

Also by Jonathan Safran Foer

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

Everything Is Illuminated

Eating Animals

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BACK BAY BOOKS

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shallow avoidance? And what about the exhalation? It isn't enough to breathe the world's pollution in. Not responding is a response—we are equally responsible for what we don't do. In the case of animal slaughter, to throw your hands in the air is to wrap your fingers around a knife handle.

5.

Take a Deep Breath

VIRTUALLY ALL COWS COME TO the same end: the final trip to the kill floor. Cattle raised for beef are still adolescents when they meet their end. While early American ranchers kept cattle on the range for four or five years, today they are slaughtered at twelve to fourteen months. Though we could not be more intimate with the end product of this journey (it's in our homes and mouths, our children's mouths...), for most of us, the journey itself is unfelt and invisible.

Cattle seem to experience the trip as a series of distinct stresses: scientists have identified a different set of hormonal stress reactions to handling, transport, and slaughter itself. If the kill floor is working optimally, the initial "stress" of handling, as indicated by hormone levels, can actually be greater than that of either transport or slaughter.

Although acute pain is fairly easy to recognize, what counts as a good life for animals is not obvious until you know the species—even the herd, even the individual animal—in question. Slaughter might be ugliest to contemporary urbanites, but if you consider the cow's-eye view, it's not hard to imagine how after a

life in cow communities, interactions with strange, loud, pain-inflicting, upright creatures might be more frightening than a controlled moment of death.

When I wandered among Bill's herd, I developed some sense of why this is so. If I stayed a good distance from the grazing cattle, they seemed unaware I was even there. Not so: Cows have nearly 360-degree vision and keep a vigilant watch on their environs. They know the other animals around them, select leaders, and will defend their herd. Whenever I approached an animal just shy of the reach of an outstretched arm, it was as if I had crossed some invisible boundary and the cow quickly jerked away. As a rule, cattle have a heavy dose of a prey-species flight instinct, and many common handling procedures—roping, shouting, tail twisting, shocking with electric prods, and hitting—terrify the animals.

One way or another, they are herded onto trucks or trains. Once aboard, cattle face a journey of up to forty-eight hours, during which they are deprived of water and food. As a result, virtually all of them lose weight and many show signs of dehydration. They are often exposed to extremes of heat and cold. A number of animals will die from the conditions or arrive at the slaughterhouse too sick to be considered fit for human consumption.

I couldn't get near the inside of a large slaughter facility. Just about the only way for someone outside the industry to see industrial cattle slaughter is to go undercover, and that is not only a project that takes half a year or more, it can be life-threatening work. So the description of slaughter I will provide here comes from eyewitness accounts and the industry's own statistics. I'm going to try to let workers on the kill floor speak the realities in their own words as much as possible.

In his bestselling book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan traces the life of an industry-raised beef cow, #534, which he

personally purchased. Pollan provides a rich and thorough account of the raising of cattle but stops short of any serious probing into slaughter, discussing its ethics from a safely abstract distance, signaling a fundamental failure of his often clear-eyed and revelatory journey.

“Slaughter,” Pollan reports, was “the one event in his [534’s] life I was not allowed to witness or even learn anything about, save its likely date. This didn’t exactly surprise me: The meat industry understands that the more people know about what happens on the kill floor, the less meat they’re likely to eat.” Well said.

But, Pollan continues, “that’s not because slaughter is necessarily inhumane, but because most of us would simply rather not be reminded of exactly what meat is or what it takes to bring it to our plates.” This strikes me as somewhere between a half-truth and an evasion. As Pollan explains, “Eating industrial meat takes an almost heroic act of not knowing, or, now, forgetting.” That heroism is needed precisely because one has to forget a lot more than the mere *fact* of animal deaths: one has to forget not only *that* animals are killed, but *how*.

