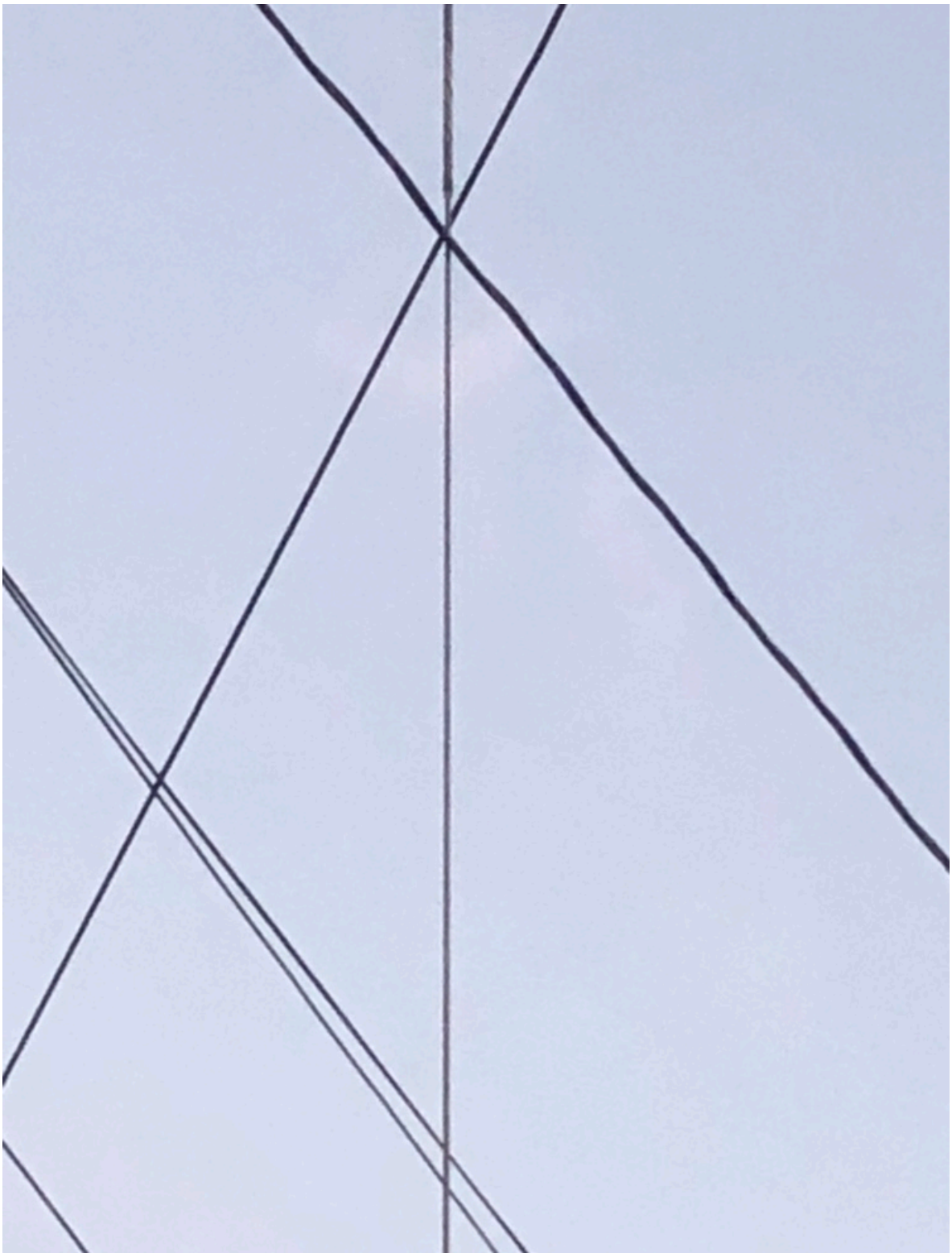
New Poetry from G.H. Mosson: “Warrior With Shield”

after Henry Moore



AN X STILL / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Blasted, broken to frag-
ments, left arm won’t—
both legs blown &
absent, the spaces abuzz
w/ anger—but I edge
forward, shield up
as leg-stumps toe
for foothold. My mouth
is an X. Still-
ness. Yet I see.
I’ve been left.

Moonlight empties
onto my chest,
rivulets down
in a branching sheen
& I swell w/ a hunch
I’ll make it
as if an old tune
warms the heart,
as if I too
might sing
again to Shelly.

I’ve been
         some-
                  one
else
         once
                  some-
body
         other:
                  a child.
Dandelion
         pods
                  tumble

past my
         open
                   palms.

New Poetry from Barbara Tramonte: “Tailored To Fit In”

I WAS GATHERED / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Somebody sewed me with a string
On the bias
I was gathered
And about to pop

This has been a pattern all my life

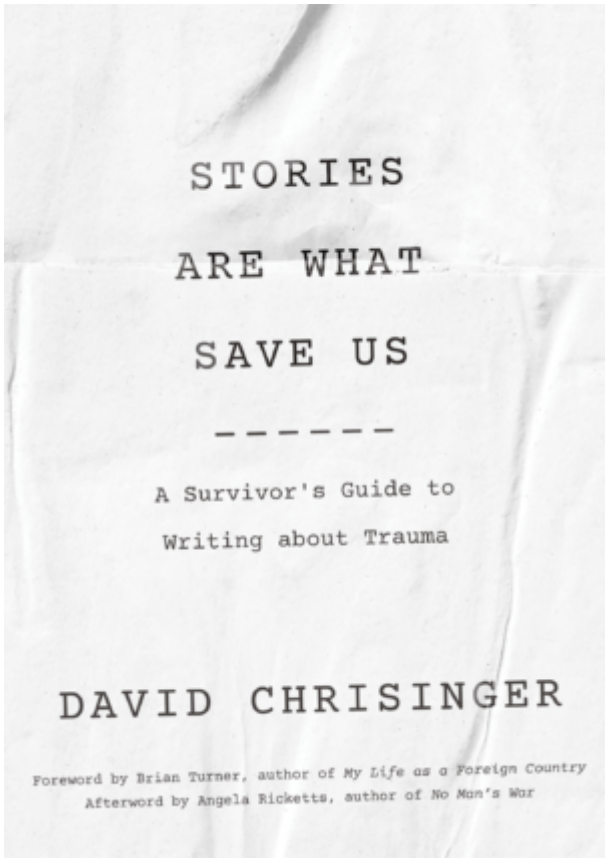
They hemmed me in with notions
Each stitch bringing me
To a false whole

(I longed to slit my wrist)

I jolted with a shock of recognition

To see that I had drifted to the wrong side

New Nonfiction by David Chrisinger: “Stories Are What Save Us: A Survivor’s Guide to Writing about Trauma”



The following is an excerpt from David Chrisinger’s new book, [Stories Are What Save Us: A Survivor’s Guide to Writing About Trauma]() (Johns Hopkins University Press, July 2021). In this section, Chrisinger has embarked on a canoe trip with author, veteran, and EOD specialist Brian Castner, author of The Long Walk, All the Ways We Kill and Die, Disappointment River, and

Stampede!: Gold Fever and Disaster in the Klondike.

Brian's goal for day four was to snake through a series of small islands to where the Mackenzie River widened into Mills Lake. According to the guidebook, it wasn't uncommon for canoeists to get stranded on Mills Lake for a day or two. The lake is so shallow that when the wind picks up just a little, whitecaps can whip up and make it impossible to keep going.

Much to our surprise and delight, the water in Mills Lake was flat and calm, not a whitecap to be seen. The sky was a brilliant blue, so blue in fact that could I have dipped my hand into it, my gloved fingers would have come back wet with paint. I'm not much of a churchgoer, but the landscape that day stirred something spiritual in me. To the north there no longer seemed to be any sort of horizon. There was only a majestic blue panorama of sky and water, a near-perfect mirror that reflected all that was beautiful and calming about this place. Instead of stopping for the day as Brian had originally planned, we skirted the southern shore without any trouble from wind or waves, feeling fortunate for the first time all week. From the back of the canoe, I steered us from point to point along the shore, careful not to get too far from land.

Brian's back was starting to bother him, he said, and his shoulders were stiff and sore from all the paddling. Each time he pinched his shoulder blades together or arched the small of his back, I could hear the pops and groans of his battered body. I was then suddenly aware of Brian's intense need for dedicated quiet, a quiet I don't think I've ever experienced with another human being. I became self-conscious of all the questions I had been asking him about writing and being an author and whatever else my curiosity suggested.

For the first time all week, I went nearly an hour in the canoe without saying a word. Before too long, the pent-up anxiety, now released, paired with general exhaustion, the rhythmic nature of my paddle stroke, and the sound of the

canoe cutting through the water all resulted in a meditative calm that eventually ended with my head slumping forward and then suddenly jerking back. Not wanting to fall fast asleep and go over the side of the canoe, I did the only thing I thought would keep me awake: I talked. Because Brian had cut me off the last time I brought it up, I started with my trip to Okinawa, not caring if Brian was listening or not. Simply saying my thoughts out loud, I convinced myself, would help me make sense of them. If Brian added his two cents, that would simply be icing on the cake. I talked about what a strange place Okinawa was and how commercial and developed it had become. Brian said he was surprised I had brought Ashley with me. He said that he'd never thought to include his wife on a research or writing trip but that she would probably be overjoyed to be asked. "My wife's love language is quality time," I said, citing the insights of The Five Love Languages. "Mine, too," Brian said in a soft, contemplative tone.

As though I had rehearsed what I would say if finally given the opportunity to speak, I found a nice, unstrained rhythm of play-by-play recounting. The highlight of the trip, I told Brian, was the second-to- last day, when Ashley and I met up with American expat Jack Letscher, who worked in his spare time as a battlefield historian. The morning we met him at our hotel, he handed me a short stack of photocopied topographical maps that were divided into neat grids and further divided into smaller squares. Certain squares on each page were highlighted, and he explained that he'd taken records of my grandfather's company and traced the routes the men had taken and the places they had fought onto the copies of the battlefield maps I now held in my hand. For the next eight hours or so, he took us along the same routes in the same order that my grandfather's company had once traversed. Brian listened without interrupting or asking questions. Then I told him about my father and what a difficult relationship I had with him and how my journey to uncover the truth and write a book about his father was a sort of pilgrimage I had created

for myself to bring my father some peace.

