

A Rhetoric of Trauma in 9-11 Stories: A Critical Reading of Ulrich Baer's *110 Stories*

As individuals of an earlier generation recall where they were and what they were doing when they learned that JFK had been shot, so we today recall our own where's and what's of September 11, 2001. My morning had started with a coincidence. I was conditioned at a young age to think of physical exercise more as religious duty than recreational escape. In twenty-eight years of exercising, I had never stopped before finishing my scheduled workout. I'd taken days off, but never, once started, had I ever quit before finishing. No more than one third of the way through my workout on September 11th, I stopped. Not from illness or exhaustion, but because of some strange distraction. I couldn't focus. I switched on my television. In the Colorado Rockies, it was not quite 7:00 a.m.

As the screen's pixels congealed into a discernable image, a skyscraper spewed smoke from a floor about two-thirds up its structure. When the camera zoomed back, I recognized the building: one of the Twin Towers. A commentator's small, distant voice informed that the burning tower was no fiction. Then a second airliner floated into focus and to smash itself into the burning tower's twin. As I worked to digest the fact of a terrorist plot, I realized that this morning of September 11, 2001 had achieved what January 1, 2000 had failed to achieve in any definitive sense: a new century had just been born.

In the minutes, hours, and days that followed, I wrestled with a torrent of intense but ill-defined feelings. I was angry. And I longed for justice—even if I wasn't certain what justice would require. But retribution wasn't all I desired. I'd wanted to visit the Towers. I'd wanted to experience them first-hand, to know whether they were grandly gaudy or majestically sublime. Not now. The towers were gone. I'd never gawk at their height, never ascend to their observatories, never dine in their restaurants. But what thoughts were these? What of the 2792 people who were in those buildings? I knew them only abstractly as fellow Americans—their absence a nameless absolute. These fellow humans were the real loss, a loss too much to dwell on for long. So I cycled in obsessions, speculating about the victims' last moments, blocking such conjecture for some time, then returning to the story, but finding no end.

My feelings were at first but a wreck of anger, disbelief, regret, sympathy, rage: the spawn of unjustifiable ruin. Generally my obsessions breed analysis, because analysis is how I tend to cope. What I noted was that my emotions were split. My first sense was an *absence of presence*—my emotions fueled by my awareness of a concrete loss: the structures and the people were gone. But that was not all. A related yet distinct cluster of emotions accompanied my first reactions. My emotions swelled to accept a second sense: the *presence of absence*. That is, beyond registering the concrete losses as a matter of fact, the losses increasingly became meaningful abstractions: matters of significance. Something, both concrete and abstract, had been stolen from me as a person, from us as a nation. We had been cheated and stripped. But what of the family and friends and lovers who had shared life with those who perished? How were they to cope? I sought their stories.

The ones I've selected to investigate here come from a single book: *110 Stories: New York Writes After September 11*. From among the narratives, I've selected seven to explore. A few general observations: Resolution proves elusive in these stories. Only three of these seven writers show a character coming to terms with the post 9-11 realities. Only one of those, the last examined in this essay, seems able to grasp any sense of redemption through the loss. Among this diversity, however, these story tellers collectively draw upon the two clusters of emotions I mention above—the *absence of presence* and the *presence of absence*—as common responses.

We know that humans tell stories to please and to instruct, but they also tell stories for release. Psychologists inform that talking or writing about trauma is of healthy use to survivors. In a recent article that explores “trauma” as an evolving concept, Irene Kacandes finds that only within the last 100 years has the term referred to psychic wounding, and then has done so haphazardly, for “trauma” can refer both to the conditions that wound a psyche *and* the resulting injured state of mind.¹ The actual labor of crafting a story is especially therapeutic. As Kacandes writes:

Being able to move on from [a] threat to the self involves in part accepting the fact that what seemed impossible did actually happen by telling a narrative about it and feeling the appropriate affect for such an occurrence. Most important to my analysis here is this: contact with uninvited disaster, the working through, and the acceptance of the presence of the impossible in one's life will *change one*.²

Kacandes' assertion offers a hypothesis for stories crafted in response to 9-11. Namely, if traumatic events produce similar effects on different people, then

the different stories from 9-11 ought to have similarities at the level of their infrastructures.

As different as the stories are in their particulars, they are bound together in preoccupations with resolution—preoccupations with either achieving it or failing to. In the narratives those preoccupations manifest themselves as *absence of presence* and *presence of absence*. *Absence of presence* pertains to a corporeal loss in which the artist's subject matter is tangible, tactile, concrete. Drawing from *absence of presence* as a common topic, the artist's focus is with the objective; the critic's with imagery. To be more precise, in drawing from the *absence of presence*, the artists deal with the death and destruction as matters of fact, as matters of what is, or perhaps more accurately, what is no longer. Reflective readers encounter this common topic predominately through imagery of persons, buildings, streets, and the like. The second topic, *presence of absence*, pertains not simply to loss as a matter of fact but to a change in the psyche—to the significance of loss. Here, the artist's focus is with the subjective; the critic's with how art gives voice to something incomprehensible that has become actual. In other words, the focus is with how narrators place their audience and how characters respond to the losses.

