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Current Affairs / Journalism

"Engrossing accounts of young reporters who found humanity amid the unimaginable heartache of Sept. 11."

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Graduate School of Journalism

"Unlike anything else you have read about the 9/11 attack. Some of America's finest young journalists dig into their hearts to tell you what it was like to cover one of the biggest stories in American history. Reading this book is like being invited to sit in a newsroom to hear reporters debrief one another. Or having access to their personal diaries."

— Morton Dean of ABC News

The young news professionals featured in this book were steeped in the details of a tragedy that most Americans felt deeply if vaguely and from a distance. Here, a Fox News Channel telecaster describes her heart-breaking work interviewing victims' families. A WNYC radio correspondent records the sounds of crowds fleeing the collapse while a *New York Daily News* photographer is buried in rubble. Residents and business owners in a Muslim neighborhood speak to a *Newsday* reporter.

Many contributors were at the scene of the collapse, and all describe the anger, excitement, terror, and depression that accompanied their coverage. Like most Americans, these writers are not seasoned war correspondents. Instead, they are smart, articulate, sensitive adults writing personal stories, memoirs in miniature, of their coming-of-age as journalists during a time of national tribulation. Theirs is the testimony of Americans unaccustomed to terror and tragedy, witnessing, coming to terms with, and reflecting upon events that changed a nation.

Chris Bull, Washington correspondent for *The Advocate*, is co-author of *Perfect Enemies* and, with Candace Gingrich, *The Accidental Activist*. He is the editor of *Come Out Fighting*, *Witness to Revolution*, and the forthcoming *AIDS: A World Changed*.

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Cover design by Whitney Cookman
Cover photograph © Corbis

THUNDER'S MOUTH PRESS
Distributed by Publishers Group West



AT

GROUND ZERO

25 STORIES FROM YOUNG REPORTERS
WHO WERE THERE

EDITED BY CHRIS BULL AND SAM ERMAN



All I Hear Is Silence

By David Paul Kuhn—*Yomiuri Shimbun*

DAVID PAUL KUHN, a reporter for the New York bureau of Tokyo Yomiuri Shimbun, the world's largest circulation daily, arrived in lower Manhattan just as the second tower collapsed into a blinding fog of debris. Disembodied torsos and limbs flashed in and out of sight. As the cloud dissipated, Kuhn could see fine particles dusting everything, like snow in September. He met an African immigrant ready to pull a trigger to defend America, his adopted country. Firemen sprayed woefully inadequate streams of black water onto the inferno that would burn for months. Kuhn stayed at Ground Zero until Wednesday afternoon, sleeping in an abandoned building in nearby Battery Park City. When he left, he did so reluctantly, believing that he did not have the right to be tired or upset in the face of such massive suffering.

Kuhn, twenty-four, went on to cover numerous World Trade Center-related stories, anthrax, and the crash of American Airlines Flight 587 in Rockaway, Queens. He is a University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, graduate who double majored in journalism and comparative world religions. While an undergraduate, he interned at Time and Money magazines. After graduation he traveled throughout Southeast Asia and Europe. He then moved to New York, becoming the fourth generation of his family to live in the city. He is currently completing a novel based upon his travels.



All I hear is silence. It's a haunting reminder. The dead can't talk. They seem to exist in the static, on my tape between interviews from September 11, 2001. When the silence passes there is interview after interview, person after person failing to convey what they saw, felt, and feared. I come back to that long hush. The tragedy only makes sense there, in the abyss of that static. All the terror from that morning stays where words have no place. Listening to the silence, as the tape reels forward, the memories rush through me. People are running through darkness. Towers are falling, vanishing into rubble. The ground is shaking. A tremendous rumble is heard. The smoke is suffocating. The air is full of ash, flakes dropping from the sky like dead snow. Then, there is only gray. The silence reminds me of that gray, and walking over unfathomable graves, past the overwhelmed. I saw crushed worlds. I remember how sunny it was that morning and how downtown New York became one color, an off-white world of ash. It was when America divided into two histories for me—before September 11 and after. It was when history became a part of me and for the first time the American experience became mine. But, when it happened it was none of those things. It was all too fast, too chaotic, and too new to be comprehensible.

