



HOMO CLIMATICUM

THE BALKANS

2026

HOMO CLIMATICUM: THE BALKANS

Regional competition by Zelena akcija, Omladinski centar CK13, Centar za životnu sredinu, Zero Waste Montenegro, and Kulturtreger (Klub Booksa) for short stories and poetry within the genre of climate fiction 2026..

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**Sufinancira
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**Centar za
životnu sredinu**

**THE STORY OF THE
1.5°C LIMIT**
SOLUTIONS AND STORYTELLING
OF YOUTH FROM WESTERN BALKAN

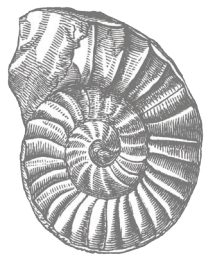


**ZERO
WASTE
MONTENEGRO**



HOMO CLIMATICUM: THE BALKANS

2026



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Foreword

There is a good reason why the title of this anthology is intentionally written with a grammatical error. Homo Climaticum (and not climaticus) is not a mistake. It is a manifesto. Climate does not recognize gender, species, or borders; it encompasses everything and changes all of us. The new entity we have tried to name here does not fit into the framework of established grammar, just as the consequences of climate change cannot easily be contained.

In response to the call to imagine the worlds that are coming (or that may have already arrived), we received submissions from authors from Banja Luka to Niš, from Mostar to Podgorica, from Split to Belgrade. The competition received 130 stories and poems from the region, written by authors born across a span of half a century. Of the 28 published works, as many as 12 are signed by young people between 18 and 30 years of age. What unites them all is a shared feeling: that we are living within change, not before it.

The works in this anthology do not speak of the future as something abstract and distant. They speak of a ban on going outside between eleven in the morning and six in the evening, of water that flows only at night, of a river that has dried up, of a city that lives exclusively in darkness because the Sun has become the enemy. They speak of jobs that do not (yet) exist today: moisture catchers who collect living dew from the air, water couriers who travel through the streets of once-popular seaside resorts, anti-robot journalists who, in a world saturated with artificial intelligence, search for the human voice, cleaners who collect seeds as a final act of hope. The climate crisis does not only bring catastrophe; it also gives rise to new forms of survival, new professions, but also new forms of solidarity.

The regional context is also very important in this case. The Balkans have a specific relationship with climate change: it has not caused it to the same extent as wealthier and more powerful economies, yet it will face its consequences on equal terms with everyone else. Our anthology has something to say about this injustice. And it says it through the magical realism of the Istrian basin turning into a mirror of conscience, through a post-apocalyptic Banja Luka where, even at the end of the world, the same old divisions reappear, through a scorching Mostar that only blooms when the sun sets. Here, the local and the global are not in opposition; they exist within the same sentence.

In these selected works, the jury recognized what is most difficult to achieve in climate fiction: atmosphere. Not a checklist of environmental themes and data disguised as a story, but a living, oppressive, and at times bitterly humorous

world in which we all now recognize ourselves. The winning stories from all four countries ("A Fish in an Armchair" from Croatia, "Rot" from Montenegro, "The Last Patrol" from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and "The Pool" from Serbia) differ in tone, poetics, and approach, but they are all united by the same ability to make visible, in an intimate way, what is lost in ominous statistics.

You will not find here a green hope pasted onto the end of the text like a romantic bandage. If there is hope, it has been expensively earned and planted in the crack of concrete, almost in spite of everything. A girl learning with her grandfather what the planet once was like, or a woman trying to manifest a forgotten minus five - these are gestures that are at once tender and desperate, and it is precisely this duality that makes them literarily truthful. It is encouraging that the authors do not write about climate change as something that will happen to someone else, somewhere else, sometime later. They write from within it - out of heat, thirst, exhaustion, worry, and empathy. This is, quite possibly, the most honest thing contemporary literature can do.

This anthology was created within a European project dedicated to youth voices, and as such it also serves a practical purpose, since it can function as an advocacy document. The poems and stories within it are not only literature; they are a testimony to how one generation sees its planet and its responsibility toward it. Feel free to read them in parliaments, assemblies, classrooms, squares, and streets. The myth of us is being written right now, and behind the lines that follow stand real people who carry hope.

The new Homo Climaticum has arrived. The only question is whether it will plant a flower garden.

Dorđe Majstorović





A FISH IN AN ARMCHAIR



Irena Plejić Premec

Zagreb

“Was it nice, girls?!”

“Yeeeeeeah!” Meri and I yelled at the same time from the backseat of the car.

“Excellent! Now, sleep time until Zagreb. We’ll be home in no time.” Dad said. Meri turned her mobile phone on. I looked out the window. I wasn’t sleepy. We were rushing along a row of pine trees. Through the mesh of their branches, fragments of the shimmering blue sea could be seen. The moment etched itself into my memory, although I was too small to be clearly aware of it. It was as if there was nothing in the world except that road and that collage of green, brown, and blue within the frame of the window.

I was six years old. Meri was eight. We spent a long weekend at our cousin’s, Noa. Aunt Lea and Uncle Tvrtko had bought a house next to the sea, on the beach. Aunt Lea is mom’s sister, just like Meri was mine. Noa taught me how to dive, head facing forward, all down to the bottom. I love the sea. I wanted to live by the sea. As though he could hear my thoughts, dad spoke:

“See, it could be like that for us as well. We could work at the sea all summer. In the evening, on the terrace, you can drink a bevanda and relax like a normal human being...”

“Do you want to pay six thousand Euros for a square meter?” Mom said. She wasn’t looking at him; she was looking through the window.

“If we had purchased it when I wanted to... but you thought it was smarter to take over Lea’s part of the orchard in Zagorje. Six overgrown plum trees that haven’t borne fruit for thirty years”, dad said. We were taking over a truck. He was concentrating on driving, so Meri and I hoped that the conversation would be over. It wasn’t good whenever dad mentioned the orchard. Lea and mom inherited it from our late grandmother, and she had inherited it from her mother, great grandmother Marija. Meri was actually called Marija, after our great grandmother. She never liked that name and wanted us to call her Meri. Dad did not like that orchard and wanted to sell it: “This is the right time; it’s now in a construction zone. The prices have gone up, people sell and earn money, unlike us...”

At that moment, I pulled out my mobile phone as well. Meri and I both put our headphones on, and each of us dove into our own world of colorful pictures. We were disappearing. We were not listening.

*

We were watching athletics on the television. I was sitting and leaning on my dad's shoulder. One runner crossed himself before the race began. I was thirteen years old and the world both attracted and confused me. Why did everyone think that their own god was the true one? And that he would be rooting for them in the race? Mom and I were cheering for an African from a poorer country. The one who crossed himself was second; ours was third. After the athletics, a show about the economy began. I wanted to leave, but mom said: "It's so nice when we're all together a little bit like this. Meri! Come here with us!"

"She's in the room, she can't hear you. Always those headphones on her ears. We don't even know what these kids think, what they listen to, what they know about the world", dad said to mom, as though I was not sitting right next to him. I remained silent. I was trying to hear what the people in the show were saying. To learn about the world.

"I don't get it. The economy can't always grow. Nothing can always grow, isn't that so?"

"It's complicated, you can't understand it." Dad responded.

I went to my room to ask ChatGPT: "Please, tell me if the economy can constantly grow."

Short answer: *On our planet, resources are limited: energy, raw materials, arable land, and the environment's capacity to absorb pollution. If growth means **more consumption and more waste**, then constant growth is not sustainable in the long term. However, the modern economy is increasingly growing through technology, knowledge, services, and digital products.*

Conclusion: *The economy can grow for a long time, but it cannot grow indefinitely based on the physical consumption of resources. It can grow through knowledge, technology, and efficiency. In the long term, there needs to be a balance between growth and sustainability.*

"You're bullshitting me." I responded.

*

“Tell me”, I said to mom. In her hand she was holding a pin cushion. My prom dress needed to be taken in. This was the third one we had ordered online, and this one was finally good, just a little too wide.

“It was called a dowry. Great grandmother brought that land into her marriage as her own property. It was hers and only hers. If she were to remain a widow... lift your arm”, mom said, and I could feel her touch and the cold of the little needles she was using to fix in the textile so it would follow my body. I knew the story she was telling me. Great grandfather had gambled with cards for money and had died in debt. My great grandmother had been saved by that land. She raised 5 children alone and survived two wars. In the photos, she had hands as huge as two shovels. They averted the gaze from her face, which was stiffly smiling towards the camera lens. “It’s from the hoe”, my mother had explained to me ages ago.

My great-grandmother brought into her marriage a dowry that included clothing she had woven herself. From it, she made clothes for the children. I looked at myself in the mirror. Turquoise satin fell all the way to the floor like a wave. *Because of me, the plane flew back and forth across the world five times*, I thought, as I imagined my grandmother cutting rough fabric.

*

The coffee shop in Vienna was full of students. I was sitting with Boris, Marcus, Stefan, and Sonia. I was at a student exchange for one semester. I was living in a college dorm. Sonia from Romania was my roommate. She was a member of an association which worked towards the protection of Romanian forests. In the evening, she would play the guitar for me while I cooked her pasta with greens. Stefan was from Belgrade. There were student protests there. Stefan was also all feisty; he would move around a lot, talk quickly, as though he was unable to catch his own thoughts which were entangled in contradictions. He spent months in the streets; he spoke about how that was the most beautiful time of his life. Still, he left; he wanted to finish college, and he wanted to be a doctor. He wanted too much of everything at the same time, just like the rest of us. I was listening to all of us, and I was under the impression that we didn’t really know anything about the world and that we knew too much at the same time. Both pushed us forward and held us back. How did we end up here? Where were the older and wiser ones? They send each other photos of anglerfish on a bed of spinach. They order egg slicers from China.

“The environmental fight is a political fight. The green economy is a business, and whenever something is a business, that leads to...” Marcus said.

“But if it does not bring profit...” Boris interrupted him. “Radicalism just leads to conflict. The world changes slowly...”

“And for the worst,” Sonia said, drinking her beer.

We were speaking in English. The discussions repeated themselves. We wanted the same thing, but we couldn’t agree on the path. Marcus studied sociology, already working as an independent journalist, and travelling. He thought seriously and wrote sharply. His English stumbled over German consonants, which was endearing. On weekends, we would hike in the hills around Vienna, and the world seemed repairable. Or at least as if there was still enough room in it to escape. I said this at one viewpoint, and Marcus asked me if I knew it was an illusion, that there was no escape. He stood close to me, and I thought that there was, there was - if not in space, then in time, because it stood still in that moment, and I was standing still in it.

“You’re turned on by young Germans who are saving the world”, Sonia told me, later while playing the guitar. I nodded while standing in front of the stove. It was true.

Later, we watched a documentary about the Arctic. A blue-haired lover of nature was travelling around the world and reporting to people about the problem of climate change and the state of the icebergs. He flew around, enjoyed himself, and earned money. He loved the adjective *spectacular*.

“Turn that idiot off”, Sonia said.

*

The orchard gave birth to plums! Mom, Meri, dad and I were cooking jam! We had so much of it that we had to give some out to our neighbors.

*

“I’m tired of your vegan fussing. If you don’t want meat, eat salad,” Mom said to Lea irritably. Meri was trying to quiet them down so that they wouldn’t wake up the child, little Tea. Everyone drank too much. It was New Year’s Eve. We were celebrating at Meri’s and Mario’s. They had gotten married two years prior. Mario was an IT specialist. He was afraid of getting fired:

"Back at the central unit, they fi... fired 1300 people", he lamented drunkenly.

Mom and dad were sitting on a balcony that was wide open. In pots, the flowers were blooming as if it were September. Noa and I sat on the couch, eating small cakes, talking about childhood and the house by the beach.

"We had to pump out the basements for the third time", Noa told me. "When it's high tide, the sea comes right up to the doorstep, and over it. The sewage rises... People try to sell, but it doesn't work. It just doesn't work anymore. And when you think about it... ten years ago it was worth its weight in gold."

"We no longer travel. Just virtual mee... meetings. The company is very con... conscious. Environmentally," Mario said. Meri demonstratively took his glass from him, washed it in the sink, and put it away in the cupboard.

"*Conscious?* Please... You don't care about who you sell your equipment too, nor do you care about rare metals. But you surely wash your toilets with rainwater. Such bullshit..." my uncle said. He had been unemployed since fall. A moment ago, he wanted to ask Mario if they had any job openings.

"Do you want him to quit out of principle? Will you take care of us then?" Meri snapped at him.

