

The Wise Hours

A JOURNEY INTO THE WILD
AND SECRET WORLD OF OWLS

Miriam Darlington



TIN HOUSE / PORTLAND, OREGON

This is a work of nonfiction, except for a handful of names and identifying details changed to respect individuals' privacy.

Image credits: p.1 Barn Owl (John James Audubon), p.38 Tawny Owl (John Gould), p.82 Little Owl (John Gould), p.125 Long-Eared Owl (John Gould), p.159 Short-Eared Owl (the von Wright brothers), p.187 Eurasian Eagle Owl (the von Wright brothers), p.231 Pygmy Owl (the von Wright brothers), p.265 Snowy Owl (John James Audubon), p.303 Feather (Rawpixel)

Copyright © 2018 Miriam Darlington
Originally published in the UK as *Owl Sense*, by Guardian Faber

First US Edition 2023
Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information, contact Tin House, 2617 NW Thurman St., Portland, OR 97210.

Manufacturing by Lake Book Manufacturing
Interior design by Beth Steidle

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Darlington, Miriam, author.

Title: The wise hours : a journey into the wild and secret world of owls /
Miriam Darlington.

Description: Portland, Oregon : Tin House, [2023] | Includes
bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022047721 | ISBN 9781953534835 (hardcover) |
ISBN 9781953534842 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Owls. | Owls—Behavior.

Classification: LCC QL696.S83 D36 2023 | DDC 598.9/7—
dc23/eng/20221012

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022047721>

Tin House
2617 NW Thurman Street, Portland, OR 97210
www.tinhouse.com

Distributed by W. W. Norton & Company

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

*For Wendy
the wisest owl of all*

*A wise old owl lived in an oak
The more he saw the less he spoke
The less he spoke the more he heard.
Why can't we all be like that wise old bird?*

—ANON.

Contents

BEGINNINGS	xi
<i>Tyto alba</i> , BARN OWL	i
<i>Strix aluco</i> , TAWNY OWL	39
<i>Athene noctua</i> , LITTLE OWL	83
<i>Asio otus</i> , LONG-EARED OWL	125
<i>Asio flammeus</i> , SHORT-EARED OWL	159
<i>Bubo bubo</i> , EURASIAN EAGLE OWL	187
<i>Glaucidium passerinum</i> , PYGMY OWL	231
<i>Bubo scandiacus</i> , SNOWY OWL	265
EPILOGUE	283
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	291
<i>Readings</i>	293
<i>Permissions</i>	299
<i>Associations and Websites</i>	301

Beginnings

MY SON BENJI SAW THE OWL FIRST. SHE WAS PERCHED like a silky totem pole, talons grasping the gloved hand of her keeper. At first, too busy with getting a place in the queue for artisan bread, I walked straight past the owl man as he stood quietly holding his charge. How was it that they were barely visible? They blurred into the humdrum busyness of the townscape, as if there was something self-effacing—a kind of greyness, an owl-camouflage that both possessed. I learned then that the mind does not easily register things that we are not expecting to see.

The owl relies on the cryptic facets of its colours, markings, and posture to shield it from the gaze of others. But something about the plumage flared on the edge of my vision and perhaps my deep-seated fascination with owls made me turn, and when I saw her I lost all interest in buying fresh bread.

Benji was already right there. Together we stared. The Great Grey Owl, *Strix nebulosa*. Grail of the boreal forest.

Keenly aware, she gripped that leather glove tight as her head swivelled from side to side and her eyes settled on each and every distraction. I drifted closer, not wanting to startle her, but longing to be within reach of those smoky, brindled feathers. Could I touch?—Yes, it was important to get her used to people, he said. She was only a few months old.

Her softness took my breath away. Deadly beauty. She turned her face towards me and I noticed its astounding circumference. There is a narrow area that falls between pleasing and preposterous, I thought, and this owl's circular face and bright yellow eyes fitted into it with perfect grace. The massive facial disc, the owl man, Pete, explained to me, produces a funnel for sound that is the most effective in the animal kingdom; she had the most sensitive ears known to humankind. The owl didn't miss a word.

Pete told us that he had known about the batch of three large, cream-coloured eggs (which had been laid in this country by a captive owl) and once they hatched he had chosen this owlet at two weeks old and raised her. She had needed constant supervision and care, and was now, as with all young birds on seeing their first carer, "imprinted" upon him. They were inseparable. I watched as he repeatedly leant his cheek on her feathers, closed his eyes, and spoke to her with such tenderness that I felt as though I was intruding on a private conversation.

"I want an owl," Benji said, his hand on my shoulder. "Can I have an owl?"

He must have known what I'd say. This is a wild creature. Shouldn't it stay in the wild? We wrestled with ourselves, with our consciences, with our hearts.

