



owl

dyke

by a.c.d

Lune lived alone.

S/he liked it that way. The air stayed familiar—circulating through her/his lungs, the apartment's rattling radiator, the decaying plants on the windowsill—until another breath chased after it. Every second there was another breath, and s/he liked knowing where they all came from. The heavy staleness was a comfort.

Others died in Apartment 4C, but Lune was the only one who lived. S/he didn't mind the ghosts. They were a constant stream of company, usually pleasant. They didn't touch food that wasn't theirs or invite strange friends over, but they took care of the dishes and cleaned the shaky marker scribbles from Lune's bathroom mirror. They checked the locks for Lune when s/he came home with aching feet and that awful fried smell permeating her/his uniform. Beyond their help and companionship, Lune was just glad for someone to witness her/him.

Living alone was a choice s/he made readily—housemates always meant another means of surveillance, her/his family the best example s/he had. The world tagged Lune as crazy/strange/wrong and so everything s/he did in front of the world was an interrogation on how wrong s/he would be this time. S/he was never anything but.

The ghosts weren't the world, though. The ghosts weren't cameras or stilted Give me a number's or bright yellow FALL RISK hospital bracelets. The ghosts didn't demand s/he find a partner who takes care of her/him because s/he's obviously a danger on her/his own. The ghosts watched Lune move through Apartment 4C, listening to the sounds s/he made to her/himself in the quiet space, and they nodded to each other as if to say Aw, that's just Lune being Lune. All her/his life s/he had been questioned, but never properly acknowledged. The ghosts made her/him real; the ghosts never denied Lune's reality; the ghosts upheld it.

If there were anyone else in her/his life, they'd probably have opinions on why that shouldn't be allowed, but Lune lived alone and worked the overnight shift, so people in her/his life were few and far between beyond the cellphone that rang with her/his mother's number every few days. The landlord emailed her/him, her/his bills were paid online, and the grocery store self-checkout was always empty when s/he shopped.

The only thing that wrestled words out of Lune's head was talking to the customers at the diner that paid too little but stayed open perfectly late. Her/his 10pm-7am shift (and the blessed one-hour lunch break squeezed in the middle) meant the world outside Apartment 4C

existed in foggy lights, wandering souls, and a thousand pours of coffee. There was nothing else s/he needed it to be; a glance out the bedroom window told her/him that.

Except...A feathered shadow caught in her/his mind. S/he couldn't ignore the flash of iridescent eyes in a sunset-lit oak blinking at her/him. With a slow drag of Lune's neck, s/he looked at the owl outside, and the owl became real.

This wasn't new. Her/his experiences created the reality around her/him like pixels gathered together to form the image on a screen. Colors, sounds, a tickle on the palm of her/his outstretched hand, each little block of awareness added a new sense or dimension. Lune built the world from static into something only s/he could hold, and then the world told Lune it had had enough and left to stand on its own. Lune didn't mind. S/he preferred to stay in her/his apartment with her/his ghosts.

The owl wasn't the first time something became real when Lune took the time to see it, but it was the first time that Lune felt certain that it wasn't going to leave.

It should've been a scary thought, but Lune found her/himself smiling. The owl didn't smile back, but Lune knew it wanted to. S/he'd never made someone smile so hard they tried to hide it.

The owl's blinking black eyes sunk deep into its face, its orange beak a slash of color distracting from the spiral of feathers on its cheek and brow. Speckled from head to foot in brown and white, Lune watched it shift its fat round head like an old dyke contemplating its worn jean jacket—fondness and ex-girlfriends alike pressed into the fabric patches. This owl was no stranger to displaying itself, but it no longer felt the need. It knew what it wanted and how to get it.

Swiping her/his tongue across her/his cracked lips, Lune tried to stop her mouth from drying out. The rapidly-fading light left the silhouette of the owl in stark relief as the sun itself backlit its perch. Lune's fingertips twitched, and s/he heard her/his beating heart like the pounding of feet on concrete against her/his chest.

Both the owl and Lune stood with gazes unmoving. Neither tilted their head, neither so much as blinked. Shadows thickened and spread wider, Lune's legs grew sore and her/his hands shook, but s/he didn't shift an inch out of place. S/he was captivated.

Ghosts whispered their customary whispers into her/his hair. Lune felt the pinpricks of fingers running alongside the length of her/his bare arms, the sensation almost enough to spark gooseflesh but her ghosts unable to touch her/his skin like the cold could. We're here, they

always tried to tell her/him, Be with us, they wanted her/him to know. S/he knew. S/he was always in Apartment 4C even when s/he wasn't. S/he was always with them—even trapped in the weighty stare of the owl.

