

Persephone bent down,  
and her uncle kidnapped her and forced her into a marriage.  
Persephone saw how her mother fought for her,  
and she became the story of creation for the seasons.

Sometime in the past, in all my obsession with Greek mythology, I was introduced to Persephone. The queen of the underworld, but first, a girl and a daughter.

I am a gay man nearing the middle of my twenties and my experiences deviate strongly from that of Persephone's, and yet I have, for some time now, wanted to write something that honours her. In the past, people may have made offerings, sacrifices, little blessings, to the daughter of Demeter and Zeus, but I am without an altar.

Writing, in many senses, is how I pay attention to something. How I dedicate a part of my time to putting into words and sentences my experience, or the experience of created characters.

For a while, I stumbled through attempts at writing a play about Persephone—about her unsettling, uncomfortable relationship with Hades; her protective mother; and her connection to abusive and unhealthy relationships in the modern world.

(It is unsettling and uncomfortable for me to see how present-day artists reinterpret the relationship between Persephone and Hades as anything but the unbalanced situation it is, in which Hades has kidnapped his niece and proceeds to sexually assault her, but that's more for later.)

I continued to struggle to take leaps with the play ideas. Some concepts were too modern, or too complicated to set down on paper—sometimes I am just too visual a creator, and I want to skip all the writing and just see my actors on the stage. It wasn't until I worked on a separate project, *The Gento Project*, that I suddenly realised how Persephone could be interpreted. She didn't need to be one woman, one single individual. I could write a series of pieces that build off the mythos of Persephone, that shift and change into new stories, new ideas. It didn't need to be one play, some 100 pages or so of the same story, of the same perspective.

Persephone could then exist however she wanted to. Or, at least, how this gay man could see her. Because I do think I have to acknowledge that I cannot slip into her shoes.

Persephone's story is exhausting and depressing. The only reprieve we can see is that at least she doesn't have to be miserable in the Underworld for all of her lifetime, just the months of the year when her mother can take out her grief on the fields and the wheat.

Demeter is as much an important, central character to Persephone's story as she herself is.

Their story is about mother and daughter.

And I am neither. But I grieve for them all the same.

**The  
Persephone  
Project**

by Keeley Young

## table of contents

- I. Harbinger & Gretel
- II. Husband
- III. Field Trip
- IV. The Kidnapping Of...
- V. excerpts

# Harbinger & Gretel

*...and from the field, she realised something  
it was the prettiest flower she had ever seen  
and she wasn't going to be around much longer to admire it.*

Up on the sixteenth floor, Gretel can see a lot of things. Nothing exceptional, mind you. The hotel is in the middle of the city, surrounded by other towering buildings like colossal spires, and vacant sky in between. There are parklands to the west, or the east—her patience for remembering compass direction vanished after a grade school camp where everyone was buddied up and she failed miserably within her team to navigate them around the grounds. Later they found out there was no real prize for successful navigation, but Gretel had already unsettled her stomach, considered packing her bags, and drawn a crude compass on her left wrist that would never move an inch.

There are only a handful of rooms left to be cleaned. This job, this slapped-together housekeeping gig, is a secondary income. Gretel props a door open with her foot. She tucks the skeleton key back into a small pocket. It all feels very elusive, very smooth. It is in her contract to sneak into the rooms of strangers while they frolic in the city, more than likely holidaying, spending money without startled freaking. This room, she thinks, suffers the most from the sealed-up window. A horrible stench palms her in the face, knocking her backwards. Not cigarette smoke, at least. Something less chemical.

She should turn back round and call reception, let them know to place a mark on room 1613's bill. A smell, a pungent smell, could still be some substance the hotel rejects in their policy. Gretel doesn't yet care about policy. It is a nosiness, a curiosity, that erupts from within her, and she inches further into the room, bending down to close the refrigerator door. Her briefest of glances gave her nothing. The coolbox is empty, mostly, as if the hotel guest checked out this morning, or never found much use for keeping things refrigerated.

Gretel pinches her nose between thumb and index finger. Comical. An unrestrained gesture that ends when she pays closer attention to her surroundings, to the lump under the covers. There is a human body lying asleep, soundly, without motion. Without motion except breath, she hopes, waiting for the rise and fall of the chest. It doesn't come.

Everything had been in order when she cleaned this room last, two days ago. Shiftwork means she isn't consistently on the schedule for each room, certainly not each floor, but she remembers coming here on Tuesday. An unpacked suitcase sat on the floor, instead of the spot designated for it by the closet. Gretel hadn't snooped. The towels in the bathroom had been drenched, soaking wet without a chance to dry in the sun, which seemed ordinary considering how boxy the bathroom is. No windows. She cleaned everything up, accidentally bumped the suitcase with her foot, and left an extra towel on top of the toilet seat.

Gretel cannot hear breathing. This young woman, probably in her early twenties, is the image of a high-tower princess awaiting rescue—fitting, given the sixteenth floor, her unanimated plank of a position, and an unblemished face. Several times Gretel calls out to her, quiet at first, in case she startles awake and finds reason to complain to reception. Then, with no response, her voice grows louder, and louder. Brashly she hears the strained affectation of her voice.

In some grand scheme, she could attempt the variety of things her mother would have done to rouse her in the morning—flick the light on and off, start playing the television at a higher volume,

bang at frying pan on the metal bars of the bedhead. But there is a sort of grace to this woman lying here, unmarred by the Thursday sun. However lifeless she may appear.

Gretel slips her fingers underneath the covers and peels them back partway, enough to get a hold of the woman's left arm. She is wearing long-sleeved pyjamas, this fast asleep girl. They are the colour of the earth, dark and dirty and moisture-rich, not that she has at all messed up her clothes by tumbling in the mud. It isn't a colour Gretel could see herself flaunting, but she is in her late-forties by now, and any understanding of fashion trends has vacated her head in a small tugboat, alongside her love of running marathons.

The hotel room cleaner feels around for a pulse. Nothing. Although she is not trained in any sort of medicine to declare a dead body, mind you. Panic and unsettled auras and a dark cloud or two crowd around Gretel as if she were about to deliver a frightening address. It is the first moment she truly notices the layered blinds are both entirely pulled down, masking the hotel room in faux darkness.

She paces over to the sealed window, fumbling cautiously with the blinds. Sunshine pours into the room. It is a cold sort of sunshine, wintery by design. The cooler months of the year are edging into town—sly as anything, unfortunately. Autumn is a week or so early. One contemplating night Gretel fetched the thick overcoat her husband bought her two Christmases ago down from the highest cupboard shelf. She picked it out from the catalogue, but he bought it, and offered to wrap it. He isn't a half-bad gift-wrapper, although he was too liberal with the sticky tape.

Autumn seems to be impatient. Too impatient.

Maybe it will snow upon her nose.

The young woman's body is cocooned by the covers. Her face is marble-white and her dark hair looks dyed, at least from what Gretel can see when she leans in to study the girl's face. Gretel knows if she snoops around the hotel room she could probably find a wallet with some identification, start to learn who this young girl is, or was. Maybe even begin to understand why this could have happened. How a person who is offered life on a platter is found dead in a hotel room, underneath the sheets, stark-white and cold and with what very well could be a frown permanently etched on her face.

She could be buried with it.

Gretel peels back the covers completely, spurred on by sick prying, she guesses.

Immediately she notices a small orchid growing out of the girl's bellybutton, poking cleanly through the pyjama shirt. It is white and yellow, and Gretel wonders whether she could send a picture of it to her mother to identify it. The girl's right hand is caked in dirt. Crumbs of the earth dot the bedspread. A vine is shooting out from underneath her, snaking from her lower back down towards her toes, which are green like grass...and Gretel thinks she is hallucinating, too, because the girl's toes appear to actually be grass. Button mushrooms form a fairy ring around both of her knees. There are mushrooms a deep crimson red, and ivory white, and riverbed brown. Her crotch is damp, as if she has pissed herself. But there is no smell. The young woman is in complete bloom, which is rather unfortunate, given she is dead.

In the elevator, having abandoned the cart, Gretel tries to rehearse some semblance of what, a confession? A revelation. Suddenly the word for stumbling on a dead body at work is escaping her, and the elevator for once isn't slow and indecisive. That dream vacation her husband recommends to them when they're lying in bed at night sounds increasingly inviting.

The rest of the shift is a blur. Gretel stumbles out of the elevator, sweating under her armpits, probably, uncertain she could ever deal with something like this by herself. A polite receptionist is best to stay polite, until another member of the staff is pale as a ghost and incoherent. Then, she can politely step away from the front desk, find her cell phone to call an ambulance, or the police, maybe even fire and rescue to be safe, and she can become nervous and tense and unsettled, as Gretel, a friend, tries to

explain there were plants twisted around the girl's body, but they weren't hurting her. They weren't the obvious reason for her death, she means, fidgeting with her clothes because it suddenly seems wrong for some reason, to be wearing this uniform. Like a janitor interrupting a funeral to sweep the floors or polish the hardwood.

The last glimpse she gets of the deceased is a snapshot stripped from the silver screen—the blanketed corpse being wheeled out of the elevator. The relevant people ask her relevant questions, and Gretel attempts to remember everything. There are many cracks at understanding it all. At one point she begins picturing the birth of this young girl, who reception confirms was travelling by herself, or at least staying in the hotel alone. The room was reserved under a name that could vanish just like that, if the world would let it. Gretel stumbles around in her head, trying to return to focusing, or unfocusing, as it is, as she is crafting it. Oh—foul play?

*Yes, do you think there could have been foul play involved?*

A tulip head pokes out of her uniform, or at least she thinks it does.

She'd always wanted to ask a police officer if there was foul play involved, but with the words forming in visible ash clouds, blown in the face of woman that is interviewing her, Gretel only feels lightheaded.

'I need to sit down,' she says, gripping to the sides of the plush sofa in the reception.

*the mattress she slept upon could have been sewn of leaves.*

*stitched out of grains of sand scooped from near the ocean*

*there was something to her yearn for nature,*

*but she wanted to lay with man, not with beast.*

Instead of smelling the salt air or climbing a tree like she used to when she was a child, Gretel is in another state, combing through a photo album that features pictures of her and her siblings when they were children. Requesting time off could've been signed off with a head nod after the incident reports were filled in and filed. Instead of bothering her husband, though, she started driving too early in the morning and called her mother from the car.