When she was fully mature, Pete was planning to show his Great Grey Owl at the local rare-breeds sanctuary. My mind filled with a strange concoction of feelings. She's a captive,

I thought. A pet. She'll be an exhibit, a misfit, unable to do what she has evolved to do, dependent on her enemies.

She could be bred, Pete added, noticing my expression, and her chicks could be taken and released into the wild. Again he laid his face against her feathers and closed his eyes.

Could they be released? The laws around captive breeding are very strict on these matters, surely? The magnificent foreigner turned her head and looked past me with her lemon-coloured eyes.

"The yellow eyes," Pete said, "mean that she hunts in the daylight."

Of course, in her native Lapland, during the summer months, there is no night-time. And in the winter, she must rely on her ears for the months of darkness. In spite of all the qualms, I was captivated.

Then, something startled her. For a split second she tottered on her tethers and I felt the breeze from her spreading wings. I must have closed my eyes, and when I opened them again, in front of me a striped grey haze of staggering silence and softness was rising; a giant butterfly, a god of the tundra. As her wings filled the air, I heard nothing but the whisper of snow falling in thickets of spruce and pine.

This owl's origins were in the far north, in the boreal forest. To somebody out shopping for food at the market on a Saturday morning, from the cosy shires of England where at worst it is just wet in the winter, the very word "boreal" released an aromatic dream of resinous spruce forests, the whiff of wildcat, the pocked tracks of wolverine ghosting through the snowy tundra.

But this owl was on a leash. She bated again, tethered by jesses. Her wings worked, but she would never fly free. She righted herself, folded her wings, and settled, neatly doing what she was trained to do.

The joy of an encounter like this is always woven with an uncomfortable undercurrent. Owls, like so many species, no longer exist purely as astonishing, innocent, wild beings. They are emissaries from an imperilled ecosystem, rare representatives of natural freedom and abundance. Once we were conscious of being surrounded by wild things—they shaped who we were. Without their presence we feel, as poet John Burnside perfectly described, a sense of homesickness. Surely, to be fully human, we still need their wild company, even at a distance?

So what can a writer do, faced with a world whose wildness appears to be unravelling? The first thing perhaps is to get to know the wild, experience it, and pay attention to it. By giving our attention in this way we might avoid the blandification that happens, especially to so many “cute”-faced animals. As we “cutify” the natural world it is at risk of becoming tame and ornamental. Once we have encountered the wild face to face, been brushed by the downdraft of its phantom swoop or been awoken by that spine-shivering nocturnal cry, it becomes real, embedded in our minds, a subtle but vital part of our being. Perhaps with this kind of attention, we can come to fully care: a word that derives from the Old English *cearu*, which means “to guard or watch,” “to trouble oneself.” Facing up to our scars and losses, taking the trouble and the time to explore the ecological details of some of the most fragile species and to record them accurately on the page, is the least we can do.

This is the story of my journey to explore those ecological details, paying attention to the incremental shift owls have experienced, and still are experiencing, from wildness to a kind of enforced domesticity. I wanted to immerse myself in their world, from the wild owls to the captives that are kept in aviaries and sanctuaries and beyond, to look into the mythology,

kinship, otherness, and mystery that wild owls offer. I hoped that during my search some wider truths would rise to the surface. I would try to find all of the wild owl species in Europe, to extend the limited baseline of the six British species that I knew lived on my patch and might survive extinction here during my own lifespan.

In his book *Biophilia*, biologist E. O. Wilson explains: “We are human in good part because of the particular way we affiliate with other organisms. They are the matrix in which the human mind originated and is permanently rooted.” Losing sight of the natural world in which the brain was assembled over millions of years is a risky step, Wilson says. Offering a formula for reconnection, he urges: “Mysterious and little known organisms live within walking distance of where you sit. Splendour awaits in minute proportions.”

My manifesto was an exploration of the nearby, then, accepting my part, my own implication in it all. To try to regain some balance, I would invite in some sanity for myself and for others, and along the way a sprinkling of enchantment might seep in. I would scour the twilight woods, fields, and valleys of my home archipelago and then reach further afield, learning about the ecology and conservation of these night-roaming raptors, about their presence as well as their absence. What was their place in our ecosystem; how and why have we made them into stories, given them meanings, wrapped them with all the folklore and superstition that we could muster? And why was it that owls were becoming semi-domesticated, kept as pets in aviaries and shown in “owl-displays,” like a new kind of surrogate kin, when so many of their kind were threatened in the wild?

