

trees and boulders that crash and resound. Horses, cattle,
entire stables that stood by my banks have been swept away,
and all the strength of those beasts has been nothing compared to
the eddies

and swirls of my current you see before you. Be prudent, wait,
and accept my invitation. Stay as my guest. When the water
subsides to its accustomed level, you'll be on your way
in safety, I warrant." Aegeus' son accepted the god's
suggestion and invitation and entered his gloomy abode. 560

The floor was damp and clammy, and the walls were of porous
pumice

and rough calcareous tufa. The chambers were thick with moss,
and their ceilings were decorated with conch and purple murex.
It was late in the day, and the travelers fell upon the large couches
in the grand audience chamber, Theseus, Pirithoüs,
Lelex, and all the others. The river god entertained them,
and barefoot water nymphs brought trenchers of food and wine
in elegant jeweled beakers. With gusto the guests partook,
ate, drank, and relaxed. When the meal was over, the hero 570
pointed out at the water and, on the horizon, an island.

"What is the name of that place over there?" he asked. "Or places?
Is it one island or several?" The river god answered, "Five
islands, but close together. They're hard to see from this distance.
They have an interesting story, for they were once water nymphs
who slaughtered two bullocks each, and invited the rural gods
to come to their feast—all the gods, that is, but me. Ignored,
forgotten, I raged in anger, swelled, tore at the forests
and fields, and swept the nymphs and the spit of ground they
stood on

into the sea. They remembered me well enough, then. And I
chipped 580

away at their plot of ground until, with the help of the sea,
I formed those Hedgehog Islands you see out there. Beyond them
is another island I love, which sailors call Perimele.

She was a girl I loved—lusted after, but loved.

Her father was Hippodamas, who disapproved of our union
and thought I had wounded his honor as much as her own, for
which

ridiculous reason he hurled her down from a cliff to drown
in the sea. . . . I caught her, held her up as she swam, and cried
out

to Neptune, 'Show her mercy. Grant her a place of safety.
Or let her become a place and live on forever.' He heard 590

this rather baroque request and granted it. New land appeared
and embraced her floating body; an island grew where you see it,
a transformation of anger and love, despair and faith."

The river god fell silent, and the men in the room considered
his words, which echoed yet in their minds of the marvel of
things.

But Pirithoüs, perhaps to be entertaining or merely
in the wrong mood for such yarns, argued, "Those things don't
happen.

You are telling us children's stories. The gods do not perform
tricks

as if in a side-show world, turning this into that, transforming
one shape to another, to dazzle the simple-minded." 600

This was a shocking thing to think, let alone to say,
and the company, stunned, was silent as if they hoped the words
they had heard might go away. Then Lelex, Troezen's hero,
whose temples were gray and whose eyes had seen much, spoke
up in gentle

reproof: "The powers of gods are great indeed. No man
can even imagine their limits. They do what they like. A story
comes to mind of an oak and a linden tree that stand
intertwined in the Phrygian hills. I've seen them myself,
these trees with a low wall that surrounds them. King Pittheus
sent me

thither. Around that place is marshland now, where birds 610
paddle, dive, and fly. Two travelers once, it is said,
appeared in modest disguises that hid their glory, for Jove
and Mercury were the two. They knocked on door after door
seeking a bed for the night, but over and over again
were turned away. In the end, in one house they found a
welcome—

or a hut really. Its roof was thatched with reeds from the marsh.
The couple who lived there were Baucis and Philemon, old and
poor,

and yet content with their lot. They were decent people, simple
country folks, one might say. And when strangers came to their
door

and stooped a little to enter without bumping their heads, 620
the old man fetched a bench for the travelers to sit on—
there were no servants or masters here, but just these two—
the man and his wife. Baucis fetched a piece of cloth
to pad the rude bench so that the strangers might rest
easy. She stirred the coals in the hearth and fanned the fire

to cook them a meal. She had one of those country kettles of copper lined with tin, in which she fixed them a dinner of cabbage from out of the garden, and a little smoked pork for flavor—

this was the best they could do, but unstintingly they did it. Philemon cut a generous rasher off the cured pork butt, which hung from a hook in the blackened ceiling beam, and his wife put it into the kettle. Then, to be sure that their guests might dine in comfort and even a show of style, she brought out a bolster filled with sedge grass to put on their wickerwork couch. Over this she arranged the embroidered throw they saved for feast days

and special occasions—a bit worn here and there, and frayed at one of its ends, but still a nice piece of work, which looked good on the wicker couch. She invited the gods to recline as quality people do when they eat and, with trembling hands, set the bowls on the tripod table—one of its legs was a bit short and had to be propped with the shard of a pot. But leveled, steadied, and wiped clean, it would have to serve, and did.

She set out a plate of olives, green ones and black, and a saucer of cherry plums she had pickled, and an endive and radish salad. She had cheese and some roasted eggs, all in the earthenware dishes

that remained of their set—handsome, embossed pieces, with only a few chips here and there. The wine beakers were carved of beech wood and lined with beeswax on the insides. Philemon poured

wine—no special vintage or old cuvée, but a hearty honest wine he'd made himself. And Baucis served her cabbage and pork stew. For dessert there were nuts, figs, dates, and plums, and baskets of ripe apples and grapes, in the center of which they produced, with a show of modest pride,

a honeycomb for sweetness. They beamed with their sweet smiles, taking pleasure themselves in what they'd given their guests.

