

## **Life and Work by Hayley Katzen**

From my desk, draft six of an essay, I looked up to see the old farm truck clattering up the gravel driveway, Jen, my farmer partner in the driver's seat. As the bumper bar pushed against the front gate, Jen looked up at me as I stepped out onto the veranda.

'I need your help now,' she yelled. 'I've got a heifer in the yards. She's having trouble calving.' Jen had watched the heifer in the creek paddock wandering around alone, then joining the herd, then taking off on her own again. She wasn't presenting at all.

Down at the yards, we pushed the heifer up the race and caught her in the head bales. The winter light was fading. Jen could feel the calf's back legs, not the head. It was a breech birth. As much as the heifer pushed, the calf wouldn't come out. I anchored myself against the rails, Jen attached the chains to the feet and soon, with the help of the calf pullers and an almighty push from the heifer, Jen guided the slippery breathing calf into the cool night air. I raced round to open the head bales, Jen carried the calf round the side and placed him on the grass in front of the heifer. We slipped through the yard's rails and stood some distance away, watching as she licked her calf clean.

'Hallelujah, mother and baby both well,' I said, as I exhaled. Last time we'd had to get the vet the hour and a half from town and still the calf hadn't survived. 'Ah look at that, it's so – beautiful.' And then, shaking my head I said, 'But not for long. Watch out little one, when you're seven or eight months old we'll send you to market.' I turned to Jen, 'How can we do this? They're such sweet little animals?'

It was the question I'd asked repeatedly over the thirteen years I'd lived on the farm with Jen.

Jen replied – as she'd done repeatedly – 'The cattle here have a good life.'

It was a clear night, ablaze with stars and satellites, with possums screeching in the moulting gumtree. Was 'a good life', I wondered, sufficient justification for the ways things were done on this small-scale cattle farm? For all these years, I'd avoided thinking about the ethics of cattle farming but I'd also come to believe that to belong on a farm was to be part of its work.

'Live to work' or 'work to live': the conundrum of contemporary life, and my personal struggle since I'd quit a job as a legal academic and moved to live with Jen on this remote farm where I chased that dream of publishing a book as proof I was a 'writer' and still a contributing member of society. Jen was less driven: in the 70s, aged twenty-six, she'd

moved to the farm to ‘live simply and simply live’. She saw herself as a caretaker of the land and had fallen into the business of running cattle.

All these years later, the cattle, like the farm, seemed to have become part of Jen and my ‘we’: I had a financial interest in the cattle business, and helped with cattle work in the yards and on the computer. Yet Jen made all the decisions about what happened on the property. Every morning I’d walk through the groves of spotted gum and silver leafed iron-bark, and then down to the creek across the open paddocks speckled with cows and shiny-coated playful calves. I’d say ‘morning girls’ and when the cows continued grazing, seemingly unperturbed by my presence, I’d delight in the possibility that they knew me. Then for dinner we’d sit down to home-grown beef. How this plagued me. Even if the cattle were Jen’s world and livelihood, surely I should still be awake to what went on around me? Still take ethical responsibility for what happened in this landscape that, strangely, seemed to have become my home? Or was this the invidious position of the ‘farmer’s wife’ – if indeed a lesbian could be a wife?

I resorted to my default form of action: borrowing books from the library and friends’ shelves, and trawling through online resources. The abolitionists, I discovered, opposed all animal usage by humans on the basis that all sentient beings have the basic right not to be treated as the property of others. The animal welfare advocates focused on treatment – much like Jen. When I read that the abolitionists regarded cattle farming as slavery, I began to wonder if, even if I’d never been animal-mad and couldn’t equate animals with people, the abolitionists made the stronger case on a philosophical basis. I didn’t want to participate in anything that looked remotely like slavery.

As we sat down to a winter dinner of rump steak, and home-grown steamed cauliflower and broccoli and pumpkin mash, I said, ‘Everything I’ve been reading is telling me we shouldn’t be farming beef cattle.’

‘Well then, don’t eat it,’ Jen said. ‘Go right ahead and become a vegetarian.’

‘But that’s not the only issue. Even if I stopped eating meat, I’d still be participating in cattle farming. Just by living here I’m indirectly participating.’ I told her about J.M Coetzee’s book *Elizabeth Costello* where the parallel is drawn between meat-eaters and those who said nothing as the Nazis murdered millions of people.

‘So should we sell all the cattle and then you can support me completely?’ Jen said between mouthfuls.

