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RICHARD P. MARTIN, MYTHS OF THE  
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WE STILL MAKE STORIES ABOUT the way the world came to exist. The tales we tell nowadays have to do with mysterious creatures—black holes and big bangs, ever-expanding cosmic bodies, “quarks” and “superstrings.” Before the science of physics, the stories were different.

In mythologies around the world, there are two central types of creation stories: automatic, in which the elements arise by themselves, and architectural, in which a supernatural being or trickster figure creates and shapes the universe. Greek myths are of the first type. Out of Chaos—the essence of nothingness—come two divinities, a place (Earth) and a force of attraction (Eros). In the physics of myth, these are enough to generate the rest of creation, including the divisions of day and night, the features of sky and landscape, and even such social forces as memory (Mnemosyne) and divine order (Themis). There is no principle of evil—unlike other ancient mythic systems—but Greek tales acknowledge that there are all sorts of bad influences and misfortunes in the world, including the shortness of human life. In the manner of genealogical expression that is characteristic of early Greek myth, such evils come from Night, who is daughter of Chaos, the original emptiness. Here, as in general, Greek myth does not attempt to explain the existence of pain and suffering. They are simply a given.

Evolution marks the origin story told by Hesiod's *Theogony*. Three generations of passionate conflict and violence are required before Zeus finally takes power and establishes his eternal order among the gods of Olympus. Before his triumph, Zeus' grandfather (Ouranos) and father (Kronos) attempt in vain to prevent change by refusing to let the next generation mature. The various repressions by these primitive gods backfire, and they end up dismembered or dismissed. There is both psychological and political wisdom embedded in this family saga. It turns out that Zeus' abilities to foresee trouble, to take advice, to be cautious, and to make alliances are what gain him victory. It helps, of course, that he also controls the weaponry of the sky, with his lightning and thunderbolts. These save the day against the final dark threat of Typhoeus. His superior physical position explains as well why Zeus wields sovereignty over his brothers, Hades and Poseidon, although they have theoretically equal thirds of the universe (the underworld and the sea).

Until the early twentieth century, it was thought that Hesiod's story of the struggle for divine kingship was uniquely Greek. But the discovery and decipherment of clay tablets containing much older Near Eastern myths, from the second millennium B.C., now suggest that many details of the Greek myth complex are either borrowings or at least shared beliefs. For example, the Babylonian poem *Enuma Elish* ("when on high"—its opening words) tells the story of the creation of gods from the mingling of two divine beings, male (*Apsu*) and female (*Tiamat*) waters. One of their descendants, Ea, god of wisdom, learns of Apsu's plan to obliterate the newer generation, and so kills him. His own son, Marduk, goes on to destroy the monstrously inflated Tiamat and become king and shaper of the universe. Even closer parallels to the Greek succession myth occur in the tales of the Hittites and Hurrians, early inhabitants of what is now Turkey. The god Kumarbi castrates his father, Anush (as Kronos did Ouranos), and produces a son (Teshub, like Zeus, a storm god), who then overcomes a dragonlike, mountain-high monster (Ullikummi) threatening his realm—compare Zeus' struggle with Typhoeus. The full implications of such close analogies between Greek and Near Eastern mythologies have yet to be worked out. In any event, it is worth remembering that the Greeks were never out of contact with the older cultures to their south and east, from Egypt to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Narratives might easily have passed back and forth.

Conspicuously absent in Greek myths of origins is any story of how humans came to exist. The Babylonian stories feature a craftsman god who forms people out of clay (albeit to be slaves of the divinities). In Greek myth, Prometheus comes closest to this role, although the idea that he, too, fashioned humans from clay occurs relatively late. Possibly, this was a well-known tale that simply does not survive in our patchy early sources. The evidence from religious cults tells us that potters at Athens worshiped Prometheus. More prominent is the complicated story of his duel of wits with his cousin Zeus. As this brings about the establishment of three key Greek institutions—meat sacrifice, agriculture, and marriage—it can be said that Prometheus creates the human condition, regardless of how people actually came to be.

Yet another myth with regional parallels is the story of the Flood. Unlike the biblical Noah, Deukalion and Pyrrha are saved merely because they are given advance information, not on the basis of righteous behavior. On the other hand, the motif of the watery destruction of humanity for offenses against the chief god unites the Greek with the Hebrew narrative. The tale of Lykaon (told here following Ovid's version) clearly taps into an additional source, the age-old belief in werewolves.

## I. THE WORLD BEGINS

How did this world of gods and mortals come to be? Here is what the Muses tell:

In the beginning was an emptiness called Chaos—the yawning gap. Then Earth—or Gaia—sprang, without parents, into being. Her broad bosom provided a sturdy seat for the gods to come. And suddenly there appeared Eros, the fairest of immortals. At his touch bodies melt; he destroys will and reason, not only for humans but even for gods. In the beginning, then, were these all-powerful three.

What came next? From Chaos arose Erebus (the Darkness) and inky Night. By joining in love with Darkness, Night gave birth to Aither—the shining of the sky—and Day.

Earth brought forth Ouranos, the Sky, to be her cover and protector and a place for the blessed gods. He was filled with stars.

