Four-Legged People: Five Poems

By Emma Walsh

Poetry

A group of animals in a field

Description automatically generated

“Let a man decide upon his favorite animal and make a study of it…let him learn to understand its sounds and motions. The animals want to communicate with man, but Wakan-Tanka does not intend they shall do so directly – man must do the greater part in securing an understanding.”

 – Brave Buffalo of Standing Rock Reservation (Lakota)[[1]](#endnote-2)

A group of buffalo in tall grass

Description automatically generated

1Photo courtesy of Jon Andelson

Recently, I learned about the Oglala Lakota tribe’s history and relationship with bison, the largest land mammal in North America. In the mid-sixteenth century, the North American prairie was home to an estimated 40 million bison and tens of thousands of Lakota people. By the mid-nineteenth century, the bison had all but been eradicated and the Lakota population reduced forced into reservations. For the Oglala Lakota, bison are incredibly meaningful culturally and spiritually[[2]](#endnote-3). To them, the bison are one with the earth and represent all growing and living beings[[3]](#endnote-4). In myth, the “White Buffalo Cow Woman[[4]](#endnote-5)” presented the Oglala with a sacred pipe and seven sacred rites, providing the Oglala with wisdom, survival, and power[[5]](#endnote-6). While the buffalo represent all beings, otherwise known as *Wakan-Tanka,* they are also equated specifically with women. I was inspired by the bison’s central role in Oglala Lakota understandings of the natural world and social relationships, and as a poet I wanted to express my thoughts and feelings about the bison in verse. In the poetry that follows, I combine my recent encounters with bison in central Iowa at the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge with what I’ve learned about the Oglala Lakota. I have learned about the Oglala Lakota’s relationship with bison from a mix of primary and secondary sources listed below. I have only begun to learn about the bison and the Oglala Lakota and recognize how much I do not know. My learning and application of it is shaped by my experiences, which are not indigenous.

watching the bison

*do not come    too close to me*, he says, with strong brown eyes that   contain   the world.

She stands atop

packed black dirt,

Facing me

as I forget my self, forget my name, feel my breath, feel hers too

Shadows cast by the afternoon sun. reflecting their sacred bodies,

moral behavior power survival entangled within their woolly dense fur

the *tatanka*,“buffalo,” are four-legged people[[6]](#endnote-7),

who hold a mystery of    sacred life,

which travels

   in dust

formed playfully wallowing, rubbing their backs

  with packs

of Earth’s colorful skin.

the prairie is a privilege

A friend’s water bottle sticker reads, the prairie is a privilege, and I ask what that means to him.

The prairie is a privilege, he says, with its mixed grasses, one of the most endangered ecosystems in the world.

The prairie is a privilege, home to sixty million bison for ten thousand years, until mass killing committed first by white hunters, who sold hides and meat,

then by travelers, shooting from trains for greed.

In eighteen eighty-three the

United States Army forced starving Native people deprived of their food and way of life

to live on reservations, bringing Native Americans under U.S. government (white men) control

“minimizing

conflict”

between Native Americans and foreign settlers

“encouraging”

Native Americans to

“take on the

ways of

white men”[[7]](#endnote-8)

The prairie is a privilege,

holding within its rich roots the bleached white bones of sacred beings,

once one of the most abundant large animals of all time.

herds were stampeded by American military men

for land and for freedom. maimed masses at the bottom of cliffs for the

repression

and

death

of fellow human beings.

“That animal (the bison) was like a part of ourselves, a part of our souls.”

Lakota medicine man Lame deer[[8]](#endnote-9)

becoming a woman

red smoke

escapes into the sky from the buffalo cow

as a calf is born,

chokecherries and water are placed in a wooden bowl,

a new woman and medicine man drink the red liquid like buffalo.

She is painted red, sacred like her first menstrual flow.

She is now a buffalo Woman, one with the White Buffalo Cow Woman, who brought sacred ceremonies so the Oglalas may live.

Bison are one the universe, naturally containing the

totality

of all manifest

forms of

life [[9]](#endnote-10)

A group of buffalo in a field

Description automatically generated

2Photo courtesy of Joan Van Gorp

excerpts and notes from Where Have All the Bison Gone?*[[10]](#endnote-11)*

without regular fire,

woody plants

invade

the meadows, displacing

the grass.

more firearms than fire sent

eastern bison on a

long

slow

slide to

oblivion.

the bison do not run once hunters begin killing the herd. They do not flee the unknown cloud of black smoke

from sharps rifles, *boom!*

Why do the herd stand for slaughter?

was it because the *boom* sounded like a thunderclap?

or maybe, the bison were not scared of man.

Bison are powerful animals, with

hooves sinking deep

into Earth.

they turn directly to face

harsh winter winds,

shake their heads in snow to find buried grass.

the Bison do not fear the human, but teach them to live well.

A field of tall grass

Description automatically generated

3Photo by Jun Taek Lee

*Maka Ina,‘*Mother Earth’

*Unšike,* ‘the pitiable,’[[11]](#endnote-12)

some traditional Ogalala women believe in the pipe and the sacred rites.

they pray to Wakantanka. Smoke the pipe and wait.

they are concerned with *unšike*, the common people of the world.

the white man is nothing more than a visitor to their world, one day destined to pass into oblivion.

The buffalo and old Indigenous people will be born again.

They look longingly

out at the prairie,

and wake

from sleep with visions and

premonitions,

sometimes visited by loved ones long passed.

these Women are believed to be powerful because they are close to the spirit world.

A group of animals in a field

Description automatically generated

4Photo courtesy of Joan Van Gorp

1. Brown, 13 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Brown, 71 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Brown, 14

   I use the words bison and buffalo interchangeably here and am referring to the same animal, although technically the species *Bison bison* is not related to buffalo at all. I use them interchangeably because many of the sources I reference do so. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Brown 72 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Lewis 44 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Brown, 13 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Quotations from Onion, 2019 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Brown [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Powers, 69 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Lott, Chapter 22, pgs. 170-179 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Powers, 178-181 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)