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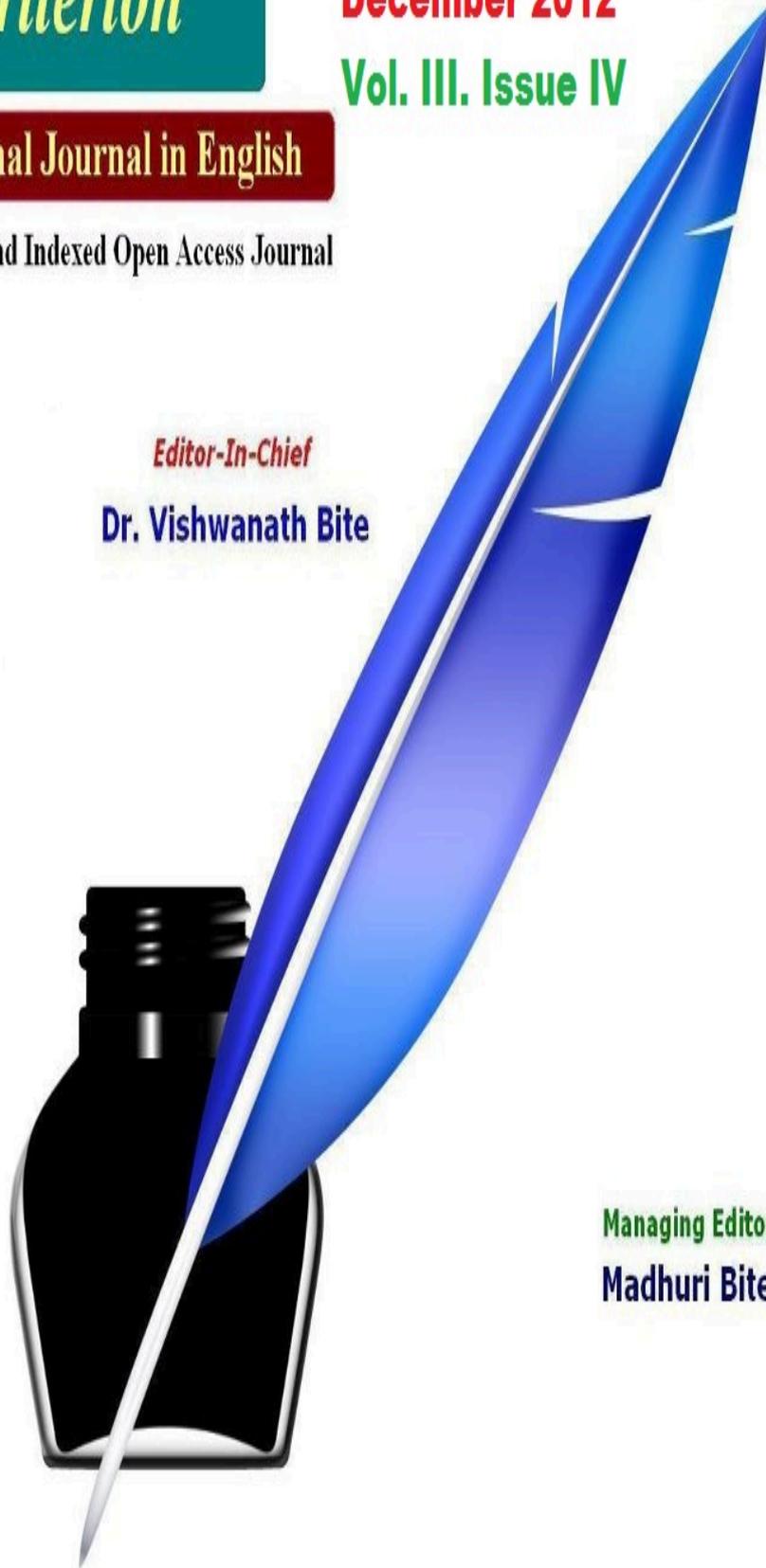
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The Weight of Shadow

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1

Anna fidgeted trying to cover the stems of her shades with a cord that could be cinched to keep them in place. She checked herself in the side view mirror of her pickup. The floppy cap would protect her ears and scalp from the sun and it made her dark broad eyes appear more intense. She situated the glasses finally. The practical khaki, belts, straps and pockets made for a handsome outfit and, along with solid boots, sun-soaked skin on bare shoulders, she was ready for the climb. She thought of her dad briefly, made a mental note to call him for his birthday and sighed. He could be such an ass, but it was his way of caring. Her lip twitched left a little when she thought of the way his ears got red when he started to lose his arguments with her.

