

ANGELA ROCKEL

Owl

February 2013

*Round eye out of feather and fur, their tracks are all over me, map and compass
bearings, my belly the night sky*

Our farm is in the Huon municipality, west of Cygnet on the ridge of a kind of peninsula or promontory that runs roughly north-south, bounded on the west by the Huon River and on the east by the bay at Port Cygnet. The eastern slopes of the ridge are mostly cleared and farmed, while the steeper western slopes, although logged last century and extensively burned in 1967, are now largely reforested. In the drier places eucalypts grow, stringybark and blue gum and the cypress-like native cherry that's parasitic on their roots; on the southern slopes of gullies and where the soil is better, silver wattle, pomaderris, daisy tree, white gum. An understorey of varnished wattle, peaflowers, prickly coprosma, shrubby helichrysum and goodenia, with bracken and blackberry and grasses in the more open places. In October and November the intense blue haze of love creeper appears from nowhere, with yellow hibbertia, pink heath and purple, green, white and blue ground orchids.

In the 1960s, for a nominal price an uncle gave Terry a block of this regrowth forest, just along the ridge to the south of the farm. Stony and steep, it was judged to be nearly worthless (uncle Tommy had bought it for a bag of potatoes). In the days before chainsaws, a local contractor had worked over it with an axe, cutting the smaller timber for furnace wood for fruit-processing factories in the area. After the 1967 fires burned through, Terry and his father sowed grass seed in the ashes of the less steep parts up near the road. At that time they were dairy farming, and as the block has a permanent spring, in winter when the cows were not in milk, Terry used to walk them along the road and turn them in there to graze the rough

pasture. Since he stopped dairying in the 1970s the block has been left to grow up in forest once more.

Now that the bushes and young trees of the understorey aren't chewed or trampled by the cattle, there's food and cover for all sorts of creatures. Thornbills and wrens and ringtail possums nest there, and pademelon – the little local wallabies – have grazed fine lawns in the open spaces where some grass has persisted. There are insect grubs and other invertebrates for bandicoots; there are bull ants and jackjumpers for echidna; plenty of food and cover for root-eaters and fungi-eaters like potoroo and bettong and for rats and mice, local and introduced. Nest-holes in mature trees for parrots and owls and cockatoos and bats and brushtail possums. Birds – insect-eaters and honeyeaters, forage their specialised feeding strata from ground level to the top of the canopy. And the predators that follow all these creatures are there too – antechinus and quoll and devils and feral cats and raptors.

In early February last year I went for a walk there with Terry, where neither of us had been for many years. I don't know what prompted me to suggest it – I usually walk alone, on the road or in bush closer to the house – except that I was restless and heartsore and full of dread at news from New Zealand that Michael, my brother-in-law and friend, was sick. The day was fine and still, with the first feeling of autumn in clear, cool air. We pushed through waist-high undergrowth. Wallabies crashed away in the bracken; a snake moved off its sun-warmed patch of flattened grass; a yellow-throated honeyeater called loudly somewhere close by – *pick-em-up, pick-em-up* – and the warm, astringent resin-smell of varnished wattle was close around.



After about twenty minutes we came out onto a dry ridge that overlooks a steep gully. To our left was a big native cherry, perhaps five or six metres tall. There's something about these

trees that draws the eye – a kind of backlit darkness, yellow-green against the grey-green and red-green of the growth around it. As we looked, there was a movement in among the branches and a slantwise lattice of sunlight and shadow resolved to barring on the plane of a wing. Then out of the dense shade of the foliage a face turned to us. Dark eyes in a chestnut disc circled by a brownblack line, like a Wandjina cloud spirit blown here from the Kimberley, a face looking into us from another world. It was a masked owl. Half a metre tall with a wingspan of nearly a metre and a half; biggest of all the barn owls – big enough to take possum and wallaby. I'd seen one only a couple of times before, at intervals of years, hunting around the windbreaks close to the house.

She (the dark disc told it) watched us over her right shoulder. I held my breath at the delight of it, the wondrous luck. And then she turned to face us, and we saw why she was in plain view in daylight. Blood streaked the left side of her chest and the feathers on her shoulder were dishevelled; she kept lifting her left foot as if it bothered her. We stepped closer and she turned again as if to fly but fell flailing, hard onto the hard ground. When we reached her we saw the damage: from the wrist where the flight feathers should spread, her left wing was gone. I remembered a friend saying, when he heard that there'd been a murder in a park he loved and went to for refuge and solace, *I felt as if it had happened inside me.*

She leaned back and clashed her beak at us when we approached, showing her talons. Her feet were huge, the size of my hand, and handlike with their padded grips. She was strong, the wound was fresh, the wing-stump still bleeding. Ah, what to do. What prospect for a wild owl that can't fly? Should we kill her? Leave her? She seemed to want her life.

