

Ezzat Goushegir

And Suddenly the Woman Said: “Leopard!”

Standing at the window facing the forest, the woman was singing the lyrics to the Cupid and Psyche opera. Exactly at the point when Psyche, curious and care-ridden, holds the candle up to Cupid’s face to examine her complexion in the dark, as a drop of molten wax drips on Cupid’s body, suddenly a spark, much like lightning emitted from a pair of eyes, penetrated her eyelids; stopping her tongue on the word drop. Drop, drop, that hot drop. Suddenly she saw the leopard seated in the dark, half-hidden in the folds of the turning leaves and twisted twigs; with a fingertip she wiped off the crystal drop of tear flowing along her cheeks.

The woman stood still in the window frame and saw the leopard sitting still in full moonlight, wiping off that crystal teardrop with his claws. And there, just as the leopard was opening his eyes, the Cupid arrow of many sparks from them penetrated her heart. Dumb and dazed, she remained locked in a stare with those eyes. A moment later she saw the leopard disappear in the labyrinth of the forest without the trace of the slightest care. She turned to the mirror, lost, before regaining her self-composure enough to continue her singing, exactly from the point where the molten wax drop had dripped on Cupid’s body, making him disappear in the belly of the mountainside.

The woman sang on: drop, drop, drop, but she did not wish to move on, away from the word “drop.” In the mirror, she continued to see the leopard’s eyes and that elegant body which had disappeared amid the leaves and the twigs. She moved her fingers on the piano, along the keyboard to find a melody to accompany the loneliness in her voice, but a moment later, saw herself running through the dense forest along the leopard’s footprints. Something inside her was crying out: leopard?

A desire, a soft savage desire made her restless; she wanted to sit face to face with the leopard, stare into his eyes, and read the mysterious signs lurking there.

The leopard ran on, immersed in his fantasies, vaulted and leapt to get himself lost beyond labyrinthine pathways of the forest. A fearsome sorrow made the shine in his eyes more brilliant. He knew that the shine in his eyes had perturbed the woman. No, he would not wish the woman to find a way to reach his crystalline aloneness. Could he have gathered the wrath of centuries hidden in the tip of his claws? He had worked so hard to make the crystal of his aloneness so dazzlingly bright; no, he would not now allow a mere woman to find her way to the labyrinth inside.

He shut his eyes and leaned his head against a tree trunk. Then, the woman’s throbbing voice filled his ears and his whole body convulsed in a wild, mad rebellion. He opened his eyes and stared at the moon. No, that voice, that mysterious melody singing through

the night window could not have been that of the woman who had driven him away, out of her innards. That woman was not one woman, it was woman multiplying herself all the time, each time presenting a different face.

In his youth, with a peculiarly innocent shyness, the leopard had wished to speak of love, but the woman had taken him all the way to the fountain, sealing his mouth with a voluptuous kiss, allowing him even to caress the beautiful crescent under her arms and touch her breasts too. But a day later the woman had become a mother and was breast-feeding him. The leopard rose up to say something but the woman put her finger on his mouth and the leopard fell silent.

Still a day later the woman became a grandmother and sang lullabies to the leopard so he can fall asleep. He leapt again to say something, to say that he meant to stay awake, but the lullaby took him away, unawares, to the land of sleep. The next day, the woman became the leopard's daughter and washed his feet in the stream. This time the leopard capered to say something when the girl abruptly immersed him in the stream.

And then, one day, when the leopard was strolling along the expanse of a sparse plain, he chanced on the woman close the fountain, with another leopard. That's when the woman turned to the lonely leopard in the plain and said: "You never were a leopard."

"A leopard?" A leopard?" The leopard didn't know what it meant to be a leopard. He had been lost in himself.

"And now," this female voice! After so many years, was making his body listless in a riot of madness. Was it curiosity or the will to risk? Was it perhaps a vague need beyond his grasp? The woman had no idea why she was treading so brazenly along the leopard's path. There was some experience, some knowledge that she had seen in no other eyes. Why was it after all, now that she had decided not to ever have a mate in her life, after having settled so consciously for a life of loneliness, that she was being drawn to a wild and fierce leopard in this dense forest?

She now stood on moist soil, bent on revivifying slices of some millennial memory in her mind. She stared at the moon and began singing, in a loud voice, verses from the Red Beard Opera, so loud that her voice penetrated the veins and sinews of the forest's most distanced branches. Suddenly she lingered on the word key, key, a bloodstained key.

At that moment, the leopard who, leaning on a tree trunk, had been wrapped by the woman's voice in an extremely unsettling sensation, felt his limbs quiver at the sound of the word "key" and began to roll on the moist soil, slowly slowly letting loose the nerve ending of his limbs. There was silence in the forest, silence wrapped around the twisting labyrinthine stems, silence floating in the moonlight.

The woman murmured, no! Those eyes, those moist eyes, those silent anxious eyes, those sad radiant eyes were now filled with a different sort of knowledge and experience. Her

voice began to mellow once more as pleasant warmth began to vibrate in her vocal cords. That's when she began to sing Orpheus.

A warm, emotion-filled kind of blood flowed into the leopard's arteries. Standing erect on his two feet by a brook, basking in the glow of the full moon, he shed his skin – slowly, deliberately. A slim tall man broke forth through the leopard skin.

The woman, still singing Orpheus, saw from behind the twirling trunks the man stretched out on his former leopard skin; on the word "love" she stopped singing. She whispered quite a few times: love, love, love. And her voice began to turn calm. But there was nothing she could do to slow the impassioned rhythm of her breathing, which was making the vegetation by the brook break into sweat. A drop of the hot sweat fell on the man's body; excited and fearful, he opened his eyes, and saw woman facing him by the side of the brook.

In a tender, emotion-filled and gracious voice woman uttered the word: "leopard!" The man looked around, agitated. Caught off-guard in a tangle of complex sensations, he felt a drop of sweat fall upon his lips. He tasted the drop; and it tasted like knowledge, like love

And there was more, there were more flavors – the flavor of something he had waited for through many years. And suddenly, the leopard said: "woman!"

(Translated by Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak)