

Once, when the world was still young and the reign of Zeus was still new, Persephone was picking flowers on a hillside in Sicily. It was eternal spring in those days and the slopes of the mountains were thick with violets, hyacinths, crocuses and narcissus. Persephone was alone. She had wandered away from her friends in search of the best flowers for a garland for her mother Demeter. It was restful up there; she could hear the distant voices of her friends far down the hillside. Somewhere off to her left was the grunting of a herd of pigs and, even further away, the occasional whistle from their swineherd. As she stretched out her hand to pluck one last delicate yellow narcissus, the earth at her feet gaped open and from the chasm rose Hades, brother of Zeus and god of the dead. The four black horses that drew his golden chariot reared in the unaccustomed light of day and snorted steam as their icy breath met the warm air of the upper world. Zeus had promised Hades a bride and he had come to claim her. The chariot plunged back into the blackness and the earth closed up once more. The lovely young goddess was gone.

Persephone's friends looked for her until nightfall, but all they could find was a scattering of broken flowers. They ran in terror to bring the news to her mother Demeter, the news that nobody ever wants to bring, the news that a child is lost. They left the hillside empty except for a

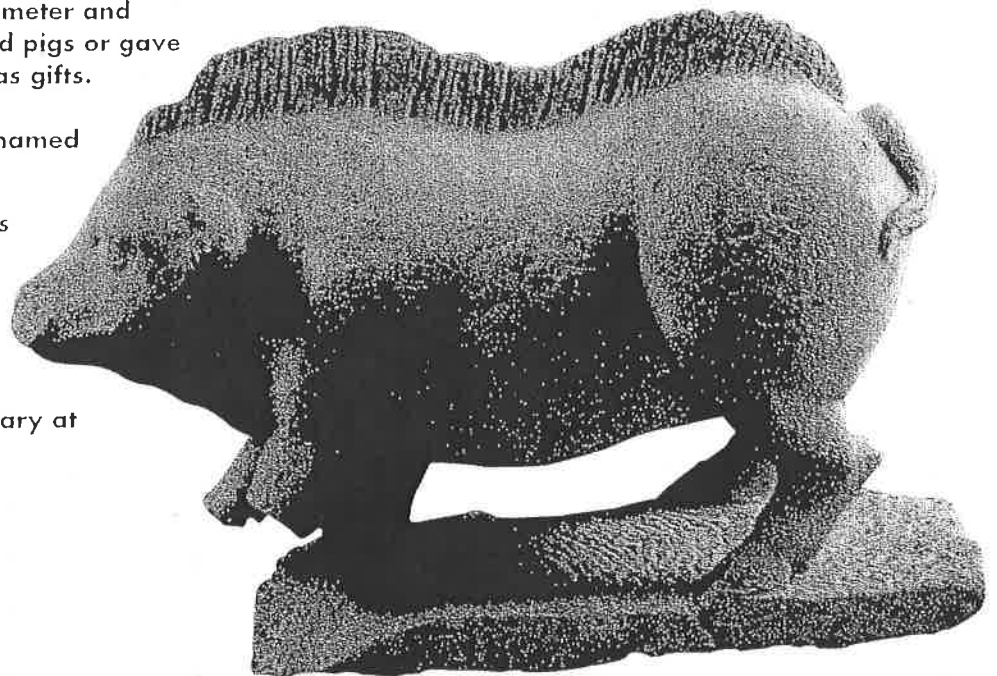
puzzled swineherd who wandered searching for his pigs, which seemed to have disappeared completely, without trace, as if the earth had just swallowed them up.

When she learned that her child was gone, Demeter felt a hollow, aching bewilderment deep within her. With a howl of anguish she sped to Sicily. There she crossed and re-crossed the mountainside, over and over and over and over again, unwilling to admit that there was nothing there, positive that if she looked just that one more time, Persephone would be there, that she would hear her sweet one's voice, hold her warm body, kiss her cherished face. It could not be that she was not there, she simply had not looked enough. She could not leave, not without one final, scrabbling, desperate hunt. She lit two torches from the fires of Mount Etna and by their light she scoured every field, every gully, every cave, every wood, every fold and crease of the mountainside until, in the first, watery light of morning, she sat down and cried.

Eventually, when she had wept herself out, Demeter arose, wrapped a dark cloak around her shoulders, re-lit her torches and broadened her search. As she wandered, she ignored her care of the earth and of the

All ancient Greek temples had sacred areas around them called sanctuaries. This pig comes from the sanctuary of Demeter at Knidos on the coast of Turkey. Worshippers of Demeter and Persephone often sacrificed pigs or gave statues or models of pigs as gifts. This one was dedicated to Persephone by a woman named Plathainis.

