

# Go Home and Dig It: A Review of Will Mackin's *Bring Out The Dog*



“Crossing the River with No Name,” the eighth story in Will Mackin’s debut collection, *Bring Out the Dog*, describes the movement of a SEAL team “to intercept” Taliban coming out the Pakistan Mountains. Using night-vision equipment, the SEALs plan to light up the night-blind Taliban with sparklers that the Taliban cannot see, and then fire state-of-the-art weapons at the invisibly sparkled men, eliminating the threat before the threat can become a threat, before the threat knows that it is, in fact, threatened. They have done this, the first-person narrator explains, many times before.

A paragraph from early in the story:

“Electric rain streaked straight down in my night vision. Cold rose from the mud into my bones. It squeezed the warmth out of my heart. My heart became a more sensitive instrument as a result, and I could feel the Taliban out there, lost in the darkness. I could feel them in the distance, losing hope. This was the type of mission that earlier in the war would have

been fun: us knowing and seeing, them dumb and blind. Hal, walking point, would have turned around and smiled, like, Do you believe we're getting paid for this? And I would have shaken my head. But now Hal hardly turned around. And when he did it was only to make sure that we were all still behind him, putting one foot in front of the other, bleeding heat, our emerald hearts growing dim."

A series of simple sentences, each spare, lithe, exquisitely precise, usually in clusters of three, each distorting the known or assumed physical world. The rain becomes part of the night vision. The mud rises up into the bones. The cold takes away warmth but provides an uncanny sensitivity to the enemy's pain and fear. But then a pivot, a pointed reference to the carefree juvenescence of these would-be demigods, when they couldn't believe they were getting paid to appear in the middle of the night and massacre a platoon of clueless, effectively blind, Taliban. And yet that was then, six intercepts ago; what now? What has happened to these emerald glow-in-the-dark hearts? Where has their youth gone?

Will Mackin knows intimately. A 23-year Navy veteran, Mackin flew jets, wrote speeches for the Vice Chief of Naval Operations, and spent six years as a Joint Terminal Attack Controller with a SEAL Team before retiring in 2014. As such, his work has a unique perspective not only on the endless succession of deployments and dislocations SEALs endure, but the disproportionate vision of people and country with all the power in the world and no idea what to do with it.

The next paragraph in "Crossing":

"We made steady progress through the rain until we came to a river. The river looked like a wide section of field that someone had broken free, that had, for unknown reasons, been set in motion. In fact, the only way to tell the river from the field was to stare at the river and sense its lugubrious vector. But to stare at the river for too long was to feel as

if it were standing still and the field were moving.”

Again: paradox. How can you make steady progress through then rain and then come to concentrated water? Then a simile that claims that what has stopped them, blocked their “progress,” has itself broken free. The pivot. A slight pause, an ironic reference to fact—slippery in all of Mackin’s stories—and an appeal to concentrated vision, some determinate perspective, which is immediately undermined and inverted when the land moves and not the river.

Soon the narrator is drowning in the river. The Virgin Mary appears. She tells him she won’t be saving him. “How come?” asks the narrator. “Because saving you would require a miracle, and you already used yours,” she said, “not unkindly.” The story then transitions to the States, and a teenage narrator who laughs at a sentimental loser football coach from Ocean City, NJ (what a place to be from! To live your entire life in!), sleeps with the football captain’s girlfriend, and smashes the mailboxes of rich people in the neighboring town. Then the narrator gets the miracle. They win the football game. A skinny kid whose name he can’t remember scores a touchdown.

Viktor Shklovsky argues that Leo Tolstoy “forgoes the conventional names of the various part of the thing, replacing them instead with the names of corresponding parts in other things.” He “estranges” because he refuses, Shklovsky says, to “call a thing by its name.” So too Mackin. As Peter Molin points out in his [Time Now post](#), Mackin calls nothing by its name—the cold sensitive heart, the literally unnamed river that does not move, the skinny kid who he does not remember. In other stories, SEALs hunt for two captured American soldiers named “no-chin” and “chin,” the SEALs hold an elaborate memorial service for a killer Vermont Trappist monk dog killed by a SEAL. “What do you folks want to hear?” asks a tuba (!) player on an isolated outpost in middle of Afghanistan. *Anything, nothing, go fuck yourself*, says the

crowd of soldiers high on horse drugs.

