

Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": Interment at Arlington



The vet read that the hero's burial ceremony in Arlington Cemetery was taking place the following Tuesday. As it happened, the vet was going to be in Arlington, the county in Virginia, that day and he had known the hero. They had taught together at West Point, and thought the vet was senior to the hero and they didn't socialize outside of department functions, a couple of episodes had offered closer looks at him. Among other things, the hero was on the softball team coached by the vet in their last summer together.

The hero played left field, an important position in softball. The leftfielder has to catch the long drives hit by the opposing team's best right-handed hitters. That summer, the hero chased down those towering shots, or circled under them, until he reared them in. It never seemed like a sure thing, honestly, but the hero almost always got them. The hero was fast, too, so he batted lead-off or second in the line-up. He was not a home-run hitter, but could easily turn a single into a double if the opposing team did not field the ball cleanly or hesitated for a moment.

But the hero was not a hero for his softball ability. Early in the post-9/11 wars he had protested the interrogation tactics used by members of his platoon when they questioned detainees in Afghanistan. Brutality, let's just say torture, was forbidden by policy and regulation, but now appeared to be a tolerated standard practice. The hero sought clarification first from his chain-of-command and then from the highest governmental levels in Washington. He then took his concerns

to a human-rights watchdog group in New York. The hero had been celebrated for doing so by many and was even named a "Man of the Year" by Time magazine. Others, however, considered him a troublemaker. Couldn't he have addressed the problem other than by writing politicians and advocacy groups? The vet wondered how he might have handled the same situation.

At West Point, the vet had seen the hero lead a philosophy workshop. He was laser focused, deeply logical, and profoundly aware of competing factors and viewpoints, which he would unpack in detail in front of the workshop attendees. As he spoke, he paced back and forth like a caged tiger. The furious physical expenditure of mental energy was endearing. The vet had read comments by the hero's former students and it was clear the hero's students had been in awe of him. In the workshop, watching him give birth to the intricacies of an argument, it was easy to see why. The vet also understood why a woman, a colleague, loved the hero and eventually married him.

At the end of his tour at West Point, the hero left the Army after 15 years on active duty. He said he had enough of the military and now wanted to study philosophy as a civilian.

But the years after the Army did not go well. First gradually, then quickly, the hero's life disintegrated. In the beginning, he excelled in graduate school, but then his work grew erratic and unsubtle. He picked fights with other scholars and his marriage fell apart. Eventually the hero lost his apartment and was several times detained by the police for public outbursts of craziness. He was hospitalized more than once, but because he had left the Army before retiring, and it was not clear that his present maladies were service-related, the VA was slow to assume care for him. Subject to the vagrancies of state-provided mental care, he was in-and-out of institutions.

Friends from the military tried to help. So did childhood

friends and distinguished professors who had been impressed by the hero's early work and potential. The decline continued, however, and as so often happens, the hero resisted efforts by others to help him. Toward the end, his grip on what Poe once called "the precincts of reality" was tenuous. In 2021, he was found dead in his room at a mental hospital. The exact cause of his death remains unclear. Was it too much or the wrong kind of medication? Was it suicide? Did his mind and body just give out?

Now the vet sat in his car alongside other cars lined up outside the burial office at Arlington Cemetery. He knew how these interments happened, because the previous summer he had been in attendance for the interment of a childhood friend's mother alongside her husband, a Korean War-era vet, who had died years earlier. The vet had known his friend's father well and knew how much his Army service meant to him, along with the prospect of burial at Arlington. He also knew the interment process to be an orderly and dignified one that respected the deceased and his or her family members. Still, that interment had been a markedly casual event, with little ceremony or eulogizing of the departed. The vet had enjoyed the company of his friend and his two children, who were now adults and whom he had not seen in decades. The cemetery official was a retired Army paratrooper, and the vet, who had also been a paratrooper, bandied with the official about their airborne days. Only when the cemetery official opened the columbarium "niche," as the square burial vaults are called, where the ashes of his friend's father lay waiting for his wife to join him, did the vet feel the momentousness of the event.

On cue, the procession of cars began to snake through the cemetery to the burial location. The hero was also to be interred in a columbarium niche, but there would be a service before the interment. A tent was set up among the gravestones to provide shade for the hero's immediate family, along with

chairs for them to sit in. Others in attendance, about fifty, stood in the sun, though for a summer day in Virginia it was neither hot nor humid. Off in the distance, the vet could see the Pentagon, which seemed ironically appropriate. An Army chaplain, a woman, stood waiting, along with a small detail of uniformed soldiers poised to fold the flag covering the hero's burial urn. About 100 yards away stood a platoon-sized honor guard and a military band. Also present was a firing squad and bugler. The vet recognized a couple of teachers from West Point with whom he and the hero had taught, but not anyone else he knew. The attendees seemed composed equally of family and friends who looked like they might have either served with the hero or been his students. Only a couple of attendees were in uniform—none especially high-ranking.

The chaplain called the service to order. She said kind words about the hero without shying away from the controversies that marked his service and his sad final days. She read from Romans 8:28: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" When she finished, the detail folded the flag and presented it to the hero's father. The bugler played Taps and the firing squad fired a three-round salute. Then the chaplain asked for a volunteer to carry the urn containing hero's ashes to the columbarium. At first no one volunteered, and the vet wondered if it was appropriate if he stepped forward. Then the hero's father said that he would carry his son's remains.

The vet had read that the hero's father was a former Marine Corps machine-gunner and a Vietnam veteran. He had also read that the father hated the military and had been a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. He was the only male at the ceremony not formally dressed or in military attire. Confined to a wheelchair, wearing a plaid lumberjack shirt, the hero's father exuded determination that his son's life was worthy of military honor.

As the procession walked to the columbarium, the band played a song that sounded like the Elvis Presley classic "Love Me

Tender." It's a sweet song, but the vet wondered at the selection. Only later did he learn that the melody belonged first to a song called "Army Blue" that predated "Love Me Tender" and was long associated with West Point.

The columbarium at Arlington Cemetery has its own kind of dignity, but it's narrow for the purposes of a ceremonial gathering. The previous summer, at the vet's friend's mother's interment, there was only the cemetery official, the friend, and the friend's son and daughter. Now the attendees squeezed into the row between the walls of burial niches or looked on from the ends of the rows. More words were said, but from the vet's position it was hard to hear them. After final remarks were completed, attendees filed past the niche and paid their last respects.

The vet had so far viewed the day's events abstractly, almost without emotion or consolidated articulation of his thoughts about the hero. But when his turn came to stand before the urn in its dark square final resting place, tears welled up and the vet suddenly found himself both short of breath and short of words. Conscious that others were waiting in line behind him, he stammered under his breath, "Good job man, good job" and moved on.

Following the ceremony, the vet spoke with his friends from West Point and a couple of others present. Someone pointed out former students of the hero's. Another pointed out the childhood friend who had gone to the most length to organize help for the hero in his troubled final days. No ready opportunity to speak with the hero's family presented itself, and the vet was hesitant to force the issue. A reception was announced, but the vet didn't get the location and had already decided he would not attend.

