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DON SPARLING AND TOMÁŠ POSPÍŠIL

## THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT AMERICA

### 1. Arizona

September 1, 1939. Germany attacks Poland. That same day Ludvík Vaculík—now one of the greatest contemporary Czech writers, then a 14-year-old—starts keeping a diary of his life in the remote eastern Moravian village of Brumov. School, family, hobbies, the daily round—the war is a distant, infrequent, almost inaudible murmur in the background, while the foreground of the diary is taken up by the countryside round Brumov, centered on the meadow he and his friends have transformed in their imaginations into

Arizona ... If I ever speak of my native region, I'll always think of this place ... [When I first saw it] the meadow seemed huge to me, in its pure colors. That marvelous greenness! Filled with flowers. To my eyes it was a new world; I felt like a discoverer. It seemed to me that I'd never seen a meadow before. Why? Maybe because I'd never 'sensed' a meadow before... And when I started reading my first stories about Indians and cowboys, I began to compare it to the prairies and steppes, and [the woods on the hill beside it] to virgin forests. And when we played games, I didn't find anywhere better than Arizona. Oh, Arizona! Do you remember how often we played there together? How when I was the Yaqui chief, I was called Fangu, how I was a cowboy, a sheriff, by the name of Rim Jack Whister, do you remember Perci Warton, Zion Jore, Slim Denwery and Croaking Raven? And my friends ... who launched so many lances into your soil ... and longed for you so often when the owner drove us off with his whip and brought us from the Wild West to the town hall and into the hands of the police ... Do you remember Pepík Pravdový, how hand in hand with him, together and inseparable, we made of you our West? Arizona!

(Vaculík 1981:81-85)

## 2. May and Seton

Old Shatterhand and Vinnetou, *Two Little Savages* and “Lobo, the King of Currumpaw”—a world of wide open spaces, sage Indians, wild animals. Czechs’ image of the American outdoors is indelibly shaped in childhood by two writers, Karl May and Ernest Thompson Seton. May is the great magus: though he never set foot in America, the world of his novels has become for Czechs the ultimate American myth, the one they keep coming back to: several hundred editions of his works have been published since the appearance of the first translations in the nineteenth century. Surprisingly enough, this is not merely a phenomenon of the past, when America was inaccessible because of physical distance or, more recently, the fierce travel restrictions imposed by the Communist regime. The past five years alone have seen the publication of twelve of May’s novels set in that imaginary America, with some titles being issued by more than one publisher and *Black Mustang* by no fewer than three. Naturally enough, the central works of the canon—those with the “Red gentleman” Vinnetou as their heroic protagonist—have fared especially well, with one complete six volume set, another of five volumes, and three other translations appearing since the collapse of the Communist system in 1989. Seton too, has had an enthusiastic following among Czechs: around 110 editions of his works have been published since the first, back in 1909 (Sedlár 1999). Seton’s books act as a pendant to the gripping narratives of May: not only do his closely observed animal stories present a vivid picture of the American wilderness, but his practical instructions on how to live like Indians and survive in the wild—his “woodcraft”—can be acted on, thus making it possible to bring America to the fields and forests and meadows of Bohemia and Moravia, and so domesticate the myth.

But what exactly is it that makes the worlds of these writers so attractive? With no first-hand experience of the subject matter, the young Czech reader has no way of telling the difference between the authenticity of Seton and the fabrications of May. But this is irrelevant: what is important is that the worlds presented by the two authors represent everything that the Czech world is not. The Czech lands are small, enclosed, with no grand geographical features; the product of millennia of European civilization, they are typified by ancient cities with highly developed industries and a countryside thickly dotted with villages and chateaux, artificial ponds and carefully managed forests. The America of May and Seton is the exact opposite, the exotic “other”—“unspoiled”, “empty” (except, of course, for those fascinating Indians, cowboys, prospectors, etc.), “natural”—the kind of other that fascinates, that, above all, offers freedom: freedom from a society bound by bureaucracies and regulations, freedom from the weight of centuries of high cultural traditions, freedom from a society trapped within the narrow bounds of its limited physical space.

