

East of the 5, South of the 10

Margaret Weatherford

Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades were brothers. They wrested control of Los Angeles — greater Los Angeles—from their forebears and drew lots to divide the spoils. Zeus got Hollywood, downtown, La Brea, the Miracle Mile, Pasadena, Highland Park, Mt. Washington —a gerrymandered “creative package.” Poseidon got the splashy west side. He built a marble castle and spent every afternoon gazing out over his lush palisades to the sea. That left Hades with Chavez Ravine and every damned thing east of the 5 and south of the 10.

Hades’s realm offered little in the way of glamour. He could not lunch with nymphs at Lucques or meditate in the tranquil gardens of the Self Realization Center. The theaters played nothing from Sundance. And no one called with Lakers tickets.

But his was a large expanse, the largest of the three, and it came -with mineral rights: gold, plutonium—whatever was down there. Hades methodically obliterated the traces of previous civilizations and watersheds, razed the citrus groves and ranches for trained lions, wrestled the rivers into concrete channels. Then, from Long Beach to Yorba Linda, Inglewood to Fullerton, he planted tireless, mechanical dinosaurs to draw oil from the earth. And when he had pumped out most of the oil, he discovered that the very ground had become valuable. It sold itself many times over at ridiculous prices. People came in droves to live their lives there with Hades —outside the gates, so to speak. And, as he gazed jealously west, his dominion thrived and expanded eastward, into the desert.

Hades’s own ranch lay near the pool of memory and the county line, deep in a canyon of live oaks, sycamores, prickly pears, rattlesnakes, and Volkswagens pushed over the edge. In the Spanish style, a slow fountain gurgled, barely perturbing the meniscus of its bowl. It was the only sound in the dusty courtyard, where no bird lit or sang or craved an

audience. Inside, Hades waited for the pomegranates to ripen, for Whittier to become the next Pasadena, and for Oscar de la Hoya to bring glory to East L.A.

As the days elapsed (and he thought of them, coldly, as elapsing—not happening or coming-and-going or even just *passing*, only endlessly stretching to their allotted length), he found less and less to interest him outside his dark tile halls. No one ever visited. What news he received of heaven and earth came to him only in twisted snatches from the *L.A. Times* or when mortals tore their hair and invoked him in curses. So his knowledge of humanity, though correct, was of only the worst kind: cars overheating in traffic; convicted felons dragged off in chains, taunting the wives of their victims; homeless men burning to death in the street; and “before” and “after” snapshots for plastic surgery ads. He accepted this picture of worldly life and sank deeper into solitude, emerging from his desolate realm only on business, or when his lust for wealth overflowed his heart, seeped into his hips, and festered.

Zeus, meanwhile, found the innocence and ignorance of his human flock enchanting. He haunted the Dragonfly and Spaceland as the slightly older guy in the guise of youth, buying expensive shots for musicians in shabby clothes. He brought flowers to dirty little galleries in Silverlake, and gorged himself on theory with painters and writers. They were all exquisitely beautiful to him, and he was ready to propel each of them to stardom. Some he did, and then wept with wonder over their puppy snarls on dust jackets and magazine covers. A precious few had even been painted on billboards and the sides of buildings — a hundred feet high, tall as gods — where the multitudes could admire them from the freeways.

Zeus could not arrange such a fate for all of them, obviously, but often he found it just as sweet to watch the ones who struggled and failed, despaired and continued to struggle. And the humans who struggled most courageously and most vainly were the ones from whom he could not bear the slightest distance. Women and men, he took

them to bed, to feel their beating mortal hearts against his chest, to touch the fragile vessels that could carry such grief and arrogance and hope.

Not all his lovers were starlets and misanthropes and nymphs with augmented breasts. When he was still quite young, he had begun an affair with Demeter, an earth-mother goddess who had come down from Marin County to teach a composting workshop at the community center on Mt. Washington, and then stayed. She was rumored to be a close relative of his, possibly even his sister. This would not be surprising—Zeus never acknowledged any boundaries for sex.

Demeter herself was open to multiple and alternative possibilities in that regard. At Cadmus and Harmonia's wedding, for example, on a farm near Calabasas, she drank eight Tequila Sunrises and slipped away with Iasius, one of the Titans. They made love in a thrice-ploughed field about to be planted with strawberries. The band was playing "Seasons in the Sun" when they came stumbling back into the tent, smirking and covered with mud. Zeus went insane and ruined the reception.

