

The Bear Hunter

DAVID MUSGROVE



Introduction by Coleman Barks

DAVID MUSGROVE'S
THE BEAR HUNTER

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*For Liz Smith,
who put up with my madness
longer than the rest of them.*

Notes on David Musgrove

Some spiritual necessity draws a Southerner north and west and north. There are forces that oppose David Musgrove's summer journey out of Alabama, but the ones that beckon him beyond the country club swimming pool and the Yellowstone gate into an arctic vastness are much stronger.

In James Dickey's poem, "Sled Burial, Dream Ceremony," a Southerner finds a Northern door into "utter foreignness" at the place where snowflakes "are born of pure shadow." Musgrove looks for that door. The dread of facing the creation-place is present throughout.

The tracking of a bear has figured prominently in contemporary American literature: Galway Kinnell's poem, "The Bear," and Faulkner's classic hunting story, to name two. In those, as in Musgrove's quest, the bear is a "mask for God" (Joseph Campbell), and the journey into its presence, an act of worship. Awe, visionary clarity, and a new intimate knowledge of a personal center are called into the open here. Musgrove arrives at a howl, a song, that is beyond his death-fear and yet contains it.

An image from my own travels occurs. At the Hittite Museum in Ankara, Turkey, researchers have found that inside each of the clay breasts of the mother goddess two talismans were placed: a wild boar's tusk and the skull of a buzzard. A fierce, blood-and-guts, relentless drive (the boar) and a *momento mori* (the carrion eater), side by side within the nurturing source. These are qualities I find in David Musgrove's account of his sudden, intuitive striking out for the Alaskan outback. He has a tenderness toward each of the guides he meets,

human and otherwise, and yet the wild boar's collision-force is revving throughout, and the buzzard inevitably lights at the corner of every frame.

It's a complicated, ancient vision, and Musgrove has found a strong free verse line to draw it with. The tension, the torsion, maintained in this long poem has a fine and lively energy. I'm really glad he brought it back. I am grateful for the daring that propelled his adventure and for the care he gives his art. "The Bear Hunter" is an astonishingly accomplished work for a twenty-three year-old to have written, a dangerously sure-footed beginning.

Jon Krakauer has written *Into the Wild*, a record of a young man's (Chris McCandless) hitchhiking to Alaska, and through a series of miscalculations, starving to death there. Krakauer writes well of the terrifying risks that the young, and the not-so-young, driven to wilderness, take, but what strikes me now about the decision to go north, whether to Walden Pond, or the Brooks Range, or a Mississippi forest, is not the basic sameness of the impulse, but the differences. This expedition is very distinct from Thoreau's deliberate retreat and McCandless's more desperate disappearing act. Both of those are explorations into what it takes to live in direct relationship with nature, how a human being can *manage* on his own, what it takes. Musgrove is more the Wild Boy claiming and re-claiming his wildness. The terms found for the solitude and eerie companionships to be had on the edge, near the limits of the mystery we live, are hauntingly unique. His terse and passionate narrative works that area, of the individual trying to be honest inside the ordeal of impulse and evolving consciousness.

Coleman Barks
June 2, 1996

*“I came here, driven to the land of death
in want of prophecy”*

The Odyssey. Book XI

***“All hail the phantom bear, the beast within
us all.”***

**Alexander Supertramp, May 1992
Into the Wild, by Jon Krakauer,
Villard Books, 1996.
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THE BEAR HUNTER

Part 1 - Dream Dark Dreams

Part 2 - North

Part 3 - The Island in the Grassy Lake

Part 4 - Wolf Lake

Part 5 - Over the Hills and Far Away

Part 6 - Rotten Water Fever

Part 7 - Tales from the Bear Skull

Part I - Dream Dark Dreams

1

Outside
the East Gate of Yellowstone
I am hidden
among dripping willows
whispering their stories
to the wind and the river
rushing over the land.
Inside my green and grey tent,
huddled in the blue glow of my lantern,
I listen.
The river mumbles its way
over slick, round rocks,
and the wind
breathes against the tent walls.
I listen to the tales
whispered in the dark.
Long into the night
I listen
and finally
am lulled to sleep
by the whispering around me
and dream dark dreams
of cold rain blown
against black cliff walls,
of willows pulled and torn in the wind.

I wake early
in the quiet, dark morning
and listen to the cries of owls
hunched among the branches,
waiting with yellow eyes
for the small bits of life
to emerge in the cold moonlight,
after the rain has passed,
and give up their blood
to silent, descending
shadows of terror.

2

In Yellowstone
in the summer
bison move down the roads
like lazy herds of cattle
and R.V.'s
disgorge families and elderly couples
who chase the shaggy behemoths
with long lensed cameras.
I spend a day
driving through Yellowstone
and stop only a couple of times
to chase mule deer,
and once a cinammon black bear,
with my camera
when no one else was around.

When I passed out of Yellowstone
I drove through a beautiful emptiness
of cattle ranches and mountains,
cliffs and frothy, clear rivers.

I stopped in Bozeman, Montana.
It is the fourth of July,
and in a park
in the middle of town
large crowds of people have gathered
in the cool, night air
to watch a fireworks display.
I walk among them, a stranger
strangely at home
among the laughter and smiling faces.
Everything seems so clean and pleasant.
An old man
offers me a beer,
and I thank him,
feeling my insides turn cool
as I swallow it down.
The fireworks explode high in the air
like giant flowers of fire,
and their noise echoes among the mountains
as giant blue green sparks
stream towards earth.
I wonder
what the bear and deer
high in the mountains
think when they see and hear
such man-made magic
exploding high in the night.

I wonder
where Jenny is tonight
and who she might be with.

3

The night we broke up
I took her
out to the hunting farm.
On the dock at the pond,
I told her the truth.
She sobbed,
choking bitter sobs,
and cursed me.
I tried to hold her,
but she pushed me away;
I fell on the dock
and my car keys
fell out of my pocket
through the cracks in the boards
and down into the cold, dark water.
Jenny walked away,
up the dirt road
to the little cabin.
I stripped
and lowered myself into the water,
dove down
and felt among the mud
and rotten wood pilings
underneath the dock
until I felt the hard metal keys
in my hand.
I wanted
to stay down there
in the cold, soft mud,
to bury myself in it
like a hibernating reptile
and stay hidden in the dark, forever.

But I could not stay down
or keep my mouth closed,
and I breathed in water
and rose sputtering and gagging to the surface.
I grabbed hold of the dock
and clung there,
naked and freezing,
unable to take refuge
even in the cold mud
at the floor of the pond.
Jenny stood on the dock,
her blonde hair hanging down
over her green eyes,
now devoid of any tears or warmth,
that glittered like cold,
far away stars.
- Take me home,
she said.

4

After I cross the Canadian border
I stop to get some money changed
and to take inventory of my belongings,
to see what I may need to buy
for the road ahead.
I have an axe and a tent,
a sleeping bag,
and a full can of gas.
I have three boxes of bullets
and my bolt action rifle.
I have books and a lantern.
Rope and a knife.
I have a pipe from Mexico City.

There is no one with me.
I am not sure where I am going,
and I have no one to meet when I get there.

Further north, radio signals lose their way,
in mountains breeding loud static.
Gas stations thin out
and become landmarks,
points of interest.
Moose carcasses lie where they have fallen
under the rushing walls of big truck grills,
their glass eyes glowing human fire.
The immense bodies sprawl
in the roadside grass and gravel
like the abandoned horses of a retreating calvary.
The road twists through the land,
a diseased spine,
humped and broken with frost heaves,
a giant, precarious ribbon
strung along the sides of mountains.
Gnarled, paved stretches
give out into dirty gravel,
mud the color of nothing.
Here and there are crosses
wedged into cairns of stone
where a smaller vehicle
had met with a moose
or plunged over a cliff
down to shallow rivers
broken like glass
over the rocky stream beds.
In the mountain passes
fog closes in,
covering cliff edges
and pushing against the skin

like wet, transparent cotton.
Or the wind blows,
blowing out the fire
of a tin can lunch
or snatching a hat
and lodging it in the arthritic fingers of a spruce.
For days and days I take roads
north and northwest
until there are no more roads west
and only one headed north
with yellow signs
warning that aircraft sometimes land here.

In Alaska
I turn up the Dawson Highway
towards the Arctic Circle.
My blazer is filled with dead mosquitoes
and tin cans of food.
Sometimes I sleep in the back of it
and wake with a start,
my legs twitching.
Other times,
I sleep in the green tent
inches from rushing streams.
Nighttime sun glow seeps through the walls,
and I imagine I am caught
in a glowing, transparent globe
of petrified amber.

