

MEDUSA

by Dương Mạnh Hùng

*'Mi hija,
we are naiads, who tarry at the fringe of ponds and streams.*

Unlike sisters from other genera with willow hair and fanciful robes, we belong to a drifting family line. Quietly ancestors of ours lived under the foliage of giants in dense brumous jungles. They protected their innately fragile and tender body by coating themselves with an invisible layer of sap that even la llama cannot breach. Their intricate rhizomes released toxins into the soil to patiently topple surrounding infringers, reducing their hojas to crumbs. From una familia of soft-branch hedges, our ancestors have learned to cling onto giant trees, leveraging themselves up while tightening their squeeze. Mujeres whose existence prospered through intentional leaning and strategic dependency...'

'Father, it is now day 13 on this spaceship odyssey to Earth. I have completed the training course to handle Polluted Environment, particularly how to breathe with an air tube that snakes into my nostril down my windpipe. They instructed me to protect my vines by covering the leaves with a spray of silver ion. Through graphs and data, they taught us that surface of the Earth has shifted after 200 million years, since the last vessel that carried human specimens escaped through the jaundice atmosphere. Many mountain ranges collapsed into solitary islands atop newly formed oceans that swelled up with rising sea level. Previous flora and fauna have either perished, or hastened to evolve within limited time to adapt to an increasingly hostile environment.

They said that we would reconnect with our origin - this homecoming is a splendid feat that ties our new human kind back to our roots, lest we forget. They showed us many photos, beautiful scenery of that green planet of yore, a sublime romance. Yet, father, the images only brought me back to what you said, about how you and mother came to meet.'

'...until one day, humans came and uprooted one of your ancestors, and carried her across the ocean on a sailing ship, to a frosty land, where the green of montañas and selvas was usurped by the faded silver of un cielo vasto. That ship sank into an endless slumber in a narrow strait, bearing la ira de Naturaleza. In that far-off land, she was confined in a small pot under a glass dome, where yellow light emitted constant lumbre. And before she realized, she was cast off again, onward to another destination. El año era 1953, when our matriarch disembarked and took root on this terra nueva.

Puedes escuchar mi voz?

We are naiads with raíces that traced back to a distant home, wreaths of flores rojas y amarillas donning our forehead, and a natural scent that repels los extraños. Humans barely spare us any glance, malas hierbas, crawling in dark corners or exiled to swampland. We live a life unnoticed, no amigos to call our name. A solitude of inferior blooms that will never grace the primly kept Babylonian jardines or grandiose tables of fiestas inimaginables. Y tú, corazón, you also came from these water edges, where generations of us women have gathered and nibbled on poison from Tierra Madre, our subterranean grudge and an insatiable hunger for a long lost place that only exists en la tierra imaginaria de las reminiscencias..'

'I still remember your tales, father, as you comb through the tangled mob on my head, your green lion mane, you would always tease me, about the time when Earth was on the edge of destruction, that after centuries of extraction, pillage, poisoning, and disrespect, Nature was no longer able to tolerate humans' arrogance. A disease began spreading from places to places, robbing people of their breath. One by one, in villages and cities, people started collapsing; never have we so desired to breathe. When newborns started dying from pruning lungs, scientists gambled on a risk-filled experiment to devise a novel survival strategy, through hybridizing the genetic codes of humans and plants, thus birthing a new 'humanity' that can breathe without lungs. Humans will surrender to plants each muscle, vessel, and internal organ, so as to absorb their essential chemicals, imbued with genes for resilience and photosynthesis. The scientists began recruiting participants for that mission impossible, mostly the poor with nothing left to lose. And you, father, has signed up, after your family perished overnight, panting for their last breath.

'Humans were down on their luck. Por cierto that bears no impact on your tías and me. Humans are but one node in the natural chain, a corrupted one at that. Yet, there they were still clinging onto esperanza, and in some way podía entenderlos. All beings are born with el deseo de vivir. Humans start beckoning plants for help. They mass-assessed the characteristics of thousands of us, so as to select the ones with the highest capacity for resisting diseases, and for whatever reasons, I was fished out from a myriad of hermanas en nuestra familia.

They brought me to a laboratory inundated with machines, soaked me in super growth liquid, and injected into my body a mysterious drug. I started running fiebres, my leaves expanded and my roots anudaban.

The flowers on my head wilted después unos días; blotches began breaking out all over mis ramas. Que droga tan horrible, I did not think that I could make it through waves after waves of delirio. I have cursed humans, prayed for the day they all go to El Diablo. I despised them, brutal savages who kidnapped me from my home, disregarded my life, and continued to use me como un objeto inanimado de experimentación.

