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Christopher Merrill *University of Iowa*

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Rhetorical Invention

The Sound of Falling

Christopher Merrill

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1 The oleander was blossoming in the courtyard of the *tekija*, a dervish lodge set in a cliff; and in the last light of a September afternoon, the white blossoms shone against the red rock. More than forty species of birds nest in the cliff, which also houses the source of the Buna River, an emerald tributary of the Nerevta flowing through Mostar, in eastern Bosnia, where Sufi dervishes arrived in the fifteenth century. They flourished here until the Communist takeover of Yugoslavia in 1945, when they went underground; they resurfaced in 1991, when Yugoslavia began to break apart, and now there were seminarians talking in low tones at a table outside the kitchen – near a display of prayer ropes, shawls, *kilims*, and devotional books for sale. A waiter brought Turkish coffee to our literary delegation. In the gloaming, we watched the swallows sweep along the cliff.

2 I thought of Rumi, the thirteenth-century Sufi teacher regarded as the greatest mystical poet of Islam. Born in Afghanistan, as a young man he fled with his family to Turkey, and there he met a wandering dervish who inspired his vocation. Rumi preached and wrote thousands of poems, often in a trance. His work is indeed ecstatic: in every encounter, he sought divinity – for him friendship was spelled with a capital F – and his revelations about the nature of existence are as pointed as they are timeless, as this short poem suggests:

> Inside the Great Mystery that is,
> we don't really own anything.
> What is this competition we feel then,
> before we go, one at a time, through the same gate?

3 This was what I felt at our next destination: the ruins of East Mostar, the mainly Muslim side of the city which had borne the brunt of destruction in the war of shifting loyalties dividing the Bosnian Muslim, Croatian Catholic, and Serbian Orthodox communities. The audience for our reading was small; and at the dinner afterward, our host, a local Muslim journalist, apologized for failing to send out invitations. From the veranda of a

restaurant overlooking the river, we had a view of the wooden bridge erected to replace the famous Old Bridge, a sixteenth-century thing of wonder that once linked the two sides of the city: a symbol of tolerance destroyed in the war. But the stones had been raised from the water. The bridge would be rebuilt.

4 Links between local Christians and Muslims would be harder to restore. The journalist, for example, blamed the West for the immorality sweeping the globe; homosexuality was his emblem of evil, and he wanted us to explain why the Pope had sanctioned same-sex marriages. Nor could we disabuse him of his theological errors – to say nothing of his intolerance.

5 "Too much tolerance leads to chaos," he said venomously.

6 His bitter words came back to me in the wake of the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, when the father of one of the purported hijackers, insisting his son had nothing to do with the crime, used precisely the same language in an interview to castigate the West. It is indeed the language of fundamentalists everywhere, of those who are uneasy with modernity, with what Henry Adams identified a century ago as the chief characteristic of the age – acceleration. But the dislocation common to many members of the Islamic terrorist cells we have gone to war against is little different from the shock we felt as a nation on September 11th.

7 It is no secret that pain can lock up our emotions. This is the subject of Emily Dickinson's meditation on loss, composed in 1862, the year of greatest carnage in our Civil War:

> After great pain, a formal feeling comes – The Nerves
> sit ceremonious, like Tombs – The stiff Heart
> questions was it He, that bore,
> And Yesterday, or Centuries before?
>
> The Feet, mechanical, go round – Of Ground, or Air,
> or Ought – A Wooden way
> Regardless grown,
> A Quartz contentment, like a stone --
>
> This is the Hour of Lead – Remembered, if outlived,
> As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow – First – Chill
> – then Stupor – then the letting go --

8 Dickinson's poems, almost half of which date from the Civil War, provide a map to the broken heart of a solitary woman – and of a nation. All was torn asunder by the Confederate secession, a public betrayal that perhaps echoed events in Dickinson's affective life. Yet she found "a formal feeling" for her grief, which transcends its private origin. Indeed it was in 1862, the pivotal year of the war, that she most vividly described the pain we now feel. That September, at the battle of Antietam, more Americans were killed on our soil than at any time in our history until September 11, 2001. While neither side could claim victory, Confederate General Robert E. Lee was forced to abandon his Maryland campaign; his retreat prompted Abraham Lincoln to issue his Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the slaves.

