

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

VESNA LEMAIČ
THE POOL

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Vesna Lemaic: The Pool

How can you explain yourself: you are human and right now, you must be standing by the pool, raking leaves off the surface. You're absorbed in your work, the shirt you are wearing is soaking wet, as is your tie. You are at the edge of the pool: you're holding a special pool net in your hands, which scrapes off everything, including the insects that keep falling in the water. The surface is completely smooth, but you go on skimming. Your progress is slow because you are meticulous, you go around it several times. A while ago, you would regard this as completely unnecessary, especially at this impossible hour. What is particularly surprising, for instance, is that you are not bothered by the scorching sun. Every bareheaded person with a normal body weight would suffer a sunstroke, if we consider that the sunbeams are not just blazing down upon the top of your head, but also reflect off the splashing water, glinting on your face. Then your phone rings, which you keep clipped to your belt. You hesitate, the people around you wave their hands dismissively, understandingly, it's not important, why answer it. But they have been here longer than you, they are more strongly committed to the unusual situation you have found yourself in. Despite your reluctance, you therefore turn away from the splashing water, tensing up, your entire body trying to remember what your past life meant to you, and only then do you gather the strength to reach for the phone and press the green call button. You hear your wife's voice sobbing in your ear: "Martin?! Christ, Martin, is that you?!" You hear the familiar beep – the battery will run out any moment now.

But before that, everything was different. You couldn't care less for pools; for a rich man, a pool is something that goes with the house and that's about it. Your brother has always been of a different opinion, he used to say: "Pools are more than just pools." Unfortunately, you understand your brother now, but back then, you and Dr Vlah both agreed that your brother was nothing but a harmless eccentric. You let him be, until he dropped out of architecture school in his third year. He came back all mysterious and in need of money. Dad took the middle path: he didn't ask questions, he gave him a job in his company; he appointed him to some junior, but respected enough position with a decent salary. Your brother did not attend family gatherings, but if nothing else, at least no one caused disturbances at these get-togethers. When you and dad were alone, he would wave his hand dismissively and say: "Your brother is autistic. But you, my son, you take the middle path."

Then one time during the week, you receive the following phone call: "Hi, son!"

"Dad, is something wrong?"

"No, of course not! Not at all. I'm healthy – "

"Well, I guess everything's in order then. Dad, I'm in the middle of a meeting. I'll ca – "

“Your brother hasn’t come to work for three weeks. No one dared to tell me, it was by pure coincidence that I – “

“I’ll call him, dad. I’ll set him straight, I promise. Don’t worry, take care.”

You go back into the conference room and ask a colleague if you missed anything important.

In three days, you remember your father’s phone call, slapping your forehead. Your wife knows the gesture, she asks what you forgot.

“I really need to call my brother, honey.”

“What for? Did you learn anything new about our queer architect?”

You dislike the fact that she doesn’t think very highly of him. Enough to resolve that you are not going to discuss this matter with her. You leave the room: you want to have a word with him in private. He doesn’t pick up the phone and you have an unpleasant feeling, the kind you get every time you are about to make a bad deal. You’re restless, walking up and down the room, thinking about your father; in half an hour, you try again – this time, he answers: your brother’s voice sounds unfamiliar – he’s excited, he tells you that he’s extremely happy you called. He takes you by surprise: your response is stiff and mechanical: “Where are you? What’s going on? Dad’s worried about you.”

“Brother, I have a new pool.”

You hang up: you can’t keep up with the situation at hand. Your brother hasn’t been seen at the office for three weeks because he’s got a new pool. No plausible explanation comes to mind: you have no choice; you’re going to have to go see him. You redial his phone number, he picks up and asks if everything’s ok. You don’t answer him, simply announce your visit in a somewhat cool tone. He tells you he’s moved. You write down his new address on a scrap of paper and put it in your jacket’s inner pocket. You drive through the outskirts of the city for a long time, before you stop in front of a house. You check the address again. Nothing particular can be learned from its exterior, least of all of the fate that lies in store for you. The pool is nowhere to be seen. An uneasy feeling comes over you that this is a bad deal.

