

2010

The Art Of War

Youval Shimoni

Dalya Bilu

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Recommended Citation

Shimoni, Youval and Dalya Bilu. "The Art Of War." *The Iowa Review* 40.2 (2010): 152-176. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.6921>

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THE ART OF WAR

Translated from the Hebrew by Dalya Bilu

In time these Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire.... In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map.

—Jorge Luis Borges

Today, many years afterwards, the decoration of his capital has been turned to useless structures.

—Gabriel Moked

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However, in order to conduct the operation in the best possible way and avoid unnecessary casualties, either on the side of the attackers or that of the people of the quarter themselves, since it was not against them that the operation was directed but only against the minority among them who were concentrated in three buildings on the square, the tall office building and the other two that looked like perfectly ordinary apartment buildings; in order to achieve the utmost precision without deviating from the plan, and to conclude each stage of the operation on time before the force moved as one man towards the target—starting from the landing point, proceeding through the peaceful suburbs and the alleys shadowing the illuminated avenues, and ending at the center itself, in the middle of which stood the aforesaid buildings (the tallest, the bronze plaque at whose entrance was as false as the man who polished it every morning, and the two apartment buildings next to it, where all the names of the residents on the mailboxes were fabrications, and where no toddler would climb onto a chair to peek at you through the peephole and no dog would jump on you when the door opened)—to this end, in order to avoid harming either his people or their opponents, either the men of the force or the residents of the quarter, who had already witnessed the eviction of their neighbors in a long, crowded convoy, pitiful in its hope of taking with it not only the household goods but also the feeling of home itself—for this reason, and without one con-

sideration outweighing the other, the commander of the force had come to his decision.

One by one he set out his arguments, stressing the importance of the operation and enlisting, albeit reluctantly, his personal charm as well as the halo of heroism with which he had unwillingly been crowned and which already weighed so heavily on his head that he sometimes wished he could take it off and hang it up like a hat on a peg. Point by point he reviewed his plan, clearly, methodically, and irrefutably, and afterwards he demanded and exhorted and warned, until in the end he persuaded not only the general himself, who had tended to agree with him from the outset, but also the heads of the branches beneath him, who would have to bear the brunt of the work, and thus they agreed to set up the façade of a quarter that would be identical to the real enemy quarter in its appearance and dimensions, and only its materials would be different; for it would be constructed from plywood and cardboard like the sets of old studio movies.

Like a milestone growing bigger in a train window the date of the operation approached, and with time pressing, the heads of the branches enlisted all their soldiers in the task, from the lowest ranks to the highest, even those who were in the middle of important missions were recalled and brought to the training ground, to that desolate terrain between arid hills inhabited by only a few field mice and shrews, and where they found their food nobody knew. Again and again the ground above their warrens was trampled by the boots of the members of the force, again and again it was disturbed by the evening wind only to be stamped on once more, until in the end it was completely overturned by the diggers. Their tools were sharp, their hands practiced, and soon they had taken over an area big enough for not only a single force to train on, but an entire division.

Day and night they labored on the foundations after the draftsmen and surveyors had completed their work, and after them the carpenters and the painters, until the whole project was concluded in a single week, whose days stretched into nights and nights into days. And when they surveyed their handiwork, even though they knew what to expect since it was after all the product of their very own labors, they marveled at the sight of the reduplicated quarter with the three buildings at its center, the office building and the two apartment buildings, every detail in accordance with the data gleaned from the maps and blueprints and reports of the intelligence agents. Seen

from above, from a bird's eye view, but for the hills encircling the imitation quarter instead of the waves of the sea that surrounded the enemy town, the spy planes would never have been able to tell the difference between it and the real quarter of the enemy town.

Day after day the commander of the force practiced the stages of the operation with his men. Throughout the week required for the erection of the imitation quarter they rehearsed their roles, until each man knew not only his own role but also those of his comrades, as well as every detail of the aerial photographs, magnified until every letter of every shop sign and graffito was clearly legible.

On the eighth day, when they arrived in the cardboard town, they felt completely at home. Easily they advanced down the western, eastern, and northern streets—penetrating from the south was out of the question; the enormous crater yawning there in the enemy town had obliterated any vestige of a road—easily they crossed the wide avenue, with no need of a map or compass or even the light of the stars, and easily they moved along the narrow alleys to the central square, recognizing from afar the false plaque on the office building and the bicycle parked at the entrance to the first apartment building, which nobody had ever ridden.

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Like the parts of a delicate, finely tuned instrument their activities merged and united into one movement towards the center, where the real quarter housed their rivals, the enemies because of whom they were undergoing this exhaustive training, and because of whom once peaceful householders—a woman beating a carpet, a man leaning over a balcony railing, a toddler pressing his nose to a window or the glass wall of his aquarium—had turned into a convoy kicking up dust.

The general felt a sincere desire to shower them all with compliments far more lavish than the conventional words of praise that actually rose to his lips, above all their commander, who was below him in rank but more highly regarded due to his heroism and the fact that he needed no promotions or medals to testify to his worth. Somewhat stooped beneath the weight of his decorations and his years the general stood before the force, his thumbs stuck in his belt, in keeping with his habit from the days when the flesh beneath them was still solid and muscular, and surveyed the men sitting at his feet, erect and alert and alike as the teeth on the cogwheels of a watch, and wished them success in their mission; not only for their own sakes, so that none of them would be harmed, but also for the sake of the people of the

quarter, who were enemies only by definition and not by deed, and against whom the general harbored no grudge at all, since they too suffered under the threat of the new residents of the quarter. And he gave them his blessings for the sake of those who sent them too—those who sent them, said the general to the soldiers sitting at his feet, in other words their families, who were ensconced in their homes in the cities far from the evil, but unfortunately it was in the nature of evil to infiltrate, undermine, and penetrate.

