

Outdoing Reality

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Jamil Jan Kochai; illustration by Leanne Shapton

Reviewed:

The Haunting of Hajji Hotak and Other Stories

by Jamil Jan Kochai

Viking, 270 pp., \$26.00

The Lockheed Martin Hellfire 114 R9X, nicknamed the “ninja bomb” or the “flying Ginsu,” is an air-to-surface, drone-launched missile, approximately five feet long and seven inches in diameter, weighing roughly one hundred pounds, with a top speed of 995 miles per hour. Most members of the Hellfire family are designed to carry different types of warheads depending on the objective, from bunkers to buildings and “soft-skinned targets”—human beings to be taken out in groups. Carrying no explosives, the R9X is unique. To avoid collateral damage, the R9X is designed to kill a single human being with what is called a kinetic or hit-to-kill design. As *The Guardian* reported in September 2020, “The weapon uses a combination of the force of 100lb of dense material flying at high speed and six attached blades which deploy before impact to crush and slice its victims.”

At 6:18 AM on Sunday, July 31, two R9X missiles were launched from a General Atomics MQ-9 Reaper drone, striking and killing the former surgeon and leader of al-Qaeda Ayman al-Zawahri, one of the planners of the September 11 attacks. The CIA had been trying to find al-Zawahri for more than twenty years. After America’s withdrawal from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, intelligence led the agency to a Taliban safe house in Kabul where al-Zawahri and his wife, his daughter, and her children had come to live. He was never observed leaving the house, but every morning, the CIA determined, he could be seen reading alone on the balcony.

On the morning in question, al-Zawahri was said to have been standing on the balcony when the missiles found him. The US Department of Defense has not specified whether one or both of the missiles struck him, but regardless, one of the heads of an R9X would have passed through him before the six spinning eighteen-inch-long blades, mounted to the missile’s midsection, reached his body and sliced whatever was left of him apart.

There are many aspects to this gruesome story of contemporary Afghanistan—points of foreign policy and human rights, philosophical questions about vengeance and the state—that go well beyond my purposes here. Suffice it to say that certain words (“hellfire,” “ninja,” “Ginsu,” “reaper”) and images (an invisible bird of prey soon to strike, an evil man on a balcony serenely alone) and capabilities (a first-person-shooter game made flesh, firing a horrifying weapon that is the definition of overkill) make it read like clumsy fantasy, something on the order of Thomas Pynchon, were *Gravity’s Rainbow* rewritten by a moron. This is a problem quite different from Philip Roth’s undyingly quoted (and here I am, quoting it) “Actuality is continually outdoing our talents.” That is not, I don’t think, the issue. Rather, actuality has become so ceaselessly stupid that fiction is having a hard time remaking it.

The absurd incursions of the real into the intelligent life of the imagination are central to the Afghan American writer Jamil Jan Kochai's fiction, a small body of work that has been charting a path not merely to how one might write about his native country, but also to how fiction might perform a reckoning with the idiotic now. A fine first novel, *99 Nights in Logar*, appeared in 2019; Kochai's new book, better still, is a collection of twelve stories, *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak*.

Born in 1992 in a refugee camp in Peshawar, Pakistan, to Afghan Pashtun parents, Kochai has set his twelve stories in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Alabama, and the Bay Area—locations that track, like his novel, close to his family history. His father left his native country in 1982 during the Soviet occupation, made his way to Alabama to start a new life, then returned home to Logar province in the late 1980s in hopes of finding a wife. Once married, the couple fled to Pakistan. While they waited for visas in the refugee camp, their son was born. Eighteen months passed before they made it to Northern California, where Kochai grew up.

Pashto was the only language spoken at home, and when Kochai entered kindergarten, he had no English. He spent the year struggling. The family briefly moved back to Logar when he was six. When they returned to Sacramento for Kochai to enter second grade, he had forgotten what little English he'd learned. He credits his teacher that year, a Mrs. Lung, who sat with him every day after school, with teaching him the language. By the time he entered third grade, he was winning awards for reading, his parents astonished that a boy who hadn't known the alphabet a year earlier would now sit in a corner of the living room with massive English books.

