



┌ TASVEER ┐
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TASVEER, a photograph, an idea, a moment in time. An organization committed to the art of photography and photography as art.

To showcase the finest in photography through its principal 'actors'- the photographers- by exhibiting their work with regularity, precision and joy.

To encourage the buying and selling of photographs as collectors items, as art, as fragments of 'captive' time, of memory. To be cherished. Shared with others. Revisited - both privately and publicly, again and again.

To advise individuals, cultural organizations museums and corporate houses interested in investing in photography as an art form and to help them build their collections.

To achieve this, Tasveer will archive, document and publish works of photography and maintain an evolving, growing digital archive of photographic images through its website and at its galleries in Bangalore, Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai.

War and Forgiveness

War enjoys exciting press in our storytelling tradition. Photographs of men firing guns and charging forward make great selling visuals. A Pandora's box of pestilence, humiliation, rape, egos', NGOs', poverty and intensely debated editorials read by people too far away most of the time, usually do not.

Our images are often of the ordinary and the obvious. They reinforce our worldview and our view of ourselves. We can remain comfortable, removed from violence and its responsibility whether its 75 policemen murdered in North India or the disregard for tribal lives over generations. After all we are normal and ordinary people deserving of justice and peace. Until Pandora comes knocking.

In 2007, I traveled to Iraq, Afghanistan and Liberia. I immersed myself in stories and on occasions experienced great fear for my own life. Unlike many people, I was fortunate enough to leave. The former liberian warlord "General Butt Naked" got his name from fighting stark naked and claims to have personally killed more than 10,000 people during Liberia's civil war. He commanded his child soldiers to commit unspeakable crimes and enforced his command with brutality. The general is now a Christian evangelist named Joshua. We accompanied him as he walked the earth, visiting villages where he had once murdered, seeking forgiveness and endeavoring to improve the lives of his former child soldiers.

I expected him to be killed outright but what I witnessed opened my eyes to an idea of forgiveness, which I always thought impossible. In the midst of incredible poverty and loss, I watched people who had nothing, absolve a man who had taken everything from them.

Our ideas of victory often involve defeating an enemy outside ourselves. A terrorist. A naxalite. A monster. Not within. Does forgiveness or redemption replace our idea of justice? Joshua says that sorry isn't enough and one has to live it and prove it. He says he does not mind standing trial for his crimes and speaks about them from soapboxes across Monrovia to an audience that often includes his victims.

We look upon these victims and perpetrators as others far away. We prevent ourselves from seeing ourselves in them, in what we might fear the most, and which is so much a part of our deepest potentials. I am fascinated with the general because he represents the possibility of what we could be, for worse and possibly for better as well.

"The banality of evil" is a phrase coined by Hannah Arendt that was used to describe how the greatest evils in human history were not executed by psychopaths

but rather by ordinary people who accepted the premises of their state and participated with the view that their actions were normal and ordinary.

I have come away from war with a sense of guilt which for a long while I could not explain. I wondered what use it would be to exhibit photographs of faraway wars, which I know would not sell in India, until I decided that the most depressing thing about working in war zones was not the fear of death. It is seeing the same things, perhaps the seeds of the same things within ourselves and in the way we treat our own people.

Disease, war and horror weren't the only things that exited Pandora's box. The last to exit was hope. If someone as atrocious as the general can attempt to redeem himself, regardless of whatever idea of justice prevails or its execution and regardless of the good or bad opinion of anyone, there is hope. Before he begs for forgiveness, he had to forgive himself. Healing comes with confession and then hopefully, forgiveness. Healing for all sides.

And that is hope. For all of us.

- Ryan Lobo 2010





Afghanistan





20,000 feet down, the Hindu Kush Mountains float by - distant and desolate. (Pg. 15) I recall reading books about Afghanistan during my summer holidays, curled up and transported, my mother's calls for dinner going unanswered. I fly into the Islamic republic of Afghanistan on the IC Delhi Kabul flight to help a friend shoot a film on the poppy trade for National Geographic Television. Over the Hindu Kush and down the rabbit hole, I think. Aid workers, security contractors and gelled Americans fill the plane. "It means Hindu killer, Hindu Kush," said the tiny caste-marked Brahmin seated next to me. World bank loan, reconstruction, mines, I.E.Ds'. The words float down the aisle to my ears as we cruise over bare mountains sipping coke and looking out our windows at the immense starkness below.

My idea of Afghanistan is Rambo, women being stoned, islamic fundamentalism and Osama Bin Laden. The movie "The Party" and Peter Sellers blowing a bugle as he is shot by an afghan, and him continuing to blow the bugle. The Afghanistan that exists in my head is monstrous.

We had hired 'security contractors', a polite terminology for mercenaries to look after us while we were in Afghanistan. I am picked up at the Kabul airport by Brian who walks into the immigration line, SIG rifle on shoulder. "You...National Geographic?" and taken to a land cruiser parked out side without my baggage which will be picked up later by an aide. "Right", said Brian "Wear this", and gives me a grade 3 flak jacket. "If anything happens listen to us, get down and get out of the vehicle on the side not being fired upon and only when and if we do. Okay?"

We drive down the Jalalabad road really fast, going off road where possible and racing ahead of traffic. The city is crowded and dusty. Some Afghans, especially the ones we almost run over, curse us. (Pg. 6)

Later, I find out that an informant has reported a suicide bomber who had been looking for a target about the same time we race towards the contractor compound. "Why do you drive so fast? There are kids about."

"Suicide bombers mate."

Beggars approach us at traffic signals which we cannot zoom through and I recall the famous Steve McCurry portrait "The Afghan Girl". A beautiful image of a beautiful refugee girl with a faraway look in her beautiful eyes. It represents part of the myth created with respect to Afghanistan. Romantic, beautiful, mysterious and given the prepubescent nature of the girl, unattainable. It was taken at a time when the Americans wanted the Soviets out of Afghanistan. The Taliban were heroes then. Eventually, when the Soviets left, the Afghans were abandoned to warlords and civil war, including the green eyed girl who so many thought was so beautiful, once.



So many images taken of the world represent our ideas of people and places and not necessarily the world as it is. A young girl approaches my bullet proof sealed window and asks for money. I cannot roll down the window. She says "Bastard" in english and stares at me through the glass. "My Afghan girl" I think.



The Remembrance of Conquerors

We take some shots from a point on a hill overlooking the city and close to Babur's tomb (Pg. 14). The city looked like an aerial sketch of Mohenjo Daro. I climb into the tomb's basement and find used syringes and faeces. The tomb's dome has mortar holes and numerous bullet holes. Here lies India's first Mughal "conqueror. "His grave has been defecated upon. (Pg. 8)

The armour group compound is located in a secure part of the city and we traversed several checkpoints with tiny Nepali Gurkhas wielding seemingly oversized Ak47s. Gurkhas always seemed to be the designated sentries. The compound gates are opened and our armoured land cruisers are checked for bombs before being let through. Manicured lawns, wire fencing, bar, air conditioning, buffet, sterile.

Approximately 50 percent of Afghanistan's GNP comes from the drug trade Afghanistan is the world's largest source of illegal heroin and has a long history of opium cultivation. The Taliban cracked down on the trade and almost eradicated it. After the Taliban regime was overthrown by the US - backed Northern Alliance in 2001, opium production resumed. According to the Americans the Taliban fund their war with profits from the trade. Eradication efforts supposedly drive angry farmers into the arms of the Taliban who levy a tax and "protect" the farmers.

We visit the only treatment centre for heroin addicts in Kabul. The men would have group therapy where they recount their experiences with the drug. (Pg. 12) The stories are similar. Unemployment, boredom and no education. 99 percent of Afghanistan is illiterate. A 2006 United Nations report estimates that the total number of drug users in Afghanistan is nearly 1 million - about 4% of the population.

We visit with two soft spoken and skinny heroin addicts. One brings his little daughter along. They take us to an abandoned building some distance out of Kabul. The structure is bombed out, bullet hole marked and littered with human faeces. The little girl waits while they smoke heroin. We film as the men crouch in a corner and thick clouds of the drug waft by. After a while, I feel nauseous but it is replaced with a feeling of euphoria. We finish shooting and I stand outside the building, unintentionally high on heroin. The mountains are beautiful. I am beautiful.

I wondered what will become of the child. "Maybe she will be sold," says Brian who gives the girl a bar of chocolate. As we leave the little girl makes scary faces and sticks her hands out in front of herself and roars, as if to act like a monster. (Pg. 10)



Monster



The Art of War. A School Desk in Jalalabad



21ST April

In Kabul, at the security compound, Brian gets us in a circle and speaks. He tells us that in the event of an attack, if the vehicle is immobilized, we are to follow his instructions and get out on the side of the vehicle not being fired upon. The rest of the security team would stay to fight and hold off the attack while we would be "escorted to the other vehicle". We are to stay at the governor's house in Jalalabad. The journey involves a road trip through rugged mountains between Pakistan and Afghanistan, home to Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters who have often attacked convoys on this road. Brian tells me about an armoured vehicle of theirs that went over the edge of a precipice into a raging river. The truck has not been found.

