



‘Disconnectedness is the new currency’: *Falling Man*, sympathy and Text-world Theory

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Introduction

The terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001 shocked the world. Many texts have struggled to portray adequately the effect that the event had on ordinary people, and the shock-waves that rippled across the United States. While some have argued that the trauma from the events is still too raw to be able to depict, others have tried to use texts and media as a way of understanding the horror of 9/11. One such text is Don DeLillo’s novel, *Falling Man*, which was published in 2007 and has been hailed as ‘the closest fiction has so far come to catching up with this huge piece of history’ (Jones, 2007). Rather than attempting to provide a realistic and documentary-like depiction of the events, DeLillo has instead chosen to focus on the shock that the attacks caused. Reviews and criticism of the novel all comment upon the detached and observant tone that DeLillo employs. This has been described as ‘terseness’ of style (Grayling, 2007), with the *NY Times* going so far as to say that ‘the cumulative effect is devastating, as DeLillo in exquisite increments lowers the reader into an inexorable rendezvous with raw terror’ (Rich, 2007). Avoiding a temptation to give into overblown sentimentality or tear-jerking pity, DeLillo’s novel creates a sensation of numbness and leaves the reader feeling profoundly unsettled. The same review even said that ‘disconnectedness is the new currency’, and this essay will focus on the ‘disconnectedness’ of the novel. Using Text-World Theory I shall consider how the stylistic techniques create this disconnectedness within the text, and how as a result my emotional response is detached and numb.

In reading the text and the subsequent book reviews, I was reminded of something that I had heard about people who have suffered Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Some of the recognized symptoms include what is termed ‘emotional numbing’ (Yehuda, 2002) and this can include a sense of detachment and isolation from other people and events. The fact that millions of people around the world watched the footage of the twin towers, means that there is a possibility that a large percentage of the population would have suffered, or will still suffer, a sense of shock and emotions associated with post-trauma, even without witnessing the event in person. One article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* claimed that 44% of adults interviewed reported some of the symptoms of PTSD in the days following 9/11 (Schuster, 2001). Extensive television viewing was associated with a substantial stress reaction; in our digital age we are faced with the fact that trauma can affect us, even if we are not the direct ‘victim’ nor have experienced it in person (Keen, 2007: 6).

The very fact that so many texts have been constructed around September 11th is evidence for the fact that emotion and narrative go hand-in-hand. Suzanne Keen notes that empathy affects our reaction to narrative because, the same drive to affiliate with others for comfort and safety that expresses itself in empathy and sympathy may also play a role in our species’ enthusiasm for narrative.’ (Keen, 2007: 5) Story-telling makes us aware of socially acceptable emotions in relation to different situations and ‘renders emotional states legible through their labels and activates our expectations about what emotions mean’ (Keen, 2007:

6). Therefore, narratives and our expression of emotions are tied up together in this way and different texts can employ certain strategies to ‘manipulate’ our feelings. Interestingly Keen draws attention to the footage of the September 11th attacks, and comments that we need not be present in the immediate audience *to catch the feelings of others*’ (Keen, 2007: 6) (my italics)

Empathy and Sympathy: Discussion of terms

It is obvious that when we read, we experience emotions even though we are aware that we are reading fiction. There has been much discussion about whether these emotions are ‘real’, or ‘make-believe emotions’ (Levinson; 1997). In this essay I shall be adhering to the view that the emotions that we experience when we read are just as ‘authentic’ as ‘original non-literary feeling’. (Stockwell, 2009: 105) We are aware that the goals and plans of the novel are simulated, but despite this our emotions are not simulated (Oatley, 1999: 114). As Stockwell points out, both sets of feelings are in fact the same thing:

They are both caused by perceiving and representing an experience to consciousness. They both involve the same physical effects. The both produce sensations that feel the same. The difference between original (minimally simulated) and literary feeling is one of degree or volume rather than type.

