

Drought  
by Tamás Rojik

I.

*Hungary*

*The state in the Carpathian Basin has been a member of the European Environmental Union (EEU) since 2029. It has a population of approximately 7 million people. Its climate is dry post-continental with an average temperature of 4-6 degrees Celsius in January and 40-43 degrees Celsius in July. The capital is Budapest, with a population of approximately 1.3 million.*

*Thanks to the Carpathian Mountains, a maximum of 10-12 moderate tornados form annually. The Balaton, Hungary's sole remaining lake, is Europe's most endangered source of fresh water. There are international efforts to decontaminate its remaining rivers, the Danube and the Tisza.*

*Despite high surcharges, it remains a popular tourist destination due to the availability of drinking water - continuously fed by ground water sources. The border has been closed to all non-EEU citizens since 2046.*

*(Excerpt from Hungary's  
European Environmental Union entry)*

As they stepped into Danny's room, the sensor pulled up the blinds. The room's only window looked out onto the dark street, the heavy patter of rain could be heard. The harsh weather suited their mood, this was how they best liked to work.

The room hardly had space for any furniture, a writing desk only just fit in alongside the dresser and the bed. The boy set his things underneath the desk when they arrived. Anika carefully set her own bag down on the blanket thrown over the bed, then sat down on the edge of the mattress where the

throw pillows already awaited her. Of course she never liked how Danny arranged them for her, she would fuss with them for a long time, nestle amongst them like a cat, long blond strands of her hair always remained after she left.

They didn't speak to one another, each set their own area in order. They placed the drinks and energy bars at arm's length so they could reach them whenever they needed. They had already discussed during math class how they would proceed that day, so Danny took out his work station and set it on the table. The small machine required a good bit of space, which is why he sat at the table and Anika got the bed, she had an older digital tablet she could hold in her lap.

Danny used the fingerprint scanner instead of the voice command to turn on the work station. He didn't want to break the silence in which the pounding of the rain and the howling of the wind were the only sounds. After the box-shaped device scanned his fingerprint, the machine began projecting in two directions. Vertically, a screen he could use his hands to zoom in on as much as he wanted, and in front a keyboard which, with a few taps, could be turned into a drawing pad.

While Danny began to sketch the panels they'd agreed on, Anika commenced with her usual routine and began coloring a black-and-white image of a flower. But this coloring was no simple filling in of a picture; the girl brought the sketches before her to life. For her, working with these flowers was like a practiced musician working on their scales. Utterly absorbed in mixing the colors for the daffodil, she didn't even notice Danny glancing over at her periodically. Anika, when she was drawing, was completely hunched over, gangly arms resting on her knees, blue eyes focused on her task. Occasionally she even forgot to blink, and had to take a break so she wouldn't get a headache.

"Should I delete it, or do you want to put it next to the others?" she asked when she was done. She spoke very softly so as not to disturb the boy, and the sound of the intensifying downpour almost drowned out her question. Danny jerked his head up and waved a hand at the control panel on the wall, pausing the sound of the rain and stopping the storm simulation on the window. Now it showed the real world, and the sudden stream of March sunlight completely blinded them.

Anika shielded her eyes with her hand, didn't notice as Danny used his finger to pull the picture from her drawing tablet over to the printer. The machine spat the paper out almost into her lap. After a few blinks her eyes adjusted to the brightness, and she examined her work. With the paper in hand she

turned to look at the earlier drawings. Dozens of flowers adorned the wall above Danny's bed, and Anika began experimenting to see where the new one fit in best.

"Why here?" the boy asked when the daffodil eventually ended up next to the lilac from last week.

"Because of the color. I think this is the best place for it," the girl reflected.

"No. Why my room?" he clarified, the words becoming more and more difficult to get out.

"Where else would I put them? In the dormitory? Next to the posters of guys my roommates put up?"

Anika's parents lived far from Budapest. They farmed and raised animals for a living, tended huge tracts of land, but somehow she never felt quite right in that environment. She loved nature and animals but preferred to appreciate them from afar, feeding and watering and harvesting wasn't the life for her. Her father had fought back tears when she got accepted to a high school in Budapest, but he didn't stop her, just asked that she come back over weekends and long breaks.

She and Danny became friends in the advanced drawing class, though initially it was difficult for the boy to accept that the teacher had seated someone next to him. It was because of an assignment they needed to talk more, since the teacher had come up with the idea that desk partners should do a project together before the winter break. She'd given them no specific requirements regarding the topic or style, only that they come up with something that complemented both of their skills.

"I draw stories," Danny said, since he'd already noticed Anika preferred to draw still lifes during free period, using color to make them unique. The girl nodded, and just said they'll make it work. The boy was both grateful and surprised he had such an understanding classmate. He was used to the others making fun of him and never being able to respond in time. The spoken word had always been his enemy. Thoughts gushed into his mind with unbelievable force, but the sentences wouldn't follow. He tried to speak in headlines to make it simpler, but most people found this either weird or frightening.

