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Katarzyna Zero Cholewa, from the *Preface*

Each of the resulting stories offers a unique perspective, just like the authors' personas, on how referring to Antiquity can serve to convey important values and better understand the world around us. An encounter with a mythical musician in a sweltering city centre, a caretaker of a home fire on a frosty day, or a messenger of the gods during an engaging reading may all provide wholesome examples of active reception of Antiquity performed by the seminar participants.

Jakub Nojszewski, from *A Word of Introduction to the Stories*

This work has a deep, specific meaning, having been born from an active collaboration of young students just like me, who were able to assemble and create new stories, new perspectives, and new worlds on the basis of a shared cultural heritage.

Davide lengo, from the *Prolegomena*

Maciej Adamczyk
Anna Baranek
Veranika Dzemyanovich
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MYTHOLOGY JUST AROUND THE CORNER

Introductions

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Afterwords

Krzysztof Rybak

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Mythology Just Around the Corner

The collection of stories created during the “Our Mythical Childhood” seminar classes conducted at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” at the University of Warsaw. The present book is the English translation of the original collection published in Polish as *Mitologia tuż za rogiem* (available also online at <http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/opowiadania>).

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The images used: Tithonos Painter (attr.), *Hermes*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 25.78.2, Beazley 203182, ca. 480–470 BC, <https://www.theoi.com/Gallery/KI1111.html> (accessed 13.04.2024); images of Warsaw – collage by Zbigniew Karaszewski

We wish to acknowledge the support from the “*Artes Liberales* Institute” Foundation in the publication of this book.

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ISBN 978-83-67605-20-5

Centre for Studies on the Classical Tradition (OBTA) Faculty of “Artes Liberales” UW

ul. Nowy Świat 69
00-046 Warszawa

Printed and bound by

PrintMedia24.pl Drukarnia & Agencja Reklamowa
ul. Stanisława Rogalskiego 4
03-982 Warszawa

They didn't admit it to anyone, but in their hearts all three of them secretly hoped that maybe one day they would be able to surprise and approach one of these strange creatures, that maybe they would catch a glimpse of the edge of a goddess's robe, the goat's hoof of a satyr would appear from behind a bush, or the roar of a centaur would reach their ears. Or maybe at least they will manage to overhear some fragment of a conversation or a whispered order from the mouth of these immortal beings...

Anna M. Komornicka, *Historie nie z tej ziemi*,
[Stories Not from This World],
Wydawnictwa Radia i Telewizji, Warszawa 1987, p. 13.

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Jakub Nojszewski

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A Word of Introduction to the Stories

As students, we are first and foremost recipients of texts. We read and discuss what others, often prominent representatives of numerous scientific and artistic disciplines, have created. Related to this is the specific, often reproductive nature of the student’s work during studies. This is, of course, a necessary part of studying; after all, one cannot participate in scholarly discussions without becoming familiar with the texts that are most important to them and the theories they contain.

The other side of what we do as students is to attempt, often with success, to create our own original content. This is the case with the “Our Mythical Childhood” seminar which produced this year’s short stories – on the 100th anniversary of Jan Parandowski’s *Mythology* (1924). During the class, we first get acquainted with the theoretical basis, learn to understand how the reception of Classical Antiquity looked and looks like, and how it manifests itself in texts for youth. With this knowledge, one can move on to free creation. The creative process is an area of practical application of this knowledge to creating one’s own stories. This year’s theme of encounters with characters known from Greek and Roman mythology, a choice inspired by a collection of short stories *Historie nie z tej ziemi* (1987) written by Anna M. Komornicka, gives story writers the opportunity to be active creators of the modern reception of Antiquity in texts for young people. Each of the resulting stories offers a unique perspective, just like the authors’ personas, on how referring to Antiquity can serve to convey important values and better understand the world around us. An encounter with a mythical musician in a sweltering city centre, a caretaker of a home fire on a frosty day, or a messenger of the gods during an engaging reading may all provide wholesome examples of active reception of Antiquity performed by the seminar participants.

The editorial process in which we participate as a group is an extremely important part of this creative activity. Working together to edit texts, we see the stories of the seminar participants take shape and become accomplished texts of publishing quality. Participation in editing is an opportunity to learn sensitivity to what and how others write and to improve our own skills in this area. It also teaches us that the observations of others allow us to make our texts better, and the “finished” printed text is rarely the result of the actions of just one person. Each of the stories is a manifestation of the unique creative invention of its authors, and at the same time the seminar participants helped give them their final shape. Reading each of them will undoubtedly be an interesting and developing experience.

Katarzyna Zero Cholewa

Artes Liberales

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Preface

Jan Parandowski's *Mythology*, published in 1924 and famous to this day, reached its 100th birthday this year. To celebrate this occasion, participants of the “Our Mythical Childhood” seminar at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” at the University of Warsaw undertook the task of creating a series of short texts inspired by famous myths. Our stories, set in an autumnal and winter scenery, showcase the world of gods and beliefs of the old, in a form aimed at children and adults alike. Our readers will be able to embark on a journey into the depths of Hades with Orpheus, warm themselves up by the cosy and safe fire of Hestia, and join Hermes on his travels – all in the company of the wonderful illustrations created by the stories' authors.

We worked on this collection for a few months, writing and rewriting and consulting all the contents within our group. Although not all stories were completed, we poured our hearts and time into all of them. It was incredibly important to us to showcase those well-known and widespread myths in a new, contemporary light, once more proving that Greek mythology is timeless. The topics it conveys are continuously alive, present, and perceptible nearly anywhere we look; the myths' diversity and richness are an ancient source of inspiration from which we eagerly drew. We are indisputably glad to have had this possibility to contribute to their heritage and we believe that, despite all the challenges we encountered along the way, the book we created will be a pleasant and educational read.

Although my story has not been completed yet and thus was not included in this collection, I believe that working on it was one of my best and most valuable experiences. The opportunity to tear myself away from academic texts and to assume the role of an author whose thoughts roam across fantastical places and incredible events was a nice change. I could look at mythology from a fresh, non-scholarly perspective, experiencing what my characters did and empathising with the emotions and situations they were going through, and I would like to hope that when my story is done, its readers will be able to feel the same.

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Student Mobility for Traineeship (SMT)”

Prolegomena

At some point, when first approaching the Ancient Graeco-Roman world, each one of us – student, professor, amateur, teacher, child, grown-up – has had to face the necessity (alongside the valuable chance) to meet up with the vast universe of mythology, with its heroes and heroines, its many fascinating stories, cleverly tangled up with one another and filled to the brim with passion, love, pain, revenge, and tenderness. The heroes and gods of the classical world tell us of eternal feelings, the same as those upon which our everyday life is founded; reading about their adventures, apart from the belletristic pleasure it brings, can still be a powerful source of knowledge, experiences, and reflections on mankind as a whole.

That is exactly why working on classical mythology remains crucial to this day – especially through its popularisation amongst the youngest; for this same reason, I am immensely thankful for having had the chance to attend the seminars conducted by Professor Katarzyna Marciniak within the programme “Our Mythical Childhood”, which has been the occasion for the meetings and discussions leading to the realisation of this collection of tales.

This work has a deep, specific meaning, having been born from an active collaboration of young students just like me, who were able to assemble and create new stories, new perspectives, and new worlds on the basis of a shared cultural heritage. This is an interesting activity from different points of view, its main feature being, as I see it, the creative process itself and its mechanisms: a reinterpretation of each myth begins with a deep understanding of the primary sources and meanings of the original story, allowing new, various, and differentiated readings and presentations – that is, a radical change of aims and communicative methods and uses of the mythical material. Yet, despite the novelty of themes and motifs, this is precisely how transmission and reception of myths worked back in the ancient world: we read multiple versions of the same myth in ancient sources and, following the same paths, we can keep this process going and make up one more, two more, a thousand more new versions of that first myth – the myth that was never meant to stay still, set in stone, but continuously and gladly kept giving itself to wonderful operations of the human imagination, renewing the plot and expressing new, different identities and realities.

Mythology and its renewal (of which this collection is a modest but skilfully crafted example) are not just about putting a set of tales together: they are the very shape of a masterful creativity, and their reinterpretation is a powerful possibility, a need, a necessity – an inspirational thing of beauty!

Anna Baranek & Veranika Dzemyanovich

THE MUSIC OF SOULS



From the authors

Hi! We're Ania and Nika, students of the Cultural Studies – Mediterranean Civilization programme at the Faculty of "Artes Liberales" at the University of Warsaw. We wrote this short story together – Ania created the overall narration and Nika prepared the dialogues and illustrations.

Our protagonists are two Syrian children living with a foster family in Poland for about a year now: Nadira, currently a student at a Polish school, and her a bit younger sibling Alex, who is non-binary. In the Polish version of this story, Alex's identity is expressed by our decision to use asterisks [*] in the gendered grammatical forms to underline further the struggles which non-binary Polish speakers are still facing – in English, Alex simply uses the pronouns they/them.

We wrote about their meeting with a beautiful story about love, hope, grief, and the power of music – which myth exactly?

You'll find out while reading...



Glossary of mythological terms

- Cerberus** – a three-headed dog guarding the entrance to the Underworld. His job was to ensure no souls would escape back into the realm of the living (Jan Parandowski, *Mitologia. Wierzenia i podania Greków i Rzymian*, Wydawnictwo Puls, London, 1992, p. 124);
- Erinyes** – three sisters, goddesses of revenge born from the blood of Ouranos (Parandowski, *Mitologia*, p. 33);
- Asphodel Meadows** – a part of Hades, the Underworld in Greek mythology, where most of the souls ended up after death;
- Thracian musician** – Orpheus was the king of Thrace (Parandowski, *Mitologia*, p. 127);
- Son of Calliope** – muse Calliope, the protector of epic poetry, was Orpheus' mother (entry "Orfeusz" in: *Encyklopedia PWN*, <https://encyklopedia.pwn.pl/haslo/Orfeusz;3951649.html>, accessed: 24.02.2024).



*And when Orpheus stood before the king of the Underworld,
he did not stop playing but, delicately plucking the strings
of the harp, began to lament, and the laments turned into songs.
It seemed that in the kingdom of silence fell quietness grander
and deeper than usual. And the strangest thing happened:
Erinyes, cruel, vicious, merciless Erinyes wept!*

Jan Parandowski,
Mitologia. Wierzenia i podania Greków i Rzymian,
Wydawnictwo Puls, Londyn, 1992, p. 128.



The day was long, gloomy. Dusk came quickly in November, so when Nadira and Alex could finally leave the school, the darkness covering Warsaw was only slightly dispelled by the golden-orange halos of streetlamps and the ads glimmering brightly on the facades of skyscrapers. Alex had always enjoyed watching them while they waited to cross the road and today, they also tipped their head back to gaze at the brightly coloured figures encouraging the pedestrians to see the newest movies and buy the next generations of smartphones. The falling raindrops slightly blurred the text on the billboard above them, so they squinted in effort, tugging on their sister's hand.

- Look how it's changing! Look, look, now it's purple!
- It seems as if it was painted on the sky itself – Nadira replied, glancing at the glimmering images. – You know, we've been here for a few months already, yet I still struggle to read the Polish alphabet.
- Yeah, me too – the younger of the two laughed. – It ended up more difficult than I thought, but I'm making progress!
- Take it easy; these things take time.
- Yeah! And I didn't even know about all those letters! – Alex nodded, pointing towards the billboard. – I still confuse "ż" with "rz"...
- That's okay; you'll figure it out in time. Did you know that these narrow streets of Warsaw...

Caught up in their conversation, the kids almost didn't notice the awaited signal change, and the crowd of people rushing to cross the street dragged them along right into the abyss of the underground passage leading to Defilady Square. Their exchange cut off abruptly and Alex grasped onto the sleeve of Nadira's jacket, struggling to keep up with her. The surrounding silhouettes of other pedestrians seemed almost to blend together – tall, unfamiliar, and a touch eerie, like shadows. They covered the bright storefronts and the blue-lit timetable boards, on which Alex so often kept trying to spot the name of their hometown. Thus far, without luck.

– ...sometimes I miss our home. And I can't stop thinking about our parents – they whispered.

Nadira slowed down momentarily, reaching out to pat her sibling's shoulder.

– I know, Alex. It's okay to feel down sometimes, but remember that we're here together, alright? We've got each other.

– Yeah, you're right...

– Do you remember the night when we arrived in Poland? It was so dark and scary... Although we made it, back then, crossing the border seemed impossible. I was so afraid and kind of hoped that it would all turn out to be just a dream...

The cold light of the ceiling lamps flickered, and suddenly, both siblings felt uneasy, out of place in what was, after all, a familiar space. After a moment, they began hearing a quiet melody, nearly disappearing in the patter of feet and the rustling of winter jackets – yet it kept drawing their attention in a way they could not quite describe. With wordless understanding, Nadira and Alex squeezed each other's hands tighter and ran out of the busy crowd, hoping to discover the source of the intriguing music. They turned left next to a kiosk, then right after passing by a haberdashery shop, and ran down an unknown passage with walls made of naked cement, walking ever further into the underground labyrinth until the restless passage to the Defilady Square disappeared somewhere behind their backs.

From afar, the busker looked like a pile of dark, destroyed clothes tossed carelessly somewhere on the side – if not for the mysterious melody, the siblings likely wouldn't have paid him any attention. Bone-thin, tall, and with his hair ruffled like those musicians on the posters collected by Nadira's friend, he almost would have seemed a bit scary if not for his sad gaze. And the music, of course – it echoed through the shadows of the underground passage. Although it wasn't as loud as the merry tunes of violins and accordions so often heard in the Old Town, there was something familiar about it: a touch of nostalgia and sadness.

Nadira's thoughts drifted towards home. Not the one here, in Warsaw, still strange despite the efforts of their new caretakers, but the *real one* – filled with sunlight and the smells of familiar foods; where even the paint peeling away from the walls seemed like something picturesque. Suddenly, the girl remembered her mother's laughter and...

– Look, what a strange guitar!

