



selections from  
**a museum of  
absences**

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## SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

The blue that day held a promise.  
Who would have thought the  
Promise was death?  
Who would have thought storied  
Steel would tremble, then tumble, turn  
Into torrents of fire, castles of grief?  
Who would have thought that  
Day a mardi gras auguring  
Too soon the season of lent, Tuesday  
Fat with bone and dust, the sudden  
Bloom of winged and poisonous flowers?

Stone and steel burst, and so did the heart.  
Stone and steel flew, alongside  
Astonished birds and bodies.  
My infidel mind saw but could  
Not grasp the greedy dark that  
Devoured such small portions of hours,  
Bit off the stitch and hem of ordinary acts:  
The morning sprawl in the shade of passion,  
The evening's plans over coffee,  
An infant's caterwaul, the lovers' sulk  
To be repaired by a coo, a kiss—  
Coins daily dropped or taken  
from the alms-box of mortality.

Those innocents looked, rushing through  
The cloud-swallowed streets, like penitents  
Propelled by the pulse of an angry air,  
Bound in an orgy of limbs, now  
Forever footloose and fancy free.  
Their mad dance brings smiles to those  
Who, living in terror of joy,  
Live only for the joy of terror.

Wednesday ash awoke us.  
Thursday was maundy, but where  
Was the savior to wash our muddied

Feet? And if Friday were good  
Was it for the blood of lambs soaking  
The rock and rubble of our days?  
At dawn of the day of the sun  
No towers grew, no dead men or women,  
No slain children arose,  
For death is a permanent gift.  
In the sorrow that holds me  
Like a terrible shining star,  
In this poem that serves as my  
Flag, my memorial, chalice and  
Crescent of my religion, are the  
Faces of which each loved and was loved,  
Are the voices of the unutterable,  
Are the alphabets we mourn and from which we  
Form the language and lesson for the living.  
Muslim and Jew, Christian and Hindu,  
Buddhist, agnostic, atheist—

All have gone but are not lost.  
In each of their deaths we live.  
In every one of our lives, they are born.

## A DICTIONARY OF THE VANISHING

In different parts of the ocean above  
You float in different parts—  
There is your left hand not knowing  
Where or what your right hand is doing

There is the lost kingdom of your  
Head, wondering whom to turn its cheek to,  
There are your legs straddling the  
Sky like a cowboy's on a bronco

There is the archipelago of your torso,  
Islands of blood and sinew, red against the blue,  
Declaring their Independence of You  
You have no thoughts

Your thoughts have you  
You are not out of your body  
Your body is out of you  
Seceding into smaller republics.

How will the body's rebellions succeed?  
Is this what mad politics inspires,  
Unwriting the text of your body, a narrative  
Disjointed, every sentence parsed by the

Grammar of meaninglessness?  
And all the words of you,  
Limb, memory, bone, love  
Lie scattered, random entries in

A dictionary of the vanishing

## COUP D'ETAT

Think of your lives as leaves,  
    One life, one leaf  
Each death a fall off a tree.  
Ponder your veins, the infrastructure  
That feeds you. One day the  
Roads will be blocked, traffic stopped  
And some voice will shout above the din  
Or whisper, elections are over,  
    The state dissolved.  
No one's in command now.  
The guards will come down  
From the watchtowers, officers  
In backrooms will shred the files,  
And all the citizens of you  
Will know it's time to go,  
    In quick or slow  
Exodus, in graceful fall  
Or plummet plunge—  
A furious leavetaking.  
Partaker of what soil had to  
Offer, the soil now offers you.  
Be neither happy nor sad,  
All of you, though some should  
Rejoice, who will for once be of use:  
Mulch, grub to the tiny and the many,  
Those whom you buried will now bury you.

## BEFORE AND AFTER

I used to think each day was a chrismatory.  
Now the day is an old story, the  
Sun a tired man, nose to the grindstone.  
He envies the moon her impeccable charm.  
That coquette!  
Whoever complains about moonlight?

Hope, you sly fox  
(It's me talking), get lost!  
Despair, you slut, open your legs  
and hear my story:  
Neither heresy nor history,  
Details change like furniture in a store.  
What remains the same:  
Lord of the land,

Two four-letter words locked  
Together, a farmer ravishing his cow,  
Who demands:  
Pay me obeisance. Adore me.  
Or.  
He turns off the heat, cuts the lights,  
Bricks up the windows.

Skylord, earthlord, sealord,  
Badlord.

We're fucked.

## **SERENDIPITY**

Through this flesh courses life  
When it could easily have been  
Death

Why this self, alive, spared, and not  
The guileless visitor or the friend  
Newly  
Dead?

Who can know the small mystery  
That waits like a jar on a shelf, to  
Spill  
Death

Onto someone, who knows who,  
Unmindful of  
Dying?

