
Chief Joseph of The Nez Perce

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Chief Joseph
of
The Nez Perce,

Who Called Themselves the Nimpau—"The Real People"

A Poem

by

Robert Penn Warren

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To
JAMES DICKEY



∞ NOTE ∞

The Nez Percé (more modernly Nez Perce) first entered history with the visit of Lewis and Clark and their great expedition to the Pacific. The explorers were received in great friendship, and the Indians even took care of supplies and gear when Lewis and Clark made the last dash to the ocean. They swore never to harm a white man, and, until forced, never did. The Nez Perce were larger than usual among Indians, strong and active but not warlike, great breeders of horses. Unlike the Plains Indians, they were not nomadic, but they did follow a certain cycle according to seasons: buffalo hunting, digging camas roots, taking salmon in season. Their religion, which was regarded very seriously and was highly ethical, made their land sacred, for there, from their graves, the fathers (they believed in a version of immortality) constantly watched their sons to be sure that they were men. To lie was a disgrace. The war of 1877 was provoked when two Federal treaties (1855 and 1873), which guaranteed to the Nez Perce in perpetuity their sacred homeland, were broken by the whites. In 1904, after the disaster, now back in the Northwest (but not in his own land, a prisoner on a reservation in the state of Washington), Chief Joseph died sitting at his campfire. The reservation physician reported the death as caused by a broken heart.

—R.P.W.

Chief Joseph

Made by the same Great Spirit, and living in the same land with our brothers, the red men, we consider ourselves as the same family; we wish to live with them as one people, and to cherish their interests as our own.

—Thomas Jefferson: To the Miamis,
Powtewataminies, and Weeauki
(January 7, 1802)

I.

The Land of the Winding Waters, Wallowa,
The Land of the *In-an-toin-mi*,
Their land, the land in the ages given,
By the Chief-in-the-Sky. Their ponies, crossed
With the strong blood of horses, well-bred, graze
Richly the green blade. Boys, bare-back, ride naked,
Leap on, shout, "Ai-yah!" Shout, "Ai-yee!"—
In unbridled glory. Eaglewing catches sun.
Glams white. Boys plunge into water, gay as
The otter at gambol, with flat hands slap water
Like beaver-tails slapped in warning, then dive,
Beaverlike, to depth, toes leaving the shimmer,
Uncoiling upward, of bubbles. On sandbars
Boys lie, and sun dries the skin.
It glints golden, red, bronze. Each year
They go where from seaward surge salmon, infatuate,
Unfailing at falls-leap, leap stones, leap the foaming
Rigor of current—seeking, seeking,
In blind compulsion, like fate, the spawn-
Pool that blood remembers.

The salmon leaps, and is the Sky-Chief's blessing.
The Sky-Power blessed the Nimpau

And blessed them, too, with
The camas-root, good to the tongue, in abundance.

*Their honesty is immaculate and their purity of purpose
and their observance of the rules of their religion are
most uniform and remarkable. They are certainly more
like a nation of saints than a horde of savages.*

—Jean Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville

It is their land, and the bones of their fathers
Yet love them, and in that darkness, lynx-like,
See how their sons still thrive without fear,
Not lying, not speaking with the forkèd tongue.
Men know, in night-darkness, what wisdom is theirs.

By campfire at night old chiefs tell boys
How first the “crowned ones,” white men with head covered,
Had come, and their great war-chief, with honor,
Clean hands and medals and gifts, had sat
On the blanket with chiefs, and Chief Twisted-Hair
Had drawn on white elk-hide the way west
Where boomed the Great Water Ill-Tasted, at land’s end,
How storms, winter-long, strode those waters, with might.

The white chief went. Returning, said, yes.

*A tremendous wind from the S. W. about 3 Oclock this
morning with Lightning and hard claps of Thunder,
and hail which continued until 6 Oclock a.m. when it
became light for a short time, then the heavens became
suddenly darkened by a black cloud.*

— The Journals of Lewis and Clark

“I was born at the time of snow. My name—
It was Miats Ta-weet Tu-eka-kas,
The son of my father Tu-eka-kas.
But not my true name. Only after ten snows
Was I, a boy, ready to climb
Alone to the mountain, to lie with no motion
Upon the stone-bed, no food, no water, heart open

To vision. To float as in vision and see
 At last, at last, my Guardian Spirit
 Come to protect me and give forth my true name.
 Three days I lay on the mountain, heart open.
 All day stared into bright blue. All night
 Into darkening air. Then vision, it came.
 Came by day, clear. An old man, he stood
 And he gave me a name.

“I went down the mountain. My father I could not
 Yet tell. But when the new-named ones, they danced,
 Each dancing his new name, I danced. I leaped,
 Skyward pointing, exclaiming, *Hin-mah-toó-yah-lat-kekht*—
 The-Thunder-that-strikes-up-from-Water. That
 Was my name. That made my medicine true.

“My father—Old Joseph, whites called him—had heard
 Of the New Book of Heaven the whites had brought
 To Lapwai—the Place of the Butterflies—
 And how it gave the heart brightness. So went there.
 Then Lapwai was reservation for many—
 But not for us who sold not the sacred
 Bones of their fathers for white-man money,
 And food-scraps. Then firewater came there. The killing.

“So back to the Winding Waters, my father,
 He fled. Yet carried the New Book of Heaven,
 New in our tongue writ, but forgot not
 The bones of his fathers, and the Old Wisdom.
 Nor eyes of the fathers that watch from darkness.

“New ‘crowned heads,’ they came, the makers of treaties.
 They came with their hats on, with paper, and ink.”

*For the South Nez Percés; commencing where the
 southern tributary of the Palouse River flows from spurs
 of Bitter Root Mountains; thence down said tributary
 to the mouth of Ti-nat-pan-up Creek, thence southerly
 to the crossing of the Snake ten miles below the mouth*

of the Alpowwa River; thence to the source of Alpowwa River in the Blue Mountains; thence to the crossing of Grande Rond River, midway along the divide between the waters Wol-low-how and Powder Rivers; thence to the crossing of the Snake River fifteen miles below mouth of Powder River; thence Salmon River fifty miles above crossing; then along spurs of Bitter Root Mountains to the place of beginning.

—Nez Perces Session, 1855

“I, a boy, stood and watched my father.
His hand reached out. It made the name-mark.
And why not? Not once had we shed white blood
Since the great war-chief on the blanket had sat
With Twisted-Hair, and called the land ours always.
Now in ink was promised the Winding Waters forever,
Where sacred bones lay, and we knew them sacred.

“*Promises, promises*—but our sacred land
They trod. They spat on our earth as though
They spat on our faces. I, then a boy,
I felt the spit on my face. New treaties
They draw up to bind us with thongs. But only
The false Nimpau signed, those who already
Had gone to Lapwai and reservation—
Lapwai, the Place of the Butterfly—
To eat, like a beggar, stale bread of white men.
Yes, they—only they—would sign. No! No!
Not ever my father. Never. Nor I.”

In my opinion the non-treaty Nez Perces cannot in law be regarded as bound by the treaty of 1863 and in so far as attempts to deprive them of a right to occupancy of any land in its provisions are null and void.

—Major H. Clay Wood, Adjutant
to General O. O. Howard

“How far away, and wavering
Like mist in dawn wind, was the law! You have seen
How mist in creek-bottoms to nothing burns

When the sun-blaze strikes. How far away
 Sat the Great White Father! He burns like the sun,
 And we heard how goodness in his heart holds.
 But only that word, like mist came to us, not fact."

Executive Mansion, June 16, 1873

*It is hereby ordered that the tract of country described
 Nez Perces Session, 1855 be withheld from entry and
 settlement as public lands and that the same be set apart
 as a reservation for the roaming Nez Perces, as recom-
 mended by the Secretary of Interior and the Commis-
 sioner of Indian Affairs.*

—U. S. Grant

II.

