

CHARLES MARTIN

After 9/11

We lived in an apartment on the ridge
Running along Manhattan's northwest side,
On a street between the Cloisters and the Bridge,

On a hill George Washington once fortified
To keep his fledglings from the juggernaut
Cumbrously rolling toward them. Many died

When those defenses failed, and where they fought
Are now a ball field and a set of swings
In an urban park: old men lost in thought

Advance their pawns against opponents' kings
Or gossip beneath a sycamore's high branches
All afternoon until the sunset brings

The teenagers to occupy their benches.
The park makes little of its history,
With only traces of the walls or trenches

Disputed, died by, and surrendered; we
Tread on the outline of a parapet
Pressed into asphalt unassertively,

And on a wall descending to the street,
Observe a seriously faded plaque
Acknowledging a still unsettled debt.

What strength of memory can summon back
That ghostly army of fifteen-year-olds
And their grandfathers? The Hessians attack

And the American commander folds;
We could have watched those losers made to file
Past jeering victors to the waiting holds

Of prison vessels from our Tudor-style
Apartment building's roof.

When, without warning,
Twin towers that rose up a quarter mile

Into a cloudless sky were, early one morning,
Wreathed in the smoke from interrupted flight,
When they and what burst into them were burning

Together, like a secret brought to light,
Like something we'd imagined but not known,
The intersection of such speed, such height—

We went up on our roof and saw first one
And then the other silently unmake
Its outline, horrified, as it slid down,

Leaving a smear of ashes in its wake.
That scene, retold from other points of view
Would grow familiar, deadening the ache:

How often we saw each jet fly into
Its target, with the same street-level gasp
Of shock and disbelief remaining new.

Little by little we would come to grasp
What *had* occurred, our incredulity
Finely abraded by the videotape's

Grim repetitions. A nonce community
Began almost at once to improvise
New rituals for curbside healing; we

Saw flowers, candles, shrines materialize
In shuttered storefronts for the benefit
Of those who'd stopped the digging with their cries

And those who hadn't. None came out of it,
None would be found still living there, beneath
The rubble scooped up out of Babel's pit:

From the clueless anonymity of death
Came fragments identified by DNA
Samples taken from bits of bone and teeth,

But that was later. In those early days
When we went outside, we walked among the few
Grieving for someone they would grieve for always,

And walked among the many others who,
Like ourselves, had no loss as profound,
But knew someone who knew someone who knew

One of the ones who fell back as he wound
A spiral up the narrow, lethal staircase
Or one who tumbled helplessly to the ground,

The fall that our imaginations trace
Even today: those whom we most resembled,
Whose images we still cannot erase. . . .

On the third night, the neighbors reassembled
For a candlelight procession: in the wind,
Each flame, protected by a cupped hand, trembled

As though to mimic an uncertain mind
Struggling toward some insufficient word—
What certitude could our searching find?

Those who had come here to be reassured
Would leave with nothing: nothing could be said
To answer, or *have* answered, the unheard

Cries of the lost. Yet here we had been led
To gather at the entrance to the park
In a mass defined by candles for the dead,

As though they were beyond us in the dark
And with them were those others, who had been
Surrendered here, marched off, forced to embark

On one of the prison ships they perished in,
All now restored to us in a sublime
Confirmation of the pattern, the design.

But none appeared to mock *this* paradigm:
All that has come before us lies below
In layer pressing upon layer. . . .

Time

Is an old man telling us how, long ago,
As a child in Brooklyn he went out to play,
And prodding the summer earth with his bare toe

Discovered a bone unburied in the clay,
From one of those whose rotting corpses filled
The hulks that settled into Wallabout Bay;

Time is the monument that he saw built
To turn their deaths into a victory,
Its base filled with their bones dredged out of silt;

Time is the silt grain polished by the sea,
The passageway that leads from one to naught;
Time is what argues with us constantly

Against the need to hold them all in thought,
Time is what places them beyond recall,
Against the need of the falling to be caught,

Against the woman who's begun to fall
And the woman who is watching from below;
Time is the photo peeling from the wall,

The busboy, who came here from Mexico
And stepped off from a window ledge, aflame;
Time is the only outcome we will know,

Against the need of those lost to be claimed
(Their last words caught in our mobile phones)
Against the need of the nameless to be named

In our city built on unacknowledged bones.