A Hard Rain

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Every morning these days I take the subway from Brooklyn Heights to the World Trade Center, where I catch the PATH train to Newark. I arrived at WTC at 9 this morning, exited the subway and walked through the long underground passageway to WTC One. Usually there is a violinist there, and he often is playing the Godfather theme around the time I get there. I didn't notice him this morning.

I could tell something was going on by the way people were milling around, and by the unusual crush of people trying to exit to the street up a staircase not usually so crowded. A uniformed subway employee was standing there, telling us we could not proceed through the door to the World Trade Center, and for a public official directing human traffic, she was unusually hysterical: "There are terrorists....go back that way," gesturing towards the subway. And most of the crowd started off obediently back towards the trains.

At that moment the people going up the stairs began running back down into the passageway. I decided to go up, against the flow, partly out of idiot curiosity, partly because if something was happening I felt safer in the open than in a tin can in a narrow tunnel.

On the street, I could see that WTC One was burning from its upper stories; curlicues of paper were floating down, glittering in the light, an eerily beautiful and incongruous effect. People ran past, some of them crying, as I stood immobilized, watching the flames.

Then there was an explosion, and fragments of glass rained down on my head. I saw a huge hole in the roof of a building two blocks from World Trade Center. I thought there were incoming projectiles of some kind, missiles or mortars, and began running away from the burning buildings, up Church Street to Chambers, wondering what would blow up next. At some point, as emergency vehicles sped past with screaming sirens towards the disaster, I concluded that the best thing I could do was make a run for the Brooklyn Bridge and walk home to Brooklyn Heights, so I headed that way down Chambers. My brain was clicking over very quickly: the municipal buildings might be another target, and I had to pass close to them to get to the bridge; or
terrorists might blow up a van in the middle of the bridge itself and try to bring it down with the hundreds of people crossing it on foot, escaping lower Manhattan.

There's another click that happens: fuck it, I could blow up anywhere, I'm just going to do the best I can. I hesitated a moment at the entry to the bridge, watching the two towers burning, thinking about the people who were dying and suffering there. A van, driven by two Arab-looking men, proceeded slowly onto the bridge; I let it get far ahead of me then started to walk, looking back over my shoulder repeatedly at the burning towers.

Someone behind me shouted, "There are people jumping!" and I turned to see a black dot, almost certainly a human dot, fall from the top of a tower.

I was on the bridge about a half-hour. The lane into Manhattan was closed to everything but emergency vehicles but the roadway to Brooklyn was packed with cars, some of them stopping midway on the bridge while the occupants got out to look at the flames. I heard a bang and flinched around to see that a driver opening his door had hit a motorcycle, throwing its riders to the ground; motorcyclist and driver started screaming into each other's faces in typical New York style--"You shouldn't have been white-lining!"--an expression I had never heard before.

A few minutes after I got home I was watching live coverage on CNN as World Trade Center 2 collapsed, then building 1 a few minutes later.

This afternoon a report that no attempt is being made to search the wreckage of the building looking for survivors until the fires burn out.... Two hundred firefighters are missing, and 78 police. No-one will even venture to say how many people total are entombed in the wreckage now.

I went to give blood at an overwhelmed Red Cross center where they sent us away and told us to come back in a few hours. But when I came back they had run out of supplies and closed, as had the other center in the neighborhood.

I am watching the endless recycling of the same news on CNN. Where is our government? With the exception of the White House counsel, who gave a brief press conference, the only talking heads on CNN are ex-government types; they found Henry Kissinger, but the President,
the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense are all in hiding, perhaps in some simulacrum of the War Room from Dr. Strangelove: "Gentlemen, you can't fight here, Its the War Room."

Right now an expert on CNN is saying, "The plane was the bomb." The terms of reference changed today. Planes are bombs, the World Trade Center can fall, and the President is hiding. The police and firefighters, who are supposed to rescue us, are standing by and letting the flames burn out because it is too dangerous to go in.

I thought of Bob Dylan: the glass I picked out of my hair an hour later was a hard rain.

I've stepped in the middle of seven sad forests,
I've been out in front of a dozen dead oceans,
I've been ten thousand miles in the mouth of a graveyard,
And it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a hard,
And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall.

I'm left with a few mixed, jangling thoughts. As I wrote in last month's Spectacle, why bother building the National Missile Defense <http://www.spectacle.org/0801/shield.html>, a classic example of fighting the last war, when the next war--the current war--will be fought using our own planes as bombs?

I think that monsters exist among us. Considering how easy it turned out to be to bring down the federal building in Oklahoma City with a truckful of fertilizer, the only reason more people haven't done something like it is because we have some sort of internal governor that makes most of us not want to. And planes haven't previously been used as bombs this way because people who could fly them were restrained, possibly by this governor, and possibly by a stronger one, the desire not to die. But the governors are weaker than they were, while the technology gets stronger. CNN kept reporting that the Trade Center buildings were built to resist a hit from a 707, but when 737's and 767's were invented, there was no way to upgrade them.

But we are not unresponsible for the monsters; they are responsible for themselves, certainly, as moral actors, but we did our part in their creation. We funded and trained the Afghanistan resistance against the Russians, who later turned on us; but more than that, when we squeeze people and crush them, make them live in humiliation and without the air and water, autonomy and self respect necessary to sustain them as humans, we make monsters. Any chaotic outsider on
the margins can kill himself in order to take out others, but when the
first Israeli Arab fifty-three year old politician does it (as happened last
week) or the first pilot does it (as happened today) we must take
notice.

What happens next I don't really know, but I know what I fear: that
we will embark, like the Israelis and Palestinians, on a mindless spasm
of killing and counter-killing; that civil liberties and freedom of speech
will be curtailed; that the president, with his powerful backers, his
deer-in-the-headlights look and his primitive philosophy, will not see
the line before crossing it, or won't care.

Getting out of Manhattan this morning, away from the burning towers,
was like a walk in the park, compared to what I think is going to come.

I tried to read this morning's newspaper this afternoon, but the pre-
bombing news seemed irrelevant, like news from twenty years ago.