

What Is Found There

Literature in the Wake of September 11th

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

In the days that followed September 11th, we called upon teachers and writers across the country to share poems and prose that they had turned to in this time. The response was a testament to the enduring power and acuity of the written word—to literature's ability to transform our experience of events as well as its capacity to be transformed, to be rendered anew by tragedy.

DONNA MASINI ON EMILY DICKINSON'S "AFTER GREAT PAIN, A FORMAL FEELING COMES—"

I couldn't read.

In the days following September 11th, poems flitted across my emails: Auden, Whitman, Yeats, Cavafy: *Say goodbye to her, to the Alexandria you are losing*. I found Aeschylus scrawled across the display window of Agnes B.

But I could barely take in the written word.

Like many others, what I turned to was television. Telephones. I wanted immediate information. Contact. Instant gratification. I stood outside in the real day, in real time, watching. I dialed friends from my cell phone, which occasionally worked.

On the blood donation line at St. Vincent's Hospital, I opened the only book in my bag—Brenda Hillman's pocket Emily Dickinson—to the first poem: "A day! Help! Help! Another day." The poem immediately assumed a more ominous charge. I saw then that everything I would read or hear, regardless of when it had been written, would be changed utterly.

But I couldn't read.

When I thought of poems, they were quiet poems of lives that had sustained terrible loss, written out of the heart's music. Poems in which what has been suffered remains an undertone. In the end, the poem that kept insisting itself was one I had by heart: Dickinson's Poem 341 ["After great pain, a formal feeling comes—"]. Dickinson knows grief—the shocked mute aftermath of psychic extremity. I was soothed, sustained by the formal, essentially iambic lines of the opening stanza, the dignity and precision of the first image, "The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs," by the dull off-rhymes, the slow, heavy pull of "the stiff Heart questions," the difficulty of saying those words forcing the mouth to shape each word.

What is particularly striking about the poem is that there isn't a suffering subject to whom the actions occur, so much as a collection of parts, a dismembered body: *the nerves, the heart, the feet*. Dickinson's use of the definite article acts to create a certain lack of definition, holding out against a specific, integrated self.

The next stanza seems to shift to the ballad stanza form, a form we find in most of Dickinson's poems. You have to say the poem aloud to feel what the shift to a shorter line does here, the introduction of anxiety, followed by a kind of mechanical monotony: "The Feet, mechanical, go round— / Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—."

I love the way Dickinson subsequently breaks the line that we have come to expect into *two* lines. In so doing, she enacts a kind of irregularity and insists that the reader visually and aurally let go of the familiar ballad form. Thus, the poem that ostensibly explores the formality that occurs after great pain, is in fact terribly irregular.

The last stanza begins: "This is the Hour of Lead—." How final, how ceremonious it sounds, a moment of mineral indifference. Rhythmically, the poem returns, in its last two lines, to the five-foot lines of the opening stanza: "First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go—." But the dashes and pauses prevent the integrated feeling that the iambic breath can so often provide. We are left with a profound sense of the way in which grief has disordered and deranged us.

After great pain, a formal feeling comes—
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs—
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
and Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round—
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—
A Wooden way
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone—

This is the Hour of Lead—
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow—
First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go—

MARISA SCHWARTZ-SIMON ON JOHN DONNE'S
"XVII MEDITATION"

The Pledge of Allegiance at our Brooklyn high school was quite a moment this morning, followed by a day of overheard conversations about enlisting and (to my great relief) foundless rumors of Muslim students being harassed in the halls. In fact, I am proud of the way the students are quickly rallying together to raise funds and volunteer, are comforting and supporting one another, and are somberly coping with the worst. For us and for our students and staff, this is not a news story. Many of them have relatives who are rescue workers or missing persons. We have all smelled the smoke in our building, heard the sirens of the legions of ambulances and fire trucks, and found debris in our yards and on our front steps from the dark, looming cloud. This, among other reflections, I thought best to share.

