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writer

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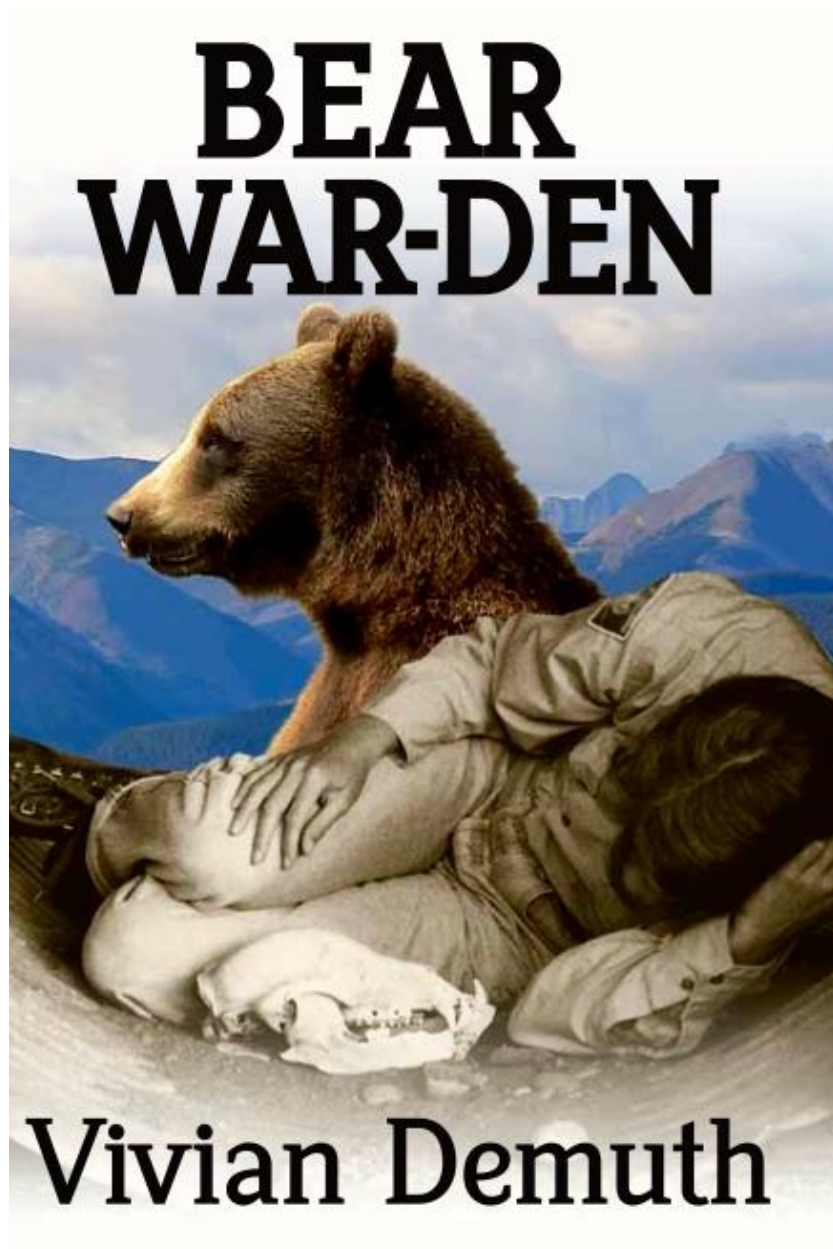
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VIVIAN DEMUTH

Excerpts from the Novel
Bear War-den



BREATHING falling panting

sweating seeing shivering

watching drooling PANTING

The two male BC conservation officers bend over the bear that they named Dolly, engrossed in their work.

“I’ve never seen a blonde one before.”

“Uncommon, that’s for sure. Make it tighter, John. Dear Dr. Franklin would not be pleased if that high-tech critter cam slipped off our bear’s fat furry neck during his pilot project, now would he? It wouldn’t come out of my pocket, that’s for sure. Check that release buckle, too.”

“Okay. She’s panting.”

“Just spray some water on her muzzle. That’ll calm her down. She’s got a scar here on her right buttock. Might’ve been a slug. Better write that down. I’m only going to take two vials of blood. This’ll be full in a second.”

“The ear tag’s in. Look at these whopping canines.”

“What did you expect for our eight-year-old sow? Now, let’s test this thing-a-ma-jig, video. You hold the antenna? Where’s that laptop?”

“The case is by the shotgun.”

“Okay. Now, to deploy, press start camera. Bingo. Anything happening?”

“The green light came on. Shit, Dolly’s eyelids moved.”