Even among writers who deserve great praise for bringing factory farming into public view, there is often an insipid disavowal of the real horror we inflict. In his provocative and often brilliant review of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, B. R. Myers explains this accepted intellectual fashion:

The technique goes like this: One debates the other side in a rational manner until pushed into a corner. Then one simply drops the argument and slips away, pretending that one has not fallen short of reason but instead *transcended* it. The irreconcilability of one’s belief with reason is then held up as a great

mystery, the humble readiness to live with which puts one above lesser minds and their cheap certainties.

There is one other rule to this game: never, absolutely never, emphasize that virtually all of the time one’s choice is between cruelty and ecological destruction, and ceasing to eat animals.

It isn’t hard to figure out why the beef industry won’t let even an enthusiastic carnivore near its slaughter facilities. Even in abattoirs where most cattle die quickly, it’s hard to imagine that any day passes in which several animals (tens, hundreds?) don’t meet an end of the most horrifying kind. A meat industry that follows the ethics most of us hold (providing a good life and an easy death for animals, little waste) is not a fantasy, but it cannot deliver the immense amount of cheap meat per capita we currently enjoy.

At a typical slaughter facility, cattle are led through a chute into a knocking box—usually a large cylindrical hold through which the head pokes. The stun operator, or “knocker,” presses a large pneumatic gun between the cow’s eyes. A steel bolt shoots into the cow’s skull and then retracts back into the gun, usually rendering the animal unconscious or causing death. Sometimes the bolt only dazes the animal, which either remains conscious or later wakes up as it is being “processed.” The effectiveness of the knocking gun depends on its manufacture and maintenance, and the skill of its application—a small hose leak or firing the gun before pressure sufficiently builds up again can reduce the force with which the bolt is released and leave animals grotesquely punctured but painfully conscious.

The effectiveness of knocking is also reduced because some plant managers believe that animals can become “too dead” and

therefore, because their hearts are not pumping, bleed out too slowly or insufficiently. (It's "important" for plants to have a quick bleed-out time for basic efficiency and because blood left in the meat promotes bacterial growth and reduces shelf life.) As a result, some plants deliberately choose less-effective knocking methods. The side effect is that a higher percentage of animals require multiple knocks, remain conscious, or wake up in processing.

No jokes here, and no turning away. Let's say what we mean: animals are bled, skinned, and dismembered while conscious. It happens all the time, and the industry and the government know it. Several plants cited for bleeding or skinning or dismembering live animals have defended their actions as common in the industry and asked, perhaps rightly, why they were being singled out.

When Temple Grandin conducted an industrywide audit in 1996, her studies revealed that the vast majority of cattle slaughterhouses were unable to regularly render cattle unconscious with a single blow. The USDA, the federal agency charged with enforcing humane slaughter, responded to these numbers not by stepping up enforcement, but by changing its policy to cease tracking the number of humane slaughter violations and removing any mention of humane slaughter from its list of rotating tasks for inspectors. The situation has improved since then, which Grandin attributes largely to audits demanded by fast-food companies (which these companies demanded after being targeted by animal rights groups) but remains disturbing. Grandin's most recent estimates—which optimistically rely on data from announced audits—still found one in four cattle slaughterhouses unable to reliably render animals unconscious on the first blow. For smaller facilities, there are virtually no statistics available, and experts agree that these slaughterhouses can be significantly worse in their treatment of cattle. No one is spotless.

Cattle at the far end of the lines leading to the kill floor do not appear to understand what's coming, but if they survive the first knock, they sure as hell appear to know they are fighting for their lives. Recalls one worker, "Their heads are up in the air; they're looking around, trying to hide. They've already been hit before by this thing, and they're not going to let it get at them again."

The combination of line speeds that have increased as much as 800 percent in the past hundred years and poorly trained workers laboring under nightmarish conditions guarantees mistakes. (Slaughterhouse workers have the highest injury rate of any job—27 percent annually—and receive low pay to kill as many as 2,050 cattle a shift.)