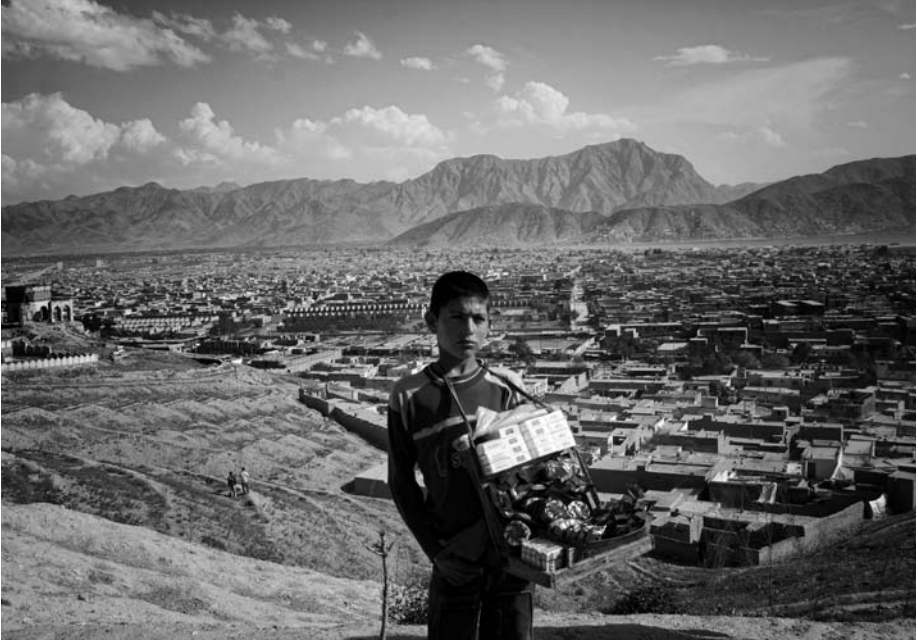
I recall Kipling's poem "The Young British Soldier" as we speed through the mountains.

When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,
 And the women come out to cut up what remains,
 Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains
 An' go to your Gawd like a soldier.
 Go, go, go like a soldier, Go, go, go like a soldier, Go, go, go like a soldier,
 So-oldier of the Queen!

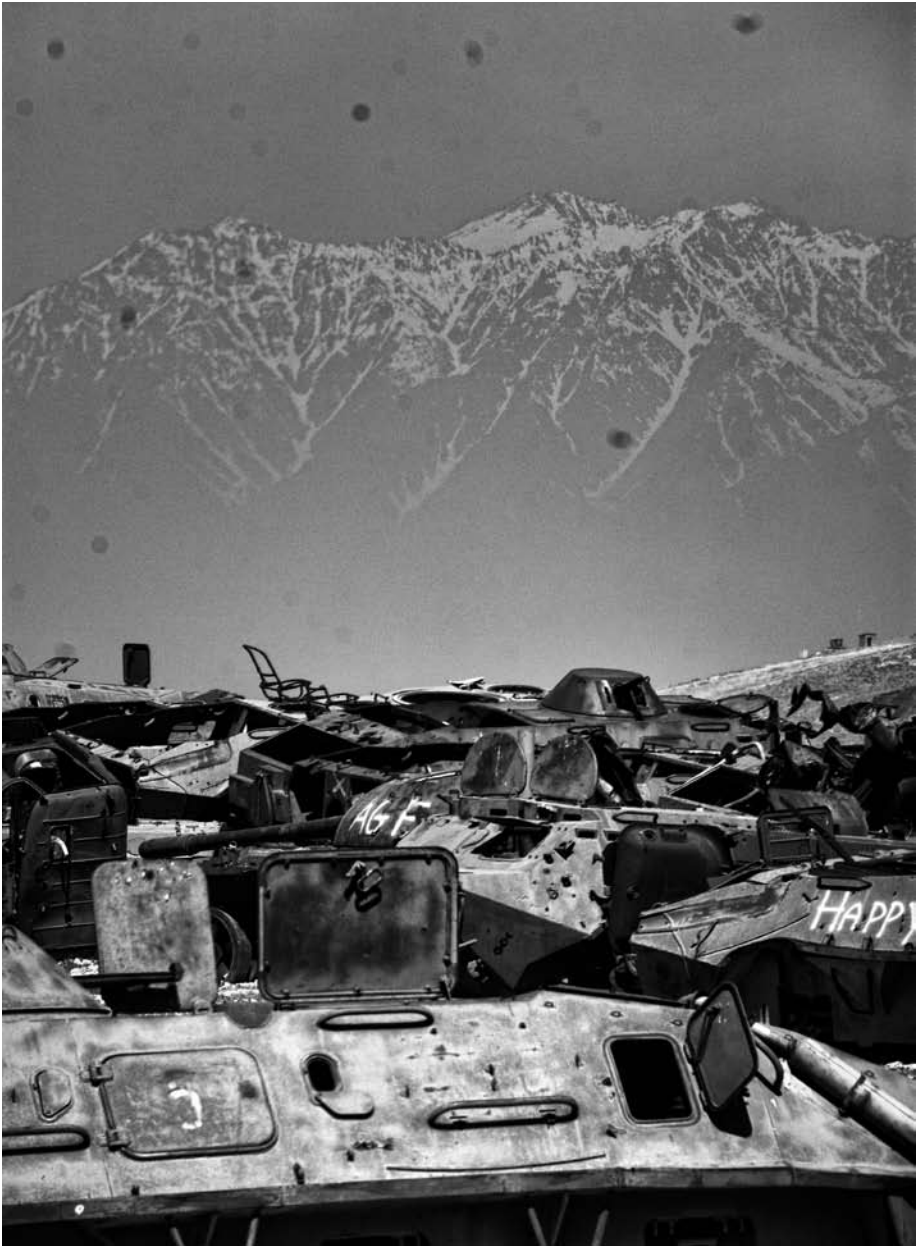
They all went to their gawd. Except for one army doctor. And, I imagine some Indian camp followers, who weren't worth recording at the time. On January 13, 1842 a bloodied Dr. William Brydon reaches the British sentry post at Jalalabad on horseback, the supposedly lone survivor of a 16,500 strong Anglo Indian expeditionary force that was massacred during its retreat from Kabul. The doctor told of a terrible massacre in the Khyber Pass, in which the Afghans gave the Indians and Brits no quarter. This helped cement Afghanistan's reputation as an "unconquerable" country. And so another myth begins, much enjoyed by Afghans I meet who repeat the story with relish, surrounded by poverty, corruption and overpowering landscapes. We travel the same road as Brydon did and I imagine being shot at from the heights, knowing that if you were captured, a horrible death is inevitable.

The scenery is exquisite. Stark mountains rise out of the earth like monsters and extend skyward, silent and immense. There are some rivers and little greenery. Never ending vistas, snow capped mountains, caravans of wrinkled bent over people with rangy mountain dogs wearing spiked collars. We pass donkey and camel caravans of gypsies and I wonder at their lives in such desolate expanses. It looks romantic but some limp and their shoes look tattered. I wonder where the next pharmacy is. Black hawk helicopters cruise in the distance and they look like mango flies against the mountains. They cruise low and fast over the earth so that gunmen don't have enough time to draw a bead on them. It is windy and silent. We pass the ruins of towns. I ask Naz what ruins they are. "No one knows. Ryan, no one knows".





Kabul



Hindu Kush



At times I look out of the window and the drop makes me dizzy. A frothing muddy river gushes past by of the road. Vehicles that have fallen off can be seen stuck in the rapids. Brian put on an afghan hat and places his rifle on his lap under a towel. He tells me a story of these contractors disguised as locals who ran into some Taliban on the road. The Taliban thought that the contractors were other Taliban and waved them on. I think Brian's disguise is awful. We drive very fast along the winding abyss edged mountain roads and along the extreme edge of the road when we see cars parked by the side. Any car with a single driver could be a suicide bomber. I hold my breath a couple of times. I wonder if the drivers in the parked cars hold their breaths too. (Pg. 16)

We reach the governor's house in Jalalabad. Our rooms are ornate. I climb to the roof and in the distance I see the White Mountains where fierce fighting had erupted during the war. A ragged flag of Afghanistan blows over my head and Naz tells me about his life in Helmand and how his own uncles want to kill him for working as a translator for the Canadians. Brian shows me images of corpses post a suicide bombing where his vehicle was the target. 10 people died but he survived even though the man calmly blew himself up right outside the window of his armour plated land cruiser. "That's the hand that set it off" he says. (Pg. 16)

22nd April

The next morning Masood arrives with truckloads of soldiers. Brian is edgy. There has been a suicide bombing on the road. He does not want to be a part of the truck convoy as a suicide bomber would head for the flashiest vehicle, namely ours. We had been seen entering Jalalabad. If there were to be a suicide-bombing attempt, it would be now. Canals flow alongside the road to the village and we pass fruit orchards and wheat fields. Poppy grows everywhere. The village is visible in the distance, surrounded by high walls. To repel what or to keep who in?

