

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?

## The Last Thanksgiving of My Childhood

THROUGHOUT MY CHILDHOOD, WE CELEBRATED Thanksgiving at my uncle and aunt's house. My uncle, my mother's younger brother, was the first person on that side of the family to be born on this side of the Atlantic. My aunt can trace her lineage back to the *Mayflower*. That unlikely pairing of histories was no small part of what made those Thanksgivings so special, and memorable, and, in the very best sense of the word, American.

We would arrive around two o'clock. The cousins would play football on the sloping sliver of a front yard until my little brother got hurt, at which point we would head up to the attic to play football on the various video game systems. Two floors beneath us, Maverick salivated at the stove's window, my father talked politics and cholesterol, the Detroit Lions played their hearts out on an unwatched TV, and my grandmother, surrounded by her family, thought in the language of her dead relatives.

Two dozen or so mismatched chairs circumscribed four tables of slightly different heights and widths, pushed together and covered in matching cloths. No one was fooled into thinking this setup was perfect, but it was. My aunt placed a small pile of popcorn kernels on each plate, which, in the course of the meal, we were supposed to transfer to the table as symbols of things we were thankful for. Dishes came out continuously; some went clockwise, some counter, some zigzagged down the length of the table: sweet potato casserole, homemade rolls, green beans with almonds, cranberry concoctions, yams, buttery mashed potatoes, my grandmother's wildly

incongruous kugel, trays of gherkins and olives and marinated mushrooms, and a cartoonishly large turkey that had been put in the oven when last year's was taken out. We talked and talked: about the Orioles and Redskins, changes in the neighborhood, our accomplishments, and the anguish of others (our own anguish was off-limits), and all the while, my grandmother would go from grandchild to grandchild, making sure no one was starving.

Thanksgiving is the holiday that encompasses all others. All of them, from Martin Luther King Day to Arbor Day to Christmas to Valentine's Day, are in one way or another about being thankful. But Thanksgiving is freed from any particular thing we are thankful for. We aren't celebrating the Pilgrims, but what the Pilgrims celebrated. (The Pilgrims weren't even a feature of the holiday until the late nineteenth century.) Thanksgiving is an American holiday, but there's nothing specifically American about it—we aren't celebrating America, but American ideals. Its openness makes it available to anyone who feels like expressing thanks, and points beyond the crimes that made America possible, and the commercialization, kitsch, and jingoism that have been heaved onto the shoulders of the holiday.

Thanksgiving is the meal we aspire for other meals to resemble. Of course most of us can't (and wouldn't want to) cook all day every day, and of course such food would be fatal if consumed with regularity, and how many of us really want to be surrounded by our extended families every single night? (It can be challenge enough to have to eat with myself.) But it's nice to imagine all meals being so deliberate. Of the thousand-or-so meals we eat every year, Thanksgiving dinner is the one that we try most earnestly to get right. It holds the hope of being a *good* meal, whose ingredients, efforts, setting, and consuming are expressions of the best in us. More than any other meal, it is about good eating and good thinking.

And more than any other food, the Thanksgiving turkey embodies the paradoxes of eating animals: what we do to living turkeys is just about as bad as anything humans have ever done to any animal in the history of the world. Yet what we do with their dead bodies can feel so powerfully good and right. The Thanksgiving turkey is the flesh of competing instincts—of remembering and forgetting.

I'm writing these final words a few days before Thanksgiving. I live in New York now and only rarely—at least according to my grandmother—get back to DC. No one who was young is young anymore. Some of those who transferred kernels to the table are gone. And there are new family members. (*I am now we.*) As if the musical chairs I played at birthday parties were preparation for all of this ending and beginning.

This will be the first year we celebrate in my home, the first time I will prepare the food, and the first Thanksgiving meal at which my son will be old enough to eat the food the rest of us eat. If this entire book could be decanted into a single question—not something easy, loaded, or asked in bad faith, but a question that fully captured the problem of eating and not eating animals—it might be this: Should we serve turkey at Thanksgiving?

2.

## What Do Turkeys Have to Do with Thanksgiving?

WHAT IS ADDED BY HAVING a turkey on the Thanksgiving table? Maybe it tastes good, but taste isn't the reason it's there—most people don't eat very much turkey throughout the year. (Thanksgiving Day

accounts for 18 percent of annual turkey consumption.) And despite the pleasure we take in eating vast amounts, Thanksgiving is not about being gluttonous—it is about the opposite.

