Carnicero

Lisa López Smith

Volume 8, Number 1, 2017

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1046627ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1046627ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)
McGill University Library

ISSN
1918-5480 (digital)

Cite this document
https://doi.org/10.7202/1046627ar
Carnicero

Lisa López Smith

Introduction
Growing up, mostly vegetarian, in suburban Canada, I faced the gamut of emotions when our first ram was slaughtered at our home in rural Mexico. The poem was born as a reflection on food sources, butchering, and eating here in Mexico following the style of Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Through the process of writing "Carnicero," and reflecting on the connection we get to have with our meat sources on a farm, I found it strangely beautiful to be able to know how each animal lived, what it ate, how it was slaughtered, and especially, to know each one by name.

I.
Juan takes long sweeping steps. He is focused force, all efficiency, his chin square, his eyes small. They told me he was fast: one long knife to the heart, arms embracing the ram, both creatures still and silent, one spurting red until finally it didn’t. The sheep collapsed gently on the concrete. Offal, viceras, skin, feet, organs removed and buried, blood rinsed into the grass. It took twenty minutes. We paid Juan one hundred pesos.

II.
Imagine killing for a living:
Do the hands of a butcher look different at the end of each workday, weighted by the lives of so many creatures? Is there an unseen cost to making death easy? I’m squeamish, I can’t stomach the acrid stench in the kitchen of burnt feathers when Luis plucks chickens in the sink, or watches YouTube videos for better slaughtering ideas.

III.
It’s cliché but true, Miguel tells me. Practice makes perfect.
The first chicken was a mess: neck half cut, feathers everywhere. He said he looked at his kids then.
Either the kids go hungry or he kills chickens. Chop. Chop. He learned to make it easy. They butchered, defeathered, and sold chicken for a year before the economy improved and he got his office job back.

IV.
My neighbor builds a low, red brick fire pit. His wife skewers ribs, chops, marinated chicken legs, and chorizo sausage on metal stakes planted inside the rectangle where the embers glow. The scent of roast: the BBQ juices dripping, heat, and tender cuts. She removes the meat from the skewer places it in thick corn tortillas; the salsas are tangy fire: chunky tomatillo or roasted red chile ancho with sweet cilantro and spicy onion. The smoky scent is a good sales pitch, and they sell out every weekend.

V.
When I was a kid, I once cried because I believed that my yolk should have been a fluffy yellow chick, and it was better to give up my dad’s eggs on toast than to kill for food.

VI.
I drive past Juan’s tiny abattoir on the main street heading out of town. There’s a pig squealing inside, but nothing like the noise the time that three pigs escaped there, screeching and hollering down the street. Luis says, we can’t keep pigs; they’re too smart. He can’t even hire Juan to kill a pig who would be too aware of impending intentions, but Luis still likes a nice bowl of pozole or chicharrón.

VII.
I stop at the local supermarket chain. My cart’s rear wheel wobbles up the aisle. It’s privilege to have a variety of protein sources; Tofurkey is not universally available. The shelves here are stocked with items in plastic, refined, colorful flavours. The Western diet, with higher intakes of meat and processed foods
is acidic to the body and can increase risk for heart disease and cancer, but none of the packaging spins it that way. However, the supermarket’s meat section seems a very modern, very Western privilege, with that magic of refrigeration and well-travelled packages of instant, fun-shaped food products so we can eat ourselves into disease, while industrial farming feeds our planet into extinction. I was vegetarian for awhile.

VIII.
The trucks go fast on the highway and there is nearly always a dog carcass rotting somewhere in the hot sun along the roadside. I’ve heard more than one story of fresh road kill mysteriously disappearing and the rumours: taco stands selling tacos al pastor too cheaply.

IX.
One night I went outside because there was an odd noise; the dogs had found a young red hen. She was still alive, body fully intact but they had chewed her legs right off. Luis got the machete and told me to hold her head and body, neck stretched out on the wooden log in the backyard. The sky was full of stars above, and I cried for so many things but mostly that a good farmer should be able to do the right thing for a suffering animal and I wasn’t sure that I could. Her blood was good compost for the guava trees.

X.
The day we got him, Luis laughed, said he’d call the sheep Asado. With a name like that, his destiny was assured. There is spirit and body, and at some point they separate, even in sheep, I think. Juan had taken the carcass to the butcher’s cooler. El Güero offers me the head: bare, red, familiar eyes staring, good for soup. He rips off the outer skin of the testicles, wraps it in paper, marking it criadillas and adds it to the rubber tub filled with rack, ribs, leg roast, chops. Asado is delicious, the kids say. The dogs are ecstatic with the bones.
XI.
Armando told me
back in the days
when NAFTA was snuffing out
all the small local economies
and there was not much to eat,
his brother would go hunting:
skunk, possum, rabbit. *A good birria stew
covers the flavour of anything*, he grins.

XII.
Feedlots, injected hormones, cages
plastic wrapped packages of neat slices,
bloodless, hygienic, no recognizable animal
parts, creatures with no name
slaughtered at six weeks of age,
fast food, frozen food sections’
icy anonymity – It’s easy to cook
because it doesn’t even feel like
flesh: sterile, safe, without a soul.

XIV.
New lambs are born, wet
and steaming in the cool
of the morning. I wipe
embryotic goo from tender nostrils,
run a finger through a mouth still
unbreathing, the lamb
shakes its heads and finally cries,
the sweet morning air
entering its lungs for the first
time. We exhale together.
The ewe licks and sniffs and
licks and sniffs. A few hours later,
the lambs are dry, walking,
nursing. They will grow hearing
morning birdsong and the sweet
sound of breeze through grass.
The children will chase them, bring
them alfalfa and clean water,
and I will name each one, even those
whose destiny is assured.
Biography

Born in Kelowna, BC, Lisa López Smith is a writer, translator, farmer, and mother living in a rural part of central Mexico. She has her BA from the University of Calgary and MA from Royal Roads University, and is a fellow of the Macondo Writers Workshop and Under the Volcano Writers Workshop. Recent publications include the UK-based Lacuna Magazine and Sin Fronteras, as her writing often addresses migration and refugee issues in the Americas.