

MARI KLOEPPPEL

Saw-Whet-Owl, 2017
Oil on canvas, 14 x 10 in



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

BRIDGET LYONS

Owlgazing

Wilderness observations
and the act of seeing

An owl allowed itself to be seen by me. I was running on the other side of the nearly dry creek, on the trail that requires me to hide my sensitive skin under layers of protective fabric. I emerged from the poison oak-choked arroyo into the foggy fields of wild oat, fescue, and brome grass, then turned up the faint two track, relieved to be out in the open. Just after veering onto the ledge with the ocean view, I swiveled my head toward the most prominent of the oaks and detected the kind of movement that can only come from a creature with a giant wingspan. I stopped and scanned the copse of gray and green tones, hoping to spot something out of the ordinary. I did—an oblong form, seemingly frozen onto a low-hanging branch.

It was a great horned owl, I think, based on its size and coloring. It looked at me—and I looked at it—for five dense and drawn-out seconds. We saw each other. And we were seen.

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While I never thought I'd be the kind of person that would marry young, I always assumed that at some point I'd find my someone and that together we'd pair up and take on the world. I never wanted kids, I wasn't looking for financial support, and I didn't think I needed to be seen as part of a couple. I just wanted a cockpit companion for shared adventures—things like music festivals, excursions to the hardware store, trips to South America, stressful family visits. Life.

After I'd been in a relationship with the mountain guide for five years, I started to assume we'd eventually make our status official in the eyes of the law. We were in that late twenties to early thirties age bracket, the period during which most happy-enough couples decide that the logistics of life are easier with rings. He and I had attended a series of weddings set in wildflower-strewn meadows, and the duos getting hitched were at the core of our social network. When I finally asked him if he saw us following in their footsteps, he said, "No. I've never even thought about getting married. Should I? Have you?" There was not a trace of anger, bitterness, or deception in his voice; the issue had simply never crossed his mind. Oily beads of shame oozed from every one of my pores, fueling the blaze I was witnessing—five years of perceived partnership going up in smoke.

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A few months later, he slept with a coworker on a climbing trip. She was the one I'd once referenced in the midst of a fight, muttering, "Why don't you just hook up with her? She climbs harder than me and is pretty much your female twin anyway." They've been married for years now, and, from what I hear, they have a healthy, well-adjusted child.

I probably should have learned something from this situation, only I was never really sure what the take-home was supposed to be. "Talk about your vision sooner" or "Have more frequent 'state of the union' check-ins" were the obvious ones. But it always seemed like there was something deeper to be mined, something I might catch a glimpse of if I caught it at just the right angle.

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Last year, I attended a presentation at a local raptor center where the docent on duty introduced the crowd to a couple of truly majestic resident owls. "Let me be clear," she had said, "if you see an owl, it's allowing itself to be seen by you. I guarantee you that by the time you've spotted it, it's already been aware of your presence for several minutes." Owls can see in three dimensions and judge distances, much the way we can. They can also hear the heartbeat of their prey from three hundred feet away. "You will never sneak up on this creature," the woman said, nodding to the owl at rest on her gloved forearm, "although it may allow you to think you are doing just that."

Since then, I have made a point of recognizing my passive role in the act of seeing. If I am lucky enough to spot one of these elusive birds, I thank it for allowing me the privilege to see it.

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I'm an almost-fifty-year-old woman who has never been in a partnership that involved cohabitation. The mountain guide and I technically split rent at a few places, but he was working in the field most of the time, so, really, I was cohabitating with his dirty clothes and climbing ropes. After we split up, I invested a little too much energy into the kinds of men that single women semiaffectionately refer to as "bad boys."

I hung out with a guy who owned a garage door company and had more than a passing familiarity with the court system. He was an incredibly skilled skier and mountain biker and a hell of a lot of fun; he also said point blank on date number two that his ex-wife had been the woman for him and that there would never be another. I gave a few more years to a beautiful half-Brazilian man who was quite open about his intention to find a woman in Rio de Janeiro who could supply him with a home and ensure the dual citizenship of his offspring. Then there was a string of men for whom I served as a rebound girlfriend, happily and quite consciously providing some bizarre public service. I knew these relationships weren't going anywhere; my view of the world didn't line up with any of theirs. Still, dead-end dating somehow seemed preferable to getting blindsided.

