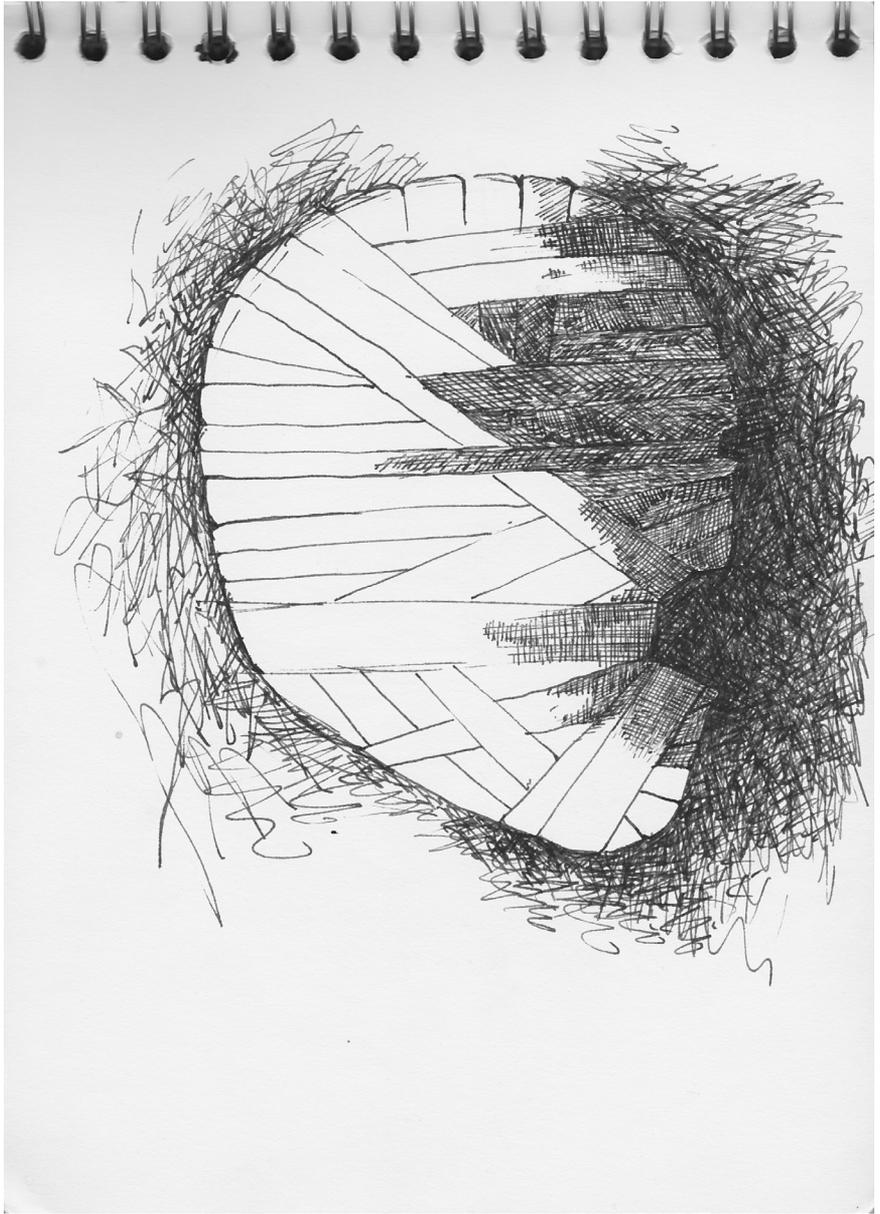


Letters from Kabul

May-June 2004

by

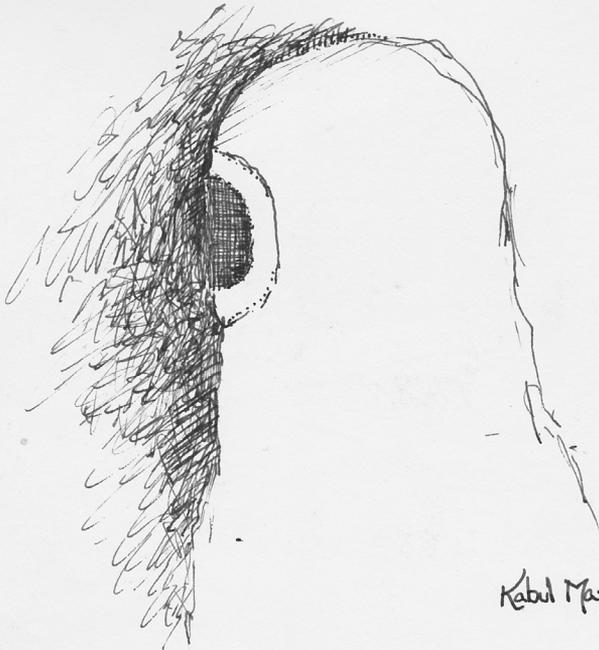
William S. Dutterer



Prologue

The first casualty, when war comes, is truth.

U.S. Senator Hiram Johnson, 1917,
upon the declaration of World War I



Kabul May 20, 2004

Letter from Kabul No. 1

Powder-fine dust, everywhere, on everything, in everything. People everywhere exuding purpose, and begging if they are missing limbs—everywhere land-mine victims. Cars, trucks, rubble, construction, turbans, and diesel fumes. Mulberry trees, roses, watermelons, and business, everywhere business.

Music, everywhere music. Smiles, everywhere smiles. Rahim's rug gallery, beautiful; he is almost the mayor of Kabul. Baggy pants, burkhas, students, everywhere students. Armed mercenaries, armored cars, I.S.A.F. (International Security Afghan Forces) everywhere. Hurrying, everyone everywhere hurrying. Donkeys, pony carts, bicycles everywhere.

Horns, bells, sirens, shouts—making more and different sounds than Mexico. Babies with kohl-lined eyes and curiosity about us—everywhere curiosity. Old town? Devastated ruins, ant hills of rubble, business and commerce—everywhere commerce, construction, fabrication. Everywhere mosques and the call to prayer. The old king's palace blasted to bits—a reminder, like the Hiroshima dome but with acre upon acre of ruined gardens, orchards and parks. Hardship, everywhere hardship. Graveyards everywhere and where you least expect them—marked by two-foot rough-cut slabs of stone standing at the head and foot and flags on slender tall poles, each flag a war victim, each stone a soul. Birds singing everywhere.

Rahim's Afghan hounds, James Bond and Grace Jones, and their five puppies plus a one-year old I've named Bambi Bond and one poor beleaguered orange tabby Tom with buffalo-sized nuts.

“You and your wife have no children?”

“No, I'm a professional uncle.”

“You are helping to build schools for the children?”

“Yes.”

“You are uncle to all the children—tash a khor, thank you.”

Rahim's father, such dignity and looking the same as one thousand years ago. I've never been salaamed in so many ways with such emotion and sincerity. I was moved to tears.

Thirty-seven hundred girls in one school, and it was Teachers' Day. Much witnessing and testifying about the import of education and respect for teachers and the future of Afghanistan. Amazing boy played harmonium and sang with the power and passion and timelessness of this place—he could not have been more than thirteen. Male teachers danced one by one.

“We danced for you, and now you dance for us?”

I did, in front of the assembled eight hundred—a little Afghan, a little James Brown, and they played faster and faster to make the old white guy spin like a New York dervish. Winded, near collapse, they clapped, laughed, cheered, slapped me on the back—boogie is as boogie does in any language.

My heart glowed through the festive lunch afterwards. Hospitality, such hospitality everywhere.

