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Sophia Starling Writes to Her Sister After Climbing Long's Peak, Late September, 1873

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Sophia Starling Writes to Her Sister After Climbing Long's Peak, Late September, 1873

Dear Aggie,
Congratulate me! The first Englishwoman
to stand this close to Heaven,
air so thin it cracked like spring ice.
Yet it was more a stiff hike
than a Matterhorn ascent: a well-marked path;
still Mr. Sprockett had to lift me,
my lungs tearing like cheap paper,
my boots slipping on inconsequential pebbles.

At the summit, we gasped and pivoted,
a hundred mile views in all directions:
to the east, plains a brown ocean;
to the west, peaks like giant white-caps.
I could have stood there forever,
but he pointed to black, bulging clouds.
"An early snow," he hastened our descent.

I've had a salutary effect on him,
smelled not an exhalation fouled by drink,
his language chivalrous as Lancelot's.
Still, men say he rode with raiders
during the late American War,
savage as any wolverine or lynx.
Yet he recites poetry so feelingly,
even scraps of his own verse,
written, he laughs, when he was young
and rabid for an Indian squaw
who understood not a word or rhyme,
whose brother and betrothed he slew,
when they disapproved of his courting.

I silently thanked him for that dash of reality,
the fire that crackles between us a chasm
wider than the canyon men claim
sparkles in the Arizona Territory
like a hundred miles of gems and Botticell's.

by Robert Cooperman