We pass through the Shinwar district where, on March 4th, marines supposedly killed 12 men, women and children and wounded about 35 civilians as they fled the scene of a bomb attack. They opened fire from their vehicles and shot at anyone they saw for several miles. Later I look it up and on May 7, 2007, a formal apology was issued by the Pentagon, but was dismissed as premature by General James Conway who said, "I would just as soon that no one, apologize or talk about terrible, terrible mistakes."

The soldiers spread out and stand guard at the village. We move to the fields, exit the vehicles and I am nervous. The Taliban have killed a lot of people for carrying out eradication. Eric shoots, I do sound and take photographs as we walk along.



Men get out of trucks and start destroying the fields, knocking poppy buds off with sticks. Children, expressing the feelings of their parents who stand about silently, stare at us angrily, not at the soldiers, but at us, the foreigners (Pg. 20). Soldiers crouch in the fields. (Pg. 21)

Masood, the man in charge of eradication, tells me that if there were an attack the village elders would be held responsible. I ask him what 'responsible' means and he does not reply. The swishers walk about swishing away. Insects flee and get on my clothes. In a field a farmer looks at me impassively as we film the destruction of his fields. (Pg. 24) I notice Masood looking at a poppy flower. Maybe he plays to the cameras but he seems to marvel at its beauty. Afghans like flowers. I recall, "The Moghuls loved gardens", from my textbooks in St. Josephs. What miserable textbooks we had. We are led into a walled compound and our soldiers spread out. Within the walls are fruit trees and it is cool. I wonder why the rest of the countryside is not planted and why the trees are walled. I wonder why they invite us to lunch when we have just destroyed their fields. Masood seems to know what he is doing. He talks politely to the farmers. "This is the Pashtun way," says Masood. "We destroy their fields; they invite us for a meal."

"What would happen if you'll didn't have guns?" I want to ask. Brian gets a call that a bomb has exploded on the Jalalabad road. We speed back to the governor's

house. On the way we pass an American convoy. We slow down and pull over, as the Americans have been known to fire at any vehicles that get too close.

23rd April

In the next couple of days, we head out to meet with a poppy farmer's family. A local informer has promised us that we will be safe. The farmer says on the phone that we will be his guests. Brian is very edgy as we have only two vehicles. After a long drive, without any backup, we drive into a house off the main road. The cars are turned around and face the road. One car is closer to the road just in case we have to flee. Naz stands guard, concealed with his Ak47. The people in the house say it is not necessary, but he stands guard anyway. An old man explains the Pashtun guest code. They say that they would all rather die than let us face harm in case of an attack. I ask the man "So basically we'd all die if there were a concerted attack". He laughs and says yes. We are offered sweet tea and biscuits. I take some photos of the kids. A little girl comes out of the house. She smiles and I take her picture from a distance. The men present shout "ZAI" and she runs off. She comes out again and smiles from a distance. The men scream at her. I decide not to take any more pictures. The boys stay out and pose. They are allowed.

We walk around the house to the poppy fields and interview the farmer. A crowd of children collect. He says that he is unaware about what the drugs will do to it's users. He avoids eye contact. Then he says it pays better than other crops. He makes eye contact when he says so and laughs. I notice people walking over from





Children of Poppy Farmers



Afghan National Army Soldier in Poppy Field



across the fields. In the distance I see figures running through trees. I am suddenly nervous. I feel the little voice, that feeling on the edge of things telling me that something is amiss. It's because the children are behaving differently. (Pg. 22)

Our informer friend appears and he is perspiring heavily. He says that we have to leave immediately. His hands are shaking. As we hurry back I see a boy who I had met earlier when he was smiling (Pg. 25). In the distance I see men crouching and approaching us. They want to kidnap us, I think. 200 yards is not far. The kids look angry. I find that frightening and I can hear my own heart beat. We get back to the house and Brian says that we have stayed too long. Enough time for someone to put on a suicide vest and come by. He looks very tense. A crowd collects and people ask us why we are leaving. I turn away from the crowd and a little boy looks at me from a doorway. In that chaos, it looks like he is swearing an oath of allegiance to some unknown flag but he's just holding a filthy shirt together. (Pg. 27)

They crowd around the car. Visions of Brian's suicide bombing images come back to me. I decide to get them away from the car and shoot myself with a group of men. Brian and the rest load up quickly. In that moment I understand how one could kill indiscriminately like those Americans did, while the men who swore they would die for us, to protect us from their neighbours, huddle around.

No good byes. We speed off. Our “informer” later tells us that those fields are controlled by Taliban, that the farmers were probably Taliban and that government troops have not visited the area since four soldiers were killed right there, the previous month.

I think that maybe he should have told us this earlier. We had heard horrific things about what could happen We leave and they watch us leave. Two enigmas meeting We are those strange people who come and go hurriedly. Our versions are accountable. It is easy to speak of the savages beyond our borders. They're always beyond our borders. In the next town, next city, next country. The monster is always a foreigner. They make for good stories, far away. Like the Caribes. They were cannibals you know. We drive back to Kabul On the way we see something in the river. It's the truck from Brian's security company that had plummeted over the edge of the precipice and down the abyss into the river and that had not been found.





Poppy Farmer



Child of Poppy Farmer



Soldier Praying



An Oath of Allegiance





Baghdad

8th October

To avoid being shot at by Iraqi insurgents, our plane cruises at 30,000 feet until it's more or less exactly over Baghdad airport. It then spirals downwards tracing the outline of an ice cream cone until it banks sharply near the end of its descent and lands. We plummet earthward and I look out of the window and see a sharply lit city with square compounds and houses. A pariah kite circles below and I wonder if it's the same species we get in Bangalore. Hundreds of American helicopters and tanks are parked in straight lines. They look miniscule, like toys. Smoke from a distant fire heads up perfectly straight into a windless sky. The plane banks sharply and I feel my innards rise up into my chest cavity and attempt an exit through my nose.

We get held up at the airport for our camera gear permit. After a long wait while our extensive paperwork is checked, we exit a desolate airport into a concrete, gray and silent exterior. Andy, our close protection security contractor is there to meet us with his crew of Fijian and Iraqi mercenaries. We head towards the red zone, an eight - mile drive into the city, on what has been called by some journalists as "the most dangerous road on earth." We pass many blown up vehicles. My view is through thick bulletproof glass from inside the vehicle. We pass a field, sudden and green and looking very different from the burnt out, destroyed wasteland. We are staying in the "Red Zone" and not the green zone," says Sarin, the woman who has hired us to shoot a film on "Iraqi women". We are angry as Sarin had told us we would be staying in the safer "Green Zone".

Clay, the Kiwi guy, tells us that we might get rammed from the back and to keep our heads down if that happens. A gun truck in the front and one in the rear. The very few people I see walk fast and glance nervously at passing vehicles. Contractors, insurgents and soldiers have killed many innocent bystanders. All our vehicles have signs that warn vehicles to stay at least 100 meters away. I wonder if the contractors play on the danger a little too much with their clients, just like documentary filmmakers sometimes, as it's good for business. At their compound choppers occasionally fly a few feet over the building and everything vibrates. Tony tells us about a sniper from across the fields. "Stay close to the wall. The sniper from across the fields put two in the back door last week." We hear mortars now and then in the distance. Stories come out slowly about the red zone being like the wild west with the Americans shooting at everything. Tony says that most American soldiers are very trigger happy.

"About 100 - 150 people are killed in Baghdad every day and 5 - 10 US soldiers are killed in our area every fortnight or so." Says Tony. He directs the statement to



Sarin who is giggling on her cell phone. We learn that the “Baghdad Islamic Party” has moved in across the street. One of the characters Sarin wants to shoot has two brothers in the Mahdi army. Tony says the Mahdi army is not popular as he has boys in hospital because of them. He talks to Sarin and us about the dangers of interacting with the wrong people in Iraq. He tells us about check posts at night run by both sides and how 30 - 40 people can rush a convoy. How 15 men teams have been wiped out. Sarin says she wants to “talk about invoicing” and Tony tells her that he’ll kill her if she doesn’t pay. Sarin finds it funny. Tony does not really smile.

Tony says “No going to the roof, or you’ll get a really big hole in your head”. We hear a bomb going off mid discussion. I go out for smoke and hear a shot down the road. If it comes under severe attack we are supposed to get to a room Tony shows us. I notice that his room is among the most protected, on a lower floor.

