

## DAVID HOCKNEY

*Tree off the Track, 2006*  
Oil on 4 canvases (36 x 48 in each)  
72 x 96 in overall



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## CHRISTIAN KIEFER

### Tree of Souls

He thought at first that the season had somehow skipped forward from late fall to deep winter and that he was, or must have been, asleep in the den, in the broad wide infinitude of his dreams, the forest of shadows in which he stood under a bright cold blaze of fall colors not the waking forest and so the scent of the boy not upon the waking air so that the whole of it—the woods, the scent of the boy, his own physical self—was therefore part of the sleeping months of his hibernation, the scent surprising only because he had never before felt it in the Big Woods but the scent itself familiar enough, easy enough to identify after ten years, that he had even given it a sort of identifier, almost a name. Indeed he had found himself in its presence so many times over so many winters that the scent had become part of him always, crossing from the hard sleeping freezes of his hibernation and on into the bright thick waking scent of spring and even into the heat of summer when he would move into the darkest reaches of the woods where hickories and maples and oaks grew in a thick tangle under which deer would lay down their bones in the damp verdant impenetrable shadows. There had been a time when his winter slumber might have pressed into those shadows, dreaming then of deer and the satisfaction of the hunt, but that time had long since passed for when he dreamed now it was only of the boy, a scent of sweetness and the faint pulse of young blood as if that of a fawn or a gosling or a kit fox. But he knew, too, that this was no fawn or gosling or kit but a boy, a human boy, a boy whose scent was familiar enough that he thought of him not as *a* boy but rather as *the* boy, as if there was or had only ever been one. That much was true. And then he knew that he was not dreaming at all, that the scent was part of the waking world for he could smell, too, the dogs and then the other men, surprised now only because he had not scented them earlier, knowing with sudden clarity that they were already at the building, the bunkhouse, in the center of the woods, that they had arrived and that, for the first time, the boy—the boy of his winter sleeping—was with them.

He could smell the man too now, the one whom the bear sometimes thought of as another bear or, if not a bear, then something just as essential, something of the woods, of the forest, part of a line that went back to the first people whose scent he had followed only in the dreamworld of

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this same forest, their lives intertwined upon the land with such depth and history that their spirits walked among the trees even now, for the man had been coming to the woods almost as long as the bear had been alive to smell him. The man had been but a boy, a cub, when his scent had first come to the bear but both he and the bear had aged as if in parallel and now it seemed to the bear that the man was, that he had to be, more part of the world of the forest—the chestnuts and oaks and bogs and insects, the deer and fox and younger bears—than he could ever have been part of the world of men. In this way he was, again, like those first people, part of the forest like the deer and foxes and the younger bears were. The man seemed even to have taken the color of the forest, too, his skin not the pale pink of those on the big horses or the dark of the others but rather bearing a hue of chestnut and oak bark, sharp-faced, in this way too like the first people of the bear’s hibernating dreams. He wondered, sometimes, if the only thing keeping the man from staying in the trees, of living in the Big Woods forever, was that strain of other blood, the smell that was not of the first people but rather of those men whose color was like the bear’s fur, men who worked, for a time, at the big house that had been carved out of the forest before the bear had been born and which

had finally begun to fall apart even though a few scattered and dissolute figures continued to move through its dark cadaverous rooms.

At first he had wondered if the boy he saw in the dream-world had been some version of that chestnut-colored man, if only because the man had been the single human being the bear held in any regard whatsoever, the only one he cared for enough to watch, not only with his nose but also his eyes, holding him in his sight over the years as the man moved among the others or sat alone in a blind, waiting for deer each autumn before the winter sleep and in the long hot months of summer too. Sometimes the bear would push a deer forward into the hunter’s vision and listen for the sharp report of the man’s rifle, although the smell of fresh blood spurting from the deer’s body sometimes made the bear moan with desire. He would watch the man come down from the blind, not smiling but resolute, focused, and begin the butchering with the same resolve and fortitude and sense of ownership with which the bear would have undertaken the same task, the tools different but the result the same.

So it was the man first, the man who was familiar enough that when the bear thought of human beings, any human beings, it was that chestnut-colored man who ranged into his thoughts. This was why when he first spied the boy in his dreams ten winters earlier, the bear thought at first that perhaps he was seeing that man as a cub, as if that man had somehow entered the dreamworld of the bears and so his memories had become part of the flow of the memories of bears. But then he knew, too, that the boy was not that man, that the boy—pale, mewling, its fat little arms jerking and grasping the empty air—was some other human, his scent different but also similar, as if he had smelled of that line before. And he knew he had, although he had not yet put together that line in his mind, only knowing that the boy’s scent was related to one he had felt, sensed, scented before, not in the dreamworld but in the waking world of the Big Woods, that the boy was part of the men who came in the late fall to run their dogs and to kill deer and younger bears and whatever else might cross their path.

He knew that there was some connection too, between the chestnut-colored man and the boy, but he did not know what it was or even what it could be, did not know it the

first time he dreamed of the boy nor at any point during the eight then nine then ten winters in which he watched the boy grow and change. He had never seen the chestnut-colored man in those dreams although he knew, sensed somehow, that he was never far off, that he was watching the boy in much the same way the bear himself was, perhaps not in the dreamworld of bears, perhaps only in the waking world of men, but watching him nonetheless.

