

Falling Man

Text by Don DeLillo (b. 1936), from his novel Falling Man, adapted by J.D. McClatchy (b. 1945)

[1] This was the world now, a time and space of falling ash and near night. [2] He was walking north through rubble and mud. People ran past him holding coats to their faces. They had shoes in their hands, they ran and fell, they took shelter under cars. Smoke and ash came rolling down the streets, turning corners, office paper flashing past. Ash and night, screams cutting through the smoke, the air, the dark, the otherworldly things in the morning pall. [3] [Interlude 1]

[4] He wore a suit and carried a briefcase. There was glass in his hair and face. There was blood and light. He kept on walking. Everywhere around him were cars buried in debris, windows smashed, noises coming out, radio voices scratching at the wreckage. There were handbags and laptops, a man seated on the sidewalk coughing up blood. He kept on walking. [5] [Interlude 2]

[6] People ran and stopped, trying to draw breath out of the burning air. Curses, and lost shouts, paper massed in the air, contracts, resumé's, bits of business quick in the wind. He kept on walking. He saw two women sobbing as they walked backwards, looking into the core of it, all those writhing lives back there, scorched objects trailing lines of fire. He kept on walking. There were figures in windows a thousand feet up, dropping into free space, the stink of fuel fire, the steady rip of sirens in the air. A shirt came down out of the high smoke, a shirt lifted and drifting in the scant light and then falling down, down toward the river. He kept on walking.

Someone came out of a door and handed him a bottle of water. She was wearing a dust mask and took the bottle back and opened it for him. He put down his briefcase to take it, and realized he couldn't use his left arm. He closed his eyes and drank, feeling the water pass into his body taking the stench and soot with it. There was an aftertaste of blood in the long swallow of water. She said something he didn't hear and he handed back the bottle and picked up his briefcase. He kept on walking. [7] [Interlude 3]

[8] The cast-iron buildings and cobbled streets around him did not seem charged in the usual ways. They were unfinished, whatever that means, unseen, whatever that means, shop windows, loading platforms, paint-sprayed walls. Maybe this is what things look like when there is no one here to see them. In time he heard the sound of the second fall, or he felt it in the trembling air, the north tower coming down, a soft awe of voices in the distance. That was him coming down, the north tower. He kept on walking.

[9] He went past a line of fire trucks and they stood empty now, headlights flashing. He could not find himself in the things he saw and heard. Two men ran by with a stretcher, someone face-down, smoke seeping out of his hair and clothes. He watched them move into the stunned distance. That's where everything was, all around him, falling away, street signs, people, things he could not name.

Then he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life.

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Movie House

Poems by John Updike (1932-2009)

[10] Telephone Poles

They have been with us a long time.

They will outlast the elms.
Our eyes, like the eyes of a savage sieving the trees
In his search for game,
Run through them. They blend along small-town streets
Like a race of giants that have faded into mere mythology.
Our eyes, washed clean of belief,
Lift incredulous to their fearsome crowns of bolts, trusses struts, nuts,
insulators, and such
Barnacles as compose
These weathered encrustations of electrical debris –
Each a Gorgon's head, which, seized right,
Could stun us to stone.

Yet they are ours. We made them.
See here, where the cleats of linemen
Have roughened a second bark
Onto the bald trunk. And these spikes
Have been driven sideways at intervals handy for human legs.
The Nature of our construction is in every way
A better fit than the Nature it displaces.
What other tree can you climb where the birds' twitter,
Unscrambled, is English? True, their thin shade is negligible,
But then again there is not that tragic autumnal
Casting-off of leaves to outface annually.
These giants are more constant than evergreens
By being never green.

[11] Maples in a Spruce Forest

They live by attenuation,
Straining, vine-thin,
Up to gaps their gold leaves crowd
Like drowning faces surfacing.

Wherever dappled sun persists,
Shy leaves work photosynthesis;
Until I saw these slender doomed,
I did not know what a maple is.

The life that plumps the oval
In the open meadow full
Is beggared here, distended toward
The dying light available.

Maturity of sullen spruce
Will murder these deciduous;
A little while, the fretted gloom
Is dappled with chartreuse.

[12] Seagulls

A gull, up close,
looks surprisingly stuffed.
His fluffy chest seems filled
with an inexpensive taxidermist's material
rather lumpily inserted. The legs,
unbent, are childish crayon strokes –
too simple to be workable.
And even the feather-markings,
whose intricate symmetry is the usual glory of birds,
are in the gull slovenly,
as if God makes too many
to make them very well.

Are they intelligent?
We imagine so, because they are ugly.
The sardonic one-eyed profile, slightly cross,
the narrow, ectomorphic head, badly combed,
the wide and nervous and well-muscled rump

all suggest deskwork: shipping rates
by day, Schopenhauer
by night, and endless coffee.

