

## Carnage

Ten bike-lengths up ahead, a brown lump rests on the fog line of the shoulderless highway. If it's scat, I'd put money on bear.

I'm a lone female pedaling through southwestern Montana—the Ruby Valley, named for abundant garnets. It's bear country and I'm heading toward West Yellowstone. July. Bears are hungry, not ravenous, right?

Scat isn't one of those things that typically prompts me to stop. If a slow approach reveals something compelling—shape, odor, contents, signature—only then will I get off and look.

It could be man-made, a work glove or knit hat.

The lump doesn't hold a solid edge like a pile of scat—it wavers ever so slightly. Closer still, crisp lines. Road kill. I'm excited, as if this dead animal were a longed-for birthday present. I unclip from my pedals, stand straddling my bike and look down at tidy, chocolate-colored feathers. Long black eyelashes set against a white face-blaze as if it were napping. The little beak, curved into the road, the color of the road. Posed like me when I take a nap, belly down, head turned to the side, wings folded, feathers spread out like a blanket. A slight breeze raises some feathers on its back; they flap noiselessly back into place.

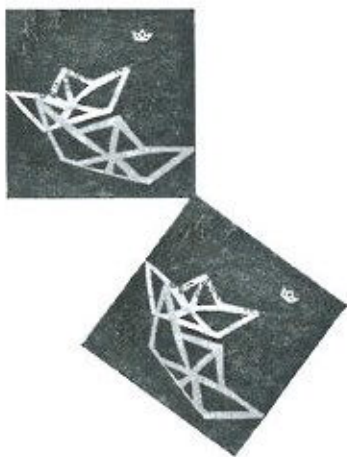
I take a picture from above, then take another with my mind's eye, clip in and continue.

How did it die? No one better drive over it and crush it.

I turn around and come back up to it. This time, I dismount from my bike and lay it down on the embankment. Three male cyclists loaded with touring gear stop on the other side of the road.

"Do you need help?" one of them asks.

"No thanks," I say. We talk across the road. "There's this little owl. It doesn't seem right to let it get squashed on the road. I'm going to move it." To my relief, the cyclists continue and I turn to the owl.



Two

I don't often find owls dead on the road, and it isn't simply that they become husk and chaff. Feathers don't stick to the road—they still try to lift off when cars pass.

Does the spirit stay connected? When a car drives over the physical trace, is the spirit brutalized, does it feel crush and tread mark again and again? Just thinking about the owl getting crunched triggers a muscular lurch through my torso that starts deep in my pelvis and ends in my esophagus. Four years back, when I was biking to work, I cut the crossing too close: three lanes of cars, mad engines accelerating. I was depressed, already felt dead, had thrown away everything precious. Nothing mattered.

In that instant, in front of the cars, the assumed impact entered my right side, knee ripped sideways, leg breaking at the femur, rib cage collapsing and the broken bones piercing my lungs, liver, and heart, blood flooding my insides, head hitting the road, and blackness.

On the other side of the intersection, I didn't know what had just happened—or hadn't happened. I thought I was dead. I looked to the street behind me for a clue, something to ground me. I didn't see myself a bloody splatter on the road or my bike a knot of metal, just the cars rushing past. I continued pedaling, looked at my chest, arms, legs, feet, hands—same, same, same, same, same. I guessed I was alive.

I pick up the owl, fold its wings around its body, light and tiny in my cycling-gloved palms. The owl's head hangs forward, long neck hidden and weighted by its skull. I turn the owl over and hold it in my left hand, tracing with my fingertips the bones along its left wing, then the right. The wing bends between elbow and wrist where it should be strong and rigid, the bone crushed like eggshell. I slide my fingers down the brief slope of the owl's beak, touch the tawny feathers on its breast, so soft I can't feel them, then its feet. The tiny talons, black daggers, the toes that hold them, yellow, dainty and gecko-like, their undersides minutely dimpled and rough-looking, sticking out from sandy bloomers. I take up a toe between thumb and index finger, the talon, smooth and warm with a sharp point, like a cat's claw.

I step down the embankment and lay the owl on curled dead leaves at a plant's base.

Let a coyote run off with it, let microbes eat it molecular mouthful by molecular mouthful. Give the spirit a chance to gently disengage, like a spider web pulled down one anchor at a time.

I climb up the embankment, heft my bike back onto the road and journey on.

Every day, every moment, the owl's fate could be my own. I live and pedal in acknowledgment of this. I only hope that when death arrives, a radiant heart will free my feathers from the road.