

Perseus
and
Medusa

A short excerpt from

Varitan's
ILLUSTRATED
GREEK Myths

Petrification is a natural process: it can happen to anything. But it is very rare, and conditions must be absolutely perfect. First, whatever it is—a shell, a leaf, a fish, a human being—is buried deep under sand. Then it is compressed and compacted until its empty spaces fill with mud. The shape of the thing stays the same, its features remain intact, but its insides are replaced by inorganic matter, as if a three-dimensional photograph has been taken and now only the picture remains. It is a fantastic thing—from flesh to stone! And it is an invisible thing, for it only occurs through millions of years of burial, millions of years of compression, millions of years of the gradual replacement of body with stone.

There are some who say this extraordinary transformation can happen overnight—and some who say it can happen in an instant! And maybe they are crazy, but there are even some people who say they have seen their friends turn to stone before their very eyes. How could such an unbelievable thing occur? It must be physically impossible! And those who say they have seen it happen—well, they must be lying or dreaming.

Yes, we know that our ancestors believed in Medusa, who was so beautiful or so ugly or so frightening that one look at her face and the snakes coiled around her head would turn the looker to stone. But she can't be real. There is no proof. We have entered an age of greater understanding, with no room for such child's play. No one believes in Medusa anymore!

There was one young man a few years back with some crazy ideas about the matter. His name was Perseus, and he was always unusual, but one day his eyes got really big and he started going on and on about petrification and death. "Gentlemen," he yelled in the town square, daring to step onto a soap-box, "Ladies, please—a great danger haunts us. It is neither death nor disease, nor famine, nor blight, but it threatens our lives, our children, and the fate of our town!"

At this point, of course, we all gathered around. What person anywhere would not drop everything to hear about a new source of danger and how to avoid it? But then Perseus got on his high horse: "We don't see because we don't want to see when our friends and comrades, our fathers and mothers, our brothers and sisters cease to speak, cease to strive, cease to breathe as living things do. It is human nature to deny what we cannot bear to face. And that is exactly how Medusa does her damage! She offers us one of her many foul faces instead of our loved ones, and slowly we lose the

power to look away; slowly we become as the frozen stalagmites of her cavern that forever guard her lair.”

Perseus made many speeches like this. He would speak passionately for a full paragraph on one enormous lung-full of air, and then he would pause to take a breath. The rest of us would begin to exchange glances, but he would take notice and begin again, pointing at us furiously: “Even the looks you give each other now, even the way you coldly watch me, these are the instruments of Medusa’s long reach, the snarling fangs of her hissing serpents! Medusa works in different ways these days, but she is an even greater threat now that we no longer suspect her. And that is why we must slay her, once and for all, for the good of our citizens and the future of our state!”

Perseus intended for this to be a climax. Perhaps he imagined that a roaring battle cry would punctuate his exclamation, and that he would suddenly and unanimously be crowned and the motley crowd would be transformed into an army with him at command. Instead, of course, we all looked at the ground in embarrassment, and some of us chuckled a little, with one or two hecklers taking up the slack.

Perseus would still be standing erect, still beckoning us to join him, but a darkness would come over him as the waves of laughter reached his ears, and with furrowed brow he would offer his final plea: “You laugh because you are already under her spell, because you prefer to remain silent and still and subdue all souls with independent enough stripes to speak, just as we pull down the statues of foreign conquerors and false gods after they have been banished from our lands. But I speak the truth. Though you may laugh, your veins are already hardening into stone—and though you may fear death above all things, the petrification that is your fate and that will deprive you of the capacity for death, as well as the capacity for life, is far more tragic than death, far more ruinous than disease, far more devastating to families than famine and blight. Your fate is not to die but to live forever dead.”

And with this he would step down, amidst sighs and shrugs and shakings of perplexed heads, and make his way home without once looking up.

What a strange fellow he was, and what a strange story! After a few weeks of delivering these vehement speeches in the town square he disappeared entirely, and no one saw him for months. It was rumored that he had gone off to slay his Medusa, or that he was sick and lying feverish in bed. But mostly he was forgotten about, and

we all went back to our normal daily activities, which of course included listening to other charlatans in the town square deliver just as fiery speeches in order to sell us their special pills or oils to resolve whatever danger or disease they had evoked.

And then one day he reappeared. And what a strange sight he was! He was pale—for he had apparently spent the past few months in the basement of his house—but he looked strong and forceful. He was wearing an odd combination of clothes, as if he had been playing at being an Olympian and just thrown on his jacket for the sake of propriety. On his head was a bronze helmet that he must have altered himself, for it looked like a helmet of war, but the wings that normally protected the ears had been hammered out to block his peripheral vision, like the blinders we put on horses when they move on crowded streets. And then he had built something none of us had ever seen before and attached it to his waist: it was a desk on one side, with his papers clipped to it—a mobile desk, where even as he walked among us he scribbled with his long red quill. On the other side of the contraption was a big, round mirror, a vanity mirror, in which if we approached him we would see our own faces staring back at us!

But few of us did approach him, instead watching him from across the street and pointing and laughing at this bizarre human being and his harebrained gadgetry. But none of our remarks or reactions had any effect on Perseus now. It was as if he existed in a completely different world, though he was physically present in ours.

Then one day he left without saying a word. This time we all saw him go, and we knew where he went—to some cave in the west that during the course of his relentless studies he had pinpointed as the destination of his self-appointed quest: the home of the creature called Medusa.

It's been over a year, and he hasn't come back. He's either still wandering in that deep dark cavern or long ago plunged to his death. Who knows? Maybe someday he'll come back with Medusa's head.

But that's not very likely, because Medusa doesn't exist. She can't possibly exist. Wouldn't we have been told if she did?

