

Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies

Volume 1994, Issue 13

1994

Article 27

Barred Owl

Chris Offutt*

*

Copyright ©1994 by the authors. *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). <https://ir.uiowa.edu/ijcs>

BARRED OWL

Chris Offutt

Seven years ago I got divorced and left Kentucky heading west. I made the Mississippi River in one day. An hour into the second day, my car threw a rod. I settled in Iowa City. Iowa isn't the pure west of cowboys and cattle, but it counts. Nobody in my family has lived this far off our home hill.

I took a job painting dorm rooms at the university here in town. The pay wasn't the best but I could go to work hungover and nobody bugged me. I liked the quiet of working alone. I went into a room and made it a different color. All four walls were in the same place and the ceiling hadn't gone anywhere, but it was a new place. Only the view from the window stayed the same. What I did was never look out.

After work every day I dropped by the Pig's Eye, a bar with cheap draft, a pool table and a jukebox. It was the kind of place to get drunk in safely, because the law watched student bars downtown. *The biggest jerk in the joint was the bartender. He liked to throw people out. You could smoke reefer in the Pig, gamble and fight, but if you drank too much, you were barred. That always struck me odd—like throwing someone out of a hospital for being sick.*

I spent my weekends waiting out a hangover until I could work on the next one. Sometimes they ran together. Since my social life was tied to the Pig, I was surprised to see someone coming to the house on Saturday afternoon. That it was Tarvis surprised me even more. He's from Eastern Kentucky, and people often mentioned him but we'd never met. His hair was short and his beard was long.

Tarvis rolled his shoulders, adjusted his hat, and knocked. I opened the door and invited him in.

"Thank ye, no," he said.

I understood that he knew I was just being polite, that he wouldn't enter my house until my welcome was genuine. I stepped outside, deliberately leaving the door open. What happened next was a ritual the likes of which I'd practically forgotten, but once beginning, felt like going home with an old girlfriend you happened to meet in a bar.

We looked each other in the eyes for a spell.

Tarvis nodded slightly.

I nodded slightly.

He opened a pouch of Red Man and offered a chew.

I declined and began the slow process of lighting a cigarette while he dug a wad of tobacco from the pouch.

I flicked the match away and we watched it land.

He worked his chew and spat and we watched it hit in the grass. Our hands were free. We'd shown that our guard was down enough to watch something besides each other.

He moved to lean against the porch strut.

I braced a foot on the house and tipped my shoulders against the outside wall.

"Nice house," he said.

"I rent."

"Weather ain't too awful bad this spring."

"Always use rain."

"Keep dogs?" he said.

"Used to."

"Fish?"

"Every chance I get."

He glanced at me and quickly away. It was my turn now. If you don't hear an accent you lose it, and just being around him made me talk like home.

"Working hard?" I said.

"Loafing."

"Get home much?"

"Weddings and funerals."

"I got it down to funerals myself," I said.

"Only place I feel at home anymore is the graveyard."

"Shame about the new governor."

"Politics," he said.

He spat again and I stubbed out my cigarette. A half moon had been hanging in the sky since late afternoon as if waiting for its chance to cross the sky.

"Hunt?" he asked.

I spat then, a tiny white dab near his darker pool, mine like a star, his an eclipse. I hadn't hunted since moving here. Iowa law won't let

you shoot a deer with a rifle. You can only use a slug in a shotgun, which means waiting at dawn in a deer stand. It was more like trapping than hunting, and I didn't much care for it. Tarvis looked every inch a hunter, the kind of guy to come walking out of the woods with a deer on his back.

"Not like I did," I said.

He nodded and looked at me straight on, which meant the reason for his visit was near.

"Skin them out yourself," he said.

I nodded.

"Come by my place tomorrow, then."