5

Late one evening near the Circle,
before the trees give out,
I turn down an old, side road

and follow it until it ends
at a stream that has caved it in and cut it in half.
I pitch my tent,
take the rifle,
cross the creek
and continue walking down the road.

*I was fourteen
when my father bought me this rifle,
and we had to ask the man
in the store in Montgomery
what to get
because neither he nor I
knew the first thing about guns, hunting.
A friend of my father's
ran a big hunting club
and wanted to take me hunting,
and my father thought I should go, too.
Deer hunting seemed some huge ritual,
some giant mystery, some passage to manhood,
something utterly unlike
chasing squirrels and birds
in the woods behind the house
with a BB gun.*

*The men in the club
would smoke cigarettes
in the cold morning air
and talk of work
and little else.
The boys in the club
seemed to do nothing
besides drink and hunt,
chase girls, and play football.
They showed up in the icy mornings
hungover, with their eyes red,*

*sore from the high school football games,
telling stories of girls,
and in the evenings
they came to the clubhouse,
their hands red
with deer blood.
They hung the deer and butchered them
went home and showered,
and then chased girls and drank all night.
I began to see,
this was manhood,
these were the rituals,
the things to do.*

*But now, years later
I felt nearly dead
from the ritual sacrifice
of myself.
I do not know
whether I have come into the North
to escape torments at home
or whether actually I
have come seeking something
that can only be found
in the wilderness*

*I am trying to save myself.
I feel as if my skull
is made of glass
and an old crow perches
on my head,
hammering away with a little, black pick of a mouth,
murmuring his rotten meat words.
I am afraid of the dark
inside all our glass skulls;*

*afraid no journey
into the wilderness
can erase my own.
I only hope,
that however hard the mad bird hammers
trying to shatter its perch,
that my skull of glass
will not come apart
and release the darkness
hidden inside
like the seed of a new plague
awaiting some rat
to carry it to virgin shores.*

6

A final heaving,
hot-aired bellow,
and the bull staggers,
back legs buckling;
he descends into a widening pool
of the red, red blood
soaking the earth.
The maddening mosquitoes
cover the carcass like tiny vultures
and turn the red pools black with their numbers,
but there is never enough blood
for so many;
no amount of slaughtered moose
could pour forth enough to satisfy them,
send them away full;
there is no end to the swarming,
the whining clouds of blackness,
no end to the drinking of blood,
to the blood itself,

still spreading over the soaked ground
under a moving, feasting, blanket of blackness,
ever drinking and still,
no end to the hunger,
no end to the blood.

I cradle the small, velvet antlers,
slightly soft,
and on the underside of one,
a cut from one of the bullets
bleeds redly onto my hands.
I stare at the warm blood
dripping from my fingertips
and remember the robin,
the first creature that I ever killed.

*When I shot him with my air rifle
he flew disheartenedly down
from a tree in the yard
to the nearby creek
between the woods and the grass.
I chased after him,
crying, praying for forgiveness
for the crime I had been trying to commit
for days.
The other robins ignored us both,
killer and victim,
coldly, in their quest for worms.
I wrapped the tender, warm bird
damp from its final, desperate bath
in burial clothes of paper towel
and placed it gently in a mayonnaise jar,
coffin of glass,
with the lid screwed on tight,
knowing sadly,
this was no phoenix or Christ.*

*I took a shovel
and made a grave for him
under the pear tree near the stream
in the dirt where his kind
daily sought their breakfast.
I buried him deep enough
that no hungry beaks
would tap against the hidden glass
and disturb the dark.*

A dead moose is a thing to behold,
stretched out on a forgotten gravel road
north of Fairbanks, Alaska.
Moose are bigger things
than the whitetails I have killed.
Their long, sad faces and towering height
become shrines to death when fallen to the ground.
They are not easily dragged around or quickly cut up.
The moose carcass rises from the flat ground
like a miniature, black volcano,
blood lava flowing down its sides
in a sudden eruption of death,
ordained by myself,
a pathetic god unsure of his own creation.
Killing a moose is different from killing a whitetail
as I suppose killing a bear
is different from killing a moose.
I suppose the only thing beyond that
is to kill a man.
But my own self-destruction
is something I must continue to struggle against.

I stand quietly in the mosquito atmosphere
before this altar of meat
I have built with bullets,
while blood continues to expand the definition

I have made for it.
I cut a few narrow strips of meat for supper
and remove the small, furry horns of the young bull
with quick hatchet blows
to the side of his lead-smashed skull.
I think now of grizzlies
roaming the dark slopes of these hills.
I imagine them,
drawn to the great bloody carcass
that lies
only a few dozen yards from my tent.
I have heard too many stories
of grizzlies taking 5 or 6 bullets
from rifles heavier than mine.
If one comes in the night
to feed on the moose,
I will not bother it,
but instead
climb into the safety of the blazer
if I can.
I do not live here, they do,
and my .270 rifle
would only bring on a charge,
a slap from a paw as big as my head,
on an arm as big around as my waist.
Deep down,
I am not ready to die,
although this is a place
beautiful enough for death.
In the fire
the moose ghost curls
upwards through the blue smoke,
carrying its peculiar smell
through the passageways
of my nostrils

and into my skull
to join the other demons already there.
I eat the meat off the blade of my knife.
With a hiss, the last sound this moose will ever make,
a few drops of warm blood
drop onto the thin branches crumbling into ash.

7

I have killed many things,
cleaned and collected dozens of skulls.
Unlike bears and wolves I keep something,
skull or horns to remember the animal by,
to celebrate its life and death.
I do not leave it all scattered
in the forest or open hills
to be consumed by insects and ravens.
I feel things besides the hunger in my gut.
When a great, beautiful creature
collapses in a heap,
there is the animal belly rumble of hunger,
the electric rush of adrenaline in the blood,
but there are other feelings as well.
I kneel down,
carefully touch a finger to the blood,
then rise and stand,
for a moment say nothing, do nothing
but look around at the dark wall of trees
or the far away horizon of the open hills
and struggle with ideas
of where it all came from, began
and deeper down
remember
that I too,

one day,
will fall and die.
There is no stronger reminder of death
than to deal it out yourself.
And so,
there is this strange need
to keep horns and skulls,
little reminders
of the pain I have caused
and may one day endure.
They bring to the mind
the smell of blood
and visions of bones strewn about the hills and forests,
marked and gouged
by the teeth of wolves
who remain as invisible as death
but always howling,
reminding me,
as death does,
of their presence
somewhere lurking
beyond green tent walls
in a hazy, brief night.

8

That night I dream:

*One cold afternoon when I am fourteen
the boys in the hunting club
drop me off
near an old house
half-submerged in kudzu and trees
between two green fields.*

*Inside the house,
a ladder to the roof.
From the roof
you can see the deer
when they creep into the fields
to feed in the fading light.
I slip into the house
with my rifle.
The floor is hidden
under two feet of old hay
that writhes with rats,
and the air
is dark and close.
It happens all over again
just as it had
those many years ago.
Something awful grips me,
awakes inside me,
as I enter the hay-filled house.
I never climb the ladder
but hunch down in the hay
as the rats move aside,
screeching and clicking their teeth.
I place the cold muzzle of the rifle
inside my warm mouth
and sit there
drooling onto my death,
my finger quivering
against the trigger
until I collapse
into the moldy hay.
When it is completely dark,
I stumble back out of the house
and find my way to the road
where the older boys are waiting*

*with a dead deer
in the back of their truck.
- Did you see anything?
- Yes,
I whisper hoarsely
- but I'm not sure
what it was.*

9

Early in the morning I hide the horns
under a blanket in the back of my blazer
and get out of there.
Although I have bought an Alaskan hunting license,
I have only one bear tag,
and none for moose.
I travel the northern road for days,
alone,
and there is much room for thinking.
It occurs to me that it was all like this
in the beginning,
dirt, trees, water and beasts.
Out of these have been made
T.V.'s, cities, airplanes, telephones.
Out here in a tent
among bones and rocks
invention becomes most clearly
some impossible thing
that did not really happen.
How to make a T.V. out here,
a car that will run?
Place this branch with this rock,
lay it over this legbone,
hold it together with dirt and water

and there it is?
Who could believe such a thing?
And the bones themselves—
made from the rocks and trees,
the molecules of the air?
This is the beginning
of God
or madness.

