

TWELVE FICTIONS ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

# The Tale of the Pig Slaughter

Martí Sales



Pau Badia

In a mountain village in Europe

in the spiritual back of beyond

when icy winter arrives

it's time to slaughter the pig

up there in a world of their own

locals gather in the street

they're not from Porto or Geneva

Madrid or Bucharest

they can't make head nor tail

of European Parliament debates

to them the whole business

all sounds like hogwash

they don't know the far right has the run of the place

Brexit's set the cat among the pigeons

even if they knew all this

they couldn't do a thing about it

governments

and people

out of step

like odd socks in today's Europe

always wrong-footed, staggering

from one disaster to the next

but they can't escape the telly

after picking the crops

and checking the chickens are safe from the fox

they spend their evenings on the sofa

watching whatever they find on the box

it's always the same old rubbish

ranting and raving on every channel

people kicking up an almighty ruckus

they don't get out much to look at the stars

the earth and the universe

are on first-name terms

but the majesty of the sky

passes them by

surplus to their needs  
what hubris the earth the centre of the cosmos  
yet  
how many still think  
there's nothing but us, the only sense  
and sensibility  
in an absurdly vast void  
they get on well this lot  
one wheeler-dealer two tongue-waggers  
the usual old-timers  
plus the blow-ins from Barcelona  
loath to return to the city on Sunday  
secretly praying for a downfall of snow  
that'll leave the village smothered in white  
sausages and chops grilled over coals  
washed down with wine from local vines  
bubbling stews with garden vegetables  
a handful of beans garlic from the woods  
and half a rabbit and a rasher of bacon  
from a friendly farmer down the lane  
a lettuce that's never been washed  
—a marvel of nature like  
fish that have never felt ice—

tongues of fire burst forth from the hearth  
warming nooks, crannies  
and the cockles of hearts  
but it never happens  
the German lass Steffi  
has made a place for herself here  
like past generations of villagers  
she's managed to raise  
poultry, tomatoes and three kids of her own  
the father's the shepherd they say  
a strapping young man  
maybe it's him or maybe it's not  
Steffi gets on with her stuff  
she's taken in two German lads  
boys with issues they say  
some love and attention soon calms them down  
the mountain air  
soothes their troubles and cares  
and a spot of hard work  
leaves no time for screens  
and dispels the screams  
of past abuse  
they run with the sheep through fields

and valleys  
chasing and larking the day away  
Agustina and Marcelino  
living legends in the village  
invite them over to their pool  
diving  
splashing  
basking  
in their new life  
but when they can  
they're away  
off to Berlin  
thumbing a lift and cocking a snoot  
out of control  
fucking who they like  
taking what they want  
sleeping in the street till they tire  
and then they're back  
in the village  
there's a poet with sparks  
coming out of his ears  
he shapes words with his hands  
sowing syllables where others

plant potatoes and up sprout poems  
with words in their roots  
from distant dells and hidden gorges  
words like  
griglans  
smeech  
brock  
his tongue on his fingertips  
his eager eyes leap up from the page  
from *Kill All Normies* to the treetops  
from *El cor quiet* to Montmagastre  
from Carner's verse  
to the fashionable fascists  
who hate everything and everyone  
he jots down the thoughts  
whispered in his ear  
by the buzzing bees  
the elm becomes a cloud  
of enchanted umeboshi  
barking dogs tractors chainsaws  
jangling cowbells squawking chickens  
the next-door neighbour's kids  
they say if you listen carefully

you can hear the wind being born  
an open door lets everything in  
an open poem turns nothing away  
yes  
this isn't prose  
yes  
it twists and turns  
scattering syllables pairing words  
all welcome  
yes  
this is a poem  
where nonsense is also new sense  
playing with tongues  
curling up words  
chewing the cud  
you're reading this in translation  
not everything matches the original  
some colours are new  
some meanings are shaded  
some offshoots have run wild  
others were nipped in the bud  
some turnings were taken by chance  
swerving away from the usual path

