New Nonfiction from Jerad W. Alexander: An Elegy for Videotape

Scott found the videotapes in his garage and brought them into the kitchen. We stacked the VHS in a wine box and the little Hi8 tapes in a gray shoebox for a pair of boots that belonged to his wife Tiffany.

New Essay from Jerad W. Alexander: An Exchange of Fire

I don’t know your name, but we tried to kill each other once.

Do you remember it? It happened on November 5, 2005, on the second day of our big weeklong offensive in Husaybah, Iraq—a dense square of markets, mosques, and homes tucked into the corner where the Euphrates River meets the Syrian border. Nearly 2,000 U.S. Marines, me among them, had stormed into Husaybah before sunrise the previous morning. We had attacked across the trash-hewn desert west of town with our eyes coated with the green electric glow of our night vision goggles. We quickly smashed into the first row of homes and shoved our rifle barrels into the faces of the sleepy men who opened the doors and blew apart the locked doors of homes that had been abandoned. Children startled awake by our voices and our boots shrieked against their mothers in terror. I remember that.

Husaybah had been a violent place for us then. Plenty of our Marines had died there before we came, and our leaders wanted Husaybah mollified once and for all, and so we searched through your homes, sifted through your cupboards and closets, through your unmentionable things with the anger of a raw nerve. We looked for anything that tied the houses and people living inside them to Al Qaeda-in-Iraq forces, or 'AQI'—just another letter set in the endless greasy sop of military acronyms.

On my second afternoon in Husaybah I stood on a roof and gazed out over the geometric madness of buildings that surrounded me. It was cloudy. Parts of the city crackled with rifle fire. You appeared around a corner of a wall that defined the small compound of a house the same way chain link fences surround our yards. I liked the walled compounds for their dominance and privacy—like fortresses. Gray metal fences are just ugly and noisy. Walls can last forever. You appeared from behind it wearing a dirty gray sweat shirt and pants, like the track suits worn by fat New Jersey mobsters. You already had the launcher on your shoulder. It was made out of white PVC pipe with a cheap wooden handgrip and a battery switch bound with electrical tape. We always laughed at them whenever we captured one. Compared to our shoulder-mounted anti-tank rockets, our wire-guided missiles, and our heat seekers, your homemade bazookas were shoddy and infantile, completely weightless against our intractable technology and sophistication. But we knew they could kill, and if we had found you before you fired it, or just simply found you carrying it, building it, handing it to someone else, or even burying it in your cousin's backyard in a rage of benevolent rebellion against all war, we would have blown your body to pieces with high explosives that have been tested and refined and improved since the First World War. We would have scattered your atoms in a wide plume with a professional calculus learned and taught and relearned in the way of tradesmen, which is what the American military was and still

is today: a profession of arms, trained to execute the final thousand meters of American foreign policy, which in this case was to kill you. We're good at it. American troops train for battle like athletes and our officers study war like scholars. To us you are dilettantes, a junior varsity team. Many still feel this way.

Yet given all this you pivoted around a corner in a dirty sweat suit and aimed your homemade rocket launcher at my friends and me. As I sit here now I think about the resolve it must have taken to do that, to build this cheap weapon and aim it with the hope and faith against the best weapons in the world created by some of the richest nations in history. Surely you must've felt it when you wheeled around corner. Yet it didn't seem to matter to you, did it? Was it God or money or hatred or maybe just boredom? You are an Arab man. An Iraqi man. A Sunni man, no doubt. Faith has driven plenty to violence. But so have debt, hunger, oppression, and just blind hatred. Did you shoot at me for those things? Can I blame you? There are many Americans, more Americans than I'm comfortable with, who stock their homes with firearms and talk as if an invasion is a real possibility, be it from some outsider or from their own government. But there is little chance of invasion for us. I am from a country that will likely wither and die by its own self-destruction.

But that wasn't a luxury for you, was it? We were in your country uninvited. You turned from behind a corner to see a real invader. What did we look like to you? I imagine we looked like armored toadstools perched on your roofs with our black weapons held at our chests. I saw you. I saw your eyes. They were wide and filled with terror. Did our sight scare you? Your face was haggard, your hair and beard short and ragged. You looked like you were in your late twenties, perhaps older. It's hard to say. I only saw you for a few seconds, but looking back and remembering . . . Yes, I'm certain you were maybe twenty-eight, thirty at the latest. You

were older than me. I was twenty-five then. Thoughtful, but brash. I could almost hear you chanting your battle cry—*Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar*—over and over and over again, begging your God for victory or maybe just to spare your life, your breaths short and fast as you quickly aimed and fired. Were your palms wet? When the circuit closed on your launcher your body was surrounded with a wispy cloud. I heard the rocket motor fire. A Marine near me yelled "RPG!"

