

2017

Voices of Ancient Women: Stories and Essays on Persephone and Medusa

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Recommended Citation

Rosett, Isabelle George, "Voices of Ancient Women: Stories and Essays on Persephone and Medusa" (2017). *Scripps Senior Theses*. 1008.
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**VOICES OF ANCIENT WOMEN: STORIES AND ESSAYS ON PERSEPHONE
AND MEDUSA**

**by
ISABELLE GEORGE ROSETT**

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR NOVY
PROFESSOR BERENFELD**

APRIL 21, 2017

Dedicated:

To Max, Leo, and Eli, for teaching me about surviving the things that scare me and changing the things that I can't survive.

To three generations of Heuston women and my honorary sisters Krissy and Madly, for teaching me about the ways I can be strong, for valuing me exactly as I am, and for the endless excellent desserts.

To my mother, for absolutely everything (but especially for fielding literally dozens of phone calls as I struggled through this thesis).

To Sam, for being the voice of reason that I happily ignore, for showing up with Gatorade the day after New Year's shenanigans, and for the tax breaks.

To my father (in spite of how utterly terrible he is at carrying on a phone conversation), for the hikes and the ski days, for quoting Yeats and Blake at the dinner table, and for telling me that every single essay I've ever asked him to edit "looks good" even when it was a blatant lie. But especially, for teaching me that the most important person I can possibly be is myself, wholeheartedly, authentically, and with determination.

Honorary mention to Professors Novy and Berenfeld, who were incredibly encouraging, understanding, and helpful in this process.

And above all: to Emma, who has honored me with a friendship that has saved my life in a million tiny ways, who has given of her time and energy and love in endless supply, who understands the voices of the stars and the value of a great road trip playlist.

I'm really glad we didn't die together up the canyon in that blizzard on Christmas Eve.

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Introduction

I chose the subject of Greek mythology for this thesis because it provided, to my mind, the perfect space to layer art historical and literary analysis with creative writing. My hope is that I have done so in a way that allows each section of this thesis to inform the others and still stand on its own.

I approached this project primarily as a creative work, one that is trying to find a narrative that is compelling and worth telling in my own reworkings of these myths. This began with seeking out mythological Greek women who were silenced, both actively and indirectly, within their mythology. I found dozens of women whose stories followed what Lucia Nixon, in her essay on Demeter and Persephone as cult figures, deems the “girl’s tragedy, with its sequence of departure, seclusion, rape, tribulation, and rescue after the birth of a male child.”¹ Persephone and Medusa stood out to me because they both have a widespread and familiar iconography, one which appears throughout the Greek archaic and classical periods and which is accompanied by a large number of literary references to each.

There are many similarities between these two women. They are both violated by a god, Medusa by Poseidon and Persephone by Hades, who acts with her father’s permission. They both live in realms slightly apart from those of mortal men, Medusa with her sisters in the land of the Gorgons and Persephone with her husband in the underworld. They both served daily roles beyond their mythology in ancient Greek life, Medusa as an apotropaic figure and Persephone as a cult goddess who presided over

¹ Lucia Nixon, “The Cults of Demeter and Kore,” in *Women in Antiquity: New Assessments*, (London: Routledge, 1995) 89.

harvest festivals, weddings, and funerals alike. And ultimately, in their respective mythologies, they are both silenced, robbed of autonomy, and punished for being women.

The Goal

In her excellent essay “The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours,” Patricia Klindienst attempts to unravel some of the inherently problematic and violent treatment of women in Greek mythology. She conducts an analysis of the myth of Philomela, the princess of Athens who was raped and mutilated by her sister’s husband. Unable to speak after his attack, Philomela wove a tapestry depicting what happened to her and sent it to her sister, who was horrified and joined her in a bloody revenge plot. In her discussion of the myth, Klindienst discusses the importance of returning to ancient myths and reframing them through a contemporary feminist lens, “staging a raid on the treasured icons of a tradition that has required women’s silence for centuries.”² She points out that many previous examinations of these myths are from a solely male perspective, and as such the active silencing of women goes unremarked upon in much of the scholarship on the classics.

I would suggest that often, this lack stems not from a conscious effort to continue that active silencing, but rather from an earnest failure to realize that there is anything missing in the narrative these women are allowed. Many approaches to these myths seem to assume that women in them remain silent because they have nothing to say. Or, as Klindienst puts it, “women are silenced partly by being envisioned as silent.”³

This thesis, then, will try to fill in some small amount of this lacking scholarship. In the following two essays, I will examine some of the ways that the Persephone and Medusa myths were received, conceived, displayed, and changed in ancient Greece. In

² Klindienst, “The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours,” in *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical world*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 279.

³ Ibid, 266.

the accompanying stories, I will try to return to these women some of their stolen, lost, or destroyed power. These stories are my attempt to, in a reconceiving of the original material, “choose to teach [my]self the power of art as a form of resistance.”⁴ They represent to me, as Philomela did to Klindienst, “an assertion of the female will to survive despite everything that threatens to silence us, including the male literary tradition and its critics... a moment of choice, the *refusal* to return violence for violence. The writer’s act of renunciation and writing as the healing of what is torn in herself and in her community requires that she be *heard*.”⁵

This is my personal, painful effort to be heard, to write and heal some of the damage that is done when men silence women in mythology, in the literary and art historical canon, and in the act of creation. This is me, trying to follow Klindienst’s plea for the woman writer to “remember the embodied, resisting woman.”⁶ In the grand tradition of countless writers before me, this is where I rewrite history and mythology for myself and those around me who need a new, better vision of power, gender, and art in our world.

⁴ Klindienst, “Voice of the Shuttle,” 277.

⁵ Ibid, 277.

⁶ Ibid, 278.

I. The Marriage of Life and Death: Persephone's Roles in *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and Classical-Era Images at Eleusis

The mythology of Persephone, the maiden daughter of the goddess Demeter is represented in dozens of iterations both in texts and artwork from the ancient Greek world. It is constantly being re-shaped and re-worked, as a myth that embodies multiple themes and, in Persephone, a figure who unifies the three distinct realms of gods, mortals, and the dead.

The following essay examines two themes that appear in both visual representations and written versions of her myth. The first is Persephone as a fertility goddess, alongside her mother, Demeter, the goddess of the harvest. Together they presided over the Thesmophoria and the Eleusinian mysteries as goddesses of life, fertility, agriculture, and the harvest. The Homeric Hymn to Demeter is considered to be an explanation⁷ of the founding of the Eleusinian mysteries by Demeter. Classical images from the sanctuary at Eleusis show the mother and daughter together in processions or being worshipped at the Eleusinian Mysteries. (Figures 1-4) Taken together, the text and the images form a representation of Persephone as a maiden concerned with life, springtime, and crops.

The second theme is that of Persephone as queen of the underworld, who exists in relation to her husband Hades, rather than her mother. While there is no full-length text that concerns Persephone's relationship with Hades in the way that the Homeric Hymn explores the mother-daughter dynamic between her and Demeter, she does appear in briefly in texts that include visits to the underworld by the heroes. Additionally, several vase paintings and reliefs depicting Hades and Persephone enthroned in the underworld are preserved from the fifth to third centuries B.C.E. (figures 4 and 5).

⁷ Helen P. Foley, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 65.

The gaps between mythology as it was recorded textually and visually are considerable, and indicate not only that the visual iconography of Persephone was used to convey different messages than the written word, but also that the use and exploration of these two particular themes, whose intersection is embodied by Persephone herself, serves a very different purpose across these different mediums. The gap between visual and textual mirrors another separation, that of her ancient myth from the ancient reality of women in classical Greece. In Hesiod and *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Persephone dwells in realms unknown to mortals; she is torn between the heavens and the underworld. In the images from Eleusis, however, she and her mother interact with their followers and participate in the festivals in their honor, carrying torches and walking in processions. Their powers over the harvest and fertility are emphasized, inviting the viewer of these images to connect to the goddess in a more familiar way than the texts do.

Persephone and Demeter in Classical Greek Art

In antiquity, Persephone and Demeter were perhaps most widely celebrated as the goddesses who presided over the Eleusinian mysteries and the Thesmophoria, two large and important harvest festivals. Reliefs from the sanctuaries at Eleusis and Athens show the mother and daughter side by side, often in a procession and almost always holding torches (Figures 2 and 3). There are also examples of pottery with Demeter and Persephone being joined by Triptolemus, a minor god of sowing grain, in his winged chariot (Figures 6 and 7).

