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James Connor

MAKING MEAT

Slaughtering day. There were five of us in the venture, and we began with five bull calves. Not one of us had ever been to a 4H meeting, or milked a cow, or fed chickens. We were Valley kids from L.A., from South of the Boulevard, children of movie directors and engineers and until then, beef had arrived in little plastic packages. It was the 60s and everyone talked about going back to the land, so the five of us took an ag course to prepare. Our teacher arranged the cattle project with a rancher in Oxnard, a man I had never met before, whose name I can't even remember, though I remember the name of his dog, an arthritic brown mongrel named Flash. We bought the calves from him, kept them on his property, but raised them ourselves, paid for feed corn, shots, vets. When the calves were two years old, we slaughtered them.

Oddly, I do not remember my friends, though we swore undying loyalty to one another. Names swim out of the fog from time to time. One was named Gerry and he was a biology major who stammered, an endless source of suspense. Another was Rita, an Italian, short, dark, with vast eyes—I was as mad for her as she was for the unnamed guy who worked on cars, told her she was wasting her life going to college, and slapped her around. The rest are lost in time. The rancher never asked us about ourselves, though he learned much by observation. Whenever we did any work on the calves, he stood near the fence and smoked cigarettes. He was a short man, wide and hard. He wore cowboy shirts with mother of pearl buttons, had mild eyes and a cavernous mouth with thick lips, a cowboy Mick Jagger. Every time I looked at him, there was a cigarette hanging from the exact left hand corner of his mouth, at the place where his lower lip thickened. Surprisingly, he never chided us, never interfered, except now and then to say: "You'd best not do that." He was nearly always right. Once, I was castrating one of the calves, and was busy enough and nervous enough to forget myself, so that I stood over the calf's back legs, breaking every rule the rancher had given us. The rancher said, "You'd best not stand over him like that." I kept working until the calf broke free and kicked me on the inside of my thigh, close enough to the groin to send me over backwards. We had nearly castrated each other. As I picked

myself up, swatted dust off my jeans, and hobbled toward the fence, the rancher glanced at me with the same mild eyes, the same expression, and said nothing.

In the long process of raising our steers, I thought I had come to some understanding with nature. I thought I had become hard, distant, uncaring as a winter storm, but I was wrong. I never quite threw away that pebble of romanticism I carried around in my pocket. When we arrived for the slaughter at six A.M., the rancher had already backed his truck into the side corral, parked it under a cottonwood tree, and left the motor running. The bed had a boom mounted on it like a tow truck, about eight feet high, with a cable winch and two hooks shaped like question marks.

There wasn't much talk. It was foggy cold, not uncommon for January in that part of California; the five of us bunched together near the cars, our souls as much a part of winter as the air. Years later, I heard Garrison Keillor do a radio piece on the cathedral silence that Minnesota farmers felt on slaughtering day. Slaughtering is a sacred act—the bringing of death is rightwise an act of God, and ought to be done with respect. This was true even in California. The rancher walked into the corral where our cattle were huddled. Flash followed on his heels. Several dogs in the neighborhood barked, but Flash, a professional dog, kept his peace. As the rancher approached, the steers scurried in a bunch to the next corner and huddled there. The rancher followed them, selecting a black Angus, who came reluctantly after being swatted on the rump with a coil of rope. The Angus tried to turn aside at the gate, to circle back to the herd, but I stood in his way with another coil of rope, and so surrendering, he trudged into the other corral with his head down like an existentialist. The rancher pursued him quietly, waving his coil, whistling, speaking softly, driving the steer inexorably to the truck and the place of killing.

The Angus shook. The rancher, cooing, speaking softly, stepped up, ran his left hand along the steer's neck, and with his right hand, held a .38 Ruger revolver behind its ear, stepped back quickly. The gun popped. The steer held on for a full breath, and then, as if the electricity holding its pieces together were blown out the opposite side of its head, it collapsed straight down. Unlike the movies, there is nothing slow about dying. It happens—the steer became meat.

