

## *Meat and Three*

Any excuse to knock off work. We love this joint, with its sweet tea and pepper sauce,  
cornbread in a basket, plate lunch and pie. There's a portrait of Bob the owner  
over the door: *Eat or we both go hungry*. We seat ourselves, connoisseurs of the authentic,  
two theologians met for lunch, self-aware, detached. We've grafted any number of theories  
over the ahistorical interpretations branded on us in our youth, word-woven and layered  
the way the untheological talk around us is plaited into the restaurant's comforting noise,  
stoneware striking stoneware, rattle of ice, laughter as coarse as a surform tool  
shaping hardwood stock in a vice. We add some noise of our own:  
Unamuno  
and Messiaen, presence in absence, sketch study, line readings, our choice  
of three vegetables jotted down by the waitress who calls us *hon'*. The braying  
air-conditioner in the wall is as calming as half-awake liturgy. When you're this hungry  
it's not even slumming. "That which is only living," Eliot wrote somewhere  
in the *Quartets*, "can only die." We look around this dinful room and tell ourselves  
we know the difference. The books we have read assure us it's the books we have read  
that will save us. Ketchup on the chicken livers—call it comfort food, soul food. Yeah,

I'll have the pie. Neither of us would say it aloud, but maybe the world is a  
heap  
of miracles, one on top of another. The table of plumbers laughs as one, a  
laughter  
they attempt to fend off but fail. If miracles are to mean anything at all,  
they'll mean it  
here, where they might raise an eyebrow. What's not miraculous about  
meringue half a foot tall,  
airy and sweet? We only order it to have an excuse to drink another cup of  
coffee, a reason to kill  
another few minutes while the last of the noon crowd clears out of the  
restaurant, making it  
more like the rooms we absented, which are silent and will stay that way even  
when we return  
to switch on the desk lamp, our work right where we left it, laid out so  
carefully, but still just words  
darkening a page. I'll have to look at them a long time before they turn again  
to sounds on my ear.

## *Arkansas Stone*

It's the dull blade that will cut you, I was always told.  
My grandfather's whetstone was worn to a concave arc,  
a beautiful line more fitting to describe the first ripple  
in a stone-pierced pond, or the wind-bent contrail  
drawn by a jetliner too high to leave its sound,  
than to be a shape eroded into a hand-sized piece of rock.  
The hone felt cool and soft, too soft for its work,  
it seemed to me. And when he let me sit beside him  
on the porch steps towards the end of a Saturday visit  
to try my hand at putting an edge on the sheep's clip  
of an old three-bladed Boker, the afternoon's light  
untangling from the uppermost limbs of the black gum tree,  
I was disappointed at how little effect each stroke had.  
My grandfather had already learned the uses of patience,  
how these lives we're given are made mostly of waiting  
and incremental wear and a life's work of standing up  
against it. In the day's deliberate ending, he worked the blade  
too quickly to see but with no sense of haste, the steel  
licking at the oiled stone of a bottomless, hopeless thirst.  
My grandfather loved his pocketknives. At any time  
he might have about his person a Schrade Old Timer  
or a lock-blade Buck, a treebrand Boker or any  
of an assortment of Double-X Case knives which I knew  
to be his favorites, the Case brand oval countersunk  
into the bone handle, all of them dressy knives the size  
of a ring finger or less, something a man might carry  
in his suit pants pocket on the way to worship.

He traded them during smoking breaks on the loading dock at the Salant & Salant shirt factory, each one with a story of its complicated provenance—what exchanged, how much to boot. Even the ones he had paid too dearly for made a tale just as willingly told, words as fine as the blade edge he would keep on the knife, able to cut straight to what was intended and nowhere else, easily and without error. I now know he loved the stories more than the objects that occasioned them. I never questioned the reasoning or the desire behind collecting such things, and still don't. Who would ever say a knife is not a piece of art, so precisely made and perfectly folded, so blissfully singular of purpose? We would love to know our place in the world and snap into it with such finality, kept true with a drop of 3-In-One oil. Isn't all beauty just this dangerous? I am tempted to say that the contemplation of every beautiful thing can tear us free from this life, opening us in all the ways a knife wound may: a deep puncture that seals itself and aches, or any number of gashes and tears and cuts that bleed sullenly and won't properly close, troubling us as they heal and even after they do. We talk about beauty in the same words. We say it cuts us to the quick. We say it pierces us, and it does. Last year I bought an Arkansas stone for myself, higher quality than my knives need or I deserve, a piece of novaculite quarried near Hot Springs. The rock is cream-colored, grayed at the ends already from the ground-in fine leavings of steel blades brought impatiently down its length time and time again. I fear I am forgetting everything

