

New Essay by Lauren Kay Johnson: Things Received

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It came by helicopter twice a week, if weather and security were sufficient for air travel. In the shack next to the Helicopter Landing Zone, it was sorted by unit; everything bound for “Provincial Reconstruction Team Paktia” loaded onto the back of a rickety cart, driven by our personnel officer down the gravel walkway to the meeting area outside our military barracks. Sometimes we waited there too. On clear days, we anticipated the announcement before the sergeant’s booming voice crackled over the radio.

“Mail call! Mail call in front of the B-huts!”

There were letters and cards, photos of people we missed and postcards of places we couldn’t be. I taped mine to the plywood wall next to my bed in a patchwork wallpaper of home. Sometimes cards fell down on me while I slept, blanketing me in sentiment:

We’re all thinking of you, Lauren.

Stay Safe!

I love you.

Kick some Taliban butt!

Though America at large may have forgotten, it was clear that elementary schools and church groups remembered we were a nation at war. Students mailed handwritten notes with endearing misspellings, backward letters and stick-figure doodles. Adult influence peppered the messages—too vengeful, too assured—but they succeeded in making us smile. Churches

sent crocheted crosses and assured us that God was blessing the brave soldiers and America, though blessing us with what they didn't specify.

There were favorite snacks. For me, Twizzlers, trail mix with M&Ms, and the Risen chocolates I'd hoarded as a child from my grandparents' candy bowls. There were baked goods that had gone stale during transit (we still ate them), chocolates or gummies that melted into one gooey glob (we ate them too). We learned to hunt for the tiny plastic baby inside a New Orleans King Cake and that Italian pizzelles look like crusty waffles but taste like buttered heaven.

There were resupplies: batteries, shampoo, baby wipes, lip balm, my favorite pomegranate body wash; and practical luxuries: alcohol-free hand sanitizer, extra strength moisturizer to combat the dry air and highly-chlorinated water that flaked off our skin in scaly patches. There were indulgences: the stockpile of gourmet coffee that doused the stale office in rotations of chocolate-covered cherry and hazelnut biscotti fumes, Netflix discs that often arrived out of sequence: *True Blood* Season 2 disc 2, while disc 1 stalled somewhere in southwest Asia. There were iPods to replace those done in by Afghan dust and CDs for an attempt to keep up with pop culture. We ordered books and movies to read and watch, but also to ensure our names would be called in front of the barracks in 2-4 weeks.

There were holiday treats, which made missing holidays both more tolerable and more obvious, and knickknacks we imbued with greater meaning. A Halloween skeleton decoration from my mom became an office mascot, a meager version of ventriloquist Jeff Dunham's Achmed the Dead Terrorist: Scull replaced with a printout of Achmed's turbaned head, "I KILL YOU" scrawled across a speech bubble. He would get new attire to mark each holiday.



Achmed enjoys Mardi Gras

There were what we called “leftovers,” items that had outlived their American usefulness or had been cast off from larger bases: gossip magazines broadcasting celebrity marriages, which by the time we read of them had ended. Cases of Girl Scout cookies, but only the tasteless shortbread variety. (I once heard rumor of a single box of Thin Mints but never saw evidence.) There were packages designated “for any soldier,” usually stuffed with candy; for well-meaning patriotic souls, sugar was a salve for any conflict. Occasionally, a “for any female soldier” made its way to our tiny base on the Pakistan border, and the seven of us gathered to ogle expired Mary Kay lotions, nail polishes and lipsticks we weren’t authorized to wear, and, once, a box of extra-large bras.

There were things that defied categorization, like the shipment of promotional materials for American Idol Season 4 runner-up Bo Bice. There were items designated for Afghan humanitarian aid: hats knitted by a widow in Florida, school supplies, sunscreen and summer sandals, and boxes and boxes of Beanie Babies.

The Beanie Babies came from Indiana, the headquarters of Beanies for Baghdad, an organization that collected the stuffed animals to send to deployed troops in Iraq and Afghanistan for distribution to local children. The PRT Paktia recipient rotated to a new unit volunteer every nine months. For nine months, the Beanies came to me.