9 1862 marked another emancipation: Dickinson completed, on average, a poem a day – hers was a "Soul *at the White Heat*," as she wrote, which traced, among other things, the hour of lead that has fallen again over this land. Our hearts have been stiffened by the terrorist attack on New York and Washington, and we must hope our writers will discover ways to transfigure this grief. Otherwise we may end up as embittered as the journalist in Mostar. Nor it there any way of gauging how we will respond to such a wound. Indeed Dickinson understood that trauma will cause many people freeze to death, literally or figuratively. What is certain is that in the years to come we will recollect the ash that fell like snow one beautiful September morning in New York. Who can say how or why some of us will waken from this cold?

10 In fact, the ashfall had not stopped when I visited Ground Zero in November. The wooden walkway some climbed to peer into the wreckage was slippery with soot; the stench of death hung in the cold air. Men and women wept. Sidewalk vendors hawked American flags, T-shirts, and hats emblazoned with nyfd and nypd insignia. A young woman embraced a policeman. I circled the site, conscious of what was missing – and of how absence may best be described through what is there: the skeletal remains of a building, a makeshift shrine of plastic flowers and teddy bears, a chamber orchestra rehearsing in a church in which the pews are covered with plastic sheets. Yet the mind reels in the face of such destruction – one reason why so many people turned to poetry in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy. For poetry, as Robert Frost noted, offers a temporary stay against confusion. One such stay is Donald Justice's poem titled "Absences":

It's snowing this afternoon and there are no flowers.
There is only this sound of falling, quiet and remote,
Like the memory of scales descending the white keys
Of a childhood piano – outside the window, palms!
And the heavy head of the cereus, inclining,
Soon to let down its white or yellow-white.

Now, only these poor snow-flowers in a heap,
Like the memory of a white dress cast down . . .
So much has fallen.
And I, who have listened for a step
All afternoon, hear it now, but already falling away,
Already in memory. And the terrible scales descending
On the silent piano; the snow; and the absent flowers abounding.

11 Juxtaposing an Iowa snowstorm with a memory of his childhood in Florida, the poet captures the interplay between presence and absence, longing and loss. Justice connects disparate realms of experience by visual means – the color white, gestures of falling – and through music, heard and unheard – the C major and A minor scales, the silent piano. The mysterious link between snow and a night-blooming cactus sharpens the image of the bridal gown, for this is a poem composed in the key of a dying footfall, resolved in the alliteration of "absent" and "abounding." Isn't that how memory works? The more you lose, the more you remember.

12 Nor can we ever really tally the losses – physical, emotional, cultural, and political – of September 11th. What is clear, though, is that we live in a new dispensation, in which for some it was only a matter of chance that they were not on board one of the doomed airliners or in the World Trade Center or the Pentagon at the time of the attacks. For the rest of us, there was "this sound of falling," in Justice's memorable phrase, which in televised footage was indeed "quiet and remote." It seems to me the sound of falling – of buildings, of men and women, of political orders – is what writers must now catch in their work.

13 What I am attempting to describe is a way of addressing the changes occasioned by the events of September 11th, for it is up to the writer to discover new lenses through which to view our circumstances – views to counter the poverty of insight offered by our commentators, on the left and right. It is all too easy to look at

the world through familiar prisms – the exigencies of the media depend upon such certainties – but in the midst of uncertainty, which we now recognize as our permanent condition, we must demand of ourselves nothing less than what William Blake insisted upon: that we cleanse the gates of perception.

14 This was a quality I prized in my friend, Agha Shahid Ali. From Ground Zero, I traveled to Amherst, Massachusetts, where he was dying. It was an irony that a poet whose clarity of vision, personal and poetic, had won him friends all over America was unaware of the turmoil into which his adopted country had been plunged, brain cancer having destroyed his memory. He sat by the window in the late afternoon, in the fading light, listening to his favorite music: The Band's cover version of Bob Dylan's "I Shall Be Released" and Albinoni's *Adagio*. Somehow he knew he was dying, even if he refused to admit it to his friends and family. But he retained no memory of what had become of New York, his favorite American city, or of the renewed violence in his homeland of Kashmir, the subject of so much of his poetry, notably in *The Country Without a Post Office*. Nevertheless he recited his poems until his final days. Shahid died on 8 December.

