

# PUT TO PASTURE

## 放生

This collection of short stories from one of Taiwan's greatest living authors focuses on the elderly, and the quiet spaces they inhabit. Huang Chun-Ming turns his gaze to the paddies and porches of Yilan, his countryside home, and to a cast of brilliantly interesting characters, such as the newspaper reader, "Mr. At-This-Minute," the blind Ah Mu, and an unnamed, bearded old man whom the local children were convinced was their local Earth God incarnate. Huang Chun-Ming describes these members of his generation with compassion and honesty, and readers of all generations can empathize with these people who are filled with love, yet set aside.

*Put to Pasture* represents a high point in Huang Chun-Ming's storied literary career. Here, as he finds himself in the lives of his compatriots, his style comes into its full power.

### Huang Chun-Ming 黃春明

Short fiction writer and playwright Huang Chun-Ming is a Taiwanese literary legend. In over half a century of work, he's published books of short stories, essays, children's books and plays, and even poetry and film scripts. His best-known short story collections include *Watching the Sea*, *The Sandwich Man*, *Sayonara - Goodbye*, *Put to Pasture*, and *This Platform Has No Timetable*. Several of his works have been adapted for film and television. He has won several awards, including the Wu San-Lien Award and the China Times Literary Award, and was recently named a "Living National Treasure" by the Taiwanese government. His work has been translated into several languages, including Japanese, Korean, English, French, and German.



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# FLOWERS IN HIS BEARD

By Huang Chun-Ming. Translated by Eleanor Goodman.

It rained constantly that spring.

The days were extremely humid, and when people curled up under their heavy, clammy quilts, they had to curl up to stay warm. By the time their body heat had finally driven the moisture out and they felt comfortable, the sun would rise. To top it off, everything in the village started to mildew. Table and chair legs and the columns of pigsties sprouted mushrooms like little umbrellas.

The houses in the village belonged to farmers, so as long as the wells didn't run dry, everything was fine. No one cared about the humidity or the mildew. Uncle Jung's old joints had started to hurt the day before the rains came, and his family wanted to take him to the doctor. But he hated to spend money, and insisted that it wouldn't help anyway. He said he'd feel better as soon as the sun came out. But the rain fell without stopping. Each morning he took a trip to the small local shrine at the village entrance, shuffling along with umbrella in hand, to go to light some incense. The incense left in the shrine wouldn't light anymore, and he never remembered to bring three sticks of fresh incense from home as he'd planned. This time, his old joints weren't cooperating, so he couldn't just turn and go back. He stood in front of the shrine, and stuck his head and hands inside to light some incense. It refused to catch. He tried again, only giving up when the lighter's metal head burnt his fingers. He stood in the rain, holding the umbrella over himself and the waist-high shrine. He waited, paying attention to how his body felt. When his joints told him he could go, he would return home to get some incense. But his joints were stubborn, and just standing was an effort. Uncle Jung could only lift his right hand, and idly examine where the lighter had burnt him. Over the past few years, people in the village said he had grown to look more and more like the Earth God. That made him happy, as it was a kind of honor. The rain continued, and he looked up at the sky, whispering to himself, *You want to rain, then go ahead and rain. You've been raining for so long, I don't think you can rain for much longer.*

A few days later the sun came out, and Uncle Jung's joints stopped hurting. He shaded his eyes and squinted into the sun, whispering cheerfully, *I didn't believe you'd never come back out.* The villagers brought out their tables and chairs to let the legs air out, and of course hung out their quilts and clothing as well.

Children had their own world back as well. As soon as there was some sunlight, it seemed there was nowhere they couldn't go. Some of the bigger kids ran into town to get snacks or bubble tea, from the village girls who worked there, while others went to get ice cream and stroll in the sunshine. The kids who were still small enough to play house went outside to the nearby fields to play. On a sunny day after a long spell of rain, no one wanted to stay in. Even the chickens, ducks, cats, and dogs each found their own sunny corners, warming their bones in the sunlight. The flowers and insects were the same – the pink woodsorrel, yellow dandelions, purple and white wildflowers, all opened overnight to cover the banks of the irrigation ditches. Honeybees and yellow-and-white butterflies fluttered among them, chased by the children. Five or six children each picked a bouquet of pink woodsorrel to take to the banyan tree beside the shrine. But they came too late – the tree was occupied by an old man

with a full, white beard, leaning against the trunk to take a nap. They didn't want to disturb him, but when they heard his tremendous snore, they got curious, and gathered around.

