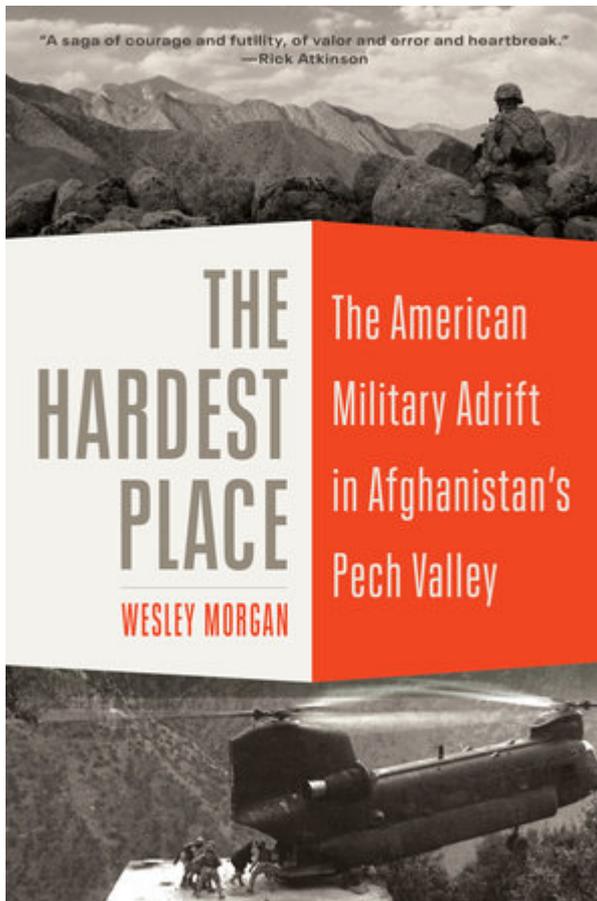


# **New Review from Adrian Bonenberger: “‘The Hardest Place’: Wes Morgan’s Post-Mortem on Americans in Afghanistan’s Pech Valley”**

If I were to write a morality tale about America’s counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan—something in line with Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* or John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, I’d make heavy use of allegory. That’s what people did in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, they named monsters for the seven deadly sins, and great heroes and ladies for the seven optimal virtues. So using that principle, I’d probably make a valley in some hard-to-reach location, and place a village of strategic necessity there, and name it Want. And the Americans would fall all over themselves trying to take and hold Want, and they wouldn’t be able to, because Want is, as everyone knows, simply the state of desiring a thing or a state or a person—it can never be fulfilled.

Well, I suppose if this were a true morality tale, the way out of Want would be Faith, or Chastity, depending on the context. That’s how those books were written back in the day.



Wesley Morgan is a journalist. His debut book, *The Hardest Place: The American Military Adrift in Afghanistan's Pech Valley* is not a morality tale, and there's no need for the type of heavy-handed writing or obvious analogies popular a few centuries ago. Morgan simply writes what he sees in interviews, documents, and research, as well as what he observed during reporting trips to the Pech, which he covered as a conflict journalist about a decade ago.

As it turns out, there *is* a valley, and the valley *does* have a village of great importance to the Americans, and the village's name *is* Want (the Americans transliterate its name from an old Soviet map to "Wanat" which could also be styled "why not?") and sure enough, filling the village with soldiers does not satisfy anyone's objectives or ambitions. Want—the place, the village—is a kind of bottomless pit, and, essentially, an allegory for itself.

Everyone, and I mean everyone who deployed to Afghanistan on a

combat mission and observed the purposeless and absurd nature of the war should read this book. There are Americans and Afghans who are thoughtful, and optimistic, and earnestly try to make things better, and Americans and Afghans and other foreigners who are cynical and egotistical and through their busy, careless actions make things exponentially worse. There aren't heroes or villains.

*The Hardest Place* is exhaustively researched, pulling on hundreds of interviews and many more sources and documents to paint a comprehensive portrait of the area—a hard to reach place in the northeast of Afghanistan, on the border of Pakistan. The soldiers and officers who are quoted and described offer vivid portraits of typical American servicemembers presented with a harsh and unusual challenge. Morgan doesn't limit his scope to the American or Afghan side of things—he talks wherever possible with Afghans, and Taliban, and other local residents of the area. It is often during these discussions that some crucial fact or perspective missing to Americans clicks into place, such as the significance of the lumber trade and the various families engaged in that pursuit in the Pech river valley. Morgan's familiar with the Soviet experience of the place, and he relays his own experiences, too, that cannot be fully put into words, but may be described as a mixture of awe and dread.

Reading *The Hardest Place* was hard to do and people with PTSD ought to be warned. One will see one's officer leadership in its pages—one will see one's units—one will see successes and failures, noble and wise visions to improve the place, and naked, disgraceful ambition. Morgan looks at the actions and events plainly, and without judgement. He writes about significant actions and results and the evolving context of the place.

Careful readers will note that there were places and schemas where it seemed like progress was being made, and that progress could be made. Those of us with multiple combat tours

to Afghanistan under our belt know this phenomenon well; one sees or experiences a failure of a deployment where everything becomes worse, and decides to turn things around during a subsequent deployment, to learn from the mistakes of the past. An empathetic battalion commander and a visionary brigade commander make progress in a place for a year or two. Eventually, inevitably, a dumb guy wants to see action, wants to see combat, and jumps in and shoots the place up, and everything goes to hell.

Morgan lays bare a couple of illusions: first, that the good officers or good plans would work without the bad officers and cruel plans, and second, that the military is capable of selecting good officers to do good planning—as often as not, these people seem to leave the military, and the ones who remain are (as often as not) the dumb and cruel ones.

Even those officers who are neither dumb nor cruel, like Stanley McChrystal, come in for criticism. McChrystal's impulse to do something rather than nothing when faced with doubt contributed to unnecessary catastrophes in the Kunar Province of which the Pech is a part. An entire mindset that has begun permeating the corporate world, depending on ideas like "data-driven" and "metrics-driven" and which earlier generations would have described as "results-driven," led to avoidable blunders and worse. Americans, it seems, murdered in the name of progress. This type of behavior and mentality could be seen everywhere in Afghanistan, and plays out here in the United States.

A morality tale might have worked out differently for the people described in *The Hardest Place*. Some veterans of the Pech leave the military, others are promoted to greater levels of responsibility. The U.S. was drawing down from Afghanistan under President Trump; it seems that drawdown has been placed on hold under President Biden. In a morality tale, there would be some clear lesson to be learned. The lesson—that America's business in Afghanistan concluded years ago and that we ought

not to be there today—is present, but Americans seem incapable of learning it.

But *The Hardest Place* isn't a morality tale; its protagonist is not named Christian, and nobody is trudging slowly toward the Celestial City. The book is long-form journalism at its best. Reading about America's sad and doomed involvement in the Pech, one feels that the valley acts as a kind of mirror, reflecting the essence of the people and units that enter. What those units encounter, ultimately, is themselves—bravery under fire, civilian casualties, idealistic dreams of a peaceful Afghanistan, Medals of Honor, victory, defeat. The place eventually resists every attempt to change it, defeats efforts to shift how America's enemies use it. What does that say about American culture? That America actually hoped to succeed, patrolling in a place named Want?

Morgan, Wes. *The Hardest Place* (Random House, 2021).

You can purchase '*The Hardest Place*' [here](#) or anywhere books are sold.

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## **New Fiction from Susan Taylor Chehak: “With a Whimper”**

This isn't the first time that man has visited this cemetery, and he supposes it isn't going to be the last. As a child he was one of the pack of kids from the neighboring sprawl of houses who came here, against all warnings, to scare themselves silly with games of Ghost or Hide-and-Seek or Sardine. They gathered near the hedges where the black angel spreads her wings, looking down on anyone who dares look up. Her expression might be a face of horror or sorrow or rage,

depending on the moon and how dark the night. Later, when he and his friends were older, they crept around in pairs and fell against each other, desperate to become one.



Now he stands alone here, a grimy shadow in his khaki pants and his brown shirt and his black shoes. His wife would have told him to change the shirt, at least. Put on something cheerful, such as the pale-pink one she bought him, but he didn't care for it and only wore it that one time, to please her.

The grave is new. Dirt. Waiting for rain. Waiting for sod to cover it over green. A motor grumbles in the distance. He looks up. It's the big, yellow backhoe trundling down the lane toward him. There was a time when a shovel was all you'd need. He lets fall the roses he's brought and turns away.

