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The Land without Twilight

Translated from Croatian by David Stanetti

“But follow me: let me before you lay
Rules for the flight, and mark the pathless way.
Then teaching, with a fond concern, his son,
He took the untry'd wings, and fix'd 'em on;”¹

“It happened again – in complete silence – another tragedy in the animal kingdom. Our lands
have once more become poorer for a characteristic animal species.”

“Through my veins, it still flows, the bitter river of our days.”

¹ *Metamorphoses*, Ovid, trans. Sir Samuel Garth, John Dryden, et al. <http://classics.mit.edu/Ovid/metam.8.eighth.html>

I dreamt that you set sail on a ship down the river, towards faraway oceans, to find me a river snail overhunted ages ago. After three months of you hunting for the snail, we sent out a search for you. We found you on the coasts of Tierra del Fuego. Your crew eroded into sand, and you were unwilling to turn back without them. You died, surrounded by wilderness, from thirst and the sun. A plum tree grew out of your mouth, blackbirds in full-throated warble on its branches. Your body never decomposed, it was as always, just not alive. You could recognize it in the glinting sand, the copper sunsets, when you'd, as if crucified, beg for mercy, pinned with roots to the lava. At daybreak, the search party took their leave of you in three-part harmony, and to me, they brought treasure from the island: a basketful of plums and two caged birds, a male and a female, who built their nest in the ear of a river snail. I was a widow, pregnant with anguish and grief. The scream that broke over the empty casket cracked the skies, and the birds that flared up from the treetops carried your name on winds to faraway shores. Your land remembered you.

From the heart of the bridge at Lađarevo, around a hundred meters away, my orange Jetta looks like a tent pitched up in an empire of underbrush and snakes. Cries reach me from behind, from the canyon, and the sounds I thought are some new Blackbirds, appear to be a couple on a raft in the river beneath my feet, carried swiftly over the rapids and into the bends. My knees buckle twice in the middle: I take my sunglasses off, to recognize something at least, to be recognized, and to not blame myself for this welcome. But except the crickets, no one acknowledges my return.

For this time of year, Cetina's water level is unusually high, and below the houses in Lađarevo dug into the sprawling rock of Vrj, the meadows, previously used for pasture and to reach Volovište, the wide and fertile fields next to the riverbed, now carry signs that say PRIVATE and have pictures of crossed out tents and kayaks. Hanged signs for RCZ CREW peek out, drowned by a couple of trees of heaven and a score of low offshoots next to them. Or, as I read on the billboard nearby: RAFTING, CLIMBING & ZIP LINE experience, with free camping for anyone hungry for more than just a single day of CRRREEEWWZZIINNEESSS. Yup, it says exactly that on the collage of photos of half-naked guys and girls with beaming smiles, sunburned shoulders, and wide dark sunglasses, on rafts, in kayaks, clipped to the high rocks of the canyon, mid-flight from one end to the other on a silver cord. The path from the bridge to the cleared pebble beach – concrete. Willows, oaks, wild beeches, and linden retreated to the sides. No brambles anywhere. This part of the Cetina Canyon has been invaded.

– Nein, nix, no – the black bale of hay speaks, resting on an old, greasy cane, head wrapped in a black kerchief, standing at the front door of the second of the three houses, halfway between Volovište and my Jetta. – *Leva, leva. Voyage, voyage.*

– It's okay, – I say – I'm from around here.

With brown, callused fingers, pores nails to palms filled with soil, she picks up her prescription glasses off a pack saddle and shoves them on. Her eyes are asleep.

– No you're not.

– I am, up from Vrj.

– Whose from Vrj? There's only so many! – two fingers waving in my face. – You're none of them.

– Žarko Suton's.

Two, now giant eyes widen behind the glasses.

– Žarko's? Hells!

– Glorija – I'm showing off.

– Of course I know! All grown. Have you married?

– No.

– And you won't – she's estimating.

– What is going on here, what are those billboards?

Hells, zipping around all day, this and that, from everywhere and anywhere, want to take everything. That's not how it goes.

– Who, the guys with the rafting?

Yes, them! Came here for rafting, or canyoning like my grandson said. All on our land. Dug up Volovište, no place for the cattle to drink anymore. Shame on them. Ptew!

She spits under my feet. It jogs my memory. Whenever Jadran and I would go to Volovište, she'd howl after us in dread, godforbid the water be your grave, godforbid your bodies be cold come dawn, godforbid this, godforbid that. The old lady from Lađarevo – old even thirty years ago. Head wrapped, hands black, face black, time didn't have mercy on her, neither did it on anyone here. She must be over eighty five.

– Do you still keep cows and oxen?

– What cows and oxen, my dear, I can hardly keep from pissing myself.

Does anyone still live here, except for you?

– Of course. My grandson and his wife, and two grand-grandsons. My son died, god rest his soul – her head shoots up and she crosses herself quickly – heart attack! – she wails – in the field! The bride lives in the city, thank god.

– Others?

– These around me, in the city. Those above me, they got their road now, no reason to leave.

The smell of the fresh asphalt wafts from the low runway to Vrj, the hill whose hairpin bends are lined with houses, like letters on paper.

What else can I ask her? What else can she tell me? The body translates this awkwardness into scratching elbows, and grabbing forearms, tingling in the knees, chasing me away from this old acquaintance.

– I'll be off now – she doesn't even look at me, puts the glasses back down, closes her eyes.

For a while, I sit in my car, protected from the sun and the exit from the highway which stretches to reach the city she mentioned just now. The city, a mythic place connected to Vrj first by an old railroad better known as Rera, then by thin asphalt roads that would crack and criss-cross into a web under the wheels of cars, all until a few years ago when the highway was built, with a quick glance into the past of a destitute region whose river deceived anyone who was just passing through. The city, a place with water which, unlike our sweet one, left salt on the skin and lips. Civilization, machines, automata, crowds, queues, a place which chased away peace and quiet towards its periphery and even further. People from the city, unlike our people, do

not die in potato fields, but under neon lights, heads glued to screens and magazine covers, in beds of imported lumber, coiled like springs, surrounded by the sharp edges of modern plywood furniture, and PVC doors and windows that protect them from the blowing of bora, which we here find curative. People from the city give up easily, willingly rip out their hearts from their god given, seemingly impenetrable chests. By hand. People from the city, neither different, nor better than others. With a heart and lungs that swallow oxygen instead of breathe it, suck it in and drive it through their bloodstream in airbags, until someone educated says ischemia, stoppage, clot, stroke.

