

Steve Koontz
Tall Ones

A rustle in the grass nearby. I pop my head up and look over to where the plain slopes down to a long trench extending north and south. Probably just wind. I look around at my brothers and sisters, but none seem to pay any mind to the trench. They continue about their business, some tired, lazing under the mid-day sun, heaping brown masses atop a sprawling yellow-green blanket. Others engage in a romp of playfighting, showing off their strength and knocking skulls in an inverted tug-of-war. They really should be more vigilant. They know just as well as I that the Tall Ones pose a great threat.

The Tall Ones are much smaller than us, carrying their bodies upon their back legs, leaving their front legs free. They are not covered in hair as we are, rather they have only one long patch on their head. The rest of their body is skin, smooth and light brown, with their lower portions covered by colored coats that they have made from our kind using their free front legs. They make other things with their front legs too. They bend sticks to shoot pointed sticks, and they even ride other beasts, so they don't ever tire. For ages, they have used the things they make to hunt us, and recently, there have been rumors of new kinds of Tall Ones, with lighter skin and shorter hair. These new Tall Ones do not ride the other beasts, but no one knows why.

So, I sit here on this grassy plain, watching my brothers and sisters frolicking. They do not worry about the Tall Ones as I do. More rustling nearby. I snap my head back toward the trench, but I see no movement. Opposite the trench, the grassland extends into the distance where it rises, gradually forming a row of tall, green mounds. It is easy to spot danger on those mounds, but the trench is different because we cannot see into it. Time passes, and nothing comes out of the trench, so I let my guard down and begin to relax.

Suddenly, a hollowed-out, shiny stick like nothing I've ever seen begins to rise from the trench, parting the blades of grass. I stand, ready to run. As I get up, others finally take notice and turn their heads toward the trench. Then, I see a small, light-skinned figure coming up behind the shiny stick; a Tall One. I cry out a warning as I begin to run away from the trench, but as I do, a loud crack splits the air, louder than anything I've ever heard before. Something hits me in the back and the impact forces me to the ground. I feel a great force in my back, and my eyes become heavy as the vision of my brothers and sisters running into the distance, the sound of their cries, more loud cracks, everything fades away.

Based on *Buffalo Hunt, Upper Missouri* by George Catlin