

The Four Who Watch

One night's discussion on an Iraqi mountain

Matthew Schweitzer

One thousand feet above the small Kurdish city of Dohuk in northern Iraq is a mountaintop world. Here, four militiamen stand around a jumping white fire, Kalashnikovs slung across their shoulders, holding bare hands to the heat. The smoke and shadows across their outpost's shrapnel-marked concrete walls sway in rhythm. There are bullet holes from "countless wars" in this stone, one of the men says, "each one different but the same."

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I am stuck here with my friend, Nadhim, for the evening. The road into Dohuk, huddled in the valley below, is closed. "Too dangerous, you must stay here, no questions. I have something hot to drink for you," Younis, the officer in charge, grumbles. He speaks in Kurdish, which my friend translates into Arabic for me. He hands me a small glass, rimmed with gold, of sweet amber tea poured from a battered silver kettle. It cuts the sharp smells of smoke, iron, and dust.

Below, night is rising up the cliffs. The darkness lingers on the ground even as the sky turns yellow. The ridges catch fire with the last glow of a winter sun until a frozen wind sweeps away the last light. To the south, a train of headlights snakes onto the Plains of Nineveh, bound for Mosul, where the city's lights flicker on and off in the distance. The earth is a deep purple. A dark grey mist rises from Saddam Hussein's famous reservoir on the valley floor.

These four men stand guard above a valley in which history began. A professor, a poet, a student, and the last, nothing in particular,

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“nothing special,” as Younis says of himself, chuckling. But now they fight as members of the Kurdish militia, the Peshmerga, whose name means “those who face death”—small people with great thoughts and immense bravery in a vast territory that scarcely notices their passage.

“Perhaps,” Fouad, the poet, mumbles to nobody in particular, “the people in Mosul do not have electricity tonight.”

His friend, Mustafa, looks out to the water. He is silent for a while, and then speaks: “I remember when the regime built that dam to make electricity, flooded the valley. There was an ancient castle there. As a child I played in the ruins.”



Perpend,
my
princess,
and give
ear.

As a professor at Mosul University, he studied the ruins, too. Now he stands, wrapped not in the scholar’s robes but in Kevlar, wool, darkness, and ammunition. “That history was replaced,” he says, with a faint smile that lingers around the corners of his eyes for a moment. There is no mirth in it.

Ali, a recent college graduate and the youngest member of the group, interjects with forced enthusiasm: “Here we are in our own castle, our own history.” Mustafa looks away.

Younis stares at his boots. “I am very cold,” he sighs, “warmth is far. So far away.”

It is dark now. The only light in our small room, an uncertain glow, comes from the fire that is fading with the night and the stars. The Tigris winds in the distance, its source “just over those hills,” Younis says, pointing—past Jonah’s tomb, the ancient Assyrian capital in

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Nineveh, the battlefield at Gaugamela where Alexander conquered the Persian Empire, through Mosul, which *The Guardian* recently called the world's "most dangerous" city¹, and next to the village "with a dozen names" where Fouad's parents are buried. "My father died in the [Kurdish] civil war in the 1990s," Younis says, "and my mother of a crushed heart."

1. Jonathan Steele, "Iraq: Al Qaeda Intensifies its Stranglehold in the World's Most Dangerous City," *The Guardian*, September 14 2008.

"What brings you together to fight with guns?" I ask.

This simple question throws them. They do not answer straight away. Fouad keeps looking across the plains to Mosul, muttering about the electricity. Younis laughs; his high-pitched staccato startles Mustafa and Ali. They glance up, expecting an answer from their leader, but he does not oblige them with one. Ali, noticing his shivering commander, kicks a branch into the fire, sending a shower of sparks into Mustafa's face. "Oh my God! You are an idiot!" he glowers, fingering the trigger on his rifle with one hand as he brushes the embers off his coat and mustache with the other. He is not very clean, and the brushing conjures most of the day's dust to flight.

Mustafa curses Ali for being "so damn reckless with the fire. He could have burned me!" He strikes a match, lights a cigarette with grey, chalky hands, and sulks. The dust settles down again. We sit quietly for a minute, witnesses to an absurd sort of comedy.

Finally, Ali speaks up. His voice cracks into a high-pitched squeak, but he clears his throat and starts again. "I think, perhaps, we are here as fighters because we are not sure what else we can do," he says, slowly gaining confidence as he goes. "Everything that happens here is so much—overwhelming. I prefer to stand on this mountain with my friends and my cold Kalashnikov and watch."

Mustafa lets out a long whistle. Younis clicks his tongue like a schoolteacher. Fouad keeps his silence, but his wide eyes and heavy breaths are visible in the icy air. His tears gleam white against the firelight.

