Dancing with Honey Paws

A Journey with Bears

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"When we moved into cities we forgot the traditional stories of the bear. But as an archetypal figure underlying the forms of culture, it persists in our dreams and imagination as though some tracks were pressed into the human nervous system during the ice ages, leaving in our innermost natures a kind of preconscious expectation that Ursus' shaggy presence will give insight into human problems."

Paul Shepard
The Others: How Animals Made Us Human

"Perhaps the impulse is the same, whether we invite the bear to share our food or our folklore: the urge to be reunited with something lost and treasured, seen in the animal that most resembles us. It is almost as though in him we can see how great is our loss of contact with ourselves. Perhaps the bear can still serve as a pilot and messenger."

Paul Shepard and Barry Sanders
The Sacred Paw: The Bear in Nature, Myth, and Literature

You are what you wear. So I hoped in visiting a taxidermist for the first time and buying a fresh bear skin prepared as a rug. Many people who aren't hunters may be offended by taxidermy. I, myself, wouldn't have come if not for the belief that my journey with bears had brought me to a new threshhold, a realm where the spirits are free to do the impossible. I wanted to know more of the bear that I had learned from fleeting encounters in the woods. I wanted to feel his skin covering my skin, his paws protecting my hands.

With a blow drier the taxidermist chased the last flecks of sawdust from my bear rug's ears. Shot in the Adirondacks in the fall after growing his winter fur, my bear had been skinned and sold to a broker, who had froze the skin and shipped it by UPS to my taxidermist in the Catskills. The taxidermist had tanned the skin into leather, then dropped this stiff leather hide into a large tumbler with other skins to be slowly beaten into a soft rug. Sawdust in the tumbler acted like a detergent removing dirt from the fur. Afterwards, he stretched the skin, patched some fur onto an old arrow scar on the rump, slipped the face over a polyurethane skull, and glued the plastic jaw set with clean teeth and a meaty pink tongue between the bear's fine black lips. The mouth looked so real the tongue seemed wet.

An animal tracker I knew didn't approve of the plastic jaw sets with bared fangs because they made bears appear mean and intimidating. In the wild, bears spend much more time neatly plucking berries off bushes with their flexible lips than they do growling at prey. But the taxidermist had warned me that a bear rug with a closed mouth looked like it hardly had any head at all. And he was right. The pink tongue and canine fangs made me focus on the face: the spongy black nose, the thin brown fur along the snout, the low forehead, and the tiny eyes. In fact, I was startled by the smallness of the dull eyes. Spread far apart at the base of the thick snout, they seemed like afterthoughts poked into pinkie depressions in the fur. "That's right," the taxidermist said. "I'll use 14 to 16 millimeter eyes for bears. A deer takes 27 to 28 millimeters."

According to popular lore, bears can track scents better than bloodhounds, but see so poorly, they'd need to sit in the front row at the movies.

The taxidermist ruffled and smoothed the fur with his hands to show me the thickness and resiliency of the winter coat. "You can vacuum it," he said. "Use the drapery attachment. It's not like a deer hide. Bear hides are tough." But he told me not to lay it on the floor as a rug. Nor did he like my idea of draping it over my bed as a comforter. The ears were the problem. To me, they felt as stiff and sturdy as wooden serving spoons inside their short thick fur, but he warned me that someone could accidentally kick and break them. Instead, the best way to display the bear was to mount it downwards on the wall with finishing nails hammered through the four paws and hidden by the fur. A small shelf built under the chin would raise the head to gaze out upon the room. I took notes on this advice. But I had a better idea. I planned to wear my new bear hide. I wanted to inhabit my totem animal.

On the eve of moving into my log cabin in the Catskills several years earlier, I had attended a workshop in the mountains with an art teacher who had developed his own rituals for connecting with nature. After hiking into the woods, we found a secluded flat by a stream, then gathered strong branches that we piled over a sharply bent tree trunk for a wooden igloo we called an Earth Womb. We wove hemlock boughs between the branches for feathery green shingles and tossed golden brown beech leaves onto the hut for natural glitter. After laying a tarp on the ground, our teacher sat in the middle of our circle with a carved wooden loon in his lap. He half-consciously rubbed the varnished wood like a genie's bottle and explained his identity as the Night Loon.

