

УДК: 821.163.41.09

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THE BARREL
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(translated from the Serbian by Sibelan Forrester)²

You can immediately recognize those unhappy little children: they come home from school to an empty house, they know *Robinson Crusoe* by heart, and they read *Life and Suffering in Siberia* and *The Road to the Land of Vashucolumb* at nine years old.

You can tell the poor little things who lost their mothers too soon, who hide their heads under their pillows when a hearse drives by, who are afraid when the clock strikes at night, who have pale, thin faces and long thin arms.

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Homework assignments didn't give me much trouble. They were all simple and easy, and I could study and memorize them before I left school for the day. But my brother misbehaved and acted like a little barbarian. He would build "a fortress on the Bojana River at Skadar"³ and imprison all my dolls, he would pull ants apart to look for their skeletons, harness grasshoppers to a paper wagon, and he walked on his hands more than on his feet.

So I would sit alone all day in some corner and flip through the bright, luminous illustrations in lexicons and natural science books. There you could see the blaze of the aurora borealis, there were those strange tropical plants with wild animal faces; the sea rustled and great galleys full of Assyrian oarsmen sailed upon it. Egyptian soldiers went to war, each one the same as all the rest, with arrows poised and that

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² With thanks to Svetlana Tomić of Alfa BK University.

³ Refers to a folk epic in which the *vilas* kept ruining a bridge under construction until a living woman was immured in the bridge as a sacrifice.

strange sharp profile, head turned while both shoulders faced forward. There Charon ferried dead men's souls, there was the scowling silence of the icy north and terrible death in sand that gives no water. There the eyes of regal tigers flashed like sharp swords, and the kind eyes of white Scandinavian hawks gleamed with a tender blue.

It was like that today, like that yesterday, like that in winter, like that in summer — first in the bedroom, then the hallway, then the attic, then the garden, then finally in the barrel.

I called it a barrel, but really it was just a huge tub, all dried out, a crumbling tub standing at the bottom of the yard and gradually rotting and falling apart with no apparent purpose. The staves still held up the sides somehow, but they were dried and cracked. There was no bottom below, but the lid was turned upwards as a roof — everything was riddled with holes, you could move every board, and several large boards were completely missing.

For a long time I had felt a fondness for that dilapidated old palace. I would peer into it between the boards, I would prod and touch the huge rock-hard fungus, move the leaves of the thick dull-green weeds, and I loved to listen to the grey melody of silence and calm.

I thought at first that I would wait and penetrate the cask while other people were there, but I reconsidered and decided to investigate it myself and conquer it Robinson Crusoe style.

One early summer morning I grabbed a small ladder, a hammer and a hatchet, I climbed on the lid and shifted the boards on it so the sun could get inside, then I knocked out a rotten board on the side as well, so that I myself could enter.

The rotten, dead wood didn't make much of a protest under my blows, but the tub cracked anyway, and a kind of many-stranded commotion and rustling began in the thick tangled weeds, the way the earth seethes and crackles when the sun bursts out again after the rain.

First I stood outside, and pulled up and cut the weeds standing there, then when I had cleared a fair area I went inside and, out of desire or fear, by lunchtime I had thinned and annihilated all the forests and groves of the ants and lizards. I left, but pruned, one row of turnip greens; the big fungus remained. On the inside, where water had been trickling down, a row of tiny red and white mushrooms remained, and I left one masterfully woven spider web.

The ground was damp and black as a grave, those little mushrooms looked as if they were sick with smallpox, and the rotten boards gave off some kind of choking milky vapor. But that all changed quickly. The enemy of the damp and dark soon arrived. July came in with its hot dry breath, and the next day the earth already had a crust, the mushrooms fell away like dry scabs, and the tangled, loosened turnip leaves smiled in a greener hue.

That day I moved into the barrel. First I took in a little chair and opened over it an old faded umbrella that the younger people would take to market in the fall. Then I dragged in my whole garden in pots, among other things two lovely tall ficus plants, which looked like palm trees inside the barrel.

Immediately after that came a mass of thin wooden cigar boxes, which I feverishly collected and even bought, because at the time I spent all day designing and cutting out boats and galleys.

After that I hammered in several nails and hung up a little saw, a mallet, some old shears, a small can, a box with nails and cords, and I dragged in, finally, one old English history book full of sketches and carvings from Theban and Egyptian tombs depicting the sea, storms, galleys, and seafarers.

