

# New Flash Fiction from Mary Doyle: "Triple X"

It's zero-three hundred and I'm yanked out of a sleep so deep I wake thrashing and fighting like a marlin at the end of a hook. It takes me a minute to figure out why. Then the sounds of raw, unrestrained sex slap me further awake.

The anger flashes immediately but I try to reign it in, to give it a minute to dissipate. I'm in such shocked disbelief at what I'm hearing, the offending noise so wrong, I'm hoping someone will come to their senses and the problem will correct itself.

When that doesn't happen I toss and turn. The volume is disastrously high. It bounces around the tents, reverberating throughout this end of the camp. I begin to think they're doing it on purpose.

I lay there, my fury building. Should I?

"Oh my god," a woman a couple of cots down from me mumbles, turns over, slamming a pillow over her head.

That's it. I have no choice. I'm the senior non-commissioned officer in my tent. It's my duty.

I shove my bare feet into my boots, throw on my grey hoodie with the four big letters spelling Army on the front. I stomp over to the tent next door and pound on the flimsy excuse for a door before storming in uninvited, strafing them with my senior-leader glare.



"Turn that shit down. NOW!"

They turn to face me. They are shirtless, in shorts,

sweatpants, t-shirts and flip flops. All of them wear the shock of interruption. One dives and fumbles for the remote.

*Oh yeah. Oh baby. Harder, harder,* and the rhythmic slap of naked skin on skin weakens. The seams of the sharp night air, ripped open by the echoes of the graphic sounds, slip back together across the camp.

They are Scouts, just returned from patrol. Defiant, young boy-men who glower through ancient eyes. They hate me right now, but too bad. They are soldiers. They respond to my authority even though I'm not wearing any rank and my bed hair probably looks horrific.

I take a second to look at each of them, memorizing their faces. Three are huddled over a poncho spread out on the floor, a disassembled SAW laid out where they were cleaning the complicated weapon, piece by piece. Two others are leaning over a bucket, scrub brushes in one hand, their other arms shoved almost elbow deep into mud covered boots. Another one is standing in front of a small mirror hanging from a nail on a post, his bald head covered in shaving cream, a plastic razor in his hand.

Not one of them is sitting in front of the small TV in the corner with the built in VCR.

They follow the lead of the man I assume is their sergeant. Those that aren't already, stand slowly, arms folding behind their backs, going to parade rest, further proof of their submission to my will.

I'm working to keep the anger in my voice now. Exhaustion, physical and emotional, feels like a cartoon anvil on a rope hanging above us, the rope fraying, all of us in danger of being crushed by it. I have no idea what they have done, what they have seen this day.

"I live next door. There are ten women in that tent," I say.

The gruff rebuke sounds genuine to my ears, if a bit forced.

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Keep it down now.”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

I turn my back on them and walk out. My boots feel like bricks as I kick them off and climb back into my rack, deflated. The mumbled ‘*thank yous*’ that drift to me through the anonymous dark don’t lessen the buzzing in my head.

The clock glows zero three twenty. Behind my heavy lids I see them staring at me. Young men flattened by fatigue, with eyes as rusted as the spent casings they’ve left behind in their work.

A guilt dagger in my gut makes me want to curl into a ball, but the metal sides of my cot won’t allow it. I throb with unleashed emotion. Grief? Regret? I don’t know. Whatever it is, it tastes sour.

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## **New Flash Fiction from Mason Boyles: “Parched”**

The hermit lived in the water tower with an alligator, both of them long-gone paler than moon. Their eyes gemmed the same pink in front of a flashlight. The hermit’s skin was scaly with scabs. His gums were too big for his lips to close over them. Some speculated that these traits were adaptive, or contracted; others insisted that the hermit had been born this way. He prompted various fictions of origin. The gator was a carnival prize won with marksmanship or a mallet-strike, some

squinting feat of darts and balloons. The hermit had cast-netted it out of the sound. He'd chipped a golfball into its mother's throat at a fatal angle and salvaged her sudden orphan from the water trap where it marinated. The hermit himself was a fugitive or dead celebrity. His retreat to the water tower was an act of grief, shame, or self-restraint. Lusting after a wrong object, he'd cloistered himself in that tank to confine perverse cravings. Regardless, he was up there: adrift on an inflatable dinghy, pale and long-mouthed and drained. The town coped with their bafflement by containing it in a holiday. The last week of every August the tank's door was unbolted and the mayor laddered up the tower with a mic to conduct an honorary interview. The bank closed at lunch for this. The school declared a half-day. Everyone pooled at the base of the tower to catch the hermit's proclamations crackling over the Shriners' borrowed P.A.



