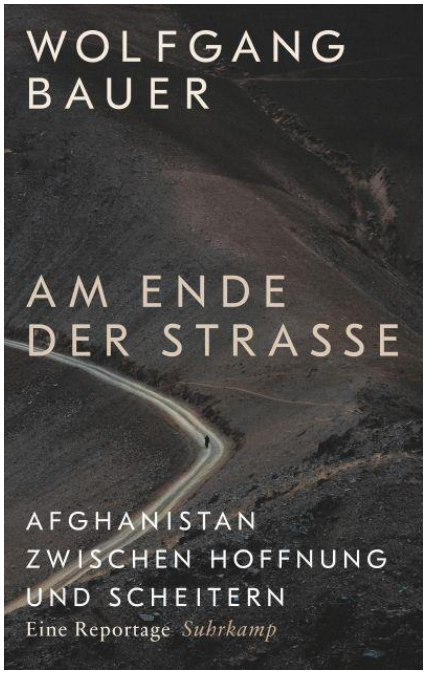

Wolfgang Bauer

At the End of the Road

Afghanistan between Hope and Failure

A Reportage

With numerous photographs

(Original German title: Am Ende der Straße.
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Eine Reportage)

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NOTES

The pages are torn. They curl, their edges frayed. They smell. Some are coated in old sand. Others are rancid with sweat, my sweat. The spiral bindings of my notebooks are coming loose, and several have become entangled. There is no order to my shelves. Notebooks are shoved in any old way. The aerial roots of long-dead potted plants have grown through them, making them difficult to read. The husks stick to the pages, become one with the ink.

For years I have kept all my notes, a reflex with no real motive. Over time it has become almost a superstition, similar to the voodoo cultures of Africa. My notes have become fetishes. Spirits in a bottle. They capture feelings in material form, contain them, tame them, translate them into a fixed, more innocuous form. The clamour of experience grows quieter. The suffering, the yearning, the hoping. It isn't silent, but neither does it roar.

These notes are interview transcripts, raw material for my reports, descriptions of people and places from the last twenty years, perceptions, corrections, occasional drawings – because sometimes they can describe things better than words. They are attempts to understand a country that pushes my buttons, questions my values and confounds me, even after all these years. No country has burrowed under my skin and into my dreams quite like Afghanistan. I often dream of Afghanistan.

I backed out of my first visit to Afghanistan, afraid. In November 2001, I was supposed to report on the war against the Taliban for a German magazine. After the attacks on the World Trade Center on 11 September, the USA dedicated itself to toppling the Taliban regime. I didn't

go, but a friend of mine did – Volker Handloik, working for *Stern* magazine. A short time later he lost his life in the fighting. We had only recently shared a meal.

I went there for the first time a few months later, after the Taliban had fallen; just for a week at first, still racked with uncertainty and nerves. Over the years to come I would return again and again, sometimes for days, sometimes for weeks, sometimes for several months. I visited most of its provinces; met cattle herders in Kunar, archaeologists in Ghōr, cave-dwelling communities in Bamyan, diplomats and politicians, teachers, traders, drug dealers, crooks and prison guards both male and female. I didn't meet as many women as I would have liked. I met people who inspired profound fear, and people I admired. I was astounded by the strength that so many Afghans have. I could never get enough of this country. I was deceived, robbed, mislead and richly blessed. And time and again I was unsettled.

I rarely open my notebooks. Actually, I never open them.

Until this night, at the end of November 2021. The last night before I board the flight to Kabul once again.

Three months before, on 15 August 2021, Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan president, fled Kabul. Since then the Taliban has returned to power for the second time in the country's history, after reigning from 1996 to 2001. Far more has been destroyed than just the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The hope of transforming a country of forty million people into a democracy has failed. Failed, too, have attempts to liberate women, protect minorities and build Afghanistan's economy. Many people are even saying that 15 August marks the end of the humanitarian era. The end of the hope that the world could be made a little better.

At first it was a wonderful feeling, shared by almost everyone who strove to build something in Afghanistan. The world had joined forces with a common goal: to guide one of the planet's poorest countries into the modern age.

