

PERSEPHONE THE WANDERER

In the first version, Persephone is taken from her mother and the goddess of the earth punishes the earth—this is consistent with what we know of human behavior.

that human beings take profound satisfaction in doing harm, particularly unconscious harm:

we may call this
negative creation.

Persephone's initial
sojourn in hell continues to be
pawed over by scholars who dispute
the sensations of the virgin:

did she cooperate in her rape,
or was she drugged, violated against her will,
as happens so often now to modern girls.

As is well known, the return of the beloved
does not correct
the loss of the beloved: Persephone

returns home
stained with red juice like
a character in Hawthorne—

I am not certain I will
keep this word: is earth
"home" to Persephone? Is she at home, conceivably,
in the bed of the god? Is she
at home nowhere? Is she
a born wanderer, in other words
an existential
replica of her own mother, less
hamstrung by ideas of causality?

You are allowed to like
no one, you know. The characters
are not people.
They are aspects of a dilemma or conflict.

Three parts; just as the soul is divided,
ego, superego, id. Likewise

the three levels of the known world,
a kind of diagram that separates
heaven from earth from hell.

You must ask yourself:
where is it snowing?

White of forgetfulness,
of desecration—

It is snowing on earth: the cold wind says

Persephone is having sex in hell.
Unlike the rest of us, she doesn't know
what winter is, only that
she is what causes it.

She is lying in the bed of Hades.
What is in her mind?
Is she afraid? Has something
blotted out the idea
of mind?

She does know the earth
is run by mothers, this much
is certain. She also knows
she is not what is called
a girl any longer. Regarding
incarceration, she believes

she has been a prisoner since she has been a daughter.

The terrible reunions in store for her
will take up the rest of her life.
When the passion for expiation
is chronic, fierce, you do not choose
the way you live. You do not live;
you are not allowed to die.

You drift between earth and death
which seem, finally,
strangely alike. Scholars tell us

that there is no point in knowing what you want
when the forces contending over you
could kill you.

White of forgetfulness,
white of safety—

They say
there is a rift in the human soul
which was not constructed to belong
entirely to life. Earth

asks us to deny this rift, a threat
disguised as suggestion—
as we have seen
in the tale of Persephone
which should be read

as an argument between the mother and the lover—
the daughter is just meat.

When death confronts her, she has never seen
the meadow without the daisies.
Suddenly she is no longer
singing her maidenly songs
about her mother's
beauty and fecundity. Where
the rift is, the break is.

Song of the earth,
song of the mythic vision of eternal life—

My soul
shattered with the strain
of trying to belong to earth—

What will you do,
when it is your turn in the field with the god?

One summer she goes into the field as usual stopping for a bit at the pool where she often looks at herself, to see if she detects any changes. She sees the same person, the horrible mantle of daughterliness still clinging to her.

The sun seems, in the water, very close. That's my uncle spying again, she thinks—everything in nature is in some way her relative. *I am never alone*, she thinks, turning the thought into a prayer. Then death appears, like the answer to a prayer.

No one understands anymore how beautiful he was. But Persephone remembers. Also that he embraced her, right there, with her uncle watching. She remembers sunlight flashing on his bare arms.

This is the last moment she remembers clearly. Then the dark god bore her away.

She also remembers, less clearly, the chilling insight that from this moment she couldn't live without him again.

The girl who disappears from the pool will never return. A woman will return, looking for the girl she was.

She stands by the pool saying, from time to time, *I was abducted*, but it sounds wrong to her, nothing like what she felt. Then she says, *I was not abducted*. Then she says, *I offered myself, I wanted to escape my body*. Even, sometimes, *I willed this*. But ignorance

cannot will knowledge. Ignorance wills something imagined, which it believes exists.

All the different nouns— she says them in rotation.

Death, husband, god, stranger. Everything sounds so simple, so conventional. I must have been, she thinks, a simple girl.

She can't remember herself as that person but she keeps thinking the pool will remember and explain to her the meaning of her prayer so she can understand whether it was answered or not.

A MYTH OF DEVOTION

When Hades decided he loved this girl
he built for her a duplicate of earth,
everything the same, down to the meadow,
but with a bed added.

Everything the same, including sunlight,
because it would be hard on a young girl
to go so quickly from bright light to utter darkness.

Gradually, he thought, he'd introduce the night,
first as the shadows of fluttering leaves.

