

Table Talk

UNSKILLED LABORER is the technical name for the job that I do. You don't hear often of other positions being specifically *unskilled*, like unskilled chefs, or unskilled doctors. Regardless, the modifier is as upfront and honest as you can get, and I can appreciate that, how the word lets those around me know straight away to expect nothing from me in the skills department. If they do, they have mistaken me for someone else, someone skilled, and that is their bad.

I don't know how other ranches work, but out here in rural New Mexico you get taught like this: you sit behind the wheel of a stick-shift truck that you have to start with a flat-head screwdriver, even though you don't know how to drive stick, while your boss's four-year-old son crawls on your head and you back a trailer stacked with juniper logs through a narrow cattle guard that is clearly in no way wide enough for you to fit through. Got it? Good. Do it.

I wonder if other jobs work like this. If, on your first day, your boss sits you down at the yolk of an airborne plane, will you learn to fly?

Good evening, folks. This is your unskilled captain speaking.

My coworker Randy, a semi-retired

electrician with the physique of a human schnauzer, is seated in the rusted and battered backhoe, digging a grave for Billy, a horse with an incurable neurological disease that causes him to fall down at random times. Billy stands nearby, watching the machine rip up massive chunks from the sun-baked soil, expressing only mild interest. If he's privy to the future use of the grave, he doesn't let on. He looks okay to me.

Out here, people talk. They say when a sick horse is set to be put down—that is to say, shot in the temple with a revolver and heaved into a large rectangular hole—she begins showing signs of increased mental and physical activity, possibly to convince the creatures in charge that she is not defective after all. *Don't shoot me, I was only kidding around. My nerves are actually not turning to hog slop. I'm fine, really, I swear.*

I was raised on a Fisher-Price See 'n' Say, one of those circular toys with an arrow affixed to the center and a barnyard's worth of animal pictures aligning the circumference. You pull down the orange tab on the side and the arrow spins wildly. If it lands on a cow it moos, a horse it neighs, a pig it oinks.

During my first day feeding the Red

Wattle hogs here on the ranch, listening to them shriek bloody murder, I begin, after all these years, to understand that Fisher Price was full of shit. I imagine this has to do with the fact that a vocally accurate See 'n' Say, one replete with all the nightmarish grind-core noises of the ranch, would, for children, lead to a lifelong fear of farms, among other psychological defects. I, for one, was happy maintaining my little cartoonish delusion.

As the hogs sniff at the air near the bucket of dry finisher pellets I'm holding, a white spumescent ooze drips from their marshmallow-like snouts. Vestigial, elongated teardrops of wire-haired flesh dangle from their cheeks and swing pendulously as they compulsively root around in the dust for stray corn kernels and musty apple cores. Anxious to show me that they're not as crazy as they look, that they're actually quite docile by nature, Randy climbs over the fence and stands on the largest boar of the bunch, spreading his arms out wide to maintain a precarious balance. "If I say it's safe to surf this beach," he says, crouching into a full-blown surfer stance, "then it's safe to surf this beach."

Docile or not, a pregnant one among them tends to bring about a certain sort of uncharacteristic aggression in the group, and when the time comes to separate the gravid one from the others, to enclose her in her VIP section on the other side of pens, they're especially pissed and skeptical. While I guard the open gate to keep the big one that just got surfed on from entering the mother's side, he charges me, all three hundred pounds of pork of him.

My only option is to forcibly press the heel of my boot to his squishy face, and even that barely prevents him from trampling me.

We finally coerce the mother into her pen by tossing a few putrid apple cores near her nest of hay, and while she's distracted we wire the gate shut. The one I was kicking snorts off to his soupy wallow and plops down leisurely, seeming to forget everything I've done to him. No hard feelings, I guess.

—Cameron Thomas Snyder

*

AS A KID, growing up, you're always on the lookout for mysteries. My uncle presented me with more than my fair share. A screenwriter, he worked in a one-room house that had no way in. No steps. No porch. No ramp. There was a door, but it hovered in mid-air. To visit—which you weren't supposed to do—you had to hoist yourself up, grab for a tiny knob, and hope you didn't fall. If you made it, once inside you discovered...nothing! Just stacks of paper, a chair, a typewriter, and a smell, an exotic aroma that permeated everything, even the central emptiness of the place. Whatever went on in this room, craft, dedication, perseverance (all words I didn't know at the time), this was its essence, what you breathed. The heart of the mystery. The smell of writing.

Later, I realized it was in fact the smell of burnt coffee, baking on a plate in the days before individual coffee makers. But by then the damage