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Stalking the Herd

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Trumpeter

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Their dark forms emerged from the bay fog as we approached. They looked to be a herd of woolly mammoths left over from the last ice-age. Their hides were thick and shaggy; brown and black fur covering animals the size of small trucks. As we moved closer their true though no less extraordinary identity became clear. Before us stood the four remaining buffalo on Long Island, Maine.

"I'd love to go closer," I suggested to Liz, my veterinarian friend. I knew she had been thinking the same thing.

We moved toward the nearest animal in the herd, stepping carefully so as not to startle them. They looked no different than their distant relatives that live as paintings on the walls of the recently discovered Chauvet Cave in Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, France subjects of the earliest artistic representations ever made by humans. In the painting a hunter steps forward, spear cocked. A buffalo charges. The victor is uncertain. Such were the dangers of the pre-industrial hunt.

But this Homo Sapien had no spear. Did the buffalo know I meant them no harm?

We stopped some 20 feet from the herd. The female's breathing sounded like a steam locomotive. Her whole body shuttered with every exhalation. How much did she weigh? A thousand pounds? A ton? Her dark fur reminded me how wild she was. Like a bear or a moose this dark hairy hides lived in a realm beyond my intellect.

We continued moving closer, halting five feet from the nearest animal. I remembered a method used by researchers who study the Mountain Gorillas in Rwanda: *Always appear submissive*. I squatted so as to not appear threatening. The female looked at us. She chewed her cud.

All of a sudden her mass trembled; she turned and began approaching us. I thought that if we ran now we might generate a predator/prey response in this enormous animal. Liz and I had no choice but to remain where we were. After a few moments the dark furry mass towered over us. My heart began to follow its own primordial rhythm:

Duh-dud! Duh-dud! Duh-dud! Duh-dud! Duh-dud!

The buffalo's head hung in the air three feet from my face. I could now make out droplets of condensed fog on her snout and the mucus coagulating around the nostrils. One of her eyes stared directly into mine.

Without warning the enormous head began nodding furiously, like a bull readying for a charge. Its horns were at least three inches thick. If she decided to charge I would be crushed.

Duh-dud! Duh-dud! Duh-dud! Duh-dud! Duh-dud! my heart reminded me.

I tried to make my fear dissipate. I thought of the grass and the dirt beneath my feet. I focused on my *hara* my center just below the navel. I reminded myself that my center and the Earth and were connected. The entire planet became my grounding.

I wouldn't run; I would face my fear.

I reached out my hand in greeting. The buffalo's head moved closer, filling my entire field of vision. All I could hear now were exhalations. As I looked into the buffalo's snout now only inches away from me I thought of a blow-hole a small opening in a sea cliff from which an entire ocean exhales.

Then her nose touched my hand. A nudge of dark, damp skin into my pale, open palm.

We made peace.

She turned her head away to greet another buffalo, giving the same nose-nudge greeting to the next friend. Then she bent her head and ate from the grasses.

For the rest of the day I had trouble thinking about anything else.

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