

THE  
OMNIVORE'S  
DILEMMA

A NATURAL HISTORY  
OF FOUR MEALS



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PENGUIN BOOKS

TWELVE  
SLAUGHTER

*In a Glass Abattoir*

1. WEDNESDAY

Today promised not to be about the ecstasy of life on a farm. Today was the day we were “processing” broilers or, to abandon euphemism, killing chickens.

For all the considerable beauty I’d witnessed following a food chain in which the sun fed the grass, the grass the cattle, the cattle the chickens, and the chickens us, there was one unavoidable link in that chain few would consider beautiful: the open-air processing shed out behind the Salatins’ house where, six times a month in the course of a long morning, several hundred chickens are killed, scalded, plucked, and eviscerated.

I said this link was “unavoidable,” but of course most of us, including most of the farmers who raise food animals, do our very best to avoid thinking about, let alone having anything directly to do with, their slaughter. “You have just dined,” Emerson once wrote, “and how-

ever scrupulously the slaughterhouse is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity.”

The killing of the animals we eat generally takes place behind high walls, well beyond our gaze or ken. Not here. Joel insists on slaughtering chickens on the farm, and would slaughter his beeves and hogs here too if only the government would let him. (Under an old federal exemption, farmers are still permitted to process a few thousand birds on farms, but most other food animals must be processed in a state or federally inspected facility.) Joel’s reasons for wanting to do this work here himself are economic, ecological, political, ethical, and even spiritual. “The way I produce a chicken is an extension of my worldview,” he’d told me the first time we’d talked; by the end of the morning I had a much better idea of what he meant.

WEDNESDAY MORNING I managed to get up right on time—5:30 A.M., to be exact—and to make my way to the broilers’ pasture before the interns had finished chores. Which today, in addition to watering, feeding, and moving the chickens, included catching and crating the three hundred we planned to process immediately after breakfast. While we waited for Daniel to show up with the chicken crates, I helped Peter move pens, a two-man operation in which one man slides a customized, extrawide hand truck beneath the pen’s back edge (thereby raising it up on wheels), while the other grabs a broad loop of cable attached in front and slowly drags the pen forward onto fresh grass. The chickens, familiar with the daily drill, scooted along in step with their slowly moving mobile home. The pens were much heavier than they appeared, though, and it took every ounce of my strength to drag one a few feet across the uneven ground; “moving the broilers” was not as easy as Joel had made it sound or the interns had made it look, but then, I wasn’t nineteen, either.

After a while Daniel drove up on the tractor, towing a wagon piled high with plastic chicken crates. We stacked four of them in front of

each of the pens housing the doomed birds and then he and I got to work catching chickens. After lifting the top off the pen, Daniel used a big plywood paddle to crowd the birds into one corner, so they'd be easier to catch. He reached in and grabbed a flapping bird by one leg and flipped it upside down, which seemed to settle it. Then, in a deft, practiced move, he switched the dangling bird from his right hand to his left, freeing his right hand to grab another. When he had five birds in one hand, I held open the crate door and he stuffed them in. He could fill a crate with ten birds in less than a minute.

"Your turn," Daniel said, nodding toward the cornered mass of feathers remaining in the pen. To me, the way he'd grabbed and flipped the chickens seemed unduly rough, their pencil legs so fragile-looking, yet when I tried to coddle the birds as I grabbed them, they flapped around even more violently, until I was forced to let go. This clearly wasn't going to work. So finally I just reached into the flapping mass and blindly clutched at a leg with one hand and flipped it over. When I saw the chicken was none the worse for it, I switched it to my right hand (I'm a lefty), and went for a second and a third, until I had five chicken legs and a giant white pom-pom of feathers in my right hand. Daniel flipped open the lid on a crate and I pushed the pom-pom in. I don't know if there is a more humane way to catch three hundred chickens, but I could see why doing it as fast and as surely as possible was best for all concerned.

Before we sat down to breakfast (scrambled Polyface eggs and Polyface bacon), Daniel turned on the gas under the scalding tank; the water had to reach 140 degrees before we could start. At breakfast Joel talked a little about the importance of on-farm processing, not only to Polyface but to the prospects for rebuilding a viable local food chain. To hear him describe it, what we were about to do—kill a bunch of chickens in the backyard—was nothing less than a political act.