(Stockwell, 2009: 105)

It is interesting to consider whether when reading *Falling Man* we are empathising or sympathising with the characters, and whether or not this affects our emotional response and the feeling of resonance that we experience in relation to the text. Empathy and sympathy are extremely difficult words to define, as there seems to be a psychological and cognitive overlap in what people think they mean. It may also be possible that there are dialectal differences between the words in American English and British English. Suzanne Keen sets out a clear distinction between empathy and sympathy that I shall find useful to refer to throughout this essay. She claims that ‘In empathy [...] we feel what we believe to be the emotions of others. This phenomenon is distinguished in both psychology and philosophy (though not in popular usage) from *sympathy* in which feelings *for* another occur.

Empathy: I feel what you feel. *I feel your pain.*

Sympathy: I feel a supportive emotion about your feelings. *I feel pity for your pain.*

(Keen, 2007: 5) (bold in original)

In this essay, I shall argue that DeLillo provokes sympathy for the characters in the text, but that I felt unable to empathise with the characters. I felt pity for them, and I felt shocked at the situation but I did not feel *with* them; I was somehow disconnected. I have come to the conclusion that what I felt was sympathy, and I shall use Text-world Theory to explore why I was able to feel sympathetically towards the characters but was not able to extend this emotional involvement to the deeper level of empathy. After informally asking my friends to read the passages that I shall analyse later, and asking for their thoughts, the reply was similar; that although they felt sad and concerned for the characters, they did not feel as though they themselves were involved. One said that she was ‘sitting back and not really *inside* the book’, thereby showing both that the metaphor of involvement is so important in

text-world mapping (Stockwell, 2009), but also that *Falling Man* does not seem to encourage an empathetic response in readers.

Text-world Theory Framework and its importance in emotional response

Text-world Theory (TWT) is a discourse framework concerned with how a text is constructed, but also with the context surrounding the text that influences its production and reception. (Gavins, 2007: 8) The context of *Falling Man* is part of what makes the novel so powerful, and readers bring knowledge of television footage of the attacks, photographs and documentaries into their construction of the text-world. The concept of TWT was coined by Paul Werth in the 1990s as a development of possible world theories, but the important difference is that the conceptual worlds which are created during discourse are as richly detailed as our direct experience of, and interaction with, the real world.' (Gavins, 2001: 34). Sara Whitely, in her extensive exploration of emotion and TWT, stresses that the richness of the mental models that are created in TWT is so important in readers' emotional response because they contribute to experiencing 'real' emotions in response to fiction. (Whitely, 2010: 29). Regarding my exploration of TWT and emotion, two facets are important to note. First is the notion that richness is central to Text-world Theory's concern with the experiential aspects of discourse processing. (Whitely, 2010: 29) Secondly, owing to TWT's reliance on spatial metaphor it is a useful framework for exploring how readers experience emotion by feeling 'immersed' in the text-world, a concept which has been termed as 'projection' (Stockwell, 2009; Gavins, 2007). Richness and projection are the two concepts upon which I will concentrate in my analysis of *Falling Man* and my emotional response to it.

Analysis of pp. 87-8 (See Appendix)

So far, I have examined the importance of *Falling Man* as a textual reaction to September 11th 2001, and I have also noted how this event triggered a Post-Traumatic Stress response from many people. I have also stated that I felt disconnected from the characters and events in the novel, owing to an inability to empathise with them. Stockwell claims that sympathy is a deictic distance from the reader; in text-world terms this would involve the discourse participants *observing* rather than *feeling* the characters' emotions. We do not participate in bidirectional trans-world mapping between the discourse world and the text-world (Stockwell, 2009: 93) – instead we scrutinize the text-world from our anchored discourse world perspective. This detached surveillance is caused by several factors, both stylistic and contextual.

