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STUDIES

A Natural History of Loss: Reading "The Last Bison" in the Age of Loneliness

by Sarah Krotz

> "In the present environmental dilemma, humanity stands like a pioneer species facing heroically the consequences of its own tragic behavior, with a growing need to learn from the more stable comic heroes of nature, the animals." (Joseph W. Meeker, 164)[1]

Introduction: Encounters with Bison

The prairie was once alive with bison. "As late as 1871," writes Wade Davis, "buffalo outnumbered people in North America. In that year, one could stand on a bluff in the Dakotas and see nothing but buffalo in every direction for 30 miles. Herds were so large that it took days for them to pass a single point" (23). In the descriptions of early European travellers, notes I.S. MacLaren, "the buffalo *is* the prairie; there is nothing but beast and grass through which one must pry" (84). The account of the sixteenth-century traveller Pedro de Castaneda vividly registers the animal's intimacy with the land: a distant herd resembles a forest of "smooth trunked pines whose tops joined," as if they have grown from the land itself (qtd. in MacLaren, 80). As the poet Charles Mair observed in his 1890 essay "The American Bison," the animals had carved the land's very contours. The prairie, he writes, was criss-crossed by their "paths, multitudes of which are worn deep into the soil by centuries of use," and he reports that in 1858 the Métis hunter James McKay had travelled "for twenty days through a continuous herd, and on all sides, as far as he could see, the prairies were black with animals" (97, 100). Little wonder that their numbers were once thought to be "Endless and infinite—vast herds which seemed / Exhaustless as the sea," as Mair put it in his poem "The Last Bison" (58).

The relationship between bison and humans goes back many millennia. For as long as people have hunted large mammals, they have hunted bison, who made their earliest known appearances in art between 30,000 and 10,000 years ago on the walls of caves at Altamira and Lascaux, frequently in poses indicating a successful kill (Morris, 13). In North America, the animal's significance to Indigenous hunters was evidenced by layers of bones at the bases of buffalo jumps; by petroglyphs and rock paintings from Utah to the Canadian Shield, where images of bison have been found as far from their range as the Bloodvein River in Manitoba and Whitefish Bay in Ontario; and by the carved ribstones that mark the prairies, two famous examples of which still sit on a hill near Viking, Alberta, overlooking a wide vista of undulating prairie that, on occasion, must have appeared like a moving sea of bison.

These rock paintings and carvings anticipate the modern statues and sculptures of bison that grace many of our current gathering places across the prairies (such as the statues flanking the grand staircase of the Manitoba Legislature in Winnipeg, and Joe Fafard's stunning sculpture "Paskwamostos," overlooking the North Saskatchewan River in Edmonton), as well as the bison iconography that has proliferated in official insignia and sports team logos across North America (see Morris, Chapter 5).

Ancient and modern representations of bison are divided not just by several millennia, however, but by a tragic history that nearly rendered the bison extinct. When the ribstones were carved, bison roamed the grasslands in unfathomable numbers – estimates range between 30 and 60 million. Modern artworks, while reminding us of the deep and abiding symbolic connection between the bison and the prairie landscape, are haunted by the colonial violence that brought the bison to the brink of extinction in a protracted event that Tasha Hubbard argues should be recognized as a "buffalo genocide" ("Genocide" 293). Genocide may well be an apt term for what Desmond Morris reminds us was "the most brutal slaughter of wildlife in the history of the human species. Nothing else comes close," he writes: "The perpetrators had no shame. They felt no remorse" as they reduced the once massive herds to a few hundred animals in the span of mere decades (72). Davis describes this systematic violence as an act of "biological terrorism" (23). Whatever term we ascribe to this history, to encounter the bison today is to confront humanity's astonishing capacity for destruction, and to grapple with the losses that continue to haunt the North American plains.

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This landscape of loss – its psychic dimensions and affective textures, its nearly incomprehensible scale, the pressures it places on our capacity to imagine not just the ecological past but also our ecological future – is the subject of this essay. Specifically, I explore how Mair, a colonial poet implicated in Canada's westward expansion, contemplates this loss in his 1888 poem "The Last Bison." Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, when the memory of the bison's extirpation was still fresh and the animal vulnerable to complete extinction, Mair looked to the bison as a lesson in human arrogance that exposed the most shameful legacies of western civilization. His poem, along with his essay "The American Bison: Its Habits, Methods of Capture and Economic Use in the North-West, with Reference to its Threatened Extinction and Possible Preservation," called attention to the animal both as a unique and significant part of prairie ecology,[2] and as a prescient sign pointing to western civilization's future environmental reckoning.

Mair is a complicated figure in Canadian literary and political history. Known as Canada's nineteenth-century "'warrior bard,'" he was an ardent expansionist and Canada First movement leader who "considered it his patriotic duty to crusade for Canada," was imprisoned by Louis Riel in 1869 when he refused to recognize the Métis provisional government of Red River, and joined forces against the 1885 Northwest resistance (Latham, DCB).[3] "The Last Bison" has been justifiably critiqued as an example of late-nineteenth-century Euro-Canadian racism, hypocrisy, nihilism, and guilt (see especially Archibald-Barber 19-20, 29-30). In many ways, Mair's poem fits the paradigm of those colonial elegies of which Hubbard is sharply critical – elegies that took "Indigenous peoples and buffalo" as their subjects, "lament[ing] their loss with a pen held in one hand and a gun in the other" ("Genocide" 302). At the same time, the poem, along with the essay, contains what at least one scholar describes as "surprisingly modern ecological overtones" (Braz). The following essay builds on this insight, reflecting on what Mair's ecological vision might tell us both about the colonial shames of the past and about our current environmental crisis.