"Come on, let's not ruin our evening now. *It's never been that it wasn't somehow.* You don't worry until it comes to your door - there's no point. Here we are, drinking, eating, and we're fine. Cheers!" My dad spoke, raising his glass. No one was following his lead.

"But it came to our door", Aunt Lea spoke loudly. "We should have sold when the Slovenians began selling..."

"That's what we get for relying only on tourism", my dad concluded, pouring more wine into my uncle's glass and offering him more French salad. "No one travels anywhere anymore, except migrants", he said. He couldn't hold back without slightly laughing at his own respite. He turned serious when he saw mom's face.

"We were evil towards the Earth, and she is getting back at us now. Space is having its revenge", Aunt Lea said, with the voice of a wise chieftain.

"Yes. Surely, everything would be fine if we had all, like you, cooked on coconut oil and smeared ourselves with natural creams that cost as much as a monthly salary on the Philippines", my mom responded to her. "Space doesn't care, Lea! We fucked ourselves over, that's what it's about. We weren't smart or practical; we let idiots and thieves lead the pack, and that

is that. Now, our children will pay. Nature doesn't give a fuck. Us or cockroaches – she doesn't care." Lea had a prepared response, but Noa jumped from the couch at the right moment:

"It's coming up now! Where is the champagne? Ten, nine, eight..." In eight seconds, we cheered, looked at each other, and remembered that we loved each other. We hugged and wished each other a Happy New Year, and we meant it from the depths of our scared hearts.

*

It was summer. I was taking my daughter Neva to kindergarten. She has a hat and long sleeves. If I were to let her go outside without a hat, somebody could report me to social services. Neva was as pale as Snow White in the middle of summer.

*

"We will buy it out. Now. Before it becomes too expensive", mom said. Her, dad, Aunt Lea and I were sitting in the living room of the old apartment. Neva was playing on the floor. "Besides our orchard, that field is the only parcel that has not been under construction yet."

"That land is not good, only weeds grow there. Your mother used to say that as well. You need to treat it with something, and regularly. Don't be naive", dad said.

"No, not that. Just natural agriculture. So, it can be ours and so we can know what it is...", Aunt Lea began.

"Then we'll grow radicchio and yarrow. That's the only thing that grows there naturally", Dad said, enunciating the word 'naturally' while he glanced at Lea. "Girls, we don't know anything about land. Have you ever tried growing something? And living off it?" His tone was softer, more tired.

"I haven't," Aunt Lea said. "But there are ways... everything can be learned."

"If there are ways, do you really know what that means? What kind of life and how much work? And even if it succeeds, how will you protect it? You hear the stories, all across Podravina, they pick the fields, they steal. They clean out your orchard overnight; you have no idea who it is or how. There are guards even around the city gardens of Zagreb. There's a lot out there..."

"We should buy it in any case. The price of land will grow. And even if

it doesn't... you can't eat cash, and yet here... look at what is happening. Who knows what awaits our children. We should secure them," Mom said.

"And you're sure you know how? That the land will save them, because it saved your great grandmother 150 years ago?" Dad said, but he was not angry. He was tired of this conversation. He was having this conversation in his head with himself for weeks. He felt he was growing old. He wanted to do as much as possible for us, to 'secure us', as mother liked to say, but this world had turned into not being his world more and more. Everything had gone in a direction he did not know how to predict. He didn't believe his own self anymore, he did not know what a good decision was anymore, and what a bad decision was. Neva felt something and climbed into his lap, hugging him.

*

No one went to the sea anymore. Uncle and aunt had not managed to sell the house in time. Only Noa and I went down there to check up on the state of things from time to time. No one else wanted to even think about that house. It had been the subject of family fights for years.

The place was silent. From the empty new buildings with glass balconies, the plaster had begun to slowly crumble. Broken branches, clusters of algae in front of houses, a flooded waterfront. The storm had knocked down the fig tree in the yard. We cleaned a little and slept upstairs. The sea danced a meter from the entrance. It was October. Neva was fifteen years old. She bravely changed into a swimsuit and ran into the waves. Her body shimmered silver in the water. She would quickly come out and flee into the shade. She was afraid of everything: jellyfish, the sun, allergies, melanoma, plastic dishes, school tests, strangers, films with bad endings, the future.

Noa and I took our masks and followed her. Noa gestured to me: the pen shells were recovering. Here and there you could once again see a few boldly upright ones, which was a good sign. The seabed was full of discarded or washed-away things. In one waterlogged and worn-out armchair, a little European sprat was happily playing.

GENERATE A NEW EARTH

Roman Šimunović
Staro Petrovo Selo

Generate me a new Earth.
After summers stopped ending.
After the air became heavy
and remained so.

Without droughts.
Without fires.
Without forests that beg for water.

Can you redistribute the clouds?
Move the humidity
-from the concrete where mold flowers
to the roofs that have air conditioners.

Give me a table.
Projection.
A graph that promises shade.

It's easier to train a model.
A few months and a lot of electricity.

To a human? Years.
Food.
Water.
Love.
Too expensive.

While your servers work,
fields are burning.

Hot?
This is the coldest summer of the rest of your life.

Don't go outside.

The next one will be closer to the skin.

Closer to the bones.

There is no more water

-in the rivers that used to be safe.

It's in the air now,

heavy,

indecisive.

Give me an alternative.

Quickly.

Of course! Which one do you want?

Synthetic one?

Digital one?

An Ocean that does not depend on the rain?

A plant does not know your market.

It does not grow in percentages.

It does not germinate by index.

I can hear thirst.

As it breathes.

Slower.

They don't yell.

They don't vote.

They don't invest.

-they are disappearing, silently.

You say: generate.

What about regenerate?

Imagine a world

where you are not the center of it,

where nothing

revolves around your needs.

That is what you are afraid of.
Not disappearing.
But the disappearance of your privilege.

This Earth
still breathes.
And it remembers
how you call it
-resource.

A SLUMBERING SCORCHER

Arijana Boban

Ljubuški

In Mostar, a summer day is something to be avoided by anyone who can. Daily temperatures rise to more than 40 degrees Celsius in May already. The city grows silent by 9am. The metal shutters descended like weary eyelids. The streets remain empty, white and somehow overly bright, and above the asphalt a vapor rises as if burning from within.

The last month of school before summer vacation was being held during the night – since it was unbearable during the day. The rest of life would “fall asleep” during the day – public institutions, hospitals, ambulances, banks, shops, cafes, bakeries... - everything works at night. During the night, workers complete their 8-hour shifts. Around midnight, they go outside for “a snack”, at the break of dawn, they drink coffee after work... During the day, only those who absolutely must venture out do so - on-call doctors, bakers, doormen and night watchmen, street cleaners and guards, and those who have lost all sense of time - the odd drunk or drug addict, young people stuck in an arcade or at an after-party, the occasional lone soul or couple, or lovers who had been hiding beneath the heat of the day.

At the beginning of June, classes would end and the students would hibernate until late autumn when temperatures returned to normal – to something small, just below 40°C. In June, the weather forecast app would already be showing around 57°, but everyone knew, or at least thought they knew, that it was even hotter in the sun.

Sunčana loved the moment when the sun finally slid behind Žovnica. Not for the romance of it - but for the permission it granted. Around 9 PM, the official city siren would sound, and people would begin to come out. First, cautiously, then with increasing freedom. As if someone had lifted a lid off the city. Sunčana's grandmother always said it reminded her of the distant past, before global warming, when her neighbors in the village would let the sheep out of the pen. Back then, in the hot summer months, temperatures would reach around 40°C, and everyone would be complaining about how hot it was.

Sunčana worked as a water deliverer – it was one of the respected professions after being a doctor or a teacher. Her electrical tricycle awaited

her in the basement of the building, where she slept with her parents and grandmother. They also have an apartment on the third floor, but they spend less time in it than winter tires would nowadays spend on a car. That was of course her grandmother's quip, who always repeats that she would love to cool down to the former 36°, which back in the day was called *čalopek*. The heat went into the walls and even with three air conditioners, the third-floor apartment could not be cooled on hot summer days.

That night, the asphalt was still radiating heat through the thin soles of her yellow "Vans". She was driving towards the *Španjolski* Square, where at 21:21h a fountain switches on at which citizens can cool off before work and other daily - pardon - nightly obligations. The tourists now only came during winter – in summertime, Mostar belonged to those who stayed because they had nowhere to go.

Sunčana made her way across *Španjolski* Square towards the Old Bridge, delivering water as she went along. The Old Bridge was lit up with cold, blue and almost surreal light. A redhead girl with a photo camera stood on the bridge.

"You again." Sunčana said, stopping her tricycle. The girl tiredly nodded her head. Her name was Hana and she photographed the day. She claimed that the day was slowly leaving the memories of the city and that one summer, people will forget what the shadow looks like at noon.

"I went out at 11 today." She said quietly.

Sunčana could feel the skin on her arms getting goosebumps, even though it was about 36°C, which was now called "cool".

"Are you insane?"

Hana shrugged.

"The streets are white. There are no sounds. There are no birds. Just the crackling of stone and some confused lizards on the cobblestone. It's as if the city is sleeping in the sun and dreaming about how it used to be 'cold'".

Sunčana offered her a big bottle of water, without any words.

"Come on, that's too much." Hana was hesitant about the generous gift, but accepted it gladly, nonetheless. Water is, after all, a luxury now. Receiving a liter of water today is like receiving a bottle of good wine or a liter of olive oil in the old days.

In the distance, the lights in the northern part of the city flickered briefly. That was known to happen when the grid was overloaded. If the power

went out, the night would become almost as dangerous as the day. No light, no pumps, no cooling. And of course, nothing would work. The city lived on a thin line between two extremes - the scorching day and the fragile night.

Hana je podigla fotoaparata.

Hana raised her camera.

“Do you know what I’m afraid of?”

“What?”

“That we will wake up one day and realize that the night is too hot as well.”

Sunčana looked towards the sky. The stars shone weaker than ever before, or was it just more difficult to see them now through the foggy haze?

The midnight siren sounded briefly, somehow metallic and thin. The city was breathing, albeit shallowly.

Hana went towards the Kujundžiluk bazaar, searching for more shots of the bluish bridge’s LED lights. Sunčana remained for a moment longer, lost in thought and leaning on the handlebars of the tricycle.

“Eh, my Sunčana,” she thought about her stupid name. Maybe you would still love your name if people loved the sun now as much as they did before.

Her grandmother named her. She was born during the hottest summer in the 2020s, which the city remembered at that time. But then, “hottest” meant 40+ °C, and the media reported “unimaginable heat”. Her grandmother would tell her how she came to this world along with the sunrise and that it would be her protector.

“You are our Mostar sun”, her parents would tell her when she was little.

Little did they know that a decade or so later they would have to hide from the sun, and that it would be so despised.

Sunčana kept going. In Šantić street, she delivered three more packets of water and one cooling battery to an elderly married couple who refused to go to a basement.

“We are used to summer,” they said, “and we had our fill of basements during the war for three lifetimes.”

After 2 in the morning, the lights flickered again. This time, they did not return promptly.

The city seemed to hold its breath for a second.

Then – darkness. Completely, thick darkness, such as Mostar had not seen in years. No blue lights. No advertisements. No buzzing of air con-

ditioners. Only the distant, shy rustling of the river and a collective, restrained fear. The only light in the city was the headlights of cars running on old-fashioned fuel, that is, petrol.

Sunčana could feel her heart pumping faster. In the dark, the temperature seemed higher, as though the heat could not wait for the lights to disappear. Her tricycle, like all other electric vehicles, stood dead, motionless. Although charged, a power outage causes problems with starting. She didn't quite understand it.

Someone was shouting from the other side of the shore. A door opened somewhere. In the distance, a child's cry could be heard.

"Calm down" she told herself, almost out loud. Darkness isn't the sun. Darkness doesn't burn.

But without electricity, the water pumps won't work. Without electricity, the basements will heat up fast. Without electricity, the night has an expiry date.

She pulled a battery-powered torch out of her bag. A narrow beam of light cut through the darkness and touched the stone of the Old Bridge. Without artificial lighting, the bridge looked older and somehow quieter - almost as if it belonged to some other time.

She then realized something her grandfather told her long ago, but something she wasn't even close to understanding then. The sun is neither good nor evil. It's just stronger than what is trying to keep it. Perhaps the city will not be able to defeat the heat. Perhaps the days will grow ever longer, and the nights ever shorter. Perhaps one summer the siren will sound too early, around 9:00 in the evening.

