

Heather Treseler

Daphne on Being Wood

I never meant it to be permanent: this body-house
of wood, this foliating iron lung, these brachia
of branched leaves that were my exeunt and leave-taking.
I did not intend to remain a tree forever: perhaps
for one or two eras of Apollo's high-octane testosterone,
the nymph mania that sparks in men between
a spendthrift prime and newborn, mid-aged fear of death.
Cycles of tumescence spin longer among the gods;
there is no one rutting season, so a girl must be keen
to spot the symptoms: late-night fistfights,
musky smells, predawn prowls of car parks and beaches,
sardine and tuna cans wrenched open and strewn
in the strangest of places. Apollo was the worst: he stank
of horse dung and char, stood squinting at the sky,
wizened like a bathhouse lecher aged light years by sun
and salt, seasonal orgies of ale and tail. Too old to be
a beach boy, but inflamed by a gold-tipped arrow wedged
slightly south of his cock, he chased me like a thing
possessed of divine selfishness. He didn't know Peneus,
my father, had taught me to run, honing my flight instinct

until I'd won the local miler by twenty yards. I didn't know
I couldn't outrace a god. When I felt Apollo's breath
scorch the valley of my neck with his back-alley intention,
when he sped in reach of my disheveling hair, hunting
me to some duck blind or grove of desolation, I saw already
the scene he intended. I caught the gibbous moon's gleam
in his teeth. I screamed out prayers, pleas, and imprecations.
Then, miraculous change was wrought in me. Stunned,
I felt my womb fall to my feet and score its roots in earth;
my legs filled to one solid girth, grooving to papery bark;
my arms sprung open like spontaneous umbrellas. I writhed
like Sibyl nearing prophecy, but my wail was walled
into a muteness beyond wonder: no longer had I mouth
or face. My features receded into whorls of wood,
an astigmatic grain in the rings of surprise that wrung
through what had been my body, piercingly hot
then chill, my blood changing to a pulpy sap burbling
in my veins. I thought, peering up at my rooftop
of leaves, I had become an oak, sycamore, or elm. I didn't
learn who I was until spring when they called me
laurel and spoke in hushed, suspicious tones of great change,
the tragedies of girlish stubbornness, as if escape ever
required less than total transformation. As if, born woman,
I hadn't been made to suffer ritual perils in escape,
hydraulic power of beauty and its maturation, fevered desire
in others and in myself, my reluctant coda of resistance.

Mortals wish to unwind themselves of time, forgetting
clocks bring anguish to just ends, even such occasions

of too much happiness, unbridled joy. The morning after
I evaded my captor, I stretched my new several feet

and gangly toes into cooling loam, girlhood's sweetly
rotting body changed to a joke on permanence:

a woman in her prime, immured in the live mausoleum
of a tree. Without choice, I found my volition.

My limbs now crown runners and rhetoricians, laureates
and long-legged, those who track truths over distance,

distressing the romance that all are born to themselves,
foremost and free: those who remember a girl, Daphne.

Persephone's Postcard

The dead, they are always descending
like mustachioed men in Magritte's
painting, so many bowler hats sailing
through a pale blue Belgian sky.

Heavy souls—freighted with evil,
leaden sorrows, or the insomniac
stare of bald regret—crash all night
against the stone gates of Hades

and stumble, wrecked, along the neon
strip mall on the far side of Styx,
a tinsel town where hawkers sell
the newbies musky perfumes,

condensed from their memories,
and half-hour holograms of any
one beloved thing: pets or dill pickles,
a niece or a ball glove, something

to cop one last recessional feel. All
night, unhappy shades rain on
the earthen roof of the root-cellar
boudoir I share with my husband

who promised, after snatching me
from behind, from the white flowers
of Nysa, that I'd grow used to traffic
of the dead, the continual thump

of souls in the night, above my head,
like the asphalt slap of a slowly
deflating basketball. He promised,
wielding his bird-tipped scepter,

to make in me another music in which
I'd hear myself without my jealous
mother's cautionary antiphon. In truth,
though Hades stole me to his lair,

he gave me to my pleasure, enticing me
to be greedy, to take and take his potent
seed into my store until I glowed dark
with satisfactions. His lust and coy

protest at my departures came to mark
time, to cadence more than our seasonal
passions. Between the knock of souls
above and our tender mock-Bartók below,

small sprays of earth fell almost nightly
from our ceiling. Most mornings, I wake
to the taste of summered grass, soil raked
through my hair, a snail burrowing

his glistening trail into loamy blankets
where Hades turns, each winter night,
for the press of my lips and obliging limbs
to receive him, his almost mythic want:

thanatos seeking *eros* to spring him to life
again, granting some vital answer
to death's absolute value of Zed.
Once Demeter's obedient daughter,

cosseted to her buxom pride, now wife
to a god of night who bears it all
away: I tell you, friend, in our green
unruly nocturnes, often mistaken

for raw shades' rueful laughter, there's
this reminder: Hades husbands
a fertile knowing beauty, but I
remain death's regnant queen.