The thick and heavy air, which usually hits the Cetina Canyon in the spring, vanilla flavored this time, is scraping my nostrils. I can barely breathe. I pull the yellow pine off the rear view mirror and throw it out. I'll have to pick you up, won't I, I think. I can't leave you here. Not how I was brought up. I'll put you in the trunk. Or just grind you good with the tire backing up.

– Pick it up – a burning bush tells me.

– Show yourself – I pop my head out the open window. – Come out, before a snake...

– No snakes here – the rustling leaves interrupt me.

– I can see them from here. There, one, two... I can't see from the willow there if that's just a creeper or...

From behind a stunted oak, up to her neck in the last brambles and wild grapes this side of the river, two green eyes under a white, cloth visor pop out. A little girl.

She raises a pair of binoculars from her chest.

– You're mad. Just a copperhead. It would prefer a frog, rather than me. Your rafting is that way – she's looking through the binoculars. – There's a bin there, too – she taps her foot next to the freshener.

I listen to the little park ranger and pick up the pine I threw out just now. Instead of the bin, I place it back on the mirror. Is everything okay now, my shrunken shoulders and eyes ask her. She moves the leather strap of the binoculars and rubs the back of her neck. She doesn't care, which means it's fine. Huh. I honk and release the handbrake, across the bridge the car gathers momentum to reach Vrj. With my last glimpse of the fresh blacktop, the sandy banks, and two white willow trees pushed into the flow of the river, I catch the little constable in the mirror, running, panting and red, her arms flailing. I brake and reverse.

– Why-didn't-you-say-you-were-going-to-Vrj? Care to give me a ride?

– Where to?

– Sutoni, second hamlet on Vrj, I'll show you.

She'll show *me*.

Vrj is the place the Sutons hail from. A nest made on the top of a mountain tree, which didn't provide any special view, if you didn't know where to look. North, south, east, west, wherever you would turn only valleys, hills, woods, dry stone walls, fields, pastures, and watering holes bound by the Cetina Canyon and the lacking human eye. Vrj is not a place like the papers and stories depict those little places – a gallery of colorful, kind, and funny characters. It's not even a little place, it's a village, divided into a dozen hamlets and as many surnames (if not a few more), filled with stone houses that sprung up from the vein of loam which everything cuts into or crosses: from the dry wall foundations to wells, from graves to plum trees, walnuts, onion and garlic fields, from feeling the bloody pulse of that vein and its – for life and soul – dangerous tilling. When you lay eyes on them, mankind here, like Vrj, is nothing special. A reflection of the land that surrounds them. Dry, hard, taciturn, until you scratch underneath. Brittle also, but only on the inside and unseen. At least that's how I've explained it to myself, long ago. Nevertheless, Vrj is heaven on earth, the first stop for every young life scientist and lover of photosynthesis on their way to glory, an unfulfilled wish of every person who wanted, before death, whether with hand or eye, to drink from the well of life. Even with just a paddle from a raft, with shrieks that startle snakes into the river from their dreams in the canopy and thickets.

My new friend turns out to be a silent companion. She gets in the car, fastens her seat belt, and closes her eyes, all winded, but keeps peeping all the way up. Only when we enter Sutoni she says:

– Thanks, you can stop here. There's my Dad.

I know your Dad, I think. Even like that, sweaty and covered in white, with the noise of the grinder and a stream of dust which looks like it is pouring into the heat right out of his mouth, and the crickets trying to overpower them.

Today is the warmest day in April in the last ten years, the radio says, and in front of me, through the swirls of ground dust, to pick up his daughter steps up my partner in crime, my childhood friend, my irreplaceable mate, a fellow soldier armed with a pocket knife and a sling, the one I said goodbye to that same summer Grandpa died and I stopped being a boy. Jadran, the Blackbird.

I, Glorija Suton, am telling you all now, here I am on the top of Vrj, standing on my toes even, straining my neck to the last sinew. I'm so high up that under my nose I can smell the heavenly pastures and the sweet milk of the fattened, divine cows that can moo clouds away.

Once I was a boy, and a peasant, and here's the proof: this rascal who is killing pigeons, doves, hens, and everything more or less tame with slingshots – that's my friend Jadran. Three days my senior, three houses down in the village, four streets in the city, same school, also a Suton. But who knows how many times removed, so he's no longer a cousin, but he's a brother in everything. Brother.

We grow up slowly, eternity behind us and in front, no splitting up on the horizon. This life is unimaginable without his arms to hug you heartily, or his feet to trip you up with malice, his shouts under the window, in the city, in the country, Glorija, let's go!

We are adventurers in the city streets, and the hardest workers in the dry karst. Everything we know is the same, and we know it through each other. We are the Blackbird Society, even if it's just the two of us. We'd accept more, if there were any, a third, a fourth, and teach them the healing song of our patron bird.

We explore Vrj girded with pocket knives and sickles whose handles we've carved from the wood of the cherry tree, sandpapered, and coated in resin ourselves. Exactly like we've learned from watching Jadran's Dad Jere, my Dad Žare, or the other Sutons skilled in those crafts. Jere and Žare would have to put the blades and handles together, they'd switch tasks between them as they'd get exasperated.

– Like this, no, like this, it's like this, it won't fit, fuckinggod, saintsfuck – and all of a sudden, we're caressing blades with our fingertips, feinting cutting our palms, stabbing the air, slashing next the garland thorns and thistles around the well. We cut and pluck out everything, without gloves if needed.

My first weapon, along with my unwavering, curious head, Dad says, will blunt quickly, if I don't stop stabbing the dry stone, the concrete, or the well. Jadran stabs and stabs, not thinking of tomorrow, but something still tells me, go easy, the road ahead is long.

With our pocket knives, we cut potatoes for planting, the ones left to sprout, and we know where the blade has to pass not to damage it. We throw them into buckets, deliver them to our dads, aunts, grandpas in the fields, where they use picks and pitchforks to open the earth and seed it with our efforts.

We carry yellow sprayers on our backs, filled with a fresh mix of copper sulfate with which we spray first on the trellises covered with high vines, then in the vineyards where we'll also tie the shoots with plastic string. If we don't empty the sprayer completely, we're ordered to pour it everywhere. Whatever's growing, creeping, crawling, and where the plague might reach, pour it on, the sprayer comes home empty.

