

## Carnicero

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## 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 Steven'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**

## **Biographie**

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.

Née à Kelowna en Colombie-Britannique, **Lisa López Smith** est une écrivaine, traductrice, agricultrice, et mère qui réside en milieu rural du Mexique central. Elle détient un baccalauréat de l'Université de Calgary et une maîtrise de l'Université Royal Roads. Elle est membre du *Macondo Writers Workshop* et de *Under the Volcano Writers Workshop*. Ses publications récentes sont parues dans la revue anglaise *Lacuna Magazine* et dans *Sin Fronteras*. Ses écrits portent notamment sur la migration et les réfugiés dans les Amériques.