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Sylvia Williams, Boarding House Owner

by Robert Cooperman

Ever since I first run into
that crazy white man, John Sprockett,
he couldn't keep a thing from me
like I was the confiding sister he never had.
He started me in the boarding house trade
after sampling my biscuits and gravy
when he found me wandering like Israelites
after I run off from Master and Missus
and he'd given up killing Kansas folks
that believed in freeing us slaves.

John said he was ashamed of that episode,
but he can't keep himself from killing.
This time, it's Reverend Burden,
who, I admit, used to quote Jesus at me:
"Slaves, obey your masters."
I pointed out to that toad-spit
there wasn't no slaves no more,
and my shotgun—propped under his nose—
could outargue Jesus if He demanded
room and board, but no coins to pay.

John insisted Burden was biding
his time for a midnight exaltation.
"Let me see to him," John spat;
I said no, not wanting that sorry ghost
interfering with my sleep.
Still, John did kill him,
as a kindness to the Preacher's widow.

Should've been Eagle Feather's job:
a blind man can see he'd laugh
at Apache torture
if her fingers were to scissor
his black hair off his face.

Gambler Longstreet's taking bets
on how it happened. I put a dollar on
"Accident." Longstreet chuckled,
"As innocent as God made you black."
I smiled and said, "You may be right."

