

## White Owl

“I had that dream again last night,” she said. “I had that dream.”

Her face was long and pale and ravaged by sleep.

They were coming to the end. He felt it. Things had been lost, abandoned, forgotten. There would be no more trying. There were things once reachable, things they had once reached, that could now be reached no longer. She felt it, too. They had been filling the gaps with blank touch and laughter, with the white flicker flare of television and weekends spent in open fields, searching for berries and insects. They picked at the wind, saw each other from great, muffled distances. For too many years they had been filling the gaps, only with more gaps.

*It's finished. Yes, it is finished.*

They could hear the sea.

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And only years later did they return—the dreams, the owl. White, both the dreams and the owl, but the owl had black eyes too. Deep, unreachable and never moving, the eyes and the dreams, when they were not white.

Her sleep, though, had never left her. She had gone there since and before, and before and again after. She had gone there hoping to see the owl, to think its thoughts and touch the shocking silent reach of its feathers. The dreams were white in colour and in feel, something she believed was holy, was God. The blackness she could not explain.

*To think its thoughts...* no, that was not it at all. The owl thought her thoughts for her. This is what she had repeatedly tried to describe to others, to him, to herself, even, as she soaked in baths and stood before horizons drawn so painfully straight. Deep black eyes that said nothing and everything and yet which could not speak, for they were eyes after all. Sometimes she woke to the taste of feathers.

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Relentless came the mornings, thick and soft and still as her dreams. Her life resounded with her rampant solitudes. The shadow inside her—a shadow? How? It had no form—the shadow inside her moved through the years of her lived life, travelled her blood. Head, heart, hands. The shadow travelled and grew and shrunk and grew. It sat in her belly now, where she felt it would stay unless it walked back to her heart, ever darker.

At times, swifts flew from her belly. A metallic blue, they were, when the sun breathed on their feathers. A box of swifts. A swoop, a drift, a screaming frenzy. Hundreds of them like ink splattered across a wall, except it was her name they fluttered across, the one she carried through her long days and wet, spacious nights. She didn't mind the swifts nesting there. It only seemed right that they should seek a space so vast, so empty and so safe. Here they could give birth. *They never touch the ground. Their whole lives they never touch the ground.* Like her, they could sleep in midair, one half of their brain awake, the other surging through dreams. Come winter, they migrated, and the ones that couldn't go—too old, too weak—stayed behind and died and were absorbed into her veins.

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It wasn't that they had been unhappy. There had been moments of joy, of belief and hot shadows moving across walls. Beds that stayed unmade until late afternoon; coffee shops for the sake of coffee shops, in the rain. Fireplaces. They had worn each other's faces and laid down to look at stars and talk and point in the direction of infinity. *But if space has an end, what's on the other side?* In the beginning, he had answers to these questions, but then came the thing he could not answer, that nobody could answer.

And this thing without answers, it gained more and more mass with each hour, with each year, that passed. Eventually, it collapsed in on itself and became silent and impossible to approach. They watched as it surrendered its ability to bear any light, no matter how dim. It was inside this darkness that her dreams—visions, she called them—were made visible.

When the owl came, it showed her what it possessed and she wanted it—the wind, the sound of trees at night, Earth as food, and the flavour of flight. There had to be a higher realm, some other state of being that was suspended above this one, waiting to be accessed.

The owl told her, in the dream language, *Lie limp as if dead; I'll come take you away.* And she tried and tried but was too heavy to be carried.

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She held herself against the cold and crossed the street. Some people in cars might have seen her. Anonymous woman hugging herself as she walked, blonde hair flying in the wind. She saw them, she saw them all, their faces gazing from behind tempered glass. Empty crisp packets and other litter swirled around her ankles. The sky was completely clear, its blue east diluted by a low sun. Her shadow stretched across the road and went up the walls of shops and flats. She felt like something spilled, for things had been spilled from her. A tilt of the head, a bending of the back, a fall to the knees in the middle of the day, for no reason—these acts and more had drained lifelong lakes and seas from her body. Dry and vast, she could approach these exhausted beds via the ropes of half-sleep or those echoing daydreams.

Driving to the New Forest in the coldest dark and walking among the trees, searching for the white owl. She thinks about it now, descending the road in late November. She had laid on the forest floor and watched and listened. The stars she had once watched with him fell flaming now towards treetops. Her breath was visible. The cold stroked her to sleep and she woke cursing herself. She woke screaming.