In the beginning I felt some childish fear, and I would jump out of the barrel fairly often, to go back in after a short pause for careful listening. But I quickly acquired the habit, and I couldn't be separated from my barrel. If they needed to look for me, they would look for me in the barrel, and if they had to find me they would find me in the barrel. What's more, later on I took the board I had moved to make an entrance and leaned it back in place from inside, so that except for the open roof I was completely walled in and completely alone. The entrance was barred to dogs and cats, it was too cramped in the barrel for my brother, but winged guests would come in to me from above.

A light, soft, quiet fantasy bloomed in this perforated and shriveled courtyard, and while the other children were making a racket outside and one summer ran from fence to fence after a butterfly, the pale little girl dreamed her saga of Robinson Crusoe in the barrel.

I dreamed of high seas where coral reefs swayed like hanging baskets of flowers. Regions where the sun's rays fall to the earth in thick heavy tendrils, and where there is no shade and freshness except when the sea birds unfurl their wings and sprinkly the flowers with water from their feathers. I dreamed of the terrible frost and glaciers whose crevasses give off a strange blue light, and I felt that the roots and elements of true eternity might lie there in the north, in those frozen energies.

In that decaying little cabin I learned to love what I couldn't see, what I didn't have, and what was fated to pass away.

I loved the sun, the light, the butterflies, the bugs and crickets. I loved them anxiously and with a tremor, for I saw that the sun was sinking, and I knew that in a day or a week the colorful, mad butterflies would die, and in a short time the exhausted little crickets would fall. They would fall, and the heat would dry them to a crisp, and I myself might step on the dry little corpses of my merry singers.

The child's small heart, which hadn't yet known even the present time, sensed that there was passing and a past, that there is a moment when things fade and fall and

grow cold, that a moment comes when the proud dragonflies who dart there high under the sun are just the same as dull blind worms crawling beneath the ground.

The sorrow of those who never believe that they will return to a place as they are leaving it, and who doubt that what has passed will ever come again, unfolded in the child.

With my body I felt the fall of evening, and like a sunflower I turned my little face towards the sun. There is, it must be, some curse meaning that nothing beloved can remain. A bird flies past, bright as an exploded star, and it never exists again. Some butterfly flits by, bright as if it just flew through a rainbow, and then it never exists again.

Perhaps some insects experience feelings like these. They drink the sun and bathe in the sun, they're quiet and don't make a sound. In the barrel I also learned how to keep as quiet as an insect. Even now I love that world that loves, takes revenge, kills and dies in noble silence. Where man grows brutal as a beast, they are restrained and mute as a passion overcome. The mysteries of love and death are silently consummated under a veil of dead leaves.

For a while, every morning at one and the same hour, a funny little bird, timid and silent, would come to the same board on the roof, I don't know where from. It would nod its head towards every side of my barrel, its body would tremble as if every feather meant to take flight on its own, and after a few minutes it would vanish.

I tried leaving crumbs in a dish, bread, cake, fruit or sugar, but the bird always behaved just the same way and never touched anything. Why did that animal come, what attracted her, what was she looking at and what did she see? I couldn't riddle out the reasons, but I loved that bird the way you love a symbol of love and goodness.

One marvelous summer day, when all the beauty of one season is bound up in a single morning, when the pigeons looked massive, sculptural and heavy, when the sun's criss-crossing rays rang like silver, when speech sounded like laughter, when the light was so thick that the flies and butterflies had to beat their way through it with their wings, when I was happy and merrily ran up to my barrel—the bird didn't come. Not then, and not ever after.

I waited for many days more and felt very sorry. But what had caught the fancy of the little girl then was the god Tammuz, who had twenty-nine names and just as any wings and lives.

I dug one sagging side of the floor even deeper, lined it with brick, filled it with water, and refilled it as it gradually dried out with my little can.

That was the sea, the great sea which was always called Red or Yellow, and I saw all the shades of that color on the dead surface of my little puddle. In the evening, in my bed, I would imagine ripples of bright-colored water singing and chasing one another there below.

And all around, on the rough and rotten sides of my barrel, I drew the whole world and everything in the world with thick strokes of white and green chalk and various gouged-out illustrations.

The continents, the seas, the islands, everything in one line of a child's handwriting practice books, where New York and Čačak, Jagodina and Formosa stood right next to each other. And on the water, I used a slender cord to tow the fantastic little boats, carefully carved and glued, which held twenty paper oarsmen in parallel rows, each exactly like the others, all with motionless slender wooden oars. I would row them for a whole afternoon, always through the same sea, now to Brazil and then to Madagascar, and then again to *there*, with the snow and sleighs, reindeer and hoarfrost.