No one saw Iasius after that, and a story went round that Zeus had clipped him—or had him clipped. There was another story, though, that his brother Dardanus had killed him for reasons that never became public. And another that he was torn to pieces by his own horses.

It was a wild time. Demeter eventually settled down, and her earthy sensuality aged well. When women in the Valley began to inject their foreheads with deadly poison to smooth the wrinkles, and even potters and poets in Ojai were dying their hair, Demeter let crow's feet crinkle around her eyes and strands of silver wind through her nutmeg braid. Although she remained an authority on sex, she herself gave it up, at least in excess, to raise native plants, particularly succulents.

It was impending motherhood that had cued her exit from the giddy whirl. Demeter and Zeus had conceived. In the springtime, their child, a beautiful daughter, was born. They called her Core for the green corn in the fields, but her real name was Persephone. Demeter had never expected that the three of them would live together as a family, and she was not surprised when Zeus continued, without the slightest pause, his investigation of human passions. Demeter cherished Persephone, and raised her atop Mt. Washington with flowers in her hair.

By the time Persephone turned 16, it had been many years since orange orchards and strawberry fields had stretched from the desert to the sea. In spring, though, when the wildflowers bloomed, poppies still blanketed the foothills and the high desert. Persephone, with nothing more required of her on Easter vacation than to enjoy nature, organized a flower-gazing road trip with a group of friends —girls from school and from the juice bar where she worked part-time. “We’ll botanize the Southland!” she announced with a thrill. Demeter bought her a flower press and sent her off with blessings, a mobile phone, and a credit card.

Eight or nine of her companions were apparently “blissing out” when it happened: Persephone simply vanished. She did not come home with the others, and her friends could not agree on when and where they had last seen her. They had probably been high the whole week. Persephone might have vanished near Lancaster, at the annual poppy festival. But it might have been far south of that, at a desert rave near Murrieta Hot Springs; or below Idyllwild on the Tahquitz highway, where they filled their ruby Nalgene bottles at a spring of sweet water; or as far east as Joshua Tree’s weird rock cairns. It could even have been much nearer, in Topanga Canyon, where they had stopped for provisions at the general store. In the end, it could have been anywhere — no one had really been paying attention.

Demeter appeared at the police station tearing her hair, and within the hour the FBI had arrived, and the parents of Persephone’s companions were surrendering their bleary-

eyed daughters for questioning. Toying sadly with their charm bracelets, the girls repeated their stories, which remained consistent only in their vagueness. Recollections that someone had seen her riding off with this boy or that boy on the back of a Vespa were promising at first, but did not bear scrutiny. Interrogation revealed that it was not a Vespa but a bicycle, not a bicycle but an El Camino — and someone’s college-boy cousin from Boulder. Finally, one girl admitted that she could not be sure it was even Persephone at all. No, she decided at last, it was a different girl.

Meanwhile, law enforcement and vigilante groups had mounted a massive search effort. Despite nearly universal skepticism of the Vespa hypothesis, the FBI took tire impressions at the Topanga Canyon store and knocked on every door within miles. Neighbors and goodhearted strangers combed the deserts and arroyos that Persephone’s addled friends remembered only hazily. Homemade “missing” posters appeared in every store window and on every telephone pole, and all of the Southland studied Persephone’s face—looking away and halfway into a smile —and tried to read her fate.

Demeter herself searched for nine days and nine nights without rest, food, or water. Her friends begged her to go home, to eat something, to sleep, but Demeter would not. She knew that if she could just keep from doing precisely those things—from acknowledging the ordinary needs that mark the passage of an ordinary day —she could suspend time and protect Persephone, wherever she was, from fear and suffering. Someone, somewhere, must know something.

