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# TROPHY OR TRIBUTE?

*by Tovar Cerulli*

Last summer, I hung a skull on the wall. Opposite the desk in my small home office, the elk is always in view as I work, antlers sweeping up and back, nearly touching the sheetrock.

Since killing my first white-tailed deer almost two decades ago, I have kept skulls and antlers. Most perch on shelves and bookcases. One small pair of three-point antlers sits nestled among hunting gear, ready for rattling.

Before last year, though, I had never created a conspicuous display. When I started hunting, I was uneasy with the very idea. Though I had seen plenty of beautifully mounted whitetails, I couldn't quite imagine having one in my home.

At one point, I considered putting my first two buck skulls on the wall but never got around to it. Having them atop a bookcase was enough, reminding me of hunts without commanding attention.

Yet, when I returned to Vermont from Colorado with a thoroughly cleaned elk head in the back of my car alongside coolers full of meat, I knew I would put it on the wall. Partly, it was a matter of practicality, the skull being too big to sit on a shelf. Mostly, it was a matter of meaning. The hunt had been extraordinary. I wanted to honor the magnificent animal and the remarkable experience by creating something worthy of both.

I could, of course, have commemorated the bull and the hunt simply by putting up a photo or creating a special place for the cartridge case. Either would have been far easier than hauling an elk head across the continent and then figuring out what to do with it.

But the skull, I knew, would bring the animal into the room. Its massive, three-dimensional reality would evoke not only the shape of the bull but also the topography of his life. His eye sockets, ear canals and nasal cavity would remind me of the senses through which he experienced the world. His dark antlers—burnished lighter where he had rubbed them against trees, heavily knurled at the base with bits of bark ground into



crevices, smooth at the tips except where untold force had snapped a few off, leaving jagged breaks—would evoke his grace and power. He would be a presence, taking up room in my physical space, as he did in my heart, mind and memory.

As I crafted a platform to hold the skull, I remembered the hunt. Working out the geometry, I thought of the excitement and disorientation of hunting an unfamiliar landscape. Planing, cutting and sanding boards milled from a black cherry I had felled a year earlier, I recalled the joy of sharing the pursuit with a close friend. Burning tiny, skeletal trees into the platform's edge evoked the beauty of snow-covered mountains studded with scorched lodgepole pines. Assembling and oiling the pieces, I recalled the final, improbable cross-canyon dash as daylight faded. Anchoring platform to wall and skull to platform elicited once again the soul-deep shock of kneeling beside the fallen bull.



When the project was complete, I stood back to contemplate the mass of bone: white skull standing out in contrast against cherry hues, dark antlers against light wall. What, exactly, had I created?

Many people—hunters and non-hunters alike—would call it a “trophy.” To my ear, the word suggests something won in a contest or battle. I’m reminded of the prizes coveted by sports teams, or the awards I sometimes won in martial arts tournaments as a teenager.

Curious, I looked up the word’s origins. Its meaning hasn’t changed much over the centuries. More than 500 years ago, “trophe”—derived from earlier Latin and Greek words referring to an enemy’s defeat—meant a spoil or prize of war, something taken and preserved as a memorial of victory, a symbol of conquest.

I hunt for a host of reasons. I hunt for the joy of immersing myself in the natural world, listening as sparrows sing and ravens *quork*, watching as the occasional coyote or bobcat pads past. I hunt for the intensity of encounters with the animals I seek, whether or not I end up taking one. I hunt to bring wild food to the table: to belong, to participate directly and intentionally in the constant, unavoidable cycle of life and death, eater and eaten, that animates the beautiful, terrible world we inhabit.

Like every predator, I necessarily pit my strengths against my prey’s strengths, my skills and wits against animals’ acute senses and deep knowledge of the land. I am constantly learning about both. For me, though, deer, elk and turkeys are not opponents to be vanquished. We are not enemies engaged in battle. We are—like bobcat and hare, heron and trout, frog and fly—participants in an ancient dance that has shaped life on Earth since long before humans walked the planet.

To me, the elk skull across the room does not announce a hunter’s triumph, much less an animal’s defeat. It acknowledges a gift received. It is a tribute to the land, to the natural community of which we are all part. It pays homage to the hunt and to the animal whose life I took, whose death became intertwined with my existence, one body nourishing another.

To me, the skull is not a trophy. It is a talisman of gratitude.



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