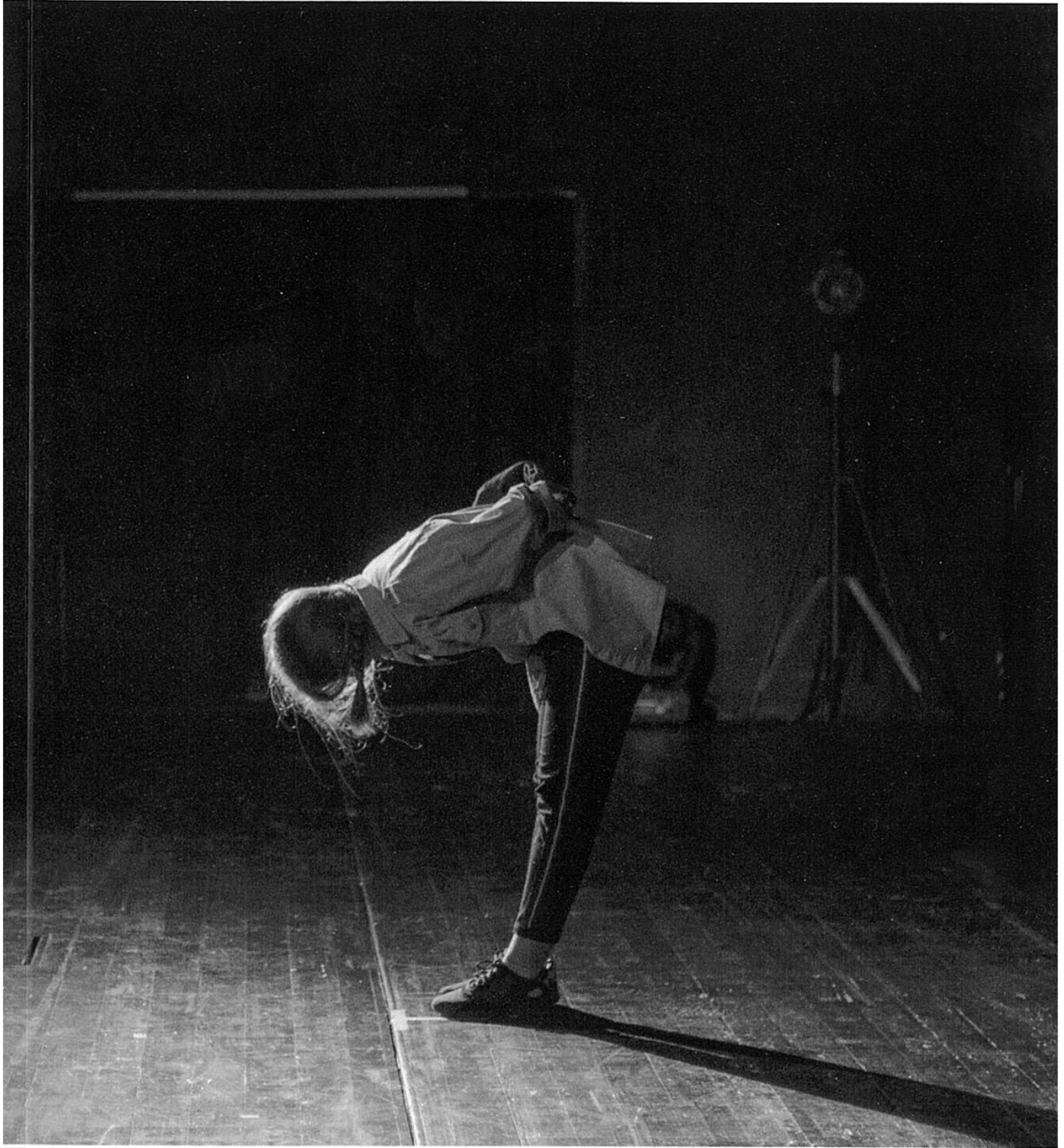


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Theodore Roosevelt, Shaman

Teddy “seemed to burn more brightly and live more fully than others, savoring every detail and every challenge.”