From abstract ethics to hard reality. A familiar dynamic: me in the ivory tower of ideas; Jen on the ground, bringing me back to earth. This was Jen's only income source. The cattle business paid the farm's costs. It had made life more financially equitable for us, and meant I could support our other needs and pleasures without a regular job. This was Jen's autonomy and lifestyle. For as long as she lived on the farm, she'd have cattle. And how far would I take ethical purism anyway? This wasn't only about the present; after all, the money I'd once inherited from my father was partly made from chicken farming.

'The industrialisation of food's the major problem,' Jen said. 'Not us eating home-grown beef. The only problem I see there is that we should be eating the offal, the cheeks and the tongue, and using the hide.'

When we collected the boxes of meat from the butcher of the 'body' we sent in for slaughter, there was rump and blade, chuck and mince, rolled roast and shin rings. The abattoirs, it seemed, didn't give us every part of the animal – they sold the 'unwanted parts' to the Asian market at a healthy profit.

'Anyway, you can't do anything else with this block,' Jen said. 'It's too poor and rocky for crops. At least by grazing cattle we're converting the grass – which humans can't digest anyway – directly to protein. We're helping feed the population real food by producing meat --'

'Oh God, even that term "producing meat" is a problem,' I said. 'It completely distances us from the reality that we're breeding live animals – sentient beings – to be killed. It's all euphemisms. It obscures the reality that this is a form of slavery.'

Jen sighed. 'I see the parallel with slavery, the way the cattle are lined up in pens at the saleyards then auctioned; we get rid of anyone who becomes dangerous in the yards, and we breed domesticity into the herd. And yes, of course they're sentient beings, each with a different personality. You see that with the old girls. I'd even have to say they have emotion – or at least they feel pain and they take care of their calves. But you could say the dogs are slaves too ...'

'Except we love and pet them. And we don't eat them,' I said.

'I'd admit we've made slaves of cattle but if I had to choose between an animal and a human, I know what I'd choose. At least we take care of the cattle as kindly as we can. There are others who don't treat their cattle as we do here,' she said, taking another mouthful of steak.

'That sounds much like how white South Africans treated black domestic workers under apartheid,' I said. 'I can just hear my parents using those same words.'

I remembered the day Jen had agreed to hire a couple of fit young cowboys, how they'd swaggered around the yards, telling Jen what to do. When they'd missed catching a calf, these two over-sized men had chased and wrestled the four month-old calf to the ground. They'd held him down spread-eagled while they'd inoculated, ear-tagged and castrated him. Jen and I had watched in horror. It was the last time we'd hired anyone.

'But what about the actual killing?' I said. 'I read a quote today – I think it was Paul McCartney: "If slaughterhouses had glass walls, none of us would eat meat."'

Jen shrugged. 'I've killed and butchered sheep and chicken and kangaroo and rabbit, and then eaten what I've killed. Speaking of which: you going to eat that rump?' she asked, her fork raised.

'Maybe,' I said, 'I haven't decided yet.'

'Well, don't let it get cold.'

I sliced the meat and took a forkful. Tender, tasty. 'Shit, shit, shit,' I said.

Jen laughed.

'Don't,' I said. 'I don't know how to do this. I feel gutless. Like I've got zero moral courage. I almost wish I hadn't started reading. The arguments make sense so why can't I take that step? Am I just too lazy to be a healthy vego – or am I an addict?'

'Stunned and their throats cut,' someone said when I'd asked at the community hall one Friday night how cattle are killed. One of the blokes had worked in an abattoir; he assured me it was quick and painless.

I rang the abattoir, euphemistically named the Meat Processing Plant. We drove past it each time we went to the sale yards – the Casino Livestock Exchange.

The receptionist said, 'I'll put you through to someone on the floor.' In the background I heard the shush of a jet of water, and I was reminded of those long-ago visits to the abattoir on my father's farm where I'd seen racks of chickens on metal hooks. Now I pictured racks of hanging carcasses like I'd seen in the butcher's shop.

'No visitors,' the very busy man who answered said. It was against health and safety regulations.

Here's a way to drive oneself mad: allow abstract ethics to dominate your reading and thinking; help your farmer partner pull a calf when the mother's in trouble; and at night chop, brown, simmer and eat beef. I chastised myself for my lack of moral mettle. I badgered Jen. I tossed and turned, at odds with myself.

There seemed only one way to resolve my internal conflict. ‘Just admit it,’ I told myself, ‘you’re no purist.’ Moral self-importance had to go. Of course I’d continue to eat meat – in which case, all I could do was ensure that I felt satisfied that the ‘meat’ that ‘grew’ on this farm had been as ‘happy’ as a domesticated animal bred for consumption could be. It was time I had a say in the farming practices.