to a new home stocked with  
strange fruit and perky jams  
made by crabby grannies  
grafted tongues  
freed and reborn  
if we have to belong to a culture  
let it be a sea of tongues  
out with the maladies  
of perfect pure lives  
the poet doesn't go to the slaughter  
but others arrive the day before  
early morning still dark  
the cock's too sleepy to crow  
lights come on  
coffeepots whistle on stoves  
stirring  
lazy lie-abeds  
wiping sleep from their eyes  
a hop, skip and a jump out into the cold  
following their own frozen breath  
an umbilical premonition  
like Donnie Darko's  
they head for Steffi's house

an ancient tradition  
gathering in the square to kill the pig  
a public event for the last 500 years  
since the Reconquest  
since the Jews were expelled  
proving one's Christian credentials  
pigs that divide  
pigs as animal borders  
give us this day our daily pig  
for ever and ever  
and yet before  
it was simply a kind of meat  
with no special meaning  
not a symbol  
but merely a beast  
and also to test  
the skills and fears of the village youngsters  
who baulks at cleaning the innards  
who licks their lips at the bubbling pot  
who covers their ears from the dying squeals  
who ties up sausages with their teeth  
there were no pigs in America until  
Christopher Columbus brought eight

from La Gomera in 1493

they ate lizards

pineapples cassava walnuts and birds

they soon multiplied

and the flu virus they carried

killed a million and a half Indians

Steffi brandishes the knife

she knows what to do

she's won over the village elders

now she leads the slaughter

and sets everyone to work

the struggling pig knows what's coming

it takes six to hold it steady

the knife cuts true

out spurts blood

gushing and gurgling

into the black bucket

they sear it with the blowtorch

the smell of scorched skin

the stench of burnt animal

fills the cold air

now they skin it while

the children clean the innards

with the hosepipe in the field

inside the adults

skin, cut and separate

first head feet and spine

out with the innards

heart and liver

hung up high

next fillets, chops and tenderloin

from the shoulder and belly

then cheeks ears and snout

from the head

the bones are cut from legs and shoulders

the fat for making sausages

and lard

then

chop up the meat and mix together

“on their knees

with two hands

till it sweats from its arse”

as Mesquida said in *Llefre de tu*

salt and pepper

herbs and spices

stuff the sausages

hang them up

set the table

for a celebratory feast

after the slaughter

celebrate the slaughter

after the slaughter

no one asks

what's left of the pig

everyone's full

after the story

no one asks

what's left of the world

we just live here that's all

after the war

no one asks

what's left of the country

we struggle to get by

after Europe

no one asks

what's left of Europe

everyone's dreaming distracted dreams

the answer's always everything and nothing

everything's used, nothing goes to waste

everything changes shape and name

you can't making sausages

without any blood

meat will be meat

cooked in its own fat

we'll throw a great party

to celebrate whatever

victory or fall

what's left or what we've lost

maybe we'll become vegetarians

perhaps there'll be no more pigs slaughtered

they'll roam freely

no longer our borders

perhaps Europe will lose its name

skinned to get through winter

maybe we'll survive on sausages

from the slaughter

on the cured meat

of hope

learning forwards

to tip the scales

to counterbalance past sorrows

and withered cultures

when the cupboard's empty  
just crumbs of the past  
when all our meat's but a memory  
when we've forgotten it all  
when a continent is once again just  
fertile land  
shelter  
possibility  
then we'll have another tale to tell

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**Martí Sales**

Martí Sales és llicenciat en Literatura Comparada. Ha fet discos amb Els Surfing Sirles i ha dirigit festivals de poesia com el Festival de Poesia de Barcelona i el de la Fundació Palau. També ha traduït John Fante, Kurt Vonnegut i John Berger, entre d'altres autors, i ha escrit cinc llibres (*Huckleberry Finn*, *Dies feliços a la presó*, *Ara és el moment*, *Principi d'incertesa* i *La cremallera*).