There were pine needles in her hair and small pine cones were pressed into her back and buttocks. The white owl had seen her but she had not seen it. It had watched her the way an owl watches, which is to say we do not know how an owl watches or what it thinks when it watches, yet it watches all the same. Perched, silent, it had observed her sleeping, no more and no less immune than she was to the elements and the hurtling photons. Without knowing this happened, she thinks about it now, descending. If that is not the way to find her owl, what is? She would persist, for surely the time would come. The owl would find her.

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The sea did not act on its promise. Though both admitted, in secret, to themselves, that it was an unreasonable ask. The sea can only do what the sea knows, which is to swallow and swell and turn its tormented face to the moon. They thought the sway of vast swathes of water would salve their forsaken spirit, that perhaps the salt would penetrate their hidden wounds—

her empty space—and begin the curing process. And cure the salt did, but only as to preserve their dead flesh, to make it edible, fool them into thinking it was alive and flavourful.

By fleeing from it, they had fled to it. Uprooted from London and trickled down to Bournemouth, with all its Victorian lore about wellness and rejuvenation, the promise of healthy cartilage. Their mistake, perhaps, was being impatient and arriving in December, when all is darkness and filth, when daily a great fog rolls in and narrows the world and places glass bells on spiderwebs. But even so, when the sun did arrive, and the beaches became what they were meant to be and the Channel turned emerald, all that water could not displace what had been wrought within them.

Slugs in the cellar. Seagull shit on the skylight.

She tried to make love to him, and he to her, while the slugs beneath them made slow trails that turned silver when dry. Some mornings she went down there to study the trails. They were like roads on a map, or cosmic phenomena, stellar splits in blackest space. The cellar was damp and haunted. Its corners had been softened by centuries of mud, of earth pushing upwards as the world spun in the only way it could, which is tilted and without relent, silently.

They went for walks in the drizzle, wet beach in their hair. They walked the pier with its melancholy pillars blackened by the sea. They hiked to the top of Hengistbury Head. She felt the wind enter her and rattle her cells. She touched the long grass and the rocks and the benches dedicated to the dead who had once loved this view. She heard voices in the wind, her name repeated over and over. At times, he took her hand. The skin there was soft and cold, the bones wilted. They walked and walked, but their walking now was more like stumbling. Neither had before witnessed such a void as the one that had settled in their hearts.

“This is too hard,” he said. “I don’t think I can.”

She tried to speak but as was often the case, she could not.

“This is just too hard,” he said, but the wind stole his voice.

They found a place to eat and they ate while rain hit the windows. His face was paler than she had ever seen it and hers, he could tell, was not her real face anymore. For dessert he ordered apple pie. It arrived warm, with custard and two spoons. He moved the plate to the centre of the table, towards her. They shared the pie, savoured it, agreed it was the most delicious apple pie they’d ever had. Their spoons clattered against their teeth. Finished, he turned and gazed through the window. It was close to the end of winter, he could feel it.

There was a small drop of custard in his beard. She reached across and wiped it gently with a napkin. After everything, after everything, this would be how she remembered him.

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Outside her office one morning, she found an empty bird's egg. At first she saw only the top quarter of it, lying white against the wall, then, searching, certain it was nearby, she spotted the rest near the base of a bin. The whole thing was about the size of her thumb. When she brought the two parts together—she aligned the cracks as best she could—the egg looked almost whole again, unbroken.

The egg was so thin, so easily broken. Why had it been designed this way? It did not seem sufficient to protect the life growing inside it, and yet it was, and would be, over and over until the ceasing of time. When she placed the two pieces together, the egg made a papery sound and tiny bits of shell floated down from it. Inside were dry patches of brownish residue. Near where the egg had cracked, a section of clear membrane had peeled from the shell. The object had no smell. A small, black, wiry hair was stuck to the folded membrane. She wondered when it had hatched, and whether the bird had survived. She pictured the moment it came into the world, wet and trembling and scared.

She took the egg back to her desk, wrapped it in a tissue, and placed it inside her drawer.

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In that first dream, she woke alone in a glass house that had a 360-degree view of the ocean. It was daytime but the sky was heavy and grey and cold, the waters derelict. She was calm, afraid of nothing. In an instant, the dream made clear to her something she could not decipher in all the consciousness of her real life, that a compass of feeling existed within her, and its play with the magnetic waves that shaped her sorrow could easily direct her into unnavigable territories. And so the solution—her life's, or at least this dream's, allotted purpose—was to wait inside the glass house until the compass righted itself.

Time passed as time does in dreams, in minutes of years; she found herself older and embodied by solitude. The sun was always setting on her view, or rising—she could not tell.