The modernity of Mair's vision emerges not only from his poem's recognition of sustainable Indigenous environmental practices,[4] or in the "sobering conclusion to the European experiment" that it prophecies (Kerber 3), but also in the voice it gives to an animal that had so recently been silenced. The bison becomes a central and arresting presence in the poem, disturbing the poet's conventional nineteenth-century visions of romanticized nature and a lost noble age to at once diagnose and

foreshadow some of western civilization's deepest environmental anxieties. The prophecy that Mair's bison utters forces us to grapple not only with the most appalling ravages of colonial history, but also with the dominant emotional registers of our current era of mass extinction and anthropogenic climate change. Beyond its particular ecological critique, "The Last Bison" is an expression of what Janet Malcolm has evocatively described as "the complicated, self-punishing experience of regret" (18) as well as the hopefulness of resilience that continues to define postcolonial and ecocritical imaginaries.

Exploring the modernity of Mair's vision invites an expansive critical approach that brings the nineteenth-century poem into dialogue with contemporary ecological thinking, both about the bison and about the wider affective landscapes of environmental destruction. Although I draw from a range of ecocritical and environmental essays to suggest the continuing relevance of Mair's poetic vision, I turn particularly to Hubbard's work on the buffalo genocide and resurgence – especially her short film *Buffalo Calling*, which celebrates the bison's return to the plains,[5] and her arguments about "buffalo peoplehood," which draw explicitly from Nehiyaw teachings about the bison. Although separated from Mair by a century and, more meaningfully, by divergent perspectives on the colonial project and its aftermath, Hubbard's contemporary images open up the phenomenological dimensions of Mair's poem, illuminating both the limits and possibilities it affords for a different kind of listening.

I. Disturbing the silence of the plains

"The Last Bison" opens with silence. A lone traveller, traversing the "homeless and unfurrowed prairies" near the Saskatchewan River (North or South he does not say) on horseback, stops to rest beside a picturesque "lakelet, lashed with flowers" (57). The scene is one of "solitude and idleness," where, we read, "all was silence save the rustling leaf, / The gadding insect, or the grebe's lone cry," and "Loneliness possessed her realm supreme" (57). But what is the nature of this silence? The reader might be tempted to linger on this scene much as the traveller first approaches it: that is, as an alluring landscape of romantic seclusion and repose that "charm[s] the spirit . . . Into forgetfulness of chuckling wrong, / And all the weary clangour of the world" (57-8). Yet in at least one sense, the landscape's "silence" is an illusion. The "gadding insect" and

the grebe both point to an ecology that is, if quieter than in the past, not actually soundless. A critical reader might interpret the apparent silence and emptiness of the prairie as linked and self-serving colonial tropes deployed to perpetuate the illusion that North America was *terra nullius* "waiting with majestic patience for the flocks and the fields, the schools, the churches, the Christian faith and love of the coming men," as Mair had put it in his 1875 essay "The New Canada" (qtd in Braz).

As the traveller turns his mind to the "Sorrow" and "sense of change" that pervades the plains, his calm repose becomes tinged not only with pathos but also with irony. This silent, empty landscape is juxtaposed with the memory of life: "Here hosts had had their home," the speaker recalls;

> . . . here had they roamed,
> Endless and infinite – vast herds which seemed
> Exhaustless as the sea. All vanished now!
> Of that wild tumult not a hoof remained
> To scour the countless paths where myriads trod. (58)

Mair invites the reader to imagine not just the sight of these "vast herds" moving like a sea across the land, but also the sound of them: the tremendous din of that "wild tumult . . . scour[ing]" the earth with their "myriad" hooves. The bison's bellowing voices, too, while not explicitly described, are subtly suggested by the recurring long "o" sounds in "Here hosts had their home; here had they roamed." As he would describe in his 1890 essay, the land was once a riot of sound, particularly during rutting season when the male bison would fight:

> the noise caused by such a tumult and concourse of huge animals, often numbering tens of thousands, was stupendous, and, incredible as the statement may seem, by putting the ear to a badger hole, could be distinctly heard at a distance of thirty miles. If one will endeavour to pronounce the monosyllable him-m-m-m with closed lips and without break, one will have a good idea of the continuous sound of a great buffalo herd conveyed by the earth as through a telephone wire. (97)

In Mair's poem, the imagined "hosts" of bison disturb the peacefulness of the traveller's rest spot to reveal a land haunted by the gravest wrongs of "an encroaching power / Whose civil fiat, man-devouring still, / Will leave, at last, no wilding on the earth / To wonder at or love!" (58). The

prairie's apparent silence, then, is the creation of colonialism's callous disregard for life.

It is, therefore, a silence that ultimately disturbs rather than soothes. Any contemporary reader of "The Last Bison" who had been "stunned by the collapse of the Canadian bison hunt in 1878," as many apparently were at the time (Daschuk 101), would have understood that the "solitude" of the "smokeless" plains that Mair conjures in his poem was a sudden and recent phenomenon ("Last" 57, 59). Like those who believed the cod could not be overfished, some may well have thought that bison could never be hunted to extinction, and found the silence of this poem not only eerie but also shocking. Yet, as James Daschuk reminds us, "the end of the bison economy had been predicted for years, if not decades, prior to the actual disappearance of the species" (101). As the creation of the "encroaching power" of colonial expansion, the silence in "The Last Bison" highlights the failure of imagination of those who take for granted the apparent inexhaustibility of wild nature.

