

BENJAMIN HERTWIG

# The Burn

IT'S LIKE THIS: THE SUICIDE BOMBER WAS THERE, then he wasn't. He was swept out of the scene, leaving behind the burned and the dying, the whole mass writhing in the animal pain of the damned in a Doré woodcut. A man clutches at his bleeding face and falls to the road. It's suddenly quiet. You hear yourself breathing, and this is what you remember: you are twenty years old, squinting into heat and sun, wanting to go home, wanting nothing more than the extension of metre sticks onto time and life. The downwash of a Blackhawk blows dust and sand into your eyes, and as the bodies are loaded into the chopper you already know that memory is not representative. Memory is a current of sleep with eddies that distort and contort—until death becomes a simile and the remembering becomes the event. And now you can't even access the way the already-dead soldier loped out of the burn or the blinding silence of the desert at night. You can't access the twenty-year-old boy anymore, so you construct narratives around him. A decade later these cauterized similes are all you have, neither good nor bad—just words and memory and language. Boredom and the space between. The muezzin calls the city to prayer; his agile voice lingers on the air, undulating like a flock of sparrows in flight.

You leave the base for the first time, and your eyes fixate on the burned-out shell of a Soviet tank in a ditch; the turret has been torn off and the tank rests lopsidedly, grinning at you like a windswept skull in a John Wayne western. A few old Afghans squat in the dust on the side of the road. Their beards are long and white, and they look up as you pass. One stands and throws his hands up and down, smiling without teeth. You don't smile back.

The convoy turns off the highway and onto a narrow dirt track. Sand and sky and twin tracks leading into a solitary dump where the dust and wind billow, whipping garbage bags high into the sky. The same tracks lead past a crumbling two-storey house. Cracks run down the length of the house, the walls dotted with bullet holes. A clothesline stretches

across the dusty yard and a few garments flap in the wind. A tattered Afghan flag dangles from a rusted flagpole. An Afghan soldier sits in a small wooden shed, cradling an AK in his lap, mostly indifferent to your arrival. He's busy eating and waves the convoy past without putting his food down, without lifting his head or looking in your direction. The tail lights flash red and you arrive at the shooting range: empty sand with the desert stretching in all directions. Everyone in the platoon knows the significance of this windswept patch of earth. The first Canadian casualties of the war on terror died here. We step out of the vehicles clutching our rifles, ready for action. The air smells acidic, like old batteries and dust. *Contact left, contact right, contact straight ahead.* You move from individual drills to section level tactics. Thousands of bullets pound the dust and hard metal casings litter the sand. Those who aren't shooting smoke and laugh and rest by the trucks. Cameras are out—hero shots next to the vehicles, arms around one another, guns cocked at the waist. The wind picks up and dust clouds swirl in the distance, blurring the boundary between land and sky. The Warrant is satisfied with the platoon's performance. *Back to camp,* he shouts, raising his voice above the wind and the dust. The sand batters your face and gets caught in your throat. You clear your weapons and crowd into the vehicles—dusty, sweaty, exhilarated, and eager to shoot something other than sand and targets because that is what you came to do.

The drivers turn the G-Wagons around and start on the sand track back to the base. You drive and laugh and chew tobacco, spitting brown saliva into empty plastic water bottles or directly onto the floor. You're in Afghanistan, not Canada, and you're feeling pretty damn good about it. The convoy halts abruptly. The carcass of a donkey is stretched across the dirt track. Its limbs stick straight up into the sky. It wasn't there three hours ago. Your head is light. White fur is mottled with blood and wires run from the mouth into the ditch. Improvised Explosive Device is a classroom concept. No one is laughing anymore or talking.