15 The Massachusetts blue law prevented his family from following the Muslim custom of burying him within twenty-four hours of his death, on a Sunday; his graveside memorial the next day thus fell on Emily Dickinson's birthday – a conjunction Shahid would have loved. For it was the anchorite of Amherst who provided him with the crucial line – "a Route of Evanescence" – for the title poem of *A Nostalgist's Map of America*. "I want to eat Evanescence slowly," she wrote: Shahid's motto. That night, after breaking the fast of Ramadan with his family, I went with friends to Dickinson's grave, where we found on her stone a sprig of holly and several pennies – an image I carried with me the next day on a flight to Central Europe, where meetings kept me occupied until the weekend, when at last I had a chance to reflect on the losses of the autumn.

16 I was staying in a castle, in a wine region near Brataslava, in Slovakia, where a conference titled *Back in Europe* was concluding. Writers from Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, and Yugoslavia had gathered to discuss their declining spiritual and material conditions; the spread of American culture was roundly condemned; the writings of Danielle Steele came in for particular scorn. The conference, convened by the Austrian Embassy, hearkened back to the Habsburg era, and it set me to

wondering about the passing of old orders: the Dual Monarchy, National Socialism, Communism, perhaps even the American order. For this was a decisive moment in history: never had a country amassed so much power and wealth; and never had it seemed so easy to topple the edifice, as in the first days and weeks after September 11th.

17 The feeling here, too, was of loss. No one could tell me the fate of the castle's Hungarian owners, who had collaborated with the Nazis; the castle belonged to the Slovak Literary Fund, explained a poet who had lost most of his family at Auschwitz; his latest book included a sequence about an angel with feathers blackened by the soot of the crematoria. And my host, whose father had just died, kept bursting into tears. We had met in Prague, where he had given a reading, which drew from his Czech audience questions tinged with nostalgia: isn't it a pity that Czechs and Slovaks are so distant now? There was even talk of requiring visas to travel between the two countries, which for much of the last century had been united. But now the Czech Republic was ensconced in the West. Slovakia was caught in a geopolitical netherworld.

18 My first night, I slept in the Black Room, in which Nikita Krushchev, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Vaclav Havel had also stayed. In the morning, when the writers departed, my host led me to a smaller room near the balcony from which someone had leapt to his death. Then the host took his leave. It sounds romantic – a weekend alone in an empty castle – but soon I fell into despair. The walls of the salon were lined with paintings of dead Slovak writers; the glass bookcases containing their works were locked. A wedding party arrived – the bride and groom, a photographer, and the driver of a black Mercedes with a doll in a white dress propped on the hood. The photographer took the couple's picture on the front steps. When they tried to drive off, the car stalled.

19 It was the coldest winter in a century; a foot of snow lay on the ground; the poplar-lined driveway to the castle had not been cleared. The restaurant in the neighboring village was closed. Likewise the café. A pair of death notices was taped to the wall of the municipal building, which doubled as the bus station; at the top of a hill, a cross-country skier was breaking a trail in a field, a lone figure set against the overcast sky. Villagers roamed in the park surrounding the castle, picked pine boughs, pulled children on sleds. I walked through woods thick with mistletoe to a shrine to the Virgin Mary, where She is said to have appeared. Snow crunched underfoot; a jay squawked in a pine tree. I have never

felt such desolation.

20 Back in the castle, I took tea in an alcove above the reception area, between a statue of the Madonna and Child and a large white oven decorated with pink flowers. The light was fading in the trees. Two older women, the weekend manager and the cook, were talking by the front door; smoke from their cigarettes wafted up the circular staircase. My thoughts turned to the recent discovery of a novel by the Hungarian writer Sándor Márai, *Embers*, published in 1942. But the Communist authorities burned the remaining copies when Márai fled to the West in 1948; and when he committed suicide in San Diego in 1989, just months before the Berlin Wall came down, he was all but unknown. Yet new translations of his books, in more than twenty languages, are earning him a place in world literature. Knopf plans to publish his entire body of work.