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Surely you remember the Persian Gulf War. How could you not? I was ten years old. My stepdad was in the U.S. Air Force then. He was sent to the Emirates to fix the American fighter jets we deployed after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. I was in fifth grade then. As I turned and walked up a broad snowy path between a set of houses on my way home from school a cold afternoon in January, I noticed my friend Chris trudging through the deep snow toward me.

"Come on, dude. Something's going on," he said. "I think it's started!"

We waded through the snow and plopped cross-legged in front of the television in his living room. We watched titillated as the special news reports showed grainy night-vision video of your anti-aircraft tracers arching toward our fighter jets high above your capital city. Whenever the screen erupted with the white flash of an exploding bomb we cheered because we knew we had killed some of you. There was nothing gory about it. We didn't see your blood or your body parts. It was clinical and precise. Even later, when we began to see the fuzzy bomb camera footage aired on the nightly news as 1,000 pound bombs crashed into bridges and factories and aircraft revetments, we saw the thermal signatures of your people—maybe your soldiers, maybe not, but all unlucky unlike us—become engulfed in the smoke and fire of our long-learned ability to destroy the human body.

Soon your whole army fell apart in front of us. When our tanks and armored vehicles crossed the border, you surrendered to us by the thousands, trudging across the desert half-dazed with your hands above your heads, flapping coalition leaflets imploring you to surrender. When you did fight us, it was almost cartoonish. Stories came back to us from the desert, or "The Sandbox" as we called it, of the shells from our main battle tanks punching through two and three of your tanks with a single shot and of bulldozers burying your troops alive right in their trenches. Just over 1,000 of our troops were killed or wounded fighting your country. To die as an American in the Persian Gulf War quickly became the unlucky punchline of a sad joke. We were so good at killing you that within four days of launching the ground offensive we annihilated an estimated 20,000 of you like we annihilate anthills in our backyards or roaches in our cupboards.

Our whole country felt as if we had returned to the heady day's right after World War II, when America basked in the destruction of two of the ugliest regimes in the history of the planet. We used your body to eradicate the ghosts of our mindless destruction in Vietnam. We felt as if we had returned to glory, that a curse had been broken. Our money had killed the Soviet Union. Our bombs had killed your fellow Iraqis. Our army was confirmed best in the world. We were Americans, natives from the "city upon the hill," citizens of God's Country. We sang Lee Greenwood songs at school recitals. Your destruction was our absolution. We felt invincible.

Americans rarely seem to make the connection, but the two wars—the one our fathers fought in and the war where you and I finally meet—are really all part of one big war, at least in a spiritual sense. Our victory over the forces of your dictator gave us carte blanche to press our moralistic notion of empire upon your people through the use of our bolstered military confidence. Because of your indomitable dictator, coupled with a strain of American Exceptionalism, we despised you all

collectively. After your generals surrendered at Safwan in March of 1991 we restricted your airspace and suffocated you with the boot heel of economic sanctions. We dangled food before your face in exchange for your precious oil. Sometimes Saddam Hussein took it. Other times he did not.

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 had nothing to do with your dictator, and certainly not your country, but I can't help but think that many of your citizens saw the smoke and ash of the fallen World Trade Center, the cavity drilled into the side of the Pentagon, and the detritus of Flight 93 scattered across a field in Pennsylvania and realized with a quiet dread that your country, as proxy for your dictator, would inevitably be called to stand tall and answer for crimes real or imagined. If you didn't, the subsequent rumblings and fist poundings from our punditry would have certainly signaled our brutal intentions. Americans wanted blood for the death of our citizens, and in many ways it was a completely justifiable desire. Our people were killed because of religious extremism, by Bronze Age clerics and zealots who failed to understand the concept of free will, and who harbored just as much sanctimonious moral superiority as the Western governments they claimed to loathe and sought to punish. You had nothing to do with it, but we came and made our demands anyway, and then we dropped more bombs.