The passage (see Appendix – all quotations shall refer to this edition and shall not be referenced in the text) occurs during a flashback scene of the novel that refers back to the event at the beginning of the text, when the woman's estranged husband appears at the flat after the terrorist attack. He had been trapped in the towers, but was able to escape. The passage is not introduced by any sort of deictic sub-world trigger, such as 'I remember when...' and therefore we have to refer to previous knowledge from the novel about when and where the event took place. Paratextually it is also foregrounded, because it starts both a new chapter and the second of the three parts into which the novel is divided. The text-world that is created is quite sparse, owing to the lack of descriptive world-builders, and this contributes to the feeling of numbness and disconnection from the text-world. We realise that it is a flashback because of the temporal clause 'When he appeared at the door' signifying an event that has already taken place; the tense of the verbs also indicates an event in the past. The lack of temporal world-builders may be owing to the fact that from our discourse world, we

already know the date and approximate time of the event; this flashback is set on September 11th 2001, sometime in the late-morning or early- afternoon. Unspecified details like this that can be provided from discourse-world knowledge help to create a feeling of social cohesion between text-world characters and readers in the discourse-world.

In the same way, there is a lack of description of place; the only locational world-builders are the preposition phrases ‘at the door’, ‘in the doorway’, and later in the passage ‘toward the kitchen’. However, these prepositional phrases lack adjectival qualification and therefore merely place the events in a generic household setting, cognitively a ‘house script’ (Stockwell, 2002: 77), without placing stylistic attention onto them. In cognitive terms, they are neglected and are part of the ground of the text. Throughout the novel, DeLillo relies on personal pronouns instead of proper names and this passage illustrates how this can increase the feeling of us observing the characters in a detached manner. The characters in this passage, or (as they should be called) ‘enactors’ as we are technically in a sub-world caused by the flashback from the main chronology of the novel (Emmott, 1997: 180-2), are referred to as ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘Justin’, his grandmother’, ‘a shirt’, and ‘somebody else’. Two-thirds of these enactors are either anonymous or referred to only by a personal pronoun, thereby increasing the sense of detachment that we feel from the scene.

Furthermore, DeLillo tries to slip in the reference to the eponymous man of the novel’s title without drawing too much attention to it. He does this by using the metonym for the falling man: ‘a shirt coming out of the sky’, and refusing to cue a sub-world switch — for instance by using he said there was’ — choosing instead to leave it as reported speech in the original text-world. Readers need to use their knowledge from the discourse world about 9/11, and the fact that dozens of people jumped from the towers to their deaths rather than remain trapped in the burning buildings. Many readers will also know about the famous image of the falling man, which was on the front page of many newspapers the day after the attacks, and realise that this anonymous man stands for all of the victims from the day. However, none of this is given in the text and its embeddedness in the original text-world serves to heighten the detachment that the woman, and the readers, feel for the image during this passage.

The second clause of the first sentence creates an immediate world-switch to an epistemic sub-world of negative possibility (Stockwell, 2002: 141). When he appeared at the door it was not possible’. This is immediately unsettling for the reader to witness. We make the switch to the sub-world but are forced to toggle back, (Stockwell, 2002: 140) as the absence left by the negated possibility of his presence is filled by the following phrase ‘a man come out of an ash storm’. We realise that the epistemic world-switch was caused by a manipulation of free indirect discourse, which implies that the woman believes that it should not be possible that he was in the doorway, but yet he is actually there. After this initial shock that the woman experiences and the accompanying world-switch that illustrates her shock, the narrative settles down slightly, and there are only a few world-switches. As is a common technique in the rest of the novel, DeLillo uses a repeating pattern of personal pronoun followed by a material action (function advancer) in a simple clause structure. For example:

He —> carried a briefcase;
 He —> walked past her;
 She —> turned off the TV set;
 She —> poured him a glass of water.

This repeated use of action predicates (Stockwell, 2002: 139) gives a sense that nothing flows from any other actions, and that the enactors themselves are robotic. Explaining his theory of emotional investment, Stockwell claims that ‘there is a directly proportional scaling between

perceived effort invested and the degree of empathy felt, with the stylistic patterns of the literary work serving as a multiplier in the process.’ (Stockwell, 2009: 95) If we follow this we can see that the simple structure of the sentences, and the repetitive pattern of personal pronoun → material action, do not require much cognitive effort. Despite the fact that they require sequential scanning (Stockwell, 2002: 66), they are straightforward processes. Therefore, I would argue that we observe the robotic actions without becoming ‘involved’ cognitively or empathetically in them.

