

TOM PIAZZA

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You could not keep it all in mind at once. Say, how cool it was, walking down early morning Broadway before the sun rose high enough to warm the storefronts and dry the hosed-down sidewalks. The cars and taxis waiting at the lights, the three men with the moustaches shouting and carrying a man's body across a street littered with chunks of masonry, steel reinforcement rods sticking out like grey bones, twisted, and hazy with dust from yet another collapsed house and yet another car vomiting its black smoke in tumbling rolls that float away on the light breeze. Or say the array of fabulous smoked fish laid out on the ice banks behind the shiny glass in the refrigerator cases at Zabar's, and below on the narrow shelf the jars of caviar arranged to highlight the contrasting label colors. Cool morning haze still clings to the chained bay waters liberty south of Battery Park, the beckoning statue in the distance raising her torch, our torch, their torch, to the morning ocean glare and seagulls while the cranes clank and the tractors pull and the bulldozers roll on their tank treads at the site, the hole, the wound still emitting all those glass microparticles and metallic dust, while the turquoise ceramic tile is cool in the shadow of the alley behind the mosque as a cart passes what is left of the east wall of the school that was built only five years ago, covered now with spray-painted anguish letters... And the grey-

haired man with trousers going thready draws too close, bad teeth and worse breath, asking, where is security, where is security Americans promised? Or the large round tables being set up just inside the stone park walls at 63rd Street for the Central Park Zoo's annual "Spring Fling," or maybe it's the "Zoo To-Do," the white table cloths and flowers and the staff in black slacks, white shirts, and black bowties—does this seem random yet?—and there is a man with his back on fire, his clothes blown off, his hair, too, walking with his back on fire, a look of urgency in his eyes as he walks through the smoking chunks of debris and body parts, this was his last view of the world, do you understand? Think of the eggs put on to boil and forgotten and the return, hours later, to find a foot of thick smoke hugging the ceiling and in the kitchen flecks of egg all over the walls and ceiling, no water left in the pan, one fragment of egg in its shell, rocking back and forth, and the man on fire finally caves in and lies on his back with his eyes still open, rocking slightly back and forth looking up at his God and what did God see, looking down at him? Tell me what did God think, if you're so fucking smart...

the wisdom of the past and the faith of the future, a future that just

[text removed]

[flash; black smoke]

I will have the tournedos, thank you.

(switch channels)

Eggs, bacon, coffee cans, phone jacks, piles of clothes... You can't look without going blind, without the protective lenses in the narrative frames, the lockstep of consequence and time... Narrative is original sin; where is there an end of it? Talk to me, you motherfucker, or I will break your fucking jaw so you can't talk. The pure products of America go crazy. Those are lemon tarts; they are exquisite... I'm sorry, I had the card somewhere here in my pocket... A sneaker, a smoldering tire, Cantor Fitzgerald stationery, charred around the edges, fluttering down over Brooklyn Heights like tickertape in the golden air... Old poems in a box, used kerchiefs, the best bagels, that expensive purse, the conversation at NOHO Star after the Pasolini screening, a fish lunging and tearing at the white carcass floating belly-up, the fuselage, dancing with the brandished rifle overhead, charred

body parts hanging from the bridge, such an achievement, it's marvelous to have such talent, but was that three months later, before or after the delicious tandoori chicken we had at the place on Second Street, the red marinade charred and so tasty... The frame blows apart, breaks the bottle in the climate-controlled cellar—a wine is a narrative—they smash the bottles, they trample the vintage...

And you, Great Leader, want assent, consent, the shared narrative which is no narrative at all, the great transcendent narrative of God's unchanging will, not subject to time except that the snake was in God's employ... Nothing happens in Paradise, and nothing happens in Hell, either, and what motive moves secretly out there beyond the margin, beyond the page, the screen, unseen and gradual; what if the bomb goes off in your narrative, kicks over your ant hill in the name of reality, in the name of truth, in the name of some God who promises to absolve you of this hideous lockstep... Wouldn't you scramble to rebuild it? Who could ever blame you?

TOM PIAZZA is the author of twelve books of fiction and nonfiction, including the novels *A Free State* and *City Of Refuge*, the post-Katrina manifesto *Why New Orleans Matters*, and the essay collection *Devil Sent The Rain*. He was a principal writer for the innovative HBO drama series *TREME*, and the winner of a Grammy Award for his album notes to *Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues: A Musical Journey*. He lives in New Orleans.