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*Notes from September 11*

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Poems and Stories

by  
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To Petra, who saved me.

Notes from September 11  
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## Notes from September 11

### I

And the sun behind the plume went out orange and then violet  
then strong and bright at end of summer  
flurries fell, the sun silvered the flakes  
there was a sound of fighter jets

My mother did not leave her house  
when the cloud fell on Brooklyn a mile away  
In her garden, on the evergreens, the powder silky and hot

She told me later that she understood  
what was in it

### II

They were asking for water on the bridges  
the day already heating up  
the exodus, the slow processions to Brooklyn  
the ferries fleeing over the water

Ash on every shoulder and every head  
whole ash men  
smothered in plaster  
silent without shirts  
streaked with blood from glass  
black women become albino  
covering their mouths  
in wet towels, bandannas, carpenter's masks

They are trying to call home on cellphones  
and the police are screaming *No cellphones! Goddammit no cellphones!*  
*They set off bombs!*

### III

I was told of the woman  
who after the fall wore only a charred skirt and a bra  
and a suit-coat slipping off that a man had given her

As they huddled in a door  
she had burns on her thighs and her calves and her arms  
her cheeks bled warm  
Someone cradled her and carried her away  
I was told how the cloud fell straight down from the towers and was breathing  
how it was sentient, it moved like a being  
and it spread darkness  
*There was no sound, someone said, and you couldn't outrun it and when you  
breathed it you choked*

#### IV

The ambulances race south trailing ghosts of dust  
over street corners where there are shoes  
Oakton wingtips and Doc Martins and worn leather tongues and Carolina  
boots  
and ground-down heels and some so old they're nearly treadless  
lining up black as beetles and neat in stacks and two by two

*Cop shoes I keep hearing shield numbers on the air a policeman says  
behind the gas-mask trembling, his eyes*

#### V

In the green light of the leaves of the square by the courthouse  
a hundred frantic people driving nails into wood  
plywood planks three feet wide and six long  
the planks laid over two-by-fours and nailed down, the boards  
clattering and thrown and the arms swinging up the hammers coming down  
ancient noise of work, the laborers are men in suits women in heels  
students with packs the nailing sighs like ocean, crescendoes  
for a moment two or three hammers out of six dozen swing in straight  
musical time  
making syncopations, the rhythms breaking as quickly  
and are just noise, horrid noise

The boards get tested At each end where the two-by-fours poke out as  
handles  
a man and a woman take hold, another lies down on the board, the bearers lift  
they nod heads, the patient alights, the stretchers are placed in piles

A man approached the work, wondering  
and now under his breath (I could touch him) *OmiGod* louder: *Oh my God*  
seeing how many stretchers already falling over each other await the trucks  
and the trucks  
coming with more two-by-fours and plywood boards and there are rumors  
of 20,000 dead  
bound for Ellis Island which they say is now the Morgue

And the man, as if a great hand had pulled him, crumpled under a tree  
heaving and dumb

#### VI

In the back of a flatbed truck  
They wear the black long-coats and the white shirts and the sidelocks and  
beards  
There are forty of them holding shovels and spades  
The police wave aside the crowd  
The truck passes  
Someone asks *Where are they going?*  
Someone answers *In Israel, when there are bombings  
the religious Jews, the Orthodox Jews  
do a special job, they retrieve body parts  
to identify the people who have died*

#### VII

Into the fire zone at dusk with Vinnie Dolan the thug who gyped me once  
for ten dollars in a bar on the waterfront  
that was a long time ago  
we were much, much younger

Now he was looking for his father, a cop  
He said his father was alright *I just wanna see him  
my father and I we never really saw eye to eye you know?  
haven't spoken to him in a while*  
And Vinnie apologized about the ten dollars  
I said *I hardly know you at all  
but let's stick together as we go*

Still at 6 pm, attack plus nine hours, the dust the ash the flame the plume  
in the purple summer dusk

We went to Pace University as volunteers with the Red Cross  
At Pace the first triage had gone up early on  
Dr. Morgenthal and his men and women  
had water and food and blood and oxygen and mounds of shiny equipment  
Later Dr. Morgenthal would tell us *We're shutting down, moving south*  
*We're useless here There are no patients*

So Vinnie and I went south into the Zone  
with six medics who stuffed our packs  
with gauze and saline and water and masks  
who said *We'll set up at Ground Zero*

Then it was darkness and men running saying *Turn back, 'sgonna collapse,*  
*turn the fuck back!*  
All the night the rumors of collapse, we took the silences of the backstreets  
The fires stirred winds through the canyons  
kicking dust-devils and storms and stinging fog yellow as deserts  
four inches of ash on cars abandoned  
the doors left open, and the wind blew a million million paper bits

I ran the ash through my fingers, it was soft and warm and almost dewy  
It was concrete and stone and glass and drywall and lime and asbestos  
I didn't yet know what my mother knew or I would never have touched it  
so carelessly  
for it was bone too

## VIII

*The longest night* the firefighters had said  
we had no idea what they meant  
or how many they'd lost  
until the first ruins of the towers rose before us  
like bombed churches in mist  
little red fires at its heart  
the cathedral windows  
and we could hear the cries for surgeons among the rubble  
someone needed an amputation

*Eyewashes! Eyewashes!* the medics cried out, fanning in teams of two  
the firemen lay on curbs, in make-shift forward triage units  
set up in the halls of the Dow Jones Company and American Express  
old strange names now  
The firemen thanked them, the saline ran down like tears  
and everywhere there were men alone  
not knowing the time or the place at all  
their throats hurting and their skin hot