### 3. On the Road I (T.P. Remembers Reading Kerouac)

The location is a winter Thursday morning in 1980. The first Czech edition of Kerouac's *On the Road* is due to appear in the bookstore, as in all bookstores in the country, naturally in a very limited edition. So, along with dozens of others, I too am queuing up. I open up the book in the streetcar on my way home and cannot stop till I read it to the end. As a consequence, I have to postpone the exam in American history I was to sit for in two days' time. I can still recall the sweet sound of the word "Denver" when Dean reached it during one of his frantic trips. The real Denver, with its obvious attractions, can only be a distant match to the vision I cherished back in 1980.

### 4. On the Road II (*The Ride*)

In 1993 the young director Jan Svěrák (five years later he won the Academy Award for his film *Kolya*) created an improvised road movie called *Jízda* (*The Ride*). This independent production, modeled clearly on Dennis Hopper's cult feature *Easy Rider*, owes its success to a creative use of the persistent myth that informs this quintessentially American genre: Nature with its vast spaces, a car, and group of young characters on the open road, music under the summer sky. Yet there are multiple ironical modifications of the original genre's stock motifs: the three main characters are not desperados but two ordinary Czech fellows with a pretty hitchhiker. They move in the region of Southern Bohemia, a landscape of fields, woods and ponds created as early as in the Middle Ages. As homely, benign and "civilized" as the landscape are some of the adventures the three protagonists go through: stealing ice-cream from a gas station ice box, breaking into a cottage that, in fact, belongs to one of the boys.

However all is not well in the end. The hitchhiker (the role of Jack Nicholson was transformed into a significantly more seductive teenage character played by the Czech sex symbol of the nineties Anna Geislerová) dies in a road accident. Out of something like existential emptiness, she plays a kind of Russian roulette with her boyfriend, who has pursued her during the whole movie and finally caught up with her. During a long descent she takes out the ignition key. At the bottom of the hill there is a sharp curve.

There is a conversation going on across the cultures between the American genre and its specific Czech offshoot, between the American landscape in the former and its Czech modification in the latter. *The Ride* is a different kind of road movie, distinctly ours, in the landscape, choice of music and character construction. Yet there would be no movie (and no success) without the myth of the American nature and space in the background.

### 5. "Where is my homeland?"

A deep attachment to the natural world seems central to the Czech imagination. Consider the Czech national anthem. Most countries have produced an-

them that focus on something grand—the people (“land of the free and home of the brave”) or the nation’s icons (“the star-spangled banner”), its revolutionary zeal (“arise, you wretched of the earth”), the physical land as symbol (“the true North strong and free”), invocations to the Almighty (“God save our gracious queen”). The Czech anthem, however, begins with a query—the rather puzzling “Where is my homeland?”—and then goes on to answer it in tones of lyrical rapture:

[where] water gurgles through the meadows  
 pines murmur on the crags  
 blossoms glow in the orchards in springtime  
 a heaven on earth to view ...

This is a vision of the Czech lands as Eden, Eden precisely because of its natural beauty. And this fascination with the natural world is reflected in a myriad of ways—in the hundreds of thousands of cottages the Czechs retreat to on weekends and over the summer, in the virtually universal ritual of sending kids off to summer camps, in the hiking clubs for all ages, and above all in the unique Czech phenomenon of “tramps”.

## 6. Tramps

For most of the year, on any Friday, train and bus stations throughout the Czech Republic present a strange scene. Small groups of people—young, middle-aged, families with children—can be seen greeting each other as they meet to head off to the countryside together for the weekend. Dressed in checked flannel shirts, army surplus clothing and Stetson hats, shod in *kanady* (high, laced black boots), draped in groundsheets and festooned with (often handmade) knapsacks and rucksacks, hunting knives and cooking utensils, carrying guitars, they are fully equipped to survive for the next two or three days *v přírodě* (in nature). They are looking forward eagerly to spending their time out-of-doors, by day hiking through the fields and forests, in the evening gathering in the woods (preferably by some lake or river or stream) at their traditional *osady* (settlements). Each group has its own site; some have been in use for generations. Such a settlement often has a rough kind of shanty, though it may be nothing more than a space to sleep out under the stars at night. But always present is the carefully prepared place for the campfire, which forms the symbolic focus of the settlement, shaping the communal space where friends come together to cook their meals and sing songs late into the night, enjoying each other’s company far from the world of jobs or school, set clearly apart from the society of *padouři* (squares). This is the world of the *trampí* (tramps), a community moved by a desire for, in the words of one of them, “camaraderie, the campfire, the Romantic” (Linhart 1966:77).