He began with a purpose statement. He called the dark silk, claiming the tank was his cocoon. He explained the discipline of stillness, how he strove toward a torpid and unmuscled state. He enjoyed practicing shadow puppets with the flashlight on breaks. He'd never grown wisdom teeth. His waist size was twenty-eight. He had loved precisely once, like a flood: a drowning, destructive, lung-hogging sensation. He'd cocooned himself in the tank to escape. The love ebbed, but his insides still bore its watermark, a scourged and porous stain of a shade. The hermit siphoned off the haunt of it with his own hand when he had to. He burst blindly into the damp heat of the tank.

Spectacular, said the mayor.

After the hermit's speech the floor was opened for questions. Most of these were procedural. The children wanted to know what the hermit ate. The parents wanted to know how he prayed. Their parents wanted to know if the hermit was coming down

anytime soon so they could decide whether or not to keep putting up with no-starch diets, with catheters and radiation and nostrils chapped from tubed oxygen. They wanted to know what the hermit coming down would signify. Didn't a cocoon imply a transformative exit? Wasn't it an interstitial state? But no one asked why the hermit had gone up there. They kept their questions confined to the ways that he stayed.

One year a bone-old man came around. He'd lurked unnoticed until the Q and A, at which point he raised his cane and—before being called on—began making autobiographical claims. He explained he'd been born here too far back for anyone but the hermit to remember. He'd been drowned and undrowned in that very water tower. He'd basked in the breaths of the man who'd breathed air back into him. He'd inhaled that man's exhale, a gust that silked down his throat and spun a cocoon through his lungs. The man's mouth had crawled into his. He'd wanted to cocoon the man, stow the man, hold him within until his own ribs bulged and broke with jerky ecloses. But he'd been too young. A boy only. He'd left town, but was back now, here to release the long-fluttering thing in his lungs. The bone-old man asked to be taken to the water tower. He claimed there was a kind of mistake that transformed as it aged.

Folks browed their hands over eyes, squinting. Frayed panting came through the P.A. The hermit limbed out to daylight, then, not bone-old but skin-old, his skin too small for his skeleton and sunburning at a visible rate.

"You came," he said. "You came. You came. You came."

The fire chief helped the bone-old man into the bucket of the tiller truck and lifted him up to the tank. The hermit kissed the bone-old man on his scalp, and the bone-old man kissed the hermit's eyes, which now looked less like gems than mussels shelled in his face. The hermit's gums looked like a swallowed animal striving out of his mouth.

“Well,” said the mayor, and climbed down the ladder. The fire chief backed the truck away. The tellers went back to the bank; the children went back to the classrooms, and the principal redacted the half-day. And the hermit helped the bone-old man down the ladder of the tank. They descended without palm fronds, walking off hand-in-hand-upon-cane.

The couple became the barnacle kind of locals. They sat side-by-side in porch rockers and corner booths, sessile, so still and plain-sight that folks went blind to them. Folks got the vague sense of a seal broken when passing them, the exposure of a thing stale from being too-long stashed away. There was the vague sense that holiness had a half-life; that a sacred thing left alone long enough would decay to the profane.

After a time it was posited that the water tower did no favors for the skyline. It was toppled that August, to applause, dissected by a Shriner-operated crane. A desalination plant was constructed in its place. It reverse-osmosed water from the Atlantic, straining off salt through membranes and boweling its product into flexuous tanks. There were those who claimed the tap still tasted salty. No one ever asked what the alligator ate.

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## **New Flash Fiction from Drew Pham: “On Their Lips, the Name of God”**

This is the memory that stays with him as his blood abandons the body and life fades—this, the one comfort that will carry him into the next life. Dawran had waited beneath a mulberry tree in May of last year. He’d come to love mulberries in a

small way—they'd always kept him company through the boredom of waiting. It was still cool in the mornings and evenings, the breeze shaking the branches, dropping the still tart clustered berries. So strange that trees bearing fruit must sacrifice their children to live. How an animal carries that seed away—the length of a kilometer, a province, a nation, to plant and bloom again. In this way, the child's sacrifice meant something. He'd liked that.

He remembers Zafar's simple house. Not more than a small compound with a low wall and one building, one shed. The gate opened, Zafar standing there in the vestibule with his daughter propped on his hip; the dim outline of a woman behind them. A handsome woman and child. Zafar put the girl down, kissed her once on each cheek, on the forehead, and on both cheeks again. He turned to his wife, and the woman smiled. The sight of Zafar's family brought Dawran thoughts of the future, of blooming. At least, that's how he likes to remember it—a smiling wife, a doted-upon child. Things he'd hoped to have one day, but never would.

