

Where I am, where America meets the Pacific sea it's ten o'clock pm, Tuesday, September eleventh, the year of our lord Two-Thousand And One, a new "day that will live in infamy." In New York Tuesday passed with the tolling of midnight bells and the screaming of sirens. In New York Wednesday morning has come. It's one o'clock am there, eastern standard time.

I write by the light of twenty-five watts, the last bulb burning in a quiet house where I hear breathing, clocks ticking, and the scratching of this midnight black pen. *Perhaps, I imagine, this bedside lamp might be the last light on in all America and only if I reach over and switch it off can night reign free and settle over three hundred million gentle sleepers.* But this thought is merely fantasy.

If I look long and hard enough, past the shadows on the wall surrounding me, I see the dead in ashen beds who will never sleep and their orphaned children's oft-squeezed teddy-bears whose fur is moist with tears. But I write far away nestled in soft warm sheets.

I write and remember when I discovered reality, or perhaps reality discovered me, in early morning when Paul told me at seven-thirty am, eleven-thirty in New York. Paul is a friend and neighbor who I car pool with. Nine days ago I performed the processional for his wedding, a violin-guitar duet, with my brother. The "Reverend" recited a very old prayer, calling upon spirits of ancestors, trees, animals and all nature to help us know and practice The Way. Jennifer, Paul's wife, cried and when she and Paul kissed and said "I do," the sun broke through the clouds as if on cue. This morning, Tuesday, Jen called Paul from work and told him he should turn on the T.V. but he was already watching.

When dawn breaks we Americans gaze east, to where the sun rises, across fields and prairies. We cock our heads and necks to see giant television images and fresh ink. The booming voices speak words that proclaim today is incredible, but I know it is routine.

On the highway, Paul and I spoke some: asked each other questions and made clever speculation. I felt numb excitement. Paul's radio, tuned to a station normally blaring upbeat classic rock, now just speaks news. Inside other cars cruising 101 drivers sit alone, drink coffee, soak up NPR and CBS, broadcast by blinking transmission towers through the ether, the electric fog we are piercing and speeding through. I think of the novel *White Noise*<sup>1</sup> about buzzing humming omnipresent electric waves, death, and the black cloud of an "airborne toxic event." My thoughts wander, but traffic is rushing steadily forward at sixty-five mile hours an hour: undisturbed and undistracted.

Our car finds the off-ramp it has sought, exits, enters Arcata. Paul parks and when he turns the keys the mustang's motor and radio fall silent. We close doors, say goodbye, and part, walking separate paths: he to canceled university classes, I to high school.

The news must be everywhere, being discussed over fresh coffee, in supermarkets, in offices, and at school. Students ask "Have you heard?" and we talk about the spectacle because it feels like the correct thing to do. A girl suddenly runs through the door, crying. I stare stupidly and wonder if I wish I could too could weep.

Come afternoon, most students leave but three souls are left behind. Now freed from a judging audience, we can be impassioned fools. In the neighboring room a throng has gathered, and from there the rhythmic mumble of T.V. sound hits our ears. In the corner where we don't know anything we shout loud words like George Bush and World War III, media and terrorists. We annoy each other, tension builds, suddenly I burst and say "fuck you" and we laugh. Then I admit I am one of the great majority who doesn't care, doesn't give a shit. I'm different only because I won't pretend I do. When the shock falls from the air and the animated faces, I know part of me is dead. I just witnessed the funeral. I walk out of doors possessing clearer self-recognition, freed to feel new feelings, and believe new beliefs.

I hitch a ride home with Erik and his mom. The spectacle is present everywhere, including their car where NPR pours out of speakers. Bush promises justice against "these cowardly acts" and a military man gushes situations, prospects, and promises to the American people. I think immediately of Dr. Strangelove<sup>2</sup>: "Gentlemen — You can't fight in here. This is the war room!" and "Peace is Our Profession."

Arriving home, I climb steps I've climbed two thousand times to find my stepsister watching televised talking heads who reiterate unchanging news forever. These pretty made-up faces come through clear and earnest but the images of death are cheap and grainy so I turn away — if I watch and listen more, I will know less and less. The

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<sup>1</sup>A novel by Don DeLillo.

