

Enza GARCÍA ARREAZA

Excerpt from the novel *Plegarias para un zorro*

Prayers for a Fox

For you ignore the great prestige
that air beings pose.

--José Watanabe

To Leonardo González Alcalá

I

Shadi Mansfield's parents were Catholic and made him pray every night before getting into bed.

Mom, tell me the story of my name.

You have been told about it so many times already —Mr. Mansfield complained from a corner.

I don't remember.

Then Shadi's mother agreed to tell him about it again and explained that his name meant "the song of birds" in his grandfather's language, a Lebanese farmer that crossed the sea towards where the sun dies.

One morning, when almost anything could happen, Shadi's parents had to leave the country: the silence of those sleeping is rooted in the rain, but the rain was getting used to destroying everything in its path. Then at daybreak only silence is heard, the kind of silence that leaves behind devastation. Mr. Mansfield was being sought for having told the truth in court: So the Embassy took pity on him, and because of services past sent them all to the city of Hokusai, under the pretext of an invitation to teach in the country's biggest university. Thus Shadi moved to the big island, and befriended Kitsune.

II

Kitsune was a child with a fragrance of wet leaves from the morning dew. Or was it rather the smell of freshly mowed grass? In the city of Hokusai there were fewer woods left than a hundred years ago, but she knew them all. She was dead. She fell into a well on a summer afternoon. Her parents cried for her so so so much that their lives became as foggy as a long autumn dream, and then they died as well.

Shadi was full of sorrow in that city. The houses were weird, and people in the street stopped to look at him: apparently they had never before encountered a child with big and shiny eyes like the first stars at sunset. The language he spoke best was Spanish, the language he used to read stories and to play with his friends. His mother stopped using Arabic a long time ago, when she was left an orphan; and his father only spoke English at work. Now Shadi

had to learn a new language, and that made him unhappy. Mr. Mansfield took several weeks to find an appropriate school for him, until he finally reached an agreement with an institute for foreign children, near a garden where ladies had tea in the afternoon.

In the city of Hokusai it was normal for children to walk alone from home to school and from school to the park. Shadi's mother was very worried at first: in the country they just left behind it was usual for children to suffer terrible things if adults did not accompany them. They might be kidnapped and someone would ask for a lot of money as ransom. Like that Lebanese family that lost their four children one April afternoon. But Mrs. Mansfield soon learnt that in Hokusai she could afford to be worry-free. Some wounds, when they are well aired, heal soon enough. Thus one morning during their first winter, she allowed Shadi to go to school on his own.

Shadi did not like winter at all. He never liked those stories where snow was considered a poet's redemption. Birds went into hiding earlier, and no creatures of light emerged from the pollen.

III

One afternoon on his way home from school, Shadi stopped to look at the ladies having tea in the Koan Garden. Winter did not seem to bother them; neither did it disturb the girls playing with their kittens. Occasionally a curious girl would approach him to ask where he was from, with those eyes of a sad little animal from *where the sun goes to die*. But even though Shadi was beginning to understand their language, he answered in Spanish and they would turn away with a little smile, charmed by his shy show of dislike.

Koan Garden was in fact the entryway to a little forest inside the city. It was a forest of pine trees, chestnut trees, cherry trees, birches, ash trees and maple trees. Needless to say there were also bamboo trees. When cherry blossom visits grew in number, the prefecture's residents were annoyed: thank the gods that the rest of the year beautiful peace was kept behind these walls. A guard warned Shadi not to climb the fence separating the main garden from the rest of the forest, but a little girl, hidden among the young red pines called to him insistently.

Shadi waited for the right moment and then walked towards the pine forest. The girl was wearing an old woolen coat and shoes without shoelaces.

Kon'nichi wa, o genki desu ka, Tori no nakigoe-san?

I'm fine, thank you. But I don't know what *Tori no nakigoe* means, he confessed, quite convinced the girl wouldn't understand him.

Tori no nakigoe is what we call "birdsong."

