

Tiger's Eye, Owl's Gaze

Moonlight reflects off the small speck below. The owl's mouth waters at the thought of glass shattering, shards fizzing in its mouth, and the dreams that come afterward. From her perch, the owl not only sees the speck move down the hill, but she also sees the trembling line of motion left in its wake: out a building, down a ramp, across three streets. A two-legged creature moving close to the ground. The thought of hair and bone cutting her throat makes the owl gag; it's only a wet human flashing when it catches the light. What the owl wants is to slurp shiny objects, swallow glow, burp glitter.

Tina has been waiting on the bench by the door for an hour. Her mother still hasn't come. She stops looking at the clock and begins counting to a hundred by tens, then fives, then ones. In all that time her wet hair has only gone from dripping to swampy. Her swimsuit has soaked through her jeans and sweater. Each time someone comes in or out, cold air blasts her and for a moment the smell of chlorine lifts. She avoids eye contact with the lady at the desk, the other parents taking away their kids, and the lone adults coming in and out of the building.

Tina stands up, she walks to the door. No one calls out. The glass door pushes back on her, and she has to throw herself against it. She falls out into the wind and dusk sky. How far is home? She had done the walk with her Dad in preschool before her parents' divorce. But never alone, never in the dark.

She waits through three cycles of red and green lights before crossing. Car lights zip by with a sound like her brother shouting in her face. She jams her hands into her pockets and walks with purpose. The air outside is fresh and she feels a lightness that makes her skip and laugh. The sound of her feet hitting the pavement brings back the feeling of eyes on her. She stops herself and returns to one foot in front of the other.

The city is made up of seven hills. Hope Street runs along the ridge of her hill. The YMCA is at the top, kitty-corner to the Observatory. She heads down the hill toward her Dad's house, knowing he will be home or a key will be under the porch.

Through a window, she sees a man drinking from a wine glass while standing at a stove, in another room kids watch TV. On nights she is with her mother she doesn't know what her father does. Work? Play squash? Eat donuts?

Her mother wouldn't have noticed that her hair and clothing were wet, but Tina wishes now she had taken the time to change out of her swimsuit. Today had been the hundredth day of first grade and she has a chocolate kiss in her pocket from the party. She knows that Eskimos keep warm eating whale blubber, and the cold is getting into her shoulders and toes. She unwraps the candy and chews so fast that it's too late when she realizes she is eating the ribbon of paper with the silky chocolate.

Tina's hair is long and blond, long enough she can sit on it. Her mother warns that if she cuts it, it will turn brown. Brown like her mother, she is glad not to look like her.

The cat doesn't so much cross Tina's path as block her way.

"Kitty!" She exclaims clapping her hands before she remembers wanting to be invisible, to not have an adult ask, *where is your mother or father?*

Tina kneels down and whispers, "Kitty, are you okay? Are you cold? Don't worry. You are not alone! I am here. I want to be your friend."

The cat looks at her. Calico fur sets off its yellow eyes. White and black patches of fur are marked with small islands that grade from brown to gold. The cat stretches and begins to walk slowly down the middle of the sidewalk. Tina follows, whispering a soft chatter, "It's dusk really, not yet night, so don't be too scared."

At the corner, the cat turns left, heading west on Larch Street. Tina pauses.

The street is dark and no cars are turning on or off of it. The houses look dark too, the curtains drawn and no one home.

"Okay Kitty, I will follow you." Tina runs a few steps to catch up. Only one streetlight is on, and the last bits of orange and blue are gone from the sky.

"Kitty, the first star! Make a wish! We can wish for our own house, just you and I."

The cat keeps walking.

"You're right, there are lots of stars, I guess we missed make-a-wish time already. But it's okay, we can make a wish tomorrow."

The cat's pace quickens. Tina scans the dark street and sees a boy up ahead sitting in the middle of the sidewalk on an overturned bucket. Her stomach flips when she realizes that the cat is headed for him. It wasn't lost, it was on its way to its owner. The cat walks at a steady pace, not turning back to see if Tina follows anymore. It stops at the boy, he reaches down to scratch its ears. His back is to Tina, and she has in mind to kick him. His bucket is next to a hole the size of a basketball in the middle of the sidewalk, cracks run out from the hole forming a spindly sun.