As the passage progresses, there are a number of sub-world switches caused by attitudinal cues. These are from the point of view of the focaliser - the woman - about how and why her husband could have come to have been in her doorway. Some of these switches are qualified by epistemic evaluations of the thoughts. As an example: she thought he might be in shock but didn’t know what this meant in precise terms, medical terms.’ And also, ‘She turned off the TV set, not sure why.’ People suffering from psychological trauma often perform actions without knowing why, and thus these world switches could be seen as evidence for the woman searching for a reason behind her actions, but not being able to find one. Also, the deictic world-switch created by the man’s direct speech is the only such example in this passage, which is surprising. ‘He said, “Everybody’s giving me water.”’ After a reunion with a loved one whom you thought to be dead, you would expect more talking, but this scene is surprisingly silent. The lack of sub-world switches keeps the emphasis on the present moment, as though we are unable to cope with other distractions. The sparse style and lack of world-switches that would denote textual richness mean that we are kept at arm’s length from the events.

Toward the end of the passage, there are several world-switches triggered by belief statements and negation: ‘There was more blood than she’d realized at first and then she began to realize something else [...]’. These two world switches, like the previous epistemic sub-worlds of this passage, follow the woman’s slow realisation of the horror of what has happened. We feel unsettled because the movement into sub-worlds mimics her progression of thought and differs so greatly from the pattern of ‘personal pronoun -) function advancer’ that had been used so extensively earlier in the passage. The two negative sub-worlds seen in his cuts and abrasions were not severe enough or numerous enough to account for all this blood. It was not his blood.’ qualify previous knowledge. Despite earlier in the scene claiming that she was not aware of the proper ‘medical terms’ to use in relation to his appearance and behaviour, the woman uses a ‘response to medical emergency’ script as can be seen in the technical word ‘abrasions’ and a previous mention of ‘grievous blood loss’ that do not seem to fit with the rest of the sentences in which they are found. This means that not only is the reader unsettled by the negative sub-world switch ‘[they] were not severe or numerous enough to account for all this blood’, but we are also disorientated by the restructuring of the schema caused by her technical medical words. I would argue that this further increases the sense of disconnection between readers, enactors and the events of the passage; the medical terms are self-consciously used and do not fit with our expectation of the scene. We cannot settle into the text-world, because the creation and development of the ‘being reunited with a loved one after an accident’ script is disrupted.

Analysis of pp.241-3

The previous passage that I analysed was characterised by a sense of shock and detachment. I will now analyse the end of the novel in which the moment of impact when the first plane hits the north tower is described, followed by the man’s attempt to help a friend who is also trapped in the building. Similar to the previously analysed passage, it is a flashback. This chronological disruption not only places the horrific event as figure, by

putting it as the last moment in the novel, and therefore making it the most resonant (for a discussion on resonance see Stockwell, 2007) but thematically, it also supports my argument that the characters are undergoing some sort of PTSD because its inclusion and focalisation through the man's eyes means that he is reliving the traumatic event.

In contrast to the descriptively sparse passage from earlier on in the novel, this scene is richly described. The location is the north tower, in one of the offices just below where the plane hit and we infer the time from our common ground of the discourse-world to be a few minutes after the impact. The characters in the scene are the man, his friend Rumsey, a 'white shirt' and a macabre reference to 'the dead'. When considering the richness of the text-world, what is most striking are the references to the state of the building: 'fire', 'smoke', 'stink of fuel', 'debris', 'wires', 'shattered glass', 'noise', 'rubble', 'blood' and 'dust'.

There is a paragraph in which Keith sees the image of a man falling past the window and the pace slows down; we move from a section in which there is a succession of images of the burning building that seamlessly flow into each other, owing to the omission of a main verb in the sentence: 'fuel burning, smoke blowing out [...] smoke outside, crawling down the surface' which is a harrowing set of images to deal with. Then this passage occurs:

Things began to fall, one thing and then another, things singly at first, coming down out of the gap in the ceiling, and he tried lifting Rumsey out of the chair. Then something outside, going past the window. Something went past the window, then he saw it. First it went and was gone and then he saw it and had to stand a moment starting out at nothing, holding Rumsey under the arms.

