6

Loss of a loss¹

*Someone, broom in hand,
still remembers how it was.
Someone else listens, nodding
his unshattered head.*

*But others are bound to be bustling nearby
who'll find all that
a little boring*

– Wisława Szymborska²

Emerging from Courtland Street subway provides the first shock. The landscape is entirely unfamiliar. In front of me a busy construction site with tall buildings on all sides. A huge steel semi-circle like some giant fairground ride heaves into the air, topped by giant cranes. No sign of Ground Zero. No neat steel fences with the names. Crowds of people though, mostly walking in the opposite direction. Slowly I take my bearings. Here is St Paul's churchyard. Railings bare: they used to be festooned with scarves, T-shirts, banners, mementoes. People taking photographs: that is the same. Slowly, slowly, the place begins to resolve itself into something I can grasp.

The churchyard is still there. The trees that had been hung with detritus spewed out as the buildings came down are still there, pristine now, coming into bud this spring. Where am I standing? Is it where the viewing platform had been in 2002? Where people had queued quietly to climb up for their two minutes overlooking the pit? I check the buildings to the right. Yes, that is it. The plywood platforms, endorsed by a visitor called Mariette with the words 'We all lost you

I Construction site, Ground Zero, May 2014

all, and mourn together. We are *not* sightseers' stood right here. I take some photographs. Pause. Think.

Which way to go? Follow the crowds? There are notices saying 'Entry to 9/11 Memorial this way'. I turn around. Hoardings surrounding the construction site opposite seem to be showing what it will look like: 'Shopping and Dining at the World Trade Center', they announce. OK. So this is going to be the best shopping mall in the world. A shopping mall to beat all shopping malls. How great the US is. I am in need of a pause. The Starbucks on the corner is still there – I enter, order and sit. People around occupied with their devices. It is quiet.

After a while I resume. Walk towards Greenwich Street, where the entrance to the memorial is, so the signs tell me. People all around, crowds in the warm sunshine, enjoying themselves, working out where to go, what to do next – like me. Police on every corner: directing pedestrians, joking with me about coaches parked across zebra crossings. I decide to give up on Greenwich Street for the time being and head to the right down a random street. Signs tell me I won't be able to visit the memorial without a pre-booked pass anyway. I need to go to memorial.org to do that.

The street I've taken runs down the back of a fire station, down the back of the Tribute Center I visited five years ago. I take a right past a memorial wall. I find myself at a corner I know well. This street used to form the outer edge of the Ground Zero that was. Not many people here. A tall new building opposite. And a police officer, large, burly, imposing, watching me. From here I can see the memorial. Or at least, I see the rows of the swamp white oaks that I've read about somewhere. I take some photographs. I move across the road to take some more. The officer tells me I can't stand in the road. I ask if it's okay if I cross. 'I need to stand on the sidewalk?' I say. 'Yes.' I take more photographs. I think I may have included the officer, but I'm not sure: I find I'm ambivalent about that. I'd like to move closer, but that means moving off the pavement and across another road. That's not allowed, the officer indicates. He is sympathetic. He tells me where the entrance to the memorial is and asks if I am going to visit it. I tell him I might come back tomorrow and do that. I tell him I'm trying to connect what's here now with what was here before. Again, he seems sympathetic.

Suddenly, for some reason, I am overwhelmed and I turn away. I am overcome with grief: grief for what this place has become, perhaps.

2 Corner overlooking the site, Ground Zero, May 2014

In 2003 I went to town hall meetings where they were debating what should be done with the site. These were huge meetings, open to all comers, with dignitaries on the platform and an emotional audience. Some wanted to build the towers back bigger – just to show them. Others, equally passionate but less loud, argued for leaving an empty space, not reconstructing: there was no demand for office space in the area. Some said, if I remember rightly, the WTC had been loss-making, part empty even. What was needed was community space.

And there was this enormous sense of community in Manhattan after 9/11 – the vigils in the parks, the temporary memorials, the applause for rescue workers as they cleared the site, the tea and support at St Paul's, the visitors an enveloping cordon around the destruction and loss. None of that is there now. The visitors now *are* sightseers, for sure. We weren't back in 2002.

The debates back then were a little like those around the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 – a moment of openness, a moment of unknowing, when the hole left when certainties disappear was visible and a different way seemed a real possibility. Had I been able to, I would have visited Berlin then. That moment was soon closed down, as what we now call neo-liberalism moved into the vacuum on a wave of US triumphalism.

