



Common Porklore

Humans and pigs tumble through literary history together

by TAMAR ADLER and JOYCE CELLARS illustration by ELIZABETH ZECHEL

JOHN STEINBECK SIGNED all of his correspondence “*Ad astra per alia porci*,” “To the stars on the wings of a pig.” His insignia, a small outline of a skyward Pigasus, was drawn by a Florentine named Count Fossi some time in the 1950s. According to the genial count, he had drawn it in the style of Raffaello.

No matter whose manner the sturdy, plumed swine imitates, the stamp noticeably depicts the animal heading to heaven alone. Idiom has the getaway setting off a litany of unlikelihoods, but looking at Steinbeck’s solo, grinning pig, one can’t help but observe that the pledge calls on the passenger, not the pig.

The pig has some non-negotiable obligations. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the downtrodden Joads christen their odyssey west by fiercely cutting the meat of their last two hogs into squares and salt-packing them into kegs for the journey, the animals’ roasted bones their final meal at home. Needless to say, the pork runs out before the road does. Steinbeck knew that you did not need to use a thousand words if you just told how people eat their pork.

Nell Harper Lee also felt that pigginess was near godliness. A ham costume saves *To Kill a Mockingbird*’s narrator, Scout, during a skirmish. She wears the costume for her role in the town’s Halloween pageant, Maycomb County: *Ad Astra Per Aspera* (“To the Stars Through Difficulties”), for which her cohorts are dressed as a cow, a butter bean, and a peanut. When she and her brother are attacked on their way home, the chicken wire buttress of the costume staves off injury.

Butter beans and peanuts, both wholesome and not without charm, might have provided similar defense, but for versatility, the ham costume was nonpareil. Earlier in the night, Scout’s older brother, Jem, had steered her through the dark, keeping an eye on her glowing fat streaks and a hand on the tapered shank of her costume: “I’ll grab your — hock.”

Pigasus exhausts his resources for us. Sleek and airborne, polished, salted, cured, pulled, ground, spiced, smoked, mixed up and pushed back into its own guts, pig wracks itself to uphold its end. What do we give in return?

A friend who raises Ossabaw-Hereford crosses in Potter Valley, California supposes we’ve given already. He thinks pigs have consented to their relationship with humans. Believing him is easy because, like hearing crows recognize each other’s calls and believing in the smoothly moving pieces of nature, to do so feels uplifting.

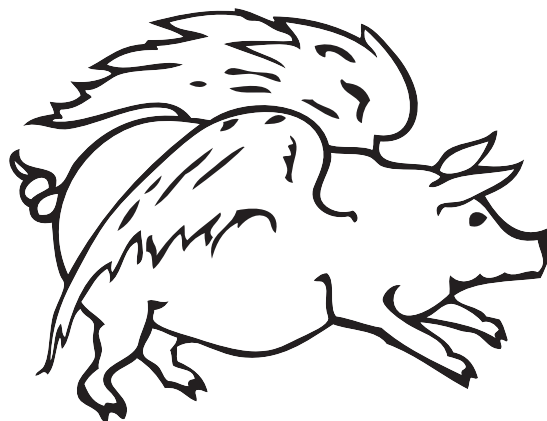
Pigs have a hell of a time living in the wild, he says. Wild boars lead harrowed, miserable lives, their unmeasured liberty something they would happily trade for a hot meal. He says pigs are happiest protected from wolves, cold, and rain, and fed organic goat’s whey and


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spent grains from local beer. The coup de grâce of his argument is that in his pigs’ final moments, when he moves them up to a covered shed to shoot and bleed them, they look him in the eye, and wait, and he waits, and then they submit, dropping their fervent heads, and settle their debt.

The argument for nature’s complicity in domestication is a deep one, though whether we are contriving roles or filling them we may never know. Roald Dahl agreed that whoever runs the paddock is bound to the pan. When the brainy pig of his grisly poem “Pig” concludes his search for the meaning of life and weighs the weights of eating and eaten, he roars and eats his keeper, Farmer Bland.

*He ate him up from head to toe,
Chewing the pieces nice and slow.
It took an hour to reach the feet,
Because there was so much to eat,
And when he finished, Pig, of course,
Felt absolutely no remorse.
Slowly he scratched his brainy head
And with a little smile he said,
“I had a fairly powerful hunch
“That he might have me for his lunch.
“And so, because I feared the worst,
“I thought I’d better eat him first.”*



Regardless of who is left chewing and who is hoisted above sorrow, beyond the pens of unkempt life, they'll have to struggle to take flight. What's true, after all, is not which job is whose, but just that we two elegant, ugly creatures are stuck in this together, and we'll likely be together for a lot of it, quiet or kicking and screaming, to the slaughterhouse, the backyard shed, or hell, all the way to the stars. 

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