# New Nonfiction from J.G.P. MacAdam: “Was His Name Mohammed Hassan?”

I don’t want to keep going back there. I’m damn near forty years old; too broke and tubby to deploy anymore. It’s my kid’s birthday next week. I should be thinking about balloons, wrapping paper, last-minute toys to order off Amazon. I don’t want to keep going back there, to the dust up my nose from another bomb buried in the road, to the holes left in me, those feelings, the loss, but I do.

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It’s eight months into my second deployment. August 2009. I’m standing in a guard tower sandwiched between two hesco bastions, looking out over a lush green carpet of terraced farms and qalats, all of it laid out before me with titanic, purple-brown, barren peaks rising up either side. Wheat grows down in the strip of green, apple and apricot orchards. Your night vision snags in their branches during patrols. I’m standing in my uniform, wearing a patrol cap, my radio tucked in my back pocket with the antennae whapping me in the shoulder. There are two other guys with me in the tower, wearing their mitch helmets, vests, ammo, however-many pounds of gear. I’m the Sergeant of the Guard, on light duty inside the walls of COP Blackhawk. My left hand looks like someone’s blown one of those purple latex gloves into a balloon, but the swelling’s been going down over the last couple of days. Within a week or so, I’ll be on patrol again.

One of the guys is talking about this new JSS—a Joint Security Something or other, I can’t remember my acronyms anymore. It’s a base. We’re going to build another base out at the far western nexus of that green carpet. Near a village named

Omarkhel.

“Somebody’s gonna fuckin’ die,” he says.

I can’t disagree with him.

“You believe this shit, sergeant? We’re practically combat fuckin’ inoperable what with all the casualties we’ve taken and they want us to go out *there* and man another fuckin’ base?”

“Bullshit,” says the other guard.

“What’s gonna happen when this JSS gets hit, huh? I mean, we can’t even use the road without Counter-IED clearin’ the way. How’s anyone supposed to get out there to help us?”

“Hell, even Counter-IED got hit with an IED.”

This is all stuff way over any of our pay grades.

“What do you think, sergeant?”

I don’t say it but I think he’s probably right. Whoever came up with the grand idea of plopping another base even deeper into Nerkh Valley is going to get a rude awakening when they hear about yet another truckful of soldiers getting blown sky-high either on their way out to or back from it. It’s the road. There’s only one squiggly-ass dirt road in or out of that valley; a natural bottleneck. We’ve already lost so many because of that road. Hall. Ogden. Wilson. Obakrairur. Farris. I’m twenty-four years old and I’m tired of people dying. People I knew, ate with, slept next to, traded jokes and slaphappy bro-handshakes with.

Maybe my name is next.

But if the higher-ups want a base out in Indian Country then they get a base in Indian Country. That’s where the bad guys are at, hooah.

The guard flicks his cigarette. “Shit’s pointless.” His cherry somersaults through the razor wire, and down, out of sight. “We’re just shoving a stick in a hornet’s nest. These people aren’t ever gonna change.”

And it hits me that if a couple of grunts with probably nothing more than high school diplomas (and a Good Enough Degree, in my case) can see the fruitlessness of our endeavors in Afghanistan, then why can’t the generals, politicians and think-tank analysts up there in the Big Beltway in the Sky? How many more grunts have to die until they do?

“What do you think, sergeant?”

“I think both of ya need to mind your sectors.” Or, in other words, quit your bitching about shit none of us have any control over. “I’m headed to the other tower, call me if you need anything.”

Within a month the JSS would be built, then abandoned. It happened on their way back. It happened on the road. Pellerin. That was his name.

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Wait, no. What actually happened was that I was in the recovery tent on FOB Shank. It wasn’t even twenty-four hours since I’d been wounded when a whole truckful of Blackhawk guys choppers in. Another IED. I beeline it into the triage tent and stand next to them, let them see a face they recognize, crack a joke or two. Some are still out of it. Specks of dirt in the creases of their faces. A couple in neck braces. One with a broken leg. Everyone’s been thrown around the inside of an armored truck and, yes, the steel is just as hard on the inside as it is on the outside. Necks, backs, heads, spines—all discombobulated. I count five, total, in the triage tent. They’re missing one. The driver.

