

# Bison

*by* Pia Ehrhardt

During the week, while my father stayed in his study and wrote music, my mother argued with my sister and me about homework, our short skirts and raggedy jeans, about how we were too young to go to mixed parties. We weren't too young, we insisted, veins popping in our necks, but we couldn't raise our voices. Ten-round heavyweight bouts were going on in the kitchen for those four years of high school and my father barely heard a peep.

If my mother needed him for something, she stood outside his door and knocked, said, "Can you stop for a moment?" He'd quit what he was doing, come out to talk, and then he'd go back in his study, frustrated, like she'd made him break a vow.

To make extra money, my father wrote music reviews for the Calgary Herald, and on Saturday nights, he went to hear the Symphony, or into recital halls to listen to the chamber music that was being performed around the city. He took me, once, to a performance of Mahler's Second Symphony because my mother didn't want to go. He dressed in a tuxedo and cummerbund, and I wore a black velvet dress, nude stockings and Capezios. I imagined every first date would feel like this one, a man at my side, our arms touching, a shared interest in music, and then Coke floats after to compare thoughts.

During the second movement, he put his head in his hand and tried to hide a sob. I'd never seen him cry, and I didn't understand what had happened to make him feel so much, but I was grateful to be part of something so private, to be there instead of my mother. After the concert, I wanted to ask him how music could do that, but he told me to follow him and rushed backstage, where he left me standing alone. I struck up a conversation with an old lady and her husband. I proudly explained who my father was so I wouldn't look

deserted. It's taken me a long time to break this habit and not feel like there's a neon sign over my head when I'm standing by myself. The sign isn't gone, but it's smaller and hand-lettered.

On Sundays my father would sleep late and then come downstairs, car keys in hand, and invite my mom and my sister and me to drive with him out into the Canadian prairie. We'd leave Calgary in the late morning and cruise up into the Rocky Mountains, stopping at bison paddocks on the way. The beasts didn't pay much attention to the cars that filed through. There was plenty of room, a million acres of low grass to roam and nibble. If there were bison close to the fence, my father would stop and park so my mother could take a photo of us standing next to them. I worried that one might rampage like a Spanish bull and plow us down for making a zoo out of them.

On the drive home, we'd do what my mother wanted, and stop at the junkyard on the Blackfoot reservation, outside of Calgary, where she'd scrounge for an old lamp, or milky green Depression glass. My father would work out a price with the Indian man, and my mother would carry the treasure in her lap.

My father has always been proud to say that he never changed a diaper, but from the minute we could sit up, he'd throw us in the car and take us for drives. When we got to be teenagers, my sister and I had other plans on Sunday, but we didn't want to disappoint him. He was giving us a slice of his time, and as a bonus: mountainous views and bison out our windows, roadside finds, Coke floats and rice pudding for everyone at the truck stop on the way home.

I was a latecomer to what a relief it could be to love other men. What I know now is that we were his portable audience, but all the applause in the world was not going to bring him out of his study. His recalcitrance kept me hungry, and I didn't want to miss a chance with him. I didn't want to leave my father alone, backstage, while I walked away to fuck and get on with my own business, so I didn't.

When we went away to college, my sister and I asked my mother for the junkyard pieces to fill up our small apartments, but she said taking the things out of the house would leave holes. Now that my

parents are divorced she wants to give us the lamps and glass, and we have no room for them.

There is a bison tusk, though, that I took, and I keep it on my desk. My mother had spotted it close to the fence and she'd climbed over to get it, giggling, while my father kept an eye out for the park rangers. She kept it on her dresser until he married another woman. I think it reminded her too clearly of Sunday drives through the paddocks, and the bison who let us watch them live. Or maybe I'm speaking for myself.

