

Reno-Bentine Site

I'd read accounts of Custer—
How he had courage
But no other noticeable virtues.
It made a moral tale—
A proper comeuppance
For white man's arrogance.

And I traced the route he took—
As close as blacktop would allow
From Fort Abraham Lincoln in Dakota—
On his punitive expedition
To make the Black Hills safe
For proper gold seekers.

I came to the hills above
The Little Bighorn before daylight
On a clear summer morning.
And passed the scattered stones
That mark where Armstrong—
As George was called by family—
And his younger brother Tom—
A hero in his own right,
With two Medals of Honor—
And the others went down—
Outnumbered, outgunned,
And outgeneraled, too—
Shot, and then butchered
By squaws' skinning knives.

On the hill beyond, Reno and Bentine,
With other companies of the Seventh,
Waited that hot June afternoon.
They saw dust and heard shots and knew
They were too late and too few
To mount a saving charge.

And fearing for their own hair
Dug rifle pits around the hilltop
And waited for the dark.

The dark was safe because
Indians who died in the dark,
Went to a dark hunting ground—
Or so it was said, but you never knew,
So the night was long.
I too waited for sunup—looking down
On Little Bighorn Coulee.
The willows along the winding creek
The only green against the pale grass.

There are washes and draws
Leading up from the river—
A thousand places of concealment
Just out of rifle range—
And the memory of shots and dust
And distant yells yesterday afternoon.

And five thousand Sioux and Crow
And Cheyenne led by Sitting Bull,
Crazy Horse, and Gaul waiting
For just the right moment, and
Trapdoor Springfields reload slow.
The light came late.

It's a fearsome place to be
Alone at summer dawn.

—John Sterling Harris

This poem is selected from *Second Crop*, a book of John Sterling Harris's poetry published by BYU Studies.