The rose garden in the front yard had been a tad triggering, and the dirt caked underneath her mother's fingers when she met her on the driveway meant she maintained eye-contact until Gwen went inside and washed her hands.

The photo album is a comfort, though. Pictures of her brother and sister and herself, squatting in the backyard of the old house three suburbs over from this one. David—her brother—playing cricket, the batsman in front of makeshift stumps... which is just the wheelie bin, stamping down a square in the grass. A picture taken when Gretel was seventeen, she thinks, standing in front of a random brick wall dressed up for someone's wedding. The family must have used the camera so sporadically, compared to photo albums her mother has since made of the grandkids. There must have been days in their childhoods where it would have been impossible to avoid the gaze of a lens.

News reports of that young girl's body being discovered in the hotel room leave out any details about dirt, and vines, and the orchid blooming from her chest. Gretel feels insane for thinking she saw it—her husband mentions the wilder side of police and government conspiracy, how they could cover up whatever they wanted and you might never know the real truth of it. He says, maybe they want to respect the privacy of her family, maybe their daughter was addicted to something, maybe she had an incredibly-green thumb, and uh, I don't know about the toes...

Gwen stirs her cup of tea. They are in the living room, which was recently given a facelift. The old couch was ugly, Gretel's mother says, adjusting in her seat as if to prove the new furnishings are squishy, and that it's like being seated in the clouds. The couch is faux-leather, a burgundy colour, and smells like a new car. Overwhelmingly so, a couch making Gretel gag like so. Her mother *doesn't know about the girl*. The hotel job is something she mostly keeps to herself, or she doesn't let people know which hotel in the city, in case they book a room sneakily attempting to run into her in the hallway. Gossips and freaks, she thinks to herself, reminded of old-timey stereotypes of women her age. Or women her mother's age, too. Tropes like shutting them off in retirement homes, too.

She meets the gaze of her mother with the warmest of smiles she can muster while still processing things like dead bodies, and bedsheet corners, and standing in elevator shafts, floating in mid-air. Hovering. Unsure, I suppose, she thinks before she speaks it, staring ahead at the endless expanse of a hotel hallway, which would normally end abruptly with a wall. Millions of doors, and hers was unlocked with a swipe of a keycard.

'It's a new sofa, Gret, could you not spill so many crumbs on it?'

Gretel shakes herself out of it, sharpening her view for the small pile of biscuit crumbs forming in her the lap of her pants. One faulty move, truly, and the crumbs would end up down the crevices of the brand-new couch, making it older, more worn down. Not so much a barren place for ants, not any longer.

A few blocks from the house there are a small number of shops, sort of a string of the ordinary essentials. This includes a newsagent, flocked to for scratchies and lottery tickets. Everyone's poor, which feels like such a crass, uncomfortable sentiment to think, but when a bill is flushed through the mailbox slot Gretel shivers even in the middle of summer. Everyone loves getting money and keeping it, maybe instead, although who keeps money for long. In the newsagent, the man behind the counter mutters a polite-enough greeting and asks her what he can help with. The ones with the cherubs in comical diapers catch her eye, and she crudely points to them. Two, please, she says.

Aggression and excitement and almost tearing away at paper with a two-dollar coin. She's in the garden, underneath a sheltering roof her father and one of his construction buddies slapped together one winter, in preparation for spring. Gretel uses the other wicker chair as a footrest and leans against the table to scratch away the grey stuff, revealing numbers that all blur together. She's no lucky winner.

The heavy overcoat is sprawled out over her legs. She has another coat on, covering her shoulders and arms, something she borrowed from her mother. What comes with incorrectly predicting the weather, she supposes.

From the kitchen, Gwen slides open a square window above the sink and calls out. 'What is it with my kids and catching pneumonia? Come inside, Gret.' She contemplates this, adjusting from a comfortable spot, yes, despite the wind and the frost. It is becoming somewhat of a ritual, strolling down to the newsagent and picking out two of the ornate-fountain-looking scratchies in the plastic window. She won a few dollars the other morning, although *won* is probably not the right word for it. Luck of the draw. She's never been much of a gambling man, although time away from the world has left a strange flower-shaped cut-out in whatever physical representation of chance the body has. Maybe she is just weaponizing the why-me of uncovering the dead body of a young woman. Is that how luck



can work, in some miraculous backwards way? Reverse the negative of seeing a life taken, a life gone...turn it into something as personal, as self-indulgent as winning some money from this industry that has such a clutch-hold on the Australian people?

She knows she's overthinking it, overworking her brain even when she's supposed to be taking these breaks. The hotel job was supposed to be a break, an escape, and now spending these weeks with her mother are the same. Unsuccessful attempts, maybe. Time hasn't run out. There's still the warmth of a blanket to distract her from the awful, awful winds probably coming in from the sea. Always the lethal, unforgiving sea winds. There would be the suited-up man in front of the map of the oblong country saying, in a sort of boasting tone, here come the coastal breezes to spell the onslaught of winter...

Her husband rings one evening, saying he's standing outside in the pouring rain with an umbrella, trying to make heads or tails of this weather...but that isn't why he called. He wants to come visit her. It's been a few weeks, and their calls are becoming an ounce sporadic.

'I know me stressing you ruins the whole point, I know,' he says, his voice muffled a little by the downpour of rain. 'It's quiet in the house. All this is, it's just concern.' Gretel leans into the wall, half-expecting it to mould to her body. Her mother is sitting in the living room, watching the news. She shouts out something half-understood, about a high school in northern Victoria. 'What did she say?'

Gretel's husband likes to insert himself into everything, when he can see an inlet. Not sexually, she thinks, beginning to wonder if a spot of afternoon delight might shake the recurring nightmares she has about shoving open the hotel room door and uncovering...things. Sometimes it is the dead body of a young woman, splayed out and brandished with a rainforest floor scene, or otherwise a flaming wildflower wreath that makes her cringe at the thought of their hot, humid, dry Christmases. One night it was just an enlarged ostrich egg. Until it cracked open and she saw the devil.

Gretel tries to steer him away from visiting, she really does.

The call ends with him setting down a schedule as if he were organising an elaborate scheme, not driving out of the city to visit his wife and mother-in-law. Everything seems so punctual and organised and his suitcase is probably in the hallway all zipped up already. It makes Gretel's intestines vine up through her throat and choke her internally. If that is at all possible, it is happening right now.

Gwen stops in her tracks in the hall, staring at her daughter.

'And I thought I banished all the ghosts with one of those good candles.'

*I do have to admit I have been feeling tired lately*

*having spent an eternity now in a tennis game*

*oh how I have had the time to learn everything.*

*and also nothing at all. what the hell is a situationship.*

Her husband still smells like himself, which is a great comfort. He still acts like himself too, commenting soon enough on the colour of her skin. He doesn't need to know about the spell of vomiting, then.

They go for a drive in the afternoon, finding a bench overlooking the ocean. Leonard holds eye contact for an uncomfortable length of time, and Gretel sits beside him trying to shake off all this unnecessary attention. She feels undeserving of it. She didn't know that girl, she barely cared for that hotel, or that job, and some mornings rooming with her mother again she feels like a true lotus-eater.

When her husband isn't looking, an internal monologue begins:

I have made discovering a dead woman about me too much.

It was traumatic, sure, but I am forgetting the training video they sent me the link of when I was hired for the job. That polite blonde woman with a Russian accent told me that traumatic things happen in this line of work and I have to learn to unsee the dead bodies and the pools of blood in the bathroom in the shower, and definitely the white stains in the sheets of any hotel guest that is probably a gay man.

Wait. This isn't even *my* internal monologue –

Gretel sighs, leaning against the wooden railing that could possibly give her a splinter. A gust of wintery wind backhands her across the face. The suit-and-tie man on the weather report the evening before reported quite frankly the coldest season, record-breaking, the sorts of words the newscasters use to farmonger among the ordinary folk that watch it on the television, like Gwen, like Gretel.

Leonard snakes an arm around his wife's waist and stares out at the blank horizon. A cheesier narrator would've said there was potential out in those waters, but Leonard exhales through his nose and smiles. 'Come home when you're ready,' he says. Something feels different since her husband arrived in this part of the world, but Gretel is not sure what. He can be tedious sometimes, sure, but he can organise her, too. Not organise in a sense that he finds the perfect spot for her on a shelf, tucked away in between a bowl of grapes and a pyramid of gum packets. She must be edible now, then. No, her husband can organise her from the outside in, help her unjumble some of the thoughts that are too convoluted. Or she may have thought they were.

When she came home that day, orchid coming out of the bellybutton open and not yet wilting, Leonard was sitting on the bed wondering what the look on her face meant. Gretel attempted to clear her head. Or attempted to think straight, which one was it? A headache was rising up between her eyebrows like a caterpillar. Her eyebrows weren't caterpillars, though, she liked this temporary eyebrow-sculpting place in the middle of a shopping complex half-an-hour from their place.

There was a girl, and she was deceased in hotel room 1613. She is deceased, as the brutality of death goes. Someone could rescue you from it, maybe, but otherwise you were and you are. Dead. This gorgeous maiden had the life sapped out of her, but she was a flowerbed now too. She is a rose. If you had stood her in a field, or a meadow, she would have been an unforgettable image. Legs like tree trunks, a deep shade of brown that would never have been mistaken for something ghoulish. The irises of her eyes were beginning to dissipate, replaced with the buds of the narcissus. For it was the only flower she would see when she closed her eyes. When she wanted to fall asleep, and wake up in some alternate reality, where all she needed to do was scratch out the grey stuff, and hold hands with her loving husband by the ocean, and smile at her mother.

Oh, and make sure she doesn't leave crumbs in the creases of the sofa.

Gretel shivers. 'I just want to go home and be under the covers.' The look she gives her husband tells him everything. *Home* home, she means. Her sofa. Her couch.