I was in the middle of it all. When you're in the middle of it all you have no perspective, no ability to step back and understand what is going on. I had no idea what was going on. All I had were confused vignettes. I couldn't even get my mind around the fact

All I Hear Is Silence

that the twin towers were gone. I hadn't seen them hit by the planes. I hadn't seen them fall on television. I hadn't seen anything but chaos. How does one write about chaos—chaos that turned to tragedy and clear objectives? It seems everything has already been said, or written, or heard, or seen live on bloody CNN. I picture the word "live" at the corner of the screen and talking heads pontificating shortly after the towers had fallen. I had no tolerance for the talking heads in the months after. They were all egos. I think about the image of the *Hindenberg* crashing when I think of the World Trade Center now. I think of the black-and-white airship smashing into the ground and the massive fire consuming it until there was nothing. I think of that cracked, panicked, powerful voice saying, "Of all the humanity." Was there a voice like that on September 11? I feel guilty even writing that date. It seems prostituted by now, some ploy of propaganda or day to say where we were and what we felt. I care little of what others felt who weren't there. I care little for how I felt. I don't deserve to feel anything because I was only there. I lost nothing.

Today, when I return to Ground Zero I see commodities—the commercialization of tragedy. It is now the number one tourist site in the city and T-shirts are being sold by the dozen. There is a sign directing tourists to the nearest pub. Tragedy for sale. It's the American way, I guess. Even worse are the anniversaries where the cable news channels have to show us those towers falling again and again and again. Then there are the New Yorkers who will compete with stories, each trying to one up each other on how they experienced September 11. I am often silent. I don't want to reduce that day to a bullet point on a résumé. But it's not people's fault. We're raised to believe we are the sum of our experiences, when in reality we are the sum of our choices. And, when I reflect, what is saddest is how the dead had no choice. Those who were high in the towers were going to die. Then there were those who risked death, the "heroes." I struggle with that word. We are whores with words like

"hero", using them too much to be true. If there were heroes that morning, they were all the people that helped. It was the closest most had come to hell and the rescue workers were struggling for life, to save lives, in an ashen world.

How far away hell seemed in the early morning of September 11. It was warm, the perfect autumn day to be barefoot in Central Park. New Yorkers were voting in the mayoral primary. I was on the subway heading to work when the planes hit. It was just after 9 A.M. when I got out at Rockefeller Plaza, and I saw people standing around a television, mesmerized by the screen. I saw what they saw, smoke trailing off the towers. Rushing to my bureau in the Associated Press Building, I spoke with my editor. I was twenty-three and about to cover the largest story in decades for the largest paper in the world. It was a Japanese daily and I had been covering hard news for them for only a few months.

No one wanted to head south. I offered one cab driver fifty dollars, but he refused. I finally caught a taxi to my apartment in the East Twenties, ran up the stairs, and grabbed my Rollerblades. With a bag full of notebooks, my shoes, and a tape recorder over one shoulder and my camera bag over the other, I skated down Second Avenue. It was empty except for the occasional police car, racing by with siren blaring. I was riding the sound of those sirens and the smoking towers in the distance.

I skated faster than I ever had. I hit City Hall, only blocks from the World Trade Center, and maneuvered around the fleeing crowd. I saw thousands of people covered in ash crossing the Brooklyn Bridge. Survivors filled the streets. The exodus north had begun. The first tower had already fallen. I continued south and barely noticed the frightened faces. I was looking toward the cloud. I wanted to be there. Then I heard a rumble and the ground trembled. People stopped walking and ran for their lives. They had been running for their lives all morning. There was a new black cloud.