One afternoon, I called Jen into my study to watch videoclips I’d found on the PETA, Voiceless and Animals Australia websites. From what I’d read, castration and carting cattle to market were the two most problematic practices we engaged in.

Jen pulled up a chair beside my desk and I clicked on clips showing dehorning and electro-mobilisation. She agreed they were brutal. Fortunately, this wasn’t an issue for us – almost all our cattle had no horns.

When I clicked on the clip about castration, while I grimaced, Jen leaned in closer and then got me to replay it. ‘That’s a good cut,’ she said, using her baby finger to point to the screen at the critical moment.

From the many ‘castration conversations’ I’d had with locals and from what I’d read, I knew what we did was legal, and that the decision was made for business and management reasons. Countless times I’d witnessed calves go from being cut to having a soothing gulp of mother’s milk, and they did seem okay. I just wasn’t so sure we humans could ever know what an animal experienced.

‘I still think we should get the vet out to do it,’ I said.

‘Too expensive,’ Jen said as she left the study.

I couldn’t let up on the issue. One evening over at Frankie’s, a fisherman who lived at the coast turned up. He had a weekender block down the road from us and a small herd of Charolais that he hand-fed bread and called by name.

‘Oooo, no,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t cut. The rubber-band method’s much kinder.’

At the annual Christmas party, I joined a table of local farmers, some of whom had learned the business from their fathers, and asked the same question. After we’d got through the haw-haw laughter, the winks and crossed legs, I heard cutting was better. ‘Quicker, more effective. With the band, you wait for the nut to drop off.’

When our vet Phil came out to pregnancy-test the cattle, he said he favoured cutting; although one of the other vets in his practice preferred the rubber-band method.

‘But shouldn’t we be getting you to do it so they get anaesthetised?’

‘That would be the ideal approach. But there are practicalities,’ he said. ‘If it’s been done for years and it’s done well, that’s okay but I wouldn’t talk against anaesthetic.’ He

fiddled with his stethoscope. ‘You have to factor in practicalities,’ Phil said, ‘especially with large-scale production and distance, the practicalities of getting a vet out just aren’t there.’

‘But dogs are anaesthetised when they get done?’

Phil pushed his glasses back up his nose. He was diplomatic. He distinguished the treatment of production animals from domestic pets and told me that they’re trying to develop an anaesthetic spray for castration and dehorning that will improve the welfare of animals and reduce their degree of pain and stress.

As I watched his white truck bounce away across the paddock, I understood the implication behind his answer: even if the vets would come and do it, they’d probably think it an unnecessary expense given Jen’s ability. These were busy country vets and we lived over an hour away.

I had to accept that even if I didn’t like it, this was ‘the way it was done round here’ – and on most Australian cattle farms. I surrendered my campaign – on castration.

Next on my crusade was the transportation to market – known as carting. One early morning I met Steve, our stock carrier, at a property half an hour away. Spending a day with Steve, I hoped, would allow me to make up my own mind about the way cattle were transported.

Steve, a chatty, friendly man with a wicked glint in his blue eyes, had been carting cattle for thirty years, having inherited the business from his father who’d carted cattle for fifty-five years.

After a herd had been loaded and I’d hoisted myself up into the truck, Steve tossed the soiled yellow electric prodder, also known as a ‘jigger’, onto the dashboard and stuffed the paperwork beside him – paperwork his wife Debbie would deal with. ‘She does all that side,’ he said.

Another ‘wife’ who played her part in the rural world. How much of an interest or say, I wondered, did she have in the business?

At the top of Mallanganee Range, Steve pulled over on the side of the road. I walked along the side of the truck and peered through the gap at eye level between the ridged floor and the green metal sides. Legs and hooves, manure and urine. No one down.

‘So what would you say to the anti-cruelty people, Steve?’ I asked. ‘They say carting’s one of the main problems with cattle farming.’

He shook his head. ‘Not if they’re calm. If they’re loaded right and they’re comfortable and in good condition, it doesn’t really stress them. Can’t have them too tight. And you can’t go fast or they’ll fall over on you. Stress comes when they’re moving off the

paddock and not handled right. If they're in early and waiting, not puffing and stressed, then their temperament is right to go.'

As we drove into Casino, there were the signs: Casino Bulls, the local rugby club; COW 107.9FM; and the annual community festival, Beef Week. Steve pointed out the old grounds for the abattoir where he grew up 'chasing cattle around, helping Dad and my brothers'. He told me there 'used to be a shop on every corner round here. Fifteen butchers in town before all the supermarkets came.'

Casino was all about cattle – and probably would be for a long time yet – whether I chose to eat meat or not.