I don't return to the hotel. I continue walking, no crowds now, towards Battery Park. In 2002, this was the place where *The Sphere* from the WTC Plaza was placed. It has probably been moved now. More signs of new construction, with the familiar 'post no bills' stencils, although we are well away from the area that was destroyed on 9/11. I turn again down to the right, and then right again, drawn in somehow. Other buildings, smaller ones, boarded up and derelict. At the end of the street I see the crowds again. And the sign, just legible, 'Entrance. 9/11 Memorial.' I decide to go take a look, and take some photographs.

The crowds are milling around, gathering, forming into groups. There are plenty of notices here – information about opening hours, what is not permitted, warning that there are no public restrooms on site – and one in a different format, black on white, telling us that this is a memorial site and demanding our respect. I'd read and been told by a friend about the security measures and the long walk from

3 Entrance, 9/11 Memorial, May 2014

the entrance to the site itself. I could see a small tent, the security tent perhaps.

I decided I might ask whether I could get in without a pass, but then I noticed there were two lanes: one for those with a pass, to the right, one for those without, to the left. And most people were making their way to the left. I joined them. A fairly fast moving lane of people being herded up and down between the standard black tapes, adjusted occasionally by staff to regulate the flow. It became clear as we got closer that the tent I'd spotted wasn't security, but a collection point for donations: five dollars or ten dollars, or 'give what you can'. A family in front of me discussed softly how much they would give: 'If there's a choice, we'll choose nothing.' By the time we got there, the demand of the transparent donation boxes, with a slot at the top to post your bills, guarded by smiling staff we had to pass one by one, was inexorable. We all paid up, even those who'd said they were intending to donate zero. I consider calculating how much they must be making from the steady stream, but don't. I was told later that without Federal funding finance is a real problem.

Beyond this point, progress slows as the pre-ticketed join the rest of us to weave around corners and past construction sites, through a

building where we are instructed to prepare for airport-like security – coats and jackets off, coins out of pockets, devices in the tray. Once through this last hurdle, our tickets scanned and deleted, things speed up. Tickets out again to pass a final test – very necessary, as there is little to stop the unprocessed joining us, bypassing security as we round the final corner – and we are here.

Trees. Rectangular beds and paths that regiment. One tree resplendent in full bloom. I pause to take it all in. People already there, sitting or strolling. Warm, sheltered place in full sun. A park like any other, perhaps. Some groups standing around seem to be reluctant visitors – impatient to leave, more interested in their own concerns, bored. Groups of police officers.

All together it seems, we head to the west side of the South Pool. It is crowded as people lean over to see the water falling. The sound the water makes fills our ears. I recall hearing somewhere that this is the most impressive thing – more than the sight, the sound overwhelms. The sound of the buildings falling? I wonder what sound that made. This sound certainly produces the silence of white noise that shuts out the sound of the traffic. I take pictures of the sunshine on the water

4 Corner of South Pool, 9/11 Memorial, May 2014

as it is guided with accuracy into thin round streams by channels that funnel it from the edges over the sides into the first pool, turbulent. And from there into the central pit. It is impressive in its scale and precision. The care of designer, architect and builder is apparent. The angles are exact, the water controlled: a gigantic spectacle meticulously crafted in every detail. Like the spectacle it commemorates, perhaps.

The crowds are thinner on the other sides of the pool. The names. A lot of names. This was a lot of people who died that day. Flight 93. The Pentagon. First Responders. Names under each of these. Names. Jennifer L. Howley and her unborn child. I look for panel 66. This is the panel where, searching online, I had found several names with no indication of employer or place of residence: undocumented workers, perhaps. And one name has been added: Jerry J. Borg. When the light catches the panel it reveals how this last name has its own indentation, breaking the smoothness of the surface.

In a wall to the side of the South Pool is what looks like a row of ATMs. Turns out these are terminals giving access to the database of names. People search, or listen to recorded testimonies of relatives. I'd read before that visitors were using smart phone apps to do this – and I did see a few.

5 Names on the 9/11 Memorial, May 2014

I move across to the North Pool: it is cold, shaded, and only two sides are accessible. The museum is not open yet, but through the glass one can glimpse vast escalators moving underground, and iconic steel girders, rust brown, ribs of the old towers, preserved for eternity.

