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The Photographer by Guibert, Lefevre, and Lemercier

The Photographer draws me into Afghanistan on multiple levels. First I identify with the helpers in the narrative. They have a strong sense of mission and seek to help despite significant cost to themselves. Second, unlike our recent readings in blogs, the narrative promises some conflict, crisis, and denouement. I am eager to know how successful their mission will be, whether they will return home safely, how they will be changed. Also, I feel a strange affinity for Afghanistan. Flying over it in 1985, I found the terrain so hauntingly beautiful that I took multiple photos of it from the window of our airplane. The photos here seem familiar to me. Finally, I find the combination of photography, illustration, and text unexpectedly powerful. The illustration and text are woven so seamlessly that it is difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins. I find myself unable to determine if I am hearing or seeing the story. Eventually I realize that I am doing both – as if I were there. But it is the photos that punctuate the story for me. *The Photographer* spawns reflection in me about helping, about art, and about transformation.

Helping

During the preparations for the journey, Juliette and the others casually instruct Didier on what to expect. Embedded in their stories about the heat, the cheats, the racketeers, the language barrier, the abandonment by escorts, the imprisonments and detainments by Soviets and Mujahideen, and the danger of the journey itself over steep terrain and through war-torn areas is the fact that they are *choosing* to endure this (17, 49, 146)! One powerful narrative detail is Mahmad's instruction to Didier to make sure that he hides under his brown patoo and in particular, that he tucks his fingernail inside his clenched fist so that the hovering Soviet helicopters will not spot a shiny fingernail (21). One has the sense that these are instructions for survival must have been learned at the cost of grave injury or a life. The journey is as arduous as he has been led to expect. It takes a month's travel on foot through rocks and streams, over mountains, dodging helicopters and bullets to arrive at their destination (97). Later, as the doctors and nurses operate for hours on end, he watches them struggle with sore backs and loss of sleep. Regis sets his alarm

to awaken every two hours so that he can check on his patients (141). What could be powerful enough to entice this band of medical personnel to endure all of this? Regis explains, "I'm going back because I'll be practicing surgery in a place where people have absolutely no access to health care. And I find that deeply fulfilling. So fulfilling that it's unlikely I'll ever go back to a cushy anesthesiologist's job at a fancy hospital in Bordeaux" (25). There is a peace that comes from a meaningful job well done (121).

How can I describe this sense of mission? I have come close to it in a smaller way when I worked as a therapist. This act of meeting another's deep human need is like stepping into a river of swift currents taking me to a unity with something or someone much better than me. I am bathed in this profound goodness and emerge sometimes to find gratitude, sometimes not. Like the handkerchiefs full of walnuts and fruit given by the mother of a dead child (55) or the soil-filled bread baked by the Afghanis who were scraping the bottom of their wheat stores to provide food for the doctors (147), gratitude is a sweet recognition that we have been to this place together. But more important than gratitude, or even the outcome itself, is the sure knowledge of having participated in the mystery of service. As the nurse Sylvie says, "dying treated is something else. . . . They thank us by saying: 'He was sick, or he was wounded, and you treated him, you prepared him to meet Allah. Thank you'" (55).

<u>Art</u>
The majority of the photos are shot in black and white. This seems a natural choice since Afghanistan is a land of contrasts and the black and white photos amplify this. From time to time throughout the photos, I note that some are outlined in red. I never know what this means. Are they the best, the chosen? Are they the rejected? Some are not only outlined, they are crossed out. Does the red signify blood? Are these photos of people who will die? At times it seems a type of foreshadowing (see examples on pp. 29, 40, 55). Eventually I come to think that they are the chosen photos, simply because of the quality of them. Yet the notion of outlining gives me an idea for a way to treat photos in a narrative.

