

## *Bubo Virginianus*<sup>1</sup>

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Scientific name: *Bubo Virginianus*.

Kingdom: *Animalia*.

Phylum: *Chordata*.

Class: *Aves*.

Family: *Strigidae*.

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology describes the great horned owl as a “powerful predator.” Thick-bodied and barrel-shaped, it is the second largest owl in North America. Its diet primarily consists of smaller mammals such as rabbits, mice, voles, squirrels, bats, and on unfortunate occasions, the household cat. When clenched, its talons “require a force of twenty-eight pounds to open.” This, coupled with its large size, allows it to also take prey larger than itself, including both porcupines and skunks. It is highly adaptable and distributed widely in a variety of habitats ranging from swamps, deserts, croplands, and a variety of forests and woodlands.<sup>2</sup>

But, I found mine, dead, on the shoulder of I-74 somewhere on the stretch between Champaign and Danville, Illinois.

It is on this same stretch that the bitter Illinois wind rushes violently across all lanes of the interstate, across acres and acres of frozen farm land on both sides. The wind does not gradually build

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<sup>1</sup> This work previously appeared in the Spring 2017 issue of *Palaver*.

<sup>2</sup> “Great Horned Owl.” The Cornell Lab of Ornithology All About Birds, Cornell U, 2015. [www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Great\\_Horned\\_Owl/id](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Great_Horned_Owl/id).

here. It blows in sudden gusts. It stings your eyes. It makes your ears throb, your cheeks burn, your fingers turn a ghostly white. It is the kind of wind that makes you turn away, bury your face deep within your coat. It is aggressively hostile. The kind that can create panic if you have any imagination at all. You feel it, the crystallization of your blood vessels. You feel it penetrating the stiff epidermis, advancing past the dermis to the fatty tissue beneath until it reaches the deeper structures of your body: your muscles, tendons, and bones. This was that wind, on that stretch of highway on that late evening. It was more than the winter wind of numb, stiff cheeks. It was the wind of cellular damage.

It is also on this stretch of highway where you can easily lose the horizon all together—if in winter, if snow covers those flat fields and the sky is grey, if there is no tree line or telephone pole allowing the eye some awareness of visual perception. More than once I have felt some rushing primordial fear when the line between earth and sky had seemingly disappeared—a fear of all that whiteness, all that surrounding nothingness with absolutely no edge to hold onto. It's a fear that the logical brain seeks to dismiss almost instantaneously. You are in your car. On a highway. Driving 70 mph. The Earth is round, and gravity is anchoring you to the planet. You occupy a real place in both space and time. The brain fastens itself to these facts. Simultaneously, the eye adjusts, visual acuity is regained and transmitted to the visual cortex of the brain travelling complex neural pathways. There is relief, a reprieve of the panic. The entire happening occurs within a nanosecond, but for that infinitesimal moment, it was there—that paralyzing fear that comes when there is no real reference point for your very physical existence. That fear leaves a residual fingerprint somewhere in the psyche, somewhere deep within the ego. There it is, a dull anxiety, a tightness in the chest, each time you find those white fields pushing toward a sunless sky.

It is also on this stretch of highway where the only radio stations you can get are AM conservative talk shows or Christian ministry. If lucky, you might be able to pick up a country song: Kenny Chesney fading in and out, interrupted by patchy static. If not, you will learn a lot about the Gospel of Mark and the moral decay of America. You will also pass the Burma Shave-style highway signs of the Champaign County Rifle Association. They are in panel sets of four or five cut from plywood, spread out by

maybe two hundred feet, permitting approximately a two-second read time per sign. Each panel is painted white, framed in heavy black trim, and nailed to two oak timbers sunk into some willing, like-minded farmer's land. Each individual set proclaims one fundamental truth: GUN CONTROL ... DISARMS VICTIMS ... NOT CRIMINALS. These are always followed by the last one with the tag line: GUNS SAVE LIVES. Once while driving with my grandfather, he told me that the signs could be found all over Illinois interstates. "Verse by the Roadside" is what he called them. "People ought to pay attention. Dangerous business—people taking your guns away. In my mind, it's better to be tried by twelve than carried by six." His voice was serious and full of warning when he said it.

And on New Year's Eve, 2015, that is where I found my two *Bubo Virginianus*, my two "winged tigers," right there between "DISARMS VICTIMS" and "NOT CRIMINALS." Right there in the wind of cellular damage. Right there in the land of disappearing horizons.

There is plenty of death on the highway. Road kill is no stranger to I-74. The freeway is strewn with the evidence of man and nature colliding. Over the years, I have seen deer. Deer eviscerated, the length of their bloody intestines strung across all lanes. Deer in the median. Deer on the shoulder. Often, there are two together, their bodies lying within five or ten feet of each other. Small fawns with broken necks, their hides still speckled with white. Occasionally, a big buck is missing its head, sawed off by some beer-drinking man-boy who threw it in the bed of his jacked-up truck in the dark of night when no one was looking. (No doubt, he has it mounted above his fireplace, bragging to every new giddy girlfriend about how he tagged it on the very first day of deer season.) I have seen coyote, raccoon, and opossum. Snakes, long, winding black snakes in their final spasmodic death-roll after just being struck. I have even seen a red-tailed fox. She was impossible to miss, the red fur of her tail blowing up magnificently from her delicate, still body.

But in all the years I have travelled this stretch, I have only seen a few birds that I might have actually been able to identify. They are normally so pulverized that it is almost impossible to tell. I imagine most of these were hawks. I see them often in winter,

perched in trees stripped bare of their leaves along the fence line, surveying the fallow fields for any movement of prey, natural predators at hunt. But this, of course, is *ante mortem*. It was once explained to me by a physics teacher that when a truck is travelling at a high rate of speed, a vacuum is formed surrounding the trailer. If a bird is too close, if it misjudges, it can be pulled into the vacuum, its fragile body and wings repeatedly striking the side of the truck, again and again, until it is thrown clear. Basic physics he had said. Frequently, all that is left is a broken wing awkwardly flapping against the wind, the rest mangled carrion.

