



Watching Cartoons Before a Funeral
John Surowiecki



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A World of Voices



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Five-hundred Widowers in a Field of Chamomile

The yellow, the pollen, the millions of fallen petals pull us down to sleep: all our dreams have gravity like the one in which we are about to drift off in our beds with the windows closed shut and our wives reading in cones of yellow light, their knees up like barricades, their eyes smiling at a clever turn of phrase.

They sip their tea in unison and the tea starts to smell like them, honey and wool, a musky odor stolen from a gland like a tiny octagon of wax. We sink deeper into our beds, into the earth: the summer smells like sleep, is sleep, its first instant, where everything is paired and within reach and where it ought to be.

Why Old Men Suddenly Break into Tears

They think we have no hearts or have machines for hearts: voltage regulators or hydraulic pumps. They become hearts. They speak of sentiment as a lapis egg, an unbreakable and pocketable jewel.

Anything starts them off: a tune, a gift, a TV show, people who overcome adversity or demonstrate our common humanity or some capacity for joy or learn at long last the etiquette failure teaches.

Sometimes it's thinking how lucky they've been, how they've done OK or done their part or how the past is doomed to glimpses: an elm leafing, an icehouse, a girl attempting a jackknife in July.

Eaten Stuans

Wonder what kind is swanmeat. —
Leopold Bloom

A circle of white ash remained and a tire iron,
which was the spit, and a mayonnaise jar
half-filled with meat cut into small pieces.
Factories were busy then, ball bearings,
cutlery, turbines, and people in town
were most thankful for what
they most despised.

Everyone knew what it was like to go hungry;
poetry had no power against desperation,
no urgency down to the dark red meat of the bone.
From each beak grew a tiny black rose of blood;
from each stomach spilled
the liquified remains
of everyone's bread.

The Five Satins Play the Apocalypse

*Still was the night, serene and bright,
when all men sleeping lay.
Michael Wigglesworth,
The Day of Doom [1662]*

We're bedazzled and UV-purple in a gym
the size of the world when suddenly they
appear in sequined black and spit-
polished shoes of Army issue: four angels
and a pickup sax announcing the end of history
and the beginning of remembering.

My rented tuxedo and I subdue
an erection in the final slow dance of time,
an inching of soles across center court,
the enormous river of us all: all elected,
all spaced-out and spacebound, all grooving
to the still center of the B-side night

The Mower at the VA Hospital

I

Our mower is young and broad-shouldered:
so were we. Love confuses him as it once did us;
the pain he feels he believes to be genuine.
He even believes it to be pain.
The tiny pink man from Verdun has shit his bed,
the handless man scratches his face like a housecat,
the mower mows and our grief is where it was.

II

We remember some things, but nothing
so exact as form or color or disposition.
All day the wards are dark, while night wears
paper shoes and speaks in insect languages.
Its milky light is sticky and inescapable;
it seals us up. Death is also a mower,
but our mower doesn't know a thing about death.

III

Our corpses are the color of plain black shoes
or white cotton socks: now you know what
never did become of us after all these years.
The lawns are littered with debris from
a summery war of winds; our mower will grind it
into dust Before him: a meadow, a stream, a city,
all sliced into colors like a snake.

IV

Tonight, stung by love, our mower will repeat
his curves and rows, his stars and spine aligned.
For us: zitis and marinara begotten by despair
upon impossibility. In the lobby, the news goes unwatched; a
last wave agitates the air. In the B canteen, a small profit is
made in Camels and Juicy Fruit gum.