“Like Field of Dreams,” Brian said.

“Yeah, I guess. I never thought about it like that,” I said, thinking of the 1989 movie starring Kevin Costner in which a farmer in Iowa builds a baseball field at the edge of his cornfield to ease his long-dead father’s pain.

“You know, though,” Brian continued, “it wasn’t his father who needed peace. It was Costner.”

“That’s true.”

“Do you want some advice?” he asked, as if he had finally realized that is all I wanted all along. “You need to figure out what peace you were looking for,” he said.

“Okay,” I said and thought for a moment. “I guess I don’t know exactly.”

“Figure that out, and you’ll have yourself a book,” Brian said with a candid authority for which I held a respectful appreciation.

Finally I was getting what I wanted, what I had been waiting for. Yes, I’d sat on a plane for two days and flew 4,000 miles from home to the Arctic to escape some of the drama of my life and recharge whatever batteries I had left, and, yes, I’d thought I would be able to help a hero of mine in a time of need, but really what I was looking for was his advice.

I thought for a moment about what peace I was looking for. Then Brian interjected another thought: “Unless you know what you, as the writer and as one of the main characters, actually wants, all you’re going to have is a bunch of pages where a bunch of stuff happens, but none of it matters because that’s all it is—just a bunch of stuff a reader has no particular reason to care about.”

Then he asked me something I hadn't anticipated: "Why do you want to be a full-time author anyway? You've put out a couple books already. Clearly your job isn't so demanding that you don't have the time or energy to work on stuff that's important to you. Plus, I bet your pay and benefits are good."

"And I have a pension," I added.

"Shit," he said, adjusting the brim of his hat between paddle strokes. "If I had flexibility and time and a salary and benefits and a pension, I wouldn't be out here for 40 days—away from my wife and kids—trying to scrape up enough material to fill a book no one's going to remember after I'm dead and gone."

"How can you say that?" I asked incredulously.

"Tell me this," he continued, ignoring my question. "Why do you really want to write this book? You writing a book isn't going to bring your father any peace; you could just tell him what you found if that's all you want."

"I suppose it's like what Twain said. If you want to be remembered, you either have to write a book or do something worth writing a book about."

"Unless your last name is Washington or Lincoln," Brian replied, "no one's going to remember you a generation or two after you're gone. No book is going to change that." He continued, "This life ain't all it's cracked up to be. Believe me."

"Well," I said, "if you think what I have is so great, you should apply. We're trying to fill like six of my positions."

Later that day, over peanut butter and honey wraps and fruit, Brian confided in me that his first book had sold for big money. He said that he was almost embarrassed by how much and that he was never going to make back the advance he received.

His second book, however, was rejected by the publisher who had bought his first one. The editor he worked with on The Long Walk told Brian that maybe he had only one book in him. “He said that Michael Herr only wrote one book too—Dispatches—and that I shouldn’t be too hard on myself,” Brian said.

“Man, what a dick,” I replied with a mouth full of food.

“Yeah, but then that same guy is my editor for this book, so . . .” To sell his second book, Brian had completely restructured it.

Twice. I started to wonder whether Brian’s experience with his second book was making him a better teacher of writing and whether he was practicing his chops on me. I’ve learned through my dealings in the writing world that good writers aren’t always good teachers. Often the opposite is true because most people are better at teaching something they’ve learned through experience, through trial and error, than they are at teaching something they somehow innately know. When someone like Brian knows in his bones how to tell an intimate, vulnerable personal story, it can be easy to assume anyone can do the same. The person just has to want it badly enough. Write a better book. It’s that simple. The cognitive unconscious of natural writers has a knack for offering up beautiful prose in story form, affording them the rare ability to write automatically—so automatically that it’s easy to believe that’s the nature of writing itself, rather than simply their nature.

Natural storytellers aren’t normally equipped with the tools to deconstruct what they’ve done or to pinpoint what it is that a reader will respond to—not until they get knocked on their ass and are forced to figure it out for themselves. Their debut books are beautiful and haunting and stick with you for days after you finish them. But because they can’t put their finger on what made it so captivating, their second

books can oftentimes fall flat in comparison.

The next available campsite was another 8 or 10 miles down the river, on the northern shore. There we found a perfect camping spot with plenty of breeze and very few mosquitos. The shore was sandy and full of seashells. Seagulls chatted in the background. The scenery reminded me of pictures I have seen of Alaska, the wide and long valleys that were carved out by glaciers and are now dotted with rocks and low bushes, a land teeming with wildlife. To the north of us, dark purple clouds fluffed by. An occasional lighting strike diverted my attention from the camp chores. They were close enough to see but far enough away not to worry about. To the west, the sun kissed the tops of the distant trees. Brian sat on a flat rock with his legs crossed, jotting notes in his journal as I pitched the tent and filled up our water bottles.

Nonfiction from Jennifer Orth-Veillon: “From Death Threats to a French Dandy, Afghan Contractors Abandoned by the U.S. Struggle to Find Asylum Abroad”

LYON, France—When the Taliban shoved him out of the sedan with the butts of their Kalashnikovs, Medhi could barely walk. For eight hours, they had blindfolded him, kept his hands tied behind his back, and beat his legs with plastic pipes.

“To kill you is our right for two reasons,” he says the Taliban members shouted at him. “One, because you are working for the Americans and therefore against Islam. Second, because you are Hazara and not a pure Muslim.”

The Taliban are Sunni Muslims, mostly Pashtun, who have a history of persecuting the Hazara Shias.

Medhi poses in front of a rosebush at Bagram Air Base. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

This was the third time the Taliban had threatened Medhi for his work as a security guard with the U.S.

military on Bagram Air Base. They indicated they wouldn't let him survive a fourth.

After seven hours, the Taliban offered Medhi a deal: "I could live, but it was my responsibility to help them sneak six of them into Bagram so they could plan an attack," Mehdi tells The War Horse. "I had 24 hours to get security uniforms and make up lies to infiltrate them. I had no choice but accept, and they let me go."

He never went back to Bagram.

Rather than betray the Americans he worked with, Medhi went straight to the apartment where he lived with his mother and four younger siblings.

"My mother told me that whatever happens, I would be killed," he says. "I knew that if I carried out the Taliban's orders, I would be executed. And if I didn't, I would be executed anyway. My father had disappeared, and I didn't want my family to be targeted."

Medhi's mother called his uncle, who arranged for him to leave Kabul the next day.

It's possible that Medhi's decision saved numerous American lives at Bagram.

'The Rights of Man'

Medhi, whose name has been changed to protect his identity, tells this story from Lyon, France, where he fled—taking a circuitous, potentially deadly route—after leaving Afghanistan. There, his request for asylum has been rejected twice. If it is rejected again, he will have few choices: to try again in another European country with perhaps the same results; stay in France illegally, which means spending his life hiding from authorities; or, if caught, be

deported to Afghanistan, where he will most likely be threatened again or even killed by the Taliban.

“France was supposed to be the country of the *droits de l’homme* (rights of man),” Mehdi said.

And America?

After Afghans risked their lives working with the Americans as interpreters, guides, sources, and guards—sometimes assuming the United States would keep them safe in return for their help—they’ve instead been denied visas by the thousands. This comes even as the U.S. military members they served with say they worry about the consequences both to the Afghans and to future generations of U.S. service members.

U.S. Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Kevin Rincon, left, and Lance Cpl. Zidan Sheabar, both with 2nd Platoon, Company I, Battalion Landing Team 3/8, teach interpreters attached to Company I how to apply a tourniquet at Forward Operating Base Price, Afghanistan, in 2011. Elements of 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit deployed to Afghanistan to provide regional

security in Helmand province in support of the International Security Assistance Force. Photo by Gunnery Sgt. Bryce Piper, courtesy of U.S. Marine Corps.

In Afghanistan itself, there is no hope: Tens of thousands of people who worked as Mehdi did to help the United States fear the Taliban will hunt them down the instant American protection leaves.

Rather than face rejection by the United States or likely death back home, Mehdi pins his hopes on a French dandy named Walid.

A Silk Scarf, Artfully Draped

Walid presides at the center of the table under the intermittent snapping fluorescent ceiling lights of a convenience store. No one ever catches Walid without suede shoes and a silk scarf draped artfully around his shoulders. Like his look, his smell is unmistakable: Dior cologne, cumin, and a lingering scent of the Cuban cigars he smokes with his cognac when the sun goes down.

“My ex-girlfriend is the former Miss Lithuania,” Walid tells us, tossing back his long salt-and-pepper hair with a wave of his impeccably manicured hand.

He flips through his cell phone looking for pictures of the courtship.

Everyone in the Lyon community of Afghan refugee applicants knows that, when all else fails with French immigration, it’s time to call Walid. In addition to providing friendship and food, he runs a free-of-charge service to assist refugees like Medhi navigate the notoriously cumbersome French paperwork.

His work with them is a testament to the reality that Afghans have been fleeing war and violence in their country in waves for almost half a century: first the Soviets, then the Taliban.

Walid smokes a cigar outside his shop. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Walid, an Afghan refugee himself, comes from a different generation and socioeconomic class. His well-off family escaped to France in the early 1980s as his father, an intellectual and critic of Afghanistan's government, was threatened by the communist regime. They were granted asylum easily.

Walid tells The War Horse Medhi represents the face of many caught up in a sordid phenomenon of the Afghan refugee crisis that will be exposed further as U.S. troops leave: Working alongside Americans provides little guarantee of gaining refugee status. However, it is certain that Afghans who worked in any capacity with the military and have remained in the country confront retaliation from the Taliban.

