

Title:

Author:

Occupy Climate Change (OCC!)

*Creative story
entry*



FORMAS



Cities of Water

By Giulia Baquè

The Book of Histories

“Once there was city built on water. A city that stood against the tides and built its strength and power on its domination of the sea.

Once there a was a city vibrant with life and colors, where the aromatic scents of spices mixed with the morning aroma of fish raising from the canals.

Once there was a city that became too eager and lost its track. A city that slowly saw its inhabitants leave one after the other until there was no one left.

Once there was a city that had been betrayed by its waters and its canals. A city that had coexisted with water and its whims for centuries. The high tides came and went, but when the water started rising too much, the water became frightening. Until one day it came and didn't recede anymore.

Once there a was a city, and now it is no more”

Year 2223

The sun was shining and the temperature was hot, almost unbearable. The journey from the northern territories had been such a long one that Maaïke was wondering why she always allowed her curiosity to get the best of her. She should have thought this through more and maybe she would have realized that this trip so far from home could not have been an easy one. She was not going on holiday, what was she expecting? Nice weather and places to relax and sunbathe?

She had started her trip in the north, in those territories that were once known, a couple of centuries ago, as the Kingdom of The Netherlands. Now there were only some independent cities left, trying to survive at the edge of a Northern Sea that was warmer and coming dangerously closer with each passing year. And now, because of her damned curiosity she was traveling south, across barren and arid landscapes, where the heat was higher than she had ever experienced. For what? She should have stayed home and be content with the dusty pictures she found in the library, instead of wanting to see it with her own eyes. But now it was too late to go back. She knew she was almost there. If her group kept a steady pace, they

would have reached their destination before heat peaked at midday. Her clothes were too warm for the southern climate. She should have changed into a more practical outfit when she had the chance during their last stop. But she didn't want to linger for too long. Despite her many doubts, the only thing she could think about was reaching her destination as soon as possible. She had heard and read so many wonderful things about the long lost city of Venice that she immediately volunteered for this journey when the opportunity arose. The library where she worked was trying to salvage as many books as possible to prevent further losses. Already the world had lost so much because of the consequences of climate change that books seemed to Maaïke a good way to save the past from disappearing completely. And books could also help preventing further losses; by understanding the mistakes that were made and transmitting the knowledge of what could be done better, maybe it was possible to build some kind of future. Maaïke had hope. And that was why she was traveling south. She hoped that this research journey, could give her stories to bring back to the library; stories about what was lost; memories that could be preserved and could be accessed to move forward in a different direction. Her purpose was to record as many stories as possible about Venice and then transcribe them, so that the library could have a record of what happened to the city that drowned so many years ago and that was almost fading from memory despite its great history.

It was at the library that her fascination with Venice had started. Right when she was only an intern doing menial tasks to help the staff there. She had seen the few old books – those that survived the rising seas, the fires that raged across Europe, and the various raids that had destroyed several cities when the first governments had begun to fall – with beautiful depictions of Venice; a colourful and crowded city, full with people coming from across the world in the days of carnival. She had seen faded pictures of the once famous *calli* and *campielli*. She had heard stories handed down from the first refugees coming from the south when the seas first started rising; the high tides in Venice started to get higher and higher, until they stopped receding altogether. Now, she was almost there. Her journey was almost over. Her guide, a muscular man in his forties, halted raising a hand. The entire group came to a stop.

“We are there” the guide sighted, almost with a hint of sadness in his voice.

Maaïke was barely able to contain her excitement. Even though she was exhausted by the heat and the long walk, she sprinted to reach the guide on top of what looked like a small hill.

She had to shield her eyes with her hand, it was so bright. For a moment she could not see a single thing. Then her vision adjusted to the bright reflection of the sun on the water. And then her heart sunk. What was in front of her was not what she expected. The water extended as far as she could see.

“How can we be here? Where is the city? Is the guide wrong?” thought Maaïke dazed.

“We must be in the wrong...” she started saying but the guide started pointing at something in the water. With such a bright light it was difficult to make out shapes and objects and the water was such an intense blue that all the other colors seemed to be drowning in it.