Having grown up poor but happy in the mountains, he loved the Adirondacks, where he camped and canoed, learned such crafts as pack basket weaving, and showed his drawings in several galleries. Thinking of himself as the Night Loon reminded him of the north country during the school year when he taught in the Hudson Valley. The bird also represented his wild soul. To him, the yodeling and yet haunting loon calls sounded like human laughter just as easily as human sobbing, expressing the thin barrier in his own life between joy and sorrow. In the bird's bold colors he had also found potent symbols: the red eyes representing warmth and enlightenment, the yellow feet innocence and childhood, the white stripes wisdom and death, and the black head night and introspection. He had decoded the loon in a way that contained his philosophy of life, and yet he still found enough mystery in this wild animal to keep searching for more meaning. He placed the carving on the tarp and told us to spend half-an-hour alone in the forest to choose our new names.

I sat beside a brook where shallow water tumbled down slate rocks reminiscent of the ruined staircase of an old castle. By the top of the stairs, an hemlock trunk held onto the eroded embankment with the tenacity of octopus roots. A morning mist had lifted from the trees into the gray sky. In a moment I decided. My natural identity had already announced itself the previous evening, as I drive from my Manhattan apartment to the Catskills. By attending this workshop, I was skipping a party on the Upper West Side held in celebration of spring. The hosts had invited guests to bring

spring poems, so I mailed one along with my regrets. Inspired by roaming through a downtown farmer's market, I had written:

> The Pussy Willow Speaks
> This spring will be the death of me
> when the Manhattan vans
> park by our swamp,
> and the murderous florists
> harvest us like wheat.
> Later they sell us
> almost as cheap.
> City dwellers
> desperate for branches
> put us in the most prominent places.
> I hope to stand
> in a black Chinese vase
> with mighty emerald warriors
> slaying the dragon that has the ruby tongue;
> unless that bitch,
> Forsythia,
> beats me to it.

But on the night highway, tuned to an alternative rock station from Woodstock, I no longer wanted to be a pussy willow. For miles, I languished in a daydream in which I performed an entirely different poem for the spring party. With the apartment lights dimmed to a reddish nightclub glow, and a backup band playing melodic rock like the Woodstock radio, I marched up to the microphone cloaked in a sweeping bear hide, my head hidden behind an open snout of ivory teeth, my chest rubbed brown with earth. Before the rapt crowd, I recited my epic poem about this bear's life in the Catskills, a story beginning with boundless appetites and casual strengths, climaxing with the ruthless but respectful hunt, and finishing with death and resurrection. Rather than urbane wit and irony, I would write with the lyric animism of Gary Snyder or Galway Kinnell, whose own poem, "The Bear," begins with bear breath rising like steam from a hibernation den under the snow, proceeds through a mystical seven day hunt, and concludes with the narrator hunter wrapped himself in the bear skin against the wind and reliving the animal's experience of dying:

...and now the breeze
blows over me, blows off
the hideous belches of ill-digested bear blood
and rotted stomach
and the ordinary, wretched odor of bear,
blows across
my sore, lolled tongue a song
or screech, until I think I must rise up
and dance. And I lie still.

On the highway, I enjoyed this daydream past several exits, replaying and refining the performance in my imagination before an audience hypnotized by my wild invention. But finally I dismissed it as an idle rock-and-roll fantasy, a reminder of those long, yearning hours in my teenage bedroom when I played air guitar for the Rolling Stones. Sitting beside the stream, however, I knew my daydream had been as meaningful as a night dream. I wanted to shed my urban life as a trimmed and bitchy pussy willow. I wanted to be a bear.

Our workshop regrouped and crawled into the Earth Womb filled with speckled light from between the hemlock boughs. On our hands and knees we bumped awkwardly, than choose spots to sit cross legged on the ground, and shifted our spines away from the hardest branches arched behind our backs. Our teacher passed around bags filled with clown paints and told us to cover each other's faces with out new identities. I painted a young woman as a wolf with a black face, green eyes, and a full white moon on her forehead. She confided her wish to visit Canada in the coming summer and hear wolves howl at night. To her, these animals represented strength, loyalty, playfulness, and devoted motherhood.

She painted my face brown, the color surprisingly cool under her fingers. With the group, we crawled out of the Earth Womb in a symbolic rebirthing into our new animal spirit guides. A passer-by might have mistaken our colorful faces for a Halloween Party. And we laughed at ourselves, including our teacher, who looked as much like a skunk as a Night Loon. But I knew I had done something more profound than playing with clown paint. What I didn't yet appreciate was that I had participated in a modern version of a ritual perhaps as old as human spirituality itself, a ritual of death and rebirth inspired by the hibernation of bears.