Basic training—boot polish and shaved heads, chewing tobacco and cans of Coke. You are sixteen years old, and your world contracts and expands. You spend an hour going over the specifications of a 5.56 mm C7 Service Rifle, the basic weapon for soldiers in the Canadian Forces. You learn how to strip, assemble and clean. How to load, unload, ready, make safe and safety the rifle. Hold and aim. Firing in the prone and standing positions. A barrage of statistics: the weight loaded and unloaded, modes of fire. Automatic and repetition. The difference between an upper and lower receiver. The basic characteristics, which you are told to memorize for the next class. There is no ambiguity, no room for interpretation. The C7 is a gas-operated, magazine-fed, air-cooled, semi-automatic or automatic weapon. It is capable of quick and accurate fire at short range opportunity targets. It is capable of a high rate of accurate, rapid fire at ranges up to 300 metres when used by an individual. It can provide effective section fire at ranges up to 600 metres. It can be fitted with a bayonet

for close-quarter fighting. The magazine holds thirty rounds. The platoon is standing in front of the barracks. The Master Corporal calls you to attention. A few of the soldiers titter. *What the hell is going on? You, what's so fucking funny? Master Corporal, someone's masturbating. Behind you.* He turns around and peers in the window. The room's occupant jumps up and slams the curtain shut. *Well goddam holy shit. That's what they get up to in the artillery. Thank your patron saints that you're infantry: you're in the real army.*

The real army: the Regimental Christmas Dinners where everyone takes drunken bites out of the Yule log, the way that beans and wieners sit heavy in your stomach after a sleepless night in the bush. Older soldiers getting you shitfaced on rum and Cokes. Wandering up and down Whyte Avenue on Remembrance Day, cold hands and feet, trying to find free drinks and the women who are into uniforms. The way that death legitimizes a soldier like nothing else can; the desire for authenticity. You may already have a uniform, a rifle, a war to fight, and the mandate of your government—maybe even a personal moral conviction—but war is still only a childhood version of Cowboys and Indians until Afghans and Canadians die. Even after it's not that different. You learn that violence reminds you of something you'd rather forget: your own mortality—that bombs turn bodies fleshy, dripping, divisible and undignified. You feel sorrow because women and men have died, but you also feel euphoria because you have a war story and no one can question its legitimacy. You're engorged with patriotism, sad and proud as hell—and if you're honest, perhaps you feel some amount of shame because you know you're capable of using death to tell a story. You flip through a stack of photos and realize that you no longer remember everyone's name—you remember faces and voices, the way men walked and held their rifles and the brand and flavour of chewing tobacco they bought, but you can't remember all the names. You gave all your gear away almost six years ago—put it in a big cardboard box and sold it to some bright-eyed B Company corporal for fifty bucks: he got a good deal and you got out of the army.

The Warrant bursts through the door and tells you to *hurry up cause people are waiting in line and there are lots of soldiers who still need to get through, so don't take all fucking day, just soap your nuts and wash your hair and get the fuck out.* You finish quickly, dress and pull on your stiff socks, step out into the night. The cold air burns your lungs. A quarter moon has risen over the Wainwright wilderness, casting a glow on the trees and the grass and fallen leaves. The yellow bus is rumbling and the running board is lit up. The familiar smell of school bus leather and exposed foam seating makes you feel like you're on a field trip. It's warm inside and dark outside and you're clean and you sleep like your dad's at the wheel till the bus driver grinds the gears and you are outside the tents. Green Day is on the radio: *Wake me up when September ends.* When September ends you will be one month closer to Afghanistan.

*Look to your left, he says. Look to your right. Some of you won't return.* You smile at one another. He is old and melodramatic, while you are young and strong. A man in your platoon won't return, but he doesn't know this yet. Another will return with the top of his skull shaved off; he will develop a stutter but today his voice is strong and sure. The man who will clutch at his bleeding face is in the crowd too, listening and watching and breathing. The man you will pull out of the turret is standing somewhere close. You will marvel at the weight of his dead body and never entirely free your nostrils of the smell of brain exposed to air, but today you are young and strong. You choose to be here. You choose the smell of dried grass and gun oil, the bags of chips and cans of pop and the endless cycle of magazines and dog-eared paperbacks. You choose the people who say you are brave and laugh at the people who say you are stupid. You choose the laughter and cigarette smoke, the insolent cry of magpies and the smell of cold in the evening. In the morning you step out of the tent, the sky is grey and overcast and the grass is white with frost.

