

Adonis

(Time – 14.37)

The king of Cyprus had a daughter. Her name was Myrrha. She hated the idea of love and marriage; the thought of it sickened her. She ordered that the doors to the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, be locked and bolted. She made all her sacrifices to Artemis, the goddess of chastity and the chase. This made Aphrodite tremble with anger. She devised a series of terrible punishments.

Punishment followed punishment: Myrrha was made pregnant, she was turned into a tree, her toes became roots, her arms became boughs, her fingers became twigs. Then the baby she was carrying began to grow inside her wooden womb. It grew and grew until she could hold it no longer. She began to crack and splinter, her trunk opened and her baby fell down onto the soft grass. And with it a fragrant mixture of her blood and tears trickled onto the ground; it was called myrrh and it has been prized ever since.

On the high slopes of Mount Olympus, Aphrodite and her son Eros had been gleefully watching Myrrha suffer her awful punishment. The goddess had her arm around her son's shoulder. Eros was wearing a quiver of sharp arrows. Aphrodite saw something fall out of the trunk of the tree. She leaned forward to look more closely, she saw the baby and at that moment something pierced her breast; it was the tip of one of Eros' arrows. Suddenly she was flooded with a sweet, sharp pain she had never known before. The goddess had fallen in love with Myrrha's helpless newborn baby, lying on the grass, kicking its legs and crying.

Aphrodite had been loved but she had never fallen in love before. She swooped down out of the sky and lifted the little creature in her arms; it was a man-child, a little mortal man-child born to die. She was filled with tender concern for him, his fluttering heartbeat, his fragile breath. He must come to no harm. Holding him tight against her breast, the goddess carried him up to the workshop of her husband, Hephaestus, the crippled god of metal work. With his hammer and tongs Hephaestus fashioned a little lidded cradle, a silver box lined with lamb's wool. The sleeping baby was laid inside and the lid was gently fitted into place.

The goddess tucked the cradle under her arm and carried him down and down and down to the one place where he would be completely safe. She carried the baby through the crust of the world, she carried him deep beneath the bowels of the earth, through layers of granite and adamant. She carried him over the oily water of the river Styx and across the shadowy realms of the underworld. At last she could see the turrets and the rooftops of a dark palace looming out of the half-light – it was the palace of Hades and Persephone, the king and queen of the dead.

If the child grew up here, on the other side of death, in the place that is beyond all suffering, then surely he could come to no harm. She entered the door of the palace. Hades and Persephone were sitting side by side on their golden thrones. Aphrodite approached them. She bowed her head to black-bearded Hades, the king of terrors, and then she turned to bright beautiful Persephone. She laid the little silver cradle on Persephone's lap. She lifted the lid. The baby blinked and gurgled. 'Look after him,' said Aphrodite. 'He is a little mortal who must be kept from all harm.'

Persephone looked down at the baby and she too was filled with love. Her heart melted. 'What is his name?'

Aphrodite smiled. 'I shall name him Adonis: "Lord".' Persephone looked tenderly down and when she looked up again the goddess of love had vanished.

There are two sorts of time: there's mortal time and immortal time. There's mortal time – your time and my time, the time that has been measured by the Fates, the little path we hurry along from the cradle to the grave – and there is immortal time – the time of the gods and the goddesses, without age or death, without limit or end. An immortal watched a mortal; Persephone watched the child Adonis.

In what seemed to her to be the blink of an eye he grew from baby to toddler, from toddler to boy, from boy to youth, from youth to young man. And with each day that passed Adonis grew more beautiful to her, a beauty that was sharpened by his fragile mortality.

Then Aphrodite appeared again. She approached Persephone. ‘That child I gave to you for safe-keeping – Adonis – where is he?’

Persephone had no choice but to call for him and Adonis came striding into the hall. Aphrodite gasped – he was become a full-grown man. He put his hand on Persephone’s shoulder; she lifted her hand to his. Aphrodite was transfixed. The scratch she had received from the point of Eros’ arrow had never ceased its feverish coursing through her veins, and now as she looked at Adonis she was filled with unbearable love and desire. ‘It is time for him to return to the world. Give him back to me.’

Persephone shook her head. ‘No. I mothered him, I raised him. This is where he belongs. He is mine now.’

Aphrodite’s eyes blazed with fury. ‘I found him, I saved him, I named him. He is mine.’

Persephone stood up and fixed Aphrodite with a withering stare. She whispered, ‘*He is mine.*’

The two goddesses were trembling with rage and a terrible fight might have followed, but at that moment Hermes appeared. The bright messenger with his winged sandals stood between them. He raised his arms: ‘Enough. I have been sent by great father Zeus. He will settle this matter.’

