

## Owl: An Imaginary

And there she is, across the street, in creams and grays, a screech owl on a bare branch of the oak. Wind-ruffled feathers, brown beak, tufted ears. Curve of chest like a warm egg in my hand. I'm not sure why, but I'm tearing up – she's so unto herself, and tenderly framed.

It's dusk. The hour of mossy light. I'm standing outside and need to pee but don't want to lose a minute with her. I say aloud *Owl*, the word itself sustenance I've been missing; such hunger is daily, and the right word can fill it.

Then the scent of pine-spice-mud rises, something else deepens, wind or danger, and the owl turns. Her beak's a single backlit branch. Her tucked wings -- a burl. Those feathers in breeze – a bunch of brown leaves unclustering.

What I'm watching is an owl turn into a tree.

And what happened was not misunderstanding. Not a mistake. Mistakes are easily tamed by convention, arranged in a place – not a den or nest, but a frame: an amusing story, my need for glasses, a perfectly arranged owl-sized shape. Or, downgraded, the misseen is just my imagination, that wild thing running away.

Imagination: kin to prayer and once a way to touch the certainty of every single thing's capacity for being. All those lives in frost, wind, sun, rain, bending or stiffening, sloughed, gone to seed. Sedimenting up. Cleaving or cleaved. Choose your method: hold your looking steady and long, or be struck by the just-come-upon. Then, whatever blood or mind jumped from another into you, if not dismissed, makes itself over. Seeds in. Propogates.

What happened was no mistake of sight. Need found a shape, at large and roaming, prefigured owl, then figured one. Call it shock or surprise that bore me along, or don't name a thing, the moment was wordless, *its essence was capacity*.

My neighborhood marks the edge of a flight path, a not-exactly-right spot for settling. One block to the west of our house, there's a patch of woods, a long greened-over dumping ground with a mess of invasives and little creek daylighting through. A block to the east -- gas stations, MacDonald's, Dollar Store, Family Dollar, barbers, laundry, storefront churches, a new ShotSpotter to map gunfire.

What happened just now? A space got filled -- which means in the beginning was emptiness. And beckoning. Into the open, an owl came. The correction of sight was a let down at first. Then everything quickly changed. The surprise was not body revising to burl, beak to branch, feathers to leaves, but the presence of desire made clear. Desire took form. And loved an owl into being.

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Flickers have their given method: find the hollow place, then drill in. Keep watching and their gestures complexify: tail feathers fan out for a brace; a deft little twist enlarges each spot. Their perfect holes line up like words, then sentences circumnavigating the trunk. In time, whole sections of trees are paragraphed, paged, enchaptered. Looking until you see *method*, is like learning how to work with anything -- steady the pressure so you don't jump the groove; score in series of three then rest; or at a certain point in the hammering, realize the need to stop banging dead on and come from the side, smudging the surface. Stay, and the materials begin to speak.

Then watch more broadly, open the frame so the entire system clarifies: sap runs from flicker holes, clouds and freezes overnight, and when it warms, squirrels come and sip. The smaller sapsuckers hover, waiting their turn. Everyone's needs are organized to be met. If you stay, the story tells itself on into spring: insects lay eggs and draw the birds back. The work, the whole of it, cycle and web, beyond any singular gesture, comes clear. Even without an audience.

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An owl is nothing like a dog. She won't lay her head in my lap and sleep. No smiling or gazing into each other's eyes. Nothing in the being of *owl* needs me. To be incidental, to occupy a brief moment in another's day -- I can't say an owl hopes to see me, only that I know I'm seen. She sees. That I am.

And if she's a made up being?

Then I come to know my owl-shaped need.

She isn't "there." I'm not her "friend."

I imagine I'm being affirmed.

I'm a site, like a trough, where thirst is eased.

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I live a modern form of exile – so many of us do, far from origins, stripped of stories, no star chart to guide the rowing, no petroglyphs to mark the path, no calling songs, few offerings and occasions for ceremony. But daily I taste what's left in my blood, spoken in breath, scored in my body bending to seed the collards in, or set down the dog's water, though she's been gone

now for almost a year. I can make washing the green mug into a task given and minded, my hand over my mother's hand as she once shaped the clay on the wheel.

In tattered form, what's left is alertness.

Flashes that give.

*The unseen bulking in from the edges of all things, changing the frame* -- not my words but read long ago and so loved they circulate freely, rise now, and resettle in me.

\*quotes in italics are from Thomas Trahern ("My Spirit") and Charles Wright (Zone Journals)