

BEARS: A COLLECTION OF HISTORIES

By

JACOB ALDER LONG

A Thesis Submitted to the Honors College

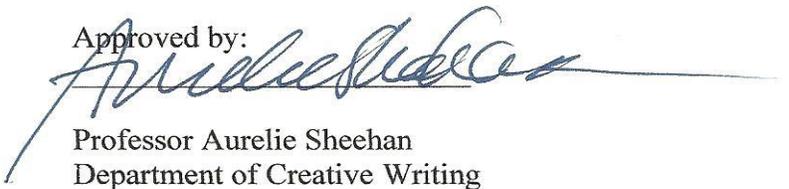
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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Aurelie Sheehan', written over a horizontal line.

Professor Aurelie Sheehan
Department of Creative Writing

Abstract

The purpose of this project is to approach a politicized topic through an unconventional lens, one that filters out inherent biases that obstruct careful and thoughtful consideration of the ramifications of the political environment on human behavior and thought. This collection of stories presents brief, episodic glances into the lives of people in their best moments, but also in their worst. The allegorical nature of the stories in tandem with the relatively even-handed treatment of the two sides in conflict forces the reader to empathize, not with groups, but with individuals. It is through these individuals that the reader is able to move from one story to the next, selecting details to invest in as the characters, themselves, choose details in turn. These stories will call upon the reader to be critical of the perspectives they encounter, and to question an alphabet soup of competing moral codes and prescribed ethics. This is all to say that the purpose of this collection of flash fiction is not to impart truth, but to inspire the pursuit of understanding.

Table of Contents:

1	Project Cover Page
2	Library Release Form
3	Abstract
4	Table of Contents
5	The Progressive City
6-7	The New Nature
8-9	The Devil's Tower
10	Stargazing
11	The Boy and the Bear
12	The Tree of Life
13-14	Floodlands
15	Severance
16-17	The Echo Chamber
18-19	The Hibernation Hypothesis I
20-21	The Echo Chamber
22-23	Tenuousness
24	Reflection
25	The Responsorial Psalm
26-27	The Hibernation Hypothesis II
28-29	The Stigma
30-31	The Stigmata
32-33	The Stone on the 7 th
34-35	Venus' Slipper
36-38	The Bear Clause
39-40	The Pool of the Widow
41-42	Reconciliation
43-44	The Dark Gift
45-46	The Great War
47	The Search for Silence

The Progressive City

In a land of increasing prosperity and enlightenment, there existed a kind of energy that had never before been coupled with such freedom of thought and wealth to invest in moral causes. It was at this time, under these conditions, that the citizens of the land began clamoring for something more than their exhausted continent could offer. Opportunity presented itself in a way that no one could have thought possible: the promise of a new world. Few could resist the temptation of pioneering, and so they set to sea in great numbers. The new world presented them with more than they could have ever hoped. They gained wealth, power, health, and freedom, and they were happy for it. They were all overjoyed with their bounty, and surely they were right to be so, but it is ignorant to assume that such gifts come without a price. They weren't prepared for what came next. The new land summoned up a whole new creature, something that had perhaps been seen before, but never in such raw form. The new world revealed to the explorers the grizzly bear. It was massive. It was powerful. It was...a monster. It assaulted their way of life, everything the citizens had come to love. It assaulted their very nature and sent tremors through their glorious visions of the future. And how did it accomplish this? The bear walked out of its cave and stood, in full, facing the citizens of the old world—unafraid and shameless. The people wasted no time in putting up walls and casting bullets.

The New Nature

A man stood firm on solid ground, the soles of his boot planted flatly on the earth beneath him. He was a lumberjack by trade, and made his living by traveling out beyond the walls of the great city and into the neighboring woods. His axe was a formidable equalizer; it brought him great satisfaction to lay into the brittle bark of an ancient trunk and, when it fell, it was a pleasure to know that, as sure as gravity, it would come to rest parallel to the lay of the land, just like his feet below and the sky above. As the years passed, the lumberjack was forced to stray further and further from his home as the forests around him receded with his labor. As he cut deeper into the woods, he began to uncover its sleepy denizens: the bears. While the lumberjack had been vaguely aware of bears, he had never before been faced with such multitudes. It was, in fact, that bears lived all over the world, all over the globe, but they kept to themselves and did not disturb the humans. It was only now, as the lumberjack made more and more headway into their territory, that he began to see that they were in conflict. Bears, of course, are nature worshipers. They do not think beyond what they see, and they see only that which they can record. They erected their shrines and chanted their rituals, and they did so alongside man for ages, completely unnoticed. It was now, in the harsh light of the stumpy borderlands, that the lumberjack could hear nature's scripture. It was at that time that the man worked himself into a frenzy. Picking up his axe, he raced back to the walls of the great city and assembled a great many torches, loaded and lit. It wasn't long before the dwellers of the city could see smoke wafting up from the forest, kissing their fortifications with ashy flakes. For many hours the smoke rose upward, flying perpendicular to the horizontal run of the soil. Black-grey tendrils of ashen wind rose like the smile of some mocking apparition, like the lumberjack's smile. He could rest easy now, knowing

that he had kept the world plain and, while he might have to walk farther to find trees for lumber, he could breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that his heels would always point home.

The Devil's Tower

The Kiowa people, dwellers of the high western regions of the continent, far removed from the great city, are keepers of a singularly striking tale. They tell of a boy and his seven sisters who, venturing deep into the forest, were romping about and squealing with play, when suddenly, while boasting of skill to his playmates, the boy let loose a deep-throated groan. Startled at his unintended outburst, and hearing his playfellows' merciless laughter, the boy made quickly to amend his remark, but found nothing permitting but hoarse, husky bellows. This sent the sisters sprawling with tumultuous gasps, their legs flailing, arms clutching their sides, but the boy was not laughing, his pupils drawing open, hair tingling with (well-founded) fear. Before him appeared a point of darkness, gaining in mass. The point opened outward into a black circle that threatened to consume him. The boy fell backward in terror upon his arms and turned to crawl away, but he was arrested in motion by an unsightly transformation. His sisters, witnessing the aberration writhing before them, turned quickly from snickers to cries of alarm. They huddled together, as if to defend themselves from the sight of their brother's contortions. The boy sprouted hair, long and coarse, and his form grew to a great bulk. His fingers became claws and his clothing mere scraps as he tore and swiped and roared in great pain. When finally his transformation was ended, he lay there panting for just a brief moment before rolling onto his paws and rising weightily to turn his gaze upon his grouped kin. The sisters were terrified; they ran and the bear pursued them. They ripped through the forest as the grizzly stormed behind. However, the girls quickly grew weary and fell down exhausted at the stump of a very great tree. They could hear the bear closing in from behind them, and they knew they would soon be destroyed by their brother, but the girls earned the sympathy of the forest's warm spirit and it

spoke to them, saying, "I bid you climb up upon the foot of this tree, and it will carry you to safety." They did as the spirit told them and, as they fell in together at the center of the stump, the tree began to rise and carry them upward. The bear, seeing his prey rising above his reach, charged at the girls, leaping to grab them, but the girls rose just out of his grasp as he clawed and tore at the bark below. He scored the tree all around with his claws, but his efforts were futile as his sisters rose higher and higher. The spirit bore the sisters to the sky above, where they would be protected from the fury of their transfigured brother. There they resided and, in devotion to their lost sibling, they punched holes in the glass floor of the heavens in the shape of a bear, and as evidence of all that has been said to be, the tree still stands scraping the sky's cold frame.

