

4-1-2007

The Slaughter

David Kann

California Polytechnic State University - San Luis Obispo, dkann@calpoly.edu

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Recommended Citation

Kann, David (2007) "The Slaughter," *Moebius*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 21.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius/vol5/iss1/21>

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THE SLAUGHTER

David Kann

We fourteen and fifteen-year old kids
sent from the July city's dull swelter
to an upstate farm. Tentative strangers
reaching across gulfs of status and sex
in mumbled half-sentences, stock gestures,
judging each others surfaces—clothes, hair,
eyes aimed aslant, angular stiff bodies.
We barely talked, gathered by our gender
against our bodies' hot revelations,
seawalls against the looming, leaning wave.

On the next day, we learned that broiler hens
needed butchering. We gathered shyly
behind the leaning barn in the hot sun.
In the stink of piled manure and old hay
I could hardly take a breath. To the side,
a trench, raw poles bridged by a two-by-four,
and fastened to the board four broad dented
dull zinc funnels—galvanized, ashy-grey;
A huge sooty pot over a low fire
brim-filled with milky, hot, scummy water,
an old wood door on sawhorses, marbled
with stony black stains. Then square, flat wooden

cages carried and stacked three times, five high.
meek eyes looked through the dowel-bars. Young hens
crammed together, almost solid, breathing,
molting feathers, and a quiet, crooning
rising from the crates into the still air.
Through a door at the top of a shit-fouled cage
the farmer drew a chicken by the legs,
pushed it head down through one of the funnels,
and with a short, casual left-right slash
he cut the throat. A spastic stiffening;
then the head hanging and the soft patter
into the trench. All breath stopped. The trees'
rushing silenced. Even the clouds stalled, still.

Some of us picked up rusted paring knives
with shiny crosshatching on the edges
and went to the trench. Others with long knives
went to the table, waited quietly.
I snatched a chicken by its slick, yellow legs.
wings flapping, it jerked my arm left and right.
I crammed it into a funnel, reached for
its thin head, like grasping my heart. It fought
in my fingers, trying to pull back. Then
I pulled it through the bottom. The blank black
eyes stabbed me. I drew back, left the bird there.
its scaly talons upward, grasping at the
air, appealing to the silent, blue and
distant sky, the drifting plump clouds in the
warming yellow late-morning summer sun.
The inverted head jerked left and right, the
amber beak opened and closed, chewing at
empty air for some vain, vital purchase,
for breath. I filled my lungs, took the knife in
one hand and the staring, terrifying head
in the other. I slashed too deep and hard.
The head fell wetly into my palm; hot
blood poured through my fingers, over my wrist
ran to my elbow. I flung the head in

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the trench and saw the blank eyes still rolling,
the beak still mutely clucking. Wringing and
shaking my hands, I sent dark blood flying,
spotting my face, my new, clean white tee-shirt.
What could I do under everyone's gaze
but take another bird? Three children joined.
Together we grabbed and slashed, grabbed and slashed.
We all laughed, astonished, passing the drained
birds to the scalding pot and then to the
table where they were laid out, cut open.
We sorted ropy guts, green gall bladders
hard garnet gizzards and red, lobed livers.
The barn's cats gathered under the table,
Yowled, fought and clawed over the spilled innards.

I found a split-shanked, rusted hand-axe,
Took a chicken, laid it down, head outstretched
Struck at its neck, two, three times and the head
Flew to the side. The hen sprang up, running,
Blood flying from the crushed neck that spasmed
In and out of its feathered truncation,
splattering everyone. Silent, we stared,
then laughed, then roared, then howled, then danced around
the red, muddy, fly-speckled killing trench;
We threw guts and organs until we were
spattered with flecks of liver, draped with
thin strings of bowel, painted with shit.

That night, still shaken by that wild laughter,
with the day's death craze still in me, I
kissed my first girl, slipped my blooded hand in
her shirt, felt her small nipple rise to me,
let her sleek hot tongue in my mouth, staggered
by the silky delta in my cupped palm.
I rose with the swelling moon in the cool.
I rose, into the brawling night seething
with spinning stars, the secret flitting bats,
dancing with crickets' and nighthawks' bright calls. 