They stood staring at the wall of the school hallway for a long time after art class ended. Every single crack became well-known to them while they tried to come up with a solution. Finally Anika threw out the idea of doing a comic book. They could work on the story together, Danny would draw the panels, and she would do the coloring.

Things got off to a rocky start, however. Anika couldn't concentrate in the dormitory, her roommates were constantly going on about crushes, music, or school.

"My place," the boy suggested once he found out why they weren't progressing.

At first she didn't want to go. She was wary of her classmate, who was a constant target for the others because of his peculiarities, plus she was frightened by the fact that their house was so far away on the outskirts of the city. The route between the Sasadi Street villas and her dormitory was almost one hour by public transportation, she didn't know how she could make it back in time, but at the same time she was curious, attracted to the unknown, and mainly to the possibility that she might finally be able to draw in peace.

His parents stood in astonishment when they first saw that their son had brought a girl home, but they tried to be friendly, bringing them soda and sweetened bars, asking hourly whether or not they needed anything.

"Leave us alone," Danny snapped at the door when he finally felt their behavior was intolerably embarrassing, and from then on his parents never went in, they only tried to chat with them when Anika was arriving or departing. After a while Danny's father began regularly driving her back to the dormitory so she got home before they locked the gates, otherwise she would have been forbidden from spending her afternoons anywhere else for a week.

Soon enough they were working together like a well-oiled machine, and their completed comic book was featured on the school's homepage, a few panels even appeared on the district website. The story took place in a world where the snails were as big as a man's fist, and they didn't leave trails of slime behind themselves, but instead moved along the tracks which already existed. These designated tracks had criss-crossed the planet for millennia, the snails never strayed from them, and every living being had to show them the utmost respect. If a snail left the path of its own free will, that meant its death was approaching. Volunteers gathered the carcasses and gave them ritual burials, thanking them for their work, though they didn't fully understand what that may have been. All they knew was that if a snail was forced from its path or killed before its time, natural disasters – hurricanes, earthquakes, flash floods – sprang up out of nowhere in the vicinity.

Anika had to go home to spend Christmas at the family farm. Danny suddenly felt very alone, and while he usually occupied himself with drawing over the winter breaks, for these two weeks he was

restless. He finished practically nothing, deleted his sketches over and over, he called Anika but it didn't help, he just stared at her on the screen and hardly ever responded to her questions. Then his parents got him the work station. The new device inspired him to some degree, and his enthusiasm lasted until January.

When they met again at school, he ran right up to her. He didn't care about the shocked stares, the whistling and whooping of their classmates, and Anika must have forgotten where they were as she spontaneously threw her arms around him. Danny – surprised at himself – didn't immediately pull away from her embrace, even though he hated when people touched him.

"We must draw more comic books together," he recited the practiced sentence in one breath. The girl nodded, and set her stuff down next to Danny instead of her old desk partner. The supposed lovebirds were the talk of the class for a few days, everyone was keeping an eye on them, but soon enough it became clear they weren't dating, and the others paid no further attention to them.

Anika soon became a regular guest at Danny's house and they spent almost every afternoon drawing. Danny prepared the panels, while Anika helped bring them to life with color.

Several attempts in the beginning ended in failure, they couldn't find the right topic, but working together inspired them. The breakthrough finally came courtesy of Mr. Misi, the new gym teacher, who thought sending the boys out for pick-up soccer games in the courtyard wasn't enough. They had to toughen up, develop their endurance, and running was the best way to do it.

Since the school courtyard wasn't exactly spacious, they had to run round and round the soccer field and keep track of the laps, which could be quite boring for someone who didn't want to be up amongst the first finishers. Danny plodded along in last place, but he didn't mind, when they played soccer he was only ever in the way, compared to that running wasn't so bad, he only met with someone else if they lapped him.

His thoughts wandered as he ran. That's how he came up with the detective, who slowly came into such focus in Danny's mind that they practically ran along side-by-side. Endre, a tough-as-nails and ageless detective, built like a vending machine, chiseled chin, his glance keen yet somber. Graying, but his hair remained thick, no receding hairline for him. After every shift he went for a run, even when he didn't arrive home until the sun was rising. He never came to love the sport, it was because of an unsolved case he ran around the track. He had to be faster than the person he wanted to catch. The

murderer struck once a year on the night of the winter solstice, always in Budapest, always in a different spot, and his victim was always a runner. Young or old, man or woman, it didn't matter, there was no pattern amongst his targets, so there was no way to set a trap for him. The detective had been on the case for eight years, it was the only one he couldn't crack, despite always receiving the help he asked for. On those nights he recruited volunteers from the police, the army, counter-terrorism units, even from the neighborhood watch groups, but somehow the murderer always slipped through their fingers. It was like he could sense where the trap awaited him and always evaded it.