Unwittingly, I had daydreamed my way into one of the most powerful archetypes in human history. "The bear has for thousands of years been the master of souls, bodies, and minds in transition," wrote Paul Shepard and Barry Sanders in *The Sacred Paw: The Bear in Nature, Myth, and Literature.* "From time far older than memory, the bear has been a special being: humanlike, yet close to the animals and hence to the source of life. Like us, the bear stands upright on the souls of his feet, his eyes nearly in a frontal plane. The bear moves his forelimbs freely in their shoulder sockets, sits on his tail end, one leg folded, like an adolescent slouched at the table, worries with

moans and sighs, courts with demonstrable affection, produces an excrement similar to man's, snores in his sleep, spanks his children, is avid for sweets, and has a moody, gruff, and morose side." Skinned, they look remarkably human. Their skeletons match ours, except they lack collarbones and have long snouts.

Like people, bears are omnivores, driven by curiosity and appetite to explore and sample large areas of terrain. Often, these animals and the early hunter-gatherer tribes ate the same things, primarily plant foods, such as berries, roots, and nuts, although they also shared a taste for deer, elk, and salmon. The bears also consumed many of the herbs and roots used by people for medicine. Unlike other animals, which taught early people specific skills, the bear was a generalist. "It is the bear's broad, searching, persistent openness that makes contact with us, that flash of recognition in which men instantly perceive a fellow being whose questing provocation, whose garrulous, taciturn, lazy ways, even whose obligations and commitments to hunt, to hole up, and to dominate the space he lives in are familiar. The bear is a special model of human flexibility, a generalist set against a world of specialists," Shepard and Sanders wrote. "We may wonder if the bear did not seem to early men to be the creature who knew everything."

Today, of course, the computer has become the creature who knows everything. The bear's earlier wisdom has been parceled out among physicians and pharmaceutical companies, therapists, ministers, and spirituality authors and workshop leaders, grandparents and cartoon characters. In Chicago the Bears are even a football team. But we haven't completely forgotten wild bears. This animal "is a kind of ideogram of man in the wilderness, as though telling of what we were and perhaps what we have lost: wily, smart, strong, fast, agile, independent in ways that we humans left behind when we took up residence in the city," Shepard and Sanders continued. "In his liveliness we sense a secret power, as though he were the embodiment of our *anima*–spirit, soul, or holy breath." That was the bear I wanted to find in the Catskills.

Upon moving into my cabin, I hung a carved wooden bear mask beside my front door, an old souvenir from a Cherokee Indian reservation that now seemed prescient. On a sunny afternoon several weeks later, I heard a thump on the back corner of the cabin. Curious, I climbed down from my work loft and stepped out the door, where I immediately saw a black bear ambling up a deer path that ramped up my rear hillside under the hemlocks. It didn't hurry, and it didn't dawdle, walking with surprising silence on loose paws, as massive as a shipping trunk yet climbing without showing any muscles or strain. It shook its face in my direction, perhaps annoyed with a fly, then turned off the deer path and walked straight up the hillside. Its hips didn't sway. Its back legs didn't even seem to bend. Its grace was in its sturdiness. And its fur was as black as could be. Then it disappeared over a rise in the hillside, leaving the hemlock grove empty again. Like a lobster man checking his traps, this bear probably knew the cabin better than I did.

In the country, everyone told bear stories. With their remarkable nose for food, they ripped open barbecue grills, yanked up garage doors, and bent metal pipes like

strongmen for bird feeders loaded like gum ball machines with their favorite candy. Someone once found a pile of these pipes dragged into the woods by a bear like an illegal plumbing dump. People took pictures of bears on their porches or leaning against their sliding glass doors. In my valley, the meanest of them all, dubbed Roseanne Bear, climbed through a window for a simmering pot of spaghetti sauce. After she took a swipe at her former mate, he was known as Scarface. She was finally killed for breaking-and-entering into a cabin she had already trashed like a punk rock star, ripping down refrigerator shelves, littering the furniture with food wrappers, tearing the drapes, and leaving a pungent stench.

In my favorite story, however, a mother and three cubs got caught in a kitchen in the wee hours of the morning, licking cake frosting from a can and lapping champagne from a spilled bottle on the floor. Knowing about this weakness for sweets, the wildlife officials baited their bear trap, made from a length of highway culvert pipe, with Boston cream donuts. The only problem with the trap was that the bears, caught and released in remote areas of the mountains, would sometimes hike 40 miles right back to the spot where they had become troublemakers.

The Catskills has a long tradition of good bear stories. "Tales of the adventures of the old bear tales of the Catskills abound in every corner of the mountains," wrote Alf Evers in his history, *The Catskills: From Wilderness to Woodstock*. "They tell of brave men crawling into dens and entering hollow trees in pursuit of bears, of hand-to-hand fights with angry bears, of courageous bear dogs giving their lives to help their masters conquer bears." In one old tale, a bee hunter looking for a honey tree found himself backed to the edge of a cliff by a drooling bear. To save himself, he sang "Nearer My God to Thee," in a voice so bad it made old ladies faint in church. "The bear stopped," Evers wrote. "A shocked look came over his face, he turned round, gave a groan, and headed northward along the ledge" never to be seen in the Catskill mountains again.