"But you are a soldier," I reply. "You are in the middle of all that is going on. How can you say such a thing?" These men fight in the Kurdish militia, which acts as a de facto army in the Kurdistan region

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of Iraq, headquartered in Erbil's eight-thousand-year-old city center. The bullet holes in the concrete cannot be accidental. At the outpost we stand above, but not away, from the violent drama playing out in the most grotesque theatre of all: their home.

"I think you misunderstand," Ali sighs. He speaks slowly now, staring at Mustafa, who is smoking with closed eyes. "By watching, I am in the center of whatever happens. Watching is the action. Is not a witness the protagonist? I do not consider myself a bystander. I am surely a soldier—I have been given a gun and a uniform, what more do I need? Yet I do not think shooting, killing, fighting, and dying are remarkable in any way, as an action or a series of actions. They do not imply agency, one or all. As a soldier, I do them because I have to. I have orders," he says, looking, with a sly smile, at Younis, who nods approvingly, "and I must also preserve my life if it is threatened. This is a responsibility, not a choice. Of course, because I am alive, I must breathe and eat and drink water, too. I do not fear dying, yet it is best not to rush that. But to watch is more powerful. I stand guard because this is what I am told to do. I stand witness because I choose to do so. I watch, and remember, and fight—in that order.

"When people think of Iraq, they think of the soldier, the gun, the bomb, the wars, the militias, and the dying. When I see the country from here, I cannot but think of its beauty. Just watch, and you will see what I mean to say." He warms his hands over the fire. The mud, blood, and grease under the nails appear as drops of dirty gold in the light.

The valley has finally shed its purple for a deep, pulsating black, profoundly alive. As the temperature drops, slow vortices of mist spin across the earth, stirred up by the winds sweeping up the plains from Baghdad. We sit in a silent world. Bright, fluorescent checkpoints on the highway penetrate the deepness, marking a long constellation of militarized fear across the desert floor. The heavens reach to the horizon, beckoning with a million points of light for the cold ground to join its infinite embrace. The sky is a shroud of stars, which the land's occupants have gazed upon for eight thousand years. Our outpost has no roof. We stand, undefended, under the naked enormity. Fouad whispers, "Praise God."

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“What is your problem tonight, my dear friend?” Mustafa says, addressing him. “Surely Ali’s speech roused your spirits?” He tries to measure Fouad’s gaze, acting as the scientist he was trained to be.

“He speaks of being a witness,” Fouad responds. “How can we be protagonists in something we cannot control? I stand shivering on this godforsaken pile of dirt every night because I must.” He has dry eyes now. His right hand trembles. “We are too small to think such big thoughts. How many men have stood in this place, looked across the valley, and thought that they, too, were important? Kings, generals, great travelers, surely.”

“Why are they any different from us?” Ali asks. With his thumb he flicks open, then closed, then open, the small cardboard matchbox he carries in the front of his vest, in the pocket above his machine-gun magazines. A few thin matches fall out. Mustafa leans over to pick them up, but Ali is oblivious.

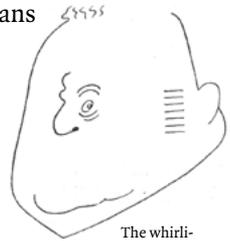
“We watch, but these great men, they choose what we see.” Fouad replies. “You might think that by remembering these visions you are preserving some sort of reality that is your own.”

“Surely, I am,” Ali says.

Fouad laughs, but he does not smile. “Unfortunately, you are too young to understand that it does not matter at all what memories you hold. Not in this country. Memories are too dangerous. It is not important what has happened, because it will always have been better an hour, a day, a year before. Why remember these good times? You will lose control of the present, you will long for something that can never be again, as much as we try and speak of renewal.”

Mustafa watches the exchange, smoking. “I have plenty of memories,” he says. “They can be beautiful. I can relive them; they are not stuck in my past, but swim through my life now when I wish. My memories are just as alive as you are. They breathe, weep, laugh, but they do not die until I am ready to lead the way.”

Ali is quiet. Fouad sighs. Younis stares. The fire cackles, mocking



The whirligig of time brings in his revenges.

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us with its light.

Mustafa pays no attention. “I remember the days when this valley was not flooded. I studied the ruins there,” he says, pointing to the dark waters near Mosul. “When I see this valley, I see at once visions lost to our so-called history, and the visions I am meant to see today. They are all one: like a calm bend in a river, the waters double back, mix, spiral, and roll in the depths.”

“Perhaps your memories flow like a river,” Fouad growls. “Mine fall like a thousand-year rain, never ending, pounding forever on the inside of my mind until I am drowned. Is that when my body dies? I do not know if that makes me insane, or merely Iraqi.”