She turned and looked up. The low morning light angled through the high tree tops and lit up particulates in a glow. What was it in the air? Pollen, gnats, bits of tree flaking away their bark or the dust of lichen kicked up by chipmunks and birds? It was celestial. It may have been the day shift that was taking over, but the forest was perpetually awake. The timeless blanketing sound of swaying plants, bugs and the occasional small animal made her feel at home.

The truck locks snapped down and she pocketed the remote. Gathering up the gear, she made a determined path towards the trail head and made her way around the ferns and wooden fencing, warning signs and trail rules. It was hard to leave everything behind today, but it had to be done. The family could wait. Dad could wait.

As she began her ascent under the forest canopy, almost immediately the sounds of the distant highway behind her gave way to muffling silence interrupted only by the sounds of her boots hitting the trail like a pulse and her breath in her ears. Pebbles tumbled aside knocked loose by tread. Puddles of water trapped by roots and mud vibrated at her approach. She focused on her breathing and found a pace that suited. As much as she wanted to look up, she could not.

Anna wandered in her mind and drove herself forward automatically. The memory of her sister's voice rang in her ear. It was Jennifer. For moment she was there beside Anna, keeping pace. Eyes gleaming up she outpaced Anna for a moment and turned to tease her along the trail. Print cotton dress, braids and leather sandals glowed in the speckled sun and the smell of lavender drifted about. Anna liked when her

sister came back to her. She was far easier to understand now in this form, this ethereal memory. It didn't matter to Anna that she couldn't see her face anymore. What lingered was the feeling that she was never far apart from her. Not for long at least. Jennifer would visit her whenever she opened her mind. Anna shifted her pack and she felt Jennifer's hands on hers over her shoulders and she imagined the pack was all the weight of her sister's frail frame. She breathed deeply, closed her eyes briefly and plunged on, holding her tightly.

The trail turned upwards, it was like climbing stairs, the fallen branches, roots and rocks all descending to meet her as her boots became heavier. The forest darkened around her. Massive trunks rose to terraced plant-life, with ferns and moss growing at unlikely heights in the folds of high-twisting branches. Fallen logs embedded in the forest floor nursed saplings, their roots making what they could of the bedding and rotting wood. Nests of insects, burrows of animals, droppings, half-eaten leaves and game trails were everywhere. All told the signs of life here.

2

The rising sun marked the hours and at last Anna came to an outcropping. Only three other hikers had passed her going down and she passed one going up. Going further the trail would bend around to the east skirting along a high rocky ledge. She was high enough for a view of the far valley opposite of where hikers entered the park, round the other side of the mountain. She breathed hard, beginning to cool down. The land rolled out in front of her at a scale that was hard to comprehend. She could see the train trestle that crossed the valley at the far end several miles away. It was a fragile toy at this distance. Below her rivers merged and creased the canopy darkly before wandering to the west. Above her the snowline was getting closer and she could see cloudy mists still lingering in the shadowed parts of the tree line.

Lowering her pack against a tree up the slope from the path, she leaned into it and took in an oat-bar. She had no appetite as it always seemed to disappear on trips like this. The water and air seemed to fill her more with what she needed than any food did, although she knew better. She tucked the wrapper, fixed the pack and put on a sweater. She watched the tree line on the opposite mountain. Occasionally she would spot movement of the trees and she imagined wolves, bears and eagles moving about.

