



It always starts the same way. The first bite is warm, tender, and reassuring. The second is familiar, expected. But the third, it always turns on me. Somewhere between the snap of cartilage and the slow sinewy pull of muscle; it bares its teeth. It always betrays me. A slick, feral thing hiding in the folds, slithering between my molars. Its fibrous body clings stubbornly to my teeth, refusing, as if it knows it was never meant to be consumed. My teeth sink into something that will not buckle.

Instead, it stretches, the fibers resist. Snapping back like elastic bands. A dull, wet pop echoes in my skull as I try to chew

through it. For the moment, I try to ignore it. To chew cautiously and pray to the gods I may or may not believe in for it to somehow soften, to disappear. For it to please not be what I dread, but somehow it always most definitely is.

My tongue searches in the mass of muscle between my molars like it's mapping a foreign landscape. It recoils. A thick, stringy web of something fleshy clings to my teeth, refusing to break apart. I pause, my throat tightening, unsure if I can swallow this thing. It doesn't seem to want to be eaten. What is it? Ligament? Tendon? Some anonymous connective tissue that once held muscle to bone, a thing that previously



allowed this creature to . . . move?

Revulsion begins to rise in my throat. I push my plate away. I sit there, staring. Switching between the horror on my plate and watching others at the table carve into their morsels without hesitation. Happy, talking, eating, living without a hint of darkness anywhere on their faces. Do they not notice? Do they not feel it? The snag between their teeth? The tiny knot of sinew, clinging stubbornly to every bite, reminding them that meat once moved?

A thought presses into my mind, unshakeable and dark: *How often do we consume what we do not fully understand?* You don't always see the tough parts coming. Hidden beneath smooth, tender surfaces, they wait silently and patiently, ready to catch you off guard and remind you of what you've forgotten.

It's not the taste that repels me; it's the texture, the unexpected resistance. Something about meat fighting back unsettles me. The mouth expects smoothness, an effortless separation of flesh. But instead, I find myself gnawing on something ancient, something that refuses to break down. A part of the body that is meant to endure—the parts of a creature that are meant

to last.

It's always what gets me to change my diet. To go back to withholding from meat. To escape the random gristle. How much of this cow's life was spent standing on the very tendon now stuck between my teeth? How many movements did this ligament endure before I found it and spit it back onto my plate? It's not just food anymore. It's a story and it's one I don't want to hear.

I was raised to eat what was given to me without resistance. I wasn't allowed to scrunch my nose up at anything, and meat definitely wasn't to be questioned. It was plated in front of me, origins concealed beneath sear marks and seasoning. I never wondered what part of the animal it came from. I never asked which animal. I didn't let the thoughts cross my mind. It wasn't allowed. Questions were offensive, and people assumed you were unhappy. It was polite to grin and bear it. Even if it was a bear.

Then, one day, I saw behind the curtain. My grandpa was butchering a deer, his hands old and arthritic, yet working a knife with practiced ease. Steady. My grandparents were hunters and farmers. They

grew or killed most of what ended up on their table, and if they didn't, their buddy down the road did. That day he showed me how to separate the muscle, how to find the seams where the body would naturally come apart.

"The trick," he said, peeling back shiny gray layers, "is knowing where the gristle is."

The knife slid through the muscle with a quiet, wet ease until it met resistance. The blade hesitated for half a second,

lingering on the sinew before it eventually pushed on. A wet, muted crunch, followed by a sudden brittle snap, sharp enough to ring in my teeth. He found the gristle. I watched as he cut around it, not through it, letting the unwanted parts of waste fall away, and plop into the chum bucket below. Each time a piece fell, it landed with a slick, deep, and final plunk into the bucket of blood and guts. The deer's lifeless head, still attached, rolled slightly with every movement of my grandpa's hands, as if nodding

