

THE QUARRY

Claire Catacouzinos

Helike

The gods are amaranthine, and so is their wrath. They are the controllers and doers of the land, they know their place, and the mortals know theirs. They decide when to thread life with a needle through their canvas, to place a stitch here and another over there, when to sail horizontally, travel diagonally, to enjoy life in a straight line or go tumbling vertically down to the depths of Hades; perhaps another colour to play with, just to test the mortal's piety? And if a stitch is removed from the canvas, a place vanishes from history; lives are taken away; the canvas shall be remodelled, in time, when the gods decide to do so. For they are the controllers and doers of the land, they know their place, and the mortals know theirs.

The Gulf of Corinth 373 B.C.E.

In the month of *Anathesterion*, Alethea the daughter of Mikkos of Helike is spinning her wool in her family's marble house when the floor beneath her bare feet begins to shake. He has come back, she thinks, moving in rhythm with the quaking earth, her body is tossed against the wall, sinking to the unsteady floor. She presses her ear against the mud brick wall, feeling the vibration of the earth ringing in her

ears. Why is Poseidon angry? She hears her stool tapping against the floor. The chimes hanging in the room jingle together like the storage jars that shimmy across the room. She forces herself to stand, to do something, anything! Her sister is screaming in the opposite room. She hears the outcries of Helikeans outside; children crying for their mother's protective arms, animal's footsteps are clapping against the cobblestone pathways, fathers hollering for their families to get inside their houses. Is it safer inside or outside? The earth shaking, Alethea waits for a moment, her body still against the wall, when it stops. Poseidon's anger has abated.

'Alethea!' she hears her sister weep. She pushes herself from the wall, and runs to locate Adelpia. She finds her amongst the pallid blankets in the corner of her room.

'Are you alright?' she asks. Adelpia's curly brown hair is tangled like vineyards, her complexion that of a terrified child.

'Why is Poseidon Helikonios angry?' Alethea grabs hold of her sister's hand and helps her up, still hearing the screams of the citizens.

'Perhaps the city has unwittingly been impious to him?' For she knows she has been for many years.

'Father is at his workshop, do you think he is alright?'

'If the gods have willed it,' Alethea says.

She hears a hoarse voice outside her window and clasps her sister's hand. She moves towards it. A tall, white-bearded man is talking to a clan of Helikeans, where more, one by one, approach to hear him speak. 'My good citizens of Helike. There will be a meeting tonight in the market place to discuss this matter. I advise all of you to be there.'

Alethea turns away from the window. She looks at Adelpia, thinking over the past years of how they have been deprived of their mother. She knows Poseidon has not been angry with her city since the day he drowned her mother at sea. They had been returning from a visit to the Oracle of Delphi, across the Corinthian Gulf. She remembers that it had been the annual festival of the Theophania, celebrating the return of Apollo from his winter quarters in Thrace. She had been twelve at the time when the turbulent waves of Poseidon had rocked the boat. Little by little each wave

grew, becoming stronger and stronger until they had risen over the surface of the boat and crashed down onto the deck, taking many helpless victims. Had Poseidon been angry with them for paying homage to a god who was not their patron? Is that why he had killed her mother? Is this why he is striking again? She knows that the only gods she prays to are Hera and Zeus, ever since she became betrothed to Elpidios. Is the quake her fault? She takes her sister's hand and squeezes it; they look at each other and Alethea knows she has to do anything to keep her sister safe.

That night, under the lunar light Alethea and her sister arrive in the market place, joining the crowded Helikeans. They surround the area like fire flies, holding their torches. They have not heard from their father for the whole day. Perhaps there was an accident during his travels to Aigion today, to deliver his new crafts?

Alethea feels her sister holding her hand tightly, just like she did that awful night when their mother was swept away. She turns her attention to the white-bearded man – a magistrate of the committee for the safety of their city-state. He is standing on a stool in front of the Temple of Poseidon Helikonios, 'My fellow citizens,' he begins, 'the quake is over. Poseidon has relinquished his wrath on us. But we shall sacrifice a bull to him tonight. We shall soothe his anger.'

A tirade breaks out amongst the Helikeans.

'Why is he furious with us?' They ask. Some are blaming the politicians for their corrupt ways; other citizens are frantic, holding their children closer to them, their eyes fixated on the magistrate.

