

An excerpt from

In the Aftermath — 9/11 Through a Volunteer's Eyes

In commemoration of the 20th anniversary of September 11, 2001

Window Washers

Before the scaffolding came down,
workmen straddled the skyscraper.
Fearless artists with rags, sprays,
and squeegees. Masterpiece restorers
erasing the amateur touch-up
from the surface of a painting
found in an old farmer's attic,
revealing an Eakins or Grandma Moses
under the grime, construction dust,
smoke from factories carried by wind
and rain across the harbor.
Each pane of glass transformed
into a crystal reflecting sunlight
off the river's tides.

Before the Towers came down,
the window washers
could not imagine
their workmanship would enable
the pilots to pinpoint their targets.
Expose the office workers
behind the casements
to their approaching death,
from both sides of the glass.
They could only watch
their artistry descend,
decay return;
debris, dust,
and ash.

The Volunteer

I was afraid of you—

your coat tainted by debris,
pieces of metal ground into your helmet,

your eyes; narrow slits blinking,
reddened by sleeplessness and smoke,

your voice; hoarse and thin from poisoned
air, shouting over the din of jackhammers,

your demands: *Where are the size 13 boots?*
Stronger pain pills?

Afraid to question you. At first, *Find anyone today?*
Then, *Find anything today?* Soon, all my questions stopped.

I sat on a crate in the back of the warehouse, pulled clothing out
from donation boxes, labeled socks, tee-shirts, work gloves,

avoided you.

Rope, shovels, cough drops,
I tried to give you what you needed.

Side Effects

The fumes
assault me
each time I enter
the warehouse
Noxious air
that seeps
through my mask

Nothing is familiar
in that stench
until the fireman
rushes past me
impatient to change gear
get back on the Pile
I hand him
a fresh jacket
“What’s that smell?”
I ask
“Is it gas?”
He turns to me
puts his hand
on my shoulder
shouts over the chaos—

*Not gas.
Human Methane.*

The Sabbath Shift

...within sight of trucks filled with body parts from the World Trade Center, women from Stern College sat outside in a tent fulfilling the commandment to keep watch over the dead. (New York Times, November 2001)

*With my voice
I cry unto the Lord*

She sits alone
beside the trucks

intoning David's psalm
but she is not alone—

hip,
hands,
leg,

from sunset to sunrise
sanctified by the shomer's prayer

Shabbat Shalom
Shabbat Shalom

No Relief

Narrow metal steps
to the warehouse loft,
bathroom on the left.
The staircase sways,
hard to keep my footing
climbing up.

He's leaning
over the sink
washing up,
stripped down
to his undershirt
and work pants.

I tell him I'm sorry
for disturbing him,
ask if he's done
for the day, finished
his shift down
in the rubble:

just came in
to clean up,
grab some sleep.
Can't go home.
Have to dig,
find my brother.

The Physics of Ripples

1. Late again.

Thirty minutes tonight.

He rushes in to class.

The door slams behind him,
disrupts the other students.

Sweat drips down his face,
seeps through his starched
white business shirt.

His eyes dart around the room,
scan the desks for a seat
in the back. He apologizes.

Tries to look inconspicuous.

Avoids me, my rebuke. Asks
to speak to me, "afterwards."

2. *After 9/11, my two little girls were followed on their way home from school.*

My neighbor's kids threw garbage at them. Tomatoes. Sometimes rocks.

Screamed, "Go back to Pakistan. Terrorists!" I drive them in the morning

but the babysitter who walks them home after school quit on us. She was

afraid of getting attacked. My wife has a dental practice. Can't pick them up.

I leave work early to bring them home, stay with them 'til my wife gets in.

But, I need this class. My company sent me here to improve my accent.

Please excuse me. Let me stay.

3. He dropped out by mid-term.

Ode to the Survivors Staircase

Oh, you charred, granite-clad,
concrete ruin, witness to terror and escape,
did you see

the fear in the eyes of the man struggling down the steps,

shouting to the woman in front, *Pull off your heels,*
run faster! Did you feel her burnt and bloodied feet,

the crush of the fireman's boots,
his failing lungs, the weight of the office
worker cradled in the rescuer's arms,

the surge of bodies pressing on, straining
through smoke-filled eyes to see over the heads
below to the open passage on Vesey Street?

You, too have been rescued.

Eroded by exposure, slated for destruction
by monied interests; developers who planned
to clear you from the site. Nine years passed

before the cranes came to lift you out
of neglect, set you down in your rightful
place, Memorial and Museum rising above.

We have been told

and believed the tales—
holiness rests on high, we must
ascend towards freedom and light;

Jacob climbing towards heaven's gate,
Elijah rising in a chariot of fire.
Descent has always allied with fear and death:

Dante in the Inferno,
Orpheus in the Underworld,
Adam and Eve, the fall from Grace.

But you

defied the metaphor. From you they
fled downward and returned to life,
blessing their survival, and yours.

At the Memorial

Vesey Street station.
Force yourself to climb the steps,
Turn towards the Towers,
Now calm, clean, tourist-ready.
For you, still smoke and wreckage.

~

Three thousand photos.
Dress uniforms, wedding gowns
Bind the museum walls.
Youth rising above the Pit,
Lives descending into stone.