Then moon, then stars. Then no moon, no stars.
Let Persephone get used to it slowly.

In the end, he thought, she'd find it comforting.

A replica of earth
except there was love here.
Doesn't everyone want love?

He waited many years,
building a world, watching
Persephone in the meadow.
Persephone, a smeller, a taster.
If you have one appetite, he thought,
you have them all.

Doesn't everyone want to feel in the night
the beloved body, compass, polestar,
to hear the quiet breathing that says
I am alive, that means also
you are alive, because you hear me,
you are here with me. And when one turns,
the other turns—

That's what he felt, the lord of darkness,
looking at the world he had
constructed for Persephone. It never crossed his mind
that there'd be no more smelling here,
certainly no more eating.

Guilt? Terror? The fear of love?
These things he couldn't imagine;
no lover ever imagines them.

He dreams, he wonders what to call this place.
First he thinks: *The New Hell*. Then: *The Garden*.
In the end, he decides to name it
Persephone's Girlhood.

A soft light rising above the level meadow,
behind the bed. He takes her in his arms.
He wants to say *I love you*, *nothing can hurt you*

but he thinks
this is a lie, so he says in the end
you're dead, nothing can hurt you
which seems to him
a more promising beginning, more true.

Snow began falling, over the surface of the whole earth.
That can't be true. And yet it felt true,
falling more and more thickly over everything I could see.
The pines turned brittle with ice.

This is the place I told you about,
where I used to come at night to see the red-winged blackbirds,
what we call *thimsh* here—
red flicker of the life that disappears—

But for me—I think the guilt I feel must mean
I haven't lived very well.

Someone like me doesn't escape. I think you sleep awhile,
then you descend into the terror of the next life
except

the soul is in some different form,
more or less conscious than it was before,
more or less covetous.

After many lives, maybe something changes.
I think in the end what you want
you'll be able to see—

Then you don't need anymore
to die and come back again.

In the second version, Persephone
is dead. She dies, her mother grieves—
problems of sexuality need not
trouble us here.

Compulsively, in grief, Demeter
circles the earth. We don't expect to know
what Persephone is doing.
She is dead, the dead are mysteries.

We have here
a mother and a cipher: this is
accurate to the experience
of the mother as

she looks into the infant's face. She thinks
I remember when you didn't exist. The infant
is puzzled; later, the child's opinion is
she has always existed, just as

her mother has always existed
in her present form. Her mother
is like a figure at a bus stop,
an audience for the bus's arrival. Before that,
she was the bus, a temporary
home or convenience. Persephone, protected,
stares out the window of the chariot.

What does she see? A morning
in early spring, in April. Now

her whole life is beginning—unfortunately,
it's going to be
a short life. She's going to know, really,

only two adults: death and her mother.

But two is
twice what her mother has:
her mother has

one child, a daughter.

As a god, she could have had
a thousand children.

We begin to see here
the deep violence of the earth

whose hostility suggests
she has no wish
to continue as a source of life.

And why is this hypothesis
never discussed? Because
it is not *in* the story; it only
creates the story.

In grief, after the daughter dies,
the mother wanders the earth.

She is preparing her case;
like a politician
she remembers everything and admits
nothing.

For example, her daughter's
birth was unbearable, her beauty
was unbearable: she remembers this.
She remembers Persephone's
innocence, her tenderness—

What is she planning, seeking her daughter?

She is issuing
a warning whose implicit message is:
what are you doing outside my body?

You ask yourself:
why is the mother's body safe?

The answer is
this is the wrong question, since

the daughter's body
doesn't exist, except
as a branch of the mother's body
that needs to be
reattached at any cost.

When a god grieves it means
destroying others (as in war)
while at the same time petitioning
to reverse agreements (as in war also):

if Zeus will get her back,
winter will end.

Winter will end, spring will return.

The small pestering breezes
that I so loved, the idiot yellow flowers—

Spring will return, a dream
based on a falsehood:
that the dead return.

Persephone
was used to death. Now over and over
her mother hauls her out again—

You must ask yourself:
are the flowers real? If

Persephone “returns” there will be
one of two reasons:

either she was not dead or
she is being used
to support a fiction—

I think I can remember
being dead. Many times, in winter.
I approached Zeus. Tell me, I would ask him,
how can I endure the earth?

And he would say,
in a short time you will be here again.
And in the time between

you will forget everything:
those fields of ice will be
the meadows of Elysium.