An official announced it was time to for the procession to depart and the attendees in their cars drove slowly toward the cemetery gates.

On the way out of the cemetery, the vet saw signs directing traffic to the Marine Corps War Memorial. It had been a long time since he had visited the memorial, so he followed the signs to the parking lot. He walked around the grounds, read the signage, and contemplated the magnificent statue of the six soldiers raising the flag on Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima. The crowd was sparse: a few casually-attired tourists and some vet old-timers wearing ball-caps adorned with patches and pins representing military units. Unexpectedly, a wedding party, dressed in their finest, strolled by from a site farther off from the statue where they had gathered for pictures.

After taking it all in for a while, the vet walked back to his car.

Biographical details about the life of Ian Fishback not recounted from memory were obtained from C.J. Chivers, "Ian Fishback's American Nightmare." *New York Times*, February 21, 2023.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/21/magazine/ian-fishback.html>



New Poetry by Luis Rosa Valentin: "Desperate Need of Help"

Desperate Need of Help

New Poetry by Jennifer Smith: “So This is My Career?”

New Poem by Jennifer Smith: “So This is My Career”

New Fiction from Kate Sullivan: “All Sales Final”



GoodSouthernBoy™ is born to a RegularAmericanFamily! in Tennessee. You won't learn where exactly, and if you do, you won't remember. It's not important. GoodSouthernBoy™ stands over six feet tall, has blond hair, and you shudder to think that at one point in time, GoodSouthernBoy™ was ConventionallySexuallyAttractive. GoodSouthernBoy™ has the trappings of a nice smile, white teeth and with enough cheek dimple for RegularAmericanMoms! across the country to swoon and say things like You Found A Keeper! and What A Heartbreaker! and there's never enough time for you to say it isn't your heart that GoodSouthernBoy™ will break. GoodSouthernBoy™ is a Marine Officer in his spare time, could be a poster boy, you can almost see him on the highway billboards proclaiming *the few, the proud*, can almost see his dress blues cover tipped forward to reveal the quatrefoil and some hefty under eye shadow. The manufacturers really go for

that. Mystery! Intrigue! GoodSouthernBoy™ has it all. The RegularAmericanMoms! are so proud.

GoodSouthernBoy™ comes with accessories like SoftGreyTShirt and AlcoholicDrinks and Excuses!

GoodSouthernBoy™ has a pull string that says lines like *let me walk you home* and *I insist* and *reach for the sky*. Well, maybe not that last one but it sort of fits? See, GoodSouthernBoy™ has this effect where you remember the acute things, the contours, but some of the specific details are sold separately. The manufacturers and makers of Marine billboards call it CHARM™, and although you were also a Marine Officer in your spare time, you don't get a billboard. You know it's not fucking CHARM™ but this story is about GoodSouthernBoy™ so you know what, you don't get a say.

GoodSouthernBoy™ is everywhere and nowhere, he lurks around every corner, attends every planning meeting because you've been assigned to the same 80-piece playcastle that's really a thousand piece jigsaw puzzle of an old World War II facility. Even though you know the likelihood of him being at the same meeting as you, or crossing the crosswalk at the same time is slim, thanks to Reassurances™ from your JobManager, the malleability of GoodSouthernBoy™ makes it so your JobManager's words ring hollow. You stop walking to that coffee shop at the far end of the work complex, the one where you know

GoodSouthernBoy™ is most likely to have clients and comrades, but just when you think you have a Routine!, GoodSouthernBoy™ will emerge from some adjacent stairwell and when your JobManager asks why you've slowed down your normally very Purposeful and Powerful walk, you'll say you left your notebook in the conference room, and when your fucking JobManager points out you're carrying a notebook you snarl *no, the other one*. JobManager became a JobManager when They realized that he'd be LeastLikely to cause a problem. In his performance report They wrote "HighlyCompetent" and "Client-

Focused.” GoodSouthernBoy™ isn’t rated “HighlyCompetent” or “Client-Focused” but when you have CHARM™ They don’t seem to care.

Extension packs for GoodSouthernBoy™ feature drunken texts months later with prompts like *hey are you out?* and *hey did you just start working here?* and *i don’t know if I’ll ever forgive myself*, and though you’ll start to wonder, you trust the manufacturers that it’s not a defect. Even if it was, there is no return policy, no extended warranty. *All sales final* is in GoodSouthernBoy™’s fine print.

GoodSouthernBoy™ isn’t a T R A N S F O R M E R™, he doesn’t shapeshift into a car or a truck or a shark. You’re not a T R A N S F O R M E R™ either (what you’d give to be one of those lucky bastards), but you don’t really know what you are because your manufacturers can’t seem to make up Their mind on what to call you. They’ve done reissues like: SoccerGirl™, LIMITED EDITION MARINE OFFICER! - NEW WITH PARACHUTING CAPABILITIES™!, BackcountrySkier™, and queer™. Your collectors’ items have included soccer balls and combat boots and plastic skis with felt climbing skins, ice axes, and rainbow flags. You’ve *had* collectors. So you still can’t understand why They prefer GoodSouthernBoy™ and his stupid blond hair even though you’ve done better in sales, outperformed and outlasted and in every reissue, your accessories have never broken.

The announcement of your latest model is particularly infuriating because there was never any preparation or marketing campaign for it. You just woke up one day and like GoodSouthernBoy™’s Excuses!, your new release just circled around your brain like a halo, because that’s the technology They’ve settled on for mass announcements. When They announced the release of V ! C T ! M, you tried to tell them it’s not how you feel for a reissue but They insisted. V ! C T ! M, defender of virtue and honor, comes complete with YouShouldSmileMore! and a 50-yard stare and a POWERSUIT. *It’s*

all about power, They say. You don't like the way people look at you as V ! C T ! M, you don't feel they can see what you're defending.

The manufacturers create a special, limited edition dual set, "V ! C T ! M vs. GoodSouthernBoy™." Even then it doesn't make sense, because you're the one defending honor and virtue but *that's not what marketing is reporting back to us as what the people are responding to!* They say.

They tell you the reissue includes a tete-a-tete with GoodSouthernBoy™, who's evidently been preparing for months. They tell you *don't worry*, GoodSouthernBoy™ is scared, he's sweat through all five of his SoftGreyTShirts, has downed the last of his AlcoholicDrinks and will be forced to rely on his Excuses! You already know you're stronger, you're just not sure you can look him in the face.

You tell JobManager you're taking a vacation (it's not), and he says to make sure your OutofOffice™ is on (it is). He never thinks to ask you how you're doing. In his performance report They wrote "EmotionallyIntelligent."

You're supposed to have a Law!yer but there isn't one available. *Your fate and the city's rest in Their hands.* GoodSouthernBoy™ has a Law!yer issued to him named Eric. You shift uncomfortably in your seat because V ! C T ! M's cape and collar are made of itchy, scratchy wool and it's ninety-seven degrees in this cardboard courtroom.

You cough but They programmed your catchphrase to *Let's get 'em!* What you hear is a voice not your own, a register belonging only to V ! C T ! M.

The city's burning, They say. *Whatever will we do? I meant no harm*, says GoodSouthernBoy™.