"But what is a piece of white paper, ink on it?
 What if the Father, though Great, is fed
 On lies only, and seeks not to know what
 Truth is, or cannot tell Truth from Lie?
 So tears up the paper of Truth, and the liars,
 Behind their hands, grin, while he writes a big Lie?"

"Yes, what is a piece of white paper with black
 Marks? And what is a face, white,
 With lips tight shut to hide the forkèd tongue?
 Too late, too late, we knew what was the white spot
 In distance—white cover of cloth, hide-tough,
 On wagons that gleamed, like white clouds adrift
 Afar, far off, over ridges in sunlight:
 This knowledge, like lead, sagged heavy in flesh,
 Healed over, but there. It ached in the night."

*But no recollection of former services could stand be-
 fore the white man's greed.*

—Major J. C. Trimble

“My father held my hand, and he died.
 Dying, said: ‘Think always of your country.
 Your father has never sold your country.
 Has never touched white man’s money that they
 Should say they have bought the land you now stand on.
 You must never sell the bones of your fathers.’ ”

*I think it a great mistake to take from Joseph and his
 band of Nez Perces Indians that valley [Wallowa].*

—General O. O. Howard

“Into a dark place my father had gone.
 You know how the hunter, at dawn, waits,
 String notched, where the buck comes to drink. Waits,
 While first light gilds highest spruce bough, eyes slitted
 Like knife wounds, breath with no motion. My father
 Waits thus in his dark place. Waiting, sees all.
 Sees the green worm on green leaf stir. Sees
 The shadow of thought in my heart—the lie
 The heel must crush. Before action, sees
 The deed of my hand. My hope is his Wisdom.

“Oh, open Great Spirit, my ears, my heart,
 To his sky-cry as though from a snow-peak of distance!”

*It cannot be expected that Indians . . . will . . . submit
 without any equivalent to be deprived of their homes
 and possessions or to be driven off to some other locality
 where they cannot find their usual means of subsist-
 ence. . . . It . . . is repugnant to the dictates of humanity
 and the principles of natural justice.*

—Oregon Superintendent of Indian Affairs

“Does a grain of gold, in the dark ground, lie
 Like a seed-sprout? What color of bloom
 Will it bear? What cunning has it to make
 Men rive raw rock where it hides like a murderous secret?
 What cunning to lie in innocent brightness
 Like wet sand in water? In water what dives
 The deepest—deep, deeper than the lead pellet?”

“For all things live, and live in their nature.
But what is the nature of gold? We know not.

“In the deepest dark what vision may find it?
On its stone-bed of vision what secret name be divulged?
If it could dance in the name-dance what
Name would be danced? Would it be
Keyox-hipaca -? iske -? ilaka -? win —
Which means, ‘Death that in darkness comes smiling’?

“Or is it man’s nature this thing not to know?”

... to attempt to restrain miners would be like attempting to restrain the whirlwind.

—S. H. Hale, Superintendent of Indian
Affairs for Washington Territory

“Years fled. But with heart grown small, as from fear,
What man forever can live? True,
We had long back made the promise of peace.
We had sworn no white blood to shed, our tongue was not forkèd.
But now we breathed the stink of the wind of Time,
As when wind comes bad from the death of peace—
As when on the big plain downwind taint comes
From the age-dead old buffalo cow that rots in the sun.
You wake at night, not believing the dream’s stink.
You try to think: ‘I lie here as always,
In my own tepee, at peace with all men.’

“But think of your father’s eyes in his darkness.

“The sun rises up. No end to the dream’s stink.”

I call him [the Indian] a savage, and I call a savage something wholly desirable to be civilized off the face of the earth.

—Charles Dickens

“You stand in the sun. You think. ‘Am I Joseph?’
You find yourself watching the white man’s horse-soldiers,

How they ride two-by-two, four-by-four, how they swing
 Into line, charge or stop, dismount.
 How the holders of horses fall back, with others
 Forming for skirmish. Or deploying for cover.

“The white horse-soldiers, they mount from the left.
 We from right. Can that be a difference?
 Still as a stone, I stand watching, then suddenly know
 How the young men watch me. Tears come to my eyes,
 For I think how bodies, dead, shine in moonlight.
 I watch how the horse-soldiers wheel into line.
 The young men watch me. One finger I touch
 To my brow. Trace lines there. Then lay
 A hand to my breast. It is hard to stand
 And not know what self you have lived with, all years.
 Oh, how can two Truths kiss in your heart?

“For now you know what a treaty is—
 Black marks on white paper, black smoke in the air.
 For the greatest white war-chief—they call him Chief One-Arm—
 Chief Howard—now in a loud voice he calls.
 At a council of those who would take us away
 From our land forever, at last I stood.

“In my weakness, tongue dry to the arch of my mouth,
 I stood. And my people waited. They waited
 For words, for wisdom, to pass my lips—
 Lips drier than dust. Before me, I saw
 All the blue coats, the buttons of gold, the black
 Coats buttoned up tight over bellies that bulged,
 White and sweaty you knew, under that cloth,
 And softer than dough. My words could not come,
 I saw their lips curl. I saw them,
 Behind hands held up, in secret sneer.
 ‘Oh, who will speak!’ cried my heart in my bosom.
 ‘For the Nimpau, will speak and speak Truth!’

“But then, my heart, it heard
 My father’s voice, like a great sky-cry

From snow-peaks in sunlight, and my voice
 Was saying the Truth that no
 White man can know, how once the Great Spirit
 That made the earth had drawn no lines
 Of separation upon it, and all
 Must remain as He made, for to each man
 Earth is the Mother and Nurse, and to that spot
 Where he was nursed, he must, in love, cling."

*The earth, my mother and nurse, is very sacred to me:
 too sacred to be valued, or sold for gold or for silver . . .
 and my bands have suffered wrong rather than done
 wrong.*

—Chief Joseph to the Commissioners of
 the Treaty of 1876

"Could Howard understand? He showed us the rifle.
 The rifle is not what is spoken in peace-talk.
 He says we must leave the Winding Waters
 Forever, forever—or come the horse-soldiers.
 We must live afar with a shrunk-little heart,
 And dig in the ground like a squaw—at Lapwai,
 The Place of the Butterflies—how pretty
 That name for a reservation to puke on!
 Far from the fatherly eyes that stare in darkness.
 Far from my father's words—and my promise!
 So my chin to my chest dug deep. For I knew
 One-Arm's numbers, and all those behind him.
 I knew the strange gun that spits bullets like vomit.
 It sits on its wheels and spits bullets like vomit.

"Worse—thirty days only to leave Winding Waters,
 With horses and herds, our old, young, and sick.
 Horses and herds, they swam, though the Snake
 Was in thaw-flood and snatched off weak colts and calves,
 And whites stole the rest that we left with poor guard.
 In our round boats of buffalo hide, the people
 Already were over, four strong horses and riders
 To swim with each boat, and push for the shore.

“Even so, our young braves, they swallowed their rage,
 Like bile that burns in the belly, and waits.
 No, not ours it was, who brought the grief,
 But the young men of Chief Kicking Bird.
 They fled, burned houses, soaked earth with blood.”

III.

“But on *our* trail the horse-soldiers came, and in darkness
 And hope to surprise us. Fools—
 With gear-jangle and horse-fart. Though we needed not that.
 At the heart of the night we heard what we heard,
 The wailful howl of the sad coyote.
 But no coyote! It was our scout.
 He lay there in darkness, owl-eyed, deer-eared.
 At dawn they came to surprise us.

Surprise!—It was theirs.

We, who wanted no blood-spill, we sent a white flag.
 But we knew not their heart, so our young men
 Were stripping for battle. Ponies
 Tossed head. Though many braves snored yet. Snored
 From firewater the killers had stolen, then sneaked in
 For refuge. Like hogs they snored. Vomit flecked lips.