She bore, by herself, tall Mountains, where gods and nymphs delight in their dwellings, and then Pontus, the tireless, rushing,

swelling sea. She went to bed with Ouranos and made Ocean, with its deep currents. From their further matings eleven more children were born from Earth; we call them Titans. These were Koios, Krios, Hyperion who goes on high, Iapetos, Theia the shining, and Rheia. With them were Themis—high law—and Mnemosyne, or memory, Phoibe with her gold chaplet, lovely Tethys, and finally her cleverest son—cunning Kronos.

Earth and Sky also produced six uglier, yet mighty, offspring. Three were the arrogant Cyclopes—Thunder, Lightning, and Flash—like gods, except that each had just a single eye in the middle of his forehead. Also were born three Hundred-Handers—Kottos, Briareos, Gyes—each of whom boasted fifty heads.

Now Ouranos, the Sky, seeing these children of his, was anxious that they would one day overthrow him. As soon as one would come to be born, he used to hide it away from the light of day by placing it deep in a hollow of its mother, Earth. He took pleasure from these evil deeds. But the Earth, vast as she was, was soon packed full. She groaned continually, to no avail. She had to come up with a way to stop him.

One day Earth crafted a great harvest sickle out of the hardest stone. Showing it to her children, she called on them to be brave: "If you want, we can get back at your father. We can end this outrage of his." All the children were struck with fear. No one spoke. Finally, Kronos, with his crafty wits, answered her challenge. "My mother, I promise to carry out the task. I don't care a thing about our cursed father. After all, he was the one who started this awful practice."

Overjoyed, Earth hid Kronos in a place where he could wait in ambush, and armed him with the great jagged-tooth sickle. Immense Ouranos arrived, bringing on the night. He desired Earth, and clasping her, he began to stretch himself out. All at once his son grabbed him with his left hand, holding the sickle in his right. In one stroke he sheared off the member of his own father and threw it behind him into the sea.

Earth took into herself the bloody drops that rained down. Within a year she gave birth to the powerful Erinyes, the Furies. The Giants, too, with their bronze armor and long spears, sprang from that shower, as did the ash-tree nymphs. From the immortal flesh that fell into the surging sea there arose in time a white froth, or *aphros*. Inside the foam was nurtured a lovely girl. First she floated toward holy Kythera, and then to Cyprus pounded by the sea. Out

she stepped from the waves, a queenly beautiful goddess, and around her slender feet fresh grass sprouted. They call her Aphrodite, from the foam in which she was born, and also Kythereia, since she had drawn near to that place, and Kyprogeneia, since she was born on wave-washed Cyprus. Eros and handsome Desire accompanied her as she entered into the gods' company. From that time she has had control over maiden talk and love smiles, cheating, sweet pleasure, delightful loving.

## 2. NIGHT AND SEA

Loving and Deception, which Aphrodite knows so well, had their own parentage. Night, the daughter of Chaos, was their mother, and they have brothers and sisters aplenty: Doom and Death itself, Sleep, and the tribe of Dreams. Night the dusky goddess slept with no one and yet produced more offspring: Blame and Grief with all its pains; the bane of Nemesis; Old Age, that destroyer; and Strife with its harsh heart. It was Night who gave birth to the Fates—Klotho the spinner, Lachesis the lot-giver, and Atropos, whose name means "no turning back." When a human being is born, these sisters decide how much good and evil each will have in life. Afterward, if a mortal—or even a god—goes astray, the Fates follow, ever angry, until the wrongdoer is given his comeuppance. The Hesperidae, creatures of evening, who live beyond Ocean tending the Golden Apples and the fruit trees of the far west—these too are daughters of Night.

Out of this dreadful brood, Strife presented her mother with the most grandchildren: Labor, Forgetting, Famine, piercing Pains, Clashes, Battles, Murders and Manslaughters, Quarrels, Lies, Arguments and Wrangles, Bad Government, Disaster (these are related evils), and finally Oath. He afflicts humans most of all: look what happens whenever somebody willfully swears an oath, then breaks the promise.

But trustworthy speech also found its place in that early world. Pontus, the Sea, had an eldest child, Nereus, who never lied. This master of truth is known as the Old Man of the Sea, since he is just and mild, never does wrong, and remembers the right ways of acting, like an elder. Nereus married a daughter of Ocean, the world-encircling river, and they had fifty daughters, who had traits of both parents, and whom all men desired for wives:

*Firstborn, Well-ordered, Saver, Amphitritê,  
Goodgift, Thetis, Calm, and Gray,  
Waverush, Cave, Swift, and lovely Salty,  
Allgoddess, Pleasant, Goodwin with rosy arms,  
Graceful Honey, Goodharbor, Glory, Giver,  
Floater and Bearer and Power and Cliffie,  
Islander, First-in-charge, fair Galatea,  
Bestower, Allvoice, Steedswift the beautiful,  
pink-armed Maremind,  
Wave-taker, who calms the surge on the misty deep  
and soothes the blasts of wind, with her sister Wave-end,  
Wave and Shore and fair-crowned Sea-knower,  
Gray-ways, Mainford (all smiles), Smooth-sailing,  
Good-talking, People-ruling, Much-minded, Self-willed,  
Slip-queen, Goodprow (the beautiful and blameless),  
Sandy (charming form), divine Horse-stayer,  
Islet, Bon Voyage, Tradition, Prudence.*

And then there is Unerring (she makes fifty-one) who has her deathless father's mind. Such were the daughters of Nereus, and they all knew excellent crafts.

