Killing a Pig

IT BEGINS WITH A PARTY, AS THINGS OFTEN DO.

“We will slaughter a pig,” someone says.

This is in Lesotho, where my wife and I have been living for a year now, up in the eastern mountains of Mokhotlong, past the diamond mine where mechanized brontosaurs churn throughout the night and cones of light illuminate lunar terrain. Up through the cloud scrim, where the roads are not roads, where they carve board games into the boulders.

We have overseen the slaughter of two sheep already, two different birthday parties, but we decide that it is time to expand from quotidian matters like ovine butchery into the more exotic realms of pig death.

In Mokhotlong district, the celebratory consumption of meat is a matter of real gravitas, since most people are unable to afford meat with any regularity. They derive their protein instead from the humdrum bean and the lowly egg. For a party, though, it is understood that the host will provide meat – mutton usually – a matter of hospitality as well as personal pride. The scent of animal flesh wafts even from the invitation. “You must come,” I can recall Ntate Mapola telling me once. “My brother, we will be eating meat there.”

About ten days out from the party, I tell some teachers about our plan. I am in the staff room with the other math teachers, out at the high school.

“A pig?” ‘M’e Mmolotsi says. “Ah no, I don’t eat that one. The fariki I think is too dirty.”

Ntate Mapola objects. “No, this is not accurate. The fariki is a fine animal. The flesh is very rich in flavor. It is excellent for consumption – but perhaps only for men.”

‘M’e Mmolotsi shudders and sticks out her tongue. “I can attend the party,” she says, “but maybe I will take just the papa and moroho to eat.”

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I should mention that I begin most schooldays by visiting the swine.

The high school where I teach is part working farm, since everything in Lesotho is part working farm. Hired shepherds graze school-owned cattle through the academic grounds. There are battered chicken coops behind the Math & Science staff room and careful plots of moroho out by the volleyball net. But it is the pigsty – down by the rim of the gorge – that I find most alluring.

The pigs tiptoe daintily through their muck-filled stone and mortar enclosures, the ends of their snouts tilting, sniffing, expanding, contracting, trying to fathom my purpose here. Some piglets are lying massed in piles, asleep and grunting in the shade. They are dreaming porcine dreams, fantasies of mud and sleep and maize husks.

Anyone who professes to find a pig adorable has never seen a pig up close. Or perhaps they are familiar with the manicured pigs that celebrities sometimes own, ironic and calculatedly quirky pets – far removed from real rural farm swine. Pigs are foul, stinking, rather unpleasant creatures. They are not adorable. They are coarse and bristling with all manner of whisker. Their tails twitch neurotically. Horseflies skitter in and out of their enormous flopping bat ears, which are a pale unpleasant pink, which are encrusted with mustard-colored scabs. Some of the swine have dark ink blotches stained across their tapered snouts, the hue of faded tattoos.

Their eyes, though, are most remarkable: so very human, guarded by blond, decidedly human eyelashes.

When I come down to the pigsty for my daily visit, the animals scrabble to their feet, emitting warning grunts to
their pen-mates as they splash from murky puddles. They sniff at the air to garner information, eyeing me warily with Homo sapiens eyes, then eventually grow accustomed to my presence.

I understand now why Homer sang of the witch Circe, who transformed Odysseus’s men into swine. As the pigs watch me expectantly, I am looking into human eyes encased in animal bodies, alive with some frightened, mute intelligence.

We are now four days away from the party. My wife Ellen and her brother Dan head off to find the requisite pig. Her brother is in Lesotho visiting for a month; he is an experienced chef and thus a good candidate for pig sourcing. They embark for the outlying villages, off farther into the mountains, along with ‘M’e Matello, a female friend who will help negotiate the pig purchase.

The three of them take the pickup out past Linakaneng clinic, where Snyder the gorgeous Kenyan nurse works. They head further up the escarpment, past the carapace of that long-abandoned delivery truck, which rusts halfway down the valley. They meander vaguely toward a village where Matello thinks they can find a pig dealer. On the road they come across some herd boys – jauntily whipping their cattle into rank and file – who point them to a nearby village.

It is a beautiful day and the swine are grazing on the hillside. They are robust, dynamic creatures, these mountain pigs. Ellen and Dan settle on one from afar and the pig dealer compliments their discerning eye. Then, after Matello haggles the man down to the equivalent of forty dollars, they go to collect their animal. But the pig is uninterested in captivity, immediately bolts for the horizon, bounds off with surprising vigor and agility.

The better part of an hour passes.

Eventually Ellen, Dan, and Matello – with the assistance of the pig dealer and a pack of harassing dogs – are able to corral the wayward hog. The pig dealer, in a nimble feat of legerdemain, snatches the beast’s hind leg as they converge, upends it, and has the animal bound around the hooves before it can react. The pig pants and squirms on the ground, hog-tied.