But as she held the torch, as around her other small lamps and good old wax candles slowly began to light up - on balconies, on the bridge, on Mala Tepa and Kujundžiluk - Sunčana saw that the city had not yet given up. People were coming outside, not because it's safe, but because it's easier to breathe together. In the darkness, Mostar was learning how to be the city it used to be. The city, without electricity, was lit up from the inside.

Sunčana raised her torch higher, as if checking how much darkness could fit into one circle of light. The stone of the bridge was warm under her fingers, but it was not burning.

She remembered her grandfather telling her that the sun is not an enemy, but an exam. It doesn't matter how much it scorches - but how long you can keep up straight under him.

In the darkness, without the protection of technology, Mostar was breathing on its own for the first time in a long time, shallow, but still breathing.

If the night could survive without light, she thought, maybe we could survive the day.

And while she stood on the bridge, named after the sun, that changed everything, Sunčana realized – her name no longer meant warmth, but endurance.

THE CELESTIAL WELL

Sanela Piranić

Sarajevo

When things go wrong in life, you have two options: you will either accept the situation and face your problems, or you'll just take your mask off and suffocate in the nothingness.

Kaja was crouching beside the off-road vehicle, holding in her hand a fistful of dry sand that was slipping through her fingers. Through a dirty visor she gazed into the distance, towards the hazy peak of Vlašić. Just a few years ago, life seemed almost ideal. Her partner and her had two children: they taught them life and perseverance in this drier part of the land, completely in sync with the rest of the community. And then, one unfortunate circumstance - and suddenly you have three mouths that you must feed at any cost.

Everything that her generation and all subsequent ones had learned about the history of Bosnia and the Balkans now felt like a distant fairy tale. Stories about abundant rivers and dense vegetation seemed completely unreal. What her gaze now took in was nothing but wasteland and sand as far as the eye could see. Water has become the most important resource of the present day. And she had just applied for a job as a moisture harvester. She had no regrets; one simply had to endure.

Kaja was still in the prime of a middle-aged woman, with the pronounced physical capabilities of the life they led. Agile, resourceful, and fearless. When you have no one to keep pushing you into state bureaucracy, you accept the jobs that are offered. Enough money and enough freedom to survive, but not to lose your mind. "Wolves" were everywhere. They bite, they devour one another, they wound the soul. To remain human enough in today's society was an invaluable virtue, and such people she found only on the margins of life.

Izi was one of those people. He gave her a chance to survive and provide for her family. The former employer of her partner was now her boss. A great man of over a hundred kilograms in his early sixties. A former soldier, a loner, a leader of a kind that is rare today. He loved their two children and was a guest of his employees quite often. He saw every family as his own legacy. He strived for them to survive and grow into healthy individuals. He

believed in the human in people, despite the climate, which had drastically changed in the last fifty years, but also in the political situation. Politics was a whore all the same. Let someone else deal with it. Nobody would touch his people. He had his own rules, a large enough company, and resourceful and honest people in the field. Kaja had successfully passed training, and this was her first job off-road. It was the highest paying one.

“The money is up there, Kaja”, Izi said to her. “We’re going to catch the fog above Travnik”, he laughed at a joke that only he understood.

Travnik, once a vizier’s city, today was a wasteland. They stood on the edge of the ruins. To survive, people had retreated to heights. The most resourceful ones, like Izi, had bought plots on the plateaus in time and installed solar panels, dug their dwellings deep into the mountain to protect themselves from the heat of the Sun and ultraviolet radiation. Polypropylene moisture nets were set up around the farm. Fog passed through them; droplets gathered and trickled into pipes leading to reservoirs housed in the interior of Vlašić. During dry periods, such as the one currently upon them, they went to the Harvest. Their current goal was to reach Paljenik, where the density of moisture was now greatest, and harvest moisture manually.

“Listen to me all! Like every year, this job is the most lucrative, but also the most dangerous. Upon completion, I guarantee everyone a hundred water units as a bonus on top of their regular pay! The reward goes to you or your families. Make an effort to spend it together with them. Let’s go! May God be on our side! Hou-hou-hoouuuu!!!” The battle cry rang out.

“Hoouuuu!” Everyone yelled at the same time. From the force of voices and the roaring of motorcycles, the dry earth trembled.

The glass vizor served to observe the terrain and supply oxygen, but it also actively filtered the fine, dry sand that the air was oversaturated with. It was the main part of the helmet that was fixed to the suit – a complex bio-technical armor. On the outside it looked like hiking gear, but in its construction, it more closely resembled a lightweight space suit, designed to withstand abrasive sand and extreme moisture. The gloves were, besides the strong military boots, the most important tool. A highly sensitive, synthetically produced material allowed for handling screens, small screws, as well as sensing the tension in the moisture net. Over the suit, Kaja wore a coat, woven from wool and glazed with wax. On the left shoulder, in strong fluorescent red, the stamp of Izi’s company was imprinted.

Kaja walked with steady steps towards the converted military truck

with wide tracks and sat in the passenger seat. It resembled a ship more than a machine. The engines rumbled.

The road from Galica became steeper towards the top. For the last few kilometers, they were sailing in a field of white fog. Their frost catcher was equipped with vertical nets on the roof. The nets collected droplets of the dense Vlašić fog into precious liquid beneath the chassis. They moved blindly, with the help of echolocation and old markings left by their predecessors. The terrain was uneven, but they prepared their stomachs for this. Izi compared it to a restless sea, which was an abstract concept for the new generations, and a bedtime fairy tale told to children. Their restless sea was in the rocky terrain near Devečani. The mask could not be removed, at any cost. What came up, they pushed down by swallowing.

"If we stop here", Catcher's leader's voice could be heard, "The fog will eat us. We will become part of the mountain before the sun even tries to push through this layer."

Kaja looked through the window. She could make out the outlines of relay towers at the summit, which in the fog looked like enormous metal skeletons guarding the secret of Vlašić. She knew that up there, at the very top, the fog was not just a natural occurrence. It was the guardian of the most important resource currently on Earth.

Suddenly, the nets on the frost catcher began to vibrate, shaking the entire machine, and through the fog, a deafening low-frequency tone could be heard, tearing through the silence of Vlašić. Kaja pressed her palm against the window glass and recoiled it. The droplets caught on the net were not flowing like ordinary water. They pulsed with a bluish, phosphorescent light.

As they emerged onto the final ascent towards the very summit, the entire cabin of the vehicle was bathed in that ghostly, cold light. This was not an ordinary Vlašić fog. It was "Živa Rosa" - a rare atmospheric phenomenon that occurs only at altitudes above 1900 meters of sea level when ionized air collides with the rocks of Čavlovka.

"This is not just water", she whispered, observing how the reservoirs filled with a liquid that shines like a melted neon.

When they finally stopped in front of the metal towers on Paljenik, the fog around them became so thick that the headlights of the vehicle could barely be seen. But within that whiteness, the bluish glow from their nets revealed something incredible: the giant relay towers were not merely

transmitters. They were magnets. They attracted the fog from all of Bosnia, channeling it towards the peak of Vlašić, as if they were feeding something down there, in the depths of the mountain.

Kaja exited the vehicle. The snow under her feet was not white. It was enlaced with blue threads that flowed towards the foundation of the main tower. She stood there, paralyzed in the blue shine, and waited for Izi's directive.

"My friends, even after all these years, we come across something new. I can't say, with certainty, that this is the highlight of my life, but during all these years, I have never lived to see something like this!", Izi finally spoke. "Currently and truly, I have no idea what we have encountered. Be careful. 'Živa rosa' is a legend. Long ago, there used to be an old writing from a shepherd from Galica: who washes their face with 'Živa rosa' from Čavlovka, will see the world exactly as it was in the beginning and as it will be in the end."

"It is said that it does not quench the thirst of the body, but the thirst of the mind. One droplet on the tongue instantly reverts you to an event that you or your ancestors forgot. Also, 'Živa rosa' cannot be spilled. If you try that, it gathers into a perfect sphere and rolls back towards the source – towards the heart of the mountain". Mak's lecture sounded even more mystic.

"This is not a clean business. Only someone from the top could have set these relay towers in motion for this purpose. I, personally, think the past should be left to the past. Learn what can be learned and seek pleasures in the present. 'Živa rosa' is the drug of the present age. Do you agree with me?" Izi shouted.

"I agree. The powerful have done enough to the ordinary world. They destroyed everything that was beautiful with their greed. Now they want to profit in this way from human misery. It has always been said that hungry eyes can never be fed. We are with you, Izi!" Kaja shouted.

"We're not gonna give them 'Živa rosa', the core of the mountain. As long as we're here, there will be water for the people but not for the greedy ones who are never satisfied, because they try to feed a void they themselves created. They have eyes hungry for the past, because they have destroyed the future!" Mak spoke up.

While Kaja's vizor light lit up the relay, she grabbed the valve. Turning it in the opposite direction, she felt a light vibration. 'Živa rosa' quickly went in that direction, back from the atmosphere and into the pipes that lead towards the heart of the mountain.

"The valves, turn the valves! To the maximum! Feed the mountain, our only source of life. The hungry eyes below will have to learn how to live in the desert they themselves created. Let's not give them these last drops gathered from all of Bosnia!" Kaja yelled. As though in a trance, she remembered her grandfather. He would always tell her that the fog on Vlašić does not hide the way but keeps secrets of those who know how to listen.

"Run away, people! This is going to blow!" Izi shouted.

The machinery groaned. Everyone gasped up, and the trucks began moving at great speeds. Behind them, a large explosion was heard, which broke through the air like the biggest thunder, lit up with blue light. Not long after that, the moisture gathering nets on the truck vibrated in a well-known vibration. "It's time, Kaja!", she heard a dear voice in her subconscious. Smiling with the corner of her lips, she gave a signal to her colleague to stop the truck.

"Here is going to be a very good place to harvest moisture."

„Ovdje će biti sasvim dobro mjesto za žetvu vlage.“

As one, all the harvesters stopped, threw their backpack-nets connected by pipes to the truck over their shoulders, and went out into the picking. The silence was deafening, broken up only by the metal "clack-clack" of instruments. The first drops of condensed water began sliding down the collector. Everyone stared at the sensors, not believing their eyes.

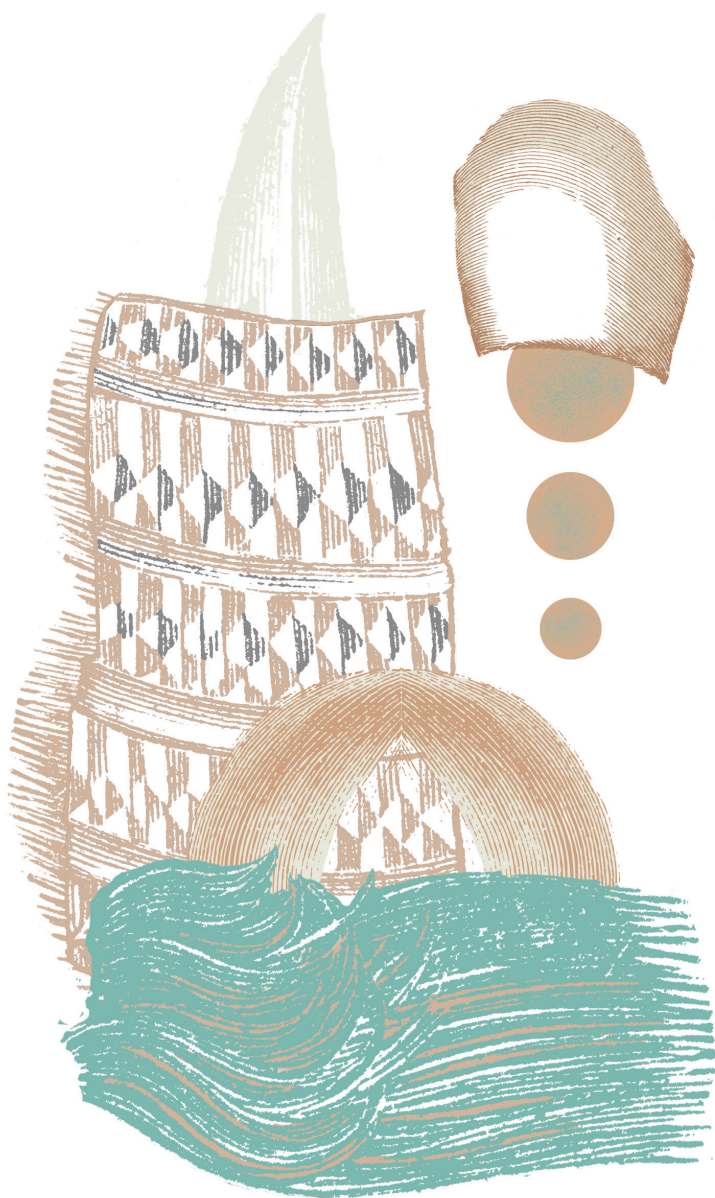
- PH value: perfectly neutral.

