

ASH TUESDAY

September 11, 2001:

An Imaginary Children's Book

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By

Jerome W. Berryman ©

To Rowan Williams
for prayers that day and
for *Writing in the Dust*,
which came afterwards,
and to the rest of us,
who met at Trinity,
a hundred yards away,
as we walked in haste
to escape the
inescapable ashes...

Jerome

On September 11, 2001, a group of us met at Trinity Wall Street in New York City about a hundred yards from Ground Zero, to discuss theology with Rowan Williams, then the Archbishop of Wales. As we were having coffee before beginning, we looked out and saw charred paper, falling like ticker tape past the windows. What a strange parade! There was no explanation for such trash falling in the streets. The black paper turned to smoke and then fine ash. What had happened?

People on the bridge between the church and the office building were chased inside by the police. A terrible accident? A plane had flown into one of the Twin Towers. It was inconceivable. Our building began to fill up with smoke. We moved to an inner room for greater safety, but the building had to be evacuated. We went down the darkening stairwells and out into the immeasurable gloom, to disperse with thousands of others in the teeming, ethereal streets.

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PRELUDE:

ASH TUESDAY

DUST
Ancient ashes,
Enacted
By two flashes.

THOU ART
Charred paper
Raining down,
A ticker tape parade
To fear, not fame.

AND TO DUST
Smoky words
Can barely say
What it's like
To run for life.

THOU SHALT
RETURN
Proud towers
And hopeful pride
No longer vaporized.
Creativity turned
To soot, now wise
Again
Takes root.

ACRIMONY UNDONE

Acrid smoke chokes
Us in the ashen streets.
I reach out from
Our gray river running
Between buildings
To grasp a lucky bottle
Of cool tea
From an abandoned stand.

I slow, then stop
To drink small drinks,
Sharing with strangers
The wet and fear.
We spit black soot.

Some street people
Sit in the dim haze,
Dazed on formerly
Green benches.
Touching, touching
All they own, they
Watch with wide-eyes,
Amazed as we, now
Street people, flee.

Still walking, knees aching,
Soul aching, earth aching
From overwhelming hate.

Our creaking
Credulity
Is incinerated.
The vacuum
Makes room
For everyday
Magnanimity.

“Are you alright,”
Strangers ask,
As I walk
Suddenly alone
In fresh sunlight.

I finally slump
In an unknown
Hotel with no room
That makes room.

STAIRS

A hundred yards away
We could not say
What the concussion was.
Shaking hands, walls, windows,
Voices, and the floor
Moved us to find an inside room
Away from breaking glass,
Until sour smoke forced us out.

Down the stairs we went
In hushed good cheer,
Fearful but without despair,
Out into the eerie streets
Filled with shapes moving
Through charred paper
And between crushed cars.

Some hurried coughing,
Some ran crying,
Some stumbled and fell,
To rise amazed
From abandoned
Shoes and empty cups
To walk again in twilight.

In that collapsing world
Hopeful heroes climbed up
The smoky stairs, radiant
With life and sweat
To fight the fire we left behind.
Then pale, then ghostly,
They were gone.

Their invisible presence,
Tangible in absence,
Nudges us now to know
The way to climb our daily
Stairs to find our lives again.

FLAMES

The Auschwitz ovens
Roar into flame
Again today.

Dismembered dreams
Get tossed in heaps
To repeat the loss.

Resentment rages
In religious dress
To worship death.

Somewhere people
Dance, not flee
In crowded streets.

Flames roast
A shish kebab,
Because the cause was ---

What was the cause
That skewered
Life so well?

Such holocaust
Necessitates
A Pentecost.

RESURRECTION PIE

Sing a rye song
Of blackbirds
Eating cherry pie.

Shout of purring cats
Watching
The world go by.

Whisper simple evil,
Once seeming
Almost civil.

We did not see
Malignant eyes
Unravel us.

We did not know
How ripe the malice
Was until it fell.

Loving their hate
They insinuate
Without mistake.

Empty sockets
Can only see
The nothing sought,

Yet the birds
Will sing again
And give cherries
To the King.

INSTINCTS

We fled exploding smoke.
It took our breath away.
It darkened hope
And choked
With stinging black
The back of every throat.

We moved quickly,
Through quiet dust,
Scuffing puffs
Of gypsum,
Diffused asbestos,
Sifted glass,
Powdered steel,
Crushed concrete,
And vaporized lives.

Worried thousands,
We scurried like ants
Through broken cracks
And over bridges
To breathe again
What was nearly lost
Along the way.

NO ACCOUNTING FOR

There's no accounting
For this gross balance
Sheet. Income is loss.
Gain is cost. All is chaos.

Our planes can bring
Flames and pain as well
As anyone's does, but it
Only accelerates the hate.

It does no lasting good
To take away the lives
Of those who took
Away our way of life.