I was a Marine by then. In late March of 2003 I watched our "Shock and Awe" air campaign smash Baghdad into rubble on CNN. I watched fire and high explosives rubble the skyscrapers of your capital with clarity of a dumb Michael Bay action flick. None of that grainy bomb camera footage that marked the opening moves in 1991. This was the modern era of the mass media spectacle. The scene felt like a cheap gratuitous facsimile of the first time, like a movie sequel that tried cover up a cheap plot with high-powered special effects.

Our leaders paraded themselves on television like conquering warlords before our troops had even crossed the border from

Kuwait, counting the gold their hordes hadn't even pillaged yet. We never discussed your plight or what you may have wanted for your own futures. You were never even considered. We just shrugged it off. We told the world we were coming to rescue you from the clutches of an evil dictator and that we would be greeted as liberators. It was only by sheer luck that the results of our hubris briefly matched your exuberate expressions of freedom when your fellow Iraqis beat on the statue of Saddam in Firdos Square with fists and the dusty soles of their shoes. But that exuberance didn't last, did it? That same dumb hubris prompted a U.S. State Department toad named Paul Bremer to fire your entire defense industry, a move which put hundreds of thousands of trained Iraqi security personnel—men who wanted to rebuild your country, perhaps even you—right out of work and single-handedly created an insurgency (up to and including ISIS) that locked us into a quagmire for the rest of the decade. A hubris that killed and wounded so many of us and exacted a still-untold cost on you. It was the same hubris that put you and me at odds with each other.

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And so here we are, back to the moment you closed the circuit on your homemade rocket launcher and tried to kill me. I might say you were brainwashed by psychopaths who arrived in the chaos of our occupation and who used the intellectual shackles of religion to make you a willing participant in my death. There is also the hard possibility these same psychopaths dangled a few hundred American dollars before your impoverished eyes, or maybe just pressed the hot blade of threats against the lives of your family in order to accomplish their bidding, which in this case was to kill Americans with a rocket propelled grenade.

Before I could seek cover behind the wall that surrounded the roof, your rocket exploded with a sharp crack against a building nearby. My veins were flooded with adrenaline and

terror. My eyes had widened and my mouth drooped slightly. The sound reverberated across the madness of Husaybah for a number of seconds before it blended into the chatter of distant firefights. My joints felt stiff. I breathed slowly and began to unravel a knot of fear in my gut.

None of the others said much of anything. I suspect we were all ingesting just how lucky we had been. Had you raised the tube a few more inches your rocket might have carved a path right to the wall that surrounded the roof we commandeered, right to where we stood, and exploded with the same flash, spraying hot slivers of metal that might have pierced our bodies and punched frothy little holes into our livers and lungs. The sudden overpressure under our Kevlar helmets might have burst our eardrums and detuned our synapses. You might have killed us. But you were nervous and afraid, so you didn't.

You appeared again a few seconds later. I saw you in a gap between two buildings as you ran. I knew immediately it was you who had fired the rocket because you looked back over your shoulder at us with wide eyes and a face that seemed to me as if grayed by terror. The emotions that arose in me in a millisecond I can only really describe as a crossbreed of disgust and atavistic rage, backed by the same glaze of self-righteousness that put us in your country to begin with. I was a member of the most skilled military on the face of the planet with the largest reach of any dominion since the British Empire. You were a terrorist from a broken nation. I raised my rifle.

Though it happened too fast to do so then, as I brought my rifle to my shoulder I could trace a trajectory of wanton caveman stupidity from your body to my barrel, through my rifle, and into my shoulder and beyond, all as a dark timeline of American foreign policy misadventures and the stone-crushing hubris of empire that created them. I could trace a hard red line back to the elected officials—thereby including

many of us—who had read just enough glorified history to think America was somehow anointed with the right to interfere and manipulate the fates of other nations, as if your wishes, hopes, and aspirations for the future of your country seemed to be of little worth if they didn't match our own. I can't help but believe that to be true. We found nothing in your country. No weapons of mass destruction. No nuclear program. No terrorists but for those we ultimately brought with us, in part because of opportunistic religious thuggery, but also because of our ham-fisted American bombasticism.

