

On Skinning Alligators

The white light illuminates even out into the dirt road, chasing back the falling blue of the evening. The air is slightly humid—mild for this part of the world. I can smell it all the way out into the street. Like fish.

The closer I get to it, the more people I see. A family that I don't know with a child wander around the open yard, and the little brown and white rat terrier barks at me until I bend down to let her smell my fingers. She slinks off, ears back, suspicious but trusting for the moment, walking in that stiff-legged hop of very small dogs.

The fish smell has gotten worse, but it isn't unbearable. Something else has joined in with the fish scent, something cold and organic that I think must be exposed, chilled flesh.

His bulk covers two six foot metal tables, one a few inches taller than the other. His tail hangs off the end of the shorter table. They've put him on his back, with his legs sprawled out spread-eagle, his malleable stomach and limbs spilling off the sides of the table.

They've already opened his skin in the T shape I'm so used to seeing in zombie movies. His flesh is parted down the middle and folded back like the pages of a book, except these pages are made of yellow hide, and the contents are pink and red. The yellow armored skin is a quarter inch thick, the back of it white with subcutaneous tissue, which four men are diligently slicing through to pull the skin free.

They say that he's a record 'gator. Over 13 feet of muscle and scales. A once in a lifetime animal.

I ask how old he is.

The guide, not the man who caught him but the man who takes people out to catch his kind, jokes that he's only a few months old. Because I'm gullible and a bit slow in conversation, I make a sound of shock, and they laugh at me.

"Nah he's probably about seventy years old."

I look at him again. Seventy years of living only to end up spread eagle on a pair of metal tables in the backyard of my neighbor's house. I wonder what mistake he made. You can't be an alligator in Florida during gator season and live to be seventy without knowing how to evade hunters.

I stand back and watch them hack his skin away, revealing more pink and white flesh. He doesn't bleed. They say he's been on ice for a few days, so he isn't putrefying, and he's gone through all the stages of death.

The sun sinks low, and the women leave the men to their work. I touch his armored tail. I could never get this close to such an animal alive and out in the canals and moats. His skin isn't as hard as I'd imagined it would be—it's rather pliable, and the scales part to reveal skin underneath. The soft thumbnail pieces that taper into the horizontal yellow sections of his belly are soft and malleable, like wet tissue paper.

I am fascinated by his body and the muscles the men reveal as they pull more and more of his skin away. But I am also sad.

The men are mostly strangers to me, except my father. The guide's nephew is there, and he is my age and handsome, but he only has eyes for the alligator, which is not an uncommon reaction from young men in my presence. The last man, I think, is the son of the guide, and his own son accompanies him, a brown little thing of nine or ten, used to being outside and dirty.

The man with the young son wears an eye patch on his left eye and is mostly quiet. The left side of his face is paralyzed.

They talk about cooking the catch and laugh over his limbs, about previous hunts and winning prizes. I never know how to feel about killing animals for trophies. I know alligators will run rampant if they aren't hunted, and the hunting is well regulated, but there are always abusers. Always people who see opportunity in taking the life of a thing.

They say that most of the meat on his bones is too tough, too strong for consumption because of his age. Most of his body will be thrown away, dumped in a place where it will rot and no one will learn anything from it. No one will study his bones to find out if they had been broken, or the contents of his stomach to see what he'd been eating. No one will keep a record of his size in a scientific book.

The only part of him that is being kept is his head, which is the length of my entire right arm.

When they get to his front feet, they cut very deep. And then, with a sharp, thick crunch, break them off. It's a sound like a branch breaking under wet cloth. I wince away from it.

I am asked to hold up his now naked pink arm while my father cuts around his shoulder. I take the limb with both hands and shove it up. The weight of it is shocking. It's soft and cold and sticky, but not bloody. I hold his arm up until my father finishes his section, and then I let it down.

Looking at his naked chest I am struck by how human-like it is. He has pectorals and biceps just like a man, and spread-eagle as they are, he resembles Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, though his limbs are much shorter. His belly sinks in at the bottom of his diaphragm

where it is soft with organs. He hasn't bloated with the gases of death. I wonder how the muscles are able to hold the fluid inside.

His anatomy becomes even stranger when I take account of what he is. This is a creature of old, a reptile made of bone and scale, a veritable dragon straight from my fantasy books. I could see him thrash in the water, churning up lilies, jaws clamping down on a bird with the force of a car crash. He is utterly alien, and yet his chest and stomach, when devoid of the scales that mask it, look like a human's.

