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Imagining Tragedy

by BK Marcus

1. Finally, after so many failures and humiliations, the cartoon cat has caught his adversary, his persecutor, his proper prey. He holds the little brown mouse by the tail, clasped between pure white thumb and forefinger, dangling him over a boiling cauldron. The mouse, his eyes wide, his face and features infantile, sees his fate roiling beneath him. His chin quivers. Tears swell and shimmer without falling. Bemused, the cat peers down at his docile quarry, no longer struggling, no longer fighting, no longer tormenting him. The mouse hangs helpless, inches from death and knowing it. Moved by Jerry's plight, Tom lets him go free. More antics ensue.

2. Aristotle would have filed children's cartoons under *comedy*, not because they are funny—that's not what comedy originally meant—but because they have happy endings. The happy ending is everything. Comedy's comical connotation came later

because so many ancient happy-ending stories employed crude humor, caricature, and even slapstick with the goal of keeping Athenians entertained. Aristotle considered comedy an inferior dramatic form. He preferred tragedy. If comedies aimed to amuse and end happily, tragedies portrayed the inevitability of unhappy endings—fatally unhappy endings—in order, according to Aristotle, to purge the audience of pity and fear, to let them experience someone else’s tragedy at a distance. And ultimately to know that the tragic story could be left behind as they departed the amphitheater and returned to less-tragic lives. Aristotle called this effect *catharsis*. It was a metaphor. A cathartic medicine is one that makes you defecate.

3. In nursery school, we are taught to close the bathroom door if we have to move our bowels, but boys are allowed to share the room to urinate. “Let’s make a X!” Today I let the other boys cross streams without me. I’m distracted by thoughts of this morning’s cartoon. Something was different about it. More real to me. Helpless in the hand of his enemy, Jerry had imagined his death. And I imagined it, too. Had Tom dropped him into the soup, Jerry would have perished in agony. The end. No next cartoon. Standing among the unheld rag dolls and soft plastic trucks, I begin to bawl. When the older teacher asks the younger one why I won’t stop crying, the younger woman tries to explain what she has pieced together from the fragments I manage between teary half-hiccups. When the older lady looks puzzled, she adds: “I don’t think it’s about a cartoon. Something’s going on at home.”

4. Sigmund Freud had a theory of comedy. Not comedy in the Aristotelian denotation but in the modern, funny-punch-line sense. Freud's theory of laughter, reminiscent of Aristotle's metaphorical catharsis, was that jokes create a growing tension in the audience, a tension released in the punch line. If Aristotle's model for tragedy was the bowel movement, Freud's for comedy was the orgasm. Inspired by Freud, comedian Steve Martin developed an approach to standup comedy that provided jokes without punch lines, tension without release. Martin's theory was that, denied outlet, laughs will erupt unpredictably—postponed but inevitable. Timing and intensity belong to the audience.

5. Sleep came easily, but now it has abandoned me to thoughts of dark, swirling water, the river that borders our town, swollen by recent rain. I don't want to look at the clock. It is some time between midnight and morning light. I need to check on my boy again. I stand in his room on tiptoe, peering into his loft bed, staring at his outline in the dimness. I tell myself to wait. It will come. His chest rises and falls and I exhale. I return to my wife's side and to sleeplessness. We had waded in the river, father and son. He clung to my neck in the depths as I fought the current until the muddy bottom crumbled beneath my feet and the water swept us downstream. "We're fine, sweetheart. Just don't hold my throat so tight." I carried him out at the next shallow. He laughed and said, "Let's do that again!" But I told him it was late. Now it is later and I lie and

listen to the hammer of my heart. A decades-old cartoon plays at the edge of my softening consciousness.