



MULE BRIGADE

By Kenan Orhan



“Mule Brigade” won second place in the CRAFT Short Fiction Prize in 2018,
judged by Jim Shepard.

An Author’s Note by Kenan Orhan follows the story.

Introduction

“Mule Brigade” for all the flamboyant ambition of its choice of subject matter and voice – a young Turkish soldier out with his unit rounding up mules as an anti-terrorist measure in Kurdish-held territory near the border with Iraq -- is authoritative in its depiction of the fractious divisions within an ethnically diverse unit, even as that unit works to oppress others. The story is also chilling on the matter-of-factness with which the inhumanity and counter-productivity of such anti-terrorist work can be registered and accepted, and on the way a young man can exult in being alive even as he’s a part of a repressive and/or murderous project: “The sun is down, go back to your pile of rubble!’ we would say... But out here there is the sky ripping open overhead, there is the complete absence of gray like I might only see colors for the rest of my life, there is the cold.” The story is also memorable on the difficulties of balancing nerves on the friz with the attempt to maintain the remnants of an ethical awareness, on the sinister adroitness with which military occupations learn to pit citizens against one another, and on the heartbreaking wreckage that all such occupations leave in their wake.

by Jim Shepard

In the mountains on the way to Iraq, the lieutenant's jeep pulls over. He hops out the back and takes a few, crunchy steps through the snow down the hill. He has to piss again.

"Is it healthy?" Corporal Kayaoğlu asks.

"Could be diabetes," I say.

It is a bright day in November, and we are hunting mules. "Accessories to crime," Sergeant Ali calls them. "Kurdish brides," Corporal Kayaoğlu says. Mules, I call them because I don't have a sense of humor. It's cramped in the armored car: packs, rifles, radio equipment, water, boxes of rations. Private Yilmaz is at the ring mount, manning the machine gun. His bottom half is stuck between me and an ammo crate. He's got thighs thick as pine trunks. We're sealed in by plates of armor not quite thick enough for these mountains. "We're not in Syria, at least," Sergeant Ali likes to say. It stinks of ripe balls in our car.

The lieutenant comes back up the hill, and we continue for the village. The country is mostly gold, streaked white with snow, speckle-green from shrubs, a tree to mark the country.

We follow the lieutenant's jeep down the highway from Şırnak where we've been posted for the last few months, where there is still a curfew. We were involved in daily roundups of suspected terrorists. We were good at it. No one saw those people again. The curfew will be lifted soon. It's all just a pile of rubble anyway. "The sun is down, go back to your pile of rubble!" we would say. There were the little echoes of bombs we felt in our bones, there was the sound of small fires burning black, there was the flat skyline of mountain peaks very, very far away. But out here there is the sky ripping open overhead, there is the complete absence of gray like I might only see colors for the rest of my life, there is the cold.

Sergeant Ali is worried about our career prospects to get stuck with a mission like ours. He takes soldiering seriously. He finds the lieutenant unbearable. It doesn't help that the lieutenant keeps pulling over to pee.

"Aren't you cold up there?" I ask Yilmaz through the hole, but he doesn't hear me.

Kayaoğlu turns to me with a finger pressed up to his grinning lips. He swings his fist into Yilmaz's crotch and croaks out a harsh laugh. Poor Yilmaz gets woozy on the machine gun. He's our interpreter. We've spent the better part of the season ducking PKK bullets. We've spent the better part of our nights on patrols, huddled under doorframes when a truck packed full of explosives destroys a neighborhood block like that. When Yilmaz speaks Kurdish there's that tick inside of us that translates to bloodthirst and nerves on the fritz.



The village is at the base of the mountains, already in the shadow of dusk. We drive down the dirt path in no time, between tumbledown shops with tarp roofs and centuries-old buildings with cracked TV dishes tacked to their eaves. At the well, an old man drops his bucket and runs from the sound of our engines. Four children in bright sweaters full of holes chase after us with smiles until their mother shouts at them, and they stop one by one: red, blue, yellow, white. Under shallow awnings stand men with thin cigarettes, watching us. There's a mule tied to the trailer hitch of a water tank just outside what looks like a coffeehouse. Rusted-out, car skeletons litter the street the way fruit vendors do back home in Mersin.