This aesthetic technique is not only a delight to read, but fits Mackin's subject. His SEALs live estranged lives. They exist in multiple time zones. They travel by air from one nameless spot on the map to the next. They have the power of gods and the soft bodies of men. At the end of "Crossing the River with No Name," the narrator, rescued from the river by a fellow SEAL (thanks for nothing Virgin Mary), goes on to intercept the Taliban. The narrator talks about how their leader Hal used to invisibly sparkle the Taliban in the middle of the platoon. "That would be the man we spare," says the narrator. "And that would be the man who would drop to his knees in a cloud of gun smoke, raise his hands in surrender. That would be the man who would tell who he was, where'd he'd come from, and why."

An act of divine mercy or human sadism? What's the difference exactly? Estrangement, undulating perspective, chip away at once obvious distinctions. Mackin's SEALs sleep with strippers, assault stripper boyfriends, take drugs, ignore training protocol, steal manpower away from other units because they can. Rules don't win wars. SEALs do. So what then are these modern-day Templars of the sky and sea and mountain top winning with all this money, all this power, all this violence, all this freedom? Are they saving Afghanistan? Afghans? Iraqis? Civilians? Hostages? The World?

Psychedelic British Classic rock mostly. Pink Floyd songs about mean teachers. Led Zeppelin LPs in reverse. Mailbox busting. Girlfriend stealing. A sense of teenage disaffection clings to the narrator, a cynical half-irony, vague entitlement in the face of endless plenty, combined with band-of-brothers militancy, a love not of the country—*dulce decorum est* and all that Horace crap—but of each other and an unwillingness not to let one another down (because, as W.H. Auden says, our sex "likes huddling in gangs and knowing the exact time").

In other words, the narrator—for all his explosions, all this violence, all those dead bodies—is not much different than any other American boy, any other American man.

How's that for the horror of war?

Barry Hannah's "Midnight and I'm Not Famous Yet" provides Mackin his epigraph. "We saw victory and defeat," the epigraph says. "They were both wonderful." Elsewhere in "Midnight and I'm Not Famous Yet" Hannah's narrator, a U.S. Captain in Vietnam, reflects:

"It seemed to me my life had gone from teen-age giggling to horror. I never had time to be but two things, a giggler and a killer."

Sometimes the SEALs call Mackin's narrator "Fuckstick" (a nod to Fuckhead of Denis Johnson's *Jesus Son* perhaps, another pseudo-bystander). Sometimes the narrator throws a charnel rock for no reason and imagines an asteroid hitting the earth and aliens—little bars of blue light—finding the SEALs dead bodies and asking each other why he threw the rock. Sometimes the narrator listens to a SEAL team leader speak about the imperative of "speed and violence," about how the SEALs are on the top of the food chain for a reason, and notices how nicotine enters through the SEALs "thinnest of membrane on his upper lip."

Displacement. Disproportion. Despair. We can call down the fire of gods in the form of drone strikes, artillery shells, and invisible lasers, but can we save the people around us from dying off one by one? Can we combat the battle fatigue evident after five deployments? Can we stabilize and make sense of the endless succession of kaleidoscopic dislocations born of a war with no clear direction, no beginning, no end?

No. Not really. But we can love our men. We can love the war. We can giggle and kill.

"Fools. Fools," says Barry Hannah's Vietnam Captain. "Love it! Love the loss as well as the gain. Go home and dig it."

*Go home and dig it.*

Dig what? What can we fools at home dig?

"I lay back on the outcropping," says another Mackin narrator, during a training exercise in Utah, waiting for a plane to blow up a fire truck that may or may not be a real fire truck. "The stone was warm, the breeze refreshing. Drifting off to sleep, I found myself feeling thankful to the war. What else would bring me up here on such a perfect day?"