We rub clothes on boards, and pin them on strings spread between poles, from the walnut and the cherry to the fence. Tired, we lie in the field, or squat bathing in the black bins which Dad

dragged back from the city and cut into improvised tubs. Even when resting we aren't still, tempers flare when we play Categories, we don't know rivers starting with I, nor cities with U or Ž, what we make up sets us at loggerheads, storming out, cursing, swearing not to see the other one ever again. Fuck you and your Ulaanbaatar!

And when we cool off...

We watch aunts and grandmas milking cows, Bunny and Freckle, and we carry the buckets full to the kitchen. We pour the milk in glass bottles as soon as it cools off, cap them safely and fill the fridge, the freezer even, if there's extra. We eat milk skin on bread sprinkled with a spoon of sugar, sometimes two, we eat lard on bread – also with sugar, sometimes wild honey, with the honeycomb if we pick it off the branch in time. We patch up sacks for tomato paste, filled and brimming with the sour water we lick it as it drips into a bowl and every buzzing insect is drowning in it. We mark the best tomatoes and peppers to be saved for seeds. We pick pits out of plums, cook apple, pear, peach, quince, and mixed marmalade with Žare. We scoop up what's left at the bottom of the pots with our hands and lap it up; the jars we've filled are opened only after they settle, and only for pancakes, or just for the sake of a spoonful. We pick figs to dry, we spread them on the balcony, we sneak into the cellar while no one is watching and pour ourselves wine into glasses that used to hold mustard. We eat the bacon, the one from the cupboard, we don't open the wicker cupboard, even though a smoked and dried pork loin, as fat as four fingers, hangs there. One fly inside and everything goes to hell, I warn Jadran, but it falls on deaf ears, his crazy head doesn't count.

Last year, the butcher is telling Dad, down in Volovište, a cow was killed by a yellow-green wire sling bullet, it was later mowed and dried with a bale of hay, nearly dodged the meat cleaver. Here, he points and smacks a tree trunk. Jadran is not having it, protesting, not his, no way, waves his arms in dismissal, while I'm telling him what I've heard at the butcher's. Nevertheless, a little while later, he's got new bullets, made out of blue wire. His fingers are bloated from bending it, and his head too from the curses of the old lady in Lađarevo. Defiance doesn't pay in Vrj, even those more careful have lost their heads.

We bake bread, mix it with old pasta set aside from the last time cooking, we put it under a baking lid on the stove, we cool the piping hot crust in a basket under the kitchen eaves. We chop chard and onion for soparnik, and nibble at its ends, still hot and off the table, we leave the middle to our dads. We wash the bellies of kids and lambs, one holds it the other pours water from a pot, we carry them into the kitchen and spread them on plastic tablecloths. We sit on the pigsty while the vet is tagging pigs' ears, and later too, in winter, when our fathers slaughter them, turn them sideways to catch the blood, for blood sausage. We stoke the fire in the fireplace and carry some loin, liver, brain, or anything we can feast on immediately on a tray. Anything that might make us feel queasy or be hard to chew, we throw to the cats. We see our dads scalding and scraping the pig's hairs with a gas burner plugged into a gas cylinder, our noses are getting used to burnt hair, the wild smell reddens our cheeks and whitens our mustaches. We mark the meat for sausages and listen to arguments about who's taking the meat off the ribs and who isn't, and what the winter will be like, so the meat doesn't go bad. Who knows what the winter will be like, fuck you, take it all off.

For months, we retell each other, or anyone who'd listen, how the butcher came to Sutoni, and then, under the mulberry tree with some huge blade, slit the throat of a calf. Its head rolled under our feet, right into our tears. In Jadran's version there are no tears, even when dads exhume their own grandparents, aunts, and uncles from the graves and throw them into the ossuary. We are here, doing our own thing... Picking asparagus and corn rocket, going snail hunting, eating eggs from mowed nests, cleaning the pigsty or the barn after Bunny and Freckle, stockpiling manure. We gather firewood, hang bronze pots filled with lentils on chains above the fire, we wait for the flames to kindle. We push wheelbarrows up-down, left-right all day – an invention that saves us, the too young to carry weight. We grab the water from the well, and deliver it to kitchens. We are homesteads without faucets and toilets – for that we need buckets and chamber pots. And as the first one fills up, the second one is emptied behind the house. The circle of life.

The drug rehab center. We shouldn't really go there, although on Sundays – not really regularly – ex-junkies serve mass and sing. They are more in grace than us others, because they watch us from the altar, same as the friar. But it is what it is, and we have no problems kneeling. When we sit our pocket knives and slings prick our butts.

From Vrj, we cross Strmenčić, a slope which reaches the base of the Canyon, to get down to Volovište and the brambles there, we pick them clean and gorge ourselves. We swim in the river, scream into the Canyon, Jadran-dran-ran-ran, Glori-rija-ija-ija echoing, we dive for driftwood, and leave the water as soon as we spot a snake. We are not scared of it, but that we will be caned if it bites us. We're slowly beating a path through to the Pranjčević dam and get stuck in garland thorn and thickets every now and then, stressed, with arms and legs full of cuts, sweat burning them, stinging. We are searching for a path we've heard about from Jere and Žare, we open a map made from school art stationery and draw the new frontiers we've reached, and then, tired and famished, we go back towards the bridge, as far away from the top of Nugao, towards the far bank where our dads are playing bocce and getting anxious as soon as they spot us. We lie down under the monument, a red star, read the words on the granite syllable by syllable: O traveler, don't cross the cobalt Cetina, stay awhile by the houses in Lađarevo... We pick gadflies off ourselves, stick switches into dung and then fence. We are savages, boys from Vrj, two Blackbirds. We whistle in the canyon, sing and fan the flames of omnipotence.

In a place like this, only the love of god is omnipotent, the friar said the other day during mass, after he had confiscated the weapons from our pockets. Be obedient and serve god, arms open, ready for his grace. However, Jadran and I... we know better. Look at us! We do not turn our eyes away from these worldly challenges, nor do they flee to heavenly heights. We are already, peace be with you, cooking up a plan to take back the spoils, we are the city country kids, neither here nor there, there is nothing we don't know. All in good time.

– What is it? – the grinder stops, he uses a towel to wipe sweat off his forehead and hangs it on a hook on the trellis.

Alta flies out of the Jetta, runs by him into the house, disappears in a moment through the hanging beads. The dust settles and lets the smell of cabbage and sausages reach us. They are cooking on a strong fire, she'll turn it off, just let her drop the backpack. She'll scrape off what's burned from the bottom with a stirring spoon, while the grinder's magic had a hold over her Dad. She'll even set the table, plates on the patterned plastic tablecloth, spoons and forks, set the pot on a mat made out of rope and cork, glasses on a tray, and a pitcher of cold water so everyone can help themselves.