\*

This is a young woman over here, but you might not know that just by looking at her. Just by looking at her you'd have to make a guess because of how she has her hair cropped so close to her skull. That's how the kids do now—just shave it off and forget about it. Also she's hidden her body inside baggy jeans and an old sweatshirt—pitch black except where it's faded and fraying at the cuffs—so you can't tell by that either. Her face is youthful, though, exposed and shining in the morning light. Pretty little thing. She's got her mask pulled down under her chin, so you can't see the dancing skeletons on it, a wry design created by her younger sister, who is dark and

depressed and, for the last few months, eager for the world to just come to its end already, the way the prophets have been promising her all her life it will. "Soon," this sister whispers, gazing into her own eyes. She's had enough, she says to anybody willing to listen. This girl here isn't like that, though. She's always been known by family and friends as the sunny one—no matter what else might be going on, she's always able to find something to make her feel fine. Right now that's a job to be done and a lollypop burrowed into one cheek while she does it. Banana Dumdum, her favorite flavor, though she didn't choose it, just left it to chance and got lucky, and so it goes.

She's moving along house by house—through a gate, up a walk, up the steps, and then back down to the street again—going door to door in this neighborhood that looks like it's deserted, but how or why is none of her business to wonder. She'll leave a census form and a Dumdum in a plastic bag inside the door or in the box or just there on the porch planks of every house she comes to on her assigned route. That's the job, plain and simple.

Who is this girl? She's not a kid and not a teenager either. You might guess her to be in her twenties. Early twenties, anyway. A college student, maybe? Had to drop out because of the plague, when classes shut down or went on-line and she had no computer of her own, or she had to drop out and move back home to live with her mother and that gloomy younger sister, who have the old house to themselves now since Dad died of alcoholism or jumped out a window or has been institutionalized somewhere. Whatever. It's enough to know he's not around anymore, so the sisters have gone from riches to rags. And the mom? She suffers from anxiety, depression, agoraphobia, OCD, she's a hoarder who hasn't left her house for years and now, with the plague going around, won't ever leave it again, not even the backyard, such as it is. So this girl...this young woman, that is...she's not a girl, she doesn't

like being called a girl...this young woman is doing the best she can under the circumstances.

She throws her head back and breathes deep, so now you can see the blot of a bruise on her neck, just there, below her chin, along the course of her jugular vein. A hickey is what it is. She was at a plague party last night is what, and the guy in whose arms she ended up was moaning as his mouth found her throat and branded it with his mark. She won't tell her mother this or her sister either. She thinks she doesn't care if she gets sick and dies, but she also doesn't believe she's going get sick, and she definitely doesn't believe she's going to die. Not anytime soon, anyway. She knows people who have been going around spreading the plague on purpose. Taking their chances with a single round, spin the cylinder, nuzzle the muzzle, pull the trigger, and...click?

The younger sister has a room in the basement of the mother's house, and that's where she makes the masks. If you put your ear to the grate, you can hear the clatter and whir of the old sewing machine at all hours of the night. But this girl took the attic because it's least cluttered with her mother's growing accumulation of all that she thinks she needs and must save. Because the mother can't get up there is the only reason why. The folding stairs are stuck and have been stuck for years, so this girl, ever resourceful as well as cheerful, comes and goes through the small dormer window on the side where the old oak has grown up taller than the house. She can shinny a rope to the tree's lower reaches, then climb on up the branches to the roof or vice versa on back down to the ground.

You might notice now that she's also wearing gloves on her hands, the floppy rubber kind made for cleaning toilets and scrubbing floors. She found them in the kitchen of the abandoned house where she woke up in the dark only a few hours ago. Where she woke up and rolled away from the guy whose mark she bears. Where she crept downstairs to scrounge in the

cupboards with a hope of finding something to eat. Or drink. But there wasn't much there. Cans of soup and something floating in brine in the pantry. Sponges and disinfectants, bleach and scouring powder and the gloves under the sink. The others were all fast asleep by that time, but this girl has long been in the habit of rising with the sun. Or maybe it was just she's the only one who has a job.

\*

That man is at home now. He's right over there, in the house on the corner. The yellow one with the white fence and all the flowers. He's sitting at his desk, where he's been writing a letter to the editor of the local paper. He has something to say about the situation. His situation. The world situation.

"There is a virus," he writes, "and it's going to kill us all." But everybody knows that. This isn't news. Whether you want to believe it or not, which his son does not. The boy called last night. Not a boy, another man, but he will always be a boy to his father. The boy had been drinking. Or something. He wasn't in his right mind, whatever that means. He seems to have some ideas that he picked up somewhere. Crazy talk about a hoax, is that it? The Pandemic. The Plague. The Plan-demic. Here to control us. Here to keep us locked down and desperate. But he can't stick it out. He doesn't have enough food to last the months it's going to take before we're free again. "Do you, Dad? Do you?"

"Dear Editor," that man writes. "Can you tell me what's happening? Do you know what's real and what isn't? My son says this and my son says that, but it all sounds like something somebody made up to entertain us or to scare us or to cause us to...what? Do you know? Because I'm afraid I can't say I know anything for sure anymore."

But that's a lie. He does know one thing for sure. He has firsthand knowledge, that's what he has. And his wife is dead,

that's what he knows. She was in a home, her brain already scrambled. He never wanted that for her, but it just got so bad that he had no choice. The children insisted. The boy and his sister. He couldn't care for her properly. That's something else he knows.

He didn't get to see her in the end but it doesn't matter, she wouldn't have recognized him anyway, and all she'd have to show him would be that quizzical look she'd get at the sight of his face, stabbing him with its emptiness. Her gnarled fingers at her lips, all twisted like twigs from some ancient tree, and her whisper nothing more than a whistle, "Who?"

He hadn't bothered to answer the last time. Just raised a hand and waggled his own fingers, which made her smile, before he turned around again and walked away.

So you see, she was already gone before she got sick, before she died, so he's not really in mourning for her now. More like he's in mourning for himself. She was cremated and then buried over there in the cemetery, in one of the plots they bought for each other a long time ago, when they were young, knowing but not really believing that that would be where they ended up. In the long run. Or the short, depending. He assumed he'd be the one to go first. All of us did. But what do we know? Nothing.

So now he walks over there every morning, before it gets too hot and when no one else is up and about, while it's still safe.

Yours truly? No.

Sincerely yours? No.

Always? No.

Ever? Almost.

As ever, then. Followed by the trembling scribble of his name.

He folds the letter once, twice, three times. His hands are clumsy. His fingertips are numb. He licks the envelope, seals it, then opens it again. Unfolds the paper, crumples it in his fist, smooths it on the desktop, folds it once more. His head throbs and his pulse stutters in his ears. He doesn't want to lick the envelope, so he staples it shut, then hammers on the staples with his fist to flatten them, which causes the small frame at the edge of the desk to tip over and fall to the floor, leaving the glass shattered and her face in pieces behind it.

\*

Over there, at the end of the block, this girl has paused. She might as well be the only person left alive on earth, one last girl standing there, sucking on a banana-flavored Dumdum with a satchel of official questionnaires slung over her shoulder, in these precious last moments we have left before the end.

Soon she'll turn the corner onto another street, and then she'll be out of sight, and after that there won't be anything left to disturb the frightful stillness that's settling in all around us now, acting for all the world like it might never go away.

While the flowers in the gardens nod their heavy heads, docile and dreamy, with nowhere to go and nothing to do but bloom and die and bloom again. Like that.

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# New Fiction from Gregory Johnsen: "Odds Are"

## 1. Heads

Years later, long after the bodies had been pieced back together, after they'd been bagged and buried, after the lawyers got involved and Code Pink rallied, after the stacks of cash and the nightmares that finally ended, he would still want that one simple thing. The same thing he'd been after that first night. Back when everyone was screaming and crying and looking to him for answers. Back when all he had was a single phone number, a string of digits read out by a voice on the phone. The number, like so much of what was to come, wasn't really for him. It was a stranger's dissent, a single act of absolution from an anonymous man. But he didn't know that yet. All he knew was the number, and that night Faisal al-Lawjari dialed it again and again.

\*

Salem had always been stubborn. Faisal knew that going in. Outsiders saw the preacher's big-bellied ease and the gentle way he joked with the kids he mentored and thought him soft. But his family knew different. Salem didn't bend. He just smiled and stood firm. And that's why, after listening to his sermon, Salem's father had asked for help.

Faisal was the obvious choice. He was Salem's brother-in-law and one of his closest friends. People respected him and his quiet counsel. Part of it was the way he spoke, soft and slow like a story before bed. A 58-year-old electrical engineer with a pressed and polished taste in clothes and eyeglasses that never quite sat straight, Faisal would know what to say. Half a generation older than Salem, Faisal had a lot in common with his brother-in-law. Both of them had made it out of

Baraqish, the dusty pinprick of a village in Yemen's eastern desert, where everyone was related and nothing ever changed.

They knew what life was like on the outside. But they also understood the obligations of family and tribe. And that one simple truth of life in Yemen: no one ever truly escapes where they're from. Home is always there, a fixed point, anchoring those who might stray too far and a buoy for everyone else. Faisal and Salem each sent money back to Baraqish, remitting salaries and returning themselves for holidays and special occasions. This time it was for Faisal's eldest son, Majid, who was about to get married.

