David Lehman (NYC 1996)

"World Trade Center"

I never liked the World Trade Center.
When it went up I talked it down
As did many other New Yorkers.
The twin towers were ugly monoliths
That lacked the details the ornament the character
Of the Empire State Building and especially
The Chrysler Building, everyone's favorite,
With its scalloped top, so noble.
The World Trade Center was an example of what was wrong
With American architecture,
And it stayed that way for twenty-five years
Until that Friday afternoon in February
When the bomb went off and the buildings became
A great symbol of America, like the Statue
Of Liberty at the end of Hitchcock's Saboteur.
My whole attitude toward the World Trade Center
Changed overnight. I began to like the way
It comes into view as you reach Sixth Avenue
From any side street, the way the tops
Of the towers dissolve into white skies
In the east when you cross the Hudson
Into the city across the George Washington Bridge.

Adam Zagajewski* (Polish, 24 Sept 2001)

"Try to praise the mutilated world"

Remember June's long days,
and wild strawberries, drops of wine, the dew.
The nettles that methodically overgrow
the abandoned homesteads of exiles.

You must praise the mutilated world.
You watched the stylish yachts and ships;
one of them had a long trip ahead of it,
while salty oblivion awaited others.
You've seen the refugees heading nowhere,
you've heard the executioners sing joyfully.

You should praise the mutilated world.
Remember the moments when we were together
in a white room and the curtain fluttered.
Return in thought to the concert where music flared.
You gathered acorns in the park in autumn
and leaves eddied over the earth's scars.

Praise the mutilated world
and the gray feather a thrush lost,
and the gentle light that strays and vanishes
and returns.

*Although written in "response" to 9/11 the poem is actually based on a walk Zagajewski took with his father through Ukrainian villages in Poland forcibly abandoned in the population transfers of the post-Yalta years.

"This was one of the strongest impressions I ever had," Zagajewski says. "There were these empty villages with some apple trees going wild. And I saw the villages became prey to nettles; nettles were everywhere. There were these broken houses. It became in my memory this mutilated world, these villages, and at the same time they were beautiful. It was in the summer, beautiful weather. It's something that I reacted to, this contest between beauty and disaster."

W.S. Merwin (American Poet Laureate in 2010-2011)

"To the Words" 8 October 2001

When it happens you are not there
oh you beyond numbers
beyond recollection
passed on from breath to breath
given again
from day to day from age
to age
charged with knowledge
knowing nothing
indifferent elders
indispensable and sleepless
keepers of our names
before ever we came
to be called by them
you that were
formed to begin with
you that were cried out
you that were spoken
to begin with
to say what could not be said
ancient precious
and helpless ones
say it

Deborah Garrison (American)

"I Saw You Walking" (22 Oct 2001)

I saw you walking through Newark Penn Station
in your shoes of white ash. At the corner
of my nervous glance your dazed passage
first forced me away, tracing the crescent
berth you'd give a drunk, a lurcher, nuzzling
all comers with ill will and his stench, but
not this one, not today: one shirt arm's sheared
clean from the shoulder, the whole bare limb
wet with muscle and shining dimly pink,
the other full-sheathed in cotton, Brooks Bros.
type, the cuff yet buttoned at the wrist, a
parody of careful dress, preparedness—
so you had not rolled up your sleeves yet this
morning when your suit jacket (here are
the pants, dark gray, with subtle stripe, as worn
by men like you on ordinary days)
and briefcase (you've none, reverse commuter
come from the pit with nothing to carry
but your life) were torn from you, as your life
was not. Your face itself seemed to be walking,
leading your body north, though the age
of the face, blank and ashen, passing forth
and away from me, was unclear, the sandy
crown of hair powdered white like your feet, but
underneath not yet gray—forty-seven?
forty-eight? the age of someone's father—
and I trembled for your luck, for your broad,
dusted back, half shirted, walking away;
I should have dropped to my knees to thank God
you were alive, o my God, in whom I don't believe.

Stephen Dunn (NYC, October 2002)

“Grudges”

Easy for almost anything to occur.
Even if we've scraped the sky, we can be rubble.
For years those men felt one way, acted another.

Ground Zero, is it possible to get lower?
Now we had a new definition of the personal,
knew almost anything could occur.

It just takes a little training, to blur
A motive, lie low while planning the terrible,
Get good at acting one way, feeling another.

Yet who among us doesn't harbor
A grudge or secret? So much isn't erasable;
It follows that almost anything can occur,

Like men ascending into the democracy of air
Without intending to land, the useful veil
Of having said one thing, meaning another.

Before you know it something's over.
Suddenly someone's missing at the table.
It's easy (I know it) for anything to occur
When men feel one way, act another.