The swineherd who lost his pigs when Hades carried off Persephone was called Eubouleos. It is said that he became the first priest of Demeter and Persephone at their sanctuary at Eleusis near Athens.



things that grow. The grass in the pastures turned yellow and brittle, the flowers shrivelled, leaves began to curl, the figs rotted and the skin of apples still on the trees grew wrinkled and brown.

After nine days, Hekate, the goddess who bears the moon in her hands, came to meet Demeter and spoke to her. 'Demeter, giver of wonderful gifts, I heard Persephone's cries, but I do not know what god or mortal has snatched her away, for I saw nothing. However, of all the gods only Helios sees everything – you must ask him.'

And so the two goddesses came to the great sun-god and asked him what he knew. Helios reined in the horses of his chariot and paused as he crossed the sky. 'Demeter,' he replied, 'I respect you and I pity you for the loss of your child. You will know the truth, for I see everything. The one who is guilty of taking your daughter is none other than Zeus himself. He has given her to his brother Hades as his bride. Hades has taken her away beneath the earth. But come, goddess, put an end to your grief. Persephone will be the great queen of the underworld and will receive constant respect and honour from humans.' Then he called to his horses and they sped off into the sky like swift-winged birds.

When she heard Helios's words, Demeter's sorrow turned to fury and she abandoned the company of the gods for the cities and fields of humans. Yet still she neglected her duties and the land became weak and barren. Trees now drove their roots deeper into the earth in a futile search for nourishment. Tender shoots turned black and rotted before they reached the surface of the earth and, even in the finest soil, seeds failed to swell and lay, infertile, lacking the force that would give them life. The spectre of hunger haunted the world and people and animals grew thin.

One day the four daughters of King Keleos of Eleusis left the city. They were beautiful girls, with the flower of youth upon them. They carried bronze jugs to bring water back from the spring to the house of their father. Near the spring, they came across a woman sitting in the dust at the side of the road. When they saw her they stopped and greeted her. The woman just sat there with her ragged clothes trailing in the dirt, her head veiled, her eyes unfocused, gazing into the distance. The eldest of the girls squatted alongside and taking the woman's hand asked, 'Who are you and where do you come from? What has brought you down so low as to sit here away from other people in a wild place at the edge of the town?'

The woman turned her head to see the girl whose kind words betrayed her goodness. 'My child,' she said, 'my name is Doso and I come from Crete. A band of pirates tore me from my home and carried me off to sell as a slave. They brought their ship ashore just down the coast from here,



This statue from Knidos shows Demeter sitting calmly on a throne with a soft cushion. She probably held an offerings bowl or a torch, which reminded people of her night-time search for Persephone. Originally, there may have been a statue of Persephone herself standing alongside. Demeter and her daughter were so closely linked that people often used to speak of them simply as 'The Two Goddesses'.

Demeter has her head veiled. In ancient Greece, brides usually veiled their heads and sometimes so did older married women. The veil was a sign of modesty. Not all ancient Greek goddesses were shown like this. Not far from Demeter's statue, there was a very famous statue of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, which showed her naked, just getting out of the bath.

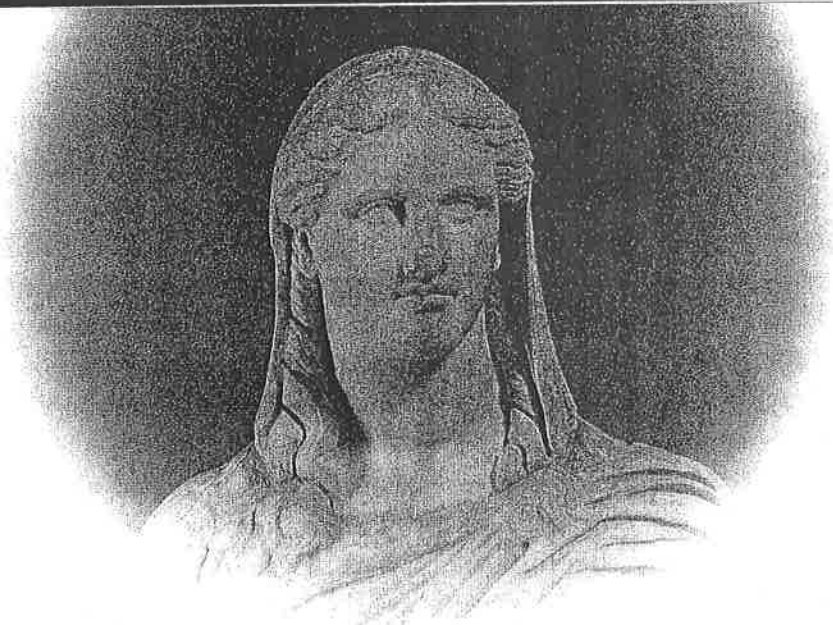
but while they feasted and drank, I slipped away into the darkness. Now here I am, alone, far from home, hungry and racked with grief. Sweet girls, may the gods grant you fine husbands and strong children if you will just take pity on me and take me to your parents' house. I am a willing worker and can do all the tasks that women do. I will weave cloth, watch over the house and care for children.'