I set my footsteps firmly ahead,  
A seer unafraid of Death though  
Fearful of  
Dying

Luck blind luck leading the blind  
Down this alley rather than that, to the  
Company of the almost living  
And the nearly  
Dead

## **SANCTUARY**

*(For Midori)*

New York came, rampaging.  
Broadway approached, barking.  
The mad heavens roared down,  
Clouds enveloped me.  
All was motion, darkness, the  
Ground rushing up.  
Mountains leveled themselves  
And my feet, faithful dogs, brought me  
Home to you, my anchor, my light.

## CORRIDORS

I.

The way of death begins  
The moment we open our mouths.  
What good will the shouting do?  
The parade on the streets, the exhortations—  
Semaphors of a raging grief.

Our fears are rabid dogs  
That crawl down timeless corridors  
Forever chewing the bone of pain.  
What we consume is ourselves.

I can think of better feasts.

II.

The way of death ends  
The way it begins,  
The mouth open only a  
Moment, to suck in a  
Yell, a memento of fear.

Breathe in the interval,  
Pursue a song to encompass  
All elusive words, circumscribe  
Pain, bring simple glory.  
Let the mouth peep as

A bird in a serenade, then  
Burrow beneath the days  
Feathered in the silence of love.

The way of life begins.

## ON READING THE *TIMES* PORTRAITS OF THE 9/11 VICTIMS

They are forever what we cannot know  
These gaps, monumental, in each narrative  
Like snaps in a yearbook  
That do not reveal the weight of a seer's curse.  
What does it feel like to view a future moving across  
The room quickly to consume you?  
What is it, to stretch your hand and grasp  
That of another? Lover, stranger, friend—does it matter?  
How beautiful the two of you are  
Even at that moment of horror, in  
That instinctive assertion of your humanity.  
How beautiful your act, of taking each  
Other's hands while unseen ones took your lives.  
No, the memorials do not reveal how it is to die  
Before you die, whether by burning or falling  
With no miracle, no deus or deus  
Ex machina in sight, though perhaps a  
Deus was in sight only to make sure  
The flames were fed right.  
Did they die for our sins as well as for theirs?

They mean well, these reporters,  
Each printed word a commemoration  
An apologia pro vita sua—  
Messages to assuage us, the living.  
How to trust what is said, what is  
Written? What text can reveal the road  
Taken in the hereafter were there a hereafter?  
What speech cuts through the  
Thicket of a life to show the life?  
What inscriptions can fill the heart's  
Zero rather than form the ground  
Where the bodies are at?  
And I, survivor in the chill fall  
Light, wonder at my lines, for  
Are they not the hard perverse  
Earth that swallows these lives once again?

## **BULWARK AGAINST THE BURNING**

Why should I worry about the winter  
When only the burly blackthorn grows?

Why should I fret, or give one cent  
For the poisonous cartridges of anger

Or for my seed's fate or yours?  
Let them fall where they may

We can only be electric  
Laurel and jolt of the future

Bulwark against the burning.  
Let me say to honor us all,

Here I live, here I fall.

## THE SHORT HAPPY LIFE OF A HERO

They call (the beret  
Looks good) and you reply  
Hell, I'll sign  
And tell the

Republic another  
Braver world has come

You show up awhile  
Cocky, cocked  
Gun in hand, then jump  
From a blazing train

Hailed by bullets  
All around  
The fellows stuck inside  
Burn to death

Do I do a jig, you  
Ask, do I talk about  
The war? Chug a lug  
Is the sound beer makes

In your gut.  
How sure are you  
About the air?  
You reply, I don't care  
Before the bomb hits  
You unfair and square.

## **vigorously do I assert my ruins**

The world is full of  
Blue bureaucratic blottings

Relegating letters  
To a garden convenient not to  
Be in, on evenings when anyone's  
Hardly there.

Dear postmodern world, cozy  
With your nuclear tea, your parlor wars,  
Bring us back express to  
The lazy majesty of being  
A sea blessing every shore

Awareness without the circumference of poles.

Still do I navigate,  
While I wait, the difference  
Between tragedy and comedy.  
Alas, the government plots

The civil servants smile through  
Their rubberstamps, while petty  
Kingdoms desire my execution.  
Then why do I vigorously

Assert my ruins?  
Because because

## TWO HOUSES

In this house each death has a double  
Each blast, an echo.  
It will not hold, no matter how  
many rooms, all our names.  
Here arise hurricanes:  
One rampages by, very soon another.  
Lightning and thunder—music to the household  
Heads, to wreak havoc, their form of loving—  
Cacophony to others.