Lawrence Chua's parable, "The Quick and the Poor," moves us into a cloud of ambiguity. The title invites a free association with the common phrase "the quick and the dead." The title calls up an archaic definition of "quick," contrasting the living with the deceased, but still allows the possibility of interpreting the word in its modern meaning—fast, speedy, rapid. In a gunfight, one must be quick not to end up dead. Does Chua's "quick" refer to speed or living? Either way we interpret the word in the title, are the "quick" contrasted against, equated with, or added to the poor? Oddly, this story is not told in a New York setting, but in Milan. This distant, exotic setting contributes heavily to making the narrative a parable. The story's main character is a nameless "he"—an old man who is on a quest. His mission: to view a famous painting.

The man obsesses over a recent loss he has suffered. The longing filling his mind stems from a poignant *absence of presence*. As he walks the streets of Milan, he wishes "there were some evidence there to mark his father's passing. His father had died quickly and poor, leaving behind nothing but some papers and an old silver-plated watch, nothing of value and nothing of worth."³ This desire plays a vital role in any interpretation of Chua's parable. The man discloses no regrets regarding the relationship between him and his father itself. His distress stems from an absence of appropriate marker to honor a cherished bond.

Sitting at a restaurant, he is overcome by an impulse. Compelled to view the painting, he'll tolerate nothing that stands between him and his quest: "He entered the museum, finally, resenting even the young woman with quiet half-lidded eyes who took his ticket. He went searching for the famous painting. He did not have far to go."⁴

It was a painting of a man lying with his eyes closed and a sheet across his naked waist. His feet stuck out from under the sheet, and the soles of the feet faced the viewer. There were wounds on the man's feet. Above the knees, the man's soft penis stirred under the cloth. Lean, dull flesh curled around the man's rib cage and his face was the color of something that no longer had breath. There were wounds on the hands also, and if one looked at the holes clearly enough, one could catch a glimpse of something moving just out of reach. In the corner of the painting, three faces leaned towards the man. They appeared to be crying, but they were not crying at all. There was something unreasonable about their sadness, its pretense.⁵

The description is that of Montegna's *Dead Christ*. The energies aroused in the man's desire (that some evidence should mark the passing of his father) seem sublimated in this quest to view the image. In a sense, the painting could be seen as evidence of Christ's death. But Montegna's style clearly declares that that is not the painting's full significance. Chua's use of *Dead Christ* reappropriates the painter's stylistic distortions for his own purposes, bringing them to bear on the media depictions of 9-11 events.

Resolution follows the man's seeing the distortions in the painting not as artistic expression but as simple misrepresentation: "He looked at the mourners and the man for a while, and then he saw that the man's legs were too short for the rest of his body. This is wrong, he said . . . This is totally wrong."⁶ Chua's drawing on the *presence of absence* manifests itself in the moment the man recognizes the presence of distortion in the painting. The painting cannot be a tribute to his father. It is not an accurate or authentic depiction of anything. As the quest was an attempt to resolve the desires aroused for his father, the distortions are not limited to the painting's artistic merit—they transfer directly to his personal grief. For this man in this moment, the visual distortion does a disservice, even an insult, to the painting's subject. Given the man's reason for wanting to see the painting, the disservice is to his father. From that moment of realization, a momentarily ambiguous segue follows: "An alarm went off, a little bird whistle. An attendant walked over . . . She motioned to the painting and the space between it and him and him and her. He looked at her and his voice was no longer impatient. Yes, he said. Yes. I know how to look at a painting."⁷

The alarm borders on pathetic fallacy: the alarm in the mind coincides with the alarm in the museum, signaling a change in psychological perspective. Such

a change is most often a private matter. That truth is conveyed here through situational irony when the man asserts that he knows how to look at a painting. His statement conveys something other than acquiescence. He now knows how to truly see, knows what an accurate and appropriate depiction would be, and that the distortion before him falls short. As he recognizes distortion, he asserts standards of proportionality and appropriateness. In doing so he crosses a psychological threshold into peace of mind, if not tranquility.

Offered in response to the 9-11 exigence, Chua's parable suggests a critique of the national media's coverage of the event. Like Mantegna's painting, the eyes of the cameras and the voices of the talking heads distorted the events, robbing them of appropriate depiction. To assimilate trauma, one must put it in proper perspective and respond to it with appropriate and authentic emotion. Chua seems to understand the delicacies of his subject and offers sage advice: the mass media offer nothing in way of treating trauma. If we can heal, we must begin by escaping media distortions.

