

TEMPTED BY NATURE
by Todor P. Todorov

translated from the Bulgarian by Vera Asenova, Kirina Boykova and Teodora Kopcheva

I am one of the last ones. Everything has been wiped out. Only ignorance and oblivion remain. And green, so much green. Now that I've seen I know: the eyes of the Devil are green. I am one of the last lettered ones. And I don't have much time. I am a pagan because I worship the Lord. But a new era has come from the west. Whence the night comes. And where Evil feels at home. The conquerers came by sea. With black boats and smoking herbs. More fearsome than Muslims. Now in the churches, they dry herbs, grow mushrooms and breed bees. They worship the giraffe and build minarets from whence its neck casts a long shadow over men. This is the new world. This is the ends of words. Now people sprout straight from the ground like cucumbers, like weeds. So does history. Here I am, one of the last ones, a former chronicler turned gardener and prisoner, putting my life in the utmost peril to steal a goose quill and a piece of goat skin parchment to commence – may the Lord forgive me – this story.

In the beginning was the Word, but it is gone. Now we are alone, all alone. Alone amidst nature. And this is the end. I will be thirty-five tomorrow and not much is left for me. So I am writing in the dark, remembering.

In the year of our Lord fouteenhundred and something, the ocean brought black boats. Their masts were short and crooked like sicles. Bare and sharp. No sails, no flags. They had no need for wind because, oh horror of horrors, white whales, seals and other wild sea beasts were pushing them. These were no ships, but aquatic carriages. Coaches on the waves. And off of them they came – mad demons rather than reasonable creatures of God. Some of the boats were Noah's arks – gigantic wooden chests full of bloodthirsty predators and huge birds with wings casting not shadows but darkness upon the villages as they flew over. There were others, too, on three legs or four, sometimes with no legs at all, crawling, gnarling, hissing. Flying fishes, submarine sheep, whole herds of devils. They were led by their masters. As I said, these were no humans and they were coming from the so-called far end of the ocean, but the ocean doesn't end, does it? Doesn't it circle the whole world, so they must have come straight from the Gehena, swarming from some hellish maw. Or from India. But not that India beyond Africa where my friend Columbus had sailed to the fakirs, but some other undiscovered India. Westward. Oh

Columbus, Columbus, why did the winds blow you thence, Columbus! Those damned African winds! What mere chance guides the fortunes of men. Now you must share a prison cell with me, you miserable drunkard! But let me return to the discoverers, because the world may be quite old, but since they have come, everything has started over again. As if from Day One. The dirty rats, they found us. The world is very small indeed, so even if you try to hide in a mouse-hole, the Great Deceiver will still catch you. So many of them poured out that it was not a great migration, but a living flood gushing forth. Their skin was dark, red, as if singed by the sun, and their eyes were rancorous slits. A vague cruelty settled over their faces like fog. One could read the same in their eyes, moist with bitterness and bestial grief. Some of them had feathers on their heads, others had long, sharp beaks, and still others wore bull's horns. They were dressed in foliage – that is to say, dead leaves – but these were long, large, covering the whole body like a mantle. Yellow, red, brown leaves. There were also black ones. I think the trees in hell have such leaves. Others wore plumage. But most of them were stark naked. Pure savagery! How dare they present themselves to the Old World that way – naked? In contrast, our captains take even handkerchiefs and pince-nez with them when setting off on a journey. But even with their God damn pince-nez they failed to catch a glimpse of mysterious India. If we had been the ones to discover them, then who knows? What story would I be writing then? It is quite clear that story would be better, but what would it be like? But alas, there is no other story but this one. Everything else is stuff and nonsense. So we must reap what has been sown and that's that. Not much reaping remains, in any case. But let me not get ahead of myself.