Temple Grandin has argued that ordinary people can become sadistic from the dehumanizing work of constant slaughter. This is a persistent problem, she reports, that management must guard against. Sometimes animals are not knocked *at all*. At one plant, a secret video was made by workers (not animal activists) and given to the *Washington Post*. The tape revealed conscious animals going down the processing line, and an incident where an electric prod was jammed into a steer's mouth. According to the *Post*, "More than twenty workers signed affidavits alleging that the violations shown on the tape are commonplace and that supervisors are aware of them." In one affidavit, a worker explained, "I've seen thousands and thousands of cows go through the slaughter process alive. . . . The cows can get seven minutes down the line and still be alive. I've been in the side puller where they're still alive. All the hide is stripped out down the neck there." And when workers who complain are listened to at all, they often get fired.

I'd come home and be in a bad mood. . . . Go right downstairs and go to sleep. Yell at the kids, stuff like that. One time I got really

upset—[my wife] knows about this. A three-year-old heifer was walking up through the kill alley. And she was having a calf right there, it was half in and half out. I knew she was going to die, so I pulled the calf out. Wow, did my boss get mad.... They call these calves “slunks.” They use the blood for cancer research. And he wanted that calf. What they usually do is when the cow’s guts fall onto the gut table, the workers go along and rip the uterus open and pull these calves out. It’s nothing to have a cow hanging up in front of you and see the calf inside kicking, trying to get out.... My boss wanted that calf, but I sent it back down to the stockyards.... [I complained] to the foremen, the inspectors, the kill floor superintendent. Even the superintendent over at the beef division. We had a long talk one day in the cafeteria about this crap that was going on. I’ve gotten so mad, some days I’d go and pound on the wall because they won’t do anything about it.... I’ve never seen a [USDA] vet near the knocking pen. Nobody wants to come back there. See, I’m an ex-Marine. The blood and guts don’t bother me. It’s the inhumane treatment. There’s just so much of it.

In twelve seconds or less, the knocked cow—unconscious, semi-conscious, fully conscious, or dead—moves down the line to arrive at the “shackler,” who attaches a chain around one of the hind legs and hoists the animal into the air.

From the shackler, the animal, now dangling from a leg, is mechanically moved to a “sticker,” who cuts the carotid arteries and a jugular vein in the neck. The animal is again mechanically moved to a “bleed rail” and drained of blood for several minutes. A cow has in the neighborhood of five and a half gallons of blood, so this takes some time. Cutting the flow of blood to the animal’s brain will kill it, but not instantly (which is why the animals are supposed to be unconscious). If the animal is partially conscious or

improperly cut, this can restrict the flow of blood, prolonging consciousness further. “They’d be blinking and stretching their necks from side to side, looking around, really frantic,” explained one line worker.

The cow should now be carcass, which will move along the line to a “head-skinner,” which is exactly what it sounds like—a stop where the skin is peeled off the head of the animal. The percentage of cattle still conscious at this stage is low but not zero. At some plants it is a regular problem—so much so that there are informal standards about how to deal with these animals. Explains a worker familiar with such practices, “A lot of times the skinner finds out an animal is still conscious when he slices the side of its head and it starts kicking wildly. If that happens, or if a cow is already kicking when it arrives at their station, the skimmers shove a knife into the back of its head to cut the spinal cord.”

This practice, it turns out, immobilizes the animal but does not render it insensible. I can’t tell you how many animals this happens to, as no one is allowed to properly investigate. We only know that it is an inevitable by-product of the present slaughter system and that it will continue to happen.

After the head-skinner, the carcass (or cow) proceeds to the “leggers,” who cut off the lower portions of the animal’s legs. “As far as the ones that come back to life,” says a line worker, “it looks like they’re trying to climb the walls.... And when they get to the leggers, well, the leggers don’t want to wait to start working on the cow until somebody gets down there to reknock it. So they just cut off the bottom part of the leg with the clippers. When they do that, the cattle go wild, just kicking in every direction.”

The animal then proceeds to be completely skinned, eviscerated, and cut in half, at which point it finally looks like the stereotyped image of beef—hanging in freezers with eerie stillness.

6.

