

Pop Cans and Doomed Pigs

On a sunny November morning more than a decade after his mother's funeral in Canada, Samuel ushers a doomed pig out to the silo corner, an innocuous-looking room attached to the bottom of the silo. He holds a section of board out in front of himself to wall off the escape route as he leads his victim to the killing room.

The pig turns around to poke at the board, trying to get past Samuel and back to its pen.

"He can't know what's going to happen to him," Samuel says. "But he saw his two brothers leave and not come back."

When they get to the killing room, Samuel traps the pig. He steps outside to load his .22 rifle. When he enters the room, he fires a single shot. But the pig doesn't die. When it drops, the pig kicks its legs as if it's running up a greased hill.

Samuel grabs the animal by its legs, spit style, and carries it out of the silo corner. He steps on one of the pig's hind legs and sticks a hunting knife in its throat, severing the jugular. The pig writhes in the dirt and under the sun of morning. It writhes more—writhes and shakes and bleeds; blood splatters the light-brown ground.

Seconds later the pig is dead.

Samuel doesn't appear to give the killing a nonpragmatic thought. He knows I live in a sanitized, packaged-bacon world. He gazes at me as if he's waiting for a reaction. I don't say a word, and I don't turn away. This is a working farm and a pig's a pig. I get it. But it's tough to ignore. Life one second. No life the next.

Hank the dog immediately starts licking up the spilled blood and then turns his tongue to the animal's snout and other parts in thirst or hunger or in some kind of primeval animal consolation. In the background Samuel's rifle leans against the red barn, its butt surrounded by brown weeds and white chicken feathers. Six kittens seek the shade given by the last leaves of a nearby ash tree.

Hank now wears pig's blood on his face like some ancient hunter who honors his prey by marking himself with the blood of his kill.

Ducks in a nearby pen quack incessantly.

To perhaps allow the dog to finish, Samuel lets eight horses out of their stalls. Five tons of horse stampede toward the gate that opens into the west pasture, devouring the space and time of the moment. Hank suddenly loses interest in the corpse and chases the horses, desiring antic exercise more than fresh blood. He barks all the while, snaps at horse hooves, dodges their kicks.

"He doesn't know when to quit," Samuel says, shaking his head at Hank.

Just after the horses run by, Rebekah, who a few years ago became the family's oldest child, comes out of the house with Esther, the youngest. Samuel tells Rebekah to leave Esther with him and go close the pasture gate.

Samuel pours two buckets of boiling water in a plastic tub,

puts the pig in, and begins to scald its hair. He then takes the animal out of the tub, lays it on an empty paper bag, and begins removing the hair with the same long hunting knife he used on the jugular.

At thirty-seven, Samuel remains thin and fit, a breathing, walking, working manifestation of utilitarianism. Physically, nothing about him is wasted; no part of his body is merely along for the ride. At five feet ten, 150 pounds, and not overly or overtly muscled, Samuel seems to possess not an ounce of fat, at least from what you can see. Only his wife knows the sight of anything other than his face, forearms, and feet. And even she may not. He has small, intelligent blue eyes that beam out beaconlike from the tanned face beneath his wide-brimmed straw hat and dark-blue clothing. Every step of this man conveys purpose.

Even the hair on his face, of course, serves a purpose. His reddish-brown beard has hugged and hidden much of Samuel's face since his baptism some twenty years ago. The beard is a symbol that he has been baptized and joined the church. Amish men eschew mustaches, which are linked with European soldiers and persecutors and associated with untrustworthiness.

Samuel is constantly in motion. Mary jokes that he does sit down three times a day: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. His day begins at four thirty every morning except Sunday, when he sleeps in until five. He feeds the horses and milks the cows before joining his family for breakfast at seven. Another Amish guy who lives up the road from Samuel has several teenage sons. Sometimes I see him sitting on his porch smoking his pipe in the middle of a weekday afternoon, confident that his sons are doing all the necessary work. Not so with Samuel, whose first

five children were girls. Spying Samuel sitting down in the middle of the day would be as rare as spotting an ivory-billed woodpecker in East Cleveland.

At times I think Samuel's perpetual motion is an apt metaphor for the high mobility of the Amish. English often think of the Amish as being settled and constant, resistant to change and dedicated to staying put. In some ways this is true, of course, when it comes to adhering to traditional values and not being caught up in the latest technological innovation. Moving, however, seems to be in their blood. As a people the Amish fled from Zurich, Switzerland, to the Alsace region of France, as well as Germany and Eastern Europe, then to America—primarily Pennsylvania, and then Holmes, Wayne, and the surrounding counties in Ohio, and on to Indiana, Illinois and other points south, west, and north. Although the Swartzenrubers originated in Wayne County, Ohio, they now occupy over sixty-four districts in twelve states, including New York, Wisconsin, Missouri, Iowa, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Nearly six thousand reside where I do.