Part 2 - North

North of the Arctic Circle
I camp in hills that are bare of trees.
The whole place has an aura of vastness.
Daylight no longer ends,
but stretches on and on;
only the watch tells time.
Eventually, time seems foolish;
the watch is put away,
and there is only the long, unbroken arctic day.
Lying in the tent reading,
trying to sleep,
there is an oppressive whine,
the single voice
of millions of mosquito wings,
and I lie there thinking,
there are many roads to madness.

I make it as far as Coldfoot.
The gas pump is broken here,
and I can go no farther north.
I have just enough gas

to make it back to that tin warehouse
on the Yukon River
where a matt-haired dog
lay on the concrete like a dead thing,
moved as much,
and a man had stared strangely at me.
He spoke of fishing
and horrible storms.

- Where are you headed?

- North.

In Coldfoot I eat an eight dollar hamburger
in the only building there,
then, head south,
head somewhere,
back towards the Arctic Circle.

It begins raining,

and miles down the road

I see a man,

standing in the gravelly mud of the roadside,

his back to the road,

looking across stunted trees and boggy ground

that stretch away from the road

for miles until the mountains,

almost invisible in the rain,

rise like the spine of some giant beast

buried face down in the mud.

The man extends no thumb.

He is not even facing the road,

but there is something

and I stop beside him.

He carries a staff,

a bundle wrapped in a cloth sack.

He turns and faces me.

His Inuit eyes,

black as caribou hooves,

are the empty spaces between stars
on a clear night
or a day during a winter
when the sun never comes.

I move things off the seat;
without saying a word
he slowly climbs in.

- Where are you headed?

- Fairbanks, he says,
where are you going?

I hesitate.

- South, I say.

He asks me where I come from
and again I hesitate.

Finally, I say - Alabama.

He shakes his head.

He has never heard of such a place.

When we stop

the old man builds a fire from moss and branches
while I put up the tiny tent.

It is too small for more than one person.

I tell him to take it and the sleeping bag,
and I will stretch out in the back of the blazer.

He nods and pulls some dried meat
from somewhere out of his clothes
and sits by the fire and chews.

I pull a crushed sandwich
out of plastic bag
and eat slowly.

We watch the bag curl, drip and disappear
with a green flash in the flames.

John is the old Indian's name.

He wants to know

what I have to drink,

and I go to the car and get the whiskey

I have brought all this way, untouched.
All around us
light lies on the land
like something permanent and incomprehensible.

He begins slowly
and tells of his brother
who took the dogs out onto the sea ice;
when days passed and he did not return
with a load of sealflesh and hides,
there was nothing to do but go out and look.
After two days
John found the rifle
far out on the frozen ice,
a cartridge jammed in the action.
He found the head and frozen rib cage.
The sled was shattered,
the dogs killed in their harnesses,
one by one,
and their stomachs eaten away.
The polar bear had eaten his brother's legs,
the stomach, heart and lungs.
He tracked the wounded animal
another two days across the ice,
and when he found the bear,
it tried to run,
and John fired into the hindquarters,
the legs, the back;
the bear roared and thrashed and tried to charge,
writhing on the ice in a white heap of anger.
Then John stopped firing,
and unloaded his rifle,
the cartridges falling onto the ice
like brass and lead teeth
plucked from a metal beast.

He clubbed the bear in the head
again and again
until the stock of the empty rifle
and the skull
cracked together with a heavy sound.
The bear lay dead,
and John collapsed on the ice,
tears freezing against his cheeks
while the blood of the bear
formed red crystals
as it oozed into the white fur.
When John returned
to the tiny village on the edge of the frozen sea,
he lay in the dark underground house.
The seal oil lamp
cast strange shadows on the low ceiling
while he passed in and out of feverish madness,
and his wife fed him and nursed him.
She took the black, frozen toes,
took them out of his boots by the entrance
and burned them in the little iron stove
because if she cast them away, somewhere outside,
they would never rot, only lie there forever.

The Innuits sits quietly for some time.
We pass the bottle
and stare into the fire.
Then he continues.

In summer
the whole village would go out in boats
when the belugas passed by
in their annual migration.
The Eskimos would drag
the great, white dolphin-looking beasts

onto the ice
and carve the great slabs of flesh,
separating meat into piles,
and every family,
every man, woman and child
had a supply of meat.
It was so much that the village never went hungry.
But when John was younger,
before the two cities in the South grew large,
before the white men came with oil and money,
drugs and liquor,
before all of this
the village had been much larger
and there were enough men, boats and harpoons
to hunt the great bowheads that passed the village
further out to sea
in their yearly, northward migration.
They would always take one whale,
sometimes two,
providing more meat and oil
and blubber and baleene as well,
than all the belugas and seals of a year.
The captains of the boats
and the harpoon men in the bow
were heroes everyone worshipped.

Farther up the frozen coast
was another village similar to John's.
Its young men had also been drawn away
into the white man's alleys,
oil plants and jails further south.
One season,
years after the last bowhead hunt had taken place,
the remaining men from this village
came to John's village to plan a hunt.
Months later when the first of the bowheads

were spotted out in the ice choked sea,
the men from both villages went out together.
John's son,
who had stayed with the old ways,
who was a master hunter of polar bear and walrus,
seals and belugas,
went out with the other men in the long, narrow boats.
To John,
it seemed as if the old days had returned.
Out in the ocean,
among jagged pieces of floating ice,
the new harpoon gun of the other village,
heavy and made of shining brass,
roared over the ocean,
sending the giant spear with the exploding head
deep into the flesh of a giant bowhead.
But the harpoon hit the whale too far back,
and the beast rose from the water
like a giant black barnacled arm and fist
and came crashing down onto one of the boats,
crushing it in half.
Those who were not instantly killed
froze and drowned in the bloody water.
The old gun from John's village
fired a second harpoon into the whale's head.
The village cheered when the boats came in,
towing the immense animal,
but quickly silenced
when they saw that a boat was missing
and the whalers said nothing.
John did not see his son among the men,
and again,
he lay in the snow and wept.

The whiskey is gone.
The old man lays the bottle gently in the fire.
We watch the glass glow,
and the label blacken,
as the thin branches crackle, shift,
dissolve into ash.
John finishes,
- The village became poison in my blood,
the sea and the land there were cursed in my eyes.
I took my wife
and brought her here into the South,
into what is now a white man's land,
and we live in a hovel in Fairbanks
where I carve bones to pay for my whiskey.

He takes his cloth bundle and unwraps it
and there are whitened pieces
of caribou and moose antler,
broken pieces of walrus ivory,
deep brown shards of mammoth tusk,
hollow caribou hooves,
polished and smoothed
by mosses and lichens,
and miles of wandering the endless tundra,
frozen hard in winter,
boggy and sinking in summer,
giving off insects from the melted ice of its veins.
John is a scrimshaw artist
and collects bones and ivory, finds it, buys it
in places like Coldfoot
and then carves it with images
and sells it in the tourist shops in Fairbanks.
- There are ways to go on living,
he says,
- ways to continue.
We sit for a long time,

saying nothing,
then John crawls into my tent to sleep,
and I lie down
in the back of the mud-cached blazer.
I lie there for a long time,
without sleeping.

Part 3 - The Island in the Grassy Lake

1

I leave John in Fairbanks,
a city full of drunk Indians,
gravel, dust and old cars.
I head south,
past glaciers and grey rivers.
This is a better road,
completely paved,
but the frost has heaved and buckled the asphalt
into frozen waves of tar.
Bald eagles dive still ponds along the highway.
I cook my meals in a blackened pan,
wedged among burning limbs inside rings of stone.
At night I sleep with my rifle beside me
in the green tent pitched close
to the rushing cold of grey rivers.
Water battering and caressing the stones
lulls me into sleep deep enough
that dreams are not remembered in the morning.
I pass no one on the road,
see no villages, no houses.

Occasionally, a gas station
with someone living behind it.
Occasionally, a cow and calf moose
standing chest deep in flowers and grass.

2

I arrive in Anchorage and go to Lake Hood
where the floatplanes land and take off.
The lake is filled with geese and ducks
and floating islands of feathers.
The shores are cluttered with shacks and small offices,
plane engines and discarded wings,
and every wall bristles with the whitened antlers
of caribou and moose.
Floatplanes roar into the sky
and drop heavilv onto the lake
scattering fowl in all directions.
Everywhere are birds
perched on buildings, stopping cars,
hissing, flapping and honking.
They seem confused
by the giant, loud birds
that have taken over their environment.
Black bear hunting is open year round,
but the pilots tell me it is impossible
to hunt them in the summer
when the rainforests and thickets
are green and dense,
boiling with insects.
They ask me,
would I like to go fishing?
But I find a man
who has cabins on Alexander Lake to the west

where he leaves men to fish for pike.
He says a black bear
has been harassing fishermen,
breaking windows and tearing up canoes.
Early the next morninig he takes me there.