But then she saw it. Of course they were in the right place. Some shapes were emerging from the water. It looked like a bell tower but from such a distance she could not be sure. “Let’s keep moving, we can’t stay under this sun at this hour”, said the guide.

And he signaled to the group to follow him. He started descending towards the water, there was what looked like a small camp, and in the distance, it was possible to see older buildings, maybe from a couple of centuries before, high constructions with what probably must have been windows and balconies. Now they were all completely empty and the people seemed to be living closer to the water in makeshift housings. When they entered the camp a crowd of children immediately came to meet them.

“Maaïke, the elders will see you later, after sundown, so you can ask them your questions”, informed her the guide with a polite tone. “I will be there to translate for you”, he continued with a smile.

The afternoon had been agonizing, both because of the heat to which Maaïke was not used, and because of the sense of anticipation and curiosity that had devoured her since they reached that small settlement.

The library she worked at in the northern territories owned a couple of old books about a beautiful city built on water. The pictures had fascinated Maaïke for so long that she could not stop talking about how amazing it would have been to once go and see it. So, when finally, the library could obtain some founding for research from the Council of the Free Cities, it was decided that the money would be well spent on a research trip to find more details about the lost city of Venice. Not only because of the wonders that city seemed to have had, but mostly because understanding the fate of such an ancient city could help in finding

solutions to prevent even more cities to be lost to the rising waters; Maaike of course was the first to volunteer for the trip. And now she was finally here, waiting to meet the elderly of the settlement, those who, according to Carlo, the guide, still retain some first-hand memories of the city.

“They are over a hundred years old so they are a bit deaf, please be patient with them”, Carlo told her before they entered the tent of the elders.

The light was dim inside but the air was fresh, it was a pleasant sensation after the heat of the sun. Maaike could see four figures sitting on carpets at the far end of the tent. Two women were discussing something in low voices while drinking water that was frequently poured to them by a young girl in attendance. The other two seemed fast asleep, with their heads lowered on their chest and their breath regular and calm.

“Benvenuta” said in a low voice the elderly woman sitting on the left, “my name is Daniela.”

“She welcomes you, she is Daniela, she is over a hundred and twenty years old. No one knows their exact age anymore” whispered Carlo.

“Carlo, is this the girl coming from the north?” asked suddenly one of the two elderly Maaike thought were asleep.

“Yes, she is the one who wants to hear your stories, Sofia. She traveled all the way from the north just to see you” replied Carlo.

“Sit down dear”, said a third voice, with a gentle and kind tone. “We are not that young anymore so our memories might be a bit confused, but we will try our best to answer your questions and tell you our stories.”

“Memories are the only way we have to preserve the past. And by sharing them we can somehow learn to live with the guilt of not having done enough when we could and the shame of not being able to preserve our world for the generations to come”, said the fourth voice who had been quiet until that moment. She spoke with an authoritative tone but the sadness in her voice was clear.

“What do you want to know?” asked the gentle voice.

“Everything you can tell me! I want to know how it all started!” said Maaike almost out of breath from the excitement.

“This is going to be a long story”, replied the woman.

“I will start, my grandparents were there when it all started, so I heard their stories,” said Daniela.

“It wasn’t sudden you know, there were signs for a long time, people knew that the city would disappear, that the sea would devour it but it always seemed something far away in the future. The previous generations did not understand how our actions can affect the future. They only lived in the moment, thinking only about the short span of their lives.”

“Venice was a city of colors; my grandmother always told me. It was a city full of life and beauty. In the summer evenings, you could see the lagoon and the bell tower of San Marco turn red at sundown. You could hear music and singing in improvised concerts, mixing with the chirping of birds and the cries of seagulls. Dogs barking would suddenly be heard in the quiet of the night and the voices of elderly people sitting at bars and speaking in the Venetian dialect would fill the hot summer air. It was a city full of life, but also silent and peaceful; at night you could walk in small *calli* and *campielli* hearing only your footsteps. You could breathe in the soul of Venice. Its unique way of living, at its own pace and with its own small idiosyncrasies. But to this beauty there was a dark side. Venice had existed for centuries in a very delicate and complex environment, but when this balance broke, Venice was doomed. Plans were made to develop the mainland, huge factories and shipyards were built, but in order to do so, canals were interred while new ones were dug to channel the water and dry some part of the land. Those areas however lost their soul. Birds, fish, and insects died. The water was polluted. The lagoon became silent.”

