

SABAZIUS

by Kristin Dimitrova

translated from the Bulgarian by Kristin Dimitrova

(Some remarks, inconsiderable events and traits of the characters are stolen from reality, but the novel is entirely fictional. A myth, however, is true because of the bigger story it relates, and not because of the costumes the characters wear at every appearance.)

...Sabazius – the foreigner, the liberator, the blood-thirsty fiend, the drunkard, the liar, the debaucher, the ascetic, the handsome one, the mad and unacknowledged god – came late on Olympus, although he was more ancient than the ancient ones. Son of Zeus and mortal Semele, he had a hard time proving himself worthy of the pantheon of the superhumans. And he did it in an inhuman way.

His symbols are the ivy, leopard, wine, serpent, bull and the phallus. And if any of these pop up in conversations or real events, it means that Sabazius is not too far away.

Sabazius, also known as Dionysus, Bacchus or Zagreus, was a Thracian. He was a foreigner on Olympus and this was obvious for another reason as well. The Greek gods could do anything but die. Sabazius, however, knew death. That is why they called him also “Dithyrambos”, meaning “he of the double door”, “Eleutherios” – “the liberator” and “the twice-born”, because he was the only one who had managed to return from the dead.

The truth is that before him Osiris, the Egyptian, was torn to pieces by his enemy Seth and fallen captive to death. Then, after Isis put him together piece by piece, he was reborn to triumph. Many assert that in Thrace he was known as Sabazius. If this is true, it would turn out that the son of mortal Semele was older than his father Zeus. There is another Thracian who claims Osiris’s legacy as well, and perhaps that is why he rarely shares the same myth with Sabazius. For this would be the same as putting a man and his shadow together and then wondering who is who.

Sabazius - the god of happiness, pain and absurdity – is also the patron of drama, agriculture and civilization...

AN UNDOCUMENTED MEETING

I didn't expect to see him again. I thought he was dead but perhaps that suited me better. The truth is I went to him myself.

He had chosen an old house in downtown Sofia for an office. As I walked to the place and counted the numbers, I already knew which house that might be. When I was a boy, I used to pass by it regularly on my way to my music classes. An old woman with long fingernails was continually standing at the ground-floor window, keeping record of those who crossed the barrier of her gaze. Her presence was so inevitable that for me the house, the woman and the stench radiating from her window melted in a trinity of body, spirit and soul. In the hot summer days the smell of hair, unwashed for years, and wetted clothes, unchanged since the last time a caring neighbour donated her old rags, mixed with the deep odour of cellar coming from inside the rotten walls. On seeing me, she would catch me the hooks of her eyes and start jabbering about receptions with ambassadors and stuff like that. She was eager to tell everybody the stories of her wild past and croon moldy tunes. No one really stopped to listen, except maybe me. She somehow paralyzed me. The house was overgrown with ivy, and if at places the falling plaster wasn't visible, that was because the green leaves crept like a skin disease all over the walls and hung in garlands down the façade. Around the old lady's window they wound a sort of a lifelong wreath.

The violin lessons lasted until my high-school graduation, so I witnessed the slow disintegration of the old woman. Come to think of it now, I wasn't quite sure of her age. White locks of hair dangled over her tight skin and everything blended in the common grey background of filth. Her stories gradually fell into pieces which got jumbled up, forming strange new combinations, like centaurs, mermaids or fauns.

She said she went on a journey with her husband, then somehow it was her lover who left her, then she got even with her best friend for having betrayed her in a difficult moment, but she never really managed to punish her... I listened as she jumped from one layer of time to another, tried to reconstruct what really happened, and was always late for my violin lessons.

The old tunes remained in her head long after everything else there was gone. During the last months I saw her, she could only sing. That was right after the changes. People gathered in crowds, chanting slogans. They would glue posters at night and bash each other with the flagpoles in the narrow streets after the demonstrations.

One autumn evening, on my way back from my violin lesson at around seven o'clock, I heard the blunt sound of blows and a kind of stifled bellowing by the old woman's house. Two men were kicking a third one who was down on the ground. Another one of the attackers had stepped on his chest to prevent him from running away. They all panted as if they were in the gym, exercising. Strangely enough, nobody made much noise despite their energetic movements - the man they were thrashing kept his voice down too. I hid behind a tree, hypnotized by their inky silhouettes. My heart, which had never been particularly healthy, began to swallow my blood in deep gulps, but in those days I took no medication, so I couldn't do anything about it. Suddenly the ground-floor window right above the men opened and they froze. The old lady leaned over them and raised her finger as if she was about to say something very important.

"My my my Delilah" she sang in a trembling soprano.

This seemed to do it because they ran away. The roughed-up guy crawled around for some time, feeling the pavement. Finally he managed to get up. He staggered along, supporting himself against the walls of the buildings. He threw up by a tree. Although I couldn't get a clear view of him through the darkness, he looked very young to me. I had no idea what he had done to attract the anger of those men. There were no election posters or glue anywhere near him. Leaning on elbows, the old woman remained at the window.

Two days later the bloody mark left by the boy's palm was still on the discoloured plaster of the house. The stain was brown and upcurved like a fat peapod. It struck me that there was something about blood that made you notice it. It glows. Dried blood is different than any other ex-red colour, and you don't want to touch it. I stepped close and touched it.

After the fight my life went on unchanged because my mother wouldn't hear of stopping my classes. I already knew that every wish she imposed upon me with iron fist actually came from my father. I was ashamed to admit I had been frightened by something I watched from behind a tree, so I told them that two men with vague faces had attacked me with a knife. My mother shouted "When?", "Where?", "How?", while my father declared that if his word still meant something in this screwed-up country, he would arrange for his office driver to pick me up from my lessons. Ever since democracy came, he had been compelled to share his driver with some other literary giants of similar calibre who used to hang about in the cultural vanguard of the former elite, but his threat worked just as well. Scared of being driven around in my father's Mercedes like a luxurious prisoner of war, I blurted out I made it all up to get rid of the lessons. So my negotiation efforts turned back to square one.

I continued to visit Mr. Linus, who waited for me with a loaded violin in hand and the ceremonial courtesy of a maître d'. To my parents he was my road to "spirituality", to him I was the golden hen that laid the foreign currency eggs of my eminent family, and to myself I was the inconspicuous go-between for the two parties. Not that anyone at home expected me to become a musician. With the help of examples and appropriate remarks I was encouraged to find a "serious profession", to become something like a diplomat, judge, or economist. Apparently neither mom, nor dad gave me too much credit with the notes. Or maybe they just knew that art brought no reliable income any more. I never really found out what my father thought about art. Probably nothing at all. He just made it and utilized it. As for me, the things I did had already started to pull me apart in all directions. I learned a "serious profession", though not of the kind they wanted, and stuck to music in order to spite them. Music was turning into an obstacle, so I began to love it.

Sometimes it seems to me that trying to oppose my father I always did exactly what he wanted me to do. This gives me the creeps.

After the incident, however, I was afraid to walk the streets again. Not that I expected anyone to attack me – there weren't many candidates to snatch away my violin. Besides, back in those days I would have readily surrendered it. But the pavements I thought I knew down to the very last tile had revealed a different face to me. The wind was sweeping the dry leaves in heaps that nobody bothered to clear. The ivy covering the house still clung to life, but had acquired the colour of mature wine. About two weeks after the incident, while I was walking knee-deep through the heaps of dead leaves, I kicked something soft. It slipped under a parked car. Kneeling, I pulled it out. It was a wad of dollars, rolled up and bound with a rubber band. My father was the only one in our family who had dollars because he was "a writer of national significance". But he kept them in his bank account and made me kiss his ass for each pair of blue jeans.

I don't know why the house I was going to stirred all these memories of events that had happened nearly fifteen years earlier, but when I'm tense my mind refuses to concentrate on urgent problems. The man I was about to visit, as far as I knew him, had no reason to invite me. I should have focused upon this. But then, I didn't really know him.

I checked up the address again to make sure I was at the right place, because the renovated building was screaming "Look at me!" like a face after plastic surgery. A golden-orange Lotus Elise was parked aslant in front of the doorway. Its black trimmings gave it the look of a napping leopard. I didn't really expect to see the old woman with the long

fingernails, but I needed some time to find my bearings in the changed scenery. The house - gutted out, refurnished and glittering in dark ruby - expected its new life. And somewhere inside it Sabazius was expecting me.