– Dad, – she yells from inside, peeks through the curtain door, doesn't even look at me – come eat!

He waves his hand, he'll be there soon, just let him take a good look at this unexpected visitor, an apparition almost. Am I seeing this right? You filled up, look at you, not just skin and bones anymore, he thinks, I know, as he's digging his heels, boots unlaced, into the dust around him. He still doesn't move the hair from his eyes. Can you see anything like that? His fingers move across his forehead in annoyance. When was the last time she was here? Who'd remember it. Five, six, seven years ago. Just for a short while.

I must be imagining things, he doesn't think of me, I'm sure Jadran erased me from this place, and he's not the only one. The earth swallowed me up, left me on the other side, life had to continue without me. Look, Glorija, how we've blossomed, it's like he's telling me, one new roof, another one soon, a couple of gardens, two brides (one mine) and two children (one mine), the oak hides us from the sun... The earth here speaks either till me, pick fruits off me, or bury yourself in me, nothing else. And your hole, this exception to the rule, we filled it as we could and stopped only when we could cross it. It's a long way, one for a new generation, but with it you return too. Am I right, we have some use after all. The land was, as you can see, put to our use. Clear, solve, cut, till. You want potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, at least three different varieties of cabbage, beans, fava beans... Roll up your sleeves and swing, and you've got everything. Except cattle... You can find a hen, here or there, and we fatten the pigs until Saint Lucy's. This is biology, and not that thing you improvise around the world.

Good grief, I haven't said anything.

– What are you doing here? – it just slips out of him.

What am I doing here? Hm, wait... what do I say?

– Alta, come here, this is your Dad's childhood friend, our globetrotter! Do you remember her?

– She's grown, I haven't recognized her – I change the subject to Alta. He's quiet.

I shield my eyes with my hand, seeing him is like the brightness of the noon sun, burns the eyes. What else is there to say? That I missed the land, the fool. What does he mean, the aggressor.

Just passing through, the best-for-the-both-of-us and the stranger. I'll leave soon then, and this spark-emitting awkwardness I spread will fizzle out.

– Reconnaissance – I don't give up – taking inventory.

– Write this down in your notebook then: first round of potatoes sprout in the garden – he chuckles to himself.

Outsider, yes, that's it. His suddenly solemn face says he can't handle me this close.

He flinches at another yell from inside the house. I'm coming, just a sec.

– Look, do you have a sickle anywhere? – I see that he's cleared all the grass around the house and garden.

– Sharpened the other day – he carries one out of the garage.

Alta comes out into the yard. She looks at me and the sickle. The handle has the letter A carved. It's hers, she's come for it.

– I'll return it later in the afternoon – I wave the sickle toward her. She leans on the young apple tree wrapped in foil and hugs it. She squints.

– You want to come in and eat? – Jadran lingers at the door.

I point my hand like I'm off, to the village. I want to know what happened to the house and the orchard, and then, wherever the dirt paths take me. I see that he's rebuilding his house little by little, patching it up. He's taking care of the fruit trees too, all neatly pruned and in lime up to the boughs, offshoots rounded up in canisters and plastic barrels. He's branching out.

Spoons clink on plates, father and daughter yell and laugh while I'm grabbing my backpack off the back seat and sucking the broken ice from a plastic bottle. My head, the car roof, the cracked asphalt, everything is boiling. No cricket is at rest at this hour.

I meander with the binoculars over the green horizon adjusting the focus. A gentle wind prickles my sweaty arms and swirls dust around the yard carrying it toward a mound of gravel and a black tarp. Four bigger stones hold it on each side and protect it from stronger gusts and rain – if it happens. From sneakers into boots, I extend my capris to full length and tie a string around the ankle (snakes, like water, always find a way), cap, my hair tied into a pony tail and pulled through the closure at the back, a jeans shirt around the waist, white tank top, knife, sickle, torch, an herbarium kit (handheld shovel, pruning shears, paper, plastic bags, tablet, pencils, counting on my fingers), smoki (two small bags of peanut puffs), a bottle of water 1,5 liter (bonus – an inspirational quote), sun cream, everything's packed, clasps click.

– Ready to go – a memory rustles through the canopy of a wide oak.

– I sure am – another memory adds and vanishes.

Here I come, to you, to myself, finally.

The house, motherfucker. Father is shadowing me while I stomp through the main road of the village, which is just gravel. What do you need there, he's persistent, prodding me. You might fall somewhere here, watch where you're going, I return to reality. And when you bump into your uncle, you'll be fleeing across the fields, he whips me across the calves. I stumble over a rock that fell off a dry wall. My eyes trail a blackbird. From oak to oak, it's following me since Jadran's house. It's fine, I'm back on my feet, nothing serious, that was the head's fault, it told the legs to do so, reckless. The blackbird's actually leading me. It lands in the lilac bush, behind the gates of our, their, my, who knows whose house anymore, and welcomes me there. Rust covers the gate and latch, only memory is keeping it light green. The houses around us are silent, no observers behind drawn curtains. Everyone's dead, and the living are napping after lunch. So stubborn, father points out through the rustle of the wild onions mowed down by the gate swinging open, and poof, he disappears in the creaking of the hinges.

I put my backpack down, lean it on the first post of the trellis, and I draw the sickle to clear my path through the grass. I open a bag of smoki and cram it between the grapevines. For the blackbird. And who knows what other birds might land here.

Kamešnica to the north, Mosor to the south, some more fertile fields to the east, the Cetina Canyon spreading to the west, and I, in the center of the world, standing on the most fertile field of the village.

Since Grandpa was buried, and father... Yes, nature is never still in this part of the land. Loads of things happened and grew here, my dear, I can hear them under the creepers and weeds on the earth which produced no efforts or suffering in almost two decades. Man has stopped there.

It was ages ago that Žare planted tomatoes here, Swiss chard, plucked parsley, cut corn rocket and black bryony with his sickle, hoed fruit trees, hoisted up the bucket from the well with a cane, threw fish inside to purify the water, dug out dirt paths to the house, saved the house from falling apart, from the rain.

We held a grudge against that water.

