

# Homage to Veneto

There is no status quo in politics. Things really do fall apart, to quote the overly quoted Yeats. For those of us born after WWII, the seven decades of Pax Europa and subsequent founding of the European Union seemed like a permanent state and a symbol of progress and hope for human solidarity. History, it turns out, really is a cyclical story, where collective human action occasionally succeeds but is often defeated by the other deeper and stronger human impulses: tribalism and greed.

The United States has not been so disunited since 1865. The United Kingdom will not remain united for long (nor, possibly, a kingdom). The European Union, after many expansive years of plenty, is now receding and fighting a losing battle against internal enemies of unity. Despite barbarians outside the gates, the fall of any empire always comes from internal pressure within its borders. In Europe these days, that pressure takes the form of nationalist political parties.

In Spain, the autonomous region of Catalonia held an illegal referendum on independence on 1 October, 2017. In Italy, the regions of Lombardy and Veneto are holding a legal referendum on autonomy on 22 October, 2017. It seems that the first step to independence is greater autonomy, and that is what Lega Nord, the dominant political party in the north of Italy, has been agitating for ever since it was founded in 1991. Though I am not Italian, I have lived in the Veneto region for over 10 years, and this is where I will now focus.

Liga Veneta (that strange L is supposed to represent elision in the local dialect, though I've never heard this elided L at the beginning of a word) is a political party allied with the Lega Nord, both of which ultimately want to secede from the Republic of Italy to form a new nation called Padania. Why would they want to do this? Obviously it's all about the

money. The north of Italy is much wealthier than the south, and supporters of the Lega Nord want to keep all that money for themselves. The central policy platform of the Lega Nord is greater fiscal autonomy and eventual secession. It is a populist right-wing party, strongly opposed to immigration and the EU, allied with like-minded parties in other countries such as the French FN and the Dutch PVV. Just as with these other parties, the Lega Nord are not as popular as they like to appear, and they have never been able to translate their separatist sound and fury into electoral success.

In the 2013 federal elections, they took about 4% of the national popular vote. In the 2014 European Parliament elections, they took about 6%. Even in their regional strongholds of Lombardy and Veneto, they only took 12% and 10% respectively. They have had a bit more success in the regional elections, winning the governorship for both regions, including a record-high 40% in Veneto in 2015. Despite this, the Lega Nord has never won a majority of votes even in its own territory. Part of that is due to the fractious nature of Italian politics and the huge number of political parties appearing on the ballot (I counted over 100 different party "lists" at one point). Maybe a larger part of it is that northern secession is just not as popular as the Lega Nord wants it to be.



Sign advertising the referendum next to my town's elementary school. It shows the Italian flag torn in half with the intact Venetian flag flying away, an [illegal](#) image according to Italian law.


I am writing this one week before the referendum on autonomy, so the results are still in doubt. It seems very probable that the "Yes" vote will win in a landslide, though I'm less sure if there will be a quorum. This is not an election between many different political parties and platforms, but merely a single-issue emotional appeal to the citizens of Lombardy and Veneto to "take control of their history and their future". A few days ago, I noticed an elderly Italian man stuffing papers in my mailbox, going from house to house on foot doing the same throughout my small town. I thought it was probably a fundraiser for a church event or advertising for the town's upcoming chestnut festival. Almost everyday mailboxes are stuffed with brochures for supermarkets or other local businesses, but 100% of the time these are distributed by African or Asian immigrants (who probably do this work 12 hours a day for a pittance, all so that those reams of wasted paper can go straight to the bin), not by retirees. When I opened the box, I found a well-made, colorful, 25-page pamphlet supporting the "Yes" vote, full of statistics and other propaganda.



The pamphlet enjoins "The Venetian People" to "rewrite its history" and finishes with the slogan, in Venetian dialect, "Vote Now, or Shut Up Forever." Catchy. I'm doubtful that the individual tax burden will relent if Veneto becomes autonomous. In fact, the whole referendum seems like a victory for propaganda rather than actual change to the status quo. Unlike the illegal Catalonia independence vote, the Lombardy and Veneto referendum for autonomy is based around a weakly worded question, and even the results would have to be voted on for approval by the full Italian Parliament afterwards. The question appearing on the ballot is: "Do you want the Veneto Region to be given other particular forms and conditions of Autonomy?" Not very specific, to say the least.

Here are the highlights from the pamphlet, all resembling mytho-historical propaganda rather than facts, and none of which seem remotely relevant to the current political or economic situation in Italy:

- the Veneto civilization is older than the Romans, with foundations in the 13th century B.C., fighting with the Trojans against the Greeks (shouldn't need much commentary, but my Master's Degree in Ancient Greek and Roman History gives me reason to be skeptical of this one)
- the @ symbol was invented by Venetian merchants for commercial reasons (impressive!)
- Federico Faggin, a scientist from Vicenza, invented the world's first microprocessor (Faggin was actually my neighbor in one of the apartments I used to rent in Vicenza overlooking the magnificent Basilica Palladiana; I'm doubtful that he supports the referendum despite being named—he has lived mostly in America for the last 50 years, has American citizenship, and received a medal from President Obama in 2009)
- the American Constitution was inspired by the laws of the Venetian Republic, and Benjamin Franklin entertained himself in Venice for almost a year (almost as impressive as the @ symbol!)
- the Venetian Republic lasted 1100 years (I'll concede historical accuracy here, even if "Republic", just like the earlier Roman variety, meant something more like "oligarchy", and by the time Napoleon put an end to it the "Serenissima" had been in decline for two centuries)
- in October 1866 the Veneto became Italian because of a fraudulent referendum, which then caused widespread hunger and forced the people to emigrate to all parts of the world (tendentious and overly simplified; after the Austro-Prussian war, Veneto was passed from Austria to France, who passed it directly to the new Kingdom of Italy according to prior agreements; Italy was unified