—Christopher Knowlton

My wife, Lynn, judges my enthusiasm for a travel destination by taking stock of the time I spend reading its history. Sometimes I read about a place before I visit. Other times, if I am struck by a location, I read about it afterward. In the case of Theodore Roosevelt National Park, I read about the setting before we left for North Dakota, I kept on while we were there, and then I continued after we went home. Our original interest in the area arose when we found out that Theodore Roosevelt is the only park in the U.S. that plays host to bands of wild horses. That alone seemed like a good reason to plan a trip. I didn't know until later, the outing would spark a year's worth of thought about wildness, prairies, and the power of one person to change the way that people think about the world.

We arrive in the village of Medora after dark. The rooftops of old-time buildings form a line, strung out like boxcars on the horizon. We pull into the gas station on the main road. After I fill the tank, I join Lynn in the gift shop and convenience store. While she adds milk to a cup of tea I wander through the aisles. Every shelf is full of souvenirs: T-shirts, mugs, shot glasses, and leather belts bejeweled with brightly colored beads. We're "traveling." Everything about the space we're in suggests that we are about to begin an experience—a park.

It's a throng of shapes and colors in the gift shop on Main Street in Medora, but I gravitate toward a shelf of books. Histories of North Dakota stand beside biographies of Roosevelt. I also find a guide to the bands of wild horses in the park. The book contains photos, names, and descriptions of well-known mares and stallions. I spend a moment reading about a silver horse named Arrowhead. He strikes me as a masterpiece of DNA: thick neck, broad shoulders, strong, elegant legs, and chiseled jaw. It's an engaging book, but it is expensive. We're on a budget, and we discovered, halfway to Medora, that we forgot our coffee cups. I notice that Lynn is waiting in the car, so I choose two Roosevelt mugs from a shelf.

With a full tank and a new pair of souvenirs we pass through the guard station on the park's southern border. At night, the outlines of ridges and valleys

only offer dark hints about the contour of the land. My imagination fills the shadows with sleeping bands of mustangs, resting nose to nose. It's a soothing image, but the night is black, it's getting late, and we are occupied with the thought of the campsite waiting for us on the Little Missouri. We make our way to the site without stopping to see what the darkness holds.

Cottonwood Camp sits at the bottom of a valley in a grove of trees. Our site enjoys the shelter of branches overhead, and it's close to the water too. We're able to listen to waves lapping along the river's edge while we pitch our canvas teepee.

Lynn is tired. It has been a long day in the car, so we pour some red wine into our Roosevelt mugs and blow up our mattresses. With our bedding set, I say goodnight. I spent the decades of my twenties and thirties obsessively fly-fishing. I don't fish for trout much anymore, but I still feel an impulse to stand in rivers with the current washing over my knees. I refill my mug and walk to the water.

Three weeks prior to the trip, I started to read about Roosevelt. As president, he protected our first monument, Devil's Tower, and the nation's first park, Yellowstone. At a time when we busied ourselves cutting down forests, damming rivers, and strip mining for coal and copper, Roosevelt waged a policy war of opposition. He fought against what we think of as a simple march toward "progress." His primary weapon in the fight was his personality, coupled with everybody else's understanding of the legend—his life story.

Nations across the world and throughout time have given rise to wise and noteworthy people. Every culture finds a way to exalt its formidable characters. We called Roosevelt our twenty-sixth president. If he were alive in another time, or another place, they would have likely called him a shaman. As a tradition, shamanism extends backward through 30,000 years of history. It spanned the globe to include examples on every continent except Antarctica. The techniques of shamanism developed along similar lines, from one end of the Earth to the other, despite the distance separating its practitioners. Apparently, at the right time in their saga, nations need a shaman.

