



HARVEST

Journal



On Receiving

We arrived at the farm at about 9:30. My friend, a generally skilled human in technological media, was there to film various stages in pig harvesting. Two American guinea hog/mulefoot crosses were fenced with three cattle panels right next to the driveway.

Today we were going to film the kill so my head was swimming with scripts. The killing of a pig is a big deal in every way. It is emotionally and physically demanding. It requires patience and efficiency in equal measure. The pig killer must seamlessly weave bursts of power with the stillest silence; the order of the customer with the good of the pig; the attentiveness of a scientist with the leveraging strength of a grunt.

Yes, my pride may be part of this. My idea of the work is definitely heroic. But there is something else that makes the labor of killing a pig such a high calling for me.



And it came out when I was talking with Andrew about scalding and scraping. There are a million reasons to de-hair, rather than to skin a pig: crackling on roasts, rinds on whole muscle cures, even bacteria for salami, to name a few. But what impressed Andrew as the black scurf slipped off to reveal the perfectly hairless and white skin beneath, was how effortless it seemed. It looked as if it was meant to come off that way.

I scald a pig because it is irresistibly scaldable.

I also can't resist the compulsion to pinch the opaque membrane off the talons, beak, tongue and crop of a perfectly scalded chicken. Tactile gratification is certainly mixed in. But it is not just that it feels good to slip off the toe-nails of a pig by hand. It is an echo of something deeper.

It is a kind of antiphonal efficiency, where my force is met halfway by the physiology of the animal. Like the difference between a nice guitar and an assembly line guitar; you don't have to work as hard to make the former sing. Like shifting into a higher gear, it takes your exertion further than you expected.

Ironically, the increased physical demand of scalding and scraping requires a degree of passivity. I am invited to be receptive to the subtle cues of epidermal physiology to achieve the perfect scald. Even when butchering, I must limit my harvesting to the natural seams and borders of the carcass to maximize yield. In my experience, these natural limits are the key to infinite expression. Take Jamón Iberico for example: if Spanish peasants were not limited by the lack of refrigeration, and were they not limited to pigs who had to scratch a living for themselves in oak savannah, we would not have the most refined ham in the world.

Given the leisure, I am sure I could find a solid culinary reason for peeling the crops and beaks of chickens. And that is the best part; being docile to the harvest leaves space for serendipity. It is a child-like way to slaughter an animal. It is receptive.

Perhaps the most convincing reason to submit to the harvest is the alternative: coercion. I don't think there is an objective line in the sand beyond which an animal is coerced. Each situation requires discernment.

Nonetheless, I think everyone can tell when that line has been crossed. Our increasing alienation from livestock and their harvesting has undoubtedly dulled our sense of this and our domestic pets don't simplify things.

The blatant signs of coercion are the CAFOs, where steel and concrete constrict the nature of pigs before more steel and concrete trim half the carcass into commodity form. But coercion doesn't have to be only large scale.

You can tell when someone is forcing any manual task by their frustrated perspiration. If I curse my winch or cut myself during a harvest, invariably I am forcing things. Coercion on a small scale doesn't have the camouflage of a mechanized slaughter house. It is painful to watch because it is ineffectual.

Which is to say that working with the pig instead of against it manifests as skill. And that is always a pleasure to behold. It looks easy.



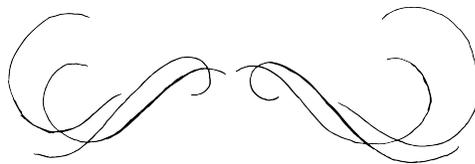
In the ontological sense, the pig I raise or harvest is a gift to the world. It is that reckless abundance of sentient life on which I survive. So there would be something deeply arrogant if I considered the pig only a thing that I own and shape to gratify my tastes.

Lo-tech pig fencing and small .22wmr rounds help to keep me always aware that the pig and I have to get along for this to work. We are in relationship. Similarly, without a meat saw in the shop, I must rely instead on due regard for and knowledge of a pig's physiology.

I could cram the pig in a corner with some help, press a captive bolt gun on her forehead and pull the trigger in half the time it takes me to shoot some pigs with my rifle. But the difference again is coercion. With my rifle, I can't force the pig into a good position for the shot. I must woo the pig. She chooses to line up for the shot and to hold still for it. I can only take her life in as much as she gives it. Which makes her the hero of this story, not me.



Brandon Sheard
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Feast of St. Isidore of Seville



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