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## When the War Began

The war in Afghanistan is older than my dog, my cat, my car, my favorite pair of jeans, the Japanese maple in my front yard, the grocery store I frequent, my credit card, some translations of the Bible, the last three books of the Harry Potter series, the iPod, most cell phones, Wikileaks, Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, The Jonas Brothers' career, and the obsession we have with the coming zombie apocalypse. It is older than the finger-paintings I have on the wall of my study, older than all the skin cells on your body, older than all the hummingbirds and human eyelashes in the world.

I have lived in my current house for less years than the war has gone on. I have only lived in one house for longer. Neither of my daughters has ever lived in the same house for as long as the war has gone on. Neither of them own anything as old as the war, not stuffed animals or real animals or friendships, with the exception of torn copies of "Goodnight Moon" and "Where the Wild Things Are" that were once mine, books I have read to my children so many times since the war began I have lost count.

The war in Afghanistan is almost as old as my youngest daughter. She was born 14 months before the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. She was too young to know what had happened, or what it might mean. I remember where I was and what I was doing that day, but so does everyone else.

The war in Afghanistan has lasted longer than the First World War, the Second World War and the Korean War. It has lasted longer than the Civil War and the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. It has lasted longer than three of the four great Crusades, the first Gulf War, the Six Days War, the Yom Kippur War, the Falklands War, the Spanish-American War, the Mexican-American War, the Barbary Wars, the invasions of Panama, Grenada, Somalia, the Dominican Republic, Lebanon, and the conflicts in Bosnia and Libya and Kosovo.

The Vietnam War lasted 103 months from the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to the last withdrawal of American troops. The war in Afghanistan has lasted 120 months so far. An active couple could have eleven or twelve children in that time. The oldest of those children would have learned to walk and talk, ride a bicycle, skip stones, splash through muddy creeks, rub food into her hair, smile, laugh, sing, dance, cry. She would have entered elementary school and learned to finger paint, drink chocolate milk from little cartons, read, play hopscotch, jump rope, and many other games such as cops and robbers and cowboys and Indians and war.

When we played war, my brother and I burned our little green army men. We'd use matches, or lighters, or gasoline, and watch them melt into pools of plastic, but in less time than the war has gone on we grew out of that.

Roughly 30-40% of marriages last less time than the war in Afghanistan. Some divorces turn into little wars of their own, full of shouting and accusations and dishes thrown against the wall. I've even heard children who have gone through a divorce are more likely to become divorced, although it's possible I am conflating that saying with the one about children who were beaten being more likely to beat their own children.

If the war in Afghanistan were married, I suspect it would be to the war in Iraq. They have lots in common: dry, barren, war-torn lands, a hidden enemy, a confused and frightened population, a tenuous idea on both sides of how the war might end. They both have bombs going off in the distance, and sand blown into everything by the constant wind, and buildings destroyed by years of war, and when we see pictures or videos of either country we often see children playing in the streets while their parents worry what might happen to them.

The war in Afghanistan just celebrated its tenth anniversary. Traditionally, this is the tin anniversary. The first metallic alloy was bronze, made of tin and copper. It ushered in a new age of weaponry and warfare.

When my grandfather was alive he used to tell me all the things they didn't have when he was growing up: computers, air-conditioning, Velcro, television, telephones, credit cards, bar codes, the pill, VCRs, ATMs, word processors, video games, microwaves, automatic windows, car alarms, jet fighters, and nuclear weapons. He was born in November of 1916, two years before the armistice was signed and World War One ended. He was married on Dec. 6, 1941, a day before World War Two began.

He has been dead now for nine years, less time than the war in Afghanistan, and I imagine conversations we might have if he were still alive. When I joined the military he began to tell me stories about his own service, although his stories never mentioned war directly. Rather he told me of the rice paddies in Korea, or driving through the French countryside in World War II. In a letter he wrote to my mother when she was still an infant, he told her of hunting geese near Pusan, Korea, how he hired a local fisherman to row him out in a small boat, and how the geese flew so close to the cliffs on the far side of the lake that their voices echoed and gathered and intensified until it seemed there was nothing in all the world but their honking. No bombs or bullets, no artillery or airplanes, no body-bags or corpses staring unseeing at the sun.

