

**“Pain is a Requirement, Not a Curse”:
Vulnerability as a Sentimental Security in Post-9/11 Literature**

INTRODUCTION

In his 1993 essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction”, David Foster Wallace asserts that TV was deeply threatening the contemporary novelist; by appropriating novelist’s very tools for criticism, TV had left authors bereft of their agency to critique and alter culture. Such criticism of TV’s “vapidity, shallowness, and irrationalism” was widespread and even trendy at the time, and yet Americans continued to religiously watch an average six hours per day (Foster Wallace 156). Foster Wallace explains this simultaneous loving and loathing of televisual culture: it had become “its own most profitable critic” in its celebration of the very elements—cynicism, narcissism, emptiness—that its critics sought to expose (Foster Wallace 157). This renders postmodern fiction’s attempts to alter the world of “appearance, mass appeal, and television” via its usual tool of self-conscious irony obsolete (Foster Wallace 171).

In the world of TV “everything presents itself as familiar.” TV “teaches us to see real-life personal up-close stuff the same way we relate to the distant and exotic,” thereby endorsing and perpetuating a culture of cynicism and indifference—moods that postmodern fiction once effectively critiqued (Foster Wallace 181). Thus Foster Wallace posits that the contemporary novel’s greatest challenge in its next phase will be “trying to make the familiar strange” by transcending the onslaught of media images to find a “real” human subject independent of images (Foster Wallace 172). In doing so, the novelist might wrest contemporary Americans from TV’s cultural bondage. He concludes his essay with a

vision for the next phase of contemporary literature: “‘anti-rebels’ [...] Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction,” willing to risk “accusations of sentimentality, melodrama” (Foster Wallace 192-193).

In light of the events of September 11, 2001, Foster Wallace’s concerns and demands surrounding the danger of TV and the future of the novel seem prophetic. In his essay response to 9/11 “The View From Mrs. Thompson’s,” Foster Wallace points out that the experience of 9/11 was, for the majority of Americans and people around the globe, mitigated by a TV screen: he learned about the attacks on the radio, then quickly ran to a neighbor’s house to watch “the hideous beauty of the rerun clip of the second plane hitting the tower.” Foster Wallace quickly recognized the tension between national TV spectacle and individual tragedy while watching “dots detaching from the building and moving through smoke down the screen”—humans jumping to their deaths from the burning building. “It seems grotesque to talk about being traumatized by a video when the people in the video were dying,” he admits. The “relentless rerunning of spectacular footage” codified the familiarity, creating an instantly recognizable, exploitable, larger-than-life image of what was, in fact, indescribable trauma and unintelligible individual pain (“The View from Mrs. Thompson’s” 132).

Objectively, the events that Foster Wallace, his neighbors, and much of the world watched unfold on their TV screens were utterly strange: spectators witnessed what still stands as the deadliest terrorist attack in history and the first attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor. Yet, the contemporary “televisual” sense

of the world rendered the attacks familiar (“The View From Mrs. Thompson’s” 95). As he watched the footage, Foster Wallace noted that the attacks were situated in the “foreground of the skyline they all know so well (from TV)” and marveled that “some of the shock of the last two hours has been how closely various shots and scenes have mirrored the plots of everything from *Die Hard I-III* and *Air Force One* to Tom Clancy's *Debt of Honor*” (“The View From Mrs. Thompson’s” 133). Foster Wallace is immediately suspicious of these similarities, as well as the TV anchor’s conspicuous “shirtsleeves” and “mussed” hair: they fit perfectly into TV’s ethos of entertaining while numbing the viewer to any sort of reflection (133). This is exactly “the sick and obvious po-mo [postmodern] complaint” that “E Unibus Pluram” calls novelists to transcend by pushing past images and into the realm of an authentic, human subject—a call to focus on the effect of the attacks rather than their spectacle in the case of 9/11 (133).

Yet, the “traumatizing” 9/11 TV images quickly took on a threatening rather than mournful tone in American culture. The unexpected, unavoidable nature of the spectacle forced First World Americans to squarely face the implications of living in what Ulrich Beck calls a “world risk society.” According to Beck, “being at risk is the way of being and ruling in the world of modernity; being at global risk is the human condition at the beginning of the twenty-first century” (Beck 330). Therefore society finds itself “increasingly occupied with debating, preventing and managing risks that it itself has produced” (Beck 332). Despite the strength of the United States military, surveillance precautions, and massive financial investments intended to eliminate risk, disaster struck in the form of an event that was “utterly improbable

according to every logic of risk, when suicide terrorists succeeded in turning commercial passenger aircrafts into rockets” (Beck 330). This is because risk in the modern world—the type of risk that occasionally materializes into terrorist catastrophe—is incalculable and therefore unavoidable. And this is terrifying, especially when the result of such risk-turned-catastrophe is being “relentless[ly] rerun” on every media source in the country (“The View from Mrs. Thompson’s” 133).

Following 9/11’s glaring exposure of the insecurity of existence even in the United States, the government was faced with the responsibility of responding to the resultant upheaval of fear and anxiety. Retrospectively, the United States faced a crossroads: it could either attempt to pause violence through self-examination and mourning or respond with further violence to mitigate risk, promising security even in the face of “more or less unadmitted not-knowing,” or (Beck 335). Faced with what Judith Butler described as the “narcissistic wound opened up by the public display of our physical vulnerability,” the government chose decisively between these two options (Butler 7). On September 20, 2001, President Bush declared to the American people, “in our grief and anger we have found our mission” and that mission was the War on Terror. With this declaration, Bush appropriated the media-created image of the falling towers as justification for further violence, refusing to accept a vulnerable existence.

In doing so, the United States missed the opportunity to recognize the falling bodies that so traumatized Foster Wallace—the troubling but inescapable reality which Butler explains as the “loss and vulnerability [that] seem to follow from our

being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (Butler 20). 9/11’s falling bodies represented an opportunity to “decenter” our international worldview and rebuild an understanding of Americans as “profoundly implicated in the lives of others” (Butler 7). By this alternative thinking, Americans could have confronted the trauma of 9/11 by reaffirming life instead of avenging death with increased violence.

In this paper, I will argue that authors Jonathan Safran Foer, Ian McEwan, and Colum McCann recognize the falling bodies and reimagine human security in their literary responses to 9/11. Thus, their novels juxtapose with the United States’ militarized response to the trauma of 9/11, which sought to reaffirm the status quo of “First World complacency” (Butler 8). In the process, these authors meet Foster Wallace’s 1993 call for writers who “treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction,” deviating from the cynical, ironic responses that dominate postmodern fiction and current TV culture (Foster Wallace 192-193). By situating characters in environments of insecurity, paranoia, and suspense, each author acknowledges the contemporary reality in which “disaster arises from what we do not know and cannot calculate” (Beck 330). However, in contrast to the United States government’s militarized response, these authors use the experience of 9/11 to assert vulnerability as innate to the human condition. In this way, the authors answer Judith Butler’s challenge “to ask what [...] might be made of grief besides war” in the wake of 9/11 (Butler xii). The novels agree with Butler’s own reply: that the experience of trauma should not be an impetus for “reactive aggression”, but rather an opportunity to “redefine [oneself] as

part of a global community,” linked by our universal susceptibility to risk (Butler xi). In the novels *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, *Saturday*, and *Let the Great World Spin*, trauma emerges as a link between disparate groups—a link across times and cultures, layers of society, and public and private spheres. Through this commonality of vulnerability, characters find themselves connected and relating to others in the process of responding to trauma and grieving. Though these novels fall short in their conception of the “Other,” limiting their conception of healing communities to national rather than international bonds, the novels proffer trauma and grief as an opportunity for community building across pre-trauma boundaries. In the modern absence of knowable material security, vulnerability forces humans to confront and embrace their dependency upon and responsibility to one another.

CHAPTER 1

Stuff That Happened to Me Humans: Recognizing Universal Vulnerability as a Path to Trauma Recovery in Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* follows 9-year-old protagonist Oskar Schell on a fruitless quest to make sense of the loss of his father in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Throughout the novel, he relentlessly contrives meaning and security in a world that suddenly feels increasingly unpredictable and threatening. As his quest drags on without result, the reader and Oskar witness the emergence of a community of trauma and recovery in New York—victims of wide ranging historical and personal tragedies—that discredit the myth of a restorative complacency for Oskar, New York, or the United States as a whole. Within this community, Oskar recognizes the impossibility of protecting himself from trauma and learns to mourn its reality. In this way, Foer asserts that the United States must

similarly mourn 9/11 as a unifying trauma rather than as an impetus for continued and heightened pain. Upon this recognition, Oskar stops individualizing his trauma and joins a community of mourners that provide emotional, if not material, security.