Brass plates with company names in different alphabets were attached to the wall, one under the other. “Wheat Ear LTD”, “Trance&Vision”, “NewsHolding” and a tour operator named “Odysseus” – probably one or two offices on a floor. All I expected to see was his name on the entrance door. I had to guess which bell button to press and, to make it worse, the bells had no tags.

“Can I help you?” asked a tall blond man with an SS haircut, who opened the door before I had touched a button. He was dressed up in a brown caftan which covered him like a chocolate glaze but didn’t sweeten up his face. While his words were offering help, his body was blocking my way.

“I’m looking for Sabazius.”

“Is he expecting you?”

“He is my uncle.”

The Nazi consulted his cell phone and just moved out of the way.

An air conditioner stirred the atmosphere in the hall. A staircase with wrought iron handrails spiralled over my head. The walls were bright and white all over, like everything that had never been used. I didn’t know where I was going, so I just started to climb up. There was a couch with lion-paw legs in Louis-the-something style on the second floor. A man in a yellowish suit was lying on it, lightly snoring with his mouth open. His jacket was crumpled under his head and the upper button of his pants was undone. He seemed familiar to me, especially his goatee which at the moment was pointing up to the ceiling. A door opened on the top floor and a slim silhouette of a man, white shirt hanging out of his trousers, appeared against its rectangular background.

“What took you so long?”

His curly hair hung around his face in elastic springs. It seemed to me, though I couldn’t be sure, that the silhouette was waiting for me with a smile. I climbed the last stretch of stairs to him. He was smiling. And then I saw the thing that had always made me shudder at the sight of Sabazius. One of his eyes was dark and the other was blue.

I offered my hand, but he embraced me. Muscles contracted under his loose shirt like the coils of a boa constrictor. Sabazius adjusted my face to the light coming from the door, as if he was about to paint my portrait, and stepped back to take a better look.

“You have grown up!” His voice was thin and very quiet.

“I haven’t heard this for a long while. Besides, you are only five years older.”

As a rule, my kinship with Sabazius wasn’t mentioned much in our family, but during the last five minutes I was reminded of it in all possible ways. He started nodding and showed me into the office. I hesitated.

“There is a man lying on the couch downstairs. Is he all right?”

“Oh, this must be Silenus. He went a bit far last night. A bit too far, actually. Has he thrown up?”

“I don’t think so. Is this Silenus, the Member of Parliament?”

The answer seemed so obvious for Sabazius that he didn’t bother to give it. His office appeared to be empty, with a few exceptions. Its centre was occupied by a huge desk, supporting the weight of a few bottles of different wines and a notebook turned on. Three marble statues stood by the wall. Their faces - one of them noseless - were frozen in painful perfection. Their stone bodies looked like straining against a heavy wind and their muscles bulged out with such suppleness that I expected to find them warm to the touch. The first statue lacked hands, the second had no legs, and the third had lost everything but its torso.

Looking at them, I realized we were not alone. By the empty fireplace on the opposite wall there stood a dark-haired woman who hadn’t uttered a word so far. Her eyes were rimmed by thick black eyelashes. They reminded me of those Christmas wreaths which had silver bells hanging in the middle. She watched me fixedly, as though she was the only one of us who had the exclusive right to observe the other. Her hair fell in waves about her pale face, and a necklace with gems, as clear as crocodile tears, surrounded her neck. I reached out to touch one of the statues, but she practically materialized between me and them. I hadn’t seen such lightning speed even among museum guards.

“Persephone, take it easy, please, he’s family.”

She went behind his back and started to massage him. Sabazius relaxed in her hands like a cat. Persephone, not taking her eyes off me, remarked that he was the last person on earth to praise family bonds. I felt trapped in the middle of a domestic scene I wasn’t part of. I

looked around to find a place to sit but Sabazius had occupied the only chair in the office. I touched the anxious face of one of the statues.

“Are they real?”

“Dug up last year. They’d spent more than 2500 years under the ground. I like them very much, they calm me down. Sometimes I even get the feeling they’re trying to tell me something.

“Like what?”

“How would I know, they haven’t told me anything yet. Well, are you happy with your life?”

Sabazius seemed keen on making fast leaps between the statues and my personal life, but I wasn’t able to follow suit so soon after the unexpected renewal of our relationship. Not that I objected.

“How do you mean?”

Sabazius caught Persephone’s hands and silently bid her to stop. For an instant they exchanged glances full of trust, concern, and the loneliness of the last two survivors after a global cataclysm.

“Well, I expected you to tell me. Don’t you know what makes you happy?”

I’m sure he didn’t mean to harass me. But it felt strange to be asked by Sabazius about life. Years ago, my father drove me up to a special school with a high wire fence and an iron gate, just outside the city. I was nine then. That was where I saw Sabazius for the first time. They sent for him. He came up running in a ragged red training suit and took the greasy fillet my father gave him. I felt ashamed that my father had brought someone a piece of meat we would never eat at home. Sabazius took it and asked for cigarettes. He took them too.

“I guess I can’t complain. I am an assistant professor of philosophy. We rehearse with a band in the evenings. The Argonauts is the name, our second name in fact. The first one wasn’t much of a success.”

“What was it?”

“Road Signs.”

Sabazius laughed. I pretended not to notice.

“We play every Friday night at the Vinyl Club, two blocks away from here. Our own compositions only. A mix between house and jazz, with ethno elements. No, it’s not what you expect. Our rhythm section is very strong. We try to create pictures of music.” I was babbling. “Come and hear us.”

“Sure. Have you got an album?”

“We have two, but it’s complicated, you know. We couldn’t reach the market, so it makes little difference whether we have albums or not. So far it boils down to what we sell in the club.”

He had come to me with two glasses of red wine and was examining them in the sunlight. He muttered to himself “This is good, very good” and apologized for making the choice instead of me. We took a sip. The wine told the story of vines, rooted in red sands beyond an incandescent sea. It was at once new, and arrogant, and deep, and reckless.

“I think I can help. A friend of mine, he is the head of Hebros TV. It’s a relatively new channel, I wonder if you’ve watched it.”

I knew it quite well. Recently the whole city woke up with the channel’s name on the billboards. I objected I didn’t need any help.

“I was saying my friend Midas needs a host for a culture talk-show.”

“I’m not a journalist. I’ve never dealt with news. And music takes up all my spare time. We are preparing for a major contest.”

“Music comes into the picture too. You were the first one I thought about, just perfect for the job. Your father’s a writer, your mother’s an artist.”

“She is a translator.”

Sabazius didn’t look like he had heard me.

“You know all these things well, it’s unavoidable. Whatever you talk to people, whoever you invite to the studio, the audience will benefit. What did your wife do?”

This made me laugh.

“How do you know I’m married?”

“It’s written on your face. What does she do?”

“She’s an actress. She’s not occupied at the moment” I said, hoping she would never find out how fast I had given away her secret.

“See? She can help you with ideas too. I intend to sell CD’s. We’ll organize concerts. It’s not true that our art doesn’t sell. Better advertising and distribution, that’s what it needs. Sorry to keep you standing, we haven’t moved in properly yet. You can sit on the desk.”

His shirt, buttoned at two or three key points, waved over the white trousers. I’ve always dreamt that somebody would invite me to do such a talk-show. But somehow I imagined the offer would come after he had listened to my recordings. Sabazius obviously had plans which were to be filled with content.

“And what is the host of this talk-show supposed to do?”

“O, come on! You’ll announce what’s new on the market, interview people. Explain to the audience what’s good, what to buy.”

We drank our wine by the window, looking at the sun-heated street. The orange car hadn’t melted down yet.

“This job is not for me. My semester starts in a month. When will I rehearse, when will I play?”

“I think you just have to see Midas. He is ambitious, always on the lookout for quality people. He said he offered good money. That is, if I find the right person.”

When I heard the salary, I swallowed, but tried not to give myself away. The sum was twice what I earned by both playing and teaching. It was hard for me to live in the periphery of my father’s bank account, and prove I was worth something too. I was already standing between the need to work for a sustained income and the opportunity to play the music I loved without being able to live off it. I resembled the Colossus of Rhodes without the gilding. Nevertheless, I wasn’t anxious to rush into a new profession just when our music was on the verge of breaking through.

An unexpectedly long pause followed.

“Do you know, Sabazius, some years ago I saw three men beat the head off a boy down there in the street.” I pointed to the pavement, just a step aside from the Lotus. “On the next day there was a blood stain on the wall.”

“I know” he said.

“How do you know?”

“That boy was me.”

Sabazius pulled his card out of his shirt pocket and gave it to me. I already had one. I had received it the other day, along with the invitation to drop by his office. All that was written on it was his name, his cell phone number and this newly acquired address.