“And Houston, I’ve got a picture, those pretty whitebark pines over there. That’ll do. Let’s back off. You grab the shotgun and tranquilizing kit. I’ll take this remote receiving station and the snare.”

“Be a good girl, Dolly. I’ll bet she doesn’t stay within range for very long.”

“Well, I’m not going flying after her. You might like to go along on a flight with Franklin and his cute assistant. Not me. I had to pick up the pieces after that last research flight crashed a few years back. Nasty.”

“Yeah, I heard. I’m surprised Dolly doesn’t have any cubs this year.”

“Our Dolly is not, as they say, a good producer. Would you look at her lying there panting like a cold, fat whore? Looks a bit like Stan’s new squeeze, don’t you think, a blonde with her eyes rolling and tongue hanging out all wet?”

“Maybe, but Darlene snores a lot louder.”

“Son-of-a-gun, ha, ha, ha . . . Come on, Dolly, wake up. That-a-girl . . .”

“I have to get a photo of that white coat of hers.”

breathing slowing reflecting

waking clicking whirring

listening gasping

running

The last thing my mother had said was, “Don’t forget to breathe, up there. That alpine air is as thin as a negligee and the wind can smother you if you’re not careful.” Ever since she started reading about Buddhist meditation, *breathing* had become my mother’s favourite word.

My mother had not wanted me to go up to the bear cave near the monastery at Mont Serrat in Spain. She could only go so far. It was one year ago, when she watched, biting her lip as I walked away from her. I was searching for an artifact, a splinter of bone or a room of death in the memory of ancestral peaks. A sliver of pre-history that I could hold and listen to until, like dreams, I would have to let it all go. My mother had said that, in desperate circumstances, I could always sell any find at an auction. I had reminded her of that when I had started out for the bear cave.

The truth was that my mother never wanted me to hike alone anywhere. She told me that her mother had had a bad experience while walking in the Bavarian mountains of her childhood. But she never cared to reveal anything more about that to me, and my grandmother had died of a heart attack long ago, so I never had a chance to ask her directly.

Now, after my termination from work at Stoney Mountains National Park, I decide to hike to the park boundary to return a grizzly bear skull. I try to explain myself to my mother on the phone.

“You like to spend your weekends in the living room of physics, sitting on your couch while you divide numbers to solve the riddle of Pi. I like to explore all the rooms in a house, our shared ecological house, for example. The earth’s room of ungulates—deer, moose, elk—or the room with predators—man, wolves, and bears—wherever they take me. Dead or alive. Rooms that suffer under our present economy, this so-called house management.”

“Don’t go complaining about my job with the mining company again. And what do you know about economics or suffering, for that matter? You hate shopping and you’re not the one with acid reflux attacks. And someday, I hope you’ll appreciate my research into Pi.”

She sighs, releasing a gurgling breath that trickles into silence.

“It’s not really economics, anyhow. It’s us. We’re the ones killing everything else.”

“That’s why I went to a community meeting last night. I got into an argument with Mike Adams, who works in the office, and he got stomping mad.”

“I’m sorry, Mom, but I’m tired.”

I rub the back of my head and discover a small lump but I have no recollection of how it got there. It’s not painful so I try to ignore it.

“Have you been tested for Lyme disease? You’re surrounded by ticks out there in the wilderness all by yourself.”

I take a deep breath and try again.

“Well, the wood ticks are better company than some people I know. Look, today I have to bring a bear skull back to its home. It’s time and I need to look for someone, too.”

“You mean, you’re off to see some eco-rooms?”

“Yes.”

“Sounds like a dream.”

“I don’t know . . .”

“Well, don’t be out there in the dark. And call me when you get home. We need to talk some more.”

I hang up the phone. My mother had developed a fear of the dark, nyctophobia, she said her doctor called it. I remove my metallic watch because of the sudden rash that has appeared on my wrist and take some aspirin for a budding headache before I enter her room to pick up the photos. I will go to the bear trap first.