This unique phenomenon sprang up quite spontaneously in urban milieus in the Czech lands soon after World War I. A number of young people within the

Scouting movement, rejecting its hierarchically organized structure, obsession with discipline, and paramilitary nature (uniforms, roll-calls, saluting), decided instead to go out and enjoy the countryside on their own and in their own way. Soon these “wild Scouts”, as they were originally referred to, started calling themselves “tramps”<sup>1</sup>, and they developed a whole new lifestyle centered on the countryside and their “settlements”, many of which were given English—and especially American—names: White Creek, Silver Star, Colorado, Utah, Hiawatha (!). In effect each group was a miniature democratic community, with a chosen, largely honorary, leader (the “sheriff”), and a membership that decided what to do, and when and where and how. The survival of groups over the years and decades, the transition from one generation to another, the continual creation of new groups, are all proof of the staying power of the desire for freedom that formed—and still forms—the basis of the movement. The close bonds of friendship that developed, and the lack of any formal, legal structure, made it possible for individual groups and the “tramping movement” as a whole to survive the Nazi occupation during World War II and, more remarkably, the forty years of Communist rule, though it was clear to everyone—the Communists included—that one of the main sources of inspiration of the movement was America, and especially the mythic America of individual freedom enjoyed amidst untouched Nature, in the world of the Wild West, among the Noble Savages.

### **7. Tramping as a Retreat from Modern Culture into the “Wilderness”**

Tramping obviously represents a retreat from the city into nature. The complexity of modern civilization is abandoned in search of a more simple way of existence, if only for a weekend. Once again a variety of contradictory American myths merges happily in the mind of the Czech tramps: the trapper, the cowboy, the Native American.

The flight into the wilderness is accompanied by a number of other paradoxes: in their quest for wilderness in what is essentially a highly cultivated, cultural land the tramps often fall on medieval ruins. Thus locations that actually function as material evidence of the centuries of cultural transformation of the land become sites where fantasies about escape into the wilderness find their most potent expression. Hawthorne missed medieval castles in wild, uncivilized American space. Without them, he believed, there was considerably less opportunity for romance. It is exactly there that the Czech tramps find their romance of the wilderness.

Or consider this: in their wanderings through the countryside, the tramps make ample use of the dense system of hiking trails, a system set up by the culture they are withdrawing from. So, obviously there is no “pure” nature in

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<sup>1</sup> According to Waic and Kössl (1992), the name tramp is derived from Jack London's *Cesta*, a book that appeared in the Czech translation in 1922, just in time to be widely read and admired by the “wild Scouts”.

today's world anymore (and in the Czech Republic this is even more true). In a chartered land where, practically speaking, there is no wilderness, one has to employ one's imagination to fashion at least a semblance of it. The fact that one is surrounded by simulacra in the case of Czech tramps does not matter. They are dreamers who in search of wilderness find good company, moments of happiness and a breath of fresh air.

### 8. Tramp Songs

The "tramping movement" might well have remained a limited and marginal phenomenon had it not been for its songs. Music lies at the heart of Czech culture—one of the Czechs' favorite sayings has it that "Every Czech is a musician"—so it is no coincidence that right from the beginning the tramps started composing songs of their own. Their inspiration was, of course, America, and over the years tramp songs absorbed country and western music, swing, American folk music, bluegrass, transforming them all into a changing but recognizable form—"Czech tramp". As early as 1925 tramp songs appeared in print, followed soon after by the first records. Amateur tramp groups became famous—many with evocative names such as the Roamboys, Westboys, Westmen, Wood Boys—and by the thirties tramp songs had become so well established on the pop music scene that professional song writers were producing their own versions of tramp songs and so surviving in the harsh economic climate. Since then, hundreds of tramp songs, their origin forgotten, have been absorbed into the common Czech song repertoire, joining those other songs Czechs sing when they gather together of an evening, at homes, in pubs and wine cellars, around campfires—Czech popular classics, Czech versions of American and other foreign songs, Bohemian and Moravian folk songs.