In figures 1 and 2, the goddesses are shown alongside their worshippers on a hierarchical scale, looming over the mortals who hold up offerings. The imagery is distinctly motherly, their large size emphasizing both their godliness and allowing the

viewer to read the image as a mother with children. Their flowing, disheveled robes and gentle attention on the worshippers emphasizes a nurturing aspect to their powers.

Pomegranates are also a common element in statues of Persephone at her sanctuaries. (Figure 8) Some sources suggest that pomegranates were eaten as a form of contraceptive or even abortifacient in the ancient world.⁸ Tied, then, to both pregnancy and death, they seem a fitting fruit for the young, bridal queen of the underworld, and their inclusion in images of the still unwed girl then suggests a blending together of her roles, mixing her chronology around so that the fertility goddess, still dwelling unwed with her mother, holds a symbol of her own imprisonment and new realm. In images of Persephone at Eleusis, the pomegranate becomes a link between the afterlife and the mortal world, a crossing over of her duties as queen of the underworld and her oversight of fertility.

Hesiod and the Homeric Hymn to Demeter

Persephone appears briefly in Hesiod's *Theogony*, around the 8th century B.C.E.. The *Theogony* includes Demeter in a list of women with whom Zeus had children and adds that Demeter "bore white-armed Persephone whom Aidoneus [Hades] carried off from her mother; but wise Zeus gave her to him."⁹ While this early version clearly shows the abduction of Persephone by Hades to have been arranged by Zeus, it does not go into any greater detail. However, earlier in the text there is reference to Persephone—in her position as queen of the Underworld—as "dread" and "awesome."¹⁰

⁸Nixon, "Cults of Demeter and Kore," 85-87.

⁹ Hesiod and Apostolos Athanassakis, *Hesiod: Theogony, Works and Days, Shield*, (London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1985) 36.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 32.

Around two centuries later, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* provides a longer and considerably expanded version of the myth. Consisting of nearly 500 lines of text, the *Hymn* focuses on the anguish that Demeter and Persephone feel upon being separated and the power struggle Demeter engages in with Zeus and Hades to win her daughter back. Woven into this narrative is a secondary story, which recounts Demeter’s attempt to nurse and immortalize a mortal child and which ends with her giving mortals the secrets of the Eleusinian mysteries. The mysteries were a yearly festival conducted in honor of Demeter and Persephone, called “Kore” in many of the texts about the cult at Eleusis which was open to anyone who could speak Greek. The mysteries seem to have promised the initiates a better afterlife.¹¹

At the end of the *Hymn*, Demeter gives her rites and mysteries to a group of men— Triptolemus, Diokles, Eumolpos, and Keleos—blessing them, and future initiates in her cult, in the process. The *Hymn* closes with further praise of the goddesses and an admonition against revealing the holy rites of the mysteries. In the context of the *Hymn*, Persephone’s identity never progresses beyond that of loving and beloved daughter, contextualizing [MB20] her within Demeter’s roles as harvest, agriculture, and fertility goddess. Persephone’s separation from her mother is the driving force of the narrative, prompting Demeter’s withdrawal from Olympus, the ensuing episode with the mortal family she stays with, and the ultimate reconfiguring of both Demeter’s and Persephone’s powers on earth.¹² However, at no point do any of Persephone’s own actions push the plot forward. Instead, she is acted upon and around by Hades, Demeter, and—less directly—Zeus. She is abducted, hidden, tricked, and retrieved, but she never pushes

¹¹ Foley, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 88.

¹² *Ibid*, 89.

back, never re-routes the narrative through her own determination or will. She is passive throughout the Hymn, hidden from and inaccessible to us—the readers or listeners—much as she would have been hidden from Demeter. The only moment of action is when, after being reunited with her mother, she decides to speak, recounting her abduction and how she was forced to eat the pomegranate seed.¹³

In the *Hymn*, the story ends with the reunion of mother and daughter, both of whom also experience an expansion and transformation of their powers and worship through the founding of the mysteries. While it is mentioned that Persephone will spend a third of every year in the underworld with Hades, the closing lines emphasize that Demeter and her daughter are reunited, two goddesses presiding over the harvest and the festivals. Persephone's role in the underworld, her duties and powers, and her future with her husband are not discussed, foregoing the tendency, in most Greek myth, to center a woman's story on the men she gives birth to or, in the case of virgin goddesses, the men she assists.¹⁴ The *Hymn*, in a departure from, it seems, every other family template present in Greek myth,¹⁵ is focused almost exclusively on mothers and daughters, including Demeter and Persephone, Rhea and Demeter, and Metaneira with her four maiden daughters.¹⁶

While the textual versions of the myth silence and violate Persephone, the visual images show her as an active participant in the mysteries and other festivals, and portray her as a goddess who is worshipped on equal or nearly equal footing as her mother. Her powers are represented as important and essential to mortal life and whose goodwill is

¹³ Richardson, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974) 290.

¹⁴ Nixon, "Cults of Demeter and Kore," 90.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 89.

¹⁶ Foley, *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 80.

sought and valued. Her size in the Eleusinian and Athenian friezes (figures 1 and 2) re-emphasizes her importance in daily worship.

In texts, the abstracted idea of Persephone as maiden is separated from her influence on daily life, divorced from the aspects of her powers that mortals would have seen as most impactful on their own lives. She is silent and subjugated by her father and husband.

Images of Kore and Demeter from Eleusis dating to the third and fourth century B.C.E. focus on the fertility aspects of their powers, showing sacrifices being made to them (Figure 2). The torches the goddesses hold in the images are also thought to signify Demeter's search for her lost daughter, which was acted out by initiates in the Mysteries.¹⁷ Additionally, torches were part of the Eleusinian festivities, which were conducted partially in a large, dimly lit structure and included a nighttime procession. At the Eleusinian sanctuary, then, the friezes show the goddesses carrying out an activity that cycles between the mortal and divine worlds: Demeter uses the torch to search for her lost daughter, who is in the underworld, an activity the initiates would then imitate in their own, linking their actions in the mortal world to those of a goddess, as well as to the underworld.

Like Persephone herself, the festival connects the realms of divine, mortal, and the dead. Are the friezes then images of the goddesses from the myth itself? Or are they, the goddesses, participating in the festivities themselves that celebrate the myth? This question is impossible to answer, both because we don't have enough information about these images and also because the distinction itself is arguably unimportant. What these

¹⁷ Larson, *Ancient Greek Cults*, (New York: Routledge, 2007) 71.

images do, then, is different from the text of the hymn: they blur the lines between the lives of the worshippers and the lives of the gods, bringing the goddesses out of the murky abstraction of their own stories and into a more concrete and tangible world inhabited by the Greek initiates themselves, one where the role of the goddesses was crucial because it was a role that infused daily life.

Queen of the Dead in Images and Text

While the story of her abduction and her mother's ensuing search is by far the most prominent myth of Persephone in both text and images, there are other instances where she appears in texts as the queen of the underworld who interacts with several different heroes upon their descent to the underworld, either through death or through their own decision to journey there. The stories of Herakles, Orpheus, Sisyphus, and Alcestis all tell of their encounters with Persephone upon their arrival in the underworld, where she often acts as a mitigating influence on her harsher husband.¹⁸

Several Apulian vases (figures 4 and 5) from the fourth century B.C.E. show Persephone enthroned beside Hades, surrounded by figures from the underworld. While many of the reliefs from Athens and Eleusis are careful to depict Persephone as a young woman accompanying her mother, these vases recontextualize her as a wife. In figure 4, she is portrayed on a throne, implying a certain level of equality to her husband in their realm. In all three images, she is heavily adorned with jewelry and her dresses are decorated, in contrast to the simpler adornment she is shown wearing in images from Eleusis. Additionally, her pose in all three scenes is active and engaged with Hades,

¹⁸ Fantham, *Women in the Classical World*, Vol. 1

showing an animated interaction between the husband and wife that diverges from the frightened, unwilling maiden of the *Hymn*.

Euripides' play *Alcestis*, written in 438 B.C.E., modifies the previous versions of the myth.¹⁹ In the older version, Persephone met Alcestis in the underworld and was so moved by her sacrifice for her husband that she sent her back to her earthly life. In Euripides' play, Alcestis is retrieved by Herakles before she ever comes face-to-face with Persephone, in an inversion of the Persephone's abduction. Alcestis is led back to her husband and she journeys from death to life. In both versions, Alcestis' return to the world of the living becomes a reversal of death or a figurative "re-birth," emphasizing the cyclical nature of life and death, a concept that is reflected in the figure of Persephone herself.