Perhaps she had been tipped her so far north or south that the sun did not rise and did not set but remained constant and low, hurtling forever in circles around her. Each day she woke she settled on the terrace and gazed at the turbulent sea and the dull orange sun. This is all she did, for the dream did not require anything else of her. She did not have to eat or drink or move, and yet, still, she was required to sleep, and dream. The sun was neither hot nor cold, it was only a light. The sea, though, howled without end, and she felt its cold spray on her cheeks and tasted its brine. She sat naked with her arms held to her chest, and she grew older but her body did not. Days of sun and cloud, of migrained rays slanting in the direction of solace. Then came the fallen feather and the white owl above it, circling its message in the sky.

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They used to say things to each other, mad, wonderful things.

“You overflow in me.”

“I’m starting to believe we’re quantumly entangled.”

“I feel you like eternity must feel itself.”

“Let’s dissolve into electrons and fly away.”

Mad, stupid things that dirty new lovers say to each other. He told her things late at night that he would never tell anyone else. She felt possessed by him, by the placement of his words, the misaligned mathematics of his speech. To keep him in her world only, she fantasised about abducting him. At times, he wanted to kill and embalm her. He wondered what it would be like to eat her. She made drawings of them, intricate pictures of their bodies hanging weightless in space, close-ups of his veiny hands pinning down her wrists from behind. They spoke about leaving their spouses, running away to a completeness they believed needed to exist. What happened was not serene, nor awash with revelations about their cosmic connection, but a devastation of lives.

As their years together passed, and with them the disintegration of their happiness, she came to believe their actions had evoked a curse. He dismissed the idea, first as a way of comforting her, then, as her convictions grew stronger, he became cynical, his dismissals condescending. She consulted with healers, collected crystals and went on Ayahuasca retreats. But all this scrambling only served to build heavier expectations on what was already an unstable foundation of hope. He could see this. On the drive back from another

consultation, she'd be hysterical, demanding to know why nothing worked, why there were no miracles. Where is God, she'd say, but he no longer believed in God or anything else and hadn't for some time; he only believed in what the doctor told them—this was the only truth.

One day he swerved off the road and brought the car to a violent stop, tyres skidding.

“Stop it! Stop crying!” he said, grabbing her frail shoulders and pulling her to face him. Her make up was running and her face was swollen with grief. She looked frightened. The digital clocked showed 11:11, which meant something to her.

“It only makes it worse!” he said, and his voice shook the car. “Those goddamn people you keep seeing—they can't help you. Only the doctors can do something.”

He was shocked to understand he no longer felt anything about the whole situation. He was exhausted by it and wanted it to end. There would be no more attempts. He no longer felt anything about anything, even her. The loss of something that had not been there to begin with—this bewildering paradox had for so long shaped such a hum of pain inside him that he had transcended it, the pain. And while this revelation shocked him, it also liberated him. He realised he had the opportunity to choose not to feel any more, and in that idling car, he took it.

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When she was on sleep's precipice, she felt like she was dying. She was a funnel, a void toppling in on itself. This happened to her every so often, but now it was most nights. In that semi-conscious state, her breath's roar became deafening, the anti-gravity blackness a cold and expansive vessel down which she plunged.

She had a childhood memory of standing on a platform at as a train approached through morning rain. Its single yellow light spoke of a distant and dreary sadness she was too young to understand, yet she felt it all the same and was transfixed by it. She must have wandered too close to the edge of the platform, because in the next gash of memory she was pulled back by her father as the train sped past. What is very clear in the memory is that her father's dark strength and the power of the speeding train decided that morning to settle forever in the roots of her molars.

This was what near-death felt like now to a fully-grown woman on the verge of sleep. A deep, thick throb along the jawline, a choking mass in the throat, descending and yet rising

too, confusing her breath, provoking it to war. She woke coughing in the dark. She woke screaming and shouting names, alone and suddenly herself in her flat near the sea.

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She started seeing them on people's windowsills. First it was just one, then the next day another, and a few days after that several more. They were made of clay or porcelain and were different sizes and shapes, but they were all white owls, their staring eyes black or hollow. She stopped to watch them, to see if they moved, or if she could get them to move, awaken them to flight. They were trapped behind glass. Her thoughts could not reach them and theirs could not reach hers. She hoped they could see her, hoped they knew she saw them and was working on a plan to release them. Sometimes there were three together, never two, never four. Mother, father and child.

She saw more renditions in shop windows—candle holders, incense burners, stickers, oven gloves, plant pots, portable speakers, clocks and kitchen timers. Further signs and miracles, messages from the sky. Over the past few weeks, her eyes had been getting bigger and rounder. Each morning in the mirror she saw the subtle changes. She craved the flesh of mice and rabbit and her nails grew unstoppably. The night, the darkness, was her ally, the hushing solitude her heart's meaning completed. Weekends she slept all day and woke at twilight, salivating for food and stars. When it was darkest, she drove to the New Forest again and walked through the trees hooting and feeling her pupils fill her eyes. She saw night as day and day as night. The white owl's silence and scarcity, its wide and quiet flight—these were things that surpassed even her emptiness until they became instead an immense fullness, an airy clarity not to be feared.

