

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.

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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.

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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 KLOEPEL

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



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