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A Presumption That Once Our Eyes Watered

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Eric Mowin shot himself, and that is why I begin this way. This is how I have introduced you to Eric Mowin, because whether it is his introduction, an anecdotal witticism, or nostalgia, any memory of Eric Mowin is perverted by his conclusion. And it permeates through everything, and all knowledge stored of him is actualized in the context of this statement: Eric Mowin was so unsatisfied being alive that he killed himself.

It was announced at school, as suddenly and as abruptly as I told you, because there is no point in embellishing it with flowery words and carefully constructed sentiments. Whether certain words are used, what happened is no less obtrusive. No matter the words, they still reverberate mercilessly and incomprehensibly in our minds until we finally make them real. Eric’s life and all that it entails: the trips planned with his father, the sound of his voice, his favorite candy—Lemonheads—the stories shared in his eulogy are channeled into an all encompassing “Eric” as a symbol of that former life. This is the only way we can convince ourselves to comprehend it, by some tangible measure or degree, either life or not-life. Eric is not-life, and through our attempt to make death sensical, we mourn, and we fabricate the memory of Eric the Sentence.

My classmates and I romanticize him. We gather around in our circles and satisfy each other with our fables. Now: Eric was the best piano player we have ever heard, the nicest boy we’d ever known, always there when we needed him. We swap memories of him to stimulate our emotions, each one more exaggerated than the last. Every revelation and life lesson we suddenly have is attributed to Eric, the martyr. Eric is recreated, and it is not him we mourn, but the preferred version we have invented.

Those who were intimate with Eric are now given a warped sense of fame and stature. The rest of us somber our faces out of duty; we knew him too, and that’s what we are supposed to do. We collectively overanalyze the hints we should have known all along leading up to it. We order the day’s events and demand to know: Who had the last interaction and what was it like? Could they tell? We think back to that day, and we swear that passing remark was
a cry for help. That smile was eerie and prescient. The bullying and insults that day were the final straw. We shake our fists at the scapegoats unanimously labeled as the cause, and then we maneuver around each other skillfully, to avoid knocking the planks in our eyes against one another.

The news of his death is stolen, and it is stolen selfishly. We comfort ourselves, shake our heads, and cradle our own shoulders. I comfort myself. Eric is now a chronological event, my growth experience. Eric is mourned because he is the first of us to die.

I am left with the question of what to do about all this. What right do I have to claim Eric’s life selfishly as part of my collected experience? Who am I to mourn the ideal Eric, the easy to love, detached Eric when I was never willing to value the life of Eric? And now, why is Eric’s life a lesson in mine?

My parents told us it’s easier as you get older. People die, so we have to get over it and move on. Why, however, should this get easier? Just because more people die does not mean it should be any more bearable, or that the value of a human life as revered or mourned or thought about should be lessened. I try to speak about death in a way that is not overused or clichéd, but death is the most overused and trite situation there is. I try to acknowledge death, but I am unable to establish a conclusion. We as humans are only able to understand death as senseless or comprehend it in relation to ourselves.

When I deviate from the Sentence, the base understanding of a chronological event, did we ever mourn Eric? Did we only mourn for ourselves? Our own pity, our own hurt, our own coming to grips with it, where does Eric fit into the entanglement we have constructed? Can we understand and mourn in a way that is not solipsistic, that does not hurt us or leave us thankful it wasn’t us? And what does Eric really mean, and why do we feel this anxiety to attach meaning to his life? Are we afraid that for us, no one will do the same?

And there is this tension to start this sentence with “I guess I learned...” to relieve both you and me. But to leave you some sort of trite statement that pretends to solve anything is inexcusable. To attach to this closure or conclusion is forced and dishonest. I will, however, provide you with this: one day, when I was in 11th grade, I found out a boy whom I had known since kindergarten shot himself and died.

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