

Opinion

The End of Meat Is Here

If you care about the working poor, about racial justice, and about climate change, you have to stop eating animals.

By Jonathan Safran Foer
Jonathan Safran Foer is the author of “Eating Animals” and “We Are the Weather.”

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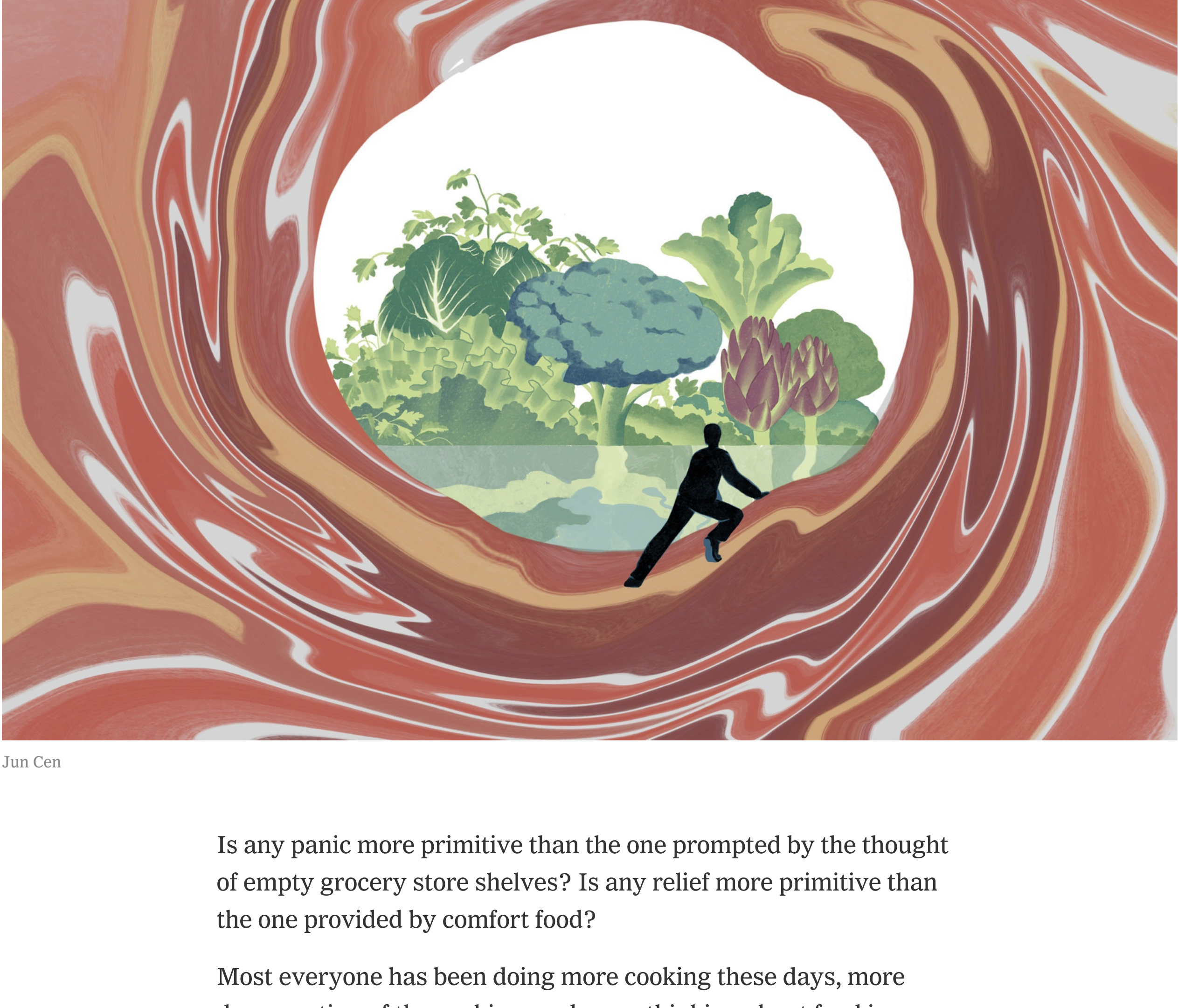
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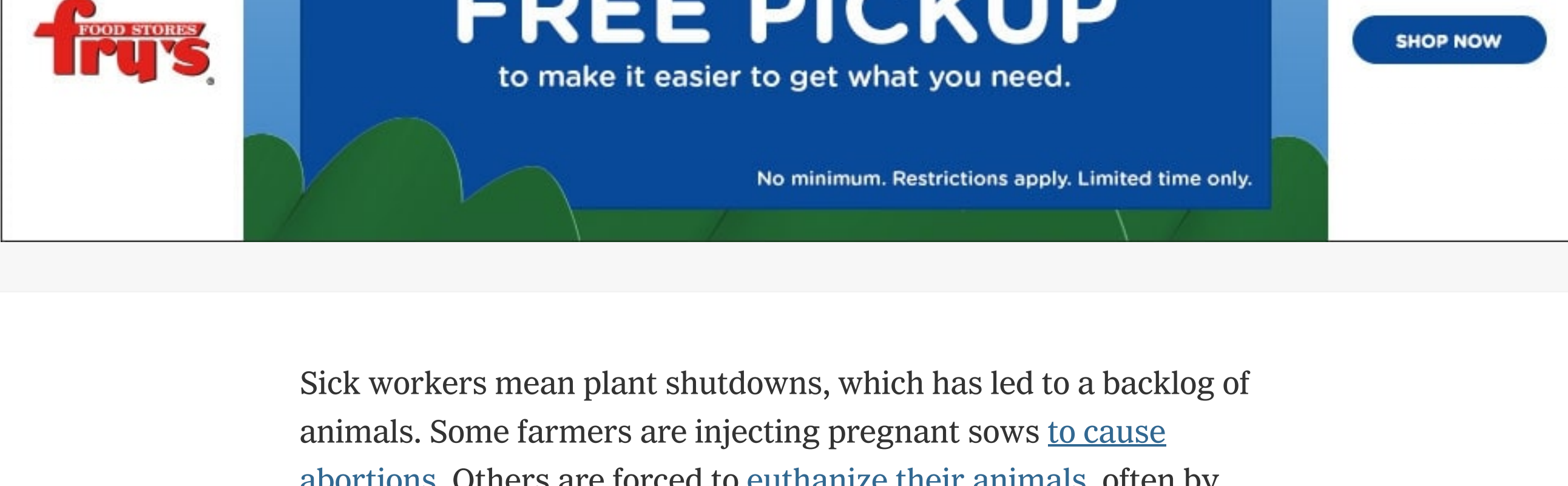
Jun Cen