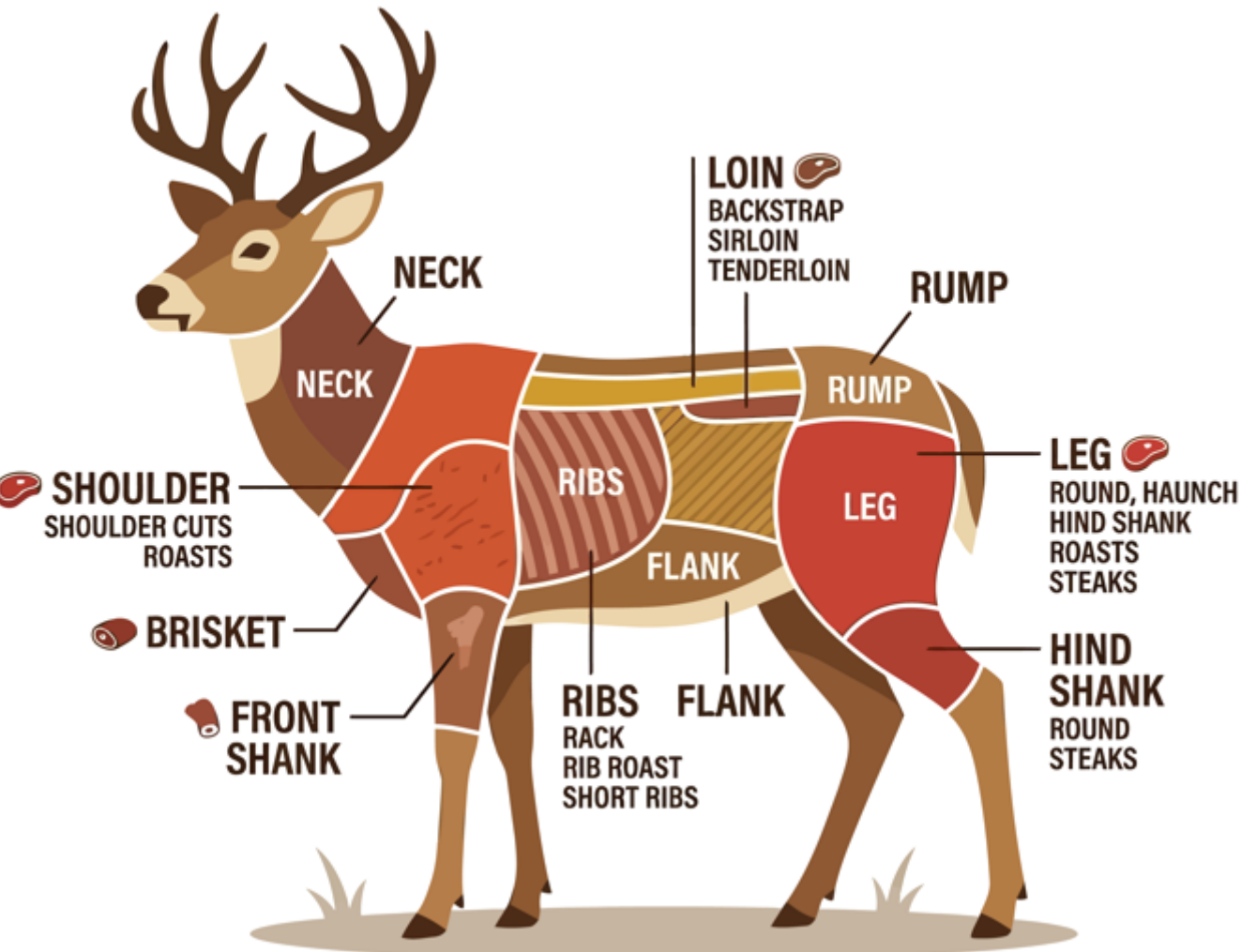


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in some silent, grotesque agreement.

Even in death though, the rest of the body resisted him, causing too much movement in something that was supposed to have long ceased by now. The sinew’s resistance caused the process to drag on, refusing to yield. Some things don’t break down so easily. Some things hold on.

That night I couldn’t eat my dinner. I used to love deer gravy. Over rice it was phenomenal. But that night I couldn’t stop thinking of the deer’s distant, empty gaze peering into mine. The head jerking to the side slightly with every cut my grandpa skillfully made into its body. How do we separate flesh from reality so comfortably? This was so simple for him. He didn’t even flinch as he sliced through the gore. As if he was doing something docile and normal like reading the Sunday paper or watering the garden.

As I grew up, I started to notice there were moments all throughout life that felt just like biting into something unpleasant. You expect things to go smoothly. You expect things to go down easily. But then, a snap. A resistance. A veiled flaw in something you once trusted. Like friendships that soured unexpectedly, people who

seemed soft and kind until I bit down and found something unchewable beneath their pretty surface. Moments that should’ve been easy, victories that should’ve been clean, but instead I found myself chewing. Gnawing. Grinding my teeth against something unrelenting.

Like the time my best friend stopped answering my calls and it just so happened to be my birthday. No warning. No reason I could name. Replaying our last conversation over and over, chewing every word, trying to find the tough, fibrous bit that must have snapped. The hidden flaw I hadn’t tasted before. Did I laugh at the wrong time? Did I forget some small, fragile secret they once entrusted me with? I sift through the fragments, gnawing at old memories. I’m convinced there must be a flaw I can taste, something fibrous, skulking unseen in the meat of our friendship.

Gristle isn’t just in meat. It’s in moments, the ones that stick in your throat, no matter how hard you try to swallow them. In people, the ones who at first seem so soft and sweet but turn out so bitter and sharp. In conversations, the ones that should have been so simple but leave you gnawing at words that don’t quite

fit right. In the realizations that don’t go down easily. The betrayals that stay lodged between your ribs, refusing to be digested. The worst part is it’s always a surprise.

