Every single car on the Tel Aviv highway slows to a halt. Without pulling over to the side, drivers stop their cars and step out of their vehicles. They stand. A siren sounds. The people rushing across the overpass stop walking. The soldier, whose father is bringing him back to base, salutes. Everyone stands statue-still. This two-minute siren is heard all across Israel, and every person who hears it stands at attention in memory of the more than 23,000 Israeli soldiers and civilians who have died in wars and terror attacks. The siren sounds twice: once at 8:00 pm on the eve of Memorial Day and once at noon the next day. During the twenty-four hours that follow the first siren, shops and restaurants are closed. There is no cable or satellite television. The three national channels show thirty-minute short movies of soldiers who have been killed. In a country as small as Israel, there is no citizen who does not know at least one soldier who has died; Memorial Day is the most somber day of the year. Most families of dead soldiers go to their loved one’s graves—their own individual monument of grief—and stand during the siren. They stand together with an entire grieving nation.

Having served in the military and having lost friends along the way, I found it strange to experience Memorial Day in New York when I first moved here from Israel four years ago. It was a day like any other. But more than that, it almost seemed like a happy holiday. A day when everything went on sale and people went shopping or to the beach. It was just another three-day holiday weekend. There seemed to be a disconnect between the public and the military and its casualties. But the more I thought about the disparity between my two homes, the more it made sense to me. Israel is a military state with conscription service where every citizen enlists, and many perish to protect their country; nearly every parent’s child is, at one time or another, a soldier. Grief itself is embedded in the Hebrew language. Horeh Shakul: a parent who has lost a child. That term doesn’t exist in English; Israel had to invent the word because it’s considered a sign of status. The bereft parent is
re-contextualized in your mind as someone who has lived every Israeli citizen’s nightmare. The United States is very different in this regard. Not every person has family or friends in the military, and the war is not fought at home but rather thousands of miles away. There doesn’t seem a need for invented words or phrases to capture the horror of a military casualty. Americans, as a nation, don’t mourn their soldiers. While military families might mourn the loved ones they lost, there is no national camaraderie, no shared language of loss, no parallel mourning.

But then I experienced the anniversary of 9/11. It was a somber day. The air felt different outside. There was a weight to people’s movement. American flags were hanging outside stores and apartments. There was a memorial service on almost every channel. Every name of every victim was read out loud. Why did Americans seem to mourn the victims of 9/11, but not the soldiers who died in Iraq and Afghanistan in the resulting war? Was it the proximity of the attack? Was it the realization that any American could be killed in a terror attack in the United States? The questions loomed large as I experienced the anniversary of the September 11 attacks, the day that—as a nation—America mourns.

A new National September 11 Memorial and Museum will open this spring amidst great controversy over which artifacts to include in the exhibit. One of the items on display in the museum is New York Fire Department’s Engine 21—a half-burnt fire truck that Captain Billy Burke Jr. rode with his men to the burning buildings, where he died. For Michael Burke, Billy Burke’s brother, featuring the firetruck is not enough to serve as a monument to his brother’s heroism. Burke is leading a grass-roots movement to include *Sphere*, a 45,000 pound globe sculpture by German artist Fritz Koenig, which sat in the World Trade Center plaza for decades before the buildings crashed down (Mathias). The sculpture was originally installed in the World Trade Center plaza as a symbol of world peace through trade. Six months after the attack, it was reinstalled in Battery Park without any kind of reconstruction, surrounded by benches for mourners.