“By the way, which of all the companies here is yours?” I asked after turning the textured card several times without seeing any other text on it.

Sabazius smiled. His distracted manner of smiling had nothing to do with his concentrated gaze. I was constantly troubled by the feeling that he paid no attention to our conversation, and that he never missed a word at the same time. Perhaps this was due to the colour of his eyes, which under normal circumstances would have belonged to two different persons.

“None of them. All of them, actually. I have shares.”

The card which otherwise gave me no additional information, signified something beyond the printed text: the end of our meeting. I took the stairs down to the sleeping MP.

“Don’t give up on the talk-show, Orpheus!” Sabazius’s voice followed me down the stairs. I could imagine him bending over the banisters. I didn’t look up.

...Contrary to what we used to see in Orpheus – the lovesick musician and philosopher, of whom we all knew that one day he would get as down as the underworld – he was in no way deprived of choice in life, because he came from a noble family. His father was Apollo, god of arts, and his mother was the muse Calliope. And since Apollo was a son of Zeus, Orpheus was a nephew of Sabazius. There wasn't much talk on Olympus about this kinship though, because Orpheus and Sabazius were Thracian, which meant foreigners. But while Sabazius fought his way to the top of the holy mountain to become acknowledged as god, Orpheus, who was human, went downwards.

Probably they both descended from a common line, that of Osiris. Yet Orpheus and Sabazius were much too different; they wandered in different myths and lived in different worlds.

It's not true, however, that they never met...

EURYDICE

I heard him come home and kick his shoes off in the vestibule. He silently opened the door behind me and noiselessly – at least that's what he thought – sneaked in, the parquet moaning under his bearish body, in order to surprise me. When Orpheus tries to surprise me, I know he is hiding something. I was just finishing my second crossword puzzle for the afternoon and when his hands covered my eyes – “Guess who?” – the inside of my eyelids filled up with black and white squares.

“Let me guess, it's the President! No, no, it's a stage director of the National Theater, coming to offer me the part of Antigone.”

While he kissed my neck, still holding my eyes closed, the residual image of the crossword faded out, making way for the open kitchen window I'd been facing all afternoon, the slightly yellowing branches of the lime tree in the park outside, and still further, the violet sky hinting that the days will soon get tangibly shorter. I could see with my eyes closed. The world was becoming so clear to me that I didn't need to see it at all.

“Where have you been, Orpheus?”

“I met an uncle of mine.”

“Uncle who?”

“You don’t know him.”

“Then you should introduce us to each other. We are relatives, aren’t we?”

“Sabazius.”

“Who is Sabazius?”

“I told you, you don’t know him” he muttered and started rummaging the fridge for something fast to eat.

“Slow down, would you? Tonight we are having dinner with your parents.”

Orpheus gave me a look to see if I were joking and all shreds of absentmindedness evaporated from his face.

“I can’t make it. I’m off to a rehearsal.”

The words “I want to”, “I don’t want to”, “I like it”, “I don’t like it” have always been very important for Orpheus. Actually, I don’t know anyone else who follows them as devoutly as he does. In high school he made up his mind not to write any essays on literature, and he never did. He could afford it.

“Go wherever you like. Tonight is your mother’s birthday and someone should give her the present...”

“Holy shit!”

“...which I’ve already bought her.”

“Have you got a cigarette?” he asked and sank at the table in front of me. He struck and struck the lighter until finally, at the fourth time, he managed to inhale smoke. Orpheus doesn’t smoke because he is a smoker, but because he needs to step out of time, hoping that when he comes back by the end of the cigarette, time would have taken a new direction. He squeezed my hand reassuringly as if it was me who needed comforting. His dejected looks were completed by the hair clusters, stuck to his forehead in the shape of blondish question marks.

“Did you go to the casting today?” he changed the subject.

“First thing I did in the morning.”

“How did it go?”

“As expected. There were some forty other girls like me, but they looked less desperate. Unfortunately the female lead is only one, in contrast to the strong male characters which are several.”

“I’m sure they’ll give you the part. No one’s more beautiful than you” said my husband who did not always walk on solid ground.

“I already heard they gave it to the mayor’s daughter.”

“This is absurd.”

“What’s absurd is you didn’t let your father call the director, who is his childhood friend.”

I knew I would piss him off, and I really did. He jumped to his feet and started gesticulating, pacing to and fro about the small kitchen. “Is that what you want? Is that what you really want, to hear about yourself? ‘Apollo’s daughter-in-law was quite good on the stage’. But just bear in mind that you’ll hear it very rarely. What you’ll hear most often will be ‘Apollo’s protégé once again did it, did she?’ Only, you’ll never know who spoke the words, because whenever you turn around, conversations will end and people will smile back at you.” He said many other things too, all of them intended to ease up my life. Which, in fact, got a bit clouded after I married Orpheus because nobody wanted to have any dealings with Apollo’s daughter-in-law. If I wasn’t taking advantage of his influence, this didn’t mean I didn’t share his enemies.

“Okay, it was the mayor’s daughter who did it today and I’m sure some day before retirement my turn will come too.”

“Lower your voice, please, I don’t want them to overhear our conversation” Orpheus said, as if he hadn’t just delivered a whole speech himself.

We occupied two rooms of Apollo’s apartment, which were equipped with a small vestibule and a separate entrance. They were perhaps intended for the servants, the guards, or whatever a Chairman of the Writer’s Union, who used to recite poems on national occasions, was supposed to have. The apartment block was built some thirty years ago for writers only, so that they wouldn’t lose touch with their calling or, more likely, wouldn’t get too deeply involved with the lives of common people. Maybe the building remembered strenuous times when behind each door there was a typewriter clattering. Now it was inhabited predominantly by old men with extinguished gazes whose books were preserved in two copies at the National Library and whose children had left the country in pursuit of more realistic dreams.

After we got married, Orpheus and I turned one of the rooms into a kitchen, the other one into a bedroom, and as for the bathroom, we had to pay short calls to the writer's abode. There were two bathrooms in the apartment, but none of them was on our territory.

A knock came from the intermediary door, locked from our side, and Calliope's voice shouted from behind it: "Come over, everything's ready".

Orpheus and I started scurrying about, he bent over the sink to splash his face while I tried to get the present from the cupboard over him, then he headed towards the door but turned back to change his shirt which was dripping wet while I waited for him in the vestibule, holding the ribboned package, and when he bent to tie his huge shoes, I remembered to put some lipstick at the last minute. Finally, we stepped out into the stairs and ceremonially rang the bell of the other entrance door of the same apartment. Calliope, dressed up in a lilac kimono, answered it.

"Oh, I am so glad, so glad!" she cried out as if we could have disappeared between her knock and our ring.

Apollo was peering from behind the corner of a salad-laden table in the living room. Calliope never rushed through things and I was sure that before donning the kimono, she had been cutting, stewing, icing and roasting all day long. Smiling ponderously, Apollo flourished a frosted brandy bottle fresh from the freezer.

Orpheus bent down to hug his mother. Their pointed noses crossed, their feathery hairs mixed up. I stood there holding the present, waiting for them to separate. Calliope kissed me too, took the package, opened it and exclaimed:

"My favorite color! A violet scarf!"

"Really?" Orpheus asked.

I nudged him to keep silent. I needn't have bothered.

"How could you spend so much money, Orpheus? That's pure silk. You shouldn't have!"

Orpheus shrugged because he had no idea how much he had spent.

"Eurydice bought you the scarf."

"Nice, indeed. How did you do at the casting, Eurydice?"

We gathered around the table which, in view of the number of dishes, needed a second floor. The four empty plates showed no other guests were expected. Such were Calliope's birthdays, in contrast to Apollo's. Then people from all over the country crowded the apartment, messages of congratulation were read, bouquets were gathered in buckets because the vases would not hold them all. This attendance, according to Orpheus, was sparse,

compared to the old days when his father would book a restaurant to accommodate his guests. But what I saw every year was good enough for me. The next day would be spent in unwrapping the presents. The greeting cards were added to the archive, the better-looking pictures were hung on the walls, the charming knick-knacks were arranged in the showcases along with all the other charming knick-knacks, because everything was a dear souvenir for Apollo. Their huge apartment looked like a street stall brimming with Eiffel towers, porcelain cats, decorative swords and snow globes which got stormy after shaking. Those blizzards would hit New York, the Sydney Opera House, the Egyptian pyramids and many other places which hardly ever saw snow, but had heard Apollo read his poems instead. In my childhood I too have recited Apollo's poems at school festivals in my native town of T., but there was no way to bring him a snow globe with a view from there. What could possibly be inside the glass – the Town Hall or the garrison headquarters?

