

When I was a boy, our backyard pushed up against a small forest
in the neighborhood park, complete with a slow trickling
creek. There, one barely-alive sycamore stood tall amongst the
maples and pin oaks. It was smooth skinned, bright white, and
hollow on the inside—you could thump its bark and hear a wooden
echo. My father said it must be older than his father.

That single tree provided shelter for countless squirrels, owls,
crows, blue jays and more. It was the grand guardian of the forest,
wide in girth and lifeless on top, where woodpeckers busily
pecked out their annual homes.

One day, city workers came to cut the old man down. But they didn't
have a clear drop, so they asked my father if the topmost
portion could fall in our backyard. He agreed when they offered to give
him the wood, cut into lengths for our wood stove.

For a little boy like me, it was thrilling to watch the workers cut
the treetop into pieces. Then, when they were nearly to the final
piece, they exposed a nest in the hollow. A baby owl came
tumbling out—not big enough yet to fly, huge eyes, downy fur,
and too young to be frightened.

*newborn baby owl
stretches its neck out its hole—
wise not to look down*

There wasn't much we could do for the little fella, so we gathered
up the remains of its nest and carefully placed them both into the nook
of a limb, back in the forest. Maybe the mother would find
him—that was our only hope. It simply was not an option to nurse
it ourselves, but we wanted to give it a fighting chance.

The next morning, I hurried out to see if the wild thing had
survived the night, but it was no use. On the ground beneath the
limb, the tiny owl lay motionless. I prodded it with a stick, still
hoping for life, but it was clearly dead.

Despondent, I walked away. When I reached my back door, I
turned for a final look and saw a turkey vulture drop from the
treetops. In a split second, the ugly bird grabbed the owlet
and flipped it into its mouth, swallowing it whole in one gulp.

That winter, we burned the sycamore logs each night until they
were gone. A new hole opened in the forest outline where the old
sycamore once stood. I kept a lookout for owls, but they were not
to be found. The turkey vultures still hung around though,
watching and waiting. And I decided never to look into a hollow
again, especially the one from that day—dark, empty, and deep
inside me.

*leaves descend like birds
rounding themselves in curled dives,
crash landing to earth*