

BELLY OF THE BEAST

IT WAS BEING THE PREY, RATHER THAN THE PREDATOR, THAT DROVE HUMAN EVOLUTION, WRITES ANNA FUNDER.

I AM NOT YET OLD ENOUGH FOR MY CHILDHOOD to be coming back to me vividly, as some say it does late in life – or perhaps I just haven't had enough therapy. I know it was a state of smallness and curiosity, a state in which things I now consider normal were revealed to me as a series of shocks. I am reminded of this now, as I am responsible for inflicting the same shocks on my children.

My three-year-old son pokes at his plate. "What's this?"

"Chicken," I say.

"We eat *chickens*?" He's genuinely surprised.

"Yep," I say, in the faux calm voice I know will drive him crazy when he's older and I'm trying to break the news – about some freaky, pointless disease or Third World debt or bride burning – without breaking his heart.

He looks up to the ceiling for help, fork flopping about in his tiny hand. Then back down at his plate. "But not ones with feathers." These would be the ones he knows, the ones that are alive, like him.

The chicken in front of him is, indeed, featherless. I can see he is hoping for a whole other category of creature that was neither feathered, nor, in fact, ever alive. "No," I say, "no feathers on this one." I hate myself for the sophistry, but these days I am full of protective, hopeful half-lies. My boy is too young to be mistrustful, but he's smart. I watch his face as he puts it together. "We eat the ones with feathers?" he asks, voice rising.

I nod. His blue eyes widen with horror. "But what if they don't *want* for us to eat them?"

"They don't mind," I say, more terribly casual still, "because they're dead."

I should be better at this. This conversation has played itself out before with both his elder sisters. And each time I am loath to be the bearer of bad, carnivorous news. But I'm even more loath to spend my middle age manufacturing complicated nutritionally compensatory meals for vegetarian children to push around their plates until they can have dessert.

Children do not draw the species distinction that adults do, which allow us, somehow, to ignore many different kinds of pain and evil and battery farming and to blithely continue eating meat. To a child, animals might well be as sentient as us, and just as attached to their lives. Like a man on the verge of adultery, we have managed some kind of self-justificatory separation between knowledge and desire, between kindness and meat.

The neuropsychologist Paul Broks puts the question of our animal, fleshly being and our minds – our brains and our consciousness – this way: "At one level," he says of the brain, "we are only meat. And at another, we are fiction." On the



one hand we are our bodies, and on the other we are the stories we tell in order to understand ourselves and the world and our place in it.

And these stories can change.

After a long and rather hopeful identification with the *T. rex* (the ultimate predator), my son, like Broks, has come to the conclusion that, "I have meat in me." He realises that aside from the small matter of aeons and extinction (mere technicalities if you are three), he would be *prey*. This he finds both surprising and disturbing – which, when you think about it, it is. "We are predators," my little man asserts, but he can't help sympathising with the chicken on his plate.

Then, almost as soon as his mind delivered him the anxiety-provoking problem of his body being meat, it also delivered the solution. "The *T. rex* can't eat me," he says, "because I have bones in me." I nod, colluding with his imagination as if a *T. rex*, like a picky child faced with a plate of fish, would refuse to touch him if it so much as suspected that he might have bones in him.

My son is making sense of himself in the food chain. Do we have some primal, residual fear of being prey? Darwin wondered about this. After observing his two-year-old son's terror of large animals at the zoo he wrote, "Might we not suspect that the ... fears of children, which are quite independent of experience, are the inherited effects of real dangers ... during savage times?"

It passes for common knowledge that man is a predator, perhaps the ultimate predator. Anthropologists of the mid-20th century focused on "man the hunter" as the engine of human evolution, as if it was our predatory nature which led to the development of the tools and weaponry that have made us into clever meat eaters and taken us from the prehistoric trees into cyberspace. Anthropologist Robert Sussman says this theory fitted with the "basic Judeo-Christian ideology of man being inherently evil, aggressive and a natural killer". It also, as social critic Barbara Ehrenreich notes, fitted uncannily with the sexual division of labour

(males striding out to hunt, females staying at home with the young) of the "American suburbanites in the mid-20th century" who came up with it.

But now, a new story of "man the hunted" is being written. Sussman says that it is our history of having been prey, rather than predator, that has prompted our clever, collective evolution. "Early man," he says, "was not an aggressive killer. Our intelligence, co-operation and many other features we have as modern humans developed from our attempts to outsmart the predator."

And what predators they were. One of the best-known early human species, *Australopithecus afarensis*, was eaten by hyenas as big as bears, saber-toothed cats and many other mega-sized carnivores, reptiles and raptors. Ancient hominid bones have been found with gnaw and talon marks, and craniums with holes into which saber-toothed cat fangs fit. Even now, in some kind of intra-species solidarity, this makes me squirm. The famous anthropologist Richard Leakey couldn't bear the idea. "Man," he declared, "is not cat food." Mid-20th century man might not have been, but his ancestor was – and it worked, in the long run, to our advantage.

As Sussman points out, "*Australopithecus afarensis* didn't have tools, didn't have big teeth and was three foot tall. He was using his brain, agility and social skills to get away from these predators. He wasn't hunting them, he was avoiding them at all costs." Ehrenreich notes that language probably developed from warning calls, and the powerful emotions of courage and altruism from the requirements of group defence. "It is through collective effort," she writes, "that our ancestors defeated the beast that was the ancestor of our fears."

Have we evolved far enough from mid-century Suburban Man to understand this? Probably. While at the same time, three-year-old Little Man retains the primal fears and desires – the fantasy of being *T. rex* right alongside the knowledge that he would be prey – that have got us this far. This is the glorious, complicated human amalgam: the ambition to be powerful, in full knowledge that we are nothing unless we band together. GW

NUMBER CRUNCH

BY EFFIE MANN

\$1 million

Approximate amount victims of abuse in the Catholic Church typically receive if they claim compensation in the US; compensation limit imposed for Australian victims: \$75,000

28 million

Number of bananas consumed, on average, each week in Australia; average number consumed per person, per year: 60-70

47th

Australia's 2011 refugee-hosting world ranking, taking in 23,434 refugees, or 0.2% of the global total; the country's ranking allowing for population size: 71st

2 in 3

Proportion of surveyed Australian women aged 18-24 who said they had tried to lose weight in the past year; proportion of those who did not achieve what they had hoped: 80%; proportion of Australian women aged 18-24 who are considered overweight or obese: 35%



DICTIONARY FOR THE MODERN WORLD

BY JACQUELINE MALEY

SIDE-BUM

Once, it was enough to present old-fashioned cleavage on the red carpet. Then along came the "side-boob", where actresses wore gaping gowns sans brassieres, flashing the breasts in profile. Now, dresses with transparent panels show off the "side-bum" – well-toned Hollywood haunches.

SNAPCHAT

A smartphone app that allows you to send digital photos that self-destruct within seconds. The ultimate in ephemeral communication, it's good news for sexters who don't want their pics to be placed on permanent record.