A bear's days are warmed by the same sun,  
his dwellings are overdomed by the same blue sky,  
and his life turns and ebbs with heart-pulsings  
like ours and was poured from the same First Fountain. 

Since we were young and carefree in the forest and the fields, we marched to no drummer but our own. Every day was endless and the summer an eternity. Although my cousin and I were not in search of moose, wolves, or bears, we did on rare occasions find one. Such a discovery would not be mentioned to the adults of our world for fear they’d restrict our ramblings to the house and the barns. On this fine day, we had gone into the forest behind the hand-dug well with the 1939 marker, and we turned east toward the rising sun. Perhaps we looked for berries—we were always looking for berries.

Not long after starting, my cousin picked up a rotten smell, a whiff of decay—his nose was always keener than mine. Being boys and adventurous, we followed our noses like hunting dogs
on the scent of a deer. This foul stench increased rapidly, and soon we saw it lying on the forest floor dappled by the sun. Here was the rotting carcass of a once great bruin of the north woods. Yet death was alive with a million maggots. We were mesmerized! We must have watched this roiling carcass for 20 minutes with our T-shirts pulled up over our noses.

At the same moment we both decided to do it! We would take some part of the bear home as a souvenir. What part? Most of the enormous skull was bare and therefore free of maggots, so we determined to each take an eye tooth. These were large and securely anchored into the jaw, so we used a small granite rock to hammer the teeth free (see photograph of the bear skull). After this, I polished the trophy tooth on my pants and slipped it into a pocket; my cousin did the same.

Why did we do this? I’m not certain. Perhaps we felt the same urge as less complex people of the past who had entire necklaces of wild animal teeth—trophies of the hunt. I had this memento of a great animal’s death for years, but like my youth I have misplaced it. Perhaps it’s still here somewhere; maybe I should look around.

Years later I reflected on how—not why—this bear died in that place at that time. Now without evidence you are left with an educated conjecture or a crude superstition; I wanted none of the
latter. In the wild, black bears can live upward to 30 years, but rarely do. Most are shot by hunters or killed by cars long before they reach that age.

One night when I was in the back seat of the family car, which my father was driving back to the lumber mill, he *purposefully* hit a bear while we were driving uphill. Mother shouted the same unfamiliar words I heard previously at the bog crossing. The car, however, was too light to inflict real damage, but it did anger the bear so much that he ran through a fence pulling up two posts. It seems unlikely, on the other hand, our trophy bear was shot because it wasn’t hunting season, and we had heard no tales of a local Nimrod slaughtering bears. I conjecture this bear died of old age. He was on his way to pick blueberries, like my cousin and me, and, at this place and at that time, he had lain down to rest never to rise again. Every creature has a last step, a final beat, in a train of billions—all good things end.

I have referred to this bear as “he” because of his great size: males are generally twice as large as females, both as cubs and adults. And they need to be large to defend their territories from competing boars (male bears). Also the older the bear the bigger. The large boar in the photograph with his paws neatly folded seems to be implying, “Yes, I have been a very good boy.” I consider this animal to be approximately the same size as the trophy bear we discovered so long ago on that fine day.
My cousin no longer walks these fields and forests with me, but not because he wouldn’t want to. In those halcyon summer days of meandering, we never once saw a live bear, although many may have seen us. All authoritative texts refer to *Ursus americanus*, the black bear, as “a shy woodland creature.” Other than the trophy bear, I have never encountered another carcass. Nevertheless I now see live bears from April to November, sometimes several different ones each day. The bruins I meet have diverse personalities, yet they don’t visit me because we are friends. Completing their billion steps, they wander freely near my home because we are not enemies. Bears are normally solitary.

