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The Legend of the Bear Mother

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The Legend of the Bear Mother

It all took place some time ago
the woman's dark child thrust from her
 in a ring of pine
the chill air in her lungs
her large hips in a pocket of needles.

The tight baby had squirmed for hours
Skoaga's screams echoed off rock walls
came back to her
came back to her
when it was done
silence rushing into that same deep hollow.

The boy was smooth and buttery
his eyes with the glint of blackberries
his maleness a capped mushroom
a nodding thumb.
The wind shook the leaves --
from the west a hush
in her ear as she breathed:
my little chestnut, my fallen berry
my bear-child, with the lips of a man.

It was spring
when she had crossed the stream
that rushed with herring
the waves humping with scaled backs
she entered the wood where the bear
was waiting in his hide
at the mouth of Whistling Rock.

In the shade of the glen
crude and ill-carved
Skoaga fell into his furred chest

into the dark-coated fear
wanting the shame, the touch
 no voice but the bear's rumbling
 no smell but the glistening oil of his hide.
She clutched at the bear's broad neck
as she would clutch the trunk of a tree
full of arousal and loathing.

Since then the Haidas
would not cross the stream
Skoaga's mother nodded
her wooly head to the drum
and wept.

There were tales at night:
she was seen crouching over an antelope
with her lover at her side
her mouth speckled red.
Skoaga was moving in the brush
her belly burgeoning plump
and shiny as a skull's head
her arms thick with new hair.

There was no truth to the tales
but this -- the bear had retreated into the cave
and she was alone at the stream
when the child was born.

Years later Tstagay the sculptor
chipped the argillite from the face of Whistling Rock
He carved her image from the stone
and she is frozen there still --
her mouth cleft in agony as the infant
rips and knaws at her bosom
that falls like a thick pod.

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