

'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



nodded her head in consent, and wheat fields nodded with her as if a wind had passed to ruffle their ears. Her mind moved upon torments that people would pity had not their victim severed all human connection and claims by his evil deed. Hunger, she thought, would be right—the worst thing she could think of.

But it is forbidden for Ceres and Hunger ever to meet. She summoned, therefore, a sprite of the mountains, an oread, saying,

‘There is a distant place, in far-off Scythia, icy, gloomy, and barren. No trees grow there, no wheat. The soil is barren stones. Go there, where Cold, Fear, and gaunt Hunger huddle together, and summon Hunger. Say I command her to visit this brute and establish a home for herself in his belly, which nothing may satisfy. Tell her I yield my powers to fill that void, to feed him. I give him to her as a toy. It’s a long journey, young lady. Take my wingèd dragons and magic car and let them carry you there in an instant.’ She gave the reins into the oread’s hands, and the nymph flew off at once to the place in the mountains that people call the Caucasus, a bleak and nightmarish region, in which she arrived at Hunger’s home. There, in a stony field, that creature gleaned with her filthy fingernails and her teeth among the stones for their bits of moss. Her hair hung down in lank and matted locks. Her eyes were sunken and circled, and were all the more marked in her pallid invalid’s face. Her lips were slack and cracked, and her skin was crazed with chilblains.

Beneath her eczematous throat, her breasts hung down like purses emptied and long forgotten. The vaults of her ribs stuck out, as did every bone in her body. One could count the knobs of her spine.

Only her legs and feet were swollen and waterlogged.

“The oread saw all this from hailing distance. She dared not approach closer but shouted the commands of the goddess, frightened

to be in sight of the dreadful creature. She felt, at this distance, a terrible pang of hunger, not merely appetite, but a deeper sense that comes from long deprivation, a need for nourishment with her body’s organs crying in want. Her message delivered, she turned, remounted the car, and was gone.

“Hunger did as the goddess had ordered or, say, permitted.

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On wings of surprising strength, she flew through the air to the house

of her victim, the wicked king. She entered his room and saw him in the dark, in bed, asleep. She wrapped her cadaverous arms about him in an embrace, and covered him with her greedy kisses. She breathed her spirit into his spirit. His veins were burning, on fire with longings that seethed in his blood. She left him

and the fertile world to return to those bleak, exiguous haunts she knew and had learned to love, her world of woe and want.

Erysichthon, asleep, is dreaming of food, banquets, grand buffets, of all-you-can-eat, belly-burster specials. His jaws move as his teeth masticate thin air.

His molars grind on nothing, and his throat muscles work to swallow

oneiric steaks and chops. He awakes, ravenous, famished, an insane craving to eat mastering all his other instincts. He calls for food, for the bounties of land and sea and air, beef and fish and fowl on which he gorges, but, even while he is eating, he is planning other menus, and complaining of his hunger. He cannot be satisfied but gobbles whatever he sees, enough for an army, a city, a whole nation. He swallows more and more into that maw. As the ocean ingests the water that rivers pour into its craw but is never filled and remains thirsty and guzzles more and more forever, so he calls out for more. As fires consume whatever they touch and burn the hotter in greedy appetite for destruction, so he demands ever larger and larger portions of more and more, as his hunger grows with every orectic bite, an unfillable black hole.

“His ravening empties the palace larder and royal storerooms, the warehouses and barns of the city. His treasury melts as purchasing agents rove in widening circles to buy provender for their master. His hunger is unabated; his fortune is swallowed up in gorging, but still his wolfish hunger gnaws at him as he gnaws bare bones. What is left to sell? He looks around his ruined house for an asset, some bauble he might swap for a couple of loaves of bread, and he sees—his daughter! He’ll sell her, as a prostitute and slave. Why not? His only daughter! He tells himself she deserves a better father than he and, with this peculiar excuse, offers her for sale. He finds a buyer at once, who drags her away. At length the girl rebels, runs off,

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## BOOK IX

and stands at the seashore to pray with hands held out to Neptune to save her from this man who has taken her maidenhead and now is about to seize the rest of her life. 'Help me, deliver me from this monster, I beg you!' she prays. The god hears her entreaty and does not deny her the help she has asked. He changes her into a man and gives her the garb and gear of one of the local fishermen. The slave master, pursuing his runaway, follows close behind, is approaching, and now accosts the fisherman: 'Sir, I say, you with the rod, may your hook catch many fish and the sea offer its bounties if you will be kind enough to tell me, Where is that girl who must have passed her only a moment or two ago? A slave girl, dressed in rags, and running this way. . . . You see the footprints she left in the sand! They stop here, but I don't see her.

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Which way did she go?' Mestra realized at once that the god had granted her prayer and she was saved. 'What girl?' she asked. 'I've seen no one here. But I have been staring seaward. Still, I can swear that no one was here on the beach but me.' The man believed her and walked back down the shore, assuming his slave had escaped. As soon as he was gone, the guise of fisherman dissolved, and the girl was as she had been. Astonishing! The father welcomed her home, for now he could sell her again and again, and each time she could change form

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to that of a mare, or bird, or milch cow, or deer, whatever the occasion or her whim of the moment happened to prompt. And still, this wasn't enough. He consumed whatever he saw, and finally ate himself, gnawing at his own body in a deplorable act of auto-cannibalism, which ended in the only possible way the punishment Ceres had ordered.

"But why do I tell the stories of others, when I myself can change my form to a certain extent? I appear sometimes as what you see, but also as serpent or bull, with my strength in my horns—or single horn, for I have lost one of these weapons."

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Thinking of this, he groaned aloud and then fell silent.

Theseus asked the god to explain why he had groaned. What was wrong with his forehead? What bull's horn? The river deity, turning a baleful look at his guest, replied, "Defeat is never a thing one likes to speak of, and yet it was no disgrace to have been defeated, but rather an honor to have striven as I did with such an adversary. Or that's what I say to myself. And I shall tell you my story, should you wish to hear it." They all assured him he had their complete

attention and fell silent. He spoke then of Deianira.

"You've heard of her, of course—an especially beautiful maiden whom many suitors pursued, I among their number.

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I entered the house of Oeneus, her father, to make my offer of marriage, along with a number of others, including the mighty Hercules. To us two, all the rest yielded their claims.

So it was he and I. He pointed out that his father was Olympian Jove and referred to his celebrated labors.

To this I replied that it wasn't right for a god like me to have to compete with a mere mortal (he hadn't yet become divine). 'I am,' I proclaimed, 'the lord of the river that flows in its familiar winding course through your own realm. Should your daughter and I wed, she will not go far but dwell close by, as a neighbor. I am also happy to say that Juno doesn't detest me, as she does my rival. No labors have been imposed upon me. Jove, he says, is his father.

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It's a claim anyone can make, and either it isn't true or else it's disgraceful, and he is a bastard son of a shamed mother. But either way, it's nothing to recommend him.'

That's what I said in answer, and Hercules glared at me, angry, which wasn't at all surprising. I wanted to show him up as a musclebound thug. He answered just as I'd hoped he might, saying, 'My tongue isn't much. My fists can be more persuasive.'

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I put up my own to defend myself, and we fought, but a dirty