I would rise at dawn and follow the flicker of the white Barn Owl near my home; I would drift along the leafy Devon lanes at dusk to find the Tawny Owls I had heard calling. I

wanted to track down the species I hadn't ever seen: the irascible, yellow-eyed Little Owl, the rare Long-eared Owl, and the elusive, migratory Short-eared Owl. I might even be able to see one of the feral Eagle Owls that I had heard were living wild in northern England, and perhaps, if I were lucky, a vagrant Snowy Owl might appear.

The plan was to unveil each of these species in their wonder, amongst their forests, meadows, moorlands, and marshes. But no sooner had the owl scheme spread its wings in my mind than my son Benji fell seriously ill. I knew I had a choice; I could accommodate his illness and work my owl search around him, writing up my findings as and when I was able to, or I could put the whole thing on the shelf. It felt wrong for our lives to be stopped in their tracks, and so slowly, with an open mind, I began. Difficulties repeatedly muscled their way in. Every parent's fear is that our young might be struck by injury or illness. How could I hide the frightening personal drama that was invading our life? The line I had read in Dante's *Divine Comedy* years earlier while studying as an undergraduate student was suddenly very real: "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura / ché la diritta via era smarrita," Dante says. "Midway along life's journey, I found myself in a dark wood, and the path was lost."

If I had known my year of owls was to be so permeated with my son's illness I might have faltered. But alongside the challenges the owl research slowed and deepened and Benji came under its wing. Alongside the fears and challenges my owl research slowed and expanded. Unexpected opportunities arose—invitations to Finland to see Eagle Owls; to Lapland to see Hawk Owls, Great Greys, and Ural Owls; to Serbia for Long-eared Owls; Scops Owls in France; and more Eagle Owls in Spain. In the end I managed to travel the length and

breadth of Europe, finding commonalities just as my own country was breaking away from the unity we'd known for many years. Going in search of all thirteen species of owl that inhabit our vast, multilingual, many-owled corner of the world, I found uniformity in a shared devotion to our wondrously varied wildlife. And far from distracting me from my family and my roots, my journeys deepened my sense of home and my ability to listen to what was near. As I learned from one of my wise-beyond-her-years undergraduate students at the University of Plymouth, adversity leaves you both a stronger and a softer human, and it is underwritten with a strange kind of joy, even at its worst moments.

Carl Jung said “fear seeks noisy company and pandemonium to scare away the demons.” I endeavoured to slow down and forgo many of my modern-world distractions. The clamour of gadgetry is as distracting from our purpose as it is sometimes helpful—and it disturbs the owls. For the owl years I abandoned my smartphone and gadgetry, staying with the quieter insights of my senses and notebook.

Women habitually remain silent about their personal lives for fear of repercussions. The honest inclusion of my family's small truths might add up to a bigger truth. For better or for worse, raw life had butted in. Again and again, I found myself living with hope when it seemed as if there was no hope. And so, my story became braided with two ecologies—the ornithological and the personal.



FOR MORE THAN 60 million years owls have roamed the night sky—*Homo sapiens* have only been here for a fraction of that time, less than two hundred thousand years. And just as our ancestors might have done, in some ways we still struggle

to understand these birds. With the aid of genetics and taxonomy we have made progress, and distinguished owls into two ancient families: the *Tytonidae*, those large-headed owls with a tall, narrow skull, asymmetrical ears, a heart-shaped facial disc, and long, feathered legs (this group includes *Tyto alba*, our Barn Owl); and the *Strigidae*, the owls with shorter, asymmetrical skulls—this group includes all the other European species. Both have particularities that no other bird has, adaptations for nocturnal activity and predation. The flat facial disc, large eyes, and downward-turned beak lend the owl its wise, human-faced quality. The familiar face provides a contrast to the bird's eerie ability to turn its head up to 270 degrees. This unique, uncanny feature—and the fact that owls were difficult to see and to know in the dark with their noiseless flight, when all other birds fly with more obvious sound—disturbed and intrigued our ancestors, and produced a fear and fascination that have never quite disappeared.

Owls have a complex attraction for humans. Their loose, soft feathers, rather than the stiff, rigid plumage of other birds, can give them an attractive “fluffy” effect. The gentle contours are not for cuteness, however; they are solely evolved to insulate, and to cloak this predator in invisibility. Their patterning produces visually confusing camouflage that breaks up a silhouette beyond any hunter's wildest dreams. Their feathers are silencers, meant to mask themselves but also designed not to drown the subtle sound of their prey. While our ancestors may have been in awe of the owl's fearsome abilities as a nocturnal predator, these days we can have a tendency not to see beyond the fluffiness. But the hooked, sharp-edged bill, unlike that of the majority of other birds which have a horizontal bill, is for ripping flesh. The acute hearing and the stealth-swoop are for murder by momentous, feathered eruption. The ferocious raptorial talons are for striking and gripping—these

are zygodactyl talons: instead of three toes facing forward and one behind, the outer digit has a joint that enables it to swivel backwards so two toes can be placed at the front and two behind. The prodigious strength of its grip is vital. The Eurasian Eagle Owl's deceptively velvet-feathered feet act as boxing gloves. This giant owl deploys its thunderous punch to grasp, snap, and puncture. Blakiston's fish owl, of a similar size and weight to the Eagle Owl, has spines called "spicules" on the underside of its toes to enable it to grip dicey aquatic prey.

