

Love Letter to an Iowan Backyard

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“GWA! GWA! GWA!” The curious sound jolts my brain and senses from the whimsically enthralling world of *Anne of Green Gables*. My head jerks up in an animal movement as I scan the trees for the perpetrator of such an inconsiderate distraction. I scrutinize the leafy vegetation, hoping for a glimpse of the disruptor. Something is rustling the branches in the Serviceberry shrub! “GWA! GWA! GWA!” The cat-like sounds taunt me from the trees and I strain my eyes, seeking to catch a fleeting glimpse of the caller. Reluctantly, I mark my spot in the book and rest it on the tender spring grass; Gilbert Blythe’s amusing antics will have to wait. Moving on the balls of my feet, I peer around in the shrubbery, surveying each branch. I gasp as a furtive grey figure flits from budding leaflet to aged trunk in an unsuccessful attempt to conceal himself. A catbird! A delighted smile spreads across my face - my old friend Mr. Catbird! *They're finally back!* I surmise. *Took them long enough.* Mr. Catbird, however, does not reciprocate the feeling of welcome and gallantly carries on with his meowing call. “GWA! GWA! GWA!”

I haven’t seen my friend for a while so, to coax him out (and for a little fun!) I emulate his deceptively feline calls. “GWA!” I sing. This infuriates Mr. Catbird - how dare someone attempts to challenge him, Regal Lord of the Shrubs! With pretentious pomp, Mr. Catbird thrusts himself out of his shrub kingdom, flaunting himself with avian regality and jerking with practiced poise. “GWA! GWA! GWA!” he screeches, opening his shining black beak. Pretending to be cowed, I scuttle away, eyes wide in feigned fright and posture bowed in submission. Believing in his arrogance that he has thwarted the monster, he proceeds to chase me up the grassy slope upon which I had once been peacefully reading. In a magnificent flurry of grey feathers, and with a victorious “GWA!” Mr. Catbird triumphantly banishes me from his leafy realm.

I smile to myself at the thought of Mr. Catbirdy’s pride in his own superiority. *I’ll let him think I’m afraid. I’ll let him rule the yard. Anyway, he was here first.* I reflect. We humans think it is all about us, but nature truly belongs to no one - or everyone. But as I walk barefoot across the hot pavement of the driveway, my thoughts turn to the more immediate issue of locating a new place to read. *The crabapple tree looks nice...* I consider flopping down in the springy, verdant green grass under the shapely tree. *One of my favorites.* Its round grey trunk hefts the crown of branches on sturdy shoulders of wood. I collapse on the comfy carpet of grass and clovers, gazing up as spears of sun limn the dense foliage with golden light.

Peace settles. My eyes close, the golden sun still warming my eyelids. The productive half of me wants to pick up my book and resume the story, but the lazy side has won. Warmth triumphs and the songs of the neighborhood overcome: bird songs, the splash of a nearby pool, even the buzzing of the lawnmowers, which should seem like an intrusion on nature but really just triggers nostalgia and sweet memories of summers past. Smells of growing things, fresh-clipped grass, and clover pollen weave sleepy spells on the afternoon, coaxing me into deep relaxation.

Unfortunately, my respite from disturbances is short-lived: a grating rattle scolds my ears. I blink, trying to adjust to the bright sunlit world after my reverie. *Now what?!* I inspect the vicinity, then roll my eyes, partially in amusement, mostly in irritation, as I spy the source of the maddening noise. My old friend Kylo Wren, the notorious House Wren, has returned from the

sultry south with a passion, more fervent than ever in his quest to maintain his domain. His “CH CH CH CH! ChChCh!” which is a house wren’s warning call, berates and castigates, rebukes and reprimands unceasingly. He continues his infuriated rattle, attempting to evict me from “his” property, centered around the nest box in which he hopes to raise chicks with a lady fair. But to no avail! I lie, patient as death, and face serene, until he assumes I am no more to him than a hideous, fleshy rock. I lift half an eyelid, and smile slightly as he pokes some slender twigs into the nest box. I wait as he busies himself with his housekeeping.

My perseverance is rewarded when, in a transcendent mood of passion, he commences his warbling, floating song, such a contrast from the scathing reprimands I so recently received. This song, this song is as beautiful as the rattle was disconcerting. Try as I might, I’ve never been able to mimic it. It embodies the clarity and bubbling of water, the undulation of a scale, the essence of late spring: the song’s Composer is too clever for the human to imitate in fullness. I gaze transfixed; it’s almost too breath-taking to breathe. Once the performer has trilled the final evanescent triplets and flits swiftly away, I head inside for the modern comforts of air conditioning and cartoons with my siblings. And maybe a popsicle. Or two.

Hours later, rested and repasted, I find myself wandering outside after dinner to witness the twilight chorus. Fred the Robin warbles a cheerful song as dusk approaches. “*Cheer-up cheer-a-leet! Cheer-up cheer-a-leet!*” Mr. Blackle the Red-winged Blackbird sends forth a piercing “BLEEK,” calling his kin to the marshes to sleep. I wonder sometimes how they can rest with the unceasing croaking of the frogs. Killdeer pleads with the hunter, “Kill-deer (not me!) Kill-deer (not me!).” A small flock of grackles (and an odd blackbird), passing overhead, screech hoarsely to each other a cacophonous bedtime lullaby: “GRAK GRAK GREE!” The last bit sounds like a poorly oiled swing, set in motion by some soft evening zephyr. Yes, the day is ending for the local fowl, but just beginning for the nighttime denizens. Rumors of night whisper through the whirl of batwing and a toad’s evening trill.

I’m back again on my grassy hillside. I cock my head, unwilling to miss the evening chorus. Mr. Catbird is back, balanced delicately on a slender branch. Mr. Catbird feels quite strongly that the chorus is pathetically incomplete without his melodious song. He begins with his characteristic “GWA,” a summons for the amorous ladies and a death threat to jealous rivals. It soon ascends to an enchanting melody of high, warbling songs, perfect for the evening chorus.

“Twee-a-leet! Tsee-eet tsee!” This is the phrase I’ve grown to know and love. For Mr. Catbird’s song is a delightfully eclectic mixture, including his own creations, but also some purloined songs of other birds. The scree of a jay and the warble of Fred the robin are recognizable in the motley, but oddly beautiful, collection of phrases. However, he always returns to his favorite motif: “Twee-a-leet! Tsee-eet tsee!”

I listen, awed, as the bleeding red and purple and gold sky fades to majestic, focused indigo. It’s been an unusually nice day, so I’ve brought along my diary to write in, but it’s quite dark by now. Cricket ventures a sharp note but is startled by the silence of Mr. Catbird’s audience. The slim grey bird enjoys his time in the limelight as his audience lays hushed in the darkening foliage. Tiny stars peep out of their twilight blanket as Mr. Catbird’s song blends with the hum of emerging crickets. Goosebumps speckle my limbs as a chill slinks into the sun’s absence. *I’ll go in soon, I need to get to bed*, I remind myself reluctantly, but I don’t make any motion to move. I smile amusedly as Mr. Catbird’s lover appears at long last, and I swear I see her swooning terribly with each liquid note pouring from his feathered throat. Dipper and Orion come into focus as I lay back, arms behind my head.

It’s funny what a beautiful place a backyard can be.