Begging the General's pardon, said the commander of the force politely, but there was no need to point these things out to his men. If there had been they wouldn't have volunteered to risk their lives. No one had forced them to do so; and before thanks and congratulations, the General should please turn his attention, or rather his eyes, to what was not in the least pleasing to the eye, for instance to this wall of the office building; here, the paper covering it, painted the color of concrete, was already beginning to come loose at the edges, and the corner was flapping in the wind; and as for the wall itself, the General could see for himself, people had to avoid leaning on it too hard, in case it might collapse. Would the General please tell him, was this the proper way to train for a mission as daring and complex as the invasion of the enemy capital? And what were his men—actors in a movie whose bullets never ran out, in whose chests no hole ever gaped and suddenly reddened in the bloom of death? After they fell would they stand up and tidy their clothes, straighten their collars, fix their hair? What was the point of this penetration, he asked, fearlessly challenging the general, this advance and the arrival at their destination, if the men of the force were unable to carry out the breaching itself, the goal of the whole operation, properly? After all, the danger did not come from the peaceful streets leading to the center, where only the last of the party-goers would be making their way home so late at night, but from these three buildings alone, behind whose concrete walls, armed to the teeth and sharpening their hatred, waited the enemy.

And therefore, if the general indeed wished for the success of the operation, which was naturally beyond doubt, let him order the heads of the branches, verbally or in writing, to set to work at once, without slacking or skimping on materials as was their wont, on constructing proper buildings, and to hurry up about it, since time was pressing. They had so many resources at their disposal, resources that his own men, in spite of all the dangers they faced in their operations and even in the training that preceded them, had never enjoyed, nor anything like them. He did not begrudge the heads of

the branches, not at all. He and his men had no need of their resources and luxuries. The superiority of the force lay precisely in their ability to operate with what they could carry on their bodies. Let the heads of the branches enjoy their resources, as long as they also used them for the purpose for which they had been allocated in the first place. It was possible, of course, that the esteemed heads of the branches were not really and truly convinced of the importance of the operation as they sat safely in their offices—not that he intended, God forbid, to compare them to humble clerks. On the contrary, everybody knew that these were not dreary, dusty offices but gleaming, imposing bureaus—but precisely for this reason, in order to keep evil tongues from wagging, they should not hesitate now to devote all their energy to the successful conclusion of the project.

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It was a long and stormy consultation (thus it was defined in the order that summoned them, and thus it would be described by the secretary afterwards, even though he was present from beginning to end) that the general held with the heads of his branches. Thick clouds of smoke filled the rooms and billowed from the windows and doors opened to let them out. The authority of the general over the heads of his branches was still as strong as the bridle kicked against in vain by the sullen hoof of a horse; and perhaps they understood for themselves, since they were far from stupid, and simply preferred to have the order imposed from above rather than implementing the task at their own initiative. And even before the smoke dispersed in the morning air (fresh and sprightly it waited outside the walls of their bureaus, as if it too was at their beck and call), their men were busy at work. Putting rapid but strict procedures into effect they activated the heads of their divisions, who activated the heads of their teams, who set their skilled assistants to work, and they too urged their men down to the last of them not to rest until the task was completed. Even before the smell of the freshly dug earth had faded from the three huge pits excavated for the foundations, the concrete was cast, and as soon as it had dried in the stories rising above them, the floors were laid and the walls plastered and painted. And after a few days—if the heads of the branches accepted their tasks they knew how to carry them out—the buildings were standing: the tall office building and the two others, which looked like perfectly ordinary apartment buildings. In vain did the bird seeking scraps of paper for its nest peck at the edges of the concrete walls; in vain did the wind try to make them flap. The walls stood firm, as did their shadows, heavier and more resistant than before.

In the creek between the western hills, used by the men of the force for their training exercises instead of the river flowing into the sea, at its opening, where the ships would ostensibly land them when the day came on the other shore, the enemy shore, the men assembled before their commander. They knew their mission inside out; they had trained for it until it had been assimilated into every organ of their bodies, and therefore the words of their commander were brief. From the balcony of the observation tower, which had been erected for this purpose alone, the general surveyed them through his binoculars, stealing like shadows through the alleys, slipping round street corners, hugging the walls and merging imperceptibly into their shadows. He barely registered them pausing on the verge of the attack, as they focused and concentrated their senses in order to breach their target like a diamond cutting through glass (as the general's secretary, observing his master's face under the binoculars, noted; the lines radiating from his narrowed eyes, his breath bated). After a few moments, astonishing in their brevity, the men's heads appeared in the windows of the three buildings; their right hands raised in a thumbs-up sign of victory directed at the general, who may have been hidden from their eyes but of whose presence they were keenly aware, watching them from a distance on his tower. No, they did not resent him for remaining behind; they were well aware of his heroic deeds in the past, and they expected no more of him now than that inclination of his head when he looked down at them later, gathered once more at the foot of the tower, that nod so brief that anyone who missed it would not be able to see it again, though no one would miss it. Now they moved away from the windows into the interior of the rooms, merging into the darkness and vanishing from binoculars' lenses as if they had never appeared in them at all, elusive as a mirage.

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On their return to the assembly point their commander did not waste words. No, he had no praise for them. This complacency, he said, this baseless arrogance of theirs—did he have to say it again? What was the difficulty, he said, in taking over buildings like these, even if they climbed the drainpipes made of the same tin and the same color as the originals, or let themselves down on ropes into the windows that they knew in advance how to open, just as they knew whose reflections would appear on the inside of the windowpanes (if there had actually been anyone there and the rooms hadn't been empty when they came and empty when they left)?

The General had to remember, said the commander of the force as the two of them paced the balcony encircling the observation tower, the entire exercise was worth nothing as long as this quarter (he stretched out his hand and the light of the breaking dawn shone on its back, turning the old scars red) remained empty. If the General truly wished the operation to succeed, which nobody doubted for a moment—after all, the General himself had many achievements in the field to his credit, albeit many years ago; he had commanded ships, armored vehicles, and he had even, as very few people knew, almost headed this very force itself when it was first set up—in any case, the success of the force was the success of the army as a whole, first and foremost of the man who stood at its head; and accordingly, in order to guarantee this success, insofar as it was possible to guarantee anything that had not yet taken place, it was necessary, no, it was imperative, to populate this quarter that had been constructed here, through all their talent and labor and with all the accompanying arguments; for only when there were people in it, living in its rooms and walking in its streets, would the men of the force be able to practice their mission properly, according to the conditions pertaining in the real quarter, the only one—and they could not be allowed to forget this, not even for a moment, in their premature rejoicing at the ease of their virtual victory—that actually had to be conquered.