On the tenth morning of her search, with heat wobbling up from the asphalt at the foot of the Grapevine, it struck Demeter that there might be circumstances in which the progression of time was the only possible comfort. She pulled her car off the freeway and wept in the pitiless sunlight. After some time, she wandered east along the Antelope Valley Freeway. She stopped for a glass of water at the home of a retired couple, Celeus and Metaneira. Remarkably, they had no idea that an innocent teenager

from the city, a good kid, the daughter of gods, had vanished. But their son, Triptolemus, who had come out of his room to make himself a sandwich, recognized Persephone's picture immediately. When Demeter told him that the Vespa theory had borne no fruit, a hurt look moved across his face, and he volunteered a piece of information. "It's probably nothing," he said, "but maybe it's something."

Ten days earlier, said Triptolemus, his brother Eubuleus had been out near Lancaster tending the family's sheep and llamas. It was a perfect day, one of those elusive spring days before the heat descends. The big clouds looked far, far away, and the tiny orange poppies fluttered like a million butterflies. Eubuleus had climbed a low hill, reclined against a boulder, and indulged, under the llamas' intent supervision, in a small but well-timed joint. Below, his sheep looked still and contented as a postcard.

After some time, from a great distance, it occurred to Eubuleus that something had caught the llamas' attention, that at some point they had all turned away from him, that the big black one, the leader, had gotten down on his knees. Then, all at once, the sky came lumbering down on them, roaring, and the earth rose suddenly and then fell away. Below, the sheep panicked, bleating and trampling each other like extras in a disaster movie. Eubuleus tried to stand on the weltering hillside, but was thrown back down. The llamas were kneeling around him.

As he tried again to get to his feet, a chasm opened in the valley floor, and the earth swallowed a great handful of sheep. Eubuleus began to struggle down the hill, thinking he could somehow save the rest, but the earth heaved in great waves, and he fell again and again. The third time he got up, he saw a Cadillac, a DeVille with tinted windows, speeding across the valley floor, raising a cloud of dust as the ground shuddered beneath it. It veered off the road into the midst of the scattering sheep, and, without a flicker of brake lights, plunged into the abyss. The ground convulsed once more, and Eubuleus was again thrown down. Then the air was still, and when he raised his head, the chasm had sealed itself over. Above, hawks rode the drafts as if nothing had

happened. The big black llama got to his feet. Eubuleus knew, of course, that a tremendous fault, the San Andreas, runs the entire length of the Antelope Valley. But what had just happened seemed so other-worldly, and so clandestine. He wondered what it was he had smoked.

“But seven sheep were gone,” said Triptolemus, “and when he walked over the spot where the Cadillac went under, he found this.” It was a Vera scarf with bright blurry flowers. Demeter had bought it for Persephone only a few weeks earlier at the Pasadena City College flea market. She stared at it in confusion, then touched it to her cheek.

“But who was it?” she whispered. “Only retirees drive DeVilles.”

Triptolemus gave her a dark look. “And Hades,” he said.

Hades, lord of the Inland Empire. The name sank in Demeter’s chest like a heavy stone. She thanked Celeus and Metaneira for the water and drove slowly back to the city, but not to the police. Instead, she took the 110 to Chinatown, where Zeus had bought a building, renovated the second floor as a loft apartment, and opened a gallery downstairs. When she arrived, he was eating especially good gnocchi, savoring the burst of each tender little dumpling in his mouth. He buzzed Demeter in, and, as he waited for her to mount the stairs, ate three more gnocchi, each more luscious than the last. He knew why Demeter had come. From the moment he had seen their daughter’s face pasted in the window of the Vietnamese noodle shop, he had expected and dreaded Demeter’s visit.

Zeus had actually seen Persephone twice, on what he later realized must have been the eve of her disappearance. Certain aspects of the situation had made him loath to come forward with the information. He had seen her first at the Tiki Hut, in a buckskin miniskirt and little hand-knit camisole, throwing down blood-and-sands. She had not yet

begun to undergo the deprivations that would bring on the gauntness of womanhood, and she was wearing some kind of glitter on her chest. A bit startled, Zeus left without speaking to her.

When he arrived at the Dragonfly, Persephone was already there, draped across the bar, delivering her order directly into the bartender's ear. Zeus was on the verge of approaching her with a jocular accusation, when he saw Hades shove off the wall and navigate through the crowd like a shark. He jostled in next to Persephone and gave her a series of brief glances with blank, button eyes.

