

The Dance of the Zodiac

*Of bodies changed to various forms, I sing:
Oh gods, from whom these miracles did spring,
Inspire me with thou celestial heat*

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book I, 1-3

Scorpio was clearly visible in the southern sky, just below the line of the ecliptic. Its tail curled auspiciously behind the extinguished horizon. The boisterous lights around the harbor were deafened by the sudden blow of a black-out. Only a few contours of lighted windows were still glowing along the coast line with its seaside hotels leaning off the cliff's edges. The surrounding slopes with the line of dancing concrete skeletons of half and unfinished buildings had evaporated in the darkness, and the schist stone houses of the villages had assumed their full cover of night.

I watched the brightly lit stars of Scorpio, burning ferociously hundreds of light years away, and felt a sensation of luck, my stomach glowing with the courage of the local black wine. On the tunes of Orpheus' lyre, the animals and figures of the zodiac moved in the imaginative semi-circle of the celestial spheres above.

Georgos looked up at Hercules, the dancing farmer on the sky-lit stage, throwing his right ankle sideways in a sudden jerk and flinging his hand into the air in a perfectly sculpted, ancient balance. When he noticed me, he released his dancing pose and threw his farmer hands around my shoulders. Here we have freedom! Georgos cried out. Here we can dance! He slammed his fist on the table to emphasize the boldness of his words and, admiring the empty night, looked fearlessly into the twinkling eyes of the stars, which looked like the judging gods spying on us humans below. If a man believes in himself alone, all is permissible, all is possible. All is everything. Everything is all. The night was long, the sky was wide, Georgos' joy was great. Every movement of his limbs, every lively gesture flirted with death, defied the stars.

I had met Georgos, when he had stopped and offered me a ride back home, after I had hiked across the mountain ridge of Pezi down the *monopati* trail to the shore. Georgos spotted me walking along the dry dirt road that hugs the island's coast. Where are you going? He asked me with a familiarity as if I had known him all my life. Where are you from? From the other side of the mountain. He smiled. I got into his gleaming white Ford pick-up truck. We drove to the center of his village and stopped in front of the white-plastered Church of the Ascension.

I must stop to get a friend first, he said. In a few minutes his friend Alexis appeared, dressed in a collared, white shirt and washed jeans with a belt. He started cracking jokes with Georgos, while each of them rolled a thin, fragile cigarette between their callous fingers. I asked if there was a *panegyri*, a village feast, since they were dressed up. But at my words, Georgos' smile abruptly turned to visible tears, welling up in his eyes. I felt embarrassed by the stupidity of my question, but kept silent. There is a wake in the mountain village of Christos tonight, he whispered. A friend died of a tumor in his head. He was only forty-seven years old. Both Alexis and Georgos frowned pensively, acquiescing that death could come at any moment. The doctor at the small hospital in the main town had told me about the mysterious occurrences of brain tumors on the island, but he too did not know why. Georgos bowed in a moment of reminiscence, but then looked up at me and his smile returned to the present. He told me that there was a *panegyri* at the mountain village of Pezi next Tuesday, and that I should go and see him

there, dancing.

Georgos dropped me off at the row of harbor tavernas. I felt a ravenous panging of hunger beating down my stomach. I entered the taverna called *Ta Kymata*, The Waves. Inside, half of the tables had been cleared away, and scattered on the floor stood a band of twenty-five brand new cash-registers with the manuals still in their transparent plastic sleeves. I wondered if the owner was manipulating the cash-registers in some way in order to conceal part of the sales from the government. I satisfied my hunger from the day-long hike with roasted lamb-chops, fried potatoes, and a bottle of cold Heineken, until I felt the force of the sea return to my limbs, and asked for the bill. The taverna owner, who was fiddling with the wires of one of the cash registers, took out a ballpoint pen and scribbled the numbers I owed on a piece of scrap paper. I paid and walked to my room in the village.

With a sudden, dull blow, all lights and sound disappeared, as if a comet had crashed into the atmosphere and had thrown me into a crater of silence. I was startled but not really surprised. I remembered that tonight the *panegyri* in Pezi was taking place. I had been reluctant to go, but with the electricity down and nothing else to do, it felt that the decision had been made for me. I got into my rattling and rusting car and drove toward Pezi high up in the mountain, a small journey to the end of the night, a drive into the crater. Pezi was one of the old hidden villages on the plateau, built under the large rocky ridges of Mavrianou, strategically tucked away a few centuries ago from discovery by roaming pirates, who scavenged the islands, ogling the coasts for a pillar of smoke rising up from a chimney. Today there were no more pirates to be feared, but the villagers were as weary of corrupt government officials pocketing bribes or levy taxes.