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People? wondered the general, imagining for a moment that a passing gust of wind had led him to misunderstand the words when he removed the grains of sand it had blown into his ear. People, repeated the commander of the force. People who will live in the buildings and go in and out of them, and drive the cars parked outside them; for what are these streets without cars driving in them and without traffic lights telling some of them to go and some of them to stop; without these things they are nothing at all. Let the General take care of it, it was simpler than putting up buildings, after all. Let him order real trees to be planted instead of avenues of cardboard and plywood, and let real dogs be sent, begging the General's pardon, to urinate on their trunks; and he wasn't saying this to be funny, not at all, but because of the well-known fact that these dogs, from the day the great war began, had multiplied in the streets, feeding on whatever they came across, including things it was better not to think about; and these dogs, as everyone knew, barked; and all it would take was for one of them to open its mouth and incite its fellows for their barking to reveal the advancing force, with a long way still to go before it reached the three buildings on the square. Therefore,

people were needed, who at the sound of the barking would look out of the windows and go out onto the balconies and remain standing there in spite of the danger (a danger to which the enemy town and its inhabitants had become so accustomed that precisely its absence gave rise to unease, like the chugging of a train that suddenly stops) both from their attackers and from the balcony balustrades, which had been shaken to their foundations. In this too the builders of the training quarter should be more precise; not out of any aesthetic consideration, God forbid, but because of the exposed iron girders from which pieces of balconies dangled like clothes hung out to dry. It was around these girders that the climbing ropes would be coiled, to them his men would cling, not to mention additional uses to which they could easily be put, which he would not talk about here, since they were not alone. Not that he was casting any aspersions on the reliability of the secretary writing down their words, God forbid, but in the course of documenting their every word he was liable to write down things forbidden for a stranger's eye to see and yet remain in its socket.

Dogs—said the general after thinking for a moment or two—trees, balconies and girders: no difficulty at all. On the contrary, let it teach the heads of the branches a lesson. Let them learn at last to pay attention to details, those braggarts who boasted of their know-how and exalted it above the gallantry of the real soldiers, like the commander of the force and the general himself. Didn't these heads of branches secretly hold the professional soldier in contempt? Didn't they despise his art, the art of war, and compare it, among themselves, to the games of boys who had never grown up? For what was a pistol, in their opinion, but the continuation of the pointing finger of a child, and what were all the great conquests if not the bloody metamorphosis of play, stealing a flag from some hill or other? Now let them go ahead and prove the professionalism of which they were so proud. A town, as the commander of the force so rightly said, was not only its buildings, the likes of which could be erected by the lowliest of architects, the kind who designed the cafés, for instance, where the city dwellers sat and sipped their coffee at their ease, as if all the evil in the world had vanished like the sugar lingering for a second in the middle of the foam before it sank and disappeared. How could they possibly have neglected the motorcars and the traffic lights? And the trees casting their shade all around? And the dogs stopping to raise

a leg, or squatting to do their business while gazing into the distance with thoughtful, straining eyes?

Yes, this sight, too, the general still remembered, like the ships he had commanded and the armored columns he had headed (especially the former, with the foam of the waves cleaved by their prows). Without hesitation he agreed to the commander's request, and he even regretted not having taken these things into account in the first place. But people, that was something that required further examination, for where would they get them from? The commander of the force certainly did not intend for soldiers to be housed there. The general knew very well what he had in mind. What was required here were civilians, like those who populated the real quarter; peaceful, innocent civilians who preferred to keep their hands clean and leave the business of killing to them, the soldiers, while they, the civilians, sank dainty little teaspoons into the quivering jelly of a cake. This being the case, he had to repeat his question—where were these people going to come from? Would they agree to leave their warm homes and comfortable furniture and the pointless decorations on their walls simply in order to take part in the training of the commander's force? Did they have any idea of the importance of this operation, at night when they were sleeping soundly in their beds with their heads buried in their pillows, any notion of what the soldiers did?

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Above the chain of hills gilded by the soft early morning light sailed the open sky, in which two birds froze for a moment as if they had been etched by a nib. Would the General please look at the view, said the commander of the force, holding out his hand to the hills as if they had just this moment been drawn by it, did his soul not expand at the sight? Was his heart not moved? Yes, he had no hesitation about using words like these when confronted by such beauty. And those locked gates and fences, road blocks and barbed wire surrounding the hills on the other side and forbidding entry to anyone not party to the operation, those things would no doubt spoil the view if they were visible to the eye, but fences too were nothing as long as you didn't bump into them—the General might compare the situation to that of a fly flying around a house: it was completely free; if it wished, it could land on the kitchen table and busily approach a grain of sugar; if it wished, it could settle on the nose of a sleeping man; if it wished, it could swing on the curtain cord; it was free to do as it wished, and only when to its misfortune it came up against the closed window pane would it realize that it was trapped; alas, from now on it was doomed to beat against the glass again and again

and wear itself out with buzzing, on condition that it didn't first wake the sleeping man, who would get up and kill it—accordingly, let the fences be removed in honor of the people coming in, rolled up as easily as a carpet and rolled out again once the people were put in place. Not in order to stop them from leaving, God forbid, but only to prevent a stranger's eye from spying on their activities and being ripped out of its socket.

