



6-15-1997

Sophia Starling Attends a Dying Man, Colorado Territory

Robert Cooperman

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Recommended Citation

Cooperman, Robert (1997) "Sophia Starling Attends a Dying Man, Colorado Territory," *Westview*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 22.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol16/iss2/22>

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Sophia Starling Attends a Dying Man, Colorado Territory

He filled the kitchen with his moaning,
his feet covered by heavy socks quivering
with each spasm that shook him like a mastiff.
His brother wandered sobbing through the inn,
racked by chills but still able to walk.

Any appetite I had upon entering—
from a day of forcing my mare
through drifts past her withers
and streams freezing into my boots—
was swept away by his broken hurricanes.

The landlady kept soaking a rag,
but a dance was planned
so I agreed to sit with him
while a fiddle scuttled down my spine
like insects no scratching can abate.

He died during the wildest reel
the fiddler's elbow could inspire.
One instant his body was drawn
into the air, the next tossed down,
those socks giving off the odour of slow death.
His brother beat his head on the door frame,
crying, "Easier to die at home in Delaware."

I wanted to hold his hand in comfort,
but fear of contagion forced me outdoors
to gulp down buckets of rasping air
until the landlady came to me,
saying the corpse had been removed,
my pallet beside the stove quite ready,
not another bed in the entire establishment.

Mr. Sprockett, my guide,
sat with the bereaved brother
for the rest of the night.
At dawn he built a coffin
from some slats behind the barn.
His skills continue to amaze me.
He even recited a portion of "Lycidas,"
no minister within fifty miles
of the grave it took Mr. Sprockett
half the morning to dig, with a pick-axe,
the ground hard as Dante's Ninth Circle.

by Robert Cooperman