Proposals

IN THE NOT-SO-DISTANT history of America's animal-protection organizations, those advocating vegetarianism, small in number but well organized, were definitively at odds with those advocating an *eat with care* stance. The ubiquity of factory farming and industrial slaughter has changed this, closing a once large gap between nonprofits like PETA that advocate veganism and those like HSUS that say nice things about veganism but primarily advocate welfare.

Of all the ranchers I met in my research, Frank Reese holds a special status. I say this for two reasons. The first is that he is the only farmer I met who doesn't do anything on his ranch that is plainly cruel. He doesn't castrate his animals like Paul or brand them like Bill. Where other farmers have said "We have to do this to survive" or "Consumers demand this," Frank has taken big risks (he'd lose his home if his farm failed completely) and asked his customers to eat differently (his birds need to be cooked longer or they don't taste right; they also are more flavorful and so can be used more sparingly in soups and a variety of other dishes, so he provides recipes and occasionally even prepares meals for customers to reeducate them in older ways of cooking). His work requires tremendous compassion and tremendous patience. And its value is not only moral, but, as a new generation of omnivores demands real welfare, economic.

Frank is one of the only farmers I know of who has succeeded in preserving the genetics of "heritage" poultry (he is the first and *only* rancher authorized by the USDA to call his birds "heritage"). His

preservation of traditional genetics is incredibly important because the single biggest factor preventing the emergence of tolerable turkey and chicken farms is the present reliance on factory farm hatcheries to supply baby birds to growers—almost the only hatcheries there are. Virtually none of these commercially available birds are capable of reproducing, and serious health problems have been bred into their genes in the process of engineering them (the chickens we eat, like turkeys, are dead-end animals—by design they can't live long enough to reproduce). Because the average farmer can't run his own hatchery, concentrated industry control of genetics locks farmers and their animals into the factory system. Aside from Frank, most all other small poultry farmers—even the few good farmers that pay for heritage genetics and raise their birds with great regard for their welfare—usually must have the birds they raise each year sent to them by mail from factory-style hatcheries. As one might imagine, sending chicks by mail poses serious welfare problems, but an even more serious welfare concern is the conditions under which the parent and grandparent birds are reared. Reliance on such hatcheries where the welfare of breeding birds may be as bad as in the worst factory farms, is the Achilles' heel of many otherwise excellent small producers. For these reasons, Frank's traditional genetics and skill in breeding give him the potential to create an alternative to poultry factory farms in a way almost no one else can.

But Frank, like many of the farmers who hold a living knowledge of traditional husbandry techniques, clearly won't be able to realize his potential without help. Integrity, skill, and genetics alone do not create a successful farm. When I first met him, the demand for his turkeys (he now has chickens, too) couldn't have been higher—he would sell out six months in advance of slaughter time. Though his most loyal customers tended to be blue-collar, his birds were prized by chefs and foodies from Dan Barber and Mario Batali to Martha

Stewart. Nevertheless, Frank was losing money and subsidizing his ranch with other work.

Frank has his own hatchery, but he still needs access to other services, especially a well-run slaughterhouse. The loss of not only local hatcheries, but also slaughterhouses, weigh stations, grain storage, and other services farmers require is an immense barrier to the growth of husbandry-based ranching. It's not that consumers won't buy the animals such farmers raise; it's that farmers can't produce them without reinventing a now destroyed rural infrastructure.

About halfway through writing this book, I called Frank as I had done periodically with various questions about poultry (as do many others inside the poultry world). Gone was his gentle, ever-patient, all-is-well voice. In its place was panic. The one slaughterhouse he had managed to find that would slaughter his birds according to standards he found tolerable (still not ideal) had, after more than a hundred years, been bought and closed down by an industry company. This was not merely an issue of convenience; there were quite literally no other plants left in the region that could accommodate his pre-Thanksgiving slaughter. Frank faced the prospect of enormous economic loss and, what scared him more, the possibility of having to kill all his birds outside a USDA-approved plant, which would mean the birds could not be sold and would literally rot.