It isn’t until after nightfall that we send Pellerin home. No

lights but the ghostly green out of a Blackhawk. The wind of its rotors. The medics, doctors and others create a cordon leading up to the bird. I'm unexpectedly grateful it's my left hand that's wounded and not my right since I have to salute with my right.

We salute Pellerin.

He floats between rows of saluting soldiers. A body shape inside a black body bag. Four carry him on a stretcher but I don't see them, I just see Pellerin sliding onto a waiting helicopter and the doors close and the engine rises in pitch as its wheels cease to touch ground and he's gone. The IED had blown him mitch-first through three inches of ballistic windshield. I pray it was quick.

In another day or two, after catching a rare hot shower—careful not to get too much water in the hole in my shoulder, or the one in my thigh, or those in my hand—I'm on my own Blackhawk to FOB Airborne in Maiden Shar, then on a convoy back out to Nerkh, where I belong. That's the order of events. A conversation with a guard in a tower about somebody dying actually happened *before* I was wounded. But it's all so twelve, thirteen years ago, it's like something out of a dream anymore. A gush of emotive images, smells, meanings. Takes a while for everything to settle into place.

Nettlesome memories, getting in the way of the story I want to tell and how I want to tell it, memories half-imagined anymore, memorized imaginings, best just forget about all of them, I got a kid's birthday to prep for—tap, ctrl + A, delete.

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I'd rather a thousand Afghans die than one more American soldier. This is what I write on my laptop in a not-so-diary word doc. It's mid to late August 2009 and I type this, and save it, because it captures everyone's frustration, my own

particularly. A thousand lives equated to one. I write it because it feels so right, visceral, and I write it because it feels so wrong, vile.

At the beginning of the deployment, I spent months not in an infantry line company, where I felt I belonged, but behind a desk in the Maiden Shar District Center trading scraps of intel with Afghan police and national army about what was happening where, which outposts were attacked when, IED reports, and so on. I learned to speak some Dari, shared meals and chai with one Afghan officer after the next, traded jokes, was guarded by them while I took my turn grabbing a few hours of shuteye in a connex no more than a few steps outside the door of our little intel-swap office. I came to admire a number of Afghans, their patriotism, their ingenuity, their faith, and to sympathize with them, with the obstinacy of Afghanistan's many hydra-headed problems, from corruption, to extremism, to poverty, to incompetence.

But now I'm back in an infantry line unit and things are a little different. I'm so tired of people dying. Everyone is. You deploy raring to kick some ass only to discover your entire deployment is turning into a line of losses, one after the next, like holes left in the road out in that bottleneck. You try to fill in the hole with something, anything, but it never fills.

Sure, we conduct a handful of night ops in retaliation, kick in some doors, find some IED-wire, but, soon enough, that hole's empty all over again.

We're rough with the people. Headed back to base, we're dismounted, when my team leader spots a guy on a cellphone. He zeroes in on the guy, smacks the cellphone out of his hand, shoves him up against a mud wall, pats him down, stomps his cellphone into pieces. Another soldier smashes their buttstock through someone's windows while we're searching their qalat. Oops. When another IED hits, more than a few of us squeeze our

triggers off at anyone. Goat-herder running away from the explosion? Pop-pop-pop. Van getting too close, not responding to shouts and waves to stop? Put half a belt of 7.62 through their windshield. Guy digging in the middle of the road for no discernible reason? One shot, one kill.

Yes, there were good things we did, promises kept. Communication barriers overcome. But throwing bags of candy at little kids and drinking chai with elders and showing general good will at best papers over the bad stuff. When the Big Army comes down and an investigation ensues about why this farmer was killed, it's found that escalation of force procedures were followed. It's an unfortunate accident. Here's some money for the family.