Anthropologists have documented the steps most often taken in the process of elevating someone to such a status. In nearly every case, a would-be shaman suffers a crisis in the form of an illness or a shock. The woe they feel begins to separate them from others. Then the anguish starts to move them, to the point where they set out from home. In some cultures, the journeys are physical. A budding shaman will travel, typically in solitude, in search of a vision. In other places, the passage is mystical. The voyage involves a trek into the spirit world. In either case, shamans return with a new set of skills. They also wear costumes as a way to indicate that they've been changed. Then they start to console people. They begin to counsel their communities.

On the evening of Valentine's Day 1884, on different floors of his New York home, Theodore Roosevelt lost the two most beloved people in his world: his wife and mother. By all accounts, the event left him in something akin to

a trance. One of his associates was known to have said, in the weeks after the tragedy, "He does not know what he does or says." In his journal, Roosevelt confessed, "The light went out of my life." He left for North Dakota, beyond the lands of Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, to the West, where an American form of wildness endured.

Historians agree that the experience of moving to the plains impacted Roosevelt. He spent a year in a shack on the Little Missouri. In his words, with respect to the time that he gave to the prairie, "It is where the romance of my life began." Photos from the era offer a vision of Roosevelt having replaced his tailored three-piece suit with a buckskin leather one, rows of fringe across his shoulders, a bandana on his neck. The new attire served as a sign to observers. A transformation had occurred.

Roosevelt later returned to his home state of New York and, of course, he spent a good deal of his days in Washington, D.C. But he maintained a residence in North Dakota, a ranch upstream on the river. He returned to the western plains off and on throughout the rest of his life. He went for the adventure. The prairie served as a muse and a source of inspiration. Roosevelt used the solitude and solemnity of time spent in the out-of-doors to create a space in his mind, free from the ordinary norms and values of business and politics. He walked the path of a shaman. Like his predecessors, down through the ages, he lived on the borderland between two worlds. He used periods of separation from society, and immersion in nature, to expand his perceptions. Like a tribal shaman, Roosevelt used his time apart to build a platform of wisdom, from which he provided a contrast to commonly held, but wrongheaded, beliefs.

Historically, shamanism offered little in the way of actual medicine with healing properties. In the past, however, if a person approached a shaman with an illness or hardship, they expected to discover a new way to interpret the symptoms of the ailment. It turns out that stories are good medicine. When it comes to improvements in health, their effectiveness is well established. The line of evidence in support of healing narratives begins with early anthropology and runs through contemporary studies of placebos, conducted in medical schools. Perceptions are powerful. They hold the potential to heal, and to the degree that shamanism changes minds, the practice proves its worth. Even in a case where a death becomes eminent, a shaman can offer someone a new way to think about their fate.

All throughout history, individuals turned to shamans for the means to re-story and redefine themselves. Societies have done the same. In the end, shamanism serves a social role. Shamans use the things that set them apart—past suffering, travel, and appearance—to challenge the status quo when the behavior of a group begins to go awry. Their example throws back the curtain of culture that often limits our ability to make sensible choices. Shamans open a place where people can give thought to what is possible.

In the time of Theodore Roosevelt, our once-proud frontier nation stood on the brink of becoming an urban and industrial place. The country found

itself in the grip of a culture that hailed the captains of industry, while at the same time forsaking the landscapes that enchanted the country's early colonists and pioneers. This is the age where we began to revel in the accumulation of wealth. We began to think of ourselves primarily as consumers. At the same time, Roosevelt-the-Shaman gave us a new sense of our potential. Apart from his legislative victories, Roosevelt used the example of his life in the outdoors to shift the way we think about our past, and more important, our futures.

Shamans offer us new stories, and every decent story is built around a string of expectations, left like bread crumbs, running from the start to the end of a narrative. Stories employ the trick of anticipation. A good story inspires an expectant mood. The stories we told about Roosevelt's adventures in the West led a country hell-bent on covering its topography with railroads and smokestacks to see what we stood to lose if we left our course unchecked. Roosevelt's example helped us to see the potential in wild places. He changed the way we see our habitat. In the words of another nineteenth-century shaman, Henry David Thoreau, "... there is as much beauty in the landscape as we are prepared to appreciate." Thoreau went on to add, "we shall be fortunate ... if we expect great things." Through the force of his biography and character, Roosevelt boosted our expectations. He challenged our culture of commerce and turned our hope to conservation.

