

## **Kuchqor Norqobil.**

### **“A welcome to arms” (Nightmares of the Afghan war)**

#### **I**

I don't know how much longer I'm going to live, but I can tell you I've already lived a long time. It's actually a lie that I've only been alive for 24 years. I've probably lived one or two centuries. But I'm still at a loss to figure out this darkness that keeps growing inside me day by day. I don't know how to see what it really is, this evil that breaks my spirit and saws my soul to pieces. I don't know if I'll ever be able to understand myself again, or even understand what's happened to me.

It's hard to live as an extra, as an overload. When it's not really you that they need, when you're just an expendable something –I can't figure out how to say it.

The one thing I can say is this – I'm a soldier. I crawl around on the ground, my gun pressed to my chest. Bullets keep flying over my head. I'm way too tired, my face is dusty and dirty. I'm going somewhere to some battle, I'm coming back from some battle. There's mountains, huge blasts, lots of blood, wounds and dead people; there's live people whose eyes have turned to stone, whose hearts are filled with fear and danger...

“Kuchkar, you're too young!”

“I'm already 19, comrade Mayor.”

“I pity my three children.”

“I'll miss my mother, I'm afraid of dying.”

“Is your mother old?”

“Thirty-Seven.”

“Terrible...”

“And what if we're captured?”

“It won’t happen. It’s life or death...You’d be better off shooting yourself, that’s just how it is.”

The suffering of war doesn’t turn into a memory. Instead, it just goes on everyday. I never actually returned from the war. Mama, how old are *you* now? I’ve lived more than ten fold of 24 years. When is it going to end? My heart hurts, Mama. The war never ends and I miss you. Are you still 37, Mama? I should be giving my wife flowers, socializing with a fake smile, reciting poems, drinking wine with my friends, making toasts, smoking cigarettes...But something’s wrong with me. There’s a dark fog inside of me. I just leave and keep leaving for the war. No, the war is not over, not by a long shot. Tomorrow we’re going to fight, we’re going to shoot. Maybe this time I’ll die, or at least come back wounded. Yesterday Shukhrat and Avaz were killed. The battle before it was Vasya and Zaytsev.

When you live with horror you get stone hearted. Nothing seems dangerous. Your pain actually becomes easy to bear when you realize that death will end all your misery. What’s the big deal? Everybody dies. So I might die today or tomorrow, what’s the difference. But at least...maybe I can die the day *after* tomorrow.

But actually, I’m not even a human being when I’m at war. I’m a dirty, clumsy, senseless animal, ice blooded, with no human feelings. If they tried to find an image to make a monument to the “Tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” my statue would be ten times worse. The war, the tragedy, the victims...they wouldn’t even seem like a big deal. Instead, an 18 year old guy with a sad stare, whose look cannot even distinguish one color from another, who regrets ever being born, who is shivering with fear, who has gone crazy, hoping to share the last draw of your joint, so he can at least get high and enter that heavy powerful world flying. I would give you the last drop from my canteen for that. The water would run out, and I would just press my teeth harder against my lips and sip.

Are you still 37, Mom? Did your hair turn grey the day I was fighting with death, and you were the only one praying to save my life at that moment? I am not 24 years old. I have survived the claws of hell for the sake of your happiness, but to my own unhappiness. It’s my game of chance, when I was playing with death I

realized how long each moment of life actually is, and that I have lived longer than every person's life taken together.

Sometimes I miss the war. Believe me, folks, sometimes I feel like just going up a mountain and shooting somebody. You won't believe it, but I would return from battle tired but healthy, I would enjoy the risk and fear and closeness to death, I would enjoy watching the meaningless, weak, helpless dying bodies. I fell in love with my gun. I can easily distinguish the sounds of different explosions into categories such as bombs, mine blasts, machine guns, ER-ER-ES shells, AGK shells. They explode in my soul every day.

“Let's drink.”