3

There are two men
going out in the same plane with me.
They are old,
look rich and satisfied,
seem unafraid of death,
seem not to give a damn.
They just want to fish
and then they'll die,
so what.
I like them.

In the air
it looks and feels as if the plane is barely moving.
Below us are the grey waters
of Cook Inlet
and then the grey mud
and green mold
of the tidal flats.
An ancient, wooden freighter
is wedged into the muddy shoreline,
part of it has been torn away by waves,
the rest remains cemented in the mud.
The plane crawls through the air
drops lower,
and below us now
are yellow grass swamps
and dense green rainforests of scraggly spruce.

The pilot is eating a sandwich
out of a paper bag
and holds it out to me.

- No thanks, I say.

One of the old fishermen once flew planes,
and he leans forward
and talks loudly to the pilot
about various types of small planes,
which are better and why.

The young pilot beside me
finishes his sandwich,
reaches down by my boot,
black with moose blood, grey with dust,
and pulls a lever,
moving wingflaps.

The plane drops lower
as the old man behind me
tells of a time
his own plane hit three ducks in the air.
They were sucked into the engine
and the impact broke an oil line.
He tried to put the plane down on a river,
but could not see
through the smoke
and the oil covering the windshield.
He held the nose of the plane too low,
and it hit the river nose first,
sunk
and the old man said,
he almost drowned,
almost didn't get out,
and when he did,
he swam to shore
and saw above the river
a cloud of feathers

drifting down slowly
in the shape of a descending question mark.

I watch green hills
covered in grass and alder thickets
grow larger as we approach.
The plane climbs higher
and out of the window to my right
mountains loom,
outrageous, impossible things,
such rock,
height and mass,
rising without purpose from the green
floor of swamps, spruce and shallow lakes.
Patches of summer snow glisten
on the purple rock slopes
like fallen flags of surrender.
Below,
the tiny figure of a cow moose
stands alone,
looking off in some direction
and even from here I see
her ears flapping.
Further along I see a black bear
hunching along in a lurching run
like a giant, silly dog.
I feel a touch of adrenaline
begin a slow creep through my veins.
Then, I see
some sprawled silver thing
among the green
so out of place looking, this metal
catching the sun
and flashing the rays at us
like a distress signal.
There are no roads here,

no houses or trucks or anything
this side of Cook Inlet.

So what is this?

The old man behind me makes a joke
- Bad landing.

I see the wrecked heap of plane now,
one wing off to the side
like a shiny beetle wing
carried away from the carcass by ants.
The plane does not look as though
it has been there long,
shining and brilliant,
new looking in the sun.
The pilot beside me grins
and begins dropping the plane
to the river below
where he will leave the old men by themselves
to fish.

4

Days later I am hunched in head high grass.
Listening.
I peer through grass and green mosquito netting
covering my head.
My eyes search for a black form,
the wounded bear,
perhaps also hunched low to the ground,
perhaps waiting for me to come closer.
I rub my fingertips together,
smearing the blood into the tiny lines in my skin.
I am on an island of tall birch trees
and dense high grass that connects to the lake shore
at a narrow stretch of black mud and more dense grass.

The lake is shallow,
vast and full of grass.
Beaver lodges rise out of weeds,
like old, wooden forts with seagull flags,
white and stout in the wind.
There are a few, empty meager shacks on the lake shore
and on this one island.
There are a few battered canoes.
On the far shore is an ancient rowboat
nearly swallowed in grass,
broken by a muddy trail of moose tracks
that continue into the lake.
Beneath the shallow surface
round balls of moose droppings
lie on top of porous mud
like giant, strange pearls
cast out, unwanted.
Enormous ravens swoop from tree to tree
in a rush of air
and loudly challenge seagulls,
eagles, bears and men.

I listen for breathing,
the swish of grass,
a roar or growl,
a murmur of pain,
a gurgle in the throat.
I am far now
from the dense undergrowth of Alabama
where I tracked arrowed deer
with nothing but a knife.
I am far now
from my altar of moose,
which by now
is nothing
but stripped bones

lying on bare ground,
thin and exposed,
having become nothing,
as all altars eventually do.
Somewhere out in the grass
there is a creature without hooves,
with hands and feet like mine.
It is not a brown, a grizzly,
only a black bear,
but a bear nonetheless,
bigger than I am,
wounded and angry
and somewhere I cannot see
in the high, dense grass.
I have never before
been afraid of an animal,
but I have never before
been an animal,
crouched in grass,
rifle held like a spear,
feeling the blood in my veins
reach the fingertips
then turn around
and go back again.
I am a little bit past
excitement now,
a little bit beyond
the thrill of the hunt.
Of this black animal
somewhere in the grass
I am a little bit
afraid.

5

The rat watches me from the floor.
I spread peanut butter on crackers,
drink hot chocolate,
and whisper things to him.
He watches me, not answering.
I catch mosquitoes and toss them
crushed, crippled, but still living
into the candle flame
where wings vaporize with a tiny flash,
or sometimes,
I lay them wriggling at the edge of the wax
and watch it flow,
hot and oozing
over them.
These small cruelties
are what the entire flock
pays for the blood they take.
A few tortured insect deaths
is all my blood is worth.
- And you, what is your blood worth,
I say to the rat.
No answer.
I throw him a cracker, heavy with peanut butter.
The mosquitoes do not pay enough.
I would kill every one if I could
to make them pay for one bite,
one drop of my blood.
It is early, and I let myself doze.
Tonight, I will take the canoe,
paddle out into the lake
and sit there,
watching the surrounding shore for bear.

I will wear my headnet and thick clothes;
the mosquitoes will be out.

At midnight I awake
and know I must have heard something,
and pause
thinking it was the sounds of fish bones crunching.
For the past two days
I had gone out in the canoe
with my spinning rod and three spoons,
two yellow, one red,
and caught pike,
filling the battered boat
with the gasping fish,
their small barracuda teeth
and speckled skin.
They would not fight when hooked,
but once in the boat
went mad every time,
thrashing and bleeding,
trying to bite.
Each day I ate fish
for breakfast, lunch and supper.
I picked my teeth
with tiny fish ribs
and their blood stayed under my fingernails.
At night,
I stared into the fire
and imagined myself an eagle,
or seagull,
hurtling through air
towards the dark form of a fish
just under the surface.
The guts and fins,
the heads and bones
were in a growing pile

behind the little cabin I slept in.
I had been waiting for the bear to come.

But what was that sound?

It is the rat
perched on my foot like a growth,
like the boot is growing another
and will soon divide, split.

He chews my shoelaces
with a quiet crunching,
not unlike the sound
a bear would make
swallowing fish heads and bones
behind this thin-walled shack.

*I remember another shack,
one filled with squirming rats.*

I shudder
and shake the rat to the floor.

I do not mind a rat,
but tell it, whispering,
- Do not touch me.

I rise
and here in Southern Alaska
the night glows blue,
almost dark,
and there, outside the window,
the bear hunches,
poking a fish head
with his black paw.
The best thing would be
to shoot through the window,
but I know that would not satisfy me.
I take my rifle and creep to the door,
fling it open,
thinking he will pause, hesitate, charge.
By the time my rifle is to my shoulder, however,

he is a dim figure
retreating full speed through the chest high grass,
only visible for a second.
The gunblast echoes.
Then, silence.
Out in the lake
a beaver slams the water with his tail.

6

The next morning I found his tracks in mud
and no blood.
I tracked him across the island
believing I had missed.
But there on some grass
I found a few spatters of red.
These continued with the tracks for awhile
and then disappeared.
The tracks went on,
the bear never stopping to rest
and I thought back over the shot,
replayed it in my mind
and figured now
I had grazed him
down his left side.
The tracks went on
leading to the narrow stretch of mud,
and head high grass,
that connects the island to the lake shore.
The tracks went in
headed for the shore
but never gave any sign
the bear paused
or slowed to rest.

I sat for a moment
in the muddy grass,
disgusted with myself,
all the fear and excitement gone.
I knew the bear
would not die,
and I knew
I would not see it again.

