

Barred Owl Elegy

8/25/01

Owl Effigy Totem (heart pine, 6 ft. tall)

Thursby Mound at Blue Spring (ca. 1200 A. D.)

© Purdy and Craven: *The Indian Art of Ancient Florida*



It's five months since I've been on the lower river and the water is, by contrast, up to the full. Everywhere we go, the river flows outwards into full-depth. A year ago it was so dry back there that we were on foot, crackling fronds and leaves, through many of the off-channel areas. Summer rains bring a rich renewal of the land and the palpable green joy of it shines everywhere.

As I pull out and across from Katie's Landing to the towering grasses, one deep gator grunt hovers somewhere above the reeds. My first impression is that I see snakes in the water everywhere—each one upon investigation turns into a stem of eelgrass or other vegetation in a long arching flutter of the surface water. Today the river is the richest black-brown, smooth, slick, and fast, wearing her tightest jeans to beguile the body spirit. Bill is still loading up and getting some flack from Carlos about leaving his Pathfinder down along the loading area.

In this first solitude, I step immediately into the river monastery. This is not really a metaphor for me. I think the water itself and the flow of it, the smooth glass, can put your

brain waves immediately at both alpha and omega. It tells me without words and completely from inside of me that I am healthy, but moving faster and faster out of this form, while the river stands rock still in some kind of eternity.

We trade places. I lodge the nose of the kayak into the reed bed and sit perfectly still—an object. It flows by like a black silk dress or a ribbon of oil. We exchange forms or modes as I begin to taste the river’s stillness inside its eternal motions, disjunctions, reflections. Bill and I will go downstream today for a few hours and race back before dinner against the flow. It is almost high noon, a blue sky providing elevated 90 degree temperatures and substantial solar glare. I want to comprehend today the difference--in the community of the river-- between the journey of the solitary soul and the opportunity of doing it with a friend.

Over the years Bill and I have made dozens of trips together on the river, using his two kayaks, and I am always saying I should buy my own and sometimes go out by myself. I have shopped three different times, even test-paddled one in Lake Virginia. But why haven’t I bought one? Often when Bill and I get going, he goes faster than I and escapes out of view for some time. But sooner or later we hitch up again and tally what we have seen. It is amazing how much actually changes in the river in the five or thirty minute intervals we sometimes build between us.

Today we float downstream through the flats, cut through some thickets to the back channel away from the homesites, and make our way through the swamp, looking for the open patch of sawgrass back there that Bill proclaims is his favorite spot on all of the St. Johns.

It is swamp mallow time and we sit admiring the blossoms, rummaging through our brains and a guidebook to determine its species. The flower has a bright yellow stamen with five little phlanges of pink on the end that gesture joy from a deep pool of pink lattice-work in five bright petals. This is consciousness. Don’t we have a bigger word for it? Shouldn’t it be just about the biggest word of all to sit in the river with your hand at the stem, your nose in the pentad of petals, your eyes reading into the finery of the most voluptuous of beds?

But the consciousness of swamp mallow is even greater when multiplied by our sharing, groping together through biological terminology that is losing its grip in our minds. What is so special about the sharing of consciousness that adds to the river monastery? The soul is the music of what happens, says Helen Vendler, in the title of her book on America’s poetry of earth, but the music accumulates when the voice of it amplifies from solo to duet to chorus. Two friendly co-inquisitors, two radically different river imaginations, grab a hold of the intricate patterns and counterpoint of mallow.

The results are refreshingly both predictable and surprising at once. It isn’t just consciousness, though, of measures of ecology, rhythms of motion, but it’s interpretation, the recognition inside the set of rich impressions that something symbolic and enlightening is there. We get some message from the river community that will lead to solace or action or imagination for the real world we both are fully engaged in, on separate but related planes—the free-lance journalist and “nature writer” vs the teacher, scholar, and writer who has stopped publishing about medieval literature to focus on Florida.

We move through thickets with downed trees. One has flipped up its circle of roots, twenty-five feet in the air, causing us befuddlement as we try to find another way around it. A gathering of blackbirds is roused up by our breaking through the branches—six to twelve of them flutter and squawk past us and I begin to get a feeling again that they are telling us something. Four or five times in the last decade or two I have had a bird experience when the uncharacteristic behavior and squawking of birds has begun to be momentous for me. This too is a kind of consciousness, which the scientific mind has to be very skeptical about—but the spiritual mind does well to consider.

I ask Bill if he thinks the blackbirds are trying to tell us something? We have disturbed their ceremonies, perhaps, and so he suggests that “today’s lesson is over and we are leaving [the chapel] to you guys.” I don’t know, but I have a very firm and deep impression of their moving by and around us in the swamp for a reason. We encounter hundreds of animals on each trip—gators, herons, hawks, fish of many kinds, turtles, a rainbow of damselflies—and it is a mystery how they decide whether to move or stand still or engage us. Sometimes, but not often, they stay put because they don’t see us. Sometimes they sit for Bill’s passing, but pitch into the water for me.

Today I am enthralled by the high formations of the golden silk spiders. One up about twenty feet high on the right looks like it is pinned to the blue sky in mid air, about five feet away from the nearest tree on the right and fifteen away from any branch on the left. If you spin your head like the earth’s sphere closely as you pass, the web comes into sight first as a pattern of white fire in the sunlight and sooner or later it all turns golden, as you pass under it and look back. The Sisters of St. Silk are all at work in the celebration of their faith, high in the airy rafters of the river’s arches.

Soon I begin to hear the low groaning calls of the barred owl, up ahead where Bill is rounding a bend to the left. It is odd to hear such calls in the high heat and light of a neon noon, but not completely unheard of. In my neighborhood at dusk and dawn, especially, they start up and one begets another and perhaps even a third.

As I float closer to the spot, I hear a low, four-note call that is almost like a shiver: “Whoo cooks your foood?” Others answer with vigorous, full-formed versions, the four-note phrase repeated twice. An owl crosses from the left to right, about thirty feet ahead, but I still hear again the low and shivery voice with just four notes and it is coming right out of a spot on the left, about 20 feet up.

I see this owl as I pass and it sees me, as the others further back on the left continue their calls. It is difficult to tell, but there are more barred owls here I think than two or three pairs. I am puzzled because I have never before witnessed anything like this gathering of barred owls. I vow to check the natural history books for reports of such social behavior (indeed find none).

I turn the kayak about and move quietly over to the nearest tree to grab a branch. The river is narrow and swift right here and it takes me a while to move the bow up stream so I can check out this short-winded one with the mournful call. He flies up to a branch of the next tree, about five feet higher, and crouches facing away from me. One owl comes down on the muddy bank. Others are moving more prominently deeper into the woods, but he continues his dirge. After fifteen minutes of this choral ode, I have to leave to catch up to my friend.

Later, recounting the story to Bill, I wonder aloud if this was some sort of deathbed scene, a hospice setting for the last swamp yowl of a retiring hunter. I don't quite know about that, but in spite of all the jabberwocky of this scene, you would have to look far to discover a deeper quiet. This stems from the fact that the barred owls callings are not for me, at least not a protest at my being there. They did not cease when I left. I am past, but one of them is passing. In the hot bright, early afternoon a night has fallen and an old owl wants to say to his kin or kind, "Eat well."

At day's end, Bill and I are summing up the takings. We each believe in our own emblems. Wekiva is the center of our being together. The space between our breathing in and breathing out is punctuated today by the white ibis and the ebony jewelwings.



Drawing by Jim Duby
Available on the Current FOWR T-shirt