

Mother Hekate

Those mushroom-head prints
she inveigled us as kids to help her engineer—

one of the eldritch projects for a rainy
summer's day she organized—

a distraction that appealed more readily
than fencing gaudy nylon pellets

into beastly forms that overspilled when baked,
becoming sloppy three-trunked

elephants or tigers with four blobs
for paws. And even building forts

from Playschool blocks to act out Armageddon
on the plains of Middle Earth

was not as cool or curious. Our mother
was a maker, knitting sweaters,

sprouting ferns from spores
on bricks, and puffing French croissants

from dough she'd rolled and folded over
many times, interlarding it

with butter—all that taken-for-granted craft
that mothers have bequeathed

to daughters since the first clock gonged,
an old black magic used to cookie-cut

a second self. And half-appalled,
we came to see she'd conjured us herself,

"roasting" babies in her "oven,"
as she once explained, until we'd popped out whole,

in perfect shape, although her fable
worried me because it painted her

as Hansel and Gretel's cannibal antagonist,
and might she shove me backwards

into coal and fire if I misbehaved? For lack
of any girls, then, she taught her boys

how best to disarticulate a new, young
toadstool and adjust its armature, gills down,

on coarse black paper. A Pyrex dish,
placed over it, would concentrate

the fungal mind and prod its dissipating
force to write an overnight goodbye.

Next day, we'd lift the glass
and gingerly unpeel the squishy

toadstool cap. Beneath, a spider's riddle
would appear, imprinted by the mushroom's

under-rim upon the surface of the page in negative,
frail mercury doodling the dark.

Was it the outline of an eerie, lunar web
with mithril spokes? Or the x-ray

of a slice of midnight's fruit embossed with sticky,
meteoric drool? She never told us

what it meant, and all that I recall
is fascination and a trace

anxiety returning from our effort
to decode, as if an echo of every being's birth

and death had resonated, very faintly,
on our kitchen tabletop. A squirt

of Aqua Net preserved our shared disquieting.
Weeks later, our awe grown stale, she'd jettison

our handiwork, forsaking sorcery
until the Moon and all her underlings

rose up again through scorch and thunder.