Part 4 - Wolf Lake

1

Back at a hotel in Anchorage,
I am on the phone talking a long time.
Something in the distance,
miles,
and time gone by,
makes me cruel,
speak cruel words
until she cries on the phone.
I am cruel
because there are places she has reached in me,
and there are empty places
I am afraid
no one will ever reach.
I hang up the phone
and stand at the window
as if what I search for
might suddenly appear
on the other side of the glass.

But across the road is only an airport
where tiny planes take off and land
on two parallel runways,
and how,
how did I not hear
the crash of that green plane
that lies upended on its side
surrounded by fire trucks,
resting awkwardly on a crushed wing
under a column of smoke
that rises to point
like an enormous finger
toward purple mountains veined with snow,
beyond which
I will fly in the morning
to a distant lake.

2

The pilot's name is Jim.
He has a heart tattooed on his hand,
and his hunting obsession is moose.
- I don't hunt black bears myself
but I've seen 'em around Wolf Lake
where I hunt moose.
I tell him I'm from Alabama.
- We don't get many Southerners up here.
Had a couple once from North Carolina.
Wanted to kill a moose and grizzly with their pistols.
I had doubts about 'em,
took 'em out anyway.
A grizzly tore up their camp,
stole their food
and they just sat there and watched,

never fired a shot.

When I picked 'em up they were mad as hell,
demanding a refund.

Hell, that's what they were out there for.

The bear came right to 'em, made it easy.

- Did you give 'em a refund?

- Hell no!

Then they called the FAA on me,

told 'em I used a lighter in the cockpit.

Well shit, the lights don't work in the cockpit.

When it's dark I have to use a lighter,

or I can't see the damn compass.

I had to pay all kinds of fines because of that.

The walls of Jim's office
are covered with moose racks and maps.

He looks at me, grinning.

- You know, some people are just crazy.

I look at Jim and smile.

3

Wolf Lake is a tiny, narrow stretch of water
choked with grass.

Jim lands and lets me off on top of a beaver lodge.

It is pouring rain.

I step off the beaver lodge into the grass
and sink to my waist.

I wade to dry ground,
carrying my things over my head.

There is an old couple on the plane.

Jim is flying them to a fishing lodge
their son owns.

They are from upstate New York.

The plane is filled with crates of Scotch for the lodge.

The old woman was worried.

- He sure seems to need a lot of Scotch.

The old man sat up front
and was having the time of his life.

- Yessir, he's a drinker!

The old woman had looked at me.

- Honey, what will you do
if a bear comes into your camp?

- Well, I'd said,

- I hope it's that easy.

4

The rain does not stop for two days and two nights.

Water seeps through the walls of my tent.

My clothes and food are soaked.

My rifle rusts.

There is no fire.

At night it is cold.

I huddle in my tent and read by lantern.

My books are heavy and warped with water.

On the second night

I awoke with a start

as if someone had seized me

by the shoulders.

I sat up in my dark tent,

shivering in the cold.

I had been dreaming

about Jenny.

It has been a while now

since I last saw her.

The morning I left town

I went to her house.

She was there alone,

home from college for the summer.
She was working as a lifeguard
at the local country club
where she would earn her pay,
something for the old men to gawk at
as she lay by the pool
in her black bikini.
Each time I went
out there to see her
I hated the way
I found them,
staring and talking
as they drank at the bar over the pool
after a round of golf.
It didn't seem right,
such older men
wanting to put their hands
on something young and beautiful.
I still considered her mine.

 The morning I left,
I had walked into her house
and back to her room
where she was sleeping on top of the covers,
curled up
in a thin white t-shirt
and tiny black underwear.
I had undressed,
closed her bedroom door behind me,
sat down on her bed
and for a long time,
watched her while she slept.

 Although she was beautiful,
there was a terrible emptiness about her
as if she were not real,

somehow
not even human.
She was like an emerald
cut from the deep insides
of some dark rock.
Her beauty could gain control of a man,
could twist him, weaken him,
and finally kill him,
kill the very spirit
that made him a man.
Men would fight over her
like they would over diamonds or gold,
and in the end
she was just like a diamond,
beautiful and glittering,
but hard and cold.
There seemed to be very little to her,
little feeling, less thought,
mainly just the nothing light of beauty,
the same nothing light you could see
in an emerald, a diamond,
a beautiful nothing light
that could hold your eye
like the mesmerizing blazes of a fire.

Her breasts rose and fell evenly
as she slept.
I tore my gaze away
and looked out the bedroom window.
At some point you have to shake it off,
to look away from the fire,
away from the nothing light
of the jewel in your hand
and come to the realization
that whatever its color, its imagined worth, its light,

a diamond, an emerald,
is after all
nothing
but a rock;
you must look down at the rock in your hand
and let it go,
let it fall back into the dust.
I reached for her,
began moving my palms
across the smooth brown thighs,
across her flat stomach,
over her nipples.

*Her nothing light
played about inside my head
like an errant beam of light
leading a lost man
deeper and deeper into a dark, empty cave,
the nothing light playing off dank, dripping walls
and stalactites pointing downwards
like thick, accusing fingers
to a hard floor pasty with the shit of bats
and there would be no way out,
no way out,
We made love,
slow and furious.*

*and the nothing light would shine on nothing,
illuminate nothing,
nothing but dark, empty hardness.*
She stopped,
shuddered,
then rolled off, exhausted.

*The light would play,
play itself out,
fade and disappear
and the lost man would stumble on in the dark*

*until confused and exhausted,
lost in the darkness,
he would sink down in shit,
eyes wide and seeing nothing,
he would curl up into himself
on the hard stone floor,
curl inward and then
die in the dark.*

The only love she felt
was for the desire she caused,
the terrible power
emanating from her own beauty
that was like some terrible god
we both worshipped,
only she was the high priestess,
and myself,
the weakened,
willing sacrifice.
I flipped her over,
onto her stomach
and thrust myself against her,
clenching the short blonde hair in my fist,
sinking my teeth
into her thin, brown shoulder.
She cried out in pain
as I emptied my anger
deep into her.
I remember lying there
for a long time afterwards.
She slept
with one leg
draped over my stomach
while I ran my fingers
through her hair.
I did not sleep

but stared up at the ceiling
where the fan slowly turned.
When I rose to leave,
I did not wake her
but slipped quietly out the door.

5

The next day it stops raining.
I crawl out of my tent,
hang a rope,
hang all my clothes on it,
put my books on a stump in the sun
and get a fire going.
I dump a can of spaghetti into the blackened pan,
lay it in the fire,
take my binoculars
and begin glassing the hills.
Far to the south are giant mountains
covered in glaciers and snow.
To the west are smaller mountains,
bare rock slopes with patches of snow,
closer, but still far away.
To the north are two green hills.
The tops bare and rocky,
the rest covered with grass and alder thickets.
They are about three miles away.
I watch them through the binoculars,
figuring these low hills might have berries on top,
knowing the open tops of these hills
will be my best chance of seeing a bear.
The spaghetti smokes and sputters.
I take the pan out of the fire
and place a metal cup

with lake water and a tea bag inside,
down into the hot branches.

I eat spaghetti
while waiting for the yellow water
to turn to tea.

I never drink the tea,
but take off after the bear
as soon as I see it
with only my gun, my pack and knife.
I travel the length of the lake
and into the swamps beyond it.
The bear is high above me,
swaggering across the bare hilltop,
eating berries.

He is big,
and at first looks to be a grizzly.
As soon as I see he is black,
I take off after him,
and in my adrenalin rush
I forget my thirst and the tea in the fire.
After a mile
I find myself
in grass higher than my head
and staggering through, blind,
plunge into a hole
and feel myself trapped in some thick ooze,
a heavy scent making my head spin.
I feel myself sinking
and can't move in the warm thickness.
I panic and thrash my arms
and feel an ugly cold fear,
nothing like the fear
I had felt tracking the wounded bear.
My rifle sling has snagged a branch,
and slowly,

I am able to pull myself out of the mire.
I climb onto firmer ground
and sit down for a while,
staring at the deep mud hole,
almost invisible,
in the tall grass.

Finally, I push on towards the hilltop
but become turned around in an alder thicket
dense and impenetrable,
except for tiny tunnels
that wind through it like a maze.

Disgusted and angry,
I give up chasing the bear
and try to head back to my camp,
but it's another hour
before I can even find a way
back downhill.

When I finally reach my tent,
I collapse inside it,
exhausted and muddy,
cursing myself
and the clouds of insects that follow me everywhere.
When I rise from my tent,
I stand and face the hills
and see the bear again.

