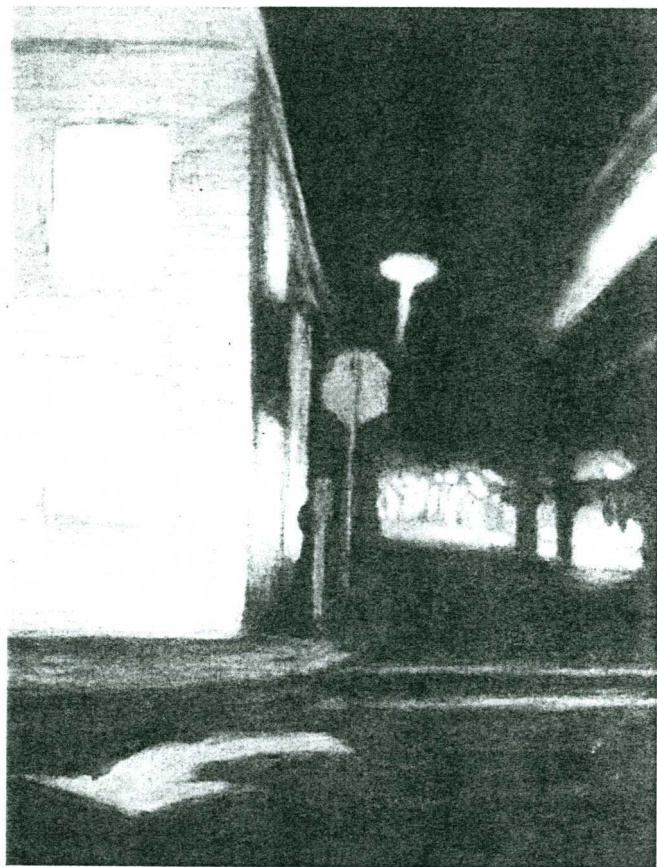


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Review



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.

"We all laugh, like it's something on TV. When I first saw it I thought—"

"You thought it was like a movie," the cop cuts him off.

I feel a little bad about abandoning Andres, but I do that, nearly running as the cop fixes his eyes on the kooky Dutchman.

I don't know now that later in the week, after I have listened to the platitudes about disaster and shock and death spewing from every TV station and radio announcer in town, from every mouth I know including, and especially, my own, that Andres said some of the wisest things I will hear about the events. If it surprises me that my own emotions continue to be both overwhelming and imprecise, lacking in either intelligence or rationality, Andres understood from the first day: Our feelings are inarticulate; we are self-involved in the face of other people's pain; we can only understand death when it steps on our toes; we spend the bulk of our lives in the blithe amused state of spectators watching screen images. And sometimes, we are lucky enough to have the world crash through and touch us, and that is what happened to us on our walk through Brooklyn.

Late that night, back at my mother's on the border of Brooklyn, I gaze out the window at the smoky landscape. We have lost so much. Metaphors of loss flip through my mind. I know that if they are not clichés already, they will be tomorrow: our innocence; our might; our sense of privilege; our belief in structures. It is not just the loss of the buildings that has been so unnerving, though, but the loss of the landscape they fit into. As your landscape shifts, you seek a new way to fit yourself into it, and as you grow used to the new view, you change too. I am a New Yorker. But if the word *New York* no longer means New York, what does it mean to be a New Yorker?

Half dreaming, I fix an image of one friend who I realize I've forgotten to call today. She has a drinking problem, and I

imagine her inside the World Trade Center as the floor caves in. In the image she is giddy and alcoholic and depressed, laughing as she falls through the floors. *It's okay to die*, she thinks, amused.

As it turns out she survived, but she, like all of us, has been enveloped in a collective mania. A vapor of nervous energy permeates the city. The phone is a receiver for frenetic explosions from friends with as little to say as I do; "my god"; "my goodness"; "I just can't believe this." "I fell apart yesterday. This has gotten to me," a friend emails. "The stress and the horror." "Where did those people go?" another asks in a voice pulled thin. "Twenty people found and 5,000 missing? How could they not find more bodies than that?"