Galway Kinnell (American)

"When the Towers Fell" (published in the *New Yorker* in September '02)

Some with torn clothing, some bloodied,
some limping at top speed like children
in a three-legged race, some half dragged,
some intact in neat suits and dresses,
they straggle out of step up the avenues,
each dusted to a ghostly whiteness,
their eyes rubbed red as the eyes of a Zahoris,
who can see the dead under the ground.

And then by trying to transform them:
As each tower goes down, it concentrates
into itself, transforms itself
infinitely slowly into a black hole

infinitesimally small: mass
without space, where each light,
each life, put out, lies down within us.

Amiri Baraka* (NJ/NY 2002)

“Somebody Blew Up America”

They say its some terrorist, some barbaric A Rab, in Afghanistan It wasn’t our American terrorists It wasn’t the Klan or the Skin heads Or the them that blows up nigger Churches, or reincarnates us on Death Row It wasn’t Trent Lott Or David Duke or Giuliani Or Schundler, Helms retiring

It wasn’t The gonorrhea in costume The white sheet diseases That have murdered black people Terrorized reason and sanity Most of humanity, as they pleases

They say (who say?) Who do the saying Who is them paying Who tell the lies Who in disguise Who had the slaves Who got the bux out the Bucks

Who got fat from plantations Who genocided Indians Tried to waste the Black nation

Who live on Wall Street The first plantation Who cut your nuts off Who rape your ma Who lynched your pa

Who got the tar, who got the feathers Who had the match, who set the fires Who killed and hired Who say they God & still be the Devil

Who the biggest only Who the most goodest Who do Jesus resemble

Who created everything Who the smartest Who the greatest Who the richest Who say you ugly and they the goodlookingest

Who define art Who define science

Who made the bombs Who made the guns

Who bought the slaves, who sold them

Who called you them names Who say Dahmer wasn’t insane

Who? Who? Who?

Who stole Puerto Rico Who stole the Indies, the Philipines, Manhattan Australia & The Hebrides Who forced opium on the Chinese

Who own them buildings Who got the money Who think you funny Who locked you up Who own the papers

Who owned the slave ship Who run the army

Who the fake president Who the ruler Who the banker

Who? Who? Who?

Who own the mine Who twist your mind Who got bread Who need peace Who you think need war

Who own the oil Who do no toil Who own the soil Who is not a nigger Who is so great ain’t nobody bigger

Who own this city

Who own the air Who own the water

Who own your crib Who rob and steal and cheat and murder and make lies the truth Who call you uncouth

Who live in the biggest house Who do the biggest crime Who go on vacation anytime

Who killed the most niggers Who killed the most Jews Who killed the most Italians Who killed the most Irish Who killed the most Africans Who killed the most Japanese Who killed the most Latinos

Who? Who? Who?

Who own the ocean

Who own the airplanes Who own the malls Who own television Who own radio

Who own what ain't even known to be owned Who own the owners that ain't the real owners

Who own the suburbs Who suck the cities Who make the laws

Who made Bush president Who believe the confederate flag need to be flying Who talk about democracy and be lying

Who the Beast in Revelations Who 666 Who know who decide Jesus get crucified

Who the Devil on the real side Who got rich from Armenian genocide

Who the biggest terrorist Who change the bible Who killed the most people Who do the most evil Who don't worry about survival

Who have the colonies Who stole the most land Who rule the world Who say they good but only do evil Who the biggest executioner

Who? Who? Who?

Who own the oil Who want more oil Who told you what you think that later you find out a lie

Who? Who? Who?

Who found Bin Laden, maybe they Satan Who pay the CIA, Who knew the bomb was gonna blow Who know why the terrorists Learned to fly in Florida, San Diego

Who know why Five Israelis was filming the explosion And cracking they sides at the notion

Who need fossil fuel when the sun ain't goin' nowhere

Who make the credit cards Who get the biggest tax cut Who walked out of the Conference Against Racism Who killed Malcolm, Kennedy & his Brother Who killed Dr King, Who would want such a thing? Are they linked to the murder of Lincoln?