July 4, 2004



Letter from Kabul No. 2

The Lion of the Panjshir's Southern Redoubt—Istalif

Exit Kabul, northbound highway—both sides commerce in packing containers. Dealers in flat standing stones and door jambs—three-, four-square-miles of packing containers and trucks, big trucks, decorated like camel caravans and Bollywood billboards. New housing up steep hillsides because there are no land mines there. An Afghan anthill with a water well at the bottom. Kids, women, jugs, jerry cans—everyone carries them all day, everyday, eight pounds a gallon up these steep, sixty-degree inclines. Goats and men-boys packed in cabs, live goats tied to car roofs, and wedding convoys on Friday's day of rest. Petrol stops—gas poured from cooking-oil jugs into funnel—and de-mined fields. Stay on the white side of standing stones—stay away from the red side or ka-freekin'-boom! Big white Motherwell check marks on mud brick walls.

Left turn, west gravel road into the mountains, now new cultivation—acre after acre of three-year-old vineyards, second planting soft green wheat, first planting golden. Dust, curves, hellos, altitude—more altitude. Villages mute and full of burial flags, everywhere flags. Water rushing from hillsides; hollows trenched, terraced, planted. Population loss? Eighty, ninety percent? Holy spring in pine grove full of young hash smoker men-boys—too friendly, we leave. New aqueducts—mountain after mountain, snow-capped and brown: the Panjshir.

Shah Mossoud, Lion of the Panjshir's southern-most mountain redoubt, Istalif. Battle after battle and then the Talib destroyed orchards, vineyards, farms—holy writ shoots itself in the foot via the stomach.

Boulder-strewn fast mountain stream. Boy-men swimming, men-boys washing cars, boy-men picnic, boy-men, cows, donkeys, goats and guns—everywhere men-boys and guns. Boy-men gather round our picnic—dozens of boy-men curious, no local women, but western women smoking and laughing. “Baksheesh?

Baksheesh?” Much posing by boy-men—sawed-off shotguns and Kalashnikovs, little boy with pet red hen. All curious, some on horseback in full fig-red velvet and tassels flying.

Butcher’s stand, heap-o-goats heads, hoofs and flies—everywhere flies. Sou-tine-worthy carcasses fresh, for sale raw or charbroiled. Pottery tradition among burned-out stalls; old mosque with no loudspeakers—the call to prayer moves on the wind. Narrow streets, kids, everywhere kids and no roofs. Down this road and that—down lanes, down to the Shomali Plain and mulberry pickers—it was “The Mulberry Empire” after all—producer of more kinds of raisons than anywhere before thirty years of war.

Across the plain, check points, Humvees, camo-clad boy-men patrol this road and that. Heavy weapons on display—dead weapons lay in empty fields. Daoud’s van croaks black, greasy smoke. Three carloads pile into two, Afghan style—no goats but one large Afghan hound. Bagram Air Base interrogation center and Blackhawks whap whap whap at tree top, heavy weapons and smiling boy-men in camo everywhere in the air. Immense industrial park north-east Kabul.

Rahim’s guesthouse, barbeque, international community all stripes, persuasions, trades—”No viable crop replacement for poppy”—like a Graham Greene gathering. Ghazni trip cancelled for lack of security. Won’t see those schools this trip. James Bond asleep on my feet—coffee—mourning doves hoot-a-hoot-hoot on cool morning breeze. Afghan time: fifteen minutes or eternity—nothing between.

July 14, 2004



Letter from Kabul No. 3

Kabul smells as pointed as a ransom note. Odor and tension are a form of extortion that envelopes mind, body, spirit, and does not, will not wash off. Smokey charcoal evil-eye preventatives carried in tin cans by beggar boys who want baksheesh for air pollution—smoke, everywhere smoke—cheap gas, diesel, greasy noise smoke from two-stroke generators and kabobs. Smoldering heaps of garbage around any corner, goats feast among the embers, old men-boys stir with sticks—treasure hunting?

Halal butchers by the streetfull. Fresh eggs, hens and fryers, goat guts, sheeps' heads leak offal and form olfactory stew but not on Chicken Street. Flies, everywhere flies.

