

MAX DESPAIN

Telling True War Stories

WE ALL FUMBLLED FOR CHANGE. I came up with two bullets I'd found in my drawer that morning. The executive officer had a notebook and pen. Crash, our enlisted driver, produced enough coin for eight of us to gain entry into the gardens where Babur, the first of the Mughal emperors, was buried in 1539. We weren't used to paying for anything. Even our new, thousand-dollar, quick-release body armor had been handed to us with a Xeroxed hand receipt. Tickets in hand, we wobbled through the half-melted snow with our extra fifty pounds of gear: tourists with cameras and weapons.

The Afghanistan of my memory is morphing romantic. A sepia tone tints the actual drab-mud hue of Kabul's homes and roads and people. I'm doing what humans do: I'm conflating and updating memories. Afghanistan. My first memories are like ghost limbs, prostheses constructed from the evening news. Alison Landsberg writes about "prosthetic memories"—memories instilled by graphic, sensory contacts with film or museums that create deeply felt recollections of a past event through which a person did not necessarily live. All to say that although I witnessed the mountains of Torah Borah and the backdrop of the Afghan presidential press room on TV before arriving on my deployment, Afghanistan in the flesh *was* a different experience. Now, though, those firsthand memories have begun to glow rosy through the lens of safety and abundance in America.

In The Places in Between, Rory Stewart describes Babur's tomb and the gardens from a 2002 perspective as war-ravaged. The beauty just now being restored in Bagh-e-babur is what had led Babur to request that he be buried there so long ago. His tomb is inscribed:

Only this mosque of beauty, this temple of nobility, constructed for the prayer of saints and the epiphany of cherubs, was fit to stand in so venerable a sanctuary as this highway of archangels, this theatre of heaven, the light garden of the godforgiven angel king whose rest is in the garden of heaven, Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur the Conqueror.

The founder of an empire won the old-fashioned way—with foot soldiers, horses, and hand-to-hand combat—recognized the human craving for beauty, and gardens such as those we found ourselves in became a part of every Mughal fort.

As Donald Anderson writes in the prologue to *When War Becomes Personal*, “War and art have reflected one another for forever” and is an intersection that deserves illumination. The beauty that the conqueror Babur found necessary is part of the need to understand how and why something lovely like a paradise and horrific like a war co-exist. *When War Becomes Personal* is comprised of personal accounts from the American Civil War to Iraq. All personal narratives run the risk of being read through the perspective of prosthetic memories. Films and museums and the five o’clock news have covered all the wars in this book. For example, Army officer Homer Steedly, narrowly surviving a landing site swarmed by the Viet Cong, finds his backpack riddled with holes and his helmet creased with a bulleted moment of chance. Steedly’s reaction was that people wouldn’t believe him, that they would claim “they’d seen that movie too.” All the memoirs are vulnerable to Hollywood and well-intentioned historians who have created a mass cultural memory of these wars that sometimes runs counter to factuality and what actual participants would say.

Our trip to Babur’s tomb did not have a Hollywood glow. The first appreciably warm day of 2008 in Kabul, the gardens had dozens of folk toiling up its steep slopes to admire the restored exteriors of the tomb, the solemn pavilion, and the enormous, enclosing wall. These visitors shied around us, out of place in our uniforms and body armor. But a group of older men seemed pleased to be included in our photos, as old men in Afghanistan often are. Our small attempts at “tashakor” (thank you) and “salaam aleikum” (hello) were met great with bursts of happy Afghan Farsi.

Crash came back with word that the second vehicle wouldn’t start. Now we were stranded. Sitting ducks. While it seemed silly to posture and bring to the Afghan tourists’ attention that we were concerned, we formed a little protective group in a corner of the wall while part of our party worked on the vehicles outside the gardens. The Rapid Recovery Unit was coming. The last time they were needed, they’d rapidly arrived in four hours.