"When the USDA sees what we're doing here they get weak in the knees," Joel said with a chuckle. "The inspectors take one look at our processing shed, and they don't know what to do with us. They'll tell me the regulations stipulate a processing facility must have impermeable

white walls so they can be washed down between shifts. They'll quote me a rule that says all doors and windows must have screens. I point out we don't have any walls at all, not to mention doors and windows, because the best disinfectant in the world is fresh air and sunshine. Well, that really gets them scratching their heads!"

The problem with current food-safety regulations, in Joel's view, is that they are one-size-fits-all rules designed to regulate giant slaughterhouses that are mindlessly applied to small farmers in such a way that "before I can sell my neighbor a T-bone steak I've got to wrap it up in a million dollars' worth of quintuple-permitted processing plant." For example, federal rules stipulate that every processing facility have a bathroom for the exclusive use of the USDA inspector. Such regulations favor the biggest industrial meatpackers, who can spread the costs of compliance over the millions of animals they process every year, at the expense of artisanal enterprises like Polyface.

The fact that Polyface can prove its chickens have much lower bacteria counts than supermarket chickens (Salatin's had them both tested by an independent lab) doesn't cut any mustard with the inspectors, either. USDA regulations spell out precisely what sort of facility and system is permissible, but they don't set thresholds for food-borne pathogens. (That would require the USDA to recall meat from packers who failed to meet the standards, something the USDA, incredibly, lacks the authority to do.) "I'd be happy to swab-test my chickens for salmonella, listeria, campylobacter, you name it, but the USDA refuses to set any levels!" As breakfast-time conversation, the topic left a lot to be desired, but once Joel gets started on the government, there's no stopping him. "Just tell me where the finish line is, and I'll figure out the best way to get there."

The processing shed in question resembles a sort of outdoor kitchen on a concrete slab, protected from (some of) the elements by a sheet-metal roof perched on locust posts. Arranged in an orderly horseshoe along the edge are stainless steel sinks and counters, a scalding tank, a feather-plucking machine, and a brace of metal cones to hold the birds upside down while they're being killed and bled out. It's not hard to

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see how a plain-air abattoir like this might give a USDA inspector conceptions.

"Make no mistake, we're in a war with the bureaucrats, who would like nothing better than to put us out of business." I couldn't tell whether Joel wasn't perhaps being a tad paranoid on this point; the pastoral idyll has always felt itself besieged by malign outside forces, and on this farm that role is played by the government and the big processing companies whose interests they serve. Joel said state inspectors have tried to close down his chicken-processing operation more than once, but so far he's managed to stave them off.

It was a little early in the day for a full-blown prairie populist stem-winder, but clearly I was going to get one anyway. "The USDA is being used by the global corporate complex to impede the clean-food movement. They aim to close down all but the biggest meat processors, and to do it in the name of biosecurity. Every government study to date has shown that the reasons we're having an epidemic of food-borne illness in this country is centralized production, centralized processing, and long-distance transportation of food. You would think therefore that they'd want to decentralize the food system, especially after 9/11. But no! They'd much rather just irradiate everything instead."

By the time we finished breakfast, a couple of cars had pulled into the driveway—two women from downstate, who had read *Pastured Poultry Profit\$* and wanted to learn how to process the chickens they'd started, and a neighbor or two Joel sometimes hires when he needs extra hands on processing day. Joel had once told me he regarded the willingness of neighbors to work for a business as the true mark of its sustainability, that it operated on the proper scale socially and economically, as well as environmentally.

"That's another reason we don't raise a hundred thousand chickens. It's not just the land that couldn't take it, but the community, too. We'd be processing six days a week, so we'd have to do what the industrial folks do: bring in a bunch of migrant workers because no one around here would want to gut chickens every day. Scale makes all the difference."

After a few minutes of neighborly chitchat, everybody drifted toward their stations in the processing shed. I volunteered to join Daniel, the designated executioner, at the first station on the line. Why? Because I'd been dreading this event all week and wanted to get it over with. Nobody was insisting I personally slaughter a chicken, but I was curious to learn how it was done and to see if I could bring myself to do it. The more I'd learned about the food chain, the more obligated I felt to take a good hard look at all of its parts. It seemed to me not too much to ask of a meat eater, which I was then and still am, that at least once in his life he take some direct responsibility for the killing on which his meat-eating depends.

