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Buffalo Killing #1

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BUFFALO KILLING #1

Four horses, the six tame buffalo tethered to the semi-trailer Mack truck they came in, each buffalo in a separate padded stall, their standard accommodations as they were hauled around to rodeos in the intermountain west, enormous baskets of flowers flown in from the flower-growing region around Lompoc on the south-central California coast, and the white Viking ship mounted on squealing rough-cut wooden wheels higher than a man's head, with a great rope hawser for towing attached: these were the principle props for what proved to be the next to the last day of shooting, ever, on Trainer's movie.

In the early morning, as Emmett watched the sun rise over the eastern mountains, the buffalo had not yet arrived, and after they had come, in the middle reaches of the afternoon, a vast thunderstorm mounted itself over the western horizon, with the slants of grayish rain opening and closing themselves like curtains over windows to the landscape beyond, and the lightning in flaring sheets decorating the oncoming darkness.

Trainer called the storm a piece of luck. "We'll just wait a little," he said, "until it's right here."

So they rested in the pickup trucks and Trainer's black Lincoln Continental and the Dodge vans carrying the camera equipment, and waited until they could see the line of rain coming at them across the playa from west to east—much as the line of sunlight had moved across toward Emmett at daybreak. The four horses were saddled and ready, with long white Hudson Bay blankets strapped under the western saddles and trailing around the legs of the horses, so that in some idiot way they resembled the animals ridden in medieval storyteller tales of wandering adventurers. Just, as Trainer explained, for the visual effect.

"Flowers," Trainer said, when one of the sound men asked him just precisely how authentic this enactment was supposed to be, "about as much as history has to do with flowers." The sound man had grinned as he asked, and Trainer had not smiled in the slightest way as he answered.

So they waited while the darkness of the storm came at them, and

eventually there was a little gusty wind whipping streaks of alkaline dust across the flat. The Yarrow brothers in their rented buckskins were riding stick horses in galloping circles, firing back at the lightning with cap pistols.

Libby stood outside the Lincoln Continental, doing some kind of California dancing shuffle with her feet, like she was moving to private music. "Them boys," she said, posing and twanging her voice into an imitation of Dolly Parton, "are one by one shooting out my lights." She grinned down at Emmett, who sat with his arm out the open window of the automobile, as though her lights were some mercurial secret between them.

Whatever they were thinking out there as their cap pistols popped distantly in the wind, it was as far from anything Emmett could imagine as dim spots on charts of the known universe. Maybe constant happiness was possible in the coils of their invisible war, but whatever, they were not wrong in their excitement. All the beginnings were over, and the long tides of Trainer's vision were rolling now, surely as the turning of the earth.

Claudette Valdez sat in the back seat of the Lincoln, knitting a stocking cap, and as he turned in the seat to look back to her, Emmett was sure she must know. This must be the way it always is, he thought, when it begins to work, and he could see how this making-believe could be worth a lifetime.

Over there, where the horses were tethered, great wicker baskets of flowers were hanging from the forks of their saddles, bobbing slightly as the animals paced side to side in the wind. Soon now they would be horseback, and hunting the running bison, galloping down the stiffening wind and pelting the buffalo with blossom after blossom from the bushels of pink columbine and yellow daffodil and chrysanthemums with heads so heavy they could be thrown like stones, yellow and white and lavender chrysanthemum and yellow crocus and blue cornflowers and purple and white sweet william and lavender sedum and endless other variety of blossom in other colors, and in the process of their hunting with flowers for weaponry and ammunition they would be releasing America to become somewhere else. That was the idea, as Trainer explained it.

There would be galloping bison, and heedless riders in pursuit, the white blankets swinging around the hocks of their horses, and the cameras following as they all traveled out onto a vast white-land territory of endless hope.

"The way it is supposed to be," Trainer had said the night before at dinner, looking across the table to Emmett and holding him with those hard yellowish eyes, sucking at his teeth and then looking away with his implacable seriousness, as if nothing anywhere here could be possibly imagined as ridiculous.