Zafar took him up to the mountainside, where they could see the whole valley. They took a small bag. Some naan. Dried nuts and fruit. Rice. They had some work to do. Checking vantage points, watching the Americans and the government troops and police, drawing up maps of the improvements the Americans made to their little outpost. These soldiers were tired or lazy or scared, so they rarely ventured out, and the summer that followed was as quiet and peaceful as anyone could hope. Before they began their descent down the mountain, a pair of shepherds came across their path, offered them a little food and tea. They sat in a little basin in the foothills, where soil had accumulated over the years from all the sediment washed down from snow melts. While the flock grazed or huddled together or slept, the men sat around the fire, telling tall tales, reciting couplets of poetry, and resuscitating dead memories. They ate, drank tea, watched the half-disc moon

crawl up the sky, trading places with the sun. The insects in the green valley below sang their song. Torch flies lit the marshy canal beds and mountain streams. A stray dog howled, and Dawran felt himself fortunate for his belly, now full with warm meat and gravy.

He remembers being thankful for Zafar, who'd had always been a patient eater. Methodical. Careful. And Dawran loved watching his mouth take some things whole, tear other things off in small bites, and seeing the thin film of grease form, his lips reflecting a little of all that moonlight. In the dark, his commander's skin seemed more like polished stone than flesh. More than that, he loved listening to Zafar speak. He told a story about a book his father had brought back from Russia, about a giant fish and the mad fisherman who'd pursued it. *We do such insane things for love*, he'd said, tracing the outlines of the mad seaman's obsession. He'd said it was love that'd driven him to madness, that he'd loved hunting the enormous fish, for it was the fish that gave him life, it was the fish that'd given him purpose.

Dawran remembers all the questions he'd had of the strange tale, questions that, when he gazed at Zafar, he knew he already the answers to. He had thought on that while the meal warmed his belly, and the fire drying the sweat from his clothes. Love deriving from purpose comforted him. It meant he could say he loved Zafar, this man who'd given him purpose, given his life meaning. And he'd learn how far that insane love would take him, but he'd stay loyal. He would slaughter a fat landlord with a knife, bomb his countrymen, and in his last living moments, watch his beloved commander flee from the field. He remains, above all things, loyal.

Even with the moon, they'd climbed high enough to not want to risk broken bones on their descent. So they spent the night there, camped with the shepherds around their little fire. They had only one blanket—Zafar's—and Dawran was happy to let him have it, despite the night's still chilly air. But the man

told him not to be foolish, it was common practice for fighters—indeed a common practice among soldiers everywhere—to make spoons of their bodies and nestle close to share heat. He'd assented, curled himself in his commander's embrace, his body like that of an infant in the womb, and listened to Zafar's strong, steady breath, took in his musk-smelling of damp soil and leather and burnt powder—and fell drowsy to the steady metronome of Zafar's heart against his ribs. They slept the whole night through, neither man moving a centimeter from the other. Through every challenge, every moment of doubt, every difficult choice, Dawran remembers this night above all nights. When the rooster woke the morning, Zafar shook Dawran awake. Soon, they heard the muezzin in the valley below singing the call to prayer. The two stood side by side, knelt in unison, their bodies bending as one, and on their lips, the name of God.



Photo by Drew Pham

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## **New Flash Fiction from Elise Ochoa: “Desert Crossing”**

If you've never seen a desert, I mean, a *real* desert, you'd think the sand looks like murky brown water rippling in the wind. Sometimes I would tell myself that, as I traversed the barren land of sand and dunes. I wandered the desert for so long, my face was wrinkled around the eyes from squinting through the sun. My eyebrows were always raised; my forehead had ripples too. Did I see Someone?

On the days a light breeze brushed the sand, I imagined the

dust rising like ocean spray after a wave. But then my tired feet would burn with the heat, and I'd have to keep trudging. Occasionally there would be people: tourists, scientists, gypsies. They'd pass me water. I'd take it without a smile. I always left them with my lips as dry and cracked as they were before. I never got hopeful when I crossed these types. They weren't you.

✘ My lips were waiting for you. My lips were waiting for your cool, sweet dew. When my heart began to tell me you were near, I would go whole hours sitting in the sand, just daydreaming of you. I twirled my long, knotted hair around my fingers. I cradled piles of sand in the form of you. Those days, it was even harder to set out across the barren land than during the hottest sun-drenched days.

