

# Wings, Wings, Wings

— AN ESSAY BY —

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**I** sometimes get asked: *Where on earth do your stories come from?* And I usually respond with a lie: *I have no idea.* I do, of course. I know exactly where my leaf-boats and love letters from the dead and snake ladies and undead babies and lovelorn giant insects and sentient villanelles come from. I'm a strange person. And I think strange things. And then I write strange stories. Even when I was a little kid, I was the one who looked for faces in the trees and ghosts in the windows. I was the one who knew there were monsters at the bottoms of lakes and that lipstick was poisonous and that it was perfectly plausible to fall in love with an enormous beetle.

But there is another answer to that question, one that, every time someone asks me, my heart longs to say out loud. *Taxidermy*, my heart says. *Literally all of my creative roads begin with taxidermy.*

Let me explain this with a story:

Long ago, when my husband and I were young and our first child was coming fast and all we had to our names were some tools, a few boxes of books, random camping gear, and a scrappy street dog named Harper, we bought a cheap house in Minneapolis, across the alley from an impossibly old man.

The man was nice enough. Though odd. And lonely. The neighbors avoided him. He seemed to age rapidly, each time I saw him — a visible, alarming entropy, as though he was, minute by minute, collapsing and dissociating, and if you timed it right, you'd bear witness to the moment when he finally dissolved into dust and ash and air. He was unstable on his bent legs and four-pronged cane, with a wisp of white hair poking randomly out of his dusty cap and a pair of orthopedic shoes that squeaked when he walked. He had papery skin and rheumy eyes and a nose that had enlarged itself into a

soft, sizable beak. He smelled of dust and formaldehyde and old grease and turpentine and tobacco.

And he was a taxidermist.

Back then, I was the primary breadwinner for my family while my husband was in graduate school, and my job as a middle school teacher didn't leave me with much time to get to know the neighborhood. As time went on, I got to know the Spanish-speaking kids across the street and next door because they loved playing with the new baby, and I knew the Native family on the other side of me because their teenaged boys helped me with the yardwork and sometimes volunteered to walk my dog, but that was really it.

I knew about the old man's garage, though. The kids told me about it in whispers. "Don't go out after dark," they said in more than one language, just to make sure I understood. "The taxidermist will get you."

Despite living right across the alley, I never talked to the man much until one day in late June. I had just completed a year of teaching in an extremely rough, demanding school, and the stress of worrying about those kids while fussing about my own little girl nearly broke me in half. I stopped eating; I stopped sleeping. It took me two weeks into summer just to learn how to laugh again. My soul felt like it had been pounded into translucency. I was walking home from the farmers' market — my baby on my hip, a full bag of herbs and beans and peas and lettuce in my hand, and the weight of the earth on my back — when a voice came from the taxidermist's garage.

"When that dog of yours finally kicks the bucket, I'd happily mount him for you. I wouldn't charge you nuthin."

"What?" I said. But then he changed the subject.

"I suppose you want to see the latest."

I stared at him. The garage door was open, but the lights were off, and the work inside was in shadow. "The latest what?"

"Project, of course. The latest project." He blew out a cloud of smoke, and it hung around his body for a moment. "Come on then."

He pulled a new cigarette out of the breast pocket of his plaid shirt, and lit it on the dying embers of the old, like a phoenix. He shuffled into the garage. My daughter's head rested heavily on my shoulder, and I knew from the sudden heat from her body that she had fallen asleep. I shrugged, thought *what the hell*, and followed him in.

I would like to think that my strange fascination with taxidermy is universal, but I fear it is not. I have been transfixed by the impulse to take a thing that has died and preserve it in the context of a singular moment of life since I was a little kid. Indeed, I have distinct memories of school trips to the Bell Museum at the University of Minnesota, listening to my horrified classmates squeal and shudder at the glassy eyes of dead animals peering unblinkingly outward, the perpetually still bodies of predators poised in mid-pounce. My reaction was very different. I found them beautiful, heartbreaking, and thrilling. They haunted my dreams. They still do.

Inside the garage, half-done projects leaned against one another on overloaded shelves. Pelts dried on the walls, alongside meticulous drawings of animal skeletons, diagrams of musculature, analyses of malformations and odd growths — neck lumps, leg tumors, third eyes, cleft jaws.

“Never much cared for rogue taxidermy,” the man said. “Jackalopes and Fiji mermaids and other horseshit. I always figured nature had a way for making things strange all on her own.” There were dogs with fifth legs, cats with nine-toed feet, a heron with a third wing sprouting from its breast. Desiccated tumors and cysts and cutaneous horns crowded together in bins. He had a tenderness for nature’s mistakes — even the cruel ones. Beauty may delight the body, but deformity touches the soul. “I see what you mean,” I said.

“But now,” he said, gesturing to the back table, “I don’t know. I barely know myself these days. I can’t start a project without wanting to make it fly.”

Every animal on the back table — cats, fish, squirrels, and two young raccoons — had a pair of wings, either from a crow or a pigeon or a sparrow, angled forward and uncurling as though only just leaping into flight.

He laughed, sucked on his cigarette, and choked. “It’s a bunch of whimsy nonsense, of course. Still. Pretty, aren’t they?”

And they *were*. “Thank you,” I breathed, “for showing me this. It’s *exactly* how I’ve been feeling.”

How many times, I thought, have I longed for a pair of wings of my own? How many times have I wanted to give wings to my students? Or to my husband? Or to my child?

“Wings,” I whispered. “Wings, wings, wings.”

He took out another cigarette and lit it, even though the one in his mouth was only halfway done. “I just like to keep ’em going,” he added. I didn’t know if he was talking about cigarettes or the animals. Maybe it was both.

A good taxidermist has the knowledge of a naturalist and the compassion of a mortician. A good taxidermist delights in oddities and whimsy. A good taxidermist recognizes that in the teeming multitudes of abundant life are variations both inscrutable and strange. I am not a taxidermist, and I never will be. But my work as a storyteller is close enough. I know what it feels like to take a particular moment in a particular life, and press a pin through its thorax, adhering it to the page. I know how to hold my breath, pay attention, find ghosts in the windowpanes and monsters in the green. This is how we build a story: the curl of the lip, the bend in the leg, the wolfish gaze of a roving eye. Like taxidermists, we are beholden to observation and presence, biomechanics and mortification, and the minutiae of life and the side effects of life. We watch, we form, we hold in place, and, by force of will, we make it live.

And then, sometimes, because we simply *must*, we give it wings.