**The Velveteen Mother**

I would shoplift ten-minute naps whenever

there were ten minutes sitting somewhere unattended.

All three babies were under five years old.

Once, I was just releasing into that first

delicious day-to-night of sleep, when I heard

the two littlest ones fighting over a toy.

They toddled over on their tiny feet,

wailing, banging on my locked door.

I clenched my teeth, whipped off the covers,

threw the door open, my throat wide open,

and roared at them, “GOD DAMN IT!”

They ran away crying harder.

Their brother, all of five, marched

up to me and said, “Mommy!

They’re *little*.”

I’ve done a shit ton of work since then.

I’ve felt the hard labor

pains of learning to stay rabbit still

in the grass, to hide in plain sight from the rage hawk.

I’ve breathed and pushed for years to birth a better me.

Am I there yet? A million invisible decisions--

to close a drawer gently, to open a conversation, to look

at what I’m doing--that and the passage of six rich decades

has rubbed my fur clean off in places. I lost

a button-eye somewhere along the way,

but nothing bothers me now like it used to.

I’m not anything like the crisp, clean mother

my kids had at first, brand new from the store. She came

rigid and wrapped in cellophane,

in a box bright with passion,

and she was strong, smooth

and scented with risen sap.

My kids loved me out of all that.

They dragged me with them everywhere,

to their sandboxes, their middle school plays,

to car dealerships and into and out of multicolored trouble.

They swam through my belly to swing wide in the world,

but they started out as my little bunnies.

I dragged them with me everywhere,

from the Tuscan bedroom where they were born,

to sagebrush windscapes in Wyoming,

to the AfterDad wilderness of Seattle,

and the warren of airport walkways,

always moving from me to him to me to him …

Now my back hurts.

My feet are sore at night.

Jars are hard to open.

And newsprint is too small.

And I am exactly where I belong--grateful

most of all to my brave, stalwart children

who survived my parenting,

who scarred up strong where

their wounds were,

and made me--

as I made them--

real.