

Delaying

Tuesday September 10, 2002

9/11 remembrances are getting a lot of chatter this morning, the day before the first anniversary. Yet the news is nearly 100% focused on Saddam Hussein which seems like a colossal deflection. Absent is even a mention of the previous villain, Mr. bin Laden – once “Wanted Dead or Alive” – but now, at this time of remembrance, he is nearly forgotten. The “greatest power on earth” seems to have no idea whether bin Laden is dead or alive. There could be special programming and discussions about him and the al Qaeda network, but those would need to include our failure to find him. So, we have moved our attention to a new target. Perhaps generations of Hollywood movies have taught Americans to need resolution in our stories.

Bagpipe corps, representing New York’s uniformed services, have set out from each of the five boroughs. They will walk through the night and converge on the site tomorrow morning. News reports over the last two days say that plans for “the commemoration” are being completed. The main event will be a reading of the 2,801 names of the people that died on 9/11, in alphabetical order. Each name will be read out loud by family members, “dignitaries” and politicians. Former Mayor Giuliani will be the first to read.

The shades in my studio are partially lowered to keep out sun and heat, just as they were on that sunny Tuesday morning one year ago. I feel odd, unable to settle into anything; this feeling has been in the air since waking. I decide to ride downtown to check some details about the Police Memorial which I had seen and written about on Sunday; it was a good excuse to get outside and see the scene before the first anniversary.

At the Police Memorial, a few steps south of the North Cove, arrangements of flowers have been set up on rigid wire tripods. The Hallmark tableaux included the least appealing flower display I have ever seen. But they are loving: cards with short handwritten notes are tucked into the frames and between the flowers. Two of the arrangements are in the shape of what I finally realized are supposed to represent a police badge – one light blue, the other made of flowers that had been sprayed with gold paint. There must be a police aesthetic that I do not understand.

From there, I slowly ride the short distance south and east toward the “viewing area,” passing endless satellite broadcast trucks – far more than I’ve ever seen assembled anywhere for any event. It seems unimaginable that so many would be in one place. Circling around, I reach the back side of the public viewing platform, an unceremonious place under scaffolding. In that darkened compressed space there are even more cameras, ranging from tens of thousands of dollars to ones worth less than twenty dollars. None of the big networks are present here, but many professional camera people – some may be freelancing for the networks.

Surprisingly, no one hassles me about being on a bike. No one is bothering anyone – a stark contrast to the last 364 days. Dismounting, I lock my bike and walk more deeply into the viewing area toward the edge where one can view into the void.

The atmosphere is low-key, a disparate scene of disconnected human beings. A short stocky couple quietly displays a seventh-grade-style poster proclaiming “Mexico is with the US.” A few German men are reading from a thick white book; the dust jacket is clipped to the chain link fence behind them. I see that the book is published by the New York Times; it is a series of short segments about each person who was killed a year and one day ago. The men take turns reading the alphabetized entries aloud; it takes several minutes to share the words about each person. It’s like hearing a series of softly spoken obituaries – they are human and loving – not exactly like newspaper text or words spoken at funerals. As the final words of an entry linger in the solemn air, each reader turns the big book around like a grade school teacher and points to the tiny black and white picture of the person he had just memorialized, slowly panning the picture outward in an arm’s length semi-circle so that anyone nearby can see. Few people look, but their performance makes up part of the scene. I have the sense that they’ve been at it for a long time and I imagine they plan to be there all day and into the night. I wonder how late they will be allowed to stay – maybe some rules have been set aside so close to the anniversary, or enforcement is reserved for tomorrow. The people around me are in their own spaces, their own heads, lives, and memories; it’s not the crowd one might see around a sports arena or concert hall before a big televised event.

I wander around the small area for a while and sense a sort of magnetism, a strange pull that I had not noticed on my visit two days ago.

A young woman with light brown skin and short tightly-curved hair held my attention. She does not seem to notice or care what is going on around her. In New York, aside from the elderly,

people are rarely still, but she is motionless, gently leaning against a freshly painted white steel post. She is still enough to be a statue, but unlike sculptures by Hiram Powers or Gaston Lachaise representing female beauty with fixed form and curves, it's her fair hair and delicate skin that convey her beauty, her aliveness.

The small woman appears unprotected, wearing only slight sandals, cut-off shorts and a gossamer white sleeveless top – more as one might be dressed at home. She has no backpack, purse or any other protection or distraction – her entire world is inside. She must need to be right here.

I walk out from under the scaffolding toward my bike, but I don't have the power to break free of this place yet. Time is not moving in a normal fashion. Gazing back toward the vast open area where the towers once stood, it seems inconceivable that they could have taken up so much space. That space is now so empty – open. Before, there was an upward, vertical feeling. Now it is outward, horizontal – like suddenly being at the seashore after a long time in a forest.