“So what had we? Had only
 Some three score, and poor-armed, old trade guns
 You load at death-lip, old shot guns, or Winchesters
 Fewer than ten. The rest held bows—but bows
 With love worked from the horn of wild sheep,
 And backed with sheep tendon, and I have seen,
 In the thundering chase, a young hunter set
 His flèche feather-deep to probe the heart
 Of the running buffalo bull, and the bull
 Stumble. Our young men, like shadows
 Were gone now, some left, some right, to cover
 The draw’s depth. To wait peace or war.

"The horse-soldiers stood. The white flag approached,
 With the heart's true invitation. But what peace
 Can be when a shot is the only answer?
 A man in a white hat, no soldier, fired it.
 But how could we know? Soldiers died. From every crevasse,
 Ledge, sage-clump, death peered, death came.
 Thirsty are sands of the canyon—oh, thirsty!
 Death came with the whispering slyness of arrows.
 Came with the whistling nag of hot lead.
 On a prong-stick you prop your barrel, aim steady.
 Not *bang-bang* like soldiers. You must husband your powder.

"Then bursts the charge of the braves on their ponies—
 The war-whoop, the *whang* of arrows at short-range.
 The last of the battle formation is shattered
 Like fool buffalo stampeded at cliff-edge.
 The sands redder go. Like old women, some soldiers
 Lose mounts. Flee on foot. In blind corners die.
 All flee. Miles we chase them. Coats, weapons, we take.
 Scalps never. We touch not the locks of the brave dead.
 Now rifles we have, sixty-three by our count.
 Now braves break their bows. Now rifles they have!
 And pistols. Ah, the white friend is kind!"

*Before you to the westward lies the historic battle
 ground of the Nez Perce Indian War in which 34 men
 gave their lives in service for their country.*

—Marker on White Bird Battlefield

"Yes, rifles we had now. But men so few.
 And white men, they swirl down like snowflakes in winter.
 Hope had we of the great Looking Glass,
 A war-chief with paw of grizzly, and cunning
 Of fox. We sent word. For he of our blood was.
 But no, but no, he dreamed he might live
 In peace. But soon knew it only
 A dream. For to his village, horse-soldiers, they came.
 They called for surrender. But Looking Glass answered
 He was not at war. So a white man fired.

Killed only a baby.

So Looking Glass, the wise, the brave,
Came to sit in our council of chiefs, the great war-chief!
White fools, they gave him to us, like a present.

“Chief Howard, Great One-Arm—his hundreds now come,
With big-bellied belch gun and those that spit pellets.
Across the flood-Salmon, we teased them, we lured them.”

A safer position was unchoosable, nor one more puzzling and obstructive.

—General O. O. Howard

“Across the flood-Salmon, thoughtless, they came
With all their fool tangle of cables and ferries,
Into our mountains, the trails mud-slick,
Roped pack-mules plunging down cliffside, the forest
In darkness at sun-height. Then we, easy,
Cross over the river. Cross back. On the plain were free
To meet soldiers, scout parties. We met, and they died.
And in the dark mountains the War-Chief-Who-Prays
Now prayed for supplies. Cut off for three days,
With bellies growling, guts flat, he at last
Made the river with all their fool tackle and gear.
At Clearwater, then, we fought them. We held.
For three days we held them, locked in their circle,
While old, young, women, and sick, by travois escaped.
But, oh, not back to the Winding Waters!”

The Indians fought like devils and were brave as lions.

—Captain Bancroft (wounded, from
hospital at Lapwai)

“We tried to be brave like men, we tried
To cleanse hearts. To make acceptable medicine.
But the Great Spirit turned his face away
From the land of the Winding Waters we loved.

"Did he turn his face because of my heart-pride?
 Because I was proud to sit in the council
 With war-chiefs, the great ones, adept at blood skills?
 They knew cunning deceits but never knew soul-fear.
 I was proud to sit there, and always my ears
 Pricked forward for wisdom, as the wolf pricks ears
 At a rustle on soft wind,
 For I stored all I heard for the heart's lonely thought,
 To be ready, be strong, when the moment came.
 Sometimes in battle I took care of those
 Too old, too young, or too sick. To give them
 Their safety. My Guardian Spirit, it told me.
 But I, too, down the length of the death-tube have peered,
 Squeezed trigger, seen blood spurt, have rallied
 My braves. I know the joy of the clamor.
 I strove to be named the name of a man.

"I have even dreamed of a death-trap and spoken
 In council. And first one nodded. Then all."

*The Great Spirit puts it into the heart and head of man
 to know how to defend himself.*

—Chief Joseph

"But later, ah, later, when men named that war
 With my name, my heart in my bosom would tighten.
 Would shrink. What praise does man want but his manhood?
 We all had manhood, we showed at Clearwater."

*I do not think that I had to exercise more thorough
 generalship during the Civil War than I did in the march
 to the battlefield and the ensuing battle with Joseph and
 his Indians on the banks of the Clearwater.*

—General O. O. Howard

"But what was the good of our sweated blood?—
 Howard behind us, the mountain-wall eastward.
 From Howard no peace terms, and eastward only

Pass Lolo, which crawled up in cloud-heights,
 And we knew that Howard would try to cut Lolo.
 For me, I would stand, fight, and die, if only
 In dream of my sacred land, but the chiefs
 In council said *no*. Looking Glass said *no*.
 And I heeded their wisdom. What right had I
 To die—to leave sick, old, young, squaws—to flatter
 My heart's pride? For a true chief no self has. So up,
 Up Lolo, track ragged and rocky, crag-dark,
 Belabored by deadfall, but with hope
 To find at the end of the long travail Sitting Bull,
 Who now sat safe by the 'skirts of the Old Lady Queen,'
 Far northward. For he would know us as men.

"Howard, we raced him. Won. But eastward
 New soldiers had forts to trap us. Now under
 White flag we held pow-wow for peace. Meanwhile,
 Our scouts smelled a way. Hard and bitter it was.
 But the east turns red with dawn—and ho!—
 Here only coals dying and pony turds dew-damp
 Until the sun hits them. We had flung out a screen
 Of braves behind ledges, rim-rock, tree-growth,
 So they dared not leave that fool fort they had built.
 Some tried, but not living to hear the gray hornet's song.
 Fort Fizzle, they called it. Fort Fizzle it was.
 But no way to get to the 'Old Lady's Skirts.'

"So up Butternut, friendly with settlements,
 Trading with farmers, for guns, ammunition,
 Not killing, laughing together. Then southward,
 Toward grass of the buffalo land, and high sky.
 Peace-thinking fooled us. We thought we were free."

IV.

"At dawn they struck us, new horse-soldiers. Shot
 Into tepees. Squaws, children, old died.

Some mothers might stand in the river's cold coil
 And hold up the infant and weep, and cry mercy.
 What heart beneath blue coat has fruited in mercy?
 When the slug plugged her bosom, unfooting her
 To the current's swirl and last darkness, what last
 Did she hear? It was, of course, laughter.

"And we, we were blind, blind in the bushes,
 Rage-blind, hearts burning, hides naked except for
 Snatched bandoliers, rifles foolish in hand—but then!
 Then the great voice of Looking Glass, White Bird's war-whoop,
 Its terrible quaver! We heard, turned,
 Saw horse-soldiers laughing, milling in firelight.
 And, sudden, we knew our darkness a blessing. Few
 Laughed longer. Few from the light escaped. Those few to high cover.
 Dug holes in the ground. But our rifles
 Found any that stirred. And light filled the canyon.

"We took their big-bellied gun that belched. We broke it.
 New rifles we had, new boots, new coats—
 From bodies then white humps gleaming in sunshine,
 Clutching earth as though they had loved her.