But why have so many of these songs become "evergreens"? Besides the melodies themselves—the products of a rich mixture of musical styles, including contemporary dance fads—there is the imaginative world of the texts. And this is America—the America of untouched natural beauty, the mythical America of the Wild West and the North, the America of the sentimental country and western ballad.

Far from here, someplace beyond these woods,  
 Far from here, we'll find a little spot beside the river just  
 for us,  
 When we've paddled our canoe through the rapids  
 Maybe your heart will grant me love.

"Bessy" (Linhart 1996:10)

When you see the blue smoke rising in the distance o'er the  
canyon,  
You'll know the place where I'm waiting for you with my longing  
heart,

An arrow soars o'er the savanna, with it soars my heart,  
And where that arrow falls, I'll find my happiness

“An Arrow Soars” [Letí šíp] (Linhart 1996:34)

Do you want to know the song of the North,  
Do you want to listen silently, alongside me,  
When the white salmon return to run the rapids?

Do you want to see the northern lights

Do you want me to kiss your face

When the north radiates great hope?

The salmon are returning, let's paddle after them

And our old longings will turn into a beautiful dream come true!

“Song of the North” [Píseň severu] (Jelínek 1992:110-111)

But this “America” is not quite so straightforward. It is certainly suggested by the use of specific words referring to the natural setting—“prairie”, “canyon”—and many cultural details—English personal names (“Frankie”, “Ben”), words like “colt” (i.e. the gun), “trapper”, and so on. But a closer examination indicates that the songs really exist in an imaginary world that is simultaneously both America and the Czech lands. When, in “Return”, the text speaks of the longing for home, and the old trails that lead back home, this could well be anywhere familiar to Czechs, or the trails might be thought to be simply metaphorical—if it were not for the line about the land “thundering under the hoofs of the herds of cattle” (“Návrat”; Linhart 1996:38). Or in another song, the “standard commodities” of the rapids, the forests, the stars in the clear sky above, the little cabin somewhere far away all suggest America—but the song begins with a river gurgling and rocky cliffs and the wind blowing, a clear echo of the Czech national anthem (“The River is Gurgling” [Řeka hučí]; Linhart 1996:14). Time and time again, what we have in these songs is the use of the American world of nature as a means of articulating certain deep Czech longings.

## 9. “Velká řeka”

In many tramp songs, “America”—the mythic America—s metaphor, becomes an imaginative home. But the playful Czech imagination also goes another step, and actually incorporates the natural world of America into the Czech reality—or putting it another way, expands the natural world of the Czech countryside to encompass the American reality. In the world of the tramps, the Vltava River becomes “Velká řeka”—the Big River, the Mississippi. In an analogous fashion, many places are given new stature when American



qualities are attributed to them. So the St John Rapids on the Vltava River, in “Memories of the St John Rapids” [Vzpomínka na Svatojanské proudy] (Linhart 1998:42) are said to be in “the wilderness”, surrounded by “an unpeopled, virgin land”. In fact the distance to the outskirts of Prague as the crow flies is about 15 kilometers. In another song, the unremarkable low hills round Bítov Lake have been transformed into more Romantic “mountains” (“Jezero Bítovské” [Bítov Lake]; Linhart 1996:88), at the “Měsíční údolí” [Moon Valley] “settlement”, the singer boasts of his “ranch”, where “the sounds of pistol shots still ring out” (Linhart 1998:37). In fact this song is a perfect blend of all the elements of tramping—the ranch, the natural location (“hidden deep in the woods”), the resounding “tone of the guitar” (presumably as a complement to the pistol shots), camaraderie (“they’re singing a song of pioneer days ... and the melody floats out over the creek beyond the dark forest somewhere into the distance”).

How serious is all this? Do tramps really feel they’re recreating a bit of America in the heart of Europe? Perhaps the shrewdest answer to this comes in a comment by an experienced older tramp, Tony Linhart:

Tramping in fact has a whiff of the theatre about it. When a Frenchman sets up camp beside some stretch of water, he remains a Frenchman the whole time, even if he cooks his meals in a pot over a campfire and gazes up at the stars from his sleeping bag at night. But with the Czech tramp everything is different. He renames a quiet town by the Vltava River Dawson, and himself turns into a prospector. Almost as soon as our tramp sets out from his house with his rucksack on his back he’s no longer Horáček but, let’s say, Bobby, and he’s heading—where else?—for the Wild West. As part of the act he’s quite willing to rename blueberry wine whisky.