I notice two large ugly grey buildings at the west side of the site, and I ask one of the security people what they are for. Maintenance. Of course. I ask how long it will be before the site is complete and the surrounding construction finished. The current date is 2019, five years from now. A long time. Too long, the person labelled security remarks. I agree. There seem to be a lot of large buildings going up all around, I say. He points out a tall grey building with a round water cylinder on top of it – ‘A new Hilton, to accommodate all the people coming here’, he says. And a new transportation hub to replace the one that was here before, but transformed: a huge shopping complex where there had just been ‘a Hudson’s and one or two other shops’ under the old Trade Center. ‘A huge new tourist attraction’, I remark. He doesn’t demur.

I am curious what will happen to all the fences and security when the site is finished. The security will remain, he tells me, but the

6 Photographing visitors attempting to photograph the inside of the 9/11 Museum, May 2014

fences will go. People will be able to just walk onto the Plaza. The airport-style checks will move to the Museum. I'm not sure I shall be back in 2019 to check.

On the way out we are directed past the obligatory souvenir store – the usual paraphernalia of mugs, fridge magnets, T-shirts emblazoned with slogans: 'In Darkness We Shine Brightest'; 'Honor. Remember. Reunite'. The collection of books is interesting. Almost all reflect a narrative of rebuilding, overcoming, stealing survival from the jaws of death, national pride. Nothing left now of memory. No sense of the disruption to national invincibility and invulnerability that the events of September 11 seemed to represent, to some at least. No evidence of the traumatic shock, or the recognition that others suffer like this daily. No recognition of the direction in US foreign policy that a particular narrative legitimated. No sense remaining that it could have been otherwise. We/they have rebuilt, but higher.

We have no memorial, no space to remember, nothing but a major new tourist attraction and the new infrastructure to make money from it: shops, hotels, products, apps. No sacred space, no space for the sacred, for the story, for the ambiguity, for the loss. I return to my hotel angry, disillusioned, upset. I shall not go again. Co-opted once into a narrative as victims – heroes – of wars that were yet to take place and would take hundreds of thousands of other ordinary lives in other places, the names of those lost on 9/11 – and their narratives – are now permanently engraved in a site of global tourism yards from the financial centre of Wall Street. Forgotten indeed.

But I did go back once more, the day I was leaving New York. After my first visit, at the start of the week, I was impelled to write an account, to set down on paper what had happened and how I felt, so that I would not forget. Over lunch the Tuesday after, I filled pages and pages of a lined paper pad with script. On the Saturday evening, fearful of losing the handwritten pages, I typed it up. On Sunday morning, I was back at the site.

It was not warm, like the first visit, but cold and windy. I went, so I told myself, to check some details that I'd missed the first time. I was less disoriented by then. Courtland Street subway was closed, so I arrived via Chambers Street and walked up Vesey to the Memorial

Preview Site on the corner with Church Street – where people are directed to go to purchase their visitor passes. It was early in the morning, so not crowded. I looked inside briefly, then walked along Church and down Liberty to the corner with Greenfield Street that overlooks the memorial plaza: the place I had stood on my first visit earlier in the week, disorientated and disturbed as I had been then. I could see people already circulating around the site, looking over the edge of the pools, moving slowly around them.

As I stood contemplating, one of the security staff approached and asked whether I knew where I was going. ‘Yes. I’ve been to the memorial site already. I just wanted to take another look from here.’ ‘So you know where you are.’ ‘Yes.’ He started talking, pointing out the various new Trade Center buildings – some built, some yet to be constructed, the transportation hub, the state-of-the-art vehicle security screening facility, the museum – and telling me how Freedom Tower had been renamed WTC1. He told me of the conflict between what the families wanted and commercial interests, and how the commercial interests had won out in the end. He asked where I was from and what I did. His daughter – trained as a political scientist – had travelled in Europe. And his family – he described himself as an eleventh-generation immigrant: his ancestor had come as an indentured labourer from England in 1680. I asked what he thought of the Memorial. His response was to talk about asymmetric warfare: states with plenty of money but little imagination, and amateurs with their more creative approach. He talked of individual heroes from US history – amateurs of their time with names I don’t recognise – and the revolution that the Freedom Tower, 1,776 feet high, commemorates. As he talks I imagine what it might be like one day – when the construction site has resolved itself into a part of the city – to cross the street to the plaza with its trees and pools.