But first Faisal wanted to talk with his brother-in-law. Salem's sermon three days earlier had been a mistake. Like most of the men in the village, Faisal had been in attendance, as Salem walked to the front and started to speak. He was going to preach on "killing outside the law," he announced from the raised platform near the front of the mosque. Salem was characteristically calm throughout the thirty-minute sermon, patiently walking the congregation through each of his points. But soft words couldn't disguise what he was doing. From where he was sitting on the mosque's thick, red carpet, Faisal could see that Salem was crossing a line. His brother-in-law was attacking al-Qaeda, and he was doing it from the pulpit.

Looking out over the crowd of men, Salem asked a simple question: How can al-Qaeda carry out attacks in Yemen that kill Muslims and then claim that they are defending Islam? This is a group, he continued into the microphone, that likes to dress terrorism up as theology. "That's not jihad," he said. "That's murder."

This wasn't a US-sponsored program or a government preacher arguing against a terrorist group, this was a single man – a 43-year-old, father of five – in the heart of one of al-Qaeda's most fertile recruiting grounds standing up and saying

what he believed: al-Qaeda operated outside the laws of God and man. The longer Salem talked, citing examples and quoting verses, the more uncomfortable the crowd became. Most of the men in attendance that morning were members of Salem's clan, but there were always a few strangers around. And no one wanted any trouble. "I challenge al-Qaeda to show me one piece of evidence in Islam that says such killing is justified," Salem said as he finished his sermon.

Three days later, in a parked car out in the desert, Faisal asked him about the challenge. Salem listened politely as the gentle man next to him voiced the family's concerns, and worried over his safety.

"Will I die if I continue?" Salem asked as he stared out the window.

Faisal paused, considering the question. "Yes," he said a moment later, nodding his head as he answered. "They will kill you. You know they will."

"What if I don't continue?" Salem asked. "How long will I live?"

Faisal looked over at his brother-in-law and friend. "Only God knows your appointed hour."

Salem nodded. "Then while I am alive I will seek justice on this earth."

There was nothing left to say. The two sat there a while longer, the air conditioner ticking in the morning heat, but Salem wasn't going to change his mind and there were things to do before the wedding.

The next day, Salem danced for hours holding Majid's right hand in his left as the circle of men moved back-and-forth across a teal tarp laid down on the sand. Faisal spent most of the day watching from the sidelines, but late in the evening

two of his son's friends tried to pull him onto the dance tarp. Slight and self-conscious, Faisal resisted for a moment, but his smile gave him away. Finding the center of the circle, he started to bounce and move, slowly at first and then a bit faster as he found the rhythm of the music, his white hair flashing under the floodlights.

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Three men, a trio of strangers, trailing drones after them like an invisible tail. Who they were and why someone half-a-world away had marked them for death were mysteries, two more things Faisal would never know.

Shortly after evening prayers on March 13, as Salem walked back to his house, the strangers dispatched a village boy to ask the burly preacher if he had a few minutes to talk. Salem hesitated. It was already dark and he was tired from the wedding the night before. But his cousin, Waleed, one of the village's two police officers, said he'd go with him to make sure nothing happened. "Don't worry," Waleed told him. "I'll be with you."

The men walked just outside the village, stopping under some palm trees near a sign that read: "Baraqish Welcomes You." None of the villagers, who had followed them to watch, could hear what the men were saying. But everyone heard the explosion. A giant flash that tore up the ground and spewed body parts. Three more followed in quick succession. Four missiles, five bodies.



This is what the far side of a drone strike looks like: scorched sand, twisted metal, and fragments of flesh. Sometimes there's blood, sometimes barely any. Sometimes the fire burns for hours, other times it sputters out within minutes. There are shell casings and shattered limbs, bits of bone, and lots of black. Everything is black after a strike: the ground, the car, and whatever's left of the bodies. Oftentimes the dead are terrorists; sometimes they're not. That night in Yemen they were both.

Standing under the palm trees less than an hour after the strike, Faisal couldn't tell where one body ended and another began. He was in a slaughterhouse. What the US military called the "kill zone," he called home. He'd been born a few hundred yards away. He'd played under these trees as a boy and walked here as a man. And now nothing was recognizable. Everything smelled and all the pieces looked the same: flesh made meat. One of the men sifting through the sand with a plastic toy pail and shovel, collecting pieces for burial, pointed at a flap of skin near his feet. Faisal stared at it for a few moments before he realized what he was seeing. It was a mustache, part of a cheek and a section of lip. Waleed.

A few hours later, Faisal's cell phone rang. The man on the other end of the line knew exactly what had happened. "Salem and Waleed were not the targets," he said. Faisal listened, but the man wouldn't say much. He didn't have any answers. But he did have a phone number. "This is who you want," the voice on the phone explained.

Faisal dialed the number three times that night. He wanted to explain that there had been a mistake. Salem never should have been killed. He wasn't a terrorist, he preached against al-Qaeda. As Faisal punched the keys on his phone, redialing the entire number each time just to make sure he hadn't made a mistake, he felt himself getting angrier and angrier. Al-Qaeda hadn't done this. The US and Yemen had. They were the ones responsible. They were the ones who had murdered his brother-in-law and cousin. In his hand, the phone rang and rang.

## **2. Tails**

I stomped hard on mushy brakes, and the embassy's ancient '87 Land Cruiser shuddered, slowed, and rattled to an unsteady stop inches from the lowered tailgate of a battered Hilux. Sanaa's night traffic had wound itself into the usual knots, twisted and tangled as four-pound test line. Taxi drivers held glowing cigarettes out open windows with one hand and adjusted the volume of dueling Lebanese pop songs with the other. Late model Mercedes jockeyed for space and pole position against an unruly mob of medieval mule carts, past-their-prime Peugeots, and assorted European castoffs. "Yemenis are the world's nicest assholes," my predecessor as chief of station had warned me during our handoff meeting. "They'll stuff your face with their last piece of bread even as they sink that curved dagger of theirs into your back. Watch how they drive. That'll tell you everything you need to know about this sweltering hellhole." He wasn't wrong. After *qat*, Yemenis flock to the roads like escaped djinn out of a sorcerer's lamp, gleefully cutting each other off and delighting in the vehicular chaos of smashed mirrors and busted bumpers they leave in their

wake.

In the back of the Hilux, two pre-teens cradled collapsible AK-47s and stared Sphinx-like at my white face, three-day beard, and Padres cap. I knew what they were thinking, and for once they were right. But so what? This was my job, and I was good at it: 47 years old and chief of one of the hottest stations on the planet. 24 confirmed kills in just over seven months in country. Not quite a record, but not bad for my first time at the controls. I stared straight back at the boys until they blinked and looked down. Part of me wondered if I'd ever see their faces in a targeting deck? God, I hoped not.

My mind caught, skipping thousands of miles, multiple time zones, and one enormous ocean. I looked at my watch. 8:13 in Sanaa meant 1:13 in Falls Church. I ran through the schedule Diana had e-mailed me at the start of the semester. If Adam was where he was supposed to be – no guarantee – he'd be sitting in tenth grade English. Katherine would be in place and on time, which thanks to the oddities of a middle school block schedule I still didn't quite understand, meant an end-of-the-day lunch she'd calorie count and chuck untouched in the trash. And Jonathan? How did a seven-year-old boy with a serious Lego addiction spend his school days? Diana had sounded worried during our weekly phone call. She said he was slipping into our bed at night again, curling up on my side and refusing to budge.

"He'll be fine," I'd assured her. "Don't worry. It's just a stage." But what did I know. I'd missed three of his last four birthdays.

This wasn't the life I'd promised my wife. 'Twenty and out,' that's what I'd told her. Pick up the pension, pay off the mortgage, ease into the cushy life of a 9-to-5 contractor, and send the kids waltzing off to college debt-free. But that was before the attacks and this one big war, which turned out to be a million tiny ones, happening everywhere and all at once,

and somehow my 20 years had turned into 23 and counting. Still, if Sanaa went well I could hit SIS-level and the land of golden pensions.

“Rationalize it however you want,” Diana said the last time we discussed my perpetually postponed retirement. “But I know who you are, Julian Fisher. You complain about the work but deep down you love it. You love the mission, and you’re petrified of what will happen if you’re not there to do it. Just remember,” her fingernails tapped a warning on my chest, “when you’re there, you can’t be here.”

