

A Retelling of Bret Harte's "In the Tules"
By Jina Kim

California

Two oxen, one prairie schooner, one man
New beginnings in a bountiful land
Land of promise, the pact of God and man
A virgin land waiting, with gold-like sand

At the rough mountains, my resolve quivers
But my singular ways do not waiver.
A wide intricate tangling of rivers,
Strange grass; my ultima thule delivered.

Still, my habits of loneliness are there.
No neighbors and a solitary meal,
Self-reliance that leaves the soft heart bare.
The empty vastness, my Achilles' heel.

I am Nature's conqueror, all alone.
I smoke my pipe and leave my thoughts to roam.

The Steamboat

A deep throbbing stands out in the silence
A steady heartbeat of dark, wide waters
A labored panting, the song of Sirens
The sweet seduction of River's daughters

I am half-curious, half-full of fear.
I leap from my wagon with strange feelings.
I stand on the river banks, squint, and peer
At sheer grandeur, like heavenly beings.

The planetary lights pierce the dark sky,
Illuminating luxury within
Marble-tops and gleaming glasses on high
Elegant men and women dance and spin

I am enthralled, mystified, in pure awe.
A dream world of which I fail to find flaw

The Encounter

A black object turns, a man in distress
Helpless against the merciless currents
As if Fate, with her power to possess,
Brings this man to me, in vague aberrance

I save the struggling man and he survives.
He comes from elegance, the steamboat world
He is quite rude and sharp as he arrives
Yet his charm—rare, sublime like a clam pearled

He asks me, “Are you not a bit worried,
The mean luck of saving a drowning man?”
I look at him and answer unhurried,
“No, I will do it again if I can”

He smiles and listens to my life's story.
My loneliness hides in the quarry.

The Domination

Late night, my guest is in profound slumber.
He is Amaryllis; I, Corydon.
I watch him with nothing to encumber.
A thought hits, hidden but not forbidden.

This man has completely dominated
Me, my personhood, my self-reliance.
As if all of my life I have waited,
Searched for something that sparks my compliance.

I do not know more of his accident.
I do not resent his abrupt rudeness.
I cannot grasp his silence, adamant.
I wonder the span of his astuteness.

It matters not. Right now, this odd pleasure,
Akin to love at first sight, is treasured.

The Coincidence

A black object turns, a dead man this time.
Strange parallels, a strange coincidence
Bloodless neck wound, a man killed in his prime.
Strange parallels but lack of evidence

Same boat, same river, yet divergent fates
Enough to cause a frontier-man's terror
This pitiful man who has passed Hell's gates,
What fatal slip led to the Prince's lair?

Restlessness arises, how would Jack feel?
An unknown relief, a baffling, dark fear?
The tie between the two is urgent, real.
If Jack knew, if he cared, would he appear?

I bury the body, grieve I do not.
As if I bear guilt, I fear being caught.

The Horses and The Doctor

A couple of fine horses were left here
By someone unnamed, likely to be Jack.
Soon after, a doctor and nurse appear
To aid with the care my ill body lacks.

I hope Jack, in his fine clothes, will return
To ease the itching sadness left behind.
It may not happen. But ambition churns.
To belong to his steamboat world, refined.

Ailing body emits stark bitterness
Once affectionate, now childishly vexed.
Cold aloofness and distant fickleness
Weapons against my naive care repressed.

Under his cold surveillance, I exist
A blessing? A curse? Do I dare resist?

The Steamboat Pt. 2

Velvet lounges and a shower of sparks
How intensely I have yearned to belong
How silly it now seems as I embark
On the steamboat, the desire prolonged

When one puts something on a pedestal,
It never is as it outwardly seems.
The ambience which once looked so festal
Has the emptiness of abandoned dreams

I am a ghost, alone, unrecognized.
The old isolation rebounds harsher.
My independence, never jeopardized
Reality is its abolisher.

Facing this insincere, vulgar Moloch
My lone solace, the cunning of Jack's luck

The Flood

I awake from sleep, hand touching water.
My roof slides, my home wrecks; I need refuge.
The horses, victims of River's slaughter
The awe-inspiring primeval Deluge.

Limbs weak, mind crumbling; I almost taste death.
The urge to plunge downwards becomes stronger.
The sheriff's face looms, doomed with his last breath.
Jack calls my name, sweet, kind like a lover

Too close, I am pulled out by a strong grip.
Strange men sent by Jack, his final rescue
His letter says, "With you, the curse is skipped.
It became mine to bear when I saved you."

He will never again watch over me.
A farewell to Captain, I mourn for thee.

The Last Encounter

Luck of the stupid, irony of gods!
Wealth does not leave space for self-reliance.
Fate and free will are quite seldom at odds.
A man's life changes when gold is found by chance.

But not even gold can make one forget
The steamboat, the flood, the distant kindness.
Jack's eyes lock with mine, I'm filled with regret.
Death tied around his neck with a tightness.

A kindly smile lights his face, perfect, pure
The proud man bows his head to say "good-bye".
His presence, ever the utmost allure.
A last act of love, a good day to die

I kiss his feet for the first and last time.
My eyes close, at peace with Jack and his crimes.

Work Based On

Harte, Bret, "In the Tules," *The Strand Magazine: An Illustrated Monthly* (London) X, 95 (Jul 1895), 753-64.