Clear and bright as the sky above him were the commander's eyes, his pupils black as the birds gliding on the breeze. The wind now reached the balcony of the tower, slightly ruffling the general's white hair and passing also through the bristles on the cropped head of the commander. Bristles as black as ravens, the general noted, and dense as those of a young man, one of his own soldiers, for instance. Was it the danger that stopped him from aging? Had death, which the commander of the force confronted every day, forgone the signs of whitening hair and stooping back? Painfully the general observed the straight back of the commander as he gripped the balcony railing with his hands and stretched his arms. And in the light breaking across the imitation quarter it seemed that in a moment the windows and shutters would be opened wide and the bed linen would be hung out to air.

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As he could see for himself, said the commander of the force to the general, the three buildings on the square alone would not be enough; and even if the facades of the additional buildings were slightly marred, with here and there a balcony destroyed, plaster exposing the bricks beneath, a room gaping open to the street, precisely this would prove their worth; for which of two buildings, in the General's considered opinion, was safer—an old one crumbling in a slow, inexorable deterioration, or a new one inflicted by some minor mutilation so that, like a cripple, it learned to rely on its other limbs until they grew far more muscular than before? Let additional buildings therefore be built, and posters put up in the capital city and the port cities, and the General would see for himself how people would flock to him—not to him in person of course, but to the heads of his branches and their deputies and assistant deputies—young couples who could not afford to buy a home of their own, hushing each other in cramped rooms so as not to disturb aged parents behind the wall; families sick of the view of a crumbling wall outside their window; and single people would come too, people not connected to anything who could easily move from place to place, all their possessions packed into a suitcase together with their memories and dreams—and actually the importance of these singles was great from

the military point of view, an importance similar to that of stray dogs in the street; for while the couples would be occupied by their own affairs and in no hurry to rush to their windows, the single's window was his permanent place, and he would be the first to sound the alarm. On a quick calculation, albeit crude and inexact, the branch heads could work out the details, they would need so and so many couples, so many families with children, so many single men and women; as for the cars, stray dogs and cats, let the gentlemen from the statistical department get out their beads and calculate the requisite numbers.

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Not a few days were required, but not too many either. In any event the date of the operation had been postponed, for what was the point of carrying it out before the preparations for the training exercise were concluded? The commander of the force was right, and the response to the posters exceeded expectations. The gentlemen of the statistical department were not required to calculate the details, since the people moving in brought everything needed with them. Thus the inventory of the items transported, unloaded, and divided among the apartments according to lists prepared in advance included, inter alia, nine grand pianos, forty-four aquariums, a glass bowl containing a single goldfish, nine talking parrots, and even a circus trapeze, slightly bent, which a retired acrobat insisted on bringing with him.

The general's secretary was responsible for noting the date in the operation log, and next to it the exact hour, minute, and second. What was the precise moment, according to his notes, at which this stage of the operation was concluded? Was it when the convoy finished unloading its goods? Or when the heads of the women peeped out of the windows and began to call their children home from their play? Or when the first laundry was hung up on the roofs to dry, and gleaming in the strong noon light and swelling in a passing breeze? Here, this was the moment.

With nightfall the column steals soundlessly along the arid creek. Close to its opening, like shadows drawn to their source, the men of the force gather round their commander. In advance they anticipate the moment when he will stop and unsheathe his claws like a cat before pouncing on its prey. Dark and still they surround him, the distant lights of the town not reflected by so much as a dull gleam in their eyes. Silently they approach the outlying buildings and slip beneath their windows at a crouch. If a child were standing, despite the lateness of the hour, with his nose pressed to the windowpane, he

would see nothing but the vapors of his breath. Soundlessly they penetrate the approaches to the avenues, pausing for the blink of an eye at the sight of the cars still moving along them and the passersby returning home late, strolling at their leisure as if they had always strolled there. Rapidly they merge into the shadows cast by the street lamps, one of which has had its globe smashed, and with the virtuosity of actors practiced in many parts they exchange their black clothes for others, neatly folded in their backpacks. Tailored in accordance with the fashion of the town, as reported by the intelligence agents, credible not only in their cut and colors, but also in the first signs of fading and the smell of sweat sprayed on them (a sweltering heat wave reigns here by day, squatting on the streets like a huge exhausted dog staring at the horizon, where the haze blurs the contours of the hills and gives rise to transparent ripples in the air).

Was this perfect assimilation of the men of the force to be explained—wondered the general's secretary, observing them through his binoculars—solely by the brief past of the inhabitants? And perhaps, if they had lived here longer, like the inhabitants of the real quarter of the enemy city, and acquired habits and ways against whose background a stranger would stand out, they would not have been so successful? As he watched them he knew that even if there had been more time they would have performed outstandingly; they had earned their fame, their clandestine, backroom glory. Before his eyes, merging with the passersby, they moved as swiftly and secretly as a quick, slender snake through the body of a bigger, clumsier one. Only in front of the square did they slow down: one by one they approached it simultaneously from all three sides, seeking out and finding each other immediately with no need of a nod or a wink as their units linked into a chain surrounding the square and immediately separated again into three, six, twelve, and slipped into the stairwells and elevators and up the drainpipes and swaying ropes already tied there.

From the observation tower only the flicker of a flashlight would be visible a minute later, flashing on and off against the background of a dark room. On the bed behind the commander's back a man and woman are sleeping, their naked bodies entwined. Is it pride that raises his hand holding the blinking flashlight? Is he satisfied at last, having penetrated their bedroom without them even noticing, these two people holding each other as if flesh could truly be anchored in flesh? He turns to face the room. His hand holding the little flashlight is careful not to turn its beam onto their nakedness and only

taps the windowpane lightly once and once again, anticipating in advance the slight, irreversible movement towards wakefulness, and the surprise following it, and the terror, and their shame at their nakedness, which they try in vain to hide.

The General should know, said the commander of the force, after joining him on the observation tower, where they stood together looking down on the soldiers of the force, whose eyes alone were visible against the dark earth of the hills—the General should know, if he hasn't already been informed by the heads of the intelligence branch, that the town against which the operation is to be conducted is not populated by friendly people like the ones here, and the buildings of the square, whose mirror image they have just invaded, are not occupied by lovers worn out by the act of love; and this being the case, he would advise the General not to exaggerate in praising his men, lest he give rise to rash and reckless pride in their hearts, and slacken their alertness in the real operation.