“Pour, Iqbol”

“You're pretty quiet”

“Don't try to make me talk, Iqbol. Just pour and shut up.” Its all passing before my eyes, I only want to talk to myself. Sorry, friend, I'm exhausted. If I were still a human being the memories would torture me. You know, when guys who have been at war meet each other they feel sick inside, their eyes have this look. They know that they are expendable in this world, that they are being crumpled and thrown out like garbage. No matter what society it is, war turns men into useless filthy trash. I am expendable. So pour me some wine, Iqbol, let a friendly soul pull me out of this darkness....

## II

The earth feels at a loss turning,  
The air scatters whistling,  
The wounded mountains keep falling  
The world is looking for a stretcher.  
The young grass keeps crying,  
It feels sick and tired.

A drop of blood falls down,  
From the water jar of heaven.

### III

Last night Ernest Hemingway visited me. We talked until dawn. I said it made no difference if I returned from the war dead or alive. He said that those who actually understood the dangers of war will go mad. I think he's probably right.

I said anyone who survives the war will be tortured for the rest of his life. How could anyone escape it?

He said it's really impossible. And that to tell the truth, war is something that's really difficult to tell the truth about.

"*A Farewell to Arms*" he said, "is a masterpiece that reveals the tragedy of war, the soul and spirit of a suffering man. When I wrote this novel I had already witnessed a lot of these events in my life. My father shot himself, my wife died, but not even these losses and suffering could divert my attention from thoughts of the war."

"You were going to say that the sadness of all pain and suffering dissolves in the face of a tragedy of the heart."

"Yes, that's right. It would be impossible to defeat this man."

"But I think that at war nobody wins. It's the war that always wins the victory over mankind." Hemingway left his war saying "Farewell to Arms," but I had to open the book that said "Welcome to Arms."

### IV

I don't know when I'm going to finish my story about war. I'm suffering a lot. And now my dreams have turned into nightmares. Even my thoughts don't belong to me. I'm losing track of my surroundings. I would have to go somewhere to finish the next part. Somewhere I can relax, where nobody can disturb me. It wouldn't be a bad idea if the doctors could tell you a way to distract yourself from yourself.

Describing the war is five times worse than dying. My hands and feet get weak, it's like something pitiless is eating my insides. It's destroying me because I can't show the truth, I can't express the whole meaning of the badness here. You have to cut up your heart so that somebody can look into it and see what you have seen, or at least to understand half of what you have been through.

There is a cold scene, an exhausted quietness frozen before my eyes. Land and sky are shaking together and are coming closer and closer, just on the point of blending into each other. Death smells from the quiet dead. The tension hurts. Your eyes abhor this cold and heartbreaking existence. The skin of your will is breaking down and falling. It is impossible to read your state from your pale, ravaged face. You can't find any place to locate yourself, you have started to break into pieces from the inside. After awhile you realize the shells are flying, they're thundering in the air. You cry out from the explosions, from the blasts turning the world upside-down. When a man roars from fear his face convulses and his hair turns grey in a second. The cold sweat foams out from vessels where the blood has stopped running and your skin becomes like glue. You are dead but alive. Is death really so dangerous? The shells start flying again, they make a roaring sound. They seem to be tearing the air into pieces. You are lying on the earth, holding your head as if the shells were coming right at you.

So the war has started again. The heavy vehicles drag ahead tearing up the poor earth. You submit yourself to the will of the war as if you are unconscious from the screaming, from the dust that flies to the sky, from the dense and bitter smoke, from the whistling bullets, from all the sorrows and troubles, from all of it happening all at once.

Barely aware of anything, I jump behind a tree. The branches and leaves keep falling down with breaking and crackling noises. If you bring your face close to the bark of the striped white logs you can smell the shell powder. You know what will happen if the shrapnel tears off a man's hands and legs. His blood vessels will show and his bones will poke out, the blood from his torn off leg will fountain high into the air.