I shook my head and recited my half of the argument. *Of course, I liked the work, but what mattered is that I was trained, experienced. If I didn’t do the job, someone else would. Someone a little less trained, a little less experienced, and a little less skilled. That made things less safe and how – in this world – could you justify making something even a little less safe?*

I pounded the dash, bouncing a few coins and some scattered cassette tapes. It was impossible to have these conversations with civilians, even well meaning ones. Even ones you shared a bed with. No one knew what it was like. Not really, not unless you’d been there. Crunched through broken glass and chalky debris, smelled the acid smoke and nitroglycerin that lingered for hours after a blast, tasted the grit and grime in the air knowing you were inhaling the dead, and then tried to puzzle-piece broken bodies back together again into something suitable for burial.

Terrorist attacks only felt random. In reality, they were plotted and planned by individuals, people who made mistakes and left a trail, people who could – and should – be stopped before they started. *That’s what I do*, I explained in the colorless briefing voice I knew she hated. I reduce the odds, play the angles, work my sources, and use every last trick the lawyers bless. And even then I still don’t know if I’ve done

enough.

*Enough.* I blew out my lips and resisted a pre-meeting cigarette. To calm myself, I recited all 15 verses of Psalm 91, said a quick prayer asking the Lord to protect my family when I couldn't, and told myself to focus.

Somewhere up ahead, tucked into the Sanaa shadows, back pressed against a rough stone wall, crouched my pick-up, Ghalib al-Qamish: counterpart, agent, and, more recently, friend.

Ghalib was an officer in Yemeni intelligence, which meant he wasn't a unilateral. Officially, Yemen's Political Security Organization was an ally in the war on terror. But in practice the organization was about as loyal as Art Modell. Ghalib was our insurance, a mole buried deep in the PSO. Unlike most of his jihadi-leaning colleagues, he actually knew the US. He'd been a student at the University of Arizona on September 11, and the unlikely trifecta of that day, its disorientating aftermath, and the unflinching kindness of a host family had, more than a decade on, paid off in the form of an excellent reporting agent. Ghalib said he owed the United States a blood-debt for 9/11, which he paid down by handing over raw intelligence on al-Qaeda and making sure we were well-informed on the inner-workings of the PSO. "It's tribal," he'd told me once in an aborted attempt to explain his motivation and Yemen's code of *'urf*.

"You mean like collective responsibility?" I'd asked, remembering a pre-country briefing. "The actions of the one implicate the whole."

Ghalib masked his smile behind a heavy blast of cigarette smoke. Kamaran lights, I noticed. "Something like that," he'd said, and politely changed the subject.

That had been seven months earlier at our first meeting. The meeting when I told him my first and, to date, only lie. The

relationship between Ghalib and my predecessor, redacted, had been fraying for weeks, missed meetings and the usual domestic squabbles of an officer and agent who'd been together too long. redacted didn't smoke and Ghalib did. Sometimes it's that simple. Running an agent is half first date flattery and half the bedrock trust of 'till death do us part'. Neglect either side of the equation, and the whole charade collapses faster than the Phillies in a pennant race.

redacted suggested he make the introductions and then disappear, while I bonded with Sanaa Station's most valuable asset. To kick-start the process, I tweaked my bio, trading out a football scholarship to Chadron State for a political science degree at the University of Arizona. "Wildcats unite," I told Ghalib over a bottle of diplomatic pouch Lagavulin, explaining we'd graduated 14 years apart, "like brothers."

He smiled and held his glass up to the light. "Bear Down."

We toasted the memory of John Button Salmon, sang an off-key rendition of a fight song I'd memorized the night before, and talked about our daughters. I showed him cell phone pics of pre-teen Katherine, and he produced one of look-alike five and three-year-olds in matching red dresses with white bows. Sama'a and Nour, Sky and Light. When I asked about the names, Ghalib blushed and swirled his scotch. "Daughters lift your eyes. They force you to look up and out. Plus," his grin was unguarded, "they're always laughing."

We agreed to meet every other Thursday for a quick check-and-chat. Ghalib would brief me on the latest from Political Security; I'd ask my questions and hand over a Ziploc bag, taped down and stuffed with twenties. He hadn't wanted to take the money at first. But redacted had insisted. Motivations matter on the seventh floor. Cash was acceptable, 'urf was not.

Ghalib's preferred spot was the *Sailah*, the sunken stoneway that separates Sanaa's crumbling old city from its just as

crumbling new one. He'd squat along the edge of the road in ratty robes, I'd swing by in a clean car, and he'd crawl inside. We called it a drive-by and on that Thursday we executed it perfectly.

Ghalib came out of his bedouin crouch slowly, like Piazza that last year in San Diego, eased open the unarmored door, and slipped into the passenger seat. He tucked a plastic Rothmans bag between his feet. I'd switched the dome light off an hour earlier, a precaution like the Toyota's civilian plates and Ghalib's stained street robes. I doubted anyone was watching, but we were in Indian country and you could never be too careful. "Mistakes in the field," an instructor once warned me, "are a lot like marriages: the wrong one can ruin you for life."

I flashed my lights twice at an oncoming taxi with purple running lights and cut behind him up the ramp toward Tahrir. Outside my window, white-haired men sat at metal tables on the steps of the Mahdi al-Abbas mosque, clicking prayer beads and sipping at milky cups of tea. Across the street, their younger selves, teenage grandsons and boys younger than Jonathan, kicked a lopsided soccer ball against a wall and waited their turn at a brightly flashing video game. SEALs v. Terrorists, probably. I wondered what the boys thought as they played at American soldiers gunning down bad guys who looked strikingly like their fathers, uncles, and brothers.

A dented minibus blocked the narrow street ahead of us, leaking Thursday night shoppers into the gold market. An angry horn sounded three cars up, and the bus lurched back into sluggish motion. Ghalib leaned forward in his seat, eyes locked on the side mirror, scanning for tails. Two more turns and we were on Abd al-Moghni Street headed south toward Haddah.

He made the call first. "Clear."

I waited another thirty seconds, until we passed the Taj Sheba Hotel, to second his assessment.

Ghalib pulled two cigarettes out of his pack of Kamarans, lighting both and handing one over, as I pushed Neil Young's "Cinnamon Girl" into the tape deck for noise cover.

"So," he smiled, looking younger than his 33 years. "We got him."

"Yeah?" I slowed to let a white-and-yellow taxi with no fender dart in front.

Ghalib blew a line of smoke out the open window and pointed to the Rothmans bag. "It's all there. The source delivered."

The source, whom I'd codenamed "Greenmantle," had appeared three months earlier, just after Christmas, claiming to be Samir al-Zayadi's brother-in-law and second-cousin.

Ghalib debriefed him for four hours in a PSO safe house that first week. "I think's he's legit," Ghalib told me after their initial meeting.

Greenmantle was close to his younger sister who, in the tangled thicket of tribal bloodlines, had married their second cousin, fellow tribesman, and local al-Qaeda commander: Samir al-Zayadi. For the first year all was bliss. The sister was happy, soon pregnant, and Greenmantle found work as his brother-in-law's driver, chauffeuring Samir back-and-forth to al-Qaeda meetings. But one night Samir got slap happy and the sister miscarried. Greenmantle didn't confront his terrorist brother-in-law – who would? – but it was clear his sister wanted out. Equally clear was the fact that Samir wasn't going to grant her a divorce. Ghalib made an executioner's chop with his hand. "This is his solution."

Together we worked out a deal: Ghalib would run Greenmantle and I'd run Ghalib, sort of. Neither the source nor Ghalib's

superiors at PSO would know he was talking to us, but the station would have full visibility.

For weeks there had been nothing. Samir hid in his spider-hole and Greenmantle refused to hand over his location for fear his sister might get hurt. "Wait 'til the bastard's traveling," he messaged Ghalib.

And now he was. "Tuesday's the day," Ghalib said, as Young and Whitten rasped about "chasin' the moonlight."

I nodded. "Anything else?"

Ghalib pulled a transcript sheet out of the Rothmans bag. "Greenmantle will receive a courier at some point on Tuesday," he translated. "The courier will take him to collect al-Zayadi. He doesn't know where he's going or who al-Zayadi will be meeting, only that's its someone important." Ghalib looked up from the paper. "Remember, Greenmantle will be driving the car. You have to wait until they've cleared the vehicle to fire."

"When were you guys going to give this to us?"

Ghalib offered a sheepish smile. "Tuesday morning. General Ali is going to rush over to the embassy with an 'urgent' tip."

"Not really enough time to get an eye in the sky."

"No, not really." Ghalib hesitated. "Be convincing, Julian. It's my neck that's on the line. But" – he flicked his cigarette through the cracked window – "this is your shot. Don't miss."

\*

"Sir," the marine guard on the phone sounded jumpy for 11 am. Too many *Rip Its*, most likely. The marines drank them by the case, crushed the empties, and stacked the carcasses beneath their desk like Genghis Khan piling bodies. "Sir, there is a

General Ali Muhammad here.” The lance corporal lowered his voice. “He says it’s highly urgent.”

