

barbed wire and T-walls. Listen to the children playing on the other side. Look past the guard tower and focus on kites riding the breeze beyond the wall. From here all you see are the colorful diamonds hovering in the lapis sky. The kites appear anchored in space and time by an invisible tether, and when you look down to see who's flying them, all you see is an endless twenty-foot-tall concrete wall. Further out, the Hindu Kush offer a rugged backdrop as a C-17 rumbles skyward.

You roll into the bomb dump where Airmen build bombs that will soon rise up on jet wings only to fall on enemy targets below. A sergeant shows the children stacks of five-hundred- and two-thousand-pound bombs. He speaks of arming systems and global positioning guidance. The kids don gloves and hard hats as they glide fin assemblies and screw fuses into place. He asks if they want to sign their creations, and the kids write their names in looping letters on the bombs' pointed noses. Then the sergeant offers 30 mm casings from A-10 cannons as souvenirs.

Next you pass a charred field dotted with twisted steel. "That's where that 747 crashed a while back," you say. They saw the video on the news back home where the heavy jet struggles skyward, stalls, and falls to the earth. There's a moment in that video where you think the jet might make it, and then you know it's too late.

Ruins of Soviet aircraft bunkers line the road next to a small dirt plot surrounded by concertina wire. A sign reads Afghan Martyrs Cemetery Site, where mine removal crews recently found forty-six bodies in a mass grave. Forensics indicate they died during the Soviet occupation, but there's no other information.

You continue, past bulldozers destroying hundreds of wooden buildings in favor of more permanent concrete structures; past storage container shantytowns where thousands of foreign contract workers live; past clusters of soldiers walking along the road; past fields with red triangle skull and crossbone signs of warning of unexploded mines; past the flight line full of all sorts of airplanes, helicopters, and drones; past the acres of equipment and rows of MRAPs waiting to be destroyed or sent home. Conveyor belts feed semitruck-sized shredders a constant flow of the tools of war. You watch computers, printers, televisions, speakers, and unrecognizable objects ride into the spinning teeth. A stream of broken fragments rains into steel bins.

At Bagram's pedestrian gate, you park and watch as hundreds of Afghan workers flow in and out. Long lines wind through concrete barricades. You're surrounded by soldiers, guard towers, razor wire, and surveillance cameras. You hold hands and merge into the outgoing line. You're supposed to wear helmets and vests here, but the kids don't have this gear, and neither do the locals, so you set yours aside. The Nepalese security guards cradle machine guns and nod from behind sunglasses and veiled faces. Like a funnel, everything becomes slower and more deliberate as you get closer to the final barricade. From a distance, you see the workers reach the base boundary and pick up speed as they disperse in different directions. The smell of a vendor's fresh naan grows stronger as you approach. Outside the gate, cars clog the narrow street, kids laugh on their bikes, and people walk hand in hand. Your kids don't hesitate as you leave the concrete walls. Together you step away from Bagram and head east toward the mountains.

Brandon Lingle's essays have appeared in various publications including the *American Scholar*, the *Normal School*, *Guernica*, the *New York Times* blog *At War*, and *North American Review*. His work has been noted in five editions of *The Best American Essays*. An air force officer, he's served in Iraq and Afghanistan. A California native, he currently lives in Texas and edits *War, Literature, and the Arts*. This essay reflects his views alone.

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Oceangoing Trader, 2017
Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 in



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