

# A SEA

## of words

Challenges, Desires and Proposals  
of Euro-Mediterranean Youths

Three editions of "A Sea of Words 2019-2020-2021"



Co-funded by  
the European Union

# **A Sea of Words**

## **English edition**

**12th year, 2019**

**Young People's Commitment  
to Social Change**

**13th year, 2020**

**Young People Faced with Climate Change  
in the Mediterranean and the 2030  
Agenda for Sustainable Development**

**14th year, 2021**

**Youth and Mobility: Towards  
a Euro-Mediterranean Citizenship**

**IEMed.**

European Institute of the Mediterranean



**Anna Lindh  
Foundation**  
— EUROMED —

## European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed)

Girona, 20  
08010 Barcelona  
www.iemed.org

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## A Sea of Words

Coordination:

Maria-Àngels Roque

Design:

Núria Esparza

Layout:

Alacta Comunicació, SL

Acknowledgements:

Elisabetta Bartuli, Jamila Hassoune, Jonathan Ezio Olandi, Pere-Antoni Pons, National Networks of the Anna Lindh Foundation

## Anna Lindh Foundation

Bibliotheca Alexandrina  
P.O. Box 732 El Mancheya  
Alexandria 21111 – Egypt  
www.euromedalex.org  
info@euromedalex.org

President:

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The Anna Lindh Foundation is co-financed by the European Union

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## Challenges, Desires and Proposals of Euro-Mediterranean Youths

The “A Sea of Words” project, organised by the IEMed in collaboration with the Anna Lindh Foundation and its national networks, was created in 2008 with the goal of promoting and expanding intercultural dialogue, and encouraging exchange of knowledge and experiences through short stories written by youngsters in the Euro-Mediterranean region. With these short stories, the authors have the opportunity to freely express their ideas and views, with their own hopes and fears, reflecting their local and international traditions.

“A Sea of Words” encourages the participation of youths from both shores of the Mediterranean and outlines the different challenges and goals facing each country in the region. Over 14 years, 3,004 stories written by youngsters aged between 18 and 30 have participated in the contest. 1,373 stories came from the northern shore and 1,599 from the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean. With the goal of encouraging young voices, the project has the objective of creating new socio-political narratives that strengthen the culture of peace in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

The last two editions of “A Sea of Words” have been affected by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, but this did not stifle the energy of the youths to write stories. The 2019 edition was entitled *Young People’s Commitment to Social Change*, followed by *Young People Faced with Climate Change in the Mediterranean and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* in 2020, and *Youth and Mobility: Towards a Euro-Mediterranean Citizenship* in 2021. The short stories were written in their original language and we now present them in English for their wider dissemination.

**A Sea of Words**

**English edition 12<sup>th</sup> year**

**Young People's Commitment  
to Social Change**

**Short stories by 11 young writers**

## # All Must Change

**Tchier Akila.** Algeria

I sat alone in a coffeehouse full of people. Bustling with noise, it stifled the air with the smell of its coffee and traditional sweets. People around me were smoking and chatting, mirroring my actions. They were all talking about politics, sports, and the crazy price spike. I heard their talks but I was not consciously listening. I merely saw their body shake to an irregular rhythm. Their bent silhouettes were exhausted by the burden of time and by a piece of land called country. I am but a regular guy with a name and a surname on a worn-out family record that reminded me every day of an act my parents did without consulting me. I should not forget that my friends called this idea blasphemy! As if life with dreams that were murdered every day and every hour was not a sin.

There I was, lost again, drifting away from this chaos to the rhythm of which this coffeehouse danced, and I retreated to my own world. I would be 27 years old in March. Again, I would celebrate with a cheap cigarette, a bitter cup of coffee, and the frame of a university degree that adorned the bare wall behind my bed. In early April, I was to set off looking for a job, even though I had graduated an architect four years ago. Through the front window of the coffeehouse, I could see the fountain statue standing silently. It was only disturbed by the coo of pigeons feeding on breadcrumbs and the whisper of the wind. Despite my daily despair, the sight of the alleys of Setif city instilled a sense of safety in me. For some unknown reason, I found deep comfort in sitting in the yard of the old mosque, and I drew inspiration while standing in front of the naked female statue that everyone cursed.

I woke up from my short daydream hastily when everyone in the coffeehouse jumped and screamed. I buried my cigarette forcefully in the ashtray when I read the large white title on a red strip: "Bouteflika runs for a fifth term and promises people early elections in which he will not be a candidate." I did not want to continue reading or know what fancy words the channel had used. I had my share of misery for the day. I would not eat yogurt as instructed by the respectful minister because his plan to glorify the president made me lose my appetite. I paid for my stagnant coffee and left. I let the winter air slap my face, hoping it would help me get rid of the stupor I felt.

For the first time since the ember years of the Arab Spring, the first of its kind, Algerians did not act the way they did this year. Every Friday, the young and the old, men and women, all gathered to demand the stepping down of a gang that ruined the life of a country that could have been a great nation with its resources and young capabilities. Algeria was destined to be the first Arab country to demand a decent life and an honest political regime. The beginning of the first Arab Spring was announced here, yet it was destined to become a grim winter. It was not easy to wake up every day to the sight of heads that, separated from bodies, called for their dignity on

sidewalks or at doorsteps. It was not easy either to hear about the slaughter of female teachers, or the kidnapping of children and young people. Those years of blood created an imaginary metal chain for people. They became like the circus elephant who would not escape because he believed he was still chained even though the chain that bound its limbs for ten years had been removed two years ago. Terrorism became a scarecrow that frightened people and prevented them from claiming their rights. Anyone who called for change and demanded reforms became an agent who worked for outside powers trying to drag the country back to a terrible era of its past.

Lost in the thoughts that assaulted my mind, I did not realize that I arrived home to an old neighborhood of Setif, one that smelled of humidity, stagnant water, and hot dumpling. When I entered, I found everyone hunched over their phone as usual, browsing Facebook for the latest news. I offered a salutation of peace that carried anything but the true peace I hoped for. I threw my weight and that of my ideas on my ragged bed. I felt nothing but the pleasure of drowning in a short nap of which my mother, on the phone with her sister, pulled me out. I had blocked my ears before entering the house because I knew I was about to hear a lengthy chattering about a myriad of idiocies. As expected, the conversation was once again about the unfortunate Rim, my cousin. She lacked of nothing, everyone thought – except for me of course. She had beautiful almond eyes and she was very talented in the housework department. “Your cousin is a capable woman. She knows a craft for every finger on her hands”, my mother repeated all the time. Unfortunately, no one had asked for her hand in marriage yet and she was almost 25! I was awakened by my mother’s whining about bad luck and her warning to my aunt against marrying her daughter to that hideous Amazigh who fell for her. At the end of the day, he remained an Amazigh who would not respect Rim’s Arab origins. It was as if my mother was very certain of our roots and those of the poor guy she was talking about. I cursed the nap that decided to abandon me to the qualms that my mother had just created with her superficial ideas.

I felt a knot start to form in my stomach when I compared my mother’s way of thinking to today’s popular movement. What would come next? If we were to succeed and vanquish this corrupt system, would we be able to uproot our negative ideas and free our minds of shallowness? Would we still look the same way at the Amazigh and call them racists for preferring to use their own language? Would we still have the same mentality toward women and treat them like human beings who were destined, sooner or later, to get married and have children, otherwise they would be called spinsters and infertile? Would we still play God and judge people, deciding who went to heaven and who went to hell? If the movement was meant to succeed, there must be a deep mental reform that would eradicate the trivialities we proudly dwell in.

My damned strong memory forces me back to those books I read on European revolutions. A profound social and intellectual change had occurred years before the revolution. Would we have better started with a social change before taking to the streets? Should we have changed ourselves before calling for the change of a regime that governed us for five years? My headache intensified. Change, in all its forms, was needed. The only problem was which form should go first. It seems the inevitability of change made all its forms equally important.

I took out my phone and started checking my social media accounts to learn some news. Facebook was filled with pictures of young men wrapped in the Algerian flag. Everyone was pleased with the ethics of this great people who went on to clean up the streets when protests ended at 5:00 p.m., after having marched in protests all day and offered roses to the police. Other posts expressed frustration with Bouteflika's decision and called him insolent. Maybe I should turn off my phone and create some calm. But all my virtual friends were sharing a short video of an Algerian guy speaking vehemently to a Sky News Arabia reporter. I played the video and saw a thirty-year-old man tell the reporter how frustrated people were with the president's decision because it was just a show with modified roles. He concluded with a phrase that became the story headline seconds later: "*Yetnehaw Gaa*" (All out or all must go), which called the entire corrupt regime to step down. My reaction was similar to that of anyone who watched the video: a hysterical laugh at first caused by the guy's tone, followed by sadness caused by the bitter taste of his words. Tonight, *Yetnahao Gaa* would lull me to sleep.

I saw my tall, athletic-looking figure wrapped in the national flag as usual, ready for another Friday where we demanded the prosecution of the corrupt leaders after their removal. When my throat hurt from all the screaming, I found myself hugging my beloved Mays to take a selfie of her wide smile as she looked at the camera where my image reflected lovingly. I decided to kiss her for the first time to thank her for being the third color in my life besides the black and white, to thank the secret fate that brought us together. But before I touched those lips that showered me with love, my mother's flabby body got between us. She shook me violently by the shoulder. I tried to understand what she was saying, but I could not hear a word. I only saw her lips move quickly in obvious complaint. The shake of my shoulder increased, and I found myself standing unsteadily in my room. Damn it; it was just a dream. I did not kiss Mays. I did not capture her in my arms. But the part about my mother was real. There she was standing in front of me with questioning eyes:

"What's the matter? Have you seen the ghost of death?"

"Not at all. I had a nightmare. Why did you wake me up, mother?"

"Ruqayya, our neighbor, committed suicide", she said in a cold, emotionless tone tinted with a hint of disgust. "Her funeral is tomorrow. She killed herself because she refused to marry her cousin for the sake of education. Other girls would kill for a man like him, but she preferred to kill herself. Isn't that ungratefulness?"

What the heck was going on? If we were so proud of our religion that we boasted it among the nations, shouldn't we rather apply its principles first? If our religion supported a woman's right to accept or decline a suitor, then why did idiots insist on going against religion and then assert that we were God's chosen people who would go to heaven because they prayed at the mosque once? Why did these conceited people insist on reining on our life under the pretense of being our guardians? Damn it. My mother noticed the rage boiling under the surface. As if fearing my lava, she left the room hurriedly, leaving me with a confused and angry frown. I saw with my own eyes Ruqayya's father demand the unseating of a president he called a pharaoh during the

protests. But who would dare call *him* a pharaoh and demand *him* to resign from his abusive role that killed a soul just a few hours ago?

The specks of sleep lingered on my lashes, and I did not care to chase them off. I felt a sudden urge to call my girlfriend and check on her. Her voice overwhelmed me like a calm, warm sea wave. I felt safe, and my smile returned despite everything. She told me with her usual laugh that she was watching a movie while eating a fatty meal, and that she was afraid of gaining weight. As usual, I reassured her for the umpteenth time that there was no need to worry because she had been devouring food like a monster for the past five years and still looked as thin as a rake, not to mention that I loved her no matter how she looked. I was not the kind of oriental men who enjoyed a body and murdered a soul.

When I regained part of my calm, I decided to end the conversation and return to the social media platforms I had become addicted to during that sensitive time of the country's history. Just hours later, the young man Sofiane became the talk of the town on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. His spontaneous exclamation became the main slogan of the civil movement. *Yetnehaw Gaa* invaded newspapers and television channels. Whenever someone wanted to express an opinion about current events, he resorted to the magic mantra. On the pages dedicated to Setif, everyone talked about Ruqayya's suicide. As usual, people split between a group who played the divine role and announced the punishment of the girl who killed herself, and another group who contented themselves with a meaningless impartiality. I was not going to take on any of their despicable roles because I knew Ruqayya very well. She was an ambitious girl who worked hard to become a successful woman. She went to great lengths to secure a job as a teacher at the middle school, without relying on recommendations. I knew Ruqayya wanted to become a college professor. She had decided to continue her postgraduate studies, and all she asked her parents was time to complete her master's degree. They could do whatever they wanted with her afterwards. Apparently, they could not wait any longer and jumped on the new opportunity that arose. At the end, all the men of our countries wanted was the nearest chance to get rid of the burden of protecting a girl's honor. I found myself confused: I was thinking about two different issues at the same time: homeland and women. But I averted my mistake, for they were one. Whether we liked it or not, women represented half of our countries. We used the feminine form to refer to the country; we never used the masculine.

Seconds ago, I decided to check my Twitter account, which I had not updated in a while. I had one thing in mind: change one word in Sofiane's slogan to achieve its original purpose. I decided to post a new slogan: "All must change". We must change ourselves and our ideas in the near future. I posted the same thought on Facebook and Instagram. I moved to the kitchen and prepared a hot cup of milk. As I sipped my milk, Quran verses rose from Ruqayya's house. With a beautiful voice, the reciter cited the verse that said "Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves". Of course, I did not need an approval of what I just did, but the Quranic verse came as a divine endorsement. I quickly went to my laptop and re-entered my second world. To my astonishment, the slogan I came up with spurred wide reactions and many questions. I did not imagine it could receive over one thousand tweets or 800 likes and 200

shares on Facebook. Everyone asked about the required change and how to go about it. For the second time, I felt a sense of duty stirred by Ruqayya's death. I decided to post an explanation on Facebook. I found myself completely isolated, seeing nothing but the website's blue color, and hearing nothing but the tap of my fingers on the keyboard.

"A few moments ago, I launched on Twitter a slogan titled 'All must change'. We all laughed and cried at the same time when Sofiane uttered his *Yetnehaw Gaa* out of resentment. No one can have a different demand. But did you wonder what would change if all the members of the regime stepped down? Would we still be the same? If you answered yes, then let us recite the Opening of the Quran to mourn the death of our uprising. Do you ever think of the selfish answer you hear when you ask people why they threw the bus ticket or their cigarette butt on the ground? You are undoubtedly smiling bitterly, because the vast majority knows the answer is nothing but: "What are the cleaners for? This is their job and they are paid to do it!" Aren't any of you surprised when a guy uses a girl's outfit as an excuse to justify harassing her? When are we going to stop religious hypocrisy and stop bragging about costly weddings? Do we really need all these things to trap a girl whom we want to see a queen on her wedding, only to enslave her for decades afterwards? Is she forced to give up her ambitions to build a family that she is unable to raise properly because she is tired and grudging? Let me ask you one more thing: when are we going to stop hating the Amazigh, and when are they going to stop playing the victim and inciting more hatred toward them? Why don't we both accept our respective essential role in shaping this country and renew our faith in being a part of the identity of this piece of land we were born in? I am a regular citizen just like you. I eat lunch one day, and I can't find anything to eat the next. But I have a deep belief that the merchant citizen does not follow any of the tyrant authorities, so why does he not subdue his greed? Why does the bus fare collector treat us like cattle and forces us on the bus like a herd? Do we now crave death or take pleasure in its imminence when we disregard all traffic rules and postpone patient appointments because we, doctors, are not able to work our shift today? My friends, I am like you: I am not an infallible citizen. The point of my slogan is to change ourselves to avoid committing terrible mistakes against a country that wants to rise to the level of great countries. I want us to learn to accept ourselves and others, to open our minds to all sorts of ideas and opinions because we each have our own perspective in life. The moment we accept ourselves and become tolerant to others, we will be able to move our homeland a step forward. I want you to know that this slogan was stirred by the story of a girl who chose the fate of Bouazizi, the man who sparked an uprising in several Arab countries. I cannot blame the girl nor Bouazizi because I would have chosen the same fate had I been in their shoes, even if their decision was one of cowardice. I also want to point out proudly that this slogan enjoys divine endorsement: a few moments ago, I heard a verse we all know but never sought to apply. For the sake of honesty, I must reveal that the idea behind the slogan was based on Mahmoud Darwish's saying: "Do we need a new country, or does our country need a new people?" Be the new people that Darwish wished for so that they are *all out*".

It had been half an hour since I posted the explanation of my slogan. I started to receive several pictures about large-scale cleaning and decoration campaigns as well as intellectual book exchanges. I was now smiling, and I did not need a cigarette.

The End

## The Heart of an Angel

Ahmed Abdelaty Hefny. Egypt

She said calmly:

“The ocean swallowed the plane.”

Maybe if she had been weeping, her sobs would have eased the shock. But she said it gravely, without taking control of the words. They came out torn, like her feelings that would from then on be shaped by that absence.

And I did nothing except bury my sorrowful head in her trembling chest, as she buried herself inside the passing of the days in a final attempt to divorce herself from reality. She couldn't help but keep his memory inside me, and on my face that looks like his, my features a constant source for nostalgia whenever she resorts to forgetfulness.

From him and to his memory, the final point.

He took the lead after the death of the father. My mother told him: “To be a man, you must do all you can for your brothers. You have to protect them from cold, fear and sadness.”

And from then on those things that radiate joy, that were buried there in distant recollection, were only an initial memory of my features, my features that resembled my longing for him. His smiles that the morning bore on the echoes of his goodbyes as the school bus was about to leave. The warmth of his arms while shivering in winter, his photo hanging in my room embracing me in patience and affection, his plunge into the crowd of parents on the school's prize day, all eyes embracing the clouds and mouths muttering congratulations.

The story has a beginning that inserts it into the depth of time. On a rainy winter morning I came home from school early. It was in 2009. I knocked on the door of the house and my mother came out. I almost drowned in her tear-filled eyes, like ice melting on a desert morning, but I was rescued by the intensity of her embrace. Then my wet body trembled, and all my yearning carried me to the question:

“Has he not come back?”

And when I felt that sadness had stolen her answer, I repeated in astonishment and shock:

“Has he not come back?”

After that, I didn't add a single word. She responded with all the pain that overflowed from her trembling mouth:

“He isn't coming back. The water took him.”

I realized that I was mistaken and that it is a sin to place hopes in the seas. He would have survived if the tide had not led him and his companions to a strange place that has its own rules. After a few days, I came to believe the saying that the sea doesn't regret swallowing those it loves. As a stubborn child, with a place very deep inside that belonged only to me, I insisted on believing that this time the waves had stirred up and risen high to welcome his presence, and so they took him.

“You'll grow up, my son, and you'll carry your brothers on your shoulders. Do all you can for your brothers; you have to protect them from cold, fear and sadness.”

She would repeat it every time she got exhausted staying up late at the window that was embellished by her wrinkles. For the past two years, she hadn't budged from it. She would smile and then return to her fond pain as to a hidden cocoon. We both got used to this every night. She would travel to her harsh exile meditating hopefully, and I would pray to God to have mercy on the heart of that bereaved widow. And I waited, and waited again, but in vain.

When things are suddenly transformed, you find you have spent too much time learning everything. The years passed and still the rusty arrow struck the heart with memory. And so, I have to pass over the silence, pass over the words and the tears if possible. And it is only a few days until people pour into the streets, shouting loudly and turning with time into huge blocks of humanity that are hard to break up. My heart fell and smashed like a crystal cup. These people were not fated to survive.

“Bread, freedom, social justice!”

It reverberated loudly in all the screens of the street. I moved with the crowd but then I remembered that I could turn into a mere memory in her wounded soul. I could return to her in coffins like those before me. And so every time that I was impelled to move with the crowd, I would double back to a point where I could reflect on matters. A thought arose within me: You will regret it bitterly if you miss the opportunity of changing the path. When I tried, over the course of days, to know all that it was necessary to know about revolutions, I launched a bitter argument with myself: Does a flower sprout in the squares just by crowding together and chanting?

During those days I met Omar, a tall dark man with a light unruly beard and, in his hand, a gleaming ebony oud. His face had the same quiet features as my brother, but he stood out by his enthusiasm, the like of which I had never seen before. The university admissions authority had allocated him a college that he neither requested nor liked, and so he had decided to leave behind his interest in engineering and throw himself into the ecstasy of plucked strings. Some

people called him “Bobbo,” but I liked to call him “Kamba.” I’m still not sure why I picked that cartoonish name.

We became close, so close that we would keep company all day long and part only when sleep decided to lay claim to its rights over us. We became like two hearts that had at some moment cleaved together, and ever since wanted to beat together, perhaps at the same time. We wandered streets where the shadow of the trees bent over our heads. We laughed and stayed up late. We wandered between the cinemas in the summer days, and in the winter the clouds poured their rain on our joining shoulders. And we would go back at night after talking deeply about everything: love, life, music, poetry and girls.

Only twenty days had passed since the revolution came to an end. During that time we were busy, Kamba and I, determining our destiny among all this. We would argue and debate for hours about the living output of this unexpected change in our lives. Life opened wide before us, and just as I met my only friend, I immersed myself in my passion for writing poetry and stories. Events soon began to take a turn that saw things change abruptly.

“The ocean swallowed the plane.”

It’s still echoing in my dreams. I shrink as I begin to remember all what happened: his decision to travel, his euphoria filled with anticipation, his kisses on my mother’s forehead as he told her of his dream of traveling to the four corners of the earth to bring them together in one hope: the dream of returning to humanity’s original innocence. May the Lord forgive me! I should not have started digging up the past. Or should I?

By stepping back into the past, you realize that nothing can guide you to its details except the memories that you formed. And my brother’s memories remained in the form of his correspondence with people from all over the world.

Facebook had not really found its way to us until the moment when the situation in the streets and squares exploded. My brother managed a wide network of relationships and social networks, some by email and some by post, a deeply rooted habit in his generation who loved the time of carrier pigeons and the ink of ballpoint pens. I discovered it all by accident, thanks to a wooden box inlaid with silver that had been left under his bed. I did not know that it would contain such a multitude of feelings, dreams and secrets.

At first, I was wary of the idea of opening up his secrets. Who knows? A person’s life can be changed by a small secret, for better or for worse. In the end, I had no way out. The box would be opened, maybe because of my deep belief that things reveal themselves at the right moment.

It seemed like all life was here, in a few perfumed and colored papers. In one of the letters that he had received I read in English:

*Dear Youssef,*

*The atmosphere here in New York is nice, unlike what you think. People here are going in vicious circles. Chasing after nothing, more or less, but they are kind and appreciate good treatment.*

*Jane - New York - 2007.*

I searched through the letters again and found one with blue edges, addressed “Cairo – from Paris.” It was no mystery after what I had just discovered. The letter inside was on pink paper.

*Dear Youssef,*

*What you are thinking of is really wonderful. Once it's done everything will change for the better. You are bubbling with affection, or to put it another way you have the heart of an angel. Imagine with me: You create an intellectual and cultural forum every year in a different country. Young people finally brought together by one thing. We all enjoy our time and share our experience. You have no idea how excited I am now. I will help you come to the United States so that we can hold our first youth forum ourselves – you, me, John, Elena, Julio and everyone else.*

*A warm embrace.*

*Jane - Paris - 2008*

I was astonished by what I was reading, and I continued reading that correspondence extensively for days and nights. There were love stories growing between the lines, dreams erased and written down again, eyes fixed on distant hopes, free souls, and embraces – many embraces. If anything there was surprising, though, it was my brother’s ability to learn about all these different cultures, even though his own education had ended in middle school. Jane had not exaggerated when she said he had the heart of an angel. According to the letters, he did not underestimate the value of ideas, however simple they appeared. It was as if he lived for a single purpose: the goal of uniting all humankind, undisturbed by racism, sectarianism, or tribal fanaticism.

Summer came and I still had not thoroughly read all the messages. With some misgiving, I told Kamba everything, starting with the messages and then my brother’s long foundational journey with the cultures of different peoples. I remember that we were going to the cafe near the street, and instead we turned on our heels and ended up on the banks of the Nile. We sat down and watched a tender sunset. A light breeze stirred the trees on both sides with a soothing, rustling sound. And then an idea came to Kamba that seemed to change everything around us. With glowing eyes and a leaping spirit, he said: “I feel as if our chance to do something we love has come.”

Kamba was probably thinking about something related to music, while I in turn thought about poetry and writing. Without any formalities, without even giving us the chance to think carefully about all the steps and the likely results, the idea suddenly came to us of an artistic and cultural studio where we would welcome art lovers from all walks of life who want to explore life in their own way.

In the last days of summer, we began to lay a solid foundation for launching our joint project. It would have been easier for us to launch straight in without bothering with a serious study. But like a flood roaring through the alleys of a small village, Kamba reminded me of the first base on which we would build everything.

“Do you know what is really important?” He pointed to his head. “This. Everything is in here.”

He wanted to make me think about we hoped to work on.

“We will not fail as long as we love what we are doing,” he told me. “We will succeed if we smother our desire to reform all human beings. We have to listen to them. Just listen to them.”

We both prepared ourselves well. We had a lot to do. And as if my guardian angel had called to me, the situation inspired me to go back to the letters. I didn’t tell my mother about it. If she knew, she would have wept for him as if he had died again that day.

Among them I found a letter that, it appeared, he had not been able to send to his friends.

*I did not get the visa. The embassy turned me down. I will try again. I will not despair.  
Best wishes,  
Youssef - 2008.*

The walls were cold and bleak as I read this letter. It seemed to have come from the past to pull me out of my inability to act. That’s what’s waiting for us. Destiny is always waiting.

I took myself back to Kamba. I told him about my fear, and he said: “Fear is normal. We just have to go on according to what we love. It’s what we love that will save us.”

Kamba and I moved on to the stage of implementation. We kept going to artistic events, presenting a pleasant mix of poetry and music. Even when we met looks of disapproval and mockery, we only cared for what we performed. Some helped us, others avoided us. In the end we learnt an important lesson: what you have to offer may not be acceptable to everyone. Let’s just enjoy our time.

To avoid me accusing myself of weakness due to lack of money, my mother lent me a sum of money to run a profitable business on the Amazon website. I carried out detailed research on the sources of profit, quality, and financial management in record time, and money began to come in quickly. That was my start in the book trade. I even postponed entering university for a year after the university admissions authority allocated me to a faculty where I had never imagined studying, the faculty of law.

It was a pleasant time, trading books with my dream still on my mind. I knew many were worse off than me. As soon as I had some money, I felt I needed to go back to my old passion: the

studio and my ideas about life, women, religion, love, beauty and literature. I continued writing poetry. And as Kamba and I prepared for the inauguration of the studio, I remembered Youssef and I wept bitter tears. It had been his dream, but I was bringing it into being, I who had never imagined that one day I would bring his spirit back to life.

Our studio kept growing and became the first of its kind in the entire republic. The revolution inspired us with a ferocious energy that we were hardly able to absorb. Facebook and other social media websites made things easier. Through it we could communicate with friends from all over the world of different cultures and leanings. After a year we decided to make our studio like a school class; to be joined by anyone who wanted to free his intellectual or creative energy. We talked about cinema, literature, writing and philosophy. Life was changing every moment. Is there anything more sublime than difference?

What we accomplished was not easy. It exceeded our expectations. We called the studio ‘Elaas’. I was like someone holding a plant who doesn’t know what it’s called. Perhaps we didn’t want the name to mean anything. Others, who were only strangers and passers-by, took over responsibility for the studio. From time to time messages would come back to us: “You are amazing”; “our ideas are clearer now”; “now we know the value of art.” And Kamba and I were invited for the first time by friends who had a similar studio in the United States to join them for two months, to speak together and share our experiences after they heard about us from the press and television.

It was still difficult to get a visa, until we received an invitation from an important cultural institute in Florida. They arranged everything for us: accommodation, transport and food. The hardest thing was left: convincing my mother that I should cross the same beast that swallowed my brother. I will not deny it: my fear was shadowing me until the moment I defeated it with the first smile of joy on her face because of the success I achieved.

She was on the point of kissing my hand and begging me not to let my ideas take me where they had taken Youssef. With all her heart she pleaded: “Please stay here for your brothers.”

But I have learned something I will not deny now, that fate alone makes our destiny.

Two months passed, and Kamba and I were looking at the buildings from a window high up, a window with no foundations beneath it. The apartment blocks seemed tiny from that height. It was only few hours before the air bore us over the Atlantic.

I looked at the sea again and again. I was not angry with it. Perhaps I had never been so close to it before, even psychologically.

Its blueness launched a shining appeal towards these cloudy skies. Was I afraid? No.

Everything was possible at this moment.

## The Assembly

**Hamoumi Ismail.** France

“Do the parents know?” “No, they’re sleeping.” The message was posted on social media. Thousands of small bodies edged their way through the dark streets of Marseilles. They headed to La Calanque and were welcomed by a cordon of small hands. Down there, on the rocks, they had spread out mats, thick pieces of cloth, mattresses, carpets. A small poster had been hung on the highest stone. In red letters: ‘The Assembly’. Some torches were trained on this improvised platform. Everything was done in complete silence; only the noise of the water against the rock could be heard. A girl stood before the drooping eyelids and crumpled pyjamas.

“Our parents have betrayed us. They are digging our graves. No childhood, no joy, no future. They abandon us on dry land, with nations plunged into mourning, polluted waters, concrete ground! Here, on this platform, we call to our mothers and fathers to respect the earth, the living, human dignities.”

Twenty thousand small hands rose up in unison. A shiver awoke the still sleeping faces.

“There is nothing unspoiled or untouched anymore. Protected natural reserves? Empty promises! Committed nations? Bloody delusions! A struggle? Lies! When we were born, when we uttered our first cries, everything had been decided. Look at this piece of plastic floating on this crack of water, it’s the ultimate excrement, the faecal matter that does not perish, the waste that whispers death! Decomposed, cut out, detached, it crumbles and penetrates all the ages of humanity. Everywhere this plastic lays down the law! Everything is stifled, everything falls silent before it! You’ve seen the disembowelled, suffocating whale, stuffed with waste, beached, dead. So, from today, we declare the Assembly of Children, One and Indivisible. Childhood will no longer be innocent, it will be vengeful. No more cuddles, no more laughs, no more love for your parents. No more human warmth, family pleasures, sweet joys. Never again! Every day, with a stony face, an embittered tone and violent words, demand that they stop their acts immediately. No more mistakes will be tolerated. The vehicles? Dented. Superfluous shopping? Spirited away. Non-recycled waste? Under their bed! Imported fruits and vegetables? In the washing machine! From tomorrow, let’s block the roads, let’s expose all this nonsense. Be socially spirited, cohesive, act, without hesitation, without fear, there’ll be thousands of us, millions, and our mass will defeat them!”

Twenty thousand small hands cheered the speaker in unison. The video streamed on social media reached a larger audience. Under every duvet, in every bed, under every roof, a small face, a fragile smile, two tiny wide-open eyes staring at the scene.

“I know I’m asking a lot of you. The sweets, forgotten. The pleasures, no more. The abuse, likely. The punishments, certain. The sorrow will be great, their anger as equally scathing. But, stand firm. Think of life, of the youngest, of your water, your land, your forests and fields. Adults have lost their minds, stunned by their phantoms and insane desires to accumulate and accumulate, and for what? To leave us nothing! We have nothing more than our future. No past to mourn, no present to regret. And everywhere, in the cities, in the villages, wherever you are, join together, unite, condemn the tortures with a single voice, demonstrate, write, act. Don’t be unmoved, don’t be the accomplice to your erring parents! Before I finish, I have to remind you about one thing. Our struggle pursues human dignity. Here is a friend who has a message for you about this.”

A young man moved forward. Blinded by the torches, he briefly raised his hand to greet the smiles. He was darker, had a firmer skin, looked skinny.

“I’m Syrian. I fled and crossed the sea alone. My parents died in the bombing. I wandered on the waters, with my makeshift clothes, my face dried, with dark circles, deep wrinkles, emaciated arms and sickly complexion. We ran aground on the Italian coast. They refused to take my fingerprints for the asylum application. I had to go to Ventimiglia and crossed the border by night, along the rocky sides of La Roya. The ground was loose, we sank with every step. One of the young men died after falling into an invisible ravine. We heard his lowing cries, his bones cracking. In France, I took the first train to Marseilles. I am frightened every day. I have applied for asylum, but without any luck. Adults are heartless. They have drowned me in the waters, dragged me in the mud, attacked me in the fields. They only know how to do one thing, fill in forms, follow procedures, exhaust the needy. Save yourselves, help us, provoke them. Don’t leave your country to people who have no aspirations. They have nothing left to offer, either the strength of dreams or the energy of desires.”

The small hands clung to the rock and made human chains. They left La Calanque, and nothing remained on the stone other than the poster with red letters. Social media caught fire, gripped by a sudden madness. Every group of friends got organised. Everywhere, people prepared early morning merrymaking.

