

# The Meaning of Meat

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**Cat.** *noun.* a small, domesticated carnivore.

Sunday was hamburger night: charred patties in fat-absorbing white buns with ketchup, mustard, and piccalilli. Four decades ago, back when red meat was healthy, back when my age could still be written in single digits, the highlight of the week was *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*. My father and I watched the television show together every Sunday evening at five o'clock. We got to eat our Sunday dinner on TV trays set up in the den. We'd turn the ketchup bottle upside down as we heard the Mutual of Omaha jingle so that by the time the show started it would pour out in perfect blood-red splotches.

Because of my brother's allergies, we couldn't keep free-ranging pets in the house, so my knowledge of animal life came largely from *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*. We always said the full title, all five words. I liked the mammals best, especially the tree-climbing herbivores, but my father was most fascinated by the reptiles and amphibians, and, of course, the big cats. I loved to watch my father, his blue eyes flickering with the television light, as he watched the animals. He came alive, adding details to Marlin Perkins': a rustle of leaves where hidden presences lurked; the pink rim on an elephant's ear; the way the lioness pulled back her lips to smell through her mouth. So as not to sabotage our time together, I feigned fascination too, and never told him about my recurring nightmares: the lioness's jaw closing around my neck; the alligators creeping out from under my bed and eating me alive; the bear that hibernated in the closet emerging in the dark and tearing off my face with a single swipe. Nor did I tell him how, awake and going about my day, I felt the eyes of a panther on me, assessing me for the pounce.

It wasn't so much fear of being eaten that really traumatized me, though. It was the whole system. Nature was crueler and more heartless than I could handle. My

father explained to me that every living thing on earth must eventually die, and many creatures would die at the hands of another. What I saw as murder was natural, necessary, and normal. "If you can't accept that, you're going to have a tough time," my father laughed. Watching *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*, I decided that there couldn't be a God behind all this, or how would He choose between the starving cheetah and the flailing antelope?

Yet my tender-heartedness never translated into self-awareness. Although we must have eaten several hundred hamburgers over those many years in front of the TV on Sunday evenings, I never recognized myself as a predator, or the meat on my plate as a kill.

Twenty years later, I was still a meat-eater. I had not become a scientist like my father but was attending graduate school in Houston for English literature. I was living with a pride of Indian men: Rajiv, who would become my life-partner, and his two Bengali friends. I was the only female, the only Caucasian, and the only American in the household. I did a lot of cultural translating. When Thanksgiving came around, I don't think my Indian roommates quite understood its importance beyond the bestowal of a four-day weekend. My explanation – that the pilgrims gave thanks to their God as a kind of Christian adaptation of sacrificial animal offerings to pagan deities – probably didn't help. My roommates, meat-eating Hindus, proposed a cook-out on the balcony of our second floor apartment. The clouds gathered as Ranabir lit the grill, and the first drops fell as Dipankar put on the glistening chicken. Rajiv, a doctoral student in engineering, rigged up a canopy from sheets and twine, and we lounged under it as the rain bounced off the fabric, its splat sounds blending with the spitting and crackling of chicken fat.

The little gray cat must have smelled the charring flesh too, and must have been near starvation to brave the balcony stairs and the presence of humans. Scrawny and semi-feral, she bore deep green eyes that dominated her silvery face. She scattered at our every move but kept returning. We modulated our movements to tai chi slowness, encouraged her with falsetto coos, and gave her the first breast, cut into chunks and offered on a paper plate. She snatched a bit and darted away, but the taste of meat in her mouth emboldened her, and she returned to devour it, watching us with wide and wary eyes.

Over the next few days she reappeared and was given tuna fish. I bought some cans of cat food, which she took in a bowl out on the porch. One cold night she ventured into the house and slept behind the sofa. We'd been calling her Kitty for weeks before we realized that she was our cat now, and the name stuck. When Ranu and Dipu moved out, Rajiv and I set up a blanket and litter box for her in the extra bedroom.

Then Kitty began leaving us "presents" – mostly mice and birds – ripped open but barely eaten, laid out on our welcome mat. She seemed appalled at our responses to those gifts, my shrieks and Rajiv's hasty disposal of them, and I felt her haughty condescension at our inability to appreciate the importance of the kill. For my part, I had trouble reconciling this beautiful, silvery cat who nestled in Rajiv's crotch while he worked at the computer with the heartless psychopath who killed not for sustenance, but for sport – for the *joy* of it. "The opposite of a psychopath is an empath," Rajiv laughed, his sharp Adam's apple bobbing. "And both are pathological." Then he added, as my father had years earlier, "If you're this tender-hearted, how are you ever going to survive?"