“Oh come on Dani, while all your stories have this poetic tone? I bet this young lady does not care about the ‘*soul of Venice*’” said mockingly Sofia. “She wants to hear the facts! How the generations of our great-grandparents allowed the big cruise ships to sail through the Canale della Giudecca, of how the tourists would crowd those cramped *calli* sometimes even preventing people from walking at all. I have heard that sometimes it looked like everyone was queuing around the entire city from how full the city was with tourists.”

“But didn’t the city drown because of the rising seas?” asked Maaïke confused.

“Yes it did” said the fourth elderly woman. Her voice sounded younger than the others but her tone made clear that she was probably in a position of authority.

“Her name is Rosa” whispered Carlo, “she is the head of the council.”

“But as Daniela and Sofia said, the lagoon was delicate and in danger all along. The previous generations did not think about the consequences of their actions. They wanted to build shipyards and factories at the edge of the lagoon, and they did without thinking how this would affect the rest of the ecosystem. They did everything in the name of profit. Profit was

their goal and as long as they reached that end, they thought they could solve all the problems. It was the same with the rising seas. Not only Venice, but everyone knew that people's desire for profit would bring about catastrophes, but they did not do enough to prevent any of it from happening. The worst was always to come, they pretended not to see that the end was nearing already, creeping up on people at fast speed. They were blind, they wanted to be blind and ignorant, pretending that nothing was changing. But everything was different."

"People forget too easily." Continued Rosa "one time, before Venice disappeared, there was a flood; it was not a normal high tide, one of those to which the people were used. It was an extraordinary one; the water was so high that it was called *aqua granda*, the great water. It was a tide so high and unexpected that left the city prostrated. So devastating that people kept remembering it, pieces of art were created to preserve its memory and the effects it had on the city and the people. But then again, everyone forgot. People did not worry anymore about the signs the lagoon was sending. The lagoon was suffering, and with it the rest of the world, but no one wanted to listen."

"Come", said Rosa, "Let me show you something"

The elderly lady slowly got up and walked outside the tent. Maaïke and Carlo followed her surprised. Rosa was walking quite briskly for her age and she reached the shore, where a small rowing boat was waiting. The three got on and the boy sitting at the oar began to row. Slowly, the buildings slightly emerging from the water started to get closer. The sun was almost setting and now the heat was not that unbearable anymore. It was almost pleasant, thought Maaïke, and the view reminded her so much of home. The old Kingdom of The Netherlands partly occupied territories that were under sea level, they had built a complex system of dykes, pumps and sand dunes that made up an extremely sophisticated anti-flood system. But not even such an advanced planning saved the old kingdom. The cities closer to the coast such as Den Haag had been abandoned and people moved further inland. The central government broke down but cities managed to create a system of self-governing cities that were still somehow holding on against the waters. Maaïke had seen how restless the sea could be.

Maaïke's thoughts were suddenly interrupted as Rosa spoke. "You see, Venice was a city built on water, in a similar way to the place you are coming from. But the past generations did not want to understand how much care was needed to make such a fragile environment not only

survive but thrive. Venice was never the city alone, nor the people. It was also the birds, the fish, the trees, the water and every other small part that composed the lagoon. Venice was never only human, but we forgot that. And when we forget how closely tied to nature we are, we also lose track of the importance of care, if we don't care for nature, we also don't take care of the people who live in it and with it. Centuries ago, when people started realizing how human actions were affecting the world, Venice could have represented an example of creating an environment that accepted both the human and nature, and in which people were used to accept nature's whims without fighting, without having the arrogance of wanting to change it. But this city also became an example of the shortsightedness of people. They did not care about the future, and so they lost their present. And now this is all that is left"

Rosa pointed towards what was in front of them.

