

Rain Taxi

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'The Victor Weeps – Afghanistan'

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During a 1996 excursion through the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands, photographer Fazal Sheikh, along with his interpreter, stopped for the night in Jalalabad. His camera had already captured the arid light and rubble of the region's war-torn terrain in panoramic detail, especially in several refugee camps where, still, more than a million Afghans who fled their country after the Soviet invasion in 1979 live in makeshift tents. Now the two men strolled through the streets patrolled by Islamic fundamentalist guards of the Taliban, which controls most of the country under brutal rule. Down a lit thoroughway, Sheikh noticed a sign advertising a photo studio, but the shop was dark and the door shut.



Upon entering, he noticed the faint outlines of absent images on the walls, and, by candlelight, the proprietor seated behind a desk. Ridzwanul Haq told the visitors that the Taliban had banned photography on the grounds that creating images of people amounted to idolatry under Koranic law. Even so, Haq had saved a scattering of his forbidden negatives, which he presented to Sheikh to do with as he wished. As Sheikh recalled in an interview earlier this year,

when he told the shopkeeper he hoped to bring the faces and voices of the territory's residents to the attention of the world, Haq laughed and said, "Should you bring such a book back to Afghanistan, it would be burned, and you would be beaten."

Set at the intersection of India, the Central Asian steppes, and the Iranian upland, Afghanistan has endured centuries of conquest and calamity – invaded by Alexander the Great, the Mongols under Genghis Khan, and, during a spell of rebellion against Marxist reforms in the late 1970s, Soviet troops. A decade after the last communist regime was overthrown by the Mujahedin freedom fighters in 1992, civil war broke out and, in 1994, with the Afghan body count some two million and rising, the extremist Taliban took control and instituted the severe measures, chiefly against women, that last year earned Afghanistan top ranking as "the worst oppressor state" by the U. S. ambassador to the United Nations.

It is against this backdrop that 33-year-old, New York-born Fazal Sheikh packed his camera and set off to explore his grandfather's homeland – once part of Pakistan, now an Afghan refugee camp. In more than 100 photographs, he documents the scarred terrain of exile and the weathered faces of those destined to survive in the wake of disaster. These are mainly close-in shots, dignified and haunting – of ex-Mujahedin elders illuminated by gaslamps; of women wholly draped in veils; of families lodged in the wreckage of Kabul; and of the young men captured on film by Ridzwanul Haq before their future crumbled. All of the image are depicted in black and white, and call to mind the work of 19th-century photographers and, perhaps, Walker Evans, with their formal poses and plain stagings – a chair, a decorative rug, a ground of stone. Most are graced with simply a name as caption, rather than with the manipulative taglines so often found in the likes of *National Geographic* ("starving girl with amputated hand") or the spate of recent books by shooters more intent on horrifying the gaze with exotic victims than translating the dignity of survivors to readers a world away from the ground-zero hell.

As with Sheikh's earlier collection, *A Sense of Common Ground*, shot mostly in East Africa from 1992-1994, many of the large-format portraits here are accompanied by oral histories – accounts of husbands, sisters, and babies being kidnapped, murdered, martyred, and disappeared during the tumultuous fighting that has yet to reach any peace. These stories work not as the thousand words a picture alone could tell, but as a vital element in the collaboration between those depicted, the photographer, and the instant *click* of recognition that echoes in the barren ruins around them.