Perhaps the turkey is there because it is fundamental to the ritual—it is how we celebrate Thanksgiving. Why? Because Pilgrims might have eaten it at their first Thanksgiving? It's more likely that they didn't. We know that they didn't have corn, apples, potatoes, or cranberries, and the only two written reports from the legendary Thanksgiving at Plymouth mention venison and wildfowl. Though it's conceivable that they ate wild turkey, we know that the turkey wasn't made part of the ritual until the nineteenth century. And historians have now discovered an even earlier Thanksgiving than the 1621 Plymouth celebration that English-American historians made famous. Half a century before Plymouth, early American settlers celebrated Thanksgiving with the Timucua Indians in what is now Florida—the best evidence suggests that the settlers were Catholic rather than Protestant, and spoke Spanish rather than English. They dined on bean soup.

But let's just make believe that the Pilgrims invented Thanksgiving and were eating turkey. Putting aside the obvious fact that the Pilgrims did many things that we wouldn't want to do now (and that we want to do many things they didn't), the turkeys *we* eat have about as much in common with the turkeys the Pilgrims might have eaten as does the ever-punch-lined tofurkey. At the center of *our* Thanksgiving tables is an animal that never breathed fresh air or saw the sky until it was packed away for slaughter. At the end of *our* forks is an animal that was incapable of reproducing sexually. In *our* bellies is an animal with antibiotics in its belly. The very genetics of our birds are radically different. If the Pilgrims could have seen into the future, what would they have thought of the turkey on our table? Without exaggeration, it's unlikely that they would have recognized it as a turkey.

And what would happen if there were no turkey? Would the tradition be broken, or injured, if instead of a bird we simply had the sweet potato casserole, homemade rolls, green beans with almonds, cranberry concoctions, yams, buttery mashed potatoes, pumpkin and pecan pies? Maybe we could add some Timucuan bean soup. It's not so hard to imagine it. See your loved ones around the table. Hear the sounds, smell the smells. There is no turkey. Is the holiday undermined? Is Thanksgiving no longer Thanksgiving?

Or would Thanksgiving be enhanced? Would the choice not to eat turkey be a more active way of celebrating how thankful we feel? Try to imagine the conversation that would take place. *This is why our family celebrates this way.* Would such a conversation feel disappointing or inspiring? Would fewer or more values be transmitted? Would the joy be lessened by the hunger to eat that particular animal? Imagine your family's Thanksgivings after you are gone, when the question is no longer "Why don't we eat this?" but the more obvious one: "Why did they ever?" Can the imagined gaze of future generations shame us, in Kafka's sense of the word, into remembering?

The secrecy that has enabled the factory farm is breaking down. The three years I spent writing this book, for example, saw the first documentation that livestock contribute more to global warming than anything else; saw the first major research institution (the Pew Commission) recommend the total phaseout of multiple dominant intensive-confinement practices; saw the first state (Colorado) legalize common factory farm practices (gestation and veal crates) as a result of negotiations with industry (rather than campaigns against industry); saw the first supermarket chain of any kind (Whole Foods) commit to a systematic and extensive program of animal welfare labeling; and saw the first major national newspaper (the *New York Times*) editorialize against factory farming as a whole, arguing

that “animal husbandry has been turned into animal abuse,” and “manure... has been turned into toxic waste.”

When Celia Steele raised that first flock of confined chicks, she could not have foreseen the effects of her actions. When Charles Vantress crossed a red-feathered Cornish and a New Hampshire to produce the 1946 “Chicken of Tomorrow,” the ancestor of today’s factory broilers, he could not have comprehended what he was contributing to.

*We can’t plead ignorance, only indifference. Those alive today are the generations that came to know better. We have the burden and the opportunity of living in the moment when the critique of factory farming broke into the popular consciousness. We are the ones of whom it will be fairly asked, What did you do when you learned the truth about eating animals?*

3.

### The Truth About Eating Animals

SINCE 2000—AFTER TEMPLE GRANDIN reported improvement in slaughterhouse conditions—workers have been documented using poles like baseball bats to hit baby turkeys, stomping on chickens to watch them “pop,” beating lame pigs with metal pipes, and knowingly dismembering fully conscious cattle. One needn’t rely on undercover videos by animal rights organizations to know of these atrocities—although they are plentiful and sufficient. I could have filled several books—an encyclopedia of cruelty—with worker testimonials.