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If so, said the general, are you ready for it now?

For a moment the commander rested his eyes on his men sitting at the foot of the tower, taut and still as the teeth of cogwheels whose movement has been momentarily arrested, and then he shook his head. No, in all these training exercises there was not even a hint of the danger awaiting them in the real town, the enemy town, they were still nowhere near it; they had not yet taken into consideration either the sea lapping at its shores, nor the suburbs surrounding it, nor the industrial zones and the entertainment centers, which the esteemed heads of the branches had not taken the trouble to construct, but which would all, except for the sea, in any case be built in the course of time by the people of the quarter themselves, even though, as they were both well aware, time was in short supply.

So it is, reflected the general's secretary as he sharpened his pencil with a child's little sharpener and blew a stray shaving off the page. And as he blew away the bits of lead sticking to the blade of the sharpener, he noted the reserve in his master's voice when he replied. An unintentional titter rose uninvited in the general's throat, which he tried as hard as he could to hide from the commander of the force, whose expression was always so stern: Perhaps he would now like to commission flocks of birds for the trees to be planted in the avenues? Perhaps their chirping was what he now required, to wake sleepers from their sleep? Or maybe he needed them to soil the white

sheets flapping in the breeze, like the stained sheets in the enemy town? And perhaps it was mice he desired, at the sight of which housewives would shriek and jump onto chairs? Now the laughter overcame the general and he averted his face until he recovered his poise. No, he did not mean to mock, he apologized after a moment. Perish the thought. So, what exactly was he requesting now?

All their actions, however precise, replied the commander of the force, were worth nothing without the resistance of their opponents. He wished the General to understand, this was no whim: all the clandestine glory of his men came from overcoming the tremendous difficulties in their path, and but for these difficulties they were no more daring than the lowliest clerk; and the enemy town on which they had their sights would not welcome them with flowers showered from the rooftops or red carpets spread over its streets; and not in this silence either, he added and waved his hand at the buildings of the quarter before them, which at this hour, as the sun hesitated before coming out, seemed to be wrapped in it like enormous pieces of shrouded furniture in a vast abandoned hall.

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The following raids took place in order; in other words, in the complex and multi-faceted order laid down by the heads of the planning branch, according to which the inhabitants of the quarter could never guess when the next raid was coming: no sooner did they imagine that they had divined the guiding principle behind the raids than they would be taken by surprise when it was broken, and when they then concluded that there was no order to the raids and they took place simply at the whim of a general from afar, they would be surprised again by their order. At the same time, in their repeated surprise at the order of the raids and at their disorder, they gradually stopped being surprised. It now became clear to them that this was the nature of the town to which they had been enticed by posters pasted to electricity poles, and it was not for nothing that nobody had come to live there before them. Would the grand piano stop playing because of this? Would the parrot stop saying the name of the woman taught to it by its owners? Would the old acrobat stop polishing the bent bar of his trapeze, as he sat on his rocking chair in a dark room whose open windows overlooked the street?

The iron girders sticking out of the concrete like the black backbone of a fish, the crater yawning to the south of the square, which had filled up with muddy rainwater and who knows what lay below, the traffic lights blinking

madly night and day, the burglar alarms of businesses going off on their own accord, the flocks of ravens circling in the sky, all of them were features of this town, their town. They had even resigned themselves to the slow progress of the men of the force as they advanced on their goal, mingling with the inhabitants and perceptible only in the gathering impetus of their movement, like that of a distant wind whose approach is sensed only by the trembling of the leaves; and they had grown accustomed, too, to the anonymous silhouette of their commander, outlined for a moment in the gaps it left behind before the air closed up again.

From one raid to the next the movement of the men grew more polished and precise, fast and slow as required, for they adapted themselves not only to the appearance of the passersby, their clothes and gait, but also to their inclination to go to one place or another: like them they would wipe the sweat from their brow or clear their throats, like them they would bend down to tie a shoelace, like them they would linger to look at their image reflected in the shop windows. For appear there it did, gradually standing out from the crowd precisely because of the perfect coordination, like that of a superfluous twin limb. Do they not sometimes feel the hint of a hesitation at the sight of the people sitting on the other side of a café windowpane, sipping from dainty little cups with supreme enjoyment? Is it a forgotten longing that raises their heads to a half-open window, where in the faint light, behind the curtains, the silhouettes of a man and a woman draw closer to each other? So similar to them are they now, to the people of this town, so well acquainted are they with their ways, that they could happily sit there themselves, in this very café, in this very building, behind one of these brightly lit windows, instead of making their way automatically to the square.

Behind the slits in the shutters and the slightly parted curtains perhaps eyes gleam as they let themselves down from the rooftops of the three buildings on the square, quicker than the quiver of the ropes; perhaps an ear is pressed to the wall, listening to the change in the hubbub of the rooms, a hubbub of which they become aware only when it is suddenly silenced. Are the people watching them waiting for the commander of the force to signal with his little flashlight to the observation tower? From the irate rhythm of the three single flashes, swallowed up immediately in the darkness as if they have never pierced it, his dissatisfaction, despite the present success, is obvious, and with it the absolute necessity of additional raids, as many as required. Only then, when his men are completely ready and not one minute

before, will they advance and attack and swoop down on that other town, the true target of the operation—the enemy town.

Butterflies, says the commander of the force, let them have butterflies. Or rather, he corrects himself, let them find them for themselves.

Butterflies? The general raises his eyebrows. The town in question, he points out with more than a trace of weariness, is not only far from any populated area, it has also been sealed and closed off since the beginning of the raids, as who knows better than the commander himself; and this being the case, where were they going to find butterflies? Crows can get here under their own steam, and find a satisfactory reward for their exertions when they arrive, but what will butterflies do here?