I went to see *Sphere* for the first time on a gray, rainy, winter day. It took me a while to find it, fenced off within the park. Not until I saw it with my own eyes did I understand what it had endured. While the sculpture may have once been a sphere, it isn’t anymore. Its 25-foot stature has been shaved down
by five feet. From the northwest corner, Sphere resembles a human face; a small crater looks like an eye, scrunched up gold forms a nose, and a disfigurement of bronze smirks like a mouth. If this is a human face, then from another angle, it looks as if someone shot off the top of its head. Sphere was only one of two art pieces to survive 9/11, and once it survived the attack, it ceased being an artwork; it was re-contextualized into something sacred that, as Burke and his followers insist, requires preservation. The evident, severe damage to Sphere, deemed by Burke to epitomize the immense destruction of the attacks, turns the sculpture from art object to memorial: a “focal point . . . for those killed in the twin towers” (Associated Press). As Koenig says, “[Sphere] was a sculpture, now it’s a monument” (qtd. in Miller). Monument. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the root of the word, monere, means “to remind.” In accordance with this definition, the re-contextualization of Sphere makes sense. Once the sculpture began to remind mourners of the catastrophe by virtue of its having witnessed and survived a national tragedy, there was no way for it to revert to its earlier status as public art. Sphere’s new meaning as a monument is deeply felt by Burke, who is fighting for the sculpture’s inclusion in the National September 11 Memorial and Museum.

In an article he wrote for the Washington Times in July 2011, Burke states that he feels the National September 11 Memorial and Museum has remade Ground Zero in a way that “does not acknowledge 9/11” and doesn’t serve as a symbol of “the evil that struck” (“Political Correctness”). The memorial consists of two voids of square pools with cascading waterfalls surrounded by trees. In the footprints of where the towers once stood. Michael Arad, the architect of the memorial, has said the pools express the “absence in our lives caused by these deaths,” and that the five hundred trees that surround the pool act as “traditional symbols of the rejuvenation of life” (qtd. in “Political Correctness”). But Burke feels the memorial will only “wipe out all evidence and memory of the attacks” (“Political Correctness”). It sweeps the event under the rug by “[r]eplacing all reminders of the attacks . . . [with] two immense ‘voids’” and the trees will “eradicate all trace and memory of what stood there for 30 years and its destruction on Sept. 11” (“Political Correctness”). But according to the Daily Mail’s coverage of the ten-year anniversary event at the new memorial, many of the victims’ family members
appreciated the fact that a more aggressive approach wasn’t taken. Cheryl Shanes, who lost her brother, described the memorial as “really beautiful and very peaceful. It is just the way [she] imagined and hoped it would be” (qtd. in Quigley). Ina Stanley, who lost her sister, likes the peace and tranquility and finds the memorial “relaxing, like a world beyond the city” (qtd. in Quigley). James O’Brien, a firefighter in the FDNY who lost many friends that day, thinks that the memorial is a “fitting tribute to all who lost their lives” (qtd. in Quigley). Within a nation of so many individuals, it is hard to construct a national monument where every single person will be happy. And so considering there can be no national tragedy, trauma, or mourning without its first being made individual (9/11 is made up of 2,996 individual tragedies), is it possible to have a monument that “reminds” us of all these singular experiences while still encompassing the meaning of a national—even worldwide—trauma? How to build a memorial that allows for both individual and national mourning?

Sphere’s importance, as a monument, to Burke seems to come from that “unique challenging” tension between his personal mourning and collective trauma. He claims that his fight to include Sphere in the museum isn’t only about preserving the memory of his brother and others killed in the attacks, but also the memory of the buildings and the attacks themselves. According to Burke, Arad had told him that including Sphere in the museum would be “didactic” (“Political Correctness”). It would tell people what to feel. But to Burke, the exclusion of Sphere is equally manipulative. The twelve board members of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC), charged with overseeing the memorial and museum, decided that the list of names engraved in the memorial of all the casualties would not include the individuals’ ages. There is no way of knowing that Christine Lee Hanson, for example, was only two years old when she died. Neither are the victims’ names identified as firefighters or police officers. Michael Burke’s brother will be identified as William F. Burke Jr., not as FDNY Capt. William F. Burke Jr., Eng. 21. According to Burke, part of the LMDC’s reasoning behind this decision is to “describe all of those killed at the World Trade Center as not ‘less’ than heroes and something ‘more’ than victims” (“On Heroes and Victims”). They think that by not assigning rank, job, or age to any name, the names become equal, as does the virtue of each victim. The
public won’t differentiate or make any “distinction in their hearts and minds” between the firefighters and police who are generally viewed as heroic, and those trapped on the top floor who are usually considered victims (Burke, “On Heroes and Victims”). But is that right? Should a person who worked on the top floor of the World Trade Center be considered a hero just for having died in a terror attack? Is memory corrupted by memorializing that person as we would a firefighter? This is why Burke believes the memorial is not intended to be a “genuine and lasting” commemoration of the attacks, but is instead rather “political correctness gone mad” (“Political Correctness”).

