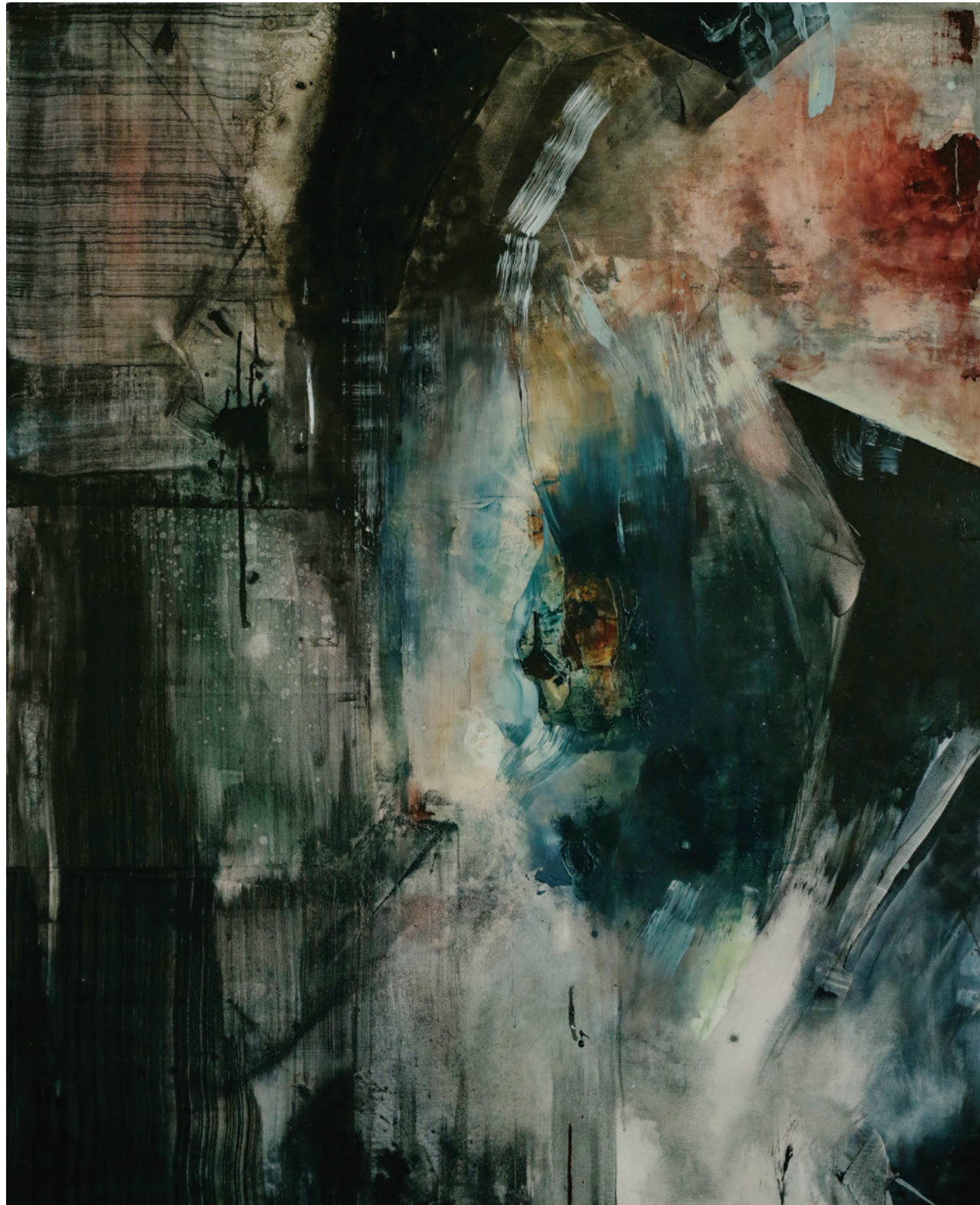


## DANIELLE TORVIK-STAFFEN

*Antithesis 10*, 2017  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST  
PHOTO BY TRAN TRAN PHOTOGRAPHY

## BRANDON LINGLE

# East toward the Mountains

A Father's Collage  
of Memories at  
the Edge of War

2014

Before the Fourth of July sunrise, your three children ride into Bagram, Afghanistan, on a C-17 from Travis AFB, California. When the colonel told you to pick up some visitors from the passenger terminal you figured he'd sent you to fetch a media embed, but there in the middle of a pack of soldiers sporting boots, body armor, and machine guns sit your three children in t-shirts, shorts, and those Nikes you'd bought them at Sport Chalet last fall. A video about what to do during a rocket attack plays. The soldiers joke with each other and don't focus on the screen. The kids ignore the warnings as they thumb their iPhones. They smile when they see you, and you can't understand the situation. Joy. Panic. Kids aren't allowed in war zones.

