

## BLACK ELK 1863-1950

JOHN G. NEIHARDT  
1881-1973

1930 Katherine Anne Porter, "Flowering Judas" • Dorothy Parker, "The Waltz"

1931 E. E. Cummings, "I sing of Olaf glad and big" • F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Babylon Revisited"

1932 Black Elk and John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* • Sterling A. Brown, "He Was a Man"

1934 William Carlos Williams, "This Is Just to Say"

1936 Ernest Hemingway, "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" • Genevieve Taggard, "For Eager Lovers"

1937 Thomas Wolfe, "The Lost Boy"

1938 John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.* • William Faulkner, "Barn Burning"

1939 Richard Wright, "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" • John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

1940 Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey into Night*

1944 Muriel Rukeyser, "Suicide Blues"

1930 Sinclair Lewis is first American to win Nobel Prize for literature

1931 Scottsboro trial

1932 Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "New Deal" introduces social security, welfare, and unemployment insurance

1933 Adolf Hitler's Nationalist Socialist (Nazi) party comes to power in Germany • 18th Amendment repealed

1934 Wheeler-Howard (Indian Reorganization Act) passed, ending Dawes era

1936 Hitler begins armed occupation of Europe

1936-39 Spanish Civil War: U.S. volunteers among those fighting against General Franco, who becomes dictator of Spain

1937 Stalin's purges

1939-45 World War II • the Holocaust

1941 Japan bombs Pearl Harbor, Hawaii • United States enters war against Japan and its allies, Germany and Italy

1942 President Roosevelt orders internment of Japanese Americans in camps

1944 D Day; Allied invasion of Normandy

1945 German forces surrender in spring; Japan surrenders in August following explosion of two nuclear bombs over Japanese cities

Nicholas Black Elk, an Oglala Lakota, was born on the Little Powder River. Although every traditionally raised Lakota male engaged in a vision quest—*hanble ceyapi*, literally "crying for a vision"—a search for spiritual guidance in his life, Black Elk was granted a particularly powerful vision by the Thunder beings (*Wakinyan*), the powers of the west, at the early age of nine. He said nothing of this until he was seventeen, when he began to fear that continued silence might lead to his being struck by lightning—a particular danger for the Thunder Dreamer. It was most usual for the Thunder Dreamer to perform the *heyoka* ceremony and become a "sacred clown," one who, for a time, did things backward and foolishly. But Black Elk was advised to have the horse dance enacted instead. Once this had been done, Black Elk began to practice as a shamanic healer.

Some four years earlier, in 1876, although he was too young to fight, Black Elk had witnessed the defeat of General George A. Custer and his Seventh Cavalry on the Little Big Horn River by the Lakota and their Cheyenne allies, an event that did not, however, slow the encroachment of the whites onto Indian lands. Black Elk joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in 1886, traveling to New York's Madison Square Garden and then to England where the show performed for the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria's reign. By that time, Black Elk had become an Episcopalian, fortunate in that the Wild West Show required all its Native American employees to be Christians.

Black Elk returned home in time to encounter the Ghost Dance movement at Pine Ridge. Skeptical at first, he eventually came to understand the Ghost Dance to be consistent both with his own great vision and with Christian teaching. The massacre of Big Foot's Minneconjou band at Wounded Knee Creek in December 1890 put a tragic end to the hopes of the Ghost Dancers and, as well, to any hopes Black Elk might have had that his vision could restore the sacred hoop of his people and help them to live in a manner consistent with traditional ways. Black Elk was baptized a Catholic at Holy Rosary Mission on December 6, 1904, the feast of St. Nicholas, at which time he took that saint's name. He never engaged in traditional healing practices again.

In August 1930, John G. Neihardt, poet laureate of Nebraska, on a trip to research material for the final volume of his epic poem, *A Cycle of the West*, drove up to Black Elk's cabin outside of Manderson, South Dakota. With Neihardt were his son, Sigurd, and a man named Emil Afraid of Hawk who had agreed to act as Neihardt's interpreter (Black Elk spoke little English). From all accounts, the two men responded strongly to each other. Neihardt told Black Elk that he was a writer of epic poetry, which, in Lakota, translated roughly to *hanbloglaka*, or "vision telling." As Raymond DeMallie has put it, "Neihardt perceived Black Elk's religion in terms of art; Black Elk perceived Neihardt's art in terms of religion." Although Black Elk was by then a Catholic catechist, he had not forgotten the promise of the great vision that had been granted to him. In Neihardt, he believed he had found one who could make that vision known to the world.

In May 1931, Neihardt again visited Black Elk; with him now were his two daughters, Hilda and Enid; the latter was an accomplished stenographer. The two men began work at day break on May 10. Serving as interpreter was Black Elk's son, Ben, who had studied for a time at the Carlisle Indian School. As was the custom when any warrior gave his "kill talks"—"coup tales" recounting brave deeds in war—temporarys of Black Elk (the elders Fire Thunder, Standing Bear, Chase in the Morning, and Holy Black Tail Deer) were present to listen and to comment on his narration. Black Elk told the story of his life in Lakota; Ben translated into the dialect called

"Red English" or "Indian English"; Neihardt repeated Ben's words in standard English; and Enid wrote it all down as best she could.

