# How to Eat an Elephant

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One hundred forty pounds used to be my obesity. Now the numbers all seem arbitrary. And I didn't care so much about breaching 200 pounds as I did about breaching 50 percent body fat. Neither of those numbers ever seemed real, even when they occurred, which is strange to think about because I often consider numbers to be good indicators of reality. To be measured indisputabilities. Still, at this point, I find myself not so much consumed by the weight of my body as by the composition of it all. It is harder to compose a body than to compose a sentence. When I compose a sentence, I have found a certain kind of addictive, additive power within myself to do whatever pleases me so long as I skate close to the prescribed rules (although, sometimes I ignore them entirely); many sentences feel more like self-justified cheats that I allow to become run-ons with added punctuation, inflections, clauses—one strung after the next strung after the one before that—until I reach a point in which I feel, somewhere deep in the soul that lies at my fingertips, that the sentence has finally ended, no matter how long it became in the process. Or short. My body doesn't work like that. It doesn't have the same kind of rules that can be bent and broken to satiate a whim or a rhythm or to drive home a point or reinforce a thought process.

Rather, my body seems insatiable; it hungers and it feeds.

I started abusing laxatives at the age of twelve. Even when my eating was considered healthy, normal, or socially acceptable. I popped laxatives like chewable vitamin C, and justified every dose using a feeling within my body. Bloated, headache, hungry? Laxatives. Full, or, heaven forbid, overfull? Three laxative pills and herbal laxative tea steeped with two bags and refilled for three cups. I think I believed laxatives would erase the shame I felt when I ate. And when the laxatives took effect and I waddle-ran to the bathroom for relief, the cleanliness felt like a full erasure, a complete rewrite. In time I realized that laxatives could only get me so far, so empty. I started taking turns between laxative abuse and starvation periods, and often referred to the starvation periods as fasting, because this term is socially acceptable, socially encouraged. But as my fasting stretched from twenty hours to ninety-six or more, I finally began to understand the true feeling of emptiness that laxatives had never reached. It was a kind of emptiness that made me feel in control, made me believe that my body might finally burn what I had stored for it, that it would specifically target what my irrational brain wanted it to eat of itself. I feel compelled to admit here that most of this essay should be written in present tense but I cannot bring myself to conjugate some sentences in that way. Put simply? Food is a struggle. Some days I eat, some days I don't, and sometimes, days turn into weeks. And I don't know what to call my eating disorder now that I am actively working toward recovery; I prefer not to call it anything at all and most preferably I would like to ignore it altogether.

I binge information to satiate my desire to open the fridge or pantry and pilfer for something savory. One book, podcast, .org, .gov, .edu, or even a simple Google search that leads me into Alice's wonderland of questionably dominoed "facts" is an acceptable kind of feeding. My tendency toward indulgence and purging leans into these nuanced webs of information and I take bite after bite until I am full, and then I keep reading until satiety disappears and all that is left is exhausted, hormonal release. My reward system is wired like the addict that I am. Once my obsessive behavior makes me feel like a relative expert on something, I spew it out in my daily conversations. I test the taste of the information on my tongue to decide if I want to pursue it further or move on to a new flavor, storm studying my way from one end of the spectrum to the other. If I feel particularly brazen, I write it down, scrawling potential essay titles into a catch-all steno pad I keep at my desk.

My favorite laxatives come in purple packaging, which suggests to my commercial mind that they will help me feel calm. We interpret purple as something that denotes dignity, wisdom, and spirituality. Essentially, laxatives are marketed as supplemental refinement. This is a brilliant marketing tactic for those whose eating disorder aligns with mine because the color then matches the purpose of the product. The problem is, in overconsumption, laxatives remove far more than impurities from the body; they remove essential nutrients and bacteria, and make it nearly impossible for the body to absorb what it needs in order to function properly. Overconsumption also removes the need for the body to produce certain enzymes and hormones and to perform certain functions. After long-term overconsumption, the body has to relearn how to do many things properly. Discovering this a few years ago didn't stop me from following through on my compulsions, though. Instead, when I had a friend who was required to do a full internal cleaning-out before a colonoscopy, I took notes. I started supplementing my daily pills and tea with half a bottle of MiraLAX diluted in Gatorade at the end of every week. I didn't care about the long-term effects—I just knew I wanted to feel clean, empty, refined. I don't recommend this lifestyle, and I know now it isn't worth everything that it causes. Still, as I write this essay, it has only been five months since my last relapse, which means that each day I continue toward recovery marks the longest I have gone without laxatives in fifteen years.

While talking about the writing of this essay with one of my coworkers, I was asked what the title meant. I responded, "Oh, you know, it's just a reference to that saying people always preach: *How do you eat an elephant?*" I have heard this saying from so many people over the years that it has become a needle in my ears. But it turned out, in fact, that my coworker did *not* know this saying. When she asked me "How?" I was confounded and brought my eyebrows in close over the bridge of my nose. *There must be something wrong with her,* I thought. *Everyone has been told how to eat an elephant.* After a few moments of awkward silence with my coworker, I finally answered her by finishing the advice that had been unsolicitedly offered to me too many times. I swiveled in my work chair, feeling forced to begrudgingly pass the so-called wisdom on to another impressionable human being, despite not knowing where her impulsivities lay. "*One bite at a time*," I said. When I left work that day, I began obsessively asking other people if they knew the detestable saying, seeking validation that my coworker was an outlier. But many others didn't know it either, and those that did told me that it meant something different than I have always thought. Instead of what

some of my new sample size has since informed me (that the idiom is about approaching a seemingly impossible task in small bits—a sort of self-preserving, myopic approach to the big picture), I passed along to my coworker that it was their—all those people who have ever given me the advice to eat elephants *in the correct way*—version of coyly suggesting that I should practice *moderation in all things*. As if it were easy. As if stopping after a single bite were functional advice. For me, "bite-sized" has never really felt like an option. Instead, I consume things one, addicted, sloppy chunk at a time. I obsess and long and crave, then hunch barbarically over my kills and gorge out fistful after fistful to swallow half-chewed mastications and call them sustenance.