He gave me directions and drove away, his arm hanging out the window. I figured he needed help dressing out a deer. I'm not big on poaching but with the deer already dead, refusing to help meant wasting the meat. People from the hills don't ask for anything unless they need it pretty bad, and we don't turn a man down, either. He knew I was that way. I didn't really have a choice and he knew that, too.

After he left I headed for the bar, hoping to meet a woman. The problem with dating in a college town is that young women are too young, and the older ones usually have kids. I've dated single mothers but it's hard to know if you like the woman, or the whole package. A ready-made home can look awful good. Women with kids tell me it's just as tricky on them. Men figure they're either hunting a daddy or some overnight action with not much in between. Still, we all go to the Pig, men and women alike, hoping to meet someone. Occasionally one of us will pair off with a new face.

This night was the usual crowd, my friends of seven years. I drank straight shots and at last call ordered a couple of doubles. I'd started out drinking to feel good but by the end I was drinking not to feel anything. In the morning I woke on my couch. During the drive home I'd had to look away from the road to prevent the center stripe from splitting. I'd fixed that by straddling it.

Four cigarettes, six vitamins, and a cup of coffee later I felt alive enough to visit Tarvis. He lived three miles south of town on a dirt road beside the Iowa River. I veered around a dead possum with a tire trench cut through its guts. There were a couple of trailers with add-ons and a few small houses. Some had outdoor toilets. At Tarvis's house I realized why the area seemed both strangely foreign and familiar. It was a little version of Eastern Kentucky, complete with woodpiles, cardboard windows, and a lousy road. The only thing missing was hills.

I'd woke up still drunk and now that I was getting sober, the hangover was coming on. I wished I'd brought some beer. I got nervous that Tarvis had killed his deer in a hard place and needed help dragging it out of the brush. I didn't think I could take it. What I

needed was to lie down for a month.

Tarvis came around the house from the rear.

"Hidy," he said. "Ain't too awful late are ye."

"Is it on the property?"

He led me behind the house to a line of willows overlooking the river's floodplain. A large bag lay on a work table. Tarvis reached in the bag and very gently, as if handling eggs, withdrew an owl. The feathers on its chest made a pattern of brown and white—a barred owl. Its broad wings spanned four feet. The head feathers formed a widow's peak between the giant eyes. It had a curved yellow beak and inch-long talons. Tarvis caressed its chest.

"Beaut, ain't it," he said. "Not a mark to her."

"You kill it?"

"No. Found it on the interstate. Reckon it hit a truck. Neck's broke."

The sun had risen above the trees, streaming heat and light against my face. Owls were protected by the government. Owning just one feather was illegal, let alone the whole bird.

"I want this pelt," Tarvis said.

"Never did skin a bird."

"You've skinned animals out. Can't be that big a difference."

"Why don't you do it yourself then?"

Tarvis backstepped as an expression close to guilt passed across his face.

"I never skinned nothing," he said. "Nobody taught me on account of I never pulled the trigger. I was raised to it but I just wasn't able."

I looked away to protect his dignity. His words charged me with a responsibility I couldn't deny, the responsibility of Tarvis's shame. Leaving would betray a confidence that had taken a fair share of guts to tell.

I felt dizzy but I rolled my sleeves up, wishing for a beer. I began with the right leg. Surrounding the claws were feathers so dense and fine that they reminded me of fur. To prevent tearing the papery skin, I massaged it off the meat. Tarvis stood beside me. I held the owl's body and slowly turned it, working the skin free. My armpits cooled from the breeze, and I realized I'd been sweating. I could smell the liquor in my skin. The hangover was beginning to lift. I snipped the cartilage and tendon surrounding the large wing bone, and carefully exposed the pink muscle. Feathers scraped the plywood like a broom. The owl was giving itself to me, giving its feathered pelt and its greatest gift, that which separated it from us—the wings. In return I'd give it a proper burial.