### 3. THE COMING OF ZEUS

The sea had taken form. The beings of the sky and air were in place as well, because Shining Brightness (Theia) had borne the great Sun, brilliant Moon, and their sister, Dawn. This lovely daughter, in her turn, married the Starry One (Astraios) and gave birth to the stout-hearted winds: Zephyr (the Western), Boreas (the Northerly), and Notos (the Southerly), as well as the Dawn Star, who announces his mother's arrival each morn, and all the other lights of the heavens. Still, the world was not the way we know it.

Sky and Earth, as you recall, had brought into the world the first generation of divinities, the Titans. Kronos, the cleverest of these, had put an end to his father's evil oppression. When he grew up, Kronos became powerful in his own right. With Rheia (a Titan herself), he had glorious children: Hestia, the hearth goddess; Demeter, goddess of grains; Hera; Hades the pitiless; Earth-shaker Poseidon; and—last but not least—Zeus, the cunning god, whose thunder and lightning batter the wide world.

In Kronos was a broad streak of his father's violence. His own mother, Gaia, had foretold that one of his sons or daughters might usurp his royal power. So when each of his own offspring was born, Kronos swallowed the child whole.

Rheia was consumed with a mother's grief. What could she do? She was pregnant again, and the baby was due. She begged her aging parents, Ouranos and Gaia, to come up with a way that she could give birth without her husband seeing the child. The old couple knew what was to come, and they told her how her brave son could survive and eventually overthrow Kronos. Late one dark night they bundled her off to the high mountains of fertile Crete. There, deep within a cave on a lofty peak (some say Mt. Ida, others Mt. Dicte), she gave birth. But instead of presenting the child to its father, Rheia tightly wrapped a large rock in swaddling clothes and handed that to her lord and husband Kronos. He took it in his hands—and shoved it down his throat.

It took a year or so before Kronos, whose devious mind had been so deceived, threw up. Out came the stone first of all and then his children, one by one. Zeus, who meanwhile had grown up miraculously fast, safe in Crete, strong of limb and crafty, took the rock and set it in the ground at Delphi, where you can see it even now, a marvel and sign of his power. Then Zeus freed his Cyclops uncles: Thunder, Lightning, and Flash. For a long time they had lain in chains, since being bound by their father, Ouranos, in the gloomy depths of Tartarus. In gratitude, they gave Zeus what were to become his trusty weapons (named after them). Armed with these, he began the final struggle.

### 4. BATTLES OF THE GODS

The older generation of gods did not give up their power easily. The Titans rallied around their king, Kronos, atop Mt. Othrys, while Zeus and the younger gods made their base on snow-crested Olympus. Ten years they battled one another, equally matched, the war drawn taut as a tug rope and with no end in sight. Once more it was the ancient, wise Earth goddess Gaia who suggested a way out. In his early days, her husband, Ouranos, had imprisoned not only the weapon-forging Cyclopes; he had also put under the earth in unbreakable bonds the huge Hundred-Handers. "Remember them," whispered Gaia to her grandson Zeus. "With their help, glory and victory are yours."

Now, Zeus was a clever schemer as much as a warrior. He found a means of secretly releasing the Hundred-Handers and of sharing with them the food and drink that the gods of Olympus enjoyed—ambrosia and nectar. Each day their strength and will to fight grew greater. Then Zeus made his plea. "You fine sons of Earth and Sky, listen to what I have in mind. For a long time the Titans and children of Kronos have been warring to win control. The time has come for you to remember how it was *our* plotting that brought you up to light from the murk. Show the Titans that invincible strength of yours in deadly combat."

Kottos answered for the three brothers. "You are right. It was you who freed us from our unrelenting chains. And we know, too, that you have the wit, the brains; you were born to be the gods' defender. We will fight the Titans in terrible battle, fight with our minds intent and our will unflinching, and claim power—for you." All the Olympians heard this and cheered. Gods and goddesses, all set about to further stoke the fires of war.

Their allies were terrible to behold, each with one hundred arms growing from his shoulders, and on each of their necks fifty heads. They seized great boulders and held them aloft. The Titans waited, strengthening their fighting lines. Then the boundless sea screeched, the earth resounded, the wide-open sky let out a groan and shook. Tall Olympus itself was quivering from the ground up under the onrush of immortals. The quake struck deep, all the way down to Tartarus, and you could hear the powerful weapons hum and thud and clash. Voices from both sides reached the starry heaven as they came together with great war cries.

Zeus held nothing back. His power blazed forth. He leapt from Olympus, blasting away with thunderbolts, the flames shooting thick and fast from his mighty hand. Below, the earth caught on fire, all the forests crackling. The ground sizzled, and the Ocean stream around the edge of earth. The Titans were surrounded by suffocating smoke. Licks of unquenchable fire reached the bright upper air. The flash of white-hot lightning blinded them, strong though they were. Indescribable waves of heat overwhelmed Chaos itself. It looked and sounded as if Sky had crashed down on Earth.

