

MICAH FIELDS

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Someone had made a mistake. Somewhere, in that brilliant and complicated train of communication, in the churning mess of government decision, someone had been wrong.

We had been sleeping when it happened. We couldn't hear it from our cots, but were soon dispatched, on our feet and into that July day, in Afghanistan, in air that felt like a continuous blast of jet exhaust in your face. We were filing west down a dirt road, all eight of us, leaving only a few to man the outpost. We were walking toward a drop site.

At some impossible altitude, undetectable except for a low growl in the clouds, a pilot had been looking down from his upholstered chair, had seen everything, and had suspected a dot on the road for something malicious, which had then been relayed to someone else, and then someone else, and so on, becoming a more dramatic and imposing dot with each rung of command, until the dot, hardly seen by anyone, became the enemy. It became, inevitably, through the handling of various officers, a distilled point of evil itself. It needed to be killed.

It took only moments for this to happen. It took less for the dot, not an IED implanter but an eight-year-old getting water from a ditch, to vanish from the pilot's screen, leaving only a cleared circle on the earth. I have seen bombs drop from a distance, which is to say that I have seen a place on the ground go from not exploding to exploding in an instant, and despite what happened afterward—the walk out there, the seeing him on the road in pieces, the inability to explain to his father why, why, was getting water so threatening?—he did not feel it.

At fifteen, I worked at a veterinary clinic. It was my first job, and the act of earning was liberating for me. I could now buy the fresh-baked cookies sold at lunch in the cafeteria, some CDs, and an accordion of condoms that sat uncomfortably expiring in my wallet past graduation. I wore hospital scrubs and learned from the technicians how to administer fluids subcutaneously to a cat, for example, and scooped shit from a patch of grass in the back. On Fridays, a man would come for our weekly euthenazations. He would carry them from the freezer in the basement, load them into a white GMC van, and take them, I guessed, to be burned. I would help with the especially large animals, and we carried them up the stairs like a loveseat, or a coffee table, minding the corners and repositioning at doorways. They were draped in foggy white trash bags, stiff with rigor mortis and cold. I remember thinking of them not as dogs, not as Great Pyrenees or Wolfhound or Mastiff, but as furniture, stuff to be moved. Like a plank in my hands, they became invisible after death.

There had been training, in Hawaii and California. There had been the firing of practice rounds, the rehearsing of hand grenade lobbing—like a baseball!—and fire team rushing to bunkers with plastic targets. There had been talk of death, of killing, but mostly the silent and individual imaginings, fantasies, little movies of heroism we played in our heads, movies where we prevailed, perhaps slightly wounded but intact and proud and celebrated, on some false battlefield. It is the kind of contrived self-assurance that has driven some terribly evil forces, I now know, but we dreamed them.

We learned some Pashto and Farsi, quick phrases that sounded awkward on our Midwest and Southern tongues. “Wadarega!” meant stop. “Wadarega yaa dee wulim!” meant stop, or I’ll shoot you. “Chup sha” meant shut up. Though we quickly forgot them, it didn’t matter. They were meant for fighting men. They were meant for warriors, American action figures in some Mexican standoff, not us. So we walked around not talking to anyone, adolescents in body armor, not knowing anyone’s name, or where we could get some Pepsi, or why their son’s body was now half a body, smoldering, actually smoldering, on the road near their house.

We would search in our military phrasebooks, looking for some instruction, some way to manage what we couldn’t understand, but it wasn’t there. Like our childish desires to be heroic, manly, the simple act of feeling, communicating, had been stripped from our world. We were in some bigger machine. We were in a place where one man could sit in the sky, kill someone, and send us, a squad of

recent high school graduates, armed with our government issue travel guides to Afghanistan, to explain it.

I remember this day not as some convenient war anecdote, but as the day our movies stopped. That day Afghanistan, war, our lives, became its own slippery kind of monster in our brains. The obscured shapes in those bags suddenly became paws, a tail, the sagging jowls of a Great Dane. It was the first time I had seen a body part by itself, and I stood there, scrambling for interpretation, sifting through the useless demands for obedience. We had learned everything that didn't matter; how to scrape carbon deposits from the little chambers in our rifles, how to make our beds, folding the sheets at forty-five degree angles. We had been taught how to order a mortar strike. We had not, however, under any circumstances, been taught to apologize.