Then, into a wall of smoke and out, we entered the very bottom of Ground  
Zero  
and the medics did not cry *Eyewashes!*  
for their hearts fell away seeing it  
the rubble and the girders and the twisted metal stretching into haze and dust  
the gray drifts of millions of sheafs of paper  
the ambulances, cars, firetrucks  
smoking in the mud in paddies where the tangled hoses had burst  
or the water had streamed from the ruins  
delicate charred lattice walls six and ten stories high  
Roman, white-pale steaming in arc-lights  
or disappearing in purple plumes  
the firemen trawling, stumbling, falling, digging, blasting water  
thousands of men in the twisted sharpened warped metal  
that flipped up underfoot like bear-traps, tore at legs, popped into chests  
It had a name, they called it the Pit and the Pile, it went, you thought, for miles

## IX

Or much later I'm sitting in a Japanese garden cleaning paratrooper boots  
wiping hard but the dried slurry of the ash won't come loose  
in fact as I wipe harder the white residue turns heavy and bluish and soaks  
into my rag  
soaking back into the boot, so as the boot dries the white grows thicker

In the hedgerow maze by the marina the morgue ship lay in a berth of light  
on the water  
near a temple of palms and glass called the Winterdome  
where there were gallerias, places to eat and buy and buy

There was a bakery, the men were making cakes or bagels or loaves, the fat  
yeast rose and fell  
still with prints of fingers on hurt soft thighs, old titties over shoulders  
other uncooked loaves lay on trays abandoned, neutron bombs took the  
cooks away  
the coffee cups half-sugared — Is this what the end of man looks like?

In the galleria, shops bombed, sales bombed, glass in ariel pools or hanging  
from ceilings  
slow-drip on uncovered heads, walking the black water, feet moving in liquid  
mutterers in piss-soaked bathrooms later tall and wise in the night, clear the  
way for new bodies  
red sea openings of men for the processions in uniforms correct and loving  
and of proper salute  
a firefighter or cop found and then all stop  
The men rough with their carving of the work with territorial bare arms,  
the beards of soot  
stop  
The metallic eiffel cranes, blind and intricate dancing with tall dinosaur dances  
stop  
and tandem to these ancient the lone men on the beams unbound from  
worldly awe of death's kingdom  
coughing their hard gems to throatful from old stomachs  
stop  
others only sleepwalkers in scows, backhoes, bobcats, spraying weld fire  
stop and with thousand-foot stare to the lights of New Jersey and other lands  
that seemed lost and unknown and unknowable and therefore: the work, the  
work

starts, again

And one among them, janitorial, ignored even the procession of the famed dead  
sweeping glass of seventeen windows shattered into petals, behind him  
Venetian blinds clacking  
as on seashores, the place suddenly unbruted by the sight of his quiet and  
his looking down  
like looking for shells

## X

Morning — zero-hour, start over, me to sleep on a cot, herds of blank, all  
men's makers come to eat  
drubbing of kegs rolling, trees torn from roots, *gherrrkk* scraping of dug  
on gravel floors moos huts floods cartoons a faint ruckus of  
distant mobs Awake, this time in a coffin, with a tap-tap-tapping of  
rain or men overhead, and the soft sway of a ship in port waters  
The morgue ship! Here!  
The Hudson! I am in the hold I will be taken to another country and interred  
I saw a flying, detached thing, black muck thing, amorphous like cloud  
gripping a straw, suck up men on an iron-grey strand  
boats lay beached

Filling a great big stomach, the Pit where we are removing the debris and  
put our own  
cancelled eyes in the cafeteria by the blown windows eat like hurt and unknown  
doctors moving among us, oxygen, oxygen  
also birdbaths in corners *My third Puerto Rican shower this week Doctor, I  
can't breath, I can't*  
Forth comes the maiden Sara, 16, strawberry blonde with the spaghetti trays  
Who will stay for five days who I fell in love with and out of all at once

## XI

You remember the people in these hours  
though you spoke little, you knew very few names  
Luke who drove a day from Nashville Tennessee  
he cleared out his bank account to buy gauze and bandages  
Carl the fireman  
Jennifer from the Bronx who wore three pairs of socks in her big boots  
given her by a cousin with big feet  
She faked being National Guard to pass the police lines

## XII

Within hours, cigarettes taste like burnt plaster and asbestos  
and sometimes, oddly, human flesh; *real flavor* someone joked  
There were jokes  
*I just found a firefighter on top of two women  
Yeah, what was he doing?*



The men surrounded him, the firefighters pulled his head up by his hair to  
show his face  
turned him over, a coroner flash-bulbed him, and no one said a word

Heavy rain made it hard for the rescuers in the days after  
a wind rose from the sea and the rain fell faster  
still the plume, its black arm, smoked over Manhattan  
When you looked at it from afar across the river  
you thought it was the souls of men and women  
it was greedy over the sky and foaming  
it was a strange new neighbor

XV

Vinnie Dolan and I watched the candle-lit streets, the vigils  
the people who wept and went away  
A candle caught flame in a cup and fell on itself bending and turning very  
bright  
The light hiccupped and died

*You find your dad?*

*I drove back in to Ground Zero with him yesterday*

*That's good*

But it wasn't true and whether Vinnie was lying to me  
or to himself did not matter  
The truth was his father  
died trying to save the dying in the fire  
Vinnie searched and searched and searched

