

Pictures of Ground Zero

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On my way to Ground Zero in an almost empty train. Each stop takes me farther downtown, farther toward the site. I think of myself as Marlowe, Conrad's protagonist in *Heart of Darkness*, traveling in a steamboat down a river into a jungle, toward a primal nightmare. When Marlowe finds Kurtz, he discovers more than he bargained for. I too am hurtling toward a darkness, hoping to discover something primal in an empty space.

The A train comes to a stop, its doors vault open, and we arrive at what is left of Chambers station. It's empty. This station used to be the early morning destination of every employee who worked at World Trade One or Two. Looking around, my company fades from a handful of fellow passengers to ghosts from a lost part of the world. As I begin my walk, I am reminded of Jonathan Lethem's essay, "Speak, Hoyt Schermerhorn." Lethem used to spend every day of his childhood in the Hoyt Schermerhorn station where "the lapping of human moments forms a pulse or current, like the lapping of trains through the underground tunnels, or like the Doppler-effect fading of the certain memories from the planet, as they're recalled for the penultimate time, and then the last" (438). I feel the lapping effect of Ground Zero, but the individual ripples are already so compressed that I wonder if others detect them, wonder if the personal realities of the horror that happened at the site have perhaps been lost to us.

Chambers station certainly seems to have sounded itself out. Quiet flows through the air like dust. Long, tiled hallways with mosaics of eyes peer out at me every ten or twenty feet. I feel as if I'm being watched, but I keep following the pupils of those eyes, trying to find my way. The eyes are part of *Oculus* by Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzler. Their project website tells us that the "work's detailed renderings of the eye—the most telling, fragile and vulnerable human feature—offer a profound sense of intimacy within a public place. Together, the images create a sense of unity and flow: animating, orienting and humanizing the station. *Oculus* invites a dialogue between the site and those who move through it" ("Description"). But with few people in the

station, the eyes have the opposite effect, something akin to an Orwellian Big Brother watching with no one to survey. As I keep walking, I come to the centerpiece of the installation—a giant mosaic of the globe, flat out on the ground with an omnipresent eye in the middle. Laid over the globe, there's a map of downtown New York. Was this place once the center of the world? Is it still?

I walk past the eyes and peek into a train, asking the only person there if the train is going to Ground Zero. "Oh no, this is the end of the line. WTC is just up there, keep going." So I leave and start walking toward the site. There are no signs that actually say "Ground Zero." I find only directions pointing toward what once was. In the epigraph to his famous poem "The Hollow Men," T. S. Eliot quotes from *Heart of Darkness*: "Mistah Kurtz—he dead" (120). Yes, Kurtz dies, but something remains. Eliot can't rid himself of Kurtz's echo. Something primal, something all too human lingers in the void.

Connecting from Chambers is the newly built PATH station, situated at the site of Ground Zero. This station will eventually be one of the busiest transit areas in New York. Here, at the heart of this underworld, I have found what may revive the empty corridors and give those tiled eyes something to stare at again. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot writes, "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man, / You cannot say, or guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images . . ." (19-22). As I think of that stony rubbish, I imagine more people. They float around the platform, some staring, others ignoring the sight, looking for their connecting train. The broken images glide by too fast for me to focus, but I see clearly the big, open hole, slowly being filled.

Upstairs, I find what is supposed to be a memorial at the entrance to the PATH. It contains pictures of people who saved lives or were affected by the events of 9/11. There are pictures of the smoke and the destruction. There are timelines of that day. And there are photos of what will be built on the site. An old man stares at the photos with troubled eyes, gasping at the unimaginable event; he looks up as if he will forever be troubled. And then I see some kids staring up at the pictures; they look more confused than hurt. But still interested. Everyone is interested; everyone is looking *up* at what will be and what has been.

It's hard to tell if anyone can *see* it complete though, or if all we really have or *can have* is just broken images. André Aciman writes in his essay "Shadow Cities" about being an exile from a foreign land, and the odd way that a tiny, neglected public park on the Upper West Side of Manhattan serves as a sort of canvas on which to project his memories of home. "I come

to Straus Park to remember Alexandria,” Aciman writes, “albeit an unreal Alexandria, an Alexandria that does not exist, that I’ve invented or cultivated . . . not just out there but that is perhaps more in me than it ever was out there, that it is, after all, perhaps just me” (371). My disillusionment with Ground Zero perhaps comes from just me as well; my idea of this space can never be concrete, and I’m afraid it will fade away like ripples. The void of Ground Zero, like the Heart of Darkness, should, within it, contain some truth. It should remind us that there is something vibrant and alive there, something more than broken images. But wounds fade like everything else, and I am left with an old man gasping at the destruction.

