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Aboard the Britannia, Sophia Starling Recalls Her First Night of Intimacy with John Sprockett

by Robert Cooperman

I have tried to blot it out,
but like a bloodstain, it will not come clean.
Sitting in a deck chair in the sun,
the chug of engines, the slap of surf,
the murmur of sedate laughter of travelers,
it seems impossible now:
his face twisted by terrible scars
but on that evening—cold, wet,
exhausted from floundering through drifts,
our horses lost, an exhilaration
to be alive against all odds—
I succumbed to his desires, and my own.

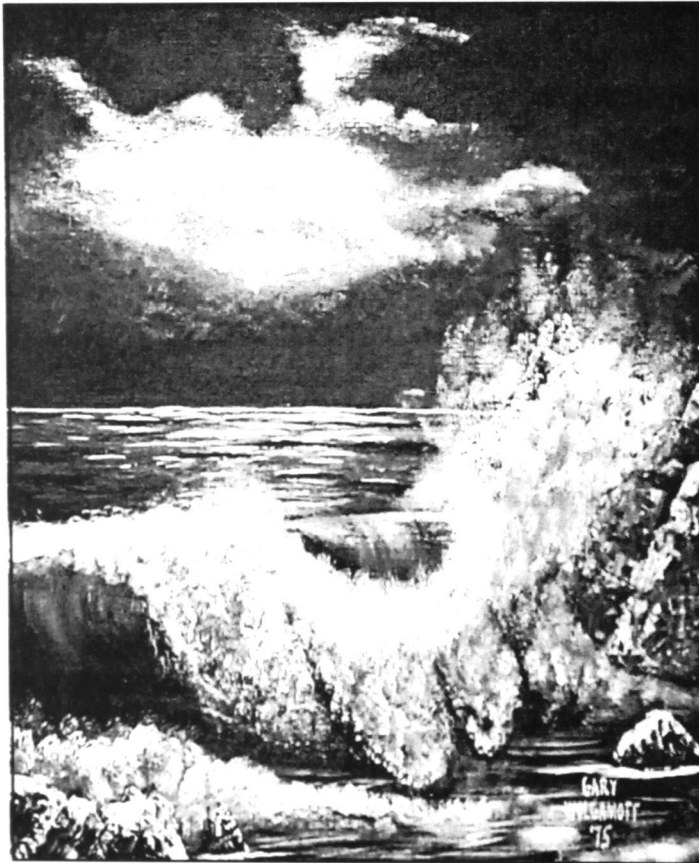
What would these ladies and gentlemen say?
What would a future husband do?
But to deny it is to betray the poet
hiding in a man of violence,
though his verses were laughable:

“Miss Starling and me, we traveled together,
Through fields of columbines, brutal weather.”

Ludicrous, yet they make me cry.
That night, despite my attempts at burial,
shall remain with me forever.
I can feel his arms laying me down
on the rough pallet, his hands chaffing warmth
back into my frost-nipped fingers and feet.
I cried out when feeling returned
and he sang to distract the pain, startled me
with bits of verse he composed on the spot.
When I kissed him, clung to him
like a grateful shipwrecked mariner,
all the stars exploded at once.



I shudder, a steward asks if I've caught
a chill in the changeable sea air.
"No," I smile at my secret memory.
Suddenly, I'm sobbing, running to my cabin,
tears like run-off, his ghost a fading mist,
no place for him in England,
as he would attest with a tip of his stetson,
a nudge to the withers of his stallion
lost in the blizzard.



Painting by Gary Wolgamott