When there was no body  
he told himself what he needed to hear  
he had many things to say to his father  
So he said *I drove in with him yesterday yeah*  
His cheeks sucked in, *I'm gonna see him tonight*

EPILOGUE

A year passes, there are wars, the horns in the air, the people come to Ground  
Zero  
to watch through fences the unbuilding, and at the year exactly, the families  
gather  
for the reading of the names of the dead, which  
the bag-pipers from Coney Island and Morrisania carry in the bright  
having marched across the boroughs all the night  
now the reading of the names of the dead in the wind off the river and the  
bay blowing them white  
I was drunk at 8 am already, sitting in old strange places where I'd seen the  
dead alight

thinking of Marcus Aurelius:

*How quickly all things disappear, he says,  
In the universe, the bodies themselves...for as soon as a thing has been seen  
it is carried away and another comes in its place, and this will be  
carried away too*

And then Marcus, good emperor of Rome, tells us, *Help men. Life is short.*

## Coney Island Orders

Watch the ships that look like coffins  
On the horizon which is straight  
On the straightness of the distant sea

It is here  
When the tide swings to ebb, unburying the green  
Rocks, when the amoebic rock sends its thousand creatures  
Scuttling, when the crab defends his home  
When the dog-fish makes the odd noise, beached and flipping  
Which gives him his name  
When the fishermen tire of death, the death they give to the sea  
When the white-headed fisherman, naked to the waist  
Gives his catch back

When you have slept, and the surf  
Changed its dull rise under the sun  
And the men and women who had delighted are gone  
And the empty lanes of dune  
Make the sound of sleep  
As you heard it once in the trees when young  
And it is September

Watch the ships that look like coffins  
In their slow retreat to countries of origin  
To the horizon which is straight  
On the straightness of the sea

And when you first heard  
The world was not pinioned on roads, telephones, beams  
Or made of patents, was not melted, or made of ice  
Was not made of glass as the city imagines

But of glass borne of ten million million cries  
The waves, meaning —  
Only  
Wave

September 29, 2001

## Darkness (Gowanus, Nov. 2001)

At midnight the garbagemen breaking glass  
The old news left on corners  
The gravelly voices and the curtains made out of sheets  
I remember under the trestle in flat Gowanus  
The trains near the canal clacked and sprinkled dirt and metal  
I sat in a doorway and cried  
I cried because I thought I had never loved anyone  
I had only been present and called for

The dogs are damp from the canal; men float there sometimes  
Found like bouncing buoys, their nipples like rocks  
The spit and moss in their underarms and their tears frozen  
She said I'm like *them* or at least not talking  
Or talking and not saying a thing  
In the passionate winter it's true we turn pale as them  
Building small love fires and waiting it out

There are rats across the street in red summer with its curses and  
motorcycles  
The rats work: Bound their homes, their hides, cut their meat and orange peels  
Chip and knock and nibble and build — they build! Which she says we do not

Nearby, the hot dog stand is run by drug dealers  
The cars drive up to the stand like ocean and the meat is thrown to the land  
So the rats and the dealers and the meat  
All have work, long unending work  
In summer, it's almost symbiotic

I'd like to get in on it, I mean get in on something communal  
With an order like spider-webs, the links, the secret orders, secret handshakes  
I've gotten pretty low and lonely to think this way  
And now it's her and I only and low, low  
If after all these years we're not in love —  
The thing suddenly realized and no earthquakes  
No vaults, no empty sockets, no flag-poles clicking  
No sudden keening birds over the dark lake

And no one below and no one above  
And no cries or murmurs or forgiving  
The land is flat, the dogs own the rooftops

## Untitled

“War is a force that gives us meaning.”

— Chris Hedges

The simplicity  
the deaths of many, the wonder, the love, the silence  
A reporter who hates war and has seen it for one score years  
tells us of the mere comradeship of arms raised in violence  
And he is of course right

Holy are the minutes of disaster we ran from the cloud  
and back into it for the dead; gather round, pound for pound  
Already some in other cities were measuring their courage in bed  
writing columns for newspapers on laptops loud

Hudson and East Rivers stopped flowing  
stopping for America, you understand — you see the dawn and dusk came  
late too?

Holy, holy — holy fuck — there’s a man standing in the middle of the  
flames

Thousands came after; we wrote their names in the ash with our feet  
still others went mad and wrote

“Kill ‘em all”

and

“Fuck you, Allah”

and

“This bus empty, empty, empty, empty, empty, empty”

His hand echoing over the carcassed bus, windows blown out that once  
contained the men and women of New York City  
Now Turin shrouds, bones of crusaders, even A.G. Ashcroft stole a piece of  
the towers

## Body bags

*Red apples*, he says. No answer

Finally: *What about ‘em?*

The other: *In those cheeks, friggin’ strange, man. How —*

—

Seeing at last — rush of the dead  
To us, they fly up, bash and pull  
Our mind and body separating

—

I had a carton under one arm  
From it dispensing shrouds  
Like the octopus spurting ink

—

Of those apples  
Indeed he saw a head with no body  
With color in its cheeks

—

They shouldn’t allow the talking  
That goes on among the body-bags

## Kids; soccer game near Ground Zero

Kick the ball, the world ball  
For that is the world  
And the sky of thee

Against the wall, kick  
And on the knee  
For to fires goes the ball  
In the end, rubber and all  
Markings of teams and wins

And the loss, the waxen-  
Faced loss.

