

Excerpted from:  
*Sleeping It Off in Rapid City:*  
*Poems, New and Selected*  
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## SLEEPING IT OFF IN RAPID CITY

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

—*Vrooom*

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 respire in its sanctum  
As if in an outsize black glass humidior  
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 glowering 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



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,  
fizzing 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?*

## ANNIVERSARY

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 whirl 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-eeee-arr, kee-eeee-arr,*  
a harsh, descending sound, and unrelenting,  
*kee-eeee-arr kee-eeee-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.