On waking, every house had been gutted. The streets were blocked by piles of objects one next to the other, broken during the night. Smashed screens, toasters with twisted springs, coffee pots with filed down connections, blocked vacuum cleaners, detached games consoles, vehicles tagged and scratched, boxes of compost with pride of place on the parents’ beds, loyalty cards cut up, buried cigarettes, broken plastic tables, cut up trinkets. Cries, bangs, roars, disputes and furores were heard, and every family, thrown into panic, terrified, breaks, tears apart, holds the kid and shakes him, like a moneybox without a penny. Nothing left in the rooms, everything spread on the floor, in everybody’s view, stinky entrails of modernity. Children rushed into the streets; the message had been passed on. They danced hand in hand, like baby penguins, huddled together and confronted the anger of the old assholes. Each group, encircled, stood firm, and hysteria, violence, was useless against this furious circle, these small hands standing fast, these

laughs, cries, and the retinas recording the scene, sharing, showing, denouncing. Here, a valiant heart raised his voice, moved forward and spoke:

“Our childhood is broken, ravaged, damned by your acts. We no longer want this destructive comfort. Enough! Look at these heaps, useless, disorganised, vain. Enough! We have declared the end of carefree and ignorant childhood, you won’t steal our dreams, our future.”

The children’s general strike was launched the same day. The commotion had inflamed spirits and shaken governments. The parents, too busy controlling their kids, couldn’t go to their offices. The politicians, workers, officials, police officers, businesspeople, researchers, teachers, builders, carpenters, computer scientists, nobody had shown up. Chains of children blocked the roads, sitting on the tarmac, defending the barricade at all costs. The factories empty, the ministries deserted, the airports abandoned, the blinds closed, the motorways paralysed, the factories slowed down, the banks unoccupied. After the first hours of shock, violence and surprise, the message was gradually received. The government, confused, not knowing how to express itself faced with the children’s discontent, remained silent and called an emergency meeting.

“I don’t understand anything.”

“Neither do I.”

“We must listen to them, it’s time for change.”

“What, children would tell us what to do!”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“It’s you, stuffed shirts.”

“Calm down, please, ministers.”

“Mister President, it’s a prank, childish tomfoolery.”

“And what about the paralysis in Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Korea, China, Malaysia and the list is getting longer.”

“I don’t understand anything.”

“The stock market is suffering. We need to end all this.”

“Obviously.”

“Stop suffocating these kids and listen to them!”

“That’s nonsense.”

“They must return to their classrooms.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“Please, gentlemen, calm down.”

“My daughter threw everything out the window, everything!”

“Don’t tell us about your private business.”

“I can’t believe it!”

The cacophony lasted for several hours. There were hardly any men or women anywhere. They could barely cope. Everybody ended up in the street, parents, single people, children, couples. Lunchtime came. They handed out fruit, vegetables, rice and water. The supporters danced and people sang everywhere. They tried to make them see reason but unsuccessfully. Socially-spirit-

ed, holding their hands, with Winnie the Pooh rucksacks, magic Tinkerbell wands, zebra-striped pyjamas, fluffy slippers, Snow Queen costumes and Martin Matin dungarees, dreams had taken hold of the street and colours prevailed over anger.

“Mister President, we need to support this change.”

“We have a mission.”

“Forget it, listen to the kids. Their dreams, joys, desires. Forget all that is superfluous!”

“Stop destroying them.”

Every country had its tide of turbulent kids. The most developed countries had their stinky entrails exposed. The least developed were more mischievous. In Sudan, children joined the teenagers and the kandaka encouraged the crowd with these small brothers and sisters.

“Let the oppressed peoples rise up, their children will have the last word. No more scams, no more excesses, let’s learn the path to follow from the youngest. Let’s dream, hope, act. A crushed government, a tottering corrupt system, and tomorrow, values, joys, respect, citizenship, everywhere. No other breach will be tolerated. Rights respected, wealth better distributed, nature protected, happy days are coming. Why do we waste so much energy and effort stuffing the turkeys in power? Stop everything at once, cut them off, don’t give them anything else, let’s save, let’s buy only the essential, water, food, nothing else! They will clearly see the value of the people!”

In Marseilles, La Calanque swarmed with kids. Greta had crossed Europe by train to reach the epicentre. Everywhere, the crowd cheered her passage. Once in Marseilles, an ovation shook the city. La Calanque roared with joy. Short skirts, dungarees and tights all hopping gaily.

“Children, don’t lose hope. Children, don’t give up. Children, don’t surrender. Children, take hold of the future with a firm hand. Children, don’t leave anything else to the madness of adults. Children, open up their hearts and souls. Children, be proud!”

The government, still meeting, quarrelled about Greta’s speech.

“No one wants to re-establish order!”

“It’s quite normal, this day is historic. Finally some time, some hours of respite, time to reflect.”

“Mister President, we need a strong message.”

“You’re right.”

The men with ties remained cautious. The President ended the meeting and returned to his rooms. The media got excited, restless and wriggling. A message was shared; the speech would be delivered in a few hours. Everywhere, the tides of children, accompanied by their parents, pursued their longing for justice. The supermarkets were emptied of anything superfluous or contaminating. Trays of biscuits, chocolate crèmes, soft drinks, detergents, everything was spread on the floor, thrown, broken, emptied, piled up. The car dealers were daubed with graf-

fiti, the buses covered with flowers. ‘Don’t give up!’ When night was approaching, they had collected wood, coal, and lit fires in the middle of the streets. They gathered together around the radio. The voice of the President suddenly crackled.

“I owe you a speech. I have to speak to the nation but in the circumstances I will let my daughter tell you what I feel.”

She stood by her father on a small stool.

“French women and men. Historic, surprising, natural, powerful, exemplary. These are the words that come to my mind faced with the action of the youngest among us. Children have given us a basic lesson in citizenry and lucidity. Citizens are above all dreamers, ardent believers, and everyday fighters. They don’t give in to misinformation, to greed, to the loss of meaning. Citizens demand the best and show it. Our democracies have been made sleepy and lethargic by a dramatic succession of complacencies and shortcomings. The children have told us to stop, to turn back, to retreat, to breathe, to reflect, to celebrate life, to stop rejoicing in our excess, in our madness. Everything was thrown out, everything proved to be vain. After several decades, we have accepted that our wealth is founded on ecocide and suffering. No rationality should justify the evils of some or the haemorrhages inflicted on our environment. Underpaid jobs, overexploited nature, oppressed nations. Individual interests prevail over collective reason and innovative voices have been raised. This historic day has succeeded; nothing will be the same again.”

She smiled at the camera, folded the sheet, and said:

“With your permission, dad. Children, be proud of yourselves. I’ll keep a close watch. The president is by your side, I know him, he is not evil, he’s my dad.”

## No Heroes

**Ioulia Stamatopoulou.** Greece

When I was attacked by three men no Superman or Batman came to my rescue, no one said ‘cut’ in my life’s film, no one said it’s just a joke and the men were not remorseful about their actions. Because, in real life there is not always a happy ending, there is just a silver lining. I’m alive, nothing irreversible happened. I just lost my carefreeness, my belief in the goodness of people and I gained the constant fear that someone is going to grab my purse again.

That someone is going to take my memories away, because my purse got stolen. That someone is going to leave me homeless and without an identity because my keys, my identification papers and my money was in that stolen bag. Yes, nothing serious happened. Other people’s sufferings are so much worse. But how do you feel when you are constantly blamed in a case you were the victim?

When everyone is trying to find a loophole that can turn you into a liar and close your case. Even, a minor incident like this can take away your faith into social change. It can turn you into a pessimistic person that has no connection with society and when the time, comes you easily betray it. You easily become what you despised, just because you feel that things will not change and you have to adapt in an injustice world.

Yes, things could turn like that, except in my case someone actually came. No, he wasn’t a hero, he was just another human being, that heard me screaming and chose to follow that scream. In that small moment, he chose not mind his own business, he chose to stop his life for mere seconds in order to see what’s wrong with mine. No, he didn’t catch the thieves, no he didn’t give my stuff back.

But he gave me something so much more valuable. He gave me back my stolen faith or at least he pissed back the broken pieces of it. He did that not only because he tried to help me, but because after two years of friendship he revealed to me why he was at 3pm in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods of Athens.

“Do you remember the night we met?” He asked while we were sitting in his house carpeted floor, watching a movie we both have seen multiple times, but we always enjoyed none the less.

“Yes and I want to forget it.” Was the sour answer that took back from me and didn’t keep him from continuing what he had started and what I knew that was going to be a very dreadful conversation.

“Have I ever told you why I was there?” he said and simultaneously tried to keep his voice neutral and failed miserably to do so. This was the question I was always nagging him about and he always didn’t answer no matter what. Now he seems ready to grace me with an answer that I’m not sure I want anymore.

“No, you always said that is not the right time” and maybe he was right, maybe he knew me better than myself.

“Yes, but now the time has come.” When these words came out his mouth, his eyes were literally filled with emotions. Sadness and nostalgia were the most prominent ones, but also determination. This was a revelation for him, I realised, a catharsis that he desperately needed, and even though I was afraid, I was not going to take that away from him even though nothing had prepared me for what came next.

“I was there to protect my sister. Five years ago, someone had broken into our house, we were all sleeping except of my twin sister that she was up late in order to finish a school paper.” When he started talking there was no turning back. The only thing I could do was listen and try to understand, understand if what I was hearing was just a dark tale or a gruesome reality.

“She heard the noise and went to see what is going on. The thief didn’t expect anyone, he got scared and just shot her. We woke up and the first thing we saw was my sister unconscious and blood everywhere.” When he reached that part of the story he stopped and looked at the door on the opposite side of the room. His eyes were just staring there unmoving, his body rigid and tense and his mind somewhere else, probably, reliving that moment. It took him 10 minutes to come back to reality and keep on with his story.

“After this I was never the same, I had trouble sleeping and I was always feeling afraid, but this house was all we had we couldn’t go anywhere else. So after two years, when my baby sister was born, I made a promise. I would never let anything like that happen to her!” He said to me full of passion and an aura of protectiveness surrounding him.

“So, I made a deal with my father. Every night one of us stays awake and patrols the house, so no one would be able to invade our house, never again.” The finality and the belief that something like that would never happen again was clear in his voice. “After some time the neighbors understood what we were doing and started doing the same, most of them you see had similar experiences with us, just not one with a tragic ending like ours. Then, we united our powers and made a neighborhood patrol, so our neighborhood will be safe and no one would feel unsafe in his own house.” His story started with a promise and ended with one, even though his trembling lips told me that he had something else to say. Good or bad I didn’t know, but this was his story and he was entitled to finish it the way he wanted.

“Yes, we didn’t make Athens a safer city, yes, we didn’t make a groundbreaking discovery, but we at least tried to do something to protect ourselves, right or wrong, I don’t know, but at least is

something, something that we didn't have in the past, and is surely better than what we had before." I realised that he was right. Being just passive will not work sometimes, and can be more detrimental than acting wrongly. In an imperfect world you are bound to make mistakes in order to make it perfect, but being afraid of taking action it takes away your chance of learning from those mistakes. When he finished talking, I didn't say anything I just hugged him and cried, we cried together for hours, mixing our tears, making this moment the most beneficial conversation I ever had after my incident.

Because after this revelation, I understood that social change is not a grand, one time thing you only experience once in your life. Is an every day procedure that comes from everyday human beings. It derives from the simple things we do. Those little things we do, hoping to change a reality we don't like or we don't approve. Stop being bitter about a world you don't like and start working in order to make one you see yourself living happily. That was the message that this tragic story gave me and this is the message I want to pass on with my own version of it.

Thank you Marcus, for teaching me what change, commitment and faith are.  
Your friend,  
J.

*Marcus became a policeman and tried to change the world with the only way he knew fighting and trying to protect others. He died in the line of duty. I followed a different path, but his life was my inspiration for everything. This story is about friendship, gratitude, commitment and inspiration. Ingredients that you will defiantly need when you will write your own stories. Because in real life stories are no heroes, just humans that act like heroes.*

The end

## Graffiti

**Sali Abu Kwaik.** Jordan

He took his drawing tools and hurried out to join the monthly meeting of the Association of Graffiti Painters he had set up in his hometown. Despite the vitality of that art, there was little vitality about the members of his association. In the last few months most of them had started to repeat their graffiti without any creativity or innovation. He had decided that his work that day would be inspired by seventies music, and why not oriental too? He had had enough of artistic hubbub and the endless fusion of colors. He had had enough of hip-hop music and the unchanging dance moves of the other members of the association that become more like a morning warm-up.

Humming Abdel Halim Hafez's 'Ask, O youth' in his rough voice, he started painting his mural. It took him only a few minutes. He stepped back a bit from the wall and scrutinized his work. The face of a man in his fifties emerged, hidden behind many black and white wrinkles, with a few hairs flying out from his grey forehead, a thick beard, and two eyes that seemed to follow the passers-by. No doubt all those walking past would wonder what was the point of a painting of an ugly face that stared at everyone passing by. He himself had no answer, but he felt relieved by the sudden change he had forced on himself and on the other members who disapproved of any kind of change in the style of graffiti practiced from the beginning.

Across the road, a taxi driver was waiting for the green light to let him go on his way, grumbling to himself, wiping the sweat again and again from his forehead, and turning right and left to pass what he considered to be a kind of overtime. His eye was suddenly caught by the ugly face on the opposite wall.

He muttered: "It's not that bad. It may look ugly at first sight, but there's something that draws my eyes to it. It looks like my half-brother a few weeks before he died, after holding out to his last breath in the hope of achieving some little fame. No matter what kind of fame: artistic, national or patriotic. It really didn't matter. He wanted his face to become an icon for something. But his time came before he could achieve his goal, poor man! None of who bore his coffin realized that the weight of his body was only the result of memories weighed down by regret and sorrow, and the burden of the desire to be free from the wooden coffin that surrounded him, to go back to his past and achieve something!"

That ugly face moved something inside him. What it was he couldn't say, but it awakened in him a desire to convey a voice to the world. He wanted to speak to his half-brother and tell him about all the changes that had happened since his death. He felt something that, if it could be identified by medical science, should probably be called a shudder of awakening.

On Facebook, he posted a picture of his brother before his death, recalling many things he had done and stances he had taken, and calling on everyone not to give up until they reached their goal. He ended his post with, “Farewell my brother, the traffic light is green, and we must move forward.” He took his foot off the brake and continued on his way.

It seems that the shudder of awakening reached the lost director, as his acquaintances called him because of his inability to finish what he started. He had been trying hard for days to think of a suitable ending for his short movie, ‘The Marvel of Youth’, about young people’s awareness of the factors contributing to the exercise of authority in society. He was quite perplexed about it. But the face of his friend’s half-brother in his morning Facebook post flashed in front of him for a moment, and we can say that the end of his film began to take shape. He would make the hero’s final scene simpler. His end would be exactly like the end of his friend’s half-brother. Yes, he would continue striving to raise the awareness and conscience of the society around him, despite being quite sure that his efforts would not bear fruit in his lifetime. Later perhaps, but not now. He finished editing the film and published it on his YouTube channel, knowing well that it would get only a few dozen, at best a few hundred views. But what harm! They say that the butterfly’s effect is unseen but persists. And the film too must have some effect, even if he himself did not notice it.

Someone woke up the next morning to practice the morning ritual of his days off. He stretched his neck and then stared out the window, which revealed only a small part of the southern end of the neighborhood, then went back to bed, browsing on and off the latest videos on YouTube, commercials, and the monthly bulletin of his socially active youth party.

‘The Marvel of Youth: A Short Film’ was the first thing that caught his sleep-heavy eyes. He began to watch it out of idle curiosity, surprised that it had got more than ten thousand views in only 24 hours. The first five minutes of the film passed, then another ten minutes, then the closing credits.

He threw his phone to the floor to get dressed and rushed out to join a march in support of young people’s freedom of expression in the media, a march he had been invited to a few days earlier but had not intended to join. The last scene in the short film must have stirred his hidden strength. Sometimes it is difficult to resist the revolutionary feelings that trouble our minds or to ignore the buried voices in our depths that call on us to preserve what remains of our vitality.

The graffiti artist lay in his bed after a hard day working to revive dead walls. The taxi driver lay back on the rear seat, recalling his half-brother. The director closed his eyes as if the words ‘The End’ were passing quickly in front of him. The activist embraced his pillow after a protest that had lasted for hours.

That night it rained profusely, until the streets turned into rivers, sweeping past dyed in the colors of murals that were utterly washed away. Even the mural of the ugly face disappeared.

The artist woke up the next day. He took his painting tools and hurried out to the street. Humming the air of ‘Ask, O youth’, he started to repaint the mural of the ugly face that had been washed away and had washed much away with it, hoping this time no weather would defeat it, that its features would not be wiped clean by the rain, that it would not be silenced by thunder, but that it would be stronger, harder, and its effect would not disappear.

## Closets Are Meant for Clothes

**Dana Ozoliņa.** Latvia

### Silence: Mary

She drops her cigarette butt and steps on it with a pointed heel, the crimson embers extinguishing on the sidewalk. Mary picks up her stride. Her every exhale draws the remaining dregs of smoke from her lungs in favor of fresh air. But the usual relief is not there – the gold around her ring finger still weighs heavy.

Mary has everything, they say: a loving husband, two beautiful children and a picket fence around her enviable world. With a humble smile, Mary accepts the compliments. She tries to convince herself to believe them. But the happiness that she is supposed to feel isn't there.

The only thing that feels true is a cheap plastic bracelet that she owns. Its once soft lavender color had long since paled to an off-white. Every summer the sun tans a line around her wrist where the bracelet rests. Mary's husband laughs, her friends whisper and giggle, but despite the teasing she keeps wearing it. To her, the lightness of plastic holds in itself an entire vocabulary of feelings she does not understand.

It is a gift from Jane, given to Mary soon after they both turned sixteen and two days before Mary's family moved. They walked the neighborhood that day, chatting and laughing and holding hands. The sun was warm and their bare feet gathered dirt between their toes.

Jane kissed her under the maple tree in the park. It was a mere second of a searing high in her chest before Mary jerked away from the confusing, wondrous softness of Jane's lips. She ran.

That was the last time she dared to meet Jane.

Soon after moving, Mary met Pablo. They passed notes with doodles to one another in class. Whenever he laughed, the world felt that much brighter. She saw sun in him that she thought had been left under a maple tree with Jane. Pablo kissed her too, but his lips were rough. Mary swallowed the hesitation and kissed him back. They found themselves married two years later, right on the cusp of adulthood.

Years passed. The color of her bracelet faded but not the longing inside of Mary that she could only quiet with the warm haze of nicotine.

The clatter of her heels against the pavement slows, and Mary lifts her wrist to look at the bracelet. It holds a promise of what could have been. She wishes nothing more than turn back time and return Jane's kiss, every day of her life.

But the bridges have burned and their ashes – scattered in the wind. Jane is gone. Mary has no friend who feels the same things she does, no sister or mother who could answer the multitude of questions that she has. Mary hears about others like her in town gossip, but they all seem like rumor-twisted versions of people.

Mary chooses silence. Her life has taken too much time and effort to build; she cannot ruin it all by speaking thoughts and feelings that are in dissonance with everything her loved ones believe.

She inhales, the sting in her eyes grows nearly overpowering. To stop the tears, Mary blinks furiously and lets her hand drop. Coaxed by the momentum, the bracelet dances around her wrist before it settles in the folds of her skirt, out of sight.

They say she is happy, and happy people do not cry.

### **Whisper: Leah & Sarah**

“Come on, hurry up!” Leah whispers, her breath a warm tickle against Sarah's ear. She bounces from foot to foot while Sarah keeps a straight face and pulls a bunch of spray paint cans from her bag. She sets the bag down and arranges the slender cylinders of cans along the wall.

“Red, orange, yellow, green, blue—” Sarah frowns when her gaze doesn't find the next can. “Did you take the purple one?”

Leah's bouncing halts and she shakes her head. “You only gave me the stencil.”

“Shit.”

The word hangs heavy in the warm twilight air. Silence is interrupted only by the faint buzz of electricity from a streetlamp a few steps to the left.

Leah crouches to look through Sarah's bag again. Her fingers bump against the metal spiral of a notebook, wooden handles of paintbrushes, a jangling mess of Sarah's house keys, but here is no sign of the paint can they need. Leah's shoulders slouch in defeat. “Nope.”

Sarah sits down next to her array of spray paint and leans against the wall. She sulks, “It won't be a rainbow if one color is missing – that's the whole point!” Sarah waves off-handedly at the stencil peeking out from Leah's bag.

‘LOVE IS LOVE’. Her and Leah’s declaration to the world that there is nothing wrong with them being in love, the declaration made by so many young gay men and women before them and many yet to come.

Leah’s footsteps, as she approaches, are soft. So are her arms around Sarah’s shoulders and the nose nuzzling sympathy into the crook of her neck. “Next year?” Leah offers her solution to Sarah’s frustration. “Pretty sure the parade here happens yearly, and even more sure that we’ll be just as gay then. Though, your aunt might change her mind about letting us graffiti her poor garage.”

Sarah snorts and elbows Leah in the ribs.

They quiet down and the world around them seems to hone in on their breath – rising and falling; separate rhythms at first which fall into unison quickly. The wild tangles of Leah’s hair, tickling Sarah’s neck; Sarah’s fingers, drawing patterns on Leah’s open palms – those are the things that paint the borders of their worlds that evening.

Sarah’s real disappointment finally tumbles over her lips. “I don’t care about the parade. I’ve been waiting to meet you face-to-face for months, planning for everything. It had to be *perfect*...”

“It already is.” Leah smiles and presses a kiss to the corner of Sarah’s mouth. Even with the evening stealing the colors of the day, she can still make out the pink splotches of blush that spread over Sarah’s cheeks as she opens her mouth to argue.

Leah beats her to it. “Okay, okay. Let’s do it now.”

She leans over Sarah and grabs the nearest can – one marked with a carmine red label and stands. Leah pulls off the cap, grinning, and shakes the can. Its rattle echoes in the empty space between buildings.

“What are you doing?” Sarah rises to her feet as well but she does not get in Leah’s way, too curious to intervene.

There is no answer. Instead, Leah lifts her hand. The red paint curves on the wall into her handwriting. She writes three words – giant, slightly crooked and beautiful beyond compare. “I love you.” Dropping the hand that holds the paint can, Leah repeats the words out loud but they are soft, they do not echo. The gentle twilight has seeped into her tone.

Sarah stares at her, wind knocked out of her. The thoughts in her head scatter, refusing to string together a sentence. Typed in a chat, crackled over the imperfect connection of a video call, their long-distance ‘I love you’s have always been abrupt and distant. This is real, warm and makes her knees buckle.

Something happy bursts to full bloom inside of her. Sarah throws herself into Leah's arms, knocking the paint can to the ground. "I love you too!" She breathes in Leah's scent and lets out a soft sigh. Love feels intoxicating, mixed with the scent of fresh paint. But a smidge of guilt still hounds her. "But weren't we supposed to do it all pretty and clear? So that other people can like it too? Now it's just...for us."

Leah grins and pulls Sarah closer to the wall to add a little heart at the end of her carmine red confession. "Yeah, well, that's enough, you know." Her grip around Sarah tightens in a promise. To Leah she is always enough.

Sarah winds her arms around Leah's waist again. She feels her embrace returned in a heartbeat.

"I think we're enough too," Sarah whispers.

Their world need not extend beyond Leah's curly hair and Sarah's smile. It's wide and happy enough as it is, painted carmine red by their love confessions.

### **Battle cry: Nadia**

Nadia is a loud infant. Her demanding, shrill cries makes her aunts and grandmothers alike wince – the bouncing in their arms never seeming to calm her. The relatives offer well-meaning promises one after another to her mother. There is pity in their eyes as they do so.

"Don't worry, honey, it will get better when she gets used to strangers." – "When she's done teething." – "Kindergarten! Socializing with other children will do her good!" – "School. She'll see how well-behaved the other girls are."

Nadia's mother smiles, her patience – never-ending – and answers nothing to the increasingly exasperated promises as the years tick by. She doesn't see a reason to silence her child.

Her patience is rewarded with a curious girl whose voice rises to ask questions as she grows older, to speak out about things she believes in. Nadia learns it from superheroes on the screen and in real life ones that all preach peace, equality and love.

The girl starts a blog of her own when she is just fourteen. Her first few articles are met with no recognition, but it doesn't stop her. She reads them out loud to her mother who always asks her questions and listens to the answers, just as unafraid to expand the boundaries of her mind and heart as her daughter.

Nadia is spurred on by these readings and tackles more and more complicated issues. She writes about the effects of climate change, about teen depression and social media culture. Her blog

begins attracting attention, and comments fill with voices of others that echo the topics through the prism of their own experience.

But it is a dance with a goal. Nadia writes in circles that spiral closer and closer to the topic that wriggles in the core of her own belief. She reaches the center of the spiral at sixteen, puts her fingers to her laptop's keys and writes.

It is the day when her world splinters into pinpricks of doubt.

To her mother, it is a grey, cold Monday. She finds her daughter sitting on the couch with laptop in front of her. Nadia looks twice her age. There are shadows under her eyes and a crinkle between her brows. She looks like she has been crying.

It is a startling sight, and her mother approaches carefully. "You're frowning, sweetie."

The couch shifts as her mother takes a seat. Nadia's frown eases in the presence of her parent but the crinkle between her brows remains. "I was just reading some dumb comments. On my article."

She tries to play it off but her mother sees the painful twitch of her lips. "You know they are just angry and frustrated with something in their own lives, right? You write well, remember that."

Nadia sighs. "It's not that." She turns the laptop so that her mother can see. A dark silence falls over the room. It is filled with weight of insults and hateful slurs in the comments of the article.

There was never a need for Nadia to come out of the closet to her parent. Her mother understood early on that the crushes Nadia developed on girls were no mere misunderstandings of childish affections. The girl seemed happy with the discovery of what young love felt like. It was heart-warming to see her light up like that.

But the boundaries around Nadia's happiness are narrow ones, her mother realizes now. Beyond them await people that the two of them otherwise share a sense of unity – a flag, a language, a culture – with; but they are less than kind towards Nadia's love. They do not hesitate to rise the words of law and God, skewed, twisted, against her like weapons.

With the computer screen dimming, Nadia finds herself curled into her mother's side, tears making paths down her cheeks again. "Mama, they don't listen..."

The shake of Nadia's shoulders breaks her mother's heart. She is a guardian, she is supposed to offer safety, support, the whole open world for her child. But Nadia is crying in her arms and there is nothing she can do to alleviate the strain put on her shoulders.

Perhaps, however, it is not comfort what Nadia needs, but encouragement.

Her mother takes a breath and it unsteady. No mother should send her child into a battlefield but she knows she must. Her daughter is strong, her voice should not fall silent. “Don’t write for them. Write for those who are like you but too scared to have their own voices, to fall in love, to live.”

The crease in Nadia’s forehead evens out. She lifts her head to look her mother in the eyes. It’s a long, searching gaze that steels into a determined one. “I can do that.”

Nadia wipes the remaining moisture from her cheeks. Streaks of smudged eyeliner remain on her face and hands as she turns her full attention to the laptop. Her fingers, all too familiar with the layout and feel of the keys underneath them, create a gentle clatter of words spilling into a draft of a new article.

*Closets are meant for clothes*, the title reads.

*With the recent developments in the social equality movement, more and more people publicly identify themselves as a part of LGBT+ community. This trend signifies a change in our society, an opening up to people with different life experiences than the current social standard.*

*It must be noted that this change is still underway and there exists a strong opposition to it. In many countries, voices of the minority are dehumanized and gay youth is forced to remain ‘in the closet’ for their safety and social acceptance. Even among those who choose to ‘come out’, many only share with family and close friends.*

Nadia sits straighter. She feels the warmth of her mother next to her. Tears have dried and passion burns in her gaze once more. The streaks of eyeliner become her warpaint. She lifts not a sword but a pen against the voices screaming louder than hers.

For those who cannot speak themselves, for those who only dare to whisper – she will be the voice of many.

*The direction of this societal change is clear, however. It moves towards understanding and completely including members of LGBT+ into the broader social community as equals. But it is a future we can only build by being patient and kind, with educating ourselves and others, not by shoving the issue in the ‘closet’.*

## Do Refugees Have Names?

### When young Europeans meet young migrants

**Anna Romandash.** The Nederlands

#### The Art of Listening

“Do you like Syria, Anna?” Mohammed asks.

He looks at me attentively, tries to get ahold of my hand as we awkwardly talk in the hotel lobby. Frankly, I was not listening to him, completely absorbed in my own work. Mohammed speaks little English; he does not need it much in a three-star hotel in Izmir, Turkey, where he works as basically an “everything man” – he waits tables, works during breakfasts, cleans up the rooms, and carries things.

I find it hard to talk with Mohammed at first. Language is one thing; but it’s also me being annoyed at the unusual friendliness I get here. It’s been a lot of attention, both because of my gender and nationality, distracting me from my work. I’ve come to Izmir on an assignment, to connect European youth with refugees in Izmir, yet I haven’t managed to talk to any of the refugees in the few days that I’ve been here.

I did manage to talk to Mohammed. His optimism and good nature are hard to fight, even in my state of mind.

“Where are from, Anna?” he asks.

“Ukraine.”

“I love Ukraine,” his face lights up, “My friend got married there. A beautiful place.”

I fake a polite smile. Not the first time I hear this in Turkey.

“I am from Syria. Do you like Syria?” he asks.

Now, I actually listen.

#### “Our landlord told us to leave immediately”

Mohammed does not only do everything in the hotel; he lives there and sometimes works for as much as sixteen hours – all for a low salary. He does not complain, though – it’s not easy to find work for a Syrian refugee, even with Turkish skills. The country has received more than

3.5 million Syrian refugees, as well as nearly 400,000 displaced people from other countries; in the last four years, it has hosted more refugees than any other nation in the world. The ones who speak the language are usually better off, but it is getting increasingly hard to find work or housing in overcrowded cities.

While Syrians are by far the largest group, the country is home to other groups such as Afghans. Since the country is a popular transit destination, Turkey received many migrants coming from the East, and was welcoming to those fleeing war. However, as the fighting continues, and there is no solution in Syria, locals grow restless and more skeptical about the situation. Many think that Turkey is becoming more conservative due to refugees, who often come from more traditional and religious Muslim societies. Others complain about the economy as there are not many jobs in the country, and the competition increases as more people arrive. Recently, there was a crackdown on Afghan refugees, who were deported home.

Yet, Turkey remains among the most open countries to refugees, and it has managed to avoid many controversies and issues that European nations faced when hosting Syrians and other newcomers. While it is difficult, and refugees still face discrimination, many – like Mohammed – consider Turkey their new home.

Izmir is a green and busy city close to the Aegean sea, one of the largest in Turkey, yet it manages to remain relatively calm and quiet with its more than four million residents. Going from riches to slums is a matter of minutes here. Across the street from nice hotels, the poor area begins. Many refugees live in a slum-type housing, with large amounts of migrants grouped together in a small area around the old historic part. The area is on hills so rocky it's hard to walk. There is no public transport, so people who live on the top of the hill need to walk for more than half an hour to reach their home from the closest bus stop. Many can't even afford the bus, so their daily routine includes slow and steady walking through the dirty streets and hilly roads.

The area is filled with people even during work hours. One of the few things that stands out: a large presence of women. Izmir is mostly male dominated; there are fewer women on the streets. The area where I'm at right now, however, is filled with women. Most of them are covered, some wear a niqab, so only eyes can be seen. Women watch over children playing outside. Some look at me suspiciously, others don't pay attention. Men sit on the streets, too – older ones are ganged together in one group, and the youngsters stick together. A few look my way.

A bizarre thing is the huge number of cats, not only here, but overall in Izmir. While the animals in the slums look bad, sickly and thin, they are not scared of people, and easily approach me. Somehow, they show the ambiguity of the place: alongside poverty and trash on the streets, life goes on as it always does, and there is no insecurity or fear around people. I walked dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, a white woman alone with no language skills, and I felt absolutely safe around strangers.

The slums are filled with Arabic music; there are stores with typical Middle Eastern food, and the prices are lower than in the rest of the city. The refugees are crammed together there because of the housing crisis; it's difficult to afford an apartment, and many locals do not want to rent their homes to migrants.

“Our landlord just told us to leave our place immediately,” says a refugee woman who prefers to stay unnamed. A mother of three, she arrived to Izmir from Syria, and now, she is working on her Turkish skills to be able to find a job. She recalls: when kicked out, her family just wandered the streets looking for a place to stay. They now live in a store, a place not suitable as an apartment, but they cannot find anything else.

Her story is not unique; refugees have a hard time finding a place to stay. Some of them lack the documents, others – money to afford a place. There is also distrust from the locals, who prefer not to deal with migrants. More importantly, refugees often do not know their rights; and since they cannot speak the language, they don't know how to protect themselves.