Maybe, if Maya, my three-year-old daughter, had been awake instead of sound asleep in her car seat, if we had been happily chatting away about the manes of unicorns, or had I been distracted by another one of her travelling meltdowns, maybe I would have never noticed that in a forty-five-minute span, I had passed five—*five*—little barreled bodies who seemingly had been gently dropped from the sky onto the shoulder of the highway. Maybe, if just one of those previous five had looked grossly macerated like all the other dead birds I had ever seen, I wouldn't have given them another thought, I wouldn't have pulled over when I saw numbers six and seven at "Verse by the Roadside." Maybe, I just would have kept on driving, kept on listening to how Jesus really, truly, in his heart of hearts, wants me to be a financial success. Maybe, I would not have been willing to risk waking my sleeping girl with my sudden braking and the crossing over of rumble strips if it had been any other day. Maybe, if instead of winter, it had been summer, the fields green with rows of blowing corn meeting blue sky, maybe, if the horizon had not been so bleak, so close to being extinguished that day, if I had not felt all that cold isolation, maybe, then, I would have never stopped. But instead, I put the car in park. Instead, I ran back down the shoulder toward the darkening sky to find them, to see for myself.

Maybe it was more than that, more than winds and vanishing horizons, much more than just the riddle of seven dead great horned owls on the side of the road that day. Maybe, if I had not visited my grandmother hours earlier for the first time since my grandfather died, since his body was placed in a black bag and taken to the morgue, maybe, if my grandmother hadn't been moved across the hall into a smaller room with a woman named Mary Alice who reeked of urine, maybe, I would have left those

owls right there on the side of the road. Mary Alice, who repeatedly barked, “Who are you? Do I know you? Do you know Margaret, my daughter? Do you know her? I said, do-you-know-her?” Each time I said no, that I didn’t think I did. “Well, that’s good because she’s worthless. Totally useless. And dishonest. Just a big, fat liar. That’s what she is.” She said this tensing her lower lip, narrowing her eyes. “Just a sneaky, horrible person. Hides my glasses every time she comes. She can’t hide from God. He sees what she does. Do you believe in God? Well, do you?” There was usually a long pause after this part, even if I answered. She sometimes fidgeted with a button on her sweater or brushed away some invisible crumbs on her lap. “My son, he’s a good boy. A fine boy.” From behind my legs, Maya listened. Finally, she whispered, “Mama, why that woman keep asking you that? What worthless mean, Mama? Why she saying her daughter a liar?” She never took her eyes off of Mary Alice, but she kept shaking her head back and forth and saying, “That bad, Mama. That really, really bad.”

Maybe if this exchange with Mary Alice hadn’t happened verbatim every five minutes, I wouldn’t have picked up those owls and carried them back to the car. Maybe, if Mary Alice’s daughter hadn’t come, if I hadn’t noticed the surprised look on her face when she saw my grandmother actually had visitors. She only stayed twenty minutes, spending most of that time showing her mother that, in fact, her glasses were right there in the top drawer of her bedside table. She didn’t say a word both times Mary Alice brought up her brother, how he was going to come get her and take her home because she, her own daughter, was too selfish. I watched as she bent over to give her mother a kiss goodbye. Mary Alice threw both of her shaky arms up in an effort to push her away. Maybe if I hadn’t seen this, if I hadn’t heard her whisper “Bitch” under her breath as her daughter left the room, I wouldn’t have felt so compelled to roll up both of those birds in our dog’s favorite travel blanket and carry them back to the car.

Or, maybe, if my grandmother hadn’t asked me who I was and then pretended to remember me after I told her: “Oh, Sweet. I know who you are. I could never forget you,” she said patting my hand. Maybe, if she hadn’t kept asking me if I had a husband and where he was, all right in front of Maya. Maybe, if Maya had been content to play with the Dora stickers I had brought along or to color in her activity book instead of asking all those questions—

Why can't she walk? What's that smell? Why do they have to feed her, Mama?—maybe then I wouldn't have driven off with two birds of prey laid between suitcases and Christmas presents.

It also might have been different had I actually driven directly to the highway after leaving the nursing home, if I had turned left instead of right, if I had driven by Cracker Barrel and merged onto I-74 instead of driving past Indian Acres Swimming Pool and St. Charles Catholic Church to 1308 Lincolnshire Drive, the home of my grandparents, the home they had lived in for forty years until my dad and his two siblings sold it three years ago. Maybe, if I had just driven by and not actually stopped the car across the street, maybe if there hadn't been festive Christmas lights on both of the neighbors' houses or if the front blinds of my grandparent's house had been closed instead of wide open, if I had not felt so completely shocked by the absence of their furniture, how different it looked even from the street. Maybe, if in spite of that, I hadn't been able to remember my own room there so well, if I hadn't been able to feel the white cotton sheets or the stitching of my grandmother's rose-covered quilt, if I hadn't been able to hear the tick of the grandfather clock in the other room, its chimes on the half hour, its strikes and counts on the hour, if I hadn't been able to imagine the feel of its thick wooden scrolls beneath my tracing fingers. Mostly, if I hadn't heard the voices of my grandparents telling me to sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs bite.

But it was all right there in an instant. Spencer Tracey's voice and Katherine Hepburn's laugh coming from the television. I saw my grandmother in her starched white blouse and her grey merino wool cardigan sitting in her pink Louis XV chair smiling. "Oh, my! She's really gotten herself into a mess now!" I could see my grandfather's closet and all the blue shirts hanging perfectly in a row. I saw him standing at the stove frying up breakfast ham while whistling. I saw him at the kitchen sink rinsing out his coffee mug and looking out the window watching his mourning doves. "Well, young lady, I think after we have some more coffee, I'm going to need to feed my birds. They're probably wondering where I'm at!" I saw the juice glasses, the jar of sugar with tiny oranges painted on its lid. The antique green salt shaker. I saw it all. Inside every closet and drawer and cabinet. Every dish. Every picture. It was all there. I knew every single inch of that house. Everything. So, maybe, if I hadn't felt all of that in a five-minute span as I sat

parked across the street, if I hadn't felt the broken-heartedness of it all, maybe, I wouldn't have driven two great horned owls in Styrofoam coolers 440 miles, across four state lines, and up into my driveway exactly fifty-one days ago.

