What We Feed Them

A father, a farmer, and the question of what children are asked to trust in the systems built to feed them

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My son eats fruit from our farm without asking me whether it is safe, which is one of those small and almost invisible acts of faith children perform every day without knowing they are acts of faith at all. He reaches for grapes the way children reach for things, thoughtlessly, hungrily, with the magnificent assumption that the adults have already done the worrying for him, that somebody has read the label and checked the water and walked the rows and asked what was sprayed and how much and when and what happens after rain and where it travels when the wind comes up, that someone older has placed himself between the child and whatever might hurt him. He is nine years old. He does not know the names chloropicrin or 1,3-dichloropropene or chlorpyrifos or glyphosate, does not know what a pesticide tolerance is or what probable carcinogen means or why one respected scientific institution can warn about a chemical while a federal regulatory agency, examining much of the same molecule through a different evidentiary framework, reaches a different conclusion, and I do not particularly want him to know these things yet, not because they should remain hidden from him forever but because childhood ought to contain at least a few years when a strawberry can still be only a strawberry.

I am a farmer, and being a farmer complicates the strawberry.

I grow grapes in Oregon, on land my family has farmed for decades, and every growing season presents some version of the same ancient bargain agriculture has always presented to the people foolish or hopeful enough to attempt it: something wants what you are trying to grow. Fungus wants it, insects want it, birds want it, mildew wants it, weeds want its water and nutrients and sunlight, deer want it, weather occasionally appears to want the whole enterprise dead in a single afternoon, and farming therefore bears very little resemblance to the pastoral occupation we sometimes sell back to ourselves in photographs of barns beneath sunsets and considerably more resemblance to an endless sequence of interventions, judgments, tolerances, compromises, corrections, and wagers made before the outcome can possibly be known. You decide what you will kill and what you will allow to live, what you will put into the soil and what you refuse to put there, how much imperfection you can tolerate, how much crop you can afford to lose, what risks you are willing to accept yourself and what risks you may be exporting invisibly to somebody

downstream, somebody downwind, somebody working in the field, somebody living beside it, somebody not yet born.

We farm organically, and I believe deeply in that decision, although I know enough about agriculture to distrust the moral vanity that can attach itself to the word organic. Organic farming is not innocence. We drive tractors and burn diesel, we use sulfur and copper and other materials whose effects and accumulation deserve scrutiny of their own, and we consume water and glass and cardboard and electricity and steel and rubber and fuel and labor and freight and land. A vineyard is itself a human intervention in an ecosystem, row after row of one species cultivated because people are willing to pay for what we make from it, and in my particular case what we make is alcohol, which disqualifies me immediately from the comfortable moral position of the man who believes his agricultural choices have rendered him pure. I have written elsewhere about the terrible contradictions inside the product I sell, and I know there is no absolution this cheap.

But farming organically does mean that certain doors are closed before the season begins, that when pressure arrives and there exists a chemically easier answer I sometimes have to accept a more difficult one, more labor, greater cost, lower efficiency, more uncertainty, and I make those choices partly because I believe soil is an inheritance rather than an input and partly because I have spent enough years around agriculture to understand that legal and safe are not synonyms, that registered does not mean harmless, that the history of agricultural chemistry contains too many substances once described as acceptable and later discovered to have consequences nobody properly understood, or consequences somebody understood and other people preferred not to confront. And once you have a child walking through your rows, once you watch your own son reach toward something growing from land for which you are responsible, every one of these decisions changes its emotional weight, because the question is no longer merely what will control the pest or preserve the crop or protect the margin, but what you are willing to place into a system that eventually ends in another human body.

Drive south from Oregon into California and eventually toward Watsonville, and this question becomes harder to keep theoretical. The Pajaro Valley sits between the Santa Cruz Mountains and Monterey Bay in one of the most productive agricultural landscapes in America, a place whose cool coastal climate and extraordinarily fertile ground produce nearly forty percent of California's strawberries and send them out in refrigerated trucks to arrive days later beneath immaculate grocery-store lighting in Portland and Phoenix and Chicago and Boston, red and glossy beneath clear plastic clamshells, small green leaves still attached, nature cleaned and sorted

and standardized into something so visually perfect that the complicated agricultural system behind it disappears almost entirely. A parent places one in a lunchbox. A child bites into it. The transaction appears complete.

