

Black Bear

By Chris Siteman

Chris Siteman lives in Massachusetts, and teaches in the English departments at Suffolk University and Bridgewater State University. His poetry and nonfiction have appeared in journals such as *Salamander*, *Boog City*, *Sugar House Review*, *River Teeth*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Poetry Ireland Review* and *Consequence Magazine*, among numerous others.

for JB & THR

“...the abyss stares also into you.”

F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886)

Sometimes that night creeps up on me like my own dark reflection mirrored in a darkened room. We were camping in the White Mountains just below Franconia Notch. Ty, a longtime friend, and I were the last to get there. As we tromped through the darkness barely broken by the beams from our flashlights, we struggled to negotiate the tangles of undergrowth. Nearing the campsite, we could smell fatty smoke. The rest of the group was already cooking on the fire. And we could hear them talking and laughing well before the slightest hint of molten-yellow-orange firelight peeked through the blackness doubled by the upper canopy, dense-woven branches and tree trunks. There were ten of us that night. It was something some friends I grew up with did now and then during summer. We went to get away from the city, beyond the concrete and asphalt, the sizzling buzz of transformers, fans and air conditioners, to unwind in the woods for a few days—every meal over a fire, breezes shimmering sun and moonlight through soft green foliage, swimming and hiking the mornings and afternoons, drinking and shit-talking nights.

Not long after we arrived, the hour already grown later than late, I was up and wide awake, sitting alone by the fire having a smoke. I watched as the flames licked their own hazy halo and the darkness beyond. I was waiting for the mottled blue tin camping cup, into which I'd poured a little whiskey over ice, to start sweating. Everybody else turned in almost an hour earlier. Where there was raucous laughter just a while before now was a chorus of snores. That with the crackling fire, the plash of the nearby river flowing in its bed, the trees rocking and creaking as branches, leaves and pine needles combed and whistled the wind, all swelled together into one wistfully sweet sound. And I was glad to have it as my company.

I was wide awake because of my job; I worked nights. Ever since my late teens I'd been a doorman of one sort or another at various clubs and bars in Boston. At nineteen, I took a job bouncing at The Rathskeller in Kenmore Sq., the then infamous rock-and-roll dive bar. It was frequented by some of the best and worst people I'd met up to that point in my life. Everybody, from local artists and academics to bike gangs and Sox fans, went there to drink and listen to live music. I sought it out because I was hurting and feeling lost. I was pissed off at my father, my

mother, my community, the whole world it seemed. I felt I'd been somehow born wronged, and I wanted to fight. I wanted to punish somebody else—anybody else. I was tired of being the one who paid. At that age, I was walking rage on tap. And the first couple years I worked that job, I repeatedly found exactly what I was seeking, in the music, in the violence, almost as if I'd called it out of the darkness itself, as though my own anger were a song answered in kind.

However, as more years passed, and I began to shake loose the effects of my late adolescent anger, I came to consider bouncing just another way to get by. Then it was a way to help pay my way through school. Most recently it became a way to make additional income during summers between fall and spring semester teaching gigs. Though, I've often questioned my need to return to the position, often wondered if it ever truly became just about money, some part of me long knowing it remained primarily about violence. The violence in me merely morphed, became refined, justified by clever arguments, matured into efforts to maintain self-control in the face of violence. Then it became an effort to assert control over the violence itself—in me and, if possible, the world directly around me.

As I sat by the fire all of that was present in my mind. But I was examining it through what happened two nights before while working the door at The Black Rose, a dark wood and brass Irish bar in the Faneuil Hall neighborhood. It was almost midnight, nearing the end of an uneventful shift. The air was thick with humidity. I stood by the front door watching couples and groups of twenty-somethings wander drunkenly by, and some were crossing the street for a late-night visit to the nearby sausage vendor.