I myself am not eating. I'm having minor hallucinations. On street corners that once had views of the towers, memories from high school flood in. The school was downtown; I see myself nearby, standing in different places, catching the towers' many angles. Then I think of the floors suspended midair before they drop, and that there were real people alive in them, and that 1000 cars belonging to those people are still abandoned in Metro North train lots outside town. I see the cars—miniature versions of them—floating downwards.

Friends who saw the collapse of the towers are the worst off. One, an EMT, describes working at the crash site the first day. He watched his partner, another EMT, write her name in ballpoint pen on her arm—"Just in case!" she'd said cheerily. My friend tells me he saw "nothing too gory," adding in afterthought: "just an arm." He pauses when he says it, as if noticing for the first time the consonance between the two images.

Jonathan, in the view-flat downtown, has taken it hardest. On Thursday the thirteenth, I bike to his apartment to arrange the details of our respective moves. He is packing. I will still take the flat, thus putting a close to my state of transience and dislocation. Over the days before the attack, I'd coddled the

image of this apartment; it represented stability, an end to uncertainty, having a home. Now the fantasy is turned in on itself. Because of roadblocks it's unlikely I'll even be able to drive my belongings anywhere close. And without its view of the towers, the apartment no longer suggests such promise.

It lies within the downtown quarantine zone. Everything south of Fourteenth Street is closed to vehicle traffic and nonresidents; so to even meet Jonathan tonight I have to present an elaborate explanation to a skeptical cop who, for some reason I don't completely understand, waves me through. Jonathan looks like a war victim when he comes to the door: eyes bright red and large, face gaunt. He embraces me without speaking, barely holding back sobs.

This is only my second view of the apartment. Post-World Trade Center, it has metamorphosed into a dark and sweltering box—Jonathan has kept the windows closed for two days to keep the new debris out. The windows are shut in by the black haze. There is no view; just smoke.

In fact it's impossible to breathe. I suggest we head for a vigil on Fourteenth Street. Jonathan explains what he's been through as we walk. We've been over this territory on the phone already, but the repetition soothes us both. When he woke up Tuesday he looked out the windows and saw the towers steaming. Without checking the news, he climbed to the roof and watched them pancake. "I had no idea what the fuck was going on. It was terrifying. I was crying. I just thought of people. People are dying now. You see the images on TV. It was that, but it was that much more crisp and three-dimensional. And not knowing why."

We continue across the warzone. It is semi-martial law conditions: darkened streets, a thinned-out population, cops and national guardsmen everywhere, movie theaters shut down, depressed people. The few open restaurants, places where you once had to wait an hour for service even late on a weeknight,

fill only one or two tables. It reminds me of things I have read set during the Paris occupation.

Signs on lampposts ask for information about the euphemistically termed "missing." When Jonathan sees the first his eyes water until he bursts into tears. I join in. We spend the next hour reading each sign, mostly color xeroxes set below that cold neologism. "Missing" persons who worked on the 103rd floor, the 104th floor, the 83rd floor: where are they? The volume of human suffering condensed onto each lamppost is daunting: a lost young woman and an older man who share a last name—a third person with the same name looking for them. *Daughter, father, mother.* An African-American man who has both a Western name and a Muslim name. People in wedding photos; people with scars; people wearing family heirlooms—a ruby ring that fits only the pinky. One worker from the 105th floor is being sought by someone who writes in the hand of a teenaged girl.

Within the next few days it will become just another unspoken agreement that we will refer to the victims as "missing." But today it is not yet obvious that the way to commemorate the loss of a loved one is to display a poster containing biographical data; it is a horrific expression of collective denial. To trust the fliers is to believe that the only thing separating the authors from the victims is some remediable wartime scenario—he is stranded in the Vets hospital and can't make a phone call because of sabotaged lines; he's shell shocked, amnesia ridden. Indeed, the xerox of an older, white-bearded stockbroker calls to mind not death but those reports of Alzheimer's sufferers losing their way—small tragedies that promise resolution.

