On a 700 foot thick shelf of Cretaceous pink sandstone
*Nel mezzo...*

Sixth floor, turn right at the elevator

“The hotel of the century”

*Elegant dining, dancing, solarium*

Around the block from the Black Hills School of Beauty
And campaign headquarters of one Jack Billion
(“Together we can move forward”)

The exact center of the Oglala known universe

*Cante wamakoguake*

Or only 30 miles or so away, southwest, off Highway 87

I waken to the sound of the DM & E

Rattling through this sleeping town

Sounding its horn as it snakes its way through

Hauling coal from nowhere, through nowhere, and then some

Old rocks and distance, a few hawks overhead

4 a.m.—*per una selva oscura*

—*Kwok, kwok, kwok*, shrieks the velociraptor

In the closed dinosaur shop

—*Vroooom*

Roars the Triceratops, like Texas thunder

They keep the tape-loop going through the night
Always have done, no one knows why
The Bible Store respires in its sanctum
As if in an outsize black glass humidor
This is a sacred ground, a holy place
4 a.m. in a sacred place
I can tell this is a sacred place, I needn't be told
It's in the air
I feel it
This old heritage hotel, this is a sacred place
The tour buses are lined up outside it
Awaiting the countless pilgrims
On the floor, my shoe, under the bed
Even my shoe is blessed
The Lord's blessing is everywhere to be found
The Lambs of Christ are among us
You can tell by the billboards
The billboards with fetuses, out there on the highway
Through the buzzing, sodium-lit night
Semis grind it out on the Interstate
Hauling toothpaste, wheels of Muenster, rapeseed oil
Blessed is the abundance, blessed the commerce
Across the Cretaceous hogback
Hundred million year old Lakota sandstone, clays, shale, gypsum
And down through the basins of ancient seabeds
Past the souvenir shops and empty missile silos
The ghosts of 98 foot long Titans and Minutemen

150,000 pounds of thrust
Stainless steel, nickel-alloy-coated warheads
Quartz ceramic warheads, webbed in metal honeycomb
8 megaton payloads
Range 6,300 miles
Noli me tangere
God bless America
We're right on top of it, baby
This is why you're here
Close enough, anyhow, just 11 miles west of Castle Rock
In a pasture, right off 79
The middle of the middle of the heart of this great land
There's a sign
This is a sacred place
Up there in the hills, the vast, ponderosa-feathered batholith
You can see it from space
2 billion year old exposed rock, rising from the prairie
A faint blue shape on the horizon
When approaching from a distance
But seen close at hand "grim and black"

Paha sapa
"Savage cliffs and precipices . . . fantastic forms
Sometimes resembling towns, some castellated fortresses . . ."
A sacred place
Custer once came through, in the summer of '74
With that mustache and golden hair,
And espied here the multitude of flowers
17 varieties in a space of 20 feet
One could pick seven different kinds at dinner
Without ever leaving one's seat
—It was a strange sight, he wrote
To glance back at the advancing columns of cavalry
And behold the men with beautiful bouquets in their hands
A sacred place
The Great White Fathers dwell in these hills
Noses and foreheads blasted out of granite
Crazy Horse too, 30 stories high
An enormous pod of migmatite glowing east
Big chiefs everywhere
On every street corner in town
Life-size bronze likenesses
See the chicana brushing President Van Buren, bless her
Bless the chicana in pink rayon, the dutiful city worker
Brushing the statue with a toothbrush in the night
There's Nixon at St. Joseph and 5th
Seated, hands folded on his lap, the way he did
In the midst of "delicate negotiations with Mao"
This is what it says at the base
Bless them, Nixon and Mao both,
Men of peace, soldiers of God
The bronze is cold in the High Plains night

The eyes they gaze out of are holes
Here, at the exact dead center of America
Or close enough, just north of here, off Highway 79
The buffalo roam in these hills
Paha sapa
The bison graze in the shadow of these hills
One angry bull tosses a Harley 30 feet in the air
A big fat biker, attached to it, 30 feet as well
The sacred bison
He would have ridden among the sacred bison, the biker
Ridden as if he were one of their own
—Tatanka, Tatanka, cries Kevin Costner
—Tatanka, concurs Kicking Bird
—Tatanka, agrees Wind in His Hair
Bless Kevin Costner
I saw that one on the wide screen, in Dolby surround sound
Kevin Costner stayed in this hotel
Babe Ruth and Calvin Coolidge too
This is a sacred place
I have come here from far away
After many years of wandering
Disillusion
And found surcease here from all my cares
Surcease here from doubt
Here, at the center of it all