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

MARY GAITSKILL ON VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S
INVITATION TO A BEHEADING

This is a fantastical story about a man named Cincinnatus, condemned to death for a crime no one will explain to him, and held in a dream-like jail by absurd jailers who all seem to be wearing gimcrack costumes. In addition to being absurd, the jailers are cruel and stupid, and the rote stupidity of their thinking threatens Cincinnatus's concept of himself—even as it is suggested that they are in fact his own creations. Towards the end, a huge, beautiful moth enters Cincinnatus's cell, and its unmistakably real, organic nature begins to subtly undermine the jailers' power.

After the attacks on New York and Washington, I kept hearing these words ("what gentle firmness! what unyielding gentleness!") applied to a tiny, perfect creature, and they gave me a feeling of tenderness and hope. The passage is impressive for its power of artistic creation; it is inspiring because it renders something primal, almost beyond our understanding, that which no act of violence can ever truly erase.

It was only a moth, but what a moth! It was as large as a man's hand; it had thick, dark-brown wings with a hoary lining and gray-dusted margins; each wing was adorned in the center with an eye-spot, shining like steel.

Its segmented limbs, in fluffy muffs, now clung, now unstuck themselves, and the upraised vanes of its wings, through whose underside the same staring spots and wavy gray pattern showed, oscillated slowly, as the moth, groping its way, crawled up the sleeve.

[...]

The creature turned over, wings hanging down, still tenaciously clinging to the sleeve—and now one could see its brown, white-dappled abdomen, its squirrel face, the black globules of its eyes and its feathery antennae resembling pointed ears.

[...]

...The great dark wings, with their ashen edges and perpetually open eyes, were inviolable—the forewings, lowered slightly, lapped over the hind ones, and this drooping attitude might have been one of somnolent fragility, were it not for the monolithic straightness of the upper margins and the perfect symmetry of all the diverging lines—and this was so enchanting that Cincinnatus, unable to restrain himself, stroked with his fingertip the hoary ridge near the base of the right wing, then the ridge of the left one (what gentle firmness! what unyielding gentleness!)....

REBECCA WOLFF ON EVELYN WAUGH'S BRIDESHEAD REVISITED

I just happened to be reading Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* when the planes hit the buildings. It has proved to be a perfect comment/distraction/interaction with the experience, as it deals with one young man's shadowy, light-filled memories of a deceptively carefree time from the perspective of a much darker time, one of unlookawayableness and necessary engagement. The contrast between the way most Americans perceived their country and their security before Tuesday and the way I hope we all feel after—curious, somber, in need of a future—is reflected in this chiaroscuric prose narrative, originally published in 1944.

"I have been here before," I said; I had been there before; first with Sebastian more than twenty years ago on a cloudless day in June, when the ditches were white with fool's-parsley and meadowsweet and the air heavy with all the scents of summer; it was a day of peculiar splendour, such as our climate affords once or twice a year, when leaf and flower and bird and sun-lit stone and shadow seem all to proclaim the glory of God; and though I had been there so often, in so many moods, it was to that first visit that my heart returned on this, my latest.

SHARON OLDS ON SEAMUS HEANEY'S
"THE TOOME ROAD"

On September 12th, a friend recited a poem over the phone—the first poem I had heard for a week or so. Line by line, sound by sound, word by word, it came in “out of nothing,” it made itself in the air, it built and built and doubled back on itself, singing to its own sounds. It was the first time since the horror, shock, grief, fear, I had heard such a thing—had felt the emergence of such a creature, such a creature-song. I heard, like a form of human love, its makingness, its wroughtness, its kindliness and livingness. I heard it as if I had new ears within my ears, as if I'd been tone-deaf and now I was a musician.

(I'd noticed how the emotional I.Q. of my listening had gone up a lot in one day: to hear a beloved known voice on the phone was a joy of deeper intensity than before, as if I could hear the miraculousness of each life, and the irreplaceable individuality of each timbre, pitch, key, meter, heart.)

Hearing the poem, it was as if I was hearing the carpentry of goodness—the work of life-making and order-making, its tenderness and complexity, its valor and cornicorporeality—and mourning, anger, elegy, fatalism, hope.

It was Seamus Heaney's “The Toome Road.”