- by force and fortune, not by popular votes)
- the first state to abolish slavery was the Venetian Republic in the 16th century (difficult to confirm; cherry-picking from a long and complex history)
  - Elena Cornaro, a 17th-century philosopher, was the first woman in the world to receive an academic degree (no qualms with this one; too bad most Venetians or humans today are not more like the highly intelligent philosopher herself)
  - the bells ring at noon to celebrate the Venetian victory over the Turks at the 1571 Battle of Lepanto, which stopped the Muslim advance into Christian Europe (the Venetians single-handedly won the victory with only a bit of help from the Kingdom of Spain, Naples, Sicily, Papal States, Genoa, Tuscany, and a few other friends like England and the Holy Roman Empire; also, this plays into the current Islamophobic narrative of European right-wing parties such as the Lega Nord)
  -  the Venetian flag is the only flag in the world with the word “peace” (the actual Latin translation says “Peace to you Mark, my evangelist”; seems similar to when Muslims say “peace be upon him” when they name Muhammed; we could also add that this flag is the only one in the world with a flying lion—impressive!)
  - Veneto has the highest number of volunteers in Italy (can’t find any source data on this; even if accurate it probably counts food-selling volunteers at the ubiquitous town feasts more than anything else)

Yes, that was fun to deconstruct, but propaganda and manipulative emotional appeal for political gain is something that I am always happy to fight against (even if I will probably always be on the losing side). The rest of the pamphlet is a series of tables and cherry-picked statistics basically stating the same thing over and over: that Veneto contributes more money to the federal government than it receives in public services. What a terrible tragedy! A

relatively rich region subsidizes other poorer regions in a modern nation-state. It would appear that there is no poverty whatsoever in Veneto, and all its problems comes from the federal government (or immigrants!). This is a widespread opinion among well-off citizens in every developed country; it is the mentality of self-interest over altruism; tribalism over human solidarity.

The last part of the pamphlet takes much time and care to compare Veneto with the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, also known as Alto-Adige or Südtirol, the German-speaking, formerly Austrian region ceded to Italy after World War One. One table shows how Alto-Adige keeps 50% of tax revenue for local administration while Veneto keeps only 24%. One point of emphasis is also that education is completely managed locally in Alto-Adige while in Veneto the federal government manages 70% of the budget. There is no reason given for why this is good for Alto-Adige or bad for Veneto. One obvious point is that Alto-Adige is 100% German-speaking and has always been awarded special autonomous status because of its history and culture (along with four other Italian regions with similar situations: Sicily, Sardinia, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and Val d'Aosta). I have spent a lot of time in schools across Veneto and I can tell you that a huge number of teachers come from the south of Italy (Veneto has a relatively low educational level and the Southern regions are relatively high, probably because there is no work in the South so more people attend university and get advanced degrees). Many residents of Veneto in general also have roots in other parts of Italy or other countries, especially Romania, Morocco, Moldova, and Albania, since there is more work to be found in here.

One of the main platforms of the Lega Nord and Liga Veneta is xenophobic anti-immigration, but given the history of Italian emigration (including huge numbers of Venetians, who mostly fled to Brazil, Argentina, and Australia) it seems myopic and hypocritical to use immigration as a rallying cry. There are

plenty of racists in Italy, just like every other country in the world, and the presence of more dark-skinned people on their streets and in their schools and companies has scared the natives. This is unfortunately a universal trait in humans that can only be expunged with education, travel, empathy, and an open mind, many of which are sorely lacking in Italy, Europe, America, and the World.

My main question regarding autonomy, secession, and independence is this: why is a smaller political unit necessarily better than a larger one? It seems like flawed logic to me that any given region with mostly arbitrary borders would automatically and by definition be better at governance than a nation-state with mostly arbitrary borders. Why not autonomy or independence for every province, every city, town, village, and house? On the other hand, why isn't every world region divided into European Union-like entities that together would make up a single world government? The contingencies and accidents of history have determined our present political circumstances. If Princip's pistol had misfired, if Marshal Ney had taken Quatre Bras earlier, if Ali Pasha hadn't missed his coffee before Lepanto, if Hektor hadn't killed Patroklos outside the gates of Troy, history might have turned out differently and there might have been no Veneto, no Italy, and no EU.



Superstrada Pedemontana  
Veneta

The point is that history and culture are not the same thing as governance. Appealing to history and culture in the name of more fiscal autonomy is incoherent. I see no evidence that an autonomous or independent Veneto government would be any more efficient or less corrupt than the obviously inefficient and corrupt Italian government. On the other hand, I need only to mention Veneto President Luca Zaia's project of a new highway

called the Superstrada Pedemontana Veneta to make the opposite argument. It is an unnecessary highway, that no one asked for, being built across the previously beautiful foothills south of Monte Grappa and the Asiago plateau. It has created a hellscape of endless trucks, dust, and cement where once all you could see were cherry orchards and castles. It is so enormously behind schedule and over budget that it may never be completed. If so, it will be financed by increased taxes on local residents, followed by the additional slap in the face of making it a toll road for the same residents. A recent collapsed tunnel under the hills near my town is the latest construction setback for this environmental and economic disaster. This, along with policies favorable to corrupt, Mafia-driven cementification, enormous [banking scandals](#) involving the Popular Bank of Vicenza and Veneto Bank, and the super expensive and useless [MOSE](#) flood prevention project surrounding Venice, proves that regional government is no more efficient, capable, or trustworthy than federal government.