He could not stop seeing it, twenty feet away, an instant of something sideways, going past the window, white shirt, hand up, falling before he saw it.

(DeLillo, 2007: 242)

The narrative places attention onto the image of the falling man as figure by repeating and altering the phrase 'something outside, past the window' and distorting the natural progression of the sentences by having the thing happen, then his subsequent perception of it. In this way it requires extra cognitive effort to sequentially scan. The repetition of the vague nominal terms 'something', 'thing' and 'It' increase the uncertainty about what is occurring and they provide a direct contrast with the concrete nouns of the following sentence: 'floors', 'wires', 'powder' and 'glass'. The deictic world-switch is emphasised further by the lack of a main verb. This sentence disorients us spatially, as we have been moved to outside the tower, and grammatically as we are aware that the sentence should not make sense.

As Gavins points out the more switches from the discourse-world that we perform, the greater is our conceptual distance from the thing being described (Gavins, 2007: 115).

DeLillo's novel stands in opposition to this idea because we are kept in the same text-world for most of this passage but we still feel at a distance from it. We feel in shock, just as the man is. The moment when his friend Rumsey dies in his arms is detached and unsettling. For example, just before he dies we find the phrase 'The whole business of being Rumsey was in shambles now', which uses a conceptual metaphor of LIFE IS A BUSINESS

TRANSACTION (other examples would be 'I've had a successful day' or 'I can't afford to lose that week') This ties into the location of the passage, occurring as it does in the World Trade Centre, but subverts it as the readers realise that living or dying is so much more important than business could ever be. The choice of the word 'shambles' is also interesting; it links to image of the building crumbling around them but also has its original meaning of 'scene of carnage, slaughter house' (OED). Furthermore, the word nowadays, among young people at least, has a humorous connotation of being drunk or a mess (Urban Dictionary).

The combined effect of the conceptual metaphor and the strange lexical choice unnerves the

reader. This is then followed one sentence later by the sentence: ‘He stood and looked at him and the man opened his eyes and died.’ Although we are in the same text-world, and death is a universal theme that we can all understand, we feel distanced from Rumsey’s death. It is extremely disconcerting that he opened his eyes before he died, rather than closing them. This reverses our normal script of a ‘death scene’. Also, the parallel between the man standing and looking and Rumsey looking back places visual perception as figure in the sentence and therefore the image of open eyes resonates after the sentence has finished.

Finally, although we remain in the original text-world in the last line of the passage, we feel uncomfortable as DeLillo uses a strange selection of words that blur the tense of the sentence: ‘This is when he wondered what was happening here.’ Firstly, we would expect him to use the demonstrative pronoun ‘that’ rather than ‘this’, as the text is discussing a situation in the past in a different location. Similarly, we would expect the adverb to be ‘there’ to denote the location inside the tower, rather than ‘here’ which suggests a more immediate present moment and location for both text-world enactors and discourse-world participants. It could be an example of free indirect speech, but even this does not seem to fit with the sentence. Therefore, at the end of the passage we are left in an unsettling situational flux; although we are still in the original text-world the locational adverb has troubled us.

Evaluation and Amendment

This essay has argued that Text-World Theory is a useful framework for exploring emotion and empathy in a literary text because it allows us to consider how a text-world’s richness or sparseness can encourage or discourage emotional involvement in that world. If a text-world lacks description, as is evident in the first passage, it is more difficult for a reader to project her/himself into that world. Secondly, as less cognitive effort is needed to navigate the text owing to the dearth of stylistic techniques (Stockwell, 2009), the reader does not experience as great an emotional return.

