Hunting Dogs

Murdoch didn’t sleep. He couldn’t. There wasn’t much time to, anyway, but even when there was, he couldn’t sleep. The FOB was a continuum of voices, lights, diesel engines, day and night. And, when Murdoch did lie down, a kaleidoscope twisted thought on thought: his son, his wife, his son, his wife.

At night, Murdoch would change his uniform. He would shave. Then his red-lensed flashlight would cast crimson over the sandbagged hovels, the rotting heskoes, and the make-shift guard towers on the way to the last tower over the gate. Murdoch would climb into the last tower. He would light a cigarette. Then, Murdoch would shoot the dogs.

There was an infestation of strays, pathetic strays. They moved in packs. They howled. They were everywhere, day and night—sniffing, snarling, wining, panting—everywhere.

Most nights in the tower, Murdoch sat with others on fireguard. The stillness, the drudgery of hours, the empty conversation erased all things, erased the kaleidoscope. Eventually, Murdoch would finger the safety off his rifle. He would trace the red dot through the lens piercing the landscape lit by jade—night vision. His eyes would graze the plain beyond the berms, beyond the concertina wire, beyond the sandbag canopies. He would start there—the grassland—two-hundred, three-hundred meters away, the muzzle of his rifle swaying in the shape of an eight, the barrel weaving left, weaving right, weaving left, weaving right… He would find a landmark—an overturned sedan, the steel skeleton, still spewing smoke, a phantasm.

There, he saw them: silhouettes pressed against lime green. They slumped low—three or four—dragging their snouts through the sand. Murdoch would hum softly, something, a rasp, and his index finger would begin to squash the trigger well. The barrel would stop circling. Then, the flash: it preceded the silence, the muzzle jump, the cavernous *plink*. One silhouette would leap, fly, as if swatted by an invisible hand, twisting, arcing, diving backwards, then motionless.

Every night. Every night, he made his way to the tower. Every night, the cigarette. Every night, something burned. Every night, the dogs, release.

But that night, that night the moon was suspended like a bulb. Its light was generous. That night, Cortez was there too, the only one.

Murdoch lit a Pall Mall. He coughed, dusted off the firing handle of his rifle, turned on the night vision. Cortez looked through his own goggles, eyeing the southeast corner of the field where Murdoch aimed.

Murdoch focused the optic on his rifle: The sagebrush, the sand dunes, the wreckage, the trash piles. The sagebrush, the sand dunes, the wreckage, the trash piles, more dunes, more sand, more sand.

The silhouettes. Murdoch counted: *one, two…five here*.

*Yep, there’s five I see*, said Cortez.

Murdoch leaned in, felt the breeze, sang the hum. The silhouettes shifted softly.

He saw it then. He saw it. Something. Something black, large, eyes. A dog? Much larger.

*Iraq got wolves?* he asked. Cortez said he didn’t think so. Murdoch looked again.

Eyes. He could see the eyes, the ears, and the snout clearly through the verdant moonlight.

*I’ll be damned. I’ll be damned. It’s staring right at me,* Murdoch said. Cortez asked where. Murdoch said twenty meters south of the one tree.

*No*, Cortez said, *I don’t see it.*

Murdoch looked again, dialing in the sight.

Eyes. And he could see the rise and fall of its back, the fur upright. *Look again*, he told Cortez. Cortez looked, then put down his sight, lit a cigarette. *Nope*.

Eyes.

*That’s defiantly a damn big dog*, said Murdoch, looking up.  *It was like it was looking right at me, man, its head up. How you miss that? I swear…*

Murdoch drew in deeply on the Pall Mall, looked back through the sight. It shook slightly.

There was the dangling moon, the dunes, the sagebrush, the trash piles. There were no silhouettes now. There were no eyes.