The narratives that are more story than parable turn inward, focusing more directly on the souls and less on the context, to comment on the trauma of 9-11. Taking up the troubles of an unlikely hero, Humera Afridi unveils the plight of a nameless Islamic woman in her story, "Circumference." The story opens with concrete, detailed description: "The woman has trained herself to wake up to precise images: aquamarine sea, limestone villas, sand the color of caramel custard. For a week now, she has awakened to this collage of all the beaches she has known."⁸ In sharp juxtaposition with that opening the lines that follow show the character is engaged in some much needed therapeutic escapism. "Less than a mile from where she lives," we are told, "there is a world destroyed, mangled, spitting the flumes of burnt steel, flesh and plastic."⁹ The city has been in lock-down. With security measures now relaxed, she is "free to roam beyond the circumference of the five square blocks where she has been zoned for the last four days since the attack."¹⁰ This woman's story, we find, does not begin with the terrorism of 9-11. It begins at least three days, perhaps even a year, before the towers were destroyed. The beach imagery, the attack, the destruction, and the ensuing physical freedom are all context for a more personal story of loss.

The nameless woman is a person whose humanity is highlighted in her flaws. Granted access to her thoughts, we learn the woman wrestles with more than the trauma of foreign terrorists: "Her lover—though after this last time, could he really be called that? Said: *We should leave it at the level of skin. No telephone calls, no e-mail.* This woman who moved alone to the city three weeks ago cannot get her lover's words out of her head. She mutters them, remembering the breadth of him against her, wishing she'd said them first."¹¹ Implied in that last wish is a commentary on our contradictory human impulses and the personal risks of private passions. He is absent. But what presence had he when he was

with her? No discourse, no words cement their bond. Then there is the desire for one-upsmanship that the game has on its players—quietly she desires that she had been first to eviscerate their intimacy. As she prepares to leave her apartment, a darker side of her reality reveals itself to us in her innermost thoughts:

[S]he thinks of her husband. He will call soon from the home they had shared until three weeks ago. She will miss the call. On the fourth day after this world has been sabotaged, she knows that the other man, the one with whom she has this arrangement, this mutual exercising of lust, will not telephone. Each time, in the days following his visit, the sensation of his presence dissipates, but now she does not let him out of her head. To do so will mean creating space for the horror outside, the sinking in that this life is no longer a fiction.¹²

The figures of speech that accumulate in the story paint a complex mural of absence. For example, “as she crosses the street it feels as though she has left a country behind.” Also, “earnestness is not what the city is about and she wears her sin too close to her skin.” And, “the woman feels she is driving through a palimpsest.”¹³ The imagery is active; moreover, it coheres as being all of a given ilk. The act of leaving a country behind has an emotional mix of loss and exhilaration. But the city she enters is foreign, her attire, the sin she wears, is not in keeping with the fashion of the metropolis. “Driving through a palimpsest” (the space created by erasing from a parchment that contains sacred writing) suggests a freedom encumbered with a lingering sense of guilt. She traverses across a cleared path, but on either side of her declarations of holy writ bear witness to her sin.

As she rides in a cab, her thoughts return to her lover. “She cannot believe that the man who fucked her seven days ago hasn’t bothered to e-mail, to call; she cannot believe she is thinking of him still . . .”¹⁴ During the cab ride, she witnesses random threats yelled to the cab’s Middle-eastern driver. The woman thinks of her lover during her cab ride. The narrator tells us, “She cannot believe she is thinking of him still and that she has thought more about him than at any other time, in any other year. She cannot believe she is becoming this sort of woman, the sort of woman who baffles her.”¹⁵ Hers is not simply an awareness of his absence, but an awareness of what that absence is making of her. She exits the cab and approaches a mosque. Spying a man at the door, she asks for the women’s entrance. “He looks over the length of her body, tilts his head. *Why? Do you want to pray?* She disregards him and walks into the squat building.”¹⁶ As she makes her way into the mosque, she is told no women are there. A man shows her the way out. She leaves, deprived of any solace prayer might afford.

Who is this nameless woman? What no name can tell us we know by her situation and its attending pathos. Her identity resides in her plight, an apparent physical freedom trumped by psychological bars: She is free to roam, but doubly trapped by circumstance and obsession. An *absence of presence* registers with readers in her absent husband, her truant lover, her wrecked city, the house of worship that bars her from its doors. In her world, the cosmos thwarts desire at every turn. The woman wants her lover, wants to pray, wants to speak. She stumbles into epiphany as each absence translates into a dreadful existential moment—the *presence of absence* that elicits an unnamed desire. Outside the mosque, “she feels stripped to the bone: shameless; adulteress; wine-drinker. Her jeans seem to say this to the men as do her boots and the fact that she is here alone on a day when the women are secure at home.”¹⁷ The functional equivalents of metonyms, the jeans and boots speak volumes against the woman’s practice of her faith. Their presence is the absence of *abaya*, *hijab*, or *burqa*. And that absence is palpable. The clothing implies an estrangement from her faith. Her untimely presence at the mosque tells a tacit story. At some point, she has drifted from her faith. Now, it rejects her.

As she stands in the street, reality weighs in: “You are here, she thinks, in this city, among things and people . . . but you cannot say a word. The sins of this life seem as flat as copper pennies ground under heeled boots, worthless as vanity, lost in dirt.”¹⁸ The metaphor is doubly telling. The woman’s metropolitan life is prized at the value of a discarded penny. Also, the metaphor heralds a new perspective as the narrator brings the story to its close: “There is a sudden newness to the street, there is a sudden stark separation of the soul from the world that sifts around and though the body. You are here, she thinks. When you awake tomorrow, and the day after and the day after that, this is where you will be.”¹⁹ Where, exactly, is “here”? In a hell of alienation. She is among people, alone amidst masses. She cannot say a word that will be truly heard by anyone. Where does that leave her? In a hell of ambiguity. Is she free to become who she will? Or is she trapped as an inconsequential sinner languishing in a city of *angst* and *ennui*? In itself, realization does not bring resolution.