Up and down, back and forth, my galley would glide to the automatic rhythm of the crickets who, intoxicated with the sun and heat, sang a song without verses or vacation, sang the poetry of a short life, sang the dreams of a pale girl who wanted to go far, far away!

Oh, little crickets that I never saw! How I always dreaded that you would move away, that you would die of hunger, that you would stop singing. But then one singer perched behind every leaf, and the powerful chirping outsang my beautiful and heartfelt concern.

Oh my little crickets, oh my great illusions! For there are no crickets in the winter, for a cricket doesn't need grain because he can't swallow it, he needs nothing but sweet, sun-ripened juice, because he doesn't eat anything either. Oh my beautiful illusions, which I can no longer enter, in whose locks all keys crumble, and whose doors no longer open.

And after the boat had long ago arrived, and the sun had set, and all the perfumes and sweets and crowns of happiness and joy which come with them in the sun's rays had left the earth again, all the same I heard my little singers, singers of harmless joy in life. A cricket! A little scrap of mud who holds something good, a gift of love and joy, an atom that lives and utters its joy in life.

From the great heat and burning, the fragile, rotten boards dried and crumbled, and the narrow black cracks grew brighter and wider. All of a sudden some bright four-winged thing would pass through them, then another one chasing it, and then a whole swarm of butterflies who had been loving in the sun, and charged into the half-dark shade of solitude, seething and mad from the sun and love. They would land on the wide cool leaves of the ficus, and they stood out on the blackish green in their bright garb, in their light and gleaming colors, as if they had bathed in liquid metal and drops of molten gold and platinum were still sliding down their wings. And then they would take a firmer stand on the leaves, rest for a moment or two, twist their spiral proboscis in, and flee back outside, repelled by the ficus's bitter scent.

And a society of little flies, winged insects and six-legged walkers poured out on the sunny side of the barrel, from a hole in the corroded wood and from the hot dry earth. Sometimes a lizard too, a caterpillar with its squinting, clouded gaze, and a beetle with large protuberant eyes like telescopes.

I liked being in the barrel, and it was hard for me to come out of it.

Even the rain didn't trouble me. When I noticed that bad weather was coming, I could climb the ladder and move the boards on the roof closer together, crouch under the umbrella on my little chair, and watch the birds rip through the air like black bolts of lightning. I would laugh at the harsh rain, whose big drops rang against the boards the way nuts shake and crack in a sack.

I would even have been glad to see a blizzard strike from somewhere, and if soft white snow had packed all the holes and exits shut, and if my galleys and boats had all frozen in the ice. For I had a much stronger sympathy for the poetry of smoky Siberian huts and the hard life of northern peoples, who were always fighters and heroes, than for the insipid and gaudy south with its torpid stifling winds and its warmed, pampered residents.

And therefore here, so to speak in the immediate vicinity of my little puddle, hot as Senegal, I dreamed an icy white fantasy of the north.

I covered an area with powdered chalk, little piles of white dust, I stuck in a few half-dried fir twigs, and I made a high pointed Koriek hut out of paper with an entry in the top. And then the icy wind of Siberia began to blow from the daydreams of a little girl, and to sweep so much snow that it broke the branches. And the good-hearted Korieks squatted around the fire, wrapped in fur.

There, in their homeland, where death always threatened outside the hut and hunger inside the hut, people there have to live as simply as in fairytales, and they have to be kind to one another and good, as in the kingdom of unborn children.

Snow and frost and the blizzard, a great red flame inside which was never extinguished, and seething coals like a dragon's mouth.

The flame and light were relatives and came from the same magical land. There were lots of pictures and tales in the flame, and all the good, simple-hearted people know that the winter flame gives everything you lack and returns everything that you mourn for and desire. The winter flame is a dragon that dozes during the day, but when evening comes he spreads his fiery wings and shakes his flaming curls, and the story, story, for the frost-bitten squatting Koriek, the story, softly and warmly, the story crackles and warms them until it carries them away, until they grow drowsy, lie down and fall asleep, and the fire constantly roars in just the same way, and it's warm and comfortable. Meanwhile outside there's open space and freedom, there are no streets or neighbors anywhere, and no one is any poorer than anyone else, and there are no

servants and, while the winds and beasts whistle and shriek, in the Koriek huts there is peace, peace, peace.

The August sun is baking, and the little girl squats on the ground under an umbrella, looks at the handfuls of chalk, and sees snow geese pass in their white slippers and snowy owls with golden eyes, and from time to time polar doves fly past, come to visit in new yellow boots.