As late as the 1860s, the region observed "Bear Day" on February 2nd, when bears supposedly emerged from their dens for a few minutes to check the weather. If the sky was clear, the temperature cold, and the sun shiny enough to cast its shadow on the snow, the bear knew that a long winter lay ahead and went back to sleep until April 1st. But if the day was cloudy and balmy, the bear would leave the den, confident an early spring would soon arrive. Today, of course, February 2nd is Groundhog Day. As Alf Evers explained, this change reflected the transformation of the American landscape from forested bear habitat to cleared fields suited to woodchucks. "But in the infant years of the nineteenth century, the bear was lord of the wild Catskills and woodchucks were uncommon in a land where their way of life was only beginning to be made easy," he wrote. Ironically, the forest has returned to this mountainous region in the twentieth century with the decline of farming and logging, and the bear population has grown as large as ever.

But if you didn't feed bears you didn't see them. As big as they were, the woods were much bigger. On dozens of hikes in the Catskills on and off the trails, through every season, in places ranging from open birch stands filled with ferns to thickets of

spruce and fir trees as dense as hedges, I saw bears twice for a total of perhaps ten seconds. Porcupines were common. (In fact, the rangers sometimes wrapped the trail signs and outhouses in chicken wire, so porcupines couldn't chew them for the salt.) Chipmunks could fill whole valleys with the their clucking symphonies. Hawks routinely soared overhead. Wild turkeys herded themselves quietly along the forest floor of dried leaves. Pileated woodpeckers occasionally landed on trees like red-crested tomahawks. Startled deer sprang away with bobbing white tails. But bears almost never revealed themselves. On one occasion in autumn, our hiking group did surprise a bear high up in the crotch of a beech tree, which it had climbed for beech nuts, a great delicacy. In a loud scratching panic, the bear dropped down the smooth trunk as fast as a fireman down a pole, then sprinted away. I marveled at the animal's agility but also at its fear. After that, I always scanned beech trunks for old claw marks, and occasionally found them, four long fingers and a thumb the same size as my hand. Touching the bark was as close as I came to shaking hands with a bear.

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As a child, I developed my first intimate bonds with a stuffed koala bear my grandmother gave me as a gift after visiting relatives in Australia. Although koala bears are marsupials, an older line of mammals than real bears which are represented in North America by possums, this golden furry toy served as my teddy bear. It had a big black button nose, marble eyes that came out like giant thumb tacks, a portly belly, cloth feet and palms, and big round ears I used as handles. It was tough enough to toss around–years later I graduated to slightly smaller footballs–yet still soft enough with fur and padding to feel real if I wanted it to be. In 1902, President Teddy Roosevelt refused to shoot a cub while on a bear hunt, an act of valor canonized by political cartoonists, and since then the teddy bear has been a staple of American childhood.

To Paul Shepard in *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human*, the teddy bear, a comforting doll "invented by a Brooklyn candy maker," served an almost primal function as an intermediary, a fuzzy reflection of ourselves as well as a fuzzy representation of an animal who isn't human. The teddy bear helped infants see beyond humans into the world of other creatures. From teddies, we grew into the early childhood stories of Pooh Bear in the *Winnie the Pooh* and reached our boisterous adolescence with Yogi Bear, the television cartoon character inspired by the baseball player, Yogi Berra. "Yogi Bear lives in 'Jellystone' Park where his companions include a small bear, named Boo Boo, the park ranger and various tourists," Shepard wrote. In this protected world of the park, Yogi hatched endless schemes "to test himself against the rules, authority, and custom in the form of the park ranger." Finally, reaching maturity, we recognized Smokey, the Forest Service bear, created by an advertising agency inspired by the story of a bear burned in a 1944 forest fire. "The rebellious phase of life is past," Shepard wrote. "He tells us that forest fires are started by our careless." Personifying a dutiful government, Smokey reminded us of our responsibility to society at large. Dressed

in work pants and ranger hat, he also embodied the work ethic with "his practical blue-collar associations with security and productivity."

