

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

Tyler Dempsey
An Account of Pride

I don't know how it goes for you. For me, the bear chin-up'ed over a sharp ledge and flew the few steps onto the trail, blowing dense frost-clouds out his nostrils as he sniffed for our sandwiches; paralyzed, I was fingering bear spray, saying, "There's a bear," so the party could begin covering. He was 30 yards away stepping at us.

Maybe they spoke, probably not—fondled cameras, braced nerves; there was a ripe second where he cocked his ear, stopped, and I thought, "He's merciful." My demeanor: panic, overruled by sheer disassociation. Nobody ran.

Then he charged; birds witnessing flattened under air rebounding 33 feet-per-second. Life as it was, stalled, a plane overhead silenced; my heart quit beating. At 10 yards he puffed fur so that it danced like jungle ferns, and began a stiff-legged encircling, reaching downwind, learning more of us.

From a 90-degree arc, he came barreling, again. Bicep-sized-branches exploded flying pathetically about, while tree trunks split his image into 3-piece sectional-art. Making quiet footprints at a straight angle from his initial charge, he resumed; collapsing sphincters were audible below and behind me.

The circling done, he closed in. **ASSURED.**

Without the risk of broken eye-contact, he shouldered a birch, thrusting like an undersexed offensive lineman. (I've never heard, or read, of bears doing this.) From the ground, the tree's base resembled a hand, palm-down, with fingertips simultaneously brought together, roots being fingers, then at a moment halfway-up, flung down. Torqueing wood-fiber popped like a grenade.

Women dropped.

If read from a fancy dinner menu, the tree was an appetizer, like Takeru Kobayashi, the Japanese competitive eater, downing 30 hotdogs after dipping them in water. Affixing left shoulder to my central-axis—he was right-handed—he approached—7—6 feet—ducking, glancing down, up, and minutely slowing. I squared, with my arm at a right-angle holding spray.

3 feet away. The forest breathed in slow-motion; I leaned—matching millimeter-for-millimeter his advance; veins bulged up my brain. He shook from nervousness. Snapped upright via musculature influence, fur launched, right-haunch-to-right-shoulder.

I sprayed.

WWHOOF; he swatted earth and spun, cancelling 15 feet in one second, then sat with us in his peripheral. I hadn't unloaded, just tickled with a spray-bullet no larger than a Kobayashi dog. He licked space.

Impregnable adult? No, the bear was moldable. A teenager. Events would twist him like a tilt-a-whirl.

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

We backed; so he got unglued. Jolted by the moment, he gathered his black strength, approached, cocky, eyes crazed. In my head I saw it all, headlines: **ALASKAN GUIDE MAULED BY BEAR**, relatives petting survivors, (a beast's wounded ego), blood decorating taiga, turquoise lichen; years from now, my story whipping the angles of this mountain.

Chaotic disaffection penetrated me—perfect adrenaline. A bear close by. The ooze of movement. Lean and shake. Having my mind made up, *this* time, to not use spray. Pure **ELECTRICITY**.

Memories get foggy, warped. We stood near embraced. What I recall: eyes. Frustration. Moments like freefalling. **WWHOOF**. Distance, another annihilation-swat; blind charging and hind legs, a drop and looking off, muscles and everything connected melting like wind shook from sails.

All for revelation, the essence or mystery: memories float like islands, too few, that conjure up warmth and gratitude at having *lived*. When called on to act, black train roaring, smoke pluming its gasping, dynamic thumb into Heaven—when what's expected is shit-stained underwear—we bind ourselves to the tracks trembling.