For many years after 9/11, the United States, in many ways, became Captain Ahab from Moby Dick, chasing the White Whale of our national security through the "War on Terror" to all corners of the world. Like Ahab, we're a nation with a wounded soul. A whole subset of our population refuses to allow itself to heal. Many of our people gnash their teeth with blood-thirsty indignation and rage, shaking their fists at lands they've never seen or even understand. Every anniversary of 9/11, we beat against our sores with old reels of doom and loss. Civic leaders, campaigning politicians, and even sitting statespersons routinely trumpet the call to arms with the fear of your hordes running through our streets with zealotry in your heart and a bomb strapped to your chest. They bang their gavels and shovel money and citizenry into the black maw of war to kill you, hoping that one more body—more than 200,000 civilian casualties in Iraq, so far—will pack that festering wound and finally bring peace. They do this in spite of the understanding that coming into your country was just a few short semantics away from being an outright war crime. But every time we lash out with drones, precision bombers, and surveillance measures the thin vindication that follows clouds a realization that every single bomb we drop, every bullet we fire, and every person we kill in the name of security only chips away at our overall safety. We will simply never be able to kill enough to bring about peace. But we'll certainly try.

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And so, with my rifle in my shoulder, I fired three shots.

My bullets struck out with the same thick vitriol that left my mouth when I saw you running away. I don't remember what I said, but it was undoubtedly profane. My eyes were wide and white with controlled, but crystalline rage. The brass shell casings jingled against the concrete roof and settled. I clicked the rifle safety and let it rest against my body armor. I lit a cigarette. All that bile settled inside me and my heart rate slowed. The rage and indignation was suddenly replaced by a hollow sense of futility.

What am I doing on this roof with a rifle trying to kill you? I wondered. The thought left as quickly as it came; there was no sense in asking. But the hollowness remained and later grew, fueled with similar experiences. For many years after there was a small part of me that grew angry when I thought about you trying to kill me with a rocket propelled grenade. RPG's are serious business, and you tried to kill me and my friends with one. Over the next few years I would think about you with the same self-righteousness that carried us to your country. Slowly, though, after I put away my rifle and left the service, the self-righteousness morphed into emotionlessness, then finally retrospection.

Regardless of my feelings, I've always wondered if you are still alive, and I have to recognize the odds are not in your favor. If we did not kill you before we left Iraq in 2011, then perhaps you died in Syria. Or maybe you were forced into ISIS—the monster that filled the vacuum once we finally left—and the threadbare Iraqi military cut you down, or perhaps we finished what we started and bombed you with our own airpower in our campaigning. Maybe you were killed by Kurds, or by pro-Syrian forces, or Syrian rebels, or perhaps by Russians. Or maybe you're still out there, lost to the blinding winds of the Forever War, trapped by the flippant

whimsy of our commitments.

I'll understand if you don't wish to hear any of this. Many things I write here are for you; some of them are for me. I cannot expect either of us to forgive the other for our intentions, nor can we reasonably ask for it. We intended to kill each other for reasons that were both out of our control.

Sometimes I daydream that perhaps the same futility that flooded me after I shot at you also filled your veins, and that you fled the war. I like to think you have a family, maybe a business, and you're living in peace somewhere. Sometimes I wonder if there is ever a chance when you and I might walk through Husaybah and marvel at the stupidity of our insignificant little battlefield. I wonder if one day I will be able to talk with you, to explain to you how the world I lived in brought me to the world you lived in to destroy your life and finish ruining the lives of those who might have loved you. I want to explain to you what it looked like to see you in your town as I stood on its rooftops with the weight of an empire pressing me toward you. I want to show you the world we lived in when I came with my friends to kill you and others in the name of security for my people. We call it freedom and liberty, but what we really mean is security. I want to show you all the neuroses that fueled the tanks we sent rumbling across your streets and sent high explosives blasting into your home and the homes of thousands of others, neuroses that loaded the bombs onto our jets and dropped them from the clouds and turned to rubble the bones of so many of those you may have known. I want to show you how afraid of the world we had become and in many ways still are today. I want to show you the worth of all the tin gold trying to kill you has earned me, has earned us all. Unfortunately, that will have to wait; I'm still trying to tally its value.

But all these thoughts are nonsense and so I cashier them, yet I know they'll return at bored moments while I am driving to work on a cloudy Tuesday morning. They'll show up when I'm

jogging, reading a book that I've grown bored with, or walking home from a bad date. But no matter how often I think of these things, whenever I think about those three bullets I shot at you and the fear and rage and blinding national stupidity that fueled them I'm always glad about one thing:

I'm glad I missed.

In war, it is not difficult to illuminate the darkness. Understanding is harder to come by. Photo by Jerad Alexander