After the deer dissection, I started noticing the weird spots everywhere. Chicken breast, unexpectedly laced with something rubbery. Steak, with an unchewable knot of sinew buried deep inside its pillowy muscle. Ground meat, hiding tiny fibrous strands that my tongue could somehow detect the instant it touched my now overly sensitive palate. I became a surgeon at every meal, dissecting my food before daring to eat it. Cutting it into absurdly small bites

just to make sure I excavated every single piece of gristle. I learned where to expect the tendons, how to spot the warning signs. My plate became a battlefield. An autopsy. A crime scene.

No matter how carefully I cut, I could never fully escape it. The texture always

found me. I could sense it before I even took a bite. How it waited silently beneath the surface, unseen but inevitable, ready to catch me off guard. Even when I ordered the most delicate cuts, I could feel its presence, its memory whispering from past meals.

Be careful. It’s in there. It’s always in there. It followed me from meal to meal, an unwanted ghost, whispers that toyed with me relentlessly inside my mind. *You know what it is. You know what you’re eating. You know what it used to be.* I stopped wanting to chew.

I didn’t want to fight my food anymore. I just wanted to relax. I wanted to sit down to a meal without the anxiety of an unforeseen unfortunate event happening between my teeth later. But sometimes, I craved the taste of it. The smell of steak sizzling in butter and garlic, with rosemary and thyme, made my mouth water. The golden, crisped skin of a roasted chicken

***“My plate
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has tempted me time and time again. But the moment I took a bite, there it was. A thin, fibrous tendon stretched taut against my teeth, pulling back like a fishing line snagged on something in the depths. My appetite turned to nausea. My hunger turned to regret.

I turned to fish at first to appease the fear. It was easier. Cleaner. I'd watched my grandpa clean them by then and never saw any sinewy strings being pulled out of the meat. The muscle flaked apart effortlessly, no gristle, no resistance, no ugly reminders coiled inside. A bite would melt on my tongue, smooth as the crystalline water it came from. Vegetables followed. I found comfort in their silence, their simplicity. It was easy to handle any texture they provided. No knots to contemplate. They had no



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history of movement, no muscle memory, no buried ligament ready to betray me. Bread. The exquisitely familiar textures

were a salvation. Soft, yielding, and predictable.



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Even when bread was toasted to a perfect golden crackle, the crunch made sense. It wasn't a ghost of something living. It wasn't the snap of tendon or the unexpected resistance of muscle fibers clinging stubbornly to their past life. It was crispness meant to be broken. It was a crust meant to be devoured. It welcomed my teeth instead of fighting against them. The first time I ate a piece of warm sourdough grilled cheese after abandoning meat, I nearly cried. My body had spent so long bracing for an invisible betrayal that when the dough collapsed under the weight of my tongue and broke free to oozing, stringy cheese, it felt like a long-awaited exhale. A sigh of relief made tangible. There was no gristle to dissect, no fibrous warning signs to pick apart, no silent ghosts hiding in

folds of flesh. Just flour, yeast, water, salt, and cheese. Nothing that harbored hidden sinew. I stopped craving the weight of meat on my plate. I stopped wanting to feel dead flesh between my teeth.

People would ask why I didn't want to eat meat. My family would tease me, giggle at my plates, and mockingly worry about my protein intake. My father would grumble like a grizzly defending its den when we'd order pizza and I'd go for cheese. He'd call it a "waste of money" and demand I bow to his whims. I always told them it was the texture. And while that wasn't fully a lie, I had to admit, it was also the ghosts.

Gristle is inevitable. It hides in things you trust, in things that should be simple, in places where you'd least expect it. The only choice we have is whether we keep

chewing or spit it out.

I choose to spit it out. I choose the clean bite, the smooth swallow. I refuse to be haunted anymore.

And yet . . .

Sometimes, even now, when I take

a bite of something perfectly safe, my tongue still searches. A phantom memory, lingering in my molars. I run my teeth over food, pressing just enough to make sure. It always disappears before I can catch it, dissolving like marrow cooked too long. But for a split second . . . it's there. A phantom strand, slipping between the teeth. Gone before

you can be sure if it was ever real, but you know it was.



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About the Author

Hk Hite is a writer and artist based in Percy, Arkansas. Their work sits at the intersection of horror and nonfiction. They draw from their personal histories of familial violence, survival, and neurodivergence to create atmospheric narratives that refuse to look away. Most of their writing is memoir driven, rooted in lived experience, and refined through obsessive revision. Hk will graduate in May 2026 with a BA in Professional and Technical Writing, a BA in Studio Art, and a certification in Graphic Design. They are currently developing *What Lurks in the Dark*, a memoir-horror illustrated novel about their nightmares of childhood and the long work of understanding what happened after everyone insists nothing did.

