



Emily Whitman

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Persephone Speaks Up

This story forced me to write a novel. It was something I never expected to do; it seemed like such an impossible goal. When I was young and always wishing on stars and white horses, I'd sometimes start to wish that I could write a novel, but then I'd sigh, knowing it couldn't happen, and switch to a different wish. But I've always loved to write. Three years ago, in addition to leading library story times and writing poetry, I was writing passages for educational testing companies—writing to order, making sure I provided exactly what someone asked for. They'd say something like, "In three days we need a five-hundred-word story at the sixth grade level with two male Korean characters, a flashback, and examples of alliteration and personification," and I'd say, "Fine." But now I was ready to write something for myself. I thought it would be a book for young children, because, after all, those are short. I'd written train poems and folktales and rhyming picture book texts. Would my first book be one of those? But then I did a dangerous thing: I asked myself, pen in hand, "What do I really want to write?" I stopped thinking and let the pen answer for me. It surprised me. Here's what my pen wrote: "I want to write about that time when you're growing up and want to be all grown up. You're getting ready to go out in the world, straining at your chains; and you hate your parents and you need your parents, and you hate that you need them so you think you don't. It's about connecting and being independent, belonging and thinking for yourself, separating and finding your own voice. I want a character that's strong, but still searching, struggling. Who has the resources for that search." Wow. That was a long way from preschool train poems. And then someone popped into my head, a girl from Greek myth who was the archetype of a person on the cusp of adulthood, about to separate from her mother: Persephone. The girl who was kidnapped by the lord of the underworld; whose absence caused her mother, the harvest goddess, to send the world shivering into winter; and whose return to earth brought spring. And there she was—a character. Now I knew what I wanted to write. There was one little problem: The thing I wanted to write was in a form I knew I couldn't write. It needed to be a novel, and I'd always known a novel was beyond me. For one thing, I've never been able to outline. But then I heard about getting to know your character by throwing her into scenes. So I started doing that. Soon I had lots and lots and lots of scenes. From the very first day, Persephone stepped out onto the page with her own voice. It was as if she'd been waiting all these millennia to start talking again. Because, maybe, just maybe, the myth hadn't been telling her story right, and she realized this was her opportunity to set the record straight. Because maybe, just maybe, she wasn't the world's ultimate victim after all. And I had my book. Now all I had to do was write it. Emily Whitman