I nodded into the phone. *Game time.* “Escort him back, please.”

General Ali Muhammad: fifty-seven, fat, and one of the last holdovers from the old regime. I remembered how redacted had described the man: “As dangerous as a swaying cobra and with the same hooded eyes.”

I double-checked the recording equipment in my desk and waited for the Marine’s knock.

“Sir.” The lance corporal escorted our visitor into my windowless office, before stepping back outside.

I poured steaming tea into hourglass tumblers, and offered him one. “General.”

Ali Muhammad took a careful sip, wiped his mustache, and got straight to business. “This morning, we received information about the location of the Mr. Samir al-Zayadi.”

“That’s excellent,” I interrupted half-standing, overselling for effect.

The general grimaced slightly at my display and rested his hands on his belly as if it might bounce away. “Yes, of course, excellent. I wanted you to know as soon as possible.”

“Do you have the location?”

General Ali slid a torn scrap of paper with handwritten coordinates across the desk to me. “Unfortunately our information says he’ll be moving soon, likely within the hour.” He blew out a theatrical sigh. “I do not think that is enough time to get a drone from your base in Djibouti into the sky, no?” The General shook his head at the unending cruelties of this world.

I leaned back in my chair, savoring the next few minutes Ghalib had gifted me. "Care for a cigar, General?"

He nodded, warily.

I clipped a pair of Padrón Anniversaries and leaned across the desk to light his. "Just between us," I said, my voice conspiratorially low.

Ali Muhammad's eyes flickered hungrily beneath their hood, and I thought of reading Jonathan *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi* the last time I was home. The General gave a slight "go ahead" nod.

Somewhere in my desk was a memo instructing Ambassador Rees to brief Yemen's new president on everything I was about to reveal. The ambassador wouldn't like it, but there was no real harm in jumping the gun by a few days. I blew out a mouthful of Nicaraguan smoke. "To tell you the truth, we have just completed transforming an old Saudi airstrip – airfield 30 – into a new drone base." I tapped the torn edge of paper with Samir's coordinates. "It will be close, but I think, thanks to your help, we can do this."

The General coughed slightly as he exhaled, but made no comment.

I stood quickly. "Thank you, General. But as I'm sure you understand time is tight. The lance corporal will escort you out."

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I dropped General Ali's scrap of scrawled coordinates in the trash, and walked up two flights of metal stairs, through three sets of cipher locked doors, and into the Box. Exact same smell anywhere in the world: stale air and unwashed bodies. Strip away the burnt coffee odor and the stress, and I could be walking into Adam's 16-year-old bedroom back home.

Two of my targeters, Alyssa and Doug, sat at a conference

table, staring silently into a row of screens, surrounded by \$250 million of machines that hummed, clicked, and whirred like an insect army.

“Anything?”

Alyssa’s eyes didn’t move, but her 28-year-old ponytail swished back and forth, carving an arc in the dead air. “Nothing yet. But we’ve got two Reapers stacked on top of the site.”

Alyssa had been a senior in high school on 9/11. A decade later, and five years into her Agency career, she’d already been on the ground in Pakistan and Iraq and was on her second tour through Yemen. She was short, Asian, and one of the best. Doug talked less, but beneath his blue light glasses and acne-flaked exterior was just as good. He’d been part of the al-Awlaki strike team the year before, earning a medal he’d touched once at a private ceremony before surrendering it back to the director and a sunless life in the Agency vault.

I sat in a swivel chair in the back and clicked open a screen to catch up on cable traffic. Greenmantle’s information would either be right or it wouldn’t. Either way, I’d have to call Peter, my boss at the Counterterrorism Center. But – I checked my watch – 4:13 am DC time was early, even for Peter the Wolf.

I knew his reputation: a workaholic obsessive – like Angelton only worse – who’d converted to Islam to understand his enemy better. But Peter also knew what it was like to operate in the field. Shortly after I arrived in Sanaa, he’d axed the dreaded “triple trigger,” which required the ambassador, the station chief, and the head of CTC to all sign off on a strike. Now it was just the two of us, completely in-house, a much more efficient process.

“Boss.” Alyssa’s voice was higher than usual. “One man entering the house.”

I walked over to where she was pointing. On the screen things looked the same: a dusty brown building in a dusty brown desert. But Doug confirmed her spot.

Twenty minutes later two men walked out of the house and climbed into a white Toyota Hilux with an orange racing stripe. I had Greenmantle as the stocky driver and the courier as the taller passenger, but without sound it was impossible to be certain.

Alyssa and Doug tensed like a pair of birddogs. I kept my voice steady. "These are our guys. Put both eyes on the car."

Alyssa relayed my directions to the pilots at an off-site facility in Virginia, and the twin 66-foot Reapers climbed a few thousand feet, steadied, and locked onto their prey. Barring a technological mishap, cloud cover or, God forbid, a sand storm the drones could follow the vehicle for the next 18 hours.

The Hilux bounced over a barely discernible track for several minutes, sprouting a rooster tail of dust that splashed a grainy white on the screen. At 1:45 pm local time Greenmantle stopped outside what, from 17,000 feet, looked like the world's saddest roadside restaurant: a tattered canvas sunshade, cracked once-white plastic tables, and no customers. The courier got out, walked inside and, a few minutes later, three different men exited the restaurant and climbed into the Hilux.

"Ok," I told the room. "That's Greenmantle, Samir al-Zayadi, and two likely AQ members. Remember Greenmantle is red, everyone else is righteous." Time to call Peter.

Two hours of slow driving later, the Hilux stopped outside a cluster of mud-brick huts. Everyone walked inside and no one came out. "Nap time," a voice from Virginia joked.

"Qat time," Alyssa snapped back, popping her gum.

An hour later, one of the men walked out on the flat roof and stared straight up into the sky, shielding his eyes with a brown hand.

"Can he hear us?" I asked.

"Not a chance," Doug said.

"Well, give us a 30,000 foot floor to make sure." Alyssa's fingers tapped at the keys, and the image on the screen blurred, dropped out of focus, and reappeared at  $\frac{3}{4}$  size.

Shortly after 6 pm local time, the men walked out of the house, climbed into the car, and started driving northeast across a hard, flat plain. They stopped after 27 minutes just outside a village.

"Where are we?"

Alyssa clicked twice. "Baraqish."

The village wasn't familiar. "Do we have anything on it?"

"Nope." Her voice sounded tight. "It's clean."

"What do you think?" I asked Peter.

"Let's watch them, see what happens."

On screen, the passenger door opened and three figures in robes piled out. "Greenmantle's staying with the car," Alyssa said.

"I see it."

Peter broke in from Langley. "Who are they talking to?"

Doug pointed at the screen. "Some kid."

"Ok." I took a deep breath. "We wait."

A minute later the boy's pixelated body scampered away, just

as a low-altitude cloud drifted beneath the drones, blocking the camera. When it cleared the three men had drawn off by themselves, about 100 yards outside the village on the road into town.

“They’re clear,” Alyssa said from her seat.

“Not yet,” I said. “They’re supposed to be meeting someone.”

Fifteen sets of eyes, in Yemen and Northern Virginia, watched Samir al-Zayadi and his two companions walk slowly toward a cluster of date palms. They looked animated and in good spirits, waving their arms and kicking off bright heat signatures on the infrared monitor. One of the men broke off from the group, ducked behind a tree, and knelt to piss. A few minutes later, two men walked out of the village and joined them.

“Is this the meeting?” I asked Peter.

Silence on the line, as Peter contemplated scenarios. “Male, military age,” his voice was a croaky whisper. “But your source, your call.”

I hesitated. On screen the five men were greeting one another, cheek kisses and shoulder hugs. One minute stretched to two. Alyssa’s gum popped.

“Julian?” Peter’s voice chimed in my ear. “Window’s closing.”

I thought of my first buck. Eight years old, breath fogging the frozen October air, my father’s hand on my back, reassuring me. I nodded. “Go.”

In front of me the screen flashed, then flashed again.

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**New Poetry from Tyler Vaughn Hayes: “They even pipe it into the bookstore,” “His first time: flight by ropes,” “The edict,” “Rappel annuel”**



WAX-LADEN DAY / *image by Amalie Flynn*

**They even pipe it into the bookstore**

It's never quite silent, though  
there's no lowing, not from God  
nor his gluttoned blind bovine. Only

the thudding of shuffling ungues  
on stereos hemmed, hidden  
in the high grass–muzak

piercing through, prodding each

tagged ear. Far better this way—  
now they needn't contemplate

the cacophony in BARN 8, the strain  
of strings tucked tight to necks, jammed  
trumpets jutting through guts, and

the flutes flushed fast with blood.  
No, much better this way.  
Bow, hark, try not to think.