Is any panic more primitive than the one prompted by the thought of empty grocery store shelves? Is any relief more primitive than the one provided by comfort food?

Most everyone has been doing more cooking these days, more documenting of the cooking, and more thinking about food in general. The combination of meat shortages and President Trump’s [decision](#) to order slaughterhouses open despite the protestations of endangered workers has inspired many Americans to consider just how essential meat is.

Is it more essential than the lives of the working poor who labor to produce it? It seems so. An astonishing six out of 10 counties that the White House itself [identified](#) as coronavirus hot spots are home to the very slaughterhouses the president ordered open.

In Sioux Falls, S.D., the [Smithfield pork plant](#), which produces some 5 percent of the country’s pork, is one of the largest hot spots in the nation. A Tyson plant in Perry, Iowa, had [730 cases](#) of the coronavirus — nearly 60 percent of its employees. At another Tyson plant, in Waterloo, Iowa, there were [1,031 reported cases](#) among about 2,800 workers.



Sick workers mean plant shutdowns, which has led to a backlog of animals. Some farmers are injecting pregnant sows [to cause abortions](#). Others are forced to [euthanize their animals](#), often by gassing or shooting them. It’s gotten bad enough that Senator Chuck Grassley, an Iowa Republican, has asked the Trump administration to provide mental health resources to hog farmers.

Despite this grisly reality — and the widely reported effects of the [factory-farm industry](#) on America’s lands, communities, animals and human health long before this pandemic hit — only [around half](#) of Americans say they are trying to reduce their meat consumption. Meat is embedded in our culture and personal histories in ways that matter too much, from the Thanksgiving turkey to the ballpark hot dog. Meat comes with uniquely wonderful smells and tastes, with satisfactions that can *almost* feel like home itself. And what, if not the feeling of home, is essential?

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And yet, an increasing number of people sense the inevitability of impending change.

Animal agriculture is now recognized as a leading cause of global warming. [According to The Economist](#), a quarter of Americans between the ages of 25 and 34 say they are vegetarians or vegans, which is perhaps one reason sales of plant-based “meats” [have skyrocketed](#), with Impossible and Beyond Burgers available everywhere from Whole Foods to White Castle.

Our hand has been reaching for the doorknob for the last few years. Covid-19 has kicked open the door.

At the very least it has forced us to look. When it comes to a subject as inconvenient as meat, it is tempting to pretend unambiguous science is advocacy, to find solace in exceptions that could never be scaled and to speak about our world as if it were theoretical.