In this regard, Mair's poem does not entirely align with colonial "'[e]xtinction discourse'" that "'takes the form of proleptic elegy, sentimentally or mournfully expressing, even in its most humane versions, the confidence of self-fulfilling prophecy, according to which new, white colonies and nations arise as savagery and wilderness recede'" (Brantlinger, qtd in Hubbard, "Genocide," 302). Rather than ascribing the disappearance of bison to the "mysterious destiny" that allowed settlers like Susanna Moodie to eclipse colonial responsibility for vanishing wilderness and Indigenous peoples alike, Mair lays the blame squarely on the shoulders of his own culture (200). As Albert Braz observes, Mair's "unequivocal condemnation of 'that great enemy of wild nature, the white man,' clashes openly with the poet's popular image as an 'apologist for the British Empire.'" Accentuating the contrast between the present lonely scene and a recent past hinted by the "grassy circlets" of Indigenous villages and the bison's "wallows, paths, / And skulls and shining ribs and vertabrae" [*sic*], Mair intimates that the only thing that is "exhaustless" in this landscape is man's – in particular, the white man's – capacity to destroy (58).

This apparent contradiction (that Mair could be an apologist for the British Empire on the one hand and critical of it on the other) was not uncommon in colonial writing. Colonial expansion instigated guilt and shame as well as bombast. It is possible to understand Mair's feeling for the bison, which ran counter to his expansionism, as a product of the animal's own agency – an agency that the poem dramatizes by creating an

encounter with another animal who shapes the poet's thinking. When the eponymous "last bison" appears, he at once accentuates and breaks the silence of the scene and, with it, any lingering illusions that the apparently peaceful prairie is anything other than the site of a protracted massacre, the final death of which both the speaker and the reader are about to witness. A great, hulking burdash,[6] the bison disturbs the traveller's reverie with a "burst / Of sudden roaring" that "fill[s] the vale with sound" (59). At first the traveller doubts the reality of what he sees: "Was this a living form, / Or but an image by the fancy drawn?" he asks, "But no – he breathed!" (59). The animal's physical presence is significant. As the "last" of his species, Mair's burdash is of course in some sense a "mythical creature" (Kerber 3) who is taking his final breaths. Yet for the speaker of the poem, he is a living, conscious being who cannot be ignored.

He initially directs his voice to his own kind, his pained, unanswered cries emphasizing the silence of ecological destruction:

> . . . with a roar so loud
> That all the echoes rent their valley-horns,
> He stood and listened; but no voice replied!
> Deeply he drank; then lashed his quivering flanks,
> And roared again, and hearkened, but no sound,
> No tongue congenial answered to his call –
> He was the last survivor of his clan! (59)

The burdash's roars echo through a world shorn of its creatures, an affective landscape that anticipates the apocalyptic emptiness of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and the lonely pathos of Fred Bodsworth's 1954 novel *Last of the Curlews*. Reaching beyond his own particular history, the burdash's voice reverberates across "the history of the planet's conquest against which no nonhuman can direct a flood of grievances that might strike a humbling note into the human soul" (Crist 17-18).

In the lines that follow, however, the burdash does exactly that. It is at this moment that the traveller, through his own "teeming fancy," relinquishes the voice of the poem to the burdash, "endow[ing] the noble beast with song" so that he can direct a "flood of grievances" in eloquent English verse to whoever might be listening (59). As Katia Grubisic points out, Mair makes the bison "the poem's central orator" until its final stanza (para. 20). Rather than reading this song as a stand-in for the Indigenous voices that are absent in the poem, as Grubisic argues (para.

24), I interpret it as emanating more broadly from a prairie ecology that has the bison at its centre. The burdash's voice is insistent: "*Hear me, ye smokeless skies and grass-green earth,*" he thunders, "*Since by your sufferance still I breathe and live! / Through you fond Nature gave me birth, / And food and freedom – all she had to give*" (59, italics in original). His song begins as a paean to Nature and ecological balance in which the bison are fed by the prairie, the "*nations primitive*," in turn, fed by the bison, living alongside and "*lov[ing their] life-stream's roar*"; the landscape he recalls teems with vitality, "*changeless and unchanged*" (59-60). The burdash then traces the history of colonial conquest that upset this balance between human and animal, which had been sustained for so long it appeared "changeless." The trajectory of this history follows the tragic shift of human impulses from "*hunger*" to "*greed*": Indigenous hunters, motivated only by the "*stern necessity which Life doth breed*," are corrupted by Europeans to a "*reckless*" and "*wanton slaughter*" driven by "*longings base*," before being fully supplanted by the "*mad desire*" of white hide-hunters "*who yearn for havoc as the world's supreme delight*" (60, 61). The burdash's song is at once a keening, elegiac lament for his species, and a scathing indictment of civilization that presages its decline and the eventual return of those who can live more sustainably on the land. Shifting from the past to a vision of the future, the burdash predicts "*The time when they who spared not are no longer spared*":

> *Once more my vision sweeps the prairies wide*
> *But now no peopled cities greet the sight;*
> *All perished, now, their pomp and pride:*
> *In solitude the wild wind takes delight.*
> *Naught but the vacant wilderness is seen,*
> *And grassy mounds, where cities once had been.*
> *The earth smiles as of yore, the skies are bright*,
> *Wild cattle graze and bellow on the plain,*
> *And savage nations roam o'er native wilds again!* (61-62)

The image of cities that were only beginning to take shape in the 1880s reduced to mounds on the earth haunts this poem as much as the death of the bison. At the end of this prophecy, the burdash is seized by "An awful anguish" of "Cold shudderings and indrawn gaspings deep – / The spasms of illimitable pain" and dies, leaving the traveller and reader alike to contemplate the portent of his echoing voice (62). In it, we hear the sound of our own death knell, the bison's demise prefiguring the fall of the civilization that destroyed it.