A day later, a friend quoted the last two lines of another poem, “Arise from their graves, and aspire / Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.” At first, he couldn't remember the rest, but then the third-to-last line came to him—and from those three lines he knew what the first line's end-rhyme would be. And then that one came to him too. As he said the stanza over, he remembered the next line up, the last one of the section that came before. We were standing in a kitchen; as I leaned on the icebox, he built that stanza, line by line: 4, 3, 2, 1—he built the entire poem from the ground up. It was like listening to destruction in reverse.

It was William Blake's “Ah! Sun-flower.”

The next day, another friend on the phone said, “One wants a Teller in a time like this.” It was several lines later before I understood it was a poem being said—Gwendolyn Brooks's Part XI from “The Womanhood.”

In the days to follow, I heard Robert Duncan's “Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal*,” and Paul Celan's “There Was Earth Inside Them, and They Dug.” I heard Muriel Rukeyser, and Robert Hass, and Adrienne Rich, and Sterling A. Brown. My soul drank and ate of the soul and structure of the poems, the promise and rage, the truthfulness.

One morning early I met armoured cars
In convoy, warbling along on powerful tyres,
All camouflaged with broken alder branches,
And headphoned soldiers standing up in turrets.
How long were they approaching down my roads
As if they owned them? The whole country was sleeping.
I had rights-of-way, fields, cattle in my keeping,
Tractors hitched to buckrakes in open sheds,
Silos, chill gates, wet slates, the greens and reds
Of outhouse roofs. Whom should I run to tell
Among all of those with their back doors on the latch

For the bringer of bad news, the small-hours visitant
Who, by being expected, might be kept distant?
Sowers of seed, erectors of headstones...
O charioteers, above your dormant guns,
It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass,
The invisible, untoppled omphalos.

WESLEY BROWN ON RAYMOND R. PATTERSON'S
"SUN AND I"

In response to your request for poems that resonated strongly with me in the wake of the attacks, I'm submitting a poem by Raymond R. Patterson from his book, *26 Ways of Looking at a Black Man*. I've thought a lot about this poem since the events of September 11th. It seems to suggest that any response to the experience of terror and menace should, hopefully, lead us to an examination of our own conduct in the world.

There was anger in the sky,
In the redness of the eye,
In the grayness of the lid,
In the place the eyeball hid.

There was anguish in the eye
For it quivered as it slept,
And the glowing of it crept
Through the eyelid to the sky.

There was anger in the sky,
In the silent, glowing thunder
And it made me stop and wonder
What I'd done and why.

MEREDITH SUE WILLIS ON JORGE LUIS BORGES'S
"A PRAYER"

This piece by Jorge Luis Borges moves me with its painstakingly achieved acceptance of what is. It isn't a matter of passivity or giving up, but rather of seeing clearly. Americans—always so arrogantly on top of the world, so flush, so skilled at doing—have had a dose of the rest of the world's medicine, often administered in the form of our arms sales and international policies. We, too, are at this moment helpless, victimized, forced to wait.

We need as individuals and as a nation to know that a quick vengeance may not salve our wounds; that sometimes the beloved does not come triumphantly through the door; that our enormous technological accomplishments may not save us; that each of us has to face death. Not easy for us. Borges's piece has a calming effect on me: it is the voice of an elder offering what Americans so rarely allow our elders to give: wisdom, the long view, comfort.

Thousands of times, and in both languages that are a part of me, my lips have pronounced, and shall go on pronouncing, the Paternoster, yet I only partly understand it. This morning—July 1, 1969—I want to attempt a prayer that is personal, not inherited. I know that such an undertaking demands a sincerity that is more than human. First of all, obviously I am barred from asking for anything. Asking that my eyes not be filled with night would be madness; I know of thousands of people who can see, yet who are not particularly happy, just, or wise. Time's march is a web of causes and effects, and asking for any gift of mercy, however tiny it might be, is to ask that a link be broken in that web of iron, ask that it be *already* broken. No one deserves such a miracle. Nor can I plead that my trespasses be forgiven; forgiveness is the act of another, and only I myself can save me. Forgiveness purifies the offended party, not the offender, who is virtually untouched by it. The freeness of my "free will" is perhaps illusory, but I am able to give, or to dream that I give. I can give courage, which I do not possess; I can give hope, which does not lie within me; I can teach a willingness to learn that which I hardly know myself, or merely glimpse. I want to be remembered less as poet than as friend; I want someone to repeat a cadence from Dunbar or Frost or that man who, at midnight, looked upon that tree that bleeds, the Cross, and to reflect that he heard those words for the first time from my lips. None of the rest matters to me; I hope that oblivion will not long delay. The designs of the universe are unknown to us, but we do know that to think with lucidity and to act with fairness is to aid those designs (which shall never be revealed to us).

