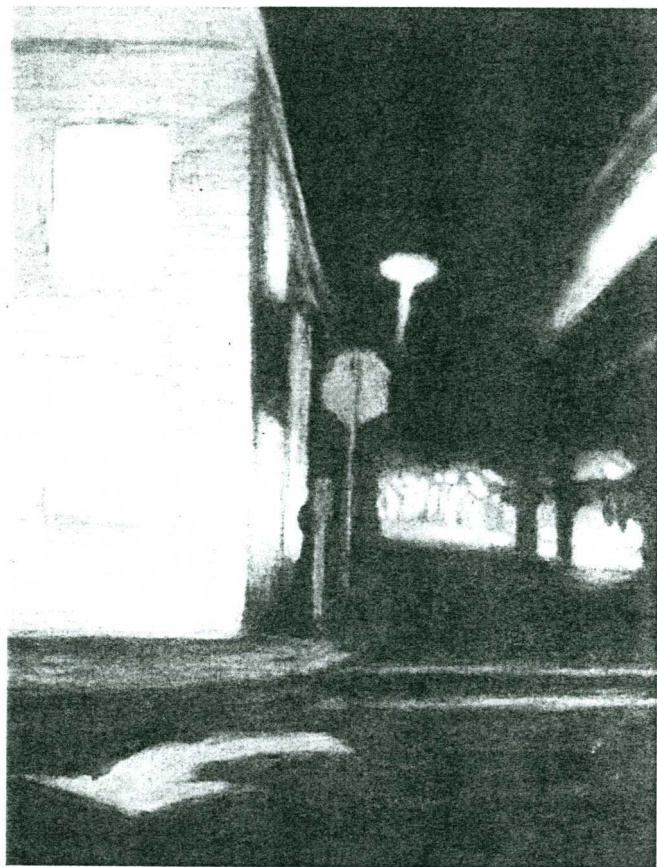


fall

2003

Review



SANTA MONICA

Katharine Haake / Gary Fincke / Elizabeth Losh

Alisa Slaughter / Lindsay Fitz-Gerald

Benjamin Weissman / John Mandel / Eran Williams

Sarah Winterfield / Elizabeth Kadetsky / Janet Kauffman

"It looked big as everything. I knew it would come to me." Ellen beamed then, easily catching his joy, the hair around her face sweaty, glasses askew.

Come to me.

I realize that her longing is so pure and strong, even Vida cannot touch it. But still it is not enough to propel the wheel into her skull. At the last possible second, it veers and wrecks the empty passenger side. Survival instinct kicks in. Ellen steers and continues to drive right off at her exit. She feels no relief.

Hunched in the police car, glass shards glittering in her hair, the bones of her face and neck are a fuzzy likeness of Matt, as if she has assumed this shape in his absence. Vida hustles towards her, pumping his sawed-off legs and wagging his tail. A gigantic plastic banner at the fast food place advertises "79 cent Tacos. No Limit." People stare incuriously at us as they load their cars with paint, plumbing supplies, kids. The sky is food-coloring blue with a single fluffy cloud out over the bay. Vivian is out in her yard by now, planting lobelia and Sweet William to fill in the empty spots. Matthew will not stay in the closet. In an empty parking space nearby I notice a pair of neatly aligned hot-pink high heels. Resisting the pull of the asphalt, its dusty velvet sheen and taffy softness, I walk. As though participating in a fire drill, I remain calm and move my legs and feet through space. It takes forever to get to her.

ELIZABETH KADETSKY

Morgue Has Moved to Stuyvesant High School: Sixty Hours in New York

On the morning of September 11, 2001, for reasons owing to a preexisting situation of transit, dislocation and romantic upheaval, I awake at my mother's apartment on the border of Brooklyn. In three days I will move to a downtown flat with a view of the World Trade Center, or so it was possible to believe until I heard the news. The apartment belongs to my friend Jonathan. It is the kind of gorgeous and sunny place that one week ago gave all impressions of containing life, a vessel holding breath.

But suddenly the arrangement of lives, and space to live, and space to breathe, is uncertain. The only thing I know for sure right now is that I am firmly located here on the border of Brooklyn, in a working class white enclave that is jammed on most weekdays with Polish and Italian construction workers. By late morning on September 11, just this cast of characters has lined the street, burly men who have greeted the confusion by sliding beercans into paper bags and sipping them thoughtfully while keeping tuned in to the events through their car and van radios. Drinking, now there's a thought.

