THE OMNIVORE'S DILEMMA

A NATURAL HISTORY OF FOUR MEALS

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THE PENGUIN PRESS
NEW YORK
2006

THE PENGUIN PRESS
Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A. • Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England • Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd) • Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd) • Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India • Penguin Group (NZ), Cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd) • Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published in 2006 by The Penguin Press
a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA
Pollan, Michael.
The omnivore's dilemma : a natural history of four meals / Michael Pollan.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 1-59420-082-3
1. GT2850 .P65 2006. 2. Food habits. 3. Food preferences. I. Title.
GT2850.P65 2006
394.1'2—dc22 2005056557

Printed in the United States of America

11 13 15 17 19 20 18 16 14 12

DESIGNED BY MARYSARAH QUINN

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SEVENTEEN

THE ETHICS OF EATING ANIMALS

1. THE STEAKHOUSE DIALOGUES

The first time I opened Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* I was dining alone at the Palm, trying to enjoy a rib-eye steak cooked medium rare. If that sounds like a recipe for cognitive dissonance, if not indigestion, well, that was sort of the idea. It had been a long time since this particular omnivore had felt any dilemma about eating meat, but then I had never before involved myself so directly in the processes of turning animals into food: owning a steak-bound steer, working the killing cones in Joel Salatin's processing shed, and now preparing to hunt a wild animal. The steak dinner in question took place on the evening before steer number 534's slaughter, the one event in his 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. 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. My steak dinner, eaten in the company of the world's leading philosopher of animal rights, represented my somewhat tortured attempt to mark the occasion, and to try—a bit belatedly, I know—to see if I could defend what I had done already and what I was about to do.

Eating meat has become morally problematic, at least for people who take the trouble to think about it. Vegetarianism is more popular than it has ever been, and animal rights, the fringiest of fringe movements until just a few years ago, is rapidly finding its way into the cultural mainstream. I'm not completely sure why this should be happening now, given that humans have been eating animals for tens of thousands of years without too much ethical heartburn. Certainly there have been dissenters over the years—Ovid, St. Francis, Tolstoy, and Gandhi come to mind. But the general consensus has always been that humans were indeed omnivores and, whatever spiritual or moral dilemmas the killing and eating of animals posed, our various cultural traditions (everything from the rituals governing slaughter to saying grace before the meal) resolved them for us well enough. For the most part our culture has been telling us for millennia that animals were both good to eat and good to think.

In recent years medical researchers have raised questions about the good to eat part, while philosophers like Singer and organizations like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) have given us new reasons to doubt meat is good to think—that is, good for our souls or our moral self-regard. Hunting is in particularly bad odor these days, even among people who still eat meat; apparently it's the fact of killing these people most object to (as if a steak could be gotten any other way), or perhaps it's the taking pleasure in killing an animal that is the trouble. It may be that as a civilization we're groping toward a higher plane of consciousness. It may be that our moral enlightenment has advanced to the point where the practice of eating animals—like our former practices of keeping slaves or treating women as inferior beings—can now be seen for the barbarity it is, a relic of an ignorant past that very soon will fill us with shame.

That at least is the animal philosophers' wager. But it could also be that the cultural norms and rituals that used to allow people to eat meat without agonizing about it have broken down for other reasons. Perhaps as the sway of tradition in our eating decisions weakens, habits we once took for granted are thrown up in the air, where they're more easily buffeted by the force of a strong idea or the breeze of fashion.

Whatever the cause, the effect is an unusual amount of cultural confusion on the subject of animals. For at the same time many of us seem eager to extend the circle of our moral consideration to other species, in our factory farms we're inflicting more suffering on more animals than at any time in history. One by one science is dismantling our claims to uniqueness as a species, discovering that such things as culture, tool making, language, and even possibly self-consciousness are not, as we used to think, the exclusive properties of *Homo sapiens*. And yet most of the animals we eat lead lives organized very much in the spirit of Descartes, who famously claimed that animals were mere machines, incapable of thought or feeling. There's a schizoid quality to our relationship with animals today in which sentiment and brutality exist side by side. Half the dogs in America will receive Christmas presents this year, yet few of us ever pause to consider the life of the pig—an animal easily as intelligent as a dog—that becomes the Christmas ham.

We tolerate this schizophrenia because the life of the pig has moved out of view; when's the last time you saw a pig in person? Meat comes from the grocery store, where it is cut and packaged to look as little like parts of animals as possible. (When was the last time you saw a butcher at work?) The disappearance of animals from our lives has opened a space in which there's no reality check on the sentiment or the brutality; it is a space in which the Peter Singers and the Frank Purdues of the world fare equally well.

A few years ago the English writer John Berger wrote an essay called "Why Look at Animals?" in which he suggested that the loss of everyday contact between ourselves and animals—and specifically the loss of eye contact—has left us deeply confused about the terms of our relationship to other species. That eye contact, always slightly uncanny, had

brought the vivid daily reminder that animals were both crucially like and unlike us; in their eyes we glimpsed something unmistakably familiar (pain, fear, courage) but also something irretrievably other (?!). Upon this paradox people built a relationship in which they felt they could both honor and eat animals without looking away. But that accommodation has pretty much broken down; nowadays it seems we either look away or become vegetarians. For my own part, neither option seemed especially appetizing; certainly looking away was now completely off the table. Which might explain how it was I found myself attempting to read Peter Singer in a steakhouse.

THIS IS NOT something I'd recommend if you're determined to continue eating meat. *Animal Liberation*, comprised of equal parts philosophical argument and journalistic description, is one of those rare books that demands you either defend the way you live or change it. Because Singer is so skilled in argument, for many readers it is easier to change. *Animal Liberation* has converted countless thousands to vegetarianism, and it didn't take me long to see why: within a few pages he had succeeded in throwing me and my meat eating, not to mention my hunting plans, on the defensive.

Singer's argument is disarmingly simple and, provided you accept its premises, difficult to refute. Take the premise of equality among people, which most of us readily accept. Yet what do we really mean by it? After all, people are not, as a matter of fact, equal at all—some are smarter than others, handsomer, more gifted, whatever. "Equality is a moral idea," Singer points out, "not an assertion of fact." The moral idea is that everyone's interests ought to receive equal consideration, regardless of "what they are like or what abilities they have." Fair enough; many philosophers have gone this far. But few have then taken the next logical step. "If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his or her own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit non-humans for the same purpose?"

This is the nub of Singer's argument, and right away, here on page

six, I began scribbling objections in the margin. *But humans differ from animals in morally significant ways.* Yes they do, Singer readily acknowledges, which is why we shouldn't treat pigs and children alike. Equal consideration of interests is not the same as equal treatment, he points out; children have an interest in being educated, pigs in rooting around in the dirt. But where their interests are the same, the principle of equality demands they receive the same consideration. And the one all-important interest humans share with pigs, as with all sentient creatures, is an interest in avoiding pain.

Here Singer quotes a famous passage from Jeremy Bentham, the eighteenth-century utilitarian philosopher. Bentham is writing in 1789, after the French had freed their black slaves and granted them fundamental rights, but before the British or Americans had acted. "The day may come," Bentham wrote, "when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights." Bentham then asks what characteristics entitle any being to moral consideration. "Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps the faculty of discourse?" Bentham asks. "But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversational animal, than an infant."

"The question is not, Can they reason? Nor can they *talk*? But, Can they *suffer?*"

Bentham here is playing a powerful card philosophers call the "argument from marginal cases," or AMC for short. It goes like this: There are humans—infants, the severely retarded, the demented—whose mental function does not rise to the level of a chimpanzee. Even though these people cannot reciprocate our moral attentions (obey the golden rule, etc.) we nevertheless include them in the circle of our moral consideration. So on what basis do we exclude the chimpanzee?

Because he's a chimp, I furiously scribble in the margin, *and they're human beings!* For Singer that's not good enough. To exclude the chimp from moral consideration simply because he's not human is no different than excluding the slave simply because he's not white. In the same way we'd call that exclusion "racist" the animal rightist contends it is "speciesist" to discriminate against the chimpanzee solely because he's

not human. *But the differences between blacks and whites are trivial compared to the differences between my son and the chimp.* Singer asks us to imagine a hypothetical society that discriminates on the basis of something nontrivial—intelligence, say. If that scheme offends our sense of equality, as it surely does, then why is the fact that animals lack this or that human characteristic any more just as a basis for discrimination? Either we do not owe any justice to the severely retarded, he concludes, or we do owe it to animals with higher capabilities.

This is where I put down my fork. If I believe in equality, and equality is based on interests rather than characteristics, then either I have to take the steer's interest into account or accept that I'm a speciesist.

For the time being, I decided, I'll plead guilty as charged. I finished my steak.

But Singer had planted a troubling notion, and in the days afterward it grew and grew, watered by the other animal rights thinkers I began reading: the philosophers Tom Regan and James Rachels, the legal theorist Steven M. Wise, writers like Joy Williams and Matthew Scully. I didn't *think* I minded being called a speciesist, but could it be, as these writers suggest, we will someday come to regard speciesism as an evil comparable to that of racism? Is it possible that history will someday judge us as harshly as it judges the Germans who went about their lives in the shadow of Treblinka? The South African novelist J. M. Coetzee posed precisely that question in a lecture at Princeton not long ago; he answered it in the affirmative. If the animal rightists are right, then "a crime of stupendous proportions" (in Coetzee's words) is going on all around us every day, just beneath our notice.

THE IDEA is almost impossible to seriously entertain, much less to accept, and in the months after the restaurant face-off between Singer and my steak at the Palm I found myself marshalling whatever mental power I could command to try to refute it. Yet one by one Singer and his colleagues managed to trump nearly every objection I could muster.

The meat eaters' first line of defense is obvious: *Why should we treat an-*

imals any more ethically than they treat one another? Ben Franklin actually tried this tack long before me. He tells in his autobiography of one day watching friends catch fish and wondering, "If you eat one another, I don't see why we may not eat you." He admits, however, that this rationale didn't occur to him until the fish were in the frying pan, beginning to smell "admirably well." The great advantage of being a "reasonable creature," Franklin remarks, is that you can find a reason for whatever you want to do.

To the "they do it, too" argument the animal rightist has a simple, devastating reply: Do you really want to base your moral code on the natural order? Murder and rape are natural, too. Besides, we can choose: Humans don't need to kill other creatures in order to survive; carnivorous animals do. (Though if my cat Otis is any guide, animals sometimes kill for the sheer pleasure of it.)

Which brings up another objection for the case of domestic animals: *Wouldn't life in the wild be worse for these creatures?* "Defenders of slavery imposed on black Africans often made a similar point," Singer retorts. "[T]he life of freedom is preferred."

But most domesticated animals can't survive in the wild; in fact, *without us eating them they wouldn't exist at all!* Or as one nineteenth-century political philosopher put it, "The pig has a stronger interest than anyone in the demand for bacon. If all the world were Jewish, there would be no pigs at all." Which as it turns out would be just fine by the animal rightist: If chickens no longer exist, they can no longer be wronged.

Animals on factory farms have never known any other life. The rightist rightly points out that "animals feel a need to exercise, stretch their limbs or wings, groom themselves and turn around, whether or not they have ever lived in conditions that permit this." The proper measure of their suffering, in other words, is not their prior experiences but the unremitting daily frustration of their instincts.

Okay, granted the suffering of animals at our hands is a legitimate problem, but *the world is full of problems, and surely solving human problems must come first.* Sounds high-minded . . . and yet all the animal people are ask-

ing me to do is to stop eating meat. There's no reason I can't devote myself to solving humankind's problems as a vegetarian.

But doesn't the very fact that we could choose to forego meat for moral reasons point to a crucial difference between animals and humans, one that justifies our speciesism? The very indeterminacy of our appetites, and the ethical prospects that opens up, marks us as a fundamentally different kind of creature. We alone are (as Kant pointed out) the moral animal, the only one capable of even entertaining a notion of "rights." Hell, we invented the damned things—*for us.* So what's wrong with reserving moral consideration for those able to understand it?

Well, right here is where you run smack into the AMC: the moral status of the retarded and the insane, the two-day-old infant and the advanced Alzheimer's patient. These people ("marginal cases," in the detestable language of modern moral philosophy) cannot participate in ethical decision making any more than a monkey can, yet we nevertheless grant them rights. Yes, I respond, for the obvious reason: *They're one of us.* Isn't it natural to give special consideration to one's kind?

Only if you're a speciesist, the animal rightist replies. Not so long ago many white people said the same thing about being white: We look out for our kind. Still, I would argue that there is a nonarbitrary reason we protect the rights of human "marginal" cases: We're willing to make them part of our moral community because we all have been and will probably once again be marginal cases ourselves. What's more, these people have fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, which makes our interest in their welfare deeper than our interest in the welfare of even the most intelligent ape.

A utilitarian like Singer would agree that the feelings of relatives should count for something in our moral calculus, but the principle of equal consideration of interests demands that given the choice between performing a painful medical experiment on a severely retarded orphaned child and a normal ape, we must sacrifice the child. Why? Because the ape has a greater capacity for pain.

Here in a nutshell is the practical problem with the philosopher's argument from marginal cases: It can be used to help the animals, but

just as often it ends up hurting the marginal cases. Giving up our speciesism can bring us to an ethical cliff from which we may not be prepared to jump, even when logic is pushing us to the edge.

And yet this isn't the moral choice I'm being asked to make here. (*Too bad!* It would be so much easier.) In everyday life the choice is not between the baby and the chimp but between the pig and the tofu. Even if we reject the hard utilitarianism of a Peter Singer, there remains the question of whether we owe animals that can feel pain any moral consideration, and this seems impossible to deny. And if we owe them moral consideration, then how do we justify killing and eating them?

This is why meat eating is the most difficult animal rights case. In the case of laboratory testing of animals, all but the most radical animal people are willing to balance the human benefit against the cost to the animals. That's because the unique qualities of human consciousness carry weight in the utilitarian calculus of pleasure and pain: Human pain counts for more than that of a mouse, since our pain is amplified by emotions like dread; similarly, our deaths are worse than an animal's because we understand what death is in a way that they don't. So the argument around animal testing is in the details: Is that particular animal experiment really necessary to save human lives? (Very often it's not.) But if humans no longer *need* to eat meat to survive, then what exactly are we putting on the human side of the scale to outweigh the interests of the animal?

I suspect this is finally why the animal people managed to throw me on the defensive. It's one thing to choose between the chimp and the retarded child, or to accept the sacrifice of all those pigs surgeons practiced on to develop heart bypass surgery. But what happens when the choice is, as Singer writes, between "a lifetime of suffering for a nonhuman animal and the gastronomic preferences of a human being?" You look away—or you stop eating animals. And if you don't want to do either? I guess you have to try to determine if the animals you're eating have really endured a lifetime of suffering.

According to Peter Singer I can't hope to answer that question ob-

jectively as long as I'm still eating meat. "We have a strong interest in convincing ourselves that our concern for other animals does not require us to stop eating them." I can sort of see his point: I mean, why *am* I working so hard to justify a dinner menu? "No one in the habit of eating an animal can be completely without bias in judging whether the conditions in which that animal is reared cause suffering." In other words, I'm going to have to stop eating meat before I can in good conscience decide if I can continue eating meat, much less go hunting for meat. This struck me as a challenge I had no choice but to accept. So on a September Sunday, after dining on a delicious barbecued tenderloin of pork, I became a reluctant and, I fervently hoped, temporary vegetarian.

2. THE VEGETARIAN'S DILEMMA

Like any self-respecting vegetarian (and we are nothing if not self-respecting) I will now burden you with my obligatory compromises and ethical distinctions. I'm not a vegan (I will eat eggs and dairy), because eggs and milk can be coaxed from animals without hurting or killing them—or so at least I thought. I'm also willing to eat animals without faces, such as mollusks, on the theory that they're not sufficiently sentient to suffer. No, this isn't "facist" of me: Many scientists and animal rights philosophers (Peter Singer included) draw the line of sentience at a point just north of scallop. No one knows for absolute certain if this is right, but I'm joining many dedicated animal people in giving myself the benefit of the doubt.

A month or so into the experiment I'm still feeling reluctant about it. I find making a satisfying vegetarian dinner takes a lot more thought and work (chopping work in particular); eating meat is simply more convenient. It's also more sociable, at least in a society where vegetarians still represent a relatively tiny minority. (*Time* magazine recently estimated there are 10 million of us in America.) What troubles me most

about my vegetarianism is the subtle way it alienates me from other people and, odd as this might sound, from a whole dimension of human experience.

Other people now have to accommodate me, and I find this uncomfortable: My new dietary restrictions throw a big wrench into the basic host-guest relationship. As a guest, if I neglect to tell my host in advance that I don't eat meat, she feels bad, and if I *do* tell her, she'll make something special for me, in which case I'll feel bad. On this matter I'm inclined to agree with the French, who gaze upon any personal dietary prohibition as bad manners.

Even if the vegetarian is a more highly evolved human being, it seems to me he has lost something along the way, something I'm not prepared to dismiss as trivial. Healthy and virtuous as I may feel these days, I also feel alienated from traditions I value: cultural traditions like the Thanksgiving turkey, or even franks at the ballpark, and family traditions like my mother's beef brisket at Passover. These ritual meals link us to our history along multiple lines—family, religion, landscape, nation, and, if you want to go back much further, biology. For although humans no longer need meat in order to survive (now that we can get our B-12 from fermented foods or supplements), we have been meat eaters for most of our time on earth. This fact of evolutionary history is reflected in the design of our teeth, the structure of our digestion, and, quite possibly, in the way my mouth still waters at the sight of a steak cooked medium rare. Meat eating helped make us what we are in a physical as well as a social sense. Under the pressure of the hunt, anthropologists tell us, the human brain grew in size and complexity, and around the hearth where the spoils of the hunt were cooked and then apportioned, human culture first flourished.

This isn't to say we can't or shouldn't transcend our inheritance, only that it is our inheritance; whatever else may be gained by giving up meat, this much at least is lost. The notion of granting rights to animals may lift us up from the brutal, amoral world of eater and eaten—of predation—but along the way it will entail the sacrifice, or sublima-

tion, of part of our identity—of our own animality. (This is one of the odder ironies of animal rights: It asks us to acknowledge all we share with animals, and then to act toward them in a most unanimalistic way.) Not that the sacrifice of our animality is necessarily regrettable; no one regrets our giving up raping and pillaging, also part of our inheritance. But we should at least acknowledge that the human desire to eat meat is not, as the animal rightists would have it, a trivial matter, a mere gastronomic preference. By the same token we might call sex—also now technically unnecessary for reproduction—a mere recreational preference. Rather, our meat eating is something very deep indeed.

4. ANIMAL SUFFERING

Whether our interest in eating animals outweighs their interest in not being eaten (assuming for a moment that is their interest) ultimately turns on the vexed question of animal suffering. Vexed, because in a certain sense it is impossible to know what goes on in the mind of a cow or pig or ape. Of course, you could say the same about other humans too, but since all humans are wired in more or less the same way, we have good reason to assume other people's experience of pain feels much like our own. Can we say the same thing about animals? Yes—and no.

I have yet to find any serious writer on the subject who still subscribes to Descartes's belief that animals cannot feel pain because they lack a soul. The general consensus among both scientists and philosophers is that when it comes to pain, the higher animals are wired much like we are for the same evolutionary reasons, so we would do well to take the writhing of the kicked dog at face value.

That animals feel pain does not seem in doubt. The animal people claim, however, that there are neocartesian scientists and thinkers about who argue that animals are incapable of suffering because they lack lan-

guage. Yet if you take the trouble to actually read the writers in question (Daniel Dennett and Stephen Budiansky are two of the ones often cited), you quickly realize they're being unfairly caricatured.

The offending argument, which does not seem unreasonable to me, is that human pain differs from animal pain by an order of magnitude. This qualitative difference is largely the result of our possession of language and, by virtue of language, our ability to have thoughts about thoughts and to imagine what is not. The philosopher Daniel Dennett suggests we can draw a distinction between pain, which a great many animals obviously experience, and suffering, which depends on a degree of self-consciousness only a handful of animals appear to command. Suffering in this view is not just lots of pain but pain amplified by distinctly human emotions such as regret, self-pity, shame, humiliation, and dread.

Consider castration, an experience endured by most of the male mammals we eat. No one would deny the procedure is painful to animals, yet very shortly afterward the animals appear fully recovered. (Some rhesus monkeys competing for mates will bite off a rival's testicle; the very next day the victim may be observed mating, seemingly little the worse for wear.) Surely the suffering of a man able to comprehend the full implications of castration, to anticipate the event and contemplate its aftermath, represents an agony of a different order.

By the same token, however, language and all that comes with it can also make some kinds of pain *more* bearable. A trip to the dentist would be an agony for an ape that couldn't be made to understand the purpose and duration of the procedure.

As humans contemplating the suffering or pain of animals we do need to guard against projecting onto them what the same experience would feel like to us. Watching a steer force-marched up the ramp to the kill-floor door, as I have done, I have to forcibly remind myself this is not Sean Penn in *Dead Man Walking*, that the scene is playing very differently in a bovine brain, from which the concept of nonexistence is thankfully absent. The same is true of the deer staring down the barrel of the hunter's rifle. "If we fail to find suffering in the [animal] lives we

can see," Daniel Dennett writes in *Kinds of Minds*, "we can rest assured there is no invisible suffering somewhere in their brains. If we find suffering, we will recognize it without difficulty."

Which brings us—reluctantly, necessarily—to the American factory farm, the place where all such distinctions promptly turn to dust. It's not easy to draw lines between pain and suffering in a modern egg or hog operation. These are places where the subtleties of moral philosophy and animal cognition mean less than nothing, indeed where everything we've learned about animals at least since Darwin has been simply . . . put aside. To visit a modern Confined Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO) is to enter a world that for all its technological sophistication is still designed on seventeenth-century Cartesian principles: Animals are treated as machines—"production units"—incapable of feeling pain. Since no thinking person can possibly believe this anymore, industrial animal agriculture depends on a suspension of disbelief on the part of the people who operate it and a willingness to avert one's eyes on the part of everyone else.

Egg operations are the worst, from everything I've read; I haven't managed to actually get into one of these places since journalists are unwelcome there. Beef cattle in America at least still live outdoors, albeit standing ankle-deep in their own waste eating a diet that makes them sick. And broiler chickens, although they get their beaks snipped off with a hot knife to keep them from cannibalizing one another under the stress of their confinement, at least don't spend their lives in cages too small to ever stretch a wing.

That fate is reserved for the American laying hen, who spends her brief span of days piled together with a half-dozen other hens in a wire cage the floor of which four pages of this book could carpet wall to wall. Every natural instinct of this hen is thwarted, leading to a range of behavioral "vices" that can include cannibalizing her cage mates and rubbing her breast against the wire mesh until it is completely bald and bleeding. (This is the chief reason broilers get a pass on caged life; to scar so much high-value breast meat would be bad business.) Pain? Suffering? Madness? The operative suspension of disbelief depends on the

acceptance of more neutral descriptors, such as "vices" and "stereotypes" and "stress." But whatever you want to call what goes on in those cages, the 10 percent or so of hens that can't endure it and simply die is built into the cost of production. And when the output of the survivors begins to ebb, the hens will be "force-molted"—starved of food and water and light for several days in order to stimulate a final bout of egg laying before their life's work is done.

I know, simply reciting these facts, most of which are drawn from poultry trade magazines, makes me sound like one of the animal people, doesn't it? I don't mean to (remember, I got into this vegetarian deal assuming I could go on eating eggs), but this is what can happen to you when . . . you look. And what you see when you look is the cruelty—and the blindness to cruelty—required to produce eggs that can be sold for seventy-nine cents a dozen.

A tension has always existed between the capitalist imperative to maximize efficiency at any cost and the moral imperatives of culture, which historically have served as a counterweight to the moral blindness of the market. This is another example of the cultural contradictions of capitalism—the tendency over time for the economic impulse to erode the moral underpinnings of society. Mercy toward the animals in our care is one such casualty.

The industrial animal factory offers a nightmarish glimpse of what capitalism is capable of in the absence of any moral or regulatory constraint whatsoever. (It is no accident that the nonunion workers in these factories receive little more consideration than the animals in their care.) Here in these wretched places life itself is redefined—as "protein production"—and with it "suffering." That venerable word becomes "stress," an economic problem in search of a cost-effective solution such as clipping the beaks of chickens or docking the tails of pigs or, in the industry's latest initiative, simply engineering the "stress gene" out of pigs and chickens. It all sounds very much like our worst nightmares of confinement and torture, and it is that, but it is also real life for the billions of animals unlucky enough to have been born beneath those

grim sheet-metal roofs into the brief, pitiless life of a production unit in the days before the suffering gene was found.

5. ANIMAL HAPPINESS

Vegetarianism doesn't seem an unreasonable response to the existence of such an evil. Who would want to be complicit in the misery of these animals by eating them? You want to throw *something* against the walls of those infernal sheds, whether it's the Bible, with its call for mercy to the animals we keep, or a new constitutional right, or a whole platoon of animal people in chicken suits bent on breaking in and liberating the inmates. In the shadow of these factory farms Coetzee's notion of a "stupendous crime" doesn't seem far-fetched at all.

And yet there are other images of animals on other kinds of farms that contradict the nightmare ones. I'm thinking of the hens I saw at Polyface Farm, fanning out over the cow pasture on a June morning, pecking at the cowpats and the grass, gratifying their every chicken instinct. Or the image of pig happiness I witnessed in that cattle barn in March, watching the hogs, all upturned pink hams and corkscrew tails, nosing their way through that deep cake of compost in search of alcoholic morsels of corn. It is true that farms like this are but a spec on the monolith of modern animal agriculture, yet their very existence, and the possibility that implies, throws the whole argument for animal rights into a different light.

To many animal people even Polyface Farm is a "death camp"—a way station for doomed creatures awaiting their date with the executioner. But to look at the lives of these animals is to see this holocaust analogy for the sentimental conceit it really is. In the same way we can probably recognize animal suffering when we see it, animal happiness is unmistakable, too, and during my week on the farm I saw it in abundance.

For any animal, happiness seems to consist in the opportunity to ex-

press its creaturely character—its essential pigness or wolfness or chickenness. Aristotle talked about each creature's "characteristic form of life." At least for the domestic animal (the wild animal is a different case) the good life, if we can call it that, simply doesn't exist, cannot be achieved, apart from humans—apart from our farms and therefore from our meat eating. This, it seems to me, is where the animal rightists betray a deep ignorance about the workings of nature. To think of domestication as a form of slavery or even exploitation is to misconstrue that whole relationship—to project a human idea of power onto what is in fact an example of mutualism or symbiosis between species.

Domestication is an evolutionary, rather than a political, development. It is certainly not a regime humans somehow imposed on animals some ten thousand years ago. Rather, domestication took place when a handful of especially opportunistic species discovered, through Darwinian trial and error, that they were more likely to survive and prosper in an alliance with humans than on their own. Humans provided the animals with food and protection in exchange for which the animals provided the humans their milk, eggs, and—yes—their flesh. Both parties were transformed by the new relationship: The animals grew tame and lost their ability to fend for themselves in the wild (natural selection tends to dispense with unneeded traits) and the humans traded their hunter-gatherer ways for the settled lives of agriculturists. (Humans changed biologically, too, evolving such new traits as the ability to digest lactose as adults.)

From the animals' point of view the bargain with humanity turned out to be a tremendous success, at least until our own time. Cows, pigs, dogs, cats, and chickens have thrived, while their wild ancestors have languished. (There are ten thousand wolves left in North America and fifty million dogs.) Nor does the loss of autonomy seem to trouble these creatures. It is wrong, the rightists say, to treat animals as means rather than ends, yet the happiness of a working animal like the dog consists precisely in serving as a means to human ends. Liberation is the last thing such a creature wants. (Which might explain the contempt many animal people display toward domesticated species.) To say of one of

Joel Salatin's caged broilers that "the life of freedom is to be preferred" betrays an ignorance about chicken preferences that, around his place at least, revolve around not getting one's head bitten off by a weasel.

It is probably safe to say, however, that chicken preferences do not include living one's entire life six to a battery cage indoors. The crucial moral difference between a CAFO and a good farm is that the CAFO systematically deprives the animals in it of their "characteristic form of life."

But haven't Salatin's chickens simply traded one predator for another—weasels for humans? True enough, and for the chickens this is probably not a bad deal, either. It is precisely the evolutionary reason the species entered into its relationship with humans in the first place. For, brief as it is, the life expectancy of a farm animal would be considerably briefer in the world beyond the pasture fence or chicken coop. (Pigs, which often can survive in the wild, are the exception that proves the rule.) It's brutal out there. A bear will eat a lactating ewe alive, starting with her udders. As a rule, animals in the wild don't get good deaths surrounded by their loved ones.

Which brings us to the case of animals in the wild. The very existence of predation in nature, of animals eating animals, is the cause of much anguished hand-wringing in the animal rights literature. "It must be admitted," Peter Singer writes, "that the existence of carnivorous animals does pose one problem for the ethics of Animal Liberation, and that is whether we should do anything about it." (Talk about the need for peacekeeping forces!) Some animal people train their dogs and cats to become vegetarians. (Note: The cats will require nutritional supplements to survive.) Matthew Scully, in *Dominion*, a Christian-conservative treatment of animal rights, calls predation "the intrinsic evil in nature's design . . . among the hardest of all things to fathom." *Really?* Elsewhere, acknowledging the gratuitous suffering inflicted by certain predators (like cats), Scully condemns "the level of moral degradation of which [animals] are capable." *Moral degradation?*

A deep current of Puritanism runs through the writings of the animal philosophers, an abiding discomfort not just with our animality, but with the animals' animality, too. They would like nothing better

than to airlift us out from nature's "intrinsic evil"—and then take the animals with us. You begin to wonder if their quarrel isn't really with nature itself.

But however it may appear to those of us living at such a remove from the natural world, predation is not a matter of morality or of politics; it, too, is a matter of symbiosis. Brutal as the wolf may be to the individual deer, the herd depends on him for its well-being. Without predators to cull the herd deer overrun their habitat and starve—all suffer, and not only the deer but the plants they browse and every other species that depends on those plants. In a sense, the "good life" for deer, and even their creaturely character, which has been forged in the crucible of predation, depends on the existence of the wolf. In a similar way chickens depend for their well-being on the existence of their human predators. Not the individual chicken, perhaps, but Chicken—the species. The surest way to achieve the extinction of the species would be to grant chickens a right to life.

