



## REGARDING THE OVENBIRD

*Winner of The LBJ's Inaugural Sparrow Prize for Prose*

Praise the ovenbird, sedate in movement, dapper in garb. Praise in particular the particular ovenbird that right now strolls and trolls my unkempt backyard, feeding on small critters gleaned from the dried leaves littering the ground or the midden of sunflower-seedshells under the bird feeder. Deliberate and unhurried it walks and walks and walks, turning over a leaf here, plunging slender bill into crevices between bricks there, white-ringed eyes watchful but unfazed by those other contenders—scrappy sparrows with their ceaseless gossip, red-hued and musical house finches, the large black squirrels.

For six May days, through the unlikely lens of my downtown Toronto kitchen window, I've enjoyed the privilege of the ovenbird's presence. I never thought to see one exhale its aura of forests and undergrowth here. Ghosting into my mind in its wake are others: the first one I ever saw darts into leafy undergrowth near the Long Point Bird Observatory on Lake Erie; a small feathered corpse lies on my steps, gift of a neighborhood cat; at dawn in a woody spot on the University of Toronto campus, a startled bird rushes under a picnic table.

This bird's plumage is so shiny it must be dressed for the breeding season. Its orange crown stripe is clearly visible even without my field glasses. The vest-like spots that stripe its creamy breast are crisp and sharp. Its white throat is breathtakingly pure. Walking composedly around the yard on its flesh-pink legs, intent yet aware, it is utterly charming. Each time I notice it I am enthralled by its insouciance, the way it seems so at home in my yard. An easy demeanor combined with that slightly potbellied shape and elegant dress suggest nothing so much as an observant boulevardier, hands clasped behind his back. At ease on his—or her, there are no marked gender differences in dress

among ovenbirds—daily wander, pausing to savor what feeds the eye as well as the stomach. As I watch it feed on snails and larvae, I imagine the bird notes, as I do, the goings-on of squirrel and sparrow, and wonder if it's making up stories about them to share when it nests a few weeks and further north from now. Such human extravagance, my musing—as if I knew.

Ovenbird. Naming is a human pleasure. But why *ovenbird*? For the shape of “its peculiar nest that resembles a miniature Dutch oven” according to Alfred Otto Gross, who essayed the bird for Arthur Cleveland Bent’s *Life Histories of North American Wood Warblers*, first published by the Smithsonian Institution in 1953. But my large cast-iron, lidded pot with its sleek sides looks nothing like the leaf-covered nests of grasses, fibers, and stems I find in the photographs in Bent’s book. My dictionary tells me a Dutch oven is also “a small metal cooking utensil with an open side which is turned towards a fire.” And sure enough the ovenbird’s nest, often set into a slight hollow on the ground in leaf-carpeted woodlands, has a side opening. It’s a fairytale oven, the fire banked within where the bird hunkers to brood.

The ovenbird does have other names, most famously teacher-bird, derived from its crescendoing territorial song, which seems to some human ears to be a chant of *teacher teacher teacher TEACHER*. Its other common names—wood-wagtail, night-walker—accent behavior, or—golden-crowned warbler, golden-crowned thrush—appearance. Who, I wonder, first called it ovenbird, and why did *that* name take?

Legendarily hard to discover, the nest is covered over with leaves and twigs. Often enough the clue to its presence is a cartoon moment—an ovenbird leaping suddenly, almost from under your feet, as you walk through the woods. And even then the nest is likely to evade you.

One of the great pleasures of encountering a bird I don’t often see is the excuse it gives me to go beyond my field guides to earlier and more

capacious books like Bent's *Histories*. In trolling through Gross's essay I've discovered the ovenbird's repertoire is not limited to the repeated call that has led to it being characterized as among the least musical of warblers. It also has a melodious flight song, sung in either wildly swift horizontal flight, or a soar high into the air, that concludes in a drop back down—a pattern similar to the flight of the poet's bird, the English skylark.