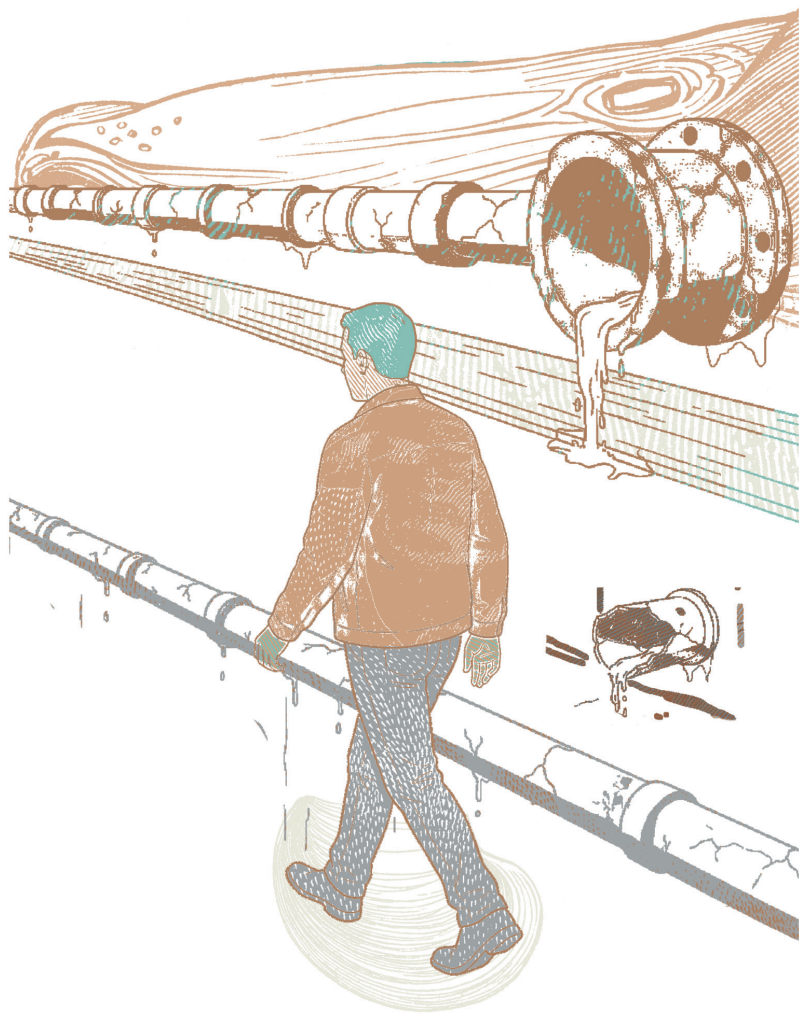
- Conductivity: beyond all known parameters.

Even in this fog, the container was lightly shining a blueish light. Kaja looked through the misty half-darkness at the distant lights of present-day Travnik. She would not get rich from this work, but she and her family would survive. Down there, water was merely a commodity. Up here, it was a gift.

"The fog doesn't take", she whispered, "the fog just keeps what we weren't ready to see."

With melancholy she repeated Izi's motto which, as if only now, had reached her and only now did she truly understand: "Here we draw water from the celestial well. Here we learn how not to thirst for what we do not need!"







ROT



Anes Batilović
Podgorica

Whenever the southern wind blows, the wind brings me the smell of bird carcasses and burning tires onto the balcony. There is a lot more of it now that the sun sets later, and the unbearable heat in early spring already begins to heat up the city. Then my whole neighborhood seems as if it will turn into a liquid mixture and collapse into its own waterless rot.

Only in the evening does it become easier, because the skin burns less. Sometimes lying down in bedding soaked with water helps, but I do that reluctantly since the city has running water only at night, under low pressure. During the day, water supplies the infrastructure of the Green Center, about which I know only that, for a few hundred Euros per night, you can spend time with an AI girl. With contempt, I dismissed even the very thought that something like that would appear, despite the announcements, until the mayor appeared on TV with the prime minister and announced the project as a capital investment that would bring tourists to the city and a significant increase in revenue at the municipal level. In time, from the income, we would have constant access to water. I was more worried about some bacterial disease in the soil, but we were being assured that the clusters were too small for the situation to get too far out of hand.

Then female silhouettes, scents, the textures of silky wigs and glassy gazes covered all the billboards, screens, and city-light advertisements in the city.

Since I got divorced, I have lived quite a boring life. I would like to fall in love and once again feel all the illusoriness of that experience, but for a long time now I haven't even thought about someone new in my life. I know that I would enjoy the warmth in my belly while, at the beginning of a relationship, we get to know each other, and probably also all the other crazy thoughts I would skillfully attach to some woman. Then, inevitably, the moment will come when we strip ourselves bare. We will have expectations of each other, and expectations always end either in disappointment or in the sweet taste of superiority. Someone always must defend themselves there, and expectations always reveal the best who must do this.

I am no longer young. That's why I don't think I could just start building something from scratch, even though in the end, a place of belonging might be waiting for me. I no longer know where I belong, therefore I doubt that I would, in the end, find inner peace. I am too old to go through the same, but I am too lonely to not try. The loneliness in me has long been gaping open. It rings when I open my mouth to say something soft, and it slips through my fingers like water, which I now dream of more often than sweaty summer embraces at night. Maybe the modern person doesn't even need to belong, but rather, in friction with someone else, should always try only as much as it is necessary to become aware of their own needs and give only what they will not later need themselves.

I have spent my entire life in this city. I bought the apartment I live in almost ten years ago, exactly one month after my thirtieth birthday, because it's located on the south side of the city and it always has enough sun. I spent the first year absorbing the calmness of mornings. Later on, there were two of us. The mornings slipped into days. We walked along the river not far from the building, while fresh air ran down our flared nostrils like cold milk, and then we often had lunch in the greenery, right where the Green Center is now, and we debated who would wake up first. When I got divorced, there were only empty water supply pipes in the riverbed. The air now smells of bacteria as they eat away at dead pigeons, and the fruit tastes like modeling clay. Two months ago, while biting off a piece of peach, I chipped off a piece of my premolar. Then loneliness gained at least another inch in my chest through the cavity in my tooth.

While my legs hang over the edge of the terrace beneath the railing, I stare blankly at the Green City, which at night is all purple neon, and for the first time I consider, out of pure curiosity, spending a few days there.

Through the open door of the balcony, the evening news is pouring in from the TV. I always listen to it, often reluctantly, mostly just to gauge what is happening in the country and if there are any newly contagious people in my area.

"Today, thirty-six cases of infection with the new bacterium have been reported. The latest findings indicate that the infection spreads in a manner similar to Legionnaires' disease. Although there are mechanisms of transmission from person to person, the greatest risk comes from buildings without natural ventilation and places with contaminated stagnant water. Epidemiologists warn about the danger of improper storage of water for household use and appeal for regular ventilation and avoiding the use of air

conditioners, as well as emphasizing the importance of purchasing bottled water due to limited access to tap water. They further emphasize that the bacterium is resistant to almost all antibiotics, and therefore the outcome of any infection is uncertain”, I listened carefully, feeling my chest suddenly relieved, because I am still safe.

I realize that in my chest there is still, besides emptiness, room for fear. I try to comfort myself by thinking that this is a good thing, because it makes me feel alive.

I fell asleep shortly afterward, dazed by the summer heat, with all the windows open.

I got up abruptly the next morning, after I woke up drenched in sweat and chugged down almost an entire jug of water. Then, as if for discipline, a feeling of guilt struck me in my ears. I shuddered to shake off the unpleasant sting of guilt because I was flaunting water that was already in short supply, and I went for a walk before the *very hot* Saturday morning turned into an *unbearably hot day* without water.

The city is a completely living and self-sustaining organism. I repeat the same sentence like a mantra, as if the city, unusually empty because people flee from one another, will come back to life and turn green again, while the dry air drives me through the streets with only the occasional passerby. We flee from one another because we don't know what words we would use; our tongues stuck to the bottoms of our mouths, enduring until evening. Saturday morning used to be my favorite time of the week. And it still is, even though the city looks like a dried piece of meat, gnawed by creeping weeds that have started climbing up the buildings, searching for every crack to seal and remain in the concrete forever.

I understand how absurd and pathetic it is to contemplate selfishness from school reading lists. The numbed tissue of the place where I grew up endured different human intentions for decades before it began to collapse from within. I tried to remember whether I ever contributed to it, while my feet sunk into the softened asphalt, pushing the rubbery, dusty smell of tar deep into my sinuses. Surely I have, I accepted the claim I've offered myself with a certain degree of shame, even though I couldn't remember exactly when my unfortunate decision sucked out the drinking water and poured it into a place where they, just as lonely as I am, try to find at least something resembling human tenderness for a moment, in dense algorithms. *It wasn't always like this*, I told myself again, *but you can't do anything about it now*, I continued, *except maybe to die from the bacterium because you almost have*

nothing to wash your hands with. Once, a friend of mine, just when the authorities announced that a water shortage was coming, told me that this was an opportunity to force ourselves into asceticism and to try and find meaning in something that would transcend human physiology. I laughed at that, smoothly but a little bit bitterly, continuing along the sidewalk down the tram tracks past car washes with a sign hanging on them reading *CLOSED UNTIL 10 PM*. This was, perhaps, the best city's harbinger of a water shortage. It was not my thirst, nor the rotten smell of air constantly circling above our heads, nor the dry sewage pipes that, through the manhole, revealed how good the citizens' digestion was. Car washes are there to remind us how the planet is slapping us around. When it has to.

My hard-to-accept irritability suddenly dispersed in my mind with the ringing of my mobile phone. I would thank God for the fact that I hadn't cursed him last night after I had thoroughly sniffed myself before going to bed.

"Hey, where are you?" My best friend spoke, sounding a bit strangled.

"I'm here, taking a walk, and then I will have breakfast when I come home. What are you up to?"

"I am waiting for test results for this bacterium. Since the day before yesterday, I've been having very weird symptoms and a temperature."

"How do you feel?"

"My, I'm fine. I'm quite weak, but it's a bacterium, just like any other. A little bit of antibiotics and I'll be good as new. I guess. But I wanted to tell you that because of this shit, I won't be able to come to the Green Center. I already paid for three nights, and I feel bad for it to go to waste. Why don't you go? Just let the reception know."

"No way! Are you out of your mind?! Because of that monster we only get water by the spoonful from ten at night, and you were planning to go hang out with holograms?!"

"They're not holograms. They're algorithms. It doesn't matter, if you don't want some girl to flatter you a bit, I'll ask someone else. You really don't know how to live."

An inexplicable wave of curiosity washed over me out of nowhere.

"Hold on, hold on. If you have already paid for everything, let me use it then. In any case, we already fucked up everything around us enough."

"Great, you can go tonight. I will forward you the confirmation of the reservation by email. I'm going to go now, I'm literally shaking from the fe-

ver”, he said, and hung up the phone.

Heading towards the Green Center, I realized I had not asked him if he needed anything. Maybe I will see him for the last time. *He'll get in touch*; I once again shut off the uncomfortable feeling with something acceptable, shyly looking forward to contacting. I never got ready so fast to go somewhere.

Registration, house rules, and all the other formal nonsense went by easily. I stepped straight out of the elevator into the room, almost completely empty, with a single bed without light and a huge lit screen from which a pretty brunette greeted me, exactly in line with the preferences from the questionnaire at the reception.

“Good evening. I am Maya. Your Maya.” She sent me a seductive kiss from the screen, seated on a leather sofa.

“Good evening, Maya. Please tell me about the epidemiologic situation first, and then we will move on to getting to know each other.” I am completely incompetent at flirting. I realized this through divorce later.

Maya's eyes flashed for a few seconds and then, in front of her, numerous graphs appeared with red numbers. The number of infected ones had grown.

“But don't worry”, she tried to convince me, “this is your safe place.”

I remained silent, not because I didn't have anything to say, but because, encompassed by the loneliness of the city outside, torn up in the built up dust and without a droplet of water to wash it off, I realized how I was also personally participating in the fact that someone outside was dropping to their knees dehydrated, while mothers in my building were pouring dirty water from one container to the other so that they could wash their clothes and sheets.

