

# Jennifer New

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## **Fire Birds**

On the weekend following September 11, I went to the swimming pool. Afterward, I talked with an older woman who I know only through our brief conversations in the locker room. "How are you?" she asked, "beside from that." I knew what she meant and immediately steered the conversation to gardening and news of my baby daughter. Another woman seemed not to be listening. After putting on her shoes, she sat immobile and spoke at the row of lockers in front of her, though the words were certainly meant for us: "I don't want to go back out there. I'm afraid it will still be there."

I understood exactly what she was saying. I had awoken every morning, hopeful that the terrible events had been a dream. This must be what it feels like, I kept thinking, after an enormous earthquake or flood erases countless lives. And yet the oddly contemporary and technological aspect of this loss—the image of the jet plane, toy like, plowing headfirst into the colossal towers—made it a new experience. That and, of course, the fact that this happened in our country, to friends of friends, to people working for company's with familiar names, to police and firefighters who wore the uniforms we teach our children to trust.

Although the woman in the locker room didn't want to go out "there," back to the reality of tragedy, what was actually outside the pool's doors was disarmingly normal. There was no hazy, smoke-filled air, or walls of makeshift posters with the images of missing brothers, aunts, and friends. Rather, outside was the tail end of summer in Iowa. Rows of thick green corn stalks blanketed the countryside, waiting to be harvested. Students, still wearing shorts and sandals, were back in class at the university.

For many Americans, Iowa is just somewhere in the middle of the country, a place you fly over or drive through. Having never seen its fecundity in summer, a painter's palette of greens, or its erotically rolling hills, they believe it to be plain and flat. It's hard not to develop an inferiority complex about living here. It's true, there aren't any spectacular restaurants or important museums, and the weather can be hard; but the pace is easy and people are kind, unsullied by urbane attitudes. People who, like me, were born and bred here or who came for school or work, often stay because it is safe. This factor is more keenly appealing than ever: the safety of being far from skyscrapers, federal landmarks, and places where thousands of people congregate on a daily basis.

I know I shouldn't assume that I'm immune from harm just because I live in this quiet, often overlooked place. In the beginning of the so-called "New War," I felt jittery enough to consider stocking up on bottled water and a first aid kit, but I've yet to get around to it. No one I know has bought a gas mask or Cipro, and a local outbreak of whooping cough is causing more concrete concern than anthrax.

People on the coasts are having a different experience of life post-September 11. A friend in New York who watched the towers go from flames to rubble, feels edgy and scared but is also newly committed to staying in the city where she grew up. And a west coast friend recently went to the post office only to find the workers in masks and latex gloves, looking like they were preparing for surgery.

If, like a time traveler, I landed in my town today without any knowledge of recent events, would it look different? There is no major airport with long, twisty lines around increased security points, and the postal workers, just as they always have, don navy cardigans and polite words, not gloves.

But there are the flags. Everywhere, flags. Cloth ones stand at attention outside houses, while a small paper version, an insert from the local newspaper, is taped

to the windows of businesses and homes, as well as to cars, bicycles, and knapsacks. After nearly two months, these thin reproductions are fading, looking more and more like Christmas decorations that someone forgot to take down. The stars and stripes appear in more incongruous places too: on Kleenex dispensers, children's clothing, air fresheners, and bakery cakes.

There's an uneasiness among many people I know about this perpetual display of colors. Unity is appealing, but it also has a militaristic undercurrent, a wartime excuse to erode rights. The other day, my husband drove behind a public school bus emblazoned with a sign: "God Bless America." Where is the separation of church and state in that? And when a friend was bombarded with angry emails and threatening phone calls after having dared to question the inferred support of the war against Afghanistan by the image of the American flag next to the school's logo on T-shirts made by a student group, I furiously wondered what had happened to freedom of expression.

Aware of the ill effects of creeping nationalism, others are trying harder than ever to be open minded and patient. Drivers don't lay on their horns as quickly when someone cuts in front of them; people in lines are more apt to meet each other's gaze and offer a friendly word. Several weeks ago, while walking with my daughter and husband, I saw a man out raking leaves in his yard to whom I'd briefly been introduced. Seyit is from Turkey. He is here with his three boys and his wife who, in her flowing gowns and headdress, is getting her doctorate in engineering. Prior to September 11, we had waved and smiled at each other, but now we were eager to make a connection. After saying everything we could think of about babies and leaves, we stood together a long while, smiling in some form of reassurance to the other.

Connecting with others, being kind—this is all most of us can do to feel we are helping the situation or providing a sense of healing. I have sent my check to the Red Cross and each Sunday I diligently read the rows and rows of obituaries in the *New York Times*, wondering how many weeks they'll appear. Our

leaders—Bush, Ashcroft, Rumsfeld—tell us to stay on “high alert” and to shop, as though that will show faith in the American economy. But I have no money to spend, nor any desire for new things as I listen to stories about children in Kabul collecting bomb fragments, some of the most valuable material objects they've seen.

The movement to connect and renew relationships began for me on the weekend after September 11, when a group of friends gathered for an impromptu meal at one of our homes. Plans to attend a play and celebrate one woman's birthday were scrapped. Instead, we hunkered down together, balancing steaming bowls of pasta on our laps and passing bottles of wine. My baby and another little girl were more popular than ever as people without children seemed hungry to hold them, to be close to their innocence and unwritten futures. After having spent most of the week in isolation, with only Peter Jennings, my small family, it felt good to be in this larger circle. We shared the details of our experiences, eager to feel less alone in our grief and dismay, to be with real people rather than televised images.

Questions went around the room: *Did you know anyone?* The closest our group came was the brother of a brother-in-law, a man met fleetingly at a wedding years ago, who worked on the 96<sup>th</sup> floor of the Trade Center. *When did you first really cry?* I'd broken down in my car on September 12, another cloudless, beautiful day, while hearing the first estimates of the missing. I'd naively hoped it might be hundreds, so when I heard thousands, I wailed. I would cry many times again, such as when a friend who is a teacher emailed about a child in a school near the World Trade Center who had looked out the window and noticed that “the birds are on fire,” mistaking airborne, helpless people for winged creatures. *What if we went to war?* Most of us cringed at the thought. One person, who travels abroad often, pondered leaving this country for good. Another offered up her family's remote farm as a place where we all could live. *What does it mean to be American?* This wasn't asked explicitly, but it hovered in the subtext, and there were no good answers.

As it grew late, I brought out the birthday cake I'd made. The candles that burned on top were not the flames of a vigil, but as they lit the faces in the room they seemed both to honor those who were lost and to cast light and hope for another year of life. The cake was dense and layered, more complicated than the one I often make. Baking had been meditative; following the directions, measuring, and sifting had quieted my mind. As my friends ate, they looked pleasantly dazed from the rich chocolate, butter, and cream—a deeply familiar taste and a comforting antidote to grief. I was pleased to be able to nourish them, to do something small but good for a roomful of people who I suddenly loved more fiercely than ever.

When I later went into the kitchen, I noticed that a piece of the cake had been neatly scraped into the garbage, resting on the remains of the salad. A woman who was the most visibly jarred among us had left early. Clearly, she'd been too upset to eat, something I understood. Seeing the chocolate slice there, though, crumpled and untouched, I was struck by the waste. It was such a small thing in comparison, but I couldn't stand any more waste, there had been so much already. Feeling foolish, I stood in the dimly lit room, a pile of dirty dishes filling the sink, and cried. It was easier to cry for the cake than for the birds who were on fire. I would cry for them for years.