But perhaps what also attracts us humans to owls is admiration, particularly that they have the skill to fly at night. This bird is feathered perfection; grace and beauty with talons. Just as a poem is the best words in the best order, this bird must be the best night-hunter in the best kit. Even without the glamour, we can't fail to envy the finely honed precision that is compressed here. The owl is made for one thing only: to survive, and to do so by stealth. For this reason, over time our suspicious minds have wondered whether it also has any supernatural qualities: Hidden in its cloak was there the capacity for evil, for instance? For if *Homo sapiens*, the wise humans—who in general do not appear always to have entirely mastered their own baser instincts—possessed the same set of abilities, it would surely make a potent concoction. And so by projection this mysterious night creature has gained human meanings that meant nothing to it.

In Egyptian, Celtic, and Hindu cultures, the owl's symbolism was involved with guardianship of the underworld. The owl was revered as the winged keeper of souls after death. In Malaysia and Indonesia it is *burung hantu*, the "ghost bird." The ancient Greeks associated it with wisdom and courage; the Romans with foreboding and fear. Wise or evil, the owl was a porous receptacle for all of our chosen meanings. But why all this mythologising? Perhaps we need and enjoy a

story with a good fright in it, to bond us, to explain ourselves to ourselves, to remind us on some level of our origins. That “sweet sense of horror, the shivery fascination with monsters and creeping forms” that E. O. Wilson confirms is wired into our minds. The human brain is configured to be wary of predators and their movements, and as predators tend to stare at their prey, the large-eyed owl provokes that trigger, the age-old possibility of threat. Humans were kept awake and alive by that possibility, whether it was perceived to be supernatural or natural, a spirit, a bear, an owl, a wolf, or a lion.

In order to survive, humans learned to outsmart dangers; the domestication of dogs and cats may have been one way of doing this. Storytelling may also have been another way we learned to do it. To think about, predict, and prepare for danger with a story was to teach our vulnerable young how to do the same. Perhaps we love the owl for its spookiness because it reminds us to be on the lookout. Literature has never failed to embolden our fascination for nocturnal ghostliness and its creatures: in Sylvia Townsend Warner’s haunting novel *Lolly Willowses; or the Loving Huntsman*, the heroine longs for something shadowy and menacing, “a something that lurked in waste places and that was hinted at by the sound of water gurgling in deep channels and by the voices of birds of ill-omen.”

In Japan, on the other hand, the word for owl is *fukuro*, which means “good fortune,” and so the owl is lucky. In Aboriginal Australia, Eerin the grey owl is a protector, sleeping by day and flying by night to keep watch and to warn if danger approaches. In South Australia the Nyungar tribe protects a standing owl-stone, Boyay Gogomat, a creator, healer, and destroyer. The Wardaman tribe in Northern Australia believes that at a unique rocky outcrop that overlooks the out-back dwells Gordol, the owl who created the world.

Owls have been part of our landscape, psychological context, and emotional ecology from the moment *Homo sapiens* became self-aware. When the daily soundtrack of birdsong died down, we noticed the owl's voice in the dark and felt puzzled and unsettled. The human brain is primed for curiosity and story, so owls invited in our myth-making. Now it is impossible to see these animals without clouding them with what anthropologist Franz Boas described as our *Kulturbrille*, a cultural lens that automatically colours the way we perceive everything. We observed owls' hunting skills, noted their powerful sensory capacities, and coveted their silent mastery of the air. They would have been and still are part of our spiritual system, that expanded along with our sense of identity as a species, our sense of our place in the world. Owls have found their way into our mythology, art, literature, and religion and so appear to be polarised. On one side, the imaginary owl of the mind, the human-created spirit bird, the familiar, the icon, the owl as commodity. Looking at any of these, we are really only looking at ourselves. On the other side, the real, live animals that breathe and fly and hunt, and this owl is so often beyond our reach. However much we taint them with our own meanings, in art, in story, in photography, and on screens, they still remain beyond us. Until relatively recently, the more we have tried to understand them through the prism of our own experiences, the more we have obscured their true nature.

