

The Fridges
for Michael

Once the storm has lifted, the fridges begin to gather: cautiously, around the edges of the bayous, peeking from between the reeds. They slink, and watch, and wait quietly for their moment – and finally, when the coast is clear, they slip into the bay with a slow, “who, me?” nonchalance, like a teenager creeping home past curfew. You can spot them as you drive from town on the highway along the coast: great white specks dotted around the gulf’s warm, peacock water. “It’s not uncommon,” the reference books reassure us, “for shoals of fridges to surface after a hurricane. The high winds and flooding roust them from their homes and, free from the shackles of domestication, they swarm wild waters, quickly regressing to their feral form.”

It is for the good of the environment, initially, that the people from town begin to pursue the fridges; there are fears for the integrity of the local ecosystem. The older ones are targeted first – “Years of wear and tear,” say the books, “Make it difficult for them to put up a fight.” A skillful hunter, approaching from behind, can incapacitate one of the beasts in seconds, and then a quick jerk of the arm is all that remains before its innards bleed into the bay. Usually, its last meal is still fresh in its belly, and chunks of food – red, bloodied meat, and lettuce, browning but always strangely crisp – spill out, all around the kill. A few of the slayers like to sit and watch this part of the process, stirred by some Archimedean curiosity about which remains will sink, and which will float. Others simply get to work, methodically wrenching off the door, and moving quickly away as the butchered carcass drifts silently toward the ocean’s floor.

But a few days after the storm, a brother and sister die, in a run-in with a Zanussi (“a particularly aggressive breed imported from Europe”). Their house is on a sheltered part of the bay, with a small wooden pier that stretches into the water; the Zanussi comes to rest there, nestled up against a damp supporting timber. The children have never seen anything like it, and approach, supposing it benign – some cousin of a manatee, perhaps – but they’re too bold, and soon the thing has swallowed them whole. Their parents realize what has happened and frantically pry open the beast’s bowels, but it has been too long; the bodies are limp and blue. Outraged, the townspeople renew their efforts to remove the menace.

The fridges start to put up a fight, unleashing a series of defence mechanisms evolved (the books presume) to deter predators. These range from sharp dorsal fins – the jagged edges of their steel exteriors – to toxic venoms: slicks of skin-burning chemicals that leak around them, like squid ink. Hunters often come away bruised, or scalded, or with deep red gashes along their arms – but always, eventually, they conquer the brutes, to the dying wails of metal scraping metal.

With so many kills a week, the mish-mash of remains begins to proliferate. The bulk of the carcasses, of course, are let sink into the bay, where their sturdy remains form artificial reefs. But the doors torn off, the entrails removed – what to do with them? The fridges are not particularly elegant creatures; there is little that a hunter can remove to serve as a tasteful trophy. Still, a few do – on principle, perhaps – leaving doors propped proudly against walls outside

garages, or old metal handles hanging solemnly over hearths. Otherwise, the parts are taken to the landfills and added to mass graves, now overflowing; the discarded organs jumbled in greying heaps; the stench of rot unbearable.

There are no further casualties, not on the human side; the Zanussi was an aberration. Hardly surprising, say the books, since even European species are “scavengers, rarely raptorial”; for food they rely more on plants, animals already dead, and, when times are dire, an occasional condiment. People begin to relax. They bring newer, tamer fridges into their homes, with gleaming coats and pleasant odours. The things purr happily in the kitchen, while their owners sleep, oblivious, upstairs.

By the spring, the cull is over, and declared a great success. The scourge is gone; the environment healing. The waters safe. But sometimes, still, the kids from town will swear they've seen a Maytag skulking in the corners of the bay – a darkened blur near the horizon, or a distortion in the water's haze. A local fisherman will insist it's a Whirlpool; that it often whispers past his boat at dusk. The books will remain skeptical. “It is virtually unheard of,” they'll scold, “for individual fridges to survive more than a few weeks on their own.” And yet, every year, in the town's snapshots from the beach, there they'll be: the fridges, lurking in the background. *Is that—?* people will ask, pulling the pictures closer. Ignoring their smiling friends, they'll narrow their eyes and study the waves, and wonder if they're seeing things.