It rushed toward us, thinning before my eyes. People were running out of it, appearing from nothing at all. Everyone was gasping for air. That's when I stopped skating south. I was only blocks from the tower that had just fallen. But I never saw it come down. I was too intent on the cloud from the first collapse to look up. I tried skating away but the ash was so thick that my wheels could not move. I went to a doorway, covered my mouth, and waited for the cloud to fade. People ran by me and only parts of them were apparent. I saw twisting torsos coming in and out of the cloud, until it was so thick, so all-encompassing, that there was only gray.

Time passed and so did the density of the cloud. A policeman handed me a gas mask. He told me the area was "frozen," meaning even my NYPD press pass did not allow me to be there. The police didn't want the press there and journalists like me relied on the confusion to stay in the area. Walking north I passed a woman whose black dress was covered in dust. She sat on the curb coughing, looking down at her high heels. To the right of her was a policeman. Back stepping in disbelief, he held his arms over his head as he looked south. Like all those walking out of the haze, he had glazed eyes. But except for their shock, those before me seemed OK. Those who were not OK were somewhere in that gray, somewhere down the street.

The streets had emptied. The last wave of people had passed. I looked south but could see nothing. The air was still heavy. Suddenly, it seemed like winter. There was something cold and quiet and the falling flakes of snow seemed dirty and dead. The ash beneath my feet would give with each step. I reached down and touched it. I let it fall through my fingers. Thinking of what made up that ash, I shivered. I thought of Elie Wiesel's novel *Night*. It was his first night in Auschwitz and he was writing about what he felt. "Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever . . . never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust." I had memorized those lines in high

school and they lived that morning. *This dust was too thick to be from human remains.* I told myself that. And, the dust was everywhere, a mixture of debris and paper blanketing downtown New York. My city looked like Pompeii, or some postapocalyptic shadow of Manhattan. I still could not believe the towers had fallen. Intellectually, I knew they were gone, but there was too much smoke to get a clear look. Nothing was clear. And, as we all come to learn in tragedy, a gap exists between understanding and reality. A gap only filled by time.

New Yorkers were accustomed to looking up and seeing those towers. They were as constant as anything could be. As a boy, I remember how fast the elevator was that took you to the top. Up there, I was too scared to stand at the edge. Years later, in high school, I kissed a girlfriend named Felicia for the first time beneath the World Trade Center. It was in January, on one of those warm New York winter nights when the sky glows a deep blue. My last time there was only weeks before September 11. I was meeting my cousin and his wife from Battery Park City at the plaza between the towers. We were heading to a party in Tribeca. It was quiet that night as I waited for them on a cement bench. Soon I decided to lie down, folding my hands behind my head I stared up at the fully lit towers as they broke the night.

I was like many people that day, anchoring myself to some memory of what was already gone. I skated to the south side of the towers. I went up a small incline and saw a young couple. They weren't covered in soot like the rest of us. I asked them the usual questions. "Where were you? What did you see? How do you feel?" They were students and told me that when the towers fell they were in an NYU dormitory that was locked down. They had snuck out and kept on asking me where they should go to donate blood. *How should I know?* But they asked me because I was not shaken. It was past 11 A.M. and there were two types of people now down there—the people fleeing and the people with some task,

some reason to be rational. My reason was journalism. It's easy to be collected when you're hiding in duties. This couple was looking for a duty. He said, "I'm O negative. We heard on TV they need blood." Something in his voice and the very center of his eyes affected me. He was like a deer that gets his hoof caught in a trap. The same way a deer will gnaw his own foot off without reason, determined to free himself of the metal clamps, this young man was going to donate blood.

That morning people wanted to feel useful. Anything was better than being another victim. Some spoke nonsensically, bordering on hysterics. All that kept them from crossing over to fits of tears and rage were their self-appointed missions, no matter how important or how unneeded.

It was time to call my editor but my cell phone could not get a signal. Finally, I found a working pay phone, called my bureau, and dictated quotes to another reporter. I was so involved in the quotes and getting back to the scene that I forgot to ask what was happening in the rest of the world. *What else had been hit?* I was reading powerful quotes, words that consumed my every thought. They were conversations directly with people's souls. Journalists usually speak to people on the surface. Often, it's the way they want to sound. But in tragedy the masks are off and people say what they feel, because what they feel is everything at that moment.