Absent oppression or persecution, I see no justification for nationalistic separatist movements. That is why the propagandists of these campaigns, including the Brexiteers, rely on disinformation as well as natural human greed and tribalistic tendencies. There is a difference between Kurdish or South Sudanese independence, and that of Catalonia, Scotland, Lombardy, or Veneto. There is nothing wrong with being a proud patriot or even being appreciative of one's history and culture; there is something wrong with being a nationalist who bends and misuses that history to suit exclusivistic political aims. The best thing to do is to help one's country and everyone in it to succeed, rather than retreating into a fantasy world of mythical history and no taxes. What's needed in Italy, Europe, and the whole world is not more division and greed, but more openness, activism, and human solidarity.

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# FOB by Daniel Ford

An excerpt of the debut novel *Sid Sanford Lives!*

by Daniel Ford

Sid stepped into the desert surrounding the cramped forward operating base just as the sun surged over the distant mountaintop. He scratched his patchy, three-day-old beard. He inhaled deeply, the already warming air singeing his raw nostrils. The sand didn't crunch so much as slither away from the hot breath of desert wind.



Daniel Ford's debut novel *Sid Sanford Lives!* is now available from 50/50 press.

He eyed the line of beige Humvees parked by sandbags piled waist-high. He strode over and climbed into the makeshift garage. Sid propped himself against the tall front tire of the closest vehicle. He stretched out his legs and crossed them, feeling the full weight of his still stiff boots on his ankle. He shifted his position just enough so he could awkwardly pull his notebook out of his back pocket. He stuck his pen behind his ear, sure the words that had been eluding him since the troubled descent through the mountain range would come before the afternoon sun boiled his internal organs. For now, Sid

propped his head up against the hard, black rubber and tried to remember how he'd landed in this dusty valley.

Roger Ray's slamming door muffled the newsroom's buzz. So many conversations from which Sid had long ago felt disengaged continued in shouted whispers once Ray started howling in earnest.

"I'd be weakening my damn city desk in the middle of a mayoral election," the aging editor said. "On top of everything else, I'd be giving you, a little pissant, a promotion ahead of, frankly, a long line of more goddamn qualified reporters."

"Someone else can cover the Bronx borough president's philandering and embezzling," Sid said over Ray's incoherent grunting and molar grinding.

"Plus, I'd catch all kinds of holy fucking hell from the board..." Ray said. "Wait, what did you say?"

Sid patiently reached into his messenger bag and retrieved a blue folder that looked like an overstuffed jelly donut. He tossed it on Ray's desk and watched as he casually flipped it open. Ray rolled his eyes as he read the top sheet, but that hadn't stopped him from skimming the tax forms, illicit photos, and tawdry phone records bulging underneath.

"Sources?" Ray grunted.

"Waiting for a phone call from whomever you decide to assign the story."

Ray held Sid's gaze, hoping his young reporter would wear his self-satisfied grin just long enough for him to slap it off his face with a hefty Sunday newspaper.

"This doesn't change anything," Ray said, slamming his hand on the pile of front-page fodder. "I could just as easily order you to write this."

"I have a draft someone can polish if that helps," Sid said. "You don't even have to use my name. Actually, I'd prefer you didn't, I don't want to get banned from Harlem and its chicken and waffles."

"Listen, son..."

"I believe you owe me one," Sid said, his jaw stiffening.

Ray waited a beat before nodding weakly. He got up, sat down on the edge of his desk, and put a hand on Sid's shoulder.

"A desert warzone isn't an appropriate place to overcome personal demons," Ray said.

"That's not what this is about," Sid said. "I've just moved beyond writing about tainted politicians and transit complaints."

"You better hope so. You survive our security training and I'll think about it. That's the best I can do."

Sid took the deal and flew out to the Middle East three weeks later.

A sharp pain in his shin brought Sid back into the present. He cursed his luck, certain he'd been stung by a scorpion. However, the pain dulled quickly, but not before another kick to his boots forced him into a crouch. His eyes burned red as he opened them fully. He put his hand against the sun and made out a camouflaged hulk wielding a wrench standing in front of him.

"Scared the fucking piss out of me," the soldier spat.

A tobacco-infused glob of spit now sparkled in the sand between the two men like a brushstroke of oil puddled in a Queens parking garage.

"Sorry," Sid muttered.

"You're not supposed to be here. I could have put a bullet in your fucking head. Probably give me a damn medal considering you're a reporter."

"I get it," Sid said. He brushed the sand off his pants as he stood. "I'm leaving."

"Don't be a pussy," the soldier said, extending his hand. "I'm Mason."

"Sid."

"Oh, I know your name. We get daily briefings on how to talk to you."

"Is that why no one has done it yet?"

"Fuck, easy killer," Mason said. "PR is not our strong suit."

"Funny considering that's part of your mission."

"Enjoying the heat while you're preaching at me?" Mason asked, slapping a wrench into his palm.

"Had to get out of the AC," Sid said. "Too small a space and too many closed windows."

"You want to open those bulletproof windows for the enemy, be my guest, but make damn sure me and my friends are all in the latrine when you do. And try not to make too much of a mess for us to sop up later."

"Yeah, well, never been a fan of central air. Messes with my sinuses."

"You been in a sandstorm yet?"

"No."

"Might change a few of your preconceived notions about our little air conditioned shit box."

"I didn't mean to offend anyone."

"Well, could you not offend anyone a few paces to your right. I've got to park my ass under the vehicle you've been using as a hammock."

"Right," Sid said. "Yeah."

He moved out of the way and heard Mason slide under the front bumper. Sid rubbed the back of his head.