Kochai says that the Harry Potter novels introduced him to fiction as an art form. Less than the characters themselves, it was the setting of Hogwarts, as place and institution—the children's movements from classroom to classroom, the sleeping chambers, the rules—that enthralled him. Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, published when Kochai was eleven, was also meaningful. Although his mother and father and grandmother and aunts all told stories compulsively and well—Afghan folktales, stories of generations of life in Afghanistan, chronicles of flight and diaspora—the appearance of Hosseini's novel and its great success was, for Kochai, a revelation: it was the first time he imagined that people outside his family could have any interest in Afghan stories. Kochai read the book straightaway but with a profound sense of disappointment. He felt its depiction of Afghanistan and Afghans was odd; he had issues with its characterization (and, later, its political and ideological details), but mostly he felt that Hosseini's depiction of the country wasn't beautiful enough.

Kochai's fiction has a spoken flair, and part of the beauty of his vision of Afghanistan is the essentiality of its language. Scores of words from Pashto and other languages—unmolested by italics—populate the

collection, and their accumulation deepens one's sense of the strangeness, and beauty, of the real: pakol, suhoor, patus, toshak, Fajr adhan, chinar, attan, patki, khala, zina, deen, fard, sunna, nafl, Qari, dhikr, janaza, istinja, wudhu.... These words in no way impede the movement of the stories, which unfold with terrific momentum. Kochai has a gift for knowing what makes the engine of a story turn over and go, what formal choices might deliver a narrative in such a way as to coax a reader to endure a set of experiences that, whatever their frequent delights—and the stories are uncommonly full of them—are rooted in sorrow, loss, and rage.

The first of Kochai's stories I came upon—"Occupational Hazards"—appeared in *The New Yorker* this past spring. It struck me as the most exciting piece of short fiction I'd read in a very long time (I sent it to a dozen friends). The four-thousand-word story is broken into nineteen parts, each of them one sentence long, each beginning with a header offering a date range and a place: "1977–1979, Mujahid Recruit, Deh-Naw, Logar"; "1982, Refugee, Peshawar, Pakistan." Consider the story's first section in full:

*1966–1980: Shepherd, Deh-Naw, Logar**

Duties included: leading sheep to the pastures near the Black Mountains; counting the length between the shadows of chinar trees cast on dirt roads; naming each sheep after a prophet from the Quran, who, according to Maulana Nabi, were all herders of sheep at one point in their lives; reciting verses from the Quran to dispel djinn; stealing fruit from neighbors' orchards for no reason at all; watching sheep; counting sheep; loving sheep; understanding the nature of sheep; protecting sheep from bandits, witches, wolves, rapists, demons, and half-brothers: the Captain and the King; taking younger brother, Watak, along on journeys to the pastures; swimming in a stream with Watak instead of watching sheep; losing two sheep, Dawud and Ismael; getting beaten by the Captain for losing sheep; leaving Watak at home; never taking eyes off the sheep again.

Leading, measuring, naming, reciting: the clauses, sixteen in all, each detailing another activity, conspire to a portrait of place and act and consequence. The reader does not know it yet, but the shepherd is a little boy, and as the story progresses, as the sentences, freighted with duties, accumulate, it becomes clear that we are reading a life presented as a CV. I concede that this could feel gimmicky: Hey, look at this cool new form! And yet as the hundreds of clauses build, initiated uniformly by gerunds, the little waves of speech carry the reader into emotional deep water that the story's surface usefully obscures.

In the section "1982, Reaper, Deh-Naw, Logar"—the date reminds us that the Soviets have invaded—the unnamed person whose life story we are reading is, with his brother, Watak, "dodging Communist patrols and Soviet helicopters," hiding and huddling and seeing a searchlight bearing down. They split up, taking different routes to

safety, the protagonist “making it home just in time to find out that Watak was caught by a patrol and executed at the bank of a canal in the shade of a mulberry tree.” He finds out more:

Learning that six other family members had also been murdered; spending the entire night digging graves and collecting limbs; seeing blood; seeking death; seeking the solitude of gunfire; watching little sisters, twelve and three, search for roots in the dead garden; deciding to live, to leave.