She was waiting for them near the boundary. That is where they preferred to strike. It was three-thirty a.m. Johanna watched the shadows quiver on the snow-dusted mountain peaks and she thought she saw lights, silvery lights in the form of giant dragons flickering on the slopes. Perhaps her eyes were tired, playing tricks with her mind. The green Aurora Borealis began to crackle and flash overhead. The origin of the heavenly sound of the Aurora had eluded scientists for years. Somehow this knowledge satisfied her. While she waited, the fall wind whistled through her over-sized, male park-warden parka. She entered her warden vehicle for warmth, placed her camera on the floor, partially rolled down the window to listen for trucks or gunshots, then laid down on the front seat. She was tired and bored, but refused to sleep. Listening and watching the Aurora, she thought of the other night with her date, Xavier. They had celebrated Mallory's last day as a seasonal warden at Jake's Bar in Pincher Creek. As she imagined receiving goodnight kisses from Xavier and Mallory, Johanna unzipped her khaki uniform pants, rubbed herself with intense pleasure until she fell in rhythm with the singing Aurora above her. She was glad that she had disobeyed uniform regulations and refused to wear a bra. As her breasts began to tingle, a gunshot pierced the cool air, blowing in through the window. Shit, she panted, then bolted upright and zipped up her pants. It had come from behind her, the shot, she was sure. She spun her truck around, then drove quickly without headlights. The highway was punctuated with spots of frost and black ice. At the park boundary, just inside Stoney Mountains National Park, she spotted a small mound on the side of the road. She aimed the truck lights at it. Outside, with her radio dangling at her hip, she hovered above the steam rising from the pile. It was a grizzly, a young cinnamon bear. An uncommon colour. Where the head should have been, a round leather collar with a bulky battery attached to it lay propped up like a halo above the bear's neck. She had come to detest these tracking devices. Many years ago, they had been banned in human prisons, a ban that had only recently been reversed. Blood pooled where the bear's paws had been, and blood trickled out of its sliced gut where its gall bladder no longer existed. Ripped out with bare hands, probably.

Johanna ignored the stench of the putrid air and stroked the bear's bristly thigh as if to soothe the animal. It was a female. Air sighed out of the rough hole in her abdomen. Something rustled in the bush, off to the side of the road, then pounded along on the ground, running away. As she depressed the key of her radio to call for backup, she felt enraged and paused. The radio repeater beeped then faded out. She aimed the truck's overhead lights into the bush, scanning for several minutes, but found nothing. She retrieved her camera and fire axe from her truck seat, and then snapped a series of photos of the bear. Perhaps, someday, someone else would see those images. She raised the axe above the bear's neck and swung it at the radio collar standing in a pool of blood. The yellowed plastic surrounding the battery cracked. She swung the heavy axe again. The battery shattered and a grey liquid splattered onto the ground. As she raised the axe once more, she thought she heard the groan of a motor ricochet off the slopes in the widening valley further beyond the park road toward Xavier. She briefly wondered if she should leave the scene, or radio Brent, the warden on standby, as per investigation protocol? There were no tracks that she could see on the hard shoulder of the road. She wanted to talk to someone—Mallory or Xavier, anyone. She left the scene, clenched the cold wheel of her truck,

flipped on the overhead red-and-blues, and flew in a fury out of the park, down the highway after the ghostly sound and scent of a bloodied poacher.

“There is one piece of film the Massachusetts Fish and Wildlife officer Lt. T. Kasprzak won’t watch any longer. ‘Bears cry,’ he says, as he slips a cassette into his VCR. ‘Did you know that? Bears cry.’

The tape shows a mother bear, still alive, watching poachers dispatch one of her cubs as it clings to a tree. On the sound track you can hear her crying. It is an awful, desolate sound.”

—from the journal Wildlife Conservation



Lying down in the damp metallic bear trap, my head in my arms, my knees in my belly, I breathe in quiet absence beside the bear skull.

This is where I saw her last. In the darkness. There is barely a scent of something, her frothing white spit perhaps. But the overbearing odour of the bait, canned sardines, impregnates the undulating space.

The barred door is open to a field of pale, drained grasses and swaying lodgepole pines. I desire closure of heavy eyelids, of a barred door, but discovery here is dangerous. It says so on the yellow sign outside: "Danger. Beware."

My panting echoes in the chamber. A dampness penetrates the green khaki uniform shirt I am wearing. The dampness feels familiar, like bedwetting, a satisfaction. I remove my park warden shirt and toss it into the garbage bag with the rest of my uniform. I close my eyes, then run my fingers over the terrain of the skull and feel the bear's life story: the smooth meadow of her cheek bones, the scree slope of her forehead, the sheer ice of her nose cartilage, and the jagged crevasses where her teeth once reigned. My fingers disappear into the arching wings of her eyes and jaw. Tiny round holes and lines inhabit the geography of this large skull into which I can slip a part of myself. But sometimes the lines break and I am disoriented.

My stomach and gums feel sore, my tongue thick with other languages. I feel like my mouth has another set of teeth, pointy canines that could rip flesh. I detect an aroma: her. I close my eyes and ears again, to hear her, smell her, touch her, and see.