Zeus drifted away to watch the band, Swan Bottom. The guitarist and lead singer, a dark, plump boy with a crazed glare and straight black hair hanging in his face, looked better suited to the chess club than to rock 'n' roll. His inchoate bleating, though, made Zeus's flesh tingle, and the insistent bass drum competed painfully with his heart. Zeus slumped against the wall and let the music shake him like a distant, sustained orgasm. After the set, as he shepherded the band to the bar for shots of Jägermeister, he saw that his daughter and brother were still there —Persephone several drinks drunker, Hades affecting a wet plaster-of-Paris smile. Only half pretending, Persephone wavered on her stool, and Hades leaned in to break her fall.

Zeus never actually formed the intention to interfere. Despite her diminishing ability to remain standing, Persephone clearly knew what she was up to. She was in good-enough hands with Hades—better than his own, anyway, and that was the way things went in their family. Besides, placating Hades, who operated under the perpetual assumption that he had just been cheated, was rarely a mistake. Zeus caught his brother's eye when Persephone stumbled by him toward the filthy hovel of a bathroom. Hades just stared. Zeus gave the demented chess player his number and left for El Coyote, where he was planning to go anyway, to buy margaritas for ordinary girls who'd been rejected from reality TV.

Zeus declined to mention any of this to the police, or to Demeter, of course, even when Persephone's disappearance was all over the media. He expected that she would saunter home at the end of spring break, hung over and sullenly triumphant, and that Demeter would never know what had ruined their relationship.

Unfortunately, Demeter had put together a serviceable version of the truth, still more unfortunately casting Zeus not as bystander, but as panderer. Hades, after all, had skipped the family picnics at Malibu Creek for years and had never been more to Persephone than a glowering presence in old photographs. But Persephone certainly knew Zeus, and Zeus conducted business with Hades, possibly shady business, on an ongoing basis. So when Demeter stepped into Zeus's apartment and he opened consoling arms to her, her hands flew at his face like raptors. Zeus dodged nimbly behind a white leather bench, composing his face to feign bewilderment. "She's out there in hell," screamed Demeter.

"Who?" said Zeus. "Where?"

"Your daughter," she shouted. "With Hades! Sucking avuncular cock!"

Zeus recoiled. The phrase brought out a vileness in the situation that he had not quite appreciated. He thrust the image aside. Demeter was being irrational. This was how things went. "Well," he said. "Hades. Thank god, she's safe."

"Safe? I said she's — "

"I heard you," said Zeus. He half-turned away and raised a hand to fend off the words. The dismissal flooded Demeter's brain with molten rage. For a moment, she thought she might die from it. Then she exhaled and started around the bench to kill him. As she closed in, Zeus remembered the dominance exercises that the monks of New Skete had recommended for his Great Dane puppy, Jupiter. He caught her by the arm, pulled

her in fast, and immobilized her with his huge arms. Demeter shouted and tried to jerk free, tried again and again, but he pulled her into his lap and then held her still and covered her mouth. She struggled for a long time, but he held her tightly, and eventually she had to stop.

Zeus spoke, quietly, with his mouth on her ear, his lips barely moving. Persephone had been “with relatives” the entire time, Zeus told her. It was all right. It would blow over. No one was hurt. No one would know. Demeter dragged in a ragged breath. Like a child, thought Zeus, not quite willing to abandon her tantrum. “Now, now, now, now, now,” he said. He rocked Demeter in his lap and watched his dish of gnocchi growing cold.

Miles away, in the unincorporated depths of Los Angeles County, Hades had no intention of sending Persephone home. Nor did he see anything illicit or tawdry in keeping her with him. To Hades, plucking Persephone, still living, from the tree of humanity and whisking her by Cadillac to his rancherito had been the most exhilarating and wholly good event of his life. Persephone had, in fact, driven the whole way herself, screaming with laughter. He had never before been in the presence of so vital a creature. It did not matter to Hades that Persephone’s presence and behavior at the Dragonfly had been a charade, a drunken adolescent joy ride. So much the better, in fact. When she awoke naked in his bed the next morning, vomited, and cried for her mama, a strange joy welled up in him, a joy with no reference to having or owning. Watching Persephone crawl like a sick coyote to the window and drag herself up by the wrought iron bars, Hades finally understood that elation and grief are not two sides of a coin that you spend as you choose, whichever way will buy you the most. No, life descends on you in ferocious and beautiful storms, and all you can do is shelter yourself and the ones you love. So this was living! He would keep Persephone forever as his queen.