I told him I didn't need to be walked home, says V ! C T ! M.

Your legs stick to the plastic chair, you feel V ! C T ! M's weaponsbelt™ conform to your hips. This is who you are now. They look at you with daggers in their eyes.

Thank you Eric! They say. We've considered all the evidence laid before us today and we thank you both for yourradicalcandor™. In the case of V ! C T ! M vs GoodSouthernBoy™, we are pleased to announce,

You wish you They assigned you a rocket ship to blast off into the cosmos. You and V ! C T ! M hope that your RegularAmericanMom! will understand.

GoodSouthernBoy™, we are pleased to name you Jeff.

New Fiction by Joe Millsap: Dreamland



Muhamet reaches for a plastic water bottle resting on the metal filing cabinet that serves as a nightstand. He drinks the last of it, tosses the empty bottle to the floor. It's early, no sunlight seeping in yet through the open seam in the plywood and sandbags that cover the only window. He rolls out of bed and pulls on clean coveralls and dusty work boots while the dull, familiar soundtrack of small arms fire echoes in the background. Before the war, the camp was a Ba'ath Party resort, a favorite of Uday's and Qusay's. When the Americans arrived they named it Camp Baharia, but everyone here calls it Dreamland.

He takes a deep breath, pushes open the door, steps out under

a pale moon onto loose gravel that crunches under his weight. It's a two-cigarette walk to the Hydrologie office. A modest, regional wastewater firm based in Düsseldorf before the war, Hydrologie was now global, with expertise in logistics, cybersecurity, force protection. Hired as an electrical engineer, Muhamet spends his days cleaning portable toilets and repairing the generators and A/C units that keep Dreamland powered up and cool. When he reaches the office, he jams his cigarette into a bucket of sand by the door and steps inside, letting the aluminum door swing shut behind him. He flips on the overhead lights and trudges over to the calendar pinned to the wall above Fatmir's desk. With a black marker he draws a diagonal line through March 13th. Another week and this war will be the same age as his daughter.

He brews coffee and takes a cup out to the small courtyard behind the office, sinks into a white plastic chair. Holding a fresh Marlboro, he runs his fingers through his thinning hair and looks out to the north, where he can see tracer rounds careen like little red meteors, the ricochets charting a random and ruinous path through the sleeping hamlets beyond the wall.

He lights up and inhales as a tangerine sunrise spills out over the desert. This is why he comes out here so early. Over time, the walls of the camp can numb the senses. When he isn't working, he passes the time watching movies or playing ping pong in the rec tent. But it's only here, sitting alone, a slight buzz from the caffeine and nicotine, that he manages, however briefly, to forget about the heat and the thousands of miles between his heart and home.

He ventures back inside and sits down at his desk, using his sleeve to wipe the dust from the framed photo of his family that was taken before he left Ferizaj, an old city in the rolling foothills of the Sharr mountains of Kosovo. The situation back home is far less dire now than it was three

years ago, when half a million ethnic Albanians fled the country to escape Milosevic and his Serbian nationalists. By the time Muhamet left, he had the luxury of a return date. But fighting for peace and independence is one thing, and buying food and warm clothes for the winter is another. Leaving Kosovo was the only way he could earn enough to provide for his family. When he thinks too much about that day at the airport, he can't breathe.

Now the fifth-largest city in Kosovo, for centuries Ferizaj was an anonymous farming community in a forgotten corner of the Ottoman Empire. Then, in 1873, a new train station was built that linked it to the Orient Express, a massive rail network that stretched all the way from Istanbul to Paris. Over time, the flow of goods transformed it into the modern city it is today.

On his way to school every day as a child, back when Kosovo was still part of Yugoslavia, Muhamet would pass by a mosque that stood right next to an orthodox church. The only thing separating the two houses of worship was a shared courtyard. Today this phenomenon is a tourist attraction, a symbol of religious and cultural harmony in a region long plagued by sectarianism.

Nearby, just west of town along a country road his family would drive on weekend trips to the mountains, is another phenomenon: the fork in the Nerodimka River. It's one of only two rivers in the world with a natural fork that drains into two different seas.

And a few miles in the opposite direction is Camp Bondsteel. When half of Kosovo was unemployed after the war, this sprawling new NATO base became a lifeline. Thousands of locals, Muhamet among them, earned reliable wages in the warehouses, kitchens, chow halls, and laundry facilities on

base. Muhamet drove a sanitation truck and ate Taco Bell six days a week, always bringing extra home for his family.

It was at Bondsteel that he first heard about the job offers in Iraq. By then, several men he had known his entire life had already signed up and left, and it wasn't long before rumors circulated about the bonuses they had earned for being in a war zone, despite living and working a safe distance from the front lines.

The morning before he left, Muhamet drove west of town, past the neighboring church and mosque, until he reached a small park. It was empty, and he sat in the cool grass and stared down at the fork in the muddy Nerodimka. Some of the water flowed to the left and some flowed to the right, some people prayed in churches and others prayed in mosques, and some people stayed while others left. Leaving was a big decision, but most days he felt more like a drop of water in the Nerodimka than a man making his own choices – part of a larger system that is perpetually moving forward, twists and turns and currents carrying you to greener pastures or dumping you an ocean away from the people you love.

In the framed photo on his desk at Dreamland, they're laughing, huddled together in the snow in the main square in Ferizaj, in front of the cubist mural of a waiter that covers the side of the Hotel Lybeten. A passing stranger took it a few days before he left, on the last night they all went out together as a family.

Fatmir arrives at the office and mutters a tired good morning. Muhamet wipes his eyes and sits up in his chair when he hears him come in. Trailing Fatmir are two Marines, one tall and dark-haired, the other short and stocky, his head shaved clean. Muhamet recognizes them from 2/6, an infantry unit from North Carolina that arrived at Dreamland around the same time he did.

Fatmir introduces them.

“The American law firm of Preston and Godchaux?” Muhamet says, grinning as they shake hands. He cringes to himself and is grateful when they laugh at the joke.

They sit down together at the small table in the middle of the room. The Marines notice Muhamet eyeing the green sea bag lying on the floor at their feet.

“Right, almost forgot,” Godchaux says. “We brought gifts.” He opens the bag, pulls out two new pairs of combat boots and a box of cigars, pushes them across the table to Muhamet.

“For us?” Muhamet says. “What for?”

Godchaux shrugs, smiles. “Fatmir says you’re his best driver and his best mechanic,” he says.

“We hear you’re good with generators,” Preston adds. Muhamet glances at Fatmir.

“I already told them we aren’t allowed to leave the camp,” Fatmir says. “If we did...” He snaps his fingers, thinking. “What’s the word I’m thinking?”

“Hypothetically?” says Preston.

“Yes, exactly. If we did, *hypothetically*, there could be no paper. Handshake only.”

Godchaux speaks next, but Muhamet has a hard time focusing and only hears some of what he says. They want him to join their nightly convoy that resupplies the Marines scattered across their area of operations. There’s a faulty generator at one of the observation posts, and the portable toilets and showers need service from Hydrologie’s “honeywagon.” They assure him it’s a one-time request, to support a “hygiene surge” ordered by their commander. In turn, they’ll pay Muhamet and Fatmir each five hundred U.S. dollars – equal to three months’ pay

back home and two weeks of his Hydrologie wages.

