

Skin

His father came in the door and slumped down at the head of the table. Jesse watched him plop his spoon in the macaroni, light a cigarette and let out a long drag of smoke. Jesse scrapped the last bit of cheese from his bowl and brought the plate to the sink, dropped it in the yellowing dish water. The bubbles splashed in the air as it sank below the surface.

“You expect your mamma to wash that? You know she’s working in her room tonight,” his father said. Jesse took the sponge and scrubbed the plate clean, washed it off, set it on the rack to dry. “You’re gonna be with me tonight, boy. Go change out of them school clothes. Put on something your mamma ain’t gonna be pissed about getting dirty.”

Jesse walked to his room, the sounds of arias coming from his mother’s study, the pause as the music ended. His mother hummed as she changed the record. The clack-clack of the type writer as the record started again and the zing as she finished a page.

His father knocked at his door, the .22 in one hand, the long stick with the fork at the end in the other. He sat on Jesse’s bed and smoothed out the sheets with his long gnarled fingers. Jesse slid into a pair of blue jeans, a t-shirt and hand-me-down boots.

“Them snakes ain’t gonna hunt themselves, boy. The church is expecting us to have them by tomorrow morning,” his father said as he chambered the rounds in the .22, the click as he turned the safety on.

The truck smelled like damp gunpowder as Jesse climbed in, the empty .22 shells under his feet. Jesse knew that his father took potshots out the window, at mailboxes, at deer, at road signs. The headlights shined over the bare spindly trunks of pines at the edge of their yard, the reaching and near leafless branches of the oaks. He remembered his father telling him as spring came that the drought was going to be so bad this year that the trees would never regain their leaves after winter.

“You gonna remember to be calm, boy? You get all riled up, you gonna get the snakes all riled

up.” Jesse nodded in the dark as his father backed up, the only light in the house the glow of the lamp in the window of his mother’s study. She took a puff from her cigarette and lifted the glass of white wine to her lips, one hand always on the keys of the typewriter.

Jesse recalled the first night that his mother went into that room. The way that she called him, asked him to bring the cold bottle from the fridge. She made him open the corkscrew, drive it into the cork and pour the wine into the glass for her. She couldn’t stop writing at the moment, she said as she told him how to get the bottle open.

The dirt road was off the highway. His father cut the truck off, got his things and unlatched the gate. Jesse followed behind, his flashlight bouncing over his father as he strode past the tall pines and sweet gums. They walked down the thin brown trail that led through the trees, Jesse keeping the flashlight on the ground in front of him.

“Them snakes ain’t going to be too active at night. We most likely ain’t gonna have no trouble unless we step right on top of one. Just make sure you step loudly, boy, so they know we’re coming.” His father handed his stick to Jesse at the creek’s edge.

Jesse thought about the one morning he watched his mother use the hoe to beat a rat snake to death in the back yard. His father came home later and hung the dead snake over the fence line that separated the yard from the trees. “A warning to any others,” he had said.

His father jumped across the deep cut of a creek. Jesse slipped on the creek bank, clutching at the wet soil. He grabbed Jesse’s wrist and pulled him back up.

Jesse crouched down on his knees and shined the flashlight down as his father ran his stick through the slow moving water. There were no thin wavy lines in the creek, no long slither of black bodies.

Jesse had a dog once, the two of them down by a creek, playing in the water, Jesse screaming as he saw the thin wavy line trailing them. His father ran with the gun from the house, yanking Jesse out

of the water and carried him crying out of the woods, his mother clutching the porch railing as she watched. Their arms around him as they rode into town. His shoulder pulled out of socket they learned later at the hospital, the dog already bit, dead by the time they returned home. His father took the stiff dog, buried it somewhere in the yard, the brown mound smooth now when Jesse looked for it, the dirt firmly patted down. Jesse came out to the grave alone later, stood at its edge and wrote the dog's name in the wet earth.

“The cottonmouth don't really live in the water,” his father said. “But the best way to catch it is in the water so it can't strike.” He picked up a rock, skipping it down the meager creek. “Sometimes if you stir up the water, they show up.”

His father walked back into the woods as Jesse followed him down the game trail, the cloven hoof prints of the deer, the scarred tree branches where they had been rubbing their antlers. Jesse's feet stirred up the leaves, the scent of the loamy earth rising up. His father reached out with his stick, rummaged in the leaves and held the thin gossamer white casing up to the light.