"Is the bridge to Brooklyn open?" I ask a few guys.

"I dunno sweetheart," one guy says, dragging from his paper bag.

Packed with people, empty of automobile traffic, the bridge evokes the disruptions of wartime. Suspended over Newtown Creek, the throngs snap photos of the smouldering former World Trade Center, or they simply marvel. Past downtown

Brooklyn and across the East River, there is a great cloud of smoke, white at the top and charcoal at the bottom, like vanilla ice cream in a chocolate cone. You can almost imagine a ghostly outline of the towers inside it.

I cross the bridge and head south, surrounded by hundreds of people who seem, like me, aimlessly pointed on trajectories that will be difficult if not impossible to fulfill until transportation comes back, which could be never. The subway system is completely knocked out. We are disoriented, as if its red and green and blue lines were the internal electrical system of our collective unconscious, made up of intricate crossing wires, a network without which we cannot function in the ways we once did. The subways were our neuronal roadmaps. Our brains, like the underground of the city, are out of whack.

A few people have bus maps—foreign objects, really, in this city sewn together by underground tracks—and in several languages people speculate as to possible routes to different parts of Brooklyn. I hear people call out the names of neighborhoods, in their many accents: Bensonhurst, Court Street, East New York. It's disconcerting hearing the names of these neighborhoods, so disjointed today. Our subways run beneath neighborhoods we have never seen. There's something Freudian in this, as if all the neighborhoods we pass through without seeing every day were parts of our consciousness that we seek to never experience. Now that the world has changed, we are compelled to experience more, forced to break through the divisions between neighborhoods. Brooklyn is, after all, a long chain of ethnic enclaves, each disconnected from its adjacent counterpart by an invisible barrier, by crossings with names like Division Street. Today we cross over.

Or not. I flag a cab. The driver is Arab. I walk to the window ready to toss out one of the dozen Arabic phrases I know. The driver waves his hand skittishly in front of his face. His OFF DUTY sign lights up. He looks at the camera around my neck as if I've

pointed a cannon at him. "Taxi, *min fudlik*,"—taxi please—I'm saying as his cab flies across the intersection. "*Shukran. La shukran*"—thanks, no thanks—I whisper under my breath, and the car disappears.

I head south, following the random arrows set by pedestrians who seem no more sure of their destination than I am. My aimlessness seems absurd to me, until I notice there is someone following me.

"Uh, you know the way?" he asks me. A camera dangles from his neck; his accent is European, his skin suntanned, his ponytail light-colored.

"Sure. The way where?"

"There."

"You can't get to Manhattan."

"So where are you going?"

"Downtown Brooklyn."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"You can see it from there?"

"Not necessarily, really."

"Okay, so you don't mind if I follow?"

Right. We are nearing a stretch of Division Street running through one of Brooklyn's less voguish districts, an industrial swath with ugly red-brick facades and sidewalks littered with condom wrappings and stray, yes, needles. It's a post-apocalyptic Yellow Brick Road we are on, with a promised emperor at the end: the view, the site, something to make this intangible event real to us. The emperor will be reason, certainty, understanding, a respite from the unknowable quality of this new world without the World Trade Center. He will help us become reconciled to it. But when we get there, reason will not exist, of course. That will be the lesson of our journey. Some fake emperor will be sitting behind a screen onto which we have

projected all our youthful hopes, our fantasy that we can somehow turn back.

I nod to my travel companion. Then I am rushing across Division Street, navigating between fast-moving vans.

"What are you doing?" my new friend yells. "You're crazy."

Andres, from Amsterdam, is on my heels as I bolt forward. I am walking fast. "Hey," Andres asks, taking my arm. "How do you feel?"

I turn and look at him. *Feel. Feel.* I feel like a nest of thoughts and nerves, something so tautly woven it does not hold even enough empty space for a sliver of emotion. "I don't know. I feel a lot, and nothing. Something big, but nothing that has a name."

He peers at me, as if gauging some current inside himself. "What about you?" I ask.