Do you speak Spanish?

No, but you believe I do.

I don't get it.

It doesn't matter.

What's your name?

Kitsune.

That means fox.

No, that means the spirit of the fox.

Your shoes are very old, and so is your coat.

That doesn't bother me.

If you want, keep my coat. Tonight will be very cold.

Why are you so worried about cold weather?

Because you are a girl.

But the cold doesn't hurt me.

Where is your mother?
 Inari let her go.
 I don't know who Inari is.
 You should know. You've been living in Hokusai for two seasons already.
 Well, I have to go. Will you come back tomorrow?
 Yes, tomorrow we will play *Kitsune-ken*.

IV

When Shadi arrived home he found his mother quite sad. Fortunately, Keiko was there to keep things in order: she had received a phone call from the faraway country to tell her that Sonia, her best friend, had died from a gun shot in the head after robbers entered her apartment in Prados del Este. *Prados del Este*, Mrs. Mansfield thought, we lived there for so many years. They held Sonia's legs apart, and counted until hundred while she screamed. Then they shot her and took her big television set.

Keiko was a very energetic woman. She had been hired to help with the house chores: one of her tasks was to teach them the new language. However, she spoke English with Shadi. Keiko had been born sixty years ago, when her mother fell in love with a British soldier. When Mrs. Mansfield broke into tears in the arms of her husband, Keiko took Shadi away to have some tea in the backyard.

Keiko-san, what is *Kitsune-ken*?
 Where did you hear that?
 A girl in the Koan Garden told me.
 It is similar to the rock-paper-scissors game but you shouldn't play it.
 Why not?
 You wouldn't believe me if I told you.
 Why do you say that?

Westerners have other beliefs. Your mother carries a medal of St. Michael the Archangel even if she has never seen him. And if she ever saw him I'm sure she would be scared to death.

But tell me, what is *Kitsune-ken*?
 What did that child look like?
 She was pretty, and told me her name was fox.

Ah, that's not good. The Kitsunes left Hokusai a long time ago. Moreover, I have never heard of a Kitsune so young.

I don't understand.

Kitsune-ken means the fist of a fox. It is played with three hand movements: the village chief defeats the hunter because of his rank, and the hunter defeats the fox because he can shoot it. But the fox defeats the village chief because it can bewitch him.

She told me...

That's not good at all. Who was the little girl with?
 Alone. She told me that Inari had let her mother go.
 That isn't good. Tell me something, did she have shoelaces in her shoes?
 No.

I see. Then she is a *yurei*: That's what we call ghosts in this country.

I don't understand, Keiko-san.

Listen to me carefully. A Kitsune is not a ghost. And it is important that you understand this, Shadi-san. Perhaps you are in danger. A Kitsune is a spirit, a *yokai*, something that was always pure, beautiful energy, if that's how you want to call it. Not like the ghosts that were blood before dying. Also, the Kitsune were not all that different from common foxes, except that sometimes they became human, particularly the women marrying mortal men. So

I'm afraid that that *zashiki-warashi* wants to bewitch you, pretending to be a servant of Lord Inari.

And who is Inari? What is a Zashiki-whatever?

Inari is the Shinto God of fertility, rice, and foxes. A *zashiki-warashi* is a ghost-child: they usually live in households and ask for a lot of attention. Girls are more common. Perhaps in Koan Garden there used to be a village where she lived.

I don't understand. In my country none of this happens.

Your country is a young country, and it is too far away.

I'm not afraid. How is a girl going to bewitch me?

She is not a girl, Shadi-san.

Well, Keiko-san, it's time for me to go to bed.

V

He had lied when he said he wasn't frightened. He had never heard anything like that before: in his country ghosts whistle in the forests or frighten unfaithful men, and there was no such a thing as a child ghost. Anyway in Caracas there was no room for stories about death that would break into your house or sit in court having counted to a hundred. But Kitsune was the only person in Hokusai that had not looked at him with that dull and rude curiosity: her apparition was welcome. In spite of his worries, he tried to sleep.