Dorothy Parker once argued that Hemingway wrote not like an angel—as his many admirers insisted—but like a man. Mackin actually writes like an angel. Like an angel that wants to go back to being a man, or, rather, like a man with the perception of an angel and the soul of a man. The cumulative effect is as astonishing as the fact our country has been fighting a war for eighteen years and might well be fighting for eighteen more years: it estranges us to the experience of ourselves, to the experience of America, the experience of history. Our eyes grow, as Mackin's says, "bright with relativity"—the war does not end; it cannot end. But we see. We fools see. Don't we?

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## **New Fiction: The Lost Troop by Will Mackin**

We had a dry spell in Logar. It was December and the weather was dog shit, so a degree of slowness was expected. But this went beyond slowness. It was like peace had broken out and

nobody'd told us. Nights we'd meet in the ops hut for the mission brief. We'd tune the flat screens to the drones—over Ghazni, Orgun, and Khost—only to find all three orbiting within the same cloud. We'd listen to static on the UHF. We'd stare at phones that never rang. We could have left it all behind, walked off the outpost into the desert, never to be seen again. We could have created the Legend of the Lost Troop. Instead, we chose some place where we imagined the enemy might be hiding—a compound on the banks of the Helmand River, a brake shop in downtown Marjah, a cave high in the Hindu Kush mountains—and we ventured out there, hoping for a fight.

I thought of the Japanese soldiers on Iwo Jima, who, when their island fell to the Americans, didn't know that it had fallen. Who, not long after, didn't hear that A-bombs had destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and that their emperor had admitted defeat. Those soldiers hid in tunnels, on Iwo, for weeks after the war was over. For months, even. For them, the fight continued in those dark and narrow spaces, until they ran out of food. Until they drank the last of their water. Until, absent the means and/or the will to take their own lives, they climbed out of ratholes into the sun, to wander warm fields of lava rock in surrender.

I wondered if, one night, we'd drop out of the starry sky in our blacked-out helicopters and land near a walled compound in the desert. We'd run toward that compound with the rotor wash at our backs, through the dust cloud that had been kicked up by our arrival and out the other side. Through a crooked archway in the compound's outer wall, we'd enter the courtyard. And there, among the fig trees and goats, we'd find an American tourist with a camera slung around his neck. Having served his time in Afghanistan, our fellow American had gone home, fallen in love, got married, and had the two bow-haired daughters now hiding behind his legs. Maybe he'd wanted his girls to see how brightly the stars shone in the desert.

Maybe he'd wanted to share with them all the strange places the Army had sent him, way back when. I imagined that he'd look over at us and then say, with understanding and remorse, "Dudes, war's over."

But, as far as we knew, it wasn't. Therefore, we met in the ops hut every night at eight. In the absence of new intelligence, we'd review old intelligence. We'd double-check dead ends and reexamine cold cases. Finding nothing mission-worthy, Hal, our troop chief, would open the floor to suggestions. It'd be quiet for a while, as everyone thought.

"Come on," Hal would say.

He'd be standing in the middle of the room. We'd be sitting on plywood tables, balancing on busted swivel chairs, leaning against the thin walls. The drones, orbiting inside moonlit cumulonimbi, would beam their emerald visions back to us. Lightning would strike twenty miles away and the UHF would crackle. I, for one, didn't have any good ideas to offer.

One night, Digger spoke up: "Who remembers that graveyard decorated like a used-car lot, out in Khost?"

I raised my hand, along with a few others.

"I think we might need to go back there," Digger said.

The graveyard in question was on the northern rim of a dusty crater. We'd patrolled just to the south of it, a few weeks prior, on an easterly course. The "used-car lot" decorations were plastic strands of multicolored pennants. One end of each strand was tied high in an ash tree that stood at the center of the graveyard. The other ends were staked into the hard ground outside the circle of graves. The graves themselves were piles of stone, shaped like overturned rowboats. I couldn't recall the name of our mission that night, its task and purpose, its outcome. But that graveyard stuck with me. I remembered the pennants snapping in the wind, dust parting

around the graves like a current.