### “Refugees need to return home”

Yet, migrants are not alone. In Izmir, there are organizations trying to help. One of them is Pi Youth Association, which connects bright young people from Izmir trying to solve local challenges through civic engagement and informal activities. Founded in 2014, the organization focuses on different goals related to youth needs, such as the rights and problems of young people.

Pi Youth Association is the one that invited me here. While not working with refugees directly, the team has developed the project ‘European Cooperation for Refugees’, where young Europeans get to meet Turks and refugees. Together, the group tries to address the issues of migration, respect, and diversity, all through sharing and working together.

Young Europeans include a group of nearly 20 people. Some of them work with migrants already, and others have experienced what is called a ‘refugee crisis’ in their homes. “I have not worked with refugees before but I know a lot about them coming to Europe, especially close to where I live,” says Manuela Manevska. A student from Montenegro, she has observed many changes happening due to refugee arrivals as Montenegro is close to Greece, a popular destination for migrants who are trying to reach Europe. Although Manuela has not had experience with refugees before the training, she has decided to help them once she is home.

“We need to find a sustainable solution to this problem,” says Tamas Horvath, “And that is peace in the conflict areas so refugees return home. I am not against migrants, but I don't see the current situation working.” Tamas explains: his native Hungary has had controversial laws against refugees coming, and while many people supported harsh rules for migrants, he himself has helped some when they just arrived in the country. However, there are strong cultural clashes and a lack of integration as refugees tend to stick to their own communities and often do not

adapt to the European way of living. Tamas thinks that it's more important to think of bringing peace to Syria and other places so people should go back there; otherwise, Europeans will have to struggle with more cultural challenges as more migrants arrive.

A fellow participant, Alessandro Gioffre d'Ambra, has a different view toward migrants and Europeans. "I see the current situation as a result of many years of imperialism," he says. An Italian, the man believes that it was Europe's involvement in many African and Asian countries that caused them to suffer when Europeans used these lands for resources and drained them, leaving local population in very bad conditions. As a consequence, those people are now fleeing to Europe to seek better lives, and it is Europe's responsibility to help them.

Sharing responsibility and helping those in need is something that Izmir Bulut Oncu Youth Centre does on a regular basis. This organization invites us to meet with refugees and later arranges a cultural get-together between them and Europeans. There is a psychologist who helps, and a translator, as the center does a lot of work for refugee youth and families. The organization will also provide refugees with free Turkish lessons once it gets accredited by the government. More importantly, it gives refugees a safe haven where they can meet and learn together.

### **"You can live anywhere when you work on yourself"**

I get to meet many young migrants once in the building. Many of them are distrustful of me, and no wonder. They have talked to many journalists about their lives and had to relive difficult experiences.

The first person I get to talk to is the one who leaves me in awe. Her name is Nour Mohammed, and she is a dancer. Nour arrived to Turkey with her parents; the only child, at first she had some difficulties adapting to a new culture as she spoke no Turkish. Now, she is working on her language skills and does what she loves the most: she teaches young children dancing.

"When we came here, I was mostly working, but then, I decided to improve myself, so I started volunteering and helping out Syrian people," she says, "I saw their problems and realized that my life here was good. I started having conversations with others and working on myself." Nour began learning English and Turkish then, and is almost fluent in both now. She feels like the language is a very empowering tool, the one which helps people adapt. "Language is definitely a problem, but it is our problem as we need to learn it since we are living here," Nour says. She believes that without the will to master Turkish language, it will be impossible for Syrians to integrate or start a new life in the country.

"Without language, there is no connection between Turks and Syrians. I have Turkish friends, but I cannot say we have a strong connection as we often cannot understand each other," Nour explains, "We need more mixing, especially for children in Turkish schools." The girl points

out: often, children are divided, so Turks mingle little with Syrians. This comes not only from the locals as migrants tend to be reluctant to talk with Turks. This has to change, Nour believes.

“I like Izmir, and I don’t have big problems with locals here. If you are going to work and improve yourself, you can live anywhere and do everything,” the girl says. At first, she had a problem saying she was from Syria, but not anymore as she is more comfortable in her new home. Now, Nour wants to focus on her dancing as she loves working with children.

“Teaching dances is the best feeling for me. I want to have a school where I can teach children. I also want to be a journalist and do something for my country,” she concludes. Now, as Nour embraces her new home in Izmir, she helps many youngsters adapt and find themselves through art.

### **The Art of Learning Names**

Nour is among a group of young refugees who come to talk to me; not all of them are comfortable sharing names or personal details, but everyone has a similar story in common: they all had to run away from their homes to a new land because of the war.

I talk to a homosexual man, who moved to Izmir. Like Nour, he also wants to be a journalist, and he studies media already. He says that being gay is easier for him here as society is less conservative as in Syria; yet, he still misses home.

I talk to a translator, who’s been in Turkey for six years, and nearly three of them in Izmir. He had to run away from military service in Syria, and when he arrived to Turkey, he had no money and place to stay. Now, he says his life in Izmir is much more stable yet a big part of his family is still in Syria, so he wants to bring them here. The documents are the problem though.

I talk to a high schooler whose life in Turkey has shaped her; and to a mother of three, who struggles finding a stable home.

The title ‘refugee’ suddenly becomes more difficult to apply as I realize that this is not what defines my interviewees for me. Each of them has a unique story, and a unique challenge. While talking about the problems migrants face is a must, it’s necessary to humanize all the people dealing with these problems. Those individuals have names, and we need to learn them even if we are not going to share them. After all, this is not a nameless community of millions: we are talking about people. There shouldn’t be us and them, locals and refugees as it’s just people helping people.

As for the stories, the more we hear the better. These stories need to be told as they are valid and meaningful.

## The Invisible

**Bartłomiej Juszczak. Poland**

You think to yourself that it's going to go smoothly. You pop in for a few hours, talk about the project, the benefits, present the calendar of events, and the village head will kiss your feet. After all, everyone should be interested in culture, especially the kind of culture that doesn't deplete the local budget; on the contrary, almost a free promotion of the town, the development of its inhabitants' awareness and interest in the region. Sounds wonderful, right? So much is said that culture builds national identity, that in developed countries, and you regard Poland as one, aesthetic needs and self-fulfillment are becoming more and more common as the people have met all the other needs from Maslow's hierarchy. At least in big cities, at least that's what they say, at least this is what it seems to a person working in an institution of culture, or you.

"You're young," they will say, "you have not seen the world yet and you have not yet gotten to know all the games that go with it." True, you are aware that the world is not built on honesty, but it's worth guiding it towards honesty. Youthful enthusiasm in the dream job is able to overshadow the minimum national salary, inconveniences resulting from the lack of funds to cover travel and training costs, overtime or superhuman effort in the name of carrying the torch of education. After all, you work in culture, it's a job with a mission, you're like a doctor, a nurse, a priest, a teacher, among such prestigious professions that the thought of having a different opinion about it does not even pass through your head.

You go to a meeting at the commune office. There's coffee, tea, a cookie, a smiling secretary and a village head, who is only a little late. You are ready for the meeting, you know how it goes; what monuments, museums and open-air museums there are in the area, after all you work in a cultural institution and do your job well, because that's what needs to be done. In the office, there's a comfortable armchair, a white eagle on the wall, a cross and the coat of arms of the commune – all is in its place. The village head forewarns that he has 15 minutes for you. You planned a 2-hour meeting to explain everything, answer any doubts and ensure the attractiveness of the project. A small rural commune, ten thousand inhabitants, there will be guided tours, meetings for the local community, trade fairs promoting traditional products along with performances by the folk song and dance group, and finally a photo exhibition on the fences of houses throughout the village. That's not all! People from nearby towns and provincial cities will come, so tourist indicators will go up, but above all it will be an opportunity to meet and strengthen the cultural identity of the inhabitants, something they should be proud of. Here you catch your breath and explain that all the costs are covered by the institute, all you need is logistic and organizational help, and you are leaving an example program and plan of events. Fourteen minutes, fifty-nine seconds. A stone facial expression. "We'll think about it" you hear.

A week passes, there is no answer. You call, you ask, request a telephone conversation with the village head. You will find out in a moment that it is an additional problem for the commune to organize such events, because they are not proud of the fact that they are famous for the production of potatoes, and besides, they have other problems here. They also have a castle and tower of Polish kings, beautifully restored using funds from the European Union. Thousands went into it, so they would sooner agree if you were to organize a fashion show at this tower and help, of course. But not so much for some kind of rural festival, guided tours and meetings for village housewives.

Five years of studies, training in the management and limiting of stress, yet nothing. It hurt. You try, but you feel that you are wasting your breath. You ask for a meeting one more time and once again drive a hundred kilometers to sit in the office of the village head. The man with the mustache and beer belly does not even try to understand what you really mean. What, where, who, for whom, what for, why? Culture has never been important. It's true, Jews once lived here, though they're not proud of it; they're not proud of the potato; they're not proud of their small town, either. However, they are proud of the restored tower of Polish kings and have real problems like building a pavement at the church, which the owners of the land adjacent to the road do not approve of. This is a real problem, you think; but you also feel that you are speaking in foreign languages and maybe even different cultural codes. Fortunately, this conversation is different from the others, thankfully this time you're not talking face to face with the village head. There are also two senior officials responsible for the culture and promotion of the region in the room. Unfortunately, you cannot rely on them. But there is also a young lady director of a rural community center who listens to your story with curiosity and growing enthusiasm. She will later confess that she has dreamed of such a large initiative involving and bringing together the residents around common heritage and traditions, but there has never been any money for such widespread activities. She was glad you came. At least her!

What is it like to be a young director of a rural community center? Probably tough. You feed on air, the fantasy that building a community begins with respect for tradition, customs, culture and the past, as well as integration and spending time together. In a village like this one, anyone who can erect his own little palace and would most like to separate himself from others with a fence and drown in his luxuries, regretting that he must live in a country like Poland. There are, of course, the less affluent residents, who must save up for two years to repair a hole in the roof, and those who could not live without the help of the commune. You look at this landscape, alarmed. And yet this is not your only project.

In the meantime, you travel through Poland – that's the job – visit the next communes and in some places it goes easier, while in others it's uphill again. You will ask yourself how to save a heritage that is disappearing; buildings that have hardly survived the test of time; stories that no one remembers. They will say that it is not important to them right now that there are more important issues than cultural education and community, and after work they will sit at their TVs to watch four programs about their region, and on the holidays mechanically replay their grandparents' rituals. What is invisible in these places is already happening on a larger or smaller scale.

There are rural libraries, there are rural cultural houses, there are oases in the churches, there are additional classes in school clubs, there are circles of rural housewives being reactivated after many years. And all this, here and there, are mainly run by young women who have given up on their careers, luxuries, social prestige, and power for the benefit of local activities. You have no doubt that if it were not for them, there would be no holiday of the local community, no celebrations or fairs. You see allies in them, as if a wise and reasonable woman stood behind every village head. It is thanks to them that most of the projects can be successfully implemented.

The village head, after being persuaded, agrees to your project, but the rural community center deals with the organization of it after hours. This is not your provincial city, there are not hundreds of volunteers or trainees who could work for free. You do it yourselves, sacrificing your free time, to get everything on track and cross the Ts, and still some of the things they do here in their own way. During the summer, grand celebrations are of course held. Most things get organized. Then there are thanks given to the village head that he agreed and actively joined in carrying out the cultural project promoting the heritage of the region; to officials responsible for cultural development; to employees of the commune office who got involved in the preparations; to the residents for their active participation in events; to two volunteers who found a few hours to help poster the neighboring villages; to a local carpenter's shop for help to nail the photos onto the fences; to the cultural institute that came out with the initiative; to the provincial authorities for their financial support; to everyone who contributed to this project, and finally to the director of the community center for coordination. You are not taken into account, you will receive flowers from the head secretary, a small gift hand made by the ladies from the village housewives' circle, a touching phone call from the local community center and a spoken 'thank you' from your boss. And there is also the satisfaction that thanks to you, we have matured a little as a community.

## Living in a Beehive

**Khamsa Harabi.** Tunisia

Does anyone of you know where honey is made other than Bees' nests?

I have the answer because I had the chance to meet bees in person. I talked and worked with them. I have been their close friend. I liked their world. Is it not crazy to live in a beehive?

You may ask me how did I find these extraordinary bees? That was not difficult for me. I found them thanks to their buzz. I adored their anthem. I learned it by heart and started buzzing, too.

It all began in late 2017 when I first came across an online application form, calling for voluntary openings in an organization. I opened the link and read the content. They were asking a lot of questions! I skimmed it for the last time and, then, filled in it. The application form came at the right time. I was a fresh graduate who was still recovering from the stress of exams and the fatigue of the daily struggle in the crowded public transportation and university restaurant. I spent three years, surrounded by papers and pens. My only refuge was the few hours that I stole from my busy day to read some pages in my best book, listen to my favorite music, or have long talks with friends.

During the three years, as a student at university, I learned a lot about British and American literature and civilization. I read novels by George Orwell and Nathaniel Hawthorne. I wrote essays on the first- and second-generation poets. I struggled to read the language of Shakespeare. I read about the United States' Declaration of Independence and I repeated again and again with a strong voice: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." My teacher told us that Americans dream big and that The British Empire is "the empire on which the sun never sets"! Is not that amazing! I learned that I have to let my tongue dance inside my mouth, moving right and left, up and down, and back and forth to make sounds. I came to realize how complex my name is not only when trying to explain its meaning to the curious people who were driven by the strangeness of the word, which is a long story that we may dwell into another time, but also because the poor tongues lose balance each time trying to pronounce the very first sound of my name that does not exist in the English phonetic system.

Three years were enough to give me a thorough idea about English history, literature, and language. I learned to write and read in English but, unfortunately, I forget to live. Life was passing by and I was simply busy. Papers and pens were quite selfish; they refused to share me with anything else. They released me after 1095 days; all alone in a melting pot of people. I was exhausted, carefully taking my steps. I was thirsty for life and eager to live every moment with

love and passion. I was waiting to pave the way for the hidden talents inside me to explode. My positive energy was sadly wasted. Thornton Wilder asked: “do any human beings ever realize life, while they live it? – every, every minute?” The answer was NOT me!

In my way to find my true self and save it from the shackles that weakened it, I met the extraordinary bees. They were full of life, passionate, energetic, and shining. They were together strong and happy, moving here and there visiting flowers and collecting their nectar. They did that in a recurrent manner without complaining. I was amazed by their huge effort. They were simply a team. I followed them with a lot of attention and curiosity. I thought they should be well-paid. This is not an easy task. To my surprise, I discovered, later on, that they were volunteers. They gave much of their time and effort to offer free services to their community. They were not ordered or obliged to do so. Their contribution stems from a free will! Lovely minds and souls! I loved them and found my lost self in them.

I joined the team, yes! They reviewed my application and they welcomed me to the family. Young and free they were. Excited and happy I was. It has been two years since becoming a buzzing bee. I learned lessons that were not taught in schools. In our nest, I came to understand that we have much in common than what we expected. We share the same goals and we have the same mission and vision. I lost myself in the breeze and I flew between flowers collecting nectar to make honey. I gave unconditionally and I was rewarded in return. I am not my old self anymore. Winston S Churchill said: “we make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.” I can definitely relate.

I am happier, wiser, and richer thanks to my new life in the bee nest. Whenever they ask me about what we do as buzzing bees in our beehive, I answer with a big smile: “We make honey!”

## The Spirit of the Revolution

**Mouna Ammar.** Tunisia

Books never attracted him. Neither did letters, paper or pens. Like many of his generation, he stole a few, or perhaps many, hours crouched in front of the computer screen, on his way to another planet known only to those who took the same flight. A planet where he saw those who had dedicated their dreams and aspirations to the advancement of their homeland, those who felt suffocated seeing their country's suffocation and rose up to emancipate their societies.

There, Hamza's eyes embraced all the colours of the seasons, all the periods of history down the ages.

The young Egyptian was eager to learn about everything that happened in every corner of the world, near and far. Nothing that was posted on social media passed him by. On any topic of discussion, he was the first to give his views with pride and confidence. This was the only space where brutal soldiers would not be dispatched to stop his mouth and bind his tongue. Here his words did not sneak from between his lips, but swaggered out like a bride with all her dignity, courage and freedom. His thoughts flowed, even raced to be the first translated by keyboards and hard disks.

And in that wide space he met all kinds of people from all over the earth. No borders, no seas or colours divided them: the mind and thought brought them together. It was the haven of dreamers and thinkers young and old.

Here Hamza opened wide the window of friendship to gather ranks of decision-makers, like someone collecting postage stamps from every spot of the earth, each with its own story. And that was how he came to know his friend Hassan from green Tunisia.

On one of those nights of cold weather and heated thoughts, their minds set off on a new and different path. It was the night of freedom and how to defend it.

"Freedom, Hamza, is a word we have been repeating ever since those tender years when we knew only the rosy side of life seen through childish eyes."

"Yes, my friend, this word has become discordant to my ear. I cannot bear to hear it anymore. I do not believe these lies they are weaving. They delude us with things called freedom that we know and they know are a myth."

"We have become like a gathering of the blind who would not see freedom even if it passed before us. We would not believe it even if it presented its identity card, because they have in-

stilled in us the idea that there's no freedom and that anyone who speaks about it has either been touched by madness or is a hypocrite."

"Even if we stole some breaths of it, we would remain like sailors lost in the middle of the ocean, watching it dissolve into the oblivion of darkness, because we have been denied free behaviour and the joy of sensing freedom."

"We want only freedom the size of a pearl in the depths, the size of a grain of sand in our desert, the size of the stone in the dates hanging in the high palm tree."

"And who will listen to you or me and others like us?"

"Will we always remain in the darkness of this cave? Is there is no way to salvation, no way to see for a moment a glimpse of light in life? Will we always be the living dead? Will our societies never change?"

"Our future is obscure, Hassan. The darkness that we live in has deprived me of the hope of finding the path of life. Our aim is difficult in this night, which seems to me almost eternal, sucking up the colours of life."

"No, Hamza! There's still life in our bodies and we must reject this death. Let death hate us, let us declare war on it, because we will die only in a free country, only in a country kindled by the flame of its youth and their ideas, a country that draws the sword of development from the sheath of youth."

"When will this country be liberated? When will our word be the arbiter?"

"Hold on to the life that is still beating inside us. It is an icon that beats inside us and a few like us like, Hamza. Hold on to it and we will remain, our dream will remain, until the bell tolls for that hour."

"Do you think so?"

"I firmly believe it."

They were words filled with the optimism and ambition of young people for whom the world had grown narrow after their ideas were imprisoned in the cells of repression and tyranny.

Those were their last oppressed, dreaming words, words with wings both bright and wilting, both weak and young to fly from sky to sky inside their pulsating bodies. They left the last line to be completed by fate, whose quiver holds things even more mysterious that shine with the first ray of daybreak bursting out from the eyelids of the night and glowing with the sun of freedom.

And those may have been the last words written in the letters of the alphabet, but not the last written in the letters of humanity, in the letters of the dream of the oppressed.

Hamza that night had a strange dream, as weird as the creatures of the ocean depths. That night, Hamza saw that little green patch clinging together in the middle of the map of the brown desert, like the petals of roses when night comes down upon them. He saw swords of thought, minds maturing under the flames, mouths of ash, and hands blooming and bearing forth their fruit – the desire to liberate the country.

And he woke to see in the light of that blessed dawn how the lovers of freedom had revolted, how the bodies of the oppressed youth walked on the earth and the bodies of the students painted their hope and their dream in the squares, as if they were prophets who had come to pluck those societies from a stagnant lake that was about to drown them in its gloomy depths. He saw how their bodies burned with a fire that wavered between anger and hope, throwing forth its sparks onto every inch of the pillars of tyranny to light the road and create lightning in the darkness of time, to light a candle in the nights of those sleeping.

He saw how the history of what was born in the dark continent was written in letters of gold by the fingers of lion cubs who would stand to see nothing marked there but the victory of the nation.

“Here is the interpretation of my dreams!” Hamza shouted with exultation, his whole being shaking with ecstasy as he watched the news programme bring him the sudden good tidings.

His father stared at him in astonishment as if asking about the hidden reason for his yell, but only Hamza knew what was going on in the depths of his dream, in the depths of his soul.

“This is the secret of their optimism and their constant hope to create change in their community. Hassan was right in every word he said.”

From that day on, Hamza waited eagerly for each conversation with his friend, who was now his first source of true information, more than any news programme. And why should it not be so, since he had formed a strong friendship with that young man, a devoted son of Tunisia.

“Hassan, thank God you’re safe, my friend. I really feel proud to call you my friend, son of green Tunisia.”

“Thank you, my brother from the womb of the Arab nation, my brother decision-maker, my brother in the spiral of change.”

“The world will record your uprising against injustice and tyranny as an act of honour and dignity.”

“We are resolved to pursue this uprising, for the truth, for nation and freedom, and for change. We will resist until our last heartbeat and our last drop of blood. Let history bear witness that we wrote our dream on the channels of our water wheels, so that our young men could pour it forth on our land as flood after drought. Our struggle and ambition give us the strength to write a free society into the pages of history.”

“You will create your own spring, I am sure, Hassan. Every teardrop will become a mighty wave, every sigh a fierce wind and every groan a cry that will shame the heavens and bring a blush to the horizon.”

“Thank you, Hamza.”

“I hope that you achieve your hopes and ambitions so that everyone can take you as a model.”

“And I hope that other peoples too will destroy the walls of their cells, built of the stone of tyranny, to see true sunlight and enjoy the spring. Be sure that on our path there is no turning back.”

Hamza’s heart was beating for Tunisia and for his friend in that country.

A week passed, then another, the popular revolution continued, and there were no messages from his friend. But Hamza was confident that he was on the streets of the uprising and in the sit-ins. He had learnt from his words, brimful of with hope and determination, that when the time of action, change and rising up comes, all must answer the call and walk together as one body towards the bright new land, overcoming all the obstacles that will melt away beneath their feet.

“Who would have imagined that Tunisia could shake tyranny and oppression after what seemed to be eternal slumber?” his father remarked.

“Father, the minds and hearts of their young people are wrestling with frustration, but injustice is feeding a volcano of anger in them that will pour forth its lava on every corner of the country.”

The flames of anger raged across Tunisia, kindled by the blood of innocent young men who had raised their hands in the face of wrong to demand freedom and change their society. The earth absorbed the blood wantonly spilled by the hands of injustice, and on that ground the flower of liberty sprang forth from their bodies.

Hamza closely followed the news of the revolution and the new nation impassioned by their march of unity. They were his brothers from the womb of the revolution. They defied the bullets to paint the flag of their homeland crimson.

But while he scanned the news, stirred deep inside by both joy and sorrow, his eyes were arrested by the picture of his friend, the one he had turned into a symbol of youth and force. “The martyr Hassan” was written below the picture. At first he did not believe what he was seeing.

“Maybe it’s another language. The letters of the alphabet cannot write this. It cannot be Hassan.”

He could not restrain himself. Tears of grief and torment ran down his cheeks. He was assailed by a mixture of feelings he had never before tasted, anger mingled with indignation. His eyeballs were awash with burning tears like embers spat out from a fire.

He was unable to suppress his fury or feign calm to his family. They saw the cloud of sorrow that had wiped all signs of joy and enthusiasm from his face.

He forced himself to stand, but the blood froze in his arteries, and the veins and nerves on his skin changed colour. He sat down again on the couch, floundering in his pain. All his anger and indignation turned to a pain that tortured him, almost suffocating him. He could no longer breathe: it was as if the air of the room had been mixed with dust from the bullets that had pierced his friend’s body.

He crawled to the nearest window, hoping some breath of a fresh breeze would heal him, but he was struck by a wave of the toxins permeating his society. He leaned against the wall in a far corner of the room, trying to hold back the torrent of tears flowing from his depths.

His mother ran to him, her heart and her face overcome with dismay: “What happened my son? Are you all right?”

A torrent of questions rained down on him and he did not know which one to answer. He stared at the eyes encircling him and saw the question points taking shape, uncertainty and suspicion planted in them. And he could only answer them: “That martyr who appeared on television was my Tunisian friend Hassan, the one I was always telling you about.”

His father patted him on the shoulder, saying:

“I understand your feelings, son, but there is no need for such grief. He is a martyr for his country and for freedom, a martyr for thought, promise and pride, a martyr whose memory will be kept immortal. Those who love change and freedom, like your friend, do not fear death at all. They delight in the rhythm of the batons and the music of the guns, and their bodies are only a pen that draws dreams and hope.”

And so the revolution continued with the eyes and hearts of the youth until the sun of freedom dawned on January 14. The will of the people was victorious, the night cleared, fate responded to the voices of the youth, and injustice bowed down before their ambition. For theirs were the past and the future.

The souls of the martyrs were pulsing in the streets and alleys, embracing the bodies of the steadfast protesters as they faced the tear gas and gun barrels.

All the world witnessed this moment, especially Hamza, in whom the death of his friend had kindled the flame of woe and hope. Since the cloud of freedom had watered Tunisia's throng of thirsty spirits and proud souls, Hamza began drawing up his plan along with a group of young people who felt injustice and tyranny as discords in their souls. It was a plan for victory and freedom, woven on the warp of those who embodied their hopes in their sister country. They wrote the letters of struggle large, and from their steadfastness drew the hope and determination they wielded to dispel injustice and tyranny from their society.

Barely a week had passed since the foundation stone of freedom and hope was laid in Tunisia, when an uprising broke out from the depths of the rebellious youth, and crowds of young people, with all segments of society joining them by the million, flowed like a torrent of fresh water to invade Tahrir Square. They bore the flags of freedom on their shoulders, and the sweetness of hope and determination sated mouths thirsty for freedom.

Hassan's face passed through Hamza's mind, tinged with affectionate memory in the protest squares garlanded with smiles of victory in both Tunisia and Egypt.

Thus started the Friday of Anger, fed by the waters of the Nile, which has long beaten back tyranny and arrogance with the aid of young dreamers. A Friday for paving the bridge across which that society would pass to a bank they have long dreamed of.

Then followed the Friday of Departure and the will of the people won again, showing that if young people awaken nothing can stop them, and that their will is the captain of the ship of courage, fearlessness and determination in the raging storm of tyranny. And if they persist, they will be greeted with shouts of victory and a holy aura before which the arrogance of darkness bows. The night fears its whispers and it embellishes society.

## The Egg Boy

**Ali Tarhini.** Lebanon

Heroes are said to be made with a special dough that God keeps in one of His closets. It is also said that life itself forces human beings to be heroes: they either rise to the challenge or drown in the hell of life's mighty power. It is said that a human being is not born a hero but rather becomes one should he decide someday to get out of his box and view the world as one house.

I am the 'Egg Boy'. I appear from behind to smash eggs on empty heads and shiny baldness. I smear the egg's grease on wan faces to make people feel their stink, a stink that gushes out even before the egg yolk spews on their skin.

Every day, I gather my rotten eggs kit. I want my eggs raw, disgusting, and easily breakable. I want them as stinking as this world walking toward the abyss.

I used to be a normal kid, the kind that sat mesmerized in front of screens, be it a television, a computer, or a phone. I watched things happen around me as if I were on a different planet. I watched rivers overflow with blood, seas sputter bodies, and wars repeat themselves to the point of boredom. I moved between scenes, trying to justify the fascination of governments with weapons and wars. We are all in danger. The others are the enemy. Your turn will come. They are all coming to seize your land. I saw slaughter, and I kept quiet. I saw bullets flying out of the machine gun of a deranged man who decided to play in real life, and I kept quiet. I heard people talk about the legends of invasion and counter-invasion, and I tried not to panic. These were nightmares that neither fattened nor starved a person.

Hearing someone speak with extreme racism in this cruel world used to make me angry. I did not know I could confront them and change the situation with the simplest of things, with the simplest food that you could find on the table of all human kind. Humans disagree on everything, but they all agree that eggs make for a tasty breakfast in the morning, that eggs can make a change if used appropriately against those who try to bring us back to a past of fanaticism, ignorance, and barbarism.

But how did I become a superhero? I was not bit by a spider, nor hit by an alien radiation. I did not drink a chemical potion either. I had to make a choice: either keep walking with this raging world, or stop. War is not our daily bread. So I took action.

The Egg Boy. "How can eggs fight bullets?" you must think cynically. "How can eggs stop an airplane? How can eggs change a cosmic equation?" Yet they did.

At the right time, in front of cameras, I was able to stop a racist farce on screen with one smash of fresh eggs on the head of a person bragging about his extremism and bigotry. I took several successive blows afterwards, true, but it didn't matter. Just like with an earthquake: there were always aftershocks. But I was able to turn the tables on everyone. I was able to prove, despite my young age, that we could take action and make a change, even with a word or an egg!

Having always been a shy kid in school, I was amazed by the sudden courage I felt out of a sudden. Maybe this was the secret of youth. They were both impetuous and wise. They did not think of the consequences, which made them an unpredictable, exceptional power. They could remove mountains if they wanted to. They could change governments if they wanted to, by the simplest means.

Everybody underestimated us and our voice. But after my incident, the eggs did it for us: everybody now feared us; they now sought our opinion in everything, after we were nobody, unnoticed.

I was embraced by everyone. A few punches from that empty head, and people were offering their help and pledging to pay for my education. Everyone sympathized with me. They treated me with kindness and offered me support. I was like the returning Christ after crucifixion. I was their savior and their leader, by the simplest means there is. It was the intention that raised a deed to the highest levels. My intention was to quiet all the voices that called for rancor and hatred, everyone's demand these days.

Even the President invited me to breakfast in the morning. As we sat at the table talking about youth-related matters and the government's plans to embrace the youth, breakfast was served. A plate of eggs had a place of honor at the center of the table. I looked into the President's eyes. "What a lovely smell!" I said jokingly. "It is the delicious smell of eggs that can change regimes. Please serve me a lot of this, Mr. President".

**A Sea of Words**

**English edition 13<sup>th</sup> year**

**Young People Faced with Climate  
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## The Silence of the Mountain Peaks

Jonathan Ezio Olandi. Italy

The engine of the *Lamborghini* roared uphill on the dirt track, its trailer jumping up and down at every hump in the road. In the darkness before the sunrise, shadowy fronds of rhododendron and *marosuli*<sup>1</sup> rustled on the tractor's wheels and on the sides of its trailer like big woody hands. Up above on the mountain side, the trees blended with the sharp edges of the Alps, swelling together against the dawn sky. My grandfather was leaning on the wheel knob like someone who had been traveling on the same track since his mother had him in a pack basket, every summer, in the morning and in the evening. *Al va pastuur*<sup>2</sup>, they said about men going up the mountains to herd cows, men who woke up before sunrise to milk the animals and who, after long summers of hard work, pinned an edelweiss brooch on their green felt hat. My grandfather was a shepherd to the bone, he was born among the cows. On the tractor's trailer there was a white plastic tank with an aluminium framework where water rolled around at every bump. I wedged in between the tank and the side of the trailer, the branches on the side of the road thumping against my body. In my hands, I held a green felt hat that I kept rubbing in an attempt to make it lose the stiffness typical of new things. Nowadays, you can't be born as a *pastuur*, but you can die as one.

The *Cima Verde*<sup>3</sup> came into sight as the track became wider. The mountain was hunchbacked, just like the silhouette of my hat: the gentle breeze of morning caressed its slopes. An abandoned mountain cottage laid at its feet: it consisted of a stable with a tin roof and narrow windows with iron gratings, a *casera*<sup>4</sup> and a bivouac, a long empty fountain and *tegiöl*<sup>5</sup> and a small dry-stone wall cellar leaned against the side of the mountain. That had always been enough for the *pastuur* living of livestock farming at such high altitudes. With his dark pastures and his blood-coloured mountains, painted gold by the early light of the dawn, the *Buschèt*<sup>6</sup> was still hiding behind the night's curtains. At six o'clock in the morning, at an altitude of two thousand metres, there was only silence. Groundhogs were still asleep underground and the mountains were silent. Every once in a while, the chiming of a cowbell could be heard like a soft sound fleeting through the air for a brief instant before fading among the empty mountain ridges.

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1. Translator's note: the grandfather and the boy from the story speak a dialect from northern Italy. *Marosuli* is a dialectal word which translates as dwarf alder.

2. Translator's note: *Al va pastuur* literally translates as "he's going to work as a shepherd", referred to men going up the mountains in summer to make cow herds graze pastures at high altitudes.

3. Translator's note: *Cima Verde* is the name of one of three peaks of the Bondone Mountain, in Trentino. Its name literally translates as "Green Peak".