But the people's grievances keep piling up. Whatever trust we build, it's erased with the single squeeze of a trigger. Try to paper over things but all that does is add fuel to the fire. It also doesn't help that the Afghan army is often more indiscriminate with their bullets than we are.

The people are convinced, the Taliban encourages them to think this way, that you can never trust a non-Muslim, a foreigner, an American, or the puppet government they're propping up. Trust is the hot commodity. You trust your brothers-in-arms over any Afghan stranger, but do you trust an American soldier's narrative over an Afghan's? Should you?

On another mission, a couple of guys wander into our perimeter, smiling, waving, out for a morning stroll—Oh look, Americans sprouted in our front yard overnight. We detain both of them, zip-cuff their wrists, put them in a row with all of the other military-age males we're rounding up. Because we don't know. We can't tell the difference between who's Taliban and who isn't. We don't speak the language, don't understand the culture, we don't really want to.

First day in country and they're telling you about counterinsurgency doctrine, winning hearts and minds, even the President of the United States can spout off buzz words like COIN and the people are the key terrain, but it doesn't make a dent in us. Not down in the thick of the ranks. From newbie privates already indoctrinated to mid-career professionals to flag officers, the majority of us resist counterinsurgency. These people, the rank and file, the army with its sergeants, lieutenants, captains, majors, colonels and kickass (kiss-ass?) corporate culture, they're never going to change.

I'd rather a thousand Afghans die than one more American soldier. We put the people in our sights because, often enough, they were the only target we could find. The people, stuck in a no man's land between pissing off the Taliban, who will kill them for talking to Americans, and us, who kick in their doors in the middle of the night and make their children scream when we zip-cuff their fathers. Still hear myself screaming at ten-year-olds. Sit down and shut the fuck up! Is that me? Is this who I am? Where's my compassion?

I'm too tired of people dying, of worrying about one of my guys dying, or myself, tired of civilians catching the flak from soldiers frustrated with their role in a mean little war. It's only another week until my scheduled R&R and it can't come fast enough.

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I'm on my way back from R&R. September 2009. I'm sitting in coach and reading the latest Stars and Stripes when there's an itch on the top of my left hand, on the meaty part between my thumb and forefinger. I scratch at it. It feels like the tip of a screw just starting to poke out the wrong side. What the hell? And I realize: it's my shrapnel. It's working its way out.

Don't pick at it.

Eventually, I leave it alone and return to reading my Stars and Stripes. The engines decelerate; we begin our descent. I finish my article and turn the—stop. *Remembering the Fallen*. Two full pages of photographs, ranks, names, places and dates of death, so many soldiers and marines, so many faces, names, but I'm zeroed in on just two of them.

That's them—isn't it? That's their faces, ranks, names, dates, place of—that's fucking them. Cox. Allen. They're fucking dead.

"Shit!"

Heads swivel. I'm on a civilian flight. I'm not wearing my uniform but one look at my high-and-tight and anybody can probably tell. I fold up my Stars and Stripes, open it back up, recheck their names, their faces. I stare and keep staring until I'm certain I'm not seeing things.

"Shit."

I say it much closer to myself this time. I fold up my Stars and Stripes—don't, don't open it again—and drop my head back and close my eyes and try not to think anything, to hear anything, but it comes on, under the clunk of landing gear and the roar of decelerating aircraft, a whisper in my head, an incantation, repeating names, all of their names.

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I'm standing in a shower connex with a pair of tweezers in my right hand. I've been in Kuwait a few days, waiting for a C-17 to shuttle me back to Afghanistan. My shrapnel's made a little recess for itself in the top of my left hand, though initially, boom, it entered through my palm. My tweezers don't even have to pull, it just snaps through the last threadbare bit of skin and rimming of puss and I'm holding it, looking at it, my shrapnel, under the phosphorescent glare of the light over the mirror. It's like a tiny meteor, silverish, clean.