Kitty's impulse was as old as the domestication of cats. The first wildcat may have ventured into human presence in the Near East's Fertile Crescent around 10,000 years ago, when nomadic tribes began to exchange a hunter-gatherer lifestyle for one of agriculture, and their diet changed from primarily meat-based to primarily grain-based. Not half a step behind the shift to grain production and storage was an influx of opportunistic rodents, and, just behind them, predatory wildcats. As carnivores, cats didn't eat the rye, wheat, oats, or barley, but homed in on the scuttling meat that these grains attracted. Cats were domesticated – or domesticated themselves – as hunters and meat-eaters. That was their niche, their job, and their identity. Nothing could be more natural.

From these early wildcats arose our housecat. A recent excavation in Cyprus, dated at 9,500 years ago, revealed the body of a young cat buried with a human. Human lives – and deaths – have been intimately bound together with those of cats for at least as long as these two skeletons lay wrapped around each other.

In ancient Egyptian culture and elsewhere, cats rose to demi-god status, so important were they to the economy.

Taken aboard ships to quell the rodent population, domestic cats quickly spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. Ironically, it was cats' carnivorousness that enabled humans to eat a grain-based diet, which in turn helped humans to spread their dominion across the earth.

At times, the cat's importance to agriculture was recognized, and the cat was revered, idolized, even deified. Mohammed's adoration of his cat is legendary, and the Norse goddess of fertility, Freyja, was frequently depicted in a chariot drawn by cats. By the time Christianity spread throughout Europe and beyond, cats had a cult-like status and were pagan symbols of fertility and plentitude. This cat-worship threatened the new regime, which began to associate cats with both paganism and the devil. They became witches' familiars, harbingers of bad luck, even succubae who stole good Christians' souls. Such medieval superstitions led to massive cat-killings. Scholars today believe that the Black Plague of the mid-14th century reached the epidemic proportions that it did because mass cat-killings had allowed the rat population to flourish.

**L**ike those cats among the ancient Egyptians, Kitty domesticated herself into the lives of Rajiv and me. For years, it was the three of us. Even though she was only eight pounds at her heaviest, Kitty seemed to fill the household. She held her own as a family member, and more than earned her keep as a mouser.

If we'd never rented that video on cats from the library, we would even have thought she loved us. Her head-butts and cheek-rubbings expressed affection, we thought – until we learned that she was rubbing her scent glands onto us to mark us as her property. (Or maybe that's what love *is*.) Except for the deception of size, cats' bodies are remarkably similar in form and function to the massive felines of the jungles and forests. Natural contradictions, housecats are domesticated carnivores. Kitty's paws, usually so soft, could become instant switchblades if she unleashed her retracted claws. Her fang teeth were perfectly positioned to break the spine of her prey, while her smaller front teeth excelled at the delicate work of stripping fur and feathers.

Kitty purred in Rajiv's lap as we watched the video with increasing dismay. "She's a killing machine," Rajiv said. I thought I detected, amidst the horror in his voice, just a touch of awe.

The triglycerides in a meat-based diet are rich in saturated fats, which are known to accumulate in arteries, molecule by molecule, year by year, until one day an artery becomes completely blocked.

When my father died of a stroke, in 1995, my mother gave him an unsentimental Jewish funeral, which he would have wanted, but which left me, still in shock's sedation,

unmoved. The stone cemetery marker, already in place and engraved, seemed eternal, its precisely etched birth and death dates making his end seem pre-determined. The solidity of that headstone, the right angles of the thick pine coffin: I couldn't reconcile them with my urgent sense of fragility, of injustice, of downright incredulity.

After the short ceremony and the Kaddish, after we each dropped a handful of dirt into the grave, I lingered to watch the workers' more efficient shoveling until Rajiv led me out of the cemetery grounds. Once past the gates, he confessed that all those rotting, insect-preyed bodies underground made him queasy. Raised with cremation, he found our Western attachment to the body alien and a bit barbaric. Numbly, I promised to cremate him, and made him do the same for me if I went first. But nothing really registered. Our deaths were as unreal as my father's.

It wasn't until we rounded the corner past the cemetery gates, and I felt the shadow of a brush at my ankles, that my face twitched. When I bent down to pet the mewling cat, my mask melted. The cat mewed and mewed, trebling my wails.

