Go to Sleep

Harrison Smith

In the last few years, I have neither slept well nor watched sports. In a four AM haze, it occurs to me that these two things might be connected, but it is late, and hard to follow this line of thought much further. Logic is flimsy at this time of night. I remember that my television does not work, and that even if it did—or even if I turned my laptop on to search for a game’s live feed—it would be too late. Even on the West Coast the ball games must be over.

The bird outside my window is switching to a new melody, and I am prone to distraction. This bird could, I imagine, be a cardinal, or a blue jay, or an oriole. He could have come from St. Louis, or from Toronto, or from Baltimore, though this is all unlikely, wishful thinking. For better and worse he and I seem to keep the same hours. He sings from midnight to sunrise, spending a few minutes on each melody before one of its variations develops into a new song. His voice is beautiful, though his kook-a-loos are mocking. I don’t know if he intends this, but I hate him, and would shake his tree if I could will myself out of bed and find him.

I attempted to identify this bird a few nights earlier, when I couldn’t sleep. I had checked out a field guide from the library—good reading late at night, when sleep is coming on slowly and there are few things to do—and a note on the northern cardinal said that the bird spends a good chunk of its life roosting, silent but awake. Little is known about this habit: the cardinal may be conserving energy or just hiding away. No word on why it forbears sleep.
GO TO SLEEP

My bird is probably not a cardinal, then. He makes too much noise. Still, little is known, and it is late, and I would prefer to give him some color. So I go with a cardinal, a cardinal from St. Louis.

I like to think that I do most of my assuming at night, when I can’t sleep. Gaps in knowledge call for explanations, and at night—when, eyes closed, thoughts are all there is—these gaps are numerous. The bird outside my window is a cardinal; the bird is male. Maybe it’s a bit of a stretch, but I’m trying to minimize my time with the field guide, and these claims seem reasonable enough.

Until recently I worked as an editor at a newspaper, a job that kept me up till sunrise once a week. This was not so bad, in itself. Mornings are nice. There’s a brightness to the world, even if there’s a cloudiness to thought. The cardinal-bird stops singing when the sun comes out, and it’s a good time for planning, if only because it’s too early for reality to get in the way. To-do lists, when I make them on such mornings, are long: I am going to read a book and start a second; I am going to go for a walk, even a ramble; I am going to pick up the dry cleaning and the groceries and the seventy-cent stamps; I am going to wipe the dust off my floors and clean out the emails in my inbox.

These lists have a way of maintaining themselves well past their due. They assume too much—most importantly, that exhaustion will not be a problem—and, for this reason, they are two to three times as long as they should be. Home from work, I’ll pick up the book and make my way through only a half-dozen pages before I feel too tired to continue. Two hours of sleep may be enough, but only for a short, inch-long list, or for someone with a stronger will.

A disappointed to-do list should only be a problem for one day, if a problem at all. Exhaustion has a way of cutting off work, but it leads—naturally and even necessarily—to sleep. To a nap, at the very least, after which work can pick up again. In the last few years, however, I’ve developed a habit that’s perpetuated this problem, a sleeplessness that’s thrown off the rhythm of all the days that follow.
I’d like to think that I’m recovering now, but I sometimes wonder if I didn’t just push things too far, cut off instinct and forget how to sleep.

As a kid I listened to nature recordings when I couldn’t sleep, with a radio alarm clock my mom had given me. It didn’t work. I was concerned that the beach recording would be the aural equivalent of putting my hand in a glass of warm water, and I was afraid of the forest wolves that yapped on the other. I gave up on the recordings after a month or so, and started tuning the clock’s dial to the FM classical station. The weeknight host, an owlish baritone, would play “Clair de Lune” fairly regularly, though the Wagner and Schoenberg that he liked never featured the piano, nor were ever played pianissimo.

On air this host seemed sleepless, which I was sympathetic to. He was certainly more relatable than his successor in the tree. I remember one night he mentioned Beethoven’s habit of counting coffee beans each morning, sixty to a cup, and that as he said this a dull sound made it onto the broadcast. A thunk of something apparently placed on his desk, next to the microphone—a cup of coffee, I assumed. Black coffee, for him and Beethoven both.