When Demeter arrived alone at Hacienda del Diablo the next morning to extract her daughter from Hades's clutches, no one would open the gate. She waited at the end of the driveway, beneath a wildly overgrown bougainvillea, mounds of fluorescent blossoms tumbling over an ugly hump of thorns. She could hear, inside, a slowly overflowing fountain and, from time to time, the chaotic barking of the three-headed dog.

The brilliant, oppressive noon lasted for hours. In the neighbor's yard, two crows hopped about a persimmon tree, clucking their tongues.

Eventually, a wraithlike servant drifted out and told her through the iron curlicues that Hades was gone and no one knew when he would be back. Perhaps he had gone to Las Vegas again, said the servant. Perhaps he had driven south into Baja to shoot doves.

"Persephone," said Demeter. "What about Persephone?"

The wraith shook his head.

Demeter drove north on Azusa Boulevard into the mountains, up along the San Gabriel River, where humans had built three tremendous dams to capture and spread the waters. The dams' concrete faces glared magnificently in the sunlight; the deep blue reservoirs were as calm and limitless as outer space. She would not go back to Zeus. He would do nothing to save their daughter. That was what it had meant when he held her so still in his Chinatown apartment—it was his choice, and he would do nothing. So here they "would part ways."

Winding out of another tight switchback, Demeter came abruptly upon an unpaved turnout where the ridge widened. As she pulled into it, pea gravel clattered in the wheel

wells. She got out of the car. The dust that had risen like smoke was carried down the canyon on the wind.

Years ago, men from the towns below, desperate for work, had come thousands of feet up into these mountains to build a stone wall along this ridge. A small bronze plaque commemorated their efforts. From these modest ramparts, Demeter looked out across civilization and decided to burn the place down.

Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades had, in effect, willed “the Southland” into being. They loved the glittering wealth of the place: the golf courses, the car leases, the truckloads of palm trees coiffed for delivery to another new mall. They loved the stubborn heroisms: the suburbs surging with immigrants forging a better life; the garage tenements packed with immigrants losing hope of one; the low-speed and high-speed desperado chases under helicopter floodlight; the teenage girls selling themselves into slavery; the gang members dodging traffic to rescue children from burning station wagons; the Jet Propulsion Labs, the Church of Scientology, and the Watts Towers! They loved it all! But what they loved most was their stewardship —their roles as distant, benevolent parents, nodding in satisfaction as their human children chose freely to do exactly what had been planned for them all along.

If, thought Demeter, if Zeus and Hades and clueless Poseidon could love all this, and still coldheartedly ignore the love of a real mother for her real child, the truest joy in the universe, then what was their precious real estate to her? And if her own daughter could betray her...?

In the glove compartment, Demeter found a flimsy little book of matches, from the days when books of matches were everywhere. Driving over the Glendora Pass and then down the north side of the mountains, she lit three matches, one by one, and threw them out the window. They did not stay lit. Just above Wrightwood, she got out of the car, lit what remained of the book, and threw it down the slope, into a mass of dry brush.

She watched the small flames, almost transparent in the midday sun, eat up one tumbleweed and move on to the next. Then she drove away. As she passed through Wrightwood, she had to pull over to let the fire engines by. Before they could reach the scene, a gust from a rising Santa Ana wind had picked up the flames. By late afternoon, fire was burning hungrily across the mountains.

As night fell over the San Gabriel Valley, the familiar silhouettes of Mt. San Antonio, Mt. Baden-Powell, and Cucamonga Peak were outlined in a corrosive orange that crept steadily downward, an acid devouring the horizon. Every few minutes, the fire surged like a living beast licking its chops, unfurling a tongue of flame high into the sky or far down the mountainside. The full moon, rufous and swollen with smoke, struggled over the horizon.

The next morning, the entire Los Angeles Basin was clad in a sickening yellow haze. Still, the wind blew, and in the moments between gusts, ashes drifted gently onto patios as far away as Torrance. The morning news anchors abandoned all pretense at jocularity. The Wrightwood fire had grown larger, and others had started.