In those dreams, the owl's message was clear but in waking life it became difficult to decipher. Like the hatched egg she had found, the importance attached to the owl's message flaked and fell apart when examined with waking hands too intense. At first sight, there was an obvious way to fit the pieces together, to align the fractures so they did not show, but on closer inspection the egg and the message had layers with their own fractures, and there were enough tiny pieces missing from those layers to make it impossible to bring together without imperfections. She returned repeatedly to see if her waking life's broken message was fixable with the transience of dream hands and fingers; so far she had not succeeded.

The owl used the font of flight to write its messages. But, being earthbound, made of that hard language, she had no way of translating the words. Still, she could think of no reason for the owl to be obscure. Mysterious, yes, but not obscure. Its crisp flight, its pure feathers and acute killing—these seemed to her qualities of lucidity, of a determination to be comprehensible despite fathomless physical and spiritual enigmas. And so here she was, alive and awake, and yet the owl was not, or refused to be. Despite prowess of blood and solitude, the owl could not penetrate the thin film of the living world.

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She battled winter only to arrive in a spring besotted with storms. They were given names, the storms—Adam, Andy, Beatrice—as if they were sentient beings, individuals that actualised through thunder and lightning. A long time ago—that is to say only three or four years back—she had loved the rain, loved its melancholic wrap around her life, the way it persisted outside windows and prowled roof tops. Now, though, the rain trapped her, enfolded her in a suffocating solitude that rung in her ears and permeated anyone within arm's length. She saw it in the bodies and faces of strangers came into contact with—soggy shoulders and slowed step, loosened eyes and diluted voice—all common symptoms of her virus.

In an attempt to find friends, or a friend, she took a pottery class. All women. They sat in faded plastic chairs arranged in a circle. She scanned their faces for evidence, to see which ones were like her. There was possibly only one, a woman in her sixties in whose ruffled skin and razor gaze she detected strands of sadness similar to her own, a carry of wasted body. She would never speak to her.

Of course, unrelentingly, she made owls. Class after class after class. First the owls she had seen in shops and windowsills, just to get a feel for how. The shape of the body, the feathers' texture, the deep round face with its beak and blackest of black eyes. She honed her ability to mould without looking. She didn't want to see what she was doing, only feel, otherwise it wouldn't come. By June she had made more than fifty of them, owls the size of a cricket ball, all of them white with deep, hollow eyes. The shadows inside the eyes made the black she wanted, the same wispy black of her dreams. Everywhere she went, she carried the owls in a bag. They clunked together as she walked. And wherever she decided, wherever she

felt an owl was needed, she took one from the bag and placed it there. Parks, trees, benches. Outside people's front doors, on car roofs, on the seat of a bus or train. She left them on the counters and tables of coffee shops, on people's desks at work (nobody knew it was her) and sometimes simply on the sidewalk. She watched from across the road as people either didn't notice the owl or walked around it. At times, a child would stoop to pick it up and the parent would pull her away from it. Many times, the owl, unseen, was kicked by a footstep and went tumbling along, breaking into pieces.

In July, eyes closed, she began work on the owl of her dreams. By then, her persistence of owls and her staring, her bacterial silence and sorrow, had separated her from the pottery class. All the time she wanted this while also not wanting this—isolation and time spent in corners, the suspicion and ridicule of others. In the pure dark, just as in her dreams, she began making the owl. This time it would be to scale, a perfect rendition. It would not be hollow. Though she knew the white owl was light, that its empty bones were the reason for its swift silence, but she decided hers must carry extraordinary weight—an owl unliftable and incapable of flight. It would not be able to leave her or hide away.

In the darkness she worked. She listened to her hands and her fingertips—there, without seeing, the finer music of her own bones and ligaments. It was the feeling of the owl she sought, the damp drone and sharp godliness it brought when perched in her dreams. While working sometimes, she dipped into a half-sleep and could feel in sleep's corners the owl lifting its head and opening its eyes. When she was awake, the owl slept, and while she slept, it woke. This was how they found each other, how they accepted the other's appearance in their collapsible worlds.