Finally, I turn away. There is a strong wind rounding the corner of 4 World Trade Center – one of the new skyscrapers, which websites say will provide ‘highly efficient, collaborative workspaces, unrivalled access to mass transit, and a perfect work-life balance’ – and I need to move. I say goodbye to my guide and walk around aimlessly for a little. The people going into the site through the entrance are moving swiftly. I contemplate joining them again, but don’t. The souvenir

shop is packed. I find Rector Street subway, and leave. My anger has dissipated. When I had told colleagues at the New School of my first visit to the memorial that week, they had asked what I'd thought. 'I didn't like it at all', I said. Why not? 'Commercialisation', was my short reply, no time to elaborate before our panel began. Later, in other conversations, I was offered excuses: it was controversial, the Federal Government had refused to finance it, the architects were working within the constraints of a difficult site and too many contending client interests.

And after all, you/we/they are entitled to concrete over the cracks, to reorient the city around new towers, to forget. 'You had the IRA', my impromptu guide at the memorial on my last day had said. Yes, I thought, we did. We had our Blitz, our Dresden, our Hiroshima, and our shock and awe too. And we immigrated to the United States and forgot them. We learned of your revolutionary war, of your heroes. We learned to be good defenders of freedom and commerce. We tourists come now, in our thousands, looking for the day thousands like us were erased, rubbed out, turned to dust: the day you seemed to realise we all share a vulnerability. We come to hold you in our arms, as Toni Morrison put it.³ But we find that you have thoroughly forgotten what that might have been, and where that might have led. You have even forgotten the horror of the use of other people's bodies as weapons, doubled by their incorporation into appalling acts of revenge – and now, triumphalism. And so, perhaps, have we. We take our photographs, buy our souvenirs, and leave. There are no echoes here of that time, of those dead. Even 'the ancient atoms' they have become have disappeared.⁴ The world has been put back together, bigger and better. Trees planted, earth levelled, the past and its remains neatly boxed into museums and repositories that we can visit or not as we choose.

I am reminded of Michael Frayn's play about the building of the atom bomb in the 1940s – the time when the surface of the earth immediately beneath the point of detonation of an atomic bomb was designated 'ground zero'. In that play, a future beyond memory, beyond redemption, is imagined. 'When all our eyes are closed, when even the ghosts have gone,' Frayn asks, 'What will be left of our beloved world? Our ruined and dishonoured and beloved world?' All

that remains, for Frayn, is 'this most precious meanwhile'.⁵ Time to wander, perhaps, in ground zeros: not of atomic bombs but of other, lesser disasters.

I haven't often written as I did that Tuesday in New York: a handwritten narrative, pencil on lined paper, urgent and fluid. The last time I can remember doing such a thing is after the birth of my first child, when I wrote to remember the pain. I knew I would forget its intensity and its impact. I folded *that* writing away in an envelope; I haven't looked at it since. *This* writing has continued to worry at me. Back in the UK, I wrote the second half of the narrative, puzzled by where the writing was leading. Slowly, I began to acknowledge what had been there all along, perhaps: an intense sense of bereavement, not for the loss itself, but the loss of the loss. It seemed it was not so much what the place had become that had upset me, but that the place – the hole, the pit – had been covered over, filled in, erased, as, inevitably, it had to be: 'Someone has to tidy up.'⁶

Or do they? The tidying up, the rebuilding, the memorialising entail a forgetting of the trauma – that which is beyond words, that reminds us of the beyond of words, of what cannot be put into words; that which reminds us of the fragility of our worlds, and challenges us to live with and alongside that fragility. But can we, could we, should we take up that challenge? I used to think that some memorial practices did that, refusing closure, refusing a rewriting of authority and authorisation, refusing a new beginning along the same lines as the old.⁷ But I think I may have given up on memory, or rather on practices of memory, now. I'm not sure I know why.

Giving up on dreams may be necessary, but it is very hard, whether it is dreams of happy endings or dreams of no endings at all. My dream of no ending was not that, perhaps, but a dream that holding on to trauma, encircling it, can save us. Nothing can save us. I say that, but I refuse to believe it. I shall carry the trauma, folded in an envelope, in my pocket. Maybe that is what most of us do, most of the time, memorials or no memorials.

New York 2014

Notes

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- 2 Wisława Szymborska, 'The End and the Beginning.' In *Poems New and Collected, 1957–1997*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1998, 228–9.
- 3 Toni Morrison, 'The Dead of September 11.' *Vanity Fair*, November 2001, 48–9.
- 4 Morrison, 'The Dead of September 11.'
- 5 Michael Frayn, *Copenhagen*. London: Methuen Drama, 1998: 96.
- 6 Szymborska, 'The End and the Beginning.'
- 7 Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.