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Some of the most thoughtful people I know find ways not to give the problems of animal agriculture any thought, just as I find ways to avoid thinking about climate change and income inequality, not to mention the paradoxes in my own eating life. One of the unexpected side effects of these months of sheltering in place is that it’s hard not to think about the things that are essential to who we are.

Jun Cen

We cannot protect our environment while continuing to eat meat regularly. This is [not a refutable perspective](#), but a banal truism. Whether they become Whoppers or boutique grass-fed steaks, cows produce an enormous amount of greenhouse gas. If cows were a country, they would be the [third-largest greenhouse gas emitter](#) in the world.

According to the research director of [Project Drawdown](#) — a nonprofit organization dedicated to modeling solutions to address climate change — eating a plant-based diet is “the most important contribution every individual can make to reversing global warming.”

Americans overwhelmingly accept the science of climate change. A [majority of both Republicans and Democrats](#) say that the United States should have remained in the Paris climate accord. We don’t need new information, and we don’t need new values. We only need to walk through the open door.

We cannot claim to care about the [humane treatment](#) of animals while continuing to eat meat regularly. The farming system we rely on is woven through with misery. Modern chickens have been so [genetically modified](#) that their very bodies have become prisons of pain even if we open their cages. Turkeys are bred to be so obese that they are incapable of reproducing without artificial insemination. Mother cows have their [calves ripped from them](#) before weaning, resulting in acute distress we can hear in their wails and empirically measure through the cortisol in their bodies.

No label or certification can avoid these kinds of cruelty. We don’t need any animal rights activist waving a finger at us. We don’t need to be convinced of anything we don’t already know. We need to listen to ourselves.

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We cannot protect against pandemics while continuing to eat meat regularly. Much attention has been paid to wet markets, but factory farms, specifically poultry farms, are a more important breeding ground for pandemics. Further, the [C.D.C. reports](#) that three out of four new or emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic — the result of our broken relationship with animals.

It goes without saying that we want to be safe. We know how to make ourselves safer. But wanting and knowing are not enough.

These are not my or anyone’s opinions, despite a tendency to publish this information in opinion sections. And the answers to the most common responses raised by any serious questioning of animal agriculture aren’t opinions.

Don’t we need animal protein? [No](#).

We can live [longer, healthier lives](#) without it. Most American adults [eat roughly twice](#) the recommended intake of protein — including vegetarians, who consume 70 percent more than they need. People who eat diets high in animal protein are more likely to die of heart disease, diabetes and kidney failure. Of course, meat, like cake, can be part of a healthy diet. But no sound nutritionist would recommend eating cake too often.

If we let the factory-farm system collapse, won’t farmers suffer? No.

The corporations that speak in their name while exploiting them will. There are [fewer American farmers today](#) than there were during the Civil War, despite America’s population being nearly 11 times greater. This is not an accident, but a business model. The ultimate dream of the animal-agriculture industrial complex is for “farms” to be fully automated. Transitioning toward plant-based foods and sustainable farming practices would create many more jobs than it would end.

Don’t take my word for it. Ask a farmer if he or she would be happy to see the end of factory farming.

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Isn’t a movement away from meat elitist? No.

A 2015 study [found](#) that a vegetarian diet is \$750 a year cheaper than a meat-based diet. People of color disproportionately [self-identify as vegetarian](#) and disproportionately are victims of factory farming’s brutality. The slaughterhouse employees currently being put at risk to satisfy our taste for meat are overwhelmingly brown and black. Suggesting that a cheaper, healthier, less exploitative way of farming is elitist is in fact a piece of industry propaganda.

Can’t we work with factory-farming corporations to improve the food system? No.

Well, unless you believe that those made powerful through exploitation will voluntarily destroy the vehicles that have granted them spectacular wealth. Factory farming is to actual farming what criminal monopolies are to entrepreneurship. If for a single year the government removed its \$38-billion-plus in props and bailouts, and required meat and dairy corporations to play by normal capitalist rules, it would destroy them forever. The industry could not survive in the free market.

Perhaps more than any other food, meat inspires both comfort and discomfort. That can make it difficult to act on what we know and want. Can we really displace meat from the center of our plates? This is the question that brings us to the threshold of the impossible. On the other side is the inevitable.

With the horror of pandemic pressing from behind, and the new questioning of what is essential, we can now see the door that was always there. As in a dream where our senses have rooms unknown to our waking selves, we can home there is a better way of eating, a life closer to our values. On the other side is not something new, but something that calls from the past — a world in which farmers were not myths, tortured bodies were not food and the planet was not the bill at the end of the meal.

One meal in front of the other, it’s time to cross the threshold. On the other side is home.

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