At the feet of the barbed wire fences surrounding the hills on their other, hidden side, the sand has piled up to the height of a hyena. The scraps of newspaper stuck to the barbs turned yellow long ago, and their letters have blurred and faded, seeping into the shriveled bits of paper until there is nothing left of them. The time table, says the general, time is running out; it goes without saying that he has complete confidence in the commander and his ability to bring the mission to a successful conclusion, even if the preparations take longer, he knows that it is only his colleague's aspiration to perfection that keeps him from acting; but nevertheless, says the general, these sleepless nights, when he sits on the observation tower balcony and watches the landscape being transformed before his eyes—but he leaves the sentence unfinished. In front of him the darkness gradually and joylessly fades, as if it is not the dawn breaking that they see before them, but the aging of the night.

Don't deal the butterflies out to them, says the commander of the force, let them discover them on their own, let the butterflies wait where they are until they find them. For a moment, as he listens to the general and the commander of the force, his eyes following the movement of his pencil on the page, the secretary imagines seeing swarms of these butterflies suddenly flying up in unison, describing a bleak and calculated trajectory that seeks not the nectar of flowers but that of human beings, and even if their strength fails them in their flight they can be made to fly again. How well their name suited them once, when they fluttered as they hovered in the air with the feathers on their tails balancing them like tiny wings, and how utterly different was this new breed of butterflies, which had no need to hover in the air

in order to home in on their target, and which did not flutter at all. Should a name be changed just because the thing it came to describe has somewhat changed its nature? Anyone who thinks so should first of all change the name his parents gave him at his birth.

Their forefathers, who were the first to reach distant continents where no white man had set foot before, and who brought the savages not only invisible gods but also paper money, heard them call it wakan-paper, in other words magic money, and their ships they called wakan-whales, in other words magic whales, and the butterfly-launchers, whose like they had also never seen before, they called wakan-bows, in other words, magic bows. Were their names changed when their nature was learned? Perhaps they were, but in this case the name was fine, and so was the tradition preserving its origins, which demanded bow-strings and feathers rather than the hardness of metal, and was quiet as a breeze instead of exploding with a terrifying bang.

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And wasn't it possible for there to be a different continent beyond the sea, mused the secretary as he swatted a pesky insect, where dragonflies were called wakan-mosquitoes, for example? And where he himself would be called by a completely different name? It was a strange business, this business of words, and once you learned what they meant, they were like the faded chalk marks left on the pavement by an old game played by children who had grown up in the meantime, and already given birth to children of their own, and they to theirs, and with the passing of the years perhaps one of these children would bend down to that same pavement and draw an arrow and write next to it something silly and magical, such as: You have to reach the corner and find two leaves! Or: You have to hop on one leg 522 times! (Thus he himself had written once upon a time; thus he had hopped.) Only the pavement remained the same and with it the goal at its end, a park with two creaking swings or a distant wood where all the vows engraved on the tree trunks had long been forgotten by the engravers.

The next night the force slowed down a little. A stranger would not have noticed, for their progress was still swift and stealthy, but if they had been advancing, for example, not on the hard, rocky approaches to the town but on the seashore (the sea that sent its waves to the enemy town and withdrew them again), the extra weight on their backs would have been very evident. There, on the shore, the deepening of their footprints would have shown, the

shortening gaps between them, the drops of sweat dimpling the sand. But the shore was far away.

In the backpacks of the demolitions detail, in addition to the bricks of explosives usually lying there as quietly and peacefully as if they promised no harm, there were now stacks of real bricks, whiter and heavier than their predecessors; instead of the single butterfly-launcher carried by the breaching detail in the past, they now carried five; and in addition to the little spade they always carried, in case they had to dig themselves a foxhole—which they never did, for they were the men of a crack breaching force, the elite of all the breaching forces—they now carried picks and hoes specially prepared for the operation that was now closer than ever. Their blades covered with felt made no sound when they dug deep into the ground of the yards, beneath the manicured lawns that defied the nakedness of the concrete and the iron girders.

Did they smile to each other as they squared the walls of the pits they dug? They laid the bricks one on top of the other and plastered them, making little tears in the plaster here and there as if it had been defaced by the voracious hands of time, and they even scratched old slogans on it, provided by the intelligence branch. And next to them, this too according to precise instructions, they drew a heart pierced by an arrow with names that had long gone out of fashion.

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The general's secretary fails to discover this smile as he looks at them through his master's binoculars, which he discreetly appropriated when the general's head dropped to his chest, without removing the strap from his neck. Judiciously he says to himself that perhaps he was projecting something of his own feelings onto them when he imagined seeing a smile on their faces, whereas they, bold and swift in this as in all their actions, had no time to smile. Well he knows that even if he were standing right next to them, no more than a single step apart, he would not hear the slightest sound; if he were leaning now for example against the fence of a house and embracing a woman he would go on embracing her; and if he had his nose flattened against a windowpane like a child, he would go on pulling faces at the night and its monsters.

In silence the butterfly-launchers are wrapped in oil-soaked cloth coverings and placed close to the walls, in silence they are sprinkled with dust from the bottles stored in the webbing pouches, in silence delicate, complex spider webs are woven in the corners with special needles, and studded here and

there with the corpse of a fly or an ant. Nor is the faintest sound to be heard when the earth is shoveled back with felt-covered spades onto the ceiling of the pit below. When dawn breaks in a few hours' time, the most scrupulous eye will not discover any change in the blades of grass returned to their places, stood up straight, smoothly combed and even dotted here and there with pearly drops of dew.

From the tops of the distant hills, which are high enough to offer a view of the terrified town as from seats in a theater, the men of the force in perfect coordination set off the buried explosives. Down there, in the yards of the houses, between budding rose bushes and overflowing trash cans, next to a colored ball lying deflated in a corner, a long thigh bone buried by a dog with drooping ears, the earth will shake and all the sleeping people will be woken by the thunder of the explosion. Is it possible to imagine how the dew and the dust, petals and handfuls of dirt and broken bits of bricks will mingle in the trembling air? The eye registers their slow, suspended sinking to the ground, and for a moment it seems that everything will return to its rightful place. Perhaps there is exactly one such moment, after which the first head will appear in a window, lean out and look down at the earth turned upside down. Slowly the roar will be assimilated in the silence, and afterwards someone will cough in a distant room, a bird will land on a window sill again and peck at a crumb, a splinter of glass long suspended on a breath of air will finally fall from the window with the child's breath still on it.

