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Wall Street poet takes stock of life

■ **Sonnets:** A corporate lawyer helps colleagues make sense of Sept. 11.

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SUN NATIONAL STAFF

NEW YORK — When terrorist attacks damaged his downtown Manhattan office on Sept. 11, Eugene Schlanger responded like the rest of Wall Street: He went home, spent a few days with his family, then tried his best to get back to work at temporary quarters in Midtown.

And somewhere along the way, he started a sonnet cycle.

Schlanger is a deputy general counsel at Nomura Securities, one of the world's largest trading houses, and the chairman of the National Association of Securities Dealers Committee of Greater



ALEC MACGILLIS: SUN STAFF
Moved: With his office damaged, Eugene Schlanger works at Rockefeller Center.

New York.

But to his friends and co-workers, he is also the "Poet of Wall Street," a writer whose poems, many of them with Wall Street themes, have long circulated in the upper echelons of the financial world and appeared in several top [See Poet, 10A]

Wall Street lawyer is poet

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literary journals.

As Schlanger's experience since Sept. 11 has shown, the attacks have revealed more than the life stories of the thousands who died. They also have altered and broadened people's views of those who lived, encouraging colleagues to take closer looks at those in the next carrel or office.

Before Sept. 11, Schlanger was a Wall Street oddity, a corporate lawyer who was as comfortable quoting the *Odyssey* as the prices on the New York Stock Exchange. Colleagues appreciated his poems as clever distractions, small windows into the quirks of their seemingly unpoetic jobs.

That changed with the attacks. Like an army chaplain after a bloody battle, Schlanger the poet has moved front and center, called on by his compatriots to make sense of the losses.

■ **Just his niche**

"When it happened, I thought of Gene, because people are looking for a cathartic experience, looking for a way to cleanse themselves, to relieve themselves of the emotional toll," said Harold Gordon, a lawyer with Jones Day Reavis & Pogue who met Schlanger in the 1980s when they were working at the Securities and Exchange Commission. "And that just seems his niche. His poetry would be perfect for that."

Schlanger, 45, is doing his best to meet the challenge. He is nearing completion of a cycle of two dozen sonnets about the attacks, which he hopes to rush into publication in time to be sold, for charity, as a holiday gift. He is giving readings at memorial services and downtown cafes, where his poems about Wall Street, even those penned before Sept. 11, are greeted, he says, with "quietude and respect."

■ **View from the inside**

Schlanger knows there will be plenty of poems written about Sept. 11 by writers far better known than he.

But he also believes he has an edge in writing about the destruction of lower Manhattan, and an obligation to exercise that edge: Unlike other poets, he is writing from the inside.

He knows what the offices that folded into dust looked like, what the people who fell with them would have been doing before the planes struck, what they would have said to each other when the buildings shook.

"It's like the World War I poets," said Schlanger, in an interview near Nomura's temporary of-

fice at Rockefeller Center. "You read poems from the poets in the trenches ... and you get a different feel of what it was like than if it was written by someone from afar."

The insider perspective gives readers the view of a Midtown bar full of Wall Street refugees, one week after the attacks:

*We went to a new saloon and drank
Heavily, without pity, mocking
friends
And counter-parties, as in the old
days
Before terrorists ruined some
buildings
South of Vesey ... Returning from
the lavatory the agency
Trader warned us, loudly, he had
walked pretty
Far south last night and the sky
was bright
with death and excavation in the
distance.*

The insider perspective also offers a glimpse of the economic fallout of the attacks:

*In the scramble after the disaster
one
Sees benevolence and greed. Daily,
The managers, promoting their
own well-being,
Make announcements: emergency
measures;
Restructured committees; a hiatus
of terminations, in an industry
that
Measures profit and loss hourly ...
No matter what relief comes
from
Washington, Wall Street still de-
vours its young.*

Separate as they might seem, poetry and Wall Street have vied for Schlanger's affection since he was a teen-ager growing up in New York. As a student at Stuyvesant High School, the elite public school just blocks from the World Trade Center, he wrote his first poem at the same time as he was investing his bar mitzvah money in the stock market and subscribing to *The Wall Street Journal*.

He opted for a career as a corporate lawyer rather than as a professional poet or English professor because he believes writers benefit from real world exposure — something that much contemporary poetry lacks, he says.

"It doesn't click. Poets today tend to write to audiences of other poets," he says. "It's unfortunate. You have poets celebrating pure emotion, but it's not grounded in anything."

Schlanger lives with his wife and two children in Suffern, N.Y., and writes whenever he has the chance: at his son's hockey practices, on the train ride to and from work, which has grown much longer since the attacks. His po-

etry has appeared in *American Scholar*, *Western Humanities Review*, *American Arts Quarterly* and *Sewanee Review*, among other journals.

Not all of his poetry, pre-Sept. 11, had a Wall Street theme. But again and again, the financial world proved surprisingly fertile ground: there was a poem about the Lehman merger, a poem about continuing education conferences, even one about the mid-1990s financial scandals in Orange County, N.Y. (which Schlanger was forbidden from reading at a bond conference because his firm was in litigation with the county at the time.)

Along the way, Schlanger collected fans who admit they were not exactly poetry lovers before Schlanger started mailing and e-mailing them his work and inviting them to his readings.

"One day on our commute, I asked him what he was doing, and he said he just finished a poem, and I said I'd love to see it, so he sent it to me," said Carmen Lawrence, who ran the SEC's New York and Northeast regional offices and now heads the New York securities group at Fried Frank Harris Shriver & Jacobson. "Until then, for me, poetry was just required reading at schools."

■ **Unlikely readers**

Schlanger's poetry has won unlikely readers on Wall Street because it offers them a new but faithful view of their own world, said Gordon.

"To hear your everyday life, which you typically think is mundane and not fodder for literature, portrayed in poetry is intriguing," he said. "His poetry captures both that there is beauty in the everyday we take for granted, but also how ridiculous and absurd some of the routines we confront in our professions are."

Now, Schlanger is faced with rendering more than just workplace routines, which hasn't been easy, he says. With so much written coverage of the attacks, he's still trying to figure out where his poems fit in.

Some of his colleagues continue to urge Schlanger to quit his job and devote himself to writing. In addition to the sonnet cycle, there is a novel about the bond crises of 1998 to finish editing.

But Schlanger resists, saying he remains as committed to his job as to his writing, and each couldn't succeed without the other.

"Ideally, a third of what I write is good," he says. "A third of it will get out and someone will say, 'This is pretty accurate, he did a good job of reporting our time in the world.'"