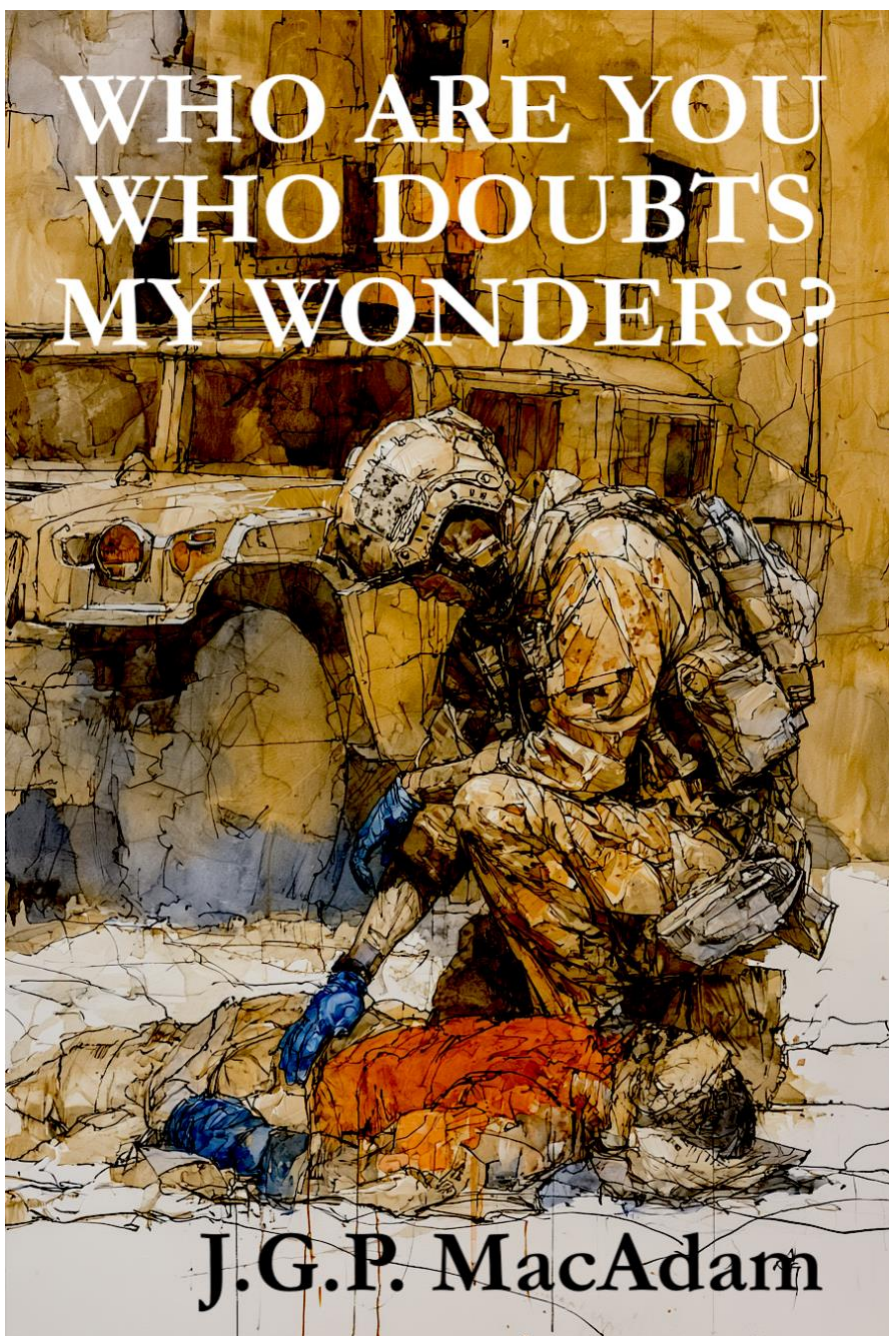

TRENCH ARTS & LETTERS

O:JA&L Chapbook Series

WHO ARE YOU
WHO DOUBTS
MY WONDERS?



J.G.P. MacAdam

O:JA&L FIREFIGHT PRESS

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WHO ARE YOU WHO DOUBTS MY WONDERS?

I.



HE SHOULD BE DEAD. Both legs blown to shit. Skin, veins, calves—meat ribbons coated with dirt like panko beef strips. Most of the dust had already settled. There's no thinking in a moment like this. I yanked the first black tourniquet from my chest, where I kept them, always ready. I peeled the Velcro-strap open, lifted the guy's left stump—only the jagged remnant of his femur poking out—and looped the tourniquet over the last flap of skin still stuck to flesh. Blood oozed over my hands. *Head and hands.* I've always been good with my hands. My hands never shook, even when it was urgent, even when it was one of our own. I torqued the windlass rod on the tourniquet as tight as I possibly could. The bleeding stopped. The screaming started. I yanked a second tourniquet for the other leg.

Our terp, Johnnie (not his real name), panted up beside me. "Shit," he murmured, through his keffiyeh. "Shit."

"Ask him his name." My voice sounded far off.

"What, Doc?"

"Ask him his name!"

He asked him his name. The second tourniquet, on the right thigh above the knee (he might keep most of this leg) cinched home. The terp shook his head.

“He’s screaming too much!”

“Tell him I’m gonna give him some pain meds. Try to keep him calm.”

Sure, the Afghan army have their own medics—on paper. But in reality, they relied on us for damn near everything. Everything from band-aids to emergency casualty evacuation.

I heard Sergeant Kim hustle up the slope behind me. “Give it to me, Doc!”

“Urgent,” I called back to him while pressing my finger onto one of the guy’s veins to stop it spurting. “Left leg amputated above the knee, degloving of the right below the knee, shrapnel to the scrotum, hand, stomach, all over the fucking place. Perforations in the stomach. Otherwise, conscious.”

“Yeah, I can hear that,” said Kim, as the Afghan guy squirmed and vented and spittle frothed in the corner of his lips.

Sergeant Kim sent up the nine-line while I told another Afghan soldier wearing a bandana on his head, instead of his helmet, “Here! Here!” and motioned for him to put his finger where my finger was. The other Afghan soldier didn’t hesitate.

The patient pounded his one good fist into the dirt. He growled, then mumbled something in a teenage whine.

“He says his name is Akhmed,” said Johnnie.

“Akhmed!” I said, “Akhmed, you’re going to be alright, you hear? You’re going to be fine. We’re gonna get you outta here.”

I was certain he didn’t understand a word, but it was all in the tone.

I think Johnnie translated what I was saying but no American could be sure what the hell terps were actually saying.

Another Afghan soldier came up and laid Akhmed’s tan leather boot with his foot still in it next to me.

“Stretcher!” I motioned to him, IV needle in my hand. “Tell him I need a stretcher.”

Johnnie translated.

“Two stretchers,” I added, forcing Akhmed’s good arm to the ground, hovering the needle tip over the vein—plunging. “One for the other guy too.”

Akhmed laid his head back on the rocks, staring his brilliant amber eyes up at the crisp sky, his breath shallowing. Pink tidbits of his buddy were still stuck to the side of his face, in his hair. His helmet had blown off somewhere. Akhmed’s buddy lay in even more pieces nearby. Other Afghan soldiers began solemnly, dumbly, walking around, gathering what pieces remained.