The hole in my hand isn’t bleeding or anything. My body made a perfect little recess to spit out the contaminant. New skin’s even starting to grow down inside. Without waiting to think twice, I release my tweezers and watch as my shrapnel drops into the sink, clink, down the drain, gone. I don’t need any token reminders. Their names are etched in my memory.

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I also own a black bracelet with all of their names etched onto it. After we got back, roundabout January 2010, everyone in the company received a black bracelet with our fallen writ across it. Many Blackhawk guys were already wearing one; now even more wore one. I did not wear one, I still don’t. My black bracelet is hidden in a box in the basement, along with all of my other army stuff. To meet me, to walk in my house, you’d never know I was even in the military. No awards or folded flags hanging from my living room wall. My scars and the beaten pathways of my thoughts remind me enough, thanks very much.

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It’s October and I’m back where I belong on COP Blackhawk talking to a couple of my fellow non-comms.

They’re tolerating me, sort of.

“Remember back in February, back before we even started building the cop,”—COP, or combat outpost. “And there was this intel report about the AP3 checkpoint out in Omarkhel getting attacked?”—AP3, Afghan Public Protection Program, call them whatever just don’t call them a US-equipped militia of half-Taliban good ol’ boys.

“Sorta,” says one of my fellow non-comms.

“What about it?” says the other.

“You remember the checkpoints falling? In February it was the

checkpoint in Omarkhel. In March, the one in Karimdad. Then Mir-Hazari in April. By May, it was Dehayat's turn." I remember this because I used to work in that intel-swap office. A big map on the wall demarcated every AP3 checkpoint; I remember erasing them. "One after the next, west to east, all through the bottleneck, those checkpoints fell like fucking dominoes, remember?"

They're not sure, it's October and this is all so four months ago. (I'm not even sure, umpteen years later.)

"But you see what I'm saying? Special Forces set up the local militias, equipped them, then set up the checkpoints to safeguard the road. But the SF are all over the place, they can't back up the militias day and night. Those checkpoints didn't have any support. Not even from us though we can literally *see* Dehayat from here."

"Mac, what's your point?"

"June was when we started taking major fucking casualties, right?"

"Yeah—and?"

"It's the road, see? The Taliban wanted unfettered fucking access to the road. That's why the checkpoints were attacked. That's why building a JSS all the way out to Omarkhel was never going to work, cuz the bottleneck was already IED-fucking-alley by the end of summer. The Taliban *knew* the road was key, they knew it all along."

"Taliban don't know shit. Don't go giving those goat-fuckers any more credit than they deserve."

"Yeah Mac, sounds like you're scrapin' the bottom of the barrel on that one. Every road's got IEDs in 'em."

And they leave me standing there in the dirt. Now I'm the one talking about stuff way above my pay grade. They didn't quite

say that, but they didn't have to. And it takes me a cold minute to realize: they're right. Stay in your lane, buck sergeant. Stop talking about shit you don't know the first thing about. No one wants to listen to you, you make too many mistakes.

I look down at my left hand.

Sure, I do some things right. I've maneuvered my squad under fire, engaged the enemy, prevented my own soldier from firing on someone they weren't supposed to only to spin around at the shot from another finishing the job. Still, I'm nowhere near the level of competence I expect myself to be. I mean, no one is, but I've got one field-grade and two company-grades under my belt in my seven years in this man's army, and—

Only a divot of a scar left in the top of my hand, a pale slice in my palm.

They told us before the mission not to go near the road. There was intel about (yet another) IED. Don't go near the fucking road, they said. And what does Sergeant Mac do?

Thing is, it wasn't just me who was wounded that day. Our lieutenant caught one or more pieces of shrapnel, too. But because his were located near a major artery—which I believe he made a full recovery from, last I talked to him—the docs shipped him back stateside, just to be safe. Be glad it wasn't worse. That's what I tell myself.