## The Jumpers

how finally borne by air not one little bit  
how not like men but like rock, anvil, fridges  
dashing, done —

the noise they make: nothing. The perch of our not saying  
on rooftops watch the white fluttering in the tall towers

and of what they bore of the thing behind that walked in the  
fire  
that wanted them, and they from his awful black breath  
all alone

then: slap like bed against wall, crack of baseball bat  
slide of lock, crick of neck  
stump dis-timbered, plops in a lake  
thuds wet as dumpsters  
man looking up and he is shattered

by the woman flying to him and him only

firefighters put their hands to ears  
they shout stopitstopitstopit  
and one, becoming human, crawls under a car

## Idyll, Oct. 2001

The rain low, the white asses of deer fled  
The field high over the valley  
I walked the field smiling and wet  
A little lewdly over the soft hill dripping  
Wanting to roll around and shout and run and dig  
My face in the women hills.

I hadn't been away in a while.

I went out into the mist hills of the little East  
That are more ancient than the Western peaks  
Cold-faced feeling blessed like He  
Through the holy fog on the green women's hips  
Through the thicket raspberry lashing my tent pitched in the wet autumn fern  
Rain crashing for slow minutes, out of steaming logs the white wisp crisp yellow  
Autumn in streambeds where the water was bearing its resurrection.

I went out remembering the berry hooked to a thread of the old poet  
Who believed in gyres, things coming apart, the method to save it, kabbalic  
As the stone of night. And now my city burning, and I went away  
I take long hikes in the afternoons, backpack full of nuts, water, poems  
I lounge along the trail in the dirt where no one comes  
Propped on rocks reading aloud, murmuring more like, until dusk stubs the  
red autumn coals  
The forest floor raises a few inches, imperceptibly a few feet  
Until I am much shorter, the woods haunt, they say: Be quiet.

And walking away looking back I flush with a start (mine and his) turkey wings  
Beating out a passage of ancient hollow drum music through the fir boughs  
filtering  
The same light that cathedral windows shed when it rains outside, and the  
wings thudding  
Make me walk faster.

I cross the bald hill out from the windbreak fir into wind facing  
Past the walls fallen in of a farmer's house  
Who chose well once, rich earth, a stream nearby  
But was chosen out by illness or ill luck, miscarriages, alonenesses  
The ruins growing elms, the valley massing the last light.

I walk the line of a bluestone wall the farmer built  
Describing his land from the land's, and look back to the fir forest  
Through schools of yellow fish-fire, then all the air like a brown river  
The bald windy hill suddenly snuffing out in blue blurry black sucking  
That seems to come from the wood, carrying sounds of the carting of stone,  
the snow  
The men, shoeless and without homes, hugging themselves against the  
winter.

## Transformation of Rooms

Rooms that are beloved & silent.  
The comfort of the small room.  
Evening sun in the west room.  
We loosened all clothing & light  
And we closed away the light  
So that it became the color of water & grass.

Darken your rooms. In our wise arms  
Lifting nothing for days, no work; we lay down.  
The storms move the tree-houses  
We have dreamt of since childhood  
And in our high rooms in the city we sway.  
The rooms out of blankets built, w/in rooms,  
Under tables, the tents in the plain,  
The snows like geysers, & the roofs made of small feet  
& the crows' *eeyærkk*.

Never belittle them,  
Though our waking undoes them.  
We do not leave them or come back to them.  
They are not the dream of death  
Paid interpreters will describe  
Nor symbolic of the womb.

In the cabin on the mountaintop,  
I have stood for six hours  
Keeping the fire hot  
While you slept & dreamt  
Of the rooms in the snow.

February 2002

## Men of War, Begone!

Men of war, begone  
That's how I wanted to start this poem, in Afghanistan, in Iraq. This seems  
to be  
the thing people are saying

I start instead:  
Men of war, we make a garden to defy you. Gilles the Frenchman  
brother of the mother of my child, my daughter's dark-handsome uncle —  
he and I dig rows for potatoes, leek, tomatoes, and on a sunny day we  
pick strawberries

And we said to each other, in French and English and then in nothing and  
maybe laughing *I had once, my entire life, been eating out of packages  
bought from stores*  
Am I to judge the men of war who feed me? O package! Shall I find you  
hidden and shake your hand and blow up in excitement?  
Thunder hid in a cloud, and then the cloud became the shape of the jaw of  
men with big ideas  
Scribblers who tell all in History will forget much they've seen

For example: two men, rows of potatoes, old communist garden in cracked soil  
Windy hill near Orly airport, tanker planes and birdy hops to Spain and  
Italy flop  
on clouds that dump rain that the two men wait for, having for this bud toiled

For example: while digging with a hoe in Gilles' garden I dreamed a second  
Deluge  
but Noah was locked in a big white room in Soho looking at art  
Gilles and I grabbed each other for the coming flood  
We grabbed our fathers alive and dead  
and our mothers who we loved who were mad  
We grabbed our girlfriends, and our children who lived and were to be  
In glass-lit foam the streets beneath us moved from side to side, the towers  
began to sway  
The world was eaten at last in self-hood

October 2001 – August 2004

## The Vision of Real Things

We fought, I left you at the foot of the bridge  
The lights lay down, the eyes lay down, nothing remembered what I did  
It rained There was snow later

And you walked through great deserted Brooklyn the piers  
The barbed wire along the sea, the donut shops, the megalomaniacs of new  
housing  
The old tall towers gone across the river  
You walked and walked and walked and your feet became lazy  
It was the cold and the howl and the winter storm  
The rain turning to snow and white veils over Williamsburg  
Walking home, you never got home  
But it was miles and miles for me and I marveled at my shoes  
I had new respect for the leather, which kept out the rain  
My scarf was built of chimneys; I kept out the red-nosed wind  
I was a little self, I had mirrors all around me