Winter whispered outside like a sick cat. At two AM, Mrs. Mansfield got into his bed with her cold hands and trembling bosom. She was crying, and Shadi pretended to sleep. He knew that she only wanted to hug him.

VI

On Wednesday, Shadi left school in a sad mood. He had his first oral presentation in Japanese and had made twenty-five mistakes. Mrs. Yoshitoshi, however, gave him one more week to prepare his speech better. Michael Firth and Jules Grant, both from England and with an almost a perfect command of the language, could not stop laughing at Shadi's failures.

He was certainly frightened when he crossed the gate of the Koan Garden. He thought that even the sky was hostile towards birds, birds that crossed such emptiness in an impossibly silent and directionless flight. The ladies from the day before were scattered between the different benches and the patches of snow glimpsed through the branches, each in touch with her own ancestors.

Shadi walked through the red pine trees. He carried a notebook with the drawings he used to practice the syllabary. He noticed that he did better reading the *kanji* characters. Time was running out, soon he would have to go back home. Then he saw the footprints. They were going beyond the red pine trees, beyond the three birch trees. The footprints were gray and small. He followed them. The smell of ashes struck him, triumphantly.

Are you a *yurei* or a *yokai*?, he asked, but nobody answered. Then he realized that he was far from the fence that separated the garden from the rest of the forest. He felt a cold hand touching his forehead.

If you let me go with you, Inari will allow me to be his servant, said Kitsune in a low voice while getting closer to his face. I will be a white fox: I will have the power to drive evil away from you; I will take care of your soul and that of your loved ones. You will always be protected. You are just a bird and do not know how to take care of rice and earthly goods. You spend too much time in the air.

I don't do anything in the air.

Yes, you do. You pretend to be asleep when your mother cries.

That's a lie.

I heard you. I can hear what you think if you want me to.

Shadi sat on a rock trying to warm his hands with his breath.

How did you die?

When Hokusai was a white town and my parents ruled over the meadows, I fell into a well chasing a fox. I broke all my bones because the well was empty. While I lay dying I could hear birds from far away, and the fox kept running.

So why do you want to be a fox? It was the fault of the fox.

Did you ever love anything in your country?

There are no foxes in my country.

Sorry to hear that.

Don't be sorry. There are no rice gods either.

You must take me to your house, *Tori no nakigoe*.

How do I do that?

Tonight you must write a letter to Inari. Ask him to let me go with you in his name. Tell him that I can be a fox. At dawn, before going to school, leave the letter in the Fumishi Inari Shrine at Ko-kit-sune-maru Street, and burn an *ofuda*. Then you can come for me.

What am I going to tell my parents?

They won't notice anything. But you will have to tell the winged man who lives in your house not to disturb me and to let me in.

What winged man are you talking about?

The man with wings behind your mother.

I don't know what you are talking about.

One step at a time, *tori no nakigoe*. Now you must go home.

VII

Shadi did not like to eat *tofu*, *daikon*, or *edame*. Neither did he liked the *daishi* soup Keiko served every night at supper. However, he had heard that foxes, from the time of the Heian, had always liked tofu. That made him smile before leaving the dinner table. News from Caracas kept Mr. and Mrs. Mansfield worried; they did not notice he left his dinner untouched.

People are saying they are planning to kill him, said Mr. Mansfield.

But if they kill him things will turn for the worse, don't you think? Nobody believes such lies anymore.

I know, but once he is dead, he won't be able to give away money anymore.

Thomas, and if that happens, would you like to go back?

What would be better for Shadi? That is my only concern.

We will have to wait for spring and hear what he has to say about it. You know how children are.

Shadi was tired. He did not know whether to write the letter in Japanese or in Spanish. For a while he went around his room restlessly, following a little spider through the translucent sliding door with an imitation Ogata Korin pattern, while he thought about the matter. He figured that since Inari was a god, he could understand anything. He turned on his lamp and went to work.