Yet what I remember most vividly through my developmental stages are still the real bears. On our first family camping vacation in a Canadian national park, we watched two black bears one evening at a small dump, several heaps of trash dropped by the edge of a dirt road. Although we stood close beside our Rambler for safety and snapped pictures, the bears ignore us as well as the flies while nuzzling and pawing through the tumbled papers and cardboard stained with food waste. A young boy, I felt sorry for these bears, having to search through trash for dinner. But I was impressed by their rounded size, their methodical focus, and their silence. Whistling to them like dogs seemed out of the question. Years later, I learned that dump bears were a common attraction in many parks until the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the dumps were closed for environmental reasons. At Yellowstone, several prominent researchers actually worried that grizzly bears might starve without these traditional feeding spots. In his history, *Searching for Yellowstone*, Paul Schullery wrote that "with improved protection" after the creation of the park, "the bears found their way into our garbage piles and into our hearts. By the late 1880s they began to show up, at first in small numbers, in the dumps near the various park hotels, and within a remarkably short time they had become one of the must-see sights on a park visit."

During my college years in California, I had several encounters with black bears in Yosemite National Park, including a mugging. After pitching our tents in a Valley campground late one afternoon, two friends and I decided to stroll along a nearby woodland trail before returning to make dinner. Dappled with sunlight, the open forest with tall trees hardly seemed wild. We hadn't walked far before one friend retrieved a roll of toilet paper from his day pack, handed me the pack for safekeeping, and disappeared into the woods for a rest stop. While waiting, the two of us spotted a bear ambling in our direction. "Don't worry," said my companion, who had worked as a park ranger that summer. "Once it sees us, it will walk away." And, indeed, the golden brown bear plowing through green flower stalks beside the trail didn't seem to notice us. Its head hunched low like a pedestrian lost in thought. Perhaps it was looking for beetles or ants. But it didn't veer away from the path. Finally, we turned and began speed walking, not wanting to admit panic by running, yet upon glancing back I saw the bear now loping to catch up with us. It wanted the trail mix at the bottom of the day pack. So I handed it to him. Carrying the nylon sack like a purse from its snout, the bear walked a hundred feet into the woods and sat down to chew through the leather bottom. It didn't even have the courtesy to try the zippers.

By now, my first friend had returned from his own trip to the trees. "You just *gave* him my pack?" he said.

A horse train of tourists passed us on the trail. A rider in a bright white cowboy hat and new blue jeans said, "There's a bear back there eating some idiot's pack."

After twenty minutes, the bear finished the trail mix, having nuzzled through the sack the way a dog would polish a food bowl. Having watched from a safe distance,

we now felt ready to retrieve the day pack, but the bear turned and walked toward us once again. This time we ran and climbed atop a large boulder. My friend banged the side of rock with a large pole-like branch, while we all chanted, "No, bear! no, bear!" Perhaps we were simply reinventing a longstanding tourist ritual of Yosemite Valley, but this moment seemed genuinely scary to us. The bear circled the uphill side of the boulder to peer at us and then finally continued down the path. Back at the campground, the ranger showed little sympathy for my story. You're reinforcing bad behavior, he scolded me. You should've thrown rocks at his nose. Listening to this insane advice, I wondered if the ranger didn't secretly want to cut down on the tourist population.

The second robbery was easier. On an overnight backpacking trip to the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, I woke to the reassuring sight of my food bag still hanging from the top of a leaning dead tree trunk. My camping partner was incredulous. "You slept through that?" he asked. Apparently, the bear had marched past my sleeping bag, stood up, and ripped open the food sack–in fact, another borrowed day packlike a piñata. After shimmying up the trunk, I pulled it down, now empty and soggy with bear saliva, which made it smell like raw bacon. For fun, I later mailed this ragged and ripe day pack to its original owner who was home for the summer in Florida. My note complained that it had failed to withstand a bear attack. She trumped me, however, by replying with a memo from her father's office advising employees using the company parking lot not to step out of their cars before scanning the area for alligators.

But these were my college stories often recounted to impress my friends and worry my parents. After graduation, I returned east and settled in Hoboken, New Jersey across the Hudson River from Greenwich Village. Joining this bohemian metropolis, I bought a black leather jacket, worked my way into a writer's block on my great American novel, and fell in love with a native Manhattanite who had slept one night in a sleeping bag and hated it. (Years later, she would continue walking on a Catskills trail after I had stopped, startled by the sight of a mother bear and her cub, because she had glanced at the black animals and presumed them to be Newfoundland dogs.) For eight years, I rarely ventured into the woods. Then for eight more years, I took day hikes primarily in parks within a train ride of Manhattan. My wilderness was populated with deer and wild turkeys, box turtles and downy woodpeckers.