“Hey—stop!” I heard it shouted to my left, turned and looked down the sidewalk. Coming towards me was a young man in his early or mid-twenties. He was a good thirty feet away. I had time to take in his dark short-cropped hair, his broad shoulders, his clenched and angular jaw, could already see veins standing out at his neck and across his face. He was clearly in a fury (after, I wondered whether it was coke-fueled). And he had a slim-built woman grasped firmly by the upper arm. He was dragging her down the sidewalk. Her high heels barely made contact with the cement. The decision wasn't really a decision. It was more reflex—accompanied by flashes of her body discarded behind a dumpster down some cobblestone side street. I stepped out of the doorway and turned to block the sidewalk with my body (I had a clear size advantage). I put my hands up loosely in front of me, palms showing, open as if the posture of a plea, a pose I thought looked disarming. I could feel the whole world but him and me

disappearing. Yet, I didn't see the knife until the very last instant. He held it in his right hand, down by his hip, as he stomped towards me. I only saw a flash of light reflect off the blade as he went to stick it in my neck. Dodging under the blade, under his arm, I threw my right arm around his neck, and hit him squarely and solidly in the chest with my shoulder. His feet, legs and lower body kept going; he was horizontal when I threw him to the concrete. When he hit, he lost the knife. I dropped to my knees, grabbed his arm and neck in a submission hold, and turned his head. But I turned his head a little too far. When I did, he bit down. Through a nylon staff shirt, through the tee-shirt underneath, I could feel his teeth chew into me. Though, it didn't really hurt; it only felt a kind of squeezing pressure, a dully insistent clamping down.

I was removed from the moment, gone to a sort of faraway space in my mind where I found myself considering the fact that he was indeed chewing on me and had just tried to stab me in the neck. That summer I was working between semesters at law school. And I distinctly remember thinking about my first year Criminal Law course, about what degree of force I was within my rights to apply. Commensurate force plus one—the words themselves passed through my mind. I decided I had the right to kill him. It was clear self-defense; if he kept biting into my chest I might have to break his—just then a hand came down on my shoulder. I turned and looked, and there stood a broad-shouldered police officer with a thick salt-and-pepper mustache. “I got this,” he said, patting me gently on the shoulder despite his stony eyes.

I think I may have just said, “Thanks.” And grabbing the sides of my toothy attacker's head, I pulled him away from my chest, pushed his face against the concrete and used his head for leverage in getting to my feet. It was then I realized he bit a chunk out of me. In pulling his head away, I helped him tear a sizeable hole in my chest. Even then, aside from being vaguely aware that I'd been wounded, I wasn't really aware how bad it was. An adrenaline raciness was on me, its own particular kind of anesthetic, and had I broken my hand I doubt I would've entirely realized (at least, not right then).

It all occurred in less than a minute, and by that point the manager and other door guys were out on the street with me. We were gathered in a semi-circle watching as two cops wrestled to get the man properly into handcuffs. The woman I'd been so concerned about moments before jumped on one cop's back as a cruiser stopped sharply at the curb, and out of the driver-side door appeared a heavy-set woman. She moved with a kind of athletic grace untold by her frame as she rounded the front of the car, grabbed the woman attacking the other officers by the back of her

belt and shirt, hoisted her in the air and slammed her bodily onto the hood of her cruiser. The sound her body made hitting the sheet metal was a dull and hollow thud; the woman lay prone. As we stood watching, the manager, a tall and lanky redhead in his early forties with a sallow complexion, turned to me. “You’re bleeding,” he said, arms crossed on his chest, pointing at the wound with his elbow.

“I know,” I told him. I could feel the wetness starting to soak through my shirt. “No, you’re really bleeding,” he insisted. And I looked down to see that there were teeth marks torn through my dark blue shirt and white undershirt, that the holes were surrounded by a spreading shadow of wetness. I pulled my staff shirt away by the collar and saw my white undershirt blossoming an orange-sized bloodstain on my chest. I peeled back my undershirt, peered at the wound. When I pulled his head away, he didn’t quite bite the whole chunk out of me, but rather half tore it out, leaving a stretch of flesh on the underside intact. I gingerly pushed it back in with my fingertips, and as I did blood pulsed from the zigzag line of teeth marks. The manager, frowning critically, stood watching me.

“Definitely going to have to get you to the hospital for shots—at least,” he told me flatly.

“Shots—how I was hoping my night would end,” I muttered.

“Wait here.” Arms still crossed on his chest, he walked away.

Before the police finished wrapping the scene, the ambulance arrived, red and white lights flashing off the surrounding stone walls and windows, sirens blaring and echoing. As I climbed in back, one of the officers, a young beat cop with an almost too boyish face asked if they could reach out to me as a witness if needed. I told him they could, and gave him my information as he scribbled in a small notebook. He thanked me, then walked away as one of the EMTs climbed in with me and closed the doors. The ambulance pulled away from the curb. And the EMT driving turned the sirens back on and ran stoplights the whole way to the emergency room. Somewhat later, the bald and square-jawed doctor inspecting my wound through a pair of silver wire-frame glasses told me an anecdotal bit of trivia about how human bites are second only to Komodo dragon bites in terms of how nasty each creature’s mouth happens to be, how had I not come in, and it had gone septic, it might have killed me.

