



Owl on Beauty

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We don't love anything unless it's beautiful, do we? . . . What is it that draws us and endears us to the things we love? Unless there were some seamliness and attractiveness in them, there would be no way they could pull us toward themselves.

—Augustine, *Confessions*¹

For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.

—Isaiah 53:2 ESV

Permitted to inhabit neither the realm of the ideal nor the realm of the real, to be neither aspiration nor companion, beauty comes to us like a fugitive bird, unable to fly, unable to land.

—*On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry²

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Sarah Ruden (New York: Modern Library, 2017), 94.

² Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 86.

An encounter with a wounded owl out in a field occasions reflections on place, beauty, the meaning of words, and the glory of God.

Owls thrive in these fragmented landscapes humans create.

—*Peterson Reference Guide to Owls of North America and the Caribbean*³

1.

One gray morning this year, the day before my forty-first birthday, I stayed three hours in the rainy woods with an injured young great horned owl.

On the way back to visit the goats in their woodland pasture, nine-year-old Beckett and his friend Gregory had found a big owl in the scrubby grass of the clearing where the paths cross. The owl was failing to fly, flapping into a sort of hop and wing whip, as if to ascend. Then, mission aborted. Something was wrong; the owl was on the ground.

I'd been folding laundry, grounded by a not-insignificant funk. Just the night before, a writing collaborator had decided to leave the project we were working on. A total bummer, since we'd both invested more than a year in working together. Was our work not compelling enough to merit the time? Should I even continue with it? What with the birthday coming and all, it seemed appropriate, if somewhat dramatic, to work up the disappointment into a crisis of sorts, modest but ugly.

"You're going to want to come out here," my husband, Josh, said from my lit phone, his voice rustling against the brush in the goat pasture.

A giant, messed-up bird, come down to the understory of our wrecked, wet woods. I dropped the dish towels and went to see.

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2.

For the philosopher Plotinus, beauty exists in the world of forms, away from the corruption of matter. His is an objective view of beauty: things are beautiful to the extent that they conform to that ideal and pattern.

I don't agree with Plotinus very much on beauty, but he describes ugliness pretty well: "Suppose a soul to be ugly, ill-disciplined and unjust, full of cravings and all kinds of disturbance, in the midst of fears because of cowardice, and of jealousies because of petty-mindedness, thinking of everything in so far as it thinks

³ Scott Weidensaul, *Peterson Reference Guide to Owls of North America and the Caribbean* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015), 119.

of them at all, as mortal and lowly, twisted in every respect, in love with pleasures that are impure.”⁴ I could resonate.

And while the beauty and ugliness of owl souls are beyond my purview, I’m not so sure that Plotinus wouldn’t have declared that owl—at least in its state that day—ugly, too. Of course not so psychologically as me. But he does say that whatever is “not mastered by shape and reason principle, since its matter is not capable of supporting complete shaping by the form is also ugly.”⁵ The owl was injured, not what it was supposed to be, and in danger, one supposes, of never becoming what it ought to be. That, for Plotinus, is ugly.

The ugliness of both situations was regrettable. But the plain fact is, we would have never stood together on the same ground, that owl and I, if we weren’t both of us messed up. He was supposed to be roosting; I was supposed to be writing.

I don’t know what to make of it.

3.

We all know what owls mean—by sounds, by images. They are a classic harbinger of Halloween danger, as those gargantuan neon eyes on the porch at a house downtown remind us. They are brainy knowledge, wisdom. Surely we’ve seen owls as the theme for a baby’s nursery, expressing in hats and totes-adorbs onesies the hopes for future intellectual achievement. Or does anyone remember the scheming, sweet-toothed cartoon trickster that hawked—wait, *owled?*—Tootsie Pops (“Mr. Owl, how many licks does it take to get to the tootsie roll center of a tootsie pop?”) back in the 1980s? And great horned owls, *Petersen’s Guide to Owls of North America and the Caribbean* emphasizes, are “everyone’s mental archetype of owl.”⁶

On each women’s bathroom stall of the local high school where we attend a fold-up church, images of owls manifested in a riddle of that commodious literary journal the *Tinkle Times* (no lie) left all summer at eye height: “What asks, but never answers?” The owl there means, I presume, the angst of a youth population plagued by unending standardized tests. If you, dear student, answer correctly (and by all of your future’s hopes, you really *should* at least *answer* the quiz questions—if possible, correctly), then you can see Ms. So-and-So for two tickets to the game.