Admiring winning
Mires us in loss.
Peace can't dance
On emptiness.

Peace is not
Weakness but
Release from *Lex
Talionis*.

Peace is a daily passion,
A warrior's transformation,
Not some rising
And falling fashion.

Let us make a virtue
Of calm necessity:
*Vade in pace,
Shalom et Salam.*

LEAPING

Gasping for air
Burning bodies
Leaped from pain,
But they can't fly.

They fall, fall, fall
Screaming for life
Not some bloated,
Obese, abstract peace.

Peace does not bleed.
While we do, freely,
From every misdeed.

Easy peace collapsed
With the Towers.
It was buried in ash
And steel, still hot.

Abstractions
Are not alive,
But they lure,
As surely as when
People catch fish
By artificial flies.

You and I must
Not generalize.
We must leap,
Each one,
Into the unknown
To make peace.

CALLING HOME

So many who talked
On the phone
That day
Never talked again.

I brushed some ashes
Away, and wiped the smoke
And sweat from my face
To say through dry tears,
Across the continent,
"I'm okay."

"Put me on that list!"

Dusty but not dead,
You kissed me
Home again
And we kissed, again
For those still missed.

**WASHINGTON SQUARE: A DAY OR TWO
AFTERWARDS**

Smoke now white,
Hovers and thins
Where the towers were.
The sad smell and sight
Still infuse us with fear.

We cover our faces strictly
Like some Islamic sect,
Warily guarding our shock.

I ache to see an Arab,
To say I know it was
Not you, but they
Had to stay away.

A fire fighter walks south
Down the empty street
In full gear to seek peace.

Water splashing, sun shinning,
Breeze singing, people at ease
With tears in their eyes.

A bent, sad lady
Solemnly offers
A cough drop
To everyone,
To not go mad.

Asians, Africans, people from
The Americas and more ---
So many languages
And shapes and faces
Shine with grace
In the noon-day shrine.

How can there be
No beautiful Arabic
Script pinned to the fence
Or mullah praying there
With human tears
That God is great,
Despite such loss?

AGGRESSIVE PEACE

Angry elders teach
To love their pain as fate,
So children learn to hate
And miss the dust we share.

Old doctrines club
New wonder dead
When food for thought
Cannot be fed.

Yet dust we are, alike,
Alike in our decay,
So let us be alike
To find a better way.

The peace we seek can't wait.
The young must take the lead,
The old have come too late
To show us what we need.

Aggressive, wily doves,
Fiercely making nests
Must be foremost today
Among our daily loves.

AN IMAGINARY CHILDREN'S BOOK:

Words

Did you see the airplanes
hit the two tall Towers
on TV?

It was terrible.
It was terrible to see.
It was terrible to be there.
It is terrible to remember.

The people who made the planes
fly into the towers said they
were doing religion.

There are many kinds of
Religions in the world –
Hindu, Jew, Moslem, Sikh,
Buddhist, Christian and more.

Does your religion tell you
to hurt or help people?

Here is a church very near
the buildings that burned. What will
the people do?

They helped.

Even the bells!

Images for the Mind's Eye

The Towers in flames...

People running through
the ashes and smoke...

Faces of children from
all over the world
Looking puzzled, solemn...

Images of people from the
major religions of the world
populate the imaginary
page...

A light blue, blank page...

Exterior of St. Paul's
in New York City
Before the planes hit...

Dust, smoke, disoriented
people entering cautiously
into the church...

Two people inside the
bell tower hitting the bell
with a pipe and the workers
turning, taking off their hats
and holding them over their
heads in the smoke...

Religious people built that building
a long time ago.

It is called St. Paul's Chapel
and is where George Washington,
our first president, went to church.

The day two airplanes smashed the
Towers the place looked like
this.

For a long time the firefighters, police,
and many other people came to sleep,
to rest, to pray, to eat, to cry, to share
the Holy Communion, to care for their feet,
to wash, to be quiet, so they could help
some more.

Construction workers, people who run
the big machines, and drive the trucks ---
all those things children need but can't
do --- they came too.

Children from all over the world sent things
to do what they *can* do.

They thought this was being religious
No matter what their religion was.

What would you do?

Builders helping in various
ways...

Picture of the Washington
pew and people in 18th
century dress attending
church...

People getting their feet
worked on in the same
pew Washington
worshipped in, sleeping
with teddy bears, crying...

More pictures of all the
people crowded into the
church to find solace...

A priest offering Holy
Communion in the dim and
busy place...

Picture the frantic work
outside with St. Paul's
in the background.

An Asian person with an
open suitcase at the door
showing children's pictures
from across the Pacific
Ocean to a priest and others
looking on...

Children's cards, banners,
etc. with workers looking at
them on the walls and in
the pews...

A picture of the sky where
the Towers once stood.