Why should I even talk about it? Hasn't it all happened before? I lie and pray to God to save my life with my head pressed against the ground, saying to myself "I'm not going to die." I start daydreaming about how if a bullet hit me in the face there would be a crater where my face used to be, or maybe it would make a small hole where it entered, tearing away my flesh, and then my bones would scatter around like pieces of wood. Or if the bullet hit my forehead the side of my face would be torn off, my eyes would come out of their sockets. I would die all of a sudden without even feeling any pain. But no, I'm not going to die.

All at once, over my head, there's a blast, some kind of lightning, fire that seems to be flaming out of my own eyes. The world becomes white fog. In a second everything will be over. The thoughts in my mind are so toxic that I even get tired of expecting my own death. Suddenly about a meter above the ground, the bark is blasted off the tree and scattered around. The bullet goes through the tree, gouging it like a nail. From fear I hug the earth and claw it so hard my fingers hurt with a sharp pain. Then the dust next to me explodes and without even being aware of it I am thrown up with the blast.

I am lying face up, somehow, and the sky is turning around me, fast. Something is pressing on my stomach. I start from a deafening scream. Then I notice Zaytsev, from my rifle company, lying in the dust and dirt, his body shivering and shaking. His screaming cries overwhelm all the blasts and explosions. Zaytsev's shocking roar now rules the battlefield. I raise my head to move. The thing pressing on my stomach falls aside. I grimace as a warm gluey fluid is sprinkling into my face. I jump up. In front of me is a leg, torn off at the hip. The blood is springing up from the place where the flesh is hanging. Zaytsev's pale eyes are staring deadly cold at the sky. A white bone the size of a fist is sticking out from the place where the leg was torn off. His uniform pants and shirt are hanging wet on his body. The dusty ground is covered with his red blood. I try to lay the torn off leg next to the body, but the leg is too heavy. I just want to put the leg with the body, I can't think of anything else. I have completely forgotten about all the firing that's going on. The trees are breaking apart with the blasts, shrapnel is falling like rain.

## V

I'm afraid to go out at night. There's a leg making heavy steps on the staircase, its climbing to the third floor. It's after me. When I put on my shoes at the door sometimes it appears, right under my face. It stands there and shakes and shakes. My eyes dim, I let out a yell. The leg comes wearing a blood filled boot and a piece of Zaytsev's brown trousers.

What time is it? It's probably after midnight. Something is stepping up the stairs. It has reached the second floor...listen...it has reached the third floor...now it's here...it's knocking on my door....

## VI

Today I talked with the poet Eshqobil Shukur about human beings and literature. He recited one of his poems. I told him I couldn't write anything at all. He explained it by saying it was the poet's consciousness. Sometimes people have this state of mind. With this state of mind, he said, you might not be able to write even one line of a poem for months. I wasn't aware of having fallen into this state of mind, but there is some kind of weight on my soul that's been causing me trouble. I wanted to go somewhere that was somehow far away, but I didn't know where that could be. I told him that. You must be under the influence of something, you have to change yourself, you have to move on, said the poet. But I've gotten used to thinking about the war all the time. Frankly, I miss the battlefield.

"Can a man go back to those times that caused him so much suffering?" I asked him. He stared at me in shock and looked away. He said that past tragedies could turn into cherished memories. He said that I was enjoying the pain and suffering, and for a man there could be no greater misfortune.

"I believe that war will defeat the world, all of mankind" I said. Eshqobil Shukur pretended not to hear me.

## VII

The moment fate put a gun in my hand at the age of 18 I was destined to remain forever in the embrace of war. The number of people I had shot and killed was the number of times I had been shot and killed myself. My hands are bloodstained, my eyes are bloodstained, my mouth is bloodstained...My century and you too are bloodstained. We are all murderers.

My heart hurts. Unfired bullets riot in my chest. I have to fire them off, in any case. But at whom? Where?

## VIII

“Kuchqor, I miss my family. I want to get out of here, now. Do you think we’ll live till the end of it?”

“I’m so tired of all of it. We’ll see what fate has in store for us, friend.”

“If we ever return from this cursed war, as soon as we get back to Tashkent we’ll drink until we are dead unconscious.