Alex's loud remark cut through the memories and Nadira blinked, focusing on the object her sibling pointed at. Delicate strings vibrated with melancholic lightness and every few moments, the busker's hands revealed the subtle carvings that decorated the curved arms and body of the instruments – stars and vines, amongst which hid fantastical creatures: dryads and satyrs listening to the magical melody. In the dim light of the lamps, their painted eyes seemed to follow the kids' every movement. Nadira shuddered.

– It's not a guitar, it's... – she started explaining, slowly recalling a blurry illustration from *Mythology* that she recently began reading in her Polish class.

– It's a lyre – the whisper of the strange man, who only now turned his attention to the kids standing above him, felt almost like a continuation of the melody that stopped abruptly. He spoke quietly, with a touch of uncertainty, as if words were more foreign to him than music, and his gaze was pale, tired. His hands, tightly grasping onto the mysterious instrument, shook anxiously.

– And what is it, this "lyre"? Is it connected to any stories? – Alex leaned closer to scrutinise the instrument, unable to contain their curiosity. For a moment, it seemed as if the man nearly smiled.

– It's a musical wanderer, just as I am. It travels the world with me and sings the sad story of love.

Nadira frowned in disbelief. After all, objects couldn't sing, let alone travel... She decided to investigate further, with a note of scepticism in her voice.

– So, this instrument is alive?

– Yes, exactly! – To her surprise, the man's expression brightened, and his words started to flow more fluently, like a melody. – Together, we create music that can touch the hearts of others. Those who listen to it are transported into the world of magical stories of the past and the future; although the melody sounds different to everyone, it's always just as moving.

– That’s incredible! How’s that possible? – Unlike their older sister, Alex was utterly enamoured by the stranger’s story, and was almost jumping in place from excitement. – Can this... lyre – they repeated the new word slowly – do anything else?

– It’s a gift from the gods. – The busker hesitated for a moment, looking at the instrument thoughtfully. Sighing, he plucked at one of the strings so that the whisper of its melody would accompany his words. – Yet even this magnificent gift did not allow me to cross the barrier between the worlds...

Though she was sure they had never met before, the man’s words sounded strangely familiar to Nadira, as if they were a part of a story she had heard somewhere before. Her eyes narrowed in thought as she looked once more at the ornate lyre.

– Sir, you sound as if you lost someone – she guessed, grabbing Alex’s hand.

– My beloved. – Sadness echoing in his voice was overwhelming. – Eurydice.

– What a pretty name... – Alex sighed dreamily, but Nadira gently kicked them in the ankle.

– We’re very sorry – she began carefully, trying to remember where she had heard that name before. – Do you... do you know what happened to her?

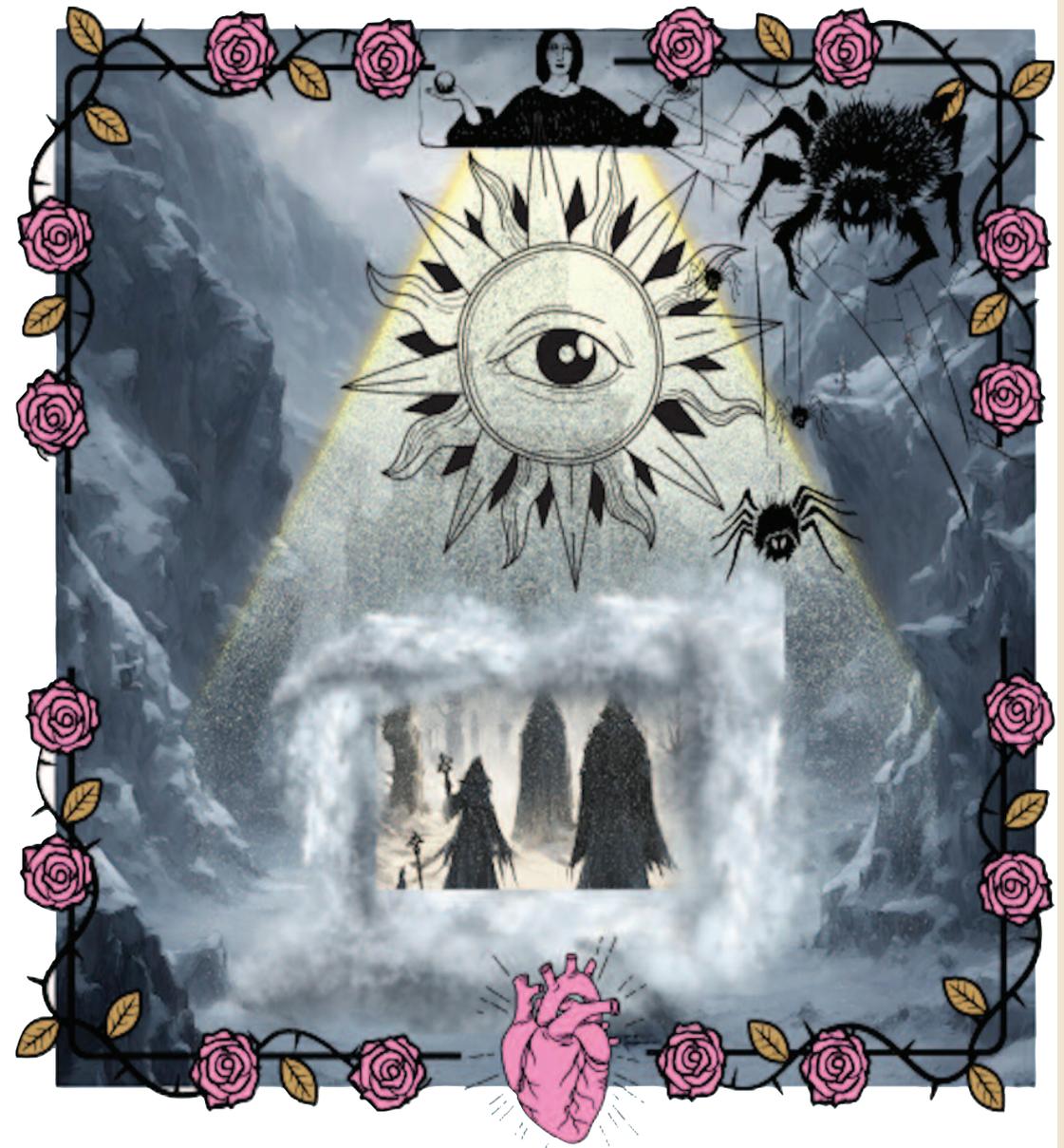
The busker hesitated, tapping the tips of his fingers against the wooden surface of the instrument. Standing there in awkward silence, Nadira began to regret asking the question and, given the man’s uncertainty, was nearly ready to apologise and drag her sibling back on the way home – yet she did not manage to say even a word.

– Sir, we understand how you feel – the younger of the kids spoke up suddenly, their voice filled with sincerity. – My name’s Alex, and this is my sister, Nadira. We’re still waiting for our parents to come to us.

The stranger smiled.

– Thank you – although he still sounded sad, a trace of warmth now bloomed in his voice. – It is nice to meet you. My name is Orpheus, and Eurydice... Eurydice left for the House of Hades.

At first, Nadira was sure that she had misheard him. After all, she began re-reading the myth about the Thracian musician just a few days ago and was certain that if he had ever really existed, it must have been long ago. And definitely



nowhere near Warsaw. She opened her mouth to express her doubts, but Orpheus was already talking again, his gaze lingering on the spiderweb of cracks covering the wall behind the kids' backs.

– We got married recently, during the summer... The weather was beautiful, and birds sang in the trees, but then... – he stopped and blinked quickly to hold back the tears. – But then she left.

Silence once more fell over the passageway. Alex shifted their weight from one foot to the other, biting their lower lip in thought.

– For that House of Hades... – they asked, not paying any attention to their sister's warning look. – Is that far away from here?

– Alex, that's... – *an inappropriate question*, Nadira wanted to say, remembering that one shouldn't ask strangers about personal matters.

– Actually, it's not – Orpheus was quicker, answering with an unusual kind of openness. Though strange, it suited him. – Some places have many paths leading to them.

– So, maybe we could go visit her? – Alex's eyes sparkled with excitement at the thought of a potential adventure.

Orpheus did not reply immediately. He looked down as if inspecting the lyre in great detail, and when his eyes finally settled on the kids again, he seemed torn – simultaneously uncertain and filled with hope.

– It would not be an easy journey...

– We can go there with you – upon seeing his hesitation, Alex interrupted quickly. – Like our grandma always said, the more the merrier!

– Besides, we still have some time before dinner – Nadira added bravely, hoping that she could unravel Orpheus' secrets during the travel.

The busker nodded and slowly stood up. Although he was tall and towered over the siblings, he still seemed more lost rather than intimidating; he did not fit in with the grey reality of Warsaw's underground passages.

– Let's go then – he said, delicately plucking at the lyre's strings. Those vibrated quietly in response and, as if guided by their movement, the musician began walking along the wall of the tunnel. After a second of hesitation, the kids followed him.



It quickly became apparent that, despite his earlier openness, Orpheus would not be a talkative travel companion. He walked first, wrapped up in a strange, grey-blue robe, his eyes were sleepily closed, and he kept plucking at the strings of the lyre, which strummed delicately – as if in an answer to silently asked questions. Besides the quiet melody, the travelling trio was surrounded only by silence. At the beginning of their journey, they could still hear the distant rumble of steps and the raspy, creaking announcements of trains departing from the station. Still, those sounds quickly grew distant, and even Alex, who tried to engage the busker in a conversation earlier, fell silent with time, squeezing their sister's hand tighter.

With every step they took, the air in the passage seemed to grow colder, and the greyness of the cement walls turned ever deeper, greedily absorbing the light of fluorescent lamps. When it became so dark that the kids could barely see the silhouette of the busker ahead of them, Orpheus came to a halt.

– We've arrived – his voice was barely audible, as if muffled by the shadows crawling all over the walls.

– But there's nothing here... – Alex whispered bravely, squinting to look around.

In response, the busker only shook his head, wordlessly asking the kids to be patient. Grabbing the lyre ever tighter, he walked deeper into the dead end of the passage and tugged at the strings, dragging an unpleasant, gravelly sound out of them – as if stone, pushed by an invisible hand, ground against an equally hard surface. Yet, for a moment, nothing at all happened. Nadira sighed, looking at her younger sibling with growing uncertainty.

Then, although there were no visible cracks in it, the cement wall parted suddenly, and fog began to crawl out of the newly formed opening – thick, slightly purple; it smelled like flowers left on sunburnt dirt and carried a touch of coldness that left a trail of goosebumps scattered across the travellers' arms.

– Oh wow... – Alex's voice had more awe than fear, though they kept holding their sister's hand tightly. – I thought things like that only happened in the movies!

– There’s more truth in myths than you think – Orpheus replied quietly, voice strained with effort. – Come on, we don’t have a lot of time. The entrance will close soon.

Without waiting for an answer, he stepped into the billows of the fog, quickly disappearing from the view. Alex immediately rushed to follow but was stopped by their sister’s hesitation.

– Nadira, what is it?

– I... I don’t know, maybe we shouldn’t go there? I’ve never seen anything like that, and we’ve only just met Orpheus...

Alex nodded, understanding those fears, and reached for Nadira’s hand.

– You’re right. But he seemed so sad; I think he needs our help. And besides... – the younger of the siblings brightened up. – Remember how you said it would be nice to go on an adventure one day? And together, we’ll certainly be fine!

– Yeah, I guess, but let’s stay close to each other, alright? – Although Alex’s optimism did not dispel all of her worries, it made Nadira feel a lot more confident, and she even managed to smile right before the two of them stepped into the mysterious opening that Orpheus had disappeared into.

Then, darkness wrapped around them like a heavy, ice-cold blanket, and the ground underneath their feet became soft, a bit springy, like fresh grass, and decidedly different from the slippery tiles of Warsaw’s underground passages. Holding tightly onto her sibling’s hand, Nadira took a careful step forward, then another – they were surrounded by silence so profound that it seemed as if the whole world ceased to exist for a moment – even the beating of their hearts.

Only after a long moment, did the now-familiar strumming of the lyre echo somewhere nearby. The soft curtain of shadows disappeared slowly, replaced by a delicate glow – blueish and dim. *Like on a winter morning, right before dawn*, thought Nadira while carefully looking around. Concrete walls and blinking screens vanished to make space for a vast meadow of pale-violet grass and tall, white flowers, framed from the left by the dark waters of a lazily flowing river. Although there was no wind, wisps of thick fog swirled by the shore, and sharp, cold air squeezed into every gap in Nadira’s clothes, biting at her nose and exposed fingers. When she experimentally shifted her weight from one foot to the other, the frost-covered blades of grass crunched under her shoes like crumbled glass.

– Oh, you’re here. Good – Orpheus’ whisper could have been a shout in the silence filling this strange place. – Now we need to find...

– Grandma?! – Alex’s shout drowned out the rest of the busker’s words. – Nadira, our grandma is there!

– Where? I don’t see anyone...

– There! Look!

Nadira glanced towards the fog again. Only now, looking at it more closely, she noticed that amongst the shapeless billows lingered wispy silhouettes of people – young and bent towards the ground by age, in sports jackets and ornate robes, each one different but all equally mysterious, they crowded the meadow and the whispers of their voices mixed with the murmur of the flowing river. Only one of those strange beings, radiating delicate warmth, had a face – smiling and full of wrinkles, familiar.

– Is this a dream? – Nadira took a step forward, not believing her own eyes.

– If it is, it’s the best dream I’ve ever had! – Alex laughed joyfully and, without waiting for their sister, began running towards the old woman.

However, she suddenly appeared right next to the kids without making even the smallest of movements. From up close, her form seemed even more ephemeral, details unclear, and edges flowing in the air as if a delicate gust of wind could be enough to blow her into nothingness. Although her features were still brightened by a familiar smile, full of unsaid understanding, Nadira could not ignore the sense of anxiety that dragged its cold fingers down her spine. After all, her grandmother was dead.