9th October

While we travel around, I chat with Andy the SBS (Special Boat Service) contractor. He is soft spoken. Out of 2,000 candidates who tried for the position, only 2 made it. He was one of them. He’s done “jobs” in Sierra Leone and Mogadishu. He is 51 years old. He describes how the mob pulled burning cars across the road as he drove through Mogadishu. He says that ‘Black Hawk Down’ is a very accurate movie. He likes diving and adventure sports and plans on climbing all the world’s peaks. He

is a diver and distance swimmer. He just returned to Iraq after having canoed 400 miles in Canada. He tells us about the "Coke can bomb" lobbed at his vehicle. The bomb blew a man's clothes off and lifted a truck in the air. He is divorced and has a kid. His girlfriend is in Kuwait. Clay, the Kiwi contractor, later tells me that Andy has killed a lot of people in combat and that's he's an incredibly experienced soldier. Andy tells me he is planning on living in British Columbia eventually. I ask him if he likes hunting, as he's bought a place in British Columbia and he says that he doesn't like hunting as he "only kills things that need killing."

10th October

There are helicopters whizzing above us all the time. They fly low and fast to avoid small arms fire. I wake up and shower so as to be on time for our trip to the green zone. Sarin is an hour late as she is doing her hair. Clay the New Zealander and the others are waiting fully geared up in the vehicles, engines running. I feel embarrassed. I think that one can bond easily with people when facing risk. So much for objectivity and "embed" stories. We finally get out and head to CPIC (Combined Press Information Center) in the green zone for our badges. While we are being searched at the checkpoint, we hear loud gunfire. 50 caliber shots, 2 and 3 at a time. And then small arms fire, quick bursts. I ask Moss our security leader what it is and he says that it's probably someone practicing at a range.

We walk to the MOD (Ministry of Defence) to meet the Iraqi general Abadi who trained in India, as did General Ali. We don't have helmets and aren't allowed to walk to the MOD with just flak jackets on. We drive and Brown walks. We meet the general after a walk through high ceilinged rooms and corridors. Moss and Ruff, our contractors, are kept outside and we go in. We meet the general and discuss inanities and permissions. He is well spoken and polite. He tells us that women's liberation has been in Iraq a long time. We reconvene in another part of the headquarters of the "very corrupt" Iraqi defense forces and leave. Our contractors say that they do not trust anyone as in the past; there have been kidnappings and murders here. Moss and Ruff keep an eye out at all times.

Later we meet Iraqi cameramen stringers. She thinks they're "sketchy." We discuss rates and they say they will get us their CV's and some footage. Their body language is confident, yet careful. At dinner, I meet 63 year old Reza who lives in Thailand. He tells us about an orphanage he ran in Cambodia and the history of Angkor Wat.

Two .50 caliber rounds have hit the wall close to my window earlier in the day. Were they from an American soldier? Or was it insurgent sniper fire? I hear a lot of automatic gunfire in the distance after dinner. Who knows really.



11th October

We go to the US aid compound and meet Colonel Michaels. She was Hugh Heffner's bodyguard and has been in the armed forces for 23 years. There's also nice wine and the best buffet I've seen in a long while. The guy handling the barbeque is from Kerala. He's been in Iraq for a month. The whole kitchen is from Kerala. They flip lobster tails and steaks on the barbeque and talk in Malayalam. We head home after dark. I doze off. Later, Clay tells me he saw tracer rounds go over us as we drove home.

12th October

I wake to the sound of gunfire some distance away. It seems to go on for a while. Maybe it's just the security contractors practicing. Ji, a Fijian contractor, says this month is the most dangerous month in Iraq due to Id. I chat with some contractors after breakfast. Today is a down day as the contractors have been "locked down". Kevin tells me about the time when their compound was attacked and how the contractors responded and how the attacks were not repeated. They put up the "wall", which meant they fired everything they had in the direction of the incoming fire for a very long time. Apparently the head of a local mosque had issued a fatwa on the people working within the contractor compound.

I see the armor group vehicle next door that's been shot up. It happened earlier



The Hand of War

on in the day. The Fijian contractors play rugby in the same yard. While I sit outside post gym chatting with Reza and Eric I see a combat chopper dropping flares about 400 meters from us. Razor says that's what the military does to mark a position for a gunship to come in and clear up. As the chopper passes overhead, I hear a lot of small arms coming from what seems to be the area it's over. We sit and watch and smoke and Razor talks about his time in Thailand and how wonderful life is and how he tells his children to get out and see the world. How he built houses after the tsunami including one for a woman who cried when she saw it finished. He has two daughters and a Thai wife. His third marriage. More choppers pass overhead and I hear a lot of AK47s go off in the distance.

That night I hear a huge explosion as I lie in bed reading. The windows vibrate. Tomorrow, I find out that a car bomb has gone off a short distance away and has killed "some" Iraqi contractors. Reza tells me that when the Iraqis' die they aren't even reported. "They aren't registered." he says

13th October

Mr. Brown was in a convoy last year that was attacked and he apparently saved many people. We haven't shot anything so far. It is frustrating running around for permissions that never seem to come. I shoot myself (with a camera). We meet at the crossed swords, which Saddam built. More running around.

14th October

I hear several loud explosions in the morning. We are being given the run around and we are the media. I wonder what kinds of run around the locals get. We go to Saddam's former palace with Mr. Brown and to the US embassy. More permissions. The Republican palace is massive. Partitions have been built into huge halls to look just like a gigantic high ceiling-ed office. There are Halloween trimmings and drawings of pumpkins all over. There are no children here. I am not allowed to take pictures. Big macs are being eaten here in vast quantities. The soldiers we meet have strange names which make me laugh, later.

Mr. Panic, Mr. Colon, Mr. Payne, Mr. Boyle.

Mr. Brown shows us Saddam's bedroom in a obscure part of the palace. It's very small with a bathtub and a big balcony. He was paranoid about being assassinated. The wallpaper near the headboard is peeling and I take a small piece as a souvenir. We stand on the balcony and Brown shows us the spot a short distance away where a katyusha rocket landed killing a KBR contractor. We look at at the air-conditioned pre-fabricated housing for State department employees in the date palm orchard.



Sniper Chairs

We go to the top of the Al Rasheed with Sergeant Rhodes. It's a tall building with two "counter sniper" posts. Choppers swoop over the buildings moving fast and low. (Pg. 38)

Seargent Rhodes who accompanies us was there when Saddams sons' Uday and Qusai were shot along with a bodyguard and Qusai's 14 year old son. He points out where it happened. The soldier's cameras were confiscated and apparently Time magazine offered 25 thousand dollars to soldiers for photographs. Uday killed himself and the others were unrecognizable, as they'd been "shot up so bad" says Rhodes. According to Rhodes, Saddam watched the whole thing from a nearby mosque and "scooted" after his sons died. I sit in the sniper chair and after awhile I photograph them. How many people died from this point? We look out over Baghdad and I see the Tigris in the distance. A child runs past in a courtyard below with a toy gun (Pg. 40). I hear shots now and then. If you hear a zip, duck, says Rhodes but he also says that Iraqi snipers can't shoot very well. We sit up there awhile in the blazing sun and then head down. Sarin is scared of heights so freaks out a bit on a ladder on the roof. Rhodes thinks they should divide up the country for the Kurds, Shias and Sunnis'. I watch pigeons fluttering around the building.

Rifle shots signal the Id celebrations. I wonder if they're shooting at me. I listen and hear zips but they're just bullets passing in the distance. We wait in the parking lot opposite the American embassy and Sarin gets us whoppers from a Burger King there. I eat it and feel a little sick post the Hershey desert. Young American soldiers sit around eating whoppers. They're kids. They spill a lot of trimming. I feel sick.

15th October

We meet Omar and his team at the house. Omar says that when you wear a flak jacket, people know you are with the Americans and you are more of a target. His brother was almost killed by the Mahdi army. They had dragged him out of his first home and were taking him to be executed when a humvee drove by. His bloodied brother ran towards the humvee and asked for help. Sarin offers them chocolate she got from the kitchen and tells them to take the whole box. Her offer is declined. She seems anxious to have them trust her. She asks Omar "so would you say Iraqi women have no rights." He says, "Iraqi people have no rights. We had one Saddam before, now we have 50."

16th October

Eric and I had earlier asked Tony if we could hitch a ride with a convoy into the IZ (International Zone) to meet Steve Finlayson at Motorola. He agrees and we go to the crossed swords and get picked up by Steve. We stay parked there in his



Baghdad



Helicopter



Collateral

BMW and Steve tells us that he now works one month on and two off. He lives in Goa. He tells Eric that he believes that the National Geographic film he was featured in might have been a reason why insurgents almost killed him four days in a row. He says that it was his car that got hit every single time and believes he had a leak. Some days previously he was about 60 meters away from a humvee convoy and stopped to let them pass. An IED (Improvised Explosive Device) blew two of the Humvees up and half the gunner's body from one humvee flew into the air towards Steve. If he had not stopped it would have been Steve hit by the IED. So, after that, he decided to chill a bit and headed to Goa, where his wife lives in Arpora.

