

Remembering What Matters
(for John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2019)
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Now

Tomorrow, what might have shattered us
begins to mature. Children born just close

to then, just close to there, learn each year
a different place to hide. Some are here who

remember, who teach those preparing
to respond, describing plane-torn towers to

dreamers who know the world was unmade
before their eyes were open. If we were there,

we tell each other there were days, months,
and years when we prayed for something to bury,

some object to name with a name. That
there were days when we saw survivors cradle

the ruin of a lost one's shoes, or
sit, cross-legged, with backs braced on walls, curling

into the shadows of their thoughts. Now,
the length of a childhood and adolescence

later, we read and release the past
because our memories write grief across time.

And we spread our fingers over these
names we can touch, our eyes across this rust and

spiral-stretched steel so much like Atlas
ribboned and remade under the artist's hands.

Then

It was a New York City morning.
It was numbers, the irony of a code

against a date, a doubled call for
help. That morning, we were binary, towers
and all else paired or opposition.
Our children were in school and daycare or at
home. Summer lingered; work dragged mere weeks
after vacations. Women traded sneakers for
heels. Those in uniforms adjusted
coats and shirts. Men straightened the slenderest of
colors to cover buttons and guard
their throats. All so ordinary – the buses
running late, trains delayed, the nuisance
of hearing breakups and fights and music not
for our ears. We did not know some of
us would rescue or be rescued as we crossed
the streets or stairs. We did not yet howl
for a city crumpled into rocks and steel
and blood. The police made routine calls.
Footprints meant what was sized to our shoes, surface
rather than depth, curbs not ash and fire
remaking the order of buildings and lives.

Now

I cannot read or write this without
wanting each of you to speak, without wanting
the dead and dying with us, whole. To
trace the angles of this beam, these wings, as one
body breaking from its home. Surely, right
now, we can inhale without fear. Surely we
might find the lost ways to escape or
to elicit rescue there and then. Yet. When
adrenaline pulses the heart, when
splinters of ice and fire surge through our veins to

air, we forget to breathe. We panic
to fill our lungs. Or trust the steps to hold firm,

our knees to move without tearing, our
days to subdivide us into hours and weeks.

So we count and breathe. We remember.
And I remember that I want these named here

to live in a world that will not fall
apart, in a world that can remake it all.

Then

Before every physical thing
that could be touched became a different shape

and sound, we knew what concrete and flesh
and bone and steel and water and blood would do.

And then they became each other, or
something else. And there was nothing that did not

need response, whether help or prayers
or simply stopping anything from moving more.

To this our first responders came. They
entered when every nerve curled in, bolting

impulse down. They went in, and they climbed,
knowing death was ahead and above, knowing

lives and walls were pushing beams and bones
apart. So many already gone. When the

stairs were sized for children and not for
adults to pass, some responders crushed wheelchairs

to rails and carried their owners down.
Shoulder to shoulder, blistered, barefoot, inside

those who could helped strangers limp hundreds
of steps in hopes there would be an outside. And

those with phones called their families and
friends because love really was the last thing on

their minds. Love was the urgency that
pushed the climb, forcing perception into will,

steel before blood, water, and all that
could be carried to a ground remade to zero.

Now

I hesitate to interrupt, to
break in. But the towers fractured. They tore. The

intersection of lives pierced through and
between and past names, apart and around like

the beams we could and could not salvage.
We learned that what holds the body together

may not be what shears us apart. We
could not mend what we could not name, could not find.

We did not know who had survived for
years. Years. If something can be said for us, should

it be that we refuse to let go,
that we link our hands and leap when lives are at

risk? Today we walk in the shoes that
will carry most of us home, or trade for pairs

more reliable for comfort; we
stand between buildings, with a tenth or fewer

steps to climb than that morning, knowing
the worst that could happen and believing *not*

today. All this, as we remember
our dead, our lost, our irreparably ill

and injured, rescuers, those we taught
and guided and lifted into a world we

believed would be here, now, us with them.
And we are here to tell them that it was. We

are here, now, to tell them that it is.