"Maybe the cat is a sign," Rajiv said. "Maybe it's trying to tell us something."

I wanted him to be right. But my father, a scientist through and through, wouldn't give me a sign; he taught me not to believe in signs, or in an afterlife, or even in souls separable from bodies. Every living thing dies, and all you can do is accept it. Or struggle.

Over the years, as Rajiv and I pursued our careers — he an environmental engineering professor, I an English professor — we moved Kitty from place to place, finally landing in Colorado. Once settled and with a backyard, we began accumulating additional animals, including two more cats and three dogs. But, aside from the unresponsive hamsters and gerbils I kept as a child, Kitty would always be my first. Her presence in our lives was almost as old as our love for each other, and equally as abiding, reliable, and at times ferocious.

A bit of the feral always remained in Kitty. We could be petting her for a good ten minutes, her eyes closed and motor running, when, suddenly deciding she'd had enough, she'd hiss and scratch at us until we recoiled. "That's our Kitty," Rajiv would laugh, and try to scratch her between the ears, provoking another swipe.

As the three of us rounded the corner of middle age, Kitty's carnal gifts slowed and then stopped. She spent more time in the house, curled up in our garage-sale pappasan. She became, at last, a pet.

Pets are supposed to die before their owners. Rajiv's diagnosis of Stage IV (metastatic, terminal) colon cancer at age 37 made no sense. It ruptured reality. Time froze in that

waiting room in the hospital basement with nothing to read but *Field & Stream*: Rajiv emerging with a "thumbs down," the doctor following with the glossy photo of the anemone-like tumor among sea-form polyps. My legs trembling. Rajiv helping me off the floor. A part of me remains there.

Then time raced. It all went so quickly: our first twelve years together, the diagnosis, the eleven months of chemo and radiation and palliative surgeries, the liver failure, the dying, the death in the middle of the night, the disappearance of Rajiv's body into the funeral home's oversized station wagon, the cremation.

Kitty had continued to sleep on Rajiv's stomach until his swollen liver couldn't bear her weight on his ribcage anymore.

I've tried to resist superstition and magical thinking in my attempts to make sense of Rajiv's impossible death. Rajiv, too, was a scientist. But everything around me seemed to be a sign.

Two mornings after he died, when I was still in shock's cocoon of unreality, I left to make arrangements at the funeral home. I got as far as the garage and screamed. On top of Rajiv's car was some sort of bloody atrocity, which, as I stepped closer, resolved itself into an eviscerated squirrel. I gagged, then sobbed. Surely this was Kitty's doing. What was she thinking?

Then I realized that I had to dispose of the body, which was supposed to be Rajiv's job, which triggered a fresh wave of sobs, which mercifully blurred my vision of the carcass. This would be my first body — to be quickly followed, I realized ironically, by Rajiv's — that I would have to dispose of myself. I pulled myself together enough to prepare a black plastic garbage bag, the heavy-duty kind for garden work, took a deep breath, and climbed onto the hood of the car.

The squirrel, its tiny mouth open as if gasping, was arranged in a cross, belly-up to display Kitty's perfect visceral extraction. The sacrificial pose was too symmetrical to be arbitrary. This body was carefully arranged. I couldn't look to see how much of the guts were left, but the rest of the body was still intact. The placement of this offering, unlike previous ones, was deliberate, intentional even. I tried to picture Kitty pulling the heavy squirrel carcass, gripped between her teeth, up onto the car's hood, then higher up to its top, and then arranging it precisely.

As I eased the stiff carcass into its body-bag, I chanted, "I'm sorry, squirrel. I'm so sorry. It's not fair. It's not okay. It's not acceptable. It's just not." I knew the squirrel couldn't hear me — that it was well into rigor mortis, and that anyway it was a squirrel — but this needless, merciless, senseless death demanded an apology. At the same time, I couldn't help being a little in awe of Kitty's act, couldn't resist seeing it as a crude sacrifice and primal mourning ritual.

Among humans, death seems to demand a sacrifice. Ensnared in grief, I became fascinated with the mourning

practices of different cultures. Sacrifice, I found, is a way of “making sacred.” The transformation of flesh into smoke and ashes symbolizes the movement of physical being to spirit. It was also, for pre-modern societies, a way to keep the dead body from attracting predators. But sometimes it was not only the person being mourned who was burned. Many traditions have killed and burned other animals, even human animals, in the mourning ceremony. Famously, after Achilles’ beloved Patroclus was killed in combat in the Trojan War, as Homer recounts it in his *Iliad*, Achilles went on an orgy of sacrifice, adding horses, dogs, and twelve Trojan captives to Patroclus’ funeral pyre.

