

Ten Weeks After...

I was in New York yesterday.
Today Ann Arbor but yesterday New York
and the day before that New York at Ground Zero.
I didn't go to see it
but I was there and I felt like I had to see it.

I'm inching north through a jungle of boards and backhoes:
pavement strangled by electric vines,
black nothing below crumbling concrete,
bleach-blinding lights above a makeshift bridge.
On its far side maybe ten yards of pavement
to the barricade.
The only reason to cross the bridge is to get a little closer
to the barricade.
A few feet closer to...

Struggling my wheelchair over crooked boards
and I can't for a second meet the eyes
of the men whose shirts read FDNY.
These aren't trendy, fresh off the street corner shirts.
These are torn and stained
from being worn here not just today
but every day.
I can't look in the eyes of these men who lost men,
who lost women,
who lost friends.
Because the only reason I'm crossing the bridge
they built
is to get a few feet closer to something
I'll never understand a thousandth as well as them.

I'm a tourist,
and no, I don't have a camera,
and no, I don't want to see body parts,
but really how far am I from a crawling gawker passing mangled cars?

Mid-bridge, fumbling over a thick, orange power cord,
angling wheels, shifting weight,
sensing soft concerned eyes,
fastidiously dodging gazes,
deliberately inconspicuous—
and then I hear it.
Of course I hear it.

“Hey, buddy, let's give ya a hand, there.”

Men are lifting my chair over the cord.
They're strong and they're dirty and they're smiling
as they lift me two feet off the ground.
Shared silent nudges instruct each other:
where to move,

when to step,
raise,
lower,
be careful.

“Hang on, ya all right?”

I try to look up at back-lit square heads.
Their eyes flash down to mine
and comforting smiles spread below thick stubble or thicker moustaches.
They smile because they’re helping someone.
Helping me to get just a few feet closer to—

What?
To something I need to see and they’ve seen too much of?

They set me down
and there’s a pat on my shoulder
and then they’re gone.

So I look for a while.
And I want to scream at the tourists *smiling* for a picture in front of—

What?
A site?
An attraction?

And does *not* smiling make me any better?

I can’t look in their eyes on the way back either.

My wheels and pants and hands
are mucked in dirt
and I’m glad.
To see the site or the thing or the “ya know”,
as so many call it in Michigan,
to see Ground Zero and roll away clean would be wrong
to me.
So I’m glad it’s raining.
And I’m glad my wheels crunch and slip
back to real sidewalks
because the least I can do is get dirty and sweaty.
The absolute least.

Hours later I’m watching skaters at Rockefeller
and there’s the tree.

Every year the tree.

I'm in Times Square and it's so bright I have to squint.
So many people the crowd moves you wherever they wish to go,
unless you fight,
and I'd rather follow.

I'm thankful to be carried.

And I'm thankful a visiting dad
pays for my cab
when the subway elevator's broken.
And a college student
gives me a quarter
because I'm having trouble finding one in my wallet.
And a Frenchman pushes me half the width of Central Park
since once you get in on 67th you can't really get off.
And they all smile.

And the men in the FDNY shirts smile.
They smile as they lift me over the thick, orange cord
so I can see just a little bit better
the site
or the thing...

Ya know.

Tonight I take a shower and black grit under my fingernails
streaks white porcelain.
Comfy PJ bottoms on
and once khaki
now gray greasy pants in the hamper.
I feel like I shouldn't wash them.
Like I shouldn't try to remove the dust crushed into fabric by my tires

'cause it's not even mine.

It belongs to the strangers and the students and the men who smile
as they lift me off the ground;
a tourist with his wheels spinning in the air.