In “The Price of Light and Air” David Hollander offers us a different view of how resolution evades the traumatized. Hollander’s is a macabre tale of metropolitan voyeurism and alienation. The tale unfolds in a technique of dark impressionism. Like the stories above, its two characters are nameless. They exist as “he” and “she.” From the start, “he” is a shady character, caught by surrounding circumstances and his own desires. His entrapment is captured in the artist’s technique—a series of regressing frames, much like the phenomenon created by two opposing mirrors. The story opens with an unseemly feel:

He stands outside a brick building in Brooklyn, braised by the sick yellow light of a nearby streetlamp. It's freezing cold, and his breath fans out in a thick cloud, like fine spores of white flour. He is at eye level with a window. The window is closed, but the shade is not drawn, and he is witness to what the room's occupant—a bald woman without eyebrows or, for that matter, any tertiary evidence of body hair, a woman whom he assumes has been stricken by some brushfire variety of cancer—is witness to.²⁰

This opening, raw and voyeuristic, frames a viewer (the woman), viewed by a viewer (the man), viewed by a viewer (the narrator), viewed by yet another viewer (the reader), all progressing down a twisted path of unrequited attraction.

The woman the man watches is approximately his age. She is a woman with a “thin pretty face that is all points and angles, a woman who has probably spent her life inadvertently stabbing friends and acquaintances with her face . . . he can see the television newscast unfold and he can see the flickering colors of that glass box wash over her like sin and redemption, and he is feeling a pang of sad remorse. . . .”²¹ Filtered by the narrator's word choices, the scene takes on a morbid sheen. The woman's pretty face “stabs.” The light from the televised images has the religious weight of “sin and redemption.” And our witness the man is hit with “remorse.” Unseen by the woman, he stares. Unknown to him, we partake in his desire through the narrator's adjectives. Hollander's readers are then thrown into another frame as the narrator's perspective shifts, moving from the moment to the man's circumstances:

Soon, he will return to his basement room in a building two blocks away, where he is writing a story. He may or may not be a writer some day, but he is writing a story, and his heart is filled with the desire for this story to be important and worthy and full of light and air, and he is smoking this cigarette in front of her window because this is what validates and defines him, walking and smoking between periods of internment in his damp basement room, where a space heater glows . . . Threatening to immolate while he sleeps, lending to his subterranean existence that very sense of danger which makes it bearable. Really, he only wants to be loved.²²

The periodic structured paragraph surprises us with its end. The peeping-Tom we've been introduced to is humanized. In his isolated existence, he longs for human intercourse.

We are returned to the chill of the preceding frame. The man sees a parade of inconsequential images on the television screen. Then, the story again calls attention to its cascading frames. On the television screen, the man sees the image of the woman who is sitting in the room. He is watching a woman, a woman who is watching a television newscast, a newscast that features the woman, the same woman the man is watching. The effect on the peeping-Tom is pronounced: "He forgets, for a moment, to exhale the smoke he has swallowed up, and chokes a little."²³ Forgetting the illusion, he watches, confused. The moving images suggest real-time immediacy. How could she be depicted on the screen and he not? In a minor climax in the narrative he then sees the woman point to the television and begin to cry. Jolted into another frame, we move back in vantage point. Outside and further away, we see the man in the context of 9-11:

He exhales stale smoke into the night dome of this poisonous cityscape. The streetlamp casts its green-yellow sheen. In the air, the atomized death of the World Trade Center's demise still hangs like a malediction, and his own breath mingles with these traces of dust and ash and metal, of human life and its registry of components, white bone and muscle meat. He watches the woman. He needs to hold her, that's all.²⁴

Wandering these gritty, mephitic streets, this watcher could be the forgotten nephew of J. Alfred Prufrock. But unlike Prufrock, in the yellow-green sheen of this city, our nameless peeper finally commits to action. He tries to open the window, but can't. Desire registers with him as an absence, a decided *presence of absence*. He wonders "if anything he ever does will be filled with light and air, and he wonders why she won't look at him, and why he's stuck here behind the glass, on the wrong side, why he can't budge things, why she is crying harder now, and what sort of irradiated potion can singe and suffocate hair follicles without killing everything else."²⁵ Frantic frustration climaxes in reckless desperation. "*Over his dead body*, he decides. That's how they'll pry her away from this life, the filthy bastards. *Over his dead body*. He draws back his arm and lets fly. And his heart balloons with a sadness he has never known, and never will again."²⁶

By nature, stories seduce. But what manner of story hath Hollander wrought? His narrative invites us to consider the price of air and light from a shadowy perspective of underworld smog. In such a short a story, Hollander brings his audience into an intense identification with this character, an identification

achieved through a severe pathos. Lofty aspirations, longings for love, an awareness of deprivation, a sympathy for those who suffer—all cherished sentiments. But what man is this? Whose mind have we shared? Whose views color our perceptions? In our last look at him, we see a man who has stepped outside the frames of reason. He turns his voyeurism into infatuation, and, in a crisis of self-worth, transmutes infatuation into existential bravado. Falling prey to his own voyeuristic infatuation, he destroys his hope for the very human intercourse that might free him from isolation. Whatever his motive, his society views his voyeurism as criminal.