Only once did I see a bear. After a hard day of hiking on a weekend backpacking trip in the Catskills, I sat in my campsite against a fallen log like a mossy deck chair. Some soft shuffling and knocking sounds arose from behind another pile of logs across the grassy opening nourished by a spring on this otherwise dry mountain ridge. The previous night I had watched a parade of ruby eyes as deer fed in this lush habitat. They remained undisturbed by my campfire. But when the bear peered up from behind the log pile and discovered me, planted on my butt and nursing on a canteen of powdered lemonade, it didn't pause and study my intentions. It spun and rammed into the thick bushes, then charged up the hillside, snorting like a boxer punishing the air between punches, yet fleeing like a chicken. At the time, I marveled that such a powerful animal

would react so skittishly. But I didn't pursue this line of thinking. I had no idea that I would one day live in the Catskills, no inkling that the bear could reflect the deepest drives of my own personality.

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An emissary of wilderness, the rock-and-roll poet bear had called me forth from the city to the cabin, where I gradually and happily adjusted to life in the woods. At night without a television, I watched with fascination as moths fluttered and crawled on the windows, as if my cabin provided a terrarium view into the exotic forest that emerged after dark. My urban friends though I was crazy to watch moths for entertainment, until they joined me. On Saturday nights, we sat by the table lamp at the window, studying the many shades of wings, from china white to tortoise shell to nude nylon. Occasionally, a luna moth landed like an angel with green silk wings held by purple velvet shoulders, a creature as beautiful as any I had ever seen. After moths, we stepped outside and admired the stars, an experience lost under city lights that made me feel connected in a way to ancient civilizations that studied these same stars and connected the dots to identify mythical gods and animals. The constellation we all recognized, of course, was the Big Dipper, seen by earlier societies ranging from the ancient Greeks to the first Hindus to the Eskimos to the Algonquin Indians as the Great Bear. Long before these peoples knew of each other's existence, they observed the same creature in the most prominent constellation in the northern sky.

During the day, I followed my established routine as a freelance journalist, but rarely felt so harried or discontent. Rather than the street noises of Manhattan, I listened to my burbling stream, a breeze shushing the hemlocks, or the persistent summer song of a red-eyed vireo hidden in the tree tops: *Here I am? Where are you?* My editors seemed more distant, my deadlines less pressing. For breaks, I stood on my porch and admired the giant tapestry of dappled sunlight on the forest leaves. Or I relieved myself on the ferns. Or climbed the back hillside to pick the latest mushrooms. Without *The New York Times* lying on my doorstep each morning, the outside world no longer seemed so crucial, so tumultuous, so infuriating when politics invariably failed to heed my wishes. In the woods, I lived less vicariously, more directly in the natural world of my surroundings, which had a much more stable temperament than the urban news cycle. I slept until I was no longer tired, rather than waking at six from anxieties as I often did in Manhattan. One night I dreamed of my self with rastafarian hair, a true wild man. Even though the bear no longer visited my cabin, he had christened it as my proper home.

In *Giving Voice to Bear*, David Rockwell wrote, "Bears were often central to the most basic rites of many tribes: the initiation of youths into adulthood, the sacred practices of shamanism, the healing of the sick and injured, the rites surrounding the hunt." Most of these rites invoked death and rebirth. For example, he wrote, "Initiation was one of the most widespread of all American Indian spiritual traditions. The

ceremonies, which encompassed puberty rites, the initiation of shamans, and the initiation of man and women into secret societies, were practiced by every tribe on the continent. Rituals varied, as did the myths supporting them, but a common pattern underlay the differences, and that pattern–prolonged isolation, fasting, symbolic death and rebirth–paralleled a bear in hibernation."

The Native Americans saw many similarities between shamans and bears. "The shaman, too, was a loner who sought his wisdom and spiritual knowledge in isolation, in the wilderness," David Rockwell wrote. "On the subject of solitude an Eskimo shaman named Igjugarjuk told the Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen how a shaman must live. 'True wisdom,' he said, 'is only to be found far away from people, out in the great solitude, and is not found in play but only through suffering. Solitude and suffering open a person's mind to things unseen, therefore a shaman must seek wisdom there."

Bears and shamans haven't been the only ones drawn to solitude. The Western spiritual tradition has been filled with hermits, monks, and seekers who retreated from human society in search of a mystical experience of the divine. Intellectuals have followed suit in pursuit of truth. In *Solitude: A Return to the Self*, Anthony Storr pointed out that many of our greatest thinkers lived alone, including Descartes, Newton, Pascal, Spinoza, Kant, Leibniz, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. "Current wisdom, especially that propagated by the various schools of psychoanalysis, assumes that man is a social being who needs the companionship and affection of other human beings from cradle to grave. It is widely believed that interpersonal relationships of an intimate kind are the chief, if not the only, source of human happiness. Yet the lives of creative individuals often seem to run counter to this assumption," he wrote. "Human beings easily become alienated from their own deepest needs and feelings. Learning, thinking, innovation, and maintaining contact with one's own inner world are all facilitated by solitude."

