



few times in the glow of the kerosene lamp that Ottie had thoughtfully lit to illuminate our deliberations.

"How long has it been?" I asked hopefully.

"About thirty hours," came the reply.

We all looked at each other. I knew what it meant. The cow's uterus was

obviously large enough to contain two calves and an appropriate amount of placenta. The operator had to strip to the waist and wash his hands and arms up to the shoulder. Then he had to insert his hand and arm deep into the uterus and, as the book said, "gently separate the cotyledons." These I as-

sumed must be extensions of the placenta that joined it to the inner wall of the uterus. The problem was that an inexperienced hand might perforate the soft uterine wall, which in these circumstances would mean a painful death for the cow.

"Hmmm," I said, trying to at least appear impressed, or perhaps wise. "Hmmm, let's have a look at her."

The barn was poorly lit but as our eyes adjusted it assumed a nobility of its own, like a Christmas scene.

I circled the cow a couple of times trying to size her up. The risk of leaving the placenta was that puerperal sepsis could set in and kill her. I ventured closer. The cow was eating contentedly and had a wet nose; it didn't look as though she had a fever. Neither Hubert nor I had a thermometer suitable for cows and I didn't know the normal temperature anyway, so this avenue was left unexplored.

"How do you think she looks, Hubert?"

"She looks pretty good to me, Doctor."

"And to me, Hubert."

In those days there was a medical principle called "masterly inactivity." I felt that this was the moment for such a time-honoured course.

By this time evening had fallen. The sun was setting, and as I drove home streaks of sunlit clouds hovered over the golden ripples on the distant sea.

In the early morning again I found Hubert at his front door. His smile told all.

"I don't know how to thank you, Doctor."

"Oh, it was the book, Hubert."

This time I drove home pondering the simplicity of Hubert and Ottie's lives and the complexity of my own.

The money was meant to be circulated so that others get a chance to use it. I had never quite seen it that way but I think Ottie was right.

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AGAINST WISDOM

1. Corpus

Post-autopsy, the returned convexity of skull reshapes the scalp.
The chest and belly, baseball-stitched, hold in one green garbage bag
a mess of unmatched guts, the viscera dissected to detect
the-thing-that-did-it.

The autopsy technician sacrificed a step
to tie off the jugular veins
keeping colour in the face,
a gesture to this man or courtesy to his last beauticians.

"Corpses are more fit to be cast out than dung."

I wash excrement from skin that holds no mystery,
slice and weigh the organs, warm and turning cold and stiff as turds.
The clues are not available to idiots with knives.

2. Breath

Your garden in November,
this moment dragging remnants of itself.

Unharvested summer squash as fat as watermelons, soft
hope grown into vegetables, and then inedible.

A pumpkin too long after Halloween.
The slow deflation of a red balloon saved from a birthday party.

A breath not yet let out
hopes too much to breathe.

3. Skin

Humans have the ocean in them,
but a body can be light
in dance,
when fear lifts mud feet into air,
or when the heavy ocean floats it.

Socrates is dead.
What dances on the last extent of flesh
is flesh extended into laughter,
the hollow at the base of neck
pulled taut between a swallow and a breath.

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