I never see Ms. So-and-So, and I never see actual owls either, great horned or otherwise. Owls had been merely a heap of accepted images to us; recognizable, if tired, symbols. Harry Potter’s Hedwig merges them all—reliable messenger and usually a bad sign.

⁴ Plotinus, *Ennead 1.6: On Beauty*, trans. Andrew Smith (Las Vegas: Parmenides, 2016), 53–54.

⁵ Plotinus, *Ennead 1.6*, 48.

⁶ Weidensaul, *Peterson Reference Guide to Owls*, 116.

4.

I walked down the half-grass path through the walnut and oak forest thick with invasive undergrowth. The ground unsteadies at the crossing, moguls and grasses and scrub where the former owners had bulldozed a deep-woods dirt-bike course. Years have overgrown the discarded-tire jumps, and everything obstructs: tricky wickets of raspberry and blackberry, knife bushes of multiflora rose that straight-up gash jeans and skin. It's far from the fruited glade planned by the nineteenth-century owner of the property, C. C. Miller, American beekeeper. Farther still from the oak savanna that preceded him and other white immigrants to Marengo.

But the owl had come there. "Owls thrive in these fragmented landscapes humans create," says the *Peterson Reference Guide to Owls of North America and the Caribbean*.⁷

The clearing seemed crowded. Children in wet sneakers pranced about; Josh, geared up in full flannel and mosquito net, brandished his metal-blade bush-whacking trimmer; gray cat birds with handsome black caps and fringes swooped down toward the owl, bravely and stupidly. Their distress calls made a soundtrack for the general melee.

Of the owl, my first impression was of a cat—that size—but a mechanical cat, head pivoting round and back at stops on the compass, face toward all of the threats—us. He did not seem, from my unpracticed eye, to be thriving. His head pivoted again and again, as if looking would tell him what next action might suffice to save him.

He didn't make a sound.

5.

Maybe we're just making the owl mean what we've heard it means. Or maybe we're making it mean what we're feeling at the moment. There's this revenge play by Joanna Baillie, *De Monfort* (1800), where just that happens with an owl. In the tensest scene, De Monfort, the eponymous murderer on the hunt for Rezenvelt, hears an owl's cry as a foreshadowing of coming violence: "Foul bird of the night! What spirit guides thee here? / Art thou instinctive drawn to scenes of horror? / I've heard of this."⁸ But Rezenvelt, De Monfort's blithely unconcerned target, hears in the owl's cry a totally different meaning: his own childhood union with nature. He remembers hooting to the owls "till to my call / He answer would return, and thro' the gloom / We friendly converse held."⁹ The thing is, though, De Monfort himself makes the scene of horror—by killing Rezenvelt. He insists on, *makes*, the

⁷ Weidensaul, *Peterson Reference Guide to Owls*, 119.

⁸ Joanna Baillie, *De Monfort*, in *A Series of Plays*, vol. 1 (London: Cadell & Davies, 1802), 376.

⁹ Baillie, "De Monfort," 377.

owl's meaning true. Rezenvelt is just as insistent, though. They both die in their certainty of what it means.

That's its own sort of terrifying, I suppose. But it's not the owl, is it?

6.

Josh told me he heard an owl, once, while feeding pigs in the woods. It hooted in the predawn dark before market. Josh thought of his dream of raising chickens. The ducks had been all right, mostly—only a few had been taken by foxes, hawks. But chickens seemed more vulnerable—well, like sitting ducks. A bad sign.