Throughout this essay, I have described the numbing sensation and disconnectedness that I feel when I read DeLillo’s text. This detachment from the emotions of the enactors, and a partial inability to react to the events that are being described I have termed as a sympathetic response, rather than an empathetic one. I feel sadness for the enactors, as I observe their struggle in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, but at no point do I feel *with them* in their struggle. I believe that this paucity of response has been experienced by others; as is evident in the review that states ‘disconnectedness is the new currency’ of the novel. (Rich, 2007)

I now wish to discuss how I believe that TWT can be improved and amended as a framework. A large part of the emotional ‘resonance’ of the novel is created by the knowledge that we bring from the discourse-world. The last sentence of the novel is an example: ‘Then he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life.’ The metonym ‘shirt’ for a noun like ‘man’ or ‘person’ only fully works as a concept if the reader is aware of the photograph of the falling man, and the fact that many people jumped from the towers on September 11th. Personally, I found that the book’s emotional resonance was increased the second time that I read it, as I had by then watched a documentary about the tragedy. Merely saying that the discourse participants bring common-ground that is directed towards the ‘textdrivenness’ of the novel (Gavins, 2007) does not satisfactorily explain the importance of the context surrounding *Falling Man*. If DeLillo had written about another event in such a terse and non-descriptive, and at times frankly mundane, manner it would not have been nearly so successful. What he has achieved, however, is a way of observing and reflecting the mass consciousness and shock of the American nation that they have suffered, and are still suffering, as a result of that day.

Therefore I think that there could be a way of amending TWT that takes into account the importance of discourse-world knowledge in relation to emotion and empathy. As a general idea, it could be possible to incorporate some of the concepts found in the discussion of conceptual metaphor and ‘blending’ (Gavins, 2007). Gavins explains blending with reference to metaphor when the two ‘input spaces’ (formerly known as ‘target’ and ‘source’) ‘feed into one space rather than simply mapping on top of one another; this new blended space has its own emergent structure that contains elements which do not exist in either of the input spaces’ (Gavins, 2007: 140) Although Gavins considers how ‘blended worlds’ are created in discourse, she limits her discussion to the worlds constructed from metaphors. I am suggesting that discourse-knowledge, and its effect on empathy and sympathy, can be discussed using an exploration of ‘blending’ For example, that last sentence of the novel again: ‘Then he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life.’ From the text-world features only the image-schema is DOWN, and the shirt is the trajectory – as it is fast moving and has appeared suddenly in the field of vision—across the landmark of the sky. Its resonance is increased by the fact that it does not end; the novel finishes before the ‘shirt’ reaches the physical ground, and this means that it lingers in our mind, as the trajectory does not reach its destination. The last word, ‘life’, and the sub-world negation of ‘nothing in this life’ causes us to think of death, which is obviously one of the most resonant themes in literature.

Clearly the shirt is an important image, but what gives these final sentences their resonance is what we add to the text-world from our discourse world. I bring a mental image, from memory, of the photograph of the falling man, and also from the stories that I have heard about the people who jumped from the towers. Also, I bring knowledge of the subsequent ‘War on Terror’ and the loss of life caused by the military intervention in Afghanistan. Although I have knowledge from the discourse-world, which can be added to the blended world to increase emotional involvement, somebody who has personally experienced psychological trauma or who knows someone affected by the 9/11 attacks would have a greater number of ‘input worlds’ from the discourse-world, and therefore the ‘blended’ world would be richer, and the empathetic involvement stronger.

In conclusion, TWT is a useful framework to discuss emotional responses to literary texts, because the concepts of distance and richness that affect our emotions can be explored in detail. I used TWT to consider why I felt detached from the enactors and events of the novel, and also to investigate whether the claim that ‘disconnectedness is the new currency’ could be substantiated by a cognitive and stylistic analysis of the text. Although TWT is suited to a discussion of empathy and sympathy, there is still room for amendment and new developments in the field. I considered how discourse-world knowledge could be brought into the analysis more explicitly, using a framework similar to that of conceptual metaphor and ‘blending’. There has not been scope in this study to investigate further such a development of TWT, but it is clearly an area with great potential.