How old is our bodily structure? The pectorals connecting to biceps to deltoids, the organs swimming under our ribcages? He is a remnant of the thunder lizards that roamed this earth when the moon was closer to us, when the starlight was millions of years younger. And yet he looks like us.

I wonder if these men see that. But they are not the type to wonder about that, I suppose. I tried my thoughts on them once, and got laughed at for my efforts.

So I keep mum and watch them pierce his left front and back legs, slide a rope through the bone and tie them, hanging those ropes from a bar on a pump lift. They raise him onto his side to continue their work.

The taxidermist arrives with his metal hook and chain. He is a heavily mustachioed man with a flair for silence, (that is common in hunters, I feel) though I can tell that he loves his work. My father mentions to him that I am an artist, and if he needs my painting services, they are available. He eyes me and asks me about painting varnishes, testing me, I think. I answer with my usual clumsy grace, and then he falls silent, calling me "missy" once when he wants me to hold the chain as he hooks one of the legs and starts cutting the head free. Afterward he just gestures, and I comply.

I don't know if I could paint for trophies. The motivations behind killing these animals trouble me. I love the art of taxidermy, and follow a show online about preparing specimens for research, which is not unlike taxidermy. The difference between these two things though, is that the show is built on scientific elements and discovery.

The taxidermist cuts out the fragile skin of his bottom jaw, revealing a flap like a clapper inside the throat. The man takes out the tongue, a monstrous piece of muscle, and throws it aside.

I feel as if I am in a bubble as I watch the men turn their prize onto his belly. They hoist him by his legs and push him over, and I fear that his legs will snap under his bulk. But they don't. There are old scars all over him, pockets of "sand," as the men call it, where scar tissue has built up or infection set in. He has been shot before.

I walk over to his head in all its glory, now turned right-side up. Two sacks of muscle the size of soccer balls hang off his neck, bulging over the table. They are soon cut away. A hole the size of a softball was blown in the top of his skull, where they killed him with the "boomstick," boiling away his brain. Folds of skin have swallowed his eyes, and I can't see them.

Algae stains his jaw, his largest teeth are the size of two knuckles on my index finger. I touch his snout, splay my hand over it, and my fingers don't cover the entirety of it. His nose is hard bone, the scales aren't as malleable here.

They are nearly done. They crack the bones in his back legs, removing the remaining feet. The bone is pure glistening white, never seen the light of day. Then they break his neck and remove his head.

They place it nose down against one of the beams that supports my neighbor's workshop. They take a hose and wash away the blood. I leave off watching the men work with the animal, and spend most of my time watching the little brown boy wander around, bored of the whole process, while his father laughs and makes racial jokes about where they will dump the body.

I wonder at his place here. That he doesn't really need to eat this thing to survive. That even though his face is paralyzed and missing an eye from brain surgery, that he still has more choices than the men he slurs about.

I do not fit in here. Not with these men, who call me missy, and seem to accept my presence like a water buffalo accepts the presence of a white heron, snapping at the bugs that float out of the grass while it eats.

I stand beside the gator's head and I watch them cut the pink flesh away from his tail. They are comfortable. They are right.

And I am wrong. I am like the gator. I am something for these men to laugh at, and to conquer, to belittle. I am a thing that they hunt. The difference is that they hunt gators with boomsticks and crossbows, and they hunt my kind with flowers and promises that they never intend to keep.

But like a gator that is too small, or a lion that is deformed, I am not prime meat. I am not similar enough to them.

I know that no matter what I say to them, their minds will not be swayed by my thoughts on anything. They laugh at me. How can one be laughed at, and yet be taken seriously?

I look at the little brown boy, bored as a creature seven times his age is opened up before his eyes. I know that he too will be a hunter. He will hunt all sorts of things.

My father finishes his bit and leaves the rest to the other men. I follow him home. I dream about the sunken eyes of the alligators head, resting against the steel beam of the workshop, nose buried in the dirt, neck severed. Prepared to be sent off and preserved and hung upon a wall for people to look at and admire the skill of the hunter.

You and I are the same, old one. We both wear cloaks of armor, but underneath there is pale, sticky, cold flesh. And one day I too will be opened up. I can only hope that I will find more respect in the end, brother.