

Passage Two

score for moving through the landscape

Any point your body is at can be a starting point, but being at the fringe of a populated place or in nature is the best place to start. Look around and seek a path, follow it, and if the road ends, keep going further as far as you can. Let your body seep through and drift.

Dear Syb,

From the buck to the sturgeon moon; from a solar to a lunar eclipse, I exist in charged cycles on a continuous road in a disappearing river. My energy is scattered; my mental field is spreading thin, and the air is on fire.

The Danube's bedrock reveals sunken secrets. I find bones, rusted metal, carved and smoothed wood, ship and boat remains, and ceramic artefacts. Where there are wonders and treasures, there are also shadows and losses: river weeds are like hay, many shells of mussels and crustaceans, which not so long ago were the homes of living creatures, are now empty; and there are fish carcasses. Now, with the water channel narrowing, death under the sun is inevitable. Fishing nets dangle aimlessly over the dried river stones, and the fear of flooding almost seems elusive. What remains in the silt may need to stay there. Secrets surface on the water's veil as I walk on history being made.

I walk across Bratislava, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, and Serbia with no air to breathe, but when I enter nature reserves, floodplains, and forests, I am born again. There, three deer and three snakes cross my path, or I theirs. On the ground, something is shining, a silver glare of a dead baby serpent, about to eat her tail. I took her with me as a protection sigil and placed her on my newfound stick, along with a clam that was no longer anybody's home. The heat dries the bodies of many fish, snakes, and various birds on the desolate riverbed. I cross power plants, factories, waste incinerators, and construction sites, where cranes, metal, fire, and gas dance dangerously close to the edge. They make my trails disappear, and swimming becomes forbidden. Heat evaporates the water, and things are becoming more and more distorted. All days merge into one; has it been only one day since I left? It feels like it. The Danube winds like the roads ahead of me, an image that merges slowly, like a mirage, and I feel like I am moving like water, seeping through the cracks. I evaporate, so I try to soak, to keep cool. I hide in my shadow to cool down. There I find people I meet along the way, resting. In their shadows I find myself, but all of us slowly disappear in the water. To not lose sight of them, I gave them my name in exchange for theirs:

Pavel, Eli, and Alex from Haus Wittgstein; Dani, my old friend Zhanina, and her partner Aled; Viktoria, Nona, Simon and his friend Alex; Tobias, Fabio and Paul, the Danube canal drifter and activist Amelie, Ihor from Antwerp, Klaus, Clément, Gabri coming all the way from Palermo, the dutch couple from Culemborg, the hat lady in Bratislava, Peter the bus driver of line 77, Lucas in Bács, the sculptor Gabor and his beautiful parter Denisa in Čičov, Elmaz in Tón, István the boxer and violinist from the camping in Esztergom, Eva and Milena in the Szezentrende camping before Budapest, Zsolt and his horse-riding daughter Betina at their family lake restaurant in Dunaújváros, Julia and Elisabeth on the bus to Kalocsa,

Rod from Australia on his laying bike, on his way to Sofia; Regina, Simon and their dog Momo, cycling back to Germany from the Black Sea; Dejan and his nephew Noa at their bar Piki at Stari Dunav, the bulgarian dance ensemble Kremikovci and Lokarsko, whom i saw dance in Mohacs, Asya and Alek, Goran on the border crossing in Batina, who gave me a lift and his kindness, Maria and Mirko at the Apatin camping, Zoran, Robert and his restaurant Kod Strike, who was coming from a line of the Danube Swabians, Hugh from Oxford, on his bike; and in Belgrade, my dearest Nevena, Sara, Zana, Dzelila, Igor, Župi, Daša, Jana, Ana, Aca, Jorrit, Vladi, Dwaine from Australia, Jovanka and of course Marko.

The days trickle with small rewards like side road apples, blackberries from the neighbour's bush, sticks to keep my balance, little road conversations, shade, water fountains, and sometimes the luxury of a bus or train ride with AC inside. My pores leak the sea, and I drink the river. I, as a human, did indeed drink the river; I, as a human, seek endless control; I, as a human, walk on the dried riverbed like a conqueror of a new land. I, as a human, no longer want to be a human. Dejan in Draž asked me, "How does it feel to walk on history being made?" I do not have an answer; I am sad, and I am afraid. When I move through the landscape, my empathy heightens. Birdsong strikes a chord, fish splashes echo on the surface, and the sounds of river snails, beavers, crickets, mosquitoes, and dragonflies busy in the dark fill the soundscape with wonder.

I carry a mixed bag of feelings. I go through electric fences to avoid the wild boars beside me. I fall swiftly with the baggage on my back: busted knees, tearing ankles. Angry dogs almost bite me, and stompy ponies want to kick me. What was up the river West is no longer here in the East. Nature is left to her vices; you enter, and it's hard to get out. But that's okay because it smells like home, and people get warmer; anybody I talk to will give you a piece of their soul if they can. The region of Vojvodina is vast; you can hear jackals cry all night long. So I lie down and listen at the world's end. I listen, and I watch how the water border has become a dune; no life survives on it. It's shifting under the sun, wind, and water movement, an elusive space, an in-between; and yet I can just walk over to the other side, but not before I get asked to open all my pockets, empty all my corners, and submit to power looking through my underwear. Separated teeth from the skull can't bite the hand. Muzzle the river with a dam and do not let water downstream; the Balkan will always be the odd one, but it's home. The people here remind you that small acts of kindness lurk around an overgrown corner. I spoke to Robert, from a fisherman's village nearby. He said: Dunav je duša. I believe him.

I cross towns of double identity, half Slovak, half Magyar, half Serbian, half Croatian, united by old bridges or separated by invisible borders. Edge-effect towns, where two social ecosystems confluence. Komárno and Komárom, Esztergom and Štúrovo, Ilok and Bačka Palanka, Tekija and Orșova echo ecotones. The Danube does not care who is who; she flows through, she blends. And yet, her hydrological and ecological connectivity is heavily abused. We need more bridges to become social veins, and we need more space for the river to run free. Let her have her floodplains; we will benefit from them too.

Sometimes the river doesn't want to be followed. She lurks from afar, alongside herons and beavers, where our eyes don't cross, and only when I close mine I can follow her. My legs and roads can't get me near her, but I feel her carry me still. The sun sets fire to the oxygen around. It's difficult, and pain takes a toll; my shoes are breaking, ankles hurting, I lose weight and my hair, and I carry heavy weight, walking fast, moving slowly. Thankfully, rest is around the corner, the longest one till now, in Belgrade, and I will remain until my ankles, heels, and knees give up screaming. Also, dogs might hate me these days, but cats

still lick my fingertips, and in the meantime, everything makes sense; everything, at all times, is around the corner and down the river. There are too many coincidences, too many foreshadowing omens, too many thoughts, and too much heat. Does it all end in the sea?