Beyond the fliers, people hold candles and chant. I feel like an interloper at someone else's funeral. I don't know a single stockbroker or secretary. I haven't heard of even a friend of a friend who was at the Trade Center that day. My mother's

neighbor worked on the seventeenth floor, and got out alive. A friend's cousin was on the forty-fifth floor—he slipped out too. My friends work in publishing, not finance—we're grieving from the sidelines, our sadness finding no object but the details attached to these mementos. The dead are still for us anonymous.

I say goodbye to Jonathan and set off on my bike heading south. The cop at the Fourteenth Street barricade remembers me and lets me pass. We're old pals. I have no destination, but cycling through the warm wind of the evening feels good, and the empty streets provide an unusually tranquil path on which to speed along, unencumbered by cross traffic, stoplights, pedestrians. The air has been so thick, I need open space to breathe. Oddly, the area close to the disaster site provides the best respite from the claustrophobia of the last days.

At the blockade on Houston Street, one ring closer to the disaster zone, the cops are tougher, but no match for my story. "I live on, uh," I begin, the cop peering at me, "Ludlow Street. I forgot my ID. 21 Ludlow Street." This is an address of a bar I know.

"No ID you can't pass."

"What am I supposed to do? I live there. I ran out without my wallet."

He considers. "What are you doing biking around without your wallet? What if you get hurt. Who's gonna know who you are?" He smiles and looks at me long. The price of passing is banter.

"The world has bigger problems today."

"Sure enough. Sure enough." The cop has long tight dreadlocks, and they swivel around his neck as his head shake yields to a nod of assent, and then to a gesture toward the other side. I hear his voice from behind as I glide down the empty pavement on Broadway: "You be careful sweetheart."

If the village was like a functioning war zone, the blocks here are more like a nonfunctioning one. There are no people and an odd silence; absent the gasmasked populace, the blocks here seem undisrupted, paradoxically so. It's as if the neighborhood has evacuated for no discernable reason, an image quite the opposite from even uptown.

Canal Street, the second major cross street above the World Trade Center, is the second line of defense protecting the site. Here, the cops have assembled a far more scrupulous anti-insurgency effort. The group at the West Broadway checkpoint are huddled under a floodlight; the streets beyond are pitch dark against the otherworldly bright of their outpost. There is a loud drone of generators powering the flood lights and trucks that line the streetcorner and sidewalks to the south: Con Edison electrical vans and police paddywagons; fire trucks and sanitation rigs. Yellow tape once laid in an elaborate pattern to demarcate the quarantine zone from the semi-quarantine zone is now in disarray, disrupted by wind and official traffic to the point it looks like the meandering origami of some shell-shocked war victim.

The cop looks at me incredulously when I roll onto the yellow tape. I am peering at a ticket booth just beyond the blockade—there was a movie playing at this theater, and in spite of the tragedy, I had not yet considered that it was no longer screening. "You have to have papers to get through," the cop says. The marquis stands out from behind the cops like a beacon—a reckless reminder that we were once innocent, and civilized, and enjoyed art.

The cops, like every civil service worker in New York City today, are tired, and punchy, and if ever susceptible to the charms of a passing journalist, especially so now.

"I live on White Street," I tell one of the cops. "Fifty-five White Street," I add, providing the address of a party I attended last winter. "It's a loft," I elaborate, since this is not a primarily

residential district. "I'm an artist." I gesture to my camera implausibly—it's scratched from years of travel and is far from state of the art.

He fixes me with a look full of pity. "You can get through, it's okay," he says, nodding.

I roll through, biking now through streets darkened by cut power lines, backlit by the spooky, high-contrast glow from floodlights on either end—Canal Street at the north, the disaster site at the south. Out of the darkness comes a band of Army-fatigued soldiers; they march past me in ghostly formation. A block down a clutch of cops appears as if vaporized from the smoke; farther, there are medics, all the men, seeming to float, psychedelically, above dust and debris that circles their ankles. No one looks at anything that is not directly in front of them, and for this reason I am allowed to continue southward to a point just two blocks north of the towers plot—the final line of defense.