“Skin. This one shed recently. Probably around here somewhere. Remember to step loud, boy,” he said, holding the skin out to Jesse. He put the skin into the picnic basket he carried as his father walked on. He bent down to the ground as Jesse ran up close.

“Be still, boy,” his father said, his arm held out, grabbing Jesse by the shoulder. Jesse wanted to ask him for how long, wanted to shine the flashlight at his face in the darkness. He felt the clench of the fingers around his collar bone and stood silent.

“Looks like something here.” The leaves shook as his father turned them. The mouth open and closed as the snake shrunk in on itself. His father took the stick, pinned the head to the ground, and with his other hand, grabbed the body. The mouth stretched impossibly wide. The tongue flicked as it darted out, forking towards Jesse, to his father. His fingers around the middle of the snake.

Jesse opened the picnic basket he carried, the shed skin at the bottom. His father dropped the

snake in, the rasp as the snake shook against the skin. The snake struck as he released the head, the snap of the teeth against the lid of the picnic basket as Jesse closed it.

“You get all that, boy?” His father asked, picking up the .22 from the ground. “You gonna try next time?”

Jesse nodded, the strike of the snake against the lid of the picnic basket. He felt the snake move in the basket and wanted to open the box, to reach in, to ask the snake what was to become of it. He wanted to hold it up to his face and feel the rasp of the tongue against his skin.

His father took the handle of the basket and shook it. The snake’s fangs thudded against the wood twice. He continued to shake it, the snake stilling to a ropey flop in the picnic basket.

“It’s all frazzled out now,” his father said, opening the lid. The two of them looked in at the snake curled in one of the corners, the lisp of the tongue in and out, the eyes silver in the moonlight. “That’s how them snake handlers do it.”

He took Jesse’s hand, reaching inside the basket. Jesse’s fingers brushed the scales, the snake inert. His father grabbed the snake around the middle and lifted it out of the basket.

“Thing’s all worn out. Won’t give a shit what we do to it. It’s like a rabbit in the headlights,” he said. “All it can do is flick that tongue in and out and stare at you.”

His father put the snake back in and gave Jesse the stick. It was heavy, the wood still warm from where his father had clutched it. He walked beside Jesse and shined the flashlight out into the woods, his feet stirring up the leaves. The red flicker of a raccoon’s eyes in the distance.

Jesse pushed aside the pile of leaves at the curve of the game trail. He saw the snake, the skin feeling all rubber and soft underneath as he prodded it with the stick. His father directed the light at the gray skin and dark stripings. Jesse pinned the snake’s head to the ground with the stick and reached down with his other hand, the thrashing of the body as the snake moved, the leaves flying up, floating slowly down. His father kept the flashlight on the head, the white cotton of the mouth swollen and

snapping.

The snake's mouth gouged the dirt and the leaves, the cotton white gone in the filth. Jesse's hand around the snake's body, sliding up and down the cold skin, clenching and un-clenching as the snake moved. The snake wound and unwound against his forearm. The little hard shapes under the skin of the last meal the snake ate.

Jesse kept the stick on the head, lifted the body. The snake flailed as Jesse tried to keep the stick between him and that snapping head. The head came loose, Jesse's hands still around the body, the whisk through the air as the snake tried to strike at him.

His father's long arm came quick out of darkness and clutched the snake about its throat. The little fangs as it bit down on air, the jaw retracting as the snake tried once more. He took the snake from Jesse, snapped it through the air, the soft whip like crack. The snake dangled then, near exhausted from his father's hands. The mouth slowly open and closed, the barely audible click of the teeth against one another.

"If you whip them fast enough," his father said, "the head will fly off." Jesse imagined the snake's head flying through the air, coming to rest against a pine tree and wondered just how long it would continue to snap open and closed. If he found it and reattached it, would the snake slither off as one whole thing or would it lay there flopping in the grass, two distinct parts, until the life went out of it?

Jesse and his father forced the snake down into the basket against the cold hard lump of the other snake in the corner. They both let go at the same time, listened to the snake strike the wooden lid. Jesse shook the basket, listened to both snakes still into silence.

"Keep an eye on the head the next time," he said. His father leaned back against an oak tree, the thick and leafy branches keeping out the moonlight. The glow of his face as he lit a cigarette. He poured some coffee out in the small cup and added a splash from the flask. Jesse coughed after his first

sip from the cup, drank the rest of it slower.

His father smoked two cigarettes, the night silent except for the slither of the snakes in the picnic basket. Twigs broke out there in the woods as something moved through the trees. Jesse shined the flashlight in the darkness, the trees casting lost and distorted shadows as he moved the light back and forth.