**His first time: flight by ropes**  
*(for Corbin Vaughn)*

it's fleeting  
the rebuff  
of a flutter  
fleecing  
the sway  
in his wee  
depleted eyes

exhausted  
the college  
girls of August  
ferry a whole  
life on the neck  
heaving TVs  
sleeping late  
they flit  
from mom  
then return

we can't split  
a pendulum  
a heavy head  
tightened white  
like a fading grip

on the tethers  
just out of reach

give it up already.

### **The edict**

There is, without question,  
a tendency to beg for  
those things we have  
already.

For instance, I once  
commanded God: turn me  
into a poet, else I'll pretend to  
be a walrus.

Bruggghllff!

### **Rappel Annuel**

I  
(for one and once)  
intend to celebrate  
a soothing din  
the cleansing mess  
fresh from the wet  
wax-laden day.  
Hip hip

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**New Nonfiction from J.**

# Malcolm Garcia: “The Forced Disappearance of Sombath Somphone”

Ng Shui Meng speaks of her husband Sombath Somphone in the present tense, with a firm matter-of-fact tone about his disappearance, a way, I presume, for her to maintain control in a situation where she has none and knows nothing but heartbreak. Yet I hear the deep sentiment behind the words. To her, Sombath is much more than the internationally acclaimed, award-winning development worker who vanished one night years ago. He is her partner, companion and mentor, a man with a quiet presence whom she relies on even in his absence. Although short and thin, he stood out in a crowd partly because of his shock of silver white hair. Most older Lao men dye their hair, she explains. Government officials all have black hair but Sombath has this head of white hair, and he always wears a cotton peasant jacket and yet there is something about him that makes everyone feel deferential toward him. That may have been a contributing factor to his disappearance, Shui Meng muses, this deference, the tranquil influence he has. He would never call himself an activist. He is not confrontational. Sombath believes in cooperation and works with Lao officials. In private he can be critical of the government but never in public. He's a pragmatist and strategic about what he does. Although he is not political, he inspires people. Perhaps that is what led to his undoing.



Sombath Somphone's wife, Ng Shui Meng. Photo: J. Malcolm Garcia.

On December 15, 2012, Somphone was stopped at a police checkpoint in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, and was never seen or heard from again. Lao officials denied any involvement. Officials with human rights organizations believe Somphone was the victim of a forced disappearance by the government. Then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton demanded answers and the European Parliament expressed its concern but to no avail. The Lao government insisted it knew nothing. Almost nine years later, his fate and his whereabouts remain a mystery. His friends can only speculate on why he was taken.



The police checkpoint where Somphone was stopped. Photo: J. Malcolm Garcia.

“There’s an expression I first learned from Shui Meng,” one of Somphone’s colleagues told me. “You cut off the head of the chicken to scare the monkeys. It means you make an example of somebody. This is how the Lao government operates. They find an example and hit it hard to give it publicity and shut everybody up, and they did that with Sombath, and its consequences are still in effect.”

Laos is not alone in its use of forced disappearance. Phil Robertson, the deputy director of Human Rights Watch’s Asia Division in Bangkok, Thailand, told me its use remains common throughout Southeast Asia. Thailand has abducted people over the years but less frequently than outright assaults and assassinations. Vietnam insists on taking people through a

kangaroo court. The Philippines and Indonesia also use abductions to crack down on dissent. Some governments are quicker to use it than others. Laos is very quick. Robertson estimates about 22 Lao people have disappeared in recent years.

The night before he and I spoke, two Khmer-speaking men tried to drag prominent Cambodian dissident Chamroeun Suon into a van outside a 7-Eleven in Bangkok. “The boss needs to catch you, to arrest you, you have to come with us to the van,” one of the men told him. They tased Suon but he escaped, running back into the store. The attackers tased him so many times that their batteries ran out. Robertson presumed, with a hint of detached humor, that they had not used a very good taser. The two attackers may have operated without the authority of the Thai government, he said, but they certainly felt emboldened to try to grab him in a public place.



Sombath Somphone,  
who disappeared in  
2012. Photo:  
Wikipedia.

“There’s a lot of these cases in the region. A prominent Lao activist disappeared recently,” Robertson said, referring to the 2019 abduction of Od Sayavong in Thailand. He is

affiliated with Free Lao, a group of Lao migrant workers and activists who advocate for human rights and democracy in Laos.

“We don’t know if there was Thai cooperation or not. The Thais have gone after their own dissidents in Laos so there very much could have a quid pro quo: You guys have targets, you go after them, and we’ll go after our guys.”

Robertson described the use of forced disappearance as one of the cruelest practices used against dissidents.

“Groups like Human Rights Watch, we raise the issue with governments but don’t get a reply,” he said. “When diplomats get involved they will get this sort of, ‘We’re investigating, yes. We’re concerned; we don’t know what happened. Isn’t it horrible?’ That sort of thing. ‘We don’t have any information. We heard he had a mistress and he ran off.’ Or they’ll say some other scurrilous excuse and accuse us of being naive to think something happened.”

Robertson did not know Somphone, but he has worked with Shui Meng, who continues to demand answers about her husband’s disappearance. At first, she was confident he was alive and being held, but Robertson thinks her attitude over time has changed. For an advocate like Robertson, questions about what happened to Somphone become sensitive. He has his opinion but it’s not for him to impose his thoughts on the family. That, he said, was Shui Meng’s call.

The more I read and heard about Somphone the more disturbed I became. The idea that someone so accomplished could be abducted without consequences other than rote international condemnation struck me as terribly wrong. I know that sounds naive, but some things are just not complicated. You don’t rip someone from their family for no reason other than a skewed notion of social control. To dismiss with a cavalier *Well, these things happen* didn’t sit well with me. During my research into Somphone’s disappearance, unidentified federal

agents began arresting Black Lives Matter protesters at the urging of then-President Donald Trump. It seemed my own country was becoming less and less removed from totalitarian impulses. I became determined to write about Somphone, and to, in a small way, join the diminished but still vocal chorus of human rights advocates demanding answers, because one day, I thought, I might be insisting on similar answers for the disappeared here.

“I don’t want fear to grip my life,” Shui Meng told me before I flew to Laos. “If they want to target you, they can. That is the factor of uncertainty. Nothing is normal. Since Sombath disappeared, I don’t know what normal is.”

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Sombath Somphone was born in 1952 and grew up in Done Khio, rural southern Laos, the eldest of eight brothers and sisters. He was curious and innovative even as a child. Shui Meng recalled one story when as a boy he decided it would be easier to raise frogs than catch them to sell in the market. At that time no one in his village bred frogs, but Somphone did and they multiplied. They also escaped because he did not have containers big enough to hold them. Still he tried. He was always experimenting.

At sixteen, Somphone enrolled at a French lycée in the town of Savannakhet, boarding with relatives in exchange for doing chores. An American teacher, Sylvester Morris, became his mentor and enrolled him in night classes at a local American school.

“He was in one of my English courses,” Morris recalled from his home outside Kansas City, Missouri. “He looked like he was 12. He was a very nice kid, very humble, respectful. He was not boisterous. The other kids looked up to him. He wanted to learn as much as possible.”

Morris helped recruit students for the American Field Service U.S. exchange program and in 1969 Somphone was accepted and spent a year with the family of Oscar and Phyllis Bardon in Wisconsin, where he attended Elkhart Lake-Glenbeulah High School.

“We called him Sam,” one of the Bardon children, David, told me. “He was so easy to talk to. He did his chores and fit right in. I can remember him laughing and always having a good time. We loved him to death. It was a sad day when we took him to the airport to return to Laos. We all cried. We had gotten very close.”

Somphone was impressed by the things many Americans take for granted, especially food. He saw stacks and stacks of packaged chicken and meat in supermarkets. He had never eaten steak before he went to Wisconsin, he told Shui Meng. Boys and girls played sports. Somphone’s only sport had been physical labor. Children yelled at their parents, shocking him. No Lao child would shout at their mother and father. He wondered how to take the good aspects of American culture back to Laos, especially technology. He was in awe of technology.

In 1971, Somphone studied agriculture and economy at the University of Hawaii. After he graduated in 1974, he returned to Laos but then traveled back to Hawaii and earned a master’s degree in agronomy. He also met Shui Meng there in 1978. A Singaporean, she was working toward her doctorate in sociology. They married in 1983. Shui Meng became a senior research fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore and then worked for UNICEF in East Timor and China. In 1986, she joined Somphone in Laos.

Shui Meng recalled that he was always clear he wanted to return home. His intentions were modest: to be with his mother and father and siblings and use his skills and education in agriculture to improve the lives of farmers. He believed that the life of a Lao farmer is rich despite its typical poverty.