That first time, ten winters earlier, he had been merely confused, not only by the location he found himself in but also by its smells, too many of which he could not name, not even in the dream: pale-scented powder and warm milk and the boy’s own hot urine soaking his cribsheets. He did not know where else he had traveled over the course of those months of his hibernation for when he awoke into the bright spring light, the only dreaming scent he could recall was the strange scent of the boy. He could not remember a season when he had awakened with his mind so emptied of scent, the boy’s so strong, so prominent that it had blotted out whatever else might have stirred him in his months of slumber. Even as he moved forth from the den, blinking his eyes into the bright green light of dripping spring, he wondered at the lack this created. This much he had learned from his mother when he was but a cub: the den was for entering the flow of the bears, of all his long line stretching back a thousand generations or more, traveling in sleep into the vast well of experience they shared. He had killed deer in those dreams, had wandered through forests of pines where he could sense smell feel slick heavy fish running upstream against the current, had wandered ridgelines in pursuit of elk, an animal he had never smelled outside his sleeping. Once, he found himself moving through a range of icy mountains across fields of cracking glaciers, the air so crisp and clean that he felt as if he was not in the deep slumber of hibernation at all but rather had slipped into some plane devoid of scent, blind to his own best vision as he floated under cornices and across jumbled ice floes as if adrift in the dark spaces of his own consciousness, the first bear in all the line, perhaps the first bear ever to be.

But even in those dreams he knew he was a bear, that he was dreaming a bear’s dreams. So when he found himself in the house, and not only in the house but in the box-like bedroom on the second floor—a location he could

find because he could smell his way through the various rooms beneath, could smell too the street and the town and the churned fields beyond—staring down at the sleeping human baby in the white cage-like crib, he knew he had slipped somehow outside of himself, even outside of his race, for he was no longer a bear but something else, something sent to hover over the sleeping boy, protector or avenging spirit or something else entirely, he did not know. But not a bear. Not a bear.

That had been the first dream but it had not been the last. By the time the cold descended again he had forgotten about the boy even though his sleeping across the remainder of that spring and summer and autumn had been fitful and most often devoid of dreams. The men came in the green hot of midsummer and then again in late autumn when the forest turned red and yellow and brown and its animals skittered across cold mornings under the flat white disk of the sun. With them, always, was the chestnut-colored man. It was his scent that brought back the memory of his hibernating dream and during the days and nights that followed, the bear watched the chestnut-colored man with more attention than he ever had before, for in him was some answer to the vague mystery of the boy. The bear did not know why or how but only that this was true, fundamentally and unchangeably true. And yet there was no answer, no proof or warrant. The men hunted. The dogs bayed. When they departed in the surrey they took three deer with them and when their scent had fled the hundred miles of forest, the bear returned to his den.

This time the boy was larger, still a cub but larger, although not by much. Sitting up and babbling and screeching, smelling much the same as the bear remembered, standing in the house again, this time downstairs in a larger wood-paneled room, watching as the boy crawled on his hands and knees across a floor polished by the footsteps of generations of humans both male and female and probably other crawling boys too. The room smelled of the smoke he had sometimes scented in the forest when the men came with their guns, indeed smelled exactly of that smoke, of those men, so that he knew that the boy’s life was intertwined somehow with those men and therefore was intertwined with his own. He looked for the chestnut-colored man, the man who he sometimes thought of as a fellow bear, but although he could faintly smell his odor



from somewhere in the vast distance, he could not locate him in those human rooms.

Again he woke from his winter sleep with only the scent of the boy riding his waking thoughts. Now he waited for the men and dogs and horses and mules to return with anticipation, for he knew there was a connection there, even though he still could not imagine what it was or even what it could be. When they came at last he watched them until they departed, as if the boy's scent might, at any moment, come wafting out of the long wooden bunkhouse and into buzzing golden air. But there was nothing. Only dogs and men and smoke and blood.

And it would continue like that for another winter and another and another. At first he had not known what point there might be in the long sleep of winter if it was not to return to those dreams he shared with the bears, his dreams of lineage and inheritance. So why this pink child? Later he did not know what dreams there were to have but those where he looked over the boy. As if his own inheritance and therefore the sense of dominion that had ambled through his hibernating mind had gone to ash and this boy was what remained.

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He had been dreaming the boy for ten winters when he scented him upon the air in the waking world at long last. The boy and then the dogs and then the chestnut-colored man. The other men too. He could have named each of them from their smell alone had he the capacity for names, for language. He could smell, too, their horses and their mules and the weapons they brought with them.

It was growing colder again, not yet winter but moving toward the cooler months, and he was in the thick part of the woods, south of the boggy lowland where he would sometimes catch a young deer at the edge of the water. He could feel the cold coming and he was hunting for meat, packing on the last pounds that would get him through the winter months in his den. Sometimes he would half open his eyes in that darkness and would see the landscape outside the den frozen into shades of blue and silver and white. There had been a time when he might have pulled such colors with him into the dreamworld but if so such a time had long passed for now he only faded back into the world that he shared with the boy. It had long since come

to pass that he associated the den with the boy, that the long months of his hibernation were months he now spent, in dreams, hovering about that human child in some state that felt, at times, less like dreaming and more like he had entered a world parallel to that in which he lived.

And yet here was the boy at long last, in what the bear knew was the waking world. The sensation was not unlike the reeling he had felt so many years before when the great trap had clamped upon his front paw with such force and surprise that he had torn his middle two claws clean off his foot in his effort to escape, leaving his print a ragged two-toed crescent. That same sense of impossibility made possible, made actual, the boy's scent upon the air and his image forming in the bear's mind until he could see him as clearly as if he stood before him in the spirit world of dreams. The boy sat in the surrey as it rolled into camp, a boy of ten summers staring out at the trees and the shadows with a look as wide and open as a newborn fawn, his hair shining gold in the slashed late morning light. There was beauty in that, in the look of him there, pale faced and faintly freckled under the big trees and the bear sat and watched as his scent passed through the air across those miles and miles of forestland: the boy of the winter den, of his dreams, here in the Big Woods at long last.

