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# Winesburg, Indiana: Beau Morrow

**Abstract**
"Blood is in our blood, son," my father used to say. He was the real butcher. I'm just a man who sells meat. He worked in the slaughterhouse at the north edge of town like his father before him and his father before him and his mother before him. My great-great grandmother, Lil. The way they told it, she was the sweetest girl ever raised until her young husband was gored to death by a crazed, escaped bull. And after that she was a snake. A picture of her hung on our kitchen wall when I was growing up, right between the crucifix and the clock. A tiny woman in a long black dress, a veil over her face, standing right up against a hanging side of beef. When I was little, I thought her hands were soaked in blood but at some point I figured out that was gloves. Then I decided she probably wore them to cover up the blood. I hated to look at her and I looked at her every chance I got. "You can't fight your fate," my father would say.

**Keywords**
butcher, father, meat

**Cover Page Footnote**
**Note:** "This story is exclusively available in the anthology, *Winesburg, Indiana*, published by Breakaway Books, an imprint of Indiana University Press, in the spring of 2015. Available wherever fine books are sold, borrowed, or used as dowry."

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BOOTH

A JOURNAL



# Winesburg, Indiana: Beau Morrow

by Robin Black

"Blood is in our blood, son," my father used to say. He was the real butcher. I'm just a man who sells meat. He worked in the slaughterhouse at the north edge of town like his father before him and his father before him and his mother before him. My great-great grandmother, Lil. The way they told it, she was the sweetest girl ever raised until her young husband was gored to death by a crazed, escaped bull. And after that she was a snake. A picture of her hung on our kitchen wall when I was growing up, right between the crucifix and the clock. A tiny woman in a long black dress, a veil over her face, standing right up against a hanging side of beef. When I was little, I thought her hands were soaked in blood but at some point I figured out that was gloves. Then I decided she probably wore them to cover up the blood. I hated to look at her and I looked at her at every chance I got. "You can't fight your fate," my father would say.

The fact is, I tried to as hard as I could. Genes or not, I knew I was no killer. I pretended to myself that the milkman was my father and that milk ran in my veins, white, bloodless blood. I understood it was weak, but when I dreamed of cows, their udders were full and my hands were on their teats. I could hear the tinny, rhythmic squirt into my pail. I patted them on their rumps when I was through – like a friend. And I knew it would just about kill my father if he found out. It took me to the day I graduated school and was scheduled to go to the slaughterhouse the next morning, the five am shift, to tell him I wanted to own a dairy farm one day. An hour later he was dead. A heart attack. From

shock.

I understood then that I could never fully leave the world of meat. I started at Karl's Finer Food the day after the funeral. But calling yourself a butcher when you've never butchered anything, just displayed it all prettied up with parsley sprigs and Easter basket plastic grass, is like calling yourself a musician because you can work your car radio. It's the kind of dishonesty that eats at your soul. And maybe my whole life has been about finding the one person alive who could understand that. Delia Barrymore, the podiatrist's wife. She was peering down into the sweating meat case one steaming summer afternoon, a kid or two hanging off each arm, when she said "If you don't actually kill the animals yourself, are you truly a butcher? Aren't you more accurately a species of meat salesman?" And she looked right at me with green-blue eyes which are as close to circles as any eyes can be, and right when I realized they were the most beautiful eyes I'd ever seen, her children all looked up at me with the exact same ones so that suddenly it was like there was just no escape from ten green-blue circle-eyes seeing right through my claim to butchery and me seeing all that beauty in all of them. There was just no escape. I said to her, "You're right. You're exactly right. I'm not any kind of butcher at all. I'm just a man who sells meat."

"It must be very difficult for you," she said. "To be living that lie." And her voice was full of understanding, full of care. She ordered two pounds of ground round and I gave her ground sirloin instead, no extra charge.

My mother used to say only people who see you for what you are can truly love you. If they don't see you clearly, they're just looking in a mirror and loving themselves. I know she saw my father for what he was. "He was a butcher to his bones," she told me just before she died. "If he couldn't take it out on the cows, God alone knows what that man would have done to us. Oh, how I loved him . . . " Then she expired.