I did not find out until later that it is in violation of state and federal law to be in possession of any migratory bird, even a single feather. For misdemeanor violations of the act, individuals may be fined up to \$5,000, and those convicted may face up to six month's imprisonment. Felony violations may result in fines up to \$25,000 and up to two years' imprisonment. It wasn't always like this. In 1918 birds of prey were excluded from the Migratory Bird Treaty Act signed with Great Britain on behalf of Canada. According to the Endangered Species Handbook, "The treaty covered almost all other species of native birds, banning hunting and killing, as well as destruction of nests." This left birds of prey open to massive persecution. Farmers and ranchers shot them on sight, convinced of their guilt when a chicken came up missing. They were hunted for sport, shot, poisoned, and captured in pole-traps leaving them to hang upside down from their feet in "tiny nooses." It wasn't until years later, after generations of slaughter, that ecologists and ornithologists achieved victory when birds of prey were finally protected in 1972 by an amendment to the original treaty.<sup>3</sup>

In precise language the MBTA states:

Unless and except as permitted by regulations made as hereinafter provided, it shall be unlawful at any time, by any means or in any manner, to pursue, hunt, take, capture, kill, attempt to take, capture, or kill, possess, offer for sell, sell, offer to barter, barter, offer to purchase, purchase, deliver for shipment, ship, export, import, cause to be shipped, exported, or imported, deliver for transportation, transport or cause to be transported, carry or cause to be carried, or receive for shipment, transportation, carriage, or export, any migratory bird, any part, nest or egg of any such bird, or any product, whether or not

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<sup>3</sup> Nilsson, Greta. "Birds of Prey." Endangered Species Handbook, Animal Welfare Institute, 2005. [www.endangeredspecieshandbook.org/persecution\\_birds.php](http://www.endangeredspecieshandbook.org/persecution_birds.php).

manufactured, which consists, or is composed in whole or in part, of any such bird or any part, nest or egg.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, “It was roadkill!” will not be defense enough in a court of law. Had I known I could face two years in prison, maybe I would have left them there. Maybe. Maybe not. Grief and fear can make you do strange and dangerous things.

However, there are some exceptions. If you are granted a permit by both your state Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, you can possess what they call a “salvage permit.” Some are granted to educators, museums, and scientific organizations, but most of these permits are restricted to enrolled Native Americans with religious standing within their tribes.<sup>5</sup> These are medicine men, men who know the ways of the sacred owl. Men who will tell you the owl is the extractor of secrets, that its winged medicine brings insight into the shadow self and that it teaches those who carry owl medicine lessons in timing, when to let go, when to move on. They will tell you that these tigers of the air are harbingers of change, bringing new cycles, new beginnings as part of a process of growth and wisdom, the process of death and rebirth. They will talk of her eyes, amongst the keenest in the animal kingdom, how they penetrate the darkness, how warriors with her long feathers tied to their strong black braids called on her to locate their enemies in the dark of a moonless night, how she offered her power to selected hunters, allowing them to see the tracks of their prey in the opaque blackness.<sup>6</sup> These medicine men will tell you that it is owl who allows the chosen few to see beyond the veil of deception and illusion, to see what is hidden, what is beyond, what others do not or will not see—that which exists beyond the enemy, beyond the hunted. But it is the medicine man himself who is most closely allied with owl. These men have made sacred, holy pledges never

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<sup>4</sup> “Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918.” Digest of Federal Resource Laws, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2013. <https://www.fws.gov/laws/lawsdigest/migtrea.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Santaniello, Neil. “The Feather in Your Cap May Be Illegal.” SunSentinel, 1994. [articles.sun-sentinel.com/1994-02-28/news/9402270377\\_1\\_feathers-wildlife-service-species](https://www.sun-sentinel.com/1994-02-28/news/9402270377_1_feathers-wildlife-service-species).

<sup>6</sup> Holmes, Jonathan. “Concerning Owls.” PowWows.com, 2011. [www.powwows.com/concerning-owls/](http://www.powwows.com/concerning-owls/).

to harm her, for it is she that allows them clear sight when dreaming their visions, their prophecies. They will tell you that she offers them clairaudience, that the tufts of feathers resembling ears allow them to hear what is not spoken, the shush that stays in the shadows, the messages that elude others. These are the ones who can hear the voices of departed loved ones who travel back from the spirit world, from beyond the horizon, across the ephemeral planes of existence.<sup>7</sup>

But if you dig deeper, you will find darker beliefs, fearful superstitions. According to Jonathan Holmes's *Concerning Owls*, "Among many tribes the owl is to be both feared and embraced." He discloses that some tribes believe great horned owls "may not be real birds at all" but instead witches, evil medicine men or women practicing "bad medicine" who have transformed, shape-shifting themselves into the form of owl so they might "fly silently through the night" spying on others in the tribe, learning their weaknesses or even casting spells upon their vulnerable enemies as they sleep, or—worse yet—steal their very souls. In these tribes, Holmes reports that owls are avoided for "safety's sake," because members cannot discern a real owl from a flying witch without the help of holy people. The two species of owls with tufts on their heads—the great horned owl and the screech owl—"are often seen as the most uncanny and dangerous of owls" because many believe these tufts to be feathered horns connecting them to underworld powers. Other tribes believe these species to be the "unquiet spirits of the dead," ghosts who cry out in the dark, screeching and wailing from their treetops.<sup>8</sup>

I suppose now that I know this, what unfolded in the last fifty-one days could possibly make more sense. Possibly. Like, maybe, if those two owls wedged between our DiGiorno frozen pizza and Marie Callender's chicken pot pies could have stayed still inside my freezer, they would have remained right there, frozen solid until next November when I would discover there that was no available space for a twenty-pound Thanksgiving turkey or until I started dating an accountant type who might possibly one evening

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<sup>7</sup> Woolcott, Ina. "Owl Power Animal Symbol of Wisdom Stealth Secrecy Part II." Shamanism, 2015. [shamanicjourney.com/owl-power-animal-symbol-of-wisdom-stealth-secrecy-part-ii](http://shamanicjourney.com/owl-power-animal-symbol-of-wisdom-stealth-secrecy-part-ii).

