

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.