The battle turned. The Hundred-Handers had been fighting in the ranks, but now they advanced to lead the assault, Kottos and Briareos and Gyes, insatiably hungry for war. They hurled three hundred boulders at a time, wave upon wave, until they completely overshadowed

the Titans and drove them off to Tartarus. There, as far beneath the earth as sky is above it, the Hundred-Handers tied them up in chains the Titans could not break, for all their might. If you threw an anvil out of heaven, it would take nine days to reach earth, and another nine to drop down to where they ended up.

## 5. THE FINAL STRUGGLES OF ZEUS

Rewards were in order. First, the Olympians cast lots for supreme rule. To Zeus went lordship over the sky. Poseidon got control of the sea, and Hades won the regions beneath the earth as his domain. Styx, the daughter of the great cosmic river Ocean, who was the first to volunteer her help in the recent battle, was granted the honor of being the oath by which both gods and mortals make their solemn agreements. She lives now deep under the earth near Hades in a stone house with tall silver columns. Whenever one of the gods makes a promise, Iris, the rainbow, is sent from Zeus to fetch up water from Styx in a golden pitcher. If a god pours that water while swearing the oath and later breaks his word, terrible things happen. He can't breathe, he lies speechless in bed, he can't take nectar and ambrosia, and an evil sort of coma overcomes him. And when he recovers from that, more punishment awaits. For nine years he is deprived of the company of the other Olympians, can't go to their council or their fine feasts. Only in the tenth year may he or she return. That is how powerful Styx and her waters can be.

Until now Gaia the Earth had been a kind protector. Without her advice, Zeus would never have survived beyond birth or defeated the Titans. Perhaps she still felt something for those Titan children whom she had conceived with Sky. Or maybe she was pained from the injuries she received in the great battle between divine generations, when the blazing bolts of Zeus ranging over the plain of Thessaly had scorched her body. Whatever the reason, Gaia showed another side. She became the enemy and began to send hostile offspring against her royal grandson.

First came the Giants, who had sprung from her when she was splattered with the blood drops from Ouranos. They were terrible in appearance, with long hair and beards drooping down, armed with long spears and shining body armor. Their tall legs ended in snaking dragon tails. As if to taunt Zeus, they threw huge rocks and burning

oak trees at the sky. Porphyrion was one of the chief Giants and the other was Alkyoneus, who could never be killed as long as he stayed in the territory where he had been born. Each time he was knocked to the ground there, Earth herself revived him.

Gaia, as usual, knew about the future. She had learned—as had the gods—that the Giants would not be defeated unless a mortal joined with the gods to help. To protect her huge sons, even from such a puny being, she began to search for a magic drug, something from her own store of herbs. But Zeus beat her to it. He told Dawn and Sun and Moon to hide their light while he himself found and cut the herb that would have made the Giants invincible.

They clashed, the Giants and the gods, with Zeus at their head. Porphyrion lunged to assault the goddess Hera, but Zeus struck him with a thunderbolt and he fell. The other divine ones used their chosen weapons: Apollo the archer knocked out the eye of the Giant Ephialtes with a bowshot. Dionysus used his long stalk, the sacred *thyrsus*, to kill Eurytos; Hecate singed Klytios the Giant with her torches, while Hephaestus the smith god slung pieces of hot metal at Mimas, killing him.

Noticing one Giant as he tried to escape, Athena picked up the island of Sicily and threw it on top of him, pinning him beneath. Yet another, named Pallas, she captured and flayed, taking his skin off to become her own protective covering (for which she is sometimes called "Pallas Athena").

Hermes, Artemis, Poseidon, and the Fates joined in the slaughter, until the earth was rid of Giants, except for their chief, Alkyoneus. How did he die? Some say Herakles was already born by then, and that it was he, the greatest hero among humans, who overcame Alkyoneus—that, without Herakles, the gods could not have succeeded. The Giant was hurling boulders, demolishing every chariot that rode against him, when Herakles tackled him. He dragged him away from the plain of Pallene, where the Giant had first seen the light of day and the battle was raging. Once Herakles had severed his precious bond with Earth, he aimed his arrow and shot him dead.

However the final Giant's death came about, there is no doubt that Zeus' troubles were not yet over. The Giants were defeated, but Gaia had one more monstrous threat in store. By the power of Aphrodite she lay with Tartarus, deep under the earth, and brought forth Typhoeus. He had one hundred horrible snake heads growing out of his neck, each one flicking forth a black serpent tongue. Fire glowed from

all his glaring eyes. His voices, one from each head, were unspeakably awful. At times the gods could actually understand words coming from him, but more often his heads made a bull-bellowing, lion-roaring, snake-hissing cacophony, which the tall mountains would echo back.

Typhoeus might have toppled the new reign had not Zeus the Father acted at once. He thundered loud and hard. The earth and the sky and the Ocean, even the deep roots of earth, reverberated. Olympus shook beneath his mighty strides. Withering heat engulfed the purple sea as Zeus brandished his lightning and Typhoeus emitted his jets of flame. Ground and sky and sea boiled furiously; high waves crested over the headlands. Even Hades in his underground house and the Titans imprisoned deep in Tartarus trembled with fear at the unquenchable din.