*Maybe we're just making the owl mean what we've heard
it means. Or maybe we're making it mean what we're
feeling at the moment.*

7.

Wordsworth's lyric "There Was a Boy," which remembers the poet's experiences with owls in the wilds over Lake Windermere, orbits *De Monfort*—as if he were an audience member of that play trying to figure out the owl for reals. At first, the boy's like Rezenvelt, sharing jovial conversation with owls. He "blew mimic hootings to the silent owls / That they might answer him."¹⁰ The owls would, "responsive to his call," hoot back in "concourse wild / Of jocund din!"¹¹ So blithe, so halcyon—nature and human in relation.

But then, the bird's meaning changes. The owls refuse to answer the boy—perhaps the jig is up; he is, after all, not an owl. Perhaps owls are better suited to silence than speech. And in the poem, the owls begin to point through their silent selves not to the boy, or to human concourse with them, but to the whole of the vale, nature as it reveals transcendent truth. And "in that silence, while he hung / Listening,"

the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain heaven received
Into the bosom of the steady lake.¹²

¹⁰ William Wordsworth, "There Was a Boy," in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. William Knight, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Paterson, 1882), 57.

¹¹ Wordsworth, "There Was a Boy," 57.

¹² Wordsworth, "There Was a Boy," 58.

Silenced by the silent owls, the boy can see the world outside his own purposes or speech.

Then the owls change again. Whatever this nature is, it's not just picturesque, or even the gentle sublime Wordsworth imagined for children: "This boy was taken from his mates, and died / In childhood, ere he was full twelve years old."¹³ The birds comes back around to forewarning death.

But "There Was a Boy" doesn't end with the death of the boy. The owls come eventually to take their place, silently, as a part of the meaning of something like beauty. Immediately after the lines about his death, Wordsworth continues, "Pre-eminent in beauty is the vale / Where he was born and bred."¹⁴

Hard to think how beauty could work like that, so near this boy's death—that it's in fact seen by Wordsworth only because of the silence pervading the churchyard and his own silence. "A long half-hour together I have stood," he writes, "Mute—looking at the grave in which he lies!"

Even that isn't the final disposition of Wordsworth's owls. "There Was a Boy" was written in 1799 and published in the second edition of *The Lyrical Ballads*. But it was later placed into the bosom of *The Prelude* in 1805—a poem about the growth of the poet's mind, which work itself was prefatory to his topmost great, unfinished poem, *The Recluse*.¹⁵

Setting those owls, that alive and dead boy, in book 5 of *The Prelude* makes them a way to think about how experiences of nature's beauty are preparation for the poet's vocation, a correction to the mind and meanings attendant on bookish fantasy—a teaching about the wonder, the mystery, of beauty. And the manuscript history of those key lines shows how much wondering, how little certainty, goes into beauty. In 1799, they went, "Preeminent in beauty is the vale / Where he was born and bred."¹⁶ In 1805, he tried, "Fair are the woods and beauteous is the spot, / the vale where he was born."¹⁷ In 1850, when the final manuscript of *The Prelude* was published (posthumously, on purpose—for his beneficiaries), it came out that that he had tried *again*: "Fair is the spot, most beautiful the vale / Where he was born."¹⁸

Hard to think how beauty could be part of your own losses, your own failures at speaking, your own vocational sloughs and stops. What to do? At end of *The*

¹³ Wordsworth, "There Was a Boy," 58.

¹⁴ Wordsworth, "There Was a Boy," 58.

¹⁵ The planned work, *The Recluse*, would demonstrate how the mind, "when wedded to this goodly universe / In love and holy passion" can renew the common world. Its mission was to sing, "Of Truth, of Grandeur, Beauty, Love, and Hope, / And melancholy Fear subdued by Faith; / Of blessed consolations in distress; / Of moral strength, and intellectual Power; / Of joy in widest commonalty spread; / Of the individual Mind that keeps her own / Inviolat retirement, subject there / To Conscience only, and the law supreme / Of that Intelligence which governs all—' / If successful, the work would 'cheer / Mankind in times to come.'"