Delia Barrymore saw me for who I was. I didn't kid myself she loved me, but I loved her right away. She would come in on Tuesday afternoons between four-thirty and five, and we would talk. She said she wanted to understand my relationship with meat. That she could tell it was complex. I told her about my father, and his father and his all the way back to Lil. She asked me to bring in the picture and I dug it out to show her. I described how I ran screaming from the family slaughterhouse as a child and never set foot in it again. How I knew I had let my father down, knew I didn't deserve to be called a butcher. That I was more like a mortician making the dead in my care look more palatable to viewers. That I felt like a fraud every day. We talked about what it would take to get Karl to take down the big red **BUTCHER** sign and put one up that said **MEAT SELLER** or **PURVEYOR OF MEATS** – her idea – or even just **MEAT**. "It doesn't have to be about me," I said. "Did you ever notice, it's the only sign in the market that's about the person working there? It should be about the meat."

She told me she agreed. She said she had always loved meat, any meat. That she craved it constantly. She talked about how sometimes she was hungry for meat in the middle of the night. In the morning when she woke up. She used the word insatiable and then the word comestible and every moment we talked was a torture of desire – as though I was alive for the first time, as though I had been just another piece of dead flesh until she arrived to see into my heart, into my soul. As though I had never seen the value of inhabiting a living body until then. Of being a red-blooded American male. As she spoke, I imagined each part of her, like the drawing hanging on the wall, a dotted line between her hip and flank, her leg and butt, each section something to savor, to taste. She would come in, week after week, fewer and fewer children hanging off her all the while, until by the Tuesday after Presidents Day, she was there all alone. It was her on one side of the counter, me on the other. Only meat between us. She picked out a rump roast and I wrapped my best tenderloin, keyed it in as soup bones. One dollar and seventy-nine cents. But before I could hand her the package, she said she'd mentioned something to Karl about the sign, that she'd told him she thought the word butcher was frightening for her children which was why she had stopped bringing them in, that she didn't believe it was a proper reflection of good family values to have a word on display that means killer, especially not on an enormous red sign – as though it were covered in the blood of the dead. And that she'd heard other mothers say the same. That local children were having difficulty with sleep, dreaming of a killer holding a huge sharp knife, lurking in Karl's Finer Foods, often taking the form of Karl himself. Little sparks of spit flew from her mouth, bright and glittering, like there was some kind of flame inside of her. She said she'd told him it seemed highly preferable to them all, all the mothers, just to have a small sign, maybe blue with gold letters, that said Meat. That the children's nightmares would surely stop. That the community would feel at peace. Then she stopped talking. She was barely looking at me then. Her cheeks were flushed. Her chest rose and fell with deep breaths. Ribs. Breasts. Shoulder. I gave her the tenderloin – and I told her that I loved her. After all those months. I couldn't help myself. I told her it was really my heart that she held in her hands. And it was. She leaned toward me so her body pressed against the glass of the case. Two great big teardrops spilled from her eyes onto the white package in her hand; and for a moment we both stared at those salt water orbs, watching as they soaked into the paper brightness, dark circles appearing where each had sat, as though she had pressed her circle-eyes to the package of meat. And for just another moment I thought how lucky it was I hadn't used the heavy wax paper because then her tears might have rolled onto the floor and been stepped on by other customers instead of making something so beautiful, so perfect. "You should never have to lie about what you are, " she said, and touched my hand. "I love you," she whispered. "But this is wrong." And then she left. Two days later, the Butcher sign was gone. By Friday, the new one was up, just like she'd described. Blue with gold lettering: **MEAT**.

Delia Barrymore and I have never exchanged another word. She still comes to

the counter on Tuesday afternoons, and I still give her the best meat I have, all the while charging her for tripe, but neither of us speaks. We don't have to. I know exactly what she wants. And she knows exactly who I am. She stands on one side of the meat case, me on the other, just like we've stood every time. Flesh between our flesh. Death surrounded by desire.

Insatiable. Comestible. Insatiable.

**Robin Black's fiction and essays have appeared in numerous publications, most recently *One Story, Colorado Review, The Georgia Review, Hunger Mountain* and *The New York Times Magazine*. Her story collection *If I Loved You, I Would Tell You This* came out this spring from Random House.**

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