– Last time I checked, I was no dream. – The calm, joking voice of the old woman interrupted her stream of thoughts, and despite everything else, Nadira smiled. Maybe it was a surprisingly realistic dream, but... – But tell me, kids, what brings you here? – Intelligent eyes regarded them both with incredible focus. – I think you may have embarked on this journey a little before your time...

– Well, Grandma, it’s about love, you see. – Alex nodded very thoughtfully, gesturing towards their silent companion. – We promised Orpheus that we would help him find his wife, Eurydice. He misses her.

The busker nodded too, shrinking somewhat under the old woman’s gaze – piercing, though not devoid of compassion.

– I hoped that she would hear my melody and return, but... – he whispered with desperation.

– We’re not quite sure where we belong.

– You have each other and the entire world to discover; belonging is not a place. You belong only where your heart feels at peace. – The warmth that could not be shared through a hug radiated from the old woman’s smile. – Now, you’ve got an important task ahead of you – she leaned closer to the kids, whispering conspiratorially. – Orpheus needs your help. He’s more lost than you can imagine; without you, he certainly won’t return to the world of the living. You must go with him to Hades’ palace and then... – She moved even closer, her voice got even quieter. – And then support him on his path forward.

Nadira wasn’t sure if she understood everything well, but she nodded, glancing at her younger sibling. The reassurances settled in her heart, filling it with hope that seemed out of place in this gloomy realm – and perhaps was even stronger because of that.

– If you believe in us, Grandma, then we’ll be fine – she said, taking a deep breath. – But... where are we supposed to go, exactly? We don’t know the way.

– The path will find us – Orpheus spoke up suddenly, despite how he so far only lingered quietly on the side. The lyre’s strings vibrated melodically as if to confirm his words, or maybe to rush the travellers slightly.

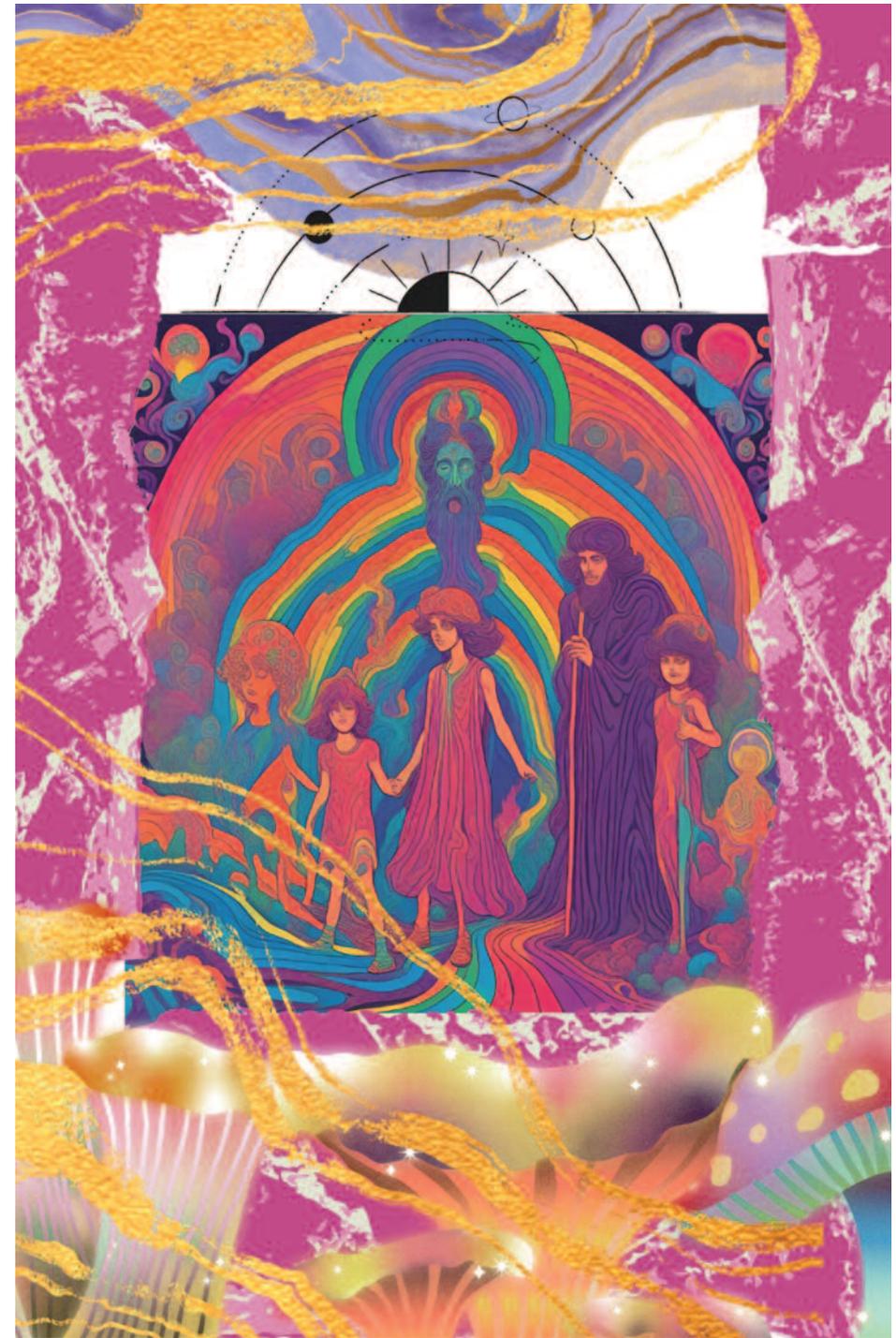
– Grandma... – Alex began to whisper. Fear and hope mixed in their voice that, although quiet, seemed to carry across the meadow strongly enough that even the spectres waving back and forth on the shore turned towards the conversing group. – Will we see each other again?

– Of course, my loves, but it will happen in many, many years – the old woman responded. – For now, I’ll be right next to you, in your hearts. All you’ll have to do is think of me.

Nadira blinked away her tears. Although she wanted to, she couldn’t fully believe those words, and suddenly, the chill of the Underworld felt even more bitter. A cold shiver ran down her spine, and a sharp gust of wind tugged at the strands of her hair – still, she forced herself to smile, not wanting to worry Alex more.

– In that case... See you, Grandma – while speaking, she grabbed her sibling’s hand again.

– See you, Grandma! – Unlike their sister, Alex sounded joyful, almost careless, as they echoed the goodbye. – We’ll help Mr. Orpheus, and we’ll find Eurydice!



For a moment, it seemed like they might still receive an answer, another few seconds spent in the company of a dearly missed relative. However, their grandmother only managed to nod before the fog once more swallowed her silhouette, as if she had never even stood there. Her eyes disappeared last.

– We have to keep going. – Orpheus did not seem too moved by the woman’s disappearance. Still, when he lightly tugged at the lyre’s strings, the melody flowing from the instrument carried a subtle echo of sadness and understanding, of longing filling the hearts. Neither of the kids felt enough strength to reply and when the busker began to walk again, they simply followed him. Nadira only wiped away the tears slowly crystallising on her cheeks.



The silent journey dragged on impossibly, likely because the landscape of the Underworld seemed entirely unchanging. Wherever Nadira looked, the same flowers swayed under the pressure of non-existent wind, and the constant whispers of the river’s grey-blue waters created a calm, almost sleepy aura. *We’re lost*, the girl thought, and just when the last spark of hope burned out in her heart, a terrifying growl rolled through the air, vibrating deep in the travellers’ bones with the threat of death, soon enough shaped into the form of a mass of black fur and three yapping maws filled with rows of sharp teeth.

Six bloodied, bead-like eyes gazed at the trio, pinning them to the spot. Very, very carefully, Alex hid behind their sister, who, in turn, slowly shuffled behind the musician. As if in an answer, the beast once more rumbled in a warning.

– Oh... What is that? – The younger sibling whispered involuntarily, looking at the monster over Nadira’s shoulder. Bigger than a family house, with its massive body covered in matted fur and with claws as large as a grown man, the creature somewhat resembled a dog or a wolf, viciously protecting its territory.

– Cerberus, the guardian... – Nadira was not allowed to finish.

The rumbling growl of the beast drowned out her words as Orpheus blinked sleepily, reaching for his lyre. He hesitated for a moment, then tugged on the strings

– delicately, quietly, and without hurry as if he was just playing for himself on a lazy sunny afternoon right before a nap. Cerberus’ snarl still vibrated in the travellers’ bones when first one, then another of the dog-like heads yawned widely, offering the trio another glimpse of sharp, white teeth. The third head stared at them suspiciously for a moment longer, but eventually succumbed to the sleepy melody’s power. Still, Orpheus kept playing, and neither he nor the kids dared to move until the deep snoring of the resting beast filled the air around them.

Only then, slowly and with their breaths held, did they sneak around Cerberus and keep walking further down the path, once in a while glancing back to ensure that the dark, twisted into a pretzel mass of the monster was disappearing behind them.

– He almost looked like the neighbours’ Burek when he slept like that. – Alex’s conspiratorial whisper made even Orpheus smile. He did not reply, though, and the kids, too, lost the desire to chat amongst the all-encompassing greyness and fog.



It would be difficult to tell when the gloomy plains turned into a palace. As sleeping Cerberus disappeared somewhere in the background, the travellers were still surrounded by the lethargic monotony of frosted grass stretching on towards the horizon and dark bends of the river weaving through the land like a snake – never close, yet somehow always right there, in the corner of their vision. Then, entirely unexpectedly but with a strange touch of delicateness, marble spilled underneath their feet and slender columns shot up towards the sky, disappearing in the clouds swirling high above their heads. Dancing wisps of flames burning on iron trivets replaced the ever-present, dimmed light, and the air, now filled with the smell of smoke and citrus fruits, turned slightly warmer. Nadira began to feel more confident as if the threat of turning into a foggy ghost no longer followed her every step. At the same time, a new kind of uneasiness wrapped around her heart: an unshakeable feeling that dozens of eyes were watching her every movement.

– We’ve arrived – Orpheus’ whisper was devoid of the relief most travellers feel upon reaching their destination. Tension marked each word as if the faintest bit of pressure could be enough to break them up into syllables and scatter lone vowels over the cracked marble tiles.

– I don’t like it here... – Alex’s uneasy, quiet remark made Nadira shuffle closer, but she didn’t have time to respond. An icy-cold, vicious gust of wind filled the spacious hall with a cacophony of a million voices whispering in a thousand languages, tugged at the flames of the torches and grasped onto the trio’s clothes, tugging on them violently as a rumbling, thunderous voice rolled around them.

– The living have no right to enter my realm. Name yourselves so I may know who will be punished.

The shadows swirled and then suddenly parted to reveal a pair of dark, deep eyes that had witnessed centuries, and from the clouds of smoke emerged a towering, not-quite-human silhouette of the King of the Underworld reclining on an imposing, stone-carved throne. Hades was clothed in flowing robes the colour of a December night and bones bleached in the sun, with an ornate sceptre in his hand and a heavy, iron key hanging on his waist. To the kids’ surprise, Cerberus sat by the footrest; compared to the god, he seemed no bigger than a German Shepard. When the heavy gaze of the Underworld’s ruler settled on the three of them, Nadira shivered.

– Hello... – she started uncertainly, trying to ensure her voice would not shake. – We’re very sorry for visiting without an invitation. My name is Nadira, and this is my sibling, Alex. We promised to help Mr. Orpheus...

– Son of Calliope – words gentle as the morning light flew through the hall, slightly off-setting the overwhelming, wet chill. The delicate scent of flowers and fresh fruits filled the air as a slender silhouette, wrapped in similarly flowing robes but emanating warmth, formed next to the shadowy god. She would have seemed out of place if not for her divine calm and the hand resting tenderly on Hades’ shoulder. – I have met your wife already.

– Eurydice! – The busker wallowed painfully, falling to his knees in front of the godly couple. – Mighty Hades, gracious Persephone, I’ve come before you to beg; let me take her back to the world of the living. My heart bleeds when she’s not with me.

– Silence, mortal – Hades’ cold command echoed amongst the columns, and Cerberus growled in warning. – The place of the dead is here, on the Stygian shores. How dare you suggest that your suffering and your grief deserve more compassion than all others whose loved ones have passed under my care already?

– I... – the words froze in Orpheus’ throat. His hands shook so much as he looked down that he almost dropped the lyre. But maybe this exact motion, the dance of flames reflecting in the ornately carved wood, reminded the kids of the instruments’ existence.

They glanced at each other in understanding, and when Nadira nodded, her younger sibling moved closer to the busker, whispering into his ear.

– Mr. Orpheus, why don’t you play for them?

Initially, it seemed that the man did not hear anything. And then, he tugged at the strings experimentally. The sound they created was ugly and grating; it was cut short quickly as the busker frowned and sighed deeply, trailing his finger along the instrument’s decorations. The entire palace, even the souls crowding the corners, held its breath in anticipation as a whole eternity passed through those few seconds of silence before Orpheus closed his eyes and began playing again. Delicate melody flowed through the shadows, and between the torches, it wrapped around the beating hearts of the adventurers and the immortal souls of the dead; lightly like smoke, it brushed over the marble floors and even touched the waters of the Styx that froze in place, listening.

The music was not accompanied by any words. Yet, in the realm of the dead there was not one being who would not have been able to feel what the melody expressed.

And played Orpheus about suffering, the world falling into pieces, and a smile growing cold on his beloved’s lips; about trees whispering on a sunny day and the warmth of joined hands; about promises whispered under the stars and sworn in front of witnesses. He played about tears and grief, fog covering his heart, and longing so powerful that even the Erinyes – three vengeful sisters armed with snakelike whips, circling behind the travellers – began to weep.

When the Thracian musician eventually dropped the lyre, its strings were now stained with blood from his fingers; silence filled the Underworld.

Persephone's hand squeezed tighter around her husband's shoulder.

– Let's give them a second chance – she whispered, tears glistening in her eyes.