But Afghanistan was unfamiliar territory for those of us in the West, unfamiliar like practically no other place on earth. Overseas aid workers were wont to liken its archaic mountains and deserts to lunar landscapes. The first steps on a foreign planet, with oxygen tanks on our backs, with pasta and air conditioning. We were Afghanauts. Fallen from the sky out of nowhere. We spent many years trying to create an atmosphere in Afghanistan that we could breathe too. Officially we were building a nation, but in fact we were striving to terraform. A project to radically rebuild the environment and culture.

In 2002, this all seemed politically inevitable, morally imperative and, above all, possible.

We succumbed to an illusion. Our space capsule, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, with which we aimed to bring freedom and democracy, has been wrecked. The people who have adjusted to our atmosphere over the last decades and have now stayed behind are in danger of suffocating.

Have we failed miserably in all our imperious aims? Was it all for nothing? Did Afghanistan's clocks simply turn back twenty years in August 2021 as the president fled and the last US troops withdrew? From 2021 to 2001, back when the Taliban ruled and Afghanistan was totally isolated from the international community? Is the country trapped in an infinite loop, and us with it? A never-ending cycle of pain and misery?

The attempt to do good in Afghanistan ended in shameful images. Desperate people clinging to departing planes. Trampling each other to death. Mothers hurling little children over an airport wall. The hope that the world had once tried to give to the whole country was now reduced to the few square kilometres at Kabul airport, hope now turned to naked despair.

Isn't it time to admit to ourselves that we can't help? Must we admit the painful truth that our aid money, those millions and billions and trillions, encourage more bad than good, that all money given to development cooperation inevitably turns to poison? Isn't it time to redefine international solidarity with a more prosaic and adult mindset?

Will the fall of Kabul finally reveal the humanitarian age, with its many aid organisations and aid workers, to be what it may always have been, the continuation of colonialism via benevolent means?

It is not the military that has failed in Afghanistan. This war wasn't lost because soldiers didn't fight or because the wrong weapons were used. Money destroyed this country at least as much as bullets.

What are we to do now? Simply let it happen? Watch the misery? Or, better yet, look away? I believe that we must learn from it.

At the end of this long night, I pack my notebooks in my rucksack and add some old photos. I want to revisit people and places that have featured in my reports over the last twenty years. I want to compare my texts from back then – which also form part of this book – with the information available today. I want to know whether I have done these people justice. I want to find out what happened to them, to their dreams, to their despair. I want to know how their stories continued. Over the years I have lost touch with many of these people. Their old phone numbers, jotted in the margins of my notebooks, no longer work. After all these years, the chances of finding them are slim, but I hope I can. I am embarking on this journey to understand why we – not just the West, but more the global community – have failed to do good.

This book is an attempt to recover hope.

[…]

KILOMETRE 0

KABUL

Walls of Bones

The road begins right outside the airport. It is an Afghan legend. The Ring Road. That's what most people call it. A road that is both a reality and practically an enigma. Only a handful of people have ever travelled it in its entirety. It begins in Kabul and spans the whole country in a sweeping circular motion. 2,200 kilometres in total, connecting Afghanistan's most important cities. From Kabul, it travels to Kandahar in the south, Herat in the west, Mazar-i-Sharif in the north. A branch around 150 kilometres long connects the capital with Jalalabad in the east. The Ring Road crosses the deserts of the south, the grass steppes of the north and the mountains of the Hindu Kush. It is the country's lifeline. All those who wanted to make Afghanistan a modern nation state have worked on this road. The last king, Mohammed Zahir Shah, began the work seventy years ago. When he was forced into exile in 1973 after a forty-year reign, the project was continued by Mohammed Daoud Khan, the first president of the Republic of Afghanistan. Since then, the country's rulers have overthrown, driven away or killed one another in rapid succession; but whatever their ideology, each successor has continued to build this particular road.

Afghanistan is one of the world's few remaining countries to have never grown together as a nation. It is a conglomeration of 14 ethnic groups with totally different cultures – even the precise number is highly contentious – who speak 14 different languages and cannot always understand each other. Mighty mountain ranges up to 7,400 metres high carve up its topography. Afghanistan is the collective term for a handful of cities and a universe of villages that rarely engage with one another. For a long time, Afghanistan was the leftovers, the remains, the rubble of two great empires, the British and the Russian, that came to blows here. The road, this road, was supposed to change that. All those who have helped to build it shared the same vision: to form a nation out of asphalt, out of bitumen, out of macadam.