In a similar depiction of unresolved trauma, Alice Elliot Dark offers in “Senseless” the story of Clara, a woman who is tied obsessively to the 9-11 news reports. The story chronicles the crisis that ultimately frees Clara from her obsession. Unlike the two preceding stories, this one offers a different sort of resolution. Her obsession stems, the narrator tells us, from the fact “she believed—irrationally, stubbornly, grandiosely, and holding herself in contempt for doing so—that if she watched enough television and learned enough facts, if she controlled the information, there wouldn’t be another attack. It was all up to her.”²⁷ Obsessive-compulsive desire is a merciless taskmaster, one whose demands forge the bars of self-made prisons. This narrative, however, whispers some hope, for it is the story of how “she cut back on her monitoring after running into two friends in the coffee line at Starbucks.”²⁸

What broke the cycle of obsession? By chance, she found her friends discussing news that she, in spite of all her monitoring, was unaware of. The source? NPR. In Clara’s internal monologue, we hear her dislike for NPR. That dislike, however, is vanquished by a fresh obsession. She locks on this absence, an absence of information, as one she can easily fill. “‘What channel is that?’ she asked. The women exchanged a look. Clara White didn’t know that?”²⁹

No, Clara didn’t know, but now she becomes aware that she doesn’t, and that awareness is an absence of presence. Compelled by the promise of NPR, a promise she herself has ascribed to the station, Clara rushed to her car to find the station. Finding the distinctive voice of the NPR correspondents, “she felt the first real relief she’d had in days, the support for which she’d been longing. She wanted to be spoken to in this quiet, reassuring voice. She supposed she’d held out in disdain for so long because it was the very thing she wanted, and she was far too discerning to automatically allow herself that.”³⁰ Granted access to her thoughts again, we see a pitiable character. She can’t simply listen to the station. She needs to justify her change of mind. Rationalizing on grounds of delayed gratification, she dismisses all the reasons she gave earlier for disliking NPR.

Like the previous story discussed, a pathos of failure drives this one. We see Clara in the travails of a rebirth as she undergoes what appears to be a conversion to NPR. She envisions how she and her friends will laugh at the old, pre-NPR

Clara. She decides to keep the station playing constantly. She vows to send donations to the local station. Her identification with the radio station resembles a true believer's with a messianic leader. Although intense, such identification is often unstable, ever subject to the flux of volatile personalities.

The real conversion, the one that ultimately moves her to "cut back on her monitoring," follows hot on the heels of her ostensible conversion to NPR. The crisis that leads to her real rebirth comes from another absence of presence: "When Clara turned the motor off, and there was a sudden silence in the car; and she was cut off from reports of what was happening; and she knew that the people who ran the world and the people who terrorized it were going about their business without her; and she felt utterly alone. . . ." ³¹ She tried to ignore the burning desire. The void proved too much for her. She turned the radio back on. But the presence of the NPR voice now proves insufficient. Her anxiety mounts. "She tried to listen, to catch up, but her heart had begun to pound uncontrollably so she couldn't pay attention. *Stop*, she thought, *please slow down, please repeat that, go back to the beginning, I've missed too much, I don't know what's going on, please start over.*" ³² The stronger the identification, the more pronounced the effects on the true believer when the oracle fails. The crisis, of course, resides solely in the mind of the convert. For Clara, the crisis comes when the oracle proves impotent. She needs control. The oracle offers only an illusion.

The story concludes with Clara's breakdown. Consumed by an overwhelming *presence of absence*, she realizes her listening grants her no control: "Her pleas made no difference. The voice droned on. She snapped the radio off, and began to weep." ³³ What are we to make of the moment? Is this breakdown a beginning for Clara, a new awareness? After all, the story is one of how "she cut back on her monitoring after running into two friends in the coffee line at Starbucks." ³⁴ Still, the end is ambiguous, unsatisfying. We see the breakdown. We know she has reduced her monitoring. Yet there is no sense of a whole person emerging from this moment. What we witness may be a moment of rebirth. If so, the trauma of the whole experience may have left Clara incapable of full resolution. Along those lines, Susan Brison has described her own experience: "People ask me if I'm recovered now, and I reply that it depends on what that means. If they mean 'am I back to where I was before the attack?' I have to say, no, and I never will be. . . . But if recovery means being able to incorporate this awful knowledge into my life and carry on, then yes, I'm recovered." ³⁵

Linda Davis's "Grammar Questions," is narrated by a particularly erudite storyteller. In the course of the narrator's musing, the story finds an important psychological and spiritual space between *absence of presence* and *presence of absence*. Davis's narrator places us squarely in the moment of change, that time of transition between two distinct states of being. Her story probes the philosophical

implications of that moment by parsing the inadequacies of the language needed for resolution. Her first sentence clearly illustrates my point: “Now, during the time he is dying, can I say, ‘This is where he lives?’” Her second sentence removes all question of the narrator’s brooding study: “If someone asks me, ‘Where does he live?’ should I answer, ‘Well, right now he is not living, he is dying?’”³⁶ If verbs convey action and time, what is this period in time in which one wavers between what was and what will be? What is that period of twilight, the period where an impending loss of a loved one divides the *absence of presence* from the *presence of absence*? More than simply posing those questions, Davis brings us into the experience of that state of mind, that state stemming from awareness that one is caught between presence and absence.

