

Pig Earth

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Over the cow's brow the son places a black leather mask and ties it to the horns. The leather has become black through usage. The cow can see nothing. For the first time a sudden night has been fitted to her eyes. It will be removed in less than a minute when the cow is dead. During one year the leather mask provides, for the walk of ten paces between fasting-stable and slaughter-house, twenty hours of night.

The slaughter-house is run by an old man, his wife, who is fifteen years younger, and their son who is twenty-eight.

Seeing nothing, the cow is hesitant to move, but the son pulls the rope round her horns and the mother follows holding the cow's tail.

"If I had kept her," the peasant says to himself, "another two months until she calved. We could not have milked her any more. And after the birth she would have lost weight. Now is the best moment."

At the door to the slaughter-house the cow hesitates again. Then allows herself to be pulled in.

Inside, high up near the roof, is a rail network. Wheels run on the rails and from each wheel a bar hangs down with a hook on the end of it. Attached to this hook a horse's carcass of four hundred kilos can be pushed or pulled by a fourteen-year-old.

The son places the sprung bolt against the cow's head. A mask at an execution renders the victim more passive, and protects the executioner from the last look of the victim's eyes. Here the mask ensures that the cow does not turn her head away from the bolt which stuns her.

Her legs fold and her body collapses instantaneously. When a viaduct breaks, its masonry — seen from a distance — appears to fall slowly into the valley below. The same with the wall of a building, following an explosion. But the cow came down as fast as lightning. It was not cement which held her body together, but energy.

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"Why didn't they slaughter her yesterday?" says the peasant to himself.

The son pushes a spring through the hole in the skull into the cow's brain. It goes in nearly twenty centimetres. He agitates it to be sure that all the animal's muscles will relax, and pulls it out. The mother holds the uppermost foreleg by the fetlock in her two hands. The son cuts by the throat and the blood floods out on to the floor. For a moment it takes the form of an enormous velvet skirt, whose tiny waist band is the lip of the wound. Then it flows on and resembles nothing.

Life is liquid. The Chinese were wrong to believe that the essential was breath. Perhaps the soul is breath. The cow's pink nostrils are still quivering. Her eye is staring unseeing, and her tongue is falling out of the side of her mouth.

When the tongue is cut out, it will be hung beside the head and the liver. All the heads, tongues and livers are hanging in a row together. The jaws gape open, tongueless, and each circular set of teeth is smeared with a little blood, as though the drama had begun with an animal, which was not carnivorous, eating flesh. Underneath the livers on the concrete floor are spots of bright vermilion blood, the colour of poppies when they first blossom, before they deepen and become crimson.

In protest against the double abandonment by blood and brain, the cow's body twists violently and its hind legs lunge into the air. It is surprising that a large animal dies as quickly as a small one.

The mother lets go of the foreleg — as if the pulse was now too weak to count — and it falls limply against the body. The son begins to cut the hide away around the horns. The son learnt his speed from his father, but now the old man's actions are slow. Ponderously at the back of the slaughter-house the father is splitting a horse in two.

Between mother and son there is a complicity. They time their work together without a word. Occasionally they glance at each other, without smiling but with comprehension. She fetches a four-wheeled trolley, like an elongated, very large

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open-work pram. He slits each hind leg with a single stroke of his tiny knife and inserts the hooks. She presses the button to start the electric hoist. The cow's carcass is lifted above them both and then lowered on its back into the pram. Together they push the pram forward.

They work like tailors. Beneath the hide, the skin is white. They open the hide from neck to tail so that it becomes an unbuttoned coat.

The peasant to whom the cow belongs comes over to the pram to point out why she had to be slaughtered; two of her teats were decomposing and she was almost impossible to milk. He picks up a teat in his hand. It is as warm as in the stable when he milked her. The mother and son listen to him, nod, but do not reply and do not stop working.

The son severs and twists off the four hooves and throws them into a wheelbarrow. The mother removes the udder. Then, through the cut hide, the son axes the breast bone. This is similar to the last axing of a tree before it falls, for from that moment onwards, the cow, no longer an animal, is transformed into meat, just as the tree is transformed into timber.

The father leaves his horse and shuffles across the abattoir to go outside and pee. This he does three or four times each morning. When he walks for some other purpose, he walks more briskly. Yet it is hard to say whether he shuffles now because of the pressure on his bladder, or to remind his much younger wife that, whilst his old age may be pathetic, his authority is remorseless.

Expressionless the wife watches him until he reaches the door. Then she turns solemnly back to the meat and starts to wash it down and then to dab it dry with a cloth. The carcass surrounds her but almost all tension has gone. She might be arranging a larder. Except that the fibres of meat are still quivering from the shock of the slaughter, exactly as the skin of a cow's neck does in summer to dislodge the flies.

The son splits the two sides of beef with perfect symmetry. They are now sides of meat such as the hungry have dreamt of

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for hundreds of thousands of years. The mother pushes them along the rail system to the scales. They weigh together two hundred and fifty-seven kilograms.

The peasant checks the reading on the meter. He has agreed to nine francs a kilo. He gets nothing for the tongue, the liver, the hooves, the head, the offal. The parts which are sold to the urban poor, the rural poor receive no payment for. Nor does he get paid for the hide.

At home, in the stable, the place which the slaughtered cow occupied is empty. He puts one of the young heifers there. By next summer she will have come to remember it, so that each evening and morning, when she is fetched in from the fields for milking, she will know which place in the stable is hers.