‘I Was Afraid There, Too’

Mehdi felt a sense of hope—for himself and for his family—when he took the job at Bagram.

At first.

In 2014 when U.S. and NATO forces began to wind down their 11-year-long occupation, Medhi checked entering vehicles for explosive devices. He’d heard about the post while selling produce from a cart in Kabul where he didn’t earn enough to take proper care of his family. The job, obtained through a U.S. contractor called Anham and managed by the Afghan Ministry of the Interior, came with a high monthly salary. Medhi says he couldn’t refuse.

“The experience was a good one overall,” Medhi says. “However, I never even thought about living anywhere else than Afghanistan. When I took the job, it was for economic reasons for my family only.”

He would spend three days at Bagram, where he slept, and return to Kabul to see his family for the remainder of the week. He worked with Afghans and men from places like Nepal and China. Even though he was employed there for two years, he had almost no contact with Americans. He didn’t speak English, and the few exchanges he had with the Americans were through his boss, who had a translator.

“I had some problems with my work for Americans,” Medhi says, sheepish about saying it in front of an American.

The first was the payment system. His paycheck was automatically deposited into a bank account, rather than paid in cash, and he had few opportunities to withdraw it. It was dangerous to take out money from banks when he was alone, so he relied on the head of his group at Bagram to take employees to the bank in groups for safety.

Sometimes, “I didn’t trust what Americans were doing,” he says. At Bagram, he was assigned to scan under trucks for bombs as they entered the base. He was also supposed to look inside the vehicles, but only Americans were authorized to unlock and open the doors for the guards during the security checks, Mehdi says. Once or twice a week, when he asked to open the doors, drivers would refuse, he says, telling him they had orders to allow access only to Americans.

“They didn’t let me do my job,” he says.

But something else was at stake. At this point in the interview, Mehdi stops speaking in English and asks Walid to translate his words. Mehdi suspected the trucks he was forbidden access to, which came from various Afghan provinces, carried pillaged items of historical value to his country that would later be sold and exploited in museums around the world, he says through Walid. After the trucks entered the base, helicopters or planes would airlift the cargo containers from those vehicles away from Bagram.

U.S. Army Lt. Col. William J. Butler, commander, 2/503 IN (Airborne), and Lt. Col. Sher Mohammad, commander, 6th Kandak, Afghan National Army, and their staff during an assumption of command ceremony for Lt. Col. Sher Mohammad at Forward Operating Base Joyce, Konar province, Afghanistan, in 2010. Photo by Sgt. Corey Idleburg, courtesy of U.S. Army.
No evidence today points to the veracity of this claim, but, as Walid explains, his misgivings are understandable. "No one can forget the Koh-i-Noor diamond," he says.

Even the least educated person in Afghanistan knows about the cultural damage caused by widespread Soviet looting or the theft of the 105-carat Koh-i-Noor diamond that sat on the crown of the Queen Mother, Elizabeth of England. It is now on display in the Tower of London. While Britain's East India Company used underhanded tactics to obtain the gemstone from the 10-year-old Indian Maharaja Duleep Singh in 1849, it once belonged to what used to be part of Afghanistan and the country has made several claims for its return.

After Medhi was kidnapped by the Taliban, he fled in the back of a pickup truck with a group of people who huddled together for warmth. It took him 15 days to cross the southwestern Nimroz Province, known as Afghanistan's "Wild West" due to its reputation as a smuggling hub into Iran.

"I was in Iran one day, and everyone told me I'd be sent back, so I went to Turkey," Mehdi says. "I was afraid there, too."

When he got to Greece, he boarded one of the special trains the European Union provided in 2015-2017 as part of their Emergency Relocation Scheme to transport refugees north into various countries. He got off in Austria, but after two years, immigration services there rejected his asylum request.

"I decided I wanted to become a chef in Austria," Medhi tells The War Horse as he sips tea in the back of a small convenience store with other Afghan refugees. "But France is a good place for that too."

Spending long weekend afternoons over tea with friends is an Afghan custom, but it is also decidedly French, a people who are world-famous for their cafes where, for a $2 coffee, customers can linger at their leisure. Lyon has also been recognized by UNESCO as the world gastronomical capital and is seemingly abound with cooking opportunities. He could fit in here. If France would let him.

Things started out well for him when he got to France. He made friends with other Afghan immigrants and hit a stroke of good luck: He was chosen through a lottery for a place in a temporary residential center for asylum seekers. The French Office of Immigration and Integration also provided him with 210 euros per month for food and other expenses. He was later transferred from Paris to another residential center in Bourg-en-Bresse, a city about 50 miles northeast of Lyon. He shares a room and living space with asylum seekers from around the world. The common language in the centers is English.

“I can talk to Americans now,” he jokes. He has also learned French.

But over the last year, things have gone downhill.

At a slender five-foot-three, and with a soft voice and ready smile, Medhi, who turned 25 this year, doesn’t cut the traditional figure of a security guard assigned to the largest U.S. military base in Afghanistan.

In France, officials from l’Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides—the immigration office—don’t believe he worked for the Americans in Afghanistan. At first, they didn’t believe he was Afghan.

“I think nobody believes me because of my size and face,” Medhi says.

And even though he has provided a work contract, identity card, and photos of himself with colleagues at Bagram, his

application for asylum has been denied.

After his second rejection in early spring 2020, the French immigration ordered him out of the country—but then extended his visa because of the Covid-19 crisis. With borders doubly enforced because of the pandemic, Medhi doesn't know which country will let him in next.

His time in France is running out.

But while visiting an Afghan friend in Lyon one weekend in the fall of 2020, he met Walid, who restored in Medhi the most he could ask for: a fragile sense of hope.

'Who Will Work With Us Again?'

American veterans say they thought that hope would come from their own country—in the form of a nation they thought they were helping to rebuild.

"My objective was to go and visit the families of the interpreters I knew and have tea or dinner with them in a stable Afghanistan one day," says Adrian Bonenberger, a decorated combat veteran, of his deployments there. "That's what would happen. But it's not."

Bonenberger, who wrote *Afghan Post*, expresses the disappointment of other members of the military who served in the war. Bonenberger served in Afghanistan for 25 months on two deployments.

"I would have loved to go back as an artist," echoes Colin Halloran, who served with the U.S. Army in Afghanistan 2006 and is now an award-winning poet. "I really believe they were the most soulful, artistic people with a giant sense of hospitality that stems from their faith."

Instead, they both fear those visits will never occur. Worse, their "soulful" friends may not live to witness a time when

such a thing could happen.

“Many of the Afghans who have worked for and supported the American presence in their country over the past two decades face a life-or-death dilemma,” states a recent Costs of War report authored by Noah Coburn of Brown University’s Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs. “Many of these military interpreters and other civilian workers are no longer safe in their own homes, threatened by anti-government fighters and criminal groups.”

But they haven’t found help elsewhere, either.

Medhi came to France after the two rejections in Austria. After the second rejection in France, he decided to contest it, a process Walid is helping him navigate. This will be his last chance.

Walid, who immigrated from Afghanistan to France during the Afghan-Soviet war, helps recent Afghan refugees with their visa applications. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

The Dublin Regulation, a European Union law that determines which member states are responsible for handling asylum seekers under the rules of the Geneva Convention, allows an adult applicant to stay in a country for six months after they submit their legal file. They have the right to appeal a negative decision, which grants them an extended stay. If they are rejected twice, immigration officials ask them to leave the country and the refugee may travel to another European country to reinitiate the process.

But the circumstances of fleeing a country, as many refugees do, can make the process harder, as it has for Mehdi. Politics haven't helped him, either.

"This wasn't only a U.S. war," Halloran says. "There were NATO forces, but it was mostly American. We have a responsibility, and the U.S. needs to step in and help these people get asylum."

Former President Donald Trump placed historically low caps on accepting refugees. By 2020, 15,000 were authorized—down from 110,000 in fiscal year 2017, when former President Barack Obama set the cap. To protest Trump's cap, which became known as the "Muslim ban," Halloran helped organize an event in Washington with other veterans and writers.

"We found refugees from each of the eight countries on the State Department's Muslim ban list and let them tell their stories to highlight the danger they'd faced and to show what extraordinary human beings they were," Halloran tells The War Horse.

President Joe Biden has just raised the limit to 62,500—half of the 125,000-person cap he originally pledged. In February, an executive order from Biden allowed for private sponsorship, the process that allowed some Jews to come to America from Europe during WWII. They're still working out the details for the new order. Congress has allotted more Special Immigrant Visas to be granted to Afghans and Iraqis whose lives were put at risk because of their service with the U.S. military. But the process that's required by law to take no more than nine months is expected to increase to up to four years. Waiting times have been exacerbated because of the Covid pandemic.

In the last three months of 2020 alone, State Department statistics show 1,646 Afghans were denied one of the special visas, and more than 18,000 Afghans await decisions on Special

Immigrant Visas applications, according to The New York Times.

In addition, the U.S. Special Immigrant Visa application for Afghans demands a long list of documents, such as identity papers, a letter of recommendation, and verification from a human resources center.

Those documents are hard, if not impossible, to file while fleeing, as Medhi did, from an imminent death threat. While Medhi had most of these items at the time he left, getting a transatlantic flight from Afghanistan to claim asylum would have been impossible. He didn't have a passport and the ticket cost was exorbitant. But Europe is accessible by land, so that's how he traveled.

And, when Mehdi fled, the special visa didn't cover everyone who worked with Americans.

"Many Afghans were not employed by the U.S. military or affiliated missions but by private contractors or subcontractors who, in most cases, could issue no official promises about opportunities after their service," Bonenberger says.

The latest May 31, 2021, report from the U.S. Department of State's Refugee Processing Center shows that in the 2019 fiscal year, 1,198 Afghan were admitted as refugees. In 2020, it dropped to 604, most likely due to Covid restrictions. As of May 31, the United States has admitted 248 Afghans in fiscal year 2021.

