Fall 1976

Letter to Franklin Pierce written out by Jacqueline Svaren

Chief Sealth

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This letter was sent in 1855 to President Pierce by Chief Sealth of the Duwamish Tribe of the State of Washington.

J.S. 1976
perhaps because I am a savage and I do not understand—the clatter only seems to insult the ears. And what is there to life if a man cannot hear the lovely cry of the whippoorwill or the arguments of the frogs around a pond at night? The Indian prefers the soft sound of the wind darting over the face of the pond, and the smell of the wind itself cleansed by a mid-day rain, or scented by a pinion pine.

The Air is Precious to the Redman. For all things share the same breath—the beasts, the trees, and the man. The white man does not seem to notice the air he breathes. Like a man dying for many days, he is numb to the stench.

If I decide to accept, I will make one condition. The white man must treat the beasts of this land as his brothers. I am a savage and I do not understand any other way. I have seen thousands of rotting buffalo on the prairie left by the white man who shot them from a passing train. I am a savage and I do not understand how the smoking iron horse can be more important than the buffalo that we kill only to stay alive. What is man without the beasts?

If all the beasts were gone, men would die from a great loneliness of spirit, for whatever happens to the beast also happens to the man.

All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth.

Our sons have seen their fathers humbled in defeat. Our warriors have felt shame. And after defeat they turn their days in idleness—contaminate their bodies with sweet food and strong drink.
It matters little where we spend the rest of our days—they are not many. A few more hours, a few more winters—none of the children of the great tribes that once lived on this earth, or that roamed in small bands in the woods will remain to mourn the graves of a people once as powerful as hopeful as yours.

One thing we know that the white man may one day discover: OUR GOD IS THE SAME GOD. You may think that you own him as you wish to own our land. But you cannot. He is the Body of man. And his compassion is equal for the red man & the white. This earth is precious to him. AND TO HARM THE EARTH IS TO HEAP CONTEMPT UPON ITS CREATOR. The whites, too, shall pass—perhaps sooner than other tribes. Continue to contaminate your bed, & you will one night suffocate in your own waste. When the buffalo are all slaughtered, the wild horses all tamed, the secret corners of the forest heavy with the scent of many men, & the view of the ripe hills blotted by the talking wires, WHERE IS THE THICKET? GONE. WHERE IS THE EAGLE? GONE. AND WHAT IS IT TO SAY GOODBYE TO THE SWIFT AND THE HUNT, THE END OF LIVING & THE BEGINNING OF SURVIVAL.

We might understand if we knew what it was the white man dreams, what hopes he describes to his children on long winter nights, what visions he burns into their minds so they will wish for tomorrow. But we are savages. The white man's dreams
are hidden from us. And because they are hidden, we will go our own way. If we agree, it will be to secure your reservation you have promised. There, perhaps we may live out our brief days as we wish. When the last redman has vanished from the earth, the memory is only the shadow of a cloud passing over the prairie, these shores and forests will still hold the spirits of my people; for they love this earth as the newborn loves its mother's heartbeat. If we sell you our land, love it as we have loved it. Care for it as we have cared for it. Hold in your memory the way the land is as you take it. And with all your strength, with all your might, with all your heart, preserve it for your children, and love it as God loves us all. One thing we know—our God is the same. The earth is precious to Him. Even the white man cannot be exempt from the common destiny.
Jacqueline Svaren is a native Oregonian. Born in Bend, Oregon, she now lives with her husband and four children in Happy Valley, Oregon.

She has studied calligraphy for nineteen years and is now teaching at Portland Community College.

*WRITTEN LETTERS* is a workbook for calligraphers written out by Jacqueline Svaren. The book contains 22 historically based alphabets. The text throughout is written in italic and the entire book is reproduced as written without reproductions or white paint corrections.

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