It was on the basis of a number of such sessions that Neihardt produced the book known as *Black Elk Speaks* (1932). Black Elk said little about his Catholicism and Neihardt chose not to mention it at all. Neihardt also edited the great vision, minimizing its concern for the achievement of power in warfare—a central concern of Lakota males—in DeMallie's words once more, to "develop the universalistic message of the vision . . . focusing on the powers to heal." "The beginning and ending" of the book, Neihardt himself acknowledged, "are mine; they are what [Black Elk] would have said if he had been able." The ending—an account of Neihardt and Black Elk's trip to Harney Peak, "the center of the world"; of Black Elk's admission of his failure to restore the sacred hoop and "make the tree bloom" again; and of Black Elk's uncanny power nonetheless to bring rain—has had widespread influence. It has appeared, in only slightly different form, as the ending to Thomas Berger's novel *Little Big Man* (1964), and in recognizable but very different form in Arthur Penn's film of the same name (1970). But, again, this ending is Neihardt's, not Black Elk's.

Although *Black Elk Speaks* was favorably reviewed at the time of its publication, it attracted little attention. This was not the case shortly after its reissue in 1961; from that point forward, as anthropologist William Powers has written, "When Black Elk Speaks everybody listens!" Although it is Powers's view (along with several others) that Neihardt's own strong mystical Christianity obscures Lakota religion rather than presenting it accurately, the eminent Lakota scholar Vine DeLoria Jr., to the contrary, thinks that is not the issue at all. Rather, for DeLoria, Neihardt has produced in *Black Elk Speaks* a "religious classic," a "North American bible of all tribes." In any case, *Black Elk Speaks* is surely the best known of Native American autobiographies, having been translated into German, French, Portuguese, Italian, Russian, and Hungarian.

Neihardt interviewed Black Elk again in 1944, incorporating this new material into the novel *When the Tree Flowered* (1951). Black Elk also engaged in a series of interviews with Joseph Epes Brown in the late 1940s; Brown's book *The Sacred Pipe* appeared in 1953.

The selection reprinted here is the complete text of *The Great Vision*, Chapter 3 of *Black Elk Speaks*. In addition to explanatory information, the notes provide some supplementary material from Raymond DeMallie's *The Sixth Grandfather*, which presents "in full the notes of the interviews, the direct words of Black Elk as interpreted into English" by Neihardt's daughters, Enid and Hilda, who acted as stenographer and secretary, respectively. As DeMallie writes, these are "the most original records of Black Elk's teachings available, and they are the sources from which Neihardt wrote *Black Elk Speaks*." They should allow the reader some closer approach to Black Elk himself, as they should also allow some greater awareness of the nature of Neihardt's art.

## From Black Elk Speaks

### III. The Great Vision

What happened after that<sup>1</sup> until the summer I was nine years old is not a story. There were winters and summers, and they were good; for the Wasichus had made their iron road<sup>2</sup> along the Platte and traveled there. This had cut the bison herd in two, but those that stayed in our country with us were more than could be counted, and we wandered without trouble in our land.

1. A brief vision experienced by Black Elk when he was five years old that was mentioned at the end of the preceding chapter.

2. "The Union Pacific Railway" [Neihardt's note]. "Wasichus": fat eaters (Lakota, literal trans.); i.e., white settlers, or those who take the best part.

Now and then the voices would come back when I was out alone, like someone calling me, but what they wanted me to do I did not know. This did not happen very often, and when it did not happen, I forgot about it; for I was growing taller and was riding horses now and could shoot prairie chickens and rabbits with my bow. The boys of my people began very young to learn the ways of men, and no one taught us; we just learned by doing what we saw, and we were warriors at a time when boys now are like girls.

It was the summer when I was nine years old, and our people were moving slowly towards the Rocky Mountains. We camped one evening in a valley beside a little creek just before it ran into the Greasy Grass,<sup>3</sup> and there was a man by the name of Man Hip who liked me and asked me to eat with him in his tepee.

While I was eating, a voice came and said: "It is time; now they are calling you." The voice was so loud and clear that I believed it, and I thought I would just go where it wanted me to go. So I got right up and started. As I came out of the tepee, both my thighs began to hurt me, and suddenly it was like waking from a dream, and there wasn't any voice. So I went back into the tepee, but I didn't want to eat. Man Hip looked at me in a strange way and asked me what was wrong. I told him that my legs were hurting me.

The next morning the camp moved again, and I was riding with some boys. We stopped to get a drink from a creek, and when I got off my horse, my legs crumpled under me and I could not walk. So the boys helped me up and put me on my horse; and when we camped again that evening, I was sick. The next day the camp moved on to where the different bands of our people were coming together, and I rode in a pony drag, for I was very sick. Both my legs and both my arms were swollen badly and my face was all puffed up.

When we had camped again, I was lying in our tepee and my mother and father were sitting beside me. I could see out through the opening, and there two men were coming from the clouds, head-first like arrows slanting down, and I knew they were the same that I had seen before.<sup>4</sup> Each now carried a long spear, and from the points of these a jagged lightning flashed. They came clear down to the ground this time and stood a little way off and looked at me and said: "Hurry! Come! Your Grandfathers are calling you!"<sup>5</sup>

Then they turned and left the ground like arrows slanting upward from the bow. When I got up to follow, my legs did not hurt me any more and I was very light. I went outside the tepee, and yonder where the men with flaming spears were going, a little cloud was coming very fast. It came and stooped and took me and turned back to where it came from, flying fast. And when I looked down I could see my mother and my father yonder, and I felt sorry to be leaving them.

