

Judith Beveridge

Two Houses *for Stephen*

I found a rental with tall trees just beyond the back fence. It was peaceful except for the 3 am Friday freight train slowly pulling the weight of its wagons along the tracks, wheels grinding, couplings shrieking, derailing our sleep for at least that six minutes of a much longer run to get the goods into Sydney. Wherever it had come from: Brisbane, Casino, that train would have travelled through the night, a two-kilometre chain rattling sleepers awake, but we didn't mind so much because often, at that hour, we'd hear the powerful owls close by in the trees and we'd get up, take the torch and wait for the light to show in their eyes, red beacons flashing on and off like lighthouses if they blinked. They were so close we could see the mottling and barring of their feathers, layers of white and grey highlighted with brown and charcoal chevrons, strong claws gripping a branch. We'd listen for the slow, deep soundings of the male, then the higher pitched call of the female, a short catechism resolving territory and distance. We watched at dusk, too, for their flight—soundless distillations of moonlight in the shadows and the trees. There were flocks of cockatoos also, like that freight train shrieking us awake, taking us out into the timbered dawn, our new haunt of astonishment. Everything that year was new: your move from interstate, my shunting an unsalvageable marriage to its dead-end siding, the gambit

we took in changing our lives. I've heard powerful owls are the only birds that can carry more than their own weight. No wonder they became our talismans. Once we saw a mother owl feeding three juveniles, tearing shreds from a dead possum. We'd find possums in the reserve neatly eviscerated, the kills always silent ... We live elsewhere now, our own place. Sometimes, still, we hear an owl, a male's wooing and territory-declaring to bring a mate in close. But we've only seen an owl once, when sitting out in our yard, it alighted on a low branch, its pearl ash and dusty grey feathers made it look like a puff of fog against the apricot blush of dusk. Watching the owl again I thought of how far we'd come—all the actions, workings, means, and mechanisms across time and distance to pull to its destinations this rich consignment of love.