"It's awful, but it's hard not to feel excited," he says, now looking upwards; by averting his eyes from his body he seems to have a better chance of catching a glimpse of that fleeting and indistinct thing inside of it. The rule of parallax might apply—that by looking away, you can sometimes see a thing more clearly, especially when it's dark. He laughs now. "I should keep in mind that lots of people are dying, but I'm a simple animal." He starts walking, and we continue southward through Brooklyn, hugging the abandoned BQE highway as it winds toward the base of the Brooklyn Bridge. "It's pure instinct," he's saying. "When I woke up, I thought, 'This is great. Of all times for this to happen, it's happening when I'm in New York.'" He laughs again. I find his laugh unsettling; as instantly, he seems able to see himself through my eyes, and becomes self-conscious, cutting the laugh short. "I keep laughing. I can't help it. I had a friend when I was a child, when I would cut myself he'd laugh. One time I said, 'Why do you laugh?' He said he didn't know. 'It's like a way to deal with it.' Maybe it's the same thing I'm feeling."

We walk for several blocks now in silence, through lengths of Brooklyn I have never seen. Occasionally Andres snaps a photograph. I'm not sure what he sees other than smoke from the fires, or the way it fills empty space behind the streetscape. His composition, or lack thereof, reminds me that our location, and our destination, are utterly random, and that this is an appropriate way to exist in a world in transition—hanging above the ground, prepared to land where fate decides. As if to underscore this fact that we exist right now in an indeterminate negative space, a great mass of people, anonymous as news footage, appears. Most wear white exhaust masks and look down, like soldiers in a death march. They look like refugees you read about in the news, not real people exactly. There is little conversation. As the street bends, we see the base of the Brooklyn Bridge. The people are pouring off of it, evacuees from downtown Manhattan. We join the crowd. The faces are harried, panicked. The people's heads suggest chaos, but rest above worksuits that communicate an incongruous orderliness.

I gesture to a woman who is pushing past us. She is African American, dressed in the Wall Street vogue of nubby wool skirt suit and Nikes, black leather brief case dangling at her thigh. The face atop the outfit is not, however, a face of competence or accomplishment, but one of confusion, worry, vulnerability. "Do you know the way?" I ask her.

She looks at me with a *duh?* face.

"I mean to downtown Brooklyn."

She inhales deeply, nods, and turns to me. "Take York Street," she says, pausing and adopting a serious expression, as if all of her concentration has suddenly been marshaled to compose these most complex instructions. "York Street. From there you turn left on Dean Street, but you have to pass under the BQE." She sighs, inhales deeply again, adopts the concentrated expression. "The highway. You can see it there." She gestures to the overpass. Inhales. "You pass under it. This is

York Street. Then take Dean. It's in three blocks. Maybe two. No. Three and a half." She looks at me gravely. "No," she adds, "a little more. Four." She nods her head at me, eye contact locked. "Dean Street. It's in three blocks, three and a half. No. Four. No. Three." Now she trails off, her eyes loosening. Where they were fixed a second ago they are now unmoored.

I reach out to hold her arm, because she seems like she might spiral to the ground. "Where are you coming from?" I ask.

Then Andres intervenes. Andres, I have come to realize, is not always on a first name basis with the English language. "She's saying the best view is from the bridge?" he asks.

The *faux pas*, miraculously, brings her back. She fixes the *duh?* look on Andres. "No," she says, clipping her glare by shifting her eyes back to me. "I'm coming from work. I'm a lawyer. I work at 7 World Trade Center."

Unbeknownst to all of us, this building is within one hour of collapsing. Later, we will all hear about the third great "whoosh" of the day, about the powerful wind created by the vacuum of combustion inside the building and how it flung fragments of walls and office memos and metal all over lower Manhattan and Brooklyn. "The *Twin Towers and everything that was in them are now strewn across lower Manhattan*"—the news will tell us tonight. A friend of mine in Brooklyn will tell me that a charred chunk of metal landed in her backyard; pay stubs drifted into her hair. They could have floated from this woman's file cabinet. The metal could have *been* her file cabinet. The debris in the air could have been the ashes of her very self, though in fact we know they are not, because she is here with us right now, alive. I am holding her upper arm, touching the nubs of her wool suit, which feel like giant goose pimples. "What's your name?" I ask her.

"Andrée," she says.

"Her name is my name?" Andres asks.

The comment elicits the glare of Andrée again. "It felt like a truck hit," she tells me.

"This name is *my* name," Andres is whispering, mostly to himself now.