*Load your weapons.*

The tarmac echoes with the metallic din and click of thirty round magazines being slammed into loading ports. You scan the grey hills of Kandahar for the first time, half expecting enemy fire. To your disappointment and relief, this is not a hot landing zone in Vietnam—only the heat dancing on the tarmac, the roar of airplane propellers, and innumerable helicopter wings beating the hot air.

A sign: *Welcome to Kandahar Airfield.*

The sky is streaking orange and you're hunkering down for the night. The air is growing cool; a lot of the soldiers have fallen asleep. Williams is inside the Hummer, curled into a ball, earphones booming. Dewey is under the Hummer, his eyes covered by a sock, one foot resting awkwardly on a dusty case of Gatorade. Beige flak vests litter the Hummer, like discarded exoskeletons from oversized desert insects. The golds and oranges and reds burn out like Christmas sparklers: the sky is now the blue and black half-light of a bruise. The air is cold. Officers and senior NCOs crouch under a makeshift tarp, folding and unfolding maps, sipping thermoses of coffee. They'll be up until early in the morning, making plans, waiting by the radio for orders. They are gaunt with the stubble of two or three nights on sun and wind-burned faces.

Your interpreters are having a race of sorts, jumping on one leg, laughing wildly. Fozzie, your platoon's interpreter, appears to be winning. *I am a dangerous motherfucker*, he told you the first day you met. He was smiling, wearing a Yankees cap, not a mean bone in his body. He has British fatigues and a pistol which he brandishes like a thug, cocked at an angle. The ANA soldiers are sitting in a circle. One man stands in the middle, dancing softly and snapping his fingers. A few clap along rhythmically. Only one man is in uniform, and he stands off to the side, watching quietly, one foot kicked up onto a truck. The rest of the men are

wearing American T-shirts, combat pants and ball caps. They break off when a dust storm kicks up in the distance.

Day after day the same roads, the same concrete with new holes, some patched, others open and raw like picked-open scabs. The same bikes and jingle trucks and wheelbarrows full of children. The same women washing clothes in the river, the same men selling bread and meat by the side of the road. The same smells: wood smoke and burning garbage. The same sweat trickling down the small of your back. The same used car lot stacked with Toyotas and the cemeteries with bright prayer flags snapping in the wind. The fear and the boredom pumping like twin pistons in the same engine until you fall asleep.

The sun sits above like a dried lemon husk. The afternoon is white and heavy with boredom. *Shooting the shit and fucking the dog is army-speak* for not doing anything. It's too hot to shoot the shit, so you fuck the dog. The tarps provide almost no shade, and you can't take your gear off while you wait for orders to move. You sit. Someone is strumming country chords on a cheap guitar. No wind, no insects, no signs of animal or Afghan life, just the sun and the sky and a few wisps of flayed cloud. There is no water, only sand and rock, the sandy road and the road winding among the mountains. You climb up into the back of the truck and throw down a case of water and some cases of food. The water is hot to the touch. Sand as far as the eye can see, and in the distance a mountain range. Nowhere to hide, to be by yourself, nowhere to take a shit in privacy. You crawl behind the tire of the truck and rest your swimming head on the hot sand. Home is far away. *The sky is overcast, leaden with snow. The air smells of cold and diesel fumes. You sit in the back of the HL like mendicants on church pews and no one says a word. The cold makes speech superfluous. The interior is black. A lighter flares and the sharp sweet smell of cigarette fills the darkness. You pull your neck warmer up over your head and breathe down into your coat. The truck lurches to a start and you pick up speed. Cold air rushes in from small holes in the canvases. Every time you hit a bump you slam back down into the hard wooden benches and your rifles smack into the frozen iron floor.* You wake to heat and the radio report of gunfire and troops in contact.

