MOX NOX

BY

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1.

Those Who Would Walk If They Existed

The mangrove forests were our greatest hope and dream. If we dreamed of anything, it was only of them—evergreen expanses of thicket on a distant seacoast, full of warmth, moisture, succulent fruit, and fragrant flowers. No one, of course, had ever seen them, those seacoasts. No one had confirmed that the mangrove forests existed at all, but we believed in them. Some of us (for example, my Auntie Marianna) hoped to make it there after death. My auntie regularly attended the meetings of the Mangrovians, whose high priest swore up and down that he had tasted the fruit of Durio trees.

"From the outside, a durian resembles the fruit of a chestnut tree," Auntie Marianna would explain when I was still very little. "Its rind is also covered in prickles, but it's impossible to confuse the two because, unlike chestnuts, durians really stink."

"What exactly do they stink like?" I would demand to know, lest I suddenly encounter one somewhere and be unable to recognize it.

My auntie would furrow her brow and, after some reflection, authoritatively declare, "Kind of like the stink of feces mixed with cherry syrup."

To no avail, I would do my best to conjure up this smell.

"In the mangrove forests," Auntie Marianna would attempt to persuade me, "there is an endless variety of fruits of the most marvelous shapes and flavors. You could live there for years on one tree and still have enough food. Mangroves blossom and produce fruit simultaneously. The inner surface of their leaves is covered with a thin layer of sea salt. Their expansive white roots protrude from the ground like the bones of some sort of gigantic creatures that the bloodthirsty trees had fed on. Yet every day, during high tide, the sea encroaches for a few hours, and the roots hide in a transparent stratum of water. Then, having eaten your fill of fruit and sucked your fill of flower nectar, you can swim and dive worry-free. Seawater is very beneficial to our coats…"

Auntie's tales so taunted and enticed me that, in the end, I would break into noisy tears because I very much wanted to end up there. My mom would bark at her sister with dissatisfaction: "Marianna, why in the world are you cluttering the child's head with all kinds of gobbledygook?"

"Mangrove forests aren't gobbledygook," she would reply, offended. "We'll find ourselves there after death! Obviously, only if we've earned it. It's only for now that we're doomed to waste away here like the last…"

She didn't finish deciding who to compare us to because we'd always been the only ones here. There wasn't a single other living creature all around, unless maybe you counted the insects, but no one ever gave them any serious consideration. That's why it was the norm to view ourselves as almighty and why the night bats, our teachers, were constantly emphasizing the fact that we had conquered the planet and become rulers of the world.

Something about this claim bugged me. How could someone be almighty if they had no one to compare powers with? Moreover, we weren't capable of absolutely everything, or at least I wasn't—that's for sure. In class I felt like the weakest and the most insignificant among my peers, and a single glance from our teacher, the night seer, Orest Aldabrskyi, made me tremble. He would often ask me things and, upon receiving an incorrect answer, would reproach me in front of the others, not mincing insults.

"Theresa," he said one day, "you hang head downward every day but can't figure out for the life of you why, when you let go, you'll crack your skull against the ground. Does anyone know why?"

I sulked in silence, wrapping myself up in my wings. My friend Lira, who in reality wasn't a friend, didn't wait her turn to speak and hollered victoriously, "Because of gravity, Mr. Aldabrskyi! Everything on earth falls or tries to fall downward. We alone, with the help of our wings, can rise upward whenever we wish. We have overcome the force of gravity. We're almighty."

"Do you hear that?" the teacher asked, nodding at Lira, and she began to beam with proud contempt. "Why does she know that, Theresa, and you don't? I explain things the same to all of you."

It took unbelievable effort on my part to not break down in snivels that very moment. Stuff like that had happened already, previously, and afterward I never knew where to hide in shame. No, almighty I definitely wasn't. I wasn't even plain old mighty. Having grasped this definitively, in the end I said, "Trees also grow upward and not downward. Therefore, they've also overcome gravity and become just as mighty as us, isn't that so?"

Everyone in class, fifty bats in total, burst into cackles but, after noticing the baffled expression of Night Seer Aldabrskyi, meekly settled down. It seemed that my question had completely stumped the teacher, and he didn't know how to respond.

"Trees can't grow downward," he just mumbled. "That is, they grow… their roots grow downward, but their branches grow upward. Yes, only due to their roots can they hold up their crowns…"

Lira gave me a quick mean look.

"Teacher Aldabrskyi, Theresa is deliberately trying to confuse you with her inane hypotheses."

At first glance, she was perfect. No one doubted that Lira would have an endless string of admirers when the time came. Her crimson little breasts instantly drew everyone's attention in the twilight. I, on the other hand, was gray headed and, on top of that, couldn't boast of such a large wingspan as hers. Lira was the very first one to be born that same year I was born, and she had learned to fly and forage for food skillfully. I, however, still couldn't maintain my balance sometimes when a cold north wind blew.

