

OWL'S MYTH

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Owl's horns flew up, and he glared with huge yellow cat-eyes from his cottonwood-top. He growled inside his throat, chortled, barked, finally boomed. "OFF! OFF! OFF OF STUMP ISLAND!"

Blast blasted his disc player, blatted his muffler, turned off the bridge. He drove his truck down the bank on tires as high as horse-withers, and he smashed through saplings--cottonwood, maple, ash, hackberry, willow, walnut, birch--it made no difference. The tires snapped the stems, sank through a film of snow, spun in mud, and a little oak flew up, and Owl swiveled his head away, flinching, gnashing his beak. He had called the wind to knock down the acorn and had watched as a squirrel had buried it, and the sprout had inched up, and the velvety red leaves had unfurled each spring, and now the stem and tap root lay mangled and shredded.

H.D.--High Drive--got out yipping, and Little Blast and skinny-fidgety Willie and dark-eyed Candy straddled ATVs in snow suits, and nine--ten--eleven more trucks came, all awesomely roaring, blazingly-glitteringly bright, idling so broad and so tall that Little Blast drove donuts beneath them, ducking his head.

Blast yelled at the fathers rolling ATVs from trailers for their kids. "Fucking A! Saturday! You boneheads ready, or you still twiddling your dicks? You want to run some mud, or you still wiping off your crust?"

Fumes from pops and sputters rolled inside Owl's bill, stinging his throat, and he flew down the island through treetops to the old-gnarled oak and Mama Horn flat on their nest.

"The stumps!" he said, and Mama Horn shifted sideways, and whitish chicks squeaked and flopped about with gangly-pink wings, their faces all beaks, eyes barely open, bodies no bigger than big men's fists, starving to grow into a warming spring.

The drivers crashed through tangles and jumped deadfalls, fishtailing, spewing

seedy brown goop, and H.D. barked and sprinted black beside them, his fur collie-length and rippling and shiny. He quieted. He crept along a narrow neck of land past the oak, and he settled his snout upon his paws at the edge of a frozen slough, and a beaver poked his face from an open hole of water.

"Stay!" cried Willie, and the beaver slapped its tail, diving down, and the dog leapt in, and the beaver stayed under, and H.D. swam round and round, nosing ice-edges, and his chin sank, his gums shook, his eyes got oily and urgent.

Willie called and clapped. He ran onto the ice, and Blast swatted him sideways, cuffing his helmet, lifting a pistol. He shot into the sky, and H.D. crawled out and lay on the ice, dripping and panting, and Blast shot again, and the dog staggered to Blast and shivered against his shins.

Willie got up from the ice, rubbing his head and elbow, and he threw his helmet ringing against Blast's truck and drove straight across the slough, skirting the beaver's hole, his shoulders slumping sulkily.

Candy straightened her chinstrap, watching him speed through widening woods, and Owl felt her thoughts-waves. *You could tear-ass through the bottoms toward the holy-ass channel and bust crazy-ass through nothing but gray-bumpy sloughs, gray-leafless trees and rotten-brown stumps, and finally the island would end, and the water would be about as whole-fucking big as the sky, and you could launch your wheels right onto an ice floe, and Blast would about hemorrhage and shout his head off and cream in his briefs.*

Blast came over and took out her key. "You fetch that blabbermouth, and I'll have one half-drowned bitch and one full-frozen idiot."

"Daddy!"

"Don't drive on that ice, I said."

She took off her helmet, flicked her hair across her nape, gleamed at him, and he turned and glared at roots on banks too steep and stump-crowded to run. He hardened his face, smiled at the oak, grinned at Candy. "You think I can't do this?"

"Your saw's at home, Daddy."

Blast bear-hugged a stump, broke it from its base, hoisted it two-handed above his

head, hurled it against another, poured on gas.