<sup>8</sup> Holmes, Jonathan. "Concerning Owls." PowWows.com, 2011. [www.powwows.com/concerning-owls/](http://www.powwows.com/concerning-owls/).

innocently ask me what those two curious bundles wrapped in black Glad bags contained. Maybe if they had just remained quiet, if they hadn't begun all that relentless screeching and wailing, I would have forgotten about them until one of those things happened. But that's not what happened. They didn't stay still. They didn't stay quiet.

I have spent every month since my grandfather's death in July waiting for him to return to me, to see him stand at the foot of my bed one night, to feel his presence walking behind me, to hear him say my name while standing at the kitchen sink scrubbing a burnt pan. I have waited for a mourning dove to look into my window for a full ten minutes without a twitch of a feather. But none of that has happened. In fact, absolutely nothing has happened. No signs. No messages. Nothing. I have even gone so far as to court him.

I don't tell people this, and I most certainly did not invite anyone over to the house on Day of the Dead this last November 2<sup>nd</sup>, a day before my grandfather's birthday. That morning, before dawn, I made a small altar on the dining room table, his picture surrounded by burning votive candles. The speckled gold mercury of their holders illuminated by the flame's flicker. I attempted to adorn it with some orange and yellow marigolds barely hanging on from the garden, their edges curling brown. Half Russian Orthodox saint with golden halo, half *Dia' de Muertos* ofrenda. I added other things, things I knew he liked. To the left, I placed a John Lee Hooker vintage vinyl LP with the song "Boom Boom" that I had taken from his record collection the day we packed up their house for good. "What do you say we put on a little music, young lady?" he would say, opening the wide lid to the large wooden stereo console. It was the one piece of furniture my grandfather had any say about in the entire house. It was his, completely independent of my grandmother's reign of all things domestic. I would sit in his spacious tweed armchair waiting for the sound of the needle drop. Then, *Boom Boom Boom Boom/ I'm gonna shoot you right down/ Right offa your feet/ Take you home with me....* He could dance. I mean really, really dance, even into his early eighties. He would spin me around while telling me how he used to sneak off to the juke joints in "Black Town" in Kansas City until my grandmother as a new bride had shut it down. Smiling, with a little bit of devil in those blue eyes, he would say, "Your grandmother, I don't think she approved of that all too much." My gram would always yell from the

next room to turn that racket down. She complained that she couldn't hear herself think, that she would have a splitting headache in the next twenty minutes. She questioned out loud what was wrong with my grandfather, had he no sense at all? He only shook his head back and forth, like he didn't get her at all, like he was simply dumbfounded by her response. "Oh hell, Hon," was all he ever replied. He just kept spinning me around and around on that braided rug, record after record.

In front of that record, I placed a bar of Irish Spring soap. I unwrapped it first to breathe in its scent. To the right of his picture, I set his heavy metal tool box, the kind you find in the images contained in old issues of *Life* magazine, the same type that belonged to the men who ate their lunch sandwiches precipitously perched upon one of those wide steel beams of the Empire State Building, their legs dangling hundreds and hundreds of feet above the concrete below. Inside were his hammer and measuring tape. In front of that, two pictures—one of his mom and one of his dad. Beside those, a third picture also in black and white. He is standing proudly in his Air Force uniform with his arm wrapped around my grandmother's perfect wartime silhouette. When he died, they had been married seventy-two years. I filled a small bowl with thistle seed for his birds. That morning I drank my coffee from his favorite mug. It is tall and heavy with the words *The Alamo- San Antonio, Texas* stamped above a raised relief of the Spanish mission. I drank it strong and black just the way he drank it. And hot. So hot it burned my throat.

For the entire day, I wore his hat with the words *ASC Agricultural Soil Management* embroidered across the crown. He only wore it while tinkering in the garage, when working in the yard, or while driving grain to the elevators for my uncle. A couple of times, I rode beside him, windows down, and with half-filled quarts of oil and old Styrofoam coffee cups at my feet. He had broken the hat in, and within its shape it held some perfect measurement of my grandfather. I wore it as I talked out loud to him when Maya was in the other room playing. I told him I was back in school. He would like that, except for the debt part. He would shake his head forebodingly about that. For lunch, I ordered a hot roast beef sandwich smothered in gravy from a cafeteria I had never been to before, and later that afternoon, I made my grandmother's chocolate cream pie from scratch, the pie he had

enjoyed for sixty-something years until my grandmother could no longer remember how to follow the recipe. After dinner, Maya and I each ate a piece right there in front of his picture illuminated by the glow of all those candles. I told him silently that it was good, but not as good as Gram's, and I knew then that my pie wasn't enough to convince him to come back to me, and that I needed to do better than a fucking hammer and measuring tape. The truth is, I tried. I tried everything I knew to do, but he hadn't come back to say one last goodbye to me, to show me that he was somehow still with me. I wonder now if maybe that was the day, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, Day of the Dead, when those owls decided to come, if they knew that in two short months I would once again drive the highway back to all that death and dying in search of something to hold on to. Anything. Maybe, maybe not.

