



art these pages © Art Spiegelman  
from *In the Shadow of No Towers*  
reprinted with publisher permission

# Memory's Shadow

by Ben Davis

***In the Shadow of No Towers***  
By Art Spiegelman  
Pantheon  
\$19.95

The experience of trauma creates a brutal paradox of memory: the very thing that lodges an event in one's mind—its chaotic, uncertain immediacy—also means that the safe distance of retrospection always fails to capture its essence. *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Art Spiegelman's first book of new comics since *Maus*, attempts to face this turbulent contradiction in relation to the horrible events of 9/11.

It is a work literally and incongruously split, in a way that demands explanation: one half consists of

ten oversized comic pages that serve as a lacerating personal chronicle of the artist's impressions of that morning; the other is an academic essay on the history of early comics, accompanied by gorgeous reproductions of classics like *Little Nemo* and *Bringing Up Father*. Spiegelman's comics themselves are a mélange of his own crude, effective drawing and other styles borrowed from these classics. The impression is of a mind stuttering, overwhelmed and unable to articulate itself.

As Spiegelman relives his attempt to locate his daughter, at her school just blocks from the World Trade Center, a subtle tension emerges between the disheveled immediacy of the account and the dates, assiduously recorded in the margins, that document



when he worked on each page. By the page completed 7/1/02, his memory has been unable to proceed past 9:15 a.m. In the meantime, events have marched on, and other, fragmented reflections on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan intrude. It is as if time has been blown in two: looping back obsessively to the trauma, while at the same time moving inexorably forward.

An image that haunts the pages is of the glowing skeleton of one of the towers, wavering as it caves in on itself. But even as it repeats on every page, Spiegelman insists that its reality escapes him. In this haunted assertion, we arrive at the book's core.

The series begins with ominous ruminations on the expression "waiting for the other shoe to drop" and the image of a gargantuan shoe-bomb crushing a street of screaming New Yorkers; it ends with cowboy boots raining on the same streets, in prophetic disgust at the 2004 Republican Convention, in which, he writes, "Tragedy is transformed into Travesty." The real disaster comes in our own appropriation of the event, when the very urgency of commemoration leads us to forget the impossible gravity of the memory, silencing us as its energy is channeled to other ends.

It is here, at last, that we can understand the literal split of Spiegelman's book. The arcane comic pages reproduced at the back become something like the dream-key to the 9/11 comics themselves, as if it was necessary to look away in order to understand the experience. They, and Spiegelman, remind us that the true role of art is not to return us to the scene of the crime, but to help us think back to before experience became memory, and to keep the trauma raw and alive and us suspicious of its appropriation. ■