And this morning Trainer had worked at tucking a woven crown of blue cornflowers around his gray fringe of hair, so that he might resemble the six buffalo with their crowns of yellow and red and purple flowers woven into the matted shaggy manes around their horns.

Then it was time, according to Trainer's notion of how the rain was coming, and someone clacked a clapboard before one of the cameras: **BUFFALO KILLING #1.**

They were all four of them uneasily horseback, Teddy and Sara and Emmett and Trainer, and the Yarrow boys were flashing their long chrome-plated imitation skinning knives, the blades so dull they would not slice bread, and dancing in anticipation of whatever it was they had come to imagine.

But the six broke-to-ride buffalo, two bulls and four cows, all of whom had smelled mainly old in their stalls, like clothing hung too long without being washed, when they were turned loose, for the most part would not run. They wanted to stand, in old instinctual ways, and drop their flowered heads, and face the storm.

The handler was a short barrel-chested man from Cody, Wyoming, and he came out and cut at them with a stock-driver's whip, raising welts of dust from their hides, but not moving them at all until he jabbed at them with a red-handled battery powered electric hot-shot, and even when they did eventually step out they did not run, but rather shambled away across the dusty plain at a long diagonal to the line of the approaching storm, heading directly to the most distant reaches of the Black Rock as if drawn to emptiness, ignoring the shouts of the riders.

It was then that Teddy turned his black horse, and cantered back to his pickup and got down and dragged his .30-06 from the gun rack behind the seat, acting for all the world like he had just come to a fine new idea about making all this sensible. Teddy, with baskets of flowers hanging from the forks of his saddle.

Emmett turned in his saddle, and watched Teddy go, and was not much moved to wonder at what was coming next when he saw his

father climb back horseback with the rifle, maybe because the afternoon had gone beyond wonderment, but more likely, as he was to think later, because he already knew in some dim-minded way what was coming next, and thought Teddy was right.

So Emmett spurred his horse, and picked a thick-headed red chrysanthemum from the basket hanging to the right side of his saddle, and wished the buffalo would really run, so he could bring himself to throw it.

Just this morning Emmett had been thinking about loading one of these horses into a trailer and going away to the Salmon River country of Idaho, north of the Sawtooth Range and up into the Selway forests where there might still be lost bands of Sheepeater Indians living gypsy hideaway existences unknown to civilization, earth-diggers in canyons where no white man had ever come back from.

Emmett had told the idea to Libby as a joke, and she had told him he better watch out, because lately everybody was getting their wishes.

They had been sitting in the Lincoln Continental with Trainer, waiting for the semi-trailer with the buffalo, and Trainer had all at once started telling them about a time when he had tried going off to work on ranches in Nevada and Wyoming and Arizona and eastern New Mexico, a week or so here and another week or so there, when he was coming to be an old man and thought he was through with movies and making a try at living alone.

Trainer had listened to Emmett's story about going away to Idaho, and sat a moment looking at his hands where they were splayed on the steering wheel. He told them his experiment with the working man's life had only lasted a couple of months, and that he maybe had made a mistake giving it up so soon. "I didn't know nothing," he said, "and I didn't learn nothing. Figured I was too old, and quit."

"But after I was home in Los Angeles," he said, "I found that I had worked up some calluses, and then there was nothing to do but watch my hands turn white and shrink."

"What I did," Trainer said, "was stay home and drink and watch the calluses peel." He told them about standing out on his lawn above Malibu, drunk in the night and firing off a .38 pistol toward the lights of Malibu down below, and wondering if he was hitting anything.

"Pick up sticks," Libby said, when her father had finished talking,

and she rolled her eyes at Emmett, and he looked away out the window to the dragon-headed Viking ship.

And now Teddy was back up on his black horse and galloping slowly toward them, carrying his old .30-06 rifle from the barroom, holding it out from his side like a present he was bringing them as he got there and slowed and the black horse sidewalked a little into the wind.

