

Sprout!

a whole being lifted out
 on the blade of my father's shovel
topsoil clinging to its roots
 never carry a tree by its neck
we steadied the stalk
 on our way to its hole
where I, popping like a sprout,
 pressed cool earth down
grow well, little tree

I followed my father, feeding the orchard
 tossed ironite outside the dripline
so the roots would stretch

 we leafed out, the trees and I —

now, our trunks grown broader
 I tend saplings, son and daughter

Kneading

I hovered over the bowl of yeast in honeywater
warm as a baby's bath
watched for bubbles, signs of cells dividing
as you measured out flour

we gave the batter one hundred strokes
with the strong wooden spoon
and the gluten stretched and tore
like a perineum —

then you sprinkled flour and showed me how to knead
turn the dough in toward yourself and down,
fold it in and down, in and down
'til it's smooth as a baby's butt

— what? Mom, I knew nothing about babies' bottoms
I had no newborn cousins, no toddling neighbors
no extended family closer than an ocean's flight
I learned babytush from the dough

which rose as it rested, and though we punched it down
it would inexplicably expand over the rims of the pans
until three hundred fifty degrees
set its crumb,

set that pattern of fibers laced through space
like the inside of a bone,
like honeycomb,
a mandala of fertilized eggs

we cut this loaf with a serrated knife
as you and my father leaned away from each other
soon to be separately
sliced

Mother,
it took this long to forgive you for leaving
and forgiveness is a kind of burning —
burn off the anger, burn off the hurt, burn it all off —

one afternoon in the needing room
we knew there was nothing left to burn
when I told my daughter
you taught me to love

The Strange Sleeping Habits of J.T.

He sleeps on the floor next to the bed.
He covers the floor with layers
of half-sized blankets.
They must be positioned
precisely.

When sleeping on his stomach
he places a bolster under his ankles.
It keeps his toenails from scratching the floor.
When his legs spasm
the bolster kicks out.

I hear his toenails.
Scr-itch, scritch, sca-ritch.
His calf muscles grip.
His quads sieze up.
His lower back bunches,
neck clenches,
head pounds.
Which he admits
only
after the third day.

Should I take a pill?

Some nights I wake to soft swearing.
He drags his body to the bathroom.
I see his balls catch
in his legs
beneath his scarred butt.
This is just for a tissue.
If the roll by his feet is out.

My husband keeps a shoyu jug
with a small mouth
behind the toilet.
He calls for it from bed.
For storage
of extra liquid.
You don't want to know
the how-to.

Sometimes he calls
after we have all gone to bed.

This is when I jump and run.
Even sleeping I can jump and run.
Sometimes he calls for his chair.
Or a rag. Or a garbage bag.
Sometimes we wash blankets.
Sometimes we toss them out.

When my husband doesn't make it
to the bed
he sleeps at the kitchen table.
Tonight he used a water bottle
for a pillow.
He stood it on the counter.
The small cap pressed up
into one side of his skull.

But first he sleeps in the truck.
Guaranteed.
Just when the kids knock out
he drags his legs up our three steps.
Pulls his chest through the door.
Twists into his chair.
Rides to the blankets.
Bangs his knees down.
Stretches out.
So I can step on his back.

And do anything else
we want.

The Drawing

my son drew
the centipede in shattered armor
the villain with his roofing hammer
and me, the mother with a heart and gun

I scribbled notes —
phone number, case number,
address of the prosecutor —
around my picture, heart and gun

he asked me
to let him forget
so more or less
that's what I've done

The Mask

Blame my mother's mask of grief —
I feel it torque my face.
It fits its wail to my jaw,
clenches claws in my brow,
blinds eyecaves with ancestral mace.
Darkness is covid, caged kids, diabetes, and rape;
my safety rules shield her, yet
kink my daughter's free-flow shape.

One night she peels
the exhausted skin from my face,
smooths and removes it
with tender fingers
like a rosemary steambath
pungent with grace.