I cross it: Chambers Street. A cop stops me. "Ma'am, are you a volunteer?"

"No."

"Then you don't belong here." He gestures: "That way!" But then he loses his train of thought and ambles off in another direction. I stay, heading farther south.

I'm scared. Fatigued guys in gas masks at intersections deliver instructions with hand gestures, the sounds of generators and vehicle motors negating any possibility of speech. Men are everywhere, some in white zip-up suits. A guy in a flashlight-topped hardhat stumbles, literally, when he sees me—I am a woman on a bike, so incongruously prosaic. There is a red glow, from the sirens on hundreds of fire trucks, Con Ed trucks, cop cars, ambulances, sanitation department vehicles, trucks carefully moving debris from the site, laced with its DNA. The lights shift as the trucks perambulate, creating moving shadows. Like a noir

set, it is black and white and high contrast. Despite the power of the flood lights, they erase color.

A *Village Voice* box lies on its side under yellow police tape. There is an abandoned Korean market; wilted sunflowers and roses, and fruit—apples and peaches—are covered under debris, their fragrance cutting the plaster smell. My lungs hurt. A white dust lies in a half-inch thick layer on the sidewalk. The ground is soft from so much dust. I see a single shoe, soot covered and tattered. I recognize it. It is the Steve Madden platform with cross straps that everyone was wearing this spring. I tried it on once too. By the time I finally decided it was the best of the season's slides, it was sold out. *It could have been mine.* A Starbucks with cracked windows and a sheath of dust on its awnings. Bicycles: Bikes are locked to a U-stand and painted white with dust over every crevice, inside the weave of the metal baskets. Another is flattened to the sidewalk under its lock.

There's a great illuminated cloud where the towers were. As I get closer, I see the remnants of the World Trade Center illuminated from behind, the slender Deco arches at its base. It is a shell, cubelike, with vertical beams sticking up randomly like stalks of white asparagus.

I have been imagining apocalypse for two days now, and now I see it: I am standing in front of a cemetery. It is the cemetery outside the eighteenth-century landmark St. Peters Church, looking nothing like its normal self. Dust-thickened pages float over the gravestones in a strong wind; the setting is Gothic, but because it is backlit and bled of color, it evokes not Poe so much as cheesy modern horror, *Friday the Thirteenth*. Six firefighters move past me in a dreamy march. "You wanna help?" one asks me.

"Sure, what can I do?"

"Carry me," he responds, and I hear his partner's jibe as they float out of view: "Don't ask her that."

Like a conveyor belt, the street produces a cop. "How'd you get here?" he asks, leaning over my bike to get a view of my face through the dust.

"I biked," I say, shrugging.

"They let you through?"

"Sure."

"I'm very impressed. Now leave. Don't you know it's dangerous?"

"What about you?"

"I get paid for this."

"What's dangerous?"

"You see that glass there?" he asks, pointing to One Liberty Plaza, a big black glass thing. "It could crack any minute."

I nod, wheel my bike away from him, but as his attention drifts to his next obstacle, I head not away but closer to the implosion. On the route, two sanitation workers are standing outside of their truck; a white bulb on top of it makes shifting shadows on their faces. One is beefy, his shirt unbuttoned to his navel to reveal a grotesquely hairy and tattooed middle. The other is short and wiry, furiously sucking smoke out of a cigarette. They are troll figures from a futurist's post-bomb fantasy. The beefy one gestures to me with a white dust mask.

"You shouldn't be breathing this," he observes, gifting me the mask and instructing me on its particular mechanics.

"You're working on the site? What's there?" I ask. They are mechanics with the sanitation department, working full time to resurrect vehicles junked from inhaling airborne refuse.

"The most disgusting thing I've ever seen," the beefy one says. "Body parts. Dead people. Lots of dead people."

"You wanna be here?" the skinny one cuts in. "I don't mean to be rude but I don't understand why."

"Nobody should see it," his partner is saying.

"Nah, I take it back," the skinny one continues. "Everybody should see it."