My heart told me you were coming. And my heart found me the oasis. It told me where the palms were. It told me where the underground spring was bubbling up. When I found the tall green palms and the low green shrubs, my hunchback straightened. I no longer needed to bow against the wind. I stood tall; my eyes widened.

Tangled among the shrubs were myriad silks, pillows, jewels. I untangled the silks, polished the jewels, scrubbed the pillows until they shone as bright as my eyes. I worked day and night, drinking from the natural spring, energized, building for you. I grew dates and pomegranates and juicy melons. No longer skin and bones, I had hips for you to grab from behind and caress.

I saw you coming from many dunes away. I knew your heart was leading you to the oasis, to me. It was a windless day. The air was clear. I saw your strong shoulders first, then your long legs, then your touseled hair. Details came slowly. I bathed in them all.

Soon, you weren't just a shadow. You were a man. A man with scruff. Thirsty, like I once was. But, unlike me, you were

confident. Lost, but not *lost*.

As you approached, your thin sandals kicked up the sand behind you. I stood at the entrance of the palms, with lavender silks, gold cushions, white melons surrounding my beautiful silhouette. With my elbows at my sides and my palms up, I opened myself to you with a smile.

You squinted in my direction. You coughed, dry, short. My smile faltered slightly. You wiped your forehead with the crook of a glistening arm. My heart fluttered. I ran for the fresh spring water. I ran toward you with the water. Like gold, I offered it.

But, like the heat, I must have wavered in your eyes. A fiction.

You blinked me away. Just a dune.

Your form grew smaller and smaller to my eyes. They bleared until you disappeared. Invisible, I cowered like Romeo, slowly dying at the feet of your not-coffin.

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# **New Fiction: Three Flash Fiction Pieces from William Alton**

## **Three Pieces of Flash Fiction**

### **1. Things That Stood Out**

There was a boy in IZARD. A brave boy. Everyone knew him. Ricky Dunkle. The Dunkles were quiet people. They lived across

from the school in a little blue house. The kind of blue house that made people shake their heads and mutter. Mrs. Dunkle raised sunflowers. They rose tall and spindly. They grew in knots throughout the yard. Mrs. Dunkle loved her sunflowers. She walked amongst them every day, caressing the petals, smelling them. She lifted their faces to her own, kissing their dark centers. Mrs. Dunkle always wore the same housecoat. A ratty, purple and orange thing. She wore slippers. Even in the yard. Even in the rain. Sometimes, she talked to herself.

Her husband worked out at the water treatment plant. A gnomish man, he stopped at the Squirrel's Hole every night and got the same thing. A burger for Ricky. Fish and Chips for Mrs. Dunkle. Mrs. Dunkle didn't cook. At night, he sat in his backyard with a telescope looking for things in the sky. Stars. Planets. Meteors rushing toward us. They were an off bunch, the Dunkles. People talked. That's what people in IZARD did. They talked. But they talked sideways.

Every morning, Ricky walked from his folks' house to work. He owned the Dragons' Stop. A pool hall on the corner opposite the Post Office. The Dragons' Stop was a place for people to go. It was loud and dark and filled with cigarette smoke. Sometimes, on the weekends, they had dances. It was the hangout for high school kids and people who didn't go to the bars. It was also where folks went to get weed and pills.

Ricky wore purple boots and black, satin pants tight as a condom. He wore pink rodeo shirts and a belt buckle the size of a salad plate. He dressed like an Easter egg. Black hair rose in a wave from a wide forehead. Rhinestones glittered from his fingers and collar.



People like Ricky Dunkle didn't fit in places like IZARD. In IZARD, people liked things simple and quiet. Things that stood

out stood out. In Izard, everything had a place. Not Ricky Dunkle. Ricky Dunkle made his own place. He knew people. Men who wore leather and rode Harleys. Men who carried guns and knives and a history of using them. Not that it mattered. Ricky was braver than all of us.

“Look at him,” Uncle Mike said. “Asking for trouble.”

“He’s helpless,” Mom said. If I could have, I would have turned to ash. I would have crumbled and disappeared.

“I saw him at the school the other say,” Uncle Mike said.

“What’re you afraid of?”

“Afraid?”

I went to my room. I closed the door and hid. Silent. Ashamed. They talked through the walls. Their glasses clinked against their teeth. I was the faggot in the corner wishing I had the guts to wear purple boots.