While Alethea watches, she can feel her fear of Poseidon rising, deep down she is sure she knows what he is up to. She hears her betrothed speaking her name. She lets go of her sister's hand and embraces Elpidios. Her arms wrap around him like Penelope did when she hugged her Odysseus for the first time after twenty years. The warmth of Elpidios' skin calms Alethea's thoughts.

'Where have you been?' she asks.

'I was fishing in the gulf when the waves started tossing our boat. We capsized and had to swim to shore.'

'Thank Hera you are alright.'

‘*Agapi mou*, of course I am alright, it would take all the gods to rid me from your side.’

Alethea refuses to ponder over the matter, for she knows, if the gods willed it, they could kill anyone. She kisses Elpidios as he wraps an arm around her and she leans into the curve of his chest and shoulder.

She can hear the Helikeans still shouting at the magistrate, when he announces, ‘I have with me the Priestess of Poseidon Helikonios, our dear Elpis. She will save us by slitting the throat of the sacrificial bull.’

Alethea watches as Elpidios’ sister wearing her white shawl, holds the dagger to the thrusting bull’s neck and begins her prayer, ‘Patron god of our city, Poseidon Helikonios, Shaker of the Earth, I humbly succumb to your presence and will, to accept this sacrifice as homage from your people.’ The crimson blood from the bull is purged and gushes forth upon the marble altar, and slowly drips down on the cobblestone. ‘For now, we hope he will give us another day for his Panionia festival tomorrow, so we may be pardoned for our misdoings.’

At midnight, the god Morpheus enters Alethea’s dreams. His presence awakens her deep thoughts on Poseidon. The spirits of Morpheus’ *Oneiroi* envision messages of dark roaring waves and high-pitched screams of civilians running inland. Animals are stampeding amongst humans, squashing those in the way like insects. Alethea finds herself amongst the waves, drowning in the ocean. Help me, help me father, Adelpia, help! Elpidios, where are you? She thinks. Her eyes are stinging as she tastes the bitterness of salt on her tongue, her nose inhaling the waves, suffocating her. Why does Poseidon hate her? He reveals himself, his white mane covering his squared face, the sharp ends of his golden trident pointing towards her, condemning her. His cerulean eyes are fixated on her, mouthing words to her, words that never enter her ears, the sea water has already deafened them. And all she can think is, You, you who are the saviour of our city, you the god of the sea, the earthquakes, the rivers, the floods, the droughts, how could you? You, you who are the Patron of our city, Poseidon Helikonios, oh why? What have I ever done to you?

She awakes from heat, sweat and dried tears. She looks over at her sister sleeping beside her, their father did not return that night. She turns her head and looks

at the starry night sky through her window. Help me Hera, oh help me, she thinks. She feels the heat and notices her blankets are lying on the floor. Is it not winter? Why is it so hot?

The next evening Alethea finds Elpidios upon his fishing boat alone. The sun rays of Helios lightening his dark skin and his obsidian hair. She watches as he packs his belongings from the boat onto the deck.

‘I thought I might find you here,’ She approaches him wearing a thin shawl. Her hand fans the heat away from her face.

He looks up from what he is doing and their eyes meet. ‘I thought you would be preparing for the festival tonight?’ He places his hand upon his brow to block Helios’ rays, his eyes squinting.

‘My father has not returned home since yesterday. I fear he has left my sister and I, the coward within him is too scared to return to Helike.’

‘Why would you say such things?’

‘He knows from the earthquake that Poseidon’s rage will be thunderous soon, yesterday was only the beginning.’

‘Alethea, you know my sister would have spoken to me if she knew Poseidon was going to punish us.’

‘Have you not heard the cries since yesterday? Something happened a few nights ago when the Akhaean League formed an agreement. There is gossip in the street that Poseidon will strike again tonight.’

‘You should not fill your head with discontent Alethea. We have appeased Poseidon with our sacrifice and today we shall rejoice in celebration of him.’

‘We ought to leave before he strikes again. We must travel inland.’

He lifts himself out from the boat and clasps her hand. ‘You should not be scared of him. Can you not see he has blessed me today with all these fish?’

Alethea’s eyes look upon the carcasses stacked in a net on the boat. Their scales silver, their black beady eyes looking up to the heavens. ‘I cannot stay; I have already sent Adelpia inland to Tritaia. Many people are leaving the city today.’

