

On the North Side of the Platte

MID-APRIL 1845

The plains were black from burning.
Along the north side of the Platte,
The horse and ox teams had nothing
But sparse patches of grass to eat.

Indians began the fires, preparing
The land, a conflagrative incision,
Scalping old growth, but cleansing
And cauterizing for the new season.

Prairie cottonwoods, now beginning
To green, were cut down for fodder,
But the animals weakened, browsing
Listlessly, slower now with hunger.

EARLY-MAY 1845

The plains were black with buffalo.
Tens, hundreds of thousands strong
They surged like tempests until no
Grass, no growth survived, killing

It beneath a million hooves. Below
That earth, graves of recent grief
Cried from Winter Quarters—a flow
Of hope, yet children died. Belief

In God was the Saints' life and so
They came past the ashes and death,
With the plains black with buffalo.
Again they'd touch blackness, with

Crops blanketed black with locusts.
Disease yawning in black readiness,
Tender new things black with frost,
Yet they followed the white vision
of truth.

—Sally T. Taylor