Oskar is deeply embedded in Beck's "world risk society": he views himself and the people he loves as acutely threatened, both physically and emotionally. He recognizes the inherent physical danger of existing in the modern world, matter-of-factly telling his mother that "humans are going to destroy each other as soon as it becomes easy enough to, which will be very soon" (Foer 43). Some of Oskar's anxieties relate directly to the terrorist attack and its association; in his comprehensive list of "stuff that made me feel panicky," airplanes, Arab people ("even though I'm not racist"), smoke, tall buildings, people with mustaches, and turbans figure prominently (Foer 36). Though this childish delineation of fears keeps with Oskar's nine-year-old, neurotic persona, it also manifests the pervasive cloud of xenophobia that settled in post-9/11 America. This simplistic assumption of threat represents Oskar's only contemplation of the "other"—a childlike, limited perspective that mirrors the paranoia of post-9/11 Americans. Though Foer's novel does little to explicitly critique anti-Arab sentiments, his later depictions of the Dresden bombings and allusions to 20th century anti-Semitism provide a subtle warning about the dangerous potential of prejudice.

Oskar's other concerns—"suspensions bridges, germs, scaffolding, sewers and subway grates, bags without owners"—indicate a general concern about the precariousness of public life (Foer 36). Oskar also feels emotionally vulnerable even a year after his dad's death, recognizing that his dad's physical destruction yielded

his own emotional destruction. He follows his list of physical threats with a description of his emotional insecurity: “I’d get that feeling like I was in the middle of a huge black ocean, or in deep space [...] that everything was incredibly far away from me” (Foer 36). Oscar’s feeling of uprooted-ness mirrors the larger sense of interruption felt in the United States after 9/11: would things ever go back to normal?

To try to restore normalcy, Oskar constantly invents fantastical devices to ensure security in the face of newly apparent threats. Many of his inventions are designed to reverse the specific conditions that yielded his father’s death. For instance, a “skyscraper that moved up and down while its elevator stayed in place” would prevent people from getting trapped on a higher floor if a plane hit the building (Foer 3). A “birdseed shirt” could provide the security of a “quick escape”; a “frozen plane” might protect from a “heat-seeking missile” (Foer 2, 258). Other inventions are aimed more generally at creating emotional stability in Oskar’s anxiety-ridden world. Oskar imagines ambulances equipped with “a device that knew everyone you knew” and could appease onlookers by flashing a sign to let them know if they should be concerned (Foer 72). He also suggests a chemical that would make one’s “skin change according to your mood,” easing emotional sensitivity towards the people around him: “Everyone could know what everyone else felt, and we could be more careful with each other” (Foer 163). The United States’ post-9/11 security policy mirrored Oskar’s intense desire for protection and transparency, especially in the light of the fact that *The 9/11 Commission Report* faulted “loose” intelligence coordination as a major cause of the attacks (Keen 86).

In the decade after 9/11, the US doubled the intelligence budget, increased research and development projects related to security, and created the Department of Homeland Security in an attempt to mitigate the uncertainties that led to 9/11 (Freedman).

Oskar's inventions and U.S. security investments manifest an acute awareness of the ubiquitous risk of *living* and an intense desire to protect people—"our families, and our friends, and even the people [...] we've never met before but still want to protect"—from the pain of loss (Foer 74). However, this neurotic inventing and investing tendency aims to reverse a grim inevitability: "In the end, everyone loses everyone. There was no invention to get around that" (Foer 74). Oskar knows that his attempts are ultimately futile. The US's heightened counterterrorism and intelligence measures have similarly yielded disappointment: issues of privacy and bureaucracy have challenged the type of protection that yields total invulnerability (Freeman). To reiterate in Butler's words, vulnerability to loss is an "ineradicable dimension of human dependency and sociality" (Butler xiv).

It is this impossibility of reconciling ubiquitous risk with the attempt to restore invulnerability that gives rise to Oskar's individualized worldview. Obsessed with securing the life around him to avoid further pain (and even, perhaps, reverse past pain), he unknowingly alienates himself from the community that could heal him. One of Oskar's inventions is an "incredibly long limousine" that stretches from "your mom's VJ" to "your mausoleum" (Foer 5). Oskar seems unconcerned that such an invention would preclude the possibility of any community interaction, as his limousine driver reminds him. Oskar also meticulously catalogues his own feelings

in a “feelings book”; during one interaction with his mother, he revises his feeling status seven times (Foer 170). Ironically, while tracking his own feelings, he deeply hurts his mother’s, yelling “If I could have chosen, I would have chosen you [to die]!” (Foer 171). Most tellingly, Oskar acknowledges that his quest to get “closer to Dad” by finding the lock—the major action of the novel—pushes him “farther from Mom” as he must constantly lie to her to facilitate his search (Foer 52). Absorbed by the loss of his father, Oskar is unable to recognize or empathize with his mother’s loss of her husband. Allegorically, the United States’ own securing impulses yielded paranoia, xenophobia, and militarization that increasingly turned the country inward in its mourning process. By viewing 9/11 as exceptional—“the worst day” to use Oskar’s words—the US alienated itself from a community of global victims that have shared in the experience of vulnerability and terror for centuries (Foer 11).

Oskar also catalogues his surroundings in a scrapbook aptly titled “*Stuff That Happened to Me,*” further indication of his inward-looking method for interpreting the world. This book represents an attempt to logically understand his uprooted life. However, its disparate, decontextualized components represent the impossibility of attaching logical reasoning to the vagaries of traumatic catastrophe. Images in the scrapbooks sometimes relate directly to Oskar’s life and the action of the text—experiments he conducts, paper airplane models his dad made. Others are totally external to his own experience—images he finds on the Internet of “a shark attacking a girl, someone walking on a tightrope between the Twin Towers, that actress getting a blowjob from her normal boyfriend” (Foer 42). Foer mirrors this disjointedness in the form of the novel, placing a long string of the scrapbook’s

images in the text—keys, a cityscape, tennis players, Hamlet holding Yorick’s skull—even though most of these images are irrelevant to the action at that point in the text, contextualized much earlier or later in the story. Thus, Foer makes the formal structure of the novel a symptom of the trauma of 9/11. In a world that no longer makes sense to Oskar, Foer undermines Oskar’s ability to lend cohesion to his surroundings.

Oskar also personalizes third-party traumas, adding them to the story of *Stuff That Happened to Me*, rather than making them part of a larger narrative of human vulnerability that includes Oskar. His book includes many non-personal traumas that he reads about or finds online: a soldier getting his head cut off in Iraq, “people who had lost their arms and legs” in a ferry accident, murdered children (Foer 42, 240, 243). Oskar’s appropriation of non-personal images into his own narrative manifests the fault of visual culture that Foster Wallace critiques: the onslaught of available images makes even the strange feel familiar, thus removing the impulse to feel shock or empathy. This individualization is analogous to the U.S. government’s militarized response to 9/11: obsessed with avoiding further trauma, the U.S. ignored the larger context of the tragedy. In this way, the United States rejected the opportunity to “narrate ourselves not from the first person alone, but from, say the position of a third” as a means of accepting and healing trauma (Butler 8). Butler suggests that the U.S. community (and Oskar) must view the attacks of 9/11 as part of a larger narrative of global violence and vulnerability that requires community to heal.

Oskar's quest to find the lock exhibits his ultimate effort to return the status quo of security and complacency that he associates with his father. He hopes that finding the lock will help him "stop missing him" and "stop inventing" by finally providing concrete conclusions about his father's death in a world that "doesn't make any sense" anymore (Foer 255, 256, 146). The inexplicable key labeled "Black" reminds Oskar of the Reconnaissance Expeditions that his dad designed for him, so he uses the search as way to stay connected to this lost ritual. He busies himself "looking for clues that might lead me in a direction," just as he meticulously scoured Central Park looking for "something that might tell me something" in his last Reconnaissance Expedition weeks before his father's death (Foer 41, 8). The mission emerges as an artificial means of letting Oskar "stay close to him for a little while longer" (Foer 304). When the mission begins to flag, he reasserts his strong desire to *know* as the basis of all his efforts, including his *Stuff That Happened to Me* scrapbook, the inventions, appeals to scientists like Jane Goodall and Stephen Hawking: "I need to know how he died," (Foer 256). However, all of these efforts ultimately fall short of assigning any meaning or understanding to his father's death. He finds the lock, "and it had nothing to do with Dad" (Foer 302).

However, over the course of the narrative, other tools emerge to help the reader understand and process the trauma of 9/11. Oskar's age—nine-years-old, albeit precocious—limits the protagonist's ability to recognize Foer's own quest to "decenter" the trauma of 9/11 and reposition Oskar as part of a historical and global community of violence-victims. Oskar remains obsessed with his own security and understanding for the majority of the novel, only gradually recognizing a version of

Butler's concept of shared vulnerability. However, the reader's understanding of trauma evolves, becoming less Oskar-centric through Foer's inclusion of third-person trauma: the various stories of the "Blacks" and allusions that create conversation with historical catastrophes.