4. Translator's note: a "*casera*" is a small building that farmers used to make cheese.

5. Translator's note: hay.

6. Translator's note: a *Buschèt* is a small grove.

The tractor's engine crackled a couple of times before shutting down. *Dom, che 'n va a töli?*, I heard my grandfather say. *Specia!*<sup>8</sup> I said, sitting by the fountain to tie up my mountain boots.

It was the last day we would spend at the *Buschèt*. Summer wasn't over yet, but at that altitude, it was already autumn for the shepherds. The cows were too thirsty: the pasture was dried up and there had been a lack of water over the last season. The tufts of *isega*<sup>9</sup> that had been spared by the rough tongue of cattle had become yellow and dry just like the twigs of a basket. They had turned the *Cima Verde* into a bright yellow cloak speckled with brown rhododendrons and ashy black stones. For many centuries, the lives of shepherds had been intertwined with those prickly grassy waves. When the snow began to melt, the mountains were drenched in streams and little cascades. Throughout the summer, the mountain ridges foamed with cows that painted the pastures green and yellow with their grazing. In autumn, the herds migrated down in the valleys, leaving the mountain ridges like wave crests dotted by white edelweiss petals. One time, snow had even fallen in August, when the cows were still grazing the pastures, and the mountain ridges had become ice white. Nowadays, it didn't happen. The mountains had stopped turning white, even in winter: the water stays underground, hidden. Year after year, water springs kept surfacing ever lower, until they dried up completely. The only way to keep the mountain cottage alive was through the tractor and its water tank. The engine's smoke did what the clouds could no longer do. It didn't make any sense: in fact, our cows were the last ones to graze the pastures on those mountains.

*Dom!*<sup>10</sup> My grandfather and I headed towards the noise of cowbells, dragging our boots on the mountain track. The cows were peacefully scattered on a small plateau. Some of them were still sleeping, their faces huddled up on their side as if trying to smell their own tail. When they got up, they left behind big poodles of ruffled grass. As the daylight grew, the sun rose from behind the sparking peaks and the beasts' shadows became smaller and turned gold. Using my hand to shield my eyes, I stared at their shiny backs, counting them by their names. Two of them, Bianca and Stella, were missing. I tried to listen closely, but the herd was beginning to head towards the mountain cottage and the noise of their cowbells echoed on every mountain side. It was impossible to hear the sound made by two lost cows.

I found them higher on the mountain, next to an abandoned small shepherd house made of rocks and roof stone tiles. *Mostrì vé*, I bursted, *ié egnüdi sü chilò a cercà l'erba fina*<sup>11</sup>. Once you got up there, you could find thousands of white edelweiss with little pointy leaves. When we happened to pass through there, my grandfather would bend over to pick one, saying *vedat, quest l'e 'l fiuur dal pastuur*<sup>12</sup>, then he would put it on his hat and tell

7. Translator's note: *Come on, let's go get them.*

8. Translator's note: *Wait for me!*

9. Translator's note: "*isega*" is a dialectal word for *Festuca*, a grass common in high altitude pastures.

10. Translator's note: *Come!*

11. Translator's note: *old rascals! They came up here in search of the finest grass.*

12. Translator's note: *You see? This is the shepherd's flower.*

me, *an di tala metarée anca ti sul capél la stèla*<sup>13</sup>; and I used to dream about the day when I would put that rare laurel on my head too. *Dom!* I clapped by hands and the two cows took the path, their bloated udders wiggling between their legs. Edelweiss had stopped growing, just like shepherds.

Before reaching the stable, I stopped on a promontory to watch the rising sun. That was one of the few moments that a shepherd could devote to thinking. I lifted my eyes towards a horizon made of still waves. Just like the sunlight, my gaze was broken by the regular mountain ridges of the blue sea of the Alps. I saw the four small buildings of the house cottages besieged by the cows hustling around to fountain. My grandfather was filling it up with the water from the trailer tank. Since the mountains were no longer capped with a soft cloak of snow, the spring that had always fed these pastures had dried up. The tractor came and went everyday with its water tank, but it was useless. *An pöl miga ha iscì tüta l'istá*<sup>14</sup> – my grandfather used to tell me. He was the only *pastuur* left, all the other shepherds had long given up. Without water, life on the mountain was fading away. The pastures were getting increasingly dry, and the cows suffered from thirst. Groundhogs and edelweiss were disappearing. Once the fountain of the *Buschèt* dried up, the season for shepherds would fade away, maybe gone forever.

What would become of the small mountain cottage, of the boots kicking the ground to the chiming of cowbells, of soft udders wiggling step after step, of the hands milking their teats, of the rhythm of the milk dripping in the bucket, of the rough tongues scraping *isega*, one tuft after the other, of the rumen going up and down, of the milk throbbing in the udders? Would only silence be left?

In the stable, the cows were tied to the trough. My grandfather was bent over to milk them, a *sedèl*<sup>15</sup> between his legs. His strong hands grasped the teats rhythmically, making the milk squirt on the bottom of the bucket. His forearms full of veins and his fists grasped the udder with alternate wrings, like two pumping arteries. Like white blood, the milk clotted on his fingers and on the bottom of the bucket, forming a white foam. Too soon, the udder was no longer bloated. With each squeeze, the teats became softer and let out less milk, filling only half of the bucket. *I cala 'l lacc*<sup>16</sup>, said my grandfather, putting four fingers on the side of the *sedèl* to show me where the milk had reached the day before.

For breakfast, I had a *mèzz*<sup>17</sup>, with warm milk wetting my nose and chin. I stared at the *Cima Verde*: it looked like a round udder shining under the sunlight. It was drying up too. My grandfather bent over the fountain as if he wanted to step inside it, and took a sip from a wine bottle that he had tied up to a wire and left floating in the water to cool it down. We untied the chains around

13. Translator's note: *One day, you're going to put it on your hat too.*

14. Translator's note: *We can't keep doing this all summer long.*

15. Translator's note: *bucket.*

16. Translator's note: *They used to make much more.*

17. Translator's note: *ladle used for milk with a volume of half a litre.*

the warm neck of the cows, and they hustled around the fountain, knocking their cowbells on its corners. Some of them wishfully smelled the old tap, remembering better times long gone. We filled it up with the rest of the tank water and after a few moments all that was left on the bottom of the fountain were the wet traces of their saliva.

The sun was shining high, and the heath of July still warmed us up. The cows grazed peacefully, the only things that bother them were blowflies and horseflies and, every once in a while, the shrill whistle of a groundhog. The heat was deceiving: summer had nearly ended, and soon it would all be over. My grandfather scratched his hat and told me *dom, che 'n va a serà l'acqua*<sup>18</sup>. We followed the fountain pipe towards the spring to close it. If the water did come back in spring, when the snow melted, closing the tap would prevent the pipe from breaking because of April nights' ice. That's what a *pastuur* had always done.

On the slopes of the *Cima Verde*, where the ground went down and created a little dip, a cubic concrete basin had been built to collect the water dropping from a small natural spring, reachable through a small iron door. There was a strong smell of moss and wet ground inside, but not a trace of water. The concrete bottom was perfectly dry and the grate filtering the water hole was clean. *L'è m'pair d'agn che l'e isci*<sup>19</sup> – my grandfather's voice echoed on the stone walls. He moved the grate aside and took a rag and a cork from his pocket: he put the rag on the hole, then sealed it with the cork, using his fist to block it. The fountain had already seen its last thirsty mouths. *An sa veed, Buschèt*<sup>20</sup>.

The herd was hustling on the track. The stable was empty. My grandfather took off his hat and hung it on the nail on the door. He pulled the edelweiss from the cord and gave it to me, saying *Tegn, mi la düiperi pü*<sup>21</sup>.

The *Lamborghini* roared on, sneezing a cloud of black smoke in the air. My grandfather released the clutch and the tractor gave a sudden jump onwards before being held back by the weight of its trailer. It started on the track puffing like an old locomotive, the empty tank bouncing up and down. *Dom! Dom!* The cowbells were chiming. With some slaps, my grandfather pushed the sea of the blotched, shiny backs onwards. The sun was shining high on the pastures, and green fronds of rhododendron and *marosuli* rustled on the sides of the cows. I walked behind them, thumped against by the branches that they pushed backwards. I held on to my hat to prevent it from flying away, but when I checked to see if the edelweiss was still there, I saw that it was gone. It had been pushed away by some branch. I turned around to look for it on the dusty road. Far behind, the stable and the other buildings were fading away in the silent shade of the *Cima Verde*. *An sa veed, Buschèt*.<sup>22</sup>

18. Translator's note: *Come, let's go close the water tap.*

19. Translator's note: *It's been like this for a couple of years now.*

20. Translator's note: *I'll see you, Buschèt.*

21. Translator's note: *Here, I do not need it any longer.*

22. Translator's note: *I'll see you, Buschèt.*

## Look at the Voices

Anja Tomljenović. Croatia

I

“Thank you for coming, Sir, it means a lot to us,” she offered her hand with a slightly nervous smile.

“Hello Mia, you don’t have to call me Sir, I have not been a professor for a year now,” he cordially replied looking through his glasses. They both knew it was a habit. She nodded and they walked into the studio which was different from how he had remembered it. The earthquake did not spare even the Academy of Fine Arts.

“As you can see, chunks of the wall have fallen off in some places, the larger windows shattered, but it’s fair to say it could have been worse. At least we still have a place where we can come and work.” A mitigating circumstance. Mia’s cycle of abstract paintings in red was peeking shyly behind a small wooden board pyramid. As far as he knew, she was the only one in Croatia, and possibly beyond, using the natural dye alizarin, extracted from a seaside plant called madder. Not far from the red painting army of smaller canvases, two young men were fidgeting on a still dusty sofa. Visibly excited and a bit nervous, they got up to shake hands with the professor. “You probably remember Roko, and this is our friend Josip, from the Academy of Dramatic Arts.”

“Hi, Roko, nice to meet you, Josip. You know, I recently stumbled upon your documentary on TV, the one talking about the behavior of foraging bees, which increasingly do not leave the hive as they are confused and don’t know how to show the way to pollen and water. It is clear that nature is protesting, problems are obvious: extremely high temperatures, the use of pesticides, inadequate protection of producers. You have your grandfather’s attitude and voice.”

“Thank you,” he replied with thoughtful eyes full of awe.

“Roko, what about you? Any progress on cleaning up Pag?” he hesitated after posing the question; it sounded more humorous in his head.

“You know, professor... It’s getting worse each year. Too many tourists, too little respect,” Roko sighed and shrugged his scrawny shoulders, referring to the abundance of materials for his sculptures. He makes them from tiny pieces of plastic, bottles, glass, syringes, greasy sponges, stray nets and other litter he collects on beaches, in the shape of oversized shells, since the island where he was born was formed by sedimentation of mollusc shells and various sea animals. Who wouldn’t buy such a souvenir?

“I know, I know. Well, one day it just has to get better. So, if I understood it correctly from your e-mail, you want to start a project related to climate change?”

“Yes, you know, any conversation about these things here usually boils down to the melting of the North Pole and the extinction of polar bears. We are not against it, on the contrary, but we find it more productive to do something locally,” Josip replied and Roko continued. “We’ve been discussing what could be done... It is no longer enough to organize exhibitions, people will be slow in coming back to museums and galleries once the preventive measures against the virus are relaxed. We were trying to find a solution which would reach people more directly. Maybe even more emotionally.”

“We must do something, young people are apathetic, many are unemployed... We believe that the society will change if we make sure there is enough space for everyone, if we expand communication channels and invite people to re-examine critically the reality surrounding us,” Mia took over the conversation, readily taking a paper out of a drawer to sketch out their idea.

“Quite ambitious... And you are asking for my support in doing this?”

“Yes, we decided to invite you because you have authority. Nobody takes us seriously. If the whole operation is labelled as ‘vandalism’, we will have achieved nothing.”

“Sure. And if I say no?”

“We’ll have to risk being reported before we manage to set up everything.”

“We’ll pay you whatever it takes,” Josip interrupted.

“Nonsense, I really don’t need the money. So, how have you envisaged the whole thing?”

## II

His wife deftly persuaded him to accept the offer he had recently received by e-mail. She knows him too well after 49 years of marriage. He is a retired professor of art history, which means that apart from writing a few texts for exhibitions held by acquaintances and watering the garden, he usually has no obligations. The cultural scene of Zagreb is rather small, so it’s always more or less limited to the same names. A long time ago, the professor had been witness to the very exciting process of the birth of environmental awareness in art. The period after 1968 called for direct communication between the author and the audience. In doing so, artists abandoned the institutional frameworks of museums and galleries, seeking alternative forms of expression to make their messages reach a wider audience, of those both more and less interested in art. In this endeavor, the public space, in which various art groups and individuals looked for their place in the sun (literally and metaphorically), had proven to be ideal.

As he is rummaging through his personal collection containing exhibition catalogues and old files, he is reflecting on the idea that the Earth should be listened to with a stethoscope, like a man who is coughing severely. It is the very approach that Marko Pogačnik used in his own method of healing the planet, the so-called lithopuncture. He put up installations, usually stones, in highly energetic places in nature, that is, environmentally destroyed locations (industrial zones or abandoned mines). Interestingly, the TOK group had to carry out some of the interventions in public spaces at night, as the professor's protégés will have to do. For instance, the TOK group members put up transparent plastic trash cans on the streets and left marks of car tires on the facade of the *Nama* Department Store. It was particularly amusing when the professor once found postcards showing a factory chimney with the inscription *Greetings from Zagreb* in his mailbox. After the experimental wind blew into the artists' creative lungs, all the problems of crossing from one country to another intervened with the reality. Faith in the humanity, and not to mention faith in art, gradually faded away. The professor got up from the wobbly chair in which he had been rocking just a moment ago and agreed with the result of his own analysis – there is a chronic lack of communication today, especially artistic.

### III

“Dear viewers, we are reporting live from Zrinjevac, where we are speaking with Professor Ljudevit Horvat, one of the most distinguished art history professors in Croatia. Mr. Horvat, this morning the citizens were surprised by a strange sight in the city center. As it happens, sculptures of various women from the Croatian history showed up near the busts on Zrinjevac. Could you tell us what this is about?”

“Well, this intervention aims to provide visibility for women who are still unjustly neglected in the overview of the Croatian history and culture, as well as in the education system, and thus to draw attention to social and environmental issues. Equality is a prerequisite for any serious political and cultural undertaking, so even when it comes to addressing the current issue of climate change, we can help only after we have made sure that everyone's voice is heard.”

He stopped for a moment after spotting out of the corner of his eye two police officers approaching. They looked each other up and down and he breathed a sigh of relief when he realized they would let him finish his thought.

“It is an educational project which symbolically draws attention to the issue of equality, and this is our version which is, of course, one of many. A sculpture is added next to each bust on Zrinjevac, so that, in addition to the well-known faces of men, as of this morning, we can see Jelena Slavna, Katarina Zrinski, Ivana Brlić Mažuranić, Nasta Rojc, Dora Pejačević and Marija Jurić-Zagorka. Each of them with her own recognizable tool – pen, book or sheet music. These temporary sculptures are made of discarded and rotted wood, straw and stones, in full size. The use of natural materials also symbolically indicates the need for discussing the problem at its heart, its root.”

“We have noticed that the citizens’ reactions on social media are diverse, ranging from amazement to disapproval.”

“Yes, it is our responsibility to perceive this example as a seriously engaged initiative which aims to shed some light on contemporary social issues from the perspective of art. Passers-by are expected to become active participants because an artwork is realized only when the spectator recognizes and adopts a critical thought. We urgently need solidarity and community policies which might be a solution in the fight against climate change, as well as fights of any other kind. I would like to highlight that I will personally speak to the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art and suggest her to organize an exhibition on this topic. Also, if you don’t mind, I would like to ask the ones who came up with the idea to say a few more words.”

He looked at Mia, Josip and Roko, who were standing by and watching the interview. As soon as he mentioned them, they froze up. He approached them and walked them towards the camera whispering,

“Now your voice is heard, make sure it resounds.”

## Life After Death

**Marwa Melhem.** Syria

Directly after the clashes ceased, they tried to remove the rubble from the city and to conceal the traces of the war that had taken place there. They declared that the armed war had ended in Homs. The neighborhoods had reconnected. My eagerness to explore the city was inexpressible. I could not wait to walk through the streets that had been battle-fields. My head was buzzing with the surreal cityscape of walls pockmarked with bullet holes and collapsing ceilings. I thought my imagination had run wild, exaggerating the situation, for the city could not possibly be so ravaged!

When I had ascertained that visiting Homs was possible again, I persuaded a friend to come with me. It was unheard of at the time – who would want to see all this devastation? Besides, it was still too scary, for there may be mines or explosives planted in the niches and nooks of buildings. But I insisted; I wanted to observe the scene right after the war, before it was cleaned up. Just to preserve it in my memory for ever.

It was far worse than I had expected. The whole town was in rubble. Dust, shrapnel, deserted remains of furniture. No matter how often this scene was aired on TV, it cannot capture the reality of it. It was beyond a massacre committed against a beautiful city like mine. The windows had fallen out because of the explosions, leaving behind empty frames with no panes. The ceilings had fallen down one on top of the other. The foundations were shaken. The buildings gaped like a mouth that had lost its teeth; a mouth that could not even weep!

I strolled among the houses, into the side-streets. Every few steps, a soldier in search of mines, or representative of international organizations, would call out to us, warning us that it would be best to turn around and go home. But we didn't. Each building took us to the next, every hole in a wall invited us to step through, following the path of a missile that had shot through. My friend and I both felt a deep urge to cry, but we had gone rigid, our tears frozen. It was a cruel day. We knew only too well that we were stepping on grounds which had only yesterday seen people dropping dead. We passed by houses, ruined on top of their furniture. We tried to paint stories in our minds of the people who used to live there. Where were they today? What had befallen them? We took pictures, among piles of garbage that the authorities were about to remove, among barrels that had been made ready to explode, and near the places that had in gone-by days been landmarks of the city.

Days passed after this memory, and I remained in my city, where I completed my studies at the Faculty of Civil Engineering. The more we learnt about buildings, their characteristics and features, how they are erected from nothingness, the images of destruction deepened in me and grew gloomier. I grieved for the city and for what had befallen it. What was worse, I was

desperate. I did not believe it could re-emerge from beneath the death that had raged through it. Despite all the hopes that we the students would become engineers, despite all the reconstruction plans that were proposed as projects by the graduating students, I always felt that we needed something much larger. A greater plan, greater creativity. A renewal that would make the city better than before!

In the last two years, I joined the civil society. I started delving more into the details of societies, wars, economy and the environment. I worked more with experts who had conducted research on the psychological, the economic and the ecological impact of war. With the passing of every day I realized further the monstrosity of what we had been through, and the difficulty of coming up with solutions that would restore the country to make it fit for life.

My relation to the environment has always been special, for I descend originally from a rich mountain village full of springs. In the village, I knew the scent of fresh air, the sweetness of fresh water. I knew mountains covered with trees for as far as your eyes could reach, and our mountain was covered in olive trees of the tastiest fruits ever known.

Last year, in the summer of 2019, an environmental catastrophe hit the village. A hidden landmine exploded, and the fires spread like a wild-fire that devoured the villages and the mountain! The pain was indescribably. As if the atrocities of the war had not been enough, it pursued its crimes, and destroyed over half the trees of the village. I was in the car, watching the ascending mountain road, my heart breaking at the sight of charred trees on both sides. It felt as if the earth and the sky were both screaming with pain. Clouds of smoke were dispersing gradually when the rains had miraculously put out the fires. The farmers wept; the women screamed; and the children stood by stunned by the deadly calamity. The olive trees and pistachio trees had burnt down. The apple trees, and orange trees, and chestnut trees. Everything had become charred, and nothing remained!

When I returned to work, I became obsessed with tracing the impact of war on the Syrian ecology. Everything that these crimes had led to. I wanted to know everything about that aspect of it, for it was my conviction that this second to none of the other horrors that had happened. If the environment was to remain as is meant that our trees would die, our air would lose its purity forever, our waters would dry out, and our animals would starve to death. How were we to continue our lives in a country that had lost everything, and was now also losing its ecology, its beautiful nature, and much of its biological diversity.

The world over there are heated debates about climate change, and the impact of human practices on the ecology and the climate. We are killing the planet, and the greatest blame falls on the major industrial countries and the countries torn apart by war! We have caused endless explosions and toxic emissions through the detonation of bombs, the dissemination of chemical gases, the use of planes, and the destruction of cities. The dust of their buildings has filled the cities. We have murdered and polluted the rivers. The trees of the Eastern Ghouta, which were the lungs of Damascus, have all died.

I contemplated all this while attending a workshop I had joined at a German Organization interested in training Syrian youth to handle public issues. I was in Beirut, among a group of active Syrian youth, who also engaged in civil work. The theme of the workshop focused on reconstruction.

We were asked to prepare a proposal for our conception of the best way to go about reconstruction in Syria. As soon as I heard this, my mind's eye relived every moment of my visit to the demolished city. I re-experienced every pain that the scenes had caused me that day, on to the images of the fires, on to the farmers' tears around their dead trees. I sensed that all these images were closely interconnected. And it was the war that was the only link to bring all these atrocities together. There was no cure but to truly rebuild everything in a better way. In a way that would embrace nature and respect its rights. I went home, and went through my old files from the Faculty of Engineering. I went through books, studies, and lectures on green architecture and sustainable development, and started to write!

In my proposal I offered ideas, blueprints and designs for buildings with green roofs, in which solar walls would be used to generate energy. They were modern buildings that cared for both people and nature. Buildings that contained ventilation systems and natural cooling systems. I also left large areas on the outskirts where wind farms and solar farms could be erected. I dedicated pages to proposals on how to dispose of chemical wastes. I was taken up by enthusiasm as I considered how we could rebuild our cities in such a way as to protect the ecological balance, and to be able to make a healthier use of our natural resources, while recycling what had been used.

For me, this was the best I could offer, falling back on all my experience and knowledge. My proposal was warmly received by the experts, who suggested that I should submit it to the academic staff at the faculties of engineering in Syria. They may, indeed, be taken into consideration in future reconstruction plans.

It may be that not much can be done, but I am grateful that I did not merely stand by, my hands tied in front of all the demolition that had raged through my homeland. There are many years of work ahead of us, where we need to obliterate the effects of war on man and stone. I hope that one day I will look upon Syria and see it regaining its rich and vital greenness.

# I Do Not Forget

**Marios Diakourtis.** Cyprus

The current wave is hitting like a WAVE!

The TVs are buzzing with warnings of a forty-something degree heatwave in between corona-virus updates and advertisements about food delivery. Last week I was sleeping with 3 blankets and now I can't imagine a time before air conditioning.

The balcony culture that recently developed made us less active but more actively observant. Before, the colour of the sky was the kind of thing you accidentally notice in between drives taking you where you were supposed to be. But now, the sky is sometimes all we have and when it goes sour with the shades of a brown, dissipated smoke, you notice.

The first sign is the sunset sunlight stealing through the windows. You see it on the floor like a yellow daisy of doom, the yellow is too bright, and you blame the heatwave for the colour which I guess indirectly has something to do with it. Then you look out of the window, through the mosquito net and see the sky is a bit off and now you blame it on the sunset and by the time you get your legs into the yard, you pass through the kitchen and hear that a fire is blazing less than 10 kilometres away and you marvel at the ugly sky and realise how poignantly pretty it is, like the sinking of the Titanic and you don't want to blame it on yourself.

And when you can't do anything in the present and are too scared to think of the future, you look into the past, the souvenirs, as the French would say, that remind you that you existed before this moment.

A year ago, today I was in a faded green car touring the mountains through unnamed streets paved with dirt and stone on the daily. The ride was bumpy, the driver was annoying more often than not, and my clothing was not quite heat friendly. But at least my view was nice. That's really one of the few things that kept me going, we would be travelling from late noon to sunset and then we would rise before dawn and by the time we were back the sun would let out its first shy screams and truly wake me in my grey, co-passenger seat.

We would drive for hours and small talk only served to keep us awake and that is what we did. We talked about the price of cars imported from the UK when we were on asphalt, we talked about how the rain makes the road a pool of mud when we passed by a bridge, we talked about the mating habits of snakes when we saw some in the middle of the road and complained that they stupidly wander in the middle of the road when in reality the stupid trespassers were us.

One day, when the driver was one of the young and actually useful people that got to where they are because of their effort and not their connections, we talked about some strange trees. Strange, not because they had a weird shape, nor because they were purple or something unnatural like that but because of something abnormal in the way they stood by each other.

They were just rows against columns of perfectly spaced trees, as if planted by a meticulous god that cared about his creations. It spanned across the mountainside and seemed almost endless had it not been for the asphalt on which we were cruising on and the massive dead land on which only soil grew, somewhere between the imagined lines separating occupied Cyprus from free Cyprus.

My gaze was assessing this phenomenon for a while, following it with each turn and I soon felt the driver stealing some glances towards me, observing me with curiosity.

Knowing I had his attention I asked, “Why are the trees planted like that?” which looking back at it showed just how ignorant I was about my island, its history, and its topography.

He responded coolly and precisely, neither judging me nor congratulating me for my observation, “They were planted by the government after the fire of Tylliria, to replenish the forest that burnt down from the conflict”.

That was all he was willing to say and all that I was willing to listen, so I responded with “I see” and put a full stop to that conversation.

His answer was so specifically vague, but impressive nevertheless, and although I did not know whose arms started the fire, nor when, I am inclined to assume it’s the Turks in 1974 and I don’t ponder it too much, even if I may be wrong. What was so impressive though was the herculean mobilization of the government which managed to artificially reconstruct an entire forest spanning through kilometres of changing altitude DECADES AGO, and now planting a few trees in the park is televised as if Iron Man descended from the sky and single-handedly restored half the problems the typical Cypriot is facing.

We were on our way back and the scenery which welcomed us was drastically changing with each turn of the wheels. Our descend took us through multiple villages which sprouted long ago and were dying at their own pace. Not everything can serve agritourism you know. We passed by small supermarkets that are not owned by a billionaire living in another country, and a few dams whose water never meets the sea, as freshwater is a very useful hostage in an island that likes to pretend it’s not a victim of desertification.

We were about 2 kilometres from our destination when on the left, high on the mountaintop some black lines jutted out like rifles on a soldier’s back. Crooked, ashy, and ugly, they were the remains and reminders of last year’s largest fire which burned an entire forest hidden on the back of the mountain. You see, mountains in Cyprus are not like mountains around the world

and this is not me being sentimental about my island. In Cyprus, every bend of the earth hides either a blessing or a scar. You can see a verdant voluptuousness climbing up to a perfect blue, you can see fields that spread like the hair of a golden statue, you can see meek creatures like the hedgehog and the sparrow praying for tomorrow and some claim that they can see God. But there, where the road bends and what you couldn't see becomes visible, you can see military posts defending their lines from each other, you can see a hairy hand flinging its expired cigarette butt out the car's window, you can see the ghost of the hare next to the burnt trees on the burnt earth and some claim that God is dead.

The earth surely forgives her children many things, but for her to forgive us she must be alive, which I do not worry too much about, but for us to be forgiven, we must be alive, and that more troubling.

Soon we were back on the military camp and it was Friday, which for me meant that I was going home for the weekend. As soon as I could reach civilisation again (which ironically meant the canteen of the camp) and could turn on Wi-Fi, a Facebook notification popped up reminding me that a march for climate change was taking place at eleven in the morning.

I swiped it away.

On the one hand because I am officially allowed to leave the camp at noon and on the other hand because something in me did not feel as brave or confident yet. I knew I could manoeuvre my way out earlier, but I didn't. I guess that's what a change requires, a motion that is not part of the timetable, and I guess that's why this island hardly sees a change, because of our inertia, our unwillingness to move, to act, to react.

A few months later my army days were over, I went to university in another country that I've grown to respect, admire and even miss now that I am forced to evacuate it early, but to be as frank as words let me be, I do not *love* that country and it doesn't feel mine. Mine, not in terms of ownership but in terms of belonging. I meticulously recycle there and with every move I make, I erase my trace like erasing my footprints on the sand but in my own country I couldn't care half as much. Is it because an innate sense of justice does not allow me to let others feel the consequences of my action? Is it because the people in my country barely planted the seed of environmental consciousness when I was growing up, so now I associate my country with a landfill I can only exploit? Or am I just a forgetful Cypriot? A Cypriot that forgets his habits when he is in another country and forgets all that he has learned when he is back at home. Growing up my state-provided notebooks were labelled with the ominous Δεν ξεχνώ (I do not forget) painted like a bitter motto in the minds of all children, so what happened? Why do we forget something happened as soon as the TV stops talking about it? I bet you in a year the coronavirus will die like an old meme and will be used only as an excuse by employers and economists for the incompetence of the market. So perhaps this is not just a Cypriot trait. The whole world adores its trivia of "a hundred years ago today some guy did this" and "two hundred years ago today another guy invented that" but what about those things whose consequences need no reminder as they are in your very eyes and yet you, and I, forget them.

There are things you cannot change and there are things you can change. Remembering the perfectly spaced trees I saw a year ago and seeing the smoke from my window now I can't help feeling a bit like water. Neutral. Passive. Going where the flow takes me. There is much of this world that CAN be fixed and do not let people tell you otherwise. Of course, it will take time, a long time, so why waste more time debating whether something should happen. No summer is really a summer in my island unless a bunch of wildfires destroy a couple of hectares of wild growth. When I started writing this the temperature in the capital was 44 degrees Celsius, over ten degrees above the expected for the season, and right now it is back to normal and the night breeze is almost chilly. My island is quite literally a hotspot for climate change and each year means more heat, more fires, less trees, less life.

The whole “my government is a selfish, money-hungry machine that does not care about its people” narrative is quite tiring and stolen from the Bolsheviks from a century ago which they stole from the French another century or so ago. News flash: the government can't do everything so we might as well as explain our stance to those who cannot see what we see, educate those who need it and cooperate with those who can do something about it.

If there's anything this limited view from my window has taught me is that reality can change so quickly and so drastically that you can hardly call it a reality if you compare it with what you had before. Perhaps now that we have isolated ourselves for so long, we can understand how much better we can be when we are together. I do not believe that the Earth punished us so we can change, the Earth does not care if we change, whether we all fry to death in tomorrow's heatwave or live for centuries to come, she will still revolute around the same sun, against the constellation of the Virgo, in perfect harmony with the cosmos until her star dies, but what about us? Can we do that?

## It All Used To Be Different

**Karlo Roginek.** Croatia

It's summer, and the sun is slowly merging with the land in the distance. A 26-year old man with joy in his heart is walking towards his grandparents Ivica and Marija's house. Soon all three are sipping juice on the front terrace. "Grandpa, grandma, how are you?" The grandma looks at him lovingly, the way only grandmas who have been through a lot can. "Well, my dear Mislav, we are hanging in there. You know, it's easier when we think of all of you scattered around the world, and even better when you come and visit." Mislav responds with a big smile. "And you grandpa, what about you, do you still go fishing?" Grandpa speaks slowly, with eyes always looking somewhere into the distance, out into the open sea. "I do, my boy, you know very well I can't do without it. The sea is my second home." "And, is there any fish? I was just thinking that the two of us could go out tomorrow at the break of dawn, like we used to when I was little, remember?" Mislav looks raptly at his grandpa, who seems to be going back to a time fifteen years ago when both of them would go fishing. "I remember, my boy, I very much do, but everything has changed, there's not as much fish as there used to be and it's all different now." Mislav now looks at him with concern. "Let's go tomorrow and you'll tell me all about it, eh? I still have a few errands to run in the town." "Of course, whatever you want. You know it's always been a great pleasure for me to sail with you."

The night air is getting thinner as Mislav and grandpa Ivica are slowly treading towards the old boat. "How old is she now, grandpa?" "Ah, she's seen her share, my Blue Lagoon. This fall she'll be turning fifty." They get into the nearly fifty-year-old boat and set off slowly, the old boat stirring the sleepy and perfectly still sea with its ripples. "Grandpa, are the traps where they used to be?" "You know, for years they'd been in the same spots, but over the last few years I've had to move them all. They would be totally empty. There used to be five, and now I throw two and usually those turn up empty as well." Mislav is now looking worriedly at his grandpa, whose face is betraying sadness. "Why is that happening, grandpa, overfishing or...?" "Of course, too much fishing now and for years, excessively, but that's not the main reason. There are more things at play." "What then, the platform on the other side of the island?" "Yes, my boy, that, too, has helped drive fish away from here, but that's not the main reason either. Since they put it up there some ten years ago, you could see there was less fish, but there still was some. Hold on, we're here." Grandpa slowly pulls the first trap out of the sea, and lo and behold, only two tiny fish inside. "There, you see. Go on, swim away, grow up a little bit and maybe we'll meet again. Nothing, that's what I'm telling you. Even if you do catch anything, the fish is half the size of what it used to be." The sun is now up in its full glory out on the horizon, starting to rouse and warm up the sea with its rays.