– Please, sir – Nadira added shyly, and Alex sniffed, pressing themselves in to their sister's side.

For a long while, Hades did not speak. Then, he leaned forward a little, as if inspecting the suffering busker, and tipped the sceptre held in a bony hand. It seemed that even the restless flames of the torches froze motionlessly, awaiting the god's decision.

– Love and courage are powerful forces. And you have the support of these two young humans, who so bravely crossed the lands of the dead with you. I will allow your beloved to return but under one condition. – The King of the Underworld paused for a moment. His abyssal gaze seemed to encompass not just Orpheus himself but all of his thoughts, fears, and hopes. – She will walk behind you, unable to say a word, and you will have to lead her out without looking back. If you turn around even once, Eurydice will remain in my realm forever.

Although Orpheus shuddered, he did not hesitate.

– I accept, mighty Hades. I will lead her safely and I swear not to look back until the sun shines above our heads again.

– Let love and determination guide you, son of Calliope – Persephone's soft voice carried a touch of life and hope, harmoniously balancing her husband's cold solemnity. – The journey ahead of you is not easy; I wish you the best of luck.

When she finished speaking, she smiled and placed her hand on Hades' shoulder once more, just as he tipped his sceptre again. Thick, milk-coloured fog that smelled like fresh herbs crawled out from the shadows and slowly formed the shape of a woman in a flowy dress and hair braided in a somewhat old-fashioned way. Nadira thought that if she ever saw her on the street, she probably wouldn't pay much attention to her – but Orpheus brightened up as if the sun just rose after a long winter night.

– Eurydice! – he exclaimed, reaching out to her. Yet she, still bound by the Underworld's powers, could only smile. Although she did try to touch him as well, the tips of her fingers faded into the fog. – Eurydice... – Orpheus repeated quietly and fell into himself, for a moment resembling the pile of the discarded clothes the kids initially mistook him for.

Seeing his sadness, Alex glanced at their sister. In response, Nadira grabbed their hand, still reassuringly warm despite the limp, cold shadows of the dead surrounding them, and tried to smile.

– Everything will be alright – she began, shyly, but when Persephone nodded in encouragement, she raised her voice a bit more. – You have to believe in that.

– We've come so far; the way back will be a lot easier – Alex added, glancing curiously at Eurydice, who waved to them in response.

Orpheus did not reply. Holding tightly onto his lyre, he looked once more at the godly couple and then at his beloved wife – he seemed uncertain, convinced that she would disappear within a blink of an eye, but, slowly, quiet determination seeped into his posture. He exhaled calmly, straightened up, and when Persephone's voice once more echoed in the hall, he was almost ready to leave.

– It's time for you to go – the goddess announced. Although her tone remained calm, a sense of urgency also lingered in it, a kind of subtle order that made the kids want to start running immediately. They held off, though, not wanting to leave Orpheus behind.

The musician kneeled for a moment.

– Thank you. Your graciousness...

– Has its limits – Hades interrupted him, tapping the end of his sceptre against the marble floor. The sound echoed between the columns, accompanying the order. – Go now, and do not look back.

No one dared to delay any longer, hardly wishing to risk the stern god's wrath. Alex and Nadira turned around first, holding each other's hands tightly and trying to avoid looking at the spectres gathered under cracked porticos, or at the road ahead, dark and seemingly endless. When they took the first step forward, somewhere behind them echoed the already-familiar melody of the lyre – Orpheus had to have been following behind them then. Did Eurydice accompany him? They dared not check.



Hades' palace disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. The familiar paleness of the meadow returned in its place, with grass crumbling underneath their feet, the clouded sky, and the sense of emptiness, its incapacitating power warded off

only by the quiet, constant strumming of the lyre which aided the travellers' courage. The Thracian musician stayed silent, though, and the kids did not want to talk. Each step required more and more energy, and the thought of opening their mouths and forcing themselves to conjure trivial joyfulness felt too difficult. And anyway, it wouldn't fit in with the howling of the wind and the uncertainty that dragged behind them ever since they walked out of the labyrinth of shadowy columns of the Underworld palace.

How much time has passed since then? Nadira wondered, but finding an answer proved too difficult. The landscape barely changed, and although she was exhausted by the travel, she could not recall if she had ever felt any differently. A ruthlessly terrifying thought snuck into her mind.

– What if we're lost? – she whispered to Alex, trying to ensure the busker wouldn't hear her.

– We're not. – Her sibling shook their head, pushing onwards with determination. – Remember what Persephone said? She wished us luck, and she's some kind of a queen here or something.

– Well, yes, but... – Nadira trailed off, glancing at the ground.

A sharp piece of a rock peeked out from amongst the frozen blades of grass – it was pale-grey and uneven, as if broken off from a larger piece. It was just a slight disruption of the familiar monotony, but it quickly became an omen of much more meaningful changes. With every step, the grass underneath their feet turned more sparse and the ground harder and steeper until it finally transformed into the rocky side of a mountain, on which a path leading towards the peak was only barely outlined. The previously difficult journey became deathly dangerous, as just one careless step could result in a fall into the bottomless chasm.

Alex and Nadira, then, walked one right behind the other, carefully setting their feet and trying not to think too much about neither the road left behind, nor the vastness they had yet to cross through. Focusing on each next step was a lot easier and slowly, the kids even managed to find a shred of a rhythm in their march, an element of repetitiveness that gave them more confidence and awakened the hope that maybe, if only they would manage to stick to the path, they would eventually return to the world of the living.

Perhaps this very feeling nearly made them fail to notice when Orpheus' music suddenly stopped. Instead of the familiar melody, a heart-wrenching wail erupting

from a pained throat vibrated in the air – it almost sounded like Eurydice's name and the sound of wood hitting stone accompanied it. Caught off-guard, Nadira and Alex turned around.

The lyre of Orpheus lay abandoned on the edge of the path, and the musician himself was kneeling on the hard stones, arms outstretched towards his slowly disappearing wife. The outline of her body quickly began to resemble a puff of breath in the winter chill. Although she was still smiling, her gaze was rapidly turning absent, empty – fitting for the blurring features, which first lost all individual traits and then disappeared altogether. With another gust of wind blowing by, the fog dispersed as if it was never there.

Alex bit their lip and grasped their sister's hand, not knowing what to do. She wasn't sure either whether she should say or do something, so she held her breath in the hope that Eurydice would soon return. That did not happen. The wind calmed down, the monotony of the realm of the dead settled heavily over the kids' hearts again, and in the sunless light, the tears rolling down Orpheus' cheeks resembled shards of glass.

– She... – his whisper was so quiet that it was barely audible. – I tripped, and I wanted to see if she was alright. I didn't want to...

Neither of the siblings knew how to respond. Carefully, Nadira picked up the lyre and smoothed her palm over the carved wood, trying to shake off the dust clinging to it as if the gesture could somehow fix the whole situation.

– I didn't want to... Didn't want... – Orpheus kept repeating, rocking back and forth to the rhythm of his own words.

One of his tears fell onto the stony ground, which suddenly resembled the grey cement of an underground passage. Thick walls and a low ceiling filled with fluorescent lamps surrounded the frozen trio, cutting them off from the mountains and chasms. The tumult of Warsaw's mundanity filled the air: patters of feet and the muffled announcement of a delayed train to Cracow repeated through raspy speakers. Somewhere far away, someone laughed.

Nadira hugged the lyre, and her sibling gently touched Orpheus' shoulder, trying to get his attention.

– I think Eurydice did not return with us – the words did not seem the best, but Alex did not know what else they could have said. – We're sorry. We know how much you miss her.

Nadira nodded, walking closer and quietly offering the instrument. Yet the musician did not move, and it almost seemed as if he could not notice the world around him, tear-filled eyes trained on the non-existent emptiness in which Eurydice disappeared. A minute passed, then another, and only when the girl offered him the lyre for the second time, did Orpheus stir back to life, shaking hands wrapping around the familiar object.

– That’s too small of a word – he whispered, more to himself than to the kids. – Too small of a word...

– We understand – Alex nodded with an unusual seriousness, glancing at their sister.

– We once had to leave someone, too. – The explanation was hardly perfect, but Nadira did not want to recall the memories that made her wake up with tears at night. It was a different story for a different time. – But did you hear what our grandma said?

– In our hearts and memories, we’ll always be together – Alex reminded, smiling at the thought of their relative. – It’s not the same as meeting again, but it’s so much better than nothing.

The musician remained silent for a while, looking down at the instrument and tracing over a scratch that wasn’t there before.

– Maybe... – When he spoke, his voice was still somewhat muffled, though a bit clearer than before. – Thank you. For the help, for everything. But now...

– He trailed off for a moment and, after wiping away his tears, looked the kids in the eyes with a shadow of a smile. – But now I need to be alone for a bit. Maybe we’ll see each other again.

– Goodbye! – The kids said at the same time.

– Don’t forget that Eurydice will always be with you – added Nadira. – And we will also think about you often!

Orpheus nodded to them once more. Then, he turned around, tugged at the strings of the lyre, and headed right into the crowd surrounded by its delicate, longing melody. Although for a moment longer, Nadira and Alex could still spot the glimpses of his ruffled hair amongst the rushing pedestrians, he quickly disappeared from their view. Yet his music stayed. It echoed in the sleepy whistling of a woman dragging her luggage towards a train platform, in the song flowing from the station’s speakers, and Alex was even convinced that they could hear it in the cooing of the pigeons perched high up under the roof.



– Let’s go – their sister’s voice shook them out of their thoughts. – We have to make it back in time for dinner.

– Oh, right – Alex started walking towards the exit onto the street but paused for a moment. – Do you think that he will always be this sad?

– Maybe – answering, Nadira frowned. – But sadness isn’t always bad. I think that the more we miss someone, the more love we still carry for them.

– You sound almost as smart as grandma!

Nadira laughed in response, pulling her sibling towards the escalator. When they both stood on it safely and the orange glow of streetlamps was drawing closer slowly, a sense of sleepiness wrapped around them and Alex leaned into their sister, quietly whistling the mysterious busker’s song. Nadira’s fingers began to tap the same rhythm against the dark railing and for that short moment, Warsaw felt just a little less foreign to them.



A note about the illustrations

All illustrations were created with Canva and Adobe Photoshop programs, utilising the following materials:

- ▣ graphic and English text-based elements from the Elements and Applications sections in the Canva database, <https://www.canva.com> (accessed: 29.01.2024–30.01.2024);
- ▣ fragments of Jan Parandowski’s *Mitologia*, London: Puls Publications, 1992;
- ▣ a photo of the exit from the metro station Nowy Świat – Uniwersytet taken by Marta Pszczolińska;
- ▣ a photo of the Greek vase 1846, 0925.10 from the British Museum’s catalogue of vases, *Orpheus among the Thracians*, Attic, ca. 430 BC, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1846-0925-10 (accessed: 21.03.2024);
- ▣ a photo of the Greek vase 1885, 1213.18 from the British Museum’s catalogue of vases, *Sappho*, Attic, ca. 450 BC, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1885-1213-18 (accessed: 21.03.2024);
- ▣ a photo of the Greek vase Cp 66; E 701 from Musée de Louvre collection, taken by Hervé Lewandowski, *Heracles and Cerberus*, Cerveteri, ca. 525 BC, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010268296> (accessed: 21.03.2024).

Krzysztof Rybak

AFTERWORD

What connects modern Syrian siblings and the mythic musician Orpheus? It seems the common denominator is trauma that accompanies them after their loss: not only their relatives, but also their place in the world. Without Eurydice, the Thracian musician resembles the shadow of a man, and to meet again with his loved one, he is ready to go to the Underworld, the most frightening place in Greek mythology. Nadira and Alex miss not only their late grandmother but also their parents and home in Syria, from which they had to flee to Poland.

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice becomes a story about the acknowledgment of loss and a difficult past in the story by Anna Baranek and Veranika Dzemyanovich. It is not easy, many times you have to go underground, but this dangerous journey – not really the deep one into the tunnels of Warsaw’s Defilady Square or to mythic Hades, but inside yourself – is necessary. Coming to terms with the past is for Orpheus, as well as for Alex and Nadira, a way to carry on in life, which could not be so easy but must be faced. Fortunately, nobody is left alone: music helps some of them, for others it is their relatives.



After reading the story “Music of Souls”, you can think about the following questions:

- ▣ What, besides the loss of relatives, connects modern protagonists and the mythic musician?
- ▣ What helps Alex and Nadira find themselves after moving to a new place?
- ▣ What aspects of the story do the illustrations emphasize? How do they make you feel?

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Maciej Adamczyk

HEARTH AND HOME



From the author

My name is Maciek, I am a student of Cultural Studies – Mediterranean Civilization at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” at the University of Warsaw. In my story I wanted to touch upon a largely undervalued topic in Greek mythology. In my view, however, it is one of the most universal ones, aptly showing the real power of myths. And how is that?

You’ll find out while reading...

Glossary of mythological terms

- Apollo** – the god of poets and fortune tellers (Jan Parandowski, *Mitologia. Wierzenia i podania Greków i Rzymian*, Wydawnictwo Puls, Londyn, 1992, p. 68);
- Demeter** – the goddess of abundance, agriculture, and nature (Parandowski, *Mitologia*, p. 110);
- Dryads** – woodland goddesses, tree nymphs (Parandowski, *Mitologia*, p. 133);
- Hades** – the god of the Underworld, the land of the dead (Parandowski, *Mitologia*, p. 148);
- Hera** – the goddess of motherhood, marriage, and family (Parandowski, *Mitologia*, p. 62);
- Hermes** – the god of merchants, shepherds, and thieves, messenger of the gods (Parandowski, *Mitologia*, p. 79);
- Hestia** – the goddess of hearth and home and family life (Parandowski, *Mitologia*, pp. 108–109);
- Nestor** – a Trojan war hero, experienced advisor (Parandowski, *Mitologia*, p. 239);
- Poseidon** – the god of the sea (Parandowski, *Mitologia*, p. 138);
- Socrates** – a philosopher living in ancient Athens in the 5th century BC;
- Zeus** – the god of storm, thunder, and sky, the most important of the Greek gods (Parandowski, *Mitologia*, p. 55).