A group of Japanese guys with dark t-shirts that read “Japan Firefighters Call 119” are respectful while taking an endless number of pictures of each other. Beyond them is a small, official sign: “All items will be removed at the end of the day” – which indicates that this is not a fence to decorate, unlike so many other decorated fences over the last year.

Finally, I unlock my bike and snake back through the small streets of old New York to head north along Church Street.

Wednesday September 11, 2002

Indistinct clouds cover much of the sky. Mozart's *Requiem* will be sung in twenty time zones. Wall Street will wait until thirty minutes after the memorial service concludes to open.

A wind began to blow just after they started to read the names. The reading lasted for two hours and thirty minutes. Humvees with heavily armed troops are cruising around lower Manhattan. Batteries of anti-aircraft missiles, including Stinger missiles, have been set up nearby. The Vice President cancelled an appearance last night and has, again, gone into hiding.

A year ago, 343 fire fighters and 37 Port Authority police officers were killed in New York City.

Around 9:00 AM I rode past my local fire station, *Ladder 5 Engine 24*, on my way to swim. The pool was nearly empty and the lifeguard was sleeping – so much for security.

On my way back from the pool at 9:50, I walked my bike past the same firehouse, where a ceremony was underway. People were packed into the truck-less station house, others spilled out into the sidewalk. This event was happening at the same time that the official celebration was underway further south. Many firemen chose not to participate in the big event at Ground Zero. Someone was speaking to the crowd, but I could not hear a word that was being said; no one else outside could either. But people stood around respectfully.

As I past the local playground, the names of the dead drifted out of someone's radio. Back in my studio, I could not find the ceremony – the reading of each name – on the radio. All I got were interviews – people trying to be “significant” while the monotonous recitation of all the names, the sound of each syllable, held such power.

I needed to make several stops uptown and set out – the wind howled – a spirit wind. Riding uptown on Sixth Avenue there was no traffic until 28th Street. In the West Village, the windows of the Gap store were filled with **We Remember** in dark blue letters. The sky was filled with the same indistinct clouds; they reminded me of smoke – white on the edges, grey inside.

At 10:20 the Debt Clock at 42nd Street listed our national debt as six trillion ,
one hundred ninety four billion ,
four hundred twenty two million ,
two hundred seventy eight thousand ,
one hundred forty one dollars ~~\$6,194,422,278,141.00~~ and counting; “your family’s share is \$67,625.” North of 42nd, all the streets east of Sixth Avenue were cordoned off for ten blocks.

Uptown, along Madison Avenue, the signs in shop windows were a bit slicker. Banana Republic had: **In Remembrance**. At Yves St. Laurent, the windows were filled with black and white American flags, no words. Ralph Lauren proclaimed: **We Will Always Remember**.

Continuing north, the wind stole my attention. It was not the wind of a storm. It reminded me of a ride north in the early hours of a hurricane, a mission to deliver paychecks to a jobsite along Central Park West. I was wearing a waterproof parka that my grandfather had worn for years when he was sailing. The suppleness of the orange fabric was long gone; it was brittle to all but the most gentle motions. The powerful wind slowed my forward motion drastically I was pedaling hard, but barely moving. It took a long time to traverse each block, a difficult but enjoyable challenge. This wind slowed me far less than that storm wind of a dozen years earlier.

Today's wind went inside me. It was a reminder of something, but the "what" was not clear – something strong and maybe sad. From time to time the wind howled, it was as much a feeling as a sound, not a shout, perhaps a mournful cry as if to remind us of its dominance, of nature's might. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art all the flags were at half-mast.

While riding downtown, I noticed men in camouflage fatigues loitering and joking on the corner of 67th Street at Lexington Avenue. They held their machine guns at the ready, not slung over their shoulders, likely protecting the Seventh Regiment Armory.

I was finished with the critical work of the day by 4:00 PM; my soul was saturated with the wind, and the relentless number of flapping flags. I needed relief from the urban grid and rode to the river. The water was especially green, covered with a white wind-beaten froth. I headed out onto an old north Chelsea pier, which I had not been on for many years. Riding to the western end, a distance of less than 200 yards, took many minutes because the wind roared from the northwest – not in gusts, but in long blasts lasting minutes, not seconds. My head was buffeted like a buoy; the straps of my backpack slapped against my sides. Long breaking waves marched eastward – one after another, never ending. The skyline across the river would be unrecognizable to anyone who has not visited New York City in eight or ten years. Dozens of new buildings line the opposite shoreline.

At 7:30 PM, it was still. The sky was steel blue with a crescent moon in the west – a beautiful, steady contrast to the wind. All impurities had been cleared, leaving the air stunningly clear.

Just before midnight, I stepped outside for a breath of air and saw more stars over Manhattan than any time I could ever remember.

James Boorstein

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