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UNDER
THE SKIN





CLOSE TO THE BONE

“VULTURE” IS THE NAME GIVEN TO A PERSON WHO DISSECTS AND COLLECTS CADAVERS FOR FUN. **CIANNAIT KHAN** GETS TO KNOW THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE MACABRE HOBBY.

VISUALS BY **CIANNAIT KHAN**



“Vultures’ passion goes far beyond knee-jerk curiosity”

When Meike Hakkaart tells me about her childhood, it sounds, in many ways, idyllic. Growing up outside a small city in north-eastern Netherlands, Meike lived on a boat and spent her summers diving off it. She whiled away long days fishing with her brother, picking cherries in the woods, sketching the insects she so meticulously studied. In some ways, though, Meike’s interest in the natural world went above and beyond. She shows me a selection of childhood photos. In one, she sits in the garden sun, tenderly swaddling her dog, Bruuntje. In another, Meike, six years old at most, grins proudly beside rows of dead butterflies, a collection she gathered herself. In one photo, the young Meike sits on a bench, stanley blade in hand, as she skins a rat.

Meike has always been fascinated by death. Last year, when her beloved Bruuntje eventually grew weak and was put to sleep, she stripped his skin. Meike sheared the meat and fleshy tumours from his bones. His eyeballs and organs – his heart, a piece of lung – she stored in jars. She made pewter casts of his

body parts, and chocolate moulds of his nose. That was after she had laid naked with his body in a meadow to be photographed.

Meike’s relationship with death is, it’s fair to say, unusual. Her home is filled with skulls, skins, bones and wings. Her art is populated by the same: drawings of skeletal creatures with ethereal eyes; ceramic plates sculpted like skulls; photos of animal bodies set out delicately on beds of flowers. And she already has plans for what she’d like to happen when her mom dies. “I would love to make photos”, she says. “Her dead body in nature, or in the garden covered in flowers, and bury her there, and keep her bones.”

“Vulture culture” is the term often used to describe this macabre way of life. “Vultures” – like their avian counterparts – scavenge for animal, and sometimes human, remains. For vultures, skinning, dissecting, and stuffing are all par for the course. A quick scroll through a popular vulture group on Facebook feels somehow illicit, with many photos blurred by the site’s adult filter. There is a piglet crammed into a jar, suspended in a fluid that has leached all colour from its skin. A limp racoon body – roadkill – with tangled insides spilling from its rump. A freeze-dried bulldog puppy, curled up in fetal position and framed ornamentally upon floral print. And that’s just the last week.

Morbid fascination is something everyone can relate to. We have all peeked where we feel we ought not, or let our eyes linger too long at a gory sight. But vultures’ passion goes far beyond knee-jerk curiosity. What sets them apart is that they embrace – often unapologetically – an impulse that most of us repress. Vultures actively indulge their taboo curiosity about death, often starting out modestly before taking bigger and bigger steps to feed their fascination.

Outsiders might assume the hobby is freakish, a sign of malaise in the individual who seeks it out. For some, it has become almost obsessive. But vultures have a lot of reasons to do what they do. Often, it is to satisfy something deeper.

Geena Fitzsimons’s attic room in her family’s South Dublin home is quite the spectacle. Several flights up, squirreled away from ordinary family activity, is her collection of animal remains. It doesn’t fit neatly in a cabinet or under the bed. The entire room, small as it may be, is adorned floor to ceiling. Pelts, many of which Geena tanned herself, drape from hooks, over chairs, and across the television. Stuffed rodents perch sweetly on shelves. Her desk shows her works in progress: a leathery squirrel skin, a handful of scrunched up dead moles, a white rabbit hide. Beside them sits an open pliers and glass eyes – a taxidermist’s specialist item.

Geena, a young artist who graduated from Dublin City University not so long ago, describes her descent into vulture culture as “a slippery slope”. Like with a lot of vultures I speak to, there were clues

early on. As a child, Geena exasperated her mum by taking home everything she found outside – feathers, rocks, snail shells – and saved up her pocket money to buy fossils in museum gift shops. Geena’s first jackpot was a broken deer skull, discovered near Lough Derg. She thought she had never found something so incredible, and was instantly awed. When Geena shows me this precious first skull, it’s easy to see why: broken as it is, the intricacy is staggering. Its teeth still rattle in place, while the fault lines down the centre of its skull plates – which never had the chance to fuse – betray the deer’s youth.

As she got older, online vulture communities helped Geena to grow what is now, by all accounts, a magnificent collection. Every few minutes, she is opening up boxes or pulling items out of corners to reveal new treasures. I balance an ant, captured pristinely in a wart of amber, on a fingertip. I even get to hold a real dinosaur tooth.