Harvey Shetler, Samuel's father, moved from Tennessee to Ontario, Canada, just after World War II. (Samuel's paternal grandfather, who left the Amish for a time, sailed to Paraguay before settling down in Tennessee and joining a less conservative sect.) Samuel grew up in Canada but he and Mary were wed in Ohio, where Mary and her family lived. After marrying, Mary and Samuel lived in Canada for a time before settling in Ohio. Since they've been here, two of Samuel's brothers have moved from Canada to Ohio, later settling in Iowa and Missouri, respectively, and his father, Harvey, joined Samuel here after his mother died.

To understand the movement and migration of the Amish, one must imagine a cell that divides, forming new cells, which in turn gather and cohere before dividing again, forming yet another microorganism, and other splits soon follow. A similar splitting of cells, leading to the creation of new social cells, has spread the Amish over much of America. They now have settlements in some twenty-eight states, with Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana being home to nearly 70 percent of the country's Amish. Samuel often speaks of picking up and moving out west "for an adventure." Moving is in his blood as well as his people's. And move he does.

He is the quintessential Renaissance man. He's unassuming and capable. He operates an eighty-six-acre farm whose crops include green beans and yellow beans (less than half an acre); three different kinds of potatoes: yellow (not as starchy, first to be planted), red ("taters," planted at the end of April), and white (planted the first of June, popular for this area); two thousand onion plants; two acres of sweet corn; three hundred and fifty strawberry plants, and five hundred tomato plants. When he's not farming he's crafting wooden furniture, raising bees, or building a barn. When he needs to be, he's a mason, carpenter, well digger or duck raiser. The man can treat a horse's hoof like a university-trained vet, and he can birth a calf like a midwife. Samuel also has exceptional people skills, and an easily piqued sense of humor. Although he's lived in the area for less time than I have, he knows ten times as many people, Amish and English alike. He's intelligent and warm, curious about the modern world yet devoted to his own.

But as curious and intelligent as Samuel is, he—like the vast majority of the Swartzentruber Amish with whom I associate—

knows next to nothing about where his people came from. The fact that they do what they do is important—the historical reason for it is one more thing they do not have much use for. They are not a people who ask why they do something, but they are a people who do what they're asked.

Most of the Amish I live among have no real knowledge that their Anabaptist heritage can be traced back to sixteenth-century Europe, where young upstarts wanting change and radical reform at a faster pace than the glacial advance of the Protestant Reformation seemed to promise broke from the Catholic Church and the embryonic Protestant reformed churches to begin their own religious community, based to a large part on adult baptism, or “rebaptism,” which is the word their critics preferred. (“Ana” comes from the Greek *ava*, meaning “again.”) According to the Anabaptists of sixteenth-century Europe—as well as today's Anabaptists—only an adult could make the conscious decision to accept the gift of salvation.

Samuel can tell you that several thousand of his people were executed in Europe centuries ago, but he can't tell you that the persecution was brought on largely by the Anabaptist belief in this idea of a “believer's baptism,” an idea that was considered heresy by Europe's established churches. Because these Anabaptists sought a separation of scripture and government, they were considered dangerous anarchists by established church authorities. These early Anabaptists desired to live by the New Testament, to live separate and independent of higher church authorities, to live lives of peace and nonresistance. They wanted to be the shepherd and the sheep. Samuel also does not know that the Anabaptists originated in Zurich in the

early part of the sixteenth century just a few years after the Protestant Reformation began. The Amish, all Amish, are descendents of the Swiss Anabaptists who evaded persecution by Catholics and Protestants in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe by fleeing primarily to France, Germany and later the state of Pennsylvania, and William Penn's promise of religious freedom in Penn's Woods. Although there are no Amish extant in Europe, they appear to be thriving in North America, particularly in the United States, where their population has doubled in the last twenty years. Now with settlements in twenty-eight states and Ontario, the Amish population is estimated at somewhere between 180 and 200,000.

Although all Anabaptists believed in excommunicating errant members, some also believed in shunning, an idea developed by Dutch Anabaptist Menno Simons, from whom the Mennonites take their name. Jacob Ammann, namesake of the Amish, borrowed the idea of shunning based on numerous biblical scriptures and tried to introduce it among the Swiss Anabaptists. Ammann's view of shunning and other issues provoked a division among the Swiss Anabaptists in 1693 that led to the formation of the Amish.