Y se emitía lentamente la toxina de mis raíces, penetrando la sangre de los humanos.....'

'When you stepped into the lab, the nurse explained to you that the specimen X19714 had ended the lives of many volunteers before. Upon contact with human's flesh and bones, X19714 initially displayed a high compatibility for hybridity, allowing its roots to permeate into blood vessels with minimal difficulty. Nonetheless, the roots' toxin quickly paralyzed the muscular system, and eventually the neural system. Despite its fatality, the Board of Experimentation still wanted to persist with X19714, given its extra-orbitant survival index, even though it was precisely that ferocious survival instinct that eliminated human specimens during contact. The nurse brought you into the liquid bath where your body would be connected to mother.'

In the drunken haze of growth liquid, I vaguely registered un mano caressing my branches, fondling the shriveled flowers en mi frente. My first impression of your father, wasn't a face or a silhouette. To me, those things are nada más que trivia. In the previous forced intercoursés, I always smell miedo in the hormones oozing from the other, even more condense and pungent que el olor de desinfectante, and that putrid smell suffocated me to the point that I had to release toxin to strangle it, such horrid mezcla de sangre, heces, vómito, y abono.

Pero, por primera vez, no me detectaba ese olor putrefacto de hormona.

In fact, from this person's fingers came a clean and soft aroma; the man smelled of agua, endless fields, of your grandmother's dream place etched between entangled roots. My branches swayed and inched toward su pecho, before wrapping around him. My roots extended and dug deep into sus gemelos, swirled around su cadera, before crawling up to sus pulmones.

'You could feel the tiniest of her roots twisting around your bones and flesh, searching in each nook and cranny, as if assessing a new abode. Your lungs inflated to the point of rupture amidst panic, each cell rang an alarm to invoke your immune system, but then mother's smell suddenly wafted against your nose. Subtly leaking from her axils. Seeped into each tattered petal. The petals dyed your retinæ red and yellow, like blood drenched into homeland soil. You placed your head on mother's chest of serrated leaves, inhaling that tranquil smell, allowing your mind to slowly shifts into subterranean springs and welcome mother's roots to enter, further, even further, until she reached the core of your heart. A vagabond embracing an exile. You wrapped your arms around mother's harsh skin, peace at last under green shade, afloat in a tingly smell of essential oil nesting in your nostril and pooling at the base of your throat. And you, father, slowly submerged into sleep, where naiads pulled your hand into the abyss.'

'After that unexpected success, the scientists kept you around for continued observation. The more contact you had with mother, the further your genetic codes transformed. The mRNA's that constituted your bodies began swapping, reversing the order of genetic codes, detaching and reattaching in an unpredictable shuffle. While your bodies did not change, your internal organs started restructuring in unforeseeable ways. One day, you were sitting next to one another, after a longer than usual session. You realized that you could hold your breath for longer, your lungs now deemed unnecessary. You could emit hormones to communicate with mother, detect answers hidden in the tiny ridges crisscrossing her leaves, flaring up when excited or flirtatiously softening when she cracked a joke. You had thought, if only things could stay like this, forever. Your hand caressed mother's green hair, receiving a slight shiver running along her branches. And she, curling her roots around your hand, seemingly for eternity. An orphan like you, finally home.'

Pero, esa era nuestra última vez junto.

While the pandemic raged on, un terremoto catastrófico ripped across the Pacific Ocean, opening una sima profunda on the continental shelf.

From within Earth's core, a cloud of sickly yellow gas permeated the water and slowly poisoned todas las criaturas marinas. The ocean became sulfúrico, fatal. The gas cloud ballooned up, emerged from water, evaporated into air, before creeping into the last humans. It caused their lungs to constrict to the point of autodestrucción, dissolved their inner organs, and solidified their blood into tar. The calamitous cloud lent a lethal hand to the plague, officially ringing in La Cosecha por todo lo que queda de la humanidad.

Earth, is no longer home for humans.

The death bells had tolled, por su exodo masivo.

They had to force your father out of the laboratory, dragging him to the spaceship. I could only stand there, watching him cry and beg, por favor déjame quedar con ella.

But it was to no avail.

They needed the newly hybridized genetic materials. And I was merely X19714 - stubborn, fit for abandonment.

An inanimate 'otra', una mala hierba.

'Te voy a encontrar, Lantana.'

Whispers reverberate as darkness enshrouds the laboratory. Right, no more electricity. No queda nada aquí. I think about the lake, the field, my sisters scattering into the wind. Suddenly, a deep sense of fatigue overtook me.