Mislav looks pensively out into the distance, and then goes on. "Grandpa, why is that so? Has the climate really changed as much as they say?" "Look, those people up there who study all that

know a lot more about it, but what I know is that it all used to be different. I mean, the weather was different. For instance, it was never this hot. It would get hot, the sun would heat it up, but this sun seems to be scorching everything in sight. We also get more and more fires. I don't think that's a coincidence. You know, my boy, the sea is warmer, too. Those guys up there may not know it, or those who come here for a dip in the summer. They like it, but we who were born here know the difference between the sea being 24 or 26 degrees Celsius." "So, you do believe in this global warming thing? I would never have thought that about you. I mean, you are old school, aren't you?" Mislav is laughing and teasing his grandpa, who responds with a soft smile. "I may be whatever I am, but I don't know about this global warming stuff. I can only tell you what I see and feel, and my sight and feeling have rarely tricked me. The sea is warmer and the sun is not warm, it's scorching. That's what I know. Here, here's the other trap." Again grandpa aims slowly and patiently and then pulls out the trap from the sea, but there's not a single fish inside. "There, this has become the everyday of fishing. This is that global warming of yours." Mislav looks pensively. "Grandpa, but fish cannot die because the sea is warmer, it's something else, isn't it?" "Yes, yes, it's something else, but it's all connected with nature. Since 2011, there's been less and less fish in our sea because other, tropical kinds of fish have arrived. Dusky spinefoot, then marbled spinefoot, silver-cheeked toadfish, brushtooth lizardfish and recently tripletail, all of them cause a lot of trouble. They simply feed on our fish, so what's left for us? The silver-cheeked toadfish is the worst. I've come across it several times, or rather, seen what it does. It tears up your net and eats your fish, and is very poisonous to boot."

Grandpa Ivica is explaining to Mislav the main reason for the increasingly poor catch, and Mislav is sad because he knows how sad grandma will be when she finds out she can't prepare fresh fish for lunch. "Grandpa, these fishes came through the Suez Canal?" "Yes, that's what they say, that they came from the Red Sea through the Suez Canal, but who knows. The fish goes where it wants and where it suits it. You know, if the entire Adriatic hadn't become warmer, they would never have reached us, but what can you do, it's in our nature to exploit for as long as we can." "Grandpa, we have to do something about it, put a stop to it somehow." "And what can we do, my boy, go alone against the world?" "Perhaps not against the whole world, but I for one am going to do something about it. I'll go to the town, I'll start something. Surely others, too, see what's going on?" "Oh yes, people see everything and the older ones know everything, but that's just how we are, everyone keeps silent because they think there's no other way. I'm old now, but you are so young and so full of vitality, you could do something."

The sun is now high up in the sky, and grandpa Ivica and grandson Mislav are coming back from their morning sail because they've run out of fish to go on fishing. "You know, grandpa, I've often missed these mornings and evenings with you. Do you remember how we used to sail out every day and be at sea for hours, talking about how one day I'll buy a big ship and how we'll travel the whole world with it? Only later did I realize that it was then that I had truly enjoyed life without even being aware of it. Now everything is somehow different, just like you said yesterday, right?" Grandpa answers him with wistful eyes reflecting the many years spent out at sea. "You know, I've sailed practically every sea, for almost fifty years, and have experienced both good times and bad times, but being here, at home, fishing with my little

grandson was my favorite thing. I, too, miss those mornings and evenings. You know, I often have the feeling that we've all sailed away somewhere far, as if we have distanced ourselves too much from nature and from what we are. I know this is just an old man talking, but people have started to live artificially, and our planet is natural. We have forgotten that nature is alive and that it is feeding us." "You've put it beautifully, grandpa, really beautifully. Are we going to stop by our cabin, like we used to?" "We can, my boy, but I'm afraid you'll be disappointed with that as well." "Why do you say that?" "No point in telling you, you'll see for yourself."

Grandpa Ivica and grandson Mislav are walking next to each other by the sea, just like they used to fifteen-odd years ago, only now Mislav is taller than his grandpa. The tourists have already arrived to the beach, taking in the morning sun rays without worrying about which fish species are swimming in the Adriatic or why the Adriatic is getting warmer. They test the water temperature with their toes, probably wishing it to be a bit warmer, and the majority of them don't understand what that means for people like Ivica, especially the younger ones who fish, but all the others as well. "Wait, grandpa, you can't even see our cabin anymore? How could they build all this, right on the waterfront?" "Well, my boy, money and human greed can do anything. Don't be upset, I know how you feel." Together they go behind a large apartment building and look at the tiny cabin where grandpa always used to have a small table, a few chairs and some basic tools. "I can't believe this! Grandpa, you can't even see the sea from here anymore. Those people, how could they build here?" They take out the chairs and sit outside by the cabin. "Really, you said it right, grandpa, everything is different and everything has changed. People want to go into the sea and exhaust it completely, and nature is now fighting back. Do you remember when we talked about me building a house here some day and you warning me that I should be careful about the distance from the sea and that I probably wouldn't be able to do it this close?" Grandpa looks in front of himself and, as if feeling the disappointment smoldering in Mislav, tries to comfort him. "I know, Mislav, I remember very well. Let them be, we can look at the sea from other places. There's no happiness in being able to touch the sea from your balcony if you haven't gotten there with honesty and respect for nature because she is our mother, she feeds us, and we all tend to forget that." Mislav cheers up at his grandpa's words. "That's right, grandpa, and a mother is worth fighting for! I will launch a petition and found an association and start fighting for nature, for our coast and for our sea because I want to stop this mad exploitation. Grandpa, will you help me do that?" Grandpa looks at him with his wise sailor's eyes and replies, "Of course, my boy, with you I'd sail to the ends of the earth."

## The Riverman

**Abdullah Adel Ali Mansour Darwiah.** Egypt

He was born here. He was born there. He was born in the river. He knows no borders. He knows no fatherland. He knows no land. He was a fish that dove into the depths; a bird that soared high; water that embraced ships. He was a body and a dreaming soul. He moved where God's hand guided him, saving the living and the dead. He was the Riverman, the name he came to be known by. A glimpse decided his destiny; at first he belied it, then he believed it. The flood had reaped a hundred and fifty souls. The newspapers honored them by listing their names. The divers honored them, but combed the river for their remains. A hundred and twenty were found; the rest, it was said, had ascended to heaven, been eaten by fish, turned into angels, become valuable relics, changed into trees that grew along the banks, into silt that was used on fields, into rains that quenched the dry land. Their truth was lost with their absence.

That was the case with Mosbah. He believed in her presence everywhere. She was inside him, etched into his heart; engraved on the wall of his room, tattooed on his body until hers was found, the remains of hers. The story is just at the beginning, as if the flood had happened yesterday, had happened this hour, when he was ten, when in his thirties. His hair is black, and his hair is peppered with streaks of white. He's by the sea, by the ocean, at the end of the world, between life and death, in search of her. She may still be there, awaiting to be saved. Yet he does but one thing. One act may be his savior, may be his salvation and resurrection. He retrieves the story, remembers, when he was little, her drowning in the river. He kept searching for her until the evening. The authorities had warned of the flood. They published the news two days before it happened. If they had had a TV back then, a radio, a local paper, it would have spared his mother's life. She would not have gone to find their livelihood on the banks that day.

He learnt how to dive with the purpose of finding her. During the first few months, he found necklaces, and rings, and little boxes, and mobile phones, and old coins. The idea seemed exciting with the passage of time. A personal challenge. He became a collector of these relics. But he kept rummaging for his mother's body. Had it disintegrated? Or was it still there as is? He did find limbs; bones; and once he made a huge discovery of ten skulls. He thought they may belong to a boat that had sunk. But he did not wish to find out the date of that incident. Nor the investigations that were made. He just wanted to find his mother's body. He promised after that to quit rummaging for these treasures of the river. He kept these unique pieces in his house. The authorities were interested in the skulls, and kept them in the city museum, and he feared his mother would one day become such a relic to be visited by people. The idea to build a little boat struck him. This way he could stretch out along the river, and not be limited to the area where his mother's body disappeared. Other ideas followed. He asked a friend who could swim and dive to help him. This was the first time he had told anyone to be with him. He informed him of the mission, and what he found in the depths. He told him of the dangers and the hardships below.

He bought another diving suit. Before that he refused for the third time to pray for her soul. He believed the body had to appear to be prayed for. Then buried in the cemetery. How could you pray for an absent body? A body swallowed by the water? Such a draining feeling. It made him feel ashamed; not just death, but the absence of the body. When he longed for her, which way should he point? And when he needed to ask her about something, where should he go? The body was like the icon he revolved around. And the river may one day clear these queries about absence.

In the evening, he would visit all homes. He would inform them of tomorrow's weather; the clothes that would protect them from the harshness of nature. He was driven by his love to help, by being the messenger of the evening. He would smile as he foretold the temperature, the expected rain, the impact of winds and storms. The Riverman had become the Eveningman. He would also show them his mother's photo, in case they may know anything about her. He would ask, "Is she ill? Lost?" To which he would reply, "No, she's dead. I'm not sure. I just want her body back."

That was his second job, to spread the news, to tell the people of what was happening around them, to ameliorate the next calamity. He did not prevent it from happening; he just prevented more victims falling. He knew that a tiny news item can save thousands from the flood. He dedicated his life to this job, in the hope to rectify the helplessness of his childhood. Back then he was nailed to the doorstep, awaiting his mother's return. Any news, no matter how small, that would tell him the world was alright. That the small world of his mother was still alive. The world of the little village where the Nile met the Mediterranean. It's more of an isolated village, at the mercy of the sea, the river and the rain. He was the first to spread the weather forecast in megaphones traveling by the little stone huts. He was the first to spread information of the ebb and tide, of nature, and of how to deal with it, with the aim to prevent the death of the villages. He spread information of underwater creatures, of dead fish because of the pollution, of the waste. The people learnt about the dangers of dumping waste, because he lived in the worlds of the land and the water. They would lose this world if their hands continued to mess with it. He also warned them that the flood happens because the water spits their pollutants back in their faces. His ideas found resonance. He was the official spokesman for a village that had gained the state's appreciation and respect for its preservation of life.

At times he would stop working for days. It was then that he felt the futility of what he was doing. It would not bring back his mother. When his sorrows tormented him, he feared that the fish may have devoured her body in one meal. Or the sea may have become her final resting place. He wondered if the sea was fit to be a final resting place; and can corpses dissolve and become traceless. The corpses that had burnt; corpses that had been blown up in explosions; what grave was there for them? Or would it be symbolic? Yes, maybe it was. He made her a special grave, in which he buried a huge framed photo of hers, with some of the treasures he had retrieved from the river when he worked in the depths. The coins and the relics in the hope that one day they would interact and create a body for his mother in her grave. That was his only hope. He would not be able to see her ever again, except in his dreams. And even these were at times difficult

to attain. It was not easy to achieve this aim either. What was he to do then? What were the others to do when they longed for the victims of life, or rather those who had left suddenly with no warning? He realizes that forgetfulness alone could douse the fire raging in his heart; these feelings of remorse and shame. They will remain his companions for the rest of his life. Despite all his efforts to immortalize what her happened. He established 'The Foundation to Save the Dead', which is meant for people who were killed by torrents and floods, who were blown about by nature. He made his room the HQ for the foundation, placing a sign on top of the door to the room and the main entrance to the house. There were three members registered in this new foundation. Every now and then, he would travel to the villages around theirs, spreading the story of these victims. Telling how a small piece of news can help. He sought to make people aware of what was happening around them. And the foundation became well-known. The media started noticing it, but he had left its affairs in the hands of others who shared his belief.

He went back to his activities in the depths. At times he became a rescuer when he saw someone fall off a bridge, or a cruiser, or even off a dinghy that carried people across to the other shore. He would pull the body towards him, and save the person in one or two minutes. He praised himself for this speed and amazing ability. And the grateful looks of the people standing by in stupor. It may be good to watch someone brought back from an inevitable death, with the loss of all hope in survival. Even to imagine the scene of death that will not be seen. He wanted to ask them what they felt, as the water swallowed them into its depths. He hoped to find an image closer to the reality of the last seconds in his mother's life. But he always relented in the last minute. He never had the courage to ask any of those he had saved. He did not know why; he just did. People may think differently in that short moment. That's too complicated. In the final scene, people were all alike in their look, in their horror, in their fear. They battled with death, and then they surrenders with the last breath. There was nothing interesting in knowing all these things – or rather in knowing what his mother had been through. It was a torment on top of his torment. He would not be able to bear it. That is why he would withdraw from the opposite shore, and directly return to his new room on the bank. He would sip a cup of tea, and in the evening spread the news. He would return to the river, but do nothing. He would just stay there, oblivious of time. Morning would break, or he would spend the whole night, then sneak back into the house and sleep till the evening. He doesn't work, not today and not for another couple of days. Until this bewilderment has passed. Then he returns to do what everyone should do. It is life at its strangest; with all its details. When he dives into the depths, he approaches the sky. A long gaze, as if he is addressing someone at height. An address of the heart that no one hears, then he lets his body glide down again in one go.

Later, he does not think of what had happened. Everything is tied to the depths, even his return to the boat. He may not be lucky to find anything after a tiresome search, or he finds only little. His day may be good if he finds a relic, which rarely happens. But he does not wonder about the stories of the things he finds. He does not want to know nor to imagine. The end was with him. Just as his mother's end was with someone else. She had died for him to see, for him to live, and for others to live at his hands.

Thus went his story; he wrote it here, there, at sea, in the skies. He went out the day his mother passed away – that same hour – and he never returned. No one was waiting for him but the little girl who knocked at his door to help her, but his mother’s call was closer. In his will, he requested to be buried by the river if his body were found, for he was the angry Riverman at times, and the son of water that filled him with confusion. Like him, it was incomprehensible, double-faced. He would stare in it, to see his own reflection, her reflection. The reflection of man who lived contradictory phases of desiring life and desiring death, of desiring treasures, or finding bodies. The desire of saving everyone, or the desire to save his mother alone. Yet he was satisfied with what he had done. He had saved the creatures of the land by spreading the news. He had saved the creatures of the river by spreading dangers. In his will he requested that the authorities not be notified, or else he would become a relic in a museum. Like his mother. And ten skulls.

The End

“The name of the Foundation for Saving the Dead was changed to the Foundation of Saving Life. It now had three HQs, with 5,000 volunteers. It aims at protecting the living by preventing pollution, which destroys life and prevents development, the protection of people working on the river, at sea or on their borders, by providing safe clothing in the case of floods or the sinking of a boat. It also worked on training the inhabitants of coastal cities in these basics. The foundation has helped a hundred thousand people, and saved two million, because of its principles of aid, protection and rescue”.

*This is not a fact, but I hope that one day it becomes one.*

## Ascension

Anne Rospabé. France

This time it was my turn to try to reach the surface. The light was becoming increasingly appealing. Having got used to the darkness of the depths, knowing that I would soon set off again on the path of my ancestors had made the darkness blacker, the abysses colder. I often swam to the top of the buildings, where the light penetrated a little more, and I remained there imagining the life going on up there. But soon these eyes that were so accustomed to the darkness became tired, my skin became inflamed and I decided to meet up with my brothers and sisters down there.

Not everything was that dark, the seabed was a fascinating beauty. The bluish cliffs covered with seaweed, the striking contrasts of the reddish corals, and the ever changing light offered us a different spectacle every day. The submerged town where we lived was beautiful, its hills bursting with life and the columns of the ancient temples providing a memorable playground for the youngest.

Our misfortune came from elsewhere. To tell the truth, nobody remembered where this uncontrollable desire we all possessed to return to terra firma came from. Our memory was no longer what it used to be, the seabed had changed our bodies and with them our minds. We knew we were no longer the same. Gills had replaced the lungs of the past, our skin was finer and so smooth. I wonder whether if our brothers of the past could see us like this they would recognise us. It matters little in the end. They were no longer there; all that remained of our race was our colony.

They had vanished and we didn't know why; only that the water had slowly swallowed everything, the sunlight had become increasingly hotter and their world had become unbearable. Thus we found refuge in their houses, which now paved the ocean floor. Sometimes someone found a picture or a book floating in a house, and we would try to decipher it as it might give us some clues about the catastrophe that had sent us down so deep. But we had long forgotten the shape that words make on paper, and in any case our vision was not good enough to distinguish them. We passed these objects to each other, everyone holding them in their webbed hands and trying to elicit the memories. From time to time someone had a flash of understanding, but what they saw made them so ashamed that they never dared speak it and remained silent after the experience. Their reactions awakened our curiosity, and we wondered where such guilt came from. What had our ancestors done for this to still haunt us, so many mutations and generations later?

Returning to the surface was a dangerous game. I had been told stories, probably to scare me, but I only half believed them. A friend of mine had told me that, once out of the water, the air would burn my lungs, the light would dry my skin, my legs would no longer be strong enough to

hold me, so I would therefore crawl at first. Like the first vertebrates that, long ago, had begun to conquer the continents by dragging their bodies outside the water. I would have to recommence the cycle.

All this sounded very painful to me, but it was almost unthinkable that such a metamorphosis could happen without it. So I will crawl. My plan was first to find vegetation to shelter, as far as possible, from the sunbeams. Then to force my body to return to the shape it had lost over the years, perhaps to become bipedal again. Once on my legs, I will try to walk. This will take a little longer, but I'm confident. The warmth and the light will be the most dangerous. I'm afraid of being thirsty and when going to a source of water to drink, of letting myself plunge again into this darker, cooler and more familiar habitat.

If only we could be happy down there. Some, whose memory quickly eroded, swam more cheerfully than others. They had lost the urge to see the surface again one day. They now contented themselves with the beauty of the seabed, which they could finally appreciate in its entirety. We had noticed that their bodies changed quickly. Their arms flattened and, most noticeably, they no longer had eyelashes. Looking closely, you could see that a thin fin was beginning to grow on their back. They swam fast and well and seemed fulfilled when the warm currents brought more food. When the sunbeams managed to pierce the murkiness of the water until reaching us, they stopped and looked. Once the light had gone, they were happy to have been able to glimpse it at least for a moment. I was surprised that I envied them, them and their simple life devoid of the latent discontent that gnawed at me every day. They distanced themselves from the human state, but was that so terrible?

My skin was beginning to hurt, it was perhaps time to leave my building and meet my loved ones for the night. Moving along the vertical surface, I slowed down from time to time to look at the drawings painted so long ago on these walls. Some of them were not covered in seaweed but it wouldn't take long. I had to make the most of it for the last time. I didn't recognise anything familiar in this graffiti but I always hoped I could detect a new detail that would make it meaningful.

Once at the bottom, the now colder water quickly calmed my skin, and the now almost opaque darkness relaxed my eyes. I felt better. I then reached my place, a bedroom on the concrete which, covered by a soft greenish foam, paradoxically had a warm side. Tired, I plunged into a dreamless sleep.

In the darkness of the night, a light woke me. A weak glow of course, but in the opacity of the depths every beam looks like a small sun. Was it day already? It is so early that everything is motionless. This light is strange, too direct, not diffuse enough. I rubbed my eyes, still half asleep. By looking more closely, it seemed as if an object reflected the beams of the sun that had just started to rise. It was just a glow and had only woken me, just me. Usually nobody takes notice of a departure. It was time, I felt it. This light could only be a sign, the elements giving

me permission to reach the surface. I remained motionless for a moment; I knew I would begin my ascension at any time.

Without saying goodbye, I took a last gulp of water, salted and so cold, and I soared. So much time wondering what was hidden beyond the water. A few more flaps, and finally I would enable the swallowed men to resume their place on earth. Such joy, such euphoria. I swim quickly, swept along by my feelings. The water pressure diminishes; I have to stop for a moment. From such a height, I can barely see my town, which looks so calm.

Something brushes me. I turn around, but there's nothing. But it is there, moving slowly at the discretion of the currents. I stretch my arm and catch it. It is hard yet malleable, and strangely transparent for my poorly adapted eyes. A bottle? No doubt the glow came from here. I see a second one, and then a third. All these objects are oppressive. Then a bag. A cup. I soar a little higher. A yogurt pot? A package, then two, then ten. Soon, I find myself surrounded and I can hardly see a few metres ahead. Who put them there? How stupid, how selfish to spill all this waste in our home. I was angry.

I stayed there outraged wondering who could have polluted our oceans like this when the outrage became a huge sudden shock. I was floating like some time ago, in the same position, in the same place, with the object that had guided me here always in my hands, and yet everything was different from the previous moment.

The moment before, my mind was just filled with questions, and each of these questions had now found an answer.

My memory, which in the past was so empty, was now full.

I remembered. There were so many of us then and we were so greedy that our actions had made the sun burning hot and the oceans acidic. Even when the water began to rise, we didn't stop. We deprived our brothers and sisters of their lands to steal their resources, we chose denial over reality, inaction over survival. We let our fellow humans die, reduced those who were not from our race to slaves, we unbalanced the balance. What pain we had caused. Shame invaded me like a blast of air, I could hardly breathe. Unbearable, it enveloped everything, impossible to shake off. Why had we forgotten? Did denial define our species? Why rise up then...? Me who wanted to restart the cycle, how could I retread the firm ground knowing that my children would later destroy it once again?

The surface was there, so close, so beautiful.

I looked back towards the depths. Once my prison, I accepted that the abysses had become a deserved punishment. Gnawed by shame and drained of all energy, I stop dead. I let myself fall, gently. The floating objects move away, like the surface. I won't go back so high. It is no longer my world.

Slowly, gradually, I feel my memory weaken. The details of my ascension become difficult to grasp. Never mind. All the better for me to forget. Then my already webbed hands flatten out even more. My legs merge together, forming a single fin. My eyes widen, my eyelids disappear. I continue to descend. It is darker but this doesn't make me sadder. It is my home down there, I've lost any right to the surface and, back in the depths, I feel an intense peace, as if everything is returning to its natural state.

I'll remain down there. In this fall I feel the solace that this last human act will have been an act of repentance.

## The Chronicle of Exacerbating Gaia

Maia Serene Zennie. Lebanon

“Human recklessness has always been the driver to ruin...,” she skidded to a halt, her vision a luster of tears as a bright white spotlight nearly blinded her while a trickle of sweat rolled down her temple uncouthly and caressed her bulbous cheek for a moment before she brushed it off. The dark eyes that trained on her lithe form made addressing such a large and prestigious crowd even more inexorable, she thought, just as someone cleared his throat as if to wake her up from her sudden, trailing silence.

She caught a glimpse of her name – *Nevaeh Onterre* – and of the other recognized youth ecstatically awaiting their turn to lecture on a plethora of posters neatly embellishing the wall to her side, and felt a gush of pride flutter in her chest.

“Climate change has been witnessed over the past decades and regarded lightly until the ‘Ob-cyespazobacillus’ raid. It almost seemed like fate had finally decided to avenge humanity for the irreversible mutilation, first by progressively shocking us with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, and thereafter by launching the fatal ‘O-bac’ without exclusion or exception,” she declared, “and the international community could not believe what was bestowed upon its people. It is unquestionable that we coped well with co-existing with the Covid-19 pathogen and succeeded in halting its spread around 20 months after its dissemination, just as the first successful vaccine made its way into people’s bloodstreams.” She couldn’t hold in a burst of incredulous laughter, as the reality of coping with the 2019 outbreak was a plain phenomenon as compared to what awaited the populace in 2027.

Multilateral recovery from Covid-19 was not a laidback process, but as soon as governments understood the dire necessity of applying strategies such as mandatory confinement, contact tracing, increased screening tests, and extensive laboratory research in a perseverant manner, community transmission was reduced. Although it left the global economy susceptible to the most drastic collapse in history, some countries were resilient to the harsh downturn while others, such as Lebanon, faced detrimental financial burden that left citizens in a paragon of uncertainty and scarcity.

She felt a warm touch of reassurance to her shoulder, as attending the most anticipated United Nations conference – “Kudos to Reclamation, Welcoming a New Era of Sustainable Development” on the 1st of August, 2029, a few months away from the renewal of the Sustainable Development Goals on January 1, 2030 – wasn’t enough to take in. At 26 years old, her invitation to discourse her experience, rise to popularity, and the loss of both of her parents only 8 years apart to two pandemics had dragged prickly claws up her spine; nonetheless, she had an oath to complete in remembrance of the only family she knew, and an obligation as a recently renowned

advocate to accept recognition. Nevaeh was tasked with sharing the heartbreak she encountered with others who faced the same tragedy; thus, she fought the feeling of desperate, endless sadness as the hollow of her mind expanded into her heart. She pondered on her experience in the past few years, took a deep breath, and started narrating.

Nevaeh lost her father, a frontline doctor, in 2020 to Covid-19, and her mother, a laboratory researcher, during the 2027-2029 *Obcyespazobacillus* outbreak. Even though an underlying resentment whirred in her chaotic mind and fed her instability – one triggered by the fact that her parents prioritized work to satisfy the skyrocketed expenses left as a legacy of Covid-19, their absence aggravated her even more at times of mourning. Memories of her trying to catch their attention flooded her vision, for she was constantly rewarded with a stark absence of expression. Yet, she seemed to seek solace, *crave* the company of their presence at home.

She had sensed that her father was ill-fitted shortly after he spent consecutive days at work, and was finally informed of his passing alongside her mother one drowsy afternoon; a taut humming cord inside her gave way that day, carrying out a river of tears that drew fine lines on her foundation-covered face. However, her mother's news came unexpected and with total retention of details, no matter how hard Nevaeh tried to plead. When she received the phone call that had drained her of all clarity, she was left in a flood of dread and agony. The tension knitting her muscles into knots took a good while to begin to loosen. She dove head-first into a spiral of depression and loneliness, and recovery was certainly not easy, especially since total confinement was mandatory in her small town near Geneva. She was as well robbed of drawing while admiring a scenery in the flora and fauna, the only activity she'd sought haven embarking on.

As an environmental enthusiast herself, she found confinement the logical task to abide by, and was well aware of the threats global warming posed on the one of the most vulnerable to its impacts, the Euro-Mediterranean region, let alone all areas; Nevaeh could not deny that the Covid-19 pandemic paved the way for the mitigation of some its effects. One of the most prominent recovery activities was the repair of a substantial hole in the ozone layer. Fortunately, the layer's rate of reclamation, one to three per cent every ten years, was overlapped in the course of a couple of months. Moreover, other outcomes included the conservation of both nonaquatic and marine wildlife and biodiversity, a considerable drop in greenhouse gases and carbon emissions, and the upsurge of prototypes to new technologies in the renewable energy sector. The former favored meeting SDGs 7, 13, 14, and 15 by increasing the scores by goal, consequently contributing to the global SDG Index score. People were solely entrusted with abiding by the instructions concerning resumption of production, transportation, and extraction processes during the remission period between 2021 and late 2026.

Life resumed rather ruggedly until 2026, when pollution resurfaced *gravely*, principally in urban locations. Nevaeh loathed attending work in the city. She decided to yell in objection one day, but her voice had vanished over the din – clusters of musicians fiddling songs, traders shouting obscurities, cars honking and motorcycles roaring, shattering all form of serene sound. She wanted to run, but her body did not obey, squeezed in a path congested with travelers and mer-

chants shilling commodities. One man stood so close that she could smell the filthiness of his breath and a spice of scent on his clothes, putrid odors that slapped her like a fetid hand. The trees were strange, short and spindly, barely upright. Nevaeh glanced at the overcrowded city surrounding her and licked her cracked lips out of sheer uneasiness; she walked away before the fury building behind her eyes manifested in a fashion she would regret. Sunrays flashed throughout the streets like trapped miniature storms dispersed from a foggy sky, and as one ray caressed her temple, she remembered the horrendous sight of the cities she saw on the news, and gulped hard.

Little did mankind know that what would hit nearly 6 years after the end of the Covid-19 pandemic would reverse the positive repercussions of each environmental project, action plan, and voluntary cessation of deeds as swiftly as a heartbeat, the erratic lifestyle practiced by humans having exhibited everything but *mercy* towards the rendered fragile Ozone layer.

The tide of life in all its forms would thereafter be reversed, leaving the kingdom of simpletons mere in the face of the future.

Spiraling downwards came the terrestrial microcosm during Obcyespazobacillus, an outbreak like no other. Never in the history of humanity has such a horrendous event been perceived; the Antonine Plague of year 165, the heinous Black Death of 1347, the 1918 Spanish Flu, and the novel Covid-19 were dwarfed by Obcyespazobacillus. A lot of blarney about the origin and genetic structure of O-bac surfaced during the early period of silent transmission in 2027 in an attempt to stifle the masses unnerved. Nonetheless, many experts manifested in suspicion with the wise intention of total lockdown, but apparently, these concerns were promptly brushed off by the ignorance of the people and their yearn for freedom after an interval of confinement they claimed threatened their lifestyle for enough time.

Not in a million years would the same people have expected to anxiously *flee* to their homes after it was officially revealed by the World Health Organization in February of 2027 that O-bac was in fact of foreign nature, asserting that the former was a consequence of human-induced environmental disasters that devastated a greater, more considerable extent of the protective Ozone layer, making way for the debris of the extraterrestrial abyss surrounding planet Earth to invade it. A galactic dust was dispersed in the air, integrating its constitution into the gases forming the atmosphere. Even the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses could not identify it before the death toll hit the roof, for its genetic structure was transcendent. It threatened both kingdom Plantae and the Animalia kingdom due to its airborne properties; upon contact with the nasal or oral tract, O-bac was shown to invade a number of cells equivalent to the liters of air inhaled and to induce death in a matter of hours if not rushed to the ICU for intubation and poison relief, with a negligible percentage of survival. Obcyespazobacillus was penetrative, restricting agricultural activity to vertical farming methods inside sealed arenas and depots. Several countries set up AeroFarms as a refuge to supplying food, whereby a variety of leafy salad greens were grown through reliance on purified air, mist, rows of LED lights, and reusable cloth medium from recycled plastic, a process referred to as aeroponics. Certain fruits, vegetables,

and cereals became as scarce as meat and poultry, and if found, costly. Delivery of medications and goods was mandatory and conducted under the use triple-sheathed protective equipment. Quotidian activities were affected, but the use of the internet during Covid-19 enlightened people to facilitate online processes in preparation for another unlikely incidence.

Lifting restrictions was no option until people finally understood the dire need to stay home and to focus on ecological undertakings, since transmission of this particular parasite was constantly in surge of acquiring repetitive peaks globally due to its characteristics. Otherwise, Earth would never recover from the calamity.

Nevaeh was convinced to temporarily give up her time in nature in hopes of leaping back to normal as soon as possible, praying for Earth's healing.

Dozens of courses, certificates, webinars, competitions, and researches later, she had both gotten used to and bored from a 'typical' quarantine, and something deeper came tugging at her, the urge to invest time creatively. She wanted to prompt her generation through inspiring them to communicate, commit, and rationally plan for a future. *A better future*. Nevaeh also took on drawing again, and through that, she managed to liberate the rage that had been boiling in her heart. She simultaneously started a blog, a YouTube channel, and organized interactive meetings, designating them for environmental awareness, motivational Q&A sessions, eco-friendly applications, and made sure to share her every encounter with the sublime beach overlooking the vast Mediterranean Sea; pencil in hand, she'd always sketched the locale to her journal as gracefully as a musician strummed his instrument while tiny granules of sand spat against her skin.

She pondered over the idea of the world being in the midst of an environmental collapse in one video, and recounted her final encounter with the seaside in summer of 2026; the wind snapped rigid at her cheeks like a noose as she searched the murky water for a form of life, but only saw churning silt and salt and the occasional fluttering shape of a swimming creature. Translucent plastic bags almost fooled her into believing she'd caught a glimpse of a divine creature, and remnants of shattered glass bottles gave her the illusion of seashells she'd always adored picking. Her stomach had pitched with the angry waves as she made her way back, remorse lapping against her like an apologetic sea.

She grew her network consistently, connecting her cause with that of socialites and influencers.

Unexpectedly, one opportunity led to countless others, a particular engagement more prestigious than the rest.

August 1, 2029 – Nevaeh had a feeling that this day was going to be a *good* one.

Nevaeh couldn't sleep that night. She had turned her face into her pillow, excitement humming in her mind. Light from the thin crescent moon filtered through the glass of the window lining the wall near her bed.

She'd sulked till dawn and admired the scorching morning sun until her eyes dried out. All her effort was put into opening her near-rock bedroom window then taking a deep breath of the humid summer breeze for the first time in forever.

