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The Ultimatum

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John E. Smelcer

THE ULTIMATUM

A corporal poured tea
from a polished service
shining like a sharp knife
while the General
trimmed his moustache
in a silver mirror.
Beside a brass lamp
a pair of revolvers
on a tight-cornered cot
their ivory grips
exquisite as the stems
of delicate china.

“Ya’ got ’til noon ta surrendah,” he said
pulling a razor across his lathered neck.

The Indian left the white canvas tent
saw the thin red line of dawn
at the edge of a new world
and a thousand angry warriors

rolling across hills like ghosts of bison
descending upon the sleepy plain.