

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

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Self Absorption

Travelling from the airport, they saw upturned Soviet tanks, smashed-up helicopters, broken buildings, bits of rotting aircraft fuselages, streets where every building looked like melted wax, donkeys pulling carts, rubble piled up beside the road, men frying meat on hot plates, blind beggars, hillsides covered by honeycomb constructions whose walls were splattered with drying fabrics.

The interpreter, who met them at the house, was clean-shaven, his white teeth glowing in his brown face.

"Do you mind if we start now?" one of the journalists asked. "We haven't got much time."

"Fine by me," the interpreter grinned. "Chronology is currency, as we say."

The two journalists were twenty-five years of age. They had impressed women in dinner parties in Manhattan with their plan to interview people in Kabul about September the 11th. It was mid 2002. The journalists' plan had been expressed with that solemnity that comes from courage, conviction and intelligence, the women impressed with this cavalier adventurism.

They went with some bodyguards to a busy street where it was impossible to see women's faces.

Inside a café, they encountered dignified-looking men whose lined faces resembled badly-ironed brown sheets. The interpreter approached each table to explain what the journalists wanted.

The journalists sat at a table with the bodyguards who ordered tea. People were rushing past the café's big windows whose glass had been replaced after a bomb blast. The subdued light went well with the café's tranquility.

Two men came to the table and sat with the interpreter and the journalists. One of the men had a missing eye. The socket that lacked an iris had become filled with white flesh that was surrounded by lightning-bolt scars. The single eye resembled a perturbed bead. The journalists found it difficult to look at that face. They were used to Ivy-league faces and that face, what was left of it, made them feel uneasy, not sympathetic: how could you trust someone with a face like that?

The other man's left hand was missing. The two men were veterans from the war against the Soviet Union. The journalists were finding it difficult to look that man with the missing eye in the eye. They had never met war veterans. The only war veterans they had ever seen had been on television.

The man with the missing hand had chipped, black teeth, and a stare that suggested that he knew all about life on earth.

"They want to know," the interpreter said, "what you think of September 11th."

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The man with the missing eye asked: "Are they serious?"

"It appears so," the interpreter replied.

"Half my family is dead because of war," the man with the missing eye said. "I've only got one eye. Most people I know don't even know where New York is, and even if they did they wouldn't care less, and they want to know what we think about something that happened in a place that means nothing to us?"

"They do," the interpreter replied.

Because the journalists had detected that the man with the missing eye was shocked, the interpreter told them: "He's shocked by 9-11. All those families, he said, shattered by that terrible event."

The journalists nodded their heads solemnly.

The man with the missing hand was more sympathetic. He felt sorry that the journalists were so innocent.

"Maybe you should tell them," he said, "that in the same week in India as September 11th 30,000 people died in thirty seconds in an earthquake. I admit that it would be difficult for young people who come from a country where war and disaster are media events, rather than realities, and where propaganda is a way of life, to have perspective."

The interpreter, secretly impressed by this, told the journalists: "He hopes another September 11th never happens again, especially in The United States which is such a great country. He said that it was so shocking that the one place in the world that represents freedom should be so callously attacked by those who mock the values immortalised by the American constitution."

The interpreter, for financial reasons, didn't want to deter the journalists. He was being paid by the hour.

The bodyguards, who spoke English well, had to look away from each other to make sure that they didn't start laughing. They were also being paid by the hour.

The next man couldn't keep his voice down.

"What the fuck do I care about people dying in New York?!" he belched. "What the fuck could that mean to me?!"

"He's disillusioned with the evil that caused this tragedy," the interpreter explained. "He detests Islamic terrorists."

The bodyguards observed the floor.

The man waved his hands around and said: "My son's legs got blown off by a mine. My wife's brother got killed by shockwaves from a B-52 strike. My house has got huge holes in it from an artillery assault that killed my uncle and they want to know what I think about spoiled bastards dying in some fucking place that I don't even give a shit where it is?! Are they mad?"

"He hopes," the interpreter said, "that the fiends responsible for September 11th receive the punishment that they so obviously deserve."

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The next man gasped: "Weeooott?!"

His fantastic smile caused the interpreter to say: "He's happy that the US has started bombing the people responsible for this horror that has blackened all our names."

A bodyguard covered his mouth and turned his glowing eyes to the wall that he was sitting beside.

Another guy said: "Yeah, I remember something about that. What happened exactly?"

The interpreter looked at the journalists and said: "Why, he asked, do these things happen?"

The next guy lunged forwards and said: "Why the fuck would I have an opinion on that?"

The interpreter told the journalists: "He said that he finds it difficult to control himself when he thinks how the work of a devious handful has slighted our reputations forever more. But God is great and punishment will be enacted, he said."

"Ask him," one of the journalists began, "if he thinks that the 9-11 terrorists were motivated by religion."

"He's just asked me," the interpreter said, "if you think that the 9-11 terrorists were motivated by religion?"

"What the fuck," the man asked, "have theoretical supernatural beings got to do with wanting to kill people and yourself?"

"No idea," the interpreter replied. "It's a new one on me. Maybe they do it in the West?"

The interpreter looked at the journalists and said: "He believes that there are those who have fallen off God's path whose bitterness towards your great nation emerged from demented misinterpretations of Allah's impeccable word."

Later, one of the bodyguards leant over the toilet in the house saying: "Misinterpretations of Allah's impeccable word," unleashing a spasm of hilarity; but in the café he merely ground his teeth together in the hope of subduing the volcanic laughter that was attempting to rush up his throat.

At the house, after hours of interviews, the journalists saw the bodyguards drinking whiskey and smoking joints.

"Is that legal?" one asked.

"Everything is legal in Afghanistan," the interpreter replied. "We men have our vices, no?"

"It's permitted," the journalist asked, "under religious law?"

"Everyone makes money from it," the interpreter replied. "The Taliban attempted to introduce a legal system, but people weren't happy with this. The Taliban tried to take over the drug and alcohol trade, keeping all the profits for themselves; hence there was revolution."

"Revolution?" a journalist asked.

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"Absolutely," the interpreter replied. "And now we are free again."

Going back to the airport, the journalists saw limbless men in wheelchairs, women in mauve burkas wandering before crumbling sandstone, an overturned Jeep with a rusting underside that looked like a dead, metal creature, a street whose two sides were separated by a line of Russian artillery-shell casings; abandoned aircraft with smashed windows sat on vacant land near the airport. They never saw a mosque.

Back in The States, the journalists said: "They're as horrified by this as we are."

The interpreter had been even better paid than he had been expecting because the journalists were delighted with the responses that their questions had produced.

Women congregated around the journalists at a party. The journalists were beautiful, with futures. Fame awaited them.

"What you guys have done," one of the women said, "has been great. Going out there and proving that the whole world was shocked by this."

"The whole world" was an expression used by people whose worlds were miniscule, but profound.

One of the stoned bodyguards said: "Some people have fallen off God's path!"

"How dare you," the other one said, "mock history's greatest ever event. Why – two buildings fell over! Or was it three?"

Many buildings in Kabul had "fallen over."

A few weeks later, the editor of a certain New York publication said: "Jack – have a look at this."

Jack read the article that Bill had given him.

"This'll put a smile on Don "The Bomb" Bum Felt By the Artillery-Lobbing Lobby's face," Jack said.

"I wonder who the interpreter was," Bill said. "We could use a guy like that."

They published the article with the usual disclaimer: The opinions expressed by the journalists are not necessarily those of this publication, another way of saying: Garbage, but if you want to believe this shit it's up to you.