I peek inside the house through closed shutters. The damp ruined the roof, it fell into the kitchen, on the cupboard, the wooden chairs, the table, the stove, and the old wood burning stove. The rods from the reinforced concrete follow the beams and parts of the ceiling hang on them. The fridge is gone. Only the outer walls are in good shape, maybe the two back rooms, but those are not ours, they are someone else's. The woodwork in the kitchen smeared everything in the raw smell of rot. Cobwebs. Cat and mice poop everywhere. A wasp nest the size of a mason's fist. Cracks on outer walls, two fingers wide, carrying all the weight. Did he see all this?

The door is swollen in its frame, and whoever wants to enter needs to smash it. Like these mulberries under my feet. A thick layer of dry leaves, and under the branches the poured concrete is almost purple, and wet in places. Did it rain or did some unexpected cold spell pass? The house is full of dried berries, growing over each other. Why wouldn't they, since Dad and I planted the tree in the freshly covered, never used, cesspool, on our side of the house, under our window, to protect us from the summer sun at dusk. Our first tree. I went with him to get

it, watched him cut it and insert the offshoot of the biggest village mulberry tree, he taped it and found the best place in the apartment for it – the balcony. When it matured enough, he put us both in the backseat. It was sticking out of the car window all the way from the city, and I had to hold it steady, learn to breathe through the thick canopy. I could barely speak, but I was already cultivating my fist tree.

When does it... I'm counting on my fingers... when does it bear fruit, when could this have happened. June, July, Jadran and I would, from the balcony of my Grandpa's old stone house, a bit down the village, hit the ten paces thick tree trunk with a pole. Or Jadran would climb it, leg-up to reach a pickaxe head mounted in the middle, where our namesakes would, to celebrate some saint or other, hang and skin lambs, let the blood run out into a bucket, or mulberries fall into our open mouths. At the start of last summer, that must be it. Whoever that was, didn't spare it, and was fed full. They hit it with an axe, in the middle and by the roots. A barbarian, a savage, in full strength or insane, attacked a young, fertile tree. Its bark is still smooth, the sun is protecting it from the rotting dampness. Not for long, the fingers feel it, the sickle opens it, the tree is rotten inside, eaten. By the trunk sits the stump with roots torn. It looks like it was beaten out of the earth by who knows what, an axe, a maul, kicked, hit by a cement block in each hand perhaps. The eye can see that nothing of this was done mercifully. Behind it is a deep, uncleared hole full of outspread roots. I would barely make it out, if I fell in. I straddle it and squat. Yes, the house, Dad, the hungry earth seeping underneath me, a tomb.

Ivy has climbed to the window of our room, and entangled the wild brambles along the way. As I clear them away with the sickle, I stir the discarded pipes, wires, wet bags of cement, tar, and the plastic buckets they were mixed in. If the blade hit this, it would blunt in a second, become notched. Bugs and geckos flee under the dry wall. The snake I don't disturb, I don't move her home. She's here and I feel it, writhing and slithering under the scattered blocks. One snake, who knows where the others are.

I put away the sickle and stretch.

Wrens peck at the smoki.

The blackbird flies over the field. Already full.

The walnut and almond trees are on the west side, by the field, fifteen paces between them. The wild cherry, the pear, the apple, the quince, and the cherry plum on the east, by the well and the fence. The wild chestnut, the last in the line, the border. The sour cherry above my head, the hole behind my back. Dad's orchard.

There is no path there. Ingrown and overgrown, green and wild.

And on every tree, hidden in the bloom, in the earth, my Dad's signature.

I could see traces of cuts on the pear and apple trees, from a pocket knife or something bigger. He would heal them later with duct tape, sometimes blue, sometimes red, even multicolored green-yellow. He tried with wire and threw it all by the well. Traces of lime on the wild cherry, I pick it out of the cracks in the bark with my nails. I remember he used to protect that tree especially, from cracking and hard winters. The walnut and the almond raised and pruned to five and four main branches per tree respectively. Their boughs are gorgeous to watch when in bloom, bees and bumblebees all over them, buzzing and sipping. Dense netting is hidden below them, grown into the earth, which Dad would spread to catch the kernels in the spring or early summer, as per last winter's dictate. Shells spread and stick out of everywhere. The cherry plum and the chestnut left on their own, to buckle and bend, towards the sun, whosever branches reach it first shades the other.

Now, while I am looking at them from the trellis, it seems to me, not really, actually... but yes, like they are there to hide Grandpa's old house from view, or to hide this new one from it. And this trellis, with its five vines of sweet grapes in one row, with stunted bunches waiting for higher temperatures and a couple more rains, they seem to be doing only now what they were supposed to be doing years ago.

Like the whole orchard is a keep made of branches. To keep your eye within your kingdom, keeping it busy with the earth it all grows on, and on its boundary – Mrzlin, the low woods that can be cut down for firewood.

And further on...

A bit of bare fields, a bit of karst, a bit of maquis. Wherever you go, if you don't set out barehanded, you'll reach somewhere. Either the Pranjčević dam, Nugao, the cemetery, or the state road D60, Brnaze – Trilj – Cista Provo – Imotski – the Vinjani Donji border crossing.

The roof, the steering wheel, the seat, they sear, they boil. I fling open all the doors on the Jetta, let the wind blow the spring heat out of it. In front of Jadran's place, under the oak, cats are chomping on the leftovers from lunch. The two of them are taking a nap, I convince myself. I throw my equipment on the back seat. I take off the sweaty t-shirt and pants. I use wet wipes to clean myself. With the deodorant I cover every part of bare skin. I pinch my upper arms. Feel my skin. Sandflies, you never know. I pull up my top. I roll down the rubber band on my underwear.

– Make sure you cover your ass too – Alta's head is peering through the open back door.

– It fits nicely in the hand – I return her sickle and put on a clean shirt, I slide into my overalls, button the sides, roll up the trouser legs.

– Leaving? – she's following my every move.

– Do you need a ride to Volovište? – with my index finger I help slide my bare foot into the canvas shoe.

– To Trilj – she’s drawing with the sickle above her palm.

– What’s in Trilj?

– An agricultural pharmacy. I need – she squints, counts on her fingers – a couple of things.

I look at my watch. 3 pm. What would I otherwise be doing until the evening and going to bed.

– Go ask your Dad.

– He said yes already, and that you have to get me back – she sits in the car, slams the door. – Let’s go!

– But put that back first so no one gets killed – I aim my chin at the sickle in her lap.

– Dad says it already has – she runs to the garage.

She’s back. Click. Her chest pumping behind the seatbelt, panting.