With her head on her pack she was sitting almost upright in nearly the same position that dead hikers were often found frozen. She chuckled

at the morbidity, closed her eyes and quickly descended into a meditative state, lowering her breathing and feeling the rush of blood in her ears. After several minutes she lingered just beyond a threshold where she thought she wasn't asleep at all. Her ankle twitched and made her aware of the forest for a moment, but then it slipped away again.

Images from her previous night came to her in a jumble. Her son. An argument. Over something. Career, maybe. She did not understand her or her son when they were like that. She imagined they formed a circle with their arms and rotated oddly, teeth bared. She had come to the forest to think. But now she was too tired to think about it.

The furious night seemed a hundred years ago and thoughts swirled as she processed the new problem at hand, what to do with the wall in her dream that had grown up around her.

She didn't feel trapped, but she felt puzzled. The wall could not be felt and receded when she pushed towards it. The wall faced her when she tried to go around it. Vaguely aware that she was dreaming, she adopted a solution-minded resolve and decided to test it. She manifested a writing plume and drew on it, but the ink faded. She raised a deer rifle and shot it, seemingly without any effect. She turned from it and found it facing her. She looked up and lifted slowly off the ground, but the wall extended up with her.

She paused briefly. Her chest collapsed, she closed her eyes and the wall went out of sight. She breathed in for what seemed to be several minutes in order to suck the wall inside her. She opened her eyes finally to find herself freed of it, still dreaming and high above a clearing. She could hear... something..

3

Anna lurched awake. Above her a few dozen yards to the right there was a crashing. Something large was tumbling through the brush, crushing the saplings and smaller trees and cracking through dry undergrowth. It sounded discordant and out of control. She scrambled up, grabbed her pack and backed toward the trail, taking a mental inventory of repellents and weapons, ropes, and first-aid. The hulk was initially dark and amorphous but suddenly cleared the brush over the path she had come up. For an instant it was airborne, silent and spinning.

It was a bear. It was upside down briefly and quite out of control. Possibly unconscious, she couldn't tell in that quick glimpse. With a massive crash it destroyed the young tree on the far side of the trail

and disappeared over the slope. Anna staggered at the surprise. She moved cautiously to the edge of the drop-off and fingered the shattered stump. Below her she could still make out violent motion and rising dust along the clear path of destruction the animal was leaving. Then there was silence. Her mind raced. Bears were uncommon in these parts. Especially one that large. What in the world was it doing falling down a mountain? Why was it out in broad daylight? She turned and looked up the broken path it had paved on the way down. Several points were evident where the animal must have fallen fifty or a hundred feet or more without hitting anything. Surely it could not have survived that kind of drop. Yet she wondered about its flailing movements as it passed in front of her.

Anna deliberated about checking on the animal. The dust had cleared and there was no movement. It was too far to discern much of anything. She could not see a body, although it must have settled around 300 yards from her down the slope. She bent down, undid her pack and checked her supplies. It was enough to get her out of most any ravine, start fires, set traps and clean and cook anything she caught. There was already food for about 48 hours. Water for half that. It would be dangerous to leave the path, especially venturing down such terrain. If she decided to stay overnight or had to stay overnight she could do it.

She stowed her sweater, closed up, stood and looked down the drop off. Clearly she could not follow the same path. She swept the area and determined that she could safely descend if she started several hundred yards off to the west, back along the original trail. Once the terrain leveled out she could cross back and see where the animal had landed, if it was still there.

She muttered to herself as she started down that she was being ridiculous. There was no real practical reason that would benefit her by knowing whether the animal was intact.

If it were dead there was nothing she could do to bury a massive animal like that even if there was any need to do so. If it were only injured, she had no reasonable expectation that it was safe to approach. On the other hand she imagined going home and not knowing whether the beast was safe or not.

The idea of it dying slowly and alone was incomprehensible. She had had to destroy Muster, her dog from a few years ago, because of tumors. Every pet she ever had looked at the vet trip as punishment, no matter how many times they went and came home safely. She could not help but read guilt in the dog's face. They simply don't understand

what's happening to them. Muster took his last shot with just as much fear and indignity as his first.