The classical Greek figure of Persephone is, therefore, a young woman whose very being embodies life and death, fertility and barrenness. She is the ultimate collision of the heavens, which mortals cannot enter, and the underworld, which mortals cannot return from. Yet she is also grounded, alongside her mother, fully and completely in the earth, in the sowing of seeds and the harvesting of crops. As the daughter of one god and wife of another, she is both a tragic figure robbed of her autonomy and voice, and also aloof and untouchable, ruling over a realm inaccessible even to other gods. However, when she is discussed in the context not of the men around her but rather her mother, she suddenly gains tangibility, becoming a figure who is no longer remote and isolated but rather present and accessible. As Demeter's famine forces Zeus to bend to her will in the *Homeric Hymn*, as she initiates at Eleusis and the revelers at the Thesmophoria worship

¹⁹ 1. Joshua J. Mark, "Hercules and Alcestis: Personal Excellence & Social Duty," *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, 2014.

the goddesses, Persephone is a woman who walks on mortal ground and shares bounty with mortal people. While the goddess in all her forms and functions was important to worshippers, the form their worship took shaped the functional place it held in their lives.

In the same way that a woman's daily life in ancient Greece cannot reliably be extrapolated from mythology—or, in other words, in the way that mythology is not an accurate reflection of daily life—representations of Persephone were molded and shaped to the function they had to serve. For the harvest festivals—both at Eleusis and the Thesmophoria—women were given far more power over the festivities than they had in their daily lives²⁰ and the images of Persephone and her mother that appeared in these places seem to correspond to the fact that at that moment, in that place, Persephone the life-bringing maiden, the loving daughter, and the joyous goddess was the Persephone the initiates were there to concern themselves with.

However, in texts like *Alcestis* or myths like *Orpheus*, where the main characters are grappling with their own mortality or the loss of a loved one, Persephone appears in the underworld and becomes a familiar presence in an unfamiliar place, a goddess whose own entrance to the realm of the dead was traumatic. While she wields the power of a goddess to alleviate punishment or even send someone back to the land of the living, she is also a figure that listeners can recognize as sharing the fear of entering the underworld. In these texts, the girlish queen of the underworld becomes a sympathetic figure, providing reassurance in a different way from the joyful harvest goddess. In both roles, though, the figure of Persephone transcends the borders that are generally imposed on the gods, bridging the separate realms of gods, mortals, and the dead.

²⁰ Nixon, "Cults of Demeter and Kore," 76.

Unless otherwise noted, all images are sourced from the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologicae Classicae*.



Figure 1: Persephone, 440 B.C.E., relief from sanctuary at Eleusis. Eleusis, Greece.



Figure 2: Persephone, 450 B.C.E., relief from sanctuary at Eleusis. Eleusis, Greece.



Figure 3: Persephone and Demeter, 4th century B.C.E., relief from sanctuary at Eleusis. Eleusis, Greece.



Figure 4: Persephone and Hades, detail of colossal *Krater* Altamura, about 350 B.C.E., made in Apulia, South Italy. Terracotta, National Archaeological Museum of Naples.

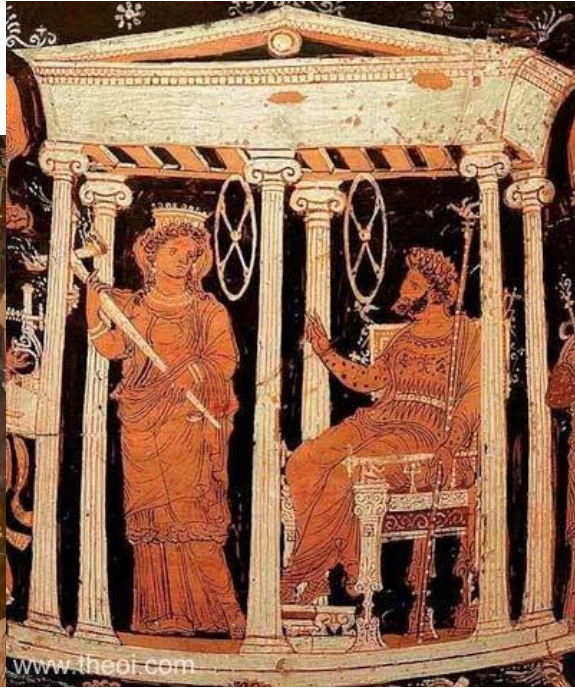


Figure 5: Persephone and Hades, detail from the Underworld Vase. Apulian red figure *Krater*, ca. 330-310 B.C.E. From Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich.



Figure 6: Persephone, Demeter, and Triptolemus, 450 B.C.E.
Detail from Attic red-figure Glockenkrater, findspot unknown.



Figure 7: Persephone with Triptolemus, 450 B.C.E.,
Attic red-figure vase, Vulci, Italy.



Figure 8: Persephone, holding a torch and pomegranate, copy of original statuette from sanctuary at Eleusis. Florence, Rome.

II. Frozen Stars

Prologue:

If gods could die, then I would say I died that day as I danced among the wildflowers.

Nymphs danced with me. A breeze twisted around us. It carried the scent of sun-drenched blooms, heavy and sweet, and we laughed as fallen petals were swept into the air and fluttered back to earth.

I felt it coming moments before it happened. Under my feet, the meadow grasses began to dry up and blacken. One of the nymphs called to me, her voice hollow and sharp, but when I turned to look at her they all backed away from me.

And then the ground betrayed me, twisted and split beneath my moving feet, and I was falling, down and down and down.

Part I:

I land in a shower of dirt and for a moment I can't make sense of where I am. The only sound is my own panting breath. Everything around me is dusty and gray. I have landed in what looks to be a massive underground cavern, illuminated with a strange, flat light that seems to have no source. The ground beneath me is dirt, and in the distance I can see rough-hewn rock walls, rising into mist that shrouds whatever is above me. Around me, ghostly trees stand motionless and bare. They look like wild animals, frozen in time, blackened branches clawing at the air. A few yards to my left, the bare earth slopes down to a wide, dark river that flows slowly and silently. Its waters are oily and sluggish between their crumbling banks of earth.

As I stand and look around, a flat-eyed woman approaches me. Dark metal shaped into snakes twists up her arms and I can see embers glowing in the folds of her tunic as she moves.

“You don't belong here,” she observes.

This is already painfully obvious to me. I can feel my not-belonging, like an itch at my very center. I am bright and misplaced in my lilac tunic, a flare of color in this dead world.

“Then why am I here?” I snap. A hard knot of dislike for her is rising in my throat, a knot that I am determined will not become tears. I brush dirt from my skirts and hair, dislodging some of the fresh flowers woven through my crown of braids. They fall to the ground and disintegrate into dust. The woman watches them with a sort of polite interest.

“Well, that's as it should be, at least,” she says. “Maybe you'll find you like it here after all.”

“That's not an answer.”

She finally meets my eyes. For an instant, her pupils flicker with flames.

“I believe,” she says delicately, as if weighing each word, “that you are have been brought here for an offer of marriage.”

I frown, my thoughts whirling, but before I can speak another figure appears from among the trees. He is stooped and wizened and filthy, with a tangled beard that hangs to his belt. At his waist hangs a pouch that clinks softly with coins. He carries a lantern with a small, steady blue flame.

I know who he is. I know where those coins come from. I remember watching mortals bury their dead with money in their mouths.

I lift my chin. The Ferryman bows to me.

“Well then,” I tell him, voice as level as I can manage, “Take me to his temple.”

The Witch of the Crossroads watches us go, her face unreadable. For just a moment, before her straight-backed, motionless form disappears into the mists, I am reminded of my mother.

When I was young, Mother taught me how to care for her plants. We spent hours together in her fields and meadows. We tended and pruned, shaped and nurtured. If I tired of it, I would lie in the grass and watch vines slither from the ground wherever she walked, flowers sprouting along their rosy green lengths. When we visited forest meadows, dryads would emerge from their oak trees to laugh and gossip with her while their trees would put forth a cloud of new leaves, rustling in the wind as if preening for her. Nymphs would rise from their streams when we arrived, shaking water droplets from their lake-weed hair and settling onto the meadow grass. Together with the dryads, they would show me how to weave flower stems into crowns for each other, and on full moons we would trace out dances among the trees, winding around them and each other in intricate patterns, flowers blooming wherever we stepped.

