




Meat

James Sturz describes the innumerable pleasures of flesh, both human and animal

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Hear James read the essay 

A man in Wyoming calls his lover in New York. It's been 11 days since he has seen her, and it feels long and terrible because their relationship is new. "It's midnight here," he says, "so I know I must be waking you. But I have to tell you about my dinner. Are you there? This is important." He cradles the receiver to his cheek, sitting on the hotel bed with his socked feet rubbing against carpet. "We went to dinner, and I need you to know about the prime rib I ate. It was swimming in a gully of juice. I mean, sopping and red, and..." He catches his breath now, recalling the bites and the texture, the moments of flesh. "It could only make me think of you," he tells her. "I was the only one at the table without boots or a cowboy hat," he starts laughing. "I was supposed to be talking about raising capital, and about getting it into Cheyenne fast. But I was thinking of you between each swallow, and all I could think of was your body."

The woman in New York says, "God, I miss you lots. Hurry here; hurry home. It's two o'clock in the morning, and now I'm not going to be able to sleep."

"Then I shouldn't have told you."

"I'm glad you did."

He says into the receiver: "You make me hungry. I'm hungry now." He's wide-awake.

"Say more," she says to him, suddenly.

He has a handful of bedspread drawn into his fist. "I want to hunt you. Inside your clothes."

There is the smell: steak, grilled over charcoal, colluding with a breeze, while dribbles of sizzle impregnate the air. And there is the taste: the seared, tender flesh, trickling mouthfuls of juice at each bite. Like monkeys, we are omnivores. We have been eating meat since we first discovered we could - since the first Homo erectus realized that killing for food made the stomach feel good. In the days when there were many gods, and many of them were wild and choleric, we sacrificed animals to them, and sometimes we even sacrificed ourselves.

Meat is about celebration. It's alimentary sex. Tristan Tzara, the great Dada poet, said in 1920 after a performance: "For the first time in the history of the world, people threw at us not only eggs, vegetables and pennies, but beefsteaks as well. It was a very huge success." The fiction and food writer Bob Shacochis recalls an anecdote about his girlfriend, the formerly vegetarian Miss F., whose doctor diagnosed her as severely anemic and prescribed liver pills with enough iron to turn her into an I-beam. "She left his office and made a beeline for Safeway, where she purchased two pounds of the antidote in its nonpharmaceutical form," Shacochis writes.

It's only an observation that people in health food stores often look sick. It is an indisputable truth that kissing a woman after a meal of steak and red wine is different from kissing her after you eat tofu. It is better.

The man in Wyoming, on the twelfth day of his trip, says to his lover, "Grow your stomach big for me. Make it round and full. We'll age you nine months." He gets off the phone, and then calls her back immediately. "I have this fantasy of you as a milk cow." She says, "I like that."

The humanivorous shark swimming off the Florida coast has the right idea: Don't waste time with herring or carp. Follow the scent of sirloin in salt water.

A woman on a second date surprises her companion by kissing him back with twice the ferocity. She is ravishing. She says, ravenously: "If I bite off your tongue, I'm not going to return it."

I am a flesh-eater. I have eaten Bambi, Chicken Little, Fernando el Feroz. I have watched slabs of steers hang in New York's Meatpacking District, dripping their essences down to the brick street. I have read the story of cannibals (human flesh is one of the finest sources of protein, experts tell us), devouring their prey with ritualized table manners and special wood forks. A half-century before Dahmer, the essayist M.F.K. Fisher suggested that the best human beef would come from adolescents raised in the countryside on apples and creamy milk. For well-behaved cannibals, including Micronesian princes and kings, fillets from the ball of the thumb were once considered unparalleled delicacies.

A friend says that the reason people eat Gummi Bears is they have the same consistency as earlobes. I believe him.

I have left marks with my teeth on others' bodies and I have felt teeth biting down on my own skin, and I have liked it. Sometimes, I have craved it.

The mother looks at her four-year-old son, still bundled in layers of baby fat. She presses a finger into the soft flesh of his tummy, and watches it spring back into shape. "I could eat you alive!" she coos, and the boy breaks into giggles. He's nine years away from his first junior high school hickey.

Who dares tell me the rump is a cheap cut of meat? Filet mignon is what you do with a lover. Hamburgers are for something lustful and quick, when you're short on patience and badly needing relief. I am ready for vegetarians to send hate mail, to tell me that you can't justifiably martyr an animal in the name of passion. But I am ready to tell them I can live comfortably with the guilt. It's a guilt I want.

"Full-bloodedness is the raison d'être of steak," argues the French semiotician Roland Barthes. In his country, if you want your steak rare, you order it saignant or bleu. You ask for it wounded and bloody. To make steak tartare, you double its animality: You take raw meat, and then you beat in a raw egg.

The diner at Smith & Wollensky looks at his dish, points to the tenderloin on his plate, and says savagely, "Hey, it was either him or me."

At a Fourth of July barbecue, an analyst wipes sauce from his chin, and says, innocently, "Yeah, it may have been a steer, but how do I know it was a nice steer, a simpatico steer?"

I asked the woman I was seeing, "Do you want to join me for eating meat?" (The syntax was awkward, but it was exactly what I meant.) My brother-in-law, the chef, offered a recipe. I bought the best piece of beef I could find. It was all tied up, bound by cotton strings. First, I seasoned with salt and pepper. Then I seared the edges of the filet mignon in a pan. I put it into the oven at 375°F, just a half-inch from the bottom, and we waited for a half-hour to pass. When we pulled it out, steam eased from the surface. Black peppers were nestled there like freckles or birthmarks. Dimples in the meat had flooded with juice. "What do you think?" I asked. "It looks luscious. I want to eat it," my own Miss K. said, not mincing words. She cut into the loin delicately, then stabbed with the prongs. Once inside her mouth, she chewed the flesh like a lioness.

I want vegetarians to explain to me how I didn't enjoy this.

Three days later, the lover returns from Wyoming. He goes to her apartment, with two weeks' worth of fantasies about her body. They sit, cross-legged in the living room, on the shag rug. He kisses her and their teeth clink. She has a freckle on her lip that he wants to chew off. She says, nervously, "I used to bite my nails and eat my cuticles. I wonder how many pounds of my skin I've swallowed since I was a little girl - because I don't think I ever spit it out."

He's looking right at her, almost laughing. He sighs, "I've really missed you."

She has a scar on her calf that he traces back and forth with his fingers. The skin is stretched smooth like a sail.

He tells her, "You're the good cholesterol inside my arteries."

She says, with her head leaning against his chest, "And now I'm making your heart work twice as fast."

If you saw the way her neck poured into her shoulders, you wouldn't need to ask why he bites. **LC**

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