Ladies who charged ten dollars sucked their cheeks under the highway  
They lay against the pillars and pretended to pee  
They wore gloves for the frantic winter

I thought of you; then not at all. You had thrown the bottle and in it we crashed  
Or was it I who threw the bottle? I can't remember  
There are piers along here where I was a child  
And much too young I climbed the fences  
Along the inlets I met dogs that chased  
I smacked them on their snouts and they howled  
I made fires in tumbled rock and pretended I had no home  
It was raining like it is tonight

I was walking home to you, there was no one to come home to  
I was very proud and sick, I was marching and abandoning  
And I knew you wouldn't be coming  
So walking home to nothing  
I imagined the welcomings, the bunting and kisses and birthdays

The friends imagined and after: The warm baths and the white smiles and  
dinners

You in your copper robe offering whatever I wanted; I was selfish

I remember before they found me  
Seeing a wet little man in the garbage along the piers  
And I said to him, "Hey you fuck!" I was drunk and hateful  
He said nothing and had a rod of five antennas ripped from cars  
The whip-metal lashed together  
He was going to fish from the river "You'll catch shitola," I said  
And I fell on my hands in glass saying it, and I bled  
The man said nothing and went on to the sea despite the weather

October 2001

## Our Two Front Teeth (Ode to the Towers)

They were the masts of the island, crow's nest, main-sail, top of the wind, they  
Brokered the sea, bent tall maitre d's  
And though scurvy critics in magazines said good riddance oh modern horror  
I saw in 'em old Melville, shipped from Manhattan, tossed till tomorrow  
and tomorrow

They were tall New York to me, the waterfront's watchers  
In the tallest of the tall cities sitting on its cloud with its feet in the dirty waters  
I went to them just about every day in my boy ways on the piers of  
Brooklyn  
Longshores broken and fences open and Flying Dutchman parked in the  
seaweed leas  
They looked at each other, those piers and those towers and those ships  
never to sea

Coffee in the piersheds, mafia on the salt piles, once there were all manners  
of goings and comings  
Languages of no letters, speeches in code and silence, nettings of all new  
Lands debouching wealth and loss, cocoa, copper, bones, cars, so-longs  
And the men, thickets of ragged hair with that look of the sea, of longing  
and disaster  
The gaunt in their eyes, their beards frozen to alabaster  
At Montero's Bar, they drank and fought, the captains Greek and Argentine  
cooked in 50 gallon drums

But us kids coming much too late for that, our little barque of logs lashed  
we commandeered  
Under the pause of dead tankers and ghost freighters to the edge of the  
flow-tide of the East River  
The river lathed north on the bow of the island, Atlantic high, and our skiffing  
fed  
A fantasy, freeze, glees, the witching water bound for Hell Gate. And the  
towers watched all we did  
Until wine-colored came the voice of the muezzin of the ferries to Staten  
Island and the oil of the ebb

In fog, tops chopped, rain walls over the bay, the towers sometimes ladder'd  
to a white tossed heaven  
The blue of the foghorns and buoys lost, and suddenly the city was small  
And tiny metals, the market bulls, had no place, solid rays  
Held the dreaming, the dump-truck ships, pay-loaded with terns and gulls  
paced the sea. I watch the ships roll in, I watch them roll away again,  
how many years did I do this

Later, older, colder, I went to these, my towers, my New York, and laughed  
that I'd never get a job in them  
Though born after their building I cannot imagine the skyline without them —  
It is illegible to me today, it is Cleveland now, or Seattle, or anyplace not  
too small, not so big  
And now I have trouble placing them in the sky, was it between the  
Woolworth and where, from the bridge  
Was it north or south of the anchorage, or was it this way, that way, was it  
at all?

Vinnie the bartender at Montero's, half-bookie, half-man, told me the day after  
*It's like they knocked our two front teeth out*

## Streetwalkers (early morning, Gowanus Canal)

Ol' Lavender Lake, the Gowanus — fumes, foams  
its white-green skin, its crude carpentries, nothing built to last  
except the water, by tide and typhus and dysentery

Two streetwalkers in underwear and rags  
alive in the tall grasses by the canal (chapels of old sea-smell)  
rubbing knees, waking up to the flat un-lusted water

Spin-drift in the smoking water goes a rowboat unmoored  
last boat of Gowanus, unmanned with its cables long-haired  
trailing green-boned and slick like the hair of streetwalkers

When did waves beat the banks? No bridges draw for tugs  
the barges go by never  
the commerce of the sea went to sea, the port gave up  
its jobs, its wives, its men

After the sailors and the ships, the streetwalkers ruled Gowanus alone  
on a Sunday, a hooker with an earthen brow  
asked me for a match, she watched the flame burn down and told me to blow  
*That's my life*, she said; *Go ahead. Blow it out*

July 2002

## The Sleepers of the Winterdome

only the softest gentlest waker, come  
no siren-lights, scream of ambulance, grieving wives, baby in crib-night

or one imagines, an atom bombing of Jersey on the far shore  
wakes the fair gardens of the sleeping men to light

I remember walking under the palms that dripped ice and ash  
into these gardens of the sleeping men, and the moats between them and us

that were the waters of war when everyone got up, was the water between us  
it was a strange time, it made of anyone who doubted the war, no object to  
it, no country

not the same man who'd gone to sleep

with candles, with the scent of moss, false perfumes of the female shops,  
they slept on new carpets  
a store sold couches, the leather when it wasn't full of glass  
lay the firemen down like question marks — if you were to wake these men....