I stacked several chicken crates in the corner by the killing cones and, while Daniel sharpened his knives, began lifting chickens from the crates and placing them, head first, into the killing cones, which have an opening at the bottom for the chicken's head. Taking the squawking birds out of the crate was actually the hard part; as soon as they were snug in the cones, which kept their wings from flapping, the chickens fell silent. Once all eight cones were loaded, Daniel reached underneath and took a chicken head between his first finger and thumb, holding it still. Gently, he gave the head a quarter turn and then quickly drew his knife across the artery running alongside the bird's windpipe. A stream of blood erupted from the cut, pulsing slightly as it poured down into a metal gutter that funneled it into a bucket. Daniel explained that you wanted to sever only the artery, not the head, so that the heart would continue to beat and pump out the blood. The bird shuddered in its cone, its yellow feet dancing spastically.

It was hard to watch. I told myself the spasms were involuntary, and they probably were. I told myself that the birds waiting their turn appeared to have no idea what was going on in the cone next to them. I told myself that their suffering, once their throats were slit, was brief. Yet it took several long minutes for the spasms to subside. Could they smell the blood on Daniel's hands? Recognize the knife? I have no idea, but the waiting birds did not seem panicked, and I took solace in their

seeming obliviousness. Yet, honestly, there wasn't much time for these reflections, because you're working on an assembly (or, really, disassembly) line, and it has a rhythm of its own that soon overpowers your mind as well as your body. Within minutes the first eight chickens had been bled out and transferred to the scalding tank. Daniel was calling for eight more, and I had to hustle so as not to fall behind.

After I had loaded and he had slaughtered several batches, Daniel offered me his knife. He showed me how to hold the chicken's little head in a V between my thumb and forefinger, how to turn it to expose the artery and avoid the windpipe, and how to slice down toward you at a spot just beneath the skull. Since I am left-handed, every step had to be reverse engineered, which tangled us in an excruciating moment of delay. I looked into the black eye of the chicken and, thankfully, saw nothing, not a flicker of fear. Holding his head in my right hand, I drew the knife down the left side of the chicken's neck. I worried about not cutting hard enough, which would have prolonged the bird's suffering, but needn't have: The blade was sharp and sliced easily through the white feathers covering the bird's neck, which promptly blossomed a brilliant red. Before I could let go of the bird's suddenly limp head my hand was painted in a gush of warm blood. Somehow, an errant droplet splattered the lens of my glasses, leaving a tiny, fogged red blot in my field of vision for the rest of the morning. Daniel voiced his approval of my technique and, noticing the drop of blood on my glasses, offered one last bit of advice: "The first rule of chicken killing is that if you ever feel anything on your lip, you don't want to lick it off." Daniel smiled. He's been killing chickens since he was ten years old and doesn't seem to mind it.

Daniel gestured toward the next cone; I guess I wasn't done. In the end I personally killed a dozen or so chickens before moving on to try another station. I got fairly good at it, though once or twice I sliced too deeply, nearly severing a whole head. After a while the rhythm of the work took over from my misgivings, and I could kill without a thought to anything but my technique. I wasn't at it long enough for slaughtering chickens to become routine, but the work did begin to feel me-

chanical, and that feeling, perhaps more than any other, was disconcerting: how quickly you can get used to anything, especially when the people around you think nothing of it. In a way, the most morally troubling thing about killing chickens is that after a while it is no longer morally troubling.

When Daniel and I got ahead of the scalding, which could accommodate only a few birds at a time, I stepped away from the killing area for a break. Joel clapped me on the back for having taken my turn at the killing cones. I told him killing chickens wasn't something I would want to do every day.

"Nobody should," Joel said. "That's why in the Bible the priests drew lots to determine who would conduct the ritual slaughter, and they rotated the job every month. Slaughter is dehumanizing work if you have to do it every day." Temple Grandin, the animal-handling expert who's helped design many slaughterhouses, has written that it is not uncommon for full-time slaughterhouse workers to become sadistic. "Processing but a few days a month means we can actually think about what we're doing," Joel said, "and be as careful and humane as possible."

I'd had enough of the killing station, so after my break I moved down the line. Once the birds were bled out and dead, Daniel handed them, by their feet, to Galen, who dropped them into the scalding, a tub outfitted with moving shelves that plunged the birds up and down in the hot water to loosen their feathers. They came out of the scalding looking very dead and soaked—floppy wet rags with beaks and feet. Next they went into the plucker, a stainless steel cylinder that resembles a top-loading washing machine with dozens of black rubber fingers projecting from the sides. As the chickens spin at high speed, they flop and jostle against the stiff fingers, which pull their feathers off. After a few minutes they emerge as naked as supermarket broilers. This is the moment the chickens passed over from looking like dead animals to looking like food.