I spun the steering wheel of the car around, counter clockwise, to turn the hairpin bend, changed to first gear, accelerated, and pressed the breaks again, only to repeat the cycle clockwise. From bird view, it didn't seem like I was going anywhere or in any direction, I was turning around my own axis without progressing, even if I was steeply ascending. The air became thinner, while the car followed the rhythmic movements of the mountain roads through the strip of pine forest. I drove from the coast into the mountains, into a different world, guided by the invisible conductor's hand directing the change of pace, from the staccato pattern of the waves into the piano calm of the higher villages.

I passed the dam of the drinking water reservoir, now filled with rain water that had been captured during the tormenting winter storms. The asphalt road ended abruptly at the bend and I made my way down the dusty dirt road, trying to evade the potholes and stones scattered on the path, while maneuvering slowly via the worn out tracks of rusty Japanese pickup trucks. Finally, I parked the car on the side of the road, in the dried grass. Without bothering to lock the doors, I walked into the depth of the night. A footpath meandered up the hill to the little church of Saint Isodoros through the thick Pezi forest, a stretch of holy oaks and bleeding strawberry trees.

For some reason, probably because of the stark contrast with my memories of city life, by the association of opposites, I had to think back of the kaleidoscopically colored nights of New York City. I saw before me again the endless rows of unfamiliar eyes that wander the streets, enlarging to intolerable proportions, until they passed a corner again, disintegrating behind my back, and the anonymous faces, with their inaudible echoes of solitude, as they slowly disappeared, forever, perishing somewhere into the grid of the city. The light in New York City was separated into primitive rays of harsh, pushy colors, jostling, elbowing, trying to catch your undivided attention for as short as it lasted, an alphabet that formed the writing in neon letters on the face of the city, a blinding beam broken on the infinite prism of gaiety. But here, there was only the pitch darkness of the island, and through the waving branches of the trees, the soothing white light of Selene hanging in the sky. Here, my memories

of the city had no sound, they were mute. The surrounding night was silent and sent me floating, as if I weren't truly present or precisely present for that exact same reason, isolated from my memories of the city, captured in the silence that allows us to hear the inner voice of self.

Despite the distant, enlarged moon clearly visible, the road was pitch dark, and I couldn't descry any lights or sounds of the *panegyri*. Now I started to worry if the feast had been canceled because of the black-out. I felt like young Goodman Brown wandering through the dark forest without direction, insecure but driven by an unknown will. The orange, ember end of a glowworm's larva lit up from a stone on the ground like a cigarette butt. Finally I heard the distant tones of music erupt out of the silence, the whining howls of a violin's lamenting strokes, the running notes of fingers crawling up and down a bazoukouki's neck to sooth its cries, and the background rambling of soft guitar chords.

I entered the little community house next to the church. Inside stood a giant cauldron cooking over a wood fire. From the life-size, aluminum pot above the brittle flames, a flagrant vapor rose up like an intoxicating smoke, as if releasing the mystic vision of fate through the oracle's crack in the earth. The pot's brim reached up to the shoulders of a silverly haired man who poked at the tomato goat stew with a large iron rod, turning over the poignant flesh of slaughtered mountain goats. Plastic bottles of home-brewed black wine, the Pramnos wine dating back to Homer, stood on the table. I ordered one bottle, asked for two small glasses and paid.

I sat down on the empty plank of a makeshift bench, at a table dressed with napkin cloth. At the other end of the table sat a group of people I had not seen before, licking their greasy fingers while pulling pieces of tender goat meat from a newspaper that lay spread open before them. I poured two glasses of wine, one for myself, and another one for anyone who would care to sit down next to me, and drank. The potent wine burned my intestines and my mouth tingled, after I had gulped down a glass of the black wine that inspired the devil and loosened the tongue.

I had to think of the forest god Pan, who was said to rest at noon, as was also the custom here in the mountain villages, where villagers slept in the afternoon and woke up again late in the night, when shops reopened, not going to bed until the morning. As I drank and watched the women and men dance, I imagined these villagers dancing naked in the mountains, like the maenads and satyrs of the ancient myths, followers of Dionysos. From the highest peak of the island, mount Pramnos, where the child Dionysos hid in one of the caves, you could see the whole island stretch out in the transparent Aegean water, but at the same time you would see nothing of the island. To see the island for real you had to go into these villages and read the faces of the people, where the true soul of the island wandered.