Trainer was turned in his saddle and grinning back to all of them like the alley-running child he might once have been, the blue cornflowers in his hair shuddering in the wind, and beyond him the driving edge of the rain was almost to them, and it was right then, in a stutter-step moment of time-out in these proceedings that Emmett saw clearly what was going to happen next.

There was Teddy coming to them straight-faced with that rifle, the cameras mounted on the Dodge vans following him as if this had been most closely planned . . . and in that hang of stillness for Emmett there was only the question of how long until the shooting.

There would be dead animals, and another impromptu triumph, all of it recorded on camera by the straggling assemblage of Hollywood technical people. Emmett found himself holding his breath, and the red chrysanthemum crushed to pulp in his right fist.

Teddy spurred his black horse, the white Hudson Bay blanket sweeping dust as he came, and he circled ahead of the buffalo, jerked up his horse, pumped the lever-action rifle, and in the longest of slow motions Emmett could ever recall, steadied himself, squeezed down on the trigger with his old-time steadiness, and fired his first killing shot of that afternoon hard into the massive dogged forehead of the old buffalo bull in the lead.

No sounds but mainly the wind, and the dim cracking of the rifle, and then a puff of dust from the head of that old animal, the sudden collapse into instant release, and the vague reflective kicking in the dirt after death.

One by one Teddy killed them all, sliding the clacking mechanism of the rifle, levering shells into the firing chamber, spent cartridges spilling out onto the alkali beside his stamping black horse. Teddy rode to each of the bewildered buffalo as they began milling around the fallen bull, and fired from a distance of never more than a dozen yards into each massive forehead, the beasts falling into that same instant collapse and then jerking and kicking their hind legs as they

began the stunned violent quivering which followed such death, the rolling hammer of each rifleshot reverberating distantly in the wind, enormous sounds trapped and diminished and blown away beneath the hard echoing clouds.

Poised, in the photographs they all saw later, they simply watched, looking unconscious of themselves until the last animal was down. While those twitching hooves traced arcs in the dust Teddy levered in a final shell, and sat gazing back to them, as if guarding his kill. Emmett wiped the paste of crushed chrysanthemum from his palm onto the withers of his horse.

Then Trainer kicked his gray horse into a walk toward Teddy, and Teddy fired one more round, into the alkali between him and Trainer, raising a little puff of dust which whipped away in the wind. Trainer circled away and upwind from Teddy, and held there, and began pitching flowers his direction, the blossoms riding away into the wind but his intention clear.

The Yarrow boys had moved to follow Trainer, and after the shot into the dust they stood awkwardly together for a moment, finally frightened, and then as Trainer began his act with the flowers, they ran to the first of the dead buffalo, the old bull, and climbed triumphantly astride, and sat there together, rocking and playing at riding, heading out on some make-believe voyage.

Teddy raised the rifle toward Trainer, and right then as Emmett watched he saw nothing he had ever suspected as Trainer held and waited.

But there was not another shot. The storm reached them, and Emmett felt the first cold misting of rain, one huge drop and then another onto his back, splattering off the new yellow buckskin, and then off the backs of his hands, and then the great hard rain came at them in a sheet, wind-driven and holding them as it blew across in waves.

Teddy lowered the rifle, and Trainer howled and began scooping great wads of the flowers from the baskets at his side, and throwing them up into the wind and rain, where they drifted and scattered across the alkali which was turning dark and muddy and slick underfoot.

Teddy rode slowly forward with the rifle down across the forks of his saddle, and stopped by the bull buffalo he had killed first, and began dumping the flowers from his own baskets, piling them down

on the animal from upwind as if joining Trainer in this ceremony of regret. When the baskets were empty Teddy spurred the black horse, and rode at a slow canter back toward the edge of the alkali where they had started, the hooves of the horse flinging clumps of mud behind while the woman named Norgene watched him pass, her mouth open in her slick rain-wet face as the cameras swung to focus on her, and then return to Teddy's back as he rode off toward the silver semi-truck trailer and the yellow and metallic blue and red-white and black vehicles gleaming there in the downpour.