

## Notes from the Underworld: "The Persephones"

Priyanka Kumar | Posted: Friday, October 14, 2016 5:00 am

In Greek myth, Persephone contains within herself darkness and light: In the wintertime, she dwells in the underworld with Hades, lord of the dead, for four months; in spring, she returns to earth for eight months, where she is associated with fertility. Before she lived such a complicated life, Persephone was a sunny maiden who loved to pick flowers and was the beloved of her mother, the goddess Demeter. One day, she vanished from her mother's circle. Her journey to the underworld and back has inspired such artists as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whose painting *Proserpine* captures the moment in which Persephone unthinkingly eats some seeds of a pomegranate, an action that will obligate her to spend time in the underworld every winter.



Big Island

Joan Myers: Big Island, HI (Kilauea lava tube); courtesy Damiani

In the preface to *The Persephones* (a limited edition from Damiani), poet Nathaniel Tarn writes that Persephone and Eurydice are essentially the same figure — vegetation goddesses. The image of the vegetation goddess marks his poem "The Eighth Persephone":

She goes into the dark  
out of the flowers into the singing machines  
which grind her down thru the earth to her rightful home

In this book, Tarn's atmospheric poems are punctuated with stunning, earthy photographs by Joan Myers, who has exhibited at the Smithsonian, among other institutions. Tarn and Myers read from and sign copies of *The Persephones* at Collected Works Bookstore on Thursday, Oct. 20.

Many photographs here are of volcanic and geothermal sites, which have an underworldly patina. "Volcanoes," Tarn writes in the preface, "link underworld, upper world, and sky... [and] it seemed to us that photographs of those giant phenomena would consort very well with the poems." Occasionally, among stubborn rock or old lava flows, a plant shoots out almost miraculously, as though assuring us that there does exist a dim possibility of escaping from the realm of Hades.

Though Tarn conflates Persephone and Eurydice for his artistic purposes, it is useful to consider their distinct identities in Greek myth, with Persephone being the reluctant queen of Hades, and Eurydice the beloved of Orpheus. They are both doomed to live in the underworld: Persephone's only part-time stay there is thanks to the intervention of her harvest goddess mother, Demeter; in Eurydice's case, Orpheus' intervention was not as successful.

The Orpheus myth is interpreted indelibly in Jean Cocteau's film *Orpheus*, which, being a modern tale, is also an exploration of the marriage between Orpheus and Eurydice. In the film, all it takes is for Orpheus to glimpse Eurydice in the rearview mirror of a car for her to disappear back into the underworld. Eurydice's fate is so compelling because she stands in the passage between life and death, and her future depends on whether Orpheus can either have enough faith or discipline his mind to not look back.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke explored Eurydice's suspension between life and death in an iconic poem, "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes." If you can, read this poem in a slim volume, *Rilke Between Roots* (Princeton University Press), a selection of Rilke's poetry translated from the German by Rika Lesser. At the end of this poem, Rilke gives us a vision of a Eurydice who no longer belongs to any man:

She was already loosened like long hair  
and scattered and absorbed like fallen rain  
and meted out like hundredfold provision.

She was already root.

In Rilke's poem, Eurydice's metamorphosis is so potent that when Orpheus does what he's not permitted to do — he turns around — she already is a stranger to him. The figure of Eurydice was of abiding interest to Rilke, and in an essay introducing Stephen Mitchell's translations of Rilke's poetry, the perceptive Robert Hass writes of how this interest followed Rilke all the way to his death. "All that really remained for him to do was to become his Eurydice. He set about the task scrupulously, specifying the churchyard at Raron near Muzot where he was to be buried, and even the gravestone, if it could be found, a very plain one, old and like his father's. He even wrote the small poem that became his epitaph."

Myers brilliantly evokes the concept of the passage between light and dark in a photograph taken in Cumae, an ancient Greek colony west of Naples, where we seem to be inside a cavelike structure, with a series of hexagonal doorways leading out into the light. While Persephone was able to exit Hades and return to the light, conditionally, her story is nonetheless marred by grief — her own and that of her mother. In a poem that describes Persephone eating some seeds of pomegranate, Tarn writes, "The ruin of herself entered her like a mist. ..."

A photograph of the feet of a stone figure from Malta conjures the weight of Persephone's captivity in the underworld and provides a haunting cover image for this book. While she is with Hades, Persephone is sometimes referred to as an ice queen because she is so unhappy. Meanwhile, her mother pines for her. Tarn captures Demeter's grief superbly when he writes in "The Sixth Persephone":

I've heard the voice of my daughter crying  
on the musk of the autumn day which is so bountiful  
and I know that something has taken her away into darkness  
though I don't know what it is.

In a standout photograph in this collection, we feel that we are standing next to stately ruins in Taormina, Sicily, while a subdued Mt. Etna looms in the background. In a photographer's note, Myers writes that "many people believe the myth of Persephone and Demeter originated" in areas around Sicily and Naples. That claim may be impossible to verify, but the photograph allows our imagination space to roam free. Just beyond the ruins, a shock of fuchsia flowers bursts out of the greenery, as though waiting for the maiden Persephone to weave them into a crown. ◀