I have been taught. Most of the time I can't even feel  
the changes the world is forcing me to, where the day bears on me  
and where I press back. Why not put it this way: I am being honed  
like a brittle blade; my heart is a length of carbon steel  
folded into a bone handle, blackened and pitted  
from my own poor care; it shines only where it has been hit  
by the whetstone, the loosely bound atoms aligned  
against the randomness of their will, the way the world  
wears us down to what we are, every day another layer  
ground away, too little to see, and you hope the world's strokes  
are directed toward some comprehensible purpose, simple as stone  
on tempered steel, taking you to a finer point, an edge  
that shines in the right light and is sharp enough to not cut.

## *Burning the Walls*

I took the torch to work today, the site  
on Circle Street, that tall frame house you dreamed  
we'd someday live in. Remember the Sundays we drove  
through neighborhoods finding dream homes?  
We don't do it anymore. We hardly get up  
from the kitchen table and never speak of  
the thirty-year note or moving from this shadeless street.  
I paint the houses we looked at and could tell you  
about their insides. You say I don't make enough  
for my effort. Does anyone? But this is work  
I understand. I can follow the repetition  
of long brush strokes, the governed paths of the roller.  
Everything I know is just motions now  
and the getting through them, how you say goodbye the same  
each morning, leaning to not touch  
my painter's whites that hide a million spatters,  
how my hand always finds the same place  
on your shoulder, the other hand  
the same place on the enameled door frame.  
The house on Circle Street had to be burned.  
Have I ever told you why that is done?  
Paint builds up. Twenty years of exterior oil base,  
every new coat a little less even  
until it has to be burned from the siding, and you start over.  
If it's done right it is all new.  
You would be amazed. I've taken off paint and found wood  
still green. I swear to God sometimes

you can see the pencil marks  
left by the carpenter's helper, the black stamp  
of the Weyerhaeuser tree. The nailheads  
will be gray and shiny. You can count the circles  
each place the nail was driven too far  
and the hammerhead struck.  
You say we never talk and you know nothing  
about what I do or how I feel about it.  
I will tell you this. I spent all day  
on an aluminum ladder. My hands are shaking  
from holding the propane torch and keeping the flame  
the right distance away. The paint doesn't blaze  
at once. It wrinkles like apples on the ground  
and slowly a bubble comes up, the first oxygen  
getting beneath the paint. Then it burns.

## *Philosophy*

I can't say the car was broken into since I'd forgotten to lock it. When I went out to get the paper, the day quarter-lit and unbegun, the trunk was thrown open, its bulb lamp a weak addition to what the sunrise had a mind to get going. I stood there in the new light, and then I began the inventory. Jumper cables and a field chair gone, a faucet set I'd been meaning to return to the home center, some hurricane relief donations we hadn't gotten around to dropping off at Catholic Charities—bottles of shampoo, multipacks of soap and toothbrushes, assorted store brand cleansers. The disposable diapers, baled into dense packages, were still there. But not my Johnny Cash CDs or the digital voice recorder left in the console with some teaching notes and the beginnings of a grocery list spoken into its memory, and a single image: *unginned cotton woven in the road weeds*. Or something like that, a few muttered words that sounded better before they'd been stolen from me. When a thief took his lamp, Epictetus cursed himself for owning one worth coveting. It takes a week of working at it before I can apply philosophy to even the smallest loss, atom-thin as the coatings on a pair of binoculars' prisms,



a trick to let in the light more perfectly. Here's what I'll say: It's just urban life.

Crimes of opportunity. We live with them, like traffic and mosquitoes. I'll say

it's the cost of doing business in the old part of town—every now and then you have to

throw a lawn mower into the volcano. A philosopher's consolations, these weary tenets

of dead men's systems, knocked together so I might stop thinking how somewhere

some thieving bastard is listening to Johnny and June trade verses on *Live at Folsom Prison*.