

Black and White Cowboys

After cartoons, the boys watch traders hock blankets and beads. This is after loggers rub their rigs against the canopy of the springhead, after pelt, pan and river swell, the spike and the sound of iron on iron, steel against brush. On TV, it's black and white: someone has to die and someone else has to stand there and watch it, but it's never enough to stop the commercials. Ask the scout and the blazer, the forty-niners with their dented mouths, the expressmen and the rivermen and the railroaders – what's the point of complicating cruelty when there's money to be made? The boys are left to judge what's good or bad by the only colors they're given. There's a white man wearing a white hat. He beats the dust off his thighs, reaches down with his index finger toward the trigger, and takes the ground from under the other man's feet. Color makes no difference to the dead, but the boys see good guys and bad guys marked by contrast and brightness. They confuse the two with what's left standing and what's left to bleed, as scripted, as directed, as advertised. Soon they will yell and squeal and cheer, ready to re-enact exactly what they just saw, ready to turn on each other in the closing credits. And we'll be relieved if they just do it outside in a place where we can watch them. And we'll call it a fair trade.