

FUNCTIONAL

My father won't read poetry. He taught
my brother the ways of paintbrush
and canvas, played guitar before I was born

but after Nam, lost interest, saw no sense
in art. I'd like to think, surviving war,
I'd see no better reason to create, proclaim
and praise *I am here*, but what do I know,

given my armed conflict with the self?
My father once cradled a dying soldier
missing everything below his waist,

and watched a starving boy convulse
after a sergeant handed the child a candy bar—
his body no longer understood food.

My father pulls shoulder muscles
as he masons walls, lays foundations.
He cracks knuckles against engine blocks,

torqueing wrenches. Because the dead
remind him that splinters in his palms
are gifts, he builds cabinets, chairs, houses.
His life is work, no room for self-indulgence

or anything frivolous. But don't we also live
in rooms not constructed out of lumber and stone?
Art is an alarm clock. Art is a ladle of beauty

lifted to the lips. My father. On the table
he planed, sanded, stained— where we've sat
together after a long time of not sitting together,
where we've eaten slow—I want him to dance

and afterwards, I want him to see the scuffmarks
on the pine as affirmations of purpose—of loving
the lost with raucous praise, of letting the gone go.

