

## 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.