

HARD PLACES

Also by John Fraser
and published by AESOP Modern Fiction:

Animal Tales
Black Masks
Blue Light / Starting Over
The Case
Down from the Stars
Enterprising Women
An Illusion of Sun
The Magnificent Wurlitzer
Medusa
Military Roads
The Observatory
The Other Shore
The Red Tank
Runners
Soft Landing
The Storm
Three Beauties
Wayfaring

HARD PLACES

John Fraser



AESOP Modern Fiction
Oxford

AESOP Modern Fiction
An imprint of AESOP Publications
Martin Noble Editorial / AESOP
28 Abberbury Road, Oxford OX4 4ES, UK
www.aesopbooks.com

First edition published by AESOP Publications
Copyright (c) 2011 John Fraser
www.johnfraser.info

The right of John Fraser to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the copyright designs and Patents Act 1988.

A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

First edition 2011, revised 2014

Condition of sale:

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, sold or hired out or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

ISBN: 978-0-9561409-5-1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Lightning Source UK Ltd,
Chapter House, Pitfield, Kiln Farm,
Milton Keynes MK11 3LW

Contents

Red Snow	7
The Rock	91
The Sea	169

RED SNOW

An Entertainment

‘Toute pensée émet un coup de dés’
Stéphane Mallarmé,
Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira l’hasard

‘O paradis cent fois retrouvé reperdu
Tes yeux sont mon Pérou ma Golconde mes Indes.’
Louis Aragon,
Les yeux d’Elsa

~ I ~

‘Hold on! Hold him!’

‘It’s hair! I can’t,’ she says.

‘Hold his hair. No, he’s gone,’ I say.

‘We pitched too near the edge. It was so beautiful,’ she says.

‘There he sails – oh no, like a bale of something. And – red snow!’ I say.

Elsa says, ‘Must be something sharp. Oh dear, how terrible.’

‘You let him go. Idiot. He died a hero’s death.’

She says, ‘He was asleep. He dreamt. Perhaps of me. He wriggled.’

‘A hero’s death,’ I say. ‘And who’s to know. That accolade the last, the least, thing we can do.’

She complains, ‘This stupid search. All the flowers are shut and under snow.’

‘Just chance. Another year will come.’

She says, ‘That’s excitement for today, enough! At least there aren’t people to be told.’

A flurry in the night.

‘You could have grabbed him,’ I say.

‘By his hair? It’s mad. Now, don’t start on me. He chose the spot, he warmed his way right down – the void, the void!’

Hard Places

‘Don’t get upset. You rock the tent.’

‘Not upset – doing my analysis, is all. Coming to terms.’

This sliding in the chill, the cold – enough!

Another scheme:

I say, ‘Paradise: food and flora.’ What do you think?’

She says, ‘Nice for the cover. As for the book itself – you’ve got it wrong. Paradise is when you’re dead. You must mean Eden – that’s where the Fall begins.’

‘There must be stuff on both. They’re basic gardens. The pity is – it’s Africa, that’s where it starts. Besides, between the fall and death, there’s just white time, just waiting for the bus. Our big idea is – immortality. Not eternity – that’s over in a flash. But going on, day after day, your legs in causal chains, your head is twisting side to side and getting wiser by the hour. What we must ask is – what animals, what flowers and such you need, to live the good, the everlasting life? That’s what the texts are all about, it’s where the heroes come to rest when all the slaying’s done.’

Elsa says, ‘You’re wrong. But sure – the idea’s a

seller, it's commercial.'

'Not just the bible stuff – all kinds of other tales, like Gilgamesh – there's deer and pomegranates, juice of peach, manna and mushrooms. And some feisty people too.'

'It's worth another expedition. Adventures – they'll arrive for sure,' she says.

'This year the world won't end, the holes are plugged in earth and sky,' I say, 'so we'll go back, and on our watch again – casting runes, the tarot, chair arrangement, cheering up the old. Mysteries.'

She says, 'You've got the book already written. What's the point of more?'

I show her. The book, as it is. It's a block of cardboard, there's no text, just montage of an eye, a feather, mountain cave, a shoulderblade with bullet hole.

I say, 'The colour's sharp.'

Grey, yellow, indigo, a splash – vermilion in a white expanse. Could be an error. All to play for.

Here's the project, then – and no more Arctic, frozen flowers, it's off to Africa, and I say, 'We must live as heroes. Then be forgotten.'

'That's not why heroes do it.'

Hard Places

I insist: ‘An epic. For the people. And the kids.’

She’s back on her track again, her lover sliding down the slope, nearly now forgotten. She says, ‘The kids? Little screwed-up guys. Too plugged-in, clued-up and clueless.’

‘You may be right. But that is everything there is.’

The pole is moving, further east and south. So we follow, hoping on the way we’ll eat and find a stash of something good. Fatuous, the complaining of the rigours, and the luxury.

I say, ‘We’ve learned to look on, coldly. Then – out, into the cold.’

‘Is that heroism,’ she asks, uninterested in an answer. ‘Guess it is.’

We inherit everything. Now, I’ve inherited Elsa. Ah, those ideas, the gardens, beautiful, like in the poem. Stupid! Much better than in the poem, any poem. And Elsa, my grubby muse, queen heavy with her tragedy – or, in this case, someone else’s.

I say, ‘Heroes need a big cast – or a big mountain. Well, I’ve tired of mountains. There, you don’t feel free, you feel cold and breathless. Bring on the elevators. As for the extras, cast of thousands – are they willing to be turned to monkeys or to stone, trampled or boiled? Where shall we find them?’

I already have the answer.

Down at the pier our ship is ready – striding off,

then, back with the loot. Sailors – once shoremen all, their houses burned, and some throats cut – a host of ghosts a-twittering before the prow, the sea is full of them, the lifeless and the dispossessed. ‘Home are the pirates, home from the sea’ – but they aren’t, they never are. What a fate, what a tempting, this ‘going on board’ – and boards these are, I stamp on them. Theatre or coffin. Urchins grown specially and sent aloft. Those sea eagles make fine weapons, if you train them right.

There’s Elsa, at the prow, she points, as if she leads the ship, the breasts, the eyes, some randy sailors paint her after every trip.

‘We’ll find some guys to sort things out,’ she says. ‘Ours is no rubber raft that circles with no destination.’

‘It’s Nick, the manager,’ I think. ‘When he comes, she’ll feel assured. It seems to her it’s all a nonsense, floating from there to here.’

If you live beside the sea, you can never throw anything away, it all regurgitates. This whole front, this shoreline, must have been tossed in, tossed back, so many times ...

Here’s a door, two halves. One half says Cruise,

Hard Places

the other half says Crews.

I say, 'We want to do a book. On Paradise. We hate the sea, but still I need a crew.'

The guy is silent, and I say, 'About four thousand.'

'Where you going?'

'To the interior,' I say. 'Find a safe haven.'

'Done it before?' he asks, 'This haven here's quite safe.'

'Done all, and many times before. This haven here is too beside the sea – always beginning over, as they say. For me, it's useless. I need something new. Each time a something new.'

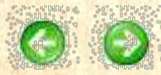
'Food? Women?'

'I shall take my own, as much as I need – the guys you sell me, they're not dumb, they'll do as they see fit. Along the way.'

'You want insurance?'

I say, 'No – these guys aren't stupid, they know what captains are. Altimeters, shovels – those are all they need,' and I think, and do not say, 'Plus all the cash they've got,' for, sure, they are not stupid, and they know that stuff is useful, always, when you've no address, no destination.

*



To read more
[purchase the full version](#)
of Hard Places