

1977

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Recommended Citation

Edson, Russell. "Down on the Farm." *The Iowa Review* 8.4 (1977): 19-22. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2274>

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Down on the Farm / Russell Edson

Good Son, Jim

. . . Poor people who do not have the price of a fence ask son, Jim, to be a fence for the chicken yard, that is, until their ship comes in; which no one really believes because they live inland.

But what's the good of a fence around a chicken yard where there ain't no chickens?

Did you eat them chickens, Jim?

No, we ain't never had no chickens.

Then what are you doing fencing what we ain't got?

I don't know, I forgot. . . .

Maybe you better be a chicken. But don't wander away, because we ain't got a fence to keep that stupid bird from wandering into the neighbor's yard and getting itself killed for Sunday dinner, said his father.

Heck, I'll just peck around the house; lots of tasty worms under the porch, said son, Jim. . . .

The Devoted Ox

There was once an ox sitting on farmer Jones's chair at farmer Jones's dining room table. Between the splits of its right and left foreleg hooves it had wedged a knife and a fork, and was playacting farmer Jones having dinner.

Farmer Jones has hanged himself in the barn because he noticed his overalls were worn and stained, as were his teeth and ankles; and he was finding very little on his head to arrange into curls; and too, his toenails were rusting.

So he went to the barn and kicked the ox.

The startled ox moo-cried, what'd I do?

Oh, just get out of the way, said farmer Jones.

And then farmer Jones put a loop of rope over a beam and tied one end to his neck and began pulling on the other end, until his face was quite blue.

The ox had always noticed that farmer Jones acted quite often without rehearsal or previous commitment to habit; so if farmer Jones wants a blue face, farmer Jones wants a blue face, and that's that.

Then farmer Jones fell down.

That's different, murmured the ox in its cud, human beings like to do that when they die, because it's trouble enough standing on their hind legs when they're alive. But when they die they feel they can let everything go. I suppose it's a relief not having to keep up appearances anymore. . . .

So the ox feels it must go into farmer Jones's house and sit at farmer

Jones's table, as farmer Jones had been seen so often to do when the animals of the farm would gather with reverent interest outside his window. Yes, there would sit farmer Jones, a knife and fork in his hooves; for what reason the ox does not know; but that farmer Jones did it, it was one more thing to be done. Now the animals must try to carry on the work of the farm.

Farmer Jones finally awakened from his faint.

When he found the ox at his table he said, I see, I must stay alive just to keep the animals from overrunning the house with bestial mockery.

Farmer Jones leads the ox away, and the ox is having trouble keeping up with farmer Jones because of the knife and fork wedged in its hooves.

And the ox is trying to explain in its most appealing moo that it had no intention of replacing farmer Jones, merely trying to keep up appearances for the deceased farmer Jones who, it turns out, is not deceased; which makes the ox very happy, really; and the ox is not just saying this to make farmer Jones feel good. . . .

Farmer Jones decides to slaughter the ox.

The ox in its mooing thoughts thinks, and it will be good to be once again participating with farmer Jones in another of the activities of the farm. . . .

The Customs Pig

A pig is all over Mr. Pleasingly, who is on his back being searched and sniffed at by that same pig.

Don't worry, Mr. Pleasingly, he just wants to see if you're hiding anything in your ears like mice or truffles.

I can assure you, I keep nothing in my ears except the inside of my head.

Do you mean there's an *inside* to your head?

Uh oh, the pig doesn't think you're serious.

About what?

A visa.

To where?

The pig pen—where else?

But I have no plans to go abroad.

Oh, that makes a whole new thing of it; now the pig thinks you are serious.

About what?

A visa to visit the pig pen.

Then the pig has found nothing I need declare?

But the pig is still all over Mr. Pleasingly, who is on his back being searched and sniffed at by the same pig.

What now? asks Mr. Pleasingly.

I think the pig likes you.

Likes me?

Likes you.

Oh, that is flattering. May I then think that the pig's attentions reflect a personal interest, and that even were I to smuggle mice and truffles the pig would still let me through . . .?