Gwen's front yard rose garden is getting barren and dry. The cold wind is whipping the thorns—even their spikes are beginning to quiver on their knees and plead for mercy. The last duffel bag is tossed into the boot of Gretel's car. In a fit of depressive displacement, Gwen digs around in the greying soil and tears up what was once a gorgeous, sublime specimen of the rose world. Leonard had left in his car twenty minutes earlier, on some schedule as usual. Last night, Gretel still had the reoccurring nightmare. Actually, she had *a* reoccurring nightmare, where she stands on the train station platform waiting for her son to arrive from up north. He had been spending a few months working there, living in a shack near the ocean. The carriage doors click open, and perhaps she was insane for expecting him to disembark at the exact spot she stood. The nightmare twists and gives her a sharp ache in her stomach, as the doors open and instead of her son, all twenty-four years of him, is a vulture wearing a thick overcoat. Or a humanoid-vulture hybrid, she supposes, given the lanky human legs.

At least for one night it wasn't the corpse of the young woman.

Gwen cocks her head, staring at the tailpipe of her daughter's car.

'There's a goddamn sugar glider living in here,' she says, tsk-tsking.

## Husband,

catch the falling tears from my cheek  
because the crop is dry again  
fill a pail with the last of my embraces.  
there are Aleppo pines in need of some loving.  
you say in truth every hole is dug too deep,  
or else every seed is buried too far below the surface.  
my seed/my hole, for you, my husband, is suffocating from too much sunlight  
and yet  
not enough. never enough.  
husband, was it your intention for me to understand you the way I do?  
which is to say  
that I will need to take a few summers  
and get back to you.

# Field Trip

by Keeley Young



In a small, rectangular-shaped back room, a mother and father, husband and wife, sit facing one another. To one, the room could appear to be an interrogation chamber. There is nothing more sinister to how encasing this room could be than who inhabits it.

**DEMETER**

*[calm, staring at the man seated opposite]*

I can do this all week, truly, I'll just cancel the Friday morning dentist appointment and we can sit here for days, weeks, months, while you try to decide whether you want to be a proper father all of the sudden.

**ZEUS**

Of course I care about our daughter—

**DEMETER**

Our daughter, the one you see here and there...

I know I am coming off in a rage immediately, when we asked for this private, behind-the-scenes chat between the two of us because all the courtroom drama is a distraction from actual talking. But. I don't think I'm completely unreasonable for assuming...

**ZEUS**

*[he smooths his grey button-up shirt, a tactic to appear less confronted by his wife than he really is]*

When she was born...our daughter. I couldn't have been prouder of something we created together. She was...she is gorgeous, Demeter. If I am to never see you again, at least let me see my child.

**DEMETER**

Do you want the weekends with her, then?

**ZEUS**

Is that an official offer?

**DEMETER**

*[sighing]*

When she was little...although I guess she technically still is, shorter than everyone, baby-faced, too, when she was younger, though...I remember you taking her out for the day, somewhere. A restaurant for lunch, maybe, but somewhere else first. The park? She had the biggest grin on her face when she came home. But she was like four, what would she know otherwise? Her father fulfilling his role, oh, thank goodness.

**ZEUS**

And you will find some point to all of this, that those little moments with our kid are long gone, I've become too busy, I disappoint her— Am I not proving, right here, that I am determined to do right by her?

**DEMETER**

*[instinctively, she rubs the back of her neck with her right hand]*

You know how many men, fathers, husbands, come into places like these and suddenly pretend they care the absolute most about being there in support of their children? Suddenly the almighty father that cannot be knocked from his grandiose pedestal is saying, on the record, that his love for his daughter is tantamount. Where's this man been?

**ZEUS**

You want so desperately to poison her against me—

**DEMETER**

She's eleven years old, dammit! She is so insanely trusting of everything. I have taught her things, like being cautious of strangers, but she is learning the world as she ages and wouldn't be tricked into thinking something incorrect about her father. She wants to adore you, but you stopped coming around to visit with the separation.

**ZEUS**

*[he grips firmly to the table with one hand]*

Maybe I am a man who wants to change then.

**DEMETER**

By getting split custody of your daughter? That's your grand plan to change your entire pattern of behaviour? I...

*[she pauses, slightly shaking her head]*

If this is some punishment for something I did, skirt around her instead. Please. Just scream and shout at me, maybe toss some of the rage directly at my forehead, but don't weaponise an eleven-year-old. She's not ready to see how much of a villain her father can be.

**ZEUS**

That's a nasty word. Villain.

*[he pauses]*

Is that what you said this morning, Mummy's going to court to spew her hatred for your father, the villain?

**DEMETER**

She isn't an infant. She understands well enough  
what today is, because I explained it, without pretending  
she's going to form these overdramatic opinions of it.  
Of course she's distraught her parents aren't in love with  
each other, and this will toy with her for YEARS after this,  
but the alternative is what, in a decade or two, I kill you in your sleep?  
Then I guess at least she's fully-grown to combat her trauma.

**ZEUS**

*[he rubs his eyes with his forefingers]*

I would like to see you attempt to kill me, my love.

**DEMETER**

We would need an entirely separate *~whatever this is~*  
if we were to discuss our love, husband. If it were at all  
possible for you to love, to care. Although here is the news:  
you do claim to care for our child!

*[she scoots her chair backwards]*

I know, I'm starting to get too loud. There is a way to be civil  
with all of this. I want that, given everything hinges on such  
a young kid, with a bright future, if you don't stifle it like you want to.

**ZEUS**

'Let's be civil', she says,  
before immediately criticizing me for some attempted collusion  
to stifle her future. You love to repeat that she is eleven,  
an age where her future is so up in the air, given everything.  
She cannot surely be thinking about every detail of it, when a career  
dream that could come to mind might just be a fancy from a subject  
at school she's enjoying.

**DEMETER**

So you believe, at eleven, the age she is,  
that it is perfectly fine to not encourage that she explores  
her potential? She's eleven, not a fresh-out-of-the-womb infant.

**ZEUS**

*[he sighs]*

I might be shot right out of the sky if I confessed to you  
that she could be thinking about what her future husband would be like  
instead, or how she will raise the children of her own?  
You want her to be a kid, don't you?  
Babied.



**DEMETER**

Not surprising you've already thought about your daughter as a wife,  
and a mother. When you met me...

*[she pauses, rising out of her chair]*

When we met. Did you look at me and think,  
here is a woman I can marry, impregnate,  
and then completely forget?

**ZEUS**

Is it not normal for a man to be thinking about his future?

**DEMETER**

A family, a home, sure,  
these are things that people covet.  
Things that people do think about, dream over.  
You're a normal man for wanting a family,  
but when have you wanted a family?

**ZEUS**

I never looked at you back then thinking there was even a chance  
we would have a child, let alone one like Persephone. A beautiful,  
insightful, fascinated-by-the-world kid.  
I assumed we would fool around and...  
I don't know, that would be all of it. A woman as gorgeous as yourself  
could go find herself another man, and perhaps,  
he would be completely deserving of her.

**DEMETER**

*[she collapses down into the chair once more]*  
Flattery will not distract me right now.

**ZEUS**

I am not attempting to distract you from anything, Demeter.  
It is merely the truth. You are beautiful, even still.

**DEMETER**

I...thank you. The first time you have complimented  
me in quite some time...it's nice.  
Nevertheless still a distraction.  
*[she pauses, burying her face in her hands]*  
*she speaks, muffled]*  
I'm so grateful she is not near to witness any of this.

**ZEUS**

Pardon?

**DEMETER**

*[realising, she lifts her head,  
locking eyes with her husband]*  
Oh—sorry. I said,  
I'm glad she isn't here. Surrounding this,  
all of it. Bearing witness to her parents tearing  
at her two arms, trying to decide who is more fit to raise her.

**ZEUS**

It would be humiliating for her, I am sure.  
She is too young to know how important it is, for her  
parents to be arguing and tussling, and publicly so.

**DEMETER**

This doesn't need to be an all-out war, Zeus.  
*[she is lost in a thought  
staring off into the distance]*  
We could agree, like we used to.  
Meeting in the middle, straddling our different virtues.  
*[she snaps out of it, glancing over at him]*  
You remember when we were young, and our arguments  
were over silly things, like what to order for dinner,  
what colour to paint over the hideous shade of yellow in  
the guest bedroom? The room that would become hers.  
Imagine her growing up under the shade of such an awful colour  
like an infernal sun burning her cheeks, aging her skin faster than  
it should be.  
*[she pauses]*  
Persephone, a girl of just eleven, and the dark side of the sun  
has overripened her. Sorry. Those days were lovely.

**ZEUS**

They are a history, a tapestry—they won't be forgotten,  
though, and you will always be able to tell her the stories of them.  
We would have a photograph somewhere, of the two of us in front of that hideous wall.  
You wouldn't have been showing, not one bit.  
We both had paint brushes, or rollers, in our hands, aimed at the ready.  
Sound the war cry, select the stance,  
our feet positioned perfectly. Close, but not close enough.  
My arms should have been around your waist.  
*[he freezes, hiding a frown]*  
Don't you have that freeze-frame of us in a scrapbook somewhere?

**DEMETER**

Who—who would have taken that picture of us?

**ZEUS**

Oh, hmm. A friend?  
One of your friends from that time,  
someone you knew from work, or your time at university.  
Hmm. It could have been one of my brothers.

**DEMETER**

They both knew her when she was nothing,  
nothing but little cells in my body, in my womb.  
It could have been him, visiting us one morning,  
so oblivious to the future. What is it,  
only the mightiest of the gods can make sense  
of what is to come with the future?  
Women and men can only pray.  
Ironic, isn't it...  
You're going to make me cry in a courthouse.

**ZEUS**

Demeter –

**DEMETER**

Gods. I was hoping I could navigate through all of this  
without having to think about what your...  
what your brother might or might not have done.  
*[she pauses, shifting uncomfortably in the chair]*  
A third party, someone completely unrelated to a marriage,  
should not be having such an impact on everything.  
But he's your damn brother, and he does.  
*[a tear tumbles down her cheek]*  
I wish you had only cheated on me.