Her dad’s own daughter, I think. Wild, from head to toe. She does not care that I’m packing up alone, the backpack, the car, closing all the doors, spraying the rear glass with water to wash away Jadran’s dust. In her head she’s already in the agricultural pharmacy, taking out her list and giving it to the vendor to get her everything she needs. She’ll wait, browse around a bit, drum her fingers on the counter, sigh a few times, like she’s saying, it’s me, I have it the hardest. You stay here, she’ll tell me at the entrance, I’ll be quick. And I’ll listen, misguided like this, sit on the front steps, until she says to me why are you dawdling, instead of let’s go. Her dad’s own daughter, through and through.

I smile and look at the rear view mirror on the desolate road.

– How come you don’t know where the agricultural pharmacy is?

Dear Alta, although I might seem close to you, where I am, memory has been flooded by time. Not just one, who knows how many memories, a discovery I dread. You ask me so cruelly, like I’ve abandoned my post. Just wait, you’ll lead a new life once, and forget.

– What about the best grafting wax?

My father would know. We’ll ask him. I can call. No, actually, I can’t. I don’t want to. It will come to me, just let it come.

– God, do you know anything at all?

Let me imagine, go back there, I can’t do that without tenderness, while you sting and scare me. Wait until I grab a hold of a detail, like the palm of your hand on your knee right now, it was on your cheek a second ago. Before that, before that...

– Is that for the apple tree in your garden? – you hug it, yes, you do. Your fingers caress the smooth foil. There’s a crack beneath, I can feel it under your palm, as you press it, and it presses you, why else?

Here it comes.

I signal my turn, cross the bridge, over the Cetina, towards Gardun, towards the co-op, that’s it. That’s where my father used to take me, to some old geezer in Vedrine, then to Vojnić to his... to someone nameless now. All that is now the agricultural pharmacy.

She’s telling me how this winter was really fu... screwed up. And that it’s still fu... screwing things up, even though the spring has long come. Daily temperatures rise to 17, 20, 23, and 26 today, but overnight it drops down fast, gets close to zero, even below. The winds carried frost from Mrzlin, a late snow from Kamešnica didn’t help, neither did the cloud full of hailstones. It happened a couple of days ago, she’s telling me, Vrj was white from the cemetery to Volovište. Even pruning doesn’t help. Neither does disinfecting the tools, nor brushing the bark. I even used a natural soap and the ashes from the fireplace. Not even lime, she claims. I’m confounded by her knowledge and care, so I stay silent and don’t interrupt. I’ve covered them all myself, she continues, maybe I made the wrong mix. You don’t believe it, but you still say it, I think. I found it early in the morning like that, insides hanging out, oozing, and the bark bending inwards, she’s using hands on her stomach to demonstrate. I feel inside with my finger, I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy. I spread what grafting wax they had in the village on it, but I want to make sure, she looks at me finally. It says on the internet that you should wrap it in foil, protect it from diseases and whatnot.

– Against pathogenic microorganisms – I add as I park in front of an unplastered single story brick house. I pull out a 200 kuna note from dad’s car registration under the sun visor.

– Against what? Ten crates of apples last year – she hits her palms together.

– And the mulberry? – I stand beside the open door, saying hi to a young man in green working clothes, his arms scraped and black from earth up to the elbows. I ask him about grafting wax, to bring the one he uses for wounds on his own trees, and for the disinfection of the bark, and some fungicide.

– From Vrj? – he asks before he disappears, and adds – a lot of cracking there these days, everyone’s patching and fixing.

– The mulberry – I repeat.

– I don’t know anything – she says into the shovels and rakes, she’s moving bags of feed and dog food, weaved baskets you can use for fruit or for a cat’s bed.

– Well? – the young man places a plastic can and two tubes on the counter. Alta is shoving a note in my hand. Let me, she waves her hand. – So? – I let her carry the bag.

– Ask my Dad – her brow is furrowed sharply and she’s walking to the door, I follow, escort, driver, laborer.

– Good luck – I can hear from the other side of the door.

Good luck, good luck, I repeat in my head while Alta squeezes the cures for her apple tree in her lap. Good luck in not getting cursed at and chased away by Jadran from the porch. Good luck when he tells me why I came here to meddle in his family affairs. Good luck when he adds that this smart Alec thinks she's going to lead a revolution in our, mostly toothless and scoliotic, part of the land just by getting a few stamps in her passport and two or three pieces of paper. Good luck and godhelpme when I discover, dear Alta, that your father and I are that dangerous species that expects to find people in the same place and unchanged since they left them. And that we think about them exactly that from which we guard ourselves with shame and silence all our lives (in my case). And that life happened to very few people and in a very small amount since then, just to us, just to me (in your dad's case).

– What is it? – the grinder grows quiet under his feet, he uses a towel to wipe sweat off his forehead and hangs it on a hook on the trellis.

– Daadddyyy! – Alta runs past him with the bag from the agricultural pharmacy above her head.

Jadran laughs. Stay, stop, where would you go now, she's under the tree, she's waiting for you, his smile points the way. She's waiting for me, I turn around to see her. It's unbearable, this thing weighing at my chest. It's Jadran's hand, pushing me, where have you been, he's giving me gloves from a plastic bucket, a knife with its point broken off and half a handle, brushes, and an old shirt to cover myself.

I'm welcome in this fatherly love.

It's rocking me, saying here's my daughter, finish what you started.

On the surface of the bed, my fingers tingle like the sheet is the sea or some other still water. A brook surrounded by reeds and herons. Murmurs can be heard. Spoons clinking on saucers followed by laughter, the barking of agitated dogs in the afternoon sun. The blunt sound of a board under a cleaver, dead meat on bones crushed, the falling of weights on old, used scales. Father sits on the terrace and in the shadow of towels and hanging sheets through the tiny holes in the rollers he whispers, Glorija, come closer.

I'm coming closer to you since last night, I think, by I'm taking my own path. I lie down in Grandpa's bed first. A heavy head smells him in the pillow. Following a scent of a man long gone, one you couldn't smell in the halls of airports. If I took off the pillowcase, I'd find traces of greasy sweat, bedsore ointments, lotions for this or that rash which opened the skin and let it decompose. Dressed, I wrap myself in the open covers that let you see the flowery pattern of the duvet inside. This hole is the only thing that seems to be able to hold me, on my belly. I remember the last breath before I surrender to sleep, wings beating over the spreading oak, the sound of the earth. As a mole burrows through it, with its strong claws.

