



FIRST SONG

Welcome to *The LBJ: Avian Life, Literary Arts*. We're the literary bird journal, for readers and watchers alike. This, our inaugural issue, has been a daydream of mine for several years now, a song stuck in my head. Judging from the response its call has received already, from the work herein, it's been a dream, a song, for others as well. May it be exactly that for you.

On the cover, you'll note a song sparrow, generously painted for this issue, along with the other plates inside, by the artist Barry K. MacKay. This is an *lbj*, a *little brown job*, if ever there was one, and a poster bird for these pages. A bird overlooked by many, but once learned, rarely forgotten. Tune-in, and they're everywhere—deep in the wilderness or your suburban backyard. And yet, in various corners of the continent, with a different look—a distinctive spot on the breast in the East, thick black streaks on the California Coast.

That's the kind of writing you'll find here: variation by region, by genre, by aesthetic, but somehow, a unified song. My hope is that, like *Melospiza melodia*, the journal will continue to evolve as we find our way to new niches, new territory; that, as *The LBJ* matures, it will pass through your hands each spring and fall in fresh, inspiring feathers; that it will bring you literature and literary reportage of the highest quality; and that you will love what's inside.

I set out today to watch a song sparrow. You should, too. I headed for a river in Rhode Island, to a small park in the old, industrial town of Pawtucket. They were there, singing, bouncing in flight, hopping up branches in slight alarm, some nest or wonder hidden below. One bird gave me the left cheek, then the right, over and over, making sure to see me with both eyes.

Meeting its many stares, I pondered this short note. Why are birds important to literature? Why have they, perhaps more than any

other class of animal, been so often writ symbolic? What is it about birdsong, about lyricism, that stirs us? Is it, as Maureen Scott Harris suggests, joining “a call and response” with the world? These are the questions that will keep this particular bird going.

I could go on and on about what I saw—or thought I saw—watching a single sparrow, but I’ll share just one note I put down:

The breast-spot is where the heart is.

If you’re like me, and people know you’re “into birds,” then maybe you’ve received many wonderful, avian-oriented gifts over the years. Recently, I was given a small book of poetry secondhand, one that was going to be thrown out by a library: *The Bird Lover’s Anthology*, 1930. I was strangely, but not surprisingly, thrilled: the smell of pages, the petite size, the gold emblem on the cover—an awkward flycatcher, about to fall off its perch—and no obligation to read it anywhere but in bed. Qualities like these are reason enough to warrant *The LBJ*. Then the anthology’s editors, in a terse introduction, write, “scarcely a poet has written who not in some wise celebrated the birds.” I’d be wise to stop there.

But there is one poem in the little volume I’d like to mention, a spot to end on. From the second stanza of “The Song-Sparrow” by Percy MacKaye:

With weary art and wordy choice,
I toiled, when sudden—low and breezy—
I heard a friendly voice
Call: *Simple, simple, so easy!*

Thanks to the staff, the contributors, and the University of Nevada, Reno Academy for the Environment, all of whom made these pages possible. Here’s to *simple, easy*, and the end of summer. And here’s to you. Thanks for hearing.

Hark, hark, *The LBJ*—

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