Younis, sitting quietly, seems to glance at the safety on his companion’s Kalashnikov. I follow his gaze nervously. Fouad is unperturbed: “When I sleep, I feel my memories drop, painfully. They feel like they are crawling inside, dripping. When I wake, I must shake off the suffocating dreams. But the residue stays. I am swept across the landscape of my life, suspended by the floodwaters of my thoughts. I have no rolling visions. No spiraling comfort in my memory. No memories at all. Only nightmares.”

“Fouad, you are afraid,” Mustafa interrupts. “Who can blame you? A life of sadness is a terrible thing to have play, over again, in one’s mind. Terror, grief, frustration, and guilt are each a flood of their own. But you must not let your fear command your memory or define the way you understand your life. What about your mother...?”

“She is dead,” Fouad snaps.

Mustafa pauses for a moment, then continues: “Perhaps now she is dead, and so is your father. We can see their graves from where we stand this night. But they were not always dead, and you should not have their story remembered by its end. Is it truly over, anyway? Our histories are not linear, and they are not tied to our bodies or even our own lifetimes. They are networks of moments without any logical form. We share memories. When you try to fit them into a line, to understand their beginning and end, you will become afraid because this is an impossible task. You will apply your own insecurities and

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fear, when you do such an action as forcing your memories into a mold that is too small.

“But this is only because you will have attempted to put boundaries on something that spreads farther than you know. If I may continue with my river metaphor: I stand on the shore, at a bend, and watch the memories move past me. Some meander and wander by. Others are caught in a strong current, spiraling, spiraling until they roll away. I choose what I see, but I cannot stop the flow. These thoughts continue around the bend of my mind, past my vantage point toward unknown conclusions. And I cannot see their source. They come from far away, but it is not my turn to ask where the spring lies. These are peaceful memories because I accept them, but I am not their slave like you seem to be.”

Ali, flicking his envelope of matches again, wears a grimace on his face. “There is surely an end to one’s life, and of course there is a beginning as well. I was born, twenty-five years ago, and that is the moment my story begins: the source for my thoughts. I think my memories, which are few in comparison to those swimming through your head, are like the stars. They are points of light in a space I do not understand. Together they create beauty. Each, alone, is a faraway sun. My pasts live there, too distant for me to examine individually, orbiting around these lights on a million worlds. Like the heavens, my memories are beautiful when I look at them together; they do not move, only flicker, as if they rely on an uncertain electrical current.”

Mustafa takes a deep breath, readying an answer. “I think we agree. This space is infinity—” But Fouad interrupts: “You speak of rivers and stars. These are pretty words that make lovely poetry. Life is not poetic; it has no order or harmony or rhythm. We men are too small for anything we do, anything we think, to matter. You, Mustafa, taught archeology in Mosul. You spent your life filling your mind with memories of ancient castles in the desert. And what of those thoughts now? Saddam filled your valley with water, and your ruins were flooded. What use is your memory now? This is no river, no point of light. This is an end. Memories are collected conclusions, things you will never retrieve but always pine for until your mind dies. The sadness is the flood I cannot escape.”

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I am eager to hear more, but a slight rustling down the slope interrupts the men's thoughts. Younis, who had been sitting quietly before the fire, jumps to his feet. He is the most ready soldier here. His are practical memories. His life marches in order to a shouted command; now his mind is crouching, remembering the "countless wars" it has fought here.

He pulls a pistol from his waist and fires four times across the plains of Nineveh. Tensed, listening, we sit in the darkness. The men peer down over the concrete wall. My friend and I sit behind. The soldiers' backs are straight and their knuckles white around rusted steel assault weapons. Ali shivers. Fouad and Mustafa flip the safeties on their Kalashnikovs. On the mountain across and behind from the one where our drama is being written, small cooking fires glow in the night. They are stars on the mountain, around which families crouch for comfort in the unknowing darkness. Ali is watching this other heaven with me. Voices carry in the bitter air, as shimmering whispers. Mustafa declares a false alarm.

Our night passes silently. The few moments of fear have plunged my companions into their own minds, where I cannot follow them. Here, such memories are far more powerful than any attacker.

"This talk of memory is frightening. Perhaps now it is time for you to sleep," Younis suggests. I doze fitfully through the short night, never really dreaming. The men change guard every hour, shuffling softly over the bare stone.

In the calm dawn, the soldiers smoke American cigarettes, consumed, like me, by their thoughts. Only Fouad sleeps. His eyes twitch. The sun appears early in northern Iraq, and daylight creeps down the cliffs presenting the men, its audience, with another day to remember.