As swift as thought, the two goddesses flew up from the depths of Hades, they soared through the air to the high slopes of Mount Olympus, they entered the palace of Zeus and stood before his throne. Each of them in turn stated her case and made her claim on Adonis. Great Zeus the cloud-compeller listened to them and pondered in his heart, and then he spoke: ‘My solution is this: for four months of the year Adonis will live with Persephone in the land of shadows far below, four months he will spend with Aphrodite and the remaining four will be his own to pass as he pleases.’

The judgement seemed fair and the two goddesses agreed. And so for the winter months, from November to February, Adonis descended to the underworld and lived with Persephone. For the months of Spring, from March to June, he delighted the goddess of love and the world quickened and grew around them. And for the harvest months, from July to October, Adonis who loved to hunt followed the stag, the boar, the wolf, the bear, the hare with his arrows and spears, taking his delight in the chase.

For a few years Zeus’ solution worked, but then Aphrodite became unhappy. She was besotted with Adonis, she longed for him when they were parted and she worried that his fragile life might be cut short by some unforeseen danger. The goddess is never at a loss for a plan. When her four months were over and Adonis was oiling his bow and sharpening his arrows for the season of hunting, Aphrodite flew up to her palace. She found her girdle of love and desire and fastened it around her waist; when she was wearing it, no one could resist her. She descended from the heavens and stood before Adonis. ‘This year, we will hunt together.’

Adonis had no choice. He couldn’t say no – he didn’t want to say no. Their lips touched and it was agreed. The goddess kilted her skirts up to her knees, she threw a quiver of arrows over her shoulder and became a huntress. She strode through the forests, shouting encouragement to the dogs, delighting in their baying and barking. She exulted in the whistling of arrows and the thrusting of spears and at night she and Adonis would build fires in the glades of the forests, roast the fresh meat, feast under the bright stars and sleep in one another’s arms.

Aphrodite played at being a mortal and for a while she forgot that she was a goddess. Sometimes in the night she would whisper her counsels to Adonis: ‘My love, let’s avoid the lions, the wolves, the

bears, the wild boars, all those beasts with tusks and teeth and claws that might tear your sweet perfection to ribbons. Rather, let's hunt the stag and the hind and the tender hare.' Adonis would silence her mouth with his kisses, answering neither yes nor no.

Adonis, perfect man, innocent in your perfection, living in a dream of hunting and loving, how could you know that the anger of the gods, massing grey and ominous as thunderclouds, was taking the form of your own death? Which of the mighty gods could bear to see Aphrodite lavishing all her affections on one mere mortal? On the high slopes of Mount Olympus Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Ares, Hephaestus, Hermes and Apollo were united in their fury, and on the earth their jealous rage was taking a shape. It was becoming a creature: the bowed, bristling back, the thick neck, the rooting snout, the unshaved tusks, the little glittering eyes, the crashing, snorting, relentless rage of a wild boar.

As the dawn took her golden throne, Adonis rose from his bed of soft grass. The embers of the night's fire were still smouldering. He took his bow and quiver, his long ash-wood spear. He left Aphrodite sleeping. The air was bright with birdsong; the soft winds of the early morning rustled the leaves. Like some perfect animal he moved among the forest shadows, his every sense alive to the quickening world.

Aphrodite was woken by a scream, one terrible piercing scream of insufferable pain. In an instant she was beside him but already the goddess was too late – the boar's tusk was gouging the inside of Adonis' thigh. With grunting, snorting rage it was tearing open the inside of his leg, it was splitting his groin and belly until his twisting entrails spilled out onto the leafy ground. The boar, blood-splattered, lifted his snout. He kicked up the ground with his hooves and crashed into the undergrowth.

The goddess dropped to her knees. She lifted the mortal head onto her lap. Her tears splashed onto the vacant, staring eyes. She pressed her lips to the mouth that was filled with its own bubbling blood and she kissed him and kissed him until every last, flickering, twitching shudder of life was drained from him and he was still. And then she tore her hair and beat her breasts and howled with bitter grief.

And then from a pocket in her girdle of love and desire she took a little bottle of nectar. She sprinkled it onto Adonis' blood. It bubbled and fermented until from his blood and her nectar a flower sprang out of the ground. It was the very first anemone; its petals the colour of blood, so delicate, so fragile, so lightly attached, that with the first breath of wind they would all be blown away; its life as brief as the breath of a man.