If the United States doesn't take more action to help these threatened Afghans, Halloran says, it could influence the way foreign countries view our future military efforts.

"In the future, who will work with us again?" he says. "Why would anyone want to risk their lives or their family's lives if we don't step in?"

‘I Cook Afghan Food for Them’

While the United States has stemmed the flow of Afghan refugees in the last four years, the number of Afghans filing for asylum to get refugee status in France has increased five-fold in five years. Until May 2021, little protection existed even for Afghans who worked with the French army.

As portrayed in a book and a recent graphic novel, *Traducteurs Afghans. Une Trahison Française*—translation: Afghan translators. French treason—only 250 of the 800 Afghan translators who worked with the French army between 2001 and 2014 as part of NATO forces were granted refugee status through asylum. Those who weren’t were forced to go into hiding with their families as they had a Taliban bounty on their heads. In May 2021, in response to the worsening situation in Afghanistan, the French government announced it was issuing immediate asylum status to an additional 600-plus Afghans who had worked with the French military.

Sher Hasan, a local Afghan worker on Forward Operating Base Fenty, Nangarhar province, Afghanistan, uses a saw on concrete blocks during a construction project in 2009. Locals who worked with U.S. troops now fear the Taliban will kill them as Americans withdraw from Afghanistan. Photo by Sgt. Corey Idleburg, courtesy of U.S. Army.

But this won’t help Medhi or thousands of other Afghans

awaiting responses from French immigration. The situation in France has catapulted into a crisis for all Afghan refugee seekers. Homelessness and reports of increased police intervention are on the rise.

Which is why what started out as helping on weekends and evenings a few years ago has become an almost full-time job for Walid—a one-man show that's becoming harder to pull off. He has just passed the test to become an official interpreter for the French court system and is awaiting final certification. This job, in addition to managing the shop, will eat up more of his time.

"I help them with paperwork, but I also cook Afghan food for them," he says as he offers a taste his succulent Kabuli palaw, an Afghan dish made in several steps with lamb or beef, fragrant rice, carrots, almonds, and raisins. "I reassure them. They take a drink or smoke here, and I tell them everything's going to be OK."

At least for a few hours on a winter evening in Lyon, Walid provides a safe place for Medhi and the other Afghan refugees. He's placed a large wool Afghan blanket over the makeshift table set up by the refrigerated section, and the men pull it over their knees and hands for warmth.

'We Go Back to the Roots'

"When age goes up, we go back to the roots," Walid replies when asked why he helps the young Afghan men. He's 47.

He pulls up to his convenience store on most days midmorning in a shiny black Mercedes, which stands out on the narrow one-way street in a mostly pedestrian area in a trendy Lyon historic district. His car, combined with his designer clothing—and the group of haggard young Afghans who congregate around the fruit stand outside the shop from noon to as late as two a.m.—have made him the target of suspicion in the

neighborhood, he says. The gossip heard by The War Horse at neighborhood gatherings over the years includes accusations of being a Mafia boss, money laundering, human trafficking, and keeping an opium den in the basement.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

After the communists in Kabul threatened Walid's father for the first time in 1979, he went to Dubai right away to build a new professional life that would allow him to bring his family from Afghanistan. In 1980, when he returned to Kabul to fetch them, the government put him on home arrest and he faced certain execution.

After Walid's family home was raided, his father fled once more. At the end of that year, Walid's uncle paid someone to smuggle the rest of the family to Pakistan, where they obtained fake passports and flew to Dubai. The Soviet-Afghan war was in its second year and made traveling through rural parts of the country to cross the border perilous. Walid's family had to change cars and buses several times to avoid being caught.

Walid recalls that poor children from the countryside brought his obviously well-off family food and bread as if they were royalty. He also remembers being frightened by bombs and other sounds of fighting as the family made its way across the border, but, Walid admits, "Compared to most, our way of fleeing Afghanistan was luxurious."

Walid's father couldn't have foreseen that the family would land in Lyon in 1985, but at that time, it was easy for Afghans to enter. As Walid jokes, a look at the history of the Silk Road and wine draws the two cities together. In the 17th century, Lyon became one of the global epicenters for silk weaving.

Afghan police recruits man AK-47 assault rifles while providing security in eastern Zhari district, Kandahar, Afghanistan, in 2012. Photo by Sgt. Stephen J. Schmitz, courtesy of U.S. Army.

"All fine fabrics traveling from Asia, including from Afghanistan, came through Lyon," he says, pointing to an open window on the second floor of the shop's building through which can be seen an apartment with wood-beamed ceilings. The shop is in one of the old silk-weaving structures, called *les canuts.* The 13-foot-high ceilings created enough space for the large silk looms.

"And the best French wine is Persian," he adds. A fine wine connoisseur, he boasts his wine cellar contains fine French reds, but he upholds the legend that the French Syrah grape originated in Iran, near the Afghan border.

Having been educated in French schools in Kabul, Walid integrated into French public education in Lyon. After university, he opened two computer businesses in Lyon. He met his wife in India, and a few years after their wedding, she

moved to Lyon and the couple had three children.

“I managed big companies and I handled big budgets, but to manage the emotions of three kids who lost their mom was horribly difficult,” he says.

In 2014, at the height of his career, Walid’s wife died at 35 from breast cancer. With three young children and aging parents to take care of, Walid sold the businesses he had acquired in Lithuania, Dubai, Hong Kong, and Manama, Bahrain, to stay in France full time. To earn extra cash and maintain contact with the world outside during his family crisis, he decided to open a small convenience store.

“OK, I’ll sell food, because if there’s an economic crisis or not, whatever happens in the world, people should eat,” he says. “And this is what the Covid crisis has proved to me: to always be in service to the people.”

Atiqualla Rahin, U.S. Marine Chief Warrant Officer Bruce Johnson, and an Afghan contractor walk around the grounds of a new building site for a men's detention facility in Lashkar Gah, Afghanistan, in 2010. Photo by Lt. j.g. Jennifer Franco. Courtesy of U.S. Marine Corps.

Since he speaks French, English, Persian, and Arabic fluently,

he serves as a translator for the nebulous legal terms that obstruct communication. But this task goes beyond word-for-word exchanges. France has a reputation for one of most circuitous bureaucracies in Europe, and translating also means wading through the language of the cumbersome paperwork that accompanies every file.

“For every small thing, you get a paper,” Walid explains. “If I could show you my boxes of letters. For every small thing, you have some letter and most of the time it’s nothing. And so, I read these letters to them and tell them everything’s OK. Most of what I do for them is basic.”

Other tasks are more complicated. He helps place them in residences and he intervenes whenever they have trouble with the police, which is often the result of some cultural or linguistic misunderstanding, he says. Since Medhi’s asylum application had already been rejected by France, Walid is in contact with a lawyer and has served as a liaison between French immigration and private legal counsel. He is also regularly in contact with people he knows in Afghanistan to obtain birth certificates, work contracts, and other documents attesting to the truth of the stories the men tell their asylum caseworkers.

But he recalls the poor children from the countryside who brought his family food while they escaped Afghanistan.

“They had no food, but they still wanted to help me, and now I feel like I’m giving back,” he says. “I was too young to recall much about Afghanistan, but I feel I need to help people who need it. All the kids I help were thrown out at critical times in their lives.”

Even though these asylum requests are processed in the Afghans’ native language, Walid has to do it for most of them because of their low education level. Many who come from the poor and working class have few years of formal education and

struggle to write a one-page letter.

Medhi lived in Afghanistan until he was 20 and spent only two years total in school. Before arriving in France as a young boy, Walid had seven years of elementary school in Afghanistan. “My education in Persian stopped when I was 10 in Afghanistan, but my writing and reading skills are far superior,” Walid explains.

Walid is also inspired by his father, who has helped in raising the three children while organizing local outreach efforts to help educate Afghans from a distance. Walid’s uncle, his father’s brother, is the head of a larger organization with a similar goal based in California called Afghan Education for a Better Tomorrow that gives distance-learning courses to students in Afghanistan.

“Humanity is his religion,” he says of his father.

‘I Fear the Worst for Him’

Just as in the United States, a growing strain of French public far-right sentiment is less favorable to economic migrants than to political ones, which is magnified by a fear of admitting Islamist radicals into the country.

Since Mehdi isn’t an economic refugee, he has a better chance of succeeding than other Afghans Walid advises. Walid refuses to follow through with some asylum cases because the men change their stories too many times. Some lie about their age, and others borrow money from him only to disappear. Others schedule meetings with him and never show up. He had to bail one refugee out of jail.

“One night, I get a call around 7 in the evening,” he says. “One of my guys blocked Bellecour metro station for hours. Police were everywhere.”

After his second rejection, the young man in question tried to

kill himself by throwing himself in front of a Lyon subway. Bystanders banded together and stopped him, but the police detained him, and that has jeopardized his case in ways Walid can’t assist.

“They don’t have the same reality as I do,” Walid says when discussing the gap in education and socioeconomic status with the Afghans. Some of the young men get angry at him if he can’t help them or won’t lend them money. But he cooks Afghan food for them once a week and allows them to gather at his shop to drink, smoke, and reconnect with their country. Sometimes fights break out and he plays an objective referee. For example, an older man who believed communism was beneficial for Afghanistan almost came to blows with a younger Afghan who saw his family’s rural livelihood destroyed by the Soviet-backed government.

“But we are human beings,” Walid concludes. “Right is right. Good is good. I won’t let a difference of education or vision come between us.”

Mehdi, however, is polite, even-tempered, and willing to help in Walid’s shop. His story has been consistent for six months. Walid has never worked harder on a case, he says.

Getting someone to believe that Medhi worked for years on the Bagram base is likely the only way he will be granted asylum by any government in Europe or elsewhere, Walid says. The War Horse has contacted the contractor, Anham, but has received no response.

“He’s like my son, and I fear the worst for him,” Walid says.

‘They Already Have Voices’

Medhi’s story, in many ways, is not only Walid’s story but the story of all the Afghans who have been persecuted due to wars on their soil for more than 40 years.