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On a great slab of Mesozoic rock
This sanctified ground
Here, yes, here
The dead solid center of the universe
At the heart of the heart of America
THE HEREAFTER

At the gates to the Hereafter,
a rather drab affair, might as well be a union hall
in south Milwaukee, but with shackled
sweating bodies along the walls,
female, chiefly, and not at all miserable,
straining like bored sultanas at their fetters,
each of them singing a separate song.
A Semitic chap—the greeter, I suppose—
gives me the quick once-over
and most amused he seems to be. Has me figured.
Not unlike a gent I met only last week,
a salesman at a stereo shop on Broadway.
—So, he says. Nothing more.
—Sew buttons, says I, in a cavalier mood
and why not.

Ushers me into a tiny cinema,
a two-seater, really quite deluxe,
a great big Diet Coke in the cupholder,
fizzling away.
—O.K.? he asks.
I nod and the film unrolls.
A 20-million-dollar home movie it is,
featuring yours truly: at the foot
of the stairs with the dog, mounting
Josette in a New Smyrna love nest,
a fraught kitchen showdown with Mom,
the suicide, car wreck, home run.
You know what these things are like:
the outlandish hairdos, pastel bathroom fixtures.
The editing is out of this world,
the whole shebang in under an hour:
the air-raid drill on Wednesday morning,
1957, when Tito wet his pants;
there I am, beside myself with laughter,
miserable little creature.
The elemental, slow-motion machinery
of character's forcing house.
Even with all the fancy camera angles,
jump cuts and the rest,
might as well be a chain of short features:
Animal Husbandry, Sexual Hygiene,
Lisboa by Night . . .
What a lot of erections, voidings, pretzels,
bouncing the ball against the stoop.
She really did love you, all along.
These jealousies and rages of yours,
like a disgusting skin condition
that never entirely goes away.
You, you . . .
What catalogs of failure, self-deception . . .
And then the lights come back on,
likewise the choir's splintered polyphony,
with its shards of *Sprechstimme*, the Ronettes, whatnot,
and in the air around us
something like the odor of a freshly spent cartridge,
when my minder asks brightly.

—*How about another Coke?*
You'd figure the hawk for an isolate thing, 
commanding the empyrean, 
taking his ease in the thermals and wind 
until that retinal flick, the plunge and shriek—
cruelly perfect at what he is.
With crepe myrtle igniting the streets
and flowering pansy underfoot
I'd get out there just after dawn each day,
before the sun made it over the mesquite and honey locust.
Cliff swallows rocketed low over grass,
dragonflies darted above:
every day, on the heels of first birdsong, juice-heads
sleeping rough by the culvert.
Before the heat,
before the ebb and flow of cicada whir swallowed the world,
when the crepe myrtle was still in bloom,
when it was the flowering pansies' time in the park and untended lots,
and still a touch of cool in the air.
I remember once, a redtail perched close by
on a branch or utility pole.
Maybe he came down for a better look,
but I think it was so that I might better see him,
who reigned over these few acres and beyond
and what it was about him so overmastering.
An ugly sheen encouraged some gold in his russet mantle.
His belly was white.
Look at me, he seemed to be insisting.
Behold, a pure wild heartless thing,
beautiful and horrible, nothing in between.
I one day saw him tearing at his prey:
he was in the crook of a tree, low and close at hand,
fixed on it, drunk with it, mercilessly at it,
the sound like a cleaver tearing through meat,
cruelly what he was, nothing else.
But on another day, not long after, I heard him,
perched high on a branch, calling out,
crying out in distress, piteously,
*kee-eeree-arr*, *kee-eeree-arr*,
a harsh, descending sound, and unrelenting.
*kee-eeree-arr* *kee-eeree-arr*,
panicked or wounded, terrible in his dismay,
until, suddenly, from some other corner of sky
another hawk flew down to join him,
not right there on the same branch but on another, close by.
And soon after that, off they flew together,
drifting, spiraling, higher and higher
in partnered loops, wheeling and diving,
enraptured by all they were, were able to do,
not as separate beings, but as two.