I no longer listen to recordings as I fall asleep. Most of the time I
find myself listening to my own head, which is often no better than a beach recording or an angry piece of Wagner. It whirs—or worries, depending—over a thought. I think about what I’ve done, and about what I will have done, if I ever do it. I think, for instance, that I may make a trip. Back home, around the whole state, to bring things full circle somehow. There may be trouble on the road, so I think that before I leave I’ll learn how to change a tire—again—and get the oil checked, and even refill the windshield washer fluid. I think about how this will be nice and productive, even though there’s no immediate need for such a trip, and my mind will spin on this idea like a top, knocked from side to side now and again by intervening concerns. I’ll need to make another, smaller trip in the morning, to the dry cleaner’s, and I can’t forget to say that I’d prefer they use no starch, and I can’t forget to be extra polite since the man who runs the place misunderstood me last time and probably thinks I’m rude. Also, it may rain tomorrow, in which case I’ll need to wear the slicker. But I’ve never washed or dry-cleaned the slicker, and even though I only wear it when water’s coming down, I figure I may need to wash it at some point, and that I’ll need to look that up before I take my trip.

Alongside these thoughts I may also think about the way the buildings looked as the sun was going down: newly washed, coated in some luminous salve as the sun hit the horizon and lit them from below. In these moments I’ll think with plenty of adjectives, for nighttime—dark as it is—is liable to make things “luminous,” and to coat them with metaphorical salve.

More insidious thoughts also arise. I’ll start to see my sleeplessness as true insomnia, for instance, and lying in bed with my eyes closed I’ll know how things will progress from here: I’ll sleep less and less each night.
and eventually lie down without bothering to turn off all the lights; I’ll close my eyes intending only to rest my ciliary muscle for an hour or two, to meditate and try to relax without imagining that sleep will ever come; specialists will hook me up to a polysomnogram, monitor my cycles of rest and activity, and prescribe a benzodiazepine; nothing will work; I’ll somehow find a way to live; I’ll fight through the pain; the struggle will be character forming and psychologically freeing; I will be heroic and valiant and doughty and ballsy.

I know that common causes of insomnia include depression, anxiety, and even restless legs syndrome. Genealogy surely plays a part, and my mother does have her own troubles sleeping. More than any of these pathological causes, though, the kind of sleeplessness I’ve been experiencing seems to be caused by thoughtfulness. “Thoughtfulness,” maybe, to distinguish this from the positive kind of thoughtfulness that is considerate and unselfish. What’s really at play is the sort of incalculable, inconsequential thoughtfulness that leads from career planning to laundry planning to baseball standings. A sort of hyperactive, inertial whirring, ongoing and superabundant until—with any luck—my body flips my mind’s kill switch and sleep comes on. This whirring may be directional, moving between objects even if the connections are absurd and illogical, but it can also be the sort of empty, meaningless whirring that comes from thinking about nothing much at all. Even in a torpor, I figure, the mind’s doing something.

One of the more unfortunate things I’ve come to assume at night is an interest in sports, and in sports writing in particular. This has turned out to be not soporific, but torporific, and at four in the morning it’s clear that this is a feeling I can no longer handle. I read about Dirk Nowitzki’s future and Tony Romo’s leadership abilities, or about NFL betting lines and the decline of the power running game, and I take on an ugly kid-in-the-candy-store aspect, spittle pooling along my lower lip. These articles can be about most anything, for it turns out that it’s possible to maintain interest while remaining totally disinterested—to keep up with baseball and football and basketball without really watching, and without particularly caring.
GO TO SLEEP

The analysis can be poor, the argument for argument's sake, or they can be exceptional and incisive. The former is usually more effective, though both work.

Sports had the opposite effect on me when I still played, as a kid. Machine-pitch baseball in elementary school, and Little League for a few years after that, were full of anxiety even in right field, where the ball was rarely hit. The sport is built around failure: errors are recorded assiduously, and to hit the ball only a third of the time you pick up a bat is a mark of excellence. I remember getting a hit every now and then, but mostly I remember waiting for the pitching machine to throw the ball in the dirt and send me off to first base without having to swing.

Last season, I started following baseball again, looking for something to fill my time. Unlike basketball or football, the sport is perfect for box scores, as well as for the digital play-by-play "gamecasts" that ESPN and others now produce. I could work around homework and follow games on the computer, or even on the phone, watching animated pop-ups and double plays on digital recreations of Wrigley or Fenway. I didn’t need to watch the whole game, didn’t need to watch any of the game. The box score gave me all the facts: every player's successes and failures, in the batting box and on the field, charted in a digestible, numerical form.

I can’t say that I was particularly concerned with the substance of these facts, but they were there, and had an attractive power that was at least strong enough to draw my attention, especially at night. This was helped along by my switch, just a few weeks into the season, from box scores and play-by-plays to columns and analyses. I could follow the sport, and sports altogether, without being tethered to game times. I could also follow along without being tethered to specific teams. I had grown up as a casual fan of my hometown teams, but there’s more to read when you don’t care who or what you’re reading about.

