



Be Still

Life in Yellowstone is raw and real.

By Sandy Seaton Sallee



SHHH...

I love floating through the trees, every footfall silent. Don't brush a branch, don't step on a twig, and don't break the hush.

I grew up in Yellowstone Park in the old mail carrier's log cabin, used a century and a half ago as a base to deliver letters and packages. The snow blew through the cracks in the logs as the oil heater belched smoke downstairs. Bison rubbed their winter hair on the rough logs, and curious elk calves watched their reflections in our windows. Tourists often wandered in, as the old sagging home used to be a snack shack at one time. Our mom was the vice president of marketing and sales for the Yellowstone Park Company Concessionaire, and that was the only place to house a single woman and her three kids. The town watched out for us.

*Bull elk screaming, clashing, trashing, fights
Cow elk grazing, 'neath Mammoth lights
Coyotes prowling, looking for a meal
Life in Yellowstone, raw and it's real.*

My sister Sue and I would ride our bikes to school in Gardiner nearly every morning, or sometimes walk down by the beaver dams where a protective wolverine once charged and challenged us. We would pick up brown elk horns and smell the sweet sagebrush clinging to the blood of the base. I would walk the draws, feeling, inhaling, and breathing elk scent. I knew someday I would hunt elk.

*The ivory tips of chocolate horns shimmer and they shine
The herd bull saunters softly through the pines
Walking so deliberately with antlers high and wide
He holds his massive head cocked easy to one side.*

QUIET...

Something is walking in the woods above me. A branch snaps, and a squirrel rattles at the movement. Birds squawk above me. I stand arrested, one foot still in the air. I slowly turn my head and try hard to assimilate the sound. Suddenly, a sow grizzly with last year's cub comes into view. I scarcely breathe. She sniffs the air, swings her head. The cub keeps wandering past, 100 yards away. The sow stands and stares towards the bush that is my scant cover. I am careful to look at the ground in case she feels me watching her. I have learned with dogs and horses not to engage or challenge with eye contact. I feel myself melting into the earth. The sow drops down, takes one last hard look, and ambles on her way.



*The grizzly shares my country, hones my town-dulled senses
I walk with her on mountainside, away from city fences
I love the edge of danger felt, I race from the mundane
Edging reflex, quickened pulse, the rush runs through my brain.*

I wander down a long timbered draw pulsing with birds, antelope, and bugs. A frog startles me when he jumps from the mud beneath my feet. A red-tailed hawk squeals overhead. I hear thunder, but it's not in the azure sky. A hundred yards below, 20 or more huge lumbering dark animals flurry past in a rolling mass of horns and hair. Bison. I sit on a hot lichen-covered rock, surveying miles and miles and miles and

miles of human solitude. I am replete with the sun and God and my thoughts.

*The bison we call buffalo are ancient and they're wise
They lived on open plains for years beneath the eastern skies
But we have pushed them off the cliffs and to the mountain trail
And through the dust we may hear a forgotten native wail....*



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HUSH...

I wintered horses for neighboring ranchers and made friends with local cowboys. If I could beg or borrow a ride on a horse after school or ride to the mountains with friends, I was in heaven. My mom wouldn't let me carry a gun in my wanderings through the Gallatin National Forest Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness Area just north of Yellowstone. I found that my old beat-up Hohner Chromatic Harmonica was a fine bear deterrent. What did a crusty old grizzly minding his own business think when some speck in the distance would hit a screeching high "G" note? Nonetheless, they honored my harmonica and me and I honored the bears. One time I decided I wanted to be the first to break trail into a remote hunting camp. I wanted to spend the night, but the dark and me are not friends. I headed back at dusk and saw a grizzly loping across the top of the divide. I'm sure he had other things on his mind besides a 16-year-old girl on an old horse, but in my active teenaged mind he was headed right for me. No time to blow a high note! I took off galloping down the switchbacks. Unfortunately, I forgot a low-hanging branch. When I awakened, I was standing in the creek leaning on my horse with only a pad on his back. My saddle was on the creek bank, with the latigo and cinch hanging. I had a large knot on my head and a big purple-colored eye. My mom was a business whiz who always wore a dress with matching heels and perfect makeup her whole life. She was mystified by my recklessness and love of the natural world.

*The smell of a wet saddle pad, my fingers twined in mane
The drumming on a canvas tent of huge big drops of rain
The mountain air, a crispy morn, the moon hung in night sky
These things that make me whole and will until the day I die.*

(Continued)



LISTEN...

It always comes back to the elk. The mewing of the cows as their babies frolic in summer is indescribably sweet. The harsh bark of danger. The spine-tingling shattering screams of a bull challenging an interloper. The thin-pitched whistle of a younger bull trying to sneak past and find a willing cow. Far away, I can tell if it's a light-colored bull, even though his antlers have tumbled off. I blend and feel where I would go if I felt horns heavy on my head. A cool dark game trail leads to an open meadow with one six-point antler resting under a huge pine. I become the elk, cocking my head sideways and feeling the unease of one huge weight dangling off the side. I trot down over the hill and survey the next meadow. The draw to the right calls me with some smaller pines and sage. I smell elk. I nearly trip over the mate—a clear match, but with a broken tine. I imagine the astounding fight the big bull had with another monarch in the wilderness while his antlers still may have had some velvety softness from new growth. The fear, agony, triumph, and wild power of bull elk fighting is an awe-inspiring ancient rite.

*The smell of elk is pungent, musk of old
The smell of elk is subtle in the aspens tinged with gold
The smell of elk is carried on the winds of Yellowstone
When I breathe the smell of elk I know I'm not alone.*

STILL...

Hunting elk antlers taught me how to hunt elk. I feel the elk in my heart. I have found them in every season. They are bugling in the high mountains in early fall, migrating to the lower meadows with less snowfall in winter. In spring the calves are born and occasional spikes live with the cows and their spotted babes. Summertime they move to

high elevation again to fight flies and get the most succulent grass. We also live the seasons on the land, and I want to be true to the land and the harvest. I have hunted elk horns hidden in the earth, but I hunt the elk that bear them for their natural lean beautiful red meat. It's a conundrum to hunt the animals you admire and respect. My dream hunt is one shot, one loud burst in the quiet, and one elk to sustain my body as well as my heart and soul.

*I love to see a cloven hoof depart a grassy bed
I love to see a buckskin bull with brown horns on his head
Migrating cows in drifting herds mewing soft and low
Velvet calves with spotted rumps surging with the flow.*

I hear a distant elk bugling, then resounding silence. A big bull will often rock the mountains with a raucous call from his belly, but younger bulls sound more thin and reedy. I loved the provocation of calling elk as I was growing up in Yellowstone when the golden leaves fell from the shimmering aspen trees in late September. This bull was confident but not too aggressive, so I imitated a young bull and bugled back deep within my throat. The bull heard the challenge and came closer, screaming at me to leave. I answered, and threw in a couple of soft cow calls for good measure to let him know this young interloper



had some sort of a harem with him. Enraged, he came closer and closer, until I finally stood behind a lodgepole pine so he wouldn't discover I was a total imposter. I believe the most bone-chilling thrilling sound in nature is a bull elk trumpeting his triumph and challenge. When a bull tosses his beautiful brown antlers over his golden back and his mouth is wide and dripping saliva, it's indelibly seared upon your heart. My .270 barked and he drifted back into the earth from where he came.

*I pray before I pack a gun, I pray that I shoot straight
I pray to be forgiven when I choose his final fate
I close his eyes and touch his hair and give thanks for this life
I close my eyes and wipe a tear. Then I pick up my knife. ■*

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