

Philip St. Clair



Another working-class-guy-turned-poet, Philip St. Clair, according to Pine Row Press, has loaded aircraft in the Military Air Transport Service, mopped floors in a student union, tended bar in an Elks club, worked at the editor's trade (both in-house and freelance), and taught at Kent State University, Bowling Green State University, Southern Illinois University, and Ashland Community and Technical College.

He's also the person who gave me the most profoundly moving example of a poet reading their work that I have ever heard. I've listened to famous poets like Heaney, Boland, Muldoon, Levine, and McGuckian, but none of them have ever come close to what Philip did.

It must have been in the late 1990s or early 2000s when he read some of his new material at a state-wide academic conference. He was working on a series of Dog Poems. Many of them have been published, but there's one in particular that he claimed was too personal to ever put into print. "Old Dogs" presents the speaker at his back door, calling for his dog to come in from the yard. But he draws a blank, and remembers the names of all the dogs he's had before. As Philip was going through this list of names, he slowed, paused, then finally stopped speaking. He was so overcome by the list of what were obviously the names of his own dogs that he couldn't continue.

In the ensuing years, I've written to him a couple of times, asking him if he'll ever publish that poem, or barring that, if I could just get a copy of it. His answer was "no" to both. And maybe it's better that way, because now I have the memory of this man who invested so much emotion into his work that his body was too small for his feelings.

The works here are all very early, when he was making his bones by negotiating with Native American stories and culture. But he's not a one-trick pony; he has two volumes addressing the American Civil War (*Vicksburg* and *A House Divided*), and his most recent work, *London: Millenium City 2000* is a walking tour of that city and its history, rooted in visits to its seven great churches.

From *At the Tent of Heaven*

Philip's second volume, it's his first exploration of the Native American experience, occasioned by his own ancestry. This is from Sanford E. Marovitz's introduction:

At the Tent of Heaven . . . is a unified series of verbal portraits in a language that is spare yet vital with color and movement, plain yet dignified by the discipline of the prosody and the oral approach of the poet, whose sympathy for his Native American subject matter is always evident but never obtrusive.

St. Clair attributes this sympathy in part to a presumed Shawnee element in his own background, which he has traced to his great-great-grandmother, who lived in Columbiana County, Ohio during the 1850s.

Her grandson, the poet's grandfather—with “skin the color of a copper penny”—has long remained at the edge of his imagination, “a shadow figure,” as St. Clair calls him.

Oshegwun
A Chippewa Woman
April 1778

Before she could marry, the Sioux
Raided her hunting party and killed many.
Caught up in panic, she ran. she was taken,
And her captors lashed her to an oak.

The two young braves were at odds: each
Wanted her. so they locked arms
And fought as bears for her.

Those men were too well matched: they came
Near death, and bitter sweat
Ran over their bloody teeth.

Helping the other up, they drew knives
And slashed her free. They stood by her,
Saying. Choose between me and me.

Through them she ran at the forest.
A blunt club wheeled the air
And struck her back: she fell

To the little dark. Then the braves
Lost respect: each scalped one side.
Their knives drove blue beads in her neck.

When she awoke. she saw both were dead:
Her father, with two muskets, had followed her.
She lived to bear nine sons, one daughter,
And the beads in her throat never came out.

Red Jacket
solus
May 1774

Maple-seeds are falling. Wind
Clacks them together over my head.
I think on good noises.
I think on turtle-rattles.

As they float they make circles
And buttons of gold. They land
On their faces. Their mouths
Embrace the earth in a life

Of one breath. Their bodies
Stand straight in tall grass.
They are plumes of gold
That address heaven.

I am a man. I am a seed.
The Great League's will
Slants my path as I fall
From the womb, and I try

All motions of grace as I rush
To the earth, and my daughters
Will be strong trees whose branches
Bear heavy in spring.

I am a man who craves children.
I think on good noises
And dancing in circles
To the sound of turtle-rattles.

**Red Jacket
Reads a Stone
July 1782**

As the drinking hummingbird
And the midwinter dancer
I am of the world-not on it.

As the red-mantled woodpecker
And the black-dappled woodpecker
My alarums ring throughout the forest.

**Red Jacket
to his daughters
November 1792**

When we hunted, hunger ran beside us.
We ran in silence, and our stomachs
Burned within to give us power.
We grew the hair-face; we were Wolf;
We were Catamount; we caught
The scent of deer in the wind's hair
And ran them down fainting, light-footed,
Desperate, and when we bloodied them
The sky went red.