We pull over to the coffeehouse with a cardboard cutout of an actor in the window. Sergeant Ali, Kayaoğlu, and Yilmaz all get out of our armored car, so I climb up to the machine gun and watch the rooftops. The cold of the metal bleeds through my gloves. The lieutenant and his men hop out of their jeep and walk up to the villagers drinking coffee and playing cards.

They find the nicest looking guy, a real sweetheart of an old man, and they encircle him, cordoning him off from the group. Yilmaz says something to him. The lieutenant asks in Turkish if the man knows of any smuggling going on out here. Yilmaz translates. The old man shakes his head and shrugs his shoulders.

“No smuggling? Ha-ha!” says Sergeant Ali. “Ask him about any PKK activity.”

Yilmaz asks. “He says there is that here, sure. There is no smuggling.”

My hands shake from the cold. The men all look happy under that awning, wearing coats and drinking coffee. I think about the nights in Şırnak, about coming down from great heights of adrenaline by carving little trinkets out of soap.

“He says we must find the PKK,” Yilmaz says. “Daughters are disappearing.”

“Haven’t they got a village guard?” Sergeant Ali asks.

The man tuts and says something to Yilmaz.

“They buried the village guard last spring.”

“Well you just tell him we’re not here for the PKK. In towns like this, it’s you peasants who are supposed to deter them.”

Yilmaz says to the old man something along those lines, but he puts his hand on the man’s shoulder. Kayaoğlu and I are watching the hands of the coffeehouse patrons.

“Whose mule is out there, tied to the water tank?” Sergeant Ali asks.

Yilmaz translates and the man smiles. “Mine,” he says in Turkish. He points to it like a father points to his strong boy.

Kayaoğlu goes to the mule, scratches its ears, and smiles wide back at the men of the coffeehouse. He’s got his finger by the trigger.

“Tell him it’s our mule now,” says Kayaoğlu.

The old man laughs. He nods and laughs.

“I don’t think he gets it,” says Yilmaz. “He says it’s not for sale.”

Sergeant Ali cares about showmanship. Sergeant Ali wants everyone here to get the message very quickly, so he kicks the small table by the old man, grabs him up by the collar of his sweater, points at the mule, and shouts at the crowd of men in the coffeehouse that this mule is ours now. Kayaoğlu and I laugh because some coffee’s spilled on the pants of one of the men, and it looks like he’s pissed himself.

“I think he gets it,” says Yilmaz, pulling on Sergeant Ali’s arm. But Sergeant Ali insists, so Yilmaz translates to the whole coffeehouse that it is now illegal to have a mule. Looking at the faces of these men you wonder if they even speak Kurdish or if this whole town is deaf.

The old man shakes his clasped hands before Sergeant Ali like it’s his own life on the line. I’ve seen people less upset about us taking their uncles. He tugs at his sweater, holding it out to Sergeant Ali as an example of something, saying look at it, look at it. The men are shuffling closer to us. They keep absolutely silent, and I’m nervous about the low rooftops, I’m nervous about the water tank, I’m nervous about the cardboard cutout in the window. Yilmaz talks to the men very calmly, like he’s not even translating for Sergeant Ali anymore.

“Sergeant,” I say because I feel like something inside me will break. “Hold on, Sergeant. We could use the man’s help.”

We don’t know the area, we haven’t got a place to stay, we don’t know who has mules and who doesn’t. It makes sense I guess as I keep talking. You’ve got to get a few locals on your side, I say.

Sergeant Ali tells Yilmaz to get all that across, to ask the man if he’s got a house, if he’d do us this favor.

“Yeah, he has a house,” says Yilmaz.
“We’re going to be staying there,” says Sergeant Ali.
The man stays on his knees and nods and holds up his hands.
“He says he’d love to host us.”



We quarter with the old man. His name is Hamdi. He leads us up the village road into the hills like sharp folds of paper to his house. It’s a squat, red thing with a few windows. There’s a shack and a little clearing behind it. Hamdi parks his mule next to the shack. Inside is a large cog and wheel used for milling.

