

Alghai falcon

87

rather 'parrot-head'

v light
'shorter'
head

+
upper
back

down? good at
down

down? slight
spangle
'rain' shining

bulky and
'heavy'

lowest
levels
primary
Vi back.

feet big
& thick for size

tail mostly
observed in
rocks. but
v. light
small fenestae.



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Cover drawing of Ahmed Shah Massoud by Maria Makepeace.
Flyleaf: a page from the author's notebook.

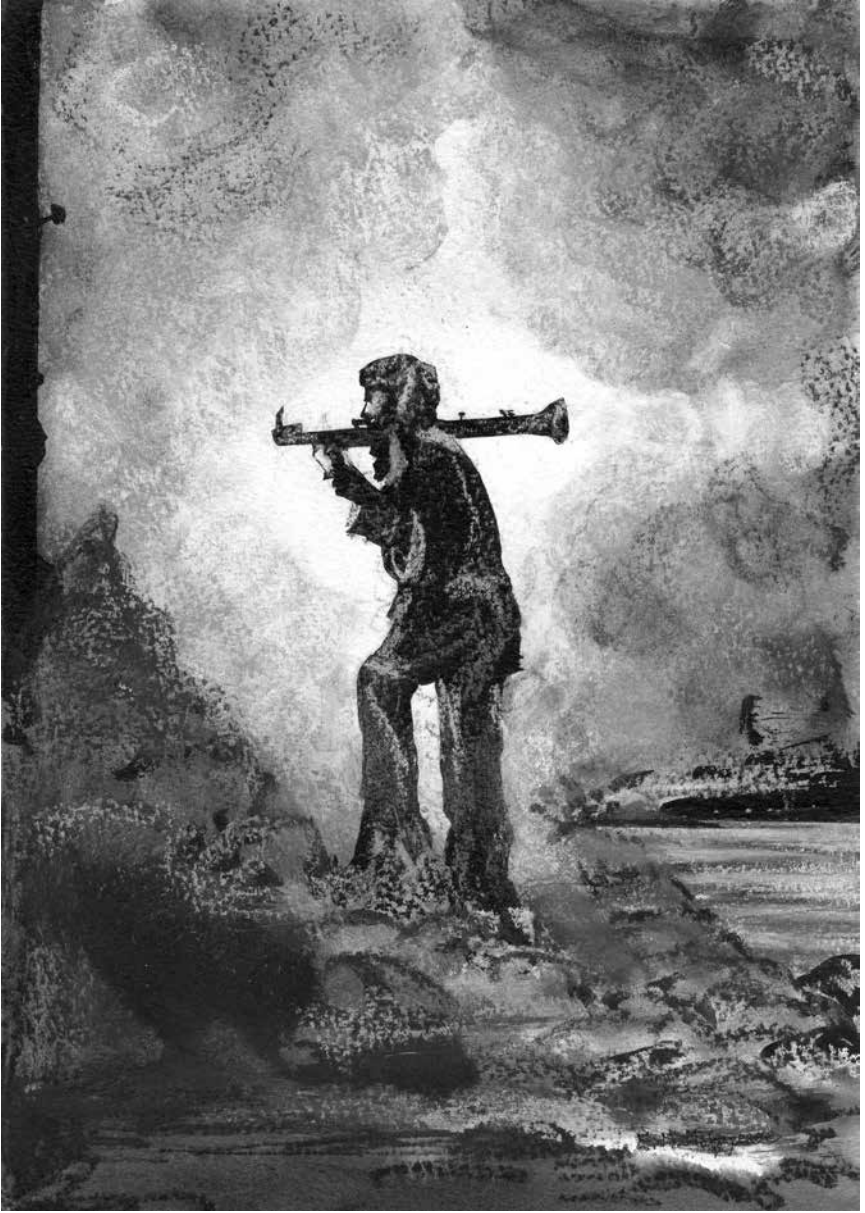
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Dedicated to the memory of
Ahmed Shah Massoud
(1953–2001)



The author in Afghanistan, by E.M. Makepeace.

Introduction

In the course of my work as a naturalist, I've been able to visit Afghanistan twice in recent months and this tragically torn country, not for the first time in its history, is a scene of devastation amongst starkly beautiful mountains and deep valleys. Afghanistan links Middle East and Orient in many ways, Central Asia and the Arab lands, Russia and the Indian sub-continent, but we have little awareness of it despite reports from the war now seven years old, despite the visitors there from this country, the refugees from there now in this country, whose reports our "media" ignore. Large parts of the interior are almost empty of people; the better little farms of the bottomlands have lost stockmen and stock, arable reverts quickly without irrigation and care to windblown semi-arid wastes: generations of work lost.

Colin Simms
Low Woodhead,
Tynedale 1987

Distances open up, dizzy altitude. White peaks and silver edges dazzle all the while at which seems as distilled off glaciers as the rock dust on dry gorge, ridge wisp, kiosk and minaret alike all also appearing friable as cake in the mirage or haze dazing torrents and waving willows and tilting strata and stirring stars.