We rejoiced in the entrail-gift
That spilled when we cut: we dipped out
The smoking liver, broken from running,
With eager hands. And back at camp
Women fell to work with flint and knife,
And we boiled venison in great kettles,
And we ate until we slept, and we dreamed
Deer-spirits, and we thanked deer-spirits
As we rose from our bodies in dreaming.

I tell you I think on those days
And blacken my heart.
Now the White man
Trades us out of the hunt.
He leads us down to a place of fences.
He shows us the way of pens and stables.
Now we rise from warm blankets, and food
Bares the throat to us at sunrise,
And our knives shine from much use,
And I am hungered to my soul's deep.

**Red Jacket
to Clasp-Of-Silver
May 1797**

This night a high call writhes in air
As unseen smoke: there is a woman
Who is wanted. There is a man who keeps me awake.

Wife, it makes me laugh, this young man
Of the elderberry flute who whistles me
Out of my sleep, who rouses a man

Named He-Who-Keeps-Them-Awake
As token of vigilance. My eyes open
For an old song from this man-of-spring.

What desperate times. those night raids
Into the women! I and my Brothers
Would languish from our heat in the forest

With bold talk of the girls we wanted,
And where we might lurk to meet them,
And whether they were comely in the blanket.

Those were brave days. We waited near lodges
And places for water-drawing.
We earned many blows and many sharp words

From many mothers, and the pretty daughters
Blushed for us—they covered their laughter,
And young shame whipped us hard.

Turn to me, good woman, for that song
Enters my loins. Come close.
Think my former name, the name

First given me, for the flute makes me
Always-Heady and this night
Is the night of a young man. I long for you.

grow heavy. Now Brother Owl glides quietly
To his mate. Now Grandmother Moon draws clouds
Close about her. Come under my blanket.

**Red Jacket
to his daughters
September 1799**

When White men came in their great boats
Of oak and canvas. they were Brothers
Whom we fed and taught. To us they gave
Axeheads and kettles of iron, and in return
We let them thrive on a small patch of land
To grow food. Sharing was, those days:
War-hands were covered and there was feasting.

Then Evil One threw dirt in their faces
Making them blind for a while. And when
They knelt by a river to bathe their eyes,
Evil One crouched to whisper, saying,
Thou hast tasted and drank of the land:
Art thou not hungry? Then the Whites stood up,
And their heads were wet, and they were greedy.

They brought forth money and gave it us.
We sold away the land of our fathers.
They brought forth cards and gave them us.
We gambled away our money and honor.
They brought forth rum and gave it us.
We howled like wolves and struck each other.
And then they brought forth a rotten bone:
Pestilence choked us as we slept.

O daughters, my raven's-wing-haired ones.
My mothers of warriors, my weavers of sweet grasses,
On spring nights when no frog sings and Owl trembles,
Thou wilt hear, with the true ear of spirit
A laugh that is high, liting. Be not deceived,
For it is the voice of Evil One,
Mocking the ashes of our Good Great League.

Red Jacket
solus
August 1801

Across the horizon a lone crow
Works against wind: his wings creak.
His eyes are wide for situations.

This is a wise crow: alone
Of his Brothers he is scout
And prophet. He would prefer

An owl, out in the day light.
As reason to call to Brothers,
A chance to conjure old hatred.

If he shouts a certain way
Others will come. also shouting,
Circling the owl with keen beaks

And dirty yellow feet.
When few crows come, they die:
Often there are many many crows.

I think this day will darken
By crows. This night my dreams
Will be yellow and black.

Last night dream crows became
Pieces of an old black pot.
Then they rose to rejoin

In air: yellow beaks
And yellow feet bristled
From that black cloud

And yellow eyes led it
As it searched out owls.
That was a terrible dream

Continue to listen: White men think too much.
White men live the Jesus-word too little.
They make their god a wicked father.
They make their god a fool, and if you speak
To such a one, you are a fool as well.

Red Jacket
solus
January 1807

For three days snow has given flesh
To air. Men and women walk through it
And disappear. Often I see Brothers
Who have gone, and when I go to them
They are someone else.

Tell me, Spirit, why this winter
Turns my brain. Tell me, Spirit,
Why my heart grows damp
By the fire, at the lap
Of my wife.