He once told me there were many things now—like automatic transmissions and refrigerators—that he would not wish to live without. War was not one of them.

On a larger scale, ten years is not a long time. Saturn's ponderous orbit of the sun takes almost 30 years, and Haley's Comet comes once every 75. The Hundred Years War lasted 116 years. Cortes destroyed Technotitlan 500 years ago. The Bronze Age lasted 2,000 years. For close to 160 million years dinosaurs thumped around the earth, roaring and hunting and scavenging and killing and dying before some greater cataclysm roared out of the sky. Before that the earth was a hot rock sizzling through space, and before that, most scientists believe, our universe was born in a flash of violence.

Since the war began I have quit smoking and started again, quit, started and quit. My oldest daughter has grown three feet, four inches. My youngest daughter has grown close to three feet. They have both started and finished elementary school. They have lost 37 baby teeth. I have finished graduate school, taught for close to a decade, seen my students become teachers and lawyers and doctors who plan on making a difference in the world. I have watched the leaves turn colors and fall from the trees and go rattling down the sidewalk in the winter eleven times.

Mercury has spun around the sun 42 times and the moon has spun around the earth close to 300, changing as it goes from light to dark and back again.

Over a half-dozen other conflicts have sprung up since the war in Afghanistan began, including the “Arab Spring” revolts, the new and most current Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and an increase in violence in the drug war along the Mexican-American border. There are currently over a dozen conflicts, wars, or insurgencies escalating, dying down, or simmering, in four of the seven continents.

The United States has built military bases in seven countries since the war in Afghanistan began. I lived for many years within 30 miles of a live-fire base. On bombing days we could feel the ground rumble beneath our feet, hear on the horizon what sounded like thunder, like storms threatening in the distance. The dishes in our cabinets rattled and shook, the wind chimes rippled without wind.

Sometimes errant bombs blew up patches of road. Sometimes in summer fires ignited the hollow grass and smoke unfurled in the distance. Sometimes the fires spread for miles, jumping roads, chasing deer, birds lifting from the trees to flee what approached. Driving through later, smoke rose from twisted trees and smoldering stumps. Fighter jets streaked past in the fall, their noise trailing behind them. At night they flashed radiant signals as they flickered overhead. The land lay scorched all winter, until spring returned and new grass broke through the crusted earth. Then the bombs came again, and the fires, and the horizon distant with smoke haze and the smell of scorched earth inside us.

Most of the time we ignored what was going on around us. We did not wake in the night to the sound of fighters screaming overhead or bombs falling in the distance. Other times it seemed the ground was always shaking, and there was nothing you could do to stop it.

There are no reliable figures for the number of lives lost in Afghanistan. There are no reliable numbers for civilian casualties, active land mines, houses blown up, children with missing limbs, wives without husbands, or soccer balls deflated by bullet holes. There are no reliable numbers for the deaths that have occurred from starvation, disease, exposure, lack of medical treatment, or the fear of what might come out of the sky.

There are no figures for children who listen to the rumbling of bombs in the distance, or fighters streaking overhead. There is nothing that mentions the flat cough a landmine must make when it tears off a child’s leg, or the way bullets ricochet off buildings or the whine and echo they make in the mountains as they

careen among the rocks. There are no statistics for the number of buildings that have crumbled under the weight of bombs, or the number of people who have dug through the rubble listening to screams muffled by stone and dust, until they fade away like the distant sounds of airplanes.

There are figures relating the number of suicides by soldiers returned from war. And the number of soldiers who came back missing an eye or an arm. And the number suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, although the numbers don't tell how many of them sit alone in a tiny room drinking vodka all day and watching people out the window, or the number who can't sleep at night or the number who feel the ground shaking beneath them all the time. Some psychologists believe those suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder are still fighting the war, years after it has ended.

There are no reliable figures for the amount of money the war has cost, but if war were a business, the war in Afghanistan would need a government bailout.