The girl glanced at her sisters and smiled, 'Humans must endure what the gods grant even if they do not want to, for the gods are stronger than us. But do not fear, you have found safety now,' she said. 'Queen Metaneira, our mother, is looking for a nurse for our baby brother. Our parents have wanted a son for many years now. He has been a long time arriving and so is a welcome and much cherished child. If you help to bring him up, you will earn eternal thanks from our family and support in your old age.' With these words, the princess raised the woman to her feet and led her to Eleusis.

When the girls explained what Doso had told them, their parents were at first unsure. However, the stranger had an air of calm, a trace of hidden power, and they welcomed her into their palace. Metaneira offered her wine, but she would only drink a mixture of barleymeal, water and fragrant pennyroyal. She would not sit on the fine chair they offered her, but preferred a low stool. There was a sadness about her. But when Iambe, one of the maids, joked with her and then fell off a stool and ended up with her skirts over her head and her legs in the air, then for the first time, Doso laughed. The king and queen handed the care of their baby son to her.

Doso was devoted to the baby. She cared for him at all times. For hours on end she would sit in the shade of the palace courtyard. He snuggled into the crook of her arm as she rocked gently back and forth and sang him songs and told him stories. When the sun had dipped in the sky, she would climb up to the roof of the palace and look out across the barren countryside with its withered grass and stunted trees and she would let the warm breeze blow her hair and swirl across the baby's face. Even at night Doso would not leave the child, but brought his cradle into the hall of the palace where she slept wrapped in her cloak by the fireside.

The king and queen and their daughters soon began to notice changes in their new-born baby boy. He seemed to become stronger every day. His skin was a glowing, peachy pink, his arms and legs were chubby, his eyes were bright and he looked out for his loved ones and chuckled when they spoke to him. In a land full of starvation, a land where no plants would grow, one little baby thrived and offered hope to all.



One night Queen Metaneira awoke with a start. She could not tell if it was a noise or a movement, but something had broken through her sleep and caused her to shiver with misgiving. She could not fall asleep again, so she rose from her bed and made her way towards the hall of the palace. She felt drawn there, thinking that perhaps the warmth of the fire and the murmuring of her child would bring her rest.

The door into the hall was open and she could see the light from the fire flickering inside. When she reached the doorway she stopped suddenly, unsure of what she could see, unable to make out exactly what was happening within and sensing deep inside her that perhaps she should not know. She could see Doso silhouetted against the light of the fire with her back to her. She was holding something in her arms and rocking to and fro. She was singing softly. The queen glanced towards the baby's cradle – it was empty, the sheets trailing over the side. She moved further into the hall so that she could see more clearly.

Doso was leaning right over the great hearth. Stretched along her left arm, she held the naked body of the baby deep in the fire. With her right hand cupped she lifted the flames and let them fall in streams over his head and arms and legs and soft belly, just as a mother bathes her child in warm water and lets tiny rivulets trickle along the folds of the baby's skin. The little boy looked up at her and smiled and gurgled and waved his arms and legs in joy as he revelled in the touch of the flames. Metaneira caught her breath.

Doso turned, and seeing the queen, snatched the baby from the flames and clutched him to her. She seemed suddenly to grow, becoming straight

and tall. Her face and whole body radiated an awesome power and the queen knew she was in the presence of a goddess.

Demeter, the Great Mother, sister of Zeus cried out, 'You mortals are so foolish and so ignorant. My fire burns away mortal weakness leaving power and strength that cannot be quenched. Your son would have become deathless, a god, a replacement for my dear lost daughter. Now that cannot be.' She paused. 'Yet, for your goodness to me, I will offer you gifts. Build me a temple, carry out sacrifices for me, pour blood-red wine and milk into the dust of the earth. Do these things in my honour and I will teach you and your people secret rites and I will reveal to you objects and speak to you words that hold out hope even when death comes to claim you.' She laid down the baby and was gone.

