

## WADING IN THE LETHE

By Carolyn Tacker

Somewhere in the Underworld, a man stands in a river as iridescent as an oil slick. He does not know who he is, or where he is, or when he is. He knows nothing at all. On the bank of that river, watching him in his not-knowing, is a girl who remembers everything he has forgotten. When he realizes how much he does not know, he opens his eyes, wades out of the river, and asks her what he should know. His name is Hades, King of the Underworld, she tells him, and she is Euthalia, his daughter. That is all she tells him, and in his confusion, he asks nothing more.

She takes him to a castle on a hill, made of stones like shadows caught in glass, and tells him it is his. They stand on the walls of the castle, overlooking a realm of fire and spirits and one small island of paradise, and she tells him that he rules it. Nothing she tells him is a lie, and the things she does not tell him are similarly truthful. Inside, in a room lit by gutters of fire, they eat a dinner they do not need, and when she does not want to answer a question, she fills her mouth with pomegranate.

After they dine, she guides him to his chambers and takes her leave. There is something he should be doing, he is sure, or something that he would enjoy doing if only he could remember what it is. Instead, he wanders the halls of the castle he recognizes but does not know, relearning its rooms and passages. It is as opulent as it is empty, and he has a feeling that he is lonely. It has not been long enough for him to want the company of others, however, and not even his steps disturb the deserted halls. If he was a mortal, perhaps the footfalls would echo and

resonate against all the glassy stone, but he is the God of the Dead, and he is as silent as his subjects.

After a while, it seems that he is spiraling inwards, each turn taking him closer to an unknown center, and, in order to reach the middle, he begins to bypass doors that, earlier, he would have explored. When he finally rounds the final corner, he discovers only a blank wall. This is jarring beyond the abnormality of finding pointless dead end. Something that he can neither name nor ignore insists that there should be a door here. He is about to turn back when he realizes that this is his castle, his realm, and if he commands there to be an opening, then there one shall be. The door he creates settles something in his stomach, feels right somehow, and without a second thought, he opens it and steps through.

It's a garden. It's green and lush and probably the most well-lit corner of the underworld that is not actually on fire. He takes three steps in and the sudden memory it brings is like walking into a spider web, clinging to him with sticky strands that are impossible to grab. He remembers a woman with mahogany locks and laurel-bark skin, dancing and laughing in a meadow that is more flowers than grass. He remembers how beautiful she was, her delight in the flowers, the sun on her face. He remembers wanting her.

Then he remembers a gash in the earth and dirt crushing the flowers and the sun receding. He remembers that she loved this garden and that he gave it to her as a wedding present. He remembers the glistening pomegranate seeds she ate, like drops of blood against her fingers, turning her mouth red and sweet until he couldn't help but come out of the shadows and kiss it. He remembers her screaming.

Falling out of his own mind, he lands on the grass, shaking and shaken. Where was she, his glorious sunshine girl? Gone back to her sunshine, his mind replied, for half the year. The loneliness that he denied earlier crawls up his back and crouches on his shoulder. He leaves the garden as though chased, and he would gladly trade the hounds of memory for the hounds of hell. Behind him, the door once again becomes a wall, sealing away the sanctuary of a girl who, at the moment, needs none. Without thinking, he directs his feet in the direction of his daughter, who he now knows wears her mother's face under a glossy mane of his coal-dark hair. She will chase this clawing loneliness from its perch.

By the time he finds Euthalia, the shades are setting the dining table, and when one brings a bowl of pomegranate to the table, he orders it away. Euthalia gives him a considering look, but says nothing, instead starting a discussion of the Underworld's most recent residents, including a pair of lovers who died of a misunderstanding and a hero who, having slain a dragon, was crushed under its corpse. If he thinks about it, he knows the thoughts and history of every dead soul in his realm. The only soul he wants to feel is painfully absent, and so he very determinedly does not think at all.