Of course he knew why the men were there, that they would hunt deer and shoot at whatever else crossed their paths and that they would, if the opportunity presented itself, send the dogs to bark and bay on his trail. He gave them that opportunity once or twice in the past, not because they were good enough hunters to find him in the Big Woods or even because he had become complacent enough to let them stumble upon his scent, but because he wondered at them the way a young cub might wonder at a butterfly alighting upon a blade of grass. He wondered at them and let them set their dogs upon him and then trundled away through the trees, interested at first and then irritated because the dogs were like hornets and would not stop their baying and yowling and in the end he had to bat several of them away with his paw to dissuade them of following him farther in the woods, circling back along his own path then and standing in silence to watch as the men came thundering past on their horses and later on the mule, the surrey dragging behind, wanting to see them even though he already knew what they looked like from

their scents, knew their shapes and sizes and even their level of experience, for he knew how many seasons he had smelled each of them in turn so that he knew how many times they had been to the woods to hunt deer and how many times they had tried to ensnare him in their traps and with their cracking firearms, the evidence of which he held in hard hot nodules everywhere under his fur.

So his caution kept him away that first day but on the second morning he could not hold himself from the boy any longer and so he followed his scent to where they huddled in a deer blind, the boy and the chestnut-colored man together, waiting, watching a clearing for any sense of movement. There he was, his scent clearer, brighter even than it had been in the first dream ten winters before, kneeling in the dappled light under the crisp yellow leaves of the oaks, his breath a faint curl of steam in the chill morning air. The boy. For a long time, the bear only sat in the duff and smelled them, their scents high and hard against his nose, so close that he could still hardly believe that they were there, together—the boy and the man—a scent-image from the dreamworld come to mingle with a scent-image from the waking one. He did not know what it meant, what it could mean. The blind in which they hid was not in a good position. The bear knew that no deer would cross before them, not that day, perhaps not any other, but maybe that was part of it too, the way a mother bear might cripple a fawn for the cub to make the kill, a kind of initiation, a kind of practice. The chestnut-colored man leaned down to whisper to the boy from time to time and then they simply sat there, frozen, much as the bear sat a few dozen yards away, his fur disappearing into the long slow fade of the forest all around him.

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He had expected some great change to come, something that other bears would dream of long into the future of their race, but the men and dogs and horses and mules seemed just the same as they did each fall and summer, boy or no boy, the dogs baying on a deer, the crack of rifle-shot, the surrey moving across the landscape to collect the meat, the bear smelling all of it even as he went about his own hunting, forty or fifty miles distant, perhaps coming near enough the bunkhouse to alert the dogs if only to ensure himself that the scents he had picked up on the fall

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breeze were those he knew and recognized, the landscape drawn forth by the long arrow of the air, the breeze pushing the scent of the world out before him so that anything behind was rendered mute, gray, featureless. The few times the dogs had caught his scent had been out of that gray and scentless field, upwind so that the bear had not known of their approach until they were almost upon him.

He kept downwind of the boy all through those days, holding the scent of him, the shape of that scent, as if in so doing the bear might puzzle out the meaning of his presence in the forest, the boy's and, perhaps too, the bear's. When he scented him, the chestnut-colored man's smell always mingled with the boy's. Not of parent and child, mother and cub, but something else. Something yet more profound. But what, he did not know, could not even imagine. The chestnut-colored man had something

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to do with the forest. That much he had known for the entirety of his life. But the boy—of this he still did not know anything at all.

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The dogs caught his scent a few days later. The men had been in the woods for nine days and nights now and the bear had wandered far and wide of them, looping back sometimes when he was no longer sure of the scent of the boy, catching that scent once more and ranging on. He pulled open a rotten log near the edge of the river that bisected the forest and pulled from its damp interior a selection of grubs and larvae. Ants swarmed his fur. The season’s last mosquitoes buzzed in the air around his head.

He did not realize how close he had come to the camp until the dogs began to bay, not the short clipped howl they employed with deer but a higher pitched wailing that brought the bear’s head up with a start, his ears twitching, nose already working the air. They smelled close, closer than he thought they should be, and when he turned and began to trundle back into the thick tangle of tree and vine and brush once more, he knew they would follow,

that they were sounding his path. He did not worry about such things as dogs and although he took the hardest route through the trees, he did not hurry, did not even trot but instead walked slowly, the dogs baying and yapping and barking in their high excited voices. He knew the boy could hear them and knew too that the boy would know what their voices meant, perhaps not because it would come to him naturally but because the chestnut-colored man would tell him, would explain to him what their baying and yapping and barking meant in that world.

That evening he stood at the distant edge of the camp’s wan light—downwind again, always downwind—and watched smelled felt as the boy and one of the men held the last squirming bitch still and the chestnut-colored man wiped some thick-smelling mud onto its ear and shoulder, covering the marks the bear had given it. Of the rest of the dogs, the bear could smell their rank wild-eyed fear, their trembling bodies. They hid under the bunkhouse in a dark recess, a space not unlike his own den. In a sense, he knew how they felt, even though he had been the reason to send them there, knew their need for a dark, silent space, a place of hiding, a refuge, and he wondered, for the first time, what would happen when the men and the boy and the dogs all left the Big Woods and he returned once more to the den. Would he still dream of the boy? Would the boy dream of him?