“Their voices need to be amplified,” Halloran says. “They already have voices that can be heard, but those voices need to be amplified. This is the role that we can play.”

While waiting for a response to his renewed asylum request, Medhi spends time at Walid’s on the weekend doing odd jobs.

“I offer him money for his services, but Medhi always refuses it.”

He continues to learn English and French at the refugee residence in Bourg-en-Bresse near Lyon that houses several families, also waiting for updates to their status. When the weather is nice, they have group cookouts. If he gets his papers, Mehdi says, he might try to become a chef somewhere in Lyon. If not, he is trained not only as a security guard but also as a tile layer—and there is a demand for this skill in the Lyon area.

“I cannot change my life,” Medhi says. “But I can try.”

*

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New Fiction from Mike McLaughlin: “What Could They Take from Him?”

After four months of not getting shot, not stepping on a mine, not taking a fragment to the neck or through the eye, Pat Dolan didn’t think about his remaining time in country. At the

firebase, men talked about it constantly, as if would improve their odds. He never bothered. He had arrived on a day in July, 1971. On another in July, 1972, he would leave. Until then, every moment he survived was the only one that mattered.

Then, miraculously, the Army dusted off his change of MOS request and kicked him down to Saigon. As shake-ups went, it was a good one. It got better on realizing he had a remarkably fair boss. For a chief warrant officer on his second war, Pulaski was a hard-ass editor only when necessary. Otherwise, he assigned work to his men, then stepped aside and let them do it.

Four weeks slipped away as Dolan learned his role as the Army's newest journalist. Learning the maps. Learning the cities and provinces. Learning the names, places and policies that defined the war – and, hardest of all, the language.

His crash course in Vietnamese was paying off, though, thanks to one ARVN lieutenant born in San Francisco. Likewise for three civilian journalists who'd covered Southeast Asia for decades. In a massive notebook he added words, phrases and phonetics, along with musical notes to help say them properly in a language where tones were everything.

After a month of intrepid news reporting, his latest piece was three hundred gripping words about an American vitamin pill now in use by ARVN troops. Easy to write, palatable for the taxpayers, boring as hell.

There would be harder work, of course, in harder places – eventually. Already weary at the thought, Dolan crossed the newsroom and dropped his article in the box by Pulaski's door.

"I'm leaving," he announced.

"Tôi đang rời đi."

No one looked up. Half the men in the room, military and

civilian, were on deadlines. Hammering away on typewriters, talking on phones, gathering around radios and televisions. To them he was invisible.

At the door he stopped.

"'Stairs,'" he declared.

"'C□u thang.'"

"'I am going down the stairs.'"

"Tôi đang đi . . ."

He frowned.

"Tôi đang đi . . ."

The rest of it slipped away.

"Shit," he concluded, then started down.

"Phân."

* * *

On Tu Do street he stopped to buy Newsweek and The Saigon Register. At work he had access to all the news he wanted, but rarely followed it unless his assignments required it. The irony was rich.

The sun was low now, the air cooler. Looking for a place to sit, he chose a tea shop with a raised terrace. He went through a set of green French doors and up seven steps into a vibrant yellow room filled with shelves and tables. Every surface was covered with jars of tea.

An older woman in a blue silk gown appeared, then gestured around the room and invited him to choose. Awed, Dolan could not.

"Is surprise, yes?" she laughed. "Very good! I will make

bring to you – yes?”

“C□m ơn dì,” Dolan replied, trying not to stammer. *“Bạn – Bạn t□t với tôi.”*

Thank you, aunt. You – You are kind to me.

Her smile broadened.

“C□m ơn cháu tra! Không có chi!”

Thank you, nephew! You are welcome!

Dolan nodded, feeling foolish yet pleased.

From behind him another woman arrived, younger than the hostess and dressed more formally. With her pink blouse and tan skirt, she could have just come from a bank or a law office. One of thousands of professional women, done for the day.

Dolan bowed.

“Xin chào, di.”

Hello, aunt.

To his surprise, the woman was delighted.

“Xin chào, cháu trai!”

Hello, nephew!

Encouraged, he continued.

“Qu□ là một – ”

He hesitated, then tried again.

“Qu□ là một ngày đẹp trời.”

It is a lovely day.

“Vâng, đúng vậy!” she replied.

Yes, it is!

As the women laughed, Dolan bowed again and went through the door to the terrace. Their voices followed him, cheerful indeed, as if from meeting again after a long time.

The terrace had a slapdash charm. The stonework was cracked, and the wrought iron fence was bent here and there, with rust showing through the peeling white paint. Above it all was a wooden canopy, thick with vines, providing shade so deep Dolan first thought he was entering a cave.

At a table overlooking the street, he had barely sat down when the hostess arrived with a wooden tray. On it were a cup, saucer and teapot made of jade green porcelain. In bowls of cut crystal were milk and sugar. A folded green napkin and silver spoon completed the display.

“I choose for you!” she declared. “So – you try! You enjoy, yes?”

Then she poured for him, filling the cup with a liquid the brightest orange he had ever seen.

“Please! You try now! You like, yes?”

Carefully he raised the cup to his lips. Hot but not scalding, the tea was excellent, tasting of oranges and nutmeg.

“Is *trà cam*,” she said proudly. “You have back home?”

“Tôi – sẽ gặp?” he replied. *I – will see?*

“Is yes! You enjoy! You want more, you ask!”

She left to sit with her visitor inside the open door. Together they laughed again, as if for an excellent jest, then began to speak earnestly. The walls inside the shop reflected their voices. The women sounded as if they were just behind him.

He set his cup down and studied the Saigon paper. The huge Chữ Hán characters dominated the page, while the accompanying Roman alphabet text struggled to be seen.

“English in Vietnamese,” someone once told him, as if sharing

wisdom hard earned.

Groaning, Dolan opened his notebook and set to work.

“Tại Paris hôm thứ Hai, ngoại trưng Mỹ Henry Kissinger da dua ra mot tuyen đã đưa – “

In Paris on Monday, America’s foreign minister Henry Kissinger stated –

That much he understood. No longer secret now, the peace talks were continuing at a snail’s pace. The stunning was becoming the ordinary.

Almost.

On the street the activity continued unabated. The talking, the yelling, the laughing. The vendors and shop owners smoking and haggling. The adults on their bicycles weaving between cars and trucks and grinning teens on Vespas.

Then he heard singing. Looking down, he saw a young nun in bright blue approaching, followed by a dozen girls. No older than ten, each wore a white blouse, blue skirt and scarf. On their feet, to Dolan’s amazement, were penny loafers. Standard-issue footwear for Catholic girls worldwide.

They were singing about a dancing puppy, or so he thought. As they marched past they looked up at him and waved. A grin spreading across his face, he waved back.

“Xin chào!” he called out. *“C□m ơn ban!”*

Hello! Thank you!

Their singing became greetings.

“Chào ngài! Chào ngài!”

Hello, mister! Hello, mister!

Dolan didn’t need the book for this.

“Chúa phù hộ bạn!” he added. *“Chúa phù hộ bạn!”*

God bless you! God bless you!

Merrily the nun and the girls blessed him back.

He turned to see if the women were watching, too, but as he did they quickly looked away.

Unsettled, Dolan watched the chorus until they vanished.

Behind him the conversation resumed.

In French.

“He must not hear,” the younger woman said.

“No,” the hostess agreed. “Perhaps he is smarter than he appears.”

“True. His accent is appalling, but that may be his purpose. To deceive.”

“Foolish boy. He has everything.”

“As do they all.”

“So typical. *Expecting* everything. Believing they are *worthy* of it all.”

Dolan caught every word. His high school French had been good. At sixteen he met a college girl from Montreal who made him better. Getting him up to speed as she tore off his clothes.

After a moment, the younger woman continued.

“The heart of the village was gone.”

“But not all?”

“No,” she said flatly. “But then they dropped their demonic

fuel. Their fire like liquid."

"Yes. Such an evil thing."

"It crushes me to think of it."

"And this was before the wedding of your niece?"

"Oh, thank the heavens, no. By then she and her husband had moved to Hoi An. They were expecting their first child."

"A girl?"

"A boy. Recently we celebrated his birthday. Now he is three. A most happy boy, with the eyes of his mother. We are blessed."

"Every child is a blessing."

Then they were quiet again.

Slowly, Dolan opened the Newsweek.

President Nixon last week signed into law the Twenty-Sixth –

The words were difficult to follow. He shook his head then tried again.

"The cadre had fled by then," she went on. "There were a dozen of them. No more."

"And you knew them?"

"Some, but not all. Two were little more than boys. The youngest was fourteen. They had often been with us. So sad. They missed their mothers terribly."

"Yes," said the older woman quietly. "It wounds the heart."

"Another man was familiar. He would stay the night with our neighbor. Perhaps the others were comrades of those who visited in the past."

“Perhaps.”

“Most were in black, as is the custom. Two were in green. The eldest of them was most senior, although this was not apparent at first. His accent suggested he had lived in China. Perhaps he was born there. He seemed a decent man. He was in authority, yet he was possessed of – of a gentleness, one might say. He was scholarly, yet deferential, as if he were a teacher, pleased with his students.”

“And, that day, they simply appeared among you?”

“Yes. I think they came from the west but who can say. It was if they sprang from the air. They demanded entrance to our homes. They said the Americans were coming, and it was their duty to protect us – and ours to help them.”

“Yes,” the hostess sighed.

“*Protect*. How absurd. I remember my mother laughed. Laughed! Others begged the men to flee. Saying they could do nothing for us now. That their presence would only enrage the imperialists. Instead, they shouted curses at us. They shook their fingers at us and called us weak. Faithless. Then they were in our homes, placing themselves at our windows and doors, looking to the west.”

The woman paused, reflecting as she stirred her tea, the spoon clinking against the rim.

Dolan winced at the sound.

