Witness

September 11, 2001

By Marguerite María Rivas

Sirens put the word in the poet’s head:
“Find the wail colloquial,” and she saw.
She saw that finger of some strange god
burning oblivion, burning like
some grotesque giant-cigarette advertising
or a cattail on fire in July,
and the black was still,
and the man with knit African homeland cap
covering mass of dreadlocks
hunkered on the bench beside her
while she stood, poised, over the rail directly across.

Their eyes, unblinking, dry, perpetually startled
they would be every time they looked—
as if the Challenger were exploding over the harbor
with 30,000 astronauts aboard
as if the mothership hovered over the city
as if they were Jackie Kennedy in a pink pillbox hat
perched next to her husband in an open car at Dealy plaza
like all that, with wonder and incomprehension
and hurry do something do something move limbs
move hands move move move somewhere.

It disintegrated before their eyes.
It disintegrated
before the mute and life-jacketed passengers on the ferry
before the truant schoolboys with their backpacks
before frightened mothers pushing unsuspecting baby strollers
and the cloud, not black now but white
cumulo-nimbus to the fiftieth power,
slouching, prowled lower Manhattan
and crept to The Battery, fanning out to the Island.

Thousands streamed,
evacuees over the ferry ramp:
a human river of ash, shoeless, and dazed.
Brass-plated nametags pinned to traders’ jackets
reflected the dissolute morning sun;
freckled-faced working girls cried for their mothers;
huddled masses, numb with confusion dared
not look back at the New Jerusalem.
They carried upon their shoulders the yoke
of a pulverized city:
ash made of concrete, paper, and life.

The air is lead now.
Unshorable fragments, hauled
along expressways in tarp-covered trucks,
are dumped in the Fresh Kills landfill.

Drugstores have run out of packet packs of tissues.
Amazing Grace bagpipes make everyone wince.
Empty firefighters’ helmets are placed
beside the Easter candle,
and borrowed coffins, flag-draped,
are borne upon brave shoulders.

These vacant caskets are held aloft,
light, too light, filled only with eternal light,
an outward sign of the disappeared
of the eleventh day of the month
of Our Lady of Sorrows.