I found myself reflecting on Jason Armagost’s personal narrative, “Things to Pack When You’re Bound for Baghdad,” which I had read on the *War, Literature, and the Arts* website just days before. I was stuck on Armagost’s description of

his role in the B2 flight to bomb Baghdad: “I am the sovereign nexus of ideology, weaponry, and a clash of civilizations.” Armagost is in awe of the power he wields. It is not lost on him that he benefits from the “morality of altitude,” a distancing from the blood and heat of battle. Standing in the garden—bodily in-country—I feel out of place, both an object and symbol of our ideology. I am an American in Afghanistan.

While we bristled in our refuge, giggling opium addicts tumbled down a nearby slope, crawling back up. They reminded me of fifth graders on the backdrop of the Montesano High School football field. Perhaps these Afghans’ behavior was threatening. Everyone became suspect.

But this scene we found ourselves witness to—a gorgeous garden, pilgrims, and addicts—was hardly the material of post-traumatic stress syndrome. Several of the essays found in *When War Becomes Personal* describe the nearly unfathomable difficulties associated PTSD. Donald Clay (“Shadow Soldier”), Robert MacGowan (“A Boatman’s Story”), and John Wolfe (“A Different Species of Time”) wrestle with the aftermath of combat. All three, however, manufacture a partial escape through the written rendering of their dark experiences to paper—once more revealing the healing vitality of that intersection of war and art.

February in Bagh-e-Babur. Outside the wall, Afghans wearing flip-flops had raced up the steepest slopes and gravel roads to extract a battery from the nearest car. Our up-armored Suburban was jumpstarted by a disembodied Toyota pickup battery.

On the ride back to the embassy, I grappled with dissonance: our cocoon-like huddle in the corner of a garden where tourist and addict became potential terrorists, and the earnest labor in the February snow to bring life back to our stranded vehicle.

With an essay entitled “Canon Fodder: an Epilogue,” Vietnam vet war poet Dale Ritterbusch examines the gift of war literature. Although from as far back as the *Iliad*, war literature has failed to prevent war, Ritterbusch would not be surprised that war literature is where I turn to better unravel my experience and that of my friends working “outside the wire.” Ritterbusch agrees: “the fact of war causes one to confront and differentiate power from powerlessness, moral complexity from simple moral platitude, the dull and stupid from wisdom and humanity. There is both grace and redemption in such loss.” Setting aside Timothy Dow’s provocative statement in *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* that “telling the truth about oneself on paper is virtually impossible,” I, no doubt like you, subscribe to the Tim O’Brien school of thought on war literature that claims “story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth.” In each account of this collection, the author’s genuineness overarches, making every piece a treasured and shaped artifact mined from twenty years of writing in *War, Literature and the Arts*.

Winding through the streets of Kabul, our drivers swerve and accelerate like drunken teenagers. Blocking cars away from the lead vehicle, the security detail riding in the passenger's seat would swing open her door and wave her pistol if any Afghan vehicles came too close. Embarrassed to be trouncing around their city as if we owned it, I hoped this memory would fade to a more pleasant version where we acknowledged that we were temporary residents in this country. But that would not be defensive. Being courteous is not safe.

When War Becomes Personal would have been the perfect complement to my experiences in Afghanistan. Safe behind the embassy walls, I found myself drawn to the *War, Literature, and the Arts* website, in particular to the memoirs, to make sense of the daily reports of combat and the daily drudge of my office-bound existence. WLA is celebrating twenty years of sorting out the necessary relationship between war and art, and its role in drawing out the rare moments of grace found in the first through the beauty of the second. The timing for publishing *When War Becomes Personal* could not be more auspicious. This collection of personal remembrances is an eloquent tribute to the responsibility WLA has shouldered over the past twenty years: telling true war stories.

LIEUTENANT COLONEL MAX DESPAIN graduated from the United States Air Force Academy in 1991 and has recently returned from a tour in Afghanistan to teach literature and writing in the Department of English & Fine Arts at the Academy.