

A Blue Country

BY DYLAN LEE LEHRKE

FROM A DISTANCE everything is blue - the stretch of water out to sea, the yawn of heaven above and human history all take on the color of contemplation.

I first noticed the sober hue of everything far away when I was in the former Yugoslavia. My memories of that one-time country are of hills rising successively higher all the way to the horizon, each ridge a lighter shade of blue than the next, until the last is only sky. Twice in my life I have traveled through these hills, once with an army rucksack and once with a REI backpack. And for the rest of my life, part of that country will travel with me.

It was autumn 1998 when I deployed to Bosnia as part of the NATO peacekeeping forces. While my experiences were postscripts to the Yugoslav civil war, which ended two years earlier, the conflict was not a thing of the past.

In fact, nothing in the Balkans is a thing of the past. Everything is ongoing. The personal memories of Serbs, Croats and Muslims seem to span a millennia. The locals speak about Turks and Nazis as enemies still stalking the world, and tell of historic battles as if the winner is yet to be decided.

In retrospect, my trip had all the elements of a classic hero's journey, beginning in an ordinary world, journeying into the depths of the underworld and returning to a place that no longer seemed like home.

The ordinary world was a dairy farm in Wisconsin. My "travels" to Yugoslavia began here. The first time I saw the country, it was surrounded by a yellow National Geographic border. Later, the images of the country always had a CBS or NBC symbol floating eerily in the air above burning homes and cities under artillery fire. The Yugoslav war seems part of my memory, part of the collective memory of my generation.

I became fascinated with this place and would clip articles from the local newspaper whenever they covered the far-away war. I still have many of them. The headline on a clip from June 1995 reads "Safe area falls to Serbs." It was a small article, the scope of which I would not comprehend until three years later.

The enclave of Srebrenica was tucked between immense hills deep within

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Serbian territory, protected only by a small UN force set upon the strategic and moral high ground. When the safe area fell to Serb forces, it was through these hills that the men of Srebrenica made their way. They wove through valleys, ambushes and land mines toward Muslim-held territory, and, they hoped, a safer area. What ensued was a Leviathan-like massacre made up of many smaller killings, individual crimes and scattered executions. More than 7,000 died.

The scene of this war crime was aged when I arrived to the American sector but the evidence was still being unearthed, literally. It was NATO's task to protect the scene from those who would prefer a permafrost make it impossible to dig up the bodies.

This was my duty on one of my first patrols. It was autumn, the perfect season for Bosnia. The country seemed in a perpetual state of autumn - everything growing more beautiful the colder the nights became, turning red, yellow and orange. Then, one morning everything was dead.

It was early morning when our convoy arrived at what was benignly referred to as the OHR site. It should have been referred to as a mass grave.

The UN was too busy at other crime scenes to investigate this newly discovered site, so the Physicians for Human Rights, a nonprofit international organization, had broken ground. After digging through only a few feet of soil they confirmed the rumors that had sent them there.

The spot was a small field very much like those which surrounded the farm where I grew up. It is strange finding similarities between a foreign place and your home. Sometimes it is a comfort. Sometimes it is not.

Autumn had left the field bare. All that remained of the harvest was low cut stubble. Next spring this small field would probably once again be planted with alfalfa or corn, but now a pit had been reopened. The first time this hole was opened it was empty and had to be filled. Now it was full and needed to be emptied.

A strand of red tape surrounded the hole, a warning of the steep edge for those who approached. But there was no warning about what lay inside. As a result, I watched people approach the edge and peer in, only to turn away, attempt to recover and recoil again. It is good that they recoil.

I walked to the edge again, looked in and let my eyes follow the uneven row of bodies down to the opposite end. Among the bodies, physicians clad in white suits stood quietly, like guardian angels who had failed. A few bent low to the ground with trowels, timidly removing the dirt and hoping there would be no second layer. Small triangle signs, each marked with a number, helped identify where one mangled body ended and another began. At my feet, half-sunk into the mud and turned on his side, was number 166.

A few feet away from 166, a physician was brushing the mud from another

er body as an archeologist would clear sand from an artifact. He cleaned off a watch still wrapped around its owners wrist. The silver band was unaged compared to the flesh and clothing, as if time had frozen for the piece.

But time had not frozen for us; and as the day wore on, these visual images were consumed by a more pungent impression. By afternoon the smell that had hung low to the morning ground had spread across the field, soaked into our clothes, hair and memories.

And once again I found a strange, uncomfortable similarity between home and away: mass graves have the same scent as my childhood home. It is the smell of farm air filled with shit, dirt and decay - both fertile and dead.

It is not a smell you can easily wash off. The scent sticks to your skin like sweat, embeds in your hair like oil and lingers somewhere always in the back of your mind.

The similar scents have muddled my memories of home and away, of good and evil.

Nine months later, I returned to my childhood home. The smell drifting across the fields, wafting from the barn doors and saturating the air turned my stomach. Never again would home be the same - it would always be tinted with the scent of a war on the other side of the world.

I have not lived on a farm since. Although I am not sure why, I can't help but wonder if the war in Bosnia had destroyed my home as well as those in the hills of Srebrenica.

Years later I would be back in hills of the former Yugoslavia. I brought my journal from Bosnia with me and would read it often, as if it were some Lonely Planet guide to the former war zone. I was not ordered to the Balkans this time. I was here for closure. I wanted to find that which I hadn't seen when I was in the country with NATO: somebody or some place at peace.

When I was young, I learned the best way to find what you are looking for is to do slowly enlarging circles. So this is what I did. I circled Bosnia, beginning in Slovenia and winding into Croatia and then into the rump state of Yugoslavia and Montenegro.

I eventually decided that the hills were where I really wanted to go. I thought those *unmoving clouds of earth set upon the horizon* would offer me a view so expansive that I could find what I was looking for.

It was in Slovenia that I learned mountains are always farther away than they appear. Still, I was convinced I could make it to the nearest peak. As I trekked, the peaks slowly vanished as I was swallowed up by the foothills. I never reached the mountains.

I remained in the foothills until I left the country. I last left Yugoslavia in a cab. It was the only way to move from Montenegro to Albania. There were