"I was terrified, terrified, I thought the world was ending."

"How angry are you?" I asked an African immigrant who was beneath the towers when they fell.

"Very, very angry, even to pull a trigger. I'm not from here but I'll go to war. To see people dying, man, they don't know nothing, they just working for a living, you know what I mean? Jumping. They had no choice, man. God bless America." He struggled to speak, half panicked and half enraged. He was my first September 11 interview.

"Why did you say God bless America?"

"They lost a whole lot of important things, documents, human lives. The World Trade Center is the most significant feature. So, I think God bless America and put everything back again."

Like this man, everyone down there was most haunted by the jumpers. It was already rumored a fireman had died after being hit by one. Another couple jumped holding hands. They fell some eighty floors never letting go. *God, they never let go.* I spoke to people unable to escape the sound of the jumpers hitting the ground. They said it was loud and when the impact was heard everyone froze. Others could not get rid of the sight of bodies bouncing off the pavement. I imagined what would bring someone to step over the edge. *What was it like up there to make jumping the better choice?* It seemed to be the very death of hope. But now, hope was everywhere. People were on missions. Everyone wanted to save someone.

Whenever I left people I would say, "Be safe." Everyone spoke like that. *It must be how people speak in war.* I continued on to the collapse, hoping to see the rescue effort firsthand. Standing a block from the rubble a fireman told me, "Once you make your way over there you'll see, when you see a half body in front of you, you'll see what I saw." He was in the north tower when the south tower fell. His eyes were red. I didn't know if they were red from what he saw or the chemicals in the air. Our eyes stung. It smelled like burnt rubber mixed with sulfur and smoke. It was a smell that would linger for months.

I was still on skates and in order to make my way through the debris I had to walk with them, as if they were shoes. It was like using ski boots on a balance beam. I stood off to the side and looked at the rubble. There I saw an arm without a body. It was partially covered. *Was it even there at all?* I imagined it was from one of the jumpers. There was still a haze over the debris and in my mind as well. Those minutes were confused, too surreal to fully grasp. Every so often the wind would clear the air. I thought of the scene

in *Life Is Beautiful* when the fog thins and hundreds of limp bodies, piled upon one another, appear out of nothing. But I never saw a body. The dead were buried under thousands of tons of concrete and steel. I recall one fireman walking over that steel. He was mumbling and I couldn't understand him. He kept on saying something as he shook his head. Then I understood him.

"I've lost my whole company." Over and over he mumbled, "I've lost my whole company."

I moved a few blocks away from the rubble so the police wouldn't notice me and escort me out. Many journalists had already been forced to leave. I wandered several blocks north, there were few civilians left. The scattered refugees remaining either intended to stay or had somehow missed the exodus out. Some of them were confused. They walked without intent until someone directed them. The yellow tape was up. Thousands of police were bringing order to the area. Firemen fought the flames, flames that would burn longer than any other fire in American history.

And, a lot of people were dead. More than at Pearl Harbor they said, but we didn't know how many. I was told numbers from 5,000 to 20,000. No one knew how full those towers were. I tried to have perspective. Even if it was 20,000 people, Vietnam had killed nearly three times that—58,000 dead Americans. But that was over a period of years. I remembered once hearing over 50,000 people had died in a single day of combat in WWI. Yet, none of those happened in minutes. Only Pearl Harbor came to people's minds, but as horrible as it was, it was a military strike. These were civilians. This was America's Hiroshima, America's Dresden. This time someone did it to us. Yet, to be fair to history, we were not at war on September 10. So people compared it to Pearl Harbor. They used numbers to show the value of the tragedy. If it was bigger than Pearl Harbor, it was worse. But for me, it was the very immensity of those numbers that kept the tragedy from becoming personal. I couldn't relate to something so

immense. It was like thinking of the Holocaust without thinking of my great-grandfather, whose name I bear.