A powerful example of the use of color is the frames of gray figures and the barely visible texture of the road against the jet black of the night when they are crossing the border. This combined with the clipped text evokes an ominous sense of danger – "Not an easy task. I hear someone fall. I narrowly miss falling too. . . . It's Afghanistan" (36-37). The technique is used again during the recounting of the

story of the young girl whose spinal cord has been severed by a piece of shrapnel “no bigger than a grain of rice” (135). The entire scene inside the room with her is cast with black figures on a dark brown background, signifying gloom.

Sometimes there is an endearing reminder that people are trying to live a life in the midst of the war. Didier captures this in his picture of a scarecrow in the wheat field (67). At other times he captures the brutality of life. See the photo of the horse carcass against the foreground of a rocky terrain and the background of a breathtaking vista of the snow-capped mountains (71).

Another powerful photo is that of two Muj’ and a donkey resting on a small rock with swirling currents all about them (74). The two men face the convergence of three mountains in the distance, two that seem to emerge from the river in the foreground and one, rising between them in the background. The donkey rests on the rock, facing in another direction, unperturbed. The vastness of the mountains and the power of the water dwarf the men who contemplate them. It seems enough for now to have moment of safety. Throughout the narrative, Didier simultaneously echoes the devastation around him, yet puts it into perspective, with his photos of the harshness of the “magnificent and unchanging landscape” (122).

Transformation

Didier is given the name Ahmadjan, perhaps foreshadowing the fundamental change that will occur in him (18). Clearly Didier is a person sensitive to the pain of others and able to enter in to it in order to help. He is gifted in his ability to capture the contradictions of devastation and beauty, the nuances of unintended consequences, ta larger perspective. Despite this, however, he makes the remarkably stupid decision to proceed back to Pakistan on his own. He seems almost giddy at the prospect of independence and deludes himself that he is in control of his adventure (168). Perhaps this is fated for him as he has not fully apprehended his need for others. On his trip back to Pakistan, he realizes just how much he had relied on others for information about where to buy supplies, when to travel and when to wait (so as to avoid snow), and how to avoid bombs. With the dawning realization that he is in over his head, he admits that he is “powerless and vulnerable” (193). Abandoned by his escorts, he is unable to properly saddle or load his horse. Nine different times he struggles to retie the bundles onto him (210-211). Again the illustrator uses tones of gray to depict his struggle. Moments of hope are depicted with a bit more light and a hint of color. Moments of failure are rendered in gray,

deepening as he comes to the end of himself. Finally, bruised and exhausted in the midst of a snowstorm, he begins to scream for help and to beat his exhausted horse (217). In each of these scenes he and his horse are depicted as totally black, silhouetted against a featureless gray background (215-219). Overwhelmed by fear he admits, “I completely lost my mind” and shoots a wide angle photo to “let people know where I died” (219). There are twelve frames of complete blackness as he contemplates his death (225). Eventually he is saved by Wolf and his caravan but he has come face to face with his own limitations, his crippledness. He shoots a picture of a “crippled Baba . . . it’s a kind of self-portrait. That’s how I feel” (229). The journey is not over. He will endure yet seven different episodes of extortion by Wolf and his caravan and fear of death at their hands when he runs out of money. He will be driven to prayer (237). He will then be saved and restored by Aider Shah (241) and sent on his way to Pakistan. He will experience one more final attempt to extort money from him by a corrupt cop who detains him before eventually releasing him poorer but unharmed (246). Again the graying illustrations are used to depict this setback. Safely back in Peshawar, he reunites with Juliette and John and learns that they too encountered the cop. It seems to be an expected detour in the struggle to help (254).

Once Didier arrives in Peshawar, he visits an old British cemetery. There he reflects on what he has endured. Something has died, signified by the cemetery. Is it his delusion of independence? Perhaps it is his lack of faith. The Universe has a way of excising from us what we do not willingly yield and it does so until we are of use. But something lives now in Didier. He realizes that he wants to go back (256). We learn in the Portraits at the end of the book that his arduous journey left him with chronic furunculosis and the loss of fourteen of his teeth. Yet he goes back to Afghanistan another eight times between 1986 and 2006, producing other work (262).