Continuing to other parts of speech, the narrator parses pronouns to explore the metaphysical implications of this state of being, this time between life and death. “Actually, then I won’t know if the words ‘he’ and ‘him’ are correct, in the present tense. Is he, once he is dead, still ‘he,’ and if so, for how long is he still ‘he?’”³⁷ This distinction between existence in terms of identity and existence in terms of mere matter comes fully into focus when the narrator abandons the masculine pronoun for the demonstrative: “He will be put in a box, not a coffin. Then, when he is in that box, will I say, ‘That is my father in that box’ or ‘That was my father, in that box’ or will I say, ‘That, in the box, was my father?’”³⁸ In each iteration the impersonal demonstrative pronoun takes on ever more prominence, conveying ever more finely the distinction between existence and life.

What it means to exist is not the same as what it means to live. “To live” requires volition; “to exist” does not. Moving to larger grammatical units, the narrator reflects on mood (an attitude toward action conveyed via auxiliary verbs), modality (the classification of propositions according to whether they are contingently true, false, possible, impossible, or necessary), and agency (the degree to which an actor is able to exercise choice). She considers the delta between the implications and the actualities of phrases commonly heard at such times: “In the phrase ‘he is dying,’ the words ‘he is’ suggest that he is actively doing something. But he is not very actively dying. The only thing he is still actively doing is breathing. He looks as if he is breathing on purpose, because he is working hard at it, and frowning slightly. He is working at it, but he surely has no choice.”³⁹ Once opened, the question of volition dominates the remainder of the narrator’s reflections:

“He is dying” sounds more active than “he will be dead soon.” That is probably because of the word “be”—we can “be” something whether we choose to or not. Whether he likes it or not, he “will be” dead soon. He will have to be dead soon, because he is not eating.

“He is not eating” sounds a little too active too, because it is not his choice.⁴⁰

A severe, fatalistic pathos resides in these grammatical considerations. The father is not dead, but is beyond exercising his will. This parsing paints an existential hell—neither dead nor alive, the man is neither fully absent nor fully present. Davis gives us a meditation on a horrible question. What would have been the state of mind, in those hours and days in which the loves, friends, and colleagues of 9-11 victims waited and waited and waited to know if their neighbor, friend, or relative would be pulled from the rubble of the buildings?

In such grammatical minutia may lie great truths. While not the last words of the story, the grammar lesson ends with us still caught in the portal between states of being and states of mind: “He is not even conscious of it. He is not conscious at all.”⁴¹ The present-active-indicative sentences echo back not simply to grammar school, but to the very thing that makes a human a human: will, choice, volition. Yes, our mortality, too, defines us as human. But it is our will, our volition—not our mortality—that primarily defines us as *living* human beings. Where does that leave those who are in the act of dying, those who—though not of their own volition—straddle the line separating life from death? And where does it leave those who helplessly watch others in that state?

Desire is arrested in this narrative; caught in stasis, it is never resolved. As the father lacks volition and hovers between life and death, what can the daughter wish for? Desire confounds itself by its own urges. Is there an end to this existential hell? Should she long for that end? What does the longing for that end make of the person who longs for it? Is she dispassionate grammarian or composed sage? The narrator doesn’t answer the questions. We are left to contemplate them ourselves.

In Samuel R. Delany’s “Echoes” we enter a meditation whose subtleties of technique intermesh the erotic with absence and presence. The narrator, Chip, descending an apartment stairwell, meets an ascending neighbor. As he walks, he hears the echoes of each of their steps. In an apparently random arousal of thoughts, the echoes stir up in his mind an impression, one of people in a prison camp and “a woman who’d learned that the one beside her was Akhmatova leaned to whisper: ‘Can you write this . . .?’”⁴² Anna Akhmatova, was a Russian poet who, among other things, is known for being among the writers who rejected the vagueness of Symbolism for a more concrete style in her youth. Later, the Soviet state denounced her and deprived her of any public voice or publishing opportunities and she was labeled “half nun, half harlot.” This fleeting thought serves as background of ironic relief for symbolism echoes throughout the story.