I heard scattered radio reports about the Pentagon being attacked. It was past noon and as far as I knew, what was happening in downtown New York was happening across the United States. Rumors abounded. A third plane was on the way. Terrorists had attacked San Francisco. The Pentagon was destroyed. The president was missing. Dick Cheney was in charge of the federal government. *Were we at war?* It sure looked like it. Cars were reduced to frames, entire sides of buildings gone, and little explosions were heard as frequently as fireworks on the Fourth of July. Everything burned. Not just the wreckage or our eyes, but our skin as well. It stung from the fiberglass in the air.

Still on the West Side, I skated north to speak to more civilians. Instead I found empty streets. It was the eeriest sight yet. Scattered pieces of paper blew in the wind and everything was white—the cars, the buildings, an empty baby carriage on the edge of a curb. I imagined the mother in Picasso's *Guernica* lifting her baby from its carriage and running for their lives. The ash was haunting. The emptiness was haunting. This place had always been alive, always vibrant. Now, nothingness. And with all the emergency personnel already downtown, for a moment I swear to silence. It was like walking out of a bomb shelter and discovering World War III was over.

People were still crying. Firemen lined up by a phone near the West Side Highway, calling their families to say they had survived. One of them told me how it felt to speak to his mother. Everywhere, people were declaring life. Some were angry; some upset; some in shock; some wanted to go to war; some wanted to go home; but they all knew they were alive, as only survivors do.

There was now a triage on the West Side Highway. As the afternoon progressed thousands of firemen sat waiting for their turn. I sat with them. I wanted to talk to them without a pen or tape recorder. I took off my Rollerblades and stashed them beside a

building. All I had were dress shoes to put on. I watched the firemen. I wanted to look at them, eat something, and get some rest. They didn't want to rest or eat or be still at all. They wanted to fight the fire and rescue their brothers. It was like tours waiting for combat in Vietnam, except everyone wanted to go. They wanted to feel necessary. They wanted to save someone. They wanted for it all to be worth it. But as the hours progressed and fewer survivors were found, the firemen were forced to recognize what they could never admit—the missing were gone.

There was one fireman leaning against a wall. His head was cradled in his left hand and his right hand held a cigarette. His orange pants were dirty and discolored. They were pulled down below his knees so he could cool off. Wearing his FDNY blue T-shirt and shorts, his left knee was up against his chest. His face was covered in dust. He sat there, on the ground, and I wondered whom he was thinking about.

I learned later that television reporters were saying morale was high. A lie. Morale was low. Many of the firemen felt low by early afternoon. It was not that they were cowards, not at all. They just couldn't believe how much they had lost. Firemen, policemen, emergency medical workers—they are not the iron heroes out of comic books. They are mostly from working-class families. Many were young like me, and all are very human.

They now had time to reflect upon what had happened. They asked about the missing, was Jim dead from this company or Darren from that precinct. They embraced one another, as only men of war do. They kept looking up, telling one another "they're gone." Each person had a story. They passed rumors off one another to figure out what was fact. Their faces were pure Hemingway. They were returning from the Great War and part of them had been left behind. Their expressions were a mixture of sadness, disbelief, and total firmness of self. And for whatever sadness they felt, the firmness was winning. One can't mistake that for morale.

No one was happy or in high spirits. There was no spirit, only instinct. But it was a hell of an instinct.

We knew other buildings would fall. Every so often areas were evacuated. I went on the roof of a building in Battery Park City to see the destruction from above. Standing some thirty stories up, I trembled. *Could this building fall?* That day nothing was certain. The most certain things in New York had fallen. Anything could fall after that.

When I looked down at the ruins I saw clouds of smoke, piles of rubble, and thousands of rescue workers. It seemed synchronized from above. The walkway leading to the World Financial Center was smashed. I looked to where the Twin Towers once stood and only spines of steel remained. The cars and people looked like toys. I thought of playing war as a boy when tragedy was abstract and I could have fun with war. I took some pictures and walked back downstairs to call my bureau. There was no light in the stairwell. It was frightening. *It must have been like this in the World Trade Center. Craving light as if it was life itself.*

The building had one of the few phones that worked in Battery Park City. It was one of those cheap push button phones that don't need electricity. None of the buildings had electricity. I was talking to a fellow reporter at my bureau, twenty minutes past 5 P.M. That's when 7 World Trade Center fell. It plummeted and another cloud of smoke shot up from the ground. I hung up and sprinted up thirty flights of stairs to see the destruction from above. The cloud grew and people ran like ants from a fire. All the firemen on the West Side Highway stood up at once. *It was happening again.* But this wasn't the Twin Towers. No one was inside.