I had never seen a death before. When the Angus died, I was standing at the gate, fighting the desire to turn away. Rita stood next to me and clutched the sleeve of my calfskin jacket. The remaining steers, still in the larger corral and far from the killing, shook and bellowed, fearful spittle hanging out of their mouths. They dug their forelegs into the mud, breathing hard. I couldn't stand to be close to them, and shucking my jacket, left Rita, walked to the rancher who was cutting the Angus's throat. The blood pouring from the cut made the same sucking noises babies make in their sleep.

"The others seem scared," I said to the rancher. He looked up from the blood, over his shoulder at the big corral, lifted his cap and smoothed his hair, replaced his cap.

"They smell the blood," he said.

"Do they know what's happening?"

"Likely."

"They knew when we showed up, didn't they?"

"Likely."

"But you haven't slaughtered around here since they were born, have you?"

He shrugged. "It don't matter," he said. Taking the hooked chain, he pierced the tendons above the rear hooves and hauled up the still quaking carcass to let the blood drain faster, and then, with a flaying knife, cut the hide from anus down, around the penis to the neck, splitting around the face to the back. Snipping tendons with his knife, he pulled back the hide on both sides until it came off cleanly, and set it aside. Then he cut the muscle along the abdomen and the carcass fell open with the smell of guts. Reaching in with both hands, the rancher pulled out the viscera, the lungs, the liver, and the still quivering heart. In the other corral were living animals, snorting, breathing, shaking. A white Charolais stood out in the fog. I turned back to the carcass—no longer a black Angus steer—and watched as the rancher, step by step, separated the organ parts—tripe, brains, lungs, heart, liver, in different places on the ground—then quartered the rest with a chain saw. The once living animal had been analyzed, organized, living flesh into meat.

The second animal we slaughtered was a Hereford. Of all five animals, this was the only one I thought of as a person. He had been the most placid of the five, a comfortable beast. After eating, he would stand in the middle of the corral with his back to everyone, chew his cud, and stare. I never quite

figured out what he was staring at, and it bothered me. I had pretensions to philosophy even then, so six months before slaughtering day, I had asked the rancher about the Hereford, asked him about cattle in general, did they have personalities, individual quirks, and the like.

“Do you mean are they people?” he said.

“Well, no, I didn’t mean that exactly.”

The rancher pointed to Flash. “Dogs are people. They pay attention to what’s going on around them.” Flash watched the rancher’s face; the dog’s entire body rocked with his waving tail.

“In that sense,” I said, “I guess that’s what I mean.”

The rancher walked past me to the corral, continuing his talk. I followed. “Steers ain’t people,” he said. “First, they got no balls. That makes them more stupid than the rest of their kind, which are pretty stupid to begin with. Second, beef cattle have had the smarts bred out of them years ago. And third, they’ve been herd animals forever, and don’t know no better.”

I pointed to the Hereford standing in the direct center of the corral. “What about that one?” I said. “He seems—I don’t know—different. Smarter. What do you think he’s looking at?”

The rancher looked at me, lit a cigarette, bending into the flame as he touched the match to the tobacco, then looked back at me while he shook the match cold. “What do they teach you in that college?” he said.

I shrugged. “Lots of stuff,” I said.

The rancher snorted, bullish. He pointed to the Hereford. “That is a belching, farting, shitting, grass-eating bag of gas, boy. It lives to be eaten. Maybe a thousand years ago its ancestors were something, but not anymore. That steer is just a piece of meat. I’ve been raising them for fifty years and I know. Meat. Just meat.” He turned and walked away.

I leaned on the fence, my elbows splayed against the wooden rail, my chin on my folded hands. The Hereford stamped a hind leg, shifted his weight, shooed a fly with his tail. He belched, chewed his cud, stared over the fence at the far green hills. I swore he was planning an escape.

The day of the slaughter, the rancher culled out the Hereford second, flicking me a glance as he swatted the animal’s rump with the coil of rope. I knew what the old man was doing. He was going to show me. I suppose he had decided that I was a college boy in need of saving, and he would show me that the Hereford would die just like the Angus, that its insides would look

just the same, and that once the work was done on it, it would reveal its true meaty nature. I didn't say anything. I thought momentarily about doing something out of a horse movie, saying "Please sir, let him live. I'll take care of him the rest of his life." But this was a steer and not a stallion. And movies are not real life. The rancher would have cursed at me; my friends would have laughed at me, even if they might have been secretly relieved, and Flash would have been disappointed. I took up my post instead, about twenty feet behind the rancher. I was going to face this killing without flinching. The Hereford was never staring at anything. He was too dumb to have thoughts. He was just a pile of meat.