I wanted to look, amongst other things, at rockthrushes and a mysterious "brown falcon". Some editors and "critics" dismissed my 1980s visits to Central Asia, including Afghanistan, as merely more exercises on the "hippie trail", an itinerary I had avoided in its time. Not so the *SubVoicive* readings in London or Bob Cobbing of Writers Forum, who reissued these poems and pieces in an enlarged and revised second edition to the 1995 selection. Sandie Robbie and Mary Hider word-processed this version very generously.

1995

This work derives nearly from verses and sketches noted in draft or drawn during visits almost a quarter-century ago, and versions in the two earlier editions from Writers Forum. I have not been tempted to include many pieces started since, some at the stimulus of eyewitnesses now refugees in England I have met; drawn by a word, their gestures, a look about the eyes; accounts 'confirmed' in our media or theirs sometimes and often not; the few exceptions are obvious. I regret I have not been back.

Dedicated to those indicated in these pieces, and others who have encouraged and helped me over the years, especially now the late Eric Mottram and Bob Cobbing, editor of Writers Forum, and faithful former colleagues Mary Hider and Margaret Hartley. Nothing is included here not sparked off in Afghanistan, but a series of poems in the "big cats" (1988 publication, Islamabad) and another from Bamiyan have been excluded for other treatment. Even so, editing may not have been severe enough. The excluded poems, and faunal lists made in the Hindu Kush and Pamirs, are available, as yet unpublished, with subsequent essays on such topics as the bigger Afghan falcons, and the post-2001 Afghan "scene".

2013

§

Nimble the men on the ridge, and the woman
with them; her bundle the lumpiest Khurgin.
Armoured-personnel-carriers stumble
aerials tremble some course-correction
snailpaced, tabular, radulas fumble
rumble half-tracks polished of friction
leaving whitened and silvered trail quite certain.

§

Stoned steel rings a scream of distant rubble
though slow to crump à la Krupp, shrapnel fountains.
“Over 200 Afghanis to the dollar!”
has become dust, fear’s avalanches of
troubles with the rest. No interest in roubles
deserters loaded with them; but guns are better:
scorch over Kabul other than unburnt hydrocarbons.

§

Since shock for her children, collapsed, she is older
Rezvan has corkscrewed a supply plane down, certain
it was hers; though she had some help with the launcher
sore shoulder after, no ammunition to rehearse
decants the boozah tenderly, with thanks arising
is no bolder, neither bolder nor “wiser”, will die to a tank
eyes ease the company, forgetting her curses.

(For seven years the Soviet 40th Army has only been able to safeguard the highway and the two pipelines north to the border and so on into Russia. They have not crushed Ahmed Shah Massoud’s strongholds in the hills though they have rushed their crack troops, tanks, gunships, whole flyways of migrant planes to bomb and rocket from Kabul and from deep within their Union. Moscow’s Frunze Academy has trained hundreds of guerrillas who are now bushed in foothills they haven’t learned every inch of and their tour of duty is over before they do—if they are going to).

1986/87

Millet

Sign nearby: there a boot has been
terraced cereal mine-field
where (prayers flag wind)
rags rip, torn plastic roars and rattles.
scarlet, emerald shards attract...

Pharsee carefully phrased salaams
undulate the outskirts with the prayers
parsing dust to some ephemeral dune

same wind can trap careless minds
unless the eye learns, spurn the false
feet guess a few steps to a new tune

quartering for particular lie
sorting-out stipples, wind ripples
stem slack or taut lines, lying-in of mines
shadow of mine sleeps with my own heart
no beggar's tap, no blind man's trust
a child was taken away in ragged parts
no children play now, the plough grows rust

used to seek lizards and larksnest, stare
where weathered quartzites have been disturbed
the cast is reeled in over a signed surface
ground grasshopper basking as secure as ever
dither spider, uptilt barrels spinnerets gossamer
same wind tell-tales to its anchor the wire
chimes thin as far muezzin off minaret, and higher.

(Between 5 and 25 million anti-personnel mines and wire triggered, grenade booby traps have been sown and planted, especially around villages in one province, and by both sides).

No Ants Yet, This Sand

Earth otherwise unstirred tip-crisp inch-perfect
here one graved raze by noise-wave either shell or rocket
displaced a little way, laid humped, glazed as clay disparate
some isolated deep-plough turnovers cadavers displayed
seamed transversely as if ancient, grain arbitrarily running
dismay the thrill and turn of the blood and of guts.

So cold for burnt cloth, the scarab already burning, laces
to the faeces, but the wind shifts a little into our faces
taints the lump to the throat, bundles, and blood pulse races.

