The warping night air having brought the boom
Of an owl’s voice into her darkened room,
We tell the wakened child that all she heard
Was an odd question from a forest bird,
Asking of us, if rightly listened to,
“Who cooks for you?” and then “Who cooks for you?”

Words, which can make our terrors bravely clear,
Can also thus domesticate a fear,
And send a small child back to sleep at night
Not listening for the sound of stealthy flight
Or dreaming of some small thing in a claw
Borne up to some dark branch and eaten raw.

I read this poem recently and found that it took root in my mind. Root is the right word, something organic that keeps growing until it takes up more and more room. Though, at first glance, it seems to be a poem more suited to Halloween with its undertones of menace and the uncanny, it is actually a poem that is equally applicable for Earth Day, which this is, or at least Earth Weekend. So, first, a few words about the poem itself.

First of all, there’s the title. Of course, Barred Owl is a kind of owl, the kind we are likely to see in these parts if we see or hear an owl at all, but the title has two meanings. Not only is it a kind of owl but it also implies that the poet is trying to bar, or exclude, the owl. The poet’s explanation to the child certainly tries to bar the
sinister aspect of the owl from the child, tries to remove the fear that the owl inspires. But we might ask who is more afraid of the owl’s cry, the child or the adult? Or does the child learn to be afraid because the adult is so assiduous in trying to remove the fear, tame its message. As the lines that end the poem after the child has been sent back to bed prove, it is all those really terrifying things that we tell ourselves not to think about, those are the thoughts that won’t ever go away. And our little strategies to make the situation better often backfire. Translating the owl’s cry into a question about domestic cooking arrangements leads to thoughts of cooking and eating in general. And where does that take us? We all must eat something. We are all, whatever our species, located somewhere on the eating-and-being-eaten line. Though this is something we usually do not stress when we are teaching nature classes to the young.

We are told not to think about things like eating and being eaten because they strike at the essence of who we are and how we are situated in nature. This poem places us closer to the owl than we like to think. It is the shadow at the back of our minds, the place where we have to think about our own mortality, our own dependence on the earth, our own lack of transcendence, our own rootedness. It is this that makes it particularly a good poem for Earth Day.
If we look at the view of our place in nature from the Biblical perspective, the perspective which has governed most of the view of ourselves for well over two thousand years, it is a perspective of the rule of humanity over nature and most of our actions have been in keeping with that perspective. Humans are given the earth for their exploitation and they have taken this mandate and run with it. However, there is another perspective that has run in tandem with this one. Interestingly, it is also a Biblical perspective found in the books of the prophets for example

Jeremiah 1414 This is the word of the LORD that came to Jeremiah concerning the drought:

2 “Judah mourns, her cities languish; they wail for the land, and a cry goes up from Jerusalem.
3 The nobles send their servants for water; they go to the cisterns but find no water. They return with their jars unfilled; dismayed and despairing, they cover their heads.
4 The ground is cracked because there is no rain in the land; the farmers are dismayed and cover their heads.
5 Even the doe in the field deserts her newborn fawn because there is no grass.
6 Wild donkeys stand on the barren heights and pant like jackals; their eyes fail for lack of food.”

Or, more starkly, Zephaniah, in which creation is run backwards and turned to destruction. “I will sweep away everything
from the face of the earth,”
declares the LORD.

3 “I will sweep away both man and beast;
   I will sweep away the birds in the sky
   and the fish in the sea—
   and the idols that cause the wicked to stumble.” Both these and other passages, in loud and threatening prophetic style, warn of God’s retribution. Traditionally, this has been interpreted as God’s wrath for various forms of disobedience, usually for not recognizing that this is God’s world, not ours, in other words, for worshipping idols, and we, too, in common with the ancient Israelites, have our idols.

U-U’s tend to reject this view of a supernatural God bent on retribution but is it really too far a stretch to see this particular form of punishment not as retribution but as the inevitable consequences of disregarding the limits of nature? Again, we are back to eating or, in this case, not eating, and the necessity of understanding our place in the natural world, the limits of our transcendence.

Perhaps we feel more comfortable with the later forms of acknowledging the power of nature, with the ideas of Spinoza, Rousseau, and later of our own Emerson. Nature became a transcendent force in and of itself and reading Nature (with a capital N) rather than old texts that these new radical thinkers to a new, radical understanding of the world and our place in it.
This is a way of thinking that comes closer to our own, even if it emptied the
churches in favor of, let’s say, Beaver Creek. But the problem with this way of
seeing the world lies in the ability to understand who we are that are doing the
reading of Nature. It is all too easy to make another god of nature and to see
ourselves in a special relationship to the god we have made. By having the ability
to name something, something we call Nature, we stand in a different relationship
to it than creatures without the power to name and to understand and to change
their environment.