No face is sure. Snow
Covers gametracks, makes the forest
Still, as if before battle. My ears
Ring from quiet. Not even children
Can break it.

Here comes a Brother, who fell
By the clubs of enemies, whose skull
Was caved in when we were young.
I know he is dead, yet my heart races
And my arms reach to him.

**Red Jacket
to his kinsmen
July 4, 1815**

This is a remembrance day. The Whites
Wash their city with beer and rum:
Muskets speak with cannon; bright cloth
Marks air, and Father England
Is called a fool by children.

Brothers' We sit in torn blankets
And scratch the ground for food.
Brothers! Game has fled to the west;
The racks empty of meat; our land
Is no greater than the longhouse-border.

The Whites love Liberty. Her face
Shines out from their silver and gold;
Her name is uttered in the high voice;
She stands in brass atop great houses;
Strong men move in her shadow.

Brothers! She is a dull woman
Whose children walk without counsel:
No good stories fall from her mouth.
Brothers! She is a timid widow
Who cannot shame her sons and daughters.

Brothers, this woman has a son
Who is called Freedom. Fear this man,
For he steals with paper and whiskey,
And he bruises the earth with iron shoes:
I name him No-Man-Punishes-Me.

Red Jacket
solus
Christmas Day, 1824

This day my wife pounds corn: the strokes
Of the wooden mortar flash the brass cross
She wears between old breasts, heavy
With the memory of milk.

The Christians bustle and grin. My wife
Smiles, for the wooden church of the Whites
Will hold her soon in Its maw: tonight
She will chant English, she will bear candles.

All this comes from her vision. This
Is the fashion in which she honors it,
And I remain her husband, and my dignity
Is dust on the graves of pretty daughters.

Woman, all my curses were in vain.
The faces of Whites pierce my sleep.
A captive god shimmers at the throats
Of our little children.

No White who vows the Jesus words,
No Quaker, No Black-Coat,
No earnest-hearted young White man
With his clever tongue, with his pitted face,

Will rise above himself to keep the promise.
Today such words are snow.
Today the Christians reach to grasp,
And chilly water courses down their arms.

Red Jacket
solus
March 1825

Though the house is dark, a storm
Hatchets my eyes: J see light
When J want blindness, Fists of thunder
Rattle low hills: men of the valley
Are afraid, and I am old, I am
An old black stone,

Take me now, thou
Death-That-Forks, thou Sunder-The-Rock:
I feel thee through wood walls,
And the nails in my' White house ring
From your maul of noise, My ears
Are dull, yet I hear your hand's clap
Deep in my eye-sockets,
The bones of my face ache, The air
Is deathly sweet

This storm is sharp,
I start many times, I think on my daughters
Who are gone, I have no name,
I am a louse in Spirit's hair.
I will be plucked out, thumbnail-cracked,
Thrown to the ground to rot.

Red Jacket
to his youngest daughter,
June 1829

Even in death I will be close
To this earth: all her dead sons,
Daughters, walking in clear spirit,

Stay here always, for their love is always
For their brown mother. a daughter,
Thy own mother, when thou wast

Beaded in tears from the small bruises
Of children, would grasp her knife
And press the cool flat of it

On thy hurt: the pain fled
From cold steel and ran
Into her broad, veined hands

And then she shook them out. So it is
With this earth. When great men
Stamp their feet, she trembles,

And when there is pain she will
Draw it away. I have felt her work
In days of trouble, when war was,

When many fought and many died.
Always, after she has moved in healing,
She is well. In these my hurtful, latter days,

I lie with her; I am at peace;
She takes up all my sadnesses:
My grave, though I yet live.

from *Little-Dog-Of-Iron*

In this collection, Philip St. Clair reimagines the Native American Coyote spirit, trickster, shape-shifter, linguist, and liar. This is from Howard McCord's introduction to the volume:

It is not that Coyote became a famous personage because of the poets; did Napoleon need poets or the hundred fifty-four biographers? No, Coyote, like Hamlet, *became* the poets. Or at least he became one poet, Philip St. Clair.

