

TABLE SETTING

For tonight's main course
let her remember the days I clung to her
while she shielded me from dragons:
My father's temper, nightmares when I was ten,
a nasty neighbor who thought I stole
his crab apples, a snarling Doberman
chasing me till she ran between us
with a broom. Many dragons, all vanquished.

She knows they're still out there, multiplying
by dark, roaming offices and freeways.
More kinds than she imagines. Sometimes
the fiercest of all is the one inside me
uncoiling to attack her reaching hands.

What makes daughters so razorish? Why must
mothers rearrange the cupboards each visit?
Rattling dishes as you juggle your budget,
blowing dust off lampshades as you dress
for a party, reinfecting that ancient cut.

Last year I was glad she gave up running
in marathons and riding fast horses. But now
she has more time to rummage in my shadows
and stalk my premises looking for dragons.

I mention her magnificence
with the long-ago Doberman. She says
she doesn't remember that at all. She sniffs
at each serving designed for her plate. We dab
at silences with monogrammed napkins, clear
the dining room, cram leftovers in odd places,
punish each other with after-dinner love.

In enigmatic ways
these movable feasts have made us strong.
The long table is scratched, but sturdy as maple.
And without her I would be hungry.