He intends to return to relearning the castle after the meal, but his daughter catches him before he can leave and reminds him of his duties. Holding court tells him more about himself than the empty hallways could, although it does not begin to compare to the revelations of the garden. Memories or no memories, the King of the Underworld is always fair, and dispensing justice to those deserving of punishment and to those whose fate the judges cannot agree upon is comfortable and cathartic. He does not look at the smaller throne beside his own, occupied by a crown and not a queen.

The corridors beckon him back when he has meted out all the justice required of him. A direction is picked at random, and he starts walking aimlessly. There is no hurry and so he doesn't. The third room he examines is not as barren and purposeless as the others. There is a cradle and a rocking chair, shelves of toys and a chest of drawers. At first he assumes it is Euthalia's nursery, but there are tunics in the drawers that are not suitable for a girl, and toy swords upon the shelves. A boy-child was housed here once, but where is he now? And then he is tipped forwards into memory.

He remembers a baby in his arms, rosy-cheeked and gurgling. He remembered his pride in a male heir, and his love of both son and the mother who bore him. He remembers his wife nursing the babe and whispering him songs and stories to keep him from crying. He remembers filling this nursery with every delight a child could ask for, the toys and clothes his son would one day need.

Then he remembers that his son, his heir, never used them. He remembers his yearly grief as his beloved wife left for greener pastures, and looking for the child to soothe it. He remembers finding an empty cradle to match his wife's empty bed. He remembers the way the earth shook for weeks and waves of fire rolled over the landscape, threatening even the shores of Elysium. He remembers hoping, in a manner unworthy of a god, that she would bring his son back when she returned, and his rage when she did not. He remembers how defiant she was, how beautiful, and how, when he hit her, the blood looked like pomegranate seeds on her skin.

The slide out of memory is slow and grating, and he lands on his knees in a nursery silent of a child's breathing. When he blinks, he sees the burst and spatters of his wife's blood behind his eyelids. Between this and the garden, he loses all desire to remap his castle in his mind. What

other rooms might lurk there, waiting to suck him in to things he doesn't want to remember? His feet carry him back to the dining hall, and from there out of the front gate. From one end to the other, he paces the Fields of Asphodel, because it is easier to be bombarded with memories of others than to be assaulted by his own. He wishes he had not remembered.

By the time he returns to the castle, the new spirits awaiting judgment are restless, not yet accustomed to the irrelevance of time in the Underworld. They shift and cower as he walks past, but he ignores them, intent on finding his daughter and perhaps triggering happy memories. It is not hard to find her, since he knows the location of every soul in his castle, but she is not alone.

Standing in the room with her is a soul shimmering with godhood in a way that his immortal daughter's does not. Hermes, he recalls, the memory knocked loose with some of the others. It is Hermes that has his arms around Euthalia, Hermes whispering things into her hair. He can easily hear the words that pass between them, and it is not hard to guess that they are lovers. At first he does not plan to listen, and even turns away, to leave them to their sweet nothings, but what he hears next stops him, draws him back.

"Come, beloved. Don't you want to see a forest? Don't you want to feel the ocean? Don't you want to be warm under the sun?" Hermes entreats. "I can have you there and back before he even knows you're gone. He'll be fine without you, you know he will." There is no question who Hermes refers to, and all at once Hades wants to kill the messenger god, even though he knows gods cannot die. Hermes has adoring worshipers, fewer responsibilities, a woman who loves him, and children in the dozens, even if most of them are demigods. He has everything that Hades doesn't, and now he wants to steal away the one thing Hades has left. Images of Hermes

drawn and quartered, Hermes burning, Hermes having his heart ripped out through his throat flash through Hades' mind.

Euthalia's voice stops him. "You know I want to," she tells him, and, from the sound of it, pushes him away. "And you know I can't. If I see the world above, I won't want to come back here. I've asked you not to bring this up, and I wish you'd respect that."

