

Night of the Leonids

People die every day. But recently a man's death was particularly stunning for me, and my grief is sharp. It was not only because he was a good, old friend, but also because he simply seemed far too smart and strong and young to die now. His wife runs a perfectly magical pre-school, and for many years the two of them have raised many people's kids alongside their own wonderful children and their blueberries and muscadines. At 5 all their graduates believe that they know almost everything in the world by its first name. And tightening a child's handhold on a walk-about comprised of trees and sturdy limbs he suddenly died. After we reeled from the news for a while, my wife noted that Brooks had died at the time of the greatest meteor shower in many years.

Now I rise in the night at 3, ill-clothed in robe and house shoes and go out to our little field to see his Leonids, his meteors. Finally, one flashes across the face of the pale sky like a sudden tear. I wait for awhile and catch a glimpse of another. Mostly the stars stand up cold and steady, as distant as Brooks is now. One cannot stretch to reach them. Our mightiest rockets cannot reach them. I feel so sorry for myself to be alone now in a world I cannot find by myself. I hate to have taken away the person who was always showing me things. With him everything had corners and nooks full of surprises. After a few hours with him I could start to see them too. Here a birdsnest, there a new neighbor with his unique project, on the right hand a startling collection of a certain kind of insect, on the left a new idea on how healing creeps up from the bottom of the mind. And this is the mathematics of a crankshaft. Here is Hoover's vice president, if you need it. Here is why rubber stretches. And there is how long a little pool of water cupped inside a hollow

tree will last when drunk by woodpeckers. Did I know that in Londonderry in 1850 dogs and cats and frogs rained down from the sky at noon one day?

Why do we have to be alone in the world, we who can rarely find things for ourselves? How can someone who is always so shockingly young die? Does he rage at death? Perhaps he is finding it. There have always been some like him I suppose, which is why we have any notions about anything at all. Someone had to notice that the stars gave us seasons, that great families of species populate the trees and oceans, that my dog wants things that are very alien to me, this is what wrens think of open spaces, here is the way a raspberry vine chooses to grow when it is thwarted by a rock. See it all, he asked? I could start to see a little, then be alone again with my old thoughts, a little room full of modest furniture. There are a very few people who see things; the rest have to learn them. How painful to be forgetting everything he saw. Well Brooks, go when I think you shouldn't, surprise me again. You always have. Streak away.