Except the strawberry carries a history.

Driscoll's, the berry company that controls roughly one-third of the United States berry market and two-thirds of the U.S. organic berry market and partners with more than nine hundred independent farmers across four continents, is headquartered in Watsonville, at the center of this valley, and its independent growers work the fields that surround the schools where the children of the workers who pick those berries sit at their desks trying to learn multiplication. Dr. Ann Lopez, executive director of the Center for Farmworker Families in Watsonville, has spent decades among the farmworker families of the Pajaro Valley, close enough to the fields and the families and the illnesses that the abstractions of epidemiology have long since acquired names and faces for her, and when she speaks about pesticide exposure her language bears almost none of the restraint of a regulatory report. It's really murdering children, she has said. Dr. Valerie Bengal, another physician who has practiced family and community medicine with a specialty in environmental health in Salinas and the Pajaro Valley for more than four decades, has been writing publicly about the same conclusion in the pages of local newspapers, citing the specific statistics she watches her patients carry.

The county's numbers are disturbing enough without embellishment. Between 2017 and 2021, Santa Cruz County recorded pediatric cancer incidence of 22.5 cases per 100,000 children for those ages zero through fourteen, approximately thirty-eight percent above the California statewide rate of 16.3, ranking the county second in the state for the disease. The Pajaro Valley Unified School District has had more than 1.7 million pounds of fumigants applied within its boundaries - more than any school district in California - and every year 5,060 acres of Pajaro Valley farmland are sprayed with pesticides that a UCLA-led study has identified as correlated with childhood cancer. In 2019 in Watsonville alone, 98.5 percent of the pesticides in Santa Cruz County associated with childhood leukemia and 95.2 percent of the pesticides associated with childhood brain cancer were applied within the boundaries of that one municipality. More than one million pounds of pesticides are applied countywide every year, on land that lies in some places yards from classroom windows kept shut during spray season. The Pajaro Valley Federation of Teachers has documented multiple cases of brain tumors, neurological problems, and severe respiratory illness in young children at schools sitting adjacent to tented, pesticide-treated fields. Teachers have left the district. A teacher named Karin Wanless told reporters that she left because she was afraid to get cancer doing the job she loved. Kathleen Kilpatrick, who worked in Pajaro Valley Unified School District health services for seventeen years and was team leader for district health services, has publicly reported that medical providers at the two local clinics serving

farmworker families, and oncology nurses at Stanford University, have shared concerns that the Latino children they care for are disproportionately affected.

There is one honest complication in this picture that any serious essay must acknowledge. At the request of the Santa Cruz County Public Health Officer, the Greater Bay Area Cancer Registry and the California Cancer Registry recently reviewed childhood cancer incidence data in Santa Cruz County from 1988 through 2022, examining specifically the cancer types that have been studied in relation to pesticide exposure, and the analysis did not find increases in those selected types in South Santa Cruz County compared with the rest of the Greater Bay Area counties. The reviewers, in their published findings, note plainly that pediatric cancer is rare enough statistically that these findings should be interpreted cautiously, that registry data was not designed to determine cause, and that registry data alone cannot establish whether environmental factors caused or contributed to particular cancer cases. This is what an honest picture looks like. The elevated countywide rate is real. The specific registry review of pesticide-linked cancers in the most exposed subregion did not confirm the pattern the community had been reporting, and the reviewers themselves acknowledged the substantial limitations of what registry analysis can and cannot show. Pediatric cancer causation is genuinely difficult to establish in any single case or any single geography. What remains true, after all of that has been properly acknowledged, is that the community has been asking for decades to be treated as though it might be right, and the reviewers themselves cannot rule out that it is.

On June 18, 2026, more than a hundred protesters gathered across the street from Driscoll's corporate headquarters in Watsonville for a rally called Enough is Enough, marking the culmination of a year of hunger strikes and press conferences and community education campaigns led by groups including the Campaign for Organic and Regenerative Agriculture and Safe Ag Safe Schools and Californians for Pesticide Reform. Driscoll's CEO Miles Reiter, in a 2022 exchange with CORA, had written that he looked forward to a more organic future in Watsonville and that school zones were a priority. As of the summer of 2026, no formal commitment and no timeline for conversion near schools has been announced. When advocates have asked Driscoll's to require its independent growers to stop applying fumigants near schools while children were in class, the answer has been no.

