

Milos Urban

The Water Wizard – A Novel

Orig. Title: Hastrman

-- excerpt translated by Iván Gutierrez

I'm like water in a dam – on the surface the laughter of swimmers, underwater the silence of a submerged village.

I came back, was set in my region once again. I didn't want things to turn out this way, but what must be, must be; no use objecting to it. I look around. I can't not see.

I've never been *here* before. The path has been neglected; the former pheasantry looks like a jungle. The hunters' club uses it now. Further on, in some thickets on a rocky slope, a rococo summer palace crumbles away, encircled by a wretched wire fence, overgrown with thornbushes; the black remains of a bonfire can be seen between the corinthian columns and the white walls are covered with fungus. The same old path leads along the Waldstein alley to Nový Zámek, now a hotel for foreigners with a restaurant that has become famous. The stone bridge is still standing here, but I find only one statue on it – and it's mutilated, Saint Jan of Nepomuk is missing his head. My eyes find it at the bottom of the stream. Saint Catherine, who used to stand facing him, is missing altogether.

The Nove Mlyny dam has swallowed up all the medieval lakes and fish ponds, along with the communicating canals, the dikes, the dug-out troughs, the alleys of alders and birch, the fish-hatcheries, the sluice gates, the millraces, the overflows, and the cottages belonging to those who looked after the the lakes. Under the dike, which used to be much lower and supported only the waters of the Dolansky lake, lies the large-capacity New Mill Ltd., an industrial complex connected to a small water-powered electric plant. At first, the mill wheels were powered by the canals between the fish ponds; but gradually, as the mills grew, they required more and more water and a steeper descent. It became a "Flour Factory" shortly after WWI. The old Black Mill, also known as the Tower, disappeared when the the new brick buildings arose around it. Even the main building of the "factory" was lost amidst them in later years, though it is said it still stands somewhere in the middle of the complex. Because of the expansion, a dam was built here after WWII. Supplying the people with provisions became such an issue that it grew into a whole industry. If the milling chamber was enough for the waterwheel, a series of wheels required a factory. And when there was a factory standing here, the wheels were dismounted and replaced with more efficient turbine engines. And then everything was brought to a halt. The workers left. Others came. The mountain which overlooked the dam started to wane like a waxing moon. Without any hope of another *new* moon.

The second reason for building the dam was to drain the ever damp region, with its fabled swamps and flooded meadows. It was successful. The dam did absorb the dampness into itself but, for some odd reason, it was not able to convey it where it was needed. Today there are shallow sand pits in the surrounding area. The wind, which is particularly harsh here—ever since the war, it is said—blows sand all across. White drifts form around the edges of the woods, but this isn't snow. Someone gifted with a sinister imagination might be reminded of sand dunes in the Sahara desert.

Nothing hinders the wind over the wide stretch of water; it gathers gale-force-speeds and the enfeebled spruce trees aren't good in slowing it—they just splinter and break. Sand settles quickly in the wind-damaged patches of wasteland.

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I shouldn't have gone there. I should have guessed that the day after the attack they would put the explosives under surveillance. It was the newspapers that put me on the right track, strangely enough. "Curiously, the culprit did not touch a stock of industrial explosives located on the secret site in the vicinity of Ralsko."

My path leads straight to a military area that used to be an airport for the Soviet occupation forces. It is a secret before the public that there are hangars there hidden under layers of earth; that there are so many of them that, besides aircraft, they made it possible to stockpile an unimaginable quantity of ammunition. Today the impoverished Czech Army rents them out to anyone who will pay a high enough price.

I am on foot. I will escape on foot as well. I make a mess of things -- this becomes clear to me from the moment I use some acid from a glass alembic to burn a path through a double wire fence entwined with barbed wire. I've underestimated the defenses of the secret installations; I made no allowance for the hidden cameras, nor for one other thing.

Armed with two homemade bombs and a willow rod, my magic wand, I wait for midnight in a pine grove behind the hangars. Then I burst out and head towards a couple of black-clad guards; one of them is lighting a cigarette for the other. "Lighting fires is strictly forbidden here," I say to the overgrown lugs and point to the warning sign on a door to one of the hangars. I raise the wand and whip them both across the eyes right when they turn towards me, startled. They roar with pain, momentarily blinded. I unfasten their walkie-talkies from their fatigues and tear their machine guns from their shoulders.