Little-Dog-Of-Iron might be sub-titled *The True History of Coyote In Our Times*, for St. Clair reveals Coyote in his historically American manifestations, from folk hero-demon to law student, from relisher of fieldmice canapes to lecher-philosopher. From hunter to hunted, in a fundamentally slapstick universe. For however plaintive Old Man Coyote's cry sounds in the desert night, there is laughter and foolishness coiled in it like snakes wintering in a ball, but laughter and tears are brothers, and Coyote was at Wounded Knee and watched with sadness as Wovoka's dream mutated and betrayed the dreamers. The ghosts dance in Coyote's memory, and we share for the moment the melancholy of immortality.

Coyote Paranoia

The first time I came east
I was wonderfully afraid. All those trees
Made me that way. They fed at the place
Where earth and sky meet. Their seeds
Clotted wind. They tore clouds.
They fought the sun each day he rose.

Squirrels bit up my heart:
Yellow teeth the ribs of dead Brothers.
Sleek tails the thighs of young girls.
Birds flicked their heads at me and spat.
Their wings were the color of rot.
They swooped close. They pecked my lips.

I almost starved there.
Deer were silver laughing women: they all knew
I hunted alone. Rabbits changed to toads
Between my jaws. Eyes of mice
Gleamed through poison thorns. Only the snakes
Offered themselves to me.

Right on the edge
I found a white house. It was guarded
By a magic square of lawn. Seven trees
Dozed in the yard: their feet were chained
By small white stones. They didn't cry out
As I ran in the carport.

I ate the garbage. I ate the cats.
I saved the head of the friendliest cat
And laid it on the hood of a Buick
Where my delivering spirits would see it.
Then I sat down. I took my ease.
I threw out a loud prayer of thanksgiving.

I ran back in the forest as white men
Shot up my howls. All the wicked trees
Scraped my fine coat. Drab knifebirds
Plucked my lush tail. By the time
I made it to the plains of Iowa
I had no hair. I had no hair at all.

Coyote Automobiles

The first car to buy me was a three-twenty-seven:
Best Chevy engine ever made. Lights,
Cops boiled in confusion and rage: I left them
Panting, I left them standing still;
There was much good mirth in the deep chuckle
Billowed from the manifold's throat
Down out the muffler. I had my name painted
On the sleek yellow door-little dashes
Around it, front and back. Like in the books.

Then there was the four-oh-nine. Songs from radios
Gave it power as it rode in sevens and tens
Out of Detroit. The first time I opened it
Was at a slow light; eyeless cops faced me
And were beside me. I romped it three times hard
And a quarter-mile down all valves
Blew off. They wrote me up; they were grinning;
Slim blue ballpoints whirred and rustled
As a towtruck gouged my chrome.

The four-eleven scared me. It was green
With gold metalflecks and looked like a box
Made of snakes. I never floored it.
When I got in and turned the silver key
Death ground his teeth in my ear.
My life belonged to many insurance devils.
Then one night some punk hot-wired it
To die in flames. And God spoke, saying,
“By the hand of the thief art thou delivered.”

Coyote Repose

Fat wool blankets in my winter den
Mate as I sleep. They twist in thick ropes,
Then doze at my side. I think they are snakes:
The male is red and gold and blue;
The female gray.

My jaws hurt when I wake. My last wife said
I ground my teeth. She said it was
The torture of rock. She said it was
The flint beak of a great quartz owl
Chewing weasels and ice.

She also said I thrashed and snored.
She said I lay on my side, working my legs
Like a whining, twitching rubber dog.
She said I choked on night, that my throat
Was a rattle of spit.

Now I sleep alone. Sometimes I dream
Of a blonde woman, dressed in blue fire.
She has deep breasts, firm eyes, wide hands.
She brings me a box of cheesecake
And many cigarettes.

Then my jaws and my paws are still.
Then I do not snore. And when I wake
The air is hazy-blue and sweet crumbs
Fill my whiskers and my blankets
Lie on my chest like lawn.

Coyote Fatalism

Until that day, I keep both hill and low place
Mine: no creature usurps me
From my den by the river. I toss plump mice
To the air; my sport is great
And my woman sleek; my pups
Honor my name to the Grandfathers.

For no hunter may kill me:
Their bullets fall short; their traps
Shatter about my ankles; their poison
Gives me laughter and dancing;
They name me Little-Dog-Of-Iron.

On that day Death will take me by the leg
And stop my heart. My wife
Will keen and rock; my pups
Will gash their arms with knives;
The Grandfathers will gallop
Toward me on clouds
And wash my spirit with singing.