Hestia did not need temples or altars. Her temple was in each home, her altar in each hearth. Whenever bright flames crackled from between dry branches, it was as if the image of the goddess shone bright.

Jan Parandowski,
Mitologia. Wierzenia i podania Greków i Rzymian,
Wydawnictwo Puls, Londyn, 1992, p. 109.



A snowflake landed on her nose as soon as she stepped outside. As quietly as she could, she closed the door behind her and gently let go of the doorknob. Her heart was pounding. A rhythmic ‘bam-bam, bam-bam’ drowned out the silent scrunching of the snow under her feet. In the faint moonlight, Angela could see some shrubbery against the tall fence. Further out extended dense pine woods – a place where one could escape the standard fare and just for a moment feel as if in some magical land.

– Stan?! Stan?! Are you here?! – she called quietly as she approached the fence.

– Quiet! I’m over here – she heard her younger brother whispering in the bushes, and a moment later saw his ruddy face in a blue hat. – Do you want someone to hear us?

– Alright, alright, I’m glad you’re here.

– Has anyone seen you?

– No, definitely not. We can go now. – She looked back once again. – It’s just the footprints...

– Don’t worry, it’s supposed to snow all night. They’ll be gone by the morning. – Stan fixed his scarf and pulled his hat down over his ears. – Ready?

Angela glanced at the dark building behind them. None of the windows had any light in them. All the residents were asleep.

– Yes, let’s go.

The children crawled under the shrubbery all the way to the fence. Gropingly, Angela found a familiar board, which had to be pried in a very specific spot to come undone. It let them create a gate, a passage to another world. The girl smiled having thought that she would be there in just a moment.



The twelve-year-old girl could barely fit through the gap in the fence, but very soon she was already on the other side. She got up and shuddered, a bit of snow got into her shoe and tickled her ankle with the iciness. She turned around to help her brother, only to find that Stan had already made it through. For an agile and petite boy like him, such a challenge was a piece of cake.

The cloudless sky was lit up brightly with the moon, and so the forest was not lost in pitch darkness, even despite the late hours of the night-time. What's more, the stark white snow reflected the light, making it easier for the children to walk. *How many times we've come here?* – Angela thought. The girl remembered the grin and the spark in Stan's eyes when he had told her about discovering the loose fence board two months ago. As he had shown her, they had both been elated. They'd even hugged, for the first time in a very long time. Since then, trips to the woods have become their favourite adventures. They would sneak out whenever they could. They loved wandering about amidst the trees. Stan, who read books about nature all day every day, could talk to his sister about interesting facts about each of the trees and bushes. But it was

the animals he loved the most. Whenever he would spot a squirrel or a woodpecker up high, he would gaze at them in amazement and smile broadly.

Now, in the winter, it was harder to spot animals. The children could have snowball fights instead. They almost always ended in a tie – despite Angela's good aim, her brother always dodged at the last moment. She had only managed to hit him once. She now remembered that moment and Stan's face when the snow melted under his collar. Now, this memory made her burst out laughing.



– What is it? – Stan asked perplexed.

– It's nothing, it's just that... – she suddenly paused as she saw some movement in the snow. – Look! – She pointed to a small grey shape in the bushes. – Something's moved there.

As if to warrant her words, the shape moved again, and soon after a quiet squeak could be heard.

– It's a hedgehog! – Stan explained as he instantly recognised the animal. They came a bit closer, but the hedgehog didn't run, it just shivered.

– I guess it's cold – said Angela and she kneeled in the snow. – I've never seen a hedgehog in the winter. Shouldn't it be in its winter sleep?

– It should be – Stan said. – Hedgehogs can't handle such low temperatures.

– Do you think we could warm it up? Can I hold it?

– I don't know... – Stan frowned. – Wild animals should not be touched. But I don't know how to help it.

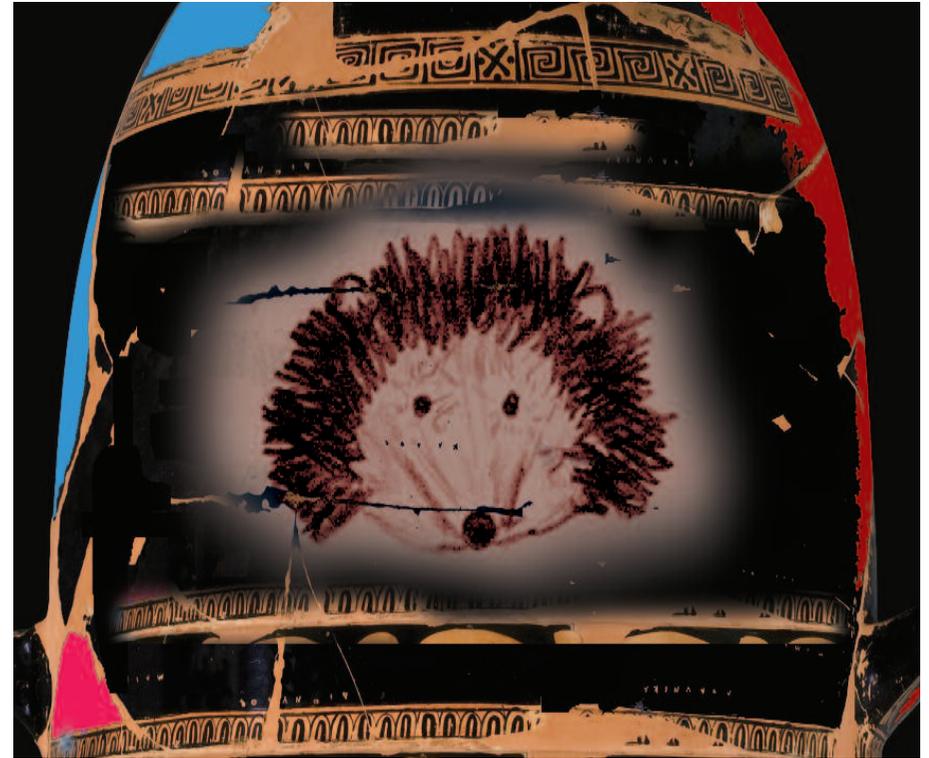
– What if I hold it through a scarf?

– I guess we have no choice.

Angela quickly took off her colourful scarf and gently wrapped the hedgehog in it. *The scarf, gloves, that might be enough* – she tried to comfort herself in her thoughts. *I hope the tiny one won't freeze.* The little hedgehog shivered again. *It is so tiny* – she kept worrying. *So fragile, alone in the dangerous world, just like... No!* – she stopped the dark thought and hugged the animal. She was careful when handling it. She just wanted to give it some warmth and protect it from the cold.

– We need to help it – Stan said decisively, and Angela nodded in agreement.

– In such a freeze it cannot survive once out of its winter sleep – her brother said. – It should be lying somewhere in a small, warm burrow, under a tree root or a pile of leaves. – Angela felt like the boy was struggling not to burst out crying. – Before winter, hedgehogs stockpile food and hibernate. But since it's awake...



– We'll help it – she calmed her brother.

– But how? We cannot bring it home. Wild animals shouldn't be taken away from the forest, and besides, if Mrs Christine found a hedgehog, she would have us throw it away – Stan's voice quivered.

– Mrs Christine is not so bad – Angela tried to defend their carer. – She... she just follows the rules too much.

Stan snarled at his sister. He didn't like Mrs Christine. Although she tried to be nice to them, he always considered her efforts to be forced. And she always tried to hug them goodnight, which Stan has never liked. He would hardly even hug his sister. Though Angela often wanted to embrace her brother, over time she realised that he didn't feel comfortable with it.

– Is it just me, or is there some kind of light over there?

– No – said Stan. – It's not just you, I see it too.

- Maybe it’s a house. They could help us warm up the hedgehog.
- I’m not so sure.
- Come on. We’ll just go and see.

After a moment it turned out that the light came from no house. In the middle of the forest, in a small clearing, a bright fire burned, and next to the fire, a petite woman sat on the trunk of a fallen tree. The children observed the clearing from a safe distance behind the trees. *Why would someone be sitting here by a fire, this late?* – Angela wondered. Stan was also suspicious.

- What if it’s a Baba Yaga?
- Come on, Stan! Baba Yagas don’t exist – replied Angela.

Right now, however, in the dark forest, seeing the dark figure, some part of Angela did believe in evil Baba Yaga witches. And that part of Angela was telling her to run as fast as she could. But the girl overcame her fear and calmly said:

– We have to help the hedgehog, and over there we could warm him up by the fire. But you are right, it would be irresponsible to approach any stranger you meet in the forest at night-time. – Stan nodded. – That’s why we’ll be careful – Angela continued. – We’ll come a little bit closer, slowly and quietly. We’ll just get a good look and then we’ll decide.

They were approaching the clearing little by little. They could now clearly see the woman sitting on the tree trunk. Close up she seemed even smaller than they thought. The fire was surrounded by a ring of green grass coming through from under the melted snow. A couple of squirrels were sitting calmly on a branch, and Stan thought that he could even see a roe deer at the edge of the light given by the fire.

- She doesn’t look so scary up close. Look, animals don’t fear her – said Stan.

Angela, who earlier tried to calm down her brother, was now having second thoughts.

– Maybe it’s not a good idea to come up to a stranger lady in the middle of the forest – she whispered.

– Maybe not, but you said yourself the hedgehog needs some warmth – Stan reminded. – Let’s go! – Once the boy decided on something, not even a Baba Yaga could stop him.

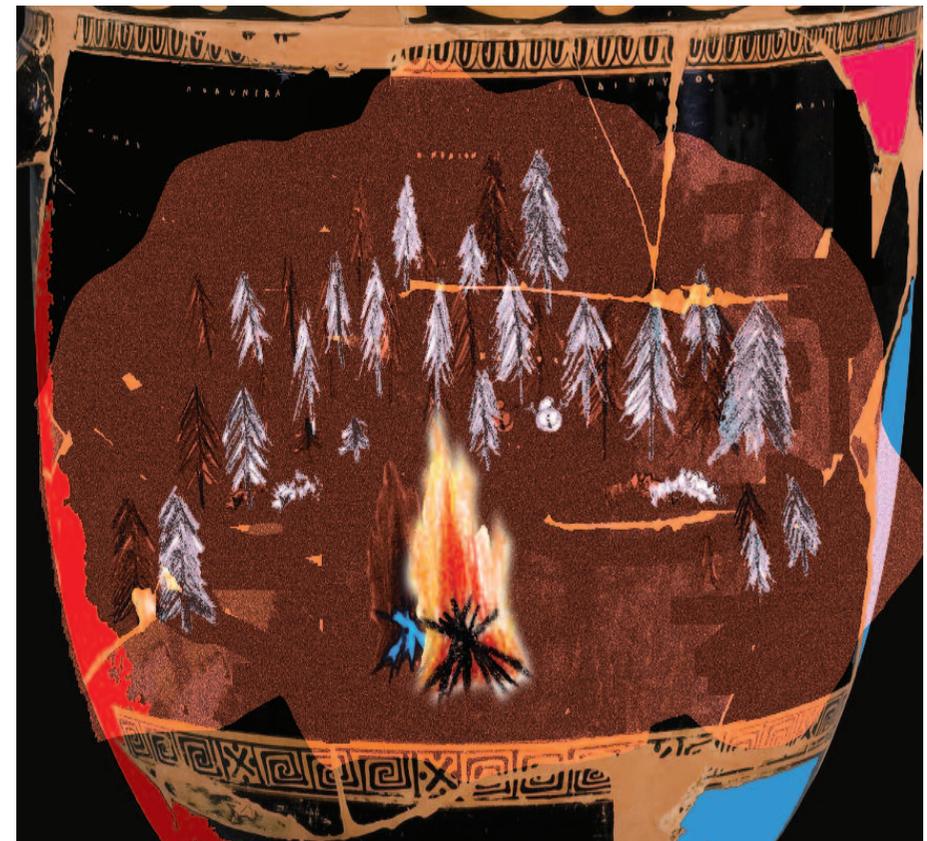
He confidently walked into the clearing, but he hesitated under the woman’s gaze. It is one thing to step out of the bushes, but starting a conversation with a stranger – now that’s a scary challenge.

- Ma’am... – his voice cracked in his throat.

– Ma’am! – Angela took over from her brother. – You have to help us! We found a hedgehog in the forest, it’s really cold, and when we saw the fire...

– the girl paused to catch a breath, but didn’t get to finish. The stranger spoke in a calm, warm tone.

– Of course, children. Do not fear, I’m going to help you. Come on, warm yourselves by the fire. – She showed them to a spot next to her. – Sit down, make yourselves comfortable – she smiled kindly. – My name is Hestia. Would you like some tea?



She passed them two mugs and filled them with an aromatic drink from her thermos. Angela thought that the container was too small to hold enough tea for the three of them. However, Hestia filled their mugs to the brim.

– Mrs Hestia... – Stan spoke nervously, but was interrupted by the woman's gesture.

– You can call me 'Auntie Hestia' – she said with a soft smile. Her voice was extraordinarily warm. When hearing it, the children felt like drinking hot chocolate: it warmed their hearts and uplifted their spirits.

– Auntie Hestia, what are you doing here alone in the woods? It is night-time, and it is freezing too...

– Oh! How kind of you to worry about me, Stan – Hestia was touched. – But you need not worry about me, it is never cold by the fire. And I think it is obvious what I'm doing, I'm waiting for you. – The children looked at each other bewildered: waiting for them? How? – And most importantly, I'm keeping the fire alive. I am the guardian of the hearth, where anyone can find shelter and warmth.