Nevaeh looked at her pale reflection in the mirror as she packed her frisky hair into her favorite scrunchie. She drew a smile across her face as she stepped out of her front door onto the creaky porch to catch the driver waiting to transport her to the pristine location.

As she gathered her thoughts and ended her talk, a deafening round of applause filled the mammoth Assembly Hall and nearly vibrated the walls of the Palais des Nations. A while later, as Nevaeh was being called for her award, she felt the urge to catch a glimpse of the swinging entrance doors across the room. She could not control the twinge of hope swelling in her chest as she squinted her eyes in a search for an expression she yearned to be alight with affection and pride – one she did not expect to find – but skepticism kept a flicker of anticipation lit in her soul. The figure that appeared looked weary but resolute, a bouquet of crimson and scarlet flowers sitting neatly on one arm. Suddenly, a swirl of unmatched emotions erupted from her heart, the question of what they meant sat noxiously inside her mind. The flowers in her favorite colors. The slim physique standing motionlessly. A cluster of hair noticeably similar to hers kept from spiraling wildly in a tight knot. Without thinking twice, she turned and ran to find a way down the central platform, tears smarting her eyes as she huddled forward.

It was not the gratitude she gained from that day that made her chest constrict around her heart, nor was it the prize she was presented for pursuing her passion and inspiring many of her generation's youth.

It was not the feeling of liberty buzzing in the air as the World Health Organization officially declared the success of global solidarity in eradicating *Obcyespazobacillus*, nor was it the acknowledgment of transitioning back into life as it had been years ago that made her soul swell with gratification.

It was the tender embrace of a mother that awaited her, one that was pitilessly taken away from her when she needed it the most.

## Out of Sight, Out of Mind

Joanna Broniewska. Poland

He felt a tightness in his stomach. A few seconds later came breathlessness. It felt like someone had pumped all the air out of his flat.

Anxiety... anxiety immediately set in. Panic, sadness, fear – dozens of emotions were puncturing its interior. None of them were positive.

He had had panic attacks several times before. As his therapist later explained to him, the reasons varied; most were internal collisions with reality. Self-esteem, social life, relationships. Many aspects in his head looked completely different than in the relative reality.

Today, however, it was different. The world outside was slightly less relative; all the frames that passed before his eyes, seconds before the squeezing in his stomach and shortness of breath, are frames that we know. That's right, we – we, who use the Internet, watch the news, read information from around the world. We see the burning Amazon and Australia, we hear that the green lungs of the earth are burning, that countless species of animals are dying. We hear that Poland is drying up, but we are really only affected by the price of parsley. We hear that rivers are disappearing from the map, that the Noteć river, about which everyone learned in geography lessons, is becoming a dry trough. We hear but do not listen. And finally, when it is not sounds but information that goes to our brain, when it connects with other fragmented messages and creates a whole – the story of our dying planet – the brain cells start working and the thought appears that without a green planet there will be no us. The human being will die out. The same human who believes that he is at the top of the pyramid of governance and decision-making with indisputable driving force. Earlier, however, he will play the apocalypse game without much strategy, one which, not surprisingly, he will lose, and this life during the game will be his hell on earth. Then everyone will go to their own heaven, hell or nothingness, because there will no longer be bodies or things that could be useful for reincarnation. No one actually knows what will be left, but it is doubtful that it will be life.

Karol has heard of climate depression. He always nodded and said he understood. Today it turned out that he couldn't be more wrong.

It all began with an Easter post published by one of the Polish poets, who ended his not-so-long-but-powerful argumentation with the words: “When celebrating the spring holiday of the rebirth of life, remember: this year there will be less a little less life reborn. The same will happen in a year. And then, very soon, there will be a year when life will simply not be reborn again. Happy Easter”.

And Karol remembered. After regaining breath in his chest, he also understood the fear he had heard about so many times before just nodding his head.

He remembered his friends who always dreamed about having children, when they approached their thirties, suddenly decided not to have children. Because the earth is overpopulated, because there will be no water, because the end of the world will kill us. Just a few months ago it all sounded surreal. After each of the apocalyptic statements of his friends, he had at the tip of the tongue: “Aren’t you exaggerating a little?”, but he never said it out loud.

Now he also remembered Greta Thunberg’s statements they had talked about in English lessons. Sceptically and a little dismissively. Because it’s all obvious. Everyone knows that the glaciers are melting, that the Maldives will disappear in some time. On the other hand, these glaciers and the Maldives are not here, Karol had only seen them in photos and never even thought about going that far. So, how does the saying go? Out of sight, out of mind?

Stop. Here he has found something local, something that has been irritating him for several years, something he has complained about many times. He complained especially in winter, when the screens on the streets displayed a large, red, sad face with an equally red message: “Very poor air quality.” He sees the screen through his fogged-up glasses from the smog mask every day: in the morning, on the way to work and in the afternoon, when he returns home. Karol lives a few hundred meters away; in a calm, quiet neighborhood with old trees, a local market square, and green boulevards. So what if he sees almost nothing in winter outside the windows, except for the gray-dirty layer floating a few meters above the ground.

He complains, but really he has already got used to the fact that from autumn to spring, before leaving home he checks the air’s quality on his phone. He usually puts on a mask. Sometimes his friends ask half-jokingly what he needs a mask for, since he still smokes like a chimney. Karol, however, thinks that one of them is his pleasure, and the fact that this pleasure is destroying his lungs is his own decision. He also does not want to add any burdens on his lungs, which is why he refuses to inhale the suspended particulates.

Several minutes. The quick chain of thoughts, memories, and associations caused by the wave of anxiety lasted several minutes. Then awareness hit. His eyes opened. Phase two: realizing that changes are still reversible. Phase three: willingness to act.

Karol wants to change the world. However, this collided with phase four: what can an individual do?

The road turned abruptly and returned to the starting point: fear.

Karol doesn’t own a car, he doesn’t even use public transport. He chose a bike because it’s the fastest way to get him places. Twice a year he visited his parents who lived four hundred kilometers to the east, but last year his parents moved to Kraków, so this trip was also taken away.

He doesn't go on vacation, he has never flown by plane. He buys local and Polish food, he is far from being lavish, he doesn't buy what he doesn't need. He goes shopping with his own bags, he only buys brioches in disposable ones. He buys his clothes in chain stores. He smokes. He smokes a lot. He washes once a day and does not use much water, although maybe he could use slightly less. He segregates waste and does not litter. He supports social campaigns on crowd-funding sites. Sometimes he will shop for the local homeless people.

He doesn't know what else he could change in his life to lessen the earth's burden, so that the water in the Narew river does not lower, to improve the lives of those who need help. He would like poverty to disappear, for dolphins to swim in Venice not only during the global pandemic. He wants life to be fair for everyone and for the planet to be green and blue always.

Karol has a double master's degree. He wrote about one of his diploma theses about the gender pay gap. He was considering doing a Ph.D. but he wasn't doing too well financially. Instead of a degree and living from the first to the last of the month, he chose life at a standard, the opportunity to be promoted every few months, and work eight hours a day. In his free time he reads, browses a lot on the Internet. He watches movies, sometimes he meets up with friends. When he wants to relax, he gets on his bike and rides to the boulevards. He likes peace and quiet.

That's how he lives – in peace, non-invasively, quietly.

He was sitting in the armchair of his two-room flat and felt that he was beginning to think more and more soberly, that the first wave of panic was passing, although he still felt some insecurity and a strange prickling in his stomach. He didn't sit at the computer immediately, he did not start looking for solutions. He knew that he would not find a solution, that there was no medicine that would heal the whole world. He had heard of many options of, as he called it, "improving the world". He knew about the struggle of many organizations, mainly NGOs, which postulated demands and made long-term plans to free our planet. On the other hand, he saw large enterprises stealing water, competitive prices of clothes sewn in Bangladesh, and fuel companies that are blocking the introduction of electric cars on a massive scale. He saw politics and power that looked identical around the world and revolved around money.

No, Karol didn't give up. However, he did not believe that he could change anything.

He decided to stop buying in chain stores. He is one, but thousands of Poles earning a minimum salary or even a national average will not be able to afford it. Trousers sewn in Poland cost three hundred zlotys. Almost identical jeans in a large clothing chain can be bought even for one-sixth of this amount. T-shirt? One hundred zlotys compared to twenty. Fair trade A small can of coffee, the production of which employs hardworking Colombians, is five times larger packaging advertised on TV and mass-produced coffee from a large manufacturer. He knew that the average Pole would worry more about expensive parsley and saving for a two-week all-inclusive holiday in Thailand, rather than buying fair-trade coffee.

He felt small again, irrelevant. He felt it was a drop in the ocean's waters.

Karol, however, did not change his mind. He made a decision about several improvements in his life. These are small changes, changes of individual importance. The end of the world still appears in his dreams, sometimes it also appears in his thoughts when he returns to an empty flat after work. His heart suddenly accelerates, and his lungs lack air. He sees dry, Mars-like landscapes and skinny people fighting for water. Ocean shores covered with dead fish, smaller continents, deserted cities.

However, he never sees himself there.

Starting today, he remembers to take his own packaging for his daily brioche.

## Shatt El Salam District

**Wennes Ben Naya. Tunisia**

She had died.

We entered El-Rahma Mosque, the Mosque of Mercy, in Shatt El Salam District; it was time for the Friday noon prayers. When the Imam finished the Friday sermon, he asked the worshippers not to leave yet, to attend the funeral ceremony. I didn't find it in me to ask who the stranger was. When the prayers were done, everyone left hurriedly, except for a fifteen-year old kid. He seemed scrawny, more like a broken stick amongst the crowds shoving about at the entrance. When the funeral procession got under way, Hady followed it alone, walking by his grandfather's side. Ever since the appearance of the 'Ghoul' in Shatt El Salam, the Shore of Peace, no one cared to walk in a stranger's funeral procession anymore. At times even the children would not bury their parents anymore. One or more days may pass with the body lying around in the hospital, until the local authorities would take charge and conduct the burial in some abandoned cemetery.

She had died! He remembered her death only too well now. It was a story of misery; just as her life had been. In the beginning, her face turned yellowish. She would at times suffer painful bouts of coughing or vomiting, and the blood. His mother had been lucky; for many of the neighbours had also suffered from difficulties breathing and strange skin rashes. The doctors said they did not know the cause of her death. But ask anyone in the district, they'll directly say, "The Ghoul!"

No one here remembers when the Ghoul first appeared in Shatt El Salam. When Hady asked his grandfather, Hamda, about the place of the Ghoul, the latter pointed at some giant metal structure erected near the harbor. He did not utter a word. No one was allowed near that place. But Hady could note from afar those old structures covered in rust, as well as the tall poles that emitted foul gases of yellowish color. Everyone in Shatt El Salam knew that some monster called the Ghoul was locked up there, inside one of those metal structures. Everyone knew that the yellow smoke that the Ghoul was breathing through the tall concrete poles was the cause of the death of many of the people living in the district.

In the past, no one dared go near the iron fence that separated the district from the Ghoul's lair. In fact, there were concrete towers on the corners of the fence, guarded day and night by armed men. Hady remembered when his grandfather once told him of a mad adventure he had undertaken. He had been of Hady's age, and his curiosity had driven him to explore the Ghoul's lair. He could get no closer than a few meters that separated him from the steel fence surrounding the giant structures where the Ghoul was hiding. The fence stood between him and the towering poles which exhaled the Ghoul's foul breath. When Papa Hamda approached from the northern

end of the fence, near the beach, he found a huge opening which poured out foul liquids that gushed directly to the bottom of the sea.

She had died. Hady stood alone in front of her body, laid out in a white shroud on the green carpet adorned with Kufi designed Quranic verses. For over an hour on the road from the mosque to the cemetery there wasn't a soul that walked with him but his grandfather. Papa Hamda had been a fisherman since his childhood. In the past, the fishing-boats would sail from the harbor in the early morning, to return in the evening, loaded with various kinds of fish. Even the harbor cats were lucky. There was a share of fish for them, which the fishermen left on the piers. But the sea today was not as it used to be. Even the sands on the beach had changed from that golden yellow glow to a gloomy black color. It, too, carried the foul stench of the Ghoul's breath.

Ever since the Ghoul had appeared, the fish disappeared from the Bay of Gabès. The harbor had become a miserable place, and the sea had become a dump. Children were not allowed to go swimming there anymore to protect them. In the past, children used put an empty shell against their ear to listen to the song of the sea waves. Ever since the Ghoul started dumping his toxins in the sea, no one heard but the sound of death here. No one wanted to become a fisherman anymore; and the cats deserted the harbor long ago. Only Papa Hamda kept his old fishing boat and torn fishing nets, even though he hadn't managed to catch even one fish this week. At times, the fishermen spent long days at sea without catching a single fish. Two weeks ago, one fisherman found hundreds of dead fish floating by the beach. Ever since then, the people of Shatt El Salam started whispering of the Ghoul again, wondering of his connection to the strange incident. It was not the first time for something weird to happen on the beach. Two months ago, Hady had found near the Ghoul's lair on the beach a group of dead sea turtles. It was a painful sight for Hady, for he loved those little creatures as much as he hated the Ghoul.

She had died. So what? For ages, people have been dying in Shatt El Salam and they were buried in the deserted cemeteries with no one caring much. Death had become a joke in the mouths of those ascending to heaven; or a wish in the mouths of the newborns. For ages, children have come into life with deformations. Some could not move because of that, while others died in child-birth. Some were aborted to save them from a life of misery. No one wanted to have more than one child around here, for it only meant an additional tragedy that some families could simply not handle. And even if they did, the child would grow up to hate everyone.

In Shatt El Salam, the Ghoul does not cease to exhale his foul breaths all over the place. At night, the scene of the yellow smoke columns rising there, and the bright spotlights among the metal structures, would turn into the image of a city under bombardment. Living in Shatt El Salam, which is only 800 meters away from the Ghoul, was like trying to catch your breath atop a dormant volcano, and you never know when it will erupt and pour its lava over your head.

Everyone who breathes in the yellow smoke coming out of those towering poles is cursed in Shatt El Salam. Even the vegetables are no longer edible. They have all become a variety of dishes that the Ghoul presents to the people of the district at the feast of Azrael. The only priv-

ilege granted by the Ghoul in Shatt El Salam is that you can choose which dish to die by. Papa Hamda used to joke that he would prefer death with Horchani Dates from one of the oases of Gabès. But the palm trees had vanished long ago, and no one even remembered the taste of dates. When he was younger, Hady would listen to Papa Hamda's stories about the dates, about the trickling of fresh water as it flowed among the palm-trees, about the taste of the cool Hochani in the summer, and about the long hours of napping in the shade of the grand oasis.

She had died. How often does one die?

Once? Twice? A thousand times? The fishermen would leave the harbor only to return a few days later empty-handed. Hady knew the sea only too well, even though he had never gone fishing alone. His grandfather would take him along sometimes on short fishing trips in the early morning or in the evening. The longest fishing trip together had been two weeks ago, when they spent two full days at sea. But they could not catch a single fish. That first day at sea, Papa Hamda told him passionately of the city by the sea, the mountain, the oasis and the desert. Hady still remembered all the details Papa Hamda had spoken of as the boat took them further and further away from the harbor. "Oh my boy! Our forefathers used to call our beautiful city Takabi. We inherited it from our Amazigh ancestors, who in turn inherited it from their Carthaginian ancestors. Today it is insufferable, but we keep hoping."

"Our forefathers tell us that Takabi was a vast paradise in ancient times. Until recently, people would flock in from all the corners of the world for supplies or for trade. The markets offered the best types of silk and the tastiest of foods. Objects made of palm fronds filled every corner of each house. The palm tree, my son, had an ancient lineage to our forefathers who had settled in Takabi thousands of years ago. They deprived it of its glory and its generosity. But they also took away the resilience and power of the desert, and the pride and anger of the sea. We've lived on this earth in peace; feeding on its goods, sleeping in its oases, traveling across its deserts; until the Ghoul came, and our life was turned into living hell."

Do the cities die like people?

What would people do for an idea they believe in? What courage does a child need to venture a battle with the waves on a high sea in the cold of winter? It was the first time for Hady to go on a fishing trip alone. As the boat gradually vanished into the sea, until it was no more than a white spot floating in the vast blueness of the sea, Hady's mind focused only on that beautiful image of Takabi.

When Hady went on that fishing trip, he had no idea what he was seeking in the sea. There were so many things one could find. Yet, he knew only too well that it would not be a short trip, like the ones Papa Hamda took him on before he died. He had a vague drive to search for something he did not know. It may be a huge fish, like the one caught by that old Santiago; or a palm-tree like the one his grandfather had told him about; or maybe the Ghoul. After hours of paddling

in his sea of thoughts, the boat had gotten far away from the shore, and was more like a little floating island now surrounded by blue.

Hady believed that everything in nature had its own language that we did not understand. In the late hours of night, when the pains of the miserable people of Shatt El Salam had fallen silent, he could hear some chats; like those whispered by a palm-tree in the desert, or those of the sea addressing the mountain. Even the skies had their language, too. But it was not easy to read the clouds to understand what they were telling us. One evening at sea, the sky was telling a lot of things about the oasis of palm-trees that had been wiped out by the phosphogypsum; about children deformed; about Hady who had lost his mother to lung cancer.

The storm was brewing. Hady no longer recognized the directions. How difficult it is for man to find his way in the time of storms! Only then do we see the things around us differently. He thought of turning around; but when he realized that was not an option anymore, he relented. Are the things one sees in such moments real? His mother's smile? The Horchani Dates? The hymns of the fishermen at sea? And Takabi? He saw it all in the wink of an eye, when the boat hit into a wild wave that almost broke every board. The image he saw just then was of immense beauty. Nothing in it suggested death or fear. In that eternal moment of pure beauty, Hady was overcome by an overwhelming need to cry.

She had died. Do the dead return to life?

How had he survived the storm? He could not remember. How long had he spend amidst the waves tossing him about? A day or two? Or fifty years? Things around him were of different ages. When he looked at the supplies he had taken with him when he had set out, it seemed a day or two had passed. When he touched his own body, he felt like the trip had lasted of twenty years or so. How long had he remained at sea? The thought was driving him mad, when he glimpsed land from afar. As the boat slowly, oh so slowly approached the shore, the distant foggy spots started taking shape, transforming into the features of familiar faces. At first, he glanced the harbor. Then the spots started taking further familiar forms. A palm-tree and a mountain. Sand-dunes. Masses of people walking in one direction, shouldering tall poles and rusty metal structures, on one side bearing the initials GCT. At that moment, when he realized he had spent enough time to allow for a palm-tree to grow in the Ghoul's lair, he called out in a childlike voice that seemed at first to be emerging from the depths of the sea, "Takaaaaaaabi. Takaaaaaaabi!"

**A Sea of Words**

**English edition 14<sup>th</sup> year**

**Youth and Mobility:  
Towards a Euro-Mediterranean  
Citizenship**

**Short stories by 10 young writers**

## Out of Tune

**Hala Kabalan. Syria**

I

The persistent sunlight tickled her tired eyelids, initiating the undeniable realisation of a new morning. She hesitantly got up to check the world outside the window beside her bed. The Mediterranean was resting peacefully outside, stretching wide and uniting with the horizon in a natural harmony. She listened carefully as the distant music of *Soli*<sup>1</sup> filled the atmosphere with random lyrics: “*Il mondo dietro ai vetri sembra un film senza sonoro*”.<sup>2</sup>

Passing by the dusty mandolin behind the door, she poured herself a cup of hot espresso. It used to make things better, she thought to herself, but not anymore. She checked her phone only to find the numbers of her digital clock staring back at her. No messages, emails or exciting missed calls. In that moment, there were only the smell of strong coffee and the salty breeze of August.

She could feel herself slipping into the empty space between her own thoughts. The silence was intolerable. *Soli* came to an end and left her alone with her mind. She has been avoiding this silence for a while now. Her isolation was magnifying the heaviness in her heart. The monster of sadness was sitting there, waiting for any opportunity to take over. In her mind, she was looking for someone or something to blame, only to be faced with nothing but clear facts.

She recalled the memory of her mother occasionally coughing and telling her “It’s just a cold”. She witnessed her deteriorating every day until she was unable to take a single breath. After a short and exhausting fight, her mother finally surrendered. Leaving her behind, alone and terrified. A wave of unpleasant goose bumps ran over her body as the flashbacks disappeared. The scars of loss are yet to be healed, and no one truly understood how it felt. She was allowed to feel numb. These days, she was destined to exist on the margin of life, waiting for time to pass.

A reckless gust of wind blew a blue ticket off the coffee table. She grabbed it quietly, reading the words aloud in her head with a desperate attempt to overcome the deafening silence. There was an exhibition in town. She vaguely remembered buying the blue ticket solely for its colour. It was that specific shade of blue, the one in her mother’s eyes. The blue ticket served as the perfect bookmark for her version of *The Prophet*. She wasn’t planning to go anywhere, not anymore at least.

Checking the empty capsules of her antidepressants, she realised she had to leave the house today, a simple mission that became rather impossible. The world right outside her house seemed as far away as the sun. Everything required a massive amount of energy that she didn’t have. Getting out of bed, drinking water, sometimes even blinking was too much of an effort to handle. She was in a

1. Alone; an Italian song by Toto Cutugno.

2. The world outside of the window seems like a silent film.

continuous state of absolute exhaustion, forgotten and alone. Warmth and happiness turned into a distant memory that calmly, yet surely, dissolved in her heart.

An hour later, she put on her floral sundress, grabbed her book, and headed out to catch a bus.

II

She did not belong.

The streets were crowded with children and their parents since it was the summer break. Happy screams and loud laughs filled the air and distracted her from the music in her ears. The sun was rising majestically over this town near the sea as the breeze tickled her dress and demanded to be acknowledged. She paused the music and listened to random conversations between middle-aged women, who were picking their mandarin oranges with impressive delicacy. Everyone around her belonged to someone or something around, children to their parents, pets to their owners, the sun to the sky. Their loud laughs declared their joy. Still, the world in her eyes seemed like a silent film.

After getting her prescription, she headed back to the bus stop where she grabbed her book to read on.

“That’s one impressive bookmark you got there.” The voice of a stranger caught her off guard. “*The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.*” He recited one of her favourite quotes of *The Prophet*. “An impressive book as well.”

Unable to process his words, she looked around to make sure he was talking to her. The guy with curly brown hair smiled generously, as if he was expecting her to start singing his favourite song.

The stranger looked like her somehow, she thought, they could braid their hair together and no one will know which is which. He was using his right hand to fix his glasses, while the slim fingers of his left hand rested on the brown mandolin case beside him. His yellow T-shirt and green shorts merged him with the trees and the sun surrounding the street. She glanced at her floral dress. It was black, and just like her, it did not fit the scene either.

For a brief second, she envied him. It must feel good to be the guy in the yellow T-shirt. He looked like he belonged to that specific moment, to that place, to that small town near the sea.

“I’m opening for the exhibition on your bookmark.” He smiled as he patted his mandolin tenderly. “My mother is one of the artists.”

Her envy grew stronger as she grasped all the privileges the guy in the yellow T-shirt was enjoying. How does it feel to easily belong to people and places? she wondered; how does it feel to be okay? Shyly smiling, she nodded in silence. She was not ready for random conversations with lucky strangers. She secretly sighed in relief as the bus showed up with its usual noise. Finally, she’s going back home.

The empty bus stopped with a much-anticipated heaviness. As they got on board, they sat opposite each other. Thankfully, he understood she did not want to be bothered. She opened her book again and stared at the blue ticket. What day was it anyway? She was about to start reading when the guy in the yellow T-shirt played a tune she knew. He was good, she thought, but he failed to notice his mandolin was out of tune.

“Your E string is out of tune.” She found herself pronouncing these words across the empty bus.

“No way, I used an app to tune it just now.”

“Half a note lower than it’s supposed to be,” ignoring his claim completely.

He took his phone out of his pocket to check the tuning. Strumming the double E string, he turned the screen to face her with his eyes in genuine shock. E was half a note lower than it’s supposed to be.

The conversation that followed felt like a dream of some kind. She found herself tuning the mandolin while advising him to check it again before his big performance. She only found herself answering his questions without having the time to ask him anything, not even his name or where he’s from. He kept smiling and greeting every new passenger with his confident *Buon-giorno!* There was something about this stranger who got life figured out. Such a lucky stranger, she thought to herself.

Reaching the 3rd station, he packed his instrument and declared: “Give me a thumbs-up in case tuning is on point. I’m counting on you.” She was puzzled as she looked down to find the blue ticket still in her hand. It’s today, she realised, the exhibition in the national park on 3rd station was about to start.

### III

There was a laidback charm to the park that slept in the middle of her town. The great oak tree stretched skywards as the roots were unapologetically making their way between scattered groups of people. She looked around to find sunshine turning into chattering and greetings while everyone spoke a different language. Still, they looked like her somehow. If one braided everyone’s hair together, no one would know which is which.

A number of artists from different ages stood beside their paintings with a sense of pride that was almost materialised into a painting on its own. Walking beside her, the guy in the yellow T-shirt made his way to the humble stage in the middle of the park. People gathered around cheering for the band and went silent after a while. The lucky stranger, who looked like he belonged to every oak tree in her town by the sea, plucked each of the strings of his mandolin. Instantly looking at her, he gently raised his eyebrows and tilted his head to the side asking for her confirmation.

Life stood still for a second. She asked herself what she was doing here, a rush of guilt and uneasiness taking over her veins. She felt the weight of the medications in her bag as she remembered her mother walking underneath the great oak tree. *Soli* started playing again in her mind, but this time it was out of tune. She was alone, descending into a deep ocean of sorrow and grief. She closed her eyes and wished she did not exist anymore, nothing meant anything anymore. There was nothing but silence.

Plucking his strings with renewed determination, the familiar progression of notes forced her to open her eyes again. He snatched her out of her despair, his strum felt like a life jacket of some kind. He was still there, smiling with raised eyebrows and a tilted head. She raised her right hand in front of her nose in secret, and gave him a thumbs-up. The band started playing a cheerful collection of songs and the crowds were happily applauding whenever they got the chance. Ending the show with a song in a strange language, the band greeted the audience and quickly found their way off stage.

The guy in the yellow T-shirt was heading towards her mouthing the words “thank you”, when a distant voice seemed to call his name. “That’s my mother!” he said as he reached her side. “You have to check her painting. It’s our story.” Unable to shake off her persistent envy, she followed his footsteps in silence. They passed by the big sign at the entrance that said, *Crossing the Mediterranean: An Exhibition*, and reached the woman with brown hair by the tree. Behind her, a large oil painting was on display.

The painting was horizontally divided into two parts. The lower section portrayed a mess of confusing shades of grey. As she looked closer, she understood it was a scene of ultimate destruction. Bombed buildings, gigantic tanks, scattered tombstones, deadly rockets, and monstrous clouds. This was war. This was death. The terrifying prospect of this scene being real sent a shiver down her spine. Her eyes looked for the upper section in a desperate attempt to find consolation, and they finally did. It was that shade of blue, the one on her ticket, and the one in her mother’s eyes.

It was the sea. It was the Mediterranean that lay by the horizon outside her room. A small orange boat was painted on the blue background of the upper half. A woman and her child stood on board, turning their backs to the destruction behind and looking straight ahead.

“We were the only ones left. My father and sister were killed in an airstrike.”

He said as he wrapped his arm around his mother. “Everyone here has lost someone, but they’re all survivors.” When she looked around at the paintings hanging on old oak trees, the artists from across the sea looked more like her than ever before. She was not alone, she realised, and their pain was the same as hers. The woman interrupted her track of thoughts, murmuring a sentence in that strange language. The guy in the yellow T-shirt smiled and said “She said you look like a survivor too.”

In that specific moment, she almost felt like she belonged somewhere.

The End

## A Bedouin in Europe

**Mohamed Ben Mbarek.** Morocco

It was seven o'clock Warsaw time. I was the first to step down from the plane, for my seat was the last row. The breeze was different from what I was used to in our desert. The sky was clear and it seemed like I was seeing it for the first time. I slowed down so the other passengers would step ahead, for I had no idea what I was to do after disembarking. I took my place in a long queue of non-European passports. When it was my turn, the customs officer welcomed me with a quick smile, which soon became more cheerful when he read the invitation extended to me by the Polish Agency for Culture and Education to pursue my studies in Poland. It stated that I was an outstanding student and recommended that all administrative procedures be facilitated for me. He stamped my passport with a warm and proud "Welcome to our country." I received it with all due love and appreciation.

I continued to follow the people in front of me towards the luggage belts, where I soon found my suitcase. I then found myself in an even more spacious hall with a crowd of people. Youngsters, as pretty as angels, were running about; the features of the elderly seemed to reflect the burden of the wars witnessed by Poland under the Nazi occupation. Then you were soon distracted by a group of well-dressed young people who carried flowers, and others who seemed to be dressed in a uniform, carried papers with names printed on them. I soon understood that these were cab drivers. I scanned the papers, wondering if I would find my name, only to find my family name carried by a blond smiling girl. Her sheer look was enough to make one forget the tiredness of the trip. I approached her, waving my right hand, and she met me with a smile I swear I never saw the likes of. We greeted each other, while my Bedouin heart seemed to explode at her delicacy. My mind was distracted, wondering who the genius was who had engrained in us, the people of the desert, that a woman had to be fat, and that the slim ones did not count as women. Slim women were outcast, and their families driven hard to clear them of such deficiency. At times they would make natural bitter extracts, too hard for camels to digest, not to mention a girl's liver who was not even ten yet. And at other times, they would force the slim girl to undertake tough exercises.

Youstina soon recalled me from my reveries, as she pulled at my suitcase and said "You seem exhausted. Please let me help you with the suitcase." She then gave me a piece of a sweet, which seemed to be made in their famous cuisine. I swallowed it reluctantly, my mind haunted by the images of the girls in my family who were doomed to slimness. We got onto a public bus, where Youstina informed me that we would reach the university dorms in ten minutes. I smiled back, "Don't worry. I spent over fourteen hours on the go since I left my house to arrive here." I told myself that spending one moment in the halls of knowledge was better than centuries in the arms of ignorance and backwardness.

We arrived at the university, where we found two lady employees awaiting us. The three ladies then spoke in Polish, firing away, with “tak tak tak” recurring amongst them. They received a copy of my passport, and then one of them gave me the key to my room saying, “Welcome to our country.”

Youstina took her leave, pecking a kiss on my right cheek, and leaving the left one deprived.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor, looking left and right in search of my room, number 206. I found it in the middle of the corridor. I opened the door as I remembered the last door I closed before my trip. It was the door to my room in the dorms in Rabat. There was a huge difference between the two rooms. The comparison was not right in the first place. My new room was spacious. In the right corner was the bed, in the other corner a desk and chair. The room had a balcony that overlooked a green garden, which soon reminded me, with grief burning my heart, of the garbage and waste you would see, were you ever to look out one of the windows in the dorm in Rabat. I asked myself who was to blame? Was it possible to dream of a better tomorrow?

I didn’t know how, but soon the words of the dorm employee and of the customs officer materialised in front of me, “Welcome to our country.” The sense of pride as they spoke the words. I felt like the whole issue lay in the pronoun “our” and the word “country”. When one has a sense of belonging, one considers the country like a big home, and all efforts are exerted to make it as wonderful as the small personal home. It was the belief that personal stability was related to the stability of the country. The prosperity of the country was related to their personal prosperity. But my dear self, how are we to convince the young and old in our countries of this? How are we to convince them that change was possible? That it was an issue of honest will and intention? There my mind failed to find a satisfying answer. I felt that the exhaustion was taking over my slim body. I dragged myself into the shower, which was located in a bathroom I shared with the neighbouring room. Suddenly I ran into a short girl, with dark hair, and a light skirt. She welcomed me merrily and asked, “Did you move in here?” She pointed at my room. “Yes,” I replied. “Well, hello. My name is Birgitt. I am an American Jew, from Poland. You?”

“My name is Mohamed,” I said. “I’m from the Moroccan desert.” She seemed to be ecstatic at the mention of Morocco, and said, “That’s my maternal grandmother’s homeland. My mother always told me how Morocco hosted the Jews, and the great respect they enjoy with the people and the royal family.” I nodded and said, “Yes.” My smile seemed tired, but contained an overwhelming feeling that with this experience I was a new-born thrown into a new world. She excused herself saying, “Let’s meet again.”

“Yes, sure,” I said.

I went into the bathroom and took off my clothes, while my mind tossed about hundreds of questions. Where is the Europe everyone was warning me of? Why did the Jewish girl not treat me warily, me the Muslim? There was such a difference between our religions. How could Birgitt travel alone? Where did Youstina learn all this gallantry and the ability to handle

any situation better than men did? My people in the desert insisted that women were created for pleasure in the bed. If a woman wanted to go out, the kitchen was good enough for her. What if my folk were to see the beauty of Birgitt the short, or Youstina the slim? Would they cease fattening our girls as if they were cattle, not humans?