Just before the Civil War in this country, a group now called the Old Order Amish separated from the main group of Amish when the latter group sought a more liberal interpretation of Anabaptist life and joined the Mennonites. In 1913, the strain surrounding shunning showed again, and this time the branch that wanted an even more strict interpretation of the Meidung and more conservatism throughout the order split off and became the Swartzentruber Amish, a group that began in Wayne

County, Ohio, and took its name from two of its early leaders. (Amish Ohioans can trace their roots in the state back to the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Jonas Stutzman settled in the Holmes/Wayne County area after moving from Somerset, Pennsylvania.)

Although there are always new church districts and settlements cropping up among the Swartzentrubers—sometimes because of westward, and recently eastern and southern, migration; other times because of unsolvable disagreements over the interpretation of the *Ordnung*, or church rules, or because of the personality of a bishop, or a bulging settlement—there is still no sect of Amish more conservative or traditional than the Swartzentrubers.

Although he is not a student of his people's history, Samuel is convinced the Swartzentrubers, who make up only 5 percent of the world's Amish, have it right, although he would never claim to be saved. Many ex-Amish who remain Christians criticize the Amish for not being evangelical. The Swartzentruber Amish do not believe it is their job to convert the masses, nor do they assume they're saved, which would be prideful of them. They certainly hope they're saved, and believe they can improve their chances of salvation by living in obedience to church rules; but deciding whether they are or not is up to God and God alone, and they cannot presume to know for sure. As John A. Hostetler writes, "The Amish . . . [define] salvation as obedience to community as it is rooted in the Gospel accounts."

Samuel has three more pigs to kill and skin. He's selling them, each about fifty pounds, for sixty dollars per pig plus ten dollars to remove the hair, without a doubt the toughest part of a tough job.

Two-year-old Esther slaps the pig with tiny hands in blue knit gloves. Her blond locks stick out from her black head covering, referred to as a cap by the Swartzentruber Amish around here. She looks at me, smiles, and laughs every time she slaps the corpse.

Hank has apparently tired of harassing the horses and has returned to the pig, which he guards from several feral cats attempting to get their fair share of the blood. Hank's a medium-size flaxen-haired mutt, clearly the best dog the family's ever had. And the Shetlers have been through a few dogs. A good Amish dog is one who barks at cars and strangers (at least at night), doesn't chase buggies or trucks down the road or spend too much time nipping at the hooves of plow horses, and doesn't bite or cause any trouble. One blue-eyed beauty was constantly nipping at the hooves of Samuel's horses and getting his legs squashed by wagon and buggy wheels. Samuel had to take him out in the woods and put him down with his .22. Another dog dug into the rat poison and had to be treated similarly. And yet another one had nothing that even remotely resembled a tail, which is something Samuel tried to, but ultimately could not, abide. "I have a hard time thinking a dog without a tail is really a dog." The tailless wonder disappeared as well. Hank seems to have everything it takes, tail and all.

In singsong Pennsylvania Dutch, Esther lets her father know she wants to hold up a pig leg and take off the hair, just

like her dad. Over 75 percent of Swartzentruber men still work on their farms at a time when nearly 50 percent of more liberal Amish men work away from the home, and Swartzentruber children begin working at a young age. But at two and three years old, Esther and Mose tend to get in the way more than help out.

“Esther and Mose are my shadows,” Samuel says. (When Mose began shadowing his mom instead of his dad, Mary referred to him as the “bedroom cat.” Mose took offense at this name and returned to his dad.)

The water in the tub has turned a rusty color.

Esther babbles and claps when she sees the pig’s tail sticking up out of the rusty water.

After Samuel kills another pig, Esther and older brother Mose walk over to the dead animal. Esther talks to the pig in single syllables: “Hey. Hey. Hey.” Soon Mose, who moves like a walking brick with a pleasant disposition, steps on the pig’s hoof with one foot and starts kicking the pig with his other foot. Esther mimics her brother. Samuel tells them to knock off the kicking, which they do for a couple of seconds. Esther returns to kicking at the pig’s dead snout. The soles of her and Mose’s black rubber boots are coated in fresh blood.

With the dog back in the field, several cats and kittens get their licks in.

Samuel’s having a hard time removing the hair so he adds ashes to the water, to make the pig slippery and the hair easier to remove.

Esther asks her dad if the pig is a good pig or a bad pig. She decides for herself it’s bad when Samuel takes it out of the wa-

ter and flips it onto a paper bag. Esther tries to cover the pig's backside with part of the bag.

Samuel tells Mose to get Rebekah and Mary, who've promised to help scald the pigs.