¹⁶ Wordsworth, "There Was a Man," 58.

¹⁷ William Wordsworth, "Book Fifth," in *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathon Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 174.

¹⁸ Wordsworth, "Book Fifth," 175.

Prelude, the poet rises “as if on wings,” looking over all the world he’s been “centring all in love.” His conclusion? “In the end / All gratulant *if rightly understood*.”¹⁹
Die trying.

8.

“Death is the mother of beauty,” wrote Wallace Stevens, in his repudiation-of-Christianity poem, “Sunday Morning,” “hence from her, / Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams / And our desires.”²⁰

*Hard to think how beauty could be part of your own
losses, your own failures at speaking, your own vocational
sloughs and stops. What to do?*

Death giving birth to beauty. That idea seemed so horrible to me. I’ve worried over this poem with students for years. It is, I say, among the most beautiful poems I’ve ever read—second maybe to “That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection” by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Stevens’s descriptions of “moods in falling snow” and “Gusty / passions on wet roads on autumn nights—” seemed indeed “measures destined for” *my* “soul,”²¹ too, not just the soul of the woman in the poem.

It was the war, perhaps, Stevens having to deal with “the heavenly fellowship of men that perish,”²² making the argument that death’s coming, the finality of it. Maybe that death makes desire endure, makes all of the beautiful meanings. “The consummation of swallow’s wings”²³ is desire’s flight, not its finish. The elongated arc of the wing is itself concentrated longing.

Even Wallace Stevens had to take another go, though—and in the same poem: “Death is the mother of beauty, mystical / Within whose burning bosom we devise / Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.”²⁴ It’s better with additional referents.

Stevens was trying, in poems, to show the mind finding what would suffice—if not Christ. In “Of Modern Poetry,” he says,

It must
Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may
Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman
Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.²⁵

¹⁹ William Wordsworth, “Book Fourteenth,” in Wordsworth, Abrams, and Gill, *The Prelude*, 1799, 1805, 1850, 479.

²⁰ Wallace Stevens, “Sunday Morning,” in *Selected Poems*, ed. John N. Serio (New York: Knopf, 2011), 44.

²¹ Stevens, “Sunday Morning,” 44.

²² Stevens, “Sunday Morning,” 45.

²³ Stevens, “Sunday Morning,” 44.

²⁴ Stevens, “Sunday Morning,” 44.

²⁵ Wallace Stevens, “Of Modern Poetry,” in Serio, *Selected Poems*, 136.

(There's this story in Juliet Barker's biography of Wordsworth. As an old man skating, "one hand tucked into his shirt front, the other into his waist band," he tripped on a stone. Barker writes, "Despite the assault on his dignity, he had the good grace to accept the accident cheerfully . . . sitting up and remarking to a watching child, 'Eh boy, that was a bad fall, wasn't it?'"²⁶ Beautiful old man Wordsworth and that boy; beautiful that fall, and even the landing crash. Barker says he "starred the ice" with his fall.)

That same Wallace Stevens poem, the last lines are: "At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make / Ambiguous undulations as they sink / Downward to darkness, on extended wings."²⁷

There's a great debate that pops up every once in a while in Wallace Stevens studies: was his reported death-bed conversion to Christianity real? Who gets to say?

9.

Who can even see these days? Here's what I mourn in my owl story: my idol phone. Elaine Scarry writes that,

out of the requirement beauty places on us to replicate, the simplest manifestation . . . is the everyday fact of staring. The first flash of the bird incites the desire to duplicate not by translating the glimpsed image into a drawing or a poem or a photograph but simply by continuing to see her five seconds, twenty-five seconds, forty-five seconds later—as long as the bird is there to be beheld.²⁸

For me, the photograph of the owl came first, the staring second. It's been a few years since Scarry wrote *On Beauty and Being Just*; maybe we all sense what's happening to us in that line.