Muhamet clears his throat. "Your vehicles, they have armor?"

Godchaux and Preston exchange a look. "That's right," says Preston. "And a lot of firepower. Nobody messes with us out there."

"You tow my truck and I ride with you? Behind the armor?"

Godchaux frowns. "I wish we could do that, Muhamet, I really do," he says.

"Unfortunately..."

He tries to explain, says something about "maintaining a tactical posture," but Muhamet isn't listening. He's thinking about the roads, how dark they must be at night. His palms feel clammy. He imagines straining to keep his truck from rolling over into an irrigation canal.

The Marines promise to stop by again the next morning to check in. The convoy leaves at dusk.

When the door closes behind them Muhamet says, without looking up, "If you like this plan, why don't you go?"

Fatmir smiles patiently. "One, because I can't fix a generator, and two, because I have a shop to supervise." He places a hand on Muhamet's shoulder. "It's your call."

He spends the rest of the day and a fitful night of sleep mulling it over, surprised that he's even considering it. The money would help, of course. And Dreamland is teeming with contractors like him in search of a payday. If not him, they'll find someone else, and they won't even have to pay as much.

Unable to sleep, he walks to the phone center and uses a

prepaid card to call home.

"It's me," he says, softly, when Samira picks up. It's late in Ferizaj, too, just an hour behind.

The call woke her up, he can hear it in her voice.

He calls often, and sometimes, on days he's feeling particularly homesick, he writes long, poetic letters that she reads aloud to Adriana, their daughter.

"I was hoping it was you," she says.

"Who else would it be?"

"I don't know, someone calling with bad news. But I don't want to think about that. Guess what?"

"Tell me."

"It's snowing."

"No. This late in the year?"

"I know, I wish you were here to see it. It's so pretty. The river is frozen over."

He can hear the furnace popping in the background, and he imagines walking home in the snow, stomping the slush from his boots and stepping through the front door to a roaring, cozy fire. Samira takes his coat and hands him a mug, and he feels the first sip of steaming rakia coating his throat and chest.

"Muhamet?" "I'm here, love."

"How are things there? Has the rain let up?"

"Yes, no more rain, but it's getting hot now. I wish I was there."

After they say goodnight and hang up, he leaves the phone center and heads for the gym, where Fatmir looks up from his

stationary bike. "I'll do it," he says.

He arrives at the staging area just before dusk. A stiff wind has stirred up the desert air and painted the row of armored vehicles a mix of deep orange and shadow gray, the patterns shifting with the setting sun. The motor pool is a beehive of activity: silhouettes of turret gunners greasing up their crew-served weapons, mechanics in tan flight suits making last-minute repairs, Godchaux gathering his drivers in a semicircle for the pre-brief. There's a detailed model drawn in the dirt. Parachute cord marks the route, small rocks represent the vehicles. Popsicle sticks from the dining hall for the hamlets, twigs and bunchgrass for the vegetation, red dice for the radio checkpoints.

Godchaux – shorter than his troops, square and muscled, his freshly shaven head glowing pink – spots Muhamet and makes his way over. "Glad you could make it," he says, smiling. "You're just in time."

He turns to address the drivers. "Ok, everyone on me," he says. His voice booms. He pauses while the young men standing before him, who look to Muhamet more like orphaned boys than grizzled fighters, gather around. "This here is Muhamet. He works for Hydrologie. You've seen their trucks all over the camp. He's Santa Claus tonight, so make sure he has everything he needs."

Before Muhamet can ask, Preston appears and pulls him to the side as Godchaux kicks off his convoy brief. He's grinning, holding something white and fluffy. "Santa Claus beard," he says. "Cheers the guys up when we deliver their mail and supplies. Normally we draw straws to see who

wears it. It's rare that we have a guest." He looks down, then back up, like he's just remembered something. "Shit," he says. "You're Muslim, aren't you? I didn't think about that till

now.”

Muhamet lets out a full-throated laugh. Maybe it's his nerves, or the look of doubt on Preston's face, over something so silly when they're about to do something so serious. Whatever the reason, it cuts through the tension in the air. He grabs the beard by its elastic band. "It's okay," he says. "We celebrate Christmas in my country, too."

Preston pats him on the back and motions to another Marine, who hands him a Kevlar helmet with night vision goggles attached to the front, a flak vest weighed down by thick ceramic plates, and a small digital camouflage backpack that contains a pair of Nomex gloves, wrap-around ballistic eyeglasses, and a handheld Icom radio and headset for talking to the other vehicles in the convoy.

"Here, like this," Preston says, moving the goggles back and forth on the hinge to lower them to eye level and back up. "It might feel weird at first, but your eyes will adjust. Just take it easy and follow the truck in front of you. If anything seems off to you, or you need something – anything at all – just hold the talk button down here and speak clearly. We'll take care of the rest." He smiles. "Good to go?"

When Muhamet gives a thumbs up, he can feel his hand tremble.

After Godchaux ends his brief with a reminder to stay alert and follow radio protocol, Muhamet climbs up into the cab of the Hydrologie truck, starts the engine, checks his mirrors and gauges, tests the pump switches by turning them on and off. Then he jumps down and does a walkaround, checking the treads on the tires, looking for a screw or nail, anything that might cause a slow leak, and takes a quick inventory of the long metal box that's bolted to the back of the cab in front of the sludge tanks. There's a tire jack, a toolkit, some spare generator parts, a backup pump hose, eight twelve-packs of toilet paper for the resupply. Satisfied that everything's

in order, he dons the flak vest and helmet and climbs back into the cab. Idle chatter, inside jokes and wordplay that's hard for Muhamet to follow, fill his Icom headset. He closes his eyes and takes deep breaths to calm his nerves.

It's dark when the Humvee in front of him finally inches forward. He fights the instinct to turn his headlights on as they weave through Dreamland's date palm-lined streets. *Preston was right*, he thinks to himself. *I can't see a thing.*

They halt just inside the front gate. Seeing the Marines dismount, he puts the truck in park and follows along. A voice from the front of the convoy calls out "Condition one!" When every weapon is loaded, they climb back into their vehicles.

Muhamet's Icom crackles, followed by, "Victor One, Oscar Mike." Moments later, the convoy is rolling through the gate and the radio banter goes quiet. The lead Humvee calls out the first checkpoint when they reach Route Michigan.

The first stop is the police station in Karmah, on the outskirts of Fallujah, where the Marines from Echo Company live with a dozen Iraqi police. Even Muhamet knows Karmah's reputation for violence. He'll have twenty minutes to fix a generator, clean and restock the chemical toilets, and fill the mobile shower units with fresh water.

At Route Golden, the convoy turns left through a break in the median. Golden is a two-lane road that starts on an incline. When it levels out, the minaret of a mosque comes into view. Narrow dirt roads splinter off the main route at random intervals, the turnoffs overgrown with wormwood and other thick brush. They're essentially long driveways that connect the paved road to small hamlets of sandstone houses that twinkle under the moonlight. Muhamet sees something move up ahead, and in the quiet of the cab he can hear himself gasp. There's something by the road, and now a second shape emerges

from behind the first one. Eyes. Four of them, green and glowing.

