White Linen
By Jane Hilberry

After we eat the food we brought for the dinner
the dead man wanted us to have at his house—
potato casserole from a wartime family recipe,
quiche, greens mixed elaborately and snipped
with rosemary, heaps of pineapple, blackberries, melon—

and after we say the good things about the dead man,
around his own dining room table, and one of us
ventures that no one is entirely good, which allows
the dead man's son, previously silent, to speak
(he believes in accuracy)—

and after the son cries a few times exactly
the way his father cried—suddenly, closing his eyes
and pulling back into himself, shaking silently—
and after someone says, "Your father just wanted you
to be happy" and the son says, "But I'm not happy"—

after the son recalls his father singing
As I walked out in the streets of Laredo
to put him to sleep as a child, then tells us
(haltingly) that he played the song on his phone
for his father in the hospital,

and that while his father was still breathing,
someone pulled a white hospital blanket
up around his neck so he looked like a man
all wrapped in white linen, wrapped in white linen
as cold as the clay—

then we drift to the fire the dead man asked us to build
in his fireplace, warming our hands, our backs.
We migrate to the chilly kitchen, where the remainder
of the salad wilts in the bowl. We wash
the dead man's dishes and replace them on his shelves.