

ROSEBUD

There is a place in Montana where the grass stands up two feet,
yellow grass, white grass, the wind
on it like locust wings & the same shine.
Facing what I think was south, I could see a broad valley
& river, miles into the valley, that looked black & then trees.
To the west was more prairie, darker
than where we stood, because the clouds
covered it; a long shadow, like the edge of rain, racing toward us.
We had been driving all day, & the day before through South Dakota
along the Rosebud, where the Sioux
are now farmers, & go to school, & look like everyone.
In the reservation town there was a Sioux museum
& 'trading post,' some implements inside: a long-bow
of shined wood that lay in its glass case, reflecting light.
The walls were covered with framed photographs,
the Ogallala posed in fine dress in front of a few huts,
some horses nearby: a feeling, even in those photographs
the size of a book, of spaciousness.
I wanted to ask about a Sioux holy man, whose life
I had then recently read, & whose vision had gone on hopelessly
past its time: I believed then that only a great loss
could make us feel small enough to begin again.
The woman behind the counter
talked endlessly on; there was no difference I could see
between us, so I never asked.

The place in Montana
was the *Greasy Grass* where Custer & the seventh cavalry fell,
a last important victory for the tribes. We had been driving
all day, hypnotized, & when we got out to enter
the small, flat American tourist center we began to argue.
And later, walking between the dry grass & reading plaques,
my wife made an ironic comment: I believe it hurt the land, not
intentionally; it was only meant to hold us apart.
Later I read of Benteen & Ross & those who escaped,
but what I felt then was final: lying down, face
against the warm side of a horse, & feeling the lulls endlessly,

the silences just before death. The place might stand for death,
every loss rejoined in a wide place;
or it is rest, as it was then after the long drive,
nothing for miles but grass, a long valley to the south
& living in history. Or it is just a way of living
gone, like our own, every moment.
Because what I have to do daily & what is done to me
are a number of small indignities, I have to trust that
many things we all say to each other are not intentional,
that every indirect word will accumulate
over the earth, & now, when we may be approaching
something final, it seems important not to hurt the land.