This week marks a year since the completion of Egypt’s Aswan High Dam, an epic –

“Then they began firing toward the fields. Most of the Americans were keeping themselves low, but not all. One of them fell. I remember another hurried to help him, then that one fell, too.”

Dolan shut his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“And then they were began shooting at us. I could hear their bullets striking our homes, passing through walls, shattering glass. Then the cadre fled, and as they ran they pledged to return.”

She stopped again, then took out a cigarette and lit it.

Controversy continues over the death of Jim Morrison in –

“*’Return,’*” she snarled. “These who declared themselves men. *Liberators.* Some we had known for years. Now they were abandoning us. Running away down the path to the east.”

Dolan kept going. He hated The Doors.

“By then the Americans were using heavier weapons. Machine guns greater than those the soldiers carried. More bullets were striking our homes. Our animal pens. Our pigs, our oxen. They screamed as they fell.”

Dolan swallowed hard, seeing it all.

“But you did not,” said the elder.

“No. Often I wonder why this was so. I knew of such things, of course.”

“Yes.”

“Now they were happening to *us*.”

“Yes.”

“Then we ran, too. We simply lifted our children, and then we ran. In that moment I felt I was floating. Bounding in huge leaps, as if flying. I had never known anything like it.”

In New York, United Nations Secretary-General U Thant announced –

“Then we heard their planes. They were low. I remember that. Approaching with a roar that shook the earth.”

The silence deepened.

Dolan watched the pastel-clad people on the street. The ice cone vendor and the eager children waiting their turns. The optimistic grandfather shuffling along, leaning on his cane, balancing a television on his shoulder.

He flipped the magazine over. On the back was a gorgeous couple, leaning against a Mustang convertible, gazing into a Malibu sunset.

“Our shrine was so lovely. It was old when my grandmother was a child. Her own grandfather had fashioned it with folding panels. He painted them a shade of gold that glowed. On clear days it was as though the sun had entered our home. Between them were two shelves. On the first were the copper bowls for flowers, and between them were the candle holders.”

She paused again.

“And on the second?” prodded the other gently.

“Many boxes. Some were the size of a sewing basket. Others were small enough to fit in one’s palm. My grandmother had built them from mahogany. She was most skilled.”

“The women in our family have always had such talents.”

“I remember how bright they were,” the younger woman sighed. “With a brush she would apply a lacquer to make each surface a mirror. Together in the candlelight, they shone with wondrous harmony.”

“And what did you keep in them?”

“Our treasures.”

“Yes.”

“Our memories.”

“Yes.”

“In one were petals of a flower. My mother picked them when she was a girl. She cherished them so. In another was a lock of my father’s hair, kept from the day of his birth.”

In the cooling shade, Dolan wiped sweat from his forehead.

“The lid of another was glass, with a photograph beneath. A portrait of my grand aunt and uncle for their wedding day. They had travelled to a studio in Phuy Tan to sit for it.”

“To sit, as one would for a painting?”

“Oh, yes. It was much the same. Cameras were quite different then. One had to sit quietly, patiently. One could not move or the image would be unclear. My grand-aunt told me they sat still as statues.”

The woman laughed dryly.

“She smiled throughout, yet her husband appeared very serious. She would tease him about this, as he was truly lighthearted. Often it was *she* who was formal in manner. That each bore the look of the other greatly amused our family.”

Dolan felt lightheaded.

“So many memories. So much life.”

The printed words were nothing.

“It grieves me so, to know that it is gone.”

The sun had set.

Mechanically, Dolan took a piastre from his wallet and dropped it on the table, then two more.

“They took everything,” she said, her voice nearly a whisper.

Dolan froze, feeling their gaze on his back.

“Look at him,” said the hostess coldly. “This man. This boy.”

The money was more than enough.

“So healthy,” the other said bitterly.

It was too much.

“So prosperous. I wonder – what does *he* have to lose? What could they take from *him*?”

Dolan stood up.

He meant to feign ignorance.

To fold his papers then return the tray to the hostess.

To thank her.

C□m ơn dì.

To wish them both good night.

Chúc ng□ ngon.

He climbed over the railing instead.

And then he jumped to the street.

And then he walked away.

It was the only way out.

New Interview of Author Hassan Blasim, by Peter Molin

Hassan Blasim's 2014 short-story collection *The Corpse Exhibition* captured American readers with its harrowing portrait of an Iraq wrecked by authoritarian rule, oppressive Islamic custom, American invasion, and sectarian in-fighting. The stories in *The Corpse Exhibition* were Poe-like in their ability to combine story-telling prowess—often humorous—with unexpected and sensationally graphic violence. Especially for readers familiar with the growing body of works written by American veterans of Iraq, *The Corpse Exhibition* aptly portrayed the nightmare of recent Iraq history from the other side, while confirming the sense that however bad Iraq might have been for American fighting men and women, it was infinitely worse for Iraqis caught in the melee. Now comes Blasim's *God 99*, a genre-defying text from which signature-style Blasim short-stories emerge organically from a textual seedbed composed of memoir, auto-fiction, and transcribed emails. The narrator is "Hassan Owl," an Iraqi exile now living in Finland, who begins a blog titled God 99 to document the experience of other Iraqi refugees living in Europe, but that conceit is only the start-point for a wide-ranging set of story-lines and thematic concerns. Roughly categorized, these include descriptions of Hassan Owl's early life in Iraq, where the dream of a peaceful life full of artistic creativity are blasted by political and religious persecution and violence, the many-year exodus that follows as Hassan Owl makes his way out of Iraq to Finland, the texture of everyday life in Finland in which quote-unquote normal existence is elusive for Arab refugees still touched by enduring conflict in the Middle East, and, finally, Hassan Owl's attempt to reconnect with a beloved family member now said to be living somewhere in the Middle East.

Author Hassan Blasim. Photo by Katja Bohm.

That's a lot, and adding spice to it all are short interludes between chapters excerpted from a long email thread between Hassan Owl and a mentor, a fellow Iraqi émigré named in the novel Alia Mardan, who is based on the Iraqi expatriate writer Adnam al-Mubarek. Potentially intimidating, the hybrid mix is unified by Blasim's dazzling prose voice, which inflects descriptions of even mundane occurrences with funny and/or startling story-turns and moments of imaginative insight. *God 99* offers a profound sense of the connectedness of war in Iraq and contemporary European life, and, even more so, a superb self-portrait of an artist in exile—a 21st version of James Joyce, Henry Miller, and the other revered expatriate authors of 20th-century literature.

I had a chance to speak with Blasim about *God 99* and his current life in Finland. We spoke in English via Zoom, and I have condensed and clarified his answers.

Molin: Do you have a particular audience or ideal reader in mind when you write?

Blasim: I never imagine that someone's looking over my shoulder while I write. But because I write in Arabic, I do consciously try to play with classical Arabic style, mostly by incorporating street language, to make an Arab reader feel the uniqueness of what I'm trying to do. Mostly though the fight

is with myself, and I don't consider what any reader might think—there's just not time or space for that. When I send the book to the publisher, it's pretty much finished—to include the design for the cover and the lay-out of the text. That's very important to me. The publisher may suggest changes, but I'm not usually very receptive. Some readers and reviewers haven't understood *God 99*; I think they expected or wanted more short-stories since my previous book—a collection of short-stories—had been successful. I had more short-stories, but to publish them as stand-alone tales in a collection to me was boring. I wanted to incorporate the stories into a larger and more complex structure, which a novel allowed me to do.

Molin: How would you describe your reception in America and in Europe?

Blasim: I don't think world literature is popular in general in America, which means people aren't used to looking for Arabic books and probably don't understand real Arabic culture apart from what they get in the movies or the news, both of which are full of cliches. I especially don't understand the publishing market and the intellectual climate. When I first published in America, I was happy like any author would be. But you need someone with energy to promote you to readers and newspapers and critics, and I didn't know how that works. Unfortunately, my first trip to America was not enjoyable. It was a huge problem getting permission to enter the country, both in terms of obtaining a visa and then going through customs, which made me feel like a criminal. And without going into detail, some of the readings and writing events were unpleasant, too. I'm not in a hurry to repeat any of that. In Europe it's better for me because I've learned a lot over the years and become more recognized by readers and book people. My books are translated into many languages, they've been adapted to theater often, and every month there are one or two book festivals somewhere where I'm asked to read.

Molin: How about in Iraq and the Arab world?

Blasim: When I first began writing stories in Arabic after arriving in Finland, I sent them to many publications in Iraq and other Arabic-speaking countries. But no one was willing to publish them because they said they broke too many taboos and the language was too coarse. So my first publications were online and then later in print in Europe. Only after I was translated into six languages in Europe did anyone in an Arab country publish me, even though I was already popular among young people who could read me online. But now with *God 99*, it's the same thing again. It's currently banned either officially or publishers won't touch it. I still feel my real work should be back in Iraq and helping Iraq understand itself better, but I'm not permitted to do that. It would be dangerous for me and my family still in Iraq to even try. It's still very easy to get shot by someone for expressing unpopular views.

Hassan Blasim and Peter Molin in one of the three Zoom interviews conducted for this story. Screen capture by Peter Molin.

Molin: What about fiction attracts you?

Blasim: It's important for English and American readers to know that I don't only write fiction, I write poetry, criticism, plays, and essays, too, that haven't yet been translated into English. I also write a lot in support of refugees, gay rights, and Iraq and the Middle East. But as for fiction, it's what I have loved most all my life, from the time I was a boy. I always liked the way stories could contain extremes and opposites, such as how a story could be both a love story and a horror story, a funny story and a sad story, both tender and violent. Fiction is serious for me, but it's also play and pleasure. In my writing, I enjoy trying to make all these parts come together. A lot of my sense of how to write fiction comes from my love of movies, from which early on I was impressed by how easily they switched between different types of scenes and moods. In my stories I want that same effect, something unexpected happening, something changing all the time. That's how I try to write, too, I don't plan anything ahead of time, I just enjoy the rhythm of writing and the chance to play. I open my laptop and I type….