Your brother appears at the door, unshaven and much thinner. He looks like a homeless person, so the first thing you ask is: “What’s the matter? Do you need money?”

“Not at all, come in.”

Once in the cool of the corridor, you regain your composure: regretting your initial haughtiness, you put your hand upon your brother’s shoulder almost spontaneously and hold him back: “Tell me, what’s going on?”

Your brother's face is inscrutable: he is hiding something and it is driving you crazy. He wrenches himself from your grip and waves you to follow. Swimming goggles dangle from his hand. Stepping into the spacious living room, you stop again. The blinds are down but there is no doubt about it: that is definitely the water sparkling outside.

"Wait," you tell him, a sudden rush of suspicion floods over you – you stop. Your entire body resists following him. "We need to talk." This time, you take a different approach. "You're in trouble, brother. Dad found out that you haven't shown up for work for three weeks. You're going to have to explain yourself to him." Your words produce no effect whatsoever: he is watching you patiently. You think of Dr Vlah, who treats female hysteria and men's diseases in your family. "Listen, maybe it would be better if you set up an appointment with Dr Vlah, I'm sure he would be able to offer you some advice."

"I talked to him earlier. Dr Vlah feels fantastic."

Your brother's face is now expressionless, you can't figure out if he's joking, you try to hold onto some definite sign close by and that's when you see the aquarium: most of the fish have bite marks, they are floating on the surface, while the surviving ones swim up and down along the side of the aquarium closest to the drawn blinds. You close your eyes for a moment, praying that the fish died only because of your brother's carelessness and not as a result of some bizarre absence of mind.

"How come you don't call me, we don't see enough of each other – " You don't know why, but at that moment, for the first time, you feel that your brother belongs to something else. You want to brush this aside now, so you go on talking in a lively manner: "We could spend some time together, play sports. I mean, because – we haven't seen each other for a long time – you have no idea of all that's happened to me since, you know – " "Brother, I have a new pool." There is a glimmer of light from behind the blinds. "A new pool?"

"Yes, it's magnificent."

"And that's all?!" You are running out of patience.

"Yes. Do you want to go see it?"

"That's all you have to say to me?!" Your voice quivers, its tone reserved and threatening. "After all this time?"

"Come."

Giving in to him is out of the question. "Look at yourself! How slovenly you are."

Your brother goes to the glass wall and pulls up the blinds, you block your eyes, the pool glistens like a cave of gold, people stand and sit around it. You're bewildered: with all these friends around him, maybe your brother isn't doing so badly after all.

“I see you have a real pool party going on outside. Looks like I’m disturbing something.”

“Won’t you join us?” he asks, astonished, as though you were the crazy one, not him.

“No. I don’t want to intrude.”

“Well, too bad. Next time, then. You’re always welcome here.”

The sudden role reversal throws you completely off balance. Before you leave, you want to re-establish the position you had when you came here: “Listen, I came to see you on a serious matter. You haven’t shown up for work in three weeks and here you are, throwing a party at your new pool. With all due respect,” you have to preserve your brother’s dignity, “but this is completely irresponsible.”

Your brother beckons you to follow. “You can join us.”

There is nothing more you can do here but accept the situation: you assume the role of the middleman. “Ok. What should I tell dad then?”

“Dad’s by the pool,” he says and leaves you alone in the room.

First, you repeat your brother’s last sentence several times. You hesitate for a moment or two, then run outside. Before you lies the pool, beautiful and frightening beyond description. There it is. You forget your father, the only thing that matters is getting as close to the pool as possible. Even though you were going straight to dad and couldn’t care less about the damn pool before you got out of the room, you head right towards its edge; if you could just stand by the water and look at it, see its bottom. But your brother stops you on the way. He takes you by the elbow. “Well, what do you think? Isn’t it splendid?!”

He gives you a tap on the shoulder and takes you to a chair next to dad.

After some time, when your father stops staring at the surface before him, you whisper to him: “I didn’t expect to find you here by the pool. What are you doing here?”

Slowly and with difficulty, he manages to turn around and gestures towards it: “I’m admiring the pool.”