“I did okay.”

“What was the casting for?” Apollo asked, filling the glasses with brandy. Benevolence and suspicion blended under his bushy eyebrows.

“Antigone.”

“Good, very good you've tried the theatre,” Calliope congratulated me.

“What do you mean? I'm constantly trying to get a role at one theatre or another, but I am not on the staff anywhere. Let's talk about something else. How old are you getting today?”

Calliope got a disconcerted look and Apollo took advantage of the pause.

“Why didn't you tell me to pull a few strings, the director is an old friend of mine!”

Orpheus jumped like a loaded gun whose soft trigger had been pulled.

“Don't you ever meddle in Eurydice's life, you and your innumerable friends! The times when you embarrassed me with your signed poetry books at school parent meetings are over. The teachers couldn't remember my name and listed me in their notepads as 'Apollo's son'. This is all your generation knows: 'I'll call so-and-so because he is a friend of mine.' You made art meaningless. Because of you, personal achievement doesn't mean shit in this country. You are like a plague, even worse.”

“Some more potato salad, Eurydice?” Calliope asked.

“Personal achievement!” Apollo repeated, aping Orpheus's angry high tone. “So what did you, kids, achieve?”

“Who do you mean when you say 'you, kids'?”

“Orpheus, we are at a birthday party” I intervened.

“Who are these ‘you, kids’? Tell me, please, who are they?” Orpheus hollered. “Because I look around and I can’t see any other people. In music everyone answers for themselves. The same is true for poetry, if you haven’t noticed yet.”

“I’ve won twelve international awards in my life. So let’s not talk about me.”

“Sure you did, posing at international forums as the one and only representative of your country! Why shouldn’t they award you? Next time, the same people will come here and you’ll award them. How many medals were struck, how many pigs were eaten at your... literary festivals. Nobody mentioned about the readers, though.”

This happened every time when Orpheus and his father sat facing each other at a table, but tonight it went too fast.

“Fine, so you don’t pose as representatives of your country. And what art did you make? You are playing in some joint no one except your close friends knows it. And you teach philosophy to a bunch of... future losers, who will be looking for jobs at schools and offices in a couple of years. Now, Eurydice got more famous than you with this TV ad, I give her that. ‘Oh, Tina, how does your hubby like to do it?’” Apollo altered his voice and fake female sounds poured out of his massive head. “‘With Monastery Grape Brandy.’ People kept asking me: ‘Do your daughter-in-law and Orpheus really do it with Monastery Grape Brandy?’ You are comedians!”

I threw the napkin and stood up to go. To the other part of their apartment. The question was whether I would manage to leave before I started sniveling. I didn’t. Orpheus was blocking my way to the door. Clutching the table’s edge with both hands, he was leaning towards his father, and I could move neither him, nor his chair. The tears came falling from my eyes by themselves. One of them dropped on Orpheus and ran down the stretched back of his shirt like a river that would get nowhere.

“This time you carried it too far. This time you absolutely crossed all boundaries” my husband yelled.

“Orpheus, apologize to your father, immediately!” Calliope managed to take part.

“He should be the one to apologize! Thanks to Eurydice’s ad we managed through the winter.”

“In my house! Where I pay for the central heating. I should have left you to heat yourselves with Monastery Grape Brandy.”

“Orpheus, let me pass!”

Let me pass. Let me pass. Let me pass. Hey, Eurydice, take it easy, I’m just teasing the cheeky brat. Eurydice, what’s wrong now? Thank you, Orpheus, thank you so much for this

lovely present. How could you! See what you did now, are you proud of yourselves? Are you proud of yourself? Are you proud of yourselves?

I heard Orpheus come into the bedroom but I didn't want to see him. I had wrapped myself, head and all, in the bed sheet, holding it tightly from the inside. Orpheus bent over me and started stroking my head, kissing me from time to time through the sheet. I must have looked like a mummy.

"Eurydice, dear, please don't get upset. Please."

"Now I can't even take a shower."

"When they go to bed, we'll both take one."

"They'll be clearing the table for at least two hours!"

I couldn't see anything through the sheet but I knew it was an indigo night outside, and the trees were black. Their colors had flocked around the street lamps where one could still see a touch of green, a trace of yellow in the leaves. The day's heat was still lingering. I could hear the wind churning the dry air, tossing something very light in the distance. A plastic bag. I did not need my eyes to see, because I wasn't here anyway.

"Eurydice, no use to stay under this sheet, please... I have a way out for us."

"What way out?"

"I'll take the job Sabazius offered me today. We can move out of here tomorrow."

I had no idea that Orpheus had received a job offer today.

"I didn't tell you anything because I was about to refuse it."

"All the same, you could have told me. I went to a casting to get turned down, while you got invited to take a job. Didn't this strike you as important?"

I sat up. Seeing through the sheet was no longer good enough. Orpheus looked distressed. He smelled of valerian sedatives.

"If I take the offer, when will I practice with the band? The semester starts in a month and I'll have to run between three jobs. I'm already torn apart; I don't know what to do first. What should I quit? What if I am no good for my new job?" he said and lied down next to me with his clothes on. He slid his hand around my waist and made an attempt to pull me back into lying position. This was far too much.

"Orpheus, what did they offer you?"

And then he told me everything. About the talk-show and the money. I pushed his hand away, rolled into a ball and just went on crying. He drew close behind me and folded his body around mine. His breath penetrated my hair and formed a round warm spot on the back of my head.

I remembered one evening in my ninth grade year, when I walked back from school and I saw Orpheus in the dark. He stood leaning against the brick wall corner I passed by every day. His long leg was propped up like a big number 4 on the wall, his face turned in the direction I was coming from. In those days I lived at my cousin's place. She had moved to the big city as a stewardess. I paid her for a furnished room and we spent the rent together at cinemas and cafes. I must have been very happy, but I didn't know it at the time. I hardly waited to finish school to get free from my last shackles of dependence – the excellent marks and the modest allowance coming by postal orders from home. The air was bubbling with opportunities which nearly choked me. They hovered around like the ghosts of unborn people, and whichever I reached for would start putting on flesh. Life, I guess, is full of opportunities only when you haven't chosen any yet. Orpheus was waiting for me.

He was in eleventh grade, which meant one of "the grown-ups" who wouldn't bother to notice us at school, and when they did, it was with condescension. Moreover, he was six feet three inches tall even then and could scare everyone at this time of the day. But not me. I could recognize Orpheus by his shoulder blade in a t-shirt, intertwined with other guys' shoulders in a basketball skirmish; by his arm in the orchestra; by his cheekbone or hazel eye among other people's faces. He took me by the hand and picked up my bag to carry it. We walked like that for some time on a mosaic of light, which the rare street lamps shed from among the baring tree branches. Our shoe noses ploughed through the fallen leaves, making each step sound like dry breathing.

Barking came from the end of the street and a pack of scraggy mongrels ran by us pursuing some issue of their own. Orpheus embraced me, as I thought then, to protect me from the dogs. He smelled of clean clothes and the day's sweat. He asked me whether I would like to take a trip with him. Just for a few days. We would tell our parents we were on a school excursion. These were the first words we exchanged. Actually, we didn't exchange anything – he did the talking. I just nodded.

"Orpheus, what happened to us? Where did we get stranded?"

His body had stiffened behind my back and was trembling lightly. I heard him sniff. My hair was wet from his tears.

...When she saw that Zeus had developed a fancy for mortal Semele and was expecting a baby from her, Hera decided to take the matters in her own hands. Disguised as a well-intentioned wet-nurse, she won the friendship of the young woman who confided to her that her lover was the king of all gods. Hera pretended to doubt this. She urged Semele to demand a proof and ask her man to appear in his full glory. Semele followed her advice, insisting on Zeus to show her who he really was.

Mortals, however, cannot stand to see gods in their true form. Semele couldn't either.

CALLIOPE

“Who is Sabazius, dad?”

That is Eurydice all over, from the first day she married Orpheus. ‘Dad’ this, ‘mother’ that. That is how they have brought her up in that two-story shack with tomatoes in the garden and a wooden outhouse by the hen-coop. The ugly little house she came from, to divide our home into two. “Dad” smiles, notices a long black hair-lock falling over her eye and brushes it away. The little nymph lowers her gaze like a grateful daughter. It feels like I am witnessing an ancient incest scene. Perhaps I should leave instead of disturbing them with my presence. But they are in my kitchen, so I’d rather they leave. I am cooking moussaka.