The anthropomorphic work of imagining what, if the animal could speak back, he might say to those who destroyed his species may well be Mair's most radical ecological intervention in "The Last Bison." Along with most of his readers, Mair was raised in a western humanist tradition that had long ago wrested the power of speech from nature and placed it exclusively in the mouths and pens of humans. According to Eileen Crist,

> history has itself unfolded by silencing nonhuman others, who do not (as has been repeatedly established in the Western canon) speak, possess meanings, experience perspectives, or have a vested interest in their own destinies. . . . [I]f they once spoke to us in other registers – primitive, symbolic, sacred, totemic, sensual, or poetic – they have receded so much they no longer convey such numinous turns of speech. (18)

In his seminal ecocritical essay "Nature and Silence," Christopher Manes traces the cultural history of this suppression of voice. "Nature *is* silent in our culture," he writes, "in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative" (15). He elaborates:

> The Great Chain of Being, exegesis, literacy, and a complex skein of institutional and intellectual developments have, in effect, created a fictionalized, or more accurately put, fraudulent version of the species *Homo sapiens*: the character 'Man,' what Muir calls 'Lord Man.' And this 'Man' has become the sole subject, speaker, and rational sovereign of the natural order in the story told by humanism since the Renaissance. (Manes 21)

Like Crist, Manes draws a direct connection between western civilization's silencing of the other-than-human world and our capacity to wantonly destroy it: "it is within this vast, eerie silence that surrounds our garrulous human subjectivity," Manes emphasizes, "that an ethics of exploitation regarding nature has taken shape and flourished" (16). Humans, these authors suggest, devastate the natural world because they can no longer hear it.

In *Buffalo Calling*, Hubbard resists this "garrulous . . . subjectivity" by eschewing human speech altogether: there is no narration, and the soundtrack of the film is dominated by the sounds of the bison themselves, whose grunts and groans call upon us to recognize a language other than our own. As Hubbard explains: "people are really used to seeing images of the buffalo, but very few people have actually heard

their voice" ("Making"). Her method is also powerfully visual. In its penultimate frame, the viewer comes face to face with a bison. It is an astonishing moment when we finally see up close an individual animal that, for much of the film, has remained distant: the softly fringed eyes; the nostrils warm with breath; the deep brown shag of curling fur; the slight movements of the animal in her living, breathing stillness, amid the sky, the wind. No less than the calls that punctuate the film's score, the bison's quiet gaze disarms a viewer used to wielding the power of words.

Following Emmanuel Levinas, the poet Don McKay memorably describes how face-to-face encounters defy the human capacity to understand and manipulate the world with language:

> Envisaging rather than naming: to bring in all that a face presents – character, expression, imagination, mobility of feature, traces of the past in lines and crowfeet. A face is a face is a face; it is not primarily a linguistic being whose chief virtue is ease of manipulation. And when a lake or a pine marten looks back, when we are – however momentarily – *vis à vis*, the pause is always electric. Are we not right to sense, in such meetings, that envisaging flows both ways? (101)

Hubbard's simulated encounter throws the viewer into this very kind of relation with animal. Looking straight into the camera, the buffalo's bright blinking eyes appear to meet our own in a fleeting yet expansive moment of mutual recognition. Following the dreamlike mix of Mitchell Poundmaker's stylized animation and the soft-focus footage of herds grazing and moving across the grasslands – and, especially, the vacant glass stares of the stuffed and mounted museum specimens that also haunt the film – the living closeness and sharpness of this not-quite-still shot are especially potent. The electric pause of the encounter creates a space of startling intimacy, as the path of envisaging indeed apparently "flows both ways": back and forth between the bison and the viewer. The shared gaze draws us out of our solipsism, emphasizing the bison's own subjectivity as we look at, but are also *looked at by*, the bison. This recognition also awakens an ethical responsibility; Bettina Bergo's characterization of Levinas's philosophy of face-to-face encounters applies well here, too: "This gaze is interrogative and imperative. It says 'do not kill me.'" The exchange thus not only decentres but also disarms the human, emphasizing the bison's living, breathing, conscious presence in all the complex inter-species relationships in which we are enmeshed.

There is no such face-to-face encounter in "The Last Bison," where the traveller remains "haply concealed" from the animal ("Uneasily he gazed, yet saw me not") as he watches and listens (59). And while he initially conveys the animal's own roars, Mair does not abandon human language. On the contrary: the burdash delivers his grievances in an artful variation on the Spenserian stanza. As contrived as this "metempsychotic transference from the animal to the human" (Archibald-Barber 120) certainly is, it nonetheless disrupts the deeply-rooted humanist tradition by wresting control of language in order to do exactly what Crist laments non-human animals cannot do, which is "strike a humbling note into the human soul." Causing the original, human speaker of the poem to retreat from view, the burdash literally de-centers the human in the landscape, prompting readers to imagine other relationships within it.

The moment the burdash speaks in English, uttering an indictment and prophecy clearly meant for human ears, he ceases to be merely an object of the traveller's gaze. Even though they issue from the traveller's own imagination, the bison's words create an immediate connection between them – one that draws attention to (and is, perhaps, an echo of) the intimacy of the bond between the bison as a whole species and Euro-western "civilization," their destroyer. The animal's English words no longer appear contrived if we think of them as symbolically refiguring the intimate relationship of killing and consumption that had, in the colonial landscapes of the late nineteenth century, grown darkly destructive. In their darkness, they draw the reader into a shared experience of ecological grief. This emotion need not be cathartic or final; rather, as Donna Haraway has elucidated, it can engender interspecies connection. "Grief," she writes, "is a path to understanding shared living and dying; human beings must grieve *with*, because we are in and of this fabric of undoing" (39). The transference of thought and language from the traveller to the burdash becomes a way of thinking, not through, but *with* the bison – of dwelling in the animal's loss that is also our own.

