

the bathroom

Jian Qin

Phoenix College

Honorable Mention, Creative Non-Fiction

CHAMBER POT BEHIND A WHITE and blue cotton curtain. That was the bathroom for our house.

It was placed next to my brother's bed. How smelly, he kept complaining. But nobody paid him any attention.

All the years when I was growing up, I had to carry out the chamber pot to the latrine on the other side of the river early in the morning. Sometimes, my sister and I carried it together. We would have to pass the front doors of a dozen houses. What I dreaded the most was to hold a full bucket over the ancient high-arched Eunuch Bridge.

My sister would lay her hands on her stomach and knead it like flour dough to fake a stomachache in order to get out of it. Then I had to do it all by myself. Those were the days when our mother was locked up in the lunatic asylum. If I didn't do it, who else would do it?

Every time I crossed the bridge, I could see the running water through the cracks between the huge stone slats. The gurgling water made me feel dizzy. Sometimes, I was afraid I would slip through the crack and fall into the river along with the chamber pot.

It rained a lot during the spring. It drizzled all day and all night. Then the stone slates became slippery like spilled rice porridge. We had to hold tight to the chamber pot and slow our steps like Granny Zhou who had a pair of small bound feet.

It was worse in the winter. I let bare my hands until my knuckles turned red like fresh turnip since I didn't want to soil my only pair of yarn gloves. Every blow of the north-west wind drilled through my padded jacket and bit my bones. I wished I could throwaway the bucket and never thought about it again. I hated the dented chamber pot and how its' red paint was peeling off like the skin of a leper. I hated its smell that could never be washed away, no matter how many pieces of Chinese honey locust you used. I hated that I had to sit on it and worry that its content might splash on me. I hated when it got too heavy for my reed-stem arms to carry. But I knew it was impossible for me to throw it away. How could any of us walk to the other end of the lane in the middle of a cold night to use the bathroom?

When it snowed, the stone slates of the bridge became more slippery. One time, I slipped and the bucket swayed. The lid fell off. The ugly yellow stains in the snow made me feel ashamed.

Every time I carried the chamber pot to the public latrine, I wished nobody were around. But our lane was always bustling with people walking or riding on bicycles or sitting in front of their houses. I hated the way men stared at you when you carried it with your shoulders slouching. Sometimes, boys made fun of you, calling you "smelly rat," like their mothers didn't have to carry those stinking buckets. I would pretend that I didn't hear them even though I felt like calling them names. I didn't want them to pick up river rocks and throw them at me and the bucket.

I would fetch water from the well to clean the chamber pot. I poured buckets of water into it to rinse. After that, my left hand held it while my right hand moved a bamboo brush in clockwise motion to clean the inner circle of the bucket. The bamboo brush beat the inside. It made clear and rhythmic sounds. I tried to brush off a layer of ivory film that was forming at the bottom. I brushed until my right arm became sore.

Even though I hated the chamber pot, there was one time in my life that I missed it. It was in 1975.

That year, our homeroom teacher led us to a village in accordance with Mme. Mao's appeal of "Open-door Curriculum." Mme. Mao ordered that all the students walk out of the campus to learn from the peasants and the workers instead of from their teachers. After all, teachers were only a group of stinking intellectuals who liked to spread bourgeois germs and capitalist seeds, according to her. Only peasants and workers could offer real knowledge to the students.

My class marched to a village by the Golden Rooster Lake with our blankets, toothbrushes, wash basins and toilet paper. We stayed there for three weeks. We slept on the floor, on a layer of dried rice straws that sent out smells of the rainy season. I didn't really mind sleeping on the floor at night or bending over the rice stalks to cut them with a sharp sickle during the day. What I dreaded was going to the bathroom and squatting over a huge vat buried out in the open. The villagers put triangle shaped straw hats high above their vats to shade them from the sun and the rain. Three corners around the vat, they made a straw closet to avoid the hooligans in the village from staring at women's butts. Each family buried a vat behind their house and the whole village stank.

On the first day by the Golden Rooster Lake, several girls of my class screamed and refused to squat over that big dirty vat. I knew a few of my classmates had toilets in their newly built apartment buildings: I heard all you needed to do was pull a string and flush. But where would all the shits go? It was difficult for me to imagine how it looked. I only saw chamber pots in my neighborhood. Buckets that swung in front of my eyes like the fat stomachs of middle-aged women, buckets that stood against the wall on winter days like old men and women sitting in the sun to keep warm.

"What's the scream? You spoiled city girls." The wife of the village head yelled. "You got to use the shit vat for free. We won't even ask you to clean it up." But I knew they would use it for fertilizers to spread on vegetables and rice stalks, just like how my neighbor scooped from her chamber pot to pour over the vegetables she grew by the river.

I hated that huge vat. It looked so much bigger than a chamber pot. I was afraid I would lose balance and fall into it. Then all the fat white worms floating in the vat or groveling around the edge would crawl all over my body. But I had no choice.

I have seen many bathrooms since, many of them I would have never imagined. I have been to the ones with shining floor, soothing music and flower scent. And all of them with flushing toilets. But wherever I go, I will never forget the bathroom behind a curtain and the buried vat with a straw hat.