Now, as the trio traverses the pseudo-roads of the district, heading back toward Mokhotlong camptown, Ellen hears a thump from the bed of the pickup. She glances to the side mirror, where she can see that the pig, having somehow freed its feet from the rope, has hurled itself over the side of the truck. Matello stops the vehicle.

The pig is dangling over the side of the pickup, still bound around the neck, its untied hooves churning in the air. It looks for all the world like a suicide.

The pig lives behind our hut for three days, tied to a stake we have hammered into the earth, on the grounds of the orphanage that ‘M’e Nthabeleng runs. This is where we live, where my wife works.

We feed the pig pans of milk and apples. We do not know if this is appropriate pig food, but – our theory goes – this will enhance the animal’s flavor when we eat it. Enlightened gastrophiles are always holding forth on what the animal ate before they ate the animal. Was it grass-fed? Grain-fed?! How gauche! We imagine telling people about this experience, years later, at some exclusive cocktail party.
Of course it was free range, we chuckle, there’s no other way in Mokhotlong.

And pan-fed too. Pans of cream and apples.

Nhabeleng’s daughter Tseli and her friends come by to play with the pig, now that kindergarten is done. They think this is fantastic, this pig we have. It is their friend. Children passing on the road are fascinated as well. "Hello!" the bold ones yell as they pass. "Who is the owner of that pig?" When I tell them it is our pig they begin to laugh. "No!" they say, "tell us!"

The pig escapes several times each day. It defeats square knots and bowlines, sheet bends and clove hitches, arbor knots, nail knots, slip knots. This pig is the Harry Houdini of pigs. Sometimes we observe the moment of emancipation and chase after the pig, pursuing it around the fenced-in grounds of the orphanage. Sometimes we go to feed it and find it gone. One time I find the pig sitting behind our hut, having yet again untied itself. The end of the rope lies several feet away, cast off disdainfully. The pig is staring at the mountains as it lolls in the shade. It looks over at me and snorts, eyes showing forth only disappointment in being paired with an adversary so inept.

One midnight I step out behind our hut to urinate. The night is perfect black, soundless, and holy. Down at my feet the pig is snoring gently. I consider leaning down to pet it but then abjure. No one wants to be woken from some dream about heaven.

Today is the day we kill the pig.

Here comes Senkatana, riding majestically onto the grounds of the orphanage, looking like some southern African Hercules. He is tall, muscular, and bearded, wrapped in what appears to be an animal skin. He is wearing the weathered bucket hat that shepherds favor, with his tattered gray pants tucked into his gumboots. Senkatana dismounts from his horse – whipping his animal-skin cape back over his shoulder – and laughs. This laugh is not triggered by anything in particular, but rather indicates the great pleasure he takes in existence. His laugh has the timbre of a baritone sax – it oozes relaxed confidence and mellowed virility. It is honeyed and warm in a way that is impossible to fabricate.

Nhabeleng has hired this man Senkatana, this ur-Mosotho, to do the actual slaughtering, based on the sound assumption that if we are unable to keep a pig tied to a stake, we cannot be trusted to oversee the humane execution of the animal.

It is perhaps relevant to note that any Mosotho man can kill a sheep. In Mokhotlong, sheep butchery is a skill acquired through osmosis, swallowed in gulps from mountain streams and inhaled through the nostrils. During the last party we threw, the man who hacked open the sternum and eviscerated the sheep was a social worker for the orphanage. Many of the male teachers I know are able to do the same.

But the killing of a pig is a different matter altogether. As Senkatana leaps down from his horse, as he unsheathes his colossal knife, I can see the other men staring at him with some mixture of admiration and jealousy.

People are milling eagerly now, staff from the orphanage as well as various strangers who have stopped in the road to watch. It is a Friday afternoon and some men have begun drinking. The air is charged with anticipation.

It happens like this:

When Senkatana comes around behind our hut, and not some idiot lekhoa, the pig knows that the moment of his death has arrived. I can see the flash of instantaneous comprehension. He springs to his feet – and in that tragic instant realizes he has not undone this final rope. Then Senkatana leads him squealing away, while he tears the earth with his hooves. He is a large animal, reaching up to my mid-thigh, and it takes three men to drag him over to the kill zone. Someone has already dug the hole in the ground into which he will pour his blood.

The two sheep killings I witnessed were quiet, almost banal affairs. These sheep went gently to their deaths, oddly mute and without any obvious attachment to life. They kneeled – dull-eyed, motionless, docile – and offered up their throats without reproach. They lay down, emptying, perhaps gave a last twitch.
All of this provoked in me the most bizarre and inappropriate of reactions – anger. What thing lacks the basic ability to fear its own death?

But the pig.

The pig is bucking wildly, all muscle now, but eventually they have him by the fetlocks and have him flopped over onto his side and bound around the feet again. He thrashes frantically in this handicapped state, writhing against the inevitability of this last moment, squealing stridently throughout. Two men hold down his rear while Senkatana kneels on his head, pressing the pig’s face into the gravel.