At the back section of the sale yards, Steve reversed the truck flush against the cement ramp. A few double-decker trucks were parked in other bays. It was still early, still quiet enough to hear the shiver of leaves, and a singular lowing of a cow.

'Wait til this afternoon,' Steve said. 'It'll be bedlam.'

Moments after parking, Steve pulled out the pin and slid open the back of the truck. Then he leaped up onto the side of the crate, yellow jigger in hand, and tight-roped along the metal ledge. From above he called, 'Walk out' and 'Haai, haai' as he waved his peak-cap about. The cattle needed little encouragement. The first six cows and three big calves walked out fine, but in the next pen one cow was down. I grimaced as I watched through the gap in the side. Would she get trampled? Up she got and they all walked out, some of their hooves slipping or skittering on the metal-grated surface, and then they were trotting along the alleyway, their passage directed by fences and the inevitable invitation that is an open gate.

Ten minutes it had taken from the moment the truck had backed up against the ramp. Within the range for 'prompt unloading' as recommended by Temple Grandin, the world authority on harm minimisation for cattle production.

'So?' Jen said when I got home, after I'd changed out of clothes speckled with manure and stinking of cattle. 'You going to join PETA now?'

I shrugged a shoulder. 'I guess it's okay. I'd rather we didn't have to send them in but Steve cares for them the best he can,' I said. 'I still flinched for them, all that strange metal and rubber under their feet, the stress of standing up close to all the others in a moving truck, and then stepping out into an unfamiliar set of yards without grass.' I took a swig of beer. 'I don't know. How can we know what it's like for them? Maybe country and city people have different thresholds. Maybe even I have a different threshold after all these years.'

One Saturday morning the phone rang. It was a woman from a village forty minutes away.

‘We heard you have cattle. Would you sell straight from the paddock?’ she asked. She’d recently read Michael Pollen’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and was trying to find a more ethical way to eat meat.

I pounced on the idea. ‘I’ll call you back after I’ve discussed it with my partner,’ I said.

‘Paddock to plate’ would save the cattle the stress of the trip to town, the sale yards and the abattoir.

It would also mean the cattle could be killed without knowing what was coming. Even if ‘happy meat’ seemed like an oxymoron, this would at least be kinder.

Jen said no. Our solar power couldn’t run the necessary refrigeration, and it would be costly to get a butcher from town to come out and cut up the animals. She couldn’t butcher a calf – she could only do rabbit and roo and sheep.

I asked around if anyone knew a local butcher and did a rough costing, factoring in running the refrigeration off our neighbour Frank’s mains power. Maybe hard numbers would tempt Jen.

‘It won’t work, Hayley,’ Jen insisted. ‘It’s not just about resources. This country’s too poor. Cattle from here need to be “finished off” before they’re eaten. That’s why restockers buy them. What if someone down the road buys a calf and the meat’s tough? Remember the year the beast we put in the freezer was really tough?’

I did. I had to slow-cook everything – and still it was disappointing.

‘There’s no getting away from selling the cattle through the sale yards – and given where we live, that means they have to travel.’

‘God,’ I said, frustrated, ‘you just won’t try anything new.’

‘I’ve been doing this for years, Hayley, and watching how others do it. This is just how it is out here. You have to know and work to the conditions and area.’

And that was the nub of it. Nothing I read or thought or suggested was really going to change how things were done on this land. In some ways the place itself dictated its purpose and processes, something Jen had learned by trial and error over decades. I, a city girl to my core, had come into an established situation, too late to be part of that learning and too embroiled in my own work to dedicate the time and effort. My crusade into the ethics of meat-eating and small-scale cattle farming was merely an attempt to face up to the complexities of food, and to have a say in the farm in the only way I knew – intellectually. But you can’t ‘farm by numbers’ or master it from theory. Cattle farming’s not a hobby, nor the work of the ambitious or impatient. It’s life and it’s work: the relationship between the



two is symbiotic, inseparable. Perhaps not so different from what life on the farm was teaching me about being a 'writer', a label based perhaps not only on publications but on the insights gained from the enmeshed relationship between living and writing.

And what about my place on this land? My role, I had to accept, was as assistant or audience – label it 'farmer's wife', label it cheer-squad. Like all of us, farmers too need one. Alone they shoulder the disappointment and worry, watch cloudless blue skies for a hint of rain, spray or pull weeds, burn or slash particular paddocks, and dole out hay in a drought. It's the farmer who knows each cow and her history, and spends hours searching if she's missing, hoping she's not dead. It's the farmer who tears up when the old girls go on the truck to market. It's the farmer whose frown lines soften when in the early morning light a new born calf sucks from her first time heifer mother. Farming is life and work.