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For the blink of an eye, in the glimmer of a hallucination, the general sitting on the observation tower (not yet fully awoken by the explosion, the checked blanket still tucked round his knees) imagines hearing the roar of water in the dry creek, as if it were the river of the enemy town flowing into the sea. For a moment there rises in his nostrils, dimly and from a great distance, the mingled smell of salt, seaweed, and rotted fish, and with it the smell of those wide open spaces where he planted no flags when he commanded ships. For a moment it seems that they are floating on the water, these flags, like the silt of a shipwreck, until, saturated, they sink and nothing can be seen but the hosts of waves racing ahead.

Beneath him, at the foot of the tower, leaning against one of its pillars and looking straight ahead of him, the commander of the force listens to the wakening town. Anyone who thinks that he has time to waste on trivial niceties can sit on balconies to his heart's content, and observe life through

binoculars and tuck the blanket around the knees of his master as if there were no greater aspiration in life, and take down his notes on paper, which wears out of its own accord and has no need of fire or scissors or even a butterfly to destroy it. On these flimsy sheets of paper the general's secretary writes down his notes, which will not last, leaving behind him a trail of slime like a snail's, whereas real deeds, those that leave their mark on the world, are too bold and too great to be trapped in his tender fingers. For what is this secretary, if not a clumsy, ridiculous hunter who dares to pursue mighty leopards, and in the end succeeds in snaring only the flies they chase from their rumps with their spotted tails.

It is easy to imagine the secretary as a child sitting and reading books, his eyes shining, as if the words themselves were a kind of town like this and he was peeping through its windows; and when he went to bed he probably turned down the corner of the page, just as the commander would break off the tip of a branch on a route to which he would have to return. But all the books' pages were paper, and when the commander's wife still used to place a flower they had picked together between them, the pages would soon suck out its life until it turned to a kind of flat, crumbling, desiccated word itself.

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Did the secretary have any idea of how the blood raced in an hour of danger, and how this thing called life suddenly became real precisely when it was about to be cut off, like a fruit trembling on a branch a moment before it drops from ripeness? And could he imagine the feeling of coming close to perfection when every stage is completed on time, in exemplary coordination with the one preceding and the one following, as if emulating not only the mechanism moving the hands of a watch but the mechanism of time itself? Perfection itself, of this the commander was painfully aware, he would never attain. Its image in his head was not as perfect as it was in itself, and this striving for it too was not perfect, nor was the striving for the striving for perfection. He was very far from it, and he would not be able to go on perfecting this art that he had chosen, the art of war, forever, like a painter correcting over and over again the stroke or touch of a brush in his painting. Could anyone imagine his loneliness, the loneliness of a man who could not be satisfied with what was flawed, however small and hidden the flaw, and even if nothing but the flawed existed? True, greater amounts of love were necessary in order to love the flawed, that was undeniable, but it was not by love that he would be judged. Those who said that he had given up his family in exchange for danger were right, and to a certain extent they were right,

too, when they accused him of neglecting his own flesh and blood for the sake of a goal that had no future.

And indeed, since he had left his family they had been living together, the two of them, he and death, and like people sharing an apartment they had gradually come to know each other's desires and caprices and nightmares, and in all those years together they had quarreled like a couple and made up like a couple and respected each other, even though they'd never produced any offspring. Did he recognize it now, after so much time had passed, this slow, almost imperceptible tremor, not the one left by a playful wind in the treetops, but the other left by the caravans of years as they passed? These eyes, closed now and heavy-lidded, were they not themselves a sign? He opened them.

Two days, he calls to the general, we'll give them two days.

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It is the intelligence agents who report on the fingernails: fingernails horny and hard, fingernails soft and bitten, fingernails yellow and swollen, fingernails tender and painted and others whose polish has peeled, all of them having rummaged through the broken bricks, and which even if collected and stacked up one by one would not have hinted at the cellar that was once there. And on the fingers too they report, the fingers thick and thin, long and short, covered in dust, scratched, soaked in butterfly oil and shiny with it as they remove the saturated cloth wrappings; and on the eyes that suddenly look like one pair they report, and on the gleam that brightens in them all when the breech bolt is slowly and hesitantly drawn back and finally cocked with a decisive click, as if this is all it has been waiting for since the day the metal was cast.

The flocks of birds that suddenly fly up from the treetops indicate the precise trajectory of the bullet on its way to its target, a dull metallic sound indicates the hit. The faint, sluggish electric light in the windows pales as do the words whispered behind them, and the darkness surrounds them with shadows. Has the old acrobat, too, started to sharpen his trapeze pole? And has the parrot learned any new words in addition to the dozen curses he picked up in the navy? Indeed he has, but this happened as he listened to the children quarreling in the yard. And did the picture taken from the wall guess at the pale rectangle it would leave behind, a last testimony to the poppy-dotted field and the woman eternally walking there, holding a parasol in her hand? And do the goldfish swimming in their glass cases, packed up

once more with their water and their little waves, dream again of the sea? In the brass plaque at the entrance to the tallest building in the square, polished to a high sheen every morning, only the street in front is reflected: the pavements are deserted, and at the entrance to the adjacent building the man who polishes it goes up to the bicycle leaning against the wall and turns it in the opposite direction, as if he's just returned from a journey. Somewhere far away and hidden from the eye, the piano-playing man sits and plays. Still he plays. It's morning now and he goes on playing, as if the sounds might bring some consolation with them.