His answer makes sense, but something else unnerves you: a few meters away, you see Dr Vlah talking – to himself, leaning over the water, visibly distressed.

You get up, restless. Your brother seizes you by the elbow as if to detain you. You break free from his grip, your step is relentless, you move to the edge – and look down: it all slopes downwards by some unfathomable logic, which surpasses every architectural construction you

have ever seen before. Very far off, but reminiscent of an upside-down cathedral: when you gaze into it, you lose the feeling for up – down, the bottom disappearing from sight under the murky arch. Your gaze slides along its inner walls glimmering in varying and bluish shades, lost in the reflections of the underwater atmosphere. You are finally roused by the phone, releasing you abruptly from your rapture. Only your wife's name flashes on the screen, you don't answer it. You hear Dr Vlah say. "Hysterics. God, how I hated them!" Dr Vlah, a rational man by nature, keeps leaning over the water, bearing his soul to it. The sight of your family therapist, talking about himself for the first time since you've known him, depresses you. Eventually, you feel a tap on your shoulder, your brother leads you back to dad.

"How nice to have you all here!" he adds and moves away.

You sink helplessly into your chair, time is ticking and the pool is right there in front of you. All around it, you recognize family friends, acquaintances and, of course, your brother, who walks around it several times, swimming goggles dangling from his hand. Meanwhile, a minor incident occurs: your uncle is trying to pull his wife away from the edge, as she breaks out in piercing screams, struggling to break free; seeing this, Dr Vlah makes a face and says: "Well, what did I tell you! Now do you understand?" The wind whips up the water's surface, a giant wave washes over your uncle, who steps briskly away.

"What a beautiful pool!" sighs dad dreamily. You can see three pool mattresses floating on the surface, a woman lying on each of them. They are all dipping their hands in the water. This would be a perfectly charming scene, if you noticed any signs of life in these women while you were standing by the pool. Your brother comes up to you, swimming goggles still dangling from his hand, his smile is enigmatic.

"How nice to have you all here."

"Listen, shouldn't we wake those women? They'll get sunburn."

Your brother is momentarily confused, then replies mechanically: "Don't bother. Everyone is responsible for their own actions."

Night falls. You look at your watch, its hands have stopped at two thirty p.m.

When morning comes, all of you are still there; in the midday heat, a strong wind rises, blowing over the surface, the women whirl around on their pool mattresses, a sharp smell of burnt skin tingles your nostrils. Waves carry them gently towards the two of you. Your father looks away, you wish for the wind to blow from the opposite direction or abate immediately. But that does not happen: the blond is the first one to get carried towards the edge, followed by her two friends at a certain distance. The buzzing of flies accompanies the smell of burnt human flesh. Dad shifts his position, turning to his side, away from the woman.

The blond lies stretched out on her back, dipping her hands in the water. The burns on her face, cleavage and belly are much more conspicuous than her Hawaii-patterned bikini. She has big dark sunglasses on her nose, for which you are grateful. The sight of burnt eyelids or flies crawling from underneath them would be something you wouldn't be able to handle. Dad pants with effort, which makes you cover your nose with your tie and push the mattress away from the edge with your foot, hard. Too hard, as the woman, along with her big dark sunglasses, tips over and begins to sink deep down, getting smaller and smaller, until she disappears into the darkness. The pool must be very deep, as you are unable to make out the bottom, despite the clearness of the water. Your shoe feels soggy, you take it off nervously and hurl it into the pool, which responds by swallowing it without a sound. Only the beeping of your phone is heard from behind your waist, letting you know that your battery is about to run out.

A few paces away, you see your brother and his swimming goggles dangling down his leg. He squats down to the edge and dips his hand in up to his wrist, as if he's checking the water temperature. He stays there squatting with his hand in the water: the pool temperature seems to suit him more than is normal for a human being. When he sees you watching him, he steps away. You have always felt a reasonable kind of love for your brother, but as you look at him now, standing between the people and the water, it is clear to you that he belongs to the pool. You can read from his lips that he's telling those on the other side the same thing he's telling you and dad: "How nice to have you all here!" And you realize it will eventually swallow all of you, you will be stacked up on top of each other at the bottom, if there is such a thing as a bottom down there.