And afterwards the reindeer's antlers begin to clatter, and you can smell the hot breath of their frosted muzzles, pressing through around the snow-drifted tents of their masters, and everywhere all around a thin film of fluid freezes.

But where the dried fir branches were stuck in, there stands a great kingdom of northern conifers with white crowns on their heads, in snowy draperies with wide sleeves and icy braided trim.

And just as in tropical regions old trees embrace one another, so the tiny creeping plants can more easily run up them, so the criss-crossed brushy muscles of all the northern giants lull and tend tiny, tender moss, under which good dwarfs in vermilion trousers and little light blue coats, with long beards and some kind of rattling language like dried peas tapping against glass, leap and rub their hands.

But there are no female ones, there are no women dwarfs. The little girl was surprised that it wasn't written anywhere and wasn't drawn anywhere that among the dwarves, in the land of goodness, patience and mercy, there were also female dwarves, that they had wives. All those little lost princes and princesses, and all those unfortunate stepchildren who had been driven out were taken in, hosted, fed and supplied with wise advice only by little men in vermilion red trousers, little men who always chuckled and who had no women among them.

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One day, the rain broke out at dawn and poured over my barrel until evening. Everything soaked up its fill of damp and water, and I couldn't go to my barrel all day. That was an unusually long time for me, and as soon as the drops grew a bit less frequent I ran to peek in and see how things were inside.

The sea had flooded over and was all muddied, everything else was drooping and had turned black, and the only sounds were the painful tones of leaking. A true dead island where black butterflies, like candle-shears, had extinguished their gleam in the color of the flower they fell into.

It stopped raining just at dusk, and the yard filled again with that good blue of a sky in late summer. The moon danced on the border of the evening twilight and the long summer day, which was reluctant to be extinguished.

The first thing I wanted to do was to run and put my head into the barrel. A breeze you couldn't even feel from outside passed through some small opening in the cracks of the barrel, and you could hear something, as if a fiddle-bow was being drawn over a dragonfly's glassy wings.

Above the sea, around Brazil, some tepid, soft, creeping vapor, and the greenness held the daunted respiration of plants at sunset. Things had tipped sideways and gone crooked, the little chair seemed to be rocking, and something green and transparent like a moonlight vampire was coming down the ladder.

But the child smiled and loved the rain and the kind summer night and her good barrel.

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Deep and shallow, great and small, my galleys multiplied from day to day, and a whole fleet sailed on cords of various lengths.

But the days were growing shorter, the dawn woke more and more reluctantly, and my boat to Brazil departed later and later.

One morning I set out in my little autumn coat, and I was cold, and I couldn't get warm even in Brazil. That very same day, just before evening, a little butterfly with torn and tattered wings suddenly fell into the barrel, miserable and all numb. I took fright at that wounded creature as if at death, and I picked him up from the ground with trembling hands. He hardly moved, he was as pitiful as some little acrobat in a pink leotard with golden sequins who had fallen from the trapeze just a moment ago and broken both legs.

Then the butterfly died, and that was the first sign of autumn. It was the first death I saw in the cask. From that day on I began to fear that part of autumn that lies and deceives with its fruits and colors, but kills butterflies and swallows.

One September night a horrible storm came up. It boomed and cracked in the sky and on the ground. I slept restlessly, I was afraid, and I woke my father several times.

That September night my summer dream withered. The gale broke the roof of the barrel, loosened and picked off the boards on the sides, ruined and shattered my household goods, drowned the little boats and wiped away Madagascar and Brazil.

The flowerpots were tipped over and broken, there were lots of dead bugs, and my little chair, like a *dodola*,⁴ was buried under wet, cold, dead twigs...

My father held my hand and said the barrel couldn't be repaired, the storm had destroyed it, and winter was coming now anyway. And I screamed. I screamed and shook with that sick despair of a motherless child the neighbor women kiss, who spends the summer in a barrel.

When the cask had fallen apart and lay flat, a child sobbed over its wooden corpse. The dead thing had found its little poet.

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That place has been sold, along with the house and the yard.

If only I could buy it, build a tower around it, and lock the tower with nine keys, from time to time I would close myself away in it. In the darkness and silence I would madly imagine that the traces of dead days could be surrounded with a wall.

Датум пријема: 20.9.2015.

Датум исправки: 21.9.2015.

Датум одобрења: 22.9.2015.

⁴ A girl who goes from house to house during a drought, wearing and carrying branches, singing ritual songs meant to bring the rain.