In the morning, we drink coffee, eat cereal, and then climb in the car. When the U.S. government created the park, its directors paved a road meant to allow travelers to see a wide swath of the area in one circular route. Depending on the amount of time spent hiking, picnicking, and making photographs, visitors can plan to spend somewhere between a half day and a full day completing the circle drive.

Out on the road, I'm struck by the terrain. When settlers entered the western half of the Dakotas they needed to name their surroundings. They chose to describe them as "Badlands." Through their eyes—the setting radiated badness. Adjectives that authors included in writings on the place include sparse, barren, and inhospitable. Of course, they judged the West by standards set in the cultivated gardens of Europe and the East.

In contrast to the disappointment that settlers felt when they cast their eyes onto the valley of the Little Missouri, Roosevelt saw "a sacredness to the Badlands silhouette." He described the region as "so fantastically broken in form and so bizarre in color as to seem hardly properly to belong to this Earth." In his mind, the place "exuded a cosmic sense of God's Creation." As with other would-be shamans, Roosevelt needed a mythical place to build a new identity—a destination that would allow him to leave the confines of his prior self. To those ends, he found the Badlands abiding.

I stop at the first scenic lookout that we come upon. We're not alone in the parking lot. We pull in next to a station wagon at the end of a row of cars.

Then we grab our cameras and make our way to a spot near a group of photographers. When we reach the other travelers-with-cameras, we discover that it's not the rumpled landscape that has drawn their attention. They're pointing their lenses at a group of prairie dogs.

I've lived in the West for three decades. This is the first full-fledged prairie dog town I have ever seen. When Lewis and Clark led the Corps of Discovery through the northern plains, prairie dogs appeared to them in "infinite" numbers. In fact, biologists speculate that the plains of the West were home to more than 5 billion prairie dogs as recently as a hundred years ago. One colony in Texas hosted 400 million residents. By the turn of the century, the number of black tailed prairie dogs in the U.S. had been reduced by 98 percent. The population of the Gunnison's variety shrunk by 97 percent and the white-tailed subspecies vanished from 92 percent of its former range.

Prairie dogs have a powerful enemy: agribusiness. Ranchers tell a story about the little animals that threatens their existence. The story has it that livestock fall into prairie dog burrows and break their legs. Over the years, that narrative unleashed a multi-generational campaign to shoot, poison, trap, blow up, gas, and drowned the American prairie dog into oblivion. Of course, historically as many as 60 million bison and 5 billion prairie dogs co-existed on the plains—and buffalo with broken legs did not exactly pile up as a result. Like their wild bovine cousins, livestock also live in harmony with their tiny beige brethren, when they're allowed. In John Hoogland's classic *The Black-tailed Prairie Dog*, he testifies to the effect that there are no published accounts of a single cow or calf ever having broken a leg by falling into a prairie dog burrow. The myth that suggests prairie dogs are "leg breakers" contains no truth, but research and data are not the forces that drove prairie dogs to the edge of extinction. They became ensnared in a cold-blooded mix of falsehood and human self-interest.

Lynn and I join the photographers at the far end of the parking lot and we start to observe. I don't know what I find more charming, the yips and barks of the prairie dogs or the oohs and ahs coming from the group gathered to watch. Prairie dogs form clans. They stand near the entrances to burrows and greet each other with hugs. Sometimes they kiss. Researchers note elaborate grooming behaviors, and in the words of the biologist Constantine Slobodchikoff, "They have the most sophisticated animal language decoded so far."

We watch them chase each other back and forth across the colony. They stop to wrestle. Then they clean each other's fur. We press on because we're set on finding the wild horses in the park, but the other photographers remain. Some of their tripods look like they're set up on a semi-permanent basis.

