

L I S A S I E D L A R Z

Tea with Elders

Dawn breaks with the stench of shit lagoon
where excrement is dumped. A dust devil
whips by portajohns, hot winds of diesel
and disinfectant. Our Terp calls it a Djinn
of free will that whispers *give in to this evil*.

Today we drive through minefields
dressed in pounds: helmet , seven;
ceramic body armor, twenty-two;
load-bearing vest packed with batteries,
bullets and grenades, thirty. We are walking
bombs with elephant grace.

The desert is littered: wrecked tanks,
trucks, silver hulls of Russian fighters.
Mosques and schools are rubble. Stucco
and mudbrick huts huddle between walls.
Our boots whoof up knee-high clouds.

Everything is dust in Ass-Crack-istan.
Children with fly-covered smiles spill
out chanting *kalam*. Pens we hand out
Are novelties in the villages.

The village elder greets us with a girl
whose mostly bald head is covered
in oozing sores. We give iodine, gauze.

The elder touches his heart, invites us in.
We peel off our armor and sit on the floor.

He presents Khosgozar, Iranian cola,
hocks spit into a spotted glass, wipes it on
his robe. Antifreeze jugs are ice buckets.
We raise our glasses. *We want Americans
to stay*, he says through our terp, *if you leave,
we will have more war.*

The old man takes my arm, *How to show
my love?* I take his hand in mine, place mine
on his shoulder, tell him *thank you.*

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