Demeter: Calendar Girl

You can't imagine what Persephone hauls
home in her hair, what lives in those marshy
dreadlocks: Stygian snails, fat little pill bugs,

shag carpeting, and the mud-matted tails
of water rats. Each equinox, my daughter
clanders above ground, trailing detritus

like a bridal train, and I give her a day-long
shampoo. Mortals call it a "power wash,"
as if potency entailed absolution.

I assume a tripod stance, like a firefighter,
and amp up that nozzle's stream, ridding
Sephone of the spores and species, the loam

and languor of her other home, that dank
cavern beside oblivion where she pays
a penance for having been born beautiful.

My daughter, the wife of death. Abduction
is a mother's second-worst nightmare after
sudden high fevers, pneumonia, immolation

via bongos, boys, batteries, or rogue birthday
candles. Thus, we use car seats and Clearasil,
seatbelts, sunscreen, inflammable pajamas.

Like all mothers, I thought I'd kept her safe.
But ten years ago, Hades envied his brother
Zeus for his glammed-up wife and sidelong

sport with nymphs and goatherds. Ten years
ago, I let Sephone play in flower-pleated fields,
not knowing my brother hid nearby, watching

war. Gone, gone was the deep saddling joy
that had once hummed in me, the sweet fever
in which I took Zeus to the loom of my wish

for child. Before she had a name, I had dreamt
the lineaments and light of my daughter's face.
I'd heard the echo of her toddling feet, seen

a trusting fondness in her gaze, known
a tenderness ignorant of malice. All was
trespassed in Hades' lustful clamor.

When I learned who had stolen her,
I fought to stay my hand, wanting
death's surrender, a quick descent

to the birdless place to find where
he had her caged. Months, I didn't
sleep, hollowed to the horror

of my daughter serving the nightly
pleasure of the dead land's king.
How could a clod of bristle beard

and fouled hands husband any woman?
Dire, the situation; direct, the intervention,
though here most stories have it wrong.

It was *I* who sewed pomegranate seeds
into the hems of all her skirts: mothering
is imagining a narrative beyond the first

emergency. Tourniquets double as parachutes,
prophylactics are hidden in passport jackets.
Because she had eaten the red seeds of earth,

Pods of memory's fertility, blood, and birth,
I could plead to Zeus for her just return.
Each spring, my daughter is mine again.

her race through meadows, frolic in bright sun,
unaware of the danger lurking there. He seized
her by belt and hair, muffling her panicked cries

as he slid her underground, turning harvest
to darkest theft, in violation of every rule—
ancient, exogamous, statutory—taking

from her what should only be freely given,
taking from me the yield of my life.
Unspeakable, this sin against all law.

Whoever thought sibling rivalry could turn
to such catastrophe? When Hades snatched
my daughter, hoarding all her laughter,

he robbed the woods of wind, the fields
of rain, the galaxies of stars that bud,
in summer, from her fairer shoulders.

Bereft, crazed, not knowing where she'd
gone or how to find her, I wandered miles,
straight through the leather of my shoes.

A pilgrim beyond the pale of prayer,
beyond gods and groveling: I bared
my chest to sun and sirocco, issuing

a wail that echoed over land, stunting crops
in their greening sleeves, curdling the milk
in the gentlest cows, scaring bees back inside

their famished hives. Long winter came, refused
to leave. Ache gnawed at the thinned branches
of trees, ravaged as burnt-out fuselage after sudden

Though a dozen goddesses squawk
and squaw over the throne of heaven,
only one is unrivaled queen of hell.

If I must share with Plouton, I'll cherish
each ascent and yearly flower, each tender
nestled night and summered hour. Perhaps

we love those the best who must recede
from us before they do return; on them
we lavish, for them, we ache and yearn.

Photo by Matt Wright



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Heather Treseler is the winner of the 2016 Frank O'Hara Prize and an assistant professor at Worcester State University. Her poems and essays have appeared in *Harvard Review*, *Boston Review*, *Iowa Review*, *Boulevard*, *Pleiades*, and the *Weekly Standard*, among other journals, and in four books about postwar American poetry. She has received fellowship support from the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.