17th October

We go to the IZ (International Zone) and while we wait for the cars to be searched, we hear an alarm and the triple canopy guards tell us to get into the bomb shelter. I rush and Sarin laughs as I hurry. "Relax Ryan" she says and giggles. We go into the shelter and I hear the mortars going off pretty close. CRUMP CRUMP. People push each other but on the whole it's calm and the pushing is gentle. When I go to the balcony that night and look out over the fields towards the city, I see a massive fire on the horizon. Its glow lights up a cloud and the sound of choppers fill the night.

18th October

I wake up early and I am 34 years old. It's my birthday. We go to the MOD and head out to a check post behind it to shoot women soldiers at work. I take photographs' and we walk to the checkpoint down past the pre-fabricated walls and bougainvillea. Our security team is taking no chances, as the area is full of militants. We have been seen several times at the MOD as well. The MOD (based on what the contractors tell me) is probably very corrupt. I think the security for entering the MOD is lax. One man being frisked with a sheaf of documents freaks out when I take his picture. He is terrified and is almost in tears. I cut off his face in the photograph to protect him from potential reprisals. (Pg. 44)

We shoot the Iraqi women manning the check post for 20 minutes and leave (Pg. 45). "It's long enough and if you stay longer you might be attacked". Only 20 minutes and so much preparation and protection. They search people coming into the Ministry of Defense (Pg. 48). I don't think much of the searching. There are so many layers of procedure and bureaucracy here with the excuses and side steps that ostensible fear allows an administration to use against reporters. In my conversations with people back home, I talk about "danger" but the truth is that I don't know how real it is. I don't know anything, but I trust the people I



am with. And now, even that is under jeopardy. The fog of war is lies.

There is always a reason why one cannot go here or talk to that person. They say the rules have changed with insurgents killing press people nowadays. In the "past," reporters could meet both sides and tell a story. "Now it's impossible," says Mr. Brown, the former Green Beret who has been designated to look after us. I wonder why. He cites the murder of Daniel Pearl. Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, the chief suspect in Pearl's murder had been in an Indian prison in connection with the 1994 kidnappings of Western tourists in India, and had been freed by the Indian government in exchange for passengers aboard the hijacked airliner in December 1999. So many cite the murder of Daniel Pearl and how meeting with Moslem locals is so dangerous which it well might be. The impotency and lack of will of my own government has in an indirect yet profound way, led to journalists falling into the same circle of compromise and bureaucracy. Our actions have eternal lives of their own. Yet, the banality of it is astounding. "Remember Daniel Pearl," everyone says. I want to say "Remember what he died trying to do".

Madhia is an MP and very eloquent (Pg. 43). She is accompanied by the quiet Mr. Fakeer. He says that relationships with the Americans are very bad. Apparently Sharia law might be implemented and they are against it. Fakeer tells us his son was murdered. After this shoot, I want to make something worthwhile. I am so tired. It's my birthday. I call home and my parents call me back They are precious. I call her and she is out and she says she cannot hear me

because of the music and hangs up. Choppers clatter overhead and I hear explosions in the great distance and their flashes light up the sky like lightening. It is like Diwali back home as seen from the roof of an apartment building. Eric wishes me. He is a good friend. Even though sometimes, I want to hit him very hard.

19th October

We wake up early and pick up Major Kraft who drives us to the prison, which is where Saddam was held before being executed. It's a huge structure that's been marked by shells. Litter blows about everywhere. Since government officials and the police are possibly affiliated with various militias, we enter with seven men, armed to the teeth. We meet the warden and we are taken through dark corridors with windowless rooms (Pg. 46) to a pre fabricated walled courtyard where prisoners sit about (Pg. 50). A lot do not want their faces shown as they might get into trouble with their families and militias. Some claim to be innocents. Some have bullet wounds. Later I ask Mr. Brown about these prisoners (Pg. 49) and he says that some of these men are guilty of horrific crimes, some are "fanatics" and some are "innocent" (Pg. 28-29). I see their rooms. They are dark and windowless with no light fittings. It is very hot inside a cell.

20th October

We stay in the house all day today. I call dad regarding tickets as it looks like we are going to be stuck here awhile. Clay says when a weapon is overly modified to





Frisk



Women at Work



Baghdad Prison

look “designer” they refer to it as a Gucci. I hear Tony early on in the day calling an Iraqi guy’s flashy modified weapon a Gucci. They’re trying to look like movie stars, the Iraqi contractors. Young men with guns.

21st October

We discover that we can get tickets from Baghdad to Amman. I try to contact Emirates for my India connection from Amman with no success all day. I am frustrated. We sit about.

22nd, 23rd October

I ask the lady who comes in everyday if I could take her picture. She says only if her face is covered.

23rd October

After some days of sitting indoors, after Tony cancels our permit because he says Sarin lied to him about for whom the film was for. I personally thank our contractors for protecting us. So does Eric. Sarin isn’t exactly the same way. The shoot is dead. An utter failure.

On the way to the airport, from our armoured land cruiser, past the same wreckages’ and through the bulletproof glass, I notice that the fields are in full bloom (Pg. 51).



Women at War



Insurgent



Pre Fab



Bullet Proof Full Bloom



Liberia



The American Colonization Society founded Monrovia in 1822 as a haven for freed slaves from the United States and the British West Indies. It was named after James Monroe, then president of the United States and was founded on the premise that former American slaves would have greater freedom and equality in "Africa". The freed slaves brought with them Christianity and created Monrovia but did not integrate with local tribes which had dealt in slavery for a long time, selling their own people to slavers from Africa, America and Europe. The religious practices of the Americo - Liberians have their roots in the churches of the American south. These ideals influenced the attitudes of the settlers toward the locals and the Americo-Liberian minority dominated the native people, whom they considered primitives. The immigrants named the land "Liberia," which means "Land of the Free," as homage to freedom from slavery. Who the freed slaves enslaved and exploited was a different matter.

A military coup supposedly supported by the CIA in 1980 overthrew the president William R. Tolbert, which marked the beginning of a period of instability that eventually led to a civil war, which devastated the country's economy, left 200,000 people dead, tens of thousands mutilated and most of the female population sexually attacked in some form or the other. I take the flight from Bombay to Kenya and then to Accra and finally Monrovia. I have read Naipaul's "Bend in the river" and find the book somewhat terrifying.

The Liberian airport is like a large shed. I reach Monrovia and get detained by a big woman with a hairy chest in a red spaghetti top. She calls me out of the immigration cue and I get taken to a room, walking past signs that say, "Liberia has friendly people". I am finally granted permission to leave. A man greets me outside the airport. It's the guy with the Levi's cap who sat behind me on the plane from Ghana. It's Joshua Milton Blahyi, formerly known as General Butt Naked. We drive into Monrovia and pass billboards and miles of forest. The area





around the road has been cleared and some the billboards seem to have been painted with relish. They say things like,

“Congratulations Miss Liberia,” “Raped?” and “Heineken”.

We reach the hotel. The usual suspects hang about. UN workers, Lebanese business men and people working on their PhD’s with grants from American grant givers. The Liberians dress well, like they live somewhere else, where a life of leisure is possible, with shiny pointed shoes and hand me down t-shirts from American charities. The visitors dress like they’re headed out into deepest darkest Africa. They wear cargo pants and Cabela’s safari shirts and trekking shoes.

Joshua and Reverend Kun Kun meet us for dinner with their wives. Joshua tells us about being robbed in the past and breaking the robbers’ arms after they shot the owner of a house in the leg to torture him into telling them where the “rest” of his money was. Joshua tells Danielle about his victims who he has met. How he had helped a drug lord convert in Ghana. He speaks of a crippled beggar on the streets of Monrovia whose legs he had cut off. Of a person he had killed and the dead man’s brother who had survived his bullet wounds. He talks at length. A woman who proclaimed in his church that Joshua had killed her father and how she had decided to forgive him. Joshua says that even though he had nothing, he had offered to be her father. He says that she made the church cry and he felt terrible and she had stopped then, for him. His name was “Kink” amongst the criminals of Monrovia and “Zeus” in Ghana. He speaks of his time preaching to Moslems in Nigeria and



how he had to take them deep into the forest as otherwise they would have been killed. "I want to take risks for the Lord" says Joshua. "In the past I took far greater risks to kill and do bad things". He says he stayed for months in the jungle not eating cooked food and only worms, roots and suchlike. I am tired. I retire. I write this.

11th November

This morning we awake and after a mediocre breakfast at the Mambo Point hotel we head to the "City of Light Church of God" church. The waiters at the Mambo point act like they're bored and that I should be grateful for any service that they give me. The hotel is surrounded by barbed wire. We go to the church. A man sits in the lobby (Pg. 62). Everyone is dressed in his or her Sunday bests'. Joshua is in a flowing shiny black gown and Kun is in a suit like no other I have ever seen. It's like a zoot suit.

We watch them preach. Very high energy. Joshua speaks and they are carried away. He reads his sermon off his cell phone. It's like a scene from the movie "The Blues Brothers". He talks about witches and evil spirits and fighting them. He talks about his crimes. The congregation chants, dances and prays.