I posted the owl on social media immediately, justifying myself with the thought that maybe someone would send advice: "Injured owl at Root and Sky Farm! Don't know how to help!" I scoured the internet to find what kind of owl he was (adolescents don't look the same as adults), and what to do when an owl crosses your path—besides, say, throwing salt over your left shoulder to ward off danger.

I texted my biologist-forester friend, but she was in Wyoming sampling rivers with students. I texted the provost of our college—she was, coincidentally, also in Wyoming with the students. They sent cheerful pictures of the young people wading through sunny patches of river water.

Eventually, I got a message to a woman at the rescue center. The animal control officer was busy and couldn't come, but she could come herself—if I could wait a few hours. And so I settled in—grabbing a cup of coffee, some sunflower

²⁶ Juliet Barker, *Wordsworth: A Life* (London: Viking, 2000), 11.

²⁷ Stevens, "Sunday Morning," 45.

²⁸ Scarry, *On Beauty*, 5–6.

seeds, an apple, and the umbrella, for it was beginning a steady rain—for a wait. My phone's battery was draining. I guess it was going to take itself out of the story anyway. All idols are false, by definition.

I kept telling myself, *look at the owl. You never get an opportunity like this.* “Little we see the nature that is ours,”²⁹ Wordsworth chided me, in my mind. Here was—no, maybe not the sea, baring her bosom to the moon—but an owl, secret as the night woods itself (into which I have not yet gone, being a teensy bit afraid) bearing his breast to me—though of course, unwillingly. And I was looking with my phone instead of my eyes. My lens couldn't get the droplets of water on him—how they silvered his feathers to a shine spark.

It couldn't get how, when I looked up into the sky at a floating hawk, the owl looked up at the hawk too—both of us at the day-shift raptor-brother enemy. Its pupils narrowed at the white of the sky, and when we both looked down again—at each other again—its eyes were almost completely pencil yellow. Or was it gym-floor yellow? Or legal-pad yellow?

“Staring,” and now we're back to Elaine Scarry again, “is a version of the wish to create.”³⁰

10.

On February 24, 1915, the English poet Edward Thomas (1878–1917) wrote a poem called “The Owl.” Thomas had been working as a literary journalist, grinding out grist-meal reviews for measly cash. He often worked, he wrote once, from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 a.m., breaking only for chores and homeschooling duties. His reviews made careers for others, including Robert Frost.

The last three years of Thomas's life, pressed down by war, depression, and vocational troubles, poetry finally spilled over from him. In 1917, the year of his death at the age of thirty-nine by a shell blast through the chest at the Battle of Arras, his book came out.

My copy of Thomas's poems came to me from the poet Brett Foster, for years my next-door office neighbor. Brett's best poems, a bit like Thomas's, poured out in a blaze of sick beauty at the end of his life. Like Thomas, Brett was shot through the gut, but with cancer.

Brett had bought the Thomas book used, too—it had been owned by a respectable Keats scholar before him. When Brett died, his wife, Anise, opened his office and let us take volumes that were important to us. I took back Roberts's *Rules of Order*, which I'd bought for Brett on his fortieth birthday as a joke commemorating those early years we wondered whether our own books would be lost in a sea of institutional arrangements. I also took the Thomas, a slim, jacketed hardcover, without knowing why. I didn't open it for two years after he died. Brett had hatch

²⁹ William Wordsworth, “Sonnet XVI,” in *The Miscellaneous Poems of William Wordsworth*, vol. 3 (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, & Brown, 1820), 180.

³⁰ Scarry, *On Beauty*, 72.

marked by several poems that meant something to him. “The Owl,” though, had *two* marks.

When the bird became flesh among us, as it were, I took up and read. “The Owl” tells a simple story of a journeying poet coming in from cold, weary hunger to an inn, with warmth, rest, and dinner. It’s all a lovely satisfaction, except that an owl’s cry reminds him of the true gorgeousness of the comfort *he* has received, and the terrible sadness that others don’t get it.