Back on the road, we roll in between hoodoos and down to the bottoms of glades. We watch a group of mule deer through the windows of the car. The pace of traffic slows at the top of a rise, and at first, we can't see why. Then we

crest the ridge and it is obvious: a bull bison. The solitary beast stands on the summit, looking out into the folds and wrinkles stretching into the distance. A group of people stands at the road's edge holding cameras. We join them, quietly.

Lynn and I spend a lot of time in parks. One of the things we like best are the people. National parks tend to bring out our most admirable traits. Inside a park, it seems, we are gracious. We practice humility. In our culture, the act of travel encourages us to pay homage to the places we visit. We go to locations that we value, and when we value a place, it shows in our eyes, our posture, and our actions.

Travelers rarely spray-paint or shoot up road signs, for example. Local kids do that, and they do it because they don't appreciate their surroundings. They are missing reverence. They feel unenthused, and the adults in their orbit allow them to take their habitat for granted, to the point where it starts to feel boring, so much so that it becomes an object of scorn, a target for vandals. With regard to the management of parks and public land, we often decry "local control," but I would argue that locals are among the last people to whom we ought to grant authority. We become desensitized to grandeur when we spend each day in its presence. Local residents rarely adore their settings in the same manner as those who save vacation days for years to see a place.

Theodore Roosevelt hunted bison, but by the late 1800s the animals had become hard to find, and on the occasions when Roosevelt located a herd of buffalo, he found it a moral challenge to shoot them. Like their cousins the prairie dogs, bison were seen as a financial threat to agribusiness people, who have a tendency to treat our public grasslands like their own private pastures. As a nation, then and now, we place the interests of commerce ahead of ecology. We are inclined to believe that "The chief business of the American people is business," in the words of another U.S. president, Calvin Coolidge.

Roosevelt's path allowed him to see with a different pair of eyes. He saw through the veil of commerce that blinds us to anything but profit-making. In a biography of Roosevelt entitled *Wilderness Warrior*, historian Douglas Brinkley suggested, "It sickened him to see wild ungulates being poisoned and slaughtered because they supposedly ate the same grass as cattle and sheep." Roosevelt created Yellowstone National Park in part to preserve the last remaining examples of wild bison left in the United States.

We don't approach the bull at the top of the ridge. We're not looking for close-ups. Lynn and I hold back and make photographs that include the animal as a part of the landscape. That's a difficult proposition, though. We have to time our exposures in concert with a photographer making circles around the bull at a distance that looks too close. Bison are stoic. They are not known for their animate gestures. When they're not eating, they stand around. For travelers

unfamiliar with bison behavior, the statue-like demeanor can mislead. Most of the time in the out-of-doors, each of us is like a Godzilla. All living things scatter when they see us. Not so with a bull bison. They stand there—unwavering. They don't even think to leave. As a result, they seem friendly, but they are not. In Yellowstone, bison injure more visitors than wolves, bears, and mountain lions combined. Because they don't run away, people walk up too close to them. Then, by the time they discover they made a mistake, it is too late. It's the indifference to threat that makes buffalo dangerous. Ironically, that trait also led to their demise. Bison hunters do not have to "hunt" them at all. They just walk up and shoot.

We pause after we've made enough photographs. I put my camera down, but I cannot stop looking. I am struck by the image of the bull against a backdrop of rippled plains. Bison are relative newcomers to North America. Animals like horses and coyotes evolved here on this continent over the course of more than fifty million years. In contrast, bison trace their original stock back to the Middle East. They are descendants of the great aurochs—the wild bovines that inhabited North Africa. Like human beings, bison migrated across Asia and into Alaska during the time of the last ice age. Bison did not evolve in North America, but this is their home. No one who sees them here could argue that they don't belong.

For our part, we press on and finish the drive. Any time we see a vantage point with uninterrupted views, we stop. Each occasion gives us a reason to step out of the car. We survey the land because the terrain is worth pausing to admire, but we're still on the lookout for mustangs. In the end the search is fruitless, however. We complete the circle and drive to the campground without finding any horses.

