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John Sprockett Recalls the First Man He Killed

I told Miss Starling of my first kill,
to make her see the lines ripped in my face
aren't just scars from a grizzly—
but invisible signs Satan marked me with at birth
until he sent his clawed messenger
to remind me I'd been claimed for darkness.

Jimmy was the boy the whores loved
to pet like a clever songbird
that could make you forget you hadn't seen
your ma since cholera sweated her into the ground
or that your pa had hurled curses
and cow shit at your back when you ran off.

Jimmy had fine blond hair drooping into eyes
so deep women wanted to drown there,
a smile for all the whores and miners;
even rough boys would sob into their whiskeys
and think of home when he strummed and sang.
No one gave a buffalo's fart
that I could recite poems by the hour,
had even composed a few.

When he accidentally spilled my bottle,
I rammed my gun into his quivering gut.
"He ain't even armed!" a whore cried.
Hell, I didn't want to shoot him,
just make him shut up for a bit
and not be so damned adored.
But a demon inside me pulled the trigger
and laughed to watch
Jimmy's grin fade on his white face.
I flogged my mount toward Quantrill—
looking for men who'd buried consciences
too deep for even wolves to scratch loose.

I'd lay some flowers on that boy's grave,
but they'd wilt in my paw.
Besides, his stone's probably purest marble,
bought by whores missing his voice and sweet face.
I'll be lucky to lie below a wood cross
that'll be no help when Satan claims kin.

by Robert Cooperman