Our relations have improved. Now that Orpheus and Eurydice are moving out to live someplace else, we are on speaking terms again. Apollo grunts, I can see he is not in the mood to discuss shady relatives, but nowadays every audience is too precious for him to ignore it.

“Sabazius is my half-brother who shouldn’t have been born.”

Eurydice is watching him with the most inquisitive look a person can achieve at a kitchen table. Her eyes are crystal blue like bottomless lakes or like prom dress sequins, depends on the point of view.

“He is a son of my father Zeus. He came along late, when Zeus had stopped hoping the future still holds something good for him. Gods grow old too.”

I haven’t seen Apollo so enthusiastic for quite a long time. Euridyce swallows his improvisations on “the truth about society as I know it from the inside” with the thrill of a person who has quoted his articles at school and received excellent marks for it. How can you resist such a listener? Unfortunately I, who corrected his commas and finished his more complex sentences for him, have long ago become immune to his creative authority. Apollo for me now is a bag of loose skin with a frightened heart.

“May I smoke a cigarette?”

While my husband is smiling benevolently, I decide that it’s time for me to intervene.

“No, Eurydice. If you don’t mind, I’m cooking.”

The kitchen is the last piece of territory I can call my own among all these rooms. The first one has been turned into a museum, the second into an archive, the third into a library, the fourth is Apollo’s study, and the fifth is where we are supposed to sleep together. I sleep in the first one. My kitchen is clean and sunny; I keep jars of jams and spices in the cupboards. I don’t feel punished for spending my days here. There are large and small kingdoms. My kingdom has a balcony and in the afternoon the sun comes in.

“Why don’t you move to the drawing room, Apollo?”

They turn to me simultaneously. They’ve been waiting for “the woman” to finish the dusting, they say. “The woman” is among the last signs of prosperity in our sinking household. Meanwhile, they are drinking coffee in tea mugs. They have left one for me on the bar counter. A perfectly correct gesture of formal integration. If they hadn’t left me a coffee, I would have been offended. Now I just push it aside.

“How come I don’t know about Sabazius? Why didn’t anyone ever mention him?”

“Because I told you, he was a mistake. No one except Zeus wanted him. He was a menace to order from the very day he was born. Those who were smarter knew he would do more mischief and tried to block his rise to power. But the boy is a horrible enemy. There were people who attempted to kill him. Some even claimed they did. We can’t feel safe any more.”

Apollo took a breath deep enough for a long story.

“Semele, the mother of Sabazius, was a nurse. She had the reddest hair I’ve ever seen. This didn’t make her necessarily beautiful. Redheads are strange. They don’t have a colour more, but a colour less. It was as if some dark shade, needed to stabilize her colors with its bass undertones, was missing. Her face and hands were milk white, and as for her eyes, I don’t remember, they must have been a mixture of all her colors if we add the freckles.

Her beauty came from her invariably red lips, from her slim body that moved with swiftness and dexterity. She laughed easily. She got shocked easily. She was filled with indignation easily. The feelings hit her like a wave and Semele gaped, pouted, waved her long hands, exclaimed in disbelief or fanned herself to get more air. Her hair, which sooner or later broke loose from all hairpins, stuck out in curly locks. Sometimes, when I went to see my father, I could hear Semele singing to herself in the next room, walking back and forth, putting things in order. She was constantly putting something in order.

Zeus got himself a nurse after a visit to the doctor, who advised him to watch over his blood pressure. Maybe he just wanted to tell him to take his medicine regularly, but for Zeus

this was reason enough to entrust his body to the care of a professional. He was a natural in two things: giving orders and distributing tasks. Everything else cost him a lot of effort.

Strange as it seems, Sabazius's mother was chosen by a contest – practice exam and written theory. Moreover, Zeus's security services checked her past, relatives, everything. Finally they gave her military rank. The general's nurse had to be always ready for action, with a syringe in one hand and pills in the other.

At first Zeus was very excited about having a medical person at his disposal. He insisted on treating all his private visitors with a blood pressure check or relaxing exercises. He tricked me into an injection for improving my brain irrigation. Before I could say a word, Semele stuck the needle into my arm and smiled to me as she pressed the alcohol swab on the red puncture. I imagined the thin tunnel the needle had cut under my skin to lay its liquid. A tiny but very deep wound. That was Semele all over, she smiled. Zeus boasted he had ordered himself a series of injections for stimulating the immune system.

I have no idea what system he stimulated, but very soon he went head over hills with the nurse. This was obvious for all of us, Hera and Semele included. As for Zeus, he insisted he was going through a second youth; that owing to the proper medical care he felt reborn, and so on and so forth. He could no longer take a walk in the mountains without Semele, although before she came he never took walks. His bodyguards waited for him with the *Chaika* at the foot of the path.

Hera might have gone spongy and heavy, but by no means stupid. I have seen her roll her big eyes of a has-been beauty behind Semele's back, but half close them in front of her, as if all day a terrible headache had been swinging her between loss of consciousness and insomnia. Calling Zeus to account would have been pointless. Getting Semele out of the way – even less possible. The girl was a ranking officer in service to the general. Exactly because of her rank, I never found out what she really felt about Zeus. But had she hated him, I would have known.

Meanwhile, Zeus needed more and more medical assistance. He attended receptions with his nurse, he took her to business trips. She looked the same everywhere. She stood somewhat aside, holding tightly her hands together. She kept silent and when anybody spoke to her, she answered with a grateful smile. Zeus was crazy about her. When her pregnancy started to show, he bought her a house and supervised the repair works personally.

“Girl, why don't you go on a maternity leave to get some rest,” Hera asked her one morning over her ginseng tea. “In your condition you can't take care of Zeus anyway. You think you know him, but you have no idea about what he really does. Well, you don't need to.

Don't be so soft on him. He can find you a replacement until the baby is born, and then you can come back to work. I'll call you myself. I know the old bloodsucker. He wants to show everybody he is the big man in charge but at home he needs somebody to wipe his snout. I'm no more in the mood to do that. Pour me a shot of Johnny Walker in the tea, dear." Hera was good at looking well-intentioned because her lies came straight out of her mouth, with no detour through the brain whatsoever. And when Zeus packed his suitcase for a trip, Semele blocked his way to the door, imploring him to take her with him. She could handle it. Didn't give a damn where he was going. Zeus wasn't sure it was a good idea but I guess he finally pinched her on the freckled cheek and agreed.

It was November. We had gathered, men only, up in the chalet, in the close circle we liked to meet. Poseidon, Hades, Hermes and Ares had already arrived. Being the intellectual that I am, I had a reserved seat in these gatherings. I wouldn't say I agreed about everything with my friends, of course. But my opinions were heeded. I remember hoping to try my new shotgun but I wasn't sure the chance would present itself. Usually Ares would be the first to start shooting, even before the animal had come close enough. We kept warning him to wait for Zeus to begin, but there was no guarantee he would hold his horses. Zeus was a poor shot and that was no secret. Hermes, on the other hand, never missed, but we all knew that his hits, calculated in Zeus's good spirits, would cost us dearly later, so we tried to push him aside as far as we could. I personally don't even like the taste of venison. But I always took part in the shooting and very often had luck. When you are inside the inner circle, you have to live by its rules. Because the inner circle is drawn by its rules only.

We were sitting in front of the fireplace in the chalet lounge. The fire was not yet burning properly, so it smoked a bit. Hermes, his skinny legs stretched out on a stool, was telling tales about his business trips abroad. The heat lingered around the fire but the corners of the room still smelled of cold air and pines.

Somebody killed the engine of a powerful car outside. Car doors banged. The steps of several people approached. Zeus entered the room and gave an exaggerated army salute to the company. Loud voices were raised in answer, everyone felt obliged to greet him. Then Semele's embarrassed face appeared from behind him. Her tight fur coat, reaching down to her knees, must have been buttoned with effort under her breasts. Her ginger locks were sticking out here and there outside her hat. It wasn't the custom to bring wives and sweethearts to these gatherings but Zeus set the customs. It turned out he was not bringing Semele only. A grey-haired man in a city overcoat followed them in. Zeus, who used the services of a VIP hospital, had snatched him from there and put him in charge of Semele's

condition. It was the first time I saw a doctor, mobilized to look after a nurse, whose job was to take care of the big man's health.