Then all hunters will see
My body turn to water:
I will eddy under the heels
Of their black boots, and they will
Name me Earth-Has-Drunk-Him-Up.

Coyote on Retreat

I have been with a woman for two days
And I have not eaten. I live on her juices
And the television. I place a red sign
On the door of my room: no one will enter
Unless bearing pizza.

I say this is fasting
Done down grand style. If this were
The way of old ones all young men
Would revel in vision and long dusty hair.

After a session she lies on me
And sometimes I am in her halfway. I watch
Money shows and old movies and they are beginning
To shine from the floor. My last meal
Was beans and pills.

My money comes
On heavy paper I am not permitted
To fold. The holes in it are square, sacred:
This is the way of the state of South Dakota.

I am not yet ready to eat. I wait to see
I Love Lucy who loves no one. Her lust
For gray fur is writ on a gray heart.
Her low shoe is quick. Her mouth lacks dignity.

Whatever I'm doing is half done. Soon
My voice will be light-I'll call up
Red medicine wheels: 'shrooms, sausage,
Olives, green peppers, and two kinds cheese.

Coyote Hitchhikes the Suburbs

This is what comes from avoiding women
With loud children -a night ride
In a pious stranger's truck. In his cab
There is no small talk. The only light
Is on his cigarette.

He knows about Jesus,
Who will lever him out of his Dodge
Come rapture-day. All his neighbors,
The jealous sinners, will gape and whine
As he soars home.

I watch my head
Glide over fine houses. I see many cats.
They are oily, indolent, secure. They nest
By tinted windows. They stare at traffic.
They brood and grin.

All televisions are on.
I think they keep the ghosts of cats,
Hardhead cats who dove through picture tubes
After the light. Now they cry to women
Who cannot hear them.

Grandfathers!
Keep me far from all light-eaters,
The ones who seek yet do not embrace,
The ones who live in cold, clear fire
And move alone.

Elegy for Kelly Keen
slain by my Brothers the Coyotes in her third year

Upwardly mobile, your mother and father
Took over a house and a concrete slab
On the well-mowed edge of Glendale.

My Brothers watched fat moving vans
Loom in and out of your driveway
Like buffalo. They saw the chain

Around your garbage can. Your cat
And the pudgy little sausage-dog
Never came outside. But you,

Brave, naive, bright with human eyes
That stare down all creation,
Toddled under the August sun

While Brothers drifted back and forth
Among the low suburban hills
Hungry, crooning gently, watching.

And when they danced into your yard
Singing, making the wary circle,
You must have laughed and reached to pet:

A blood remembrance of that ancient bond
Between your kin and mine. "Pretty!"
They said, and then they took you down.

Coyote in Law School

When I was in law school I had hair.
I had a lot of hair. I smoked good weed
And I drank white wine. All my dorm friends
Were very careful cynics—their parents
Lived on other planets. All my dorm friends
Tacked photos at the edges of their mirrors:
On the left side was the car.
On the right side was the girl.

Lyndon Baines Johnson gave me a grant.
When I read his letter, I grabbed my Astros hat
And hitchhiked for three days—total joy!
I sang a Lyndon Baines Johnson song
Eight hundred times—eyes of truckers sparkled
As I sang it. Bright motes of dust made diners
Holy places: young waitresses smiled at me
And waved their long red fingernails at me.

Crastino et de caetero, I did it to my head
I found all law is owning all the land.
I learned to draw a magic square with chalk
And how to step inside. “Droit-droit!” I shouted
When termors, purlieus, warnoths menaced me.
Grandfather spat whenever I came home. Grandmother
Wept and rocked, crying, “Little owl, little owl,
Your tongue brings the whirlwind, little owl!”

Muzak Coyote

At this truckstop four young men sing
In boxes. They croon by the table
Where waitresses watch distant hawks,
Where they lounge and listen as reedy voices
Tell the pain of loving young.

Each girl's white shoe
Carves an arc in stale air. Each yellow sale
Nods and bobs in cigarette ghosts
While out the window ripe summer wheat
Dances a victory on the broken earth
Of Valentine, Nebraska.

I think the young men
Hurt too much, for when they make
Their saddest, highest note, many crows
Burst out of the wounded field and every waitress
Stares at me as if to take my heart.

