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Robert Cooperman

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The Reverend Thomas Burden Considers His Calling

by Robert Cooperman

As a boy I was called by the Lord
to cry out against all evil nesting
like cottonmouths in a river.
My sermons made grown men weep,
women screech and speak in tongues.
Everyone said I had the power
of the Lord in my voice and eyes.

Now, a viper stings my vitals,
but I can't tell Lavinia
that Mary LaFrance's white breasts
beckon like snow-capped peaks,
promising the sight of God
and all His dancing angels.

Mary longs for San Francisco,
but if we sneak off like Jonah—
swallowed by the whale
of his disobedience—
I'll end up blaming Mary
for my sliding into sin;
she'll grow bitter as Lavinia:
my barren wife spinning webs
of gall beside our unhappy hearth.

No, I'll see Mary when I can,
offer her my hand
if something befalls Lavinia,
though it's a sin even to hope
for her untimely, accidental death.

