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A Wall Street Lawyer-Poet Unmoved by 9/11 Tributes

OPINIONS about the plans for a World Trade Center memorial are easy to find. Precious few qualify as poetry, though. Eugene Schlanger's thoughts carry no more weight than anyone else's. But their lyricism is unmistakable, agree with them or not.

Mr. Schlanger, 47, is a Wall Street lawyer. He is also a writer of poetry since his days at Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan. After the memorial jury narrowed the competition to a few finalists, a disquiet came upon him. So he did what for him is second nature. He took out his fountain pen and paper.

The result was "8 Mute Minimal Designs." It begins with a punch to the gut:

*Where is the twisted human torso?
Where are the flames? Where is the
smoke?
What crossed fingers still dangle
below
These calm subterranean spaces?*

It continues:

*Placid well-lit puddles of piddling
light
Confine the defiant. Monuments,
Intended to mourn, feign empathy
and
Experience. Serene Ground Zero.
Is this the scene searched in vain for*

remains?

Each age has the art that it deserves.

Well, there is no doubting where this poet stands when it comes to the "rush for meaning" he sees in the memorial process.

"I thought I was a mouthpiece for what people were thinking," said Mr. Schlanger, who though he writes in longhand, distributes his work by e-mail. He estimates that he has 300 regular readers. The reaction has been positive, he said, with people offering comments like, "I was feeling the same way, but couldn't articulate it."

Among the eight finalists, of course, was the design that prevailed, "Reflecting Absence," by Michael Arad and Peter Walker. It has been modified since Mr. Schlanger wrote his criticism. For one thing, it now includes an underground center where battered artifacts from the Sept. 11 terrorist attack will be housed.

He is at work on a new poem about the Arad-Walker plan, Mr. Schlanger said over coffee near his office in the World Financial Center, where he is the deputy general counsel for Nomura Holding America, an arm of the Japanese securities giant.

But he was noncommittal when asked if the design modifications might persuade him to reshape his views. That's the problem with writers, you know. They'd rather

A disquiet came over him after the finalists for the memorial were chosen.

write about it than talk about it.

Over the years, he has been published in journals like *The Sewanee Review* and *The American Scholar*. But his poems about 9/11 draw the attention now.

Lots of poetry has emerged from the attacks. But Mr. Schlanger was right there when disaster struck, and still is. He writes, if you will, from the trenches.

His uniform is a business suit, a gold pen tucked in the breast pocket of his shirt. But where is it written that poets must wear torn jeans, live in a garret and shun a day job? (And are forbidden to vote Republican, as Mr. Schlanger does?) No less than Wallace Stevens was a corporate lawyer. T. S. Eliot was a bank clerk for a time.

"To be a lawyer," Mr. Schlanger said, "you've got to have, if not love, then at least respect for language."

He likes dealing with classical themes, from ancient Athens to Plutarch. He also

writes admiringly about the financial world, finding lyrical gold in its language, even while recognizing that it might bounce dully off the untutored ears of those who are not part of that tribe.

"How many people read poetry at all?" he said. "They tend to be poets or writing instructors, and they probably don't know what to think about poetry about Wall Street. There are a lot of creative people on Wall Street — there really are."

INEVITABLY, 9/11 occupies considerable space in his thoughts.

For the second anniversary of the attack, he wrote: "The Dead are smiling again on West Street/Their mothers and brothers, husbands and wives/Carry their photographs through the Winter Garden."

In "Porters and Promoters," written a few months after Sept. 11, Mr. Schlanger began: "This death was an egalitarian act/Uniting porters and promoters, the rich/And the illiterate, cops and fire chiefs,/In a wealthy smoldering tangled mass."

The defiant fist that he raised at the end might appeal to many New Yorkers:

*The reports of New York's death are
unfounded;
We are as greedy, hungry, and loud
as ever.*