"Few laughed as they lay there. Our own hearts
 Were swollen with rage, with rage like great joy.
 And gratefulness. The Chief-in-the-Sky—
 He had seen our need. He smiled on us.
 He said: 'Know now you are men. Be men!'

"With his help we were men. And our scouts always out."

*I could smell white people, the soldiers, a long way. . . .
 My Guardian Spirit instructed that I scout mostly alone.
 None of the enemies had appeared coming on our last
 sun's trail. . . . I watched if antelope acted curious. It
 might be danger. If prairie birds flew up in distance, it
 might be buffalo stampeding . . . the unexpected shadow
 against a big rock.*

—Yellow Wolf, scout of the Nez Perces

“Yes, never again did the sunrise come
 Without, at first light, a far shadow on ridge-spine
 To wheel, wave blanket, ho! At night had that scout
 Snaked nearer and nearer a campfire? The sleeper
 Breathed steady. A throat might be slit, and the sleeper
 With no breath to moan. For a hand lay on mouth.
 And scouts at distance knew how to direct
 The far anger of Enfield, or Spencer, or Sharps.
 Men have fallen from saddle before echo came.
 Men have fallen face-down in a skillet when cooking.

“All night white men knew that eyes would be watching.

“All night scouts wore wolf-skins. In darkness wolves called.

“Past lava, past schist, past desert and sand—
 A strange land we wandered to eastern horizons
 Where blueness of mountains swam in their blue—
 In blue beyond name. The hawk hung high.
 Gleamed white. A sign. It gleamed like a word in the sky.
 Cleanse hearts and pray. Pray to know what the Sky-Chief
 Would now lean to tell. To the pure heart, Truth speaks.

“We dreamed to enter the pass they name Tachee,
 The land where Evil Spirits may dwell,
 Where water may stink, and a river stink evil,
 And the ulcerous earth boils foul.
 But we trusted the will of the Sky-Chief to lead us,
 To lead us the way of silence and shadow.
 We dreamed of the mountain where one drop of dew
 At noon yet hangs at the pine-needle tip
 And speaks back to no sun. We dreamed.
 But no. Not yet.

“Squaws gather the root on the camas prairies.
 It is a gift from our Great Earth Mother—
 But only for us. The white man spits on it,
 Blpheming. And to the white man it gave back,

At last, one word. And Death was the word.
 On Camas Meadows we found him. In moon-dark,
 In columns of two, as though soldier-saddles we rode.
 We sat up as soldiers, as though the friendly
 Patrol returning. We knew a patrol out.
 We rode in close. Challenge, at last! Then war-whoop, the blaze,
 Tents tettered by bullets, the death-scream, the mule train
 Stampeding after the bell of the lead-mare
 Now rung by a brave who had crept in to steal it
 And now dashed onward, and on,
 Into darkness and distance. Thus
 It began. Some ran from their weapons.”

NARRATION: Some were crying. They ran, and one voice called loudly for them to come back to their guns.

QUERY: Where were the guns of the soldiers who were standing guard?

NARRATION: The guns were stacked.

QUERY: You did not really hear the soldiers crying, did you?

NARRATION: I heard them cry like babies. They were bad scared.

—Interview with Indian Warrior

“Then Tachee, the door to the friendship of mountains,
 And the world of the foot-soundless shadow. Ah, there—
 There the mountains of Yellowstone, and the silence,
 The secret recesses. There the wolf call
 Could be but a wolf in wolf-darkness, calling.
 You turn on your side. You sleep. Sleep till dawn.

“What days, what nights, had we come in our harriment?
 Long, long the summer, but dawn-ice now blue.
 Remember your dead now lonely under
 Stars with no name. Snow comes soon. Awake.
 In new mountains you stare up to see, bright as steel,
 Stars wheel in unfamiliar formations. You know not
 That sky. Nor that land, nor where foot leads.

“But there was one with us, of white and red blood
 Together, but red was his heart, Poker Joe, and he knew
 All the sly trails, deceits of the passes. In
 That land of mountainous nightmare, he scented in darkness,
 He tasted the air. We trusted. He knew
 The names of the mountains, in darkness
 Their whisper he heard.

“And Howard’s poor half-wits, with compass and maps,
 Had traveled more than their thousand
 Miles, steel of horseshoes thin-splitting, leather
 Of boots no longer saving the callous
 From blood-scrape of razor-edge lava, or granite,
 Coats threadbare for blasts northward now nourished, the belly
 Already growling in hunger’s anxiety.”

*As it had been a severer tax upon the energies of officers
 and men than any period in the late Civil War, surely
 some method must be found to encourage and properly
 reward such gallantry and service hardly ever before
 excelled.*

—General O. O. Howard, Report

“But we, our hearts leaned toward the mountains!
 We could never starve in the Sky-Chief’s goodness.

“Into that mare’s nest of chasms and peaks,
 We plunged. But no mare’s nest for Joe! How soft
 Is the pine-needle padding to foot-arch stone-strained,
 Lava-cut! How gentle the silence as when
 You wake, and the loving boughs lean! What if
 Old One-Arm should come, as sure, in the end?
 With new men, new supplies, new spit-guns, new boots?
 And we guessed, before word of scouts, that eastward,
 Where eye-into-eye mountains see sun come,
 Already horse-soldiers were freshly counted
 To grind us between mortar and pestle.”

v.

Where east, and north, the mountain wall broke,
 Stone fingers, with nails, stretched out at the plain,
 And in between fingers were passes that westward
 Became a gut-tangle of canyons, ravines, crevasses,
 And cliff-sided slits no roots could clutch, or bear claw,
 And if you looked up, day was only a sky streak.
 From high west to high east ran spine-ridges with
 Peaks stabbing high beyond the darkness
 And clamber and shag of conifers. Who,
 North or south, could make way that way? Yes,
 Poker, yes, Joseph, his people, they could.

And Howard,

In blunder and bumble—yes, he was tough.
 Would winch wagons—unwheeled front or rear—two hundred
 Feet up, or worse. Then down. Then days
 Later find he had cut
 Across his own trail. Was sometimes, in fact,
 As baffled as any young kitten that tangles
 Himself in a ball of sock-wool, or a trot-line.

The only scouts Howard had out not later found dead
 Were those with news Poker wanted Howard to hear
 As he staggered through the insane Absarokas—
 That saber-jagged, murderous nightmare of mountains
 And stream-yelling canyons where every
 Direction is a lie—hoping
 To pin Joseph at last against Colonel Sturgis,
 Who horse-held the plain, waiting, waiting.
 For Sturgis, a son dead with Custer, was mad for revenge.

Yes, it would be
 An operation brilliant in textbooks,
 A nut-cracker action—depending, of course,
 On information and timing. But Howard,
 His scouts all found dead, hung ignorantly north,

Near Clark Fork headwaters, waiting to strike.
While Sturgis, in hot haste and heat of revenge, was tricked
South, up the stinking Shoshone, and into the mountains,
Pursuing Joseph and Joe, signs carefully clear,
To a well-trampled spot, a spot
Where ponies outward had circled and circled
To hide all trail thence, or generously give
Too God-damned many—but, ah, plainsward
Sturgis spied dust rise—the bands, of course!
Dust rose, swelling slow in the pale pink of dawn-shine.

So “Halloo!” shouts Sturgis, hell-bent for the spooks,

And spooks they were. Dust settles, and nothing
Is there but ripped pine boughs and sage-clumps left
By braves now galloping north, and coiling their lariats.
But taking time for their laughter.

Back now—back at the circle of trampled confusion
Devised by the wicked cunning of Joe or
The instinct of Joseph—or whose?—Sturgis found
The telltale spot where no dew seemed shaken from shyest leaf,
Where a pebble too perfectly showed no streak of mud.
And that, of course, was the route of escape, the magic
Of red men. It gave
On a knife-slice of canyon as dark as a tunnel,
And needle-narrow, and fading back north.
It faded north, reversing the track of Sturgis’ revenge.
Northward, it led Joseph to enter
The mystic path, past Howard, to
Clark’s Ford and freedom.