By the end of the tour some of the soldiers are feuding. Petty shit starts happening—people hiding laundry, pissing on laundry, cutting up laundry, pouring buckets of water on laundry. Beds overturned. No one wants to be here anymore. You've been together as a platoon for well over a year, and you're tired of one another—the novelty of war has worn right off like lacquer on a cheap table. Canada, sea to shining sea, is waiting. Summer is waiting. Girls are waiting. No more dirt or dirty faces or authentic military experiences. It's time to get the fuck home and get back to real life. Six months of tax-free cash are burning a hole in your bank account, and no one wants to die with a bank account full of cash. No one wants to die.

An intake of air, like the pavement trying to breathe. Gunfire and screeching tires. The mechanical whine of the ramp, the charred remains

of a vehicle litter the road—pieces of black metal framed in a circle. Your head is swimming and the ammo in your Tac-Vest pounds into your sides as you lope across the pavement. A man rushes out of the open ramp: eyes filled with blood, face the colour of ash. You clutch at him and yell that he is going to be okay. Another sits on the floor; his hands cover his ears and blood trickles out in steady drops. You shout his name. He does not respond. The interior of the vehicle is littered with bottles of water and cans of Snapple. A third is slumped over in the rear hatch; his helmet is tilted to one side with a deep white gash on his temple. The smell is sweet, like chemical sugar. You try to pull him out, but he's too heavy. A crowd of Afghans assembles around the wreckage. A cordon is established around the blast zone. Motorcycles, bicycles, jingle trucks and wheelbarrows pile by the side of the road. Afghan police troll the crowd, whipping those who stray too close. Electrical wires crisscross the street in all directions. The muezzin calls the city to prayer; his agile voice lingers on the air like a flock of sparrows in flight.

A second explosion shakes the pavement. You stumble and trip over a body. Soldiers run in all directions. Baby-blue robes are wet and heavy with blood. An Afghan crumples to the ground, staring at the dark hole in his foot. Blood thick as engine oil pools beneath him. The smell of burnt rubber and wood smoke. Bodies thrown into the open box of a pickup truck. Sirens and screaming. You hear yourself praying. Blood is dripping off the tailgate.

A Blackhawk raises a halo of dust as it lands on the road, throwing debris into the air. You load the bodies into the chopper and watch it disappear into the pale afternoon. Everyone is smoking. A taxi is stuck in the ditch, forced off the road by the explosion. You hand the driver a bottle of water. He looks you in the eyes and you both start to cry.

You're ordered to clear a small series of mud huts. You kick at the first door and it cracks open: a woman stands a few metres back, her face exposed. She stares at you, silent. Her eyes are blue. A dirt floor with chickens and fruit on an old wooden table. Her gaze is steady against yours and angry. You do not belong in this room. Here. You lower your eyes and back out the door—pointing your rifle in her direction as you turn your back to her eyes and run back to the vehicles.

An A-10 Thunderbolt streaks across the afternoon sky, shooting off green and red flares, machine guns firing in lengthy bursts. The soldiers retreat from the compound. A minute later the reverberations of a 200-pound bomb startle you out of your reverie, moving the ground beneath your body, throwing dust up into the air. *It's just Chuck Norris punching the ground*, intones one American casually. Everyone laughs. A moment later you all drop as incoming rounds crack above your heads. *Everybody stay the fuck down! Johnson, get on the radio and tell Rivers that we have contact. Where the fuck is that fire coming from?* The rounds snap above your head. The mud wall is at least three feet tall and two feet thick, and

