

Family Secrets.

The Funeral Response

The tater tots were perfect; magnificently golden brown—
Arranged in a way that parallels and intersects, crashing
Into each other in the kindest of ways. They meet down
Here, ever so often, to keep all the details inside: mashing
Down the ground deer, the cream of mushroom—crashing
Into one catastrophe of a casserole pan, stained with the same
Kind of scars left behind by the reason the casseroles came in
The first place.

It sits on the counter in the blue Pyrex dish, losing steam
In the same way that I am, as I weave throughout the blacks
And browns and navy blues toward the kitchen sink only to
Be grabbed away by Aunt Wanda as she grabs my face with
Aged hands explaining that God's plan is somewhere in Matthew,
Revelation, Leviticus verse 47:8. And I thank her, but all I want
Is to wash all the feigned compassion off my hands and face.

Someone has done the dishes: the dishes that are never done,
Probably in an attempt to make things easier on everyone, but
I know that their pity, their misunderstanding, is caked on the counter.
So I take the sponge and try to wipe up this invisible mess that
Only I can see. Out of the corners of their conversations, I can hear
Them whisper that "I'm doing what I can to get by" when actually
I just want them to leave. I want to sit in this sweet melancholy.
They didn't know you like I did.

But soon they will leave, and I'll be left with this food and your memory.
Each of those people was thinking of you, remembering you, as they
Stirred in the pineapples and cool whip into the green gelatin
That has become so signaturely "funeral." And even though I
Know that they wanted to care, tried to care, believed in the grief
That I'm sure is splattered across my face like a lengthy obituary
Across page B6, there's nothing more they could do but offer
A cobbler and sympathy.

Once they leave, I find my way into our bedroom and trace the
Outline of the blazers that I was too selfish to send you away in.
I suppose I should have chosen your favorite, but I needed it more
Than you did. You linger in its seams; you exist within its fabric.
They left me here with you, to find you in whatever spaces you've
Decided to occupy in what used to seem like such a small house.
It's not until I pass the mirror and see what looks like the first wrinkle
On a particularly young face that I realize that you may actually be gone.

Laminaria, 1986

I thought I heard your heart beating
But I must have been mistaken
Because the heart that I heard start
To beat was just one breaking.