

Buffalo

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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.”