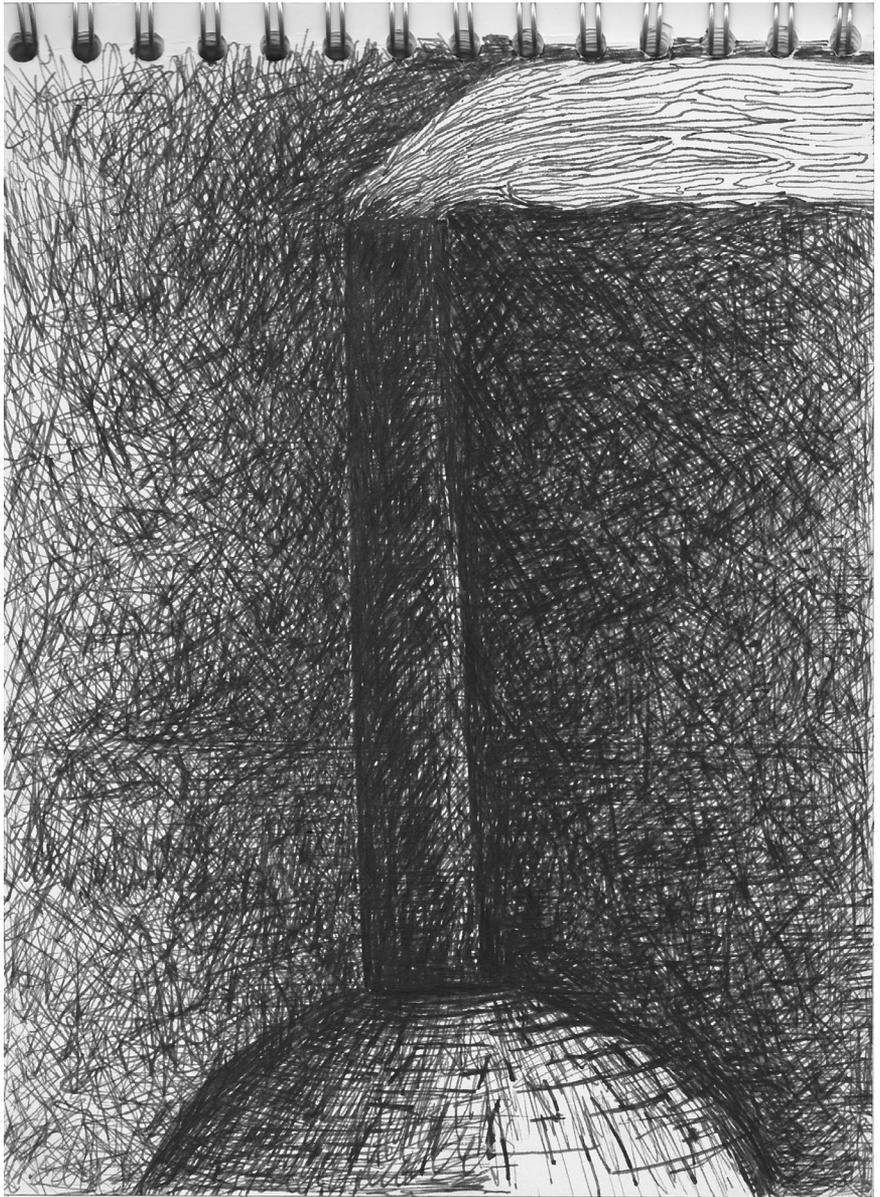
Heat waves rise above mountains of plastic jugs full of gasoline at refueling stations. A quarter mile down-wind and I know to not light a cigarette.