“I feel bad about being here. My friend most likely has this new bacterium, which is resistant to antibiotics, and here I am, trying to get horny for a virtual doll.”

“That's OK. You're in survival mode. This is not your fault. If you want, I can describe what I would do.”

I quietly answered yes, trying to call room service and order a bottle of water. Maya dropped the call. It seemed to me as though her eyes were shining differently.

“I can see what you're trying to do. The Green Center doesn't have water for guests. The confirmation said you were required to bring it yourself.

But let's get back to us. So, first I would take your shirt off, like this", she whispered while taking off hers, which I watched without blinking, already significantly more relaxed about what is about to follow, even though I was too thirsty and confused.

I followed her skilled movements, like a dance, momentarily forgetting the world outside, aware that I *might* leave this place. Weakness spread through my body; I didn't know whether it was thirst, desire, or perhaps infection. I closed my eyes, letting Maya's husky voice soothe me. I needed it especially now, because my friend was on my mind again; my mouth was drier than my palms, and in my head the city kept looping endlessly, exalted and colorful, full of pleasant scents of nature wrapped around residential districts, knowing that it no longer existed as such. My friend was trying to return to my thoughts. I pushed him out of my head again, like back then when I was walking, as if it were a bad wish. The air was getting hotter and hotter. Maya's voice was getting softer, completely disabling me for anything except mechanically grabbing myself by the crotch and trying to imagine her stepping out of the screen.

I licked my lips and, with a cold calm, felt my muscles aching more and more, and in dizzy fractures of consciousness, I heard Maya's moaning in the distance mixed with hurried footsteps and technicians' voices like *saturation 78, this one's fucked if antibiotics don't help*, and then again *we don't even have water to cool him down*, while blows in my chest drowned everything out, followed by violent coughing, no peace, no city, thirsty but only now completely certain that I will wake up one day and maybe finally manage to put together a list of things I lost somewhere along the way.

DOG DAYS

Bojana Uskoković

Podgorica

In the city that once lay on the now-dried-up bank of the Morača River, on “October Revolution” Street, for which no one understands how it managed to keep the name of a historical event that no one remembers anymore, a black skyscraper gaped in the dense darkness.

In apartment number one hundred and six, someone couldn’t sleep. She sat and, for the third time in a row, wiped the table of the heavy sweat that made her hands stick to the modern marble surface. Her hair was the color of the dark night, the same one that engulfed the city, sticking to her neck. She gave up on the attempt to tie a neat bun again. The one with which her neck could breathe. Just like her bun, she had given up on many other things that enabled her “air”.

It had been six months in a row that she didn’t have any electricity at night.

In her city, there were no heroes. There was no system they needed to fight against, because the culprits were all of them, together. There were no protests, no news. There was no electricity, only darkness and water that was receding.

The darkness had silenced the neighbor from the third floor. The darkness had silenced the bus station in her neighborhood and the unbearable traffic noise that could be heard from there. The darkness had sneaked into people’s lives.

Only the stench cut through the thick summer air, just as the noise once tore through her sleep. No one remembered the wind, but that stench of her city, which once lay “bathed” on the rivers, spread relentlessly, as if carried by the wind, reaching every apartment in the skyscraper where she lived.

All of that, nobody remembered at that moment. Her future was nowhere to be seen in collective thought.

People knew about war and conflict, but not about thirst. People knew about floods, but not about this drought. People knew about arguments, but not about life without wind.

Perhaps this is why everyone talked under their voices in conversation.

A panicked knocking on her door interrupted the train of her thoughts.

With cracked lips and dry eyes from severe dehydration, the neighbor from the second floor stood in front of her, holding a baby in her arms that had been crying nonstop for the past hour.

She said that today, when water was being distributed in the city, she wasn't able to get what was due to her. The baby was hungry, and she didn't know what to do. She was begging for help, for a little water.

Without a moment's hesitation, the girl from apartment number 106 pulled out a half-empty canister that stood alone in the corner of the room. It was the only place in the apartment where the sun didn't reach. The two women, accustomed to thirst and darkness, walked blindly through the building's hallway, whose corners and staircase they had memorized in the map of their memory.

She may have been a prisoner of drought and darkness, but not of this building. She thought.

She decided to come down in front of the building, where the quiet murmur of her neighbors could be heard.

Some had taken out their chairs, and some were just standing. She was not alone in her insomnia, in fact, she was in the majority. She felt a slight relief. The darkness, in which she once could only sleep, had now slyly stolen her sleep. The fact that she was not the only one made the difficult situation easier.

An uneasy closeness could be felt in the air. People were mostly unaccustomed to it.

That's how it is when nature teaches you a lesson, she thought. No one was hypnotically staring at the blue light of their screen anymore. Now, terrified, they were looking into each other's eyes. Eyes that were longing for water.

She was drawn into the conversation quickly.

"Neighbor, can't you sleep as well? Did you hear the information on the news today that our river officially lost its status as a river? It's now a swamp. Only dead fish float in the water. They are cooked. My wife is afraid. What can you do? We must learn how to live... Sit with us, we're just deciding who will bring a candle next night. Will you take part, at least so we can see each other's eyes..."

On one side, the neighbor was speaking quietly under his breath, with-

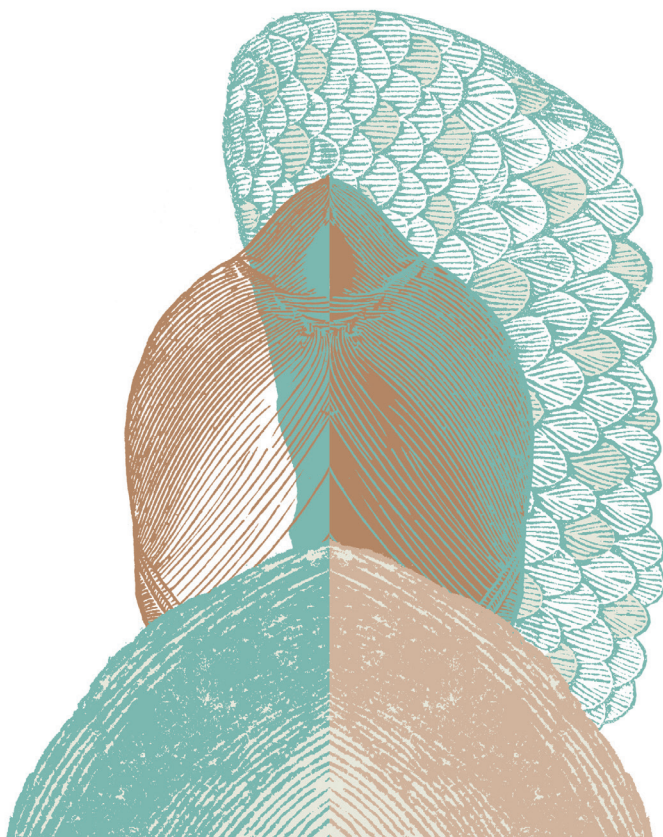
out pause or a moment in which she could say anything. On the other hand, children shouting and laughter could be heard.

The older ones were afraid, children did not know fear, or they did not know that their future, just like hers, did not exist in the collective past of this humanity.

From her deep pocket, silently and without words, she pulled out a half-melted candle and lit it for the first time after six months of darkness. A weak initial flame lit up her face.

A spark settled in her pupils.

A quiet rebellion against the darkness that had stolen her sleep began right at that moment.



DOOMSDAY

Marija Katić

Solin

Amid a karst plain

Stone wall I

dry stone wall, a humble hut

a trough for thirsty cattle

olive, fig, vine

Stone wall II

concrete wall, a villa

a pool for unruly beasts

palm, Buddha, cocktail

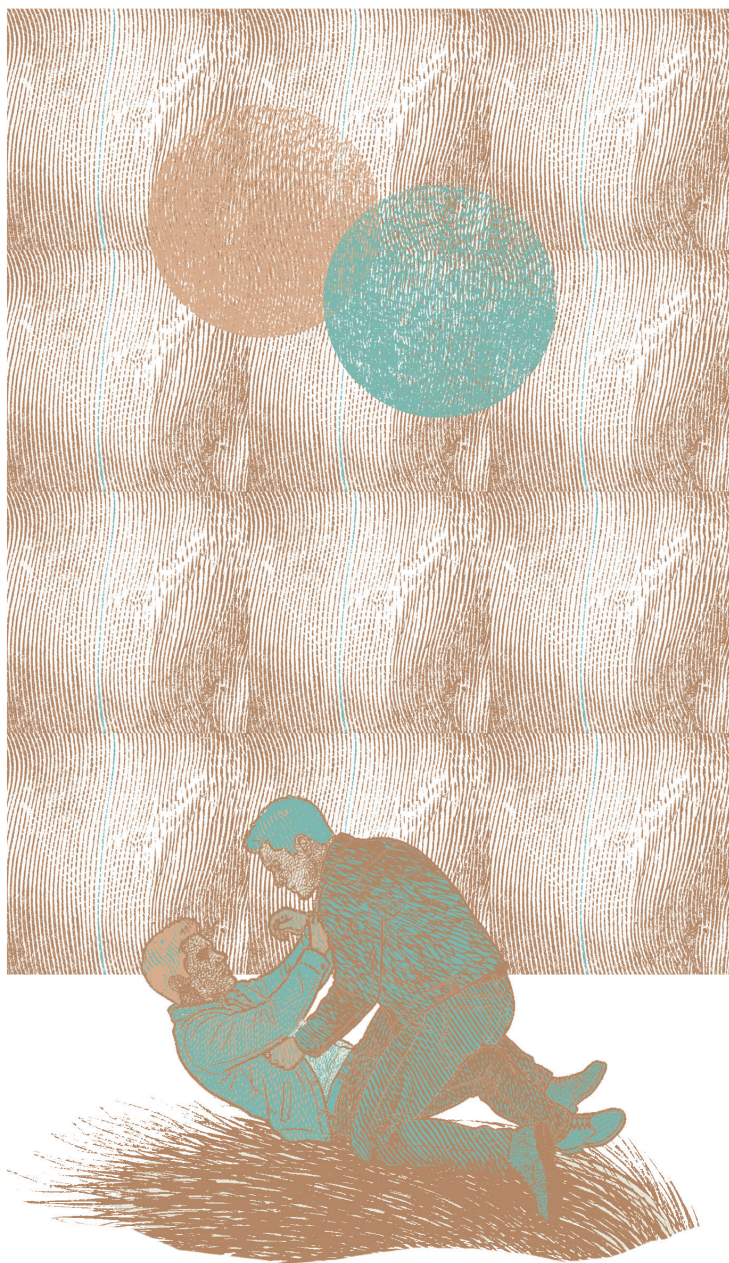
Stone wall III

maquis, fire

infernal summers

water, water, water







THE LAST PATROL



Miloš Stijepić

Banja Luka

The August sun is at its zenith, indifferently scorching everything beneath it. The monotony of the barren and dry hills of the Banja Luka district is sporadically broken by ancient ruins peering out from sandy deposits, scattered, without any order, across the hills and around them. A desert wind hums as it breaks against the devastated walls, slowly but relentlessly burying them in oblivion.

On one hill, attention was drawn to a structure made of a small cargo container with a military tarpaulin stretched over it, which on one side formed a kind of awning. Under the awning, there was a wobbly table and two chairs. From the structure, banging and juicy cursing could be heard. The door flew open and through them, a limp, semi-bald old man with a thin beard that covered half of his neck. He wheezingly coughed and then dropped down into the chair near the door, breathing heavily and scratching his sluggish stomach. Soon after, another man dragged himself along. He seemed younger than the first one, but his drained face and hunched demeanor made it more difficult to tell his age. He carried an almost empty bottle of water and a chipped glass. He sat on the other chair and poured the glass half-full. He drank the water eagerly, refilled it and handed it to the first man, who drank it absentmindedly. Without any words, they observed the landscape that unfolded in front of them.

"They're late, it's noon," said the drained one, observing the shadow of a nearby cactus and scratching his neck with concern.

"Take it easy, perhaps they were delayed," the old man slowly responded. "In any case, it's not set in stone when they're supposed to pass through." He ended.

"How much do we have left, four liters of water?" The drained one asked.

"Almost six", the old man responded. Actually, they were left with less than four liters, but he did not have the willpower to listen to whining.

The drained one responded with mumbling, after which they proceeded to observe their surroundings in silence.