Few other gods and goddesses left the mountain as often as my mother did. On the rare occasions that we visited the temples and palaces of Olympus, I would hear the other goddesses whisper as we passed. I knew that they didn't understand why Mother felt the need to work in her fields, when they rarely bothered with mortal affairs. Only the

goddess of the hearth would greet us without judgment, smiling her calm smile and asking about the crops.

Sometimes, when we were alone, Mother would hold my hand in hers and look intently into my face.

“Never forget that we are goddesses, and we are untouchable,” she would tell me ferociously, fingers tight around mine. I would nod, staring into her dark brown eyes. I understood what she was trying to tell me, what the other gods had yet to realize. For my mother, power was never about sitting back and watching. It was about holding everything she had so tightly that no one could force her to let go.

There is no wind in the land of the dead. This is the first thing I learn as I follow the Ferryman through the desolate landscape. No wind, no birds, no stars. Everything is silent except for the small, insistent whisper of my own breath. As we walk, the dead emerge from trees and mist around us. They are the same shadowy gray as everything else is here, and they do not speak. They do not laugh or cry or scream. They watch me with eyes that do not reflect back the light of the Ferryman’s lantern but instead consume it whole.

We follow the river, which flows into a passageway with a low, arched stone ceiling and a beaten dirt path running parallel to the water. Several minutes more bring us to a set of large metal gates which extend all the way over the river and into the rock wall on either side. There are no guards or locks. The Ferryman pushes them open and steps back to let me through.

“I can’t leave the river, but you can go right through. Nothing will threaten you. His temple is straight ahead.”

With another bow, he turns and starts to make his way back from where we came.

I touch the metal of the gates. Flakes of black rust fall away under my fingertips. The wrought iron is cold, brittle, almost fragile. I glance back, but the Ferryman has disappeared around the bend of the tunnel. The bobbing shadows cast by his lantern fade away as I watch.

I try to remember what I know about the Lord of the Underworld. Mother always said he was stern and dark. He was consigned to his vast kingdom by my father when mortals first crawled from the mud and proved just how easily they could snuff out each other’s lives, and he has never left. I’ve heard the tales about the horrible punishment he passes on the dead, tales mothers repeat to make their children behave.

Nothing will threaten you, the Ferryman had said. I shake out my skirt and run my hands carefully over my braids, and then I walk forward through the gates. The tunnel ends in a massive cavern, extending into distant shadow. The temple is directly in front of me, black stone columns rising to an undecorated pediment. Beyond it, empty fields and more broken trees stretch away. The dead are here too, pale figures whose wanderings seem to make the whole silent landscape undulate.

I continue to the temple, up the steps and through the main entrance. The interior is unadorned, bare walls and bare floors. There are even more souls here, standing motionlessly.

Across from me, the Lord of the Dead descends from his throne and approaches. He is tall and dark and I keep my eyes down, afraid to look into his face.

He stops in front of me and offers a ring on his open palm, a band of diamonds that shine like frozen stars. I reach out for it and am surprised at the heat of his skin. I had thought he would be as cold as his kingdom. I suddenly remember my mother, telling me about how he was born from the marriage of ice and flame at the dawn of the world.

His hand trembles under my fingertips.

“You do not have to stay,” he tells me quietly. His voice is like a river, rushing past so quickly I almost miss the hope in it. I cannot look at his face as I slide the ring onto my finger. I wonder, for the first time, if he wanted to rule this shadow of a kingdom or if my father simply gave him no choice.

I think of my father, loud and careless and powerful and insatiable.

Somehow, I doubt that he ever thought to ask.

Part II:

For a long time, my mother had stayed firmly at the center of my world. Her earthy, floral smell, the laughter that laced through her conversations with nymphs, her cloudy brown hair: these were the building blocks of my reality, more concrete than the luxurious and distant peaks of Olympus or the blustering power of my father and the other gods.

But over time I began to notice that no matter how badly I wanted to stay in the world of fields and flowers with her, I didn't belong there. The flowers knew it first. They always burst into riots of color and scent when my mother passed. As I grew out of childhood, however, buds stayed tightly furled when I passed by and leaves would dry up and crumble if I touched them. Trees that dropped long tendrils of branches down to

caress Mother's shoulders when she sat at their roots would rustle their leaves like gossipy grandmothers around me, disdaining to brush up against my hair or tunic. Sometimes I would pick a bloom and watch it shrivel up and turn black in my fingers. Once, I walked across a meadow barefoot and turned to see smoking patches of dead grass where my feet had been. The underworld was calling to me even then.

Next the nymphs and dryads began to pull away. By the time I had grown to match my mother's height, I had slowly but surely been excluded from the circle dances under the moon, from the chattering clusters of dryads under their oaks on warm, lazy afternoons, from the whispered confidences as they wove crowns of blossoms and leaves. They gave me polite smiles and distant greetings and with each passing year I felt more and more ostracized. My mother claimed me to be hers alone, but I knew that the shadow of my father lived in my own face. I knew that everyone could see him in the strong, stubborn line of my jaw, the jutting nose, the way I would knit my eyebrows together when thinking. As time passed, I also came to know that I couldn't stay in my mother's world forever.

My mother, it seemed, was the only one who didn't notice - or didn't admit - that I no longer fit into her life with seamless ease. She wanted to ignore the half of me that came from my father, who had betrayed her with careless words too many times. The more her world pushed me away, the more she pulled me close.

Several days after my arrival in the temple, I venture back through the decaying metal gates of the Underworld and find the Witch sitting there on the riverbank, watching

as the Ferryman pilots his boat back and forth. The silent souls huddled in the prow don't look up as they pass us.

“Your mother is looking for you,” says the Witch as I settle beside her.

“I know.”

She turns, eyebrows raised.

“Do you know how she is making them all suffer?” she asks. I shake my head.

The world of mortals is utterly removed from me here.

“Your mother searches ceaselessly for you. She does not weep or tear her hair. She is silent and taut and her eyes blaze with a desperation that says she will throw herself against the rock of her grief until she shatters.

“The sacrifices of kings and peasants alike are lost on her. The harvest is already withering in the fields and all the leaves have fallen from the trees.” Her voice is formal, distant, and I get the impression that as she relays this, she is seeing all of it vividly.

“The prayers will become frantic, the sacrifices more frequent. Soon, kings will beg for your mother to return. Your father will watch them panic as they starve and turn on each other, slaughtering anyone with food left. Children with stick-thin arms will cry over their murdered mothers. Babes will die in their cradles.”

“Stop it!”

My cry halts the tumble of words, and she ceases. I can't stand to hear any more. I jump to my feet, chest tight.

“My mother would never do that,” I tell the Witch angrily, turning to leave. As I stomp away, she doesn't bother to tell me what we both already know.

My mother would do anything to get me back.

After that, I stay in the throne room and watch my husband. He is a quiet man, and at first I am afraid of him. The stories of his cruelty run again and again through my head. He seems as impassive and stony as the grand black throne he sits on, passing down judgment and punishment to the newly dead. His fingers are long and when he moves his hands, ropes of tendon knot and bulge under his brown skin. There is another throne beside his, equally large and impressive. He never asks me to sit in it, and I stay to the side of his throne room.

In the beginning, his hands are all I can look at. I tell myself it is because I am afraid of the harshness in his glittering eyes. But time passes, and I stand by as he reunites wives with husbands who have waited patiently, as he reassures anxious sisters that their brothers will join them over time. I watch as he leaves his throne to crouch before small children who arrive with the Witch, wide-eyed and confused, torn from their lives by illness or accident. He takes their hands and tell them their parents will return to them. He accepts newborns from the Witch, rocking them quietly, speaking gentle nonsense to them. He sits in judgement for all who come before him, considering each person with his dark eyes, and I watch as he struggles to be both fair and merciful. He is careful to keep his face calm, but I see the way his hands move against each other.

Many of the dead fear him, shrinking away and watching their own feet as the Fates pass him the scroll of their life. They know the same stories I do. For some, he does indeed assign horrible punishment, and they fight against the hands of his servants as they are pulled from the temple. Some of them yell, or sob with fear, or curse him viciously. He accepts it all in silence and passes back the judgment scrolls all the same.

One day, as he greets a young woman who is trembling with horror, I look up into his face and allow myself to name what I see there.

Not cruelty, then. Loneliness.