IV in. Tubing plugged and tied. Next out of my med-kit I grabbed a saline bag with ketamine and antibiotics and started them pumping into Akhmed. By the time I had his other hand dressed, where the ring and pinky fingers were missing and the middle finger hung by a thread, the skin from his palm to his elbow flayed by the blast, the ketamine had begun to take effect.

Johnnie kept reassuring Akhmed—quick, hushed bursts of encouragement—while one of his battle buddies held and patted his good hand. Yes, you’ve still got your dick and balls, said Johnnie. No, you don’t want to die here. But Akhmed seemed not to be listening anymore. Just staring into the sky with his jewel eyes. Barely even a peach-fuzz moustache over his lips.

I kept the compresses coming, shrapnel having bored a hundred tiny red holes in him. The remnants of his left leg, particularly, was no more than a mash of pebbles, bone bits, mine fragments, blood, sand, and flesh. He probably had a concussion, too, at least. Blasts don’t just rip limbs off, the pressure-wave booms *into* the body. Deep within. For all I knew, he could have torn guts inside, which would lead to infection, or internal bleeding, or he could have a brain injury, either of which could very well fuck him up even worse for the rest of his life. And what life waited for him after this? What hospital? What home? Who would pay for the pain meds that he would almost certainly need for the rest of his days? No state-of-the-art recovery clinic or Western-trained prosthetic specialist waited for him. A wounded veteran’s pension from the Afghan government? Yeah... right.

It all seemed like seconds—minutes, at most—but was probably close to a half-hour by the time Sergeant Kim said: “Bird in-bound!” The familiar thumping echoed over the hills, sharp and dull at once. Akhmed screamed pitifully when we loaded him onto the stretcher. I bundled him in an emergency blanket. I told him he was going to be alright, but he seemed not to hear me, looking off and mumbling to himself, perhaps praying. I figured his eardrums may have been perforated by the blast. His hearing being the least of my worries in these crucial minutes.

We didn't have far to carry him. Sergeant Kim had picked a rocky overhang about a hundred meters to the east. "They gonna land *there*?" I asked him.

"They don't need to land," said Kim.

The chinook whirled overhead. Kim popped smoke and threw the purple-spewing grenade onto the rocks. The mountainside thumped as the chinook descended and the pilots touched only the back wheels to the rocky overhang before the medic crewman hopped out and waved us forward. The back rotors of the chopper felt barely inches over my helmet as we ducked and slid Akhmed up the ramp, his stumps still smoking. His buddy in a body bag who I never learned the name of slid on next to him. Hot exhaust blew on our butts, up the gaps in our sweat-soaked body armor, as we scrambled away, then turned to watch. The bird was already hauling ass back over the mountains.

I heard later, after our joint mission, that Akhmed had survived. He was in Bagram, at the hospital, stable, alive. I didn't tell him when putting those tourniquets on him that all this was only the beginning. A medic never says that, doesn't even think it, really, when those first few minutes mean the difference between life and death.

Preserving life, preventing death—it's built into everything we do, all our training, why medics in the military exist in the first place. Life, no matter the pain, no matter the consequences, no matter whether the patient begs to just let them die.

Still, after you've done this a few times, you learn. You do a deal with Death. Death's going to take his cut.

II.



WOOF. They knew you were coming. I watched them bury the mines right

along the path. Smart of you to leave yourselves in the rear and send the natives forward. It's *their* country *they* should be fighting for after all, isn't it? No tears nor cries to *bring the troops home* when the blood spilled is other than your own, neh?

I love the smell of blood. My canines tingle upon the mere whiff of it. I watched you bandage the boy and bag off the other one, hoping—virtually willing with my mind, so ever, ever hungry I am—for a meaty morsel or two abandoned upon the field of battle, this dinner plate you call the earth, this drool dripping from my black lips. But, ha—what field of battle is this? You march around and drag these unlucky boys about until one or more of them gets blown up. Grrr, you wouldn't know a good fight if it bit you in the ass. Which I might, come to think of it. You all could use a good chomp in the ass cheeks, my teeth puncturing your cheeseburger-fattened flesh.

You shot at me, when you spotted me, lurking about, despite the thick bronze of my fur blending me to the rocks. But I heard the lock of the bolt and the breath of the shooter far before the bullet came sailing in my general direction. I've probably been shot at more than you, I fancy. These Muslims hate dogs; don't you know that? They'll chain us up and dock our ears and pull our teeth and call us "wolves" and "vermin" and all sorts of untouchable epithets. Then they'll shoot us when we're of no use anymore, or get caught lurking too close to the mosque, or for sport. But when we're together, in a pack, howling in the hills, they lock their doors and huddle in their homes and pray Allah to protect them. I've stolen babes from where their mothers set them on the edges of streams and dug up graves to gnaw on the bones of the recently deceased. I am a dog. Would you expect any less of me?

You wonder how they could've known where to lay the mine? Oh please, don't address me like one of your babies. I know how you Westerners treat your dogs back in the lands of your home. How you dress them up, pen them up, send them to doggy daycares, academies, boarding schools. How you shampoo them up and perm their fur and interbreed them until their noses sink into their face. You think I would prefer a life in the West to my life here? Imbecile. Anyone and everyone can see what you're doing—parading around, running one patrol after the next across the mountainsides, setting your vehicles in close circles upon the same patch of earth day after day. Even I could see you're scouting around for the best spot to build a new base.

And lo! How right I am proven.

Next thing you know, up go the walls of stacked dirt. Up a green, billowing tent behind the walls. A truck delivers a concrete bunker. A backhoe digs a burn

pit. A sawed-in-half metal drum serves as your toilet. You plop four berms of mud in each of the four corners of your tiny, self-made prison, festoon it with concertina wire, then position your armored trucks atop each of the berms. Your gunners watch from each of the turrets, clinking their ammo trays, adjusting their sights, already bored out of their gourds as they look out on all this wide bosom of a landscape which seems only hostile to them but is, in fact, where I was raised.

Here, I am free. Here, I shit where I want. I fuck where I want. I eat what I want. Tired? I simply curl up wherever I may. *Wherever I may roam...* isn't that the lyrics of one of your Western songs? Infernal music. Allow me to treat you to the *awooo!* of eternity... Puts the muezzin to shame, neh? I may have no flocks to herd anymore, which is why my kind was brought into these hills in the first place, and the people who brought me here, who moved into homes in the valleys and tend their pathetic fields, may now scorn me, but I wouldn't trade one mile of this rugged freedom for all the comfort and yum-yums you could dump out the back of one of your cargo planes. Icy peaks ever within my sight. Air like nettles in the nose. Breathe it in, silly person, quaking in your boots in the face of Death. You only have the Father of Man, the First Prophet, Adam, Peace Be Upon Him, to thank for that most mortal of sins.

Your little outpost will be attacked. You want it to be attacked, you tell yourselves. You don't even bother to engage with the locals, or hand out humanitarian aid, build bridges. You let yourselves be made into bait dangling on the end of a hook. A big target. A juicy bite, irresistible to your enemy—Haqqani, Taliban, whoever else. "Bad guys" who've known more war, more fighting, more ambushes and mines blowing the legs off their children than any number of Western nonprofits could shake a money tree at. Oh, they're idiots, too. The rule of the bullet will make martyrs of you all. *Allahu Akbar!* into your graves... and what good does it do any of you?

