

Returning today to the assigned poems for tomorrow's discussion, I couldn't help being overwhelmed by the eerie poignancy:::

8:30 AM Awake after staying up late reading Pound, I turn on the Today Show to check the weather. It looks clear outside but I think perhaps rain? A bit cooler than yesterday?

8:40 AM I flip back and forth between the Today Show, Good Morning America and Canadian tv. No weather yet.

8:45 AM Was it then? Did it happen then? The timeline flashes across the tv screen all day and still I do not know the exact chronology.

“Their shadow dims the sunshine of our day,
As they go lumbering across the sky...

They scare the singing birds of earth away
As, greed-impelled, they circle threateningly,
Watching the toilers with malignant eye...

They swoop down for the spoil in certain might,
And fasten in our bleeding flesh their claws.
They beat us to surrender weak with fright,
And tugging and tearing without let or pause,
They flap their hideous wings in grim delight,
And stuff our gory hearts into their maws”

—Claude McKay, “Birds of Prey”

8:48 AM I pick up the phone to call my mother—without thinking, on reflex—I hang up. Not today, I shouldn't call her today. Today my mother undergoes her third spinal procedure in only a few months. I should let her be calm today I think. But the ultimate news junkie—would she be more upset if I did *not* call?

8:50 AM So I telephone my mother. The first of many phone calls—delivered and received—which begin with the command “Turn on the TV.”

8:55 AM My father is en-route to Manhattan—he is unconcerned by the news—he reminds me “New York is better at handling things than Philadelphia—it would shut Philly down all day but Manhattan can keep it contained.”

Time has become skewed. There is only before and after.

“spinal cord, the part of the nervous system occupying the hollow interior (Vertebral canal) of the series of vertebrae that form the spinal column, technically known as the vertebral column.”

9:05 I am watching the television when I see the second plane. But there were helicopters in view just a second ago so I think maybe it is a surveillance plane. As if frozen in time, I become increasingly alarmed. (Do I speak out loud? Do I actually say it or just think it?)
“That plane is too close...it’s too close...”

Flashback: New Year’s Eve 1986

My mother and I are in a car accident returning from a doctor’s visit.
One block from our house, we hit a tree at 15 mph and the blow feels catastrophic.

“Experts estimate the planes flew at approximate speeds close to 500 mph upon impact.”

As if a cartoon, the hood of the car, from the bumper to the dashboard accordion pleats into mere inches. The engine simply collapses. Crunching metal. Sheared steel.

Time slows.

Katie Couric is talking to a producer via cell phone who cries “Oh No” and “Oh my goodness...another one just hit.” She is remarkably calm.

“His head is raised to the sky he stands staring
His mouth is still his face is still his eyes are staring”
—Archibald MacLeish, “Cinema of a Man”

Matt Lauer guesses that it is a small plane—a prop perhaps??
The producer assures him it is a big plane—a 747 perhaps, a commercial jet-liner—Matt Lauer doubts her “It didn’t look that big from here.”
I realize she is not as calm as I thought—she is annoyed by his doubting—she insists it looked enormous from the street.

Minutes tick by and this is what becomes important. Debates about size. One of the commentators wonders if there is something wrong with Air Traffic Control. It is already clear that this is terrorism. That this is terror.

terror 1. The state of being terrified or greatly frightened; intense fear, fright, or dread.
 2. The action or quality of causing dread; terrific quality, terribleness
 3. King of terrors, Death personified.

9:10 AM I do not move from the TV. I answer the phone. Hang up the phone. Answer the phone.
 “Yes, I am watching.” “I was watching it live when it happened.”
 “Yes, I saw—I was trying to find out the weather.”

9:15 AM A trash truck picks up our recycling.

9:20 AM My mother calls to report that my father is “disappointed” the city is closing.

“The spinal cord mediates the reflex responses to some sensory impulses directly”

My partner wakes and is unable to understand what I tell him:

“Two planes flew into the World Trade Center. I was watching—trying to find out the weather—when it happened. I saw it happen.”

“Two planes flew into the World Trade Center—20 minutes apart—first one and then another—it’s terrorism.”