After dinner, we decide to hike along the banks of the Little Missouri. Early on, we meet a ranger and we stop to talk. We tell her we spent the day looking for horses, with no sign. She asks a handful of questions about the timing of our route. She explains how, over the years, she built a feel for the way horses move through the area, and then she makes a suggestion. She tells us to wake up early and drive to the north. Her advice is to try to reach Jones Creek before sun-up.

In the morning, we discover the value in a ranger's knowledge of a park. When we drive over the last crest separating us from Jones Creek, we are greeted by the sight of horses grazing at the bottom of a draw. We find two bands wading in the grass—not too far from the pavement. Then, as we drive closer, we see a band of six on a bald ridge, each wild horse striking a pose.

We're not the first to notice the mustangs. We pull onto the shoulder next to a pickup from Texas and a sedan with license plates from Michigan. The others are already making photos of the two bands enjoying a breakfast of little bluestem at the bottom of the valley. Both families attempt to shield their foals. Mares position themselves between the photographers and their young ones. The stallions stay to the side. They leave space between themselves and

the others in order to monitor the scene.

Human beings and wolves and primates and elephants are the only land mammals that form bonds to the same degree that we find in the equine world. Horses create long-lasting and profound relationships. At a distance, you can often distinguish horses from other ungulates because they stand so close together that they touch. Cattle don't hug each other like that, and neither do elk. Mustangs engage in friendly sparring games on their hind legs, they pull their friend's tails as a way to tease them, and they watch each other play in puddles after rain. They also hold established roles within their families. Mares and stallions posture themselves in relation to one another, their young, and the members of other bands. We know a lot about the social lives of horses, but our understanding of the animals is also limited.

Research on mustang behavior has been stunted by the status of the horse in our culture, and by the way we organize knowledge in universities. We tend to study animals in two places on an American campus, colleges of agriculture and departments of biology. Horses often become the subjects of scholars working in agriculture. But those researchers study domestic animals. They focus on husbandry and techniques for training horses as our servants. They overlook the wild ones. In departments where they study fish and game they also tend to ignore the behavior of horses, because we usually define them as property, as opposed to wildlife. Theodore Roosevelt viewed the mustangs of the North Dakota Badlands differently, however. He pointed out, "They are as wild as pronghorn."

Mustangs fall between two established, but self-limiting fields. People who conduct research on domestic animals disregard them because they are not domestic, and people who study wildlife discount them because they don't consider them wildlife. As a consequence, the workings of wild horse families and much about the mind of *equus* remains enigmatic. I would argue that the disciplines of biology and agriculture have provided an important baseline of knowledge with respect to horses, but neither field is positioned to help advance the cause. New insights will need to come from researchers in anthropology. Jane Goodall and Diane Fossey studied primates under the guidance of the anthropologist Louis Leakey. They used the techniques of social science to break open our understanding of the group life of chimpanzees and gorillas. When it comes to the study of social mammals, ethnography has proven its value as a method.

On the side of the road, four of us try to make pictures of a mare grooming a foal. She showers attention on the colt by nipping at his mane. Horses are unlike bison. Technically, they are both prey animals, but bison stand and fight when faced with danger. They swing their skulls and horns to ward off an attack, and thus, tend to stand still in the presence of photographers. On the other hand, a horse's only defense is to run. Unlike the other ungulates

in North America, horses do not possess any cranial ornaments—no horns, antlers, or paddles protruding out of their skulls. When it comes down to fight or flight, horses were made to flee. When you approach a band of mustangs, there's an ever-present question: Will they run away? Anyone who hopes to walk toward a group of wild horses feels the tension. Will they stay? Or will they go?

I am contemplating these questions as I focus my lens. I'm changing aperture settings and shutter speeds. I am not paying attention to the other photographers. Making images of horses is a dynamic undertaking, though. Sooner or later, wild mustangs shift off to another patch of grass or to other interests. After a moment, the horses I'm watching decide to move on, and when they do, I look up and turn to the person next to me. It's a woman, and I can tell she's been crying.

People are the only animals that cry. Of course, we do so for obvious reasons: joy and sadness. In both cases, we leak from our eyes when we feel overwhelmed. There are more nuanced occasions when people weep, however. I have noticed, when people see free-roaming bands of wild horses for the first time, the sight can often lead to tears.