II. Visions of Animacy

Buffalo Calling closes with a sensory, phenomenological recognition of shared existence as we encounter the bison in its living, breathing individuality – not as "it," in effect, but "who." The buffalo's distinct, shaggy, warm bison-ness can be imagined almost as our own body can be felt, there and then (or, in Hubbard's filmic illusion, here and now), in the sunshine and wind, the shifting weight of hooves tamping down the

prairie grass. Who is *this* buffalo? I wonder. What does she see, hear, smell, touch, and taste? From what experience of the world, from what memories and senses of present and future does she gaze out at us? What can I learn from her?

These are questions that Mair also implicitly asks. The anthropomorphism of his singing burdash not only emphasizes the interconnectedness of bison and human histories, but also elevates the bison to a status commensurate with the Nehiyaw conception of buffalo "peoplehood" that is central to Hubbard's arguments about genocide ("Genocide" 299). "[T]he slaughter of the buffalo constitutes an act of genocide," she posits, not just because killing them destroyed the lives and livelihoods of plains Indigenous people for whom bison were "[t]he cornerstone of plains subsistence,"[7] but for their own sakes (293, Daschuk 31). "An Indigenous paradigm expands the conception of people to include other-than-human animals," she explains (Hubbard, "Genocide" 294). The reasons for this are manifold, and reach deeply into traditions of animacy and kinship; but they also include respect for the bison's particular behaviours and emotions, for example that they grieve their dead (300). Mair, too, recorded this particular trait, along with the observation that they sharpened their horns on large boulders ("American" 98), both behaviours suggesting forms of consciousness to which humans can relate. Mair also noted that, before their "merciless persecution, . . . the herds possessed a distinctive character, and seemed to have their roughly defined boundaries, like the Indians themselves"; each herd, he added, had slightly different physical attributes and, accordingly, were sometimes referred to (by the Cree, among others) by different names ("American" 95). Mair's attention to the emotional life, territoriality, and distinctive herd identity of the bison in his essay, along with the transference of consciousness that occurs in his poem, suggest an imagination capable of grasping – perhaps even subtly influenced by – the Indigenous conception of peoplehood upon which Hubbard draws.

As familiar as he was with Indigenous hunting practices ("American" 95), Mair had likely also encountered their conceptions of the world as an animate place. His poem, in fact, begins to explore this idea even before the burdash speaks. When the animal first appears, his mere "presence" seems to awaken the consciousness of the land itself, his "enormous bulk . . . fill[ing] / The very vale with awe" (59). This awakening might be understood simply as an expression of the sublime – an aesthetic well suited to an animal regarded as an "evolutionary triumph" of "almost invincible" strength (Morris 7). Mair's burdash is magnificent:

> . . . His shining horns
> Gleamed black amidst his fell of floating hair –
> His neck and shoulders, of the lion's build,
> Were framed to toss the world! (59)

The land's subtle responsiveness in Mair's poem anticipates the "majesty" with which the bison blends with his environment and makes it sonorous again in Jon Whyte's 1981 poem *Homage, Henry Kelsey*:

> *The one is a black a Buffilo great*
> whose size would call forth titan's tumult
> summoning trumpeted speeches from dumb mouths
> and in his majesty the thunderheads
> roil in his cumulus hulking shoulders' mass… (qtd. in MacLaren 121)

Whyte, like Mair, finds in the bison the power of "summoning" speech, which is "trumpeted" from the "dumb mouths" of the awestruck as the animal's massive shoulders merge with thunderheads in a metaphor that animates the bison's whole environment, blurring any sense of separation between them. As Mair's burdash asks "the smokeless skies and grass-green earth" to "Hear" him, the whole environment becomes animated in a way that similarly amplifies the bison's role in the landscape. At the same time, it amplifies both the experience of loss and the reach of the bison's voice in confronting it. The environment becomes more alive with the bison in it – an ecological truth that also suggests how the loss of a single species will reverberate through the many other beings who are dependent upon or affected by it.

The land's animacy can be understood as part of an ecological vision that includes humans. Broadly, as Neil Evernden has emphasizes, animacy is an expression of our interconnectedness: the world "is animate because we are a part of it" (101). But animacy is also central to many Indigenous approaches to the world, as culturally specific as Hubbard's notion of buffalo peoplehood (and, of course, connected to it). It is a defining feature of several Indigenous languages, among them Cree, Blackfoot, and Anishinaabemowin. As the Potawatomi biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer has shown, the idea of animacy, and the relationships it creates between humans and their environment, expresses itself in the structures of these languages. A "grammar of animacy," Kimmerer explains, names the world with verbs instead of with the nouns that dominate languages such as English. This grammar opens up "whole new

ways of living in the world" through its recognition of "other species [as] a sovereign people, a world with a democracy of species, not a tyranny of one" (58). "To be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday," she explains, "all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive. Water, land, and even a day, the language a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things, through pines and nuthatches and mushrooms" (55). To be a prairie, to be a smokeless sky, to be a grass-green earth: Mair's own subtle language invites us to see this world of interconnected beings, each one of them capable of experiencing – and even, in their own quiet way, articulating – both awe and loss.

III. Listening to the Bison

In Kimmerer's view, the grammar of animacy is "for everyone": "Our toddlers speak of plants and animals as if they were people," she writes, "extending to them self and intention and compassion – until we teach them not to" (57). When the burdash takes over the voice of the poem, Mair invites his readers to relearn this ability to extend these same traits (self, intention, compassion) to the animal that they are witnessing on the brink of extinction.