I descended and sprinted across the West Side Highway. In the confusion I reached the base of the structure and stood while firemen tried to drown the flames. The hoses got stuck and could barely reach the rubble. The water was black and the air heavy with

dust. I couldn't see beyond the fire. Between piles of steel littering the street, the ground was soft and thick, coated in a mud of debris. You couldn't walk without stepping in a puddle or tripping over steel. Then the haze cleared and only a pancake of steel and concrete remained. And there was nothing above the ruins. Emptiness. Only sky where the World Trade Center had been. It was like seeing no pyramids in Egypt or no Eiffel Tower in Paris. We rely on these structures. They symbolize what all humans crave, permanence. But they were gone and so was everyone left inside. Firemen worked tirelessly to extinguish the flames, as the hours progressed and evening turned to night. Security had tightened by midnight. The air remained thick; the smell was even thicker. Police arrested a few civilians still in the area. I was by the fire, where there were no cops. The firemen tolerated my presence, as long as I didn't get in the way. I didn't. They had erected a flag at the base of the ruins. It stood large on a mound of rubble. Lit by the truck lights, the night's shadows fell over parts of the flag, as it blew in the wind.

I returned to Battery Park City around 2 A.M. On the phone my editor said I could leave but I wanted to stay. I slept on a couch for a few hours in an abandoned building's lobby. It was a sordid sleep, the waking type. I arose at dawn, threw some cold water on my face, and walked back out to the West Side Highway. My skin still burned as I walked along the Hudson River, looking over to New Jersey. The sun had barely risen and its orange glare was visible off the water. Battery Park's often cool morning wind blew off the river. Police were sleeping on benches. Scattered cartons of food littered the area. I heard seagulls and turned back toward the water. They flew like nothing had changed. I took a deep breath. *Yesterday happened.* I walked on to the pile, as the ironworkers were calling it. The firemen's ranks had thinned and the National Guard had arrived in force. Security was the priority. I was an outsider, maybe the only journalist around, an alien among these men and women. Those awake looked worn, a little bit beaten. No one wanted to

admit it. "No one could beat our bravest," they said. But heroism is not black and white. The rescue workers were inspirational because of their humanity, not in spite of it.

There was still hope. The rescue workers tried to find any reason a person could survive. Some said there could be space in the underground food court; others speculated that firemen could be caught in pockets of air between steel beams. Every doctor, fireman, medic, volunteer, ironworker, and policeman refused to give up. They were united by solidarity, a collective determination to deny death. But they were also sad and entirely humbled. The aimless still walked that way. And hundreds were ready for their shift. I sat with a busload of firemen waiting to go back to the front, back to Ground Zero. Time would prove their dedication. They would dig through the nights, through the rain, deep into the rubble. I would speak to firemen a week later in that same spot. They were less hopeful but still digging. They would dig for months. They were digging anywhere but into themselves. Anything was better than sitting around thinking about it. They wanted to do anything but think about it. They knew the only thing that saved them was chance.

I would leave Ground Zero much more slowly than I had entered it. It was the afternoon and another warm autumn day. I walked up the West Side Highway holding my bags and Rollerblades, still unable to get my mind around the tragedy. I passed the press line. Cameras were everywhere. Journalists waited their turn to enter the scene. I saw a press pool heading south, escorted by police. I continued north and saw thousands of New Yorkers cheering the rescue workers. Women were on their boyfriends' shoulders, children were in front of the crowd so they could see, and the waving of flags seemed necessary and sincere. It began to hit me how big all of this was. Two women came up to me.

