

3-2-2020

FROM Daystart Songflight: A Morning Journal

Brian Bartlett
Saint Mary's University



Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#), and the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Follow this and additional works at / Suivez-nous ainsi que d'autres travaux et œuvres:

<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose>

Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Bartlett, Brian. "FROM Daystart Songflight: A Morning Journal." *The Goose*, vol. 18 , no. 1 , article 12, 2020, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol18/iss1/12>.

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Goose by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Cet article vous est accessible gratuitement et en libre accès grâce à Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Le texte a été approuvé pour faire partie intégrante de la revue The Goose par un rédacteur autorisé de Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Pour de plus amples informations, contactez scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

BRIAN BARTLETT

From Daystart Songflight: A Morning Journal

The following prose is one of many journal entries from an experiment begun in the spring of 2018 after my previous plein-air work, Branches Over Ripples: A Waterside Journal. In the new manuscript I've turned attention both to particular, unique mornings, and to morning as explored by scientists, poets, painters, and other sorts of observers and thinkers. While much of the project's seeing, hearing, writing, questioning and learning is unpredictable and spontaneous, one guideline I've followed faithfully is to be outdoors before sunrise. The following journal entry is the ninth.

*By Partridge Island, near Ottawa House, Cumberland County, Nova Scotia
Friday, June 15, 2018
Sunrise: 5:25. Writestart: 11:48*

Three apple trees have been stunted by icy winters and the winds off Minas Basin. Their crookedness and their favouring one side, however, suggest they've adapted well to the waterside location. Not only has the weather bent them; you could say they've cooperated in being bent, yielding when yielding helps them survive. One of the trees leans onto another, their trunks touching for only about a foot; the upper tree likely hasn't damaged the lower. The third tree is on its own but its highest branches nearly touch the highest branches of the taller of the two others. Its trunk keeps the sun out of my eyes while I sit writing in the tree-cast shade. Farther up the grassy bank, near a Canadian flag ruffling on its pole, is a more shapely, more thickly blossomed apple tree. The flag is there because in 1871 the peak-roofed house, now a museum, became the summer retreat of Charles Tupper (1821-1915), founder of the first free, non-sectarian educational system in British North America, Premier of Nova Scotia in his forties, member of the first Canadian Parliament, and Prime Minister from 1896 to '99. Much of the house was first built in 1765 but Tupper oversaw its expansion into a 21-room Georgian mansion.

One reason for choosing to write near shore, with breezes stirring and cooling the air, is to avoid being plagued by mosquitoes as I was while writing by Bass River two days ago. A drawback to the seaside location is that I'll not hear as many kinds of birds as I did on Wednesday with more trees around—yet a warbler species I usually associate with forests, the Parula, has briefly visited one of the apple trees. A few times its trill with an abrupt, pinched-sounding end-note has cut into the quiet. If the birds in the following hours are going to be few and far between, that'll create a space in which I can copy out from three small slips of paper

my lists of the first ten species I've heard and/or seen during the past five mornings, starting before sunrise.

Monday (beginning outside Elizabeth Bishop's Great Village childhood house, where I'm in residence for a week, and from a walk through the village, then a visit to Spencer Point):

1. American Crow
2. Song Sparrow
3. American Goldfinch
4. Black-capped Chickadee
5. Red-eyed Vireo
6. American Robin
7. Duck species (three flying & quacking)
8. Cedar Waxwing
9. Belted Kingfisher
10. Bald Eagle

(If mammals were included, a squirrel and a cow would've been including for their voices.)

Wednesday (beginning outside Bishop house, then again at Spencer Point):

** species not among first ten encountered on Monday.*

Parenthetical numbers refer to place in previous morning's order.

1. Cedar Waxwing (8)
2. Song Sparrow (2)
3. American Crow (1)
4. Northern Flicker*
5. Black-throated Green Warbler*
6. Belted Kingfisher (9)
7. Great Blue Heron*
8. Chimney Swift*
9. Mourning Dove*
10. American Redstart*

Friday (today) (after the Bishop house, where—hilariously—I rushed out to the car and drove away as fast as I could so I *wouldn't* hear too many familiar birds there, though numbers 1 and 2 were inescapable):

** species not among first ten encountered on either Monday or Wednesday.*

Parenthetical numbers refer to place in previous mornings' order.