Not quite halfway into the story, the life in question has begun to collapse, the curriculum vitae—which literally means “course of life”—moving us through many deaths to the ultimate injuries this man will suffer in the freedom of the United States, calamities that will see him, by the end, “waiting for the pain to ebb.” The story’s turnkey repetitions, by that conclusion, have taken on a scriptural quality (think Genesis 1’s “And God called.... And God said.... And God called.... And God said”). Kochai adapts that mode, movingly, to a form that embodies the two species of hazard that can arise in, and under, occupations.

Although “Occupational Hazards” makes use of the most conspicuous form of the twelve stories, most take similar risks. “Playing *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*,” which opens the collection, is narrated in the second person, with each section of the story again a single sentence, and details a heavy young Afghan émigré man’s quest (“You’re hauling your two-hundred-and-sixty-pound ass on a bicycle you haven’t touched since middle school, regretting all the Taco Bell you’ve eaten over the past two years”) to obtain the latest iteration of the *Metal Gear Solid* video game series, which is set in 1980s Afghanistan (a real, 2015 video game, my youthful sources inform me). Game obtained, the story’s “you” returns home, speaks briefly to his father, and then begins to play the game, slaughtering Soviet soldiers, all very predictable, before something narratively weird happens:

Sneaking along dirt roads, past golden fields and apple orchards and mazes of clay compounds, you come upon the house where your father used to reside, and it is there—on the road in front of your father’s home—that you spot Watak, your father’s sixteen-year-old brother, whom you recognize only because his picture (unsmiling, head shaved, handsome, and sixteen forever) hangs on the wall of the room in your home where your parents pray.

And suddenly the game becomes a rescue mission in Afghanistan, in which the son is trying, through the game, to save the real Uncle Watak who, in “Occupational Hazards,” could not be saved but now, through this fantasy of escape, is redeemed.

The ghost of Watak haunts five of the stories in the collection, stories that connect in different, tangential ways, but many of the others are discrete. In “Return to Sender,” married Afghan doctors who were living in the US return with their son to Kabul for a year, out of guilt, to serve their people. The mother, a pediatrician, works the night shift, the father the day, the family never fully together. And halfway into their year of service, their eight-year-old son disappears. Horrifically, the parents begin to receive packages at their door containing one severed part of their son’s body after another.

It is a grotesque tale of abduction, one that, as it progresses, grows stranger. The mother begins, with each new piece returned, to sew her son back together on his bed, until all but a finger has been reconstituted. Once that final trace is found by the father, the boy’s body suddenly shudders as the finger is brought near: “Together, piercing and threading, tearing and binding, flesh to flesh, Amina and Yusuf both realized that they would never leave Kabul again, that they were home.” Not merely the family but the body politic, the rent flesh of the people of Afghanistan is, through diaspora in reverse, made whole. It is a fantastic idea in every sense, made all the stranger by how emotionally complete it feels, without a wink or a shred of whimsy.

Two other stories involve explicitly fantastic transformations of an Ovidian kind. In “The Parable of the Goats,” a US Marine pilot, Billy Casteel, is shot down over Afghanistan, captured, and put in a pit, where he will be punished by local Afghans. Kochai does a fine job of sketching Casteel’s life just enough to animate him, pushing him past caricature with memorable details:

Minutes earlier, as he circled above his targets, Second Lieutenant Billy Casteel made the mistake of peering down and glancing upon a flock of baby goats led by two tiny shepherds who couldn’t have been more than six years old. Briefly, Second Lieutenant Billy Casteel was reminded of his own childhood on a goat farm in Davis, California, where he once cared for his father’s flock alongside his older brother, David, who died one night falling off a horse on a ride through the dark woods near their farm, a ride Casteel had suggested despite the darkness and the cold and his brother’s frail heart. In the years after his brother’s death, Billy had abandoned his father’s goats and taken refuge in computer-generated pornography, online social simulations, catfish accounts on Instagram, the philosophy of Jean Baudrillard, the writings of Philip K. Dick, and the *Modern Warfare* franchise, through which he had carried out his first virtual drone strike on little blips of Afghan enemies. Well, those boys could be me and Davey, Second Lieutenant Billy Casteel thought to himself before his desensitization training kicked in and he turned the blips on his screen into blossoms of light. Eventually, though, Casteel was struck by what he thought was a terrible pang of guilt.

But what actually strikes the young American isn’t guilt. Rather, a sword swung by a giant—hellfire from a reaper—knocks Billy’s jet from the sky and puts him in the pit to be punished. Scores of the

giant's townsfolk line up, but before any of them can begin, a 123-year-old woman, Bubugul, asks to go first. Her request is granted by her people, who love and fear her "because none of the villagers could recall a time before their love and their fear of Bubugul." So she goes away for a few minutes, returns with a goat, and with the giant's permission leads it down into the pit. What follows? One goat becomes two; two, four; eight, sixteen—no explanation given, no coupling, simply accumulating, magically, and yet somehow convincingly—the soldier's body rubbing against the goats and the soldier, slowly, transforming into a goat himself, one whose final fate is to be slaughtered by his former platoonmates, American liberators who feel no guilt at all.

The longest, most complex of the stories in the collection is "The Tale of Dully's Reversion." In the story's first sentence, as a mother is praying Fajr, the first of the five daily Islamic prayers, "Dully Abdul Kareem, her second-born son, crossed the path of her janamaz [prayer mat] and promptly transformed into a small monkey." Echoes of the first sentence of Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" are clear, as is the tonal allegiance to that long story's tender, poignant pursuit of Gregor Samsa's doom.

Dully, too, will meet his, but not before this mild-mannered Ph.D. student becomes a revolutionary mujahid, one leading apes and men against a warlord allied with the US-backed government in Kabul. It is, in thumbnail outline, utterly ridiculous; and yet Kochai manages to wring from such conceptually crude nonsense another parable of family and war that serves as a way of addressing the fundamentally absurd—and horrific, and tragic—way in which Afghanistan has been passed from the English to the Soviets to the Taliban and onward to "the thousandth bombing of a benevolent American invasion."

Kochai's collection is without sanctimony. It is also without any sort of soft-focus cuteness or exoticism. It begins and ends with stories in the second person, the collection subtly framed by two distinct characters who embrace the many people and modes that flow between them.

The final story's "you" is very different from the first. It is the perspective of a surveillance operative who has been tasked with spying on the doings of a Sacramento family of Afghan refugees, listening in for signs of radicalization. When the father suspects a wiretap, he becomes obsessed with finding out how they are being observed. Rather like Gene Hackman at the end of *The Conversation*, Hajji, the father, looks for *you*:

He searches for you on the phone, in the streets, in unmarked white vans, in the faces of policemen, detectives in street clothes, military personnel, and his own neighbors. He searches for you at the hospital, at the bank, on his computer, his sons' laptops, in webcams, phone cameras, and on the television. He searches for you in the curtains and in the drawers of the kitchen and in the trees in his backyard, in the electrical sockets, in the locks of the door handles, and in the filaments of the light bulbs. And, even as his family protests, Hajji searches for you in shattered glass, in broken tile, in the strips of his wallpaper, the splinters of his doors, his tattered flesh, his warped nerves, and in his own beating heart, where, through it all, the voice whispering that he is loved is yours.

You: the eyes of the occupier whose country the refugee now, under suspicion, occupies. How will you look at such a refugee? And how might such a refugee escaping hellfire hold on to the idea that, despite it all, you might love him no less than you do yourself?

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* The version of the story that appears in *The New Yorker* differs from that in the finished book—clauses tweaked, amended, weakened or refined. ↩

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