The rancher drove the Hereford toward the killing place. The animal turned this way and that, trying to find a way out. This one didn't seem as frightened as the last, just more excited, nervous. Skittish. Thumbs hooked in my jeans, I stood my ground. A thought passed through my mind—open the gate; knock the old man down before he could get to the pistol stuck in his belt; yell "Fly! fly! fly for the hills!"

Nothing like that happened. Instead, I went turtle. The Hereford refused the place of killing, stopping mulishly halfway across the corral, legs splayed to lower his center of gravity. The rancher cursed, swatted the steer with his coil of rope, pushed from behind, and got kicked for his trouble. He turned to the five of us, beckoned with his head. "Give me a push, here," he said. None of us were happy. This was not in the contract. These steers were supposed to go quietly, stupidly to the slaughter. We glanced at each other, and as a group pushed forward.

"Grab ahold now," said the rancher, and we grabbed ahold. I remember leaning backward against the steer's rump and pushing as if on a stalled truck. Slowly, we edged the beast into place, its feet sinking into the bloody mud behind the lift. We pulled away and the rancher stepped up, his pistol ready. But he must have been distracted by our scrambling aside, because his concentration was broken. The gun popped, but the steer, instead of falling, pivoted and hopped deer-like to the opposite side of the corral. The steer panted. Blood spurted from a red spot behind its ear. Red drool swung from its lower lip. Its breathing, labored, became a hard chant: *hunk! hunk! hunk!*

The rancher cursed *shitshitshitshitshit*. This had broken the hidden rules of slaughter. The animal was *supposed* to go quietly, to give no trouble and suffer as little as possible. The rancher turned to us, trying to find something he could pin on us, but he couldn't. We had done everything right, even if we

hadn't *felt* everything right. Disgusted, he turned to his truck, shoved the pistol into the glove compartment, and without a word, trudged up to the house. He wasn't going to use the pistol on this beast. Going near a wounded, brain damaged steer, even polled, was unnecessarily foolish.

After he had gone, we stood looking at the Hereford, listening to the hard *hunk* of its breathing. Without the protective crust of the rancher's experience, we felt exposed to the death we were bringing about. The steer threatened us, even stunned and bleeding as it was in the corner. One at a time, we retreated to the fence. Only Flash seemed alive, his eyes dancing, as if something wolfish had been awakened in him by the steer's panting that had not been awakened by the blood alone.

Ten minutes later, the rancher carried a scoped 30.06 into the corral, his eyes nearly shut with anger. His wife had followed him down and stood outside the gate, a dishtowel still in her hand, her face hard. "This should do it," he said to himself. Since we had witnessed his embarrassment, we did not exist for the old man until the steer was rightly and truly dead. Standing in the middle of the corral, he put the rifle butt to his face, waited a long breath, fired. The Hereford jumped, stumbled, and ran past the rancher, to pant in yet another corner.

Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck! The rancher stood with his head down. He met no one's eyes. The Hereford was visibly failing, its breathing reversed, longer exhales than inhales. It remained standing, its blood dripping out of a new hole in its neck, forming another muddy pool in the corral. I turned to Gerry, whispered "It won't be long now. It can't live too much longer," and felt the ambiguity of my words; the beast was no longer a *he*, but an *it*. Flash wormed under the fence, in and out of the corral several times, then hopped excitedly, turning slow circles. The rancher finger-whistled at him, and he stopped, settled quietly in the dirt just outside the gate. At the whistle, the Hereford, whose head was turned away, groggily faced the rancher, then turned away. The rancher waited a long moment, raised the rifle once more, whistled soft and low through his teeth. The Hereford turned its head once more, and the rancher fired. The bullet ripped into its forebrain, the steer fell to its knees, slowly rolled onto its side.

