



Foreign Affairs & International Trade Canada

the jinn in the nightmare's eye

—with apologies to AS Byatt

When we stepped into morning light
after 24 hours under a sky blazing with bullets
and rocket fire, it was hard to know
whether to scream or weep for joy.

Shrapnel had eaten a bleeding hole
in Captain Barclay's side, and we spent
a delirious night with him yelling into the com
for reinforcements that never came.

The pain and morphine made him hallucinate
and he kept singing, Red-poppy fields forever,
'til I thought my teeth would explode.
The terrorist cell in the village

we'd been sent to eliminate
turned out to be a starving camp
of women and children clawing our sleeves
for food and stark-eyed with fear.

They looked at us like we're the Devil
incarnate, a gun in one hand
and sweet water in the other. Most of the women
were old enough to be our mothers.

The real insurgents came at us
like wind-demons in an Afghan dust storm,
the jinn in the nightmare's eye, somehow
everywhere at once and nowhere.

When help finally came churning
through the dunes in a yellow cloud
the adrenalin began to drain from our blood,
and some of the men couldn't stop shaking.

Corporal Jones, who had been stalwart
and wordless under fire the whole time,
couldn't stop screaming. He had to be
held down and shot with tranquilizer.

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The clefts and gullies of these mountains
have been carved by the chisels
of hard centuries, the dark eyes of her people
burning with love for this fierce land.

What was it, exactly, we came here to do?
The shock troops of empire, the blue-eyed
sultans of oil, rosy-faced youth gone pale
and haggard in the belly of the beast.

Now to be sent home to our sofas and
satellite tv, politicians who never set foot
in a desert seething with mines, and family
who have no clue how to support us.

But you who sent us away to pass through
hellfire and napalm, much as we love you,
cannot expect us to fully return. The jinn
have snared our souls in the nightmare's eye.



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