Please, that kind of talk makes the pig nervous.

The Mail Order Monkey

The basic kit is the torso. Very often this is thrown in the back of a closet by a beginner who has no patience.

The enthusiast completes the torso. He saves his money and orders the hair kit, the nipple kit, not to forget the navel kit.

But you can tell the real monkeyologist from the frivolous amateur when you check the bottom of the trunk. If the monkey-builder hasn't sent for the anal and genital kits, then he is one of those who would rather play with dolls than monkeys. Many amateurs neglect these either out of embarrassment, or worse, for having no real care for authenticity; using the excuse, *they don't show*, and all that kind of dodge.

After the torso is complete one begins ordering the other kits. The arm and hand kits, the leg and hand-feet kits, the fingernails and other structural details. The head is the last kit to be ordered, being as it is almost as complex as all the rest of the monkey.

The head comes without teeth or eyes, or even ears. These are all separate kits. The practiced craftsman puts the teeth in last, as this often saves one from a severe bite.

Another good trick is to put the left eye (the eyes are marked) in the right socket, and the right eye in the left socket; this makes the monkey quite crosseyed or walleyed, as the case may be, which keeps it from correctly aiming its attacks while you work on it. The eyes can always be switched back when you are finished. If in doubt the amateur can simply leave the eyes for the last detail.

Sometimes the monkey-builder runs out of money, or, I hate to say it, interest; and begins to use oddments found around the house, like some old relative's dentures instead of the correct teeth kit, as shown in the catalogue. So that the monkey is not only inauthentic, but also a grotesque oral cripple. Or the monkey-builder may use an old glove attached to the monkey's wrist with a rubberband instead of the correct hand, as shown in the catalogue.

There is no use starting a monkey unless one is prepared to complete it. This means having the proper funds put aside so that one is not, for instance,

overwhelmed by the cost of the fingernail kit, or a simple detail like the tongue; these can be had in several shades of raw pink, and must be shipped wet, either in a can or in a moist dressing; otherwise they tend to crack. And of course the eyes have to be shipped in little bottles full of tears. All of this brings up the cost. The manufacturers have to keep hundreds of monkeys crying all the time to harvest enough tears. . . .

The mail order monkey is just not all that simple. . . . Of course it's easier and cheaper to buy a whole natural monkey, but it's not the same as building one yourself. . . .

Of The Hayloft and All That Kind of Thing

A cow turns to mush, its hide flickering with veins of light. With a huge plop it ends up on the barn floor like a thick cornmeal; the horns sitting in the mush like a bow tied in a girl's hair. . . .

It was just as the farmer was getting ready to pull the cow for milk that it began to shake; it cracked and fell into a heap of thick wet stuff; the horns riding there like a moon in quarter. . . .

The farmer had just been getting the stool down from its hook on the wall when the cow began to vibrate. It seemed to glow; and then it cracked and tore and folded down into a wet shapelessness, its bell sounding against the wooden floor; the horns floating like a ceremonial canoe on a sea of mush. . . .

This he tells his wife, who doesn't believe him, and refuses to go to the barn to see, because she's had enough of the hayloft and all that kind of thing. . . .

Pretty Antiques Shining in the Moonlight

An old hog had furnished his hog-shed with rare antiques. And while it was his necessity to wallow in the mud and gloom of his own droppings to feel more swinishly substantial, he was careful not to upset or crush his antiques in these joyous surrenders.

A man wishes he had antiques like that in his house, and wonders how the old hog got them for his shed.

He sees that the old hog wallows in mud and manure, and thinks, what a gay old thing is that hog.

The man thinks maybe if he wallows in mud and swine poop he'll get some antiques too. . . .

Actually, all he gets from rolling in mud and swine droppings is dirty smelly clothes, and having to sleep out-of-doors because his wife won't let him in; and he hasn't even got a hog-shed like the old hog has; that old hog there with all his pretty antiques shining in the moonlight. . . .