

# Masks

by Katherine Jensen

When I was born, the sun had just risen in the almost Solstice sky.  
The first face I saw, through watery-veiled vision,  
Was wrapped,  
In what I would later learn,  
Was a white, cloth, face mask.

By the time I would wear a mask,  
They would be blue, and made of paper,  
Pre-shaped, with an elastic band;  
Or accordion folded,  
To be stretched out over your nose and mouth,  
A metal band  
Pinched over your nose and under your glasses,  
Paper strips to tie behind your head.  
Later still,  
They would be attached to a clear plastic  
Face Shield,  
Protection from being splattered  
With blood,  
Or “other potentially infectious material.”

But, when I was born,  
Masks were made of cloth,  
White cloth,  
That you sent to the laundry.

The hands that held me as I emerged from my mother’s body,  
Were female,  
Gloved.

I was placed on a white towel,  
Bright, in the dim room.  
I would later learn,  
This was a bathroom,  
A bathroom converted to a delivery room,  
According to need.  
My mother showered here,  
Brushed her teeth,  
Sat on the toilet.

The towel was stretched  
Between the strong arms of another woman.

When I was born, I was surrounded by women.

These arms, the arms receiving me,  
Were meant to wrap the towel up tight around my body,  
Were meant to swaddle me,  
Were meant to take me from the room.  
Retreating,  
Rapidly,  
The arms backed up quickly towards the door.  
Their sudden exit startled me,  
In perfect symmetry, reflexively,  
My left arm flung the towel aside,  
Exposing me.  
Small and wet and vulnerable,  
I turned my head.  
I heard my insides screaming,  
“Mama!”  
Reaching out as I was gathered in,  
Reaching out towards shadows I could not yet see.  
I wasn’t meant to leave.  
It was the only thing I knew for certain.  
I wasn’t meant to leave.

“Remember?  
You were my mother a long time ago?”  
My four year old is quizzing me.  
“I’ve been your mother many times,” I answer him.  
“I remember.  
I was 400. You were 800.  
When you died,  
I was very, very sad.”