In his armor Zeus leapt down upon the monster and incinerated every head. Then he whipped him, and the mutilated beast fled, smoking still from Zeus' lightning strikes, so that the forests caught fire and earth began to burn. You've seen tin melting, when the bellows blow on it in a crucible, or iron, the hardest metal, when Hephaestus the smith heats it in a mountain forge. That is how earth started to melt under the rays of fire from Typhoeus' body. Zeus in his disgust seized the monster and hurled him to Tartarus. From his rotting body arose the wet winds that beat down on the misty sea all of a sudden, scattering ships and killing sailors and battering down the lovely crops on earth: *typhoons*.

## 6. THE MARRIAGES OF ZEUS

After that, Gaia gave up. "Make him king," she told the Olympians. At last secure in his power, Zeus, son of Kronos, son of Ouranos, ruled unchallenged. He remembered, however, what had led to the downfall of his father and grandfather—cruelty and violence, yes, but also stupidity. Each had tried to suppress the next generation, and each had made a fatal miscalculation. No child of Zeus would overthrow *him*. This is how he made sure.

Ocean and his wife, Tethys of the golden crown, had fifty daughters and numerous sons. They were mainly streams, springs, and rivers. The Nile was one and Scamander near Troy another. The oldest was Styx, the stream of the underworld, who had aided Zeus in his

struggles. In the new ordering of the world, the children of Styx—Contention and fair-ankled Victory, Force and Strength—lived with Zeus, never leaving the vicinity of Olympus.

One of the fifty girls was a beautiful young goddess called Mêtis. She represented a different kind of power. In some ways she resembled her cousin Nereus, the wise son of Sea. She knew more than any other god or human, and for this she was well named “Cunning Ability”—for that is what Mêtis means. Any mortal who drives a war chariot, steers a ship, or makes an intricate piece of craftsmanship does so through her sort of practical wisdom: knowing what step to carry out and when to do it.

Zeus learned from Gaia one final secret. To prevent being overthrown, whether by a son or any other god, he must master Mêtis. Any offspring of hers, it was said, would be outstanding for cunning. So he married her, his first bride of many to come. But that was not enough. When Mêtis was about to give birth, Zeus, again with his grandmother’s advice, coaxed her with wheedling words—and then swallowed her whole (. . . like father, like son, you might say). Yet this did not prevent the child from coming into the world. With Mêtis in his belly, Zeus began to feel swollen. The pain was not in his stomach; it was his head that hurt. Hephaestus, his son, was summoned, and as Zeus sat still on his throne, Hephaestus split his head open a bit with an axe. Out jumped a daughter—Athena, goddess of craft and wisdom, already fully armed (thanks to Mêtis, who provided all from within). War, after all, is also an occupation for the cunning, and Athena is as good at casting spears as she is at weaving. Her mother remains within Zeus still, a source of good advice.

Zeus took as his next wife the sleek and lovely Themis. She bore him the Seasons, who are named Orderliness, Justice, and Peace. Some say it was by Themis, not Night, that the Fates came into being as well, which would make them daughters of Zeus rather than ancestral powers. Another daughter of Ocean named Eurynome presented Zeus with the three lovely-cheeked Graces—Aglaia (Delight), Euphrosyne (Cheer), and the desirable Thalia (Bloom). Demeter bore him Persephone. Hephaestus had become his son, yet his latest wife, Hera, had produced him without the help of Zeus, one time when she was enraged (as she often was) with her lusty husband. Hera and Zeus together had Ares, the war god, Hebe (eternal youth), and the midwife goddess Eileithuia.

## 7. THE BIRTH OF APOLLO AND ARTEMIS

Eileithuia was old enough to be a helpmate at the birth of her half brother and sister, Apollo and Artemis, which took place on the tiny, rock-strewn island of Delos. Their mother was the mild and beautiful Lêtô. Made pregnant by Zeus, with her pains coming on, she wandered over the world looking for a place that would welcome and care for her. From Crete to Athens, the peaks of Mt. Pelion to misty Lemnos in the northeast corner of the sea, down the coast past Khios, Samos, Karpathos, she went, circling the entire Aegean (as it would be named later). No land would have her, no matter how rich. They all trembled in humility and fear at the thought of seeing mighty Apollo born on their soil. At last she came to Delos. Lêtô, exhausted, set foot on her and begged: “Delos, if you would only be my son’s refuge, the site of his rich temple, no one else will ever take you over. Apollo won’t forget you, either. It doesn’t look to me as if you can raise cows here—or sheep, or vines, or anything else, for that matter. Ah, but if you have Apollo’s temple, people will be bringing hundred-cow sacrifices, feasting and holding fairs, and the smell of meat will spread all over. You’ll feed off the fat of the land—and I must say you are pretty skinny yourself.”

After she made her plea, Delos beamed with delight and said: “Lêtô, you who are so glorious, the daughter of great Koios . . . I’d be overjoyed to receive your son. It’s true. I’m unattractive otherwise, and this way I’d be brimming with honors. But there’s one thing I am afraid of, Lêtô—I won’t hide it. They say Apollo is going to be overwhelming in power, that he’ll be the one who gives order to gods on high and mortals on the wheat-covered earth. So I’m terribly frightened that when he sees the light of day, he’ll spurn me (I *am* just a little rock cliff) and he’ll give me a kick, tip me over, and shove me under the sea. Then a big wave will always be washing over my head, while he goes off to some other land that he likes more and builds his temple there and all his shady sacred groves. And me—I’ll be home for octopuses and black seals.