"Can you hear the music?" The boy asks without turning to Tina.

“Why are you blocking the sidewalk? It belongs to everyone!” She is surprised by how loud her voice comes out.

“The music, do you hear it yet?” He turns to her grinning. Tina screams and throws her arms in front of her as if to block him from coming closer. While parts of him looks like any other boy in first grade, other parts look like a very old man. He has messy red hair sticking up in the back and he is wearing corduroy pants with holes in the knees. But the skin on his face is wrinkled and there are yellow spats of blood in the whites of his eyes.

“Fishing, ya’know, I gotta catch something.” His voice sounds like a kid, but it’s coming out of a mouth with only two teeth, the lips folding in over the gums. *Has he lost all his baby teeth and he is waiting for his adult teeth to grow in?*

“Fishing?” Tina holds her hands in tight fists. She turns to walk away, but at the same time twists her head to get a better look at the hole.

“Yep, fishing. It can take twenty years to find a hole to *this* ocean. Not like you get to decide.”

Tina takes a few steps closer, avoiding stepping on any of the sidewalk cracks emanating from the hole and making sure she is more than arms reach from the boy. “To get to the ocean, you have to drive an hour to the coast, stupid.”

He shrugs. “Taste it.”

Tina kneels and the cat rubs its head against her knee. She hears the *bloop bloop* of sloshing liquid. With one hand on the cat’s warm fur, she reaches the other down. The liquid is warmer than the air. It feels like, like, like water.

She lifts her hand out and licks her finger, the salt stings her mouth, reminds her how thirsty she is, which reminds her how long she sat alone, how cold she has gotten, how far from

home she is, how no one remembered her, how she wants dinner, how she doesn't want to go back to her parents yelling everyday in the kitchen, but her life is split in two, ripped and she doesn't really want either half, but has no where else to go. She reaches her hand in again to feel the hole itself; the edge is not very thick, just an inch before it hits water. Her small hand grips the edge, *how can the sidewalk be so thin? How do we not fall through walking on it?*

She backs away nervous and uncertain. She wants to run, but her legs are tired and cold. She is frozen to the spot.

“Ha! I knew I would get something good.” The boy stands up and pulls the rod as if a huge fish were pulling on the end of the hook. The cat is over by his side, perched and ready to attack. Tina shivers, hears her teeth clatter and has to put her hand up to stop them. The boy is no longer laughing, he is grunting and breathing heavy. With a splash and popping sound he falls back. Hooked to the end of the line, still tilting into the hole, is a blue and yellow metal box. Tina leans forward and sees that it's an old cookie tin with the faded picture of two dogs running through a meadow of flowers.

“That's no fish!” She yells. An ocean under the sidewalk and fishing for junk! This is all so stupid, she wants to tell the cat, but the cat is sniffing the box and standing by the boy.

The boy looks at her now, his eyes narrow. She wonders why the bones in his cheeks stick out. *Can bone tear through skin?* She thinks she sees green-gray mold between the folds of skin hanging loose below his eye sockets.

“Salty, right?” He hisses.

“You probably also think you can dig a hole to China!” She meets his proud smirk with a glare.

“Well Maxwell, lets see if this has what we need.” The boy says to the cat. The cat sits by him as he pries at the lid. He has no fingernails and has to rub and rub the edge of the box from underneath. The lid finally opens with the sound of metal rubbing metal that feels like a finger grazing Tina's neck. The cat dances around the boy's legs. The boy laughs and his big smile makes his wrinkles disappear and for a moment his face matches his child-like body.

“This will feed her for weeks!” he laughs.

Tina only sees a magnifying glass, toy jewelry, the iridescent body of a butterfly pinned under a glass frame, and a few glass figurines of princesses and poodles. The boy holds up the magnifying glass and the lone streetlight buzzes, flickers, and then the street is immersed in total darkness. Tina shrieks, but when she feels the cat against her leg she sucks in her breath.