Molin: *God 99* pays tribute to many writers and movie-makers who have inspired you, both Arabic and Western. As a youth in Iraq, what attracted you to European and American art, film, and literature?

Blasim: When I was growing up, my friends and I loved European and American movies, art, music, and books, me probably most of all. It seemed so free—there were no taboos and everything was possible. A lot of it was easily available. Even after the first Gulf War, for example, in the early 90s, we were still reading Raymond Carver and Richard Ford stories. When economic sanctions were put in place by the US that limited imports and forced us to restrict the use of electricity, we would still gather in apartments and have parties while watching Oliver Stone movies. We loved Arab writers and artists, too—we celebrated all art and artists, especially contemporary

ones—they were heroes to us.

Molin: One writer referenced frequently in *God 99* is the Italian author Italo Calvino. What do you like about Calvino?

Blasim: Calvino is very popular in Arab countries generally. For me, I love him because he is my opposite. I'm very loud in my writing, like an Oliver Stone or Quentin Tarantino. But Calvino is so cool, and you can tell he's a slow and deep thinker, in a good way. I'm jealous of people who can sit and consider things without getting excited, because that's not me, nor is it like Iraq, which is so passionate and excitable, like heavy-metal music. The part in *God 99* where I describe fleeing Iraq and traveling through Europe making my way to Finland with only book, Calvino's *Mr. Palomar*, is true.

Molin: That's important—the book you carry with you when you are fleeing from one country to another! Another writer you mention is Henry Miller. How is Miller important to you?

Blasim: I discovered Henry Miller in the 1990s and read six of his books, all of which was a big shock for me growing up in a society where so much was restricted. He's a great fighter and he's honest.

Molin: When did your admiration for American and Western art become complicated by politics and war?

Blasim: From the beginning. As a teenager reading Western books and watching Western films, I learned many ideas about freedom—individual, cultural, religious, and political. My friends and I wanted to change culture and society as much as we wanted to be rid of Saddam, and we didn't like the restrictions of Islam either. Mostly we just wanted to do what we wanted, such as drink, which I started to do as a teenager. I quickly learned that books could be transgressive, too—many were censored and you could get in trouble if you read them. So in the beginning, my love of Western art placed me in opposition to the dominant attitudes in Iraq.

That continued in college where I studied film. From classroom discussions and making short films, I learned that it was dangerous to complain about the government, so I kept quiet about politics, but I still got into trouble. After I made a documentary about poverty in Iraq, for example, I was visited by Baathist officials who questioned my motives. My teachers always complimented my ideas and work, but it was clear that they were also warning me about being too radical and too outspoken. Within the college there were lots of rumors about spies, and one of my teachers warned me that if I didn't keep silent, the police would send for me after sunset, which was an idiom for being executed, being sent "into the dark"—we knew many people were being shot in those days. Meanwhile, members of my family were also in trouble with the government, which was constantly watching us. This is when I knew that I would eventually get into trouble if I stayed in Iraq and it was important to find somewhere freer and safer.

After the American invasion in 2003, the problem for me changed. By 2004 I was in Finland, but I was hearing horrible reports from friends and family in Iraq and I could see things were going to get very bad. The sectarian civil war was breaking out, and the danger and violence were worse than ever. So now I began to speak out and write against the Americans and the religious violence the invasion unleashed.

So, my attitude toward America is complicated, like a crazy mystery. In terms of the culture and people, I don't know many Americans, but my Iraqi friends in America encourage me to visit again or think about moving there. They tell me the people are friendly and the living is easy, more so than in Europe. That wasn't exactly my experience on my first short visit, as I mentioned above, but the diversity of people, the literature, and the music all are appealing. The politics and the capitalism are not.

Molin: During the period you were trying to flee Iraq and then settling in Finland (2000-2004), how did you keep alive the

dream of being a writer and artist?

Blasim: In high school I wanted write and make films, and I studied film in college. I was always writing, but then my life was unsettled for a long time, but when I got to Finland I began to write again, and I had some small jobs that allowed me to write and translate, but it was boring and not creative. But fiction and public writing happened after I finished work and was sitting at home. After I discovered the Internet everything changed for me. The Internet gave me an outlet and allowed me to build an audience, and then led to the print publication of my books.

Molin: You must get asked about identity a lot—have you come to think of yourself as Finnish?

Blasim: It's funny because I'm a Finnish citizen, but I'm not considered a true Finnish writer because I don't write in Finnish and so am not eligible for Finnish literary prizes. Still, I now have a lot of good memories from living in Finland for many years, and when I travel around Europe, it feels good to return to Finland, where I am comfortable. But I also still feel like an exile, which doesn't make me sad. Exile can be a gift for a writer, or for any human being. When you think about it, reading is a form of exile—when you read a book about New York or Tokyo, you go into a temporary form of exile that takes you out of the boring daily life of your own country and allows you to see things differently. I've learned not to be become too attached to one place, so I treat any location I'm in like a hotel—one room is in Baghdad, another is in Helsinki, etc. That's also how I've come to think about my identity.

Molin: In *God 99*, it's written that Finns are very conservative except when they're in the sauna or at the bar. As someone who is one-quarter Finnish, I like the part about the saunas and the bars.

Blasim: Yes yes, I like it here a lot. The country is peaceful and the people respect free speech. That's good, very good.

Molin: In *God 99*, the chapters recounted by the narrator are interspersed with short interludes transcribing email conversations with a woman named Alia Mardan. In an Author's Note you explain that the emails with Alia Mardan are based on actual emails you exchanged with Iraqi writer Adnan al-Mubarak, who lived for many years in Denmark before dying in 2017. Why is al-Mubarak important to you and how did you devise this form for the novel?

Blasim: As I began to write *God 99*, I had a lot of stories but no structure. I was also depressed about the death of al-Mubarak, who was my friend and mentor. When I was on the move from Iraq to Finland from 2000-2004, he would write me long emails full of talk about great artists, classical Arabian folklore, and philosophy. I didn't have any books or much time to read, and I was very desperate, so he was my best friend and teacher, an angel really. Those emails meant so much to me even when I arrived in Finland and was working in restaurants and was even homeless for a while. We often talked about writing a book together, but never got the chance while he was still alive. When after his death I was lost emotionally and thinking about how to bring the pieces of *God 99* together, it occurred to me to use our email dialogue to frame the stories I had written. It might make things difficult for the reader at first, but it works for me personally and I think for the book, too. The emails in *God 99* are all real, though I cut them up and made a collage of the thousands of emails we've exchanged.

Molin: You change the gender of your interlocutor from a man to woman. Why?

Blasim: That's my ode to Scheherazade—the inspiration for a thousand stories!

Molin: Alia Mardan is interested in the 20th-century French-Romanian essayist Emil Cioran and writes frequently about her ongoing project to translate Cioran into Arabic, which seems to amuse the narrator. How is Cioran important for *God 99*?

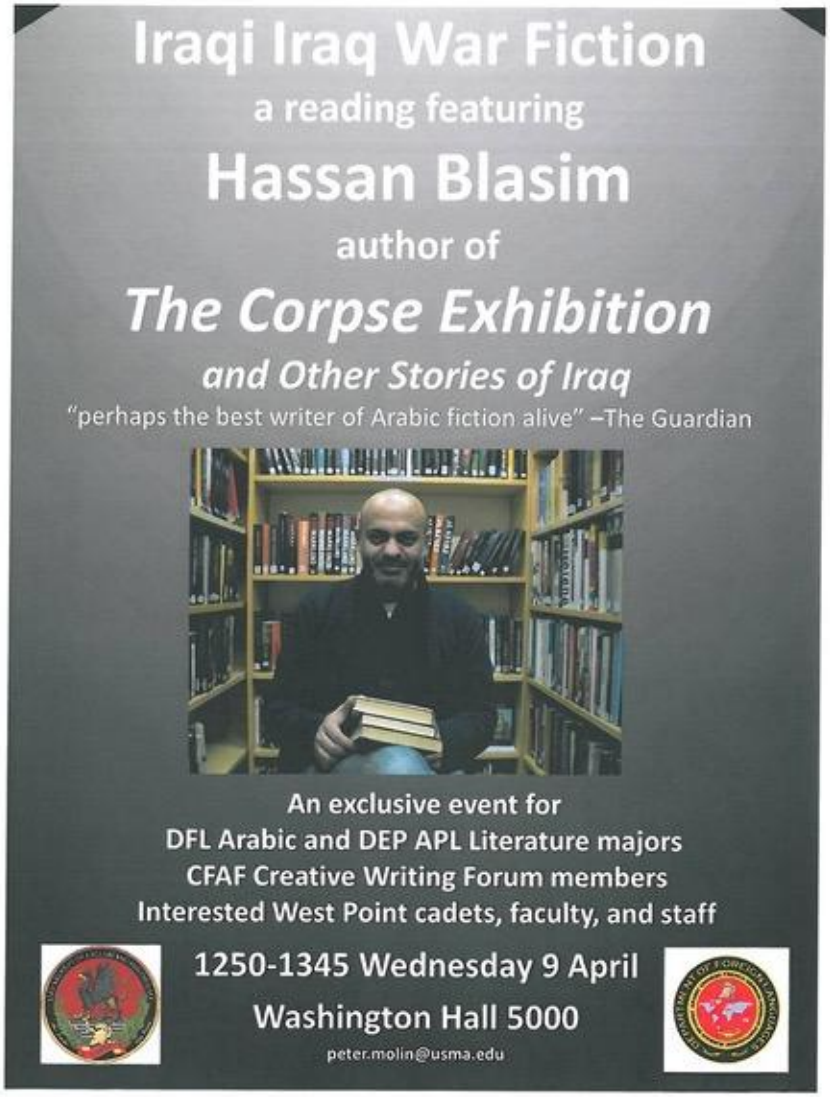
Blasim: Cioran is not popular in Europe now, in part because he had a brief association with the Nazis, [an association he renounced and regretted]. Maybe he is just too dark for Europe, but he is widely loved in Arab countries. They love him so much it's crazy. It's his pessimism, his bleakness, his nihilism, his black humor. But I haven't read all his books, mostly I like his quips, many of which I got from al-Mubarak.