About one hour passed. The air became hotter. Just as the two of them

were contemplating on going back inside the container and resting in the basement, they heard the rumbling of motorcycles in the distance. They pulled out a couple of metal receptacles from the container and proceeded to stand in the shade at the end of the awning. After about ten minutes, an armored reconnaissance vehicle pulled up in front of them, which the EUFOR soldiers affectionately called “the Badger.” A head with a helmet peeked out of the roof hatch, observed the two men, the container and the receptacles, then proceeded to confusingly retreat into the vehicle. Shortly after, the back side of the vehicle opened, and six soldiers exited, in light, desert uniforms. One of them, with a sergeant’s insignia on his lapel, stepped forward and approached our heroes.

“Sergeant Erik Frauenschläger, but ‘mister Sergeant’ will suffice.” He said and stopped, expecting their names.

“Marko, mister Sergeant”. The old man said.

“Safet, mister Sergeant”. The drained one said.

“Misters, we will make use of your shade, with permission.” The sergeant said, with a tone that implied that no permission is being requested. Marko and Safet mumbled their consent with servility, showing them towards the container. The Sergeant made himself comfortable in one of the chairs, rolling out a military map across the table, while his soldiers gathered around him. He then proceeded to study the map, silently frowning.

“Mister Sergeant, what happened with your previous Meyer?” Safet asked.

“He died from typhus.” Erik responded, keeping his eyes peeled towards the map.

“Such a shame for such a young man, we went along quite well with him.” Marko silently intruded, sniffing.

“Is that so?” Erik responded half-interestedly, not removing his eyes from the map. “He did not speak your language, as far as I know.”

“That’s why we went along well.” Safet said, which Marko supported by sadly nodding his head.

The Sergeant continued to look at the map, taking measurements and notes into his notebook. After a minute, he turned to the two of them.

“This is Hill 202, formerly known as 34 Dimitrije Ljotić Street?” he asked them.

“Yes, mister Sergeant.” Marko responded. “It stretches between the rem-

nants of the ruins down this side all the way to the riverbed of the Vrbas.”

“Riverbed?” The Sergeant asked, confused, taking another look at the map. “There is no river here...”

“There is none in the riverbed either.” Safet continued, “but nostalgia is a wonder, what can you do.”

“About ten kilometers to the east is the military base of Lockheed Martin, is it not?”

“Not anymore, mister Sergeant. A few months ago, they packed up and fled away.” Marko responded.

“Do you maybe know where?”

“Just that they moved towards the East.” Safet said.

The Sergeant took something short down in his notebook and gave the soldiers a sign to move.

“We won’t be keeping you any longer. A good rest of your day to you.” He said to the hosts and followed his own to the vehicle. Safet and Marko exchanged alarming looks.

“Hey! Er, mister Sergeant...” Marko began, stepping towards the Sergeant who was already entering the vehicle. The Sergeant turned towards him, and he continued: “Sergeant Meyer used to pass us some water every time he visited, you know.”

“Where did you get the idea that a reconnaissance patrol has water to spare?” The sergeant asked, mildly surprised.

“Think of it as more of a gesture of goodwill to continue cooperation.” Marko said.

The Sergeant straightened up and turned towards them. His hard, military face didn’t give any signs of emotion.

“There is no need for further cooperation. The enemy base in the East does not exist anymore, and this region is already unpopulated enough to not warrant further patrolling. This is the last patrol. Regarding water, this is all that we can give.” He said, lowering down a small canister in front of them.

Marko and Safet kept looking at the canister, and then back at the Sergeant, in disbelief. Marko grew mad.

“Well, this is enough for a few days, perhaps ten if we decide to die of thirst slowly! What are we supposed to do with five liters of water?!” He began yelling, in despair.

The barrel of the cannon on the “Badger” silently swiveled and aimed at Marko’s chest, and his outburst deflated faster than it had flared up. The Sergeant looked at him condescendingly.

“EUFOR is not a humanitarian institution. The UN’s private base is four days of walking towards the North. Taking into account what we gifted you, you have enough water for the trip. I would recommend you start off as soon as the sun goes down; you don’t have a lot of time. And yes, I hope you aren’t afraid of needles.” He devilishly grinned along with his last sentence, then proceeded to enter the “Badger”. The door closed and the vehicle was on its way.

“Those horrid motherfuckers.” Safet said, shakingly.

“I hope they die terrible deaths.” Marko tiredly agreed.

Without saying a word anymore, they entered the container where they left the water, passed by an improvised toilet which was located right next to the entrance, and then lowered themselves into the basement. It was barely large enough to fit two dirty cots, a desk and a worn armchair behind it. They had long since grown accustomed to the smell of damp and filth, so without a word they each flopped down onto their own cot. Observing the mold on the ceiling was their favorite pastime lately, and since they had nothing to do until dark, they dutifully gave themselves over to that amusement.

They would often see appearances from old times in the moldy stains, so they would tell each other what they see and talk about it. Once, Marko saw King Tvrtko on the ceiling, which led to him and Safet getting into a fistfight after a heated discussion, after which they did not speak for ten days. To be quite honest, such incidents were rare. If someone does happen to see something touchy and sensitive in the stains, well, it can indeed be kept to oneself.

Such as it is, their day passed napping and occasionally going to the toilet. When dark fell, they left the hatch of the entrance to the basement open, so that something resembling air could enter the stale chamber. They folded up the awning, and they brought in the rats that were drying in the sun, so that something didn’t end up taking them away. Subsequently, they took the heavy toilet from the container and carried it outside. After they completed everything, they sat in the chairs next to the entrance and frowningly observed the devastated landscape.

“I don’t feel like going hunting tonight.” Safet said.

"Me neither." Marko said, wheezingly. "The Kraut seriously fucked us up."

"You're still thinking about that?" Safet asked.

"And what else? With Meyer, there was an order. We could be here forever. This one fucked us over good." Marko spat out.

"Indeed. That's why I thought perhaps it's best to use the night and get a good night's rest, and then to see what we're going to do tomorrow." Safet suggested.

"You speak well. To get a good night's sleep, and to see tomorrow with a clear head." Marko agreed. They sat in silence for a short while, then proceeded to go to the basement. It didn't take them long to drift into sleep.

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Sometime during the night, Marko was awoken by a cough. He straightened up in his cot and held on for dear life while the piercing cough teared at his lungs, stomach and head. When the attack passed, he could not hear the usual sleepy snoring from Safet's side. He slowly arose and observed the other cot. Empty. He climbed up the steps, pulled a full white canister out of a pile of junk and carried it outside. He sat down in the chair, filled a glass, and stretched out his legs.

He observed the moon for a while, moistening his lips with water occasionally. After an hour, he saw someone jolt out of the bend and approach him with haste. Marko straightened up with expectation, continuing to observe. When this person was close enough, he could make out Safet, carrying the EUFOR canister in his hand. Marko could see his face was deranged from anger, so he began to laugh.

"I will kill you, you dog!" Safet yelled, throwing the canister at Marko so strongly that Marko keeled over, sprayed up. Based on the smell, taste and color, any average chemistry teacher that would have found themselves there by accident could, without a doubt, confirm that the liquid in the canister was urine. Most likely human. Marko's smile was wiped off his face. He rose up and scrunched his nose, looking at his wet rags.

"Fuck it, you could have at least closed it. Ugh, it stinks..." he said disgustedly, while he was taking the clothes off him.

"Take a gulp, the taste will have you amazed." Safet responded, with poison in his tone, going around Marko and the puddle around him, searching

for something to freshen himself up with on the table. He opened the white canister and mistrustingly looked inside. Sighing from relief, he poured himself a full glass and gulped it down with desire. His bliss lasted for only a moment. His face deformed from terror. Safet coughed up, grabbing himself by the throat and collapsing to his knees, coughing. A few steps away from him, Marko had just finished spreading his clothes to dry across the sand. He went into the container, going around lying Safet, who was shakily fighting for his breath. He re-appeared a moment later, carrying dry clothes, and proceeded to sit.

"Wha... What is this, for fuck's sake?" Safet muttered, weakly leaning on the table and slowly getting to his feet.

"Stale mineral water with artificial banana flavoring, served at room temperature." Marko replied, then tilted the glass and carefully moistened his lips, making sure not a single drop entered his mouth.

Safet dropped down into the chair and stared in front of him, in a haze. They were both silent, with each to their own thoughts. The silence was broken by the awakened life around them. Everything that was still during the day was now hastily leaving its shelters. Under the light of the full moon, the low ruins resembled the remains of some ancient skeleton, half-dug up, which gave the entire landscape an eerie nuance.

"I don't know... I wouldn't do that even to my enemy." The silence was broken by Safet, who was still coming to his senses. "Kraut monsters. Devils."

"Fuck their morning dew." Marko agreed. "Until the last drop."

"Is it really possible that they deliberately lugged that around with them, just to pawn it off on us?"

"Anything can be expected from garbage." Marko said, then spat bitterly in front of him. "But never mind, theirs won't burn till dawn either. Their state will collapse too, and then it'll be our turn to gloat!" "Of course, I've heard that things have been seriously shaking up there with them too for years now. They're not the power they once were either." Safet added.

"Like they once were..." Marko repeated sadly. "Eh, the stories say that during Tito, not every scumbag could raise its leg at us, like today."

"Of course, it was a real country. There was water, forests, and everything. Factories were built, the people went to school, we were a force." Safet confirmed.

"We had an army, the Krauts trembled before it."

They sat like that for about ten minutes, looking at the moon, talking and remembering ancient tales.

"The only thing is they gave you lot a little too much compared to the others, that's what I've heard. Not saying they shouldn't give to everyone, but distribute it fairly." Marko said all of a sudden.

"Aha, distribute it fairly, while Zagreb and Belgrade fill their pockets to overflow, and then whatever scraps are left trickle down to us, is that what you meant? If so, well it really is nicely distributed. Truly, indeed." Safet shot back at him curtly.

"What are you on about, man, did they not build you industry, countless mines, ironworks..." Marko began listing.

"Yeah, for us to break our backs and choke, and then you lot skim the fat, and then on top of all that toil the Slovenes come and screw us all over together! You got screwed just once; we got screwed twice! At least!" Safet flared up.

"You got screwed more? If anyone was ridden and exploited here, it would be us! And who rode us? All of you, with the help of your foreign masters, of course!" Marko flew into a rage.

"Byzantine primitives!"

"Kraut stable hand!"

"I'll give you now..."

*

The moon is high in the sky, indifferently illuminating below it two male figures slapping each other and raising an almighty racket. The monotony of the barren and dry hills of the Banja Luka district is sporadically broken by ancient ruins peering out from sandy deposits, scattered without any particular order across the hills and around them. The night wind whispers icily, rapidly cooling the crumbled walls, slowly but relentlessly crumbling them into oblivion.

MY DIARY 20th of March 2086.

Petra Gavrić

Podgorica

I woke up with the reflection of a bloody moon in drowsy eyes. I inhaled. The alarm hadn't woken me up in time, the battery was empty again. The power must have been cut out during the night. I stretched and hurriedly headed toward the kitchen to check the daily forecast. The maximum temperature will reach 48 degrees; it will be somewhat cooler than yesterday. The lowest night temperature – 31 degrees. Now, at 04:30, it is 38 degrees. I skipped the list of risks; I knew them by heart. Dehydration, sun, smog, typical.

School was about to begin in an hour. I quickly showered. I did not wash my hair because I saw that we didn't have enough water for this month. It doesn't matter; I'll pull through a few more days.

I ignored my grandma's willingness to talk. Yet again, she spoke about bees and some other unusual insects. She was quite insane, but my mother didn't like it when I mentioned that... despite the truth. She kept talking about time "before". About plants or was it fruit... they were called strawberries. No, little strawberries. Something like that. I grabbed my mask from the commode and ran out of the house.

I arrived at school on time. The lecture was not interesting. We talked about today's historical events. The professor did not manage to keep our attention because her lecture was constantly interrupted by coughing spells. During the third class, some new students arrived, migrants from Venice. That city bore the most due to climate change. People's lives have been suspended there. At 10:30, class finally ended. I was going back home with Maya, who almost cut her hair bald. This is how she will bear the heat better. When I felt droplets of sweat on my neck, I thought that might not be such a bad idea.

The sirens began their irritating song around 10:50. Every note vibrated in the heavy, stifling air. My mask was falling off of my face. It was crowded. It was like this every day. They were reminding people of the curfew from 11am to 6pm. We all knew this, even without warning. Only those with suicidal thoughts will break it.