I wanted contact with the true nature of these birds. Encounter was what interested me, to observe the birds in the wild. To see some of the more elusive owls I needed specialists to guide me. I went in search of the people who could help. Unexpected friendships grew. My guides helped me find my owls—but they also taught me something else. I found that in the end any encounter between a wild owl and a human

must always be tentative, aware of the assumptions we might wrongly make. Just as I would only ever be a small fragment of the owl's landscape, I could only ever partially come to know owls. Learning that was a whole journey in itself.

IN THE FIRST century AD, Pliny the Elder wrote in his *Natural History*:

The eagle-owl is thought to be a very bad omen, being as it is a funereal bird. It lives in deserts and in terrifying, empty and inaccessible places. Its cry is a scream. If it is seen in a city, or during the day, it is a direful portent, though several cases are known of an eagle-owl perching on private houses without fatal consequences.

I love that Pliny covers himself, carefully stating that some homes might occasionally be spared the fatal consequences.

The irony is that most of the 250 species of owl on the planet evolved as forest birds, and since humans depend upon the planet's forests to maintain our atmosphere, as we continue felling and burning we are spelling our own doom.

Once we lived much more consciously within the ecosystem. Our lives were sensitive to the wild, entirely embedded amongst predator-prey relationships, and animals were respected as part of our lives in ways which it is difficult for Western humans to remember or imagine. In December 1994 a group of three spelunkers, or cavers, were following an old mule path beside a cliff face along the Ardèche river in southern France when they came face to face with an astonishing reminder of our connection to the animal world. They found a narrow slot in the rock of the cliff, and climbing inside they felt a tiny current of air emanating from some rubble. The

subtle breath from the rock could mean only one thing: there was an unexplored cave inside. They cleared the rubble and scrambled in. By the light of their lamps they found that the cave, larger than any they had seen before in the region, was scattered all over with bones, scratch marks, and wallows, all from one extinct animal: the cave bear.

Moving through the chambers of what came to be known as the Chauvet cave—named after one of the explorers, Jean-Marie Chauvet, who later wrote about it jointly with the other cavers—they found astonishing paintings. It began with red ochre dots and smudges made by the hands of Palaeolithic artists, and as the chambers of the cave stretched out for over 240 metres, they found each chamber contained new wonders. The red ochre was replaced by black, and these turned out to be the earliest paintings. In some places horses and bison had been engraved in the soft surfaces of the cave walls, perhaps scratched with a human finger. Small fragments of charcoal were lying about where they had been knocked from the artists' torches, as if they were still fresh. A mammoth, a leopard, and soon a whole pantheon of animals danced across the walls, and their forms felt vibrant enough to be recent. The artists had used the uneven surface of the rock as if the animals were emerging from it.

“Suddenly our lamps lit upon a monumental black frieze. It took our breath away. There were shouts of joy and bursts of tears. We felt gripped by madness and dizziness,” the cavers later wrote in their book *Dawn of Art: The Chauvet Cave*. They were staring at a panel that had been scraped clean and worked into a scene of a dozen hunting lions, their heads deftly shaded, their eyes alive and intelligent, their bone structure and musculature clearly delineated. These were familiar, intimate portraits. The expressions of the lions as they stalked were varied and well observed. Carbon dating showed that

the first of these paintings had been begun around 36,000 B.C. They were far older than anything previously discovered. The bears, bison, reindeer, cave lions, rhinoceroses, horses, and mammoths had been depicted by artists who were skilled and attentive. The graceful depictions were accurately and lovingly rendered and showed that the artists must have worked calmly and reverently. Were these devotional images? Returning from the deepest part of the cave where the lions reside, and looking back into it, in a place where the floor had collapsed so that it was now unreachable, the cavers noticed that on the ceiling there was engraved a striking solitary figure of a Long-eared Owl.

The Chauvet owl is the oldest known depiction of an owl in the world. It is 45 centimetres tall—close to the size of a large Long-eared Owl, *Asio otus*. It has clearly etched ear tufts, and is perched on a downward-drooping rock pendant. Most interestingly, its back is shown facing outwards, wings folded, with fifteen streaks to demarcate the densely lined plumage. This closely observed owl is depicted as if swivelling its head 180 degrees backward to peer into the dark, its face turned to look out into the cave and meet the gaze of the people walking towards it. To portray it thus, the real animal must have been watched many times and its skill noted. In view of the sophistication of the other drawings, the deliberate positioning of the bird suggests the artists understood something of the Janus nature of the owl, its troubling liminal status on the boundaries of light and dark. This owl captures a strange suggestion, its ability to face both ways, both out into the cave and back into the body of the rock and whatever that was thought to be concealing, as if the rock were merely a veil.