The Americans, too, had great hopes for the construction of the Ring Road. They wanted to achieve peace with asphalt. US President George W. Bush, having just overthrown the Taliban, made the Ring Road one of his priorities, nation building in every sense of the word. He arranged for progress updates to be delivered to him in person every day. In a speech, he quoted former US Commander Karl Eikenberry: 'Where the roads end in Afghanistan, the Taliban begin.' 'Road building', Bush explained, 'brings jobs to young men who might be recruited to the Taliban. [R]oads enable people to get commerce to centres of trade. In other words, roads promote enterprise. Enterprise provides hope. Hope is what defeats this ideology of darkness.'

This view was shared by Joe Biden, then a senator, now US President: 'How do you spell "hope" in Dari or in Pashto? A-s-p-h-a-l-t!'

This never came to pass. The road remains unfinished to this day. Its story is one of corruption and intrigue. It has brought neither prosperity nor democracy. Every construction site was soon contested. Barely had the asphalt been laid, but it became a battleground. The fiercest battles of the war took place along this road. Conceived as Afghanistan's lifeline, it became its trail of blood.

I want to spend the next five weeks following this road, as far as is possible. Together with my companions, I am planning something that very few have managed – to travel the road in its entirety. Starting in Kabul, the journey will take me first to the east, to the border crossing to Pakistan, then clockwise along the Ring Road to Ghazni and Kandahar in the south, Herat in the west, Mazar-i-Sharif in the north, and finally back to Kabul via Kunduz. My previous travels in Afghanistan were severely limited. The Taliban's sphere of influence began just beyond the outskirts of Kabul, and even within Kabul we were well advised not to linger on the streets unnecessarily. The risk of being kidnapped or robbed by bandits was too great.

Almost overnight, the total defeat of the old regime turned the situation on its head. For the first time in decades, peace prevailed in Afghanistan. Weapons fell silent almost everywhere. Nobody prevented foreign journalists from travelling. It became possible to truly experience the country. At present it is in a state of shock. A great fatigue has settled over the country. Afghanistan is rearranging itself. Coalitions between ethnic groups are being recalculated, networks renegotiated in local power structures. The calm after the storm or the calm between storms. Nobody knows how long it will last. We want to make the most of it.

This journey is a chance for me to rediscover Afghanistan. It's also kind of a personal journey through time. A journey into my own past. It's still a risk, but a calculated one – I think, I hope, people tell me. 'As long as I'm alive', Rafik Hamadi, my driver, tells me, 'you don't need to worry.' He'll repeat this many times over the coming weeks.

Rafik. He's waiting for me outside the airport, his gaze tired. He's often taken for an Indian, with his jet-black hair and dark complexion. He was born in Jalalabad, the only city in Afghanistan with a tropical climate like that of India. Over his traditional white salwar kameez he wears a black winter coat with a protruding fake-fur collar. A large lock of hair keeps on falling over his face, and he bats it away like a pesky fly. He's in his late twenties and has three children, the youngest just a few weeks old. He's a racist, deeply unsettled by anything foreign, a sexist. With gusto he tells jokes about gay people and the Shiite Hazaras. He loves to easy greasy, heavy food. He's vain, easily offended, not resentful and one of the most liberal Afghans I know.

Also along for the ride is Lutfullah Qasimyar, our translator, just a few years younger than Rafik but a totally different character. Unfailingly serene, calm personified. He's a born mediator, and will settle many conflicts in our Toyota over the coming weeks. He even – he'll forgive me for saying this – looks a little like a resting Buddha. Back in the Republic era, he worked as a translator for companies and institutes. He is deeply religious with a remarkable mind and a photographic memory. He comes from Badakhshan in the far northeast, grew up in Kabul and speaks fluent Dari and Pashto. He got married just a few weeks ago – an arranged marriage, like most in this country. He talks to his young wife on an almost hourly basis. 'Don't worry, apple of my eye', he murmurs, 'nothing's going to happen.'

The other member of our little fellowship is Kaveh Rostamkhani, who will photograph our journey.