Political correctness highlights another difference between individual and national mourning. I have never met a mourning parent who cared about being politically correct. An Israeli father who has lost his son might say, “death to the Arabs” as quickly as “let’s relinquish all land; it’s not worth my son’s life.” Neither statement should require disclaimers nor explanation. But national mourning cannot afford to be as emotional. The LMDC is right to be politically correct or didactic. Burke’s responsibility is to his brother. The LMDC’s responsibility is to everyone. To Burke, his brother is more important than any other casualty of 9/11. To the LMDC, every casualty is equal regardless of age, profession, or rank. Mourning on the national level perhaps cannot account for the immense trauma of losing a loved one.

This tension between national and individual mourning—between the large scale and the intimate—is echoed in Mark Doty’s essay, “The Panorama Mesdag.” In the essay, Doty struggles with the contradiction between art that is ambitious and larger than life, and art that is intimate and private. When Doty visits the Mauritshaus museum, he is affected by two pieces of work. One is a small, rectangular canvas—framed—upon which Carel Fabritius painted a goldfinch chained to an iron hoop. The other is Hendrik Willem Mesdag’s Panorama: a huge, circular, panoramic seascape painting with no borders or frames in which the viewer is absorbed. Starting at a pavilion on the shore, the painting spreads out 360 degrees, from sand to ocean to clouds, filled with people and boats, summer houses and chapels. Mesdag shows every person who steps into the Panorama: “[H]ere was a beach town, just as it was, in 1881. And here is something of how we understood ourselves” (236). But Doty also interprets the work beyond its literal
Panorama Mesdag seems a tribute to a particular moment in time, and “representative of an era” (236).

The Panorama Mesdag suggests the purpose of a memorial: to say “here was a city, just as it was, in 2001. And here is something of how we understood ourselves then, and how we understand ourselves today.” The memorial is not built for any particular individual. The memorial is a representation of an era. The LMDC wants to have a memorial that is like Fabritius’ small rectangular canvas or like Sphere before the attacks: unassuming, unobtrusive, inoffensive, and neat. Burke’s movement wants a memorial with the same essential elements as Mesdag’s Panorama: all encompassing, and that can take us back to our world—the world of that event—as Sphere did after the attack.

A memorial should be, as Doty describes the Panorama, “[a] ring whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere” (235). Every part of the memorial could be its center. For some, the center could be the half burnt Engine 21. For others, the names of those who perished in the attacks. And for others still, it could be Sphere. These could all serve as the access point, the center, from which a nation expresses its grief. But when it comes to individual mourning, the center of the memorial is usually the gravesite.

On Memorial Day in Israel, I always try to visit Jonathan, my childhood friend. First I visit his grave, then I visit his mother. He was killed in an operation in Gaza in 2005, and one of the hardest things that followed was watching his parents’ relationship. Jonathan’s mother and father had completely different ways of dealing with their son’s death: his mother needed to constantly talk about him and to be surrounded by his friends, while his father couldn’t spend time with anyone that reminded him of his son. He threw himself into his work. She threw herself into memorializing her son: designing the grave, organizing a memorial run, then an hour-long movie about Jonathan’s life, then a website commemorating him. Once she finished one thing, she moved on to the next. I came to understand that this preoccupation with memorializing was the frame through which she mourned, and that, in fact, it wasn’t so different from Burke’s own mourning process. Burke’s movement to include Sphere in the national memorial is an expression of his private, individual mourning. Despite my empathy with Burke’s grief, it seems as though his movement to include Sphere in the 9/11 memorial is not concerned with national mourning. Maybe, like Jonathan’s mother, Burke’s
constant involvement with this issue keeps his brother alive. But while understandable, such a response may not be fair to the other grieving families to whom the memorial also belongs.