I was born last of all of us, sometime in late October, and within a week of my birth the first snow had already fallen. My mom and I flew through all the orchards in search of the final fruits. It was very cold. I was shivering all over and pressed against my mother's chest, latching on to her breast with my toothless mouth. My mom, meanwhile, flitted from tree to tree, now and then spotting a wrinkled plum or an apple shriveled by the first frosts. The last fruits lacked juice, yet they nevertheless tasted better than the reserve supplies at the plant. The vineyards were entirely empty already; only floppy yellow-and-black leaves rustled on the dry vines.

"You'll taste them when summer arrives," my mom consoled me. "Grapes are very sweet and tiny. You need to spit out the little seeds, otherwise your stomach will hurt. Right now, all we have left are either guelder roses or mountain ashes. Guelder roses are sour, and mountain ashes are bitter and tart. Bitterness and tartness—those are the flavors of the cold seasons."

On our way home, Mom picked up height, and I surveyed my homeland for the first time. It consisted of patches of black land, bare trees, and the equally black buildings of our city, almost thoroughly destroyed in places. A sheet of freshly fallen snow solemnly blanketed the blackness. My homeland was black and white, and bleak. A tall tower jutted out in the middle of the city, and on three sides of it sat cathedrals beneath rusty domes. We lived in the rafters of one of them; from there we could hear clearly the tiny bells on the crosses that adorned the domes. Other homes in the city were lower—one, two, or three stories tall. There, in horribly cramped conditions, wintered the weakest of us.

"Why do we live in brick buildings? Wouldn't it be easier to settle right in the orchards, in the trees that give us sustenance?" I would ask my mom, who, so it seemed to me, also often contemplated this.

"In the trees, we wouldn't survive the snows and frosts."

Her argument seemed convincing. I handled the cold poorly. I detested it and, just like everyone else, fantasized about the mangrove forests. But I couldn't understand where the building that we lived in had come from.

"They're a natural phenomenon," Night Seer Aldabrskyi would knavishly explain. "Our dwellings were formed by landslides."

But none of the landslides explained the crosses and little bells on the domes of our cathedral. Someone else, someone living, must have mounted them there. In addition, the structures had some sort of practical logic: certain rooms were larger, others were smaller, still others were long and narrow. The floors, for instance, were also connected by stairs, which were wholly needless for us and only got in our way. Stairs had to have been invented by those who had no wings and relied on limbs to move around on the ground. Doors were also unnecessary for us since we flew in through broken windows or holes in walls and roofs. Beds, which could still be found in the residences, for an umpteenth time convinced me of the accuracy of my own hunches. Someone must have rested on those beds and must have done so in a horizontal position and not like us—heads down, claws clutched onto wires, cornices, or tree branches.

The longer I pondered all this, the more I noticed the results of the activity of the mysterious four-limbed creatures all around me. For personal reference, I named them *vadants*, which translates from the Latin as "those who would walk if they existed." The translation may not be entirely accurate because the Night Seer Fe Dir Saussura, who taught us dead languages, often alluded to the fact that I liked to insert more meaning into unfamiliar words than they actually had. He performed his job sloppily since it was unlikely that he himself even believed that the knowledge of dead languages would someday prove useful to us. The only thing that we had mastered fully was the graffiti on the city walls left by some of our ancestors or by someone else before them. The graffiti proclaimed sad truths: *memento mori* (remember death), *vita somnium breve* (life is a short dream), *summa summarum* (the sum of totals) and *mox nox* (here comes the night). We really liked this last expression and often repeated it while languishing entire days with the adults in a state of half-sleep and anticipation of the long-awaited twilight. As soon as the sun would set, we would be allowed to finally flit out of the buildings to savor our

aerial maneuvers in the gray sky. Night for us meant cheerfulness and motion. Day meant slumber, rest, more often than not boredom, and sometimes death. My grandmas and grandpas, great-grandmas and great-grandpas—they had all died during the day, sometime between one and two o'clock in the afternoon. It is during this time that we have the least strength and faith that the sun will, in fact, set at some point.

I remember how my mom first told me about where we had come from and why we don't like sunlight.

"Our forefather, the true fox Big-Eared Vulpes, strayed into these lands from who knows where. He had no wings, a brilliant reddish coat of fur that many of us also inherited, and sharp little teeth with which he tore apart the flesh of other living creatures." At these words, my mother's face grimaced from horrid disgust. "Vulpes was cruel and killed without the slightest remorse. The fruits that the ground bestowed on him bountifully he ignored, until he suddenly found himself all alone in the big wide world because he had eaten everything living. Everything except for the insects, of course, but we're not taking them into consideration."