I want to die completely; I want to die with this body, my companion.

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE ON WILLIAM STAFFORD'S
"THE WAY IT IS"

Those of us who were talking about poetry with students on September 11th were lucky, I think. Through our stunned conversations with the students who sat before us, we were reminded to what extent poetry is empathy, and how expressiveness can help us to regain balance in times of turmoil and shock.

That day, I found myself reaching for William Stafford's "The Way It Is." The poem had felt like a familiar friend for a long time, but on September 11th it spoke with doubled resonance. It has been a lifeline ever since.

I love that this poem may be read to anyone of any age. Listeners may then discuss, or hold close in silence whatever threads exist in their own lives: having friends, digging in the garden, listening to music, writing.

Stafford's poem takes into account that things won't always be easy. But it also suggests that we don't have to feel entirely lost during these rough times. Just keep hanging on to the thread.

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

ERIC GAMALINDA ON YEHUDA AMICHAÏ'S
"HALF THE PEOPLE IN THE WORLD"

Yehuda Amichai's passing last fall saddened me, because I felt we had lost one of the strongest champions of peace. He lived most of his life in Palestine, and although he wrote with love about his native Israel, he never wrote with hate about Arabs. Chana Bloch, in her introduction to *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, said that love was the center of his poetry, love for life, which transcends race, religion, or politics.

Half the people in the world
 love the other half,
 half the people
 hate the other half.
 Must I because of this half and that half
 go wandering and changing ceaselessly
 like rain in its cycle,
 must I sleep among rocks,
 and grow rugged like the trunks of olive trees,
 and hear the moon barking at me,
 and camouflage my love with worries,
 and sprout like frightened grass between the railroad tracks,
 and live underground like a mole,
 and remain with roots and not with branches,
 and not feel my cheek against the cheek of angels,
 and love in the first cave,
 and marry my wife beneath a canopy
 of beams that support the earth,
 and act out my death, always
 till the last breath and the last
 words and without ever understanding,
 and put flagpoles on top of my house
 and a bomb shelter underneath. And go out on roads
 made only for returning and go through
 all the appalling stations—
 cat, stick, fire, water, butcher,
 between the kid and the angel of death?
 Half the people love,
 half the people hate.
 And where is my place between such well-matched halves,
 and through what crack will I see
 the white housing projects of my dreams
 and the barefoot runners on the sands
 or, at least, the waving
 of a girl's kerchief, beside the mound?

ROBERT PINSKY ON MARIANNE MOORE'S
"WHAT ARE YEARS?"

"What Are Years?" is a poem I have loved for a long time, but the poem is transformed for me in this recent new context of a city, a country, the whole world, confronting vulnerabilities and evils and the need for courage. I admire Marianne Moore's unshowy approach to courage, somehow understated at the same time as it is ringing.

What is our innocence,
what is our guilt? All are
naked, none is safe. And whence
is courage: the unanswered question,
the resolute doubt,—
dumbly calling, deafly listening—that
in misfortune, even death,
encourages others
and in its defeat, stirs

the soul to be strong? He
sees deep and is glad, who
accedes to mortality
and in his imprisonment rises
upon himself as
the sea in a chasm, struggling to be
free and unable to be,
in its surrendering
finds its continuing.

So he who strongly feels,
behaves. The very bird,
grown taller as he sings, steels
his form straight up. Though he is captive,
his mighty singing
says, satisfaction is a lowly
thing, how pure a thing is joy.
This is mortality,
this is eternity.

