

MELANIE MCCABE

Those Mothers

You hear of them, the teller suddenly dismissive
or snide or welling in a venom that chokes the voice.
These are the mothers who botched the job so badly

that they are abandoned along the side of the trail,
too heavy to be carried out of the canyon.
Deadweights. Millstones. A leak

of muddy river bailed from a swamping boat.
A harpy set adrift on an ice floe.
I never planned on becoming one of them.

I used to pull a chair up to her crib to watch
her sleep, to wonder at the way the small lungs knew
what to do, without my having to instruct them.

For years, I read to her in her twin bed, waiting
for questions that rose out of a place so old
that neither her father nor I had ever been to it.

And for years, our house tilted in its plot of earth —
groundwater swelled, breaking levels of concrete,
patterns of stones — but slowly, and so we tilted with it.

There was no one day when everything changed.
There were so many days that I couldn't count all
the steps she was taking backwards, away from me.