Joshua says he had to perform a human sacrifice every month and believed he would die or something horrible would happen to him if he didn't do so. He

would often sacrifice children. Kun takes us to a house a short distance away from the church where Joshua hid out after he converted to Christianity. The church kept Joshua with them as otherwise they believed the powers he had served would come for him since he stopped sacrificing humans. Kun said they would pray a lot in those days for deliverance from evil, in that house. Kun also tells us how Joshua had murdered babies by grabbing them from their mothers and bashing their heads against a wall and drinking their blood as part of certain rituals.

We go to the bridge and meet General Saddam who once fought with Butt Naked who tells us about how Joshua rescued him from an ECOMOG (Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group) attack. He tells us about his human sacrifices to get 'invisible armor'. He tells us about his belt that could turn into a snake and swallow bullets. He is very animated. He talks of his clothing and how they rendered him invisible during battle. His belt did not apparently swallow all the bullets fired at him and he shows us a scar on his back from a 50 caliber bullet. Joshua had saved his life after he had been shot, carrying him to safety.

12th November

In the morning we go to town and get some city shots. A handless man grabs me. He expects me to be shocked and intimidated. I laugh. He looks offended and asks for money. During the civil war The RUF's signature terror tactic as well as other factions was mutilation. An estimated 20,000 civilians suffered amputation, with machetes' being used to sever arms, legs, lips, and ears.

I do a time lapse at the building Joshua once controlled with his child soldiers. He wears his Levis cap and plays with some kids. Senegalese the former child soldier whose legs Joshua had shot off looks stoned as usual (Pg. 58). It was here, in this building and close to where he plays with kids now that Joshua once held off a siege of ECOMOG troops. He talks about how he trained children to jump down whole flights of stairs and how he would beat those that could not do so. He killed a baby right there where he talks to some children. And ate its heart.

We have to leave after awhile as a UN truck arrives and makes a racket. It has come to load signs which have been piled up against the building. They're about peace and reconciliation. Here in Africa wounds are being acknowledged. The intention is that they wont express themselves later if they are confessed and hopefully forgiven. Later we go to the beach and Joshua and Senegalese are interviewed. Joshua apologizes. He recounts the story of how the general shot him in his legs and how he begged him not to. Senegalese forgives him (Pg. 64). Later I look at my photographs and Joshua looks smaller than the impression he gives me, than he actually is physically.



Senegalese Johnson and the UN Effort



International Standard Industries



13th November

We meet Joshua and his youngest child soldier Bobby. "His gun used to drag!" says Joshua and they laugh. He puts up posters by a busy road advertizing his church and we head to a slum called Xolalli, which means, "Where death is better than life"(Pg. 60). Joshua warns us that the people here are very smart and will rob us and to be very careful. Many are heroin addicts. I take one camera and leave the backpack with my passport behind. We walk into Xolalli and the corrugated ceilings of the barrack like buildings have been sold off to pay for drugs and maybe food, says Joshua (Pg. 68). We walk into the building into a room where men smoke heroin. Joshua goes into a tirade against himself. He says that when they were boys he had forced them to kill for him. "This one I forced him to fight, this one I forced him, FORCED him to fight."



Joshua looks distraught. Eric, Ryan and Danielle wander off. Joshua is with me. A woman emanates from the shadows screaming at him. She has a terrible scar on her face (Pg. 60). She sobs out that the general has killed her brother. She points her

finger at Joshua and cry's out not words but sounds of grief and horror at seeing him.

Joshua says "I am sorry. I was not the person I am now, then I did not know what I was doing." She calms down and puts her head in her hands as Joshua begs (Pg. 63). Mensilentlysurround us. I take a photograph. Finally, she places her hand on his shoulder as he touches her feet and leaves. I feel like I have witnessed something immense. Joshua tells the story of how he killed her brother and then ate his heart because he spoke French as one of the factions the general fought against then spoke French. Kun would later say "There can be no true healing for either side without confession and then forgiveness."

People who have truly suffered do not find it difficult to forgive. And this was my experience in the days to come. Out of suffering and sorrow endured seems to sometimes come a deeper understanding of forgiveness and the shortness of life. Victor Frankl writes about how his perception of beauty improved dramatically and profoundly even though he was in a concentration camp, starving to death. When the war was over he felt no feelings of revenge for his captors. We do not know what to do sometimes, perpetrators and victims as well. This sense of knowing how similar and connected we are, this sense of privilege as Lauren Van Der post writes, can come from suffering.

We visit his old quarters where the general would live with his child soldiers. So many hundreds were tortured to death in this room. He tells us how he shot Senegalese Johnson again, in this room. How he begged to be spared and was shot in the legs. How he dragged him to the bathroom to die. He tells us how Bishop Kun Kun came into this room. How he wondered how brave a man Kun was. How he watched Kun closely when Kun told him that he would pray with him as he was waiting for Kun to make a move to harm him. I take pictures of the general. I am alone with him in this room. The stains on the wall look like ghosts. He looks like Jesus to me. A most unlikely Jesus. But a Jesus nonetheless. (Pg. 66) We leave and he puts up posters on the wall outside the room he once murdered within (Pg. 65).

We speak to child soldiers on the beach and they tell us about how it was to serve under the general. He was "drastic" on them and killed kids for disobeying orders. "We have been rejected by everyone". They pose like American rap stars. They were told that they could not be harmed when they fought.

They killed babies and ate human hearts in ritual fashion. They often tortured people to death. The rape and killing of women was common. "We didn't know what we did. We were kids and the general gave us Drugs. We were scared of him". I say to myself William Golding eat your heart out. Literally. The waiters



What is justice?



Forgiveness



A Registration of Suffering



The End Time Train

at the mambo point still behave like they're making up for years of colonialism and Eric gets annoyed in general. I decide I am not taking anti malarial medication, as Eric is the perfect case for how Larium can turn someone into an idiot. I think to myself that maybe he "knows not what he does" but I still want to kick his butt.

14th November

I awake early and we head out to meet Joshua to shoot him on a bridge he once defended. He tells us about the battles he fought there. How he would use the child soldiers to flee and draw the ECOMOG and Charles Taylor's men over the bridge. Once the general and his boys skinned the arms of 3 captured ECOMOG fighters and kept them in seawater until they died.



I watch another former general preach by the river. He is screaming and pointing (Pg. 67). So many preachers. How else would one live with the horror of years of murder. This idea of an end time is a desired end time to suffering. This idea of a promised land helps us make simplistic sense of our own nature.

I walk over to the tall building and Joshua is being interviewed at the point where he was converted. He tells us how the Krahn barracks where the Krahn tribe was based was coming under attack and his people had begged him to hold the bridge. He refused and a lady gave him her baby girl. He cut open the child's back and tore out her heart with his own hands and ate it. He asked for water to wash his hands which was when he saw a bright figure that told him his "servant" was not at his feet but on his shoulder. He then went to the bridge and defended it. He says he didn't know who this person was but later believed the person to be Jesus.

At the bridge his 45 pistol exploded when he tried to fire it to launch an attack, followed by his rifle, which malfunctioned. He was freaked out and says how Pastor Kun would visit repeatedly and how uncomfortable that made him and



how his deity would warn against Kun when Joshua would commune with him at night. Kun invited Joshua to his church and Joshua accepted but his deity told him not to go as they would kill him. Finally he was ready to meet Kun and his deity freaked out but he went anyway and was touched at the greeting he received. "Pretty girls embraced me. Me, a sinner being accepted. Me, being loved. Maybe he loved me because he thought I could do good work for him. That's why he came to me."

After that we go to the devastated and looted "Africa Hotel". Little kids swim in the green water of the hotel pool. Even the wiring has been ripped out of the walls. Joshua tells us about his childhood. His father was married to a woman from a different tribe. The Krahn tribe wanted a priest and his father was in line but since his father was educated and lived in the city he didn't want to be the head priest of the Krahn tribe. The elders forced Joshua's father to marry a Krahn woman and Joshua was born. His first wife had to flee or face the wrath of the Krahn.

Joshua was initiated as the high priest of the Krahn at the age of 11. He was taken to a big rock where the deity "Ngumayorwe" appeared. Joshua tells me that the deity was dressed in rags, his skin was like an old piece of cloth that had been left in the swamp for years. The left side of his body was dead and his left



Xolalli - Where Death is Better Than Life



Dark Water

foot dragged. A large rock moved and they crawled under it. He was fed fresh meat with blood in it for 11 days and when he emerged he was the new head priest of the Krahn tribe.

"These deities are fallen angels and they get more power when more people worship them". Joshua said he would murder children and do rituals with them and he would do so every month at the full moon. He would dig a hole by the river and swim underwater and drag small children into the hole. Then he would take out their eyes and tongues and put the bodies back in the river. He would astral travel every night and explained that was like dreaming, leaving the body except he was in control and spiritually trained to do so. Joshua tells me after his interview that 3,6 or 9 yr old girls were preferred for sacrifice and were called "diamonds". Girls over the age of 9 were called "bronze". He would take a checkerboard and meet people from other tribes to kill or take over their minds. He would engage them in arguments or make them laugh so that he could gauge their spiritual continence and he would thus have the knowledge to be enabled to kill them while they slept and he astral travelled. He would tie them up in their dream state and in the morning they would be like they were dead. When their "bodies" went for post mortem they would be cut up. He says that the spirits of those people wander about looking for their bodies. Other than this, he was a "good kid who was obedient". Today I see a blind man being led by a child. I notice suddenly that the child is blind as well.

