

# CHOCOLATE AND PEARL

EMILY WELTY

During the 2020 Australian bushfires, I housesat for a fellow anti-nuclear activist in Melbourne. The most important piece of my duties was caring for two chickens, Chocolate and Pearl, who changed the way I thought about relationships with animals and food. Before my time with these two big personalities, I had seriously under-estimated the temperaments and traits of chickens. The way they schemed about their desires and used simple strategies to pursue those wishes, charmed me. This is not an over-projection or an argument about whether animals have complex inner lives or not. Pearl and Chocolate had definitive agendas – to eat the pizza crust in my hand, to walk around on the porch, to be picked up – and they took steps to achieve these goals.

Eating meat for me depends on not knowing these things. I don't believe eating meat is unethical though I know most of the ways that meat is produced particularly in the United States is deeply unethical. Even our language prevents us from thinking about the ethics of our food – "meat" isn't "produced" at all. "Meat" is what we call certain parts of animal bodies after the life force has left them. We eat animals.

That I am neither a vegetarian nor a vegan has always been one of the central ways that I disappoint my earnest Peace and Justice Studies students. I puncture their idealized version of my life and my activism with my omnivorous diet. They generously make excuses for me to each other – that I travel in a lot of circumstances where not eating meat would be a challenge, that I have a disability that means I have to be really careful about my body all the time. And they aren't wrong about these conditions but I also don't know that these are why I eat meat.

I have a dear friend who draws the line between what she will and will not eat at eyelids – that is, she will not eat creatures that have eyelids – so yes to fish and birds, no to mammals. I've embraced different food rubrics overtime. There was a period when I wouldn't eat anything that I couldn't kill myself. I've done elimination diets for every possible toxin from red

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Chocolate, by Cathleen Halloran

meat to dairy to wheat to food coloring. But chicken always felt like one meat that I would continue consuming – because of the possibility of raising them ethically seemed imaginable. And before that December in Melbourne, chicken personalities seemed flatter so it was easier to see them as food.

Pearl and Chocolate changed that. There was something elemental when they looked me in the eye, recognizing me as a fellow being and appealing to me to do something they want. I don't know that you can be appealed to and then eat the appellant. (To be clear, eating Pearl and Chocolate specifically was never an option – but if two particular chickens capture your heart, it's no longer easy to eat other chickens just because you haven't met them.)

I called their names and they came running to me. Heads out, tails extended, legs like athletes with bright eyes. The smoke from the bushfires during those weeks was hazardous. I could hide in the house but they had nothing but their pen and the yard. I went out each day to spend some time with them. I struggled to grasp if I was inventing an anthropocentric narrative of affection but Pearl and Chocolate seemed to delight in my company. What even matters at the end of the world? And how odd that the phrase for what I felt is “cooped up” – an indication that we know that confinement in little spaces isn't good for living things – humans or chickens. Pearl seems to crave human contact and considers herself a lap chicken. When she leapt into my arms during the smoke-filled afternoons of 2020, she would lean against me and gently tug a curl of my hair. Here we are, together, in this hazy, opaque world.

One morning Chocolate laid an egg. This struck me as such a defiant gesture. The egg was so much bigger than I expected and just so improbable that she was carrying that around in her body. Intellectually, I know that's how it works. I'm just so detached from my food sources that this still comes as a surprise. I scrambled the egg and ate it for breakfast. This felt like reciprocity.

I ate wagyu beef for the first time in Japan. In Nishiki Market in Kyoto, I wandered the crowded lanes gazing at the food and finally ordered a single small piece of wagyu beef. A friend told me that he ate a piece of meat here that was so delicious that he wept tears in the crowded marketplace. I want to feel that way about food. I was rapt as a single morsel of meat was carefully grilled in front of me, meticulously turned by tongs over the glowing coals. If as animals we must eat each other's bodies, may we do it like this – with such a degree of

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reverence what we feel the life that was taken for our nourishment.

A neatly framed conclusion to this story would be that after my time with Chocolate and Pearl, I never ate chicken again. But that kind of banal simplicity elides the deeper knowledge that I took away from my relationship with them. I eat animals. To do so is a choice and one that is fraught with hundreds of other ethical choices that I'm making all the time. Caring for Chocolate and Pearl made my decision to eat chicken a choice that I can never make without thinking about their lives as lives. What we each needed and what we shared when the world was on fire affected me and gave me a sense of reverence for the lives that we take if we eat meat.

What is it to me, that Chocolate and Pearl love their lives? It is everything.

To warm up when you are cold, to cool off when you are hot, to lay down and fall asleep when you are tired, to drink cool water when you are thirsty, to dry off when you are wet, to feel the skin of a creature that you care for and who cares for you. The taste of a sharp piece of cheese. The comfort of a crusty piece of bread and butter. The way it feels to stretch your back. Pleasure in the smallest gestures. A recognition of one another's lives.

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Pearl, by Cathleen Halloran