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Buffalo Road

There is a road on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon that only the buffalo know. Evidence of their presence is clear: hoof prints, bones, and the faint smell of musk. There is little evidence of human life there. The asphalt, once black and smooth, is now torn; ravaged by time, the elements, and the weight of generations of migrating herds. In this landscape we were loud, human? and alien. We were invaders.

However, we were not there to plunder. Our mission was to locate research plot points and collect data. That is why we began our walk into the forests. Our map, several years-outdated, showed a slightly meandering forest road that ran parallel to our data collection points.

But in the road there was a locked gate. There would be little point in unlocking it; pine trees had long since crushed sections of the iron bars, chipping the green paint and allowing rust to invade the metal. Nature had begun its headlong rush towards assimilating the gate into the wilderness. Like animals we crawled over the trees and the broken metal, further into the woods.

Downed trees littered the landscape. Their impact had cracked the asphalt and parts of the road had sunk into the earth. For a mile we walked along the remains of the human road, skirting holes and ducking beneath tree trunks. And without realizing it we stepped onto dirt and grass. We were no longer following a human-made path and we were no longer alone.

That was when the buffalo saw us. The soft humph humph of their breathing was gentle compared to our sharp inhalation. We suddenly felt very small. Each humph we heard could have belonged to a creature weighing several thousand pounds. We felt defenseless. But then they began to run.

Dozens of buffalo streamed out of the little valley, following a gully further west. And before we could stop ourselves we were running too. Against all logic we were running after dangerous animals. We began to

run faster, our breathing became heavier, increasing with the strain to keep up. We ran until the last buffalo was out of sight. It was as if for one brief moment we had taken a step back in time; back when every road was a buffalo road.

We left several hours later. Back up the dirt path and then onto pavement. Back over the logs and over the gate. We went back to 'civilization'. But we did not return 'civilized'. Two hundred years ago our run with the buffalo would have been common. Instead of a spear, bow, or shotgun we had a compass and some clipboards. And it had felt so natural. Even reaching back a thousand years or more would have resulted in humans following buffalo. That one, brief afternoon taught us what has so often been forgotten: humans are a part of nature.

There is a road on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon that I have walked. On the old forest road there is barely a human presence. The sky, which could be clearly seen from the road, is now being covered by trees; trees growing up through the abandoned asphalt and the buffalo path. In this landscape we were loud, human? and natural. We were citizens.