Not that this can even be called reading, really. Late at night, going through NBA analysis for a third hour, it’s more like watching something. I move through stories at a clip, as though feeding them
through a machine. I can’t tell you how the pick and roll is properly defended, or what the NFL’s CBA means for player acquisition, or how the mid-level exception works, though I’ve gone through thousands of words that might enlighten you on these subjects. This isn’t to say that I’m uninterested—it’s just that, at these moments, the subject matter is less important than its effect. When things are at their worst, I’ll read, and be—generally speaking—thoughtless. After a few hours of watching the screen I’ll even start to feel like an elevated, assumptive Mary, swallowing up sleep—if not, as she did, death itself—in victory.

It may actually be that I’ve sought out sleeplessness more than I’ve sought to escape it. I know this seems backward. At bottom, though, sleeplessness—the kind of sleeplessness that feeds off thoughtlessness, and doesn’t even attempt to kill the lights and close the eyes—is a kind of gluttony. I’ll binge not on food or booze, but on nothing, pinning my eyes to the screen without thinking or feeling. Exhaustion will evade sleep and stretch itself out in a torpor. I may read until I can no longer keep my eyes open, though this is surprisingly rarer than it sounds. More often, I’ll read until my computer dies, and let the screen go black before my eyes do.

It occurs to me that while much of my sleeplessness has been caused by poor assumptions—late-night attempts to fill in the gaps on whatever’s lacking in explanation; an interest in sportswriting that does away with the need to explain or think about anything at all—one thing I never do assume at these moments is responsibility. Not a specific responsibility like walking the dog or picking up the dry cleaning, but a fundamental, base-level responsibility, one that comes with being the only person capable of deciding, at any and every moment, what to do and what not to do. It can’t be shrugged off, though lying in bed, laptop open, there’s no way around the fact that I’m attempting to remain in a state of non-responsibility for as long as possible. It’s a shameful place to be, spittle overflowing at the lips, though it is a comfortable one. At these moments, sleep starts to look like a dual move of resignation and expectation, better avoided than embraced, for going to sleep would mean resigning myself to
the fact that yesterday is done and gone, that I have no more chance of doing what I would have liked to do. It would also mean looking ahead to the fact that tomorrow there will be a new list—more than a few inches long, probably, and with more than a few of the items that I never got around to doing today. Much easier to avoid all this and catch up on how the first line of the Blackhawks is playing. No action is required, and no disappointment is possible.

This base-level responsibility really plays out as triage, and may be the key to sleep. Setting aside a thought, running through impulses and motivations and desires, determining what can or can’t, what should or shouldn’t be done. It’s something that happens all the time, or fails to happen well, and occurs in thought as well as in perception. Some nights I can hardly hear the bird at all; others I hear it like a soundtrack, part of a radio station that’s broadcasting right outside my window. If the mind’s inertial, a little push and pull has to occur.

There are nights, though, where it seems impossible to pull back. I’ll think about everything that’s left to do, about the chance of unwanted starch in the dry cleaning and of rain in the morning, and count backward from one hundred in an attempt to block things out. This is an old tactic, and liable to fail. A meditation instructor I once had—part of another, failed tactic at sleep—will come to mind before I go from eighty-nine to eighty-eight. When I visited her she would talk about what it means to feel yourself at rest, but she never wore deodorant, and this distracted me. In bed I’ll try anyway, and it feels like a wave, as though something were upreaching from my toes, but thinking about this is still thinking, and I won’t sleep.

One other thing that’ll occasionally come to mind, interrupting my long countdown or my meditation, is the last time I went to see a baseball game. This was a few years ago. I had sat across from an elderly man, a diehard fan with a ball cap and a pencil on his ear. He would watch the game and seem to be resting his eyes, relaxing his vision, while he notched the scorecard in his lap with numbers and Ks, codes for stolen bases and pinch hits. He was wholly attentive, and the work he was doing, complicated as it was, hardly looked like work at all. Keyed-in to the game as he was, I doubt he heard any
of the bleacher-men hawking hot dogs and beer around him. I’m sure he would have jumped to his feet if an emergency had occurred, or if the game was actually close, but as it was he was undistracted and purposive. He seemed only to be thinking; less absentminded than wholly in mind. He was peaceful, and he looked like he could have fallen asleep, and I’m sure that later in the evening—after the fireworks had gone off and he had made his way home and gotten ready for bed—he did just that, bird or no bird.