A figure of loss, of environmental desecration, of the other-than-human victims of human self-centredness and destructiveness, the burdash issues an important lesson, painting a bleak picture that is particularly damning for Euro-American civilization and its environmental ills. As other critics have pointed out, Mair's antipathy toward the Métis surfaces in his unflattering portrait of their hunting culture (Archibald-Barber 220), a portrait that bears scant resemblance to the practice of following strict rules of management, with hunters killing "only prime animals" and using all parts thereof, observed first-hand by John George "Kootenai" Brown in the 1870s (MacLaren 102). In Mair's poem, the burdash creates a straightforward hierarchy of responsibility for the bison's disappearance, with Euro-American civilization carrying the heaviest burden. Accordingly, his antipathy toward the Métis is primarily directed at the "paler currents" that infused Métis culture with their "longings base" (60). The burdash's harshest criticism is reserved for the "pale destroyers" who – unlike the Métis – wantonly eradicated an entire species (60). As Braz points out,

> the reason whites have decimated the bison appears to have less to do with any specific animosity toward the species than with

> their own deficient collective makeup. As the burdash contends, Euro-Americans are an unscrupulous breed who slay with 'equal mirth / The harmless or the hurtful things of earth' and who 'yearn for havoc as the world's supreme delight.' It is because of their seemingly insatiable appetites, their 'mad desire,' that the bison are on the brink of extinction.

Although Mair's hierarchy simplifies a complex history, there is much to support the burdash's conclusion that the white man's culture is to blame, whether in the form of an "invasion" of "English sportsmen" in the second half of the nineteenth century (Truetner qtd in MacLaren); of the "insatiable market for buffalo robes" generated by "the industrial cities of eastern North America" (Foster, J.E. 61); and, especially, of concerted efforts (particularly in the United States, where the extermination of bison became policy) to clear the plains of both bison and Indigenous people in order to make way for agricultural settlement (see Hubbard 297-98; Daschuk 102, 183-84; Morris, chapter 3).

The behaviour that the burdash condemns stands in marked contrast with the sustainable practices of Indigenous hunters, who, he attests,

> . . . loved us and they wasted not. They slew
> With pious hand, but for their daily need;
> Not wantonly, but as the due
> Of stern necessity which Life doth breed. (60)

Driven by "the claims of hunger, not of greed" (60), Indigenous peoples represent "a way of life that," Daschuk reminds us, "had endured for 10,000 years" (183), as opposed to the rapacious extractive culture of the European settlers, which obliterated this way of life in a few decades. The burdash's succinct conclusion, structured around a chiasmus that points as much to a lost future as to a lost past, registers the brutal efficiency and sudden tragedy of this extermination: "So waned the myriads which had waxed before / When subject to the simple needs of men" (61).

Thus diagnosing the ecological consequences of over-consumption, the poem extends its reach beyond the bison's particular history to our own present environmental crisis. The animal speaks not just to the traveller, who listens in rapt awe, about his particular time and place, but also across future generations of readers affected by an environmental ethos that continues to lead us into an ever-more-lonely age. In these lines, the burdash could be describing any number of species who have been subject to anthropogenic extinction or extirpation. The passenger

pigeon – once the most abundant bird in North America, whose mass extermination coincided with the bison's – the cod, the blue whale; countless species of fish, of insects, of birds; forests, marshes, tall-grass prairie; all of these, and many more besides, have since also "waned" as a result of expanding agricultural and industrial capitalism. Reading "The Last Bison" in the midst of witnessing, almost everywhere we turn, the devastating consequences of humanity's impact on the habitats and lives of so many other living beings, the burdash's "sobering" message (Kerber 3) becomes more hauntingly prescient.

We live – and read – in an age of mass extinction. This is the sixth such age that the earth has experienced, but the first that humans have caused. Struggling to cope with this reality, we search for language that can capture its bleak realities and affective textures. The proposed geological term "Anthropocene"[8] attempts to convey the extent of humanity's impact on the planet. The naturalist E. O. Wilson, however, has suggested another name for this epoch: "the Eremocine, the age of loneliness" (Jarvis). This term opens up the emotional registers of this epoch of dramatic ecological losses.

Like those who inhabited the prairies when the last herds were slaughtered to make way for agricultural development, we are witnessing the variegated richness of life on earth diminishing at an alarming rate, replaced by a more homogeneous, simplified environment shaped by growing numbers of humans and our voracious industrial-capital appetite. As Brooke Jarvis has recently emphasized, the figures across species are devastating. The sixth mass extinction is creating an increasingly "disordered… ecosystem," she writes; "the world's largest king penguin colony [has shrunk] by 88 percent in 35 years," while "more than 97 percent of the bluefin tuna that once lived in the ocean are gone" and "93 percent of the land where [tigers] used to live is now tigerless." Insects, though far out-numbering large vertebrates, are following these patterns of sudden and rapid decline; as the title of her article announces: "The Insect Apocalypse is Here."

How can humans bear the weight of all this loss for which so many of us are responsible? In the search for language that can fathom the extent of these deaths, and the emotions of sorrow, guilt, and shame that they elicit, terms like "civilization" come under increasing scrutiny. As the opening sentence of "The American Bison" declares: "There is perhaps no fact in the natural history of America which brings such reproach on civilized man as the reckless and almost total destruction of the bison" (93). In the poem, the term "civilization" assumes a bitterly ironic

meaning that anticipates the sentiments of environmentalists like Carson, who wonders "whether any civilization can wage relentless war on life without destroying itself, and without losing the right to be called civilized" (95). Although Mair is more sanguine elsewhere in his writings, the plight of the bison made him see his own culture differently. The Mair of "The Last Bison" would likely have agreed with the ecocritic Jonathan Meeker that "Civilization, at least in the West, has developed as a tragedy does" (Meeker 162), consuming everything in its path until there is nothing left and it, too, perishes like the species it has wiped out. A tragic hero, Meeker observes, acts like a pioneering species, aggressively "conquer[ing] new territory" in order to "achieve unchallenged dominance where hundreds of species lived in complex equilibrium before our arrival," the result of which can only be a death that is one of "the consequences of its own tragic behaviour" (162-63, 164). Civilization follows this same trajectory in Mair's poem: leaving "no wilding on the earth / To wonder at or love," civilization too will disappear beneath "*vacant wilderness*," all but erased, like the bison (58, 62, italics in original).

