

COUNTING BACKWARD TOWARD BEFORE

We bring back
the troops, put down
missiles and rifles, withdraw
fearful, suspicious stares
from fellow humans on planes,
in public places—Middle Eastern
faces that could be Moses
or Jesus or Mohammed.

Watching television, tears
roll up our cheeks, hands
uncover our faces. On a morning
like any other we return
to what we had been doing—
eating breakfast, morning exercises,
getting in the car to drive to work.

And the twin towers
swallow smoke and flames.
People run backward into coffee shops,
sit down to newspapers folded open,
mugs of cooling latte.
They jog backward to catch taxis
that slowly reverse into the day.
As the cloud of dust and smoke is sucked
back into ground level at the towers,
first responders back out, remove their gear.
People walk back into buildings,
help each other up stairwells,
sit down at their desks, take a moment
to call husband or wife or child to say
I love you and *I'll see you tonight for dinner*—
fingers click on keyboards.

Tourists in the street watch
glass and debris rise up from pavement
like dirty rain falling up,
stare as bodies flap skyward
like pigeons back to window ledges.
Towers reemerge, reconstruct themselves
like the Phoenix from her ashes.
The World Trade Center is whole,
and 2997 more people are alive.

As the New York horizon regains
two pylons that hold up the sky,
those towers expel two airplanes.
The pilots of flights #11 and #175
sit up, lift their hands to the controls,
swing their planes back toward Boston.
Inside the planes' cabins

passengers refasten seatbelts—
clinking carts roll down the aisles with coffee.
Five men on each plane close cockpit doors,
return to their seats, return something dark
to their jacket pockets.
When the planes land, all disembark.
The anonymous non-perpetrators—
no carryon bags, no checked luggage—
back away, disappear below the surface
of the sea of Tuesday morning airport faces.

We are not yet looking for someone to blame,
someone upon whom to exact revenge.
Back before—
before the trajectory of history
took an unexpected turn.

-- Janet Ruth (published in *New Mexico Remembers 9/11*
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