The sound of rugs being shaken out fills the air and then something brushes against her hair, a claw flashes across her vision. The screams turn to sobs in her throat. A buzzing sound hums up and down the street like a wave, and the streetlights blink on and off twice before staying on.

The boy holds up the magnifying glass so that it catches the light. A giant owl the size of grown man hovers over him. Its wings open and close creating a wind that tugs at Tina and then pushes her backwards. Tina smells rotting meat, old eggs, and something metallic. The owl dives towards the boy's face, and the boy stands very still. Tina gasps.

At the last moment, the owl changes course from face to hand, and it grabs the magnifying glass. It holds the handle in its beak, throws it into the air, and catches it in its mouth.

Tina hears the owl's voice, “Very shiny. Find more or next time it will be your eye.” Then there is the rush of air, the sound of rugs beating against pavement, and the owl is gone. The smell fades. *Could this just be her imagination?*

“Now you know,” says the boy, “beneath our feet is the ocean of tears and all the beautiful treasures lost to it.” And that is when she realizes that she is hearing him, that she heard the owl, in her mind. His lips aren't even moving.

She tries it. “I hate you and your pet owl.”

The laughter reverberates in her skull. She watches his calm ancient face, his closed lipless mouth. “Do you hear the music?” She hears him say in her head.

But she is running even as the words slip into her mind like a snake slithering in the grass.

She tries to outrun it, but her body is filling with stones. More drop onto the pile each step so that she has to go faster and faster to outrace the avalanche. She is back on Hope Street, car lights zooming and zooming, the streetlights all on, more houses lit up now. The light seems to slow the growing mound of rock inside her guts. She runs barely looking at each intersection, she wants only to be home. At Rochambeau she turns left, the last block. Her throat burns. She tries to fill her mind with nursery rhymes to keep out any more messages from the boy or owl. She feels eyes watching her and hunches to stay low to the ground.

The door is unlocked; inside her Dad is eating pasta out of a pan while writing numbers on a long pad of paper.

“Hi Dad!” she says brightly.

He looks up and smiles.

“I had a great dinner with Mom, she dropped me off.” Tina knows what would happen if she told him her mom didn't show up.

Her dad smiles and goes back to his notepad. Tina's stomach growls, her skin all goose bumps and her shoulders full of shivers. She runs past her dad and up the stairs.

She stops to look in the hall mirror. A thin red line runs from the edge of her lip to the side of her eye. In her room, she rummages through her clothing drawer, throws open all the little boxes on her dresser. Breathless now, she shakes all over. She finds it under a comic book in her shirt drawer - a stout flask the size of her hand made of tigers eye with a blue emerald set into the stopper. She holds the bottle to the cut from the owl's claw, feels the cool stone, and then shoves it into her pocket. *The owl will never take my eyes.*

She walks down the stairs and slips from the hall to the kitchen to the backdoor. She pauses, but her dad doesn't say anything. She opens the door and steps out onto the porch. She holds her hand out with the bottle. The only smell is of cold puddles and grassy yard. After three breathes she walks to the yellow and blue jungle gym and climbs the ladder. She puts the bottle on the highest point, the deck with a metallic gold star painted on it. This is the place where she leads her pirate ship adventures and launches herself down the slide.

That is when she hears it: the rhythmic eight beat of mouse paws, the four beat of hopping rabbits, cat vertebrae vibrating the air, dog howls bleeding into wind, trees growing with the richness of earth coming up their roots and out their branches.

The music is the interlocking of gears: animals, wind, and plants.

Everything is calling to her, it tugs at her, pulling her down to the ocean beneath the dirt, pulling her up into the sky. She has to hold her breath to focus on it all. It is she who must keep the strings taut.

The soft, *meow*, pulls her back to the night air thick with cold moisture that reaches into her shirtsleeves and around her socks. It is the cat, sitting at the bottom of the slide, waiting for her.

The End