you press your body down into the dust and try to become part of the earth. An RPG slams into the ground to your left, throwing up sand and chunks of mud, covering your body in grit. The boom of a LAV cannon silences the incoming. After a minute the Captain stands up—*Y'all can get up too. Shit's moved on.* There is only one injury—an American lieutenant with a shrapnel wound on his cheek. Blood trickles from a flap of skin the size of a nickel. *Way too fucking close,* he yells, a big grin on his face. *Way too close.* The tapping of single rounds echoes from the river. The Captain walks up to a zap-strapped Afghan. *You're fucking Taliban,* he says, scoping the prisoner. The man is overweight and his body is drenched in sweat. He shakes his head emphatically, yells something to the interpreter, eyes growing wide. The interpreter looks at the Captain: *He says that he's a farmer of the village. Like fuck he is,* the Captain bellows. *When Taliban roll in, farmers roll out. Pronto. And he's here.* The prisoner is wringing his hands together like he's trying to wash them clean.

You signed up for war but for the first few weeks you're stuck inside the wire, a combat virgin. The canvas guard tent is furnished with a red couch, a mini-fridge, a coffee-maker, a few DVDs. There's a stack of *Maxims* next to the mini-fridge, but the magazines are cut to shit and some bored bastard who was here before you pasted an X-rated collage on the coffee table. It looks like *Guernica*—but with more breasts. During the day you strip down to combat pants and a beige cotton shirt and try to keep as still as possible. You're in and out of consciousness and the isolation extends up the alleys of sleep. At nighttime you strap on NVGs and race around the compound in the G-Wagon. Up in the turret the wind blows cold and through the night vision thousands of pinprick stars crowd the sky in a wave of green fog. You see a rocket burst on a telephone pole like a large Roman candle and the flame blossoms white in the night sky—the closest you have come to action.

A family gathering after you return and a cousin mentions the war—you start and can't stop crying. You know people are looking at you. You know they feel sorry for you *and* confused by you. Your tan is the only thing they understand. You're angry at yourself and angry at them and embarrassed and proud—straight-up catatonic, walking from room to room, biting your lower lip and trying to figure out a way to stop the tears. But they don't stop: you know that something is broken. Your stooped opa with his edelweiss suspenders stops you in the hallway. He puts his arm on your shoulder, gently like you're a child again. *It's okay,* he says, looking at you over the rim of his glasses, eyes steady against yours and blue. *I know.* That's it. He doesn't ask any questions and he walks back into the living room where he picks up his cake and sits down.

An American chaplain visits FOB Robinson on Easter Sunday. He has flown, it seems, on the wings of the morning. He knows that men are grieving. He knows that the Hesco, the mounds of sands and the

exposure hem the grief like a festering wound. *Your dead will live, he says. Their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy, For your dew is as the dew of the dawn, And the earth will give birth to the departed spirits.* In a cardboard box cage, two sand scorpions circle one another like UFC fighters in the Octagon. The 105s are pounding the hell out of something kilometres away. The soldiers move with the timing and precision of a pit crew. They are stripped down to their combat shirts and when the gun recoils dust jumps into the air, suspended in motion. The immensity of the sky whitewashes your imagination, and you fade into the blue.

You read all the obituaries in an old stack of *Maclean's*. Except for the digital glow of equipment, the inside of the LAV is dark and you use your head lamp. Young skiers who got lost on out trips, teachers who went canoeing in Alaska and never came back. You are alone and stretch your legs. The padre says that there are no atheists in foxholes. You don't use foxholes anymore, and there are plenty of atheists. The radio crackles, broken and distorted. The hissing clarifies into a conversation—two voices, one tight with fear and the other heavy with authority. An ambush gone wrong. Your shift ends and the desire for sleep is stronger than curiosity about the outcome. The clouds have cleared and the moon is bright as you walk the 300 metres back to your sleeping corner. From the top of the plateau you have an almost panoramic view of the Helmand valley. The valley is black, except for a few distant fires. The sand releases the heat of the day, and the musty smell of cooling dust rises from the ground. Tonight you sleep under the stars—stars that are alive and press down on mind and body. You wake with the dawn and drive the long, barely arterial roads back to Kandahar.