"Something wrong?" Mason asked from beneath the vehicle.

"Can I help you with anything?" Sid asked.

"You know much about auto repair?"

"Not really, no."

"Then I'm good."

"Well, how about I just keep you company then?"

"Like to work alone."

"This is the longest conversation I've had in days," Sid said.  
"Give me something."

"I didn't shoot you, what more do you want?"

"Son of a bitch," Sid mumbled.

The clangs and grunts stopped. Mason wagged his boots back and forth.

"Coffee," he said.

"Do you want anything—?"

"Black."

"You got it."

Sid headed back to the FOB. He found another hulking figure in fatigues leaning up against the counter, waiting for the coffee pot to finish gurgling.

"Lieutenant Núñez," Sid said, keeping a respectful distance.

The officer growled something through his dark mustache that sounded like, "motherfucker." Sid contemplated reaching for his notebook and peppering Núñez with questions before the man had even poured his morning coffee, but thought better of it.

"Given any thought to my, um, repeated requests?" Sid asked instead.

The officer's severe, but sleepy, brown eyes motioned toward the coffee pot.

"Got it," Sid said, grabbing two Styrofoam cups from the stack.

"Thirsty?" Núñez asked.

"Getting one for your mechanic."

"Are you referring to Sergeant Ward?"

"This would be a lot easier if you didn't break my balls every time we had a conversation."

"But it wouldn't be as fun," Núñez said. He filled his mug and turned to walk out the door. "Don't bother my men without my permission or I won't talk to you at all."

The officer knocked into Sid's shoulder as he left.

"Sir?" Sid called out.

"You're not ready to leave the wire," Núñez said, pausing in the hallway. "Some of my men aren't ready. Request denied."

"Thanks for your time, Lieutenant..." Sid muttered.

He knew picking fights with commanding officers wouldn't get him anywhere, but he hadn't been raised to keep his mouth shut (or respect authority for that matter). However, Núñez had just confirmed Sid's suspicions about the base's preparedness. What Sid couldn't piece together is whether that mattered in this country or not.

Sid returned to the Humvee and found Mason's boots pointing out the opposite end. Sid pounded his fist up against the bumper.

"Jesus H. Fuck!" Mason yelled out.

Sid heard tools thump against the sand.

"Delivery," he said. "I'm allowed to give you coffee, right?"

"Hell yes," Mason said.

After climbing out from the car's underbelly, Mason grabbed the cup and downed the coffee in one swallow. He tossed the cup back at Sid who caught it while preventing his own coffee from sloshing out.

"That must have felt good," Sid said.

"Nothing feels good here. Needed a jolt."

"Happy to help. Does this mean I can ask you a few questions?"

"Hope you're not looking to fill column inches with me," Mason said. "I'm a pretty boring story."

"Yeah, I figured that out pretty quick," Sid said. "But I'll take what I can get right now."

"What are you writing about?"

"Don't know yet."

"See, you want us to engage, yet you have no fucking clue what

your plan is.”

“I’m here, that is the plan. A lot of people have questions about what’s going on over here.”

“Tell you what, a lot of guys over here have a question or two on what’s happening.”

“Maybe we can learn from each other.”

“When can I say I’m off the record?”

“Whenever you want.”

“And you can’t use what I say?”

“That’s how it works.”

“Then I’m off the record.”

“Fine by me.”

Sid leaned up against the door, burning his elbow on the hot metal handle. He pulled it away, more pissed about the squad’s antipathy than by the glowing red blotch on his arm. Mason wiped his forehead with an oily rag and then got back to work.

Mason clamped his thick hand down on Sid’s shaking leg.

“Really? Still with the fucking nerves?” Mason asked. “The mission is over, fucking relax.”

Sid adjusted his helmet and nodded.

“Lieutenant, Bob Woodward here is still pissing himself,” Mason yelled above the roar of the Humvee. “Any suggestions on how he can calm his delicate senses?”

In the passenger seat, Núñez turned his head slightly and growled something that sounded like “fucker.”

“Well, I wouldn’t do that to your mother,” Mason said. “Just

sit tight, we're almost home."

Sid had hounded Núñez for nearly a month to authorize his first patrol. The squad now fancied itself a crack staff, impervious to the anxiety and turmoil endemic to other platoons across the desert. Outside of the occasional pop-pop-pop in the distance, however, none of the men crowded in the FOB had been in a firefight or had to halt a long caravan in order to investigate and detonate an IED. How would they react in the face of something more treacherous than cleaning out latrines or standing at attention for Reveille?

It turned out that Sid's hands refused to stop shaking the moment he parked his ass in the Humvee. They shook all through the meeting with the hard-eyed, sun-scorched elders of the nearby village. Núñez listened patiently to the staccato Arabic flying off the leader's rotten teeth like acid. He absorbed the overwhelmed translator's stuttering and backtracking while nodding and trying to maintain eye contact with his counterpart. Sid watched as younger, more anxious men prowled along the back of the tent, shouting and pointing every so often. They had been stripped of their arms before entering, but their danger still permeated the cramped space.

"What are they pissed about?" Sid had asked Mason.

"No water. Limited food. Enemy offering it all at discount prices," Mason had said. "It means we're fucked. Now shut up and keep close to me or anyone else with a gun."

Sid's concentration was broken by Mason leaping out of his seat and climbing on top of a snoozing soldier in the rear of the Humvee.

"I said move your hand, Bee," Mason shouted, slapping his subordinate on the cheeks.

"Wake the fuck up, this ain't fucking nap time."

"Sorry, Sergeant," Bee said.

"Up all night playing 'Call of Duty' again?" Mason asked.

"Nuh-uh, Sergeant," Bee said.

