

EROS OF THE SEA

Bryher

H.D.

For her gift of Greek

I.

“Hear me, Eros, Eros of the Sea! I am lost in the thorn. I am caught in the knots of grass. The wood opens at your footstep – tell me – shout me the path, the white path that ends at your temple porch.”

Wild birds swirled over a grey sea. There was no sound even of the water in this hollow of rank grass and moss-stained rock. Only the temple caught a flower of light, itself a tuft of orchard-buds, dawn-white about a calyx of dark fire.

“I have torn poppies, salt with the waves and gold, to sweep the silt of sand from your petalled floor. I will find sprig of coral and shell, sunset-flushed, moon-blanced, rippled with sea-beauty, for your feet to crush as you turn to the pools at dawn.”

“Only do not turn me from your gates.”

Leaves – the dead leaves – moved with the wind. The air filled with rustle of their desolate arrows. Day fluttered to the temple roof, fugitive and swift before the black cormorant of night.

“Have I prayed to Wisdom to choke with my own pain? O god of the cyclamen, here at your feet I leave the sword won from her threshold at too great a cost.”

Was it darkness that closed so firmly about the bronze and forbidden entrance or the dragon-bold wings of a god?

“I have prayed to Beauty but Beauty is where you dwell. Life is one touch of your mouth, the light in your eyes. Hear me – be pitiful – Must I make my last prayer to Sleep?”

No watcher – priest or initiate – came to the even steps.

“I dare not stain with my tears the tufts of grass your feet have scented but this, the last bud of my hope, I leave where the pool will part – dark leaf – from your flower-white limbs.”

A gull circled, caught the light, breast and wing-tip soft as thyme, the sloping thyme of the rocks.

"Hear me, hear me, O Eros! Is it life – this dust in my hands, this ache of my loneliness? Are my prayers as nothing in your eyes?"

"O Eros, be pitiful that my spirit may not die!"

There was silence over the water; silence over the cliffs. The bronze doors swung forward, beak of fire, open for day to pass. Tall as a long spear, tall and slender as the twig of a young citron, the keeper of the gates stepped over the threshold on to the short turf. The startled gulls were shrill about his head but she who was suppliant at the far edge of the pavement neither heard nor saw him, her head bent to the parched ground, rigid, quenched of hope, moaning without end "Hear me, O hear me – Heal me!"

"The fear in your eyes has withered these, the flowers of Eros. Are you not afraid to scatter his bright gulls with your despair?"

She raised her head to his reproof. "I have sought in many temples to be delivered of my madness. I heaped stones to Wisdom on a far hill and watched them seven years. And the sword I had, won with my own blood, I left it where the tide would wash it back to the steps of Eros, my first gift and my greatest."

"Wisdom is power. Have you left her porches that are stars above all the earth?"

"What is knowledge to a heart shrunk with its loneliness?"

"And the other temples torn with your shrill cries – ?"

"Have I not prayed to Beauty? Have I not chosen silence to protect the hope she flung to me? Childhood is laid – a flower – upon her altar."

"There are other gods."

"There is Death. Priest of Eros, watcher of his temple, shall I pray for the black buds of Sleep?"

"Was Leda joyous at the end and what of Maia, spreading the cave with rushes for limbs tired of her limbs, waiting for a life never to be hers more? Only Hyacinth was happy. Do you know the gift you ask?"

"It is told: Love is wild, Love is flame, swift to kill as the beak of a sea-white bird. But to fear, to be so desolate is death – How should I dread his hands?"

"Then put off pride with the dawn and lay your pain at his feet."

The gate opened again. The surge broke on the cliff and withdrew in even movement. The watcher entered with bent head – turned in farewell.

"Follow this ridge of meadowsweet till you come to the open sea."

II.

“Leaves carved of the white moon, buds of dawn, flushed with honey, frail as the slender wheat –

I leave milk-orchids, stained with the salt sea, to pluck spray on spray of this meadowsweet.”

The rim of the shield-wide shore, crusted with coral and shells, circled from cliff to cliff. The dark tendrils of a pool forced a path between the bronze rocks and the weed. Dawn opened into morning. A swift figure, sudden as the wind, stepped from ledge to ledge still cool to the tread with night.

“I dream of your limbs – my mouth presses each leaf, bitter as the grass but sweet

Even so frail will your limbs be on mine, if we rest on the meadowsweet.”

The figure was bright a moment against the hollow of the cliff – the light movement of his body mirrored as against bronze. And she who was suppliant laid her gift where his hands must grasp the stalks as he stepped from the pool to the width of sand.

“Leaves carved of the white moon, buds to spread beside the arrow-print of your feet

I leave as gift, Eros of the Sea, my flower, my love, which is meadowsweet.”

III.

The pool was light; light became a film of gold to flood each shell with honey, light that quivered from the limbs that rippled it into curves. His eyes – filled with the sea – followed the circling gulls. He was at the edge where she hid – he must rise from the water – set his foot on the flat edge of rock. His hand was on her gift. She trembled back from the wonder of his body – afraid . . . afraid . . .

“Ivory is harsh; ivory flushed with dawn is too harsh for your loveliness. My eyes dare not open to this light.”

He lifted the spray of meadowsweet from a hollow in the shore. Frightened he would speak – frightened he would not speak – she waited, shrinking more than the weeds that touched and drew from her hand.

“I take your gift. Tell me your desire?”

Words died. All her body spoke its longing but her lips could not utter her request. Yet dream had not betrayed her. This was the end of hope – to wait for the sea, to drown, not to re-enter the desolation she had left. How could she, having looked on Beauty, live? The god drew nearer, spoke.

“Must you fear? I give Life to those at my altar steps.”

“I am hurt too much. I am torn with waiting for your tread till all I ask is sleep.”

“You blaspheme my beauty with your tears.”

“Once I was happy – once I was not afraid – in childhood – long ago.”

“There is a flower more beautiful than childhood. Come, take it of my lips.”

He moved to her – a wild gull – with eyes she dared not face. Wild eyes – wild wings – above her. Her head bent – back. Flutter of wings, flutter of more than wings, toward her face . .

“O ripple of bird-notes
On my throat.”

[Bryher’s manuscript corrections have been incorporated into the text. In addition, the editor has made the following emendations to the original typescript:

1. The original typescript has a space before each terminal punctuation mark. These spaces have been omitted.
2. Concluding quotation marks have been added at the end of three paragraphs: in part I at the end of the paragraph beginning “Have I not prayed . . .”; in part I at the end of the paragraph beginning “There is death”; and in part III at the end of the paragraph beginning “Once I was happy. . . .”
3. In part I the following change of punctuation has been made, in the paragraph beginning “Was Leda joyous . . .”: Only Hyacinth was happy, [Only Hyacinth was happy. —E.G.]