Demeter did not confine her vengeance to Hades's territory. She held Zeus equally, perhaps even chiefly, responsible. So before morning broke, Griffith Park was aflame, and Altadena was threatened. Nor had she spared Poseidon. In Oxnard, flames tore through fields of artichokes, white asparagus, and heirloom tomatoes. She stood on the beach to watch Malibu burn.

For the humans who lived under the protection of the gods, it was a dismal, hopeless time. Across the Southland, they watched their livelihoods, the places where they lived and worked, picnicked and hiked, the things they ate, going up in flames. Certainly, the wealthy were punished. Their stilt-legged houses came sliding down the hillsides in heaps of embers, their picture windows exploding into the canyons. (The cost of insurance would go up again.)

But ordinary people—the poor, the reclusive, the generous of heart—suffered unutterably as the fires roared through the small towns of the foothills and canyons, incinerating trailers, bungalows, and cabins that represented years of savings, that offered a glimmer of joy in a lifetime of toil. Some owners died of grief watching the fire take their homes. Many pets had to be left behind when the police came around, blaring their horns, with the order to evacuate. The wild animals, of course, had no place to go. Deer came panicking down the mountainsides, sometimes into the very arms of the exhausted firefighters. Helpless against the inferno, the firefighters cradled the heads of the gasping deer, fed them water as they died.

Not all the humans escaped the flames. Some waited too long, or took the wrong road, or just had no way out.

Persephone, shut up in Hades's canyon hideaway, watched the tragedy play itself out on a very old television with terrible reception. Hades refused to pay for cable, and the ancient antenna moored to the roof turned noisily to no effect. With hills rising up so steeply around the hacienda, only two channels came in at all—both distorted in ways that seemed to identify and exaggerate the grotesque in any image. One anchorman's eyes were moored several inches offshore from his face, and the reporter on the scene had great fluorescent lesions around her mouth. Worst, though, were the shots of the fires themselves, because fire is nothing but distortion and nightmare—bright snakes leaping into the air and snapping like whips: no degree of clarity could resolve that picture. Before the smoke got too thick, Persephone could actually see the Wrightwood fire, away across the Valley, slithering over the crest of Mt. Baldy. She looked from the mountainside to the television and back again. It was really happening.

Her first morning at the hacienda — after the night of the blood-and-sands and the Cadillac and the earthquake—Persephone had lain on the cold tiles of Hades's

enormous bathroom and begged him to let her go home to her mother. He had insisted she stay until she felt better. Until she was more presentable.

She was sick all that day, the sickest she had ever been, so sick she could not move or think. She just lay there hoping to die. By late afternoon, she could sit up. Hades brought her tea with milk and sugar and sat glaring at her breasts as she sipped it. She felt too sick to be embarrassed. In an awful way, he was sexy.

And so, when morning came again, Persephone awakened to see for the first time where she was. Hades's bedroom was at the back corner of the hacienda, cantilevered out over the steep canyonside among the live oaks. With the big windows open all around her, it seemed she had been sleeping in the treetops. Fog washed up the canyon. A path of stepping stones ran through an herb garden. A coyote came along the path and stopped to look at her. Then Hades came in with fresh orange juice in a tall glass. Later, they bathed each other in a huge claw-foot tub out on the deck. Ten days passed like that.

When the first fire started, Persephone asked again to go home. "They're evacuating people from the campground where I said I'd be," she said. "My mother will be so worried." Hades looked at her steadily for some time. The shadow of a smile moved one corner of his mouth. "You don't know, then?"

"Know what?" said Persephone.

"Who started the fires?"

"Why would I know? What do you mean?"

The corner of Hades's mouth moved again, and then he was looming over her.

It was the next day, on the five o'clock news, that several motorists reported having seen a disturbed-looking older lady, possibly drunk, driving through the Glendora Pass dropping burning matches out the car window. All of the Southland wondered what kind of person would do such a thing. By evening, there was a warrant out for Demeter, and both stations interrupted their regular programming with her picture. It was a lovely picture, really. Persephone remembered when it was taken: at a Thanksgiving dinner; Demeter was laughing at a compliment. But on television, above the caption "mother of the missing girl," it was the portrait of an arsonist.

Demeter remained at large, the Santa Ana continued, and the fires raged on. A picture surfaced of Persephone dancing at the KROQ Wienie Roast in bra and panties. Someone came with a subpoena for Hades, but he had his wraithlike servant keep the gates closed.

