

Passage Three

score for breathing

Close your eyes, let air in, guide it deep down your core, hold it there. Maybe chills will run up and down your skin. Hold it one more second. Inhale just a bit more. Release as slowly as you can. Don't worry if you wobble, just let go of all the air inside. Repeat 5 times.

Dear SYB,

The Donau, Dunaj, Duna, Dunav, Dunărea, Dunai hold different characters in one water body, the same way I, Rada, Radka, Radu, Radi, Radina, Radinka, hold different characters in one human body. We both contain multitudes, inhabit different landscapes, and exist in parallel, infinitely. A new moon cycle has passed since my last letter, and that cycle ends at home under the Harvest moon. Each minute of every day that has passed until this point spilled into the sea at Saint George. The snake eats its tail, and the circle becomes whole. From the Black Forest to the Black Sea.

I follow the river, letting everything around the corner mold and shape my experience, thoughts, and identity. In the meantime, I still carve my way with a certain agency. I am suspended in tension between certainty and surrender. A voluntary and involuntary tug-of-war. Too stuck in the box on my shoulders, too snug in the borders of my skin, and the shadow on the ground reminds me of the body that crosses the land. But do you know what happens to a body when it stops seeing the landscape as something outside itself? The boundaries become soft, then liquid, until they begin to disappear.

In Serbia, I have been strolling old fortresses, gazing into sewer canals, and talking to polite fishermen. I followed large catfish that chase small bleaks and jump across the surface. Strong winds gust up, and small raindrops remind me that autumn is not far away. In the Đerdap Gorge near Golubac, slopes are steep and wild cats hide in the tree shade. In the valley, there are fast cars and narrow roads without a sidewalk for me to walk on. At the occasional construction site, dogs bark, and my heart jumps. Dunav here is wise and wide, and I wish I had a boat or a flying carpet to see each corner, cave, and island. The rock formations in the gorge become a funnel that lets high-speed wind chase the river's tail. I listened to the waves smashing on the stairs nearby, and I breathed in notes of salt in the air. My place is with the wind, but I find myself buried on Dunav's shores, under a pile of limestone, quartz, granite, and sandstone. Moving water swirls the sand grains, pebbles, and organic materials against some of the softer points in the rocks. A natural drill, carving out smooth holes, turning them into hag stones that become lucky charms for those who find them. The river swirls me as well, as I too lie in her waters, waiting to be carved and carried.

The Iron Gates are too big to grasp, powerful enough to tame nature, and erase history. Many powers have come together to decide that these dams need to exist. Built to prevent flooding, yet they flooded and completely erased a fully populated island. Forced displacement, humans deciding where land goes and where land is being sunk. The river turns into a lake, a prison for catfish, perch, bela riba. A prison where invasive species of crab feast on the caviar. They have made their way in by holding on to the sides of ships. Alas, the sturgeon can't do the same and hasn't swum upstream for 54 years. We are under a spell of progress. We dream of control.

In September, fires are still burning around. The wind blows me closer home as the currents fight to flow left or right. The people I meet are sweet as honey, spilling rakia in the early hours of the day, wishing for the arrival of rainfall after three months of drought. In the heat haze, I drift towards a sunken hospital ship from WWII and walk over bombed remains and rusted metal. Around me, there are 176 ships; a metal graveyard that reminds of something looming. People say bombs are

sleeping on the bottom, surrounded by skeletons; history is looking up from the silt, while I am looking down for its sound. All I could hear were air bubbles escaping between the cracks. After leaving the second Iron Gate, I continued searching for the sea. Released from the tight grip of concrete, the river is about to bring me back into Bulgaria. I met Ivana, who gave me a ride to the border crossing in Bregovo. She said to me: "Water is our data and memory; water runs in our veins, and there is no coincidence in where we have been born".

Upon entering my mother's land, I was offered a ride on a motorcycle and on a donkey, while having a drink with the local men at the pub. Eventually they arranged a car ride for me towards Vidin. The nice thing about Dunav in Bulgaria is that it's difficult to reach by car or foot, meaning wildlife is just doing its thing. There is no infrastructure; there is little tourism, only a few old fishermen who complain about the European Union, the lack of fish in the river, and high prices. They toss some words around the dry land and continue tossing their line, but the air smells familiar. These days Dunav and I chase sunsets and welcome sunrises. With us are dissipating ghost villages, little water, and an abundance of cormorants who fight with the fishermen for dominance over the few fish left.