"I can't sleep," the beefy one says to his partner. "I've slept two hours in two days. I don't want to go home."

The other is nodding his head in the direction of two open-bed trucks filled to the brims with brand new, orange buckets, still wrapped in their cellophane. "They gotta go through the rubble by hand, to keep the body parts," he observes.

"One bucketload at a time," his partner echoes, returning now to his treatise on sleep problems. As the lights above spiral across the rubble-strewn street, my eyes follow, meeting yet another pair of men walking with apparent purpose in the direction of the site. Their faces shine as the light falls on them, then retreat again into darkness.

One of them looks at me funny. "Who are you?"

"Uh. Reporter. What are you guys up to?"

"Uh. Salvation Army." They look at me funny some more.

"So, uh, what's in the rubble?"

"It's so much better than yesterday," one says vaguely. He doesn't mention body parts. "Why don't you go in yourself?"

"With you?"

They scrutinize me more. "Okay." The taller one gives me his hardhat—it slides over my forehead—as the other stashes my bike in the shadows. "Here, take this," the tall one adds as we walk, handing me a stethoscope." The other gives me gloves. The sanitation guys are locked in conversation, oblivious to the shifting roles on our theater set.

"Thanks for the disguise guys," I mumble.

"I'm Andy, this is Mac," the tall one says, still pulling things from his pockets. He shows me photos he found in the rubble, of a little boy playing with a goat at a zoo, the same little boy reveling before a tray of stuffed animals, plastic toys and M&M's; a third is of someone who might be the boy's teenaged sister. *Missing*, I think, remembering the adolescent script on the poster at Union Square.

The sidewalk gradually becomes harder to traverse, more impeded by chunks of things—metal and mud, though no body parts—until we are standing in a hill of junk—a bed of girders and rocks dusted with papers and unidentifiable charred objects—*desk accessories? tourist memorabilia? picture frames?* Where are the file cabinets, the desks, the office chairs, the evidence that 20,000 people worked here? All is reduced to dirt.

I've been looking down to keep from tripping. It's only when I look up that I see we are standing in the middle of what was once the north tower of the World Trade Center. It is magnificent, beautiful like a dream. Backlit and misty, one remnant wall is pitched at an eighty degree angle, mangled and coiled. The hard metal gives a sense of the actual impact. Jagged slivers of metal jut out from the wall, along with wires and things that look like they're about to tumble off of it. Lights are out in the buildings all around; structures on all sides look like they've been lobbed off at the knees; they are soot covered and black. One of the few standing buildings on the rim of the site has a hole in its side. It's a second before I realize a piece of a Twin Towers wall is lodged inside the hole: The windows of this chunk are thinner and longer than the standing structure—the distinctive faux Deco arches and proportions of the towers. A second Starbucks is more derelict than the last, its windows busted out.

The scene evokes burnt out buildings from Sarajevo, hills of corpses from World War II. I cannot locate the grim scenario in the here and now. Images are deferred. I hate that it seems surreal. It is very real. Death is real. Not a movie.

"You hate to say it, don't you?" Mac observes, following my gaze. "It's like a movie set."

"I'd like to help," I respond.

Mac fixes Andy with a look. "Water run?"

Andy makes a nod gesture with his eyes.

We go to a makeshift canteen carved from an abandoned deli. There are still metal trees holding plastic containers of Roberts health food snacks—Smart Puffs and Potato Flyers and Veggie Booty. Andy lifts a flat of bottled water from the ground. A fat guy with an American flag pin and a goatee looks at us long. He, too, is from the troll movie. "What are you doing?" he barks.

"Taking water to the front," shrugs Andy.

"The guys on the front lines get cold water, only cold water. Who told you to come here for water? Everybody should know it's only ice cold water to the front."

Andy mumbles something, which it appears he is making up. No one told him anything, it seems.

"C'mon don't protect him," the goateed man taunts. "You don't want to give him up." He continues to rant as we skulk out to locate more water flats.

"That guy's crazy," Andy whispers, redundantly enough. This, however, gives him opportunity to tell his Bill Bradley Joke. "So. Bill Bradley was at a dinner banquet." Andy's placing a flat of Poland Springs bottles in my arms. I buckle under the weight. "Can you handle that?"