Honor?

Revenge?

What good?

The only profit I sniff on the air is the yet living flesh bound to become a salacious treat for yours truly. Ah, sooner than I thought! A vehicle approaches...

III.



I AM UNIVERSALLY LOATHED yet ubiquitously used, manufactured, implanted, spread about in farm fields and demilitarized zones the world over to this very day. Excuse my Carolinian accent—it *was* General Rains who concocted me into existence in the first place. Punch a wad of black powder into a plain ole artillery shell, pop a pressure fuse on top, and, yes sirree bob, you have yourself a bona fide landmine. Minted fresh for the killing fields.

However, it was not until my friend, Nobel, invented dynamite that I truly came into my own. The wonder of wonders that is mass production of munitions put millions of me into the field. My name is Legion, as the Good Book proclaims. Yes, my progeny boometh into posterity, or so it seems, with the flash of an ignition, the rending of flesh, the screams of thousands of highly personal incidents year upon year. Simple reason being that the vast majority of my progeny—from claymores to the MS3 to, one of my personal favorites, the cherry-popper—do not simply kill. We maim. We remove pesky limbs and genitals you humans in your simplicity suspect you need. We show you otherwise, hm? We show you the ease with which destruction may be rent, how vulnerable your poor mortal flesh truly is, how tender your psyches, and how wondrous! How the body, the soul, may be split yet survive, child. We show you the twined damnation and salvation of luck.

I do believe you appreciate me even as you detest me. Longstreet and Sherman decried the advancement of me. They called me “uncivilized” yet nonetheless procreated me to devastating proportions. Child, if I—in all my multifarious forms, in all my spools of wires and ingenious springs and *power* and use of natural terrain to hide my very existence—am anything, I am proof of civilization. War is symptom of civilization, sweet darling. While marveling yourselves with the gadgets and qualities of progress, you need something to peel back the veneer, so to speak, hm? Reveal the depravity latent within. The ultimate flaw. The defect ever-present within yourselves right below the surface.

Believe me, I'm not going anywhere.

Why, look at these brave boys—these succulent young men—sitting in their pitiful little base on some hitherto unheard-of speck in the mountains. How many of my seeds spread themselves across these valleys and bare river runs in this poverty-stricken country before any of these young men ever arrived? How many to be dug up and reimplemented in one war after the next? Millions, at a minimum, thank you to the glorious machine presses of the former Soviet Union. Behold, children, your inheritance...

Two of you stand upon the ground outside the walls, taking a much-earned cigarette break after staking all those stakes, unlooping all that concertina wire. You both lean against the hood of your truck. Rute and Tate, yes?

"Hey Treebeard!" says Rute, the radioman, up to one Private First Class Schneider in his turret. (You soldiers are marvelous in your nicknames.) "You wanna smoke?"

"Nah," says Treebeard, drawing out his syllables in that folksy Midwestern accent of his, stretching his long legs he normally lopes about the inside of the base. Though the three of you stand outside your base at this moment, on yet another detail you call *busy work*.

Neither of you notice my approach.

"I gotta cut back," says Treebeard. "Those cheap Chinese cigarettes'll be the death of me." He coughs, once, then tucks his hands into the armholes of his vest.

You can be forgiven for not noticing. This might be the border zone, a veritable middle-of-nowhere, but traffic moves at a steady trickle down along the wadi-road below. You can be forgiven for not paying a great deal of attention to the one dirty white Corsica throttling its way up the muddy path towards the village. Until, that is, we take an abrupt right turn.

Sergeant Tate groans as he settles into the driver seat, wriggling within his body armor to get it to stop pinching his love-handles. The wind blows with a touch of those high, snow-laden passes, and he yanks the armored door closed. Takes his mitch off. Lights a cigarette. Glances through the windshield.

"Hey, Treebeard," says Tate.

"Ya, sergeant?"

“You see that vehicle?”

Treebeard stands up, takes his hands out of his vest. “That guy lost?”

“He’s coming right for the concertina,” says Rute, turning from his lean against the hood.

“Wave him off, Treebeard,” says Tate. “Before he hits that wire and we gotta redo it!”

Treebeard starts waving. This alerts another gunner, Goldie, named for the surfer-shock of blond atop his noggin, currently hidden under a helmet, standing in another truck up on the nearest berm inside the walls. Goldie starts shouting and waving at the Corsica, too. Can’t they see? you wonder. Haven’t these locals yet learned to stop driving in this direction around the village? It’s been weeks since there’s been a new base here, in Margha. Dumb country people and their stubborn habits, you suppose.

Then again, all at once, as the Corsica shows no sign of turning—indeed, begins to rev as the driver in among us presses the gas to the floor—all three gentlemen take note of the rear bumper of the vehicle practically dragging on the ground. Their eyes fly wide.

Oh yes, *here* I am.

“I remember seeing him...” recounts Treebeard, to friends, later. “Could see the driver’s face. He wore like a white tunic. Sergeant Tate hollered at me: ‘Treebeard, shoot that fucker!’ but I was already behind the two-forty, aiming. I saw my rounds go right through that windshield, right into the guy. A couple bursts, at least. Saw him sort of rear up, like he was trying to stand in his seat or something. I think I hit ‘im.”

He sniffs, looks into the distance.

“Then it went off.”

Treebeard takes a long drag on his cheap Chinese cowboy-killer. His friends who heard the blast, who felt the blast, but who weren’t immediately in it, hang on his every word.

“I’m pretty sure I hit ‘im...” He taps at the bandage tape wrapped around his hand, touches a calloused finger-pad to the other bandage on his cheek. “But

it still went off. I put up my hand up like this.” He lifts his bandaged hand, palm out. “And I got blown back in the turret, and...” He drags once more. “And that was it,” he says, his words exhaling with his smoke.

Your medic, affectionately dubbed Doc, came scampering out through the gap in the walls with his med-pack. He found the truck’s door ajar, a crater yonder, only a hundred meters outside the walls, pieces of vehicle yet smoking, and Sergeant Tate kneeling over Rute.

Rute had attempted to move around to the other side of the truck, to fire his rifle over the hood, but what are rifles compared to stacks upon stacks of me? Lovingly, intently wired to one another? To a trigger device? Tate had Rute’s casualty pouch, which every American wears, split open. Rute laid propped against the wire rims of the dirt-packed wall, blood splattered like a Pollock painting alongside the pale, right side of his face.

Doc’s hands move—behold the wonder of them! Were I not here in such magnificent, devious force, what story would you have to tell, hm? What actions of these mouthwatering young men would there be for you, for them, to marvel upon? I make—no, *war* makes—the best of you rise to the occasion, does it not? And therein lies the wonderful paradox of what you humans are. No less the martyred driver, Rahman. Did you know Rahman’s uncle, Akbar Ghul, had been a martyr as well? All his young life, Rahman looked to the grainy picture of his uncle, propped in the prayer room of the mud-walled compound he grew up in in Waziristan. As a boy, Rahman ran through wheat fields bent with golden bounty. He swam in brisk mountain streams. He learned to recite the Holy Quran. He learned to shoot his uncle’s Kalashnikov. The imam promised him Paradise and a beneficiary payment for his ailing mother. His father had been injured years before accidentally digging up one of my progenies in his field. For years, his father had sat or laid in the house, an invalid, hooked on opium to succor the pain of his twisted leg and missing toes. Rahman did not want to end up like his father. He wanted to fight like his uncle, Akbar Ghul. To be remembered. The imam promised.