I thought it a noble idea, reallocating American surplus in the form of fuzzy, bean-stuffed animals that were fleetingly thought to be a valuable collector’s item. I was no stranger to the toys—I still kept one of the rare nine original Beanies on a bookshelf in my childhood bedroom: Flash the Dolphin, purchased at a swim meet in my pre-teen years—and I was happy to be their Paktia courier. I wasn’t expecting, however, the sheer quantity of Beanie Babies that made their way from

American households to Indiana, to cargo space on a commercial airliner; to Germany or Spain for redistribution and refueling; likely to Kuwait or Kyrgyzstan for further sorting; then on military aircraft to the Regional Mail Distribution Center at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan; then on smaller aircraft to eastern region hubs in Khost or Paktika provinces; then finally by helicopter to Paktia, separated into the PRT pile, loaded onto the back of the gator, driven down the gravel walkway and passed, with growing amusement, into my expectant hands.



The author out on mission

At first, I opened the boxes alone at my desk, rummaging through layers of bright plush, pulling out any pigs (insulting in Muslim culture), the American flag-emblazoned bears (a bit too overt), and any snacks or novelties buried underneath to be tossed in the office “morale pile” for mass

consumption. The remaining Beanies were stacked in the humanitarian aid freight container next to bags of rice and fluffy piles of winter coats. After a while, though, something happened that neither I nor the founder of Beanies for Baghdad could have predicted. Maybe it was the regularity of the packages in a place where nothing seemed regular, or nostalgia to bridge comforts few and far between. Perhaps it served as simply a colorful diversion from the monotonous, dusty brown. Whatever the reason, I suddenly became very popular on mail days.

The coffee maker spewed sweet fumes over a growing crowd while I sliced the packing tape on the familiar boxes. Over the clack of busy keyboards and wind rattling the flimsy outer door, the office rang with cries of, "Oh this one's so cute! I'm gonna put it on my desk!" A young Airman started a collection of sea creatures; by the time we left, she could have staged a production of *The Little Mermaid*. We could barely see our head medic behind the community of bears that inhabited her desk. I kept two cats perched next to a picture of my real cats. At Christmastime, a parade of festively-adorned Beanies marched across the conference room table. We discovered a dinosaur that bore uncanny resemblance to the sword-wielding figure on the insignia for the neighboring Army unit, and the unit adopted him, using a sharpie to make color corrections and gluing a plastic knife between his paws. Some, like the gruff Army First Sergeant, feigned annoyance, but a smile twitched across his lips as he cursed the Beanies under his breath.

Even the PRT's hard-headed, no-nonsense lead engineer who worked next door took a liking to a lemur with large, goofy eyes. One day I threw the lemur over the wall that separated our offices—it had become habit for us to launch care package goodies back and forth, a form of warzone entertainment. On this occasion, though, all that came flying back was a comment about "this one" being "especially ugly." Big Eyes spent the

rest of our tour displayed prominently on the engineer's desk (watched over by Bo Bice's shaggy-haired, bare-chested image from a calendar that the engineering team swore they hung ironically).

A few of the Beanie Babies even made it back to the States. Birthday bears were popular to send to loved ones at home, but occasionally another critter grabbed someone's attention. I remember one afternoon a Security Forces soldier plucked a Beanie from its box and held it out in his burly arm. The soldier's rifle, slung across his chest, rattled as he bounced excitedly, smiling through a cheek-full of tobacco.

"Hey L-T, mind if I take this one? I want to send it to my daughter. She loves pandas."

I didn't think about it then, the irony of these well-traveled Beanies, making their way from their original homes to Indiana and through the 2-4 week odyssey to Paktia, only to be boxed up and sent back in reverse. On both ends, something to fill the gaps between the lines. Something to miss or hope for, something to crave. A distraction—escape from monotony and chaos and uncertainty, and from other topics we'd rather not discuss.