The sun is setting and the sky is a dull grey against ocean blue. The proprietor walks out with platter after platter of food: warm pita with tahini and hummus, bowls with olives and pickled beetroot, sliced potatoes in lemon juice, vine leaves stuffed with meat and rice, large Cypriot sausages, feta cheese, goat's cheese and loaves of bread. *This is a meze, he says, and he brings out large pitchers of wine, a bottle of ouzo, and a local booze called Zivania.* He starts you all off with a shot, and he takes two shots to every one of yours. You cram food into your mouths, shouting out orders for more beer and wine. You eat with gusto, no longer afraid of rockets or suicide bombers, though the nightmares will soon start and not end for a number of years. Half-eaten plates of food litter the table along with empty bottles of beer and overturned wine glasses. You pick at the remains of the table. Everyone continues to drink, and as you drink you call out the names of the deceased, the names of girlfriends and wives and former lovers and celebrities you want to make love to. Moderate drunkenness turns into belligerent, stumbling drunkenness. The proprietor argues with you over the bill and you end up paying over a thousand American dollars. *Slut patrol mount up, Johnson yells, gesticulating wildly and laughing.* You strip down to your boxers and



wade into the ocean. The water is warm and the waves roll languidly. You crash through the waves, your head spinning; you fall. Your head is underwater. The water is salty and the sun is bright and you throw up into the ocean. You wake the next day to the crashing of waves and the cry of seagulls, the late afternoon sun on a room that's been torn to shit.

And suddenly it's all over. The last light of the sun is dropping orange in the west and the land is a patchwork quilt of green woodlands and golden fields. The highways are long and straight and dotted with lights. The pilot gets on the radio and tells you to look out the window: two F-18s roar up on either side of the plane, no further than a few hundred metres away. You get out of your seats and crowd around the windows. *You're almost home*, he announces, *but we have a little something for you first. Canada salutes you.* The fighter planes tip their wings and flare off into the night.

You step off the plane and smell the green, the fresh-cut hay, the late-afternoon storm. The tarmac is damp and it feels like you've never been anywhere else. All smiles and back patting—you can't help it. You've passed through the heat with stories to tell. For a time you forget the bomber and the truck with the piled, dripping bodies. You grab your packs and saunter into the hangar as veterans. The mayor of Edmonton greets you at the door. He's wearing his fancy beaver-tail necklace, standing in front of sandwiches and Nanaimo bars. No one cares about the mayor or food. Soon you're shuffled onto the bus, and the flashing lights of the police escort cast strange shadows on the old, familiar road. You roll down the newly christened Highway of Heroes. Every telephone pole on 97 Street from downtown to Griesbach has a yellow ribbon tied to it. Cars honk as you pass. At some of the intersections small crowds in red shirts have gathered, cheering and waving. A pretty girl in a red Forerunner waves and blows the bus a kiss. A soldier pushes his face up to the glass and gesticulates wildly: *Ever fucked a war hero?* he shouts. The bus roars with laughter. The first night out you wake up crying and your bed is sopping with piss. You grab the sheets and throw them in the tub, running hot water and praying that your family doesn't wake. You don't understand what you've become.

The river valley steams with an early morning mist, catches the November light and filters it through the boughs of a thousand bare trees, casting slender shadows on the early snow. A jogger labours up a slushy bike path, breathing heavily. A magpie calls terce to the morning. A mother with two small children silently pushes a stroller down Ada Boulevard. Old, creased men knead dough with their feet in large clay pots by the arches of downtown Kandahar. Others squat in the dust, sharing tea and the news of the day. Children run, congregate and scatter, yelling in anger and happiness. A young girl pushes five small children through the sidewalk traffic in a wheelbarrow. The muezzin calls the city to prayer. His agile voice lingers on the air, undulating like the living and the dead. Like a flock of sparrows in flight. ❧