"I see him in black and white," he explained to Anika in the afternoon. "He runs with me, his knees bend, his arms swing. He pants. His hair is sweaty. He stinks. He hates running, but has to."

He tried to explain the whole thing, but could feel he wasn't using the right words, that what he said didn't make sense, everything got all scrambled up. He trembled as he tried to summarize, sweat beaded on his forehead, and he became more and more agitated.

"Draw it for me," Anika said, covering his hands with her own. The boy's shaking subsided. He turned on the work station and set to work. That's when Anika, to keep herself occupied, began coloring her first flowers, and thus began a kind of ritual that they were ever afterwards compelled to follow.

Once she had put the daffodil on the wall next to the lilac, Danny sent her some fresh panels from the detective story. But before Anika could take a look at them, a question came tumbling out of the boy's mouth, one he'd long been wondering about.

"Why always flowers?"

"Because this is the only way we can see them now. My mom has tons of coffee table books at home, doesn't matter if everything is on the internet, she sticks to those books. When I was little she showed me all the flower species that used to exist in her childhood, before all the insects were exterminated."

"Why not insects?"

"I used to draw those too, but I wouldn't put them up in anybody's room. My dad told me about how there were still spiders and bugs when he was a kid, and everyone was either scared of them or thought they were disgusting. It's no surprise when you look at them. Too bad the bees also got wiped out in the extermination."

"History, unit 3."

“Yeah, I know we learned about it in school, but it’s still really sad. One time I drew a swallow for my mom, they used to live here, and she burst into tears.”

“Happy tears?”

“I don’t know, maybe. She definitely cried happy tears when my dad managed to get her a jar of real honey for her name day. Not the substitute you get in the store, I have no idea where he got it from, maybe Asia, but I bet it was super expensive.”

“No viruses.”

“Yes, I know exterminating the ticks and mosquitos once they started spreading tropical viruses was a good thing.”

They spoke no further, Danny let Anika immerse herself in the coloring, and he leaned back in his chair, completely exhausted from the drawing and the conversation. When they were done he went down to get his dad, who sat in the kitchen in front of his own work station, typing intently.

“Done. Ready to go,” Danny said.

“Alright, we’ll leave in a second,” his dad said, and turned off the device. Though the car had room for five, Danny never went with them. It didn’t bother Anika, it was only his dad who brought it up every time. “I assume you’ll shut yourself up in your room then?” he asked, a shade snarkier than usual.

“Don’t like to say goodbye,” Danny said angrily, but immediately regretted it, and looked fearfully toward the stairs. He had hoped Anika was still gathering her things, but she was already standing there behind him, reddening as she fixed her gaze on the floor.

“No problem, see you tomorrow,” she whispered, and hurried into the hall to get her coat. This time they only waved as they stepped out the door.

The dormitory wasn’t that far away by car, and just forty minutes later Danny’s dad was back home, the boy could hear him as he tramped up the stairs. He knew his son didn’t like to be bothered in the evenings, but he still wanted to speak with him.

“Can I come in?” he asked after knocking lightly.

“If you have to,” the boy responded, and he entered.

“You could also take your girlfriend home.”

“My friend.”

"You could take your friend home. You've long since turned sixteen, you could drive the autocar."

"Exam."

"I think you could pass the exam with just a few weeks of preparation, there isn't much to it. Just the driver's ed classes, one day for the exam, you could practice the emergency shutdown here at home, your mom and I can help. You'll pass no problem, do the first aid training, and then you can take Anika home."

"Not interested."

"I, on the other hand, don't want to spend a lifetime ferrying your friends or girlfriends all over. When I was young, it took a whole year to get your driver's license, and for some it took even longer," he let slip. Even he was surprised that he'd brought up his teenage years, seeing as he swore he would never talk about them.

"Next week," Danny shrugged.

"Okay, find a school and we'll pay for it," his dad said in surprise, and left once he saw the conversation was over, closing the door softly behind him.

Danny flung himself down on the bed, exhausted. Anika's scent still lingered on the blanket. Before, he probably would have swapped it for a new one, but for a while now it hadn't bothered him. In fact, he liked feeling as if the girl were still close to him. What he didn't like was having to face grown-up things, he'd always been afraid they would find him someday. As an escape, he looked through the finished comic book panels again. Over time they'd come up with a notebook's worth of material, and he noted with satisfaction that it could hold its own against the stuff he liked to read.

He turned off the work station, pulled on his pajamas, he wanted to get to bed earlier than his parents so they wouldn't get on his case about how late it is and how early he has to get up tomorrow. Waking up early had never been a problem for him, he didn't understand why they constantly harped on about something which only they had difficulty with. He turned off the bedside lamp, no further light shone out from the room, he could be sure they wouldn't bother him until morning, not even to say goodnight.