Sergeant Ali orders us to secure the area, and there’s that momentary jump in the blood again, but no one is here, no one expects us. I poke around the shack and find nothing. I nudge Yilmaz, and we go inside the house.

“Tell him to start a fire,” I say. “Please.”

Hamdi introduces us to his wife who begins crying when she sees us. She’s an ugly crier, but she is smiling the whole time. He pats her head and sends her back into their bedroom. He starts the fire, and I sit in front of the stove warming my back like a cat. I unsling my rifle and put it on the floor, and for the first time in weeks it doesn’t feel like an extension of my arm, and I’m not scared to be without it.

Yilmaz takes off his helmet and his vest, and he helps Hamdi in the kitchen. They make a large pan of meatballs and fried potato slices in tomato sauce. Yilmaz offers Hamdi a cigarette. Out the window, the light is waning. It’s all just dust and mountains, dust and mountains, some snow, a low sun in the sky as yellow as fried egg yolk, thin air—cold, cold for the lungs.



The first few days are slow. What do we do? Sit around in the village until someone walks by with a pack animal, which of course no one is doing because the whole village knows why we’re here. Sergeant Ali blames Hamdi, saying he must’ve telephoned people last night to warn them. So the lieutenant has us scout the nearby farms and ranches and still we’re finding nothing but empty stables, full troughs with a thin layer of ice forming, piles of hay covered in frost.

Kayaoglu throws Yilmaz’s helmet down a well. Sergeant Ali reminds him we must wear our helmets at all times. Hamdi gives Yilmaz his wool hat so his head won’t freeze. We deflate the tires of every car we see, hoping it will force people to ride their mules around. We deflate the tires of every car we see because we are bored and nervous.



What a lot of nothing there is out here. You could get a few land surveyors out into the mountains between Iraq and Turkey, and have them take samples and measurements, and they could do it for years without ever coming close to cataloging all the nothing they’ve got kept out here.

We sit around with Hamdi most of the day. The lieutenant and the rest of our platoon have taken the armored car and gone into town. They’ve shacked up in some local *ağa*’s decrepit

villa. They're setting up a large pen for all the mules our squad is out catching. We've found three mules and a donkey all week, and Sergeant Ali is getting upset.

Hamdi brings me and Yilmaz a small tray of meatballs wrapped into half-loaves of bread. His wife pours out cups of strong tea for us between sobbing fits. Sergeant Ali has just come back with Kayaoğlu. We go outside to meet them. They were driving through the nearby hills, and unless they've got them tucked into their back pockets, they've found no new animals today.

"They're warning each other when we're on the move," Sergeant Ali says.

I look at Yilmaz and Hamdi who are popping olives into their mouths like on holiday.

"He's got no telephone," says Yilmaz.

Sergeant Ali lights a cigarette and squats in front of the house. I take a few canisters of gas to the jeep and fill it up again.

"There's got to be a whole hillside packed with mules," Kayaoğlu says to me. He grumbles about what we're doing. He leans against the jeep and smokes a cigarette and says that we're fucked. He's glad to have reprieve from Şırnak, but we are good and fucked, going nowhere now, and it's only a matter of time until we become a permanent station in the middle of nowhere.

Sergeant Ali tells us that we're important. He's good about that—keeping up morale—so long as you don't think about how he's really just talking to himself about himself. He says that for every mule that goes to Iraq and comes back, that's two thousand lira in the hands of terrorists. There's got to be three, four, maybe even five hundred mules and donkeys and horses in the mountains around here. He says the villagers rent them out like cars at the airport, he says the PKK are nothing more than beloved vigilantes out here.

"If we don't get a mule today, it'll be his we take next," says Sergeant Ali, pointing at Hamdi.

Hamdi is flashing smiles, keeping our bellies full and our hands warm with fresh tea. His wife is inside by the stove, her skin ruddy from the warmth, peeling from the steam of the *çaydanlık*. Yilmaz whispers something to Hamdi. He whispers it over and over but it's nothing any of us have said. It sounds like pleading.