Farmers have everything they need, he said: food, fish, water. They grow enough rice to sustain themselves for a year. He thought that there was much wealth in this kind of simplicity. A farmer lived with very little and was quite content to pick fruit, gather mushrooms, swim in the river. Many of them did not have running water or electricity yet they seemed happy. Somphone was always curious about nature and the relations between different plants. Shui Meng was a city girl. She couldn't recognize one mushroom from the next, one animal from another, but Somphone taught her to value the diversity of a forest and what it provided. He wanted to improve the lives of farmers without violating their attachment to the land.

"I adjusted," Shui Meng told me. "I was also curious about Laos. It was very different from anything I'd known. When I first came I saw that farmers had very little, but they had a contentment that I admired."

Throughout the 1980s, Somphone struggled to secure Lao government approval for projects promoting community-based sustainable agricultural development. He offered to work with the department of agriculture on the use of organic fertilizers. However, officials did not know what to make of his ideas and were suspicious: Why had he returned to Laos when so many others wanted to leave? Abandoned to his own devices, Somphone used his family's farm to implement his ideas. He experimented with azolla, a water fern that can be used as an organic fertilizer. He also encouraged the use of rice-based farming systems, in which rice is the major but not sole crop. Farmers diversified by planting vegetables, beans and fruits. They also began raising fish and fowl rather than catching them in the wild. In addition, Somphone introduced the use of fuel-saving stoves and rice mills, and large clay pots to collect rainwater for the dry seasons. He developed a recycling center in Vientiane.

In 1996, with the permission of the Lao Ministry of Education,

Somphone founded the Participatory Development Training Center, better known as PADETC, to promote education, leadership skills and sustainable development buttressed by Buddhist principles. He trained young volunteers and local officials in community-based development, including sanitation, recycling and agricultural production. PADETC became perhaps the best-known civil society organization in Laos.

A woman who worked with Somphone at the center in the early 2000s, and who spoke to me on condition of anonymity, remembered him as zen-like. He was always smiling. The co-worker enjoyed watching Somphone and Shui Meng together. They teased each other. Shui Meng would tell funny stories about the two of them. They just looked happy together. She was the one who was more outgoing. He was calm, composed, thoughtful, and reflective, but he didn't drone on. He could make people laugh when he wanted.

Much of Somphone's work, the co-worker said, had to do with changing school curricula to better represent Lao culture. He was very focused on getting children involved with local customs. True happiness, he told them, was founded on one's culture and the environment in which they lived. Cooperation with the government and the education of young people, he believed, would bring progressive change to Laos.

Somphone retired from the center in June 2012 to spend more time with his family, meditating and writing. Six months later, he disappeared.

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Before I departed for Laos and between calls to Shui Meng, I spoke with a number of Somphone's associates. Like his PADETC colleague, most refused to let me use their names. No, don't print that, they would tell me. Even without my name, the Lao authorities will know you're quoting me. As one man told me,

the mystery of a disappearance is what makes it so effective. "It's a strategy of repression through fear," he said. "As long as there is no information about Sombath it will have this chilling effect. No one will talk to you because no one wants to be next. If they can take him, they can take me."

Everyone I interviewed remembered how Somphone loved driving around in an old army jeep and how he enjoyed relaxing on a log, drinking beer and eating sticky rice and grilled fish. He cooked little pizzas in a toaster oven and told stories. He was very centered except when he played ping-pong. He was mad about ping-pong and would play for an hour or longer. He insisted it was good exercise.

His friends told me that Somphone often spoke about the use of communication technologies to empower communities. He believed in developing people and then letting them create their own organizations. He could be quite forthright about his opinions but he wasn't an alpha male, as one friend put it. He didn't raise his voice to be heard. He spoke softly when he offered a different point of view yet he didn't mince his words. The considerate way he made his point impressed his colleagues. He was unassuming—his presence felt through his humility.

In the years before his disappearance, Somphone had been concerned about families losing their farms to government land seizures for industrial projects. After years of political and economic isolation, the Lao government began soliciting international investment in the 1990s. It agreed to hydropower dams along the Mekong River financed by the Thai government and to a high-speed railway connecting Vientiane and Kunming, the capital and transportation hub of China's southern Yunnan province. Somphone talked often about these developments to friends but he didn't make public statements. He never slammed the government. He wouldn't do that, was always careful, but he knew he was walking a fine line. But the line always shifted. Who knew where the line was? Who knew when it was crossed?

There was one friend of Somphone's whose recollections may offer a window into his disappearance. The friend had been involved with a weekly talk radio program. Listeners called and raised concerns about government corruption and other issues affecting their lives. In 2011, farmers spoke on the program. They opposed government confiscation of their land for commercial development. The show's producer opened the lines and callers made strong statements in support of the farmers. After the show aired, the deputy director of the state-run Lao National Radio called the producer and told him his show had been canceled effective immediately. Somphone unsuccessfully appealed to the government to restore the program.

Around this time, a sympathetic, low-level official warned Somphone's friend that he and Somphone, among others, were on a government blacklist. None of them thought they would be disappeared. Perhaps imprisoned for a short time but nothing more. And given the official's minor status, the blacklist might be nothing more than a rumor. But the official insisted. Somphone, he said, was the first one on the list, but no one believed him.

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I flew to Vientiane in February 2020 expecting to enter the grim urban decay of a totalitarian state, something out of a dystopian movie. Instead, I found a city that despite its population of 683,000 people felt very much like a small town. Men and women paused at vendor stalls picking through fruit and the aroma of bread rose from French bakeries and Buddhist monks in orange robes strolled past parked tap-taps whose drivers slept sprawled across the front seat. Barefoot farmers watered crops near roads that meandered through parks where women sold flowers. Travel bureaus promoted tours to other cities.

"There are a lot of tourists," Somphone's PADETC colleague

told me, "and you kind of forget the regime. The totalitarian aspect is not overt. It's smartly managed. You don't feel the regime."

The day after my arrival, I met with Shui Meng at Common Grounds, a coffee shop on a posh narrow street that included restaurants and stores filled with overpriced wood carvings and supposed antiques. After spending months talking to people who had asked me not to name them, I felt nervous, their paranoia becoming mine.

"Don't keep looking over your shoulder, otherwise you'll be more suspicious," Shui Meng scolded. "Nobody is listening to you. If they want to target you they can and you wouldn't know you are a target. Nobody tells you anything."

That did not make me feel better, but the stern look she gave me through her wide glasses kept me focused. Her dark hair, streaked with gray, came down almost to her shoulders and she leaned back in her chair, legs crossed, as if nothing was amiss. She pointed across the street to TaiBaan, a shop she and Sombath founded a year before he disappeared. It sells handcrafts made by hundreds of Lao women across the country. The women receive all the profits from their work.

Shui Meng described Laos as living in a fishbowl. Everybody knows everybody and everybody sees everybody. It is not necessary to use the power of the state. It's just knowing you're being observed. Maybe you're not, but you think you might be.

"I really do believe that 95 percent of the time and 95 percent of the people are not being watched because the state does not have the resources," Shui Meng said. "It's that five percent chance that keeps everyone guessing."

We left Common Grounds and drove to the police checkpoint where Somphone was last seen. The crowded roads teemed with cars and tap-taps and a few wagons loaded with vegetables.

Storefronts on both sides of the two-lane highway appeared to be doing a brisk business and I saw half a dozen signs offering dental services. Nothing remotely suggested a police state. In fact, I did not see any police officers.

“Because it can be so easily controlled, the oppression does not need to be very overt,” Shui Meng explained. “You don’t see police because you don’t need to. Everyone monitors himself.”

After about 15 minutes we reached the police station on Thadeua Road, in Vientiane’s Sisattanak district not far from downtown. We stopped at the intersection and I snapped a photo. There was not much to shoot. The sidewalk had crumbled into a dirt path and ran past the station, which was little more than a hut. When the light changed, Shui Meng told me to put down my camera and we passed the station immersed in the flow of traffic. Shui Meng continued for about five minutes so as not to draw attention before she turned around. We drove back the way we had come and again passed the station, which appeared vacant.

“Sombath’s disappearance is an invisible wound,” Shui Meng said as she took me to my hotel. “It’s not like a cut where I can stop the bleeding. There’s no recourse for justice. The police say they don’t know. The government says it doesn’t know. How do you make a case against a state system that has all the power to lie and there’s no independent press or judicial system? Where do you go? Nowhere.”

In 2012 Laos was chosen to host the Asia-Europe Meeting, an annual gathering of leaders to discuss the relationship between Asia and Europe. From October 16 to October 19, the ministry of foreign affairs asked Somphone to co-chair the ninth Asia-Europe People’s Forum, a parallel three-day convention of grassroots activists and nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs, to discuss matters affecting their communities such as land and water rights, religious freedom

and other issues. About 1,000 participants attended, the biggest civil society event ever held in Laos.



The cultural hall where the forum took place. Photo: J. Malcolm Garcia.

