

The Trouble with Knives

The trouble with knives is that they are made to cut, made to slice, made to sever. The trouble with knives is that they must always be sharp. The trouble with knives is that there is no such thing as a kind knife, a soft knife, a knife that gives. That is not just a bad knife; it is not a knife. Three days ago I stood with a blacksmith over his knives. When we'd met he'd described to me the pleasure he took in making something as hard as metal take form. Now I had come to see. The knives were lined up flat on a table like fish at a monger. Their blades gleamed like scales. Blade by blade I lifted each to the bare bulb light as the blacksmith watched me. On the side of each knife a wave pattern shone, formed from thin sheets of steel pressed and then folded and then pressed again, until the many echoed back and became the whole. *Like time*, I said. The blacksmith nodded. The knife I liked best was eight inches long and heavy with the force of intent. *Anger*, I read aloud off its side. The word was stamped into every knife, small and tight. *Ahn-zhay*, he said, correcting me. *French. My last name.*

But anger in French is *colère*. *Ahn-zhay* has no meaning, is just soft syllable, so the word read could have only one intent. Like the blade. *What's this used for*, I asked of the knife I was holding. My favorite. *To cut*, he said. *To cut what*, I said. This looked like a sword, had a nub for the thumb to steady the blade. I could not imagine wielding it in the kitchen, that place—for nearly vegetarian me—of nicety. *The Japanese once cut their vegetables with swords*, he said. *When in the 1800s the new emperor forbade the samurai from making swords, even from wearing them, they practiced their art in secret. They sold their blades for the kitchen.* His voice was hushed and deep and in it I could hear the wide proud faces of the samurai, the labor they loved and the objects born of it, their quiet honor. And the women who took the blades in like children. The blacksmith crossed the room and put his hand on my arm, warm and heavy. There was pleasure in his voice; he liked this story. He liked the subverting of the ban: the sword, renamed, becomes a knife. Possibly he liked me. But I heard the story differently: the kitchen became the place of the sword.

The night before visiting the blacksmith, I'd sat on a bed with a woman and read a poem to her. *Stop bleeding said the knife. I would if I could said the cut.* The poem was one a lover had once copied from a book and sent to me. The woman I sat on the bed with had just shown me a video of a dance she had choreographed in which women in white dresses contorted their faces, noiselessly wailing. They kneaded bread dough and smeared flour over their dresses. They twisted the dough into nooses and strung the nooses around their necks. An impossible object, the dough noose. Like the soft knife. I read her the poem. Only later did the poem strike me as a strange one to read. A warning, I think now, though I hadn't intended it. But it is true that I had begun to think of the choreographer's heart as soft and begun to fear I might cut it. *If only you didn't bleed said the knife I wouldn't have to do this.* No: I had known I would cut her. I had watched myself be so careful with her heart that I knew that if the care began to cost me I might turn hard. And more literally than that, for though we weren't yet lovers when I read her the poem, the bed we sat on we had taken for that purpose. The hotel room it was in we had taken for that purpose. Wouldn't I there make her bleed, my nails trimmed but never right to the quick, there is always something inside that tears? A lesson taught me by the lover who'd sent the poem. The way, inside, I always cut her. The way, inside, she always cut me.

And the trouble with knives—that past lover had worked selling knives once and had strong opinions about mine. How dull they were. How little they could truly cut. (But I didn't cook with carrots, I protested. Nor potatoes. I found it—I find it—easier to adapt to the limitation of my bad knives, to bend to suit their form.) She had wanted to give me knives as a present. When I complained such a gift would be bad luck from a lover, we compromised: I would buy the knives from her sister at a discount. *The blood discount*, she called it. When the knives arrived in a shipping envelope, they gave me trouble. Or I gave them trouble. I thought one had a pink sheen. I thought another had a dull blade. On the Internet I found a single review that said the knife brand was a bad one, and on that basis I complained. I had promised her I would keep the knives in a wood block on the counter so their blades would stay sharp. Instead I kept them sheathed in the cardboard they'd come in, then wrapped in their mailer. As though they weren't my knives.

Still I found I could not sleep well with them in my house. That was why I had always had bad knives: because of the fear that with good ones I would not be able to sleep. The night in college I had learned of

a classmate's death I'd gone to a lover's bed so as not to be alone. But during the night I'd had to rise again and again to count his knives in their block. The classmate's boyfriend had slit her throat in her kitchen. Slit it with her own knife. For a year before I'd sat across from her in French class and watched the delicate rise of her throat as she learned to roll her r's and catch glottal g's. I suppose I liked her, though I wouldn't have known to call it that then. Her throat was papery and pale, the blood visible under the skin. Sometimes she wore her hair plaited in two long brown braids, and each time the sight made me remember a girl in my childhood school who'd worn her hair that way. Boys had held that girl down by the lockers and hacked her braids off with the home-ec scissors. Though I'd seen the girl only afterward—seen the horrible black bristle of her hair, the way once cut it could not be contained, and the look on her face like a wound—the image of the cutting had taken root in my imagination. Forever after when I saw braids I saw them cut.

For the college girl, it turned out, I worried the wrong thing. The wrong cut. I was studying the Jains then, and how their religion required them to walk everywhere with their heads bent to the earth, so as to avoid stepping on even an ant. They did not cut their hair but plucked it out, strand by strand, to keep it whole. Any cut, they understood, was violence. The night the college girl died I rose from the bed so quietly, so stealthily, because my lover had become a knife to me himself, like the ones he'd used to cook me dinner. Was he sustenance or threat? I no longer trusted I knew.

Like I no longer know sometimes whether in trying to stay only on the soft side of living I have failed to learn something elemental. I am getting tired of not cooking with carrots or potatoes and I am getting tired of choosing only the tepid love that can never really do harm. When the blacksmith hammers out his knives he keeps a chunk of metal along one side raw and formless, a reminder that ore is mined from earth. The trouble with knives is how quickly that which feeds can turn foe. The trouble with *ahn-zhay* is that when you carve it into the side of a blade it becomes anger. I think I will buy one of the blacksmith's knives and I think I will learn to keep it on my counter. I will learn to keep sharpness in my home. But when the knife is stamped I will read it only *anger*, never *ahn-zhay*. I better trust the blade that knows its cut.

The poem quoted is May Swenson's "Bleeding."