But there have been lots of questions, lots of maybes since my grandfather's death. I now wonder if there is no such thing as a soul at all. Maybe there is no imperishable spirit to take immortal flight from the broken, diseased, and withered body's last breath. Instead, maybe that's just it—the last breath, the finality of one's total existence. The Chassidic masters explain the essence of the soul of man as “literally a part of God above.” Maybe there is no piece of immortal God inside of us. Sometimes it seems easier to believe that. Maybe those who remain behind only create myths, invent divine signs of after-death communication to ease the grief, to somehow survive the unbearable void created when those we love die. Maybe we have to find a way to keep the dead with us in order to make sense of our own existence. I don't know. I don't talk about these questions. I choose to keep them to myself—but Maya, Maya is different.

It is mostly at night, right at bedtime. She shares the most with me during this time. After turning off the light and several minutes of silence, it is not uncommon for her to snuggle up to me, for her fingers to first find my neck and then my silver necklace engraved with the word *MAMA*. More often than not she whispers into the darkness, tracing each letter and spelling aloud M-A-M-A. She will grow quiet again for several minutes before she begins to confide all those small intimacies that nest in her child-heart. At school, Eli told her she couldn't like the color blue because she's a girl, and it hurt her feelings when the boys told her to go away, that she couldn't play with them. Why did they do

that? And why did I use that voice when I told her to get in the car this morning? She didn't like it. It wasn't very nice. Things like this. But then there are also the questions, and the questions, and the questions. So much is unsettled in her child-mind. "What are bedbugs?" "Were there bedbugs when Jesus was alive?" "Why would God make bedbugs?" "Why do I have two houses when most little kids only have one?" "Is Earth in space?" It goes on and on. But since my grandfather's death, the questions have become harder, and they are often asked over and over again, no matter how many times I answer.

She wants to know what heaven is. I do a terrible job. I say things like, "I think it might be when your soul returns to a place of universal intelligence, like a return to perfect love—order. Yes, order. Maybe? I'm not really sure to be honest." I can hear myself and I understand why she feels the need to ask these questions repeatedly in the hopes that I might be able to eventually provide a satisfactory answer. She wants to know what "universal intelligence" is, where it is on a map. I don't know the answer to this, so now when she asks questions about heaven I tell her, "Heaven is just a beautiful place, Baby. It is where everyone is happy." She wants to know if it is in the same place as universal intelligence. She wants to know if God is there. "How can God be in your heart and in heaven at the same time?" "How can he be everywhere?" "How is God in nature?" "What do you mean you can see God in a tree? How?" She is relentless. Three nights ago she was like this, all those pieces in her mind trying to find a place to settle down.

"Mama, is grandmother going to die? I think she is. You know why I think that? I think that because she's really old like grandfather." She sat up and looked at me blankly. I reached for her hand, but she pulled it away to better arrange her stuffed lemur and panda bear under the covers beside her.

"Well, Baby, remember what Mommy told you, how everyone—everything—dies? How it's part of life? But, yes, you're right. Grandmother is very old, and she might die pretty soon, but nobody really knows *when* someone is going to die."

"I know that, Mama," she said sitting up and with a sense of total exasperation. She answers with this expression a lot lately. "Mama, when you die, who will be my new Mama?" It's embarrassing to admit that this question injured me, that I felt the wound of being replaced so easily, from the casualness of her voice

when she asked it—that I felt a tinge of both anger and fear. But I did. Instantly, I saw her father’s new girlfriend tucking her in at night and kissing her forehead. I felt the horrible panic of “Will she forget me?” I wanted to yell, “No one! No one will be your new mother! You only have one mother! Do you understand? You have one mother!” I hated myself for such grotesque selfishness, a selfishness that must be unknown to better mothers. But even then, I only thought more about myself, about my own mother and how when she dies I won’t get another mother. She will just be gone. I’m not sure, but I think it was then that those owls, tired of their plastic body bags, began to wake up, when they began to grow restless.

“Baby, please, don’t worry about that. Please. Remember what I told you? That most everyone gets to live until they are old?” I took her shoulders in my hands. “And, no matter what, Mommy will always, always be with you, in your heart. Forever and ever.” I took one hand and placed it on her heart and rubbed it gently, trying to somehow massage the truth of it deep within its beating life; but she pulled away and suddenly stood up on the bed, wobbling to keep her balance.

“Am I going to die? Who will live in our purple house when we die?” The words were tight in her throat and caused her cough to erupt. I heard it—the mucous and phlegm. The indication of a high-level infection of the respiratory tract. I also heard those words come out of her mouth—the word “I” and “die” in the same sentence. I, too, now struggled for a breath. “I want to live in our purple house forever! With you!” Her thick lashes had already begun to stick together and an even more steady flow of snot was running from her nose. She took her tongue and licked it away from her upper lip.

“Come here, Baby. Blow your nose.” I pulled her to me holding a tissue to her nose until she calmed down enough to blow. “You’re not going to die for a very, very long time. Don’t think about that. Everything’s okay. Mommy isn’t going to die for a long time, either. Lie down here.” She stayed there on my chest coughing sporadically until she eventually fell asleep. Although I am certain that she thought about it, she never insisted, “But, you just said, you just said no one knows when someone will die.” I was grateful. Sometimes we need the answer to be easy, the one that makes it okay, if even for a minute. Maybe she needed that answer right then.

She asks these questions about death because when my grandfather was dying, I made the conscious decision to be open with her, to be honest with her. I had thought about the children who grow up on farms, how they learn about death watching their father slaughter chickens with the deciding blade of a sharp ax or by finding one of their ewes killed, ripped apart and half-eaten by coyotes, its white fur caked with red blood. Death as nature. Simple as that. I thought about the pioneers and how so many children must have watched as a sibling was buried right there beside some wagon trail, dead of smallpox or a violent kick to the head from the hoof of a spooked mule. How they must have stood waiting for the shovel to break apart the hardened earth, how the wind must have whipped through the tall prairie grasses as their wagon moved further and further away from that small life they had only hours ago believed belonged to them. If they looked back—back toward that make-shift wooden cross—I imagine those prairies must have been swallowed up in shadow, that they suddenly must have collapsed under the weight of one massive rolling wave of grief, how for miles and miles, it must have decimated all those blowing stalks of wild rye that only yesterday glistened golden in the sun.

