

Megan Wesko

## Owl Land

A great horned owl sits high atop a quaking aspen tree. Its eyes are a rich reddish brown ringed in black, like that of the shadow cast by the early morning suns glare on the green saltgrass flats. The half -acre aspen grove extends, its roots connected as one beneath the ground, to the edge of an embankment that holds the turquoise waters of a fifty meter long reservoir. Red Angus cows of a nearby farm come to wet their cud filled mouths. The owl sits. With its mottled coat of pale browns, washed out grays and dark streaks, it waits for the day to begin, for it is in the nearby fields of alfalfa and clover that the owl goes to feast with ease. It rotates its head, once, twice, in an eerie sight of torsion and alertness. The sun, a true glutton for brightness, rises higher in the morning sky with each passing moment. With a single bow to its feet and a ballerina-like grand plié of its legs, the owl pushes off a branch, wings wide and flapping, in a fluid feat of gravity defying grace.

With the great horned owls' exit, enters a group of northern ravens. The ravens soar above the aspen grove, shy yet conspicuous, with sleek black coats, letting their guttural croaks and complex intelligence echo for miles. The swaying thorny-branches and muted yellow fruit of the Russian olive tree seem the perfect place for the ravens to perch and scavenge. Introduced as an ornamental from Eurasia, this tree has now become an invasive species, choking out natural species and hoarding water supplies. The ravens, however, use it to their advantage, peering out over the reservoir and searching for their next meal.

The oval-shaped reservoir is surrounded by a lush and varied landscape of softstem bulrush, rabbit foot grass, Kentucky blue grass, box elder, willow, tamarisk and smooth scouring rush. As one steps closer to the edge of the reservoir, a startled jump from a bullfrog can be detected by the erratic shaking of nearby broad-leaved cattails. With five feet long, narrow, blade-like, sharp green leaves, it seems unnatural that a brown, furry cylinder could rest successfully upon such a fragile, thin looking stem. It is in the sea-green waters with tropical island hues that the bullfrog, with its yellowish brown neoprene-like skin, dives beneath the waters surface to escape a predator's threat.

A fleet of young large mouth bass floats lifelessly adrift in the gentle swaying of their aqueous home. It isn't until the head of a mallard duck submerges into the water that the large mouth bass swim ferociously away. A group of mallards buoyantly rest their water-slick feathered bodies on the waters surface. The male mallard's jade colored head and neck looks as soft as velvet. He glides effortlessly across the water with his prominent yellow bill and grey body. His female counterpart is heavily mottled with brown feathers and a pale orange bill. After a single rush of wind, the ducks startle. A group of ten splashes up and out of the water, airborne for only a few moments before returning to a spot closer to the edge of the reservoir in a short crescendo of flight.

At the edge of the water the most regal and mysterious of birds, the great blue heron, stands in perfect stillness. Its yellow bill juts out from a small white head with beady, fierce eyes and a black feather plume. Its body is blue-grey with a long and curved thin neck that seems almost as long and narrow as its dark, lanky legs. In the same instant one catches sight of the great blue heron, that its wide wingspan and elegant body can be seen circling above the quaking aspen grove, before it disappears once more.

The wide expanse of aspen trees provides a welcomed and unusual shade in a landscape of desert valley and farmland. The late afternoon sun glimmers through the treetops, creating god-like sunrays that beam through the openings of a network of limbs and branches. The soft and peaceful light lands on the leaves of a big sagebush and the pale purple petals of the desert star flower. A well-trodden path through the blanket of saltgrass covers the ground below the aspen grove, where a young mule deer and its mother can be seen. Their white muzzles graze while their short black tipped tails stick up in the air. The mother, with a body of reddish brown fur, lifts up her head with oversized ears and stands still while listening for a possible threat. The fawn mimics her actions and waits for her muzzle to return to the saltgrass once again before it does the same.

As the sun's rays weaken and a salmon colored sky touches all that it lands upon, one notices six bird's nests three feet wide composed of various branches and twigs scattered among the aspen trees, a magical sight indeed! In these nests, perched high above the ground, the great horned owls rest and bear their young. With the sun a mere memory, and a dewy purple-pink twilight settling among the tall and scattered trees, one great horned owl glides into its nest. It isn't long before another owl comes to perch in its barricade of branches. Another comes. Another. Another. As night begins to fall, the day comes to an end, in owl land.