15th November

The forgiveness rally is hot as hell. Joshua's wife talks. Joshua talks about reconciliation. About how sinners need as much love as victims. He talks about the trauma many people have faced and how one can get over it. Turn to Jesus Forgive. Seek reconciliation. A huge crowd attends. Many people who have done violent things break down. Their victims also break down. Meanwhile, Eric and Danielle are upset at Joshua's wife. After the epic nature of everything Josie wants her husband home and away from the physical dangers of redemption.

16th November

Today is a full day. We leave for Xolalli with Joshua and his wife Josie. We walk in and Ryan films Joshua meeting with the same lady whose brother he had murdered. We enter on foot and after awhile things go out of hand. We had asked a few of the local guys to help us ask some of the slum dwellers to move downstairs to give us some silence and things get rough when the helpers' start yelling at people. Joshua apologizes at length and the lady accepts his apology. She tells us that she forgives him as it is the past and because he has earnestly appealed to her. Just like that.

We leave the interior room and I stay there while the rest go off. In no time a group surrounds me. One says he will take the camera and smash it on my head if I take his picture. I smile and things get worse. They push and walk me into a corridor. After awhile one says he likes my hat and shoes. They are high on heroin, high out of their minds. One asks for money. I say I don't have any. They get in my face. I am very afraid but pull off the nice guy, I am here to help you act. One guy looks like he has a machete in his pants. He does. I am going to get robbed or worse. They egg him on. I take his picture. I say that I will make them famous and put them on the cover of National Geographic. They like this and pose with me. I look around to see where I can run. I am afraid but also calm. When I raise the camera I find myself automatically watching myself as well as the exposure and composition. I watch my fear from a place of calm and am almost amused at my own terror. I squeeze out and two guys in football shirts approach me and tell me about a sick child which needs my help. I think they want to get me away from the rest of the crew. I feel my innards implode. I grin, take pictures (Pg. 71), turn and scoot.

Crowds hem me in and push me. Guys are going wild and things are slipping out of control. I walk and don't run to Eric and Eric says we have to leave. A riot is beginning and we are the focus of it. We leave, trying to walk calmly with yelling and screaming all around and the car is not where it should be. A crowd follows and they are very angry. They ask for money like it is owed to them. The general is talking to them and he seems to keep himself between them and us. I decide to hit the first person that goes for me with the camera. I change lenses, as I don't want to ruin the wide lens and replace it with the 35-70. They follow us on the road as we walk away. "You come here like this and just leave man...show some respect, I want something" Eric promises food and on compulsion he, Joshua and myself stay behind and the rest leave in the car to buy rice. Eric leaves with Danielle. I return to Xolalli with Joshua and the rice. People are fighting and





Marking the Passage of Time

screaming. (Pg. 74) One tall guy warns me not to take photographs. Guys come up to me and ask for money aggressively. Women are given food first and the lady whose brother Joshua had killed, comes to the front of the line shoving and screaming. Women fight. I am hemmed in. One man gets stabbed but I don't see it. I talk my way out of some situations. I stay close to the general but he has problems of his own being inundated with people. He pauses in the middle of the chaos and is silent (Pg. 72).

Joshua makes a phone call and in 5 minutes about 10-15 guys from the forgiveness rally land up. They help organize things and after awhile some of the young men go crazy and Joshua tells me to get into the car NOW. One guy is frothing in rage. I put the camera on the floor and put my foot on it as they try to grab it through the window. They are all over the car running alongside it, banging on the windows and trying to grab stuff. One jumps on the car as we drive off and hangs on for a while before dropping off. He yelps when he hits the road.

After this we go to the church to wait for Pastor Kun. The yanks watch "The Office" in the car on a laptop. I decide that if the UN pulled out, this place would go to hell very soon. I wonder at the systems people have faith in here. The church to some could be a refuge. They are no other functioning systems. No justice system or rule of law. No trustworthy government. We horse around in the church. Joshua jokingly tells me he will cut my d--- off as his wife says I am cute. I pose for a photo with them and he suddenly lifts me up over his head. At night Joshua emails his mother some photographs I took. I type for him as he dictates.

Dear Mom,

This is the rally for acceptance. We appealed to the society yesterday for every harm the child soldiers has caused. We took the blame because we were the ones who forced them to take arms. Now we do not feel better that the society accepts us and reject them. We appeal to their parents and relatives to please accept them and made them to confess their sins openly and appeal for forgiveness. Fifty of them are accepted by the church and they are trying to cater for them. The church in Liberia is not strong yet but they are trying. Mom it was touching yesterday when the society came embracing and accepting their children again. I wish I could put these guys in a home and get people to train them. I am feeling really good! Love you mom,

Joshua and Josie

At dinner Danielle chats with Joshua and asks how he felt when people were screaming when he killed them. Joshua said he didn't think he was doing anything



wrong and spoke of how he had been conditioned to do the same since he was 11. He said he initially thought that Jesus was just another powerful deity and that he had chosen Jesus, as he thought he was more powerful than his deity.

Joshua tells me about how spirits can latch onto vulnerable people. He tells me about his astral traveling and how he would lock himself in a room when he astral traveled because if his body was moved, his spirit would not have found the body again. He would astral travel and latch onto other people and tie up their spirits so that they would be comatose in the morning. He tells me of haunted houses where spirits would not believe themselves dead. And of the people he murdered then and about the scar on his forehead. About spiritual attacks on him and that they were actual physical attacks. I ask Joshua about his dreams and he says he recently had a terrible nightmare where the ghosts of people he had killed were trying to kill his children. He would carry them through a house trying to evade the spirits who wanted to kill them. I show him some videos on my laptop of Iraq and he is agitated. I show him a photograph of the remnants of a suicide bomber in Afghanistan and he tells me that's a "strange" bravery.

17th November

Today we are to film Joshua's baptism. We meet Doug an Aussie preacher who is to do the baptism and drive down to the beach at 14th street. Doug according to

Joshua has been preaching in Liberia for 51 years. Joshua considers him a mentor and a great man. He gives Joshua instructions to close his eyes and fall back.

Doug reads from the Bible about how Paul persecuted the Christians but came over to Christ. Joshua listens carefully, slightly hunched and respectful (Pg. 75). He is baptized (Pg. 76). Danielle is crying. Joshua looks elated and stands still praying (Pg. 77). He suddenly runs into the sea and swims through the waves. A few minutes later Danielle dives in. She tells me this is the most moving moment of her life.

We go back to the hotel and we head to the “Africa Hotel” post lunch to shoot the master interview (Pg. 79). It is unbelievably hot. The building has been destroyed, cannibalized and abandoned. The jungle grows into rooms here. The interview is cut short by rain. Joshua is asked questions about what he did and how he feels about his personal accountability. He says that he was in the control of spirits and his way of life then was all he knew. He would do anything for his deity. He felt all people belonged to his deity. He is not at all hesitant with his answers. He does not blink a lot.

We drive back. I sit in the car with Joshua. Hours of recounting his crimes seem to have drained him. We head to the building by the bridge he once controlled and shoot Joshua recounting the battle. He tells us how Prince Johnson and Charles Taylor had all the food and how Joshua would cut up corpses for food. “Chuk” means cut in pidgin. In the distance stretches the bridge so many people





The Baptism of Joshua Milton Blahyi



Immersion

died upon. A child stands in the shadows. I take a photo of exhausted Joshua and the kid in frame (Pg.52-53).

18th November

We drive many miles into the country, far away from Monrovia and drive off the road into the jungle. We are in the "interior". Joshua tells us we can't stay there too long. Later at the hotel I am angry as they say its 5 USD extra per day for Internet. I ask the manager if three of us can share a room. He says no. My money is drying up. I go to the restaurant and see a beautiful Liberian girl in very short pants with three older white men. They grin and paw her from time to time. The men are aid workers.

19th November

We go to meet Joshua at the church but he isn't there. We meet him much later. We drive around a lot. I go to the bridge and try a time lapse. I am nervous as people keep shouting at me from the bridge. I am alone. It rains. We head back to the hotel. We stop by some wrecked cars near the presidential palace and we take some photographs. The head of Liberia's secret police stops by and yells at us. Joshua says we should leave and we do. Joshua tells me about how Xolalli will be razed soon and says "There will be violence".