There has been war almost continuously in Afghanistan since 1978. That's over thirty years. That's Mercury around the sun 125 times. That's Max sailing to the land of the Wild Things over 10,000 times, over 10,000 combs and brushes and bowls full of mush, 10,000 old ladies whispering hush. That's 3 Vietnam Wars, or 6 Civil Wars or 1825 Six Days' Wars.

Thirty years ago I was in first grade. At recess we played football every day. We lined up opposite each other and tried to control the field, tried to take over what the other team held. Sometimes we got into fights, as children will.

Thirty years is older than both my children put together. It is half of my father's life. Thirty years ago he was still in the National Guard. I woke some Saturday mornings to watch him shave and put on his uniform. When he bent to kiss me he smelled of aftershave and shoe polish. I asked him if he would ever have to go to war and he said "Not if I'm lucky, Son."

I was in Basic Training when the first Gulf War broke out. My National Guard unit was never activated, and a few weeks after the war began I graduated from Basic Training and started college.

When the air war began my roommate and I watched it every night, swimming drunk in our dorm room, the TV screen showing the green skies over Baghdad, the flashes of bombs over the city, the tracer fire shooting skyward at airplanes they couldn't see. We watched all night, until morning crept up on us and the world outside looked too bright to be real.

The ground war started my second semester. It lasted close to a hundred hours. When the troops rolled across the desert there were oil fires burning in the distance and men walking with their hands held out in supplication, no longer willing to fight.

The next summer I was in South Carolina for the second half of my military training. By that time the war had ended and the troops were returning home. There were gaggles of parades and celebrations, women hugging men on stone quays and tarmacs, men hugging children and mothers and fathers, above everything the joy and exultation that it was all, finally, over.

I am trying to decide which is older: war or prayer.

The war in Afghanistan is made of unwashed clothing. It is made of dust and wind, exposed Kevlar fibers, and rocks. It is made of MREs, trip wire, flashlights attached to the end of rifles that go bobbing up narrow stairways in the middle of the night, unshaved beards, mornings without sleep, scraps of food and whispered conversations. It is made of death, as all war is.

The war in Afghanistan looks like unbrushed teeth. It looks like gangrene, and mold, and cockroaches scurrying to find new places to hide when the light comes on. It looks like cancer or tuberculosis or emphysema. It looks like unkempt hair and red eyes, dismembered toes with yellow nails, frozen earth, oil rainbows on unmoving water. It looks like trees skeletal with winter, blue haze of wood smoke and real smoke and car exhaust hovering over the cities, a strange sky at night.

The war in Afghanistan sounds like rocket bursts in the distance, or long stretches of wind howling over mountain flanks. It sounds like words that don't mean anything. It sounds like loudspeakers in the streets, muffled shouting, the laughter of children just before they fall silent. It sounds like coughing, low-throated whispers, an incoming whistling, rocks fountaining upward, dogs slinking through trash-littered alleys, snow falling in the last reaches of forest.

It smells like unwashed bodies and fear. It feels like scabbed over wounds. It tastes like dirt and ashes.

I had just started graduate school when the war began. It was October, a Sunday, and the leaves must have been falling from the trees. I don't remember what I did that day, or where I was. But on a normal Sunday in graduate school I would have been sitting at a bar drinking and talking too loudly with writer friends about our desire to change the world with the words we would write. Walking home, the

night would have been almost cool. We did not know then that the bombs had begun to fall. I would wake the next morning with a headache from drinking too much, my stomach sour and a horrible taste in my mouth as I listened to the news from halfway around the world. But the night the war began I must have looked past the city lights to the stars hurling themselves through the sky like holes shot in the night. My children were at home in bed, blankets tucked in neatly to keep them warm and safe and I must have walked toward them along the dark streets, in and out of patches of light, my head thrown back, happy with my place in the world, watching nothing but leaves fall from the sky.



**PAUL CRENSHAW'S** stories and essays have appeared in *Best American Essays 2005* and *2011*, *North American Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, and *Texas Review*, among others. Crenshaw served six years in the military during the early 1990s.