

WHEN I WOKE UP ON SEPTEMBER 11TH

*Who among the numberless you have become desires this moment
Which comprehends nothing more than loss & fragility & the fleeing of flesh?
He would have to look up at quickening dark & say: Me. I do. It's mine.*

- Larry Levis

What else can a poor boy do?

- Mick Jagger

When I woke up on September 11th, I groaned and showered. Ignorance, which sometimes tries to dress up as the future tense, used to push me blindly in my work, in my play, and—when I was lucky—into class. Now, I don't know.

That morning I went to work. I thought of, and then drank, some coffee. The night before...who knows. A Monday. A meal with a beer, a pretty girl, an affinity with loss as I knew it then: my wife, my poems, any song, my family, and—the most scorching of baptisms—my vision (whatever *that* was) of where and what I was going to be. I was, then, on the bottom.

I had a job. I hated that, too.

What hadn't I lost? Part-time teaching. In addition to my full-time corporate job, I was teaching research writing at the university, and my students—*my?*—were suddenly, insufferably there. That is, they kept showing up. What could I do for them, and what were they going to do for themselves because (or was it in spite) of

me, because when you're found in an event that's transformed the world—that is, your world—irrevocably, almost transparently, how long do you remain numb?

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You see, I had this system of breaking my own heart. Who doesn't? Indulge me. The center of my divorce was fear (the polar opposite of love), which surfaced as anger, depression, and denial. Or, the center of my fear (anger, depression, denial, et al) was the divorce. I won't, and can't, speak for her. Whichever, it was over—the marriage—and it ended quietly, as common as cancer and void of drama. Those days, I kept hearing Eliot's "The Hollow Men":

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

not with a bang but a whimper.

My world had not ended. My world was a virtually infinite *process* of ending every day. The depression, my truest, most reliable companion, lived tenaciously. One simply doesn't wake up one morning *being* down. It takes years of hard work to reach the bottom. It's a long way down. At its most vivacious, my depression would splinter through my shoulders—I'm thinking of lightning just now—and wave a ribbon of flame behind my eyes until the pain grew so acute and so covertly precise that I would know, to the second, when and where I would breakdown. The reasons,

however, remained innumerable and nameless. And the private humiliation, which far outweighs any public humiliation one can suffer—as I’ve learned—can take years to get over. I’ll let you know when it happens. Maybe that’s why I’m writing this...is it to you or is it to myself?

When depression “hits,” *that* episode is *the* most painful. In this way, depression is predictable, quotidian. At least mine was, is. My desire to end that pain became an obsession; and suicide, in those moments, is perceived by this sufferer as an act of self-preservation. Perhaps in others it’s a gesture of great courage and strength. I’ve never wanted to die, unless it’s in the Elizabethan sense: *to come*. I want ecstasy, a word whose etymology traces not just extreme pleasure, but also a desire to be put out of one’s place, to be driven out of one’s wits. Depression, for me, was the infinitesimal, daily banality of a rootless tragedy. And I wanted that over with. But perhaps the most resonant of my depression’s ironies is that, as in the case of those suffering from addictions, the cause, and obliteration, of its existence lies only within the self in whom it has germinated.

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Who saw the first plane? How many since claim to have seen it coming?

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The first thing I’ll admit to hearing on September 11, 2001 is Howard Stern. Was it “Oh my God, we’re under attack...” or “I’m not kidding! They’re blowing up New York! Robin....” I didn’t *think* to call my ex-wife until a week later. I still haven’t called. Neither has she. We had a new mourning, and once again, my

prayers had been answered as austere as I'd asked.

Through mutual friends, I've heard that she may have been in Paris on September 11th. Maybe she stayed. What must it feel like to watch yourself under attack from a distance, and still feel that undeniably powerless weight drop from your chest to your stomach? Is *that* the soul descending? It's at least one of depression's slides. As I listened to the Towers collapsing—first the South, and ninety-one minutes later the North—I was also listening very intently to my depression begin its long series of brief and frequently interrupted farewells. Yes. When the Towers collapsed my version of depression, along with the shards of my marriage I was clinging to, collapsed with it. I'm not proud of it, but there it is: something far more tragic was happening to someone else. I told myself that I had nothing to do with it, and that it had nothing to do with me.

And the *manner* in which the attacks were executed—diabolic brilliance at its most realized—seemed something stolen from *our* very own pop-culture...but removed from me. What was once something I'd file into theaters to escape with was now as real and obscene as the greetings to bin Laden chalked onto the daisy bombs we'd be dropping a few weeks later.

