

Wendy Rose (Miwok-Hopi)

I Expected My Skin and My Blood to Ripen

When the blizzard subsided four days later [after the massacre in 1890 at Wounded Knee], a burial party was sent ... a long trench was dug. Many of the bodies were stripped by whites who went out in order to get the Ghost shirts and other accoutrements the Indians wore ... the frozen bodies were thrown into the trench stiff and naked ... only a handful of items remain in private hands ... exposure to snow has stiffened the leggings and moccasins, and all the objects show the effects of age and long use ... [items pictured for sale] moccasins \$140; hide scraper \$350; buckskin shirt \$1200; womens' leggings \$275; bone breastplate \$1000...

—Kenneth Canfield's 1977 Plains Indian
Art Auction Catalog

I expected my skin and my blood
to ripen, not be ripped from my bones;
like fallen fruit I am peeled, tasted,
discarded. My seeds open
and have no future.
Now there has been no past.
My own body gave up the beads,
my own hands gave the babies away
to be strung on bayonets,
to be counted one by one
like rosary stones and then
tossed to the side of life
as if the pain of their birthing
had never been.
My feet were frozen to the leather,
pried apart, left behind—bits of flesh
on the moccasins, bits of paper deerhide
on the bones. My back was stripped
of its cover, its quilling intact,
was torn, was taken away.
My leggings were taken like in a rape
and shriveled to the size
of stick figures
like they had never felt the push
of my strong woman's body
walking in the hills.
It was my own baby
whose cradleboard I held—
would've put her in my mouth like a snake
if I could, would've turned her into a bush
or rock if there'd been magic enough
to work such changes. Not enough magic
to stop the bullets, not enough magic
to stop the scientists, not enough magic
to stop the money.