There is an intensity to skinning, a sense of immediacy. Once you start, you must continue. Many people work fast to get it over

with, but I like to take it slow. I hadn't felt this way in a long time and hadn't known I'd missed it. I felt as if I were back home again, that my years in Iowa were in the past. I'd served my time. I was free.

I eased the skin over the back of the skull. Its right side was caved in pretty bad. The pelt was inside out, connected to the body at the beak. The reversed head still held the shape of the skull which pushed into the skin of the mouth. It was as if the owl was kissing the shadow of its mate. I passed it to Tarvis. He held the slippery skull in one hand and gently tugged the skin free of the carcass.

"Get a shovel," I said.

Tarvis circled the house for a spade and dug a hole beneath a willow. I examined the bird—both legs, the skull, each wing, its neck and ribs—all were broken. Two of the owl's ribs felt crushed. Its head hung from several shattered vertebrae. I'd never seen a creature so clean on the outside and so tore up on the inside. It had died pretty hard.

I built a twig platform and placed the remains in the grave. Tarvis began to spade the dirt in. He tamped it down, mumbling to himself. I reversed the pelt so the feathers were facing out. The body cavity flattened itself. It was an empty skin, a pouch with wings that would never fly.

Hand-shaking is not customary among the men in Eastern Kentucky. We stood apart from one another and nodded, arms dangling, boots scuffing the dirt, as if our limbs were useless without work.

"Got any whiskey?" I said.

"Way I drank gave it a bad name. Quit when I left Kentucky."

"That's when I took it up."

"I started wearing workshirts after I moved here. Boots, hat, the whole works. Never did at home. Here they think I'm a tough guy, at home I was about half a sissy."

"What makes you want that owl so bad?"

"Owl is like a shark. It's pure built to hunt. It's got three ear holes. It can open and close each pupil separate from the other one. It flies silent. They ain't a better hunter."

"Well," I said. "Reckon you know your owls."

I drove to the bar for a few shots and thought about eating, but didn't want to ruin an eight-dollar drunk with a four-dollar meal. I didn't meet a woman and didn't care. I laid drunk through most of the week, thinking about Tarvis in the blurred space between hangover and the day's first drink. Though I'd shown him how to skin, I had the feeling he was guiding me into something I'd tried to leave behind. He was trying to bring the hills to Iowa. Part of me wanted to paint them out with liquor.

A few weeks later I met a teacher who was considering a move to Kentucky because it was a place she thought could use her help. We

spent a few nights together. I felt like a test for her, a way of gauging Kentucky's need, and I guess I flunked. Maybe I did it on purpose, I don't know. Do-gooders bug me, especially the ones who want to help groups instead of individuals. Anyhow, she moved to South Dakota for a job on a Sioux reservation.

On Memorial Day I took a six-pack to Tarvis's house, parked behind his truck and opened a beer. At first I wanted to gag, but there's no better buzz than a drink on an empty stomach. I drank half and held it down. The heat spread through my body, activating last night's bourbon. I finished the beer and opened another.

Tarvis came out of the house, blinking against the sun. We went to the riverbank and sat in metal chairs. A great blue heron flew north, its neck curled like a snake ready to strike. The air was quiet. We could have been by the Blue Lick River back home. It felt right to sit with someone of the hills, even if we didn't have a lot to say.

I asked to see the owl and Tarvis reluctantly led me to the door. His eyes were shiny as new dimes. "Ain't nobody been inside in eight years but me."

The cabin was one room with a sink, range, toilet and cot. A woodstove stained from tobacco spit stood in the center of the room. The only furniture was a tattered couch. Shelves lined every wall, filled with things he'd found in the woods.

A dozen owl pellets lay beside a jumble of antlers. A variety of bird wings were pinned to the wall. One row of shelves held sun-bleached bones and another contained thirty or forty jaw bones. Skulls were jammed in—raccoon, fox, deer, at least a dozen groundhog. Hundreds of feathers poked into wall cracks and knotholes. There were so many feathers that I had the sense of being within the owl pelt turned inside-out.