A community of vulnerability most clearly materializes through Oskar's journey through the Five Boroughs meeting Blacks—people reeling not only from 9/11 but also from other personal tragedy. In the second house he visits, when Abby breaks down in tears as a result of her marital problems, Oskar marvels at the manifestation of other pain: *"I'm the one who's supposed to be crying"* (Foer 96). Further down the list, Oskar finds a parallel to own pain when he learns Agnes Black was a waitress at Windows on the World and also died in the attacks. Oskar initially responds by appropriating Agnes' death into his first person narrative: "Maybe she knew my dad. [...] maybe she served him that morning" (Foer 195). However, he shortly recognizes Agnes as more than an actor in his dad's story: Agnes represents the inevitability of loss and vulnerability—a reality Oskar has been fighting throughout the novel. Oskar's inquiry "Does she have any kids?" represents a child's processing of the need to refocus his energy on the life left behind in the wake of trauma. Over the course of his journey, he unwittingly establishes a community, as he notes when many of the Blacks attend his school play: "what was weird was that they didn't know what they had in common" (Foer 143). Though this commonality manifests as a community of support in the reader's eyes, Oskar continues to see each Black as a failure in his attempt to reestablish security by finding the lock.

Despite the support of the Blacks, Oskar still feels “extremely alone” that night (Foer 145).

Foer further decenters Oskar’s individuation of the 9/11 trauma by debunking the myth of the existence of a restorable, pre-catastrophe American security. Though Foer never depicts the actual events of 9/11, limiting description of the event to, “Planes going into buildings. Bodies falling,” he includes graphic description of other historical violence (Foer 230) For instance, the text includes a transcript of an interview with a Hiroshima survivor that Oskar shows in a school presentation. The interview graphically recounts the death of a woman’s child in the bombing: “Her skin was peeling off. The maggots were coming out all over, I couldn’t wipe them off, or I would wipe off her skin and muscle” (Foer 188-189). The testimony illuminates the inevitability of human insecurity in the modern moment given such destructive capabilities as atomic bombs. Furthermore, the allusion to Hiroshima manifests violent attacks as a reality that not only affects, but is also purveyed by the United States. To a similar effect, the renter’s vivid description of the Dresden bombing conveys the timelessness of trauma, even when it feels uniquely apocalyptic. Like the US, who collectively marveled “Why do they hate us so much?” in the wake of 9/11, the renter also questions his complacency: “why would anyone want to bomb Dresden?” (Butler 3, Foer 210). Grandfather asserts, “that night has no beginning or end, it started before I was born and it’s still happening,” referring to the trauma that has plagued not only his own existence, but all of humanity (Foer 208).

Oskar's visit with Mr. A.R. Black, a war reporter for "almost every war of the twentieth century", similarly confronts the reader with an image of war-torn human existence: "Did you know that in the last 3,500 years there have been only 230 years of peace?" (Foer 154, 161). Mr. Black's index of one-word cards for everyone from the 20th century who seemed "biographically significant" implies a world history defined by violence: "Nine out of ten significant people have to do with money or war!" (Foer 157, 159). Oskar remains more interested in the technical than the emotional implications of encounters like these: he detachedly reports scientific explanations of radiation effects following the Hiroshima interview and resolves to Google names from Mr. Black's biographical index that he does not recognize. However, for the reader, these episodes highlight the ruse of the "complacency" that Oskar's inventions and the U.S. War on Terror seek to restore. The events of Hiroshima and Dresden, as well as Mr. Black's experience as a war reporter, manifest a global reality of insecurity (which was at times fostered by U.S. military action) even before 9/11. According to Butler, the U.S. was long able to ignore this reality because "Our own acts of violence do not receive graphic coverage in the press, and so they remain acts that are justified in the name of self defense" (Butler 6).

The interviewee in the Hiroshima testimony and Mr. Black, as acute examples of modern insecurity, symbolize Foer's demand for characters to redefine themselves through their connections to one another rather than their comparative security. In the face of vulnerability, humans must find unity in the desire to shelter not only "our families, and our friends" but also "the people [...] we've never met

before but still want to protect” (Foer 74). Mr. Black’s biographical index symbolizes Butler’s criticism of the U.S. response to 9/11 and other global catastrophe: the “fully terrible experience of violence” becomes the “explanatory framework” for the defensive, securing impulses across history. Mr. Black’s reduction of history to one word—largely “war” or “money”—represents the conditions that fostered “US unilateralism and [...] its defensive structures” (Butler 7). Notably, Oskar’s dad does not have a card and Mohammad Atta, one of the 9/11 terrorists, does. This bothers Oskar because “My dad was good. Mohammad Atta was evil” (Foer 159). However, in light of the intense desire to secure oneself from physical vulnerability rather than acknowledge it, figures of war become more historically significant than falling bodies like Oskar’s father or the Hiroshima survivor’s daughter. Mr. Black’s revision of his own one-word biography from “war” to “husband” symbolizes his reprioritization of human community over individual security: “I chose her over war!” (Foer 161). The Hiroshima survivor echoes this call at the end of her testimony, “I thought if everyone could see what I saw, we would never have war” (Foer 189). Though Foer quotes or paraphrases the majority of the interview transcript, these lines are absent from the primary source (“Testimony of Kinue Tomoyasu”). Thus, this creative insertion manifests Foer’s belief that trauma can provide a juncture at which to find common ground amidst vulnerability to suffering.

Foer offers his most authorial call for a decentered, realignment of self in the face of insecurity in the allegorical bedtime story of the Sixth Borough. Thy myth tells the story of an extinct Sixth Borough, “an island, separated from Manhattan by

a thin body of water” (Foer 217). At some point, the island inexplicably recedes from the rest of New York and its infrastructure collapses—the type of inexplicable, unavoidable, and unknowable catastrophe that plagues the modern world. The inhabitants try in vain to “detain” the island: “They liked their lives and didn’t want to change,” Oskar’s dad explains (Foer 221). The myth sympathetically acknowledges that a sort of complacency, rather than “stubbornness, or principle, or bravery,” motivated their resistance (Foer 220). In the same way, Oskar’s mission and the US’s War on Terror are rooted in a nostalgic desire to restore a more secure past. With the unstoppable drifting of the Sixth Borough, Foer asserts the futility of attempts to establish infallible security in the face of obvious precariousness. While clinging to a “secure” past, the Sixth Borough and its inhabitants drift to Antarctica—literally frozen, symbolically static and isolated.

Foer’s myth proffers an alternative to such stasis: the “joy of the borough, it’s heart,” Central Park, forgoes its defunct past and integrates with New York, quite literally “pulled by the people of New York, like a rug across a floor, from the Sixth Borough into Manhattan” (Foer 221). Children “lay on their backs” and move “into Manhattan and adulthood,” maturing by their decision to relinquish the trauma of a lost way of life and move forward as part of a new, unified community (Foer 221). As a result, Central Park becomes a symbol of “what those children had lost, and [...] what they hoped for” (Foer 222). The decision to “salvage the park” represents Foer’s call for Oskar and the United States to mourn and evolve rather than seek to reestablish a bygone complacency in the wake of 9/11. Though this process involves

the pain of a loss of innocence—a shift “into adulthood” in the allegory—it offers the possibility of a dynamic, rather than frozen, future (Foer 221).

For Oskar, his changed relationship with his mother represents his eventual answer to the call to decenter his trauma. For most of the novel, Oskar’s mother is a marginalized character. The text characterizes her flatly, a victim of Oskar’s hurtful self-centered mourning and a questionable parent in light of her apparent unawareness of her son’s un-chaperoned weekend journeys. Contrary to Oskar’s criticisms—“Why didn’t she try to stop me, or at least keep me safe?”—her knowledge of the quest comes to light when Oskar finally finds the key’s owner. In fact, “My search was a play that Mom had written, and she knew the ending when I was at the beginning” (Foer 292). After the anticlimactic conclusion of his quest, the ultimate Mr. Black inquires about Oskar’s second key around his neck. His response marks a shift in the text’s action: “That’s to our apartment.” (Foer 302). At this point, Oskar’s quest turns symbolically towards a new lock—towards home. That night, when Oskar resumes his inventing-coping, he revisits an invention from the first page of the novel: “a teakettle” that spoke in various voices, sometimes his Dad’s, to reduce his loneliness (Foer 1, 323). In the next line, Oskar immediately arrests his inventing and physically turns to his mother for comfort, finally recognizing her potential for emotional security. He maintains that “things are extremely complicated” but ceases his manic desire to know and understand (Foer 324). He decides not to start a new volume of *Stuff That Happened to Me*, even though his first edition is out of space. This mentality shift is further codified by his decentered grief for the anonymous falling man, whose image is included in the

novel: “Was it Dad? Maybe. Whoever it was, it was somebody,” (Foer 325). This simple statement represents a profound recognition of the universality of vulnerability. However, amidst this complex understanding, some concepts are “also incredibly simple. In my only life, she was my mom, and I was her son,” (Foer 324). Here, Oskar ends his obsession with knowledge and protection and refocuses on existing community as a means of security in the face of acknowledged vulnerability.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close manifests a world of insecurity and trauma, both past and present. For Americans, the experience of such marked vulnerability is entirely novel and they are no more able to interpret it than nine-year-old Oskar. However, Foer presents this condition as a potentially unifying opportunity, rather than one that must be fought and quelled. Oskar informs Abby, “Humans are the only animal that blushes, laughs, has religion, wages war, and kisses with lips” (Foer 99). This statement affirms Abby’s bleak, realistic statement—“people hurt each other. That’s what they do”—while also highlighting the unique human capabilities of empathy, community, and hope (Foer 290). It is these tools that emerge as the healing mechanisms for trauma, rather than increased security.

