

STALKING THE INEFFABLE

In the new house, I spend the early mornings trying to remain alert to the ineffable. I have to be quick. It's maybe a fifteen-minute window when the possibilities of the day seem to open like a flower — when the sunlight through a tree casts a webwork of shadows against my yellow garage, and there sits the silhouette of a house sparrow motionless on a branch. The birds around my house are modest: the house sparrow, the common grackle, the American robin (*turdus migratorious!*) My dog Nellie sits next to me on the flowered couch; I call her the common bichon. The nuances of this new house reveal themselves daily. There's a chipmunk who disappears into the drainpipe after pausing a moment as if to allow me to appreciate the vividness of its stripes. The grounds are densely planted, and Lynn and I have been watchful to what appears each week. So that's a magnolia! And that's a century plant that turned from a giant asparagus into a white flowering flame.

A tree trunk has been cut down directly in front of the library, and, if I put on my reading glasses, I can count 73 rings. Time suddenly tumbles down around me like falling leaves; I imagine the planting of that tree in 1946, the year of "It's a Wonderful Life." A small circle of humorless, formally-dressed men (in goatees) and women (looking like Emily Dickinson) stand staring at the tiny tree. And now, in a massive shift of time, they suddenly look across Library Place to see a lawn sign soliciting money for Project Graduation 2020.

"What exactly is Project Graduation?" a man with a goatee asks.

I explain: "The idea is that the current senior class will get so drunk on graduation night they'll kill themselves unless we warehouse them all in an amusement park for 24 hours."

The gentleman nods grimly.

A high-school senior's car parked near my house has the windows soaped with *Go Dawgs!* and *Go 2020!* It amuses me to register how 17-year-olds perceive both time and themselves — so vastly distinguished from the class of 2019! And though their vision of time is different than mine, maybe they *are* singular; maybe they *are* remarkable. Maybe, in fact, they're simply seeing more clearly than I am. What a strange world they're passing

through. I watch the young people on television and they seem to spend all their time ordering mattresses on their iPhones. I can't help but rewrite the dialogue:

SHE: My husband's ego is so huge that his side of the bed needs *much* more support than mine. Luckily, my Sleep Number mattress....

Lynn told me she saw ad this morning for an "avocado mattress" made entirely from organic material, and I visualize our millennial couples finally putting down their phones to seek slumber in half of an enormous avocado, drenched in lemon juice. Go Dawgs!

Will the future (73 years from now) view us as absurd? As memorable? As worthy of forgiveness? My friend the filmmaker Richard Linklater has announced that he's currently filming the Sondheim musical "Merrily We Roll Along." The musical follows three friends over the course of 20 years (moving *backwards* in time — they start old), and Linklater intends to film his movie over 20 years. He'll finish it in 2039. What strikes me as most remarkable about this plan is his faith in the future: that the actors, the director, the producers, will still be alive 20 years from now. I love Linklater's unforced optimism. His invitation. He's betting on a generous future that will welcome us. And why not? We live among the American robin, the house sparrow, the common grackle, the common bichon — but this morning, as I look outside my back window, I think how *uncommon* this vast pattern of light and shadow and crickets and wind chimes and passing traffic really is. How uncommon and how beautifully transitory.

I move back into the living room and there's Lynn on her phone. I think she's ordering an avocado mattress.