That last sentence, more than any statistic, is what stays with me. A corporation that controls one-third of the berries Americans buy and two-thirds of the organic berries Americans buy, headquartered in a valley where children carry an elevated pediatric cancer burden and where the corporation's supply chain depends upon intensive pesticide use on land adjacent to the schools those children attend, was asked by parents and teachers and physicians to require its growers to pause the most intensive applications for the hours when the local children were sitting in their local classrooms, and the corporation declined. The decision is documented. It is not a rhetorical

flourish. Driscoll's does not itself farm most of the fields whose berries carry its label, and the distinction matters, because it raises the harder question of supply-chain responsibility: when does a corporation that does not own every farm nevertheless become morally responsible for the agricultural practices required or tolerated within the production system bearing its name. The community that had built the company had asked the company to answer that question with a specific small accommodation of the community's children, and the company had declined to answer it.

Among the chemicals at the center of this argument are chloropicrin and 1,3-dichloropropene, or 1,3-D, soil fumigants whose names sound almost deliberately designed to prevent ordinary people from remembering them. Chloropicrin was first deployed as a chemical weapon in the trenches of the First World War, used then to kill soldiers, used now to fumigate the soil beneath the strawberry rows of California, because chemistry itself is morally indifferent and the same capacity to injure biological systems that once made a substance a weapon of war can, under different dosage and application, become commercially useful. 1,3-D is classified by California as a probable human carcinogen and by the EPA as a likely human carcinogen and is banned in forty countries. California strawberry farms use more than nine million pounds of fumigants statewide each year, with roughly eighty percent of all pesticide weight applied to California strawberries coming from these two compounds. The fields are treated, the soil is covered, the pests die, the crops grow, the berries leave the valley, and somewhere nearby the children of the workers who applied the fumigant sit in classrooms practicing multiplication with the windows closed.

Some hopeful math equations are underway inside the same valley. Joji Muramoto, a UC Santa Cruz associate professor who specializes in organic agriculture, has documented that organic strawberries now account for roughly fourteen percent of Santa Cruz County's strawberry crop, a substantial increase from the almost nothing that existed at the dawn of the commercial organic movement in the 1980s, and side-by-side comparisons have shown organic yields at roughly seventy percent of conventional. Nobody believed organic strawberries possible in the 1980s, Muramoto has said. It took almost forty years to get here. Slowly but surely, things are changing. The mathematics of the conversion is real and the pace is slow, and the children who will benefit from a fully converted valley are not the children currently sitting in the classrooms with the windows closed.

This is the place where I keep returning to my son.

Not because his life is equivalent to theirs, because it is not. He is extraordinarily fortunate, and so am I. He does not spend his school day beside fumigated strawberry acreage. He does not have parents working long hours in those fields because agricultural labor is one of the few economic doors available to them. He lives inside a radius of privilege that has given me options many farming families and farmworker families do not possess, and the ethical mistake would be pretending otherwise. But fatherhood has done something inconvenient to my imagination. Once you have loved one child with sufficient ferocity, the abstraction called children becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. A nine-year-old in Watsonville is no longer simply part of an exposure cohort. I picture the backpack and the water bottle, the peculiar hierarchy of things that matter to a child during a school day, who sits beside whom at lunch, whether the math assignment is finished, whether recess will happen inside or out, whether somebody remembered to get the permission slip signed, while outside the window adults are making decisions about allowable exposure and acceptable risk.

The entire architecture of modern chemical regulation rests upon that phrase: acceptable risk. Not no risk. Acceptable risk. The distinction is necessary, because no human activity occurs without risk and agriculture cannot be practiced in a laboratory sealed from the world. A substance can be toxic at one dose and tolerable at another, hazard is not exposure, exposure is not automatically injury, association is not causation, and anyone writing seriously about chemicals owes readers these distinctions because fear is easy to manufacture and farmers have been caricatured too often by people who do not understand what farming requires. And after all of that has been properly acknowledged, the question becomes acceptable to whom, who receives the benefit and who absorbs the risk, who earns the profit and who breathes whatever crosses the property line, who eats the berry, who decides that the uncertainty is small enough, and who discovers twenty years later whether the calculation was wrong.