We wrapped her in a shirt and took her home. Half an hour from here is a place where a local man, Craig Webb, has established a refuge for injured raptors, caring for them and releasing all those that have a chance of survival. I phoned him and we drove there with the owl. I had a sick apprehension that I was merely passing on the job of killing her. He unwrapped her and looked stoically at the wound, holding her firmly by the legs and talking to her as he handled the damaged wing. He thought she'd been hit by a car while hunting insects in the headlights; it happens all the time, he says. He didn't know how she'd go – we'd just have to wait. With the help of his young son he transferred her to a dark box in a quiet place where she could rest and we went home.

All night her face was in my mind, fierce. She can't survive, I thought; unable to fly, unable even to reach a perch, she won't want to live. I should have killed her. I couldn't kill her. And we had walked straight to her in 50 hectares of bush unvisited for years. Foggy rain

fell through the darkness and in the morning, light came up blue through mist with the sound of black cockatoos in the pine hedge, their creaky speech, their wild wailing, cracking cones and throwing them down.



It's a very young self who is summoned by the wounded owl, looking as if for the first time into the face of damage and death, understanding that some hurts are irreversible and must be assimilated, somehow. Feeling the dread of that knowledge, bone-deep and throwing out links across all space and time to other damages suffered and inflicted.

The next day there was an email from Craig – a few hours after we left, the owl took food and let him dress the wound. “If she survives”, he said, “she can share an aviary with another female masked owl, who can't be released because she's blind in one eye and can't hunt.” Day 5: “The owl is one of the most amazing birds I have dealt with. I moved her into the aviary after 4 days and she went straight to the mid-height perches (tho I had placed lower ones for her). Today she was on the highest perch. She has great courage, strength, spirit. She has met the other owl and the 2 sit together.”

Now it's one year on. The owl is healthy and moves around a lot, jumping big distances from perch to perch and from perch to ground. The aviary has a pool, trees, cover. Owls love water and she's often down by the pool in the early morning. She interacts with the two others now in the aviary with her, a male and a female. There's also a wild male who visits; there's thought of making a hole in the netting so that he could come and go. Craig hopes there will be a mating – it has happened successfully in other places and the young birds seem to do well when released. Something from the wreckage. A life; new lives.

When I was young I would have found intolerable her adjustment to being confined, to being unable to fly. I had a great need to see damage resolved, healed, made good, and

assumed that I knew what healing was, what good was. I would have had an idea of what being an owl must be. Now it seems to me that the owl wants to live and she's accepting the life that's possible. The ongoing negotiation of the grownup self – how to tolerate limitless uncertainty about what you must have or be.

As seemed somehow presaged by the meeting with the owl, in July our Michael died, a few days after his sixty-fourth birthday, following a return of the cancer he had first experienced twenty years earlier. In my adolescence, the friend who described his response to the murder in the park also said, speaking about his father's last illness, "He struggled bravely to stay alive." I was shocked – my friend knew about suffering yet praised the desire to continue, right there in the midst of it. More than anyone else, Michael was the one who showed me how that contradiction could be lived. He loved his life and drank it to the last drop, the bitter with the sweet, enduring his own pain and grief and also ours. He lived from the clear heart of an understanding that it's all worth it, accepting loss as one of the faces of love, knowing that, as Mary Oliver puts it:

To live in this world

you must be able

to do three things:

to love what is mortal,

to hold it

against your bones knowing

your own life depends on it,

and, when the time comes to let it go,

to let it go.

"In Blackwater Woods"

The family story about our surname is that it means owl, and that the clan chose or were chosen by it somewhere in the forests of northern Europe, up near the Baltic Sea: *rockel* – a piece of onomatopoeia like *morepork*, *boobook*, *ruru*. Humans love to identify with nubles in the fractal soul of things as it buds up, buds down to infinity, its parts at once discrete and

unified, continuing. Universes come and go. The cosmos has these ideas – starfields with their planets, planets with their landscapes dreaming up stringybarks and truffles and bettongs and owls and humans.



Early in the morning a few of weeks ago I heard a racketing of honeyeaters and blackbirds and thornbills and wrens in the hedge. It wasn't the hawk call or the snake call but the one they make when they've found a ringtail possum outside its nest or a young morepork caught in daylight before it can find dense cover. I went out and found the birds, beaks aligned like filings to a magnet, calling and pointing to a place about six metres up in one of the macrocarpas. And as I stood and watched, out of the background twigs and chiaroscuro emerged the form of a masked owl – my death, my life regarding me, calm, alert, wild.