VI.

Now the last dash! The Great Spirit had smiled
 On those who knew to endure or die,
 And those who knew the joy of expending man's strength
 That others might laugh in sunshine, and sing.

If you were the eyes of the Eagle of eagles,
 And from vast height looked down on the bruised
 Thumb-hump of the Little Bear Paw Mountains, then southward,
 You'd see a tangle of canyon and coulee
 Where water, long back, had sliced at the high plain,
 And south, then plains of great grass curried
 By wind-comb, or lying gray-green in its slickness
 Of windless autumn sunlight, or worn down
 By buffalo hoof or tooth-edge to earth's
 Inner redness, and dust-devils rising in idle
 Swirl, or the white-streaked poison of
 Alkali flats, standing stakes of poplars long dead,
 With shadow as sun saddens westward, and low.
 Then, worn down by ages and ice-grind, the Little
 Rockies, and eastward crawling the glitter
 Of rivers, first the Missouri, then
 Plains again, lounging and lazy, or plagued by dust-devils.
 More mountains, the Moccasins reaching north-south,
 The Judiths east-curving, and likewise the Big
 Snowy Mountains, and farther some eighty miles,
 Another glitter of river, slow, idle, eastward,
 The Yellowstone, and from that level,
 The bulge, the hump, the leap of the Great
 Granite Peak, from which all earth away falls
 Past glacier, precipice, past rocks ripped
 Like wounds from a grizzly's claws. —And there,
 Two hundred miles off, slow, slow, in distance,
 Almost invisible, even to Your eternal Eye, the advancing
 Riffle of dust. They come.

Northward they move.

They move from the Land of the Evil Spirits unharmed.

But dimmer by distance, almost transparent
 In late light, unformed as a thumb-smear, blue blur
 On the sky's autumnal yellowness: Howard.

Old One-Arm, dogged, devout, knowing
 Himself snared in God's ambiguity of justice,
 He stirs in the saddle. His heart is military.
 Is inflamed with love of glory and
 Vanity wounded. He is the butt
 Of every newspaper. Like foxfire,
 At night in his dream, his quarry flickers, sardonic
 Before him. Does
 He hear distant laughter in dream? By God,
 Pursue! He will! The old wound
 Aches. He thinks of Seven Pines. Well,
 Let the last leather split, let feet bleed, the last
 Horse-shoe be cast. Man
 Is born to suffer. He is born to God's will.

But a stern chase, by land or sea,
 Is a long chase. He knows that much.
 His heart is iron. He has seen much blood. But
 Against his will, his ambition, the heart
 Melts in his breast. It
 Suffers a flame of logic that
 Vindictively flares through the straw
 Of ambition, and he, in heart-pain, admits
 That from Fort McKoegh, northeast, Colonel Miles
 Might, upward and west, strike a long angle
 Of interception.

And receive surrender!

Nausea burns his throat. Acid of bile. What
 Then for him, for Howard! For his
 Long struggle, unflinching, over a thousand miles,
 For anguish, defeats, his dead lying under
 Unloving stars? His heart splits in prayer.

He has stood before his regiments on Sunday morning
To pray. Now in darkness, he prays.

*If Thou wilt grant my request, do so, I beseech Thee,
even at the expense of another's receiving credit of the
expedition.*

—General O. O. Howard

He thinks of Miles. He thinks what all men know:
A groveling hem-kisser of the draggled skirts of glory.
He thinks of him. But,
Suddenly, with sad pity.

Orders, identical, go out. One by
Horse, one by boat. —And the heart of Miles at McKoegh
Flares like a rocket. A general once—
But only of state militia. Now only
A colonel—reduced. His head goes dizzy
Like a drunkard's whose fingers close on the bottle.
In the infinite black firmament inside
His skull, a star, in explosion, blazes, bursts
In the birth of worlds. He knows now that
God loves him! Bugles blare.
Blare here! Blare there! Distance is nothing.

. . . something of a glory-chase, like Custer . . .

—Major Lewis Merrill

As Joseph drew northward, Howard drew on.
Joseph knew only one word: north. And northward
The Yellowstone flowed, backed westward by yellow-
Gray rim-rock and shortening sunsets. Joseph,
His sick, his old, his young are now driven onward
Like wraiths in Joseph's iron dream.

Sturgis has his own blood-drenched dream.
His scouts feed his dream.

Only once, westward, the bulwark of rim-rock
 Breaks where a creek flows in, and in
 That narrowness, flanked by crevasses,
 Flange rock, and rubble, one man is twenty—
 Is fifty—if powder holds out. So Joseph
 Drives on. Oh, for that opening wide
 That suddenly, like a lethal noose,
 Tightens! He hacks at his scouts.

There it is, and the incompetent
 Are huddled up-canyon. A few braves
 Are set at the opening for bait—and Sturgis,
 Gave thanks to God, and struck! The bait
 Faded before him into the narrowing throttlement.
 Poor Sturgis! He never could learn, and now crowded
 His horsemen in until suddenly from
 Flanges, rim-rocks, ledges, sage-clumps,
 The unhived lead hummed honeyward.

With Joseph long gone up the death-sweet canyon,
 Howard arrived to survey the scene.
 From saddle, he slowly surveyed it with more than
 Professional eye:

*It was the most horrible of places—sage-brush and dirt,
 and only alkaline water, and very little of that! Dead
 horses were strewn around, and other relics of the bat-
 tlefield! A few wounded and dead were there. To all
 this admixture of disagreeable things was added a cold,
 raw wind, that, unobstructed, swept over the country.
 Surely, if anything was needed to make us hate war
 such after-battle scenes come into play.*

Yes, Joseph again gone, Sturgis
 Outfought in spite of men and equipment,
 And pursuers unable to breach the bulwark of rim-rock.
 Now on the northern horizon, the dust
 Of Joseph was lost. Southward three armies,

In the rugged Ansarokas had, breath-bated, lain
 In wait, but Joseph's people, like water,
 Like air, like ghosts, had slipped through the clutch of fingers.

But Joseph knew not of Miles, and his star.

Miles curses the cavalry, infantry, forward
 To follow the flare of that star. In his saddle
 Miles reels. The thought—it was ghastly! What if
 Howard comes to find Miles merely holding Joseph at bay?
 Then all—all—for naught. For Howard, outranking,
 Receives the surrender. Miles shuts his eyes. Sees
 In darkness the glare of newspaper headlines,
 Far off, in New York. In Washington, too.
 Then the masonry of the news story.
 Tears come to his eyes. He curses his laggards. And Howard.

On the western shore of the mountains, Joseph
 Moves north four days, but slower, slower,
 For Howard, in cunning, relaxes his pressure
 That Miles, unknown, on the eastern slope
 May drive on past, then strike a hook southward.

Joseph, at last, to the Little Bear Paws comes.
 He believes himself safe by the Old Lady's skirts.

*I sat down in a fat and beautiful country. I had won
 my freedom and the freedom of my people. There were
 many empty places in the lodges and the council, but
 we were in a land where we could not be forced to live
 in a place we did not want.*

Clearly defensible, in the alluvial gulch
 Of Snake Creek, beside good water, they
 Set themselves down, protected from wind
 By bluffs, farther by mountains, tepees now set
 In a circle, good hunting handy. Squaws

Could here dry winter meat, and livestock
 Graze widely. But in precaution at each
 Tepee a mount was staked. No scouts out, however.
 For this was a land of peace. They had peace.

In dawn light this was the pastoral scene Miles saw—
 And saw, or thought he saw, how the slope,
 Wide, rolling, slightly a tilt,
 Invited cavalry's thunder. No Howard!
 His heart leaped. One charge—and the star!