Stargazing

On a woodland hill overlooking a small, homely cabin, a young bear cub was studying the stars for something to fix upon. Often in his late ramblings the cub had chanced to look up and meet the stare of night's many-eyed face; that's when he could feel it—the sense that he was being slowly swallowed, as if he were a mere reflection in a pool of water, gradually being annihilated by the rippling of some unseen disturbance. While he was scared, and shaken by sublime vastness, the cub was more inclined to resist the sensation rather than avoid it; it was for this reason that the cub began to etch his own image into the malleable mouth of the abyss. He started with a single point, a pulsating puncture easily identifiable by its relatively clumsy size. He traced it downward then, broadening the line into a body, closing the form and projecting texture upon its surface, granting it a familiar timbre. He relaxed then, finished with his work, and sank backward into the grass, his face pulsing with recognition. “There I am.” It was then that he heard his mother's footfalls at his side and turned to face her. She came parallel to her child, rising well above his height, looking him in the eye momentarily, then turning her head upward. He tracked her gaze across the sky, moving from his own likeness to a neighboring cluster, larger, though similar in arrangement. She turned back to her child then, her eyes locked and flickering with intensity, as if they were saying something, glittering with the fullness of comprehension. “And there am I.”

The Boy and the Bear

A young boy, no older than seven years of age, was playing in the forest just outside of the city walls when he happened across a bear cub. The boy had never seen such a creature and did not know what to think, but was of course fascinated by his discovery, and curiosity hung brilliantly in his ever-widening eyes. The bear cub was equally curious, new to the world and willing to explore it. After summing each other up, they realized that they were both of the same sound mind and became quick friends. For a couple of years the two met in the woods and enjoyed life together in harmony, but as the boy grew older and more educated, he heard stories of the dangers of bears. He tried to ignore them, but one can only ignore such things for so long. One day, when the two were sitting near each other by the side of a small stream, fairly deep in the forest, the boy began to examine his animal companion. He looked down at his paws and, for the first time, began to realize the size of his claws. He lifted his eyes to his friend's face and was drawn to the pearly white teeth, razor-sharp and at attention. He saw muscle ripple beneath fur with every breath his friend sighed and, suddenly, the boy began to feel fear. Later that night, when the boy was at home, he thought more about the power his friend possessed and what he could do with it. He shuddered. The boy's fear overwhelmed and moved him. He got out of bed and drifted to the shed, grabbed his father's rifle, and set out to find security. The echo from the shot fired would never fade, but rather, grow louder and louder, summoning up the roar of the grizzlies and deafening generations of humans and bears alike, until all that could be felt was animosity.

The Tree of Life

In days past, Argesh fell to the Earth and embraced its warm core, feeling its lively pulse, but, in that moment of transference, she felt also great pain. She inherited the Earth's bodily knowledge; she learned of seasons, and how winter felt, tingling, on the Earth's smooth skin. She tasted the salty ocean's ebb and flow, and she could smell the dizzying clouds of ozone, but in addition to all of the wonderful sensations the Earth had conveyed upon her, she inherited, as well, the great shock of the Earth's gasping sore. She felt the Earth's agony; she felt its fear of the terrible contagion that threatened to spread beyond the bounds of its sleepy collective. Distressed by her revelation, Argesh traveled westward, guided by the pain she inherited from Earth's festering wound. She came upon a dark thicket and, in treading close upon its borders, could feel the tenderness of the Earth, its soreness. It was with great compassion that Argesh entered the thicket and uncovered the tree of life. The Earth cried to Argesh to contain its dark gift, for whosoever should eat of its fruit or drink of its sap would be cursed with eternal life. In keeping with the Earth's wishes, Argesh set fire to the tree of life and collected its ashes, distilling its essence into a liquid, which she bound up in an earthen jar. This jar would be passed down through the ages from guardian to guardian, whose appointment would ensure the confinement of immortality, and though the appointment would always be a great honor, it was also a great burden to be the bearer of the Earth's scarred suffering.

Floodlands

Pooled between two hills in the north, drawn together in undisturbed clusters, the townsfolk of a little settlement made their homes from brick and grass. The town had been moved on two occasions. The first relocation followed the plague of a nearby valley, whose sheer cliffs claimed many an unsuspecting pedestrian. Any who went walking westernly were met with a most mortal spill, but it wasn't until well into the year that any ill will was suspected. When it became clear that the canyon had claimed as many men as it met, the town convened to move to a more hospitable home. They flooded out of their former haunt and headed south, down by the banks of a praiseworthy river. Here they stayed happy for full two cold seasons before finding they lived but as guests on this plot. One day, when walking down near the river, a man, unsuspecting, met, moving, with such strange resistance. And when, in driving but harder at motion, he could not overcome the unflinching obstruction, the bear returned with such fatal swipes as did draw out the wanderer's more mutable substance. When word got around that such terrible powers were at work in nature, bearing a most grizzly namesake, it occasioned yet another immediate exodus. The once-river-dwellers made haste to the East, finally falling to rest between two kind hills. Here, in this space, a man held witness to a welcome revelation. He received knowledge of time to pass, when such insufferable sound should pervade the air, so as to kill everything hearing. And this, thought the townspeople, would kill every bear. Then, when the terrible sound subsided, a great stroke would make even the improper terrain. And the severed heads of the lofty peaks would melt molten to fill every valley that then still remained. Then would the horrors of the cruel world be resolved, and the land be made fit for good-natured creatures. Many assayed the prophet at this, knowing no way to avoid their own destruction, but the seer was

ready to dispel such concerns, describing how humans might preserve their own kind. “But build, below ground, a brick habitation, constructed so that the roof be made flush with the surrounding earth. This, then, might be made an example for the world, and used as a point of comparison, whereby all else is to be leveled even. Seal yourselves in, and when you arise, these two oppressive hills will no longer contain us to a sad, isolated collective.” Everyone set to work on the sensible solution, and the homes, being done, were filled to wait. Everyone but one man, that is, who occupied himself in watching, from atop the friendly hill to the west. And as the townsfolk anticipated the judgment of their enemy, the grizzly, their true enemy sat looking down upon them, with naught but toleration.