You kneel and wrap them in your arms and ask: "What are you doing here?"

"We came to visit you," says your twelve-year-old daughter.

You keep a poker face as your mind whirls.

"Does Mom know you're here?"

"She brought us to the plane."

In the Afghan heat, surrounded by quick-walking soldiers, you shepherd your kids to Disney Boulevard, Bagram's main thoroughfare, named after a young Army specialist who died there in 2002. Many times while moving along that road, your thoughts drifted to family trips to the Magic Kingdom and how this place is the opposite. Late in the war now and Bagram, the main NATO base, swells with people as smaller outposts throughout the country close. The drawdown is drawing down. MRAP armored vehicles, trucks, and ragged SUVs kick up dust as they slow-roll past. You think of *Mad Max* as their massive wheels grind the gravel. Contractors eyeball you. A trio of bearded Special Forces guys grin at the kids. You hear a whisper-growl "Hooyah," as one gives one of your ten-year-old twin boys a high five and a patch with the *Punisher* skull. "Those guys do what you do in *Call of Duty: Black Ops*," you say. Your boy nods and quickly slides the patch into his pocket.

The aerostat—a ghost-white blimp—hangs above, pregnant with sensors and cameras, looking for Taliban. Consider the camera operators zooming in on the kids at that moment. Picture battle staffs analyzing the oddity of children strolling down Disney.



Your other twin boy snaps a photo of rusted anti-aircraft guns rusting in front of a crumbling Soviet building turned U.S. headquarters. A pair of Pave Hawk helicopters fly over. A gunner waves. There's no need to tell your kids that those helicopters pick up the wounded and dead, and the crews hose the blood from the floor panels.

Your daughter says, "It stinks here," and the twins laugh and plug their noses against the sewer, diesel, garbage stench. You're uneasy. You think about body armor, helmets, and pistols. Should you discuss tourniquets and bunkers? None of this makes sense.

The dining facility door guard says the kids can't eat. He makes a one-time exception for you. The place echoes a warped version of the home-style buffets back home. The Afghan workers, bearded men in white uniforms and paper hats, smile and nod at the kids. Who knows what they think of your daughter. She's taller than most of them, doesn't wear a hijab, and is unafraid to look the old Afghan men in the eye. She orders a grilled cheese, and the fry cook stares hard at you. The twins order burgers and fries. They grab handfuls of chocolate chip cookies and select Cokes from the wall of glass-doored refrigerators. You join a table of C-130 pilots. They speak of the mission they just returned from and throw fist bumps at the kids.

The boss, a one-star general, walks up, introduces himself to the children, and says, "Welcome to the fight. We're glad to have you here." The kids shake his hand. He sits at your table, ignores you, and continues, "We have lots to show you. You can go swimming in the general's compound later. We love having kids on base."

What the fuck? You're speechless, confused. His grandfatherly approach betrays his normally hard and cold demeanor. He spoke more to the kids than he had to you in your months in Afghanistan. Plus there's no pool on Bagram, is there?

As the kids eat, you're figuring out how to get them on a jet back home.

"We need to get you guys out of here," you say.

Your daughter says, "It's okay. We want to stay. We'll stay with you until you come home."

You dump your trays and walk into the white Afghan light.

You pass a ragged fifties-era hangar the Soviets used. It's weathered and gray, and you can sense the ghosts. You

wander inside where Army medics show the kids helicopters and equipment. Thankfully the soldiers don't share the rumors that the Afghans burned and hung Soviet soldiers from the steel beams here at the end of that war. They say if you look close enough, you can see black marks on the walls and ceiling. But that's only a story. There's no way to really know.

