Hard Woman

James C. Mitchell*

*Iowa State University

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Abstract

The launch nosed quietly into the dock, its exhaust blubbing in the greasy water...
THE launch nosed quietly into the dock, its exhaust blubbering in the greasy water. A length of rough manila trailed over the side and I move toward it.

"Git a move on and tie 'er up." The course voice surprised me. I thought it should have been this Mille I was looking for, but this sounded like a man. I looped the wet end of the rope around a battered post and waited for the voice to appear.

A figure emerged from the cabin. The floating dock sank perceptibly as she stepped from the boat to the slippery timbers. She swayed toward me, stopped, and glared, "New here, ain'tcha?"

"Yeah."

She looked me over, the sharp blue eyes squinting out from beneath glistening folds of flesh. "C'mon, I'll buy ya a beer." I followed her waddling bulk up the sagging plank that led to the deck of the floating bar.

"This is one of my joints. Nice, ain't it? Siddown. Hey, Joe! Bring us a beer!" She dropped her weight into an oversize wicker chair and kicked off her dirty canvas shoes. Wiggling her bulbous toes against the cool wood of the deck she stared at me again. "Where ya from?" My answer brought forth a derisive snort. "Hah! Iowa! A hell of a state that is!! Hitch-hiked through there once, and all I could get out of those damn' stingy farmers was flap jacks for breakfast." She pulled a dirty, red bandanna from the pocket of her faded cotton slacks and mopped the trickling perspiration from her fat face.

"What'cha doin' out here?"

"I've been looking for you."

"Huh!" She fumbled for a cigarette in the pocket of her blue denim shirt, found it, lit it with a wooden match, and blew a mouthful of smoke in my face. "What you wanta see me for?"

"I was with your son when he was killed in China."

She leaned forward, her stringy, sun-bleached hair slipping across her face, screwed up and ugly now. She took a quick
draught from the beer and sent the bottle spinning across the floor. It crashed against the stone fire-place. Then she seemed to get herself under control again. But her hand still trembled as she wiped the white flecks of foam from her pinched lips. The hardness in her eyes softened suddenly and she sagged deeper into the chair. The look of harsh independence gave way to one of lonely dejection.

"Then he is dead." A single tear crept slowly down her weathered cheek.


Drouth

The midsummer sun burns white at high noon.
June has passed, and the Thunder Moon.
A drouth lies over the blue-hazed land.
And the green water sleeps on the burning sand.
The wind blows hot through the brittle grass.
That whispers in the sun like fragile-speared glass.
It sighs in the apple-studded orchard trees
And drowns the droning of the honeybees.
It lifts the maple's silver-bright leaves
Where a dust-drab turtledove sadly grieves.
The sun parched earth lies heavy in dust,
With zigzag cracks slashing sun-baked crust.
The sun-beaten, wind-driven, green-leaved corn
Bows on stunted stalks, shredded and torn,
And thrusts its roots in the hollow ground
Searching for rain with a dying sound.
Grasshoppers leap in the sizzling heat
And a field sparrow trills in a voice honey-sweet.
Cicades shrill on paper-thin wings,
Legs like a bow on the fiddle strings.
White clouds laugh high in the blue-blue sky
As the brown earth prays while its children die.

—Ruth Knuths, H. Ec, Fr.