

A Certain Slant of Light

Each December, about the time that the last of the milkweed pods crack in the old fields across from my house, I begin to see white-throated sparrows around here. I know then that sometime during that same week the last phoebes will leave, and I'll see a few lingering thrushes, and the sad little flights of sparrow flocks will become increasingly evident.

It is also about that same time of year that I begin to notice a silvery, raking light spearing through the bare limbs of the large trees in the older sections of the town. The grass will still be green on lawns, the privet hedges will still hold their leaves, and, in the woods, the oaks and the beeches will cling desperately to the last remnants of a forgotten summer.

For years I used to keep a record of little events of this sort. I would begin in late winter and follow the slow opening of the season through the spring and into summer, and on into fall, winter, and then back to early spring. Each year, around the middle of June, after the indigo buntings and the kingbirds arrived, the entries would become sporadic. I would record a few flowerings of the field wildflowers, the first calling of the bullfrogs from the pond below my house, but then by midsummer the journals would dry up altogether, only to begin again in autumn, about the time that the monarch butterflies would appear and the little migratory hummingbirds would start to show up in my flower gardens. After that I would record the changing leaves, the last of the oaks, then another slump, then the first ice, then the first snow, the appearance of Orion, and the coming of the juncos and the winter finches.

For three or four years I kept at it, and each year I began to fill in a little more so that the blank periods would take shape as well. And then I began to get interested in endings as well as beginnings. When did the last dandelion bloom? When did the snowy tree crickets stop chirping? When did the meadow crickets give up? (Surprisingly late in November it turned out.) Finally, three or four years after I filled out the whole year, I began to notice a phenomenon. Every year the same events would occur on almost exactly the same date.

After a while I stopped keeping records. Almost incidentally, without trying, I found I had committed the year to memory. I threw away the calendars and began marking time by nature, so that when I first saw the phoebe on my land in spring I would know it was March 27. The forsythia would bloom, the grass would turn green, and I would know that it was April 10. The wild plums would bloom on April 22. The first lightning bugs would appear in the meadow behind my house on July 9. By August 27 the nighthawks would appear in the evening



sky and so on throughout the summer and fall until the fifth of December.

Toward late afternoon on that day, somewhere between Lincoln, where I work, and Littleton, where I live, I would notice that the shadows cast by the old oak trees had lengthened dramatically, and I would see in the west that peculiar slant of silvery light, and I would know that the dreaded month had finally arrived, with all its baggage of endings, its hope, its innuendos of things to come, and its remembrances of things gone by.

There should be nothing unusual in all of this. It is the way people have marked time for the better part of human history. But in an age when the great circle of the year is cut into snippets, when response is measured in nanoseconds and time itself has been analyzed into nothingness, natural time seems barbarically inaccurate and, for this very reason, worth reviving.

December 1990