We promised.

And our promises, more often than not, come prepackaged.

You pressed a dressing carefully but firmly to the nubbin of ear left on the right side of Rute’s head. (Of course, it’s the radioman who is now minus an ear.) Rute, he seemed lucid, at the time, and this lessened your worry concerning brain injury. Tate went to check on Treebeard who was already standing back up in his turret holding his hand, worried about Rute, worried he didn’t shoot

back fast enough, and that there will never be any end to such worry. You told Rute, as you popped a needle into your patient's skin, threading the metal tip into the viaduct of vein in his arm, that a medevac was already inbound. And, in a heartbeat, you realized that this was all getting a little too routine for you.

IV.



I AM DEATH. No shadowy veils nor scythes to me. I shine, you see? As radiant and perennial as the rolling sun. You imagine that I hover about you, malignantly tapping you upon the shoulder, like a dark angel reminding you, alas, how I am never far. You imagine I am invisible, until I am visible. You imagine my clammy presence, my tart kiss upon your cheek. Haven't you learned how I am inside you? Have always been inside you? I was there the moment of your conception. There, when your heart drummed its first tiny beats. There, the instant you wailed your first breath. Within life, lies death, and within death...

The fog and the night chills envelop you and your base. Those of you who are awake shiver in your turrets, unable to perceive much of anything. I could glide right up to the walls, and you wouldn't see me. You hear strange rustles upon the perimeter. Flappy sounds. Until one of them caws and it's a relief. More flaps and, before you know it, hopping crows and avian chortles and silly little territorial tiffs blanket the ground about your base. The crows waddle and nip with their beaks and it's a few minutes before you realize precisely what has brought them swarming in. A feast of fleshy bits amid the bolts and mine fragments and vehicle remnants. All life is fed by death, yours most certainly. In turn, your death, their death, feeds, too.

The fire-worshippers understood. Every speck of the universe was, is, a holy substance to them. Water. Earth. Fire. Air. Bodies did not belong in the ground, nor in the water, nor as smoke. The body should not be allowed to contaminate the earth, the streams, the air. Therefore, they built towers upon the precipices

where you may, today, still stand and overlook the vales, watch cloud shadows slither slowly across this massive rolling earth. They laid their dead in the towers where the vultures, hawks and crows perched, waiting, ever waiting, to turn death's half-face back towards the light.

First, crows. Now, dogs. Dogs love the smell of blood, even day-old blood. You hear their paws pitter-patter through the fog.

"Xi, Xi!" says one of you (I try not to burden myself with names). "You hearing this shit?"

"Leave me alone, Doc."

You wonder how he could not hear. The dogs practically tear each other apart, fighting over the scraps, out beyond the walls. You listen and can't imagine a more nightmarish sound than the hounds gnashing their teeth at one another. If anything keeps you awake at night, despite all of me you've already seen, and are to see, and prevent, despite all of the lungs you'll keep breathing and hearts you'll keep beating, despite all the blood upon your hands which you can't ever seem to wipe clean, *this* sound does the trick.

You never own a dog, later in life. Not so much as a puppy though your daughter begs you. You see a dog on the street, in the park, anywhere, and you hear only the ceaseless sniffing and smacking of lips. Oh, I know what comes for each of you. I am the Light of All Light. I am Ultimate Knowledge. I am Fate, and more. The darkness from which you came. The darkness to which you must return. The web of this tale, charge, has already been spun—remember?

The sound wakes your senior sergeant. He steps up to the top of the berm. "Fuckin' Christ," he says, listening to the unholy clamor, spotting only the swish of a tale, the dart of legs. "Fuck this," and he reaches for the radio. "All elements, I want three men from each squad with garbage bags at the east gate in five mikes. Bring gloves. Two-seven, out."

He fires his rifle to scare the dogs away.

Many of the soldiers on detail wish they had been on guard instead. There isn't much left of the martyr, at this point, but there's enough.

"Shelley, the fuck you doing?"

"Look at this, Sarnt!"

The soldier named Shelley, whose whole life, every action, every guilty thought, I see writ upon his spirit as though in stone, holds up a flap of the martyr's cheek. He's found the remnant upon the ground, black beard hairs yet clinging to it—indeed yet growing. He puts the flap and beard to his face.

"Look, I'm a haj!" He dances in a little circle. "Durka! Durka! Walla Akbar!"

Everybody laughs, beside themselves. You laugh, too, unable to stop yourself.

"Walla Akbar! Durka! Durka!"

You've all been sundered from home for too long, subject to too much drudgery, too much violence. Such humor is in itself a symptom of the anxiety. A burning balm. Lilies pinched in rigor mortis hands. Something sweet to cover the stink. Something funny, however obscene, to blanket the sickness latent within each body, each soul.

The sun rises and flees the fog. I depart with the crows, absorbed into the dawn. But do not fear, I'm never far.

V.



HEY, THE HELL YOU GUYS UP TO? I know you're all bored outta your fucking minds but come on! Can't you show a little decency, huh? A little restraint? I like your jokes though. You hear me laughing?

"So, this is what it feels like to be the tip of the spear," says the medic guy. What's going on with him, huh? He freaking on ya? Can't have your medic going nutso on ya. Last person you want losing it, you know what I mean?

"Hey Doc," says buddy boy, Ski. "Ain't the tip the most sensitive part?"

Aw, there it is. There's that smile. You guys need more jokes. A little comic relief. Cripes! Can't get the fucking chill outta my bones no matter how many times I ruffle my feathers. You like my plumage, huh? I just combed. Caught a couple lice for breakfast. Oh, you think you got anything better to eat? How many grams of trans fat in that "cheese omelet" outta bag, huh? How many years it been sealed in that bag? Even I wouldn't eat that shit. When you gonna have another body part confetti party, huh? I got kids to feed.

Aw, there you go again. Shooting. Leave those dogs alone, will ya? I know they big and hairy and stinky—that wolf-looking mastiff especially—but they're just hungry mutts. You know how much food you throw away in that burn pit? More food than these mutts see in months. And it's getting cold! Everybody's tightening their belts. We got long winters up here in the mountains. Everybody's gotta survive. Law of nature, right?

Here comes that Sergeant Colt again. Who does he think he is, huh? Some sniper hiding under that burlap on the top of the wall? He's good though. Look at him! Real patient type. He hunts back home, you can tell. Sitting real still like that for—what?—fifteen minutes now? Dogs ain't dumb. Like people. Shoot at them only a few times and they start to learn the tricks. They see a silhouette up on the wall and they *know* to scurry away. No food wrapper or half-eaten MRE is worth a bullet in the butt. They can smell it though, and their bellies aching, and pups back home squealing... Everybody gotta eat.