The first time Lynn and I visited the Black Hills Wild Horse Sanctuary in South Dakota, we took a tour with a guide. We rode in a truck across the property, to a place where mustangs often meet. The drive took half an hour, but we found horses in the spot where we hoped to find them. When we climbed from the truck, I noticed that Lynn was dabbing her eyes with the cloth we use to clean our cameras.

I asked our guide, "Is that common? Do people cry when they come upon a group of mustangs?"

He said, "Absolutely. Yeah. It happens all the time."

I have seen a good deal of evidence, in the past several years, to suggest that he is right. Lynn and I often drive people out to see wild horses. Misty eyes and tears are typical. It's joy. At least, that's a part of the explanation. My sense is that it's more than happiness. Maybe it's something different. When people cry in the presence of mustangs, it's like the outpouring of emotion that we feel in a gallery when we come upon a work of art that touches something in our scaffolding of memories. It's comparable to times when unexpected songs come on the radio, and we find ourselves moved by the feelings that flow from the lyrics or melody. It's happiness, of course. It's sadness too.

When people see wild mustangs for the first time, they are often struck by the affection the horses display toward each other. In the West, mustangs have hundreds of thousands of acres they can roam as individuals, but they stand with their faces together, squinting into one another's eyes. Of course, they're larger and more physically impressive than us, but they're also better at maintaining families. I think, for many people, when they see a band of wild horses for the first time—it feels like a vision of how mammals ought to relate to each other.

My family is spread out across the continent. We're all "successful" to some degree. But we've made careers, and real estate, SUVs, and high technology the focus of our lives. In fact, the more that we succeed, the further we fling

ourselves into directions we're supposed to value in society: beach resorts and second homes and ski vacations, in the case of just three examples. The sight of wild horses lazily caring for each other in the sun shocks many of us as an image of what our lives ought to look like. It's a bit like peering into Eden. Calm. Affectionate. In contrast, most of our days are defined by a lack of serenity and the absence of touch. I think people cry in the presence of wild horses because we are so similar. But we're so different. When we watch bands of mustangs, it's like looking into a mirror—with one exception—we do not see a reflection of ourselves. Instead, we see what our society has done to us.

I nod at the woman standing next to me with water in her eyes. I give her a knowing glance. Then I smile with the intent to convey "I know. Me too."

It's our last day in the park, so we drive slowly through the rest of the circle tour. We stop to look at another colony of prairie dogs. A stand of cottonwoods suggests itself as a spot for a picnic so we hike into the grove. While we are nestled in the trees a group of pronghorn wanders by at a distance shorter than usual. We eat sandwiches, drink sparkling water, and talk about the horses that we saw. After a meal in the shade, we decide to finish the drive and head to camp.

On the last stretch of the tour I notice a silver horse, standing by himself near the top of a ridge. When I flipped through the guidebook to the wild horses in the park, the stallion named Arrowhead captured my attention. The horse ahead of us on the road has a coat that matches the silver tone of the animal that struck me in the gift shop. I nudge Lynn and tell her, "Look. It's Arrowhead." She catches a glimpse of the animal, but she only sees his hindquarters. As we approach, he slips over the horizon.

When we arrive at the top of the hill, we pull off the pavement to see if we can find him. We look along the length of the ridge, but he is gone. I notice a trail made by hooves leading down around a bend, so we start to follow the path. Eventually, the trail shifts to the north and leads us to another view. When we make it past the turn, we find the horse, along with a faraway look out onto the landscape.

He appears thinner than the beast that struck me in the guidebook to the park. If this is Arrowhead—the band stallion—it is an older and more solitary version. He looks over his shoulder to examine us. He doesn't leave. At least, not immediately. The animal takes a moment to think about who we are and what we represent. Then he turns and continues down the path in the unhurried way of old people who reach a phase where they become unflappable. Lynn and I exchange a glance, confirming that we shouldn't follow him. We just stand and watch him go.