But Fate, the slut, is flirtatious. What
 Miles, in his hypnotic passion, did not
 See was a network of small, brush-grown coulees,
 And a great coulee, moat-like, east and west,
 Draining down to the Snake, the growth
 At its top with the look of the levelling plain.
 This Miles could not see, but clear to his sight,
 If not to his brain, there was
 A long ridge overlooking the village, behind it,
 Now brown with autumn-bit sage that gave
 Perfect deception for braves to lie in,
 Barrel steady, finger looped, eye squinting.
 What made Miles here blind? But did see the horse herd,
 And brilliantly thought how he would,
 With second-rate cavalry, strike a stampede there,
 While wings of infantry closed on the flanks of the village.

How calm the plain looked. In saintly peace
 Miles stood in God's love. He knew that God loved him.
 For at the debouchment of Bear Paws there was
 No perspective to show, in that dip, swell and dip,
 The last ridge, which on his, the south, side, looked easy—
 The easiest yet, eastward sinking.
 Ah, how in his dream could he know
 That on the far side it dropped sharp
 To hoof-trap and haunch-grind, and sudden

Would crumple the cavalry eastward, and spill it,
 Tangled and cramped, directly under
 The rifle-pricked ridge
 And the closer spite of the fanged coulee.

Miles saw in his head the victory form like a crystal—
 With Companies *A*, *D*, and *K* of Custer's
 Old favorite Seventh, with Cheyenne scouts,
 As the cutting edge of attack.

His breath comes hard. How slow the bastards find place!
 Already the Cheyennes, now slick-skinned and naked
 To breech-clout and moccasins, paw, panting to ride
 For the kill, to make *coup*,
 To dab cheek with the blood of a brother.
 They yelp in the snow-swirl. Captain Hale jokes:
 "My God, have I got to go out and get killed
 In such weather?" It was a good joke. Laughter.

No Howard yet! Miles lifts his arm.
 He takes the deep breath. He shouts: "Attack!"
 He thought of the fools down there, scarce more
 Than a hundred. *What were they thinking down there?*

There was silence only down there.

Now is the rhythm of hoof. First, trot:
 Down slope, down dip, up ridge-swell,
 Then down. Then bursts the real thunder!—
 And then the blind surge when the ridge's dire secret
 Compresses the ranks, swerves horsemen, and spills
 The mass in the open before the moat-coulee. Then
 The blaze bursts, bursts first
 At a hundred and fifty, a hundred, then fifty
 Long paces, but not long for lead, and the charge,
 Like sea-froth at cliff-foot, in blood-spume
 Shatters:

Horses rearing in death, the death scream, saddles
 Blown empty, lines broken, all officers down, pure panic.
 Now Death probes out for the backbone, for shoulders,
 At Enfield—, at Winchester—, at Sharps range.

Captain Hale was a prophet: dead in such weather.

Miles's infantry fare some better. Some died,
 But in dying had ringed the camp with a ring
 Of investment, which promised a siege, and revenge
 For the grisly first charge. So the siege settles down,
 With slow, systematic shelling of all in the village,
 And hunger begins its long gut-gnaw.

For Miles what lousy luck! A siege—and how long?

But luck held for Miles. Under the fire
 Of cannon buried howitzerwise, what else
 Except negotiation? It came—with Miles
 Violating a flag of truce to hold Joseph.
 But the braves were alert. They grabbed hostage, too.
 So terms were arranged, Miles's terms strangely generous.
 Suddenly Howard stands there.

Stood there, commander, enduring the only
 Outlet of rage and hatred Miles
 Could give vent to: ironical courtesy, cold,
 Gray as snot. But Howard,
 Whose sweat had wet sheets in wrestling with God,
 Laid his remaining hand on the steel-stiff shoulder
 That quivered beneath it. Howard, almost
 As soft as a whisper, promises him the surrender.
 And hearing his own words, he knew a pure
 And never-before-known bliss swell in his heart.

After that, affability ruled the roost.
 Miles laughed with the laughter of friend or brother.

But if Howard smiled, the smile was inward—
 A fact unnoticed by Miles, who already
 Was deep in his head's dizzy darkness composing
 The rhetoric of his official communique:

*We have had our usual success. We made a very direct
 and rapid march across country, and after a severe en-
 gagement and being kept under fire for three days, the
 hostile camp under Chief Joseph surrendered at two
 o'clock today.*

How now would the newspapers blaze! Sherman smile!
 And let old Sturgis—a colonel yet—bite his nails.
 Fuck his son—all soldiers die.

*I felt the end coming. All for which we had suffered
 and lost! Thoughts came of Wallowa, where I grew
 up. . . . Then with a rifle I stand forth, saying in my
 heart, "Here I will die."*

—Yellow Wolf

Five inches of snow now, sky gray, and yonder
 One buffalo rug, black on white,
 And kept white until Howard, Miles, and the staff
 Would arrive when the hour struck. It would strike.
 For terms now are firm: rifles stacked
 With bandoliers twined. No need now for rifles,
 For hunting or honor. They'd go to McKoegh
 And eat white man's bread, with only the promise
 Of Miles that in spring they'd go west to high land
 Where mountains are snow-white and the Great Spirit
 Spills peace into the heart of man.
 Wallowa—no! But some land of pure air,
 Blue distance, white peaks, their own lives to live,
 And again their own guns, to hunt as man must.
 And there they might think of the eyes of the fathers
 Yet on them, though across all
 The mountains, the miles, and the noble disaster.

I believed General Miles or I never would have surrendered.

—Chief Joseph

At late afternoon, light failing according
 To season and latitude, Howard
 Is called, with his brass, to the buffalo robe that
 Lies brushed black against snow. Up from the dry
 Brown gravel and water-round stones of the Eagle,
 Now going snow-white in dryness, and up
 From the shell-churned
 Chaos of camp-site, slowly ascends
 The procession. Joseph, not straight, sits his mount,
 Head forward bowed, scalp lock tied with otter-skin.
 Black braids here framed a face past pain.
 Hands loose before him, the death-giving rifle
 Loose-held across, he comes first.
 Chief Hush-hush-kute, beside him, on foot,
 Moves, and that chief speaks, and the head
 Of Joseph is bowed, bowed as in courtesy
 To words of courage and comfort. But
 The head may be bowed to words by others unheard.

Joseph draws in his mount. Then, suddenly,
 As though all years were naught in their count, arrow-straight
 He sits, head now lifted. With perfect ease
 To the right he swings his buck-skinned leg over. Stands.
 His gray shawl exhibits four bullet holes.

Straight standing, he thrust out his rifle.
 Muzzle-grounded, to Howard. It was
 The gesture, straight-flung, of one who casts the world away.

Peremptory or contemptuous, Howard
 Indicates Miles. Upon that steel symbol,
 The hand of Miles closes. We do not know
 What ambiguities throttle his heart.

Miles is sunk in his complex tension of being,
 In his moment of triumph and nakedness.
 Joseph steps back. His heart gives words.
 But the words are addressed to Howard.

Tell General Howard I know his heart. What he told me before I have in my heart. I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. Looking Glass is dead. The old men are killed. It is the young men who say yes or no. He who led the young men is dead. It is cold and we have no blankets. Our little children are freezing to death. I want time to look for my children and see how many of them I may find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me, my chiefs, I am tired. Heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever.*

VII.

At McKeogh they ate the white man's bread.
 Found the taste gray to a prisoner's tongue.
 Then Bismarck, then Leavenworth, far off in Kansas,
 On one side a river. Before ice came, edges
 Were streaked, slick, slow. It crawled.
 But when sun in its season came back, its wrath
 Might suck up green bubbles of slime, to burst.
 On the other side a fat lagoon lolled
 With dead fish floating, belly-white upward,
 And all water foul for cooking or drink.
 As early heat grew, by daylight or night,
 Night moonlit or dark, unremitting, the insects
 Were whirring or sizzling like lust in the blood,
 Or the sound the lust of murder makes
 In the deep of your heart before the stroke.