The shuttering of the slaughter plant wasn't unusual. The destruction of the basic infrastructure that supported small poultry farmers is nearly total in America. At one level, this is the result of the normal process of corporations pursuing profit by making sure they have access to resources their competitors don't. There is, obviously, a lot of money at stake here: billions of dollars, which could either be spread among a handful of megacorporations or among hundreds of thousands of small farmers. But the question of whether the likes of Frank get crushed or begin to nibble at the 99 percent market share enjoyed

by the factory farm is more than financial. At stake is the future of an ethical heritage that generations before us labored to build. At stake is all that is done in the name of "the American farmer" and "American rural values"—and the invocation of these ideals is enormously influential. Billions of dollars in government funds marked for agriculture; state agricultural policies that shape the landscape, air, and water of our country; and foreign policies that affect global issues from starvation to climate change are, in our democracy, executed in the name of our farmers and the values that guide them. Except they're not exactly farmers anymore; they're corporations. And these corporations are not simply business magnates (who are quite capable of conscience). They are usually massive corporations with legal obligations to maximize profitability. For the sake of sales and public image, they promote the myth that they're Frank Reese, even as they labor to drive the real Frank Reese into extinction.

The alternative is that small farmers and their friends—sustainability and welfare advocates—will come to own this heritage. Few will actually farm, but in Wendell Berry's phrase, we will all farm by proxy. To whom will we give our proxy? In the former scenario, we give over immense moral and financial muscle to a small number of men who even themselves have limited control over the machine-like agribusiness bureaucracies they administer to immense personal gain. In the latter scenario, our proxy would be entrusted not only to actual farmers, but to thousands of experts whose lives have been centered around the civic rather than the corporate bottom line—with people like Dr. Aaron Gross, founder of Farm Forward, a sustainable-farming and farmed-animal advocacy organization that is charting new paths toward a food system that reflects our diverse values.

The factory farm has succeeded by divorcing people from their food, eliminating farmers, and ruling agriculture by corporate fiat. But what if farmers like Frank and longtime allies like the American

Livestock Breeds Conservancy got together with younger groups like Farm Forward that are plugged into networks of enthusiastically selective omnivores and activist vegetarians: students, scientists, and scholars; parents, artists, and religious leaders; lawyers, chefs, businesspeople, and farmers? What if instead of Frank spending his time hustling to secure a slaughter facility, such new alliances allowed him to put greater and greater energies into using the best of modern technology and traditional husbandry to reinvent a more humane and sustainable—and *democratic*—farm system?

I Am a Vegan Who Builds Slaughterhouses

I've now been vegan for more than half my life, and while many other concerns have kept me committed to veganism—sustainability and labor issues most of all, but also concerns with personal and public health—it's the animals that are at the center of my concern. Which is why people who know me well are surprised about the work I've been doing to develop plans for a slaughterhouse.

I've advocated for plant-based diets in a number of contexts and would still say that eating as few animal products as possible—ideally none—is a powerful way to be a part of the solution. But my understanding of the priorities of activism has changed, and so has my self-understanding. I once liked to think of being vegan as a cutting-edge, countercultural statement. It's now quite clear that the values that led me to a vegan diet come from the small farming in my family's background more than anywhere else.

If you know about factory farming and you've inherited anything like a traditional ethic about raising animals, it's hard not to have something

deep inside you recoil at what animal agriculture has become. And I'm not talking about some saintly farm ethic, either. I'm talking about a ranch ethic that tolerated castration, branding, and meant that you killed the runts and one fine day took hold of animals that perhaps knew you mostly as the bringer of food and cut their throats. There is a lot of violence in traditional techniques. But there was also compassion, something that tends to be less remembered, perhaps out of necessity. The formula for a good animal farm has been turned on its head. Instead of speaking of care, you'll often hear a knee-jerk response from farmers when the topic of animal welfare is raised: "No one gets in this business because they hate animals." It's a curious statement. It's a statement that says something by way of not saying it. The implication, of course, is that these men often wanted to be animal farmers because they liked animals, enjoyed caring for and protecting them. I'm not saying that this is without its contradictions, but there is truth in it. It's also a statement that implies an apology without giving one. Why, after all, does it need to be said that they don't hate animals?