Severance

Late in the night, in a small forest cabin just outside the city walls, a young father and his wife were held down, submerged in shallow slumber. They tumbled about in the sheets, glistening with sweaty moonlight, trying to sink deep into dreamscapes, when a thunderous report shocked them into a frenzied consciousness. A gunshot. The pair made motions to rise, but the woman was arrested by her husband's firm hand. His persuasive powers were such that she contented herself to sit, merely muttering cautionary fragments. The man punched his arms into a coat and scooped up a rifle, lumbering out the front door like he was favoring an injury. His leg limbered as he moved, soon flexing in strong, swift motion. He came to a stop some hundred yards or so from the cabin and listened. A cracking noise nearby. The man soundlessly crept upon the place, rifle raised and trained on a point of motion. Tension suffocated the air, and muscles strained in artificial action. Closer he came, and closer yet, until he finally could see the man at work. He could see that the man was a boy—his boy—upon his knees in front of the carcass of a grizzly cub, his rifle cast aside, raising a rock above his head with both hands, and bringing it heavily upon the face of the splayed form, over and over, crying in choked sobs, breathing in audible bursts. The father rushed in upon his child, dropping his rifle in the dust near its companion and catching the boy's hands at the peak of their motion. He hugged the boy until the resistance fell away, and the stone dropped to the ground with a wet thud. The father looked over the child's shoulder at the cracked, mutilated jaw of the bear. "I..." the boy sniffed, "I want a tooth."

The Echo Chamber

In the western regions of an open continent, a civilization began to take root, one foreign to the land. As the society grew, so too did their aspirations. The townsfolk were told to speak in resonating tones, ones that projected beyond the field of vision. Indeed, the happy group was based on this far-reaching principle and exhibited it in each facet of life. “Manifest Destiny!” they cried as hundreds of axes broke the oak trees in a rhythmic chant. The land spread out longer and longer before them, and their buildings became so spacious that even the most minute stirring would receive heavy applause. They lived in this world of double-voices in pleasant company, and dreaded drudging to the outskirts of the city and into the indifferent wilderness. The townsfolk tell a story. Once, a prospector took to resting after a long day of work. He was weary from toil, and decided to stop a while and recover before beginning the long trek home. He wandered over to a nearby cave and sat, just in the mouth, under the shade cast by the lip. Dropping weightily upon the floor sent reverberations through the tunnel. Pleased by the commotion, the man began a discourse with the chamber, getting back prompt and carefully selected answers each time. He shouted loudly, to define himself definitely, and the chamber echoed his sentiments. The man smiled upon reception, taking great pleasure in hearing his words repeated by this ghost of humanity. It continued in this fashion for a short while, until, interrupting the prospector in his expression, a hoarse and grating roar filled the cave and silenced him in an instant. It did not stop. The voice rushed by him, out of the tunnel, with tangible ferocity. It beat on the walls of rock and it beat inside his rib cage, interrupting the redundant beating of his heart. With terror streaming behind him, the man fled the cave, leaving

his pick where it lay, and did not stop his flying feet until he slammed his front door behind him, and the echoes of his home swore security.

The Hibernation Hypothesis

Deep in the folds of urban sprawl crouched a reputable school for youth. The budding humanity that frequented the place showed signs of promise to develop into adults of distinction. The instructors at the establishment did not content themselves with this fact, and relentlessly pursued their ends—gorging the students with information. It was on this particular day that the educators were instructed to review some of the elementary materials in response to a study that indicated a great misunderstanding, on the part of the students, of the most basic principles. The teachers proceeded with purpose, mortified at the suggestion that such fundamental concepts were known to so few. A young girl, who remembered the arguments well, propped her elbow up on her desk, pressing her cheek into her palm, mirroring her professor as he spoke, reciting the exact words from rote. “The Hibernation Hypothesis: To move is to be in a state of agitation. Motion is a response to an unfavorable stimulus that forces corrective action at the cost of energy. Each action purposes a solution. Thus, we move to resolve. We resolve to reap the benefits. Benefit is not always immediate. Sleep is an intermediary between the actions of today and the rewards of tomorrow. To sleep is to acknowledge the purpose of action. Hibernation, however, is an end. The actions taken prior to hibernation ensure only hibernation. Therefore, hibernation is its own reward. Hibernation is infinitely cyclical, therefore it is a false purpose and the rewards of its preparation receive no permanence. This is the folly of bears.” He moved to the Corollary to the Hibernation Hypothesis. “We dream while we sleep. The sleeping creates. We remember dreams when we wake. The waking recalls. Thus, we must both sleep and wake to process a dream. To hibernate is to forgo waking. Therefore, to hibernate is to forgo the recalling. Thus, dreams have no meaning in a system of hibernation.” He adds, “If bears have dreams at all, that is. Ha ha ha.”

The class laughed. The girl rolled her eyes sleepily to the window. “Now, I propose a discussion question. Would you not rather dream? Would you not rather have purpose? Go home and prepare a short argument on why hibernation is inferior to human sleep and bring it in for group discussion tomorrow. Don’t just quote the theorem now. I expect some original insights.” The bell rings. Class is dismissed. The girl looked down at her notes and realized that she had been scribbling on the page over and over; tracing the same circle around and around. Her cheeks flushed as she crumbled the paper and stuffed it into her pocket, her eyes zipping about nervously. No one saw her depart like a fugitive, concealing a bloodied rag. No one saw her on the bus, in the back row, pressed up against the wall, draw a crumpled paper out of her pocket and trace her finger over the black smear until her skin grew dark and stained. For the first time, no one.