I then got dressed and left the bathroom, wondering how it was not only a bath for the body, but a pressing invitation for an intellectual bath, too. I threw my tired body on my bed, reciting the prayer for travelling which the speedy events had made me forget about.

The alarm clock on my phone rang. It was 6 am; my first morning in Poland. I got dressed and went to the breakfast hall. I met my neighbour Brigitt, neatly dressed and a distinctive scent emanating from her. She suggested I order the third option on the menu, saying it was the healthiest. We chatted about the discipline each one of us was specialising in. We discovered that we were both at the faculty of sciences and technology, with a slight difference in the times of our classes. We decided to go together to find out about our lectures, which were due to start after two days. It was fun to walk with her. She was a mature girl, despite her young years. She was well-read about other cultures and history, clever in communicating her thoughts, very accurate in her choice of words. We went through many paths and alleys, not even noticing. I felt like I was only then performing the act of living. The beauty of Polish architecture added a special touch to the scenery, for I was a lover of architectural arts. And then suddenly I heard foul words in Arabic. I turned towards the source where the words came from, to find two young men sitting on the pavement of a square. Next to them was a bottle of wine they were fighting over. I was stunned by the scene and disappointed. Brigitt interrupted me, "Here we are at the university. Look, there's Building A, where Monday's class will be." She then added, "Let's go to the cafeteria and get some rest." It was a huge yard surrounded by columns in Roman style. At the top of each column was the engraved face of a human. I later understood from the expert Brigitt that they were Polish thinkers and scientists. It was a sense of pride in the past and the forefathers engrained in every inch of the place. Brigitt later asked me, "Why do you let me speak more than you? Why do you prefer to remain silent and just listen? I, too, love that, but we're chatting and getting to know each other." Her shining eyes stimulated me and I said spontaneously, "I'm a man of the desert. We grow up in a tough environment. Most of our time we tend the cattle and search for water. We don't return to our tents until night. This is my first day in Europe – the land of non-Muslims – as I always knew it." She interrupted me smilingly. "It doesn't matter where you are from, or the nature of your origins, or your faith. What counts is that your heart holds love, that you look at all people through humane and friendly eyes. The world today counts on us, the youth, to lead humanity towards a future of peace and prosperity for us and the coming generations, without any harm to the natural resources of the world."

She paused for a moment, to smile that smile of a loving girl as she said, "You owe it to Poland." I replied without thinking, "Yes. Beyond the ability of words. The few hours I had spent here were enough to change many concepts, and correct many wrong ideas that occupied my mind. The scene of the two young men a while ago was enough to understand the fear of

European governments, and their repetitive call for essential integration. The decency of the customs officer was enough to understand that this continent respected the law and welcomed, and encouraged, anything that was legal. The trust that the Polish state granted me when it offered a monthly stipend, housing and food was evidence that the European governments wished to extend their hand to the youth of the south to develop their skill and serve their countries. Your culture is far-reaching, your style of conversing, the way you present your ideas, all these showed me that what a woman can reach by far exceeds what the mind of a Bedouin like me could grasp. Females were not created for sex alone. Females are sophisticated humans who can offer a lot.”

Her smile seemed to express victory, her brows moved up, as she said, “At last you spoke more than me.” She then lent closer, taking my hand, and pecking a kiss on my left cheek, which I had been deprived of that night.

I replied, sarcastically, “Your kiss is more precious to me than the scholarship.” We then left the cafeteria, totally different from how we had come.

## Letters Unwritten

**Mahmoud Jamal Ahmed Miqdadi.** Jordan

Dearest Mother,

I hope you are well, and are still watching the boats, wondering which will carry me to my destination. I have taken my first steps. I managed to secure part of the money, working in the stone-pits near the port. The other part I got from the grocer's. I used to do my shopping there in my lunch breaks. He realised the reality of what I was planning, and gave me the money saying he would forgive me if I did not succeed in my adventure. But if I were to make it, and became wealthy, he would not only expect the same sum back. Rather, he would expect me to transform his little shop into a huge mall. He said so laughingly, but I caught a glimpse of a tear hiding at the bottom of his eye. And I remembered you.

I made a deal with the boat owner. He insisted on getting the cash up front, claiming there was a deal with the guys on the other shore. I didn't like him. But if I pulled out now, I would never make progress again. With the crack of dawn, I have to be on board. Pray for me.

Dearest Mother,

I was amazed at what I saw at dawn. Maybe I was lucky because I was alone and not in charge of anyone. I thought we would be a number of people. How naïve!

I felt so sorry, Mother. I saw an old man with a woman who carried a baby. I didn't know if she was his wife or daughter. Nor did I know if the baby was a boy or a girl. What made them venture with the baby like that? If it died, it would know no better. If it lived, it would consider us savages.

There was a young man with his adolescent brother. The young man approached me, saying what a genius his brother was. He had just completed his sixth school year with flying colours and he would exert his utmost efforts, to get his little brother the chance to pass Grade 7 in Germany. He spoke with utter confidence, believing the Germans would be amazed by his brother's genius. In the future he would become one of their most prominent scientists.

It was weird, Mother, how this young man placed all his hopes on his little brother. As for himself, he didn't mind living an idle life, creating opportunities for his brother. Until he grew up and became a prominent scientist in Germany.

There's a little girl who holds on to her doll. And an old man who tapped along in rapid knocks with his crutch, as if in a hurry to get started. Why would he emigrate?

There is an obese man. Another told him jokingly, "The fish will get a feast." And a drunkard, who looks long at the calm sea, to say in the end, "How serene this grave!"

We crowded on the boat. I sat between the drunkard and the little brother. Dishevelled hair, combed hair. The smell of booze, the scent of perfume. Frustrated dreams, encouraged dreams.

We set sail with the dawn prayers, as if we were performing a ritual. The sea was calm and gentle; it carried us on its clear surface. The waves held some dignity for us, for they agreed with the winds not to disrupt our sleep. But once the land vanished behind me, I felt a pang in my heart, as if I had just, of my own free will, left a wealth behind me. A wealth I would never retrieve.

It's a dreary feeling when only water rules the four corners. The space for free movement was only a couple of metres. A prison whose walls were humans who were haggling with death for a better life. The baby cried, and the woman gave it her breast, finding refuge behind the other women whose lips didn't stop murmuring prayers. A strong gust of wind snatched the doll from the girl's hand. She tried to catch it, but they explained to her that she would drown. She would die if she did. Did she even grasp the meaning of drowning? What idea did the child have of death? I looked at her tiny soft fingers; they aged suddenly when they lost the doll. I looked at the doll floating in the sea, before a wave swallowed it into the depths. The first victim.

Suddenly, without any warnings, the situation changed. The sea roughened, and the angry waves started tossing the boat left and right. Weeping. Crying. Wailing. All at once. The young man hugged his little brother. The drunkard shrunk at my feet. He swore to sober up. The old man raised his crutch and shouted: "He saves you from the sea. Pray to God." When I checked the boat's direction, I glimpsed the silhouette of land. There was our paradise, hovering ahead of us. But we were not sure we would be able to cross to it.

Dearest Mother,

Half our sea. It was merciful to us. Even when we desert and reject it. It would never hurt us. The other half was very different. It did not like us. It was offended by our smell. It did not like our features, coloured with suffering and impossible wishes. What heart did that sea have! It did not soften to women's tears or children's crying. It sent its waves to throw us towards the shore, and at the same time it prepared the messengers of death to reap our souls. Land grew, but the sea sought to capsiz the boat more and more ferociously. I told the people to remain calm, for we were very close to survival. I looked out for the people of the other shore, the ones the merchant had spoken of. I saw no one. I turned to the merchant to ask him, but alas! I was shocked to realise for the first time that he was not among us. Only then did I realise how naïve

I had been. I wanted to vent the frustration within me in a scream. But a huge wave was faster. It capsized the boat, and all that surrounded me was water. I glimpsed black figures through it. My boatmates. The current was sweeping them away. Death was reaping them in front of my eyes. I was helpless to save them. Hands reached out from here and there, searching for a saviour. Do you remember when I told you of a Russian writer who once said that Man at the moment of death sees things in his mind's eye that were farthest from the horror of the moment? That is exactly what happened with me. When I sensed the many hands, my mind wandered to Mahmoud Darwiche: "Those drowning extend a hand to protect them from drowning." I grabbed a hand, and pulled it to the surface. It was the little brother. When he came to, he asked for his brother. He wept as he called his brother's name. It was not the right time to console him. I went in search of the rest. Far away, I saw the fat man. The water was pulling him down gradually. He held the little girl in his arms, like the doll she had been holding. He held her above his head, hoping the sea would be satisfied in swallowing him alone. But to no avail. She drowned, too. I tried to manage. Had it not been for the waves working against me, and the little brother clinging around my neck. The baby had suckled the water of the sea. The fat man was indeed becoming a feast for the fish. I hoped the drunkard would find serenity in his watery grave. Everyone was gone, Mother. Only the little brother and I remained afloat. And the old man's crutch. And the drunkard's bottle. Two gravestones of this mass grave. The boat suddenly bobbed up. Just like that, Mother. You may not believe it if I told you that it was no longer upside down. But this time it was empty. I pushed the little brother to it, then I climbed in myself. It seemed spacious now, allowing me to move as I wished. But it made my chest contract. As if it crouched on my chest. The sea calmed, and the little brother put his head on my chest. I watched the land getting closer and becoming clearer. Until I fell asleep.

Dearest Mother,

We had arrived. The paradise I had always aspired to. But there was a problem. It was fenced in with an electrified fence. Behind it were men armed with the latest weapons. The little brother woke me, saying as if he did not believe himself, "Land, land."

We ran, shrieking with happiness, calling for help. We halted when we saw the men and the fence between us. It was more like barbed wire. They threw something on it, and it burnt. They tell us the electricity would burn us if we approached. Where should we go then? Even the boat they had shelled, and it was powdered. Had they feared that the little brother and I would return to it? Or had they feared it would bring more like us? Was it a criminal in their eyes and needed to be executed? I don't know. What I know is that we remained for days in this tiny spot of sand. The electricity in front of us, and the sea behind us.

The little brother's health deteriorated. He started talking of death and God and heaven and hell. He asked if his brother was in heaven. Then he cried begging me to be rejoined with him in heaven. As if I could fulfil that wish. His lips dried up. His cheeks hollowed out. He held onto

my hand with what little strength he had left. I would look at the men, and cry and weep, “Please save the child. He’s dying.” But they couldn’t care less. They showed no reaction, so much so that I suspected they may be robots. He raised his head and smiled. Then he said joyfully, “Look. My brother Azzam.” Only now did I learn his brother’s name. But the little brother’s name remains unknown to me. He’s gone to his brother, and he left me alone. I dug a grave for him in the sand. As I did, a woman passing by in her car saw me. She got out and started filming me.

Dearest Mother,

The issue is not in the people but in the laws and regulations. The first woman who passed by this remote place made it a destination for everyone else. I saw the people gathering and crowding. They put up banners with a photo of me as I buried the little brother. Cameras were pointed at me from every direction. There were attempts at throwing food and drink to me. Unfortunately, the electrified fence burnt everything. And yet I felt sated. Cheers. Raised fists. But the situation did not change. The men did not allow the people to come closer. They allowed them to express what they felt, but they prevented them from offering real help. The strange thing is that the armed men joined the crowds after hours. They voiced their rejection of what I suffered from. Then they would return to their duties when it was time to work again. Can you see that, Mother? I told you, the problem was the regulations and the laws. But the people – everyone dreams of living in a world where we can all be happy. How did we ever get here?

Dearest Mother,

The people got bored. Just like what happens in the Arab World. An issue of public opinion. It echoes for a few days. Then it is forgotten as if it never was. Each returns to their personal lives. Caring for their petty problems. I don’t blame them. In this world of suffering and grief there is so much that is beyond their ability to control. Just a few days to appease their conscience. It makes them feel they have done what they can for this cause.

Gradually the place returned to its real owners. The men. The electrified fence. Me. The cameras vanished. The people left. The raised fists were lowered. Even the men. They returned home after work, rather than standing by and supporting me.

I don’t mean to break your heart, Mother. But this is my end. I am certain of it. I am sure my lips are dried. My cheeks are hollowed. And, what saddens me most, there is no brother or beloved who preceded me to paradise to come and take me.

Only now I lay down on the sand. I don’t care about what is to come.

Dearest Mother,

I woke to the sound of footsteps. I looked at the sea and saw people running a marathon. They were heading towards me. When they reached me, they helped me up, and made me run in front of them. And I reached the finishing line. The public were cheering. Some jumped down from the seats and ran to embrace and kiss me. I ascended the platform, and received the gold medal. And flowers. I was over the moon. But I was also exhausted with the running and lost consciousness.

Dearest Mother,

I opened my eyes in the hospital. I couldn't move or speak. It may be the anaesthesia or the lack of rest. I heard the doctor telling his colleague: "The electricity did not affect some organs. We can still make use of them."

The other doctor said sadly, "They refuse you alive, and accept you dead." To be honest, I didn't understand all they said. I'll wait until I'm well again and ask them.

Dearest Mother,

This hospital is very strange. They do not check on the patients. I've been here for days, but no one entered my room. Today I regained my ability to move and speak. At first I called for any doctor or nurse. But I got no reply. I opened the door and walked down the corridor, which was soon drowned in darkness. I retraced my steps to the door. What I had found, I had searched for often but to no avail. Now I was in the world of darkness. I walk through it as if through a vast wasteland. I have been like that for days. Or maybe for years. What is this? Mother, dear Mother. I see much green in the distance. It is full of trees and flowers and water. I'll walk there, Mother. But I hope you will pray for me. Pray for me that there won't be any armed men or electrified fences. Please, Mother, pray for me. Pray for me.

## Their Voices I Hear

**Kristina Stankova.** Bulgaria

Quiet. You are embarrassing us. You are embarrassing yourself. You don't understand a thing. Get out of there. You don't belong with men. Girls don't belong here.

Now it seems quite logical that I wanted to run away. To leave. Not to be there anymore.

I grew up badly. Not enough for someone to intervene, but the right amount for me to look from the edge of my mental health and stumble into the abyss. I was born in Sofia, in a middle-class family and grew up in a big, dirty and old apartment. My older brother beat me regularly. And seriously. My mother hated her father-in-law, with whom we lived, and so they quarrelled constantly. I don't know who won in the end. My father *was* (recently making progress) unable to express emotions verbally. I first heard the words "I love you" from him when I decided, a month ago, to share everything I felt with him. Up to then, our conversations had usually been about who cooked what. A passion we share. Ah! And I mustn't forget to add that my first sexual contact was violent. I was fifteen and I didn't tell anyone. I was ashamed and I was sure they would either make fun of me or not believe me. I felt that I was bothering everyone and something was wrong with me, so I thought I deserved to be treated badly – me and my body. I don't want anyone to feel that way. It took me years in a developed and tolerant society, only to realise that what had happened to me was wrong. People should not behave like that with each other. You just don't have to. Then I read a book: *Post-Traumatic Stress* by Hristo Popov. I devoured the three hundred and forty pages as if he had been entrusted with the secret of life. I was amazed at how simple everything was, after seeming so irreversible and insoluble to me. Every thought, emotional state, reaction, dysfunction that I had attributed to my character, to myself, was there. Listed as symptoms of chronic post-traumatic stress.

I so dreamed of someone telling me I was normal. I spent so much time in fog, fear and humiliation.

You are asking me what mobility is for me? – Hope for life.

I am far away now and all my memories seem hazy and confused. But I remember my dreams quite clearly. I never dreamed of a shiny wedding, husband, children or family. I dreamed of travelling. I read a lot and imagined my future adventures around the world. I saw myself as a researcher, scientist or athlete. I wanted to try everything and go everywhere! To have dinner in Paris, to waltz at the Vienna Opera, to sail in the Balearic Sea, to ride the Spanish Pyrenees on a bicycle, to see the ocean, to sleep under the trees, to write, to live freely!

I think it's a miracle that everything listed above (except for the waltz... for now) is part of my current reality. I made it! I left this sick country of Bulgaria and followed my dreams. I crossed the threshold and left the old dark sticky reality. I replaced it with the sunny shores of Catalonia. Without even realising how heavy the burden on my chest was. I just grabbed every opportunity that came my way because I was convinced that at forty I would lose my mind. So I tried not to waste time. I applied for everything and agreed to all kinds of challenges.

I have been living in Spain for four years now and have been travelling around Europe for six. I love my life here. I have friends from all over the world who often offer me amazing adventures. I speak four languages almost every day and eat food from all over our planet. I feel that I am at my place and I am happy. Where I was born was not for me and I was allowed to try again in a new place. I was accepted, given an education, a job, a social life and no one protested against my presence. I thank myself for each of the decisions I made, but the truth is that it was not difficult at all. After all, I am a white woman who was born in the territory of a current member state of the European Union. I haven't contributed much to the acquisition of these characteristics of mine, and I can't help but think how unfair it is to those with less luck. How many scarier stories than mine have a completely different ending? How many women and men are in the abyss and do not have the same right to hope? They never manage to get away from what pulls them down. They spend their lives in a place they don't belong to. And, maybe more, much scarier. And the few who take the risk of illegal emigration hardly know that with their arrival, their suffering is just beginning. Years without even hope of documents and legal work. The constantly re-occurring thought, "Will I be forcibly sent back?" I wonder if I could handle this tension, knowing how unfair it is.

Sometimes I don't understand people at all. I have the feeling that we are deliberately creating problems for ourselves and then spend too much time pretending that we can't find a solution. Human mobility has been a fact since the beginning of our existence. The inner urge to explore and discover new lands, to meet different people, to seek salvation, education, work, love, is something that has almost never been completely stopped by the legislature of any country in Europe. I don't know why we continue to pretend that there is a sense in restrictive migration policies once these people are moving. They're here. Barcelona, for example, is so crowded with illegal immigrants that you can see graffiti on the walls of the city, with the inscription *sin papeles* (without documents). These people remain, despite all the difficulties of their unsettled legal residence. Proof of how much we are willing to sacrifice for the possibility of a new beginning.

## Until the Next Wave

**George Gerasimos Mantziokas. Greece**

The sky was depressingly grey. The sea was the same glum colour, perfectly mimicking the celestial dome, a cold breeze sweeping over it, freezing his body and giving him the chills.

The circumstances were anything but ideal for swimming, but Tassos was determined to not leave the small beach unless he first took a dip. After all, he had gone swimming on much more overcast days than this before.

“This is what a sunny day must be like in Norway,” he said in jest, a crooked smile on his face while taking his shirt off, folding it neatly and placing it on the old beach mat he had brought with him. He placed a stone on the mat to keep the wind from sweeping it off.

He made his way leisurely to the water, swinging his arms left and right to warm himself up. His body was shaking at the touch of the cold wind but he took no notice.

The water timidly touched his feet and, boy, was it ice-cold! Why on earth had he decided to go swimming in May? Did the first sunny break fool you, old man, and you thought the entire month would be like that? Or did you perhaps think the seasonal torridity of springtime could warm up the sea? I say, the sea, old man, is always cold; you should have known this by now.

Tassos stood still for a while, the water almost up to his knees. An immense sea was all around, infinite and overcast. Others would up and leave, not him though. It all felt like a challenge, a bit of an adventure to him.

He made up his mind. He went ahead and plunged his old body into the cold sea. The feeling of chilled water enveloping him was refreshing. He started moving fast inside the water to get his body warm and accustomed to the temperature. Then, he spread his arms out and by swimming swiftly he went further out at sea.

Being now at a distance from the beach he was content with, he shifted and began to swim parallel to the shore. Often little waves would come from afar and crash against him. He loved this anyway. He enjoyed it every time he had to measure up and take on the waves, although he knew, deep down inside, they were no real danger, maybe not even a challenge.

There it was, another wave rearing up on the horizon, hardly five metres off from where he was. It was bigger than the previous ones, which made Tassos even keener on tackling it. To catch this wave, he started swimming faster, pulling at an even greater speed, looking forward to

throwing himself onto it, to feel the violent force of the sea and then to beat it at its own game, on its own turf.

There was yet another reason why he loved this showdown with the waves. Wherever a wave closes in, at first it gets you to a level that is inferior to where you originally were. You're in trouble but it's only temporary. If you manage to keep yourself afloat, above sea level, the wave, upon subsiding, will eventually get you even higher compared to where you had been when it first found you. It gives you a boost upwards and a power you did not have before.

Tassos finally caught the wave just before it passed him by, and what struck him, albeit belatedly, was that it was bigger than he had expected. The water crashed on to him with sheer force and caught him in its wet grasp. Totally unprepared, he had no time to react as the overwhelming power of the water flipped him over.

By making an effort, hardly negligible given his age, he managed to resurface. His heart was racing. He could hardly breathe. He thought he'd better wait for a couple of minutes until he got his heartbeat back in rhythm.

Unconsciously, his gaze wandered off and around before it stopped at the sight of the shore. A feeling which he didn't really wish to explore was wringing his heart, the sharp contortion of his face indicating his disenchantment.

The shore was reminding him that he had to get out of the water soon in order to leave the beach and go back home.

The shore was reminding him that he needed to be back at the office on Monday to deal with business affairs.

The shore was reminding him that Marina, his daughter, was probably going to divorce her husband.

The shore was reminding him that the bank has turned down his request for a business loan.

The shore was reminding him that... Oh Lord...the house was empty and last Sunday was the day when they had organised a memorial service for Anastasia, his wife.

Tassos turned his back on the beach and started swimming angrily towards the deep ocean. He wanted, even for a little while, to escape his thoughts and needs.

He immersed his head and started swimming frenziedly, shifting his direction multiple times, sometimes going left, sometimes right and sometimes straight out towards the open sea but never once heading back to the shore.

There came a moment when he felt a cold and heavy drop of water fall hard on to his head. He could feel the goose bumps all over his skin. He paused and stayed still for a little. Pretty soon, another drop fell right down from the sky and bumped into his head, and then another and another and then came more. Before he knew it, there was a big storm.

The sound of thunder came from afar and momentarily a thunderbolt lit up the sky. Tassos turned around to face the shore and started to swim like a maniac. But the shore was too far away.

Huge waves began to rear up like little hills owing to the powerful winds the storm was bringing with it. Now, no matter how much he tried, it was impossible to escape the waves. They were pounding him with fury, one after the other, engulfing and submerging him. Every time he anxiously reared his head from the dark waters it would turn out the waves had carried him even further than where he had been last.

This was making his predicament more dangerous. The shore was small and after a handful of metres of sand there was a bunch of sharp rocks. If he, by any chance, got too close, a strong wave could send him crashing against the rocks.

He tried to fight the waves and to swim against the winds but he got tired and eventually gave up trying to beat them. Soon he was at the mercy of the waves which kept coming by the score, pulling and lifting him up only to submerge him with sheer force and violence into the salty sea that frothed and foamed.

Each time he thought there was a window for him to swim back to the tiny beach, the wind would grow stronger and another wave would appear, cutting him off and taking him further away.

But isn't life like that? Whenever you think you have made it, when you have managed to do something great, the next wave rolls and sweeps everything off, dragging you along, taking you back to the starting point, if not further backwards. And Tassos had been hit by too many waves in recent years.

His own business, the clothes store his late father had opened back in the 70s, when they moved to Athens from Areopoli, Laconia, the very store where Tassos himself had been working all along after his graduation, had gone under. All that time he had been doing his job the way he knew he should, and he always had enough to pay off debts on time. Out of the blue, there came a year when he couldn't meet payments, so he took out a loan. The next year he had to take another to repay the previous year's loan, which is how he got himself caught up in this mess. And now, after ten years of battling loans and creditors, he was told there can be no more loans and he must come to the bank to settle his debt and negotiate the terms. "I will be blunt, Mr. Andrikopoulos, it will be very difficult for you to save your business," was the very first thing the bank clerk had told him. That was the first blow Tassos had taken. The store, his father's legacy, had gone under the waves of the economic crisis.

He worked hard to get his head above water. Hardly had he had time to clear the salty froth from his eyes when another wave came along, drowning him once more.

One evening Marina had knocked on her parents' door at eleven. "I cannot take this anymore; we are arguing all the time," she said. Those stupid quarrels were really intense. Neither Tassos nor Anastasia ever figured out what the last straw had been or who was to blame. All they saw was their distraught daughter, which was enough. Subsequently, Marina worked things out with Alekos, and went back to her home. The ceasefire didn't last long. Two months later she was back in her parents' place and she stayed on. Then she left again but before long she was back, living with them, once more.

The feeling that their daughter's family was falling apart was a source of constant pain for the couple. There was this bitter aftertaste which lingered.

But the third wave was the hardest of them all. It drained Tassos.

Anastasia, his wife, suffered a major stroke, age sixty-two. After a few days in a coma she passed. It felt like he had lost his anchor. The small haven, which had always been there to make him feel safe and secure, was no more.

Tassos was sinking deeper and deeper into the ice-cold waters. He was no longer kicking to go up. A thought crossed his mind: that was it, he had been defeated. The waves had turned out to be too strong and he had been too weak to cope.

"Oh, God", he thought, "what if I gave up now? What if I stopped fighting off these cold, merciless waves? Would that be my fault? I wonder whether there might be a reason for me to keep on fighting?"

Tassos heard, or thought he heard, in his head, an utterance from a voice that he knew was not his. "And Job said: 'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh. Blessed be the name of the Lord.'"

And then he knew. What had happened was not his fault. It would have been his fault had he failed to make an effort. It would have been his fault had he given up trying. By surrendering his weapons, he would be committing a huge sin. He would be refusing God's providence. He needed to keep on fighting and let God take care of everything else for He knows best.

He tried to shake his legs to go upwards and he kicked with a force he never knew was there. Having reached the surface really fast, he was facing the huge waves again.

He had no idea how far the sea had taken him but he was definitely far from the shore. He noticed, a few feet from where he was, a handful of boats being rocked dreadfully by the waves. Their keels were going up and down in a frenzy, at the pace the waves set and yet they stayed on, right where they were, thanks to their heavy anchors.

Tassos carefully got to the nearest boat and managed to grasp and hold on to it. Its little bow read, in big red letters, “St. Nicholas”, the patron saint of seamen.

He was not safe as with every jolt he risked losing his grip and sinking deeper. So, he decided to get on the boat.

His jaw clenched, he applied all the physical strength he had to his arms. He lifted and pushed himself into the boat, leaning forward to climb inside.

He then rolled over, looked up and saw a sky full of black clouds. Gradually the rain started to feel like a soft caress. Some golden sunrays were slipping through the cracks of the clouds straight to his face. Tassos, his eyes wide open, saw the clouds disappear one after another. They were giving their place to the sun, which was shyly emerging, illuminating sea and shore.

A faint, tired smile appeared on his face.

“It was just a squall,” he whispered.

## Grandma and the Sea

**Jana Slika.** Lebanon

I was very upset that afternoon. I turn my head to my shadow, which was extending across the wooden seat along Beirut's sea. I close my eyes and listen to the sound of the waves like one listening to a song. When I suddenly open my eyes, I see a tanned hand very gently giving me a sweet. I lift my head a bit and see her. It was her. That pretty old woman. My neighbour in the sea. I've been meeting her for two months now, always at this time, as if we had an appointment. She would sit on the seat next to me and we would share the sea. I always watch her, and wish to speak with her. Here she is today, offering a smile with the chocolate. The grandma said, "It's Belgian chocolate. We Belgians are famous for chocolate. Chocolate has a special magic. It consoles. Have a piece, my child." I shyly took the delightful piece and smiled. Grandma smiled back and went. I suddenly felt better. She had understood my sadness, and had absorbed it as the sea always did. That's the sweet grandma!

She is Belgian, then. Only yesterday it crossed my mind that she may be Turkish, on a temporary visit to Lebanon. Her features were not Lebanese. And she was reading a novel in Turkish. She held the book in her hands like a spoilt child, fiddling with the pages and then turning to one in particular. She looked at it with love, and then halted about midway. She half closed the book, said something to the sea, and then returned to her reading. I think she finished around twenty pages like that. Then she put the book, with her mobile phone, into her straw handbag and walked away. When she was gone, I realised I had spent the whole afternoon watching her. I had neglected the vivacious sea stretching out in front of me. This grandma demanded the full attention of anyone who saw her. They would look at her ceaselessly, just like the sea did.

A couple of days ago, I thought she may be Spanish. A child of no more than eight was with her, and she was trying to teach him how to draw. She said in broken Arabic, "We Spaniards are known for our genius in painting. Remember Picasso, Salvador Dalí, Velázquez and others." She drew something, and the boy traced the lines. It must have been very special, for she laughed from the bottom of her heart. That evening, when my visit to the sea was over, I tried drawing many things. A flower blossoming at dawn. A sun succumbing to night and setting. An old man complaining to the stars of his loneliness. What a grandma! She reminded me of art, of wonderful dreams, of flowers, of children and old people, of beginnings and ends. Just like the sea did.

The grandma was very confusing for me. She was in her eighties. How did she know all these things? How did she face life with all this hope? She challenged the stereotype of the elderly I was familiar with. Angry elderly who grumbled at life with their sticks, who hated summer because of the mosquitoes, and hated night because of their fear, and hated winter because of the cold. They got disturbed by the sea because it was treacherous. And by children because

they were noisy. And by technology because it was a curse. My stereotype of elderly women who loved discussing their medication, their pain and who believed their lives had come to a standstill in some distant past redolent with memories and dreams.

I was certain she hid stories and secrets, as plentiful as did the sea. We give it our secrets gratis, in the firm belief that it has no tongue. It would keep them in its depths. Innocent and naïve secrets; dangerous and destructive secrets. Secrets that seek to find a voice, others that prefer to remain silent. This time, I insisted on finding out the secret that links the grandma and the sea, and to find out about her origins. Her features were mysterious, her accent enigmatic, her talk whetted my curiosity. That is why I made up my mind to talk to her the following day. I would start by thanking her for the Belgian chocolate!

And that is how it happened. I thanked her and then asked her about her homeland. The grandma said she had many homelands. She kept them in her heart. She said it was not important where we were born, but to which land we decide to belong. Our belonging to many countries is not a rejection of our own but rather a gentle flirtation. It is not a detraction from our patriotism but rather an enrichment. She then told me of these homelands. Her features changed with every homeland. The joy in her eyes sowed atoms of great enthusiasm when she told me of the great Greek civilisation and its philosophers, of the history of Britain, of the Pharaohs of Egypt and their legends. Then she was suddenly overcome with sadness, which etched more wrinkles into her face, as she told of the war in her homeland Syria. How quickly the old woman's face changed from serenity to anger, from joy to anxiety. Just like the sea waves that would rise one moment and then calm the next. In their arousal there was anger and in their calmness was gentleness.

How could a person be so like the sea? I vow the woman was very much like it. She had the form, the features, the sound of the sea. Her face reflected the visage of fishermen but also their patience. Her eyes held the pleasure of children as they built their sandcastles on the beach. But also their disappointment when they are scattered to the wind. She had the ability to say so much without saying anything. She embraced bright suns in her soul and long nights, just like the sea would engulf the sun and then the night with every evening. Like the sea, every attempt to understand her was futile. With every attempt, I felt more ignorant, and she made me admit incompetence in the face of her reality.

The grandma invited me to her house the next day. An appetising aroma welcomed me at the door. And an old tune that evoked a strange nostalgia in me. Later, I discovered it was the aroma of Moroccan spices, which the grandma loved and used in many a recipe. The tune was an old Romanian melody, which the grandma mastered to perfection. Her house was wonderful, just like her. Nothing was haphazard. Everything was in its place with full intention. On one shelf of her huge library was a set of nicely ordered photos. In front of each photo was a tiny flower. Grandma said she loved gardening, and every city she visited reminded her of a flower, and the scent of the flower was an extension of the city for her. Lilies reminded her of Tunisia. Damask roses reminded her of Paris. She connected Denmark with the sunflower, which evoked constant

joy. Beirut was connected to amaryllis, which offers unconditional love. One photo stood out; the photo of a beautiful girl in her twenties. She sat on a boat with an elderly man. In front of her was a white wilted flower.