Sadly, people in animal agriculture today are increasingly unlikely to be bearers of traditional rural values. Many of the people at city-based animal advocacy organizations, whether they know it or not, are from a strictly historical perspective far better representatives of rural values like respect for neighbors, straightforwardness, land stewardship, and, of course, respect for the creatures given into their hands. Since the world has changed so much, the same values don't lead to the same choices anymore.

I've had a lot of hope for more sustainable grass-based cattle ranches and seen a new vigor among the remaining small family hog farms, but when it came to the poultry industry, I had all but given up hope until I met Frank Reese and visited his incredible farm. Frank and the handful of farmers he's given some of his birds to are the only ones in a position to develop a proper

alternative to the poultry factory farm model from the genetics up—and that's what's needed.

When I spoke to Frank about the barriers he faced, his frustration with a half-dozen issues that couldn't be easily addressed without a significant cash influx came into focus. The other thing that was clear was that the demand for his product wasn't only significant, but positively immense—an entrepreneur's dream. Frank was regularly refusing orders for more birds than he had raised in his entire life because he didn't have the capacity to meet them. The organization I founded, Farm Forward, offered to help him create a business plan. A few months later, our director and I were in Frank's living room with the first possible investor.

We then set to the cat-herding work of bringing together the considerable influence of many of Frank's existing admirers—reporters, academics, foodies, politicians—and coordinating their energy in the ways that would deliver results most quickly. Plans for expansion were moving along. Frank had added several breeds of heritage chickens to his turkey flocks. The first of a series of new buildings that he needed was under construction, and he was in negotiations with a major retailer for a large contract. And that's when the slaughterhouse he used was bought and closed.

We had actually anticipated this. Still, Frank's growers—the farmers who raise many of the birds he hatches, and stood to lose most of a year's salary—were scared. Frank decided the only long-term solution was to build a slaughter facility that he owned, ideally a mobile slaughterhouse that could be right on the farm and eliminate the stress of transport. Of course he was right. So we started figuring out the mechanics and economics of doing this. It was new territory for me—intellectually, of course, but also emotionally. I thought the work would require regular speeches to myself correcting my resistance to kill animals. But if anything made me uncomfortable, it was my lack of discomfort. Why, I kept wondering, aren't I at least uneasy about this?

My grandfather on my mother's side wanted to stay in farming. He was forced out like so many others, but my mother had already grown up on a working farm. She was in a small town in the Midwest with a graduating high school class of forty. For a time, my grandfather raised pigs. He castrated and even used some confinement that was moving in the direction of today's hog factory farms. Still, they were animals to him, and if one got sick, he made sure that individual got extra care and attention. He didn't pull out a calculator and figure out whether it would be more profitable to let the animal languish. The thought would have been unchristian to him, cowardly, indecent.

That small victory of caring over the calculator is all you need to know to understand why I'm vegan today. And why I help build slaughterhouses. This is not paradoxical or ironic. The very same impulse that makes me personally committed to eschewing meats, eggs, and dairy has led me to devote my time to helping create a slaughterhouse that Frank would own and that could be a model for others. If you can't beat them, join them? No. It's a question of properly identifying who the them is.

7.

My Wager

AFTER HAVING SPENT NEARLY THREE years learning about animal agriculture, my resolve has become strong in two directions. I've become a committed vegetarian, whereas before I waffled among any number of diets. It's now hard to imagine that changing. I simply don't want anything to do with the factory farm, and refraining from meat is the only realistic way for me to do that.

In another direction, though, the vision of sustainable farms that give animals a good life (a life as good as we give our dogs or cats) and an easy death (as easy a death as we give our suffering and terminally ill companion animals) has moved me. Paul, Bill, Nicolette, and most of all Frank are not only good people, but extraordinary people. They should be among the people a president consults when selecting a secretary of agriculture. Their farms are what I want our elected officials to strive to create and our economy to support.