"The creative person is constantly seeking to discover himself, to remodel his own identity, and to find meaning in the universe through what he creates," Storr continued. "He finds this is a valuable integrating process which, like meditation or prayer, has little do with other people, but which has its own separate validity. His most significant moments are those in which he attains some new insight, or makes some new discovery; and these moments are chiefly, if not invariably, those in which he is alone."

My bear not only promised wilderness. It promised creative solitude, the time and place to write poetry, and the opportunity to reimagine myself freed from society. Yet it also promised grand adventure.

Although long forgotten, the early bear stories about a woman who mistakenly marries a bear, thus uniting humans and animals, and about her son, the hero in a thrilling pursuit through the underworld to rescue a maiden, underlie Western literature. Some of our first epics, *Beowulf* (literally translated as "bee-wolf" or bear) and *The Odyssey*, arose directly from bear stories. Today, the Bear Son appears regularly at the Cineplex, although few viewers munching on Good & Plenty would recognize the Neolithic narrative origins of Hollywood entertainment.

In a popular screen writing guidebook, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structures for Writers*, Christopher Vogler outlined the classic hero's journey that has occured in movies ranging from *Titanic* to *Pulp Fiction*. Inspired by Joseph Campbell's synthesis of the world's myths in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Volger described a plot structure as old as the Bear Son tale in which the adventurous son dropped down a well into the underworld and rescued a beautiful princess from an evil dwarf. Returning to the real world, the son surprised those who thought he'd died, and now possessed both the princess and wealth. By visiting the underworld, an act like hibernation, the hero has experienced death and resurrection. Then the hero returned home with new wisdom about themselves and the world. One obvious and magical version of this story was *The Wizard of Oz*, but this structure has shaped many realistic dramas. As Vogler explained, even *The Full Monty*, a comedy about unemployed Scottish steel workers who resorted to male striptease for money, told the hero's journey of the central characters. They entered the Special World of striptease where each faced an Ordeal of great doubt. Finally on stage for the big show, Volger wrote, "The men reveal themselves totally, RETURNING WITH THE ELIXIR of self-knowledge, cooperation, understanding, and self-respect. They have found a new way to be men in the new society."

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The taxidermist checked my bear rug a final time and folded the legs inwards like four coat sleeves. My arms full, I carried the square bear out to my car with the head nestled under my chin. On the passenger seat he sat nearly high enough to peak out the windows. In my own quiet way, I had undertaken the hero's journey by moving into my cabin three years earlier. "The Hero's Journey and the Writer's Journey are one and the same," Volger wrote. "Writing is an often perilous journey inward to probe the depths of one's soul and bring back the Elixir of experience–a good story." In Manhattan, I had struggled not only through the prolonged and painful end of my marriage, but also through an endless series of freelance assignments that offered little emotional satisfaction and occasionally soured into nasty exchanges with my editors and kill fees. In theory, I wanted to be mercenary, writing whatever paid well in order to survive financially in Manhattan, but in truth I was fighting against myself. Rather than following my muse, I was writing about new "super" landfills in eastern Washington, the environmental hazards of dry cleaning, or rich people donating park benches in Central Park. The only one who made this last project tolerable was the official park photographer who told me the boss forbade her from taking pictures of anyone eating a banana.

In the cabin, which I more easily afforded at $415 a month, I worked in my journals and finally began finishing and publishing some poetry. Rather than witty bits about pussy willows, I reexamined my childhood in a strained suburban family, my young adulthood in Hoboken, New Jersey, and the collapse of my marriage. At the conclusion

of *The Writer's Journey*, Volger compared writers with shamans, his closest link to bears. During their initiation rituals, shamans may have visions of being eaten down to the bones by a bear or a lion. From the skeleton, they remake themselves into a new person. In a way, I had carted my wounded bones up from Manhattan and remade myself through poetry in the solitude of my cabin. The bear had been my spirit guide. Now I was ready to don his hide as my hero's cape.

At home, I discovered my rug made an awkward cloak. An oval piece of wood like a carving board sewed under the head prevented me from slipping on the skull like a hat. The arms flopped around my sides. His felt lining didn't feel like skin. I couldn't sneak my fingers into his curved nails. And his wide girth gave him the pear shape of someone with an extremely fat ass.