Appendix

pp.87-8 (DeLillo, 2007)

When he appeared at the door it was not possible, a man come out of an ash storm, all blood and slag, reeking of burnt matter, with pinpoint glints of slivered glass in his face. He looked immense, in the doorway, with a gaze that had no focus in it. He carried a briefcase and stood slowly nodding. She thought he might be in shock but didn't know what this meant in precise terms, medical terms. He walked past her toward the kitchen and she tried calling her doctor, then 911th, then the nearest hospital, but all she heard was the drone of overloaded lines. She turned off the TV set, not sure why, and then went into the kitchen. He was sitting at the table and she poured him a glass of water and told him that Justin was with his grandmother, released early from school and also being protected from the news, at least as it concerned his father.

He said "Everybody's giving me water."

She thought that he could not have traveled all this distance or even climbed the stairs if he'd suffered serious injury, grievous blood loss.

Then he said something else. The briefcase sat beside the table like something yanked out of a landfill. He said there was a shirt coming out of the sky.

She poured water on a dishcloth and wiped dust and ash from his hands, face and head, careful not to disturb the glass fragments. There was more blood than she'd realized at first and then she began to realize something else, that his cuts and abrasions were not severe or numerous enough to account for all this blood. It was not his blood. Most of it came from somebody else.

pp. 241-3 (DeLillo, 2007)

The stink was fuel and he recognized it now, oozing down from floors above. He got to Rumsey's office at the end of the hall. He had to climb in. He climbed over chairs and strewn books and a filing cabinet on its side. He saw bare framework, truss bars, where the ceiling had been. Rumsey's coffee mug was shattered in his hand. He still held a fragment of the mug, his finger through the ring.

Only it didn't look like Rumsey. He sat in his chair, head to one side. He'd been hit by something large and hard when the ceiling caved or even before, in the first spasm. His face was pressed into his shoulder, some blood, not much.

Keith talked to him.

He squatted alongside and took his arm and looked at the man, talking to him. Something came trickling from the corner of Rumsey's mouth, like bile. What's bile look like? He saw the mark on his head, an indentation, a gouge mark, deep, exposing raw tissue and nerve.

The office was small and makeshift, a cubicle wedged into a corner, with a limited view of morning sky. He felt the dead nearby. He sensed this, in the hanging dust.

He watched the man breathe. He was breathing. He looked like someone paralyzed for life, born this way, head twisted into his shoulder, living in a chair day and night.

There was fire up there somewhere, fuel burning, smoke blowing out of a ventilation duct, then smoke outside the window, crawling down the surface of the building.

He unbent Rumsey's index finger and removed the broken mug.

He got to his feet and looked at him. He talked to him. He told him he could not wheel him out in the chair, wheels or not, because debris everywhere, he talked quickly, debris blocking door and hall, talking quickly to get himself to think in like manner.

Things began to fall, one thing, and then another, things singly at first, coming down out of the gap in the ceiling, and he tried lifting Rumsey out of the chair. Then something outside, going past the window. Something went past the window, then he saw it. First it went and was gone and then he saw it and had to stand a moment staring out at nothing, holding Rumsey under the arms.

He could not stop seeing it, twenty feet away, an instant of something sideways, going past the window, white shirt, hand up, falling before he saw it. Debris in clusters came down now. There were echoes sounding down the floors and wires snapping at his face and white powder everywhere. He stood through it, holding Rumsey. The glass partition shattered. Something came down and there was noise and then the glass shivered and broke and then the wall gave way behind him.

It took some time to push himself up and out. His face felt like a hundred pinpoint fires and it was hard to breathe. He found Rumsey in the smoke and dust, facedown in the rubble and bleeding badly. He tried to lift him and turn him and found he couldn't use his left hand but was able to turn him partly.

He wanted to raise him onto his shoulder, using his left forearm to help guide the upper body while he grabbed the belt with his right hand and tried to snatch and lift.

He began to lift, his face warm with the blood on Rumsey's shirt, blood and dust. The man jumped in his grip. There was a noise in his throat, abrupt, a half second, half gasp, and then blood from somewhere, floating, and Keith turned away, hand still clutching the man's belt. He waited, trying to breathe. He looked at Rumsey, who'd fallen away from him, upper body lax, face barely belonging. The whole business of being Rumsey was in shambles now. Keith held tight to the belt buckle. He stood and looked at him and the man opened his eyes and died.

This is when he wondered what was happening here.

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