What I especially like about older bird books is their generosity with language, a generosity that doesn't hesitate to braid feeling with fact. Consider this note by Lynds Jones, a professor of zoology at Oberlin from 1892 to 1930, describing what he called "the passion song" of the ovenbird. As quoted with ellipses by Gross: "It is an outburst of melody of such richness and fullness, such thrilling ecstasy, that the singer is lifted into the air on quivering wings to pour out his melody without a pause until the inspiration has passed.... I have seen the ovenbird suddenly vault into the air, mounting to the tree tops on quivering wings, then dart back and forth in a zigzag course swift as an arrow, and finally burst into song as he floated gently down."

Jones's extravagance, bespeaking himself as well as the bird, is endearing. Writing before suspicion of the adjective and adverb invaded science, indeed before the human-centered frame of words like "passion" or "ecstasy" was noticed and renounced, he has launched himself into quivering flight in this paean to the ovenbird. I imagine him standing in the field, gawking at the vaulting bird, and then licking his pencil as he fumbles to describe what he has seen. His enthusiasm makes me long to hear—and see—this small bird's extraordinary performance.

A current account in Dunn and Garrett's *A Field Guide to Warblers of North America*, published in 1997, refuses such enthusiasm: "[T]he male ascends 10-60 ft. above treetop level and hovers and flutters with spread wings and tail while singing." Granted, the precise description of its wings and tail is useful, but there's no sense here of the *gawk*, a term I borrow from the poet Don McKay. The gawk—

otherwise known as “stupid staring,” according to the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*—is that transfixed and wordless looking I fall into when my eye—or ear—is caught by something I haven’t yet quite named. It’s the moment when perception outstrips intellect and some gap between the world and me is erased briefly, some self-consciousness lost. We don’t often encounter the living world through immediate sensory experience now—it’s largely mediated to us through words and images—and that moment without words, knowingness gone, is lovely. And important, mitigating an impoverishment we’ve come to dwell in, self-contained and solitary, as if we belonged there.

But I don’t or can’t rest in wordlessness. Words in fact are what I have to gesture with toward that unwordable moment; they are the best I can do. And so my gawk yields to a reaching for words as I try both to tell myself what I’ve seen *and* speak to the moment. But just what happened in it? Seized by something that absorbed my attention, I was taken out of myself. I spilled over my usual boundaries of skin and thought—and in that spilling over I lost my own name. The hard work of maintaining myself gave way, and I fell into the world beyond me, finding myself part of it. I don’t know if in that instant I was no longer lonely, or no longer existed in the same way, and it doesn’t really matter. Freed from the border-guard scrutiny of the intellect, I experience myself as part of something truer and more ample than my usual sense of self and am enlarged. Relief and joy combine when I join hands with being: for a moment, I’m as insouciant as the ovenbird.

Is my haring after words a writer’s response, or is it the impulse of any human staring at the world in wonder? What if, whatever form it takes, responsiveness is essentially instinctive, a remnant of what once kept us alert to the sensuous world surrounding us, and so alive? Perhaps we are hardwired to be brought to our senses; perhaps humans, stunned by the world, need to sing to survive like the ovenbird calling for its teacher. The singing is our acknowledgement that the Earth is both teacher and home. Do such illuminating, self-forgetful moments teach us who we truly are, a part of the chorus of beings?

With these thoughts turning over in my mind, I watch the ovenbird in my yard continue doing and being what it is—a small olive-brown warbler that prefers the ground to the trees. I see it spell itself out in its behavior, mapping the yard, yes, but also mapping a larger gestalt: the world of scuttling leaves, milling sparrows and finches, sudden explosions of flight when a shadow crosses the ground, a world that includes even me, the absorbed watcher.

Looking over what I've written here I see that I'm like Lynds Jones. Just as he produced his own flight song in describing what he saw and heard, I've mimicked "my" ovenbird by writing from gleanings—a detail plucked from a bird book here, a note of observed plumage there, mixed with the stray thoughts that arise as I walk round and round in my mind and elsewhere. Jones and I are both participants in an old and on-going call and response, a rich exchange between humans and the world. In that exchange we both discover and reveal that our deepest selves are as at home here as the ovenbird is in its brief tenancy of my yard.