

The Nek
Natalia Garber
www.goodplanetpoem.org

101 steps. They told me that there are 101 steps on the path leading up there. Hoo-boy, that's gonna be really hard to climb, I thought. Is it necessary? They told me that it's the main sight of their country. Did I really need to see it? I had already been to the capital, there are plenty of temples. One more pagoda? What is there to see – diamonds? Inlay? Glorious sculptures or paintings? "No," said the old guide, looking like the brownish wooden figure from the temple. "You just go up 101 step and see. If you take a chance."

The low steps were a little worn away. "But not that many people go up, right?" I asked. "The people who come here are those who need to," he said. "And not that many people need to reach the top. Most people are pretty fine with living at the bottom. You have reached this far for some reason, even though the entire group has stayed back there, down the stairs, people got tired. But you wanted to go up the stairs and I've brought you here. If you wish, we can go back without seeing the temple. It's your decision. Your real wish is the only question."

"Well, I've already made it halfway, so I'll climb to the top just on principle. Would you come with me?"

"No. Everyone goes there alone."

"Have you been there?"

"Yes."

"How was it?"

"Everyone takes away something different."

"What did you take away?"

"I became a guide to the temple."

"What did you do before?"

"A farmer – rice, rice, rice."

"Work, work, work."

"Well, not less work now. I've just found my place."

"Probably you don't want to go up because you have already found your place?"

"Probably, yes."

"Then I'll go for sure. As I'm at a standstill."

"What?"

"I left my old place and didn't arrive at a new one."

"And so?"

"I'll go up and come back."

"You'll do what you wish. I'll be waiting."

"Sure."

I went up. In the end, 101 steps is not that much. Although it's damp here – tropics, lush vegetation all over, flowers – and everything smells. Plus it's high in the mountains with thin air as well. Although, it's not hard to breathe. It's more that you have to do it thoughtfully, as your metabolism differs somehow – the forces moving inside your body are strange. Every breath in and out has to be thought over as if something odd is happening inside the body – everything flows, moves and feels in some way different from life at the bottom of the stairs. I had already made it halfway when a butterfly sat on the step in front of me. It was a large tropical beauty, so languid and self-absorbed. Suddenly I wondered if she might be poisonous. The butterfly noticed my dismay, turned to me and slightly raised its wings, threatening. All of a sudden, I felt the muscles playing at the back of my neck, and, determined to lean forward, I frowned straight into its eyes. I was amazed at myself and wondered where this wolfishness had come from. The butterfly shivered, fluttered up and flew away.

I went further and heard a hiss. Hell, I didn't even have a stick! Why hadn't the guide told me there could be snakes here? I looked closely, it crept out: so beautiful, gleaming green and blue, it slid along with ease and dignity. The snake was impressive and huge, as thick as my hand. It didn't pay any attention to me, so I cast my eyes down like a servant in front of the king. Suddenly I realized that I knew this ceremony. I knew how they lived here! I just wondered,- why?

While I was reflecting, the snake crept on, lightly slapping its tail for the last time, and disappeared into the grass. I understood that it was better to go on quietly and slowly. At his pace. And I began to move, stepping gently and looking around: the vines were whispering, but there were no more living creatures anywhere.

When there were just a few steps left, I realized it was easy to breathe. My sense of smell had become sharper – I could smell not only various flowers, but also clearly defined animal traces and the scent of humans carried from down the stairs. It was like someone had opened a New World map for me with captions in an unknown language, and suddenly I began to read, recognizing the letters of this unfamiliar language. I realized that I belonged here, belonged to this world. I was just a guest downstairs. And now I plunged into the smells as if into the sea. Going up, I intentionally looked at my feet so as to see everything above at once. And then, standing on the last step, I raised my eyes.

There was nothing there. Absolutely nothing. I stood on the mountain top, seeing the hills stretched out downwards, covered with magnificent rainforest sending out signs of life. An untrodden descent laid in front of me, losing itself in the vines. Smells and sounds were coming out from it and I knew for sure how the animals, insects and birds making these sounds looked! I knew how this forest smelled in a rainy season, how it looked after a fire. I knew it for sure.

I raised a paw; black hair shone, powerful claws were slightly protracted. Yes, these were panther paws.

The guide quietly tapped with his stick below. I roared, and he paused, surprised, then breathed a sigh of relief and gave a long whistle in response. I smelled the forest, recalled the odour of my lair and went further into the heart of the forest. I returned home.