There's static on the handheld, followed by Preston's baritone: "Fuckin' dogs."

They weave through the serpentine barriers at the IP station, where a working party is waiting to offload the supplies from the seven-tons. Godchaux jumps out of his vehicle and ground-guides the convoy into a defensive posture while Preston helps Muhamet back his truck up to an opening in a row of Hesco barriers. Muhamet cuts the engine and steps down from the cab. Lifting up his night vision goggles, he's stunned by the ragged appearance of the working party. They look like the feral dogs they just passed on the way in: pale and skinny, dark circles around their eyes. Muhamet whiffs a nauseating mix of body odor, cigarettes, foot powder.

"Look, Santa's a fuckin' Haji." They're pointing at him now, laughing. Only then does he suddenly feel ridiculous in the beard.

He knows this vibe from his time at Bondsteel – a mix of youth and tribal hostility toward outsiders that's more bark than bite. Thinking fast, he grabs the end of the vacuum hose from the back of the truck and holds it up in the air.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he yells. "You have been good this year, boys and girls. Allow me to suck your shit!"

The working party doubles over in laughter, and Muhamet goes about his work while they offload the trucks. He cleans the toilets and refills the shower tanks, and Preston points out the generator and holds a flashlight for him. Muhamet takes a knee to get a closer look, and when he bends down he notices three men sitting on the opposite end of the courtyard. They have long beards and they're wearing dark pants and light blue

shirts with the sleeves rolled up.

Preston squats down by his side. "See how they just sit out here all nonchalant, no body armor or nothin'?" he says. "Like they know they're safe somehow." He nudges Muhamet. "Watch this," he says, standing up.

"Evening, pig fuckers!" he hollers. The three men glare at Preston, who waves back at them. "SalaamAlaikum!" They frown and say something that Muhamet can't hear over the gargle and spit of the generator.

From the IP Station they head north to a small observation post on the north end of town. They have a schedule to keep if they hope to make it back to Dreamland before sunrise.

Muhamet tails the Humvee in front of him as they turn back onto Golden. They move slow, scanning the road ahead, ready to stop on a dime. It's still and quiet under the curfew, and with the first stop behind them he lets his shoulders relax for the first time all day.

"Watch your asses," Godchaux growls over the Icom. They're approaching a traffic circle the Americans call the Lollipop. On one side is the mosque.

As soon as Muhamet's truck enters the roundabout, there's a bright flash. Something has knocked the wind out of him. He feels a vibration surge through his body, like a fault line cracking open his insides, then nothing.

He comes to face down on the side of the road, a loud ringing in his ears. Voices in his headset sound distant and muffled, and he tries to speak into his handheld but nothing comes out. He tastes metal, and before he can think about it his vision narrows and he loses consciousness again.

When he wakes up, he tries to stand but stumbles, his legs rubbery. Out of nowhere, Godchaux appears and grabs his arm to keep him from falling. He can feel something wet under his clothes. He reaches for his thigh, expecting blood, but pulls his hand back to see blue liquid from his truck.

He leans back against a berm and sees the charred remains of the truck halfway submerged in the canal. Metal fragments are scattered across the road and the adjacent field. A medevac helicopter clatters overhead.

But when he looks up he's surprised, and delighted, by what he sees: falling snow. It looks beautiful through his night vision goggles. An ethereal, emerald green flurry. That he realizes is a cloud of ash and burnt toilet paper whipping around in the air from the force of the blast and the rotor wash.

Godchaux reappears. Maybe he never left. "Are you okay?" he shouts in Muhamet's face. Muhamet points up at the snow, not knowing it's just ash and burnt toilet paper swirling from the force of the blast and the helicopter's rotor wash. Godchaux looks up, then back down at Muhamet. "Just sit tight," he says. "Doc's on his way."

His head throbs, his heart beating in his throat. He nods at Godchaux, who disappears again behind the white cloud of a fire extinguisher someone is spraying at a burning Humvee tire. His Santa beard has melted away and his mouth feels gravelly. He wipes an index finger along his gums, to scoop out the debris, and pulls out the pink fragment of a molar. Feeling his vision start to close in again, he gazes up at the eerie green snowflakes, swirling around and around, waiting for gravity to take hold. He sticks his hand out, hoping to catch some, but he feels dizzy and steadies himself against the berm. He closes his eyes and thinks of home. With a little luck, he'll make it back before Christmas and take the family to Gjyla, their favorite restaurant. Samira and Adriana will

wear the new coats he can afford to buy them, and they'll warm themselves by the crackling brick hearth until their table is ready. He smiles at the thought of it when he feels himself being lifted into the air and carried away.

New Nonfiction from F. Ahmeti: Bunker Mentality

"The home of the Albanian belongs to God and the guest."

Kanun

Durres reminds me of the Jersey Shore. The mix of family fun and adult nightlife, and the dirt, is not unlike the town featured on the MTV reality series in which a bunch of people mostly from Staten Island, NY stayed at a house on the boardwalk in Seaside Heights, New Jersey. Like Durres, Seaside's boardwalk has a carnival atmosphere, with games, prizes, and vendors selling novelty food and toys – and all the litter that comes with it. There are many Jersey Shore experiences which are nothing like the infamy promoted by MTV, and far from the filth one would expect from an almost comically industrialized and densely populated state. These were all beyond my family's price range, though, so we used to go to Seaside Heights when I was a kid. My family is from north jersey. Our path to the ocean is geographically blocked by Long Island. Thus, we don't go to the beach but *down the shore*, per local dialect. On the long journey south the landscape becomes sparse and starts to look like a Springsteen song, and one can infer why there is an undercurrent of animosity between the northern and southern sides of the state.

My memories of Seaside Heights, perhaps mercifully, grow sparser with time. There was the time when we stayed in a high-up hotel and I got a Cookie Monster themed fifth birthday cake, and I remember that was when my mother quit smoking for several years because she said it was a wake up call that she got *pneumonia in the summer*. There was a time my father frugally brought down discounted focaccia from an Italian grocery store up north and we ate it cold sitting on the floor of the cheapest motel room we could find. The last time we went, when I was eleven years old, a man who was arguing with his pregnant girlfriend in the street punched out the driver side window of my mother's van in the middle of the night. When the motel's night manager knocked on our door, the police had already wrapped the man's hand and taken him away. Some old men hanging around outside relayed the story and pointed out the trail of blood. I remember seeing the old men and thinking I was like them, because I like to stay up late, too. I realized when out-late later in life that those who stay up and idle in the streets at night are people (drugged up or not) who can't or won't go home. My mother brushed away the broken glass and drove home up the highway with 70 mph winds in her face. At home, I discovered I was covered in bed bug bites that I'd thought were only mosquito bites.