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My myopia is so severe that I am considered legally blind without my contact lenses. There is no question that, in another era, I would have been run over by a mastodon, for the simple reason that I would not have been able to see it coming. My vision impediment first appeared in fourth grade, when I was called on to read aloud off of the blackboard and couldn't make out the sentence written in perfect pink cursive. I was the best reader in my class; I had whizzed through all the short story modules in the color-coded box at the back of the room, and I was the only student who was permitted to dive into whatever chapter book she wanted during free reading time. Only that day,

during free reading time, I had to go to the nurse's office to squint at fuzzy capital letters hidden deep inside a big beige machine. In my fourth-grade school picture, I am wearing a pair of ugly wire-frame glasses.

We nearsighted people—those of us who cannot see objects from a distance—have what is called a "focal point." This is the dividing line between the part of the world we can delineate clearly and the part of the world that remains a total blur. Every year, my focal point moved closer and closer to me. By the time I was an adult and living on my own, it was only a few inches in from my face. Luckily, contact lens technology improved during the course of my childhood, and I have been sticking little plastic discs into my eyeballs for something like thirty-five years now. I put them in as soon as I get up every day and take them out right before I go to sleep, so I rarely experience my near blindness.

When I have almost cohabitated with men, I have deliberately gone to bed with my contact lenses still in my eyes. I take them out sometime later, when I get up to go to the bathroom. I tell my bedmate that I can't stand the awkwardness of groping for the glass of water on the nightstand. Really, though, I'm afraid I might miss some key facial expression.

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My favorite bird at the raptor center was K2, a Eurasian eagle owl—a slightly larger Old World version of a great horned owl. She was enormous, intimidating, and remarkably graceful, and my mouth dropped as I watched her fly from perch to perch, swooping down with one beat of her wings to seize and devour frozen mice. Her feathers were covered with intricate weavings of rich brown tones, and her eyes were downright piercing. Apparently, she could kill a deer in the wild, and she regularly ate pocket gophers in a single gulp—bones and all.

I could see how developing some kind of a relationship with her would be emboldening. It's one thing to get a dog or a cat to be loyal; you just need to give them food and a little attention, and they're on your side forever. With raptors, it is clear that you need to earn their trust. You need to meet them where they are, play their game, and be on top of your own. I got the feeling that they'd know when you were being dishonest—with yourself or with

them—and that they'd deny you their affection if they saw you entangled in a mess of self-deception.

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Somewhere in the litany of bad boy companions, I detected and acknowledged my self-sabotaging pattern and started focusing on "nice boys." I figured they'd want to know more about who I was and where I was going and that they'd have their own aspirations they were pursuing. I knew they might not be as much fun, but I had started to accept that someone with life-partner potential might present himself in some other kind of plumage than the kind I'd been on the lookout for. I decided to be more open about my interest in a long-term relationship—with myself and with them, and I was willing to overlook details that I had previously thought were important. Maybe it was okay if he didn't like to travel. And so what if he didn't read much or invest political significance into every grocery store purchase? A little difference would be healthy, especially in the long view—which was what I was aiming for.

The nice boys supported me unquestionably, in everything I did. And I did some really stupid things. I quit jobs and burned bridges and acted impulsively. I blamed other people for my bad choices, and I claimed victim status for a slew of misfortunes. They never called me on any of it. In their eyes, I was perfect. In mine, I was not.

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Owls are classified as raptors. The word *raptor* comes from the Latin verb *rapere*—"to seize or take by force"—so, these birds are, in fact, defined by their predatory behaviors.

When I watch them, each and every movement they make strikes me as deliberate and calculated. These masters of efficiency appear to waste no energy on unnecessary action, and, when they are still, they exude strength, confidence, and poise.

* * *

Sometime in my late twenties, the seemingly limitless deterioration of my eyesight finally tapered off. "Of course, soon enough you'll start getting farsighted too," every eye doctor was quick to remind me—from the age of about thirty on. For almost twenty years, I was able to come

back at them with some snarky retort about my unique reverse-aging process.