And it hits me: I'm not cut out for this operational shit. It's October and we're not even pulling patrols out west of Dehayat anymore. We're doing odd jobs around COP Blackhawk, pulling guard, visiting "safe" villages like Kanie Ezzat and Dae Afghanan. Busy work. Minimal risk. Command doesn't want any more casualties, not this late in the game. It's October and all we're doing is winding down the clock, waiting for the next regular infantry company, the 173$^{rd}$ out of Vincenza, to

begin rotating in. It’s October and I’m less than a year out from the end of my enlistment, and I’m done. Done with Afghanistan, with the army, with all of it. If I make it back to Fort Drum in the next couple of months, I’m out.

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It’s the day before my kid’s birthday and we don’t have any cream cheese. How’re we supposed to make frosting for his birthday cake? Who’s running to the grocery store? You? Me?

Please let it be me.

Going into it you think it’ll be easy, being a stay-at-home dad. You won’t turn into a frazzled wreck of your former self. You won’t end up desperate for a mere thirty-minute jaunt to Walmart, a slice of time, a guilty convalescence from the rabid lunacies of your toddler, a chance to feel, I don’t know, normal again, but you do. Transitioning to solids. A dab of toothpaste the size of a pea. Fucking potty training. Your spouse gets to go and do adult things like commute to work, talk to other adults at work, stress out about work, while you get to stay at home and watch Blippi the clown for the umpteenth time and fight to survive another day of it. Because when you’re a stay-at-home parent every day can feel like a losing battle. He’s teething (again). Only daddy can rock him to sleep anymore. Take that out of your mouth. Spit it out—now!

I’m standing in the dairy section at Walmart and I’m spacing out. I’m not thinking about the all-natural organic cream cheese in my left hand, a buck-fifty more expensive than the low-fat generic cream cheese in my right. The coolness of their cubes in my palms. No, I’m trying to remember the names of mountains.

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It’s December and my last night in COP Blackhawk. The

remaining days of twenty-o-nine, and our deployment, can be counted on one hand. We're hours away from lining up in our chalks and hitching a ride up to Bagram. Midnight flights.

Darkness the infantryman's friend. The 173rd have already come in and taken over, pulling guard, running missions, sleeping in what were until very recently our tents. I'm standing down at the smoke pit and the stars are above me, brilliant spangled sonsabitches like nothing you see back stateside. And there are the mountains, black crags tearing into the spectacle.

I recall a few missions where we scaled the mountains and when we scaled them, we named them. Names like Mount Outlaw, Chocolate Chip, Drag-Ass One, Drag-Ass Two-point-O, Blackhawk Point. Who knew, or cared, what names the Afghans had given them.

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At least, those are the names I can remember. I doubt my memory and I absolutely doubt my own versions of events, biased and incomplete as they are bound to be. I don't really mention any heroics, mine or anyone else's. My mind doesn't dwell on standard heroics like it does the unpleasant realities, the blind spots in our collective rearview, the things that should not have happened but always do.

I'm damn near forty years old, staring into space, until I remember the cubes of cream cheese in my hands. Organic or generic? Price and packaging. What's the difference, really? Is there any difference between the mythic me, the combat story me, and the now me, the real me standing in the dairy section of Walmart in flip-flops and pajama pants with two leftover bits of twelve-year-old shrapnel still in him? God knows they may never work themselves out.

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My cherry crackles in the midnight December chill. There's only a handful of us down at the smoke pit. None of us speak. We're all looking out at the stars and mountains. Each of us in our own way saying goodbye, good riddance and good fucking luck. It's only a few hours and we're walking across the landing zone of COP Blackhawk under the gusts of propellers. I count my guys aboard the Chinook. Then I embark and catch a seat with a view out the back ramp. The only light is a green bulb in the fuselage. It details each of our faces. The only sound is the thrum of the double rotors. I give a thumbs-up to the crewman, then, in the next moment, we're leaving. Never get tired of that elevator-drop in the pit of my stomach when the chopper's wheels cease to touch ground.

