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Batter my heart, three-personed God; for You as yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend: 
Holy Sonnet XIV l. 1,2 
John Donne
The Pastor’s Wife Considers Her Chops

I come from a long line of butchers, called
to slaughter hogs, steers, dry milk cows
on the hay mow side of bank barns
where the animals never go.

I prize knives,
mallets, surprise, spare words.
I saw. I slice. I trim. I discard. I
rearrange body parts. I will grind
anything for the sake of tenderness.
Testaments

*Isaac Tells Rebecca*

It was bad enough my old man was so old and wandered. One Sabbath instead of leading the sheep, he forgot and made me carry the wood. Just like always he got out his father's knife, blew on that little punk flame, looked up; and then I knew he thought I was the lamb. O my God! I screamed. He seemed dazed, but he finally found a ram.

All my life I’ve been his son.

*Jesus Tells Mary Magdalene*

It’s strange enough my dad is so old and wonders how to make everything different. One Sunday instead of dinner he sent me out to Nazareth. Just like always he made the face, the belly, the little hands with fingernails. He said that I am the lamb. O my god! I cried, but he seemed pleased he’d found a new way.
Copper Crayola

*The price of copper is going up!*
I’ve heard all my life: first

from my Dad who’d trade
meat, cheese, the use of his truck
for a secondhand pound or two:

old plumbing, wire, roofing, a still;

then, from my son who scrounges
abandoned houses, dumpsters,
under bridges, Pittsburgh streets:

car parts, bracelets, a weather vane.

Now, while I read the news
my grandson sits next to me
coloring with his prize crayon:

pennies, a rooster, and the wheels
on a bus going round and round.
My great-great-grandfather Enos Thompson assassinated a high-ranking member of the Know Nothing Party, then retreated to California. My family said his stories of giant redwoods, painted deserts, and mountains so high trees wouldn’t grow made politics seem unimportant.

Grandpa Weed was a certified chicken thief, spent 30 days (along with Uncle Morris) in the Crawford County Jail to make it official. All my uncles said that farmer misunderstood the deal, and besides The Depression was hard times.

Cousin Bob was found in a field naked from the waist down in a compromising position with a chestnut mare. My relatives were grateful it wasn’t a stallion or worse—a gelding—so it wasn’t a completely unnatural act.

My second cousin, Bruce, on my mother’s side, shot his daddy (who beat him regularly) and then his mom (after she complained) with a .22, because they wouldn’t let him wear blue jeans. The family maintains he solved all his problems and some of theirs now that he’s required to wear denim.

My third cousin once removed took her husband’s life insurance and finally got to travel. Cousin Lola was the first white woman to spend the winter in Point Barrow, Alaska, and the last to leave a Greyhound bus where she had quietly died at the age of 89.

Uncle Otis drank himself to death, served as an example to my father who never touched a drop. My brother, Joel, one fresh June morning on a dare chug-a-lugged a fifth of vodka, lay down and died in the bed of his pick-up truck. My mother still remarks how heart trouble runs all through this family.
My Friend Melissa

(after Charles Causley’s “My Friend Maloney”)

My friend Melissa, eighteen,
Smokes like a chimney,
Ran into trouble two years back
With the local gentry.

Pastor and mayor's sons
Climbed atop her.
The psychologist took one look at Melissa,
Fixed her proper,

Talked of the crime of youth,
The innocent victim.
Melissa never said a kind word
To contradict him.

Melissa of French Street,
Back of the City Mission,
Daughter of a crack pusher,
Blamed television.

Psychotherapy triumphed.
Everyone felt fine.
Things went deader.
Melissa reeled in her line.

Melissa lost a thing or two
Changing orientation.
First skirt, second innocence,
The old irresolution.

Found herself a girl-friend,
Sharp hair, drab colors.
Melissa drives a Volvo,
Sued for one million dollars.
College boys on the corner
Polish their black Blazers,
Look at old Melissa,
Eyes like dull razors.

“I don’t need hassle,” says Melissa.
My partner is a fox.
What you’re not, she’s got, fellers.
You can keep your mean cocks.”

Pastor got a TV show,
Mayor, in the end the same.
The psychologist incorporated.
“Life,” said Melissa, “is a game.”

Consider then the case of Melissa,
College boys, pastor, mayor, shrink.
Who was the victor and who was the victim?
Think.
Absurd

1.

I don't go to Johnnie Arnone's Italian Delicatessen often. Johnnie, round and ageless, stands pleased amidst his piled angel hair pasta, olive oil, pizzelles, and hanging mozzarella; presses on me samples of salami and antipasto salad and says “Taste the provolone and take this sub home for the mister,” and I’m thanking and protesting and mentioning profit and he’s adding too few numbers and an extra loaf of bread, and I’m not even Italian. Who on earth does Johnnie think he is? God? Giving away the bread!

2.

What we’re made of sometimes is calculated in calcium, iron, and phosphorus whose worth inflates each year. Each body, an investment, accumulates cucumbers, artichokes, a pinch of salt, garlic, tomatoes, Thanksgiving, gooseberry fool, and hot sausage sandwiches with fried green peppers and onions on homemade Italian rolls now baked by Sylvie, Johnny Arnone’s widow, who wears a shapeless black dress and still cries, because it’s only been a year and it’s baseball season and Johnny could have been a catcher for the New York Yankees, but he stayed home, since his father, too, died young, and everybody counted on Johnny to start the tomatoes, the peppers and the cucumbers.