Part 5 - Over the Hills and Far Away

1

*digging in the rock moss hilltop green
with black claws the nighttime color of clear winter days*

*i gather blue blood bleeding blueberries
into sugar heaps
as sweet as newborn moose calves
lying naked and new
with sad faces begging to be devoured
in the high wet grass
i swagger through meadows mine
but test the air
for grizzly bears
who will kill us out of pure meanness
or sows of my own kind
dangerous with their cubs in tow
clouds skid low in the blue sky
and show their phantom selves
in flat silver lakes
where i sometimes catch ducks
and eat all but the heads
the bills of which
i learned long ago
will give me stomach pains
i have seen none of the giant birds today
that roar between clouds and hilltops
and try to catch me in their shadows
i am afraid of them*

2

Finally, on top of the mountain
I lay my rifle in the wet grass
and lean forward,
hands on my knees,
and swallow air like cold water.
I curse myself
for being fat and lazy, out of shape,
slow and weak,

and for having stupidly left camp
without water,
not having drunk anything since last night.
The bear is plainly visible
on the open slope
of the next hill over,
raking berries up into messy piles
and devouring them
with teeth and tongue turned blue.
I have made my way around the lake
through more swamps
and up the hill.
Finally at the top,
I see that the bear
has crossed the alder jungle valley
and made it to the top
of the next green pinnacle.
Too much sweat has poured out of me
and my mouth has long since gone dry.
I have followed the bear all day
and need to hurry
before he disappears again
or I give out.
I hunch forward, gripping my knees,
and gasp like an old man,
not used to this,
not used to these mountains.
I am more used to
ambushing deer from trees,
and heavy midday lunches.
Then, I see something
a few yards to my left.
It is the severed leg of a moose.
Past it I see another leg
and then a raven,

hunched in the hut of a ribcage.
I go and examine the half-eaten carcass
that lies half-hidden
under great heaps of ripped moss,
crumbling clods of soil
and a few spruce branches
ripped from a tree.

The marks of great claws
are gouged into the rocks and loose soil
of the hilltop
where the moss has been pulled up.

I see giant tracks
pressed deeply into the dirt.
They are not from the black bear.
The other side of the hill
drops down into a timbered valley.
There the grizzly must be resting.

Or perhaps right here
in that thick tangle,
that nearby island of brush and trees
with boulders heaped about outside.
I see a huge pile of droppings
purple with berries.

I see a dropped piece of meat
like a red flower
among the grey and pink moss.

Slowly,
slowly,
I back away.

I push on,
walking down the trail the black bear has left
through high, wet grass,
working my way down into the alder thicket,
and eventually,
out the other side.

I climb the next hill
and coming out into the open
moss and rock blueberry top,
I take off my wet boots and pack
and slip quietly forward
on steaming cotton socks.
I cannot find the bear
and figure he has gone into the alder thicket
to the right,
the direction he was headed when I last saw him.
The wind changes,
now that I am close,
and blows my scent right to where I think he is.
There is nothing to do but try and circle around him
to the next hill over
and wait for him there.
He must be aware of my presence now.
I cross the top of the hill
and descend down
into another alder hell
that seems filled with a musty smell
that may come from grizzlies
or my own fear of them.
I worm and crawl my way
through twisting alder branches
until suddenly,
I come out onto the bank of a muttering stream
where moss hangs over the edge
like a torn carpet,
and rocks are slick with slime.
I crouch among green tinged stones
to splash a little water on my face,
and then,
I see the bear,
standing in the shallow, rushing water

like an immense shadow,
caught in a world of light.
His breath,
white in the air,
drifts through his jaws continually
as if all the mist rising off the stream
were nothing more
than the beast's exhalations.
Quickly, I crouch
in the dead heap of a tree,
but the bear has seen me.
He is watching me,
and moans from deep within his body,
loudly clicking his teeth.
My heart pushes at my ribs,
towards the bear.
I hold the rifle as still as I can,
against the white, wind-blasted roots
of the fallen tree.
The cross hairs waver
high on the bear's shoulder,
and I fire.
I miss,
and frantically work the bolt,
while the bear stands motionless,
apparently shocked at the sound.
I imagine he has never heard a gun before
except for shots fired in the sound-swallowing distance.
Before he can do anything,
I hold a little lower
and calmer now,
I fire again.
I cannot see the bullet impact,
see no stumble or hunched back.
He does not fall,

but rises onto his hind legs
and sweeps the air with his paws,
trying to slap or crush
whatever unseen thing it is
that now has hold of him.

The bear roars
a blueberry roar of blue tongue and blue teeth,
a roar of roaring water,
filled with the pink backs
of salmon wriggling upstream,
a roar of ground squirrels crushed in their tunnels
by giant, digging
black hands of terror.

It is the first time I have heard
any predator roar,
bear or cat,
and it is the first sound of any kind, it seems
that I have ever heard,
a terrifying loud cry
blasting the green hills,
an animal cry that seems to shame and eclipse
the utterances of all other creatures.

The bear's mouth
is open to the sky,
he staggers backwards
through the rushing water
on short, massive hind legs.
He roars the black fury in his eyes,
in his thick, red heart.
He swings desperately at air,
unable to understand
with his small beast brain,
that death does not always shamle forward
in a heavy shouldered form like his own
to grip him in white teeth and black claws.

The roar becomes
a mournful, throat-rattle-howl at death,
the same death that runs wild in a wolf pack,
hunches in the humped shoulders of a grizzly
and lies quiet and still
in every rifle.
He tries to catch it in the air,
to seize it and bite it,
and roll his weight on top of it.
Feeling it,
feeling death gnawing a little red hole in his side,
he turns on himself
and claws his own shoulder,
snaps his teeth at the bleeding hole
that death has crawled into
like the first worm.
Losing his balance, forever,
he topples backwards
into the shallow water,
and the current drags him a short distance
over the mossy stones.
He moans
and half-heartedly claws at the blue sky
with a black hand
and then lies silent,
the hills and the stream
still vibrating with the roar and moan
of a beautiful and powerful thing
being eaten alive
by death.

Part 6 - Rotten Water Fever

1

I open my eyes slowly
and feel them already,
tiny wriggling organisms
eating hair size tunnels through my brain,
channeling through the red meat of my heart,
boring tiny windows in the white tissue of my eyes.
I feel heavy, weighted to the ground
as if I will never rise again,
but lie here forever,
a lump among the dirty knuckles of twisted roots
pushing out of the black soil
at the base of this tree.
I will lie here and be a part of this tree,
watch creatures as they pass
through the grass clearings between the alder mazes.
Bears and wolves will not gnaw me
and ravens will not lift me to the sky
piece by tattered piece
because they will not know me
at the bottom of this tree,
now a part of this tree,
and death will not know me
and so I will not die.
But the rotten water has wrapped
loose, brown fingers around my brain,
seeps through my system,
fills me,
and if I were cut,
I would trickle from the wound

like the trapped brown water
that oozes from a fresh axe blow
in a tree after heavy rain.
Down in the yellow brown swamps
where creeks course through alder hells,
across vast plains of grass
and swell at beaver dams
into black pools.
I could find no clear water,
no glass streams glinting over rocks.
In these lowlands between low hills
the water is rotten and brown
and weaves through grass tangles and alder thickets,
like giant slow slugs,
stopping at each beaver dam,
curling up, then pushing on.
This water is filled with beavers
and the microscopic organisms living on and in them,
floating in clouds of thousands
through the dank streams,
poisoning any human stomachs that might drink them.
I drank,
I imagined,
millions of them.
I drank the black water
collected in the corners of grassy moose beds.
I gathered handfuls,
speared through with moose hairs,
and swallowed it down.
I cupped hands,
gathered up the tiny ocean
contained in a moose track.
The blackness swirled,
writhed with tiny organisms
struggling to rise through the water,

to the sinking surface
that lowered down to the ocean floor of my palms
as water oozed between my fingers.

I pressed my mouth
down into moose tracks
and sucked until my teeth and lips
pressed into mud.

And finally,
I drank from streams and ponds themselves,
drank in the poisonous essence of the beaver
and then lay down here,
among the knees of this tree to die,
too tired to move on
or climb the tree to see where I was,
though I had left my rifle sling
clinging to a branch in my efforts,
and it now dangles
like a short noose.

Yesterday,
after I killed the bear,
I found myself too exhausted
and plagued with thirst
to carry the heavy hide and claws
as well as the skull, in my pack,
and so I hid the black robe
in an alder bush.