I think about this in Oregon because my own state has its own history of learning slowly. Chlorpyrifos, an organophosphate insecticide used for decades on American agriculture, became the subject of mounting evidence connecting prenatal exposure with neurodevelopmental harms in children, including reduced IQ, loss of working memory, attention disorders, and delayed motor development. The chemical has been banned in thirty-nine countries including the

European Union. Oregon eventually adopted rules phasing out nearly all uses of chlorpyrifos on food crops effective January 1, 2024, a meaningful public-health decision that also raises the uncomfortable historical question of what it means that a chemical can remain legal, familiar, useful, and economically embedded for decades while evidence of harm accumulates around it. The Oregon rule arrived only because the EPA, under the first Trump administration, had reversed a planned federal ban, forcing states to act individually where the federal government had chosen not to. Farmers who used chlorpyrifos legally were not criminals, they followed labels approved by regulators, they purchased a product available through ordinary agricultural channels, and yet when regulation finally catches up with science the retrospective clarity can become brutal: yesterday's accepted practice becomes tomorrow's thing we cannot believe we once permitted.

The forests of Oregon provide another version of the same argument. Herbicides are still applied aerially to private timberland in parts of the state, an efficient method of suppressing competing vegetation after clear-cuts so newly planted commercial trees can establish themselves. Between September 2023 and September 2024, 381 aerial spray operations were completed in Oregon, treating approximately 610,000 acres from the air with chemical mixtures that include glyphosate, triclopyr, 2,4-D, and hexazinone. Among these herbicides is 2,4-D, one of the two primary components of Agent Orange, the defoliant deployed by the United States military in Vietnam and linked to cancers and birth defects that have continued to appear in Vietnamese children for generations. Equating present-day 2,4-D formulations with Agent Orange itself would be chemically and historically misleading, because Agent Orange's catastrophic legacy was tied in substantial part to dioxin contamination of the other component and to the enormous wartime scale of exposure, and I want to make that distinction plainly because getting the history right matters. But the historical echo is impossible to hear without discomfort, compounded by the fact that Agent Orange itself was tested in the coastal forests of Oregon before it was deployed in Vietnam. 2,4-D is still being sprayed from helicopters over Oregon forestland today, legally, and the Oregon Department of Forestry does not require public reporting of what is sprayed or in what quantities, which means the researchers and physicians who would study its health effects in surrounding communities cannot obtain the records they need to do so. In 2013, in Curry County, aerial herbicide drift from a private timber operation landed on more than forty residents of a small community called Cedar Valley, seriously sickening many of them, and beneath the subsequent litigation over local versus state authority were people who could look upward and see an aircraft releasing chemicals over the landscape where they lived.

This is what makes the history of Monsanto so difficult to separate from the present, because Monsanto did not merely sell individual chemicals but became one of the architects of an agricultural system in which chemistry, seed genetics, intellectual property, and farming practice were increasingly interdependent. The company manufactured polychlorinated biphenyls, or

PCBs, for decades before the United States banned their production in 1979, manufactured DDT before its agricultural use was banned in 1972, and was one of several producers of Agent Orange for the American military during the Vietnam War, each product carrying a different scientific and regulatory history but collectively forming the sort of corporate biography that makes later assurances of safety impossible to hear without also hearing the echoes of earlier assurances.
Then came Roundup, introduced in the 1970s as a glyphosate-based herbicide that eventually became one of the most widely used agricultural chemicals in the world, valued precisely because it worked extraordinarily well, and that point matters. Farmers did not adopt glyphosate because they were stupid or indifferent to health or secretly eager to contaminate their land. They adopted it because it controlled weeds efficiently, simplified farm management, reduced some forms of tillage, and, especially after the introduction of glyphosate-resistant crops, allowed enormous fields to be treated in ways previous generations could barely have imagined. Modern agriculture is full of technologies that become ubiquitous because they solve genuine problems, and Roundup solved genuine problems spectacularly.