Via his nine-year-old protagonist, Foer legitimizes a literature of “untrendy” sentiment and earnestness as a means of interpreting and responding to 9/11. In a new literary mode, frank, simple sentences like “I’m constantly emotional” because “my dad died the most horrible death that anyone ever could invent” intend to evoke thoughtful empathy rather than cringing, postmodern cynicism (Foer 201). By placing his narrative voice in a young boy, Foer creates a narrative in which

innocence is both debunked, in keeping with the experiences of post 9/11 Americans, but also maintained. Foer acknowledges and embraces the enormous task of responding to such a trauma with literature, while also manifesting its necessity. The cultural modes of the turn 21st century—TV images, self-referential irony, and political promise—could not comfort a grieving nation; perhaps Foer’s novel cannot either. At the very least, though, it serves as a pause—a 326-page testimony to a fallen body, a treatment of “emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction” (Foster Wallace 192).

When Oskar’s grandfather returns to the U.S. after years of running from trauma, he states that his purpose is: “‘To mourn,’ and then, ‘To ~~mourn~~ try to live,’” (Foer 268). Foer asks readers, and perhaps governments, to meet this challenge in their responses to trauma, catastrophe, and violence. In a letter, Stephen Hawking asks Oskar to consider, “What does life depend on?” (Foer 304). Hawking thusly challenges Oskar to stop seeking security in logic and science and accept that some questions cannot be answered. Oskar takes this to heart, learning to find security in “extremely simple” truths of his manifest interconnectedness to others (namely, his mother)—a microcosm of the shared vulnerability Butler asserts. Though the opportunity was missed in the U.S. response to 9/11, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* remains a call for the embrace of vulnerability in literature and politics.

CHAPTER 2

Saturday Everyday: Relinquishing Private Complacency in McEwan’s *Saturday*

Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* is more chronologically and geographically distant from the events of 9/11 than Foer’s novel, chronicling London neurosurgeon Henry

Perowne's day on February 15, 2003. The specter of September 11th lingers in Henry's consciousness throughout the day, manifesting the permeation of the event's terror, as well as the challenge of reconciling its consequences for those less immediately affected by its trauma. It is this challenge that ultimately consumes Henry's Saturday. Throughout the novel, Henry grapples with the tension between the personal security that the trappings of modernity seem to provide—via science, technology, and privilege—and the obvious insecurity and uncertainty of the public world. When this insecurity becomes more proximal after a home invasion, Henry recognizes that the complexity and inequality of the public sphere bears directly on his private existence, undermining his interior complacency. As a result, Henry ultimately accepts vulnerability—his own and his family's—as a leveling rather than threatening condition. He redirects his many privileges, using them to extend security to others as he is able, rather than shoring up his own. In this way, McEwan utilizes a private allegory to protest public efforts to eliminate insecurity via efforts such as the War on Terror and the Iraq War. Instead, he proffers acceptance of vulnerability by even the most privileged as not only a healing mechanism (as utilized by Oskar) but also a necessary path towards arresting the modern cycle of violence.

The novel's epigram, a passage from Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, sets up the tension between modernity's overwhelming threats and collective freedom—a concern that preoccupies Henry. The quotation contains Herzog's mid-twentieth century musings about “what it means to be a man. In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass.”

Herzog questions the transformation of the individual in light of dramatic societal

changes, such as increased mechanization, suburbanization, and the Vietnam War. Throughout *Saturday*, Henry will similarly contemplate this question in regard to the newly begun twenty first-century, and the 9/11 attacks emerge as one of his central reference points for resituating himself.

Henry's morning begins with a contemplation of his existence in a world risk society in which catastrophe is part of daily routine. When he awakens on February 15, 2003, his thoughts immediately turn to the "baffled and fearful times," resigned to the passing of "more optimistic days" (McEwan 3, 2). As he considers the week ahead, he muses upon the hospital's development of an updated Emergency Plan, involving increasingly complex precautions to prevent new risks that "have recently become bland through repetition" (McEwan 10). Insecurity and violence are the norm: "Iraq of course, America and power, European distrust, Islam—its suffering and self-pity, Israel and Palestine, dictators, democracy [...] weapons of mass destruction, nuclear fuel rods, satellite photography, lasers, nanotechnology" comprise "the early twenty-first century menu" (McEwan 35).

The novel's first episode—Henry witnessing a burning plane crash landing at Heathrow from his window—provides an allegory for the emergent societal awareness of modern security risks in the wake of 9/11. TV coverage of the burning plane emerges as a motif, "this infection from the public domain" shadowing each activity of Henry's day (McEwan 109). Henry and Theo immediately associate the plane with 9/11: Henry notes the familiarity of the scene and Theo wonders if it's "terrorists" or "jihadists" (31, 33). This ungrounded assumption that the plane is a

threat rather than an accident manifests the climate of fear that rattled not just Americans, but all “First World complacency” after September 11, 2001 (Butler 8).

Though Henry exhibits awareness of impending threat in the world around him, he is frustrated by his inability to interpret the private consequences of such doom. This frustration represents the modern Westerner’s challenge to accept a degree of uncertainty and insecurity in daily life. As the plane dips out of his vision, Henry contemplates the familiar experience of “catastrophe observed from a safe distance,” making him feel “culpable somehow, but helpless too” (McEwan 15, 22). He rapidly turns to the TV for explanation, hoping to transform the crash from “an unrealized subjective event” to something more understandable (McEwan 29). Like Oskar’s quest, Henry’s plea to an outside medium to make sense of an event he witnesses firsthand symbolizes the global challenge to make sense of 9/11. Many, like Henry, turned to the visual culture that Foster Wallace critiques, seeking to lend the comforting familiarity of TV media to even the most inexplicable spectacle. After the news reveals that the crash resulted from a mechanical malfunction, Henry is embarrassed by his “folly of overinterpretation” (McEwan 40). Yet, he still follows the story throughout the day, developing a “confused sense that he’s about to learn something significant about himself” each time he tunes in (McEwan 183). When he realizes that the threat, and thus the story, has totally dissipated, he feels like “a dupe”: unable to draw his own conclusions, “he’s becoming dim with contradictory opinion, he isn’t thinking clearly” (McEwan 184, 185). Henry craves security in the unpredictable world, but also feels ashamed by his inability to make sense of his surroundings—a symptom of the post-9/11 world and the ubiquity of media

explanations. The most challenging aspect of the contemporary moment seems not to be existing with risk but the inability to fully quantify the effect of those risks: “Misunderstanding is general all over the world” (McEwan 40).

Conversely, Henry lauds the modern moment as one of unprecedented achievement, even if some of the achievements yield insecurity. In the moments immediately before the crash, he feels secure and even in control of the square below: “he watches over [the people], supervising their progress with the remote possessiveness of a god” (McEwan 12). Henry attempts to assert this feeling of certainty in the order and function of the city against the insecurity of the world. Looking out at the square from his “own corner, a triumph of congruent proportion [...] an eighteenth-century dream bathed and embraced by modernity,” he can remain undisturbed by “the state of the world” (McEwan 1). The square’s most distinctive feature is itself a celebration of modernity: the Post Office Tower, with its “geometry of fluorescent lights,” embodies “a religion of the future” (McEwan 202, 203). McEwan finds comfort in the “accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries,” such as the telecommunications power embodied by the Post Office Tower (McEwan 3). He extrapolates comradery with the city people below, “harmonious for the most part, nearly everyone wanting it to work” (McEwan 3). The crash temporarily disrupts his godlike certainty the world around him—perhaps he existed in the midst of “a global crisis that would [...] take a hundred years to resolve”! (McEwan 33). He very quickly dismisses this idea as absurd however, reasserting “the streets and the people on them [as] their own

justification, their own insurance” (McEwan 76). Modernity, Henry hopes, is invulnerable because of its own success.

Though Henry contemplates his security within the city on communal terms, its reality emerges as individually material, a product of his privilege. Over the course of the novel, the narrator subtly exposes Henry’s material securities as unique to his privileged societal position. As he contemplates the city’s modern invulnerability, he idles in his Mercedes S 500, part of his “overgenerous share of the world’s goods” (McEwan 74). Later, he takes cheer in the “little resonating clunks” of the car’s central locking system that protects him from the threat of the street (McEwan 121). Back at home, the Perownes guard themselves from “the city’s poor, the drug-addicted, the downright bad” with “three stout Banham locks, two black iron bolts as old as the house, two tempered steel security chains, a spyhole with a brass cover, the box of electronics that works the Entryphone system, the red panic button, the alarm pad with its softly gleaming digits” (McEwan 37). In a more direct conflict between material security and public threat, Henry utilizes a squash game at his private club “as an assertion of his privacy,” demanding his right “not to be disturbed by world events, or even street events” (McEwan 109).