I catch one last glimpse of those frightened Homo sapiens eyes, behind those delicate blond eyelashes. Then Senkatana pulls the pig’s head quickly back and makes a deep lateral slash across his throat. The neck is thick with muscle and it takes even the expert Senkatana two more deep slices before the gouts of arterial blood come pulsing forth. This whole time the pig has been screaming in the most disturbingly human way. And now, as the vocal cords are cut and the neck opens up and begins to separate away from the body, I realize that the sounds are no longer coming from the pig’s mouth, but are issuing directly from the trachea – an agonized, pathetic wheezing and gurgling as the carotid artery chugs away over this last spastic vacuuming of breath.

Senkatana gives another sharp upward tug and snaps the pig’s neck. The convulsive struggles of the body taper off, the horrific choking sound dies away, and the pig is dead. Blood runs into the hole in the ground. All of this has taken about forty-five seconds.

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Some logistics:

After the pig is dead, two things occur. The second thing that occurs is the depilation of the pig, the removal of the dense wiry hair that covers its body. This is done by pouring buckets of boiling water over the carcass, then scraping vigorously with the jagged tops of metal cans. Several people scrub away with these makeshift tools until the pig is stunningly pale and hairless.

But the first thing that happens after the pig’s death is the removal of its testicles. These have been promised to Senkatana as part of his fee. With the deftness of a surgeon he makes quick, artful incisions and then removes the testicles, each of which is bigger than a man’s closed fist, or perhaps the size of a large mango. He places them over on a table – his prize – these two purple perfect veined ellipsoids. They look like two human hearts.

The gathered crowd has turned quite festive, anticipating the real celebration tomorrow. Men are now grilling the freshly excised organs for late-afternoon snacking: heart, lungs, liver, kidneys. Senkatana begins dancing merrily, a quart of beer in hand, and it is only now that I recognize he is wearing a black and blue argyle sweater, perhaps from an old J.Crew catalogue. Somehow it works perfectly with the rest of his ensemble: animal-skin cape, gumboots and tattered pants, shepherd’s hat and whip, argyle J.Crew sweater.

Even when slaughtering an animal, one must dress to impress.

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It is Saturday, the day of the party. We have stayed up all night, slow-cooking the pig over a bed of low coals, hand-turning the beast on a jury-rigged metal spit.
Now the women come dancing up from the orphanage, in procession toward the pig buffet, their red plastic plates held out before them. They are doing a slow shuffle-stomp and singing a rhythmic song of thanksgiving as they march. These are the bo-m’ê, the house mothers who care for the orphaned children day and night. The men are eating already, drinking and laughing and leaning casually up against things in the way that all men at parties must do.

Everyone is here: Nthabeleng and her children, the orphanage’s entire thirty-person staff, fifteen teachers from the high school, and various friends from around town. A Peace Corps volunteer from New Jersey. Two Congolese doctors who give preferential treatment to the kids from the orphanage. A Zimbabwean colleague of mine and his cousins. A French-speaking Quebeccer on a furlough from her job. A wind-blown British woman hiking her way through Lesotho, whom I found wandering in town earlier today and looking rather hungry.

People begin to dig into the hog. The bo-m’ê pile their dishes high. Nthabeleng’s daughter razes small towers of meat in a way that American five-year-olds cannot. The teachers, through mouthfuls, argue the relative merits of spit-roasting versus grilling. The night watchmen – Bokang and the ancient Motsi, who alternate nights shivering next to a small fire in the guard shack – are giddily tearing through platefuls of pork. Motsi is – can that really be? – Motsi who is older than Jesus, Motsi who is older than the oceans.

The meat is unlike anything I have eaten before. It does not taste like milk or apples. It tastes feral and unsubtle and dangerous. Is it possible for meat to taste vigorous? This meat tastes vigorous.

Someone has run miles of extension cord up from the orphanage, and the famo blasting through the speakers sounds like an explosion at the old accordion factory. The partygoers are joyously shake-shaking their asses now, even the kids, up from the safety of the building, in our arms and laughing maniacally at this adult madness. Now someone is passing the charred head of the pig around. Its face is frozen in a warlike snarl, lips pulled back to expose jagged teeth. This quickly becomes a photo op. The teachers pose with the animal’s head, proof that they ate pig at some crazy makhooa party. Bokang the night guard poses with it, pretending to punch the hideous death mask, conqueror and vanquished. Nthabeleng poses with it, holding it in front of her face, ferocious pig-woman, all four-and-a-half feet of her.

As the afternoon stretches out we approach a moment of decadence and comfort that is hard to properly convey. Perhaps this is the way to say it: the sun is on our faces. We all dance and shimmy. We sing and stomp. We lie in the grass. When night comes we sit around the fire and watch the riot of galaxies overhead.