The controversy concerns what else it may have done. In 2015 the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the specialized cancer agency of the World Health Organization, classified glyphosate as probably carcinogenic to humans, while the United States Environmental Protection Agency has continued to conclude, across successive administrations, that glyphosate is not likely to be carcinogenic to humans when used according to its assessment framework. Both statements are technically true. They are often presented as though one must be a conspiracy and the other science, when in fact different institutions evaluated overlapping but not identical bodies of evidence according to different methods and reached different conclusions. The disagreement is not reassuring. Nor is disagreement itself proof of danger. It is exactly what makes the situation so maddening for ordinary people, because somewhere between probably carcinogenic and not likely carcinogenic stands a homeowner holding a spray wand, a farmworker entering a field, a farmer deciding what to purchase, a parent pushing a shopping cart, and each of those people is being asked to make a decision on the basis of a scientific consensus that does not exist. Research from the University of Washington concluded that exposure to glyphosate could increase certain cancer risks by up to forty-one percent. The USDA has detected glyphosate residue in oat-based products marketed specifically to children.

Some mornings I read this material at the kitchen table before Benjamin comes down. He arrives in his pajamas, opens a cabinet, pours himself a bowl of the oat cereal he has been

eating almost every morning of the year he has been in third grade, adds milk, sits down across from me and asks what I am reading. I tell him it is work. He nods and eats his cereal. The residue findings are on the laptop screen next to the bowl. He does not ask. He is nine.

Then came the lawsuits. Dewayne Johnson, a California school groundskeeper who had regularly used Roundup as part of his job and later developed non-Hodgkin lymphoma, became the first plaintiff to take Monsanto to trial and win, in 2018, in a case in which the jury found that Monsanto had acted with malice. The verdicts that followed reached extraordinary sums before reductions on appeal, with a Georgia jury awarding two billion dollars in April 2025, a Pennsylvania man awarded $2.25 billion in January 2024, three Missouri residents receiving $1.56 billion, and approximately ten billion dollars in total jury verdicts and settlements reached across the accumulating litigation. Bayer, the German pharmaceutical and agricultural conglomerate that acquired Monsanto in 2018 for sixty-six billion dollars in what has since been called one of the worst corporate mergers in history, eventually set aside sixteen billion dollars to address claims, with roughly fifty-eight thousand active Roundup lawsuits remaining as of early 2026. Throughout all of it, Bayer has continued to stand fully behind the safety of its products and to cite the EPA's regulatory conclusion in its defense.

And then, on June 25, 2026, the United States Supreme Court changed the legal landscape. In a seven-to-two ruling in Monsanto Co. v. Durnell, the Court held that federal pesticide law preempts state-law failure-to-warn claims requiring cancer warnings on labels the EPA has not required them on, reversing a Missouri jury's verdict in favor of a plaintiff who had used Roundup for approximately twenty years as part of his job and had developed non-Hodgkin lymphoma. For thousands of people who had developed cancer after years of using the product and believed a jury should be permitted to decide whether they had been inadequately warned, one pathway to recovery narrowed dramatically. The circularity of the arrangement deserves attention regardless of what one believes about glyphosate's carcinogenicity, because the regulator approved the label without a warning, the manufacturer complied with the label the regulator approved, and the absence of the warning has now become legally protected by the very approval that produced the absence. This may be sound federal preemption doctrine, and it may produce national regulatory consistency that would otherwise be impossible if fifty states could effectively require fifty different pesticide labels, and farmers and manufacturers have legitimate interests in predictable regulation, but a legal system can be coherent while leaving an ordinary citizen with an unsettling question: if the regulator turns out to have been wrong, where does responsibility go.

Monsanto's deeper agricultural legacy, however, was never merely the herbicide. It was the system built around it. Beginning in 1996, Roundup Ready crops were genetically engineered to tolerate glyphosate, allowing farmers to spray entire fields in ways that killed susceptible weeds while leaving the crop alive because the crop itself had been re-engineered at the genetic level to

survive it. Adoption was extraordinary. By 2014, more than ninety percent of all soybeans grown in the United States were Roundup Ready, along with the majority of American corn, cotton, canola, and sugar beets, with millions upon millions of acres integrated into a production model in which seed and herbicide had been designed for one another.