The Echo Chamber

In the northern regions of an open continent, a corpulent stateswoman waved a hand at a spacious residence down the street, boldly proclaiming, with the full force of her excellent lungs, that the recluse inhabiting the place was a most loathsome thing, disgracing the town with his reserved tendencies. Inside the homely shell, a panic-stricken prospector clawed fitfully at white, paint-crusting wallpaper, dragging his nails downward to reveal a glass door, thick and inlaid with shapes inscribed to produce ponderous refractions. The man tossed the chalky paper scraps aside and twisted the translucent handle, revealing a dark, cramped, vacant space, the likes of which the city had long forgotten, and now could not fathom. The man's hands trembled as he pushed inside, rattling the handle and setting the chamberous home aglow with crackling joints. He retreated from the sound, slamming the door just in time to avoid hearing the visceral croak of a most unpleasant stateswoman. The room was smooth, and polished, and perfectly sealed, admitting only the prismatic beams that ventured through the thick, glass door. The room rebounded with the sound of breathing. The prospector took to a corner of the room and sunk down, planting his feet flat on the floor and burying his face in his knees. His mind wandered to a cave just outside of the city, a place where a roar could echo until it sounded like a man. The thought aggravated the pieces of his shattered complacency and he sought comfort in the sound of his own voice. "I am ss-sitting in a room," he started, "different from the one I was in." His voice ricocheted around the generous walls, but he was not reassured. "I am ss-sitting in a room, different from the one I was in. I am ss-sitting in a room," he continued chanting in inhuman frequency, fixating upon his tonal shifts, obsessing over his every word. "I am ss-sitting in a room, different from the one I was in." The stateswoman had only just finished her sub-par lunch

(and everyone near and far knew it was a sub-par lunch) when she couldn't help but notice that the house down the street—the home of that most dreadful recluse—was shaking as if it might, at any moment, be swallowed up into the earth. To all outward appearances, the building was in a prodigious uproar but, in the innermost chamber, unknown to all but a solitary man, amid precious streaks of brilliant refraction, an otherworldly music played, sounding nothing at all like a prospector.

Tenuousness

A rather large grizzly woke up one morning burdened with a sense of dread. It was the dream he was having; it spilled over into his wakeful state like a vague impression left in passing. While he could not remember the content of the dream, the grizzly remained a few moments in consideration, waiting for the equilibrium of sober consciousness. When the feeling of dread had passed, the bear got up and walked through the forest, making toward the river to fish. He passed many places on his way, smeared and blurry with familiarity, deigning no notice. It wasn't until he was almost upon the river that he was drawn away from his purpose by an unusual sound. It had an unpleasant quality, harsh and brittle; one that was not recognizable. He moved off in the direction of the noise to investigate, finding that it originated from the far-side of a fallen tree. The bear stepped up upon the trunk and glanced down the opposite side to find the severed head of some creature, with fur as white as the rapids. Dread seized him then, sinking its cold claws deep into his core as he remembered his dream the night before; the dream about a great white beast who took to sawing its own neck back and forth over a jagged stone, continuing until its head hung from strings. While he was immersed in recollection, however, the strange crackling noise that he had heard before brought him back to the present and re-oriented his gaze upon the thing before him. The head was making some flapping noise. The wind was moving it and it was flapping. And it wasn't a head, or at least, not the head of any animal that he had seen, but it was strange, like the severed head of the white creature. It was so very like the head of some white creature. But what was that? What is it to see what you dream? Why must there be a division of realities? Looking down upon the object before him, the bear felt inclined to believe that there was some connection between it and the creature from the dream. He felt as if it were *placed* there. He could not indulge the thought, though, because he would not be believed. The other

bears would ridicule him. He would be ruined, because bears do not believe things like that. Bears understand coincidence. Bears only understand coincidence. And so, looking down upon the white thing flapping in the wind, the bear felt loss and longing, as if he had been cheated out of something. He felt like he had been coerced into self-destruction by some undeniable manifestation of rationality, infecting his wounds, his weaknesses, and making him ache for release.

Reflection

A bereaved mother was moving through the forest outside of the walls of the great city, making her way patiently toward a pleasant pond where she sought to rest and soothe her dry tongue. She had lost a child some years back, and while she was better now, and well-adjusted to her solitary state, the memories recurred, prompted by the spring-time splendors of young motherhood. She was coming fast upon her destination when an outside blast stung her ears and froze her progress with frosty terror. A gunshot. The sweet remembrances of her lost love swelled in her breast; her fear welled up and formed a reckonable fury. She drove onward now, bounding ferociously, powered by her projections upon the sound. Surely they've killed another for sport. Or spite. Or perhaps the humans were just bored and glad to have something lively to shoot at. She was very near to the pond now, where she suspected the sound originated from. She slowed her pace, keeping in the brush and out of sight, unwilling to allow the human to strike first. Her eyes raged and sparked behind the thin cover as she drifted around the rim of the pond, keeping always concealed. The water was rippling in the still air. Her lip was quivering with anticipation as she closed in upon the human. She came in close and was surprised to find the creature crying. It was a young boy, she could see that now, no older than fourteen, and he had sunk to his knees, one hand still fingering the rifle, the other clutching some small piece that hung from a cord around his neck. She came closer, and his hand slid down and dropped to the ground, limp and useless, allowing the object about his neck to sway to stillness. It was a tooth. A bear tooth. He collapsed then, falling on his side and curling up like a child, folding in his knees to his gut and tying them up with his arms. And where was the body? What had he shot? She felt pity then. Pity for the boy. Pity for herself. Pity for the humans in their walled city. The water was rippling.

The Responsorial Psalm

In a forest, not at all like Arden, and in no small degree distanced from any structure of man, a meeting of a peculiar nature was in progress. The meeting was never called to order, nor was it, in any way, officially initiated, but, one action producing a reaction in kind, the awareness of the occasion grew outward like a disturbance in tranquil water. In but a moment, new pathways from disparate parts of the woods were forged in progression toward the central point. There, a rather large she-bear lifted herself upon her hind legs and sowed the seeds of ferocity, but not without some degree of inward resistance, and with the slightest tinge of regret. She bellowed forth a terrible sound, guttural and hoarse. It was piercing, and primal, and rang in the dust-speckled air. A grave moment was granted in meditation on the sound, wherein nothing dared stir, nor disrespect the sanctity of its wake. Then, having held its breath, the forest exhaled, only momentarily, in an act of desperate composure before a second cry rang out from a new arrival: a boorish brute lumbering in on all fours, hair spiny and caked with filth. His was but a half-step improved upon her own, but carried with it a manic, searing, almost demonic quality, like something you would expect to answer to a dark ritual; grating the senses. More bears arrived and the pattern continued in this fashion, moments of deep silence punctuated with ever-altering roars, each correcting the former, and each displaced in succession. The woods were alive with passionate discourse, with the drive for perfection. It was only a matter of time before the sequence was ended, before the last sound issued forth over the shivering canopy of conspirators. A little cub was but a season away, resting here, in this place, but not in this moment, waiting for that last inhuman groan. The last syllable uttered, the cub could but bury his face in his paws, listening to the sound of his own breathing, and to the forest's slackening pulse.