*Ollokot, brother of Joseph.

Ah, when would the terms of the promise be kept!
 When would the word of Miles set them
 Among promised mountains, far blueness, far whiteness?
 Could they know that Miles, whom now they trusted,
 Was only a brigadier behind whom
 Moved forces, faceless, timeless, dim,
 And in such dimness, merciless?

After the arrival of Joseph and his band in Indian Territory, the bad effects of their location at Fort Leavenworth manifested itself in the prostration by sickness at once of two hundred and sixty of the four hundred and ten; and in a few months in the death of more than one quarter of the entire number.

—Report of the Indian Commission of 1878

Perhaps Joseph prayed, but could not die.
 But lived for one thing only—to see
 The terms of surrender maintained, and his people
 Living again in their high land,
 Where men love earth and earth loves man,
 And men eat food that earth, in love, gives.
 With agents, with bosses, Joseph spoke,
 With inspectors, with officers, getting no heed.
 Only one man, with an uneasy conscience, might
 Speak out the truth, and the truth be heard,
 And was it integrity, or some
 Sad division of self, torn in ambition
 And ambition's price, that at last made Miles
 The only staunch friend of Joseph for all
 The years? In his rising success, did something make Miles
 Wonder what was the price of a star?

And was it the friendship of Miles that got him to Hayes
 To tell the presidential ear his old, old story?
 Using Yellow Bull to speak, he spoke
 To the Great White Father, but old Hayes
 Knew all the tricks, so Joseph was sent to sit

With busy commissioners to say,
 "It makes my heart turn sick when I
 Remember all the good, kind words
 And broken promises." He told
 The bounty white men had sometimes paid
 For a red scalp—the going rate,
 One hundred dollars per buck, fifty
 Per squaw, only twenty-five for a child.

*A party of miners have returned to Owyhee from a
 raid on Indians with twenty scalps and some plunder.
 The miners are well.*

—The Portland Oregonian

In the words of old war-comrade Yellow Bull,
 In a great magazine his words were published,
 The fraud of, the suffering of, his people, the lies,
 The thoughts of his heart. Thousands, bored, read.
 Some read, remembered. Felt their hearts stir.

VIII.

It took all the years. But to the Northwest, not Wallowa,
 At last, honed down by the old torments and Time,
 The people came. On a reservation,
 Joseph sits, can stir thence only by permit.

"They built me a house at Nespelem—
 After many had died by the stinking river,
 Where death rose on the air of evening
 And bellies of dead fish float, bloated white
 In moonlight. In that stinking land we left
 Our last dead. Did at last they dream of our mountains?
 But mothers remember the names of some left there,

Still sacred in stink, and children
 Remember the names that there sleep. The old
 Who there sleep, sleep on the sweetest of pillows—the knowledge
 Of what it is to be brave in your time. Their eyes
 Fix on us as they lie in their darkness.

“They built me a house—for me, a chief,
 Who had lifted the death-tube, Winchester or Spencer,
 And peered at the blue spot the sight levelled with
 In nameless election, as I slow squeezed the trigger.
 The blue spot was still.
 For me, a chief—as though I were one
 Of the white half-men who scratch in the ground,
 And at evening slop hogs. For me,
 Who had lain on the prairie at starlight
 And heard the coyote-wail of the far scout.

“No foot of mine ever crossed that doorsill.
 I pitched my tepee on earth. I lay there.
 At evening I stared at my camp-coals and wondered,
 If, snared in my error and weakness, I
 Had managed at least some pinch of rightness. I prayed
 That my father, whose eyes see all, and judge,
 Might give approval to some act of mine,
 However slight. I sit, but all
 I yearn for is that he thinks me a man
 Worthy the work in dark of his loins.

“But what is a man? An autumn-tossed aspen,
 Pony-fart in the wind, the melting of snow-slush?
 Yes, that is all. Unless—unless—
 We can learn to live the Great Spirit’s meaning
 As the old and the wise grope for it.
 And my heart swells when I remember
 That day at Snake Creek when Miles surprised us,
 And I, herding horses, no gun, ran
 Through bullet-song and scream of the hit ones,
 Back to my tepee, but before
 I touched, the slot had opened and my own

Wife's hand thrust forth the rifle, and only
 One word came: *Fight*. Now all I remember
 Is how her eyes gleam in dream-darkness, forever."

At night coals wink from the heart of years,
 But when he rises, the years fall away
 Like leaves from a great oak in autumn to show
 The indestructible structure, the height.
 To a height uncommon to men the head rises
 In upward straightness, framed by braids fading,
 The face like bronze hardened long back from the mold,
 Nose thrusting, the long thrust of jawbone, the downward
 Decisive will-thrust of lips where they join
 On each cheek-side. If you gaze at him,
 Eyes you gaze into will seem but to show
 The mirror of distance behind you, far,
 And the mirror Time that brings you both here,
 And will, in time, part you forever.

Frozen, you stand in that moment of final assessment.

He is famous now. Great men have come
 To shake his hand in his poverty.
 Generals who chased him, ten to one,
 With their fancy equipment, Gatling guns,
 Artillery. Histories named him a genius.
 And even Sherman, who never had fought him
 But gave more death than ever his generals—
 Yes, the slime-green waters of Leavenworth—wrote:

*The Indians throughout displayed a courage and skill
 that elicited universal praise; they abstained from scalp-
 ing; let captive women go free; and did not commit
 indiscriminate murders of peaceful families . . . they
 fought with almost scientific skill.*

Frontiersmen, land-grabbers, gold-panners were dead.
 Veterans of the long chase skull-grinned in darkness.
 A more soft-palmed ilk now swayed the West. They founded

Dynasties, universities, libraries, shuffled
 Stocks, and to the last drop milked
 The Treasury of the United States,
 Not to mention each other. They slick-fucked a land.

But as their wealth grew, so Joseph's fame.
 As the President's guest, in the White House,
 He had shaken Roosevelt's hand. With Miles,
 No longer a mere brigadier, he broke
 Bread among crystal and silver. Back West
 Artists came to commemorate for the future
 That noble head. In bronze it was cast:

In gallery 224 of the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession number 06.313, may be found the bronze portrait of

"Joseph, Chief of the Nez Percé Indians.

His Indian name, Hin-mah-toó-yah-lat-kekht,
is said to mean Thunder Rolling in the Mountains.

. . . This medallion was taken from life in
1889. Bronze, diameter 17½ in. Signed:

Olin L. Warner. . . ."

—American Sculpture: A Catalogue of
 the Collection of the Metropolitan
 Museum of Art (p. 42).

Great honor came, for it came to pass
 That to praise the redman was the way
 Best adapted to expunge all, all, in the mist
 Of bloodless myth. And in the predictably obscene
 Procession to dedicate Grant's Tomb, which grandeur
 Was now to hold the poor, noble dust of Appomattox,
 Joseph, whose people had never taken
 A scalp, rode beside Buffalo Bill—
 Who had once sent his wife a yet-bloody scalp
 He himself had sliced from the pate
 Of a redman who'd missed him. Joseph rode
 Beside Buffalo Bill, who broke clay pigeons—
 One-two-three-four-five—just like that.

Joseph rode by the clown, the magician who could transform
 For howling patriots, or royalty,
 The blood of history into red ketchup,
 A favorite American condiment. By his side
 Joseph rode. Did Joseph know
 Of the bloody scalp in love's envelope, know
 That dead Grant once in the White House had,
 In his own hand, certified the land
 Of the Winding Waters to Joseph's people—
 "Forever"—until some patriot shit
 Jerked him by the nose, like a bull with a brass
 Ring there for control? Not right, not left,
 Joseph looked as the hoofs on the cobbles clacked
 In the dolor of that procession. He
 Was only himself, and the distances
 He stared into were only himself.

