

Books

# Photos of the Invisible

**No Place Like Home: Echoes from Kosovo**

Melanie Friend

Midnight Editions. 148 pp. \$39.95.

**By Marlene Nadle**

It was the fear that returned, the acrid sweaty memory of being a woman in a country controlled by armed men. It was the same body reflex, the clutch of breath felt every time I approached a Kosovo checkpoint where my being a foreign journalist was no protection and an immediate danger to the Albanians in the car begging me to stay silent. It was a plunge again into an arbitrary world where arrests, beatings, death waited around every unpredictable corner and menace was as constant as the military planes skimming the tops of buildings.

Melanie Friend's remarkable book time-machined me back to the Balkans, where we both worked as journalists before the world was paying attention. Following separate paths, we arrived shortly after the autonomy of Kosovo had been revoked by the Serb-dominated Yugoslav government. A military occupation and pattern of apartheid were being imposed by Belgrade's ethnic nationalists. Describing her 1989 trip in the book's introduction, the British journalist writes of the widespread unease of the Muslim Albanians and her own arrest after photographing three women selling vegetables.

She returned often over the next twelve years to interview and photograph Albanians, Serbs, Bosnians,

*Marlene Nadle is a journalist formerly based in the Balkans and an associate of the East and Central Europe Program of The New School.*

Turks, and Roma. But she rarely took her camera out while on the street and avoided having her film taken again.

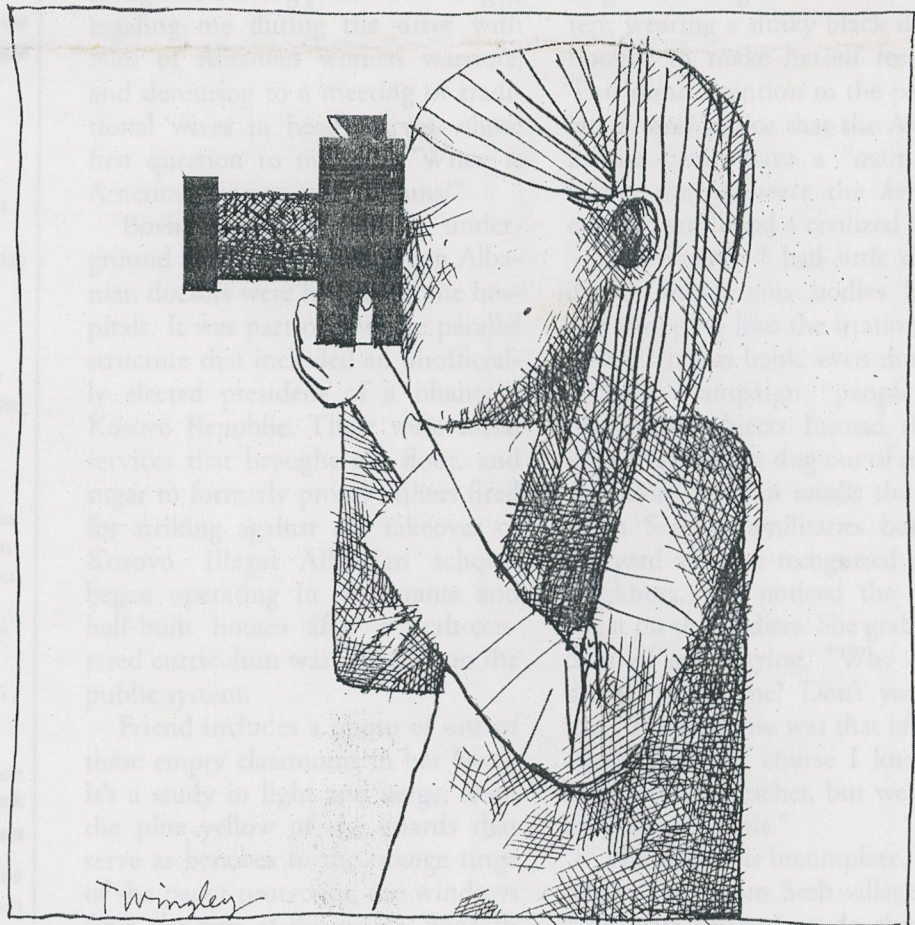
I wasn't as lucky. Police grabbed my tapes and notebooks when I was out of my hotel room. Two days later, they snuck into my empty room and put the material back. I laughed at the strange code of courtesy, but remained angry at being treated like a bug under some unknown maniac's microscope.

The worst part is I became corrupted. My humanity, my trust, disappeared in a distorted perception that saw everyone as an enemy. How did the receptionist know I was a journalist when I never told her? Who were these hulking men in imitation leather jackets always hanging out in

the hotel lobby? Spontaneity, warmth, curiosity stopped being the way I related to strangers. I built my own wall cutting me off from the world.