The Hibernation Hypothesis II

Sitting on a cement wall bounding a city park, beneath a sky obscured by smog, a young girl was scribbling away on a notepad—her protruding tongue forced into the corner of her mouth, her shoulders hunched forward in the posture of concentration. Her left leg jumped up and down like a weighted spring—her right twisted sideways, resting upon the tension of her joints. While her right hand checked the pen, her left thumb massaged a black ink spot in the upper left corner of the notepad, smearing a circle round and round. Her eyes stung with alertness. Her fingers ached from pressure. The seconds lingered, slowed by relativity. Strain mounted in her features, building up in intensity until—the pen stopped. Her eyes seemed to bulge as she straightened her posture. She set aside her pen and began rotating her wrist, opening and closing her hand. Then, clearing her throat, she seized the pad of paper and began to read aloud. “A Refutation of the Hibernation Hypothesis: To be in motion is to be in a state of agitation. Motion is a response to an unfavorable stimulus that forces corrective action at the cost of energy. Each action purposes a solution. Thus, we move to resolve. This implies that to lack motion is to be in a state of complacency. It is to have agitation resolved. Therefore, immobility is an end. Hibernation is immobility. Thus, hibernation is an end. Therefore, motion works toward hibernation. Sleep is only temporary. It is a transition between two states of agitation, cyclical and spiraling endlessly without resolution. This is the folly of humans.” She paused for a moment. “The Corollary to the Refutation of the Hibernation Hypothesis: To sleep is to dream. To wake is to recall. To do either is to act. Action is agitation, therefore the process of sleeping and waking is a process of agitation, never to be resolved by repetition. The states are interchangeable in this regard: each undermines the other. Neither becomes significant in relation to the other. Hibernation, however,

is final. It is definite. The waking state prepares for the state of hibernation. Hibernation is void of action, and in its lacking, emphasizes the action of the waking world. The two become more starkly defined in relation to each other—hibernation the dream of the waking world and motion the dream of those at rest. Each becomes imbued with significance. Human rest does not allow for this, as it achieves no permanence of state.” The last word seemed to be absorbed into the frigid air of the city, hanging densely around her. She began to feel concerned. What if someone could see them? What if someone could read the words written clearly in the smog? She felt the rotation of her thumb, still smearing the ink around and around on the page. She stopped the motion and lifted her hand from the paper. No one was watching. No one could hear her words.

The Stigma

In the far north and to the east, a legend pervades the riverside villages—a legend virtually unknown to the outside world, being too dangerously taboo to speak. It’s a tale made of whispers, of deep, husky tones, haunting the rafters in rented rooms and moonlit groves. The legend tells of a seasoned sportsman, and how, in the early months of summer, he set out from town into the forest to check his traps for game. His strides were long and jovial, and he was warm with anticipation of good eating, but as he came bounding down a slight decline, he happened upon a set of tracks that sunk his buoyant spirit. They were the tracks of some large, barefooted man, imprinted in the loose soil and painted with pooling blood. The hunter’s heart went out for the unfortunate soul who, no doubt, sustained some serious injury thereabouts and, in his pain-induced delirium, wandered wrongly, deeper into the woods. The hunter, always apt to empathize, decided immediately upon assistance, and set off in pursuit of the man, directed by the rust-colored tracks. It was not long before the hunter could see clearly some fateful propension in the passage of those dark-soaked prints, as they made, in direct motion, for the place where the hunter had cleverly concealed a rather weighty bear trap. Fearing that the man should fall to an even more fatal condition, the hunter doubled his pace to a worried trot, charging heedlessly through clawing brush. Arriving at the place where he had concealed the snare, the hunter could see clearly that the metal jaws of the bear trap were yet undisturbed and taut with anticipation. This, however, was a great source of wonderment to the young man, who could see clearly by the bloody marks that the injured man had stepped square upon the pressure plate and had passed unharmed. Taken with the notion that his snare had proven ineffectual, the hunter took it upon himself to grab a nearby stick and prod the plate, so as to confirm that it was,

in fact, a dud. Yet, with but the slightest applied pressure, the trap sprang and the jagged teeth bit viciously into the wooden probe, snapping it in two. At this, the young man staggered backward, bewildered by the fortunate failure at the time of the injured person's passing. Wasting no more time, the hunter made quickly in pursuit of the footprints, certain now that some grace was at work in the preservation of the man, and in his own impressment to aid. The trees broke in front of him into a clearing, situated at the top of a steep, stony cliff. He came onto the scene with great trepidation, the momentum of his strides made motionless by thick, overwhelming terror. The trail ended here, moving unswervingly, heedlessly, toward the deadly drop until there was nothing but open air. The rapid pulse of his quickened heart seemed slow to the hunter, his worldly senses warped by his fleshy, gushing adrenaline. His body felt moist and dirty as he inched toward the precipice, but his mouth and lungs felt dry and chapped and stinging. A high-pitched peal, long and drawn, rose in his ears: the kind of sound that you hear when you sit, unmoving, in perfect silence, only it was louder now, and menacing. He reached the edge and kneeled down beside the last couple of tracks, breathing deeply, before finally turning his eyes down. He sprawled backward at the sight, overcome with profound horror because there, on the cliff face, continued the pulpy prints, cooked dark upon the white stone.

The Stigmata

In the far north and to the east, a young hunter stirred stupidly, waking from an unnatural, amnesiac slumber. At first, the world was a sensory mesh, grainy and sticky, and blowing through a hollow reed, but slowly his consciousness bobbed up behind his eyes, like a bubble rising through viscous amber. His lids peeled open, crusted with rheumatic shards, and the pulsating world of the eye fought to subjugate the other senses to the tyrannical powers of light. The world was a watercolor to the hunter, his pupils drunk with dilation, but slowly the darkening lines of reality drew up their wayward borders and he began to see clearly his surroundings. He was floating, surely, as the ground was there below him, some many feet down, and yet... He pushed himself up off the rocky turf to find that he had been at rest on the verge of a steep drop, and the act of raising himself sent stones skipping down the white face of the cliffside. He wheeled about, his eyes tracing the unfamiliar forest for some token of recognition. He latched onto a series of tracks, the bare footprints of a large man, filled freshly with thick, warm blood. The impressions brought on a vague sensation, not unlike memory, but indistinct and visceral. Without any better alternatives, the man decided to act upon instinct, following the red-marked road into the glowing green of high-noon nature. The farther he walked, the more memory began to feel like grasping at fleeing phosphenes, or fireflies with clumsy swipes. Eventually, the hunter came upon a place which expressed a far-off familiarity. "There's something here," he thought, still following the trail, "and it's...dangerous." The next sound he heard was metallic and strained for want of oil. His shin cracked like a dry stick and his leg flared with white intensity. The bear trap. His memory returned. The wrathful springs flung the thirsty fangs of the capricious clamp deep into his plumpish meat. His mind swam in confusion.