“I don’t think it needs stitches, though” he told me. “I’m just going to have one of the nurses clean it, give you something to make sure nothing nasty comes of it, and then bandage it. You’ll have to come back so we can take a little blood, run a couple tests. In the meantime, we’ll

make sure to get you a scrip for some antibiotics.” Then the nurse came in, a tallish, middle-aged woman with sand-colored hair. She washed the wound with saline, and gave me so many injections I started to feel rawer from the needling than I did from the bite. She bandaged me up, told me to change it at least once a day, but twice would be better. Then the doctor returned, looked it over briefly, gave me the prescription, and sent me on my way. Later the next day, while I was changing the bandaging, the chunk he tore at with his teeth fell out whole.

As I looked in the bathroom mirror at the jagged edges of the wound, dried blood, pink-red-white-raw exposed flesh, and the surrounding deep purple-black bruising, the moment kept playing on a loop in my mind. It had been doing so all night and into the morning, then again since I’d woken. It could’ve all gone down differently—it could’ve ended differently. It happened in mere seconds. I’d barely seen the knife: it was only that the light from the streetlamp glancing off the blade caught my eye. I was just lucky enough to see it. Everything after was almost automatic. And while me grabbing him like that was one thing, me hitting him hard enough off the ground to make him drop the knife was something else entirely. I was lucky twice. The whole thing could’ve happened quite differently; I thought it through again.

Those were the thoughts I was still stuck on almost forty-eight hours later. They were insistently present the whole drive up into the mountains, and were just as nagging as I sat alone by that fire. But I was happy to have the chilled tin cup of whiskey to sip on. The fire even began to draw me into a kind of ease I hadn’t felt since before the altercation. I put my hand gingerly over the bandage on my chest and listened again intently to the crackling flames, the river, the wind in the trees, the others snoring in their tents. There was no place I’d rather have been at that moment, and the way the whole of my surroundings worked on my senses lulled me.

I imagined looking down on myself by the fire; peering at myself through the trees outside the circle of light; I was standing among river rocks under the star-salted sky, water flowing around my legs; I felt at once joined to and apart from all around me. I thought about time, how long it took to get to now, how all that ever existed prior to this moment existed to bring this moment about, and each subsequent moment thereafter. I imagined the writhing world, a seething ball of life. I imagined the bacterial, the viral, all the insects and the rest of the slithering-crawling-walking-swimming-flying creatures inhabiting our blue dot, all the many trillions of billions that are, and have ever been, on Earth. They appeared a dense scribble of too many points to count. And looking down on it all from my imagined vantage, I heard all that life

buzzing, all that consciousness wavering into darkness. It filled the void around me with a kind of beautiful white noise, until even the void and I felt at one. I thought about Thoreau, his ants in the woods by the shore of Walden Pond; his vision of the human race; all of existence a deviating pattern patterned on pattern, patterned on pattern, ad infinitum. I sipped some whiskey, lit a smoke and settled even further into the blanket of night.

That was when I heard it—a crisp snap. The sound concentrated my mind; it was sharply out of tune with everything else, the trees and water, even the crackling fire. My mind tore through a list of potential sources of the sound (chipmunk, no; squirrel, no; falling branch, no; no, no, no—), burned through all the possibilities in what seemed an instant, and came to rest on large mammal. I jumped from my chair and spun in the direction I heard the noise. Every hair on end, the fire at my back, I stared into the darkness, but had just been staring into the flames. I was night blind. I couldn't see more than two or three feet beyond the glow of the fire. I stood stone still, jaw and fists clenched, mouth suddenly dry, feeling the earth pulse beneath my feet, electricity shooting my spine. And I stared. I could hear my heartbeat, and was sure whoever or whatever was out there could hear it too. Slowly my eyes adjusted, and the darkness began to fall back bathed in golden-orange light. Still I saw almost nothing, but kept staring as my eyes adjusted further. I could see twenty feet, just beyond the ring of tents, fifty and more, through the immediate thatch-work of trunks, branches and scrub. But I could see nothing besides shadowy vegetation, never mind anything big enough to have made the noise.