"I finally figured out the best way to do the ears is with your hands," Samuel says as he tugs ear hair off with his fingers. "They're so floppy you just end up cutting them all up with the knife."

Amidst the splash of the pig being moved around in the water, the morning is filled with the sounds of occasional whinnies, quacks, moos, and crows.

"Hey, did you hear the joke about the rooster?" Samuel asks. "Why does he run around after his head's cut off?"

He waits a beat or two like any skilled comedian.

"He's not used to it."

Samuel laughs at his joke.

"I wouldn't want the lady these pigs are for watching me do this," Samuel says, throwing a hairless corpse onto a paper bag. An English woman has ordered four pigs for a cookout she's having and she plans to pick them up at noon, which is making Samuel rush the butchering a bit.

Samuel understands the way most English in America are disconnected from the food we eat. I can't imagine that the killing of these pigs is anywhere near as toxic and barbaric as what goes on in this country's meat-processing plants, but the butchering isn't pretty. Few of us know where we derive our food, unless we're talking about the grocery store. Most of what Samuel and his family eat has been grown or raised on their own farm. Samuel and Mary are pleased that their business is

done locally, either on their farm or on the farms of close Amish neighbors. For their basic needs, they are in no way dependent on the state, national, or global economy. They consume little, and they produce what they need.

All this does not mean that they don't buy a few things they want at the Wal-Mart in Ashland or at the Dollar General in West Salem. Hitching posts can be found at the far end of the Wal-Mart parking lot. (One Wal-Mart in the area expanded its parking lot and erected thirty-seven hitching posts to accommodate its Amish customers.) It's not uncommon to see a Swartzentruber Amish man in a buggy with a large open bag of sour-cream-and-onion potato chips on his lap, having just left the Wal-Mart. The Amish I know best are nothing if not thrifty, and they tend to love the deals to be had at the Dollar General, which has been dubbed the "Amish store" by the English of the area.

Rebekah has finished with the horses and has come over to help her father with the pigs. I ask her if helping with the pigs is her favorite job. She knows I'm joking; she smiles and shakes her head no. What is her favorite job? "Dressing turkeys."

Much like her father, there appears to be nothing Rebekah will not do. The child loves a challenge. When she was ten she began plowing the field, taking her place behind five plow horses—preferring this to milking the cows, which began to bore her. She also helps with the machinery and construction. On any given afternoon, Rebekah might be helping her father grind feed or thrash wheat, or she might be hammering nails or mowing the grass with an old-fashioned blade-and-sweat-only mower. And according to Mary, Rebekah is also the best cook in the house, excepting her mother.

Samuel slits the jugular of another pig and walks away from it as it squirms in the bloodied dirt. He picks up a handful of chicken feathers, wipes off his bloody knife, and says, "Fine rag." He throws the fistful of feathers back on the ground.

After Samuel's finished scalding a pig, he places it in vats of cold water.

"That's as close to refrigeration as I'm going to get."

Rebekah, who is small for her age, pretty and graceful, walks over, sits on a roll of tar paper, and picks up a kitten.

Suddenly the killing and the play are interrupted by another of Samuel's daughters hollering something urgent from the porch.

"Mary's cut herself and she's bleeding," Samuel says as he runs toward the house.

Rebekah, Esther, and Mose stop what they're doing and wait for word of their mother.

Mary is a heavily freckled, big-boned woman who smiles easily. She has a pretty face and nice skin, and wears what the English would call John Lennon glasses. Her voice seems able to comfort toddler and plow horse alike. She always appears to be working—cooking breakfast, lunch, and dinner; canning; helping out with the produce—and yet she'll still apologize for the messiness of her house, even though the house is never dirty. At its worst, the kitchen might be cluttered with kid litter: some crumbs from cookies here, a bib or ball over there. Because she's constantly working around the house, there will often be boxes on the kitchen table being prepared to fill and sell at the Monday or Wednesday produce auction in Homer-ville. And there might also be jars of canned foods: apple butter, beets, honey, pickles, peppers. Her favorite outdoor job is

shucking corn. She likes it because the whole family does it together. Family means everything to Mary, even beyond the regard that most Amish seem to hold for family life. She is deeply tied to her parents, who live only a few miles and a country road farther north. Mary's grandparents were among the original settlers of what the Swartzentrubers of this area refer to as the Lodi settlement, which started in the early 1950s. Originally from Fredericksburg in Wayne County, Ohio, Mary and her family moved northwest to Ashland County when she was a teenager. She's lived here ever since and hopes to stay here for the rest of her life. Whenever Samuel talks about moving out west, it's Mary's determination to stay near her family that keeps him dreaming from Ohio rather than moving to Iowa.