To put it another way, we often see our place in the world as either God’s
special species, the species second in command, in charge of all the rest, or, if we
reject this idea, we often see ourselves as a species who is able to stand outside the
world in which we live in yet another way. For the God we no longer
acknowledge, we substitute Nature, but we still see ourselves as exempt, as being
given a pass, as somehow the species with the power to control, through our
cognition and our consciousness, our destiny. What is hardest of all, and is perhaps
the curse that we all share, is to see ourselves, not as above nature or below nature
but as part of nature. It is hard to see ourselves on some kind of cosmic scale, as no
different from the owl.
That is what makes this poem so compelling. We push away the idea that we eat and could, possibly, be eaten. We embrace the idea that, because we cook our food we have a different relationship to its source. We keep the owl away through nursery rhymes and other incantations because to understand our place in what we call nature is so very threatening. It is a large and cold universe out there. We find ways to cut it to our size and warm it up.

But all the nursery rhymes in the world cannot keep us from the knowledge that we are part of the great chain of energy that goes from the least plankton to us and other beasts of prey. This is how things seem to be organized, even if we wish it were otherwise and even if we rebel against the cruelty that seems to be part of it, and so, part of us.

No wonder most religions locate the spirit anywhere but in the body. The body returns us to the cycle of birth and death, to our own mortality and the mortality of everyone we love. It reminds us of change and the impermanence of everything, even mountains. We want to rise above that cycle and find a place where we and everything else is imperishable. But as far as we know, the perishable body is where we live. Through our bodies, through strength and weakness, through pain and through pleasure, through the complex web of our senses, we understand the world. We cannot understand it any way but through our
appetites and desires, our revulsions and our longings, our mastery of our muscles and nerves, and, at some point, the loss of that mastery. It is through our living bodies, if we will, that we come to wisdom.

This is the shadow of the owl’s wing, the shadow we turn away from. We would prefer a spirituality divorced from the changeable, impermanent body lodged in a changeable, impermanent universe. But such a spirituality doesn’t have much to say to our earthly condition. I think we do better when we see how we meet the world and recognize both our ability to act on the world and to be acted on by it. We do better when we meet the perishable within us and still find that which has imperishable value. We are, like the owl, both actors and creators as well as acted upon and created, in and by that which is much larger than our brief lives. The owl’s sermon tells us that we are grounded and yet we fly, roots and wings.

Earth Day, whether it was yesterday or today, is to remind us of both our dependence and our abilities. Never have we been as aware of both the fragility and the power of this planet. On the one hand, we are beginning to see how our actions have harmed the world around us and many are taking steps to, at the very least, limit the damage. On the other hand, we see that we are meddling with immense forces that we do not understand and, in creating the kind of imbalance
that we have through our exploitation of the earth, we have set in play a cascade of events that may result in our extermination, even as the earth continues to spin around the sun. Perhaps mosquito archeologists will have something to study in the future.

We are beginning to see things differently. To see how we are as dependent as the rest of the world on the exquisite balance of forces, to see how we are not the rulers, or even the stewards or the acolytes, but are as dissolved in the forces we try to understand as salt is in the ocean. We cannot really stand apart.

Our thoughts are marvels. We are, indeed, very different from other creatures. But we are still creatures. To commemorate Earth Day, or Earth Weekend, or Earth Year, I’d like us to share our remembrance of our creaturelyness by sharing, symbolically, in the act of eating. I’d like to offer communion with the earth and with each other. Let us begin by reading number 727 together. We will pass bread and juice among you. There is a choice of wheat bread or gluten free wafer. When all have been served we will share these together.

*When all are served:*

This is the body of the earth, given so that we may live. Let us eat this to acknowledge our common need.
This is the blood of the earth, given so we may live. Let us drink this to acknowledge our common humanity.

Now, let us join in singing Hymn 406.
The barred owl (Strix varia), also known as the northern barred owl, striped owl or, more informally, hoot owl, is a North American large species of owl. A member of the true owl family, Strigidae, they belong to the genus Strix, which is also the origin of the family's name under Linnaean taxonomy. [2] [3] Barred owls are largely native to eastern North America, but have expanded their range to the west coast of North America where they are considered invasive. Common Name: Barred Owl, Hoot Owl, Northern Barred Owl, Swamp Owl, Striped Owl, Eight Hooter, Bard Owl, Hooting Cat of the North. Lifespan: 15-20 years. Size: 17-24 inches. Weight: 22-29 ounces. Wingspan: 50-55 inches. Conservation Status: Least concern. Barred Owl Identification. Barred owls are heavily camouflaged, but their overall large size, round head, and medium length tail help birders recognize them more easily. The Barred Owl is a fairly large owl with a large, rounded head with no ear-tufts. The species name varia is a form of the Latin word varius, meaning diverse. It has also been known as the Hoot Owl or Eight Hooter, and mistakenly called the Bard Owl. Photo Gallery (19 pictures). Sound Gallery.