When I had my annual vision checkup last week, I was confident I'd be able to read the letters on the close-up card, and I was ready with a comment about being frozen in my prime. Only, when the optician slid the farsighted test sheet in front of my eyes, I saw nothing but fuzzy, feathery, gray masses. Now, I've got a pair of cute readers with hibiscus flowers on the sides. I've also got a reason to spring for another couple of sets with different color schemes. Then I can stash them in my desk and my car and my messenger bag, which is what I see my older friends do.

I'm not really all that worked up about aging. I like the gray skunk stripes emanating from my temples, and I appreciate the wisdom that I've gained along with them. It does worry me, however, that not only am I now unable to see things at a distance, I am also unable to see what is going on right under my nose.

Supposedly, when one sense disappears, the others become heightened to pick up the slack. I wouldn't mind being able to hear the heartbeat of a mouse from three hundred feet away or the sound of my future sneaking up on me.

* * *

After I had cut things off with five attractive, kind, and relatively stable men over a six- or seven-year period of time, the word *predatory* began to be paired with my name in the landscape of small-town gossip.

I don't think my neighbors' assessment of me was accurate; no self-respecting predator would have wasted that much time and energy on such uncertain targets. I really believed that I could make these relationships work. At least, I did at the outset, anyway. I tried to convince myself that people can grow into love, so I stayed with the bartender even after I realized that we could never have a meaningful conversation about current events. I stuck it out with the fireman even though he complained incessantly about his supervisors and threw back Jameson shots at the conclusion of each shift. I even gave the spiritually sophisticated pot farmer a couple years more than I should have, hoping that his occasional references to abandoning felonious work might eventually result in a career change.

I didn't think I was gauging and measuring, and I sure wasn't trying to take anything by force; I was trying to slide into the kind of comfortable coupling I saw around me, the kind where each person can see the other one thinking, understand where they're coming from, and perhaps visualize where they might be heading.

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The eyes of owls can constitute up to 5 percent of their body weight. *National Geographic* says that if we had eyes of the same proportion, they'd be the size of oranges. Their enormous eyes make owls farsighted—like me, now.

The limitations of their farsightedness are overcome by their impressive depth perception and ability to see in low light. While they don't see in color—they lack sufficient cone cells to do so—their low-light vision is exceptional. Owls have five times as many rods in their eyes as we do, allowing for incredibly keen night vision. They see things we cannot. In conditions where we struggle to make out even basic shapes, much less fine detail, owls can both identify objects and locate them in time and space. It seems fair to assume that they can assess their significance too—in the black of night, from far away.

* * *

In each of my nice guy relationships, I held on until eerily clear pictures of these men's futures began to emerge like individual trees from the forest of uncertainty. At some point, I started having recurring premonitions—like home movies, almost—of each of them going about lives that didn't and couldn't include me. They looked completely content in these dreamlike narratives, and it became impossible not to see how my presence would revise these scenes for the worse.

"You can't break up with me because you think you're not right for me," one said. "That's bullshit. I get to decide what's right for me, not you." But I stuck to my guns, convinced of my superior ability to see into the depth of time. I foresaw parenthood for several of them, and a different sort of woman—more stable, more traditional, more rooted in routine—for all five. I clung to those images as I set each of them free while being accused of shortsighted thinking, restlessness, unrealistic expectations, and stupidity.

Two of them are fathers now—happily married (so far

as I know) and fortunate enough to have regular jobs and child care. One is in a stable relationship with a single mom; he just moved closer to her in order to show his degree of commitment to both mother and daughter. The pot grower has found a gorgeous astrologer who smokes as much as he does and has no issues with his operation. And, while it's true that one of the five is very much alone, I'm still quite certain he's going to make his way back to his ex-wife. Accurate timelines don't seem to be part of my limited clairvoyance.

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The raptor center I visited rehabilitates injured birds and, whenever possible, releases them back into the wild. Many of the birds have been hit by cars, others have contracted lead poisoning from eating bullet-ridden carcasses, and still others are the victims of electrocutions or window strikes. After injured hawks, eagles, and owls are brought to the center, they spend anywhere from a week to several months undergoing treatments such as chelation for poisoning and surgery for repairing broken bones.