So these creatures came and started planting. The streets of Madrid and Rome disappeared amidst banana plantations, tomatoes, blue bunches of grapes and melon-fields. Notre Dame was buried in thick-set greenery, ivy and white poppies, flowering amongst the shrubbery. Poppies resembling the sun. Prickle bushes and thorns crept out all over and scarlet herbs stained the earth. Cities turned to forests, echoing with owls' cries. Crows flitted and anteaters scuttled to and fro broodingly through the wind-swept leaves. And the parrots shrieked away, shitting on everything in sight. They started drying tobacco in the Cologne Cathedral. Then they rolled the leaves, lit them and inhaled the smoke, which put them into a deep stupor, making them roll their eyes and drop heavily to the ground. They would sometimes start bonfires with weeds and herbs amidst the plazas (where there were any left) and all the people would suddenly go berserk, running wild and raving outrageously for days on end. This happened in Avignon, Florence and Constantinople, where they say it is still

going on. They planted chili peppers at the University of Paris and turned the place into a greenhouse. Altogether, the universities have proved excellent pepper fields. Amsterdam, on the other hand, vanished, swallowed up by thriving melons and sunflowers. Barbarization and floralization encroached upon Europe; in short, the continent was greened up. That was what the chronicles and historical records would say in future, if they were to exist. But they will not, because the barbarians, these swarthy Indians, hate the Word. They do not use the Word to communicate – they howl like wolves and jackals, bark, bellow, snort and blow like wind. That is how they talk. They speak the language of nature, earth and air and are free of words. They have no religion, either; they have no gods, but profess a vague yet rather fierce cult towards nature – they bow down before the giraffe and worship dreams. Witless pagans! Patsies! Morons! They have greened everything, turned the world into a jungle. That was why they forbid books – animal feathers and skins are sacred. They don't even eat meat for fear of somehow hurting nature. Yet, nature eats them right up, without turning a hair. And why should she, when they brought all these crocodiles, coyotes and red wolves? Mother Nature, she's a bloodthirsty one, I'll have you know; not a mother but a wicked stepmother. The Church of Satan. But they don't know that. These savages are one with nature, not exactly identical with her, but they have indulged in her, fused with her. It is as if their arteries run under the solid ground. Deep inside where they no longer differ from the roots of the underground tunnels, seeds, hellfire, darkness and everything else down there that we don't even know about. Breathing along with the firmament, with the movements of the stars, they are spinning away obliviously. As if they were flowers. As light and mindless as seaweed. Smooth, slow, in full leaf. Naked, tempted by nature, tempted to death. That is because their art of eavesdropping on nature's groans, spilled as they are inside of her like ink in water, has taught them dark truths. And they believe that man, too, came from the ground, but like a weed, like a dandelion that grows alone to feel the breeze, the gust of wind exhaled by death. Though they vibrated with all that is living, they felt the need to go, like the trees' leaves and the grass in the fall. To go in good time, to make way.

To make way for life. Because even man can be poisonous in large doses. To this end, when they turn thirty, thirty-five, they all commit ritual suicide. This is how they cleanse nature. They go to some river, they slash their wrists, lie in the water and watch their blood blossoming above, dissolving on the surface like a lotus. The rest stand by stunned and watch, dumbstruck by the beauty of death. And what relief, what gratefulness shines in their eyes at that moment! I am not exactly sure about the age, because they do not measure it in years as

we do, but by the migrations of various, the appearance of comets and other most random events. But I know my end is near. One day there will be no one left. Only the greenery. Only it.

As I write these lines, they are leading out my cellmate, Columbus. He sailed across the seas several times, reached India, lived with the fakirs who showed him how they turn small fluff balls into light, swallow them and then shine with their empty stomachs. He learned other things there as well. He used to believe that the world was like a small sphere, so if you head westward you will end up in the East. But when he returned he said this was complete nonsense, just follies and ignorance. The world was, mind you, like a cat's back, which as we know, constantly changes shape – some time it's arched, some time it's coiled, sometimes it stretches out suddenly like a snake. You never know. Head a random direction, and it's still possible to arrive anywhere. Once one place, then another. Why bother? This truth saddened Columbus and he took to drink. He had planned a grand journey westward to supposedly reach the East, but in despair, he sold all his ships and drank them up. It makes no sense, he said, neither ships, nor expeditions. Oh Columbus, Columbus, why did you have to go to India?

As I said, I don't have much time left, tomorrow they will come for me. Nature eats everything. She is a monster, untamed. Verily I tell you (and let he who finds this think on it) there is no greater enemy than nature. But what if we had tamed her after all, if we had found weapons to milk her, to control her, to stick trunks into her earthly bosom and suck her sweet motherly milk dry... Oh how I wish that were so! What would have happened then? I wonder? That it would have been better there is no doubt, at least we wouldn't be killing ourselves. But yet I wonder, what would have been?