

Mama Atlas

Standing
at the sink doing dishes
my fingers are foamed with soap and warm water
my belly, broad and soft from past pregnancies,
presses against the counter
my shoulders, my back are
Monumental, tiredstrongtired
and my mind amasses the world's weight

The Atlantic Ocean is by my right ear
and the Pacific is by my left
Arctic ice shelves crack
across the top of my forehead
while the Indian Ocean dribbles down my chin
The Continental Divide swinging down through the Americas
protrudes from the back of my skull like a crest

Square between my eyes I see frag--
menting continents
I smell scrubby tundra at the top
clean and cold
smokestacks and sweat below
All the aromas of
heaven and earth and humanity
encircle my head

I am carrying the world on my shoulders
Weight and Lift in equal measure
holding me up and pinning me down
for the responsibility of it all

Because I have children
whose eyes are wide and ears are open
Nothing gets past them
who require explanations and reassurances
And while the news used to throw curve balls
it now hurls thunderbolts

The foam is gone from my fingers
but the plates are clean
and the children are sleeping

Till morning

So carry the world I will
for them
until I can hand it off
whole I hope
and if not, if fracturing
then slathered in love like paste
and stubborn gratitude like glue
adhering our futures and universes and
World up here on top of our shoulders
determined hopeful flawed
All the unfinished glory of the turning globe

Bread from Scratch

If Grandma was still alive

I would learn how to bake bread from scratch
for a dozen people a day
because that's what it took to feed her family
not just how to bake the bread
but how to do it
Everyday, in and out
how vice-like her grip and chiseled her patience
from the mixing-kneading-pounding and waiting-to-rise
the work of unending nourishment
they required
on a frugal budget

It's no surprise she spent her graying years a cook in the hospital cafeteria
She'd spent a lifetime in the business of feeding legions

If Grandma was still alive

She would show me all there is to know
about blended families
for she started out so swiftly a widow
with two of her own
when she married Grandpa and the two he came with
then they mixed in seven more of their own making
(it's okay to gasp)
for a grand total of eleven children she hollered at and raised
What a recipe that must have been

for love
and leavened expectations
No wonder her grandchildren never tested her endurance
Coming as we did in more prudent numbers

If Grandma was still alive

I would ask her what it was like to lose
her first love
the one she gazed at in an old photograph
held in her papery hand
her first partner in love's nourishment
and the father of her first children
taken by war, lost at sea
hidden in deep waters
Did she crumble
like sift
when the telegraph was delivered?
And how did she get up again?
Dying, she said she most looked forward to seeing him

How Grandma endured so much
while delivering sustenance to so many
is a wonder to me
an art I struggle at
my fingerpainting to her Mona Lisa
And all I ever knew her for
was her drawer of Sunday School prizes
like from the bottom of a crackerjack box
And the scent of yeast that wafted from her steady hands

X is Us

X is us--
Variable to the enth degree
and changing with surrounding terms
always on one side of equal or the other
never Equal itself
Now the metaphor is belabored
for we labor
under rules and precisions
beyond our control
like gravity and

metabolism

But we make music
which means
mechanics has a hold on us
but so does Mystery
biology but also Beauty
and sometimes we are content
to Encounter rather than solve

(I painted my fingernails silver
and my toes for no one to see but me
for the holidays)

Prisms take invisible light and
fracture it into rainbows
our hearts work the same
Hard in wholeness but
when crushed by life's pestle
to a fine grain
we are Medicinal
the substance of us, the fragrance
is Released

This is why we seek love out
like treasure, water, air
even though it has to end in heartache
Has to--does--
Because
we are insidiously fragile
we are brief and dying
Our best hope is to go quickly
to spare caretaking loved ones
before they follow, in a decade or a day
the steep descent
to Endings

Thank goodness for seasons
for moons waxing and waning
tides coming in and going out
and perennials
Every scrap of Nature that reassures us
things leave to come back

Are not gone forever
live on
somehow
and so might we
seeding our belief
in Resurrection

Bath Time

My daughter and I close the day
with a water ritual
She climbs in
turns clear water to gray with
the well-earned grime of childhood
She lifts her head in shimmering pride
and I smile to hear her boast:
“I’ve been playing!”

She spent hours digging in the side yard
All day the dust settled and stayed
on the droplets dappling her forehead
smeared along her forearm
every time she swiped it
across her sweaty brow
Now dirt under her fingernails
dampens, loosens, steepens
into the bathwater like tea leaves

She is a country-king
made happy by heroic comings and goings
by tree-climbing, creek-crossing, path-exploring labor
Like a farmer she gestures satisfaction
taking in the plowed fields of Play

So I know the best I can hope to do
is send her out into the world
to drink to dregs
each and every swollen day