**ZEUS**

*[he clasps his hands together]*  
I don't blame you for using the affair to try to sever any claim  
that I get any custody. What court will want a father who cannot be faithful to his wife  
to attempt to be a faithful parent to their child, completely?  
*[he pauses, sighing]*  
My brother is a good uncle to her—

**DEMETER**

Ha!  
Our daughter comes home to me with tears in her eyes,  
tears of an uncomfortable sadness, but joy too, for reuniting with me.  
Her mother. She is quieter, then, doesn't want to speak much.  
Just wants to be held, by her mother. Didn't you see your uncle, I say...

**ZEUS**

What are you trying to imply?  
He wanted to see her, his niece, so I arranged it.  
You said moments earlier that you want her to spend time with me,  
spend time with her family that isn't just you and her cousins,  
and as it sounds, her female cousins.  
I don't know why she would be so miserable seeing her uncle.

**DEMETER**

Maybe because he hurt her, Zeus?  
Maybe because she is eleven, and Hades  
doesn't have children, or a wife, or a girlfriend,  
or anyone he could use as a sort of guide on how to treat  
girls, and women, and anyone that isn't his damned brother?

**ZEUS**

My brother is a misogynistic disgust of a man  
because he doesn't have enough women in his life?  
Is there a quota to being respectful enough?

**DEMETER**

Our child comes home sobbing!  
Her personality has changed, Zeus.  
*[she wipes the tears from her eyes]*  
My darling daughter sobs right into my breast the first time since she  
was toddling, and you are so focused on the qualities of your brother.  
Believe that he is a wonderful man if you wish,  
but he is spending too much time around her, and she is  
*miserable* for it.  
*[she sighs]*  
I don't want shared custody with you and your brother for my child.  
You can have her weekends, you can spend time with her, but I did not  
marry your brother. If he is there at your mother's, helping baste a Christmas ham,  
sure, I cannot refuse Persephone from spending the holidays with her family.  
But she's his niece, not his friend.

**ZEUS**

You assume he has done something so horrendous to her...  
She won't say anything to you, won't confess that he has...  
He is a good uncle to her.  
*[he shakes his head]*  
Don't you want to rake me across the coals for fucking all those  
women in our bed?

**DEMETER**

You can't shift the attention from your brother onto you.

**ZEUS**

I am surprised you didn't immediately take that opportunity to bury me. The women that are not floating around Hades' head, but are a constant shame to you.

**DEMETER**

To us.

*[she shifts in her chair]*

Do you not feel like a shame of a father for wanting every woman other than your child's mother?

It's not like I would take you back at all.

But. Persephone wouldn't mind having a father that doesn't shame her mother so much.

This marriage has been, truthfully, disbanded for years.

Never has a piece of paper meant so little.

*[she laughs, softly, avoiding his eye]*

You could almost just call this a convenience, so that Persephone had two parents for the years that she has.

*[she meets his gaze once more]*

At this point, I think one parent will do.

**ZEUS**

All the love we shared, is just a convenience to you?

**DEMETER**

How many women do you say you love?

**ZEUS**

I love the women who mother my children.

*[he tries an old technique:*

*the charming smile]*

I respect them, which I think is far more important.

When I first saw her little face, tickled her little toes,

I wanted nothing more than to dedicate the world to my daughter.

Persephone. Maiden daughter of the skies, the world.

They are all so incredibly important, as much as you wish to discredit it all because they are not all yours.

**DEMETER**

I have never needed to be the father of all of your children, Zeus.

Christian religions have this strange obsession with collecting young minds, minds they can harness to spread their gospel truth.

It's low effort, the brainwashing of babes ripped so recent from underneath the dirt.

Are you converting after all this time to a devout Christian, husband?

**ZEUS**

*[he cocks his head]*

I can hear the disgust and the lingering regret in your voice.  
You hold such a grudge against me for finding someone else,  
while we have been separated, and  
having children with her. Do you want me to apologise?

**DEMETER**

I can't put my faith in any of your apologies, or attempts.  
You sort of just look at me with faux-charm, puppy dogs,  
or your equivalent...like a bald eagle trying to pretend it will  
not gobble down the eggs of a lesser bird if they welcomed it  
into their home.

*[she scoffs]*

Although I always want to hear the apology.  
Just to taste it on my lips.  
Hoping, praying—if I were the type of woman to pray—  
that this time the words will taste like a perfected fig.

**ZEUS**

I am not apologetic for getting another woman pregnant.

*[he pauses]*

A woman that I do deeply love.  
We plan on getting married, once everything here blows over.

**DEMETER**

I'm glad you are being patient enough while  
your daughter gets blown over.  
The...the more difficult this all is, Zeus,  
the more difficult it is for her.  
This eleven-year-old kid that doesn't want,  
or deserve, consequences for donning goggles  
and being a bright adventurer.  
Or, I guess, I don't know, you expect her to wear pink  
dresses and flounce around in front of her uncle and  
accept his creepy, disturbing advances.

**ZEUS**

When has he made creepy, disturbing advances?

**DEMETER**

Obviously when you are leaving the two of them  
alone, or right in front of your own eyes...  
I would not be surprised. You probably encourage it.

**ZEUS**

What? Demeter—he is a good man.

**DEMETER**

I want to hear your definition of a good man.

**ZEUS**

He is passionate, he is respecting.  
A good man honours his parents and desires for greatness for his children.  
He is noble, true to his word.  
My brother is a good uncle to our daughter,  
he cares for her and wants to protect her.  
*[he pauses, inching forward in his chair]*  
I trust that he would do right by her if I were to  
leave off on some other business, and it were the two of them, alone.

**DEMETER**

Do you consider yourself a good man, then?

**ZEUS**

We weren't talking about how I view myself—

**DEMETER**

Do you consider yourself a good man?  
I will come back to your brother Hades in a moment.

**ZEUS**

Yes. If you held me at gunpoint, I would believe  
that I am a good man, opposed to considering  
myself a terrible, callous one.  
*[he sighs, staring off  
at a spot on the blank wall]*  
Is it not in human nature to make mistakes?  
*[he returns his attention]*  
Is it not something we all do,  
screw around on our decisions, learn the patterns,  
and etch in the proper details the next time we approach something?

**DEMETER**

So this next marriage of yours,  
will it be perfect? You won't make a single mistake.  
You'll never cheat on her, you'll never make her walk  
the coals you should be dragged across instead?  
If you have learned how to be a better husband, father, man...  
You won't make her think she is so undesirable to be misplaced  
and forgotten. Disrespected, too, with phrasings like,  
'He is good to our daughter; he would never hurt her.'

## ZEUS

You weren't my first wife, Demeter,  
and she isn't my first child.  
Perhaps that has some undesired effect, that I am  
destined, as you seem to think, to never be  
the perfect husband.

We are all broken, making grandiose attempts to stitch ourselves back together.

*[he pauses]*

I will do better for my family. Always.  
But I will also do better for myself.  
There is not always a clear overlap to that.

## DEMETER

I...how am I supposed to surrender to that?

Let my daughter spend part of her life with her father,  
a man that will confess to me that there are forks in his life  
where he must decide whether to benefit himself, or his children?

Or his wife. It is not so surprising, though.

*[she sighs, pushing out her chair with her feet]*

I have spent years assuming that you remember our existence when it suits you.

You could confess, right this very moment, that this very moment  
was entirely thought up as some ploy to benefit only your brother.

He is miserable, I must assume. Weaker the older he gets, the lonelier.

*[she rests her head on the palm of her left hand]*

It wouldn't do you good to think about mothers—

hell, your parents were not the most loving, although your mother should  
be a sort of reminder that mothers will nine times out of ten  
be fiercely protective of their brood.

*[she stands up, moving off into the corner of the room]*

I move out of your way, so as not to accidentally get struck by lightning,  
but I will not resign on wanting to protect my daughter,  
at the heart of everything.

Do you want to protect her, or to possess her?

To change fate for her, to manipulate the world for her?

Or to spend moments with her, where you can say she is your daughter,  
and she is grateful her father is not relegating her to some other world.

I am tired, as a mother, of being told by men that I can trust  
another man, for he is respectful, he is familiar, he is *good*.

Persephone buries her head in my shoulder and whispers,  
*he touched my breasts and told me I am beautiful.*

And if he spoke those words to you, repeating his advances,  
you would, what, applaud him for showing there is still desire left  
in that cold, depressive, mournful heart of his?

No matter that he is behaving this way to your daughter.

I want to starve him myself.



**ZEUS**

Demeter—

**DEMETER**

*[she moves towards the table]*

Can you even imagine your kid coming up to you  
and confessing something so disturbing happened to her?  
You're too involved in it.

*[she half-turns away from him, disgusted]*

In some cultures, even today, girls young like our daughter  
are still married off to older men, often to men the same  
age as their grandfathers.

*[she turns back to him]*

These girls are told from such an early age that they are symbols  
of marriage, childbirth, their beauty, and their innocence.

All at once. When they still think they might grow up and become astronauts,  
or find a cure for cancer, or suddenly transform into dinosaurs.

I mentioned that earlier, that I want to watch Persephone make a million  
guesses as to what she will do with her future, because she is eleven.

Too young to apply for an open job position at NASA and be told she  
doesn't have the qualifications, or there are too many women already employed.

Or she is offered the position, and she is embarrassed by her coworkers  
any chance they get. They think her boobs are too big for fitting  
inside the spacecraft, or whatever they call those things. Rockets.

Gosh. I feel too ancient.

*[she pauses, sinking back into the chair]*

Whatever if I am not the first person to make this analogy,  
not the first woman to be concerned her daughter will not be  
respected by men.

She should be respected by her father, and her uncle,  
enough to not be terrified at the prospect of spending every second weekend  
at his house, where she still at least has her own bedroom, and you would hope,  
her own privacy.

*[she stares at him, disgusted]*

No, I didn't watch a documentary on that, or paraphrase what someone else said.  
I just hate compromising.

**ZEUS**

Hades has no intention to marry our daughter—

**DEMETER**

Did you have one of these extended chats with him then?  
Where he confessed he would never even consider incest,  
because it is a sin?

Stop pretending your brother is a quiet romantic, Zeus.  
He's a creep. He lives in a dirty apartment by himself.

**ZEUS**

He is not a creep.  
He keeps to himself, sure.  
The apartment is hardly dirty, it's just unorganised.

**DEMETER**

You can keep making excuses for him, and for yourself,  
but I don't want to continue to sit through this legal battle  
over our daughter when only one of us is protecting her.