And then there was the isolation of her sister's death.

Her lot was cast. For now the sun was high and she continued to back herself down the west slope as carefully as possible. Her hands worked quickly, feet occasionally crossing, muscles extending, lowering her weight deliberately and steadily. She stopped every 15 minutes to assess progress and make adjustments. The landing zone, as she came to think of it, was still off to her right, obscured by rocks. She did not let her mind wander. There was nothing to think about worry or contemplate until she got to the bottom.

After an hour she had descended to the elevation she wanted. She was covered in dust and had a few scrapes on her shins, forearms and one on her forehead from a momentary slip where she bounced her head off an exposed root.

She hydrated again, got her bearing relative to her mental landmarks and estimated the direction of the river to the south that would probably be her exit route. The valley was far less visible from this lower altitude so she could not see nearly as far. The landing zone remained to the east and she began to deliberate how to approach it.

Bears have tremendous burst speed, up to thirty miles per hour and she had no hope of outpacing any animal like that that decided to charge her. She decided to approach from upslope, since that would give her the advantage for visibility. If the bear was quite mobile and could see her sooner, it would be more likely to wander away. If she surprised it and it was down slope from her, she expected it to feel less cornered.

She set out again and as she paced slowly forward she tried to be conscious of how disruptive she was. Her utility knife was sheathed above her ankle and her rope was out of the pack now slung loosely over one of her glistening shoulders. The heat was rising off the low brush and grass. This, along with the lower altitude and direct sun exposure, made her work harder. Despite best efforts her boots were still crushing and grinding loudly and she grew impatient with herself and lack of rational options.

In her mind her sister chided her gently for being driven by passion. She smiled, since she would not have it any other way. She had to remain open to possibilities.

4

After 15 minutes of traversing the slope, as she came around a bend she immediately dropped to her knees to freeze. She was far closer than she planned. Blast the distraction of the terrain and wandering thoughts. Before her was the landing zone, a pocket in the brush to the right that was held back on the far side by rising trees. To the left she could see up the slope where the massive animal had crushed a path sliding into the pocket.

Black streaks smeared along the way and it was an alarming amount if it really were blood. Beyond the right the pocket seemed to disappear into dark forest, over impossible brush, boulders and small trees. In the shaded middle lay the great bear, perhaps only 20 yards from her. He was faced away from her, tangled in a mass of high grass, branches and logs that followed him down the slope, covering him in a sort of shallow grave.

She was irritated with herself for stumbling so close to the area without scouting it better. Furthermore it dawned on her that she was upwind of the landing zone. Heart pounding she dared not move until she knew whether the bear was aware of her presence.

He was still. She waited.

Was it a he? At that size she could not imagine it to be a female. Even at this distance and half obscured, the animal still was an imposing presence. At home under a nearby bridge there was a concrete troll fashioned to look as if it was crushing a Beetle into the ground. Little of the car remained there and what she could see here of the exposed brown pelt indicated something no smaller than that car. That put him at a minimum of 1200 pounds.

Anna ventured a look at her watch. It had been ten minutes and nothing had moved. She could not make out any breathing, but was frankly too far to see that. She elected to skirt the area to the north and see whether she could get an angle on the head. She crossed slowly, low to the ground, moving up the slope and coming finally to the landing path. A sickly smell rose to meet her and confirmed the blackened streaks were a blood trail.

She rested here, hoping the smell would obscure her presence. Her perspective on the carcass was clearer at this angle. There were several puncture wounds in the bear's coat and she could see torn flesh. Several wounds had broad branches protruding from them.

Of course, she thought, the momentum must have propelled him to be impaled several times throughout his fall. His rear hips were at an improbable angle and she ventured to guess that his back was broken, probably in several places. She noted that his fur was silvered in places, either wet with blood or perhaps faded and tipped with gray.

Was he dispatched in a fight? Was he aged? Had he stumbled? Had he spent his life atop the mountain only to slip stupidly from a stump and fall ingloriously to this death a thousand feet below his home territory? How did bears normally die? Territorial battle? Drowned fishing? Heart attacks from geriatric strain? Or did they all die in their sleep during hibernation? As much as she knew about bear life, she did not know their deaths.