Sergeant Ali drops his cigarette and goes to the shack. The mule is eating a little bit of hay. Sergeant Ali unties it from the mill and leads it in front of the house. He fastens it up to the jeep while Hamdi watches, smiling at me and smiling at Yilmaz who keeps repeating something under his breath. Hamdi goes into the house and hurries back out with a fresh pack of cigarettes, offering them up to Sergeant Ali.

"He wants to know what you're doing," says Yilmaz.

Sergeant Ali is doing his job, anybody could see that.

"I don't think that's a good idea," says Yilmaz.

"If you're not careful, people will assume you're interfering," says Sergeant Ali.

Hamdi looks like a chicken, running around, clucking madly in Kurdish. Kayaoğlu should be laughing but he isn't. Maybe he's just too cold like me. Maybe he and I should go inside and sit by the stove and let these three sort things out. Maybe Kayaoğlu and I should get in the jeep and drive down to the coast and all the way back home.

"He says he knows where you can find another mule," Yilmaz says. "He says if you leave his alone he can tell you where to find a replacement."

Sergeant Ali smiles. He's clever. That's why he's Sergeant Ali.

“What wonderful news!” Sergeant Ali says, throwing his arms out wide like he might embrace Hamdi and give his cheeks two kisses each. “What a wonderful host we have, isn’t he, fellas?”

Hamdi settles down but his gaze never leaves the rope of his mule tied to the jeep. Sergeant Ali wants him with us as a guide, but he says he can’t, he has to stay with his wife today. She’s very sick, can’t we see that? He says please to let him stay here. So we take down his directions. Yilmaz leads the mule back to the mill. We ride off in the jeep.

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Kayaoğlu walks the ditch road bordering the small field. He’s looking for any other animals. He’s looking for a kid with a gun. I can see even from here, the steam of his breath scatter in pale puffs. Inside the house, Yilmaz, Sergeant Ali, and I talk to the man who farms the field. The man is telling us his mule is like a brother, in fact it is better than his brother who is a drunkard that smells worse than his mule’s asshole. His brother wastes the days away, stealing small handfuls of lira from his family and spending them in the back of the coffeehouse that doubles as a *rakı* and gambling den. We should be taking his brother, he’s the one breaking the law, not the mule. He’s the one shooting heroin, fucking little boys, gambling, shitting wherever.

“He says his mule is so hygienic, it even shits into a trench he’s dug out,” says Yilmaz. I want to see this trench.

“He says he’s never been involved with the PKK and never smuggled anything.”

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Sergeant Ali is a resourceful man. In no time, we’ve got a few locals helping us out to protect their own mules and donkeys—a network of informants. Kayaoğlu says that’s what’s wrong with Kurds, so easily they give up their brothers. Sergeant Ali tells him to be thankful.

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Next day, we’re all standing in the cold sunlight, waiting for Yilmaz. Sergeant Ali barks like it will speed things up. There’s a glow in the windows, flashing between the panes. It’s the fire in the stove. I watch the smoke spill out of the chimney with envy. My fingers will break off in my gloves.

Yilmaz finally comes out with his helmet tied over his dick because Kayaoğlu keeps punching him there as a joke. The joke is that Yilmaz’s mother is Kurdish.

And I’m the one with no sense of humor.

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We’re out by the stream today. The water is low. It will flood with the thaw. Hamdi’s with us as a guide. He tells uneasy jokes as I drive. It’s scrubland all around. Our footsteps sound like cracks in the earth. We’re here for the old lady who lives here, turned in by her son.

There’s a donkey with a big smile waiting to greet us when we pull up. He stands by an empty trough dry as a bone. The old woman runs out to us. She’s wearing a red headscarf and she’s missing a few teeth. Yilmaz and Hamdi talk to her. The old woman looks worried. She and

Yilmaz talk. She asks us into her home. Kayaoğlu laughs and starts pulling the donkey to the jeep.

Inside she has two little boys sitting on a cushion by the wall, her grandsons no doubt. They sit in front of a busted radio taking turns playing with a candy wrapper. She starts shaking her head. There's nothing in their house but the woman and her grandsons and the odds and ends they've collected over the years that pass as their possessions: a cushion, a radio, a copper serving tray, cracks in the walls, callouses on their palms, and wide, clear eyes good for staring. The boys stare at me and Yilmaz. The woman shakes her head at Hamdi, and he says something like: *please*.

