

baking for my brother

a haibun by Mary Ellen Rooney

Like a high priestess before an altar, I lay out baking utensils on my kitchen counter. Some are old and belonged to my mother; the chipped flour sifter, hand eggbeater, and glass juice squeezer. There is no sacred cloth on the counter but I wear the green Viyella Robe my brother gave me a few Christmas's ago. My missal book is a battered wooden card box with the faded decal of a potato that says "Bridgehampton." Long ago, when we were still a farming community, a friend drew the decal to be used for class fundraising. At the time I chose to place it on this box that contains index cards with recipes written by my mother's hand. Today those recipes, with ink smudges and kitchen drippings, respond to ritual like old rocks.

I move like a dancer while creaming the room-temperature butter and sugar by hand. Mother advised about 150 turns of the spoon a minute and warned that scraping the bowl did not count as a beat. It takes longer than using an electric beater but I need to expand this activity. It's all I can do. Everything else has failed. My brother's AIDS has progressed to its final stage. He's on morphine. I know I am here to see him through. I'm his big sister, just the two of us.

Each ingredient is added to the ancient mixing bowl with the appropriate Latin prayer. This cake is a requiem mass made with my own hands. Although I am alone in the kitchen, I hear Mozart in the background while I handle these simple ingredients.

requiem...
praying
a second time

My kitchen represents many lands today. I could be at the altar of a very old country church, before a flat rock beside the Irish Sea or within a rich green Rhineland forest. The cake is a fragile attempt to summon greater time, the land and bloodline as I prepare to lose the one who carries my archive.

Bridgehampton loam
rich planting soil
for McMansions