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He scented the men early the next morning, so early that the sun had not yet risen over the damp cold earth. They were moving southward through the woods along the old weed-choked road, the mules dragging the surrey upon which sat the boy and the chestnut-colored man and the dogs too, the bear knowing this not from the scent alone but because he simply knew it, him not even realizing or understanding that he was, even now, not quite a bear but something else, some spirit or animus come to range over the land, godlike not only in body but in spirit, in knowingness, indomitable and ancient and alone and standing sentinel over a forest that was his and his alone regardless of the presence of the men with their dogs. Dominion. That was what it was. Dominion.

By the time the hazy outlines of the trees were visible, the boy was alone, the men’s scents moving out and away

from him. The dogs as well. He knew they were hunting him now for there was no other reason for the men to move this deeply into the woods, nor for them to travel in the broad circle they described upon the landscape. And yet they had left the boy. It might have been that he was part of that broad circle or it might have been that he was simply too young to join them, uninitiated, untested. The bear knew that the boy had not yet taken any prey. Not even a squirrel.

The scent came to him and he followed it, moving in total silence now. The dogs were somewhere else, upon some more distant ridge, and the men upon their horses were with them or not far behind.

The earth marshy. Reeds along the bottoms. A woodpecker in a tree. *Tak tak tak tak tak. Tak tak tak tak tak.*

The bear could see the boy now, could see him and feel him and smell him all at once, the boy standing in a deer blind not unlike the blind he had used nearer the men’s camp, and the bear watched him through the cane, his great paws sinking a bit in the soft black earth. When the woodpecker fell silent, the boy seemed to stiffen in anticipation. He wondered then if the boy might look for him, might swivel to find where he stood in the reeds but the boy did not move, did not even turn, but only stood there, the rifle held in his grip, his face freckled in the yellow light, the leaves above him lambent in red and yellow and orange. There he was. There he was alone at long last.

The bear might have done anything then. It felt as if his heart had lifted clean out of his chest, a feeling that seemed strangely familiar to him although he could not recall ever experiencing such a thing before. And yet there it was: a buoyancy, a rising. He might have strolled across the empty space between them. He might have killed the boy or let the boy kill him or he might even have taken him back to his den in hopes they might have fallen together into their dreams at long last, side-by-side, the boy’s tiny pink hands nestling into the bear’s black fur.

But he did nothing at all and after a time he slid backwards into the reeds, the marshlands that bled into the river, and was gone. Behind him he could just hear the woodpecker start up its knocking again. *Tak tak tak tak. Tak tak tak tak tak tak.*

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That winter he found himself in the grassy field where the solitary sweet gum stood, a high hot summer sun shining green through its canopy of leaves. Even at a distance, the tree seemed alive with motion, its thick gnarled branches shivering and those bright green leaves flapping and quaking. And then he could smell them. Squirrels. Thirty or forty or a hundred or a thousand, their gray bodies looping and twisting along the branches, hooking up and back so that the entire tree, from trunk to uppermost leaf, was shivering with their motion.

He did not know what it meant or could mean but he knew it was not a bear’s dream and knew too that it was not even a man’s but something older, more ancient than either. Perhaps it was the dream of the forest itself. Or perhaps it was no dream but his own.

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The boy returned when the forest radiated with summer heat. The bear did not smell him first this time but instead smelled the horses and of course the dogs and then chestnut-colored man. He thought perhaps that the boy was not with the men this time, that he would only come in the fall when the leaves were burning but then he scented him amongst the others, older but still a boy, a child, his blood a high bright thrumming in his chest. He wondered if the boy, too, had dreamed of the gum tree with its cargo of swirling squirrels but of course there was no way to know such a thing.

He felt the boy upon the air every day of those two weeks, although he did not see him, did not lay his eyes upon him, instead keeping away, down in the tangle across the river, watching him only by his scent. He knew the boy was looking for him, that he meant to meet him in the forest somehow, knew it and did not know it, knew it and yet did not believe it, for the boy still held the rifle and the other materials of the world from which he had come, those scents mixing with that of the boy himself, the scent of which was like a series of hard sharp stones embedded in a sun-warmed blackberry and when the boy grew close to the river, the bear moved farther east and then south and then west, keeping out of the boy’s path day by day because the scent of him was wrong. He thought the boy would know that much, would know how to meet him in the forest, but then the bear realized that he had answered the

question of dreaming, that the boy did not, had not, never would dream of the squirrels or any of the other dreams of the bears, that he was a boy and there were a boy's dreams and a bear's dreams and they would ever be separate.

But then something changed. There was a day in which the boy's scent carried to him across the sloping hills and brambles and across the river and the bogland and there were less of those hard sharp stones and then the bear knew that the boy had left the weapon behind. He could feel him moving through the woods and although he was still a boy, still felt like a boy, smelled like a boy, he was less a boy than he had been. Not even the chestnut-colored man ranged the woods without his weapon. Not once, ever, had the bear scented such a thing. But the boy had done so, was doing so now, almost as if he was becoming something else, not a deer or a fox or even a bear, but rather something naked and wild and without boundaries or edges or borders of any kind, if he entering those dreams of the first bear upon the icefields, the boundless roaming, the endlessness of that dreamworld.