That was when I realized the only nearby spot that remained too dark for my vision to penetrate was the darkness inside my own silhouette. I leaned slowly to my right. And there it was, no more than eight feet away. It stood on all fours, mouth agape, teeth showing, eyes illuminated a deep amber by the fire. The outline of its head seemed incredibly angular in the firelight. If someone told me the bear weighed four hundred pounds, I would've agreed to it with surety. It may have weighed more, perhaps less, but as I stood there it struck me as absolutely massive. Again, my mind raced: I pictured myself running to the other side of the fire pit; no good. One of the others brought a sword with them. It hung in its scabbard, shoulder strap slung over a knob protruding from the trunk of an enormous oak—just six or so feet; my mind measured and re-measured the distance; never make it. I pictured myself running around the trunk in a desperate circular race with the bear; no chance. One look at its forepaws spread on the ground was enough to dispel any fantasies I ever had about what I'd do if confronted by a bear. I

could see the musculature of its body through its thick fur. I pictured it swatting my arm, my head, the devastating damage: arm half torn off, jaw hanging broken, scalp torn away. I pictured it biting me, what its teeth would do, the power of its jaws. It made getting bitten two nights before seem so instantly and absolutely trifling the incident entirely disappeared from my mind. I slowly stood as tall and broad as I could, making my silhouette before the fire as big as possible. All this, the whole moment spanning from the snap of the twig to me standing puffed up in front of the fire, despite how excruciatingly long it felt, occurred in seconds. As my mind remained fixed on the bear, thinking over the various and graphic ways it might disfigure or dispatch me, I realized it was standing right next to Ty's head. It was separated from him by mere inches of empty space and a thin layer of nylon tenting.

"Ty—" I whispered, an urgent hiss, keeping myself as large against the fire as I could.

"What," he barked, his annoyance at being woken obvious.

The bear shifted at the sound of his voice, but didn't take its shining eyes off me.

"There's a bear—next to your head," I hissed again, assuming this vital information.

"Why—" he whispered back, "did you wake—me up?" I pictured him struggling to escape the tent while the bear went after him. He was right. I should've just left him sleeping. Spreading my chest and shoulders, standing tall and still, I'd hoped the bear would back away, but that hope evaporated like a thimble of water thrown in our fire. The bear took no notice of my attempt to seem intimidating. Instead, it walked directly towards me. I could feel the electric impulse to run firing through my torso, down my arms and legs, but I didn't move; I watched the bear close the feet between us. It stopped, snout three inches from me, sniffed audibly about my thighs, hips, gut, then lumbered around me and the fire, as though each merely interrupted its walking an otherwise straight line through the forest. I stood listening to it crash through the undergrowth until I couldn't hear it anymore, and then stood listening a while longer.

After it had been gone for several interminable minutes, I frantically piled logs onto the fire. I grabbed the sword, unsheathed the blade, re-sheathed it, leaned it against the chair where I'd been sitting. It seemed inadequate. I grabbed the fallen trunk of a long grip-sized adolescent oak, struck the few branches from it, put the tip in the fire and let it char. Then, on the rocks that lined the outer ring of the pit, I rubbed the charred end to a point. I did this several times, until I was sure it would do: long enough to give myself a chance of keeping it away, hardened enough to give me a shot at penetrating its hide. The whole time I kept a sharp ear towards the darkness

beyond the light. I drank another whiskey to smooth my jitters, and it almost helped. Still feeling the soil throb beneath me, I lit a smoke. I turned the moment over.

I'd carried my violence into the forest and the forest responded, showed me its true face, emerged from the trees in the shape of a bear—I felt I'd somehow called it out of the darkness. And I could still feel it out there. I felt transported across a gulf of thousands of years. I'd taken part in an original moment, a ritual once common now slipping into a semi-forgotten past: a human alone at night encountering an apex predator. I considered how this moment, like dreaming itself, informed the vast province of night for humans for almost the entire time humans have lived on Earth. More, it was as though a cord woven of elements spanning human history and beyond was struck in me, as though the darkness not only showed me its face but also whispered me its name. I felt distinctly alive. I thought again of Thoreau's ants. I thought of the bite taken from my chest, the missing flesh. And I laughed nervously, quietly, to myself.