My gaze falls on the green-painted doors leading straight into the heart of the earthen mound. Aside from a crossed-out flame, there is another sign hung there: a yellow triangle. Dangerous chemicals. If I were to blow all of this up, I would cause an ecological catastrophe. Me!

I try to retreat, but the way back to the hole in the fence is blocked. Under the moonlight, a grass-covered hatch opens up in the manmade sod between runways and a man weighing 100 kg stands in it, lit up from behind by purple light bulbs. He looks like Satan emerging from his domain. I fall to the ground and crawl over to the nearest trees.

I don't take my eyes off him. He would make an excellent target, with his crew-cut melon-head sitting on top of that lumbering frame; too bad I don't have anything to shoot with. I know who I have the honor of dealing with; explosives expert Laudon from the Vlhost'stone mines. A human monster who should have long been laid to rest, six feet under.

A bullet from an automatic pistol bores into the trunk of a spruce tree I am hiding behind. I take flight, hidden by the forest shadows and the thin mist rising up through the spruce needles on the ground. Suddenly it is as if someone had turned on a switch in the woods. There are mushrooms everywhere; a crazed mushroom hunter lights them up, one by one, cutting through the haze with a searchlight, and then sweeps

through the branches and foliage with a burst of machine-gun fire. I run deeper into the woods. I run for my life.

Then I catch the revving of a diesel motor; the noise drives me towards the south of the military compound. The forest here is a meshwork of asphalt roads hard enough to support the weight of a tank. Bad news for me. Two security jeeps have no trouble handling the sharp turns among the trees. They drive along the roads as if they were on the highway.

Or do they? Maybe they aren't quite the professionals I am making them out to be: I hear snapping branches and a metal clang, and then a pair of headlights are swallowed by darkness. Now there is only one vehicle left and people on foot; and now there are dogs after me and upon me. I blind two of the fastest beasts with my wand; there are three left further off and they haven't yet lost my scent, but their masters are slow and stay behind. The mist isn't thick enough for me to slip away, and a sudden rainfall in which I might reliably disappear remains nothing but a prayer. I stumble over roots and fallen branches and head for a spot where I can smell water. The trees thin out at last and the moon opens up before me like a gaping mirror; bewitching, and yet strangely clouded. With relief I shatter its reflection, plunge under the surface—and then dig into the bottom with my forehead. I sit up, my shoulders and scraped head protruding above the surface of the shallow, greasy water. I bite back a curse; the pond is almost totally drained. There's hardly any water here—it's barely above knee-level—but as if to make up for it, it stinks like a petroleum refinery. And there's a jeep coming through the woods already. Searchlights aim unerringly at me and a figure with a pistol instead of a head leans out of the driver's compartment and points at me.

The dogs stay on the bank; they are reluctant to enter the stinking mud pit as the thick, oily slush would drown them after they'd taken just a couple of steps. A coarse voice shouts, breaking through their rabid barking, and orders me to surrender. I put my hands up. The jeep sinks slowly into the water; the glaring lights illuminate the greasy layer on the surface along with all the half-sunken dross: bald tires, a heaping mess of plastic bottles, hole-ridden gas cans, a rust-eaten gate and a complete field kitchen with a blown-out cauldron.

The unforgiving military mess helps me win the race and thus saves my life. I take off my boots; first with my right, and then with my left foot I step on the water's surface. I stand on it. I turn on my heel and face a revolver which is aiming right at me. The gun trembles.

This is my chance. In a flash I turn around and rush to the middle of the pond; the treacherous water is slippery, but I manage to keep my balance. Meanwhile, the man in the jeep gathers his wits about him, shoots once and then again; both shots are wildly off target. The first bullet flies off into the woods on the opposite bank and the second rings out with a ping against a piece of metal nearby.

The engine grunts and the headlights sink beneath the surface of the water; steam rises up from the radiator grill as the sturdy jeep cleaves the water like a snow plough; the mud seeps slowly into tire-tracks behind the vehicle; the spilled oil is thick as gruel.

