

*How the Woman Becomes the Bear*  
for Cissy

Do you remember how the woman becomes the bear  
from not enough sleep, and crawls into her dark cave  
with walls covered in drawings  
and claws left in the soft shallow dirt?  
Do you remember how the woman becomes the bear  
in my dreams, lumbering  
across the wild grass  
in the direct path of my sister?  
We were camping out back  
and went crawling through the cab window  
to get to the keys and drive away.

There was the town we lived in  
and the way the bear roamed the streets,  
lost in a crowd and smelling her way  
for you and your blood.  
And how I panicked.  
Running down the road after hours  
with it in my mind to save you  
from what was already yours.

Do you remember how I stashed you in the attic  
with blood on my hands; how we drove across the hot desert  
through two borders, in a loaded down car full of malt shakes  
and the smell of French fries  
and crumpled white paper bags on the floor board?  
How your lipstick lay on the dash and melted red  
into the sun's wide open mouth  
under a sky that stretched like someone's flared skirt  
and laughter over our heads.

We woke to cold mornings in early spring:  
that tin trailer in the park, the way the moon  
showed its flanks on both sides  
and the night came unexpected.  
We pressed our skin against the screen  
while she went on and on about what might be  
out there. Dredging up volcanoes  
out of our innocence. Those unheard of animals.  
The way a hand could be devoured.  
The way the sides of your body could look like ribbons.  
The way we had to be protected with only our fear.  
The way we could end up with nothing

and how there was never really any way around it.

Blood cursed through us  
and does, from the center of the body  
and across, in a line out the mouth  
like a long finger, like a thread  
woven out and left behind,  
like a trail between trees in the forest.

And what were you thinking of all this –  
with your curly blonde hair  
and tiny fingers, with your little teeth  
and the legs that bolt you across the lawn  
like a young deer in new white skin.

This thing has been chasing us for so long –  
we could take off running, you know,  
we could start up dancing and shake  
the heavy weight of your thighs.  
We could drop off the old orange stretch pants,  
we could wipe off the dead black mascara  
and give you back the slap of your paws.  
We could shake off running.  
We could leave the popcorn and movies behind  
and do it over.

I never meant to leave you  
I never meant to, but that's all done now, anyway.  
And all those teeth came way too close  
to my skin not to have changed  
something.

Your green eyes chase summer things.  
Your heavy arms wave around in the heat of the day  
revealing stretch marks like rings at the center of trees  
that surround us. Your turned up nose for picking berries  
out of a cool tray in the supermarket.  
The stubs of your hands pull pits from your mouth  
and toss them away in an old brown sack in the corner.  
When it is hot, you put the frayed ends of your hair up in a barrette.

So come on now, come on.  
We can take off in that other direction.  
I'm ready to go where she told us never to –  
That old log across the river we had to scoot across.  
Every fallen tree in the path is ours to know.  
The way the leaves lay out like coins in the pathway,  
only better. They won't leave you for another man.

Don't you remember  
how the woman became the bear and gave up smoking?  
Don't you remember how she tore out of that big, empty house?  
Ha! A sight to see.  
She drove out to the beating heart of the mountain  
and asked to be let in.  
But only so far, she said, holding up her withered claw;  
I can only go so far.  
She lumbered into the front seat of the pickup  
and adjusted the seat belt, watching, out the bug-splattered windshield  
with her small brown eyes.

Well, I am going further.  
At least, I am going as far as I can,  
as far as that is. I am looking for that bear, did I tell you?  
I am looking. I am taking all I have, which is nothing,  
and walking deep into the forest, with only a slit of light  
like birthing over my head. I am going right in  
where the pine needles rest beneath my feet, listening  
to some song about a bear.  
I am going in.

– *Taos Review*