## **2. Civilized Behavior**

In my family, we killed things. We hunted and trapped. Fathers taught sons and sons taught their sons. The women waited at home, preparing for the slaughter. They knew how to cut the carcasses into pleasing pieces. They knew how to wrap the meat in white paper and how to stack it just right in the freezer, oldest on top. In my family, killing was providing. Men provided. Women prepared and preserved. I was not yet ten but Grandpa was determined. “A man,” he said. “A man does what’s necessary.”

It seems spilling blood was necessary.

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We lived in the crotch of a small valley. All around fields and pastures. Barns and sheds. An old outhouse slumped in the backyard, unused and emptied. Chickens searched for seeds. At the edge of things, a forest rose and scratched at the sky, a mix of oak and hemlock, spruce, pine and fir. Brambles lined the floor. Mast softened it all. The woods were always wet, except in the final weeks of summer when the sun shined hard enough and long enough to pull the moisture from the thick soil.

Grandpa and the uncles carried flashlights and they kept the beams on the ground. A narrow path cut through the meadow. Dew painted the weedy pasture a bit silver in the moonlight. Goody, the milk cow, lay in a patch of tall grass slowly chewing her cud.

The path ran rough and knotted under ancient limbs. I stumbled but didn't fall. Grandpa was a massive shadow in the dim morning. I was cold and tired. But I was scared too. Grandpa had something in mind and he didn't like questions.

We walked without words. We found the first trap. Empty. And the second. It held a raccoon. Grandpa shot it with his revolver. He skinned the carcass, gutted it and cut its head off. We moved the trap down the trail.

"This," Grandpa said. "This is how we live."

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I learned young how to cope with violence, or the promise of violence. I was a small kid, scrawny and lean. I was often a target. People seemed to think I wouldn't fight back. "If you're going to fight," Mom said, "fight dirty. If you're going to fight, make sure someone goes to the hospital."

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Becket Smite was a square headed boy and mean. Tall and thin,

his eyes sat too far apart and his lips were thin as worms. His big hands made big fists. Everyone was afraid. I was afraid. He came to me in the lunch line. He came and cut between me and Lotti. Mostly, at school, no one bothered me. I was a Neel. But Becket liked a challenge.

“Are you tough?” he asked.

“What?”

“Do you think you can take me?”

He put his hand in the center of my chest and pinned me to the wall. I told him to stop. My voice was stronger than I felt.

“Or what?”

“Just go away.”

Becket smiled.

“You sound tough,” he said. “Are you tough?”

I grabbed his wrist. He looked at me. This was it. This was how it was going to work. This was a fight I wasn't going to get out of. I swallowed. I swung the lunch tray. The crack was too loud. His nose broke. Becket dropped and howled. Blood. Things got thin and sharp. He held his face. But then got up and it was on. We punched and kicked. I lost track of my fingers. I lost track of everything.

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Mr. Sawyer lectured us on civilized behavior. He called our folks. Mom came. Tired and bent. Unhappy. Days were her nights. She asked if I was hurt.

“I'm fine.”

“Is he?”

I remembered the crunch of bone and the blood. The whole thing left me sour and tangled. "I hope so."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Good."

That's how it worked in my family. Violence and regret. Shame kept just under the skin.

### **3. Back Then and Back There**

There was this girl. Back when I was a kid. Rudeen. Only, no one called her Rudeen. Except her mom. We called her Ding Ding. Silly but back then and back there, silliness wasn't always silly. Ding Ding lived across the road. Her people's land bordered mine. Somewhere back in time, we were cousins. Generations removed. One of her greats married one of mine.

She was in my class at school. A pretty girl. Blond and small. She painted her nails blue and gold. Boys fluttered about her like crows. They flapped about and brought her shiny things. Bright things. They told her jokes that fell like stones to the floor and rolled about but she smiled because she was a good girl and, back then, back there, good girls smiled when boys told them jokes.

Terry Shaw, with his high and tight haircut and quarterback hands, knew how to talk to her. He knew how to get her to look at him. Terry Shaw sat with her every day at lunch. He lived in town. His dad was a banker or something. They were perfect. I hated him. I was a poor boy in hand me downs and re-soled boots. I was skinny, long haired and shy. I was not like the others. I preferred books to people. I preferred the library to the football field.

We had a deal. Back then and back there, good girls didn't walk alone in public. Ding Ding was a good girl. Her mom talked to my mom. Because I was a good boy and back then, back there, good boys did what their moms said, I walked Ding Ding to and from the bus stop. A mile. Maybe a little more. It was faster to cut through the fields, but there were snakes in the fields and gophers and traps. If you knew what you were doing, the fields were safe but our moms didn't like the fields and back then, back there, we didn't do things our moms didn't like.