21 *Embers* is set in a manor house in 1941, at the base of the Carpathian Mountains. The war is a distant presence for an aging General who over the course of a single night will tell the story of the day his world collapsed, at the turn of the century. He and his best friend, faithful members of the Emperor's army, had gone hunting early that morning; when a deer emerged in a clearing ahead of them, the General made a terrible discovery. Let me quote Márai at some length here to give you a sense of his writing and his keen understanding of the human condition. "And then something happened that I could never prove in a court of law," the General explains to his friend who after forty-one years has crossed mine-laden seas to visit him,

> but that I can tell you because you know it already – it was a little thing, I felt you move, more clearly than if I'd been watching you. You were close behind me, and a fraction to the side. I felt you raise your gun, set it on your shoulder, take aim, and close one eye. I felt the gun slowly swivel. My head and the deer's head were in the exact same line of fire, and at the exact same height; at most there may have been four inches between the two targets. I felt your hand tremble, and I knew as surely as only the hunter can assess a particular situation in the woods, that from where you were standing you could not be taking aim at the deer. Please understand me: it was the hunting aspect, not the human, that held my attention right

> then. I was, after all, a devotee of hunting, with some expertise in its technical problems, such as the angle at which one must position oneself in relation to a deer standing unsuspecting at a distance of three hundred paces. Given the geometrical arrangement of the marksman and the two targets, the whole thing was quite clear, and I could calculate what was going on in the mind of the person behind my back. You took aim for half a minute, and I knew that down to the second, without a watch. I knew you were not a fine shot and that all I had to do was move my head a fraction and the bullet would whistle past my ear and maybe hit the deer. I knew that one movement would suffice and the bullet would remain in the barrel of your gun. But I also knew I couldn't move because my fate was no longer mine to control: some moment had come, something was going to happen of its own volition. And I stood there, waiting for the shot, waiting for you to pull the trigger and put a bullet through the head of your friend. It was a perfect situation: no witnesses, the gamekeeper and the dogs were a long way back, it was one of those well-known 'tragic accidents' that are detailed every year in the newspapers. The half minute passed and still there was no shot. Suddenly the deer smelled danger and exploded into motion with a single bound that took him out of our sight to safety in the undergrowth. We still didn't move. And then, very slowly, you let the gun sink.

22 This is only the first blow the General suffers. His wife and best friend have conspired against him, a betrayal played out in silence. His friend leaves for the tropics; and he moves into the hunting lodge, refusing to speak to his wife again, even when she falls sick and dies. The rest of his days he devotes to rehearsing the story he will tell his friend, if he ever gets the chance. Indeed his life depends upon him telling this story well, in order to elicit from his listener answers to the questions he has carried with him ever since the day his life fell apart.

23 *Embers* may be read as an allegory about the demise of various orders – a family, a friendship, the aristocracy, the Concert of Europe, the Dual Monarchy. Nor is it an accident that it is set in the midst of world war, when another order was taking shape – an order that disappeared within months of Márai's death. Now the

book is finding an audience even as another order is created. I do not wish to belabor an obvious political point by reminding you that large numbers of people around the world feel betrayed by certain foreign policies of our government, to say nothing of the fiscal strictures imposed by the international lending institutions associated with our Treasury Department. The General takes his revenge by recounting his betrayal, spinning a tale at once haunting and true. But others will seek revenge of a different order. The sound of falling may be quiet and remote: a shot not fired in the woods, the silent unraveling of a marriage, a friendship abandoned without explanation. Or it may be as thunderous as a plane slicing into a building, a bomb exploding in a cave. In any event, it is up to writer to record that sound, which has its own music. And there is consolation in getting it right, as the General learns at daybreak when his guest departs. His old nurse asks if he is feeling calmer now. Yes, he replies. And as they walk through the portrait gallery, he instructs her to restore his wife's picture to its place on the wall, for she can no longer hurt him. The nurse makes the sign of the cross on his forehead, then they kiss. "But like every kiss," Márai confides, "this one is an answer, a clumsy but tender answer to a question that eludes the power of language." A kind of absolution is thus conferred upon the teller of this tale – and upon the reader, too. Isn't that a kiss we desire?

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