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## **The Birth of God**

In an ordinary green field, in middle England, a cow surveyed its surroundings and wondered whether there should be more to life. The grass in the neighbouring field looked a delicious shade of green, rich and vibrant, evidently full of nutrients. For the past week, her daydreams had been filled with the vicarious delights of eating that grass. That must be, she had thought, the acme of experience. She slowly chewed on air, pretending the virgin grass was on her tongue, between her teeth, sliding down her throat into her rumen, there to soften up before passing into her reticulum, omasum and abomasum.

But now she wasn't so sure. What if it was a trick of the light? What if that grass wasn't all she imagined it do be? What if – and this was highly likely, the more she thought about it – what if beyond that field there was another field with even richer, greener grass? And beyond that another one? And yet another one? It was too much to contemplate. She might walk two miles in search of the perfect grass and never find it. And what if it was here all along, beneath her hooves, only she wasn't intelligent or cultivated or educated enough to recognise it?

Then, in confusion and growing distress, she began to wonder whether the quest for perfect grass should be the summit of her ambition anyway? Couldn't she aspire to something grander than the consumption of monocotyledonous plantlife? Was this as good as it got? So began the cow's existential crisis.

At first, no-one noticed. A morose cow is barely distinguishable from a happy one, even for other cows. And so she kept herself to herself, standing alone beneath the shade of an ageing chestnut tree which, the more she contemplated it, became less and less substantial. Finally, convinced that it was a figment of her imagination, she ran into it full pelt and was concussed for a week. By the time she recovered, she had forgotten what had caused her

headaches and began, anew, to ponder the reality of the tree and the significance of things. She walked around it clockwise and then again, anti-clockwise, following the twist and curve of its trunk, memorising the texture of its bark until, through a form of self-hypnosis, she became convinced that she was the tree and the tree was a cow. At this point, the herd began to perceive a change in her but, not being versed in the techniques of cognitive behaviour therapy, they failed to offer her the community support that might have saved her life.

She became paranoid that her roots were coming adrift and she would surely crash to the ground in the next puff of wind. Tentatively she lifted one leg after the other and imagined herself teetering from side to side. In desperation she tried to dig herself into the ground, selecting – intelligently enough for a cow, or even a tree for that matter – the boggiest ground at the foot of the field, nearest the river. Time and again, she reared up and planted her front legs into the muddy soil, churning it up and softening it until, finally, she was buried to her fetlocks. Then she shook her rump from side to side in an attempt to force her hind legs downwards. The herd watched with dispassion as she slowly, carefully, lovingly, rooted herself in the fine English soil.

When she was satisfied, she stood stock-still, waiting for a wind to blow and test her solidity. The thought of spring, only weeks away, was exciting her: all those new shoots budding, growing, life from life, stretching into the sky in hopeful tendrils. For the first time, she felt she had a purpose, she felt valuable. Look at that cow, she thought, staring contemptuously at the chestnut tree, all it does is eat and fart. It's methane on legs. She, on the other hand, noble English chestnut, she turned carbon dioxide into oxygen. The mere fact of her existence, planted in the soil, was helping to save the world.

Yes, she thought, she was saving the world, she was the saviour of the planet. Without her, doom was inevitable. Only she stood between the earth and catastrophe. The corollary was clear: she must be God. She must be the divine imagination which had conjured grass and clover, invented bonemeal, designed country lanes, milking maids, pails. She alone had seen

that the earth was nothing but a void, empty and dark, and she became the sun in the morning and the rain in the evening, she was the wind that blew and the grass that grew. She brought forth every living creature, the cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth, according to their kinds. Cows and sheep, dogs, rabbits, humans even. And she saw these things. And she saw that it was good.

And with that thought, a hideous weight fell upon the cow who became the tree that was revealed to be God. All that responsibility, the knowledge that the future of every living being – and there must be hundreds of them – rested with her, and her alone. It was the most solitary burden in the world, but she would bear it with fortitude, because the world required it of her. All of this I have made from the slime of the earth, she thought, and in that reckoning she became aware of her own substance, the mighty chestnut, the lord of all she surveyed. All of these things she had created – she looked at them with a mixture of beneficence and aloofness – should they not now bow at her feet and give thanks to her, their God, for making them, nourishing them, letting them live amid her bountiful splendour?

Yea, she thought, the world should bear witness to her munificent gifts. It would have to learn to appreciate her. And her heart grew hard, because were there not those who would repel her, refuse to acknowledge her power? Any who cherished her name and denied not her faith, they would surely be blessed, but all others dwelt with evil.

She would have to establish rules, certainties. After all, even she hadn't realised she was God, so how could the rest of the world know? How could she make them understand that she, God, required their worship? That she expected from them blind devotion, adoration, treats? She would have to proclaim herself Mistress of every field between here and there, the right and true owner of every drop of water that had ever been and every inch of soil in which her pure and virtuous roots now stretched. It was a huge job for one soul. She would have to be everywhere at once, a simultaneous entity. Again, inspiration struck: she would have to learn how to fly.

Trembling with fear at the revelation of her righteous destiny, she tried to ponder the nature of flight but, without an understanding of the laws of gravity, she was at more of a disadvantage than she realised. Nonetheless, she observed her front legs, buried six inches into the ground and knew instinctively that this was not a good position from which to start. She began to rock from side to side while the herd moored their encouragement, settling at once into a laconic, steady rhythm. She regarded the cows disparagingly. Dumb creatures, they knew so little of the world around them. They were concerned with nothing grander than the search for fresh, green grass, while she, God, had the future of everything thrust on her quivering haunches.

Thus it was, in deep contemplation, that she failed to notice that her rocking, far from releasing her from the mud, was sinking her ever deeper into it. She planned an amnesty for rabbits as long as they promised no longer to eat grass reserved for the cows. She pondered how best to eradicate the fox, what to do with the badger, how to ensure humans stopped slapping cows on the rump in that indelicate and unnecessary manner. She planned grand, chestnut-based rituals to celebrate her glory. Her stomach became stuck in the ground as she worded a decree banishing, with immediate effect, flies and midges to a field without grass at least four miles away, on the other side of the river. The buzzing things hadn't been one of her best inventions, she now conceded. Her shoulder blades slid under the soil, and her back and her rump, too, leaving only her neck and head free. Still she didn't notice, busy as she was preparing an ordinance on the offsetting of cow-methane with tree oxygen which would require the number of cows and the number of trees to be maintained in perfect symmetry.

Momentum was driving her down, the ground by now so loosened she was sinking fast. Her nose tickled as soil settled around it. Her eyes began to stream, her lungs to burn. This must be some form of rapture, she supposed, reserved only for the supreme God. She was privileged to experience it. The light around her was dimming, a soft English breeze fanning her last remaining visible portions. In the distance she could hear the bucolic mooing of cows, the soft

rustle of trees in the evening. This is all very pleasant, she thought, her soul detaching, drifting, rising effortlessly into the sky. She looked down on the tranquil scene, the cows chewing peaceably, rabbits scampering, foxes prowling. She noticed the greenness of adjacent fields, deepest emerald, shimmering. At the bottom of the nearest field, next to the river, she saw the strangest sight. Silly thing, she thought, there's a cow there that thinks it's a rabbit. But already she was floating, far, far away from such minor concerns, a hundred miles or even more. She had a planet to save, subjects to attend to. Is this what it's like to be God, she wondered. And then she wondered no more.

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