I can tell he thinks I am being an alarmist. Am I being an alarmist? Have I been victimized by the news media, whipped into a frenzy, manipulated by their shock tactics?

(After all, women are so emotional—so quick to panic—so easy to upset—Why can’t a woman be more like a man?)

Upon impact, the car ejects approximately 12 feet into the air before crashing down (estimated from burn marks on the bark and branches—still there even now).

It—we—tumble through the air before crashing down and rolling.
Windows shatter. Glass rains around us.

The phone rings. Grad students who boast of not owning televisions suddenly call and leave messages to turn on a tv or radio. People confess the near-misses:

“supposed to be on the 94th floor of the building today.” “can’t get through to my
brother in the Federal Building.” “was en-route to Manhattan today—due to
arrive early this morning.” “trapped in the subway.”

“A shock wave is caused by the sudden, violent disturbance, such as that created by a powerful explosion or by the supersonic flow of the fluid over a solid object”

9:35 AM The Pentagon has been bombed. Perhaps. That’s the first report. From someone inside the Pentagon who says he is walking into the hallway. I wonder why he isn’t leaving. Oh, of course. Because they are not alarmists at the Pentagon. A loud crash, the building shook, the windows rattled and still he wanders the halls, calls NBC from his phone, ponders the alarms remaining silent.

Katie Couric compares this bombing to the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center—she notes that on that day, the weather was gray and overcast whereas today is “bright sunshine, crystal clear blue skies.”

People are seen jumping from windows as high as the 80th floor. The story of a man and woman jumping, holding hands.

12 feet felt like an impossible distance—a lifetime before landing.

The cliché: seconds do indeed become hours. Not “life passes before your eyes” but death, dying, a rapid-fire of stills pass before you. You see in front, peripherally, everything at once. You see with sudden clarity. Everything committed to memory instantaneously.

Leaves, sky, clouds, houses, grass, concrete, grass, houses, leaves, sky blur and spin.

9:40 AM Phone rings. “Is this the lady of the house? This is the Buffalo News calling—we’re offering a trial period.” “Well, we’re not saying that you have to cancel your other subscription, but just try this one as well.” The voice on the other end sounds surprised that I am too interested in seeing the news on tv at that moment rather than talking to her. It occurs to me after I hang up that perhaps she does not know. Does anyone not know? It hardly seems possible that it has all happened in under an hour.

Someone in the World Trade Center calls NBC on their cell phone. Soundbite: “We’re fucking dying here!” Katie Couric quotes it afterwards as “we’re bleeping dying here.”

“What do you see in our eyes
At the shrieking iron and flame
Hurled through still heavens?
What quaver—what heart aghast?”

—Isaac Rosenberg, “Break of Day in the Trenches”

9:50 AM The first Tower crumbles.

The car comes to a stop driver-side down, teetering and threatening to roll roof-down. Neighbors come screaming, crowding around the car, peering in.

I yell our names and address over and over again. I do not stop to listen to their questions. I am unable to stop repeating this simple information. Robotically, as a toddler learns this information, only mechanical recall of information with seeming incomprehension of its relevance. They ask if we are okay, if we can breathe. I continue to scream the address—instruct someone to run and get my father, only houses away.

10:20 AM I cannot leave the TV. I have now seen the footage perhaps more often than the Zabruder films. But even though the picture is far clearer in these films, there is still that surreality. The horror in knowing that it is about to...here it comes...right there—never goes away. You know it is coming and still you watch as if the outcome might be different.

10:30 AM The second tower falls.

The dark air spurts with fire....

Maniac Earth! howling and flying, your
bowel
Seared by the jagged fire, the iron love,
The impetuous storm of savage love.
Dark Earth! dark Heavens! swinging in
chemic smoke”

—Isaac Rosenberg, “Dead Man’s Dump”

10:45 AM I call Joyce to see if the department is still open. I can hear the news reports in the background. “This is just like Pearl Harbor,” Joyce—who is always in charge and calm—says. “Yes, I know,” I answer. But I do not know. Pearl Harbor?—the associations ring in the air after I hang up.