Like the Jersey Shore, there are plenty of places in Albania to go if you're in need of something more scenic. But I used to swim at Seaside Heights. One spring, still battling a bout of bronchitis, I bathed in the cold waters of Brighton Beach off Brooklyn. I breathed in big swigs of the Hudson River in small installments through the mist blanketing transit stops in Jersey City. I was practically nursed on dirt. So it doesn't bother me like it should.

~

The Albanian collective memory, whether painted in blood, or etched on the angry edges of towering gray stone mountains, is threatened by our general lack of written record. There exists

an Albanian literary canon, nursed in mosques and monasteries, written by exiles and those who became martyrs because they didn't act quick enough at becoming exiles. These works withstood the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage that goes on in the background of every occupation: the slow burning suppression, like not allowing children to be educated in their native tongue, and the literal burning of libraries and cemeteries. My Albanian parents left Yugoslavia in time to avoid being martyrs or refugees, so are instead exiles.

Despite sharing a language that survived several consecutive centuries of occupation, those Albanians who *could* read and write did so until the turn of the twentieth century in three different regional alphabets. In 1908, Albanians converged from all across their regions at the Congress of Manastir, (present day Bitolla, North Macedonia) to decide on one alphabet to unite them all. Among those in attendance were guerilla fighter Cerciz Topulli, priest-and-poet Gjergj Fishta, and Avni Rustemi, a school teacher who later assassinated the traitor Esat Pasha Toptani with two bullets in broad daylight in front of the Hotel Intercontinental in Paris.

Early English records of the ancient and as-yet uncharted nation came in the form of travelogs written by those well-to-do westerners who bothered to visit and found what they saw interesting enough to write down. There was Edith Durham, who first went to the Balkans for some fresh air after her doctor told her that her stuffy upper-class Victorian lifestyle was making her ill. After her first trip, she wrote a book affectionately titled *Through the Lands of the Serbs*. On her second trip, she met the Albanians, and dedicated the rest of her life to writing and lobbying for the Albanian cause, decrying the then-new Yugoslavia as a front for Serbian hegemony, calling it a new tyrant worse than the old. There was Lord Byron, the ever-image-conscious poet, who had his portrait painted in southern Albanian costume, and stayed with

Ali Pasha Tepelena at his castle situated in the bright blue waters across from present-day Greece. He characterized us as “brave, rigidly honest, and faithful... cruel though not treacherous, and [having] several vices, but no meannesses.” Byron acknowledges in his letters home that Ali Pasha, who treated him with the utmost hospitality, was a bona-fide tyrant. But he was equally well known for his diplomatic prowess, progressive religious pluralism, and most importantly for defying the Sultan and running his governorate as an almost-autonomous Albanian state. For the last of these, Ali Pasha’s head was paraded through Istanbul on a silver plate in 1822.



Castle of Ali Pasha Tepelena, Butrint,
2022

In movies we are gangsters, human traffickers, arms dealers. *Taken* shows Liam Nisson murdering his way across western Europe to retrieve his daughter from the Albanian traffickers who sold her into the sex trade. In *War Dogs* two American arms contractors travel to Albania to seize upon a cache of discounted AK-47 rounds, only to find that the Chinese-made munitions are subject to embargo and must be fraudulently repackaged before sale. The first season story arc of the *Law and Order* spinoff, *Organized Crime*, revolves around Detective Elliot Stabler going undercover to infiltrate the Albanian mafia in New York City; they own a boxing gym, as is expected of people with a warlike nature. In a classic episode of *The Simpsons*, Bart is traded for an Albanian exchange student, a polite and conscientious guest who turns out to be a spy seeking nuclear intel. I will gladly tune into any of these, no matter how negative the representation, if only to hear the actors take a shot at the Albanian language.


Of course stereotypes are not pulled from thin air. Florin Krasniqi, a school teacher from Kosovo, crossed the US-Mexico

border crumpled in the trunk of a Cadillac on Christmas Eve 1988. In New York, he worked as a cab driver and a construction worker and eventually opened his own roofing business. Then, Krasniqi funneled \$30 million in weapons and equipment to the fledgling Kosovo Liberation Army, purchased legally in the US and transported under the pretense of exotic game hunting.

~


The Balkans, particularly the formerly barricaded fields of Albania, carry a type of mystique that quirky off the beaten path type travel bloggers salivate over. There is a particular brand of adventurer that marvels at scarcity as spectacle, and Albania is certainly vulnerable to them. One can get a similar effect by visiting their own ghettos or touring the ruins of an old boomtown close to home, but it reads sad when the subject and audience speak the same language and carry the same currency. Here is an example (based on 100% true events) of what one of these might sound like:

My first morning in Duresse I woke up to dead jellyfish all along the beach. They had been spit up onto the shore in a storm, and the waters of the Adriatic were dark, churned muddy by the rains.

*By the hotel poolside, families with multiple close in age  little children drank Turkish Coffee and ate Bread and Cheese for breakfast. I walked the beach a bit and saw **The Bunkers!** which were filled with trash and there was also trash strewn everywhere all around....*

.....At dusk, a dog descended on a polluted drainage ditch to drink. I went out to get some dinner along the cobblestone promenade between the beach and the long strip of hotels that vary in price and quality from bare bones cheap family digs to infinity pools and dining terraces that transform to dance clubs at night, complete with live music. One charismatic

performer switched between traditional Albanian songs and Dua Lipa hits and shouted "join us" in English, waving at passers by on the cobblestones.

I gave some lekes to a beggar with no hands who raised his  wrist-stumps in appreciation and offered what sounded like blessings in his native language.

I stopped in a restaurant that specialized not in Albanian cuisine but the food of neighboring Macedonia, where the waiter brought an ashtray with the menu, something we don't do in the USA anymore.

The restaurant offered Kosovan beer and local raki, an Albanian white whiskey that is said to be a healing tonic for all manner of ailments. I had Macedonian specialties like specia (peppers) and buk me djath (bread and cheese), some qebapa (kebabs), and a lettuce-less salad of cucumber and tomato. I washed it down with a liter bottle of mineral water. They don't serve tap because the tap water in this country is not drinkable.

I didn't drink alcohol because I was too scared (out here in a strange land all alone).

For dessert and digestion I walked and wandered down the cobblestones a bit more and there was a Turkish in a vest and a red fez selling dondurma, the iconic stretchy mastic ice cream, in exotic flavors like hazelnut and pistachio to complete the oriental ensemble of it all. At that moment, I realized it was late, and feared I would be human trafficked, so I went home past the stray dogs and also humans that all but hid away during the day and slept on the beach at night. [Here is where the tourist might add candid photos of the locals as if they were inanimate]

Albania is one of the poorest countries in Europe, and this is why the exchange rate was ever in my favor. A leke is not equal to a dollar.....

~

Durres is not foremost a resort town, but a port with an incidental beach. At a hotel there, I remembered the words of my immigrant friends, who say things like *I was too afraid even to order a coffee*, when describing the disorienting experience of their early days in America. I know about enough Albanian to get by as a guest, but not enough to hold a job or build a life. I know enough that a variable in accent or cadence can completely throw me off balance. I can barely read a poem in Albanian, but even with jet lag, I can still read most signs and restaurant menus.