The closeness is staggering, it feels for the walls around itself, it stumbles on the burgeoning suitcases and broken zippers. It pulls the pants down on the toilet, it tastes like black coffee on teeth unbrushed, it sighs lulled in the bamboo armchair, barefoot and shining. The closeness lowers the awning on the south side of the building that faces Mali Pazar and discovers a cat hidden under the coffee table on the balcony, a little tiger with soft whiskers and baring two spears in its chops.

– Where's this kestrel from?

– It's a cat.

I notice a bandage on his hand, its edges are dirty, but it has a nice iodine scent, a salty decay which is pleasant in this heat. Where did he get that? Where did he get the cat? It jumps from the basket into his lap and lies down there, its tail wagging left-right, left-right. In her world I'm the intruder, and she's protecting my father from me.

– Mrrrawr – I tell her and go over the fence to the outer terrace. A scrubby albizia grips my attention, it's planted in a terracotta pot. You're suffocating it, I think. I grab the trunk and pull it up with all my strength from the pot. The pain in my back is awakened by the plant enthusiast in me, common to being close to my father. The roots are hitting the bottom, they have nothing to hold on to, no moisture, why does this tree persist at all. I'm looking at it as I sift the dry earth in my hands. I'm transplanting it, first chance I get.

The heat under my soles chases me back into the kitchen. It smells like cleaned fish, pilchards in a strainer on the table, next to the medications for diabetes, blood pressure, heart rate, keys to the apartment and the car, old newspapers, the remote, and an old wooden bowl where the old man puts nails, screws, nuts, batteries, rubber bands, and everything else he's found and emptied out of his pockets here.

His fingers are, since I remember him, dirty, but from the city asphalt, not from the earth. The wall above the dresser in his room, on which he folds his pants and shirts before bed, holds his prints.

His eye is tuned for tiny, shiny or dirty objects, generally discarded ones. My father has his own, mechanical herbarium, without a method or usefulness, but one with an anticipated everyday convenience. With it, I imagine, he keeps his healthy, seeing eye, as well as the boy running through woods and mercilessly going through birds' nests in search of food, alive. Still, his explorations hide him in the shade without warmth of parental love. I notice that already as a little girl in other parents, and even in my Grandpa. My father needs no daughter, he doesn't need a helper, or a humble Sherpa to carry all the weight – so why do I do it? Why do I keep approaching him?

And the eye that is blind, whose iris rolls around in its bed like a carcass in the wind, and because of which he doesn't see much in front of him: what if that eye was the fatherly one, the parental one? He's used to being alone, I've known since forever, he only approaches his shiny trinkets with fervor and ferocity, that white marble with a gray-green mottle that fell out of its socket and broke into a glossy city bauble.

I can hear him, he's already fiddling with something. While I'm leafing through old newspapers, reading an underscored article, a reminder about a permanent photo exhibit from the 70s and 80s in the Lokve neighborhood, as it once was in our country, he's turning the washing machine dial, 95 °C for sure, he'll throw in two scoops of powder, like he's washing work clothes. He's not waiting for cheaper electricity rates, and doesn't care about dirty kitchen cloths after lunch or towels after showering. It's not his problem that after the machine spins through its program the sun will be far to the northwest, behind the transmitter, the quarry, and over the ocean. He wants to stay busy, I know, keep his head and body occupied. There is no time left, he's speeding. He wants... I give up, he's looking right at me.

In bed. I lie, then toss and turn. I toss and turn our first morning. I toss and turn Jadran's question about Dad. I toss it and turn it for days and don't know what to answer. I grab my phone, and the light from the screen illuminates the cat on the armchair by the door. Maybe you know how Žare is doing, huh, do tell, now's your chance. She curls her tail and lowers her whiskers to her front paws. Hah. Maybe I'll fall asleep if... We are sitting under Jadran's trellis, waiting for evening and the cold from Mrzlin, for Alta to wash herself so I can tell her I'll be back soon, like the plan we made. We can plant chayote and sunchokes. Here, I give her two small paper bags I found at the bottom of Žare's wooden bowl full of seeds. If your dad lets you, and you will let me, Dad, won't you, she was obsequious, I'll take you to Svilaja Mountain with my friends. Deal? Tell me, here he comes again, how's your Dad?

Žare like Žare, I answer. To Jadran, to the cat, to myself, he's fine.

It's fine, I'm managing, he'd repeat to me in our short calls. He is in his first year of early retirement. He retired two months after I got my PhD. He didn't mention the Jetta except in postscript (the car is registered, Jadran helped him), nor going to Sutoni, caring about the fruit trees, he didn't complain at the highway being built across Vrj. He wasn't telling me what he read in the paper. Everything he would talk about, if he would talk, would be what he heard on the radio and TV (he followed animal documentaries, travelogues, football).

He stopped even texting me. The texts he used to send during my Zagreb days, those in which he'd tell me small everyday things: saw a fox on the way to Nova Sela, it was digging through trash behind the old school and aimed its fabled grin at him, almonds this year as big as pears, the highway passed Bisko, bought five tees for fifty kunas (all the same!), they took out the building door and moved it five meters forward, the lock wasn't changed, bocce tournament starts soon, the turkey I made for New Years, delightful, you'd have finished it with me, the disability allowance went down, motherfuckers...

He'd answer my texts with OK, at least those in which I kept on with stuff from my life.

Landed, OK. Arrived in Kent, found a place, I have four flatmates, met some Croats, OK. I should have actually studied somewhere in Russia, these things I do were started by Vavilov, this cool Russian who'd wander everywhere for years and gather seeds, OK. Found a job in a pub, but I also work in a garden, not really permanent, I'll explain when I call, OK. How are you doing, OK. Don't eat too much unhealthy stuff, you'll ruin your kidneys and pancreas, OK. My classes are over, the money arrived, I won't be coming home. Europe is financing some project so I'm going on an expedition around the Balkans. Šar Mountains first, it's similar to home, OK. Broke my arm, nothing serious. We were climbing the Kamnik Alps and whoops, slid down on a sheet of broken ice. I'll send a pic, did you set up your phone to receive media, OK. I started writing the thesis, the money arrived, OK. I know the date of my viva, the money arrived, OK. The thesis is done, fieldwork again soon, OK. You could have congratulated...

A couple of years after my PhD, when I told him that I have a new fieldwork project and that I would like to spend a month or two at home before that, he didn't say anything else except OK.

Knowing him, this OK, as soon as his fingers knew the way around the phone, he saved it as a draft and just pressed the green button until he got the message sent notification.

