

KATHERINE SCHIFANI

The Breath of Allah

THE MINI-GUN HAS SIX INDEPENDENTLY firing barrels and fires 3000 rounds a minute, or 50 rounds every second. It shoots so fast rounds can't stay in the chamber or they will cook off due to the temperature of the metal and randomly fire out of cycle. Often, the rounds shoot so fast not all of the powder goes off and as the barrel cycles there is a little explosion of the residual powder igniting, shooting flames out the front of the gun. In Iraq, they call this fireball out the front of the mini-gun the breath of Allah. In Afghanistan, they call it dragon's breath. In both places, they call it the end of someone's desire to fight the Americans with the mini-gun and an effective way to vaporize a suicide bomber before he can detonate. Aaron, the weapons specialist for the Green Beret team I am in Iraq with takes me out at midnight to shoot the mini-gun. After an appropriate amount of mini-gun lube, he tells me to aim at the base of the hill.

Unlike the .50 cal, which is recoil-fired, you can't shoot the electrically fired mini for longer than three second bursts, Aaron tells me, or the timing will mess up. If you count to yourself to help prevent this, count by tens because twenty takes longer to say than two. I cut a wooden structure in half, counting ten—twenty—thirty, slowly to myself, and admire the tracer rounds that bounce off the berm behind the target and ricochet into the night sky like fireworks. He says we can try and cut part of a car in half before I leave.

I am tired because I was up late cutting wooden structures in half with Aaron and a machine gun. Hameed, my interpreter, comes for me and we drive to go see Ahmed, one of the Iraqis I am responsible for advising, principally on logistics, but, because of a miscommunication between the Air Force and the Army about my actual position, also on interrogation, hospital administration, power production, reverse osmosis water purification units, and anti-aircraft hijacking. We are going to tell Ahmed his equipment request for mobile kennels, collars, bite suits, and training narcotics for their newly purchased South African working dogs got approved for funding. It's the second day of Ramadan.

"Ramadan kareem, saydie," I say.

"Alo," Ahmed says and offers me a cigarette even though I have declined every day for five months.

He and Hameed talk for a while. We tell him about the dog equipment. Hameed raises his hands and delivers a monologue to Ahmed.

“One of the dogs died,” Hameed tells me.

“How?” I ask.

“Ahmed wants to know if we can go to the BX and get soap for him and Hussein,” Hameed says.

“What happened to the dog?” I ask.

We get up and walk out of Ahmed’s office and out his building towards his boss’s new office-palace. Two and a half million dollars got Fadhel, a US-sponsored warlord, a new two-story office complete with intricate ceiling carvings like the Alhambra, a more fully equipped galley for the chai boy to make his sweet, cardamom tea, gold windows, two fountains, two waterfalls, and a hot tub Jacuzzi in each of his and Hussein’s private back rooms. We have to walk off the paved part to get around the western style corral fence surrounding the porch and front walkway. Near the air conditioner on the side of the building is some kind of heaped rug.

As we get closer and up on the porch, I realize that it is not, in fact, a heaped rug. It is some kind of newly slaughtered animal. Perhaps the dog. The large instrument of death sits next to it, blade still wet, the terminus of a blood trail that starts in a large pool near the front door. Two soldiers have the hose out and the full-sized squeegee and are washing the front porch where apparently moments ago, just before they slit this creature’s throat, it shit on the porch out of fright or anticipation. Hussein gives Hameed 90,000 dinar and asks for shampoo, conditioner (for his daughter, or his mustache), and Irish Spring. The dead animal is looking at me.

“He wants to know if you want a tour of his new office,” Hameed tells me.

I look away from the dead animal’s stale glare.

“No thanks,” I say.

An old jeep pulls up to the side of the building. Two soldiers get out and hoist the animal into the back, pick up the knife, and drive away. I stare at the empty spot previously occupied by the body of an animal slaughtered on the front porch of Fadhel’s office-palace at 10am. Hameed and I walk back to the car and set out for the BX.

“A second dog died,” Hameed tells me.

“What was that?” I ask him and point to the spot the dead animal vacated.

“A lamb”, he says, “they slaughtered it for Ramadan.”

“I thought they don’t eat during the day,” I say.

“We don’t,” he says, “it is for dinner.”

We arrive at the BX to discover they are out of Pantene conditioner and they only have the cheap flat toothbrushes.

“The dog handlers didn’t notice that the shipping container that they converted into a kennel lost power and the air conditioner shut off,” he says. “The dogs cooked to death in the heat, can you believe that?” he says.

The real breath of Allah. Hameed puts twenty bars of soap into his basket, leaves nine on the shelf and checks out.

Katherine Schifani is a graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy and spent seven years on active duty in the Air Force. She received her MFA from Seattle Pacific University and lives in Colorado.