

## Riding Tatanka

The tankers came hauling the silver steel plates by the dozen. They ebbed and flowed, during the night, pumping out sloshing black gold under the acres of land. The crickets chirred, raising their hind legs, dropping, withdrawing, and then, dropping down again. Unlike the grasshoppers, they didn't have wings to fly.

They were tied to the earth, Mother Nature providing the food and shelter to propel us toward meaning. I see them now in the distance. Ghosts of the once massive herd that moved through the Great Plains are congregating in the hearth like plumes of fog breath and pillars of stampeding hooves.

As a Sioux Indian, with a mixture of Hidatsa and Mandan blood, I view the Tatanka, the wild buffalos, as my ancestors had done. I dream about them at night. What were once plentiful and roaming the terrains with unabashed refrain are now gone.

But are they? One midsummer night, as I walk on the cracked sidewalk of Newton, North Dakota, I watch a train puffing black smoke into blue sky. The conductor tips her blue hat to me as the wheel comes to a halt. She smiles an unearthly smile and whispers I can ride for free.

“Even my cousin?” I ask.

She nods. I hop onboard, holding Mia's hand. She moves freely in the cabin. Seating in the passenger seats, a troupe of people gaze out the windows, observing the plains roll by. Every single one holds an antique rifle, rusty in their design, that shoots metal balls.

They say the longest sentence in the English language, using the same word repeatedly and grammatically correct, is buffalo buffalo buffalo buffalo buffalo buffalo buffalo, eight in all, yet there are more than eight here.

As the summer breeze sighs through my hair, I see them in the hundreds, in the thousands, filling the vacant land with their burly furs and massive shoulders, dark guardians in the backdrop. The battle cries greet my ear. But they are not the cries of a great warrior who skulks silently in the grassland with a wolf costume. It's the scent of gunpowder and a bright muzzle flash where tears cannot be disguised.

My cousin points to big-rig and mentions she was raped.

“Where?” I ask.

“There, in the low fields, behind that abandoned house,” she says calmly. There is no sorrow in her voice, no tears.

“Haven’t you told anyone?”

The passengers continue to fire into the throng of buffaloes. I smell death, blood soaking the virgin soil.

“Do you know who did it?” I insist.

She nods. “It’s no big deal,” she says, shoulders slumped. “I got over it.” Isn’t that what we all do, eventually? We get over it and move on.

I smell the hour of death. I smell the Great Plains. Like these words you feel with the tip of your fingers and that read green grass, wild-flowers, and courtly shrubs, fifty years from now, I see these mighty herds, just as these words leap out to you in battle, out of their elements, to touch you.

I see them. I can taste them, the way they tasted long ago. They have returned. They are returning in great numbers. Their fog plume breath, their snorts, and their dancing feet. I ride the train and see all the passengers with bows and no arrows, guns without powder, unable to shoot.

I call out to them in a dream. They hear me. The words with the longest same-word sentence, buffalo buffalo buffalo, raise their heads and watch me pass. I see meaning in the water, the air, the clouds, the rocks. I see meaning in all parts of life, and what it means to our people.

They have returned and they are grazing like the word buffalo.