After I had skinned the bear
and removed his head,
I stood over the red carcass
where it lay in the stream
and opened up his chest.
As the water rushed in
and the stream clouded with red,
I reached deep inside,
past the shattered lungs

until I felt
the warm,
giant red fist of heart.
I cut it loose
and took it with me.

As long as I was high in the mountains
I could see Wolf Lake glittering in the distance,
but once I was down into the swamps,
it became dark.

Weary from walking and thirst,
I became lost in the maze
of waterways and alder thickets.
I wandered in a terror of hidden grizzlies,
a terror of dried insides,
my guts rasping and cringing for water,
my tongue like a dry rag.
My eyes felt dry and thick when I blinked.

Eventually, I gave in,
drank the first water I found,
then again at the next,
and once I had started
could not stop
and so drank and drank
until I felt I would burst.
I then tried to climb
this thick, gnarled tree
to see if I could see my lake glittering
somewhere in the blue darkness.
I tried to use my sling for a rope
but could not manage it.
I collapsed heavily at the base of the tree
and could not rise again.
The rest of the night
I drifted in and out of consciousness
as the fever settled into my brain.

I dreamed the tree was growing,
growing more gnarled and thick,
encircling me,
enclosing me inside its dark trunk.

2

Awake again,
it is now daylight,
and I know if I do not find clean water
today,
I will weaken and be unable to move
and then dehydrate and die.
I resolve to get up,
but the fever has me gripped tightly
in its brown water claws,
and I feel
maybe it would be best to rest a while,
to lie here and rest
forever.
My stomach
writhes with hunger.
I reach deep inside my pack
and take out the heart
wrapped in a piece of torn cloth.
I dig some matches
out of the bottom of my pack,
scrape together some moss,
a few broken limbs,
and in a few minutes
I manage to build a small fire.
I impale the heart
on a short stick
and hold it in the flames,

watching it darken
and smolder
until thick smoke rises
from the hardened, dark meat
like some final demon
driven late
from the last scraps of the animal's flesh.
I hold it over my mouth
and let a hot drop of blood
fall from the heavy heart
onto my tongue.
The blood dark meat
burns in my mouth
as I chew and swallow the thick tissue
until there is none left.
It tastes
like the dark blood that had pulsed
beneath the black hide,
and maybe
there is some taste
of the bear's moan,
I had seen,
white, escaping
out of his darkness
and into the mist of the stream.
I lie back,
against the tree
and once again I sleep.
When I awake,
I reach under my coat
and touch my chest
where I feel
my heart beating.
I try to imagine it
still and unmoving

as the bear's heart had been
when I pulled it out of his chest
and out of the rushing stream.
It is cold now;
fog has formed in the trees.
Twisting shapes
detach themselves from the mist
and float like spirits through the spruce,
slowly dissolving as they go.
Then through my heavy lids
I see something black before me,
a towering creature with heaving sides,
sad, black eyes
and steam rising from his flanks
into the cool morning air.
Water drips from his great belly,
his drooping trunk of a nose
and from his crown of dark grey fur antlers.
He stands before me in the fog,
another shape formed by the twisting mist.
I sink down inside myself,
try to sink down into the grass
and hide from the spirit of the moose
that I slaughtered on the northward road,
believing he has appeared before me
now that my death is at hand,
to welcome me into a world of vague shapes and mist,
a cold, formless world
that I myself introduced him to.
I draw myself into a little ball
at the base of the tree,
hoping I will disappear in the fog,
that the spirit of the moose
will not be able to see me,
and yet,

I am more terrified still,
that I am actually disappearing into the fog,
leaving the forest and becoming a part of the mist
as I forced the moose to do
on that abandoned road.
But the animal simply watches me
with no malice or expression of any kind
other than the blank, confused stare
I last saw near the Arctic Circle
as I stood over the dying moose
and looked down on him
as he stared up at me
and heaved a last, agonized breath
while blood flowed around, and beyond, my boots.
The moose stares at me for a long time,
not trusting this new bulge at the base of the tree.
He steps closer,
close enough to take my scent out of the still air
and then snorts in fear,
trots across the little grass clearing
and plunges into a wall of alder.
He is no ghost.
He is the moose I had seen each night at Wolf Lake.
The same bull with the crooked left antler
that waded out to his neck each evening,
out among the ducks
and low beaver heads, sliding across the glass surface.
I know this moose,
sent up from the lake
to find me and show me the way home,
as if the very spirit of the moose I killed
had forgiven me,
decided that I should live,
should continue the journey, after all
and had sent his brother creature,

this living moose,
to watch over me,
guide me out of the wilderness.
I try to pull my muscles together,
pull them out of their rotten water bath.
At first I cannot,
but after much struggle,
I rise,
feeling myself swirl in the fog.
I lift my pack and rifle
and stagger down the trail
the moose has left in the wet grass.
I follow his path back into an alder thicket.
I struggle through it, staggering
like a beetle beset by ants
and breaking through the other side,
I see the narrow length of Wolf Lake
with its circling ducks and beaver lodge islands.
I see the green dome of my tent.

Part 7 - Tales from the Bear Skull

1

Lying underneath
the green walls of my tent,
with oozing rainwater
soaking my clothes
and stinging the red welts
where insects have marked me,
the tent seems

a giant drop of green water,
and I,
some struggling protozoa,
struggling weakly
to break out,
but with nowhere to go
should I succeed.

A new fear grips me,
the plane will not come;
maybe the pilot has died
and no one knows where I am;
the office has burned
and there is no record of my presence here.
Death passes before my eyes.

I see spiders carry their little white eggs
and hide them in the tattered remains
of my green and grey tent.
Beavers grip my leg bones
in their short thick jaws
and take them away
for use in lodges and dams,
mistaking my limbs
for limbs.

The bear skull rests on top of the stump.
The eyes, like those in a painting,
seem always fixed in my direction.
I lie sweating, mumbling,
and he watches me,
the red meat of his cheeks
turning hard and brown,
the black, beady eyes
drying, sinking back into the heavy skull
as if retreating
from the feverish sight of myself,
but nonetheless,

still watching.

The teeth seem to grow longer, brighter
or is it the fever,
or has the stump moved closer,
do the eyes stare harder,
are the flies buzzing louder
or are there any flies at all?
Is the noise somewhere inside my own skull
around which the flesh seems to dry, harden,
the eyes sink inward,
under the fire
of this rotten water fever.

By morning the skull is at the edge of my tent.
The flies dance on the smooth ballroom floor
of enamelled fangs
and listen to prehistoric murmurings,
trapped in the clenched jaws and swollen tongue.
They fly, it seems,
through the mosquito netting
like tiny black ghosts
and land in my ears,
whispering
these tales from the bear skull.
I moan and try to brush them away.

2

I sleep again
and dream;
caves with smoke-blackened walls
and giant bear skulls
piled in small pyramids.
Over a fire
some dark organ roasts,

and it seems the whole world
is for the making of bones,
growing of bones,
the cutting them out
from their prisons of flesh
in order to cast them,
red and steaming on the ground
to be gnawed to a polished, pure white,
then give up your own.

When I awaken the next morning,
the skull is in my tent.
I stare deep
into the withered, black eyes
and somehow
think of Jenny,
think of going home.
Something within me now
seems almost to recoil
at these thoughts,
and I no longer know
what love is
or what it is to want someone.
I only know
I once believed
Jenny could have filled
what feels
like such an emptiness
in my heart.
But now,
the longing I felt for her
seems like it might have been
for something else entirely,
something deeper and inexplicable.
Now, I think

I may have tricked myself
into believing all I wanted
was this one girl
to keep from going mad.
I ask myself
what is this emptiness
and do I really know what,
if anything,
there is that will ever fill it.
I imagine myself
never going home,
simply disappearing
into green mountains
that disappear
into shifting mist.

Out in the lake
the savior bull moose
stands neck deep in water
and slurps and bubbles
like a child.
Beavers swim around him, like disciples,
and slap the water with their tails.
A duck family quacks, scatters,
always in the way
of some heaving, wet mammal.
The baby ducks
are like fragile paper boats.
I do not know
what the skull wants,
whether it seeks to devour me
or has come to provide me
with sustenance instead.
I have awakened to find
this skull in my tent
with no surprise,

only with the weariness
that has accompanied each stab
to my own glass skull
from the black bird on my head.
I am tired,
and I suppose
a little terrified
at this new face,
black-eyed and red
with ivory fangs,
that madness has put on for me today.

