

Morning View Kentucky
24 June 1957

Hello Mr. McCarthy,

Friday morning there occurred one of those small bits of coincidence, completely inconsequential, but none-the-less enjoyable. I was picking green beans over in the garden that rests like a chip on the shoulder of the pond-field. I have no great fondness for green beans, but always plant some, as they, like radishes, are so satisfying to grow -- just stuff the seeds into the earth with neither great care nor skill, and return within what seems only a few days to gather the crop. I have often suspected Thoreau of planting them because they are so undemanding.

As I gathered beans, thereby reducing the loveliness of early morning to a most plebeian level, the Rain Crow (our American member of the Cuckoo family) flew low above me on his way from his nest in the tree patch to a locust clump where he was accustomed to hunt little green caterpillars for his young. His sleek beauty and magnificent flight restored the morning's splendor. Pleased with an excuse to straighten up. I stopped picking beans to watch him, and, as has long been my custom upon seeing a Cuckoo, I recited in his general Direction,

"Sumer is icumen in
Lhude sing cuccu."

A few feet away, partially obscured by a pudgy bean bush, my tiny radio instantly replied,

"Sumer is icumen in
Lhude sing cuccu." -- except your version had an ly suffix of Lhude.

To be sure, practically everyone has encountered this unlovely bit of ancient song, and you were quoting it to usher in summer, whereas I spoke directly to the Cuckoo; but I was nevertheless astonished to hear it so immediately repeated. Had I spoken a few seconds later, it would have been a most unrehearsed duet.

Actually, it is most unfair to direct a song written of the pernicious English Cuckoo at his distant American relative. Our cuckoo is a self respecting bird who builds his nest and raises his family with the utmost care, whereas the English one has no nest and despoils with its eggs, the nest of smaller birds.

Both in coloring, tan above and white below, and in the slow grace of his normal flight movements, our Rain Crow always reminds me of the effortless, smooth flapping of a swimming sting ray. Even the young birds are sleek and only slightly awkward when they emerge from the nest.

Our counterpart to the English Cuckoo in nesting, or rather, lack of nesting habit, is the Cow Bird. Occasionally they lay their eggs in the nest of a bird as large as a Cardinal or Wood Thrush, in which