Then there was nothing but the air and the swiftness of the little cloud that bore me and those two men still leading up to where white clouds were piled like mountains on a wide blue plain, and in them thunder beings lived and leaped and flashed.

3. The Little Big Horn River [Neihardt's note].

4. In the vision Black Elk had had four years earlier.

5. In DeMallie's transcription, Black Elk uses the singular, "Your Grandfather is calling you," refer-

ring to the western Grandfather whose cloud tepee is the home of the Thunder beings. Neihardt deemphasizes the importance of the west and of the fearful Thunder beings in *Black Elk Speaks*.

Now suddenly there was nothing but a world of cloud, and we three were there alone in the middle of a great white plain with snowy hills and mountains staring at us; and it was very still; but there were whispers.

Then the two men spoke together and they said: "Behold him, the being with four legs!"

I looked and saw a bay horse standing there, and he began to speak: "Behold me!" he said, "My life-history you shall see." Then he wheeled about to where the sun goes down, and said: "Behold them! Their history you shall know."

I looked, and there were twelve black<sup>6</sup> horses yonder all abreast with necklaces of bison hoofs, and they were beautiful, but I was frightened, because their manes were lightning and there was thunder in their nostrils.

Then the bay horse wheeled to where the great white giant lives (the north) and said: "Behold!" And yonder there were twelve white horses all abreast. Their manes were flowing like a blizzard wind and from their noses came a roaring, and all about them white geese soared and circled.

Then the bay wheeled round to where the sun shines continually (the east) and bade me look; and there twelve sorrel horses, with necklaces of elk's teeth,<sup>7</sup> stood abreast with eyes that glimmered like the day-break star and manes of morning light.

Then the bay wheeled once again to look upon the place where you are always facing (the south), and yonder stood twelve buckskins all abreast with horns upon their heads and manes that lived and grew like trees and grasses.

And when I had seen all these, the bay horse said: "Your Grandfathers are having a council. These shall take you; so have courage."

Then all the horses went into formation, four abreast—the blacks, the whites, the sorrels, and the buckskins—and stood behind the bay, who turned now to the west and neighed; and yonder suddenly the sky was terrible with a storm of plunging horses in all colors that shook the world with thunder, neighing back.

Now turning to the north the bay horse whinnied, and yonder all the sky roared with a mighty wind of running horses in all colors, neighing back.

And when he whinnied to the east, there too the sky was filled with glowing clouds of manes and tails of horses in all colors singing back. Then to the south he called, and it was crowded with many colored, happy horses, nickering.<sup>8</sup>

Then the bay horse spoke to me again and said: "See how your horses all come dancing!" I looked, and there were horses, horses everywhere—a whole skyful of horses dancing round me.

"Make haste!" the bay horse said; and we walked together side by side, while the blacks, the whites, the sorrels, and the buckskins followed, marching four by four.

I looked about me once again, and suddenly the dancing horses without number changed into animals of every kind and into all the fowls that are, and these fled back to the four quarters of the world from whence the horses came, and vanished.

6. The color specifically associated with the Thunder beings and the color of difficulty but also of courage to triumph over difficulty. Successful Lakota warriors have black faces.

7. Symbols of durability and thus long life.

8. "Happy" and "nicking" are Neihardt's additions.

Then as we walked, there was a heaped up cloud ahead that changed into a tepee, and a rainbow<sup>9</sup> was the open door of it; and through the door I saw six old men sitting in a row.

The two men with the spears now stood beside me, one on either hand, and the horses took their places in their quarters, looking inward, four by four. And the oldest of the Grandfathers spoke with a kind voice and said: "Come right in and do not fear." And as he spoke, all the horses of the four quarters neighed to cheer me. So I went in and stood before the six, and they looked older than men can ever be—old like hills, like stars.<sup>1</sup>

The oldest spoke again: "Your Grandfathers all over the world are having a council, and they have called you here to teach you." His voice was very kind, but I shook all over with fear now, for I knew that these were not old men, but the Powers of the World. And the first was the Power of the West; the second, of the North; the third, of the East; the fourth, of the South; the fifth, of the Sky; the sixth, of the Earth. I knew this, and was afraid, until the first Grandfather spoke again: "Behold them yonder where the sun goes down, the thunder beings! You shall see, and have from them my power;<sup>2</sup> and they shall take you to the high and lonely center of the earth that you may see; even to the place where the sun continually shines, they shall take you there to understand."

And as he spoke of understanding, I looked up and saw the rainbow leap with flames of many colors over me.

Now there was a wooden cup in his hand and it was full of water and in the water was the sky.

"Take this," he said. "It is the power to make live, and it is yours."

Now he had a bow in his hands. "Take this," he said. "It is the power to destroy, and it is yours."

Then he pointed to himself and said: "Look close at him who is your spirit now, for you are his body and his name is Eagle Wing Stretches."

And saying this, he got up very tall and started running toward where the sun goes down; and suddenly he was a black horse that stopped and turned and looked at me, and the horse was very poor and sick; his ribs stood out.

Then the second Grandfather, he of the North, arose with a herb of power in his hand, and said: "Take this and hurry." I took and held it toward the black horse yonder. He fattened and was happy and came prancing to his place again and was the first Grandfather sitting there.