(Linhart 1998:55)

Perhaps none of this is particularly surprising in a country whose President is, by profession, a writer of absurd dramas.

## 10. Country and Western Music as a Form Political Escapism

With the United States as the main Cold War adversary of the Soviet Bloc, whatever ideas or cultural influences were coming from those distant shores were, by definition, suspect. The exceptions were few: Paul Robeson was in, just as Langston Hughes or whoever’s work could be used to bash the enemy.<sup>2</sup> Blue jeans and Coke counted as dubious luxuries. Harley Davidsons were

<sup>2</sup> Yet many notable American literary texts did appear, if only in limited editions. The protracted struggle to make this happen and the significant impact American writing had on the Czech readership forms a very interesting chapter in our cultural and political history. Here again, the subversive influence of American culture on the picture of the world endorsed by the Communist party was great.

known to us only from a rare Hollywood flick. At a certain point in the 1960s the unquestionable darling of the Czechoslovak media was Angela Davis.

After a brief period of opening up in 1968 the door, once again, slammed shut and two decades of so-called "normalization" set in. People turned inward, to their families, hobbies and cottages. The early seventies saw a major baby boom as the disenchanted started to look for meaningful alternatives and make use of the heavily subsidized housing, food and children's clothes. The comrades at the top knew very well that family men and women make poor revolutionaries (or rather counter-revolutionaries).

It was in the same decade that country and western music moved into the mainstream and established itself there as the unquestionable number one. As in all areas of life, there was, inevitably, some interference from above. Following an official directive in 1971, the authorities, for instance, would not tolerate English names. Bands such as the Greenhorns or Rangers became Zelenáči and Plavci, but under the new labels they kept turning out a particularly inventive Czech variation of American country and western. Michal Tučný ("Fatman"), the overweight front man of the Greenhorns, ruled, universally liked regardless of the age or social standing of his listeners. So the Czechs sought refuge from the gray, dreary reality of their everyday existence not only in the tranquillity of their small gardens. They also enjoyed the company of seductive Mexican girls in the haciendas of the Southwest, braved the elements in the deadly blizzards of Alaska or were massacred along with the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry at Custer's Last Stand. ("El Paso", "Blizard" [Blizzard], "Blizko Little Big Hornu" [Close to Little Big Horn], respectively; Vyčítal 1995:66, 31, 33)

The authorities were quick to recognize the essential benignity of the fad. Letting the listeners embark on imaginary journeys across space and time via country and western music posited a considerably lesser danger than letting them go in person and risk defections, should they get seduced by the glittering face of late capitalism. Thus this musical simulacrum became part of a tacit social contract that materialized in Czechoslovakia after the collapse of the Prague Spring: one could keep one's private sphere, family, hobbies and even American music. In return one had to give up one's civil liberties and let the communist nomenclature run the country toward a slow bankruptcy.

## **11. Wells Fargo, Pony Express and the White Indians of the 90s**

The collapse of Communist control brought about many changes to all aspects of our lives. This also had major ramifications for Czech tramping, country and western music and other activities that were inspired and informed by the American myths of the frontier, the cowboy or the Native American.

The most important result was, of course, a number of newly granted kinds of freedom. Freedom not to be employed and opt for an unusual lifestyle, such as that of a full-time Central European Native American, freedom to set up a private business, such as a country and western saloon, a rodeo or a whole western village. For some it was a time of "coming out", for others a time of discovery

and a new beginning. As early as 1985, for instance, Jindřich Bílek, pioneer of the Czech Westerners Movement, organized a 250-mile Pony Express ride to commemorate its 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The secret ride connected two major centers of western life in the former Czechoslovakia, the ranches in Suchdol nad Odrou and Mníšek pod Brdy. In 1990, finally, one could fully come out and the Czech route of the Czech Pony Express was officially “connected” with the historic route of the original US Pony Express. The governor of the state of Nevada, by a special decree, made June 2, 1990 a memorable day to honor the Czech Pony Express Riders. Jindřich Bílek’s next project is a journey in a replica of an original Wells Fargo Coach to the world congress of Westerners in Oklahoma City in 2001. Along with the c. & w. band The Taxmen he wants to take two orphaned children on the ride so that, as he says, “they can see their dreams about cowboys and Indians come true, just like I did.” (*Srdce Evropy* [Heart of Europe])

The nineties saw the establishing of many farms in Western style. Their owners and employees are typically enthusiasts who have returned to nature and breed Western horses that participate in rodeos and rides all around the country during the spring and summer season.