Gail Eisnitz comes close to creating such an encyclopedia in her

book *Slaughterhouse*. Researched over a ten-year period, it is filled with interviews with workers who, combined, represent more than two million hours of slaughterhouse experience; no work of investigative journalism on the topic is as comprehensive.

One time the knocking gun was broke all day, they were taking a knife and cutting the back of the cow’s neck open while he’s still standing up. They would just fall down and be ashaking. And they stab cows in the butt to make ’em move. Break their tails. They beat them so bad.... And the cow be crying with its tongue stuck out.

This is hard to talk about. You’re under all this stress, all this pressure. And it really sounds mean, but I’ve taken [electric] prods and stuck them in their eyes. And held them there.

Down in the blood pit they say that the smell of blood makes you aggressive. And it does. You get an attitude that if that hog kicks at me, I’m going to get even. You’re already going to kill the hog, but that’s not enough. It has to suffer.... You go in hard, push hard, blow the windpipe, make it drown in its own blood. Split its nose. A live hog would be running around the pit. It would just be looking up at me and I’d be sticking, and I would just take my knife and—eerk—cut its eye out while it was just sitting there. And this hog would just scream. One time I took my knife—it’s sharp enough—and I sliced off the end of a hog’s nose, just like a piece of bologna. The hog went crazy for a few seconds. Then it just sat there looking kind of stupid. So I took a handful of salt brine and ground it into his nose. Now that hog really went nuts, pushing its nose all over the place. I still had a bunch of salt left on my hand—I was wearing a rubber glove—and I stuck the salt right up the hog’s ass. The poor hog didn’t know whether to shit or go blind.... I wasn’t

the only guy doing this kind of stuff. One guy I work with actually chases hogs into the scalding tank. And everybody—hog drivers, shacklers, utility men—uses lead pipes on hogs. Everybody knows it, all of it.

These statements are disturbingly representative of what Eisnitz discovered in interviews. The events described are not sanctioned by industry, but they should not be regarded as uncommon.

Undercover investigations have consistently revealed that farmworkers, laboring under what Human Rights Watch describes as “systematic human rights violations,” have often let their frustrations loose on farmed animals or simply succumbed to the demands of supervisors to keep slaughter lines moving at all costs and without second thoughts. Some workers clearly are sadistic in the literal sense of that term. But I never met such a person. The several dozen workers I met were good people, smart and honest people doing their best in an impossible situation. The responsibility lies with the mentality of the meat industry that treats both animals and “human capital” like machines. One worker put it this way:

The worst thing, worse than the physical danger, is the emotional toll. If you work in the stick pit for any period of time, you develop an attitude that lets you kill things but doesn't let you care. You may look a hog in the eye that's walking around down in the blood pit with you and think, God, that really isn't a bad-looking animal. You may want to pet it. Pigs down on the kill floor have come up and nuzzled me like a puppy. Two minutes later I had to kill them—beat them to death with a pipe.... When I worked upstairs taking hogs' guts out, I could cop an attitude that I was working on a production line, helping to feed people. But down in the stick pit I wasn't feeding people. I was killing things.

Just how common do such savageries have to be for a decent person to be unable to overlook them? If you knew that one in one thousand food animals suffered actions like those described above, would you continue to eat animals? One in one hundred? One in ten? Toward the end of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan writes, “I have to say there is a part of me that envies the moral clarity of the vegetarian.... Yet part of me pities him, too. Dreams of innocence are just that; they usually depend on a denial of reality that can be its own form of hubris.” He's right that emotional responses can lead us to an arrogant disconnect. But is the person who makes an effort to act on the dream of innocence really the one to be pitied? And who, in this case, is denying reality?

When Temple Grandin first began to quantify the scale of abuse in slaughterhouses, she reported witnessing “deliberate acts of cruelty occurring on a regular basis” at 32 percent of the plants she surveyed during announced visits in the United States. It's such a shocking statistic I had to read it three times. *Deliberate* acts, occurring on a *regular* basis, witnessed by an *auditor*—witnessed during *announced* audits that gave the slaughterhouse time to clean up the worst problems. What about cruelties that weren't witnessed? And what about accidents, which must have been far more common?

Grandin has emphasized that conditions have improved as more meat retailers demand slaughter audits from their suppliers, but how much? Reviewing the most recent audit of chicken slaughter conducted by the National Chicken Council, Grandin found that 26 percent of slaughterhouses had abuses so severe they *should* have failed. (The industry itself, disturbingly, found the audit results perfectly acceptable and gave all plants a pass even when live birds were thrown, tossed in the trash, and found scalded alive.) According to Grandin's most recent survey of beef plants, fully 25 percent

of the slaughterhouses had abuses so severe that they automatically failed her audit (“hanging a sensible animal on the rail” is given as a paradigmatic example of the kind of abuse that dictates an automatic failure). In recent surveys, Grandin witnessed a worker dismembering a fully conscious cow, cows waking up on the bleed rail, and workers “poking cows in the anus area with an electric prod.” What went on when she was not looking? And what about the vast majority of plants that don’t open their doors to audits in the first place?

Farmers have lost—have had taken from them—a direct, human relationship with their work. Increasingly, they don’t own the animals, can’t determine their methods, aren’t allowed to apply their wisdom, and have no alternative to high-speed industrial slaughter. The factory model has estranged them not only from how they labor (hack, chop, saw, stick, lop, cut), but what they produce (disgusting, unhealthy food) and how the product is sold (anonymously and cheaply). Human beings cannot be human (much less humane) under the conditions of a factory farm or slaughterhouse. It’s the most perfect workplace alienation in the world right now. Unless you consider what the animals experience.

4.

## The American Table

WE SHOULDN’T KID OURSELVES ABOUT the number of ethical eating options available to most of us. There isn’t enough nonfactory chicken produced in America to feed the population of Staten Island and not enough nonfactory pork to serve New York City, let alone the country. Ethical meat is a promissory note, not a reality. Any

ethical-meat advocate who is serious is going to be eating a lot of vegetarian fare.

A good number of people seem to be tempted to continue supporting factory farms while also buying meat outside that system when it is available. That’s nice. But if it is as far as our moral imaginations can stretch, then it’s hard to be optimistic about the future. Any plan that involves funneling money to the factory farm won’t end factory farming. How effective would the Montgomery bus boycott have been if the protesters had used the bus when it became inconvenient not to? How effective would a strike be if workers announced they would go back to work as soon as it became difficult to strike? If anyone finds in this book encouragement to buy some meat from alternative sources while buying factory farm meat as well, they have found something that isn’t here.

If we are at all serious about ending factory farming, then the absolute least we can do is stop sending checks to the absolute worst abusers. For some, the decision to eschew factory-farmed products will be easy. For others, the decision will be a hard one. To those for whom it sounds like a hard decision (I would have counted myself in this group), the ultimate question is whether it is worth the inconvenience. *We know*, at least, that this decision will help prevent deforestation, curb global warming, reduce pollution, save oil reserves, lessen the burden on rural America, decrease human rights abuses, improve public health, and help eliminate the most systematic animal abuse in world history. What we don’t know, though, may be just as important. How would making such a decision change *us*?

Setting aside the direct material changes initiated by opting out of the factory farm system, the decision to eat with such deliberateness would itself be a force with enormous potential. What kind of world would we create if three times a day we activated our

compassion and reason as we sat down to eat, if we had the moral imagination and the pragmatic will to change our most fundamental act of consumption? Tolstoy famously argued that the existence of slaughterhouses and battlefields is linked. Okay, we don't fight wars because we eat meat, and some wars should be fought—which is not to mention that Hitler was a vegetarian. But compassion is a muscle that gets stronger with use, and the regular exercise of choosing kindness over cruelty would change us.

It might sound naive to suggest that whether you order a chicken patty or a veggie burger is a profoundly important decision. Then again, it certainly would have sounded fantastic if in the 1950s you were told that where you sat in a restaurant or on a bus could begin to uproot racism. It would have sounded equally fantastic if you were told in the early 1970s, before César Chávez's workers' rights campaigns, that refusing to eat grapes could begin to free farmworkers from slave-like conditions. It might sound fantastic, but when we bother to look, it's hard to deny that our day-to-day choices shape the world. When America's early settlers decided to throw a tea party in Boston, forces powerful enough to create a nation were released. Deciding what to eat (and what to toss overboard) is the founding act of production and consumption that shapes all others. Choosing leaf or flesh, factory farm or family farm, does not in itself change the world, but teaching ourselves, our children, our local communities, and our nation to choose conscience over ease can. One of the greatest opportunities to live our values—or betray them—lies in the food we put on our plates. And we will live or betray our values not only as individuals, but as nations.

We have grander legacies than the quest for cheap products. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote passionately about the time when “one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular.” Sometimes we simply have to make a decision because “one’s

conscience tells one that it is right.” These famous words of King's, and the efforts of Chávez's United Farm Workers, are also our legacy. We might want to say that these social-justice movements have nothing to do with the situation of the factory farm. Human oppression is not animal abuse. King and Chávez were moved by a concern for suffering humanity, not suffering chickens or global warming. Fair enough. One can certainly quibble with, or even become enraged by, the comparison implicit in invoking them here, but it is worth noting that César Chávez and King's wife, Coretta Scott King, were vegans, as is King's son Dexter. We interpret the Chavez and King legacies—we interpret America's legacy—too narrowly if we assume in advance that they cannot speak against the oppression of the factory farm.

## 5.

### The Global Table

NEXT TIME YOU SIT DOWN for a meal, imagine that there are nine other people sitting with you at the table, and that together you represent all the people on the planet. Organized by nations, two of your tablemates are Chinese, two Indian, and a fifth represents all the other countries in Northeast, South, and Central Asia. A sixth represents the nations of Southeast Asia and Oceania. A seventh represents sub-Saharan Africa, and an eighth represents the remainder of Africa and the Middle East. A ninth represents Europe. The remaining seat, representing the countries of South, Central, and North America, is for you.

If we allocate seats by native language, only Chinese speakers



would get their own representative. All English and Spanish speakers together would have to share a chair.

Organized by religion, three people are Christian, two are Muslim, and three practice Buddhism, traditional Chinese religions, or Hinduism. Another two belong to other religious traditions or identify as nonreligious. (My own Jewish community, which is smaller than the margin of error in the Chinese census, can't even squeeze half of a tuches onto a chair.)

If seated by nourishment, one person is hungry and two are obese. More than half eat a mostly vegetarian diet, but that number is shrinking. The stricter vegetarians and vegans have one seat at the table, but barely. And more than half of the time any one of you reaches for eggs, chicken, or pork, they will have come from a factory farm. If current trends continue for another twenty years, the beef and mutton you reach for also will.

The United States is not even close to getting its own seat when the table is organized by population, but it would have somewhere between two and three seats when people are seated by how much food they consume. No one loves to eat as much as we do, and when we change what we eat, the world changes.

I've restricted myself to mostly discussing how our food choices affect the ecology of our planet and the lives of its animals, but I could have just as easily made the entire book about public health, workers' rights, decaying rural communities, or global poverty—all of which are profoundly affected by factory farming. Factory farming, of course, does not cause all the world's problems, but it is remarkable just how many of them intersect there. And it is equally remarkable, and completely improbable, that the likes of you and me would have real influence over factory farming. But no one can seriously doubt the influence of US consumers on global farm practices.

I realize that I'm coming dangerously close to suggesting that

quaint notion that every person can make a difference. The reality is more complicated, of course. As a "solitary eater," your decisions will, in and of themselves, do nothing to alter the industry. That said, unless you obtain your food in secret and eat it in the closet, you don't eat alone. We eat as sons and daughters, as families, as communities, as generations, as nations, and increasingly as a globe. We can't stop our eating from radiating influence even if we want to.

As anyone who has been a vegetarian for a number of years might tell you, the influence that this simple dietary choice has on what others around you eat can be surprising. The body that represents restaurants in America, the National Restaurant Association, has advised every restaurant in the nation to have at least one vegetarian entrée. Why? It's simple: their own polling data indicates that more than a third of restaurant operators have observed an uptick in demand for vegetarian meals. A leading restaurant industry periodical, *Nation's Restaurant News*, advises restaurants to "add vegetarian or vegan dishes to the mix. Vegetarian dishes, aside from being less expensive... also mitigate the veto vote. Usually, if you have a vegan in your party, that will dictate where the party eats."

Millions upon millions of advertising dollars are spent simply to make sure that we see people drinking milk or eating beef in movies, and millions more are spent to make sure that when I have a soda in my hand, you can tell (probably from some distance) whether it is Coke or Pepsi. The National Restaurant Association doesn't make these recommendations, and multinational corporations don't spend millions on product placement, to make us feel good about the influence we have on others around us. They simply recognize the fact that eating is a social act.