Geena studied biology, and these objects are clearly a way for her to better understand the natural world. Indeed, as Darwin himself might tell you, looking under the hoods of animals unveils a wealth of knowledge. Geena shows me a small tusked skull that once belonged to a hyrax. “These are the closest relatives to elephants. And they just kind of look like a big fuzzy rat”, she explains. But, as she points out, “you don’t know until you get under”.

Most people I speak to are similarly enthusiastic about the educational benefits of vulture culture. But while it might be purely scientific for some, I’m not convinced that’s the case for most of the vultures I talk to. I usually get the sense there’s something more spurring them on. Whatever that may be, Geena struggles to put it into words. “I think it’s like a draw to ... the beauty of the natural world”, she says. She’s fascinated by the boundaries between life and death: boundaries that society enforces quite rigidly. As soon as an animal is dead, people rarely want anything to do with it. They assume the beauty is lost. “Suddenly people will reject it really hard”,



AS A CHILD, MEIKE HAKKAART OFTEN SKINNED RATS

says Geena. “They’ll see a dead fox on the road, and they don’t want to look at it. But if there was a live fox lying there, they’d really want to look.”

There is a curiosity to this resistance. Indeed, it’s not the only way we habitually avert our gaze from the reality of death. We call dead animals on our plates by another name, and often find the display of even an urn a little unsavoury. In some Western cultures, the prospect of a wake is horrifying, and younger generations in Ireland are distancing themselves more and more from the tradition. Geena, like many other vultures, takes a different approach. “In a way it’s something that we all share. The basis of every living thing is that it’s going to come to an end. I guess I just became sort of fascinated with the taboo.”

Franks Wiersema, who lives in Amsterdam, vividly remembers the first time he had roadkill on his table. It was a seagull. “It was just a beautiful animal, and I saw it as an animal, and just to put my scalpel in it and cut it

open ... I just could not do it.”

Later, after leaving the bird to sit awhile in some water, Frank tried again. This time, he managed to get the job done. “I guess I’m just too much interested in it then, not to take that step. And now it is perfectly normal for me.”

No matter what spin you put on it, “processing” an animal – the clinical term that vultures use to describe cleaning up a cadaver – is a grisly business. Vultures use a variety of products, from dish soap to ammonia to alcohol, to wash and preserve specimens. In many vulture households, freezer space is in short supply: there are many family disagreements over dead animals being stored next to peas and Haagen Dazs. The freezer is, for obvious reasons, an indispensable piece of vulture equipment. Frank tells me about a time when he accidentally left a fox brain out too long on the balcony in the summer heat. He’d been keeping the brain so that he could later rub it on the fur, as the brain has natural qualities that help to smooth out pelts. Frank describes the smell of the decaying organ as like “rotting food

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basically, with a hint of rotting egg”.

Apart from furs, Frank’s collection consists mostly of bones. “I don’t like taxidermy”, he says. “It seems fake to me. It’s putting this film over death aspects: you still pretend it’s alive though it’s not.” In his house, he keeps the skeletons of deer, cats, birds, and even humans – some of which date back to the 16th century, leftovers from archaeological and medical research. Always a fan of Stephen King novels and gothic subculture, Frank’s progression to full-fledged vulture was no great surprise to him. Now, friends regularly give him bones as gifts.

“It’s very intimate also. I mean, the creature is completely exposed. You see what its last meal was”, says Frank. “It gives a very intimate connection with this dead creature.”

The argument is often made that hunters, farmers and fishers – those who dole out death sentences to animals – regularly do so with the utmost respect for these creatures and for the circle of life with which they are, by nature of the trade, intimately connected. The idea, then, that vultures might respect nature on a deeper level is perhaps not outlandish. But what does it say about the vulture as a person? Doesn’t becoming desensitised to the prospect of death prevent individuals from being shocked by the horrors that often accompany it?

“I don’t think so”, says Frank. “I do still have a huge lot of respect for whatever is dead, and I’m aware of the fact that that was once alive. I mean, I love animals.” Frank certainly practices what he preaches – he’s a vegetarian himself. Getting up close and personal with cadavers hasn’t changed that. “I don’t think that makes me less sensitive to cruelty towards a living animal, because that’s a completely different ball-game”, he says. In fact, he thinks it might even make him value life more. There is some logic to it: every vulture I speak with emphasises the fragile beauty of working with dead things. After seeing Geena’s collection of skulls and skins, I can easily imagine how seeing inside these creatures can instill in somebody a sense of wonder, and a deep appreciation for the many peculiarities that make life tick.

But, while it’s all very well and good

to say that vultures respect the animal whose bodies they handle, at some point surely the collection of such specimens, and the compulsion to procure more and rarer species, becomes merely a hobby akin to collecting Pokémon cards. Isn’t there an argument that the animal’s life, then, isn’t really given the gravitas it deserves? Frank laughs when I ask him this. “I’ve actually never really encountered someone calling me out like that.”