He did not even realize he had begun to move in the direction of the child until he was almost upon him. By then, the boy had left the other pieces of the men behind, two more small sharp stones of scent gone so that he felt, to the bear, as pure and empty as the first time the bear had seen him, smelled him, ten years before when he was new. It was not quite the same scent, for the boy had grown, had changed, was becoming something else, not different from a boy but also not a man in the sense of the other men in the camp, becoming, perhaps, something akin to what the chestnut-colored man had always been to the bear, something like a bear himself, but now he realized too that the chestnut-colored man had never been a bear at all, that the man kept his weapon with him always and the bear knew, too, that had the man come upon the bear in the forest, the man would surely have fired upon him, perhaps not in the surprise and shock of the encounter but in response to some primordial conduct between species and that the boy, in leaving those objects behind him, was relinquishing himself of that primordial conduct in favor of some other, equally ancient code, relinquishing it not to the bear or even to the woods but to his own true self, the scent which was, even now, growing closer and closer to where the bear moved along the edge of the low muddy cane-choked wetland.

He did not know what drew him to that moment or why the compass of his heart had spun to point to resolutely toward the boy. But so it had. He thought again of the dream of the tree of squirrels and then of the long ago icefield and the long flow of dreams he had had over the years of his life, those dreams of the boy sitting amongst the others like a leaf upon the surface of a river. There was a line between them, between them all. Even the boy, a baby screeching from his crib, then crawling, then walking, then running, and finally beginning to grow into the shape the bear could smell upon the hot damp still air. A buzz of mosquitoes around his muzzle. A frog's brief lazy splash into the scum-covered surface of the bog.

A great closing. That was how it felt, the scent of it, not from the boy or even because of the boy but *of* him nonetheless. He was the key to it somehow. He had to be. The men would come and come and come and they would run their dogs and shoot and that was one thing but there was also the churning of the railroad where it cut through the Big Woods, those steaming iron cylinders roaring through the teeming silences of the forest. It was not the icefield. The icefield was its opposite, its antithesis. This was something else. But what exactly the bear did not know. He was a bear, after all, and what abstraction there was could only be rendered in the scent of a boy upon the damp still air. The tree of squirrels. What did it all mean in the end?

And then even his scent was gone, the faint breeze reversing to blow into the bear's face, bringing an image from some distant topography ahead of him: berries and wet earth and a lone deer across the low hills. He had known the boy was behind him because of his scent but now that it was gone it felt as if the boy had disappeared entirely, had become sunlight or leaves or trees or the wet earth itself, for the bear could not find him in the ranging phenomenological matrix of his thoughts within which stood the forest and the forest alone. The bear did not even know if he was still a bear at all. Perhaps he too had become the trees, the leaves, the berries, the wet earth.

When the boy appeared at last he looked different from the shape he had taken in the bear's memory, for even though it had only been two seasons since the bear had last seen him, the boy had changed. Then he knew what it was, for the boy had taken on something of the

appearance of the chestnut-colored man, not in the hue of his skin or in the shape of his features but in his bearing, in his movement through that verdant dappled landscape, in the smell of his sweat and his blood and his very life. But it was more even than that, for the similarity was superficial. Again he thought of the rifle held ever in the man's grip and then of the boy's pale empty hands, hands which, as the bear looked upon him at long last, gripped nothing but the scent-infused air before him. When he moved forward from those shadows, his eyes staring at the bear's footprints before him in the wet earth, he moved not like a boy but like a panther, slinking through the trees with a slow surety, as silent as a deer or a fox. As silent as a bear.

Their eyes met only for a moment, the boy frozen at the edge of the trees, the bear's own footprints filling with the muddy water that seeped up out of the damp earth. When the bear turned away from him, it was in the hope that the boy might follow but when the air shifted once more he knew that the boy had not moved, that he remained there in that small damp clearing near the muddy bog, still staring in wonder after the vacancy the bear had left.

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There were six years then. Spring then summer and fall and then winter and the long sleep and spring once more. He no longer dreamed of the boy, did not dream of him again after their meeting in the woods, although he also did not fully return to the bears. He seemed at times to be two places at once, not only asleep in the den and moving across some landscape of dreams, but in some other world. When he woke he sometimes found the image of the squirrel-filled tree riding his thoughts but he did not know if that was a dream of the bears or his own dream alone.

The boy came every summer and fall, the chestnut-colored man with him and the others too. One summer he shot a deer, his first kill in the woods. The bear heard the flat sharp report of the rifle and knew what it was for he could smell the blood too, not immediately but after the minutes it took the scent to blow his way from across the forest. The boy and the smell of gunpowder. The rifle was with him always now, the boy's empty hands feeling like some distant and immutable memory. He got his deer and they loaded it into the surrey at the end of the two weeks and carted it away.

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of dreams, but in  
some other world.*

The next fall he shot one of the smaller bears while it was walking along the riverbank, the animal releasing a long hard yowl of anguish and then falling silent. When the bear scented that death across the miles of forestland it felt as if he had once again entered the dreamworld, the forest achieving something of the quality of a gauze, a thin and lambent translucence that shimmered across the trees and hills and into the low bogland and across the river to where he stood in a glade of dying wildflowers amidst a late season swarm of honeybees. It was not that the younger bear had been shot—the younger bears sometimes fell to the hunters and their rifles—but rather that it was the boy who shot it, her, a young female, four or five winters old, physically fully grown and yet she had hardly entered those years of sleeping and dreaming that would bring her fully into the life of the bears. Had it been one of the pink-faced men or even the chestnut-colored man, the bear might not have questioned it at all, but it had been the boy and in this it felt like a kind of betrayal, as if a repudiation of the line that had stretched between them that day when the boy had come into the forest without rifle or compass or watch, his scent naked and silent and clean, that day the boy had—at least for that moment—become a bear.

So his killing of the younger bear with his rifle made little sense, the bear no longer walking but sitting now in that dappled and faintly luminescent forestland as if in a



dream. The bees had become squirrels now and they ran back and forth across the branches above him. Then he realized he had come to that monumental sweet gum in the center of the clearing, its thick branches holding aloft a bright flame of yellow leaves so thick that the busily running squirrels disappeared and reappeared as if through some warren of rabbit holes in the earth.