Perhaps I will sleep, until the day you come.

Por favor, me vuelve, querida hija mía.

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The ship slips through the Earth's amber-hued atmosphere like a sun-dazed iceberg. I watch as the dense cloud thins into droplets streaking the glass window. The ship has entered thermosphere, then mesosphere. An asteroid flares up before vanishing. I pulls from my pocket the only photo that father has kept of his broken homeland. Father was sitting in a mostly empty room, next to an ink-blue bath. Mother was next to him; his head on her leaves, his hands placed on her red and yellow blooms. His face was content, while hers was hidden behind beige-colored bark. The ship is now in troposphere, only about 50 km away from landing. Before this voyage, father has reached out to the scientists and asked for the coordinates of the laboratory, where he last saw mother. He still talked about it, when the vines of the past would enter unannounced and wrapped tightly around his ribcage. A glossy film would cover his eyes, his heart palpated like a hummingbird, sweats breaking out on his forehead. It would take a while for him to return. *Go and find your mother*, he pleaded. *Please find her, and tell her that I have kept my promise.*

The ship lands soundlessly on an exposed riverbed, a stone throw away from the remnant of a city. Skyscrapers now warp into cylindrical jungles, with fronds and branches protruding from window holes. Bumpy roads undulate with under-current roots, giving off the vibe of an ocular illusion painting.

Silently departing from the group, I switched on my GPS and input the coordinates. The laboratory is not too far away, about 3 km westward. I bend my knees to gather force, before springing into thin air. My lethargic muscles groan after too many days dormant; I could hear chlorophyll coursing through my veins, awakening my senses. I fling effortlessly between jungle towers and feel the humidity seeping through my protection suit.

Almost there.

The GPS releases a single *beep*, announcing that I have reached my destination. One last bounce, then I land in front of a dilapidated building hugged by high metal walls. Squeezing through the slightly ajar front gates, I enter the laboratory. Switching on the chemo-detector, I do an initial scan - no dangerous toxin detected. I pass by metal-framed door fastened with bolts lining dark and slightly

flooded corridors. From unknown corners echoes the splashing sound of rodents running to escape the light from my torch. The only sound left now inside this obscure womb is my sloshing footstep. I reach a fork junction, where the corridor ahead splits into two equally dark roads.

Then, I smell it.

Of oil and fragrant leaves.

Hija mía!

The vines on my head jolt awake, scurrying forward as they emancipate themselves from under my hat. Standing up like ramrod cobras, they have detected my mother's smell, and are now practically dragging me toward it. The skin on my scalp is pulled taut; blood vessels threaten to burst beneath. The oil gland at the base of my vines begins seceding oil to respond to my mother's call.

Mi náyade, me vuelves!

I glide across the floor, as if walking above unfathomable depth. Mother's scent infuses the air. Heart palpating as if mad, I feel a tiny bud bursting on my head.

Mi corazón, me creí que nunca podría verte, que tendría que dormir aquí en esta celda para siempre, soñando contigo...

I am standing in front of a door with X19714 carved on the front. Mother's code. I try pulling the rusty door; it remains unrelenting. Conjuring all of my strength, I wrap my vines around the door handle and give one last pull. Creaking angrily, the door grits its teeth before trudging to one side, revealing an inside pregnant with darkness...

Déjame verte, abrazarte, ay mi hija perdida. Your homecoming has been a strenuous journey. Cansada estás? Lie down under my green shade, so I can sing to you, about marismas interminables y terrenos neblinosos, about mujeres que se levantan con alba en sus ojos, que hilan girando la rueda del destino, que lloran esperando la luna, que sembran sus dientes con esperanza de ver brotar arboles gigantes.

Women who sew their homeland across their chest while blood drips from their breasts.

Querida,

*lloro de alegría.
porque
me vuelves.*

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mother has died.

all that remains, is the memory of her scent,
that she left hidden in seeds
scattered across the cold floor.
black seeds, green seeds, round and round they roll.
i sit here, in the embrace of her wilted chest, tiny flowers popping
across my head.
red flowers, yellow flowers, small and small they bloom.

would she know that i have come back for her?

i wonder,
when did she decide that she would never wake up again?
did she think of me,
and father,
before drifting into that endless journey.

perhaps, i will bring her back, to my planet.
another homeland.

An unending loop.
the path of an exile
an heirloom,
a coded instinct to detach and uproot,
a map with no demarcated boundaries.

Mami,

vamos.