"He's telling her he will bring her a crate of figs for the boys," Yilmaz tells me.

"He doesn't have any figs," I say.

"Maybe he does. Maybe he will. He'll be the richest man in these hills after we leave."

What he means is: Hamdi will be the only one with a pack animal.

"They're all supposed to be rich," Yilmaz says. "They're supposed to be making thousands of lira a week off these mules."

Sergeant Ali keeps telling us these mules are worth fortunes. But look around. I mean, where's the money? In the empty tea-tin?

The woman sits down behind the boys and pulls their heads to her chest, smiling, still shaking her head.

"Hamdi's telling her they are handsome boys."

"She looks jealous," I say. She holds them tighter with every word out of my mouth.

"She says it used to be different, you know?"

Kayaoğlu comes in. He's got the donkey tied to the jeep.

The woman becomes upset. She says no over and over. She looks at Kayaoğlu, saying something you don't need a translator to understand. Her face is cracked from the wind.

"Let's go."

Hamdi keeps saying it: *please*. He tells her to stop, that's what it looks like. He watches her boys like the hawk watches the hare.

Kayaoğlu disappears outside and the woman follows him with her protests. Hamdi smiles and says in Turkish to Yilmaz and me: "Everything OK, everything OK."

Sure, Hamdi, everything's OK.

I get in the jeep and the wind slips down my collar, whispering chills into my bones. Yilmaz stays with the boys with those clear, wide eyes innocent to movement, and the three of them sit still as stones in a creek.

The old woman yells now, she hobbles after Kayaoğlu. It's the boys that care for the donkey—feed it, water it, work it through their small grove. You can picture it when you look down the dormant rows of the grove, one brother sitting atop the donkey, the other leading slowly ahead with a rope tied round the donkey's neck. They are so young they could be great-grandsons.

Kayaoğlu hits the woman to shut her up. He's got a lot of work to do today, we all do. I start the engine. We have four more stops to make before we lead the train of animals to the lieutenant's pen. Yilmaz doesn't even look to see the commotion, he and the boys stay turned to each other, watching one another. Hamdi helps the woman to her feet, dusts her off, and takes her inside and starts a meager fire for her. But Yilmaz doesn't move, he stays with these boys, letting them play with his knife until I honk the horn and he climbs in.

Just a few decades ago, just half a century ago, this was nothing more than trade, the routes through the hills. Borders are there to be crossed, I think. If you squint into the morning sun, you can't even see the thick line over the mountains demarking Iraq. And it is a thick line; in places like this it is a very thick border so that your whole body, a whole village can occupy this vague limbo, as opposed to the thin lines of places like Germany or the Netherlands, where your hand can be simultaneously in three different provinces.

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Sergeant Ali and I are inside, standing in the living room with our backs to the stove just watching Hamdi and his wife on the couch. They watch us right back. Hamdi keeps nodding with a grin on his face. He's nodding, saying with his grin: *don't kill me, don't kill me, don't kill me*. Hamdi's wife is still crying those silent, heavy tears, so heavy there is no break in them, no individual tear, there are just two lines of liquid down her cheeks like swollen veins.

Hamdi's wife offered us tea but Sergeant Ali scoffed so I couldn't take any either. "Aren't you cold?" I ask him. I throw another log into the stove and give the bellows a little squeeze.

"Pull yourself together."

Sergeant Ali is a poor man with high aspirations, stuck in charge of us degenerates. He cleans his rifle again. He's going nowhere. How long until he sees that?

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Sergeant Ali takes over Yilmaz's shift a little early. Yilmaz comes in from the night with frost in his mustache shining red from the embers of the stove. He becomes nothing more than his shadow in the dark. I half pretend to be asleep, but I feel just as much that I am pretending to be awake.

"I'm going to kill that Kayaoğlu," Yilmaz says.

I wait but he knows I'm awake. "Man, don't say a thing you can't do."