He understands the point of view. But for him, the whole process is inherently about respect, on a number of levels. “I see it as my mission that nothing gets to waste. I want to clean bones, I want to tan hides whenever I can”, he says. “That’s for me a sign of respect towards the animals, that even after death nothing has to go to waste: it gets repurposed or a second lease of life.”

Of course, it would be idealistic to assume that all vultures are driven by noble causes alone. There is no doubt an element of homage to nature’s beauty in a lot of the work done by these collectors. But Meike, for one, is frank about her own, more selfish desires. She admits that her interest in death has not always been respectful per se. She has looked at gruesome photos: of murdered people, of corpses dead in the mountains.

“It’s horrible and it makes me feel sad”, she says. But witnessing such horrors piques something in Meike, some realisation. It’s scary and illuminating all at once, to see death laid so bare. “For me it’s a way to deal with it. I don’t understand it, and I want to understand it.”

As Meike points out, however, what is considered respectful very much depends on your perspective. It’s an important point: when it comes to death, other cultures often do things very differently. In sky burials, still practised in many Asian cultures, the dead are left to be eaten by carrion birds. In some cultures, people eat their loved ones themselves – a practice known as endocannibalism – while in others, bodies are set on fire in front of their family’s eyes. “That’s the reason my view changed about cremation”, says Meike. “It can be very beautiful and spiritual.” Taking a step backwards in time, Meike points to the Victorians, who of-





ten kept the hair of their loved ones, made death masks, and took post-mortem photos. Such death portraiture often does the rounds on social media, to inevitably horrified reactions. This horror is reflected in law, too: what Meike would like to do with her mom's body isn't just frowned upon, but legally restricted.

"I think for me personally, I want to see the whole road of someone's life, from when they were alive, and death", Meike explains. "I think it's a shame if you miss that and hide it, because it's still a very intimate way of seeing someone."

"When people say, 'oh, that's so disrespectful, how could you?', I always get a bit annoyed. But I know that's just the way people are used to."

"It's not like people are hypocrites on purpose", she says. "That's how our Western society is, but I still think it's interesting and that's also an important reason why I want to do it, [to] make people think more about it. Also, for me myself, of course, I'm a hypocrite as well."

In our own society, death has for the most part been exorcised from everyday life, at least on the surface. As Meike points out, we happily Instagram photos of steaks, but don't conceptualise it as being related to death, even if it's materially no different than the roadkill on vultures' tables. Death is literally buried beneath the ground, or incinerated out of sight. Yet it's not out of mind, not really – even if we have chosen not to confront it head on. With life taking place more and more online, in photographs or on social media, our impulse to immortalise and self-memorialise is more alive than ever.

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Is it possible, then, that seeing death as vultures do might help us to manage our fear of it? Many vultures believe so. Frank thinks that his familiarity with the process of death has already helped him to deal with loss: the passing of his father and stepfather, for example. "I already was well aware of the fact that death was a part of your life," he says. "I found that people who don't expose [themselves] to death and everything related, they have a much harder time coping with the loss of loved ones. Whereas if you're more exposed to death, or more aware of death, then it helps you knowing how to go through that whole grieving process."

Meike, too, found working with her dog's body profoundly therapeutic. Far

from a mindless act of barbarity, seeing her pet in this way was a meditative experience. It also opened a Pandora's box of important existential questions. "It made me think a lot about what is life. Now, so to speak, the soul is gone. I'm not sure if I believe in a soul, but, the life that once was is gone", she explains. "Then you see all these parts, and think about, 'what is this even? Is this still my dog? Does it matter what happens? Is it just my emotions attached to the body?'"

Meike's reflections on death have also proved, for her, a wellspring of creativity, breathing new life into her art. Her work is vivid and other-worldly, featuring stag spirits and flaming animal skeletons that herald death. She also

regularly arranges "animal funerals", where animals she has found are arranged in mandalas of blossoms, shells and leaves.

"I know it's a natural reaction of humans to be repulsed by death", says the description on her online portfolio. "But I know that beyond the sadness there is a certain beauty in death."

"I think I feel closer to the world when I do it", she tells me.

The Danse Macabre – the dance of death – was a popular concept in art during the Middle Ages. Although undergirded by religious notions of afterlife and the vanities of earthly existence, this art highlighted the universality of death. In these artworks, individuals from all walks of life march gaily to the grave: the one place where we are all united. Such art made manifest *memento mori* – a Christian theory that encouraged reflections upon mortality, literally meaning "remember that you will die". In today's world, such ideas feel faraway. Vulture culture, to the uninitiated, may seem dark, eerie and even morally dubious. But at some point, we may need to flip the mirror back on ourselves, and ask why we find such displays of death so unsettling in the first place.

We don't know what the future holds for the limits of human mortality, but for now, death remains something not simply to be overcome or hidden from sight. It's an uncomfortable reality that needs, at some point, to be accepted. Perhaps we can all take something from vultures' boldness in doing just that.