"Okay, I'm a little disoriented," Andrée, the woman, is saying.

"*What if it had been me?*" I hear from over my shoulder.

"It *would have* felt like a truck, I mean, except that the building swayed. You could see people running up Church Street. I watched the two towers collapse. You could see people gawking. Everyone was in shock."

"What about you?" I ask, a redundancy, really.

"I'm in walk-and-be-logical-mode right now," Andrée says matter-of-factly. "I'll have time for post-traumatic stress later. This is Dean Street. You cross under. In two and a half, no three—"

"Are you gonna be okay? Where are you going right now?"

"Did she say you can see it from Brooklyn waterfront?" Andres asks me.

Andrée refocuses her glare on Andres.

"It's not a good time to be alone," I tell Andrée. "Listen, it's okay if you're feeling scared."

"I can't afford that now. Jay Street. That's where you turn. I gotta turn here." She's weaving now, her focus shifting from near objects—Andres and me—to far ones—the highway overpass, the white-masked evacuees. "I just keep thinking about the daycare center in the building. There were kids there. I gotta go."

"Andrée!" I call after her. "Don't be alone now!" But she's running. Her body from behind is crooked, like she's running into the sidewalk instead of on it. For a second I see her as a bent beam in a demolished building, a piece of stressed metal in a fire that could crack it in two.

"She could have died there," Andres says. "You know I realized that all morning this has seemed so unreal to me. It was just another evacuation, like something you see on television."

I am leading us toward Atlantic Avenue. Here resides the largest Arabic-speaking community this side of Detroit. I suspect there will be strong reaction, if not action. I walk into a Yemeni felafel joint, leaving Andres outside to snap photos of the desolate street. I have had rubbery pickled carrots here once or twice in the past. I give the bearded cook my order in my pidgin Arabic: Felafel please. *Min fudlik*. He looks at me funny until I repeat my order in English, and then fills it silently. My felafel comes soggy, wrapped in a stale pita beside wilted lettuce and mealy tomato—it's not edible. How must I read the welcome, or unwelcome, I am wondering as I sit alone, the only non-Arab, the mood here dour, if understandably so. I play with my pickled carrots while I contemplate my next move—what to make of this conundrum, how to read this place—until a man with a beard, a pillbox cap and a mechanic's shirt—the name AMEEN is stitched into the pocket—deposits himself in the other seat at my table. He drops his elbows onto the table, his chin into his hands. He gazes at me openly.

"So?" I ask.

He nods.

"What do you think?"

"Bad." He continues to nod.

"Bad?"

"Everybody sad. Nobody like it. Nothing to say. Bad. Human beings are all human," He speaks haltingly, jumping from thought to thought. "But people get confused. We live in the U.S. thirty years. I came when I was fourteen. I live here thirty years. We don't want this to happen." He throws his hands up. "Someone comes into your house and tries to kill your family, kill your children, you let him go? No. If it was me, I'd kill who did this. He deserves to die."

By now others from the café have gathered around, including the cook. He speaks no English, so a Moroccan who was eating in the back translates. "He says if it was his brother he'd go to the Congress and say kill him."

"It's a terrible thing," another man adds.

"He's been here since he was four," someone else explains about the cook.

"We didn't have anything to do with it," someone else adds.

"Tomorrow people will forget," Ameen adds. "Everybody goes back to his job like nothing happened."

"Your husband dies, your son dies..."

"One day, two days..."

"When someone kills someone we kill him..."

"We're against all this killing..."

I walk out of the café with these phrases spinning in my head. Like my own emotions, they are inchoate, unreal, unfocused. Confused. We are all so confused. There is this black cloud hanging over our city, and we are trying to make it mean something, trying to make it rational, trying to relate it to geopolitics. But really that black cloud is one ugly thing: death, dead humans, bones imploded to ash. This is all we know right now: There are a lot of people dead, and dying, just across the river. We can hear their sobs, and we bleat incoherently, failing in our attempt to give those sounds meaning. There is so little to say; there are so few complex thoughts. I feel sad and empty, wishing my emotions held more.

Outside, Andres has located some cops who are erecting a police barricade at the end of the block, and as I overhear his dialog, his persistent need to define these unformed reactions, I am repelled.

"You're laughing too," Andres is telling a cop. "Why are you laughing?"

"I'm crying inside," the cop allows.