“I hope we can all get home safe and sound.”

“Yeah, if none of us are dead, we can go out to a restaurant together.”

“Oh yes.”

“And you can recite some inspired poetry.”

“Of course. Give me a drag of your smoke.”

“I hope we’ll be that lucky.”

“Don’t tempt fate, Shukrat. You’ll see, it will all be over someday. Then I’ll recite poems at the top of my voice.”

“Do you think people will be shocked?”

“I don’t care! If you want I’ll recite poems standing on the table. If only we’re all safe and sound.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Restaurants, bars, cinemas, cute girls, it will all be ours, right?”

“I hope it will all come true.”

But no, Shukrat, no. Your wish did not come true. Almost half of us were gone, dead, by the time we got out of there. And I lost half my soul. One half of the

world was blasted away, my friend. Do you want me to recite some poems to the open graves, Shuhrat? Do I deserve to recite any poems, Shukrat? Would it be worth anything if I recited poems? My heart is not filled with poems now, but with dirges, Shukrat. Why did you grip my hands so tightly when your eyes were closing for the last time, friend? My heart and soul were aching, tears fell from my eyes, my throat was clogged. You were going to die and leave me in a life which did not smile at us, but that I survived into. Shukrat, my friend, for a moment when you were saying goodbye to the sky and the clouds, your lips shivered:

“RECITE POEMS IN ANY CASE”.

I’ll recite, friend, I’ll recite. I’ll recite burning in flames, spitting and scattering. Farewell to you, my friend!

## IX

“So whadayou want, sir?”

«Be a good girl, bring me six bottles of beer.”

«Just for you? Alone?”

«Yeah, is that a problem? You want me to blow up your bar?”

The waitress' eyes opened wide. She thinks I must be crazy. Anyway, she brings six bottles of beer and puts them on the table. She makes me pay the bill right away as if she has to run away from an enemy.

The world is shaky. The world is like a ship being drowned in the depths of the ocean. People are walking around with their heads down and their feet up in the sky. Look, people are walking on their heads! On their headzzzz!

## X

In my throat, forty souls of mine are splashing,

If I stare at the sky, the mountain and rocks are flaming.

At this moment my mother is remembering me, burning

Farewell, my mother, my dear friends, start crying and weeping.

The world isn’t worth my fingernail,

Whatever I saw,  
The world will take revenge on me  
This bullet that hits my chest,  
Will tear my mother's breast.  
I could agree to rot in this ground,  
If only I could just visit my motherland for a second.  
I am dying,  
My tortured body is washed by my blood  
I wish I could hug my mother,  
Say farewell to me, and cry for my mother, friends

## XI

Like a ship overturned in a storm, I fall down together with the table. Empty bottles fall on top of me with jingling sounds. The ceiling is turning around and around at high speed. Over me I notice some bodies turning around with the ceiling. They seem to resemble police. Yes, that's them. Something hits my head, heavy like a stone. My eyes are inflamed and I come to my senses a little. I clearly see two policemen with batons. They're beating me and hitting me on the legs as they drag me out of the bar. One by one they all pull me out.

"Idiot! Why'd you drink so much if you can't handle it?"

"Hey, this guy's a journalist, isn't he?"

"Just let him lie there, he's passed out, right? He's crazy."

"Hey, I think he works for the same newspaper my sister works at."

"Put his stuff back into his pockets."

## XII

I can't sleep at all tonight. The cockroaches are crawling over my body and not letting me sleep. The fleas are sucking my blood. What is that dropping onto my face? What is that thing hanging from the ceiling, waving at me? What is it? Ugh, ugh, it's a man's hand, a man's hand. Mama, mama, please!

