

# Ethics of Love and Slaughter

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ABOVE: ABATTOIR KISS  
Artwork: Georgie Mattingley



I am a vegetarian, but I love to work at the abattoir.

I was initially drawn to abattoirs by a curiosity for the unknown. Then I found myself humbled by the gruesome yet honest nature of the work. Now, after 18 months of weighing back-fat, packing boxes, cutting tongues and cleaning shit from arseholes, I have developed an endearing admiration for my fellow workers.

The positive friendships I have formed on the kill floor<sup>1</sup> allow me to switch off my moral sensors and enjoy the work. When I walk past the sticking pen<sup>2</sup> where animals thrash about and bleed to death, I smile and wave to the gentle fella with his knife in hand, getting showered in blood.

Expressing affection despite such atrocities seems to contradict a basic moral decency. Even more so for a vegetarian who would presumably be against the industrial slaughter and processing of animals. However, the more I unpick the values behind my everyday decisions, the less convinced by my moral standards I become.

I don't eat meat but will readily purchase products made in a Bangladeshi sweat shop. I offset my carbon footprint while flying, but I drive to work. I walk past beggars on the street yet will pay \$5.95 for flakes to feed the tropical fish tank that decorates my living room.

In defence of these contradictions, I don't think it's necessary to strive for ultimate moral consistency. But we can at least start by seeking a greater understanding of what defines the context for how we consume and what we deem right and wrong. A need for cheap meat renders it acceptable to slaughter thousands of animals a day behind closed doors. Yet it is still unacceptable to slaughter an animal in public space, as the artist Ivan Durrant showed us in 1975 with *Slaughtered Cow Happening*.

We delight only in the pictures before and after the fact: a precious white lamb in grassy meadows, or a softly lit steak adorned with fresh herbs. Images of animals and meat are entitled to (and probably required to for the well-being of our economy) appear aesthetically pleasing, yet, there are no delightful pictures of the process in-between.

Slaughter has become distant and separate, making it easy for "outsiders" to judge the industry with contempt. Alternatively, we become complacent and close our eyes to it altogether. After all, Australia needs to like meat.

We slaughter more than 547 million animals for national consumption every year.<sup>3</sup> Given our affection for this product, we would need to take only a small step further to embrace every business, process and hand that makes it all possible. Besides, our demand for slaughter is giving jobs to around 66,329 workers<sup>4</sup> that would be affected by a decrease in our consumption of meat.

I joined this body of abattoir workers to acquaint myself with the industry that makes a fundamental contribution to our diet, culture and

economy. And in doing so, I learned that it does not take any particular kind of person to work in an abattoir, just the right frame of mind or the right set of circumstances.

Meat workers Elizabeth and Boyson (depicted in embrace on page 58) moved to Melbourne from their home in New Zealand about five years ago. Boyson found work at an abattoir a few days later and quickly secured a job for Elizabeth too. Boyson's job is to pluck the hearts from carcasses and throw them down a chute to Elizabeth, who rinses out the blood clots and packs them. Elizabeth enjoys theatre, ballet, listening to jazz and shopping. Boyson likes rugby and relaxing on the weekend.

This story is now less about the abattoir than it is about people inside it, and their resilient capacity for love, empathy and friendship in the face of hard work. It's about the integrity and uniqueness of each abattoir worker that shines brighter than the terror or mundanity of the task at hand.

Therefore, the grand narrative I present is not really a new one, but our current one. I am not attempting to paint a new or "better" world – just offering a deeper insight into a hidden aspect of the world we live in. Nor am I asking that we eat less, or more, meat. I am simply expressing the jarring position that I find myself in: wedged within the moral complexity of a much greater beast.

Moral predicaments aside, it's time our abattoir workers receive some public recognition. Meat eaters can appreciate the provision of their next meal and vegetarians can find someone (or something) else to blame, because abattoirs are simply completing a task which the market demands.

I can only hope that my work, *WE ♥ ABATTOIR*, will help peel away the plastic wrapping that separates us from slaughter and, in doing so, reveal some of the most amazing people who work behind closed doors to provide us with a product that our nation loves to eat.

1. Kill Floor is a section of the abattoir where the killing, decapitating, gutting and skinning takes place.

2. Sticking Pen is usually a separate room where the animals' throats are cut.

3. Animals Australia: Unleashed, 18 October 2013, [www.unleashed.org.au/animals](http://www.unleashed.org.au/animals)

4. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census, (Total sum of employees added together from *Butchers and Small Goods Processors; Livestock Farmworkers; Boners and Slicers and Slaughters; and Meat Poultry and Seafood Workers*).

**WE ♥ ABATTOIR, Georgie Mattingley**

**1 May – 8 June → The Substation & other locations**