

Actaeon

(Time – 7.14)

There once lived a hunter, a great and skilful hunter called Actaeon. He and his friends had been hunting in hot August with their bows and spears and bright arrows and their fierce hunting dogs. All morning they'd been hunting until the ground was soaked red with the blood of wild animals and their nets, spears, arrows and knives were clogged and caked with sticky gore. Now it was too hot to carry on.

'My friends,' said Actaeon, 'we've killed enough for one day. The blistering sun is at its height, cracking open the fields with its heat. Let's rest in the shade of these trees. Look! The dogs are panting for water. It's time to lie down and take our ease.'

His friends threw down their weapons and stretched out on the cool ground under the overhanging trees. His dogs ran to a trickling stream and lapped up the water with their lolling tongues. And Actaeon strolled along the stream's edge, following the mossy river bank as it wound this way and that, delighting in the rippling music of the flowing water. Then suddenly he heard a deeper note in the distance; the thrumming, cascading sound of a waterfall. He hurried towards it.

There is a hidden valley in that forest that is overgrown with sharp, needled cypress trees and tall pines. At one end of it a stream tumbles from high, ragged rocks into a pool of clear water with soft, grassy banks. It is here that Artemis, the goddess of chastity and the chase, loves to bathe. And on the day of my story she was naked and waist deep in the water. She was surrounded by nymphs. One had taken Artemis' javelin. Another held her bow and quiver of arrows. Another had her cloak hanging across her arm. One was combing the goddess' hair. One had a jug and was sluicing the cool, pure water over the goddess' perfect shoulders.

As Actaeon followed the stream, towards the sound of the waterfall, he suddenly heard the rise and fall of women's voices talking and laughing. He hurried towards the sound. The wood grew thicker, cypress and pine. The steam wound between the trunks of the trees. Then suddenly the trees stopped and he stepped into a dappled clearing. And there they were – a goddess and her attendant nymphs, beautiful beyond words and stark naked.

It was the nymphs who saw Actaeon first. They lifted their hands to their mouths and screamed. They clustered round the goddess as though they could hide her nakedness with their own bodies, but she was far taller than they were. Artemis blushed as red as the rosy dawn and turned away from Actaeon so that he could see only her back. And then she began to shake and to tremble with fury. If only her javelin and her arrows were to hand, she would kill the wretched mortal where he stood.

She scooped up a handful of water. She called out over her shoulder, 'Now, if you can, go and tell your friends how you saw a goddess naked.' Suddenly she swung round and flung the water into Actaeon's face.

No sooner had it struck him than he felt a heavy crown of antlers bursting out of his brow. His neck lengthened, his hands and feet became cloven hooves, his ears stretched upwards, his arms and legs lengthened, his body was suddenly covered with dappled hide. In the moment it had taken him to blink the water from his eyes, he had turned into a stag.

Then the goddess filled him with animal panic: the stag turned and ran. Actaeon bounded along the edge of the stream, amazed at his lightness. He glimpsed his reflection in the water. He wanted to cry 'What has happened to me?' but all that came out of Actaeon's mouth was the belling cry of a stag. His thoughts were the thoughts of a man but to all the world he was a beast. He thought, 'What shall I do? How can I make myself known? Should I run home or hide in the forest?' Human tears trickled down his stag face.

It was Melampus, Actaeon's Spartan hound, who saw the stag first. He began to bark. Deep thinking Ichnobates, his Cretan hunting dog, spied him next. They set off in hot pursuit, followed by Dorceus, Pamphagus, Oribasus, Nebrophonus who was strong as a wild boar, Pterelas the swiftest in the pack, Agre with the keenest nose, Nape whose mother was a wolf, lanky Ladon and black Harpalus with a white star on his forehead. All of Actaeon's dogs, too many to name, chased the mighty stag. Like a furious wind they pursued him.

Actaeon's friends, woken by the hubbub, leapt to their feet. 'One last kill to end the day. Come on! Let's follow the dogs. Where's Actaeon? Actaeon! Actaeon!' Actaeon heard them calling for him as if he were not there. He could hear his own dogs close behind him. He tried to shout, 'I am your master. Don't you know me?' But no words came. He ran, leaping and bounding, and they followed him sweeping over rocks and crags, through cliffs and thickets. The air echoed with barking.

It was Melanchaetes who was the first to fasten his teeth into his master's back. Then Theridamas and Harpalus clung to his shoulder. Actaeon staggered and then the whole pack was on him, sinking their teeth into his body until there was no place left for tearing. And behind the dogs his friends' voices: 'Actaeon, where are you? Come and look at this. Such a mighty stag!' They shouted for him as if he were absent. He turned his antlered head at the sound of his name. He fell to his knees. His head swayed. The woods that had echoed to the sound of his happy hunting now echoed to the grunts and groans of his dying. Every dog's mouth was filled with his hair and muscle until at last his life was torn from his bones. The great stag shuddered and died, and only then did the anger of Artemis, the bright huntress, goddess of the chase, grow still and find peace.