Long before human predation was domesticated (along with the select group of animals we keep) it operated on another set of species in the wild. The fact of human hunting is, from the point of view of a great many creatures in a great many habitats, simply a fact of nature. We are to them as wolves. And in the same way the deer evolved a specific set of characteristics under the pressure of hunting by wolves (fleetness, sensory acuity, coloration, etc.), so have the animals that humans have hunted. Human hunting, for example, literally helped form the American Plains bison, which the fossil record suggests changed both physically and behaviorally after the arrival of the Indians. Before then the bison did not live in big herds and had much larger, more outstretched horns. For an animal living in a wide-open environment like the Great Plains and facing a sophisticated predator armed with spears, mobbing in big groups is the best defense, since it affords the vigilance of many eyes; yet big, outstretched horns pose a problem for creatures living in such close proximity. It was human hunting that selected for herd behavior and the new upright arrangement of bison horns, which appears in the fossil record not long after the arrival of human hunters.

"While a symbol of the 'wild west,'" Tim Flannery writes in *The Eternal Frontier*, an ecological history of North America, "the bison is a human artifact, for it was shaped by Indians."

Until the advent of the rifle and a global market in bison hides, horns, and tongues, Indian hunters and bison lived in a symbiotic relationship, the bison feeding and clothing the hunters while the hunters, by culling the herds and forcing them to move frequently, helped keep the grasslands in good health. Predation is deeply woven into the fabric of nature, and that fabric would quickly unravel if it somehow ended, if humans somehow managed "to do something about it." From the point of view of the individual prey animal predation is a horror, but from the point of view of the group—and of its gene pool—it is indispensable. So whose point of view shall we favor? That of the individual bison or Bison? The pig or Pig? Much depends on how you choose to answer that question.

Ancient man regarded animals much more as a modern ecologist would than an animal philosopher—as a species, that is, rather than a collection of individuals. In the ancient view "they were mortal and immortal," John Berger writes in "Looking at Animals." "An animal's blood flowed like human blood, but its species was undying and each lion was Lion, each ox was Ox." Which, when you think about it, is probably pretty much how any species in nature regards another.

Until now. For the animal rightist concerns himself only with individuals. Tom Regan, the author of *The Case for Animal Rights*, bluntly asserts that because "species are not individuals . . . the rights view does not recognize the moral rights of species to anything, including survival." Singer concurs, insisting that only sentient individuals can have interests. But surely a species has interests—in its survival, say, or the health of its habitat—just as a nation or a community or a corporation can. Animal rights' exclusive concern with the individual might make sense given its roots in a culture of liberal individualism, but how much sense does it make in nature? Is the individual animal the proper focus of our moral concern when we are trying to save an endangered species or restore a habitat?

As I write, a team of sharpshooters in the employ of the National Park Service and the Nature Conservancy is at work killing thousands of feral pigs on Santa Cruz Island, eighteen miles off the coast of Southern California. The slaughter is part of an ambitious plan to restore the island's habitat and save the island fox, an endangered species found on a handful of Southern California islands and nowhere else. To save the fox the Park Service and Nature Conservancy must first undo a complicated chain of ecological changes wrought by humans beginning more than a century ago.

That's when the pigs first arrived on Santa Cruz, imported by ranchers. Though pig farming ended on the island in the 1980s, by then enough pigs had escaped to establish a wild population that has done grave damage to the island ecosystem. The rooting of the pigs disturbs the soil, creating ideal conditions for the establishment of invasive exotic species like fennel, now rampant. The pigs also eat so many acorns that the island's native oaks have trouble reproducing. But the most serious damage the pigs have done has been to feed golden eagles with their piglets, sparking an explosion in the eagle population. That's when the island fox's troubles began.

Golden eagles are not native to the island; they've taken over a niche formerly occupied by the bald eagle, which lost its place on the island after a chemical maker dumped large quantities of DDT into the surrounding waters in the 1950s and 1960s. (Settlement money from the company is underwriting the habitat restoration project.) The DDT damaged the eggshells of the bald eagles, crashing their population and creating an opening for the more aggressive golden eagles. Unlike bald eagles, which dine mostly on seafood, golden eagles feed on small terrestrial mammals. But while the golden eagles have a taste for pig, piglets are harder to catch than the cubs of island fox, which the eagles have now hunted to the edge of extinction. To save the fox, the plan is to kill every last pig, trap and remove the golden eagles, and then reintroduce the bald eagles—essentially, rebuild the island's food chain from the ground up.

The wholesale slaughter of thousands of pigs has predictably drawn

the protests of animal welfare and rights groups. The Channel Islands Animal Protection Association has been flying banners from small planes imploring the public to "Save the Pigs" and friends of the animal have sued to stop the hunt. A spokesman for the Humane Society of the United States claimed in an op-ed article that "wounded pigs and orphaned piglets will be chased with dogs and finished off with knives and bludgeons." Note the rhetorical shift in focus from the Pig, which is how the Park Service ecologists would have us see the matter, to images of individual pigs, wounded and orphaned, being hunted down by dogs and men wielding bludgeons. Same story, viewed through two entirely different lenses.

The fight over the pigs at Santa Cruz Island suggests at the very least that a human morality based on individual rights makes for an awkward fit when applied to the natural world. This should come as no surprise: Morality is an artifact of human culture devised to help humans negotiate human social relations. It's very good for that. But just as we recognize that nature doesn't provide a very good guide for human social conduct, isn't it anthropocentric of us to assume that our moral system offers an adequate guide for what should happen in nature? Is the individual the crucial moral entity in nature as we've decided it should be in human society? We simply may require a different set of ethics to guide our dealings with the natural world, one as well suited to the particular needs of plants and animals and habitats (where sentience counts for little) as rights seem to suit us and serve our purposes today.

6. THE VEGAN UTOPIA

To contemplate such questions from the vantage of a farm, or even a garden, is to appreciate just how parochial, and urban, an ideology animal rights really is. It could only thrive in a world where people have lost contact with the natural world, where animals no longer pose any threat to us (a fairly recent development), and our mastery of nature

seems unchallenged. "In our normal life," Singer writes, "there is no serious clash of interests between human and nonhuman animals." Such a statement assumes a decidedly citified version of "normal life," certainly one no farmer—indeed, no gardener—would recognize.