Digger, who'd been closer to the graveyard than I was, thought that the graves had looked suspicious. He thought they resembled old cellar doors—the type, I imagined, you'd find outside a farmhouse in Nebraska and run to from darkened fields as a tornado was bearing down. Digger postulated that at least one of those graves was made of fake stones.

“Styrofoam balls,” he suggested to us in the ops hut, “painted to look like stones, then glued to a plywood sheet.” Digger thought that, if we sneaked into that graveyard and pulled open that hypothetical door, we might discover a Taliban nerve center, a bomb factory, or an armory. Digger had no idea what could be down there, but he'd got a weird feeling walking past that graveyard that night.

“Good enough for me,” Hal said. “Let's make it happen.”

We rode our helicopters—two dual-rotor, minigun-equipped MH-47s—northeast from Logar. We sat in mesh jump seats, across from one another, roughly ten per side. The MH-47, at altitude, stabilized like a swaying hammock. Lube, dripping from the crankcase, smelled like bong water. Beyond the open ramp at the back end of the tubular cargo bay, we watched the night pass by like the scenery in an old movie.

The 47s dropped us off in a dry riverbed, three miles east of the graveyard. We patrolled westward under heavy clouds. The clouds carried a powerful static charge, while the earth remained neutral. Sparkling dust hovered, and through night vision I saw my brothers, walking with me, as concentrations of this dust. All I heard, as we walked, was my own breathing.

We connected with the crater's easternmost point, then walked in a counterclockwise direction along its rim until we reached the graveyard. We found the pennants torn and tattered, the ash tree diseased, the graves crooked. None of the stones were made of Styrofoam. Not one of the graves was an elaborately

disguised entrance to a nefarious subterranean lair. Though, upon closer inspection, I noticed that the dust that I'd remembered parting around the graves, like a current, actually funnelled into the spaces between the stones. In fact, it seemed to be getting sucked into those spaces, as though there were some sort of void below the graves, which lent a measure of credence to Digger's theory.

From the top of one grave, I selected a smooth, round stone, about the size of a shot-put ball, and I heaved it into the crater.

Joe, our interpreter, was right there to scold me. "I would expect such disrespectful behavior from the Taliban," he said, "but not from you."

Joe was Afghani. His real name was Jamaluddein. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, in 1980, he'd escaped to the U.K. with his parents; he was twelve years old at the time. Now, as a middle-aged man, he'd returned to help save his country from ruin. He wore armor on missions, but he carried no weapons. His interpretations of our enemy's muttered words were always clear and precise. He had a bad habit of walking two steps behind me on patrol and closing that distance whenever we made contact with the enemy. Thus, I'd seen conflagrations reflected in the smudged lenses of Joe's glasses. I'd heard him whisper prayers between sporadic detonations. His voice, with its derived British accent and perpetual tone of disappointment, exactly matched that of my beleaguered conscience.

So I jumped into the crater after the stone. I found it at the end of a long, concave groove in the dust. Turning toward the crater's rim, I saw my boot prints in the dust, descending the slope, each as perfect as Neil Armstrong's first step on the moon. On my way back up to the graveyard, I was careful not to disturb those tracks, or the flawless groove that had been carved by the stone. I wanted these things to remain, I

suppose, in the event that an asteroid should slam into the planet, sloughing away the atmosphere, boiling the seas, and instantly ending life on earth. Our troop—asphyxiated, desiccated, frozen—would lie scattered about the graveyard, preserved in the seamless void of space forever, or at least until other intelligent beings came along and discovered us. Perhaps because those beings existed as thin bars of blue light, incapable of offensive or defensive action, they'd puzzle over our armor, our rifles, our grenades. They'd wonder, especially, why we'd worn such things to a graveyard. There would be no mystery, however, regarding the boot prints in the crater, since they'd know, from the boots still on my feet, that I was the one who'd left them. Furthermore, they'd deduce, from the groove, that I'd descended into the crater after a stone. Only one particular stone could've cut that groove. And they might find it, among a thousand others, right where I'd returned it, atop the grave, just moments before the asteroid struck the earth. But none of that would explain why the stone had been in the crater in the first place. "Did one of them throw it?" the curious bars of blue light might ask themselves.

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