But I wasn't disappointed for long. I discovered another enchantment: holding his head in my hands and, nose to nose, staring into his small eyes like a crystal ball. Seeing the future wasn't my goal. I wanted to look past my rational mind into the primal psyche reawakened by this intimate encounter between bear and man. I wanted to unleash the ideogram of wilderness lurking within my soul. And, fixated upon his eyes, I felt a slight dizziness, a dizziness like being cross-eyed, because the bear's eyes lay so far apart I tried to spread my gaze open like a V. (Some 4 inches apart, the bear's eyes seemed like headlights at the sides of his low slung forehead, compared to mine at 2 3/4 inches.) But the emotion that surged surprised me. It wasn't one of the feelings inspired by wilderness, such as a sense of humble grandeur, or beautiful solitude, or fleeting camaraderie with the animals. It was a nostalgic affection for dogs.

In truth, bears and dogs parted company on the family tree of evolution some 25 million years ago, an era when the first bear species was as small as foxes. Not until 6 million years ago did bears evolve into huge predators, culminating with the cave bears hunted by the Neanderthals, both now extinct but perhaps still lingering in our subconscious imaginations. Unlike modern bears with stubby tails, the Great Bear constellation we now call the Big Dipper, has a long tail or handle, which was true of cave bears. The ancestors of our own black bears, *Ursus americanus*, crossed the Siberian isthmus 100,000 years ago. Today's black bears are more closely related to raccoons and weasels than to dogs and wolves. And they're the only one of the world's eight bear species truly prospering amid our spreading civilization.

Aside from the snout, my bear didn't particularly resemble a dog. His forehead lay much lower and broader, his ears were cupped rather than pointed, his pink tongue remained nestled behind his fangs, rather than sprawling and panting like the tongues of man's best friend eager with subservience. My bear seemed an equal, not an acolyte. Like a dog, however, he seemed a friendly partner. And his aura of wilderness no longer mattered so much to me. After all, I had lived in a cabin for three years in a hemlock forest above a trout stream. Rather than suburban robins, my windows were filled with the music of hermit thrushes and black throated green warblers, deep woodland birds. Under the hemlock shade grass wouldn't grow, so I settled for ferns and moss, Indian pipes and late summer mushrooms. Raccoons sometimes climbed my stone chimney

onto the roof. Deer ate my winter birdseed. Mice ruled my cupboard shelves. For an exotic experience, I now drove down to the mall, where garbage gulls circled from the vast roof over the empty acres of asphalt gently sloped towards stormwater drains.

After a while, my bear settled into my cabin like a pet. I spread him across the couch, hung him over the loft railing, or folded him on top of the table behind my computer desk. For a break from the monitor screen, and all the human energy churning through cyberspace, I spun around in my swivel chair and took a good long look at the bear. With his open jaw and slightly upturned lips he always appeared to be in the middle of saying something cheery. Perhaps he was my Ed McMahon, my sidekick who wouldn't outshine me but would steer me true. His eyes never shifted away from mine from boredom or distraction. His ears remained cocked at full attention. His enthusiasm never lagged. He offered something better than wildness. He provided me with company.

I groomed him regularly. His black fur collected a surprising array of paper flecks, hemlock needles, staples, wood slivers, moth wings, bagel crumbs, and other cabin dirt that needed to be picked clean. But he never complained about my lack of vacuuming. And I enjoyed rubbing my fingers across his thick fur, releasing the smell of his leather as rich as a new car seat. I delicately touched his snout covered with brown hair as fine as eyebrows, then patted his forehead as broad as a ping pong paddle. He was a bear, no doubt, big and confident, but in places he was surprisingly delicate. His eyelashes were as tiny as mine. His black lips looked as tender as a puppy's. His small eyes always urged me to lean closer to share our metaphysical intimacies. Without much thought, I began calling him Big Guy, but felt free to tell him anything. He became my wildness coach, urging me to write my way into new terrain on the computer. The idea of nailing him to the wall, a crucifixion, seemed a great mistake. I wanted him close to me, preferably near eye level. If I need his table, I moved him to the floor for several hours, but always put him back. And at all times, of course, I treated his ears like a crown of jewels that couldn't be knocked against anything.

One night, I dreamed of the visiting taxidermist and myself seated at my cabin table. The bear rug lay neatly folded in the corner. In the midst of our conversation, I glanced at the rug and saw the bear yawn, then scratch his ear. "Did you see that?" I asked. But the taxidermist had vanished. When I looked again, the bear rug was escaping through a hole in the wall just big enough for his head to pop free like a cork. Yet he didn't run very far. On the lawn he began dancing in the breeze like a puppet freed from its strings. He had finished his work as a somber symbol. Now he was eager to play. His loose black cloak flopped around as if improvising his own wild jig. The wall between us disappeared. I beckoned and the bear shuffled towards me. Filled with nothing but air he swayed as lightly as joy. So I reached for his paws of honey.

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Will Nixon
Dancing with Honey Paws
A Journey with Bears
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