The eating of the bodies burned, particularly in animal sacrifice, is a central part of many ritual sacrifices – so much so that one anthropological theory has animal sacrifice arising from guilt over meat-eating. The animal killed and consumed was, at the same time, thanked and mourned. Ancient Greek civilizations, for example, seem to have had deep, irreconcilable ambivalences over the killing of other animals, over making others die so that they may live. Ritual sacrifice was a kind of “compromise formation” to reconcile butchery with that nebulous entity called guilt, or conscience, or the gods.

Humans are said to be the only animals who perform rituals and sacrifices. But Kitty’s offering makes me wonder.

Sacrifice is not an option for me. I have no gods to thank for my meat, but only guilt and excessive empathy, which can never be appeased.

After Rajiv’s death, I started taking vegetarianism seriously. I’d been leaning towards it for a long time. Guilt over the treatment of animals at factory farms was a big factor. Rajiv’s research in groundwater contamination had led him to investigate cows’ elimination of over-injected antibiotics, which wound their way into soil, rivers, and fish. A clandestine field trip with him to a local McFarm in Northern Colorado horrified me: cows lined up in stalls ass to ass and wading in their own and others’ excrement. Rajiv’s environmentalism also led us to the realization that meat-eating – or at least the current American style – is not sustainable, and is both depleting and warming our environment at an unconscionable rate. I also, after Rajiv’s death, turned to vegetarianism as a tribute to his Hinduism, though he, himself, violated its dietary philosophies. Beyond principles, though, I was still the little girl unable to handle death, even on television or off-stage. If I were honest, I would have to admit that I was primarily motivated in my

vegetarianism not by any of the noble factors I regularly listed to people, but by the ick factor.

The smell of burning flesh as we shoved Rajiv’s body into the incinerator: this is almost surely a false memory, but it’s as distinct and vivid as any memory I possess. I recall the shock at the recognition of the smell of meat on the grill. Although the flash of recognition almost surely didn’t happen the way I replay it mentally, its reverse is a regular occurrence: the smell of cooked meat, the flash of recognition that meat is a dead body.

But I am a hypocrite. Even though I’ve been meatless long enough that meat has begun to disgust me, even though I’ve recharted my path through the grocery store to avoid the butchery and the carnage of luncheon meat, even though I once gagged on the moving walkway of the airport as it passed a restaurant advertisement featuring a money-shot photo of a plate of brisket, I still feed meat to my animals. It’s conveniently disguised as kibble, arriving in little pellets far

removed from the suggestion of animal carcasses, though I still have to hold my breath as I scoop it into bowls. I tell myself that cats are “obligate carnivores”; they must eat meat. It’s their nature. Dogs don’t require meat, and a careful vegetarian can satisfy a dog’s nutritional needs with balanced portions of beans and whole grains. But my dogs disdain my carrots and leftover lentil beans, while meat is a magnet. Only meat will work as training bits. A dog’s attraction to meat is far beyond, or far before,

hunger or need. It’s absolutely real, and absolutely animal. It demands respect.

I still understand the call of meat – the way the imperative to consume animal protein *feels* absolutely natural, whether it is or not. Once in a while, when I’m really hungry and premenstrual and my amino acid balance is off, something primal takes over. I flip over from my usual mode of pathological empathy to the carnivorousness of the big cat on the African savannah. Once when I got home late and had hardly eaten all day, I quickly fed the critters before feeding myself. As I was spooning out Kitty’s wet food from a can, my nose caught a whiff of the mushy mass in reddish-brown gravy. I found myself salivating so effusively I had to suck up a strand of drool before it hit Kitty’s bowl.

I’d switched Kitty to wet food when her decline in health made her finicky. At age seventeen, four years after Rajiv’s death, she developed mammary gland cancer, and quickly her chest was studded with hard lumps. The university vet school

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recommended chemo, surgery, and radiation, but I declined. Rajiv had chosen these tortuous treatments, but imposing them on a geriatric cat without choice or understanding was simply torture. Selfishly, too, I knew I couldn't go through that kind of caregiving again, not even with a cat. Rajiv's suffering and death nearly killed me.

