

PERSEPHONE

Clair de Lune A (bars 1-8)

Persephone was the daughter of Demeter, the corn goddess. Demeter caused the crops to grow and the harvest to ripen, and taught men how to plough and tend the earth. She was one of the Olympians, the sister of Zeus, and she had a shrine at Enna in the centre of Sicily.

Long ago, when Zeus had defeated the monster Typhon, he had bound and buried him under Mount Etna in Sicily. There the giant writhed and struggled to escape, and sometimes he burst open the earth's crust, sending hot ash and streams of molten lava flowing across the land. Hades, the god of the Underworld, felt these disturbances and feared lest the earth should crack and daylight seep into his dark realm to terrify the spirits of the dead. He rode out in his golden chariot drawn by four black horses to inspect the foundations of his kingdom.

Clair de Lune A+B (bars 1-16)

There, in the upper world of light and growth, he came upon Persephone among a company of nymphs, gathering flowers in a meadow. The air was sweet with the scent of lilies, of violets, crocus and irises, and the girls laughed and chattered as they ran about with armfuls of blossoms and piled them into baskets.

Persephone had strayed some way from her companions, and was out of their sight when she was drawn to a place where a bank of narcissus blew in the breeze.

There Hades saw her — and there Eros, urged on by his mother Aphrodite, bent his bow and shot an arrow of desire straight into Hades' heart.

Too late Persephone saw the dark god's approach. She sprang up in terror — tried to run — struggled as he seized her, dragged her into his chariot, and whipped up the horses. Persephone screamed. The nymphs heard her, and from far off her mother, the goddess, heard her too, but no one saw what had happened. Hades drove his chariot across the fields of Enna, crushing flowers, scattering flocks of frightened goats. Persephone clung on and cried for help; but Hades gathered speed. Across Sicily he drove, over mountains and lakes and plains, through sulphurous Palica, past Syracuse — until he was forced to stop at the River Kyane, where the Naiad of that place caused her waters to rise up in protest. But the Naiad was no match for a god. Hades struck the water with his sceptre and at once the river bed split and opened up a chasm that led straight to the Underworld.

Now Persephone saw what was to be her fate. As the chariot plunged down, the desperate girl pulled off her golden sash and threw it into the river; then the earth closed over her.

Clair de lune C (bars 17-28)

In the world above, Demeter searched everywhere for her daughter. She lit pine torches in the fires of Mount Etna, and for nine days and nights she did not rest, nor wash; she did not taste ambrosia nor drink nectar; she roamed the world crying out her daughter's name, asking everyone she met for news of Persephone. But there was none. Demeter neglected the crops. Corn withered in the fields; cattle died, and the people went hungry. The goddess cared for nothing but her daughter; in her grief and fear for her child she was inconsolable.

At last, having searched the world for Persephone, she returned to Sicily — and there, cast up on the bank of the River Kyane, she found her daughter's golden sash.

As she held it, muddy and stained from the water, Demeter knew for certain that Persephone had been taken by force. She howled and tore her hair and cursed the land as ungrateful and undeserving of the gift of grain. She broke the ploughs, caused hot sun to scorch the seeds, violent rain and wind to scatter them, flocks of hungry birds to devour any that were left. She wandered, ragged and grieving, across Sicily, and sat down at last by the fountain of Arethusa at Ortygia and wept.

Clair de lune D (bars 29-37)

Arethusa, the Naiad of that spring, rose waist-high from the water and tossed back her dripping hair.

"Immortal goddess," she said, "do not blame the earth for your daughter's loss. It opened against its will to take her into the Underworld. But she is not dead."

And she told Demeter how, as she fled the amorous river god Alpheus in caverns deep below the earth, she had seen Persephone, the bride of Hades: "sorrowing still, and full of fear; and yet a queen, ruler of that dark land, and wordy consort of a great god."

"Persephone? My daughter? Queen of the Underworld?"

Now Demeter was filled with anger against the gods. She rose to Olympus to protest — for Hades was her brother: when the realms were divided up, Zeus was given sovereignty over heaven and earth, Poseidon became ruler of the seas and oceans, and Hades became Lord of the Underworld, the kingdom of the dead.

Demeter burst in upon the gods, and her fury was terrifying.

"Hades has stolen my daughter! He has taken her against her will! I demand justice from the gods!"

Zeus tried to calm her. "Sister," he said, "Hades is an immortal, a deathless god. He has made your daughter a queen. You should rejoice."

But Demeter did not rejoice. She insisted on Persephone's return. Until then, she said, she would mourn and the land would be untended and the people would starve.

When the gods saw that Demeter would not be reconciled to the loss of her daughter, they sent Hermes to bring Persephone home.

"On one condition," said Zeus. "That while she has been in the Underworld she has taken no food or drink. This is the rule the Fates decreed long ago and I cannot change it."

And so Hermes hurried on swift feet to Hades' kingdom, while Demeter waited in her temple at Enna, full of hope and fear.

She was right to be afraid. Hades, anxious not to lose his beautiful bride, had cut in half a red-fleshed pomegranate and offered it to the girl. Persephone knew she should not eat or drink, but she was thirsty, and the fruit tempted her. She took three seeds and ate them.

Then Hades knew Persephone was bound to him for ever; so when Hermes came to claim her, he let her go, knowing she must return.

Demeter, waiting in her temple, saw Hermes and Persephone coming from far off. She cried out, "Persephone! My daughter!" — and ran like a maenad down the mountainside and clasped Persephone in her arms and kissed her.

"Tell me," she said, searching her daughter's face, "tell me you have neither eaten nor drunk in Hades' realm?"

Persephone could not look her mother in the eye. "I did not mean to," she said, "but I was thirsty, and it was so little — only three pomegranate seeds."

"Then you are lost!" cried Demeter. With foreboding in her heart she accompanied Hermes and Persephone to Olympus, and found Hades already there.

"Persephone is mine," said Hades. "The Fates decree it."

"I cannot deny your right," agreed Zeus, "but her mother grieves and mankind suffers."

He ruled that Persephone should live in the world above for two-thirds of every year, but that for the third part she must return to the Underworld as Hades' queen.

And so it came to be. When her daughter was in the Underworld, Demeter mourned. The earth grew cold and barren and the grain lay dormant. But when Persephone returned, the days began to lengthen; flowers bloomed and the trees put out new leaves, and people knew that spring had come again.

Clair de lune E (bars 38-48)