The farmer would point out to the vegan that even she has a "serious clash of interests" with other animals. The grain that the vegan eats is harvested with a combine that shreds field mice, while the farmer's tractor wheel crushes woodchucks in their burrows and his pesticides drop songbirds from the sky; after harvest whatever animals that would eat our crops we exterminate. Killing animals is probably unavoidable no matter what we choose to eat. If America were suddenly to adopt a strictly vegetarian diet, it isn't at all clear that the total number of animals killed each year would necessarily decline, since to feed everyone animal pasture and rangeland would have to give way to more intensively cultivated row crops. If our goal is to kill as few animals as possible people should probably try to eat the largest possible animal that can live on the least cultivated land: grass-finished steaks for everyone.

The vegan utopia would also condemn people in many parts of the country to importing all their food from distant places. In New England, for example, the hilliness of the land and rockiness of the soil has dictated an agriculture based on grass and animals since the time of the Puritans. Indeed, the New England landscape, with its rolling patchwork of forest and fields outlined by fieldstone walls, is in some sense a creation of the domestic animals that have lived there (and so in turn of their eaters). The world is full of places where the best, if not the only, way to obtain food from the land is by grazing (and hunting) animals on it—especially ruminants, which alone can transform grass into protein.

To give up eating animals is to give up on these places as human habitat, unless of course we are willing to make complete our dependence on a highly industrialized national food chain. That food chain would be in turn even more dependent than it already is on fossil fuels and chemical fertilizer, since food would need to travel even farther and fertility—in the form of manures—would be in short supply. Indeed, it

is doubtful you can build a genuinely sustainable agriculture without animals to cycle nutrients and support local food production. If our concern is for the health of nature—rather than, say, the internal consistency of our moral code or the condition of our souls—then eating animals may sometimes be the most ethical thing to do.

ARE THESE good enough reasons to give up my vegetarianism? Can I in good conscience eat a happy and sustainably raised chicken? I'm mindful of Ben Franklin's definition of a reasonable creature as one who can come up with reasons for whatever he wants to do. So I decided I would track down Peter Singer and ask him what he thought. I hatched a scheme to drive him down from Princeton to meet Joel Salatin and his animals, but Singer was out of the country, so I had to settle for an exchange of e-mail. I asked him about the implications for his position of the "good farm"—one where animals got to live according to their natures and to all appearances do not suffer.

"I agree with you that it is better for these animals to have lived and died than not to have lived at all . . . ," Singer wrote back. Since the utilitarian is concerned exclusively with the sum of happiness and suffering, and the slaughter of an animal with no comprehension of death need not entail suffering, the Good Farm adds to the total of animal happiness provided you replace the slaughtered animal with a new one. However, this line of thinking does not obviate the wrongness of killing an animal that "has a sense of its own existence over time, and can have preferences about its own future." In other words, it might be okay to eat the chicken or the cow, but perhaps not the (more intelligent) pig. Yet, he continued, "I would not be sufficiently confident of my argument to condemn someone who purchased meat from one of these farms."

Singer went on to express doubts that such farms could be practical on a large scale, since the pressures of the marketplace will lead their owners to cut costs and corners at the expense of the animals. Also, since humanely raised food is more expensive, only the well-to-do can afford

morally defensible animal protein. These are important considerations, but they don't alter what seems to me the essential concession: What's wrong with eating animals is the practice, not the principle.

What this suggests to me is that people who care about animals should be working to insure that the ones they eat don't suffer, and that their deaths are swift and painless—for animal welfare, in others words, rather than rights. In fact, the "happy life and merciful death" line is how Jeremy Bentham justified his own meat eating. Yes, the philosophical father of animal rights was himself a carnivore. In a passage seldom quoted by animal rightists Bentham defended meat eating on the grounds that "we are the better for it, and they are never the worse. . . . The death they suffer in our hands commonly is, and always may be, a speedier and, by that means a less painful one, than that which would await them in the inevitable course of nature."

My guess is that Bentham never looked too closely at what actually happens in a slaughterhouse, but the argument suggests that in theory at least a utilitarian can justify eating humanely raised and slaughtered animals. Eating a wild animal that had been cleanly shot presumably would fall under the same dispensation. Singer himself suggests as much in *Animal Liberation,* when he asks, "Why . . . is the hunter who shoots a deer for venison subject to more criticism than the person who buys a ham at the supermarket? Overall it is probably the intensively reared pig who has suffered more."

All of which was making me feel pretty good about eating meat again and going hunting—until I recalled that these utilitarians can also justify killing retarded orphans. Killing just isn't the problem for them that it is for other people, including me.

7. A CLEAN KILL

The day after my steak-and-Singer dinner at the Palm I found myself on a plane flying from Atlanta to Denver. A couple of hours into the flight the pilot, who hadn't uttered word one until now, came on the public

address system to announce, apropos of nothing, that we were passing over Liberal, Kansas. This was the first, last, and only landmark on our flight path that the pilot deigned to mention, which seemed very odd, given its obscurity to everyone on the plane but me. For Liberal, Kansas, happens to be the town where my steer, very possibly that very day, was being slaughtered. I'm not a superstitious person, but this struck me as a most eerie coincidence. I could only wonder what was going on just then, thirty thousand feet below me, on the kill floor of the National Beef Plant, where steer number 534 had his date with the stunner.

I could only wonder because the company had refused to let me see. When I'd visited the plant earlier that spring I was shown everything but the kill floor. I watched steers being unloaded from trailers into corrals and then led up a ramp and through a blue door. What happened on the other side of the blue door I had to reconstruct from the accounts of others who had been allowed to go there. I was fortunate to have the account of Temple Grandin, the animal-handling expert, who had designed the ramp and killing machinery at the National Beef Plant, and who audits the slaughter there for McDonald's. Stories about cattle "waking up" after stunning only to be skinned alive—stories documented by animal rights groups—had prompted the company to hire Grandin to audit its suppliers. Grandin told me that in cattle slaughter, "there is the pre-McDonald's era and the post-McDonald's era—it's night and day." We can only imagine what night must have been like.

Here's how Grandin described what steer 534 experienced after passing through the blue door:

"The animal goes into the chute single file. The sides are high enough so all he sees is the butt of the animal in front of him. As he walks through the chute, he passes over a metal bar, with his feet on either side. While he's straddling the bar, the ramp begins to decline at a twenty-degree angle, and before he knows it, his feet are off the ground, and he's being carried along on a conveyor belt. We put in a false floor so he can't look down and see he's off the ground. That would panic him."