The second Grandfather, he of the North, spoke again: "Take courage, younger brother," he said; "on earth a nation you shall make live, for yours shall be the power of the white giant's wing, the cleansing wind." Then he got up very tall and started running toward the north; and when he turned toward me, it was a white goose wheeling. I looked about me now, and the horses in the west were thunders and the horses of the north were geese.<sup>3</sup> And the second Grandfather sang two songs<sup>4</sup> that were like this:

9. Symbol of the Thunder beings.

1. "Older than men . . . like stars" is Neihardt's addition.

2. Literally, *tauacin*, "will power," which, for the Lakota, is the creative power of a mind made wise by means of a vision, a power that can be used on earth [adapted from DeMallie's note].

3. Neihardt has much condensed this section. In *The Sixth Grandfather*, Black Elk understands the

second Grandfather to be saying that he will "create a nation," and "cure lots of sickness with this herb," thus causing the people to cry joyfully as geese do when returning to their northern home after the hard winter has passed [adapted from DeMallie's note].

4. Black Elk attributes the first song to the first Grandfather, of the west.

"They are appearing, may you behold!  
They are appearing, may you behold!  
The thunder nation is appearing, behold!

They are appearing, may you behold!  
They are appearing, may you behold!  
The white geese nation is appearing, behold!"

And now it was the third Grandfather who spoke, he of where the sun shines continually. "Take courage, younger brother," he said, "for across the earth they shall take you!" Then he pointed to where the daybreak star was shining, and beneath the star two men were flying. "From them you shall have power," he said, "from them who have awakened all the beings of the earth with roots and legs and wings." And as he said this, he held in his hand a peace pipe which had a spotted eagle outstretched upon the stem; and this eagle seemed alive, for it was poised there, fluttering, and its eyes were looking at me. "With this pipe," the Grandfather said, "you shall walk upon the earth, and whatever sickens there you shall make well." Then he pointed to a man who was bright red<sup>5</sup> all over, the color of good and of plenty, and as he pointed, the red man lay down and rolled and changed into a bison that got up and galloped toward the sorrel horses of the east, and they too turned to bison, fat and many.

And now the fourth Grandfather spoke, he of the place where you are always facing (the south), whence comes the power to grow. "Younger brother," he said, "with the powers of the four quarters you shall walk, a relative. Behold, the living center of a nation I shall give you, and with it many you shall save." And I saw that he was holding in his hand a bright red stick that was alive, and as I looked it sprouted at the top and sent forth branches, and on the branches many leaves came out and murmured and in the leaves the birds began to sing. And then for just a little while I thought I saw beneath it in the shade the circled villages of people and every living thing with roots or legs or wings, and all were happy. "It shall stand in the center of the nation's circle," said the Grandfather, "a cane to walk with and a people's heart; and by your powers you shall make it blossom."

Then when he had been still a little while to hear the birds sing, he spoke again: "Behold the earth!" So I looked down and saw it lying yonder like a hoop of peoples, and in the center bloomed the holy stick that was a tree, and where it stood there crossed two roads, a red one and a black. "From where the giant lives (the north) to where you always face (the south) the red road goes, the road of good," the Grandfather said, "and on it shall your nation walk. The black road goes from where the thunder beings live (the west) to where the sun continually shines (the east), a fearful road, a road of troubles and of war.<sup>6</sup> On this also you shall walk, and from it you shall have the power to destroy a people's foes. In four ascents you shall walk the earth with power."

I think he meant that I should see four generations, counting me, and now I am seeing the third.

5. Associated with the buffalo, with nourishment, and with health.

6. This is Neihardt's interpretation. Black Elk's

own explanation seems fairly untroubled: he says, "From east to west I have power to destroy and from north to south power to do good."

Then he rose very tall and started running toward the south, and was an elk; and as he stood among the buckskins yonder, they too were elks.

Now the fifth Grandfather spoke, the oldest of them all, the Spirit of the Sky. "My boy," he said, "I have sent for you and you have come. My power you shall see!" He stretched his arms and turned into a spotted eagle hovering. "Behold," he said, "all the wings of the air shall come to you, and they and the winds and the stars shall be like relatives. You shall go across the earth with my power." Then the eagle soared above my head and fluttered there; and suddenly the sky was full of friendly wings all coming toward me.

Now I knew the sixth Grandfather was about to speak, he who was the Spirit of the Earth, and I saw that he was very old, but more as men are old. His hair was long and white, his face was all in wrinkles and his eyes were deep and dim.<sup>7</sup> I stared at him, for it seemed I knew him somehow; and as I stared, he slowly changed, for he was growing backwards into youth, and when he had become a boy, I knew that he was myself with all the years that would be mine at last.<sup>8</sup> When he was old again, he said: "My boy, have courage, for my power shall be yours, and you shall need it, for your nation on the earth will have great troubles. Come."

He rose and tottered out through the rainbow door, and as I followed I was riding on the bay horse who had talked to me at first and led me to that place.

Then the bay horse stopped and faced the black horses of the west, and a voice said: "They have given you the cup of water to make live the greening day, and also the bow and arrow to destroy." The bay neighed, and the twelve black horses came and stood behind me, four abreast.

The bay faced the sorrels of the east, and I saw that they had morning stars upon their foreheads and they were very bright. And the voice said: "They have given you the sacred pipe and the power that is peace, and the good red day." The bay neighed, and the twelve sorrels stood behind me, four abreast.