Slowness, Baiting...

slowness, baiting the “Bird of Prey”
ground baiting day after day
proves he’s a vulture really
not to be compared with
Altai’s enigmatic falcon.
whose contribution his play
speed, as a windy day,
good for “saying the say
recurring wordslay
carrying life away
at the right moment”

Vibrations

Antique air-conditioning still working
fans for no Afghans!! and no punkah-wallahs.
Antics upstairs: “drug dealers and gun-runners”
sounding like martens in farmhouse attics;
revealed as those scene-stealers anywhere
Bradford-related Pakistani children drugged or
lassitude paranoia adrenaline hysteria.
One of them: “Mahsood has got back
the emerald mines. We’ll trade them for guns”.

Peshawar, from Dean's Hotel

Hemipenes

Mountains pulled these winds scraped pushed men
beyond these foothills and no further such
forks grain up into the Hindu Kush
deserters from Alexander's battalions.
Rock's serpent's Organ-of-Jacobsen
between delicate placement and sheer "luck"
tried them for genetic fit, and they stuck.

He Paints Himself with Ochre
(once man, now bird)

*Does he do this as Tibetans do, against the cold
and or against insect attentions?*

Majestic Death is the Bonecrusher
most magnanimous of all vultures
power for his transmutations buccaneer
changes light and shade post-mortem
gives his life back to mountains

Yet mean to us in his appearances
his watchers say avoiding Russians, Russia
offers fresh unexpected reward to such
as we are, Ins'allah, not "familiar"—
type of man isolations control over
with the eagles ours against life grievances
for similar wisdom, long life deliverers

Leaves patter for half an hour after
death as if dropped by the Bonecrusher
spiralling, or falling faster charred
the flash of the dump going up
going up had not sent him away
or its earthshaking crump or cordite
bitterness full on his air hotter
than ever, buoying him up an hour thermal gyre
longer than he would have hung there watching
so that we watched him for when it would clear:
go in and crush skulls ahead of him.

(Lammergeier: The Bearded Vulture)

Remembering Embarrassment

reject impressions on the trails' silent
possessing the way which is less direct
and because of its weight not to be detected

fearing is still not open enough, this night
we move in not even in bright moonlight
confession will not wait interrogation expected

Hindu Kush and beyond, Pamir knot and beyond
divide stars, near and far, dislodge the way
their procession this is, eagles' could be wisdom

part of it was cast off from the mountains
part by the head of the man ahead, for the moment
or age our leader, whether tomorrow he *will* be different

one stretch of alp will suddenly connect, recollection
happiest one man who passed it on; I hope to keep up
beyond where I have nothing to bring out embarrassment

then I find that like mine in the light their eyes
are on falcon, enlightened, and raven, anxious
caress and pat each burden and forget spies and foes

and sing in the evening if we've been able to go in the light
or in the morning if the day ahead is forbidden
denied grumbling bears cracking lice and listening!

and to EMZ

Grafted onto Any Stock, Such a Bud

Sage birds out after rain in pursuit of it
rive juniper bushes hardly if already berried
stone echoes lose old clothes to increment talus
cement dries around toes silences and pales if
chanting children as to stick-and-stones play
deliberate tune stiff as water-dropping, as slow
in starting-up early crickets above colour's sure notes
pure chords looted like a Ming bowl being used
by one to mix barley ground as shale flour mash
stark up-sun white-stemmed *Betula utilis* birch-
stick sings rattling thick black-lenticular marked bark
what is going to be written will depend, as with our birchwine
of Hesleyside and there less sweet, more stark;
on the *sap* running, if he is still here to sup it
who has long since discarded hashish and tobacco
and might be Kelly's young brother, back in America,
strapping expendable paper cups to cambium cuts;
premature "buds"... all such children never grow up.

Refutations

Bare ridges bridge
rubber boots rub-amber
screeruns creeks as bergs age away
loosening smoking rooftops pantile pattern
Shiva lives high Himarleah, other
gods regime the rivers
are other mountain-clusters refused to climbers.

Flustered Clumsy-Custards

Our way decided of a thousand trails
mustered arbitrarily (according to day and season
and safety), moutonéed rock old as of Cumbrian
rockribs similarly worn down by feet and sheep
rock at the surface leathery, (not meadow-hide dales
collecting rain, mist, seed-clogging bootseams and eyelets)
but noisier counterpoint, stinging bare hooves ringing steep
inselberg's; Schoenberg after 1914 when structures
emerged fresh as for Pound, all art broke strictures
"brave are those who accomplish deeds beyond their courage;
if the Gods had granted their awareness of what they were doing
they would not be so enviable, but what they do is to be coveted".

Matériel at Herat

Walled locality, more corral
than city, more man who can
rebuild a gun of any material
come to hand as the only ground
we have is the day we have

spiritual rationale and its optimism is
temper to appropriate calibre

crankpins grimace harness lynchpins
as turned earth home yielded silky as spittle
bronze palstave supposed millennia "old"
uncreased, smooth as of constant use
shepherd claimed he had lost it "only in the war"
metal never old until its gone to corrosion.
In this war, makes ore of filigree, decor.