Henry takes shelter in the comforts that surround him—“supermarket cornucopias, torrents of accessible information, warm clothes [...], extended life-spans”—and extrapolates these comforts to be similarly enjoyed by the entire community, blissfully unaware of London’s inequality (McEwan 77). As he drives, he marvels at the seeming contentedness of the people on the road—people he is sure to be “at least as content as he is” (McEwan 77). Henry believes life has materially

improved “at every level [...] for most people” (McEwan 77). To this end, Henry hopes people will rally together to defend the “realizable pleasures” of modernity against security threats like terrorism (McEwan 128). However, his view belies a more sinister reality of unequally distributed comfort and contentedness. Only moments before Henry’s tribute to the self-preserving “supermarket cornucopias” of the modern moment, he encounters a man tirelessly sweeping streets. Henry’s quick “look away” represents his discomfort with the recognition that his cherished material security may not be universally felt (McEwan 77, 73).

Henry’s ability to maintain superiority to public threat is compounded by his supreme scientific knowledge. As a neurosurgeon, Henry possesses the ability to literally repair mental and bodily damage. Chapter 1 devotes 5 pages to describing the whirlwind of Henry’s previous workweek: a frenzied medical panoply of clipped cerebral artery aneurysm, repaired craniotomy for a meningioma, acoustic tumors, relieved subdural haematoma, and removed pilocytic astrocytoma (McEwan 6-8). Every operation yields success, and Henry does not find them emotionally taxing in any way—“He’s too experienced to be touched by the varieties of distress he encounters” (McEwan 10). To the non-medical reader, Henry’s operation narrative reads like the magical realist literature that he so loathes: McEwan describes an exposed portion of the brain in the midst of surgery as “a pale delicate structure of beauty, like the little whirl of a veiled dancer” (McEwan 9). This mastery of and intimacy with the most vulnerable part of the human being endows Henry with a “superhuman capacity” in his own mind and the reader’s (McEwan 10). To this end, Henry utilizes scientific, “molecular level” explanations to reason through and dispel

otherwise concerning experiences (McEwan 4). When he awakens suddenly with an inexplicably euphoric mood, he blames “dopamine-like receptors to initiate a kindly cascade of intracellular events” (McEwan 4). Similarly, after his car wreck Henry diagnoses “a modest rise in his adrenaline levels” that make “him unusually associative” (McEwan 91). These scientific explanations mitigate uncertainty, granting Henry a seeming superiority to biological uncertainty.

Henry’s experience during the car wreck with Baxter initially seems to validate the use of science and material wealth as protection from intrusion and vulnerability. The accident is the novel’s first immediate invasion of the public world into Henry’s private life; though smaller in scale, the threat posed by Baxter is far more immediate than the morning’s plane crash. The crash occurs after a policeman lets Henry bypass a road that is closed for an anti-Iraq War march. Henry continues to play his squash game uninterrupted despite the political turmoil that is literally roaming the streets, excited that “he can be exempted” from rules like road closures (McEwan 79). He similarly finds a way to exempt himself from Baxter’s aggression when the car crash threatens to ruin his squash game plans. Baxter immediately emits a “destructive energy,” making threatening demands and punching Henry in the chest when he refuses to comply (McEwan 88). However, Henry finds explanation and escape “at the level of the complex molecule” (McEwan 92). During the interaction, Henry reverts to “pedestrian diagnostician,” noting behaviors in Baxter indicative of Huntington’s disease (McEwan 92). He uses his medical expertise as self-defense, diagnosing Baxter and offering up vague promises of treatment—“Exercises. Certain drugs” and “pain relief, help with loss of balance,

tremors, depression” (McEwan 97, 98). Henry mentally admits that, “generally, there’s nothing on offer at all for this condition” but he takes advantage of terminal patients’ hunger for “the slenderest leads” to gain the upper hand in the confrontation (McEwan 96). Baxter’s companions desert him, and Henry slips back to his Mercedes “while the possibility remains that he can still rescue his game” (McEwan 100). Thus, science and material advancements seemingly prevail in protecting Henry from the threat of the outside world.

However, the encounter also exposes shortcomings of Henry’s reliance on material and scientific progress for protection. The same scientific knowledge that comprises Henry’s superhuman healing abilities also illuminates the precariousness—even randomness—of human life, both at the biological and social level. Minutes before the wreck, Henry takes comfort in Medawar’s proclamation, “To deride the hopes of progress is the ultimate fatuity” (McEwan 77). However, during his interaction with Baxter, he reverses this attitude: in this encounter, Henry describes promises of a palliative treatment as “fatuity” (McEwan 98). This shift manifests the social inequality that makes Henry’s comforting notion of progress inaccessible to Baxter. Henry admits that Baxter’s doomed future “is fixed and easily foretold” by pure biological coincidence (McEwan 94). Even though Baxter possessed “real intelligence,” his unfortunate neurological degeneration deprives him of the comforts of modernity that Henry enjoys (McEwan 113). The truth is that brains, like cars, “can let you down,” throwing into question Henry’s notion of guaranteed progress (McEwan 99).

Following the car crash, Henry's surety of his security begins to falter. Henry makes it to his squash game, but feels "a disquiet" verging on guilt as he warms up (McEwan 103). The car crash yields a more intimate version of the disquiet he experienced after watching the plane crash. Each event is a "catastrophe observed at a safe distance"; Henry registers the threat that the plane and Baxter pose, but he also retreats from both events unscathed (McEwan 15). He hopes to reaffirm his imperviousness by triumphing over his squash opponent, but the faltering of his physical body—creaky knees and a chest ache—makes him aware of "his own life as fragile and precious" (McEwan 103). He hopes that the squash game will be a reprieve—"an assertion of his privacy"—from the nagging turmoil of the morning plane crash, war protest, car crash, and standoff with Baxter (McEwan 109). Instead, it only compounds his fallibility: old age makes him stiff and the events of the morning come back to him as "trailing memories" that distract him from the game (McEwan 107). The game becomes an exhausting and heated affair even though "there's nothing at stake," as Henry strives to "prove to himself something essential in his own nature" through victory (McEwan 115, 117). This "something" is his reclaiming of the physical imperviousness that he convinced himself of as he cruised in his Mercedes that morning—his superiority to public threat. The loss riles him up, exacting the opposite effect of the emotional complacency he hoped to restore. At this point, Henry's hope that habit, reason, and material progress will guarantee his security manifests as self-delusion.

Though he does not fully see it in himself, Henry recognizes a similar delusion in his rumination of Prime Minister Tony Blair's political promises of

security. While driving to visit his mother, the public world intrudes on Henry's routine again, this time in the form of a television shop displaying an interview with Blair. Henry cannot hear the audio, but suspects that he is commenting on his endorsement of England's participation in the War on Iraq. Henry questions Blair's veracity, and, more troublingly, questions his own ability to evaluate Blair's veracity: "is this politician telling the truth? But can anyone really know?" (McEwan 142). Henry realizes that Blair's promise "that going to war will make us safer" is based on good faith rather than knowable fact (McEwan 143). However, in the threatening climate of the contemporary moment, society demands certainty from its politicians. Henry's anecdote about an interaction with Blair manifests the political necessity of concealing any doubt: at the grand opening of an art museum, Blair mistook Henry for an artist. Upon realization of his mistake, "a hairline fracture [...] appeared in the assurance of power." Yet he leaves the mistake unrecognized, knowing that "turning back" would yield negative political consequences (McEwan 146). Blair must approach the War on Iraq with the same requisite of certainty. Henry's description of the War implies a wealth of unknowns—the decision comprises a list of vague "might," "could," and haphazard predictions (McEwan 147). Though Henry critiques Blair's attitude, Henry's own actions evince the logic behind Blair's promises of certainty. In light of the fact that "an attack in a European or American city is an inevitability," the modern "community of anxiety" demands defense—the reason for Henry's alarm pad, constant appeals to TV explanations, and attempts at refuge in reason (McEwan 180). Politically, the most effective way to gain approval is to promise this security

even when it is utterly impossible. The same logic underlies Bush's promise that the War on Terror "will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated" (Bush).

However, Henry is unable to apply this understanding of inevitable uncertainty to his conception of his personal security until he experiences intimate catastrophe. In a conversation moments before the home invasion, Henry affirms the unknowable nature of the war in a debate with Daisy: "this is all speculation about the future. Why should I feel any certainty about it?" (McEwan 192). Yet, such public insecurity remains "catastrophe observed at a safe distance," not yet connected to Henry's private life (McEwan 15). He remains comfortably safe behind his locks and alarms. He admits that "being wrong is simply an interesting diversion," manifesting the low personal stakes that Henry attributes to "geopolitical moves and military strategies"; his position of privilege gives him the luxury of musing about global threat without contemplation of his own vulnerability (McEwan 198).

