

A black and white photograph of a small, scruffy pig sitting on the ground in front of a wooden fence. The pig has light-colored, shaggy fur with darker patches around its eyes and on its face. It is looking slightly to the left. The ground is covered in dirt and some dry grass. The fence in the background is made of vertical wooden planks.

Isa Leshko

# Allowed to Grow Old

PORTRAITS OF ELDERLY ANIMALS  
FROM FARM SANCTUARIES

FOREWORD BY SY MONTGOMERY

ESSAYS BY GENE BAUR AND ANNE WILKES TUCKER





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# Foreword

SY MONTGOMERY

Isa Leshko's images of aging animals show individuals near the ends of eventful lives. All the animals photographed in this book were, at one point, unwanted. Many of these animals—goats and turkeys, chickens and pigs, sheep and cows, horses and dogs—were victims of abuse. Many more suffered from neglect. Some were found wandering the streets after escaping from trucks en route to the slaughterhouse. All were rescued. All of them survived to old age because someone understood that these creatures love their lives as we love our own.

The individuality of each animal shines forth in each portrait in this book. Those of us who have lived with cats and dogs know each is distinctly different. But what about chickens? What about sheep? Many people unfamiliar with these animals underestimate their intelligence and deny them individuality. Perhaps two reasons for this mistake are these: farm animals often live in large groups, and we just see a crowd. Equally important, the point at which a human observes them is often stressful for the animals. Nobody's personality shines forth as distinct when everybody is scared. Yet it is at this point—when an animal is approached by a frightening intruder, one who is pointing a big black eye at them and popping blinding flashes of light—that many animals are photographed. This doesn't show us who an animal is at all.

Isa took a different tack. She approached her animal subjects humbly, giving each time to get used to her, returning again and again till they were calm in her presence. Isa took the portraits at the subjects' own eye level, approaching them as if she were a fellow sheep or duck or pig. She avoided flash, using only available light. It took Isa nine years to complete these photographs.

And what do they reveal? These are individuals with knowledge and memories. They have seen people come and go. They've seen friends and sometimes their own children die and be taken away. They remember their friends—as we know from watching joyous reunions of animals and people who have been apart for years. They remember abuse and neglect. They also seem to understand they are safe now. You can see this in their faces.

Another thing you see in these faces: Animals, like people, can grow wise with age. They become finished and complete. Which brings us to the subject of grace.

Most human and nonhuman animals embody physical grace in their youth and are elegant, effortless, and refined in their movements. Most of us lose some of

this in old age. But we may gain a different grace, the kind with which we bless our meals, the kind to which we appeal when we need the excellence and power of a greater-than-human origin. Grace is also, theologians tell us, the power to regenerate and sanctify, inspire and strengthen.

This grace is evident in every photograph in this collection. I'll mention just one (p. 8): two arthritic Finnsheep are lying in the doorway of their barn. They've been napping contentedly next to each other and have just woken up. The photo feels as intimate as touch. It recalls for me the golden hours I spent with Christopher Hogwood, our pig, in the final summer of his fourteen-year life. He had a little bit of arthritis, and some porcine pattern baldness by then, but in his old age had attained both gravitas (at 750 pounds!) and grace. He had always loved gentle touch, especially belly rubs and warm baths. But these gentle pleasures took on greater importance to him, I think, once he outgrew the excitability and athleticism of his youth. In his elder years he seemed to especially relish the times we would simply lie beside one another in the green grass, bathing in the sunshine, the scents of the barnyard and orchard, and the glow of each other's affection.

There are people who say that once animals grow old, they're better off euthanized. I know that's not true. I know it because of my father, who unlike these animals, could speak. He had been a prisoner of war and was a survivor of the Bataan Death March. He would have understood what some of the farm animals in this book had been through before they, like him, were liberated. He was an athletic man who loved golf, tennis, swimming, dance; he loved good food and music and travel to exotic countries. But there were times, he said, that he would purposely let his thirst grow sharp, just so he could better enjoy a pleasure he was denied in prison camp: a simple sip of cool water.

When my father developed cancer in his 70s, he could no longer enjoy travel or golf, swim or dance. Chemo killed his taste buds and dulled his hearing. But there was always the joy of a sip of cool water. There was the comfort of being with his wife and his daughter. I was with him when he died, and up to the last second, he was fighting for one last moment of this beautiful life.

The company of a friend. The warmth of the sun. A sip of cool water. It's not just enough; it's glorious. It's all that really matters, and it's all that ever mattered. This is what the animals in these pages know. This is what Isa's photos show us. Perhaps, as well, they will teach us something just as glorious: that we humans

have the power to let animals live out their precious lives until they are finished and complete. When we learn to do so, perhaps our kind will have attained the grace that you can see on these faces—and realize that farm animals are as worthy of our love and respect as are our companion animals and our fellow humans.



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