Tarvis pulled a board from the highest shelf. The owl lay on its back, wings stretched full to either side. The claws hung from strips of downy hide. Tarvis had smoothed the feathers into their proper pattern.

"You did a good job," I said.

"Had some help."

"Ever find any Indian stuff?"

"All this came from hunting arrowheads," he said. "But I never found one. Maybe I don't know how to look."

"Maybe this is what finds you."

He handed me a stick from one of the shelves. It was eighteen inches long, sanded smooth and feathered at one end. He reached under the couch for a hand-made bow.

"That's osage orange wood," he said. "Same as what the Indians used. I made them both. Soon's I find me a point I'll be setting pretty."

"You going to hunt with it?"

"No." He looked away. "I don't even kill mosquitoes. What I do is let the spiders go crazy in here. They keep the bugs down and snakes stop the mice. Hawks eat the snakes. Fox kills duck, fish eat frogs, coon eats the fish. An owl hunts everything but nothing hunts the owl. It's like man."

He put the owl on a shelf and opened the door. We went outside. The staccato of a woodpecker came across the river, each peck distinct as a bell.

"How come you don't hunt?" I said.

He looked at me, then away, and back to me. His eyes were smoky.

"I don't know," he said. "I wish I could. Take and cut a woodpecker's beak off and it'll pound its face against a tree until it dies. Not hunting does me the same way. But I still can't do it."

The river shimmered in the wind, sunlight catching each tiny cresting wave. Tarvis stared across the water at the woodpecker's sound. A breeze carried the scent of clover and mud. I slipped away to my car.

Work hit a slow spell. I was in a dorm I'd painted twice before and could do it blindfolded. The rooms repeated themselves, each one a mirror image of the last. I went in and out of the same room over and over. Sometimes I didn't know where I was, and leaving didn't help because the hallway was filled with identical doors.

The next time I visited Tarvis, I drank the neck and shoulders out of a fifth while he talked. He was from a family of twelve. His last name was Shipley. He grew up on Shipley Ridge, overlooking Shipley Creek in Shipley County. His people numbered so many that they got identified by hair color and their mother's maiden name. Nobody called him Tarvis. He was Veda Barber's fourth boy, a black-headed Shipley. That's what finally made him leave. Nobody knew who he was.

Tarvis and I sat till the air was greyed by dusk. Night covered us over. We were like a pair of seashells a long way from the beach. If you held one of us to your ear, you'd hear Kentucky in the distance, but listening to both would put you flat in the woods. I realized that a shell, like the owl pelt, was an empty hull. The ease of Tarvis's company just drove in the fact that after seven years, I still didn't belong in Iowa. Leaving had ruined me for living in the hills. My home was the Pig.

I went back to see him at the height of summer. The river moved so slowly it seemed to be still, a flat pane of reflected light. Mosquitoes began to circle my head. Tarvis opened his door, squinting against the sun. He'd lost weight. His hands were crusted with dirt and he reminded me of the old men at home, weary from slant-farming

hillsides that never yielded enough.

We nodded to each other, began the ritual of tobacco.

His voice sounded rusty and cracked. He moved his lips before each word, forming the word itself.

"Found one," he said.

I knew immediately what he meant.

"Where?"

"Creek. Four mile downriver. Half mile in."

"Flint?"

His head moved in a slow shake.

"Chert," he said. "No flint in America."

"Did you make the arrow?"

He shivered. Mosquitoes rose from his body and we looked at each other a long time. He never blinked. I smacked a mosquito against my neck. He compressed his lips and went back inside, softly closing the door.

I spent the rest of the summer drinking and didn't think about Tarvis anymore. For a while I dated a woman, if you can call it that. We drank till the bar closed, then went to her house and tried not to pass out in the middle of everything. Things eventually went to hell between us. Everybody said it would. I guess I knew it, too. She was warm and kind, though, and at a certain point nothing else really matters.