### XIII

On the way back from Ali-hali our troops demolished a village and turned it to ruins. The houses, fences, all knocked down. Tanks drove through, grinding up the yards and gardens. We passed by shooting at the farm animals. We picked and ate fruit as if it was our own orchards, throwing fruit at each other for fun. Before we got there the artillery, planes, and helicopters had bombarded and shelled it so fiercely that there was not a human to be seen in the village. When we passed a ruined house with broken windows Bachkaryov kept staring at me, pointing at the half fallen down wall with his hand. Under the wall lay the dead body of a boy, about three years old, completely naked, his intestines hanging out loosely. I covered my face. My legs shook and I got dizzy. I started throwing up over and over. My jaw cracked, cold sweat ran from my body. I wished and wished very, very very much that the earth would swallow all our regiments and all our army completely. I had no interest in life, or for my own survival.

Nothing will ever wipe out the scene that is stamped in my eyes. It will accompany me as long as I live. The fallen wall, and I myself, fallen along with it.

Something seems to be pulling my bed somewhere. Something soft is touching my feet. Now it's crawled up to my knees. My body is freezing. I'm afraid to look at it. It's crawling towards my stomach. It wants to lie next to me. I'm shivering, I look at it, terrified. At that moment a swarthy baby claws my face with both hands, something is streaming down his rotted crocodile skin. I try to scream but my voice is strangled in my throat.

“What’s the matter with you?”

“Bring me some water, I had a nightmare”

My wife runs sleepily to the kitchen. My little son lying next to me cries out. Without fully coming to my senses I try to calm down my son.

“Go on, go to sleep now kiddo, go to sleep now...”

“Here is the water, drink it please. My God, you scared me to death. Did you have a fright today?” I keep silent, watching over my son and wife until dawn. I’m afraid of going to sleep.

#### XIV

There’s another bad thing about war. The tragedy is that war passes to the next generation through the blood, leaving its impact on the whole human race. The scenes of each war, each minute of which seemed to have lasted for years, turns man into a beast, makes him numb. Those who witness it will live all of their lives in the claws of that war. I was shocked to see my son, not even two yet, and he won’t let his toy machine gun out of his hands. Now he’d rather play with guns than trucks, remote-control cars, or any other toys. I wonder suspiciously whether his interest was inherited from me in the form of the revolt which sometimes riots in my blood.

“Hey, son, drop that thing in your hand. Can’t you see it’s a gun? It can kill people like me, like you and your mom (No, I had shot one myself).

#### XV

Whenever I have written about the Afghan war I have considered myself a bloody handed soldier of an occupying army, with its policies of endless sins. We are occupiers, that's all there is to it. I don’t want any comments or other interpretations. Nor do I want the participants of the Afghan war to be tortured, discriminated against, or called international soldiers. And don’t belittle us by claiming 'the state has taken care of us.'

Whatever I have written about the Afghan war I considered myself a bloody handed soldier of an occupying army, with its policy of endless sins. We are occupants. That’s all. I don’t want any other comments or interpretations. Nor do I want the participants of the Afghan war to be tortured, discriminated against, or to be called international soldiers. And don’t insult your own intelligence by saying that 'the state has taken care of them.'

The poet Nabi Jaloliddin who fought in Afghanistan wrote to ask people to pity the soldiers, to not talk about them behind their backs, and if they were no longer needed, to please gather them all in Independence Square and mow them down with bullets. But no, no Nabi, they wouldn't dare shoot us. If the people who were really guilty of the Afghan war were gathered, there would be no bullets left for you and me. There would be countless government officials, generals and talking heads who would have to be shot down first. I would be willing to make myself a target for a bullet at the end. If only for the sake of a peaceful, quiet life for my son, who is still unaware of the world's cruelty, for the sake of a country that could promise that my son would not see any war.

My dear friend, Nabi Jaloliddin! The sinners of this war are countless.

## XVI

It's raining heavily. It's about evening. I am climbing up a slippery hill. There is no trace of a human to be seen anywhere. But I'm carrying my gun over my shoulder. Beside me my son is there. I'm wearing my flack jacket. Suddenly, in front of me, there are bearded men with guns in their hands. I fire at them, but my machine gun doesn't work. Carrying my son, I run down the hill. They are following us.

*Translated by Kosim Mamurov*