"Whose grandpa is he?"

"I've never seen him. He's probably not from the village."

"Right! He isn't from around here."

After they had decided that the old man wasn't from their village, their voices got quieter, and they retreated a step.

"His face is so red, and his beard is so white!"

"His nose is even redder."

"He's got more wrinkles than my grandpa."

"Look at how big his ears are. It's weird." This child's grandmother often complimented him on how big his ears were, and what a lucky sign that was, so he especially noticed other people's ears.

"He's laughing in his sleep. How funny!"

They all laughed.

"Shhhh!" one of the little girls said, reminding them to be quiet. Their semicircle had tightened so much they couldn't step forward another inch or their heads would bump together. Seen from behind, the old man's torso and legs were completely hidden.

Then one boy cried, "I've seen him before!"

"Where?"

He wasn't sure. He said, "I've seen him more than once, lots of times."

"You're making that up."

"At...at..." the boy tried to think where. His feeling soon began to affect the other children, and their faces no longer showed suspicion.

"I...I think I've seen him too." The child was afraid the others would accuse him of lying too, so he spoke nervously.

To everyone's surprise, in the end, four children had the same feeling.

"Does he maybe look like the Earth God from the shrine?" another child queried.

When the others heard this, they echoed him in unison.

"Yes! He looks like the Earth God!"

The sudden shout startled the old man. The children had long since woken him, but he'd pretended to be asleep so he didn't disappoint them. He had been enjoying discussion.

The children knew they had been too loud and had certainly woken the old man. They started in fear and backed up a few steps to observe him. To reassure them, the old man shifted position, and snorted loudly through both nostrils so that his white beard trembled like a puff of cotton candy.

That put the children at ease right away, and they cautiously gathered close again. One of them whispered, "Look! He really is the Earth God."

They all agreed. That's how belief is: awe follows fear.

"But - but the Earth God wears a special outfit. This guy's wearing the same clothing my grandpa wears."

"Yeah. The god wears boots too. And he's barefoot."

"Let's go see if the Earth God is still there, and then we'll know for sure," one of them recommended.

They ran happily over to the shrine. As they approached, their footsteps slowed until finally they were tiptoeing forward. When they were five or six steps away, no one dared go further. They clung together in a group, bending forward to stare at the shrine. The sun was so

bright they couldn't see clearly inside.

"Hey! It's really gone!"

"It really is!"

The children in the back pressed forward, pushing the ones in front down to their knees.

"It's there! I see it," one of the kneeling kids cried excitedly. He'd been about to complain about getting knocked over, but now the pain was forgotten. "Look!"

The children squatted down to see better and spied the statue of the Earth God in front of the air vent. "I see it! It's there!"

At that point, the spirit that had been scared out of them by that mystical feeling returned to their bodies. They quickly squeezed together in front of the shrine.

"I want to see if he really looks like the god."

The entrance to the shrine was so narrow that an adult could barely fit his head and torso through, so even two small children was pushing it. Two had already stuck their heads in together, and the ones outside heard them talking.

"Do you think it looks like him?"

"It does and it doesn't."

"So does it look like him or not?"

"Not really."

"Not really?" His voice was questioning.

"Um, a little." He sounded doubtful. "Actually, now I think it does."

"It's weird," said the other, a bit downcast, "now that you say it looks like him, I feel like it doesn't."

They went on like that, making the children outside felt more and more impatient.

"Hurry up, it's our turn to look."

Before the first two had even pulled their heads back out, the others were pushing each other for a place in line.

After everyone had taken a good look, they came to the conclusion that the old man was not in fact the Earth God. He sort of looked like it, and sort of didn't. And no one had ever seen him before. He wasn't from around there.

Curious, they returned to the old man under the tree. When the old man saw them coming, he feigned sleep again, and started to snore. He found them adorable and wanted to keep the game going. The children felt the same way: the half-familiar old man was wonderful fun. They cautiously gathered around him again.

"Look, his beard is so white and so long, it looks so much like the Earth God." One child couldn't help but lean over and gently touch it. He stroked it a few times, while the old man pretended to be fast asleep. Once the first succeeded, they all took turns patting it carefully, stifling their laughter.