On the next day we took up a position in the valley and started waiting. The thin snow had turned into an ice crust overnight and crunched under our steps. Our feet sank into holes, full of brown dead leaves. The beaters took their places away from our sight. All we had to do was wait with our guns loaded, so we took out a bottle of brandy. It started traveling from mouth to mouth and didn't touch only Semele's red lips. She was sitting on a fallen tree trunk nearby, cuddling up in a thick scarf. She was wearing bright gloves with different-colored fingers. Zeus was in his second childhood, no doubt about that.

Shots came from the wood. After the first noise everything happens very fast. We raised our guns. A doe dashed out of the bushes and leapt over the tree trunk at the end of which Semele was sitting. I saw the animal was not running alone, but that was about it. Somebody fired a gun near me. It must have been Hades because at one moment the doe was running at breakneck speed, and at the next she somersaulted, dead. The fawn that was following her got confused. Lost sense of direction. He was about six months old. Still hadn't left his mother, though the white spots on his back were already gone. Zeus, who wanted his trophy, took aim. Semele jumped, pushing his gun away. Still Zeus managed a shot. I don't know if otherwise he would have taken the fawn down, but now he hit its leg. It detached itself from the body, hanging on some thin thread only. Blood splashed on the snow and the red blots steamed. When an animal loses a limb, it doesn't understand what has happened at first. It tries to walk with its missing leg. The fawn took a step and staggered over its nonexistent support. This time Hermes fired and finished it off. For Semele, however, it was too late.

Sabazius was prematurely born, with something like horns over his forehead. They say Zeus took care of Semele who went completely insane. It's possible. He managed to save Sabazius though, and I have no doubts about that.

Silence followed. Eurydice lit up a cigarette.

"Eurydice, if you don't mind, I trust we agreed upon smoking."

Eurydice put out her cigarette in the tea saucer. The long butt broke in the middle, brown curly things springing out of the cut. It acquired the sad air of everything, made as it should be, but having no luck to fulfill its purpose.

"Dad, this is no reason to hate Sabazius, right?"

"Of course not."

Eurydice went out to check on how far Orpheus had got with the packing of his books. Their luggage was almost ready for moving. Apollo hung around for a moment, scooped up some minced meat with his two fingers and licked them.

“Just a bite!” he interrupted my protest and hurriedly left the kitchen in case I had something more to say.

Left by myself, I felt relief. I listened to all the bullshit Apollo threw out about Sabazius and I knew I should have spoken then or forever remained silent, as they say at weddings. I have no other achievements in life except Orpheus, about ten good translations and this kitchen with a balcony. I am aware this small room had carried me, like a raft, through storms I didn't want to get into, and over depths, I didn't want to dig into. There were surely other ways of living, but I believed that if I held on strong enough to my raft, I would survive. Somewhere along the journey I lost the habit of interrupting Apollo when I disagreed.

Truth is, Semele didn't lose her brains right away and completely. Hera took measures that the girl's condition – whatever it was – should be kept under control someplace at a safe distance, preferably out of town. Sabazius had been given for adoption when I went to see Semele.

I traveled about half an hour to the sanatorium. Its windows were barred as if they were overlooking a basketball field, and at first glance the whole building looked like a school. The doorkeeper told me to wait until he informed the doctor in charge. The reception room floor was tiled with marble chips set into cement. In those days this was called “Roman mosaic”. I sat down in the sagging armchair by the window. A row of metal signs on the wall in front of me read: “No smoking”, “Surgery room”, equipped with an arrow pointing upstairs, and “Visiting hours”. A slogan explained when and how we would reach the bright future.

Semele was brought in. Her hands and legs dangled out of her dressing-gown. Her hair had lost its color. We were given permission to take a walk in the yard. We sat on a bench near a broken drinking water fountain. Somebody had driven a peg in its spout, thus solving a plumbing issue. People say birds don't sing in former battlefields because of all the deaths that occurred there. I can make a personal contribution to the topic. Birds never cease to sing in the yards of mental institutions. They are so loud they practically obstruct any conversation. It must be something to do with freedom of speech, but I haven't figured out the connection yet. On the inside of Semele's arms, between the wrists and the elbows, two large violet spots had formed. This usually happens when they cannot find your vein, and they

cannot find it because you are wriggling and trying to get lose. Semele's overall appearance showed that the needle had reached hers. I gave her the chocolate biscuits I had brought for her.

“At school we sat in alphabetical order, so he was sitting at the desk in front of me,” Semele said after a short silence. “Then one day he disappeared and I thought he had gone to live somewhere else. At least, his parents said so. But they kept themselves to themselves, and I heard nothing more of him. Then there was this large dinner table by the barbed wire fence, set up in the open air for Zeus. It was a bit chilly for eating outside, but sunny nevertheless. Men in uniforms buzzed around us. Zeus was laughing loudly, kept repeating that only work could reform the loafers. I already regretted ever going with him on this working visit. Prisoners were lined up on the opposite side of the fence. They looked like stubbly skeletons. All were covered with festering wounds but the most disgusting thing about them was their smell. Urine, vomit. What an idea, to serve dinner there... Suddenly one of the skeletons raised his hand towards me and almost stepped forward, looked like he was trying to tell me something. He had no teeth. I recognized him a moment before a guard battered him down with a truncheon. It was my classmate, the one who had disappeared. Such a smart boy, he spoke three languages...”

This was one of the last occasions I talked with Semele. She might have made up the whole story herself. After all, they treated her for schizophrenia there. Apollo, however, is a master of mythology. And the Olympus he has always described, although bespeckled with misfortunate accidents, was on the whole a place where wise decisions were made. The immortals tell more lies than anyone else, because they don't give a damn about the others.

“There you are!”

My son's large hand slapped me on the back. I was out on the balcony, holding a bunch of dry geranium leaves which, apparently, I must have cleared off from the pots. Orpheus leaned on the railing beside me.

“The truck is coming tomorrow, isn't it?”

“You can always come to visit us” he said.

“Sure. That's why you are moving out.”

Orpheus sighed. His father and I screwed him up. We taught him to value things we didn't understand, and to defend causes we never cared about. And while we were lying to ourselves, he believed us.

“Will you be all right?”

“You are incorrigible” he said and pushed my head down in the geraniums. We both laughed. But I laughed with a sinking heart.

Sometimes I wonder whether there is anything more to life than the struggle to survive. According to Apollo’s songs, there is. But that’s what they paid him for.

...Myths are reenacted every time when a new beginning is at hand. The roles are distributed once again; the drama is about repeat itself. Still, during each transfer of information, there is danger of errors. Two characters might blend into one. The new relationships among the gods are subjected to changes. Myths, which used to be separate, unexpectedly appear together and start fighting for territory. Events near the story's end turn up in the middle. Some say that Orpheus, after his vain attempt to bring Eurydice back to his life, was torn to pieces by Sabazius's followers, the Maenads. Yet it is possible that he tore himself apart, trying not to lose Eurydice. These slight alterations do not mean that the myth has become unrecognizable. Or that it has turned into another one. It is here, and has already entrapped its heroes.

There are some other, lesser problems as well. Has anyone heard of a hero wearing socks?

The question is irrelevant.

ORPHEUS

“Sorry, Pegasus, but only a sick mind can come up with this” said Bellerophon, who had given up following us with his bass guitar. I heard his rumble disappear a few bars ago, but I went on with my violin.

Pegasus finished a roll of thunder on the drums, leaned between the cymbals and asked:

“What?”

His long sleeves T-shirt hung on his skinny shoulders as if on a wire hanger. The illiterate copy of a Chinese dragon he wore on a leather string around his neck had twisted backwards, giving the impression of a garrote. I was constantly worried that while Pegasus was whirling his sticks it might get caught somewhere. There was just one thing tidy about him and it was his long thin hair. It hung from both sides of his head, neatly parted into a perfectly straight line. I was convinced that Pegasus was the only person in the world who knew no vanity, until I saw him fixing his hair in the bathroom mirror. So that was it. You could always trust Pegasus to keep a straight line of his own, no matter how it made him look. Actually, he looked kinky.

Bellerophon thought better of repeating his remark and just flourished his bass neck at Pegasus, as if he would punish him. I was expected to give my opinion too.

“Pegasus, you are writing them more and more complicated. I sound like a kicked-out whore swearing in front of the client's door, trying to get her money.”

Pegasus beamed.

“Exactly what I meant! Can you believe it? Spot on!”

I slapped him on his drooping shoulders. How he managed to swing the sticks with these bones, it was a mystery. I tried to formulate my comments as precisely as I could and I heard myself saying:

“There is something in this piece, I guess. Let’s get to the end of it first.”

