

MILLIE MAE WICKLUND

The Last Buffalo Roaming Iowa City

A buffalo lying down in a heap like a great crushed automobile
In a wide-open prairie of long, wavy grass.
Is this my car that I abandoned in 1965—my
Nervous exhaustion, my car's? My taut body,
Its accompanying furtive eyes and spasmodic stomach,
Roamed in that wavy prairie once too and Humankind
Stalked my wounded belly full of vomit and fear.
Lying down now, buffalo, in a heap of bone,
We have the Fate that determined our adapting instinct.
We began the prairie, the first grasses parted only
By us and winds. Sunlight made movement a destiny
Each summer and our long shadows took distorted shapes
As if in watery depths washing over our bodies in mid ocean.
Again and again, the light ebbed and emptied like a
Coastal tide and sounded watery, oceanic, the prairie
Winds ebbing and emptying too. In Winter, the constant
Cold air stung our lungs, eyes and we breathed a remembered
Summer's warmth, but our lungs still burned in nude landscapes.
Later, when the prairie's grasses became scarred and trodden
Down by heavy, wheeled animals, we braced our shoulders
And heads against the nearing sky. We were no longer alone
And in dangerous landscapes, haunted by instinct's movements,
Hooves falling again and again in rutted grasses.
Metal sticks exploded and our lungs burned once again.
But we breathed only gasps of dying air,
A last nervous ripple of skin (neck, shoulders and back legs),
In wave after wave of falling buffalo bloodied the land.

Blanca, when you shot me twice in the back with your
Illegal pistol's blank bullets in Iowa City in 1968, I was the
Last buffalo in Iowa City roaming its prairie streets.
Instinctively, I stuck my head and shoulders up against
The sky Christ! How near everything was then,
. here in Rhode Island, where in a night's instinct, I've
Seen the buffalo lying down in a heap of long grass, I can't
Begin to tell you how much fear is in me and how in light
Ebbing and emptying, I am the memory of that last buffalo
And I will never die. Word after word explains you
Blank, metal face, you suffer this poet's honesty,
Cowardice and craziness. Cold, crushed heap of metal
That was once my car, you will never be an assassin's gun . . .
. . . you are the last buffalo roaming Iowa City:
The poem taught there!