There were not, of course, as many squirrels as in the dream but the five or ten of them he could see raced about with an industry the bear did not understand, did not even care about. The boy and the tree and the squirrels and bear and maybe even the endless fields of ice too.

He stood there watching, smelling the scent of the dying flowers, the boy, the blood of the younger bear, listening to the bees, for a long long time until at last the landscape seemed to shiver back into the bright clear reality of his waking. Only then did he step forward once more, moving down to the cool waters of the river and wading into its flow.

\* \* \*

He knew there was a connection but did not learn what it was until the following season when the boy returned once more with a tiny yapping dog that would be the bear's undoing, not because the animal was dangerous but because it underscored a fact of the forest and the dogs and the boy and the bear that the bear had not seen before, had not seen and so had not understood, until the yapping dog's presence.

The animal was a fyce, a dog not much larger than a squirrel and while the bear scented it almost immediately upon its arrival, he did not entirely understand what it was until the animal surprised him in the forest a few days later, a rat-like creature behind which roiled the yowling dogs the bear had run from time and time again, once, two summers before, barreling down a length of tangled deadwood where the tornado had raged a decade or more earlier, knowing he was in full sight of the boy and so showing him, telling him, just what he was possible of, moving at full speed through that chaos of downed and twisted timber with the dogs struggling to hold position, baying and yowling as he blasted over that landscape, the boy watching him, mouth slack with amazement.

He had grown accustomed to the idea that the boy

was hunting him now. Perhaps that was what their connection in the woods had been, that single look they shared between them that of predator and prey and that, despite everything, the bear was the prey, the boy the predator. But is that not how it had always been, even before the bear had been aware of it? Even without his weapon, without the rifle or the compass or the watch, was the boy not the end of everything, the woods, the bog, the deer, even the end of the squirrels and the sweet gum and so, of course, the end of the bear?

So perhaps the bear should not have been surprised when he rounded out of the path he sometimes took from the high hill to the boggy bottomlands, the summer heat upon the land so that its damp moisture rose in almost visible clouds that wet the bear's fur and beaded the long shape of his snout, rounding that path out of the thickest path of trees and catching the lightest scent of the dogs only a moment before they were upon him and not even running this time, not because he could not but because the shrill yapping rat-like dog came at him like some tiny demoniac force out of the lager pack of yowling hunting dogs so that the bear found himself staring in a kind of amazement not unlike that of the boy two summers before when the bear had shown him his speed and his power. He might have expected the boy to try to match that speed and that power somehow, with a larger rifle or something else, but whatever answer or response he might have tried to expect it was not this frantic creature.

He had not seen the boy yet, although he could faintly smell him, what movement of air there was blowing against him so that he had to guess that the boy must have been standing behind the dogs. Instead, there was only the frantic yapping of the fyce, furious and fearless and perhaps even insane for the little animal keep coming even when the bear rose to his full height, its back against the trunk of a cypress that hung heavy near the water's edge, the other dogs flooding in behind the fyce as if steeled by its crazed aggression.

The bear took no pleasure in killing such creatures, animals that should have known better and probably did know better, but he knew then that he would have to kill the little dog because the animal would not stop and would not stop and the bear had prepared to do that when at last he saw the boy. He was yet older now, of course he

was, still a child and yet comprised of sinew and muscle that he did not have before. He had held the rifle in the shadows behind the dogs but the weapon was not in his hands now and when he came through the roiling mass of animals his scent was as naked as that day two years before when they had met on the terms of the bear, their bodies resplendent and pure in the boggy lowlands. But now there was no meeting, for the boy was not rushing to the bear but rather in spite of him, rushing instead to the little fyce and grasping it by the fur of its neck and hoisting it into the air, the two of them, for a moment, tiny creatures huddled below the bear's height, and the bear watching them both, watching as the boy looked up at him, their eyes meeting for the second time in all their lives, perhaps the last time they would ever meet, the line between them now a kind of zigzag like a crack in winter ice, the bear understanding, as if for the first time, just how different they truly were, how different they had always been, and so understanding how different they would continue to be, the boy's hunting of him now a kind of farce, the little dog held in his arms and the boy staring up at him with a look of repudiation and betrayal and perhaps even disgust, a look so utterly without fear that the bear could do nothing more than stand there, rendered mute and immovable by that singular and unfettered and betraying gaze.

When the bear turned at last the boy disappeared into the shadows once more. The dogs continued to bay at him but their enthusiasm had dissipated with the removal of the tiny monster and with the departure of the boy and when the bear dropped to his forepaws again they scattered, barked a few more times half-heartedly, and then fled in the direction the boy had gone. Their scents disappeared almost immediately. Such was the faint breeze. Such was the bear's own body moving away through the oaks and gums.

\* \* \*

He avoided the boy after that, for he had come to realize that the child was his enemy and through that realization that they all were, even the chestnut-colored man who had fooled the bear into believing he was somehow different than the rest. The bear no longer dreamed of the boy. When he dreamed at all—which was seldom—it was to return to the gum tree with its swirling river of squirrels,

a dream he still did not understand. He wished he might float that dream upon the vast dreamworld of his ancestor bears but he had become disconnected from that ocean somehow, the boy's presence in his dreamworld earlier having broken whatever had tied him to that golden river. He had thought at first that the dream of the gum tree might have been a way back into that flow but he knew now that it had been his dream alone, not shared, not even borrowed; for whatever reason he had been cut off from the dreamworld of the bears and he would never return to it.