When we lift our forks, we hang our hats somewhere. We set ourselves in one relationship or another to farmed animals, farmworkers, national economies, and global markets. Not making a

decision—eating “like everyone else”—is to make the easiest decision, a decision that is increasingly problematic. Without question, in most places and in most times, to decide one’s diet by not deciding—to eat like everyone else—was probably a fine idea. Today, to eat like everyone else is to add another straw to the camel’s back. Our straw may not be the backbreaker, but the act will be repeated—every day of our lives, and perhaps every day of the lives of our children and our children’s children....

The seating arrangements and servings at the global table we all eat from change. The two Chinese at our table have four times the amount of meat on their plates as they did a few decades ago—and the pile keeps getting higher. Meanwhile, the two people at the table without clean drinking water are eyeballing China. Today, animal products still account for only 16 percent of the Chinese diet, but farmed animals account for more than 50 percent of China’s water consumption—and at a time when Chinese water shortages are already cause for global concern. The desperate person at our table, who is struggling to find enough food to eat, might reasonably worry even more at how much of the world’s march toward US-style meat eating will make the basic grains he or she relies on for life even less available. More meat means more demand for grains and more hands fighting over them. By 2050, the world’s livestock will consume as much food as four billion people. Trends suggest that the one hungry person at our table could easily become two (270,000 more people become hungry each day). This will almost certainly happen as the obese also gain another seat. It’s too easy to imagine a near future in which most of the seats at the global table are filled by either obese or malnourished people.

But it doesn’t have to be this way. The best reason to think that there could be a better future is the fact that we know just how bad the future could be.

Rationally, factory farming is so obviously wrong, in so many ways. In all of my reading and conversations, I’ve yet to find a credible defense of it. But food is not rational. Food is culture, habit, and identity. For some, that irrationality leads to a kind of resignation. Food choices are likened to fashion choices or lifestyle preferences—they do not respond to judgments about how we should live. And I would agree that the messiness of food, the almost infinite meanings it proliferates, does make the question of eating—and eating animals especially—surprisingly fraught. Activists I spoke with were endlessly puzzled and frustrated by the disconnect between clear thinking and people’s food choices. I sympathize, but I also wonder if it is precisely the irrationality of food that holds the most promise.

Food is never simply a calculation about which diet uses the least water or causes the least suffering. And it is in this, perhaps, that our greatest hope for actually motivating ourselves to change lies. In part, the factory farm requires us to suppress conscience in favor of craving. But at another level, the ability to reject the factory farm can be exactly what we most desire.

The debacle of the factory farm is not, I’ve come to feel, just a problem about ignorance—it’s not, as activists often say, a problem that arose because “people don’t know the facts.” Clearly that is one cause. I’ve filled this book with an awful lot of facts because they are a necessary starting point. And I’ve presented what we know scientifically about the legacy we are creating with our daily food choices because that also matters a great deal. I’m not suggesting our reason should not guide us in many important ways, but simply that being human, being humane, is more than an exercise of reason. Responding to the factory farm calls for a capacity to care that dwells beyond information, and beyond the oppositions of desire and reason, fact and myth, and even human and animal.

The factory farm will come to an end because of its absurd economics someday. It is radically unsustainable. The earth will eventually shake off factory farming like a dog shakes off fleas; the only question is whether we will get shaken off along with it.

Thinking about eating animals, especially publicly, releases unexpected forces into the world. The questions are charged like few others. From one angle of vision, meat is just another thing we consume, and matters in the same way as the consumption of paper napkins or SUVs—if to a greater degree. Try changing napkins at Thanksgiving, though—even do it bombastically, with a lecture on the immorality of such and such a napkin maker—and you’ll have a hard time getting anyone worked up. Raise the question of a vegetarian Thanksgiving, though, and you’ll have no problem eliciting strong opinions—at least strong opinions. The question of eating animals hits chords that resonate deeply with our sense of self—our memories, desires, and values. Those resonances are potentially controversial, potentially threatening, potentially inspiring, but always filled with meaning. Food matters and animals matter and eating animals matters even more. The question of eating animals is ultimately driven by our intuitions about what it means to reach an ideal we have named, perhaps incorrectly, “being human.”

6.

