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 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.