When the bird became flesh among us, as it were, I took up and read. “The Owl” tells a simple story of a journeying poet coming in from cold, weary hunger to an inn, with warmth, rest, and dinner.

Downhill I came, hungry, and yet not starved;
Cold, yet had heat within me that was proof
Against the North wind; tired, yet so that rest
Had seemed the sweetest thing under a roof.

Then at the inn I had food, fire, and rest,
Knowing how hungry, cold, and tired was I.
All of the night was quite barred out except
An owl’s cry, a most melancholy cry

Shaken out long and clear upon the hill,
No merry note, nor cause of merriment,
But one telling me plain what I escaped
And others could not, that night, as in I went.

And salted was my food, and my repose,
Salted and sobered, too, by the bird’s voice
Speaking for all who lay under the stars,
Soldiers and poor, unable to rejoice.³¹

This poem is not a moral lesson in how to get outside yourself, not exactly. Rather, it’s an *avian ars poetica*—a way to consider the relationship between a messed up self, a warring world, and especially, *especially* consider whatever might be said or made of any of it. His friend Robert Frost would say it like this, that the bird asks this question in all but words: “what to make of a diminished thing.”³²

You can tell something’s wrong with the speaker by the inverted syntax that dogs the lines. To make the words fit—and remember with Plotinus that the

³¹ Edward Thomas, “The Owl,” in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), 26.

³² Robert Frost, “The Oven Bird,” in *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged*, ed. Edward Connery Latham (New York: Henry Holt, 1969) 120.

beautiful must be mastered by pattern—all must be torqued upward toward the resolving rhyme. There it is in “Downhill I came,” “Hungry, cold, and tired was I,” and “in I went.”³³

Whatever the internal chaos was, the poem tries to insist, it might be managed. All those *yet, yet, yet*’s try. It’s how you might tell your friends—the ones you don’t want to bother—the story of some slough of despondency. It was bad, yes, but not that bad. Look, the downhill way *could* be seen as the relief of the end of the journey—not only as a sinking slide, right?

Not so fast. The rumpled rhythm—trochees for line openings, interjections, and such—cries no such thing. Thomas may have been trying to avoid the facilities of conventional poetry by borrowing prose rhythms—he wrote in a letter as much. But he tries to hold up the standards of form, too. That *will* rather scatter a person.

And the biggest disturbance in the poem is the titular call itself—“An owl’s cry, a most melancholy cry.”³⁴ The tawny call lurches Thomas—himself and his lines—away from a romantic conversation between nature and self, away even from the impress of beauty on the self that undoes you. It calls back to the salted sadness of the open sky and the open eye—to no personal bliss of daffodils, nor repose, only need, the night road.

By poem’s end, all of the desperate non-pattern-keepers rock the lines. The last three lines start with trochees, not iambs, as the salt of the earth come in to lines and minds stressed as they are.

Thomas followed his own poetry to the war—“Now all roads lead to France,”³⁵ he wrote; it was the road to be taken. “Unable to rejoice” sounds about right.

11.

Therefore I will wail and howl, I will go stripped and naked: I will make a wailing like the dragons, and mourning as the owls. (Micah 1:8 KJV)

We used to give each other Micah 1:8, one of scant biblical references to owls, at summer camp.³⁶ We’d get Post-its from the Christian Supply and write the reference to that verse on it. We’d slip it into someone’s hands, saying, “I just feel like the Lord laid this verse on my heart for you.” And snicker. (Anything with nakedness, you understand.)

We had good intentions; we’d look up the verses in devotions. But we thought the key verse of Micah was SIX eight, not ONE eight—about the Lord’s requirements. (Sing it with me: but to do justly [but to do justly] . . .).

Those minor prophets knew us better than we knew ourselves. I read them all one summer afternoon on a day trip from camp to what we called Moshier Falls, a

³³ Thomas, “The Owl,” 26.

³⁴ Thomas, “The Owl,” 26.