There is another difficulty. It is the essential problem of trying to cover events that police don't want covered, that take place in cordoned-off villages or in the middle of the night. There are people too terrified to have their pictures taken. As a photographer, Friend faces uniquely hard questions. How can you document the invisible? How can you visually represent fear and repression?

These external limitations shape her answer and make it more creative and original. She plays tranquil images of homes or people against



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their words, describing the disintegration of relationships between neighbors, the small survival gestures used to maintain human dignity, and, yes, some of the horror. It is the contrast between the beauty of the Vermeer-lit color shots and the desperation of the lives that gives the photo essay a unique tension. The understatement creates the book's power and poignancy. Instead of doing grisly photos, she rescues ordinary people from the abstraction of war and traces the particulars of their lives from the tearing down in the prewar years through the refugee camps to the rebuilding on return.

It was simpler for me, working with words, to document the invisible. As early as 1991, I was operating on time-delay, arriving at homes after the event, seeing only the scars from the beatings, purple and ugly, beneath scrunched green T-shirts. Dr. Flora Bovina took me along when seeing patients in villages, regaling me during the drive with tales of Albanian women warriors, and detouring to a meeting of traditional wives in head scarves whose first question to me was, "When is America going to send us guns?"

Bovina helped set up an underground medical network when Albanian doctors were fired from the hospitals. It was part of a whole parallel structure that included an unofficially elected president of a phantom Kosovo Republic. There were social services that brought oil, flour, and sugar to formerly proud miners fired for striking against the takeover of Kosovo. Illegal Albanian schools began operating in restaurants and half-built houses after a Serb-centered curriculum was imposed on the public system.

Friend includes a photo of one of these empty classrooms in her book. It's a study in light and beige, from the pine yellow of the boards that serve as benches to the orange tinge of the paper protecting the windows from the eyes of the police. Beneath

it are the words of a student saying, "We have a lot of problems on our way to school. . . . But we carry on. . . . We have to study and not be assimilated."

The Albanians' desire to preserve their identity as much as their lives is visible again in a seven-by-seven photo of a ramrod-straight old man dressed in a white skull cap. In the accompanying page of text, he says: "The Serbian police used to say, 'What do you need this hat for?' . . . It's our traditional Albanian hat, and the Serbs don't like it. . . . They wanted to throw it in the fields. I was hit by the Serbian police four or five times because of my hat. They can kill me, but I won't take my hat off."

Explaining her method, Friend says, "I looked for people I could engage with—a spark in the eye, an intensity. This came first, then the talking, and finally the photograph." It's only this intimate way of working that could produce the shot of a singer standing in front of a refugee tent wearing a slinky black dress just bought to make herself feel better. This same attention to the particular lets Friend notice that the Albanians in the camp have a "main street" where they recreate the *korzo*, the evening stroll and a civilized life.

Like Friend, I had little desire to depict anonymous bodies bleeding and dropping into the irrational mud of war. In this book, even during the military campaign, people aren't turned into objects. Instead, the individual dramas are dug out of memory. A Turkish woman recalls the instant when Serb paramilitaries burst into her yard and she recognized them as neighbors. She noticed the nervous sweat on the soldiers. She grabbed the chin of one, saying, "Why are you doing this to me? Don't you know me?" His response was that of a sulky adolescent. "Of course I know you! You were my teacher, but we've been ordered to do this."

His answer is incomplete. What I often heard from Serb villagers was, "We were ordered to do this or we

would be killed, too." It was part of the pattern whenever Belgrade-based paramilitary groups like the Tigers came into a region. That isn't to say some villagers didn't willingly get rid of non-Serbs. The nationalist propaganda that intensified in 1989 twisted many into hatred.

The land the Serbs were taking they justified by myth. It was based on ancient ballads that say Kosovo has belonged to Serbia since the Middle Ages. But they left reality out of

their oral tradition. The ballads make no mention of the Ottoman Turks who controlled Kosovo for 500 years, or of the fact that the Serbs' sovereignty in Kosovo was not established until 1912, and was lost again to Albania during World War II.

History in this region is a shape-shifter. As Friend says, "I would sometimes feel schizophrenic after spending the morning with a Kosovo Serb and the afternoon with a Kosovo Albanian—listening to entirely different ver-



"KGB," a new novel by former U.S. federal prisoner for peace Mike Palecek.

