

Death Bear Wants your Unhappy Things

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[Photo by Kevin Walsh; Courtesy of: <http://natehillisnuts.com/3/death-bear/>

A recent story by Tina Susman in the Los Angeles *Times* called my attention to Brooklyn performance artist Nate Hill's character Death Bear, a seven-foot tall, brown-bear-masked, somberly dressed visitor who comes to your house to rid you of objects that carry painful memories.

On his website, Hill describes the intent of his performances:

We all have someone or something we would rather just forget. Things fall apart. Love hurts. Dreams die. But when you summon Death Bear to your door, you can rest assured

that help has come. At first you may be intimidated by his stature and color (7 feet tall with a hard, black bear head, black jumpsuit, and black boots), but absorbing the memories of others is a dark art, and Death Bear must present himself appropriately for this solemn duty. Death Bear will take things from you that trigger painful memories and stow them away in his cave where they will remain forever allowing you to move on with your life. Give him an ex's clothes, old photos, mementos, letters, etc. Death Bear is here to assist you in your time of tragedy, heartbreak, and loss. Let Death Bear help you, and absorb your pain into his cave. [1]

Death Bear's services—performed rituals for an audience of one—are only available to those living in Brooklyn, but are free of charge. People contact him primarily to remove the detritus of failed romantic relationships, but also for less predictable tasks: to remove rotten food, a giant beer-funnel, or a large-sized pair of underwear—the lingering evidence of previous weight-gain.[2] Those who offer their objects to Death Bear are certainly audience members to a personalized performance, but they are also (pro bono) customers, contractors, suppliers, and perhaps even his patients.

The article in the *LA Times*, like most of the other media commentary on Death Bear, focuses on the therapeutic aspect of the performance for the people who summon him. One user of Death Bear's services comments: "It was almost like sacrificing something to alleviate the feeling of a heavy heart. It's all symbolic, but it really did help." [3] Susman quotes another user on the heartbreak that motivated him to contact Death Bear: "I feel I've moved on, but she still haunts me'," and later says he found it "cathartic to unload items that [he] had kept for too long." [4] But by imagining the performance as a therapeutic exchange of emotion, in which the pain of one person is taken and absorbed by another, we gloss over the material exchange that Death Bear enacts.

Much like the ritual of disposal and object transformation enacted by the tooth-fairy [5], Death Bear offers people a way of disposing unwanted, no longer functional, but still emotionally important objects. Yet this solution doesn't involve destroying the objects (like on a funerary pyre) or throwing them away (thus transforming them into trash), nor does it put them back into circulation (like, say, giving them to a friend or to the Salvation Army). Perhaps anticipating this function, Death Bear is careful to create a story that provides a mythical destination for the objects he collects: they are to be placed in his "cave," which is located somewhere in Central Park. Susman quotes Hill: "It absorbs things like a black hole. Maybe one day I'll figure out how the cave works." [6] Once in the cave, the objects are preserved forever, but their capacity to affect their previous owners is neutralized. One user explains: "When I gave him those things, the exorcism kind of began [...] I asked him about the energy of these little mementos — if bringing them back to his cave affects the energy of his cave. He said, no, his cave actually neutralizes the energy of these objects." [7]

The symbology of the cave is well chosen. A cave is surely where a story-bear would choose to store his odds-and-ends, but caves are also ancient (and sometimes modern) sites of burial and burial rituals. As archaeology and popular culture regularly remind us, caves are venerable and

trustworthy store-houses of humanness.[8] And the image of the cave—cool, dark, timeless, perhaps impenetrably deep—suits ambiguous desires for the disposal of objects that affect us too much and not enough for us to keep them around: they will remain there, undisturbed, and no longer disturbing.

While we are (perhaps) becoming better at disposing things that mean little to us, our rituals of disposal still focus primarily on bereavement. We have not (yet) expanded them to cope with the overwhelming modern accumulation of stuff, nor the expansion in varieties of modern loss.[9] How thoughtful and kind of Hill to invent and enact a ritual of disposal so simple and somber to fill this void, if only for a few brave denizens of Brooklyn.

NOTES:

[1] <http://natehillisnuts.com/3/death-bear/>

[2] http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/35319061/ns/today-valentines_day/ April 11, 2010

[3] *ibid*

[4] http://articles.latimes.com/2010/mar/29/nation/la-na-death-bear29-2010mar29_11 April 2010

[5] Helen Polson, "Where do Teeth Go?" *Cabinet* (Winter 2009-1010, issue 36): 16-21.

<http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/36/index.php>

[6] <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/mar/29/nation/la-na-death-bear29-2010mar29> 11 April 2010

[7] http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/35319061/ns/today-valentines_day/ April 11, 2010

[8] See <http://www.nature.com/news/2010/100324/full/464472a.html> and

http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Adam_and_Eve both 11 April 2010

[9] The results of which have also made their way into popular culture; see

http://www.salon.com/entertainment/tv/hoarding/index.html?story=/ent/tv/heather_havrilesky/2010/04/10/am_i_a_hoarder 11 April, 2010