Miraculously, Kitty lived on for two more years, her svelte eight pounds dipping to a dangerous six. I gave her all the wet food she wanted, in increasingly complex gourmet flavors and textures. She had "medleys" and "casseroles" of "minced," "flaked," "marinated," "roasted" and "grilled" meats, all in "rich gravies" and "bisques" and "stews." Kitty greeted me each morning with her customary quack, demanding food. Throughout the day more quacking, more eating. She fed the tumors – one the size of an apricot, others like full-season cherries, bunched like the cluster of varicose veins that once hung on my father's thigh.

As she declined, Kitty developed the tell-tale old cat smell, fishy and slightly rancid. She squawked at me as I tried to comb the mats out of the fur that she used to groom so punctiliously, now thick with oils, dander, dust, and decay. She squawked when I stopped brushing. She squawked when I resumed. Unable to find comfort, she quacked for more food.

When the quacking stopped, I knew we were nearing the end.

As the vet had said, Kitty tried to go away to die. She stumbled around the back yard between bouts of collapse. At one point she hobbled up on her failing hips and walked over to the Buddha statue I'd gotten because his broad nose and high cheekbones reminded me of Rajiv's. Fresh rain had pooled in the Buddha's cupped hands. Kitty took one lap, then another, then, miraculously another, before flopping back into a deep sleep. Next time I checked on her, she had a huge splotch of bird poop on her fur that she hadn't bothered to clean up. She tried to hiss when I cleaned it off her. With her mouth wide open, bobbing for oxygen, her breathing looked just like vomiting. One eye was dripping goop. The other looked pleading. It was time.

But on the vet table, catheter in her leg, Kitty seemed to rally. The vet gave us a few last minutes alone together. Kitty poked her head up, then stood up on her arthritic legs, and walked around the examining table. She seemed curious, or maybe there was still some fight in her. Was I wrong?

"Quick, wrap her in the towel and make a run for it," a familiar voice said in my head. It was Rajiv's. I shook with a laugh that produced tears.

The procedure was quick. It was nothing like Rajiv's death of labor and strain to the end, each breath struggling to pull yet one more after it. His agony seemed so unnatural, so cosmically wrong, that I'll never be OK with it. But Kitty's artificial death seemed much more natural. The vet

injected the medicine and Kitty's head settled into her front paws. By the time the injection was completed, Kitty was dead. In those few moments after she drew her last breath and before she began to stiffen, she looked more alive than when she was dying. Her eyes, which hadn't been truly open for ages, were wide with green memories.

I remembered her squirrel sacrifice. Kitty deserved to have her death marked dramatically, performed in wild style, with ritual cruelty. But in spite of her life of flaming carnivorousness, I merely had her cremated, and poured her ashes into the Big Thompson River in Rocky Mountain National Park, where they would follow Rajiv's. Both bodies returned to the ecosystem and the cycle of life without ever becoming meat.

I still can't accept this cycle of life, or the necessity of death. If my vegetarianism is merely an attempt to live in denial of the unacceptable, so be it. Meat is natural, my carnivorous friends tell me, whereas empathy for prey goes against nature.

Well, the truth is that I *am* against nature. I can't stomach it. If meat is natural then death is natural, and to eat meat is to be OK with death.

As my father and Rajiv had both warned me, that level of tender-hearted denial of reality makes for a tough time. Resisting the naturalness of death is a fight that can never be won.

I read recently that if a person dies in her home, the cats will start eating her body in less than 24 hours, whereas the dogs will wait over a day before partaking. The odds are good that I will die in my home, in the presence of my remaining dogs and cats, with no other humans around. I wonder if the canines would fend off the felines for a while, or stand by as my cats, unfed and hungry, begin to nibble. I can picture the three spaniels bent over me with ears flopping forward, waiting for alpha Olive, my bossy border collie, to stop nipping and butting at my shins, trying to nose me back into life. She will then give them the signal to begin, and they'll each grab a limb, while the cats go for the gut. It might take a while for the human world to miss me; by the time humans come for my body, the animals will be close to the bone.

Despite my tender-heartedness, I am at peace with this vision. More than that: I hope they will experience in this act, if not love, then communion, or even the orgiastic ecstasy of ancient sacrifice rituals, where one symbolically, or literally, eats one's elders to incorporate them into one's own body. Maybe their feeding will make me sacred, or at least carry me on in their animal bodies. If so, I hope that there's a rush of nourishment when my domesticated beasts finally – after a lifetime of invariable, artificially flavored, nutritionally enhanced kibble pellets – taste real meat: raw, fresh, fleshy, bloody, and absolutely natural.