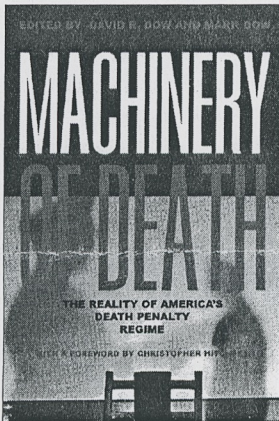
George Bush Sr. ordered the killing of the people of Iraq in the early 1990s and the killing of the people of Panama and El Salvador. He is coming to Sioux City, Iowa—flying a new Stealth bomber in to be delivered to the 185th Air National Guard.

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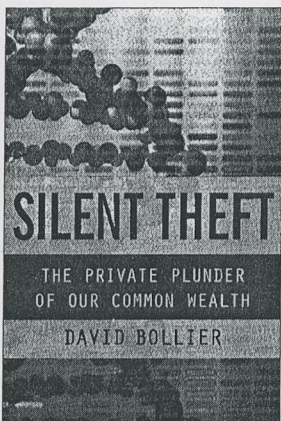


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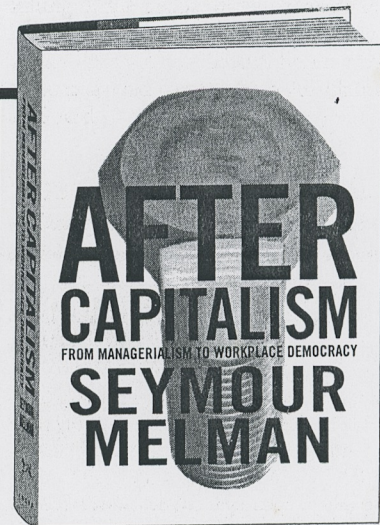
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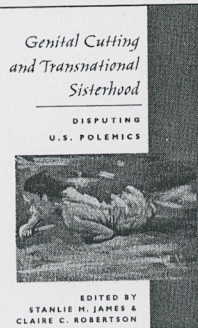


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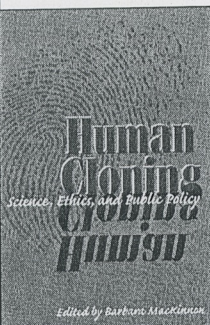
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**ILLINOIS**

sions of history." It happens because ancient legends and contemporary media are ethnically separate and erased of other people's truths. Now, Friend shows, some deny, even to themselves, the wrongs done by their side. There are others like the relaxed young women in a café who speaks of the postwar revenge of her own against the Serbs and says simply, "I felt ashamed to be Albanian."

Friend doesn't begin contacting Serbs until later. It's a loss for the book. Earlier conversations could have revealed how ordinary people got pressured by thugs or suckered by politicians into the blood and soil insanity of ethnic nationalism.

Once she begins engaging the Serbs, she treats them with the same respect she shows the Albanians. In many ways, these longer interviews done in 2000 are a mirror image of the earlier ones. Only it's the Serbs living in constant fear, refusing to risk being photographed, fleeing Kosovo, or living like inmates in a prison surrounded by KFOR, the U.N. peacekeeping troops. "We never go into our garden unless KFOR is here," says a woman in her seventies. "Our three Serb neighbors have left. . . . Every day we live in this

terrible silence."

To get to remote homes, Friend hitches rides with KFOR troops through the deserted countryside and is vulnerable to abuse as a woman. That possibility is part of the calculations of all female journalists working in a chaotic situation, but is usually not enough to stop us. So Friend manages to collect idiosyncratic voices of people grappling with the absence where their loved ones should be, the acceptance or avoidance of responsibility for things done to others, the decisions about their own future and Kosovo's. She captures the confusion of people in different ethnic groups who once were friends, and who, immediately after the war, can't figure out what their relationship should be.

One of the oddest bonds is between a leader of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and Serbs who fled. As the KLA man says of his former neighbors, "One rings me from Belgrade. He cries and weeps for Kosovo. He asks, 'Do you think we can ever come back?' And I say, 'We're working on it,' to make him feel better. But as long as this generation is alive, Serbs and Albanians cannot live together." An older Albanian disagrees, recalling the eruptions of ethnic cleansing carried out by Serb nationalists since 1878. He says, "There have been many wars between us, and both before the wars and after we would sit together and eat together."

Friend's sensitive response to all these traumatized people is seen in the photographs she took of the guardians, the safekeepers of memory. In one haunting picture, a woman with her back to the camera plods up hill through autumn foliage to the site of a massacre. The special stillness of the composition makes clear why Friend's work was shown at the National Portrait Gallery in London and the Hasselblad Center in Sweden.

The book itself is a movable museum. Its fragments cohere into a complex exhibit of individuals overwhelmed by a wave of history. ♦

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