Lune couldn't decide if s/he'd rather reassure her ghosts or press her/himself further into the owl's expansive eyes, but in the end the decision was made for her. It let out a single, discordant Hoo—the sound reminded Lune of a wailing creature stuck on a chain when it knew it shouldn't be—before stretching massive wings and thrusting its body into the night sky.

Silhouetted only a shade darker than the charcoal-drawn world surrounding it, the owl faded from Lune's sight until nothing but shadow graced her/his window ledge. Her/his ghosts called her/his name, but right now there was no Lune to call. There was only a body digging clenched fingers into a paint-chipped sill, a heart beating rapidly in an ever-expanding chest, a panting breath clutching for more air and finding none.

In the seconds and minutes and hours following the owl's ascent from Lune's world, it left in its wake the sparking kindling of a new kind of desire in Lune's chest.

Lune woke to her/his alarm going off at 7:35pm.

Her/his heart pulsed in time with the beat of the obnoxious jingle until a glance at the face of her/his phone revealed that it was her/his day off.

S/he'd forgotten, in the whirlwind of emotion yesterday. S/he'd also forgotten to do the dishes, water the plants, or turn the heat off now that the sticky feeling of spring crept into the muggy apartment.

The ghosts were in a tizzy when s/he finally pulled her/himself out of bed. There was a visible sweat patch pressed into the sheets. Lune wrinkled her/his nose and then wrinkled it more at the smell in the air. Heady and heavy, dank and dewy, s/he could see the wallpaper peeling around her/him. Then s/he remembered that her/his apartment didn't have wallpaper and the patterns squirmed away before her/his eyes.

Ghost whispers turned frantic and pressing the longer her/his eyes stayed open. Now that s/he was awake, their buzzing energy crescendoed around her/him. Lune watched the ghosts zip between her/his yawning gums and outstretched fingers. Flashes of light lit up the rapidly darkening apartment, but none of them illuminated anything beyond the headache they were giving Lune.

Reason often evaded her/his ghosts' behavior, but tonight Lune had a sneaking suspicion about what left

them so agitated. The owl's powerful form stayed imprinted on the backs of her/his eyelids.

What was it like? S/he couldn't help but wonder at the idea of wings, of talons and beaks and sharp, sharp eyes. What was it all like?

The ghosts protested flights of fantasy that took Lune away from her/his present—from Apartment 4C and the diner and the dead voices crowding her/his mind. The ghosts didn't like when Lune longed for change that the ghosts could not deliver. The ghosts knew they couldn't make Lune wings or talons or beaks or eyes.

Lune usually listened when they whined, but Lune didn't want to listen tonight. Listening led to that sticky trapped feeling coating her/his skin. Was the owl ever covered in the tar of inability? The heavy, gluey weight of confinement? S/he doubted it. There was nothing but freedom in its form. Looking at her/his hands, all Lune could do was wish for freedom in her/his own.

The setting sun pushed stark lines of light across her/his fingers, and an idea crept into Lune's mind. Soon it would be completely dark in Apartment 4C, and Lune hated the dark.

But the owl didn't.

The owl could see, the owl could sense in the dark. The owl wasn't forced into a small corner of its own mind when the dark arrived. How hard could it be for Lune to become (at least a little like) the owl?

The ghosts told her/him to turn on the soft lamp next to the couch, quickly before the shadows blended together, but Lune stayed put. Seconds fell with the sunlight streaking across her/his floor. S/he wiggled her/his fingers until it was dark enough that s/he might as well not have any. In her/his mind's eye, talons stretched from the ends of her/his palms, and the blanketing darkness didn't disguise their strength from her/him.

Then Lune's talons clenched and became hands, immaterial and shaking, when the blanketing darkness started to suffocate her/him. S/he tried to force the heaviness off of her/his chest, but it wouldn't budge, not even when s/he pictured the owl's powerful wings blowing it away.

The lamp felt too far away. The couch felt too far away. Lune's body felt too far away. The ghosts whispered We told you so's in her/his painfully human ears. Shadows wrapped around her/him, pulling at her/his clenched knuckles, and her/his stiff lungs.

The image of the owl faded in her/his mind, replaced

by the shaking, nervous wreck Lune had become. Would s/he ever stop being that person?

After her/his first disastrous attempt to become something new, it took a few days before Lune wanted to try again.

The night never turned from threatening to inviting, the lamp never stayed off, the ghosts never stopped being smug. But Lune grew tired of letting that get her/him down. Would the owl let something like failure stop its powerful body in its tracks?