Next door, in Craig Joint Theater Hospital, the kids ignore the walls lined with portraits honoring dead U.S. troops. A surgeon friend rushes up. He's sweaty and blood stains his scrub pant legs. He says, "We're operating on four civilians from Kabul. Suicide bomber." And, "You're welcome to watch."

"No thanks," you say.

The kids sigh.

You recall a conversation with a colonel on his first deployment. He said, "I want you to show me around the base to see what our folks are doing. I want to get my hands dirty."

"Okay, sir, I'll bring you to the hospital during the next mass casualty," you said.

"Oh no," he said. "I don't want to see that."

You turned from the coward and never looked at him the same.

You ease past the trauma bay where the wounded Afghans arrived. Only minutes before, medics rushed the living to operating rooms and the dead to the morgue, and now young airmen and Afghan janitors mop the blood, clean gurneys, and restock supplies. You say, "Don't look at the blood. Just remember the hurt people are getting the help they need now."

They stare at the blood.

On this day no wounded Americans lie in the hospital. In the intensive care unit a Taliban fighter with no legs lays glaring with fogged eyes at a nurse. She tells the kids, "Don't worry about him. He tells us he'll 'kell' us, but I think that's the drugs talking."

A few beds over, an Afghan girl covered in bandages and a handmade blanket sends a slight smile to the kids. Her father in a pakol cap sits next to her with his head down. Your daughter walks to the girl's bedside and says, "I hope you get better soon." The girl looks to a nearby interpreter who shares the message. She nods.

You see an old man with a misshapen head in the inpatient unit. A doctor explains they've removed a tumor

that would have killed him and now they're working to reconstruct his skull. You're proud that the twins don't flinch or look away too quickly. A boy, maybe seven or eight, who took shrapnel to his chest, sits on his bed. The interpreter tells us the boy and his brothers found a shiny object near their village. They picked it up, and the explosion wounded the boy and killed his two brothers. Their father ran and picked up his dying children and carried them, stacked in his arms, to the nearby U.S. outpost. The father pleaded with the soldiers at the gate, and they brought the kids in. Soon a helicopter from Bagram came. After surgery, the boy stayed in a coma for a week before his eyes fluttered. Despite all this, the little boy waves at the twins and they wave back.

## 2011

During Ramadan in Iraq, we host an Eid-al-Fitr meal for our Iraqi Ministry of Defense colleagues. They come to FOB Union III, our Baghdad base, in jackets and ties carrying platters of food . . . figs, dates, biryani, maskoof, dolmas, taboon, lavash, and baklava. We provide soda, milk, juice, water, Tabasco sauce, fruit, and desserts we pilfered from the dining facility. In our windowless office, on the ground floor of the bombed-out Ba'ath headquarters, we sit at a tilted conference table and break bread under fluorescent lights surrounded by maps, computers, guns, cameras, and body armor.

General Ali, our main man at the MoD, tells jokes and stories. Many Iraqi military men call themselves generals, but Ali is different. His nonchalance and wisdom carries legitimacy. He says he was an Iraqi fighter pilot in the eighties and a tank commander before that, and even if neither proves true, he's close to people we want to be close to and he weaves a good story. He speaks fast through his gold-toothed smile, and I catch fragments about his seven children, bongos in Basra, bombing Iranians, cursing Russian vodka, and his standard refrain, "Don't worry, be happy."

His friend General Abbas is more subdued. Rail thin and a chain smoker, Abbas brings his ten-year-old son to the meal. The boy is at home with us. His presence gives the feast a family feel, like a maximum-security Thanksgiving. The boy sucks down three Cokes in five minutes and

stacks a pile of chocolate chip cookies on his foam plate. He reminds me of my sons. I give him a patch from one of our units. He stares at the skull, helicopters, and English writing before sliding it into his pocket. The interpreters joke with the boy and ask if he wants to work with the Americans someday. He doesn't answer. Straight-faced, he looks at his father, who nods, waves his hands, and says, "Yes, of course. Yes. Someday. Someday he works with Americans!"

At 10:00 P.M. our guests stand and say they must go. We walk the long corridor into the Iraqi night. As we approach the checkpoint, three contract security guards rush toward us from the T-wall shadows. One says, "How old is this child?"

"Ten. He's my guest's son," I say.