“Continuous shock waves, such as those produced by supersonic aircraft, are of particular concern as they tend to recur along regular routes”

Now the report comes in that another plane has crashed into the Pentagon—not a bomb.

A bomb threat at a NYC high school—another evacuation.

“Said Adm. Robert J. Natter, commander of the U.S. Atlantic Fleet: ‘We have been attacked like we haven’t since Pearl Harbor’”

—Associated Press, 11 September 2001

My mother is disappointed that she will miss the news reports in the hospital. I try to be optimistic, to sound hopeful—maybe it will be on in the check-in area instead of those awful soap operas we usually sit through. She has had this procedure before—we pretend this makes it normal.

3. reign of terror, a state of things in which the general community live in dread of death or outrage

I need to get in the shower. I need to eat something—I forgot about breakfast. I need to get dressed if I am going to campus.

“The arches are positioned so that the space they enclose is in effect a tube, the vertebral canal”

My mother’s spine is crumbling. Slowly at first but now increasingly rapid degeneration. This is not the only problem. There are many others. A medical file thicker than a Norton Anthology. I have learned to say: “ImmunoCompromised.” But still must stop each time to remember how the doctor’s discuss her “condition.”

It does not seem real no matter how often I say it.

The World Trade Center has been attacked by terrorists. There is mass confusion in the streets. People are screaming. Firefighters and FBI agents run through the streets.

The Pentagon has been bombed.

My mother is trapped between concrete and metal. I must get out if she is to be rescued. I stand on anything to hoist myself out of the passenger side window.
(Later I learn what I used as my springboard was her broken ribcage.)

11. Special Combs.: spine-basher spine-bashing; spine-bill; spine-bone; spine-chiller, something (rearily someone) that inspires excitement and terror; esp. a horror or suspense story, film, etc.; spine-chilling ppl
a. and vbl. n. inspiring excitement and terror horrifying

I am bulky and awkward in my winter coat. They tell me to move slowly so as to not jar the vehicle but I am scrambling, shaking, my arms are not working the way I want them to. I am not strong enough. Familiar hands grip me, they are my father's arms lifting me out. Time is skewed. It is freezing but my hair mats against my forehead and neck, clammy with blood and sweat.

A fourth plane is down in Western Pennsylvania. Headed for Three Mile Island? So that's what's next? Chemical warfare? A nuclear attack which dwarfs the World Trade Center kamikazes?

The Twin Towers have now fully collapsed. Crumbled. Debris covers everything. Manhattan looks like Pompeii.

“Manhattan's roofs and spires and cheerless domes!...

Almost the mighty city is asleep,
No pushing crowd, no tramping, tramping feet...

Grotesque beneath the strong electric lights.
The shadows wane”

—Claude McKay, “Dawn in New York”

I pack my lunch. We're out of grapes. I'll go to the Co-op later. And mushrooms too, we need mushrooms. Oh right—Pearl Harbor, mushroom clouds, kamikazes—it all reduces to simplistic metaphors.

11:00 AM I call Joseph's office directly and ask again if the department is holding classes. I should just not go. I should not feel so responsible. I should just make up my mind that I'm not going. How indecisive.

terrorist 2. Dyslogistically: One who entertains, professes, or tries to awaken or spread a feeling of terror or alarm; an alarmist, a scaremonger.

There are reports of car bombs in the streets of New York. Or perhaps they are overheating from the fires.

11:15 AM Family members call. To console. To be compassionate. I say I am going to spend the next 6 hours discussing Ezra Pound and Emily Dickinson. No wonder they think grad school is some alien, disconnected venture.

I pack my bag. Should I bring the Perloff? No, I probably won't get a chance to look at it. Well, you never know—I'll bring the Perloff.

It's chillier than I thought. I run back for a sweater.

“Many of the Pentagon's more than 20,000 civilians and military personnel were already on the edge when the attack came...it seemed as if every office television was turned on. Military and civilian employees watched in disbelief as smoke engulfed the two towers. In a macabre foreshadowing of what then happened, Mike Slater, a former Marine, told his coworkers, ‘We're next.’