I thought about the children in all those post-mortem daguerreotypes and tintypes from the Victorian Era when a third of all children died before the age of nine, how siblings stood in front of a camera in their Sunday best beside the propped-up corpse of younger baby brother or sister who had died from tuberculosis or dysentery only hours earlier. I once saw a picture of a family posed all together. The mother is holding one baby in her arms. The father is holding another. Both babies are dead. A boy around the age of seven is sitting stiffly upright on the parlor sofa, his eyes left open in an unnatural stare. Beside him sits a young girl, their only surviving child. She has bows in her hair. Beautiful bows perfectly tied. The photographer added a rosy tint to all three of the deceased children's cheeks, a practice not uncommon during the time. Dead, but alive. According to the article, the photographer's notes revealed that influenza had swept through the house and that within one week all three children had perished. I imagined the picture hanging in the home's parlor. A visual keepsake to indelibly link the living to the deceased.

Even in those times, with the soaring death rates of the 19th century, when death was an everyday occurrence, still there was an effort to reject its finality, to deny it. Corpses dressed up and posed awkwardly surrounded by a few chosen personal items. Children hold their porcelain-faced dolls or their favorite toy. Others lie in their beds portrayed as merely asleep. But in the end, it is only a photo, a photo with people nobody remembers. This is true of most old photos. They are only faces. If you are lucky, there is a name and date written on the back. But you do not know that one in the photo loved to sing “Fair Margaret and Sweet William” at the piano each evening. You do not know that white peonies were her favorite. You do not know that the man collected butterfly specimens, preserving eggs and caterpillars in alcohol, mounting pupae and emerged butterflies on tiny insect pins late into the night. You do not know that once he caught a most glorious one, and that instead of pinching its fragile thorax between thumb and forefinger, that instead of adding its beautiful iridescent wings to his growing collection, he had let it flutter away unharmed. You cannot tell from the picture the sickening sorrow he felt for the creature. They—whomever they may be—have long disappeared, and so too the acute grief of their loved ones. All completely forgotten within two generations.

But, I had mainly thought about a segment on Radio Hour I had heard while driving to Lowes one morning. It was Alan Watts’ thoughts on the essence of dying. His voice was strangely synthesized on the recording, and it echoed mysteriously over the playing of languid violins. When I got home, I spent an hour searching for it on-line so I could print it out. Eventually, I found it.

And, so therefore, one person who dies in a way is honorable, because he’s making room for others.

Why else would we have children? Because children arrange for us to survive in another way by, as it were, passing on a torch so that you don’t have to carry it all the time. There comes a point where you can give it up and say now you work.

It’s a far more amusing arrangement for nature to continue the process of life through different individuals then it is always with the same

individual, because as each new individual approaches, life is renewed. And one remembers how fascinating the most ordinary everyday things are to a child, because they see them all as marvelous—because they see them all in a way that is not related to survival or profit.

When we get to thinking of everything in terms of survival and profit value, as we do, then the scratches on the floor cease to have magic. And most things, in fact, cease to have magic.

So, therefore, in the course of nature, once we have ceased to see magic in the world anymore, we're no longer fulfilling nature's game of being aware of it.

There's no point in it any longer. And so we die. And, so something else comes to birth, which gets an entirely new view. And so nature's self-awareness is a game worth the candle.

It is not, therefore, natural for us to wish to prolong life indefinitely. But we live in a culture where it has been rubbed into us in every conceivable way that to die is a terrible thing. And that is a tremendous disease from which our culture, in particular, suffers.

And we notice it personally in the way in which death is swept under the carpet. And, so a person is left to die alone, suddenly, unprepared, and doped up to the point where death hardly happens.<sup>9</sup>

I did not want this for my grandfather, this sweeping of death under the carpet, so I introduced my daughter to death. I don't know if it was the right decision, if she should have gone to a graveside funeral at only three years old. Maybe she shouldn't have seen my grandfather lying in an open casket or the gaping hole beside it. I did not tell her that he was sleeping. I told her that he was dead. I did my best to explain it in a child's terms and to still be honest. Alan

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<sup>9</sup> Watts, Alan. "When Death Happens." Beautiful View on Death and Why It Must Be, Spirit Wise, 2015. [spiritwisenet.wordpress.com/category/uncategorized/](http://spiritwisenet.wordpress.com/category/uncategorized/).

Watts translated for a child. I tried to create an atmosphere of both comfort and openness. I cried in front of her, mainly in the mornings before there is time to shake off all that vulnerability and sturdy yourself for the day ahead. Each time I reassured her while microwaving oatmeal that I was okay, that both death and sadness were natural, a part of being human, that the tears were good tears because they showed how much I loved him.

I even went to the library and checked out five books on how to help kids best cope with death. I tried to follow all the formulas in all the literature I read. In the end, I don't know how it will affect her. Maybe our bedtime conversation three days ago, her fear, will only be a sign of what is to come, that she will start having nightmares six months from now, or maybe, in the end, she will know how to better deal with loss, how to be comfortable in her own grief, how not to "brush it under the rug." I have no idea. I can only hope that I did it right, that I haven't somehow permanently scarred her. It would help if I could better model it, if I knew how to do all those things myself, if I believed every word of Alan Watts.

