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Recommended Citation
McManama, Meg (2015) "When Things Start Decomposing," Inscape: Vol. 35 : No. 1 , Article 5. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol35/iss1/5

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WHEN THINGS STOPPED DECOMPOSING

by

Meg McManama

You came home from work and found me watching the news. The experts were stumped and theorizing.

You adjusted to the new world before I did. You reminded me that we would go on living. You reminded me that I’d always cried too much at funerals, been too scared in zombie films, and now I’d never be buried and eaten by worms; now my fear had decomposed—you laughed when you told me that.

You sat by me on the couch and kissed my cheek. We watched the theorists describe the scavengers and decomposers.

The earthworms stopped first. Slugs, bacteria, and fungi followed. There was a debate about whether the actinolites had become extinct altogether. Scientists were scrambling. Some of them were optimistic—anticipating and predicting how the ecosystem would adapt.

The lack of cavities caused the dentists to go out of business. Some went back to school, others took an early retirement and ran off with their hygienists. The taxidermists likewise found different professions.
A man in the next town was on the news last night. His wife died—they don’t know how long ago. He sat her up at the kitchen table, and she remained there each day, part of the kitchen, part of the home.

Flowers frozen in their freshness filled table tops, rooftops, fields, and hillsides for years and years. When the flowers became too much, they were gathered and buried in a pauper’s grave in the south side of New Mexico.

We visited Hawaii a few years ago, before things stopped decomposing. We were on a beach, and we saw a turtle on the shore in the distance. It was enormous. We cautiously jogged to it, excited to see it close up, but as I got closer, I saw that the turtle lay on its back, its head bobbing side-to-side. Something was off. You said, stop. As we got closer, I realized it was dead. My gaze immediately fell on its eyes, on the white substance falling out of the sockets.

After things stopped decomposing, the tradition of burying loved ones became cruel. They didn’t become dust and ashes—Ephesians didn’t apply anymore. The burial-service industry gradually changed to the encasing-service industry. The deceased were now referred to as “the sleeping.” Wood coffins were replaced with glass coffins. The mausoleums, which quickly changed their names to “rest homes,” became one of the most popular and profitable businesses. When the mourners, now called visitors, would come alone, they would read to their dead, pray with them, cry on them, shut the case and return home. The rest homes were remodeled to accommodate large parties of visitors who often came to celebrate birthdays. Each rest home would limit the amount of visits per year depending on the package purchased.
I began to accept the new world, and I let you take me to an old woman’s home. She had been on the news for weeks. She was collecting dead animals and lining them up in her backyard. She was mute. She hardly acknowledged the news teams. Neighbors reported the roadkill in her yard the same day that things stopped decomposing; it was as if she knew. It seemed grotesque to me, insane even. She would let people wander her backyard, pet the animals, pose for photos. Some even brought their dead animals to her home. She took them in and added them to the collection. They began to call her “the artist.”

On the drive, you suggested that she wasn’t crazy, but that she probably knew things we didn’t. In her backyard, we walked through the maze of rodents and dogs. At first, I was scared—scared that these animals might move and start running over our feet. I began to recognize the stillness of death in these creatures, and my fear subsided. I tried to imagine what they were looking at as they died, the emotion captured in their eyes. I paused when I saw a turtle. It was looking down and I knelt on the ground to inspect its gaze. The eyes were black with vivid green irises. They still looked wet.