On an average day, I have about sixteen hours carefully scheduled. My day planner allows me to organize my time by the half hour, and I try to fill my days with work, school, church activity, research, writing, reading, hiking, service—any socially acceptable, seemingly guilt-free thing that I can overindulge in. After all, no one has ever told me that I get *too many good grades* or should *consider hiking or serving or learning a little less.* No one warns that these things might get bad for me in overconsumption. I keep doing them. And I often find that the research I want to do leads me back to the human body, to genetics and nature and homeostatic impulses for survival. I am frustrated when I learn that I cannot blame my disorder on my genetics. At least, not entirely. I have tried, though, and there is certainly research that supports that both of my parents' relationships with food and their bodies lent to the creation of my eating disorder. According to neurobiologist Andrew Huberman, genes aren't "deterministic," and they don't dictate behavior. Still, sometimes I *have* blamed my parents. Not so much for my genetics but for my conditioning. I also blamed my thinner friends, and my sister, because their bodies were what others said mine was supposed to be. It didn't matter that they were facing their own body battles—I resented them the same way I resented my relationship with food.

One curiosity I struggle with is the label that, because of my disorder, I am impulsive, because it suggests to me that my constant efforts to be in control are always going to be futile. My impulsivity is often referred to as a lack of inhibitory control. I cannot say no. Many who struggle with eating disorders such as bulimia are also prey to other impulsive behaviors: alcoholism, promiscuity, interrupting others when speaking, nail-biting, self-harm, and manic depression. The list goes on. Like those who struggle with ADHD, I seem to operate within the bounds of hyperactivity and hyperfocus. I crave praiseworthy hyperfocus.

Nevertheless, even now, as I type my notes haphazardly from my steno pad into my computer and call it the first draft of an essay, I am simultaneously listening to an argument between my dad and my brother, hearing door hinges squeak open and closed, watching my parents' English mastiff walk past my childhood bedroom window, monitoring the slight movement of trees in my periphery and the changes of light as clouds move across the unseen sky, mapping the movement of those clouds, stressing over the way my stomach feels bulged as I sit and it presses against my desk (shouldn't there be a gap?), and becoming more and more aware of the hunger in the back of my throat that is telling me that I only had four eggs, one piece of toast, the thinnest layer of fig preserves, and twelve ounces of unsweetened almond milk today. I can still taste the eggs in my mouth but my body wants something more. Something savory with a side of dopamine. My body wants avocado marmite sourdough toast, cheesy pasta with red pepper flakes, red meats covered in melty jalapeño artichoke dip, a few salmon mango tacos with red cabbage and ranch, and plain refried black beans with garlic powder, and it wants them all by three o'clock this afternoon so that it has time to decide what it wants for dinner. I choose not to feed it, because *I know better,* but the effort is strenuous.

And maybe the idiom doesn't really work. Maybe my growing sample size is right and it has nothing to do with moderation at all. Nothing to do with monitoring consumption. And yet, the image the idiom conjures for me begs to differ: I massacre an elephant and, unable to haul in my score, I leave it to rot where it lies. I return to scavenge pleasure as every day, week, month, I come back to the same rotting flesh and greedily hoard its waning nutrients. And it waits for me, day in and day out, weighing on the back of my mind, salivating in the back of my throat, shamefully forcing my eyes to dart back and forth to make sure no one is watching. But the real problem is this: I massacre too many elephants at once (because one at a time would be too easy to digest). As a result, dead elephants sweat from the pores on my face and the glands that cover my body. And still more beasts roam free throughout my mind-image, waiting to be hunted. Overscheduled and overfed, sufficiently gorged despite recent starvation, I return insatiable for a few more bites, and then a few more after that. And, all the while, as my fist meets my mouth, again, I think to myself in a thousand refraining voices: *For shame. Don't you remember how to eat an elephant?*

You can imagine, at this point, that I clench my jaw, walk to the kitchen, and open the pantry, the fridge, the cabinet above the Ziploc drawer. I climb

onto the granite countertop to look through the teas for the box with a purple label. I struggle to compose myself. With empty hands, anxiety itching across my shoulders, I trudge back to my bedroom. Back to my desk. I stare at my laptop screen and then open the old catch-all steno pad to the page where I have scrawled "On Ostrich Jerky" across the top—an essay in the making. My gel-ink pen bleeds into *before I stopped eating birds,* which becomes *the tenderizing process for exotic dried meats,* which, inevitably, leads me to *kneeling on the ground, I rest the jerky options against my thighs—everything from ostrich meat to mustard-flavored mushrooms.* Composing the start of this essay on jerky is easier than it was to climb down from the kitchen counter. I finish my thoughts on jerky and turn a few pages, rediscovering a tried-and-true recipe for cranberry pumpkin oatmeal cookies. *When can I make these?* I begin a mental shopping list and take out my planner. But I know better. I close the steno and walk away.