“Probably a deer, or a raccoon. Most animals only hunt at night,” his father said.

Five more snakes before the night was out. They spooked a deer as they walked out of the trees back to the truck, the shot after the brown antlers already far gone. The last deer his father shot in the middle of a freeze in winter, the house and the refrigerator not big enough to store it, the deer sitting for four days before he gave up trying to butcher the meat himself. The deer was frozen as Jesse walked behind his father as he tugged the deer into the woods behind their house. When he had the dog, the two of them would stumble onto the carcass, Jesse poking into the decaying flesh with a pine branch, wondering just how long it would take until the maggots were done, until nothing was left but perfect bone.

The hot breeze blew in through the open windows of the house and then lay heavy and still in the rooms. His father walked through the hall, the soft knock on his mother’s door. The typewriter stilled as his mother spoke, the tinkle of the wine glass as she held it to the lip of the bottle. The words, “not now, not tonight,” came to Jesse in the dark of his bedroom.

The snakes still lay in the picnic basket on the back porch, the occasional rustle, the soft strike as they launched themselves against the wood. Jesse heard the loud clomp of his father’s shoes on the porch as he gave the box one last shake, his solitary plop into bed later. The flick of his lighter just audible under the click-clack of the typewriter.

Jesse walked out there in darkness, opened the lid to the picnic basket and looked down at the

snakes. He shook and shook the box before they finally stilled again. He reached in and pulled out the long white skin, saw how it still formed what it once was and took it back with him to his room. He wrapped it in his father's discarded newspaper and wedged it under his mattress.

His father's callused hands on his shoulders, the red eye of the cigarette in the purple darkness of pre-dawn as he shook him awake. He held out a cup of coffee to Jesse.

"Ain't too strong. I put some milk and sugar in it. Like your momma takes it." Jesse gulped deep at the coffee, his father holding out the same clothes for him from last night. He sat on the bed while Jesse changed.

They got stuck on the muddy dirt road that led to the church. His father wedged two by fours under the wheels, the mud churning as Jesse tried to push. The muck in his face when the truck lurched forward and he fell.

The men in suits all sat on the cracked steps of the church when they pulled up. They all rose from the church steps, walked inside when they saw Jesse and his father.

"Got stuck in the mud," his father said to their backs. The last one in the black suit nodded as he closed the door of the church, Jesse and his father left standing in front of an empty porch. The wooden box out front tied with a rawhide thong, the white of the shed snake skins inside. The snakes curled into dark concentric circles when they opened the picnic basket. His father shook the basket as the snakes plopped out, unwound into the box at the church steps.

Jesse's father sat on the steps, the old and green wood creaking under him. Jesse tried to dust the mud off himself as his father grabbed his hands and pulled him close.

"Don't worry about it, boy. It's just dirt. Come right out, later. Take a dip in the lake on the way home," he said, lighting a cigarette and leaning back against the steps. "Long night, huh, boy?" Jesse nodded, the door to the church opening.

“Charles, gonna have to ask you to leave,” the man in the black suit said. “You know how this works. The same every week. You leave them snakes, I get you the money later,” the man in the black suit flicked mud off the porch steps with the edge of his shoe. The pomaded heads in the spare light of the church just inside, the other men sitting in the pews.

“Got my boy with me this time. 10 years old and caught his first snake. Two years younger than when I did it. Fat old cottonmouth,” his father said.

“You leave the snakes, Charles. We pay you good for them snakes, but you leave the snakes. You can’t come in, you can’t sit here. You put the snakes in that box and you get gone,” the man in the black suit said.

“We come back on Sunday? See what you do with them snakes?” His father asked.

“You know the snake-catcher ain’t welcome at worship. Your father wasn’t welcome, you ain’t welcome, your boy ain’t welcome,” the man said, the slam as the door closed. His father tossed the half-lit cigarette at the door. The morning sun hit the box where they dumped the snakes, the rustle as the snakes warmed up.

They pulled off at the lake on the way home. His father stood in his boxers, the water just over his chest and thin knobby arms as he stared down at his hands under the surface. Jesse swam around his father, touching bottom, his toes against the hardness of tree roots, the spongy mud. Jesse laid back, the water coming over his eyes, and looked up at him through a brown haze. His father wet his hands, placed them over his face.

Jesse wanted his father to pick him up high over his head, to throw him, to send him with a giant splash into the water, the slight pain in his stomach as he belly-flopped, his father pulling him up to do it again and again.

