautly stretched piece of silk pierced by a sharp knife.Shortly after he and Grandma heard the gunfire, they were herded over to the dike, along with a number of villagerselderly, young, sick, and disabledby Japanese soldiers. The polished white flagstones, boulders, and coarse yellow gravel on the dike looked like a line of grave mounds. Last years early-summer sorghum stood spellbound beyond the dike, somber and melancholy. The outline of the highway shining through the trampled sorghum stretched due north. The stone bridge hadnt been erected then, and the little wooden span stood utterly exhausted and horribly scarred by the passage of tens of thousands of tramping feet and the iron shoes of horses and mules. The smell of green shoots released by the crushed and broken sorghum, steeped in the night mist, rose pungent in the morning air. Sorghum everywhere was crying bitterly.Revue de presse"Mo Yan deserves a place in world literature. His voice will find its way into the heart of the reader, just as Kundera and Garcia Marquez have." (Amy Tan)"His idiom has the spiralling invention and mytho-maniacal quality of much world literature of a high order, from Vargas Llosa to Rushdie." (Observer)"Brilliant, lyrical and intoxicating." (San Francisco Chronicle)"One of China's leading writers... Mo Yan stands out in China's literary scene. His work rings with refreshing authenticity." (Time)"A real heir to Lu Xun, a fine Chinese writer deeply concerned with the gate of his fellow men." (Times Literary Supplement)