

Han Dong, *Banished!* Translated by Nicky Harman

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***Banished!** takes place during the Cultural Revolution. Tao and his wife are cadres uprooted and banished to the countryside, along with their son, young Tao. This apparently simple story touches on themes such as despair, parental love, and 'rootedness': ultimately, young Tao rejects tradition and defines his own roots, which are coloured by a lifelong memory of his childhood years in Sanyu village.*

In this excerpt, the family has been in the village about a year.

One day September and a friend called Little Dick came to the house to arrange to go hunting swamp eels with young Tao that evening. Little Dick was the same age as September but a good deal shorter. He was hunchbacked and as skinny as a beanpole. He was not strong enough to work for the production team, so he stayed at home all day, unlike September, who was to be seen around the village showing off his new growth of hair¹ and new outfit. Even if Su Qun had had advanced medical skills, she could not have cured Little Dick of his hump, so he was not especially close to the Taos.

They had come to invite young Tao to hunt swamp eels with them because they had their eye on the family's electric flashlight. When the wheat fields were flooded, swamp eels would emerge from their holes in the dykes, and transfixed by the light of the flashlight, they could just be picked out of the water.

¹ Su Qun, young Tao's mother, had become a 'barefoot doctor' and successfully treated September's ringworm.

Before the Taos' arrival, villagers going out to catch swamp eels at this time of year had to make do with small oil lamps. Even inside the house, these lamps, made of ink bottles, barely threw their light a couple of feet in front of them, so they were not much use in the open fields and not nearly as good as a flashlight for terrifying swamp eels. September of course was the only boy lucky enough to have easy access to the Taos' flashlight because of his friendship with them.

The two older boys each carried a big, round, narrow-necked fish basket, and young Tao had the flashlight, and in its flickering beam the three of them made their way out of the village.

Before they arrived, they could hear people sloshing through the water. Everywhere their oil lamps flickered like fireflies. The three boys got to the edge of the fields, took off their shoes, and waded in. Young Tao gave the flashlight to September and found himself holding September's smelly shoes, as well as his own. He followed the others.

His feet had not yet developed calluses, and the wheat stubble under foot jabbed his tender soles painfully. He walked with great care, not daring to lift his legs too high. Sometimes his feet touched sludge left by the river, and its coarse grains massaged his insteps pleasantly. Hobbling slowly and gingerly along, he soon got left behind. He asked September and Little Dick to walk more slowly, but they paid no attention. In the end, the bright flashlight beam moved so far ahead that he was left to feel his way through the dark paddy fields.

September and Little Dick soon filled their fish baskets with eels, but instead of coming back for young Tao, they made for the dyke on the opposite side, where they could take a rest while they waited for him to catch up. September was messing around with the flashlight, shining it here, there, and everywhere. Young Tao had no idea how long he had been wading through the water, but the flashlight seemed to him to be getting dimmer and dimmer until it looked just like one of the oil lamps. Finally, he reached the dyke himself.

September gave young Tao the flashlight, whose battery was by now run down, and took back his shoes. Young Tao was annoyed and wanted to go home, but the other two were engrossed in conversation and had no intention of going just yet. He said he would go

alone, but they scared him by telling him that all along the dykes and at the water's edge there were ghosts who particularly liked children, especially city kids like young Tao, soft-skinned and tenderfleshed, whom they considered such a delicacy that they would greedily wolf them down, yummy, yummy.

The topic of the youths' lively discussion was a girl. Guilan was from the first house on the west side of the village, where Yu Gengqing and his family lived. At eighteen, she still wet the bed, so every day there was a quilt draped over the straw stack at the front door, drying in the sun. When the Gengqings burned the straw in their cooker, it gave off a smell of pee. This problem meant that Guilan had reached the age of eighteen without finding a husband. Rumor had it that she had been engaged once to a man whose family lived in the Dazhang production brigade, a mile or so from Sanyu, but that when they discovered about the bed-wetting, they broke it off. Once back home, she was there for good. September and Little Dick were arguing about whether Guilan had actually married or not. One said yes and the other said no, and neither of them would give way.

According to September, on hot summer evenings Guilan liked to lie on a "lattice bed" in the cool of the Yanma River banks and would sleep there overnight. A Sanyu lattice bed was a frame made of branches through the middle of which was woven grass rope.

She lay on the lattice bed with no matting under her, so when she peed, the urine trickled through the lattice onto the river bank, and the smell was blown clean away by the morning breeze. All Guilan had to do was wash a few grass ropes. She could do this only in summer. In cold weather, she had to move back indoors, and every morning there would be a quilt spread out to dry on the straw stack outside the Gengqing household.

According to September, once in the early hours of the morning on his way back from catching swamp eels, he had seen Guilan asleep on the riverbank. He went up to her and pulled down her trousers. She turned over and scared the life out of him. He ducked down, and Guilan's big bottom was right in front of his nose.

"Guilan hasn't got any pubes!" he told Little Dick.

"No pubes?" said his friend. "No wonder she still wets the bed!"

They guffawed. Young Tao racked his brains but could not work out what "pubes" were.

"She's bad luck, she is! Bad luck!"

The older boys spat noisily. When he had finished spitting, September told them that afterward he had pushed Guilan into the river. It was common knowledge in the village that Guilan had fallen into the river and drowned.

Then the two boys started talking about what a pretty girl Guilan had been. Her white skin was prettier even than Su Qun's according to September, who said that if she had fallen into the flour tub, you would not have been able to tell where she was. As for her bottom (only September was allowed to say anything about her bottom, with Little Dick just playing the audience), it was like a mirror in which you could see your face.

When his mother came up in the conversation, young Tao did not want to hear any more. He started making a fuss again about going home, but September and Little Dick told him that Guilan had turned into a water ghost, and she climbed out of the river every night without a stitch of clothing on and a tongue a foot long hanging out of her mouth. That just made young Tao even more anxious to get home.

Eventually young Tao made his way home alone, though with considerable difficulty. (The flashlight was dead, and he had to go along the haunted banks of the Yanma River.) That night, he ran a high fever. When September turned up the next morning, young Tao refused to speak to him. Eventually Su Qun managed to get out of him September's story that he had pushed Guilan into the river. But Tao knew everything there was to know about the history of the village, and after doing a quick calculation on his fingers, he told his son, "September's talking poppycock. He was only nine years old when Yu Guilan died."

The real reason that young Tao and September stopped being friends was something else, however.

One day young Tao saw September talking to a group of boys under a tree in the village. Spotting him, their chatter and laughter grew louder, and they sneaked glances at him out of the corners of their eyes.

September was telling them a story about Su Qun. One day she had said to him, "It's so hot today!" To which he had said, "Not during the day, but it gets hot at night." And Su Qun had responded, "It's hot at night and hot by day too!" In the Sanyu dialect, "hot" and "fuck" sounded the same, and the boys all burst out laughing. Looking at young Tao, they said, "Fuck at night, and fuck by day too!"

Very pleased with themselves, they repeated this, laughing spitefully. September was most pleased of all since he had made it up. They kept telling young Tao that Su Qun had said, “Fuck at night, and fuck by day too!”

When he got home, young Tao told them September was a bad egg and that they should not buy any more duck eggs from him or lend him the flashlight. Su Qun spent a long time trying to get out of him what had happened, but the boy refused to say, and the family never did get to the bottom of it.