S/he just needed to do something...more striking. Something that left no room for overthinking or mental overcrowding. S/he spent boring shift after boring shift trying to fill the time with ideas that her/his ghosts didn't quake at. There must be something that was so unequivocally part of the owl that Lune's insignificant humanity wouldn't take the option away.

It hadn't visited again since that night, but its image was never far from the back of Lune's eyelids. S/he'd tried to dissect every bit of strength s/he remembered flowing through its form. Where did it come from, that power? How could Lune get it for her/himself?

The answer came to her/him while s/he picked at the soggy remnants of a safe cereal clinging to her/his safe bowl. There were things Lune needed to eat or the world became fuzzy, but there were also things Lune wanted to eat so s/he felt well enough to deal with late-night customers and emails from her/his landlord. The owl was getting its energy from somewhere, Lune just needed to find it.

Her/his ghosts were always trying to convince Lune to eat the right things, so s/he worried at what they would say about the results of Lune's cursory internet search for "owl food," but they were strangely silent as s/he sought out options. The right things make you feel better, they said. The right things are good.

The next hour was spent on a research rabbit hole where s/he saw more pictures of dead mice than s/he'd ever seen before. With a substantial list of options on a sticky note stuck to her/his laptop, Lune left for work for the night to think over how s/he wanted to do this.

The answer arrived after a trip to the local reptile store (a place Lune didn't know existed until s/he was carrying her/his bag of frozen mice back to her/his car.) Three and a half grueling hours of waiting for them to thaw later, it was time.

The mice glistened in their plastic packaging. Lune touched a hesitant fingertip to one velvety ear and steeled her/himself against the urge to cringe away. Lune's ghosts swarmed her/his hand when s/he pulled back, tugging on her/his nails and sending sharp stinging sensations down the lines of her/his palms.

But despite the discomfort, nothing whispered to stop, that this was a bad food. When the feeling of skin returned to Lune's palm, s/he pressed her/his thumb into the body of the mouse whose ear sent her/his ghosts aflutter. Its form felt lukewarm and supple underneath her/his hand. There was a strange sort of give to its skin, like the melted ice surrounding it hardened away from the heat of Lune's touch. S/he pressed harder and the stinging sensation traveled up her/his arm next, reaching for her/his shoulder.

Lune tried to press harder. Lune tried so much to just press a little harder. S/he tried to break the mouse's skin and gouge a pointer finger into its flesh so s/he could start scooping its corpse-stiff insides into her/his mouth. S/he really, truly tried.

The stinging got worse—after a few seconds of pressing, s/he couldn't hold her/his arm up any more. The mouse splatted to the ground. Lune's arm dangled uselessly from her/his side and every point it touched on

Lune's body felt like it was on fire. A gasp fled her/his mouth and with it, Lune felt her/his teeth start to crumble. The blunted edges of her/his molars clacked against each other and ground down like tire treads on hot pavement. Lune's soft, inefficient lips smacked thunder in their wake.

The owl's beak—its powerful golden beak—flashed through Lune's mind. With an agonized grunt, Lune's body crashed to the floor, weighed down by its inadequacy, by its inability to let Lune do what s/he wanted for once in her/his fucked up little life.

The ghosts found Lune stuck to the dirty carpet with a useless dead mouse staring her/him in the eye. S/he couldn't stop blinking.



The owl remained a dream outside Lune's window and Lune remained trapped in a human-shaped body inside her/his apartment. Lune could tell her/his ghosts wanted her/him to feel better, but their whispers and shivers didn't comfort like they used to—every faded voice or cold touch only reminded Lune of the powerful wings/talons/eyes s/he couldn't have.

The hopelessness that lived in Lune's heart spread through her/his veins into each of her/his shaking limbs

like mercury rising in the heat. Every cell in her/his body weighed more than it should. Trying to lift her/himself led to ghostly cries to get down stay down don't move don't blink don't look they're here they're coming they're already here. Apartment 4C's comfortingly stale air grew cloying and metallic over time. Lune felt stuck like s/he had never been in this home before. Her/his only constant was the image of the owl that lived inside her/his mind, soaring off into the night.

S/he stopped going to work, stopped watering her/his plants, stopped doing her/his dishes. The shower stayed off, the laundromat stayed unvisited, the toothbrush grew mildew from its place by the sink. In all this time, Lune tried her/his best not to look out the window. S/he didn't want to see what s/he was missing.

Eventually, the ghosts stopped tolerating Lune's listlessness. They grew angry—furious. They rattled Lune's plastic dishware against the wall as if they could shock her/him into responding. With tortured screams and sighs, they chipped the wood of each door in the apartment. Lune never responded, so they never stopped pushing. Apartment 4C became unlivable.

