

Undertaking

Jeanne Emmons

At the temple of Demeter in Eleusis,
the ground gapes into a hollow
through which, they say, Hades
thundered up and snatched Persephone
at her flower-gathering, her basket flying,
all the paper white narcissi scattered
in the hot slipstream of his chariot.

I tell myself you don't have to be a virgin
the gods lust for. Anyone can undertake
that journey, from anywhere. It's a matter
of mindset. Unfettered regret. Failure to forget.
But then I think otherwise. The dead turn
a cold shoulder to the living. And I hear,
if you make it that far down, no one escapes.

Except for Theseus, Orpheus, Hercules,
Odysseus, Dante, Psyche, Aeneas, Alcestis,
even Persephone, for the warmer months.
Oh, and Jesus and all the souls he harrowed
out of hell. Let there be no mistake. I want
to be in the illustrious company of those
who found their way back aboveground.

I fear Lethe, its current, the expunging
plunge. I'm afraid of being fastened
forever to the chair of forgetfulness.
I am going there solely to remember.
But I have no Circe to give directions,
no vat of blood to raise you, Mother,
or open up your tight-lipped, waxy mouth.