"You know children aren't ever allowed on the FOB."

"No, I didn't know. Sorry. They're headed out now."

"Actually, they can't leave now. We need more info."

Our interpreters talk with Ali and Abbas in murmurs, assuring them everything is okay. The guards speak into their radios to the ops center where others watch the conversation unfold in real time via surveillance camera feeds. They ask for Iraqi IDs and U.S. credentials. General Ali raises his hands from his side and says, "Don't worry, be happy." The security men don't smile. Their ball caps catch the perimeter lights and cast a half-moon shadow on their faces. Abbas lights a cigarette, looks over the Americans, pats his son's head, and grumbles to our interpreters, who shake their heads no. Ali and Abbas seem way too comfortable with the encounter. Sometimes you forget random detention is normal in a failed state.

Moments later, the guards wave their hands and say we can go.

"Have a safe night," they say as they turn and walk toward their posts. The generals laugh as they stroll through the checkpoint and onto the quiet street. Abbas grinds his cigarette into the asphalt and speaks softly to Ali as they close their car doors. The floodlights give the Iraqi night a silver glow, and we watch the sedan's tail lights grow small as it nears the Fourteenth of July Bridge. Besides the generators' drone, our base is quiet, and from the wall you can hear the Baghdad traffic. Think of Abbas and his son. Is the father always afraid for his boy or is he used to the idea that blasts or bullets could swipe

their lives anytime on these ancient streets? If only it were as easy as General Ali's mantra.

## 2016

In our small California town, if a road isn't named after you, you're an outsider. I wonder how this makes our Afghan neighbors across the street feel. Our family gets along well with Fred, the Americanized version of his name, his wife, and their three children—two girls and a boy. Our kids play together nearly every day. They throw balls and Frisbees, ride scooters and skateboards, walk to the gas station, and play foosball in our garage. Another Air Force guy and his family live next door, but we get along better with our Afghan neighbors.

One summer night, Fred invites us into his home. The kids rush off to play video games. My wife and I sit with Fred and his wife in their dining room under a gold-scripted Islamic prayer decorating their wall. They've just broken the day's fast.

"*Ramadan Mubarak*," I say.

"Thank you," says Fred, slapping my shoulder.

Fred's wife brings tea. He sells cars in the next town over so we ease into a conversation about the auto business. Soon, we're talking about home improvement and the neighborhood, and before long Bagram bubbles up.

"You've been to Afghanistan?" asks Fred.

"Yes, Bagram a couple years ago," I say.

"Bagram is beautiful," Fred's wife says.

We learn Fred grew up in Kabul. His family still lives there. As a teenager, he immigrated to the U.S. during the Soviet occupation.

"My mother packed my brother and me a bag of food and told us we must go," he says. They walked east toward the mountains and Pakistan. "A difficult and long journey," he says.

"Let's not talk about that now," says his wife. "It's a very sad story."

I sense Fred wants to share, but now's not the time. All I can think to say is, "The world should hear your story one day, and I'm happy you're here now."

"Yes," he says. "Many have told me that."

"Do you want to show your children Afghanistan?" I ask.

"Yes, of course. I look forward to bringing my children to visit someday."

## 2009

On a bus outside Nairobi headed to Arusha, Tanzania, I'm pinned in a wheel-well seat as people keep piling on. We're six wide in a space engineered for four. On my right sits a man who has to be six foot six but he takes the crowded conditions in stride. His faded ball cap, wire-rimmed glasses, and Lincoln beard leave me wondering what I'm in for rubbing shoulders with this dude for the next eight hours. We roll through the suburbs where coffin makers line their wares along the streets, and I marvel about how death seems closer in these parts of the world. The driver's bloodshot yellow eyes dart to and from the rearview. Low-voiced Swahili punctuates the engine's hum.

Outside Nairobi, the highway turns to dirt and dust clouds the bus. Passengers lob their garbage out the windows with angry tosses. Maasai tribesmen in red gowns stand out against the savannah. *Rungus*, wooden throwing clubs, swing in their hands with each step. I'd just read about a thirty-five-year-old Maasai man recently clubbing a lion to death. The clash lasted half an hour, but victory was short-lived. Hyenas waylaid and killed the man moments after he slew the lion.

