

The Delicate, Plummeting Bodies

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A great cry went up from the stockyards and slaughterhouses, and Death, tired of complaint and constant abuse, withdrew to his underground garage. He was still young and his work was a torment. All over, their power cut, people stalled like street cars. Their gravity taken away, they began to float. Without buoyancy, they began to sink. Each person became a single darkened room. The small hand pressed firmly against the small of their backs was suddenly gone and people swirled to a halt like petals fallen from a flower. Why hurry? Why get out of bed? People got off subways, on subways, off subways all at the same stop. Everywhere clocks languished in antique shops as their hands composed themselves in sleep. Without time and decay, people grew less beautiful. They stopped eating and began to study their feet. They stopped sleeping and spent weeks following stray dogs. The first to react were remnants of the church. They falsified miracles: displayed priests posing as corpses until finally they sneezed or grew lonely. Then governments called special elections to choose those to join the ranks of the volunteer dead: unhappy people forced to sit in straight chairs for weeks at a time. Interest soon dwindled. Then the army seized power and soldiers ran through the street dabbling the living with red paint. You're dead, they said. Maybe

tomorrow, people answered, today we're just breathing: look at the sky, look at the color of the grass. For without Death each color had grown brighter, At last a committee of businessmen met together, because with Death gone money had no value. They went to where Death was waiting in a white room, and he sat on the floor and looked like a small boy with pale blond hair and eyes the color of clear water. In his lap was a red ball heavy with the absence of life. The businessmen flattered him. We will make you king, they said. I am king already, Death answered. We will print your likeness on all the money of the world. It is there already, Death answered. We adore you and will not live without you, the businessmen said. Death said, I will consider your offer.

How Death was restored to his people:

At first the smallest creatures began to die-- bacteria and certain insects. No one noticed. Then fish began to float to the surface; lizards and tree toads toppled from sun-warmed rocks. Still no one saw them. Then birds began tumbling out of the air, and as sunlight flickered on the blue feathers of the jay, brown of the hawk, white of the dove, then people lifted their heads and pointed to the sky and from the thirsty streets cries of welcome rose up like a net to catch the delicate and plummeting bodies.