Dear Mr. Inari:

As you may know, my name is Shadiya Mansfield Tarabay. I arrived to the city of Hokusai last autumn because they were going to kill my father. These months had been very strange. I

never though that I would be here; I didn't even know what an island was. It is hard, as you can imagine. In my country islands are always warm places, and there are no foxes. If I am writing to you, it is because precisely a fox has asked me to.

Kitsune is a girl actually. She is dead, and this is hard for me to say. She fell into a well and broke all her bones. According to Keiko, my friend Kitsune is a yurei, and Keiko says that yurei do bad things. I do not know. I have no proof. I have only been here two seasons. However, I think that you can make it up to her by changing her into a yokai. I would be very happy if a girl or a fox took care of our house. My mother says that if things do not change in Caracas, they will probably come here and kill my dad. This would be awful, like if one were to fall into an empty well. Therefore I think that a Kitsune would be extremely helpful for us. I must confess that I would be very pleased if she were to still look like a girl, but if she wishes to change into a fox, I am not going to contradict her. So, please, change her into your servant. Give her nine tails and I will take care that she has enough tofu always.

I am not sure yet how to tell the winged man to let her in. Who is she referring to? Well, I think that such persons do not exist. So I suppose that it would be no trouble. And, yes, please, help me with my kana writing. I still have trouble remembering them all.

*Yours truly,
S.*

VIII

Shadi woke up in a good mood and finished his breakfast in no time.

You look happy, Shadiya -his mother told him.

Yes, I'm very happy. Today I will go to a shrine. I need to know what an *ofuda* is.

Ask Keiko, Mrs. Mansfield said. But Keiko went out very early to do some shopping.

Then I will ask dad, Shadi said, but Mr. Mansfield was still in bed. That didn't stop him from getting into his father's room.

Dad, why aren't you up yet?

I'm going, I'm going, but I'm not feeling too well. Besides, I don't have to teach today.

Can you tell me what an *ofuda* is?

It is a holy script on a piece of paper or wood. It can be the name of a *kami* or a prayer. In the house entrance there is one, a piece of wood covered with moss. Why do you want to know?

I'm just curious.

I haven't asked you yet: do you like it here?

A little. These people believe in foxes. Besides, everything is very clean, and mother lets me walk alone to school.

Does it mean that you wouldn't like to go back to Caracas?

I don't want to talk about that, dad. I have to go.

Fine. Come closer.

Shadi came closer. He thought that Mr. Mansfield was going to ask for a goodbye kiss. But instead he took an *ofuda* from his drawer and gave it to him. He told him that he received it the first time he came to Hokusai, when he was seventeen years old and his father was selling sweets.

Who gave this to you?

A girl, in the Fumishi Inari Shrine. They say it is lucky to have one. Take care of it.

Take care of yourself too.

Then go, Shadiya, and do not talk to strangers.

It was a winter morning. This wasn't his favorite place on earth. The word "empire" came to his mind from deep inside; it was also possible that such word would scatter ruins throughout the day. He assumed that skipping school wouldn't be a problem. In Caracas no teacher calls home if one misses classes for a day. He thought, in order to reassure himself, that it was not possible that everything would be so perfect here! He really wanted to visit the shrine and meet with Kitsune.

He had to see her slanting eyes and black hair for the last time before Inari changed her into a little animal.

There were three people at the shrine: the man in charge, dressed accordingly, and two westerners taking pictures of the statues. In a clumsy but charming Japanese, Shadi asked where he could leave a letter to Lord Inari. The monk, or whatever he was, thought he was joking. Shadi insisted that this was a serious matter and begged him to tell him how to go about it.

You can bury it over there, he said.