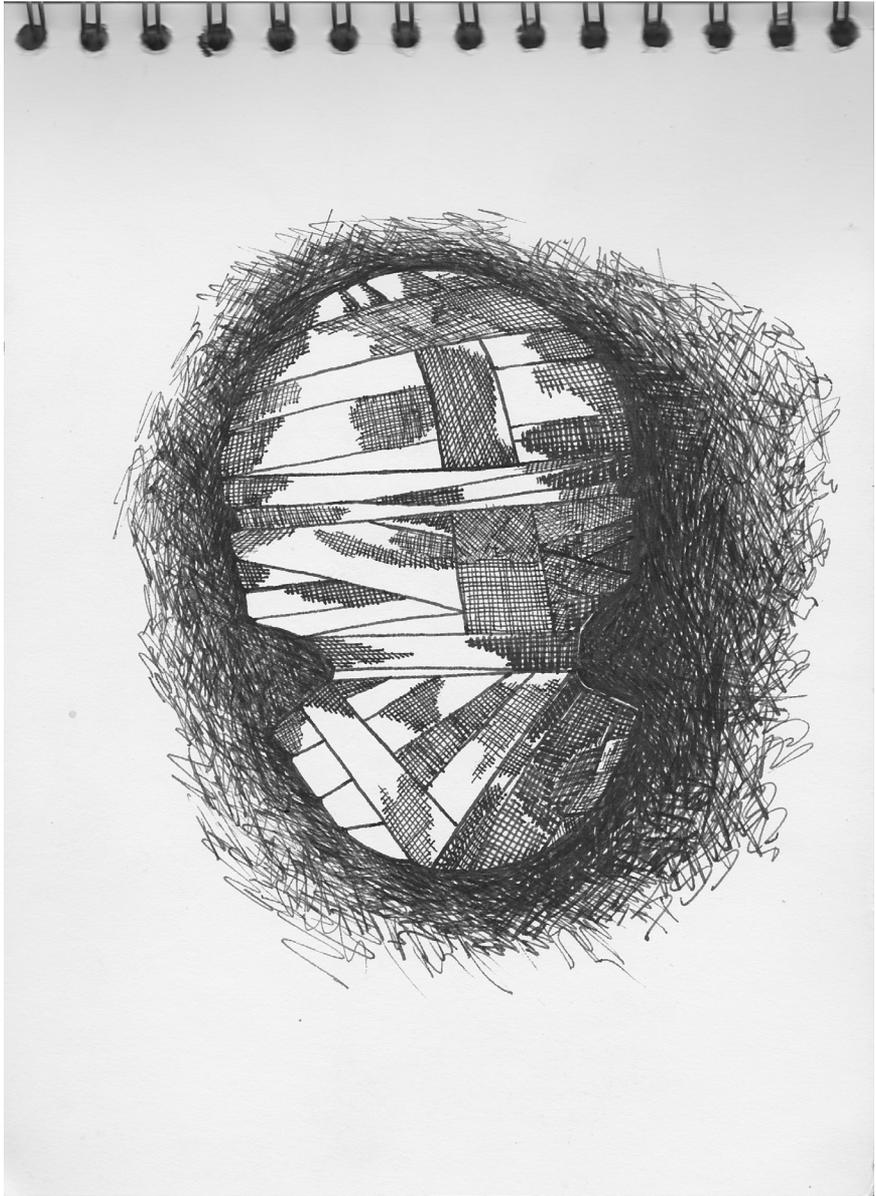
Honey wagons carry “night soil” and do not need to be seen to know that their job has been done.

Dust, everywhere dust, a smell on the afternoon wind as bitter as the tension in the air: dust 30% dry fecal matter; tension 100% palpable, a sour tangy mix of urine, shit, fake Armani cologne, and rot—smell, tension, dust invade every crevice.

Coffee and rose blossoms in Rahim's sunrise garden. The smell of Kabul awakens every morning, but the tension never sleeps.