As if to legitimise her words, the hedgehog cuddled up by Hestia's feet, and it seemed to the children that the warmth of the fire was helping it. Angela sighed with relief. *So we did it* – she thought. Maybe she didn't expect such an adventure as she squeezed through the gap in the fence, but most importantly they helped the little hedgehog. She could now get a better look at the stranger. She was quite short. She was wearing a yellow woollen jumper, which made her look like a cartoon character. Her cheeks were red and her eyes glistened with the flame of the campfire, on her head, she had on an orange hat with a pom-pom on top. The girl realised that just a second ago, Hestia had spoken to Stan using his name, even though they had never introduced themselves. She frowned at that thought. It all seemed so strange, and yet she didn't feel uneasy. If Hestia helped the hedgehog and the other animals don't fear her, perhaps they can also relax by the fire.

– Do you like the tea? – Hestia asked.

– Yees! A lot!

– Wonderful, I'm very glad. I wasn't sure if you like herbals. I got it from my sister not too long ago. She picked and dried the leaves herself. She's always had a green thumb, and lately, it seems she's been experimenting with tea. – Hestia giggled. – But no wonder. There's nothing quite like tea for the long winter nights.

Stan felt warmed from the hot drink, he sighed with relief and blissfully rested his head on his sister's shoulder. Hestia sighed.

– You are such lovely siblings, my dear children. – Hestia's eyes glistened with cheerful sparks. Stan smiled in embarrassment, trying to hide it under his scarf.

– And you, Mrs... – Angela started,

– Auntie – Hestia interrupted her, giggling.

– Do you have any siblings, Auntie? – the girl asked, embracing her brother with her arm.

– Oh yes! Five siblings, all younger than me. Two sisters and three brothers. And a lot of cousins and aunties and uncles. It's a very big family. A little crazy. – Hestia laughed. – Perhaps absolutely crazy. My sister Demeter is the one who gave me the tea. She's such a lovely woman, she just can't handle the winters. But in the spring, who knows, you might meet her and run around on the meadows with her daughter. – Hestia smiled ever more, and seeing that the children could also not help smiling. – Hera, on the other hand, might seem a little uptight. She doesn't frolic around in the fields, not even on sunny days. She's rather serious. – Hestia lowered her voice and frowned comically. Stan burst out laughing. – Day to day she is calm, but better not to get under her skin. But then she is also family-minded, kind and caring, almost like me!

Hestia leaned toward the children to refill their tea.

– And my brothers, well, they're also rather serious, but not always as calm. Especially Zeus and Poseidon. Sometimes when they fight, electricity sparks about. And the earth can quake too. Luckily they always make up and have a laugh about it. – Hestia pondered for a while. – It's just Hades who stays aloof. He's a loner, partly by choice, but partly because he is misunderstood.

A shame really, because he is such a fascinating person. Oh, and you should see his garden... – Hestia fell quiet again, gazing at the night sky, but soon faced the children again with her radiant smile. – Yes. I have amazing siblings, I cannot wait for the solstice, which is when I get to see them all. Not just them. A lot of my cousins are coming. I wonder what prank my nephew's going to do. Not sure if you know, Hermes is the best at tricks and jokes and pranks. One day his half-brother Apollo was sunbathing while watching a herd of cows. I would prefer a dog for a pet, but to each his own, I guess. Anyway, when Apollo focused on the sunbathing rather than the cow-watching, Hermes snuck in and stole all his brother's cows! Oh, how surprised Apollo was when he woke up from his nap! – Hestia's eyes were full of joyful sparks. – But keep listening, the joke's not over. Hermes knew that Apollo would wake up soon, so he covered all trails so that even Apollo couldn't find them, and he had eyes like a hawk, trust me! – Hestia laughed loudly. The children were smiling looking at her. – Ah, it's so nice talking to you that I've completely lost track of time. It's getting late, and I still haven't told you how proud of you I am.

– But we haven't done anything... – Stan blushed.

– You helped the little hedgehog, you brought him to the hearth. He will be safe here. And soon, in the spring, when Demeter gets her joy back, when the dryads come out of hiding, the hedgehog will run around happily in the bushes and look for worms in the grass. – Hestia leaned toward the hedgehog, which cuddled at her feet, napping on its back and showing its belly. – I'm sure he's dreaming of treats. – She winked at the siblings. Seeing the sleeping animals, the children couldn't help yawning. – I guess you might need some sleep too, my dear children!

Angela didn't want to admit it, but she yawned again. Stan saw that and, this time, showed how caring he was.

– I guess we do need some rest.

– But we don't want to say goodbye, Auntie – Angela protested.

– My dear, we are not saying goodbye forever. There will always be a place for you at my hearth. And I will always welcome you with my arms open.

– And same to you, I mean with us... I mean, we will always welcome you at our... – Stan's tongue was twisting as he floundered to respond.

– Thank you, Stan – Hestia smiled kindly. – I am certain we will meet again.

The children hugged Hestia. When they hugged the woman, they felt her gentle warmth.

– Farewell, my dears – Hestia whispered. – See you soon.

The snow scrunched under their feet as they walked through the forest holding hands. They had never been so tired and yet so happy coming back. They were quite a distance away from the fire, but somehow Angela realised she didn't feel the freeze. And she did remember how freezing it was when they entered the forest.



– Mom! Mom, can you help me?

– Of course, love, what is...? Ah, I see! Sit down on the chair and I'll tie your shoelaces.

– I really like Uncle Stan – the little daughter said suddenly.

– Like him?

– Yeah, He is always so nice. He always tells us so many interesting stories. And so many animals live with him. Socrates always jumps on my lap letting me pet his fur. And he purrs so loudly! Or Nestor, the turtle. Did you know, Mommy, that the turtle's shell is actually its spine? Or that in winter they dig into the ground and hibo... hibernate...

– Hibernate? – Angela hinted.

– Yes, exactly! Uncle Stan told me all this – the child sounded really proud.

– We will all see him soon, love. – Angela finished tying her daughter's shoes and stood up. – Come on, sunshine. Just put on your hat and run to the car, Daddy's waiting.

– Are you coming?

– Yeah, I'm coming – Angela laughed. – Of course, I am; I'll be right behind you – she added softly and smiled. She smiled warmly, just as she did by the fire so many years ago.



Note on the illustrations

▣ All illustrations are my own drawings, done in simple pencil and crayons. They were graphically composed to resemble the style of ancient Greek pottery paintings by Zbigniew Karaszewski.

▣ Photograph of an ancient Greek vase 1885, 1213.18 from the catalogue of The British Museum. *Sappho*, Attica, ca. 450 BC, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1885-1213-18 (accessed: 27.03.2024);

▣ Photograph of an ancient Greek vase by the Briseis Painter, *Apollo and Artemis*, ca. 470 BC, G151, from the collection of Musée du Louvre, picture taken by Marie-Lan Nguyen, Wikimedia Commons: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Apollo_Artemis_Brygos_Louvre_G151.jpg (accessed: 27.03.2024);

▣ Photograph of an ancient Greek vase depicting Hestia holding a chaste tree branch, Oltos (attributed), Tarquinia National Museum, Beazley 200502, Wikimedia Commons: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hestia#/media/File:Hestia.jpg> (accessed 27.03.2024).

Krzysztof Rybak

AFTERWORD

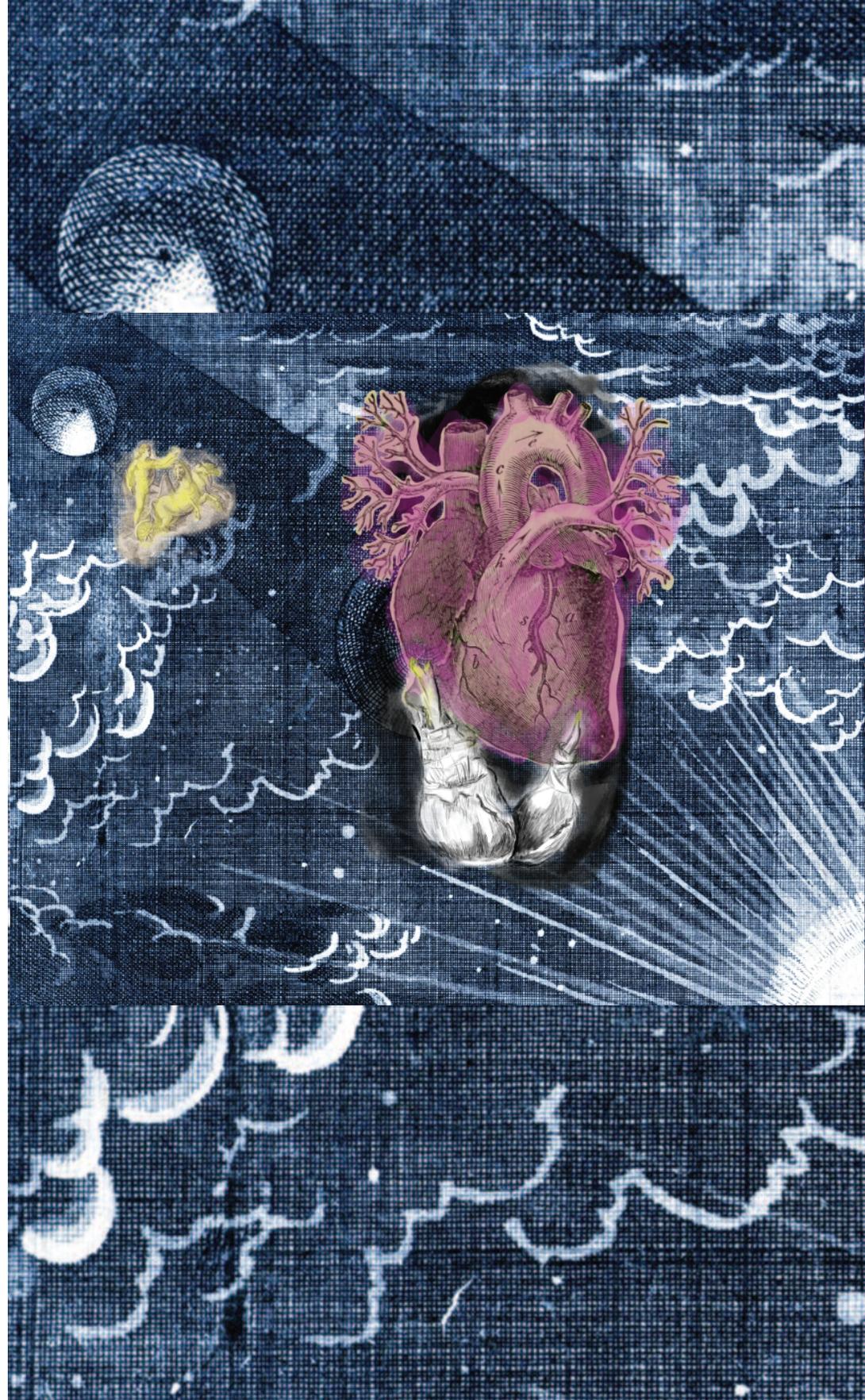
Although mythical beings often seem distant from our reality, they can be an emanation of ordinary human feelings. Such is the case of Hestia, the goddess of hearth and home, who embodies the care and warmth which we bestow on others. Similarly to our ancient ancestors, both Angela and Stan find their own place, a place of safety for them, but also for a small hedgehog they encounter along the way. The fire lit by Hestia warms all beings around it who need a moment of respite from the difficult reality.

Maciej Adamczyk created a depiction of the goddess Hestia which is very close to her ancient image, but simultaneously resonates with the sensitivity of today's readers. Because everyone seeks a place of safety. "Hearth and Home" shows us that a Greek myth can be offered both to children characters, most likely orphans, who were also looked after by Hestia, as well as to animals, and thus all beings living on Earth. The message is important not only because of the ecological awareness associated with the need of all beings to coexist harmoniously but also because of the care that humans should take in respecting the natural world that surrounds us.



After reading the story "Hearth and Home" you might want to think about the following questions:

- ▣ What do the experiences of the human and animal characters have in common?
- ▣ How did the meeting with Hestia emphasise her character?
- ▣ Which aspects of the story are highlighted by the illustrations? What emotions do they elicit?



Léa Piroird

WHERE THE DAFFODILS GROW



From the author

My name is Léa, I am a student of Artes Liberales at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” at the University of Warsaw. The protagonist of my story is a girl who likes to soak up the sun and observe nature. I would like to take readers on a journey through a dreamy land, full of scents and mysteries. Where is it?

You'll find out while reading...

Glossary of mythological terms

Aidoneus / Hades – one of the Olympian gods, ruler of the Underworld, he sits on his golden throne next to his wife Persephone (Jan Parandowski, *Mitologia. Wierzenia i podania Greków i Rzymian*, Wydawnictwo Puls, Londyn, 1992, p. 148);

Aeolus – the ruler of the winds in Greek mythology, he dwelled on the island of Aeolia, and was a favourite friend of the gods (Parandowski, *Mitologia*, p. 106);

Hermes – the son of Zeus and Maia, the messenger of the gods. The god of thieves, shepherds, travellers, and merchants (Parandowski, *Mitologia*, pp. 79–82);

Demeter – one of the earth goddesses, sister of Zeus, the goddess of harvest; her attributes are ears of grain and a golden sickle (Parandowski, *Mitologia*, pp. 110–116);

Kore / Persephone – the daughter of Demeter and Zeus, the goddess of the Underworld, her attributes are poppies and pomegranates (Parandowski, *Mitologia*, pp. 110–116);

Thracian singer – Orpheus was the king of Thrace, widely renowned for his beautiful singing (Parandowski, *Mitologia*, pp. 151–153);

Daffodil – a flower that in ancient Greece symbolised dream. It also was considered a sign of the spring, fertility, and Persephone (Anna Kaczan, *Narcyz*, <https://phavi.umcs.pl/at/attachments/2023/0428/085346-narcyz.pdf>, accessed: 29.03.2024).



[...] in their white petals sleeps desire, and their scent turns thoughts away from heaven. Suddenly, the earth birthed a flower that the sun had never seen. A hundred heads sprouted from a single root, flared with golden spathes, and the reeded edges of the white petals burned bright scarlet. A wonderful fragrance filled the sky, and permeated the earth to the salty depths of the sea until all the Nereids rose from their emerald beds and exclaimed: "Ah!"