We cannot know exactly what the owl meant to those artists, only guess that they perhaps trusted that it would be

meaningful—a helpful companion perhaps, or a guardian in these deepest reaches of the dark. Humans are the loneliest of creatures amongst all the earth's species, self-consciously and visibly a species apart. But when they hunted for food every day for their survival, our ancestors must have known their prey intimately. They would have gazed into the anatomy of their prey animals and experienced the resemblance. On the outside we may look different, but on the inside it is clear that in some way we are related—there is a common ancestor, somewhere way back—and in peering into the entrails and skeletons of the birds, early humans may have felt recognition. The organs, the spine, the ribcage, the breastbone; the arm-like wings with fingery tips; the hips joined to the legs, the toes; all, at their core, relate to and reflect our own human structure.

This unspeaking kinship with animals may have drawn us, or certain of us, more companionably into the dark unknown recesses of the caves, as well as into the deepest recesses of our imaginations. Looking at the Chauvet cave masterpieces, where animals appear to spring from clefts and cleaves in the rock, perhaps here was a place where we felt we could call them up out of the ground. We can never know for sure, but it might be here that humans started to fit these animals with symbolic thoughts and began to use them as metaphor. They became useful as a way of explaining the world. Was it from this point onwards, with the slow appropriation humans excel at, that the exploitation of animals began? At first they might have been respected as unspeaking companions and beings that were meaningful in ways humans have forgotten now. They would have seemed magical, both mortal—as they could die—and immortal, as new identical members of their kind seemed to reappear and carry on. Later they were raw material to be used, subjugated, and also silenced.

With the advent of medieval Christianity, animals became fair game for teachings that justified religious beliefs. Owls were dirty and slothful, according to Benedictine abbot Hrabanus Maurus in *De Rerum Naturis*, written in the year 847 AD. He intended this encyclopedia as a handbook for preachers, stating that owls cry out when they feel that someone is going to die: “He flees from the light, in the sense that he does not look for the glory of human praise,” Maurus tells us. Unpleasant, antisemitic connotations abounded in the illustrations of his owls. During this period, strange images of owls in religious artworks such as illustrated bestiaries and sculptures were often given a human face with a prominent hooked beak to denote the supposed long, hooked nose of the Jews. Scenes of the owl being mobbed by other birds were common in the medieval manuscripts—and in reality wild birds do call in alarm and mob owls as they threaten to predate their nestlings. To some medieval minds the mobbing was punishment for being a night-creature that shunned God’s light. The owl was often carved on misericords in medieval churches and monasteries. Here too they were portrayed as being attacked by other birds as if they were sinners condemned by righteousness. As monks sat down on these misericords they would be doing Christ’s work by robustly squashing the evil.

Owl symbols abound in the darkly imaginative Renaissance paintings of Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516). There are very few paintings by this artist that do not contain a hiding owl. Bosch’s owls might not be malevolent, however, and are sensitively depicted. It is as if they are merely supervising the action in the paintings, not taking part in it. As the owl is a creature that can see in the darkness where others are blind, for Bosch it might in fact be seen as bringing light to darkness, contrary to medieval Christian views about the bird. His tiny owls often peep out, watching wherever there is a

human committing a sin or misbehaving in any way. In *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and many of the other paintings, owls appear embroidered in some item of clothing, hidden in a pocket, sitting in a basket, peering from a windowsill, in a tree, fountain, or vase, everywhere and anywhere, ubiquitous watching eyes. Art historians have been discussing the meaning of Bosch's owls ever since. Far from symbols of wickedness, they seem to be symbolic observers, meditative representations of the esoteric teachings Bosch was party to, representing mystery and meditation, a consciousness or conscience bigger than our own.

None of the critics suggest that these owls are whimsical; they seem to be deliberate. The Pygmy Owl and the Barn Owl—the varieties Bosch most often depicted—were known to be frequently out in daylight, and were looked upon more favourably at the time. The Pygmy Owl, often diurnal, has a pleasant flute-like hoot, and in France it was said to be benevolent, and especially lucky company for travellers. The Barn Owl had domestic aspects, and was a familiar companion that lived close to our dwellings and destroyed vermin. The ingenious Bosch was evoking complex thoughts about the solitary contemplator. The clear-sighted, meditative, wise bird that remained in its quiet nook in the brickwork (or cell) all day was like a monk. The owls were thoughtfully placed to bear witness to the human misdemeanours happening elsewhere in the paintings.

Albrecht Dürer's melancholy portrait of a deep-eyed young Tawny speaks of a surge of sympathy in his 1508 depiction *The Little Owl*. This delicate watercolour sensitively traces something of how the artist feels about the captive owl. Instead of dissecting it or using it as a Christian vessel, in fine detail he catches particular aspects and distils an elusive essence of owlness. The large eyes with fathom-dark pupils and the sharply

hooked claws, the soft, brownish-grey camouflage, all show well-observed traits of this young nocturnal predator. Fragile lines trace the long primary feathers and the softer down on the owl's breast. The fierce young bird is captured in an alert yet thoughtful moment, and with its claws spread wide on a man-made surface, its wings furled, it poignantly suggests that this young owl has all his life ahead. The wild creature's isolation from nature in a captive environment suggests that Dürer felt the potential of the creature yet disapproved of the cultural appropriation or caging of it, and cared about more than the simple appearance and received ideas of owls. It is caught in a poignant, vulnerable pose, and its predatory power appears locked up, as if it cannot wait to be its simple, natural self and fly free.

