

Transference

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The dappled brown goat stood in forced immobility beneath the tree he was tied to, regarding me with a tense bodily expression. I was allowing myself, for a moment, to mourn for him, pre-mortem, and I think he knew it—he saw my stance, my eye contact, my contemplation—and I think he was sensibly alarmed to be the focus of that attention. I want to thank you, I thought at him. You are about to die. I am about to watch them kill you. Your breath will stop and mine will not. Tonight I will eat the muscles off your bones and I will continue living, and I want to thank you. I had no illusions that the goat could hear my thoughts, and if he could have I do not think it would have mattered—having your life taken from you is the worst, most hated, most terrifying possible end for any living thing, no matter how thankful the recipient—but still, I stated my

thanks, voicelessly. It was a selfish act. I knew I was about to witness the forcible taking of life. Not peaceful death, but killing, and the living anguish that goes with it. I wanted him to know that at least I was thankful. And even though I had no way of telling him, in a silent way, I tried.

When the time came to kill him, two Maasai men—both young, warrior age, enrobed in their shukas, bright purple and red—untied him from the tree and led him into the shade of another, where they had collected branches full of fragrant leaves, a bed to keep off the dirt. My friends, my fellow students, had gathered around, and as the warriors led the goat to us by the rope around his neck he bucked and reared, resisting with more fury than any of the countless others I have seen being led by boys across Northern Tanzania. “He knows,” someone said. Animals, espe-

cially those that we have domesticated, are better, I think, at reading human intent and emotion than we know. Maybe in that instant the goat saw that all of us knew more about his death than he did. Maybe all animals that die for us know from the start that we are predators, but it’s only in the final moments that it matters. He saw his final moments in our faces, so he tried to run away.

The two warriors



BY MEGAN MCGRATH, 2012: Serengeti National Park, Tanzania

worked as though their bodies were one, a four-handed thing. One pulled the animal's legs out from under him and laid him on his side, and he held them in his hands, front legs and back; the other wrapped the goat's muzzle in one hand and clenched it like a vice, and then he knelt, head bowed, with his right knee on the goat's outstretched throat, cutting off all of its internal workings, breath and blood. The rest of us stood and crouched around, silently watching, as the goat struggled in the only tiny movements that he was allowed. He flexed against the men's iron hands, clenched his eyes in agony, and mewed again and again, sounding like a child who is being smothered (and so he was). It sounded like a cry for help and also a cry of despair, the sound a thing makes when its own fear overcomes it and it must scream despite the fact that there is no use in screaming. His fear found its outlet in his breath, which was then breath wasted, because it was what he needed more than anything, and there was no recovering it once it was gone.

His cries became weaker and weaker, his struggles were less and less. The warriors began to relax as they had less of a life to contain and press out. The goat's life left with his breath, and he slipped away. I think it was only about a minute before he lay still and seemed to fall into a sleep. Catatonia. I know little about death, but I think that that quick sleep ended his pain. It was the beginning of his death, because his knowing life left him. That was what struck me the most: how fast it left. How fast they crushed it out of him and then it was gone. It was merciful. He didn't know about dying for very long at all.

When his eyelids slid open to reveal glassiness and blank, distended pupils, the warriors let go his legs and rose off of his neck. One of the men kept his hand around the goat's muzzle for several minutes still, bringing the animal the rest of the way out of life. I wonder what it was that the warrior felt that finally told him to let go. The process of dying was done; the goat's nose and mouth, now released, would not suck air and chase life, because life was fully gone. How did he know that it had happened? What did it feel like? From a few feet away, I couldn't

see the transition from dying to dead, but the warrior felt it, let go, and then took out his knife.

Once the goat was dead, it was meat, bones, and viscera, without the animation that usually protects bodies from knives. The warriors slipped the blades through skin and around joints like painters making brushstrokes. Two of my friends, fellow students, knelt to help them in the butchering, and so eight hands, white and black, moved over the corpse with equal sureness, making neat decisions with their knives.

The goat, with his lifeless staring face still intact, lost his legs at the joints—revealing, for the first time, the slick red of muscle—and then lost his ribs, which were lifted off of him in one piece. His organs spilled out onto the sweet-smelling leaves, tumbling blue piles of intestines and a vast, slippery stomach. The butchers lifted all of this away, and only then was there blood. It flowed into the body cavity and sat, a gore pool that began to congeal in the cool air. At the warriors' urging, we lined up and dipped our hands in. The blood is the spoils of those present at a slaughtering. Left to stand, it gels—you have to drink it while it still holds the warmth of life. I watched as my friends' faces became smeared with blood, and then I was kneeling in front of the carcass, dipping my fingers in—and it was warm. I raised my hand to my mouth and tasted the goat's life, salty and tangy like my own blood, but also sweeter, meatier—it tasted like sustenance. This was what he had died for. His blood became ours. The warriors slipped the goat's kidneys out of the carcass, and cut them into slivers. The kidneys are usually reserved as an honor to the most senior person who has participated in a killing, but today a piece was given to each of us. The small chunk of purple organ also tasted of blood; I closed my eyes and chewed, refusing revulsion at the strange melting crunchiness. I want to thank you, I thought. From his body to mine.

That night, we ate goat meat and goat soup. I ate until my belly was full, and every bite was delicious.