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Robert Cooperman

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Mary LaFrance, Prostitute, Gold Creek

by Robert Cooperman

One look at John Sprockett's face
and spiders are walking all over my belly:
that evil eye ripped out by a grizzly,
claw marks jagged as Satan plowing his cheek.
An ugly heart too, always sizing up a fight
when he's downed enough rot-gut
to kill most of the men sipping as far
from him as the walls will allow.

"What you gawking at?" he'll snarl.
One feller laughed once, and was dead
before the guffaw could roar out of him.
Now, boys just mumble apologies,
knees knocking like the nutcracker
I saw in Mr. Smith's window one Christmas.
The other girls hate him too,
afraid he'll tear our throats out
like that grizzly should've done to him,
though he's always polite with all of us.

So you could've knocked me flat
with a tail feather when he traipsed in,
an Englishwoman on his arm,
her eyes superior slits.
Yet something in the way she held him:
heart-shot by that murderer.
And him stately, sober as Lincoln.

They ate so silent you could hear
the whiskers growing out of Sid's nose.
Sprockett set the key for the one private room
in her hand, escorted her upstairs.
I thought we'd hear the bed creaking
like a stage chased by bandits.
But he thumped back down,
men hiding smiles behind swigs of liquor.

Silence sank into the warped floorboards
while he sat in a corner and glared,
big as a bear, waiting for the least excuse
to toss someone through the window,
and business slow enough
I wouldn't have minded the excitement.

