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## Olive Phalen, Formerly of New York: Laundress

Robert Cooperman

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# Olive Phalen, Formerly of New York: Laundress

by Robert Cooperman

Da bartered me over and over,  
men wild for a virgin —  
or so he swore was my condition—  
till I stole the cash he thought  
himself clever as a Tammany boss  
to hide under a floorboard.

When I landed on this gold mountain,  
I got took under the broad black wings  
of Preacher Burden's Sunday coat,  
a good man—who cried my competence  
with laundry and simple mending  
to all and sundry —  
though he's a damnation Baptist.

His wife too pure to dirty herself  
cleaning his shirts;  
I'd have married him,  
if the job didn't mean  
nastyng the sheets at night.  
How else, you'll ask, can we bring  
good Catholics into this world?  
Ask the Blessed Virgin.

Preacher Burden let me bide  
in his house: my own bedroom  
and a tin tub filled once a week  
with hot water; lye soap  
scouring the dirt off me.  
He read to me from the Bible  
till sleep washed me clean.

Wouldn't surprise me if his wife  
shoved him down that dirty pit.