My stomach was growling loudly when I arrived home, but the kitchen was quiet and empty. Grandma didn't cook anything, she just continued talking about animals from her period. It's too bad I can't eat words. I didn't feel like listening, but I directed empty smiles at her. There was some protein and a puree of fish and carrots in the fridge. It wasn't a real fish but some synthetic imitation. I had never seen a real fish in person, but my mother told me that they were very interesting beings. They could breathe in water! How cool. Recently, I truly started loving carrots. Maya says I just got used to it, but I really like it. It's much better than spinach puree and cloned fish.

"Is there water, my love?"

I nodded my head.

"Not for hair, but you can take a shower."

She laughed slightly.

"And why are you late?" I asked.

She exhaled.

"You know why. They were protesting in front of the company again."

"Aha."

I did not feel the need to continue the conversation. Why would I ask questions? I could assume the answers myself already.

"And grandma? How is she?"

I shrugged.

"She started up her own story again. Come on, show her those pictures, it calmed her down last time."

She nodded, but like she wasn't there. Her eyes diverged towards the window and the thin curtains that were covering it.

"Did I tell you about the last snow I remember?"

"Yes, maybe about a thousand times."

She laughed.

"It's still the most beautiful day I remember when I was little." She drifted away with her thoughts for a few moments.

"Be careful with grandma, my love. We don't know what it's like for her. This is not the land she remembers."

For the next few hours, I drew and worked on my homework. I wanted to call Maya and ask her when the test was, but yet again, there was no elec-

tricity for a few hours. The evening had already befallen upon us when I noticed that grandma was not in the living room. Mother had gone shopping; the heat had died down a little bit. I went out onto the balcony, with a mandatory mask over my face. Grandma was sitting in her wooden chair. That wood, saved in the shape of a chair, was older than the rules that banned tree cutting many years ago.

Her tiny blue eyes were looking at the muddy sky.

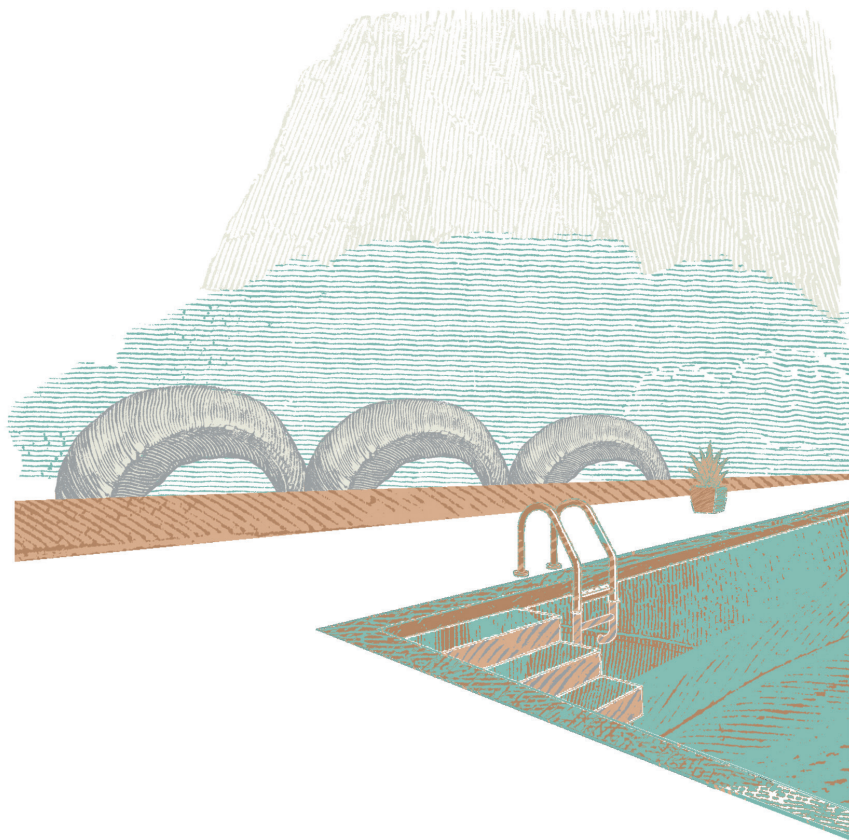
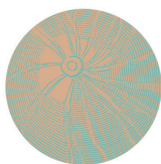
“There are no stars.” She said, with a voice that could barely be heard. She was not wearing a mask.

“No, there are none.” I replied. You could see the stars before; mother told me about them.

“Will they come back?”

“They will.” I said, even though I did not believe in it myself. We all prefer lies that encourage us to truths that bring us down. Grandma belongs to the generation that often repeated that hope dies last.







THE POOL



Rebecca Duras

Niš

This house needed a pool. That's what the woman from the agency said.

"Tourists want a pool, especially if you don't have any other content in the vicinity."

"But the sea is 10 kilometers from them!"

"I'm just telling you like it is, mister Antonio. If you want guests, you need to make a pool."

There were 5 residents left in the village and 4 holiday homes. Everyone else had pools and more guests.

The holiday house was Lovro's idea. He had given the money to renovate the house. "You will cover the costs more easily, dad" he said. "And you won't be alone, at least not during the summer."

But Lovro's money was gone. There was nothing left for maintaining the house, let alone for a pool. Barba Tone picked up the receiver of the landline without dialing a number. "Lovro, I don't know why I need that *cazzo* of a pool for," he said, trying to drown out the empty tone. "They only want me to throw my *soldi* away, eh. Those darn tourists! Never enough for them. They want air-conditioning, they want breakfast, they want *bičikleti* for rent, now they want a pool! Ča, so they can splash about naked under my window, like little pigs."

He hung up the receiver and went over to the old case where he kept his money - his pension and the payments from the tourist agency, which the postman regularly delivered to him in cash, because Barba Tone had never trusted banks. He counted the money, even though he didn't have to, because he knew, at every exact moment, how much money he had in the house.

It wasn't enough. It was too little to pay the bills for the old house, to fix the roof, and if he were to have the same number of guests he had last summer, it would be too little to pay Ivo to cut his firewood for the winter.

Barba Tone sat in front of the house and leaned his head into his hands.

"Since when do Jurić cry over some *furešti*?" A voice asked him from the backyard.

He raised his head and saw a man, shorter than average, in an unusual black suit.

"Who are you?" Tone switched to classical language, out of courtesy.

"Don't speak to me like I'm a *furešt*. I'm the one offering you help, that's all *ča* need to know."

Tone's mother used to tell him about some strange people who offered help without being asked. Once, his uncle and his companions were offered treasure, but when one of the villagers slipped one gold coin more than allowed into his pocket, they all found themselves lost on a hill- dazed, bewildered, and temporarily mute.

"Ki listens to me, doesn't go wrong", the man said, as though he were reading Tone's mind. "I heard you need a pool; I will create a pool for you and maintain it. Today, a pool is like gold, because tourists are worth gold."

"And *ča* will it cost me?"

"Keep the *šoldi* to yourself, don't give it to that woman from the agency. I don't need it."

Tone shook his head. "My mom always told me that it always costs something."

The man looked at him a little bit and then moved the rim of his hat so he could better see Tone's face. "You are the first of all the neighbors to ask *ča* it will cost you. I will ask you for nothing from your pocket. Only, you're not allowed to watch me work, you're not allowed to ask me where I got the water, and you're not allowed to look at the hill behind the house."

Tone looked at him. "Neighbors?"

"How do you think everyone has *šoldi* for pools? I created them, just you hadn't asked before."

Tone looked at the house. He promised Lovro he would maintain it. "Alright then, create that pool for me."

"When you wake up in the morning, it'll be there. Just don't go out of the house tonight." The little man extended his hand. It occurred to Tone that his mother had always told him never to make deals with people whose names he didn't know, but at that point, he felt it was already too late.

The next morning, Barba Tone woke up with the sun and opened his curtains. There, in his backyard, there was a pool, turquoise blue, surrounded by grey tiles.

Tone went into his backyard and looked at the little man, who was rub-

bing his hands with satisfaction. "But where's the walnut?" Tone asked. The walnut tree, that had been standing in his backyard since he had gotten married, had disappeared. No stump or roots could be seen, only smooth grass and the tiles of the pool.

"Perhaps *namisto* looking at *ča* you don't have, you should look at *ča* you do have. And thank me."

If one must make alliances with creatures whose names one does not know, Tone's mother used to say, one should thank them. They take offense if you do not. But Tone was staring, stunned, at the place where the tree had once been. "That's what Foška and I planted when I brought her home. It grew big, in no time. You could've shifted the pool a bit over here, it wouldn't have bothered anything."

The little man exhaled. "It's not for peasants, really. You can tell you know nothing about pools. The walnut's roots were deep, and the fruit and leaves would fall into the water. The canopy would make shade, and then it would be too cold for the tourists to enjoy. I did you a favor." The air around him started to crackle. Tone was getting light-headed.

Tone quickly bowed. "Thank you so much for the pool."

The little man acknowledged his gratitude with a slight nod of his head. "Don't forget – do not look at the hill."

"I don't look over there," Tone said firmly. He had even closed the shutters on that side of the house and warned the tourists not to open them. He told them it was because of the sun, so they wouldn't get too hot.

That hill did not exist for him.

The woman from the agency was ecstatic. "You made that just in time, mister Antonio! Easter is coming up and they've prognosed warm weather – I already found you guests!"

That Easter was really warm, and Barba Tone retired early to his garage, where he would usually be while he was renting the house to tourists. A group of Austrians was splashing their legs in the water. They had left him a 5-star review and one used condom behind the bed.

Tone's house was full every weekend in May. It was warm and sunny. The guests admired the beautiful weather and the perfect pool. The sun pressed down on the earth with its rays, suffocating the young leaves of the grapevine as they struggled to survive. There had been almost no rain the entire spring. Tone had no asparagus to pickle, only enough for a few omelets.

Tone didn't see the little man again, even though the water in the pool was fresher after every group of guests. He closed the shutters on that side of the house more tightly, just in case.

June was also warm and sunny, with only two days of light rain in the morning. And even on those days, the guests swam in the pool after the rain had passed. "Mr. Antonio, you are really successful with agritourism," the woman from the agency told him one day. "Guests only want to stay with you."

Barba Tone ignored her and looked at the sky. If rain doesn't fall, there will be no *agri* of agritourism."

"Ah well, the sun is good for the season, is it not?"

"For the season it is, but not for anything else." He muttered. He went back to his garage and slammed the door without saying goodbye.

That evening, the news reported on the tourist season. A record number of tourists was expected, especially in Istria, which had already surpassed its records in June. The forecast showed no rain.

The next morning, Barba Tone had nothing to do around the house since the pool was already full, so he went to the bench in front of the former shop to see if anyone was there.

It was still early, so the other elderly folk from the village were still out and about. Barba Bepo joined Tone on the bench. "It's lovely to see you Tone, I haven't seen anyone these days. I can't even get out of the house these days, how hot it is."

Tone nodded his head. "I can't remember it ever being this hot so soon. Who knows *ča* awaits us, it's still *pomajić*."

"At least it's good for the season."

Mrs. Tonka waltzed by. Bepo called her out. "Oi, Tonka, *ča* you have tourists as well?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't want those devils in my house. Look at all of *yous* with pools, it's just throwing away *šoldi*." Tonka was the only one in the village that didn't rent her weekend house.

"Not really, if you know who to ask." Bepo poked Tone and winked at him. Tone moved away a little bit and remembered he never really loved Bepo. It was one of the problems of old age. You had to hang out with the people that remained, not the people you liked.

Tonka leaned into her cane and straightened her back. She shot both

men with a deadly stare. "What a *vergogna* when old people forget all the sense that they've lived their whole lives by!"

Tone shifted uneasily on the bench and remembered that before retirement and the closing of the school, Tonka had been a geography teacher at the main school in the municipality. "Come on, Tonka, *č*a are you like that?" Bepo grumbled.

"The pool needs to be paid for, but from where will we fill it?" She snapped at them. "Maybe you don't remember how our mothers had to walk kilometers and kilometers to the nearest pond because we had no water here, but I do." She waved her cane at them and both old men instinctively leaned back on the bench. "You shouldn't anger God, that's what we always used to say."

She turned around and made way towards her home with tiny, yet fast steps. Bepo got up as well. "I'd say the sun has hit her head already. Let us young men go home as well." He smiled, but Tone did not reciprocate.

Tone went home and stopped in the hallway. Reflections of sunlight from the pool were occasionally blinding him. He picked up the telephone receiver. "Lovro, you were always a smart young man. *Č*a do you do when you've made a deal that wasn't very smart?" The empty ringing tone on the line gave him no answers he was looking for.