Bellerophon leaned his guitar against the wall and sat on a cardboard box. It was full of books nobody cared to unpack. We rehearsed at a neighborhood community centre turned into a refuge for all arts on a local scope. There were bookshelves on our right and ballet mirrors on our left. The space in between was generally used by musicians like us and an amateur theatre troupe. Sometimes we found small pieces of props behind the bookshelves – a bowler hat, a lady’s elbow-long glove. Once we discovered a bundle of plastic revolutionary swords in the corner. Bellerophon and Pegasus started a duel. Before I could separate them Bellerophon hit Pegasus arm rendering it useless for a week. This community centre hall floated through time like a Noah’s Ark of arts, leaking water from everywhere.

We all sat on the donation of stale memoir books, which the librarian could not brace herself to arrange on the shelves. The boxes stayed open, so once I rummaged through their contents. The works inside were mostly of the type my father received as keepsake presents by the authors themselves.

Pegasus’s grandmother had arranged for us to use the hall. She played the accordion at the pre-school language classes in the same building.

Bellerophon struck the pose of ‘The Thinker’ and started pulling his upper lip with two fingers. He did this when he wasn’t sure who the power balance was in favor of. People who didn’t know Bellerophon well took him for a modest guy. “Look how quiet he is, how nicely he smiles.” Bellerophon was quiet all right but, when alone, he worked out with weights. His body obsession had paved his abdomen with thick slabs leading up to the breasts of a porn star. Women liked him, and on this issue they shared Bellerophon’s view – he liked himself too. He earned his living by shooting weddings. Once I told him that while shooting the guests, he could play to them some music as well. Bellerophon was indignant; he said that his name meant something after all, so he wasn’t doing any vulgar shit. His reaction took me a bit by surprise. Bellerophon was the only one among us who couldn’t read notes when we started the group. Gradually he learned to spell out the scores, but couldn’t shake off the suspicion that whenever Pegasus and I put down a piece of music, we exchanged coded messages.

In fact, Bellerophon was a much more interesting person when his name was not involved. Before we met, he had earned good money for five years as a singer traveling around Western Europe. He toured the pubs with a six-men choir, doing the bass part in a repertoire of Eastern Orthodox chants. They presented themselves as traveling Russian monks. All choir members were equipped with silver crosses and the black cassocks of some imaginary monastery in the Urals. Bellerophon still kept his outfit. Once they ran across a Russian lady emigrant, who was eager to talk to them about their common motherland after the performance. The men tried to leave her with the impression that apart from the singing they kept a strict vow of silence. And, more or less, they dashed towards the bus. No one's Russian could have lasted for more than a brief exchange of greetings. Once I asked Bellerophon why they needed all this Russian window dressing since they sang Bulgarian, meaning even older, Orthodox chants. He had an answer for everything. "They expect *rachenitsa* dance in *tsarvouli* from us, and mysticism from the Russians. I didn't go abroad to wrestle public opinion in the pubs, but to earn some cash. The chants were authentic." We knew each other from Pegasus's place where, at some period, one could meet anyone and everyone.

Bellerophon was not the type to let go easily.

"So what substances induced the composition of the new piece?"

"Oh, leave me alone. I'm clean. I go to bed after the Goodnight-kids cartoon. It's a new person standing in front of you," Pegasus said, crawling on all fours, rummaging the lower shelves of a bookcase.

"Of course. You just wanted to see whether a human hand could play this," I teased him.

"I have no doubts about your hand" he said. I saw Bellerophon's face flinch.

Pegasus took out a bottle of vodka from behind the books and gave it a tender look.

"Welcome back, baby!"

I was not as free as usual anymore.

"Pegasus, please, leave the bottle. Bellerophon, let's try it again. I know how to fix it here and there. Let's get going because I must run back to the TV center. I have to do montage."

"Just listen to our dignitary here!" said Bellerophon. "We TV guys haven't got much time, have we? It doesn't matter that there's a big competition coming up."

Pegasus's eyes were turning from me to him and back again. His arms hung loosely by his sides and the right one seemed to be drooping a little lower because it was holding the drumsticks. Bellerophon was the least of my concerns, so he couldn't get me angry.

"Now, listen carefully. First, I don't feel so happy at Hebros, because the old dog that I am, I have to learn new TV tricks and wreck my brains for interview questions. And now, find a pencil and write this down: we will get ready for the competition. Whatever it takes. I live for music."

Pegasus laughed.

"Or for Eurydice."

"And for Eurydice, too. Let's try the new one again."

They exchanged glances and lifted themselves from the boxes. We played until the hall started to fill with pupils in national costumes. I had got carried away and was late for the montage. I took a taxi.

The physical body of Hebros TV was situated a little off from the city center, in one of those so-called developing districts, which became more expensive by the day because of the rapid construction work, but no building could hide the fact that it had been raised there because of the cheap prices. The TV center was an unassuming two-story structure whose whitewashed façade was adorned with the national tricolor, the EU flag and the swamp-green textile version of the company logo, waving on a pole. A muddy street led up to the main entrance.

Inside, however, some distinctive accents showed that one had not entered an average office, but a well-regulated, lucrative world. There were mineral water dispensers in the corners and a coffee machine on the second floor. Although the architectural design of the place had obviously not swallowed millions, it was functional. The corridors swarmed with artificially blond news presenters in executive jackets. Bearded camera men lounged about, administration staff people carried files, make-up artists drank coffee out of plastic cups and smoked in a passageway by the toilets.

A door would open from time to time and one of those celebrities, which could be seen only at formal receptions, rallies and TV shows, would walk out. I knew those titans of power from my father's official meetings; in the old days they were more awkward and now they were more arrogant. Since regular people never really met them, they perceived them in a non-material, electronic kind of way. Those special persons came here to slip in behind the

TV screen. After leaving the studio, they walked the earth as far as the entrance, where they got into their office cars.

I enjoyed watching them. One turned out to be shorter than I imagined him, another smelled of expensive perfume and sweat simultaneously. Their powdered faces tarnished their competent looks. During the short moments I watched them they were worried, trying to figure out whether they had blurted out something all other media tomorrow would want to know more about. But this showed only when we walked past each other. A deputy minister looked so familiar that before I thought twice I greeted her. Since I wasn't somebody she knew, she didn't even nod in reply. Apparently she had never come to the Vinyl Club, or to the jazz festival we played last year, whatever.

I named my show Talking Heads. This is the cheapest type of TV spectacle. You need no special props or applauding extras. I had decided to keep it honest. Meanwhile I could do my best to give my scant audience real quality. I had promised myself to present the best writers, directors, or musicians around, no matter whether they were my competition or not, by dragging them out of the tight spots their more pushy colleagues had cornered them in. It was time for my dumb and constantly screwed-up generation to speak up. I could help there. For if people had no ear for the new sound, what would the quality of any work matter to them? Such thoughts helped me to see myself in a brighter light while running towards the montage room.

Callirrhoe was working on her own material when I walked in. Small squares of today's parliamentary control were arranged on the screen.

"Hello. I'm a bit late," I articulated the obvious, hoping it would sound like an excuse.

Callirrhoe just rolled her eyes, looking on the edge of patience. She was a brisk woman in her late forties. The years were burning away her subdermal fat, and two pointed cheekbones, a straight nose and a divided upturned chin were already sticking out from under her thinning facial skin. Callirrhoe looked like an hourglass, one half of which was filling up with experience, while the other, with her time left on screen, was running out. By the time that I met her, the experience part had already got the upper hand. I didn't know my colleagues too well because we worked at different hours but I managed to ask a few people about her. She had no family and although she had changed four TV networks everybody said she was married to her work. Callirrhoe stayed late on the job without any special need for it, wandered about the corridors like a vestal of a deserted temple, rummaged through information agencies to find some piece of news no one had noticed yet, smoking with the doorman by his box. This was how she undertook my professional education. Callirrhoe

taught me another thing as well: that some journalists worked in the field of politics, others in the field of culture, and there was a caste distinction between them. There was a caste distinction between Callirrhoe and me.

I took a place next to her.

“I saw your last three shows. Get a decent haircut. This drooping fringe makes you look like something chewed and spat out.”

“I thought you’d say ‘like a creative type’.”

“And, please, stop repeating ‘you know, you know’ as if you are looking for the TV viewers’ approval. Try to be more convincing, they’ll approve you okay. Not that I expect millions to follow you, though...”