Before I realized it, Stella, a village girl sipped from the second glass of wine, grabbed my hand and pulled me to the dance floor. Two and one! Stella spoke in a husky voice, her possessed, shelly eyes of adulation looked up to me. I held her fragile, petite body, which she pushed closer to me with every step, and tried to follow the rhythm of her groins. I grew stiff under the pressure of her body, but she pulled herself harder onto me. I thought of Rigodon, Celine's novel of escape, but this Ikariot dance instead kept on moving forward, never making a step back. Her eyes were filled with desirous passion. I was too conscious of myself, of Stella's moving crotch, my growing erection between us, and her flirting eyes that seemed to beg me not to stop dancing.

I kept falling out of line with Stella's fluent steps, while she kept correcting my faulty passes. I am from here, she said, from Christos. Do you like the island? But I thought of New York City instead, sitting on a tarred roof top in Soho at midnight, writing poems and drinking Merlot wine from a coffee mug, staring at the starless sky and listening to the endless din of the city, the bright windows of skyscrapers,

the eroding streetlights, distancing red rear-lights of cars, the approaching white-lit eyes of strangers, fallen stars under an empty heaven, floating on the shallow currents of the city, all artificial and vague compared to the star filled night under the colored bulb lights of Saint Isodoros. I smiled back at Stella, embarrassed by my dim-witted response, and didn't know what to say to her, while her gleaming iridescent green irises revealed my longing thoughts of the city.

Maybe the stars are not just the past glow of died-out celestial bodies, or the elevated lights of gods' stares, maybe the stars are the living reflection of peoples' souls dancing forever in the moment under the rotation of their heavenly bodies.

I observed the villagers dancing. Every step was a stitch of tradition, every breath an amplitude of the past. Every song, every tune had its own dance, and each dancer fit flawlessly without hesitation in the correct sequence of steps. I noticed Georgos the old farmer, his eyes caught sight of mine, and to show me what he was made of, he kicked his ankle into the air, like a passionate youth, he slapped his foot with the palm of his hand, jerked his chin up above his chest, and waved his arm high above his head. *Hopa!* I could feel the exaltation of his spirit glow in his eyes, time went forward, time went back, the dithyrambic rhythm followed the beat of his heart, submitting space to the dimensions of his dance, his chest stood bravely forward, corpulent but with the breath of his youth, escaping age in the Dionysian gap of time, this was the choreography of his freedom.

Georgos was eighty-five years old but age did not define him well. I am the drunkest man in town! he boasted, when I had asked his age. Two girls bent down to their knees, placed their cheeks close to the ground, listening to his steps pounding on the hardened soil, and stared upward at the brusque stamping of Georgos' feet. The young girls were clapping him on at the count of his steps. In the next dance, it were the men who bowed in reverence before the women's heels kicking over their heads.

The dance floor in front of the little church was full of people, their formations changing over time, but all stayed in a certain invisible cohesion, as if the gravity of communion kept them in place, always converging back to their place among the others. At first it seemed chaotic, but a complete order emerged. The constellations of each dance altered with the music, but each atom, each person, was a minuscule particle in the larger space, governed by the overseeing rules of timespace. Out of these unruly choreographies formed the phalanx of a single community, interlocked shoulder by shoulder, anchored in the past and sheltered from progress, their backs to the outer world, forming a symbolic circle of perfect harmony.

A few weeks later, I drove to the capital town of the island, where the only ATM on the island was placed. The telephone lines turned out to be down and the ATM was not working, returning only a time-out message. A young couple with American accents looked rather helpless, being stranded and running low on cash, not knowing what to do. I told them they wouldn't really need much cash, and besides, they would never be homeless on the island, people would let them in, and then there were the stars and the beaches.

I gave them my telephone number in case they needed help, which seemed to offer them a little consolation, and their eyes turned a bit more cheerful. I couldn't help but wonder in amusement at their fragile reaction to such a simple failure of modern life that had turned them instantly so helpless and lost. I decided to have a frappé in one of the harbor cafés and wait for the returning bus. There, I ran into Dido, a Bulgarian friend who worked at a *cafeneion* in Christos. I smiled at recognizing his face. Have you heard about Georgos? he asked. He died last weekend. I was stunned hearing the news. What happened? Georgos was fishing with his boat early in the morning. His nets must have gotten caught in

a piece of drifting wood, so without a second of thought, he took off his shirt, his shoes, and dived right in. But the currents were strong that morning, and the wind was pushing the waves onto the shore. He must have gotten wrapped up in his own nets and drowned. By the time they pulled him out he was already dead.

I felt my smile turn to tears, and thought of Georgos dancing up in the sky, with every step on the count of the moment, as if he was dancing forever.