So Lune did the only thing s/he could think to do. S/he tried again.

Seeing like the owl, living like the owl—none of that had worked; Lune couldn't overcome the fragile humanity of her/his insides. Maybe s/he was going about this wrong. What was the thing Lune admired the most about the owl?

Its freedom.

Lune needed to fly.

Flying was easier said than done, however. Lune's ghosts were vitriolic before s/he'd even had the chance to voice the idea. For days, they pestered Lune with screams in her/his ears and stings running up her/his arms. The whispers grew cacophonous, drowning out

Lune's attempts to talk through it with them.

Lune knew their opposition was for her/his safety. Her/his ghosts never did anything for any other reason. They kept her/him cautious—kept her/him aware. Unlike her/his mother or her/his social workers or her/his landlord, Lune's ghosts wanted Lune untroubled, not "healthy". And s/he couldn't argue that the owl wasn't troubling her/him. Even if s/he didn't see that as a bad thing right now.

But even her/his ghosts must learn not to interfere sometimes. Lune appreciated their input, but chose to be

stubborn because s/he had no other options. Every time s/he imagined that first gust of wind under her/his wings, Lune's heart leapt into the air. S/he just needed her/his body to follow.

First step: find a ledge. Probably the easiest part of the process, Lune's apartment was on the top floor and the roof lived invitingly close to her/his window.

Second step: Take a breath. Mostly to prevent any last minute panic attacks. Forgetting to breathe was a common problem when Lune made a big decision. Usually her/his ghosts reminded her/him, but today Lune told them to wait inside and they were listening for now.

Third step: Look down. People usually suggested the opposite, but how else would Lune know how high s/he needed to go? How else would the satisfaction of soaring take over? Where else was s/he supposed to yell "FUCK YOU!" if not at the ground?

Fourth step: Walk off the roof. Lune considered putting some fanfare into her/his start, but why make a ceremony out of it when the main event would be so much more exciting? The plunge off the roof didn't mean anything unless Lune caught her/himself; s/he wasn't going to give it meaning just for the sake of it.

Fifth step: Fly. Now the trouble presented itself,

because Lune found a ledge, took a breath, looked down, and stepped off the roof pretty well, all things considered. Her/his confidence never wavered. It was only then, a few moments in the air, that her/his foundations shook. The ground approached with a debt to collect, but there was no paying her/his way out. Lune's skin felt like fire underneath her/his fear. As air whistled past her/his human ears, Lune felt her/his body flay open with the harsh wind. S/he couldn't move, let alone flap nonexistent wings; all s/he could do was wait for the ground to take what it was owed.

Until a familiar stinging sensation traveled up her/his cold, stiff arm and shot her/his fingers out one by one against the side of the building's rusted fire escape. A familiar push clenched Lune's fist around the metal railing, staying firm even when her/his shoulder wrenched painfully enough to force the rest of the air out of Lune's lungs. Voices—whispers—in a familiar tone starting singing in Lune's ears, drowning out the horrible wind. The overwhelming feeling of falling was replaced by the determined grit of catching. Lune's heart filled with relief and light and confusion in equal measure; Lune's ghosts sang with its beating.

Gentle hands that didn't exist caressed a body that couldn't fly, but even if her/his powerful wings weren't

spreading across the sky, Lune felt weightless. The support of her/his ghosts pushed at the harsh lines of humanity drawn all over Lune. Feelings blurred into thoughts blurred into actions blurred into reality. A hand became a talon became a claw became see-through became nothing became everything s/he could see with eyes no longer squinted against the wind. Lune wasn't the owl, but s/he wasn't nothing, s/he was Everything. S/he was Lune. S/he was her/his ghosts.

Her/his arm held, despite the way Lune felt it shaking. S/he flung herself across the railing with a crescendo of whispers in her/his ears. Time faded from Lune's mind as it often did when her/his heart felt out of control. A blink and s/he stepped up to the window latch, another blink and s/he sat down on her/his stained couch, another blink and s/he felt the presence of the ghosts of Apartment 4C burrowing tight against her/his skin.

There would be no more steps. Lune remembered the whispers holding her/him aloft, the sensation of the world existing within and around her/him. There was no owl to save Lune from her/his body—there was no body holding Lune back anymore.

Looking up at the pitch darkness of Apartment 4C, Lune saw each particle of dust with perfect clarity.



A short story about Lune, a lesbian living
in an apartment full of ghosts, who
decides to become an owl. It's harder
than s/he thought.

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