July 31, 2004





Epilogue

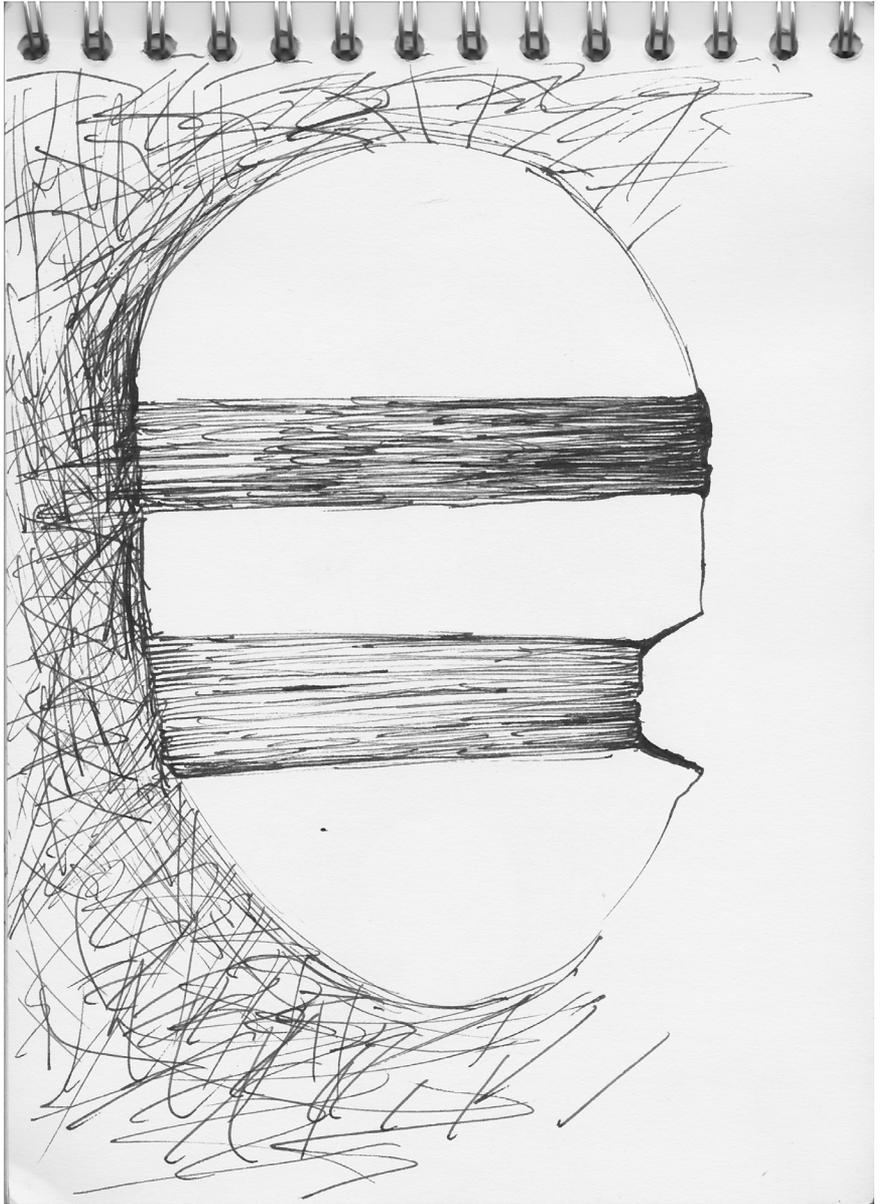
“The enemy of my enemy will never be my friend.”

My boots are still stained with Afghan dust and undigested memories. Yellow-dust memories are permanent. We want to return to Afghanistan. We are considering the how and when.

In late May 2005, Fred was in the internet cafe three blocks from Rahim’s carpet gallery when the suicide bomber walked towards him and pulled the primer cord; the explosion killed three people. The bomber was emulsified. Miraculously, Fred walked away. A few days later, Clementine Cantoni, of C.A.R.E. International, was kidnapped by an organized crime clan. She was released several weeks later. In late May, cases of cholera were reported in Kabul. The situation has morphed from the tension last year to overt acts this year. There have been ninety-three troops and over fourteen hundred Afghans killed since January 2005, and kidnappings too numerous to count. Suicide bombings, never an Afghan tactic, have become all too frequent. With the normal tribal/factional fights, warlord turf wars, and the rise of violent organized crime, one has a country not at all secure. It’s a picture that’s worse this year than last, and worse than the year before. We cancelled our June 2005 trip to Kabul.

Everyone would do well to consider the Afghan proverb—“The man who spends a hundred years achieving his revenge . . . is not a patient man.”

July 14, 2005



Afterword

Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.

George Orwell

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