Candy towed H.D. by the fire, and Little Blast pulled an old rusted cable from leaf litter, and Blast looped it from the oak to his truck, and then his door slammed, and he was in the cab. The truck lunged forward, and the cable tightened, and Owl flew down and beat his beak against the windshield. His talons screeched against glass, and Mama Horn clung to a rear tire, clawing tread, biting cable, and the truck boomed jet-like. The oak screamed. It split. It thundered down, and then there were shots, whoops, big-belly laughs and shreds of chicks on shattered nest sticks, and H.D. rolled across Mama Horn--her bib raw-bloody flesh, an eye and ear tuft pasted against a nearby tree.

Owl hooted mournfully down, his moans hollow, barely as loud as the beaver's wake--drawn out--contained--drawn out again.

The old bulbous oak thudded against trunks and stumps, dragged by Blast's truck, and he revved across the crater, and everyone followed, and the Stump Island Bottoms thrummed like an eight-lane bridge in a city.

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A coyote licked and chewed at her breast and lapped up the chicks. He slunk into dusk between trunks, and then that scavenger-dog winked high in the dark, sniffing the heels of the Insatiable One who raised a hickory war-club, wore a hot-pulsing belt and carried a turtle-shell shield that spat incisors snapping after the Seven Ancient Owl Sisters who swirled the voices of the dead in a funnel until the departing howls rose through the sky-hole and blew across a flat-frozen world of bones, featherless buzzards and eagles bald who gnawed dried-up marrow and cried like the wailing cracks of splintering ice.

Moon climbed out of the river black and steaming and thickening.

The stars blurred blue and hazed yellow above town.

The lights went out at the house, and Blast kicked open the storm door, squeezing Willie's nape. He pushed Willie to the driveway and muscled his face against the dent in the truck's door and then against the windshield-cracks. "Bend over." Blast thrust

Willie's helmet into his hands. "Hold it down against the ground." Blast pulled a rubber strap from the pickup's bed, swung it huffing and grunting, and finally its s-hook flew off, plinking against the garage, he went in, and Willie cooled his ass and thighs against the cold-crusting lawn. He lay prone, his arms sprawled, his helmet on, its tinted visor drawn down, its ear-speakers pounding Vicious Rage, and Owl saw the color inside his breath, a sooty vapor like the billowing smoke of burning tires. He saw the stink sink in Willie, the darkness gather around his organs, and he thought of a brood hatched without beaks, eyes never opening, skin greenish and transparent, stomachs droopy and leaky. The chicks had writhed, begging, and Mama Horn had closed her beak upon their necks firmly, quickly, and then there had been that fawn wiggling on its back on the bridge, snorting, kicking its legs, and a white-smocked man had used a merciful needle.

Owl glared down from the yard's flagpole, burning wind-howls onto the Vicious Rage disc, and Willie melted.

Willie left only a grease spot on last year's grass, and H.D. pawed beneath the fence of his pen, whining, whimpering, and Blast got hard, waking beside his wife. *Crissie was making high little moans? Squirming? About what? Willie's pay-up? The slime-ball looks from her head-honcho boss?*

Crissie's eyes popped open--Owl leaned forward from a bedpost, squeezing Kitty limp and bleeding in a talon. He tossed the cat at Blast's feet and flapped at Blast's lap. He bit down, and Blast squiggled backward, and Owl convulsed as if constipated, and he spat Blast's thing like a pellet upon the mattress.

He slit open Kitty's belly--an early winter wren flew out--a song sparrow, bluebird, house finch, goldfinch, an early robin, chickadees and cardinals flew out.

"I do as you to us!" Owl gulped the thing again, ripped open a pillow and beat wings through a sudden storm of down. He plunged into the toilet, a merganser diving deep, and then he flew up through a sewer grate. He shook himself clean, and High Drive jumped against his pen, barking, and Owl lit upon the dog's ruff, ran a claw across his throat and then raked the dog's fur.

Oh, a piece of her heart.

Owl blew breath upon the glob, and Mama Horn pushed out, and Owl spat the

thing again, and Mama Horn swallowed it, and they flew above town into an enormous blue glow, Heart City Hard Motor.