## The First Thanksgiving of His Childhood

FOR WHAT, AT THANKSGIVING, AM I giving thanks? As a child, the first kernel I transferred to the table was symbolic of my thankfulness for my health and the health of my family. Strange choice for

a kid. Maybe it was a sentiment made in the shade cast by no family tree, or a response to my grandmother’s mantra of “You should be healthy”—which couldn’t help but sound like an accusation, as in, “You aren’t healthy, but you should be.” Whatever the cause, even as a young child, I thought of health as something unreliable. (It wasn’t only because of the pay and prestige that so many children and grandchildren of survivors became doctors.) The next kernel represented my happiness. The next my loved ones—the family surrounding me, of course, but also my friends. And those would be my first three kernels today—health, happiness, and loved ones. But it’s no longer my own health, happiness, and loved ones that I am giving thanks for. Perhaps it will be different when my son is old enough to participate in the ritual. For now, though, I give my thanks for, through, and on behalf of him.

How can Thanksgiving be a vehicle for expressing that most sincere thankfulness? What rituals and symbols would facilitate an appreciation for health, happiness, and loved ones?

We celebrate together, and that makes sense. And we don’t just gather, we eat. This wasn’t always so. The federal government first thought to promote Thanksgiving as a day of fasting, since that was how it had been frequently observed for decades. According to Benjamin Franklin, whom I think of as a kind of patron saint of the holiday, it was “a farmer of plain sense” who proposed that feasting “would be more becoming the gratitude.” The voice of that farmer, who I suspect was a stand-in for Franklin himself, is now the conviction of a nation.

Producing and eating our own food is, historically, much of what made us Americans and not subjects of European powers. While other colonies required massive imports to survive, early American immigrants, thanks to help from Native Americans, were almost entirely self-sustaining. Food is not so much a symbol of freedom

as the first requirement of freedom. We eat foods that are native to America on Thanksgiving to acknowledge that fact. In many ways, Thanksgiving initiates a distinctly American ideal of ethical consumerism. The Thanksgiving meal is America's founding act of conscientious consumption.

But what about the food we feast upon? Does what we consume make sense?

All but a negligible number of the 45 million turkeys that find their way to our Thanksgiving tables were unhealthy, unhappy, and—this is a radical understatement—unloved. If people come to different conclusions about the turkey's place on the Thanksgiving table, at least we can all agree on those three things.

Today's turkeys are natural insectivores fed a grossly unnatural diet, which can include "meat, sawdust, leather tannery by-products," and other things whose mention, while widely documented, would probably push your belief too far. Given their vulnerability to disease, turkeys are perhaps the worst fit of any animal for the factory model. So they are given more antibiotics than any other farmed animals. Which encourages antibiotic resistance. Which makes these indispensable drugs less effective for humans. In a perfectly direct way, the turkeys on our tables are making it harder to cure human illness.

It shouldn't be the consumer's responsibility to figure out what's cruel and what's kind, what's environmentally destructive and what's sustainable. Cruel and destructive food products should be illegal. We don't need the option of buying children's toys made with lead paint, or aerosols with chlorofluorocarbons, or medicines with unlabeled side effects. And we don't need the option of buying factory-farmed animals.

However much we obfuscate or ignore it, we know that the factory farm is inhumane in the deepest sense of the word. And we know that there is something that matters in a deep way about the

lives we create for the living beings most within our power. Our response to the factory farm is ultimately a test of how we respond to the powerless, to the most distant, to the voiceless—it is a test of how we act when no one is forcing us to act one way or another. Consistency is not required, but engagement with the problem is.

Historians tell a story about Abraham Lincoln, that while returning to Washington from Springfield, he forced his entire party to stop to help some small birds he saw in distress. When chided by the others, he responded, quite plainly, "I could not have slept to-night if I had left those poor creatures on the ground and not restored them to their mother." He did not make (though he might have) a case for the moral value of the birds, their worth to themselves or the ecosystem or God. Instead he observed, quite simply, that once those suffering birds came into his view, a moral burden had been assumed. He could not be himself if he walked away. Lincoln was a hugely inconsistent personality, and of course he ate birds far more often than he aided them. But presented with the suffering of a fellow creature, he responded.

Whether I sit at the global table, with my family or with my conscience, the factory farm, for me, doesn't merely appear unreasonable. To accept the factory farm feels inhuman. To accept the factory farm—to feed the food it produces to my family, to support it with my money—would make me less myself, less my grandmother's grandson, less my son's father.

*This* is what my grandmother meant when she said, "If nothing matters, there's nothing to save."