After all the years, back at Nespelem,
 No right to move without written permission,
 He wore the poor dress of his people. The great
 War-bonnet, whose eagle feathers had once gleamed in
 Ceremonial grandeur, grander than life,
 Lay locked in a box. Only once
 Permission was given him to go to the Winding Waters.

"The grave of my father now lay in a land now tilled
 By the white man who owned it, but had something human of heart.
 No plowshare had wounded the earth where my father slept,
 And the mercy of stones was piled to forbid.
 I gazed at the stones. My eyes were dim.
 I lifted my eyes that they might be washed
 In the purity of the distance of mountains.
 I thought of the purity of that poor man's heart."

Back at Nespelem, by the campfire did
 Joseph wonder if the gaze of Old Joseph
 Yet fixed on him?

At least, no sacred land had he ever sold.

At last, he said: "I shall see
But one more snow." Face painted, the body,
Adorned for its rank, awaited the shaman
To rise and speak, and lay the tall ghost.
The earthly possessions among friends were scattered.

But this not the end:
Next year at the second death-feast, Yellow Bull,
Now forking the dead warrior's war-horse, rehearses
The tale and its greatness. The coffin
Was opened, and that face for the last time seen
By the Real People. But only by them. It was shut,
And thrust beneath the expensive monument
Of white generosity—that seizes all in the end.

More than twenty years passed before the people
Of In-an-toin-mu dug up what was left
Of Old Joseph still in the cornfield, and took it
To a shore of the Winding Waters, and there
Set up, in sight of snowy peaks, their stone. It was theirs.

This much was all that remained them,
After Little Bear Paws and Snake Creek's bitter waters.

IX.

To Snake Creek, a century later, I came.

*La Guardia to O'Hare, American Air Lines, October
9, 1981, Ticket 704 982 1454 4, Chicago. By Northwest
to Great Falls. Met by two friends, Stuart Wright and
David Quammen.*

Out of Great Falls, north, in the Honda,
Out on the swell of infinite plains

By washes or coulees here and there slashed,
 Vacant of cattle, horse, or man, the color
 Gray-brown, the season October, not yet
 Snowfall. Low ramparts of cloud, dark blue,
 Hug the horizon westward like
 A mountain range shrunken in distance,
 Solid, supporting the arch of the sky.
 Correspondingly eastward, the dark blue rampart
 Is topped by an edging of pale, pale gold,
 Where sun lay in wait. Sprang forth, and distance
 In all directions fled, devouring
 The scraggle of villages dropped by history on
 Route 87. Far off, a gold clump
 Of cottonwood shows ranchstead or waterhole.
 Sky shudders from blue to the apex of near-white. We plunge on.

Plunge on, northeast, but in our minds see
 Only our small black dot creeping slow
 Across a large map outspread. Next morning,
 At a map-point called Chinook, southward we turn.
 Tires now grind gravel. Right, west,
 Plains swell to the sweep of arrogant skyline.
 Now southwest, the skyline begins to heave,
 To darken. There, at last, are
 The Little Bear Paw Mountains, mostly
 In curves dulled by ages, but some, a few yet,
 Snag angrily skyward, snow-smearred. Then eastward
 They swing, suck the plain up in blueness. This
 Is the ridge that once had hidden Miles.

We turn left at the sign. There
 Are the modest monuments. First,
 A bronze plate, in stone set, and
 In relief, a soldier (presumably Miles), and before him
 An Indian, tall, naked, one arm lifted skyward,
 And beneath, the words of Joseph:
 "From where the sun now stands I fight
 No more forever."

There is the map,
Large, enamel on metal, weatherproof:
Analysis of the action. And then,
The large bronze plate on granite propped
By the Republic to honor the name
Of every trooper who, in glory, had died here.

But the troopers who died here, and died
For the ego of Miles, did not rot here. Their rotting—
That process was achieved with those who in Custer's
Dream died, when, by the Little Big Horn,
He at last salted the tail of
That idiot phantasm of immortality.

The map shows, too, a mass grave
Where, no doubt, red flesh had rotted.
But not all red flesh, for when the siege-line
Was tightened, and shells began lobbing in,
The Indians tried to dig caves for children,
The women, the old. And shells spared the later
Spade-work from blue-bellies.

You see the heaved earth, now mollified.

Snake Creek loops away, is hidden in thickets
Of last leaves of wild roses, now dusty crimson of leaf,
Branches studded with red hips. You tear through briars
Shoulder-high. Snake Creek is near dry, only
A string of mossy-green puddles where Joseph
Had once found water fresh for people and horse-herd.

Beyond is the raised alluvial flat
Where tepees stood. There, southward, a steel pipe,
With marker screwed on, defines the location
Of the tepee of Joseph.

If you climb the slope, say south a mile and a half,
Or two, to the point where Miles must first

Have debouched from the Bear Paws, and look north,
 You see what he saw—or what years have left.
 Did he send his Cheyennes
 To scout the lay, or did his star dance
 In its passionate certainty? Northward,
 You see what you guess he saw
 In his manic snatch for glory—the village,
 The downward plainsweep, swell and dip, swell and dip,
 Cunt-open and panting, inviting the picture-book cavalry stroke.

Now if you wander old sage you will find
 Steel pipes thrust in where each man died—
 If he was white or of any consequence.
 There are markers screwed on with a name: *Poker Joe*,
 Who knew the tricks of the Yellowstone,
Ollokot, brother and warrior peerless,
 And *Looking Glass*, war-chief and cunning in council.
 And names of the troopers, including the jokester
 Captain Hale, who died in such weather.
 And you find the spot marked where the buffalo robe
 Once lay black on the snow, and Howard, with what
 Compassion or irony, gestured to Miles.

Alone on that last spot I stood, my friends
 Now prowling and far, on the high land. No snow
 Now on brown grass or red leaf
 Or black buffalo robe ceremonially swept
 To its blackness. All
 Now only a picture in my head—

and there

He stands, the gray shawl showing
 The four bullet holes, and hoofprints seen
 Backward in that hypothetical
 Snow marking the way he had come. I,
 In fanatic imagination, saw—
 No, see—the old weapon
 Out-thrust, firm in a hand that does not

Tremble. I see lips move, but
No sound hear.

See him who in what midnights
Had stood—what seasons—while the susurrus
Of tribal sleep dies toward what stars,
While he, eyes fixed on what strange stars, knew
That eyes were fixed on him, eyes of
Those fathers that incessantly, with
The accuracy of that old Winchester, rifled
Through all, through darkness, distance, Time,
To know if he had proved a man, and being
A man, would make all those
Who now there slept know
Their own manhood. This, even though
He, standing there, might well, in midnight, have foreknown
The end. But could not know that, after
The end, his own manhood might, burnished
Only in glow of his endless pity, shine.

I saw

Vastness of plains lifting in twilight for
Winter's cold kiss, its absoluteness. Thought
Of the squirming myriads far at
My back. I thought of the mayor of
Spokane—whoever the hell he may have been.

But suddenly knew that for those sound
Of heart there is no ultimate
Irony. There is only
Process, which is one name for history. Often
Pitiful. But, sometimes, under
The scrutinizing glass of Time,
Triumphant.

I heard shouts of friends, closer.

Now soon they would go back, I too,
Into the squirming throng, faceless to facelessness,
And under a lower sky. But wondered,

Even so, if when the traffic light
Rings green, some stranger may pause and thus miss
His own mob's rush to go where the light
Says go, and pausing, may look,
Not into a deepening shade of canyon now,
Nor, head up, toward ice peak in moonlight white,
But, standing paralyzed in this momentary eternity, into
His heart look, while he asks
From what undefinable distance, years, and direction,
Eyes of the fathers are suddenly fixed on him. To know.

∞ THE END ∞