As our representation of owls proliferated, we continued to cage them with our human ideas and misconceptions, and now in the twenty-first century they are often literally caged. Since the phenomenon of Harry Potter, where owls were often depicted as glamorous companions, they are increasingly popular and often desired as pets. In Britain their breeding in captivity is regulated and they are sold by falconry specialists, but increasingly second-hand owls are easy to come by online. Across the world an unintended effect of Harry Potter has spread with the books' fame. With its translation into many languages and vastly popular films, and alongside the rise of social media, special interest pet owl groups have proliferated. In Java and Bali where bird markets are widespread and owls are not protected, wild-caught owls are commonly sold as pets. The Pramuka market, the largest in Jakarta, may often have up to sixty owls for sale, with eight different species on show at a time. In Indonesia it is traditional to keep birds as domestic pets, but previously *burung hantu* or "ghost birds" were feared and avoided. Now the ghost bird is called a

“Burung Harry Potter” and prices are rising for the rarer owls as more and more people wish to own one. The loss of these unprotected apex predators from the wild must be interfering with fragile ecosystems, imperilling the conservation of rare species, as well as causing distress to the captive owls. A 2017 research survey by the Oxford Wildlife Trade Research Group found many species now being sold freely in the Far East: the Javan Owlet, the Bornean Wood Owl, the Buffy Fish Owl, the Australasian Barn Owl, and many Scops Owls were noted, and still more species were unidentifiable due to poor light conditions, feather damage, or the owls being sold as chicks or juveniles.

Framed in cages, in high resolution on our TV screens or in closely filmed nature documentaries, owls present a paradox. The binary distinction between owls as cute and owls as sinister can make them appear as ferocious as they are fascinating. While the reptilian burn of their gaze still seems to suggest that our mortal existence is of little significance, in Hollywood films their chill call foreshadows some ghoulish turn in the plot. At the same time, in the world of consumerism the owl has been reduced to an item to collect, sequestered for a companion, a cutesy fashion accessory, or printed on crockery and clothing. Owl toys are obsessively hoarded and displayed. The owl has become an “experience,” a collectible, a postcard, and a pin-up.

Where, amongst all this, is the real owl?

ONE AFTERNOON IN MARCH I walked away from the houses of our suburbia and into the overgrown green lane in the next valley. It was windy, the eye-watering wind that bites, but the downward drift pulled my feet into a steady rhythm. The undulating ground felt like a great sleeping animal, and there was some energy rising out of it that lent the mind some balance. Common polypody, ivy, and hart’s tongue

ferns covered the banks and clattered in the breeze; above my head crows tumbled and flapped and the wind tossed all the sound up like flotsam. In the mud there were badger tracks, then some fox prints, and after that, the slim slots of a roe deer. I began to feel the deep humanness of the track, a thousand years of passage, all the human and animal feet that had weathered it into this eroded way opened by roots and water and footfall.

I thought of the huge lone oak standing in the middle of the field, still dignified, squeezed between the tremendous mounds of earth that would soon be marked on the map as the new development being built close to our house: “The Camomile Lawns.” Somehow, long ago, in the midst of the rough pasture of the field, in spite of the grazing noses of cattle, its acorn managed to take its chances and sprout. My mind ranged through its elephantine stature and its gnarly bark, imagining its thousand dependants: its fungal, algal, and plant inhabitants; its ferns, beetles, wasps, and lacewings; its birds, bats, shrews, and other small mammals. We live in the company of intricate and complex systems.

“The Camomile Lawns.” My trust wavered each time I walked back past the sign, its veneer created by some faraway corporation. The field is being developed as I write, earth moved in tremendous heaps, sifted and flattened. By the time you are reading this, the town will have grown, and one hundred houses been built for human families. The whole town is expanding, quite suddenly, and hundreds of homes are being built in different locations all around its edges. People need homes, and they need the green amongst them. The same developments are happening in many places. But neon glow and street lighting will rise at night where before there were pools of darkness. Unless it is provided for, the wildlife will have to adapt, or leave.

