

SUZIE ECKL

*Gussie Remembers Winter in Circle City*

One night, Bill, you had your spree in a narrow arc of lamplight. This was when the dust on your shoulders was of the regular kind, not heavy or shimmering bright. Dish-washer. Broom-sweep. Your name in the general store ledger was still the one you'd been christened. Not mine. I'd etched L-A-M-O-R-E into the piano with a hat pin because that's what I thought of myself: *More*. Outside mongrels choked on grease-soaked dishrags and the dog-punchers drank their swill. Inside you bought a round you couldn't afford and then refused to take a sip. You dropped nuggets down my stockings as I twirled upon the rough-sawn bar-top, stamped in time to piano-song, tried not to trip on the knots. *Not here*, I told you, laughing. I meant, Not anywhere. Oh, Bill. You've always been a fool, from Fortymile to Circle to here. When I walked home down King Street, sweat froze my corset, cold stole the voice from my breast —and you thought you'd done it.

*Gussie With Her Sisters on the Winter Solstice*

The quicksilver's froze on the sill this morning: thirty degrees below. Nell calls for hot beef tea, but I bring her the hootchinoo and coo, *Hair of the malamute*. Let's go to the Palace Grand, I want to kiss a man and dance the hula-hula! Nell says, *Too cold*. Nell says, *Too tired*. I pout on the stoop, where a bottle of whiskey has froze right through, and I say *Well woopdidoo* and kick it. Sky-dark. Snow-soft. Make that forty degrees of frost, and my big toe has a heart beating inside it. Then Grace comes to see us. I say I want to hear the Rag Time Kid down at the old Dominion. I want to twirl with the dancehall girls and stomp a sawdust floor. Grace (the priss) is so full of excuses. She tries to light the porch lamp, but the kerosene's gone hard inside it. Fifty degrees under, then — or colder still. Oh, how I hate the night that lasts all day. In a world like an ink-spill, I could disappear. When the sun rises behind the hills and no one sees it, it's not really there. By God, Bill! Why am I the only one who knows it?

*Gussie Goes to the Diggings I*

Windlass shriek, water slosh, the squeal of a wooden rocker box—and I think I hear gold settling in the riffles, Bill, out on the Eldorado. You stand gaiter-deep in glacial melt, your back humped over the river. Gazing for color, you murmur, *It's a well-known fact the Swedes will dig anything*, and then slowly return to shore. I like the way you look without your Prince Albert coat, the way you walk careful when your feet are heavy with wet. I like the way your hired men break their backs for your favor. When you remember me, you giggle stupid, bucket me, winch me south (*Why don't you ride down my shaft, Guss?*) and say to keep what gold I find. *Oh, magnanimous!* I smile for you till the dark goes thick and stiff and I don't want to.

## *Gussie Goes to the Diggings II*

In the pit, the fastened earth breathes ice on every side. *Witches*, I think. *Coffin dark*. A hole in the ground is a hole in the ground. Somewhere above, your hired men rock cradles like demented mothers. They sound so far away. Did you ever send a girl to the Salvation Army for the venereal? I know a dancer who's given birth to five corpses, each the size of a roasted spud; another who sold herself to a man for her weight in gold—I helped sew buckshot into her corset. In the bloom of match-light, I run my fingers along a glistening seam so like a woman's wet gash. I prize what I can with my nails. You holler something and shake the roped bucket, but you, too, sound insignificant. I once sat round my mother's skirts, and she warned me of you —of all men and their great, insatiable need. Bill, I don't kid myself. Pay-dirt turns us filthy, same as any other kind.