I had been wondering what 534 would be feeling as he neared his end. Would he have any inkling—a scent of blood, a sound of terror from up the line—that this was no ordinary day? Would he, in other words, suffer? Grandin anticipated my question.

"Does the animal know it's going to get slaughtered? I used to wonder that. So I watched them going into the squeeze chutes on the feedlot, getting their shots, and going up the ramp at a slaughter plant. No difference. If they knew they were going to die you'd see much more agitated behavior.

"Anyway, the conveyor is moving along at roughly the speed of a moving sidewalk. On a catwalk above stands the stunner. The stunner has a pneumatic-powered 'gun' that fires a steel bolt about seven inches long and the diameter of a fat pencil. He leans over and puts it smack in the middle of the forehead. When it's done correctly it will kill the animal on the first shot.

"After the animal is shot while he's riding along a worker wraps one of his feet and hooks it to an overhead trolley. Hanging upside down by one leg, he's carried by the trolley into the bleeding area, where the bleeder cuts his throat. Animal rights people say they're cutting live animals, but that's because there's a lot of reflex kicking. What I look for is, is the head dead? It should be flopping like a rag, with the tongue hanging out. He'd better not be trying to hold it up—then you've got a live one on the rail. Just in case, they have another stunner in the bleed area."

I found Temple Grandin's account both reassuring and troubling. Reassuring, because the system sounds humane, and yet I realize I'm relying on the account of its designer. Troubling, because I can't help dwelling on all those times "you've got a live one on the rail." Mistakes are inevitable on an assembly line that is slaughtering four hundred head of cattle every hour. (McDonald's tolerates a 5 percent "error rate.") So is it possible to slaughter animals on an industrial scale without causing them to suffer? In the end each of us has to decide for himself whether eating animals that have died in this manner is okay. For my part, I can't be sure, because I haven't been able to see for myself.

This, I realize, is why Joel Salatin's open-air abattoir is such a morally powerful idea. Any customer who so desires can see how his chicken meets its end—can look and then decide. Few will take up such an offer; many of us would prefer to delegate the job of looking to a government bureaucrat or a journalist, but the very option of looking—that transparency—is probably the best way to insure that animals are killed in a manner we can abide. No doubt some of us will decide there is no killing of animals we can countenance, and they probably shouldn't eat meat.

When I was at the farm I asked Joel how he could bring himself to kill a chicken. "That's an easy one. People have a soul, animals don't. It's a bedrock belief of mine. Animals are not created in God's image, so when they die, they just die."

The idea that it is only in modern times that people have grown queasy about killing animals is of course a flattering myth. Taking a life is momentous, and people have been working to justify the slaughter of animals to themselves for thousands of years, struggling to come to terms with the shame they feel even when the killing is necessary to their survival. Religion, and ritual, has played a crucial part in this process. Native Americans and other hunter-gatherers give thanks to the animal for giving up its life so the eater might live. The practice sounds a little like saying grace, a ceremony hardly anyone bothers with anymore. In biblical times the rules governing ritual slaughter stipulated a rotation, so that no individual would have to kill animals every day, lest he become dulled to the gravity of the act. Many cultures have offered sacrificial animals to the gods, perhaps as a way to convince themselves it was the gods' appetite that demanded the slaughter, and not their own. In ancient Greece, the priests responsible for the slaughter (Priests! Now we give the job to migrant workers paid the minimum wage) would sprinkle holy water on the sacrificial animal's head. The beast would promptly shake its head, and this was taken as a necessary sign of assent.

For all these people it was the ritual—the cultural rules and norms—that allowed them to look, and then to eat. We no longer have any rituals governing either the slaughter or eating of animals, which perhaps

helps explain why we find ourselves in this dilemma, in a place where we feel our only choice is either to look away or give up meat. National Beef is happy to serve the first customer, Peter Singer the second.

My own wager is that there might still be another way open to us, and that finding it will begin with looking once again—at the animals we eat, and at their deaths. People will see very different things when they look into the eyes of a pig or a chicken or a steer: a being without a soul, a "subject of a life" entitled to rights, a receptacle of pleasure and pain, an unambiguously tasty lunch.

We certainly won't philosophize our way to a single answer. I remember a story Joel told me about a man who showed up at the farm one Saturday morning to have a look. When Joel noticed a PETA bumper sticker on the man's car he figured he was in for some unpleasantness. But the man had a different agenda. He explained that after being a vegetarian for sixteen years he had decided that the only way he could ever eat meat again was if he killed the animal himself. So Joel grabbed a chicken and took the man into the processing shed.

"He slit the bird's throat and watched it die," Joel recalled. "He saw that the animal did not look at him accusingly, did not do a Disney double take. He saw that the animal had been treated with respect while it was alive and that it could have a respectful death—that it wasn't being treated like a pile of protoplasm." I realized I'd seen this, too, which perhaps explains why I was able to kill a chicken one day and eat it the next. Though the story did make me wish I had killed and eaten mine with as much consciousness and attention as that man; perhaps hunting would give me a second chance.

Sometimes I think that all it would take to clarify our feelings about eating meat, and in the process begin to redeem animal agriculture, would be to simply pass a law requiring all the sheet-metal walls of all the CAFOs, and even the concrete walls of the slaughterhouses, to be replaced with glass. If there's any new right we need to establish, maybe this is the one: The right, I mean, to look. No doubt the sight of some of these places would turn many people into vegetarians. Many others would look elsewhere for their meat, to farmers willing to raise and kill

their animals transparently. Such farms exist; so do a handful of small processing plants willing to let customers onto the kill floor, including one—Lorentz Meats, in Cannon Falls, Minnesota—that is so confident of their treatment of animals that they have walled their abattoir in glass.

The industrialization—and brutalization—of animals in America is a relatively new, evitable, and local phenomenon: No other country raises and slaughters its food animals quite as intensively or as brutally as we do. No other people in history has lived at quite so great a remove from the animals they eat. Were the walls of our meat industry to become transparent, literally or even figuratively, we would not long continue to raise, kill, and eat animals the way we do. Tail docking and sow crates and beak clipping would disappear overnight, and the days of slaughtering four hundred head of cattle an hour would promptly come to an end—for who could stand the sight? Yes, meat would get more expensive. We'd probably eat a lot less of it, too, but maybe when we did eat animals we'd eat them with the consciousness, ceremony, and respect they deserve.