

# OWL WOLF GHOST

*Paula Bohince*

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Hush.

Wolves are walking  
into our deepest fear of waking, blind  
and cold,  
at the forest's dead center.

Is this intimacy?

As we cling to the notion of them, to each other?

Aroused, they slink in  
as convicts, bowed with self-hatred—

ghost-guardians, all breath  
and electricity, shudder against shoulder.

Ice-coast of the forest.

~

Forest as coppery blur, a letter burnt  
at its edges, unsent,

or else a thread, unraveling into many at its ends,

or else a circuit  
composed of wolves in their chains,

owls as pins holding together  
the pines, gods of the ghosts who storm in.

A whirlwind.

~

Owl smiles as it tears into the rabbit—  
once so close to earth, it could run without touching  
a single leaf—white blur, sped-up cloud.

Now a doll in a claw-like mouth.

And the owls in the sisterly boughs twist their heads  
in competition. Admitting unfairness.

Envy as decay.

Why wolves kill in packs. Encircle the fawn's broken legs.

~

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What did the hand intend?

Separating the clouds so stereotypically? Like clouds do  
in movies.

Above the forest's unlit candles, owl flung across the vapor and solidity  
of sky, like the prop that it was.

With prey in its jaw.

Besieged play, the animal and its victim suffer  
a mutual debut.

Vision field. The near-empty stage. *Feeling*. Sick with it.

~

Owl stoops in its essence, blown  
image, soiled reputation.

Where is wisdom?

In a tree's hollowed ribcage. In heartlessness?

Steeped in night's waters,  
owl is boil and blossom together,  
the forest's ignition—

tar silhouette against tea-light,  
wings lifted.

~

Owl loves to kiss its own ivory face  
when flying the river,

crossing the desiccated forest to the flourishing  
mirror, greeting its fancy-faced

brother, dressed lace collars, and born  
to the sky's highest power.

~

Owl in a serial hunt:  
a humming thought allowed to wander,  
compelled to earth, dripping petals.

Prey sees itself from the sky:  
peril in the iris, panic behind closed eyes  
of clover.

Flowers are mindless.

Part reptile—talons, the hard mouth—  
all the rest, smoke.

~

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Owl carries a snake in its mouth  
like a victory banner, or branch offering unrest.

When the owl screams, it does so  
in pleasure.

When the snake dies? When the owl dies?  
They become the river.

Meaning river as trench the soul rides through.  
The body's irrelevant.

~

Limbo  
in the copse (forest  
in miniature).

Commiseration  
(misery multiplied)  
by the river.

Nostalgic for bodies,  
ghosts tilt  
between violets,

mourn over corpses  
vanished in wind.

~

Wolves and their ghosts  
kneel beside the glass-eyed river.

Downhill, the river widens, grows human  
beside human fields  
of smoke and music and pity.

Upstream, water weakens  
where it begins, where the hard-shelled  
insects and scrub brush  
are banished.

~

What is a story, but branches bundled into sense  
with flesh on it?

Skeleton as lesson.

For instance, the owls in their nursery.

Bent into each other's breast, leaning into clean sleep,  
they bite and nuzzle all night.

So the wolves.

Ghosts witness this and are in torment.  
They miss the lover's body.

*How will I find you?*

~

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Rain occupies the larger part of an hour—

intermission in the forest's theater, night's filler  
knifing the atmosphere.

Gnats first to emerge, after.

With frantic bodies, they try to locate each other.

A nightmare of wolves, fur whittled  
to needles, gorgeous no more, show themselves  
as the dogs that they are.

~

Minnnows spark beneath the river's marbled ceiling—

unadmiring of the owls crowning  
above their bed—

vacant of wolf-philosophy,

but content to live coldly, wholly ignorant of the forest,  
with shadow fluency.

~

Pussy willow bent against the verve  
of the river, soft faces smuggled on branches.

Moon purrs, pours its cream.

*How can you thirst when there is so much light?*

Kittenish, they mew and bundle against the nipple.

Swell against the vespertine.

~

Wolf-jealousy—

the bees' hive, a lantern  
soaked on the tree.

To live in the lantern, its industry,  
to exist as a bee,

to shape-shift, to inhabit  
the darkening face,

neutrality changed to anger,  
then returned its sugar.

Balm of the forest.  
Such persuasive sweetness.

~

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---

The forest's tenants sting the river.

Understanding the trees will soon open their manifold doors.

And day will intrude on the dream.

This has happened before.

First the moon is erased, then their tenuous bodies.

With hardly a cry as they fade. Barely a crimp in the leaves.

~

Over time, and wordlessly,  
the ghosts came to agree that sex was wholly  
unnecessary.

The consequential moan, the exhaustion of afterwards.

Impossible now.  
Water pouring through water.

~

Orphaned in the largest sense—  
the god-sense—  
and stationed long in the scent of wolf and water,

the ghosts forget  
lives that once seemed essential, the human  
bled out, left only a sentence:

*I was afraid, but then I touched your hand  
ever so literally.*

~

To dream long is to dwell  
in the thrill and the thrall, jailed in the fog  
of a far-off forest.

Head-clouds rich with other lovers.

The dream flaunts the flower  
of what might have been, then scatters its seeds  
to haunt the rest of our hours.

Paula Bohince is the author of a poetry collection, *Incident at the Edge of Bayonet Woods* (Sarabande Books, 2008), and the recipient of a 2009 Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Her poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *Slate*, *Ploughshares*, *The Yale Review*, and elsewhere.