One child who still held some woodsorrel suddenly had a thought. He tried weaving a flower through the beard. Everyone liked this idea, and followed along. They were at an age where they had just learned to tie their own shoelaces, but this was a different material altogether and trying to thread flowers through a beard wasn't easy, especially with the clumsiness of their youth. Had the old man not truly loved children, it would have been quite a trial for him as well. Unified by their collective risk, the children felt stimulated by the tension. Risk-taking often ignores consequences and plays with danger. At the beginning, they had paid attention to where the hairs attached to the face. Threading the flowers in was hard enough, let alone finding a spot for each one, especially while being jostled by the other children. In the end, they forgot that the beard was attached to flesh, and some ended up yanking out the hair.

The old man could take the gentle ones, but when a rough one had a go at it, he moved a bit and pretended he was waking until the child let go and retreated. He knew that the instant he woke up, the game would be over, and he would feel their disappointment as his own. He didn't have grandchildren, and this was a chance to enjoy the company of children for a while. So the children watched as the old man seemed to slip back into sleep with a loud snore. They circled around him again to continue their creation: pink flowers woven into a silver beard.

Those who hadn't yet had a chance watched the others clumsily tucking flowers into the beard while they stifled their own urge to scold them for being rough. They also continued observing the old man's face.

"Look! He's crying," said one of the older girls anxiously, tapping one of the flower-weaving children on the arm.

They all focused on the old man's face. It was true: two glittering tears trembled at the crusty edges of his eyes. The children stopped and stared in silent remorse.

"He isn't really crying, is he? He's still smiling!" The child fervently hoped that the strange old man wasn't crying. Although the beard hid the upturned corners of his mouth, his round, high cheeks showed the children he was smiling.

Seeing this dispelled their nervousness. Stifled laughter began to burst forth again. Of course, the old man was aware of the entire scene, and his awareness became a kind of satisfaction. Those two tears, distilled from his emotion, were forced out by more behind them, like two children preparing to race each other down a slide. The children watched as the two tears ran down from the corners of his eyes toward his nose, crossing over the smiling cheeks and sliding into his nostrils, where they paused before burrowing into the forest of his beard.

One of the children said in surprise, "He is crying."

"He's not crying. He's smiling."

As the tears rolled past his nostrils, some got sniffed up into his nose. There was nothing he could do; they choked him. He wanted to hold it in, but suppressing it only made his eventual sneeze all the more explosive. The children were so surprised they didn't have time to run, but could only hide behind the tree. It was too narrow to conceal all of them, but they crowded there anyway, whispering.

The old man sneezed again and again. Having pretended to be asleep for so long, he was now stiff and sore. He knew the children were behind the tree, but he pretended not to notice. He finally stood up and stretched, and then began to walk toward the shrine. His white beard was threaded with many pink flowers, and as he walked, they swayed in the breeze and shone in the sun, as though he were bringing the lively scenery with him wherever he went.

The children stole glances at him and saw how happy he looked, and they felt moved. They followed him with their eyes as he receded from view. When his shadow slipped behind the shrine, it was as though he had disappeared. They ran to the shrine, to the bamboo grove, to the canola fields, back to the tree, and to the shrine again, but couldn't find him.

Feeling sad and unwilling to accept that they'd lost him, they took turns searching the shrine. Of course the old man wasn't there, but they all felt that the Earth God's expression seemed more kindly, its laugh lines a bit deeper.

Soon Uncle Jung came up from the village. He wasn't limping, since his joints no longer hurt. He wanted to tidy up the shrine, and change the incense.

"Are you here to make off with the offering cakes again?" Uncle Jung asked them cheerfully before sticking his head into the shrine to attend to his business.

The children didn't dare bring up the strange old man, but they wanted Uncle Jung to check whether the Earth God looked different.

One said, "Uncle Jung, do you know why the god is smiling?"

He withdrew from the shrine and smiled at the children. "Because the sun is out!" He saw their confused faces, and thought that his silly answer hadn't been clear enough. "It's been raining here for days." Then he ducked back into the shrine. This time he saw that the small stone altar in front of the deity was sprinkled with pink woodsorrel petals. Petals hung from the god's beard as well. He thought, *This is definitely the work of those naughty kids*. He pinched a few and backed out of the shrine, intending to ask them about it. But the children had disappeared. He looked at the petals in his hand and then bent down to glance at the god. A breeze lifted and he felt a sudden exuberance. On the road back to the village, he heard the voice of the smallest child crying to his brother, "Wait for me!"

Uncle Jung turned to look at the village. Then he shook his head and smiled.