

Passed
for Ursula Vernon

My mama can speak to the dead.
That's third grade social suicide,
a recipe for your only friends to be
names on gravestones. There's money

in it, at least: police don't care about enough
about enough of the dead to find their murderers,
so after the funeral bill is settled the family pays Mama
to show up in her best dress,

the black one with tiny polka dots, and sit
a while with the body, engaged in slow
conversation. It's not simple work.
Ya don't always see who killed ya, she says,

dying does a number on ya even if you did.
She gets what information she can; I get
endless funeral snacks, potato chips and soda,
cookies, casserole squares, as if feeding

me while Mama works averts bad luck.
They don't like to touch me, though.
Be polite to them, take what's offered, remember
they're grieving. When the fluorescent bulbs

of churches and funeral homes weigh me down, I flee
to the playground if there is one, the graveyard
if there's not. It comes on you about twelve,
if it's going to, and I hope it will and hope

it won't. I want to be my Mama, finding out
where the will is hidden and bringing out
the words people couldn't say, but I want
to go to college, maybe for art, dress wild,

make friends who don't know death
speaks to my blood, talk about hit songs,
maybe have a crush that doesn't think
deadspeakers and enbys are unnatural things.

Today it is Friday and Mama doesn't send me
to the kitchen but keeps me close.
Dead bodies don't frighten me; I've seen
too many, am immune to slasher film nightmares

I ask why, mind on chips and cookies, hear *it's time you tried*,
so ask him how he's doing, now, and
we'll see. I shake as I ask low and
querulous, and she shakes her head.

You gotta talk firm and loud, she says,
like this: *how are ya doing Mr. Wakefield*,
and I hear him, clear as top forty radio,
nothing hurts anymore. That's good, I say,

that's good, and Mama's smile is only
a little pained, through the pride of a shared
legacy. She strokes my hair, sends me out,
and the cookie tastes like childhood's end.