Four
He is always waiting
at the edge of my dreams.
Metered footfalls muffle his
soft crooning—Are you washed
in the blood? He blesses my sleep
with the oil of his coming.
I wake as he raises the knife.

Now the ghost made flesh—
redheaded, fifteen—descends
to earth, to my little girl
in her second-grade beauty.
Praise Him all ye little
children is his lullaby
as he takes her in his arms.

The police bring him, charmed
with bracelets, a Bible jutting
from his pocket. Now she knows
as I know the burning print
of his face. He is humming
Standing on the promises
of God. Always humming.
A Girl’s Father

“Daddy, stand up straight!” She pushes at his rounded shoulders. A daughter her body as erect as a loblolly pine does not see that he is weighed down like an African man under a yoke, carrying buckets of water for miles to keep his bloated children alive. She does not yet know the forces that bend people like trees under a wet spring snow.

Her father, a Marine, trained to survive off snakes and rainwater, to shoot out the heart on a man target, to drop bombs on sleeping villages, wages unseen battles. His body pumps hormones designed for cracking small bones with his fists, for bathing in the stink of sweat and blood, for fucking quickly and cruelly, faceless women.

The open road sings a siren’s song: travel light, fast, alone. The father pretends not to hear. The daughter sees only the shape he has taken out of love—a trim, middle-aged man, muscles heavy, who sighs as he mails out checks, trudges off to a job wearing pants now shiny in the seat, whose eyes moisten when he holds a new baby. He hangs up his male heart like a coat worn only on special occasions, now too tight across the shoulders, and stares into a distance she cannot see.
You grow in little jerks
my time-lapsed flower.
I watch a blue vein
begin sly swelling
under one nipple, your legs
turn to knobby stems.
Feet that once fit
into my hand lengthen
like feeder roots.
Your stalk of waist
stretches and narrows
and three dark hairs
sprout under an arm.
Coquette, you peer through
petals barely parted.

How Does Your Garden Grow?
Rob Hall had some nerve, burrowing down in a snow hole, sucking tanks dry of oxygen to die with a tourist from Seattle. He gave himself like a lover to the blizzard, radioed his pregnant wife, telling her not to worry while his hands and face became crystal. Like him, you, my daughter, measure your goals in thousand-foot increments of Arctic tundra, racing your bike above the Colorado tree line over skittering gravel trails hikers can barely climb.

Your friend tells me how, at eleven thousand feet, you skidded off a cliff, but had the luck to land on a ledge. You shrug at India ink scars mapping your muscled legs. “I need to be afraid,” you say. I remember catgut knit into your black brows, an arm sagging over splintered bone, and later, inky pupils crowding out blue as you flew on dope. And stupid me, after you had crouched, weeks alone driving out the demon, I thought quitting drugs had saved you.

Now ten years later the devil returns, singing Rob Hall’s thin tune. While new climbers step over his iced corpse, you shoot up danger like crystal meth, jamming the pedals over bald peaks. I look away from hand-sized scabs, picturing your once baby-pink skin, as you, too, tell me not to worry. I can only bruise my knees nightly that the phone never rings with the dreaded news, that you may live past thirty.
My daughter asks me to help arrange her bedroom furniture. First the futon. Lia lifts her end like a tray of glasses. Mine just clears the floor. We set the chest by her bed, the white pine desk under a window, leaving the papasan chair to jut out like a rude comment. We hang photos in blues and greens—Lia hiking in Bryce Canyon, mountain biking in Moab.

In 1922, Grandmother was Lia’s age—thirty. Three toddlers hung from her skirts like baby possums when the news came: a drunk taxi driver, her husband dead. I asked Grandmother how she’d survived. “I moved furniture.” Her heavy oak sideboard perches in my garage. I think how she shoved it, the balled feet scraping plank floors, then pushed it back again. The grooves underfoot mocked tear tracks on her cheeks, just as torn muscles masked sorrow.

I sit on the futon by Lia, an engineer, single and buoyant as any cloud. I want to tell her how two generations have given her this life, but just as when I describe my bra-burning days, her blue eyes would glaze. She’d sooner understand Egyptian hieroglyphics, my past is that ancient.
For those wrongs I inflicted on you, my son,  
I wear guilt like a belt cinched notches too tight.  
From the moment in the delivery room when  
I sat on your head, pushing out of my body,  
to receive the saddle block, you have suffered  
to have such a mother. Still a child myself,  
you became my new toy, like the doll  
I’d left out in the rain ten years earlier.

These are my confessions: The day of your  
birth I smiled to hide the evil thought—  
I don’t want to be anybody’s mother. I still cringe,  
remembering how, when your daddy flew jets,  
I swatted at you, a kitten tugging on my leg,  
ignored your little boy tricks, bopped you  
with a wooden spoon for tormenting your sister.  
Yet you gave me kisses, told me you would live  
with me always. Your little boy voice still rings  
in my ears as it once pealed across grocery aisles—  
“Mommy, I love you!” I told myself not to worry,  
at thirty-five you would have plenty to tell a therapist.