11 years ago, I made the decision to leave a life I had spent 11 years building. While living in Ruse, I left a life behind to search for prospects in the West. Now I have come back to the spot where I made that decision. I remember every corner, face, and breath I used to take, and I see another person in the reflection. I have become someone I only dreamed of back then. But who can I become next? I keep following; the mouth of the sea comes near. I soon enter and hope to be swallowed. Two pelicans fly over my head, sturgeons swim in small, confined spaces against their will, and I walk where mammoths have walked. Every building around me is collapsing as I get closer to the world's edge; the river is slowly filling with rainfall, but my words are drying up fast. Locals mention how the Iron Gates don't let water downstream, which is funny because the people at the Iron Gates say it's the West who doesn't let any water downstream. "Propaganda" is tossed around like a hot stone. An endless cycle, in which the Moruna swims. That's what the sturgeon is called around here. She is a white ghost, fast air, a košava, slowly disappearing from the land of the living into the underworld.

Dunărea in Romania is a countryside masterpiece of sunsets and animals. Time is slow, and the air quiet; only the streets brim with overly fast cars. If you come out unscathed, you can continue to enjoy this peace; the delta is almost in sight. The river branches out into many arms and legs, and I stretch mine to fit them into hers. Romania is vast; an entire endless horizon of fields, grazing landscapes, and animals on the loose. Horses, cows, goats, and dogs. They follow or run into the water. Dunes still stand under the scorching sun, and fishermen catch mostly river weeds. Crows have replaced the storks. It's autumn equinox, time for completion, time for harvest, another threshold. I can't believe I have been on the move for so long; I am tired. I need rest. The river goes and flows and goes and flows.

The temperatures are slowly falling, and the sun sheds its heat. A statue of a conqueror of Dunărea points at his prize. He wants control over the waters, and as I enter the last part before I reach the sea, I only see ships and ports from long ago. Total control: the waterway is a highway. There is no sign of drought any longer. And just like that, abyss. The mouth of the sea opens and swallows me whole. Where the horizon blends, and every second of every past day rushes in and dissolves into the Black Sea. The way to the convergence is endless. The Dunărea is tightly hugged by a massive wetland: wild horses, cows, drone alerts, military ships, fishermen, and birds. What a reality. Before I left for this journey, I saw a dragon in one of my dreams. A long dragon, with a thin body that seemed like it wanted to show me around and guide me. Now I have finally reached the mouth of the sea, at Saint George. I walk on a desolate beach, where the currents and waves mark an X. I taste salt water on my left side, and sweet on my right. The sky and water become one.

For three months, I have followed, and followed in so many ways, this magnificent body of water, the Danube. The harvest moon is almost rising, two days until it's ripe, and I will be at my mother's home, looking out at the Black Sea again, and seeing the Danube's reflection. У дома, at home. It's bittersweet. I can be with this river my whole life. I am in a way, and I will be. I saw abundant life in every aspect. I saw nature, wild and tamed. I met people, kind and rude. I walked on paths,

paved and made of dirt. I ate an array of traditional foods. I had conversations that made my ears bleed or drip with honey. I cried, and I laughed. I took risks and got into trouble, and I submerged my body in the water at every possible moment. I saw the river full and dry, wide and narrow, young and old. She held many lifetimes. She was alive but also dead, obstructed and free, industrialized and pure. Her magic pushed me forward, symbols and tales flowing in and out of me. River of the living and river of the dead. The serpent eats its tail, and the water flows. The world keeps ending, and the world goes.

Vladan from Golubac in his supermarket, who was kind to give me snacks and tell me about the nature around Đerdap, Ljuba who relocated from Bulgaria in 1994, now living in Donji Milanovac, Anya, Andriana, Natasha, and Verica working at the Fetislam Fortress in Kladovo, the lovely hostess Emilija from Kladovo and her fisherman friends, Alexandar, Petar and Tijana living and working the waters in their summer house in Brza Palanka, the old couple and their magic bungalow camping at Angelinin Konak, Boki, Anchica and their daughter, the inspirational businesswoman Ivana, at their accommodation in Prahovo, Georgi, Nikolai, and Cvetomir at the local pub in Bregovo, who poured me beer and helped me get to Vidin, by calling Vanyo, who drove me there, Antoine who was traveling from Georgia back to Paris, the enigma, spitting infinite knowledge, Jean-Marc from France, volunteering around the world and at the campsite of the beautiful and hospitable Vassi, in Kozlodui, Rosey and her dog Daisy, the drunk men, Bob from Scotland and Dan from the UK, Miri and Sasha from Germany, owning a property with horses in Vubel, Angel, my old friend from Ruse, Margarita who told me her whole life story from Tutrakan, and Mario and his wife, living in London with their two kids, Mădălin, who poured me homemade wine at his camping near Harșova, Florina, Christian and Andrea working at the Jaja pub in Brăila, and lastly but surely, Hubert in Tulcea and his two cats, Bastet and Kronos.