



## Rescue Mission: Poems from *Mute Map* for the Drowned

Arian Leka



Photo credit: Roland Tasho

Arian Leka was born in the port city of Durrës, 1966. He belongs to a group of authors who appeared as literary avant-garde following the opening of the borders of Albania after the fall of communism. He works as a researcher at the Academy of Albanology Studies (National Institute of Albanian Linguistic and Literary Research) and as a professor at the University of Fine Arts of Tirana and holds a Ph.D. in Literary Sciences. He is the author of 19 literary publications in poetry, short stories, novels, literary essays, and book retellings of ancient Mediterranean mythology as well as of numerous scientific articles and essays on lore and culture. A well-known book is the monograph *Socialist Realism in Albania* (Albanian Academy of Sciences, Tirana 2020) devoted to Albanian literature of the “golden ages” 1930–1944 to the communist period and the soft-modern trends in this literature. Another of his research books is *Consensus and Polemics: On MYTHS and NAMES of Albanian Literature* (Academy of Albanology Studies, Tirana 2022).

Arian Leka’s poetry has received several national and international awards. He is editor of the poetry magazine *Poeteka*. His texts can be found translated in many anthologies and magazines worldwide. In 2020 his fact-fiction poetry book *Mute Map for the Drowned* (Poeteka Publications) was translated into several European languages. It is dedicated to the never-ending theme of emigration and human trafficking. Among many similar statements in his work that revolve around Albanian history since the fall of the Berlin Wall, in addition to the inexhaustible European subject of the Balkans, Arian Leka writes:



*Mute Map for the Drowned*  
(Botimet Poetika 2019)

*The end of my youth coincided with the collapse of the Hoxha regime, but I lived in a matriarchal family system, as my father was a sailor and rarely came home. In the year I was born (1966), the ancient amphitheater of Durrës was discovered, after having slept 1500 years under the soil. A year later (1967), the cultural-atheist revolution began, which closed religious institutions and sent the clergy to work in factories and farms. I don't know if the writings of a man who lived only one year by the grace of God be trusted, as I do not know whether the words of a man who learned to walk in the same year as swimming and who, in the first grade of primary school, began to learn simultaneously the letters, numbers and musical notes? Maybe that was too much for one child. That's why I like to use docu-fiction techniques and the fictionalization of autobiography.*



— from television news  
March, 1998:

*... I heard a voice that spoke to me. "Go upstairs," he told me, "because I'm not feeling well."  
That's all I can remember.*

— from the memories of a survivor

## Rescue Mission

The animals arrived ashore, not us.  
A crocodile. A puma. A rhinoceros. A shark. A horse.  
An elephant.  
Even a long dog,  
Which did not reach yet the age of death.  
They sailed on our clothes.  
Animals, embroidered on branded t-shirts,  
Bought in third hand clothing stores, held tightly,  
With hoofs and nails against the wet cotton, produced in poor countries,  
Such as our homeland, where people drowning in sweat, like us,  
Sew their eyelids with a thread.

We saw them breaking the waves.  
They abandoned their t-shirts, as the sailors do with ships once they reach the shore,  
To bring to people the news that the sea had given us a new nationality,  
That our bodies would not appear on the sand, that collared doves could tie a twilight  
On their neck, as they sit on the ships' chimneys,  
Lined up to be transformed into scrap and rust, out of which,  
Once melted, heavy ships are built again for emigrants and  
Emigrants' sons, who will wander in this sea late at night,  
Trodden by our feet and deeply plowed by our legs.

without a date:

*... Then I found myself into the sea, I returned to the water surface back within the boat, I got out of  
water holding my breath. The boat took me down while entering the sea water.*

— from the memories of a survivor

March 26, 1997: three days before the Otranto tragedy:

*If Italy fails to stop the emigration of Albanians towards its shores and land,  
then it is better to throw them back into the sea, declares the Italian MP Irene Pivetti*

— from the press and televisions

## Children of the Southern Coast of Albania

In August, in the night of the falling stars  
Children do not throw flowers into the sea.

We beguiled the little ones offering them plastic stars  
We whispered: the drowned are planted as seeds in the soil  
They jingle like Pinocchio's golden coins on the earth.

Pennies were the drowned into the sea  
At the bottom of the marine mercy's savings box.

The drowned enter the airplane quietly  
Dressed in black bags  
Similar to HUGO BOSS sheaths  
Protecting suits from ultraviolet rays and dust

In the aircraft coffin fridges drip on gifts  
Put into wheeled suitcases. Parents queue at the airport. I look forward to the end of the  
passport control:

A European. An Albanian. A drowned.

<< EU PASSPORTS—LEFT • RIGHT—ALL OTHER PASSPORTS >>

September 5, 2011:

*Irene Pivetti attended the reception for the Italian record holder Massimo Voltolina who swam symbolically across the Adriatic. Her presence in Vlora was not seen well by the representatives of the association of the victims of Otranto family members. "Your presence here has poisoned the Albanian land and our hearts!", she was told in Vlora. At the end of August, Pivetti had a meeting with Jozefina Topalli, Speaker of the Albanian Parliament.*

— from the press and television chronicles

February 3, 2016:

*According to data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 60 of the 272 migrants who drowned in January 2016 in the waters of the Aegean Sea between Turkey and Greece were children.*

— from the black chronicle

## Heavy Objects

At that time, when according to my dad  
I was old enough to have a watch on my bangle  
He gave me one: a Zeppelin.

He didn't buy it, but removed it from his wrist  
— Move on, fly if you like, but do it quietly, without noise  
— Like a Zeppelin?:  
a) — time shuttle —  
b) — a pocket watch with shackles —

A history floats in silence  
When children transform the hands of the father's watch  
Into navigation shovels  
When someone on the shore carves boats  
On the bark of trees  
A child draws the sea in his notebook  
And, watching the news on TV-screen  
He tries to respond towards alternatives of what  
An immigrant at sea might be  
a) — a floating cloud —  
b) — a boat shovel —  
c) — a broken propeller of Zeppelin —

Mare Nostrum. Mare Mortuum.  
Blue grave, separated by liquid — barbed — wire — waves:  
a) — a sea barrack —  
b) — a concentration camp —

August 6, 2015:

*Less expectations of finding survivors in the latest maritime tragedy in the Mediterranean*

— from the tv news