Now, you’re nearly that age, a businessman,  
when you call me at noon, your voice quivering.  
“There’s just one thing I can’t forgive,” you say.  
As if in a car rolling over a precipice, time slows,  
breath stops in a tide of nausea. “Tell me.”  
“The time Hank Aaron hit his record-breaking  
home run, you didn’t take me to the game.”  
“Oh, that’s it?” At last I can draw a deep breath.
I watch you, my son, offer your baby girl
in her trailing lawn dress to the pastor,
smile when she grabs his nose and coos.
Beside you, your wife holds hands with toddler boys
who twist around her legs like tropical vines.
As you give this new child to the church,
I remember how, branded with words of Sartre,
Russell, and Maslow, I vowed to keep you free
of my childhood’s curse—the fiery sermons,
a preacher’s accusing finger, fear of sleep
and dying, my body forever afire for some
small sin. I threw away the hair shirt
of guilt that pushed my mother into suicide
and taught you to believe in good, not God.
Your smile for your wife, for this baby,
glows incandescent as you repeat the vows.
Your blue eyes unclouded by doubt, you never
wonder if you can raise your children to be free.
I hear them in the bathroom, toddler brothers, two and three. Water splashes, the commode gurgles, giggles creep under the closed door. Forbidden words float to the kitchen where I chop onions. “Hiney, doo doo tee tee.” One wears diapers yet. When naked, he fingers little balls, grins up at me. I remember at three in the woods behind our house, my pants off, Ben DiMayo’s around his ankles. We stared, at each other, touched ourselves, the burning tickle enough. Now my grandsons wear the blueprint in their perfect plump bodies of muscle and sinew, of the pleasure they will give and receive.
At twenty months, Jack toddles by to lean over his little brother’s downy head as if to kiss. So sweet, I think, but the baby shrieks. A red arc of teeth marks the soft spot. Their mother snatches up the baby, points a stiff finger at Jack. “You are so bad!” His tears wet the pillow as I lay the chubby boy down to sleep. “No, ma’am, no, ma’am.” Jack stings me with his tiny arsenal of words.

You, my sister, had other ways of punishing me. Already five when I came, you were too tough to cry. In photos you glare as our father holds me to his chest. You took revenge by vacuuming my toes, dosing me with vanilla and pepper, reading to me—stories about children who die in flames—any torture that didn’t leave marks.

Half a century later, stroking this little boy’s silky hair, I remember how we sisters snuggled in our maple bed, safe together even while our father raged and our mother wept, the pinches, the tattling, the kicks under the table forgotten and forgiven. I think how someday Jack will yearn for his brother, just as I grow hungry for you, my sister, your voice in my ear, your cold-creamy good-night kiss.
A knife pushed through a bagel slips.
Blood drips from a finger, the first I’ve
shed in months. Changing my grandbaby’s
diaper, I think of that blood. The fat halves
of her bottom meet like the seam of a peach.
“You are perfect,” I tell her, just as I told
my daughter, just as my mother told me.
This child has two brothers with silky skin,
as sweet as their melted-chocolate eyes.
Yet no one feeds them that lie.
We won’t tell her until whispers come
to her incredulous ears, how she will bleed,
enough in her lifetime to fill a small room,
how from the moment the first smear appears,
she will be set apart from her brothers, ruled
by the drag of bellyache, the flow she must
staunch with pads and plugs, the clothes
she checks for blotches. She will spend her life
dreading the blood, longing for the blood,
hers fate written in sticky red. We won’t warn her
how men, like timber wolves drawn by the scent
of her hidden core, will become her willing slaves.
Racing a yellow light, I honk at a woman who pulls out then slows down. The list on the car seat beside me rations my minutes. I check off each item, pen digging into paper, as if the trip to the grocery, letters mailed, clothes washed and folded, dishes put away would save a life in Iraq. By dark, the food I cook has been gulped, a new list replaces the old. I watch Luke, a two-year-old grandson, build a tower of wooden blocks, knock them over, start again. “Look at me,” he commands that night in the bathtub. He holds two plastic cups—one yellow, one purple—pours rivers over his head, throws cascades into the air. “Tea party,” he says, grinning. I take the cup of murky water he offers to toast at least one life with purpose.
I doze in my chair. Pots chime in the kitchen, and I think,
Oh, it’s Mother, cooking,
and sink back, forgetting she is dead for twenty years,
and I am now the mother of a father. I hear her:
she sings my wake-up call,
promises hot cakes and bacon
a morning of sunshine. I feel her fingers stroke my hair
as lightly as butterflies.
Like stains of red wine creeping along
the threads of a linen tablecloth,
my genes hopscotch random fibers,
weaving me into a patchwork blend
of family donors. I wear my mother’s
Irish eyes, a grandmother’s long feet,
my father’s helpless smile. Tossed
like dice from a cup, the same genes
become my sister. She wears Mother’s
milky skin, along with her gift
of honing words into polished beauty.
Pieced from another quilt top, fusing
new patterns with old, my son tells
the jokes of a grandfather he never knew.
My daughter flies a bike over mountain trails
as her father once flew attack bombers.
A niece guards her box of legal drugs,
as careful in addiction as three of her grandparents.
In my arms, I study a new baby’s round face,
a jigsaw puzzle of two families, and tweak
his right foot, its two fused toes matching mine.