Shadi made a crack between the snow and the soil. He presumed that he had to pray, but his mind went blank. I do hope, Mr. Inari, that you don't mind if I do the sign of the cross: it is the only thing I know. I hope you can hear better than our Lord Jesus Christ, and much better than his Sacred Nails or his Apostles. Praying is done in a low voice and without any distraction, and where I come from one cannot get distracted just like that. Do you know Mr. Inari what the father of my friend Antonio went through? He was sent to prison only because he explained how a flame-thrower works. And I do not like the idea that now Antonio's father, having so much time in his hands, finds himself in need of praying. Mr. Inari, that is like falling in an empty well. I'm happy that you do not have to visit my country. Damn it, damn it, damn it! I hope that you are not offended if I say damn it!; my country is a damned country.

Shadi got out his pocket the beautiful *ofuda* his father had given him. At first he thought he would keep it, but then thought these were extraordinary circumstances. When he was approaching the fire to complete the mission Kitsune had asked for, the monk-or-whatever stopped him hastily and told him:

What are you planning to do?

I have to burn it.

If you burn an *ofuda* you could lose everything.

I don't know what you are talking about.

American idiots! You think that things here are like in those magazines. Get out of here!

But Shadi, patient and stubborn as he was, waited for the monk to get busy and went back to the altar where fire was burning. He threw the paper in and thought of Kitsune.

And suddenly the sun shone on the city of Hokusai.

IX

And that was the last time Shadi felt the sun and snow on his face. News shook the city for weeks to come: a young man had entered Koan Garden with a gun, shooting eight people: among them an eleven-year-old foreign boy who had skipped school that day.

During an unexpected thaw Mr. and Mrs. Mansfield and Keiko attended the funeral in the Catholic cemetery in Inukai Street. Needless to say, Shadi had a privileged view of everything. He held his mother's hand while she wept in so much pain in her husband's arms. He did not have any question to ask, until Kitsune showed up wearing a white kimono, hiding her feet:

I didn't have to burn the *ofuda*, did I?

It was all for your own good.

My own good?
 You would have never been happy among the living on this island.
 What now?
 We can stay in the garden and one day someone will bring a fox.
 Why don't we do something better still? We can go home. My mother and my father
 are not thinking of leaving.

X

Kitsune was taken by the idea of having a home. She had spent more than a hundred winters away from the shining of a night fire, away from the light steps of a mother doing her chores silently. They walked. If someone had seen the picture, they could have died from pain: such beauty under the skies of Hokusai on a winter morning. Trees with bare branches, like men wounded in battle; the sun, barely visible in the fog, the wind playing with the ghosts of fallen leaves. Two beings with a heart of water and fog at the mercy of the street and yet untouchable and noble, carrying the heritage of a universe unknown, but sensed at midnight when all respect the silence of darkness.

Mr. and Mrs. Mansfield went in first. In the garden she fell into her knees and covered her face with wet soil. Her husband said nothing. He was in a corner looking for the words that someone had tried to erase from a piece of wood. Keiko prayed: she was not going to lose control of herself, as she learnt early in life that words did not help. The word for fate is fate, and neither the outrageous sound nor a deceitful slowness with which some languages pronounce it will change a thing.

When Shadi and Kitsune passed the gate, the sky seemed to darken faster than usual for that time of the year. Something frightened Kitsune, like a fox is frightened by the madness of a hunter.

You wanted to protect my home. Why don't you come in?

I only wanted you to die so you can stay with me.

Don't be afraid, little fox, come.

Then Kitsune saw him, standing beside Mrs. Mansfield who was crying with her mouth full of soil. He drew his sword and attempted to fly. His wings were a revelation, a revelation older than the mystery of light: nobody before had ever seen such a creature in the Heian Empire, an invincibly heavenly being among mortals, like a song that guarded in its belly the real name of a city. And then, in a dizzy spell, his wings closed and changed the little girl into a fox, the girl that for more than a hundred years walked alone through the gardens of Hokusai.

Shadi smiled, and then bowed.

He will have to wait for the arrival of spring to show to his fire-fur Kitsune how birds sang among flowers.

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Translated from the Spanish by Carolina Iribarren