On the other side is another house.  
Small it may be but the wind passing  
Through does so on delicate feet.  
All its inhabitants, refined and gentle.  
No one will demand a visa.  
No one will ask, who are you,  
Where are you from?  
Enough for you to be human—  
Blood, bone, flesh, heart.  
Your breath, the breath of all.  
Your death, the world's own.

*(translated from the Pilipino)*

## **LINES AFTER READING JAMES BALDWIN**

Things are revealed in precincts and heard,  
Whispered and seen in hallways and  
Basements, bruited about on elegant  
Avenues I daily run, that  
Death will come dressed as a reasonable argument  
with a warrant for my permanent arrest.  
Concerning my scarred omniscience  
Astounded by fate, devout and ominous  
What citizen of the white world will believe me?  
God's citadel so hideous and squat  
Its spires and domes—gun turrets  
Its pulpits—forts  
Its crucifixes, crescents, and stars—murderous axes.  
And every prayer, every hymn  
Is one dream less to achieve,  
One more for the maw of a salivating deity.  
Oh to merely survive is not bliss.  
How far we are from peace!  
And the justification for the century's  
Benedictions of fire?  
That my point of view be obsolete forever.

## PASSWORD FOR A HYBRID CENTURY

The world is full of speech unheralded  
Each creature, each thing, fashions  
Words not said, nor heard

Mankind, beast, flower, fish, atom cell

On the avenue, in the city's  
Fields of streets  
A language of secrets unscrolls  
Rich in the grammar of love

Pure as an infant's theology

I sense it in this room when  
Your beauty navigates this space  
By osmosis  
When your seaweed hair announces  
Itself as a sacrament

I sense it on the days of  
Longing, when this trill and utterance  
And weave, this eloquence beyond the  
Exultations of art, beyond the scribbles  
And bankrupt narratives, blesses and

Bathes me, drowning the pornographic  
Stutter of a center that devours its young.

Speak me as I speak you,  
And not only you, my beloved,  
But all of you who are my beloved  
This speech without speaking, this

Covenant and testament  
As the measure, the love of

All the invisible and real  
Sometimes am I blessed

By such tongue, to move through the  
Interstices of being and put

My head on the twin laps of  
Pain and pleasure in  
Whose hymns I

Taste death, that passage  
Out of life into life  
Where in a vast hall

New music plays, and each one of  
Us, from particle of dust to deity,  
Is a scale of ancient lore

Read me read you

Speak me then as I speak you  
As notes for a song  
Between speech and nonspeech

Between a living that is a dying  
And a dying that is a living

Make me a part of your speech  
An act looking for silence and utterance

An O lodged in the mouth of a mute god

## NEW YORK MYTHOLOGIES

*For the undocumented victims of the Twin Towers collapse*

Buildings and streets talk of the bold and the old.  
Through them now race people's heartbeats:

Fast sails on the Mediterranean.

Nothing abstract in our days of earning  
Bread, in these heights that

Itch with glass and modern blood  
Of skywalkers and ironmongers

Nothing abstract in an archipelago  
Of byways, from Harlem River Drive to

Northern Boulevard, from Mulberry Street to  
Flatbush Avenue in yellow cab, in

Caravanserai of vans and buses that crawl through

This vast metropolis, on the Seven train  
Where all the Earth gathers:

Here all we are and were, rot  
And divinity, from the Adriatic to the Pacific,

Gifts of seven continents—  
Mongol, Aztec, Berber, Cherokee, Zulu

Zuni, Semite, Aborigine, Malay, Han, Viking—  
Alphabets ancient and modern of

Natives and immigrants writing the  
Secrets of love and empires of desire

Higher than the city's fabled towers.  
Do we not make her language, her

Stories come alive with our trespasses,  
Our gentle violations? Have we not now

Always spoken who have always been  
Spoken for? Are we not both the

Citadel's trade and traders, its builders

And inhabitants, its orphans and parents?  
Do not the black livery driver, brown

Bodega man, Muslim mother and householder  
Respond with an act of faith, when taunted

Or shot at? Seduced we seduce, with the  
Music of our food and the food of our music

Black bean arpeggios, green curry sonatas  
Milkfish symphonies, the *kundiman* of ginger

Souk of lemon grass, ragas of tamarind and chili.  
To you who have sheltered all, Manahatta

Ourselves we bring as presents and  
Presences, our imagination rude with grace.

In the aeries of an ever-evolving city  
In the streets of a revolving text, where a

Derelict contemplates the Bhagavad-Gita  
A messenger dreams of running through Machu Picchu

Our bones are marrow'd with hope  
Our childhood gods and duendes in tow

Cradles and graves on our backs.

Manahatta, you whom no one can own  
Listen!

In the days that whisper of the past  
In nights without history

Our bodies are your capital  
Our lives and deaths your new mythologies.