In Durres, I drank coffee sitting in the sun by the hotel and read the news from America on my phone. I read about the people who cooked to death in the cargo hold of a tractor trailer in Texas, and I thought about the violently bumpy roads of Albania and the empty expanses on either side of them and the conditions that lead one to throw themselves into the potentially deadly journey of migration even when their life at home is not under imminent threat.

After breakfast, I went for a walk on the beach, where I saw big purple jellyfish, like the ones on Spongebob Squarepants, staggered in a line, dead. I ducked around a bunker, and saw that it had been filled with trash, an act of resourcefulness that helped keep the contents from blowing around the beach in the breeze.



Image of Death in
Durres, 2022



All along Enver Hoxha's border, guards waited with rifles ready to fire upon any enemy upon entry – and to shoot on sight any who dared to defect. The bunkers, built by Hoxha as a project of national defense, are a visual culmination of his

extreme isolationist policy.

They were built to be used by citizens in the event of an invasion, but more importantly, to loom in the background of daily life. Enver built 173,000 of these instead of fixing the roads. Today, these concrete domes of varying sizes sit like small bitter blisters on what could otherwise be an unspoiled panorama. Some bunkers dot the peaks and valleys of the countryside, while others are sprinkled on the shores of coastal cities. Some of the larger bunkers have been creatively repurposed into museums and others painted as public art. Many are sinking slowly, soon to be reclaimed by the land, unsightly but unworthy of the effort of being removed. But the bunkers have an enduring mythology all their own. They are known as hideaways where young lovers go for privacy – something like what the automobile was for American teens in the 1950s. They are known as sites where rural people relieve themselves when an outhouse is too far away. I have been on Albania's highways. For an idea of the experience, picture the landscape where Wile E Coyote chased the Roadrunner through endless empty miles, but painted gray and green and more poorly paved. While I don't personally know what passions would possess one to want to have sex in a mad, dead, dictator's concrete bunker, I do know that there are not many rest stops in the Albanian highlands, and if it was between pooping in the open road or befouling Enver's bunker, I know what choice I would make.

~

The Austro-Hungarian scholar Franz Nopsca wrote about asking for water at an Albanian home he passed on his travels in Kelmendi. He was offered buttermilk instead, and consumed the entire container. When a family member came home with a craving and saw that the buttermilk was all gone, he proclaimed his relief that Nopsca had arrived first, sparing the family the shame of having no food to offer to a guest. Albanian hospitality is legendary but not very much more

legendary than anyone else's. There is a reason why a viral Reddit post about a Swedish family not feeding their son's guest spiraled so out of control that it garnered a research-driven analysis in The New York Times. Most cultures will feed and protect their guests. It is considered indecent to do any less.



View of the Adriatic from
inside bunker, Durres,
2022

Once I worked in a beer restaurant in the domain of yuppies along the Hudson River. This is a place where, for example, factories where immigrants toiled are refurbished as luxury apartments and the brutal markers of the building's past life like ceiling beams and exposed brick are fetishized as features, rather than blight. One evening, a Turkish gentleman came in and sipped a big beer on the terrace. He was very sociable, very bald, and very much a happy drunk. He asked me questions about the history of the building; I asked around and learned that it used to be a belt factory, and shared this info the next time I circled past his table. Amazingly, that was the same night my favorite work belt that had served me well for several years finally broke. It was Italian leather, given to me by an Albanian old lady ex-coworker who said it used to be her own but now she was too fat. The Turk said he was interested in the restaurant's concept – modeled on an Austro-Hungarian beer hall – because he had majored in hospitality and hotel management at school. I had always felt suspicious that the vibe attracted at least a small percentage of covert white nationalists. I don't remember if I told him that. Obviously, it came out that he was Turkish and I was Albanian when we finally told each other our names. He told me, with some excitement, that his grandmother was Albanian. I told him I might have some Turkish mixed in somewhere amid the five-hundred-year occupation. I told him, we might be cousins.

I left to do other work and returned to perform the final closing task of shutting the terrace umbrellas and front gate. My cousin was now sitting with two white people at another table, captive in conversation with these strangers who were fast becoming his friends. So when the white lady said she *feels bad* about holding me up, but didn't actually get up, I saw an opportunity to give her some soothing perspective and maybe even close the show. I said: Don't worry about overstaying your welcome – this guy (my cousin) came to my house once and didn't leave for over 500 years! My cousin commenced to shake and laugh as the whites declared themselves unaware. Then he rose, staggered towards the restaurant gate, set down his beer, hugged me, and handed me a \$10 bill.

Upstairs, the manager said for future reference that this late after closing I was allowed to simply kick people out.

~

Enver wasn't completely crazy for thinking up the bunkers. The lands of the Albanians had over and over been invaded. We starred as supporting acts in so-called proxy wars between major world powers. We were there as states splintered and borders bled together.

His paranoid policy was only a shrewd exploitation of the Albanian collective memory.

There were many things that attracted occupiers to us. Kosovo has its silver mines. Macedonia fertile soil for farming. Albania a path to the sea. On the edges of Montenegro and Greece there are still droves of Albanians who exist in a precarious position, plentiful enough to be a political scapegoat but not quite plentiful enough to hold their share of political power.

While the path forward for the Albanians in former-Yugoslav states has been and remains bumpy, no Albanian inside of Albania has been killed or persecuted for being Albanian in

generations. I try to imagine, as an exile's child, how bad it had to be that someone from Albania would elect to defect and risk being shot for it along the way. Only a few years before the war that sent Kosovars pouring out into Albania to avoid death by Yugoslav federal army, and a few years after Enver Hoxha finally dropped dead, Albania had its own mass exodus out.

There is a famous image from this time. Type in "Durrës migration" and Google will give you the original photo and everything you ever wanted to know about it all from differing angles. The picture was appropriated during the height of the war in Syria and the migration crisis it precipitated. Those who defended migration aimed to garner sympathy by claiming the photo showed European refugees fleeing the Nazis in World War Two. The Nazis (of today) said the ship showed Syrians. Both were wrong.

The ship was called *Vlora*, leaving from Durrës bound for Bari full of Albanian migrants and Cuban sugar. The photo was not from 1944 or 2015 but 1991. These weren't Europeans,TM but Albanians. A few seconds of Googling could have stemmed the tide of this disinformation. The name *Vlora* is clearly visible on the bow. *Vlora* is a coastal city in southern Albania, the former capital, and site of the 1912 flag raising and declaration of independence. *Vlora* is Albania's Philadelphia.



Durrës Sea Cliff
across from Italy,
2022



View of Durrës, 2018

In 1991, twenty thousand Albanians hitched themselves to every available inch of space including the ropes and ladders and parts of the *Vlora*'s rigging; many were forced to hang on for

dear life the entire voyage. On arrival, the passengers were crammed into a football stadium while Italy planned. Conditions rapidly worsened, and police even alleged some of the people who had arrived without any luggage and some without shirts on their backs had fired guns inside the stadium. Some escaped the stadium, but all of the rest were deported. The Albanians were especially plucky and so continued to try. Italy seemed tired. Politicians resorted to lazy tropes about the Ottoman Empire and the migrant "invasion" of the day, their own more contemporary incursions into Albanian lands notwithstanding. In 1997, the ship Kateri I Radkes sailed from Vlora across the Strait of Otranto. An Italian navy ship assigned to intercept and inspect instead crashed into it, causing it to roll and sink, 35 miles from Italy's shores. Over half of the 142 people aboard drowned.