Coyote Eucharist

Three dark powerlines link the street
To Ray's Phoenix Lounge: grackles live
Where they join. Fifty feet away
A small gray coffin hums on a pole.
My fur spikes up as I trot by.
From there each cable
Curves to the loose twig-circle
Keeping their children.

Each day I watch
The babies fatten. They begin to glow.
They leave orange trails as they reach
To be fed: naked wings and blunt quills
Crackle, arc. Their cries flake brick,
Haze paint, turn a keen bright needle
In everyone's ear. Now all easy game
Is gone.

They are hungry
For the fire holding home. They lean
Over the nest, cutting half-moons
In tarred arteries of light,
Pecking and scratching at crystal kettles.
Crazy-brave, they stretch to lash out
At mothers with kids, at joggers,
At utility people.

Now the street
Is barred by yellow trestles. Neighbors
Lock their pets away—the calico cat
I want for lunch is gone. A cop and shotgun
Wait under the nest: his cruiser
Pounds my face with red and white. Dazed,
Dappled, famished, I hide here and wait
For a small bite of spark.

Coyote Apocalypse

The Good White Man is coming. I see him
Move in the corner of my left eye.
He gestures at me, and when I turn
He is gone. All old stories say
He carries plates of stone as Moses did
But this I have not seen. He may be Death.
He may be Death's brother. I say this because
Death comes from the left to fight
With a long red hand. All my friends
Say this is so.

I am waiting
For the Great Cleansing. In this I am patient
As any Christian. I am waiting for Jews
To rebuild their temple so I listen
To the radio. I am waiting for White Man
To build a dwelling high in the air
So I listen to the radio. For years
Old ones waited in small, dark houses
And thought on old stories. Now they go
Outside at night. Now they look at the sky.
Red lights gleam from their radios.

When he comes to the land he will float.
Birds will fly under his feet.
When he lifts his tablets to catch the noon sun
The world will molt like an old snake.
The wicked and thoughtless will die.
Then all will be bright with flowers,
Heavy with trees. All water
Will be sweet. Bears will fatten
On salmon and fruit. Great buffalo nations
Will tremble the ground and every red radio
Will vanish in smoke.

Coyote Addresses His Brothers
The Wolves and the Foxes on the Banks of
Wounded Knee Creek:
April 1891

Brothers! When the great chief Sitting Bull
Heard of a new religion, brought down from heaven
By the Prophet Wovoka, his heart grew light:
He wished to hear more. He summoned
Kicking Bear, who had gone to find that magic,
Who had learned it from the Blue Cloud nation.

And Kicking Bear spoke to the people,
And told them of the world to come,
And reunion with their ancestors,
And the death of every white man,
And the singing and the dancing
Jesus taught him up in heaven.

And Kicking Bear walked among them
To give them the dance and the singing,
And they joined hands and made a circle,
And their steps were slow and careful,
And their dancing moved as the sun moves,
Going from the right hand to the left.

They worshipped far into the darkness:
Many fell down and had visions,
And were taken up to Wakan Tanka.
When Little Wound went up to heaven,
Jesus met him, and embraced him as Brother,
And led him to his relatives and children,
And brought him the playmates of his youth.
When Crooked Nose went up to heaven,
Jesus told him He would save all red men,
And gave him two red berries
And two black berries, fresh from the bushes
That grow near the tent of Wakan Tanka.

On the fourth day of that dancing,
McLaughlin, the white agent at Standing Rock,
Sent fourteen men to stop it. But Spirit
Clouded their minds, and sent them back:
They were as men who walk within their sleep.
But the eleven who came after
Rode horses straight into the circle
They seized Kicking Bear and all his men
And led them off the reservation.

That night, before a new dancing,
Sitting Bull went into his cabin,
And brought out a fine long pipe,
Kept in remembrance of the day
He brought his people home
From Grandmother's Land, five winters after
The fight at the Little Big Horn.
He raised that pipe, and with his hands
He broke it in two, saying,
"For the words of the Messiah,
For the world Great Holy promised,
For the coming of our ancestors,
For the death of all the white men,
I will fight and die!"

And the new way threw down deep roots
In all the agencies, and at Pine Ridge
There was much dancing, and many red men,
Arrogant in the faith, waved bright knives
At white men, and sold what they had to buy guns,
And wore blue ghost-shirts that were proof
Against white bullets. Then the talking papers
Cried out, saying that a great battle
Was surely to come, and white men at Washington
Turned their eyes westward.