³⁵ Edward Thomas, “Roads,” in *Collected Poems*, 164.

³⁶ Not even really sure it’s an owl. Some translations go with an ostrich. Which is definitely a different feel, at least for English speakers.

natural rock waterslide and falls where we could picnic and slide all day. It was the final bit of my first read through of the whole Bible—all those short books poured out in a great gush. How closely they link, those prophets (Habakkuk, Micah, all of them), the gorgeous beauty of the Lord God’s saving power and the disgusting ugliness of human injustice. “Look! The Lord is coming from his dwelling place!” says Micah (Mic 1:3 NIV). “His splendor was like the sunrise; rays flashed from his hand,” says Habakkuk (Hab 3:4 NIV).

How closely they link, those prophets (Habakkuk, Micah, all of them), the gorgeous beauty of the Lord God’s saving power and the disgusting ugliness of human injustice.

Here comes beauty—not just in spite of but *because* of the worst.
He comes to us, messed up. Wish we could have seen that.

12.

His head was a fuzzed dun softball, rain furred. Small, tufty ridges highlighted the promised brows. The widow’s peak descended severely to the beak in would-be-angry eyebrows of white, if it weren’t for the equal-and-opposite force—curved letter Cs, sweeping skates of brown up the outside of his eyes, suggesting questions.

His eye marbles were lensed with a clear glass thickness. Under the crystal knob, they were, I felt, the precise yellow of a #2 Dixon Ticonderoga pencil. Dilating pupils, feather ringed by interrupted circles smudging gray and brown and orange—a weighted gaze. His eyes amassed orbiters like twin suns.

Well, *my* massive inertia lurched, anyway. There was gravity there. I tripped my way slowly over the mini-moraines of the clearing. I thought to project myself as a non-planet—Pluto, even—a rock chip, apposite a grounded sun, drawing slow thighs by him, slowly narrowing the gyre. Ten feet. Six feet. Five feet, and, finally, four feet away. I was this close in the gray morning, only the length of my useless desk between me and one of the great raptors of the night woods.

His aspect was all intention—no, not intention—attention. Only the violet underlid occasionally slow closed in what Josh called a mascara blink (the violet did have an eyeshadow look to it), against the gold and gray and brown.

I could see the lighted under-feathers. A harlequin, or harlot, tipping buff gold petticoats; he was jacketed in cascades of variegated feathers, trimmed in undulating sandbars of white, buff, tan, sienna. I could see all the layers of softness required to remain silent in flight, and at night. One wing in disarray.

His head turning was like a royal’s, dispensing attention; all his finery that of a hunter-king, girded up, girthed about, with worthy furs.

13.

The fact that something is perceived as beautiful is bound up with an urge to protect it, or act on its behalf.³⁷

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
 because the Lord has anointed me . . .
 to comfort all who mourn,
 and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
 to bestow on them a crown of beauty
 instead of ashes.
 (Isa 61:1–3 NIV)

Is every birdcall vocational? Karl Barth would call the owl, being creation, beneficial, covenantal. Before seeing that owl, we might have been said to be the sort who would consent cheerfully to admire the owl's glories, if it were convenient. Had we thought about it, we would have wished to be on the right side of owl protection against herbicides, should taking sides be called for. Our social media likes and shares would not have failed to speak out.

In the owl's presence, though, I wanted to really save it. And I feared that if I left it, even for a few minutes, it would hop away to hide somewhere in the bent undergrowth and die before I could.

But it was by no means certain that my presence was salvific in any way. What did I know of owls? I got too close (two feet away)—and learned that great horned owls hiss, just like cats, just like your skin when it touches the pan. And then, when the rain picked up, I unthinkingly raised my golf umbrella, and that owl puffed out his feathers so far he enlarged himself by half—in what I supposed was fright prompted by my peacocky fantail of o'erweening might. He tried again to fly away, but only got a few feet. I had hurt and frightened him.