But, for my part, I can tell you, it has been a brutal and haunting mistake, linking her to death so young to life, so soon from the womb. To hear her use "I" and "die" in the same sentence did something to me. She has not brought it up since, but for me, the permanent mark was made the moment the question fell from her mouth. I am quite certain that is when my owls' eyes bolted open inside those Glad trash bags. The horror of this connection—between death and my daughter—isn't something I thought of or anticipated ahead of time. If I had, I think I would have lied to her, telling her that her grandfather moved far, far and away across the ocean to Ireland where everything is green—that each morning he sets forth into the heavy fog for a brisk walk with his two ever-faithful Border Collies. Yes, that is what I would have said. I would have lied because now death is too close to her, to her tiny hands with chipped purple nail polish, to her child laugh. It has no business anywhere near her mispronounced words, her pink tutus and cheap plastic tiaras. I would have lied because I would have known how all those theories of mine overlooked that I'm simply not brave enough to endure even a vague connection between death and my daughter.

I understand intellectually that this fearful relationship I now feel between death and my daughter amounts to no more than strange superstition. I know one hundred percent that it is not possible for her to have become more vulnerable to death just because the concept has entered into her understanding, that it is absurd to think that. I also know that there are mothers who actually have children who are dying right now, at this very instant, and that I am not one of those mothers. That in some ways, all this panic and fear is grossly indulgent, that I haven't earned the right to feel this terrified. But there it is. So, it only makes sense that when I heard those words "I" and "die" come out of her fragile mouth that the owls trapped downstairs in the Frigidaire began to break free, their sharp claws tearing away their strappings one layer at a time.

I stayed there beside her, feeling her forehead. It was day seven of temperatures above 100. I listened to each cough waiting to hear what the doctor's stethoscope might have missed. I heard it mainly when she inhaled, the crackle. I imagined the air struggling to make its way through the respiratory passage narrowed by fluid and mucus. "Try to cough, sweetheart," I told her while shaking her shoulders gently. And for a second, I know the doctors are wrong, that it isn't only an upper respiratory infection. I am certain that since our appointment two days before, it has spread down her trachea, past her primary bronchi and deep into her lungs. With my hand on her chest, I tried to determine whether pneumonia had decided to unleash itself on her tiny lungs. The first night when her fever spiked at 103.8, she had woken up shivering and crying. She complained that her arms, legs, and head hurt. She repeated over and over in lethargic cries, "They hurt. They hurt. Help me, Mama, please." The truth is, there was very little I could do except hold her trembling body while waiting for the Tylenol to kick in, except hold a cool washcloth to her burning body.

When I was pregnant, I often pictured my childhood German Shepard, how she carried and delivered her litter. How the whole process, if stripped down, was at its core a most basic function of nature. I found a picture of her and hung it on my bathroom mirror to remind me of this. After a called-off engagement, I went through eight of the nine months of my pregnancy alone. Maybe that was why I thought of her—why I chose to view my pregnancy predominantly as only an act of biology. Maybe it was less

frightening to think about it like this. It's not to say that I didn't place my hands on my swollen belly and feel love for the developing life inside of me. I did. But there was a distance, so nothing could have prepared me for just how much I would love her.

I did not ache from the enormity of it until I held her in my arms, until I rocked her back to sleep in the quiet darkness belonging only to mothers and their infants. How could I have known how overwhelming it would be until I held her defenseless body as she slept? How could I have believed all those other mothers when they told me that love would only grow? Nothing can prepare you for that kind of vulnerability. Nothing can prepare you to love another being with such immensity. And as you carry your baby wrapped in your arms out those hospital doors, you understand that you are responsible for keeping this small life alive, that this being your body grew and protected is now outside of you and helpless to this world. Maybe it happens on that very first night when you are seized with the terrifying reality that there will be no possible way to always keep them safe, to always protect them from all that might harm them, all that might cause them pain or suffering—and, ultimately, that you may not be able to even keep them alive. It starts with SIDS and then exponentially expands. Suffocation. Infections. Diarrhea. Dehydration. Choking. Stairs. Accidental poisoning by a single poke berry. Had I known the risk beforehand, the fear of losing all that love, I am not convinced I would have been brave enough to have a child at all. Almost daily I don't think I would have been.

But hadn't I just promised my daughter that she wasn't going to die for a very, very long time? The problem with promising something you know you can't truly guarantee is that you become acutely aware of exactly what it is that you cannot fulfill in order to keep that promise. As soon as you promise it, the impossibility of fulfilling it is all you can think about. You can't do it, and you now know, more sharply than ever, exactly what that means. And that's what happened three nights ago when I made that promise to my daughter. I realized more than ever that, ultimately, I could not keep her alive.

Lying beside her, I thought of every horrific story I had ever heard. I tried to stop it, but it came like floodwaters rushing from a broken levy. I thought of the boy who died from e-coli after

visiting a petting zoo. I thought of brain hemorrhages resulting from a simple slip off the balance beam at a gymnastics practice. Drowning. Secondary drowning. I thought about Sandy Hook Elementary and Columbine. I thought about predators. I thought the most unspeakable of things. Rape. Date rape. Things I wished I had never read or seen on the news. Things too horrible to ever write down. I thought about Todd Bennett, a classmate of mine, who died his sophomore year when he was thrown from the Jeep his parents had surprised him with on his sixteenth birthday. There is a picture of him sitting behind the wheel, a big red bow still attached to the hood. I imagined her sledding into trees—brain swelling and severed spinal cords. I imagined meningitis passed by way of a Solo cup at a party in college. Drugs. Drugs I have never even heard of. I thought of tumors and Leukemia. Radiation and chemo. I thought of a story my friend, a head pediatric nurse at Mission Hospital, had told me. She had called, voice shaky, wanting to have a drink. That day she had been in the room when a young patient had died, a girl of five or six with brown eyes—the same color as Maya’s. She told me that when the little girl took her last breath, she sat straight up in bed and turned to find her mother, to look into her eyes, to reach for her hand. That’s what she said—that with her last gasp, she had jolted up and opened her eyes and looked toward her mother. “They always want their mother,” she said sipping her margarita. She quit nursing less than six months after that, but I still think about that story. I thought about it that night. I also thought about how I had yelled at her for taking too long in the morning and for squeezing half the tube of toothpaste into the sink.