Baxter's invasion makes public threat personal, undermining the private security that Henry clung to in the face of obvious public chaos. Baxter's invasion interrupts the distinction between public insecurity and private comfort that Henry fought to maintain throughout the novel. At the beginning of the novel he looks out at the uncertain city "with the remote possessiveness of a god," symbolizing his empowerment within the fortress of the domestic sphere (McEwan 12). However, when Baxter invades, the home becomes a place of helplessness. The family members fall subject to Baxter's various demands: all must hand over their phones,

Grandfather Grammaticus receives a blow to the face, Daisy must undress and recite poetry. In this way, the invasion displaces the large-scale threat of global threats like 9/11 or the Iraq War, bringing the effects of these events to a graspable level for the reader and Henry.

At this point, McEwan's allegory asserts the necessity of relinquishing securing impulses and seeking communal security in the face of trauma. Despite the family's manifold security measures, Baxter's intent overcomes material precautions. The unpredictable nature of Baxter's invasion embodies Beck's principal argument about existing in a world risk society: "disaster arises from what we do not know and cannot calculate" (Beck 330). Unpredictably, the family's rescue comes when Daisy recites Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach": the poem shockingly disarms Baxter, throwing him into a state of sudden nostalgia and elation. Though Henry relied on his scientific diagnosis of Baxter's disease to escape the last encounter, the means of his salvation during the home invasion are enigmatic to Henry: he has never heard the poem and even mistakes it as one of Daisy's. Neither Henry nor modernity's achievements could have provided such a defense. Tellingly, Daisy's easy recall of the poem stems from the family ritual of reciting canonical poems to her grandfather. In this way, security arises from the family's commonality—their shared vulnerability and devotion to one another in the face of terror. The family resists division despite Baxter's attempts to isolate them, following the advice of Arnold's poem to "love each other [...] when there's no peace or certainty, and when desert armies stand ready to fight" (McEwan 229). Rather than material security, the Perownes rely on the power of "the web of kindly social

and familial relations, without which they're nothing" to secure them from threat (McEwan 237). Though these connections make them vulnerable to the pain of loss, McEwan asserts familial community as the most powerful tool for security in an unpredictable climate of risk. The Perownes may have lost their illusion of security, but the threat of losing one another affects them much more powerfully. As he falls asleep next to his wife that night, he asserts the singularity of this form of security in the contemporary moment: "there's only this" (McEwan 289).

More importantly, the incident serves as an impetus for Henry to acknowledge vulnerability as a commonality between himself and Baxter. Though their relationship embodies vast power inequalities, Baxter and Henry share an unavoidable human subjection to violence, disease, and pain. He abandons scientific explanations—"defective genes"—for Baxter's aggression and admits that his own fearful actions led to Baxter's retaliation (McEwan 228). Up until now, Baxter and Perowne perpetuate the cycle of violence by eschewing their own vulnerability in favor of leveling some security advantage against the other. However, at this point Perowne realizes the unavoidable nature of threat: in avoiding one crisis, he has merely "steered [...] into another, far worse"—the condition of the contemporary moment (McEwan 219). Henry's recognition reminds the reader of the unpredictable outcomes of securing impulses like the War on Terror and the impending Iraq War.

Immediately after disarming Baxter, Henry's reactive, securing impulse rears its head: "what delusional folly to permit yourself sympathy towards a man, sick or not, who invades your house" (McEwan 239). He reasserts his superiority over

Baxter by detailing the essential care he provided: opening his airway, an improvised “collar out of towels,” checking vital signs (McEwan 239). In this way, Henry turns the tables of vulnerability, making Baxter subject to him as a means of asserting his security. He seemingly continues this trend by performing surgery on Baxter.

However, following the surgery, Henry begins to see himself in community with Baxter, fully relinquishing his illusion of control over the threats that surround him. Though unequal in many ways, Baxter and Henry are equal in their vulnerability to unpredictable violence and disease—a recognition that could actually reverse the cycle of violence. Baxter’s vulnerability during and after the surgery is palpable: he lays obliviously in the recovery room “like a fighter laid out by a killer punch” (McEwan 271). Yet, when faced with the vulnerability of his attacker, Henry loses the indignant fury that overcame him after the invasion. He attempts to reassert his authority by taking Baxter’s pulse as he lays unconscious, but instead finds himself simply holding Baxter’s hand. When Henry returns home, he symbolically turns off the lamp rather than “turn the light on [...] and examine” the bruise from the earlier conflict with Baxter (McEwan 272). With this action, Henry relinquishes his impulse to dwell upon and atone for Baxter’s affront to his security. Instead, Rosalind and Henry find comfort in the emotional security of one another: though Rosalind acknowledges a desire for vengeance for the “sheer terror” Baxter caused, she also admits that through the terror “You”—Henry—remained infallible (McEwan 278). Though physical security has proven tenuous,

the Perownes find security in the shared humanity that bonds them—a link that also binds them to Baxter.

The novel opens and closes symmetrically, with Henry observing the square from his window. However, at the novel's conclusion, Henry's concluding stare is not "god"-like, but rather empathetic (McEwan 12). He recognizes the vast inequality that exists in the city below—conditions determined by random, "dim fate" (McEwan 282) Henry abandons the delusion of a community of Londoners bonded by their celebration of the comforts of modernity, instead acknowledging his responsibility to "look out for" the people who do not feel these achievements equally—to "make them comfortable somehow" with his own privilege (McEwan 282). For Baxter, this means surgically correcting his head trauma and not pressing charges.

He fully recognizes his vulnerability to global insecurity, relinquishing the guise of certainty and admitting that there are "no clues to the future"; he inhabits a "horizon indistinct with possibilities" (McEwan 282, 286). As he goes to bed, Henry muses upon certain predictable inevitabilities: his mother's death, his children's growth, the passage of time. Amidst this list, he ponders, "a bomb in the cause of jihad will drive them out with all other faint-hearts into the suburbs" (McEwan 286). Amidst these inevitable vulnerabilities, Baxter, Henry, and the rest of humanity are divided in their inequalities, but united in the yearning Henry saw in Baxter—"how much he wanted to live" (McEwan 288). This "claim on life, on a mental existence, [...] because it won't last much longer" unites all humans, providing an impetus

toward nonviolence that secures humanity against vulnerability to one another (McEwan 289).

The July 2, 2005 London bombings, occurring only months after the publication of the novel, eerily validate *Saturday's* assertion of inevitable insecurity. However, Henry Perowne's eventual acceptance of vulnerability proffers a response to global terror. In a world risk society, security is unattainable and the price is human lives. Certain actors, both state and individual, surpass others in their capacity to mitigate this risk via retaliatory violence or material luxuries. However, as demonstrated by 9/11 and Baxter's home invasion, even the most privileged are subject to the vagaries of terror. Rather than leveraging material privilege in response to a display of vulnerability, Henry ultimately responds sentimentally: he finds comfort in the shared aspect of the climate of risk. His wife, children, and even Baxter are all parts of an unknowable environment of terror. A vulnerable human existence emerges as the shared condition that both halts violence and provides emotional security.

CHAPTER 3

"The city is bigger than its buildings": Memorializing Individual Suffering in McCann's *Let the Great World Spin*

Like *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* traverses the entirety of New York City. The Twin Towers figure prominently, but as artistic props rather than traumatic voids. The majority of McCann's novel takes place on a single day: August 7, 1974, the day that a Frenchman traversed a tightrope strung between the recently completed Twin Towers. Though the novel opens with the funambulist's spectacle, it quickly moves

to the street-level, gradually introducing the novel's eleven protagonists through interlinking vignettes. The tightrope walker backgrounds each story, creating a unity of place that links these disparate New Yorkers. However, the characters come to be more tightly linked by a much less fantastical event on the same day: the deaths of an unlikely pair—a Bronx prostitute and Irish monk—in a fluke car accident and its repercussions. McCann's emphasis on individual tragedy rather than collective spectacle manifests a diverse community of New Yorkers plagued by personal suffering, creating an image of a community of vulnerability similar to the one Oskar encounters on his quest. However, by intertwining these raw displays of human vulnerability to addiction, death, violence, and poverty, McCann manifests the power of human resilience, empathy, and creativity to overcome trauma and the power of human interconnectedness to ameliorate loss. Specifically, the early deaths of two of the novel's protagonists come to symbolize the destruction of the World Trade Centers. However, the empathetic and creative actions of other protagonists that occur simultaneously and in response to the deaths suggest unity as a countervailing force to trauma. In this way, McCann allegorizes suffering across time and space to contextualize 9/11 within a broader reality of human vulnerability, while also proposing tragedy and displays of vulnerability as an opportunity for creation.