1. American Crow (1, 3)
2. Song Sparrow (2, 2)
3. Winter Wren*
4. Northern Cardinal*
5. American Goldfinch (3, —)
6. White-throated Sparrow*
7. Blue Jay*

8. Red-breasted Nuthatch*
9. Mourning Dove (—, 9)
10. Northern Flicker (—, 2)

With all the early species heard, glimpsed or watched between about 5:00 and 7:00, the following can be noticed. Only two birds—crow, ever-reliable, ever-welcome Song Sparrow (the 2nd species heard Mon., Weds. and Fri.)—were among the first ten observed all three mornings. Five were recorded on two of the three mornings. The others appear only on one of the lists. Is this record too brief and narrow to hold much significance beyond one observer's experiences in one week of a particular June? For it to be of ornithological interest to others, should the record extend over dozens or hundreds of mornings, preferably over a few years, so that broadly illuminating patterns would emerge? As it stands, the listings might seem an example of a statistical approach in its infancy; yet going back over the species encountered in the given order (given not by me but by natural, complex happenstance) helps me re-experience, even if in a greatly distilled form, three early mornings' sequences of witnessed birds. Collecting such data needn't yield obvious rewards for it to feel valuable and nourishing. Can't it be a way of honouring small varieties among the hours just before and after sunrise?

For how many mornings would I have to scratch down the names of birds as witnessed one by one until a morning's order was *exactly repeated*? At least the gathering of even a few temporal sequences of names might demonstrate how one daystart differs from another. It's tempting, yes, it's tempting to consider doing these lists of "the day's first ten birds" as long as I work on the manuscript—a thought I'm surprised hadn't occurred to me until a minute ago.

After reading that Parrsboro is currently the central site of a four-day-long International Plein-air Painting Festival, I was curious to check out the annual event. Over 30 painters have registered for the festival (including a competition. Before choosing this unexpected spot under apple trees, I chatted with Ray and Jane, a past-middle-age couple from Massachusetts, who'd set up easels and begun painting before I showed up. By now they must've paused to have lunch elsewhere; they're nowhere in sight, but their easels and some of their bags still rest in the grass. Before I had much time to mull over the etiquette of dealing with *plein-air* painters in action (is it okay to gaze at their works-in-progress or to strike up conversations, which might break into their concentration? would it be the height of rudeness to say, *Do you always paint 'realistically'?*) they chatted willingly. In yesterday's desultory, damp weather, they said, some painters did their work—awkwardly, I'm guessing, with annoying limitations—from their cars (if their windows were open, would their acts qualify as *plein-air*?). Ray and Jane said they "love this coast" and wish they could live here. Ray's praise of Canada must be fed by his despair over Trump's America, and in his first mention of the White House Ozymandias his speech sped up and his tone grew more anxious. "It's on our minds all the time," he said, "even at night when we're trying to sleep," and by *we* he likely meant not just himself and Jane but many, many Americans. I recalled for Jane and Ray a moment at last month's Swedish conference on Thoreau when one of the plenary speakers cited HDT—at a time when the Fugitive Slave Law, the Mexican War, and disappointment in Daniel Webster weighed him down—writing, "The remembrance of my country spoils my walk. My thoughts are murder to the State" (108). To

the visiting painters their fellow countryman's words seemed to ring all too true. "Yes," Jane said, "on our walks we try our hardest not to talk politics, but . . ."

Other than Herring Gulls, the only ocean species that have entered my sight is a Black Scoter, all dark brown, solitary unlike scoters often seen in small fleets along the Nova Scotia coasts in January and February. When I sauntered down to the jumble of rocks lined up as a border between the grass and the shore—too systematically placed as a wall to have all travelled there together naturally—to photograph the apple trees, I was startled by a squeak, but I couldn't tell whether I'd stepped on a mouse or a Mink. (I recalled seeing over a decade ago a black Mink among the great rocks of Peggy's Cove far from the famous lighthouse.) An hour later, I've looked up and seen a Woodchuck resting on the rocks, breezes ruffling its fur. Had that hefty, thick-coated mammal, or one of its kits, made the high, hurt-sounding cry? As I approached from the side, it hardly blinked, then when I faced it head-on the Woodchuck still remained where it was, as if absorbing the sun's warmth after no sun was visible during yesterday's prolonged drizzle. If that animal and its family have found a home among the rocks with many gaps, crevices and mismatched surfaces, with neither wood nor soil central to their lives, then the name Woodchuck might be replaced by Boulder-hog or Rock-hider. Now the creature has left the rocks and is sniffing its way across the buttercup-scattered grass, as if to claim the name Grass-muncher or Buttercup-guts.