"Christ, just what Uncle Fucking Sam had in mind when he signed your sorry ass up," Mason said, retaking his seat. "Has more goddamn kills online than he does in real life. Put that in your article, Sanford."

"Why do they call you Bee?" Sid said, ignoring Mason's jabs to his bicep. "Hard to figure considering your nameplate reads Zdunczyk."

Bee glanced at Mason, who nodded his approval.

"Real name's Frank," Bee said.

"I'm aware," Sid said. "Why Bee?"

"Aw, tell him," Mason said, throwing in another scoop of tobacco below his bottom lip.

"My first day in the mess I wanted to make conversation," Bee said. "So I started talking about this article I read about bee hives being like a communist society. Then I started in on the similarities and differences between hives and military bases. Kind of explains it all."

"You're so fucking lucky 'Queen Bee' didn't stick," Mason said. "Whole squad was fucking howling so bad Núñez smoked the shit out of us. So worth it."

Sid reached the pocket of his flak jacket and pulled out his recorder. He waited for Mason's affirmative before turning it on.

"Why'd you sign up?" Sid asked.

"No one needs to hear that fucking story," Bee said, wearily

looking at the slim device. "No offense, sir."

"This is your penance for conking out," Mason said. "Be thankful it's not fucking licking my boot whenever the fuck I tell you to."

"Yes, Sergeant," Bee said. "It all started when my father was murdered..."

"Murdered?" Sid asked, the quake in his hands now having less to do with nerves or the Humvee's shimmy.

"Yeah, couple of townies broke into our house looking for shit to pawn to buy meth or some shit," Bee said. "My dad went to investigate and they dropped him with one to the head before he could raise his pistol."

"Holy shit," Mason muttered, spitting tobacco juice into a cup. "Where were you?"

"Getting high in the woods with a bunch of fucks from school," Bee said. "We all passed out there. Cops ended up coming out to find me. We all scattered thinking they were going to bust us for weed. Ran home and right into the yellow caution tape like a goddamn marathon runner."

"They catch the bastards?" Sid asked. "I mean...did they apprehend the suspects?"

"Nah, this is the best part," Bee said. "They stepped over my dad and started ransacking the rest of the house. Probably looking for money or trying to cover their tracks. Make it look like there were more than two shit kickers. My mother had holed up in her closet and waited for them with a Remington 870 shotgun she bought on layaway from Walmart. Blew both motherfuckers away when they opened the door."

"My kind of woman," Mason said. "Shit, sorry about your Pops, but this is making my shit hard."

“So how’d that lead to you enlisting?” Sid asked, once again ignoring Mason.

“Despite being relieved, my mother was pissed as hell I wasn’t home when it all went down,” Bee said. “She told me that since she took care of my father’s killers, the least I could do was go shoot some towelheads in the desert. Sorry, is that too crass for a newspaper?”

“I’ll clean it up, don’t worry,” Sid said. “You regret it?”

“Only regret I have is not killing those pricks myself. And not having a chance to kill anyone here. Fucking glad-handing political bullshit isn’t my thing.”

Sid nodded and pressed the pause button.

“Thank you for trusting me with your story,” he said, extending his hand. “I’m sorry to hear about your father.”

“Oh, I don’t trust you for shit,” Bee said, shaking Sid’s hand. “But Mason does and I report to him. I’m just as liable to shoot you next time you come near me.”

“Understood,” Sid said. “Just make sure Mason’s behind me when you do it. Takes care of both our problems.”

“You fucks know I’m still fucking here, right?” Mason asked.

The Humvee’s breaks squealed like a downtown bus as the hulking transport swerved abruptly. Sid tumbled into Mason’s lap just as the cup of dip flew out of the Sergeant’s hands and onto Sid’s chest.

Núñez shouted something unintelligible from the front of the vehicle.

“Shit,” Mason said. “Look alive, fellas.”

Sid’s nerves actually calmed as the camouflaged men around him checked their weapons and reached for additional ammo. He

heard a distant whistling that aggressively faded into dense thuds nearby.

“Fuck, we’re in the shit now, boys,” Mason said.

The Humvee shook after a mortar landed a few yards away, spraying sand and debris across the small windows. The whistle intensified as the enemy’s aim improved. Núñez’s orders came out in a stream of profanity and pseudo-Spanish as he exited the front seat. Sid could feel the ripple of steel and sand as the Humvee continued to race across the desert. Mason shoved a finger into Sid’s chest.

“What did I fucking tell you before?” He asked.

“Stay close,” Sid said. “Preferably next to someone with a weapon.”

“Good,” Mason said. “Don’t fucking forget it.”

And then the world went white.

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<https://www.amazon.com/Sid-Sanford-Lives-Daniel-Ford/dp/1947048104>

<http://www.writersbone.com/>



Daniel Ford

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# New Poetry: “What Great Grief Has Made the Civilian Mute” by Jennifer Murphy



To watch soldiers load into planes on television  
To ignore veterans who manage to make it home

To cry out when an airman murders four of your friends  
To never question the valiance of combatants

To have visions of your father stabbing you to death  
To lose your sight in vodka and cigarettes

To flee the western night for that big bright eastern city  
To discover there is no such thing as relief in escape

To forget the names of the slain from your hazy youth  
To remember in excruciating detail the site of their wounds

To learn there is nothing you can do to raise the dead  
To spend your life writing the killed into existence

To read the greatest fear for men is being embarrassed  
To understand that for women it's being murdered

To be the only female in the room of camouflaged men  
To befriend the lonely fighter in the city of civilians

To love a Marine who became a decorated firefighter  
To lose him in the North Tower that blue September