His hands shot down, as a compulsion, to grasp at the site of puncture and his fingers crawled along his flesh, groping the surface. He fumbled fruitlessly for a moment before dropping his head, as if on a hinge, to bear witness to the wound. There was his leg. There was his foot, pressing on the primed plate. And there was no wound. He jerked his leg upward, stumbling backward as the metal slate creaked with release. He caught himself, and looked at the trap, still waiting for something. Not for him. Not for the injured man before, whose bloody stain stayed plain upon the plate. The hunter took off at a startled sprint, charging after the bleeding man, following the footprints back toward town, now looming in view through the thinning thick of the forest. He came with great speed, seeing now something just outside the trees, a brownish bundle on the earth. He stopped abruptly. The tracks led right up to the creature, for it was a creature there, and not a man of any make, and yet the trail could not be mistaken for anything other than human. There were the footprints, and there was the bear, paws still wet with bleeding. An hour later, a procession of wise men came upon the place, led by the hunter, still sweaty with excitement. After a moment of deep consideration, the officials decided upon a course of action. "You are to dispose of this body by way of burning. Then, do away with the evidence of your work and return to town. Speak to no one of this. When you return, come to the town hall and we will proceed as fit." The hunter did as he was commanded and, after several hours of work, he made his way homeward in the darkening day, exhausted from his labor. He arrived at the town hall and, pushing his way in, was seized upon entry. That night, there was a public event of great note. A traitor had been tried and found to be guilty. There were many words and eyes to bear witness to his guilt, but there was little to provide any defense for the gagged transgressor. Suppose the dead could speak. Can they? Now, a twining, slumped mass spun on a creaking chord. He's speaking. An ashen cloud, and the croak of taut rope.

The Stone on the 7th

In the smoldering wastes of a once proud forest, a melancholic bear pawed dismally at a still-burning sapling. The crackling conifer was in a state of excitement, perpetuating itself in equal measure to the fire's voracious consumption, but the appetite of the ravisher could not be satisfied, and neither could the will of the potentiate be exhausted. The bear, however, in its state of burdensome consideration, took this for a sign to sleep. He began the trek northward, around the eastern wall of the great city toward his den of languorous residence, singing hopeful songs flickering with nostalgia. Winter passed in uninterrupted, torporic bliss, and spring roused the bear from his pleasant slumber. He arose, optimistic and refreshed, and set out to return to his former haunt, moving south along the river west of the city. He followed the water as it bent eastward, on the south side of the stone walls, into the rich, black soil of the former forest. The water here was thick with salmon, the ground strewn with the fibrous beginnings of new life. All except one circular clearing. Here the sapling burned still, rising and falling in a sick equilibrium, leeching the life out of the earth to sustain its futile struggle. The bear could not bear to watch it, and turned his attention to more promising sights. Spring and summer passed, the cold months set in, and the bear left, again, for his resting place, moving, as always, around the east side of the city to the northern retreat. The seasons passed in cycles, and so too did the wanderings of that fateful bear, moving around the city. Six times he made his passage, each time voicing the prospect of better years to come. It was the spring, then, of the seventh year that the bear returned to the southern side of the great city, along the banks of the river, and made his way through the promising growth to the detestable clearing, where he knew he would find that burning sapling, menacing in its fluctuating stagnation. When he arrived in the clearing,

however, he found no sapling, but a very strange stone in its place. It was tall and rounded, and covered in unknown symbols. It was then that the bear cried out in delight for this unexpected change, and it was then when a large stone broke free of its perch upon the outer wall of the city, and fell, with a muffled thud, to the soft, ashen earth.

Venus's Slipper

Once upon a crowded sky, in the futile light of the early morning, a young scholar slid down dingy streets to the mausoleum—ornate and swollen in the otherwise flattened churchyard. She tugged upon the yielding grate, flexing it outward and wrapping herself around it—flowing, liquid, through the seeming preventative. She clutched the iron-crafted, horizontal-shaft handle and cranked downward, looking around before performing her fugitive entry. A struck match enkindled the mounted torch, which was taken up in turn by the young scholar. She shuffled down the dank passage, past the coffin-crammed cubbies, to the far end, and set the torch upon a stone sconce. Prostrating herself, the young girl crawled into a vacated niche, working her way to the back where she pushed aside a loose panel, providing a passage outside the city walls. She stuck close to the stonework for some distance, stepping once over a large moss-covered stone, until she arrived at a point where there was cover sufficient to move deeper into the forest. From there she took a direct path, radially outward from the city into the woods. She did not go undetected. As she passed through a clearing, she caught the attention of a venerable grizzly who had frequented the area for many years. He, suspicious of the newcomer, tracked the scholar on her wayward wandering, staying some steps removed so as to avoid notice. She led him across familiar territory, though unfrequented due to the broken canopy and resulting verdant density. This did not deter the youth, who proceeded with arms outstretched, wiping away the springy underbrush. The grizzly elder, however, could not pursue her now without revealing himself by way of crackling branches and whispering leaves. He took it upon himself, then, to circumvent her by taking a route around the dense patch of wood. He quickened his pace, tracing the eastward gyre with as much rapidity as he could muster so that he might not lose the peculiar

child. Should he stop her? Should he keep her from that place? When he emerged on the far-side of the brush, he found the girl pushing her way through the last of the branches and stopping in a most unnatural clearing. It was a fresh scar on the landscape—the trees severed from the sky and their stumpy skeletons blistering the ground. The undergrowth had not yet had sufficient time to pus over the wound. Here, too, a most unsightly rock formation rose from out the ground, tall and rounded smooth and awkwardly stuck into the disturbed soil. And yet, the youth kneeled down by the sad remains of a white spruce, slipping out of her shoes, reaching out her soft hands as if caressing a snowflake, and the old grizzly pined for his younger years. There, growing in a hollowed-out cavity in those sad remains, was a solemn slipper. The grizzly cried, and Venus sighed, and the luminous youth smiled, speaking softly, “This is the folly of humans.”

The Bear Clause

Behind the walls of a great city, deep in the political quarter, a conference room bristled with commotion. Men dressed in fine attire deliberated with unprecedented fervor, working well beyond their appointed hours in drafting a document that had, for the time, displaced all other matters concerning the state of the city. It was very late in the night when an elderly man, standing behind a podium, rapped out a conclusion with his gavel, and brought the assembly to rest. He cleared his gravely throat and lifted a large document up before his glassy lenses, pronouncing the words with gravity.