"Are you okay, were you in the towers?" they asked. "No, I'm fine, I'm a journalist." *Was I allowed to be upset? No, I'm a journalist.*

But I was not upset. It still was not personal. I was only numb. They must have seen that I was numb.

When I returned to my bureau I had little to say. Colleagues asked what I had seen, if I had nearly died. I didn't have the words. I had to see a photograph, one image that captured all the tragedy. I still had not seen the planes hitting the towers or the towers fall. It came on the television. I froze. It suddenly seemed like a bad Hollywood movie. Planes get hijacked, crash into towers, towers crash into the ground, thousands die, and people search for the survivors. I was sick. *Is this what it would become?* It was too horrible for Hollywood, too real, too fresh, to be recreated for years. Were the hijackers horrible? Could I call them evil? Was this evil, is anything evil anymore, or do we explain away all that is bad? The nineteen terrorists were evil, their cause meaningless beside their act. They had attacked the innocent and the very psyche of the world's city. With all the gray of that day, what was good and bad was absolutely clear. But the tragedy was still not as clear. The worst things exist beyond the mind, where only our souls exist. This was one of those things. I did not want anyone to cheapen that. But September 11 was already beginning to be cheapened. The television news played background music and used dramatic lighting as people spoke about the tragedy, calling it the worst day in the history of the world. I wanted to scream. *Why couldn't people just let it be as it was, let it be really horrible? Why do we have to use words like Holocaust or Pearl Harbor at all? Why is it a competition?* I sat at my desk imagining what it was like, sitting on planes as your future crashed into a skyscraper. After that, I couldn't stand to see the towers fall again. I still can't. *Mourn the dead, not the towers.* I typed in my notes and my reporting became part of a larger story. I was anonymous and maybe it was better that way. I checked my e-mail and sent a mass message to say I was OK, after which it was time for me to go home. I got up and left, with my skates in hand and my bags over my shoulders. They were covered in dust. Inside them

were handfuls of ash, along with a book with an airplane on the cover that I'd found underneath the rubble. I also had a check I had uncovered. The address was 1 World Trade Center.

It was past dusk and I was home. Setting my bags down I felt as if I hadn't slept for weeks. But first I would eat. I walked up Third Avenue to my favorite sushi restaurant. It was raining out and thousands of New Yorkers filled the streets. People didn't want to be alone in their apartments. Near the armory, television crews interviewed those who passed by. Posters of the missing were up. Hundreds scattered across my neighborhood—on store windows, TV vans, the sides of streetlights. I walked to a phone booth and looked at several. I looked at their eyes and held them, trying to find something intense. One girl was described as quiet and another guy was said to have a scar on his shoulder. I read who was looking for them. There were words of total desperation. I felt so badly for the mothers. There was a poster up of someone my age. He had black hair and brown eyes. He looked so full of life. It was the first time I saw myself in the dead. I stood there quietly, alone. The rain rolled off the poster, blurring the ink. I composed myself but he was still dead. They were all dead. Everyone was hopeful that night. But I was not. I had been there. I knew better. If there was a poster up, they were dead.

From Nightmares to Redemption

By Petra Bartosiewicz—*New York Observer*

Like many late-rising reporters on September 11, PETRA BARTOSIEWICZ of Brooklyn found herself trapped outside Manhattan when the city suspended subway service. Shortly after the attacks, this New York Observer writer rode her bicycle to the Brooklyn Bridge, circumvented a police roadblock, and pedaled into downtown New York. On the evening of September 12, she was among the first journalists to enter Ground Zero, spending the night with rescue workers amid the rubble. When journalistic instincts told her she had to get into the restricted area, Bartosiewicz helped distribute bottled water, taking notes on what she saw every step of the way.

Bartosiewicz, twenty-seven, is a 1996 graduate of the University of Virginia who covers city affairs for the Observer. She has also written for the Atlantic Monthly Online. Her diary of her activities in September reveals both the pervasiveness of the destruction in the city and the possibility of redemption.