“They’re all just pictures,” he says, “you want to see more?” He floats around the memorial, wearing a green coat, and handing out maps of Ground Zero. At first, I figure he has some conspiracy to preach. But then a few people start to listen to him, and I decide—out of curiosity—to join in. He looks a bit scruffy, but he has conviction. He’s dignified in a way that’s alluring. The man has two worn photo albums with pictures, some of which show the planes hitting the Twin Towers. He points out that they were taller than the Empire State Building. It’s a small and odd detail, but it somehow makes things more real. They *were* taller, and I had forgotten. He has a picture of a little boy around his neck. As the man rolls through more photos, I see him flip past the ones of the boy. Never stopping on them. There seem to be pictures of the man when he was younger too. But he rolls past those and shows us photos of the other WTC buildings instead; he explains that three buildings fell that day, not just the two that we’ve seen over and over again in photographs and on videotape. He shows us photos of buildings that were damaged and then points to them. They look as if nothing ever happened. And he keeps talking about Chambers station and the more extensive subway that existed before the planes came. He almost starts to cry when he explains the part about the people who were trapped. I look at the photo of the little boy, and I know almost certainly that it was his son.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlowe describes Kurtz’s last moment: “I saw on that ivory face the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath—‘The horror! The horror!’” (388). On this day, there is no horror in the air at Ground Zero, but something still unsettles me. I want to be seized by the place, undone by it,

but the only visceral reaction I have is for the man in the green coat, and for the son he lost. The man preaches only detail and reality. But to listen to him, you'd think he was trying to save the world.

The last thing the man points to is a new building on the skyline. He smiles and says, "I bet you didn't know that was there." The glossy new tower is the WTC 7 building, already complete. I *had* never noticed it. Perhaps I should have paid more attention. The entire site is supposed to be completed by 2012. The centerpiece and the tallest building of the new World Trade Center will be Freedom Tower. The artist's impressions of the architectural behemoth show it as a glossy pinnacle. Shooting up from the roof of the tower will be a giant needle, and from this needle a beam of light will blaze upwards toward the sky. It looks like something from a video game, a thing my parents would have called childish if I had shown it to them in a comic book.

Pictures of all these things—the past and the future of World Trade Center—cover a tiny booth in the middle of the memorial. A man sits inside, and you can ask him for information. Built around this booth is a fence with more information and pictures regarding the future of the World Trade Center. And behind the fence, a green tarp covers what lies behind it. People have poked holes in this tarp to see Ground Zero. Eliot writes in "The Hollow Men," "Between the conception / And the creation / Between the emotion / And the response / Falls the Shadow" (78-82). I am standing next to something that is being created, something that is between stages, and a shadow certainly seems to have fallen. The hollow men in Eliot's poem walk through the Waste Land. They're hollow inside, seemingly disenchanting with reality. There are others who are described as having gone to Heaven's Kingdom, who look back on the poor, hollow souls left after the destruction and remember them. From my new vantage post, I feel hollow too, as I did walking through that empty subway station, or peeking through the holes in the tarp to see Ground Zero—as if peeking through holes were all that was left.

I had hoped to find something vital. I had hoped to find a Heart of Darkness, a trace of primal truth that would wake me up. But everything here is already turning into memories, which saddens me because I don't know if I will ever really understand what happened. I turn around and go back downstairs to the PATH station. Fewer people are down here where you can see Ground Zero. Others are upstairs looking at the World Trade Center. Aciman writes about the tourist maps they sell in Rome, the ones that feature a modern-day Roman landscape: "When you place the transparency over the

picture of a ruin, the missing or fallen parts suddenly reappear, showing you how the Forum and the Colosseum must have looked in their heyday. . . . But when you lift all the plastic sheets, all you see are today's ruins" (370).

When I arrive in Chambers station, I realize that I don't want to take an empty A train back uptown. The mosaic eyes of *Oculus* stare at me. What makes them really Orwellian is that the eyes outnumber me. I am reminded again of being disconnected from Ground Zero, from an increasingly visualized world. There is no horror here, only a terrible watching. And I realize that the centerpiece of *Oculus*, the flattened globe with New York and the eye in the middle of it, represents my point-of-view. I am caught in a twenty-first century American experience. I sense that the farther the eye tries to see, the more vague the images become, images that cannot reveal the complexity of this hallowed ground. I sense only the shallowness of a flattened Earth.

But Ground Zero has been, for almost a decade, the center of American consciousness. And yet I can't grasp it, can't fully understand it. The site leaves me empty. Perhaps we should just build over it—make a memorial—and move on; maybe that's all we really can do. But to feel the reality we must somehow be made to see what led up to it. Imagine being shot in the leg by a stranger and never quite knowing why he did it, even after others have given you explanations.

I turn my back on *Oculus*. I'm weary of pictures. The final lines of Eliot's "The Hollow Men" ring in my head: "This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang, but a whimper" (97-98). I'm afraid that when the world finally fades away from me, I will be caught unaware, realizing that I've lost everything. But I resist, hoping that one day soon we'll be able to see Ground Zero for what it was, even if they do cover it over as they've done with other ruins. Perhaps when the space is restored, put back together in some form or another, it can evoke in us something primal, something so deeply human that we can't avoid seeing ourselves for what we are.

I don't know. But I can't help thinking of that beautiful man in the green coat and the picture he has, which I barely got to see. He and his son were together; they were at the southern edge of Manhattan Island, where downtown meets the horizon and those old towers stood against the background. I remember being a kid myself, remember when life stirred me, not because of any horror in the air but because the air was full of something other than memories. And I know that even if I never fully understand what happened to this space, I want it to be alive with the ghosts. I want a memorial that will return us to a life and to a world of more than broken images.

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