## Vinnie Dolan Goes Home

I kept seeing Vinnie in the streets. I saw him in the rubble or standing on corners or sitting on stoops. The meetings felt ordained. The last time I saw Vinnie before I found out what happened to his dad, it was five a.m. on Sept. 22, he was sitting on the steps of St. Charles Church, across from my mother's home. His clothes were dirty and torn and they were the same baggy jeans and t-shirt he'd worn on the night of the attacks. His skin was yellow, his lips were white, and his nose was running. "Vinnie!" I said. "Vinnie! Holy shi — Vinnie!" I was elated to see him, I wanted to hug him, I wanted to get drunk with him.

"Nah, nah, go ahead, I can't drink. Been thinking about things," he said. "Long time since that whole shit. I feel like I been out here a couple years."

He told me he had been living on the streets for the last week. Wandering. "Don't wanna go home. Be around nobody. I'm out here and it's alright. I got money. Make it to dawn, see what happens."

We sat on the steps for some time, dawn was breaking. Vinnie said nothing, he sniffled, drew up a throatful of snot and spat it out on the steps of the church. I said, "You're better than last time, right? At least a little? Fucked up, this whole thing."

"Yeah, it's no good. Nothin's good. Yeah, I'm better. I dunno. They said I have post-trauma disorder. Stress. Fuckin' don't wanna eat — that's the stress. I'm goin' to Pennsylvania with my aunt. She got a place there. A farm. Go away there awhile. Maybe I start something there. I dunno. Just start something else. Get away from this. I dunno. That rubble — I'm still smelling it. I wanna go someplace where I can't smell it."

"Probably in your clothes."

"Nah, it's still in the air."

"Yeah, it's in the air."

"I'm afraid I won't stop smelling it. I been coughing. They're calling it World Trade Center Cough. September Eleventh Cough."

"You see a doctor?"

"I saw one when I was there. At the Red Cross. They gave me something to breathe, with the mask. Didn't do nothin'. Coughin' black shit."

We sat on the steps of the church for a half-hour, the light was coming up, it made us squint.

"You really going away to Pennsylvania?"

"I dunno. I'm seein' ghosts. You see any ghosts?"

I shook my head.

"I'm seein' 'em. I got this nightmare I keep having over and over, I'm walking around and I can't stop cryin' and there are these ghosts, eyes, in the windows. That's why I can't sleep. I never seen the dead like that — I never seen the dead look at me and judge me. Those bodies down there, there were some of 'em that died with their eyes open. There's a God, he was watching through those eyes. Feel like I didn't do enough. You know?"

I didn't know what to say. "Vinnie, listen, you — you worked. You did the same thing everyone else did and you did a lot more. C'mon."

"I was paying something back. That's all I was doin'."

There was a long silence, the birds chirped.

"So when are you going to Pennsylvania?"

"Tomorrow. Who knows. I dunno. I don't feel good about nothin', I don't even know if I wanna go."

I didn't see Vinnie for a long time after that, but at Montero's Bar I heard stories. People who didn't like Vinnie told me he went to Ground Zero to rob bodies, steal jewelry, loot cigarettes, maybe pocket one of the gold bars rumored in the ruins, and that's why he'd disappeared now, he'd gotten his piece of the dead. I went down to the car service where Vinnie hangs around, a rectangular hole on Court Street that has old saggy pinball machines and walls stained with leaks and stringy cats to kill the mice. Vinnie sells things there, stolen goods, "anything you want, he'll sell it to you," says fat Artie, who has a pencil mustache and drives a car.

The dispatcher, who has glasses and kindly jowls, says, "I know Vinnie since he was little, I knew his mother. Vinnie's a little strange. His father was down there, that's what I heard. That's why Vinnie was digging."

Artie cuts in, "I've been nice to Vinnie, but he's not been nice back. I've taken Vinnie in my car wherever he wanted to go and he said he'd pay me, and he didn't pay a dime. Vinnie. You think you know him until he sells you your own watch. You trust him about this much." Artie held his thumb and forefinger an inch apart.

"Wait," I said, feeling dizzy, "wait. You said Vinnie's father was down there. Whattaya mean?" The dispatcher looked up at me, glanced at Artie, took a brief call, barked a street number into his headset, looked at me again, over his glasses: "Vinnie's dad. Yeah, he died down there. When the building fell. You knew him?"

## Overheard at Montero's Bar Twenty Weeks After

"Nah, I didn't know — his father was—"

Artie broke in: "Ha, c'mon, Vinnie smokes so much crack he can't find himself in a mirror. Much less find his own father in a pile o' rubble. Fuhgeddaboutit."

I burst into tears. Artie started laughing.

"You know when your marriage ends, when you realize there's nothin' there — and you know why? 'Cause she had no humor. She couldn't take a joke. Kinda woman you need to beat her to make her laugh. Sick — it was her father. And I don't hit. You know that."

"She was the hitter," said the other.

"She used to beat the shit out of me — that bitch I put her in a headlock, calm her down, but that was it. Fuckin' gentleman. I never told you how it happened when I told her it was it?"

"Yeah, you told me it was the place out in Coney."