At that hour on the beach
when the flies begin biting in the renewed coolness
and the backsliding skin of the after-surf
reflects a pink shimmer before being blotted,
the gulls stand around in the dimpled sand
like those melancholy European crowds
that gather in cobbled public squares in the wake
of assassinations and invasions,
heads cocked to hear the latest radio reports.

It is also this hour when plump young couples
walk down to the water, bumping together,
and stand thigh-deep in the rhythmic glass.
Then they walk back toward the car,
tugging as if at a secret between them,
but which neither quite knows;
walk capricious paths through the scattering gulls,
as in some mythologies
beautiful gods stroll unconcerned
among our mortal apprehensions.

[13] The Short Days

I like the way, in winter, cars
ignite beneath the lingering stars
And, with a cough or two, unpark,
And roar to work still in the dark.

Like some great father, slugabed,
Whose children crack the dawn with play,
The sun retains a heavy head
Behind the hill, and stalls the day.

Then red rims gild the gutter-spouts;
The streetlamp pales; the milk-truck fades;
And housewives – husbands gone – wash doubts
Down sinks and raise the glowing shades.

The cars are gone, they will return
When headlights in a new night burn;
Between long drinks of Acheron
The thirst of broad day has begun.

[14] Movie House

View it, by day, from the back,
from the parking lot in the rear,
for from this angle only
the beautiful brick blankness can be grasped.
Monumentality
wears one face in all ages.

No windows intrude real light
into this temple of shades,
and the size of it,
the size of the great rear wall measures
the breadth of the dreams we have had here.
It dwarfs the village bank,
outlooks the town hall,
and even in its decline
makes the bright-ceilinged supermarket seem mean.

Stark closet of stealthy rapture,
vast introspective camera
wherein our most daring self-projections

were given familiar names:
stand, stand by your macadam lake
and tell the aeons of our extinction
that we too could house our gods,
could secrete a pyramid
to sight the stars by.

[15] Modigliani's Death Mask *Fogg Museum, Cambridge*

The shell of a doll's head,
It stares askew, lopsided in death,
With nervous lips, a dirty tan,
And no bigger than my hand.
Could the man have been that small?
Or is life, like rapid motion,
An enlarging illusion?
Ringed, Italianly, with ivy,
The mask makes an effect of litter,
Preserved inside its glass case like
An oddly favored grapefruit rind.

[16] Summer: West Side

When on the coral-red steps of old brownstones
Puerto Rican boys, their white shirts luminous,
gather, and their laughter
conveys menace as far as Central Park West,

When the cheesecake shops on Broadway
keep open long into the dark,
and the Chinaman down in his hole of seven steps
leaves the door of his laundry ajar,
releasing a blue smell of starch,

When the indefatigable lines of parked cars
seem embedded in the tar,
and the swish of the cars on the Drive
seems urgently loud –

Then even the lapping of wavelets
on the boards of a barge on the Hudson
is audible,
and Downtown's foggy glow
fills your windows right up to the top.

And you walk in the mornings with your cool suit
sheathing the fresh tingle of your shower,
and the gratings idly steam,
and the damp path of the street-sweeper evaporates,
And – an oddly joyful sight –
the dentists' and chiropractors' white signs low
in the windows of the great ochre buildings on Eighty-sixth Street
seem slightly darkened
by one more night's deposit of vigil.

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Songs of Innocence and of Experience

Poems by William Blake (1757-1827)

[17] The Lamb

Little Lamb, who made thee?

Dost thou know who made thee?
Gave thee life, & bid thee feed
By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing, wooly, bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice?

Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Little Lamb, I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb, I'll tell thee:
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb.
He is meek, & he is mild;
He became a little child.
I a child, & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.
Little Lamb, God bless thee!
Little Lamb, God bless thee!

[18] Holy Thursday

Is this a holy thing to see
In a rich and fruitful land,
Babes reduc'd to misery,
Fed with cold and usurous hand?

Is that trembling cry a song?
Can it be a song of joy?
And so many children poor?
It is a land of poverty!

And their sun does never shine,
And their fields are bleak & bare,
And their ways are fill'd with thorns:
It is eternal winter there.

For where-e'er the sun does shine,
And where-e'er the rain does fall,
Babe can never hunger there,
Nor poverty the mind appall.

[19] Spring

Sound the Flute!
Now it's mute.
Birds delight
Day and Night;
Nightingale
In the dale,
Lark in Sky,
Merrily,
Merrily, Merrily, to welcome in the Year.

Little Boy,
Full of joy;
Little Girl,
Sweet and small;
Cock does crow,
So do you;
Merry voice,
Infant noise,
Merrily, Merrily, to welcome in the Year.

Little Lamb,
Here I am;
Come and lick
My white neck;

Let me pull
Your soft Wool;
Let me kiss
Your soft face:
Merrily, Merrily, we welcome in the Year.

[20] The Tyger

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?