

# Richardson

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Albanian author Gjekë Marinaj finds refuge in Richardson **16**

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# Power of a poem

Gjekë Marinaj's words inspire freedom, help defeat communism in Albania



By LINDSEY BEVER  
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**H**e heard the gunshots of approaching Albanian soldiers before he made it to the border.

He thought he had outsmarted them, weaving his blanket through the barbed wire — only a kilometer from the former Yugoslav border near Podgorica, Montenegro — to block the sensors that would alert the communist army of his crossing. But his plan failed. They were coming to take him home.

So just after midnight on Sept. 12, 1990, 25-year-old Gjekë Marinaj started running.

“When I got on the top of the hill and across the border, I had a chance to look over the whole field where my house is, thinking, ‘You are going to say goodbye to that forever,’ because at that time, it was still communism in power,” said Marinaj, 46, who moved to Richardson 20 years ago. “You just feel tears running down your face.”

In 1990, when native journalists who did not work hard enough to promote the Communist Party of Albania could be imprisoned, Marinaj had written and published a radical anti-government poem that helped trigger the uprising that would finally free his people.

The 22-line poem called “Horses” ran in the country’s leading literary publication, *Drita*. The horse served as a metaphor for the Albanian people — who were robbed of free will.

“Then people started to go on demonstrations and read the poem aloud,” Marinaj said.

But there was no freedom of speech, and his attempt came with a price. Just weeks later, an agent of the secret police approached Marinaj and told him to appear at police headquarters.

“I knew what was going to happen. I was afraid and I left the country that very evening,” said Marinaj, who had to

flee without telling his parents and six younger siblings where he was going.

These experiences have influenced his view of politics and, more important, humanity.

Among many published works by Marinaj is his theory of literary criticism called Protonism. His book, *Protonism: Theory into Practice*, recently won the 2011 Albanian BookerMan Prize for Literature from the National Media Group of Tirana, Albania.

Mujë Buepapaj is a member of the National Media Group and director of the Albanian literary and cultural newspaper, *Nacional*. He said a professional jury honored Marinaj because his Protonism theory is important to the study of literature.

“It promotes peace and positive thinking in Albania and the Balkans, a region that was often involved in ethnic wars, social crisis and other conflicts,” he wrote in Albanian via email.

### Making headlines

It was nighttime when Serbian police officers led Marinaj into a dark room and locked the doors behind him.

He had been bused with other immigrants to a refugee camp near Belgrade called Padinska Skela Detention Centre until they could find room for him at Hotel Avala, a local tourist resort that had been converted into a refugee camp by the United Nations. From there, he would apply to the American Embassy and make his move to San Diego.

“They were speaking Albanian,” Marinaj said of the immigrants. “They said, ‘What is your name?’ and I said, ‘Gjekë Marinaj,’ and they said, ‘Oh, we heard about you, Gjekë!’”

“It was known right away that I left. Overnight, it was all over Europe as the news.”

Marinaj made it to the West Coast with only a small amount of Albanian cash and no understanding of the language. Within six months, he had made his way to Texas, working as a runner, fetching pillows and fresh towels, for Westin Galleria Dallas.

That’s where he met his wife of 20 years, Dusita, 45, who came here from Romania.



Photos submitted by GJEKË MARINAJ

Marinaj revisits Hotel Avala in 1995 where he stayed as a refugee five years earlier.

“I just think about leaving your life behind, leaving your family, leaving your friends, leaving your country really, and going to a new place. It’s overwhelming,” said Dusita Marinaj of Richardson. “On the inside, I feel that I am the luckiest person because we got a chance to meet each other and have a life. It ended up being a good thing in the end.”

Over the past 20 years, Marinaj has made a life for himself in Richardson. He earned his associate degree in science from Brookhaven College and his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in literary studies from the University of Texas at Dallas. He is currently completing his dissertation for a UTD humanities doctorate.