"Yeah, but I never told you, right, what happened? It was right in that big window, you know in the kitchen there? I'm sittin' there real early watching the waves, and I see this bird comin' toward the window — this is that big window, remember, wide as a room, it had this view, the sea, and sometimes I'd just sit there not doin' nothin' and stare out that fuckin' window. Evelyn hated that shit. She used to yell at me for sittin' there, and I wasn't fuckin' doin' nothin'. That bitch. And this bird comes down out of the sky and he flies right toward the window, right toward me, and I'm thinkin' this fuckin' bird better pull up, do some fuckin' evasive maneuvers or some shit, 'cause he's gonna smack that window. And I'm watching this fuckin' tragic situation in slow-mo, I can see him comin' — whack! thump! he fuckin' breaks his little beak on this big wide window, whack, and he bounces onto the porch. So I pick up my beer, and I walk outside, and the poor thing is layin' there dead, and it's fuckin' cold out, and I pick him up and bring him inside and I'm about to lay him there on the table, and then I think about how the bitch is gonna have a fit 'cause the dead bird is touching the table where we eat, so I put him on the floor, I got some aluminum foil, I put that down and then I put the bird down on the foil and I sat my ass down and I said to him, 'You know, I'm feeling like you, little birdie.' And I'm looking at him, I'm thinkin' what kinda bird is this, and I remember we got this bird book that Evelyn bought when she thought it'd be nice to fuckin' look at birds along the shore, you know, summertime, back before things got bad, and I get the book, I'm lookin' at his feathers, and his fucked-up broken beak and his fuckin' dead little beady eyes looking up off that aluminum foil, and I'm looking at him close, pokin' him and turning him like a pancake, and I'm trying to figure out what kinda bird is this, he looks like a sparrow, I can't tell shit. So I call Evelyn. She was getting ready for work, and she comes in, and I say, 'Evelyn, take a

## The Dick Cheney Presidency

look at this. This poor little thing just fuckin' headbutted our window here, and I feel bad for him, so I wanna know what kind of bird we have here, and here's the book.' And Evelyn. Goes. Fuckin'. Crazy — she goes completely fuckin' ape, she goes, 'That's what you call me in here for?' And then I can tell she's looking at the aluminum foil, she's lookin' at it as if I had a fuckin' 'nother girl's legs spread on the table, she says, 'And yer using our Glad for this?'"

"Glad!" said the other.

"And she's got the balls to tell me to get a job when I supported her bitch lazy cunt for a whole year when she went to school— So now she's all high and mighty, she says, 'Here's what I think of your bird' and she goes and gets a paper towel and picks up the bird, and then somethin' happened in me and I got up and I grabbed the bird outta her hands and she goes, 'Yer fuckin' bird came in through the window, he's going out the window,' and I say, 'This little bird didn't do nothin', this is your book, you wanted to look at birds, here's a bird, he's fuckin' dead, you can fuckin' inspect him till sundown,' and we're shoving and screaming and she gets the bird out of my hand and starts fuckin' beatin' me on the head with the bird, and I start hearing this little tweet, like a screaming tiny tweet — and here's the shit: this fuckin' bird was still alive! You believe that shit? And he starts pecking Evelyn's hand, he tries to fly, he's throwing feathers all over the place but no way he can fly, he's fucked, he tries to fly two feet and kerplunk to the ground, and there he is crawling along the carpet and you know what Evelyn does? She fuckin' stomps him with her heels, this crazy bitch, and she goes, 'You lazy piece o' shit, get a job' and she walks out hopping to the bathroom 'cause she doesn't wanna get bird-guts on her carpet, and I can hear her turning on the shower to wash the guts off her feet. And I knew what to say."

There was a long pause. The other, very drunk, at last recognized the silence, and said, "Sofockinwhathapp'nd?"

"Well, okay, you know what I said? I said, 'I want a divorce, you fuckin' cunt!' And then I picked up the bird, all fuckin' crushed, and I walked out and I walked down to the beach, and I was fuckin' crying, and I buried that bird in the sand. And that was it between us."

The short-lived Dick Cheney presidency on Saturday July 29 of 2002 was feted in a number of Brooklyn bars by at least two people. I was one of them, the other was a drunk named Sal. We drank to the Dick Cheney ascendancy on Friday night. On the dawn of the Day, the day on which at an unknown hour George Bush would be explored for ass polyps and sedated into a babbling stupor and power would be briefly transferred to Mr. Cheney for the sake of "national security," I was passed out very drunk lying on a pile of sand and rubble at the edge of a broken-down pier off Buttermilk Channel, which is part of Lower New York Bay. Buttermilk Channel was so named for the cows that 250 years ago used to cross the mud-flats at low-tide, trundling their teats along the channel floor.

A fisherman came to the shore, a large narrow-eyed man in gaiters. At that point, I was busy trying to drag a soaking-wet steamer trunk floating in the surf up the rubble bank and into the street by the pier. "Hey, man, morning," I said cheerily, "you give me a hand here a sec?" The man said nothing. He looked at me like I was a dog-fish: you know how the ugly and inedible dog-fish barks when it gets beached?

I figured what I had actually said was "Ey ma' awning oo eeve m'a han hersec?" I wanted to make contact; but I needed to *enunciate*. So I stared out to sea for a moment the way the man was staring out to sea. Profoundly. I concentrated. "Ketch th' good fish here?" I finally said.

"Not much," the man said. He was a grim dude.

"Dick Che'y's president t'day, y'know?" I said, and proceeded to tell him about the polyps and how the Ay-rabs would use this moment of weakness to hit us all over the country. I thought this was hilarious and belly-laughed and went into a coughing fit, the guttural seeing-stars kind.

