

Losing My Religion

I was born suffering.
I have always been ill, sickly, odd.
The boy with the limp. The boy with the strange walk.

They say that I'm too young to be sick.
That this only happens to the old, the weak.

Does that mean I'm weak?

It feels like every month is a new sanctuary.

Epidaurus.
Kos.
Athens.

Another priest, another offering.
Another slew of success stories and miraculous cures. Another sleepless night on a stone floor.

Another dream of my brothers, who have married and left home. Who smirked at me as they left to play with their friends, who continued with their lives and left me behind without a second thought. Another dream of my mother, who patted my shoulder gingerly, as if at any moment I would crumble into a pile of bones.

Another dream that Asclepius would come to me and fill my joints with muscle tone, restore me to greatness as Athena to Odysseus. Let my family love me as Odysseus and Telemachus did. Let anyone love me as Penelope loved Odysseus. Another dream that Asclepius would fix me where all others have failed.

Another disappointing morning.

The cold walls of a healing sanctuary have never been comforting to me. They feel like great cages of stone, locking me away from a normal life. The rolling hills outside the temenos should be a warm environment in which to heal, and yet they are a silent, unforgiving void.

Sanctuary goers are oddly muted. They want to be healed and leave as soon as they can, thus there is no time for small talk and chatter. I wish that in the dusty silence, someone would just scream as loud as they can, just to prove that all the air has not been sucked out of them. Sometimes I wish that I would stop breathing in the dense air, just to leave this mournful life I have created for myself.

Growing up, I focused on the idea that one day I would be cured.
Everyone always said that to be a functioning member of society, I had to be muscular, flexible.

Strong.

But as I grew up, the day my service to society could be fulfilled never came. I was afraid that if people thought too long about me they would realise I was a waste of space. I am afraid of being ostracised for my failure to be normal.

Why was I born cursed? What did I do before my life began that threw me onto this path?

Sometimes I think of Hephaestus. The black sheep of the immortal gods. The dark shadow of the brilliant glow of Olympus.

Rejected eternally. Immortal but unappreciated.

And yet even I am not useful like Hephaestus. I don't have a special skill, a redeeming quality that means people can ignore my illness. I cannot create powerful weapons or marry beautiful goddesses. My life is an endless circle of doctors and miracle cures and sympathetic looks. Constant reminders that I will never be mighty.

How long can I do this for? Am I doomed to spend the rest of my days waiting to be cured? How long can I read of the heroes of old knowing that I cannot even come close to being like them?

I will never be cunning like Odysseus, or strong like Achilles. I'm not a second Paris or Hector. I am a serial sanctuary shopper. A returning customer with a bad review. The pigeon that will try any remedy to cover his feathers in snow and become graceful, like a dove.

Perhaps I am brave simply for facing my illness, for living for as many years as I have. But bravery in the epics is not about facing illness. It is fighting for your city, for your people. It is protecting your family at all costs. They do not write epics about men who cannot walk or talk, or who have barely made it to manhood.

Then why do I still wish for a cure? How do I know if any of it is real- the stories, the myths? If the gods are real, why haven't they saved me from this existence?

If Asclepius could cure me, why hasn't he? If Hygeia can make me whole again, why do I still suffer?

When Father Zeus hears my prayers, why does he not answer?

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