The streets of Kabul. Rafik's stamping ground. Excellent quality. The best asphalt, often four lanes. The grandiose beginning of the Ring Road. Rafik knows every shortcut, uses every gap between traffic jams to accelerate to almost one hundred. Half asleep, I look out at a city I've never liked. Who would? Its residents certainly don't. The beauty it once had, the old

townhouses with their delightful gardens, the many trees that used to blossom here, have almost without exception fallen victim to wars and greed. Kabul's architecture is brutal.

It is said that the city walls, built into the sheer mountain sides, are still standing because they contain the bones of the labourers. The story goes that 1,100 years ago, the tyrannical King Zamburak and his terrible brother, Zanbilak, ruled Kabul. Fearful of invasion, they had a mighty wall built and forced every family to give up at least one son to the cause. Labourers who didn't meet their targets, who were too weak, were executed on the spot. The living, staring their own death in the face, were forced to encase the dead in the mud wall.

Kabul is obscenely ugly, its hideousness concealed behind thick make-up. Unplastered, cheap concrete buildings with filthy false fronts. The grey prefab buildings, the microdistricts erected by the Soviets in the eighties, appear lovely in comparison with the apartment blocks that have risen in recent years. Rows and rows of monstrous blocks, thirty storeys high, spaces for people to sleep but not to dream. Monuments to greed that know no compromise. Staggering monotony. There's a reason why Kabul's most popular photo motifs are the bunches of colourful balloons that street vendors sell to children. In this city, the cement is made of excrement and trash. In winter, the sky over Kabul is clotted with gooey grime emitted from hundreds of thousands of home heating systems, with the gas from burning plastic. In this city, happiness is mere survival.

At first glance, not a lot has changed since the Taliban returned. Kabul has long teetered on ungovernability. Does it have six million residents, or twelve? Nobody knows. The traffic police are back on the streets in their silver and blue uniforms. Traffic is still noticeably thinned out. There are hardly any of the convoys with which politicians and warlords used to force their way through the city. At night the Taliban perform checks every few hundred metres, but during the day they are barely to be seen. We pass the presidential palace, the white flags of the Islamic Emirate flying above it.

The city robs me of my bearings. It always has. And every time I wonder why that is. I've been here so many times. The city has swallowed all horizons. Its concrete and brick buildings extend in all directions. Once upon a time, the city was erected on the banks of the eponymous Kabul River, now nothing more than a cesspool, a sluggish flow of excrement. The city sprawled into the valley floors, grew around and up onto several mountains, not even stopping for the steepest of slopes. In the last twenty years Afghanistan's population has exploded. Numbers are nothing more than an illusion in this country, where no census has been conducted in living memory. And yet, in the last twenty years the population is said to have risen from 21 million to 40 million. A third of these people are estimated to live in Kabul.

The city streaked across the high plateaus, covering dozens of kilometres, and was rapidly approaching the foothills of the Hindu Kush when the president fled in summer 2021. For the first time in twenty years, Kabul's growth stalled. But this probably won't last long. Experience has shown that the greater this country's misery, the larger Kabul becomes.

We stop in front of a gate that looks like many other gates. An average upscale neighbourhood. Beep. Rafik cocks his head impatiently. Beep. There's no sign on the gate, nothing to indicate the identity of its occupants. I'm staying overnight in the empty offices of a small aid organisation. Hotels are too dangerous for me in Kabul. Rafik has worked for the NGO as a driver. He beeps one more time. Finally someone opens the gate.

They stand at the door of a three-storey concrete villa and greet me. The project manager, the IT specialist, the cook. I've only known them for a few weeks, Rafik included. Since the fall of the old regime, arriving in the city unsettles me. It's like arriving at the home of old friends and finding only strangers.

My world of trusted contacts and networks no longer exists. They've all left the country by now. My translator, my great teacher, who risked his life for much of my research, who taught me so much about the country, is now in Germany. Many others have fled to the USA, Turkey, Australia, India. Amdadullah Hamdard, my friend and colleague, was shot just days before the end of the war.

Kabul's ghosts. My ghosts. I chase their shadows. The city is filled with them. I see them in familiar places, restaurants, cafés and gardens. As though it were yesterday.

The house of the Afghan journalist where I always stayed when I was in the city, that became the starting point for almost all of my journeys through Afghanistan in the last few years. His desk is still in his office, his chair behind it. The books are on the shelves, many of them in English. He didn't read that much, but the books made a good backdrop for his live broadcasts. Over the last few months he gave interviews every quarter of an hour, for TV channels all around the world.

