

Demeter and Persephone

Aphrodite, goddess of love, looked out across creation. She saw man and woman, god and goddess dancing to her tune. Oh, it was true that Zeus was the king of all the gods and goddesses, but she controlled the hearts of everything; everything on the earth, everything in the sea, everything in the sky.

She called her son, little Eros. She cuddled him in her lap.

'Darling, we have made a mistake. Three worlds are under our control, it's true, but one is still free of us, Hades. He rules alone. He has no wife. His thoughts are too clear. It is our duty to disturb his single-minded purpose. Look there, on the earth. You see the meadow? You see the daughter of Demeter, the goddess of growing things? You see Persephone picking flowers with a nymph? You see Hades, under her, beneath the earth? Take both of them with one of your arrows.'

Far below us, beneath the crust of earth, there is a vaulted land of gloom, a dismal empty place where mortals' souls go after death. There they cross the river of forgetfulness and leave behind all memory. Their host, the host to many, magnificent, impassive, his eyes as dark and deep as open graves, is Hades. He is neither kind nor cruel.

Little Eros took an arrow from his quiver, one in a million, the surest, the sharpest of all of his shafts. He put it to his bow. His aim was true. The arrow struck Hades' cold grey skin. Hades threw back his head with the shock. He looked up. He saw the earth and on the earth he saw a meadow, and in the meadow he saw the daughter of Demeter, the goddess of growing things, Persephone, picking flowers with a nymph. He saw her and loved her in the same moment. He was overcome, overwhelmed with lonely pain. She was his opposite in every way. She was life and he was death. Urging on his four black horses by name, he rode his chariot up and up.

In the meadow, Persephone saw a terrible wound crack the ground, a gaping gash that belched bitter fog, and through the cleft came cold grey fingers that gripped her ankle and pulled. Poor Persephone fell. She scrabbled through the grass, she grasped the hand of her friend the nymph. The nymph held tightly. The nymph grabbed Persephone's dress but the dress tore. Persephone's hand slipped out of the nymph's grip. Persephone was flailing now, pulling at the loose earth round the edge of the gap, and then she was gone, into the darkness below.

The nymph was beside herself. She was overcome with shock. She sank to her knees. She put her face in her hands and wept. Her shoulders shook. Tears trickled down her arms, tears trickled down her legs. All of her, every pore of her, every cell of her, wept tears. She dissolved into tears, melted into sorrow until all that was left of her was a torn dress floating in a salty pool.

Demeter, whom we must thank for every full mouth, for every bulging belly, who wears a crown of corn around her brow; Demeter, who makes the harvests grow, who gave us the plough; Demeter, Persephone's mother, heard whispers from the House of Rumour. Something awful had occurred. She called her daughter's name. There came no reply. She searched Mount Olympus. She descended to the earth. Neither Eos, goddess of the dawn nor Hesperus, the evening star, found her resting. The crown of corn slipped from her brow. She pulled out handfuls of her own hair. She tore her dress. Where she walked the world was blighted, sometimes by too much sun, sometimes by relentless rain.

At last, she knelt to drink from a pool and found the water salty. The nymph wanted to speak. She wanted to tell the terrible news but her lips, her tongue, her mouth were just water now. With her shifting currents she summoned the torn dress. Demeter recognised it at once. She ascended to Mount Olympus. She burst into Zeus' hall. A feast was being held. Wild-eyed, she looked around, grasping Aphrodite.

'Three worlds are not enough! Always you must have more.'

The hall fell silent. Aphrodite said, 'Your daughter is a queen now. She's the queen of a vast land. She sits beside the king of shadows himself. You should be proud.'

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'Proud? How can you say those words when your child is sitting in your lap? How can you scorn a mother's torment? Zeus, it's in your power. Please, give me back my child!'

Zeus put down his goblet. 'There are forces, powers to whom even I must answer. The three sisters who live below, the Fates, have decreed your daughter will see the sun again. She will be freed, unless she has tasted Hades' food.'

Demeter was gone, down to the earth, beneath the earth, across the river. She saw something glowing in the gloom, in the land of the dead. She called her daughter's name. Persephone turned. Her lips were glistening, red as blood. She was holding a pomegranate. She had eaten six seeds of the pomegranate.

Demeter returned to Zeus. 'Imagine a world where nothing green grows, a world without hope or joy, where the ground is white and brittle as bone, where no birds sing. This is not the land of the dead that I describe. This will be the land of the living unless you give me back my daughter.'

What one god or goddess has done, no other can undo. But they found a compromise. For half the year, Persephone would live here, on the earth, with her mother, and her arrival is greeted with great celebration because she brings with her warmth, light, new life. And for half the year, she goes below, into the underworld – six months for six seeds – where she is loved by the dead because she brings with her something from our world. She brings with her a little hope.