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When she imagined herself with her—she always wished for a girl—she was holding her small hands in hers as she fell asleep, or taking her into the sea, or wrapping her in a big towel after a bath, or removing a smudge of dirt from her cheek. She was reading to her, or baking muffins, or walking her to school, or pushing her on a swing. Sometimes she was a baby, other times a child, a teenager, a young woman. There was a website called Show Me My Baby, where you uploaded a picture of yourself and your partner and an algorithm combined the two to produce a mock-up of your child. Over the years she had uploaded

scores of photographs, noting the subtle influences that light and angle had on the result. Hidden deep inside her work computer was a folder named Emily, where she saved her favourites.

Often, just after he made love to her, she pictured the sperm travelling towards the egg and the egg being penetrated. She thought her mind could make it happen, that the miracle of maternal will could bypass the indifference of her physiology. With each passing week, with each passing year, the hours of her life became ever more silent and inert. As she retreated further into her sorrow, she felt increasingly safe there, as if this was her true space, her habitat of solace, and she became hidden, a solemn and mute entity of looking.

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Perhaps a poison brewed in her, lurked and reproduced deviously inside the nooks of her cells. She could sense it sometimes, a sickness between her legs, a near indiscernible misalignment of her inner-skin and its fingerprint. Something had gone wrong in her making, a failed experiment in the mixing of dusty old stars and DNA. She couldn't think of anything she had done to cause this. She had always been kind, loving, faithful, girlish. A prayerful being—at times on her knees—reverent of the light, of a benevolent might unseen. And now, when she died, so would this gentle view, her determined goodness.

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Collection of crystals deep in her jacket pocket, she walked along the beach, head down against the icy drizzle, against that barbed British wind. If each grain of sand was a thousand years, one day of eternity was equal to all the grains of sand from all the beaches in the world. Her father had once told her that. She hurtled along that line now, unstoppable and seeing no end but knowing it was there, the end, as blunt and hard as a wall.

She stood at the shore. Salt filled her mouth. She held the crystals in her fist, took a deep breath, and threw them as hard as she could towards the sea. They scattered in the air and, for a moment, hung there, static and confused at their unexpected state. Resigned, they let go and dropped to the water, each making tiny white smudges as they penetrated the surface. She shouted. Without meaning to, she shouted. She recognised it as the same shout

that clung to the sharp edge of her sleep when she woke from the nightmare whose details she could never recall. It was always just a black abyss, old and metallic, a rusted consciousness. That was the shout, and it was made of iron and she could taste it because it was the same as the planets of her blood, a hum from deepest space. The sound helped her see the shape of her loss. It was an empty circle in every corner of every room of her life.

Instead of the crystals, it was just the broken egg now, transported home within layers of kitchen towel to keep it from disintegrating further. She placed it on her bedside table so she could look at it as she fell asleep, and also so its hollow space, along with the soundless sound of the air collected and stored within, might protect her. How strange, she thought, that this frail, flaking shell could guard her better than the brutal crystals. As she drifted each night, she concentrated on picturing herself inside it, warm and unborn.

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She knew her owl was complete when it weighed the same as her emptiness. A grand thing, bigger than her dreams, tall as a window and, to her, just as transparent. She could see to its very heart, that misshapen organ which stored the message. While no one was looking, she had hidden it there, the owl's heart, hidden it so that when placed side-by-side, the pathway between her and the owl could finally converge. Using this pathway, each could map the other's mazes and decide on which chamber to meet. This navigation, this effort of searching and finding, of deciphering coordinates—being themselves being numbers—eventually painted thin residues of peace within them both. Neither understood how the other purveyed it, this peace, this drawing back from animal violence and somnolent bile, and yet purveyed it was, in the treetop wind of their thoughts. In this new manner they went about being who and what they were, both to themselves and the other. Neither was advantaged or disadvantaged, for their solitudes weighed the same.

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At times, her whole life felt like the late substance of a dream she was trying to remember. Something vast had been lost, but she was happy not to know exactly what it was, just like

the owl when it woke from dreams where it had forgotten how to fly then remembered it could, and would.

She returned to the New Forest, no longer to sleep and scream but to carry the owl and set it down, finally, in place. In the dark, in the clearing where the stars showed and fell, she dug its feet into the trampoline earth—it must always stay upright, staring—and left it there. At first it glowed but then it darkened, darkened, darkened, until its clay feathers matched the dark eyes.

In the seasons that followed, she went back to visit the owl, interested in its progress as an object of lesser meaning and sorrow. And though weathered and worn, it seemed nobody ever touched it. Too heavy to carry, it was not moved from its decided place, nor was it stolen. It remained, for no one but her knew what it really was or what to do with it.

Eventually she forgot the owl was there, her memory of it eroded by rain. It can only be assumed that it, too, wore away, or broke apart, or decayed all on its own, over years and years, as all things must.