"He doesn't even remember you. He doesn't remember anything. How can you stay for him when he won't stay for you?"

"It doesn't matter if he remembers me or not. He's my father and it's my duty as his daughter to care for him when he is unable to care for himself. Even if it was not my duty, it is my choice. I love him. And I think he may be beginning to remember. He sent away the pomegranate at dinner."

"Do you think he remembers everything?"

Euthalia's laugh is tired and bitter. "Do you think I'd be standing here if he did? I'd be on the banks of that thrice-accursed river again waiting for him to remember how his eyelids work. I would prefer that we end this discussion. You did not come all this way to talk to me about my father." Hermes seems reluctant, but acquiesces. The sound of the lovers follows Hades down the hall, and he takes refuge in the throne room, calling in the souls for judgment.

Countless spirits come under his gaze, and there is no doubt or uncertainty to weigh down these decisions, nothing to remember or feel. He melds to the throne and to his fair but merciless personae, and forgets the father who forgot. The spirits he judges become hazes of greyed out, undefined features, slipping past, past, past. Eventually Euthalia comes in, flushed but unruffled,

and takes her place behind his throne. She's just in time for the spirit of a youth to enter, his features more defined and brighter for the untimeliness of his death. There's something about his face that jars Hades, makes him wake up and pay attention. Then his vision shakes and blurs and another memory superimposes itself over the present. This is the first time it has happened in front of others, but he is too absorbed in the memory to care.

He remembers the throne room, his throne, a different cast of souls awaiting his decision. He remembers his lady and his queen, sitting beside him on her own throne, resplendent in purple and adorned with orchids, and Euthalia hidden far from her treacherous grasp. He remembers a youth like the one come for judgment, this one alive and solid and sun-browned as he shoves his way past the dead and into the throne room. He remembers his own dark amusement, that a hero would come all this way to die, and asks him what he thinks to accomplish, breaking into the Land of the Dead and confronting its king. He remembers planning the foolish young man's death, and the way his laughter almost covered his wife's gasp.

He remembers the youth leaping forward, the glint of the golden blade, the fresh spray of his wife's pomegranate blood, the silvery sound of her scream. He remembers his anger, burning like Tartarus and dark like the pit. He remembers the youth stomping in the stain of his wife's blood, the pomegranate seeds indistinct against the scarlet, and realizing too late what has been done. He remembers their vicious victorious smiles, his and hers, before rising, thunderous and vengeful, to tower over them. He remembers damning the boy to the depths of Tartarus, in the way that only a god can, sentencing him with vines growing through a barely healing body and flowers rooted in his flesh, with a mockery of a sun that only burns and the eternal rotting of his feet in the earth. He remembers his wife's horror, her rage, even as she held her organs in and

pomegranate juice was seeping around her fingers. He remembers the words “He was your son, monster” and the glow of Persephone’s departure.

He remembers that the Lethe felt like a still pond against his body and whitewater rapids against his soul.

The throne room he returns to is empty and his daughter is crouched in front of him, peering into his face. What she sees there obviously does not please her, but he is not concerned with that right now. Pushing her out of the way, he staggers to the place where Persephone’s blood had not stained, and kneels in the puddle of his memory. Behind him, Euthalia’s lips press together, grieved and resigned.

She argues and begs all the way down to the river bank. “Please, Father, isn’t it easier this time? Can’t you stay?” But it is not easier this time, it is fresh and painful and the memories hurt no less for the time that has passed since they were made. The guilt is crushing, the loss of his wife is crippling, and he cannot stay, not even for his beautiful, loyal daughter, who gives up her sun for the man who damned his son, her brother. When he first walked into the river, she had cried. Later, she had fought, tried to restrain a god in his own domain. Then she’d left him on his own, to blunder through unaided. And now she is quiet, she is stoic, she waits, she remembers, while a man stands in an iridescent river, somewhere in the Underworld.