To watch soldiers load into planes on television  
To embrace veterans who manage to make it home

*for Deborah, Amy, Melissa, and Heather Anderson  
and Captain Patrick "Paddy" Brown*

**Photo Credit: U.S. Army photo by Maj. Adam Weece, 3rd CR PAO,  
1st Cav. Div.**

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# **Exit West and Dark at the Crossing: Two Novels of Syrian Refugees**

It has been a long six and a half years since the Arab Spring, the popular movement of early 2011 that toppled dictators and challenged regimes across the Middle East. While Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt have since then followed different political paths trending either upwards, flat, or downwards respectively, Syria has virtually fallen off a cliff. Over six years of constant war between four major belligerents have left the country with perhaps half a million dead and at least two thirds of its people displaced. The formation of Daesh created a new terroristic boogey-man for Westerners that somehow distracted from the consistently cruel inhumanity of the Assad regime.

Meanwhile, the worst refugee crisis since World War II continues unabated. The neighbors of Syria—Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq—have taken in most of the refugees. The [paltry number](#) of victims that have made it into Europe or

North America has prompted a xenophobic and Islamophobic backlash resulting in a resurgence of far-right parties. In such a world of hard-heartedness, it is often art that helps us rise above the quotidian news mill and find shelter in stories of compassion, love, and our shared humanity. Two new novels by two very different authors have attempted to tell the stories about Syria and its refugees that we need to hear: *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, and *Dark at the Crossing* by Elliot Ackerman.

*Exit West*, shortlisted for the 2017 Booker Prize, is the fourth novel of Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid. It tells the story of Saeed and Nadia, focusing on how their relationship begins in an unnamed city (presumably Aleppo) before and during a civil war. The first third of the novel follows a straight-forward narrative arc of the main characters' increasing desperation in the face of the violence surrounding them. Nadia, independent and rebellious by nature, agrees to leave her flat and move in with Saeed after his mother is killed in her driveway by a stray bullet. Hamid describes the life-altering horror of trying to survive in an urban warzone: "One's relationship to windows now changed in the city. A window was the border through which death was possibly most likely to come. Windows could not stop even the most flagging round of ammunition: any spot indoors with a view of the outside was a spot potentially in the crossfire. Moreover the pane of a window could itself become shrapnel so easily, shattered by a nearby blast, and everyone had heard of someone or other who had bled out after being lacerated by shards of flying glass."

As the fighting escalates, there are rumors of doors around the city that transport you to other places, the kind of desperate superstition that takes hold when true hope for a reprieve is nearly lost. Eventually, Saeed and Nadia decide to pay an agent to lead them to one of these doors; they give him their money and don't hear back from him for weeks, the

victims of con artist. Until he does actually call back and lead them to an bombed out dental clinic with a pitch-black opening where the supply closet should be. They both walk through this portal and find themselves on a beach in Mykonos, Greece. The reader also suddenly finds herself in a new type of book that is no longer realistic narrative but Borgesian speculative fiction. It reminds me of last year's Booker Prize winner *The Sellout*, by Paul Beatty (my review [here](#)), in which straight-forward story of slave plantation brutality opened up to a literal Underground Railroad in which the characters ride from state to state.

The novel changes focus from survival in a war zone to survival as a refugee in a foreign land. After a bit of bartering and wandering between the numerous refugee camps on the Greek island, the pair are helped by a local to another escape door, this one landing them in London. They find themselves in an abandoned but curiously well-appointed condominium with plenty of food and soft towels. Hamid does not ignore details like the pleasure of a long, hot shower after weeks of living in a dusty tent. Soon, numerous other refugees from all over the third world start filling the house. It turns out that the system of transport portals is not limited to Syria and Europe. Hamid writes: "That summer it seemed to Saeed and Nadia that the whole planet was on the move, much of the global south headed to the global north, but also southerners moving to other southern places and northerners moving to other northern places."

As you would expect, the locals do not like the presence of millions of new residents inhabiting their cities, and a violent nativist movement begins to isolate and attack them relentlessly. Unexpectedly, an eventual accord is reached and people begin to live in relative peace and start a new socialistic society. During their final move to the Bay Area in California, the same pattern repeats. Hamid makes an allusion to the historic promise to freed slaves in America in

this passage: "In exchange for their labor in clearing terrain and building infrastructure and assembling dwellings from prefabricated blocks, migrants were promised forty meters and a pipe: a home on forty square meters of land and a connection to all the utilities of modernity."

Throughout the novel there are short episodes of unrelated and often unnamed characters in the same alternate universe, following the tone of the main narrative by telling stories of how other humans are dealing with the radical change of free movement. In one, a Japanese man ominously follows a pair a young Filipinas in a dark alley; in another an elderly Dutch man meets a Brazilian artist and moves to Rio; in yet another an elderly English lady who has never left her mansion watches as society changes around her while she stays in place. As Hamid writes: "We are all migrants through time."

In *Exit West* Hamid has created a convincing and uplifting portrait of what the world could become if humans evolve ever so slightly out of their instinctive tribalism. The author is in fact an avowed optimist with an interesting biography, which he discusses in his collection of personal and political essays called *Discontent and Its Civilizations*. The titles of some of these essays include "When Updike Saved Me from Morrison (and Myself)", "Get Fit with Haruki Murakami", "Nationalism Should Retire at Sixty-Five", and "Why Drones Don't Help". The relatively sanguine attitude he conveys in this quote, for example the picture he presents of modern Pakistan, is indeed a refreshing view in an increasingly unoptimistic world: "But if globalization is capable of holding out any fundamental promise to us, any temptation to go along with its havoc, then surely that promise ought to be this: we will be more free to invent ourselves. In that country, this city, in Lahore, in New York, in London, that factory, this office, in those clothes, that occupation, in wherever it is we long for, we will be liberated to be what we choose to be." He is also the author of a gripping, enigmatic

novella called *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which I highly recommend and which can be read in a few hours (and has also been made into a film that I have not yet seen).