Aw! Aw! The fuck, come on! Gets me every fucking time. Poor mutt. Look at him sprinting off, yelping. A hit, yeah, Colt got a hit. Good for Colt. High-fives all around. Laughs. It's all fun, huh? A little marksmanship practice while you wait day after day after day behind your walls going outta your fucking minds with busy-work and turret rotations and shitting in a can. Everybody just wants to be away from everybody else, not have to smell the sweaty socks of the guy he's nut-to-butt next to in the tent. Everybody's sick of MREs, sick of the same old stories, sick of nowhere to escape, nothing to do, but wait—wait for the next *boom*. Sure to come. Sure as the sun rises and sets. But this?

Law of the fittest, people like to say. Aw! Aw! You all crazy about physical fitness, yeah? Tell ya little me can fly further, see farther, survive longer than any of ya. Fitness is rel-a-tive, I tell ya. You fit for one type of war. Other people fit for other types of war. You don't look too fit for this type of war, impressive as you may be, your plumage downright bristling with guns and ammo and armor. But you look kinda silly, too. You look outta place. How can you be fittest when you're not a natural part of the ecosystem, huh? If you don't fight the way people always been fighting in these parts?

What're you doing now? Hold on, lemme flit over here and get a better view. Oh, you all getting on-line. I see now. Gonna *ambush* the hungry mutts sniffing around the burn pit, huh? Oh, you big soldiers, ain't ch'ya? Can't manage to set an ambush for your own enemy gotta ambush some of the local wildlife, that it? Fucking kids, the lot of ya.

"That Chow Chow's mine," says Goldie, leaning into his rifle butt.

"I got the spotted one," says Shelley.

"Black one's in my sights," says Tate.

"That white bitch," says Colt. "The one with the titties. I got a bead on her."

Colt's gonna give the signal. There it is. Your certified fucking ambush. The shots echo.

"Woo-hoo!"

"Yeah! Git some!"

"I got that fuckin' Chow Chow! I got him!"

How many total? Kill count? Chow Chow got hit, for sure, but he ran off. The spotted one's dead in the dirt.

"I missed," laments Tate. "Black one ran off behind that hill."

"Got mine," says Colt, not rising from behind his sights. "But she ain't dead, not yet."

Look at her, the white one, she's just flopping in the dust.

"Musta got her through the spine," Colt says. He squeezes off one, two, three more well-aimed shots, but can't seem to land another bullet in her.

Aw! Aw! Come on! She's just lying there suffering. Somebody finish her off already, will ya?

"I got this."

Who said that? Was that Doc? That Doc unholstering his nine-mil? Chambering a round? Walking with steady fucking steps down the berm, out

the gap in the walls, to the burn pit? Look at him. Nobody whooping or hollering or clapping now. Everybody just watching Doc walk out there, stand over the flopping white bitch in the dust, aim, and—

Aw! Aw! Gets me every fucking time. I don't like loud noises.

You just gonna leave her laying there? Her and the spotted one? Doc walks back in, up the berm. Ain't nobody talking to him. Shows over, for now. What's up, Doc? You don't look good. What're you doing standing there at the top of the wall just staring down at your nine-mil in your hands, huh? What ch'ya doing? You confused, huh? It feels like some violation of your fucking hypocritic oath? Them hands that shoot are the same hands that heal, huh? Feel like a contradiction? Feel like you just tore something outta your soul and now, now... you can't put it back?

Hey man, this beak I pluck a bug from its life is the same beak I feed my kids with. What's the big fucking deal? War ain't the only thing chockful of wonky fucking paradoxes. *Life* is full of paradoxes! *Death* is! Everything! Welcome to the law of survival, buddy. Nature, as it is, on this here blue ball spinning in the big black nothing. You think the meteor done wiped out my ancestors gave a shit about you or me or anybody?

Aw! Aw! Call to prayer's going up. About time I headed home. Bad news bears for the wife and kids. Everybody going home hungry tonight.

VI.



HERE I AM. Use me. You know you want to. You know how I tempt you.

You ask a good buddy of yours, Ski, to hold your nine-mil for you. You love Ski from the bottom of your heart. You will go on, loving him. You think of him as one of the few level-headed ones. Part of the reason for that, you suppose, is that he has kids. Kids have a way of setting a person's priorities

straight.

“You alright, Doc?” Ski asks you, receiving your nine-mil in his hand, the bolt locked open.

You hand him the mag with all of the shiny-nubbed mes in it, too.

“Yeah,” you say, “I just don’t wanna sleep with it next to me, not tonight. Just hold it for me till sunup. And...”

Why the hesitation?

“Don’t let me have it. Not tonight. Not even if I ask for it.”

Ski doesn’t pester you with any further questions. Good man. Good friend. He who removeth temptation from our path.

I am made to do what you are trained to undo. What nonsense is this? Putting medics with infantry platoons? Sending veritable nurses in with the fighting troops? Even training the fighters in basic first aid—stop the bleeding, administer an IV, clear a blocked airway, and so on? What sense does it make to save lives when it’s also your job to end them? It makes economic sense. Doctors, nurses, medics—you’re all mechanics. Mechanics of the body. You determine patient priorities, likelihoods of living, assessments of functionality, and you patch, repair, heal, and send back to the line. You fix the cogs. You’re essential repair people in the great war machine. You save the life of one body so that body can then continue ending the lives of other bodies.

Or not.

Not all bodies are returnable to their former functionality. Not all bodies are cogs. Some are civilians. Some are children. This is why you turned down that forward surgical unit job. The tent hospitals get all the soldiers, yes, but they get all the civilians, too. Anyone and everyone hurt in the fighting.

It’s the kids, right? You can’t *not* see your own kid in them, under the tubes, and the patched-up little wounds, and their bewildered eyes.

Don’t think about it.

Don’t think about me.

I’m not the one with your name on it. Or am I?

You will wonder, won't you? You don't even know yet how much you'll wonder, with both a little fear and a little hope, which one of me it's eventually going to be.

Why not me?

Why not now?

There's something sure, hard, and pure in knowing, in deciding, in selecting *this* one.

You're so fucking tired.

You and Ski decide to sleep in the bunker. Sucks sleeping in the trucks. Sucks sleeping in the tent. The smell. The endless, pointless card games. The tea-bagging shenanigans and petty power trips. Tired of everybody. Tired of Afghanistan. You've got a cold sore the size of a nickel on the corner of your lips. Don't pick it. This is what happens when you spend over a month at Margha. This is stress slowly undoing your body, your mind...

"Your feel sick?"

Ski wants to know.

You only nod from your sleeping bag. Yes, sick. But you know there's no amount of meds in that bag of yours will cure what ails you.

Ski built a small mud oven in one corner of the bunker. He shaped it out of the clayey soil, poked a tube in the top, and cooked it firm. A small trash fire burns in the oven now. It's toasty inside the bunker. No light escapes. Ski grills a couple of hot dogs he filched from the chow hall before leaving for Margha. They smell hot and savory.

"You want one?"

No, you shake your head. You're just ready for all of it to be over with already.

"It's my kid's birthday today," says Ski. The firelight flickers across his haggard face.

You try not to look at your nine-mil stashed next to his rolled-out sleeping pad.

“No shit,” you say. “You get to wish him happy birthday?”