I'm looking out the back of the Chinook, at the dark outline of COP Blackhawk as it circles below. The overall square of hesco bastions. The moonlit carpet of gravel from one end of base to the next. Armored trucks parked in rows. Light discipline observed. In a few beats of the chopper's blades, COP Blackhawk is out of sight and I lean back in my seat, and my gear, my carbine muzzle-down between my legs, and I'm looking back at when we first arrived in Nerkh.

COP Blackhawk did not exist back in January or February or whenever it was. We visited the Nerkh District Center, a stone's throw down the hill from where COP Blackhawk would be. The District Center wasn't much to look at. A handful of Afghan soldiers, a sprinkling of police. What caught our attention were the bullet holes riddling the walls around the outside of the compound. One sergeant looked at me, grinned and said, "It's like the Alamo." I grinned back at him. Hell yeah, the Alamo. That's what every infantryman really wants deep in their bones.

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From January to December 2009, Blackhawk Company lost a total of eight killed in action. All of them to IEDs. Not to mention

the dozens upon dozens of others who did not die but continue to suffer from paralysis, imbedded shrapnel, leg, neck and back injuries, PTSD, suicide. Their names are forever etched in my memory.

After we left, COP Blackhawk was renamed to COP Nerkh. Did the 173rd rename the mountains, too? Or the company after them? Or the company after them? The names that stay with you, the names that wash away.

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When I ask the Afghan army commander who had taken over COP Nerkh after the Green Berets' exit if there was any way that someone could bury a body 50 yards outside his perimeter without him being aware of it, he laughs. "There is no possibility," he says, pointing out that his guard towers have clear lines of sight in all directions over the flat ground. No one could start digging outside the base without attracting immediate attention. "The Americans must have known they were there."

—*The A-Team Killings*, Rolling Stone, November 13, 2013

It puts my hairs on end. I've walked over that ground. We, Blackhawk Company, built COP Nerkh. My ten toes tingling inside of my boots. Ten bodies buried under the ground. When a place you've known becomes a site of torture and mass burial, it's unthinkable, tragic, and then, all too familiar.

Many regular infantry bases, built up during the surge in '09, were turned over to Special Forces roundabout 2012. The surge was drawing down, the decade-long withdrawal from Afghanistan just beginning. Special Forces were sent in to assure Afghan allies we weren't completely abandoning them while appeasing taxpayers back home by supplanting thousands of regular troops with "pods" of Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) teams.

ODA Team 3124 took over COP Nerkh.

In November 2012, Aziz Rehman was found under a bridge in a wadi, beaten, near death. He'd reportedly been stopped by Special Forces, on the road, earlier that day. He died right before reaching a hospital in Kabul.

Mohammed Hassan, in December 2012, was waiting with his family for the bus to Kabul. The bearded soldiers told him to come with them. Mohammed said to his family not to worry, that he'd meet them in Kabul. They never saw him alive again.

Nasratullah, a veterinary student, home on break in Ibrahimkhel, was abducted in a Special Forces night raid in February 2013.

I've read there was a box, on COP Nerkh. A plywood cube. The bearded soldiers put the men they arrested in the box. Agha, a fifty-year-old man and employee in Maiden Shar, described how Special Forces broke into his house without knocking and took him to their base. When he was electrocuted, buried up to his neck and left to freeze overnight, or dunked headfirst into a barrel of water, Agha said it was the Americans telling the Afghan soldiers to do it.

The SF went to Karimdad, to Omarkhel, to Dae Afghanan, to all of these villages I still see before me, the road twisting through them, golden mulberries drying in a wooden bowl, the apple orchards with the oldest trees and the deepest shade. There was a man I met in Dae Afghanan, in twenty-o-nine. We knocked on his door and he allowed us to search his home. It was a cursory search; peek inside. Clear. I remember I stood outside, just below the man, in his courtyard, my eyes feasting on his garden. A bee rummaging across the fiery head of a zinnia. Red-lipstick geraniums. The cool blue of cornflowers, or something like them. Salamalekum. You have a beautiful garden. I said this to him through our interpreter. He put his palm to his chest. Salam. Thank you. Was his name

Mohammed Hassan? I don’t know; I can’t remember even asking the man his name.