Here is a gallery of extraordinary bears I have known:

At my latitude, April 10 is the average date for a bear to emerge from hibernation. On April 23, I noticed a bear walking toward the back of my empty pickup truck in which I often transport food. I assumed this bear was looking for a snack. Then he does something incredible! Here is an animal who knows nothing about trucks, and might never have seen one previously. Yet he effortlessly twists the handle clockwise on the cap of my truck, flips the door into the up position, and hops in the back. Instinctively, I grab my camera and bolt from the door of the house. Knocking on the truck’s cap, I calmly say, “Come on out, big fella.” He responds to my request by hurling my...
plastic recycling box from the truck as an Olympic athlete casts a javelin—and almost as far. At that moment, I had a revelation that what I was doing was dangerous, perhaps extremely dangerous. But before I could have a second thought, the bear is out of the truck facing me just a body length away. Again acting instinctively, if not wisely, I take his picture. The great portrait artist Yousuf Karsh couldn’t have been happier with the result (see “Barney the Black Bear”).

As you can infer from his portrait, this bear was not angry or shy but rather curious—let’s call him Barney. I suspect he was about a five- or six-year-old male—almost every bear without cubs in the spring is male. I talked to him in quiet, soothing tones telling him not to go in the back of my truck again. Perhaps he should go look for a lady companion, I softly whispered. He did neither. He ambled a few feet away and sat on my grandfather’s stone fence in the most relaxed fashion possible. Fear left my body and I continued to take his photograph for some minutes before he lumbered off.

I saw him often that summer, and he always had a relaxed easy-going manner. We were not enemies; we were not friends. But we were acquaintances.

Later that summer, one of my regular visitors was the nubile young princess pictured above the caption “Pretty Woman.” Rarely do you see a wild animal this well coiffured; all she needed was a bow in her hair, I thought. She was perhaps 3.5 years old and not yet gravid, a perfect mate for my acquaintance Barney. Females (sows) are impregnated every two years throughout their mature lives and deliver one to three cubs every winter.
Like humans, bears are promiscuous. Unlike humans, some of whom are ready for sex 365 days and 24/7, bears mate in July. If “Pretty Woman” didn’t breed with Barney, then one of the local louts had that pleasure. A sow ready to mate attracts a retinue of admirers. I once had a young female lope up my driveway; over the next three hours, eight males followed her.
Bears are the stuff of legends, dreams, and childhood. They are teddy bears or vicious killers, saints or villains—maybe they are neither. They can, however, be the stuff of humor. Consider the four photographs of the bear that appears to
be inebriated. Windfall apples had been fermenting for a time under some of my large apple trees, and this ruffian had eaten as many as his stomach would allow. He seems to know he has been imbibing and regrets it—a bear hangover.
Whether Pretty Woman or the other sows breed with Barney or a local lout, any cubs will be born around Groundhog Day. At that time of year near my home, the temperatures can plummet to as low as –40°. Worse yet, each helpless cub weighs about 10 ounces and lives in a hole in the ground with a hibernating mother. Death seems imminent! Still, such is evolution, bears are not put in a situation they cannot survive. “Whatever does not kill me makes me stronger,” writes Nietzsche.

Yet how do they survive? First, hibernation for bears is not a vegetative state but more of a torpor inducing only a slight drop in body temperature. One glance inside a bear’s den and the wide unblinking stare of the sow will convince you of this fact—and of the wisdom of a very speedy retreat.
The den is small so the mother’s body can heat it, and the cubs snuggle for life itself. Although the sow neither urinates nor defecates all winter, she will lactate rich milk, so the cubs can grow quickly. The mother licks her cubs to stimulate defecation and then eats their feces to keep the den clean—this is premium day care. To see how rapidly cubs grow, compare their size in the two pictures taken just five weeks apart.

Like human children, bear cubs have much to learn. Unlike human children, bear cubs obey instantly. Lesson number one—taught before they leave the safety of the den site—climb a tree when danger is present. At my back door is an enormous white pine tree, and the cub pictured peeking out from behind it was watching me. The cub’s sibling was even higher up this tree. Apparently, their mother saw me (the danger) through the window and sent her cubs skyward—a wise false positive. For extra, and may I say unnecessary, insurance, she stood guard at the tree’s base. After some minutes, the sow, with a few meaningful grunts, summoned her cubs to scramble down, and then they vanished into the engulfing forest. Lesson taught, learned, and used!
Cubs also spend much of their day playing and some of this fun involves climbing trees. The sturdy youngster taking a “time out” has exhausted himself playing and naps in a tree—note his eyes are shut. Playing and learning are inextricably bound together and prepare all mammals for life’s contingencies. *I play therefore I am!* And play is not unique to mammals. I have seen hawks, blue jays, and ravens frolic; the latter will even create patterns in the snow with their wings.
Unless you have children, you cannot fully know the remarkable bond between parent and child—both human and nonhuman (see photographs of mothers with their cubs). Cubs stay with their mother for approximately 17 months; all the while she is protective and affectionate. During the first summer, they nurse every day cradled between mother’s legs as she licks their bodies. And, in the fall, they will take the long sleep together, snuggling for warmth, with mother’s body blocking the den entrance. But next summer everything changes!