"I mean it. Next time he looks at me I will shoot him right in his chest. Easy. One, two three."

"One, two, three," I say.

Out the front door, I can hear Kayaoğlu talking and Sergeant Ali's awkward little laugh he uses when he is embarrassed. Kayaoğlu has shoved things up Yilmaz's ass: a toothbrush, a flashlight, a nightstick, the handle of a *cezve*.

"You could use your knife," I say.

Yilmaz props up on his side. "Will that look like an accident?"

I sigh. "Is that what you're planning? To get away with it?"

Yilmaz thinks. I can't see more than the boundary of his shoulder and neck in the dark. I've been staring at the embers; my eyes won't adjust.

"Shit. No, man, that's not what I plan on doing."

"He deserves it," I say but it sounds apologetic, like I don't believe in Yilmaz.

"It's about justice."

It's cold. "Don't you think?" I ask.

"What?"

"It's cold."

Yilmaz might have drifted off to sleep then. Or maybe I did. I was thinking about a beach near Mersin. I was thinking of peeling oranges and tanning in the sun.

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The network of informants has been successful beyond our wildest expectations. Sergeant Ali chalks it up to the general stupidity of the locals. He and Kayaoğlu are with the mules now. Two hundred of them in the large pen. I thought about how the shepherd might use his flock to smuggle cigarettes in their wool, but some things you keep to yourself.

Yilmaz and I load the MG3 into the back of the jeep. Hamdi's wife smiles at us. Hamdi asks Yilmaz something. They see I'm curious. Hamdi holds up a hand and disappears into his house. Yilmaz straps down the MG. Hamdi comes back out with a thermos I hadn't noticed before. He gives it to me. "Tea," he says. "Hot, hot. Now you go."

Yilmaz laughs a weak laugh.

"Thank you." I take the thermos without guilt. This is Hamdi's only valuable. I sip the tea. It is strong and honeyed. I thank him again and say to Yilmaz: "Did you teach him that?"

Yilmaz nods. "All week he's been practicing how to say 'now you go.'"

I take another sip. The tea is hot, but once I sit behind the wheel of the jeep I'm shivering again, and I can feel the cold of steel through my clothes, on my arms, my fingers, my thighs, my ass. I start the jeep. Yilmaz hesitates.

"You'd better hurry," he says.

"They won't be happy about you sitting this out," I say. "They'll think it's because you're Kurdish." He's running the risk of being called a sympathizer, or worse a spy of the PKK.

"If I go, I'll shoot Kayaoğlu."

I shrug. "He deserves it."

He waves me off. I drive down the dirt path through the village that looks deserted in the cold, without mules. The only one left in the whole municipality is Hamdi's old mule breathing steam into the bright day.

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I back the jeep up against the pen. We have all the time in the world to unstrap the MG and mount it and feed the belt into its hungry maw and slap the cover closed and chamber the first round. We spread out, ten meters between each of us so that there is plenty of space for the discharged brass, plenty of room for the wind to bite at us.

The lieutenant's men are leaning against the railing of the pen, steadying their left arms on it as they aim their rifles. No one seems to notice Yilmaz's absence, not even Kayaoğlu. We are all too anxious.

Some of the mules still have their packs strapped to them, a few have their reins still hanging from their muzzles. One has a strip of cloth tied over its eyes to keep it from going dizzy while walking circles round the cog of a well pump. All are well-fed like members of the family. None had sacks of cigarettes tied to them. None had rifles or shotguns hidden in their troughs. One had an owner with a collection of bootleg DVDs. Three hundred and seventeen animals out there, huddled together, close as pebbles in the dirt. Clouds of breath-steam disembark from the density of beasts. Behind us are the first few houses of the village.

Sergeant Ali gives us the order lazily, says with a smile: “All right, boys. Go on. Shoot them.”