And white men at Pine Ridge made threats:
They vowed to stop the issue of beef
And the dancers grew afraid.
Then Short Bull had a vision
And addressed the faithful, saying,

“Brothers, listen! A great tree will sprout
On the banks of Pass Creek, and all believers
Will see dead kinsmen by it
Waiting for the embrace. Now you must dance
For the rest of this moon, and at its end
The earth will shake, and a great wind
Will blow down from the north,
And the tree will burst from the ground
Fully leaved, and all our dead fathers
Will circle its trunk.”

“Believers! Fear for nothing!
Even the guns of the white belong
To our Father in heaven-whatever they say
Do not heed them!”

When Sitting Bull heard of that vision,
He sent a message to the agency,
Saying that he must travel to Pine Ridge
To pray and dance. Then McLaughlin
Gave the order to arrest him:
Thirty Indian Police rode into his camp
And the Army sent men to help:
One hundred soldiers kept watch a mile away,
And they had a many-barreled wagon-gun,
And they had a twice-shooting wagon-gun.

When the Indian Police rapped on his door,
Sitting Bull said, “Yes! Come in the house!”
When the Indian Police told him their mission,
Sitting Bull said, “All right!
Let me put on my clothes and go with you!”
Now the Indian Police were fearful:
They wished to leave quickly,
But Sitting Bull was slow and aged,
So they honored that great chief
By dressing him, and their hands trembled.
His youngest wife sang, “Husband!
Always you have been a brave man. What
is going to happen now?”

Soon many people at the camp
Gathered by the cabin door.

When the chief came out, two men
Held his arms; a third kept a revolver
Tight against his back. Then Crow Foot,
The son of seventeen winters, cried out:
“Father! Always you have called yourself
Great chief, but now you are being taken
By the Chests-Of-Metal!” Then Sitting Bull
Struggled with the Indian Police,
Saying in a loud voice: “All right!
I will not go another step!” Then
Knives and rifles came out of blankets
And the people fought the Indian Police,
Driving them inside the cabin.

When a runner came with news, the Army
Galloped to the camp of Sitting Bull:
A half-mile away, they saw much smoke
And fired the twice-shooting wagon-gun—
Many died and many ran away.

Then the Army came into the camp
And saw that the ground was strewn with corpses,
And saw that Sitting Bull and his son were dead.
Across the river, a warrior in a ghost-shirt
Sang as he rode through the trees: “Father!
I thought you said we were going to live!”

Then began the capture of the dancers:
Those who fled the camp of Sitting Bull
Joined Big Foot’s people, who were taken by soldiers
And brought to Pine Ridge. “It is well,”
Said Big Foot, “for I was going there anyway!”

The soldier-chiefs told all their men
To take the weapons of the faithful:
Troopers began to search each lodge.
Then the people, cold and hungry,
Gathered near the tent of Big Foot,
And they joined hands and made a circle,
And they faced inward on that circle,
And their steps were slow and careful,
And their dancing moved as the sun moves,
Going from the right hand to the left.

Then Yellow Bird, the medicine-chief,
Began to pray, throwing red dust
To the winter air, crying "Brothers!
Do not be afraid! There are many soldiers

And many bullets, but the prairie is vast-
No bullet will harm you, for as you see me
Toss up dust, and as you see dust float away,
So shall the bullets of soldiers
Be taken away by the wind of Spirit!"
And Black Coyote stood up, and drew
A fine Winchester from beneath his blanket,
Shouting that he would never give it up
Unless the white man paid for it in gold.
When two white troopers seized him from behind
Black Coyote's rifle spoke-many warriors
Fired their weapons at the lines of soldiers.

Then, my Brothers, the killing began.
That noise was like the robe of Wakan Tanka
Being torn in two. That smoke was like
A great white fist, rising in anger at the sun.

Here is the count of the faithful who died:
Of the men, eighty-four.
Of the women, forty-four.
Of the children, eighteen.
Big Foot lay dead in the snow.
Yellow Bird lay dead in his tent.
Black Coyote was never seen again.

And when Wovoka, the good prophet,
The preacher of peace and friendship
Between red man and white man,
Heard of that fight, he wept,
And pulled the blanket over his head,
Crying, "My children! My children!
Now you must travel a new path,
The only way for us to walk—
The white man's road!"