★

The first action in cattle slaughter is called stunning. In a slaughterhouse, this is done with a compression gun that looks something like a shock absorber, powered by .22 caliber rim fire loads. That's for professionals with metal chutes and presses and white coats that so quickly turn red. We weren't professionals, so we had to use something bigger. We didn't stun the animals—one at a time, we blew their brains out. The next action is called sticking. This is where you insert a knife into the carcass just above the brisket and cut the carotid arteries and the jugular vein. At this point, the steer may or may not be quite dead. The hanging carcass shudders now and then, but this gradually lessens as life flows out, until the hide twitches slightly as if chasing off flies, and then it ceases altogether. By this time, the blood has nearly run out, forming a sticky pool underneath the hanging nose. Like a mountain lake, the pool overflows and runs in little rivulets until it soaks into the ground and makes red mud.

After sticking comes the first stage of dissection, called heading. At this point, you cut the hide down the face from the horn to the nostril. Then you skin the face on both sides, bend the head back on its poll, and cut the Adam's apple and atlas joint to remove the head. Since we were slaughtering outside, we didn't have a skinning rack, or even a concrete floor—we skinned our cattle by lowering the carcasses softly onto the mud, so that only the neck rested on the ground, a bit like changing a tire. By cutting into the hide at the back of the fore and rear shanks, then cutting down the legs to the mid-line and along the belly from the neck to the bung, we were able to pull the hide off each animal, snipping tendons along the way. In the end, the skin came off in one piece and the rancher set it aside. All the body parts he segregated into neat piles—heads, hides, shanks, sweetbreads, hearts and livers, brains.

The rancher did his work with efficiency, neatly and orderly. He worked in silence while the five of us looked on. Now and then, one of us walked up to the house, grabbed a drink of water, visited the bathroom, blew into some cold water, stared a long moment at the floral design the rancher's wife had installed on the walls, tried to blow the blood smell from our noses onto a piece of toilet paper, and then walked back to the corral. By that time, the rancher would have nearly finished skinning some animal, and was beginning to open up the chest.

Now and then, he asked me to help him pull on something or cut something. Sometimes Gerry helped, sometimes one of the others. Rita held back, standing beside the rancher's wife. For all of feminism, for all it was the 60s,

the world had been re-divided along traditional lines. The rest of us pitched in, all the men, but mostly me, since I was the only one willing to get my jeans soaked with blood and my boots caked with red mud. I wasn't any less squeamish than any of the others, but these were my cattle, not the rancher's, and I felt that even without the skill, I owed them my attendance. Halfway through the pulling and tearing of flesh and hide, I felt that cathedral silence growing inside me, pushing off more human sentiments, until inside me was soft and respectful and full of love for the very beasts whose blood soaked my hands. I am a large man, and have enough native muscle to push and pull, so the rancher called on me more than the others, which I didn't mind, though I do not have much grace of movement, and all I was able to do was lend my weight to things when needed. It was on the first steer, the black Angus, that I got bloody, and after that it became increasingly easy, so that by the time we were on the third animal, the Hereford-Angus mix, the one with the horns, I was so soaked in blood I didn't care anymore. I felt like a battlefield surgeon, a soldier in trench warfare. Once, on the third animal, the rancher was sid-ing—pulling the hides off the flanks—and called me over. He needed to roll the animal slightly to get a better purchase on the left side, so without turning his head, he motioned at me with his hand, still holding the bloody knife. Feeling exhausted and full of resignation, I slogged through the mud to him, stepped over the severed head, caught the leg of my jeans on one of the horns, and lost my balance, dragged the head a few feet behind me, slapstick hopping, until I landed face down in a pool of blood. Flash barked with delight, his entire behind working his tail. My friends, including Rita, laughed, then quickly cut it off. The rancher looked at me, folded his lips, asked me if I was through, and told me to grab the animal's front shoulder and push on it. I hesitated momentarily, fearing to touch something dead, until I decided to avoid looking at the hide that was hanging like a half torn shirt off the flank. It was in that moment that I made the transition. Below the line where the hide still hung, the carcass was a dead animal. It had skin, hair. I could stroke its hide and be reminded of its life. Above that line, the animal was meat, and I could take it apart, cut it, baste it, roast it, grind it without a thought.