The Bear Clause

Adopted by the Assembly of Elders at its 9181st meeting, on 31 October

The Assembly of Elders,

Expressing Concern at the increasing hostility of the grizzly bear population, *considering*, especially, the attacks upon those situated outside of the walls, as well as those in less fortified, neighboring settlements,

Emphasizing the need to defend our people from the current, present danger,

Acting under Chapter XII of the charter of R_____,

Conversion Tactics

1. *Recognizes* the fact that, at one time, all humans were bears, and that, at a later date, all bears were humans,
2. *Acknowledges* that every existing bear represents a lost human,
3. *Abhors* the notion of losing men to the ranks of bears,

4. *Demands* that all able-bodied men over the age of 12 years report at sunrise, tomorrow, November 1st, at their local chapters, in order to be outfitted for an extermination of the bear species to take place the evening of November 1st,
5. *Urges* all women and children to stay indoors during the conflict,
6. *Commands* the alchemical division to begin, at once, preparing Compound S to the order of 100 pounds for tomorrow's excursion,
7. *Condemns* any party failing to report to their local chapter to the title of traitor and to be whipped until dead.

The weight of his final pronouncement seemed to resonate in the room, and the men of the assembly began to clap, slow, isolated claps, which rose up into a continuous cracking, as if it were the felling of a forest, two trees at a time. The men parted quickly afterwards, charged with implementing the scheme that very night. Only one timid member lagged behind, approaching the senior member at the podium, who was drawing up the newly drafted resolution.

“Is it true what they say about bears, sir? That they were once all human? That we can bring them back with this...this compound?” His eyes searched the old man's features for an answer

The elder lifted his eyes from his work, looking directly at the young man, telling him very plainly, “Yes, it is true.”

“Th-then...” he stuttered, “I could become one of *them* tomorrow?”

“Perhaps not.” The elderly man replied. “Not everyone is susceptible to transformation, and you can only ever change once.” Here he grabbed up his quill, dipping it into the inkwell and proceeded to press the point upon the page of the recently-drafted document. “You see,” he continued, “there is a test that will allow you to see if you are susceptible to transformation. One

that never fails.” He then set aside the quill and placed his thumb in the little pool of ink and smeared it around in a circle, thick and dark. “What do you see here?”

The young man looked startled. “Why, nothing but a black smear, sir. A circle of sorts.”

“Then you have nothing to fear,” smiled the elder. “Off you go now.”

Relieved, the young assembly member departed quickly, with shaky strides. The elder, however, waiting a few moments alone, then drew up his other hand out of his pocket, turned it over, and looked at his thumb, dry and stained black. He shuddered.

The Pool of the Widow

Inside the walls of the great city, in the deep hours of the night, lanterns drifted about the streets. The lanterns were attached to city officials, going door-to-door to call young men to arms in preparation for the extermination of the bear species. It was soon discovered, though, that a young girl was missing from her bed, a young scholar who had no business being out of doors at that hour. The messengers, then, became doubly employed, both spreading the commission, as well as searching for the young lady. She was not to be found that night, however, for, having snuck out of the house to confirm a suspicion, she happened through the alley behind the conference room in the political quarter, and overheard the plan ahead of time. She then quit the city, by way of the mausoleum, and set out into the woods. She walked a very long way, not knowing precisely where she was going, looking about her as if to find some sign for guidance. She had been walking for hours and was growing weary from travel when she was jolted into liveliness by the sound of snapping twigs. She wheeled about to face the sound, but saw only brush. Only brush...and a pair of eyes, two full moons glowing milky grey in the darkness, as if to say “and here am I.” The girl felt some sort of inexplicable transference taking place, and she allowed herself to indulge the sensation. “They’re coming to kill you.” She said, feeling light-headed. “Tomorrow, in the evening. They’re calling it extermination.” The two moons extinguished momentarily, and returned, like a pair of fireflies in coordination, as if to say, “Follow me.” The young scholar trailed the grizzly mother for a matter of minutes and arrived at a cave, the gray rock shimmering with moonlight. The bear went to the entrance, and turned around, eyes soft with offering. The girl thanked her, ducking her head to enter, but she was stopped by a gentle pressure. She pulled back slightly, and looked at the bear, who then inclined her head upward. The youth followed her gaze to the night sky, and there was the little dipper.

When she looked back at the bear, her eyes were liquid. The bear looked at the girl, as if to say, “I know.” It walked away then, and the scholar ducked inside the cave to wait out the war, and it would be a war; the sow tore open the air with her cries of outrage, summoning up a responsorial psalm. The voices multiplied and converged, drawn to a central point in the darkness. They met at a shrine. It was a place of great reverence for the bears; it was the place where Argesh, the Widow of the River, fell down upon the earth, and embraced it, and felt its heartbeat. When she arose, she knew that the earth was round, and spinning, and she understood the seasons. Late in her life, when she began to grow stiff with age, she, herself, ran round and round in circles, cutting away at the earth until she found herself at the bottom of a deep pit. The earth sustained her there, but her form grew weak with stagnation, and her skin began to slag and putrefy. Her body liquefied, but her consciousness remained, and identified itself with the thick, black ooze. This is the site the bears drew in upon. They gathered around the pit, feeding long branches down the hole, and drawing them up, painting their claws with the goo. Suddenly, a terrifying testament to the power of the bear species arrived at the shrine, dragging along a squirming lumberjack, agonized by his twisted limbs. He tossed the lumberjack at the edge of the pit and put forward his paws to be painted. He then raised his claws, dripping with oily midnight, and slashed the lumberjack across his bare back, his blood boiling with the searing ooze. The lumberjack began to convulse then, frothing at the mouth and sprouting fur. He underwent a transformation, his body twisting, his skin splitting, until he rose, thrashing, to his feet, rippling with ferocity; the new bears are always the most violent. His eyes were yellow in the darkness, and his teeth were yellow in the darkness, and those yellow eyes and that yellow grin, there, in the dark, were a declaration of war.

Reconciliation

Just outside the walls of a great city, in the late hours of the night, an unexpected visitor pounded importantly upon the stained door of a quaint cabin. The inhabitants of the home scurried about in the dark, pulling on coats and picking up rifles before heading to the door to confront the unwelcome guest. The father and the son arrived at the door in the same instant, the boy yielding the honor of answering to his superior. The pestered parent ripped the door open without a trace of grace, scowling at an official holding up a gas lamp. “What business do you have coming about at this hour?” The official made a quick answer, not at all intimidated by the unceremonious greeting. “All able-bodied men over the age of 12 years must report by sunrise, tomorrow, November 1st, at their local chapters, in order to be outfitted for an extermination of the bear species to take place tomorrow, on the evening of November 1st.” The father’s face brightened up at this, putting on a big smile. “Well, it’s about time, and here we’ve been sitting on our haunches, the two best bear hunters that this side of the country’s ever been blessed with claiming. My boy here’s been killing bears since he was a little squirt. He’s a natural.”