The day we split up, I got drunk at the Pig. Someone was in the men's room and I went in the women's. It was commonly done. The uncommon part was falling through the window. The bartender didn't ask what happened or if I was hurt, just barred me on the spot. He thought I threw a garbage can through the window. He said that nothing human had broken the window, which made me wonder just what he thought I was made of.

In October a policeman arrived at my house. I tried to remember what I'd done the night before and couldn't. I got scared that I'd hit something with my car. The cop was neckless and blond, officially polite. He asked if I knew Tarvis Shipley and I nodded. He asked if the deceased had displayed any behavior out of the ordinary and I told him no, wanting to side with Tarvis even dead.

"A will left his house to you," the cop said.

"Maybe he wasn't right when he wrote it."

"We don't think he was," the cop said. "But the house is yours."

He stood to leave and I asked how Tarvis had died. In a slow, embarrassed fashion, he told me part of it. I went to the county coroner who filled in all the gaps. It was his most unusual case and he talked about it like a man who'd pulled in a ten pound bass on a dimestore rod.

Tarvis had fastened one end of the bow to an iron plate and

screwed the plate to the floor. Guy wires held the bow upright. He fitted an arrow with a Burlington chert point into the bow. He drew it tight and braced it. A strip of rawhide ran across the floor to the couch where they found him. All he had to do was pull the leather cord to release the arrow aimed at his throat.

His body had been shipped home for burial. As much as he'd tried to get out, the hills had reclaimed him after all.

I drove to Tarvis's house and gathered his personal stuff—a toothbrush and comb, his tobacco pouch, knife and hat. I dug a hole beside the owl's grave. I built a twig platform and dropped it all in. It seemed fitting that he'd have two graves, one here and another in Kentucky. I filled the hole and smoothed the earth and didn't know what to say. Everything I came up with sounded stupid. It was such a small place in the ground. I wasn't burying him, I was covering over how I felt. I looked at the house that would never really be mine, and drove to town.

My neighborhood was neat and clean, like dorm walls after a fresh coat. From the outside, my house looked like all the rest on Rundell Street. The refrigerator held lunchmeat, eggs, and milk. The toilet ran unless you jiggled the handle. I didn't even go in. I bought a pint for later and drove to the Pig, my true home, forgetting that I'd been barred. I sat in the car outside, looking at the building. The windows of the Pig were brightly lit and I knew everyone in there. I hadn't been to the bar for three months and nobody had called me, not a one. It was a fake social life, the skin of one.

I drove back to Tarvis's road, pulled over, and cut the engine. I hadn't known how tore up the inside of the owl was, and I couldn't tell about Tarvis either. Both of them should have stayed in the woods. It made me wonder if I should have. I opened the whiskey. The smell was quick and strong. I threw the full bottle out the car window. I don't know why. As soon as I did, I regretted it. The bottle didn't break and I knew the bourbon was emptying into the ditch.

I drove down the road and parked in the shadow of Tarvis's house. The river was dark and flat. Barred owls were calling to each other, answering and calling. There was one female calling and three males hollering back, which reminded me of the bar. I realized that I missed the Pig more than Kentucky. I took that as a bad sign. The bottle in the ditch held a little more whiskey, and thinking about it was an even worse sign. It was time to quit. I was done with it. I quit. No more whiskey.

I walked across the yard to the river and sat on the bank for a long time. I thought seriously about moving back home. At first, I figured I'd get a little closer, Indiana or Ohio, but then I decided to just go ahead and go on home. I hadn't seen my family in seven years. I didn't want to wind up going back the way Tarvis did.

I stood and took a deep breath. It was time. I was ready. I walked to my car and started it. I drove past the bottle in the ditch. On the way to town, I decided to stop by the Pig. Enough time had gone by that I could get back in. I needed to tell my friends goodbye. It would be as much for them as for me, and I'd only have one drink.