Even in the cities one can get a taste of the good old West: restaurants and pubs in country and western style have been popping up practically everywhere. The loveliest c.& w. pub I (i.e. T.P.) have been to is located in the Brno housing estate of Kohoutovice. It used to be a typical prefabricated impersonal space built in Communist style for the purpose of guzzling down beer by the gallon, but now, the wood paneling, saloon style doors and pictures of the landscape in the American Southwest have made it almost bearable to sit in. However, one still drinks Czech beer there, rather than bourbon or rye.

A more alternative lifestyle that can be adopted these days is that of the Native American. The Czech League of White Indians, numbering several thousand souls, organizes camps where people spend their vacations in Native American style, practicing their crafts, learning their ways, languages, philosophy and religion. There is an intense communication between the Native Americans and their Czech counterparts, with members of various Indian nations visiting the local camps and with league members going to learn from Native Americans in the United States. With the disappearance of the Communist law requiring citizens to have a regular job (otherwise one could get arrested for “social parasitism”), it is now possible to become a free-lance Czech Native American, if one wishes so. Making one’s living by selling Indian handicrafts, as the “Shaman” from Tišnov (a Moravian village to the northwest of Brno) does, is a viable possibility now.

And there are many more attractions: gold-mining California Style in the streams of Bohemia, races of Husky Dogs Alaska style in the Beskydy Mountains. Practically all activities connected with the myth of the American West and North find in the Czech Republic their eager and happy simulation.

## 12. The Nineties and the Disappearance of "Porta"

Counting one's gains in a sense always entails counting one's losses, too. Among the principal victims of the opening up of the nineties was the Porta, a popular festival of tramp, country and Western and folk music, that at the height of its fame in the late 1970s and early 1980s, drew crowds of thousands. There, young people would gather for a marathon of concerts, drawn by the music, with it evocation of America. The current successors to Porta are but pale evocation of the festival in its days of glory.

The sense of a very large community that shares a common liking is most probably gone for good. Members of the generation that used to frequent the festivals have meanwhile reached their middle age. With the barbed wires gone from or borders, instead of singing about America, they can opt for a package tour to see the "real thing". The younger generation, in turn, can be seduced by many other attractions: energy drinks at an all night dance party, for instance, or perhaps a couple of days in Venezuela on a last minute student discount?

In addition, with the arrival of capitalism, things have speeded up. One has to think of one's career, one's future prospects on the job market. As a student one is simply forced to work harder. To spend a couple of leisurely days listening to c. & w. music under the open skies sounds like too much of a luxury at the moment.

### As Carl Sandburg might put it:

The porta is gone.

And those who saw the porta are gone.

And those who saw the porta by thousands and how  
     they dreamed with sounds of banjoes,  
     guitars and violins in the night  
     under the great pageant of stars  
     of the Pilsen sky,

Those who saw the porta are gone.

And the porta is gone.

## 13. The Present and the Future: A Conflict of American Influences

The number of people tramping and going to concerts and festivals is declining. One American influence—tramping, country music, dreaming the "good old American myths"—is giving way to another distinctly American cultural import: enormous shopping centers, blocked freeways, junk mail, the constant barrage of advertising on commercial radio and TV stations. There is a multitude of other, newly established attractions to compete with the old ones for one's time: poolrooms, squash and fitness centers, entertainment parks. The importance of the former American influence vanishes but is far from gone. And never will be, since human life, we are sure, is bound to contain more than

setting one's mind on the most recent sale in a supermarket at the edge of the city.

But just as in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, where there is a subculture that cares so much for books, clinging to the fringes but never giving up, there will be tramps and white Indians and all kinds of other „freaks“ who care for nature and the more picturesque and varied side of original America. As long as there is a person in the Tišnov area who lives alone in a cabin in a wood, making his living by selling hand-made arrows, as long as two Brno girls speak Lacota to one another, much to the dismay of their less advanced white Indian mother, we have no reason to give up hope on the never-ending human desire for variety.

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