So it's with lackadaisical thirst that we fire the opening rounds: two in the dirt, one through a cloud, another into the haunch of the nearest mule like an accident. The mules all jump, their muscles rippling under their skin in shock at the sound. They are unable to move, to turn and run even the short distance to the edge of the pen. A few bursts. We are acquainting ourselves to the act. How many of us have ever killed a thing? And the mules are looking at us, saying: *don't kill us, don't shoot us*. And we are saying back: *don't move so much, just die easy, OK?*

Disappointed in us again, Sergeant Ali takes his handgun from his hip and fires into the flank of a nearby mule until the gun is empty and he reloads and empties it all into the dead mule again so that we get the idea, so that we follow suit, and I don't want to, but everyone will notice, so I fire a few bursts from the MG off to the side, high so no one will see I am missing. Sergeant Ali tells us to go nuts, to have fun with it, to shoot like they were the devil's own. And I guess it makes sense to the others. They tell you that if it weren't for us, Turkey would be a dangerous country, and you believe them. And then they tell you what a Kurd is, how they are not Turks, they don't want to be, and that having this many Kurds is dangerous. Then they show you videos of PKK attacks, of bus-bombings, kidnappings, assassinations, and you go along with it, it makes sense, they are dangerous, they do want to kill you. Then they say to round up families, collateral is important, but you know that by now, they hardly need tell you. They say the PKK is strong because of smuggling, because they terrorize and extort the east. But then they put you in a jeep and drive you to a village full of old men and women and say none of it's enough, now we have to kill these mules because they too are dangerous—do not be deceived! They are threats to the state, they are accessories to treason and their trials will be quick, their executions summary, so you drag the mules by rope to this pen, and you pull the trigger, and most of them don't even move, they just look toward the boom of gunfire with those eyes, black and round as cherry pits stuck into the sides of their faces, and only now am I asking myself what dots weren't connected along the way—but what am I going to do?

I fire the MG in long bursts. I miss the mules. I fire at their hooves. I fire where the others are firing, and I think of Hamdi and his mule because I have done good. I have spared some small piece. Steam pours from the barrel of my MG, and I realize I can feel my hands, better still I can feel heat through them. I hover my hand a few centimeters from the barrel and I can feel the warmth in my veins again, and I smile at this morsel of summer I am holding between my fingers.

The steam dwindles. The wind will have the barrel cooled soon. I fire another long burst, the rattle pouring through my bones. I shoot the already-dead mules but the thud-slap of bullets puncturing them is an addictive sound. I shoot a standing mule this time and watch the ripple of muscles under its flesh stop and be still. They will grow suspicious, my brothers, I have to hit the target to keep shooting. The barrel is a bonfire to stoke, and I am relieved briefly, my shoulders slack, I become aware of how tensely I have shivered until now, and all that is gone in the warmth. I am malleable.



Yilmaz isn't at the door of Hamdi's house waiting for us—neither is Hamdi. I hop out of the jeep as a buffer between the absence of Yilmaz and any number of eventualities piled into the

jeep behind me. I call out to Yilmaz, Kayaoğlu shouts his name too, shouts that they carved out a whole mule pussy just for Yilmaz, they've got it intact he says, and I believe him. Sergeant Ali jumps out after me. To the east the mountains of Iraq are a warm gold, bathed in sunlight.

A scuttle of feet. Sergeant Ali turns in time to catch Hamdi's arm in motion. He's wielding a knife aimed right for Sergeant Ali's throat, and in a quick bit of momentum, Sergeant Ali yanks Hamdi through the rest of his swing into the dirt. Hamdi screams when Sergeant Ali stomps on his wrist. He drops the blade and begins squeaking like an injured sparrow. Sergeant Ali pulls out his handgun again.

"What's he saying?" I ask.

"Where's Yilmaz?"

Bastards, Hamdi yells at us, bastards; bastards; dirty, filthy bastards.

Kayaoğlu calls out from the house. We turn and see him dragging Hamdi's wife by the arm into the open air. She's stopped crying; she's bleeding all over the place, dirt sticking to gleaming patches in her thigh. She's got a tourniquet tied above the hole but it's bleeding through, it's her femoral artery. None of us are medics. It'll be a minute more maybe. She's already losing consciousness.

"PKK," whispers Kayaoğlu.

Hamdi pulls on the sleeve of my fatigues the way orphans on the beach back home do, leading you to their small treasures of oysters, turquoise pendants, sea glass. Hamdi points to the shed by his mill. I realize the mule is gone like realizing a dream. Hamdi points beyond the shed.