Elliot Ackerman's second novel, *Dark at the Crossing*, is shortlisted for the National Book Award. It is the story of Haris Abadi, an Iraqi former interpreter who wants to cross the Turkish border to fight in Syria. Haris gained American citizenship in return for services rendered from years of loyally working with Special Forces in Iraq (a plausible but unlikely occurrence in real-life). He was able to bring his sister along to his new life in Michigan, but he loses a sense of purpose for his own life after she gets engaged and he does not have to support her studies anymore. He travels to south-eastern Turkey to fight for a cause in Syria. It turns out that neither he nor the readers ever get a strong sense of what exactly that cause is. A large part of the narrative involves waiting in Turkey trying to cross the border, and flashbacks to his time working with SF.

The only American character (other than the naturalized protagonist) was one of the SF team members named Jim, who seemed to be a stand-in for the muscle-bound, arrogant, secretly sensitive, not-as-smart-as-he-thinks American soldier trope. This is similar to Ackerman's previous novel, *Green on Blue*, in which a mysterious CIA operator known as Mr. Jack is the only American among a cast of Afghans. In flashback scenes, we see Jim involve himself again and again in Haris the interpreter's life, including drunk midnight confessionals in his tent. Jim obviously meets an untimely death, and the guilt Haris harbors is part of the reason for his quest.

During the long period of waiting to cross the border, Haris is taken in by a Syrian refugee couple, Amir and Daphne. Educated and sophisticated, they were among the first revolutionary protesters before the civil war started. Now their lives and relationship is stuck in place as Amir wants to move West and start a new life, but Daphne cannot abandon

the dead daughter she thinks is still alive in their old village. As Haris becomes entwined with these two and other seedier characters, an opening is found to enter Syria, and their journey together continues inexorably, bewitchingly towards its destined climax.

Ackerman was a Marine Corps officer for eight years, serving multiple tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq. His first novel, *Green on Blue* (review in *The Wrath-Bearing Tree* [here](#)), was a remarkable tale of an Afghan boy's gradual rise through the ranks of militancy in War on Terror-era Waziristan. In fact, it was riveting reading for me because it is set exactly in the Afghan province of Paktika in which I also spent two years deployed to Forward Operating Bases, specifically around Bermel, Shkin, Gomal, and Orgun. Ackerman has also published a short story in the veteran writers' anthology [The Road Ahead](#) (to which I am also a contributor), and now lives in Turkey.

One of the greatest benefits of literature is that it can build empathy for people whose lives you could not previously imagine (a theme I discussed in my essay [Why Black Literature Matters](#)). I have visited the western part of Turkey, but never the eastern borders of Syria and Iraq, nor have I personally met any Syrians or Iraqis. The only Syrian characters I have previously encountered in my reading are the types of conniving, cultured, expatriot merchants that occasionally dot the pages of a Conrad, Durrell, Naipaul, or Greene. With their characters and their stories that let the reader experience the lives of others, Hamid and Ackerman, like all great authors, show how ultimately we all share the same hopes and fears, and that our humanity defines us more than our nationality.

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# Stalin's Biography: For Serious Readers Only

Diving into an 850-page biography of one of the most monstrous and powerful men who ever lived is not something one does lightly. So it was with some hesitation that I opened the pages of Simon Sebag Montefiore's acclaimed *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (2003).

Montefiore begins the biography on a night in November 1932 in which Stalin and all the leading Bolsheviks and their wives were having an intimate holiday party. Up to this point, despite the mass carnage they had wreaked on Russia and the peasant class, the political elite lived a charmed life together, a so-called "golden age", strolling around the Kremlin relaxedly with their kids, and taking vacations to the same Black Sea resorts. All of this would come to an end on this particular night in which Stalin's beloved second wife, Nadya, returned home alone after a public row and killed herself. Thirty-one years old to Stalin's fifty-three and mother to Vasily and Svetlana, she had been his secretary since before the Revolution and, like many of the Bolshevik women, a historically important character in her own right. In a gripping novelistic account, Montefiore shows how this most mysterious and tragic event of Stalin's personal life began the downward spiral towards the Great Terror of the Thirties.

As a student of history, political philosophy, and literature, I have long been interested in the phenomenon of the dictator—the set of conditions that facilitates his rise to power, the ways he remakes a government and state in his image, and the ways he is portrayed and resisted by writers and artists (the topic of my essay [The Dictator Novel in the Age of Trump](#)). Stalin, more than any merely regional potentate like Rafael Trujillo or Mobutu Sese Seko, was basically the Dictator to whom all dictators bow down in (dis)respect; the

cannibalistic Cronos who ate all his own children; the monster who out-monstered even Hitler. The fact that Hitler is (rightfully) our universal archetype of monstrously inhuman dictator rather than Stalin is mostly because of the not insignificant detail that we were allied with the latter in the world's biggest war. Regarding Hitler, the title of world's worst human and author of the most heinous genocide has not stopped him from still being read and worshipped by neo-Nazis in America in 2017 (including the current [American president](#)). Regarding Stalin, even his image as an ambiguous but not-all-bad tyrant is being rehabilitated by the current Russian government. Vladimir Putin, himself an illiberal second-rate dictator and master of false equivalence, [has stated](#) that "there is no difference between Stalin and Oliver Cromwell". Whatever that means. Someone named Marx once said that history repeats itself first as tragedy, then as farce. Stalin and Hitler formed a secret alliance that led to WWII; Putin and Trump are now allies. Draw your own conclusions.