The boy had come to the bear's dreams with a scent that was naked and unafraid and then had come into the woods having learned fear and then had learned to become unafraid again and now had proven himself once more to be unafraid, but not in the way the bear had expected, not unafraid of the bear but unafraid of himself. He had thought that boy was changing or had already changed but now he simply wondered if he had never entirely understood the boy's presence in his life at all, and if that was the case, then he had not understood the chestnut-colored man, or the dogs, or the hunting, or any of it. It had seemed like part of the natural progression of things but now there had been the fyce and the boy and when he thought about their indifference to his size, his shape, his claws, his fangs, his dominion over the things of the world, he smelled something hot and metallic, a scent not unlike the gunpowder from their rifles, and he realized then that the scent came from himself and that it was the scent of fear.

\* \* \*

They hunted him each time they came now, preying upon deer and younger bears first and then, just before they departed the Big Woods, turning the hounds loose on his trail. There had been a time when the bear had been able to choose when and where they might catch his scent in the woods, but it seemed that time too had come to an end, for now the men and the dogs seemed to find his track whenever they so desired. He wondered if the boy had learned something of him that he could not shake off, something primitive and ursine that allowed him to find the track over and over again, automatically and without effort.

Three years later came the new dog. He did not at first give the scent any credence or attention. One dog among

many. Nothing more than that. And yet he should have known it was different from the start. It was as if the boy’s tiny fyce had grown into its full size, its ferocity matched now by enough strength and force that it could produce an actual tangible threat, not by yapping and alerting the men with their rifles—the boy now amongst them—but because it possessed its own teeth and claws. It could not take down the bear, he knew this much, but it produced in him a wariness that he had seldom experienced in the Big Woods, and an understanding that the very geography of the place had changed, not only because of the fyce or the train or the road or the men with their rifles but because of how he had come to think of himself, no longer with the sense of ascendancy he had marshaled within himself for all the winters of his life but rather with the knowledge that he was a hunted creature upon the land, that he had, inexplicably and beyond all reason, become prey.

The new dog was the color of their rifles and was larger than any dog the bear had ever seen, although still small in comparison to his own size and bulk. It was, in a sense, like a young bear or perhaps, more accurate still, like a panther, its speed matching the bear’s own so that when the dog first set upon him, the bear could hardly escape unscathed. He might have turned to assault the pack but that single dog, a dappled blue not unlike the sunlight through the bare winter trees, came at him in utter silence, a fact so contrary to the bear’s experience that he could not help himself but to run and run, down to the river, where he most often led the dogs, and then into it and swimming downstream for mile after mile after mile before finally coming out upon the opposite bank, his body steaming even as he shivered from the cold, the ice in the sandy puddles seeming to tremble from the great whoosh of his hot breath upon the air.

Then came a cold morning when the bear could not escape and stood with his back to an oak, the dogs in a flurry all around him. He thought the boy might come, even though there was no scent of the boy upon the air, but instead two men came up out of the forest, men from the camp, one mounted upon a horse that kicked and jolted at the sight of the bear, the man upon it struggling to aim his weapon and then firing it at last. That first shot struck the bear clean in the chest so that he gaped and sucked in air. Then the second man, this man charging up out of

the shadows, rifle at his shoulder, the bear thinking with surprise that it would not be the boy, the bear standing there looking down at the man—both men now—and the dogs and the dark lithe shape of the new dog as well, and when the second man fired it was in a volley, the sharp crack coming again and again and again.

The bear thought he was dead, should be dead, certainly should be dead, but he felt nothing and at last he dropped to his forepaws again, the crescent of his two-toed foot leaving its mark in the soft earth, and turned to move off through the trees. He was alive. Still alive. So it was boy after all. It had to be him. He knew it now, knew that the five shots would have killed him otherwise and then he wondered again if he had been dreaming all the while. Perhaps from that first moment he had traveled, in the long weeks of his hibernation, to the boy’s crib, from that moment on he had been dreaming and had never awakened. Perhaps that was all his life had amounted to in the end.

The tree bore an outline of his shape in five points. A constellation of stars. A chittering of furred shapes racing the branches.

\* \* \*

The winter he was called to the tree of souls was the coldest he could recall in all the winters of his life. The dogs came later in the season than was usual and they seemed to bring cold with them in the sully, a deep chill at first, hardening over that first week and then into the second, ice riming the grasses and encrusting the boughs of the trees so that the whole of the forest sparkled like the ancient icefield of his dreams, the memory of which had remained, somehow, as sharp as clear as the night he had traveled across its crystalline landscape.

The men hunted deer for two weeks, the boy amongst them. When others began to gather at the bunkhouse he knew that they would be coming for him, for he could smell them massing, the men of the swamps and of the forest, men who smelled sour and partially rotten like a log the bear might tear open to get at the fat sweet grubs within. He could smell the dog now too, the new dog, although no longer new now, blue as a rifle barrel and just as direct and fearless as the shot from that rifle. He knew that he had managed to cheat the dog the last time and that he might cheat it again but only because he knew it

was the boy, that it had to be the boy, knowing now that when he had first dreamed him in the crib it was because he was dreaming his own deliverance and when the boy had come to grab the yapping fyce from under his claws it was in repudiation of that deliverance. Where then did that leave him? Where then did that leave any of them?

He could smell the boy but only faintly. The chestnut-colored man too, the teacher, the one who had given him the knowledge to claim ownership over the bear and hence over the forest itself, all of it, not inherited from the world of men but inherited directly from the bear himself. The man who would give the whole of it to him who had earned it, not by killing the bear, not even that, but by showing the bear that he already owned the land even before the bear had come to understand it, even in the crib, yes even then.

