

## Space Junk Yard Junk

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Some kind of plant is growing out of the hood of my sister's white Mazda sedan. The car has sat beside my Dad's driveway, in between the fence and the firewood pile, for a few years, ever since Mary hit a deer — though she maintains that it hit her — mangled the front end and then bought a used SUV to replace it. The Mazda is driveable but ugly, held together with white duct tape. Dad parked it out of the way until he could get around to having the bumper and hood replaced, either to sell or to drive if his own car, which had just topped 200,000 miles, finally gave out. None of those things happened, and the Mazda sank into the clay, forgotten. Tires flattened, battery dead.

I imagine the determined weed working its way up through the engine block in the dark, weaving through a maze of valves, winding around belts and wires, until it peeped into the sunlight. When we discovered it, we marveled at nature's tenacity. Nobody made any effort to move the car.

A decrepit car in the driveway or out behind the house is a pretty common sight in my dad's neck of the woods. The arid Colorado climate is well-suited to long-term automobile shortage because with a dearth of water and oxygen in the air, iron and steel don't rust. But rural yards across the country are decorated with beaters and buckets, lemons and shitboxes, clunkers and heaps. Scrap metal dealers paper local bulletin boards with handwritten fliers: "WE BUY JUNK CARS." People without trash service sometimes keep an old "trash truck" used exclusively for weekly trips to the dump. The trope has gotten the drawling Jeff Foxworthy treatment: "If you mow your lawn and find a car, you might be a redneck!"

Of course, not every yard car is an abandoned backup. In the U.S., at least, it's common for someone, usually male, to have a vehicle into which he pours his spare time and mechanical skill. Whether the car runs, whether it's a classic Mustang or a vintage Ford pickup or a tuned-up Honda Civic, is irrelevant. What matters is the keeping of it, the fussing over it, the doting on it. There aren't many things that the tradition of American masculinity allows men to be truly, embarrassingly lovesick over. Cars, like lawns and sports teams, are one of them. For those who don't have a garage, the project car gets a prime spot in the driveway; see the popped hood, see the man with grease on his hands, see all that could be yours with a little hard work.

In that context, it makes sense that in December 2017, Elon Musk, the 21st century's premier shitposter, announced he would be launching his car into space. Maybe when a person reaches the status of billionaire, he can only justify his excess of capital by removing himself from the scale of humanity. The universe becomes his backyard and the only reasonable stage for his posturing.

The car in question was a 2010 Tesla Roadster, slick and shiny and red like a pomegranate seed or a woman's manicured fingernail. SpaceX engineers mounted it like a hood ornament, convertible top down, to the top of the company's Falcon Heavy rocket. In the driver's seat sat a mannequin dressed in a space suit; in the glovebox there was a copy of the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*; on the circuit board there was inscribed a message to the aliens who read English: "Made on Earth by humans."

In February 2018, the rocket and car launched and established a solar orbit just outside that of Mars. A four-hour livestream video of the car and spaceman dummy looked, like most videos of space, as though it had been filmed in front of a green screen, the spaceman's eerie stillness highlighted as the car floated past the sterile, cloud-marbled earth. Today, the top

YouTube comment is distinctly yearning: “It looks so peaceful. No politics, no media, no drama, just peace and quiet.”

Business websites fawned over Musk’s marketing genius. Who needs a billboard or a magazine spread or a Superbowl commercial slot when the universe is at one’s disposal? When the Roadster in the sky can signal wealth and humor and capitalist excess not just to the blinking masses down below but to the entire cosmos? The world’s billionaires have entered a full-blown space race while down below, systems sputter.

Not that Musk’s car, currently traveling at 74,000 miles per hour some 183 million miles from here, has an easy road ahead. If meteorites don’t destroy it, some scientists predicted that the sun’s unfiltered radiation would eat away everything but the car’s metal frame and glass windshield within a year. The spaceman will probably disintegrate, but the skeleton of the vehicle could last for thousands of years out there. We won’t know its fate for a long time, because the Roadster’s orbit won’t come close to ours until 2047. But its lack of visibility almost doesn’t matter. For most of us, outer space exists primarily in our imaginations, and much to my personal dismay, we cannot forget the car out there among the twinkly lights any more than we can forget the man who put it there.

Back on earth, I’ve always associated my father’s house and property with the sheer volume of stuff contained there. Furniture and mementos in the basement. Mismatched linens and the vestiges of my sister’s and my teenage wardrobes in every closet. Tools of every variety in the shop. Leftover hay and bags of sheep’s wool from our farming days in the barn. Dad’s not a car guy but a boat guy, so he owns a tin-can fishing boat (maximum speed: six miles per hour), a blue plastic kayak from Walmart and a small sailboat that we dream of taking to the lake every summer but never quite do.