Then the Pentagon, built to withstand terrorist attacks, shook like a rickety roller coaster, A section of it collapsed and burned”

—Don Van Natta and Lizette Alvarez, New York Times, 12 September 2001

I stand on the sidewalk as firefighters and rescue paramedics circle the car. The “jaws of life” are summonsed. More accurately, a chainsaw is retrieved from a rescue vehicle. The siren lights wash the scene red.

“The hijacked planes were all en route to California, and therefore gorged with fuel”

—Serge Schmemann, New York Times, 12 September 2001

There is fluid flooding the street. Water from the radiator? But it is not freezing. It is close to dusk now—temperatures are dropping, darkness is impeding the rescue. Is it anti-freeze? Gasoline? A mixture. There is the problem of time. I am one face in the crowd. I cannot see my mother or hear—there is too much of a crowd now—but she is apparently alert and talking. I think I might have lost my hearing—unfamiliar faces are moving their mouths very close to my face, their eyes searching mine for response, my ears are not working.

11:45 AM The roads are empty. I feel foolish to be going out, to be going anywhere.

12:15 PM The first person I see after parking my car tells me to turn around and go home. The university is officially closed as of noon. I am annoyed that I bothered.

I try to “make the best of it”: I will check my mailbox, pick up my printouts from yesterday in the Cybrary. (I am indeed my father's daughter.)

12:30 PM The monitor in the Cybrary is tuned to CBS. Students are arguing over which channel would be better. People are gathered around the “Express Computers” sending messages, getting news reports online. People are spreading distorted versions. “There are planes headed for the White House.” “They can’t find Cheney.” “There are still like 10 planes out there—out of radar.” I want to correct them—as if I know anything—but stand quietly and watch the footage I have been watching all morning. As if it is different footage in this new context:

Once again—the hole in the first Tower—the one we didn’t see happen. Then the plane coming at the second tower. “Billowing smoke.” “Fireball.”

s p i n e , n .

2. The sting of a bee. Obs.

5a. Any natural formation having a slender sharp-pointed form. b. Needlework. c. A tall mass of lava projecting upwards from the mouth of a volcano.

Engineers discuss the steel construction. Approximate miles per hour upon impact. Debate who manned the planes—were the pilots killed or forced to fly head-on into the skyscrapers?

“More than 10 hours after the terrorist attack, Secretary of Defense, Donald H. Rumsfeld struggled to give the impression of business-as-usual in a brief appearance in the Pentagon pressroom”

—Don Van Natta and Lizette Alvarez, New York Times, 12 September 2001

My printouts are not there. I ask one of the Computer Consultants. He is impatient. Annoyed. Perplexed that I care. I remember that one of the symptoms of shock is attempting to proceed as if nothing has happened. So I leave the Cybrary.

“conduct a full-scale investigation to hunt down and to find those folks who committed this act. Terrorism against our nation will not stand...”

—George W. Bush, Florida, 11 September 2001

12:50 PM For once, I drive home at a reasonable speed. NPR has special announcements. The music in the background sounds like the overture from Schindler’s List. The soundbite again and again of Bush saying we will “hunt down” the perpetrators. We will “find the folks” who did this. “Folks”—as if the Hadfields took shotguns to our fields. “We”—as if Americans need only to feel solidarity and all will be well.

Sound finally gets through:

the Fire Chief is standing tall, high-hatted, in consultation with his crew:

“She’s not understanding. She won’t make it. There’s no way to save her. She’s gone.”

This is what I hear. This is what I remember hearing.

I flee. I run. I fly over sidewalk. Eyes tear from cold and panic.

I do not know that the first “she” he is referring to is my mother—and by “gone” he means that she is in shock and unable to understand the severity of the accident. But the second “she” refers to the car—which my mother is urging him not to cut into. The gendered pronoun of the automobile has convinced me that my mother is dead. I run home the 8 house distance with this knowledge ringing through my ears, my chest. A witness—something in me needs to tell what I have seen. What I have heard.

1:20 PM I am mesmerized by the tv again. I watch the reports and feel tired. Feel nervous. Feel on the verge of tears. The phone is very quiet now. I watch the clock. I calculate how long it takes for the procedure.