Marinaj has continued to publish his poetry and freelance articles, interviewing public figures such as former President George W. Bush, Brazilian footballer Pelé and Israeli President Shimon Peres.

In 2000, he interviewed Albania’s former president and communist leader, Ramiz Alia.

“Everything I do now, I just think what kind of impact that piece of work is going to have on behalf of humanity,” said Marinaj, who teaches English and communications at Richland College. “I feel like I am very lucky I didn’t get killed for it and very honored and humbled I could write something which could make such a difference in the world.”

After the fall of communism in Albania, Marinaj returned home to visit family and do a few local interviews in 1995. However, he stayed only four days because he was afraid to stay longer, he said. He went back in 2008 and then again last year to do research for his dissertation, he said.

But, Marinaj said, the past two decades do not tell a story about only him and his struggles.

“I think it’s a story really about America more than about me because lots of people like me have taken the same path — left their country for one reason or another to come here,” he said. “No other country is like this one. It meets your expectations, and I am just an element that proves that. I am just one piece of the puzzle.”

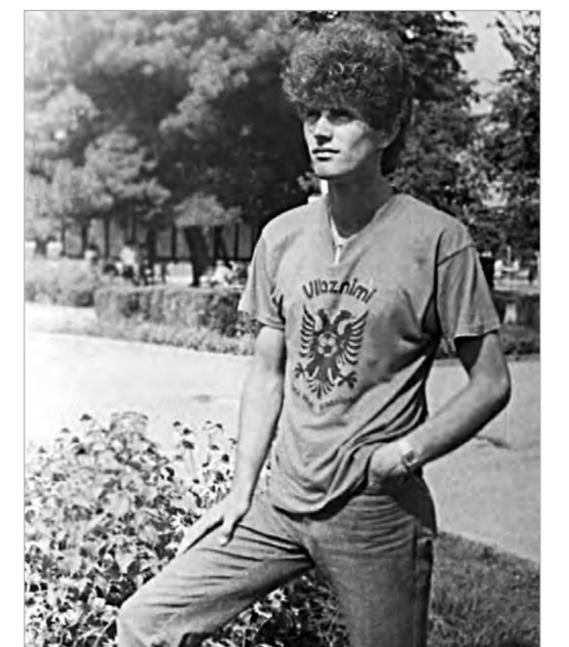
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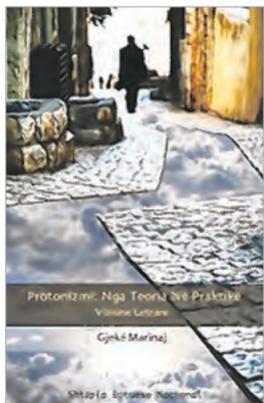
**Top two:** Marinaj’s poem “Horses” was published in *Drita* in 1990. Third: A 2006 article in *Koha Jonë* covers several of his works. Fourth: Marinaj was featured in the January *Nacional* for his recent award.

### HORSES

All our lives we keep running,  
we look only ahead.  
What happens behind us, we fear to know.  
We have no names.  
We are all called horses:  
we don’t cry,  
we don’t laugh,  
we silence ourselves.  
We listen,  
we eat what we are given,  
we go where we are told.  
None of us is sharp enough.  
For the horse of the king,  
they made a high post.  
For the horse of the princess,  
they made a gold saddle.  
On the horse of the peasant,  
they tossed a saddle of straw.  
As for the wild horse,  
they threw him outdoors.  
Yet before the people,  
we were and remain horses.



Twenty-five-year-old Gjekë Marinaj poses for a photo only five hours before he fled his country, Sept. 11, 1990.



**Above:** *Protonism: Theory into Practice* recently won the 2011 Albanian BookerMan Prize for Literature from the National Media Group of Tirana, Albania.

**Right:** Gjekë Marinaj of Richardson holds an Albanian newspaper featuring his story on former president and communist leader Ramiz Alia, whom he interviewed in 2000.