



The Barred Owl

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The poem has two stanzas of six iambic pentameter lines each in rhymed couplets. As with much of Wilbur's poetry, this poem observes nature in order to interpret human life. In the first stanza, a child is awakened at night by an owl's hooting. The speaker explains to the child that the owl is just asking "Who cooks for you?" In the second stanza, however, the nighttime visitor asking about cooking becomes a fearsome predator "with some small thing in a claw/ Borne up to some dark branch and eaten raw." This juxtaposition (cooked versus "eaten raw") occurs in the final lines of the two stanzas and forces the reader to see opposite views of nature.

The speaker sees language as working in two ways: to "domesticate a fear" and to "make our terrors bravely clear." The first stanza domesticates the owl, a friendly creature asking a question. In the second stanza, the owl is the predator who eats small creatures. The title "A Barred Owl" both names a particular species of owl and hints that natural terrors such as the owl have been "barred" from the child's imagination. Yet Wilbur's imagination, unlike the child's, can comprehend "bravely" nature's more frightening forms, perhaps responding to critics who have judged his work as too safe and too easy.

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