Thinking about the bottom distracts you and at first, you fail to notice that the pool women have been washed up dangerously close again. The one closest to you is wearing a string of giant faux pearl beads around her neck, reflecting the blinding rays of sun. With frantic strokes, you start pushing the water away from the edge, but the women linger about, merely floating in the same place. Dr Vlah shouts to you in a feeble voice: "It's no use! You can't stop women's hysteria!" He gasps for air. "It's the only weapon they have!" You give up, Dr Vlah's words have always had a deterrent effect on you. Upon returning to your father, you see a wet stain around his crotch, he says to you: "My son."

You tell him that you're going to get him away from there but at the same time, you feel the pool looking over your shoulder. Dad leans closer to you: "I know that what I'm about to tell you goes against all reason, but I really feel something bad is going to happen to me if I move away from it. Do you know what I mean?"

You look towards the pool; it is unpredictable. The water's reflection has a certain air of fate about it: your eyes are transfixed by it. Is it possible that your brother could father something as horrible as this? When you look at his scrawny biceps, it's obvious that the only

thing his hands can hold is a pencil. Is that puny little body of his capable of such a horrendous conception?

Now you see your father's sweaty forehead and you simply snap. You feel ashamed before him, but you are unable to control your lower jaw any longer: it doesn't stop chattering. Your father finally asks you to leave him alone for a while. You stand up straight as best you can and withdraw. The people in the beach chairs show definite signs of dehydration and the pool is getting more sinister and beautiful by the minute; you wouldn't dream of leaving it: the pool becomes as intrinsic a part of you as your own unconscious.

The woman with the pearl necklace is getting dangerously close to Dr Vlah, stretched out languorously on the pool mattress, with one leg up to her knee in water: even in death, she exudes complete confidence as she swims all the way to the psychiatrist, right when he's leaning over the water, his face close to the surface, as he says: "I know I am fallible compared to you, but you have to admit – they are deadly." The woman's knee, sticking half out of the water, brushes against him and this is the last you see of Dr Vlah, as he jumps in after her, slipping off the pool mattress. Only his hand is seen as it takes the hysteric down with him into the depths of the pool. The empty mattress undulates innocently.

You lean over the edge and gaze at the surface. How can you explain yourself: in no other way than in relation to the dreadful pool. It keeps looking over your shoulder, where your hands are, what you are looking at, listening to what you say. The pool has designated you to a certain position next to itself, you are committed to it. Deserting it would be utterly irresponsible.

And now you're standing next to it: you're holding a special pool net in your hands, which scrapes off everything, including the insects that keep falling in the water. The surface is completely smooth, but you go on skimming. Your progress is slow because you are meticulous, you go around it several times. A while ago, you would regard this as completely unnecessary, especially at this impossible hour. What is particularly surprising, for instance, is that you are not bothered by the scorching sun. Every bareheaded person with a normal body weight would suffer a sunstroke, if we consider that the sunbeams are not just blazing down upon the top of your head, but also reflect off the splashing water, glinting on your face. Have you fallen into some nervous snare, because you don't understand your own actions, you only know you have to perform them? You know you have to perform them properly, otherwise something terrible will happen to you. Then your phone rings, which you keep clipped to your belt. You hesitate, the people around you wave their hands dismissively, understandingly, it's not important, why answer it. But they have been here longer than you, they are more strongly committed to the unusual situation you have found yourself in. Despite your reluctance, you therefore turn away from the splashing water, tensing up, your entire body trying to remember what your past life meant to you, and only then do you gather the

strength to reach for the phone and press the green call button. You hear your wife's voice sobbing in your ear: "Martin?! Christ, Martin, is that you?!" You hear the familiar beep again – the battery will run out any moment now. You have to decide whether or not to tell her the address of the hell you're in. Are you going to be selfish and tell her about the place, where you'll all die together from sunburns and thirst, or keep the location of the horrible pool from her, out of love for her and the children? You take the middle path: "Just don't come to 224 RichkillStreet, honey." The pool mattress carrying the female cadaver comes floating by. You dip the net into the pool and start serving it.