Her brow furrowed and she looked over the top of her shades. The bear was breathing. She paused and she could hear her sister's voice rising with concern. "Um, Anna...?" Actually he was breathing faster by the moment. The bear had noticed her. One paw swept backwards and bashed a log. It feebly scratched for traction and then came forward again.

The head did not move but suddenly she was able to distinguish movement in the one eye that was on her side. The eye was not looking in her direction.

A low grumble reached her ears, almost subsonic at first and then finishing with a wet squeak as the bear suddenly inhaled. She tracked the gaze to the left and at about fifty yards out to a dry, barkless tree that had long ago crushed itself into the side of the slope. It seemed to be a knuckle in the very side of the mountain.

She blinked at the overly lit area outside her shade. The bone-dry wood became clearer as she tipped her head back up to see through the polarized plastic.

There was a cougar on the gnarled wood, statue-still and regarding with great intensity the landing zone and the disaster it held. The cougar indicated no awareness or interest in her, and only fixated on the bear. Anna reasoned that it had approached from downwind, probably attracted by either the disturbance or the smell of what it thought might be a fresh kill. It might be just curiosity that held its attention now, since it had probably been there for quite a while.

Anna shifted off her ankles and sat back on the slope. The cat glanced in her direction once and hunkered down, its attention immediately focusing on the bear again. His coat was magnificent and blended him to the dry grass behind him perfectly. He was small, probably less

than 150 pounds and would normally never dare consider such potential prey as a bear. Even small bears are no match for a single cat. Not healthy ones at least.

Anna returned her gaze to the bear, which wheezed quietly, unmoving. He was alive and was surely in pain and shock, but hardly mobile. She doubted the bear could even lift its head. She imagined the shattered bones and other injuries were draining away the bear's blood and soul.

She would not leave it in this condition. However, if she moved toward the bear, she risked having the golden cat becoming intensely interested in her instead of the bear. If she moved away she would be chased and caught for sure.

She looked up to try to see the original trail and the outcropping. She was under it and the angle did not allow her to see any of the hikers who might have come to the promontory for the view from several hundred yards above her.

Anna sighed. She was essentially bound to this scene for the time being and her best option was to wait, relatively safe, sitting obscured, in the blood trail of the bear. She kept her hand on the pack and another hand on her utility knife..

5

The sun crept further to the right and the shadows lengthened across the cat's log. It had been hours now since the bear had moved and the cat looked decidedly bored. However it had not retreated from its perch.

When it stood up suddenly it looked to her like a house cat stirring when his patch of sun moved. It dropped to the forest floor and the illusion was gone. The cougar crept up in range of the bear. Fluidly, Anna reached for a rock, pulled on her pack and stood nearly straight up. She was waiting for this. She knew what she wanted to do but need the cat to make the first move.

When it was as far from the bear as she was, the three formed a perfect triangle. The cat stopped and flattened its ears. The bear's wheezing changed and the great paw swept across its view again.

The cat circled closer and came between Anna and the bear. The cat seemed oblivious to her still as it was so focused on the bear. The bear's eye tracked the cat and grew furious. Blood trickled from the bear's mouth as it finally raised its head. The cat was in full alert

and growling back. It crept closer and smelled the trail just a few feet from the bear. Its mouth opened wider. The bear jerked its paw slightly and the cat roared and flew up in the air, rearing on its two hind legs and closing its forepaws on open air in front of the bear. It came down in front of him almost flat to the ground.

At the same time, in a flash of black-matted fur the bear's other paw which had been tucked under his muzzle shot out and swung dangerously close to the cat, as the front of the bear rolled backwards crushing one of the trunks holding it in place. The lower half of the bear remained in place in a sickening twist that defied logic.

The cat lunged forward, mouth agape. The bear's left paw that had previously only managed a feeble wave now came down on the cat's skull pinning it soundly. The cat panicked and twisted, its rear feet coming around and striking mid-air, too slow to stop the bear's clawed grip from dragging the cat into gaping jaws. They closed around the cat's face in an instant and with a crack it was lifeless..