Peter pulled the birds from the plucker, yanked off the heads, and cut off the feet before passing the birds to Galen for gutting. I joined

him at his station, and he showed me what to do—where to make the incision with your knife, how to reach your hand into the cavity without tearing too much skin, and how to keep the digestive tract intact as you pull the handful of warm viscera from the belly. As the viscera spilled out onto the stainless steel counter he named the parts: gullet, gizzard, gallbladder (which you must be careful not to pierce), liver, heart, lungs, and intestines (have to be careful here again); then he showed me which organs to keep for sale, and which ones to drop in the gutbucket at our feet. The viscera were unexpectedly beautiful, glistening in a whole palette of slightly electric colors, from the steely blue striations of the heart muscle to the sleek milk chocolate liver to the dull mustard of the gallbladder. I was curious to see the gizzard, the stomachlike organ where a chicken uses bits of ingested grit to crush its food after it's passed down the gullet. I slit open the tight, hard nut of gizzard and there inside found tiny pieces of stone and a blade of bright green grass folded like an accordion. I couldn't make out any insects in the gizzard, but its contents recapitulated the Polyface food chain: pasture on its way to becoming meat.

I didn't get very good at evisceration; my clumsy hands tore unacceptably large openings in the skin, giving my chickens a ragged appearance, and I accidentally broke a gallbladder, spilling a thin yellow bile that I then had to painstakingly rinse off the carcass. "After you gut a few thousand chickens," Galen said dryly after I'd torn another chicken, "you'll either get really good at it, or you'll stop gutting chickens." Galen had clearly gotten really good at it, and he seemed to enjoy the work.

Everybody was making desultory conversation as they went about their jobs, and the morning had something of the flavor that I imagine a barn raising or a November session of corn shucking once had: people who ordinarily work alone having a chance to visit with one another while getting something useful done. Much of the work was messy and unpleasant, but it did allow for conversation, and you weren't going to be at it long enough to get bored or sore. And by the end of the morning you had something to show for it—and a great deal more than you would have had had you been working alone. We

hadn't been at it much more than three hours before there were three hundred or so chickens floating in the big steel tank of iced water. Each of them had made the transition from clucking animal to oven-ready roaster, from killing cone to holding tank, in ten minutes, give or take.

While we were cleaning up, scrubbing the blood off the tables and hosing down the floor, customers began arriving to pick up their chickens. This was when I began to appreciate what a morally powerful idea an open-air abattoir is. Polyface's customers know to come after noon on a chicken day, but there's nothing to prevent them from showing up earlier and watching their dinner being killed—indeed, customers are welcome to watch, and occasionally one does. More than any USDA rule or regulation, this transparency is their best assurance that the meat they're buying has been humanely and cleanly processed.

"You can't regulate integrity," Joel is fond of saying; the only genuine accountability comes from a producer's relationship with his or her customers, and their freedom "to come out to the farm, poke around, sniff around. If after seeing how we do things they want to buy food from us, that should be none of the government's business." Like fresh air and sunshine, Joel believes transparency is a more powerful disinfectant than any regulation or technology. It is a compelling idea. Imagine if the walls of every slaughterhouse and animal factory were as transparent as Polyface's—if not open to the air then at least made of glass. So much of what happens behind those walls—the cruelty, the carelessness, the filth—would simply have to stop.

The customers pick their chicken out of the tank and bag it themselves before putting it on the scale in the shop next door to the processing shed. (Having customers bag their own chickens preserves the fiction that they're not buying a processed food product, which is illegal in an area zoned for agriculture. Rather, they're buying the live bird, which Polyface has slaughtered and cleaned as a courtesy.) If you buy one at the farm, a Polyface chicken costs \$2.05 a pound, compared to \$1.29 at the local supermarket. To keep that premium as low as possible is yet another reason for processing on the farm. Having to take bees and hogs to the packing plant in Harrisonburg adds a dollar to

every pound of beef or pork Polyface sells, and two dollars to every pound of ham or bacon, which regulations prohibit Joel from smoking himself. Curing meat is considered manufacturing, he explained, smoking slightly now himself, and manufacturing is prohibited in an area zoned for agriculture. Joel is convinced “clean food” could compete with supermarket food if the government would exempt farmers from the thicket of regulations that prohibit them from processing and selling meat from the farm. For him, regulation is the single biggest impediment to building a viable local food chain, and what’s at stake is our liberty, nothing less. “We do not allow the government to dictate what religion you can observe, so why should we allow them to dictate what kind of food you can buy?” He believes “freedom of food”—the freedom to buy a pork chop from the farmer who raised the hog—should be a constitutional right.