The officer peeked in at the boy, no older than fourteen years, standing half-eclipsed by his father, as if he were hiding. “You see that there bear tooth he’s got around his neck? C’mere kid.” He reached back with his arm and pulled the boy forward into the light of the lamp. “That’s a tooth from his first kill when he was just seven years old.” The officer didn’t betray anything at these words, and proceeded to say, “Failure to report at the designated time will result in death by whipping.” After finishing these words, he turned around and walked away. The father called after him, “Hey, you don’t have to worry about us. We’ll be there alright,” and shut the door. He then turned and addressed his son. “Now, how do you like that? Go get yourself ready and then get some sleep. I’ll wake you up when it’s time to get going. This is going to be the best hunting

of your life.” The boy stole away to his room then, closing the door behind him and lighting up an iron lantern. He packed up his things, slung his rifle over his shoulder and then, looking at last into the mirror, running his fingers around and over the bear tooth necklace, he turned to the window, opened it, and passed out of the room and into the night, dragging his lantern along after him. He walked for a long time, looking, as the sun began to rise, for a place to hide himself and rest during the day. And, just as the forest began to warm itself with illumination, the boy heard the sound of singing coming out of the mouth of a nearby cave. He walked over and stood just outside, listening to the milky tones smooth and dress the naked words:

“If you listen close, you can hear Pan’s pipes
As he breathes through hollow tubes of wood
Maybe for me, shod with Venus’s Slippers,
Though bare of foot, and fresh with trembling dew.”

Something about the song was welcoming, so, with acute awareness of his own clumsy intrusion, the boy entered into the cave and met, for the first time, with someone worth meeting.

The Dark Gift

A great bear sage wandered lonely in the recesses of the northern wilderness. His movements were saturated with the weight of age, and his brown-grey fur hung loose about his frame. He was a creature of great importance, praised for his insights into the nature of the wilderness, and, as a token of respect, he was given a trying task by the descendants of Argesh. As he became distinguished with middle age, the children of Argesh presented him with a peculiar necklace—an earthen vial, scorched shut, filled with sloshing fluid. The necklace was nothing in its size, and nothing for a bear of his stature to carry, so it came as a great surprise to the sage when, the necklace having been conferred upon him, his back strained to brace himself against its weight and his body flared with distress. However, despite the great pain that he had been given, the bear sage was fortified by his knowledge of the importance of guardianship, and of the prolific nature of the sickness he carried. So it was that the jar was passed on to the great bear sage, who, growing to a venerable age, was deeply troubled by his weakness. He took to rolling the jug over in his great paws, dreaming of its sustenance. He could feel himself decaying, withering away and drawing in upon the close of his years. It was in this condition that his will was broken. He traveled south, down through the forest to the borderlands, looking out upon the homes of men. For years he had watched their vile advance, tearing away at the flesh of the earth, drawing in upon his own home. His hatred smoldered then and, despite the weakness of his feeble body, he summoned up the last of his strength to charge in upon the homes of men, tearing away at the bodies that presented themselves, slaughtering the men at work and the children at play until he was gunned down by their frenzied forces. It wasn't the bloodshed, though, that satiated the

boundless hunger of vengeance, but what he saw before he passed: a jar of singed earth
borrowing the heat of a human hand.

The Great War

The mouth of the great city was agape and drooling. Armored men poured out of the gates and into the woods, armed with rifles, knives, and pouches of clear liquid labeled, "Component S." Every man commissioned to participate had reported in, with the exception of a young boy from outside the walls and an old council member, who protested he was much too ill to participate in the excursion. No such excuse was made on behalf of the boy, whose father felt the shame of his desertion, and the child was sentenced to death in accordance with the tenants of the Bear Clause. The rest of the city's masculine element marched on, glowing with torches, into the eve of evening. Along with them went terrible weapons, cannons loaded with shards and shrapnel and chain-shot. They were bound for a place deep in the forest, a river thought to be the very heart of bear country. They would start there and strike outward, until they met with no more resistance. From the moment of their departure, though, the men were watched. Grizzly scouts traveled back and forth, relaying information about the movements of man, arming the ranks of bears with knowledge. They were prepared to meet the humans in open war.

As the armies of man flew through the forest, they slashed wildly at the shrubs and the trees, sending echoes ricocheting through the woods, until they came to halt at the sound of a deafening roar. The men formed up, drawing close about the cannons, as, from out of the trees in front of them, leapt a massive creature, nine feet tall at least, weighing near two tons, and looking nothing at all like a lumberjack. It was black, and smoking, and had an ethereal quality. "Kill it, men," an elder called out. "That one cannot be saved." At that the men unloaded their rifles at the creature, enraging it with the sting of their guns, causing it to frenzy, then drop dead, thrashing in mid-sprint. Just at the as the volley was fired though, from the east came a flood of

grizzlies, charging into the formation from the side, slashing men with mortal strokes, setting them convulsing on the forest floor, some with death, others with transformation. The men collected themselves quickly, spinning the cannons about and firing off a few good volleys before they drew and charged into the melee, swapping to their daggers, piercing their pouches of Component S, and letting it soak the blades. Their chemical swipes set the grizzlies squirming and writhing, their skin sagging and fighting with something within. They burst then, torn apart by a human, struggling to escape the sac, like a child being born. The bears were bewildered by the capacity of the humans to produce a weapon so similar, in effect, to their own, the blades shimmering with protean liquid. Men were screaming, bears were howling, and the sound went ringing through the forest valleys and caves, seeming to grow louder with each reverberation. The war could not be exhausted, the newly-borns taking up the task of those who fell. Bears and men, hearing the ringing of the Great War miles away, poured in from all over the continent to add to the ranks of either side, fueling the conflict further. They fought and slept and ate in turns, sustaining themselves, and the war went on.

A little cub was but a season away, resting here, in this place, but not in this moment, waiting for that last inhuman groan. He would be greeted then, by a pair of extraordinary humans, waiting to meet him in that moment, waiting in a cave nearby, listening to the sound of a slackening pulse, and to the sound of their own breathing.

The Search for Silence

Sometimes silence is deafening. Sometimes a textured tone can be a refuge from the caustic stagnation of the sleepy air. And sometimes there can be no worse companion. The world had become a cave, and each motion, more violent than the last, sent out reverberations that stilled the hearts of those with hearts to still. Unfortunately, the notion of silence had been almost entirely forgotten. There was a girl who could hear something that no one else could. She heard the roar of the bear and the shouts of man, but she could hear something else through it all. She was close to a boy at the time, so naturally she mentioned this peculiarity to him. “It’s quiet,” she assured him, “but it’s there. Listen. Promise me that you’ll listen, that you’ll hear it.” He tried for hours to hear what she heard so as to gain her approval, but he didn’t know what to listen for. When it finally became unbearable for him he cried out, “I don’t hear anything!”

“Nothing at all?” Her eyes widened.

“No, not a thing...” His eyes fell, ashamed of himself.

“Then you’ve heard it.” She smiled warmly. “Isn’t it lovely?”