With the mustang out of sight, we turn our thoughts to the land. The view from the horse path is better than the one on the circle tour. From our vantage point, we see farther than we could see from the road. The view is stunning, but it is marred by the sight of oil derricks and machinery. In the first decade of the 2000s, the state of North Dakota underwent a boom in energy development.

The rigs are not in the park, but they were put in place along its boundary. Rapid drilling gave the region a temporary economic boost, but it's easy to imagine how Theodore Roosevelt would have fought the placement of industrial equipment on the border of the park that bears his name.

As a native of New York, Roosevelt came of age in the city. His family earned a fortune operating factories. He understood the value of commercial endeavors. Roosevelt even made attempts to profit from a western ranch, but he also understood the thoughtless nature of our lust for capital. His time in the Badlands turned him into a prophet ... or a shaman ... or a seer ... or a sage. His journeys on the borderland between our culture and the wild places left in America gave him insights that most of us never take the time to cultivate. He looked past his own self-interest, and he saw through the mist of immediate personal wishes that too often block our ability to make reflective judgments. He looked into the future and saw our broader needs. In his words, "Our duty to the whole ... bids us to restrain an unprincipled present-day minority from wasting the heritage of unborn generations."

Roosevelt forged his character in the otherworldly landscapes of the West. Of course, one could argue that his character was more than his alone. Some might suggest, as a people, we cut the shape of the American character out on the edges—in the frontier—where wildness and civilization buff each other to a shine. Roosevelt believed that our spirits are best renewed in nature. In his mind, that made wild places and wildlife worthy of protection. At times, we've taken up conservation with zeal, but the fervor behind our efforts has been waning. We've begun a practice of shrinking the monuments that we established to guard the scenic wonders of the continent. We refuse to protect threatened species on the outside chance that doing so might limit the activities of multinational corporations. Our own government agents remove wild horses from public land, and then they wink when private parties ship them to slaughter in Mexico.

The historian Lynn White once said, "What people do about ecology depends on what they believe about who they are." Who are we, in the end? There were times when, as a nation, we could have considered ourselves the heirs of Theodore Roosevelt. Today, a claim like that would feel strained or maybe even false. We let our culture back us into a corner—with careers on our minds, phones in our hands, and a range of obligations spread out before us. When we came to think of ourselves primarily as workers we grew intent on consumption. After that, it became hard to hold any space open for adventure or time spent in contemplation. When you're embedded in a way of life, it becomes hard to imagine another type of existence. Even so, I am not telling any secrets by suggesting there's a growing sense that, when it comes to the character of our daily lives, and perhaps the course of the nation, something is going wrong. But questions dog us at this juncture. What will we do?

Throughout the previous 30,000 years of human history we would have likely turned to a shaman in times like these—a person with wisdom and an ability to stand outside the norms and values that govern the actions of the group. We don't turn to shamans anymore. Even if we did, I'm not sure where we'd look. Still, as I watch the campfire on our last night in the park, it

occurs to me that Theodore Roosevelt's example may have little to do with the importance of sages or shamans or critics or leaders. With my eyes stuck to the flames twirling upward along the bank of the Little Missouri, I am reminded that Roosevelt turned to no one for assistance. He looked to wild country at watershed moments in his biography. Time and solitude were the tools he used to re-story his life. He took to the wilderness as a way to refashion himself as a new kind of person.

It is quiet by the fireside. Lynn and I are both reflecting on the day. When it's time to start thinking about going to bed, she stands and makes her way toward the teepee.

From inside, I hear her ask, "Do you think that silver horse was Arrowhead?"

I don't even have to think. I say, "Yeah. He's just a little older now."

At least, that's the memory I am taking with me from the trip. When it comes to memories and the life stories that they stack up to form, we write and curate them ourselves. On our last night in the park, that thought gives me a measure of comfort. I take one last sip of wine from my Roosevelt souvenir coffee mug. Then I toss the little bit that's left onto the campfire. The flame shudders, but then it begins coming back. The fire continues to burn.