That night he dreamed only of black emptiness and when he woke and heard the first baying of the dogs he knew that he was ready for them all. He knew where his trail lay, its scent marked carefully and clearly, the dogs following it just as he knew they would, that one gun-metal beast at their head, silent, charging on through the scented woods like a panther. And so he ran, ran at his full speed, faster than even he thought possible, the forest a blur around him: patches of steaming earth and slick ice and bare tree trunks and the crisp frozen shapes of dead leaves. It felt as if his paws did not even touch the ground, and yet still they came, as he knew they would. There was a gunshot near him, the leaves flicking around him as the pellets burst through the underbrush, and still he continued to run, his lungs heaving, his powerful legs churning under his rolling body, and in his thoughts, only the boy. Where was he now? Why could the bear not feel his scent upon the cold chill of the air? He must have heard the shot, the baying of the dogs, so where was he?

He turned to the river in a kind of desperation because he still could not find the boy’s scent and lofted himself bodily into the current, the water exploding around him even as the hard cold of the river burst against his furred flesh, crossing to the opposite bank and shuffling up out of the cold water just as he scented the boy at last.

He turned. There they were, coming for him across the river, the boy submerged so that his head seemed to float, mule and some other man beside him in the current, rifles held up out of the water. And then, from behind

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them, came the dogs, not even pausing but leaping pell-mell into the current, the hard blue beast leading them, swimming even faster than the mule and the boy and the man. From somewhere else he could smell the chestnut-colored man too now, perhaps just coming to the edge of the river, perhaps just ready enter its endless flow.

The bear came out of the water but there was nowhere left to run and so he rose, rose to stand there upon the riverbank, the gray clouds heavy above him and the dogs roiling below. He did not even try to stop the blue dog now. When it came at him, teeth bared, he merely grasped it in his claws, feeling the animal’s teeth upon his windpipe, the hard crushing bite of it, the bear’s claws raking down the dog’s body, feeling the hot spill of blood against his fur, the scent of the entrails as they rose to his snout.

He thought the rifle shot would come now, that the boy would rise from the water to take what was his, but then something happened that he could not have imagined, not in a dream, not in the waking world, for it was not the boy who would deliver him but the man with him, the same anonymous man who had shot five times and missed and now ran at him with a silent rage not unlike that of the blue dog he commanded or seemed to command, the knife raised in his hand and then coming down into the bear’s neck, the bear thinking, almost in words, almost in actual language—No No No—the man wrapping his legs



around the bear so that the three of them tottered together for a long trembling moment, bear, dog, man—and where was the boy? where had he gone now in the moment of his greatest need? where had he gone?—the knife twisting against the bear’s spine so that he fell forward, pulled by the weight of the man and the weight of the dog, crashing down into the damp thawed riverside earth, the cane splashing out all around him in a dry brittle hiss.

He did not look for the boy now but he thought he was near. And then he smelled something else: the chestnut-colored man. It was a kind of call. A kind of acceptance that was also a kind of repudiation, not of inheritance or of dominion but of life itself, and he knew then that it was the boy after all, that in repudiating it he had claimed it as it truly was, as it had ever been, not owned or even kept in trust and when the bear stood again it was only to scent him upon the air one last time, the boy and the chestnut-colored man who had taught him not how to be a hunter or even how to be a bear but how to be the forest itself, for that was what it amounted to, a lesson the bear himself had never learned although it was there, had always been there, for all the winters of his life—

and then the boy was there upon the bank but also not upon the bank, for they were somewhere else, the scent upon the wind not even the boy’s scent now but the scent of the chestnut-colored man and something else, something far away and so sweet that the bear shivered from its pull, a scent of bright green leaves and a trembling too, a trembling of motion, another bear, many bears, something else, then he knew it was the chestnut-colored man somehow, the man and the dog too, the blue dog he had gutted, and he could feel the boy’s eyes upon him, could scent that too upon a cold wind that seemed to rise and rise within him until it was like the tornado that had torn through the forest so many years before, but this was not the same but something else, there was no scent separate from himself now, it had all become as one, and when he rose it was into a fur, a motion, a blaze of yellow light, the dog, the man, the bear, there had been an icefield somewhere in his dreams, he could sense that now, but it was the opposite, the antithesis of everything he knew or might have known, that freedom, that white endlessness that was a kind of blindness, and then truncating down, for it was not the boy after all, for it had never been the boy and it

had never been that long hard field of ice, implacable, endless, stretching on forever, but instead a kind of siphoning inward, the edges of the forest becoming clear and bright and all the creatures of its shadowed and pungent depths rolling forward toward a centerpoint that he still could not see, although he was rising toward it now, rising upon no wind but his own, the edges pulling inward so that the whole of the forest drew in upon itself, the thick brambles, the boggy lowlands, and then he saw it at last: the field of wildflowers in the center of which rose the huge ancient shape of the sweetgum, not in December cold but in the full riot of summer, its leaves shaking, trembling, shivering with motion, because there was no forest now and soon there was no field but only the tree, its souls held upon branches dancing with motion, some last final repudiation of dominion, of ownership, even of death and so even of life, the bear’s last thoughts flashing out toward the boy one final time, the hot scent of his body upon the riverbank, dominionless upon the upraised branches of the tree of souls, as it had been in the beginning and as it was, now, at the end. And to think: he had never been a bear at all.

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# DAVID HOCKNEY

*Summer Sky, 2008*

Inkjet printed computer drawing on paper,  
edition of 25, 34 1/4 x 45 1/2 in



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