I cross the room quietly. He doesn't notice me moving until I draw even with him, and then he looks up from the girl and watches as I deliberately gather my skirts and climb the steps of the dais. At the top I turn and sit in the empty throne, clasping my hands neatly on my lap.

Wonder blooms on his face, sunlight through clouds.

One evening my husband and I walk together through the grove of trees behind his temple. I tell him stories about mortals from the world above as we loop around and through the dry, dead tree trunks. He says that all he knows are the endings, and that he likes the small details about people, the ones that won't appear on the Fates' scrolls. So I tell him about the songs sung at weddings, the family showering the new couple with sweet-smelling flower petals and prayers for a bounteous life together. I talk about the celebrations when a child is born, when the whole family drinks and dances well into the night and the fire leaps along with their pounding feet, sparks showering through the dark, warm air. I give him the beginnings of things, a whole mortal world that he's snatched only glimpses of: a mother's wonder at her child's first word, the delight of a first kiss between two young lovers at a forest stream. He listens without commenting, but when I describe the harvest festivals for my mother he reaches out and cautiously takes my hand.

“Your mother's destruction is spreading.”

It's the Witch, making her way towards us with narrowed eyes. My breath catches awkwardly in my throat.

“Wars are breaking out. Even if he were willing to face down your mother’s anger, your father can’t keep ignoring the prayers. He’s sending the Messenger to bring you back.”

My husband’s fingers tighten on mine, an unspoken question. My mind races, and I realize that I don’t have an answer for him.

The Witch holds out a red pomegranate to me. I take it and drop my husband’s hand to split it open with my thumbs. It’s the only living fruit I’ve seen here.

“You are free to do whatever you choose,” my husband tells me. His voice is low and calm, but when I look up his dark eyes are opaque with fear. The pomegranate rests in my palms, filled with irregular globes of bloodily translucent flesh. I breathe in and out, and find my decision in the space between one heartbeat and the next.

I pick out six seeds, roll them between my fingers, count them over and over. I know how they will taste, the burst of juice that will roll across my tongue when I bite into them, the sudden hardness of the seeds crunching between my teeth. I know what it means to eat the fruit of the dead. I know my own fate.

I look up at the remote face of my husband. He doesn't look away as I eat the seeds, one by one. Sweetness blooms in my mouth and iciness trickles down my throat. For the first time, I am the one who holds out my hand, and he accepts it.

When the Messenger arrives, striding commandingly into our temple with his scarlet cloak swinging, my husband and I rise from our thrones. His grand gestures look

slightly ridiculous here, where he has no power. The dead whisper as he passes, but they do not bow to him. He stops in front of our thrones and bows slightly. I lift my chin in acknowledgment, but we do not bow back.

“Time to go,” he says. His voice is too loud.

“Not forever.”

My husband’s tone is mild, but the way he locks eyes with the Messenger forbids disagreement. Surprise registers on the Messenger’s features, and his eyes narrow as his gaze slides to me. He examines my face for a moment, and then he abruptly bows again, deeply this time.

“Your Highness,” he murmurs to me. “Your mother won’t be happy about this.”

I already know the betrayal my mother will feel. The guilt of it sits in my chest like a searing coal, but I’ve made my choice.

“My mother will forgive me.”

As he and I leave together, my subjects bow to me. Betrayal or not, this is my kingdom now in a way that my mother’s sunlit world never could be.

When I return to her, the Messenger at my side, Mother knows what happened before I even open my mouth. Furious, she summons my father.

“Change it! Tell him he cannot have her,” she hisses at my father. She won’t look at me.

“You know what happens if I meddle with fate,” he reminds her. Even my mother, who brought the whole earth to its knees with her grief, cannot change the

ancient ways. Father's voice is harsh, and his eyes are like hard, simmering embers. I meet them with my own. I am queen of a land he cannot claim.

He looks away first.

They leave me alone with Mother in her meadows, and her anger burns out into tears. I have never seen her cry before. The grass withers around her feet as she sinks to the ground. She asks how my husband tricked me, she wants to know what he did. I have nothing to say to her, and instead I put my hands over hers. She stares at my ring.

“Not a trick, then,” she spits out, and I cannot meet her eyes.

“I am sorry,” I say to our entwined fingers.

My mother pulls her hand away.

Six pomegranate seeds means six months among the dead and six months among the living.

Mother is cold and hard towards me at first. The barren wastes of forest and farmland, lush and green before we were separated, only come back to life bit by bit. Hints of crocuses begin to poke up through the dirt, and mists of green blooms slowly emerge along the gray branches of the trees.

My father sends rains. I sit in my mother's temple as the water pours from the sky, pooling along the marble steps, and I know it is his apology. I don't know if Mother will ever forgive him - for his absences, for his inaction, for his arrogance and his carelessness. The Messenger had told me that my father had known where I was for weeks before finally telling Mother. She had been furious when she found out.

I look down at my husband's ring and think about the shadowy dead who drift through our kingdom. Sometimes, if I approached gently, they would speak to me, spilling half-forgotten memories of their mortal lives, of love and betrayal and regret. I think about the dead who have forever lost their chance to forgive, and those who have forever lost their chance to be forgiven. I think about eternity. I look up at the sky, at the falling water, and find that forgiving my father is as simple as this: breathing in, breathing out, finding the decision in the space between one heartbeat and the next. I hold out my hand, catching the rain in my palm and watching the drops run over my fingers. It will be good for the plants.

Mother approaches, weaving through the forest, holding her skirts up in one hand. I stand and meet her in front of the temple. We are both squinting against the rain. Her anger still radiates from her, cloaking us both. If I wait for her to speak first, I will wait forever.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Speak.

"It could have been more," I say to the ground. My face is wet. Mother shifts, looks down too. We're silent for a moment. Then,

"What?"

Her voice is dangerously quiet, venom crawling through every word. I twist my ring around my finger, look sideways, wipe rain from my face.

"I could have eaten more. I could have stayed forever."

Anger claws its way up my throat and I swallow hard.

“I wanted to eat more. I wanted to stay down there, with him. Everybody knows I don’t belong up here. Everybody knows that if I had stayed here it would have meant an eternity of watching you wield a power I can never have. But you can’t see past your own desire to keep me all to yourself, always yours, your untouchable daughter!”

The words are flames in my mouth and I spit them out before they can burn me. My hair has come down, tendrils of it sticking to my wet cheeks, and above us lightning streaks across the sky. Mother’s mouth twists at the cracks of brightness in the clouds.

“You threaten me with this?” She is livid, her face drained of color, her red-rimmed eyes blazing as she hisses the words. “You tell me it could have been worse, and think that warrants forgiveness? Your father could never see how his actions hurt those around him, and apparently neither can you-”

“Six months, Mother! I’ve given you half of every year. I’ve given you more than you would ever have willingly given me! And yet you look at me and see all the betrayals of Father, of Olympus, you see your own fear, you tell me that half isn’t enough, it’s never enough, you need it all!

“But I can’t give you that.”

I’m yelling over the rising noise of the storm, but then the wind drops. My words ring eerily in the sudden silence, and I’m aware of the rain on my skin and the gritty mud working its way into my sandals.

“You were supposed to be the one who never betrayed me,” whispers Mother. Her voice sounds shattered, like I could slice my fingers open trying to pick up the pieces. For the first time in my life, she looks small and lost and broken. Raw fear is

etched into every line of her face. I remember the look on my husband's face when the Witch brought us the pomegranate.

An eternity is a long time to spend alone.

"I'm sorry, Mother," I say.

She wavers, and for a moment it seems as if her entire body is blurring and collapsing under the weight of the water pouring from the sky. I reach out for her, alarm flaring under my breastbone, and she is reassuringly solid when I wrap my arms around her. We stand for a long moment.

Something brushes against my ankles. I step back, startled. Plants are crawling from the dirt, unrolling along the ground, spilling from the branches around us. Leaves push from the branches of trees while vines race up their trunks. Grass sprouts from the mud, fresh blades emerging with exuberance. Blossoms burst open on the shrubbery around us, releasing clouds of rain-drenched scents.

Mother wipes water from her eyes and we watch silently as green spreads around us like ripples in a pond. Her shoulders are tense, and I know that things will never be the same. But we stand there together, hand in hand, and breathe in. And breathe out.

I return to my husband after the harvest. He doesn't remark on my return, but when I take my seat on my throne, I see the Witch of the Crossroads nod approvingly.

Later, as he and I walk through the trees together, he stops me with an outstretched hand.

