The Taxidermist and the Repairman

On a recent airline flight from North Carolina to Minneapolis, I was seated comfortably next to a rough-hewn fellow wearing a camouflage vest. Being a bit curious, I asked him what he did for a living. "I'm a taxidermist," he said in no uncertain terms. "I live north of the Twin Cities and I've stuffed just about everything you can catch or shoot. I'm self-taught—been doing it ever since I got out of the service after the Korean War."

He laughed when I asked him about his clientele. "Mostly bullshitters, but some with expensive tastes and the money to back it up." He went on to tell me about the basics of taxidermy, and the project that was waiting for him at his shop—stuffing a giraffe and several other large animals that a real estate developer had shot while on "safari" in Africa. I was interested in his work, but shocked at the businesslike manner of the killing he described (most of which had no claim to being either sporting or utilitarian), and at the outrageous ends his clients were going to display their manhood. An image of the trophy-filled Gun Room at the Biltmore Estate near Asheville, which I had visited just a week before, flashed through my brain.

After telling me tales about hunting trips to Hudson Bay and a Texas "game" farm, he asked me what I did. I told him I was a repairman. While he thought about me wearing a pair of blue coveralls and peering into the greasy guts of some contraption, I eased into my story. "Yeah, it's kinda like the work you do. You know, arranging things, putting things back together again. Only I try to put them back together so that they can live again. What I repair are damaged ecosystems. Places like prairies, woods, and wetlands, where the plants and animals are missing."

Well, that caught him by surprise and I could see that he was about to peg me as liberal, tree-hugging environmentalist, which is exactly what he did. "Sounds like do-gooder work," he said, looking me straight in the eye. "I've been plenty of places and there's always been enough fish to catch or things to shoot at. You're probably worried over some useless minnows or some old trees."

"Well, you might call me a do-gooder," I replied. "In fact, I hope I am because there's plenty of harm that been done to the Earth for all sorts of reasons. I know you think that the Earth and everything on it are here for humans to use. I don't necessarily disagree with you, but I think we also have a responsibility to care for the Earth and its human and non-human inhabitants. That's what my repair business is about. It's about taking care of the Earth, so that we can continue to use it, enjoy it, and still honor those other creatures that live here with us. You take care of your taxidermy tools, don't you?"

The way he looked at me, I knew I'd struck a nerve. My seat didn't feel so comfortable right now. "I know what I take care of! I take care of what's important to me! My family, my country, my shop! Don't go accusing me of not taking care of things."

Just then, somewhere above the Appalachian chain, the steward came by, interrupting us with offers of sodas and bags of mini-pretzels. It gave things a chance to cool down.

Several long minutes passed. The jet raced along, moving us rapidly northward. I hesitated for a moment, and then restarted the conversation. "Well, we do agree on something," I said. "We agree that everyone takes care of what is important to them. We all hug what we value, what we love." I looked right at him, trying not to focus on the pretzel crumbs in his gray beard. "I didn't mean to accuse you of not caring. I just wanted to tell you what I cared about and why my repair work is important to me. I mean, you strike me as a very creative fellow, but I must confess that your stories of people killing animals for displays and trophies really sadden me."

He gulped down some soda, looked out the window across the solid white cloud deck, and then back at me. "Listen," he said, "you go ahead and repair your eco-whatcha-ma-callits and I'll keep doing what I do. It's my life and it's too late for me to do anything else. If what you do makes a difference, well all right then. I just want to let you know that I enjoy Nature as much as the next guy. I might just enjoy it in a different way. I've got my trophies, just like you have yours."

I almost rose to the bait, but decided to let the conversation end there. He was wrong about trophies, though. I'm not into them anymore—those were things I collected as a kid. Yet, it's true that we conservationists have or yearn for our ecological trophies—viewing acre upon acre of California poppies and lupines, seeing a population of restored butterflies, protecting a thriving tropical coral reef, and so many more.

As we made our way homeward, with the cold waters of Lake Michigan visible below, I began to think about how, given the cruelties of this world, we need to remain compassionate and capable of forgiveness. I realized that under different circumstances the fellow next to me, with his creativity and interest in the outdoors, might have made a good ecological repairman. Instead, fate handed him the pitiful task of putting animal skins around lifeless forms. Lucky us—the ecological repairers of the Earth—the beings, forms, and processes we work with are so alive they will thrill us and confound us until our dying days.

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