His father dove under the water, the white of his boxers billowing around him as he swam. Jesse paddled after him, his toes just barely scrapping the bottom. He turned back and sat in the

shallows, watching him climb up on the pier that floated in the middle of the lake.

“Dad,” Jesse called once, twice, three times before his father dove off the pier and swam back.

The typewriter was silent when Jesse woke on Sunday morning. His father in his bedroom again, holding out a different set of clothes, the fabric freshly ironed, stiff as Jesse put it on. His father cinched up a tie way too big, stuffed the excess into Jesse’s shirt. He dug into the can of pomade, rubbed it between his hands and swept Jesse’s hair back from his face.

His father slowly drove through the woods this time, the bump and jolt over the dirt road, the splash through the puddles from last night’s rain as the heavy tree branches scrapped against the roof.

Others walked through the pine trees on the path alongside the dirt road, the galoshes thick with mud. His father stopped for the first family they came across, asked if they wanted a lift. The stare from the family as he put the truck back into gear and drove on.

Jesse heard singing from inside the church as his father parked the truck, shut off the engine. The families trod out of the woods and walked up the stairs, the hands running over the box they put the snakes in. The door shut after the last one out of the woods.

“Smooth down your hair, boy,” his father said, looking in the rear-view mirror, pressing his fingers against his mustache. He reached over and once more cinched up Jesse’s tie.

The leather thong lay in mud beside the empty box by the front stairs. White skins sat in the bottom of the box. His father held the wooden door open for Jesse, the creak as he closed it after them. A few bent heads rose and turned to look at them at the back. His father nudged Jesse into one of the last rows and grabbed his hand as they bowed their heads.

The rough grasp of fingers in his from the person next to him, the palm lined with grit and sand. Words echoed from the people around him, his father trying to mimic their murmuring, the words lost and garbled as Jesse struggled to hear. The people still stood once the prayer ended.

Jesse peeked through the cracks in the crowd, looked out from the end of the pew. The wooden floor polished smooth from steps up and down the center aisle. The man in the black suit spoke, the clap of his hands together.

“I don't know how many times I've told this, but what did Jesus say to his disciples in Mark 16:14?”

The people shouted the name of 'Jesus', of 'Praise Him'. The man in the black suit bent down, grabbed the box in front of the pulpit. The ebb and flow of his voice and the pauses, the cries from the men and women around Jesse.

The man in the black suit held the box over his head, shaking it in circles. The snakes woke, the dull thud under the voices as the snakes struck and re-struck the box.

“Ain't got no rattlers,” the man in the black suit said, the sigh coming from the crowd, “Got us a mighty big cottonmouth though. Gonna take a lot of spirit to lay hands on it.”

The cottonmouth's teeth nearly snapped Jesse's face two nights ago. He wondered about the feel of poison coursing through him, wanted to know if it would make him feel as good as the wine made his mother feel, if the pain would turn into something good. The way his shoulder hurt at first and then felt so good as they dosed him with medicine at the hospital.

The other men in suits passed the bowl around, the greasy dollars, the sweaty coins clinking against one another as it went from hand to hand. His father lay in a single crisp dollar and sent it on.

“Jee-sus! Jee-sus! You want some Jee-sus?” The man in the black suit fell back against the pulpit, his arm clutching the wooden railing, the unknown words shouting from his mouth. His eyes rolled back in his head. Jesse watched the people leave the pews, the traces of mud in their footsteps.

His father pulled his hand.

“Come on, boy,” he said. The calluses smooth with sweat.

“I don't want to,” Jesse said. The tight set of his father's jaw as he bent down to Jesse, ground

Jesse's fingers against one another.

“You don't want to see what they gonna do with that snake you caught?”

The others in their pew pushed against them. His father's hand left his, the dark eyes as he looked back as he followed the line to the pulpit. Jesse thought of his mother back in that dark house, rising from bed this morning, stumbling down to the empty study, placing herself again in front of the typewriter. He remembered how he used to watch her, nestled in a chair in the corner in those days when she kept the door open. The long fingers as she stretched them, ran them through her long black hair and finally bent down to the keys.

The foam came from the mouth of the man in the black suit as he spoke in gibberish, his hands running over the hard curves of the people that passed in front of him. His touch ran through the hair of women, pressing into the faces of the men, running over the broad chests, the slim bosoms. Each of them bent down to the box of snakes, looked in, ran their hands over the wood.

“Who shall be the first?” The man in the black suit asked as the line inched forward, the ones that already passed back in their seats, sitting down and swaying, all of them speaking in a unison of unknown words.