The popularity of the event scared more conservative elements of the government. Plainclothes security police took notes and photographs, intimidating many of the participants. A statement by Somphone, about promoting understanding, was translated into Lao and English, but not released. Somphone would never be critical. He was encouraging and inclusive but never confrontational. However, the Lao authorities thought differently. Despite his good relationships with various ministers, there were others within the government who always viewed him with suspicion because of his U.S. education and his close working relationships with international NGOs.

Tensions between the authorities and the forum's organizers soon emerged. The government had no experience dealing with

such a sizable number of people descending on Laos from Europe and Asia, some of whom were activists within social movements. People were speaking openly about life in Laos. The ministry of interior and the public security forces had planted minders everywhere. Anger over little things spilled over. The security people might say, You can't sit here. Why not? an organizer would demand. We can sit wherever we want. These small clashes became problematic because the authorities were not used to people arguing with them. As co-chair, Somphone had to sooth irate officials. What he may not have understood was what a facade the government had put up pretending the forum would be a safe place to speak freely.

Security people confronted one woman for raising concerns about land and housing rights in her village in southern Laos. The police intimidated her family. According to one source, the woman complained to Somphone, who became upset. He had given participants his word that they could say what they thought, based on the government's assurances to him if he agreed to be help chair the forum. He felt responsible, this source said. Somphone asked participants to compile a list of those who were being harassed. No one knows if the list was made. If it had been, knowing Somphone, the source said, he would have spoken to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Not in an in-your-face manner, but in his quiet way.

"Maybe this made him seem like a threat to the government," the source told me.

Another friend of Somphone's recalled that he was not looking forward to the forum. I'm ready to tend my garden and not deal with this, he said. He complained it was going to be a big headache. Somphone didn't anticipate how big a headache it could be until an NGO administrator, Anne-Sophie Gindroz, was thrown out of the country.

Gindroz had been the country director of Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation in Laos, an international NGO that works on

agricultural development and land issues, from 2009 until her expulsion. She and Somphone worked together to organize the forum. They were in constant negotiation with the government about what they could and could not do. Still, she believed they had made progress. But she now believes the government took advantage of their trust and used the forum to observe the most outspoken participants, something neither she nor Somphone had expected.

In preparation for the forum, Somphone led a survey to measure happiness throughout Laos with the cooperation of local authorities. The findings of this consultation were incorporated into a video, "The Lao People's Vision," promoting an alternative development model based on consultation with rural communities. It was not a critical discussion about policy, but many issues came up, including the use of land and how development was conducted, as well as government corruption. People were very vocal. In a country where denunciation of the government is not tolerated, such an exchange of ideas would have been perceived as dangerous.

During the forum, the authorities would not allow "The Lao People's Vision" to be distributed. Some officials realized the potential consequences of people openly discussing their concerns. It was as if an alarm had gone off, Gindroz said, a wake-up for conservative elements of the government. They didn't want this in their country.

Gindroz described herself as very outspoken and along with Somphone had expressed concern for the harassment of forum participants with the Lao government even after the forum had concluded. On November 21, 2012, she submitted a letter to international NGOs and donors critical of the government's interference with the forum and the repercussions people had suffered. About two weeks later, on December 7, she was called into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a meeting she thought was about partnering her agency with local aid organizations. The meeting, she recalled, actually began with a discussion

about her work, and at times she thought she had a good relationship with the ministry. But then an official said, You know, I've had a very bad night. I couldn't sleep. What happened? Gindroz asked, and then the official handed her a letter notifying her that she had to leave Laos within 24 hours. Her husband and children, the woman said, could stay if they chose.

"Of course, I will go," Gindroz said, adding, "I think it's a pity. What you are doing now is proving what I was saying was right. You are putting restrictions on freedom of speech."

The official gave her a pained look.

"That was it," Gindroz told me. "I left. I was thrown out."

This was eight days before Somphone disappeared.

On Saturday, December 15, 2012, Somphone and Shui Meng left his office at 5:30 p.m. He got in his jeep and drove behind her. She last saw him as she passed the police station about a half hour later. When he did not come home for dinner, Shui Meng became concerned and called his phone but received no answer. Then she contacted friends to ask if they had seen him, but no one had. She drove on the road leading to their house to see if his jeep had broken down. She went to hospitals. Nothing. The local police said it was late and no one worked on Sundays. Come by on Monday.

Friends of Somphone called everyone they knew to ask if he had been seen. People were worried because he had worked closely with Gindroz and she had just been banished. Paranoia set in. Sombath, they took Sombath! Be careful, save yourself, his friends told one another. Many of them hunkered down in their homes. One man told me that he would tell his family and friends where he was going and when he would be back. He advised his wife: If I do not return, go to the nearest embassy and ask for asylum. Or cross the Mekong River and flee to Thailand.

Friends had to decide: Would they be afraid and not help Shui Meng or would they stand with her? For Lao people it was very hard, and in the following days Shui Meng lost many friends who did not want to be seen with her.

On Monday, December 17, Shui Meng reported Somphone missing to the police. She had noticed security cameras around the police station where Somphone was last seen and put in a request to view the footage. To her surprise, the police agreed without hesitation and allowed her to copy it to her phone. The footage showed a jeep slowing to a stop at the police station shortly after six p.m. Somphone stepped out and appeared to speak with an officer. No other vehicles were stopped, and traffic on the road continued unhindered. A few minutes later, an unknown motorcyclist stopped, got in Somphone's jeep and drove away, leaving his motorcycle behind. A short time later, Somphone and at least two other men, in the presence of police officers, got in a truck and drove away.

Shui Meng was stunned. Surely, she thought, it had to be a mistake. Why would the police stop Sombath? She asked various government administrators but no one admitted knowledge of the event. Then she showed the security camera footage at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and officials there appeared shocked but claimed ignorance. Still, Shui Meng remained hopeful Somphone's detention was a mistake. They'll ask Sombath a few questions and then he'll be home with his quiet smile. I was held up, he'll tell her. They let me out. Don't worry.

On December 19, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced it had begun an investigation but about a week or two after Somphone's disappearance, Shui Meng noticed that government officials avoided her and replied with hostility to her questions. She soon became convinced that Somphone's arrest was more serious than she had realized.

About two weeks after Somphone disappeared, three members of

the Asian Parliamentarians for Human Rights met with Lao officials about Somphone. Walden Bello, one of the parliamentarians, told me the officials denied knowing what had happened and refused to even confirm he was missing. They insisted their investigation had revealed nothing.

Bello told me that he believes the Lao government made a cost-benefit analysis: Shall we silence this guy and risk reactions from the world or let him go and allow his voice to get louder and louder? In Bello's opinion they chose to silence him and take the heat. Bello feels sure the decision was made by senior government officials. He doubts too many people outside the ruling party knew about it.

Almost a month after he disappeared, Lao police issued a statement that the activity at the police station the night of his disappearance had been routine without any reported disturbances or detentions. Police insisted Somphone had not been taken. They suggested, without evidence, that he may have been involved in a personal dispute. No information, the police concluded, had been discovered to suggest what happened to him. The government-backed Vientiane Times English language newspaper published the police findings on February 4, 2013.

There is a risk of mythologizing Somphone given the circumstances of his disappearance, Somphone's PADETC colleague told me. He lived by principles we can all aspire to. She continues to work with farmers and thinks he would be happy about that. She feels confident that people involved in development work still remember him. When she is alone with a colleague she'll talk about him—his work and philosophy. Sometimes she meets with adults who had been involved with him as children, pleased they mention him. She has no doubt she is watched and trusts only a small group of people. Every time she attends church she prays for Somphone and for the truth to be told. She once thought he'd be found; he was just so kind, a gentle soul. Surely, he'd talk his way out. His decency

would prevail. Despite everything in some ways she believes it has.

These days, Shui Meng sees herself as the voice of remembrance for Sombath. His memory persists, partially because the government's own security cameras filmed his abduction. The new technology can be a double-edged sword. The state surveils people, but people can also surveil it. The government certainly didn't expect that. The audacity of taking him without turning off the cameras angers her almost as much as his abduction. The arrogance.

She knows people believe Sombath is dead, but she has stopped being disturbed by what others think, their pity. She can't control the feelings of other people and won't lose energy over it. Sombath remains very present for her. Friends say, What a shame, a man like that who had so much to offer to have been disappeared. How can Shui Meng respond? She can't, other than to agree. Every minute of every day she worries about him.

"I miss Sombath," she told me on the last day of my trip. We were sitting in a back room at TaiBaan surrounded by colorful tapestries. Her voice quivered for the first time in our many conversations. Shui Meng still hopes Sombath will return to her but uncertainty has become her shadow, an unwanted escort. Sometimes she sees him in a dream. Come back, she tells him. I can't, he says. I'm leaving now. And she wakes up. Come back, she says again in the emptiness of their bedroom.

But by then he's gone.