Immediately, the king called together the people of Eleusis and told them what the goddess Demeter had ordered. They worked day and night to build her a temple and the goddess came and sat inside, shunning the company of gods and humans.

Now great Zeus was deeply worried. He could see the earth was dying and that all the inhabitants of the earth would perish too and that the gods would no longer receive the gifts of sacrifice from humans. So he sent Iris to Demeter to ask her to relent in her anger and return to the company of the gods, but Demeter would not change her mind. Then he sent all the gods and goddesses to take gifts to Demeter, to surround her and to beg her to bring life back to the world. Still Demeter sat in her temple and refused to give way until she had her daughter back with her and could see her dear face and hold her in her arms. Zeus had no alternative. He sent for Hermes and ordered him to go to Hades and command him to release Persephone.

In an instant, Hermes was on his way. He slipped unseen over the decaying cities, past smoking funeral pyres, over arid, famine-stricken fields, far, far to the west until he passed through the gates of the underworld and reached the shadowy, echoing halls of the king of the dead. He came to a stop before the throne of Hades. Persephone sat apart from Hades, her back turned to him, her heart filled with longing for the light and warmth of the world above.

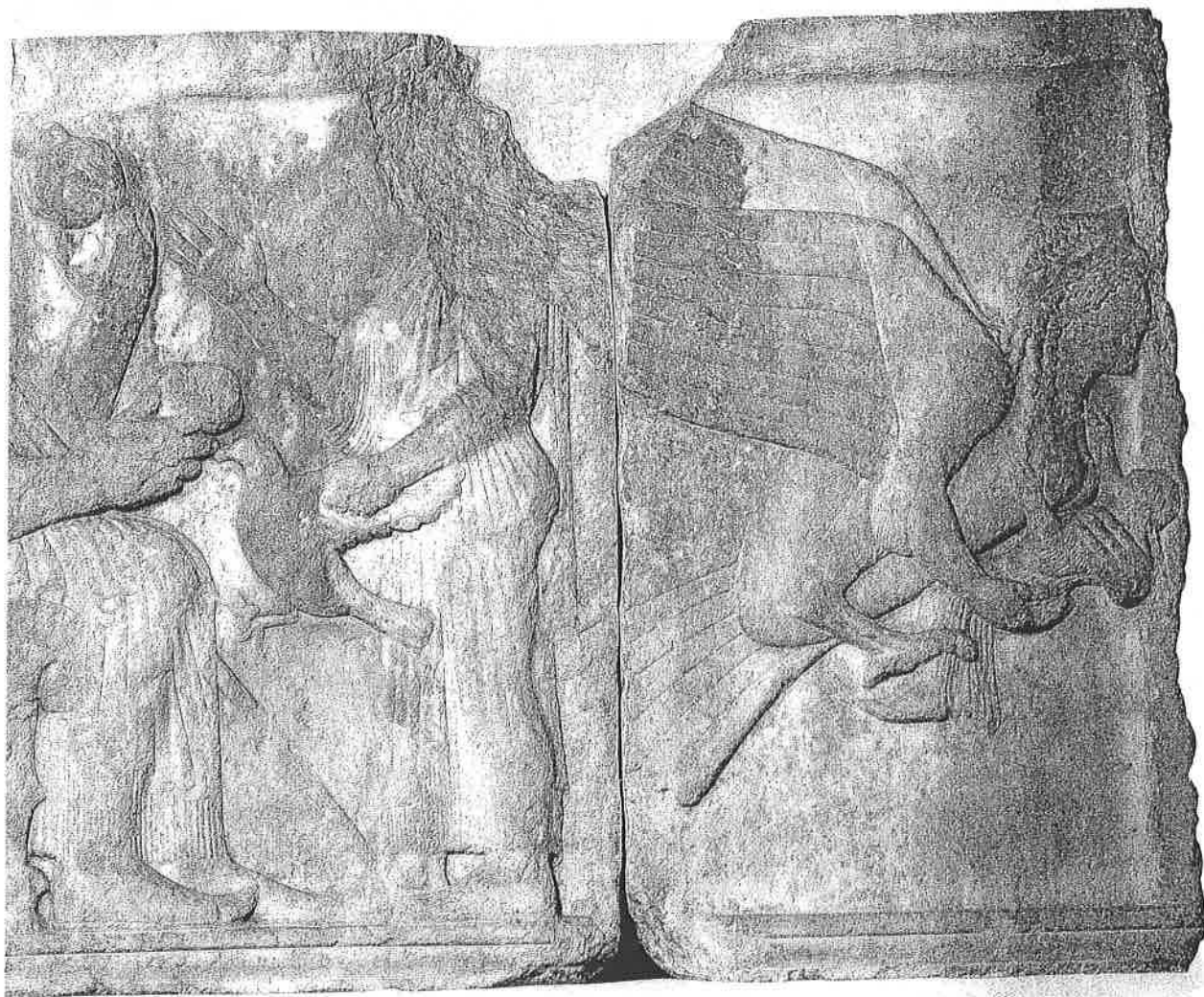
'Forgive me, uncle,' Hermes began, 'but your brother Zeus has sent me to order you to return Persephone to her mother. The world above is dry and barren and all living things are near to death. The gods can no longer rely on the worship and sacrifices of humans. Your sister Demeter will not relent and make the earth fertile again until she has her daughter back and sees her dear face and holds her in her arms. I am here to escort her.'