**ZEUS**

You are so certain I could possibly know everything  
that happens when I can't be looking—

**DEMETER**

It should've concerned you, even to some instinct,  
when your brother was spending so much time with her  
alone, in her bedroom.  
*[she pauses, bowing her head, sighing]*  
I still want to keep that dentist appointment.  
I'll come for your brother some other time,  
whenever I feel like traipsing down to hell,  
but let's just settle this.  
I want full custody returned to me, but your silly grin  
seems to convince everyone to give you a chance  
and award you partial custody of our kid.  
So...I don't know...  
Get back to figuring out how to continue to parent a child.

**ZEUS**

Demeter. Don't you remember how affectionately  
we once spoke to each other?  
I'm—I'm not attempting to be a distraction.  
I want it to be known how this decision does not need to be devastating.  
You still get to spend time with your daughter, more parts of the year than I do.  
Than her uncle does.  
*[he pauses]*  
The apartment isn't his anymore.  
He has to move in with me, so he'll be there when she is.

**DEMETER**

*[she is quiet, uncomfortable; disturbed]*  
I feel like I'm going to need a bucket to be sick in.

**ZEUS**

She can lock herself in her bedroom if she is so inclined to.

**DEMETER**

Persephone will be a prisoner...

**ZEUS**

If she is uncomfortable around him, she will tell me.

**DEMETER**

Or she will weep in my arms, repeatedly,  
and wonder why her father would rather abandon her  
than make sure she is safe.  
It is exhausting talking to you.  
Everyone else has to make the sacrifice, the compromise.  
Your new wife, where did you order her from?

**ZEUS**

I met her at the zoo...

**DEMETER**

I hope she's the *murder my own children, ask questions later* type.  
If she ever finds herself here, in these boxed-in four walls,  
trying to defend herself against you...  
*[she wipes away the tears in her eyes]*  
It makes you feel like a failure.  
And I know I'm probably not, and I have Persephone as proof,  
but sitting here it makes you feel like everything you did is moot.  
A man can swoop in and kick your daughter in the shins  
and you'll have people saying you're a shoddy mother for not  
teaching her well enough  
how to avoid being objectified and hurt.

**ZEUS**

You are no less a worthy mother for what happens to your children,  
my dear Demeter.  
Persephone is safe, she is loved, and we are good people  
doing our very best in raising her.  
Our kid is resilient enough to weather our separation, although we have  
technically been separated since she was three.  
We're good parents.

**DEMETER**

I'm a good parent.  
You are a good doll collector.

**ZEUS**

I want to leave this on good terms, Demeter—

**DEMETER**

I...I am noticing this obsession with good.  
A good man, a good parent, good terms.  
Everything has to be good for you, Zeus.  
Beneficial to you, in support of you. A good daughter.  
Is a good daughter one who listens, or one who speaks?  
One who shuts up because her father is this fantastical man in front of me...

**ZEUS**

*[he sighs]*  
Ethics, right?  
Who is greater than who?  
This is why I suppose I respect you so much as mother to our child.  
Why you should certainly still raise her, care for her,  
and make sure she continues to follow in her mother's strides.  
Because you notice the way people treat one another.

**DEMETER**

I certainly don't always do the best job at it.

**ZEUS**

Well, it was never meant to be your calling in life.  
I should rephrase, really:  
You were always meant for other talents, including raising our child.  
But not limited to, of course.  
Your thumb is so green, I admire such a commitment to growing things.  
More than children, more than yourself. Crop, the harvest,  
to sound so medieval and caught in the past of everything.  
*[he pauses, smiling, honestly]*  
The little tulip bud you planted in a pot in our first place together.  
How it grew and flourished under your care, and you were certain  
that it would be dead when the weather shifted.  
And it did, but not as soon as you predicted.  
You probably squeezed out an extra two weeks or so of life for that tulip.

**DEMETER**

Zeus...

**ZEUS**

Don't make me regret not going harsher on you.

**DEMETER**

*[she exhales]*  
I cannot find it within me to thank you and mean it. But thank you.

**ZEUS**

I do love her.  
Our daughter.  
My new wife.  
You, once.

**DEMETER**

You have a strange way of expressing it.

**ZEUS**

As you said, we would be here for an eternity  
if we were to linger on how we loved each other,  
or how we didn't. How everything between us was  
for her. On the creation of Persephone.

**DEMETER**

You know I won't be telling anyone I'm divorced.  
I am an unmarried woman, a single mother.  
You are the father of my child.  
*[she glances at the door]*  
It's more comfortable that way.

**ZEUS**

I'll see you back out there then.

**DEMETER**

I will only be a moment.

He stands, scooting audibly out of the chair. The only sound in the room is his footsteps as he approaches the door. It squeaks open and he exits, leaving her alone, in a semblance of silence that could be considered comfortable.

Demeter, mother of Persephone, sheds a final tear.

# **The Kidnapping of ...**

by Keeley Young

Her nose was dripping with snot, and she buried it into her sleeve. She would have embarrassed herself if there had been anyone around, but the meadow attracted little attention in the middle of the night. Percia liked the quiet. She would stand completely frozen, trying to slow even her breathing, trying to listen out for the dimmed croaks of frogs, or otherwise the cicadas. She could move for the cicadas but the trick was in catching them. She'd left the small wooden cart five paces from the tree stump where the meadow had opened up to her, which would make the trick even more elaborate. The cart held an array of glass jars, cannisters, and handcrafted containers. Her mother expected the sort of bounty a natural landscape would provide—wildflowers, fungi, rooted vegetables that had been planted by the roaming folk, which of course meant you were pilfering from their stock. People in the village didn't seem to think it mattered much. The roaming folk were named as so because they oftentimes made settlements on the outskirts of town and burgled the locals in the way of finding whatever had been left outside overnight. People, then, got quite comfortable growing certain plants indoors.

Percia should have been scavenging in daylight, too. Her mother had a sensibility to her about young children being out at night—they shouldn't. During the morns, the meadows were rife with the anti-zealous. In the afternoons, parents would be wading through the longer grasses trying to pick their young ones off the ground, mud between their ears. The parents of course would be wearing oversized rainboots the colour of the rain itself. There was the right peace to the evenings. Percia never wished to stay awake too long anyhow. She wanted to catch a frog, hold it in her palm, and meet its gaze. They would speak telepathically with one another, somehow translating one another's language, and she would know what it was like for a slimy little reptilian to live in this world. The frog would learn about being a girl, the daughter of a god.

In the reeds, Percia tried to be subtle with her splashes. She had made it to a small stream that skirted the meadow, certain there would be a number of the green creatures somewhere hidden in plain sight. Her own boots made the rock-clustered bed of the stream less slippery and Percia was splayed out with her arms like wings to find a good balance of things. She wondered if flapping these arm-wings would achieve anything. No one would be the wiser if she was a complete failure in that. Flapping, however, would draw attention from the frogs. She surveyed the area surrounding her and her feet, but the water was murky and not spotlighted at all by the moon overhead. It had vanished, frankly. Percia found it a form of bullying of its own—nature tempted her, then refused her. It was by design, her mother would say, while she brushed Percia's hair in the garden behind their home. 'It has to be beautiful, or else it would to be abandoned,' her mother said once. There had been a steely look on her

face at the time. Learning the secrets of a specific universe, so purer than her own, that would be beautiful.

The water was rising against her bare legs and Percia had to stumble backward at the cold sensation of it. The further out into the stream she got, the more uncertain she became—if they were to find her body, she was certain now they would blame her for it. Little girl, little girl, why did you drown yourself? Or tangle yourself. Found the dangerous side of the woods, did you? Percia paused, listening for the calls that would soothe her, the calls of speckled frogs and midnight. She wondered if that were the time. The moon peeked out from behind clouds. At least something was saying hello, she thought, upturning her head to gaze upon its clear face. An insect found her intriguing. Zipping around her face, briefly landing on her shoulder. She shook herself with a nonchalance.

The uneven path back into the village shook the small cart, rattling the various implements of capture she had brought with her. Her luck with finding frogs had been abysmal, but she had caught a night-wandering fly in her hands and transferred it into a glass jar. It frantically battered against the walls, then slowed itself down, exhausted. Percia noticed a light on in the window of one of the houses on the outskirts, a sinking hovel owned by the sort of man most people kept their children away from. Percia had grown up with a small handful of rules, like sleeping when her mother slept at night, like staying away from the types of people that would draw her attention. Like keeping to oneself, not revealing too much about oneself. The unnerving man was probably perched in the kitchen, pushing round the contents of a late-night pie with a fork. She thought of delivering him the jarred fly without a word, a silence peace treaty. As if he were a frog. The fly would be bait, or at least better suited to be bait. There were poked holes in the lid of the jar. As she passed the old man's home, she was calibrating plans of her own for how to set a humane trap for a frog. It was her new lifelong passion, despite only being small, and presumably immortal. Her mother hadn't given her all the details.

'I'll catch myself a frog,' she whispered to herself, peering into the open window of the man's house on the outskirts. Nothing stirred. A tall shadow stood in the corner of the room. Percia figured it was the cast of a closet, probably where the older man kept his tattered clothing and maybe the skeleton of a child or something. She was nevertheless unworried and did not expect a sudden flourish of activity at the porch step, where he would then snatch her and lock her in a basement with stairs hidden by said wardrobe. Percia kept walking. Her rainboots made damp prints in the barely-there-road.

Home was a ground dwelling boxed in at two sides by towering pine trees. The rear of the house opened into a small garden, which in turn was fenced by the forest. Percia lived with her mother, a woman with hair already greying. Many would comment on how she appeared older than she was—



she was young by many circumstances, but the straight, greying locks that reached oftentimes to her lower back were misleading, confusing. Certain neighbours were convinced she was lying about her age, about her parentage, too. The town baker was convinced she might really be Percia's grandmother, but what he meant, truly, was that he believed her to be a child-snatching witch. Demella had laboured through an exhausting birth, longer than expected in the human realm, and she'd hoped her daughter would have never heard rumours like these. Percia heard them often.

