

Encountering the Owl

"...What I came to say was,
teach the children about the cycles.
The life cycles. All the other cycles.
That's what it's all about, and it's all forgot."
– *For/From Lew*, Gary Snyder

Silent and dappled as the forest itself –
that placenta, that rich compost,
that graveyard.

Start anywhere. Ground slope litter –
needle duff, the forest floor strewn
with big wood, wind-thrown roots and rot –
equal parts earth, water, air, the slow fire
of decay. Conscious-netted-fiber-bodies
of fungi encase threaded fibril rootlets

of hemlocks & monumental firs. They trade
sustenance from earth to tree, tree to tree,
tree to truffle. The earth's become a kind
of skull for all the fungal nerve-and-synapse-
like weft-and-webbing that fruits the hidden-
truffle-scents guiding-in the gliding squirrel,

the red-backed and long-tailed voles,
the spotted skunk. All night it's search, scurry,
harvest, gnaw. Spread the spores with whiskers,
scat, furred and trailing tails until the owl,
its flight feathers muffled with fine serrations,
seizes one more less-wary or less-nimble meal

of forest flesh for the long night's sustenance
and the nest's fledglings. All this will be returned –
bones coughed-up in pellets, vole scat
sprouting saprophytes, blow-down softening
into nurse logs, the owl's feathers fanned flush,

silent and dappled as the forest itself –
that graveyard, that rich compost,
that placenta.

-- Bill Yake