The following June, the sow becomes very intolerant of her cubs and attempts to drive them away—or so the textbooks say. Yet this is not what I have observed from my home. Rather the parting is more like the one that occurred between the “Little Lady” and her mother. The mother commanded her obedient cub (see photo) to stay in the middle of my field not far from the Red Spot. Then she shambled off into the forest only to return in 20 minutes to see her cub again. Then, once more, she left. This coming and going repeated itself half a dozen times over a period of three hours. It had every appearance of a long, sad goodbye. Finally, she left forever! Now was her time to find a gentleman caller—not a hard task I might add.

![Little Lady with Pancake Bum](image)

Remarkably, the still-obedient cub stayed in the field until sundown obeying mother’s command. It may have stayed hours
longer, but I couldn’t tell on that moonless night. She* was gone in the morning. Now, obedience alone will not help her survive although it has taught her many lessons. Life now required a new paradigm. Some learn, some don’t; some live, some die. Life’s challenge is always the same: adapt or perish.

In her hunger, our young orphan tackled a porcupine—always a poor menu choice (the white arrows show three quills). Unlike some dogs we had on the farm, she will never repeat this mistake. I was cheering for her survival, although almost half of all such castaways die before fall hibernation.

The reader has already realized bears have an amazing physiology. Neither urinating nor defecating, they lie in a dirt hole for five months with no ill effects and no bone loss. Somehow, they reprocess the urea in their urine to create new proteins. I know of no other animal that can do that. Scientists are studying this incredible ability to benefit the bedridden and astronauts both of whom lose considerable bone density from lack of exercise or weightlessness, respectively.

If the fall berry and apple crop should fail and a starvation year ensues, the sow’s body will absorb the developing fetuses to preserve her life, nature’s birth control. So that winter she will

* The cub’s small size indicated she was a female.
have no cubs. This unusual phenomenon will synchronize the estrus periods for female bears over the entire crop failure area. I became aware that these periods were in sync in my region.

Because of this phenomenon, the unfortunate little lady with the quills in her face had much competition for food from other orphans. One sow I knew had two large male cubs that she had turned out into the world. Whether she left them at different times or whether they were cast out together, I cannot say. What I do know is I would see one or the other every few days.

Much against the advice of my friends and everyone else, I decided to feed these three orphans with cracked corn and dog kibble. I marvel at the wonders of evolution—this book celebrates its creations—yet that is not a moral or intellectual imperative to imitate its severity. So I stepped in and fed these foundlings who quickly learned to come to my free kitchen several times a day. Both they and I were amply rewarded. The dejected female orphan, who was left in the field, grew into the fine animal pictured standing on the rock pile. She had many cubs of her own in the years that followed. She always brought them to dinner. Clearly, she didn’t bring her progeny to show me, but she did manifest a presence and a sense of pride that said, “I, Ursus americanus, made these things.”
The two male cubs I mentioned earlier finally met at my food kitchen. To me this chance meeting was spectacular for animals that are supposedly solitary. They greeted each other with hugs—yes, bear hugs—and kisses (see the “Brothers United”). Their chance encounter was nothing less than joyous. No longer alone and afraid! *Stand by me* they implied to each other, and they did all that summer.

Since they were young and carefree in the forest and the fields, they marched to no drummer but their own. Every day was endless and the summer an eternity. Although they were not in search of moose, wolves, or bears, they did on rare occasions find one. On this fine day, they went into the forest behind my home and turned east toward the rising sun. Perhaps they looked for berries—they were always looking for berries.