He paused again, waiting, looking at me without pause, and in a half hour, when the rain had more or less soaked him through, he walked into a dense honeysuckle thicket, and stood, drier, under the hedge. Still never ceasing to look.

I followed in a panic, tripping over the moguls, frantic as a chicken. I dashed the empty coffee mug back into the soaked grass, chucked the apple core somewhere, tucked the empty bag of sunflower kernels into my pocket. And I stepped forward, back, up, down, trying to find the right angle, in the rain, through the branches, past the catbirds all gray and black and fine that circled him unceasingly, sentinel. I found the owl still looking at me without moving.

So, I looked as hard as I could, into the dim, to the dark center of those owl's eyes. I stood in the steady rain under the darkest of umbrellas, grass water dampening up my jeans, trying to stay still. Trying to look. Trying not to look at my phone.

³⁷ Scarry, *On Beauty*, 80.

I thought, *stand and wait, stand and wait. They also serve who stand and wait.* If I could just stay with the owl so that it didn't get lost, it had a chance of getting rescued by people who could really help.

I will climb up to my watchtower and stand at my guardpost.

But then I glanced to the left as gushing down rain hit the goat-stripped raspberry canes, dropping on the immature Queen Anne's lace and the many purple faces of heal-all.

No, look at the owl. Where were his eyes again? There.

I didn't want to lose him.

For the last forty minutes or so, phone battery dead, it was just me and the rain and the owl, catbirds circling around. His gaze never wavered for even one instant. It took me the whole time to give up, settle down, and look back.

Thirteen licks is not enough to look to an owl.³⁸

He was fine, he was beautiful, even if he *was* messed up. He was beautiful—as theologian Alejandro García Rivera writes—as what moves the heart is beautiful.

14.

And this contemplation of mine burbled up in my mind from the inmost recesses of my heart, and I wrote some volumes entitled "On the Beautiful and the Fitting." I think two or three of them—you know, God, but I forget. We haven't got them anymore; they've wandered away from us somehow.³⁹

When the rescuer came—her name was Dawn—she crouched into the brush with her falconer's gloves and grasped his legs, inverting him, achieving instant calm. She brought him out into the clearing to examine the wing. Her hands were confident as they slid over his wings to determine the injury. I peered at his massive, dinosaurial talons.

"Look," she said, "here." I saw feathers worn off against a slim bone, a scrape of blood. "And yes," she said, "here it is, a break in the proximal ulna."

She looked at me. "You stayed out here with him the whole time?"

"Yep."

"That's nice of you," she said.

She told us they had a mother at the center, who'd take care of him. They'd set the wing, give him something for the pain. She put him into a box like one of those coffee carriers from Tim Horton's and set it on the front seat. He was perfectly quiet and still.

"Sorry about the state of my car," she said. "You can fill out the form on the clipboard there."

³⁸ Pretty sure Wallace Stevens would understand, even if Mr. Owl wouldn't.

³⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 94–95.

The form had a box to check if we wanted to receive an email about the animal's "final disposition." (A parenthetical note here requested a minimum \$50 donation if so.) I waited until October to ask for my email, for his final disposition. I said I'd been writing about the owl, trying to figure him out.

"Thank you for contacting us!" came the reply. "We will respond to your message as quickly as possible!"

Since then, one Facebook friend, who lives in Utah now, posted a photo of the owl she found on the hood of her car—it made her late to her mammogram. Another, from down the road, showed me a photo of an owl on the roof of their chicken coop, covered in her chicken's guts and gore, eye bloody and feathers ruffled from the death match. At daybreak recently, my husband was moving the cows in the pasture and saw a great horned owl float from the finger jut of forest to the treed field's edge.

This particular conversation, however, has gone quiet.

And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it. (Psalm 90:17 KJV)⁴⁰ ⊕

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⁴⁰ This essay is for Margaret, Miho, Elise, Josh, and Todd, with gratitude to Beth, Nicole, Christina, Christine, Brett, Flint Creek Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, Beaver Camp, HoneyRock, and Root and Sky Farm.