But there were rules. We didn't talk. Ding Ding only talked to boys like Terry Shaw. We focused on walking. After school, we had chores and then there was dinner and then there was homework. She walked ahead of me, all pretty and bright in the sunlight. The road stretched on and on. Dirty and rutted. I counted my steps. One hundred. Two hundred. Three.

At our driveway, I stopped and watched her walk to the twin willows marking hers. She took her time. Ding Ding's home was loud sometimes. Her dad was known for meanness and drink. Saturday nights, he sat in the bar with my grandpa. They told stories and bought each other whiskeys. They stayed up too late and slept through Sunday mornings. She stopped that day, under the willows. She looked at me and nodded. Ding Ding never looked at me. She never nodded. I was a shadow. I followed her around but I didn't mean anything. We weren't friends. I stood there until I heard her screen door slam.

Later, when the sheriff came with the fire trucks and the county ambulance, no one knew what was what. People ran here and there. Mom stood on the porch with Grandma. Grandpa came from across the way in his jeans and sweat stained undershirt, one arm around Ding Ding. She wore a thin, green blanket. "Gas," he said. "Pilot light." Back then and back there, some folks cooked with gas. Sometimes, the pilot light went out. Sometimes, gas filled the house. Sometimes, people died.

The funeral was long and solemn. Mom made me wear a suit and tie. She made me polish my shoes and wear socks. Pastor talked about valleys of death and shepherds. Ding Ding wore a black dress and black sneakers. She sat up front with her grandparents. Stone faced and pale. No tears though. Back then and back there, crying in public just wasn't done. Later, they shook hands and they tried to eat with rest of us. They thanked everyone face to face. I sat with Ding Ding for a bit. There were no words. We were thirteen. Back then and back there, we knew about death. We hunted and we raised our meat. But this was new. This was something all together different.

Her grandma came, a big woman with big hips and too many chins. "Rudeen," she said. "It's time." I blinked up at her. Rudeen? It seemed right. Yesterday, Ding Ding. Today, Rudeen. We knew when to leave things behind.

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## Flash Fiction from Amanda Fields: "Buffalo"



In Badlands National Park...American Bison (Bison bison)

When I was a child, and my father had just begun to be noticeably strange, my mother took me to the zoo. It was July, and hot. The lions were thin, their manes as brittle as straw. Monkeys tumbled in a canopy of ropes, pausing to pick at each other's hair. They ignored us. The parakeets seemed lifeless, tucked into layered bark. After hours of this, our wrapped sandwiches eaten, our feet sore, my mother suggested that we

leave.

“Please, can we stay?” I scuffed my thick shoes on the walkway to slow her down.

Her dress seemed too loose in the cooling wind. “The crickets are tuning up,” she said. Strands of hair dropped on her cheeks.

“Just one more thing, then,” I begged. I was thinking of the meerkats in their artificial desert, a painted sky behind them. I wanted to see them one more time. A sentry always stood at attention on its hind legs, making sure no harm came to the rest.

“The buffalo,” my mother said, touching her rounded stomach.

As we crossed a little bridge over an expanse of land, my mother gave me a nickel, and I slipped it into a metal stand that resembled a parking meter. A pair of enormous binoculars perched on the stand, the lenses opaque without the click of the coin and the tick of the meter. I strained up and felt the crick-crack of my corrective shoes, the ones my parents made me wear so that I wouldn't walk pigeon-toed.

The lenses blurred until I moved my eyes into just the right place. Then the view through the slits became clear. There were the mighty buffalo, grazing in what appeared to be deadened grasses – what at the time I thought of as prairie, not understanding that the prairie didn't exist anymore.

I squinted one eye, then the other, watching the buffaloes' fluffy bent heads in the stalks. Despite the binoculars, the buffalo were distant, as unrealistic as moon craters in a telescope. The sun warming my back seemed a closer friend.

“See the buffalo?” my mother whispered. “They don't belong here.”

I pulled away from the binoculars and blinked. My mother wiped

at the sweat beneath her nose then gripped the railing. I heard the tick-tick and put my eyes back.

But I didn't get a good look before the minute was spent and my mother held out a white-gloved hand, her forefinger smeared a light pink where it had run against her upper lip.

I twitched my face to indicate that I might cry, turning my left foot inward.

"No more nickels," she said, glancing at my toes. "No more time."