They strutted atop a giant neon sign, bowing and bobbing in a throbbing buzz, and he preened her, and they locked bills and clacked, but she plummeted from him. She pressed her belly against a pickup's tire and bit the air valve, and it tore easily, and then Hard Motor trucks sank from lot-corner to street-front.

Owl clawed open a gas cap, and she spat the thing in there. She spat saliva thrice, clearing the taste, and she yelled, "DIS-SOLVE! DIS-SOLVE! DIS-SOLVE-A-HA-HOO-HA!"

They flew into a red glow, Heart River Hardware, and rows of four wheelers waited outside on double-decker trailers, and they bit off those valves, and then they fucked at River View Inn, slapping, spinning and flapping like English sparrows on the carport's roof.

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They perched on the backside of Stump Island, and he HAW-HOOED at the Dipper. He cursed the Dipper. He besought the Dipper, and then he hooted down, and Mama Horn blinked in assent--the ice-echoes from River Sun Slough sounded nearly as solid as when cold had gripped all things, and darkness had pinned silence against Earth as unflinchingly as talons hold rats.

And, oh, the slough had thundered then! It had shifted, and ice-shards had flown high, and the Dipper had glittered in place, had fallen, had bounced up again. The bucket had smashed the north country flat, and the handle had made the long-curving valley to the gulf. Ice-shards had scattered all across the sky, and a stump had risen on this bank, and the slough had boomed, and the owls had flown out, coming into being.

The ice had knocked, and a woodpecker had flown out, had clung to the stump, had hammered away an icicle. The woodpecker peered through a crack, pumped his bill yes and shrieked deliriously--a tiny curve of sun glowed inside the stump! Two burning-black eyes! A black-glistening bill! A song came out! "Heat-heat-heat-heat! Cheat-

cheat-cheat!"

River Sun Warbler! She sat on a nest in there!

She poured out her warmth, and a fiery white ball rose from the stump, and pretty soon the slough smelled of mud and catfish and turtle flesh, duckweed bloomed, and teal with crescent-moon cheeks came, and swans funneled down from the sky, and grebes pumped horny-blond heads, skidding and gliding across the melt.

Owl tore open a rabbit, and Mama Horn bent with the meat, but their first fuzzy ones scrunched suddenly down, looking over the nest-rim with lion-sized gawks.

A brown head rose from the slough--a man. He fisted a mallard's neck, and a woman plucked the duck on this bank, her ribs too big-looking. Their girl squalled, her stomach thinner than her waist, and the man grabbed a hickory club and walked off toward a marsh, smelling muskrats, and then the woman saw a wet-gray splotch on a maple trunk, and she and her girl licked it hungrily. It tasted sweet, and they peeled bark from a river birch, folded and sewed boxes with bone-awls and nettle-fibers, hung the boxes on maples each year, caught the sap, and always the men hunted the thawing marshes, and always the women stayed behind, boiling syrup on this bank.

The women molded sugar in duckbills...reeds...rawhide...brass...tin, and one morning shouts came from the channel, commands. A keelboat moved up the current. A crew of white men pushed poles from their shoulders, hunching forward, grunting, and their captain quieted, and the women knew his stare. The women left their kettles. They ran through the bottoms, and River Sun fell, her ankle throbbing in a groundhog-hole. The crew hoisted that girl, her new breasts wiggling against her dress. The men got her down in the sugarhouse, the captain spread her on a bearskin, and River Sun shrank beneath him. She screamed, "Heat-heat-heat! Cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat!" She grew yellow feathers. She flew out. She hid in the stump like the warbler on eggs, and the men brought axes from the cargo box. They swung blades against the stump, and splashes sprayed their ankles, and the river gushed cold up their thighs. The river shriveled the men. It covered the island, banging with ice-chunks, and the captain climbed onto a sweeper, heading for his boat, and Mama Horn called a gust, and he fell in, and Owl felt the captain's last thought.

