

Vila do Cano, July 2035:

From every corner crowds flock in pilgrimage, seduced by stories of miraculous waters and talking boreholes. The more drought threatens the rest of the country, the more the popularity of Vila do Cano grows, and its unusual abundance of water. On the surface, nothing differentiates it from the desolate aridity of the rest of central and southern mainland Portugal. Here, too, drinking water is rationed, and each Cano resident takes only one bath a week. However, since the authorities have confirmed the existence of a groundwater table, and rumours spread about the properties of that water, the pilgrimages have begun.

None of this is new: the reputation of Cano spring water is centuries old. The village is located above the Estremoz-Cano Aquifer System, made of porous and permeable rocks that retain this precious water. In similar places, subterranean rivers running for several kilometres can be found, many of them pure and crystalline water. Explorers are constantly seeking a deeper flow, given that surface areas are now contaminated by decades of intensive farming, high levels of ammoniacal nitrogen and nitrates, which means they are unfit for human consumption. The Portuguese mainland has 62 aquifer systems and the Cano River has now become a last stronghold, a spark of hope in the general gloom.

The magical properties of the local waters are also legendary, with their powers of healing, cleansing, curing love ailments and offering the gift of invisibility (for this reason the crowds are not always seen on pilgrimage). The ancestral mandingas now compete with others of a more contemporary bent: it is said that the water from the Cano River attracts followers on Instagram, unblocks traffic jams, prevent air sickness; and that only two drops of it in the printer makes the ink cartridges last twice as long. It prevents the absorption of gluten and activates collagen. It's good for the skin, but even better for the pixels.

Scholars arrive from every latitude to study it: at international conventions and congresses on hydrology, hydrogeology, hydraulic engineering and even artificial

intelligence (which nowadays gets involved in everything). The caves and recesses are studied, but also the superstitions and the fairy tales. Nobody has yet come up with a good explanation for the voices that are heard coming from wells and boreholes hereabouts. We only have data coming from oral tradition; from local legends and sayings: talking waterfalls, communicative outcrops, voices rising from the subsoil, boreholes of water willing to talk, cries echoing in the void. One of the best-known tales is that of the Count of Romeiras, because from the wells on his estate furious screams would be heard that terrified the whole population: ‘Stop!’, ‘The water is mine!’, ‘What do you think you're doing?!’, ‘You dunderheads!’ (this would be a ghost with broad vocabulary). I say ghost because the most logical explanation that locals came up with for the voices was that they belonged to the Count of Romeiras himself, the owner of the estate, who at the time of the events had already passed away. The residents were terrified; the voices were guttural and would freeze the blood of the better prepared passerby. The story gained traction, but then the voice was silent for more than a century. It has now returned, in our times, with redoubled strength. Anyone who comes near hears a dizzying cry that repeats for anyone who wants to hear ‘Stop — infamy! You lunatics! You senseless louts! The water's mine. Leave it alone! It's mine!’

There are those who say — those in the know, specialists and influencers — at countless conventions and councils in which the subject is discussed, that it is the voice of the Earth itself.

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