“Not yet. I’ll call ‘im when we get back to base.”

“How old is he?”

“Two.”

Ski stares in the fire. Sears form on the dogs as they sizzle.

Don’t think of me. I am made for bodies—for aortas and tibias and ribs and intestines and veins and fascia and brain matter. I am made to fly from the throat of a barrel, spinning through the rifling, then tumbling end-over-end as air pressure and gravity do their work on me. I am made to strike, to pummel, to splice, to pop out the other side or get lost, lodged, inside. I am made, and this alone is perhaps more than you can say of yourselves. Who made you? What body were you, your countrymen, or your enemy, crafted in the image of? If you knew that, then you could also know for what intent you were formed. Why you exist, at all.

I know why I exist.

I know why your body armor exists.

I know why the claymores, emplaced a hundred meters out facing into ditches and other concealed enemy approaches, exist.

I know why the Angel of Death, watching over each of your shoulders, exists.

I know why your position as a medic exists.

I know why your lieutenant right now thinks of sending Sergeant Tate out with two others to set up a listening post about two hundred meters up that one hill.

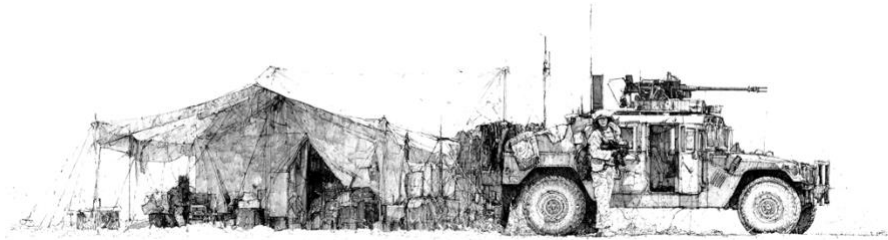
I know why your commander back at the main base requests an eye-in-the-sky at all times over Margha, though his request is denied.

All is quiet. You sleep. The four guards in turrets at every corner of base struggle to keep their lids from sliding down into oblivion, their night vision apparatuses weighing the front of their helmets, their breaths fogging before their faces. The tent sleeps. The dog sleeps. The crow sleeps. The other mines yet hidden in the hills, lying in wait for a hapless foot or sandal to awaken them, sleep, too. Fog flows like a river in the vale. Stars glitter in the insomniac green

glow of your apparatuses. Two shadows, unseen, at a distance of about three hundred meters, whisper to one another before peeking over the crest of the nearest hilltop. They whisper again. A sharp triangular appendage emerges from one of the shadows, a shadow itself. They take aim.

I am here.

VII.



I TOLD HIM HE WAS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT. I tell everyone they're going to be alright, even when I don't believe it. What I believe doesn't matter. It's what *they* believe, in those first crucial moments, minutes. Whatever belief you want, buddy. If it works for you, it works for me.

Goldie had been freaking the fuck out.

I told him it was only jock itch. "Apply two or three times a day," handing him my only tube of fungal cream. "You'll be fine."

Still, Goldie was like, "But Doc, what if it's infected or some shit? I can't stop scratching it."

"Don't scratch it."

"I can't stop, man! It fuckin' itches."

All I could think about was how goddamn tired I was. I couldn't even remember how many days, weeks, we'd been stuck inside this lame excuse for a base. No relief. No resupply. Zero privacy. Just a mountain of MRE boxes in a tent next to another mountain of ammo boxes. These last few days, guys were clearly starting to lose it. Walking around butt-naked, as though daring any sergeant to chew them out. Tate had already lined up his guys, one day, and given them the once-over: making them shave, wash with what water they could pour on one another, apply foot powder, wear one pair of crusty socks

while the other dried, tell them to keep their boots laced and their buttocks wiped. Still, beards grew. Hair grew. The layers of dirt only thickened around our cuffs and collars. My own buttock itched like crazy. We ran out of toilet paper a week ago. The tobacco stains deepened on everyone's fingertips—a whole black market arising in those cheap Chinese ones from the nearby village of Margha. Dip ran low. The dirt never came out from underneath our fingernails. Could taste it in our teeth. Feel it at the bottom of our sleeping bags. Dirt protected us.

Goldie wasn't too far off target talking about infection. If he kept scratching it with those filthy fingernails of his, infection would be exactly what he got.

Finally, Goldie came out with it.

"I gotta get back to base, Doc. I can't take another fucking day here."

This was exactly why I had already started making the rounds at least once a day. Talking to each of the twenty-nine grunts stuck within these walls. Leadership included. Asking them how they were doing. How they were sleeping. What their minds were dwelling on. Shooting the shit all the while watching out for facial tics, listening for trigger words, asking about any pain or stress or fucked-up thoughts...

I even sat down with Sergeant Kim, a couple days passed. Found him in his truck, alone, staring out the windshield, steadily dip-spitting into a bottle.

"Everyone's fucking done," I told him. "We don't get these guys outta here, doing something, back to base so they can at least take a shower and eat a hot meal..."

"Then what?" said Kim.

"I don't know. Nothing good, Sarnt. Does command not realize what leaving guys in a dinky little base for a fucking month will do to them?"

"You think command cares?" said Kim.

Spit.

You had to hand it to the man. After bringing up my concerns, as the designated health professional for the platoon, Kim decided he would find something for everyone to do. He would have them filling sandbags, reinforcing bunkers nobody would use, building gun positions that, likewise,

would be useless in an actual attack. Stupid-ass details. I went back to Sergeant Kim and told him he's only making these guys even more tired, even more angry and fed up.

"Let 'em be fed up," said Kim, bottom lip bulging with dip. "I give a shit. Anger better than whining all the fucking time. Anger at least make 'em fuckin' focus on the task at hand."

I went to the LT, but he deferred back to Sergeant Kim. "The man been in fifteen years, Doc. He knows what he's doing."

I couldn't fucking believe it. Neither could the guys, filling the hundredth fucking sandbag—for what purpose? No purpose. None. They get off four hours of guard duty only to have to stand in a pit with an e-tool digging away as what few hours of daylight remained to them whittled away, asking their team leaders why their platoon sergeant hated them so much.

Then, one night, fuming in the back of Kim's truck, making a point of *not* talking to him, more angry at Kim than I'd ever been angry at anybody, Taliban included, he began telling me about his family back home.

"My great uncle came from Korea, after the war. You know that, Doc? That my family came from Korea?"

I didn't know that. I never *told* him I didn't know that. But I didn't know that.

"My dad told me never to ask my uncle one thing. He said never ask your uncle about Korea."

Okay, I thought, I'll bite. Nobody tells you when you sign up to be a medic that half your job's gonna talking the platoon sergeant, the senior enlisted man, simply because he or she would have no one else to talk to.

"Why not?"

"On account of his wife." Kimm looked down into spit bottle. "My dad told me that my uncle had to leave his wife behind in the North. No one heard from her since."

"Since when?"

"Since the end of the fucking war."

“When was that?”

“1953.”

“Sheeit.”

“You think a few weeks is a long time, Doc?” Kim turned to look at me. “Try five fucking decades.”

I thought of what Kim told me while listening to Goldie whine about his jock itch. I thought of that when I looked Goldie straight in the face and I told him, “No, I’m not asking Sergeant Kim to send in a medevac for you.”