My horse now faced the buckskins of the south, and a voice said: "They have given you the sacred stick and your nation's hoop, and the yellow day; and in the center of the hoop you shall set the stick and make it grow into a shielding tree, and bloom." The bay neighed, and the twelve buckskins came and stood behind me, four abreast.

Then I knew that there were riders on all the horses there behind me, and a voice said: "Now you shall walk the black road with these; and as you walk, all the nations that have roots or legs or wings shall fear you."

So I started, riding toward the east down the fearful road, and behind me came the horsebacks four abreast—the blacks, the whites, the sorrels, and the buckskins—and far away above the fearful road the daybreak star was rising very dim.

I looked below me where the earth was silent in a sick green light, and saw the hills look up afraid and the grasses on the hills and all the animals; and everywhere about me were the cries of frightened birds and sounds of fleeing wings. I was the chief of all the heavens riding there, and when I looked behind me, all the twelve black horses reared and plunged and thun-

7. "Wrinkles" and "deep and dim" are Neihardt's additions.

8. "With all the years . . . at last" is Neihardt's

addition.

9. Black Elk also says, "This old man had in his hand a spear," which is omitted by Neihardt.

dered and their manes and tails were whirling hail and their nostrils snorted lightning. And when I looked below again, I saw the slant hail falling and the long, sharp rain, and where we passed, the trees bowed low and all the hills were dim.

Now the earth was bright again as we rode. I could see the hills and valleys and the creeks and rivers passing under. We came above a place where three streams made a big one—a source of mighty waters—and something terrible was there. Flames were rising from the waters and in the flames a blue man lived.<sup>1</sup> The dust was floating all about him in the air, the grass was short and withered, the trees were wilting, two-legged and four-legged beings lay there thin and panting, and wings too weak to fly.

Then the black horse riders shouted "Hoka hey!" and charged down upon the blue man, but were driven back. And the white troop shouted, charging, and was beaten; then the red troop and the yellow.

And when each had failed, they all cried together: "Eagle Wing Stretches, hurry!" And all the world was filled with voices of all kinds that cheered me, so I charged. I had the cup of water in one hand and in the other was the bow that turned into a spear as the bay and I swooped down, and the spear's head was sharp lightning. It stabbed the blue man's heart, and as it struck I could hear the thunder rolling and many voices that cried "Un-hee!," meaning I had killed. The flames died. The trees and grasses were not withered any more and murmured happily together, and every living being cried in gladness with whatever voice it had. Then the four troops of horsemen charged down and struck the dead body of the blue man, counting coup; and suddenly it was only a harmless turtle.<sup>2</sup>

You see, I had been riding with the storm clouds, and had come to earth as rain, and it was drouth that I had killed with the power that the Six Grandfathers gave me. So we were riding on the earth now down along the river flowing full from the source of waters, and soon I saw ahead the circled village of a people in the valley. And a Voice said: "Behold a nation; it is yours. Make haste, Eagle Wing Stretches!"

I entered the village, riding, with the four horse troops behind me—the blacks, the whites, the sorrels, and the buckskins; and the place was filled with moaning and with mourning for the dead. The wind was blowing from the south like fever, and when I looked around I saw that in nearly every tepee the women and the children and the men lay dying with the dead.

So I rode around the circle of the village, looking in upon the sick and dead, and I felt like crying as I rode. But when I looked behind me, all the women and the children and the men were getting up and coming forth with happy faces.

And a Voice said: "Behold, they have given you the center of the nation's hoop to make it live."

So I rode to the center of the village, with the horse troops in their quarters round about me, and there the people gathered. And the Voice said: "Give them now the flowering stick that they may flourish, and the sacred pipe

1. This section is much condensed. It is after several attacks on "a man" who is said to be "the enemy" that "a man painted blue" emerges from the splashing waters. Three songs are also omitted.

2. *Kear*, the turtle, is an ally of the Thunder beings

and a benefactor of humankind, something more than "only a harmless turtle." Black Elk interprets his kill to mean that "sometime in the future [he] was going to kill an enemy."

that they may know the power that is peace, and the wing of the white giant that they may have endurance and face all winds with courage."

So I took the bright red stick and at the center of the nation's hoop I thrust it in the earth. As it touched the earth it leaped mightily in my hand and was a waga chun, the rustling tree,<sup>3</sup> very tall and full of leafy branches and of all birds singing. And beneath it all the animals were mingling with the people like relatives and making happy cries. The women raised their tremolo of joy, and the men shouted all together: "Here we shall raise our children and be as little chickens under the mother sheo's<sup>4</sup> wing."

Then I heard the white wind blowing gently through the tree and singing there, and from the east the sacred pipe came flying on its eagle wings, and stopped before me there beneath the tree, spreading deep peace around it.

Then the daybreak star was rising, and a Voice said: "It shall be a relative to them; and who shall see it, shall see much more, for thence comes wisdom; and those who do not see it shall be dark." And all the people raised their faces to the east, and the star's light fell upon them, and all the dogs barked loudly and the horses whinnied.

Then when the many little voices ceased, the great Voice said: "Behold the circle of the nation's hoop, for it is holy, being endless, and thus all powers shall be one power in the people without end. Now they shall break camp and go forth upon the red road, and your Grandfathers shall walk with them." So the people broke camp and took the good road with the white wing on their faces, and the order of their going was like this:

First, the black horse riders with the cup of water; and the white horse riders with the white wing and the sacred herb; and the sorrel riders with the holy pipe; and the buckskins with the flowering stick. And after these the little children and the youths and maidens followed in a band.