The second thing I'll admit to that morning is looking at my watch. I wasn't monitoring the course of history. I was in my cubicle staring blankly, as always but surrealistically different that day. I may have had another one of those meetings I had to attend, the kind where I seemed to be the only one *not* there. My watch stubbornly read *Now*. Just as it always had, and there was no one thing I could do

about it. So when America's *Now* caught up with my *Now*, we—America and I, History and I—achieved an understanding. The street, a field, the Pentagon, the Towers—now—were all down. I had been waiting for some company. I, now, had it.

Then my watch began to read *Then*. I'm not sure if it was trying to convey *back then* or *until then*. And that's the thing about tragedies, personal or global, imagined and real: time begins to fall like...what? Spilt milk? A body?

The empathy I'd been praying for had come, but so had the guilt. My guilt is American. It lets me live with a fair amount of pain in a society where expressing that pain is as taboo, still, as taking Prozac. *Time's* Lance Morrow examines American guilt, specifically as it has resurfaced since September 11th:

...America is arrogant. Who can doubt it? The world's sole surviving superpower, and its most fabulously successful democracy, could not be unarrogant if it tried. But the arrogance is complicated. In the American mind, arrogance coexists with a surprising, even squirming self-effacement -- a perverse impulse, for example, to think that somehow America may have deserved 9/11 for their sins (notably, the sin of arrogance!). Or the touchingly strange concern in the U.S. that 9/11 might lead Americans to think anti-Islamic thoughts, perhaps be rude to Arabs. (122)

This is my guilt, and part of me wants to wave it proudly, to announce that I, too, as Clinton used to say, "...feel your pain...." That, of course, couldn't be further from the

September 11th realities of the bereaved. And besides, who cares about my guilt other than me? I don't—can't—know others' pain.

For better and for worse, as they say, all I have is my imagination.

Here are four scenes I hover over daily, and therefore almost know:

—A stock broker on the 102nd Floor sipping coffee is overwhelmed by Gotham's arrogant and glorious strength, he feels it flare and push his fluid blood along before he becomes the news.

—A blond and a married man re-ignite their tryst in a janitorial closet. The ecstasy they share is imbued with flame and suffused with the sudden disappearance of their legs.

—A fireman stands in the lobby forever, thinking hard for us all, before he takes his climb.

—A sort-of villain: when he catches the sour-sweet stench of his own vomit mixed in with that of the stewardess he's captured, then slashed...is that the virgin-filled paradise he'd been promised?

—And the beneficiary of all this? Me, and the annulment of my exile from the precipice of serenity?

Sweet Jesus, it fell right in my lap.

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Could it be that one only experiences depression because they've once experienced unadulterated happiness? Could depression be a choice? Not one of the conscious mind, and not one of a genetic predisposition; but the choice of someone who has tasted—or at least imagined—some version of freedom, and in order to savor it again he shackles himself in the throes of the non-choice? I don't know. I'm trying hard not to have an agenda.

Or my agenda is ecstasy, and I've lost my notes.

Honestly, I'm thinking of George Carlin just now, and his rant against what he calls American Diseases: bulimia and anorexia. "Only in America," Carlin says, "can one poor slob be rooting around in a garbage dumpster for a peach pit...and in a restaurant down the street some rich bitch can eat a perfectly fine meal and puke it up."

Certainly, beneath Carlin's veneer of insensitivity is a more fundamental perplexing question: is it only those who can *choose* to suffer who truly *do* suffer? Camus, of course, says it better: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (3).

I'm thinking now, again, about the men who stole and steered the planes into the Towers, Pentagon, and Pennsylvania field, how they were once boys who must have experienced poverty at such a demeaning level that I could never fathom it. Judge me as you must. Could it be that their depression—economical, physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual—was a germination of fear that ultimately morphed into an unpromised paradise of flame a few blocks up town from the East River?

National Public Radio reported on December 11, 2001—another Tuesday—that some of the hijackers didn't know their mission was a suicide mission. Apparently, bin Laden didn't think the Towers would collapse, nor was he disappointed. Depression creates delusions, which sometimes surfaces as a war, among the other things.

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So what is it that lasts? Is it any tattered flag dozing from a US highway overpass? Is it that photo I mistook for Iwo Jima of three firemen hoisting our flag in Manhattan? Can it be fear in its subtle and severe versions, perversions, and subversions? Or is it, as the television says, a diamond? Christmas is coming and I'm hearing a diamond lasts forever.... My ex-wife loved that commercial. Maybe she still does, though she doesn't wear one anymore, at least not one from me. Depression can be so precious. Maybe she thinks of that commercial in passing as she sips her coffee, taking in the jewels of the Eiffel Tower, dawn quickening. Manhattan smolders. I do, too, as I walk through town to meet my students. Maybe I'll meet

them in the eye and ask them how we're doing. Maybe they can tell me.

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