And the thought took many reservations, many brown mutilations, many killings. But the Noisy Things finally came, downing trees, loading logs onto rail cars, dumping rock, pouring cement, and then the flood backed up behind hard iron gates and long white walls, and River Sun Warbler flew into the top a little cottonwood sticking out above water scummy and brown and not-flowing.

She stared anxiously at the surface. The cottonwood leaves opened into tiny hearts, glistening sticky with sap, and she felt an egg coming, and then the leaves shriveled, and the sapling floated up with bloated roots. She flew into the top of a little oak, and she waited, looking down into the water, and the oak leaves shriveled too.

And when finally the water dropped, and the stump stood dry, River Sun Warbler sat glowing in her nest-hole, and sharp black nails burst in, meticulous hands.

She flew out: all the little raccoons had grown big while the flood had lingered, and now they sniffed stumps everywhere, standing easily on two paws, reaching in, and their snouts dripped yokes.

Only a few little River Suns hatched and came out, and they begged from branches, and their parents searched shrubs and trees, stacking worms in their bills, but little snakes, little squirrels, little crows, little jays and kittens had also grown big, and they left only a little yellow down from the chicks.

Mama Horn would hiss at her own young hunters. "The River Suns! Don't eat them! Pass them over!"

Owl raged. Now the big old oaks and cottonwoods were about gone from this bottoms all the way to the mouth, and Sky Warbler no longer whispered in towering crowns from island to island or bank to bank. Every spring, that little bird used to brush the air the deep cerulean of the south, yet now the blue of the day pales to a smog, dims, and no one in rolling or flying or floating machines hears that soft song at all.

Nor River Sun Warbler calling plaintively for little ones not answering.

"Heat-heat-heat-heat! Cheat-cheat-cheat!"

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Blast drove his truck home, balanced himself on the cab's step, swung his legs ably across the side panel. He spread his feet on the bed and unbuckled his belt, and a gas hose flopped out--tough like his strap, thick as if the hospital had sewn it on from a fuel tanker. Pinkish and orange, it hung off the tailgate, and Candy cupped palms beneath it, lifting it from asphalt, and Crissie fingered its trigger, stretching it out the driveway, and Blast wiped a tear. "Remember my--" He gulped pain in front of cousins, neighbors and dad-buddies. "Remember my--WILLIE!" He cocked his big-boned chin, set his bite irritably, glared stubbornly at cameramen, party chairmen, voters, finally senators and representatives. "We drive WHATEVER WHEREVER WE WANT!"

Invasion-tanks, armored fighting vehicles, multiple missile carriers, multiple rocket launchers, transporter erector launchers, commando four-wheelers, armored reconnaissance vehicles, self-propelled sensor carriers, feather-smeller transporters, Skyhawks, Seahawks, Eagles, Harriers, Blackhawks, Fighting Falcons, Sea Stallions, Hornets, Dragonflies, Sidewinders, Diamondbacks, Cayuses, Chinooks, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Apaches lined up, and everyone wore crisp fatigues, saluting, holding and stroking his hose, and gas holes sucked and sucked and sucked and sucked and sucked and sucked and sucked his nozzle, and Blast hummed and vibrated and swelled and hoisted his boy to his shoulders.

Little Blast straddled Dad's neck, kicked his feet, inched close, found his little hairless thing had turned into a hose too. He thrust it secretly through his fly, screwed it into Blast's nape, and then he saw on his hand-held monitor a hole high in an oak, Owl's new nest. He saw a stump near the roots, the curve and gleam of a helmet, a heat reading that told him his brother was definitely held down inside, and Blast sniggered, rolled in his hose and zippered up.

Amphibious assault vehicles landed at Left Kettle Point, and tanks and hummers sped through Old Oak Neck.

Lasers shone dots against stumps, and earthmovers crushed them with dozer blades, and a buttery warmth glowed up and spread across the ground. It melted snow. It softened mud, and machinery sank, and nettles swarmed up, and the razor-hairs cut through welded steel, honeycombed armor, anti-radiation liners.

