

HERMES

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START

HERMES.

World-winged Zeus, most admired
of all immortals, lay in a myrtle wood
with Maia, daughter of the Titan Atlas
who bears on his back the gods' home Heaven
and I was born. My name: Hermes.
My work: to carry messages from god
to god, sometimes from gods to men.
Today I am sent here with one for you.

This place is Delphi, earth's epicentre.
On this hill the god Apollo,
who I call brother, built his temple.
At its heart he set a tripod.
There Apollo prophesies so men
may hear his voice and know what is
and what will be.

Who hasn't heard
of Athens? A great seaboard city
named to honour my sister Athene
who holds on high a gold-tipped javelin.
Outside the town: a cliff, north-facing,
known as the Long Rocks. There one day
came Creusa, daughter of the king of Athens.
There too came Apollo.
They lay entwined – mortal maiden,
glittering god – in a dark cave.
Afterwards the god gave orders: 'Seal
your lips.' She did. She sealed also
her doors and windows. Even her father
failed to hear her cries as her child,
when its time came, from *its* dark cave
crawled into daylight.

EURIPIDES

When she could walk,

Creusa slipped out of the palace,
up the steep cliff, through the cave mouth,
laid her son on the stone she'd lain on,
left him. Apollo summoned me.

'On a cliff, in a cave: a baby. Bring basket,
blankets, boy to Delphi. Leave him on
my doorstep. All else leave to me.'

I stand now as I stood then.

Basket I set down, lid I open
slightly. Let the boy breathe. Watch.

Night slides slowly southward.

Pale dawn silhouettes the mountain.

Priestess who tends Apollo's altar
arrives, sees basket, stands amazed

any woman would dare ditch

on this sacred hearth an unwanted whelp,

hauls it up, prepares to hurl it

down the steps that front the temple.

Apollo, true to his word as always,

slips the catch of her soul. It opens.

Who is this child? From where does he come?

He teases her memory. Of what? Of who?

She can say no more than the boy himself

but her heart heaves. She keeps him, cares for him,

learns she loves him. The temple his playground

he wanders and is welcome everywhere. He grows.

A youth, the court of Delphi appoint him,

first, guard of Apollo's gold.

Then altar attendant. Now chief caretaker.

Enter ION.

And there he is. Each morning he sweeps
walls and floors, scattering drops

ION

of holy water to purify the temple precinct.

His future Fate holds in its hand,

spins it, casts it. It will fall which way?

I know which way,

I, Hermes, am first to use

the name all men, all gods will praise:

Ion, famous throughout Greece,

founder of the Ionic nation,

conqueror, lord of half of Asia!

Dawn. Of this name he knows nothing.

It will be his by dusk today.

Exit HERMES.

// STOP

~~ION.~~

~~Great Sun, with fingertips
you grasp the mountain peaks
and swing across the sky
bringing the day.~~

~~Myrrh and laurel
desert gathered
laid in clay jars,
perfume the rafters.~~

~~Apollo's priestess
perched beside
Apollo's altar,
croak the chant
Apollo whispers.~~

~~As for me, I do the tasks
I've carried out each day since childhood
since this place became my home:
hang the walls with floral wreaths,
sweep doorways with laurel twigs,
sprinkle floors with pure spring water.~~

~~If birds dare foul the precious gifts~~