Who invaded Grenada Who made money from apartheid Who keep the Irish a colony Who overthrow Chile and Nicaragua later

Who killed David Sibeko, Chris Hani, the same ones who killed Biko, Cabral, Neruda, Allende, Che Guevara, Sandino,

Who killed Kabila, the ones who wasted Lumumba, Mondlane, Betty Shabazz, Die, Princess Di, Ralph Featherstone, Little Bobby

Who locked up Mandela, Dhoruba, Geronimo, Assata, Mumia, Garvey, Dashiell Hammett, Alphaeus Hutton

Who killed Huey Newton, Fred Hampton, Medgar Evers, Mikey Smith, Walter Rodney, Was it the ones who tried to poison Fidel Who tried to keep the Vietnamese Oppressed

Who put a price on Lenin's head

Who put the Jews in ovens, and who helped them do it Who said "America First" and ok'd the yellow stars

Who killed Rosa Luxembourg, Liebneckt Who murdered the Rosenbergs And all the good people iced, tortured, assassinated, vanished

Who got rich from Algeria, Libya, Haiti, Iran, Iraq, Saudi, Kuwait, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine,

Who cut off peoples hands in the Congo Who invented Aids Who put the germs In the Indians' blankets Who thought up "The Trail of Tears"

Who blew up the Maine & started the Spanish American War Who got Sharon back in Power Who backed Batista, Hitler, Bilbo, Chiang kai Chek

Who decided Affirmative Action had to go Reconstruction, The New Deal, The New Frontier, The Great Society,

Who do Tom Ass Clarence Work for Who doo doo come out the Colon's mouth Who know what kind of Skeeza is a Condoleeza Who pay Connelly to be a wooden negro Who give Genius Awards to Homo Locus Subsidere

Who overthrew Nkrumah, Bishop, Who poison Robeson, who try to put DuBois in Jail Who frame Rap Jamil al Amin, Who frame the Rosenbergs, Garvey, The Scottsboro Boys, The Hollywood Ten

Who set the Reichstag Fire

Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers To stay home that day Why did Sharon stay away?

Who? Who? Who?

Explosion of Owl the newspaper say The devil face cd be seen

Who make money from war Who make dough from fear and lies Who want the world like it is Who want the world to be ruled by imperialism and national oppression and terror violence, and hunger and poverty.

Who is the ruler of Hell? Who is the most powerful

Who you know ever Seen God?

But everybody seen The Devil

Like an Owl exploding In your life in your brain in your self Like an Owl who know the devil All night, all day if you listen, Like an Owl Exploding in fire. We hear the questions rise In terrible flame like the whistle of a crazy dog

Like the acid vomit of the fire of Hell Who and Who and WHO who who Whoooo and Whooooooooooooooooooooo!

* I think because this was originally spoken all the transcriptions have differing line breaks. I couldn't find his version, but I'd say listen to it anyway.

Wislawa Szymborska (Polish, Nobel Laureate)

“Photograph from September 11” - 2005

They jumped from the burning floors —
one, two, a few more,
higher, lower.

The photograph halted them in life,
and now keeps them
above the earth toward the earth.

Each is still complete,
with a particular face
and blood well hidden.

There’s enough time
for hair to come loose,
for keys and coins
to fall from pockets.

They’re still within the air’s reach,
within the compass of places
that have just now opened.

I can do only two things for them —
describe this flight
and not add a last line.

Brook Emery (Australian)

"Monster [I can't get my head around it]" - 2007

I can't get my head around it. How did we devise

a concept like just war: *the slain of the Lord*
are dung upon the ground. I know there are distinctions
it is important to make and I don't expect perfection
but the chicanery of subtle thought . . . if I pick it all apart
will anything be left to sew back into sense?

Cleverer minds are reconciled. Cultured, poised,
the government official (Should I give him spectacles?
Should they reflect the light?) pauses and replies:
The President regrets . . . but consider the alternative …

would you offer succour… and I can almost understand.

I sleep with reason as my lover, wake beside a monster
in my bed. I fumble beneath the mask, shape my lips
to the prospect of a kill, feel your thigh
against my rump, your fingers at my throat.

Oh, Rakosi, I'm still strumming on my lyre. Is there really
so much wrong with that? I'm embarrassed

by the flimsiness of my resolve, the silliness of saints and monsters,
conversations with a being who can't plausibly exist,
this mockery of flagellation: this is my defective heart,
this my amputated foot, this the bandage from around my head.
A monster dies in the middle of his trial, another
denies the power of the court, two more evade arrest:
in politic's parlour game, each day annuls the last.

9/11, I say, and Afghanistan, Bali and Iraq,
but I can't fix a year to each event, what is,
what well might be, are steam against a bathroom mirror:
I see bits, an eye but not its double, the other ear,

a chin that lacks a jawbone for support.

Rachel Zucker (American 2009)

"Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday"

Saturday morning
two hawks flew over the soccer field and swooped in low
as Abram almost scored a goal. Moses, on the sideline, sat
on a stray ball reading a book, not looking up at the game
or the hawks or his brother who noticed. That night
at the Basic Trust Day Care Poker Tournament I got knocked
out with queen/nine against queen/jack by Dan Shiffman
who seemed almost sad to beat me. I sucked on ginger candies
and held new baby Phoebe Kate, born on the same due date
as the baby I miscarried. When she left I cried and had more candies.
In the end, Josh beat everyone and won a 40-inch flat-screen TV.