The woman who greets Chip on the stairs is Lois, a neighbor who tells him of the tragedy that befell her daughter, also named Lois. The younger Lois worked

in the World Trade Center, and she was engaged to a fireman. On the eleventh of September she called work telling them she'd be late coming in that day. As she hung up, the planes hit the towers. Her fiancée, not knowing his betrothed was still at home, scrambled to the scene to render aid and to get her out of the burning building. Determined to save her, he died when the buildings collapsed. The cosmic irony of this tale takes another twist in a tribute of condolence. The fireman's colleagues, knowing the couple's plans to buy a puppy, got the dog for her in his stead. An act of such kindness should not be questioned, but the dog, offered as solace, must also play another role in the woman's life: a presence of absence, a daily reminder of the loss she suffered. Lois has one request to make of Chip:

"You're a writer aren't you?"

"Yes. That's right."

Lois looked at me.

"I mean, do you think there is any way you could write . . . ? I mean write something? To tell people that story? I don't know—I just would like it if people knew, somehow. That things like that happened." Lois shook her head again.⁴³

The request is clear: write the story of Lois and her fiancée. The story does not do that. Caught in psychological paralysis, the narrator-writer tells *his* story, not hers. The younger Lois is introduced only to be pushed into a mysterious absence till the end of the story. Lois is present, if at all, only as an echo. "Over the next weeks," confesses the narrator, "I've thought of other things I would also like to write about." His list includes a friend's wife whose altruistic impulses drive her to go halfway around the globe to render aid; a random piece of music; a writing instructor's revelatory advice; and, sandwiched in among the items on his list, "about why it is so much easier to tell Lois's mother's tale . . . Than it is to write it [Lois's daughter's tale]."⁴⁴

The last echo of his images offers a subtle but telling innuendo, one that hints at, but doesn't really answer any questions it raises. The last impression Chip thought he might write about?

About crossing Broadway at 79th and going from bright sun into the shadow of a building, where—now that the light was off my dusty glasses—I saw people coming toward me over the street, and a smoky blue afterimage pulsed over the face of a young woman stepping off the corner, lighting a cigarette: Lois (Lois's daughter)

smokes—I've seen her smoking in the stair; though not for three months.⁴⁵

The image is one of wonder, adoration, perhaps even infatuation. An image of a woman, which when seen, imposes one of those moments where the frames in the film of life move in slow motion. Chip feels the younger Lois's presence most keenly in her absence. So keenly, in fact, that her haunting image thwarts his attempts to tell the story of the betrothed lovers. On a subsequent reading, we see her image is included among a not-so-random list: the heroic altruist, the arresting music, the sage writing instruction, an untimely yet all-too-timely request for a minute's silence to honor the dead. No inordinate affection is explicitly revealed in the story. Desire stands behind a silent veil. The younger Lois could be Muse to Chip as easily as she could be a lustful infatuation. The narrator keeps his own council on the matter. The desire the narrative arouses passes as unfulfilled as the betrothed lovers' marriage.

Thus far, our New York writers have plumbed the depths of trauma but offered little toward resolution. The last of our writers discussed here differs in that regard. Peter Carey's "Union Square" is the story of a father whose sons serve as foils, glossing the narrator-character's transformation from a sanctified New Yorker into a full-fledged American. As in previous stories, the *absence of presence* again manifests itself in images of a city attacked, and, again, the *presence of absence* shows itself in a changed self. Unlike the other stories considered, however, this story strives for resolution. "Union Square" opens with a view of the 9-11 clean-up work:

That evening we are standing on the corner of Houston and 6th Avenue watching the huge earth moving equipment and heavy trucks rolling, bumper to bumper, in a never-ending parade down toward the devastation. Here is the endless might and wealth of America. Here are the drivers, like soldiers, heroes. These are not military vehicles, but huge trucks from small companies I am reminded of Dunkirk. I am moved. We are all moved. The crowds come out to cheer them. I do too, without reserve.⁴⁶

The character's conflation of truck driver with soldier figures heavily in how he comes to terms with the 9-11 trauma. The story opens with the narrator celebrating his status as a New Yorker and holding in contempt anything American—especially its military might. The narrator's witnessing the response to the trauma is what begins his conversion. To hear of the Dunkirk Spirit is one thing; to actually see it is quite another.

The eventual union between his New Yorker identity and an American identity, however, would not have merged had it not been for an absence of presence pervading the story: “Everywhere people are touched by death. Our friend David across the road has lost his best friend, the father of a brand-new baby. Silvano the restaurateur has lost a fireman friend already, and as Charley [the narrator’s younger son] and I walk out of our immediate neighborhood we are dismayed to see the huge piles of flowers outside the tiny fire station on West 3rd Street.”⁴⁷ The effects of the trauma are dramatized as a split in narrator’s self. The narrator becomes both subject and object here. As our storyteller, he is the subject of his own tale. But as witness to the horrors of the destruction he is a victim-object of the terrorists. The split manifests in rage:

As for my own feelings, I am more vindictive than my son. I want to strike back, pulverize, kill, obliterate anyone who has caused this harm to my city. I may be Australian to the core but I have become like the dangerous American the world has most reason to fear. This phase passes quickly enough. It has passed now. But on those fist days and nights I was overcome with murderous rage.⁴⁸

The rage is not the transformation, but it does open the door for the transformation. It puts the narrator-character in the position of experiencing possibilities, of seeing another version of himself. That opportunity allows him to see the dichotomy he holds, the clean cleavage between cosmopolitan, Australian New Yorker and dangerous, ugly American, as a false one. The narrator dramatizes that dichotomy in an exchange between his son and himself:

Once, a year or so ago, I heard my son saying, “When we bombed Iraq.”