"Sure," I lie.

"And everyone gets one pat of butter." So Bill Bradley says to the guy, "Can I get two pats of butter?"

"No," the guy says. Everybody gets *one*."

"Hey, do you know who I am?" Bradley asks. "I'm Bill Bradley."

"Oh yeah?" the food guy says. "Do you know who I am?"

"No," Bradley says.

"I'm the guy in charge of the butter."

Mac and I smile. "You don't really work for the Salvation Army, do you?" I ask Andy.

"Uh, no," he allows. By now we are back on the hill of rubble, thrusting bottles of water into the hands of red-eyed and sweat-covered rubble removers.

Andy is spared having to give an explanation by shouts from firefighters warning that with the wind picking up, the building to our north is ready to tumble at a whisper. Firefighters are yelling: "Everybody out! Everybody walk! Walk! Walk!" The calm with which the troops move is chilling. Andy grabs my hand and pulls me down, through mud, as we climb over girders, stepping on cinderblocks and masonite that rise from the rubble at odd angles.

Later, a similar calm descends on the site when firefighters yell for quiet. Dogs have honed in on a chasm. EMTs listen for breathing. We all watch: A rope is lowered through a crevice between chunks of concrete. A silky black lab circles. Only generators emit sound.

A female police inspector has an ecstatic look on her face. All the others are men: They seem to hide their hope. They are national guardsmen in gas masks, white guys with tattoos and New York accents, militiamen from all over the country dressed in regional t-shirts and fatigues, soot on their faces. They look like images from a war. These men are smart to hide their hope. The slim possibility of human rescue is dashed by the minute—no one's found a survivor since Tuesday afternoon, now sixty hours ago. Several times, the crowd stops and cheers when an ambulance pulls away from the site. Each time, the ambulance is later revealed to be carrying rescue workers—men with clogged lungs, runny eyes, twisted ankles. There will be no more survivors.

Andy and Mac are out of place among these men. Who are they? They talk about yoga. Mac demonstrates a headstand. *This is bizarre.* "How did you guys get here?" I demand. "Really."

"Uh," says Andy. "We walked."

"You're like me."

Actually, the first day they *did* volunteer for the Salvation Army, they explain. Hardhats procured, they won free access to the site thereafter. No one is directing anyone down here. "We've been working on the getup," Andy adds with a wink, gesturing to my stethoscope. "It was all about the hardhats."

An EMT has joined our circle. The name ERNEST is stitched onto his shirt pocket. We are standing in front of the black glass structure, One Liberty Plaza, which is no longer particularly black so much as gray, with soot. Ernest was working triage here, he's telling us, until they moved the unit because they thought this building would tip. It has not, yet. As he speaks I peer beyond him and notice finger writing covering the lower walls. It is not graffiti, but a retinue of useful information. MORGUE HAS MOVED TO STUYVESANT HIGH SCHOOL, I read in the grime, and I get a chill, because that was my high school. I think about how these words will disappear when the dust is cleared, and this seems sad to me. Things are written in a negative script, letters pulled out of the dust so as to leave only negative space. We are all thinking of what's not there, not what is—what's missing.

"You know how to use this thing?" Ernest is asking me, fingering my stethoscope.

"Yeah, sure."

"Who do you work for?"

"Uh," I recover, "Salvation Army. Though actually," I pause now, looking at my stethoscope. For the first time, I notice it's rather unprofessional looking. "How *do* you work it?" I pull it over my hardhat.

Ernest examines it briefly and then reveals that it is not only antiquated, but missing its suction ring. "Where'd you get this? This thing hasn't worked in a decade."

I look at Mac. He shrugs, grins, looks away.

But we are not useless. The men in the rubble love us. We make another dozen water runs before two A.M.; we serve the thirsty.

It has been windy all evening, but there is a sudden fierceness to it now, as if it was never windy to begin with. I only vaguely notice the sound of glass breaking. "Everybody out!" the familiar shout calls, beginning another silent exodus, the slow march of rescue workers away from this building that has been threatening collapse all evening.