The latest great horned owl to be admitted to the center came in just two weeks ago. He was hit by a car but suffered no fractures. They were able to release him the next day, after a course of anti-inflammatory pain medications. I know this because I check the raptor center's website obsessively, wondering what birds are in there and why. I like to know when they are set free, even though the center rarely reveals exactly where these former patients are flung headlong into the next stages of their lives. Sometimes they post videos of the moment of release. They're only four or five seconds long—even in slow motion—so I can watch them again and again if I want to feel that vicarious exhilaration. I don't need either of my pairs of glasses to see their lightness when they take to flight.

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Were my visions real or were they just excuses? While they did play themselves out with intriguing accuracy, it could be argued that they were generic enough to be reasonable scenarios for guys in any small town—especially one where the majority of residents sink their heels in and stick it out in their established nests. But, if they were excuses, what were they excuses for?

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"Let's just call this habit 'preemptive narration,'" a writing buddy told me over a couple of margaritas. "You script a story in which you can't possibly be right for the guy, which gives you an excuse to never really show yourself. You keep the plot line handy until you get restless, then you release him in some dramatic performance. When these guys end up living out something that vaguely resembles your little fiction, you get to be the hero, the catalyst, the fairy godmother. The one who enables him to spread his wings. Sounds to me like a great way to keep yourself hidden and still take credit for improving everyone's lives. Well, everyone's except for your own, that is."

I suddenly felt like my drink was a little stronger than I could handle, and my menu was looking extra blurry. Using an early-morning meeting as an excuse, I politely got up from the table and walked home.

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There are about two hundred species of owls. Almost all of them are solitary. Up to eight owlets may be found in a nest together when they are young, but, once they fledge, owls are rarely seen in the company of others. Owls come together only for the couple months of nesting season; the rest of the year, they live and hunt on their own. Great horned owls mate for life, however. Somehow, they manage to find and get back together with the same partner, year after year. I wonder if they recognize each other by

their feather patterns or the rhythms of their hearts. Or perhaps it's something else—a distinct odor, a flight cadence, or even an aura that scientists can't yet detect. I wonder, too, how they found each other in the first place, how they established that they were a they.

* * *

I'm not sure what I don't want them to see. Once upon a time it was my imperfection, but I'd like to think I'm over that. I'm pretty forthright about my confusion these days, and I issue plenty of caveats about my existential dilemmas. I fess up to my exercise addiction, my rigid eating and sleeping habits, and my inability to maintain a meditation practice despite knowing that it might be the only thing that can save me from myself. I readily admit that I've fenced off a minefield of unresolved parental issues, and I'm old enough to know that any physical perks I once offered are fading fast. What's left to hide?

I worry that by the time I am seen, there will be nothing left to see.

* * *

The owl and I both maintained our distance from each other. I knew better than to advance even one more step; just a twitch of my leg could prompt it to fly from the twisted limb into the darkness of the creek bed below. At the same time, those penetrating eyes appeared quite content to check me out from up above. For the owl, getting closer wouldn't reveal any new information. Its acutely refined senses had already taken in and processed everything important about me. On the other hand, I think I could have learned more about my companion if I had been able to see it better. Maybe it would have looked less regal, less powerful, or less smart if I could witness a twitch, shudder, or blink. Maybe I would have caught a glimpse of hesitation or ambivalence. But since I couldn't close the gap between us, I was left reinforcing my initial impression—that this bird was poised, wise, and in command of itself and its world. Everything about the owl's presence suggested that it could never be caught off guard.

The fog was lifting, and the fields of strawberries and brussels sprouts along the coastline were coming into focus. The faded map on the kiosk back at the parking lot had indicated that another path—one I'd never been on—led

down that way. I pulled my shirt off, tied it around my waist, and began running toward the ocean. Then I suddenly stopped and rotated my head to look back toward the oak grove. I must have sensed its gaze, still unwavering, as it followed me along this new trail.

Bridget A. Lyons is looking forward to moving back to Santa Cruz, California, after completing an MFA in creative writing at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona, this spring. A graduate of Harvard University, Lyons now works as an editor and composition instructor. She has had previous lives as a wilderness guide, yoga teacher, energy bar maker, and graphic designer. Her essays have been published in *Hawk and Handsaw*, *Atticus Review*, *Wanderlust*, and *Elephant Journal* and by 1888 Center. She recently received a Voices of the Wilderness grant to travel with and write about bird biologists in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

MARI KLOEPPEL

Barn Owl in Manzanita, 2017
Oil on canvas, 26 1/4 x 21 in



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