

The Highlight of Bessie's Life
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This piece is from a Writer's Workshop Exercise on August 8, 2021. We had about ten minutes to write after being shown a newspaper clipping with a photo of Bessie. This is what I wrote in my journal:

Bessie, an African cape buffalo, lived at the Prospect Park Zoo in Brooklyn for 32 years. Write about the highlight of Bessie's life.

What could possibly be the highlight of the life of any animal confined to a cage in a zoo? Bessie was probably contained in a small yard with a stable to keep her hay dry and a place to lie down. She must have had a mud hole to wallow in, so I'd have to say the highlight of Bessie's life would be the spring thaw when her mud hole sprang back to life and gave her the first wallow of the year. Bessie counted time by the seasons, with the spring thaw marking her New Year's Day and each new spring adding another year to her life.

Bessie didn't think she was supposed to live this long, but then again, she didn't think the place she lived was actually where she belonged. Sometimes in her dreams she was running long distances over low rolling hills and fields of blooming grass. There was something tender and delicious about these dreams, especially when she woke to the scent of fresh grain in her trough and fresh water in her bucket.

They did take good care of her, these strange two-legged creatures who seemed to enjoy hosing Bessie down after she had her first good wallow. The water would not be as cold next time, nor the mud so crystalline prickly, the frost giving her hide a good massage. Next time it would be warmer and then warmer still, until the two-leggeds had to fill Bessie's mud hole with water from the hose to keep her happy.

Not until next year at thaw would the annual New Year's wallow be as delicious as it was today, the highlight of her year until her final spring wallow was her last and surely the highlight of her life.