

**T**hat autumn, and then in the winter and spring, I would pop over to the Mała river whenever I had an hour or two to myself. Mostly to wander around and take a break from people. Daniel, however, became its resident and ambassador. What had happened there made him a nature and climate activist. He talked about the Mała to anyone who'd listen. He kept inviting people there, repeating the same story. So that everyone could hear it and maybe learn something. He spoke and wrote of a river that wanted to be free and wild, but wasn't allowed to. He cleared building debris from its banks. He used a sledge to drag tires out of the water, and once he found a TV. Sometimes we'd meet at the Mała, but more often we'd miss each other. Still, we regularly sent each other photos and recordings of chance finds. A dead shrew, deer tracks. "Listen, crackling oaks at -12° C." "Look, what a nice cauliflower mushroom." Or: "You'll find a beautiful parasol mushroom at the meander where the old dam used to be, enjoy." We got a few camera traps with which we caught the nocturnal visits of foxes, herons and boars. Even more frequent in the recordings were dogs and children, who would wave and stick their tongues out at the cameras. We moved our beaver watching further south, where the Mała flows from the Soleckie Meadows. We knew that a few families lived there. One of them built a big dam right by the fence of a gated community. It fed mostly in a small bog at the feet of the dunes in Czarnów. We called this place the water farm, because it would steadily flow into the furrows of the former potato field, now covered with pines. Another family (one, or maybe more?) beavered at the village's drainage ditch. There were five or six dams there, two or three lodges, and so much water that we had to settle for conjecture and generalisations. It was hard to tell, anyway, whether that ditch wasn't really the river's main channel, because a few kilometres further on it connected back to the other branch.

We did some beaver watching, but it was streaked with grief. With the memory of what happened at the wetland in the forest. Anyway, Daniel decided to take matters into his own hands. To repair the damage done to the river, at least in part, he started pretending to be a beaver. He built a makeshift dam, and learned how difficult it is while he was at it. Although the water was now only knee-deep in that part, it flowed so fast that stabbing even just a branch into the bottom took superhuman strength. The silt that he used to try and seal the construction was immediately flushed away. But he got there in the end. After a few weeks, the Mała was partitioned by a semi-watertight dam, which slowed the current at least a little. A snowy winter, a late thaw and a rainy spring all helped. The thin trickle of water flowed down the branch of the river all the way to the pond at Grzybowa. Sometimes, to contribute to the undertaking, I would also drag in a random bough from the forest and throw it into the channel. I treated this as an act of civil disobedience. I remem-

bered the words of Wiktor Kotowski, a biologist at the University of Warsaw, who claimed that nothing rewilds a river like trees on its banks and logs in its current. He would talk of how the geomorphology in mountain rivers is shaped by stones and gravel, while in lowland ones – by woody debris and logs, also those felled by beavers. They make the river start to meander. It slows down, no longer a drainpipe but a water reservoir. By constructing imitations of beaver dams we can, in the short term, stimulate the natural processes taking place in a stream and let it catch the right rhythm for at least a moment – writes Michael M. Pollock, an American biologist working in hydrology research for one of the government agencies. According to Pollock, building such dams only makes sense, however, if – with time – their handling is taken over by beavers, much more scrupulous at managing water resources than we are.

Excerpt translated by Marta Dziurosz



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**ADAM  
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#### Selected books

*Kiczery: podróż przez Bieszczady*, 2019

*Hajstry: krajobraz bocznych dróg*, 2017

Adam Robiński is a journalist and a certified guide in the Kampinos National Park.

#### Selected awards

Literary Award of the Capital City of Warsaw (2018) – nomination

Witold Gombrowicz Literary Prize (2018) – nomination

The Magellan Award (2018)