

The Near Woods

A bear came last night. It came down through the trees into the clearing around the house, most certainly in the bright moonlight. I did not see it. I did not hear it dismantling a shed where I keep supplies, snapping wall strakes off like matchsticks. He was rooting after some odor, and he scattered my things in his search and not for the first time.

At dawn when I saw the havoc I got my tools and began to make repairs, and while I worked I wondered where the bear had come from and why. Where I live is both rural and wild, on the west slope of the Cascades in Oregon, country with a shallow white history compared, say, to Maine's or Florida's. It is lightly and recently settled compared to rural Illinois or Mississippi. The grizzlies are gone as are the wolves, but black bear and mountain lion pad by the house on the track of deer and elk, and chinook salmon the size of my leg spawn on gravel bars I can see from the living room.

I have lived here for thirty years, and though I can still find the deep woods within a few miles and go in, it is getting harder. I don't believe the bear came from the deep woods. Like many of us who occupy these margins, he is from the near woods.

The deconstructionists write that the deep woods is only an idea. I wish I could take these men on a tour of the planet, into Antarctica's whale- and seal-packed Weddell Sea, into Australia's poorly mapped Tanami Desert, into the boreal forest north of the Yukon River. What is striking about these places is not wild animals or even spectacular or sublime scenery. It is not even space with no artifact, as far as a straining eye can resolve. It is the way the vastness is permeated by silence. The volume of space is tensioned by silence. The increments between sounds, a goose pounding through overhead, a human shout, only reify the silence.

The bear did not come from such a place. In his daybed he can hear the sound of trucks coming up the valley toward the pass. He can hear the passenger jets en route to Denver. He can hear the

whistles on the yarders where men are logging. The integration, the joinery of the space he inhabits with the sounds that penetrate his silence is awry. He naps in the near woods. If he had ambled 200 feet down the hill from my house to the road last night, and stood there gazing at moonlight on the river and been oblivious, a truckload of flooring headed for Minneapolis could have killed him.

I sometimes think the singular privilege of my life has been that I have gone inside the deep woods. I could never live there. I have sat enthralled by too many books. The best I can do is make a life in the near woods, and when some opportunity to go once more into the deep woods arises, to go. I think it must be the same for the bear, though with him it's not having read books. It's the taste of apples in an orchard nearby, and the honey in another neighbor's hives. And my compost.

The bear and I are not enemies. I do not tire of his violent inquiries. I repair the shed and in the afternoon sit nearby in the filigree of sunshine coming through the 150-foot Douglas-firs and read Philip Levine's *The Mercy*. I like the poems enough to read them out loud (perhaps the bear listens if he is near). I imagine from the compassion, the intelligence and grit in the poems that Mr. Levine would understand the bear's dilemma. I would like to fix Mr. Levine lunch and sit here in the woods and talk with our plates balanced on our laps.

Sometimes when I stand in the woods at night I am afraid. I don't believe the bear will attack me, but things are not so plain in the near woods, where we're shoved up against each other. If he opens up the shed again, should I just shoot him as my neighbor advises? If he is hungry and has had an eye torn out on a barbwire fence or a foot broken in a trap and I'm easier than deer, should he just swat me down? Should I stay inside? Should I consider that I would be safer inside where the books are and the telephone and a Brahms concerto on the stereo? Inside, in the magazines I read, are essays that say the bear comes from a place that is only an idea, and that it is in Brahms not the woods that you can better discern the increment between tones, and in Mies van der Rohe that you can better understand space.

I am not so sure. The way to catch the bear, to preserve the shed, is to shoot him with a dart or trap him in a box in the near woods. The only way to hold him afterward is to cage him, take that deep woods space-time away from him. Get rid of that notion, then it's safe. I'm not confident about this kind of safety though. It feels like the safety the Spanish thought they had when they moved the Indians onto encomiendas.

When I go to sleep tonight, the bear will be out there in the woods somewhere, lifting his head to the night breeze. What am I to do if he turns up in my dreams?