Soon the guy on my shoulder starts a conversation. He's headed back to Arusha—home to the UN's Rwandan Criminal Tribunal—after picking up his wife from the Nairobi airport. She's wedged on the opposite side of him and appears relieved to be riding the ruts near the border of Kenya and Tanzania.

He's a doctor. After a stint of African humanitarian work in the eighties, he returned to New York where he opened a practice and gained a family. Later, he shuttered his office and journeyed back to the continent. He and his wife raised their kids on the Kagera River near Lake Victoria on the fringe of the Rwandan genocide. He described the bloated bodies clotting the river from bank to bank. He spoke too of malaria, sleeping sickness, chikungunya, dengue, and yellow fever.

Now the doctor provides hospice care to this AIDS-ravaged region. He toils to help people die as painlessly as

possible in their homes. He often travels dozens of hours by air and four-by-four to reach his patients.

"It's powerful," he says. "We're making progress."

He asks why I'm in Tanzania. I say, "Climbing Kili-manjaro," and wish I had a better answer.

"You'll get sick," he says. "They don't publish the numbers of the people who die on Kili. You should climb Meru, it's prettier, you feel better, and it's easier to get down. Remember, this isn't the States. We don't have trauma centers."

He tells me how problems easily treated in the West are killers in parts of Africa. One of his colleagues careened into another car on this same dusty highway a year ago. "He'd have died if another driver didn't pick him up and rush him to the hospital. Luckily, the OR and a surgeon were available. His colleagues donated blood. All of this came together for him. Most aren't that lucky."

"What happens to children born with serious health problems?"

"Usually, they die. Doctors declare them untreatable."

"In the U.S., they'll fly kids across the country if they have to," I say.

"That's not an option here."

Consider Kevin Carter's Pulitzer photo of a starving Sudanese toddler suffering alone on the barren ground while a vulture stalks the background. You can see it and read the story online.

"Working with children must be the toughest part of your work?"

"Nah, it's the most rewarding," he says. "Most of us don't realize how lucky we are."

## 2004

Growing up, I sometimes heard: "You don't know how lucky you are to have been born in America." And, despite our country's flaws, it's true that quality medical care is widely available and people are less likely to die from treatable illnesses. This premise echoes in my mind on a spring afternoon as I follow the ambulance weaving through San Antonio traffic. Our infant son, Casey, lies in the ambulance as medics labor to keep him stable on the ride from one hospital to the next. Doctors called for the move after diagnosing Casey with a severe heart condition requiring

multiple open-heart surgeries.

The doctor said, "I could send you anywhere in the country for this surgery, but the team here is good. I'd send my kids to them."

Radio voices describe the battle for Fallujah. Marines pummel the city after the public killing of four security contractors a few weeks ago. The traffic and news voices lull me away from my family tragedy to the regional calamity underway in Babylon. The Texas haze softens my view, and I try to picture what the Fallujah Marines see on their deadly roads.

Imagine being a father in Fallujah. Leaving is the only choice, but what if that's impossible? How do you cope? Can you quell your rage? As I follow my son to the care that could save his life, I think about where we'd be if he were born today in Fallujah.

## 2016

Mosul. Raqqa. Aleppo. Sanaa . . .

Fallujah remains a war zone. One headline: "Iraq digs security trench around Fallujah after recapturing city from ISIS." This twenty-first-century moat reminds us that medieval tactics never really go away. A college professor's quote echoes: "In the long haul of history, a stone ax crushing a skull is no different from a Tomahawk missile except in its efficiency."

Besides today's combat, Fallujah's children face the consequences of battles past. Some call Fallujah "Iraq's Hiroshima" due to an unprecedented rise in birth defects scientists attribute to the weapons used there. One doctor said, "It's common now in Fallujah for newborns to come out with massive multiple systemic defects, immune problems, massive central nervous system problems, massive heart problems, skeletal disorders, babies being born with two heads, babies being born with half of their internal organs outside of their bodies, cyclops babies literally with one eye . . ." You can see photos online.

Mogadishu. Benghazi. Kandahar. Ciudad Juárez . . .

## 2014

You leave the Bagram hospital, drive the perimeter road in an old SUV, and stop near a creek running under the



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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PHOTO BY TRAN TRAN PHOTOGRAPHY