“Why not, Doc? Why the fuck not? Plea—”

“No.”

Deep down, I did care. I cared about all these fucking guys. Loved them, even. But it wasn’t my job to get anyone out of doing their jobs. No matter how tired they were. No matter how desperate or disillusioned.

“And if you keep fucking scratching at it and it *does* get infected, all I’m gonna do is tell you that I fucking told ya so!”

I packed up my med-kit and stalked off, leaving Goldie with his pants hanging around his knees.

It was about midnight, that night, when I gave Ski my nine-mil for safekeeping till dawn. Just for one night. Just one night. And it was that night, too, when the probe hit.

If any guards had been nodding off, they woke up real quick when two rocket-propelled grenades came screaming in. The RPG’s sailed over the concertina wire and hit *inside* the wall. They sounded like twin cracks of a baseball bat only ten times louder. Bursts out of a PKM, a Russian machine gun, followed. No one knew if this was it or not. *It* being the whole purpose the little base at Margha existed: to encourage an enemy attack. The gunners on the east side of the perimeter returned fire—the deep thudding of a fifty-cal, its orange-red tracers bouncing off the top of the nearest hill. The throaty chug of a mark-nineteen grenade launcher. The probe and counterfire lasted maybe thirty seconds total, until someone called a ceasefire. They’d come, hit us, then melted into the midnight mists, back down the wadis towards the border, using the fog as cover. It wasn’t until dawn that Sergeant Tate and a fire team went out to

find the spot where the enemy had fired from.

“They can fuckin’ see everything we do from up there,” said Tate, coming back in, huffing in the high altitude. “Who takes a shit when, guard rotations, everything.”

After a breakfast chow consisting of power bars and Skittles, the LT gathered everyone around the tent.

“Full battle-rattle from here on out,” he said. “They can come at us from any direction they want. They picked east, last night, but the big one could come from any direction. It—” The royal *It* “—will likely come from multiple directions at once. Shelley and Hop did a good job on the guns last night, Hernandez and Xi, too. No matter how bad it gets, we gotta maintain sector discipline. Sergeants, team leaders, remind your men: sector discipline. We can’t leave any side of the perimeter undefended. They’ll come at night. They’ll use the wadis to cover their movement till their right on our doorstep. That probe last night was just that: a probe. They wanted to see how we’d react, and though we reacted well, you can bet your next paycheck they got something bigger planned.”

“How ‘bout we just bet *your* paycheck, sir?” said Ski, giving everyone a much-needed laugh.

Everybody got frosty, at first. We cleaned our guns, oiled bolts, triple-checked racks of ammo, ran scenarios of who would go where once *it* started. But as another night, and another, and yet another, wore on with nothing happening, not so much as a single bullet or rocket, nerves began to fray. Guard was doubled during night hours, which meant even less sleep for already sleep-deprived soldiers. That’s when shit got straight-up spooky.

“Yo, Doc? You hear that?”

“Hear what?”

The fog would drift into the low places soon as the sun set.

“That whispering?”

For the life of me I couldn’t hear anything. It’d be so quiet you had to hold your breath to listen, and then, you’d wonder... Was that something? Whispers? Crunching boot soles?

Guys saw shadows flitting through their night vision. Over the radio would come Zlat's or Muerte's or Faraci's dumbass voice requesting to clear-by-fire the nearest hill. Always, the LT having to get out from under his woobie and check shit out, talk them down. No need to shoot at no shadows. Kim and the other sergeants became royally pissed. "All you privates getting spooked about nuthin, thinking you're hearing djinn and boogeymen and spirits, but there ain't nuthin there! There ain't no ghosts! It's all in your heads."

Some guys (and I never mentioned a word of it to Kim) even began muttering about abandoning Margha.

"We could steal a couple of trucks and book it back to the big base."

"They'd fuckin' impound our asses for sure."

"Better to be in prison than over-fuckin-run. I don't know about you, but I don't wanna fuckin' die here just cuz the colonel wants to get an award for killin' some fuckin' Taliban."

We, as a unit, had only another month and a wakeup. One month till that big bird home. Still, command refused to slow the optempo. Couldn't give it a break, despite most of the mountain passes already being snowed in. Had to keep pushing it, pushing us, to the bitter end.

I was in Sergeant Kim's truck, trying to not look at my watch, at what hour of the day it still was, when the squawk box blurted, "Two-seven, all squad leaders, to my truck, over."

It was the LT.

Night was falling.

Sergeant Kim got out.

"This is it?" I said to Kim, who didn't answer. "Isn't it?"

Ten minutes later, Kim returned from the leadership huddle walking with a fucking purpose. He spat his old-ass dip into the mud. "Doc, you stay with me."

"Roger."

Two extra trucks were driven to opposite sides of the base to cover the gaps in

the walls. The more experienced gunners, like Treebeard, were told to get on their guns. Everyone else took up predetermined positions around the wall.

“The fuck’s happening?” I asked Sergeant Kim.

“LT said they got intel that a hundred fighters just crossed the border, coming this way.”

“How the fuck they know that?”

Only enough light left in the sky to see Kim smirk at me. “You remember that guy you saved, Doc? The one lost his legs?” He spit. “Apparently, his granddaddy lives right over the border in Pakistan. Not only that but his granddaddy sees this Galang guy gathering up an assault force and the granddaddy, I shit you not, *walks* from his house all the way across the border to the main base to tell the Americans what he seen. You believe that shit? The granddaddy of the fuckin’ guy you saved.”

I think I just stood there with my mouth hanging open.

“Karma.” Kim knuckle-slapped my chest. “Good fuckin’ karma, Doc.”

Within an hour, we heard the telltale buzz of a drone high in the sky. The numbers began climbing: two hundred... two-hundred and fifty... three hundred... *four* hundred suspected jihadists with guns and machetes massing just the other side of the border. The CO ordered another platoon—an additional five gun trucks—out from the main base to back us up, but it was a two-hour drive and night fell swift. The last ribbons of light were swallowed up by the horizon. Everyone donned their night vision. The weight of my pack cinched into my shoulders. I hoped I would have enough saline bags, enough tourniquets, enough hands, to earn a little bit more of that *good* karma tonight. I thought back to that night in the bunker with Ski, when I asked him to take my nine-mil from me. The same nine-mil that I had already taken back, reloaded, chambered a round, that I now had strapped to my chest. I wondered if I’d have to use it—on a person this time. It was amazing though. In that moment, standing behind the lip of the wall with twenty-eight other crazed-outta-our-minds grunts, all of us listening, waiting for that first shot. All despondent feelings, thoughts of abandonment, of home, of whatever came after, vanished under the weight of *this*, this moment, this shared sense of impending fate.

A cold wind came down off the snowcaps, blew in our faces, made our breaths plume.

This is it.

I blew in my hands to keep them warm. Keep them ready.

LT was on the horn nonstop. “Apaches on call, over.” He kept everyone updated as news came in. “Predator on station.” “The eye-in-the-sky says they’ve got heat signatures on trucks, which means gun-mounted, likely.”

“Shit,” I heard Goldie whisper. “That mean dyshkas? That mean they got fucking dyshkas coming at us?”