The Massachusetts couple returned and moved their equipment up into the shade. To give my legs and neck some flexing changes and movement, I wandered over to Ray and Jane. Ray, in a long-sleeved blue shirt and blue jeans, told me that about half of the festival participants are Canadian, half American. He joked about trying to suppress his accent, so he wouldn't be associated with the putting-Ray's-guts-in-a-knot president. "Look at the portraits of American presidents and compare them to Canadian politicians, like that Tupper—I noticed there's a *warmth* in his face, whereas one of our presidents—"—he put his hands on his hips and stuck his chin up in the air—"—look like they're saying, 'I'm American, you better believe it, I'm the *best!*'" I didn't point out that many Canadians in public realms have been or are entrenched in social intolerance of all sorts, or that a gallery of prime ministers would reveal some cold or sullen faces (I should check the Tupper portrait to see if Ray is projecting); instead I suggested that some photos of FDR suggest his humanity. "Oh yes, I loved FDR," said Ray, "and Obama. Obama was good, but he had terrible advisors." Ray went on to mention that Ottawa House has a bathroom: "And you have to remember three things in this *plein-air* business: park—paint—piss." His and Jane's realistic renderings of the sand and water, with Partridge Island farther along the shore, and the cliffs of Blomidon across the bay, were drying, removed from their easels and placed flat on the ground. I didn't see any of Ray's feisty, intense character expressed in his conventional canvasses.

"You're done for today?" I asked. "For the weekend, it looks like," answered Jane. "We have to go home tomorrow."

"So you'll be missing the competition results on Sunday?"

“We’re not here for the competition,” she explained. “We’re just here to do what we came for.”

Before driving back to Great Village, I want to look again at a few lines I copied out last night from the final poem in Bishop’s first collection. Once I misremembered the title as “Aubade” (morning song) rather than what it is, “Anaphora” (succession of repeated line-beginnings), not surprising since the poem starts:

Each day with so much ceremony
begins, with birds, with bells,
.....
with white-gold skies our eyes
first open on, such brilliant walls
that for a moment we wonder
“Where is the music coming from, the energy?
The day was meant for what ineffable creature
we must have missed?”

As is often the case, Bishop is both serious and funny here, with nothing in the alliterative accents and ceremonial tone of the first lines suggesting what’s to come: the second question’s wryness, and the allusion to humans as “some ineffable creature / we must have missed.” The following lines foreground the “long intrigue,” “memory” and “mortal fatigue” of the human subject, but another surprise awaits us at the poem’s end: the introduction of a

. . . beggar in the park
who, weary, without lamp or book
prepares stupendous studies:
the fiery event
of everyday in endless
endless assent.

While the conclusion of “Anaphora” remains elusive, I see a kind of mythic radiance around the self-reliant beggar who deeply considers the “music” and “energy,” the fire and yearning (“assent” punning on “ascent?”), in every day.

Not that early today suggested a fiery climbing, since clouds were amassed so thickly that the rising sun was hidden for the day’s first few hours. Early this morning on a drive to and from Londonderry, a village once known for its gypsum mine, CBC *Daybreak* on the car radio included a brief story that in Britain and Ireland plastic straws—two million of them distributed daily—will be banned. The morning show’s hosts also mentioned that today marks the end of Ramadan, and somehow the intersection of that with the welcome news about plastic straws felt appropriate: my daybreak-freed imagination took flight into a fantasy that prayers and fasting might’ve helped prompt a decision beneficial for us and the planet (I wrote “our planet,” then crossed out the “our”).

It's past 3:00 p.m. so I've begun to wonder, *Does today's entry truly belong in a "morning journal"?* The apple trees were just barely part of my morning experience. Much else—the woodchuck in the rocks, the solitary scoter, Bishop's poem—have belonged to the afternoon. As I wrote about them I absentmindedly didn't for a moment consider that I've included encounters from the afternoon, though every sentence articulated after 12 noon, even if it was about the morning, was created after morning. The project is evolving, still finding its forms and modifying its guidelines (I write as if the project were animate, with a will of its own, and sometimes that *does* feel like the journal's nature). Morning, I've now decided, needs to be essential as the time of writing, and the primary but not exclusive time of subjects and topics (we have morning thoughts about afternoon, evening, and night things, and they shouldn't be barred at the gates).

Like a final punctuation mark for writing this entry, a tent caterpillar has crawled onto my sweat-jacket, then across the blank book's page. If I had any talents as a painter, I'd try to do justice to that with watercolours or oils: with a backdrop of rocks and ocean, a page of handwriting with a blue-black-orange caterpillar moving across it, the golden hairs sunlit and alert (what a tiny brush would be needed to paint them), the larva intriguing enough in itself that you hardly need remember its transformation into a flying moth.

Works Cited

Bishop, Elizabeth. "Anaphora." *The Complete Poems: 1927-1979*, Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1979, p. 52.

Thoreau, Henry David. "Slavery in Massachusetts." *Reform Papers*, edited by Wendell Glick, Princeton UP, 1973, pp. 91-109.

BRIAN BARTLETT of Halifax has published seven collections of poetry and three books of non-fiction. Excerpts from his books of nature writing, *Ringling Here & There: A Nature Calendar* (Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2014) and *Branches Over Ripples: A Waterside Journal* (Gaspereau, 2017), appeared in earlier issues of *The Goose*.