"That's the belltower of San Marco right?" said Maaike pointed to a green roof protruding from the water. "I have seen its pictures at the library."

"Yes, most of the buildings you are seeing coming out of the waters are belltowers, Venice used to have a lot of them" said Rosa with a laugh. "But this is not why we came here". And the boat crossed easily across the sparse towers emerging slightly. They reached a construction that looked newer. When they arrived, Rosa gestured Maaike to get off the boat. "Carlo, you wait here with the boy", she said in an assertive tone. Then she gestured to Maaike to follow her.

They entered the building; it was white and definitely newer than the old buildings they just sailed through. They entered an elevator and starting going down. Rosa didn't say anything so Maaike just followed her silently.

When the doors of the elevator opened, they went out.

"We must be underwater now", thought Maaike.

They walked across a narrow corridor and entered a room. To Maaike's surprise books were stored there, and they looked old. Older than any book she had ever seen in her life. If she thought that the pictures they had at the library were old, these must have been many centuries older.

Rosa slowly walked to a shelf and carefully selected two books. She wrapped them with a cloth and gave them to Maaike.

Then she started to walk back where they came from. When they reached the boat, they got on without a word. Rosa murmured something to Carlo, but he didn't translate; Maaike did not understand what was happening.

Rosa seemed happy and relaxed on their sail back to the shore. She seemed to be absorbed in contemplation, looking at the sparse buildings that could be seen in the water.

When they reached the coast, Rosa suddenly spoke. "Ti auguro un buon viaggio di ritorno! Ti prego, tieni al sicuro questi libri per noi, qui probabilmente andrebbero persi, ma sono parte della nostra memoria e vanno conservati. E poi, anche i due autori sono stati grandi viaggiatori, in tempi diversi ovviamente, ma come te hanno esplorato posti lontani e misteriosi. Buona fortuna!¹", and then she disappeared back into the tent. Maaike started to follow her but Carlo stopped her. "We should get ready, tomorrow we travel back to the north" he said. "But I didn't get what I wanted" exclaimed Maaike, almost angry.

"You got something more precious, you got the memories of Venice, its stories and also the stories of those who left it to travel far away, to visit new countries, but who always longed for it. Marco Polo and Nicolò Manucci wrote the books you are carrying. They are part of the memory of this city. Save them and with them, save the stories that the council of the elderly told you. They told you of a city that was complex, beautiful but difficult, full of contradictions, but also of hope and curiosity, a city that even when lost sight of what was important kept fighting. There were always people who tried to be the conscience of this city, reminding the people in charge how delicate it was and how quickly it could be destroyed. No one listened to them, they were not the majority, but they were there and they tried with all their strength to save not only the people, but the lagoon and all its beauty. Now you can bring back not only the story of how Venice disappeared but also their stories, and stories much older than those. Memory is the only way we have to keep thinking about the future. Saving the past means building the present and imagining a future that will be different. I also have something to give you, come!"

They walked silently to a low building of red bricks. Carlo pushed the door and entered. The room was small with a low ceiling. Carlo walked to the table and took a copy of a book whose pages were yellowed and whose back was discolored by the scorching sun. "Take also this. It is my copy of *The Book of Histories*. It is a poem written by the people who witnessed

¹ "I wish you a safe journey back! Please keep these books safe for us, they would probably be lost here, but they are part of our memory and should be preserved. Besides, these two authors were also great travelers, at different times of course, but like you they explored faraway and mysterious places. Good luck!"

the rising seas and were forced to leave Venice. In here they tell their fight to make people realize that the city and the lagoon were in danger, and they tell of how they saw the water coming and not receding anymore. Take it, these are also the stories you came for.”

Maaïke looked confused. She could not accept so many important books, why were they giving them to her? They were the memories of Venice. But listening to Carlo she started to understand, the memories needed to be saved and preserved, and shared in order to make a difference. Those books represented the different souls of the city, of the lagoon, and she was entrusted to keep them safe.

“Thank you”, she said to Carlo, “I will keep them safe, and with them, the memories of Venice, of its people and the lagoon. They will never fade from memory again.”