Jan Parandowski,
Mitologia. Wierzenia i Podania Greków i Rzymian,
Wydawnictwo Puls, Londyn, 1992, p. 110.

*From the stars we come, to the stars we go.
Life is [...] but a journey into the unknown.*

Walter Moers,
The City of Dreaming Books, The Overlook Press, 2008, p. 48.



It was a beautiful morning. A cold day was beginning. The sun illuminated the frost wrapped around the branches and the snow crunched pleasantly with every step. Moreover, it was Friday – the last day of school for the week.

Leaning against the cold windowsill, I watched January clouds lazily drifting across the sky. Suddenly, light spilled into the shaded corridor, and the old oak floor was covered with golden patches. Groups of people scattered around the floor were absorbed in conversation. They reminded me of bees in a hive that starts buzzing from the pleasant warmth, enlivened by the good weather. The cheerful noise heralded a wonderful end to the week. I began to plan how to make the most of the approaching weekend. Maybe play hide-and-seek with my hamster? Or perhaps bake a cake? Flavoured...

– Alisa! – the voice of my friend snapped me out of my pondering thoughts. – Did you finish your homework for the Polish class? Dobiszewska will be mad if she catches you.

I rolled my eyes to show that I wasn't interested at all. Suddenly, the bell rang. A mass of people poured through the narrow door pushing each other, and we entered the classroom. The teacher began the lesson slightly out of breath



after managing to secure a relative silence in the room. Bored with the lesson and the monotonous voice of the teacher, I drifted away, gazing through the window. I returned to contemplating what cake to bake. Carrot or chocolate? I had a serious dilemma ahead of me...

– Pssst! Do you want to be a team?

– What’s going on? – I asked, distracted by the question.

– Oh, drifting off again, are we? – Veronica smiled at me with a tender grin.

– Today’s topic is quite interesting, actually. We have to read about ancient heroes from Parandowski’s book as homework. Now we have to answer question 2 on page 47 in pairs.

– Mhm... – I grunted. – Sure, why not.

– Oh, and there will be a pop quiz next week.

– Again? Is she trying to torture us? – I replied whispering, disappointed that I would have to change my plans.

– I’m not thrilled either, but maybe Dobiszewska is trying to convey something important to us? – my kind-hearted friend asked resolutely.

After class, Veronica and I borrowed copies of Parandowski’s *Mythology* and we headed to the locker room. The janitor kept a strict eye on the change of shoes. She was like a guardian, ready to not let students enter the classroom if they forgot to take off their dirty shoes. More formidable than Cerberus, whom the teacher had mentioned today, she was incorruptible and mercilessly guarded the entrance to the school corridor. Fortunately, thanks to my Grandma, I didn’t forget my indoor shoes this morning, so I avoided a confrontation with Cerberus.

– What are you planning to do this weekend? – Veronica asked, quickly changing her shoes.

– Maybe bake something... Otherwise, I definitely plan to relax and do nothing – I replied. – And you?

– I’m going to the movies with my family today. Ah... I’m not sure if I’ll make it on time, the movie starts in 10 minutes. I have to go now. See you on Monday! – she said, rushing out of the locker room. – Have a nice time baking! – she shouted down the hallway.

I decided not to rush that evening. I closed my green locker. *The end of learning for this week* – I thought to myself, pleased.

January darkness decided to fully settle into the nooks of the streets, even though the city didn’t show any signs of weariness yet. The frosty wind gently nipped at the ankles of passers-by, precisely at the spot where the sock ends and there’s not enough material to cover the chilled skin. Heading home, Alisa observed the traces left on the snow-covered path. There were footprints, cat paw prints, and bird tracks. Each of the creatures went its own way, and although they probably never met, they left behind shared traces. The girl was pleased at the thought that she could participate in this mysterious exchange and also leave her “I am” in the snow. She felt a similar connection with the stars in the sky because since she was little, she was convinced that the twinkling dots in the distance were also a record of existence.

It reminded her of summer vacations spent by the sea when she asked her mom if the stars were also watching her. The peaceful sound of the waves resonated in the silence. Both of them were looking at the vast sky, which merged into the sea like two infinities connected by the night.

– And what do you think, darling? – her mom asked.

– Moom... answering a question with a question isn’t fair! – she replied irritated.

– Sometimes you have to look for the answers within yourself, you know...

– Alright... I feel like the stars exist, too. I mean, they don’t have eyes, but they know I’m here – said Alisa. – I never felt lonely when I looked at the stars. They gave me courage when I was lost, scared, and didn’t know what to do. As if they knew I was here, too. Are stars like us, humans, and also feel?

– Hmm... – her mom pondered. – I don’t know much about that. Some say that we become stars in the sky after life on Earth. Each person who ever existed has a corresponding star in the sky. That’s why there are so many.

– That’s amazing... – The girl looked at the dark, stretching blue above.

A delicate breeze tousled Alisa’s unruly strands of hair, which danced across her face. Above the two wanderers, the sky opened up and countless twinkling grains seemed to have their own answer to the girl’s question.



The door, painted with brown paint, which our neighbour always complained about, appeared before me. I no longer remember why I was thinking about the walk with Mom... Oh yeah, the stars... It was pleasant to enter the building. The warmth wrapped around my heart with its long scarf, my face started to thaw, and the tip of my nose began to sting. I climbed the stairs to the second floor. Luckily, we lived fairly low. I was surprised by the pleasant smell of butter, which poured out of the room when I opened the door. Fruzia greeted me with a meow. I hurried to take off my shoes and tiptoed into the kitchen, to investigate the situation and maybe snatch a couple of cookies. I was just about to lay my hands on the loot when a shadow obscured the light from the kitchen lamp.

– It's not nice to sneak like that – Grandma surprised me, pleased with her trick. I think she deliberately waited to catch me.

– I... It's not like that! – I said. – I'm just checking if they're... not too hot. You know, taking care of you.

– Well, that's lovely! – Grandma chuckled. – In return for your diligent service, you can go to the living room and wait until the last batch is baked. I'll make tea. And then you'll do the dishes.

– Oh Grandma... I don't feel like washing dishes, it's Friday...

– You want cookies? – she chuckled cunningly.

I decided not to risk it. Grandma's little blackmail succeeded. I went to the living room. I slumped on the couch. I glanced at Grandpa, who was comfortably sitting in his armchair, flipping through the large, grey newspaper. He winked at me knowingly.

– Did she catch you? – he whispered conspiratorially.

I rolled my eyes.

– I tried too... – He made a disappointed face. – Next time, we'll succeed!

– We both smiled.

I felt like time was dragging on mercilessly, and the smell coming from the kitchen made me hungry. Luckily, I had lunch at school. I went to my room to feed

Frederick. Fruzia never seemed to be interested in the hamster, but for safety, I always closed the door behind me. Frederick must have sensed that I was about to give him food because he immediately came out of his hut and ran up to me.

At least he doesn't have to wait for treats – I thought, feeling a bit jealous.

I picked up the hamster and gently stroked his tiny back. I unpacked my backpack and, comfortably lying on the bed, started browsing through Parandowski's *Mythology*. "In the beginning, there was C h a o s. Who can say exactly what Chaos was?" – were the first words of the chapter on the *Birth of the World*. Contrary to my initial reluctance, the book turned out to be very interesting. I managed to read the stories of gods and heroes that the teacher in the Polish class required for the quiz.

– Ready! – Grandma called out.

Quickly, I ran out of the room and thanked Grandma for baking the cookies. *Perfect!* – I thought, taking the first bite. Crispy and still warm, the cookie melted in my mouth. The aroma of melted butter settled in my head – I felt how it was enveloping me from the inside. The tension from the whole day left through the window along with the aroma of freshly baked cookies. I sipped my tea and laid down on the couch. Fruzia looked at me with her emerald eyes, signalling that it was time for her nap. I moved the cups from the table so she could climb onto it. She curled up into a fluffy ball next to me.

I looked at the ceiling, listening to the rustle of the newspaper pages turned by Grandpa. Outside, the wind started to howl, slender branches tapping on the window, setting a steady rhythm. Today the RCB Alert came: "Attention! Today and tomorrow there will be very strong winds. Possible transportation difficulties and power outages. Secure loose items". The aroma of cookies slowly gave way to the fragrance of daffodils. *Grandma must have placed scented sachets in the living room* – I thought. Swayed by the sound of the approaching snowstorm, I began to drift away with the wind. *I'll do the dishes in five minutes...* – I promised myself silently.

I was lying with my legs curled up, still feeling the warmth of Fruzia. Getting up from the couch, I stretched my limbs. Still sleepy, I went to wash the dishes. I put the cups away in the old dresser, which creaked while being opened. I went out in front of the building to secure the bike for the night.

I looked around not recognizing the place. Long strands of grass danced in the wind. I turned around, trying to find the street... at least a little hint of the city. I still vividly remembered the street lights mirrored in parked cars and the evenly constructed sidewalk. I looked up and had to close my eyes blinded by the light. Here, the sun was still high. Seeking to rest my eyes from the afterimages dancing under my lids, I gazed upon the fields. Slightly pink, topped with plumes, velvety to the touch. The entire fields were covered with something resembling a wild variety of grass. I went deeper into the lush wilderness. Now, the grasses reached up to my waist.

– Haha... – I chuckled nervously. I felt a sting of anxiety in the ribs, I had no idea where I was. *Alone in this vastness. Impossible. What am I going to do? Where to go?* Thoughts rattled in my head. I was trying to piece together what I was experiencing right now. Disoriented, I started walking ahead.

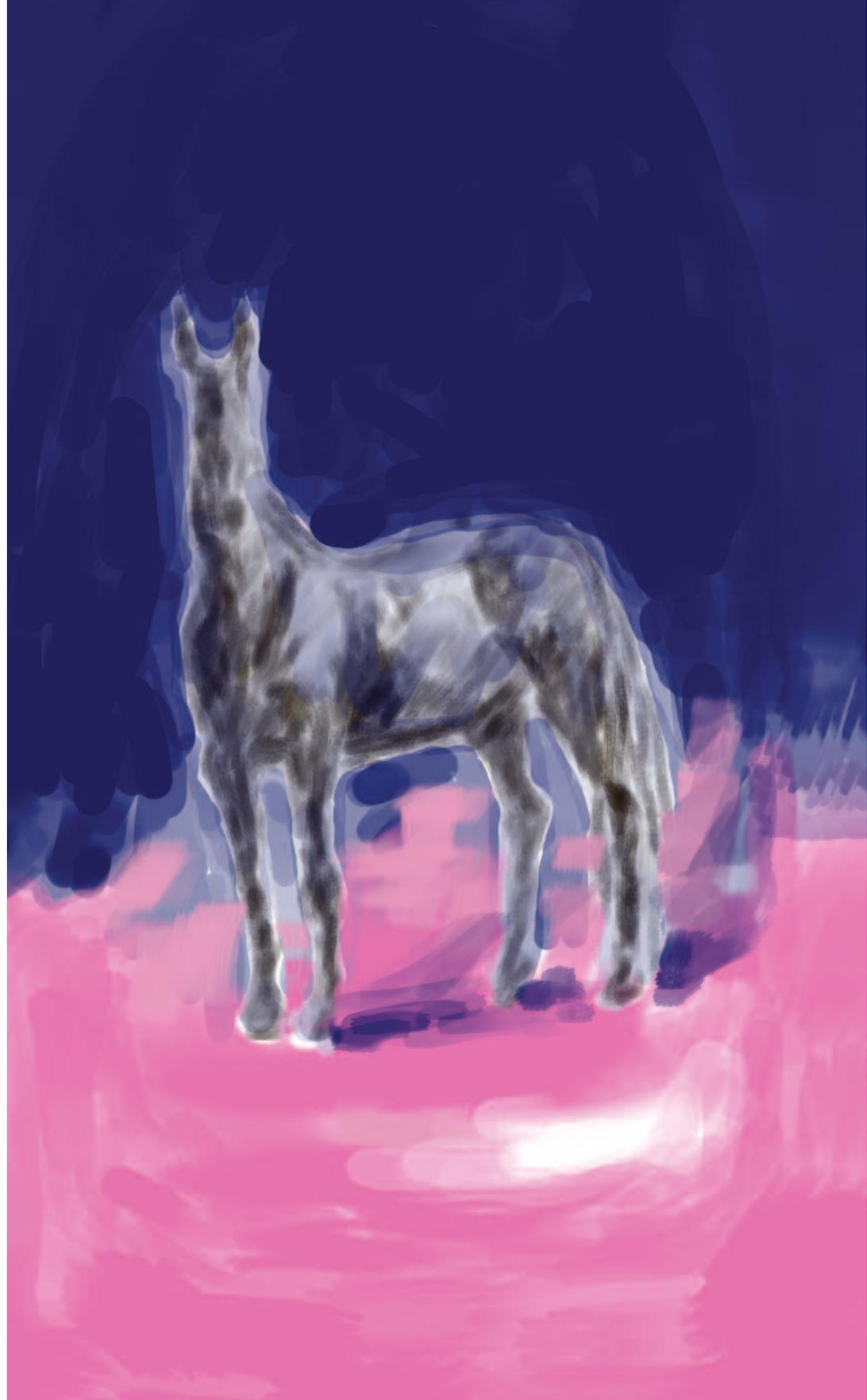
Through stretches of such space you have to make your way slowly, attentive to every brush of grass, avoiding the sticky webs woven by field spiders. Walking through hills covered with grass, I stopped for a moment and closed my eyes to experience this world wholly, with all my senses. The silence was as terrifying as it was beautiful. I took a deep breath. *Daffodils* – I thought. The scent was intense, similar to the scent of hyacinths. I looked around. I saw a black horse on the hill.

The animal looked towards me, with attentive ears, tracking for sounds. I glanced at the clearing still wandering about the daffodils, but I couldn't spot them anywhere.

The horse looked at me with curiosity. I was hesitant to approach it. Suddenly, a powerful voice spoke from behind me. I jumped terrified.

– What brings you to this place?