She had left the window opened in her bedroom, and she attempted to jimmy herself through the gap with the help of a series of upturned terracotta pots she had moved underneath the windowsill. She would be stealthy. She wouldn't wake a mouse, let alone her snoozing mother. After stubbing her toe on one of the pots, Percia flung her right leg through the window, careful with the swinging movements that could cost the entire operation. She had left a step stool by the window, on the inside, but her calculated moves were making her frantic. There wasn't a stool. Her heart leapt in her chest. Someone had noticed. Her mother, Demella, had noticed. Percia toed the air, looking for something to land on. It would be the floor or nothing, and with a cautioned tumble, she collapsed down onto the wooded planks of her bedroom.

The glow of a candle flickered into the room. 'Did you catch something?' Demella whispered, her figure flipped and haunting from Percia's mangled position on the ground. 'Was it your death?'

As she clambered to her feet, half-unbalanced, Percia saw her mother in a different light. The biting sarcasm had fallen off, replaced with fear, with worry. She was attempting to bury a concerned frown. Demella offered out her palms as if about to scoop up a baby bird fallen from the nest, and her daughter felt completely embarrassed. The fly rattled around in the jar outside by the window. The candlelight was a blush cast upon her little face. 'Wake me next time, my daughter,' Demella whispered, before kissing Percia's forehead. Theirs was not a relationship of mistrust and control. There was pull, backwards, forwards, rhythmic sway, but there was a comfortable middle ground between the two of them. Percia glanced up at her mother. She knew how complicated it was to be her mother's child, even if she could never put that to words, or convey it organically. It was in glances. In footsteps, oftentimes in daughter following behind mother.

Demella brought her daughter into the kitchen and pulled out one of the chairs, offering it to her. She stewed briefly by the window, her greyed hair catching in the moonlight. To Percia, her mother was almost moonlight itself—she shied away from the sunshine, where she could, and glowed like all the twinkling stars. Perhaps she was an idoliser.

In time, her mother moved from windowsill to chair and extended her hands out to her daughter's. 'Did I ever tell you the story of my first child?' Her expression was well-worn, and Percia shook her head. She knew she had many siblings, but she had never met any of them.

Her mother laid out the necessary landscape. ‘I was young, but not your age, although I suppose I could have been,’ she said, dotting the background with olive-coloured shrubbery and narcissus flowers. ‘I was in love with her father. I was young, in love, and my stomach was the size of Maels Morrim’s hunch.’ This made Percia laugh, picturing the old woman’s bent figure in her head, but reversed, strapped to her mother’s own torso. ‘I remember being frightened, because I had never reared my own child, or given birth. I haven’t told you much, Percia, about the throes of giving birth, but my own mother had told me even less. My head was aflush with unobservant miscalculations and hurried stresses and the worry I would choose the wrong name for my child.’ Percia used her imagination to conjure the image of her mother frantically flinging her arms about—her idea of what it looked like to be panicked about bringing a daughter into this world. She found it strange and unusual to picture someone older than her so much younger. This little newborn sibling, not yet born. The cause of such torment.

Demella paused, smiling down at her youngest. ‘Your sister did her best to soothe me from inside the womb. Her little toes tapping, and I am sure she would have whispered something to me if she could have spoken.’

‘What did her father say to you, to try and soothe you himself?’

Demella tipped her head to the side, a question she wasn’t expecting.

‘Fathers in this bloodline are not too familiar with how to aid their burgeoning wives,’ she said, pausing once more. She shook her head. ‘We were not married neither, so I was a woman with his child, not his wife.’

Percia stared into her mother’s eyes as if expecting she would somehow grow to understand what that meant. At her age, the complexities of adult relationships like marriage seemed line to line, a process that began in one instance and followed down the track. It all seemed too complicated to understand that the father of her sister had not been her mother’s husband. One of the trees behind the story wilted of its leaves. She mourned silently. Demella told her about the woman who had assisted in the birth. Percia thought about the father.

‘When I held that child in my arms, I knew I was a mother, and I *knew* I was a mother.’ Demella hesitated, then added, ‘I apologise if the cadence confused you.’ She smiled, extending her hand out to take her daughter’s in hers. ‘I was added to physically, having this little girl to look after, but I was also added to in spirit, too. My daughter further completed who I was, as woman, as goddess, as protector.’ Percia had stopped thinking about the absence of the man, and about the image of her mother, sweating, holding a newborn in blissful relief. There was a truth to the story of gods being able to implant their tales inside a mind. This vision was crystal.

A rapping at the door splintered it, and Demella gripped to the back of the chair as she rose to her feet. The knocking continued, the moon pooled in through the only window in the kitchen.

Demella opened to the grief-stricken face of Thirell, who operated a small woodworking trade out of the rear building on the property his family had owned for generations. He was wearing the thinnest of his coats over his pyjamas and occasionally closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. His voice was coarse and horribly slowed. ‘Anthes’ daughter has gone missing,’ he said, the colour drained from his face. ‘We have sent men to search for her in the woods, but we ask for your assistance, Demella, please, he won’t be the same man if his daughter isn’t found tonight.’

From her perch in the kitchen, Percia was leaning forward, able to see the man’s face through blank space. Thirell was the same height as Demella, but her presence made her seem heads taller. Percia crept out of the chair, mixing her concern with her curiosity. Her mind went to the old, strange fellow on the outskirts of town, the overwhelming shadow of the dresser, the croak of frogs bringing in bad omens like this. Thirell noticed the girl mid-sentence whilst describing what happened.

‘Make sure she stays inside the home as soon as the sun goes down,’ he said, but his tone was not controlling. He was frightened.

Percia, buried underneath the sheets from her bed and her mothers, felt like a rabbit protecting itself from the forces unbeknownst to her. She kept reminding herself, you are not scared, you are not startled, no one is coming for you—and she believed this, but she believed she was witnessing her mother telling her another story, too. Tucked under the covers, Percia listened to the beginning once upon a time...she saw the fabric of her mother’s bedclothes caught in the low wind of the night as she scoured the edge of the wilderness for any trace of this missing child. Using some new foresight, Percia saw Anthes, his crumpled figure hoisted by two other men, but he was not drunken or taken ill. Wells and sobs leaked from his eyes, and the occasional onlooker thought him both incredibly passionate and deranged. A father for his child. A father almost unable to search for her. Percia wondered if her own father would react in such a way—fling himself out into the open, wail at the moon, curse that darn moon. When she asked any sort of question about her father to Demella, her mother would steady herself against something nearby—a chair, the pale wall—and give the same response, or a variation. Your father, she would say, married another woman. He raises her children.

Percia fell asleep half an hour or so after her mother left to join the search for the missing daughter. She always had ambitious dreams, gorgeous set dressings of large stone palaces she wished to inhabit, or else the place she imagined her father to be waiting on her, without an imposter family circling round him. Sometimes her mind twisted, and Demella would soothe her with forehead kisses and remind her nightmares are there to balance the happiest of dreams. They protect us from assuming we are destined for only greatness because of who we are, she would say, tucking Percia back in.

*You must know there is darkness.*

In dreams, stepping and narrowly avoiding streamwater, Percia could see a gathering of townsfolk crowding around something in the meadow. She assumed they had discovered the little girl, who she knew was her age, her height, looked similar to her except for the eye colour and the shape of her nose. Some faraway voice whispered that it could have been her. She had been disobeying her mother, frolicking late in the evening without any form of protection, and she'd skipped right past the house of the older man who could be responsible, she didn't know. The crowd didn't part to make room for Percia, and she once again tried to peer through the space between. Some people were covering their eyes. Others leaned in, made remarks of disgust and billowing rage. Demella was not anywhere amongst the gathered crowd. For one brief moment, Percia was deathly afraid she would come upon her mother in the centre of the circle, somehow caught in the terror of the evening. They could have come together collectively to demand why a goddess chose to live amongst them all and yet give no proper sympathies when an ordinary child went missing. Where were the summons to the other gods, the sorcerers that could divine this daughter of Earth's location? You are only helping us on land. Wandering, looking beautiful, keeping your own daughter protected. How many immortal children escape the tortures of life where ours do not?

Percia woke up coughing and leant over the side of the bed, expecting bile and vomit. She'd never seen who or what lied in the middle of the circle, but it had disgusted her all the same. Whether it was her bloodied mother or the trampled remains of Anthes' daughter, there was darkness. She stumbled out of bed, tapped her fingers against the walls, the door frame of her bedroom, the table in the kitchen, and opened the door out into the darkened world. Distant torches flamed. Percia couldn't see her mother or hear a gentle wind that reminded her everything was safe. She thought for a moment she could hear the echo of a childish whimper, but she couldn't imagine any lost and lonely girl was nearby. It was cold. Distant torches still flamed.

When she awoke, Percia listened out for the sound of a girl her age playing games with her father. Once more it was a disappointment. Demella was in the kitchen, slicing herself a cut of bread. There was an air to the morning that Percia did not understand, and she lingered on asking whether anything had come of the night before's search. Her mother turned when the bedroom door creaked.

'Stay close to the house today,' she said, setting the slice of bread onto a grey plate. Demella was sluggish, but not decidedly lazy with her movements. It was a sadness. Percia knew when her mother was in some form of grief.

She felt like she herself was tied down to a boulder. 'Can I spend the day with you then?'

Demella just smiled at her, but shook her head. 'I have to spend the time with Anthes.' It meant: no children should be around him. Percia didn't want to cross borders.

People would make eye contact with her, but she kept her head mostly down, afraid of glancing at something deeper in the pools of their irises. She wandered through the meandering village, toward the meadow, trying to listen to hushed conversations to hear anything. Absolutely anything. The disappearance of a child was far more frightful than the death of an older soul, and Percia thought of how it would be if she herself were lost. Abducted. She paced past the home of the strange old man as hurried as she could, on the complete opposite side of the path. Her eyes were wide and convicting. Of course he would have something to do with it. But she was only small, and no matter her heritage, she would likely not be believed. That irked her. When she had been only a year or so younger, she had confronted the father of one of the other village children, a silly brat named Julon, who had been tossing snapped fragments of sticks into her hair, sometimes aiming for her mouth. The father did not believe her for a moment—Julon would never be so careless to someone he could wed in the future, he had said, in far less a polite and respectful tone. Percia didn't feel comfortable mentioning it again.