But just as I feel comfortable understanding Burke as misguided in his effort to make a national memorial emblematic of his individual loss, I am reminded of my identity as an Israeli and my relationship to loss. National mourning doesn’t exist without individual mourning. You wouldn’t have Memorial Day without the individual soldiers who have been killed and the individuals who grieve. During a Memorial Day national event I attended in Israel a few years ago, Bibi Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, was speaking. A father who had lost his son stood up and started yelling obscenities at Netanyahu. A police officer came up to the father to quiet him. I thought he would forcefully eject the father from the area. Instead, the police officer hugged the father tight and held him close as the father sobbed into the police officer’s neck.

It’s easier to have a national memorial bring people together in Israel than it is in America because of the different reality of living in this proximity to—and having a shared sense of the horror of—war and death. Almost all Israelis, by their twenty-first birthday, will have attended a soldier’s funeral and have seen a parent weeping over their child’s grave. Horeb Shakul. The war is fought at home. Any of the terrorists I stopped during my five-year service may have blown himself up on the bus my sister rides to school, or the market where my mother shops. This condition creates a culture of memorialization, which is needed in order for a memorial to be effective. It is this culture that America lacks. But I believe it’s a culture that can be changed. I doubt American families who have lost sons and daughters in wars overseas greet people in the street with “Happy Memorial Day” when that day arrives. It would be a good start not to greet people with “Happy Memorial Day.” Perhaps schools should have their students become pen pals with soldiers overseas in order to build a connection between military and country, soldier and civilian, and to debunk the myth that the war is far away. Instead of putting things on sale, shops might close down as they do on Easter, in order to make it a more solemn and sacred day. Perhaps television channels could interrupt their regular programming to show documentaries of war and fallen
soldiers. If these things existed, then it would be easier to memorialize through a memorial.

As far as the new 9/11 memorial goes, I don’t think it matters whether or not *Sphere* is included. It matters less what particular exhibits are displayed in the museum and more that the museum itself is located beneath the hallowed grounds of where the towers—and *Sphere*—once stood. Surely, anyone who goes there will automatically feel in awe. The names of the dead—regardless of our knowing or not knowing their ages and ranks—will evoke a feeling. I don’t believe *Sphere*, on its own, could stand as a memorial for 9/11. An ideal memorial should invoke more than just destruction. The LMDC is smart to also include different artifacts in the museum where, hopefully, all visitors will find at least one thing that connects them to the tragic event. The memorial museum at Ground Zero will mean different things to tourists, New Yorkers, and friends and relatives of victims—all of whom have experienced different kinds of losses. To be able to mourn in your own individual way in a place others mourn in theirs may mean being more tolerant and sympathetic, no matter what our connection to 9/11 may be. Burke will still have his brother’s truck in the museum, even if *Sphere* remains in Battery Park. *Sphere* is a physical representation of destruction. But the lasting emotional and psychological destruction wrought by the attacks is a far more significant symbol of 9/11’s impact. After all, the destruction of *Sphere* is nothing in contrast to the death of a brother, a son, a friend.

The siren sounds. I stand. The sound evokes a feeling inside of me. It puts my skin on edge. For those two minutes, I’m alone with my thoughts. They wander. Jonathan is gone. Erez, Harel, and Nir are also gone. There are many wounded. Tal is still alive but he got shot in the eye. Why am I alive when others aren’t? What would my family look like had I died? What would my Memorial Day movie have looked like? I look at the older man standing across the street from me, with his hands by his side and his eyes cast down, and I wonder what he’s thinking, what he’s lost. I think about my mother. I allow my thoughts the freedom to go everywhere and nowhere, to go wherever the siren takes them. The siren is a memorial that allows me to be alone as I mourn and yet feel united with every other person in my country. This is a memorial you can experience from anywhere within Israel. It is a country
all-encompassing, which stands in grief and loss, in hope and spirit. The siren allows for both individual and national mourning: it is the ideal memorial.

WORKS CITED