“No,” I said, “When THEY bombed Iraq.”

“No,” he said, “We.”

I have joked about this moment often, but in truth it put a chill in me. I was very happy for him to be a New Yorker, but I wasn’t sure I wished him to be American.”⁴⁹

The cognitive distance separating New Yorker from American in the narrator’s worldview is fraught with a cognitive dissonance that predates the destruction of the World Trade Center by a year. In that distance and dissonance is a wall that separates father from son, a wall that is both a self-imposed identity and an *absence of presence* in paternal-child bond. The son is American. The father is not.

Sometimes the changes resulting from trauma is beyond words, even when the

changes are healthy changes. Like the unseen transformation of Shakespeare's Hamlet, Carey's narrator changes off stage:

But on the second day after the attack on the World Trade Center, I bought him a large white T-shirt with an American flag on its front. Sam is a very hard guy to buy a T-shirt for, but this shirt he put on immediately, and then we went out together again, out into the dark, out amongst the people, giving ourselves some strange and rather beautiful comfort in the middle of all the horror that had fallen on our lives.⁵⁰

Posterity has long ranked high as a reason to secure the blessings of liberty. Carey's is one of the happier stories of the collection. Not only does the story have resolution, but it has a restoration of hope. That hope is found in the narrator's new understanding of "American." Part of what it means to "be an American" means rests in ordinate affection, in finding comfort from being among Americans.

What can art do for a traumatized society? Across the ages, many critics have argued art should never be judged by what it does or by what it tries to do. But times of crisis call for human responses—from policymakers, administrators, and perhaps even more so from artists. The notion that art serve no other end than simply *to be* denies everything people do to give value and meaning to life. The stories of 9-11 are as much rhetorical and social acts as they are aesthetic creations. In sum, they look into the hearts of survivors and ask whether and how the wounded can heal. Art can help us come to terms with reality, if not change it. Most people never fully resolve deep-seated trauma. Some are wholly crippled by the horrors and terrors of life; some mend themselves enough to get by; and a few others are able to make something better of life when, somehow, enlightenment follows horror.

Why do some victims prevail, while others don't? The answers are hid in mystery, a mystery that if ever solved is solved only obliquely, never directly. If there is a single truth from these different stories, it is a cold one, and it is this: Fortune metes out the hazards of Life with a blind eye. In the bedlam that is so often Life, human desire plays more by chance than by design. In that game, pawns can expect tragedy. But along the way, if luck allows, a rare serendipity may grant them not simply succor, but reconciliation, even redemption.

Notes

1. Irene Kacandes, "9/11/01 = 1/27/01: The Changed Posttraumatic Self," in *Trauma at Home after 9/11*. Ed. Judith Greenberg. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. 168-183.
2. Kacades, 171.
3. Lawrence Chua, "The Quick and the Poor," in *110 Stories: New York Writes after September 11*, ed. Baer, Ulrich (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 58.
4. Chua, 58.
5. Chua, 58.
6. Chua, 59.
7. Chua, 59.
8. Humera Afridi, "Circumference," in *110 Stories: New York Writes after September 11*, ed. Baer, Ulrich (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 10.
9. Afridi, 10.
10. Afridi, 10.
11. Afridi, 10.
12. Afridi, 11.
13. Afridi, 11.
14. Afridi, 11-12.
15. Afridi, 12.
16. Afridi, 12.
17. Afridi, 12.
18. Afridi, 12.
19. Afridi, 12.
20. David Hollander, "The Price of Light and Air," in *110 Stories: New York Writes after September 11*, ed. Baer, Ulrich (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 148.
21. Hollander, 148.
22. Hollander, 149.
23. Hollander, 149.
24. Hollander, 149-150.
25. Hollander, 150.
26. Hollander 150.
27. Alice Elliot Dark, "Senseless," in *110 Stories: New York Writes after September 11*, ed. Baer, Ulrich (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 65.
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29. Dark, 65.
30. Dark, 66.
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32. Dark, 67.
33. Dark, 67.
34. Dark, 67.
35. Kacandes, 179-180.
36. Linda Davis, "Grammar Questions," in *110 Stories: New York Writes after September 11*, ed. Baer, Ulrich (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 72.
37. Davis, 72.
38. Davis, 72.
39. Davis, 73.
40. Davis, 73.
41. Davis, 73.
42. Samuel R. Delany, "Echoes," in *110 Stories: New York Writes after September 11*, ed. Baer, Ulrich (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 75.

43. Delany, 76.
44. Delany, 76.
45. Delany, 76-77.
46. Peter Carey, "Union Square," in *110 Stories: New York Writes after September 11*, ed. Baer, Ulrich (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 54.
47. Carey, 55.
48. Carey, 56.
49. Carey, 56.
50. Carey, 56.

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