~

I empathize with immigrants. Sometimes, in my effort to be hospitable as possible I tell them their English is *very good* even when it isn't and sometimes I accidentally go too far and flippantly say their English is perfect when I really mean I can understand them perfectly. I don't know what it's like to immigrate, but I know what it's like to be in a room full of people I know well and all-but understand their conversations, but not be able to participate. I know the frustration of filtering your feelings through your own inner-translator and it still coming through slow with plenty of sediment. I knew what it was like, back then when in the den of yuppies but now more than ever, studying in tiny Tallahassee, to have everyone ask about your accent. I know what it's like to be asked to coach everyone you meet on how to pronounce your name and still have most people just avoid calling you by any name altogether. I try and try and try again to find a short and satisfying way to explain to others why *I am an Albanian* does not mean *I am from Albania*.

I was born and educated in America, and so I have a soft spot

for the visual poetry of aquatic migration. We were taught early of the mystic power of the Mayflower, and the music of mass migrations to Ellis Island, all those millions who muted themselves to become a part of one collective American orchestra of white noise. In conversations about migration, I think about the ones who aren't invited to assimilate, even with the proper paperwork. I think about those who survive sneaking through the desert only to drown in the Rio Grande. I think of the little boys Aylan and Elian – one drowned, and one seized by immigration officers at gunpoint, their names aloud almost like anagrams, their images emblematic of the endgame for sociopathic immigration policy. When I get frustrated with our country, I think about the group of Yugoslav-Albanian conscripts who were accused of killing a Serbian comrade who drowned in an accident. They fled across the border and Hoxha handed them back to be executed. I think about my father as a conscript, placed in the brig for cursing Josef Broz Tito in an argument with his Yugo-Slav commander. Me and my father have the same name and somewhat of the same temperament and I'm annoyed with him and my mother for giving me this name but grateful at least they gave me an Albanian one.



View of from Butrint
Lake, 2022



Entrance to
Ali Pasha
Castle, 2022

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It is not likely for most people reading this to find themselves in the Balkans, but likely enough that they may someday find themselves in the home of an Albanian, as we tend to immigrate out. I have encountered more than one of my

brethren even in my time in tiny Tallahassee. So, below is a travel guide not for the Albanian homeland, but an Albanian home, wherever in the world you may find it:

1. We don't wear shoes in the house; this keeps the floors clean. Sitting on the floor is optional, normal. The couch is as much a seat for your ass as a backrest for floor-sitters.
2. You will get dry fruit and nuts and tiny cups of coffee (sometimes tea) and depending how serious your guest is about their religion you may get with your small cup of coffee a shot of raki. Be careful, some people think it's water. They grab it to cleanse the palate after the strong sediment-laden coffee. It will successfully clear your palate, but only by burning off whatever flavors are on there.
3. Kids can choose between White or Black soda. There's going to be smoking so if you have asthma or your kids do not like smoke, visit only in good warm weather so you can be received on the patio, porch, terrace, or equivalent where there is ventilation. Eat even if you are not hungry. If someone offers you something to eat, say yes and eat at least some of it.
4. When it's time to go, the signal is you will get fresh fruit. You may be able to tell how beloved you are by your host based on what kind of fruit you are served. Chilled melon, for example, is a labor of love. On holidays or special occasions you may get a baked sweet. Baklava is another labor of love. But the layered politics of Baklava are too dense to cover here.
5. After the fruit, instead of leaving, talk for like two more hours in the doorway. Talk until the sun sets if it hasn't yet. Be sure to have many peaks and valleys in this conversation, many false endings and wild asides, so as to reflect the peaks and valleys and various wild wormholes of Albanian terrains and topographies.

Note:

Mirembrema = good evening, hello

Naten a mire = good evening, goodbye

New Review by Adrian Bonenberger: John Milas' "The Militia House"



In the Mind of Madness

There is a nightmare I used to have with some regularity even before my time in the military, in which a house from my childhood concealed some horrible and sentient threat bent on doing me harm. How else to describe it? The house – its bannisters, its rooms – the attic, sometimes the basement, sometimes a room at the end of a hall – contained within a horror so awful that to perceive it would be to go mad, or die. Naturally, I'm sitting here writing, so the horror was never perceived... but what if... someday... ?

This dream contains within it the purest and most intense fear I have ever experienced. No event or encounter approaches it, in or outside combat. Fear, paralyzing and irresistible, is not like the anxiety one actually encounters in one's daily life. And in moments of great danger one does not feel fear as such – in my experience it is either a rage that compels one to action, or something quite different, which compels one to inaction (often, taking cover behind a wall).

John Milas, whose publications have appeared before in *Wrath-Bearing Tree*, has a new book out that captures a small portion of that pure fear, and taps into it as effectively as any story I've ever read. *The Militia House* follows a marine lance corporal and his unit during the tail end of an uncomfortable deployment to Afghanistan. As they take over responsibilities for a helicopter landing zone run by the British, a remote building just outside the base draws their attention. The British discourage the marines from exploring it but they insist, and have a very bad time inside. Bizarre things start happening to them – or is it all in their minds? As reality itself begins to fray, ultimately, it doesn't matter.

Another horror story that considers the line between sanity and insanity is *In the Mouth of Madness*, a John Carpenter film starring Sam Neill, and I thought of that while reading the book. The protagonist has a blog that's gotten him in trouble with his commander – the power of writing to change a deployment, to get people fired, is a quiet but insistent thread in the background. Again, if the protagonist has the power to destroy others' lives with words, with his perspective of the war, isn't it likely that he can author his own destruction through imagination (madness), too?

And what are haunted house stories if not stories about the mind, with the "house" and its various rooms forming memories, concealing some terrible insight about the self that a protagonist cannot face? In another film starring Neill, *Event Horizon*, the haunted house is a spaceship – and the revelation by Neill's character every bit as awful as that of any film of its genre.

The book functions effectively as an allegory about regret, and shame, and if not PTSD, the conflicting emotions that arise from military service overseas. Milas is a veteran of Afghanistan who deployed with the U.S. Marine Corps, and writes with authority about the place and the inconveniences particular to those deployments. In that sense, it is in

addition to a reflection about the war, a kind of meditation on the challenges faced by young leaders; responsibility for the lives of others, and being “good” in the eyes of authority.

Milas’s protagonist and marines return to The Militia House later in the book. They cannot keep away from it. What happens is both upsetting and also surprising, and I don’t want to spoil the ending, because it’s worth reading the book to learn what happens. I encourage people to do so, and enjoy the well-composed story as well as it’s lively (if – well, this is horror! – plausibly frustrating characters). If you’ve ever suffered from nightmares, and you enjoy interrogating why, you probably like horror as a genre... and if you like horror as a genre, you’ll like *The Militia House*.