Though set long before the security crisis of 9/11, McCann's great spinning world is just as tumultuous and threatening as the public settings of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *Saturday*. However, the first image of the city is not one of violence and suffering but rather the larger-than-life image of the funambulist's

spectacular walk between the World Trade Towers that forms the background of the novel. Because the majority of the novel takes place on the day of the walk, the characters are obliquely linked by this image of vulnerability that backgrounds the novel's action. The novel opens with a prologue that offers a bird's eye view of the scene—the only vignette recounted by a third person omniscient narrator. The act defies the normative bustle of the city: watchers of all trades—"Lawyers. Elevator operators. Doctors. Cleaners. Prep chefs. Diamond merchants" and more—pause in their commute, unifying in a hush that defies New York's "everyday noises" (McCann 3, 4). The act creates a sort of unity amongst the normally disparate inhabitants of New York City: the man above them made "the air [feel] suddenly shared" (McCann 7). This established unity emerges as a preliminary thread connecting every vignette, with each character becoming more deeply linked as the novel progresses.

This opening scene also immediately conjures memories of the 9/11 attacks. Though the novel is distinctly pre-9/11—all but the final vignette are set in 1974—the novel's repeated reference to the tightroper's walk between the Twin Towers consistently recalls the pain of their current absence. In fact, the novel's opening image—people standing on the street and pointing upward at a "dark toy against the cloudy sky"—could serve as an introduction to a novel about the September 11, 2001 attacks (McCann 1). Instead, however, the "dark toy" is a man with as-yet uncertain intentions—the watchers had not "yet made sense of the line strung at his feet from one tower to the other" (McCann 1). The man's presence also calls up the human craving for spectacle that Foster Wallace critiques in the wake of 9/11: watchers found themselves craving disaster, "torn between the promise of doom

and the disappointment of the ordinary” (McCann 1). In the same way that the media’s constant replay of events heightened the collective terror of 9/11, the gathering of people below the man grimly suggests that perhaps “they really wanted to witness a great fall [...] and give the Wednesday an electricity, a meaning.” There is even a sense that tragedy might solidify the fleeting unity of the moment—“that all they needed to become a family was one millisecond of slippage” (McCann 6). Instead “Out he went” onto the wire, manifesting a captivating performance rather than a tragic spectacle that still manages to unify all cross-sections of New Yorkers (McCann 7). By recalling the destruction of 9/11 in the context of what ends up being an artistic act of creation, McCann suggest the possibility that beauty may arise from human vulnerability. Marita Sturken’s essay “Memorializing Absence,” asserts that in the face of “absence so violently and tragically wrought at the cost of so many lives, people feel the need to create a presence of some kind” (Sturken 374). By calling up the historical tightrope walk after the event of 9/11, McCann creates hopeful, potential-filled image of the Twin Towers even against the backdrop of the contemporary absence of those towers. This renders the tightrope walk a sort of monumental memorial to 9/11.

However, after the prologue, the novel quickly moves to street level, individualizing timeless forms of suffering with segmented vignettes about the lives of disparate New Yorkers on and around August 7, 1974. Sturken’s essay also discusses the tension between two types of memory of 9/11: “the monumental and the individual, more intimate rituals of grief” (Sturken 375). By immediately shifting away from the prologue’s monument to 9/11, McCann makes the absence of

the towers a context for the novel but individual memory its focus. Instead of the tightrope walk, the first vignette provides the plot action that propels this web of suffering forward. Narrated by recent New York immigrant Ciaran, the first story describes his relocation to the Bronx to live with his brother Corrigan. Corrigan is an ex-Jesuit who abandons institutionalized religion and moves to New York to find a “fully believable God [...] in the grime of the everyday”—an end he fulfills by settling in the Bronx and letting the prostitutes who work his street use the bathroom in his home, giving them “a little spot they can call their own” (McCann 20, 26). At the conclusion of the vignette, Corrigan crashes into a guardrail on his way home from helping some of his prostitute friends evade jail after a police raid. Both Corrigan and Jazzlyn, a prostitute, die in the crash. These deaths unexpectedly alter the lives of every subsequent character, subtly shifting the narrative to revolve around these seemingly insignificant individual deaths. Thus, this individual trauma takes on momentous proportions in its ripple effect on other lives, while the spectacle of the tightrope walk fades into the background of the novel. The death of the two characters at the outset of the novel comes to serve as an allegory for the collapse of the Twin Towers on 9/11.

The stories of suffering populating the vignettes after Jazzlyn and Corrigan’s death codify an image of New Yorkers as immersed in environments of destruction. Though the characters allude to timely all-encompassing social issues like the Vietnam War, racial segregation, inequality, political corruption, and addiction, each vignette clarifies the impact of such abstract problems on the private lives of characters of different social classes, ethnicities, and genders. Each character’s story

expands the narrative of human suffering further in temporal and literal breadth. All characters inhabit a world of destruction with “bits of [fear] floating in the air,” (McCann 29). Corrigan analogizes this fear as a dust that covers the whole city: “It’s like dust. You walk about and don’t see it, don’t notice it, but it’s there and it’s all coming down, covering everything,” (McCann 29). This image of a city covered in its own ruins clearly calls up the material state of the city after 9/11.

The novel manifest a world in which no one is exempt from trauma, eliminating any notion of an innocent, utopian pre-9/11 New York. Some characters—Gloria, a black woman who is the granddaughter of a slave and mother to three sons killed in Vietnam, and Tillie and Jazzlyn, a mother-daughter prostitute duo from the Bronx—struggle to escape cycles of historical oppression. Tillie defines her history as part of “the house that horse built,” indicating the challenge of breaking out of the cycle of poverty and addiction (McCann 219). Similarly, Gloria must carry the burden of slavery with her as she navigates life in 1974 amidst lingering racism and slow desegregation, because “If you start forgetting you’re already lost” (McCann 299). On the other hand, even the most privileged characters find themselves caught in systems of pain and mourning that they cannot escape. Claire Soderberg, a wealthy wife on Park Avenue, laments the death of her son in Vietnam alongside Gloria and other New York women in a makeshift support group. In the wake of the deaths of their sons, these women interpret everything in light of their losses. For Marcia, whose son was a pilot, just the sight of a helicopter in the sky evokes “that dread” of grief (95). Once again, Marcia’s reading of danger into otherwise commonplace events resonates with the reader as part of life in a post-

9/11 world: today, an aircraft hovering inexplicably near a building looks undeniably predatory. In another part of the city, a rich artist couple, Lara and Blaine, compound their struggle with drug addiction with the guilt of causing the accident that kills Corrigan and Jazzlyn. Lara refers to the accident as a “moment of terror,” burned in her mind as “a perfect snapshot” in “an album to despair over” (McCann 116). This calcified moment of terror, too, resonates with those who lived through 9/11—the image is immutable. With each of these stories, McCann manifests a New York that was in despair long before 9/11. Through allusions to 9/11 that subtly call up the memory of the event, McCann acknowledges the trauma of 9/11 while also contextualizing it within a larger history of suffering.

As the vignettes progress, the prologue’s image of the tightrope walker emerges as the beginning of a pattern of stories of creation juxtaposed with suffering. Just as McCann juxtaposes the opening scene with the reader’s historical memory of 9/11, he continues to counter destruction with creation throughout the novel. Some of these juxtapositions occur immediately: characters recast acts of seeming ruin as forms of creativity. For instance, after leaving their paintings outside in a stupor of drugs and guilt over their hit and run, Lara and Blaine wake up to discover that rain has destroyed the paintings. While Lara sees this destruction as “months and months” of “wasted work,” Blaine suggests that the paintings may be merely “utterly changed,” simultaneously both “beautiful and ruined” (McCann 127, 132). In this way, Blaine rejects the mutual exclusivity of beauty and destruction, offering a redemptive future for the paintings with his suggestion to “do the formal paintings in the style of the past and have the present destroy them” (McCann 134).

Blaine acknowledges the uncontrollable nature of the present while also asserting the power of creativity to remake ruin in the future. Similarly, Claire's son Joshua's Death Hack juxtaposes the numerous deaths in Vietnam with the creative force of coding. By creating a program that could count war deaths, Joshua "creates a space for them so that they became sort of alive" (McCann 88). He expresses optimism that he could one day "write a program that could make sense of the dying"—a goal that resonates with 9/11 mourners like Foer's Oskar (McCann 88).

