

Winter Piglet Diary

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Clothed in Carharts I settle into the straw next to a newly farrowed sow named Aurelie. She is breathing slow and rhythmic, every few seconds she grunts intimately to her aggressively nursing piglets. Their heads bob as they futz with the teats, wiggling the nipple, then sucking for a few seconds. One piglet remains alone in the brooder box keeping warm. I get up to take a peak inside to be sure he is well. As soon as I disturb the little bugger he grunts with surprise and waddles out to join his siblings. The rest of the piglets have begun to slow. They are falling asleep at the teat, snouts press firmly against mother, eyes blissfully shut. But it is cold this morning and they begin to shiver. The auburn hairs upon the domes of their heads stand erect and their sides vibrate. Aurelie, too, has begun to shiver. Its barely 10°F this morning and she has exposed herself to the elements by rolling over to expose her warm under belly to the piglets. While they nurse, her teats warm them and she loses her heat to the cold February air.

The straw beneath Aurelie is actively composting, emitting soft wisps of steam every time she moves. She must long to roll over and nestle her belly into the straw again, but she's a good mother and bears the cold with a stoic shiver. Pushed now more by comfort than hunger, the piglets begin to peel off and return to the brooder box for warmth. The sleepy pig, the last to nurse, still fumbles for milk, sorting through the teats for one last sip before retiring to the brooder. The sow maintains her position as the piglets vacate, steam from her nostrils shoots from the straw over her face with each full-body breath. A patch of frost has condensed on the board above her head. She is a big creature with a quiet demeanor and an unshakable drive to be a mother.

With the piglets gone I take the opportunity to fetch some fresh straw. The pack



Aurelie and Beatrice and their piglets. *Photo by Karma Gos*

is composting well, but seems a bit damp and in need of some dry carbonaceous material. No sooner do I return but the piglets return for another go. All six little snouts find a teat and settle in. The hunger in their bellies won against the cold and they vibrate against mama's udder like fat pink hummingbirds.

As with lambing and calving, late winter piglets require a dotting ritual of late night walks to the barn and careful tending of the youngsters. In a February cold snap that dotting must also apply to the mamas. It calls for extra straw all around, warm molasses water for every meal, and extra corn for energy to burn. My sows are round, red, steamship sized creatures with wiry hair coats and inches of back fat, but even they feel a chill after hours of birthing. The effort of farrowing and the drain of lactation take their toll on even the hardest behemoth. I know, however, that after a couple of recovery days she will be up feeling lively again, causing trouble, flipping over feed tubs and rattling the latch on her door.

As I sit ensconced in the composting pack myself, I watch the piglets come and go out of the brooder box every few minutes. Aurelie keeps her teats exposed. She

is now fast asleep, occasionally kicking and grunting in her sleep like a dog. One leg is thrust through the door of the brooder box and the piglets use it as a hairy bridge as they wobble back and forth from the warmth to nourishment. The rest of the sow house resonates with the snoring, grunting, and growling of the other pregnant sows. They sleep together in a heap like beached whales. Steam rises from their prone bodies as the pack beneath them turns straw and manure into a bowl of warmth. Occasionally someone shifts and grumbles. The big sow Beatrice growls and snaps at the boar as he settles to closely. Some of the sleeping bodies have bird droppings on them. They haven't gotten up for a fair bit and cheerful sparrows in the rafters have marked them with white smudges. The sparrows twitter and flit playfully above while the mamas-to-be sleep away the winter afternoon.

Post Script

Spring is creeping onto the farm and Aurelie's piglets are grown and weaned and moved on to another farm. She and the other sows are outside lounging in the warming April afternoons. They will all soon be weaned from their piglets and enjoying a four-month respite between litters.