

Whose Flesh
By Reese LaFond (CHS)

I cooked a steak and accidentally stepped sideways into the animal, which is the sort of thing that happens when you let meat sit quietly and think for itself.

It lays on the plate, raw and red, like something that's been paused mid-existence. Not alive, but not food, merely potential. The label had declared it beef with the confidence of a prophet who had never once been asked a follow-up question.

We are very trusting creatures, humans. We see plastic wrap and a price sticker and assume an entire moral narrative has already been resolved for us.

"This is a cow," the universe had said.

"All right then," I replied, because dinner was involved.

Still, the steak felt wrong in the way that mirrors feel wrong when you stare into them too long. Too familiar. Too similar. Flesh is flesh, after all, and evolution, having reused the same basic template for everything with knees, had been economical to the point of laziness.

I poked it. It was cold.

I had the sudden and deeply unhelpful thought that if this were human flesh, I would have no way of knowing. There is no instinct that screams That's William from accounting! The tongue is not a detective. The stomach does not testify in court. The body, when fed, rarely asks where the food went to school.

Animals in the wild have it easy. A lion knows its dinner was a zebra because the zebra was running away five seconds ago. I, on the other hand, am an animal with a grocery store, which is to say an animal whose hunting strategy involves fluorescent lighting and Costco cards. Civilization has kindly removed all the screaming from the process, leaving only seasoning.

I picked up the knife.

Knives are honest things. They have no opinions, no allegiance, and no interest in what they are cutting, only that they are cutting well. The blade slid into the steak with a disturbing lack of resistance, the way it would slide into my own leg, if I were ever foolish, curious, or writing a much darker story.

"Well," I said aloud, because when reality fails to object, it feels polite to comment.

I cooked the steak, because heat is how humans turn doubt into dinner. Fire has always been our way of saying, Whatever you were before, you are something else now. The meat sizzled,

which is one of the most reassuring sounds known to mankind. Sizzling is the sound of certainty forming.

As it cooked, I reflected that civilization is mostly a shared agreement not to think too hard about things.

We agree money has value.

We agree traffic lights mean something.

We agree that what's inside the plastic tray is not someone we might have gone to school with.

These agreements are not written in stone, they're written in exhaustion. You can question everything, but you will starve doing it.

When the steak was done, it looked confident, browned and decisive, like it had found its purpose. I cut into it and ate. It tasted like steak.

This was not the relief I had hoped for. Taste, after all, is a liar that works for pleasure. Taste would happily tell you anything if butter and salt were involved.

As I chewed, I realized that the truly unsettling thing was not that I might be wrong, but that being wrong would change so little about the experience. I would still be standing there in my kitchen, thinking, Next time, more pepper. This, I suspected, was how the world actually ends not with horror, but mild culinary note taking.

Afterward, I washed my plate. The sink swallowed the evidence without comment. Water is excellent at forgiveness.

That night, as I got into bed, I checked my leg. It was still there. Warm, attached, and comfortingly mine. I took this as confirmation enough, though I couldn't have said of what, exactly.

The truth is, I don't believe I ate human flesh. But belief is not knowledge; it's a truce. A small, necessary lie we tell ourselves so we can get on with things like sleeping, working, and deciding what to have for dinner tomorrow.

Tomorrow, I will probably cook another steak.

And I will not think about this one.