Julon eventually ceased when he became more interested in tormenting Koura.

Who was now missing.

Percia shook herself out of it.

Any speculation would exit out of this girl's mouth like some sort of slander from the gods, and heaven forbid she sacrificed the relationship she didn't even have with her father by being silly and accusing eleven-year-old Julon of being capable of kidnapping. Although, Percia began to wonder, he could have bashed her face in with a rock and dragged her corpse to the old man's house. He would have swallowed her skin and bones right up.

Percia noticed the dark cloud swirling around her as she neared the meadow.

The air was stiff and cold and she blamed herself for not taking a coat off its hook near the door. A shiver shook her body, an ant crawled up the back of her leg, and she scoured the area of the meadow most open, looking for someplace to convene with the nature spirits. She hoped they would listen to her this time. Percia knelt down in the field, tracing out a circle in the dirt. She had absolutely nothing of Koura's, and she figured going about asking for something of hers would have seemed out of touch, too. You don't remind a man what he has just lost, you don't try to borrow his daughter's clothing, she thought to herself, poking a finger into the soft dirt to make a divot. The wind howled.

'Tell me, wind spirits, have you seen Koura?'

The wind giggled. Percia cocked her head, waiting for a better response. Nothing.

'Tell me, soil and earth, has Koura treaded upon you this morning?'

She narrowed her eyes down at the soft dirt beneath her feet, willing something. Anything.

The ground did not quake underneath her feet, nor did it open to swallow her whole.

Percia sighed, but there was a new feeling too: she understood. She was merely a child. This was not her realm. She listened to her mother, she broke a handful of rules to have them reminded to her, and she skirted away from the boy throwing sticks. Her legs were cold. A fly buzzed around her head, and she sharply flung herself to the side to avoid it flying right in the direction of her eye. Percia didn't think it was truly possible for her to catch that elusive frog. The adults didn't seem to know where the little girl had disappeared to. Her mother, Demella, would continue pretending there was hope—why had she not confirmed where the girl was through the help of other deities? Were they not willing to assist Demella? Did all those powerful gods and goddesses Percia had been taught about no more care for the missing child of Anthes than they did the death of a forest boar?

She didn't notice the tears until one pooled at her upper lip and she licked it off with her tongue. The meadow was not the comforting, reassuring place she might have thought it to be. It was isolating and the beautiful flowers that bloomed were hibernating as if in mourning too. Percia tried to remember if Koura frequented this spot, this exact spot, where dense coverage exploded out into tall grasses. She placed a dirtied palm against one of the trees, hoping she would see something on the horizon, the figure of a girl her age, maybe. A wind spirit come to answer her.

Nothing.

Silence was often such a comfort to Percia. She dwelled in it like it was a personal bungalow. The meadow was behind her, the sharp angles of the wood jutting out. Percia ducked underneath a protruding branch. She was in a world. A different one, at least, seeing through an opening between curtains. No part of this world gave hints to anything. There were distractions though, and she stopped paying so much attention to the stones beneath her feet. There was enough of a distraction for her not to notice the greyed figure come from behind a tree and wrap his arms around her, snatching her deeper into the wood. It was sensory overload. Percia screamed out for her mother first, forgetting where she was. She screamed instinctively for help. No one came. Her eyelids were becoming heavy and she recognised this feeling, like falling into a slumber, like fading off with the clouds as a guide. It would have been peaceful. Except Percia knew she was being kidnapped.

That is a roof, she thought, opening her eyes in an unfamiliar place. There is an ornate carving on the ceiling, something sculpted by an artist who could afford to live in the more affluent regions of the country. These were strange thoughts to be having as she came to, but Percia could tell with certainty she was nowhere close to her home. This must be the reason, she thought, this must be why no one can seem to locate Koura. Little girls getting whisked across country for ancient sacrifice in temples.

She was wearing the same clothes, smelled like the same forest, but was laid down and swallowed in sheets that choked her at the neck. Percia clambered out of the bed, glancing around the room. A dresser that almost reached the ceiling stood to the left of the door. The door. Her way out. She raced for the handle, shaking it with a fervour she was previously unfamiliar with. It was certainly the time for unfamiliarity. She combed back the hair falling in her face and grunted—the door was locked, unsurprisingly. It was miserably heated in the room. There was no dirt, no path outside, no window for certain. She could have screamed out Koura's name until her throat bled but she tried for a few minutes and nothing happened. Another girl's voice in a place like this would at least be a comfort. Percia tried the door again. And again. At last, she realised someone had taken her shoes off. They had been tucked underneath the bed. She blinked and saw her mother lift her limp, sound asleep body into the bed so far from here. She blinked again and knew nothing in this room smelled like her mother.

Percia flung herself back onto the bed and fell once more back to sleep.

Grey shapes surrounded her once more, in dreamland. She was upright, her shoulders touching the stone of the wall behind her. The shapes weren't men, they were pillars, sturdy, fuzzy in the strange glow of light. A cropping of pillars, but only in this part of the grand hall she stood in. One wall opened to nothing—a great nothing, open air and peach sky and a soaring hawk with wings the length of her entire height. She had to squint to see so far away. Her feet were planted still, refusing to budge, and for a moment she thought the wall had shackled them. Dream logic. The body misbehaving.

Percia screamed out something, but she misunderstood herself. It was her language but her language muddled up. In her own sort of way, she attempted to speak backwards, but her tongue continued to get trapped and twisted in the back of her mouth.

There was a figure in the great nothing. He walked back and forth, dressed in a white robe. Percia screamed out something new, something that surprised her. She called him father. The figure hardly reacted. Percia realised she could walk now, but her motions weren't fluid and exhaustive, she was sluggish, she was struggling on feet that blistered and burnt. The grey pillars became statues of undesirable monsters—the things of story and folklore, creatures her mother would have told to her to worry her, to protect her and keep her safe. This grand hall had never felt safe.

Percia woke up, panting. A deep red sheet was caught around her throat, half strangulating her. It took her half of her energy to slip from within the sheets and she collapsed onto the floor, landing on top of her arm. A shock of pain was sent through the bent limb, but she remembered the sort of thing her mother would tell her about bravery, even if this felt like the least of her woes. This tumbling. Her mother would say, *you have tenacity in you. You came into this world bound to prove your strength.* Typically, she had assumed it was just a parental slice—something they were coursed to say. But it would beg the question of, by whom? *Nature.* Certainly for Demella.

Percia climbed to her feet, rubbed her elbow, and made a second beeline for the door. She wondered if it had been all part of the dream, that fragile panic of a locked exit. Nevermind how accurate the dream had made its rendering of the room she found herself in. Detail down to the lacing of her boots. Her hand touched the warm metal of the door handle. It shook against her force, then clicked open. Percia blinked in amazement, although this result was her hope, her intention. The door swung outward into a concrete hallway. Never had an entrance to somewhere else felt less inviting to the girl.

Concrete hallways led onto concrete hallways. The girl wound around a corner and realised she had come across a dead end that was decorated only with a pomegranate curtain and a small wood end table. There was no window behind the curtain—she tested this several times, convinced there was some trick or angle she needed to shift her head to see out into the sunshine. The hallway was well-lit but lacked any fresh air. There was a lingering smell she couldn't quite place either. Percia turned round and headed in the opposite direction, her bare feet against the concrete floor. Demella had told her of stories involving mazes, labyrinthine chambers with no escape, but once more she summoned the courage to keep moving. She was small, uncertain, still on the whole terrified for what happened to Koura, but she was determined. Every door seemed to be the same door but it mattered little to her if she paced past the same place five, ten, fifteen different times. The moral of those stories was always that the person trapped within the labyrinth would find their way to the surface, a rabbit emerging from a warren. A triumphant rabbit.

Percia came around another corner and discovered not a dead end, but a doorway she hadn't seen before. There was a curtain draped over one half, a greyed colour not unlike the bare walls of the hallway. The door seemed to beckon her, or maybe that was the promise of an escape from the paranoia of not knowing where she was. Another door handle. Percia reached down and turned on it, or more accurately yanked on it, and stepped into a darker room, furnished by burning flourishes of purples, blues, and greens. Percia crept further into the room, staring around, hoping her eyes would adjust to the minimal light. There was a fireplace with a low flame, which burned an icy blue. It was an informal living space, but certainly more lavish than anything Percia had seen in the village she had grown up in. No windows, of course. She was starting to be convinced wherever she was was underground—a frightening thought given the sorts of stories she had heard from the other village children about the creepy crawlies that lived underneath the surface. They weren't always talking about bugs neither.

And of course there was the underworld.

A voice trickled out from nowhere, and Percia glanced around, a hopeless attempt to find the slender body of a bug-like man, perhaps the one who had kidnapped her from the meadow.

'Percia, daughter of Demella and Zakal,' he said, from air, 'I am your uncle.'



Percia eyed the room to find the source of this mysterious voice claiming to be family. The far reaches of the space, the shadowed corners, were far too darkened for her to discern whether someone was lurking in them, delivering this sudden bout of an introduction. She didn't even know she had an uncle.

She inched forward, as if blown by a miraculous wind. The voice seemed to have crossed across the entire length of the room without her noticing and now came louder. 'I am Hazlet,' he said, appearing by the fireplace, illuminated by the blue glow. Percia tried to bury and displace her fear...this man was surely responsible for her kidnapping, but maybe he could help her find her father. She'd just decided he must be missing somewhere, for he never paid her any attention. Her mother very rarely spoke of him. Percia moved at a glacial pace towards Hazlet, uncertain, regretting that she left the boots off her feet in the bedroom she awoke in. They would have been a good attack strategy, if need be.

'I know we have never met before, Percia, but your father and I have an arrangement. Not one he would have told you about, mind you, but you're of the age that you can become my wife regardless.'

Percia tasted her own vomit.

Without shoes, dressed in her frog-hunting clothes, Percia looked no more than twelve. Her hair was uncombed and her face blotchy, likely from the struggle when the grey figured had kidnapped her from the woods. Her jaw hung slightly ajar and she was flicking her thumb with one of her fingers. Hazlet barely paid much attention to her appearance. He was grinning, though, and he took a chalice of something from the mantle of the fireplace and took a hearty mouthful from it.