“Here’s what I want. Swear by Styx that he’ll build his first beautiful temple *here* . . . before he goes anywhere else, as I know he will.” And Lêtô did. “I swear by great Styx—so help me, Earth and Sky—Apollo’s fragrant altar, his sacred enclosure, will be here, and he will honor you, Delos, above all others.”

When this contract was completed, Delos was happy. Lêtô, how-

ever, felt her pains come on sharper than ever. For nine days and nine nights she was pierced by labor pangs. All her goddess relations came to her: Dionê, Rheia, Ikhnaie, Themis, Amphitritê who lives in the groaning deep, and all the others—except Hera, who knew the birth was the result of her husband's affair. Worse, she knew that young Lêto, with her lovely curls, would have a towering, famous son.

Hera was jealous, and she made up an excuse to keep Eileithuia busy on Olympus, up in the golden clouds. Back on Delos, the other goddesses became desperate. They sent Iris the rainbow to fetch the midwife, promising her a lavish gold and amber necklace, and they told Iris, "Don't let Hera find out." So Iris shot off up to the sky, reached the high plateau of the gods, and stood at the doorway of their golden house. "Eileithuia," she whispered, trying not to be noticed. The young goddess excused herself and hurried out. Iris explained the situation, with such urgency that Eileithuia was swayed, though she was taking a risk. Like a pair of white doves the two descended to Delos. At the very moment Eileithuia stepped onto the rocky shore, Lêto felt the birth begin. She knew this was the time. She threw her arms around a slender palm tree growing all alone by the side of the gentle slope of Kynthos. She pressed her knees into a spot of soft meadow grass. Beneath her, Earth smiled. Out the baby leapt toward the bright light. The goddesses all together let out a high-pitched shriek of joy. "Ololololê!" They bathed baby Apollo in pure waters, wrapped him in white linen, fine-spun and shining, and put a thin gold band all around it. Lêto did not suckle him; Themis instead fed him nectar and ambrosia. His mother gazed at her infant and was happy and proud because she had produced a strong boy, a real bowman. His twin, Artemis, who also favored archery, was born the same day, but with less fanfare.

## 8. PROMETHEUS AND THE HUMAN WORLD

Like Zeus himself, Lêto was a child of Titans. Zeus got along quite well with the women of that clan, but the men kept giving him trouble, even after his victory in the great battle. He had an uncle, Iapetos, brother of Kronos, who had four sons, Zeus' cousins. Two were known for strength (good and bad) and two for their wits (that is, for having them and lacking them). Atlas was the son with the most useful physique, and Zeus, sometime after the Titan war, set him at the far



edge of the world, where the clear-voiced Hesperides live, to stand there forever and on his muscular shoulders bear up the wide sky. With his strong legs rooted beneath the depths of the sea, Atlas, big as a mountain, keeps the heavens from crashing onto the world below. Menoitios, his brother, had been a boaster and a brawler, and nobody missed him when Zeus hurled him down to the netherworld with a thunderbolt in battle. Of the other pair, Prometheus was the intelligent one—too clever, some would say—while his brother, Epimetheus, was all too dumb.

Some say that Prometheus, the Fore-thinker, first created human beings, while he was experimenting one day with clay and water. Like a potter, he kneaded the earth and built up his creation. He fired these clay models with life and let the newly made men and women go forth on their own. But he was always looking after them, even though the Olympian gods could not be bothered much about humans.

Wherever people first came from (and there are many stories about that), in the beginning human beings and gods lived in harmony. In a way, after all, both sides were descended from the same mother, Earth. Gods would fall in love with mortal women from time to time and produce half-divine sons and daughters. In those early times, all



enjoyed coming together and feasting. One day their gathering place was set at Mēkonē, not far from where Corinth is now. Prometheus was to make the meal. Now, this cousin of Zeus was an excellent butcher, but an inveterate trickster. He always did things differently. On that day he brought a big ox to cook. Happily, he set out preparing. When he had killed it, roasted part, and grilled some other pieces, he slyly divided the food into two portions. For Zeus, and the other gods, he bundled up the ox flesh and the meaty parts in the animal's paunch, to make it look unattractive. For the humans, he laid out the white bones, but nicely dressed them up in sleek, shining fat.

Zeus took one look and said, with an edge to his voice: "It looks to me like an uneven split, my dear son of Iapetos." So Prometheus, in his twisty-minded way, smiled and said, "Zeus, almighty, glorious, ever-living god, pick the portion you want." Zeus had caught on already, but he played along, because he had plans of his own. He reached out both hands and took the glistening fat package, found it was only bones covered up, and exploded with anger. He had to live with his choice. (That is why nowadays humans still burn on the fragrant sacrificial altars the white bones for the gods—and eat the tasty meat themselves.)

"Never without your tricks, Prometheus," said Zeus—that was all. But Zeus got his revenge. He refused to give humans the fire they needed (for things like cooking or pot making). When people tried to produce sparks by rubbing together sticks from ash trees (which fire inhabited—so they thought), nothing happened. It was as if all the power of Zeus' lightning had gone out.