The jeep is slower; much slower than my bare, flashing feet, which have just drawn an arc and stopped behind the vehicle. Suddenly, a white luminous eye opens up above two red ones, turns on its axis and finds me. The transmission rattles, the jeep backs up with a jerk, gathers speed... and slams into the field kitchen's cauldron with a sound of ripping steel as if a pressure cooker had exploded. The cauldron remains stuck in the sandy bottom and though it shifts a bit with the impact, it doesn't fall over. The noise deafens me more than the pistol shots. The water around the jeep is boiling and

seeps into the fresh fissures rent in the back of the vehicle. One of the tires is completely blown out. The wreck sits there in the shallow water; there is nowhere for it to sink.

I know there's no need for me to hurry. The motor has died and nothing is moving in the driver's compartment; the dogs on the bank bark away furiously, but they are powerless, and their masters are far off somewhere. I have a sudden vision of myself as seen from outside. I open the jeep door slowly with my left hand and grab the pistol which has fallen out with my right. The fact that my hand is missing its trigger finger goes unnoticed by the driver, who is in shock. He is still alive, but he sits behind the wheel stiffly like a crash-test dummy. He can't move his head or his hands. He shifts his eyes in his sockets helplessly, but he is able to speak. He hisses his opinion of me through clenched teeth: I am a terrorist son-of-a-bitch and should be court-martialled.

I ask whether or not he's afraid of death, which I can see right on his tongue. He answers that he's been through worse. Crimson bruises are spreading on his swollen face. He's lucky, I hear myself after a moment's pause; I have no desire to kill him, despite the fact that he's heisted a whole mountain off the surface of the earth and he deserves nothing less than to be slaughtered. He gathers up enough strength to spit at me; he hits me on the neck. I grab the pistol by the barrel, wipe the spit away with my arm and whack him with the battered gun between the eyes. A bump forms on the bridge of his nose; the skin is broken, laying bare some bone and cartilage. Blood oozes out in a thin trickle; the wound is white, as if frostbitten. Tears of pain flow out from under Laudon's closed eyelids; his lips are clamped together so he won't cry out.

When the first shock has passed, his mouth opens and he erupts in an uninterrupted stream of curses at me. You can make minced meat out of me if you want, says Laudon afterwards, but calm now, you've got the wrong person. He only follows the firm's orders. He was kicked out of the army; what was he, supposed to starve to death? He has to make a living somehow, do the only thing he knows how to do well. If I killed him, I would be killing nothing but a pawn and the firm would go ahead without him. When Titania is finished mining away this hill, it'll just move on to the next, with all its bulldozers and its explosives, I can bet on that.

I ask if he denies responsibility, then, for destroying the environment and all it entails.

It is the firm's management who's to blame, says he, he's only a foot soldier and a poorly paid one to boot.

So is it the director? I smirk. Mr Otrla. Mr Accountable?

His eyes make an affirmative gesture along with his mouth.

So I spare him, but someone else is going to have to foot the bill in his stead. Someone else is going to pay the price for having mutilated the mountain. Otrla runs Titania; Laudon is just a *machine* carrying out orders, a hired hack. Well, he's certainly going to have to take a break from quarrying now.

I leave him in the jeep, throw the gun into the water and wade to the bank; the dogs are gone and there's a tomblike silence around the pond.

Next time, I say to myself, I am going to mow down the ones who have sown all of this. But I'm leaving the foot soldiers alone. The old guard in the stonemine was innocent, and he ended up dying anyhow. It happens every day. So it is about time the *guilty* ones started paying up.

Not everything has changed. Some things have remained the same. I used to walk through the woods and if I didn't pay attention to the complicated way the paths intersected, I'd get lost. The woods languished in dryness; but in the splintering, undermined area this was not unusual. I quickly saw my strength sapped.

A space opened up among the trees, however, and there was a pool of water before me. I squatted down by the bank and stretched out a hand to refresh myself with a bit of water. My hand betrayed me; it refused to shape itself into a hollow and sink beneath the surface. I let it fall alongside my body and straightened up. I stared into the water. It was clear, but seemed black due to the pine needles on the bottom. I wouldn't put my hand in it for anything in the world now.