Grandma said she was the girl, and the elderly man was her father. He had been a sailor, and she had spent all her youth travelling and visiting the countries embracing the Mediterranean Sea. Grandma said the sea had no specific identity. It brought together many identities. It was rebellious and spoilt, choosing a different homeland every morning. Just as we selected our breakfast. One day it would be the sea of Beirut; another the sea of France; or Spain; or of Egypt. The sea brought together all these homelands for it belonged to them all. Like the rays of the sun brought together the colours of the spectrum, for they were all part of the sun. Grandma said she had loved the sea, until she became like it. It became her home that reminded her of her father, her childhood, the smell of the first successes and failures. Travelling was her master, who had taught her to pick from every homeland the best it had to offer. For every homeland is beautiful, and stands out in its own way. Travelling has taught her to cook, languages, art, music, painting, writing, gardening. But most importantly, it taught her passion, renewal, perceiving the spaciousness of the earth and the potentials it had to offer. It taught her to dream for as long as she lived. When I asked her about her dream, the colour of the sea touched her eyes, and she said, “To help young people like you acquire knowledge and to learn about life through travelling. The other dream is my father’s dream. To allow the sea to rejoin what the borders have put asunder.”

## A Conversation at the Airport

**Ahmed O. Benomran.** Libya

At the airport, there are huge crowds of travellers, arriving, leaving. Each is carrying a bag or pulling a suitcase behind them. Millions of faces, and every suitcase tells a story. Every face, if you look closer, is a novel. In the smoking area, a young man in his twenties, with blond hair, sits on the floor with a cup of coffee in front of him. He is watching the take-off and landing of the planes in the dark night, enjoying a soft summer breeze as it soothes the summer heat. He lights a cigarette as he continues to watch the planes. His backpack lies next to him and he leans on it, while his laptop rests on his legs. Another tall young man, slightly older with dark hair, approaches him. The blond man looks up, and the other young man smiles as he says, “Nice seat.”

The blond one laughs, then waves at the floor and says: “Be my guest.”

“I don’t want to distract you.”

“No, not at all.”

The standing man takes off his backpack, places it on the floor and sits down next to it.

“A smoke?” the blond one asks, offering his cigarettes to the one sitting next to him. Taking one, the blond man lights it for him.

The other one pats his hand, thanking him for lighting the cigarette.

The blond one smiles.

“As smokers we all have the same habits, even if we come from different cultures.”

The young man next to him smiles in agreement, and then says: “As if we were united.”

The two young men fall silent, and then the dark-haired one asks: “I just saw you at Gate 212. Are you from there?”

The blond one asks in turn: “You mean the gate itself? Or the destination designated by that gate?”

“It can’t be the gate itself. Imagine living at an airport gate!”

They laugh. Then the blond one explains, “In fact, I did once live at an airport gate for three days. It was late, and there was something wrong with the plane just before takeoff. And the airline could not send a replacement flight until three days later.”

“And you were never recompensated? Or at least taken to some hotel?”

“They did offer to take us to a hotel outside the airport. But I couldn’t go because my passport requires an entry visa. So I found myself stuck at the airport, awaiting the unknown.”

The dark-haired man was taken aback and wondered: “And they never told you of the time?”

The other one smiled. “We asked the airline officer in charge, but he claimed he didn’t know and that it was out of his hands. We’re used to these things in our country.”

“Where are you from?”

“From a country abounding in crises and problems. A country where the diseased die for lack of treatment, where the citizen dies of hunger for lack of food. I am from a country where poverty and ignorance prevail. And no one thinks of finding a solution.”

“It’s funny, but this description applies to many a country, including my own. It can’t be my country, can it? Why do we speak in English, then?”

They laugh, and then the dark-haired one resumes their chat. “If you don’t want to name your country, I understand. But help me along. Let’s take the Mediterranean as a reference point – in which direction do you live?”

“The southern shore. And you?”

“I felt it was a country like mine. I live on the northern shore.”

The southerner looks at the other one a while, then asks: “You call yourself European with that dark hair? My friend, I’m far more European than you are.”

They laugh again.

The northerner asks: “Where are you headed?”

“Back home for the summer holidays. To go back to your question, yes, I was at that gate awaiting my flight.”

“I don’t believe much in coincidences, but this one is certainly a coincidence. I, too, am awaiting that flight.”

“Business or pleasure?”

“Pleasure, to be honest.”

“Of all the countries of the world, you come to my country for tourism?”

“Your country is beautiful!”

“Only on the outside. You tourists never get to see the dark side of the countries you visit.”

The southerner was a bit surprised, and then asked: “How do you mean?”

“I mean you don’t see our suffering. You go to places no regular citizen can access. You buy gifts and souvenirs, but you don’t know how many people toiled to produce them.”

“But that applies to all countries. If you come to my country, for instance, as a tourist, you would do the same.”

“My dear friend, I’m from the southern shores of the Mediterranean. To visit your country, I would need oodles of money, a visa, endless paperwork to get the visa, an appointment at the embassy. And after all that, they may simply reject my application under the pretext that one day a man from my country committed a terrorist attack.”

Silence falls for a while before the southerner continues: “You see our countries as a place to spend your summer holiday. We see your countries as the land where we may fulfil our simplest dreams.”

“What would those dreams be?”

“To pursue my education. To get married. To find a job. To settle down. To fulfil myself. When I was little, I dreamt of becoming a professional football player who would play with the national team and achieve glorious victories for my country.”

“We have the same dreams. I, too, used to dream of this. I probably dream the same dreams as you do. When I was little, I, too, dreamt of playing with the national team. But back then my dad thought that my education was more important. He always said focus on the path towards education. The path to your dreams will come later. When I completed my education and thought I could now change to my dream path, I found myself on the path towards a career and marriage. I found myself moving from one waiting point to the next. The paths I was waiting for had multiplied endlessly, and I forgot about the path of my dreams.”

“They used to tell me the same. To take the career path and let the dream path wait.”

“And what happened?”

“There aren’t any paths in my country to follow!”

They, yet again, and the northerner says: “I’m really glad I met you. I never imagined that despite the big blue sea that separates us, we have so many dreams and aspirations in common.”

“It’s one of the charms of the Mediterranean, my friend. Maybe if the mobility towards your countries were a bit easier, we would not believe that there were so many differences between us.”

“True. We may, indeed, find that we have many things in common, and we would focus more on these commonalities.”

The northerner looks at his watch, only to get up in a hurry, panicking. “Hurry up, we have a plane to catch.”

But the southerner looks at him calmly and says: “Calm down. This plane, like the trains and paths that we’re awaiting – they are always late.”

“How would you know?”

“My dear friend who comes from the north of the Mediterranean. If this plane were en route to your country, it would leave on time. But it’s heading back to my country. Like all planes heading towards my country, it will be delayed. Even the flights know that your country is better. Now sit down and let me get you another cup of coffee and we can chat a bit more about our dreams.”

The northerner sits down again, and they wait for their flight. They chat and they laugh, while the planes outside take off and land, carrying travellers with diverse stories. They may be very similar to our story, or very different. But no doubt, regardless of the shore we live on, we’ll remain the inhabitants of the Mediterranean. And we’ll be brought together by similar thoughts and dreams, just as that sea has brought us together.

The End

## Border Houses

**Miroslava Kulkova.** Slovakia

Mikelis stopped in the middle of the road. The cars were honking and the drivers were yelling *vlákas!* at him, but he heard none of that. His mother was walking down the street on the other side of the road, but she was thirty years younger.

He lifted one foot, then the other and he walked towards the apparition. He was growing more and more confused. Walking in front of him was the same dress that his mother was wearing in an old photograph. The buttons were in the same places, there was that sewn-up part that she had ripped when she was climbing over the neighbour's fence to pick a few unripe grapefruits. Only the belt was missing, but the belt loops that recalled the belt were still on the dress. Even the lady's hair was in the same style that his mother used to wear it when she was young. It was only when the smell of tar and the stench of rotting vegetables hit him on the nose that he realised that he wasn't dreaming and that he was actually near the marketplace in the old part of Nicosia.

He reached out with his hand. The dress was surprisingly rough and also a little moist with sweat.

Cemaliye was startled and instinctively jumped back. She was so shocked that she didn't even start screaming. She simply took a good look at the olive-skinned youth with her big dark eyes. Why is he looking at me as if he was seeing an apparition? She took a look at herself, all the way from her sandals up to her breasts – nothing, she looked completely normal.

Mikelis was standing there with his hand stretched out and his eyes wide open. Cemaliye thought to herself that he was looking rather silly, but pretty harmless. He was very attractive. She was quite interested in finding out why he was staring at her like this.

“Hi, my name is Mikelis. Can I invite you for a frappé?”

The past is conserved in a strip of land that is several metres wide and several tens of kilometres long. Goods from the 1970's are growing pale in dusty shopping windows. A red Toyota Corolla, which was brand new in 1974, has shown 32 miles on the mile counter for decades now. There are cars, large TV sets with antennas or radios trapped in this temporal limbo.

Only soldiers wearing blue berets carefully walk through the Dead Zone, which is what the locals call this place. They are more diplomats than fighters, getting more training in peace-making than in close combat. Young Brits, who were trained to survive in explosive arid areas, learn

about nuance here. They carefully guard bags of sand that mark the border between the Greek and Turkish part. If they find they have been moved by a couple of centimetres in the morning, they move them back to their original position. A quick intervention can save lives. In winter, they are on the lookout for people who come to pick wild asparagus that grows in the untouched land between the trenches. They watch out for smugglers and poachers. A forgotten landmine that would blow any Cypriot to pieces would also blow up the fragile equilibrium on the divided island. Apart from explosives, the greatest threat to UN soldiers is falling parts of buildings, which have been falling into a state of disrepair without humans to take care of them. Rust is slowly eating away at signs, ads and fences.

Day after day, the lonely blue berets guard this land of ghosts.

Not even cats, the mythical wanderers, walk through this space-time.

There was a dead tree standing in front of the house with a thatched roof. Salty air was blowing at it from the sea and the scalding Cypriot sun turned it black. It looked like a tree from hell, but the whole of Cyprus resembled hell in 1974.

To Cemaliye's parents, the house resembled their own house they had abandoned in Paphos in the south. They ran away from the fighting. Greek Cypriots had been longing for independence for ages and when the international community refused to grant it to them, they took matters into their own hands. Then Turkish soldiers arrived in the north of the island with orders to protect their language compatriots. Greek Cypriots had to leave their homes in the north in their pyjamas and only with a few family photos they managed to grab. The cruelty of the Turkish soldiers will never be forgotten among the Greek Cypriots. Many of them have never learnt what had happened to their family members.

Cemaliye's father was a Turkish Cypriot from Paphos and her mother was from mainland Turkey and she had come to the island seeking work years ago. There was no way they could stay in the south.

For the first few years, they kept imagining what the family who had lived here before them may have looked like. The lady of the house had beautiful dresses but Cemaliye's mother was ashamed to wear them. It was Cemo who found them hidden in the attic later and decided to give them a go. The only thing her mother had told her about where the dress had come from was that she had found it at the waste dump in Kyrenia.

For ten years they lived in the house as if they were ghosts. Every day they expected the original owners to return and they were always ready to leave immediately. They made no changes, no repairs.

After Cemaliye was born they realised the island had been divided for good. Nobody was coming back to their house ever.

In the autumn, when Cemo first started going to school, they redecorated the walls in the house for the first time.

A little green bud appeared on the dead tree.

Mikelis showed Cemaliye the Sandman comic book about half a year after they started dating. It was his favourite item that was sold at the bookstore near the Ledras border crossing in the divided capital city where he worked. Cemaliye fell for the story of Dream immediately. She also felt like a traveller between worlds. Every morning on her way to work on the span of several hundreds of metres, she changed her SIM card and switched the alphabet on her phone. She replaced the lengthy singing of the muezzin with Greek pop songs. She travelled light years. Compared to the Greek part, the Turkish part of the divided Nicosia was like a scary dream where everything seems familiar, but at the same time absolutely strange.

The cats in the Turkish part were so skinny you could see their ribs. Their faces were covered in scars and they had in their eyes the hungry look of wild beasts. They were even scared of people. The cats in Greek Nicosia had shiny coats and their bright eyes weren't dimmed by hunger or disease. They were little domestic goddesses who were getting fed and cuddled everywhere they went. She once shared this discovery with Mikelis. "It's simple. If the Turks cannot take care of their own people, they will hardly be able to take care of cats." Then he got up, hugged her and whispered "Sorry" into her hair.

Cemaliye worked for a non-profit organisation that was trying to start a dialogue between young people in both communities. Mikelis was a small miracle for her. She got him excited about various projects and he liked to help her with them. They felt like Romeo and Juliet whose love would bring together two quarrelling houses.

Cemaliye is giddy and excited. The moment has finally arrived.

Mikelis is sitting in the car next to her and, with his eyes wide open, he is watching every detail of the road. He scoffs at a huge Turkish flag that somebody had painted on the hill next to the highway from Nicosia. Provocation. Cemaliye squirms in her seat with shame.

Today, she will introduce Mikelis to the parents. She will show him her birth-house and Kyrenia. The road is surrounded by high mountains, it's spring and everything is in full bloom. In the distance, you can see the sky-blue sea.

Cemaliye wants to avoid the traditional traffic jams on the main road to Kyrenia, so she is taking the back roads through the poor neighbourhoods. Jazz music is playing from a CD – the Greek radio was replaced with static after they crossed the border and she doesn't want to turn on a Turkish radio.

Mikelis is watching the buildings under construction and the dirty streets with amazement.

He looks at her and Cemaliye cannot ignore the short moment of satisfaction he himself failed to realise. "I knew you guys had nothing at all!"

She explains to him that the buildings on the Turkish side haven't been repaired for a long time because the ownership issues haven't been settled yet. And the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus isn't recognised as an independent state by anybody but Turkey. This means they cannot apply for funds and subsidies from the European Union, as opposed to their Greek brothers. However, recently there has been a lot of construction activity going on, mainly huge hotels for tourists.

After a while, Mikelis gives her a tender caress and leaves the palm of his hand on her knee.

Cemo sees the familiar outline of the tree and the thatched roof and her heart starts pounding. Her parents walk out onto the doorstep, dressed in their Sunday clothes. They are smiling. Mother and father are holding hands. It's only when Cemo parks close enough to the door that she notices that mum's knuckles are all white from how hard she is clutching father's hand.

"Cema, is this your house?" Mikelis lets go of her and keeps looking motionlessly.

Cemaliye agrees, not understanding what he means.

"Take me back home."

"What's going on, my love?"

"I want to go back home."

Cemaliye grabs his hand, but Mikelis breaks free.

"When my parents were running away from Turkish soldiers from Kyrenia, they only managed to take with them a small bag. Only the things they managed to put into it in a few minutes. One coat, a couple of photos and my mum's jewellery. My parents had those photos framed. They are hung in the kitchen. I've been looking at this house since I was a little boy."

Cemaliye looks him in the eyes, frightened. She feels he won't be letting her back into his rented apartment in Nicosia.

With silent resolve, Mikelis gets into the car and folds his arms over his chest. Cemaliye walks towards her parents, hugs them and whispers: “It won’t work. We are living in his parents’ house.”

The tree starts trembling and dark green leaves start falling on the car. Cemaliye gets into the car, starts the engine and slowly drives her Romeo back to where he came from.

She leaves behind a bare tree that will not be covered in leaves for a long time to come and her crying parents, who will shortly be telling her about the true origin of the dress in the attic.

## I Trust You

**Patricia Jimeno Fernández. Spain**

It's cold, even though the sun is shining in the sky; my body feels heavy but it's my clothes that make me sink; I'm afraid.

And now I regret it.

There were only six places in the boat, and they gave me one. They looked me in the eye and told me that they trusted me; they gave me the last thing they had left, the hope of staying alive, at least until the day I died. It seems incredible that this only happened a few hours ago.

What happened to them?

It was still night-time when the barge began to sink. I was asleep, the movement of the waves lulled me, and I rested on my mother's lap, trusting that this journey would be the beginning of a better life for both of us. My father had disappeared one day, he had been telling us for a long time that he would travel to Spain, and that once he got there he would help us, first with money and then by getting us out of Libya. I don't know if he got to Spain, I don't know what made him think that we'd be better off without him but with money. My dad never came back, and now my mum would never return.

I'm tired, but I still feel their eyes staring at me, as they lifted me up, and quickly pulled me off the barge. I don't believe I will ever be able to explain what I felt at that moment, I don't expect anyone listening to me today to understand, I just need to tell the story, and share this burden that will honour me for life.

When uncertainty lurks, human beings can only react in two ways, with fear or with love.

"Malak, daughter, what about you? How old are you?" A voice shouts at me from the other end of the night.

"I'm 14, my birthday was a couple of months ago." We were sinking, and these people were just talking about dreams and longings. We had little time to get out of there, the captain of the boat told us that there was a lifeboat, and that it would only save five people along with him.

"So why do you want to live, Malak?" another voice shouted to me. My mother had been frozen for a while, saying nothing, silently crying, wetting my face already damp from the splashes of the waves. Her tears were soon mixed with mine, when I answered:

“I don’t know, I just know I don’t want to die here.” Now I wonder why I didn’t say what I felt, why I didn’t save my mother with me, I just wanted our dream to come true, and to be able to start our new life together.

A deathly silence buried the last moments of hope, when the hands began to rise, voting for those chosen to occupy the five places in the lifeboat. There were four of them who had convinced the rest that even though their lives were as valuable as theirs, on that day heaven was on their side. The barge slowly sank more and more, like the cold of the water that was creeping up our ankles.

“Malak doesn’t deserve to die here. She still has to discover why she has to live, and no one deserves to die without knowing that,” said the man sitting next to us in a serious and powerful voice. He kept looking at me and my mother and I didn’t know what to say. “I’m a doctor, and my life is valuable because I’ll be able to save many others, but what kind of doctor would I be if I couldn’t give my life, my body and my soul for someone who needs it more. Take her, boatman, and be sure she makes it, because in her name it is written, she is the angel who will take our souls to the glory of heaven.”

“Malak, be happy and strong, remember where you come from, and those who gave their lives for you,” whispered a person I couldn’t see as I crossed the barge.

“Girl, may your life honour the life of the daughter I lost to the fevers in Libya,” a woman yelled as she put my hand on her forehead, and with a heartbreaking scream began to cry.

“I love you.” And with a kiss, my mother released my hand, so that they would take me out of the coffin our dream passage had become.

I remember this feeling, a very salty taste in my mouth, as if I was still in my mother’s lap, while she cried and her tears reached my lips.

Nobody thinks that this will be the day they have to die; nobody imagines that they have to have an interview with the grim reaper; to explain to him if it is your or your neighbour’s life he has to take. I can’t forget how we got into the boat; we had won that game but in exchange for carrying the heaviest burden imaginable on our shoulders.

I’m tired, my legs move less and less.

The boatman had deceived us, and forced us to jump in the middle of the sea, near the coast that we still couldn’t see; and, at gunpoint, he told us that he had already done his part, and that it was now God who must have mercy on our souls.

I’m afraid. Now what? If I die, we will all have died, I can never be a doctor, and save other people’s lives, I can never try to find happiness and honour the memory of that daughter. I... will never open my eyes again, so neither will my mother. No

“Help! Please! Please... get me out of here.” My mouth fills with water again, I cough, and I fall silent.

I don’t know if it is the sound of the waves invading my ears, or the echo that is still rumbling inside me. But my mother is screaming “I love you” as I move away, and I hear her voice fading little by little. Mum, thank you... Thank you for everything, because you have been the one who has taught me to be strong, to be proud to be alive, and to fight for the life that we all deserve. All those people died that day in the Mediterranean, in a barge that had not been designed to take fifty passengers on the open sea. Each of them had dutifully paid their ticket, for a journey of no return, until death.

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The Mediterranean has become the graveyard of the world. The uncertainty of whether tomorrow we will also be able to eat, whether my children will be able to continue studying, or whether my wife will die giving birth, pushes one shore of the Mediterranean to cross the entire sea in the hope that their fears will vanish, and find the European dream, that those same Europeans wanted to find in America years ago. I was a survivor of a barge that sank 20 years ago, and I have been a survivor of a human trafficker, who forced me to jump out of a boat into the open sea. I don’t ask that you understand my suffering; I only ask that you help me to fulfil all the wishes that my travel companions placed in me that day. I only want you to give me your support, and for all of us to seek a solution to the exodus that the Mediterranean witnesses every few weeks. I don’t need to live for many years, because it is humanly impossible to fulfil all the years given to me by those people that day. But please, let’s do something. Because although my name is Malak, which means angel in Arabic, it is that fisherman who saved my life who is the angel and, unfortunately, there are not enough angels for all the lives that need to be saved.

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Hello, my name is Patricia, I’m from Granada and I have always had a happy life. I was lucky to be born in Spain, the place that many people want to reach. You may wonder why I decided to write this story, and I have a good explanation.

I decided to volunteer for the European Solidarity Corps in Turkey, in Ankara, where we did an activity that would mark me forever.

All the volunteers sat in a circle in a room, and we closed our eyes. We thought of our relatives, of the people we loved the most, and those who it would hurt the most not to see again. We wrote how we would say goodbye to them in a letter, and they only gave us three minutes for it. We recreated a scenario where we were on a barge about to sink, and had to explain why others should save our lives. I didn’t know what to say at the time, only that I wanted to live, and I wanted everyone else to live, and that there would never be enough reason to condemn someone else in my place. We voted, but we did so by giving a piece of paper to each of the people we

thought deserved to live, as we looked them in the eye, and said: “I trust you.” This was a double-edged act because, at the same time, while looking into the eyes of those you condemned, you had to say: “I’m sorry, I don’t trust you.”

Everyone had explained why their time had not yet come, but still, somehow, we ignored them, and judged which life was more valuable. I didn’t expect to be saved, but when I opened my hand to count the votes I had received, a place in the lifeboat was mine. I got on the boat, and while my companions looked at me with sadness and trust, that day I knew that my life had changed; and that always, and when you least expect it, you have to be ready to fight for yourself and for all the people who have ever placed their hopes in you, who have entrusted their secrets to you.

I was unable to look them in the eye without tears filling mine; and, with all the gratitude that I could muster in that moment of fragility, I thanked them one by one for their vote. Even today, I imagine that this story I’m writing here would not have been a reality, and then I remember that it is, and that thousands of people leave their home every day in the hope of finding a better place, if not for them, at least for their children or companions.

Coincidences only exist to make a greater good come true, and this is my time to tell you my story.

Thank you

## “Gracias”, My Friend

**Alara Tugce Egesoy.** Turkey

In the week of my fifty-fifth birthday, I attended a breakfast planned with my friends. Finally, we were able to decide on a weekend where we could come together amid the hustle and bustle. Well, even though few people call in the rest of the year, everyone would find time for birthdays and to be with you. The gatherings did not exceed ten people. When we were young, we had a stable group that didn't change much over time, while people were added and dropped frequently. Recently, the conversations in these rare meetings had become no more than the agenda of the country and our complaints about various issues. As the table was being set, several of my friends seemed about to have a heated argument. Even when we agreed, everyone was raising their voices in the excitement of the discussion. This was as ridiculous as it was tiring.

Everyone started to fill their plates with all kinds of food. When one sees these breakfast tables in our house, one's appetite would be whetted immediately. I haven't been keen on eating and drinking lately, like I used to. A piece of cheese, some olives, some jam. Ever since I was a child, I have loved eating sour cherry jam and cheese together. When another topic was brought up, I was busy taking a bite of feta cheese on my plate, and when I put it in my mouth, I couldn't hear anything. Some tastes and smells have carried me to other places, sometimes they have taken me into a memory, sometimes a feeling, sometimes a period of my life. Now I was in a completely different place where I experienced them all together.

“Feta cheese,” said the host, Nuran, “a friend of ours brought it to us from his village in Greece, where he went the other day.”

Now, with the letter inside, I went there again, drained like a cork-cap glass bottle thrown into the sea. That was exactly thirty years ago. I grew up in a big city and had visited many cities in Turkey. However, when I was going to volunteer for a project in Xylokastró, a small Greek town I had never heard of, I was both excited and worried about being in an unfamiliar environment. Besides, I had never travelled to any part of Greece before. I knew that we shared a lot with these people we once lived with, but I also didn't know them at all. I was confident in my foreign language but I was afraid of being a foreigner.

It was the beginning of August, when the sun was the hottest in the hottest year. I was going to take some transfers from Athens airport. My first impression surprised me. They weren't as blonde as we thought but even looked quite like us. It was already dark when I finally arrived in this town, where I was going to spend the few months of my life that had a profound effect on me.

While I was thinking about this, I heard my friends talking about my distraction. However, it was starting to feel so unnatural to be here right now. I gathered myself and joined in their conversation. But once I had a desire to walk away, not from this table but from this huge city where I was born and grew up. I barely waited until the end of the meeting. I hugged and said goodbye to everyone one by one and accepted their good wishes.

I knew what to do when I got home. The thought of going on a trip had taken over my mind, along with my overwhelming enthusiasm. It was the place where I felt most at home in that short time and I was amazed at how long it was before I went again. While taking my passport from the shelf, I dropped a notebook with a picture of a donkey on the floor in the excitement of the moment. I bought this in a small bookstore in Corinth. I couldn't help laughing when I opened it and read a page. "I don't understand why people speak Spanish here. In the bakery I went to this morning, in small boutiques, in the supermarket, in short, everywhere I go, people greet me by saying "gracias". Besides, doesn't that word mean thank you? Do they want to say thank you for coming to our shop? Still, I accepted the situation and started saying "gracias" to people wherever I went. However, I later learned that the correct word for what I understood as "gracias" was "yia sou", meaning "hello" and "goodbye" in Greek. Now I could order my "pita", my coffee, with a smattering of Greek.

I visited a few other places while I was there. Memories took me to the famous white stone beach of Lefkada, where the colour of the sea is different. Aegean beaches are beautiful, but this place was very different from what I saw. After swimming until the evening with the people I met there and became friends with in a short time, we sat at a pub nearby. In a photo taken at that time, I looked happier than I had felt in a long time, with my red-hot face. Meals had not yet begun. I tasted "buyurdi" there for the first time, which I tried to make a few times later and couldn't find the same flavour, and I passed out. It was as if the warm spirits of the people here had influenced these flavours that I could not find where I lived.

Of course, we also had a lot in common. I used to order Turkish coffee, which I love to drink with a Turkish delight, like Greek coffee there. Even though there were minor conflicts about common tastes from time to time, we accepted that we were all from the same society, the same geography, and we loved it.

I had to stop thinking and plan. I was going to call an agency and get my ticket. But first I had to call Eleni, a dear friend of mine there, and let her know. The phone rang several times but I got no answer. Since I knew where she lived well, I thought I would find her when I went and hoped that she would still live in the same place. I didn't think I could wait more than a day. I bought my ticket the next day.

When we landed at Athens airport, there was a great excitement inside me. It was as if I had returned to my home, where I had been away for years. Even though I knew few people here, I never felt a stranger. My feelings when I came for the first time were very different from now. It was now a familiar and even missed place.

I smiled involuntarily when the passport officer said “yia sou”. “Den milao Ellinika,” I replied, realising that I was continuing in Greek. He smiled and said in English “but now you speak it” and after quickly checking my passport and seeing that I am Turkish, this time he let me pass by saying “goodbye” in Turkish. I had already remembered why I loved these people so much and felt so close to them.

In contrast to the fact that I would be turning fifty-five in a few days, I felt like a child. I couldn't help the urge to run around. I wanted to live here, not just to be here for another year.

Even after a long time, I was able to find my way easily. I reached Xylokastro before dark. Eleni's house was in Sykia, but I preferred walking instead of getting off there. First of all, I wanted to enjoy this place, walk in the woods and breathe the salty air. While volunteering, we cleared the brushwood in all these forests and collected the garbage on the coastline. Judging by the cleanliness of the surroundings, there must still be volunteers. Once, when I tried to collect goat horns from the trees here and eat it, I was met with bewilderment. I woke up early in the mornings and took walks in the fresh air, as if it were yesterday.

After walking for a while, I arrived at Eleni's house. I didn't even know if she would recognise me, or if she would be surprised to see me. After knocking on the door, I waited for a while and heard someone calling from the window. A young girl was asking who I was. When I said I was looking for Eleni, I was afraid that she might have moved. This girl, who I later learned was Alkisti, invited me in. She told me that her mother had died last year but before that she had left a box and told her to give it to me if I came back one day. She was as surprised as I was by the fact that I had finally come. Eleni had told her daughter a lot about me, but I didn't even know she had a daughter.

Alkisti brought me the box. When I opened it, I couldn't stop the tears. The aged “Mavrodafni” that came out of it was from the wine cellar in Patras, where we went thirty years ago. Eleni knew how much I loved this very sweet wine. But what really made me cry was the one word note that came out of it: “Gracias friend”. It means that even when she said goodbye to this life, she did not forget me, and on top of that, she wanted to make fun of me once again with her quick wit.

“Come on,” said Alkisti, “since it's your birthday, we should celebrate it. Let's go to the port, there's a meeting there that I think you'll like very much.” We walked together towards the port. In this event they called “Mediterranean Meetings”, dozens of people from different countries came together. Everyone was involved here and there according to the subject that interested them. I blew out the candles on my cake and we had long conversations with everyone celebrating my birthday in their own language.

As the song “Avgoustos” played on the radio, I found myself returning to the past. I was experiencing the same feelings I had in August when I first came here. The past had brought me

together with so many people I never knew, and while I was diving into the past, these young people around me were busy living that dream. I hoped they knew how precious this time is.

The next song was “Fevgo” by Orfeas Peridis, which I loved very much. It was as if this song was saying it was time to go. “Fevgo,” I said, which meant I was leaving. “Oh sas!” Everyone learned this word, and they said goodbye to me in unison. Only one person, Alkisti, shouted “gracias”. But this time she did it not to make fun of me but because she wanted to thank me for coming. I repeated in my heart, for all the time I spent here and the people I knew: “Gracias, friends!”

## Conclusions of the Youth's Proposals

The 2019 edition “Young People’s Commitment to Social Change” looked back over the previous decade, which was characterised by an economic crisis in the northern Mediterranean and political upheavals in the eastern and southern Mediterranean. In this context, the participating youths explain their own experiences (through fiction or real stories) and call for a socio-economic change that in most cases has not come.

This lack of change is reflected in the poor institutional support and unfavourable conditions for young people. The short stories reflect the obstacles facing them when they want to take hold of their own future. Institutions must allow cultural projects to develop and spread a political message of social change; and young people go on fighting to bring about this change.

Communal work, political action, mobilisation, and persistently seeking social change are still fundamental in the mentality of each person who has participated. At an individual level, through our everyday activities, we can bring about a society-wide change. By making our activities more sustainable, respectful and socially just, we can transform the world to make it a better place.

The 2020 edition “Young People Faced with Climate Change in the Mediterranean and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” was caught up in the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the theme of climate change and the 2030 Agenda was successful.

The stories explain that climate change goes beyond natural catastrophes. The rise of global temperatures disrupts the balance of the ecosystems and has many consequences for the environment in the long term. In a context where the authorities make no commitment to effectively stopping climate change, individual action is vital for fighting the degradation of the environment. Each of us, at the local or regional level, can take part in this movement.

The COVID-19 crisis also affects young people, and several of 2020’s stories link this impact to climate change, which creates a feeling of helplessness and discouragement. Fiction and reality-based texts all describe this feeling of discouragement but also ways of overcoming it to go on fighting for a better world. Youths are part of the growing number of people searching for more sustainable way to live on the planet, working for a new post-pandemic future where sustainability and social justice can be the two main pillars of society.

In the 2021 edition “Youth and Mobility: Towards a Euro-Mediterranean Citizenship” the vast majority of texts have a common base: learning through mobility. It is indeed learning because of the new contexts that mobility brings to us, on a bus through a city, with a motorboat on a sea

strait or in an airport. It shows us new realities and we can learn from them. It is through mobility that we discover new places, new people, usually leaving difficult living conditions behind.

One clear example is the mobility between the two shores of the Mediterranean. The way different people clash in terms of rights, economic stability and personal security shows us the diversity, differences and inequalities that exist in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

It is through mobility that we discover new contexts and find that they are often harsh and challenging, as the stories show. The texts reflect the authors' maturity and their courage to move across the Mediterranean in search of new and more favourable places. Mobility is a way of reaching emotional maturity by creating new social relationships and overcoming adversity.

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lib[er]i ad Laudem dei. honore<sup>ni</sup> et caris v[ost]re Venet[is] et exaltationem fidei catholice  
vobis v[ost]r[is] d[omi]n[is] p[ro]p[ri]is Venet[is] posse h[ab]ere v[ost]r[is] de ip[s]o q[uod] d[omi]n[is] v[ost]r[is] p[ro]p[ri]is  
illis illustri dno p[ro]p[ri]o Gradone iudice Venet[is] Quia et honorabil[is] v[ost]ro Consilio et Cor[por]i v[ost]ro  
catholice Ecclesie dicit. Ita supplico q[uod] vobis v[ost]r[is] d[omi]n[is] p[ro]p[ri]is Venet[is] posse