In 2013, a military investigation was opened, shut, with “no evidence connecting US troops to allegations of abuse, torture, harassment and murder of innocent Afghans.” Protests erupted in Wardak Province. Hamid Karzai demanded the Special Forces leave Nerkh and, by April 2013, they did. Within a month, with permission from Afghan security forces, relatives began uncovering bodies scattered in shallow graves around the walls of COP Nerkh. Relatives who had searched, questioned and quested in vain to find out what had happened to their brother, father, son, as no record existed of their relation being detained in any official database, now knew.

Neamatullah wept when, with pickaxes, his three brothers, Hekmatullah, Sediqullah, and Esmatullah, were raised up out of the brown broken earth. He knew them only by their clothes—a telltale scarf, a shirt, a watch. All else was bones and barely decayed flesh.

Information is scant, but from what I can discern an investigation was reopened, per new evidence presented by the International Committee of the Red Cross, and it’s still pending, or has gone stale, unresolved, or is closed again. Who knows? It’s all so five, six, seven years ago. Many fingers point towards the Special Forces’ interpreter, Zikria Kandahari, but, as a 2013 Human Rights Watch article points out: “Even if Afghan personnel are found to have carried out the killings and mistreatment, US personnel can bear criminal responsibility for war crimes and other violations of international law if they aided and abetted, ordered, or knew or should have known about crimes committed by their subordinates and took no action.”

Things buried, whether in flesh or earth, have ways of wriggling themselves out into the light. Ten bodies buried under the ground. Another eight found dead or left for dead in

wadis, under bridges, or what have you, in Nerkh Valley, Afghanistan. Come home, kiss your wife, go to your kid's birthday party. And what of the people you left behind who don't have their son, father, husband anymore? What memorial will come to stand on that ground? What plaque speak their names?

Mohammad Qasim. Nawab. Sayed Mohammad. Noorullah. Mohammad Hassan. Esmatullah. Sediqullah. Atiqullah. Mansoor. Mehrab Khan.

Maybe the tragedy itself needs a name for people to remember it by. Maybe we call it the Nerkh Massacre, or the Nerkh Killings, so it can join the long sad list of other massacres, named and unnamed, committed by US military forces, from Wounded Knee to No Gun Ri, from Bud Dajo to Bad Axe, from Haditha to My Lai. That village, or valley, or river, that ground forever in collective memory stained in blood. Or will their names, too, one day, wash away?

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My kid's birthday goes off without a hitch. He's running circles around the yard with cream cheese frosting still stuck to his cheeks—organic, only the best for my baby. I'm sitting in a lawn chair, watching him, and imagining a future-me and a future-teenaged-him sitting at the table in the kitchen. I'm talking away about something or other, but then, out it slips, and he asks, "Wait, dad, you were in the army?" and I say, "Yeah, for… a little while."

"Why have I never heard about this?"

"Well, it wasn't anything to write home about—say, what're you doing with your friends this afternoon?"

That's how it goes. Divert and distract. Change subjects. It never works out that way. But I don't want my kid following in my footsteps. Chasing war, combat, strife, then growing into a

forty-year-old man who spends his days trekking the fields of his memory, gleaning shoots of violence, reciting the names of others gone before him to prevent their dying a second death. No, not for my kid. If I could swaddle him in a bubble of innocence forever, I would.

Though, chances are, it'll all go to shit.

He'll grow up wanting to join the army, the infantry of all things, he'll go off to fight in some mean little war just like daddy-o. Because I can't stop going back there. Because the United States can't help itself from starting mean little wars it can't finish every couple of decades or so. Because part of me is in love with the making of a myth of myself.

In May 2021, with only a thousand or so American troops remaining in Afghanistan, the Nerkh District Center is overrun. A Taliban spokesman claimed Afghan security forces were killed or captured in the taking.

I don't know how to make it stop, or what remedy would suffice. I can't bear to count the dead anymore. All any of it makes me wonder is: whose names are next?

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