

CHICKENS

Max Garland

For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them. —Proverbs 1:32

As it turns out, it was a farm of only seven-and-a-half acres. Everyone thinks his own childhood was bigger. Everyone thinks his childhood would make a compelling movie, for example. It's hard to believe that the great scope and depth of childhood experience is not, at least in part, a result of vast physical scale. So it was barely seven-and-a-half acres, a small country to me, and therefore, a typical childhood. Beginning with pigs.

The pigs were huge, muddy lumps of earth that somehow grew curious, or ravenous, developed snout and tail, and began jogging early one evening toward the barn. They were creatures without discrimination, as well as sources of great comedy. Like most comedy, the comedy of the pigs was based upon incongruity: the barrel shaped body upon the stick legs, the tail curled like an auger, the grotesque snout, the coy eyelashes. The piglets were explosive combinations of energy and imagination. They would, for instance, stampede headlong across the pen, then veer suddenly, or even slide to a terrified halt for no visible reason, the danger lurking only within their tiny rocklike skulls.

The pigs could also be frightening. To think that they were capable of devouring anything tossed into their paths: hard corn, over-ripe tomatoes, apple cores, pumpkin rinds, dinner scraps, dishwater. It was not beyond the realm of possibility that they might even tackle a small, careless boy if conditions were right. My grandfather, who owned the farm, did nothing to dispel this notion. It seemed simple enough. To the pigs, the world was food.

Another element of pig life was their repertoire of sound: grunt, squeal, snort, snuffle. Their communications with one another were direct and involved simple combinations of these sounds, accented at appropriate times with a swift kick from a hind hoof, or a quick

nipping motion. There was, of course, an element of disgust in my attitude toward the pigs. How could they live the way they did? There seemed to be complete and passionate acceptance of filth, as if given the choice, the pigs would always prefer a tiny fly-infested barnyard for a home. It didn't occur to me that a lazy pig was a fat pig, and therefore, a valuable pig, or that the pigs were living our versions of their lives.

It was partly from the pigs I learned the art of turning away. I learned how to avoid the thought that connected the huge ear-flapping comedians with the links of sausage or strips of bacon that appeared regularly on my grandmother's flowered plates, or the country hams hanging from the garage beams. There was simply a blank space, a little bridge of amnesia where the connection might have been. I didn't want to know how much of the squeal, grunt, and ear-flapping we had stolen, or that the pigs, for all their eccentricities, would ultimately be measured in pounds and ounces. The turning away was easy. The pigs would simply be loaded on a truck one day, and the next thing I knew it was Christmas: gifts, vacation, the reappearance of hefty, vaguely familiar relatives, and of course, tables covered with plates of dressing, potatoes, pies, and slices of sugared ham. The next thing I knew the gifts were scattered across the living room floor, my father had fallen asleep in his chair, and I was beginning to nod, lulled to sleep by the dinner and the familiar wash of sound from the television.

At some point my grandfather stopped keeping pigs. I don't remember why. Maybe it was the economics, maybe just the odor. Anyway, as far as I was concerned, the pigs, as remarkable as they were, were not the true stars of the farm. They just provided a rather raw and sluggish background, like a series of living bass-notes. The real objects of my affection were the chickens; mostly White Leghorns, usually about eighty of them, with an occasional New Hampshire or Rhode Island Red, or more rarely, a speckled Plymouth Rock.

Like the pigs, the chickens were capable of comedy at times. For example, the exaggerated fear of some sudden innocent motion, the tendency to flap away dramatically at the tiniest threat. There was also the trick of standing on one leg, body frozen, eye rolling and pivoting to take in the henyard.

And oddly enough, the chickens were beautiful to me. From a distance they reminded me of small white sails, or pieces of tissue paper torn from gifts and blown across the scrabble of grass. If the pigs were the bass-line, the chickens provided the melodic complications for the farm: cackle, crow, squawk, wing-flutter, scratch, a kind

of throaty ticking sound, even, at times, something resembling a purr.

We called them a flock, but they seemed more like a tribe to me. There were always two or three roosters, arrogant and chiefly, with puffed feathers and sharp spurs at the back of the claws. And then the hens, which individually appeared rather frightened, comical, and somewhat reptilian, but as a group possessed a certain grace and intelligence, as if they were eighty complicated and scattered parts of a single body. I couldn't say it at the time, but I felt strangely supported by the presence of the chickens. The combinations of sound and image were like a net under the summer days.