3

That night
the fever seems to abate a little,
and I sleep
deep and dreamless
for several hours
until I suddenly awake
in terror
as if someone had wrapped
a cold hand around my heart.
I sense there is something
out in the dark,
something lurking beyond the tent walls.
I am afraid that what I have hunted for so long,
that what has been so long hunting me,
is finally come.
I hear nothing,
see nothing,
but fear it is there.
I feel the feverish blood
racing through my veins

and know I must go outside,
I know I cannot wait
here in the dark tent.
My hands tremble,
fumbling for the loaded rifle in the darkness.
All summer I have drifted northwards
into places more and more wild,
and perhaps all along
knew what I was searching for
but knew nothing else
beyond that.
I must leave the tent,
go out into the dark
and meet it.
For some time now
it has felt me coming,
felt me drawing nearer
and has waited for this night.
It has been searching for me
as I have searched for it,
and now we have found each other
on the marshy shore of Wolf Lake.
I am not sure
what it is we want from each other,
or which of us
has truly been hunting the other.
I do not know anything, anymore,
only that
it waits for me
outside,
in the blue, moonlit darkness.
I put on my boots,
staring upwards,
through the thin skin of the tent,
at the burning moon.

I rise and slip quietly through the flap.
The night is silent,
the moon's reflection
lies like an empty, silver face on the lake.
I see nothing.
I look behind me
at the stump
where the bear skull rests.
Behind it
some enormous thing,
is breathing in the dark,
a piece of the mountain
come down to the lake to drink.
Its face is furrowed
with deep scars rising out of the short hair.
The left eye
is a dark, empty socket,
darker than the black eyeball
staring from the right side of its head.
The hairs along its back are silver
and the thing seems ancient,
worn down with age.
It shambles forward
with heavy shoulders
and stares at me,
an eye of black nothingness
as if all the vast
emptiness of space
were somehow caught inside it.
It does not moan or roar
or click its teeth,
only stares in silence.
I feel the black
nothing light of the eye
dig deeply into me,

feel its gaze like some black worm
burrowing into the decaying meat
of my soul.

I do not know
whether this is the final face of madness
come down from the mountain
to tear out the last remnants of sanity
from my fevered brain
or it is a flesh and blood creature
ready to rend the life
away from my bones,
or whether there is any difference at all
in the living death that is a grizzly
and the unseen death of madness
that worms its way
through all our brains
like maggots deep
in fetid flesh.

From the snow-covered hills
far to the west
a wolf howls,
then another and another
until the invisible animals
are howling their own dark song,
older than campfires and stone tools.
The creature raises its head
and looks beyond me
towards the mountains
where the wolves sing their mad song.
It rises,
towering high above me,
and blasts the air with a roar,
darker than dried, black blood,
the twisted tangles
of alder thickets in the night,

the dank, dark water
of beaver pools,
hidden holes of sucking mud,
the beaks of black birds,
hammering, murmuring,
the claws of the black bear
gripping mossy, underwater stones
in a final death dance,
the empty eyes of moose,
dead in their blood,
and the dark, empty places
into which,
the nothing light leads.
*The roar is the darkness of nothing,
the nothingness of the dark.*

In the distance,
one by one,
wolves
cease their howling
and listen
to the mad voice,
the mad song it sings.
Standing,
the beast roars on and on
until the beavers slam the water with their tails,
and the ducks in the reeds
wake
and fly quacking to the far shore.
My rifle slips from my hands.
I drop to my knees
and dig my fingers into the soil,
grip the earth with my own claws
and howl,
howl my own mad song into the night

so that the trees,
the mountains, the wolves
and the lake
cannot help but hear it
and remember it
long after the beast has finished its song
and carried the shreds of my mind
up into the mountains
or killed me with the black daggers of its hands.

*This is the way the nothing ends,
on the marshy shore of an animal lake
where the next hunter
may find my bones,
mossy in the muck,
and hold aloft
the half-crushed skull
like the colossal, broken egg
of some dark bird.
Perhaps, the hunter will envision
what red yolk came dark and streaming
out into the moonlight,
what red yolk of madness, pain, the dark and
things roaring, howling in the dark,
envision the yolk of empty, nothing light,
and the dark eye beaming blackness.
Perhaps the hunter will imagine the life
pouring out into nothing,
the pain and hate and agony
and unending sadness of nothing
pouring out onto the nothing ground
until the head, empty
lies on the ground,
finally thinking nothing,
eyes staring,
staring upwards.*

Suddenly,
it is quiet.
I look up,
look for the shadowy beast,
the dark shadow of its eye,
but it has disappeared,
somewhere into the high grass
that waves and murmurs wind words.

4

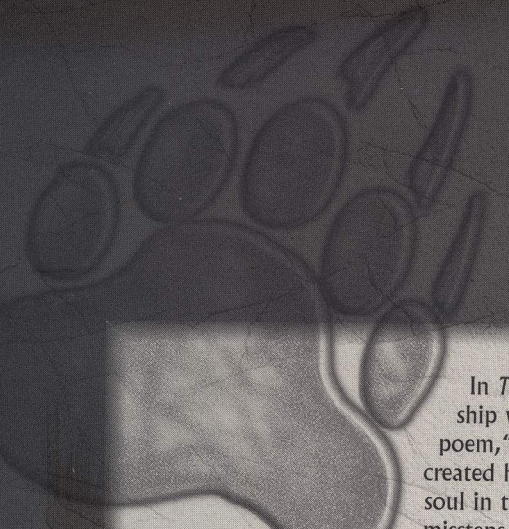
The first thing I hear the next morning
is the moose splash his way out of the lake.
Then I hear
the buzzing approach of the plane.
I open my eyes
and watch the plane descend slowly
like a metallic pteradactyl
and then skid onto the water.
Here is my only link with the other world,
my only connection to the self
that all others know.
Here is the only way back
to where I have come from,
to who I am.
The story of the beast echoes,
roaring,
inside my skull,
and I think for an instant,
of killing the pilot,
burning the plane,
and taking off on foot
back over the hills
to escape everything I have ever been

and all I might one day become.
But it passes.
Between my tent and the lake I see
an immense flock of blackbirds has gathered,
stabbing the cold earth
with their beaks.
I begin to gather my things
and the bear skull's black eyes
watch everything from the stump outside the tent.
He grins
at some story he has heard,
has known and repeated,
some story I cannot hear.
I close my eyes
and imagine
bear bones strewn across hilltops,
scattered among the rocks and moss
and soon to be lost
under deep drifts
of white, wet snow.
There must be ways
to continue the journey
but I have not found them, yet.
I pick up the skull
and wrap it carefully in a cloth sack.
I stare weakly at the morning sun,
the glinting plane,
and shudder coldly at the fever
still laced with brown thread throughout my bones,
but maybe I am a little stronger now.
I clutch the cloth wrapped bear skull
to my chest like a child,
then place it in my pack
to take back with me
because I am careful

not to leave in this wilderness
anything
I have brought into it.
I pick up the rifle
and walk down to the plane;
blackbirds
rise up off the ground
and swirl away
through drifting patches of fog
like small pieces of night
trapped inside
the pale, cold day.

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In *The Bear Hunter*, which shares kinship with Galway Kinnell's famous poem, "The Bear," David Musgrove has created his own poem of search for soul in the American Wilderness. A few missteps aside, Mr. Musgrove has shown clearly he knows how to tell a story,

which is no small feat in the era of sixty-second sound bite. There is a charming and attractive vulnerability to the voice of the narrator that draws readers into the journey. The sweep of landscape—populated by demons, ghosts, and forces of nature—is captured through powerful descriptive detail. Here the poet bridges youth and young adulthood in parts of an American South that view hunting as a cultural and social landmark. However, his individual pursuit and slaying of the bear—a ritual as old as time in any culture—as a rite of passage and redemption is startling in a contemporary American culture which has increasingly insulated itself from nature. This is a strong debut from a poet who has shown he has the potential to make a significant contribution to American Poetry.

—Steven Ford Brown

It's a complicated, ancient vision, and Musgrove has found a strong free verse line to draw it with. The tension, the torsion, maintained in this long poem has a fine and lively energy. I'm really glad he brought it back. I am grateful for the daring that propelled his adventure and for the care he gives his art. *The Bear Hunter* is an astonishingly accomplished work for a twenty-three-year-old to have written, a dangerously sure-footed beginning.

—Coleman Barks, from Introduction

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