Steel beams crumble in minutes. “Built to withstand only so much pressure.”

“Structurally, the spinal cord is a double-layered tube, roughly cylindrical in cross section.”

3:30 PM Still scrambling for some purpose, something to keep me busy, so decide to cook. I gather ingredients. I wash. I chop vegetables. Dice. Mince. Mutilate.

10. a. In sense 6, as spine-ache, -case, -chisel, -pad, etc.; spinebreaker; spine-breaking, -broken adjs.; spine-wise advb.

1882 FLOYER *Unexpl. Baluchistan* 120 “We bumped, stumbled, and jolted in a most horribly spine-breaking, bone-dislocating manner.”

Peel onions. Carrots. Garlic.

Soundbite: “People with burns went running by me with their skin peeling off in giant sheets.”

Our neighbors are blaring the radio. First “R.O.C.K in the U.S.A.” and then “Solid as a Rock.” Even more than my shock at the level of the volume on their radio, I am stunned that any station is playing music. Let alone rock anthems.

“shock, any condition in which the circulatory system is unable to provide adequate circulation to the body tissues...Dilation of blood vessels may be caused by injury to the nervous system, or by pain or emotional stress”

“Moaning I turned away, for misery

I have the strength to bear but not to see”

—Claude McKay, “The Castaways”

5:15 PM I will walk. Go to the ATM—no line. “Please wait while we contact your financial institution.” Get mushrooms and the streets are amazingly quiet. It is even cooler than I thought. I can hear the news reports streaming from every house. Almost in unison, I can hear the footage of the Towers collapsing. Of people screaming. Of the panic in reporter’s voices.

“Make no mistake. The United States will hunt down and pursue those responsible for these cowardly actions.”

—George W. Bush, Florida, 11 September 2001

6:00 PM I am embarrassed by footage of Congress on the Capitol steps singing “God Bless America.” I am angry that people clap afterwards.

terrorism

1. Government by intimidation as directed and carried out by the party in power

Reports of people calling their “loved ones” from cell phones immersed in the debris. But firefighters and rescuers are only finding body parts. Decapitated heads. Stray limbs.

“A day such as today underscores our importance and our responsibility as teachers and as researchers as we continue our efforts with our students and colleagues to build a strong and coherent framework of knowledge and understanding”

--William R. Greiner, UB President, 11 September 2001

k n o w l e d g e a n d u n d e r s t a n d i n g

Reports of people calling final goodbyes in from the planes. from offices just minutes before the collapse. of a son losing his elderly mother and traveling the city by rollerblade trying to find her. of a 40-year veteran firefighter who went back in one final time but never came back out.

Reporters hypothesize that perhaps they were in the basement and are now under 80 stories of debris?

I commence calling relatives and informing them that my mother is dead.
I vomit. I shake. I do not cry. I remain calm and telephone people.

I do not know that TV crews have arrived—they film the wreckage for the evening news. We will be a “happy new year’s” story on the 11 o’clock news. The final line of the story: “this driver walked away without a scratch.” There is the need to be positive at all costs.

I try to grade papers. I save leftovers for tomorrow. I try to read. I try to get organized.

“My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;

A wave of longing through my body swept,
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept”

—Claude McKay, “The Tropics in New York”

I keep turning off the tv and walking away only to return again.

5. *Comb.* b. objective (with *pr. pples.*), as terror-breathing, -causing, -giving, -inspiring, -preaching, -stirring, -striking,
c. instrumental (with *pa. pples.*), as terror-crazed, -fraught, -haunted, -mingled, -ridden, -riven, -shaken, -smitten, -stiffened, -stricken, -struck
d. *Special Combs.* terror-bombing, intensive and indiscriminate bombing designed to frighten a country into surrender; terror raid, a bombing raid of this nature

Soundbite: American flags are “flying off the shelves” at Walmarts across the country.

Sunny. High in the 70s with an increasing chance of showers. Lows in the 50s by this evening.

“It’s Tuesday, September 11, 2001 and this is Today.”