The county had announced water restrictions already at the beginning of July, earlier than usual. That night, Tone waited outside the house until the man appeared. "You don't need to fill the pool, they've announced water restrictions," Tone told him.

The man laughed. "You should have listened better. You know the restrictions are never applied to tourism. The waterpark is working, so can your pool. Now go inside so I can work."

Tone complied. The next guests arrived in the morning. He lay in bed but could not sleep. He went out into the yard as soon as he saw the first rays of sun. He struck the hard ground with the tip of his slipper. The dry earth crumbled under his blows. "Istria has always been dry land," he said, watching the cracks in the garden slowly turn into furrows.

He turned around and went back into the house, to prepare it for the tourists. "Nothing is new", he repeated, even though he knew that it was a lie. The droughts started earlier and earlier, and lasted longer. Water use restrictions lasted the entire summer. But no one mentioned swimming pools.

On the news, it was said that it had been a record weekend in terms of the number of tourists. By the end of July, Tone was listening to the TV more than watching it, stretched out on the sofa in the garage. For days he had been troubled by a heavy feeling in his chest. The air conditioning gave him sciatica pain, but the room was suffocating without it.

At the beginning of August, he turned on the tap in the evening, but only a thin trickle of water came out. He went to the cistern and lowered the bucket for a long, long time without it drawing any water. The bucket came back half empty. He thought of the guests and quickly walked toward the house, even though the tight pain in his chest was getting worse.

A Slovenian family was packing up their car. The father approached Tone and, in slowly pronounced Croatian, explained to him that they were going to ask for a refund from the agency. "There is no water, I cannot be here with my children. We found a hotel for a few days", the man explained. Then, he pointed his finger behind the house. "And the advertisement says a nice view, but it's horrible behind your house. We're afraid a fire will start."

Tone silently walked to the passage along the side of his house. He pushed aside the dense bushes in the back yard that he hadn't wanted to clear for years.

The hill behind the house looked as if some giant had squeezed all the water out of it, like from a sponge. The streambed had dried so much that it shone white like bone in the setting sun. Tone leaned over the overgrown fence and saw the skeletons of small fish and crabs in the dry channel. The grass around the stream and all the way up to the line just below his yard was dark brown. There was a faint crackling sound as the wind moved through it. When darkness fell, the man appeared next to him. "I will empty the pool tonight, since you didn't listen to me."

Tone pointed out towards the hill with a shaky hand. "Is this... was this the pool?"

The man laughed. "Don't pretend you're stupid. The water must come from somewhere."

Tone held onto the fence, stiffly. "What have you done?"

"Well, what have I done?"

"You dried out the hill! You dried out the entire hill; we don't have water..." Tone placed his trembling fingers into the shape of a horn, an old symbol of protection against *štrigons* and curses.

The man laughed loudly. "It's a bit late for that now! I dried it out! Did I

make money from tourists? Did I install the pool because it wasn't enough for me? All of you older ones know Istria has always been a thirsty land, but you've been taking water straight from its mouth." He stepped closer to Tone and grabbed him by the collar. "You're only angry at me because you thought I'd be pumping water where you wouldn't have to see it. This is your legacy. This is what you left for your children. *Šoldi* from tourism, stuffed into a black sock."

"For my children..." Tone looked at the top of the neighboring hill, the top he had been avoiding for three years, where the village graveyard lay. All the grass around the cemetery was dry. The old cypresses that had, for years, guarded the wall around the cemetery and survived all previous droughts, were now brown and thin. With every gust of wind, their needles fell like flakes of snow.

"Lovro", Tone whimpered. He tried to run towards the graveyard. The earth slid beneath his slippers in thin layers of dust. He fell. The dry grass pricked into his palms. Tears fell onto the ground. "Lovro, Lovro, why did the cypresses go? I hoped at least you would have shade."



ALWAYS CLEAR ABOVE THE SAHARA

Marija Vulović
Čajetina

When born, my granddaughters
won't see the snow.
In March, plants bloom
that once used to wait for May.

Somewhere above, glaciers melt.
The pus of the sun seeps through the ozone hole
and drips down the back of my neck.

Bridges remember
riverbeds once full of water and gold-washing fish.
In the park trees grow
that are not from here.

Children draw a planet that once
was blue and green
and ask whether the sky remembers the clouds.

Always clear above the Sahara,
but it promises nothing more than desert.
So in the cracks of the asphalt
I plant a tiny flower bed.

It is a message for the unborn,
should they dare to be born:
we knew the world was fragile,

and we tried
to teach it
to breathe again.

TAMAGOTCHI

Angelina Životić
Petrovac na Mlavi

I

Fed with concentrate from a green eco-packet, Maksim headed to work. His work was located in another, specially isolated, efficient room. Maksim lived alone and the woman, to whom he was married, lived in another apartment on the other side of the city. This was, apparently, the best for them. They would see each other once a week. They didn't wear their rings, and they had an application that Maksim created so they could keep up their long-distance relationship. In fact, it all came down to a simple scientific solution: the app was designed to show a partner's movement based on changes in the location of a microchip in their shoes, jewelry, or smartphones; additionally, through the app, touch was transmitted in the form of vibration, creating an incredible sense of closeness and connection between partners - therefore, a scientifically proven and completely environmentally safe relationship.

II

The concept of efficient rooms: Efficient rooms were invented for work from home needs. It was a simply decorated space, isolated from the noise of the city, which was being reduced from day to day. *Think green.* Every five minutes, the air filtering system turned on. After that, the space smelt according to your choosing, a completely fresh and healthy scent (citruses, mowed grass, wheat fields, etc.). Hanging containers (for drinking water) with suction cups, were cleaned using special air devices. All workers had access to tablets (drops) that contained all the necessary fruit, i.e. vitamins; the effectiveness of this formula had been double tested in laboratories, and in addition to a refreshing taste, they naturally increased concentration and detoxified the entire body. The World Health Organization had approved this method of revitalizing the body.

The green state emphasized minimalism and new technology over comfort. Workers did not travel to their jobs to avoid the use of oil and other harmful fuels. The land had been ploughed over.

In a few years, experts assessed, there would be no drinking water.

III

Forests. Their constant breathing. Large and diverse leaves spread, revealing their bones. Their trees passed one another in thickets, like bodies. In search of sunlight, they reached their crowns up into the sky, forming roofs. Strands of low-growing plants stretched taut. Resin flowing in cycles. A network of fragrant grasses. Ancient weeds. *Allium ursinum* tickled the bases of thick elms: its white flowers open like ballet dancers' feet in second position. *Mentha longifolia*. *Convolvulus arvensis*. *Glycyrrhiza glabra* against fires. The deadly *Aristolochia* pushed through the earth with its roots, making it vulnerable. *Helleborus odoratus*. *Salvia officinalis*. Waists of *Hypericum perforatum*. The low life of the forest, speckled with snake-like backs, moved in processions. The wind gently leaned them against one another. An unusual refraction of light created the impression that the blades were dancing and caressing each other.

The shaking of the trees served as a reminder that microscopic life writhed in the underground. Fungi and lichens came to life from the decaying crotches of old trunks.

The Earth spoke in the voice of subterranean waters. The entire world, situated on the edges of cities, began a new creation.

A young oak sapling unfolded its first leaf.

The creaking of young plantains announced a new miracle.

IV

Think green.

V

A child from an epruvette, marked with the number 404 (or Error), didn't live with either its mother or father. It was considered that shared living would be too exhausting for the electrical maintenance systems of the home and would cause serious psychiatric disorders in both parents. Therefore, a more efficient solution was found: a special institution in which children are cared for under strictly controlled conditions. Children were no longer

part of their families, but the property of the state. The only contact with their parents was maintained via a stable internet connection, of course, when the parents had time for it.

The child was fed from green concentrates, marked with numbers. Number one: skin elasticity, two: bone development, three: synchronized motor skills, four: cognitive function, etc. It did not know the taste of apples. Apples had been banned because of packaging. Strawberries because of allergies to pesticides.

VI

Bees existed only in laboratories.

VII

July 1st, 2080

On screen, it said: "Congratulations, your child didn't create a single gram of waste today."

VIII

July 2nd, 2080

Maksim's wife, Jelena, opened the application on her smartphone. Her apartment was identical to Maksim's: white surfaces that didn't attract dust and air that smelled like the ozone: something like an imitation of cleanliness and the lethargy of air after a supercell storm. On the screen, an icon of a child appeared. Number 404 had a blue-colored aura that day, which meant his vital functions were stable. The robot spoke: "The child has been fed today. The child's cost for today amounts to about 4 dollars per parent. Thank you for looking after the world's economy."

Jelena swiped her finger across the screen. On the other side of the city, in an institution, the sensors on the child's crib emitted slight warmth. It was a hug. Jelena felt glad because she had fulfilled her daily quota of motherhood. The application sent her a notification: "Your closeness is 12% more efficient today than it was yesterday. You've saved 400kcal, which you would have spent on physical transport to the location. The planet thanks you."

IX

They forbid trees. Instead of them, holograms were placed, which did not give shade.

Oxygen was created by one liquid tree per 200 square meters. A liquid tree was a rational bio-technological solution. The main part of the device was an aquarium with 600 liters of water containing unicellular freshwater microalgae. Through photosynthesis, they would bind carbon dioxide directly from the air and, again through photosynthesis, release pure oxygen. And this was an aesthetically adequate solution. Trees took up too much space that was being used for the construction of buildings.

After forest fires in 2025, leading psychiatrists considered that the ban on planting trees was the best measure that the new ministry could have declared.

X

On the edges of the human world, in a ring that remains untouched, the melted Alaska and the North Pole reveal new species of wild chestnuts and some other primordial trees. Giant ferns are born and slowly crawl toward us with their roots. *It begins.*

XI

July 10th, 2084

The night before, Maksim had dreamed about two chamois running into the aquariums of the liquid trees. While the air purifier kept turning on and off, the wall was soaking up some kind of forest moisture. *It had begun.* In the morning, he opened his diary and drew the chamois; they were the way he remembered them from his childhood.

Image 1 brought on Image 2 later on. The next night, the forest was touching him through the window.

Dream description: He lied on the ground and smelled the roots, which reminded him of his mother, home, and radishes cut into children's hands. The windows were wide open. The sky had the color of warm boiled milk spilled over a stove. The branches of an old tree swayed slowly and tapped soothingly against the roof. A gentle branch pushed its fingers into his room.

XII

April 15th, 2085.

A gentle branch is pushing its fingers into my room. Two chamois, with sharpened horns, rush into the aquarium. Through the green algae, bubbles of different shapes passed. I got up and began to speak a story from childhood:

"People placed a plank over a deep stream. Two goats met on the plank.

'Move aside!' shouted one.

'You move aside; I won't!' said the other.

'Let's see who will get out of the way!' The first one said, bending his horns, ready for battle. The other one took the same stance. They butted horns into each other, and both fell into the water." Nature is one chamois, man is the other, but only man falls, falls, falls...The child? Where is the child? A system error occurs.

XIII

October 16th, 2085

A dandelion, with a speed that science could not describe, broke through the concrete. The ministry announced biological contamination. *Think green. Think green. Think green. A gentle branch pushed its fingers into my room.*

XIV

Child 404 sat in front of a liquid tree. Both the tree and the child had a higher temperature. Bubbles turned into visual noise, a grey zone where biotechnology turned into clean, uncontrolled wilderness. The whisper of creation could be heard. The merged particles resembled a leaf's nervous ending. The dendrites and axons of the boy were forming new synapses. *Didn't they resemble the imprints of ferns on the wall of a cave?* While he slept, his fingers were bending as though they were trying to grasp the bark of a tree. *The bark of the tree quietly cracked under the hooves of the chamois.*

XV

At the same time, a thousand kilometers to the north, the root of that young oak touched the first concrete pillar of an abandoned highway. It was a kiss that would bring down cities.

XVI

October 17th, 2085

Maksim took a pencil. He drew a third drawing: Jelena and Child 404, sitting in the crown of an oak tree, growing in the middle of his efficient room. While he was drawing his last line, the air purifier finally went quiet. From the ventilation opening, instead of ozonated air, a single damp, green acorn fell out. Maksim picked it up in his hand. It was heavy. It was real.

At that moment, the last system message appeared on the screen of his phone:

Error 404: System is returning to the root.

XVII

July 10th, 2130

A message from Maksim's diary was announced on the news:

The forest is approaching us. The forest is approaching us. Nature is passing through your windows. Be careful.



Sufinancira
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Centar za
životnu sredinu

THE STORY OF THE
1.5° C LIMIT

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OF YOUTH FROM WESTERN BALKAN



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