Kayaoğlu is doing his best with Hamdi's wife, giving her a little morphine, reapplying a bandage, telling her nice things, wonderful and good things like how she is going to be all right even though he is now covered in blood too, even though the wound is slippery and it looks like she is coming undone. He's even looking for a poker to cauterize the wound.

I lift my rifle, sights just below my eyes. I take nervous steps toward the shed. Sergeant Ali follows me with his own gun, with his own pair of hungry eyes. On all fours, Hamdi starts crawling to the shed, he's crying now, and pointing, and standing up, and then he runs in front of us, runs for the corner of the shed and behind it. Sergeant Ali tells me to wait, wait until we have secured the area, but I run after Hamdi and see him climb up the rock terrace around the back of the shed, and up the escarpment of dirt to the top of the hill. I drop my rifle and clamber up after him. Sergeant Ali curses me.

Hamdi calls me a bastard while I climb. I know what he's thinking: I promised safety, I promised no harm to him, and as I reach the crest of the shallow ridge, I follow the line of Hamdi's finger and see—not so far from us as to make him little more than a speck, but too far for us to call out—I see Yilmaz on the back of Hamdi's mule. He looks like something from a fairytale. He looks like Yilmaz *hoca*, missing only a billowy turban, off on a pilgrimage to Iraq on the back of a short mule with fast legs, his desire line is merely the opposite of us, the opposite of Turkey, the opposite of many different words. That's one way to live your life here, in the land of this-or-that.

Author's Note

“That’s one way to live your life here, in the land of this-or-that.” brings my story to a close, but the line was hard to reconcile. A friend of mine recommended deleting it entirely, another suggested writing something else there. I grew concerned that the line was ruinous, but I came to realize my anxiety over the sentence was born from its on-the-nose feeling.

American short fiction, as a genre, is wrought for better or worse by an obsession with perfection. Writers feel so guilty about cliché that they abandon all sincerity for the safety of Socratic irony or self-reduction (re: the check-mark stamped on program fiction) that is so often lauded as “tight” “terse” “clean” and “lean” that there is no hope for a story except in butchering and excising all blemishes. This inherently lends itself to an impossible process of constant editing while writing (how else could perfection be achieved, the loop perfectly sealed if not by unending adjustments?). Perfection is about constant self-restriction and preemptive removal instead of the process I espouse: overwrite and sculpt. Where the strive for perfection prohibits exploration and unallows surprise in favor of constraint, overwriting is how I have found the core of all of my stories. It allows me to be sincere while the procession of perfection crushes sincerity out of fear that it bloom into cliché.

I am against perfection. It is smooth and comforting. It is concerned with rewarding the reader for getting the story instead of engaging and challenging them. It removes conversation and debate (what is there to say about perfection?), and destroys the small pleasures of complaint by the audience. It admits there is a right and a wrong.

With sincerity there is the possibility of looking distinctly like an idiot, the possibility of cliché or speaking too bluntly in a field that praises hyperreal exteriors and muddled, vague interiors, but there is also the hope of literature instead of hollow excellence. I think of Hassan Blasim’s stories, or Sait Faik Abasıyanık’s stories, or Ahmed Sadawi’s novel *Frankenstein in Bagdad* as examples of sincerity, the way they deal so bluntly with the largeness of the human condition would be balked at in a workshop, teetering on the passé. The last sentence commits my story to an ideology so it is not safely ironic. Because of it, the story experiences an axial shift in its thematic interests (we are cast into the interrogation of duality instead loyalty, thus leaving our narrator and his struggle to connect the dots of tolerable evils for the sake of a homeland for the binary of Yilmaz). This means it is flawed—the threads have come undone, we are taken out of the fictional dream, and in the last moments we are left with questions outside of the confines of the narrative. Whether or not the line succeeds is individually at each reader’s discretion (for that is where literature occurs). The sentence can be called an unearned or unwarranted shift; it can be called flawed and committed; it can be called cliché and didactic, but it makes me happy. It reminds me that even for our fictions there are always other people to consider.

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