Second, came the tribe's four chieftains, and their band was all young men and women.

Third, the nation's four advisers leading men and women neither young nor old.

Fourth, the old men hobbling with their canes and looking to the earth.

Fifth, old women hobbling with their canes and looking to the earth.

Sixth, myself all alone upon the bay with the bow and arrows that the First Grandfather gave me. But I was not the last; for when I looked behind me there were ghosts of people like a trailing fog as far as I could see—grandfathers of grandfathers and grandmothers of grandmothers without number. And over these a great Voice—the Voice that was the South—lived, and I could feel it silent.

And as we went the Voice behind me said: "Behold a good nation walking in a sacred manner in a good land!"

Then I looked up and saw that there were four ascents ahead, and these were generations I should know. Now we were on the first ascent, and all the land was green. And as the long line climbed, all the old men and women raised their hands, palms forward, to the far sky yonder and began to croon a song together, and the sky ahead was filled with clouds of baby faces.

When we came to the end of the first ascent we camped in the sacred

3. "The cottonwood" [Neihardt's note]. A cottonwood is used as the center pole for the Sun Dance,

as it was also the center pole for the Ghost Dance.

4. Prairie hen [Neihardt's note].

circle as before, and in the center stood the holy tree, and still the land about us was all green.

Then we started on the second ascent, marching as before, and still the land was green, but it was getting steeper. And as I looked ahead, the people changed into elks and bison and all four-footed beings and even into fowls, all walking in a sacred manner on the good red road together. And I myself was a spotted eagle soaring over them. But just before we stopped to camp at the end of that ascent, all the marching animals grew restless and afraid that they were not what they had been, and began sending forth voices of trouble, calling to their chiefs. And when they camped at the end of that ascent, I looked down and saw that leaves were falling from the holy tree.

And the Voice said: "Behold your nation, and remember what your Six Grandfathers gave you, for thenceforth your people walk in difficulties."

Then the people broke camp again, and saw the black road before them towards where the sun goes down, and black clouds coming yonder; and they did not want to go but could not stay. And as they walked the third ascent, all the animals and fowls that were the people ran here and there, for each one seemed to have his own little vision that he followed and his own rules; and all over the universe I could hear the winds at war like wild beasts fighting.

And when we reached the summit of the third ascent and camped, the nation's hoop was broken like a ring of smoke that spreads and scatters and the holy tree seemed dying and all its birds were gone. And when I looked ahead I saw that the fourth ascent would be terrible.

Then when the people were getting ready to begin the fourth ascent, the Voice spoke like some one weeping, and it said: "Look there upon your nation." And when I looked down, the people were all changed back to human, and they were thin, their faces sharp, for they were starving. Their ponies were only hide and bones, and the holy tree was gone.

And as I looked and wept, I saw that there stood on the north side of the starving camp a sacred man who was painted red all over his body, and he held a spear as he walked into the center of the people, and there he lay down and rolled. And when he got up, it was a fat bison standing there, and where the bison stood a sacred<sup>5</sup> herb sprang up right where the tree had been in the center of the nation's hoop. The herb grew and bore four blossoms on a single stem while I was looking—a blue, a white, a scarlet, and a yellow—and the bright rays of these flashed to the heavens.

I know now what this meant, that the bison were the gift of a good spirit and were our strength, but we should lose them, and from the same good spirit we must find another strength. For the people all seemed better when the herb had grown and bloomed, and the horses raised their tails and neighed and pranced around, and I could see a light breeze going from the north among the people like a ghost; and suddenly the flowering tree was there again at the center of the nation's hoop where the four-rayed herb had blossomed.

I was still the spotted eagle floating, and I could see that I was already in the fourth ascent and the people were camping yonder at the top of the third

long rise. It was dark and terrible about me, for all the winds of the world were fighting. It was like rapid gun-fire and like whirling smoke, and like women and children wailing and like horses screaming all over the world.

I could see my people yonder running about, setting the smoke-flap poles and fastening down their tepees against the wind, for the storm cloud was coming on them very fast and black, and there were frightened swallows without number fleeing before the cloud.

Then a song of power came to me and I sang it there in the midst of that terrible place where I was. It went like this:

A good nation I will make live.  
This the nation above has said.  
They have given me the power to make over.

And when I had sung this, a Voice said: "To the four quarters you shall run for help, and nothing shall be strong before you. Behold him!"<sup>6</sup>

Now I was on my bay horse again, because the horse is of the earth, and it was there my power would be used. And as I obeyed the Voice and looked, there was a horse all skin and bones yonder in the west, a faded brownish black. And a Voice there said: "Take this and make him over; and it was the four-rayed herb that I was holding in my hand. So I rode above the poor horse in a circle, and as I did this I could hear the people yonder calling for spirit power, "A-hey! a-hey! a-hey! a-hey!" Then the poor horse neighed and rolled and got up, and he was a big, shiny, black stallion with dapples all over him and his mane about him like a cloud. He was the chief of all the horses; and when he snorted, it was a flash of lightning and his eyes were like the sunset star. He dashed to the west and neighed, and the west was filled with a dust of hoofs, and horses without number, shiny black, came plunging from the dust. Then he dashed toward the north and neighed, and to the east and to the south, and the dust clouds answered, giving forth their plunging horses without number—whites and sorrels and buckskins, fat, shiny, rejoicing in their fleetness and their strength. It was beautiful, but it was also terrible.