The man said nothing. I kept tugging at the steamer and staring out to sea, then staring at the fisherman, who would alternately fade into a blur and then seem to shed a preternatural light. "Poison fish in th' bay," I said. "Pol'ooshin. You eat 'em?" The man just grunted and went about casting his line.

I got back to work; I pulled at the trunk like a weakened monkey and got my shoes squishy-wet in the oily water. "Diiiiick. Cheney," I said out loud to no one.

"Jesus," the man said. He shook his head.

I was having a hard time with that trunk. It was huge and heavy and waterlogged and tugged like it was full of rocks. But it was a beauty, an art-piece, with false-gold clasps and carven whales on its sides. I hauled the trunk

## The Attack of the Moths (Malediction)

a few inches over the shattered masonry, making a godawful clatter, and every so often I looked up at the fisherman with tears in my eyes (I was very happy about the trunk).

I sat down for a while, having at last gotten it out of the surf. After two minutes of silence and the sea lapping, I turned to the man and said, “We split the treasure, whattaya say?”

“Jesus,” the man muttered.

I finally gave the trunk a real go, put my weight into it, both hands on the leather strap. “C’mon, DICK,” I barked. “his steamer trunk ‘s coming wi’ ME!” I dragged and heaved and cursed, and got it halfway up the rocky bank, my feet slipping, but the wet strap broke, I flew backwards and bashed my back into the rocks and cried out.

“Oh! Gimme a fuckin’ break, will ya?” the fisherman now said, casting a baleful gaze and looking like he wanted me to drown. “Jesus! Je-*sus!* Take your steamer trunk and shove it up your ass!”

“But I can’t carry ‘his ‘hing alone, man,” I said, deflating. “I can’t do it!” And now the guy moved off a little ways along the pier, enough distance to make it clear that there were miles between us.

So this is how it would be with Dick Cheney president. A lonely and savage world: every man for himself. No pity for us poor drunkards. Not even a little hand for a steamer trunk full of treasure. Not even some friendly banter.

The Dick Cheney Presidency went badly after that. The sun rose high and white; fear and confusion behind the wheel of my car. Had a six-minute drive home, but I knew the police would get me, this soused — straight to jail. Very bright blurry streets, like rain in klieg lights. And the paranoia. Dick is just the kind of guy to get my license plate and call the cops with his cellphone and make a TIPS report. That put the fear in me. I parked the car in a quiet lane and hid in the backseat like a sick cat and passed out. Woke up four hours later, refreshed, and went back to get the trunk. Dick Cheney was gone. I pulled that bastard trunk up to the road and opened it, and Dick, you know what I found among the sea-garbage and the stones? You won’t believe it: A fish-head. A rotten little fish-head with its mouth open.

Summer rain and humid night, the door is open, the candles are wide. Tree-frogs and crickets pump their antiphonies. From the murmurous, rain-stunned forest, big black moths and white and orange moths are beating on the window screens, scratching like idiot dogs, hungry for the 20 candles that light the cabin. And when they at last find the wide open door with the welcome mat they charge the candles and die.

The image takes on a gruesome cast — something like an insect reenactment of Gallipoli or Pickett’s Charge or any bloody battle; great charges, crackling gunfire, followed by crying; another charge, more crying.

The night drips, very black, moonless. My pack of tobacco, the rolling kind, smells like old shoes, smokes lightly, goes out. I’m guessing that the heat and humidity has brought the moths in numbers tonight. Perhaps cocoons were burst in the lancets of rain; or the hot wet week past has raised them to a fever. The fact is they are out in armies, nuzzling my ears, shedding golden dust when they die. For some this is painful to see: say, the diaphanous white-winged thing that just perished. I examine her (must be a woman, dressed in chiffon), turn her over: a pure white belly. But at the edges of her feathers, I see where she has burnt herself.

I am guard at the door, feet half out on the wet deck; they must pass me to reach the light, and soon, out of courtesy for their suicide, I remove myself to a corner of the room to watch the processions. They come flitting and clicking and whispering against the bright wood; the candles, ensconced in iron candelabra, shed burnished light. They make the same swoops as eagles dropping down thermals in canyons, round and round the light, but they lose their composure fast, they grow more jealous, until at last they draw too close. Among the first victims is a bright creature, creamy orange, with wide wings — the flame gutters, spurts large, the moth crackles, bounces sputtering like a cartridge from a pistol, skips against the wall, goes into a tail-spin, regains her senses, pulls out of the descent (screaming burning plane) and perches on a chair for perhaps a tenth of a second. But she has tasted the source. And so there’s nothing to be done but drive directly into the flame.

Now by twos and threes and fives, they converge on the candelabra, they hum and jerk and plow through the air, ping-pong off the fire like pinballs. A candle goes out in an explosion of sparkling dust and a puff of smoke and splattered dollops of white wax that runs black with ash and there is a sound like a tiny turd dropping as the victim plummets to earth. They singe wings

and sing out in hissing, and they limp along the shelves where the candelabra light their shadows, dragging ashen wings, crawling among themselves, gathering for another attack — and they attack. Soon, their murders, the dozens and dozens of them, turn cacophonous, amplified by the closeness and the quietness of the woods. I stare at the fallen. Some are being slowly sealed in wax. Some die in restful sighs. Others throw a tantrum, epileptic, jumping and ricocheting and rattling, seizing up and calming down, breathing hard, crawling toward the light, still, insane with acquisition.

After a while, I get sick of them. I close the door, and shut them out, and begin to clean up the bodies; they smell like burnt hair.