"But why was Vulpes so imprudent?" I asked, trembling with indignation.

"He probably didn't know that you could live differently. That's what his fathers and forefathers did. They killed in order to satiate their hunger, but the more they killed, the stronger their hunger became."

I wasn't capable of completely grasping what this meant—killing another. The adults often quarreled among themselves, at times even squabbling, for the sake of a more comfortable spot on a cornice or a riper fruit. My mom, for instance, had gotten into a big fight with my father right after my birth, so we only saw each other in passing at public gatherings. But despite

this, I had never witnessed someone killing someone else, or even shedding someone else's blood.

"So, what did Vulpes do when there was no food left?"

Auntie Marianne butted into the conversation: "He finally understood that you could eat not only what's looking at you when you kill it," she replied angrily. "Lying halfdead under a tree—croaking, more simply put—Big-Eared Vulpes used his last ounce of energy to fumble for the first fallen fruit he could find (they say it was a wild pear) and shoved it in his mouth. And that food tasted better to him than the flesh of any living creature had before. Vulpes started eating the fruit that he found beneath trees, and his physical strength began to slowly return to him."

"Not just his physical strength," Mom clarified.

"Yes, not only his physical strength, but his spiritual strength too, which he, or rather his ancestors, had lost the moment they took another life for the purpose of stuffing their own paunches."

"What's a paunch?"

"A stomach in one of the dead languages. You're going to study them when you're older, Theresa."

Every last one of us knew the legend of Big-Eared Vulpes. It really did explain a lot of things, like, for example, why we alone existed in this whole black world. Based on the books we had read, found on the shelves of our homes, we had a vague notion that other living

creatures had also existed in the past—cats, dogs, humans, elephants. But the insatiable Vulpes had devoured them all.

"And with each ensuing day," continued Auntie Marianna, "tasting the fruit of trees and the nectar of flowers, Big-Eared Vulpes sensed that his body was becoming lighter and his thoughts brighter, because spiritual growth always begins from correct nutrition. It was Vulpes who planted the first orchards and created the first vineyards. In order to be able to feast on the produce as soon as possible, he planted flowers and bushes that bloom as soon as the snows melt. Then, one time, when Vulpes got the urge to reach the highest branch of a cherry tree in an orchard, thin web skins grew between his front and hind paws, forming two wings. He flapped them and alit easily, conquering the force of earthly gravity. We commemorate that day every year because it's the day of our birth. It was then that we transformed from armed-and-legged creatures into armed-and-winged ones or, as you'll study later, into the *Pteropus giganteus*—the fruit-eating flying fox. We were murderers but became angels."

"What a lovely story!" I exclaimed with delight, but Auntie Marianna shook her head.

"It's lovely but not very. No sooner had Vulpes alit than he felt a sharp pain in his eyes and had to hide from daylight as swiftly as he could. At first, he thought that his optic nerves were damaged, and only with time did he realize that from that day forward he would forever have to hide from the sun, atoning for his great transgression against the world. For, having once been a murderer, Vulpes no longer had the right to enjoy the beauty of day. He planted flowers but couldn't see the colors of their blossoms, while certain flowers he couldn't see at all because they closed their petals for the night. We also atone for Vulpes, which is why we sleep by day and prowl around like the damned by night. Everything is reversed for us—inside out and upside

down. And we rest with our heads hung repentantly downward too, as if asking forgiveness for an original sin. Every Pteropus is born a sinner."

"Me too?"

"You too."

"But I've never eaten anyone…"

Auntie didn't respond. An oppressive silence pervaded the vault of our cathedral for some time. Two of my second cousins, who were hanging close by and had heard everything, cried softly. Their tears ran over their foreheads to the crowns of their heads and dripped down, hitting loudly against the stone floor. It isn't the most pleasant thing to be born and to find out that you'll spend your life bearing the punishment for a sin committed by someone else whom you've never even seen. The sun shone for the trees, the bushes, and the flowers, but not for the only ones who had eyes and could appreciate the beauty of a sunny day. Instead, we, in order to have a good look at something, had to make do with moonlit nights, which aren't all that plentiful in a year.

In the main square of our city towered a monument to Big-Eared Vulpes. His legend provided answers to many questions. But not to all.

"Who built these places where we live?" That's what interested me the most. Only Auntie Marianna was courageous enough to reveal the truth to me. No one in their right mind would've fallen for a fairy tale about a landslide.

"Hmm…" My auntie appeared confused. "I don't know. I thought that these buildings had always existed. You know, sweetie, I'm more interested in life after death."

"Theresa," my mom interrupted the conversation. "You're going to bring on trouble with those questions of yours!"

She peeked sadly through a hole into the darkness outside, hoping to spot the one who had no intention of returning.