Tyto alba

BARN OWL



*In spindrift mist a white owl sits
on the barn's storm-wrecked hull.
Moon-faced she takes the last midnight watch,
talon-tight on the listing deck of oak.
In place of the nest, a squared-up show boat,
no space for quilted flight,
no cobwebbed corners,
no mothy, fathomless dark.*

—JENNIFER HUNT, "Barn Conversion"

WE HAVE A LONG ENTANGLEMENT WITH THIS SPECIES, tethered by a story more complex than our simple admiration for its beauty, its super-senses, and its formidable hunting skills. Our association is important for the owl, too. It has adapted to live alongside, even among us. Our closeness has developed over time, like a marriage, but perhaps not an altogether happy one.

As a vole hunter the Barn Owl was attracted to the dense rodent populations that inhabit our man-made rough pastures and meadows. But while in the early twentieth century this owl was a common sight in the fields of lowland Britain, it is no longer the case. The Barn Owl Trust tell us that the causes of the owl's current decline are the result of human activity: changes in agriculture, loss of nesting and roosting sites, the increased use of lethal hazards such as rodenticide, and the proliferation of trunk roads all have combined to impact on the sensitive Barn Owl. It is likely that there are fewer than five thousand pairs left in Britain.

To begin at the beginning. These raptors were on the planet long before us. Fossil remains of owls have been dated from 65 to 56 million years ago. In the Pleistocene, *Ornimegalonyx*, giant Barn Owls, ranged across the Mediterranean area. They stood over a metre in height, weighed twice the heft of today's Eagle Owl, and preyed on large rodents such as capybara. Our human ancestors may have noticed these hunters and been fascinated by their nocturnal powers and haunting

cries; unable to explain the owl's uncanny skills without the benefit of science, they might have believed these creatures were party to some knowledge that eluded us.

The Barn Owl's long, lightweight wings evolved for grass-land hunting, not dense forest like some of the short-winged owls. It came from the plains and scrub of warmer, drier climes. But as the ice sheets retreated from Northern Europe between ten and twenty thousand years ago and humans spread north in greater numbers, so followed this wraith-like owl. It was drawn by the pasture that small-scale farming created, and later found the protective nesting cavities that were offered by some of our cliff-like structures: farm buildings, attics and haylofts, churches and homesteads all mimicked the owl's native cliff-scapes and provided the perfect place to breed. So from our early history *Homo sapiens* and *Tyto alba* began to share both feeding grounds and housing. While some of the owl's northerly movement may have been due to climate and habitat change, much of this was human-made. The owls came to depend on our shared habitat, where it could easily find shelter: drifting low above scrub and floating over meadow grasses, it uses its acute hearing to hunt in prey-rich portions of grassland, its super-sensitive ears pinpointing small rodents with ease even in the faintest glimmer of moonlight.

Our lightly grazed pasture was thick with native grasses perfect for the tunnels and nests of small rodents, particularly field voles, the owl's main food source. For over a thousand years our clearings, meadows, and summer pastures have made a dense and diverse thatch—velvet grass, sweet vernal-grass, false oat-grass, red fescue, rough meadow-grass, smooth meadow-grass, false-brome, wood false-brome, upright brome, and cocksfoot—all useful species that when left un-mown or un-grazed decompose so slowly that they form a "litter layer" providing protection for small mammals. Fields

with such ecological niches were perfect foraging ground for the owls, but this once-common farmland is under threat—from increasingly intense agriculture, mechanised farming, and more aggressive use of rodenticides and pesticides.

But it is not all bad news. The agricultural relationship between humans and Barn Owls has taken on a new aspect in recent years. It is accepted that the Barn Owl actively removes vermin; but could Barn Owls remove as many if not more rodents from our fields and barns than a chemical intervention? To address this question and raise sympathy for the Barn Owl, in 2011 Mark Browning dreamt up the Barn Owl/Rodent Project. This flash of inspiration was set up in California to investigate whether it was more sustainable to deal with an infestation of rodents by owl or by rat poison. A 100-acre vineyard had been overrun by a voracious American rodent named the pocket gopher. These prolific nibblers were causing huge economic damage to valuable vines. For the project, Browning designed owl nest boxes and placed them at 500-metre intervals along the perimeter of one vineyard. By the following year, twenty-five Barn Owl nest boxes had been erected and these had attracted eighteen pairs of Barn Owls that fledged sixty-six young. Browning calculated that if each adult owl needed one rodent per day and the growing young double that, a conservative estimate was that in 2011 the owls consumed 9,576 rodents in total. In 2012, the growing population of owls consumed approximately 15,204 rodents: by any account, a prodigious number of rodents was being eliminated. The owls were shown to be targeting the vineyard where the gophers burrowed, and the level of gopher damage was considerably reduced.

Even with the initial investment, the owls would pay for themselves within two to five years: for the Californian study the original cost of twenty-five nest boxes, poles, mulch for