<sup>2</sup>*Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Bomb*, directed by Stanley Kubrick.

cathode rays suck my soul away.

America is a fat county. When we citizens are not filling our mouths with food, we gorge ourselves with cheap talk. I fear, sometimes, that the words I love, the words we love, will be robbed of all meaning by careless mouths. When and if that day comes, words will die whimpering deaths in dreams.

My family dines accompanied, no, *dominated* by TV. I hear carefully pronounced electric words I resent and have avoided for the whole day. Sad, sappy piano music adds dramatic pizzazz to slow panning shots of smoking rubble and a bright-colored title graphic shouting "Attack on America!" I watch with interest, when, at last, I see spectacular images appear on the T.V. screen: a small jet flying gracefully into a massive building. All but for the smoke and flames that do not look as real those pictured in the movies, the scene occurs so nonchalantly I am capable of wondering: "Does this happen in New York every morning?"

My family lives under a spell and dinner conversation is muted. With every word we violate and disrespect the human beings who were destroyed today so no one knows what to say. I think of only one response to the news that totally satisfies my sense of horror, so after dinner I select a CD, the soundtrack of *Koyaanisqatsi* composed by Philip Glass and load it in the player. The film's name is a Hopi word that means "1. Crazy life. 2. Life in turmoil. 3. Life disintegrating. 4. Life out of balance. 5. A state of life that calls for another way of living."

The music of deep voices chanting "Ko—yawn—is—scots—ee," an electric organ, and singing flutes fills my house and I smile slightly satisfied, listening to art that is beautiful and sad. Minor and diminished arpeggios beat endlessly, reaching up to a frightful mysterious high power.

I imagine I am listening to the soundtrack of America, raining down like tears and roses from heaven upon glittering cities and fields of grain. My mind, possessed by music, soars above to join singing angels and I feel the freedom of flight far above the Earth, following a sweet tail of jet exhaust freshly exhaled from engines of a sinister golden cold-metal bird, glistening in light from the east, where the sun is rising. It is lined on either side by a row of one-hundred tiny windows framing human faces pressed against the glass, gazing longingly, helplessly, down at distant ground. They are frightened, trapped inside a journey whose end is fast approaching. I wonder: How innocent are these American Airlines travellers who sip soda, snack salted peanuts and dominate the clear blue skies? How innocent am I who is safe, well-fed, rich and privileged? I, who enjoys the protection of the strongest military in the world?

All the people, babies, children, mamas, papas, friends and foes, in this plane are dying for our worldly sins. A few are making the final fantastic pilgrimage of their lives, but some others, hostages, are pilgrims against their own will. I cannot look inside the cockpit of destiny into the focused eyes that peer beyond the glass windows because I am afraid. I do not understand the martyrs' expectant gazes towards the shining horizon and afterlife beyond. I only remember Allen Ginsberg who said: "All we do is for this one frightened thing we call Love, want, and lack."<sup>3</sup>

Now I turn out the light on my strange fantasies and turn over in my warm bed for sleep, a luxury I generously allow myself plenty of. After seven dreamless hours I wake, dress, turn on the computer, read eMail, and visit Washingtonpost.com: Bin Laden suspected... 90% of Americans polled will support military mobilization in case of foreign attack... George Bush makes a speech... frantic phone calls made before death... and links to donate blood — For me, the front page is more than enough. Its 6:25 a.m. Pacific time, 10:25, eastern standard time when I switch the computer off.

A man visited school on Tuesday and told us to write poetry and I know now why he said this — until I write, I am without a voice, powerless, drowning in the language of countless strangers. Now I plunge in and out of depression, sweet sadness, and I find faith that is beautiful; faith that satisfies me when I write alone under half-masted America flags at odd hours, read my words set in black ink on the page, or hear my own voice speak.

Thank you for listening.

— Aaron Antrim, 15 September 2001

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<sup>3</sup>"Wichita Vortex Sutra." Track Six of the album *Hydrogen Jukebox*. Poem by Allen Ginsburg. Music by Philip Glass.