6

Anna was breathless. She dropped the stone and stumbled back. The entire dance had lasted seconds. She began to doubt what she was doing. The rock was useless. The knife and rope were useless. She shivered.

She had forgotten why she had come on the hike in the first place. An argument, really? She was off the trail in coming dusk at least a half a day's hike from either her truck in one direction or from the river exit in the other. There was blood everywhere and surely the one cougar was not the only thing that would be attracted to the bear's demise. She felt stupid and small and alone.

Still backing up, she fell hard on her butt and stared, but the bear did not move. The cat that could have destroyed her in an instant was itself now lifeless before her. The bear was alone again after killing the only thing it thought was threatening and it was staring at her with no more regard than a bug.

What in the world did she expect to accomplish here? The bear seemed to relax at her retreat and he laid his bloody muzzle down on his right paw. His breathing slowed and he began to wheeze again. Blood pooled around him and he pushed the cat away.

Her eyes glazed and she tried to clear her head. She hated the bear for killing the cat. It was nothing to him. It wouldn't feed him and

he was dying anyway, why destroy something that soundly in your last hours?

And why did the cat act so stupidly? No cougar in its right mind would go after a bear. There was plenty of other game, it should not have been starved or crazed. Was it curiosity? Posturing? Territory?

She wondered vaguely if there was a den nearby with waiting kits in it. It was possible. How could she begrudge any animal surviving by hunting? Or defending itself?

She was in over her head. What would she do now, go snooping in holes? Reach into a motherless den and pull out tiny kits? She had done that kind of thing all her life and now look where she was. There was nothing to be done about it now. She was a bit player in the great circle of life, on stage in full bloody color, right in front of her.

Her passion hadn't saved her sister either. Can't reach into burning wreck and pull out a tiny girl. Not when you are tiny and broken yourself..

7

With that image in her mind she clutched her temples and squeezed her eyes shut against the flames. The fire. Fire. She snapped to.

She looked up. She had to build a fire. Leaving this late for a half-day hike was not an option and she began to plan her survival for the night. Around her there was plenty of brush to start a fire.

She cautiously eyed the bear and began to move about without turning her back to it. It paid her no attention and its breathing got shallower. She cleared a spot about 20 feet from the bear, dug out a hollow with a sharp stone and circled the pit with large stones. She filled it with brush and branches and crushed logs from the around the far side of the bear.

After lighting the fire she decided it was time to move the cat. The bear huffed only once and its paw fell limply from the cat's back as Anna heaved it to the left embankment. There was a space there between large roots and the cat fit snugly inside. She avoided the head as she positioned it gingerly and filled the rest of the space with leaves brush and then large stones to secure it from all but the largest of scavengers.

She retreated to the fireside opposite the bear, collapsed in a pile

and removed her boots. She wiggled her toes in the firelight. The bear breathed slowly but steadily, its one available eye reflecting the firelight easily. It must be in complete shock now and very close to death, she concluded. It wouldn't be long now. She bit her lower lip and fingered the hilt of her knife.

Anna waited until it was nearly completely dark. The bear was breathing so slowly that she couldn't hear it anymore, but could only see its chest rise once in a while. She stood and, still barefoot, crept around the back of the landing zone and slowly put her hand out to the bear's shoulder. The fur twitched and she went breathless, but unmoving. After a moment, she deepened her touch.

Without warning or sound, his great head swung around, as big as a boulder. He looked at her and she almost faltered. But she could see pain and blood and broken skin and bone and matted fur. In the eyes she saw nothing, as if he was looking through her. His massive head only lingered a moment and slumped again. She placed both hands now on him and he exhaled under her touch. The fire swelled and she laid her head on him. Jennifer's hand appeared to her on top of one of her own. Her heart pounded and she thought she would faint from the stench and smoke. But she gripped the fur as her sister's hand entwined with hers. Her breathing slowed with the bear's.

"I did it," she muttered and the great bear was dead.