As far-fetched as his prophecy may have seemed to Mair's initial readers, many of whom were poised to build those very cities across the west, it seems easier to imagine now. Although some contemporary critics have dismissed Mair's prophecy as "nihilistic" (Archibald-Barber 229) or illusory – as Grubisic writes, "an imaginary state of poetic suspension" that "reaches to an oneiric past and to an implausible future" (para 30) – it proposes a form of environmental justice derived from both an apocalyptic sense of moral retribution and a premonition that the relentless exploitation of nature cannot sustain human civilization, let alone other species, on the earth. The bison's prophecy is not "histrionic" (Braz) if one has witnessed the extirpation of a species that once thundered like a surging ocean across the plains, or stretched one's imagination to the limits of a certain civilization's capacity to destroy their habitat. The limits of Mair's imagination, marked by his infamous chauvinism, expand in his environmental reverie. Here, he is not only capable of forecasting the possible end of life on earth as we know it (now a palpable reality, according to many scientists), but of listening for a voice to speak it that was not his own.

Moreover, the strange admixture of apocalyptic destruction and ecological renewal in Mair's poem aligns with a tradition of environmental thinking that has repeatedly imagined both the devastation of civilization and the resilience of at least some of the planet's life forms

in the aftermath of anthropogenic environmental disaster. This is precisely the vision that post-apocalyptic writers such as Cormac McCarthy (in *The Road*), Margaret Atwood (in the *MaddAddam* trilogy), and Richard Van Camp (in "On the Wings of This Prayer"), among others, have explored in environmental speculative fiction. Mair anticipates a wider literary tradition that contemplates the fall (usually by self-destruction) of western urban civilization and the return of various forms of wildness. As Edward Abbey would conclude in *Desert Solitaire*:

> Let men in their madness blast every city on earth into black rubble and envelop the entire planet in a cloud of lethal gas – the canyons and hills, the springs and rocks will still be here, the sunlight will filter through, water will form and warmth shall be upon the land and after sufficient time, no matter how long, somewhere, living things will emerge and join and stand once again. (qtd. in Campbell, 23)

With the disasters of climate change and extinction now a certainty, such visions make it possible to imagine that, in the long history of the planet, some form of the wild will revive.

The burdash's prophecy also resonates with modern thinking about the bison in particular, especially in Indigenous contexts. If the bison are included among the "savage nations" that the burdash says will one day return to the plains, Mair's prophecy echoes long-held Nehiyaw teachings about the future. As Hubbard explains: "Our stories, still told and still understood, tell us the buffalo will return one day" ("Genocide" 303). This anticipation of the bison's return is not unique to the Cree, but shared across the "Buffalo Nations" of the plains, where, Winona LaDuke has written, "the grass calls to the buffalo, and their hooves respond with thundering": "It is said that should the Earth, the mother of all life, ever be shaken to crisis by the people living upon her, then the White Buffalo Calf Woman will return. . . . The return of the White Buffalo Calf Woman symbolizes the beginning of a new time, a new era, and with it the promise of restoration" (140). Hubbard signals this promise in "Buffalo Calling." In the wake of the film's animated images of cowboys, hunters, and conservationists, and of endangered animals awkwardly rounded up into rail cars, this bison's gaze near the end of the film carries the weight of the history that Mair's burdash conjures. Yet in the quiet of this face-to-face encounter, what matters the most is this particular bison, living and breathing in its own present moment. What, she seems to ask, will we do now?

IV. Memory and the Affective Geography of Loss

"The war on nature," LaDuke argues, "is a war on the psyche, a war on the soul" (149). One of the psychic dimensions of this war is the challenge that it poses to the imagination both to fathom the damage that humans are capable of doing, and to reconfigure relationships between humans and the earth. By envisioning the fall of the civilization that eradicated the bison from the plains, Mair pushes us to contemplate our own extinction. However, rather than interpreting this act as a kind of nihilism, we might look to it for the possibility of a different kind of ecological imaginary. Perhaps it is only when we face the possibility of our own demise that we can truly come face to face with the bison, and feel the full weight of the losses that the species has sustained. Only by allowing "civilization" to recede, both psychically and literally, can we create space for the resurgence of a wilderness that the animal can inhabit. Mair reminds us of all of this.

Such reminders are necessary, for another psychic effect of the war on nature, as Davis has recently shown, is "ecological amnesia" (21). Humans can forget as efficiently as we can destroy, and "[t]his capacity to forget, this fluidity of memory, has dire implications in a world dense with people, all desperate to satisfy their immediate material needs" (24). Forgetfulness, he posits, is a habit we have learned that makes it possible to adapt to ecologically impoverished landscapes, but it signals "the ease with which we have removed ourselves from this ecological tragedy" (23). Astonishingly, "the terrible events" of the mass-slaughter of bison and the replacement of tall-grass prairie with farms "unfolded but a century ago," and yet they have come to seem "as distant . . . as the fall of Rome or the siege of Troy" (23). In addition to allowing the violence of this genocidal history to recede, our amnesia also obliterates memories of the ecological richness we have lost, allowing the memories of the "myriads" that once coexisted with – indeed, frequently overshadowed – human beings, to fade.