Molin: All right. Let's end with some bigger questions.

Blasim: Smaller questions are good, too. Just normal is best.

Molin [laughs]: OK, then, how about last thoughts?

Blasim: I wonder what your memories are of my visit to the United States Military Academy at West Point, where you were my host. Did you often invite artists and writers?



Poster made by Peter Molin for Hassan Blasim's visit to West Point.

Molin: Yes we did, at least while I was there, and before and after, too, I think. We brought in mostly Americans, and not all military writers, a lot of civilian writers, poets and filmmakers, too, including Oliver Stone. I would say you were pretty far out there compared to others in terms of your background, but you were a trooper—you gave a great reading and talk and were pleasant with everyone, even though it must have seemed a strange thing for you, after the way war has wrecked Iraq. But you gave us our money's worth, and we all—faculty and cadets, including several international cadets from Arab countries—enjoyed hanging out with you.

Blasim: Some of my friends are surprised to learn I visited there, but I was encouraged to do so by my hosts in New York City, who knew West Point had a tradition of inviting writers such as Orhan Pamuk to visit. I just thought it was an interesting opportunity and was just taking things as they came.

Hassan Blasim at West Point. Photo by Peter Molin.

Molin: Well, I'm sure I was pretty inconsiderate about what it all meant for you—it couldn't have been easy. Maybe I was hoping for you to learn that we aren't all monsters or stupid idiots, at least not all the time. I mostly wish I could have given you a funner memory, like we might have gotten drunk in the barracks or something like that. You haven't written the visit into a story yet, for which I think I'm glad.

Blasim: No, no, that wasn't a bad day. Still, I hope that we can meet again sometime with that military stuff far behind us.
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Hassan Blasim, *God 99.* Translated from Arabic by Jonathan Wright. First published in Arabic by al-Mutawassit, Milan,

2018. Published in Great Britain by Comma Press, 2020.

New Review from Matthew Komatsu: Adin Dobkin’s ‘Sprinting Through No-Man’s Land’

I cannot separate my early memories of war from those of cycling. I’d just begun to cycle competitively – as a lieutenant and duathlete stationed in San Antonio – when I deployed to Afghanistan in the summer of 2002. And in the short several months I was stateside before deploying to Iraq 2003-2004, I spent much of my time in the saddle. In fact, I was run over by a San Antonio driver and violently ejected from my bike the week before I boarded my plane to Iraq. On the flip side of Iraq, I put in over 200 miles a week on the bike. As much as ten hours a week, post-war, often spent alone and silent. That’s a lot of time to think.

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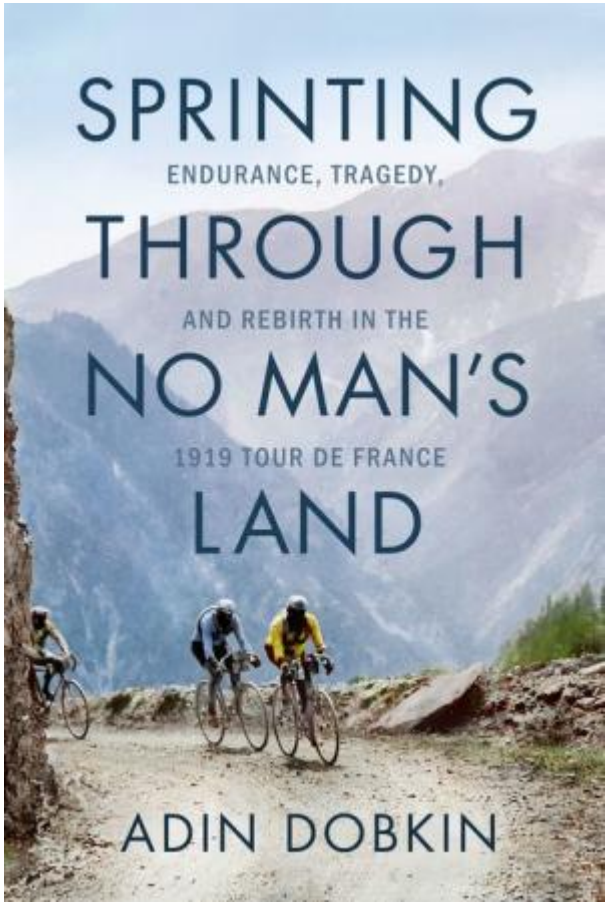
I thought a lot about those days as I followed Adin Dobkin’s nonfiction narrative along the 1919 Tour de France in his debut *Sprinting Through No Man’s Land*. It was hard not fill the minds of the cyclists, many of whom fought in WWI, with thoughts of my own. But while I the cyclists of *Sprinting Through No Man’s Land* spent close to half the race along a

course that was altered because towns that had once been stage starts or finishes either no longer existed, or were so devastated that they could not support the logistical needs of the race and its competitors.



The book begins, fittingly, in Paris in the Fall of 1918, mere days after the end of WWI. At the desk of Henri Desgrange, the editor of the sporting newspaper *l'Auto* and founder of the Tour de France, we witness his decision to resume the Tour de France even as Armistice celebrations are erupting in the streets. From there, we're off to the races, if you'll forgive the turn of phrase, following a cast of characters as the Tour makes its way around the periphery of France.

To call Adin's cast "colorful" falls short. There's Desgrange – positioned as a kind of rigid omnipotent. The ll-seeing, all-knowing, and ultimately all-powerful race director and mouthpiece of the race through *l'Auto*.. The racers: brothers Henri and Francis Pelissier, both veterans of WWI. The former,

an underdog by his age; the latter, the younger brother still in his elder brother's shadow. Eugene Cristophe, older than even Henri Pelissier. French veteran. Firmin Lambot, the Belgian who weathered WWI under German occupation. And others, of course.

The research that went into the writing of this book is exhaustive, and Adin takes great pains to show the reader the sourcing and methodology he used to develop the writing itself. He does a marvelous job of world-building, layering context in a chaptered structure that roughly matches the 15 stages (and gobsmacking 6,500km/4,000 miles covered during the 1919 Tour). He even went the extra mile, including three interesting vignettes regarding under-represented narratives that are connected geographically with where the reader is in the race at the time. In other words, I learned a great deal about WWI-era France.

Which leads me to my only quibble with the book, which has more to do with the baggage I brought to the reading than Adin's intentions for the book: this isn't your average armchair sports enthusiast paperback. Those books are predictable: event-driven, illustrated by flashes of character background, and largely high-velocity pacing. *Sprinting Through No Man's Land* is a careful book, slow and methodical, that takes great pains (as alluded to in Adin's afterword in which he addresses the pitfalls of narrative building) to paint as full an understanding of the race as possible. In Adin's world, it would appear he's more concerned with telling the story of a time, than of a particular race and its characters. To do so, he spends a great deal of time providing the reader the story of the land in order for us to experience the race. So, don't come expecting chaptered race standings and attrition lists (the number of racers who quit before the race's end is breathtaking) because that's not Adin's story. And that's just fine because it's impossible to separate the 1919 Tour from WWI. The landscape, the racers, the people: WWI

had changed *everything*. Countryside towns along the front had been reduced to rubble and roads thrashed by the years worth of passage of men and machine. Three previous victors had died in WWI. And the people themselves had been traumatized by the wartime experience, many of them displaced and grieving. So really, Adin's book is as complete a story of that time as he could make it.

As a former competitive cyclist, I found Adin's technical details refreshing. The Tour of today inherited the spirit of those Tours – the grueling distances, staged structure, and general classification scoring methodology and accompanying yellow jersey primary among them – but I doubt Desgrange or the Pelissier brothers, if popped into a time machine to see what their race would become in a century's time, would find much in common with today's Tour. Unlike today's professional cycling team structure, the teams then rallied under similar kinds of corporate banners, and remained amateur in nature. The teams of today serve to protect one most talented member of the team and his chances of winning the overall race. *Domestiques* – typically junior members – sole purpose in life is to create advantages for their captain, often find themselves breaking the headwinds for their captain, fetching water bottles and sustenance from the team's chase vehicle, and even giving up their bicycle should the captain's fail. In 1919, each rider was an island in Desgrange's amateur storm. If your bike broke, you had to stop and fix it yourself in, say, a local blacksmith shop. And I do mean *yourself*. No spoilers, but there's a nail-biter of a scene in a late chapter that will have you counting seconds as a rider repairs his bike fork while the blacksmith simply observes. If a rider fell behind, other riders on his team were forbidden from falling back and pulling him forward lest they all risk time penalties from the ever-present eyes of Desgrange's armada of *l'Auto* journalists/race observers. Today's bicycles are technological marvels to the point that several years ago, professional cycling implemented minimum bicycle weights, and

specified wheel types and bike frame geometries to reduce aerodynamic advantages. The bikes you see in the Tour today are a far cry from what Adin exposes us to: thick-tubed steel framed bikes with one-gear wheels that required a racer to dismount and manually change out to change gears. They were tanks to today's sports cars. And the clothing – my god – ask yourself how you'd feel about cycling 4,000 miles in wool, minus the luxury of padding under your ass.

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Sprinting Through No Man's Land is a triumph of nonfiction storytelling, and it will be a welcome addition for the bookshelves of cycling fans and war literature aficionados alike (I'm both if you can't tell). Every page is a delight, unified by Adin's excellent prose and editorial choices, from the exit from and return to Paris, and it brought me back to my own post-war cycling in ways unexpected and refreshing. My recommendation: turn on this year's Tour. Read a chapter at the end of every stage, and let Adin build that world for you in ways that simply watching it never could.

Allez!

*

Dobkin, Adin. Sprinting Through No-Man's Land: Endurance, Tragedy, and Rebirth in the 1919 Tour de France.