You could only see through the water in certain spots where the golden sand patches on the dark bottom layer shone. Whatever could be hiding down there? I wondered. It probably wasn't anything other than a possibility, and that enough seemed a horror to me. The water was still. There might be anything staring out at me, or nothing at all. I didn't know which was worse.

I walked around the pool and lay down in the grass where the bank was lowest and the bottom quite dark. Then I leaned over the edge and looked deeply into the surface. It didn't move at all; not a single ripple disturbed the smooth, level surface. I saw my reflection, and apart from that quivering gaze of mine, there was nothing else. The bottom disappeared, I could no longer judge the depth of the pool, what was above and what was below. I got dizzy. And then I fled. In that black pit of water I was all alone.

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We are allowed to change what's given, to intervene in the state of things as they've been all along, on one condition: that we create something better, in honour of those who made the mountains and who filled the lakes; something laid out as an offering to those makers.

My father hewed into the rock. Initially, he was an ordinary young pond-digger from the little town Bělá and there was nothing to distinguish him from any of the others in the region at first sight. Then he went to Italy and saw the work of Bernini. He went to Rome to visit him. The sculptor was at the height of his fame then and took the clever Czech in as his apprentice; he called him the "water wizard" and consulted him during the construction of certain of his fountains. My father took a liking to fountains spouting water in grottoes and learned how to make them. But when the master saw his work, he discharged him, fearing he might have created a competitor. My father did not want to stand in his way, so he set off to try his luck in France with a series of fantastic blueprints he had drawn up in his saddlebag. When he arrived in Anjou, he presented himself at the duke's court. The duke had him make a fountain that would combine in itself the pagan beauty of Roman statues with the Christian faith in one almighty God. It was to be a grandiose structure—so grandiose that because of it the duke ended up falling out with the King, who resented that he had "sunk" in it monies originally destined to arm the troops of the realm. He was forbidden access to the royal court.

The construction of the fountain took my father twenty years, and even so it was never completed. It consisted of a grotto with a fountain that spouted a stream so strong it was able to bear the weight of a small cannonball on top of a column of water. Whenever the stream surged or slackened, the cannonball lunged upwards or plummeted downwards, but the water would always catch it again. The whole thing was framed by numerous vertical and slanted jets of water that shot out of trumpets held in the air by graceful stone angels, beautiful and cool like the statues of antiquity. The effect was overwhelming: a stone ball supported from beneath by a liquid platform, inapprehensible and changing according to the amazed observer's vantage. Whoever stepped into the grotto would be greeted by the sight of a triangle with a moveable center, whereupon he then realized it was a pyramid made solely of water—with a stone ball hovering in the middle of it all. It was reminiscent of the pyramid which housed the eye of God.

The cave was situated in a garden where distinguished guests would walk about; eminent aristocrats would approach the miraculous sculptor, bow before him, and try to lure him from the duke's services into their own. His master would also come to admire the fountain and my father remained loyal to him for a long time. He gave no importance to the duke's irregular moods and it took him some time before he realized that Anjou was only interested in his work to the extent that it made a sensation, and that artistic values were indifferent to him. When work on the fountain was half-finished, things in the realm began to look up; the region, which had been destroyed by war and drought became green and bountiful once again. Nobody thought about war anymore and the King pardoned the duke. This required an equivalent gesture in return. The grotto was never finished and the artist was released from the Duke's services, having received but half of the fees that had been agreed upon. The king learned of this and immediately invited him to his court. He did not want any fountains, but he needed someone to look after his fish ponds. In order to retain him, my father was raised to noble status. He enjoyed his new condition until the realm was scourged with a new war. My father fled home to Bohemia and, not far from his birthplace, bought a small estate from the Waldsteins with an ingenious system of intertwined medieval ponds and a small castle known as Rybná, which had long belonged to the lords of Lipá until they lost it to the Waldsteins after the Battle of Bílá Hora. He did not linger long here; new commissions soon took him abroad again. In Germany, he got married and fathered a son. Before he died, he spent most of his time in his palace, bathing in a small pool adjoining his bed-chamber. Towards the end of his life, he had created a masterful system of dikes, floodgates and drains for his ponds; for his own amusement, he made sketches of wondrous fountains every once in a while.

My father lived 300 years; he was a maker. I am his age now, but I am nothing. Nothing but a destroyer.