Then they all stopped short, rearing, and were standing in a great hoop about their black chief at the center, and were still. And as they stood, four virgins, more beautiful than women of the earth can be, came through the circle, dressed in scarlet, one from each of the four quarters, and stood about the great black stallion in their places; and one held the wooden cup of water, and one the white wing, and one the pipe, and one the nation's hoop. All the universe was silent, listening; and then the great black stallion raised his voice and sang. The song he sang was this:

"My horses, prancing they are coming.  
My horses, neighing they are coming;  
Prancing, they are coming.  
All over the universe they come.  
They will dance; may you behold them.

(4 times)

6. Neihardt omits passages concerned with flames, lightning, and thunder and, in particular, Black Elk's killing a dog spirit that is white on one side and black on the other.

5. Neihardt's addition; he also added "sacred" to the description of the red-painted man above.

A horse nation, they will dance. May you behold them."  
(4 times)

His voice was not loud, but it went all over the universe and filled it.<sup>7</sup> There was nothing that did not hear, and it was more beautiful than anything can be. It was so beautiful that nothing anywhere could keep from dancing. The virgins danced, and all the circled horses. The leaves on the trees, the grasses on the hills and in the valleys, the waters in the creeks and in the rivers and the lakes, the four-legged and the two-legged and the wings of the air—all danced together to the music of the stallion's song.

And when I looked down upon my people yonder, the cloud passed over, blessing them with friendly rain, and stood in the east with a flaming rainbow over it.

Then all the horses went singing back to their places beyond the summit of the fourth ascent, and all things sang along with them as they walked.

And a Voice said: "All over the universe they have finished a day of happiness." And looking down I saw that the whole wide circle of the day was beautiful and green, with all fruits growing and all things kind and happy.

Then a Voice said: "Behold this day, for it is yours to make. Now you shall stand upon the center of the earth to see, for there they are taking you."

I was still on my bay horse, and once more I felt the riders of the west, the north, the east, the south, behind me in formation, as before, and we were going east. I looked ahead and saw the mountains there with rocks and forests on them, and from the mountains flashed all colors upward to the heavens. Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.

Then as I stood there, two men were coming from the east, head first like arrows flying, and between them rose the day-break star. They came and gave a herb to me and said: "With this on earth you shall undertake anything and do it." It was the day-break-star herb, the herb of understanding, and they told me to drop it on the earth. I saw it falling far, and when it struck the earth it rooted and grew and flowered, four blossoms on one stem, a blue, a white, a scarlet, and a yellow; and the rays from these streamed upward to the heavens so that all creatures saw it and in no place was there darkness.<sup>8</sup>

Then the Voice said: "Your Six Grandfathers—now you shall go back to them."<sup>9</sup>

I had not noticed how I was dressed until now, and I saw that I was painted red all over, and my joints were painted black, with white stripes between

7. What Black Elk actually said was "The horse's voice went all over the universe like a radio and everyone heard it" (emphasis added).

8. Neihardt adds the light streaming to the heavens, but omits a passage in which Black Elk sees a white cloud in the south and the west over people

who are sick. He interprets this as "probably the white people coming."

9. Here Neihardt omits a lengthy section in which Black Elk receives the soldier weed of destruction. It is at the end of this section that Black Elk notices how he is painted.

the joints. My bay had lightning stripes all over him, and his mane was cloud. And when I breathed, my breath was lightning.

Now two men were leading me, head first like arrows slanting upward—the two that brought me from the earth. And as I followed on the bay, they turned into four flocks of geese that flew in circles, one above each quarter, sending forth a sacred voice as they flew: Br-r-r-p, br-r-r-p, br-r-r-p, br-r-r-p!

Then I saw ahead the rainbow flaming above the tepee of the Six Grandfathers, built and roofed with cloud and sewed with thongs of lightning; and underneath it were all the wings of the air and under them the animals and men. All these were rejoicing, and thunder was like happy laughter.

As I rode in through the rainbow door, there were cheering voices from all over the universe, and I saw the Six Grandfathers sitting in a row, with their arms held toward me and their hands, palms out; and behind them in the cloud were faces thronging, without number, of the people yet to be.

"He has triumphed!" cried the six together, making thunder. And as I passed before them there, each gave again the gift that he had given me before—the cup of water and the bow and arrows, the power to make live and to destroy; the white wing of cleansing and the healing herb; the sacred pipe; the flowering stick. And each one spoke in turn from west to south, explaining what he gave as he had done before, and as each one spoke he melted down into the earth and rose again; and as each did this, I felt nearer to the earth.

Then the oldest of them all said: "Grandson, all over the universe you have seen. Now you shall go back with power to the place from whence you came, and it shall happen yonder that hundreds shall be sacred, hundreds shall be flames! Behold!"

I looked below and saw my people there, and all were well and happy except one, and he was lying like the dead—and that one was myself. Then the oldest Grandfather<sup>1</sup> sang, and his song was like this:

"There is someone lying on earth in a sacred manner.  
There is someone—on earth he lies.  
In a sacred manner I have made him to walk."

