

THE LISTENERS

Jeffery Beam

ONCE there was a country where bird song was held in the highest regard. However, as it is with most things humans cherish, they were often taken for granted. Nevertheless, much time was spent categorizing and debating their curlicues' and coo-coos' finer points, preserving much admired songs for subsequent generations.

The preferred method for studying songs involved sitting in a peaceful setting (a garden, a wood, a boat on a pond) and simply waiting for a bird to sing from the branches of nearby trees, the fields' verges, the airwaves of the winds. Many beautiful and unique songs were discovered this way. After many centuries, through such sterling and productive methods of collection, a repertoire became established. The people understood these songs. Even their subtleties were discernible by many, and could be explained to those who could not understand (sometimes in quick order but frequently in dense and massive tomes).

Unbeknownst to these adoring practitioners of the listening arts, the world filled with thousands of other, perhaps subtler or brasher, unheard songs from birds hiding in bushes or in the deepest woods, on high mountaintops, in noisy city streets, or drifting above the ocean's roar, the earthquake's rumble and the desert's heat. Occasionally, in the evolution of birds, one of these seemingly awkward but equally serious songsters would fly inadvertently by storm or happenstance or curiosity into the domain of the Listeners.

A predictable response occurred: the offending feathered beast would be shooed away at best, and at worst, pelted with stones for disturbing the peaceful poise of anticipated song. Less frequently one of these invaders, perchance by observing and listening, would learn enough sanctioned winning notes and sing. Begrudgingly, almost, these entrepreneurs would be allowed a place on the bandstand. A hundred years later, they, too, were part of the canon, often hailed as innovators who changed the way of song forever.

IN this country lived one farmer who since childhood had wondered at the stranger noises he heard on the edge of the fields and woods. Since adulthood, when the crops were in and his other responsibilities laid to rest, he had searched the earth for songs no one had heard. He was admired for his tenacity, tolerated for his practically querulous obsession with the other, smiled at for his foolishness, and gently pitied for his ear's loose logic

and eccentric tone. Indeed, he had been responsible, at times, for coaxing a rare voice to sing from some tree in a Listener's garden so the Listener could take credit for finding a new but acceptable song.

Most often he was ignored, or at least left to his own too simple or too impulsive devices. *Why he seemed to have no aesthetic, or at least a schizophrenic one!* (Once it was discovered that he could sing with these odd birds, *as if he were one of them*. Most unusual! And most dubious!)

His mind was full of the twittering of birds. His life's work, when not farming, was to preserve the gene pool of song, the primitive, the celestial, and the lovable unloved.

THUS things continued as they always had. While the Listeners held their conferences and wrote their monographs and bibliographies, the farmer wrote furrows in his fields and planted the field within his mind. While the majority preserved the comfortable, though without doubt the oftentimes valuable and beautiful songs, the farmer salvaged and recorded the unknown ones.

It seemed it was meant to be like this and all were happy. The great numbers of unknown, unappreciated, ignored, or uncataloged and secret birds felt a gratefulness that someone, some *one*, cared. They could not, however, completely remedy a hint of melancholy in their songs, and truthfully didn't care to. But at other times their protector allowed them to feel the untamed grace of their off-color yet essential notes. Then they would wonder, "Perhaps another world exists or even many, where a vibrant many-ness holds sway, where one listener's ear, no matter how uncommon its inner workings, is as highly cherished as another's."

AS for you, dear reader, search out a new tree, a different hill, a separate cove. Perhaps a bird of some other song will sing for you, a bird of another color will fly before you, a bird of a variant sweetness, or peep, or trill, or caw, or burp, will fill your ear, gut, or heart today. Who is to say then, for sure, in that other country, whether a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush? We can never know, can we?

—for Jonathan Williams