Enhancing the mystery of the chickens was the chicken house itself. A dim, labyrinthine structure, actually a collection of sheds built at various times and connected by a system of hallways and doors. Rooms led to other rooms according to no discernible pattern. My grandfather kept adding to and subtracting from the chicken house as the years passed. The building was constructed of old lumber, new lumber, corrugated tin, old metal signs with faded advertisements, anything that would take a nail and turn the rain.

On the wall of one of the corridors deep in the maze of the chicken house, hung a portrait of my great-grandfather. I never asked, never seriously thought of asking, why the portrait hung there. It was a huge hand-tinted photograph surrounded by an imitation hand-carved frame. It was also water-stained, dust covered, and draped with a decade of spider webs, but nevertheless there he was, my great-grandfather laid out in his coffin, his mustache thick and frosted, cheeks tinted, hands crossed in an attitude of rest, the network of veins faintly visible through the cobwebs. Much later I would discover that many families had funeral portraits made. I suppose, then, it became a matter of what to do with such an emotionally charged relic. It wasn't the sort of thing even the most devoted mourner would care to look at often, but on the other hand it was impossible to throw away. As the years passed, my great-grandfather was partially covered and obscured by empty feed sacks and pieces of harness and eventually disappeared altogether, but not before adding his strange weight to the atmosphere of the chicken house, and lacing the memory of childhood with an important element of ghostliness.

At the other end of experience, the chicken house was part of the first myth of origin I ever heard. My grandfather told me that as an infant I had been discovered in a nest under one of the sitting hens. Naturally, I was picked up, dusted off, and carried into the house to be raised as a normal child. Since my grandfather was not known for his wit or imagination, I had no reason to doubt this version of my beginnings. Like the portrait of my great-grandfather, the infant-in-

the-nest story enlarged the experience of the chicken house by a factor impossible to measure.

As for the hens, they laid their eggs in nests made of wooden milk crates filled with straw. I remember reaching under the sitting hens with apprehension and nostalgia, feeling for the warm shapes of the eggs. I liked the sense of accumulation: two eggs here, another five there. It felt good, like the beginnings of wealth, that rich strain in the muscles of my shoulders and back as I carried the egg buckets toward the house. It seemed right that the chickens worked *for* us, laid their eggs *for* us, although sometimes there was a minor flare-up of reluctance. A hen would momentarily threaten, making a sound remarkably close to a growl as I stole the eggs.

Sometimes, of course, the eggs weren't gathered at all, but were left in the nest to hatch. This happened rarely, and primarily for my benefit I think. My grandfather was usually too impatient to wait for the hens to hatch their own broods. Also, being a Protestant, I think he found it difficult to watch the hens sit idly, day after day, for the time it took the hatchlings to appear. Most of the new chicks were obtained from Austin's Feed Store. I would help my grandfather carry the long, flat cardboard boxes of baby chicks to the car, listening to the fragile peeping and the sounds of sliding, scratching, and gentle tumbling as the chicks tried to balance themselves. Every Easter he would allow me to pick out a couple of brightly dyed chicks at Austin's: red, purple or green. Every year I fell for the same illusion. Each time I believed the chicks would retain their colors, that in a matter of months I would possess huge purple or green chickens capable of producing eggs of the same colors, giving birth to new generations of brightly colored hens. I remember the gradual fading of the dye and the increasing difficulty in locating my chicks among the others, until finally all the pullets looked the same and there was nothing to distinguish the ones with the brilliant early careers.