The importance of reading true history and biography is that it allows us to work out complex series of causes and effects, and to make sense our own world and how it got to be this way. But also because that old cliché about [history repeating itself](#) really is true in a certain fundamental way—this is because the ways in which humans wield political power is fairly limited and predictable, and also because most ideologies human have created share many commonalities. If we want to examine 20th century authoritarian ideologies, for example, we can quite easily find a set of overlapping traits between Fascism, Nazism, Falangism, Marxism-Leninism, Stalinism, and Maoism. They all believed that the ends justify the means, that individual lives are meaningless, that violence is necessary or even good, and that the Leader is indistinguishable from the State. Resistance to existing dictatorships requires no knowledge of the leader's biography; resistance to future potential dictatorships, on the other hand, does. While I have no interest at all in reading about

Hitler (Don DeLillo's [White Noise](#) was enough), reading Stalin's biography has been slightly disturbing but also very insightful.

Montefiore is quick to dispel the common myth, first propagated by Trotsky, that Stalin was a "colorless bureaucratic mediocrity" but was in fact "exceptional in every way". Early on, he gives a powerful summary of Stalin's character:

"The man inside was a super-intelligent and gifted politician for whom his own historic role was paramount, a nervy intellectual who manically read history and literature, and a fidgety hypochondriac suffering from chronic tonsillitis, psoriasis, rheumatic aches from his deformed arm and the iciness of his Siberian exile. Garrulous, sociable and a fine singer, this lonely and unhappy man ruined every love relationship and friendship in his life by sacrificing happiness to political necessity and cannibalistic paranoia. Damaged by his childhood and abnormally cold in temperament, he tried to be a loving father and husband yet poisoned every emotional well, this nostalgic lover of roses and mimosas who believed the solution to every human problem was death, and who was obsessed with executions. This atheist owed everything to priests and saw the world in terms of sin and repentance, yet he was a "convinced Marxist fanatic from his youth." His fanaticism was "semi-Islamic," his Messianic egotism boundless. He assumed the imperial mission of the Russians yet remained very much a Georgian, bringing the vendettas of his forefathers northwards to Muscovy."

Montefiore avoids the familiar territory of the Russian Revolution and Soviet foreign policy in order to focus almost exclusively on how Stalin interacted with the small inner circle of Bolshevik leaders to wield power and dominate the Soviet Union from Lenin's death in 1924 until his own in 1953. Using previously unreleased archival documents and correspondence, Montefiore paints a vivid picture of this

unique group of revolutionaries who remained a close-knit family for the first decade and a half after the Revolution: "They were surrounded by the other Bolshevik magnates, all hardened by years in the underground, blood-spattered by their exploits in the Civil War, and now exultant if battered by the industrial triumphs and rural struggles of the Stalin Revolution. Some, like Stalin, were in their fifties. But most were strapping, energetic fanatics in their late thirties, some of the most dynamic administrators the world has ever seen, capable of building towns and factories against all odds, but also of slaughtering their enemies and waging war on their own peasants."

Despite my having no credentials in psychiatry, it did not take me long to recognize Stalin as a clinical psychopath, rather than the madman he is often dismissed as. Montefiore writes: "He was emotionally stunted and lacked empathy yet his antennae were supersensitive." He was also an extremely charming and even lovable person to everyone around him, and this was his best tool of manipulation. "The foundation of Stalin's power in the Party was not fear: it was charm. Stalin possessed the dominant will among his magnates, but they also found his policies generally congenial... While incapable of true empathy on the one hand, he was a master of friendships on the other. He constantly lost his temper, but when he set his mind to charming a man, he was irresistible."

I usually skip past the first pages of a book which contain laudatory blurbs from journals and reviews, but in this case I found myself reading with great interest the several dozens of such examples. The cognitive dissonance between how an excellent book about a horrible person was expressed, and the contradictory language used for such a delicate purpose led to typically awkward phrases like this: "A wonderful, well-written, extensively researched portrait of a terrifying, inhuman madman." Some of the reviews seemed to blur the lines to a slightly disturbing extent between the superlative skill

of the biographer and the superlative monstrosity of the protagonist. Some examples of this include the words "hero", "humanizing effect", and "black humor"; one even spoke of how Labour and Tory ministers should read it for tips on "how to become an efficient fighting machine", whatever that means (presumably start murdering your enemies and allies alike on industrial scale). One brief review by notable war criminal Henry Kissinger jumped out due to the sheer arrogance of this would-be universal expert: "I did not think I could learn anything new about Stalin but I was wrong. A stunning performance."

It's not always easy to continue reading such a book, heavy with chapter after chapter of paranoia, manipulation, and the vicious blood baths inflicted by Stalin and all his equally monstrous lieutenants. It is only Montefiore's telling of this important story that really draws in the reader and makes it impossible to quit. Neither the man nor the ideology find any semblance of redemption here, but it does help to account for the lengths to which humans can go (or the depths to which they will sink) in furtherance to their ideology. Bolshevism, as much a religion as a political system, maintained that a classless utopia was possible if only the old capitalist corruption were destroyed. One of the most useful facts we can understand by reading history is that there is no utopia that will ever be free of human corruption, and that power should never be concentrated into individual hands. Montefiore comments that: "It is hard to find a better synthesis between a man and a movement than the ideal marriage between Stalin and Bolshevism: he was a mirror of its virtues and faults." Now we must continue to be on guard against the next would-be dictators of our own age, the type of charming psychopath who values power over others as the ultimate goal and would subsume entire continents to achieve it.