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The Herders

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BUFFALO COMMONS
Jim Richardson

THE HERDERS

She brushed the spider-web off her cheek,
Reined hard to the left,
And ducked low beneath a heavy branch.
After a careful scan of the murky darkness,
Concluding, “No more critters in this timber,”
She guided her horse out to join the other riders.
To the east, across the series of misted draws,
The sun was momentarily resting,
A sliver of red on the horizon.
Below, the yellow and purple prairie blooms
Lit the tallgrass, and the morning songs
Of invisible ground-nesting larks
Seemed to rise from the earth itself.

They merged their steers into a bellowing mass,
A patchwork of black, brown, and grey,
Crossbreds fat from the prairie summer:
Their season of effortless satisfaction
On that lush green blanket that stretched to the sky,
Cushioning hooves, cradling backs,
And filling their ruminant stomachs
With a banquet of endless, sweet forage.
No humans to schedule their feeding,
No boundaries but a distant fence that kept them
Within calling distance of their brothers
And curtailed their natural drift,
But no matter: it was fine enough here.

She looked out now across their crowded backs,
Tails swishing, a head thrown back here and there,
A scuffle now and then as one would rear and ride another.
The herd all gathered and drifting west just right,
She glanced around the periphery of riders:
Family, neighbors, helping today,
Their faces calm and satisfied in this – the best work.
Herders, she thought, an ancient, universal profession.
The Maasai of African plain,
The Mongols of Asian steppe,
And us here, with these simple, beautiful beasts
And these trustworthy grasses
From which we make our lives.

Annie Wilson, Five Oaks Ranch, Chase County, Kansas