I want to be careful here because the phrase genetically modified food has been abused by people who treat genetic engineering itself as though it were synonymous with poison, and I do not believe that. Human beings have been altering the genetics of domesticated plants for thousands of years, modern genetic engineering is capable of producing genuine agricultural and nutritional benefits, and the presence of a genetically engineered trait does not itself make a food dangerous. The more interesting question is what the trait was engineered for. In the Roundup Ready system, one of its principal purposes was to make the crop compatible with broad glyphosate application, and the modification therefore exists in service of a chemical system rather than in service of the crop itself. The food was re-engineered so that the fields could be sprayed. As resistant weeds evolved, the system required further adaptation, additional herbicides, stacked traits, new chemical combinations, the familiar evolutionary arms race in which nature responds to every intervention eventually by selecting for the organisms able to survive it. Agriculture solves one problem and creates another, then solves that one, then discovers what the solution changed. This is not evidence that agriculture is uniquely corrupt. It is evidence that ecology is complicated and human beings are impatient.

I know something about impatience.

A fungal disease does not care about my environmental philosophy, and mildew does not read the employee handbook, and weeds do not respect the hundred-year vision of a family farm. There are mornings in agriculture when the beautiful theory of stewardship meets the humiliating immediacy of something going wrong in a field, and the temptation is always toward whatever works fastest, whatever costs least, whatever makes the immediate problem disappear before it becomes an economic one.

I want to tell you about a morning this week.

It was the last day of August, and I was walking the rows of Pinot Noir that are typically among the first blocks we pick, moving back and forth between vines and pulling berries as I hiked, because the last days of August and the first weeks of September in the Willamette Valley are the

window during which we walk block by block tasting fruit and pulling small clusters for lab analysis to build our understanding of where each vineyard is on its arc toward ripeness. Harvest for most of the vines is still two to three weeks away. The grapes are not yet ready. What we are doing during this window is exactly what farmers have done for two thousand years before the existence of a refractometer or a lab, which is to put the fruit in our mouths and feel for the daily accumulation of sugar against acid that will eventually tell us the block is ready to pick.

I taste the berry, pulling the flesh of the grape away from the seed with my tongue, tasting the skin, trying to understand the balance of sugar and acid and tannin and flavor, looking for the crunchy fresh fruit that nearly bursts in the mouth as the skin pulls away from the juice, and then I spit the seeds into my palm to count them and to see how brown and hard and lignified they have become, sometimes pressing a fingernail against a seed to test whether it is fully ripe. I taste berries from vines on both sides of the row. I taste from every part of the fruiting cane, near the head of the vine and the middle and the end. I taste small berries and large berries. I taste from the clusters exposed to the sun and the clusters shaded by leaves. I taste berries I have selected with my eyes and berries I have grabbed without looking. I do this in nearly every block of vines across each of our five vineyards, and my vineyard manager and I have both been doing it for a long time, and we can taste with reasonable accuracy the sugar content of a berry within a point or two of what the lab will later confirm.

What we are also tasting for, though it is harder to describe, is the specific quality of ripeness that is not merely sugar accumulation but the readiness of the flavor to declare itself, the moment when the fruit stops tasting green and starts tasting like itself, when the tannin in the skin has softened and the acid has come into balance and the block is asking to be picked.

This has been a difficult year for mildew pressure in the Willamette Valley. The cool wet spring extended longer than usual, the humidity through June and into early July stayed higher than we would have wanted, and powdery mildew found conditions across the region that our organic program had to stay vigilant against week after week for the entire early and middle part of the season. We managed it, staying disciplined about the timing of our sulfur applications and accepting the additional labor and additional tractor passes that organic mildew control requires in a year like this one. There is a version of this year in which the mildew would have won a block or two, and we would have lost fruit, and I would be writing a different essay. In this version, the fruit is on the vine, the vineyard is intact, and the specific block we were walking that morning is beginning to show the arc toward ripeness we have been watching for.