“Look.”

We both crouch and stare, shocked. A small spot of green, worming its way through the gray dirt. I reach out, nudging it gently with a fingertip.

A crocus.

Epilogue:

Our room is dark and cold and full of mirrors. Everywhere I look, gleaming surfaces reflect my face back at me, dark face and two eyes like stars. I am a piece of the starry night sky, torn off and buried deep within the earth. The mirrors seem to whisper to me, voices so low I would think them a mere breeze. But there is no wind here.

Queen

Queen

Queen

I turn over, reach out to the warmth of my husband, and will myself to sleep with my palm against the smooth skin of his back. I do not dream.

III. A Most Monstrous Victim: Medusa's Power and Violation

In Greek mythology, female monsters abound. From Scylla and Charybdis in *The Odyssey*, to the “mother of monsters,” Echidna, to Lamia the Libyan queen, there is no lack of monstrous women who clash with gods and heroes. Among them, Medusa was one of the most popular in artworks from the Archaic era onward. Easily recognizable in her Archaic form by her snaky hair, wide, curving mouth, and protruding fangs, her face appears in apotropaic images carved into everything from temples to private homes.²¹ Full body images also appear, often depicting her being beheaded by Perseus (figures 1 and 2). Both in these images and in later texts - specifically Ovid - Medusa is positioned as a woman whose possession of power makes her a threat to be eliminated, channeling her power to a man - Perseus - who can use and control it.

In literary sources, the Gorgons— Medusa and her two equally snaky sisters—are first mentioned in Hesiod's *Theogony* and later appear in Pindar and Aeschylus, among others. Ovid's first century CE text, *The Metamorphoses*, provides a modified backstory for her monstrous appearance. In Ovid's text, Medusa interacts with three powerful beings. Her narrative traces encounters with Neptune, Minerva, and Perseus. In the Archaic sculptures from temples at Corfu and Selinas, the images are focused primarily on the moment of conflict between her and Perseus. This essay will examine the way power is accessed and portrayed within these two different approaches to her myth. While Medusa has great power at several points in the story, she is continually robbed of it, becoming nothing more than a conduit for that power.

The Gorgons appear early in both literary and artistic Greek tradition. They are first mentioned in Hesiod's *Theogony* as

²¹ T. H. Carpenter, *Art and Myth in Ancient Greece*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991) 107.

the Gorgones, who, beyond the famous stream of Okeanos, live in the utmost place toward night, by the singing Hesperides: they are Sthenno, Euryale, and Medousa, whose fate is a sad one, for she was mortal, but the other two immortal and ageless both alike. Neptune, he of the dark hair, lay with one of these, in a soft meadow and among spring flowers. But when Perseus had cut off the head of Medousa there sprang from her blood great Khrysaor and the horse Pegasos.²²

Early visual representations of the Gorgons depict them as distinctly monstrous and they appear on temples, homes, and workshops throughout the archaic period.²³ Often, Medusa is also accompanied by her children with Poseidon, Chrysaor and Pegasus, who sprang from her neck when Perseus beheaded her (figure 1). These images function in a primarily apotropaic manner, protecting the temples and homes they appear on from evil or misfortune. In this way, the mortals who used her head for protection were mimicking the goddess Athena, who wore Medusa's head on her shield or breastplate in battle.

In the fifth century BCE, Aeschylus wrote about the Gorgons in *Prometheus Bound*, describing them as “three winged sisters, the Gorgons with their snaky hair, hated by men, for no mortal can see them and not cease to breathe.”²⁴ This is one of the earliest explicit indications of the deadly nature of the Gorgons. Although it does not mention their eyes turning men to stone specifically, the power of the gaze is still very much emphasized. In the Pythian Odes, written around the same time, Pindar writes of “Perseus, who slew the Gorgo, and brought her head wreathed with its serpent locks to

²² Hesiod, *Theogony*, 31

²³ Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) 17.

²⁴ Aeschylus and Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Bound*, (New York: Heritage, 1966) 34.

strike stony death to the islanders."²⁵ While her face was used for protection throughout the fifth century B.C.E., when both of these pieces were written, they clearly portray her as a monster. Her visage, therefore, becomes both protection and threat, a warning against feminized power while also becoming a way to use that power for personal safety. In the first century AD, Ovid's inclusion of Medusa in his work creates a version of her that, while clearly referencing older mythology, also expands her story and provides his own clear series of events.

Ovid's Depiction of Medusa

Ovid's extensive poetic work *The Metamorphoses*, written in the first century AD and made up of 15 volumes of nearly 250 stories, details the adventures and interactions of gods and mortals. The central theme is that of metamorphosis, an experience many gods undergo willingly (often to pursue and sleep with a mortal woman), while it is often forced unwillingly on those unfortunate mortals or nymphs who cross paths with Olympian gods and goddesses.²⁶

In Ovid's version of the Medusa myth, Perseus recounts her story to admiring soldiers after he returns triumphantly with her head, saying

She was once most beautiful in form... In Minerva's temple
Neptune, lord of the Ocean, ravished her. Jove's daughter
[Minerva] turned away and hid her chaste eyes behind her aegis.
And, that the deed might be punished as was due, she changed the
Gorgon's locks to ugly snakes. And now to frighten her fear-
numbered foes, she still wears upon her breast the snakes which she
has made.²⁷

²⁵ Pindar and John Edwin Sandys, *The Odes of Pindar; Including the Principal Fragments; With an English Translation by Sir John Sandys*, (London: Heinemann, 1961) 309.

²⁶ Patricia Salzman-Mitchell, *A Web of Fantasies: Gaze, Image, and Gender in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005) 7.

²⁷ Ovid and Frank Miller, *The Metamorphoses* (London: William Heinemann) 235.

Medusa's power is framed as both evil and deadly in accounts of the Gorgons from sources like Pindar and Aeschylus. However, none of these accounts tell of her actually murdering anyone. Although Ovid does mention the statues of men and animals around her cave that testify to the deadly power of her curse, he does not go into any further detail about the circumstances of these encounters.²⁸ The reader is meant to side with Perseus, but it is hard to attribute these deaths to malicious intent on Medusa's part, especially when Perseus approaches her with the intention to kill on sight. If it is merely the threat of a woman with power that makes Medusa such a reviled figure within this mythology, it is worth wondering how previous encounters between her and others played out. Were these previous statues created through cold-blooded murder on her part? Were they instead the results of self-defense, or even horrible accidents? Was she considered a monster before she was cursed, or did the status come with the snakes and petrifying gaze? Perseus does not go into further detail when he recounts his story, as he kills the monster in her sleep and she therefore never actually acts or speaks in the poem. Medusa is relegated to the realm of monster from the moment she is cursed by Minerva as punishment. In this case, the reality of her malice is irrelevant. Simply the threat of unfettered female power is enough to seal her fate as a monster to be feared, hated, and finally killed.²⁹

Ovid's version of Medusa's story is characterized by her betrayal and violation. She is violated three times: first by Neptune's rape, next by Minerva's curse, and finally by Perseus' attack. Each time, the violent act is marked by both gain and loss. She is

²⁸ Ibid, 233.

²⁹ Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 19.

raped by Neptune, which leads to the conception of her divine children but the loss of her virginity - and, at least for modern readers, would be read as a deeply traumatizing act. Minerva gives her the deadly gaze that gives her an impressive level of power over enemies - so much so that the goddess herself later appropriates it - but cements her own status as a monster, not to mention the isolation and loneliness it would have caused. Finally, Perseus murders her - allowing her children into the world, but robbing Medusa of her very life in the process. Within her own narrative, Medusa functions as a source of power for gods and men around her, who gain access to that power with extreme violence and violation of her physical and emotional autonomy. Beginning with Neptune claiming sexual control and followed by Perseus' deadly violence, Medusa's body is subject to abuse and violation while her voice is silenced. She is isolated and reviled after being cursed, which is arguably the direct cause for her murder when Perseus is sent after her because she is so deadly. Ultimately, hers is a narrative that recounts a series of destructions by men intent on claiming what she can provide them and discarding her afterward.

Perseus, after murdering her, takes advantage of both the winged horse Pegasus, who is born from her severed neck, and of her decapitated head. By using these tools, he soon defeats a sea serpent, petrifies his foes in several tense encounters, and wins the hand of princess Andromeda. His narrative in Ovid ends with him, triumphant and glorious, gaining his every desire with the appropriated and redirected power of a dead woman - power that was forced on her by another woman. Yet Perseus is seen as autonomous in his victories, all the credit directed to him. Meanwhile, Medusa's entire arc is dictated by Neptune's inciting action, and she is crushed under the weight of his

violence towards her. Perseus gains recognition, fame, and true love by claiming a power that does not belong to him and using it for his own gain. Medusa is punished, isolated, and killed as a result of something she did not want and could not prevent.