His father fell to his knees in front of the box of the snakes, picking it up and shaking it above his head. He held his eye to one of the air holes, staring in at the snakes. Jesse sat alone in his pew, patting his hair down, brushing the pomade tinged sweat from his forehead, trying to remember how his mother use to smooth his hair out, how she patted the cow-lick down until it finally stayed in place, humming to herself.

His father released the latch, the babble stilling. His arm was in the box, the limp snake in his hands as he pulled it out. The cottonmouth that Jesse caught. The head swayed back and forth as he held it up, let the tail wrap around his wrist. He made eye contact with the snake, his head following the snake, bobbing back and forth as the snake moved.

The snake snapped once, the undulation of the jaw as the snake tried to bite again, the fangs coming together on empty air. His father jerked the snake back each time, the drone of the voices rising and falling when the snake tried to strike.

The grasp of hands around his father as the crowd reached out for the snake. They pulled the snake's tail from his wrist and un-wrapped his fingers from around the middle of the snake. The snake passed from hand to hand in the crowd. The snake coiled around shoulders, around skinny arms, around balding, stringy-haired heads.

“The book says demons, the book says serpents. Only by taking hold of them, can we send them back! Show them that the un-sinned strikes down evil, stares it in the face and says,” the man in the black suit said, the spit spewing from his mouth. The crowd repeated the words jee-sus-jee-sus-jee-sus. His father stood in front of the pulpit now, another snake in the hands of the man in the black suit.

“Cast thee out!” He struck his father on the forehead, the snake wrapped around his wrist, Jesse rising from his seat as his father fell. “Cast thee out!” The man in the black suit said once more, bending down to his father, his open palm on his father's face, the snake hanging from his shoulders. He pulled him up, his fingers pressed in his father's eyes. “The un-sinned sees the sinned every time, snake-catcher!” The last shove back, his father stumbling as the crowd hissed. His father bounced from person to person as they pushed him down the aisle, through the open wooden door.

Jesse sat there and watched the door shut after his father. The snakes were all out of the box now, the passage of them through the pews. Jesse ran his fingers over the giant cottonmouth when it came to him, the snake limp now, lifeless and exhausted. He touched the small indentation between the eyes, felt the small gray flick of the tongue against his face. He remembered about cracking the snake like a whip, thought of standing and sending the head flying across the room, the jaw clasp open and shut as the snake slowly died.

They took the snake from him then, the woman next to him draping it over her chest, coiling it

around her head, the snake's jaw opening and closing ever so slow.

His father waited in the truck when Jesse came outside. The click as he pushed in the cigarette lighter.

“The snakes all worn out,” Jesse said. “Them people did whatever they wanted with them.”

His father nodded as he started the truck and backed up through the mud. Jesse stared at the thin white coat of paint on the church, the high pale cross blending in with the pine trees. There must have been a man who painted that thing once they put it up there, Jesse thought. The wind must have swayed him back and forth, the needles from the pine trees scratching his face. The painter must have looked down when he finished and saw all those smiling faces, all those people who were so glad he was done. Those same people who waited at the bottom as he climbed down, their arms reaching out to help with the last few steps.

His father told Jesse to go check on his mother when they pulled in their driveway. Jesse looked back as he opened the door to the house and saw his father sitting in the truck smoking.

The blinds to his mother's room were already drawn. The house was silent, missing the loud clack-clack-zing of her typewriter. The door to her room was locked when he tried it.

He heard the record player volume rise as he walked away, the footfalls of her bare feet as she paced the room. “An idea doesn't always just come,” she told him once as he flipped through the same picture book, knowing the words before he saw the outlines of their bare shapes. “Sometimes you got to wait for it to strike.” Jesse watched her pace eight more times before she finally sat in front of the type writer.

He went to his room and pulled the milky-white snake skin out from under the mattress. Back on the porch, he sat down by the empty picnic basket. He stretched out the skin until it enclosed his arm.

Jesse waved his arm back and forth while he sat there, the crisp rattle of the shed skin against his own skin. He watched his father out in the truck as he smoked cigarette after cigarette and flicked the butts out into the yard. He saw his mother through the kitchen window, at the sink finally, her hands in the dish water, her head bent to the task.

Jesse held his hand up, the arm still encased in shed scales. He made his fist into a jaw, the arch of his fingers again and again as he attacked the air. He turned to his parents as they looked away from him, his father to the woods, his mother to the sudsy dishes and struck them each, his tongue flicking back and forth at the edge of his lips.