He welcomed me, insecure and not ready to live together, his body hidden behind the open door. It seems he's become as boring and suspicious as much as distrustful. A man totally unlike the father I've always known as resolute, unpredictable, sharp, and fateful in everything he was doing. I'm sure that anyone who knew him carried a scar from an injury inflicted by him. And here he is now, slow, deliberate, just a bit jolly (like he has to be, mimicry), and in all that, I'd say – gentle. Gentle to himself, the cat, the world which is letting him give up the fight.

My father is preparing for his own death.

That's how I should have answered Jadran. Play it all or nothing. Show the injustice that was done to me. Me, as you see, nobody was there to prepare me. The world did not wait for me, all this time I was gone, it didn't sit under a tree contemplating until the passing shadow of its

daughter roused it. It grew, expanded, wrinkled some faces, pulled teeth out of some mouths, curved a lot, knotted, cleared, ruined and built, read, wrote, learned, and worked tirelessly. This world is looking at me from above and forcing me to turn goodbyes into healing morsels. It doesn't want to protect me from anything. It's learning from my father, or he from it. There's nothing I wasn't exposed to, no horror I wasn't lured in. My father, I fear him and fear for him equally. He is my savior, my biggest victim, my only foe. Such grade of fatherly love, which is typical and extremely effective, was brought from Vrj to the city in a half-empty bundle. What could I have expected from it then?

I get it, I understand everything (I don't!). That is the way it has to be, and in all that, the two of us. Father and I. He's rolling into Abaddon, and I follow after him and take care he doesn't take a shortcut or worse, *what is it with you, woman, to take him from god*, go astray. That's how my Dad is doing, dear Jadran. That is how I'm doing.

– Glorija! – he rumbles from the diaphragm. – Glo-o-o-rija – he coughs. Anyone there? – he chokes.

He bangs the door, grabs the handle, an excuse to come in. A fuck and a don't-you-hear-me-calling-you reach me through the dream. What comes next is in free fall, comes out naturally: why did I come here just to stay in bed and loaf around, he's had enough of that, on my feet, it's sunny. What feet, what sun, are you insane? The watch says it's not even seven.

– I could strangle you with these hands – I raise them above my head just enough to demonstrate on the pillow and get me to my knees.

He's heard that already, used to say it himself, I don't even get a rise.

– Make us coffee – he goes into the bathroom, to cough out the sickness into the sink – and then we go.

He went down to Mali Pazar as soon as the neon light flashed in the newsstand, got the paper, read the obituaries. He's sitting across me as I'm reading it (the insert he left on the table is all mine). He's sipping coffee, and putting Tyrol sausage cuts on thick slices of bread, he's leaving black fingerprints on the crust, then eating it. Monstrous bite, sip, sip, hurries me.

We're going to a funeral. Grandpa's last surviving brother died. One of those from the life before me, he told me about them ages ago, when was that, high school. In the papers we count his relatives, the bereaved, whether he went after a long and severe illness, suddenly, or maybe passed away peacefully. Among them we find the names of all Dad's brothers.

– Inheritors – he says.

– Come on – I get bold – that makes us the rest of the grieving family – and that lightens his mood a bit.

Our uncle is not the first one we'll meet mourning on Mulovača, the place from which the dead depart Vrj. Squeezing next to each other, we won't even notice that we're touching before we recognize a familiar face, a cousin or a brother. Rumbling and dread start here. Remembering the horrors which were roped off, separated from lives. It's weak now, and nobody will touch it. And the villain has diminished, reallocated, died. Still, Dad leaves the procession for mass, and I follow. He is walking to the cemetery, running to his own dead, those in whose obituary he had his full name among the bereaved.

Our priest is a friar, our saints Anthony and Elijah, our church is hundreds of years old, and the Sutons who walked here from Brotnjo, with the sounds of clanking porcelain and wooden bowls, anything they could enchant from mud or old wood, followed a priest who convinced them that Vrj is their promised land. Our dead are Mara, Matija, Ante, Anđa, Nikola, Vlade, Karmela, and Joso. They are buried in two graves, one in the new part of the cemetery from the fence of which you can see the path to the Cycle of Life, and the other in the old cemetery from the fence of which you can see only fields of stone ruins left behind the nameless, diggers, ploughmen, potters, and an occasional warrior. Up until Vlade they were buried in bags, sometimes even bare, stuffed inside, meter for meter, feet first, from the womb to the field, from the field to the grave. After Vlade they were buried in coffins, and they bother us more, they are on our side of the fence, we still feel them, negotiate with them, and walk them to the only infinity we recognize after death: remembrance. We wash their graves with water from a white canister with a red cap. From them we throw away old, dried flowers, and fill the granite vases with fresh water and put in real carnations. We polish their names and pictures, polish our sorrow that way, to keep it in retreat, away from our eyes and mouths. For these dead, we don't pray at all. No Heavenly Fathers, no Hail Marys. Blessed are those who mourn and the meek, which hunger and thirst for righteousness. The Lord gave them a life in pain, woe, and poverty, and because of that the kingdom of heaven and eternal rest. Amen.

Father doesn't stay long by them. He holds his hands behind his back and walks around, noting the living and the dead, all the family names in the Vrj region, and he leaves me by myself in the heaviness of this spring. Dad, Dad, my thoughts wander in his open shirt and sweaty back, a body that will surely be cut in half one of these days. That albizia should be planted in earth like this. In a short moment it would prosper in this emptiness, and even if frost got to it, it could take it. I would put it next to this old wall, correct the soil acidity, fertilize it. What would've Grandpa said to that, the thought itself amuses me. He'd have said, it will grow, you, my dear, just have to plant it in the earth. I spot the friar in his funerary habit saying goodbye to the gathered, what would he say. Certainly something in the vein of how dare you go against the usual deathly, dignified, inconspicuous cypresses with this albizia. It would be okay if it were a cypress, but we won't nourish our sorrows with pink flowers; god sees all, no use in making oneself more noticeable to him.

But there is no god here at all. If this horrible sight didn't turn him away, he might stop by from time to time, so we could bask in him, the people who, like our land, know how to create but not how to administer. Huh, Dad, what do you say? Dad, where are you?

He is in his shelter, among the gravestones, wobbling along the narrow pathways and counting:

– Karaman, Matoš, Dražić, Pranjčević, Gojun, Đin, Babić, Vejić, Voloder, Bradarić, Radman, Perkušić, Basić, Strukan, Majić, Lejo...