While Theresa chatted with customers as she checked them out, occasionally dispatching Daniel or Rachel to fetch a dozen eggs from the fridge or a roast from the walk-in freezer, Galen and I helped Joel compost chicken waste. This just may be the grossest job on the farm—or anywhere else for that matter. Yet I came to see that even the way Polyface handles its chicken guts is, as Joel would say, an extension of his worldview.

Joel went off on the tractor to get a load of woodchips from the big pile he keeps across the road, while Galen and I hauled five-gallon buckets of blood and guts and feathers from the processing shed to the compost pile, which is only a stone’s throw from the house. The day was getting steamy, and the heaping mound of woodchips, beneath which simmered earlier installments of chicken waste, exhaled a truly evil stink. I’ve encountered some funky compost piles, but this one smelled like, well, exactly what it was: rotting flesh. I realized that this was what I had caught the occasional waft of during my first sleepless night in the trailer.

Beside the old pile Joel dumped a few yards of fresh woodchips, which Galen and I raked into a broad rectangular mound about the size of a double bed, leaving a slight depression in the middle. Into this dip

we spilled the buckets of guts, forming a glistening, parti-colored stew. On top of this we added the pillowy piles of feathers, and finally the blood, which now had the consistency of house paint. By now Joel was back with another load of chips, which he proceeded to dump onto the top of the pile. Galen climbed up onto the mass of woodchips with his rake, and I followed him with mine. The top layer of woodchips was dry, but you could feel the viscera sliding around underfoot; it felt like walking on a mattress filled with Jell-O. We raked the pile level and got out of there.

The compost pile repulsed me, but what did that say? Beyond the stench in my nostrils (which, believe me, was not so easy to get beyond), the pile offered an inescapable reminder of all that eating chicken involves—the killing, the bleeding, the evisceration. And no matter how well it is masked or how far it is hidden away, this death smell—and the reality that gives rise to it—shadows the eating of any meat, industrial, organic, or whatever, is part and parcel of even this grassy pastoral food chain whose beauty had so impressed me. I wondered whether my disgust didn’t cover a certain shame I was feeling about the morning’s work. Just at the moment, I wasn’t sure I could imagine eating chicken again any time soon.

I certainly couldn’t imagine keeping this rotting heap of chicken guts an errant summer’s breeze away from my dinner table. But Joel probably saw that pile in a very different light than I did; who knows, by now it might not even smell all that bad to him. For Joel, yet another of the advantages of processing chickens here is that it allows him to keep the whole cycle of birth, growth, death, and decay on the land. Otherwise, the waste would end up in a rendering plant, there to be superheated, dried, and pelleted, turned into “protein meal,” and fed to factory-farmed pigs and cattle and even other chickens, a dubious practice that mad cow disease has rendered even more dubious. This is not a system he wants any part of.

It could be that Joel even finds a certain beauty in that compost pile, or at least in its redemptive promise. He certainly hasn’t hidden it away. Like every other bit of “waste” on this farm, he regards chicken guts as



a form of biological wealth—nitrogen he can return to the land by locking it down with carbon he's harvested from the woodlot. Having seen what happened to last year's pile, and all the piles before that, Joel can see the future of this one in a way I can't, its promise to transubstantiate this mass of blood and guts and feathers into a particularly rich, cakey black compost, improbably sweet-smelling stuff that, by spring, will be ready for him to spread onto the pastures and turn back into grass.

## THIRTEEN

## THE MARKET

*"Greetings from the  
Non-Barcode People"*

## 1. WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON

Following the corn-based industrial food chain had taken me on a journey of several thousand miles, from George Naylor's Iowa fields to the feedlots and packing plants of Kansas, through any number of far-flung food processors before ending up in a Marin County McDonald's. After that, it didn't surprise me to read that the typical item of food on an American's plate travels some fifteen hundred miles to get there, and is frequently better traveled and more worldly than its eater. By comparison, the grass-based food chain rooted in these Virginia pastures is, for all its complexity, remarkably short; I had been able to follow it for most of its length without leaving the Salatins' property. The farm work in Virginia may have been more taxing than in Iowa—killing chickens as compared to planting corn—but the detective work here was a relative cinch. And all that remained to do now was to trace the grass-based food chain along the various marketing paths linking Joel's pastures to his customers' plates.