It was easier to turn away from the deaths of the pigs than the deaths of the chickens. The pigs simply disappeared. For a child, that left any number of illusions possible. With the hens, the fact of assassination couldn't be avoided. There were two basic methods: the simple jerk, employed by my grandfather, snapping the neck of the hen; and the more grisly method used by my grandmother (my sweet, tear-prone, hymn-singing grandmother). This was the axe-murder method, which led to the unforgettable sight of the doomed hen dashing about the yard headless, stumbling, rising, finally recaptured and held by her feet at arm's length by my grandmother. It was hard to find a place for this vision in my mind. It was hard to incorporate the fact that this creature could live and move separated from its tiny

brain, bill, and eyes. And even harder, that the hand of rosewater and tenderness, the hand that so delicately riffled the pages of the Methodist hymnal, or the tissue-thin pages of *King James*, could grasp death so easily and yet so firmly. My grandmother would remove the organs in the kitchen sink, then soak the plucked carcass to loosen the remaining feathers. It was a spectacle that sent me back to the yard toward some game or diversion, something that would rescue me from understanding the connection between the death of the hen and my own life, between my grandmother's bloody hand and tenderness.

It was a delicate mental trick—to see and not see at the same time. I had no way of knowing how much of my life would depend upon this trick, how many of the words I would speak or write over the years would be versions of this turning away. On one hand, I believed the chickens had emotions like mine, hunger like mine, a certain element of devotion, a very evident capacity for fear, a sense of exuberance. They could, after all, actually fly a little, though most attempts seemed more like leaping and then gliding back down with nothing much accomplished. The chickens possessed a nervous curiosity and a sense of thoroughness. Nothing edible, not the tiniest grain blown into the henyard, could escape their combined attentions. Also, there was the sense of community. In the evenings the chickens roosted on a series of bean-poles placed horizontally at different levels, a sort of bleacher effect. They clucked, rustled feathers, and held on in ascending rows of white. Domestic, tired, maybe even dreaming.

On the other hand, there was something impenetrable about them. At some point in school I would learn there was a long chain of bird-life leading all the way back to the reptiles, but much earlier than that, I felt the intuition of that chain. There was something in their eyes that no amount of humanizing could fix. A distance, a remoteness, a feeling that in spite of their domesticity they were not totally amendable. There were other, deeper allegiances. This was the view that helped me acquit my grandmother of the axe-murders. I would simply demote the chickens back down the evolutionary scale until they were reptiles with feathers, an act excusing both slayer and witness.

This happened in delicate conjunction with the instant of turning away. The creatures I had granted humanity were still in the henyard clicking and fluttering like sails. Their lives were comparable to my own. At the moment of death, however, they became ridiculous creatures, beings with brains so small and superfluous their bodies could actually function a short time without them.

During dinner at my grandmother's house there was generally talk of the weather, small family grudges, the mysterious rise or inevitable

decline of some aunt's health, and frequently, the delicious greasy plates of golden legs, breasts, and thighs, by that time thoroughly and convincingly transformed into food, prayed over, divided, and enjoyed. But enjoyed in part, I think, because of a missing connection, an ability, at least on my part, to absolve myself of a certain knowledge. I wonder now at the consequences of that absolution, that curtain that descended and allowed the creatures I loved, the ones I considered comical, musical, and beautiful, to become delicious. It's another of those things I can't find a place for. I begin to wonder what else might be happening behind that curtain, behind the turning away, which occurred even though I watched the killing of the chickens. The turning away had nothing to do with watching or not watching. It had to do with disconnecting and denial. I'm not sure I was wrong. Maybe a certain amount of aversion is necessary for survival, helping deliver us from needless self-hatred or even ghoulishness. I think it's the question of cost that bothers me. What is the price of turning away from such small, unpleasant, yet normal events? How deeply ingrained is the habit, and at what point does the phenomenon occur in my own recollections, conversions, relationships, and dreams?

Maybe there was a third possibility for the chickens, neither human nor reptilian. Maybe there was a realm in which fear, pride, comfort, hunger, sleep, dream, accident, and even forgiveness occurred, but in ways not open to my understanding. In other words, an emotional, or even spiritual life that was real, though not the one I had imagined or defined for the chickens. Maybe it was the same for the hogs, I don't know.

About twenty-five years after witnessing my first chicken-killing, I was walking through a piazza in Florence and came upon a huge dark statue of Perseus, his arm raised and extended, holding the bloody, severed head of the Gorgon. I didn't know much about Greek mythology, and still don't, but strangely, I thought of my grandmother, and realized that someday I was going to have to confront the turning away, the ordinary slaughters; maybe even dig among the roots of the word *sacrifice* in order to understand the world in which I lived as a child, and still carry with me in faint constellations of habit and thought.