It's like he's only just left. His two brothers still live in the house, also waiting to leave. The younger, always a lost soul, has become addicted to alcohol. He can't cope with the fear anymore, the gruelling inactivity. The elder worked for an NGO that, like almost all aid organisations, discontinued its projects. They are running out of money. They live in what used to be Kabul's most liberal district, the last refuge of the last free spirits, but they rarely leave the house for fear of being detained by the Taliban. Of coming across a checkpoint where they would be recognised as brothers of the famous journalist. It's highly unlikely but not entirely out of the question, and why run the risk? Their famous brother is now living in a provincial city in Canada and is setting up a new office, again for live broadcasts about Afghanistan, although interest is waning.

For me the house has always symbolised openness; now it has become a prison for its final occupants.

Rafik and I continue through Kabul, through my world of shadows. A modern bungalow in one of the city's best districts. Home to an Afghan diplomat. He's now living in exile in Germany. Before I left, he asked me to swing by his house in Kabul. I'm supposed to pick up a few personal mementos for him and check whether the house is being cared for. It's important to him, worrying him from a distance.

The diplomat's long-serving attendant opens the door; he's expecting me. He looks left and right from the metal gate and lets me in.

I've spent many evenings here. I see the terrace in front of the house, where there was a buffet almost every night. There was white wine and red wine and scotch. The diplomat loved his evening soirees, loved to be at the centre of it all, invited people with different viewpoints – wealthy entrepreneurs, ministers, poets, military leaders, Afghan secret service agents who lived in his neighbourhood. There were lots of arguments at these events, sometimes shouting. Sometimes the participants left in a fury, but they always came back.

Now the terrace is covered in wilted foliage. I enter the living room; American style, sofas and armchairs. Previously the walls were bedecked in photographs in gold and silver frames, carefully arranged, stages of life, evidence of the diplomat's importance. The walls are bare.

Only some calligraphy remains, featureless artwork tolerated by the Taliban. 'I've kept them all safe', the attendant says. He asks me to wait, leaves the room, insists on showing me the photographs. Then he returns with a whole pile. He spreads them out on the floor. The diplomat with Angela Merkel. With Steinmeier. With George W. Bush. With former and current presidents. 'Please tell the master I'm taking good care', he instructs me.

He lays gold frame upon gold frame, glass crunches on glass, some are already torn, but they're still here.

Since the transition, all the houses on the street – previously reserved for the government elite – have been taken over by Taliban commanders. As the attendant tells me proudly, this house is the only exception. Initially they moved in here too, but then he, the loyal servant, played a trick! He moved in with his family and his brother's family and explained that the house is in private hands. The Taliban left then. They only occupy government property. But occasionally, every few weeks, some of them still spend the night here. That's why he guards the presidents.

'Come, come!' he urges me to follow him upstairs to the diplomat's bedroom. He shows me the shoes he has just shined, the suits that hang in the wardrobe, nice and clean in their plastic covers. All ready for his master's return.

His salary is still being sent to him from Germany, but it's unclear how long this will last. 'I don't know what's going to happen to me. But I can't leave this house', he says. 'Who'll look after it then?' He has packed a suitcase for his master and entrusts it to me. Suits, shoes, nuts. Sweet treats from the diplomat's favourite bakery. He invites me to stay a while, to tea and pastries as in former times. I accept for the sake of politeness. I sip, I eat, two bites, then I feel a rising urge to get away from this place of sorrow and wasted hope. Before closing the door, the attendant looks left and right again. 'Tell my master how well I'm looking after things.'

There are Taliban on the street.

At many houses that often welcomed me as a guest, I simply drive past; there's nobody there to visit now. I snatch brief, almost stolen glances. The houses are empty and abandoned. Relatives from the village have probably moved in, or the neighbours. I eat in familiar restaurants, drink coffee in the old cafés. They're half-deserted. I see none of the familiar faces I would have invariably encountered in times gone by. Then suddenly, in one of these places, a cafeteria, I see Ahmad, the musician. I'm delighted. 'Ahmad, Ahmad!' I say. He whispers to me. The Taliban stormed his music studio, destroyed the instruments. He seems to be on drugs; he must have just taken something.

'Help me', he says. 'Get me out of here.'