I slowly turned around, feeling a chill run down my spine. I expected a giant only waiting to tear me apart. I was surprised when I saw a young man with a mysterious smile standing before me. He was looking at me with piercing eyes. The man was wearing an extravagant hat, topped with a pair of wings. Worn sandals and a walking stick in his hand were also tipped with a pair of wings. The snakes wrapped around the staff stretched out their tongues, feeling the air. They were alive. Only now did I notice that the young man looked very tired.

– I don't know exactly what just happened... There must be a mistake. – I uttered. – I was standing in front of my house a moment ago and suddenly I found myself here – I added, confused. He reminded me of Hermes, whom I read about in Parandowski's *Mythology*. I admired the skill with which he made his disguise, it was very credible. – Who are you?



The stranger kept looking at me with a piercing gaze. The right corner of his lips lifted, as if he was pleased by my confusion. I did not feel amused. I wasn't feeling well with that expression of his, as I had an impression that it would not be a sign of anything good.

– Oh, yeah! – he spoke up. – I keep forgetting that mortals are so impassive – he added with a half-whisper. I winced as exaggeratedly as I could to let him know that I wasn't enjoying his company either. Glancing at the horse, I thought that maybe I could mount it and cross these plains, too vast to just walk through them. I walked around the stranger and headed towards the hill on which the horse stood.

– Wait! – he exclaimed. – Aren't you curious about why you're here?
I hesitated.

– If you want to know who I am, stop. I'll show you the way back home.

I turned around. Emotions started to well up in me. I felt a mix of anger, sadness, curiosity, and fear.

– I didn't think that I would run into you during this part of the travel. I came to deliver a letter to Her Royal Highness. – He offered me a rolled-up piece of parchment.

I looked at the letter, but I could not decipher the signs that covered it. They did not resemble English, Polish, or any other language that I knew.

Δημήτηρ Κόρη μου χαίρειν

– *Demeter Kore mou khairain* – he read out loud. – From Demeter to her daughter – he added as an explanation.

– Demeter? Kore? – I wondered. But those were mythical goddesses. What were they doing, listed in a letter? Suddenly, I allowed myself to think of the possibility that, maybe, the stranger standing in front of me could be the “swift-footed godling” that Parandowski wrote about. Yes! This was Hermes...

– I just found Demeter – the messenger of the gods continued his story. – She hid in a cavern in the Arcadian Mountains. She cried long on the Rock of Sorrow, so long that a new spring formed, called Beauty. I don't know if you've heard that news.

– I know this story – I replied, befuddled. – She lost her daughter, who was kidnapped to the Underworld by Hades.

– I'm supposed to hand her daughter this letter. I'm so tired, they keep asking me to deliver their letters. As if they couldn't use a postal pigeon. – Hermes rubbed his forehead, his head began hurting from annoyance. – I have a great idea. I'll help you return home if you take care of this letter – he added, satisfied. – After you fulfil this task, I'll transport you back to your world. Remember, you only have one chance. The poor Thracian songster tried to meet Persephone all by himself, but from where you're going, there's usually no way to return.

I felt as if my throat was squeezing shut, and just barely I managed to swallow thickly. I sensed that, to the gods' amusement, I was dragged against my will into something much bigger. Honestly speaking though, I did not have much of a choice. To stay here and wander who knows how long on those hills or to play the role of a messenger.

– Show me the way – I said.

Hermes pointed his finger toward the border, where the vastness of grass was suddenly cut off by a curtain of dark air. It looked a little like the surface of water. Those who had ever looked closely at the mirror-like surface of a lake would be able to notice the striking resemblance here. The rays of the sun pushing through the water depths become thinner and thinner, the deeper they venture, only to eventually make way for total darkness.

– Mount the horse, it will lead you to the right place – Hermes said. When I looked at the animal, I remembered another part of *Mythology*: “Hades, the god of hell, kidnapped Persephone on a chariot drawn by black horses”. – Does it belong to Aidoneus? – I asked.

– Yes – the messenger of the gods replied while helping me mount. – One more thing – he said. – On your way back, the stars will guide you...

Before I managed to ask what his words meant, Hermes disappeared into thin air.



We set off on our way. On the other side of the light's border awaited a cold, which viciously bit into my bones. It was gloomy, I could barely see that nothing grew there, aside from the rachitic heathers and lonely narcissus flowers. It must have been their smell that reached me earlier when I paused for a moment among the grass.

The hilly terrain quickly made way for vast plains that stretched out towards the horizon. Only the stars that shone high above strengthened my courage.

The journey itself did not take long. Soon enough, I found myself close to a woman who stood right by the entrance to Hades. Persephone seemed lost in thought. She had her hair in a long braid. On her head, she wore a wreath made of leaves, from which peeked out violets and forget-me-nots. She looked sad. I climbed off the mount and stepped closer to her. The horse belonging to Hades galloped towards the abyss and disappeared. Kore turned her gaze towards me. In response, I handed her the letter.

– Thank you – she spoke. – They said that they would send a messenger. – She unrolled the scroll in one smooth motion. As she read, she smiled a little, then her brows drew together as if from invisible pain. One lonely tear slowly rolled out of the goddess's eye, drawing a curved line on her cheek. The drop fell onto the barren ground. Then another and another. Persephone, standing on the border between the world that she knew, filled with the warmth of her mother, and foreign Hades, was making her goodbyes.

– *Khairé, meter.* Goodbye, mum – she whispered.



The earth shook as if mourning Kore's words. Strong wind, sent by Aeolus, picked up and carried her words further while also lifting Alisa from the ground. *So, this is how Hermes planned to transport me* – she thought.

Gliding high up in the sky, the girl watched the stars. They were tiny, like flecks of ground pepper that one time spilled out of her grandfather's grinder. Out of all the constellations, she recognised the Morningstar, which her mum once told her about: one of Zeus's caretakers, who showed the way to sailors. Alisa turned towards that constellation. As if she suddenly caught wind in her sails, she sped up so much that her eyes began to water. She started falling. Thinking that she would inevitably hit the ground, she stretched out her hands in front of her to soften the fall.

Alisa fell from the couch, her eyes wide open. She was in the living room. She glanced at the clock. It was 11:08 pm. Outside of the window, snow was falling. *Was this only a dream?* She wasn't sure of the answer.



Konice

A note about the illustrations:

The illustrations were created in freehand using the Krita graphics program. The photographs used are in the public domain:

- ▣ <https://picryl.com/media/heart-and-large-blood-vessels-in-an-academicphysiology-and-hygiene-1903-d3e455> (accessed: 5.03.2024);
- ▣ <https://www.publicdomainpictures.net/en/viewmage.php?image=395844&picture=astronomy-earth-moon-sun> (accessed: 5.03.2024);
- ▣ <https://www.rawpixel.com/image/9199185/image-vintage-publicdomain-white> (accessed: 5.04.2024);
- ▣ <https://www.lookandlearn.com/history-images/YR0676713/Tulip-Tulipa> (accessed: 27.03.2024);
- ▣ <https://www.lookandlearn.com/history-images/YSM0137514/Tulipagesneriana-garden-tulip> (accessed: 27.03.2024);
- ▣ <https://www.rawpixel.com/image/5923435/photo-image-public-domain-stars-galaxy> (dostęp 10.03.24);
- ▣ a photo of the Greek vase 1885, 1213.18 from the British Museum's catalogue of vases, *Sappho*, Attic, ca. 450 BC, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1885-1213-18 (accessed: 27.03.2024);
- ▣ a photo of the Greek vase 28.57.23, Fletcher Fund, 1928, *The Ascension of Persephone from the Underworld*, The painter of Persephone (attr.), ca. 440 BC, Metropolitan Museum of Arts, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/252973> (accessed: 27.03.2024);
- ▣ a photo of the Greek vase Malibu 86.AE.680, *Pluto and Demeter*, Louvre Painter (attr.), ca. 350–340 BC, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, <https://www.theoi.com/Gallery/K26.1.html> (accessed: 27.03.2024).



The excerpts used in the story come from the book by Jan Parandowski, *Mitologia. Wierzenia i podania Greków i Rzymian*, Wydawnictwo Puls, Londyn, 1992, pp. 36, 81, 111.

Krzysztof Rybak

AFTERWORD

Why read Jan Parandowski's *Mythology* today? Alisa hears at school that mythology is something important, but why, in fact, should she believe her teacher? The heroine will see it with her own eyes only when she finds herself alone in a difficult and unexpected situation. The dream of the protagonist who, like Carroll's Alice, goes where the daffodils grow, shows us the world of a young girl's imagination. But is it only her imagination for sure?

We can find a peculiar journey to the titular place in Léa Piroird's story – a journey to the Underworld. There, the heroine meets the god Hermes, she even does his job for a while, despite it being an ungrateful task, as godly correspondence between Persephone/Kore and Demeter is not only an indication of the separation of daughter and mother but also a change of seasons related to it. The world of nature is key aspect of this story, which also returns in the form of the sky stretched above the heroines. As in ancient times, in modern times, the fate of people is written in the stars, which constitute a waypoint in the life of the heroine.

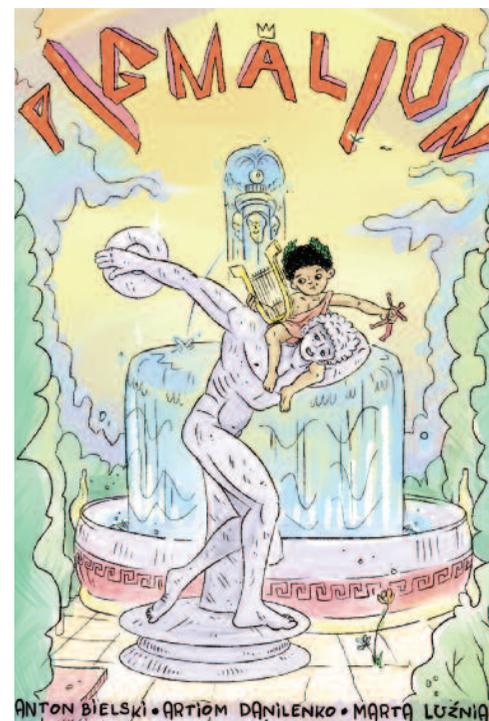
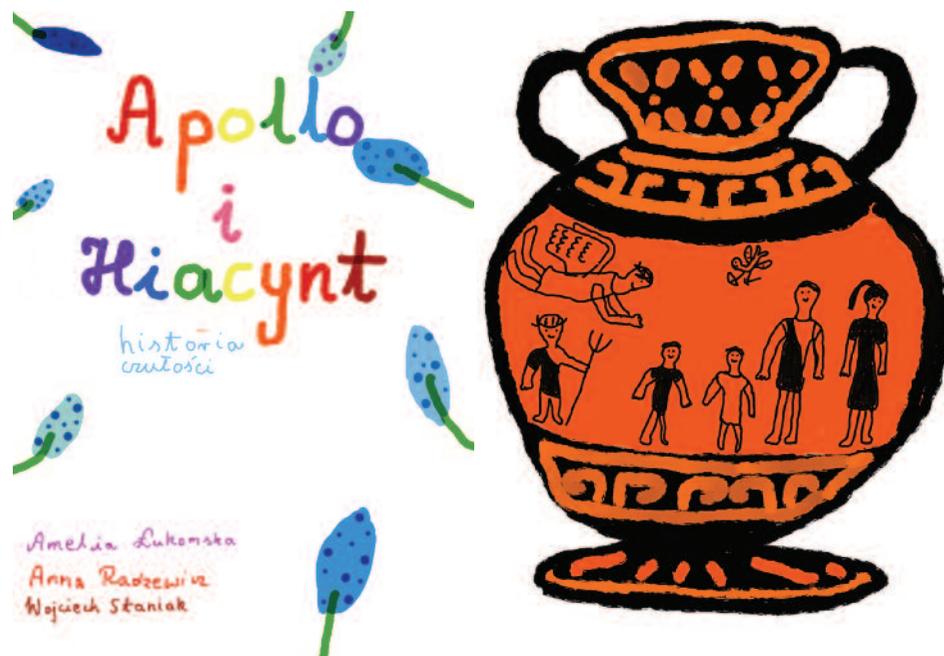


After reading the story "Where the Daffodils Grow" you can think about the following questions:

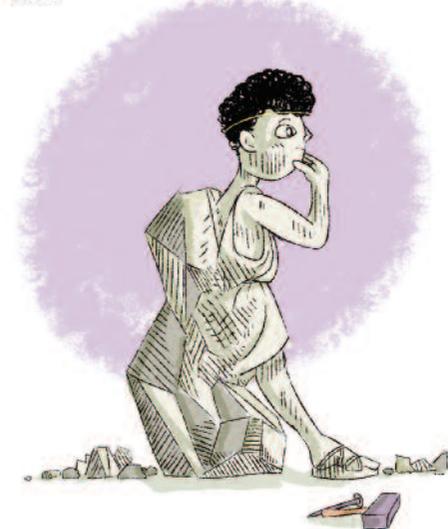
- ▣ What does the journey to where the daffodils grow become for the heroine?
- ▣ What is the meaning of passing time and its relation between past, present, and future?
- ▣ What feelings do the illustrations accompanying the text evoke in you?

We invite you to read the picture books that have been created at the past year seminar!

<http://www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/picturebooks>



Pigmaliion zastanawiał się, jak te posągi zostały zrobione. Przecież były tak podobne do prawdziwych ludzi!



Śmieciobranie z Artemidą



Aleksandra Iwaszko
Malina Kuranowska
Aleksandra Majewska
Paulina Prus

Widzisz te sylwetki między drzewami?
To moi przyjaciele, zaraz ci ich
przedstawię. Część z nich to ludzie,
tak samo jak ty, ale niektórych
pewnie kojarzysz z greckich mitów.
Nie tylko ja postanowiłam zerwać
więzi z przeszłością. Stworzyłam
tutaj bezpieczną przestrzeń dla
wszystkich, którzy pragnęli
odnaleźć siebie na nowo.

