

“Butcher’s Son” by Joe Heithaus

Nothing to do with blood. Nineteen,
I cut off my left pinky and he laughed, held
my bleeding hand over the chopping block
beside four sides of beef on hooks.
He’s a butcher today he must have thought, his own
missing pointer scratching his head. He smiled,
walked me to the sink, the light at the door
was gray, the cat pawed a kidney behind the screen.

I thought of all this at my wedding when he held
up my hand after the mass – four fingers
and stump, the gold ring, Amy staring down
at her dress. It was ‘69, Vietnam, Nixon
president , we drove away in a big black Electra
and talked about my buddies overseas who
couldn’t be there, his insistence we bring
a cooler of steaks on the honeymoon.

When I remember those days, I hate him.
That fucking back room, the sawdust
I’ve swept every day since I turned sixteen.
Joey, help Mrs. Benson, sharpen this knife,
and she’d whisper, What a sweet man
your father is. I’d fake a smile, look
out the window at the theatre across the street.

We’re closed today, I’m putting my black suit
back on, scrubbing the stains from my hands.