

Erysichthon

There once lived a foolish and arrogant king. His name was Erysichthon. He was as foolish as his daughter was wise. Time and again she'd saved him from his own folly. But one morning, before she understood what was in his mind, he ordered his servants to fetch his subjects from his city. He took them all, his daughter too, down to a grove of trees sacred to the goddess Demeter — Demeter of the crown of corn, of the lustrous hair, whom we must thank for every full mouth, for every bulging belly, Demeter the goddess of plenty, the goddess of the harvest.

In the centre of the grove there was an ancient oak. 'Chop it down.' His servants looked at one another anxiously. The princess: 'Father, this is madness. If you cut down this tree, the goddess will punish you for it.'

'Just my point. There are no gods, no goddesses. There's only us. And you are all fools who shake at shadows. I will prove that every prayer is wasted air.'

He grabbed an axe. He swung it behind him. Everyone who dared to look then saw the tree trembling from its roots to the tips of its leaves. When the blade struck the bark dark blood came from the wound he'd made and there was a cry, shrill: 'I am the spirit who lives in this tree. Cut it down and you slaughter me. If I die by your hand, I swear revenge will fall on you as heavy as a falling oak.'

The king, he laughed. He kept on cutting until, with a dreadful moan, the tree crashed to the ground.

And the king had his servants fetch his subjects back to his palace. He held a feast that night. He stuffed his mouth, he stuffed his mouth, he stuffed his mouth until his belly bulged. That night nymphs in the grove wept around the tree stump. Then one of them flew up to Mount Olympus, the home of the immortals. She flew to the palace of Demeter and she asked for revenge.

Demeter granted her request. For every power there must be its opposite. If there is a goddess of plenty somewhere there must be a goddess of lack. Of course the two can never meet. Demeter said, 'Nymph, take my dragon-drawn chariot. Ride three days and nights through the sky to the north till you see below you a leafless, lifeless place. There you will see her, the spirit of hunger. Tell her to possess this Erysichthon. Tell her King Erysichthon belongs to her now.'

The nymph rode the chariot through the sky till she saw below her a wasteland where even the air moaned. She saw Hunger at once. Hunger was on her hands and knees, scraping at the cracked, arid earth, uncovering a tree root that she ground between her teeth. Hunger's face is a blue-grey skull. Her jaws clack together as if she is a cat staring at a bird out of reach. Her joints seem swollen beside her spindly limbs. Her skin is so thin, veins, guts can be seen quivering within. The nymph knew danger when she saw it. She shouted her instructions from a safe distance away. She shook the reins of the chariot, rose up into the sky. But even so she felt a cramp in her gut.

That night Hunger flew through the sky. She travelled to the palace of King Erysichthon. She crept through an open window. He was fast asleep in his bed on his back, snoring, his mouth open. She pressed her thin lips to his and blew a torrent of starvation into his open mouth. Then she was gone, like smoke sucked up a chimney, away from the land of plenty back to the realm of lack. The king as he slept dreamt that he sat at a table eating a meal that tasted of nothing.

Next morning he was woken by a nagging pain in his belly. He sat up and found his jaws had a life of their own. They clacked together as if he was a cat staring at a bird out of reach. He called for food. He ate and ate but this hunger was like fire: the more he fed it the stronger it became. He called for more food in bigger bowls heaped higher. But it was no use: it was as if he was throwing crumbs into a chasm.

Food enough to feed his family, food enough to feed his palace, food enough to feed his city, food enough to feed his nation he crammed into his open mouth. He only stopped chewing to call for 'More food! More food!'

He ate his way through all his wealth. He sold all of his lands, his herds, his properties, until at last all he had left were the clothes he wore and his daughter. He sold her into slavery for the price of one meal. She did not deserve such a fate. As she was led away she lifted her head to the heavens: 'Great Demeter, don't punish me for what my father did. Help me now!'

Demeter answered her request. When the slave-owner reached the harbour he turned to speak to his new slave. She'd gone. And where she had been an old fisherman was mending his nets. 'Hey you! Where did that woman go? She wears her hair long and loose. She was here moments ago. Where is she now?'

The princess looked at her hands. She didn't recognise them. She'd never seen them before: gnarled, brown, trembling. She put her hand to her chin: a beard. The goddess had answered her prayer; the goddess had transformed her. She opened her mouth and out came a voice she didn't know: 'Oh, she fled into the city. If you go at once, I'm sure you'll catch her.'

The slave-owner turned. He ran as fast as he could. The princess took one step and she was restored to her true shape.

She had an idea. She searched the city till she found her father squatting by the side of the road, cramming leaves and twigs into his mouth. 'Father,' she said, 'I've found a way to save you from yourself.'

That afternoon King Erysichthon led into the market a mare, a horse with a flowing mane. A soldier bought it. He paid a high price. As he led it away, the reins in his hands behind him sagged, went slack. He turned and looked. The horse had vanished into thin air. But beside the road a young woman, her hair long and loose, was picking flowers.

Next day King Erysichthon sold a bright bird to an old woman in another market in the city. The woman took it home. She left it in her bedroom. After a while she opened the bedroom door to look at it. The bird had gone, vanished into thin air. She ran outside and all she saw was a young woman, her hair long and loose, picking figs.

Next day King Erysichthon sold a ewe to a shepherd. As the shepherd was urging it out of the city he stumbled. And in the moment it took him to close his eyes and open them again the sheep vanished. He turned, looked about him and there, beside the road, a young woman, her hair long and loose, was searching for mushrooms.

Every day she played this trick. Every day she won money to feed her father's hunger. But it was no use. At last the moment she dreaded arrived. Erysichthon was cramming food into his mouth one day. In his eagerness to eat he bit too soon. He bit into his finger and it tasted good. He bit it off, and then the next finger, and then the next, and then the next, and then the thumb. He chewed. He swallowed. He chewed through his knuckles, through his palm, through his wrist. King Erysichthon devoured himself.