



Back
to Earth

SULAIMAN ADDONIA [BELGIUM]

Oh! The early mornings, the fragments of dawn falling over Flagey, the heaving breaths of joggers lapping around me, as the poet with a red scarf over his shoulders sits by my side, writing in his notebook. This poet knows I am not just a pond as idle as a painting. He sees the rain falling on my skin, and that water dripping on water is like making love to oneself. Under his gaze, I stretch to receive the offering of the sky. The leaves on the surface of my skin quiver. The swans and ducks steady their wings landing over my pores as soft as velvet.

The poet leaves and in his wake, I hear thunder.

Hours pass. People come and go. Buses, trams, cars, bikes hurl past this way and that way. Slowly the morning turns into afternoon, and the poet returns with his book to recite poetry, his breath carrying a tinge of Pablo Neruda and Gwendolyn Brooks.

I begin to think about writing a letter to my younger self. But I wonder what I would say, how I would reflect on my life, and the years I have spent in this part of the universe.

Unlike the poet, who scribbles his words on paper, I speak my words to the air. Air is my pigeon post that delivers my thoughts to my past, present and future self.

I long to tell my story. Of how it all started, of how before I came to be known as les Étangs d'Ixelles, the two ponds of Ixelles, I was just one long lake, without a name, my existence unhindered, or restrained by boundaries.

There were not many buildings around me those days. Instead the fields stretched into the horizon, making the hilly meadow my view. I passed my time kissing the stones and rocks around me, and at times, going in circles, each part of me playfully enveloping another part. Seeing how I fed the pasture rejuvenated me. Watching the sheep graze on the grass I had watered, renewed my hope. When labourers scooped barrels of water off my pores to make their mud for their new buildings, I prayed for rain.

Now, the times are different.

I think about the joy and the pain of having people around me, a feeling that intensified on that summer evening a few years ago when I saw the poet in a red scarf for the first time.

I recall that evening, how the aroma of runners' perspirations and strollers' perfumes hung in the air. Residents of Flagey began to gather around me. If a human being is made of sixty percent water, I remember thinking to myself then as I surveyed faces, mine is one hundred percent. Just imagine living with the reality that I have forty percent more of what kept the human race afloat, forty percent more than those who believe they have power over me.

I was thinking about the nature of my relationship with people when I noticed the old Moroccan woman in white djellaba with a hood, arriving at my bank about to begin her evening saunters. As she promenaded around me, she pressed her walking cane on the ground to aid her glide. From the stories she mumbled to herself - and in return to me, because they all spoke knowing that I was their only listener - about her past, I understood that it was desire that energised her legs. She was fond of recalling a lover, a younger man outside Marrakech, a man who touched her soul.

When I peeled my eyes off the old woman, I caught a glimpse of a younger woman with a shaved head and in a blue dress staring at me. Her eyes were red. Nothing matches the piercing and tender gaze of eyes belonging to a wounded heart. I moved towards her, my water stroking her feet. She cried.

My eyes roamed around me. People everywhere. There were those leaning against trees, others sitting on the bare grass, all whiling away their evening, seeking solace from my breaths, showering me with occasional praise, emphasising my beauty, or rather the reflections of themselves on the surface of my skin lit by street lamps.

The scent of alcohol drifted from everywhere. Some lit their cigarettes and smoke rings circled above me. The breeze, heavy with drops of my liquid, extinguished the threat of fire from cigarette butts on the grass before it even started.

Music blurted out from phones. Giggles, cries, conversations, shouting, quarrels, all made high tides of human emotions lapping above my calm surface. I smelt weed. Perhaps I was already stoned when I saw two lovers passing hands under each other's skirts. I breathed in the aroma from their inner thighs so that the fish and plants inside me could rejoice.

These people were my garden, I thought. They were my visitors, who loved beside me, kissed and hugged, wept, brought news of marriages of wars of promotions of adventures of separations and reunions, confided secrets to each other that became my secrets too, and broke the news that death was imminent for some of them, while others were carrying the joy of a new life in their wombs.

They don't know it, but when humans envelope themselves with tenderness and vulnerability, nature gives birth to more beauty, the kind that replenishes their souls in return.

I was in a melancholic grip when a man arrived on his bike, a guitar without a case on his back. He tied his hair in a bun as he dismounted and disappeared behind a willow tree on my bank. He unzipped his trousers and his fountain of piss flew into me. I shuddered as I tried to absorb this filth, hoping it would be the last time.

I was wondering about him and those like him, when I felt thumps like from a hammer falling at the other end of my body.

I turned around. A woman was kicking me on the tip of my skin. Perhaps she was raging at herself, at someone somewhere, at her life. But why was she taking her anger out on me? I held myself together, creating currents as if circling around myself, so I could replace my bruised skin under her feet with different parts of me. "Stop," I wanted to shout if I could. "Stop."

I looked away from the man, from the woman and the human species around me and retreated into myself. My rage bubbled in the long silence that followed. I had given these people a space to lean on me, a moment to do their reflection, an eternity to soothe their wounds and heal them by my side. I had given them the place to come and laugh and dance. Their summers wouldn't be merry without me, their autumn wouldn't be as colourful without the leaves of the trees feeding from my breasts. I added meaning to their life as they ambled around me. I offered my depth as a safe place when sorrows hit their hearts. I listened to them without asking for anything in return. I even invited ducks and swans to ornate my skin so we could add colour to their lives.

Yet, at times like this, when piss trickled on me, objects and spits thrown at me, burning cigarettes put out on my body, it was as if I was a volcano and not a pond. I wanted to feed a passing cloud with droplets so it could turn darker and pour down. I needed to be left alone.

I wanted peace, I thought to myself.

Just then a man with a red scarf arrived and he brought with him the loneliness sitting on his shoulders that only I could understand. I knew he was a poet when he sat beside me, and looked at me in silence for a long, long time. He then opened a book and began to read out loud a poem to me:

He takes me, from under my arms

He plants me, in a distant cloud

And the black rain in my eyes

Falls in torrents, torrents

He carries me with him, he carries me

To an evening of perfumed balconies

I closed my eyes. To the poet. To the poetry. To the tenderness.

Oh! How poetry revives me, how it brings me excitement, how it allows me another way of understanding people. And how the glint in people's eyes, like his, touch me so much that I turn into a poet myself, and not just the ponds of Ixelles.