20th November

I wait downstairs and have breakfast with Joshua. He talks about how he makes a living, from preaching in Nigeria mostly. He tells me about how embarrassed he is by the attention he gets, as at one time he protected Monrovia from genocide by Charles Taylor. Joshua tells me he plans on going to Australia to get in touch with agriculturalists to bring to Liberia. I tell him the visa might be a problem. He agrees. He tells me how the Nigerian secret police keep an eye on him all the time. He says he would like to have a free life. Everyone in Liberia has a past, says Joshua. One would have to prosecute the whole nation if one wants "justice". We head out to do Joshua's master interview and we go to the Baptist Bible College. It's by a river. Joshua tells me that this is the place of his dreams. Augustine, the driver, tells me about gigantic man eating crocodiles which live in the river. I lie down on the earth and am lost in thought until red ants bite me.

They start the interview. Augustine tells me he knew Joshua as a child. He tells me how he would attack ECOMOG soldiers with a cutlass and how people would



Stairway

clear out whole neighborhoods when he arrived. He says that Joshua was very brave and that Joshua would come to his house to watch TV when he was a child. Everyone knew everyone in Monrovia. I ask if Joshua was above 11 years old then as Joshua killed his first child when he was eleven.

Joshua is happy the interview is over. It was a brutal interview. He acts like a kid, leaping and laughing. This same energy and innocence was brutal and cruel, once. (Pg. 81)

21st November

I get my pass done at the UN to shoot Indian female peacekeepers. I see a white guy climbing a light pole in a safety harness and a black guy without the safety harness alongside him assisting him. Hundreds of UN land cruisers are parked in the compound. Some have their air conditioners running with drivers asleep inside. After that we go to a travel agent with Joshua. The guy who is rude to me seems scared when he notices Joshua. The woman behind the counter looks at him with something like sympathy. We are paying for Senegalese to go to Ghana on Joshua's request. Then we meet with Mr. Mulbah K. Morlu Jr. at the NGO, which is pushing for a war crimes tribunal in Liberia.

He tells us about the "class struggle" between the Americo Liberians and the "Natives". How Samuel Doe was in essence a tribal man propped up by the Americans who murdered and ruled with extreme prejudice for so long. How Mrs. Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, the current president supported Charles Taylor and is herself responsible for war crimes. How the current administration does not want a tribunal, as they would be indicted as well. How Taylor is in the Hague even though he is a "Christian". About various people guilty of vicious crimes like George Bolay and Prince Johnson who is a "fake Christian", who tortured and murdered President Doe on camera and who is now a sitting member of parliament. The need for a tribunal and due process in a country where various criminals hold office. How people don't have faith in a government that supports these same warlords. How even though Joshua might have repented he still has to submit to justice. How he is a personal friend of Joshua and how even if his own parents did war crimes he would want due process. How he witnessed several horrible massacres. How the church must be separated from the state. He quotes from the Bible about how St. Paul was martyred, about how a king abused a woman sexually and was held accountable. Mulbah says he doesn't believe Joshua who says he will submit himself to justice, as the evidence is overwhelming against him.



The Redemption of General Butt Naked

Outside I see a chimpanzee in a cage. He looks thirsty. I give him some water and ask what he is there for. A kid says "chop chop." In the 70's a Harvard team of economists decided that Liberia was small enough to be a test case for Africa. How one little nation could be turned around, easily.

22nd November

We go to the UN building and meet the Indian peace keeping force. Of the 125 officers, 105 are women from CRPF battalions all over India. One reason why the Indian contingent was called to duty is that UN deployments themselves have in the past been accused of sexually exploiting women and children. The presence of female peacekeepers is expected to encourage Liberian women to join the force. Dhundia, the contingent head, believes that a woman's maternal instinct can help her perform better in post conflict scenarios, especially where women and children are involved. I go on patrol with 3 Indian women. They wear flak jackets that seem too large and are armed to the teeth with AK47s' which does not deter catcalls.

'Some people believe that women are physically weaker than men and cannot handle hard missions. It is not always only physical strength that helps in a mission. Emotional intelligence can be everything sometimes" says Seema. One of the girls recently had to shoot dead an "armed robber" who was surrounded by the Indians in a house he had taken over. He exited the main door and on full automatic fired his AK47 at the women. He missed. The women did not.

The girls walk on, ignoring incessant comments. "The same thing also happens back home" says one of them. Seventy percent of the women are married with children. Those I spoke with said the hardest part of their deployment was being away from their families. I ask one of the girls what her greatest fear was. "That we might have to kill child soldiers in self defense." Mr. Singh at the UN compound tells me "Did you know that the people here are lazy? The mangos are left on the trees, and are not harvested! They need a dictator!"

23rd November

This morning I go with Eric and Joshua to meet Patrick Dorbor, a trauma counselor who hates Joshua. Joshua is penitent. Patrick is silent at first. Joshua says he is sorry and mentions that he will face justice as he wants his kids to be proud of him and for the countries future as otherwise people will believe that they can do awful things including joining the church to escape justice. They end with singing for forgiveness to save Liberia. Joshua prays fervently. Patrick's brother and sister



have been murdered. He forgives Joshua but remains clear in his desire for a tribunal in Liberia to instill faith in people. He offers Joshua a kola nut and tells Joshua he gives him his heart and that they are brothers now. They play checkers. Joshua wins. I recall how Joshua would dig a hole in the river bank and swim out underwater to pull swimming children into his burrow to kill them. I take a photograph of some kids swimming later (Pg. 69).

24th 25th November

I am almost out of money. While sitting with Joshua at the Mambo point hotel I meet an elderly gentleman Mr. Alfred M. Prince, MD who is the chairman of the chimpanzee sanctuary in Liberia and also the Head of the Laboratory of Virology at "The New York Blood Center". He tells us about how honest the people are in the "interior". How you could leave your wallet and camera with them for days without risk and about his chimpanzee program. A website excerpt.

"Since its inception, Vilab II has planned for the retirement of the chimpanzees that contributed to its research in a humane Sanctuary. The original concept of releasing retired laboratory animals into national parks was abandoned because it was realized that Vilab chimps had lost their fear of man and could pose a danger to tourists and villagers living adjacent to park areas. Therefore, starting from 1978 to date, Vilab II has pioneered a method of releasing groups of chimpanzees into

river islands. Suddenly faced with the huge ethical and economic problems of what to do with so many surplus chimpanzees (each chimp costs roughly \$10,000 a year to maintain in the U.S.), the National Research Council issued a report in 1997 advising Congress against euthanizing the chimps, calling instead for some way of properly repaying them for services rendered."

Prince asks Joshua about child soldiers and why they dressed like women at check points 'When you dress them like that, mixed with violence, you dehumanize them and they will do anything you want them to,' says Joshua.

Islands. Slaves. Research. Chimps. Harvard test case. Chop chop. There is something dark here that is primitive, violent and expressed openly. Our so called humanity of the "west" sometimes obscures these dark parts of our nature whose existence we reject and allow for them to manifest in so many ways. This idea of an island, where we believe in judgment days and paradises, "end times" to misery, islands for freed chimpanzees and perfect countries for freed slaves. We want to believe in universal peace, justice and wild animals living freely without predation. The truth is that our existences are circles of shadow and light, murder and forgiveness, peace and war. Our deepest most primitive archetypes come forth and are as much a part of us as we believe they are a part of our enemies. It will always be no matter the islands we imagine. Our history is more gigantic, more beautiful, and more terrifying than what we know of it.

Francis the driver drops off Eric and Danielle to the airport. I enjoy the drive back to the cheaper Tilda lodge. On the way Francis stops twice and borrows 10 USD from me for his girlfriend Asha. The road from the airport has been cleared for some distance on either side but the forest is growing back. Creepers are growing up the billboards. Without regular pruning they would soon take over.





The Preponderance of Nature



Credit: Vivek Matthew

Ryan Lobo was born in 1973 in Bangalore. After a Bachelors degree in Science he left for the US in 1996 to do a Master's degree in Cell Biology. Towards the end of his course, post an autumn afternoons musing, Ryan returned to India and with a friend set up an advertising agency called Opus CDM. In 2000, Ryan co-founded Mad Monitor Productions, a film and photo production company. Ryan has traveled the planet shooting, producing and managing more than 70 films to date on subjects ranging from Papua New Guinean tribal initiation rites and maximum security prisons to the culinary enjoyments' of Anglo Indians.

His films have aired on the National Geographic Channel, Animal Planet, The Oprah Winfrey Show and PBS among other networks.

During the process of film making Ryan found his still photography almost compulsive and felt his photographs often told a better story, than the film itself. He feels that photography allows him greater fulfillment, artistic integrity and timelessness and endeavors that it gives voice to people and stories without.

For the last decade his photographs have been featured in magazines like Tehelka, Outlook Traveler, Marie Claire, Elle, The Wall Street Journal, Geo, Time Out, The Boston review, Chimurenga, The Caravan, Onzeweruld and Bidoun magazine among others. His art prints have been exhibited all over India. He joined Tasveer in 2006.

In 2009, Ryan shared his photographs and his ideas on "compassionate storytelling" at the TED conference, to a standing ovation.

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