The slap of the wooden screen door reveals Samuel, who's walking back to the barn and the pigs while carrying two buckets of boiling water, which he pours into the plastic basin.

"Mary's okay," he says. "She cut her finger with a kitchen knife. But it stopped bleeding."

Now that he knows Mary's fine, Samuel gets back to the bloody mess on his hands.

"I'm going to try to do this one just right," he says as he lays the pig in water. He wants the water to be just this side of the boiling point this time.

Getting water is not always easy. The well is sixty-eight feet deep. A little gasoline engine is used to pump the water out of it. "I wish it was a diesel for safety reasons," Samuel says. "In the summer we were pumping twelve hours a day, six days a week, and we only ran it dry—or to where the pump couldn't get at it—once. We let it go for a while, not watering the garden, and

then we were okay.” The Swartzentruber Amish of this area are permitted small, stationary gasoline engines, as long as a belt is used to connect the engine to the feed grinder or the washing machine or the table saw.

“You have to move the pig around a lot too,” he says. “It takes water and air to scald.”

Samuel gives up on the last pig, a red one, and decides to use a small propane torch to burn off the rest of the hair. As he applies the torch, he tells Rebekah to hold a piece of plywood up to block the wind.

Esther and Mose bring out balls about the size of softballs. Mose’s is green plastic and Esther’s is a soft rubber. She comes up to me and throws me her ball. We play catch for a while.

A minute or so later a beater of a rusty van speeds down County Road 620 heading east. I have often thought about trying to get the township to erect a sign warning about the number of children here. Between the Shetler family and the Yoders just down the road, there are twenty-three children. Because there are no sidewalks, the Amish children have to walk to and from school in the road, and they often cluster in groups as they walk.

“Everybody drives too fast around here,” I say.

“Did I tell you what happened to the girls the other day?” Samuel asks.

He tells me that Rebekah, Barbara, Clara, and Lena were walking east on County Road 620 on the way to their one-room schoolhouse, just over two miles from their home. On most days they talked and laughed their way to school, or they were silent and lost in thought as their metal lunch buckets

stuffed with cheese sandwiches and fruit banged against their legs. Then a red pickup truck and a few rural English high school boys barged into their daily school walks.

At first the truck just passed them going too fast and too close, the boys shouting things the kids didn't understand and then laughing at their own idiocy. But then the pop cans started to fly. As the girls walked to and from school for the next few days, they had to watch out for the red pickup and the boys in it. The guys would drive by at sixty, seventy miles an hour and hurl pop cans at the feet of the girls. Full cans banged open when they hit the pavement, spraying cola everywhere, on the road, on the girl's capelike outer smocks. And then one day a pop can hit Clara in the temple.

The next time they saw the truck, the kids jotted down the first half of its license plate number, and the next day they recorded the rest. The girls had told Samuel and Mary about the truck and the cans, but the idea of getting the license plate number was their own. The day after the girls got the number, Samuel stopped by the office of the gated community near his farm and asked them to call the sheriff so he could report a crime.

The sheriff came out and took down the story, but Samuel said he did not want to press charges—he just wanted the violence and harassment to stop. Because there's a high school five miles down this same country road, the sheriff knew where to look first. That same day he waited in the senior parking lot behind a red pickup. When the kids came out he told them to find another route to school or he'd make sure they never drove the truck again. The truck hasn't been seen around here since.

“There are so many more people here than when we first came,” Samuel says.

He’s right about that. Since he and Mary moved to Ashland County in 1992, the population has increased by seven thousand, which does not sound like a lot until you factor in how many more vehicles are now on the road. But that’s not the worst of it. Farmland is being bought up by developers and sold in five-acre parcels on which people build generic-looking houses, trying to pretend they live in suburbia, making the Amish feel more and more like they’re being squeezed out.

A car pulls in the driveway. Samuel tells me it’s the lady who ordered the pigs.

Samuel often dreams about moving to Iowa and settling near his older brother; he would not have to butcher pigs and turkeys, raise so many crops, or cut trees for extra money. His brother raises cattle and has a little furniture shop on his farm. He can let the cattle eat grass all year round, and then he sells the meat once a year. The rest of the time he works in his furniture shop. If Samuel moved to Iowa he would still farm, but he wouldn’t have to raise bees, chicks, and ducks or work an orchard.

And there are fewer people in Iowa, and not as many pickup trucks. Maybe Iowa’s a place where country boys wouldn’t hurl pop cans at the heads of schoolkids.

The last thing the Shetler family needs is for something to befall another of their children.