

Ursus arctos horribilis (Grizzly)

L I S A S E W E L L

Whether standing like this, surveying the distance
or foraging, fishing, digesting or denned
how the skinned body resembles yours: the paunch

stuffed like yours with roots and grasses
ground dwelling rodents, white bark pine nuts.

In the berry bushes where appetite thrives
I reach toward thorny branches and think
the sweetness before it satisfies like Western adventure

a hunting spree and carcasses left to rot
along the highways of California
where the state flag still bears witness.

In quest of him, the Cheyenne painted their elaborate skins
performing all the rites for making war
on a neighboring nation.

Despite the uncountable near-death encounters
with *these gentlemen in open country*
recorded by Lewis & Clark in their journals

though she is man's food that makes food of man
the one thousand that remain in the lower forty-eight
are almost always at least a little hungry.

You have kept the mashed watch
and busted compass, bit of your own scalp
pickled in a jar, a torn and bloodstained handkerchief

for your hope chest and memory box
though nothing can staunch the foul combination:

wet dog and rotten meat, stench of hamster cage
and musky decay.

She has a sense of justice and humor, of winter
coming in her muscles, a den facing south and claws
that can grasp and reach articulate as fingers.

Here is a holy necklace made long before
the last Californian was shot in 1924.

Don't get me wrong. Don't wander in a haze
or sing a song without purpose for she can teach
you a lesson, twist my arm, break your heart

my whole head between her jaws and the sudden
sound of all the many bones that make a skull
unmaking as she clamps down and shakes.

O Grizzly, most pugnacious and ancient survivor
on the trail, in the brush, sing loudly, ring bells
if charged, stand your ground; if attacked

make a cannonball shape, cover the back of your neck
with your forepaws. And if I am suddenly there, uncertain
what I am or my intentions, do not look me in the eye.

What looks playful could be desperation
and in all the faces ever filmed you will discover
no kinship, no understanding, no mercy.

Washington	10-20	Idaho	est. 140	Montana	460	North Dakota	1889
Oregon	1933	Utah	1923	Wyoming	est. 500	South Dakota	1890
California	1924	Arizona	1935	Colorado	1952	Nebraska	1854
New Mexico	1931	Kansas	1880	Texas	1890		