Poison ivy vines dangled suddenly from greening trees, the shiny-oozy leaves hung across Mama Horn's hole, and she spun inside, blowing, and mists swirled down and moved like dust devils through mortars and grenades, and drivers and gunners blistered beneath masks and goggles and body gear.

They bled from bumps and rashes. They felt traces of centipedes and wood roaches scurry through ears. They wailed as if woodpeckers were stuck inside their heads, hammering, trying to get out, getting nowhere, just pounding forever against skulls, crying and whinnying. "Heat-heat-heat! Cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat!"

Hérons taller than Bradleys high-stepped through the diesel smoke of dying engines. They smashed hatches and windshields with bills. They squeezed bodies like sunfish down long-constricting throats. They flew above the command bunker and shot whitewash on the roof, and it was mottled like flak jackets.

"Cream shitters?" Blast barked at the brass. "You couldn't see cream shitters coming?"

Crissie clicked through infrared images, and the computer screens went black--an intelligence drone corkscrewed down through the sky, tumbling in flames--wild grapes and Virginia creeper were racing up towers, darkening satellite dishes.

"We didn't really see Willie's helmet," said Crissie. "Willie must be--"

"I still feel my Willie alive on my fingertips."

"He's as dead as anything else you seem to touch."

"You don't know owls." Blast gripped her mouth and pushed her teeth crooked against her tongue. "Owls are wicked, but they got bullshit spines held up with nothing but hot air."

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The weather stayed warm, and vines wrapped the bridge-spans, hanging down to pavement, and hoots murmured inside the tunnel of tangles, reverberating west of town. Or had it been north? Or south? Or merely above?

Candy swam brazen strokes up River Sun Slough, climbed onto a log, arched a

thigh in a blaze of light, and her breasts thickened beneath bikini-cups, her hair fuzzed beneath her navel, and an old soft-shell hauled himself up beside her, raising a fleshy throat-pouch, a shy-curving smile, little crocodile eyes.

She lay back for his web-fingers, and the turtle grew more man-like with her sighs, and she drew a kiss away, giggling, leaving a tiny gold disc on his tongue.

"Just crawl-ass to Owl's tree and drop it there." She cuddled him like the hose. "Just squeeze it ass-out like an egg."

"To aim your father's missile?" He wrinkled his nose at a cottonwood-top, and Sky Warbler streaked down to a willow shrub, puffed his mantle, bowed his head fiercely, and Candy caught her breath. *The fuck-ass blue on his crown! His nape! His wings! A kick-ass dark-ass necklace! A cool-ass white-ass vest!*

"He warbled the first lovely breeze." The man's hard-on turned blue, and its ridges showed a map to the seep at the head of the Heart. "He flew out of the dense-dark color of the first dawn. He feathers your beautiful breath."

The bird let go a rushing whisper, and then the man put his moods in Candy, and she wiggled and cried out and snuggled with him.

She flung the disc like trash. The log bobbed. A snapper closed fangs across the man's neck.

The man shattered in shards, and the snapper spit splinters, heaving atop Candy, ripping and biting her, pumping down, banging, and she sprayed apart. She pelted water and shore like mud clots, and the snapper stood, and Blast slipped out of the shell, a howitzer smoking and recoiling from his loins.

"No fucking traitors, none what-so-fucking-ever." He wiped off the slime, and hoots receded in woods behind him, and he swung around, and wild cucumbers snagged the howitzer, roped his legs and arms, pulled him down.

Owl clawed and gnawed the neck, carried the head behind a stump, looked up, widened his eyes, and then his face pulsed, and his beak slammed down and hooked into Blast's brow.

And then Blast's body was gone, and cucumber flowers bloomed starry and white, and swollen prickles dripped pus from splitting fruits, and oaks blasted up from

the drops.