Prometheus, seeing how his poor mortal friends suffered, devised a plan. There is a plant that grows in marshy places, called *narthēx*, or fennel, tall like bamboo, but with a whitish pith inside it, all the way down. Breaking off one of these stalks, Prometheus secretly made his way to Olympus, stole back fire from where Zeus had hidden it, and returned to the humans, with the flame safely smoldering inside the fennel stalk.

When Zeus saw, at a distance, the unmistakable brightness of fire burning on humans' hearths, he was angrier than ever. He went off to design something really evil to pay them back. He had Hephaestus make out of clay a figure that looked like a bashful human maiden, with a human voice and looks that would rival those of a goddess. Athena dressed her in a silvery gown, adorned her with jewelry, and on her head placed an intricately worked veil, topped with a crown of

lovely blossoms. She also taught her to weave at the loom, as women should. Then Zeus had Aphrodite give the maiden grace and charm, the kind that leads to melting desire and wrenching heartache. The Graces and Seasons and Persuasion joined in. And Hermes he ordered to make her thieving and shameless. Hermes named her as well: Pandora, "All gifts," because all the gods and goddesses had presented her with something.

Pandora was made to bring men pain. Some say she was the first woman, and that from her came the race of women (to some men, the gender does appear to be a separate race). It seems she was the first bride, at any rate, and with her began the custom of marriage.

When the immortals had finished adorning her, Zeus sent Hermes to bring this lovely "present" to Epimetheus (the less bright brother, aptly named After-thinker). Epimetheus had been specifically warned by Prometheus: "Don't accept any gifts from Zeus. Send them back, or something awful will happen." But when he saw lovely Pandora on his doorstep, he forgot all that and took her in. Only when the harm was eventually done did he remember.

All during the time when gods and men dwelled in harmony and enjoyed shared feasts, humans lived on the earth without experience of labor, or any evil, or killing disease. But then Pandora came, and with her she brought a big jar, like the kind women use in the store-room to keep grain or oil. Whether or not she knew what was in this jar (it could be that Zeus told her not to look but had also made her curious), Pandora one day, living in Epimetheus' house, lifted the lid. Out flew disaster, voiceless sicknesses that haunt the night, and ten thousand other ills. The sky and sea became filled with them. Pandora tried to reseal the jar again, but not until everything had escaped. All, that is, except for Hope, which, being small, could not manage to get past the lip of the container. So, in one way, Hope is safe. In another, we don't have much hope out in the hard world. And, come to think of it, since it was stored up in that jar of evils by the gods, perhaps Hope is less beneficial than one supposes.

## 9. PROMETHEUS PUNISHED

No one tricks Zeus and gets away with it. Sooner or later the father of gods catches up. Before long the burly henchmen of Zeus, Force and Strength, the sons of Styx, paid Prometheus a visit. Together with

Hephaestus, who makes chains, they dragged Prometheus off to the far northeast, to a mountain named Caucasus, and there meted out punishment. They bound him hand and foot with unbreakable bonds to a rocky outcrop. Hephaestus was hesitant. "I can't bear to look at a fellow god being tied up like this." But the two brutal brothers did their job, warning Hephaestus, "Do not pity Zeus' enemies overmuch, or you may be the next one to be pitied." And they mocked Prometheus as they tied him all the tighter: "Now you won't be so arrogant, stealing the gods' rightful honors and sharing them with those creatures of a day. Now see how your philanthropy has been repaid." Then they went away and left him.

Alone, Prometheus called out:

*"Shining bright sky, breezes swift as birds,  
River sources, laughing waves of the sea,  
All-mothering Earth, Sun observing all:  
Look at me, see how gods force a god to suffer."*

As he moaned over his condition, he caught a scent as of perfume and an echo of voices. "Here I am chained, a sight for my enemies to mock," he thought. "What god or mortal is coming to have a look now?"

Up came a group of young girls, of the age when they are just learning to do their choral dances all together. They had heard the blows of hammer on metal and, being curious, had persuaded their father to let them track down the sound. As they gazed at this stranger and heard his story—how he had helped mortals, even stopped Zeus from wiping out the human race, and been punished—their eyes filled with tears. Yet their innocent minds could not fathom the matter. "Well, you did something wrong; now you just have to think of a way out," said one. Prometheus was gentle but bitter, and said: "What wrong I did, I did willingly. All my discoveries have brought me pain! I wanted to be a protector of my people. Never did I think I would find myself pinned to a cliff with no humans in sight."

Just then the girls' father arrived on the scene. It was Ocean—a kinsman of Prometheus—and these were some of his many daughters. He sympathized, he advised, he philosophized, but he could do nothing to help. Besides, Prometheus did not encourage him: "Think of what happened to Typhon when he rose against the new order, hissing terribly, glaring, determined to overthrow Zeus. One thunderbolt and he was ash, his body buried under the mountain of Sicily, still send-

ing up puffs of smoke and streams of fire throughout the island. Don't take such a risk."

Only with difficulty could Prometheus make them understand the extent of his good deeds, all the inventions he'd made for man: metal-working, star tracking, counting, letters, ox yokes, chariots, boats with sails, how to interpret dreams, to find useful herbs and remedies, to listen to sounds, watch birds in flight, or read the livers of sacrificial beasts to tell the future. "Any craft they have, they have from me," he sighed. But his listeners, never having worked or suffered, did not see the point of the god's lament.