My vineyard manager snipped a cluster from a row and popped berries into his mouth. He nodded slowly and did not say anything for a while. Then he handed the rest of the cluster to me. The berries were small and dense, darkening purple as we are just past véraison, still cool on

the tongue from the cool night before, and when I bit it, I could tell the juice was sweeter than it had been the previous week and less green in its acid and beginning, just barely beginning, to taste like what it wanted to taste like. Not ready. Not yet. Two weeks, maybe three, before we would come back to this block with picking bins. But moving. Alive. On its way. We walked another twenty rows and tasted from six or seven more vines, and we did not speak much because the tasting is quiet work and the conversation, when there is conversation, comes later, while we taste the juice samples, over the numbers, in the lab. This is what farming actually is most of the time. Not the crisis. Not the dramatic decision. The slow, patient walking of blocks, tasting fruit, feeling for the day when the arc reaches its peak, and the pick begins.

My favorite summer afternoons just may be when Benjamin joins me in the vineyards because a nine-year-old boy in a vineyard in August is a happy nine-year-old boy. He walked with me for a while, asking the questions he asks, why the leaves have been pulled off some vines but not others, whether the birds ever get into the fruit before we pick it, how many days until harvest, and I answered as well as I could. Then he wandered a little ahead of me down the row, and I watched him do what he has been doing every August for as long as he has been able to reach the fruit, which is to eat grapes off the vine. He is nine. He does not know that much of the grape harvest in the world would never permit a child to do what he is doing, because much of the grape harvest in the world is grown under a chemistry regime that would make eating fruit directly off the vine an act of exposure his father would not want to allow. He was eating them because he was hungry and they were beautiful and they were on land where he had been raised to believe he was safe. He turned back toward me and held out a small cluster he had picked from a vine two rows over. These are getting really good, Papa.

I took the cluster. I ate the grapes.

I did not, in that moment, have to wonder about what had been applied to the fruit in his hand. Because I knew, and knowing itself is an extraordinary privilege in a food system built increasingly upon distance, anonymity and trust. I have made this vineyard the place where that arithmetic does not have to happen, which is a form of privilege I acknowledge honestly, and which is not available to most of the parents whose children eat most of the produce grown in America. Most parents cannot know the field their child's fruit came from, cannot know the person who farmed it or the materials that touched it or the water that fed it or what crossed the fence line before harvest; asking them to possess that knowledge would be absurd, because the point of a functioning food system is precisely that they should not have to know. They should be able to say yes.

They should be able to let their child eat.

A parent standing in a field, or a kitchen, or a grocery store, saying yes without having to calculate. What we have built instead is a system in which the yes is available only to those who can afford to opt out of the system, and in which the parents whose children carry the largest exposure to the system's chemistry are the parents whose economic position affords them the fewest alternatives.

There is a principle in medicine and environmental health sometimes called the precautionary principle, although the phrase has been used so broadly that it can mean almost anything if one is careless: when an activity raises plausible threats of serious or irreversible harm, uncertainty should not always be treated as permission to continue unchanged until the final causal mechanism has been established beyond dispute. The principle can be abused. Taken to an extreme it can paralyze innovation, because almost nothing new can be proven harmless in advance. But its opposite can be equally dangerous, particularly when the people receiving the possible harm are children and the people receiving the economic benefit are adults.

The question Watsonville keeps asking me is how certain we need to be, not whether every pesticide caused every cancer or every farmer using conventional chemistry is irresponsible or every corporation malicious, but how much uncertainty we are willing to tolerate when the body receiving the possible consequence belongs to a child.

I find myself thinking again about the classroom windows. A teacher closes them. Outside, berries are growing beneath a system designed to make them abundant, uniform, beautiful, transportable, affordable enough to sell throughout America in January. Inside, children are learning to read. The distance between these two activities may be a few hundred yards.

The moral distance feels much larger.

And then I think about the grocery store, where all of the complexity disappears beneath refrigeration and branding, where a person can stand beneath immaculate lights and hold in one hand a conventionally grown clamshell and in the other an organic one and make a decision that appears to be entirely private, although it is not private at all - price is there, and privilege is there, and agricultural labor is there, and soil is there, and regulation is there, and corporate power is there, and a farmworker's exposure is there, and the farmer's debt is there, and the parent trying to stretch a grocery budget through Friday is there, and the child who wants strawberries is there,

and no purchase in that aisle is innocent because the only choices available are choices whose consequences have been made more or less visible to us.

