

SHANGHAIED

BY JESS ARNDT

THE MINERS CAME IN FORTY-NINE,
THE WHORES IN FIFTY-ONE;
AND WHEN THEY GOT TOGETHER
THEY PRODUCED THE NATIVE SON

The Drowsy: A prologue

Ships empty. Their decks black with sea, whale-reek still on them. A watchman, a half-drunk Captain and no one else. Holds flapping bare to the breeze.

-Open up.

At *Ming's* opium haunt, through the pungent doorway a shadow yanks the head back, holding the severed pigtail in hand. *Ming* shakes no, sweat on his jaw.

-I said open the fuck up.

On the floor three doped sailors lie in a mess of knots.

Knifepoint on the soft of *Ming's* under-chin, nudges the old teeth open.

-Here you go grandfather, stuffing the pigtail past the wet struggling tongue, deep into the quivercave of mouth.

Knife nicks the skin and a bright line of blood springs out, thickening into drops.

Pulling *Ming's* silk jacket off, caressing it once and throwing it to the dirt crunching heels into it.

-Good old boy, and kicking him down onto his torn coat.

Three other men hoist the bodies into a waiting cart.

Fog like seabreath piling higher and higher on the bosky and dark green hills. Massive pungent swaths of it pearling up from the West and then down again, shoving hard into the wet slaps of wood until the tenements and storefronts sink slowly off-kilter. Sun weak and horizontal and then gone.

A Breakfast in Town

One box of Sardines...\$16 00

One box of hard bread... 2 00

One pound of butter..... 6 00

A half pound of cheese... 3 00

Two bottles of ale..... 16 00

Total..... 43 00

plus

One quart good whisky.. 30 00

to wash it.

Coughing, coughing. Sea carrack, the cold. *Mabel's Hoochy-Coo*. Why don't we shove up in here? Like a stiff one... Nice and homey. A mother uv a wind outside. Wanting my feet on the goddamn goldcoated ground.

Hydrophobia: a morbid dread of water; sign of rabies.

The Recipe: schnapps laced with beer laced with sleeping pills, whisky plumed with tobacco chaw and laudanum. A bludgeon, a bung-starter. Struck a cigarette dipped in morphine.

Lime-Juice Corner, cross of Battery and Jackson. Out from *Mabel's*, a couple of ruddy-faced sailors sharing bottled whiskey with a stranger, a chloroform-cloth hidden in his sleeve. The kids first standing, then sitting until little by little slumping farther down drooling into the crate wood and skins of withered fruit.

-Carlos? Mumbles one. I coulda sworn his name wz

Pockets cut through and the entrails emptied quick into bags. Everything sold. Locketts, bent knives, a scrap of paper claiming some gold country east of Sacramento. *Dear Ma, I'm coming home...* Five dollars for a half-scrawled love letter to be finished by a new hand, then sent off.

-I need ta piss. Put my bare ass on land for some reason. What wz it? Tongue thick, tongue slugged. Where'd my knife get...? Hunnh. Carlos?

Rat-squeak in the low crease of night. The runner rowing the boat out, some of the bodies breathing. The Captain tosses a towline over and yanks out the slack. Counts down on the dark forms, seven, eight, quite a haul: his new crew.

-Scratch my name on the wall, scratch something, you...swear I wz here?