
At the Washita River Battle Site

Oklahoma wind is the only sound today,
unlike the morning Black Kettle's band
was jarred into a frosted dawn by Custer's buglers,
bullets whizzing, hooves crashing through
the creek's brittle skin. The Seventh Cavalry
beat the Cheyenne with surprise that day.
Black Kettle, finished with making peace,
fell defending the village. This must have been
as good as any place to die, sheltered
among the river bottom cottonwoods,
buttes blue from distance on the benchlands
where buffalo fed on the yellow-cured grass,
and the sky holding everything down.

The smell of the dead, of burning tipi skins
and eight hundred gutshot horses is gone.
Hereford cattle graze the hillsides now.
Beer cans left by kids on Saturday night
scatter the lawn around three picnic tables,
and the asphalt glitters with broken glass.
The bottom has been cleared and plowed—
red furrows lined with winter wheat,
stretching to the edges of the sky.