Percia felt a strange compulsion to step forward, and another to begin asking questions. 'Can I see my father?' She wanted to say: can I ask him why he thought of this? Why does he not at least visit with my mother and me? She was fearful even one question would not be answered. Hazlet glanced in her direction and the blues of his eyes seemed to flicker, burn, and overwhelm her. She was lightheaded. Homesick. This felt like an abandonment. Nature was abandoning her.

'Your father?' He said, moving towards the girl. 'Zakal sends his best.'

This repetition of his name stunned her. It was a name she had heard before, in story, prominently from the other children in the village. They spoke of a Zakal that would smite them if they misbehaved, and a Zakal that kept his sights on them all and would punish them and their families when they did not please the heavens sufficiently. The lightning and the thunder, that was him, that was the god Zakal. Her father...he was the mighty Zakal. It was like her heart had been electrocuted. Her mother had always shunned discussion of her father, so perhaps it had been to avoid his wrath if she misspoke against him? Percia didn't think anyone had succeeded very well. The room was overwhelmingly scalding.

She could not find the confidence to demand anything. Spaced beyond her, she felt the breath of her capture on her neck. She knew if she struggled too much, she would face the penalties of the one who doesn't listen—many a story has ended in someone facing the consequences of their actions. Percia wanted to spit back that her mother would come find her and avenge the deed, but she thought she would sound rather childish calling into the world for the protection of Demella. She was, of course, a child. A barefooted princess. A little goddess. A captive.

'You know what happens to all the souls when they cross into your realm,' she spoke, clued into her true whereabouts. 'What happened to Koura, a girl from my village? She went missing, as now I have.'

Hazlet paused, his face awash with the light of flames. She recognised that look upon his face—he thought the question beneath him. Little girls go missing. People disappear. Percia was not unaware to that, but with every tangle lodged into the canopy of trees inside her head, this was a question she thought could be simply handed over to her. A nobody child, not one born of god blood. No chess piece in the dealings of two brothers. Just Koura. Daughter of Anthes, but who was he?

Her uncle stepped forward. 'She could be here, she could not.' His tone struck her much the same as his expression, which lingered much longer than his words.

Percia was certain a welt was burning into the heel of her foot.

'I cannot see my father, you have kidnapped me, and you cannot tell me where one of my friends has disappeared to?' There was fire in her voice. She was siphoning the world, this world, the underworld. Taking her rage and her fury from the pockets of fire seeping into the room from the fireplace. If there had been dirt, earth, she would have called for a mystic force to swallow him up...but her power, her child-power, mattered very little against Hazlet, the ruler of the underworld. He had his paws on her no sooner than when she had finished speaking, or more accurately, hurling her heart of fuelled anger at him. The grip on her arms tightened.

'You have no power here, Percia.'

His response was followed by a dismissing hand.

Percia trialled a few different rebuttals in her head, but nothing would stick. Her father was quite obviously the sort of father that would toss her aside like this. She inhaled, then exhaled, but nothing in front of her, or behind her, changed. It was the same shadowy room that lunged forth on occasion to swallow her up. Her uncle appeared no less frightening.

'That room?' She said, pointing distantly toward the hallway she had come from. 'Is it mine?'

Hazlet nodded, swatting his hand in the direction of the door.

If it would have made much difference, she would have told him to go rot in the underworld.

But that fate was for her, too.

There was nothing to do in the bedroom. She toyed with the curtains draped across the bare concrete walls. She poked her head in every drawer of the towering closet, hoping to find a hidden exit, or at least something left behind from whomever Hazlet had kidnapped before her. It could have been Koura, and he could have done away with her mere hours before Percia arrived. To be his bride. The thought of it made living life as a croaking frog one thousand times more inviting. She could outmanoeuvre the hunters, she thought, picturing herself in the land-water life, dining on buzzing flies and bellyflopping from the bank into the filthy brown water. Something about the meadow now made her feel disgusted and ashamed. How she had spent mornings, afternoons and evenings searching for whatever was her quarry. The carnivorous look that might have been in her eyes if other girls came upon her by the stream. She had tried for years to be seamless among them. Now what she craved most was to be in the centre of the village, surrounded by girls in their best dresses, completely void of thought. Then she would not be thinking about what marrying the god of the underworld would be like.

An hour passed. Percia passed out on the bed, her arms and legs splayed out as if she was fighting off something creeping up on her. An invisible smoke. In this dream, she was running as fast as earthly possible, passing the meadow, the trees, the spot, the house of the elderly man who seemed now like a pestering flea. There it was, there was home. She wiggled her way in through the window in her room, thumping down, narrowly avoiding gashing her leg on the shattered remnants of glass on the floor. Why was there glass? Percia crawled to a sliver and studied it. Her window had been smashed in. She screamed out for her mother, hoping she would be home. Demella did not respond, not from the house, not from wherever she was. Arms, disembodied arms, clambered in from the outside and clutched at Percia's ankles. They dragged her back through the window. Glass scarred her arms as she scraped her fingernails against the wood. Scarlet red blood pooled into the bedroom. A peace now a sacrilege. Percia woke up screaming. She'd find some way to burn this bedroom down to the ground, she thought, shoving everything off the bed into a heap in front of the door. The bare mattress was lumpy. Her throat was dry. She did not expect anyone to come round to heed the care of her needs. This was not a palace. It was aptly named hell.

The next time she awoke, she had slept in the sheets-and-things pile at the door. It was like being swaddled. There had been no dreams, or nightmares, and Percia now stared underneath the bed and thought about the missing ending to her mother's story. The first daughter. It was an interrupted thought, and Demella had gotten no further than the birth of this child. Percia wanted to know what had become of her sister. Now she was certain she would never hear another word from her mother's

lips. It would have been inconsiderate to demand the grieving father go bother someone else, go searching for his daughter Koura someplace else, but maybe the plea would have guaranteed Percia more time with her mother. Was she expected to spend time with her uncle now?

A thought like that made her shudder. He had been so cold in introduction. Hazlet had welcomed her with sickly proposals and nothing to eat or drink. Not that she was all that willing to accept anything from him, on the assumption it could be more trickery. Her stomach groaned and she licked her lips at the empty air, waiting with an upturned patience for a fly to buzz into the room, somehow. She pretended the heap of tossed-aside sheets was a high mound of dirt by a stream. She was a frog. This could be the meadow. The stream. If only she were to visualise it. Mud before it dried back to dirt. Typha reeds shooing upwards, trying desperately to reach her father. She froze in place, picturing her mother kneeling at the bank of the stream, a face wept of tears.

*Come back to me, Percia.*

Her voice would be weakened from all the screaming.

Percia sunk into the heap. The only thing she wanted to do was fall asleep.

Again, and again, and again.

On the website, there are various details about her kidnapping. Percia, the daughter of the goddess of the harvest Demella and the king of the gods Zakal, was given from one brother to the other as a gift. Hazlet wanted a bride, and the young girl was of marriage age, or near enough. The story is rather cut-and-dry. She was given no choice but to marry the god of the underworld, and in order to trap her in the underworld, he discreetly fed her a pomegranate seed. On the website, there are various details that trap her within the walls. Percia is a personality on the internet now, the little darling that eventually became the queen, because she simply had no choice. She never caught a frog. But she gave us winter.

**PERSEPHONE**

Sometimes I wonder what the definition of *moment* is,  
whether it is as short as I once thought it was,  
or as tedious as I now think it is.

*[she sighs, realising how bitter she sounds]*

**PERSEPHONE**

If I were to tell them the truth—  
that I go to Olympus,  
maybe indulge in a banquet or two,  
then will they react any differently?  
I might as well remain in here,  
by my lonesome,  
trying to avoid my husband.

**PERSEPHONE**

I am not a baby about my trauma, Ude,  
I can speak about it.

*[she inches forward in the throne]*

I feel a little gross sitting like this,  
like you are some humble servant,  
and I am this great and respected queen.

I am respected, I suppose.

The glances are temporary, when I arrive, but otherwise,  
my people—the people, they do embrace me.

At least I am not my husband, I say,  
a whisper to myself in the dark.

We should be sitting on cushions, the both of us.

You look so comfortable down there, Ude.

**PERSEPHONE**

You would be conflating my husband's rage with mine,  
the natural-born leader of this world, and a girl.  
Sometimes all I look to myself is a girl.  
This little ragdoll thing with a face made of flowers.  
Pluck me, Ude, irritate me.  
Offend me!  
It could be fun.

**PERSEPHONE**

You will die, Ude...  
No, sorry, that isn't possible.  
You'll be screamed at?  
Publicly flayed out on a wheel and spun for eternity,  
while my husband drinks your blood in his chalice?  
He doesn't quite think of me as someone to be freed.  
I ate the pomegranate, didn't I?

**PERSEPHONE**

You can call me Persephone. I prefer it.

Women being mistreated in Greek mythology is nothing special. Stories written by men in an era dominated by men were going to favour men. Persephone is scorched by the men who are supposed to protect her—her father, her uncle. Demeter does everything but unravel the Underworld to get her daughter back. Persephone is a young girl.

For a while I have felt uncertain about writing on her, despite my connection to Demeter's passion, and my unwillingness to let Persephone be rewritten as a woman solely in love with a dark, edgy, mysterious man. Do your rewrites, if you must. But I think there is a darkness to imagining theirs as a gothic love story. The wrong sort of darkness.

I'd had ideas on how to write a piece where Persephone wasn't merely a victim, that she found the strength to withstand her trauma. There are remnants here, little excerpts, but I never found the ability to reach an ending. Persephone should never be purely victimised, so I can see the appeal in reimagining her story as something less miserable and less shadowed by her kidnapping and sexual assault. There is worry, perhaps, that in reversing away from *Persephone as the victim* it becomes *Persephone as the cringe defier of men*. Woke!Persephone, if you will. One day I will figure out how to give her story the proper defiance ending.

Persephone is old now. A centuries-old myth, a warning for the determination of a mother and to pick flowers less. I guess. She's not a little girl anymore—there is a lot of possibility for her future in fiction. Whether you cast views into her true existence or not, she remains the lady of the Underworld, in some form or another. Pieces of her story make their way into pop culture to this very day.

This is not a goodbye, Persephone.