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Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo.

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Abstract

You said it was a linguist's jerkoff session; the same word repeated eight times; gibberish; baby talk; a bon mot for bad parties; a possible Jeopardy answer, you Alex Trebek and me the bookish school teacher from Des Moines; but it was really just homework: breaking down pieces of an echo.

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BOOTH



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Fiction by Lucas Church

You said it was a linguist's jerkoff session; the same word repeated eight times; gibberish; baby talk; a *bon mot* for bad parties; a possible *Jeopardy* answer, you Alex Trebek and me the bookish school teacher from Des Moines; but it was really just homework: breaking down pieces of an echo.

Buffalo

You learned in class the first word is Buffalo, the city, what is left of it, a proper noun. You do not live in Buffalo, never have. You know it's cold. You have read about it online, what it once was and what it is sliding into. Your advisor was from Buffalo, and he would sit across from you and look defeated. When you think of defeat, you think of Buffalo, of its football team, of blizzards, of buildings empty so long they've known more time without people than with, a place that keeps a memory of its former self locked away under rust and snow.

buffalo

Buffalo are animals, tangles of hair; long, impossibly headed; horned and bearded masses of something you and I do not understand. They do not live where we live. I have never seen a buffalo. You have also never seen a buffalo, though you cried during *Dances with Wolves* during the massacre and said it was the worst thing you could ever imagine, or something like that.

Buffalo buffalo

It makes no sense that “to buffalo” is to bully. Its archaic phrasing is nearly cute, you think, which is problematic, like when my mother met you for the first time and said she was expecting someone taller and less ethnic. In the beginning, we meet the buffalo who come from Buffalo who have issues. It sets the stage and the actors: the animals that other animals bully. Those are the characters, like in a play or a story, though for the purposes of this exercise, they cannot be called bison, though they are, which would ruin everything, which is the job of either you or me or my mother.

buffalo buffalo

You were buffaloed, are still, but never knew to call it that and never would draw attention to that anyway. Unlike *cowed* or *dogged*, the word doesn't seem to fit the animal. You think of buffalo as docile, noble, not bullies, every one of them pregnant with a collective, cumulative wisdom, and that they were not almost wiped from the American landscape by us but rather simply chose to collapse under the weight of history until they were bones bleaching in the prairie grass.

You also know you don't know shit about buffalo.

But in the sentence, the second noun phrase is the turn, the lesson that reverberates: humans are shitty. Sure, it's all about buffalo, but buffalo aren't bullies, not like how people are, not like I am, not like the world can be. You grab me and we lock eyes. We fight in parking lots, in the middle of supermarket aisles, in front of nativity scenes. I brush up on my Spanish to finally know what *hijo de puta* means.

Buffalo buffalo.

The phrase is repeated, though the meaning is not immediate. What exactly is happening with the buffalo from Buffalo? You think harder, but instead remember when I picked you up from work with beer on my breath, how you knew I'd started up again. What would the poor buffalo think of that? After intense study, after many cigarettes and a half-bottle of cheap wine, we learn that the buffalo from Buffalo bully the buffalo from Buffalo, too. They find their friends and neighbors, you say, half-laughing, and shake them down for milk money. They call attention to the fact that another buffalo has gained a few pounds, that some poor buffalo lost his job, that another had her calf taken away by the powers that be.

The sentence has proved circular. The bullied end up being the bullies, the town a convenient lexical trap, the thing you thought you were running from but instead was the place you stood still. Your Chomsky professor called the buffalo sentence "seemingly nonsensical," and you grabbed onto *seemingly* like a drowning man would a life raft, to make something out of it. They become what they're taught, you said. They learn by what they see, you said. I said we all do, and you crumbled in front of me, like you wanted to cry and laugh at the same time, like you really expected us to be different from the animals.

I said if you need a class on a sentence, it's probably not a good sentence.

So, instead of bursting into tears or something else, we let the snow gather around the Hyundai like a blanket, and you put away your homework and mumble that the buffalo sentence is predicated on so much knowledge that a single person wouldn't know that it's really unfair, an academic exercise so cold that you feel cast out, alone again, congested and sniffly, outside the limits of what people are willing to entertain, bound to some logic only you can feel, drinking out of my flask on this shitty winter night, until I pull you closer, wait a beat, and start the car.

Lucas Church's work is forthcoming or has appeared in *West Branch*, *Five Chapters*, *PANK*, and the *Fairy Tale Review* among other journals. He holds an MFA from North Carolina State University and is the editor of *PINBALL*, an online literature and comics magazine. You can reach him at lucaschurch.com.