

Sheila Dietz

My Mother's Ghost

Another terrible party — my house, your house — this one's
 sprawled across an evening lawn
 sloping towards Long Island Sound.

Another glass of wine in hand, I lean
 into a massive oak because it's near
 the open bar, this party a picture

I'd like to rip in half, a photograph
 I hate, myself aloof, unfriendly. Here,
 on the terrible lawn, the sun can't reach

earth by simply letting go. It has to ride
 the flagpole down. I drink
 until I dare approach the hostess

who is busy stacking burgers on a silver tray.
 "Can I help?" I say.
 Everything's under control. She's done something

unique with the meat. Her secret.
 My "delicious" sounds suspiciously
 like "delishiouse" and I have to squash

the impulse to tell her everything. Stuffing butter
 up her nose, my mother's ghost fights
 for some attention. "I hate it

when she does that," I whisper
 noticing how the other guests cluster, whipping
 custards of conversation into a frenzy

of irrelevance. *Hello, goodbye,*
so hot, so cold. Mother's voice inside says
 they're being superficial. Be real, she urges.

Confide, connect —
 even with a stranger. I've watched her trade secrets
 for affection. Younger, at her parties, she has me pass

as sweeter, more polite. In my fluffy party dress, I have
 to pass hors d'oeuvres while she mingles
 to perfection. That scintillating constellation — her mouth

eyes, hands — has her guests rapt. Auburn hair
 swept back, settles in the comb's gold teeth,
 catches light, and martinis make her

sparkle. Later in those evenings, only close
 friends cap the night, circle chairs
 around her voice.

From bed: laughter, her voice the drawstring
 on a purse. Cosy at first.

Then she sips the drink on which things turn,
 makes the string, drawn tighter, burn. She's gone
 "too far," my father's "had enough," storms
 upstairs triggering an angry clatter, metal pans

splinter crystal soaking in the sink.
 Upstairs, curling deeper, I can't hear
 ice tumble, hear her steps

on the dark back stairs the house's former owner,
 drunk, spilled down 40 years ago, can't hear
 my mother weaving in the hall.

But my bedroom door opens
 exactly as I know it will, arcing
 hall light into my open eyes. She flips

the bedroom light on too, because she has a right
to know why I don't love her, or because
she wants to make me say "I love you." Or she doesn't

flip the switch, make me sit up, just stands
in the doorway, forever, staring at me
until I want to swallow myself.