This is one side of a tomb found in southern Turkey. The sculpture is in a Greek style. At the sides, winged harpies carry off small figures of the dead. Their embrace seems protective in spite of their clawed feet. In the middle, a large man sits on a throne. He may be a dead ancestor of the family. A woman is bringing a bird as an offering to him. He is holding two pomegranates. The ancient Greeks connected pomegranates with growth and fertility because of the numerous seeds they contain.



Do not resist, or once the souls of those still left on earth have descended to your gloomy kingdom, there will be no more of them and the numbers of your subjects will never increase again.'

Hades recognized the force of necessity and nodded agreement to Zeus's command. He called for his golden chariot to be harnessed and made ready for the journey. Now Persephone's heart leapt with joy at the thought of once more feeling her mother's arms around her and she raised her eyes and turned towards Hades and Hermes. Then the king of the dead took a pomegranate from a table at his side and cut it in two. He offered half to the lovely Persephone. Hades knew what he was doing – the taking of food would be a pledge to return to the underworld, a sign that she belonged there. Persephone had neither eaten nor drunk since entering the realms of the dead. Yet even in the cold darkness beneath the



earth, a young girl can feel hungry. She saw the seeds glistening ruby red in their creamy beds. She took the fruit and raised it to her lips. Her teeth bit into the pomegranate's brittle, blushing skin and she sucked out the veins of sweetness. Hades smiled. Then the chariot was brought and he, Hermes and Persephone rode to the palace of Zeus.

As soon as Demeter heard the news, she rushed to Olympos to catch her beloved daughter in her arms, to kiss away her tears, to feel again the soft warmth of her child's embrace. Even when Zeus told her of the pomegranate and ordered that Persephone would always have to spend one third of every year as Hades' queen, Demeter could find no more rage in her, no more grief, just a sense that some part of her child had slipped away from her. Together, mother and daughter returned to Eleusis and as they went, they brought fruitfulness back to the land.

The Panathenaic procession followed a road known as the Sacred Way from the edge of Athens to the Acropolis. The other end of the Sacred Way was at Eleusis, where Demeter and Persephone were worshipped. On this drinking cup, Demeter stands on the left holding a torch and some stalks of corn. Persephone, on the right, has handed her stalks to a young man seated on a throne with wheels and wings. He holds an offering bowl. This is Triptolemos. Demeter and Persephone taught him how to grow corn and he travelled the world teaching other humans. This painting is from a pot which was found in a tomb. The ancient Greeks connected together death and fertility and this connection was probably at the heart of the mysteries of Demeter and Persephone.

The seeds began to sprout, buds unfolded, apples and figs and grapes swelled. They taught humans how to plough and sow and harvest and how to unlock the riches of the earth, so that during the winter, when Persephone was in the realm of Hades, they would have enough to eat and could prepare for her return in the spring. Finally, just as Demeter promised, they revealed their mysteries to the people of Eleusis, the secret of how to loosen death's grip.

These two women are sitting on a comfortable-looking couch. The one on the left has a footstool. She wears a headband and a large ring on her finger and may have been holding a mirror or a fan. They both wear coloured clothes and the woman on the right has bright red shoes. Some people think they are Demeter and Persephone. In ancient Athenian society women had very clear roles to play in the home and in religious ceremonies. Poorer women, foreign women and slaves were seen outside the house more often than wealthier, freeborn women, who had little independence. Whoever these women are, they lean together in intimate conversation. They remind us that talk and close relationships between women can flourish even in an oppressive world.