I did this until I felt sick, actually drunk—dizzy, nauseous, shaky. I am sure some kind of adrenal poisoning, the hormones of fight or flight crashing into one another. I did this until those owls flew right up the stairs and into our bedroom, until they beat their razor sharp wings in a wild fury, slicing the air above my head into a million broken shards. I did it until their talons ripped at my hair and tore at my skin. I did it until I could not stand it for another second. Until the panic of a strange paralysis made me will my body out of bed one leg at a time. And that’s when I decided to take each of their stiff bodies out of the freezer and down to the basement to thaw.

The next evening, Maya's dad picked her up to take her to Cary to spend the weekend with his folks. Even though her temperature was finally normal, I sent him with a zip-locked bag containing a thermometer, Children's Tylenol, Children's Claritin, saline spray, elderberry syrup, and her daily vitamins. Before they pulled away, I ran down the front steps after them to ask him if he still had the card I had given him to put in his wallet. "IN CASE OF ACCIDENT—PLEASE CONTACT MOTHER IF CHILD IS IN THE CAR." On the back is my name and number. He said yes, but it crossed my mind that he might be lying. He doesn't even latch the door leading to the steep basement stairs at his house. They are exposed, wide open to the concrete below, with no walls on either side to balance yourself in case there is a slight misstep. I can see it from the back door each time I drop her off and pick her up. When I tried to gently insist that he lock it, he rolled his eyes and said with irritation, "Fine," before shutting the door in my face. When I picked her up three hours later, it was still unlocked, the hook dangling from its anchor. When she is with her dad, it is a constant fear, a fear to think of her hurt, to think she might need me, that my face might not be there if she needed to look upon it. So, I prayed like I usually do when she leaves for those weekends. I largely view these prayers as acts of superstition. I believe in the philosophy that a noninterventionist creator winds the watch and then steps away. How else could you explain all the unanswered prayers of the mothers of Syria, of Afghanistan, of the mother of Todd Bennett, or the mother of the gasping girl in my friend's story? How else could you explain my grandfather's slow and painful death, how he suffered begging for water? Still, I pray. Just in case.

With Maya gone, I felt comfortable resurrecting the owls from the basement. I unwrapped them one at a time. It took more time than I expected to cut through all the layers, all the duct tape I had used with the goal of preventing the spread of salmonella. Once they were free, I placed them on an old sheet covering half of my dining room's wooden floor. On the night that I found them, they had not been dead long. No foul odor from digestive enzymes or the acids and gases of decomposition. No insects or maggots. This was a good thing. I also carried from the basement two large plastic bins which I sat next to the boxes of Borax I had bought earlier that day. Only twenty dollars will buy you four 76-oz. boxes at Walmart.

For the first hour, all I did was open their broad wings, turn them over, go back and look at the diagram I had printed out. I studied them. I held their talons in my hand and felt for the tibia and tarsus. I have read that scientists have determined that they can apply at least three hundred pounds per square inch of crushing power within them, a PSI considerably greater than the human hand is capable of exerting. They say that if you find a dead owl with its prey still strangely grasped within its clutches, it is impossible to wrench it free. It cannot be done. I held their thumbs up next to mine. I measured their claws. I counted their primary feathers and their secondary feathers, their tail feathers. On their wings, along the primary feathers leading edges, I searched for the small structures they call hooks and bows that break up the flowing air into smaller, micro-turbulences allowing them to soundlessly fly inches above their prey without being detected. I did not pull the feathers back in search of the two, almost human sized yellow diamonds that we imagine as children staring out at us from the deep, dark forests of our storybooks. I could not bring myself to do that.

It was only after all this examination that I picked up the knife, a six-inch blade with a carved bone handle. My grandfather had given it to my dad when he became an Eagle Scout, and a couple of years ago my dad had given it to me. It is a light knife, easy to hold, but still my hand shook. The first cuts were to the wings. I extended them first, pulling them away from the body by their tip before gently slicing into the skin and muscle until I felt the blade hit bone. I put down the knife and used the wire cutters, like instructed on the webpage. They effortlessly made the cut. I did this to both wings of the first owl. Using straight pins, I secured them to three-foot-long rectangular pieces of foam board. Each wing was spread open and full of the memory of flight. I also took the same owl's talons. I'm not sure why. All were laid in the bins before I buried them in layers of Borax. I did not touch the second owl for reasons that I again cannot explain.

The next morning, I took both their wrapped bodies, one wingless and without her great talons and the other intact, to the very back of our garden. By this time of year, I have normally already taken inventory, gotten up close to each plant and examined it closely with a discerning eye. It is then that I decide what is viable or what no longer serves the life of each plant, what

has to be cut away in order to make room for more growth. With shears in hand I cut it away, sometimes with a delicate snip and sometimes with a hard, severe prune. Either way, it must go. But with each cut there is always heavy regret.

Between two pink rose bushes, their leaves just flushing out, I dug a hole way deeper than it actually needed to be. The ground was soft and the soil gave way easily. Within it, I laid them side by side. Before filling it back, I looked at them both, each one's body wrapped in yellow calico fabric tied with red yarn. I had expected to feel something, some kind of closure. I had expected that somehow I would suddenly be able to follow the gossamer thread linking them to my grandfather and his death, to my grandmother's eventual passing and her sad final existence, and, finally, to the fragility of my daughter's life. That somehow it would all make sense and immediately become clear to me, that somehow death and life would be tidied up, packaged and tied with a silver bow within my mind. That, at least, there would be some small release of all that fear and grief. Maybe, I expected them to break free and suddenly take flight. Maybe that's what I hoped would really happen. I don't know. I just know that didn't happen.

According to my information, in three months I can remove the wings from the Borax bins. They should, in theory, remain in the position I pinned them.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Author's Note: Since the writing of this essay, the author is no longer in possession of any owl feathers and/or body parts, having returned them back to the earth out of respect for the law.