I am not asking every parent in America to become a toxicologist before making breakfast. That would be absurd, and it would also concede something I do not want to concede, which is that the burden properly belongs to the parent standing in the grocery aisle. It should not. A functioning food system should not require an advanced degree in environmental epidemiology before a person can safely pack a child's lunch. We created regulatory agencies precisely because ordinary citizens cannot evaluate thousands of chemicals individually, cannot independently examine dose-response curves and occupational exposure studies and groundwater persistence and carcinogenicity models while also going to work and paying mortgages and getting children to soccer practice.

Trust is the hidden infrastructure of food, because we trust the farmer and the company and the regulator and the label and the grocery store, mostly without thinking about any of them, and beneath all of those adult arrangements sits the smallest and most absolute trust in the entire system: children trust us. That is why regulatory failure, when it happens, feels less like technical error than betrayal, because the child never consented to acceptable risk, the child simply ate the strawberry.

I return finally to my own farm, because outrage becomes cheap when it remains pointed exclusively outward. There are things I can control and things I cannot. I can decide how we farm our vineyard, I can ask more questions, I can accept costs I believe are justified, I can attempt to leave the soil healthier than I received it, I can be skeptical of inputs without becoming anti-science, skeptical of corporations without pretending corporations cannot innovate, skeptical of regulators without imagining that regulation itself is the enemy. I can acknowledge that my own livelihood contains contradictions, that organic farming does not make me innocent, that my family business consumes resources and produces a product with its own capacity to harm, that stewardship is not a certification one receives but a question one answers again every morning.

And I can watch my son.

He is nine now, and perhaps someday he will have nothing to do with this farm, which is his right, because inheritance should never become conscription. Perhaps he will choose an entirely different life. Perhaps he will someday walk these rows as I do and inherit not only land but decisions, not only vines but obligations, not only the beautiful parts of farming that look good in photographs but the late-night Excel sheets and crop pressure and weather anxiety and impossible compromises nobody includes in tasting-room brochures.

If that day comes, I do not know exactly what I want to teach him. I do not want to teach him that chemicals are evil, because they are not. I do not want to teach him that natural is synonymous with safe, because it is not. I do not want to teach him that organic farmers are virtuous and conventional farmers careless, because I know too many extraordinary farmers to participate in a lie that stupid. I want to teach him something harder. I want to teach him that every intervention has a consequence, that legality is a floor rather than a moral philosophy, that absence of proof is not always proof of absence, that the people absorbing the risks of a decision deserve representation in the making of it, that children deserve a wider margin of safety than adults because their bodies are still being built, that farmworkers deserve the same concern we extend to consumers, that soil and water cannot speak at meetings and therefore require human beings willing to speak for them, that corporations capable of earning billions of dollars from agricultural chemistry should bear a commensurate obligation to investigate harms honestly rather than merely defend products successfully, and that a farmer's responsibility does not end at the property line because water leaves, air leaves, soil moves, birds move, people move, chemicals move, consequences move.

This, I think, is what we feed them, not merely strawberries and grapes and oats and corn but our confidence and our uncertainty, the science we trusted and the evidence we dismissed, the compromises made in boardrooms they will never enter and the regulatory thresholds calculated before they were born, whatever molecules remain in soil and water after the harvest has left the field, whatever consequences we could foresee and whatever consequences we could not, and perhaps most consequentially our example, the habits of attention by which we teach them whether convenience is the same thing as wisdom and whether legality exhausts responsibility and whether the person downstream or downwind or not yet born belongs inside the circumference of a decision made today.

That afternoon at the edge of the vineyard, Benjamin walked ahead of me down the row and picked another cluster of grapes and offered one to his father and ate the rest and wiped his hands on his shorts and went off toward the spring to search for cool rocks, leaving me standing there with the small dark fruit in my hand, something grown from the soil beneath us, something he had eaten without hesitation because he was nine years old and this was his father's vineyard and he believed, without knowing he believed it, that whatever grew here was safe.

I ate the grapes.