



THE
VIOLET
HOUR

GREAT WRITERS AT THE END

KATIE
ROIPHE

It's no surprise to see author Katie Roiphe has contributed to The New Yorker. This look at the final hours of famous figures is broken into five sections: one on Susan Sontag, one on Freud, one on John Updike, one on Dylan Thomas, one on Maurice Sendak and an epilogue talking with James Salter about his own future death. Each of the five main pieces serves as both a profile of these figures and a detailed look at how they died. Any one of them would have made a substantial piece in The New Yorker, which is a compliment. This is certainly not a primer: they are all magnetic, forceful figures and their fame means simply that while all people die, the famous certainly manage things before that in ways you or I could not. Doors open, accommodations are made and so on. Invariably, similarities and differences appear: Sontag's refusal to admit even the possibility of death, Thomas embracing doom with drunken gusto, Sendak embedding the fear of death in his picture books, Updike determined to be a good host right to his family and friends up to the end and so on. Each piece is elegant and satisfying, though the three recent figures are examined more penetratingly than the historical deaths of Freud and Thomas. Roiphe's chat with Salter is amusingly macabre, taking the form as it does of one of those pre-obituary rituals where major papers like the New York Times send a writer to interview the faded greats knowing the material will be saved for some future encomium. You'd best enjoy *The Violet Hour* by taking a break between each piece of a few days or more so they don't all blur together. What struck me most was Roiphe's vivid writing at the very beginning of the book (where she details her own childhood illness and confronting death at a young age) and at the end. It sparked to jagged life the way the smooth professionalism of the other sections did not quite do. You can't help thinking Roiphe focused on the dying of others to sidestep dealing directly with her own mortality or at least the awkwardness of anatomizing it for others. But isn't that what we all do? -- Michael Giltz