So Persephone achieved notoriety. Letters to the *Times* pointed out that her name actually meant "she who brings destruction." Her schoolmates suffered through a weeklong seminar on sexuality and self-esteem and began to call her *Proserpina*, "the fearful one." Few people remembered she had ever been anything but a slut.

When the fires had been burning two weeks, the *Times* printed an opinion piece by Hermes explicitly linking the disaster not simply to Hades's abduction of Persephone, but also to a pattern of avarice in his management of the region's energy resources. "If Hades decides to keep Persephone," he wrote, "we can only expect the situation to worsen. Hades will lose no sleep converting your actual suffering into his material gain. Hades loves this fire!" He called for the citizens who still had electricity—who still had houses! —to turn off their air conditioning. He called for a boycott of gasoline.

Hades, reading the newspaper over breakfast, looked across the table to Persephone, vacantly considering an egg-white omelet. The luster had gone from her skin and hair, and it was more than the drugs. "My dear," Hades said, "you seem unhappy." She

glared at him and, with violent efficiency, began rapping an unopened box of cigarettes against the heel of her palm. Hades watched her for a moment. Her little demonstrations, even the miserable ones, still thrilled him. But this boycott. He went to the phone.

That night on the news, local meteorologists reported a change in pressure that would end the Santa Ana and bring, they smiled, a hint of precipitation to the region. Overnight, the firefighters broke the back of the Wrightwood fire, and the others were coming around.

Hermes brokered the settlement. Persephone would return to live with Demeter—with no criminal or civil blame adhering to either her rapist uncle or her arsonist mother—provided she had abstained entirely from “eating with pleasure” during her sojourn in the underworld.

Persephone was delighted. After that first night in bed with her uncle, she had barely touched a morsel. She certainly hadn’t enjoyed a thing.

It was well after Persephone’s return had already been arranged, and, indeed, after Chez Melisse had been booked for her homecoming and the menu chosen, that Ascalaphus, Hades’s “house guest,” came forward. Interviewed on *Good Day LA*, Ascalaphus claimed that near the beginning of Persephone’s visit, he had been sent out by Hades for some Ecstasy and beer, and that, having procured those supplies, he had accompanied the lovers to a water tank perched above Rose Hills Cemetery. There, he claimed, they watched the sun set beyond the Long Beach oil derricks into a mercury sea, and Persephone had eaten seven red seeds of a pomegranate—with gusto. Pressed for evidence of this gusto, Ascalaphus replied that the juice had dripped down her chin, and she had smeared it ear to ear with the back of her hand. When the sun disappeared, they had turned eastward to come down the path, recalled Ascalaphus. It was then that they saw the mountains were on fire.

The Channel 9 investigative crew found the wretched water tank, or anyway a water tank in the Whittier hills, and crushed beer cans lying in the dust. DNA tests, they suggested, would surely prove conclusive.

Following these revelations, the two sides renegotiated —and reached a peculiar agreement: joint custody. Persephone would live with her mother half the year, returning with relief and despair to the knee-sock innocence of girlhood, as do so many young girls rescued from their autonomy. Of course, she would go to private school. Hades would have her the other six months as his sultry queen, if only he would take her out dancing now and then, and not just to senior-citizen karaoke at the Canyon Inn.

Demeter regarded the agreement as a defeat, however, in terms of both her daughter's lost innocence and her own lost trust, so she took advantage of the renegotiation to clarify her role in the original balance of power. And it is this clarification that affects you and me, and our children and theirs, and all the other hopeful, helpless pawns who make their fragile lives in this opulent, desolate paradise.

Even if Zeus and Hades and Poseidon are the gods we struggle so hard to please, it is Demeter who suffers us to live at all. It is she who gives us food. It is she who lets us build our houses on bluffs eroding into the sea; amidst living tinder; on the flood plains of precariously imprisoned rivers; along huge fractures in the crust of the planet itself.

And so, when Persephone's time with Hades rolls around again, as it does every year, and the long, unhappy, oppressive, dreary, stifling months of summer stretch horribly toward Halloween, Demeter reserves the privilege under the terms of the renegotiated agreement, to strike a few matches and watch the Southland burn.