Eventually, they drifted off. Prometheus on his crag thought deeply. He nearly became one with the rock. Humans, far away as they were, gradually forgot him. It is not clear what was the worse punishment, the torment of mind or body, their forgetting him, or the last cruel touch that Zeus added. Every day he sent his favorite bird, the eagle, to seek out Prometheus where he stood chained, pierce him with its beak, and peck at the lobes of his liver. Every night his liver grew back and every day the eagle came. It went on for nearly forever, until one day a mortal hero set him free. But that is another story.

## 10. THE GREAT FLOOD

In the days when Prometheus was still cheerfully inventing crafts and devices for his beloved humans, he had a wife (either Asia or Hêsionê was her name), and the couple had a son, Deukalion. He was an ordinary boy, not a trickster like his father, and no one expected that he would grow up to be famous. But then again, no one thought humanity, except for Deukalion and his bride, would be washed from the face of the earth. It happened this way.

When human beings were first created, they lived in perfect peace, like gods. It was before the coming of Zeus, when Kronos was still ruling over all. Old age, hard work, and sadness were unknown. They died, in good time, after some hundreds of years, as gently as falling asleep. They had all they could ever want to eat and drink, and the earth brought forth good food without plowing, sowing, or harvesting. It was a Golden Age, now that we look back. When people of that age went to their rest beneath the earth, their spirits continued to go about the world, clad in mist and invisible. Even now they are keep-

ing an eye on us, whoever does right or wrong, dispensing justice—that is their special role.

Another generation succeeded them, as different as silver is from gold, and like silver of less value. They took a hundred years to grow up. All that time they stuck by their mothers like witless infants. Nor were they any smarter full grown. These Silver People kept on doing one another harm, and worse, they insulted the gods. After the incident at Mêkonê, toward the end of the Golden Age, gods and mortals no longer shared meals as equals. The humans were supposed to cook meat and offer part to the gods, and they in turn (since they did not eat anything but nectar and ambrosia) took delight in the smell of sizzling meat. But this newer generation failed to sacrifice, or did it profanely.

Zeus came down from Olympus one day to see for himself the evils of the age. As the evening shadows were falling, he crossed Mt. Kylene and arrived in wild Arcadia, the land of a certain king named Lykaon. Though the god was in disguise, all the villagers he met treated him with reverence—except Lykaon. The king thought to test the divinity of Zeus, in the lowest sort of way. He cut the throat of a prisoner and at the mealtime he presented cooked human flesh to almighty Zeus as if it were a delicacy. Of course Zeus knew, and as soon as the dish was served, he demolished the king's house, brought it down right on top of the banqueters. Lykaon escaped, panting as he ran into the woods. But he was punished all the same. In the dim forest light he saw his arms and legs begin to bristle with thick gray hair. When he tried to speak, he could only let out a howl. His eyes gleamed and he felt a craving for the raw flesh of sheep flocks. He had become a wolf.

As Zeus later told the story, it was then he decided that the age that had produced a Lykaon must perish. Using fire was too dangerous. He remembered the end of Typhon, when the universe had nearly gone up in flames. So water seemed best.

Prometheus heard of the decision in time to warn his only child: "Build a stout wooden chest, like a coffin," he told Deukalion, "and when it starts to rain, stock her with supplies and board her." As the sky got blacker, Deukalion worked harder, until the makeshift craft was ready and he clambered into it with Pyrrha, his wife (the daughter of Epimetheus and Pandora). The heavens opened up, and rain pelted down, whipped sideways by competing winds. Greece was soon covered with raging flood waters. Cattle and houses, horses and peo-

ple, were torn from the land and swirled about in the muddy waves. The daughters of Nereus, swimming atop the flood, gazed down on what had once been towns and woods. Dolphins dove among the tops of oaks, seals changed places with grazing goats, the wolf paddled along amid the sheep. And still it rained.

After a time, all was submerged. Only the twin peaks of Parnassus stuck out above the plain of water. On one of these peaks, Deukalion's wooden box came to rest, and he and Pyrrha disembarked. Before anything else, they paid homage to the local nymphs, and to Themis, whose oracular shrine stood in that isolated mountain spot. Zeus was happy seeing this; the clouds began to scatter with the cold North Wind, and the waters to subside. Gradually the couple realized that they were the only ones left alive. It was up to them to remake the race. But they were stunned, without direction. "If only I had my father's skill at shaping people out of the earth," said Deukalion in despair. Frustrated, the couple could only sit and weep. Finally, they decided to seek guidance from Themis and went to consult the Titan. The oracular reply was shocking: "Leave this temple and throw over your shoulders the bones of your great parent." For a long time the pair pondered this dark saying—what could it mean? At last the son of Prometheus came to a conclusion: "The oracle could not have commanded something so impious. Unless I am mistaken, by 'parent' it means Earth; by 'bones,' the rocks."

Pyrrha was persuaded. Together, they gathered as many rocks as they could. Then, standing close, they threw the stones one by one over their shoulders, without looking back. If they had, they would have seen the stones hit the ground and immediately lose, in part, their hardness—that became flesh—and in part, retain it—that turned into bone. The rocks thrown by Deukalion changed into men, and Pyrrha's into women. Which is why we humans are a flinty lot.