<u>AVERSIVE CONDITION(ING) FOR(M)</u> Canadian Department of Parks and Recreation	
<u>Name:</u> <i>grrr</i>	
<u>Type of Bear:</u> <i>Peaceful</i>	
<u>Place:</u> <i>unknown</i>	
<u>Tags:</u> <i>(She removed them)</i>	<u>Collar:</u> <i>(she removed it)</i>
<u>Conditioning Type:</u>	<u>Amount of:</u>
rubber bullet	<i>50</i>
noise maker	<i>100s</i>
repellants	<i>1000s</i>
other	<i>he yelled. She looked and turned away into her dreams.</i>

The sun, a tint of fish flesh, begins to set as the old grizzly sow rises from her day bed hidden under a small thicket of subalpine fir on a mountain ridge. Her right front paw limps slightly as she ambles along the ancient animal trail toward the alpine pass. Fortunately, she is a left-pawed bear. Two days ago, while feasting in a field of huckleberries, she had caught the scent of trout. As she investigated, her right paw fell into a trap. She cried out in pain, then detected the smell of something human in a nearby pine tree. A video camera tracked her writhing body as she tried to escape the snare. It was not long before she recognized the acrid odour of men, the ones who called her “Dolly.” Then her body fell limp. She can smell their ghostly hands around her neck now as she excavates for roots and rodents along the alpine slope, trying to ignore the loud noises below.

She pauses at the col to rub the red plastic tag in her ear and a scar on her rump against a wooden post with signs. Last year, a hunter’s bullet grazed her body, leaving its mark. Her body jiggles the signs that say “Leaving British Columbia” and “Stoney Mountains National Park Boundary.” From below, the whirr of machines pierces the fall air as new roads and a coal mine are being built on the south side of a lake. The lake, once jumping with trout, is in the middle of her ancestors’ ancient home, a rich landscape of berries amid the relative absence of humans.

Suddenly, an alarm pierces the air. Her memories and soothing back rub are interrupted by a blast in the belly of a nearby mountain. Mining. She falls on all fours, turns east into the National Park, leaving the signpost slumped at forty-five degrees.

She passes one of her old dens, a chamber dug beneath a few bent fir trees, and thinks of her cub born there three years ago. “Click, click,” the foreign mechanical sound scares her, and she runs almost all the way down to the highway while the light on the video camera around her neck glows fluorescent green—

stop

wait

who is this who sees? hummffffff

let me show

look

blueberries sprout like nipples

families of earthly smells

of rocky memories

SHE pursued

yellow

butterflies

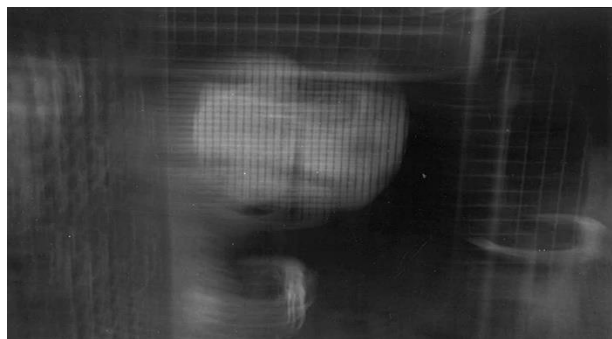
her small eyes

glowed

we danced through purple fireweed
huffing precious darling
darkness a labyrinth trail
must find her tender paw
near blood red mushrooms
that is where saw
herrrrr

Through the gridlocked shafts of light, I discover scars on the uneven surface of this wheeled, cylindrical drum, a bear trap. The markings of previous captives. How many of them survived prodding, weighing, tagging, measuring, extraction, jabbing, tranquilizing? I desire a jabstick of telazol please, how tranquil is it? I pass my fingers over the scratches, searching. An edge catches my nail. It grates along the metal ridge leaving a sliver of white merged into larger brown slivers. My arms feel heavy with pain. Dreams roam on the surface of my skin. Satisfied with my mark, I roll over and momentarily close my eyes.

I imagine pigeons fluttering above with messages attached to their legs, but I cannot reach them. A woman suddenly appears with stunning white speckled pigeons, a white cape of feathers hovering around her head and shoulders. Her face is masked. She disappears as I try to raise my arm to reach for her. *Where are you, Jo?*



VIVIAN DEMUTH'S ecofeminist novel *Bear War-den* was published in 2015 by Inanna Publications. Her poetry book, *Fire Watcher* (Guernica Editions, 2013), was a finalist for the 2013 Banff Mountain Fiction and Poetry Award. Vivian is also the author of an ecological novel, *Eyes of the Forest* (Smoky Peace Press, 2007). Her fiction and poetry have been published in journals and anthologies in Canada, the United States, Mexico, and Europe and have been broadcast on CBC radio. In the 1980s and 1990s, and with the assistance of the BC Human Rights Coalition and pro-bono lawyers, Vivian filed human rights cases that improved the hiring and working conditions for women and visible minorities working as park wardens, park rangers, and ambulance attendants in Canada.