Archaic Images of Medusa

Medusa as an antefix was common on Archaic buildings, but she also appeared in full-sized scenes on several temples. On the temple of Artemis at Corfu, dated to the 580 B.C.E., Medusa is the central figure on the pediment. (figure 1) Her face has the familiar iconography of an apotropaic Gorgon, and snakes around her waist serve to emphasize her identity. Perseus and Athena are absent in this image, which instead shows the Gorgon in motion, flanked by animals. However, her demise at their hands still looms in the form of her children, Chrysaor and Pegasus, who hover above her shoulders. In her chronology, Chrysaor and Pegasus are not born until her death, springing from her dead body, and their presence in the scene - even though she is still alive - is a strong reminder that her story is centered on her death, rooted in the fact of her destruction.

Temple C at Selinus, dated to the 6th c. B.C.E., also features Medusa, both in the form of a Gorgoneion in the center of the tympanum (this would have been similar to figures 3 and 4) and in a section of the metope frieze. (figure 2) Here, Perseus and Athena are both present. Athena stands behind Perseus, guiding his hand as he beheads the monstrous woman. In her arms, Medusa clutches a miniature version of Pegasus, who rears in distress.

The emphasis is on Medusa's moment of death, and this emphasis reminds viewers that the protection her image provides is only gained through her destruction.

Perseus' function is to turn her from a threatening and demonic woman who looms at the

edge of civilization to a tool that can be used at the will of her murderer for his own purposes. Athena's presence is a strong reminder of her role in Medusa's destruction as she assists Perseus.

Sue Blundell, in her introductory essay to *Women in Ancient Greece*, observes that monstrous women in Greek mythology serve to illustrate the "notion of women as 'liminal.'... women in Greek myth can be seen more often than not to be boundary-crossers: they are represented as anomalous creatures... they are always liable to cross over boundaries into some disorderly state of being, and for this reason they are seen as highly dangerous."³⁰ Medusa could certainly be categorized as one of these boundary-crossing women, as her curse and subsequent power transgresses the established role of a woman - especially an unwed woman. Her chaotic ability is threatening as long as she wields it, and is not considered beneficial until it is literally severed from her and brought under the control of a man, who promptly uses it on dozens of people for his own personal gain - namely, in pursuit of a woman - and is hailed as a hero.

Immediately after her discussion of women as monsters, Blundell continues on to discuss women who are victims, stating that they are "perhaps equally as common... though receiving far less attention. They are united with their more outgoing sisters in a basic antithesis: mortal women who are active are very often destroyers, while mortal women who are passive are very often destroyed... in a sexual act or in giving birth they are liable to perish."³¹

Medusa, then, becomes a being who is both destroyer and the destroyed in her myth. She wavers in the most liminal of spaces between victim and monster, blurring

³⁰ Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 19.

³¹ *Ibid*, 19.

together the fear many female monsters of Greek myth evoked and the brutal reality that many mortal women faced. Her familiar, archaic face (figures 3 and 4) is the ultimate attempt to control the wild, the unknown, and the feminine into a tightly controlled role. The focus on her moment of death (figures 2, 5, and 6) can also be interpreted as a focus on the moment of control, the moment the unpredictable woman gives up her power. The duality of her death and the birth of her children overlaps her status as monster with that of a victim, as she becomes one of the dozens of Greek women in mythology who die as their children are born. While Ovid's interpretation was written centuries after these images were created, the anxiety remains. His imagining of her as a beautiful mortal before the curse serves to link together even more closely femininity and danger, as her beauty is a direct catalyst for Neptune's rape. Whether in Archaic Greek imagery or Classical Roman text, Medusa stands as the epitome of a woman who, whether victim or monster, must be destroyed to ensure continuing order and safety.



Figure 1. Gorgon Medusa, detail of the sculptures from the Pediment of the Temple of Artemis, 580 B.C.E., limestone, height of pediment 2.79 m, Corfu, Greece. Photo
Credit:<http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/greeks/architecture/pictures/corfu.jpg> }



Figure 2: Perseus beheading the Gorgon Medusa, detail from metope on Temple C, terracotta, 6th century B.C.E., Selinus, Italy. Photo Credit: Getty Images



Figure 3: Gorgoneion detail of an antefixe, 5th century B.C.E., terracotta, Taranto, Italy. Ausstellungskatalog Basel



Figure 4: Gorgoneion detail of an antefixe, 5th century B.C.E., terracotta, Taranto, Italy. Museo Nazionale Romano



Figure 5: Perseus slays Medusa, detail from Pelike vase By Polygnotos, 450 B.C.E., attic red-figure vase, Athens, Greece.



Figure 6: Perseus slays Medusa, detail from Olpe vase, 6th century B.C.E. attic black-figure vase, Corinth, Greece.

IV. And the Stars Sang to Us

I. Before all of this, I would lie in bed at night and listen to my breath crinkle against the silence.

But now, curled between my sheets like a snail in its shell, I am beginning to hear other noises. Scales whispers against themselves.

Hissing tongues taste the air. Tails flicker against my bare shoulders.

My hair has become heaviness and warmth, has turned to slither, has turned to snakes.

II. Before all of this, my favorite color was blue - blue for the flowers that we planted along the back fence, blue for Leah's eyes, blue for the endless perfect line where the ocean fell off the edge of the world to become the sky. Blue was cold, and hard, and smooth, it was the deadly translucence of ice in winter, or pearls on a necklace, or water licking my toes.

Now blue is like pennies in my mouth, sharp and bitter, and I crave warmth endlessly.

III. The air tasted like sweat and beer and fumbling hands. Leah and Steph and I drank gin and fruit punch from red plastic cups and danced with our friends in the living room. We took turns climbing onto the coffee tables and lifting our hands to the ceiling, hips swaying. We offered ancient gestures of supplication to the damp shadows that tangled with the strings of colored Christmas lights thumbtacked to the walls. We threw our heads back and sang along to the shivering music that threaded its way through our bones. The lights were red and

purple and orange and green and as they moved across my sisters' faces they wiped away all familiarity, left nothing but dark eyes and dark mouths and dark hair and glinting teeth.

IV. When I was twelve Steph gave me a book called "The Secret Life of Lobsters" about lobster fishing and marine research in Maine. I declared that I wanted to be a marine biologist. My parents indulged me with trips to the aquarium and swimming lessons, with summer science camps and a scuba diving certification course. I got an aquarium in my room and spent hours watching the jeweled fish drift through the thicket of plastic plants I had carefully arranged for them. At night, I dreamed of swimming through the endless ocean depths and breathing water like it was air.

One day, Leah and I got into an argument and she caught one of my fish and dropped it onto the carpet where it flopped uselessly until, gasping, it died.

"I hate you!" I screamed, crouched over the damp circle where the small, scaly body lay, my tears hot.

"I didn't think it would die!" she had sobbed in response, scooping up the limp form and dropping it desperately back into the tank. Steph appeared in the doorway.

"For once in your life, Leah, think about how you might hurt someone before you do something," she snapped. I saw the shock in Leah's eyes, the immediate regret in Steph's. The fish's body floated to the top of the tank, fins trailing in the water

like dissolving rainbows.

- V. After black and white, the first color to receive a name in any language is *blue*.
- VI. My sisters and I were all beautiful and learning how much it could hurt, men watching us on the street, an unseen hand on my leg in the crowded bus, whispering breath fumed with alcohol in bars.
- VII. I was eight years old and my family was camping in the woods. Steph and Leah and I lay on the grass next to the campfire, heads together, and Steph told me to shine my flashlight up at the stars. I clicked it on and searched for the circle of light above us, but it disappeared into blackness.
- “It’s falling away from us,” Leah whispered. “Hold on tight, or we’ll fall into the stars too.”
- I rolled over and held on tight, burying my face in the dirt and pine needles and grass. I could feel the whole universe pulling me away, pulling me up into the shimmering pond of the night sky.
- “Don’t worry,” Steph slung her arms over our shoulders with the bravado of an eldest child, “I won’t let you fall.”
- VIII. Spontaneous Knotting of an Agitated String is the mathematical explanation for how ropes get tangled, setting out an equation that dictates the likelihood of knots based on the length of the rope and the number of places it intersects itself. The

more encounters, the higher the likelihood of tangling and the longer it will take to undo.