They grew twice as tall as redwoods, sinking roots through buried turrets, clenching limbs like fists, thrusting out burls like chins, and then they uppercut one another, blasting themselves higher than the river bluffs, and the nest hole shook, suddenly hazy with dust.

Mama Horn braced her wings wide, shifting belly-feathers on bouncing eggs, and wood-chunks fell, and termites dropped onto her, grabbing feathers with ant-feet and ant-mouths, crawling like soft-gooey larvae, and Owl leaned through the hole, hooting inward howls, and the bugs flew onto his tongue.

He glided down through pounding trees to shore, and he spat the termites onto a fallen trunk, and they bore through insect holes and wood flakes, and Owl clawed furiously to the bottom, and a half-bent stem snapped up.

Owl hovered above it, beating deep wing strokes, and the stem rose from blood, sprouting catkins smelling sweet. The catkins whispered like water. They hushed like air, and a big uncle oak turned from his boxing, nearly melting through his bark.

“Candy?” He lifted and tickled her, and she squealed and shrieked, and he and Granddaddy swung her by crown and roots, and she got as big as Uncle, and they hurled her across the river, and she blasted down on the compound at Hard Motor Tire.

Garage-bays collapsed like balsam boxes, and nine--ten--eleven more oaks flew across, all awesomely giggling, leaves blazingly-glitteringly bright, roots like multiple boots kicking so broad and heavy that earthmover wheels and tank-treads higher than horses’ heads squashed flat beneath them.

Oaks filled the sky, thrown from the island, and Candy hollered as they marched across yellow-brick towers, red-brick offices, blue-glass offices, aluminum warehouses, church spires, Colonials, Victorians, split-levels, the gas-hose hospital. “We walk **HOWEVER WHEREVER WE WANT!**”

Owl coughed fuzzy-cottony wads inside her crown, egg sacs from the fallen trunk, and spiders hatched, and a web shrouded Candy, and Tomahawks flew in, and the missiles jerked about as if caught in a mist net, and Uncle plucked them out, and Candy slid each reentry vehicle beneath a root-boot and sawed it open, and Uncle hurled the

warheads against the turtle-shell shield. They mushroomed into fire-blasts up there. They spiraled inwardly, dwarfed and dimmed the Insatiable One, and then the hickory war-club swung down, and the Heart River dams spit concrete like surf-spray, and the river rolled above the levee, the rubble, the bluffs.

The oaks and nest tree blasted higher, and the Dipper dipped down. It dipped into the flood. It dipped up and circled North Star, and the bucket dumped east and then west, and people and their things washed down the mountains into the oceans.

Water sank around stumps from the Atlantic to the plains, and the warbler-holes glowed, and the sky hushed blue, and Mama Horn saw all the way to the gulf. Beaks tapped shells beneath her, but she heard the wakes of the fleet just off the mouth and even the shush-sounds of Candy, a live oak now, her shroud suffused with moss, her limbs draping the tide from a silted-sandy bank.

Crissie shouted through quadraphonic dentures from an aircraft carrier, “You will be the death of all owls, Candy, all oaks, all islands, all your vines!”

Little Blast came out of the bridge, raising a bullhorn to a chemical protected hood. “Get off our land!”

“W-h-hooooo-whooooo-whoooooose land?” Owl blurred duskily against Candy’s trunk and blew her voice out to the ship. “W-h-hooooooooooooooooo-hoooooooooooooooooose?”

“Blast left in my hands secret blasts to blast away all blasts against us!” blasted Little Blast.

“Heat-heat-heat! Cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat!” The live oak straightened, and Candy squeezed out from a groove of opening bark, her body green and gold, wiggly and wobbly like a frog’s. She steadied webbed talons on a branch and spread a rubbery chin against a violin, and her hair flopped down, shiny strands of pondweed, and her nipples sweated algal drips as she tensed droopy-crooked fingers on her bow.

Owl hooted and hummed time, and she played with aplomb concertos for homes of the sun.