By the fourth animal, a white Charolais, I had become an old hand. The rancher shot the fifth—another Hereford—we stuck it, headed it, skinned it, gutted it. We worked silently, the rancher and I, growing used to each other's presence, pointing and pulling, cutting here and cranking there, a dance of

labor that ended too soon, just as it had become a dance, and we, the rancher and I, returned to our separate lives at the very moment that the last animal turned to meat. We had worked together, teaching, learning, until by the end, the work had come naturally, as if we had been doing it together our whole lives. Soon, I expected, we would shake hands, nod, go our respective ways, and not speak of it again. So it was, for the rancher and I—certainly, I will never forget him, though I can't remember his name.

The piles of separated parts lay around the killing place, the pool of blood half soaked into the ground. The local grocer we had contracted with had just arrived, and he and his assistant, two other men working, were slowly loading the piles as we made them into a refrigerated truck. Flies swarmed over the sodden flesh, so we hurried to keep ahead of the grocer. By noon, we were done. The rancher's wife called us up to lunch. The rancher and I cleaned up the last bits of useful flesh, nodded to one another. I had participated in a dance far older even than my species, a dance that meant life to some, death to others, and though the civilized part of me felt deeply ashamed, the animal part of me understood the dance, and respected it. As an animal, I was implicated in the deaths of these steers, implicated by birth. Everything else was silence. I turned my back to the place of killing, leaned against the fence, and watched the others trod the path to the house, heads down, weary as cattle, though I could not follow, not yet. The rancher's wife smiled a welcome at them from behind the table, where she had hamburgers laid on the grill, Texas chili, and corn on the cob. A feast, all laid out on a picnic table covered with a happy red and white plastic tablecloth that flapped in the soft California breeze. My last trip to the bathroom, I had watched her set it out—Styrofoam plates and plastic utensils, black coffee and/or red punch, with wild daisies stuck in a bottle in the exact center of the table.

I turned back, stood at the fence ten feet from the place of killing. The grocer and his helper had nearly packed the last of the meat, formerly a white Charolais, in the back of their refrigerated truck, and stuffed the useful innards—heart, lungs, tripe, brains, kidneys, liver, intestines, pancreas, all the glands—in separate plastic bags, each marked with black letters on tape for easy recognition. They moved smoothly, caught in the cathedral silence that had fallen on the place like a soft rain, while Flash hurried after, nipping at their heels, dancing in and around and through their legs, until he stopped suddenly, as if in all the excitement, he remembered to bark twice and then chase his tail. I had decided out of an odd respect not to leave the place until

the last of the meat had disappeared and the grocer had driven off, leaving a red lake on the ground and a persistent smell of blood in the air. Milk cows from the rancher's next door neighbor, half a mile down the road, lowed in distress.

In three minutes, the last of the meat had disappeared, and the last bag of innards had been shoved in behind it. The grocer turned, gave a little wave, climbed into his truck while his assistant sat stolidly beside him. The engine turned, failed to catch, turned again, started, and the truck lurched forward, out of the paddock through the open gate, down the road behind me, and out toward the highway beyond. I would not turn as it moved, but fixed my eyes on the red lake and listened to the old motor as it passed behind me and coughed up the hill and into the distance, to slowly blend into the grumble of background noise. The rest was silence—no longer seeming to fall from the sky, but now to ooze from every space between every cell of every living thing, filling that small depression in the earth that held the place of killing. The farmer's wife called me once again, but I couldn't move, held by exhaustion and silence. A scuffle in the dirt, a sound of cowboy boots, and the rancher stood beside me, his hands hanging loosely over the fence rail. We faced each other, and he glanced quickly at my eyes, then turned back to face the red lake. We said nothing after that. After half a minute of silence, he offered me a cigarette from his own pack, and I took it, though I don't smoke. I lit mine from his, and we stood waiting for the silence to subside, while the smell of hot meat and the warm chatter of human voices pressed on us from behind.