Interaction breeds complication.

IX. Steph had convinced her friend Peter to let us go to his college party.

“They’re my sisters, they’ll be chill,” she had assured him on the phone. We couldn’t hear his response, but she rolled her eyes at us and grinned and we knew he’d agreed. Steph loaned us shimmering skirts and Leah lined our eyes in black. The party was in a house Peter shared with his older sister Annette in the Malibu hills, overlooking the PCH and the crumpled, ever-shifting surface of the ocean. Steph was the oldest and wielded her beauty like a weapon, regarded men with contempt and disgust, upper lip lifted, sharpness, storm, and we followed in her wake as she danced the way a fire burns.

I felt eyes on my body and I could feel my skin glowing like a constellation.

X. The week after the party, my sisters and I drove our old silver minivan to Death Valley. I wanted to see the super bloom.

A Vampire Weekend song came onto the radio as we sped down an empty highway in central California. I closed my eyes. It felt like there was sand under my eyelids.

Leah reached over and turned the dial randomly, switching to a Christian Rock station. She and Steph didn’t look at me and I didn’t need them to. My hair writhed against the skin of my neck and shoulders. A thousand whisper-thin

tongues caressed my skin.

The entire park was hot and silent. We pulled off the road at a lookout point and hiked up the footpath. At the top we halted, standing side by side by side to gaze out at the valley spread beneath us. The ancient red and yellow and green swells of sand distorted the landscape. Under the quiet of the desert, I heard ancient voices whispering secrets that I couldn't translate. Between the dunes, masses of bright flowers quivered in the wind. I looked down at the valley floor a hundred feet below the edge of our path.

Leah looped her fingers through mine and hummed the refrain of our favorite Simon and Garfunkel song.

XI. He was whispering soft reassurances, *don't worry don't worry you're ok*, his voice sliding over my cheeks, leaving behind scratches from its sharp-edged scales.

XII. "Isn't it funny," I remarked to Leah one time, standing on the subway platform at Union Station, "That we all know the exact sound of a cell phone hitting the ground? How do we recognize it?"

We turned toward the oncoming train, away from the man who was checking his iphone screen for scratches.

"I guess," she responded, following me through the metal doors, "That our brains are just a lot better at remembering the sound of disaster than we give them credit

for.”

XIII. (*the woods are lovely, dark and deep,
but I have promises to keep,
and miles to go before I sleep*)

XIV. Leah wore her beauty like armor, laughter and lipstick, sunshine glinting through her thick strands of hair, she wore beauty like someone who knew that the world won't end in fire or ice, not with a bang and not with a whimper, the world will end with rot and rust, it will dry up and blow away in a great cosmic gust of wind, it will dissolve into clouds of red mist and swirl away through the endlessness of space and every part of ourselves, our teeth and hair and bones and blood, our empty asphalt parking lots and all-night convenience stores and stone temples, our silk skirts and plastic flowers and gold rings, everything that we have built and destroyed, it will all return to where it came from, to the stars that built the particles that built us.

XV. He pushed me down onto his bed and got on top of me and I couldn't feel my fingers but I could feel my tongue in my mouth, like velvet, and I could feel his sticky breath on my cheek. There were words in my throat, *please no*, but the room was smearing like ink in water and I couldn't say them.

He had turned on a Vampire Weekend song.

One of his hands was in my hair.

Tears leaked out of my eyes and I felt a small flame of worry that it would smudge my mascara, and his breathing was faster, and I bit my tongue, and when I closed my eyes it was like falling, down and down and down, falling into the stars.

XVI. The “death zone” on a mountain refers to anything above 8000 meters, beyond which the human body is incapable of long-term acclimatization. Fourteen peaks in the world have a death zone, all of them in the Himalayas.

Any time at all in the death zone is dangerous, even with weeks of gradual ascension to allow the body to adjust to altitude. More than twelve hours in the zone is a slow and certain death preceded by hallucinations, confusion, nausea, and dizziness. These are followed by high-altitude cerebral or pulmonary edema. The majority of deaths on Mt. Everest are in the death zone. Many are from altitude sickness itself, as the sufferer succumbs to the fatal buildup of fluid in their brain or lungs and the effects of exposure to below-freezing temperatures. Some are from foolish decisions made while confused from lack of oxygen, with eyewitness accounts of people suddenly turning and climbing back up the mountain for no reason, unclipping from safety lines on deadly slopes, or failing to self-arrest when they slip. The rest of the deaths are avalanches or simple mistakes, such as Chen Yu-Nan, who on May 9, 1996 forgot to put his crampons on before stepping out of his tent on the Lhotse face, and slid 2000 meters to his death.

In the frozen, lifeless, windswept world of upper Everest, bodies wrapped in

brightly colored snow jackets litter the landscape and the impossible melts into reality while reality dissolves into uncertainty.

XVII. My hair has become snakes and I wrap my beauty around me like a burial shroud.

I tattoo flowers up my arms and birds across my back. My world is becoming mist on a river, becoming echoes of dying music. My beauty was sacred and I am engaged in the careful process of making it profane.

XVIII. “What the fuck?”

Annette’s voice fell through the room, slicing the air open and leaving it to sluggishly bleed.

“Get her the fuck out of here before anyone sees.”

Swaying palm trees against the dark purple sky. Glittering rivers of headlights and taillights. The smell of the ocean licking the inside of my throat

“I don’t care about your parties, but for fuck’s sake Peter, think about what this looks like.”

Silence.

Steph’s perfume, her cold hands. Her hair on my cheek as she bent over me. The air turning sour with her anger, her fear.

XIX. “Fragments are the only form I trust.”

XX. For my seventeenth birthday Leah invited all of our friends to the beach. We took tabs of acid and watched the clouds. Ruby buried Jacob's legs in the sand. Schuyler and Rachel sat on their towels and peeled oranges, peering at the sober beach-goers around us and giggling about our secret, colorful world hiding in plain sight.

Thomas dared Steph further and further into the surf, laughing at her when she splashed him, and they kissed while salt spray caught the sunshine around them and made the whole world glow.

Leah and I smiled at them. The world was wavy and shining, the drugs filtering everything through a soap-bubble haze. I pointed up at sheets of clouds above us.

"They're all full of skulls," I told Leah, "Do you see? We're in an ossuary."

She didn't know what an ossuary was. I googled them for her and passed her my phone. She studied them for a long moment.

"Someday we'll go to Italy and see them for real," she said.

XXI. "I'm calling the police."

"Get the hell off of my property."

"What the fuck did Peter-" "She can't even stand-" "You don't have any-" "-blood-" "-slutty sister-" "I *trusted* you-"

Steph's voice splintering, Leah's hands straightening my skirt, panicked gasps that could have been any of us --

XXII. In Ottoman Islamic architecture, the dome symbolizes the celestial curve of heaven. In Christian Gothic and Neo-gothic architecture, the spire of a cathedral indicates reaching for heaven. The Egyptian pyramids of the middle to late kingdoms were built to lift earthly Pharaohs to the sacred realm of the sun god. Greek columns connected the mundane to the divine.

XXIII. “Steph won’t look at me anymore.”
“He was her friend, Maddy. She brought us there.”
Silence. A sip of hot chocolate. Running my hands over the ridges of terracotta tiles, like a topographical map of the earth’s desires.
“I don’t know how to wash away the handprints.”

XXIV. “Forgiveness is the abandonment of all hope for a better past.”

XXV. Now that our hair has turned to snakes, men who dare to touch us are bitten and we smile at the taste of blood in our mouths. We go to West Hollywood and dance in the clubs and laugh like the color red and leave bodies in our wake.

XXVI. We lay on the asphalt road next to our campsite in Death Valley while the horizon swallowed the sun and rolled each other joints. The flames of our lighters sparked our faces into existence a moment at a time in the growing darkness. Coyotes shrieked just beyond the perimeter of the camp. Their voices lifted into the stars like ragged metal for long moments before they moved away.

“Leah,” I whispered. I could feel the warm shape of her on the ground next to me

“Yeah?”

“Is it happening to you too?”

“It’s happening to all of us,” came Steph’s voice.

I bit my lip. In the silence, our hair hissed and the stars sang to us and I could no longer tell if we were falling up into them or if they were falling down onto us.

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