Sunday morning
I couldn't sleep so got up early, went to the Hell's Kitchen
flea market and bought a dining table and chairs from a man
named Toney. Bargained him down to $690 (including delivery)
because "the chairs need new upholstery." A 1950ish Danish
with expandable top and funny splayed feet—it reminds me
of my late Grandma Lotty, her sister Marguerite, and the heavy-laden
tables of childhood. I've no idea what it will look like
with my small family gathered round or if I'll overworry
the polished surface. We'll see—
it arrives on Tuesday.

This morning
I got a stack of papers from sophomore lit. The top two
had the author's name misspelled. I've not yet looked at
any others. I talked in class about how Art Spiegelman
chose realism over sentiment, how we conflate historical time
with personal time, how on 9/11 I took my nine-month old son
to his first day of day care and the city expoloded, went up
in smoke, and no one but me cares that he spent hours there,
only nine months old, while we watched TV in our phone-jammed
airspace, breathed in fumes, tried to give blood, wondered was there
anywhere, anywhere we could or should
flee to?—

Josh called right after class and said he'd gotten "strong intent" from an agent
who's "all about the money."

Nothing disastrous happened this week. Not so far. Unless you count
what I saw next, between classes on my way to read student poems
at Empanada Mama's on 48th and 9th. A teenage boy lying on his side
in the middle of the street. The traffic stopped and a crowd watched
while six or seven other boys ran back and forth and stamped down
hard on his skull. I turn a gag into a kind of cough and dial 911
We've already called the fucking police, says a woman as I retch
into an empty trash can. Finally three teenage girls surround the boy
and the other boys move off.

Later,
on my way back to Fordham, I stop a cop and ask
about the boy. *EMTs got him,* says the officer.
They had no shame, no fear, even with all of us watching . . . I tell him.
They're kids, ma'am, he says. *You know what kids is like.*

Tonight
in Writer's Workshop I & II I read two cantos from *Model Homes*
by Wayne Koestenbaum and then "A Poet's Life" by David Trinidad.
These poems hijack form and make it present, contemporary, immediate. Look how
Wayne puts a plumber and lovers, his mother, porn mags, fashion into terza rima
that lead us along, punch drunk, addicted to real life. And oh how David's crown
of sonnets breaks our hearts! The students stare blankly; one:
These are sonnets?
and someone's cell phone rings with the sound of a human voice pleading:
Pick up! Pick up! Pick up!

After an hour
we head upstairs to hear Linda Gregg, Saskia Hamilton, and Tess Gallagher.
Linda says, *I had a husband once named John and we did mushrooms*
and John said, "We're lost but hey don't worry because when it gets dark I can read
the stars" and I said "I don't know what you're talking about. We're not lost.
We're right here." And my students, aghast at who knows what,
start passing notes and rustling papers. Tess talks about her cancer
and the ghosts within and Saskia reads poems thick with grief,
some in a cracked guttural tongue I think is Danish.

When I get home
and try to describe the boy in the street Josh says, *More people died*
in Iraq this month than any other and I remind him that tomorrow morning,
before the new table is due to be delivered, we're going to Saint Vincent's
Hospital where Dr. Margano will put the KY-covered wand inside me
and tell us if these past nine weeks have yielded a fetal heartbeat
which will change everything, nothing.

W.H. Auden
"September 1, 1939"

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night.

Accurate scholarship can
Unearth the whole offence
From Luther until now
That has driven a culture mad,
Find what occurred at Linz,
What huge imago made
A psychopathic god:
I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.

Exiled Thucydides knew
All that a speech can say
About Democracy
And what dictators do,
The elderly rubbish they talk
To an apathetic grave;
Analyzed all in his book,
The enlightenment driven away,
The habit-forming pain,
Mismanagement and grief:
We must suffer them all again.

Into this neutral air
Where blind skyscrapers use
Their full height to proclaim
The strength of Collective Man,
Each language pours its vain
Competitive excuse:
But who can live for long
In an euphoric dream;
Out of the mirror they stare,
Imperialism's face
And the international wrong.

Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

The windiest militant trash
Important Persons shout
Is not so crude as our wish:
What mad Nijinsky wrote
About Diaghilev
Is true of the normal heart;
For the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.

From the conservative dark
Into the ethical life
The dense commuters come,
Repeating their morning vow;
"I will be true to the wife,
I'll concentrate more on my work,"
And helpless governors wake
To resume their compulsory game:
Who can release them now,
Who can reach the deaf,
Who can speak for the dumb?

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky:
There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.

Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.