One only has to go back a few generations to find records of the astonishing abundance and variety of nonhuman life that once made it so difficult for people to anticipate the losses of the Eremocine. Drawing from J.B. MacKinnon in an argument that dovetails with Davis's, Jarvis

conjures a startlingly different picture of the world that also included Mair's "Endless and infinite" bison herds:

> In the North Atlantic, a school of cod stalls a tall ship in midocean; off Sydney, Australia, a ship's captain sails from noon until sunset through pods of sperm whales as far as the eye can see. . . . Pacific pioneers complain to the authorities that splashing salmon threaten to swamp their canoes." There were reports of lions in the south of France, walruses at the mouth of the Thames, flocks of birds that took three days to fly overhead, as many as 100 blue whales in the Southern Ocean for every one that's there now. "These are not sights from some ancient age of fire and ice," MacKinnon writes. "We are talking about things seen by human eyes, recalled in human memory."

In the Eremocine, these recollections disappear as the lands, waters, and skies are emptied of life. The loneliness of this age is the loneliness not just of losing one's companion species, but of losing a whole history of the inhabited earth. As Robert Macfarlane has recently pointed out, this loss creates a linguistic silence as well as an ecological one. In *The Lost Words*, Macfarlane's poems, which he characterizes as "spells," summon back into language a selection of plants, birds, and other animals recently excised from the Oxford Children's Dictionary. Along with Jackie Morris's exquisite painted illustrations, he invokes language as "an act of conjuring back" species that are disappearing both from our lexicons and, increasingly, from the earth itself.

In the Canadian and American west, the bison remains the most poignant marker of ecological amnesia. Robert Kroetsch famously described the forgetfulness of prairie settlers (and writers) in a famous passage in "On Being an Alberta Writer," where he recalls coming upon a buffalo wallow as a boy. After his father explains that the "large, shallow depression in the ground" was made by the buffalo, Kroetsch recalls thinking "What buffalo? . . . When? From where?" (328). His questions divine the deep well of forgetting that, over a single generation, created "absence" where once there was presence, widening "the gap between [himself] and history" (328). The act of recognition is powerful; identifying the buffalo wallow helps to destroy "the illusion that the land my parents and grandparents had homesteaded had had no prior occupants, animal or human," making his prairie home no longer "the

ultimate tabula rasa" in which "We were the truly innocent" (328). An empty landscape is a landscape wiped of memory.

Mair has a place in a wide network of poets and thinkers concerned with memory and social and environmental responsibility. As his younger contemporary poet Archibald Lampman cautioned in "The City of the End of Things" (1894), forgetfulness was a feature of a civilization on the brink of collapse. Lampman imagined the apocalyptic end of those cities of "pomp and pride" that Mair anticipated. Built by "multitudes of men . . . in their pride," he writes, the "roofs and iron towers have grown / None knoweth how high" in an industrial hell that rings, not with the sounds of life, but only with a "gigantic harmony" of "inhuman music" (49-50, 9-10, 20, 24). Anyone who stumbles into this lifeless place (if they manage to survive) suffers a spiritual death precipitated by amnesia: "Each thread of memory snapt and cut," we read, "His soul would shrivel and its shell / Go rattling like an empty nut" (42-44). As much as industrialism run amok, the loss of memory – both historical, and, one assumes (knowing Lampman's interest in the natural world), ecological memory – is the death knell of civilization.

There is a particular urgency to remembering in both Mair's and Hubbard's work on the bison. As they call upon us to recall the "prior occupants" of the land and the ecological harms of colonialism, they also push us to imagine alternatives to the landscapes of western civilization, which are full of pomp and pride, but forgetful of ecological abundance and diversity. "Buffalo Calling" is a calling back, a summoning of the animals, whose voices then call not just to each other, but to us as well, to attend to their return. It is an auditory version of the effect of looking at the bison who is looking at us near the end of the film. A "calling" is also a vocation: the title of the film thus intimates the work that must be done to repair relations between humans and other species. The bison who gazes out at us at the end of Hubbard's film, however – along with the burdash who becomes the speaker of Mair's poem – also reminds us that this work must be a collaboration. The bison may be regarded, in an important sense, as an author of these works, the face we must contemplate, the voice we must hear.

Notes

1 I would like to thank my anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this essay, Eric Adams for his comments on an earlier draft, and Mackenzie Ground for first drawing my attention to the significance of the bison's voice in Mair's poem for a Nehiyaw reader.

2 In this essay, Mair "offered what may well be the first Canadian taxonomical descriptions of [the animal] to a meeting of the Royal Society of Canada, held in May 1890" (MacLaren 102).
3 For more detailed accounts of Mair's politics, see also Grubisic para. 38-42, Braz, and Shrive.
4 For an analysis of Mair's depiction of the "ecological Indian" in this poem, see Grubisic.
5 Over the last century, bison numbers have grown from the meagre hundreds that were saved from extinction at the end of the nineteenth century by a few dedicated ranchers and conservationists to more than half a million animals across North America; though, as Morris points out, of these, only about 15,000 animals currently live in their wild state, that is, free to roam as they did before settlers erected fences across the now agricultural west (see 79-82).
6 In "The American Bison" Mair writes that the burdash was thought to be either hermaphroditic or, as its Cree name Ayā-quāyu suggests, "'of neither sex.'" I refer to the burdash as "he" which is the pronoun Mair gives the animal in his poem. Mair adds that "[s]uch an animal, with its colossal frame, its vast front, and spreading horns was a striking object in a great herd, and, when killed in season, yielded what was known as the 'beaver robe.' This robe was greatly prized for its immense size and glossy, silk-like coat, and sold, twenty years ago, for ten times the price of the best robe of commerce" (100). By making his "last" bison an economically coveted burdash, Mair points obliquely to the commercial culture that had reduced the animal to a commodity.
7 Bison provided plains people not only with nutrition but also with tools, warm clothing, and shelter; Morris notes "as many as 65 different ways in which the American Indian tribes would utilize a dead bison" (58; see also Mair, "American," 103-06).
8 See Crist for a trenchant critique of this much-debated term.

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