McCann also utilizes the formal structure of the novel to juxtapose trauma and creation, highlighting the intentional, creative potential of humans as a counter to the various sufferings of characters. The three vignettes that comprise Book One morbidly detail Corrigan and Jazzlyn's death, the support group for mothers with deceased sons, and Lara and Blaine's relapse and hit and run. By contrast, Book Two's first chapter "Tag" temporarily leaves this aboveground drama to recount a teenager's obsession with photographing subway graffiti. In the larger story of New York, the underground graffiti culture represents another example of crime run amuck—tags destroy the once "virgin territory" of every exposed surface (McCann 174). However, photographer Francisco sees it as a "new frontier" of art that should be exposed: he goes down into the subway with his camera to "photograph them, bring them out of the darkness, lift them up from the alleys" (McCann 171). Fernando's tag photography becomes the "thing that oils the hinges of his day," lending simple meaning to an otherwise glum existence (McCann 168). This dual act of creation—"the lines, the curves, the dots" of the tags and Fernando's reverence for them in his photography—juxtaposes the constant tragedy of Book One. By

highlighting an occult, unrealized art form, McCann's further emphasizes "ground level" lives rather than macro-level spectacles like the war or tightrope walk. This trend continues in the next chapter of Book Two, where a group of Californian hackers "blow off steam from the programming" by looping calls to random payphones (McCann 177). The programmers' normal work is very serious: they have been contracted by the Pentagon to develop a hack that can predict missile locations. However, on August 7 they are using the emergent ARPANET to call pay phones near the Twin Towers to get more information about "some guy walking the wires high above New York" (McCann 177). The vignette includes the novel's only description of the tightrope walker's actual walk, as relayed by a bystander to hacker Sam. However, it is the cross-country connection between the New York woman on a pay phone and the California hacker that holds primacy in the chapter; the walker's feat feels insignificant compared to the intimacy of the phone call, a feat of technology in 1974. When the walker finishes, Sam remains hesitant to hang up the phone, wishing he "was there, with her" and marveling at the way that code can yield "being connected, access, gateways" (McCann 195, 197). Thus, Book Two opens with two powerful stories of individuals facilitating and witnessing creation at multiple levels—creation of art, technology, and interpersonal bonds—occurring simultaneously to the pain and suffering of Book One. This transition from a book about ruin to one about creation sets the tone for more creative connections to emerge between characters as the novel progresses and characters become increasingly implicated in one another's lives.

The plot action that follows Corrigan and Jazzlyn's death similarly juxtaposes senseless destruction with creation. McCann narrates the car crash in gory detail: "Corrigan gripping the steering wheel, frightened, his eyes large and tender, while Jazzlyn beside him screamed, and her body tightened, her neck tensed." Jazzlyn's death is evocative: "head-first through the windshield, no safety belt, a body already on the way to heaven, [...] Jazzlyn's body, only barely dressed, made a flying arc through the air, [...] and she smashed in a crumpled heap by the guardrail, one foot bent in the air as if stepping upwards" (McCann 68). In light of the novel's 9/11 parallels, the imagery likely calls up the iconic images of 9/11 victims falling to their deaths—the ultimate image of destruction.

However, every subsequent action in the novel establishes an increasing connectivity between characters. At the conclusion of the support group meeting, Claire offers the optimistic solace that "We hurt, and we have one another for the healing," indicating the healing power of community in the face of trauma (McCann 114). The novel's action goes on to validate this claim and even offers it as a timeless reassurance amidst suffering of all types: no matter how disparate, we are all implicated in the lives of others. Solomon Soderberg, Claire's husband, hears the court cases of the tightrope walker and Tillie and Jazzlyn. Claire establishes a genuine friendship with Gloria that transcends racial boundaries, manifesting an empathy that was absent in her individualized mourning of her son. Gloria, who lives in the same Bronx neighborhood as Corrigan unbeknownst to the reader, adopts Jazzlyn's twin children, Jaslyn and Janice, when she sees the social workers taking them. Gloria takes the babies to visit their grandmother Tillie in jail, who is

guilt-ridden over “the bad I slung [Jazzlyn’s] way.” Gloria helps her fulfill the vow that “I ain’t gonna sling it the way of the babies, not me” by taking them in and providing them a secure childhood (McCann 236). Though characters remain unable to totally break out of the oppression of ubiquitous loss, racism, and poverty, they are able to heal one another’s needs through the creation of unexpected connections.

If McCann’s prologue is a memorial for the Twin Towers, the epilogue mourns the individual lives lost in 9/11 and beyond. By its conclusion, the novel has shifted entirely away from its opening scene, and Jazzlyn and Corrigan have emerged as the story’s allegorical fallen towers. The epilogue moves ahead to October 2006, narrating now-adult Jaslyn’s trip to New York to visit a dying Claire Soderberg (a close friend of her adoptive mother). The epilogue’s opening sentence revive the prologue’s monumental tightrope walk: Jaslyn always travels with a picture she found at a garage sale of a man “high in the air while a plane disappears, it seems, into the edge of the building” (McCann 325). The image brings to conclusion the eerie connection that readers have felt between the tightrope walk and 9/11: Jaslyn agrees that the picture of the plane behind the tightrope walker “somehow anticipates what would come later” (McCann 325). However, its true value is in its personal significance: it was taken the day her mother died. The spectacle of 9/11 and the tightrope walk fall away as Jaslyn’s story develops, peppered with subtle allusions to other, more contemporary traumas—Katrina, the War in Afghanistan, continuing racism, global warming. Jaslyn continues to suffer from some of the system oppression as her predecessors: when she checks into a

ritzy hotel, the desk attendant asks for her ID, and Jaslyn notes that she did not ask the white couple in front of her for theirs. However, the reader discovers that both Jaslyn and her twin sister Janice have largely broken out of the “house that horse built”: Jaslyn works for as an accountant for a low-income tax preparation company and Janice is serving overseas in the military. Thus, the individual lives of Corrigan and Jazzlyn are symbolically recuperated in the lives of Jaslyn and Janice, even as the systemic traumas that plagued 1974 New York pop up in 2006.

This resolution does not undo the trauma of the death of Jazzlyn and Corrigan or 9/11 allegorically, but rather demands the hopeful possibility of creation in the wake of destruction and the process of mourning. Claire’s discomfort with the tightroper’s walk embodies this seeming contradiction: the walk represented “an attempt at beauty” but “something else in it still rankles” (McCann 103). Namely, she is disturbed by the seeming thoughtless risk of the action: “Death by performance? [...] So flagrant with his body” (McCann 113). The tightrope walker’s chosen vulnerability makes “her son’s [life] cheap”; for the same reason, it discomfits contemporary readers in its recollection of 9/11. However, the connection between Claire’s son’s meaningless death and the tightroper’s flirtation with it manifests the unavoidable nature of vulnerability: we are all at risk of unexpected, senseless trauma even at street level. By making the central image of the novel the street-level deaths of Jazzlyn and Corrigan, McCann de-monumentalizes the terror of 9/11 while also paying it homage. He acknowledges both the towers’ disastrous absence and the falling bodies that were lost in the tragedy, thus avoiding the “transformation of individual identity of the victims into a

collective subjectivity, and thus resist the mass subjectivity of disaster in general” (Sturken 380). McCann’s novel, in eschewing representation of September 11, provides an image of a resilient New York that both recalls and transcends the trauma of 9.11. Though spectacles like the tightrope walk or 9/11 may unify us temporarily, humans are most significantly implicated in the lives of one another in their ordinary, daily vulnerability. Our ability to creatively and empathetically find hope amidst ruin informs our ability to move past trauma.

CONCLUSION

Each of these novels attempts to reclaim the memory of 9/11 from the generalized terror that the attack produced—the effective goal of terrorism. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *Saturday* manifest the internal divisions that 9/11 produced amongst a grieving world: debates of security, militarization, paranoia, and xenophobia propagated, alienating communities as they attempted to restore their attacked complacency. Amidst this reaction, the “individual identity of the victims” becomes part of a “larger image of collective dead,” transforming personal loss into an image of abstract disaster (Sturken 380). It was this abstraction of insecurity and terror amidst loss of life that discomfited Foster Wallace in his essay “The View From Mrs. Thompson’s,” alienated Oskar from his mother in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and distanced Henry from the inequality of London in *Saturday*.

However, each of these works counters the atmosphere of terror by presenting concluding images of resilient, unified families and communities that relinquish terror and accept the condition vulnerability. By placing the trauma of

9/11 in conversation with other historical, global, and local tragedies, each author calls attention to individual suffering across time and space. All three novels manifest a world in which both suffering and hope exist outside of the context of 9/11, a truth most clearly manifested by *Let the Great World Spin*. In light of this revelation, characters can mourn and accept vulnerability as innate to the human condition, rather than viewing displays of vulnerability as spectacles to be combatted. In establishing this thinking in their characters, these authors emphasize shared, emphatic emotions in response to tragedy: a nine-year-old's hyperbolic view of a world in which his surroundings feel is "incredibly close" or "extremely loud" (Foer 250); a London neurosurgeon's doleful visit to see his Alzheimer's-ridden mother, where "the tragedy of her situation will be obscured by the banality of detail" (McEwan 155); a Bronx prostitute's justification of her return to the stroll because her daughter needed schoolbooks (McCann 217). In another literary age, such displays of heartfelt insecurity might have been dismissed as prosaic or overly sentimental. However, in these novels, sincerity serves as a monument to vulnerable human existence—to life as precarious but worthy of contemplation and grief.

Thus, each novel emerges as a memorial that both honors lives lost in 9/11, as well as lives lost to other tragedies before and after. McCann's Jaslyn summarizes this with her assertion that "pain is a requirement, not a curse," admiring those people who resiliently overcome the inevitability of trauma (McCann 337). These three novels endorse this outlook, providing a hopeful image of a world that accepts the painful vulnerability of 9/11 and all the painful vulnerabilities are yet to come in our insecure world.

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