"We gotta get out of here," Andy shouts, grabbing me by the hand again. He points to the origin of the glass sounds—I see shards popping from the windows, hear the growing whirr of the wind. "C'mon!" He's pulling me now, Mac following. A block up, Mac gestures to a clearing between sidewalks piled with rubble. "A dust devil," he points out.

There is indeed a small twister in the middle of this space, a white churning thing about fifteen feet high, with a wide flat top. It is transfixing, this object, shifting in shape as it swirls in front of us. We are in Hell, it reminds me, but with this white twister asserting the life still extant, how can one not think of the soul, a large and collective one, a ghost encompassing everyone who's gone now? This thing is like a dancer—I think of Fred Astaire's *pas de deux* with a hatrack in *Funny Face*. It's scary, the life embodied in this thing that is actually composed of inert dust, detritus of incinerated humans and office furniture.

But then, as much as I would like to convince myself that this twister embodies new and resurrected life, I feel the palpable presence of death all around, and know that the twister is merely evidence that we are laboring in a crematorium, a place only as alive as fire or wind, but not as alive as all the humans who should be speaking and breathing tonight and are not. I think of the sinister, debris-ridden cemetery, and remember that it is only there that the dead belong.

"They're there all the time," Mac is explaining about the dust devil, "usually you can't see them because there's not the dust." The ash makes visible something that was always there but

invisible, like supersonic waves or the subway system that let us ignore those neighborhoods.

The wind steps up again, one more notch, causing the twister to spin more furiously. Large raindrops angle through the cavern between the building stumps at a sharp angle—60 degrees from the ground. They are like no raindrops I have ever felt. It is new rain, cleansing, maybe, or perhaps just the rain of a changed world. The drops are heavy, dense like pellets of mercury. What hail is to snow, these drops are to rain. In two seconds, they have eradicated the dust devil.

Mac has run off to find a friend. Waiting for him, Andy puts his arm around me and pulls me tight. I let my head rest under his chin, and for the first time since Tuesday, I let myself sob.

"It's okay," Andy is saying. "It's ugly, but it's going to be okay."

Mac comes back and looks at us, nodding his head. "It's dramatic, truly dramatic. The two of you there, the wind, the rain."

Andy nods. "Let's go." He pulls me by my arm again. Just as instantly the rain accelerates—from its single pellets falling to fill the air—to a downpour. Before we've walked the one block back to my bike, the air is no longer a dense cloud of dust, but a thick wet wall of water, pure liquid. It smashes into the street with such noise I can't hear what Andy is saying. I can barely make out his mouth moving behind the sheets of rain.

And absurdly, a National Guardsman stops us under a respite of scaffolding to ask who we're with.

"Uh," we all say in unison, good at this now. "Salvation Army." Andy taps me approvingly.

"Can I see identification?"

Mac and I look at each other, but Andy doesn't flinch. He pulls his driver's license from his wallet.

The guardsman scowls at the ID. "You need something official, from who you're with."

"It doesn't matter, we're leaving," Andy points out, pulling me by the hand again, and before the uniform can protest, we run off again into the downpour, three blazing humans persevering through this air that is a solution of water and incinerated dead people. And so the official can't follow, Andy gets on my bike, gestures for me to sit. I climb on the handlebars. Andy, nodding to Mac, sets off steadily. "You haven't taken your run today, have you Mac?"

"Certainly not." Mac begins jogging next to us. Andy pilots the bike like it's solid as a Boeing through clear skies. And I wonder, the rain pushing my hardhat away from my eyes, my hair slapping over my shoulders, What is solid anyway? Cool drops splash on my face, and I lean into Andy. The bicycle doesn't waver a bit. And like something insisting on its ability to move slowly and deliberately through a medium in chaos, we ascend deserted Broadway. We slowly emerge back into the city, penetrating, again, the Canal Street boundary, and the Houston Street one, and now Fourteenth Street. We press forward, back to the world of the living.