Scattered Bones [1]

May 20, 2015 Flash Nonfiction [2]
Nature [3]

Flash Nonfiction by Jeri Edwards

Black Canyon of the Yellowstone, Wyoming, May 11



There's no saving him, with his limp induced by the drag of a useless back leg.

We watch on the opposite bank of Cottonwood Creek, the way this thousand-pound bison pushes to distance himself from us, an annoyance he doesn't need. We know he knows that, save for a handful of sunrises, he'll be sustenance for a grizzly or wolf.

But we don't feel a need to save him, give him crutches, airlift him out of the mud. For what? To be like us, surrounded

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with plastic swimming pools and goldfish in six-inch glass bowls? Instead, let this magnificent beast, adorned with a massive shoulder hump and shagged wooly mane, lay down his head where shooting stars erupt from snow-edged meadows—or, if he can make it that far, south along the banks of Hellroaring Creek.

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We adjust our packs and carry on, as bald eagles soar under gray skies. Our destination: the 1Y1 backcountry camp on a broad strand of the Yellowstone River. Along the high-ridged trail, we witness vestiges of winter's war: bloated bison contorted between mammoth boulders, elk hides long pulled from their skeletons, a cavity of rancid meat. Could we, would we, if we were starving, carve from it?

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The tumble of the Yellowstone far below us, the dips and swales of every turn, at every rest—the discovery of chalky white bones, scattered, like dreams we once had.

After ten miles, we reach the 1Y1, the river song full in our ears. Light snow dusts the tarp we huddle and eat beneath. Our conversation turns to encounters on the trail. How was that bison injured? How long do you think he'll survive? How do newborn calves, so wobbly legged, keep up with their mothers? Where was that lone wolf trotting off to on the plateau above? Were unseen members of his pack watching us?

Before dark encloses our tents, before hail staccatos our sleep, we kneel beside a perfect print of a mountain lion on the sandy bar. By dawn, every trace has vanished on the rain-soaked slope.

One of us points down at a pocket of shallow current: A thigh bone of a small deer shifts in the ripple.

Art Information

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Jeri Edwards is a writer and a pastel/mixed-media illustrator who grew up in Virginia with a couple of acres of woods as her backyard. She now divides her time between the Santa Monica Mountains in Southern California and Northern Arizona. She's passionate about the never-ending discovery of the ways we're connected to everything in nature and remains a steadfast conservation advocate.

She's been published in journals such as *Quiddity*, *Yalobusha Review*, *Portland Review*, *Worcester Review*, *Lumina*, and *Westwind*.

Jeri took this hike in Yellowstone National Park in 2008. She says it brought to mind a line by Wallace Stegner in "Child of the Far Frontier," his 1962 essay:

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> [T]he history of one’s truly native place may be comprehended in the bone and the blood.

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