The meat industry has tried to paint people who take this two-fold stance as absolutist vegetarians hiding a radicalized agenda. But ranchers can be vegetarians, vegans can build slaughterhouses, and I can be a vegetarian who supports the best of animal agriculture.

I feel certain that Frank's ranch will be run honorably, but how sure can I be about the day-to-day running of other farms that follow his model? How sure do I need to be? Is the strategy of the selective omnivore "naive" in a way that vegetarianism is not?

How easy is it to avow a responsibility to the beings most within our power and at the same time raise them only to kill them? Marlene Halverson puts the strange situation of the animal farmer eloquently:

The ethical relationship of farmers to farm animals is unique. The farmer must raise a living creature that is destined to an endpoint of slaughter for food, or culling and death after a lifetime of production, without becoming emotionally attached or, conversely, without becoming cynical about the animal's need for a decent life while the animal is alive. The farmer must *somehow* raise an animal as a commercial endeavor without regarding the animal as a mere commodity.

Is this a reasonable thing to ask of farmers? Given the pressures of our industrial era, is meat by necessity a disavowal, a frustration

if not an outright denial of compassion? Contemporary agriculture has given us cause for skepticism, but no one knows what tomorrow's farms will look like.

What we do know, though, is that if you eat meat today, your typical choice is between animals raised with either more (chicken, turkey, fish, and pork) or less (beef) cruelty. Why do so many of us feel we have to choose between such options? What would render such utilitarian calculations of the least horrible option beside the point? At what moment would the absurd choices readily available today give way to the simplicity of a firmly drawn line: *this is unacceptable?*

Just how destructive does a culinary preference have to be before we decide to eat something else? If contributing to the suffering of billions of animals that live miserable lives and (quite often) die in horrific ways isn't motivating, what would be? If being the number one contributor to the most serious threat facing the planet (global warming) isn't enough, what is? And if you are tempted to put off these questions of conscience, to say *not now*, then *when?*

We have let the factory farm replace farming for the same reasons our cultures have relegated minorities to being second-class members of society and kept women under the power of men. We treat animals as we do because we want to and can. (Does anyone really wish to deny this anymore?) The myth of consent is perhaps *the* story of meat, and much comes down to whether this story, when we are realistic, is plausible.

It isn't. Not anymore. It wouldn't satisfy anyone who didn't have an interest in eating animals. At the end of the day, factory farming isn't about feeding people; it's about money. Barring some rather radical legal and economic changes, it must be. And whether or not it's right to kill animals for food, we know that in today's dominant systems it's impossible to kill them without (at least) inflicting occasional torture. This is why even Frank—the most well-intentioned

farmer one could imagine—apologizes to his animals as they are sent off to slaughter. He's made a compromise rather than cut a fair deal.

A not particularly funny thing happened at Niman Ranch recently. Just before this book went to press, Bill was driven out of his namesake company. As he tells it, his own board forced him to leave, quite simply because they wanted to do things more profitably and less ethically than he would allow while remaining at the helm. It seems that even this company—literally the most impressive national meat provider in the United States—has sold out. I included Niman Ranch in this book because it was the best evidence that selective omnivores have a viable strategy. What am I—are we—to make of its fall?

For now, Niman Ranch remains the only nationally available brand that I can say represents a robust improvement in the lives of animals (pigs much more than cattle). But how good would you feel sending your money to these people? If animal agriculture has become a joke, perhaps this is the punch line: even Bill Niman has said he would no longer eat Niman Ranch beef.

I have placed my wager on a vegetarian diet *and* I have enough respect for people like Frank, who have bet on a more humane animal agriculture, to support their kind of farming. This is not in the end a complicated position. Nor is it a veiled argument for vegetarianism. It *is* an argument for vegetarianism, but it's also an argument for another, wiser animal agriculture and more honorable omnivory.

If we are not given the option to live without violence, we are given the choice to center our meals around harvest or slaughter, husbandry or war. We have chosen slaughter. We have chosen war. That's the truest version of our story of eating animals.

Can we tell a new story?

STORYTELLING

Where will it end?