

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE BUFFALO?

What will Coyote think?
A century after the millenium,
Trotting west across a sagebrush slope.
“What happened to the buffalo?”

“I played with the lives
Of the first people.
I was here when they came,
Jesting, testing,
I meant no harm.
What happened to the buffalo?”

“I can show you a trick
When there is no rain
Sometimes it works,
And then again –
The people understood
There is a joker
In the deck of life.
People come and people go.
I meant no harm.
What happened to the buffalo?”

Who speaks for all the people?
“I did. And the salmon, the beaver, the raven and the buffalo,
Each in our own language.
We were the voices
And the people listened
Because they had to.

“The spirit of life was in the land.
We were a part of it,
We meant no harm.
What happened to the buffalo?”

“Those who came after
Did not understand
My function in the scheme of things.
And when one god begot a thousand greeds
They divided the waters and the land.
Theirs was the grass, the grain, the gold,
They held the deeds to
Rocks and trees,
And the buffalo.”
What happened to the buffalo?”

Like an old dog curled in a south slope den
 Coyote's dreams twitch with the memories of men.
 I remember other dreamers.
 They could not make it whole,
 They meant no harm.
 Did it last? He shrugged,
 "It's hard to tell
 What happened a full century ago,
 What happened to the buffalo."

"It is easy to lose sight of the field
 When you are hungry for mice.
 But what are field mice without a field?
 I can show you a trick
 With fields and mice
 And fire, and fences, and plows and cows
 And dust and hunger.
 What happened to the buffalo?"

But what did happen? We wanted to know
 What did happen to the buffalo?

Coyote grins, "Let's have the Storyteller speak."

"Once upon a time some three half hundred years ago",
 The Storyteller chants, "We heard new voices saying,
 'There is a tree of sweet fruit
 And great beauty
 Standing in the land beyond the land we know.'
 And the voices said, 'The tree is our tree
 And it must have a keeper.
 And the first task is to dare
 To reach the tree and pick the fruit.'
 And in half a hundred years
 They picked its branches bare.

"So the voices said, 'Keeper, act.'
 And the next task was to share the sweet fruit
 There was some for you, and you and you
 For every year the branches renewed
 And the sweet fruit passed from hand to hand
 And more takers came from across the land
 And in half a hundred years

The tree was beginning to show
A little wear.

“The path to the tree was clearly marked,
And easy to traverse.
The sweet fruit dwindled
And, even worse,
The great beauty of the tree was marred.
The voices spoke
Saying, ‘Some must be barred.
We have fruit in plenty, keep the tree
Of great beauty, let our children see
It as it once was long ago.’
So the third task was to care.
And for half a hundred years
The keeper became a keeper of rules
For picking the fruit
And seeing the tree.
And the voices spoke
Saying, ‘What about me?’
And . . .”

Coyote interrupts “What kind of world was this?
The spirit of the land is not a toy
To play with without consequence, the rules
Are crafted from the nature of the earth,
Not given by the self-begotten gods of greedy men
Because they have the power to destroy. But then
Who is to keep the keeper from the certainty of fools?”

What did the voices say then, storyteller, please?
“She does not know,” Coyote laughs
Because it has not happened yet.

“That was more a time of voices than of deeds.
Too many voices make more sound than sense.
I can show you a trick
With two dogs and a bone.
There’s a lot of barking
But the bone is gone.
What happened to the buffalo?

“Listen when the song dog sings,
For echoed in the pattern of my song
Are all the native rhythms of the world,

The sound of running water, falling snow
 The drift of sun and cloud repeating slow
 Across rain scented sage.
 Green and gold, hot and cold
 There are reasons for all seasons,
 Does not beauty lie in balance
 Though the song
 Forever change?

“But, what happens when the purpose of the singers
 Is to interrupt the song?
 How much discordant babble does it take
 To break the rhythm of a living land?
 And what will the composer write,
 Or bold conductor do to lead
 A raucous, off-key chorus
 Into tune, or find again,
 In concert with the pulse of life itself,
 The balance that can heal a host of ills,
 In the melody of mountains,
 In the humble harmony of hills?

“As once a poet said, the land was ours
 Proprietary, mercenary even.
 But when we are the land’s
 Both land and we depend upon our vision.
 A keeper must be wise
 To tell a vision
 From a thousand lies.
 It is a trick, but I am tired.”

And then? What happened then? We want to know!
 What happened to the buffalo?
 Coyote yawned and blinked,
 “The never ending story ends each time it’s told
 And ends again tomorrow and tomorrow.”

But you know? “Of course. And no,
 I will not tell.
 That is my nature. So
 You must determine for yourselves

What happened to the buffalo.”

Jim Ruch