"Philemon then was about to refill the empty wine bowl. He picked it up but felt that it wasn't empty. Instead, as much as they drank, the wine had replenished itself, and the bowl

was as full as before. Bizarre! Frightening even. He caught his wife's attention and gestured. She looked herself at the wine bowl,

watched as one of the gods refilled his glass—and the wine in the bowl didn't diminish. They stared at the ceiling and prayed for mercy, mercy. They thought of the simple meal they had offered

their supernatural guests and felt dismay. They had done far too little, had failed to recognize these strangers or give them enough. In the yard, they had a goose, a pet, a kind of watch-geese, but now Philemon went out to kill it to serve their divine guests. The gods watched as the goose ran this way and that and the old man tried to catch it. The wife went out to help, but the goose was too fast for her also, and it ran inside to the gods themselves, who laughed and commanded:

'Let it live. We are gods, and we thank you. You've done enough, more than your nasty neighbors thought to do. Follow us up to the foothills and watch from the mountainside as the gods chastise the sins of men with the punishment they have earned. You alone shall be spared. Come with us now.' In awe, the couple put on their mantles, took up their walking sticks, and followed after the gods, struggling higher and higher up the slopes of the nearby hills. Not far from the top, perhaps a bowshot away, the gods stopped, turned, and pointed, and the aged couple turned to look back down at the region, all covered now with water. Only their house remained. An astonishing thing! A marvel. But they did not rejoice. They wept

at the ruin of all their neighbors, and quaked with fear at the power that could, in an instant, transform an earth they had taken for granted and make it strange. Or worse, that the strangeness is always lurking,

always there but seldom visible. Poor little house, but it was changing, too, their simple cottage becoming larger and grander, a glittering marble-columned temple. The straw and reeds of the thatch roof metamorphosed into gold, and gates with elaborate carvings sprang up, as ground gave way to marble paving stones, which were fit for a king's courtyard. Wonder on wonders! In shock, they listened as Saturn's son spoke in a reassuring voice: 'Old man, old woman, ask of us what you will. We shall grant whatever request you make of us.' The husband whispered into the ear of his wife, and then turned to listen as she whispered into his.

'We ask only to serve as your priest and priestess to guard your temple. And having spent all our lives together, we pray to die at the same time,' he said. 'I'd hate to see my wife's grave, or have her weep at mine.' And Jove nodded. As long as they lived, the couple took care of the gods' temple that had been their house. Their lives had become a dream, a story, the ending of which was more strange than all that had gone before. Arrived at a very old age together, they stood at what had been their modest doorway and now was a grandiose façade, and Baucis noticed her husband was beginning to put forth leaves from his head and shoulders. He saw that she, too, was producing leaves and bark. They were

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turning
into trees, and they stood there, held each other, and called, before the bark closed over their mouths, a last 'Farewell.' And then there was only silence, or the whisper among their leaves

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of the intimate secrets trees confide in each other. Today, in that part of the world, the peasants will point out the two trees that seem to be growing out of the single trunk, the oak and linden tree together. Their wise men swear it happened, and people come from miles around to hang in the boughs of that double tree their wreaths and gifts of woven flowers. I myself was there and touched my hand to the tree and recited the prayer they say: 'Let those whom the gods have loved

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be gods. Let those who have worshiped well, be worshiped themselves.'"

Here, Lelex fell silent. The tale and the teller had moved everyone in the room, but Theseus most of all.

He wanted more stories of wonders the gods have done and can do.

The river god, their host, lolled on his couch with his head cupped in his chin and his arm leaning upon his elbow.

"There are some," he said, "whom the gods change, and they stay that way

forever. To others they give a remarkable power to take one form after another, whenever they will. So it happened to Proteus, who dwelt in the depths of the blue sea. He could appear as a young man, or a lion, or boar, or perhaps an adder that men might fear, or a bull with a great pair of horns, or even a stone, or a rooted tree, or flowing water, or tongues of dancing flame, which water hates and fears.

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'So it happened with Mestra, Erysichthon's daughter and Autolycus' wife. This man, Erysichthon, scorned the gods and declined to sacrifice on their altars or do them honor.

One day he went to a grove sacred to Ceres to cut firewood and defile those trees with his axe head's steel.

A mighty oak in that stand of centuries-old trees was hung with votive tablets, twists of wool, and wreaths that postulants had left in the hope their prayers might be granted. Dryads would often dance around this tree, holding hands and forming a huge circle—for the trunk was a good fifteen yards around. It towered over other trees, as they towered over the grasses and shrubs below them. Erysichthon, nevertheless, instructed his servants to cut it down, which they were afraid to do. This only made him angry, and he grabbed an axe from the nearest man and announced to all: 'It's only a tree the goddess likes, but assume instead it's the goddess herself, I'd cut it just the same. Its top shall touch the ground this day.' As he said this, the tree shivered and groaned, and its branches shook. Its acorns grew ashen and pale.

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Anyone else would have been deterred, but he swung his axe and struck the tree, and blood came gushing forth from its bark as if he had plunged that axe into the neck of a bull at an altar. Astonished, appalled, his attendants protested that any sane man would desist from further assaults on the tree.

One fellow close by attempted to take the axe from his hand, but Erysichthon glared in fury, called out, 'You pious son of a bitch, take that!' and, with one swipe of the weapon, beheaded the man. Forthwith, he returned to the tree and hacked again and again, deep cuts. From within the tree, a voice called out, 'I am a tree nymph Ceres loves, and my pains of death are eased by my knowledge that you shall be punished for this

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terrible deed. I prophesy doom!' But he would not listen and continued to chop, to weaken the trunk, and he tied strong ropes

his men could tug at to fell the enormous tree. It leaned farther and groaned and crashed at last to the earth, and leveled a wide swath of destruction among all the smaller trees.

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"The dryad sisters, stunned at this loss, put on black mourning and went to Ceres to plead that the malefactor be punished grandly, as he had offended grandly. The bountiful goddess