‘Are you going to leave me?’ he asks, wiping his hands on his tunic. Alethea smells the odour of fish, and breathes in the scent, remembering all the times she has been fishing with him. How he catches a bundle, kisses each of them, and thanks Poseidon for the blessing. Out in the ocean, this is where he had kissed her for the first time. On their patron gods territory, when she was only fourteen years old, the same ocean that killed her mother. Why is Poseidon doing this now? she thinks.

‘You need to come with me. I want you to leave with me.’

‘I cannot go,’ he says.

‘Can you not see the animals are fleeing? Even they know Poseidon will release his rage soon.’

‘My sister is the priestess, you are defying our patron.’

‘Then why have the wells risen? The air soaring with heat when it is winter? The fate of our city is in turmoil...Elpidios, *please?*’

‘No Alethea, I am to stay here in the city with my family. I have an obligation to them. If I leave them I will lose my honour.’

‘There will be no honour once Poseidon has had his way.’

‘You do not know if he is to cause any misfortune. Elpis said Poseidon had sent us a message yesterday to strengthen our piety for the festival today.’

Alethea closes her eyes, and takes in a long breath of the salty air. She could go and leave him here. He could suffer the wrath of Poseidon if he wanted. She could find a new partner, marry a different man. And yet, all she wants is to be the mother of his children. She wants to be with him.

‘*Agapi mou*, you are being suspicious because of your mother. Please stay for the festival tonight?’

She did not know what she was doing. A part of her wanted to run to the hills, to jump onto a cart and ride to Tritaia, further and further away from Helike. And yet the other half of her, yearned for Elpidios, for him to stay with her. Perhaps Poseidon would not strike tonight. Perhaps tonight, the festival *would* soothe his rage, and they would be left for another night.

The festival that night is triumphant; the athletics start with men and boys competing against each other in honour of Poseidon. At dinner time, four fat bulls are sacrificed by the Priestess during the procession. Libations of silky milk, red wine and honey are poured in honour of Poseidon Helikonios. The Priestess performs her fluid dance, choirs of boys and girls sing in praise. And to Alethea's shock, there has not been another tremor. It is not until midway through the next pouring of libations and dancing that the ground begins to shake.

She jumps from her seat, grabbing Elpidios' hand and runs away from the festival, her body shaking and moving with the rhythm of the earth. She can hear people screaming, panicking – run, run for your lives! Have mercy on us! What are we to do! Keep running! She hears thunder above her head. *He* has awakened. She keeps running. She needs to find safety.

'Alethea, wait!' Elpidios shouts, catching his breath. But she cannot, she is terrified, her heart pounding in her chest like her fists banging on dough. Her eyes watch the buildings around her shaking; some are swaying side to side, and others she can see are forming cracks. She keeps running, with him behind her. She runs, and runs, and runs all the way outside of the market place, pacing through the cracking buildings and animals thrashing from their chains.

She hears outcries.

'Help me!'

'Where is my mother?'

'Where is my father?'

'Oh Zeus help us! Where are my children?'

And then. It stops. And so does she. She bends down, and inhales a long breath of air. Oh help me Hera, she thinks. That's when she turns around and sees Elpidios is still there. Scared like her. But, her eyes look above him. She sees a huge wave. It is rising up, up, up towards the sky, as when she had lost her mother.

She cries, 'Oh Hera! Please, help us!' She tilts her head up, watching the wave; it just keeps on rising, *it just keeps on rising*. 'He's got us, he's got us!'

Until, in a split moment, as she holds her breath, it hits its peak...and then, like the speed of Zeus' lightning bolt, it rushes towards the city of Helike.

Elpidios grabs her. He clutches her as he whispers in her ear, “*Signomi agapi mou, s’agapo.*”

The tidal wave crashes down upon them. For the gods are the controllers and doers of the land, they know their place, and the mortals know theirs.

[For] you will remember, for we in our youth did [many] things, yes many beautiful things. Someone will remember us, I say, even in another time.

– Sappho of Lesbos

Fragments 24A & 147

Glossary

<i>Anathersterion</i>	February/March
<i>Agapi mou</i>	My love
<i>Oneiroi</i>	Dark-winged spirits of dreams
<i>Signomi agapi mou, s’agapo</i>	I’m sorry my love, I love you