When one is learning, one should be constantly aware of it. Otherwise one could get the urge to grab the half-finished bottle of bourbon, hidden behind the monitor, and smash the instructor’s head. It didn’t take me long to notice that people, working for Hebros TV, just like so many others, drank a lot. Yet they drank neither like my university colleagues, out of despondency, nor like my fellow musicians, for inspiration, but in their own journalistic way, against stress. The booze usually met their level of the food chain. Golden liquids with English language labels enjoyed priority status.

“Callirrhoe, why do you hate me?”

“Who, me? Why should I hate you?”

We worked for an hour on my next show, which was dismantled in tiny bits and put together with the reportage pieces in the most professional, although relentless, manner. Callirrhoe’s real answer came later, when I was about to leave. A second before I went out, I heard through the narrowing slit of the door my colleague grumble under her breath:

“Fucking protégés.”

The sound-insulated door closed, so I could just hope there wasn’t more to it. Obviously my father’s ghost, overcoming the gaps of time and the irregularities of the destitute neighborhood, had managed to chase me down even here, but I, unlike Hamlet, had no chance to do anything about it.

I walked home. I was eager to see Eurydice, but I needed to air my head. The pavements were glistening from the recent rain. The shortening day was making me feel like I was walking through an infinitely nocturnal city, where the illuminated shop windows signaled like lighthouses the last outposts of life.

The streets looked changed by my new job, though. After I got my first substantial advance, I felt the urge to buy whatever crossed my path. I would catch myself entering restaurants with the sole aim of making the waiters dance around me. I would come home with a large salmon fillet, although neither Eurydice nor I liked fish. It was as if now that we could afford its rosy flesh we would inevitably grow to like it. I started to look upon beggars as loafers. I used to feel compassion for them before, out of fear that I could easily find myself in their shoes. I imagined the following picture: my father bequeaths our family home for use as a museum, my mother dies of sorrow, Eurydice disappointedly leaves me, and I stand, in fingerless gloves at some windy corner, drawing mournful sounds out of the violin; my university pension covers my electricity, water and heating bills, and the odd sixty watt light bulb to replace the burnt out one.

After a few larger salaries the beggars began to induce different thoughts in me. “Why don’t they do some work? I run up and down all day, tear myself between jobs and responsibilities, learn to do things I find tiresome, rush through rehearsals, swallow humiliations, fall asleep at night during the crime and mystery film and in the morning I don’t really want to get up, because the first thing I must do is to check my schedule. Music, philosophy, rhetoric, once they coexisted in a harmonious whole, while today I can’t even pull myself together. Money doesn’t grow on trees, does it?” I guess I had started to envy beggars. I detested myself for these thoughts and forbade myself from having them.

Then I would go and buy another salmon fillet.

At the intersection by the canal I hesitated before crossing, decided the road was clear and made a few steps on the asphalt. Suddenly three black cars appeared out of the adjoining street and raced past me with the whisper of the perfect engines. The first one skirted me with an abrupt manoeuvre and the other two followed suit, as if strung on the same thread.

I saw Sabazius in the car, sitting by the driver.

For about a quarter of a second we passed by each other. First the headlights blinded me, next came the paralysis of the imminent hit. Then, through the side window, my gaze got locked into his. Sabazius’s face was self-absorbed as usual. I couldn’t be sure whether he recognized me or not. In any case, no muscle twitched. Finally I was left with the impression that his dark eye had noticed me, while his blue one hadn’t. It seemed to see inside a world I couldn’t stand the sight of. The three cars slipped out through the far end of the boulevard like balls of mercury from a broken thermometer. Black mercury.

My new home with Eurydice was a two-room place on top of a fifteen-story block of flats. We moved in with some of our old things, bought what we lacked, and as long as we kept busy with painters and porters, we were very happy. We started living above a street whose name contained the word 'road', but which was in fact an international motorway. The transport advantages were obvious. All buses connecting the east outskirts with the city center passed under our windows, with the addition of some trolleys which twisted and turned along their Old Testament routes. At the expense of this bonus the motorway produced a constant rumble which could be kept out only by closing the windows. This was the first home of our own. The very thought, that I could finally offer Eurydice something like that, gave me strength during the day.

The entrance door was a white-painted iron thing with vertical bars over its window. All balconies up to the third floor were iron-barred too. Once I asked a neighbor in the elevator why people on such a high floor would choose to turn their flats into prison cells. He looked at me as if I were coming from Mars to investigate the living habits of humans.

"When somebody on the ground floor installs a window grate, it becomes a ladder for thieves to climb up and burgle the second floor. Then the people there install a grate too, but the problem goes up to the third floor."

It would take them some time to get to the fifteenth, I thought with relief.

When I unlocked the door, I found all lamps ablaze. It was warm inside, smelling of some potato dish. I entered the living room and saw Eurydice's black hair hanging out of the only armchair. She had fallen asleep in front of the TV. She was breathing lightly, her mouth half-open. The colors had run out of her face, her body was lying limp as if deserted, while her anxious eyebrows suggested that far away, in some distant place, she was living a life of her own. She was wandering in the restlessly changing scenery of a dream, thinking about her unsolved problems. I wasn't aware Eurydice had any unsolved problems. At least, while awake, she didn't seem to have any.

I kissed her in order to pull her back to me. Fairy tale princes do it all the time. Eurydice opened her eyes, saw me and looked like she wanted to go back.

"Hello, I'm home! Let's have dinner."

"I already had."

She was looking at me somehow from afar, like a person who wasn't really around, though she was just an armrest away from me. I took her hands in mine. I began apologizing for my being late.

She rubbed her eyes.

“Eurydice, how was your day?”

“Well... I watched you on TV.”

She stood up and locked herself in the bathroom. While having dinner, I could hear the shower water lashing at the body underneath with steady force.

“Eurydice,” I banged on the door.

“What?”

Yes, exactly. What.

“Are you happy?”

No answer came, but the shower stopped. The door opened and Eurydice, wrapped in a white towel, came out along with a ball of steam and the smell of soap. She tried to evade me but I blocked her way. She evaded my eyes.

“We had plans to go to the cinema, remember?”

I made a few urgent promises. We’ll go tomorrow. By all means. I’ll take care. “There was no way for me to come earlier. You know that.”

“Yes, I know. What really worries me is that you have forgotten.”

I had returned to a home, entirely prepared for just one other person – me. Meanwhile, however, I had been substituted by my empty copy. I tried to take Eurydice in my arms, I was so anxious I had made her suffer. She held me at an elbows length. Then she looked down – and laughed.

“You are wearing odd socks.”

She was right. Two small bare feet were standing on the white corridor tiles, and two large feet were keeping them company: a brown and a green one. Then the bare feet disengaged from mine, ran through the sitting room carpet and carried Eurydice to the bedroom. I wanted to follow her, but I had to prepare my morning classes. I opened the window to let some fresh air in. The noise from the motorway entered immediately. The cars followed each other in two streams of red and white lights. Every now and then a heavy-load truck roared along, the sound of its engine warping as it passed by. They all looked very determined. In the corner of the windowsill I saw the deep glass ashtray which used to stay on the table in our former home. It was filled to the brim with the cigarette ends of Eurydice, who had been keeping our place clean of her smells all day.

When I went to bed at about two o’clock, the pill I took every morning for my heart was waiting for me on my bedside table. A beta-blocker. Eurydice never forgot to leave it for me, even in days like this, when I was afraid she was trying to tell me much more than she did.

HADES

I am Hades and I really exist.

The earth is transparent to me because I live there. It is the medium in which I move. I breathe soil, take walks in the stone, enjoy the landscape on the inner side of the mountains. The iron oxide veins – which, seen from the surface, resemble blood traces in the marble rock – look like haze after a summer rain to me, while the magnesium streaks in the green minerals are the forests where I roam. Most of all I like to watch the thin tubes of the water springs, sucking the liquid up. Hell is a beautiful place if you are local.

Sometimes I lie down on my back and watch the people above. They move about the earth's surface like skaters on ice. Some of them are really skillful. Others just bustle around not going anywhere. It is interesting when those creatures bump into each other. Sometimes they multiply; sometimes they come down to me. Finally, they all come down to me.

People don't like this. They say the stone is too dark for them. In the beginning it is always like this. Nobody wants to change. I don't know what change means though, I was born immortal. I feel sorry for them and can see their pain. Actually, I can see it much better than anything else, because pain is a kind of hardening, a strong solidification between the throat and the stomach. Some people carry real stones inside them. Not here, of course, but up on the surface. Even before they have entered my kingdom, they carry me inside their chests. Most often than not, they feel lightness when they come down here, but I have no way of telling them this.

I am Hades and I really exist. Everywhere.