

## The Afghan Blood House

—Gabriel Tolliver

Halloween. We had just arrived  
replacements at FOB Gambit.  
Flying over Zabul province in a Blackhawk—  
the movie set of *Conan The Barbarian*—  
sci-fi Afghan. Ethereal. The house  
used to belong to some warlord who was  
killed by the Taliban a few months back.  
The Talibs shot up the warlord  
and his minions in a couple of the rooms  
leaving bullet holes, witnesses to execution.  
Now the house was a place to treat  
the wounded from the outlying combat outposts,  
for the dead to be picked up  
and taken to Kandahar Airfield.

Inside, a wall of handprints drawn  
by the previous Canadian units stationed there.  
Hands big, small, and medium-sized outlined in a variety of S  
outlined in Sharpie and paint colors  
alongside various messages, some  
handprints became memorials for those  
Death claimed for her quota.  
I had some time to kill and found a spot  
near one of the makeshift operating rooms  
to catch a nod. THOOM!...THOOM!...  
A Stryker's 105mm gun sending up

orange illumination flares toward the hills.

*Trick o' Treat, Talib*—I mused, imagining  
bullet candy, hearing Michael Jackson's "Thriller"  
in the MWR hut, Taliban zombies coming down  
from the hills and assaulting the FOB.

I woke to sounds of the aid station coming to life.  
An IED strike hit a Stryker. The driver and the gunner  
were CAT-A and rushed in. The driver was in his 20s.  
His ACUs were burnt, bloodied, and ripped open.  
Dude had a dazed, quizzical look on his face  
as if to say, "Really???" as he was being wheeled in  
by the medics toward one of the bullet-pockmarked ORs.  
As the kid's gurney was passing the handprint wall  
he raised his bloodied right hand  
touched a row of hands, giving each  
a bloodied signature.

*"Let's go, Bix"*— my squad leader called.  
I gathered up my M4 and Mich and followed him  
out into the full moon of the October night.  
We were relieving the listening post team  
outside the wire. Hours later we came back in and  
I headed back to the aid station. The bloodied streak  
across the handprint wall was wiped clean  
but still left a faint smear. I didn't see the kid.  
I asked one of the medics about him.  
The medic shook his head and kept on walking.