“We’ll have A-10’s on station, too,” said the LT.

Air support—fuck yeah. Everybody felt a load lift off their shoulders. An A-10 could bring five-hundred-pound bombs to bear on those fuckers. But would it get all of them? Would it run out of fuel before the fight even started? What about the fog already drifting into the defilades? Would any pilot even be able to see the enemy?

“And specter gunships,” added the LT.

What? Specters were usually reserved for spec-ops. Those flying fortresses had a straight Howitzer canon sticking out the side of their fuselage.

“And a B-1, over.”

Guys had to laugh at that one. They had to be pulling our legs. For real—command managed to score a *bomber*? Don’t those things take off from like fuckin’ Nevada or some shit?

“Enemy sighted two clicks, out,” came the LT.

We bit our lips. Where was the airpower already? How close were they going to let the enemy get? We had to be outnumbered at least five-to-one. But this was our purpose, the point of stringing a small element way, way out on a little base. Dangling like irresistible bait on the end of a line. This was the fulfillment of our month at Margha. I just hoped I’d do my job right—fulfill my purpose, as a medic. I just hoped that we’d all live to take that big bird home. Though in my heart of hearts, I didn’t really believe all of us would...

“One click out,” said the LT.

I turned to Ski, saw my buddy's face under the green glow of his night vision, and I told him, "It's going to be alright."

VIII.



TAKE MY PUNISHMENT, YOU WHO DOUBT MY WONDERS. In the inevitable moment, when the mountains shake and the vaults of the sky are rent asunder, you shall be distributed into two groups. The people of the right shall be blessed. The people of the left shall be cast into the Pit. The people of the right do not question. The people of the left? All they do is question: "So when we are dust and bones, we shall be raised again upon the Last Day?" You who doubts my wonders, you shall boil in lakes of fire.

Was it not I who created the earth upon which you maneuver? Was it not I who created the firmament under whose darkness you hope to hide? I, who set in motion the stars? I, who sets in its place every drop of rain? Was it not I who sparked the djinn into being from a smokeless flame? Was it not I who crafted mankind from potter's clay? I, who put language upon your tongues?

"Move forward," spake Galang into his walkie-talkie. "Move your men into the wadi. Take a knee while the others catch up." (Did you not know your enemy watches your every moment? Records your every word?) "That's it."

A half-hour of swirling darkness later: "Move your men forward. When you take the base, cut the Americans heads off and place them on stakes. I'll see you on the objective."

Your enemy admires your organization, your skill wrought fighting many wars in these very hills. But your enemy, also, is in no mood for prisoners. Nor for mercy.

Heed the words of *al-Waqi'ah*! Summon them! Recite!

A flicker of light, a sound, a buzzing, which you do not recognize until you do, until it is too late, and in the inevitable moment you know it to be the sound of your doom. You hurry forward but the sound grows, and grows, into shrieking fury. A flash and a bang and the ground goes up under you, and the cliffs so tight in this passage through the hills crumble down on top of you. Angels seem to plummet from the heavens, and surely, you wonder, whether even the djinns in these hills aren't split open, too, by the blast of a bomb, the shredding of a thousand-thousand rounds spewed from the tip of some unseen harpy, these very metal shards which splice into pieces your friends, your followers, the men who you led, who you promised, who now die in their dozens around you. Take my punishment you who doubts my wonders. Watch your so carefully planned attack come undone before your very eyes, before it's even begun. How could this tragedy be? How could your Creator, the most gracious, the most merciful, not have His Hand in this? For even the doings of Shaitan are designed by He Who Sits on High. All that is or was or will be is already writ.

In this moment, my Light shineth upon thee, and for a moment, as the skreich of utter power descends upon you along with Death itself, I gift you Sight.

You see the gray splotch which is yourself in the sights of the infidels in their cockpits who target you. You see the image relayed from the cockpit to the drone higher up who relays it to a secret satellite among the stars who relays it to yet more screens in operation centers from the main base to the larger battalion base to Bagram to the worldly command they call CENTCOM to a headquarters in a place called Tampa to the Pentagon itself which nineteen other martyrs had previously laid low, at least for a day. So many eyes upon you, Galang. What wonders of Man exist that I do not ordain? What Hellfire?

The thunder rises to crescendo. The eye of the storm, in all its metallic and electronic might, bears down upon thee.

And what remaineth of thy force? Amid the smoking corpses of your trucks, the lightning-rent craters in the dirt? Of a force of one hundred and fifty (mostly) willing martyrs staged against twenty-nine infidels huddled in their pathetically small base? Nearly five times the manpower. Every single one of your men who you convinced, cajoled, coerced onto this mission of duty, of glory, of honor, as though you, yourself, given your decades of experience, believed in such things... what remains of them now?

Spleens and bone fragments and gall bladders and snipped urethras. Chunks of torsos. Twisted-out spines. Hip sockets and a leg with one buttock still attached, though no foot, its cargo pants and kneepad yet duly strapped over the flesh. Half a face. They're barely even recognizable as human anymore, the

meaty bits flung hither and thither. The bombs keep coming though they're merely tossing pieces from one side of the pass to the next at this point. Booming you, all of you, into smaller and smaller morsels, until nothing remains, nothing but dust.

No one survives. Your enemy takes no casualties whatsoever. Not a single shot fired in anger from the platoon within the base. Only the cool, calm, disinterested voices in cockpits delineating and neutralizing targets. You see, as you leave the remnants of your body which you no longer recognize as a body behind, all of the Russian-made guns and mortars and grenades you had so carefully checked and rechecked on each of your men, and you wonder in amazement at how tiny, how puny, how fickle, it all seems. Will there be anything left to resurrect upon The Last Day? How could my Hand not be in this? Who are you who doubts my wonders?

Time shall tell. Time tests all Faith.

IX.

NOT ONE. NOT A SINGLE SHOT. The enemy never got close enough. We stood down. Returned to our trucks and cots and sleeping mats, the adrenalin leeching out our veins into our livers until, next morning, we pissed it out with the rest of the waste.

Still, what a fucking show, huh? All those thuds in the mountains. The white smacks of light on the horizon.

"Like fucking fireworks," said Kim.

"A farewell show," I said, and it was, and I remembered to unload that round in the chamber before we, those of us who remained, returned to base.



ABOUT THE WRITER:

J.G.P. MACADAM is the first in his family to earn a college degree. His publications can be found in *The Colorado Review*, *Every Day Fiction*, *JMWW* and *Pithead Chapel*, among others. His novelette *A Square of Dirt* about the birth, life and death of a firebase in the Tangi Valley, Afghanistan, is available from ELJ Editions.

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Drops of Water

Haiku by Yuko Otomo

Irish translation by Gabriel Rosenstock

Scots translation by John McDonald

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Haiku Sequences on the Mississippi Delta region by Jianqing Zheng

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Poetry by Bruce Robinson

Eye of the Fish

Haiga (or EKPHRASTIC HAIKU) with photography by Debiprasad Mukherjee

and with Haiku in English and Irish by Gabriel Rosenstock

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Experimental Discourse by Jim Meirose with an essay

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Pareidolia

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Haibun & Short Poems by Steve Gerson

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Overland Geometry

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Poetry by Sean G. Meggeson

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