Such collections cannot be contained by architecture. The stuff spills out into the yard: Two desks with broken shelves, a fallen clothesline, and, inexplicably, an authentic Chicago fire hydrant, heavy as sin and buried among the tall grass. Some of the detritus is obviously useful, representing future plans and dreams. Some of it we might burn in a big pile come winter, always a joyous occasion. Some of it “needs to go,” as my dad would say, but never quite left. All of it is chock-full of spiders. Once I took a photo of a broken iMac computer in a trash pile, struck by the way that sleek white-and-silver frame, such a monumental purchase when new, was tossed in alongside an orange pool noodle, the leg from a dining room table and a leaky watering can. Junk is junk.

Getting rid of things is hard and, in many cases, expensive, involving the borrowing of a truck and the 30-minute drive to the dump. In some cases, as with cars, scrap metal dealers will come and retrieve the dead vehicle, but there’s still a certain level of effort involved: calls to make, pickups to be arranged, emotional ties to be severed. Dad works full time and spending his days off dealing with the clutter is not usually a priority. It bugs him, but not in an existential way. He would love a universe where the yard is free of flotsam, where the Venn diagram of stuff he owns and stuff he needs forms a perfect circle. But this is not the universe we live in.

Dad’s former neighbors, wealthy Texas transplants, fretted (audibly) that he would bring down their property values, but there wasn’t much they could do about it. Not so for our other old neighbors a few years back, renters who accumulated an incredible amount of junk in just a few short months at a house nearby, the yard becoming a maze of scrap metal. Then one day they abruptly started cleaning up, hauling stuff away. Word got out that they’d been ticketed for operating an illegal junkyard. The Texans had called the county.

There's no one to call to report an excess of space junk. The solar system lacks zoning regulations. Since the 1950s, people have been blasting objects through the confines of our atmosphere into the great vastness beyond, and not all of them come back. Many spacecrafts are intended to stay out there indefinitely, housing astronauts, taking measurements and photos, wandering the pitted surface of the red planet next door. But for every functioning spacecraft, there are thousands of dead satellites and bits of debris deliberately shed or torn off those craft in the rollicking ride through Earth's atmosphere. The U.S. Department of Defense is currently tracking more than 23,000 pieces of space debris larger than a softball in Earth's orbit. Objects in low orbit move at around 17,500 mph; at those speeds, even flecks of paint can cause damage to other spacecraft and threaten astronauts.

Defunct satellites and space stations also continue to orbit and slowly degrade. Countries including the U.S., China and Russia have used anti-satellite weaponry to blow up their own satellites, creating more debris, and then publicly condemned one another for doing so.

My aversion to space junk as a concept and my derision for Elon Musk's contribution to it boils down to the fact that I feel bad that the sky, like the earth, is becoming downright crowded with human inventions. The proliferation of satellites in our skies — SpaceX alone plans to launch thousands for satellite-based internet services — will be visible at night, forever altering our view of the stars.

But said internet services will bring connection to populations around the globe that other broadband companies have disregarded. And when it comes to the junk: Who am I to talk? Every piece of plastic I've ever bought or used — every toothbrush, every tampon applicator, every scrap of bubble wrap — is still here. Just because it's in a dump somewhere doesn't mean it went away. And, as my dad's yard demonstrates, there's plenty of it that we don't even bother to get

out of sight. Space junk operates under the same principle as yard junk: it's there because getting rid of it is too expensive or too hard. Wherever human beings go, we can't help but litter.

I sometimes joke that minimalism is for rich people, just like launching cars into space. Packaged as both an aesthetic and a lifestyle, minimalism promises purity, clarity and peace through lack of clutter. Tiny houses filled with beautifully designed multipurpose items, timeless capsule wardrobes, airy downtown lofts with no signs of mess or life: all these highly postable images seem the domain of those privileged enough to throw things away knowing that they can always just buy them again. (Not to mention that my attempts at minimalism always serve to make my life more boring. Every few years I purge my closet of random items I rarely use and then find I have nothing to wear on Halloween.)

The broker people get, the more they seem to hold onto things. It's impossible to know when that box of newspapers or mismatched tupperware might come in handy. The older I get, the more I appreciate working class resourcefulness, the kind that always has twine or scrap wood or spare tires on hand, the kind where you never have to worry about whether you have the right size Phillips-head screwdriver — only whether you can find it.

Still, I have my prejudices, and a yard car isn't a great look. I worried that the parked Mazda indicated that my dad had crossed a threshold into a new level of redneckery that would be difficult to return from. Dad didn't share my concerns, having long ago given up on caring what people think of him.

Then, last June, my grandparents offered me their old Subaru, which was about five years and 50,000 miles newer than my current car. I gratefully took them up on it, but fretted about what to do with my own loyal and beloved hunk of metal. My old car wasn't worth more than a grand and would be hard to sell because of a loud rattle from the back end that I'd chosen to

ignore for months. But we weren't sure the Subaru was entirely mechanically sound either, so the idea of keeping the old car as a backup was comforting. Dad offered the obvious solution.

"Leave your old car here," he said. "I've got the room."

So I did. I parked it next to my sister's Mazda, and went away for grad school. I promised myself it wouldn't be forever, that no plant life would have time to take over. Next summer, when I'm home, I'll figure out what to do with it. That's what I keep telling myself.