Now the tepee, built and roofed with cloud, began to sway back and forth as in a wind, and the flaming rainbow door was growing dimmer. I could hear voices of all kinds crying from outside: "Eagle Wing Stretches is coming forth! Behold him!"

When I went through the door, the face of the day of earth was appearing with the day-break star upon its forehead; and the sun leaped up and looked upon me, and I was going forth alone.

And as I walked alone, I heard the sun singing as it arose, and it sang like this:

"With visible face I am appearing.  
In a sacred manner I appear.  
For the greening earth a pleasantness I make.

1. I.e., the fourth Grandfather; his song is one Black Elk himself later used in curing. Neihardt omits a passage in which Black Elk sees himself lying ill on earth and is told to drink a cup of water in which there is a blue man, who is both a fish

and a spirit. Black Elk says that he "received strange power" from the cup and that he could "actually make this blue man come out and swim in the cup" when he used it for curing.

The center of the nation's hoop I have made pleasant.  
 With visible face, behold me!  
 The four-leggeds and two-leggeds, I have made them to walk;  
 The wings of the air, I have made them to fly.  
 With visible face I appear.  
 My day, I have made it holy."<sup>2</sup>

When the singing stopped, I was feeling lost and very lonely. Then a Voice above me said: "Look back!" It was a spotted eagle that was hovering over me and spoke. I looked, and where the flaming rainbow tepee, built and roofed with cloud, had been, I saw only the tall rock mountain at the center of the world.

I was all alone on a broad plain now with my feet upon the earth, alone but for the spotted eagle guarding me. I could see my people's village far ahead, and I walked very fast, for I was homesick now. Then I saw my own tepee, and inside I saw my mother and my father bending over a sick boy that was myself. And as I entered the tepee, some one was saying: "The boy is coming to; you had better give him some water."<sup>3</sup>

Then I was sitting up; and I was sad because my mother and my father didn't seem to know I had been so far away.

1932

2. This song does not appear at this point in the transcript.

3. Here Black Elk says, "They were giving me

some medicine but it was not that that cured me—it was my vision that cured me."

## EDGAR LEE MASTERS

1868–1950

Few books of poetry published in the United States have had an immediate impact like that of *Spoon River Anthology*. Its lack of rhyme and verse, its rough, flat, unpoetic diction, its forthright presentation of private yet ordinary lives, its representation of sex as a basic human motive, and its deeply critical view of small-town values—these traits of the volume ran counter to public expectations of what poetry should be like. But controversy was good for sales; the book went through nineteen printings in its first edition, a record for poetry up until then.

Edgar Lee Masters was practicing law in Chicago at the time of its publication in 1915. He was born in Kansas and grew up in two small Illinois towns, Petersburg and Lewiston. His father was a lawyer and politician, his mother a lover of music and literature homesick for her native New England. Masters attended Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, for a year and then studied law in his father's office. He passed his bar exams and entered the legal profession to please his father, but broke decisively with both parents when he moved to Chicago in 1891.

In Chicago, Masters met many of the writers and intellectuals involved in the Chicago Renaissance, a movement aiming to make the city a cultural center. He worked with Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, an important little magazine. He began to publish poetry of his own. A friend, William Marion

of J. W. Mackail's *Selected Epigrams from the Greek Anthology*. In this collection of some four thousand short poems written between 700 B.C.E. and 1000 C.E., Masters found interconnected autobiographical poems, where the speaker in one poem talked bluntly about speakers in other poems. This structure showed Masters how to give poetic shape to a naturalistic vision more commonly associated with fiction.

All the speakers in *Spoon River Anthology* are dead, buried in the cemetery on "the hill," which is the title of the first poem in the book: "All, all, are sleeping on the hill." These lifelong friends and neighbors continue their loves and quarrels beyond the grave. Their dissonant voices converge in a lament for suppressed and wasted lives, only rarely varied by joy or gusto. Sex has driven them, but given little pleasure. They long for the sympathy that they withhold from each other. Yet the poems as a group are compassionate, not judgmental.

Masters's dramatic sense, his ability to condense and convey a whole life through the narration of one incident, contributed to the craft of the short story as well as to a new sense of what poetry might consist of. His work was immediate inspiration for hostile depictions of small-town and small-minded America in the work of 1920s writers like Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis. None of Masters's many other books of verse, except the sequel *The New Spoon River* in 1924, attained the reputation of *Spoon River Anthology*. He was, however, a prolific writer in other modes. He composed several novels; biographies of Abraham Lincoln, Vachel Lindsay (the Chicago poet), Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain; and his own autobiography, *Across Spoon River*, in 1936.

In all, he wrote more than fifty books, committing himself after the success of *Spoon River Anthology* to a full-time literary career. He married twice and had four children. He gave up the law, left Chicago, and settled in New York City in 1920, living in later life at the Chelsea Hotel, a favorite residence for writers.

The text of the poems included here is that of *Spoon River Anthology* (1915).

## Serepta Mason

My life's blossom might have bloomed on all sides  
 Save for a bitter wind which stunted my petals  
 On the side of me which you in the village could see.  
 From the dust I lift a voice of protest:  
 My flowering side you never saw!  
 Ye living ones, ye are fools indeed  
 Who do not know the ways of the wind  
 And the unseen forces  
 That govern the processes of life.

1915

## Trainor, the Druggist

Only the chemist can tell, and not always the chemist,  
 What will result from compounding  
 Fluids or solids.  
 And who can tell