

Sacrifice¹

What if his future life flashed past his eyes, during those busy minutes just before he died: scrolling down, weaving a scrapbook of the man's foreshortened life, like a home movie thrown on a white kitchen wall.

Shepherding to safety women paralyzed by fear, he sees the lambent glowing eyes of the dark-haired girl he'll never marry.

Descending seventeen flights of stairs, a frightened two-year old on his hip, he's conscious of the skin-moist wriggling son she'll never bear. His right palm cups that tiny head. The impact of their first eye-contact rocks him, moving steadily through smoke.

The face of a frail banker is the father he won't bury. Then he lowers the next survivor from his shoulders: it's a never-born grandchild, whose bright eyes light up in thanks. He turns. Climbs the stairs.

¹ On September 11, 2001, terrified people in the South Tower noticed a young man wearing a red bandanna as he called for fire extinguishers to fight back the flames, tended to the wounded, and led survivors to safety. He carried an injured woman down 17 flights on his back. Then Welles Crowther went back up all those flights, and back down again, leading more wounded. Up and down, up and down, until the moment when the tower fell.

Welles' courage pushed right past his sacrifice, the way a
fireman dons his gear - thrusts fists through stiff, resistant sleeves.

Then that tall tower's melting members gave. He fell -
a hundred stories to the ground. Shrouded in all the joys
that never would be his, mixing with rainbow shards of shattered
window glass that drifted round him, to the street below.

Road Kill

The largest of the crows looks right on
past the other two. Fixes his gaze on
the dusty highway median.

Studiously ignores
the squashed corpse at their feet, although
all three know perfectly well they are
about to eat the squirrel.

Elsewhere, a judge
sententiously sentences a single mom to jail
time. She loses her lifeline job. A used car
salesman closes the deal with an immigrant
family at a price he knows they can't afford.
Generals group around a map on which population
centers go unmarked, and call in bombing runs.

All repeat, in crow chorus: *Hey, don't look at me.*
*I wasn't driving the car. I wasn't even **in** the car.*
I'm only here for a good meal.

Not Just West 47th Street

In fact, New York is crammed with actors in rehearsal. A gangly waiter takes your order

at the Dim Sum Go-Go, on East Broadway at Worth: he's trying out for the lead role in a Chinese immigrant success

story. Peer inside the head of the young aspiring literary agent as she shares dim sum with you: she's running over her next few

lines, it's a tragicomedy that tells us all we'll ever need to know about life and love in the City. The hulking black

beggar with stumps for legs, strategically positioned where the stairs decant onto the ILR subway platform, uses each

shake of his coin-filled can as cadence for *Pathos: a One-Man Show*.

I shouldn't begrudge them the scant moments it takes to be their

audience, to render a quick review, before resuming my own drama: aging but imaginative poet finds just the right words to immortalize his thoughts.

Death Grip

Smell yourself, putrefying in buzzing sun. Green-bottle flies walk on your eyeball. Maggots burrow, half-submerged. See them spin and turn, churn skin into slime, a mish-mash, no sort of flesh. Accept that you will never again run, laughing, in a light rain.

Now plunge your hand in! Dig along a leg. Find the shin. Close your fist around that bone. Feel softening flesh squish out between your fingers. Feel bits of your own corpse embed beneath your nails. Grasp! - as you would hold a lover. Let the climax build. Hold it there.

Next, the strict rule for withdrawal. You may shake that wet flesh off your hand, or palm-wipe on your flannel shirt. But no washing. No, let that wet waste dry like paste.

Carry it with you, grit they'll one day bury. As your fingers flex to grasp a wineglass stem, or to shampoo a grandchild's silken hair: Death, scum skin on your skin, spectral despair.

Bereft

Think of the other mothers. Farm wives in the
“frozen summer” of 1816. Their anguish.

They grew potatoes in southwest Ireland, corn
in Atlantic Canada. In that year, a June frost
wilted every thin green shoot. In July, the cold
returned and blackened the replanted crop.

No harvest. Nothing at all. By midwinter, only
the seed grain bin remained. And so, come mealtime,
they scooped from it, scooped their way toward starvation.

Feeding their family. Precluding replanting. Did their tears
salt the gruel as it simmered in the pot?

All ancient history.

Still, I thought of it just now, in the private airport lounge
where they’ve sequestered the “waiting families”. The story
bounded into my mind like an eager puppy, when Ms. Johansson,
the airline spokesperson, her voice appropriately compassionate,
updated us.

They’ve found the

wreckage. No survivors. Not even you.

I'd been
picturing you as the sole survivor. I'd seen you scramble to safety,
barely outracing flaming jet fuel. The footage ran and reran
in my head, a grudging revision of

my more inclusive
film from this morning, in which your plane had glided to a "Miracle on the
Hudson" landing, ditching in Lake Eerie with the rescue of all on board.

All through this
endless day, I've been eating my way through my heart's shallow bin, and
now stand over it, wooden scoop in hand, the wolf-snarl of starvation staring
back at me, with not one single kernel of hope left to live on.