

Night, Owl

If I were the protagonist of *The Scarlet Letter*, the “A” would stand for ambition. It was ambition that pushed me to earn perfect grades, that string of “A”s that stretched out ten years long. It was ambition that bound me to my music for hours, repeating the same passage over and over on my piccolo. And it was ambition that kept me shut inside over a sunny Spring Break, toiling away on my creation like Victor Frankenstein.

My creation was not a monstrous man, but rather an owl. Along with the formaldehyde-coated frogs and soggy elodea leaves of traditional biology classes, I had been tasked with designing a new owl, adapted to the man-made horrors of the modern world. So, like every other overly ambitious student, I resolved to create a painstakingly realistic owl species.

As hours turned to days, my thoughts turned from temperature resistance and wing structures to my own design. Had I been optimized, like my owl, or was I doomed to fall victim to the world around me? *Lung capacity? Strong. Flexibility? Above average. Vision? Could be better.* But, in the midst of this checklist, I remembered what every science teacher ground into our heads. *The goal of every organism is to survive and reproduce. Those who cannot have been selected against by nature.*

As a freshman who had just realized my sexuality, this remembrance chilled me to my core. Evolutionarily, homosexuality would make an organism less likely to reproduce and therefore less likely to pass on their genes. Choking on the thick, acrid scent of rubber cement, my mind reeled. Had I been selected against by nature? Had I been doomed to wither and die without contributing so much as a twig to the tree of life? I glanced down at my graphite-dusted hands and saw only ashes.

But when night fell, my thoughts inevitably turned to her. My best friend, my mentor, my savior. Watching her smile beneath the light of the midwinter moon was when I first realized I liked girls. To her I wrote ten thousand words in fifty letters. A new hiking path, the way the sun glints off the soccer fields at 6 A.M., a half-remembered song; these were the things I tried to share with her in writing. To this day, I have not mailed a single letter.

Shaking off this distraction, I pressed myself to work on, outlining fetal development stages and uropygial gland actions. But, while sketching a delicate wingbone, I recalled the gentle curve of her cheek. Adding pigment to the russet eyes of my creation, I found myself meeting a facsimile of her gaze. Fragments of an unfamiliar song flitted through my head.

Owl, owl, eyes so dark, how can one glance cause a spark?

At that point, it was nearly midnight, yet I tried to focus on the task at hand. My project was already complete, but I was never one to merely meet the standards. Now, with the full knowledge of my evolutionary defect, I resolved to redouble my efforts. Maybe if I worked that much harder, if I was that much more successful, people wouldn't look down on me for being gay.

Owl, owl, beak so sharp, can your song outplay the harp?

Notes scrawled in a stuttering hand, sketches half-abandoned in their obscurity, a few highlighted articles scattered across the floor; these were the sources of my power. I inked out a map of my owl's territory, delineating the icy Kamchatka Peninsula. I wrote up a description of migration patterns, nesting tendencies, and hunting grounds. I gave my paper creation not just life, but history. Three years later, I would do the same for myself when I picked up Lillian Faderman's *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*.

Owl, owl, wings so bright, do you know the name of night?

My frenzy of productivity nearly complete; I had just one blank to fill. My creation had no name. I had been given six names at birth, in keeping with Cuban traditions. Over my fifteen years of life, I added on other labels: sister, student, musician, archer. There was only one that had proved too difficult to say, that made my eyes dart away and my heart pulse. And so, my pen hovering over the last open space on my phylogenetic tree, I took a step towards embracing that label.

Like other owls, this species is largely active at night. Siberian nights are some of the darkest and stillest. They are the most isolated from the light and noise pollution of the modern world. For this reason, I have chosen to name my species B. yerunkar.

I had named my owl, my creation, after the girl I loved. After packing away my pencils and stacking sheaves of notes, I finally lay down to rest. The cool darkness enveloped me as I relaxed into temporary oblivion, confident that a love that drove me to learn and create could not possibly be some evolutionary curse.

From then on, night became a comfort. It was a time to reflect, to question, to be honest with myself. I reasoned through my feelings and practiced refuting the anti-homosexuality arguments I heard pouring out from too many politicians and preachers. I even planned how I would come out to my parents. After my more serious thoughts petered out into drowsiness, I liked to remember the conversation of one particular autumn evening before drifting off.

Well, my name is pretty traditional. My middle and surnames both come from my father. He used to be a ship captain, did I ever tell you that? But my first name comes from an old Sanskrit word; it means “night.”