Tomorrow, says the commander of the force, tomorrow. Tough and decisive, he measures his words to the general and his secretary sitting on the balcony of the observation tower. No, he has nothing against the general, who fought heroically against the years, too, until they defeated him with their numbers and their tricks; slyly they stole between his lashes, slyly they seeped into the pores of his skin, until they conquered his body and took over his dreams at night and his waking in the morning. But this secretary, whose complaints against him the commander knew only too well, and for whom he might have felt a modicum of respect for not joining in the chorus of his praises, if at least he had shouted his words from the top of the tower; for words were the secretary's weapons and he was capable of sharpening them to pierce the heart, but instead he put them onto paper and drowned them there like kittens, tying the stone round their necks with a pink ribbon.

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Supply and silently the commander descends the ladder, slightly shaking the high wooden floor and with it the general's chair and his hand holding the binoculars. The general doesn't remove them from his eyes, and the expression that now appears on his face is well known to the secretary; it's not the enemy town and its army that have given rise to it, but the longings. The secretary has spent many years in his service, and in the lenses of the binoculars it seems to him he can see through the landscape of the arid hills to the seagulls sailing to and fro in the glass, until they beat against it and scream; one of them even drops a fish from its beak.

What the general is looking at is the column of people. Gradually it extricates itself from the town, like an unraveling thread swaying and curling and lengthening. He focuses the binoculars: this child bringing up the rear, hugging to his chest an aquarium that he refuses to allow anyone else to carry, brings back to him from distances long crumbled to dust the forgot-

ten movement of the little fish; gold in name only, and yet they glittered and performed magic in the water, their fluttering mouths unleashed a torrent of tiny bubbles rising and bursting, and one of them stopped at a green seaweed and waited underneath it. And the general's mother said—what did she say? I don't like them, she said, they always turn belly-up in the end, she complained, and one morning when he went to them they were all floating on their backs on top of the water, and his father came and emptied them out into a place that he didn't want to think about, and at night in his sleep he saw them sailing down long murky pipes to the sea.

He pulls the blanket up over his knees again. Something he had already done then too, but in those years a corner was enough to hide the tear he had torn in his trousers. His mother said—no, she didn't say anything, she had already despaired of saying anything at all to him, either good or bad, and in the end she too had lain on her back and been covered with earth, and he stood and called to her, get up! Get up! Now he lowered his binoculars and turned them towards the creek. At its opening, hugging the side of the hill, the men of the force lay in a long line, not disguised by the bushes planted on their backs but out in the open, all of them with checked blankets covering their legs, and under the blankets their camouflage trousers were torn at the knees, and from the tears, this too the general saw clearly, bundles of unraveling threads moved in and out, fat and white, and he closed his eyes.

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Above the flimsy pages the secretary's eyes followed the movement of his pencil, whose point grew blunter as it turned into words. One after the other they advanced over the whiteness, fragile as the footprints of birds, and when he sharpened his pencil his thoughts turned to them again, and from them they turned to the god who was perhaps also sitting high and lofty in an observation tower, and who perhaps also had in his hand a kind of sharpener whose blade had blunted beyond repair. And since the pencil had grown shorter with every sharpening until it was no longer than a pinkie, he wondered if this bit of wood in his hand still remembered the poplar tree from which it had been sawn as he himself remembered his home (only the curtain on the window now came to mind, wavy and flapping in the wind), and the touch of the wind on the leaves one of whose sides was silver; for a moment he saw them chiming softly, but it was only in his imagination, he knew, and the orange curtain of his bedroom window would never billow again, and there was nothing in front of him but this plain and this town on

it, a town as transient and foreign as an uprooted bush that had strayed here in its aimless rolling.

“And morning rose,” the general’s secretary wrote in his diary, “and the sun shone on the town and on the hills around it and the creeks between them.” And in one of them, his back to the hillside and his face to his men, the commander of the force surveyed his soldiers sprawled on the ground. They were all lying on their backs, fast asleep. They looked like children with their open mouths and their touchingly thin eyelids, and like a father watching his children sleeping in their rooms he looked at them. His own son, in a city so distant as to seem like a mirage, drove a wooden truck over the floor of his room, built towers of blocks, blew soap bubbles, but when he caught his father looking at him he overturned his towers and burst his bubbles, and hurled his truck violently at the feet that had been absent so long; and as for the mother, she murmured the names of other men in her sleep. In vain he waited for his son to ask him about his deeds, all of which were for his sake, so that he could blow bubbles in the air and build towers of blocks in his room. His son didn’t ask him anything, but only collected his scattered blocks so that he could rebuild his tower as soon as he left the room.

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His sons here, they had come to him of their own free will and chosen him above all others in spite of the dangers awaiting them, and he had chosen them one by one after hard and exhausting tests, until only the best of the best remained. He now gazed with compassion at their closed eyelids as if to guess at the dreams behind them. At the end of the last watch, which he always kept for himself, he would see how their dreams were forced back into the distance, and with every wake-up call he beat them further back, and from night to night they made their way more slowly to their eyelids and stumbled more as they emerged; women pulled up laddered stockings with grotesque haste, girls left the ribbons of their braids behind them, fields shed first their poppies and then their haystacks, until they were swallowed up again in the arid plain.

How flimsy were the eyelids of his men and how peaceful nevertheless was their sleep; the end of a smile still lingers on their faces, a long embrace, immediately to be broken off when the engine hoots and smoke rises and the platform is emptied forever. If a stranger were to observe them now, he would never guess the least of the deeds they had done and those that still awaited them, first and foremost the one coming next; all he has to do is snap his fingers, there is no need even to pronounce their password, and they will

all wake up and stand in a straight tense line at the entrance to the creek, pausing for only a brief moment to clear their senses, before they swoop down like a flock of shadows on the enemy town.

However, in order to conduct the operation in the best possible way and avoid unnecessary casualties, either on the side of the attackers or that of the people of the quarter themselves, since it was not against them that the operation was directed but only against the minority among them who were concentrated in the three buildings on the square, the tall office building and the other two that looked like perfectly ordinary apartment buildings...