TOM SLEIGH ON ALEKSANDER WAT'S
MY CENTURY

When I read this passage by Aleksander Wat, the Polish poet who spent years of his life behind bars during the Stalinist terror, I would like to avoid saying anything that has the least connotation of what W. H. Auden called “the windiest militant trash / important persons shout.” Wat reminds me that life is a “patchwork affair.” I turn to Wat for release from the morass of conflicting realities and what he calls “tragic fragments.”

The fact that Wat finds such harmony in voices and specific moments of pain, or another person’s warmth and glance, restores me to textures and sights and smells, and to a sense of time not looping always backward to replay horrors made numb by repetition. None of this talk of “pre-established harmony” will cause the crash site’s fearful images and sensations to fade very quickly, of course. The consolations of philosophy Boethius finds in prison won’t easily translate to someone watching TV or living in downtown Manhattan.

Would Wat call the memory of the crash site and the presence of that harmony two sides of the same thing? But “two sides” of what? On one side, modern modes of fear and violence? On the other, consolation? Spiritual life in the state of becoming? Perhaps poetry, under such conditions, is itself a state and not a fact, not a memory, not a wound that poets must stare into for validation even while sharing in the substance of the wound.

I am not a poet because I write poems . . . or because I composed poems in prisons to condense my spiritual states. And not because I had loved poetry since I was a child and had a high respect for excellent verse.

[. . .]

And not because I wanted to make my life into a work of art, a poem In my early youth, I wanted to end up as a drunk in the gutter, a *clochard* (and I came close to it in my dadaist phase) or, alternatively, as a hermit philosopher living in the extreme poverty that I thought probably lay in store for me anyway. I also had long phases in which I needed to take refuge in mediocrity, and that was bad, very bad. On the whole, my life was a patchwork affair, and there was no question of its being a work of art.

[. . .]

But my life, oh, my life, had been a constant search for an enormous dream in which my fellow creatures and animals, plants, chimeras, stars, and minerals were in a pre-established harmony, a dream that is forgotten because it must be forgotten, and is sought desperately, and only sporadically does one find its tragic fragments in the warmth of a person, in some specific situation, a glance in memory too, of course, in some specific pain, some moment. I loved that harmony with a passion; I loved it in voices, voices. And then, instead of harmony, there was nothing but scraps and tatters. And perhaps that alone is what it means to be a poet.

GAIL KARP ON VIRGINIA WOOLF'S
MRS. DALLOWAY

In the days that followed September 11th, I wanted words that could provide both sentimental comfort and the bright, clear surprise of survival, words that acknowledged the numbing terror in one's head, then transcended it. Conventional wisdom recommended poetry, but I kept moving toward something longer, thicker, more replete with chapter-long contradictions and life-long complications. I found myself driven to locate and unpack a dog-eared edition of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*.

What I was looking for in the aftermath of September 11th was contained within this single book—not just in its description of the doomed and shell-shocked war veteran Septimus Smith, but also in its portrayal of the vain, exuberant, and determined-to-be-joyful socialite Clarissa Dalloway. The death of Septimus is a tragedy, but the heart and soul of the book isn't that. The core of the novel focuses on the life of the stunned and reeling Mrs. Dalloway, someone who might be irredeemable in her apathy about politics and her antipathy for the "Armenians? Albanians?" (she doesn't remember which). But Clarissa *is* redeemed. In the moments after Septimus's suicide, she struggles with "the sudden swelling of the terror," and permits long held-back emotions to crash through the barricades of her mind. "Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death."

While Clarissa never experiences the possibility of jetliners raining down on her or the beautiful bravery that comes from walking down the street anyway, she does respond in a way that is instructive. Clarissa's actions carry her beyond the sudden arrival of death. She overcomes her paralysis and continues, changed, but inhabiting fully what comes after.

Then (she had felt it only this morning) there was the terror; the overwhelming incapacity, one's parents giving it into one's hands, this life, to be lived to the end, to be walked with serenely; there was in the depths of her heart an awful fear.

[...]

It will be a solemn sky, she had thought, it will be a dusky sky, turning away its cheek in beauty. But there it was—ashen pale, raced over quickly by tapering vast clouds. It was new to her. The wind must have risen.... The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. He [Septimus] had made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She must assemble.