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Josefa:
A Morally Deficient Siren

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On account of her death
this story, rife with contradictions, splinters.
The end result, always the same.
His death, a means of defense.
Hers, a reaction, fueled by vitriol.

> *There was a mob, so brilliant, so bright—was it the noble metal or their skin that shone?*

"¡Adiós, señores!"[1] Those were her last words, they said—July 5th, 1851 (Downie, 1893*)*.
The day before, however, was not one of farewells. It was a parade, a party, where spirits were high, and levels of consumption were higher. Happiness was a drug, but so was the liquor that made the discovery of treasure that much sweeter.

They wailed, so loud and so piercing, in unsuspecting ears—they rang. They hollered and they huffed and they sang:

> "[...] go and dig the gold that lies in California.
> 'Find' is presumably miswritten for 'shine.'
> Why should this noble country by Indians be run O'er,
> While many of them are starving and many more are poor?
> Go, rise, and with new energy and without more delay,
> And go and dig the gold that lies in California" (L.W. Lee, 1904).[2]

The tunes that carried the Californian guarantee left split lips and reached the heavens, and in return brought hell instead.

[1] "Goodbye, sirs!"

[2] Sung long before it was finally put to paper in 1904 per the Library of Congress "Gold Rush songs collection."

It was rich, the town. It was known for its mining, where people, mainly men, came in droves. CLUNK. It was a mission, one of God, of Gold, of Growth. CLUNK. Dirt caked their skin. CLUNK. Pickaxes hit the ground. CLUNK. Bullions hit the pans. CLUNK. White fists against brown faces. CLUNK. For land. CLUNK. For wealth. CLUNK. For power. CLUNK. CLUNK. CLUNK.

"¡Adiós, señores!" Those were her last words, they said. It was a Saturday, the day following the Fourth, that she spoke those words into existence.

Nobody knew her name, at least not with any certainty. Juanita? Or was it Josefa? Josefa Segovia? ¿O Josefa Loaiza?[3]

To the White men, she, like most women in the borderlands, was a body.
Small, they said.
Slender, they said.
Stunning, they said.
But of her mind?
Sound, they said.
And of her tongue?
Sharp, they said.
So, serpentine, they said.

Many had plenty to say, but in truth, no one knew who she was, not really—only what she looked like and if she was well-liked—nothing of substance.

"The lustre in her eyes shone in various degrees, from the soft dove-like expression of a love-sick maiden, to the fierce scowl of an infuriated lioness, according to her temper, which was the only thing not well balanced about her," He said, the founder of Downieville said. William Downie said.

A reporter of the *Streamer Pacific Star* said, she "presented more the appearance of one who would confer kindness than one who thirsted for blood" (Mejia, 2019).

Ni de aquí ni de allá.[4] She was brown, not white. She was Mexican. She was American. She was a Dahlia planted in California. She couldn't grow, couldn't blossom; the hands in search of gold didn't let her.

It's flimsy, the memory of Truth passed down—what's said, what isn't—it's not clear.

1. It was a celebration until it wasn't. It was an invasion. It was Frederick Cannon. A miner who mined the valley, they said. Unwelcome, she said.
2. It was also said that because of the Independence that fueled his jaunty stagger into the adobe home built for two, *not* three, he took some liberties. So much so that some say *he* went to apologize the day after, and *she* attacked him—a baseless assault.

[3] Or Josefa Loaiza?
[4] Neither from here nor from there.

3. Others say, Cannon grabbed her at a bar, and not at home, called her a whore, and she reciprocated with a blade.
   It was warm, the blood.

The tongues that tell the tale change, the particulars change, but the characters remain.
Three stories. Same ending: a Bowie knife, straight to the heart.
"I would do the same again if I was so provoked" (Mejia, 2019).

This proclamation was a promise, as the noose found a home around her neck. Josefa didn't have a choice; her Jose was stuffed in a barrel, and down, down, down he went, downhill. Or was he exiled?

Facts are illusory, they are malleable—they stretch and they bend—but one is without a doubt irrefutable: She. Was. Alone.

Trial by f~~r~~iends, the town now crowded for a different reason. His murder, and hers, a token—a shiny one they'll carry in their pockets only to be passed on and muddled, the memory of its origin, now a myth. Spectators looked on with a sense of wicked awe, of filthy fascination.

So, it was alone and without fear that she climbed the steps of the scaffold. It was alone and without fear that she, with a firm grip on the rope, placed it around her neck. And she remains alone, to this day, as the only woman to be hanged in California.

Made an effigy by the town, the people, the men who sought justice for *their* man. Her choice was taken away, but *her* voice outlived *them*:

"I would do the same again if I was so provoked."

The Craycroft Building: once a saloon, a jail, a printing house, a restaurant, a courthouse—red exterior, green awnings—a bar, again. It stands, just as tall, if not taller, than *that* day in 1851 when it was said that Cannon first laid a hand on Josefa.

IN MEMORY OF JUANITA—There's an iron plaque against the brick that houses the tavern. A marker that recounts the town's sordid past, a permanent blemish in its history. Josefa is seen, Josefa is heard, Josefa is recognized. But is she really? She is a footnote among other happenings of circumstance: like the Shooting of Thaddeus Purdy, like the inauguration of the St. Charles Hotel, like the Downieville Museum as the oldest building in the town (Historical Marker Database, 2024).

The epitaph is murky, riddled with holes and half-truths. She was a "Spanish woman known as Josefa," and he was the victim, "Frederick Alexander Augustus Cannon" (Historical Marker Database, 2024).

Her reputation as murderess now cast, her words forever cemented:
"I would do the same again if I was so provoked."

References

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